



ART IN DERMATOLOGY

JUSEPE DE RIBERA: CANVAS AND PAINT, FLESH AND SKIN

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Depicting skin in paintings is a challenge which artists have grappled with for centuries. The concept of a canvas as 'flesh' to which a 'skin' of paint is applied is an important feature of 16th and 17th century art historical discourse. Jusepe de Ribera, or Lo Spagnoletto, the little Spaniard, was a 17th century artist who explored this relationship between canvas and paint, and skin and flesh, in his dramatic depictions of scenes of martyrdom, most notably, those of St Bartholomew. In this talk, we will examine this relationship between artist, canvas, paint and skin from a dermatological perspective, using the examples taken from the works of Ribera. We will examine the techniques exploited by Ribera to convey in chilling detail flayed and aged skin: the liberal use of impasto (application of paint in thick layers), the exposure of canvas threads, the use of chiaroscuro, and non-finito (more traditionally associated with the work of Michaelangelo). In explaining these techniques, we will discuss the possible motivations for their use, and the effect thus rendered in Ribera's paintings. Finally, we will discuss the process of ageing and the effects of conservation on paint and canvas in the context of the paintings of Ribera, and how these processes have influenced the depictions of skin in these images.

