

New Exhibition: The Human Touch: Making Art, Leaving Traces The Fitzwilliam Museum 6th January – 3rd May 2021

The Human Touch is an exhibition with a profound and urgent topicality. It is the Fitzwilliam Museum's first temporary show since COVID-19 changed our world, and it explores the sense that is at the very heart of our pandemic and human experience.

Taking as its starting point the idea that touch is our first and deepest sense, The Human Touch is a journey through the anatomical workings of touch, its creative force and its emotional power, through anger, desire and possession. It unearths the symbolism of touch in faith traditions from across the globe, and reveals the marks of touch, on art and material culture from four thousand years of human history.



Mud Hand. Richard Long, 2016

Objects range from ancient Egyptian limestone sculpture to medieval manuscripts and panel paintings, from devotional and spiritual objects to love tokens and faith rings from all over the world. Drawings, paintings, prints and sculptures by Raphael, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Carracci, Hogarth, Turner, Rodin, Degas, and Kollwitz will be re-analysed, seen alongside work by contemporary artists Judy Chicago, Frank Auerbach, Richard Long, the Chapman Brothers, Richard Rawlins and others.

In the context of the pandemic, many of the one hundred and fifty or so objects in the show have become doubly powerful, and made us newly alive to the preciousness and the dangers of touch forcing us to look at them in new ways. As the rules of engagement around touch have evolved, each representation of a handshake, a kiss or an embrace has taken on new and often intensified resonance. And, as the levels of prohibition around touch have ebbed and flowed, we have become aware as never before of how much we need it and how much we lose when we are denied it.

The exhibition invites us to stop taking touch for granted and to reconnect with the tactile foundations of our lives. It begins with a reminder that the earliest traces of human creativity are the direct imprint of touch, grooves made by fingers or prints made by the whole hand. We set the scene with an Egyptian coffin fragment bearing the fingerprints of its creator, and a print by Richard Long, a powerful, primal allusion to cave painting.

Anatomy of Touch

The opening section looks at skin as the organ of touch and at the complex anatomy of the hand, with dissection models from the Whipple Museum and anatomical illustrations from Cambridge University Library. In Barbara Hepworth *Study of Surgeon's Hands* (1947) we see how hands can be an instrument of astonishing complexity, sensing texture and shape, and flexing, teasing and gripping with just the right force. Artists' exploration both of the complexity of the hand and the sensitivity of skin, is examined, telling its painful histories, both personal and political, through works by Donald Rodney and Thabo Lowani.

Hands at Work

For some artists, hands are an alternative self-portrait, a statement of intent more telling and more expressive than the face. We include works by Edgar Degas, Turner and Auerbach that bear the direct imprint of their fingertips. Other works reveal the collaboration of different hands working together: Rubens re-working drawings by earlier masters he had collected, Thomas Hardy resisting the printed changes to his original manuscript of *Jude the Obscure*, and John Constable communicating with his engraver, David Lucas, through outlines and coloured daubs on trial proof impressions..



Nicola Bensley, *Hand of Frank Auerbach*, 2015. Katrin Bellinger Collection

Taking Hold

As humans we all share the desire to make our mark on the world around us, to draw on a pristine beach or disturb snow-covered ground. We have developed many ways to signal our presence to others, some universally accepted, others less so. Street art has been seen as a form of symbolic conquest, a way of staking claim on public spaces. We are delighted to work with RUN Giacomo Bufarini who has painted a mural in the exhibition space and will paint two further public mural installations in Cambridge city centre to highlight the show. He said, 'The importance of a hand and its touch are as irreplaceable as trees are to the heart'.

We look at tactile interactions between humans, in the way it establishes crucial development in children, as seen in Jessie Oonark's interpretation of a family unit connected through touch in her vivid print, *High Play* (1972). This section also explores the limits to the boundaries of touch and issues of consent in paintings and prints by William Hogarth.

The Power of Touch

The hand has been seen as an interface between the material and spiritual worlds. Tracing the lines of character and fate in the palm of the hand is for some a key to the soul. For others, the shape of the hand is a way of imagining god, a visual shorthand for divine power or divine blessings. The show includes remarkable and rarely seen handprints of artists' hands, collected by the palmist Marianne Raschig in 1920s Berlin for her comprehensive, systematic study *The Hand and Personality* (1931). We include the hands of artist Käthe Kollwitz whose work appears later in the show.

Rituals of touch can release the healing powers of the spirits, and hands and their touch help us navigate death, in mourning, or in mythology. Touch also helps us believe. In the Christian story of the resurrection of Jesus, the human need to touch is laid bare in his encounters with Mary Magdalene and Doubting Thomas. Works by Raphael, Michelangelo and Albrecht Dürer show us that when belief falters, touch can convince.

Revere/Destroy

Touch can be ideological - reverential and violent. Devotional actions such as the mudras (hand positions) crucial to Buddhist spiritual practice require considered, solemn gentleness. Kissing and rubbing devotional images, books, or sacred objects is common in religious ritual and or on pilgrimage. Periods of religious or political turmoil are characterised by violent actions, and leave their traces for contemporaries and future generations to see. We showcase panel paintings and books that were subject to iconoclastic attack during the Reformation, including rare survivals from a Norwich church and a *Life of Thomas Becket* owned by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, with every use of the word 'saint' obliterated. Defaced prints, over-stamped coins, and anti-Royal playing cards from the French Revolution express moral outrage and political disapproval.

The Power in your Hands

Political movements often deploy the symbolic power of the hand, whether the splayed hand or the clenched fist; Its image evokes protest and the refusal to submit, and conveys agency and the desire for self-determination. Bound or shackled hands signal enslavement and de-humanisation. The extended hand supports those in need, reaches out across divisions, and seals the bond between individuals, communities, and nations. In this closing section, works from Ancient Egypt to the present day (including sculpture by Rodin, and prints by Käthe Kollwitz, Richard Mark Rawlins and Helen Sebidi) document the hand as an image of subjugation, protest, affirmation and hope.

Luke Syson, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum said,

'This exhibition, and lavishly illustrated book, celebrate this multi-faceted, all-embracing sense, and I am thrilled we have been able to work with three remarkable artists – RUN (Giacomo Bufarini), Carmen Mariscal and Richard Rawlins – who, in text and image, have shared their own vision of touch. The curators of the exhibition, Elenor Ling and Suzanne Reynolds, have, through their selection and interpretation of objects, created a meditation on this sense that we hope will touch you.'

-Ends-

For all exhibition enquires please contact Fitzwilliam Museum Communications:
Emma Shaw | Press & Media Manager | ehs33@cam.ac.uk | 077 88 727 601

Notes to Editors

Exhibition Curators :Elenor Ling, Curator (Paintings, Drawings, Prints), Suzanne Reynolds, Curator (Manuscripts and Printed Books).

The exhibition catalogue THE HUMAN TOUCH: MAKING ART, LEAVING TRACES is available from PHP publishers in January 2021. Hardback, 280 x 240 mm 192 pages, 192 illustrations £35 ISBN: 978-1-913645-05-2 **CATALOGUE ENQUIRIES: Kristen Wenger kristen@paulholberton.com**

The Exhibition was designed by Nissen Richards Studio. **For more information contact Caroline Collett of Caroline Collett PR Ltd on T: + 44 (0)1297 444179 M: + 44 (0)7801 270598**

Nissen Richards Studio

Nissen Richards Studio works with many of the world's greatest cultural institutions. Comprised of architects, graphic designers, film-makers, animators and interpretation experts, the studio currently has live projects in the UK, Europe and the Far East and won the Best Exhibition Design Award at the Design Week Awards 2019 for its 'Life in the Dark' project at the Natural History Museum in London, as well as the Gold and Silver awards in the Pop-Ups, Display, Exhibit & Set Design category of the London Design Awards 2019 for projects for the Wallace Collection and Historic Royal Palaces. Founded in 2010 by Pippa Nissen and Jim Richards, the studio's particular combination of skills lies in its respect for all the voices involved in a project; its willingness to experiment, its unique storyboarding process and its particular fusion of architecture and theatre design. Our clear systems of thinking, working and communicating, together with our boundless curiosity about the world, translate into beautifully-designed spaces for people to come to, be stimulated by, enjoy and remember.

www.nissenrichardsstudio.com

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funded programme. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation. www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk / <https://beta.fitz.ms>

Press | The Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum is open to the public from Wednesday 2 December, and will be open Wednesdays to Saturdays, 10am to 5pm and Sundays, 12noon to 5pm until 31 March 2021.

Over the Christmas and New Year holidays, the Museum will be open Tuesday 22 and Wednesday 23 December, 10am to 5pm, closed Thursday 24 December to Friday 1 January 2021 inclusive and reopening Saturday 2 January.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission NORMALLY OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00; CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday

Business Partners

The Museum is supported by our Business Partners during 2020; TTP Group & Brewin Dolphin.