

From the Beginning

We were our own first works of art. That is a profound way for a facepainter to view what he does: it was here from the very beginning. We humans painted on ourselves before we ever began to decorate the world around us.

Transforming ourselves is the fundamental human art. We take control of ourselves—we differentiate ourselves from being merely animals—when we mark ourselves. We prove that we are aware of the effect we can have on the world when we transform ourselves. It is part of being human.

Face and body art are universal. Every culture uses makeup, body art, masks or costumes to change human appearance. The reasons for the transformations in different cultures are as varied as the images they create. In traditional cultures, tattoo and scarification can mark an individual's place in society and his or her accomplishments. Those marks can signify a change in status such as an initiation completed or a marriage. Face and body painting is more transient and can convey a wide range of meanings, from ritual and celebratory to the purely aesthetic. Facepainting can disguise the wearer and allow an individual to create a new identity. Theatrical makeup and masks allow performers to become anything, even living gods that bring a mythical world to life in a physical form. In tribal rituals gods and spirits are brought to life by masked dancers so bizarrely disguised that they are unrecognizable as human. The possibilities for transformation are as limitless as our imaginations.

This is the way I approach a face when I paint it. I can do anything. The person I paint can become anything. There is an endless wealth of ideas from thousands of years of human history. There are the thousands of faces I have painted. And there is the face before me. Each face is very new and very old.

To present facepainting to the public as an art you have to take it seriously. Like a painter working on canvas you need to refine both your craft and your understanding of the art.

My art has led me on an exploration of the world history of masks, makeup and body decoration, searching for imagery

and inspiration in books and the incredible museums of New York City. As fun as facepainting is on its own, learning and thinking about masks has made it an adventure. The painted faces of the Chinese Opera or Japanese Kabuki Theater; the face and body decorations of indigenous people living today in Papua New Guinea and the Amazon; the faces of Plains Indians as recorded in the paintings of George Catlin; the incredible photographs of the painted bodies of the Southeast Nuba in Africa—these are the masterpieces of the art of facepainting. I am a student of these images. They educate and inspire me, especially as I re-create them on the faces I paint.

The faces presented here are not the authentic photographs from other lands or images and drawings from other times that are the treasures you can find in books and museums. These are my painted faces. These are my view of the world of face and mask art, through the lens of my own artistic sensibilities and limitations. These are my lessons learned.

Most of the photographs in this book are of my own work on regular people painted along the way, either as part of my stage shows on the history of facepainting or at public events and private parties. There are lots of photographs here, about as many as I and a team of my artists would paint during a weekend event. Facepainting as an entertainment presents a unique opportunity for an artist to be productive. We fill events with painted faces. I like to make each face different, both to make my work more exciting for the spectators and to keep pushing myself to try new designs. There are so many different ways to paint a face.

This book is not a treatise on body arts and the cultures that practice it. Whether on stage or in this book, to speak of tribal and cultural sources is to speak in broad generalities at best. Mine is an artist's approach to subjects best explained by ethnologists and anthropologists. The complexity of so-called primitive art can never be revealed in a few words or images, nor can they represent traditions that have continued for thousands of years. All the bits and pieces of information here are filtered through my own interests and my love of a good story.

This photo was taken in 1992 at the annual St. Francis Day Fair for the Blessing of the Animals at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. This was the first time I had painted this design on myself. It became a signature face for me which I used for many years to open my facepainting/storytelling show. The photo is by Danny Gosnell, one of our artists.