Pintados A Philippine Heritage

The pintados (painted ones), inhabitants of the Visayan islands as described by the first Spaniards to set eyes upon them, would use sharp metal instruments previously heated over fire. The Kankanay from Benguet used a small piece of wood called gisi, to which three iron points were attached. The Ifugao had an instrument made entirely of iron, with two or three points. The Kalinga would use five needles at the same time. The Isneg from Apayao had a very different and far more elaborate instrument, which they called igihisi, fashioned from a carved piece of rattan. At one end, four or five pins were attached. A string then connected the central part of the instrument to both ends. During the actual procedure, the designer would continuously beat the igihisi in order to push the pins deeper into the skin.

The process of tattooing was an extremely painful ordeal. After the procedure, the area tattooed remained swollen for several days. A patient could only endure tattooing in small installments, and it would normally take several months before the entire tattoo was completed.

Among the pintados, the tattoos were extremely elaborate, taking the form of paintings and even tableaux. A wide array of designs and forms were used. Only the wrists and feet were left bare. After the procedure, soot or black powder was pressed onto the scar which, when dried, could never be erased. The pintado women tattooed only their hands.

Among the men of the Ibaloi tribal community, tattooing was usually rare. In the few male Ibaloi cases, the tattoos differed according to individual whims and caprices. There was no common identifiable pattern. The Ibaloi women, on the other hand, would adorn their arms from above the elbow down to their knuckles with elaborate and extensive tattoos made of crisscrossing, horizontal, vertical, and curved lines. So extensive was this form of tattooing that it was extremely difficult to see the skin beneath it.

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