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This Section of *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* appears in each issue of the Journal and is dedicated to all forms of creative production born of an intimate and individual urge, often secretive, unbound from the conventional art system rules. Through short descriptions of the Outsider art work of prominent artists and new protagonists often hosted in community mental health services, this section intends to investigate the latest developments of the contemporary art scene, where the distances between the edge and the center are becoming more and more vague.

Carole Tansella, *Section Editor*

Corpus Delicti: Frances Glessner Lee and the art of suspicion

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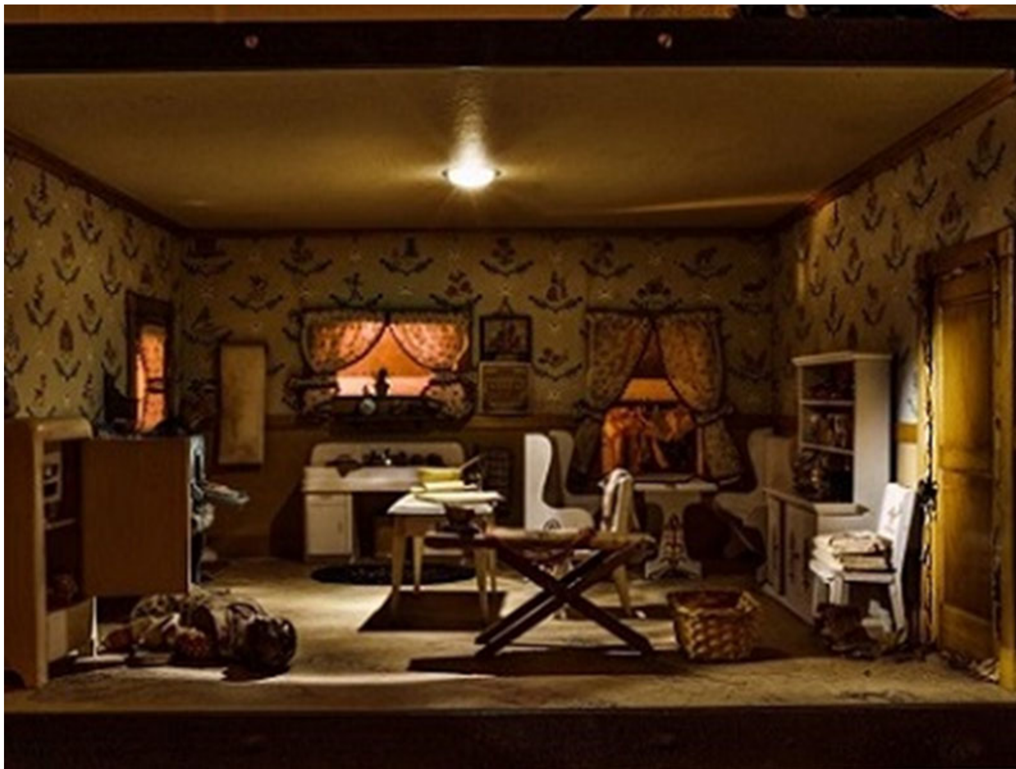

Fig. 1. Kitchen death scene, reported 12 April 1944, courtesy of Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Baltimore, Maryland.

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> Though reality may seem to be opaque, there are privileged zones – signs, clues – which allow us to penetrate it.
>
> — Carlo Ginzburg, 1989

> Miniature is easier to tell than to do.
>
> — Gaston Bachelard, 1964

Difficult psychiatric and medical diagnoses are arrived at through what has been called an 'epistemology of suspicion' (Strowick, 2005), that is, through a paradigm of clues (Ginzburg, 1989) or traces that are combined and recombined in order to produce a satisfactory, but always conjectural, hypothesis. The emergence of scientific models of modern medical diagnosis emerged with force in the late 18th century, the same period when the discipline of criminology arose (Vogl, 1991). Indeed, a figure no less original than Freud (e.g., 1915–1917) was fond of drawing analogies between the work of the detective or criminologist and that of the psychoanalyst. Put succinctly, the work of the psychiatrist, like that of the detective, is the logic of guessing, a method of abduction, C. S. Peirce's term for the production of knowledge, based on observation, in order to infer otherwise invisible causal relations from visible signs (McKaughan, 2008).

Abduction is suited to the methods of the psychiatrist detective as well as to those of the artist since both are concerned not with a scientific method that generalises from a set of cases to a rule about them (induction) but with reasoning to the 'case' itself. If something is amiss (e.g., there is a dead body in the kitchen of a house (Fig. 1)), then we want to know why. Enter the art of Frances Glessner Lee (1878–1962), who, in the 1930s and 1940s, created 20 dioramas (18 are extant) on the scale of 1 inch to 1 foot in which a dead body and its spatial context become the objects of suspicion as a method of knowledge (Fig. 2).

Lee, an heiress who was raised with the Victorian-era expectation that she would be a society matron, assumed a very different career path when she met her brother's friend, Dr George Magrath, who later became a professor in pathology at Harvard Medical School and the Chief Medical Examiner of Suffolk Country, Boston. With her interest in crime first fed by an appetite for detective novels, Lee would become a pioneer in forensic investigation, taking a feminine hobby and art, doll-house and miniature making, and transforming it into a tool for criminology. In 1931, Lee endowed a department of legal medicine at Harvard, and, in 1943, she was appointed captain of the New Hampshire State Police, the first woman in the USA to hold such a position.

Called by Lee 'The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death', her meticulously crafted dioramas were to be used for the invention of explanatory hypotheses. Beginning in 1945, Harvard University installed the first dioramas for use in their semi-annual Seminars on Legal Medicine in which law officers were given 90 min to study carefully one diorama for all clues, details that seem out of place or provide evidence of medical significance. According to the nomenclature of mid-century American coroners, there are just four manners of death: natural, accidental, suicidal and homicidal. Determinations of 'probable', 'unclassified' or 'undetermined' were also used, and they underscored the inescapably hypothetical nature of forensic detective work. Lee knew the 'answer' to the riddle of the corpse, but her students were to treat the Nutshell Studies not as 'whodunits' but as miniature fields of speculation. 'They are not presented', Lee insisted, 'as crimes to be solved – they are, rather, designed as exercises in observing and evaluating indirect evidence, especially that which may have medical importance' (Lee, 2004).

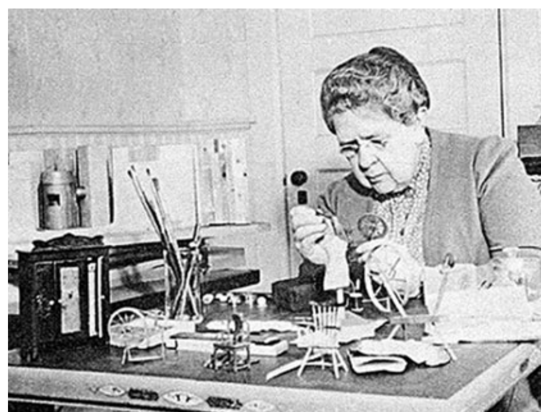

Fig. 2. Frances Glessner Lee at work on a Nutshell, circa 1945, courtesy of Glessner House Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

The miniature evidence that she and her carpenter produced is stunning in its detail. The dioramas' painstaking construction is remarkable, with nothing meant to be taken at face value. If, for example, a murder can be staged as a suicide or accident, or an accident misconstrued as murder, then it will be the details – the traces, clues – that must be placed under the sign of suspicion. In this, her projects are intensified spectacles of paranoiac space. The objects in the home – all of them – are clues or threats, encouraging ever further scrutiny. Neurotic in their detail, the dioramas, each taking 4 months to produce with dental and jeweller's tools, involved the weathering or ageing of materials, socks and undergarments knit with a pin, and modified doll bodies (often antique German bisque figures), weighted with BB shot in cloth to achieve precise corpse-like positions and with painted colouration as clues to mortality.

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Based on actual crime scenes, reconstructed from photographs and interviews with witnesses and police, the dollhouse-like models invite the exploration of details that are sometimes beyond the normal range of visual and tactile experience, necessitating the use of a flashlight, a tweezers, a magnifying glass, a miniature mirror or the dismantling of the model itself. In one diorama, there is a corpse of a man outside a saloon door, and beyond it, invisible to the outside observer, is a detailed tavern whose three-dimensionality offers potential clues. In another diorama, there are to be discovered 31 major errors committed by an inept policeman (Dempewolff, 1953).

After Lee's death, the models were acquired by the Medical Examiner's office in Baltimore, Maryland, and are still used as training tools today. The dioramas have inspired not only other forensic science teachers such as Tom Mauriello (Sachs, 2003), but many contemporary artists, working with miniatures, concerned with the hermeneutics of suspicion, the fetish of death and the everyday, and the spectacle of transgression. These artists include Abigail Goldman and her 'dieoramas', Canadian physician Jonah Samson, New York sculptor Thomas Doyle, American artist Cynthia von Buhler, British artist and film-maker Ilona Gaynor, and Los Angeles artist Randy Hage.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Standard

The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

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Michael Uebel, PhD, LCSW, is a researcher and mental health practitioner in both institutional and private practice. He has published on Schreber, shame, masochism, masculinity and gender issues, and a wide range of psychoanalytically-informed topics, and is currently at work on a study of spatiality and the epistemology of murder in film noir. He has been appointed Lecturer at the School of Social Work at the University of Texas, and has taught as professor (Literature, Women's Studies, and Social Theory) for over 15 years at the University of Virginia, Georgetown University, and the University of Kentucky.

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