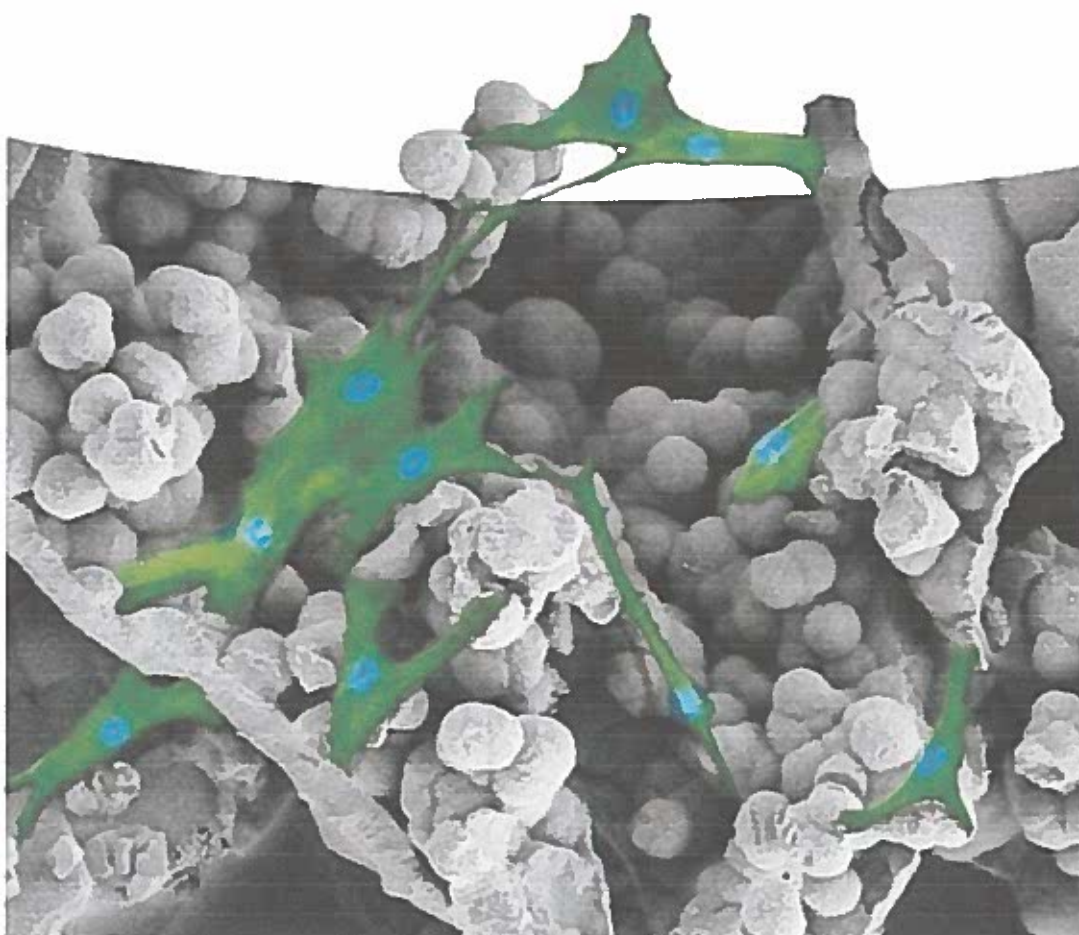


Edited by Andreas Taubert, João F. Mano,  
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# Biomaterials Surface Science



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## Contents

**Preface** XVII

**List of Contributors** XXI

### **Part I Polymer Surfaces** 1

<b>1</b>	<b>Proteins for Surface Structuring</b>	<b>3</b>
	<i>Alexander Schulz, Stephanie Hilll, Patrick van Rijn, and Alexander Böker</i>	
1.1	Introduction	3
1.2	Structuring and Modification of Interfaces by Self-Assembling Proteins	3
1.2.1	Formation and Modification of Protein Structures at Liquid Interfaces	4
1.2.1.1	Silaffins	4
1.2.1.2	Hydrophobins	5
1.2.2	Formation and Modification of Protein Structures at Solid Interfaces	8
1.2.2.1	Silicateins	8
1.3	Structuring and Modification of Solid Surfaces via Printing of Biomolecules	11
1.3.1	Intaglio Printing Using Nanostructured Wrinkle Substrates	11
1.3.1.1	Wrinkling: Nanostructured Templates	11
1.3.1.2	Assembly of Bionanoparticles on Wrinkles	12
1.3.1.3	Intaglio Printing of Tobacco Mosaic Virus	14
1.3.2	Microcontact Printing for Bioinspired Surface Modification	16
1.3.2.1	Microcontact Printing onto Self-Assembled Monolayers	16
1.3.2.2	Microcontact Printing with Wrinkle Stamps	16
1.3.2.3	Microcontact Printing with Porous Stamps	18
1.3.2.4	Enhanced Microcontact Printing	20
1.4	Conclusion and Outlook	22
	References	22

6.4.3	Cytotoxicity of Polymer Vesicles	188
6.4.4	Next Generation of Polymer Vesicles	189
6.5	Conclusions	190
	Abbreviations and Symbols	191
	References	193
 <b>Part II Hydrogel Surfaces 205</b>		
<b>7</b>	<b>Protein-Engineered Hydrogels</b>	<b>207</b>
	<i>Jordan Raphael, Andreina Parisi-Amon, and Sarah C. Heilshorn</i>	
7.1	Introduction to Protein Engineering for Materials Design	207
7.2	History and Development of Protein-Engineered Materials	207
7.3	Modular Design and Recombinant Synthesis Strategy	210
7.3.1	Module Design	210
7.3.2	Linker Design	212
7.3.3	Recombinant Protein Expression	214
7.4	Processing Protein-Engineered Materials	216
7.4.1	Cross-Linking Mechanisms	216
7.4.1.1	Effects of Cross-Link Density	217
7.4.1.2	Chemical Hydrogels	219
7.4.1.3	Physical Hydrogels	220
7.4.1.4	Self-Assembling Hydrogel Triggers	222
7.4.2	Protein-Engineered Hydrogel Processing Techniques	222
7.4.2.1	Thin Film Techniques	223
7.4.2.2	Bulk Protein Techniques	224
7.4.2.3	Surface Patterning Techniques	226
7.5	Conclusion	228
	References	229
 <b>8</b>	 <b>Bioactive and Smart Hydrogel Surfaces</b>	 <b>239</b>
	<i>J. Carlos Rodríguez-Cabello, A. Fernández-Colino, M.J. Piña, M. Alonso, M. Santos, and A.M. Testera</i>	
8.1	Introduction	239
8.2	Mimicking the Extracellular Matrix	240
8.2.1	Importance of Mimicking ECM Structure: From 2D to 3D Culture	240
8.2.2	Patterned Surfaces	242
8.2.2.1	Lithography	242
8.2.2.2	Micromolding	243
8.2.2.3	Nano-Microfluidics	243
8.2.2.4	Biopatterning	243
8.2.2.5	Response of Cells to Patterned Surfaces	244
8.3	Hydrogels: Why Are They So Special?	245
8.3.1	Chemical versus Physical Hydrogels	247
8.3.1.1	Chemical Cross-linking	247
8.3.1.2	Bioinspired Peptidic Motifs for Physical Cross-linking	250

## 8

**Bioactive and Smart Hydrogel Surfaces**

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## 8.1

**Introduction**

Biomaterial scientists have been inspired by nature in their research on polymers. In nature, all biological systems are dynamic, changeable, and very flexible to the alterations in their environment. Efforts are underway to mimic this easy way to face up to the external changes with smart polymers.

Smart polymers, also called *stimuli-sensitive polymers*, respond in an extreme manner to even slight changes in their environment. The peculiarity of these materials lies not only in the macroscopic changes (shape, surface features, solubility, and sol-to-gel transition among others) but also in the reversibility of these transitions. The environmental cues can be changes in temperature, pH, ionic concentration, presence of metabolic chemicals, and so on [1].

From a biomedical application point of view, and specifically from tissue engineering, the most attractive polymers are pH- and temperature-sensitive ones. Therefore, soluble pH and thermosensitive polymers that overcome gel transition at physiological temperature and pH have been proposed as minimally invasive injectable systems. In this way, hydrogels constitute an alternative therapeutic treatment without invasive surgical procedures [2].

Hydrogels are water-swallowable, water-insoluble polymeric materials, which form a three-dimensional network of polymeric chains that are cross-linked by chemical or physical bonding and display tissue elastic properties, constituting a scaffold where cells can grow in [3].

In order to make hydrogels more similar to the extracellular matrix (ECM), it is important to take into consideration the huge number of cellular interactions and communication events that takes place between the cell and the surroundings. For instance, there is evidence that topographical features such as ridges, grooves, and curvature can affect cell adhesion, migration, morphology, and even proliferation, pointing to an important role for the incorporation of topographical cues in tissue scaffolds. Modifying the patterned surface of the hydrogel, with different

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