

Personas: George Segal's Abraham and Isaac
Scenes from the Collection
The Jewish Museum
July 19, 2019–October 31, 2020

Exhibition Wall Texts and Checklist

George Segal's Abraham and Isaac

On May 4, 1970, the Ohio National Guard was called to the Kent State University campus. This was in response to several days of mass student protest against the escalation of the Vietnam War. In the ensuing confrontation, the Guard opened fire on the students, killing four and wounding nine. The official government investigation concluded the shootings were unjustified. This use of military force against civilians resonated throughout the mass media and led to demonstrations across the country.

The sculptor George Segal was commissioned in 1978 to create a memorial for this event. He turned to an episode from the Hebrew Bible in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son as a demonstration of his faith and obedience. Segal chose his fellow artist Lucas Samaras as the model for Abraham and Alexander Tsiaras, a student, for the kneeling Isaac. Segal's allegory poetically reflects on the idea of generational struggle. These biblical personas, according to the artist, "call on older people who have the power of life and death over their children to exercise love, compassion, and restraint."

George Segal (American, 1924–2000)

Abraham and Isaac (in Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State University), 1978

Plaster, cloth, rope, metal, and acrylic paint, 84 x 120 x 50 in. (213.4 x 304.8 x 127 cm)

The Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of the George and Helen Segal Foundation, 2013–15

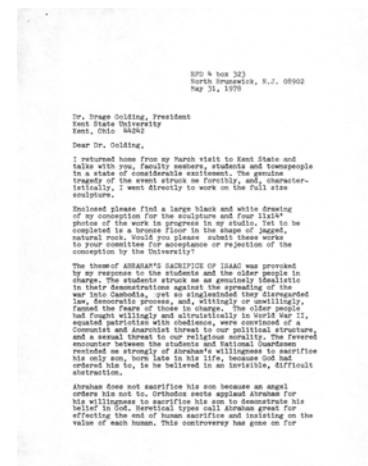
Segal worked in a variety of media, but is best known as a sculptor of highly realistic life-size figures. He made direct plaster casts from live models, preserving the white color of the material. In 1978 he was commissioned by an arts foundation to create a memorial to students killed by the Ohio National Guard while protesting against the Vietnam War at Kent State University.

In the Bible, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to show his devotion, but stays his hand at the last moment. Segal used this passage from Genesis as an allegory for the conflict between the generations and a commentary on the moral failure of the American government with respect to both Vietnam and the young protesters. In the 1980s Segal began to paint his figures black. Here, the shift underscores the work's role as a funerary monument.



Letter from George Segal to the president of Kent State University,
Brage Golding, North Brunswick, New Jersey, May 31, 1978
Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University Libraries,
Ohio

In the 1970s, when Segal was working on the Kent State commission, the killing of the students was still very recent and shocking. He knew that the memorial was controversial—the university and the state of Ohio were reluctant to record the event with a permanent reminder—and he expected his design to meet with resistance. He visited the university campus and then submitted a preparatory drawing and photographs of his sculpture-in-progress. In this letter to the university president, he explained his choice of an allegorical subject, based on the tragic antagonism of youth and age. "The issues are difficult and contradictory," Segal wrote; "I don't pretend to have the answers." His aim instead was to provoke "a more thoughtful attitude on both sides."



Arnold Newman (American, 1918–2006)

Dinner Party, Newman Apartment, New York City, April 1979

Gelatin silver print, 4 x 6 in. (10.2 x 15.2 cm) [unframed]

George Segal Papers, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, New Jersey, Gift of the George and Helen Segal Foundation

At the time when he was working on *Abraham and Isaac*, Segal attended a dinner party at the home of his friend, the photographer Arnold Newman. The artist Lucas Samaras, who was the model for the figure of Abraham, is second from left, facing Segal (in a white shirt).



Letter from Peter Putnam to the president of Kent State University,
Brage Golding, Mildred Andrews Fund, Cleveland, Ohio, August 30,
1978

Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University Libraries,
Ohio

After eight months of negotiation, Kent State University declined Segal's project. (An abstract memorial by another designer was eventually installed on campus in 1986, along with several other markers and artworks.) In December 1978 the Mildred Andrews Fund, which had commissioned Segal's sculpture, offered *Abraham and Isaac* to Princeton University. The following year it was cast in bronze and installed there.



Arnold Newman (American, 1918–2006)

George Segal, Abraham and Isaac Sculpture: Dedication of Kent State Sculpture at Princeton, October 6, 1979

Gelatin silver print

Collection of Rena Segal

George Segal attended the dedication of his sculpture at Princeton University, together with his daughter, Renabeth; his wife, Helen; Daryl Harnisch of the Sidney Janis Gallery; and Dean Kahler, a student who had been paralyzed in the shootings at Kent State University. The director of the Princeton University Art Museum, Fred Licht, helped to arrange the gift and defended its controversial aspects, which, he said, dealt with the "crises that contemporary students and contemporary teachers have lived with."



George Segal (American, 1924–2000)

Proposed Memorial for Kent State University, Ohio, on the Events of May 4, 1970: Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac, 1978

Graphite on paper, 36 3/4 x 28 1/4 in. (93.4 x 71.8 cm) [framed]

Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University Libraries, Ohio



George Segal (American, 1924–2000)

Memorial for May 4, 1970, Kent State University: Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac. Work in Progress, May 31, 1978

Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 28 cm) [unframed]

Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University Libraries, Ohio



John Paul Filo (American, 1948–)

Mary Ann Vecchio with the body of Jeffrey Glenn Miller, shot by National Guardsmen during an antiwar demonstration, Kent State University, Ohio, May 4, 1970

Gelatin silver print, 7 11/16 x 9 1/2 in. (19.5 x 24.1 cm) [image] 8 1/8 x 10 1/16 in. (20.6 x 25.6 cm) [paper] 14 1/16 x 16 7/8 in. (35.7 x 42.9 cm) [mat]

International Center of Photography, New York, Gift of Jim and Evelyn Hughes, 1998

This now-famous photograph was taken by a student photographer as Jeffrey Miller lay dead in the street at Kent State University. The Ohio National Guard loosed a fusillade of more than sixty shots in thirteen seconds, wounding nine students and killing four: Miller, Allison Krause, Sandra Scheuer, and William Knox Schroeder. The photograph earned Filo a Pulitzer Prize and was published widely. Edited and cropped in various ways for graphic impact, it became the mass-media icon of the tragedy.



Nixon's Home Front

Cover of *Newsweek*, May 18, 1970

Ink on glossy newsprint, 11 x 8 1/2 in. (27.94 x 21.59 cm) [unframed]

Two weeks after the shootings at Kent State, the news magazine *Newsweek* released an issue devoted to the event. For the cover John Filo's photograph was transformed. The finality of death is evoked by the prone lower body of the victim, and the kneeling woman becomes a symbol of national grief and outrage. The extreme cropping and violent color contrasts of contemporary printing techniques emphasize the stark horror of the scene.



Richard Hamilton (British, 1922–2011)

Kent State, 1970

Screenprint on paper, 28 11/16 x 40 1/4 in. (72 x 102.2 cm) [sheet]
Kent Fine Art, New York

The killings at Kent State were immediately seen as a proxy for the Vietnam War itself. Artists responded. In this screenprint, Richard Hamilton focuses on the bloodied body of Dean Kahler, paralyzed after being shot. He photographed his television screen during a BBC newsflash on the events in Ohio. Hamilton was particularly interested in the techniques used by the media to disseminate such traumatic images. To the artist's mind, the degradation of the final image through multiple reproduction processes suited the brutality of the events and was "far more menacing than a sentimental registering of personal disgust."



Michael Blackwood, director (American, 1934–.)

George Segal, 1979

Color film, 8 min. extracted from 58-minute original

Produced by and courtesy of Blackwood Productions, New York –

Michael Blackwood documented the New York art world on film extensively in the 1960s. He recorded George Segal in his studio as he prepared casts for the Kent State University memorial while explaining the significance of the subject of *Abraham and Isaac*. The film features the artist; his wife, Helen; his daughter, Renabeth; Alex Tsiaras, posing as Isaac; and Herbert Lust as Abraham. Lust was later replaced by Lucas Samaras whose demeanor, Segal felt, better paralleled that of the biblical patriarch.

