

Illustration Methods for Life and Death Education—A Practical Study Grounded in Life Philosophy

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Abstract—Death is one of the most profound existential dilemmas encountered in human development. The cognitive understanding of mortality and the artistic expression of emotions related to life and death constitute a critical subject that contemporary society cannot overlook. Based on the philosophical theories of life, this article applies the form of illustration in art education to propose innovative methods and strategies for life-and-death education. By integrating commemorative and abstract sculptures, metaphorical installations, culturally reflective paintings, and interactive card games, our project builds a framework for illustrative design practices and exhibitions centered on mortality. These art forms engage individuals across age groups to confront death, reflect on life's significance, and cultivate constructive perspectives on existence. The project offers a novel paradigm for embedding illustration in life-and-death education, expanding its conceptual and practical boundaries through practical experimentation.

Keywords—illustration, life philosophy, death education, exhibition design

I. INTRODUCTION

Artistic expressions can serve as a bridge for people to understand life and death, subtly influencing individuals to engage with existential questions. As societal taboos and educational gaps persist in confronting mortality, two pressing questions emerge: How can artistic mediums transcend cultural barriers to facilitate meaningful dialogues on life and death? Specifically, what unique capacities does illustration possess as a visual language to mediate death education in an age-appropriate and aesthetically pleasing manner? Building on these questions, this paper introduces an innovative methodological framework that extends illustration beyond its traditional two-dimensional boundaries by integrating it with sculpture, installation, interactive design, and curatorial practice. This article aims to raise awareness of existential themes across generations and cultures, providing individuals with philosophical enlightenment and establishing healthy psychological foundations for confronting mortality.

A. Systematic Challenges in Life and Death Education

Despite growing recognition of its importance, life-and-death education remains underdeveloped due to cultural, methodological, and institutional barriers. Deep-rooted taboos hinder open discussions about death, both at home and in schools, often leaving children unprepared to cope with loss [1]. School curricula tend to rely on isolated, didactic, and two-dimensional materials rather than experiential methods, treating death as an abstract concept. This limits the impact of education and fails to leverage more immersive, multimodal methods—such as

sculpture, installation, or interactive games. Additionally, life-and-death education is often marginalized in some institutions. For instance, in some Chinese schools, emphasis is frequently placed on suicide prevention and resilience training [2] rather than broader existential inquiry or hands-on, art-based approaches. Most scholarly research remains tilted to theoretical explorations, with limited integration of art-based practices into formal curricula.

B. Significance of Death-Themed Artistic Expression

Artistic expression addresses the challenges in life-and-death education by engaging audiences of all ages—especially children—through subtle, embodied, and narrative means. By challenging taboos, visualizing abstract ideas, and fostering cross-cultural dialogue, death-themed art practices redefine conventional understandings of mortality, promote psychological healing, enrich educational practices, and foster philosophical reflections.

1) Challenging taboos and building resilience

Death-themed art dismantles cultural taboos by translating abstract existential questions into accessible, concrete, and evocative imagery. Through metaphor, color, and form, illustrations invite audiences to engage with existential questions in an approachable way. Interactive artworks like installations or games create safe spaces for processing grief and confronting fear, helping both children and adults develop resilience [3].

2) Enriching learning through multimodal engagement

Combining illustration with sculpture, installation, and interactive approaches offer multisensory experiences that enhance emotional and intellectual engagement. Such multimodal learning offers a more intuitive method of grasping abstract concepts than verbal explanations alone, which is especially effective for children and those with psychological challenges.

3) Fostering lifelong inquiry

Beyond immediate pedagogical aims, artistic explorations of life and death spark enduring philosophical curiosity. Through narrative prompts and reflective spaces, they invite audiences to question life's meaning, celebrate life's intrinsic value, understand cultural attitudes toward death, and position their own beliefs. Death-themed art fosters continuous philosophical exploration on existential themes and supports personal growth throughout the life span.

II. ILLUSTRATION-BASED STRATEGIES FOR LIFE AND DEATH EDUCATION

In this section, we integrate the above theoretical foundations into a cohesive, practice-oriented methodology

for art-based life-and-death education. Using illustration as our core medium, we integrate sculpture, installation, interactive design, and curatorial practice. These multimodal presentations translate abstract existential insights into concrete visual and tactile experiences, encouraging engagement with death-related discourse, cross-cultural perspectives, and reflective insights on life. As shown in Fig. 1, our strategies expand the conceptual boundaries of illustration through diverse, integrated formats that facilitate multidimensional explorations of different life-and-death themes.

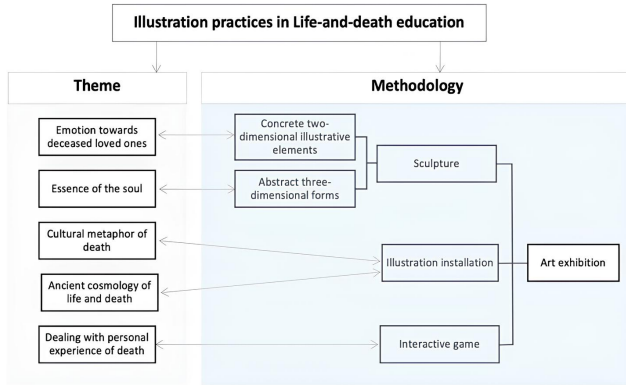


Fig. 1. Overview of themes and methodologies.

A. Translating Death-Related Concepts and Emotions into Tactile Forms

This approach explores how planar illustration can merge with three-dimensional sculpture to convey death-related concepts through concrete or abstract visual symbols. When combined, these forms translate complex philosophical ideas into tangible expressions, enhancing understanding of abstract notions like the soul. Illustrative elements appear in sculptural works as embedded images, symbolic shapes, and color schemes that enrich allegorical meaning. As shown in Fig. 2, figurative illustrations applied to metaphorical sculptures deepen semantic content and connect more directly with viewers' lived experiences. Material choices further strengthen the visual narrative and intensify emotional engagement with existential themes.

This method also includes embedding abstract symbols within sculpture to represent intangible ideas such as the

soul's ephemerality, prompting metaphysical inquiry. Such works invite open interpretation and discussion, encouraging dialogue on spiritual essence. Both strategies show how the interplay between illustration and sculpture creates layered, emotionally rich expressions that provoke contemplation on death and existence.

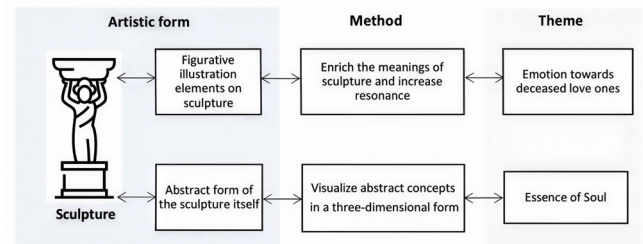


Fig. 2. Exploring death through combining illustration with tactile sculpture.

B. Mapping Cultural Metaphors of Death in Space

Illustrations can be integrated into installation design to explore death-related metaphors and articulate socio-cultural interpretations of death. As Lakoff and Johnson [4] argue, metaphors are central to human cognition, helping us grasp abstract ideas through familiar experiences. Illustration applies metaphor and symbolic imagery to express death indirectly and foster cultural communication. For instance, the metaphor "life is a play" views death as the end of a dramatic play. Designers can visualize this through stage-themed installations tailored to specific cultural practices such as the "spirit house" tradition in ancient Chinese funerals, as shown in Fig. 3.

This approach can also reinterpret historical artifacts that have symbolic meanings in funerary rituals to reflect ancient cosmologies of life and death. Mythological and supernatural narratives, like those in Chinese afterlife traditions, offer poetic insights and educational value in terms of cultural heritage in contemporary society. Illustration revives these narratives in engaging, modern forms. For example, the T-shaped painted silk garment from the Mawangdui Tombs can serve as a structural and thematic base for contemporary installation works, with illustrations bridging past and present views of the afterlife, fostering engagement with death-related themes through culturally embedded visual metaphors.

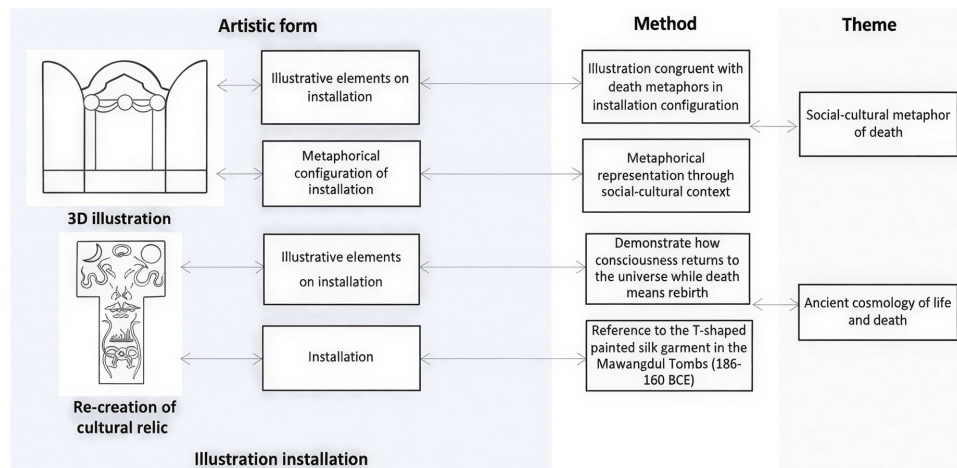


Fig. 3. Conveying socio-cultural metaphors of death through illustrative installations.

C. Enabling Interactive Exploration of Death Scenarios

This approach explores how illustration-based game design empowers audiences as co-creators, transforming passive viewing into active engagement with death scenarios, facilitating interpersonal dialogue, and prompting self-reflection. As shown in Fig. 4, an illustration-based card game can feature creative character design, immersive backgrounds, decorative elements, and narrative text, inviting players to a thematic world. Players choose scenarios and coping methods, answering questions to deepen their understanding through active participation. The game's entertainment value and relaxed tone help reduce fear and traumatic memories by encouraging reflection on personal experiences. This illustration-driven approach turns art appreciation into a dynamic, embodied experience, enhancing interaction through both physical and cognitive engagement.

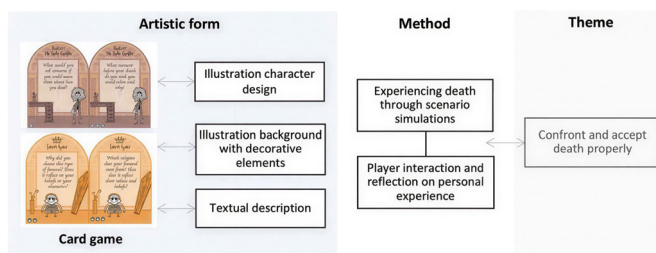


Fig. 4. Experiencing death through the interactive application of illustration.

D. Constructing an Immersive Curatorial Framework

Solitary modes of appreciating illustrations—such as scrolling through isolated images on a mobile device, can limit emotional engagement with complex themes like death. In contrast, thematic exhibitions that integrate illustration, sculpture, installation, and derivative products offer immersive and interactive experiences.

As shown in Fig. 5, this multimodal exhibition model weaves illustration, sculpture, installation, and derivative products into a cohesive spatial narrative, enhancing sustained engagement and fostering open dialogue. Compared to text alone, combining visual and spatial elements more effectively captures interest and creates narrative connections among visual components.

Derivative products displayed alongside primary exhibits—including bookmarks, cards, and booklets with the artist's insights—can reinforce audience impressions and extend the exhibition's impact. Additionally, these products generate philanthropic value for the charitable organizations supported by our exhibition.

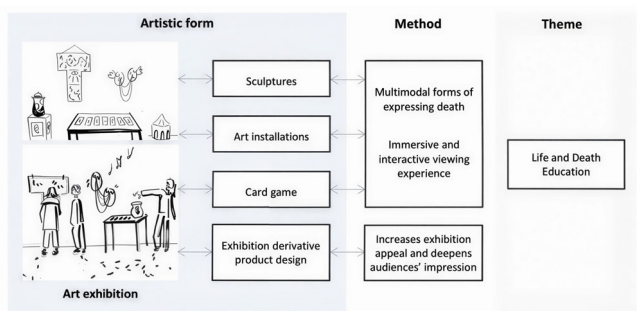


Fig. 5. Immersive experience through illustration-based exhibition space.

I. RESULTS AND PRACTICES

Using a range of media and innovative illustrative techniques, we create a dynamic visual narrative centered on illustration. The “Transcendence” exhibition weaves together sculptural works that blend figurative and abstract symbols to explore memory and the soul, a paper theater reimagining funerary rituals through metaphor, an installation interpreting ancient cosmological beliefs on life and death, and an interactive card game encouraging participants to confront fictional death scenarios and engage in self-reflection. These elements are unified in an immersive curatorial experience that combines artworks, textual prompts, and derivative products to inspire reflection and conversation. By presenting death through accessible visual narratives and supporting charities like Caledonia Funeral Aid and Richmond’s Hope, our project bridges artistic exploration with community engagement and social impact.

A. Memento and Soul—Sculptures Incorporating Figurative and Abstract Visual Symbols

We designed the *Mementos* sculpture (Fig. 6) to symbolize the enduring bond between individuals and deceased loved ones, highlighting the historical role of mementos in grief, a practice dating back over 2,000 years. Inspired by ancient Chinese bronze ritual vessels, the sculpture incorporates visual representations of personal mementos (e.g., urns, jewelry, voicemail recordings) to express how people preserve memories of the departed, suggesting their continued presence in our recollections. Made from paper clay to emulate a traditional vessel, a flower emerging from its opening symbolizes lasting love and remembrance. Ink illustrations, painted on a white surface for clarity, were also printed using Lino-cut techniques and compiled into an anthology accompanying the vessel. Drawn in a comforting retro style using a limited, low-saturation, and warm color palette, the illustrations evoke a peaceful feeling with a sense of hope and positivity.



Fig. 6. Immersive mementos, ink on paper clay, lino-cut printmaking.

In addition, our abstract sculpture series *The Soul and Body* (Fig. 7) explores the mysterious connection between soul and body. These works reflect on philosophical and religious ideas that the soul comprises multiple parts and the body serves as its container. Cracks in the sculptures symbolize the soul's release from physical constraints, while the fragments represent its multiple facets. By creating a peaceful and quiet atmosphere, these abstract and intriguing forms encourage open dialogues and invite viewers to think about the nature of the soul.



Fig. 7. The Soul and Body, clay, UV adhesive.

B. Ritual and Metaphor—A Three-Dimensional Illustration

We created a paper theater to reimagine a funeral scene, drawing on the traditional Chinese concept of “life is a theater”, where one’s life plays out like a film at the moment of death. In this metaphor, the abstract notion of life is understood through the familiar idea of a theatrical performance, with the funeral representing the final act. Inspired by the traditional Chinese “spirit house”—a paper-crafted miniature house burned in funerals to honor and accompany the deceased—our paper theater resembles a tombstone on the outside but reveals a stage within (Fig. 8). Illustrations decorate the 3D paper sculpture, reinforcing the life-as-theater metaphor. While farewells are painful, death may be seen as a well-deserved rest after completing the “performance” of life.



Fig. 8. Life is a theater, ink on paper.

C. Ancient Cosmologies about Life and Death—An Illustrated Installation

Another installation, *Returning to the Universe*, is inspired by the T-shaped painted silk garment from Tomb No. 1 at Mawangdui, the 2nd-century BCE burial site of the Marquise of Dai [5]. Known as the “fei-garment”, the term “fei” implies meanings such as “flying”, “screening”, or “proxy”, each suggesting a ritualistic function [5]. Early texts link the garment to soul-summoning rites, though its elaborate design hints at a deeper symbolic role. The artwork envisions the Marquise’s spirit ascending from the underworld into the heavens, merging with ancestral origins. Motifs like coiled dragons, the Jin Wu bird, and a jade disc underscore this celestial transition. In Chinese cosmology, dragons represent life force or *qi* ascending toward the heavens, symbolizing death as a transformation rather than an end. These ancient narratives are imbued with poetic romanticism that guides us toward life’s cyclical renewal. Modern quantum theory similarly views consciousness as quantum energy. Lanza and

Berman [6] suggest that consciousness may persist via quantum entanglement after death, highlighting the significance of life beyond death.

As shown in Fig. 9, we created a T-shaped installation suspended against a black backdrop. This installation merges ancient and modern perspectives, positing the soul as quantum information enduring in the cosmos. Painted on sulfuric paper to evoke lightness, the piece mimics the original garment’s function of aiding the soul’s ascension. Its wrinkled texture reflects the relic’s age, while layered tissue paper suggests textile richness. Vivid, colorful brushstrokes represent consciousness as cosmic energy, while the ethereal color palette serves as a modern reinterpretation of ancient afterlife visions, inviting contemporary viewers to engage in a dialogue that transcends time and space.



Fig. 9. Returning to the universe, acrylic and ink on sulfuric paper.

D. Experiencing Death—An Interactive Card Game

We designed the *Death Departments* card game to encourage relaxed, meaningful conversations about death (Fig. 10). By encouraging participants to confront death, explore cultural beliefs, and relate personal experiences, this interactive approach transforms the heavy topic into a creative, open exploration of values and emotions. The game addresses common fears, especially those surrounding the dying process and its uncertainties, by presenting varied scenarios that prompt players to reflect on confusion, sorrow, fear, or guilt. To earn points, players must relate these experiences back to themselves, fostering personal engagement and meaningful dialogue. This approach helps them build empathy and form a healthier, more open relationship with death.

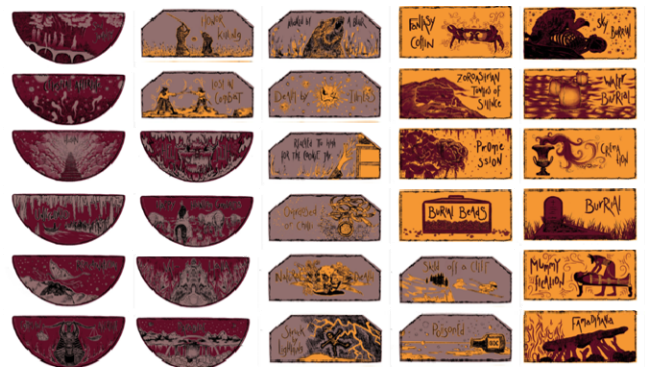




Fig. 10. The death departments.

E. Transcendence: An Immersive Life and Death Exhibition

The artworks were ultimately consolidated into an exhibition titled *Transcendence*, first presented at the Edinburgh College of Art Wee Red Bar and open to the entire university. Each piece included a textual description, enabling visitors to navigate freely and engage with reflective prompts (Fig. 11). The spatial layout supported thematic coherence, with a designated area for playing the card game in an accessible space. Visitors discussed the works among themselves and with the artists, enriching their understanding of the theme. A table offering prints and publications encouraged audiences to select a memento of the experience (Fig. 12), with the publication which introduced the works and articulated the artists' reflections on life and death, emerging as the most popular item (Figs. 13 and 14). Partner charities also set up promotional and donation tables. The exhibition was later re-staged in the main sculpture court during the annual Winter Fair, demonstrating the model's flexibility as an educational tool on life and death themes in open public spaces.



Fig. 11. Photos taken at the exhibitions.



Fig. 12. Prints and publications.



Fig. 13. Interior page designs of the publication.



Fig. 14. Printed publications.

II. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this study, we have shown how illustration can be integrated with sculpture, installation, interactive design, and curatorial strategies to effectively dismantle cultural taboos and address gaps in life-and-death education. By grounding our methods in Traditional Chinese life philosophy, Western existentialism, and theories of artistic vitality, we translated abstract existential ideas into age-appropriate, cross-cultural visual metaphors, designed a multimodal learning environment, and curated the *Transcendence* exhibition—a cohesive spatial narrative that sustained emotional resonance and deepened intellectual inquiry into life and death. By systematically aligning visual strategies with philosophical foundations and practical exhibition outcomes, this research offers a replicable and scalable model for life-and-death education that cultivates openness, resilience, and lasting philosophical inquiry.

Looking ahead, enriching this model with digital extensions such as interactive projections, video installations, and soundscapes could further amplify audience agency and broaden accessibility, enabling remote audiences to engage in life-and-death education. Embedding these art-based methods into formal curricula to facilitate multimodal workshops will help institutionalize the approach, while engaging with cultural institutions in local regions can ensure that future works resonate with local cultures and traditions. Finally, embracing community-driven collaboration, such as school groups and social organizations, into the design process will ground the work in lived experience and

generate more nuanced, empathetic pathways for exploring life and death.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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