

**Erin Monroe**

## **Gorey's Worlds**

**E**dward Gorey may have thought of it as “The Doubtful Bequest,” because its arrival was unannounced, like the peculiar visitor in one of his stories. Whereas Gorey’s uninvited guest proved to be nothing but a nuisance to the family he descended upon, his bequest was a welcome addition to the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art’s holdings. Nevertheless, word of Gorey’s intention to leave his collection of fine art to the museum was received without warning. The news was met with excitement and curiosity but also prompted another reaction: *What does it mean? Why us?* Gorey was notoriously evasive in conversations and in interviews, habitually avoiding directness and clarity. Therefore, the reason *why* he chose the Wadsworth Atheneum to be the sole recipient of his fine art collection was not explicitly stated in his will. The answer requires a degree of inference. First, that he chose to leave a bequest to a *public* institution suggests that he meant to share it widely. In essence, it became an invitation to step into his artistic mind-set and to consider the relationship between Gorey’s artistry and the artists he admired.<sup>1</sup> The collection manifests many attributes characterizing Gorey’s aesthetic: the compositions are primarily black-and-white, there is a potent gothic sensibility, and animals are prevalent. However, there are surprising distinctions too. Two noteworthy examples are the scarcity of images of children, and while much of Gorey’s own art recalls a distant past, he also actively collected art of the present.



Second, the museum held great personal significance to him because of a shared history with the two *b*'s: Balanchine and the ballet. Gorey deeply admired the work of George Balanchine, the preeminent choreographer of the New York City Ballet during Gorey's lifetime, who was briefly involved with the Wadsworth Atheneum.<sup>2</sup> Prior to establishing himself in New York City, Balanchine, who was Russian, was first invited to Hartford, Connecticut, to establish a school for ballet. This plan was formulated by the museum's pioneering director A. Everett "Chick" Austin Jr. and his Harvard classmate Lincoln Kirstein, a dance impresario. Within days of his arrival, Balanchine found Hartford too small for his magnificent creative vision. He and Kirstein redirected their energies to New York City, where they established the School of American Ballet (SAB), in 1934, and the New York City Ballet (NYCB) in 1948.<sup>3</sup> By 1953, when a young Harvard graduate named Edward Gorey moved from Cambridge to Manhattan, the NYCB was thriving under Balanchine's direction. For nearly thirty years, Gorey habitually attended the NYCB, to drink in Balanchine's masterful choreography and modern costuming. Gorey described him as "the ballet equivalent of Mozart" and gleaned from his mastery how figures move across the stage and the page.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Gorey also spent time in the galleries at the Wadsworth Atheneum, on his seasonal journeys to and from Cape Cod, Hartford being more or less a halfway point on his car trip.<sup>5</sup> Documentation of his interest in a wide array of objects in the collection includes the nearly two dozen postcards he collected of notable artworks in the museum's holdings, ranging from antiquities to Hudson River School landscape paintings.<sup>6</sup> After he took up full-time residence on the Cape, Gorey continued to make occasional city visits—to Boston and New York, as well as Hartford—for a worthwhile exhibition or performance. For example, in 1997, he returned to Hartford to see the exhibition *Design, Dance and Music of the Ballets Russes, 1909–1929* featuring the museum's storied collection of ballet costumes and scenery designs.<sup>7</sup>

## ACCUMULATING

Gorey loved collecting, which he preferred to call "accumulating." To better understand the Gorey bequest and his motivation as a collector, it is helpful to observe how he lived *with* his collections. From flea market finds to fine art purchased from Manhattan dealers, he filled his New York City apartment and then his home on Cape Cod with his collections. Gorey's relationship to these

physical objects crossed into the emotional realm and is best understood in the context of the philosophy of the twentieth-century cultural critic Walter Benjamin. Benjamin observed the evolving relationship between one's private living space and its contents. He claimed, "For the private individual the private environment represents the universe."<sup>8</sup> He further described the significance of interiors and their contents to the collector, who "dreams that he is not only in a distant or past world but also, at the same time, in a better one."<sup>9</sup> Benjamin's philosophy is a logical jumping-off point for our interpretation of Gorey's interiors as an extension of himself, and, conversely, of how these interior spaces were Gorey's creative laboratories.

From 1953 to 1983, Gorey lived with as many as six cats in an apartment in Manhattan's Murray Hill neighborhood. In 1978, photojournalist Harry Benson photographed Gorey in his apartment for a feature in *People* magazine. Benson's portraits of Gorey are possibly the only surviving images that offer a glimpse of his collections at this address (fig. 1.1).<sup>10</sup> Holding one of his beloved cats, a plainly dressed Gorey stands in front of one of his quintessentially eclectic arrangements. Hanging in proximity to a weathered crucifix and a needlepoint of a skull is a print by Edvard Munch and drawings by Balthus, two artists known for their macabre, creepy imagery.<sup>11</sup> The flaking paint at the top of the wall transposes the imagery of decay from art to life. This snapshot of one wall in Gorey's apartment shows an example of his catholic taste in art and his idiosyncratic display methods.

In 1979, Gorey bought a nineteenth-century sea captain's house on Cape Cod. He went on to accumulate art, objects, and a vast library of twenty-six thousand volumes, creating what one journalist later described as "cloistered clutter."<sup>12</sup> Number 8, Strawberry Lane, Yarmouth Port, now a designated historic property, is open to the public and has preserved a few of Gorey's peculiar arrangements. The house during Gorey's lifetime is far better documented than is his city apartment. The actor-photographer Kevin McDermott created a beautiful visual record of this sanctum. Published in 2003, *Elephant House: or, The Home of Edward Gorey* is not only a tribute to an artist McDermott deeply admired and respected; it also informs our understanding of Gorey's obsession with physical objects, both natural and man-made, large and small (figs. 1.2a,b).<sup>13</sup> The photographs of Gorey's second-floor studio reveal a tiny room no larger than a walk-in closet. When it came time to translate his conceptual ideas into artworks, Gorey crammed his six-foot-four-inch frame into this intimate space, since he admitted he "[didn't] need much room" to do his drawings.<sup>14</sup> To channel these imaginary worlds onto the page, Gorey plucked props, plots, and patterns from his vast mental inventory and from his accumulated objects.

**Fig. 1.1**

Harry Benson (Scottish, b. 1929), *Edward Gorey in His New York City Apartment with Cat*, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 30 × 24 in. (76.2 × 61 cm). Collection of the artist. © Harry Benson.





**Fig. 1.2a**

Kevin McDermott (American, b. 1964), *Detail of Edward Gorey's Living Room*, from *Elephant House*, 2000. Gelatin silver print. Collection of the artist.

**Fig. 1.2b**

Kevin McDermott, *The Studio*, from *Elephant House*, 2000. Gelatin silver print. Collection of the artist.



## THE COLLECTIONS

### The French Art

Gorey's studies as a French major at Harvard University laid the groundwork for a lifetime of Francophile interests. This may seem surprising since scholars and critics frequently note the Edwardian flavor of Gorey's aesthetic, evidenced by the formal interiors and gloomy Dickensian conditions. These English influences are altogether absent from the art he collected. He owned a single watercolor by the English artist Edward Lear—a drawing given to him by a friend—but he *purchased* nearly thirty prints and drawings by French artists such as Balthus, Pierre Bonnard, Eugène Delacroix, Jean Dubuffet, Édouard Manet, Charles Meryon, Odilon Redon, Georges Rouault, Félix Vallotton, and Édouard Vuillard, and photographs by Eugène Atget. Gorey wrote books in French and frequently interwove French phrases in his English texts.<sup>15</sup> His collections confirm his deep admiration for and close study of French artists and views of France.

Gorey's earliest purchases were three drawings by Balthus. This purchase was likely spurred by new financial stability. Gorey typically published one book a year, beginning in 1953 with *The Unstrung Harp*, until 1963 when he published three major works including *The Vinegar Works: Three Volumes of Moral Instruction*, a suite of cautionary tales that included the now-iconic *Gashlycrumb Tinies*, the tragic alphabet of twenty-six children who die untimely deaths; *The West Wing*, a Zen-like series of textless illustrations of menacing objects and ominous rooms; and *The Insect God*, the story of a toddler sacrificed to insects. Gorey also published *The Wuggly Ump*, about a fantastic creature that devours small children.

This success enabled him to buy “fine” art; in 1963 he bought three “minor but good” figure drawings by Balthus, one of his favorite artists.<sup>16</sup> They marked his appreciation for Balthus's larger body of work, which he knew firsthand from major exhibitions in New York. Gorey's vast library included every monograph on the artist and the first comprehensive catalogue raisonné of Balthus's work.<sup>17</sup> Similar to Gorey's own stories, Balthus's pictures featured recurring motifs of cats and children as harbingers of strange, ominous acts. (A notable difference, though, was that while Gorey's children might be threatening, they seemed virginal as contrasted with Balthus's young girls in their explicit poses.) Both artists drew on the literary tradition of nineteenth-century illustrated cautionary tales of Heinrich Hoffmann such as *Slovenly Peter* (*Der Struwwelpeter*). In the twentieth-century context, Gorey's

and Balthus's works were often associated with surrealism and the prevailing interest in dreams.<sup>18</sup>

Balthus was particularly interested in dreaming and made a series of paintings about dreaming figures. One of the drawings Gorey owned, *Étude de Personnages*, is a preparatory study for one of these pictures (fig. 1.3). The figures in the sketch closely resemble the two people in *La Rêve II* (1956–57; Private Collection), where a standing female figure with flowing hair reaches toward a sleeping figure—also female—whose head is resting on the arm of a couch. In the drawing owned by Gorey, however, the sleeping figure appears to be male. His darkened eyes are in a trancelike state, and his body is slumped, passive. The figures' bodies fade into the blank page, suggesting an apparition. Their haunted appearance brings to mind Gorey's characters that are preoccupied by seen and unseen forces, such as the Throttlefoot Spectre in *The Object-Lesson* or the shadowy "phantom" in *The Listing Attic* (fig. 1.4).

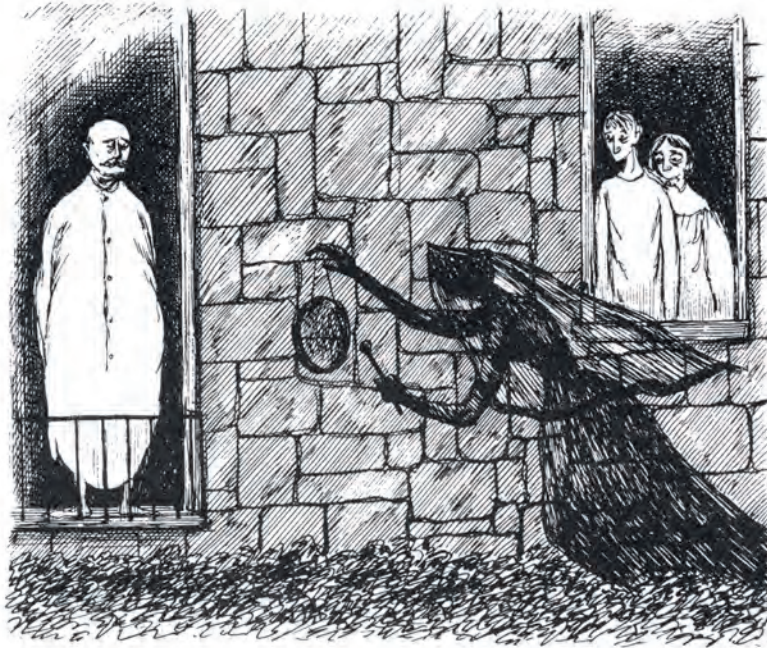
Balthus's pen and ink drawing of a Spahi is of a more worldly subject (fig. 1.5). The artist created portraits of these cavalry soldiers during his service in Morocco for the French military from 1930 to 1932. The Spahis were recruited from French colonies in North Africa. Balthus sketched the soldiers carrying out their daily activities and resting during downtime in the barracks, as with the reclining figure in the drawing Gorey owned.<sup>19</sup> This drawing de-emphasizes the soldier's uniform and instead focuses on his shirtless torso and reclining pose. This posture creates an undercurrent of sexual tension. Balthus's image making was profoundly influenced by his military experience. Traveling to a new environment far from France opened his mind and expanded his worldview. Balthus said it liberated him from the aesthetics of the postimpressionists and the concern for light.<sup>20</sup> Focusing on the figure reaffirmed Balthus's interest in drawing people, an interest to which he remained committed for the rest of his career. By 1963, when Gorey was collecting Balthus's work, the French painter had a reputation for paintings filled with sexual tension. His figures, notably young girls, appeared in provocative poses with fixed gazes suggesting that they were suspended in a permanent daydream and slightly vulnerable.

Gorey's early work from the 1960s resonates with the moods, motives, and characters in Balthus's paintings and drawings. There are notable affinities between two of his stories he wrote around the time he bought the Balthus drawings. In 1961, he published *The Curious Sofa: A Pornographic Work* and *The Fatal Lozenge*. In *The Curious Sofa*, sexual tension abounds in the form of









**Fig. 1.3**

Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola) (French, 1908–2001), *Étude de Personnages (Figure Studies)*, 1954. Graphite on paper, 8 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 6 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (21.3 × 16.2 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.20.

**Fig. 1.4**

Edward Gorey (American, 1925–2000), “At the Villa Nemetia the sleepers / Are disturbed by a phantom in weepers; / It beats all night long / A dirge on a gong / As it staggers about in the creepers.” Illustration in *The Listing Attic*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1953.

innuendos and playful words, such as the naughty game of “Thumbfumble,” and references to objects placed in suggestive places. In *The Fatal Lozenge*, Gorey’s first of many clever alphabet primers, Z is illustrated by a Zouave, an infantry soldier often recruited from the same region as the Spahi (fig. 1.6). Gorey’s merciless soldier impales a baby; the soldier wears loose pants in the North African fashion and open jacket similar to the uniform worn by the Spahi.<sup>21</sup> Like Balthus, Gorey seems to have been inspired by the exoticism or foreignness of these soldiers.

In addition to the Balthus drawings, Gorey later purchased two depictions of interior spaces by Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, two nineteenth-century French artists who were core members of Les Nabis, a group of avant-garde artists centered in Paris (figs. 1.7, 1.8). Their pictorial aims were more expressive than realistic, and even after the group disbanded in 1899, Bonnard and Vuillard worked together and continued exploring the depiction of interior spaces.<sup>22</sup> These intimate compositions were also very





**Fig. 1.5**

Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola), *Spahi*, 1930–31. Ink on paper, 8 3/8 × 6 3/8 in. (21.3 × 16.2 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.21.

**Fig. 1.6**

Edward Gorey, "The Zouave used to war and battle / Would sooner take a life than not: / It scarcely has begun to prattle / When he impales the hapless tot." Illustration in *The Fatal Lozenge*. New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1960.

similar in scale to Gorey's artwork and resonated with his tendency to use private spaces as backdrops to his stories.

Gorey purchased an untitled sketch by Bonnard in 1977 after seeing it in an exhibition at the Acquavella Galleries.<sup>23</sup> The remnants of a meal or tea are set on a table with a view of a large window framed by curtains decorated with a curlicue pattern. The window is prominent and serves as a wide portal to an unseen world. Windows have a venerable history as symbolic motifs for artists and writers, including Gorey. In his Cape Cod house, the desk in his studio faced toward the window with a view of a magnificent magnolia tree. There, he transcended the tiny studio space by embarking on his favorite journey, "looking out the window," which went hand in hand with his favorite occupation, "drifting."<sup>24</sup> Gorey's love for windows and for Bonnard is further evidenced by a postcard he sent to his friend Robert Greskovic. It was a reproduction of Bonnard's painting *The Window* (Tate Gallery, London), accompanied by a message that simply read: "Why can't life be like this?"<sup>25</sup>

**Fig. 1.7**

Pierre Bonnard (French, 1867–1947). *Interior*, c. 1927. Charcoal and graphite on paper, 6 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 4 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (16.2 × 12.4 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.28.

**Fig. 1.8**

Édouard Vuillard (French, 1868–1940). *Interior*, c. 1890. Graphite on paper, 6 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 4 in. (15.6 × 10.2 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.72.





**Fig. 1.9**

Edward Gorey, "Caviglia was painted by Sergissopov as Mae in *The Dubious Errand*." Illustration for *The Blue Aspic*. New York: Meredith Press, 1968. Pen and ink on paper, 7 ¼ × 8 ⅞ in. (18.4 × 21.8 cm.). The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust.



The contents that appear in Vuillard's drawn interior—the seated figure, the furnishings, and so forth—are roughly articulated and unfinished, reinforcing the scene's evocative mood. The seated figure's sketched legs appear to dissolve into her chair below. Gorey similarly blended his characters into their immediate physical surroundings, emphasizing flatness and texture over depth and perspective. In *The Blue Aspic*, for example, Gorey seems to mock his love of decoration by literally framing the opera singer Ortensia Caviglia within the actual painted landscape scene behind her (fig. 1.9). In another scene from the same story, the texture of Jasper Ankle's hound's-tooth suit, the wood grain of the furniture, and the geometric wall tiles are painstakingly delineated as if in the same plane (fig. 1.10).

Gorey's extensive collection of French artists included more than twelve different architectural views of Paris, ranging from nineteenth-century prints to modern photographs. He owned seven prints by Charles Meryon, five of which were from the artist's well-known portfolio of etchings of the city, published in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Meryon's dense cross-hatched prints prefigure Gorey's labor-intensive line work (figs. 1.11, 1.12). In addition

**Fig. 1.10**

Edward Gorey, "Without his clippings, Jasper now wrote long letters to Ortensia, which went unanswered." Illustration for *The Blue Aspic*. New York: Meredith Press, 1968. Pen and ink on paper, 7 ¼ × 8 ¾ in. (18.4 × 21.7 cm). The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust.

to their technical appeal, Meryon harnessed the moodier qualities of Paris. In some instances, Meryon added fantastic phenomena to his otherwise "real" views, which Gorey likely appreciated. In *Le Ministère de la Marine (The Admiralty, Paris)*, for example, the official building is under attack by a fantastic horde of flying horsemen and airborne sea creatures.<sup>27</sup> The scene resembles a weird, dystopian nightmare akin to science fiction. Meryon's images were at times puzzling and bizarre, and, as one scholar noted, they suggested a "long and lonely meditation on life and nature, on time and space, and the bewildering abysses of his imagination."<sup>28</sup> One explanation for these disquieting compositions may be that the visions arising in the "abysses of his imagination" were realities for him. He suffered from *folie* (madness) and was ultimately committed to the asylum.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the impetus, Meryon's combination of varied objects and levels of reality resulted in compositions closely related to surrealist collage.<sup>30</sup>

The nightmarish quality of Meryon's Paris also extended to Gorey's unnamed worlds where otherwise innocuous settings turn dangerous or deadly. A similar group of menacing flying perpetrators threaten society in Gorey's dystopian tragedy *The Evil Garden*. Seduced by the "free" admission, a group of

**Fig. 1.11**

Charles Meryon (French, 1821–1868). *Le Petit Pont, Paris*, 1858. Etching on paper, 12 ¼ × 8 ¾ in. (31.1 × 22.2 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.57.





people innocently enter a public garden where, within moments of entering, they encounter threats large and small. The flowers smell putrid, moths are the size of peacocks, and the plants are carnivorous. A swarm of hairy bugs carries off an infant in a scene resembling a Meryon fantasy (fig. 1.13).

Similarly, the theme of madness also extends to the characters Gorey invented. Numerous characters, young and old, are troubled and display erratic behavior, suffer from fits—like poor Susan in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*—or are driven to madness by their obsessions. Such is the case of Jasper in *The Blue Aspic*, whose unrequited love for Ortenzia Caviglia escalates to impel his creepy stalker-esque pursuit. Committed to an asylum, like Meryon the artist, the bereft Jasper stares at his records (“no gramophone was available to the inmates”); released, he ends up murdering Ortenzia (fig. 1.14).

Gorey's collection of dreamlike imagery included Odilon Redon's lithograph of floating eyeballs, an enigmatic composition inspired by Gustave Flaubert's prose poem *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (fig. 1.15). This image recalls Meryon's fantasy worlds and his Vuillard sketch with a disembodied head beneath the more finished interior (see fig. 1.8). The mystical and grotesque reappear in Gorey's haunted worlds, where similar implausible, nonsensical happenings feel dreamlike and surreal.

The largest body of work by a single artist in Gorey's art collection is a group of ten photographs by Eugène Atget.<sup>31</sup> Gorey owned all the important monographs and the definitive catalogue raisonné of Atget's work to feed his voracious appetite for his “haunting” photographs.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to Meryon's invented fantasies, Atget's camera lens captured the bizarreness of reality. The American photographer and champion of Atget's work Berenice Abbott described this effect as “the shock of realism unadorned.”<sup>33</sup> The sparseness of Atget's aesthetic made them ideal backdrops to Gorey's doom-laden tales.

In fact, many of Gorey's characters appear to have wandered into one of Atget's unpeopled Parisian scenes. Such is the case for the lead character—an author—who wanders the streets aimlessly in Gorey's alphabet book *The Chinese Obelisks*. The letter *P* was for “a Place he did not know at all.” In the illustration, a (suspiciously familiar) fur-coated man stands between two wrought iron gates that echo the stone walls in Atget's *Passageway* (figs. 1.16, 1.17). In *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, “I is for Ida,” who falls from a rowboat and drowns in a lake, without a soul present to save her. Atget's mesmerizing photograph of Rambouillet Park, located just outside of Paris, features an empty rowboat floating in a barren lake (figs. 1.18, 1.19). Even Atget's floral

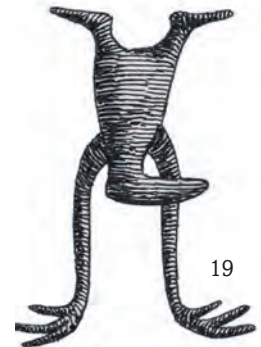
**Fig. 1.12**

Charles Meryon, *Le Ministère de la Marine (The Admiralty, Paris)*, 1866. Etching on paper, 9 × 7 1/4 in. (22.9 × 20 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.53.

**Fig. 1.13**

Edward Gorey, "A hissing swarm of hairy bugs / Has got the baby and its rugs." Illustration for *The Evil Garden*. New York: Fantod Press, 1966. Pen and ink on paper, 4 × 5 in. (10.2 × 12.7 cm) (image), 7 × 8 in. (17.8 × 20.3 cm) (sheet). The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust.







**Fig. 1.14**

Edward Gorey, "Jasper was committed to an asylum where no gramophone was available to the inmates." Illustration for *The Blue Aspic*. New York: Meredith Press, 1968. Pen and ink on paper,  $7\frac{1}{4} \times 8\frac{3}{16}$  in. (18.4 × 21.7 cm). The Edward Gorey Charitable Trust.

**Fig. 1.15**

Odilon Redon (French, 1840–1916), *Et que des yeux sans tête flottaient comme des mollusques* (*And the eyes without heads were floating like mollusks*), 1896. Lithograph on paper,  $12\frac{1}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{4}$  in. (30.8 × 22.3 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.63.



studies, such as *Ombelles*, resonate with Gorey's flora and fauna. In *Ombelles*, the flowers resemble giant hogweed, a highly toxic plant whose sap can burn the skin and eyes, making it a plausible muse for Gorey's *The Evil Garden*, or for "The Plant" in his parody of Tarot cards *The Fantod Pack* (fig. 1.20). "The Plant" symbolized "*July / tics / sexual indecision / impetigo / loss of intellect / misplaced confidence / writhing sickness / loose ends / palsy / assailed credit / dissolution / scandal / worms.*"<sup>34</sup>

In *Naturaliste, rue de l'École de Médecine*, Atget captures the eerie juxtapositions in a macabre window display (fig. 1.21). A dopey-eyed skeleton is surrounded by skulls and other curiosities housed like specimens in clear jars. In the upper portion of the window, a reflection distorts the items on display. Abbott considered the effect of reflections in Atget's works and posed the question "Is there anything more mysterious than reality?" which hints at Gorey's interest in sourcing ideas from current events and the evening news.<sup>35</sup> The skeletons in Atget's street view are echoed by other graphic images Gorey collected (figs. 1.22a,b, 1.23). He owned two anatomical engravings of a skeleton whose posture seems remarkably "alive." Many of Gorey's leading ladies strike a similarly expressive pose, with one arm outstretched and wrist slightly cocked downward.<sup>36</sup> In his collection was a print titled *Life and Death*, a double-picture illusion depicting two children whose heads form the eye sockets of a skull, originally published by Currier and Ives and popularized by a morbid Victorian preoccupation with death.





**Fig. 1.16**

Edward Gorey, "P was a Place he did not know at all." Illustration in *The Chinese Obelisks*. New York: Fantod Press, 1970.

**Fig. 1.17**

Eugène Atget (French, 1856–1927), printed by Berenice Abbott (American, 1898–1991), *Passageway*, n.d. Gelatin silver print, 6 7/8 × 9 1/8 in. (16.4 × 22.7 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.17.

