

During my four years of military service, back in the misty antiquity of the Vietnam War era, I awarded myself the dubious distinction of being the only officer I ever met—before or since—who actually had to court-martial someone for getting a tattoo.

In all fairness to *moi*, this was not a case of a grinchy, power-hungry lieutenant picking on some poor GI. Our mission at this particular installation was to train Air Force recruits as aircraft engine mechanics—a fairly crucial job specialty, involving a costly, intensive training program. Among our many standing orders was a proscription against airmen having themselves tattooed during their three months of tech school. The reasoning behind this stemmed from the high rate of infection that seemed to accompany the tattooing process, particularly in the beer bar district of the dusty little town just off base. When a trainee got sick enough, he had to be pulled from the program, and either moved back to the next class or retrained in another specialty. Either way, it cost the government a ton of money, and thus, as a matter of pure economics, any unnecessary exposure to possible injury or infection was verboten. When this poor guy—an otherwise intelligent, affable trooper—showed up one Monday morning with a huge multicolored tiger’s head unfortunately emblazoned on his chest, his fate was sealed. Mine too. Since then, I’ve never been able to look at a tattoo without thinking about that kid.

Today, any tale like this that even hints at the disreputable past of tattooing in our culture is pretty much an anachronism. Multimillionaire athletes, paparazzi-targeted entertainers, junior executives, plumbers, prom queens and soccer moms have all collectively blessed the tattoo’s once-seedy image with the

## The Canvas of the Human Form

stamp of propriety. Even the most commonplace expressions of skin décor—butterflies and *fleurs-de-lis*, blood-dripping daggers, heartshaped declarations of love, inked on arm bands and ankle bracelets of barbed wire or delicate filigree, have all become as socially acceptable as eyeshadow and moussed hair. In a lavish tribute to this phenomenon, northern California publisher Earth Aware Editions now gives us *Ancient Marks: The Sacred Origins of Tattoos and Body Marking*.

This elegantly reproduced black-and-white collection (all originally shot on Tri-X, then digitally enhanced and color separated) is the work of photojournalist Chris Rainier, a former apprentice of Ansel Adams and a serious de facto cultural anthropologist. His ongoing “Ancient Marks” project, represented in these images, documents a highly personal fascination with what the publisher describes as, “the age-old, ritualized act of painting, carving, incising or etching upon the canvas of the human form.”

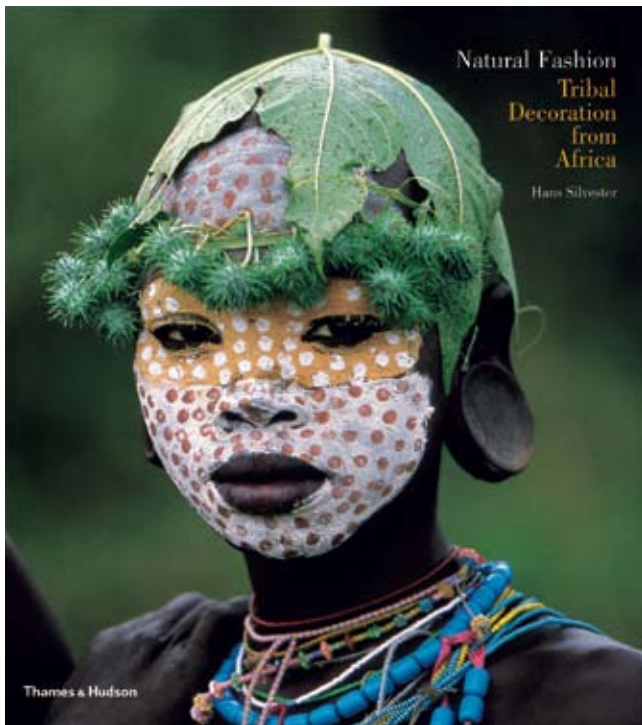
That canvas, writes author Wade Davis in the book’s foreword, if laid out flat as a single sheet, “would cover more than 20 square feet... a work surface more than four times the size of the ‘Mona Lisa.’” But the body decor represented in *Ancient Marks* seems to strive beyond even lofty works of great art, to, in Davis’ words, “a sacred geography of the soul, a map of culture and myth.” There’s



a universality among these images that supports this notion. The very first picture in the collection—the cover shot—suggests a tribal shaman, half-immersed in ceremonial waters against the jagged topography of some remote, volcanic landscape. In fact, the subject is an American tattoo artist, sporting elaborate samples of his own handiwork, and photographed in the waters of a Tahitian lagoon. There’s a theme here that resonates through-

out the book's 100 or so images: a sense of timelessness and the cross-cultural exploitation of body art to reflect completely different belief systems. On alternating spreads, we have a close-up of temporary henna-based tattoos covering the hands of a Moroccan woman; the full-body ritual tattooing of a nude Yakuza mistress from the Japanese underworld; the menacing profile of an ornately scarred West African man; Rama devotees near the Taj Mahal, copiously, and painfully tattooed, from head to toe; and a pistol-wielding East LA gang member, his bare arms and shoulders covered with gangland iconography.

There's a fine line between exploitation of these living art pieces and photographing them with respect and compassion. That line seems to define Rainier's approach to his tattooed subjects. One image from the notoriously raucous annual Burning Man Festival in the Nevada desert has an apparently defiant young celebrant glowering at the camera as he stands in front of a hand-painted sign that reads "no video or film cameras without permission." Rainier seems to understand the irony of this image. There's an obvious narcissism to wearing body art, and the photograph poses a silent question: If his tattoos are making some important statement about his beliefs, why is this guy on the defensive? Maybe he's drifted from the spirit of the simple Malaysian tribal message Rainier has chosen for the opening page of *Ancient Marks*: "When we have lost our tattoos—we have lost our culture."



### "And You Thought You Were Good with Cosmetics"

This tongue-in-cheek jacket blurb from *Entertainment Weekly* says a lot about a vivid new photo collection by veteran travel shooter Hans Silvester. *Natural Fashion: Tribal Decoration from Africa* needs only a quick flip-through to reveal a lively, dazzling exposé of one of mankind's oldest creative outlets. Shot on location near the borders of Ethiopia, Kenya and Sudan, these images show the flamboyant artistry of the ancient Surma and Mursi tribes, expressed in the facial and body décor their people have



practiced for thousands of years. In the fragile ecosystem of their homeland—the lower Omo River Valley—these ancient cultures subsist in what is probably the wildest region of the African continent. Gradually, under increasing threats from climate change, encroaching tourism and political conflicts, the peoples of this region still draw on the riotous natural colors of the wildlife and earthscape surrounding them to produce a wild palette of native dress and body decoration that has no equal in the known world. The use of natural paints, especially, is completely unrestrained. Their "body paintings are totally free," Silvester writes, "...they never repeat themselves and there is no underlying system." Despite the freeform quality of their artistry and the illusion of playfulness in their use of colors, Silvester reminds us that "there is nothing clownlike about Mursi and Surma body painting... What we have here is a skill and an art form that is an integral element of their culture."

Silvester is a skilled portraitist, even under what have to be strenuous conditions of weather, topography and a huge cultural disconnect. He shoots much of the work in *Natural Fashion* under soft lighting conditions, to carry the whole range of saturated colors. His lens and aperture choices minimize depth-of-field-distractions, and he somehow communes with the shy, reclusive exponents of a vanishing, but visually vibrant, way of life.



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## More Information

### *Ancient Marks: The Sacred Origins of Tattoos and Body Marking*

Chris Rainier

Earth Aware Editions

[www.earthawareeditions.com](http://www.earthawareeditions.com)

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### *Natural Fashion: Tribal Decoration from Africa*

Hans Silvester

Thames and Hudson

[www.thamesandhudsonusa.com](http://www.thamesandhudsonusa.com)

168pp.