

# Body Arts

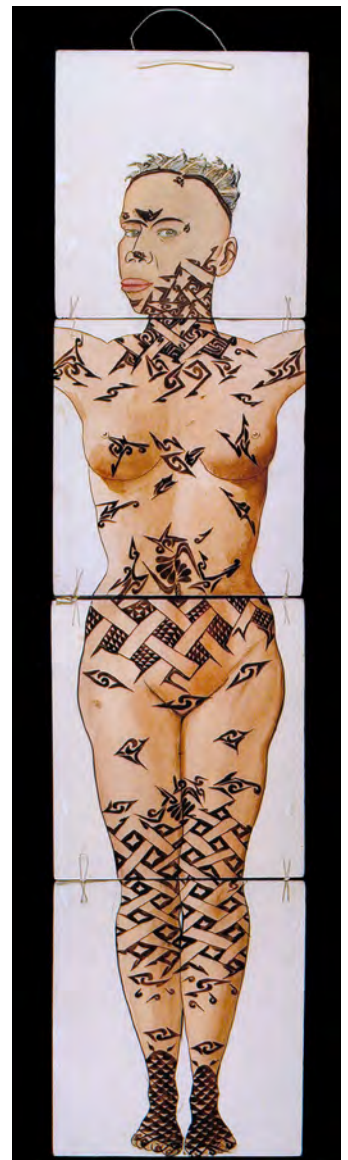
## Uli



Traditionally, the women of the Ibo people of Nigeria painted their bodies with patterns. They used a dye made from the seeds of uli plants that temporarily stained the skin black. This type of body decoration is known as *uli* painting. Uli designs refer to plants and animals; some are also based on objects used in ritual and everyday life.

This painting is of a woman covered with uli designs that were worn by girls who had just left a 'fattening room'. Fattening rooms are where young women were secluded in preparation for marriage. The period of seclusion usually lasted about three months. During this time young women were instructed on sexual, religious, and domestic matters and taught how to be good wives and mothers. They were also fed rich fatty foods supplied by their families and sometimes by their future husbands. They were also kept sedentary in order to gain weight, because fat is a sign of health, wealth, and fertility. When girls were ready to leave the fattening room their bodies were painted with uli so that they could be presented to the community at the height of their beauty.

Uli designs emphasize the girl's best features and highlight her physical strength. Physical strength was important because it meant the girl was able to work hard for her husband and family. The designs are often concentrated around the neck because a long straight neck was considered beautiful and strong. They also draw attention to the pubic hair, which is a sign of strength and fertility. When uli is drawn on the legs it emphasizes beauty and strength. Men were only painted occasionally with much simpler designs than those shown here.



Uli painting, Nigeria,  
1972.24.172

Uli dye is made from uli seed pods. Before uli is applied the body hair is shaved off to make a smooth surface. Then a red powder is rubbed on to the skin. This red

powder stops the skin from sweating so that when the paint is applied the dye will not smudge. The uli designs are then drawn freehand on to the body using metal tools. When the dye is first applied it is a greenish colour but overnight it turns black and the designs stand out clearly against the red powdered skin. When the dye has dried, oil is applied to the skin to make it soft and shiny. The uli dye remains visible for about four days.

When this drawing was made in the 1930s and 1940s, Ibo women often wore uli painting on everyday occasions as well as during important festivals. At the same time missionary schools were discouraging women from painting uli on their bodies and instead taught them to embroider the designs on textiles. Uli artists were asked by missionaries to record their designs on paper. These were then used to make templates for the embroideries.



Cushion cover, Nigeria, 1972.24.16

## Further Reading & Sources

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

ADAMS, SARAH, 'Praise Her Beauty Well: Ùrì from the Body to Cloth', in *Call and Response: Journeys into African Art*, New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery (2000), pp. 9–44.

WILLIS, LIZ, 'Uli Painting and the Igbo World View', in D.J. Cosentino, J.F. Povey, and D.H. Ross (eds.), *African Arts*, Los Angeles: African Studies Center, University of California, Vol XXIII, no 1 (1999), pp. 62-67.

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

**First Floor (Lower Gallery) L46B**

Fact Sheet compiled by:  
Jennifer Peck, Project Assistant  
DCF Redisplay Project  
2002

Revised by:  
Bryony Reid, Senior Project Assistant (Interpretation)  
DCF What's Upstairs?  
October 2005

Edited 2010