

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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Canvas is a strong, heavy cloth often used to do oil pants on.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A salon is a place where people have their hair cut or colored, or have beauty treatments.



In Japan, tattooing has been practiced since 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,<sup>3</sup> 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 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 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 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.

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 coloring, which comes from a plant, fades and disappears over time.

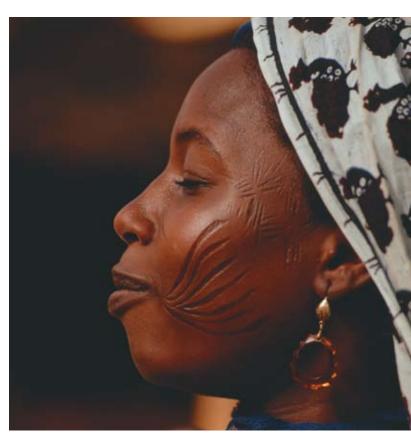
In recent years in many industrialized nations, <sup>4</sup> tattooing, henna body art, and, to a lesser degree, scarring have been gaining in popularity. What makes these practices

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

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."

<sup>3</sup> The **Mafia** is a criminal organization that makes money illegally.

<sup>4</sup> 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.