

DEATH

A PICTURE ALBUM

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**wellcome
collection**

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INTRODUCTION

This book contains treasures from a unique collection devoted to our complex and contradictory attitudes towards death. Assembled by Richard Harris, a former antique print dealer from Chicago, the collection is spectacularly diverse, and includes art, historical artefacts, scientific specimens and ephemera from across the world. Rare artists' prints are displayed together with anatomical illustrations and sentimental postcards, images of human remains join Renaissance *vanitas* paintings, and a range of contemporary artworks show that death remains a source of powerful inspiration for many artists today.

At the heart of the collection are questions about the value of art in communicating ideas about death and the body. Can the production and appreciation of symbolic artworks help us to negotiate death? What function do inanimate objects play in burial and mourning rituals? How can our possessions help to activate memories that connect us to the dead? What might the impulse to collect signify about our attitudes towards death or our desires to transcend it? A modern-day cabinet of curiosities, this book functions partly as the visual autobiography of one remarkable individual, at the same time providing us with an opportunity to examine our own feelings about mortality. Sometimes disturbing, occasionally macabre and often moving, these images provide a singular insight into the history of our eternal desire to make peace with death.

Kate Forde, Curator, Wellcome Collection



Vanitas Still Life with a Bouquet and a Skull

Adriaen van Utrecht (1599–1652, Belgium)
Oil on canvas, 1643

Van Utrecht's composition teems with precious objects testifying to the pleasures of life and the inexorable flow of time. The pocket-watch, hourglass and bouquet of flowers are reminders of ephemerality, contrasted with the immobile skull, whose hollow eye-sockets draw the viewer into their shadow. The laurel wreath alludes to the ultimate triumph of death.

THE DANCE OF DEATH

The images here focus on the universal certainty of death, regardless of our status in life. Versions of the *Danse Macabre* first appeared in the late Middle Ages, when Europe was periodically ravaged by plagues, famines and wars, and such images were powerful reminders of death as the ultimate leveller. Scenes of feverish revelry uniting the humans and skeletons were intended to dissuade people from self-indulgence and vanity, while offering a humorous perspective on life's absurdity. A common theme of the *Danse Macabre* is the indiscriminate nature of death – popes and paupers, kings and peasants, women and men, old and young, the good and the wicked are all equal in the eyes of death. Here, too, we are presented with some of the many faces of death: (triumphantly brandishing his scythe or dolefully sounding the bell; as a benign skeleton playing a violin or as a playful circus performer; death the enemy and death the friend.

Head Games

Susan Hardy Brown (b. 1947, USA)
Offset printed artist's book

To produce this book, Susan Hardy Brown used a set of ten rubber stamps derived from early 18th-century anatomy engravings of the human skeleton. A spirited interplay of ideas, with clever use of the humerus in conjunction with the cranium, this is skulduggery at its most visual.

