

Body art takes on an eastern

Story and photos by ALEX FRAZER-HARRISON

Mirror News Editor

Body art is a growing trend among Calgaryans, as more people tire of the same old flesh tones and want to use their bodies as a canvas.

But not everyone wants to undergo the sometimes painful, sometimes risky and usually permanent act of getting a tattoo. So many people are turning to the ancient East Indian art of Mehndi to give themselves that exotic look.

Mehndi dates back generations.

It is a process by which skilled artists take a dye made from a plant extract called henna. This dye is then applied to the skin — the artist drawing intricate and intriguing images that can cover an entire hand, a foot, or be as simple as a flower drawn on the shoulder.

Once fixed with a mixture of lemon juice and sugar, the art remains visible for up to a month, depending on the part of the body used as a canvas.

Surbhi Bhargava, a local artist, says Mehndi has been a tradition in her family for many years, and she's been practising it for about 15 years herself.

"It is really old — but now the (designs) are more modern and more accessible to fashion," she said. "Originally it was just the hands and feet, but now we do backs, arms, even 'necklaces.'"

Mehndi was originally associated with marriage ceremonies. The bride's Mehndi was drawn on her hand — and somewhere

within the design was hidden the groom's name. If the groom failed to find his name within the Mehndi — tough luck, fella! — the bride was said to have control over the marriage.

In Canada, Mehndi isn't as closely associated with weddings outside the East Indian culture, but Bhargava said it is a popular way for couples to show devotion to each other.

In recent years, celebrities like Madonna have given Mehndi a more public face in North American culture.

Besides the exotic aspect, it gives people a chance to "test drive" a future tattoo design, or get the body-art look without having to opt for the permanence of a tattoo. Prices for Mehndi work are also considerably less than getting a tattoo.

"I already have a couple of tattoos and I don't really want to get a third one — but I think this is so cool, because I would never want to have a tattoo on my arm," said Calgary Mirror classified sales representative Tasha Loewen, during a recent visit to Bhargava's studio.

Surbhi Bhargava crafts a Mehndi design on the arm of Mirror Classifieds sales rep Tasha Loewen.



Over the course of just 20 minutes, the artist drew an intricate flower design onto Loewen's upper arm.

"It rarely takes me more than an hour," said Bhargava, adding that the preparation time for doing Mehndi is more extensive.

The paste is usually prepared a day before, using henna imported from India.

Surbhi and Tasha show off the finished product.



And in keeping with tradition, meditation is as much an important part of preparing the henna as is the mixing of ingredients.

For information on Mehndi art, check out Bhargava's website at <http://members.xoom.com/hennabodyart>.

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