



THE SKIN: A COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE STORY

G. Caresana

Dermatologic Surgery, Casa di Cura Piacenza, Italy

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Introduction. The skin reflects biological, symbolic, and identity-related meanings that are deeply rooted in the history of humanity. The study and reflection on the skin have involved many different disciplines across fields, often very diverse from one another: Medicine, Religion, Philosophy, History, Psychology, Literature, Art, Communication, Sociology, and Law.

Materials and Methods. The skin is the organ that connects us with the environment in which we live and with our fellow human beings. The sensory aspect of the skin—touch—is a function that operates constantly and automatically, so much so that we are often not even aware of it.

Results. Touch is a bidirectional function: on the one hand, through discriminative (epicritic) tactile sensitivity, mechanoreceptors, thermoreceptors, and baroreceptors, it allows us to actively explore the world around us and obtain information from the external environment; on the other hand, it enables us to establish contact and affective interactions through a silent dialogue and a universal language—af-

fective touch—shared by all humankind.

Conclusions. While in the nineteenth century medical studies were mainly focused on the discriminative tactile function of the skin, the twentieth century saw the emergence of a growing interest in tactile function also in its relational and affective aspects, through clinical, behavioral, and neuroendocrine studies. This development has continued up to the most recent neurophysiological findings of the twenty-first century, culminating in the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2021.

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