The Porous Body in Early Modern Europe (London, 30 Nov–1 Dec 17)

King's College, London, Nov 30–Dec 1, 2017
Deadline: May 30, 2017

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Renaissance Skin 1st Annual Conference
'The Porous Body in Early Modern Europe'

In early modern medical theory, skin was imagined as a porous boundary. Plato, Hippocrates and Galen all agreed on the permeable quality of the skin, which the sixteenth century physician Mercurialis described as a 'fisherman's net', easily pierced and difficult to protect. Its porous nature invited speculation about sweat, urine, blood and tears, and its susceptibility to disease focused civic debates about the environment, atmosphere, humours and astrology. Treatments like blood-letting, cupping and purging sought to maintain its integrity through the counter-intuitive manoeuvers of piercing it, while, as a canvas upon which the signs of disease could be read, it invited medical participation from lay and learned alike. Écorché models, anatomical illustrations and artistic representations of flayed skin spoke to the ease with which skin could be set aside, even while new genres of portraiture, and artisanal cosmetic practices valorized it as a cultural determiner of beauty, purity and individuality. The malleability of cutis in early modern artistic, medical and artisanal discourses called into question not just the healthy, moral individual's relationship with skin, but the boundaries between medicine, the individual and their environment as well.
This interdisciplinary conference aims to consider the porousness of the early modern body as physiologically, emotionally, and socially constituted, depicted in art, debated in print and played out in a dizzying array of social practices. Historical focus on skin has often been highly anthropocentric; but bodies were not just human; nor were the porous properties of skin defined by medicine alone. As flesh it was eaten, as fur it was worn, as leather it was worked. We invite papers which consider the relationship of human, animal and matter and investigate the variety of ways porousness was understood. In considering the broad dimensions of porous bodies, and the many reasons these ideas changed, this conference investigates boundaries between nature and culture, animal and artifice, human and other.
Keynote speakers: Thomas W. Laqueur & Anita Guerrini
We invite proposals for papers or panels addressing all aspects of The Porous Body, including, but not limited to:
- Skin as a surface - porousness, hair, nails, leather, shells, fur, complexion
- Skin as a net - excretion, accretion, incretion
- Treating skin - bleeding, lancing, leeching, cosmetics, skin diseases
- Using skin - leather, fur, dress, craft

- Thinking skin - metaphors and analogies, gender, beauty, subjectivity, senses and sensation, complexion, purity, cultural contact and sociability
- Living with skin - skin diseases, skin variations, animal skin, human skin

Proposals for 20-minute papers should be sent to Hannah Murphy and Evelyn Welch at renaissanceskin@kcl.ac.uk by 30 May 2017. Selected participants may be invited to submit essays to a conference volume planned for 2018.

This conference is organized as part of the Renaissance Skin project (@RenSkinKCL), funded by the Wellcome Trust.

Reference:

CFP: The Porous Body in Early Modern Europe (London, 30 Nov-1 Dec 17). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 20, 2017 (accessed Nov 8, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/14993>.