

Art and Hygiene Lesley Nadel

We often read images of cleanliness—hands being washed, floors scrubbed, laundry beaten out and hung to dry—as quiet proof that life is in order. It is an easy symbol: care, renewal, the small rituals that keep chaos at bay. Alongside it sits another familiar story, repeated so often it begins to feel like fact: that people in “times gone by” rarely bathed and simply endured a perpetual stink. But history is not one long, grim queue of unwashed bodies. It depends on when you look, and where.

In ancient Egypt, hygiene was more than practicality—it belonged to the realm of spirit as well as skin. Early soaps and scented oils were made not just to cleanse but to protect, and perfume could be part of the preparation for entering temples. The Greeks, too, wove washing into daily life; their art preserves the scene in passing, in painted vases and murals that treat bathing as routine and ritual as one. The Romans amplified this into a public culture of water: communal bathhouses where cleanliness, leisure and social life mixed—sometimes literally—while walls around them celebrated water’s place in the empire. Later, in the Middle Ages, the story turns quieter and more complicated. In monasteries, cleanliness could be a discipline—an outward sign of inward purity—so handwashing became a familiar ritual, and herbs and fresh linen helped keep bodies cared for. Yet even here there were contradictions: some early Christian saints treated dirty skin as a kind of virtue, proof of moral superiority over bodily concerns.

Bathing comes back into view in Japan as a major social institution in the 15th to 17th centuries as a major social institution. What had long mattered for religious and therapeutic reasons sharpened into something more direct: becoming clean. Japanese art records the practice with confidence—often women, often bathhouses—suggesting a culture comfortable with the bath as both ordinary and communal.

At roughly the same time in Europe, bathing was far less straightforward. Warm water was argued over: did it open the pores and invite disease? Even when people wanted a full bath, the labour and fuel it demanded made it a luxury. Many settled for what was possible—sponging parts of the body or pouring water over themselves. Among the aristocracy, fine linen shirts were trusted to draw dirt from the skin, while herbs, salves and flowers did the work of masking, soothing and, when they could, cleansing. It is telling that so many painters lingered over the bath—Degas, Renoir and Vermeer among them—while soap itself is often absent. Whatever the practical reality, art repeatedly returns to bathing and ablution because it sits on the boundary between hygiene and purification. “Clean” is never only physical; it is moral, social, even political, shaped by ideas about class, contagion and belonging. When artists elevate soap, water and scrubbing into subjects worthy of attention, they make visible a cultural ideal: inward purity, elevated status, a promise of comfort—sometimes also a means of control. And they leave us with an uncomfortable question: what, and who, is a society trying to keep clean?

Victorian Britain then pushes that question to the foreground. Cleanliness—especially in the upper and aspiring middle classes—became an obsession, amplified by new germ theories, industrial grime and a moral urgency about what a

“good” life should look like. Art, advertising and interiors embraced a sanitary aesthetic: bright, orderly rooms; airy spaces; the insistence of white in clothing and décor as a symbol of spiritual, moral and physical health. In high art and in the booming world of branding—Pears soap, most famously—soap was sold not simply as a product but as civilisation itself, with cleanliness equated to wealth, purity and respectability. Influencers such as John Ruskin helped popularise the idea that a clean environment reflected a healthy conscience. And, inevitably, the contrast was sharpened: middle-class “respectability” set against the supposed dirtiness and immorality of the poor. Hygiene became a language of social class—and a tool of social control.

The Arts Society North West Norfolk will be hosting a talk by Mike Higginbottom on ‘Temples of Sanitation’ on Monday 8th June 2026 at 2 pm at Sedgeford Village Hall. He explores the immense problem of sanitation in the 19th century with the burgeoning population, and looks at the contribution of Joseph Bazalgette and the extraordinary engineering and decorated buildings that were created. New members are welcome to join our friendly society. **www.artssocietynwnorfolk.org.uk**.