

Self-Guide

Off with Their Heads

Inspired by the playfully disembodied human heads that practitioners of Victorian photcollage whimsically grafted on to animal bodies or morphed into household objects, this guide reveals the bounty of beheadings in the collection, from the ghoulish to the gorgeous.



GALLERY 1

Untitled page from *The Madame B Album* (1870s) by Marie-Blanche-Hennelle Fournier

Following the Queen of Hearts's repeated directive—"Off with their heads!"—aristocratic Victorian women regularly decapitated the studio photos of friends and family to compose their humorous and sometimes rather subversive photcollage scenes. As this page from the museum's own Madame B album demonstrates, the severed heads were often reassembled into animal bodies—both complimentary and insulting. Being associated with a turkey, as you might imagine, was no more flattering in the 19th century than it is today, so we can only wonder what sort of joke or commentary Madame B was making by including herself and family at the crest of this turkey's tail feathers.



GALLERY 220

Head of a Guillotined Man (1818/19) by Jean Louis André Théodore Géricault

While preparing to create his notorious painting *The Raft of the Medusa*, which captures the final tortuous days of the Medusa shipwreck victims, French Romantic painter Géricault became somewhat obsessed with the suffering and death the victims would have endured. He became a frequent visitor of morgues, dissection amphitheatres, and hospitals and often brought home cadavers and amputated body parts, which the artist reportedly kept to the point of decomposition while he captured them in various studies and small oil paintings. The severed head in this work, that of a thief who died at the "madhouse" Bicêtre, is one that Géricault painted from various angles and supposedly kept in his house for a fortnight!



GALLERY 141

Twenty-Armed Dancing God Ganesha (11th century), India

It's not often that beheadings have happy endings, but this was indeed the case for the elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha. Lonely while her husband Shiva was away, the mountain goddess Parvati made a boy from dirt and called him Ganesha. When Shiva returned, he became enraged when the strange boy would not let him into his own home and swiftly chopped off his head. Parvati was inconsolable, and Shiva sent his *ganas*, or demon attendants, to search for the first suitable replacement they could find. They discovered, of course, a sleeping young elephant, whose head was reattached to the boy's body. Ganesha is depicted in this 11th-century sandstone dancing exuberantly; even his vehicle, the rat, joins in the romp.



GALLERY 155

Statue of a Seated Woman (2nd century A.D.), Roman

No, this headless Roman statue did not lose its head; in fact, it was specially made with the deep well in the neck to accommodate interchangeable heads. Marble was expensive, and it was rather wasteful of time and resources to throw out an elaborately carved sculpture and make a new one every time a new ruler came to power. So those economical Romans regularly reused the stone bodies and simply replaced the heads. This figure, draped with the heavy folds of a long garment and cloak, would have suited the goddess Juno or an empress such as Faustina the Elder or her daughter Faustina II, both elevated to goddesses after their deaths. Or perhaps the sculpture served as the body of all three in turn!



GALLERY 272

Head of Pavlova (1924) by Malvina Hoffman

The ballerina Anna Pavlova was known for her ethereal grace and sprightly energy, traits her friend, the sculptor Malvina Hoffman, captured in numerous works of art. However, this work, a wax portrait with closed eyes and a serene expression, presents a much more sedate, almost melancholic side of the dancing celebrity. The inspiration for the work came from a costume party in which Pavlova appeared as a somberly praying Byzantine Madonna. Though Hoffman cast the wax portrait from a life mask, the resigned and impassive expression make it appear almost like a death mask, a haunting reminder of mortality for even the most fairy-like creatures.



GALLERY 288

Woman in Tub (1988) by Jeff Koons

There's no definitive answer as to why Jeff Koons's *Woman in Tub* is missing most of her head. Since the work was created from a picture on a postcard, it may simply be due to the postcard's original image crop. Yet it also could be because Koons only depicted as much of the woman's body that was necessary to tell his joke—no head needed. As the artist explained, "There's a snorkel and somebody is doing something to her under the water because she's grabbing her breasts for protection. But the viewer also wants to victimize her." While the eye-catching woman is certainly the most readily apparent subject of the work, by repurposing found images and combining various techniques—the cartoonish style with the Rococo porcelain finish—Koons also makes taste itself his primary subject.

Can't get enough of those severed heads?

See how they're reattached in all the fantastical creations on view in *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, opening October 10. For the more gruesomely inclined, visit the city's Halloween festival, Chicagoween, when Daley Plaza becomes Franken Plaza, October 23–31.