Foreword

by Wade Davis

If the skin of the average human body was laid flat as a map, a sheet of parchment, it would spread over twenty square feet. This fact that did not go unnoticed by the primordial artists of the world. Had Leonardo chosen the human form as his canvas he would have had a surface to work with four times the size of the Mona Lisa. Fully engaged in the unexpressed yet palpable excitement of the Renaissance, he remained focused on other possibilities of expression. But throughout history and for the vast majority of the artists of the world the body has always been the template of the spirit, the palette upon which all dreams and possibilities may be realized and expressed.

The skin is the boundary that separates the self from the external world. It is the interface between the inner and the outer, the intimate and the infinite. In pre-literate societies, where mythology came alive in figurative forms carved into rocks or painted onto the roofs of caves, the human body was seen as yet another feature of the landscape, a sensual geography upon which might be written or inscribed the hopes and fears of a people. To touch the body electric was to record mystical events, give credence to established patterns of order and hierarchy, make sense out of sensation and secure through artistic expression the place of the individual in the hierarchy of the collective. The human form, whether isolated in the forests of the Amazon, swept clean by the bitter winds of the Arctic, or soothed by sunset rains of Polynesia became through the brilliance of inspired artistry a map of culture and myth, a sacred geography of the soul, all expressed by the simplicity of forms painted, carved, incised, or etched upon the canvas of the body.

It all began with pigments extracted from the ground, white gypsum and chalk, ochre and copper, the iron soils of Africa, and in the Americas vegetable dyes, genipa and achiote, the black blue hues and reds of the Amazon. The designs sketched upon skin expressed the values of a particular culture. They represented fidelity to those values and thus stood as expressions of solidarity. The motifs became definitions of culture, symbols of inclusion, iconic representations that carried not only discrete meanings, but multiple meanings, deep connotations that could only be understood and recognized by those born to the particular cultural reality celebrated by the forms.

To be painted was to display and honour a connection to something greater than self, a communal knowledge, never spoken about but never forgotten. Every impulse of the human heart, every desire for fertility and grace, for health and well being, protection,

PMB# 337 1718 M Street NW, Washington DC 20036 PHONE 646.246.6085
3030 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93105 PHONE 805.563.0099 FAX 805.563.2070

balance, harmony, was affirmed and expressed in decoration that slipped in time from pigment to the indelible mark of the tattoo, and from the pain of a needle struck a thousand times into the subcutaneous layers of the skin to the raw cut of the blade that permanently transformed the topography of the skin through scarification. The pain implied sacrifice, a word derived from the Latin term meaning ëto make sacredí. To endure the excruciating ordeal inherent in the decorative techniques was not only to pass in initiation from innocence to experience, from childhood to maturity, it was to establish an explicit connection between the individual and the realm of the spirits. To be tattooed or decoratively scarred was to be human, and to be human was to know the gods.

The Mentawi, a rainforest people from the island of Siberut off the shores of Sumatra, believe that souls enliven everything that exists, birds, plants, clouds, even the rainbows that arch across the sky. The spirits rejoice in the beauty of the world, and cannot be expected to reside in any form or human body that is not itself beautiful. If the world loses its luster, if the universe becomes drab and monotonous, the souls will abandon this realm for the settlements of the dead, and all life will perish. Thus the Mentawi, both men and women, devote their lives to the pursuit of aesthetic beauty, preening their bodies, filing their teeth, adding brilliant feathers to their hair, and inscribing delicate spiral patterns on their arms and legs. In daily life, they approach every task, however mundane, fully adorned.

For the Wodabe and Berber of the African sands, the embellished body is both an aesthetic statement and a powerful talisman that safeguards health and well being as it wards off the Evil Eye. In the upper Amazon, among the Shipibo, the delicate lines of purple and black that adorn the shamanís face allow him to dissolve into the spirit, becoming a bird of prey, a jaguar, an anaconda. The same lace-like decorations on the faces of initiates allow the healer to deduce the proper melodies of the incantations that must accompany the ingestion of ayahuasca, the most important entheogenic preparation of the forest. In Borneo the Kenyan endure four years of intense ritual pain to complete tattoos that in death are believed by them to serve as torches to guide the way to the next world.

For cultures such as these that maintain no clear separation between the secular and the sacred, the material and immaterial, the decoration of the body serves both a spiritual and social role. A single artistic gesture links the individual to the gods, the community, the lineage of the ancestors and the promise of the children. The Haida employed ivory needles to inscribe heraldic designs and family totems onto the breast and between the shoulders, branding in a celebratory manner the individual with the

markings of clan, lineage, family name. Among the Nuba of the Sudan, body art and decoration reveal in an instant the identity and age of a woman, linking her to a particular cohort with whom she will share all of the passages of life.

Arguably the most elaborate tattooing traditions are found among the Polynesians, an astonishing civilization of seafarers who flung themselves across a quarter of the Earthís surface, ten million square miles of ocean and islands, the largest culture sphere ever to have been brought into being by the human imagination. In Samoa, one of the key points of origin of the Polynesian expansion, tattooing was the essential rite of passage. Unmarked, a boy could not marry, speak in the presence of elders, engage in anything but the most menial of work. It was said that in death and cremation, the properly executed designs glowed with an intensity not seen in life, thus revealing the promise of a spirit world everlasting. In the Marquesas, ritual tattooing reached perhaps its most sublime degree of elaboration. For these islanders, all artistic expression was inspired by the divine, for every creative gesture recalled to their minds the primordial act of union in which their mythical celestial father, Atea, gave light to the darkness by impregnating Atanua, the feminine essence of the Earth. Thus in making something of beauty, be it a carving, a canoe, a mask or a tattoo, the artist by definition invoked the raw energy of the spirit. To create was to serve and honor the gods.

Every step in the process was enveloped in ritual, circumscribed by tradition. Each motif had a name, a lineage. These classical forms were considered by the Marquesans to be inviolable, the distillation of generations of customary practice and law. Thus the craftsman worked within fixed limits, expressing his artistry not through original inspiration but through the dexterity, speed and nuance with which he performed his anticipated task. The transformation of the human subject was determined by a precise sequence. Every part of the body between the waist and the knees, including the most sensitive surfaces of the genitalia, was tattooed. The design was a cloak of honor that each the man carried with him into the grave.

It was within the Polynesian sphere that Europeans of the modern era first struggled to come to terms with this strange transformative art. It was not as if the tradition was totally unknown to them. Almost all peoples, including those of Europe, had discovered techniques for permanently coloring the flesh. For the Greeks and Romans, it had been a sign of disgrace. One etymological origin of the word ìtattooî is the Latin term for stigma, an indelible mark cut into the flesh of a slave or criminal to brand his or her status forever.

The prejudice that in time would lead the colonial authorities of France and Britain to

ban the Polynesian art of tattooing, as they would indeed condemn every feature of island life, was by no means felt by the first Europeans to reach the South Pacific. To the contrary, Captain James Cook, the greatest navigator of the Enlightenment, was dazzled by what he encountered. His naturalist, Joseph Banks, was the first to observe and describe the extraordinary art form. His detailed account, written on July 5, 1769, as the flagship Endeavor set sail from Tahiti, is a celebration of commitment and endurance, of beauty and artistry, of threads of social cohesion woven through ritual in a manner utterly foreign yet irresistibly enticing to the European mind.

And then came New Zealand. If the tattoos of the Tahitians amazed, the patterns etched into faces of Maori warriors left the British gasping for explanations. In October 1769, the English made landfall, and in a skirmish a Maori was killed. Joseph Banks examined the corpse and saw in the warriorís face a pattern of swirling designs not only imprinted onto the skin, but etched into the flesh. This was the first European encounter with moko, a decorative technique that combined the pigmentation of tattooing with the raw intrusion of scarification. Every mature Maori had had his face transformed into specific patterns, sacred designs, so unique that they served literally as signatures of the individual. When, in time, the Maori negotiated treaties with the British, their chiefs would sign documents by replicating in ink on paper the precise pattern that adorned their faces.

The pain implied in such a transformation of human flesh astonished the British. Each Maori man encountered had by definition allowed his face to be incised with patterns cut into the skin with chisels carved from bone or shell, and shadowed with pigment hammered into the wounds. The result was a pattern of scarred ridges and grooves so elaborate and baroque that for a generation after the conquest severed Maori heads would be traded as exotic art forms in a marketplace that only generations later would be described as obscene.

The British were both attracted and repulsed. They saw in the faces of the dead the very designs that their adversaries carved into wood to decorate |war clubs, canoes, long houses. The body was just another surface upon which mythological beings might be brought into the world. Here for the English, themselves a tough island people, was a new definition of commitment.

From this encounter remarkably was born a fundamental tradition of the British navy. Even as English missionaries railed against the practice, symbolic as it was of everything they failed to understand and thus feared, British sailors were lining up not only in Polynesia but throughout the world to colour their skin in fantasy. In 1862 the Prince of

Wales, later Edward VII, had the first of his many tattoos etched into his skin on a visit to the Holy Land. His sons, the Dukes of Clarence and York followed suite, and after that it was impossible to turn back. On one of his many foreign excursions, Edward found himself in Japan, where he sought out Hori Chiyo, a legendary tattoo artist, and asked that dragons be incised onto his arms.

The British ambivalence toward this sacred art had found its perfect match. The Japanese were equally obsessed. From the 6th century tattooing had been for them a form of punishment, codified as a technique to brand criminals and outcasts. For a people obsessed with order and conformity, an indelible mark of separation was a sanction too terrible to contemplate. Its very power lay in its deviance, and in time the truly criminal adopted the stigma as a sign of inclusion and grace. During the time of the Tokugawa shoguns, the first years of the 19th century, itinerant gamblers coalesced into gangs that became known as the Yakuza. Champions of the poor, the Yakuza were tempered by a strict code of honor that prohibited vile criminality, theft and rape, even as it demanded loyalty, courage, dedication, all of which were made manifest through a willingness to suffer intense pain, whatever the source, to prove fidelity to the greater commitment.

Thus in time, the criminal underworld of Japan took on the art of bodily decoration as an indelible sign of solidarity. Despite official disapproval, the aesthetic tradition grew, the designs becoming so elaborate as to animate the human form, artistry that came alive with every movement of the body. The Japanese transformed the tattoo from a two dimensional representation into a set piece of theatre played out upon the surface of the skin.

Today the art of bodily decoration has emerged less as a protest than a keen desire to reestablish something of a connection to these primordial impulses that have driven human societies for all of history. The celebration of the primitive is not a cheap impulse, but a hunger to find some meaning and association in a modern world in which the individual has been cast adrift from the community, and science, as Saul Bellow wrote, has made a housecleaning of belief. To contemplate the images in this book, whether the living faces of Polynesia, the raised flesh of Africa, or the erotic tensions of reinvention celebrated at Burning Man, the millenarian gathering that blossoms each year from the deserts of Nevada, is to remember why all peoples through all time have in the end found ways, whatever the impediments, to seek and celebrate a transformation of the spirit.