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Haut zwischen 1500 und 1800: Verborgen im Buch–Verborgen im Körper. Herzog August Bibliothek.

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This recent exhibit at the Herzog August Bibliothek resembled a <cite>Wunderkammer</cite>, a collection of the strange and wonderful, held together more by the common novelty of the items than by a common thread of analysis or narrative. Very broadly, <cite>Haut</cite> treated the material culture of skin in early modern Europe; more specifically, it concerned the multiple linkages between skin and reading, from parchment to lavishly illustrated anatomical texts. While several intriguing aspects of this theme were introduced, their full development was neglected in favor of exhibiting further visually stunning and quirky objects. <p> The first section, <cite>Von der Tierhaut zu Pergament und Leder</cite>, examined the manufacture and use of parchment and leather in writing, printing, and binding. Early modern illustrations and clear descriptions guided the visitor through the processing of animal hide into these distinct products and introduced the physical considerations (thickness, pore size, pliability) that made different skin suitable for different purposes. The vast collections of the Herzog August Bibliothek were combed for helpful displays on the recycling of older parchment manuscripts into new bookbindings and the different types of leather covers, to name two of the innovative bibliographical perspectives provided. Much about a book, it turns out, can be judged by its cover. <p> It is somewhat perplexing, then, that the next section, <cite>Beschreiben und Bemalen von Pergament,</cite> focused on manuscript production and usage largely without reference to the parchment itself. In particular, the relationship between parchment and paper, a competing (and skinless) writing surface coming into widespread use during that period, was omitted. Instead, this section was filled with spectacular parchment manuscripts whose descriptive labels concentrated on textual and visual content rather than the codices' material elements. This assemblage was a small jewel of an exhibit on medieval manuscripts in itself, but its connection with the wider theme was tenuous. <p> In another dizzying switch, the exhibit's third part, <cite>Haut und Tastsinn</cite>, examined early modern conceptions of human skin's physiological function. The transition was all the more abrupt because human skin was introduced as a wholly new topic; its connection with animal skin was never thematized. By displaying an array of texts from three centuries that pondered what could be learned through the skin, either by the person inside, through the sense of touch, or by the person outside, through using the skin as a guide to the soul, this section of the exhibit demonstrated the relevance of the skin to many key questions and thinkers of the period. Unfortunately, it did not demonstrate the centrality of the sense of touch, as many of the texts seemed equally (if not more) concerned with other senses. This sense of diffusion was intensified by the confusing chronological and thematic ordering, so that the Aristotelian/Thomist conception of the senses was introduced (although not explained) in two unlinked displays. If there was a point to this meandering, it was to underline the innovation introduced in the late eighteenth century by Herder, who gave increased emphasis to the sense of touch and to the skin as the preserver and representer of the body's unity. The implications of this move, however, were not made clear. <p> The thematic threads of the exhibit came through most clearly in the fourth section, <cite>Haut und Anatomie</cite>, which examined the anatomical revolution of the early modern period and provided numerous well-chosen examples of early modern visualizations of skin as concealer and revealer. As the introduction to this section aptly put it, "Wie der Koerper gibt das

Buch seinen Inhalt nur preis, wenn es geoeffnet wird." While its narrative was occasionally thrown off course by an over-simplified retelling of the triumph of visual and empirical knowledge over that mediated transmitted by received authorities, this section's visual component, with its numerous lavishly illustrated and beautifully displayed anatomical texts, revealed the delight early modern authors, publishers, and readers took in transgressing the boundary of skin. With stunning images such as the title page of Bartholin's <cite>Anatomia reformata</cite> (1651), where the book's title is shown imprinted on a hanging human skin, it would be quibbling to point out that many of the displayed pictures showed in intricate detail muscles, inner organs, or the circulatory or skeletal system, in other words, everything but the skin. <p> The connections between skin and medicine were more closely examined in the exhibit's final two sections, <cite>Haut und Krankheit</cite> and <cite>Haut als Heilmittel</cite>. Somewhat surprisingly, the discussion of skin and disease focused on leprosy. While certainly a spectacular example of a condition revealed through the skin (a point driven home by two late twentieth-century wax models of leprous body parts), leprosy was neither particularly prevalent nor particularly resonant in the early modern period. An examination of plague or syphilis, also conditions that disrupted the skin, would have revealed much more about how early modern people viewed skin health. A different focus also would have moved the discussion away from the iconic function of the leper's body (as revealing in ambiguous fashion the mark of God) to more informative areas such as distinctions between learned and lay attitudes towards skin ailments and their treatment. The early modern context slipped even further away in the last section, which rapidly covered medical and popular interest in skin, from the use of the skin of executed criminals to ease labor pains (a well-established early modern practice) to the development of skin grafting techniques (only perfected in the modern era) to the Victorian Rudolf Virchow's obsession with criminal tattoos. Visitors who wanted to know what tanned human skin looks like were well advised to visit this section of the exhibit. For an understanding of the logic of its medicinal function, however, or even examples of the early modern interest in tattoos, a fascination driven by imperial interest in extra-European peoples, one must look further. <p> <cite>Haut</cite> was an ambitious exhibit, not only in covering a bewildering variety of topics, but also in venturing into areas, such as material culture, the history of the senses, and popular medicine, in which scholars combining social and cultural history with the history of medicine are breaking new ground. The curators should be commended for using the library's considerable visual resources to guide visitors towards objects not usually seen as culturally significant and towards new ways of seeing familiar objects. From my point of view as a historian, the exhibit was most successful when it pursued the innovative questions raised by the history of skin; when it tried to squeeze unique but tangentially related objects into the display cases or incorporate sweeping, established narratives in the discussion of these materials, the skin of the exhibit disintegrated. <p>