



THANATOLOGY

Beyond the grave

Death's multifarious faces in two London exhibitions exhilarate **Ewen Callaway**.

Some people hoard comic books, others sports cars, dolls or door knobs. Pretty much anything that can be culled, catalogued and curated is being amassed by someone, somewhere.

Richard Harris collects death. More than a decade ago, the former antique-print dealer and one-time anatomy student came across a series of *memento mori* prints, such as a late eighteenth-century engraving that depicts a half-man, half-skeleton digging his own grave. That print, along with several hundred other works that Harris has since acquired, is now on show at *Death*, a marvellous exhibition at London's Wellcome Collection.

"It's a universal subject," Harris said, as gallery workers put the finishing touches to the five-room, 300-piece exhibit. "We're all going to die."

The vast Wellcome Collection — comprising medical devices, texts and miscellanea — is an appropriate setting for Harris' collection, which shattered attendance records when it was shown at the Chicago Cultural Center in Illinois earlier this year. But it is safe to say that Henry Wellcome, the million-

aire who amassed the bulk of the Collection, never owned anything quite like Jodie Carey's 4-metre-tall *In the Eyes*

of Others (2009). One of the work's three chandeliers, which are made of hundreds of plaster-cast bones, illuminates the entrance.

Bones abound at *Death*. Barthel Bruyn the Elder's sixteenth-century *Portrait of a Man/A Skull in a Niche* is a two-sided painting: nobleman on one side, a skull on the other. One wonders whether its original owner oriented it according to his health and mood. Contrast that work with the Argentine collective Mondongo's *The Skull Series* (2009) — a 2-by-2-metre skull made of miniature plastic books, buildings and a rubber duck, set against a backdrop that depicts *Pacman* video-game screens. 'Conversation piece' doesn't do it justice. Harris's own favourite is also the smallest: June Leaf's *Gentleman on Green Table* (1999–2000), a hunched skeletal form made of rusted tin, wire and screws. It is more evocative than any pile of calcium carbonate I've seen or held.

Yet there is a sense of osseous overload. By the time you get to Marcos Raya's imaginative series of Mexican portraits, inspired by Day of the Dead folk art, with skeletons superimposed on each family member, you have seen bones forged from brass, papier mâché and laser-cut paper.

The most powerful pieces tackle death directly. In a series of 51 etchings, the German expressionist Otto Dix depicts his time

as a First World War artillery gunner. *Storm Trooper Advancing Under Gas* (1924) shows ghoulish gas-mask-clad soldiers emerging from a trench. A century earlier, Francisco Goya captured the horrors of the Peninsula War between France and Spain in a series of haunting etchings, *The Disasters of War* (1810–20). Corpses, a severed head and limbs dangle casually from a tree in *An heroic defeat! With dead men!*. These etchings, along with those of Jacques Callot from the end of the Thirty Years War, resemble war photojournalism in their matter-of-fact portrayal of brutality.

Death gets a more informative treatment across town, at the Museum of London's fascinating *Doctors, Dissection and Resurrection Men*. If real-estate tycoons are the primary beneficiaries of London's redevelopment boom, archaeologists come in a solid second; they often gain access to long-buried historical sites when new construction peels back a layer of the city's past. (*Nature* last year published the genome of the bacterium responsible for the Black Death, collected from bones excavated by Museum archaeologists in a fourteenth-century plague pit.)

In 2006, Museum of London archaeologists unveiled a nearly 200-year-old cemetery adjacent to the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel. Their excavation revealed graves containing jumbles of bones from many people, as well as the odd turtle and cow, showing signs of amputation and dissection.

With the surgical profession on the rise in the early nineteenth century, medical students at private anatomy colleges needed cadavers for study. Legitimate sources — executed prisoners — were scarce, so anatomy schools sought the services of the grave robbers known as 'resurrection men'. The text displays at the exhibition are enriched with a range of journal clippings, letters and other primary sources.

Resurrection men could earn a handsome salary for digging up one body, and some even turned to murder. The slaying of an Italian boy and the trial of his murderers is told in detail, through video and documents. The killers were convicted and executed, and their bodies given over for dissection. The episode sparked widespread public revulsion and led to the passage of the Anatomy Act of 1832. This allowed the "unclaimed and friendless" bodies of indigent hospital patients to be used for dissection.

Among a sometimes intrusive welter of videos and interactive displays is the thoughtful *The Body Beyond Death* (2012), in which Londoners give their views on mortality. One, a young woman in a headscarf, explains why she would not want to donate her organs — poignantly showing how, for some, the dead are much more than a pile of bones. ■

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