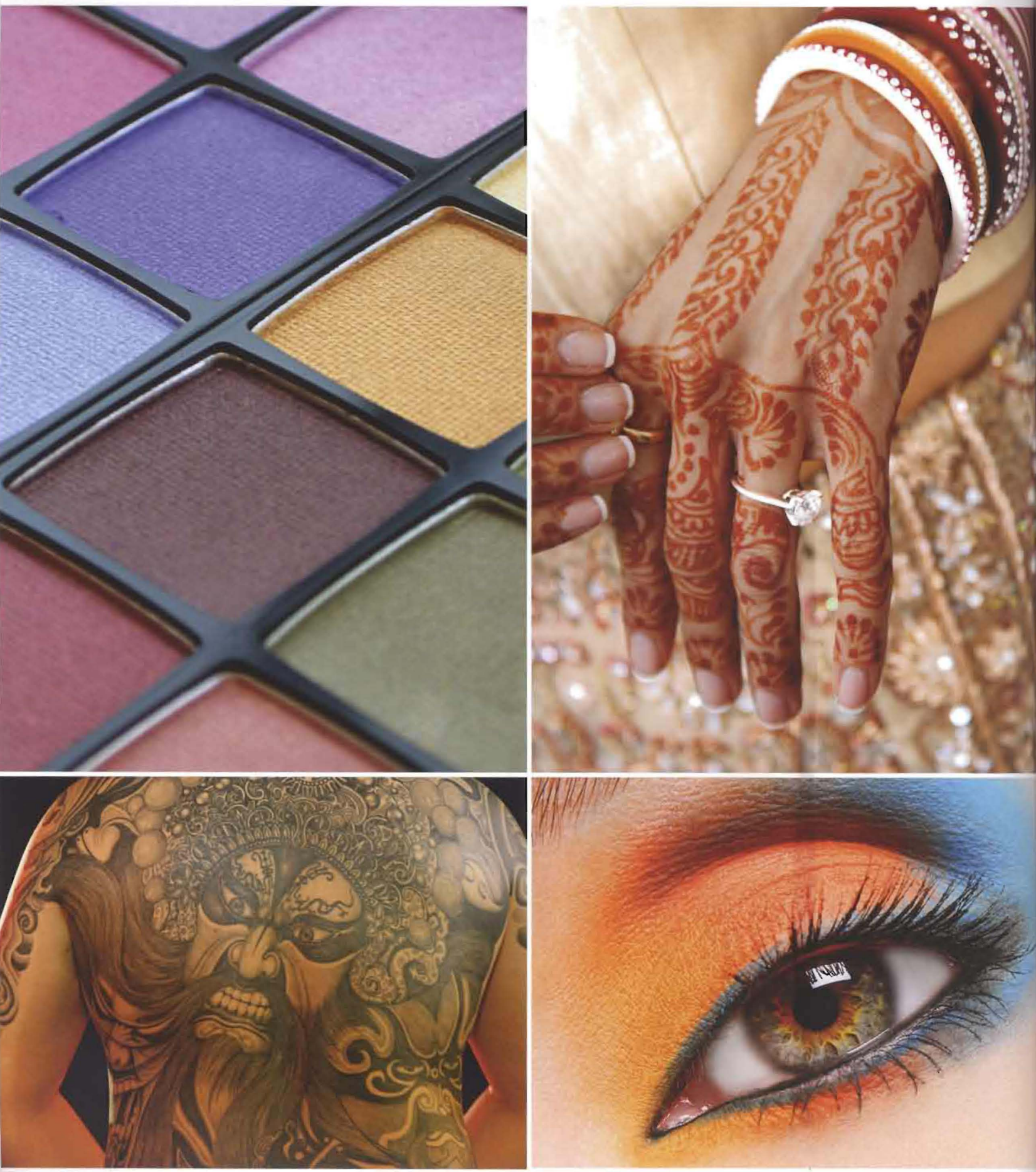


The possibilities for colouring human skin are manifold and also provide information about the ideals of beauty held by the different cultures and subcultures.
Photos (4): Fotolia

The Self-Decorated Ape

Man has always used colours to alter his appearance. This self-painting has taken on very different forms over the centuries, from war paint to make-up. Prof. Nina Jablonski, anthropologist at Pennsylvania State University, describes how man evolved into a "decorated primate" and the communicative significance of colour on the skin.

Foto: Dong Lin

We look at our own skin and that of other people hundreds if not thousands of times a day. As primates, we are visually oriented animals and these casual or deliberate glances provide us with an enormous amount of "data". Much of this information comes from the skin. Our skin is biographical. It tells the story of our age and our health and provides insights into our ancestry, personal history, identity and aspirations.

Humans are unique among animals in being able to deliberately alter their appearance by the adding colour to their skin in a variety of ways. These modifications can be subtle or starkly obvious, but they are all done to achieve an effect. Because of our primate obsession with faces, we spend great effort in adding colour to our faces in ways that will influence the behaviour of our fellow primates. We don't generally think about self-decoration in this way, but we apply colour to our faces and bodies to advertise certain features, expressions or attributes and possibly even to deceive others into thinking we are something we are not. The beauty of this effort is that it requires not one word to be spoken.

Skin decoration in prehistory

The history of our obsession with decorating our own skin is poorly known because it is rare for skin to be preserved for a long period after death. After we die, our skin decomposes and disintegrates, taking with it all vestige of our decorative efforts. Still, we can get a glimpse into this past behaviour by looking for tell-tale clues in archaeological records. Indirect evidence for the decoration of skin comes from archaeological sources dating from the later Palaeolithic onwards and direct evidence from preserved and mummified skin attests to the pervasiveness of skin decoration since Neolithic times, roughly from 10,000 years ago to the present.

When our ancestors began to decorate surfaces such as the walls of caves and rock shelters, they almost certainly decorated themselves too. Humans use their skin as a canvas, and the earliest methods used to alter the appearance of the skin involved the addition of colour using naturally occurring pigments. We know from ethnographic reports that people throughout the world tend to use the same range of naturally occurring pigments as body paints. These include yellow and red ochre (hematite and limonite, respectively), the black of pyrolusite (manganese) and the white of ash, chalk or lime. Red ochre was probably used for purposes of body decoration from the end of the last Ice Age, as long as 77,000 years ago, as attested by the presence of crayonlike pieces of ochre from the Middle Stone Age site of Blombos Cave, South Africa.

Cosmetics – body paints specially made for the skin of the face – first appeared in ancient Egypt, where palettes of powdered, coloured minerals and other compounds were used to decorate the faces of the living and the dead, beginning more than 6,000 years ago. The cosmetics included naturally occurring lead-based compounds, which were ground up and used in their original state, or else manufactured by chemical reactions to produce new pigments with different colours and properties. This marked the beginning of the cosmetics industry, one of the fastest moving and most lucrative types of human business today and one dedicated solely to the appearance of skin.

There seems little doubt that humans discovered the art of per-

Ideal of beauty or mark of social belonging? Face paint can have many meanings, as can be seen by comparing this man in India ...

Photo: fotolia

... with this English soccer fan. Face painting of this type is the "war paint" of the civilised world of the 21st century.

Photo: istockphoto

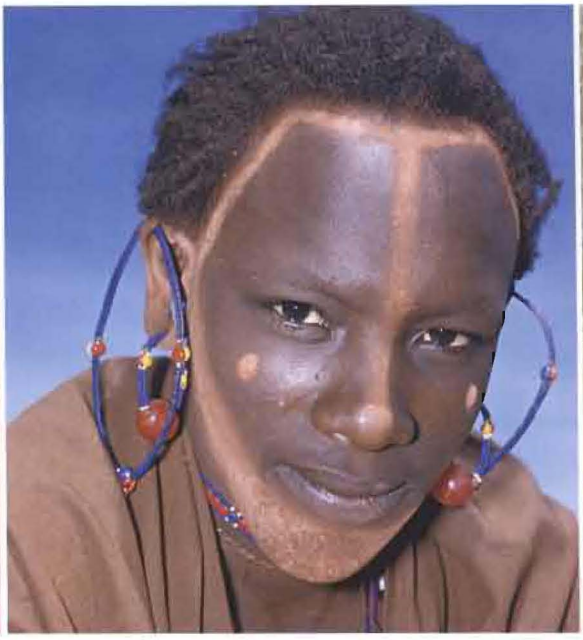
manent skin colouring very early in their history too. The advent of tattooing cannot be dated with certainty, but we do have a few extraordinary examples of genuinely old, well-preserved and deliberately decorated skin that attest to the great antiquity of this practice. The famed "Ice Man", nicknamed Ötzi, who died in the Tyrolean Alps nearly 5000 years ago, was discovered to have the earliest evidence of permanent marks on skin believed to be tattoos. These were in the form of black lines found on the ankles and back of his skin (Figure 4). There are 14 sets of these tattoos on his body, produced by rubbing soot onto the skin and then puncturing the skin to push the dark residue into the holes. Because some of the tattoos were placed on Ötzi's back and would not have been easily visible to him, it has been suggested that they were put there not for decoration but as part of a healing ritual. Soon after Ötzi's time, however, we find evidence of lavish tattoos that do appear to have served an unambiguously decorative purpose. These were found on the bodies of the Pazyryk people recovered from frozen tombs in the Altai Mountains. These bodies feature the figures of real and mythical animals and are nearly 4,500 years old.

The modern painted primate

Humans have continued to develop a great variety of methods and materials for decorating themselves in historical times. This has led to the development of two distinct modes of cutaneous self-expression – the temporary and the permanent – which serve very different purposes. Cosmetics and body paints are placed on the body to achieve an effect for a specific occasion. Colour is added to the skin in ways that emphasise certain features or facial expressions. Cosmetics for darkening the margins of the eyes and imparting colour to eyelids and lips have been a staple of self-decoration for both women and men in many cultures, and it is only in recent centuries that this practice has become largely confined to women. The effect of the added colour to the eyes and lips was often heightened by whitening the surrounding skin with a thick application of white lead or other white foundation make-up to make the eyes look bigger and the lips more prominent. In contrast, face paints are not applied to specific features of the face, but to the skin on the forehead, cheeks, and chin. Their purpose is not to increase the prominence of the eyes or lips, but to change the perception of the face as a whole. These can work to emphasise the expanse of the forehead, to change the perceived size of the face, or to introduce incongruities or asymmetries that highlight certain facial expressions and enhance their emotional effect.

Tattoos differ from cosmetics and body paint because they are permanent. They are carefully calculated representations of core beliefs and sentiments and thus deliver completely different messages from those conveyed by transient media such as cosmetics, body paint, hair styles and nail polish. The very appeal of tattoos is that they represent a lasting inscription, which conveys a message of group identity, commemoration or protection. Because of this, tattoos are ruled less by the whim of fashion and more by inner convictions of beauty or significance. They declare a person's affiliation to a social unit and are usually acquired voluntarily, although tragic cases of involuntary tattooing of

In many East Asian countries a pale to white complexion is a classic ideal of beauty.



Massai with face paint: the white lines are intended to make the face look larger.

Photos (2): Edward S. Ross

A similar colour range – here for the purpose of camouflage – on an American GI.

Photo: istockphoto

prisoners or slaves are well known. For many people, tattoos also signify a permanent and visible commitment to membership of a group or class. Modern gang tattoos fall into this category and can thus often instantly elicit sympathy or fear. Other group-specific tattoos, such as the facial tattoos of some East Asian women that are considered beautiful within their own cultures, but are reviled by outsiders, are not meant to frighten but simply to proclaim group membership.

Throughout most of the history of our species, we have decorated our skin. As our technology has evolved, we have developed ever more ingenious and colourful ways of doing this. We do this explicitly because we are highly visual mammals, for whom visual recognition and the first impression are of consummate importance. The addition of colour and patterns to our skin allows us to change other people's and even our own perceptions of ourselves. The added colours and designs allow us to subtly manipulate emotions and moods and, because in many cases the colourful additions we make to our skin can create an effect from a distance, we communicate through them in a way that transcends the need of spoken language. How wonderful to be a colourful primate.