



Skin: The Body's Canvas¹

Wes Wheeler's tattoos, which cover his entire back, took 70 hours ► to complete. "Getting the tattoo was painful," he says, "but sometimes I look in the mirror and say, wow, that's beautiful, and it's on me."

- 1 If you took off your skin and laid it flat, it would cover an area of about 1.9 square meters (21 square feet), making it by far the body's largest organ. Covering almost the entire body, skin protects us from a variety of **external** forces, such as extremes of temperature, damaging sunlight, harmful **chemicals**, and dangerous infections. Skin is also packed with nerves, which keeps the brain in touch with the outside world.

The health of our skin and its ability to perform its protective functions are **crucial** to our well-being. However, the appearance of our skin is equally—if not more—important to many people on this planet.

- Take skin color, for example. Your genes determine your skin's color, but for centuries, humans have tried to lighten or darken their skin in an attempt to be more attractive. In the 1800s, white skin was desirable for many Europeans. Skin this color meant that its owner was a member of the upper class and did not have to work in the sun. Among darker-skinned people in some parts of the world, products

- used to lighten skin are still popular today. In other cultures during the 20th century, as cities grew and work moved indoors, attitudes toward light skin shifted in the opposite direction. Tanned skin began to indicate **leisure** time and health. In many places today, sun tanning on the beach or in a salon² remains popular, even though people are more aware of the dangers of UV rays.³

- Just as people have altered their skin's color to **denote** wealth and beauty, so too have cultures around the globe marked their skin to indicate cultural identity or community status. Tattooing, for example, has been carried out for thousands of years. Leaders in places including ancient Egypt, Britain, and Peru wore tattoos to mark their status, or their **bravery**. Today, among the Maori people of New Zealand as well as in cultures in Samoa, Tahiti, and Borneo, full facial tattoos, called *moko*, are still used to identify the wearer as a member of a certain family and to symbolize the person's achievements in life.

¹ **Canvas** is a strong, heavy cloth often used to do oil paints on.

² A **salon** is a place where people have their hair cut or colored, or have beauty treatments.



▲ A group of children from Washington International Primary School shows a range of different skin tones.

In Japan, tattooing has been practiced since
 50 around the fifth century B.C. The government
 made tattooing illegal in 1870, and though
 there are no laws against it today, tattoos are
 still strongly associated with **criminals**—
 particularly the *yakuza*, or the Japanese mafia,³
 55 who are known for their full-body tattoos.
 The complex design of a yakuza member's
 tattoo usually includes symbols of character
 traits that the wearer wants to have. The
 process of getting a full-body tattoo is both
 60 slow and painful and can take up to two years
 to complete.

In some cultures, scarring—a marking caused
 by cutting or burning the skin—is practiced,
 usually among people who have darker skin on
 65 which a tattoo would be difficult to see. For
 many men in West Africa, for instance, scarring
 is a rite of passage—an act that symbolizes that
 a male has **matured** from a child into an adult.
 In Australia, among some native peoples, cuts
 70 are made on the skin of both men and women
 when they reach 16 or 17. Without these scars,
 members were traditionally not permitted to
 trade, sing ceremonial songs, or participate in
 other activities.

75 Not all skin markings are **permanent**, though.
 In countries such as Morocco and India,
 women decorate their skin with colorful henna
 designs for celebrations such as weddings
 and important religious holidays. The henna
 80 coloring, which comes from a plant, **fades** and
 disappears over time.

In recent years in many industrialized
 nations,⁴ tattooing, henna body art, and, to
 a lesser degree, scarring have been gaining
 85 in popularity. What makes these practices

appealing to those living in modern cities?
 According to photographer Chris Rainier,
 whose book *Ancient Marks* examines body
 markings around the globe, people are looking
 90 for a connection with the traditional world.
 “There is a whole sector of modern society—
 people in search of identity, people in search
 of meaning . . .,” says Rainier. “Hence, [there
 has been] a huge explosion of tattooing and
 95 body marking . . . [I]t’s . . . mankind wanting
 identity, wanting a sense of place . . . and a
 sense of culture within their community.”

³ The **Mafia** is a criminal organization that makes money illegally.

⁴ An **industrialized nation** is a country which has a lot of industry,
 such as factories, businesses, etc.



▲ The scars on the face of a Gobir woman from Niger indicate her membership in the tribe.