PAINTED BODIES OF AFRICA

Carol Beckwith & Angela Fisher
Introduction

Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher’s latest work “Painted Bodies of Africa” explores the fascinating and seductive art of African body painting, a dynamic activity first performed to attract the opposite sex, identify oneself from the enemy, and access the spirit world. Using the skin as a canvas and the earth as a palette, body painting has always been a vital outlet for creative design.

In one of the most remote corners of Africa, the Omo River peoples still decorate their bodies from head to toe using organic colors such as chalk, ocher, and charcoal. Other tribes, such as the legendary Maasai of Kenya and the Himba pastoralists of Namibia, cover their bodies with red ocher found in earth rich with iron ore content. For these people, the color red symbolizes blood and the all-encompassing life force. When perfumed with fresh herbs and mixed with animal fat, the red ocher both beautifies and nourishes the skin. Voodoo worshippers in West Africa, who desire to enter the spirit world, cover their bodies with white kaolin powder considered “food for the gods.” This pale pigment helps a devotee attain the highly sought state of possession, whereby a deity may enter his body and empower him.

The African continent reveals the widest range of body decoration in the world. In addition to painting the human form, “Painted Bodies of Africa” explores the delicate art of henna popular among Swahili brides in East Africa; the practice of facial tattooing found among the Wodaabe nomads in Niger; the ritual scarification of sacred cowhorn patterns among the Dinka of Southern Sudan; and the decorative scarification of Karo men and women in Southwest Ethiopia who focus sensual pleasure on the touch of textured skin.

Body painting is one of the oldest art forms on the African continent. Evidence of its origins is found in the early African cave paintings and rock engravings dating back to the Stone Age. One of the most dramatic examples is found in Chad and is known as Niola Doa, “the beautiful ladies,” dating back 4,000–7,000 years. In this early engraving, the human body is decorated from head to toe, a testimony to the powerful human instinct to beautify the skin.
Thirty-five years ago American-born Carol Beckwith and Australian Angela Fisher met in Kenya and began a relationship with the African continent, journeying over 270,000 miles, through 40 countries and recording 150 African cultures.


Their latest book, *Painted Bodies of Africa* (Rizzoli, 2012) is a Pan-African study of the art of body painting focusing on the oldest art form of decorating the body, used to attract the opposite sex, establish tribal identity and access the power of the spirit world.

Aware that traditional cultures in Africa are fast disappearing, Carol and Angela are working to complete the third volume of their ongoing study of African ceremonies. Their fieldwork will cover the remaining traditional ceremonies in the 13 African cultures in which they have not yet worked. Recently they visited the Royal Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, to photograph the 800-year-old Igue Festival. *African Twilight* is scheduled for publication in 2014.
Karo Man Painted for Courtship Dancing, Ethiopia

© 2011 Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher
Karo Man’s Painted Chest, Ethiopia
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Himba Girl with Ochered Veil, Namibia

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Ochered Maasai Warrior, Kenya
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Swahili Woman Decorating her Hand with Henna, Lamu Island, Kenya
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Henna Painting on Arms and Legs of a Swahili Bride, Lamu Island, Kenya
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Wodaabe Charm Dancer Preparing for the Geerewol, Niger
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Wodaabe Male Charm Dancers, Niger
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Surma Girls Face Painting by the Dama River, Ethiopia
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Surma Men Painted for Courtship, Ethiopia

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