

# The New York Times

## A Tell-Tale Display Brings Words to Life



The Poe exhibition at the Morgan Library

Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

By KAREN JONES Published: October 27, 2013

TORTURED souls, restless spirits and the fear of premature burial are familiar themes in the works of [Edgar Allan Poe](#). The author of “The Raven,” “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” found the mysteries of the grave fertile ground for his gothic tales

Apropos for the master of the macabre, a fragment of Poe’s original coffin is on view in “[Edgar Allan Poe: Terror of the Soul](#)” at the Morgan Library and Museum in Manhattan. “It is sure to put shivers down the spines of visitors,” said Declan Kiely, exhibition co-curator and Robert H. Taylor curator and department head of literary and historical manuscripts.

Poe lived most of his life in poverty and was not destined to rest peacefully in the Baltimore cemetery where he was buried without fanfare in 1849. His posthumous fame as an esteemed author, poet and literary critic led to his exhumation and relocation in 1875 to “a more honored part of the cemetery,” Mr. Kiely said. A bystander collected the coffin fragment (4 by 6 inches) from the damaged original as “a morbid keepsake.”

For maximum effect, Mr. Kiely has displayed the fragment with original newspaper excerpts describing the coffin’s contents: “The flesh and the funeral robes of course had crumbled to dust,

and there was nothing left but the bare bones and a few clumps of hair attached to the skull, to tell that a body had once been there.”

“ ‘Eeew’ was the effect I was going for,” Mr. Kiely said. “I think Poe would have approved.”

He also painted the exhibition gallery blood red in homage to “The Masque of the Red Death” and moved display cases close together to invoke the claustrophobia of “The Premature Burial.”

“It was a risky strategy, but I wanted to create a sense of unease,” Mr. Kiely said. “Otherwise, you are asking people to look at yellowed pieces of handwritten paper 150 years or more old.”

Taking risks is necessary when designing an exhibition like “Terror of the Soul,” composed mainly of manuscripts, letters and other handwritten works on paper.

“The secret to doing an exhibition on a literary figure is to mix up your letters, manuscripts and related materials to give visitors a balanced diet. I think of myself as a mixologist,” Mr. Kiely said. “In a visual arts exhibition, you can put 50 Picassos on a wall, but it would be deathly to expect a visitor to look at even 20 letters in one part of the exhibition.”

At a time when readers are more accustomed to viewing text printed on screens or in books, handwritten manuscripts and letters may initially appear “distant,” said Daniel Greene, vice president for research and academic programs at the Newberry Library in Chicago. He added, “But they feel closer if we take the time.”

Mr. Greene is co-curator of the Newberry exhibition “[Home Front: Daily Life in the Civil War North](#),” which focuses on the war’s impact on civilians. “Soldiers’ letters were a key way news of the war traveled home,” Mr. Greene said. He paired a photograph of Pvt. George Deal, a Union soldier, with a poignant letter to his wife, Sarah, in which he expresses concern for her health. Displaying the homesick soldier’s photograph with his letter “helps him come alive and give a better picture of who he was.” Private Deal died at the Battle of Atlanta in 1864.

“Home Front” also includes sheet music from the era. Mr. Greene hired local musicians to record selections of the music, which can be heard in the gallery or through mobile devices.

Though literary exhibitions are based on creating an engagement with the written word, some handwritten manuscripts hold a fascination for visitors even if they are illegible, said Stephen Enniss, director of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, and former Eric Weinmann librarian at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

“This happened all the time at the Folger,” Mr. Enniss said.

He cited a 16th-century letter from Thomas Cromwell referring to the approaching marriage of Henry VIII to Anne of Cleves. Despite its being written in what he calls English secretary hand, a style common in the 16th century “but like a foreign language today,” visitors wanted to see it.

Letters, manuscripts or personal effects can also become surrogates for the absent author, Mr. Enniss said. “The response we feel towards these items is rooted in their survival and their startling presence in our time. It is a response to materials that is not textual, but indeed quite mysterious.”

Edgar Allan Poe would have approved.

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