Body Hair in Early Modern Visual Culture (Florenz, 24–24 Oct 25)

Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Instituut (NIKI), Florence, Italy, Oct 24–25, 2025
Deadline: Apr 1, 2025

Mandy Richter

Hirsute, Downy, Hairless. Meanings and Forms of Body Hair in Early Modern Visual Culture.
International Workshop.
24-25 October 2025.
Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Instituut (NIKI), Florence, Italy.

While long overlooked in art historical studies, over the past two decades body hair has emerged as a significant field of research, offering new perspectives on Early Modern visual culture. The presence or absence of body hair serves as an indicator of aesthetic (or artistic) preferences and prevailing social norms specific to certain periods and locations, revealing complex intersections between art and real life.

In profane art, the representation of male body hair tends to be quite common. It often points to idealized virility, strength, or even a natural state of being. However, its excess or misplacement might indicate mockery, degradation, or even alienation of the depicted subject. In comparison, female hirsuteness appears less frequently in artworks from the Early Modern period due to different canons of beauty associated with the female body. These rare instances of representation thus hold particular interest for this workshop.

In religious art, hair in general is of notable importance and this significance extends to body hair as well. Various iconographies of saints include these distinct features, raising questions not only about visual traditions in different cultural contexts but also querying particular hermeneutic meanings, such as notions of humanity, carnality, and spiritual transformation. In some cases, there could be a connection to preserved body hair relics of specific saints, which has never been part of a broader study thus far.

Technical challenges in representing hair are another point of interest. Artists and art theorists addressed these challenges across different media throughout the Early Modern period, as evidenced in theoretical treatises, anatomical studies, and workshop practices. Not only does this include the question of how to differentiate between human and animal hair but extends as well to artistic experiments in finding new and creative ways of treating or even avoiding body hair.

This two-day workshop aims to explore the multiple dimensions of body hair in visual culture through an interdisciplinary approach. Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the fol-

lowing themes:

1. Gender and Social Norms
- Male vs. female body hair in art
- Social and cultural implications of hair presence or absence
- Body hair as an indicator of social status and cultural norms

2. Religious and Symbolic Dimensions
- Hair in religious iconography
- Symbolic meanings in sacred versus profane contexts
- The role of body hair in representing humanity versus divinity

3. Artistic Theory and Practice
- Technical challenges in depicting body hair across different media
- Body hair in artistic treatises and anatomical studies
- Relationships between artistic theory and artistic practice

4. Cultural and Geographic Variations
- Comparative studies across European regions
- Cross-cultural perspectives on body hair representation

Submission Guidelines:
We welcome proposals from doctoral students, post-doctoral researchers, and established scholars. Papers may be presented in English or Italian.

Please submit:
- An abstract (300-500 words)
- A brief biographical note (150 words)
- Current institutional affiliation
- Contact information

Submission Deadline: April 1, 2025
Notification of acceptance: April 15, 2025
Send proposals to: m.blanquet@udk-berlin.de and richter@khi.fi.it

Publication:
Selected papers will be considered for publication in a peer-reviewed volume following the workshop.

Practical Information:
The workshop will be held at the Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Instituut in Florence (NIKI). Accommodation and travel information will be provided to accepted participants.

Contact:
For any queries, please contact: m.blanquet@hotmail.fr / richter@khi.fi.it

Organizers:

Mathilda Blanquet, Universität der Künste in Berlin, Université Fédérale de Toulouse, Universität

Hamburg

Dr. Michael W. Kwakkelstein – Dutch University Institute for Art History in Florence (NIKI) – Utrecht University

Dr. Mandy Richter, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

Reference:

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