

Body Arts

Body Painting

Papua New Guinea



The photograph below shows Wulamb, a Wahgi woman, being decorated for the presentation of her bridewealth. Among the Wahgi, and many other people of Papua New Guinea, an exchange of gifts takes place on marriage, the bride's side giving more than they receive. Relatives of both bride and groom often decorate themselves elaborately on such occasions.

Wulamb wears a headdress of red parrot plumes, with cassowary feathers behind. The sheet in which her body is draped is to protect her finery from the powdery red face paint. However, there is no specific meaning to the design being painted on Wulamb's face, or to the colour red. Instead, what is significant for the Wahgi is whether the skin looks glossy, since this is an indication of ancestral favour and fortune. The weather at a wedding is also felt to be significant. As Wulamb was being decorated, her relatives were discussing whether it might rain.



Photograph of Wulamb, by Mike O' Hanlon, Papua New Guinea, 1979



North America

On display in the Museum are many samples of body-painting pigments from North America. These were collected in 1911 and 1912 by Barbara Freire-Marreco in New Mexico and Arizona.



Pigment, USA, 1911.86.3



Pigment, USA, 1913.87.92



Pigment, USA, 1911.86.4

On her return to Oxford she wrote the following in the Museum's accession book:

The performers in a dance are...elaborately painted. For instance, at the Pogon Jari of Feb. 9 1911, Casimiro Tafoya had his face evenly coloured with yellow...and a design of arrows on lightning in red running upwards from each cheek to the middle of his forehead. Other boys had blue spots and stars on cheeks, forehead and chin, or blue lines on cheekbones. The bodies and limbs of the dancers are also coloured. At the buffalo-dance at Santa Clara, Jan. 6. 1911, the men were painted dark grey with river mud, their legs above the knee and their bodies below the waist being painted white, so that a little white showed above and below their kilts, and their hands also white. They had white 'stars'...on their backs, shoulders and arms, representing the star which belongs to 'the governor of the buffaloes'....The two performers in a Handkerchief Dance at Nambe, Sept. 1910, were painted in red and white and green and white respectively...a most effective disguise....Women dancers have a large red spot painted on each cheekbone. At the end of a dance, the male performers run down to the river to swim and wash off their paint. The women wash in their houses....In summer, many Indians have a band of black paint diagonally across the chest; they do not wash it off until the summer rains have come....One of them, a K'osa, also painted his face with black rain-drops...

Further Reading

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts>

Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L47B for pigments from the USA

First Floor (Lower Gallery) L48B for photograph of Wulamb

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