TEACHER'S CORNER: BODY ART

by Enid Schildkrout

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Body art is an ancient and almost universal custom and can be seen today in cultures around the world, including our own in the United States.

After reading about the various techniques of body art described below, ask students to find examples of each technique in magazines, newspapers, books, and on the Internet.

With these examples, ask students to describe the body art and explain to the class, or in writing, what they think is its significance for the people with the body art. How does each example reflect the notions of power, individuality or group identity, life transitions, or beauty as explained in the previous lead article. How does each example help illustrate a general point made in the lead article, and how does each example illustrate one or more of the techniques described below?

You might ask students to discuss their thoughts, ideas, and feelings about body art prior to conducting their research for this assignment. After their reports, ask them to share with their classmates if their ideas changed and, if so, how, as a result of their research. For example, did they become aware of any personal negative or positive feelings about specific kinds of body art as a result of their research or from listening to their classmates' ideas? Which methods or techniques for creating body art do they find most appealing, and which do they find most troubling and why?

As a culminating activity, students might enjoy making a bulletin board display of various techniques and uses of body art, creating topical "headlines" for various sections of the display drawn from this issue of *AnthroNotes*. They could then illustrate these topics with photographs and pictures brought to class as a result of their research.

BODY ART TECHNIQUES

Body Painting

Body painting, the most ephemeral and flexible of all body art, has the greatest potential for transforming a person into something else—a spirit, a work of art, another gender, even a map to a sacred place including the afterlife. It can be simply a way of emphasizing a person's visual appeal, a serious statement of allegiance, or a protective and empowering coating.

Natural clays and pigments made from a great variety of plants and minerals are often mixed with vegetable oils and animal fat to make body paint. These include red and yellow ochre (iron rich clay), red cam wood, cinnabar, gold dust, many roots, fruits and flowers, cedar bark, white kaolin, chalk, and temporary skin dyes made from indigo and henna leaves. People all over the world adorn the living and also treat the dead with body paint.

The colors of body paint often have symbolic significance, varying from culture to culture. Some clays and body paints are felt to have protective and auspicious properties, making them ideal for use in initiation rituals, for weddings, and for funerals – all occasions of transition from one life stage to another.

Historically, body paints and dyes have been important trade items. Indians of North America exchanged many valuable items for vermilion, which is mercuric sulphide (an artificial equivalent of the natural dye made from cinnabar). Mixed with red lead by European traders, it could cause or sometimes caused mercury poisoning in the wearer.

Makeup

Makeup consists of removable substances—paint, powders, and dyes—applied to enhance or transform appearance. Commonly part of regular grooming, makeup varies according to changing definitions of beauty. For vanity and social acceptance, or for medicinal or ritual purposes, people regularly transform every visible part of their body. They have tanned or whitened skin;

changed the color of their lips, eyes, teeth, and hair; and added or removed "beauty" spots.

From the 10th to the 19th century, Japanese married women and courtesans blackened their teeth with a paste made from a mixture of tea and sake soaked in iron scraps; black teeth were considered beautiful and sexually appealing.

Makeup can accentuate the contrast between men and women, camouflage perceived imperfections or signify a special occasion or ritual state. Makeup, like clothing and hairstyles, allows people to reinvent themselves in everyday life.

Rituals and ceremonies often require people to wear certain kinds of makeup, clothing, or hairstyles to indicate that a person is taking on a new identity (representing an ancestor or a spirit in a masquerade, for example) or transforming his or her social identity as in an initiation ceremony, wedding, graduation or naming ceremony. Male Japanese actors in Kabuki theater represent women by using strictly codified paints and motifs, and the designs and motifs of Chinese theatrical makeup indicate the identity of a character.

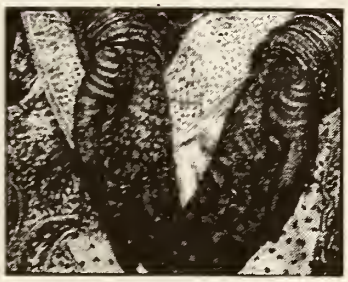

Figure 5 (India)

Hair

Hair is one the easiest and most obvious parts of the body subject to change, and combing and washing hair is part of everyday grooming in most cultures. Styles of combing, braiding, parting, and wrapping hair can signify status and gender, age and ritual status, or membership in a certain group.

Hair often has powerful symbolic significance. Covering the head can be a sign of piety and respect, whether in a place of worship or all the time. Orthodox Jewish women shave their heads but also cover them with wigs or scarves. Muslim women in many parts of the world cover their heads, and sometimes cover their faces too, with scarves or veils. Sikh men in India never cut their hair and cover their heads with turbans. And the Queen of England is rarely seen without a hat.

Cutting hair is a ritual act in some cultures and heads are often shaved during rituals that signify the passage from one life stage to another. Hair itself, once cut, can be used as a symbolic substance. Being part, and yet not part, of a person, living or dead, hair can take on the symbolic power of the person. Some Native Americans formerly attached hair from enemies to war shirts, while warriors in Borneo formerly attached hair from captured enemies to war shields.

Reversing the normal treatment of hair, whatever that is in a particular culture, can be a sign of rebellion or of special status. Adopting the uncombed hair of the Rastafarians can be a sign of rebellion among some people, while for Rastafarians it is a sign of membership in a particular religious group. In many cultures people in mourning deliberately do not comb or wash their hair for a period of time, thereby showing that they are temporarily not part of normal everyday life.

What we do with our hair is a way of expressing our identity, and it is easy to look around and see how hair color, cut, style, and its very presence or absence, tells others much about how we want to be seen.

Body Shaping

The shape of the human body changes throughout life, but in many cultures people have found ways to permanently or temporarily sculpt the body. To conform to culturally defined ideals of male and female beauty, people have bound the soft bones of babies' skulls or children's feet, stretched their necks with rings, removed ribs to achieve tiny waists, and most commonly today, sculpted the body through plastic surgery.

Becoming fat is a sign of health, wealth and fertility in some societies, and fattening is

sometimes part of a girl's coming of age ceremony. Tiny waists, small feet, and large or small breasts and buttocks have been prized or scorned as ideals of female beauty. Less common are ways of shaping men's bodies but developing muscles, shaping the head, or gaining weight are ways in which cultural ideals of male beauty and power have been expressed.

Head shaping is still done in parts of South America. For the Inka of South America and the Maya of Central America and Mexico, a specially shaped head once signified nobility. Because the skull bones of infants and children are not completely fused, the application of pressure with pads, boards, bindings, or massage results in a gently shaped head that can be a mark of high status or local identity.

While Western plastic surgery developed first as a way of correcting the injuries of war, particularly after WW II, today people use plastic surgery to smooth their skin, remove unwanted fat, and reshape parts of their bodies.

Scarification

Permanent patterns of scars on the skin, inscribed onto the body through scarification, can be signs of beauty and indicators of status. In some cultures, a smooth, unmarked skin represents an ideal of beauty, but people in many other cultures see smooth skin as a naked, unattractive surface. Scarification, also called cicatrisation, alters skin texture by cutting the skin and controlling the body's healing process. The cuts are treated to prevent infection and to enhance the scars' visibility. Deep cuts leave visible incisions after the skin heals, while inserting substances like clay or ash in the cuts results in permanently raised wheals or bumps, known as keloids. Substances inserted into the wounds may result in changes in skin color, creating marks similar to tattoos. Cutting elaborate and extensive decorative patterns into the skin usually indicates a permanent change in a person's status. Because scarification is painful, the richly scarred person is often honored for endurance and courage. Branding is a form of scarification that creates a scar after the surface of the skin has been burned. Branding was done in some societies as a part of a rite of passage, but in western Europe and elsewhere branding, as well as some forms of tattoo, were widely used to mark captives, enslaved peoples, and criminals. Recently, some individuals and members of fraternities on U. S. college campuses have adopted branding as a radical form of decoration and self-identification.

Figure 6
(Papua New Guinea)

Tattooing

Tattoo is the insertion of ink or some other pigment through the outer covering of the body, the epidermis, into the dermis, the second layer of skin. Tattooists use a sharp implement to puncture the skin and thus make an indelible mark, design, or picture on the body. The resulting patterns or figures vary according to the purpose of the tattoo and the materials available for its coloration.

Different groups and cultures have used a variety of techniques in this process. Traditional Polynesian tattooists punctured the skin by tapping a needle with a small hammer. The Japanese work by hand but with bundles of needles set in wooden handles. Since the late 19th century, the electric tattoo machine and related technological advances in equipment have revolutionized tattoo in the West, expanding the range of possible designs, the colors available, and the ease with which a tattoo can be applied to the body. Prisoners have used materials as disparate as guitar strings and reconstructed electric shavers to create tattoos. Tattoos are usually intended as permanent markings, and it is only recently through the use of

Figure 7 (London)

expensive laser techniques that they can be removed.

While often decorative, tattoos send important cultural messages. The "text" on the skin can be read as a commitment to some group, an emblem of a rite of passage, a personal or a fashion statement. In fact, cosmetic tattooing of eyebrows and eyeliner is one of the fastest growing of all tattoo enterprises. Tattoos can also signify bravery and commitment to a long, painful process—as is the case with Japanese full body tattooing or Māori body and facial patterns. Though there have been numerous religious and social injunctions against tattooing, marking the body in this way has been one of the most persistent and universal forms of body art.

Piercing

Body piercing, which allows ornaments to be worn in the body, has been a widespread practice since ancient times. Piercing involves long-term insertion of an object through the skin in a way that permits healing around the opening. Most commonly pierced are the soft tissues of the face, but many peoples, past and present, have also pierced the genitals and the chest. Ear, nose and lip ornaments, as well as pierced figurines, have been found in ancient burials of the Inka and Moche of Peru, the Aztecs and Maya of ancient Mexico, and in graves of central Asian, European and Mediterranean peoples.

The act of piercing is often part of a ritual change of status. Bleeding that occurs during piercing is sometimes thought of as an offering to gods, spirits or ancestors. Particular ornaments may be restricted to certain groups—men or women, rulers or priests—or may be inserted as part of a ceremony marking a change in status. Because ornaments can be made of precious and rare materials, they may signal privilege and wealth.

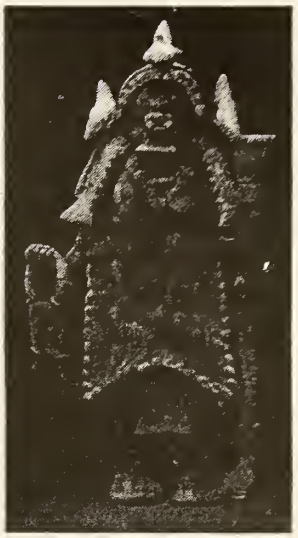
Figure 8 (Ecuador)

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Photo Captions

Permission was granted to publish the following photographs:

Figure 1. Horiyoshi III holding his as yet untattooed son. Photo credit: Sandi Fellman. Large-format Polaroid. Japan 1984. A renowned tattoo artist, Horiyoshi III here displays both his infant son and his own full-body tattoo. The Japanese art of irezumi, literally "insertion of ink," typically involves the pictorial decoration of the entire body, from the neck to the wrists and ankles. Horiyoshi III's tattoos depict traditional imagery including waves, whirlpools and carp. His tattoos were done by hand, using bundles of needles, by Horiyoshi II, the master who passed down his professional name to his disciple.

Figure 2. Narayit from Mexico. Seated male figure. Ceramic, 300 B.C.–A.D. 300. American Museum of Natural History 30.3/2457. Photo credit: D. Finnin. The ancient peoples of Mexico and Central America created magnificent ceramic statues and sculptures that portray men and women with

various forms of body art, including painting, scarification, sculpted hair, tattooing and piercing. This male figure from the Mexican state of Nayarit is shown with lines of scarification that outline zones of painting on his face, as well as painting on his neck, arms, torso and waist. He has sculpted hair and wears multiple rings that were attached by piercing the nose and ears. Such adornments seem to have indicated relatively high status.

Figure 3. Neely. Woman with carp back tattoos. Photo by William DeMichele, 1994. Tattoo artist: Jesse Tuesday. This woman's tattooed back shows an image of a koi, or carp, reflecting the influence of Japanese tattoo on the West.

Figure 4. Jon from the series "Hybrid Identities" (1997-1998), photographed in New York and San Francisco by Bettina Witteveen.

Figure 5. IVB: Henna. American Museum of Natural History.

Figure 6. Ceremonial "debating" stool with male figure. Wood, paint, feathers. Iatmul (Papua New Guinea). Collected by Margaret Mead, 1930s. American Museum of Natural History, 80.0/8131. The figure on this stool from the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea wears scars as well as face paint. Raised scars on the chests and backs of Iatmul men, resulting from scarification during initiation ceremonies, express male identity and represent the tooth marks of the crocodile spirit, said to have devoured the initiates as boys and expelled them as men. The stool was displayed in a ceremonial house and beaten as an accompaniment to speeches given by men.

Figure 7. Edith. Oil on canvas by George Burchett. Collection of Lyle Tuttle. Edith Burchett was tattooed by her husband, the "King of Tattooists," in 1913. Her designs featured serpents, a geisha, an Indian, a crucifixion scene, copies of old Master paintings, and on her breast, a set of Allied flags, added during World War I. For George, Edith's body became the individual "canvas" on which he honed his technique, using the "modern" electric tattoo machine to implant pigments under the skin. Clients of his London shop included King Alfonso of Spain, King Frederick of Denmark, and King George V of England.

Figure 8. Ceramic Vessel with male figure. Jama-Coaque (Ecuador) 500 B.C.-A.D. 500. Museo de Antropologia, Banco Central del Ecuador, Guayaquil GA-1-2896-86. Jama-Coaque men displayed their social importance with elaborate piercing. This warrior figure wears large earrings, a nose ring that encircles his mouth and bean-shaped nipple ornaments. Figurines like this one and ornaments of gold, silver, platinum, shell and emeralds suggest that in ancient Ecuador some men pierced the nose, ears, forehead, lips, chin and torso. They sometimes wore metal breast ornaments attached to chest piercings, and their teeth were shaped and embedded with semiprecious stones.

[NOTE: View the photographs in color at the *AnthroNotes* website (www.nmnh.si.edu/departments/anthro.html).]

FURTHER READING

Caplan, Jane, ed. 1999. *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History.* Princeton Univ. Press.

DeMello, Margo. 2000. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tatoo Community.* Duke Univ. Press.

Faces 12(4), December 1995. Issue on "Ornaments."

Faces 10(9), May 1994. Issue on "Hair."

(Continued on page 19)

("Body Art" continued from page 8)

Mayor, Adrienne. "People Illustrated: In Antiquity Tattoos Could Beautify, Shock, or Humiliate." *Archaeology* (March/April 1999):54-57.

Rubin, Arnold, ed. 1988. *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*. Museum of Cultural History, Univ. of California.