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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

The Art of Crime: Murder and Mug Shots at the Met

Museum exhibit traces history of crime photography and a mass cultural fascination with gore



Toe tags on the body of John Dillinger in the Chicago morgue in 1934. *PHOTO: BETTMANN/CORBIS*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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A stiff corpse may not be the normal stuff of fine art, but it almost always makes for a riveting photo.

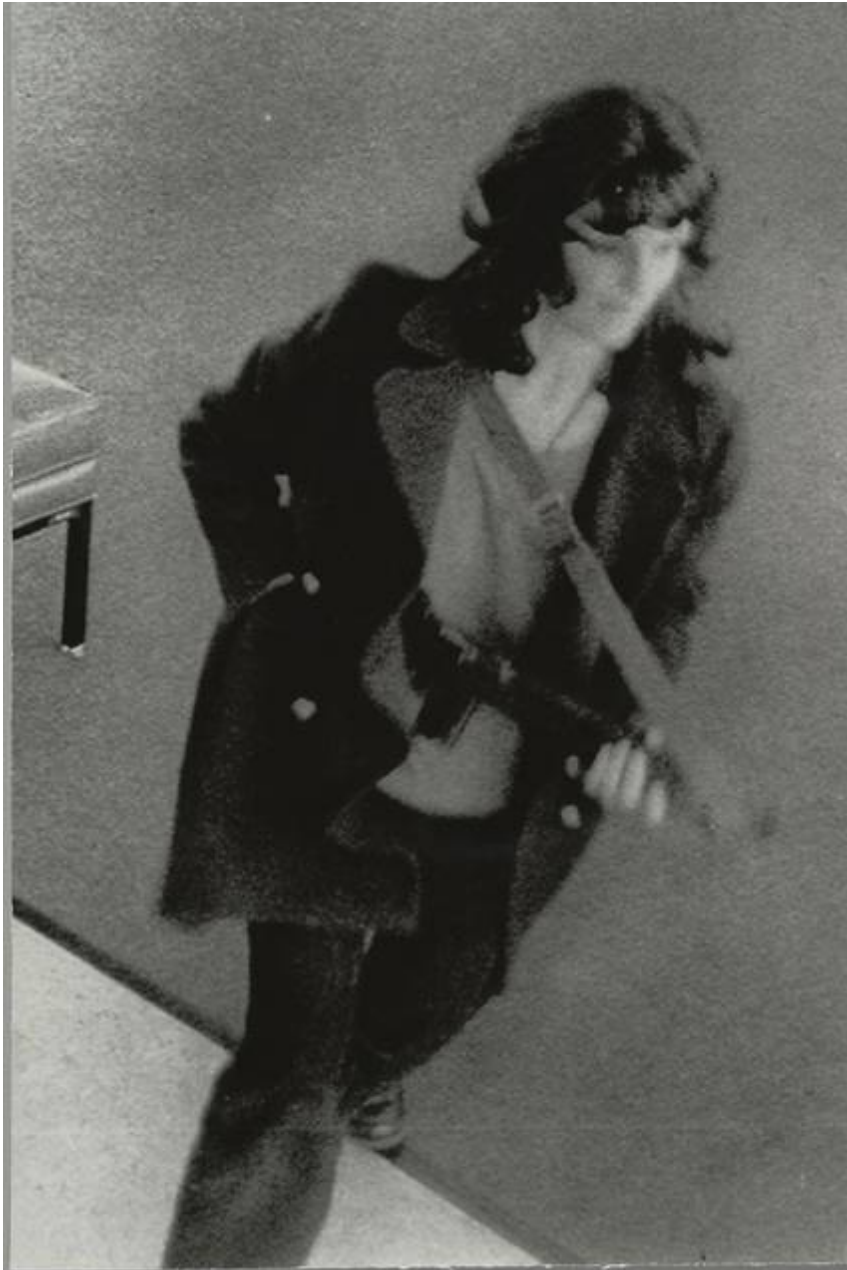
In “Crime Stories: Photography and Foul Play,” an exhibit opening Monday at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, curators have dug deep into the museum’s photo collection, exhuming a wide and historic array of images that are similarly hard to resist. Their subject: shady characters, dirty deeds and their often grisly results.

From mug shots to snapshots, forensic records to photojournalism, the exhibit

spotlights “our mass cultural obsession with gore,” said Doug Eklund, a curator in the museum’s photo department and one of the show’s four co-organizers.

It reflects our impulse, he said, to both participate in the transgression of the act by looking and then also participate in the punishment: “You get to have your cake and eat it too.”

The images go back almost as far as the photographic medium itself, starting with an 1860 portrait from a “rogues’ gallery” book, which tagged criminals with labels such as “counterfeiter,” “sneak thief” and “cracksman,” for a burglar or safecracker.



A bank security camera image distributed by United Press International shows Patty Hearst in 1974. *PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART*

Images from the 20th century range from documents like a morgue photo of the tag hanging from gangster John Dillinger's big toe and bank-surveillance shots of kidnapped heiress Patty Hearst to fine-art photography by Diane Arbus and Larry Clark.

Other historical pictures come from Alphonse Bertillon, a French criminologist who pioneered the use of photography to help systematize the tracking of miscreants in late-19th-century Paris and identify repeat offenders. Along with taking precise measurements of various body parts, Bertillon took pictures in a methodical format that came to be known as the mug shot, with both a frontal and side view.

"The profile view was more important because it shows the unchanging structure of the face and also the ear," said Mia Fineman, associate photography curator at the Met and another exhibit co-organizer. "If you really wanted to make sure you had the right person, you would look at the shape of their ear, which was unique."

In the latter half of the 19th century, photographs also worked their way onto "wanted" posters. A poster in the show pictures an array of fugitives including one of history's most notorious: presidential assassin John Wilkes Booth.

The poster hangs near a later photograph of Booth's co-conspirators in the murder of Abraham Lincoln awaiting their execution. It was taken by Alexander Gardner, a noted Civil War photographer who had been granted exclusive access to that and other Lincoln-assassination-related scenes by the U.S. Secret Service. Some of his photos served as sources for woodcut illustrations published at the time in Harper's magazine.

As crime-scene photography became a routine tool for police investigations, it also helped drive the rise of tabloid newspapers between the two world wars. Arguably the star of the genre was Arthur Fellig, aka Weegee, known for his graphically lurid but stylized pictures of murder and mayhem that often drew viewers deeper into the picture frame with dramatic camera angles and cropping.

Weegee's signature look was "dark and gritty, but humorous and aware of feeding people's appetite for gore and crime," said Ms. Fineman.

Typical was an image like "Human Head Cake Box Murder," an overhead shot from 1940 of a group of men and a photographer focused on a severed head on a sidewalk. With the live men's noggins obscured by wide-brimmed fedoras, the image becomes a winking shot of headless bodies all focused on a bodiless head.

It wasn't just hard-boiled photojournalists who had a fascination for the sinister



A robber at a Cleveland bank in an image distributed by United Press International. *PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART*

subject. Richard Avedon, for one, was renowned for his portrait and fashion work. But in 1960, he traveled to Kansas at the request of his friend Truman Capote. The result: a striking up-close image of Dick Hickock, one of the two killers featured in Capote's true-crime novel "In Cold Blood."

Some artists eyed crime photos as inspiration, source material or both. The show includes the first photo of death by the electric chair—a macabre 1929 image of murderess Ruth Snyder taken clandestinely at Sing Sing by a reporter with a miniature ankle camera. In tribute to its effect, a scrapbook on display shows a newspaper copy of the same photo, collected by a young Walker Evans.

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“Here we have a young artist interested in image culture looking at the big trial of the day,” Ms. Fineman said.

Hanging nearby is pop artist Andy Warhol’s silk-screen image of the same prison’s electric chair decades later, isolated in a cavernous chamber and made more haunting by its murky smears of paint. Appropriated from mass media, the picture channels the artist’s fascination with the sordid spectacle of crime and our broader culture’s fixation with it.

Even the Met’s curators themselves said that poring through the gore in their collection offered certain forbidden pleasures.

Whether artistic in intention or vernacular in nature, said Mr. Eklund, the images “have a kind of energy and make you look.”

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