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# Body Art



Written by Kira Freed

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	4
Body Painting .....	5
Tattooing .....	8
Piercing and Ornamentation .....	12
Body Shaping .....	16
Be Smart About Body Art .....	21
Glossary .....	23
Index .....	24

## Introduction

Have you noticed how people decorate their bodies in different ways? In addition to clothing and hairstyles, people have many ways of **adorning** their bodies. Some think of their body as a blank canvas on which to create art, while others change their body to **conform** to cultural standards of beauty.



Yacouba acrobats in the Ivory Coast wear face paint to perform a traditional dance.

Body art has been practiced since the first humans were alive. Every **culture** in the world practices one or more forms of body art. Cultures have **unique** styles of decoration, as well as unique reasons for doing it. Read on to learn about some of the ways people around the world create body art.



Piercings of the nose, lip, and ears are a common way to show individuality and creativity.

## Body Painting

Body painting, the most **temporary** form of body art, is believed to be at least 30,000 years old. For thousands of years, people in most parts of the world have painted their bodies for special occasions, such as hunts, war, and mourning. People also paint their bodies for special ceremonies to mark a **rite of passage** or a change in social **status**.

Many body-painting traditions, passed down from generation to generation, have survived to modern times.

Among the Aboriginal people of Australia, body painting carries **spiritual** meaning. Designs reflect social rank, family and **ancestral** bonds, and connections with animals and the land.



Red is considered a sacred color by the Maasai tribe. They use red ochre to paint their bodies.



Aboriginal Australians use traditional designs for face painting.

Traditional body painting called *mehndi* is still practiced in India, the Middle East, and North Africa. Mehndi is worn to help celebrate special occasions. Brides traditionally wear mehndi, and in some **ethnic** groups the grooms do as well.

A reddish-brown paste made from the henna plant is applied to people's hands and feet using

a plastic cone. The **intricate**, fine-lined designs may last from two weeks to several months.



An Indian bride wearing mehndi (above). Powder from the henna plant is mixed with water to create the dye used for mehndi (inset).



Surma children wear body paint.

The Surma people of Ethiopia paint their bodies with chalk and other natural **pigments**. These cattle herders have few possessions, and body painting is their main form of artistic expression. Children learn body painting from their parents, and close friends often wear matching face paint to display their bonds.

The most common modern body painting is the use of cosmetic makeup by women in Western countries. Some wear makeup to hide skin **blemishes**, while others try to conform to the media's images of beauty presented by models and movie stars. Westerners also enjoy face painting at Halloween and at festivals. Fans often use it to show team loyalty at sporting events.



A model wears makeup.

## Tattooing

Tattoos, which are **permanent** body painting, are another form of body art that's been practiced for thousands of years.



Tattoo artists use fine needles to create permanent tattoos.

Irezumi is an advanced art form in which tattoos cover large areas of the body, including the arms, back, chest, and legs. A traditional irezumi “body suit” can cost \$30,000 or more, and may require up to five years of weekly tattoo sessions to complete.

Tattooing involves applying pigments under the skin, often using fine needles, or in earlier days, quills.

Japanese tattooing, called *irezumi*, has both decorative and spiritual purposes. It is believed to have started more than 10,000 years ago.



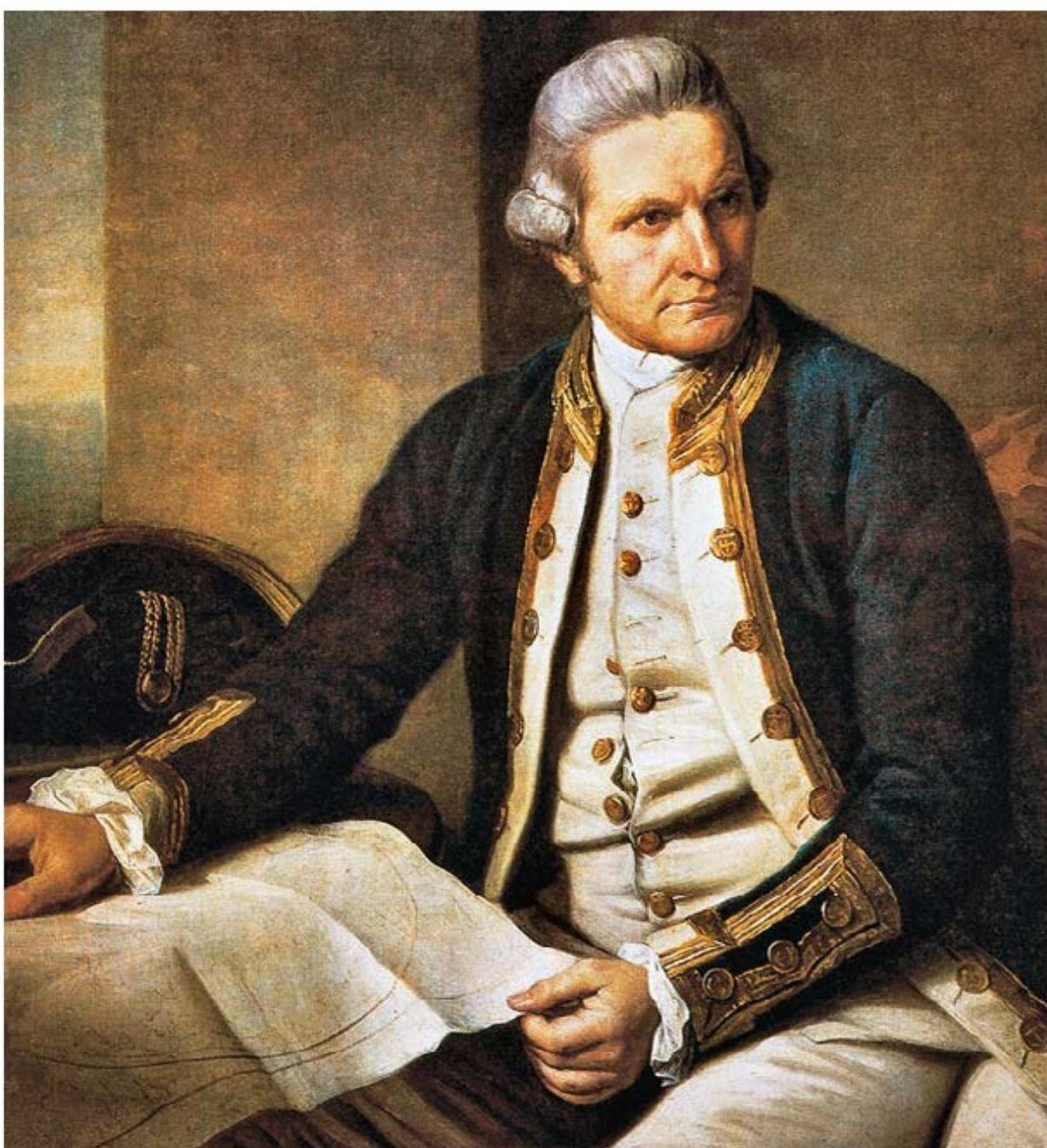
A traditional irezumi “body suit”



Traditional tattoos for males in Samoa

Among the people of Samoa, a South Pacific island, men wear bold, dark gray tattoos that extend from the waist to the knees. Their tattoos include traditional designs such as animals and geometric patterns. Samoan women's tattoos are more varied but always include a diamond shape on the backs of the knees. For Samoans, tattoos represent adulthood and a willingness to serve their community.

Captain James Cook brought tattooing to Western culture from the South Pacific in the late 1700s. Many of his sailors returned from Tahiti with a tattoo as a souvenir. As others copied this art form, tattooing became a popular form of self-expression in Europe and eventually North America. It remains popular today as a decorative and sometimes humorous expression of freedom and **individuality**.



Captain James Cook



## Do You Know?

What happens when someone gets a tattoo and later changes his or her mind? Tattoo removal is a long, expensive, and usually painful process without perfect results. Methods include sanding away layers of skin, surgically cutting out the tattoo, and the preferred method—laser treatments. People are working to improve ways to remove tattoos. They're also working to develop new inks that are less permanent.



Tutankhamun, a young king in ancient Egypt, had pierced ears as shown in this mask.

## Piercing and Ornamentation

Body piercing is at least 5,000 years old, as revealed by one of the oldest mummies in the world. An ancient mummy, found in 1991

in an Austrian glacier, has pierced ears. Some anthropologists believe that the first piercings may have been done as protection against demons.

Piercings were a sign of royalty and success.

The reasons for piercing,

both long ago and today, include fashion, social status, religious ritual, and personal expression.

In ancient Egypt, piercings were signs of success and reserved for royalty. Only the pharaoh, or ruler, was allowed to have a pierced navel.



Ears, noses, and lips are common places for piercings. Some of the most spectacular lip piercing is found among certain African tribes. Girls of the Mursi tribe of Ethiopia start wearing a plate in their lower lip around age 15. A round clay disk is inserted into a pierced hole. The lip gradually stretches as plates of increasing size are inserted over time. The larger the plate, the more wealth in the form of cattle the girl's father will receive when she marries. Other tribes, including the Suyá of Brazil, wear a similar body ornament.

Mursi woman with a lip plate



The septum—the tissue between the two nostrils—is another common location for body piercing. This practice has been most common in warrior cultures. Septum ornaments often are, or are made to look like, animal tusks to create a fierce appearance.



An Asmat warrior from New Guinea proudly wears an ornament used during earlier wars. It is a symbol of strength.



Tribesmen in Papua New Guinea take part in a traditional ceremony.

Before contact with Europeans in the late 1400s, septum piercing was practiced throughout the Americas by the Maya, Aztec, Inca, and other tribes. Septum piercing is still popular among many South Pacific island cultures. In Papua New Guinea, body art among men is an important part of ceremonies and festivals. Members of different clans display their cultural roots through body painting, piercing and ornamentation, and elaborate headdresses.

## Body Shaping

Cultures around the world also have many methods of shaping bodies. Women of the Padong culture of Myanmar and Thailand begin wearing heavy brass neck coils at the age of five. The coils press down on the rib cage and shoulder muscles to make the neck look longer, which is considered attractive.



A young Padong girl wears neck coils.



Skull shaping is also practiced by the Mangbetu tribe in central Africa.

Skull shaping dates back at least 10,000 years in Australia. **Prehistoric** people in the Americas also practiced skull shaping. Today, on the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, mothers bind the head of infants using soft tree bark covered with a basket and rope. Over the next six months, the child's head slowly takes on a more **elongated** shape. Elongated heads are considered a sign of intelligence and spirituality in the Vanuatu culture.

Chinese footbinding began in the tenth century and continued until 1949, when it was made illegal by the newly formed government of the People's Republic of China. Women tucked under the four smaller toes of their young daughters' feet and wrapped each foot tightly with strips of cloth. The binding was tightened every two days.

Footbinding broke bones, caused severe pain and infections, and made it almost impossible to walk. In the Chinese culture, bound feet were considered beautiful and were believed necessary for a woman to marry and have a good life.



A deformed foot after binding



A Chinese woman with bound feet



Wearing a corset created a tiny waist.

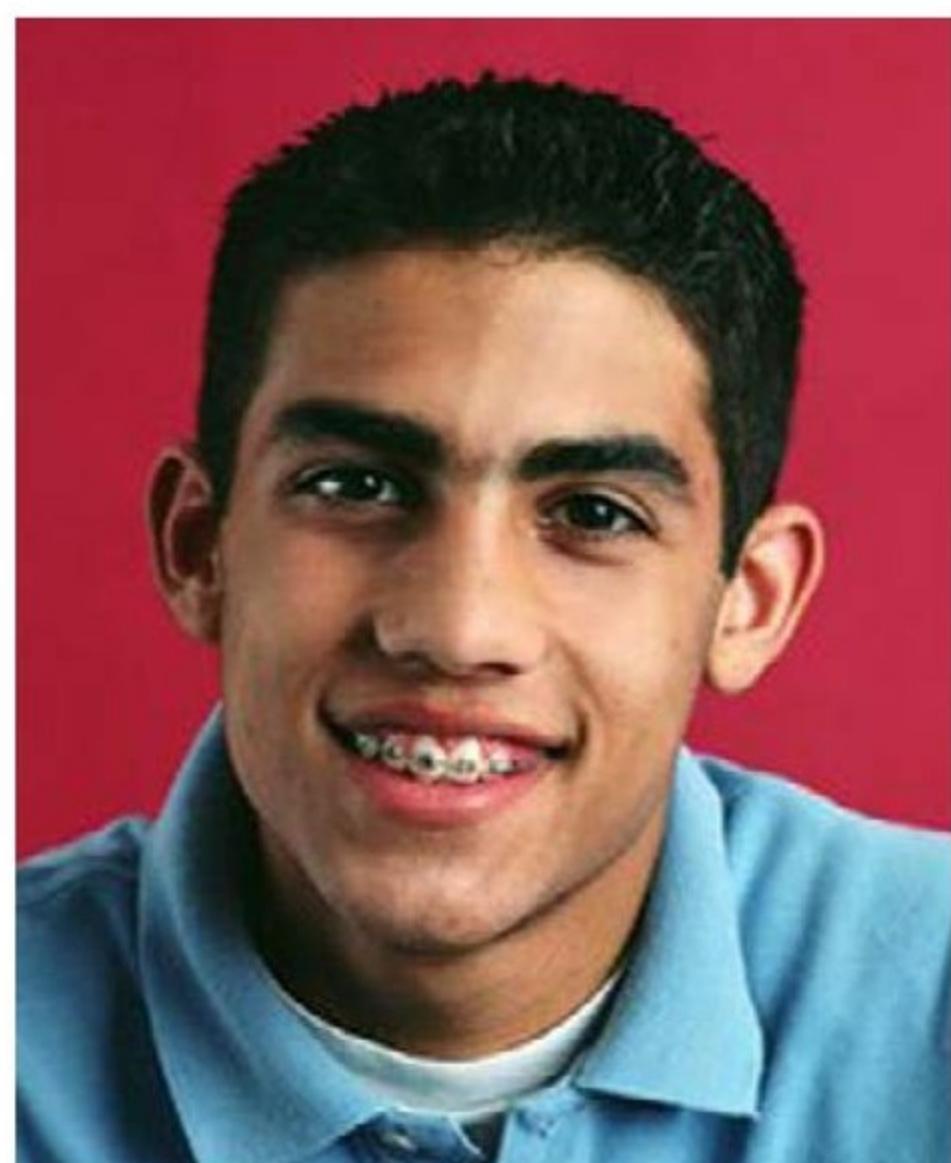
European women wore corsets starting in the 1500s. A corset was a tight undergarment that created a tiny waist, which was fashionable through the early 1900s. In addition to discomfort, some women who wore corsets suffered from painful broken ribs and disturbed internal organs. The fashion gradually became less popular as women began to work outside the home and needed to move about freely without a tight corset.

Teeth are another target of body shaping. Hindu people on the island of Bali file their six front teeth to create a smooth edge so their teeth will not look pointed like those of wild animals. The Mentawai of a different island do just the opposite, filing their teeth into sharp points. And in many countries today, some people have their teeth straightened to follow a standard of beauty. Teeth whitening is also becoming popular.

Cosmetic surgery is a popular—and often risky—practice in many parts of the world. Millions of people each year have surgery to change the shape of their face or body, often to meet an ideal standard of beauty. Severe infections, scarring, and other problems can result.



The Mentawai people file their teeth into sharp points.



In many countries, teenagers and adults have their teeth straightened.

## Be Smart About Body Art

Which kinds of body art in this book are temporary? Which ones are permanent? Before you get any body art, here are some things to think about.

- Permanent body art is for adults—kids aren't old enough to make decisions that last a lifetime.
- Permanent body art is risky. People who get tattoos with unclean equipment can catch serious illnesses, including HIV. Permanent body art can lead to infections and injuries that may require surgery. Large scars can grow, even from a small wound.
- Some permanent body art can be extremely painful!

Needles used for permanent tattoos can cause pain.

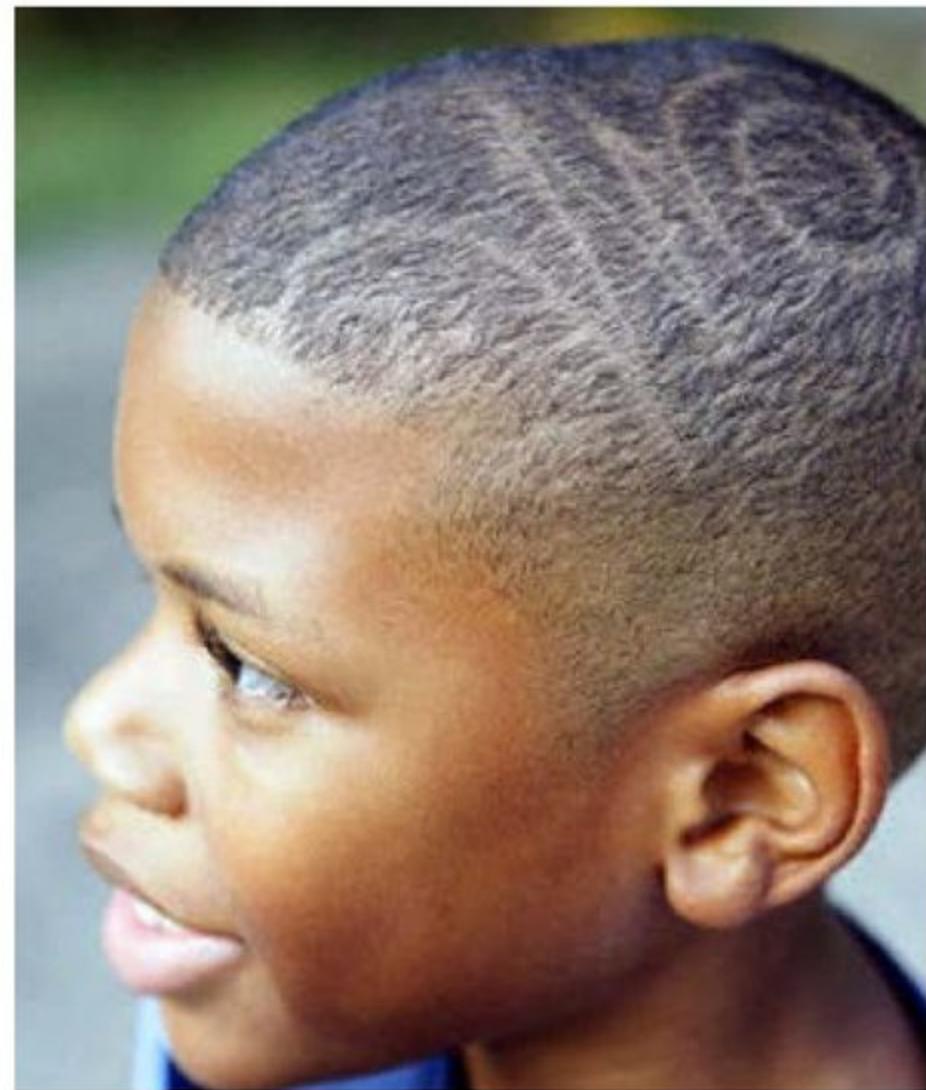


A temporary tattoo can look like a permanent one and is much safer.



If you like the idea of body art, try these kid-friendly ideas.

- A new hairstyle or kind of clothing can be a great way to express who you are.
- Temporary tattoos come in an incredible variety of designs.
- Many kinds of fun jewelry don't require any piercing.



- Face painting is an excellent way to play with your appearance and step into a new identity. Enjoy it for Halloween, a festival, or a party with your friends!



## Glossary

<b>adorning</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	decorating (p. 4)
<b>ancestral</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	having to do with relatives from long ago, before grandparents (p. 5)
<b>anthropologists</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who study human societies around the world (p. 12)
<b>blemishes</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	small flaws that reveal imperfections in something (p. 7)
<b>conform</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	to follow, as in rules or other standards (p. 4)
<b>culture</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the way of life of a specific group of people (p. 4)
<b>elongated</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	unnaturally long in comparison with its width (p. 17)
<b>ethnic</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	related to a cultural subgroup (p. 6)
<b>individuality</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	identity as a separate person (p. 10)
<b>intricate</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	complicated (p. 6)
<b>permanent</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	lasting forever (p. 8)
<b>pigments</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	powders that create color (p. 7)
<b>prehistoric</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	from a time long ago before written records existed (p. 17)

<b>rite of passage</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a ceremony marking the change from one life stage to another (p. 5)
<b>spiritual</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	related to spirit, soul, or a divine being (p. 5)
<b>status</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	social rank or position (p. 5)
<b>temporary</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	lasting for a limited amount of time (p. 5)
<b>unique</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	one of a kind (p. 4)

## Index

- Africa, 6, 7, 12, 13, 17
- Americas, 10, 15, 17
- Asia, 6, 8, 16, 18
- Australia, 5, 17
- body art (placement),
  - feet, 18
  - head, 7, 12–14, 17
  - limbs, 8, 9
  - neck, 16
  - torso, 5–8, 19
- Europe, 10, 19
- irezumi*, 8
- mehndi*, 6
- Pacific Islands, 9, 10, 14, 15



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