Being beautiful can be a real BEAST

This Bushaica woman of the Sudan is an Orthodox Muslim, whose faith requires that her face be veiled for modesty. Her face is covered by a heavily jeweled mask called an arusi.

By Rebecca Unger
Hi-Desert Star

"We want a show about tattooing," members of the Yucaipa Valley Youth Commission told their supervisor.

Lynn Richardson, a Cal Poly Pomona anthropology professor, has been trying to help her students learn about the African society. They created "Eye of the Beholder," an exhibit that showcases the art and culture of the Hi-Desert Nature Museum.

"Our makeup models must look pretty bad to many of these cultures," Richardson quipped as she pointed to a group of airbrushed Western magazine ad layouts.

"Some women would look at them and wonder where their scars are."

The exhibit starts with prehistoric artifacts and the process that shows how human bodies have decorated with geometric designs. Many of the objects, including masks, are still used today, like smiles, mumps, and lips.

Tattooing, using the skin to insert pigment, is one of the permanent body modifications practiced in the exhibit. Viewers will see how traditional Polynesian tattooists use a needle and a small hammer while the Japanese use needles set in wooden handles. Many 18th-century sailors were intrigued by encounters with these cultures and submitted to their tattoo methods. But the electric tattoo machine revolutionized the practice and is still the Western preference for swallows, and tigers alike.

Body piercing, once the staple of National Geographic photojournalists, has resurfaced as a popular form of decoration. The piercings pass down from ancient peoples to today's traditional cultures are used to mark annual events, marriage or leadership. The museum exhibit shows.

Richardson's photographs and memorabilia trace the history of body modification's many forms, such as skull tattooing, foot binding, neck stretching, and rib removal. Today, plastic surgery and body building are accepted Western forms of sculpting to societal standards of perfection.

"Eye of the Beholder: Beauty and Culture"

On display is a suite of tools used by a Tubaica Valley craftsman. Strata Tattoo Lab, is shown to stretch the earlobes.

The marriage-aged women of the Tubaica people of Zaire and Zambia use scarification to prove their strength, and their ability to survive child-bearing processes. The scars, when inflicted into the wounds, help men to achieve their age status.

"This exhibit presents a sweeping view of the Western and the indigenous communities," Richardson completed.

The exhibit, which includes tattoo and body modification tools courtesy of Strata Tattoo Lab, will be on display in the museum lobby through March 1. A new show by Richardson, complete with henna tattoos, will be held Jan. 19.

"For thousands of years, humans have gone to great lengths to change their natural appearance," the show's tour materials observe. "This exhibition presents a sweeping view of the Western and the indigenous communities."