

## **coveted. cared for. martyred. Bodies in the Middle Ages**

National Museum Zurich | 15.3. – 14.07.2024 | Extension Level 2

### **Tour of the exhibition**

#### **Prologue**

A graphic display of facts about the Middle Ages and an installation taking a fresh look at Hieronymus Bosch's *Haywain* introduce visitors to the medieval period. They learn about body sizes, life expectancy, the growth of cities and religions, as well as the fact that many people's lives were influenced by the moral teachings of the church.

#### **Section 1 – Naked bodies**

The exhibition explores various topics related to the human body, from birth through to death. The first section focuses on birth and nudity along with the importance of clothing. Until the late Middle Ages, depictions of childbirth mostly showed the births of Mary or Jesus, while placing them in a medieval setting. Instructions on midwifery and child rearing were to be found in health handbooks. Illustrating the theme of naked bodies, the painting *Adam and Eve* by Lucas Cranach and his workshop takes pride of place in the first room. Until the beginning of the Renaissance, the first man and woman according to the Bible were the main vehicle for depicting the naked human form in art. Interpretations of the Biblical narrative of Original Sin, and scholarly debates, shaped attitudes towards desire and sexuality in the medieval period.

#### **Section 2 – Coveted bodies**

Lust and eroticism take centre stage in this part of the exhibition. At the end of the 15th century, Hieronymus Bosch tackled these themes in his *Garden of Earthly Delights*, a triptych that continues to both fascinate and mystify us to this day. The animated version of the original, which is on display in the Prado, presents a series of erotically charged scenes depicted in a largely moralising yet at the same time entertaining manner. Eroticism and carnal lust are also the subject of a number of prints by artists including Master E.S, Israhel van Meckenem and Albrecht Dürer. These demonstrate the variety to be found in the portrayals of couples engaging in carnal pleasures, from dance to satire, augmented with symbols of lust and desire. Even the apparel donned by the nobility could take on erotic overtones, such as the *poulaine*, a shoe with a long pointy toe. A few of the very rare examples that survive can be seen in the exhibition.

Audio extracts from erotic literature and small, mass-produced badges with playful, libidinous depictions of male and female genitalia in human form, and often in amusing scenarios, prove that the Middle Ages was not as straitlaced as generally supposed.

One genre of relevance when discussing bodies is *Minne*, a celebration of courtly love that began to flourish in the literature, song and visual arts of the 12th century. It made unsatisfied desire a prominent topic, and was a popular subject on tapestries, tiled stoves and various accessories in the 14th and 15th centuries.

### **Section 3: Ideal bodies**

In the medieval period, it was Christian art and courtly culture that defined the ideals of the age. Arranged as if in an arena, the sculptures of the Virgin Mary, Saint Catherine, Saint Vincent of Saragossa and the Archangel Michael portrayed as a knight embody the ideals of physical beauty. At their centre, Matteo Civitali from Lucca's *Man of Sorrows* presents Christ as the ultimate 'superbody'. Courtly ideals also included fashionable clothing, with hair and accessories to match. Artistically carved ivory mirror cases and gravoires, or a treatise containing recipes for hair care and hair dyes, reflect the desire for beauty and body optimisation. Sporting activities were essential in achieving an ideal, healthy body. Fencing practice and wrestling matches were part of a knight's training, while tournaments were social events, as illustrated in the medieval manuscript known as the *Hausbuch der Herren von Hallwyl*. One extremely rare sporting relic to be found in the exhibition is a leather fistball dating from the 14th/15th century.

People in the Middle Ages cared for their bodies and their physical wellbeing, and they too longed to be rejuvenated in old age, as can be seen in depictions of the *Fountain of Youth*. The widespread teachings of humoralism, aimed at achieving a balanced combination of the four bodily fluids, played a key role in preventive healthcare. Diagrams showing specific bleeding points on the body and utensils used in cupping and bloodletting illustrate the methods involved in remedying an imbalance of humours. Many private and public bathhouses came into being, for health as well as hygiene reasons. Although the painting by Hans Bock the Elder dates from the 16th century, it mirrors the outlook that places medieval bathing customs somewhere between care of the body and permissive social pleasure.

### **Section 4: Sick bodies**

In the Middle Ages, disease was everywhere: leprosy, the plague, ergotism or – from the late medieval period – syphilis. The cramped conditions in towns and cities favoured the rapid spread of diseases. Paintings, stained glass and

manuscripts present images of those afflicted with leprosy. The motif of St Martin dividing his cloak to share it with a beggar exemplifies a practice that became established in the Middle Ages: ministering to the needs of the sick and poor, admitting them to hospital and providing them with charitable care. As a Christian ideal, compassion was a commonplace subject in works of art, such as *St Oswald giving alms* painted in 1480/85. People suffering from epilepsy or psychological disorders were considered to be bodies possessed by demons, and exorcisms were sometimes used as a form of therapy.

Manuscripts dating from the 9th to 14th centuries testify to the transfer of medical knowledge from the Arab world to Europe; this played an instrumental role in the development of Western medicine. The first universities, founded in Salerno and Bologna, taught both men and women in the 11th/12th centuries. But only the select few could afford to be treated by educated physicians. Most people were forced to rely on lay medical practitioners, barber-surgeons, and natural remedies that began life in the monasteries before becoming widely adopted thanks to numerous practical guides on their use. Others believed in the healing powers of mummies, gall stones and the supposed miracle cure theriac.

### **Section 5: Other bodies**

Another section is devoted to the various species of 'strange peoples' with curious body forms that were believed, until the late Middle Ages, to inhabit the edges of the world. These extraordinary beings were catalogued by Hartmann Schedel in his 1495 *Chronicle of the World*. We also encounter mythical creatures like the 'wild folk', naked but entirely covered with hair, who lived free in the wild and were sometimes seen as a counterpoint to the norms of civilised society. Their image can be found on many frescoes and tapestries. Depictions of conjoined twins and dwarfs point to the common understanding of human bodies that deviated from the norm: they were a source of fascination, while also acting as a divine warning.

### **Section 6: Suffering bodies**

The martyred body of Jesus Christ, dead or dying on the cross, is an omnipresent symbol within Christianity. The slender, completely naked figure attributed to Michelangelo's workshop is a visual manifestation of the contemporary description of Christ's body as "graceful, lithe and fine-limbed".

The tortures inflicted on early Christian martyrs became a popular subject in art from the 14th century. Frequently divorced from the overall context of the legends of the saints, the physical punishments pictured are not portrayals of the actual forms of physical violence meted out – although these are also addressed in this

section of the exhibition. Instead, they glorify and give visual form to the torments suffered by the body, apparently without feeling pain, in the name of Christian faith. In contrast to the ideal, and partly sexualised, bodies being martyred, those of the henchmen are portrayed as ugly, with physical flaws. Zurich itself is referenced in a cycle of seven paintings narrating the martyrdom of the city's patron saints Felix and Regula and their companion Exuperantius.

For most people in the Middle Ages, suffering in this world came from performing hard physical labour under difficult conditions and was brought on by malnutrition, poverty and disease. These figures are relegated to the margins of the action in medieval altarpieces, where they are shown begging or receiving alms, or as workers in scenes showing the Labours of the Months.

### **Section 7: Dead bodies**

No one can escape the *Danse Macabre*, which leads the way into the final section. Death was ever-present in the Middle Ages. Dances of Death and depictions of decomposing corpses – like those on a large woven tapestry or on the copies of the monumental tomb group at La Sarraz – were intended to remind the onlooker of their own mortality. Depictions of heaven and hell, of the resurrection or Last Judgment brought home to the living what would ultimately happen to their bodies, depending on what sins they had committed. This fate is illustrated by altar pieces and an animated version of *The Last Judgment* by Hans Memling.

In addition to the resurrected body of Christ in the form of the host, the mortal remains of the saints were found worthy of particular veneration. An installation in the centre of the room brings together reliquaries from the 13th to 15th centuries. The rise of reliquaries that recalled the shape of the original body part they housed – a bust, an arm, a leg – gave physical presence to the bodily remains of the saints. The faithful believed in the power of relics to cure the sick, ensure a good harvest or help them become pregnant.

### **Epilogue:**

The exhibition closes with an animation of Lucas Cranach's *The Golden Age*, which takes as its subject the everlasting desire for a carefree life lived in harmony with nature and with no false sense of shame.