PRESS RELEASE

SURFACE. ON SKIN

2 DECEMBER 2026–28 FEBRUARY 2027
Exhibition Hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings
Press Preview: Tuesday, 1 December 2026, 11.00 am

Frankfurt am Main, 4 November 2026. The skin has always been a central motif in art. It covers and envelops the body, defines and protects it, and enables us to feel. As a highly sensitive sensory organ and the visible boundary between the body and the outside world, the skin shapes human appearance. With the exhibition “SurFace. On Skin”, the Städel Museum focuses on the materiality, representation and execution of the skin as an artistically designed surface. Taking selected works from the Collection of Prints and Drawings as its starting point, the exhibition brings together some seventy works in various media and from different periods from the collections of the Städel Museum and the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, including photographs, paintings and sculptures. Spanning from antiquity through the Old Masters and modern art to the present day, the exhibition presents a multi-layered panorama that sheds light on the depiction of skin as a fundamental aspect of artistic practice.

In art, the body’s surface serves as a mirror of experiences and emotions, of youth and old age, and at the same time as a sensitive site of vulnerability and desirability. The exhibition juxtaposes works by Hans Baldung Grien, Pierre Bonnard, Albrecht Dürer, Hendrick Goltzius, Dora Maar, Raphael, Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, Titian and others, thereby illustrating the diversity of creative approaches. The choice of materials and techniques influences the artistic process, the surface, texture and plasticity of the body’s surface, as well as its individual effect on the viewer. The rendering of the face and body reveals the distinctive qualities of the skin, its flexibility and mutability. Wounds appear as intrusions into the closed surface of the body, clothing as a shaping envelope, touch as the basis of interpersonal communication, and the physical imprint of the skin as a unique, individual signature. The exhibition at the Städel Museum sharpens the viewer’s awareness of the surface in art and allows it to be experienced sensually.

“SurFace. On Skin” is made possible by funding from the Städelverein.

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Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum, on the exhibition: “The depiction of human skin is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating and, at the same time, most challenging themes in art. With ‘SurFace. On Skin’, we are once again presenting treasures from our Collection of Prints and Drawings alongside significant paintings, photographs and sculptural works from the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung. The exhibition thus offers a cross-epochal and cross-media overview spanning from antiquity to the twentieth century. The focus is on questions of artistic practice: By what means, techniques and materials is it possible to make the sensuality, tactile quality and adaptability of the body’s surface tangible? Today, skin is rightly understood as an expression of identity; our exhibition aims to complement this perspective with an art historical approach that examines its representation and development across the various media of art, thereby inviting visitors to sharpen their own perception.”

Astrid Reuter, Head of Prints and Drawings before 1800, Städel Museum: “The exhibition title ‘SurFace’ itself points out that, when we engage with the skin, we are moving along the surface of the human body, which—when translated into drawing, painting and sculpture—becomes one with the surface of the artwork. We perceive it as rough or smooth, vulnerable, brittle and hard, or seductively soft; we may wish to explore it through touch or recoil from making contact. This supreme degree of sensitivity, flexibility and expressiveness of the skin makes it a fascinating subject in art, which we explore in the exhibition through well-known works as well as those rarely or never before exhibited.”

Tour of the Exhibition

The exhibition “SurFace. On Skin” is divided into six chapters, offering insight into the broad spectrum of artistic explorations of the human skin.

Surface

The faithful reproduction of the incarnate, the so-called “flesh colour”, has been regarded in European art history—particularly since the Early Modern period—as a central test of an artist’s abilities. Depending on the medium and technique, different strategies for creating a lifelike body surface can be identified. Depictions of the face clearly demonstrate how the perception of the skin is influenced by the tactile properties of the surface—the texture of the paper, the chosen drawing medium, the grain of the pigments and the application of paint. For example, the *Mummy Portrait of a Girl* (c. 120–150 CE) features a partially glossy, relief-like surface due to the use of wax, whereas the skin in Hendrick Goltzius’s *Portrait of Gillis van Breen* (1588) appears powdery as a result of the use of chalk. The flesh tones in Titian’s *Portrait of*

a Young Man (c. 1510) appear particularly soft. In the works of Hans Baldung Grien and Parmigianino, the individual rendering of the skin stands out in different ways: in his *A woman's bust* (1527), the former models subtle transitions with just a few lines and clear contours, while the latter captures the delicate sheen of the skin in *Head of a Bearded Man, Looking Right* (c. 1523 – 1525 ?) using luminous red chalk. In the modern era, photography has opened up new possibilities for artistic exploration of the skin's surface. Dora Maar, for example, uses depth of field in *Mannequin with Perm* (1935) to emphasise the bare shoulders.

Body

The depiction of the naked body in art history oscillates between idealised notions of beauty and the precise observation of anatomy, as well as changes due to age or circumstance. The outward appearance is largely determined by the skin. The extent to which the different depictions of people—whether old or young, stout or thin, muscular or emaciated—influence the content of the image is illustrated, for example, by the contrasting portrayals of *Adam and Eve* by Albrecht Dürer (1504) and Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn (1638). A prerequisite for a convincing depiction is the precise observation of the texture of the body's surface, its elasticity and tension, or rather its pliability. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, growing anatomical knowledge became increasingly widespread and contributed to a deeper understanding of the movements and functions of the skin. Physical changes are particularly evident in the contrast between the living and the dead, as in François Gérard's depiction *Orpheus Tries to Hold on to Eurydice* (1791), which juxtaposes Orpheus's living body with Eurydice's pale, fading form.

Wound

Wounds are often also injuries to the skin. They make the body's sensitivity tangible, mark the boundary between the inner and the outer, and are a sign of the body's fragility. In the Christian tradition, the wound symbolises not only suffering, but also redemption and revelation. To depict pain and violence powerfully, blood and wounds are often highlighted in colour, as in the relief of the *Holy Trinity* (1450). Attributed to Hans Multscher and his workshop, the work shows the slender, slumped body of Christ, with the crown of thorns and bleeding wounds clearly revealing the hallmarks of the Passion. Additional dynamism is created in artistic depictions, for example, through the contrast with unblemished skin, as in the *Crucifixion of Christ* (late fifteenth century), through deliberate exaggerations, as in Hendrick Goltzius's *The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus* (1588, after Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem), or through a rough, rugged stylistic language, as in Max Beckmann's *Dream of War* (1946).

Touch

Where bodies touch, the skin becomes a conduit for human sensations, which may be associated with intense emotion. Medardo Rosso's 1886 sculpture *Aetas Aurea (The Golden Age)*, for example, depicts an intimate moment in which a mother tenderly turns towards her child, their heads merging into a single form. In Hendrick Goltzius's drawing *Hercules and Dejanira* (1597), in which the two lovers are depicted touching and exploring one another, bare skin becomes a catalyst for emotions.
The ancient myth of Pygmalion tells of the desire for immediate physical experience when perceiving works of art: the sculptor falls in love with the statue he has created and feels its transformation from stone into a living body, depicted, for example, by Antoine-François Dennel in *Pygmalion* (1778).

Covering

The skin serves as a protective covering that envelops the body while simultaneously forming its outer boundary. In art, it is also rendered visible as an independent object that can be separated from the body through the depiction of its violent and painful detachment. This motif is explored in the myth of Marsyas and the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew. By depicting the separation of the skin from the body in his painting *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (c. 1435), Stefan Lochner draws attention to the difference between the skin's external appearance and its organic nature. Furthermore, fabrics, clothing and armour serve in pictorial works as a shaping "second skin" or symbolic covering that protects the body and can emphasise social roles. An interplay of concealment and revelation is evident in form-fitting armour, as in Leendert van der Cooghen's *Male nude with suggested antique armour, seen from behind* (undated), or in draping robes, as in Raphael's *Caryatid* (1520), whose flowing folds envelop the body like a protective covering. Leather and metal muscle armour, as well as translucent fabrics, thus reinforce the notion of an idealised body.

Imprint

The imprint is regarded as visible and immediate evidence of a body's former presence. It derives its authenticity from direct contact with the skin. In Christian art, Saint Veronica's veil bearing the image of Jesus became the epitome of a "true image" (vera icon). Claude Mellan's copperplate engraving, *The Holy Face (Formatur unicus una)* (1649), renders this motif with the utmost virtuosity in printmaking: Christ's face emerges from a single spiral line. The claim to authenticity and truthfulness is particularly condensed in the mechanical fingerprint as a forgery-proof proof of identity. In the work *Untitled (Brain with Fingerprint)* (1986), Jochem Hendricks places his fingerprint over the visual cortex of the brain, thereby linking individual vision with the unmistakable trace of one's own body.

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Curator: Dr Astrid Reuter (Head of Prints and Drawings before 1800, Städel Museum)
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Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main
Information: www.staedelmuseum.de/en/
Visitor Services and Guided Tours: +49 (0)69-605098-200, info@staedelmuseum.de
Tickets: 19 euros, reduced 17 euros, Tuesday Special: every Tuesday from 3.00 to 6.00 pm, €10; admission free for children under 12. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: 17 euros per person. Registration is generally required for all groups, by telephone +49 (0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de. For up-to-date information on special opening hours, please visit https://www.staedelmuseum.de/en/visit.
Overview Tours: Regular one-hour guided tours introduce visitors to the most important works in the exhibition. All dates and programme tickets can be found at https://www.staedelmuseum.de/en/exhibitions-programme.

Catalogue: A catalogue, edited by Astrid Reuter, is being published by Sandstein Verlag to accompany the exhibition. It features a foreword by Philipp Demandt and essays by Daniela Bohde, Mechthild Fend, Rebecca Partikel, Astrid Reuter, Romana Sammern and Julia Saviello. German edition, 224 pages, 34.90 euros (museum edition), 48 euros (bookshop edition).

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