Exhibition

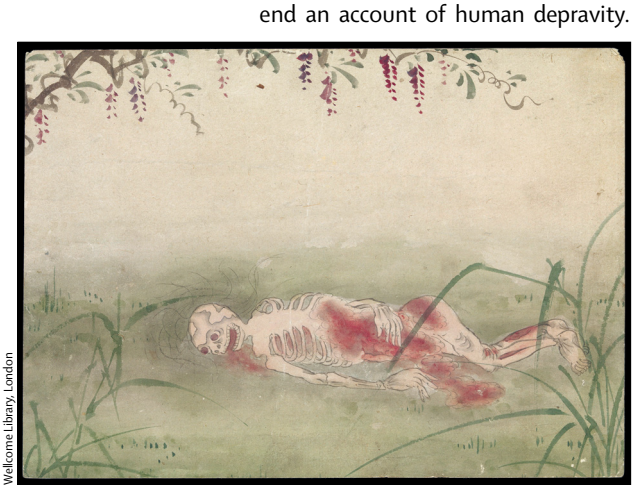
A macabre curiosity

Forensics: The Anatomy of Crime
Wellcome Collection, London, UK, until June 21, 2015
http://wellcomecollection.org/forensics

By no means all crimes are murders, but there is no mistaking the real subject of *Forensics: The Anatomy of Crime*, a new exhibition at the Wellcome Collection in London. It is all about mortality—the fleshiness, impermanence, and fragility of our existence, and the traces we leave behind. The sensibility here is more Edgar Allan Poe than Arthur Conan Doyle: not so much the clinical investigation of a crime as an exploration of existential terror.

For although the exhibits consider methods of criminological detection, deduction, and prosecution—fingerprints, Photofit facial reconstruction, legal proceedings—they are pervaded by a sense of the dark brutality that drives one person to treat another as a piece of meat fit for the worms. It is an old fascination. Poe's 1841 *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* offers a taste of what you should expect to find in this grimly compelling exhibition: "On the chair lay a razor, besmeared with blood. On the hearth were two or three long and thick tresses of grey human hair, also dabbled in blood, and seeming to have been pulled out by the roots… [there] lay the corpse of the old lady, with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off."

That (spoiler alert!) wasn't in the end an account of human depravity. But there's equal bestiality on display in surveyor Frederick William Foster's sketches of the body of Catherine Eddowes mutilated by Jack the Ripper in 1888. If it seems a mercy that *Forensics* doesn't include the contemporary photos too, there is plenty else to challenge the squeamish. It's all too easy to imagine the stories behind preserved mortuary remains that seem at first like innocuous anatomical specimens: the slices of brain traversed by the dark band of a bullet's path, the liver punctured by knife wounds, the skull glued back together from the jigsaw remains of an attack with a "blunt instrument".



Wellcome Library, London

Kusozu, *The death of a noble lady and the decay of her body*

> **"the science takes a back seat to reflections on our ability—maybe even our compulsion—to stare ugly death in the face"**

Forensics is modestly sized, but crammed with points of ghoulish interest. The real Parisian "rue morgue" of the 19th century, for example, was something of a public attraction: one could visit a viewing gallery in the morgue to watch the handling of the corpses. That helps explain the origin of the word from the French *morguer*, to peer. And it is hard to suppress a voyeuristic shiver on seeing the original reports of the investigation into the infamous Dr Hawley Crippen for the murder of his wife, parts of whose dismembered body he hid under the floor of his basement. Crippen was convicted and hanged in 1910, and it is chilling to find that there was still a medieval aspect of public spectacle about it: the exhibit includes a "broadside" pamphlet printed to mark the occasion of "The Execution of Dr Crippen", awarded here the Punch-like epithet "The Naughty Doctor".

The Wellcome Collection has always shown both a commitment to integrating art into its scientific subject matter and a light touch in doing so. The combination works powerfully here, for there are several exhibits that defy categorisation. In a series of 18th-century Japanese watercolours, the "nine stages" of decay of the body of a noblewoman are painted with a delicacy that almost inhibits the mind from processing the grotesque subject matter. The images of American photographer Sally Mann of that same decomposition process in corpses exposed to the elements genuinely defeat classification. They are records of a scientific experiment in Tennessee to document the progress of decay, but also appeared (controversially) in Mann's 2003 photography book *What Remains*. The experience convinced Mann to donate her own body for scientific research after her death.

There is a similar confusion of status about Corinne May Botz's large-scale photographs of the miniature crime scenes made in the 1940s and 1950s by criminologist Frances Glessner Lee for training police. These constructions, an original of which is on display, are dolls' houses from hell: beautifully rendered interior scenes where unspeakable things have happened. Botz's photographs expand them to a nightmarish human scale. This interplay between documentation and art works both ways. The monochrome photographs of New York crime scenes recorded with forensic detachment by photographer Arthur Fellig are like stills from a surreal film noir: a street crowd gawps at a dressmaker's manikin stiffly doubling for a murder victim.

So while there is plenty to be learnt from *Forensics* about the way pathology and anatomy have assisted criminal investigations, the science takes a back seat to reflections on our ability—maybe even our compulsion—to stare ugly death in the face.

Philip Ball