

Amiq Tang'rhncarluku – DECORATING THE SKIN

In addition to richly decorated, knee-length parkas, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq ancestors wore piercings, face paint, and tattoos. Together a person's clothing, jewelry, and body art shared messages. Dress and decoration helped to communicate age, gender, family, home village, achievements, and social standing. They also had spiritual significance. People adorned and altered their bodies for special events and to signal transformation.

Both men and women painted their faces, changing designs to match the occasion. This artwork provided temporary transformation for performances and special events. People painted their faces before a long journey, in preparation for warfare, to welcome guests, when initiated into the community house, as they returned home from hunting, for dancing at winter festivals, and at the death of a family member. Shamans painted their faces for performances. Face paint made the dead more visible to the spirits and helped them transition to the next world.

Alutiiq people made face paint from ground minerals, mixing red, black, and white pigments with a binder like fish oil. Historically, people used red paint liberally and reserved black and white paint for detailed painting. The style of painting and the use of colors varied by occasion. Hunters often wore red face paint. People mourning the death of a family member wore black face paint.



Example of Alutiiq chin tattoos. Illustration by Eric Carlson from a watercolor painted by M.T. Tikhanov is 1818.

Piercings and tattoos transformed the skin in more permanent ways and were commonly associated with passage through the stages of life. Alutiiq babies were born in special huts and received labret (lip plug) and nose ring piercings twenty days later, before entering their family home. Girls received chin tattoos at puberty, to mark their transition into adulthood and readiness for marriage and motherhood. Married women tattooed bands across their chests to demonstrate love for their husbands. Other tattoos were family symbols or indicators of wealth and status. Both men and women wore tattoos and decorated their upper bodies—the face, neck, chest, back, and arms.

Alutiiq people made tattoos by pulling a soot-coated piece of sinew thread under the skin with the bone needle. This created blue-black designs. Women were likely the tattoo artists, given their extensive training in the sewing arts.

LEARN MORE:

Igaruacirpet—Our Way of Making Designs, 2018, edited by Amy Steffian, Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak.