

## SKIN

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It. *Pelle*; Fr. *Peau*; Germ. *Haut*; Span. *Piel*. From a physiological and anatomical point of view, skin is the outermost coating in the body of vertebrates and the main means of protection of all of its internal parts against external agents. With a size of about 2 square meters and a weight of 10 kg, it is the main bodily organ in the human body. Skin is a real “dress” for the muscular frame, and permits perspiration, a fundamental function for setting the bodily temperature and for excreting toxins. In this action as “filter” inside and out, skin plays an important role not only in preserving the body functions, but also as a place of sensory experience. Skin, in fact, is an anthropological, social and aesthetic meaningful cover since its surface – which, so to say, hosts the sense of touch – is a border territory which functions as a condition of possibility for the knowledge of the surrounding world. Notably, the majority of organisms can survive without one or more of their sensory organs (for instance, one can live without eyes, nose, tongue, or ears), but the lack of even a small portion of skin can lead easily to death.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Studies on the nature, functions and symbolic meanings of skin began during Antiquity. Aristotle (*De Anima*, III, 13, 435b) believed that the origin of sexual pleasure was located in the sense of touch, and that therefore skin was to be considered as the origin of the cognitive functions for all other organs. But it was especially during the 18<sup>th</sup> century that skin held a significant position within the field of aesthetic studies. Johann Gottfried Herder was the first philosopher credited of having elaborated an aesthetic theory based on touch. Particularly in *Plastik* (1778), one of his most celebrated essays, Herder came to conceive touch as the slowest and darkest sense but, for this very reason, the one not easily deceived. In Herder’s conception, skin is the boundary between the Beautiful and the Ugly, as everyone can see in sculpture. Marco d’Agrate’s marble statue *St. Bartholomew* (1562), situated in the Cathedral of Milan, portrays a flayed man. The interpretation of touch developed by Herder in *Plastik* epitomizes a “vivid” specimen of the Ugly in art, and the impossibility for the hand to know an object that has no surface: a body without skin is a body without touch, a corpse that transmits no sensation, in both humans and statues.

In the following century, skin became the object of study of anthropologists, psychologists and naturalists. Among them, we must surely mention Charles Darwin (1871) who considered the human skin – which is almost completely hairless except the head and matured sexual organs, unlike that of other animals – as properly an ornament. Naked skin, indeed, is for Darwin a real attribute of beauty: it supports the survival of the species since human beings (who gradually had lost their physical strength) “stripped” their skin, in order to make it attractive for the individuals of the opposite sex. For his part, Sigmund Freud analysed skin with regard to the body’s erogenous zones: in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), he considered tickling a patch of skin like a seduction through amusement. In the wake of Darwin, Desmond Morris (1967) studied the importance of skin colour in different situations. It is possible to communicate emotions with skin through its complexion. For example, if anyone threatens with a pale face, he/she will be likely attacked; on the contrary, a red-faced menacing individual could be probably harmless.

English anthropologist Ashley Montagu (1971) studied skin from the perspective of the formation of individuals: it is an object “shaped” by the contact of the mother with the child: “the sensation of touch as a stimulus is absolutely necessary for the survival of the organism” (Montagu 1971: 252), and to ensure the healthy development of the child. In a psychoanalytic key, as in the metaphoric use of the concept by Didier Anzieu, skin is also the representation that the subject makes of itself – from a very early age – as an Ego that includes psychic contents. The “Skin-Ego” (*Le moi-peau*, which is the title of one of Anzieu’s most famous studies, first published in 1985) is a mental casing which is produced by the symbiotic relationship between the mother’s skin and that of the child. This mutual epidermis is intended to be ruptured when the subject becomes autonomous. The “Skin-Ego” can be formed in two ways: either as a narcissistic envelope, by which the subject feels fine inside its “intact” skin; or as a masochistic shell, in which the subject feels its own skin as it were lacerated and wounded – an uncomfortable and painful situation.

Jean-Luc Nancy, in one of his most famous books, *Corpus* (1992), used skin as a symbol of existence: life is considered as a bodily exhibition, an uninterrupted *ex-peau-sition*. Touching (and being touched) is an experience of limit, and this limit – precisely skin – is a border between life and death that is subject to a constant change. More recently, Winfried Menninghaus returned on the Darwinian question concerning the relationship between naked skin and sexual attraction: in *Das Versprechen der Schönheit* (2003), he considered it as a matter of fashion: “naked skin is not only a degree zero, but also a human body coating selected in the space of many generations” (Menninghaus 2003: 89). Because it is an object made through the millennia via “taking away”, one can transform it with supplementary additions like clothes, jewellery, until tattoos, piercings etc.

## ART AND AESTHETICS

The arts have dedicated a large space to the representation of skin. Probably, the theme of *Apollo and Marsyas* was the one that had more luck in the iconographic repertory since the Antiquity, the scene in which the god, after winning a singing competition against the satyr, flayed him. The myth had its main literary source in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (VI, 382-400), where it is depicted the contrast between the world of poetic inspiration (symbolically embodied by the stringed instrument played by Apollo) and the world of

*Téchne* (the know-how based on experience and exercise represented by Marsyas and his *aulós*, a wind instrument). A verse (385) of *Metamorphoses* clarifies the role of skin from a symbolic point of view: "Quid me mihi detrahis?" ("Why do you peel me out of myself?") is the desperate question that Marsyas asks his executioner while being tortured, meaning that skin is the very essence of the individual. It is interesting, indeed, that in a version of the myth of Marsyas, while the rest of the body was torn apart, his skin was stored inside a cave in Celene (a city of Asia Minor) like a relic. Furthermore, according to some writers (for example Aelianus, *Varia Historia*, XIII, 21), Marsyas' skin hanging in the grotto remained inert if it perceived the sound of cithara, but was vibrating if anyone played *aulós* next to it.

In Dante's poetic transfiguration of this myth, skin became a symbol of the poet: in the invocation to Apollo that opens the *Paradiso*, he asks the god to be transformed into the satyr's skin: "fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso" ("Make of me such a vessel of thy power"), so that the god can breathe into the poet's bosom. It seems to be a chain of symbols (Skin, *aulós*, the poet) at the end of which we find Apollo who – like a flute player – blows in Dante's bosom as if it were Marsyas' Skin.

At a certain point, another figure was superimposed on Marsyas: it was the martyr Bartholomew, who transfer the myth of the flayed satyr in a Christian context. Like the flutist defeated by Apollo, the Apostle was skinned alive. The *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* and *The flaying of Marsyas* became two complementary themes in painting and sculpture. Perhaps the most famous representation of *Saint Bartholomew* is that in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (1536-41). Almost in the middle of the fresco, just below the image of Christ judge, the Saint holds his own skin and a knife – the instrument of his martyrdom. There are many differences between the aspect of the Saint (muscular, sculptural and glabrous), and that of his skin (on the contrary floppy, misshapen, hairy). Presumably, Michelangelo wanted to represent the otherworldly metamorphosis from an imperfect human condition (the inactive skin, with its special features), to the state of Grace after the bodily resurrection of the righteous (Barnes 2004: 979; Wyss 1995: 73).

In the following century, the theme of Marsyas/Saint Bartholomew became the privileged place to represent the relationship between poetry and art, in a reversed perspective. Jusepe de Ribera's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1637) and *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1642) are allegorical depictions of the painting that equals, or even surpasses, poetry. In the Brussels Musée des Beaux Arts version, Apollo is wearing a coat very similar in appearance and colour to Marsyas' skin. It is probably the representation of this symbolical message: inspiration has finally been combined with manual skill (Campione 2015: 40). In the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* kept in the Stockholm National Museum, it is the painter himself who flays the martyr (or gives him back the skin?): it is likely an ambiguous allusion to the artistic ability to recreate the shape that the myth had destroyed. In the artistic representation, the theme continues until today: let us only think, for example, of Damien Hirst's *Saint Bartholomew, exquisite pain* (2006), a bronze statue representing a man who cuts off his own skin by himself with some scissors.

In the contemporary world, skin has become the commonest object of aesthetic consumption: not only in the field of cosmetic surgery (which is used to "find" lost youth, sometimes with questionable results); but also in some body transformation practices, like – for example – tattoos. For a very long time, tattoos had

been indicated as the hallmark of the marginalized and delinquent, sailors, convicts and prostitutes. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, indeed, Cesare Lombroso studied tattoo as an artificial “stigma” of the natural born and incorrigible criminal. The criminologist was convinced that the thug’s body, through the skin, “confessed” its misdeeds (Campiono 2009: 84; Campiono 2015: 78). Since the 1960s, however, tattooing has escaped from the apartheid in which it was relegated by a centuries-old culture of prejudice, and has gradually expanded its attractiveness to become the most widespread exemplification of body art in our time. In art, tattoo has abandoned the beauty imperative, and has given new meanings to the skin, which perhaps embody the chaotic character of a new type of aesthetics.

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