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The Body. The Art. The Psyche

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Text Story: The Body. The Art. The Psyche

Anushtha Agrawal

Tattooing is one of the most ancient and common forms of body art, with some research indicating it dates back to the Neolithic age.

Lisa Turner, an New York City-based art therapist, visual artist, and designer says that body art has both personal and communal interests. She says that it is a way in which people can have control over their bodies. They can stand out or they can feel that they're a part of a ritual to feel included in a community.

While body art can be a way of identification for the recipient, it can mean something deeper for the artist. Austin-based art therapist Mallory Keeks says, "There is obviously a desire to create and do something meaningful." Keeks, a former tattoo artist, says body art comes with a lot of trust, intimacy and vulnerable moments. The permanence of tattooing offers the ability to "give someone something they can keep forever."

New York-based tattoo artist Paul Booth is known for his macabre black-and-gray tattoo art that often features demons and dark imagery. "I basically look inside my client's head. My consultations are a bit of psychotherapy session I suppose, and I get in their head and I figure out what their trauma is and their demons are and I visualize them and depict them on their skin. So, it's kind of an exorcism process," says Booth.

Though body art doesn't need to be dark or even permanent to be emotional and meaningful. Another ancient practice, henna, is an impermanent form of body art that often marks a critical life moment. It marks a moment in time from which both the artist and the recipient need to move on.

"I think there is a push and pull between wanting a change and not wanting a change. Expecting a change and not expecting a change," says Keeks. What people want on their skin can be associated with their ideals.

Henna art dates back centuries and is deeply rooted in Indian, Egyptian and South African cultures. It is still used today as a way to adorn and beautify the skin, from the protection of brides and kids in various traditions to marking a great celebration.

"Receiving it or giving it is the beautiful human connection that happens through the experience of application, because we're breaking through the barriers of personal space," says Natalia Zamparini, a henna client and a budding henna artist.

Whether it is a matter of identity, connection, protection or ritual, body art often signifies a longing to belong to something. What makes it special, Keeks says, is, "It kind of has an ability to stretch out the bounds of language. "