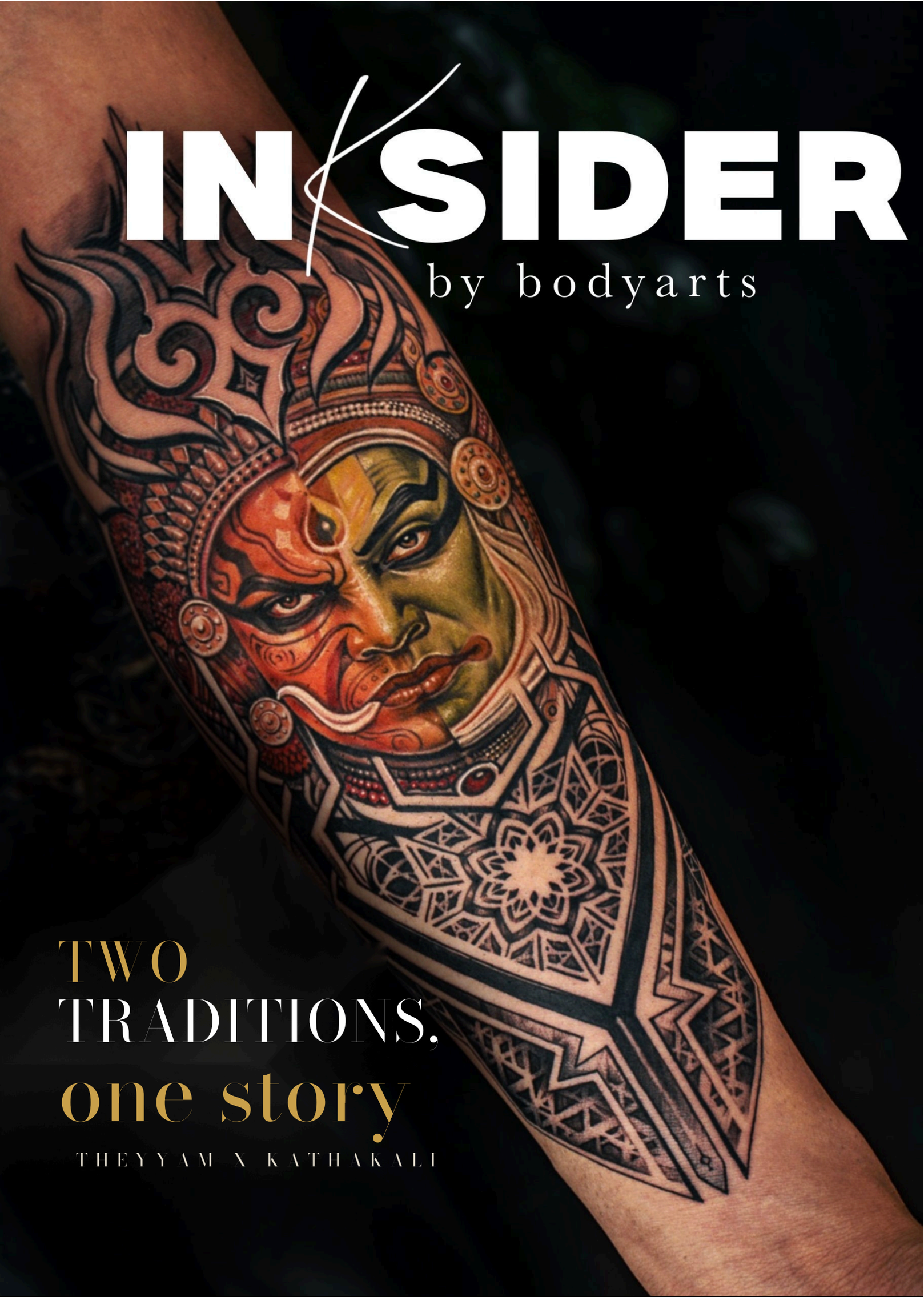
INSIDER
by bodyarts
TWO
TRADITIONS,
one story
THEYYAM X KATHAKALI

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TWO TRADITIONS, one story

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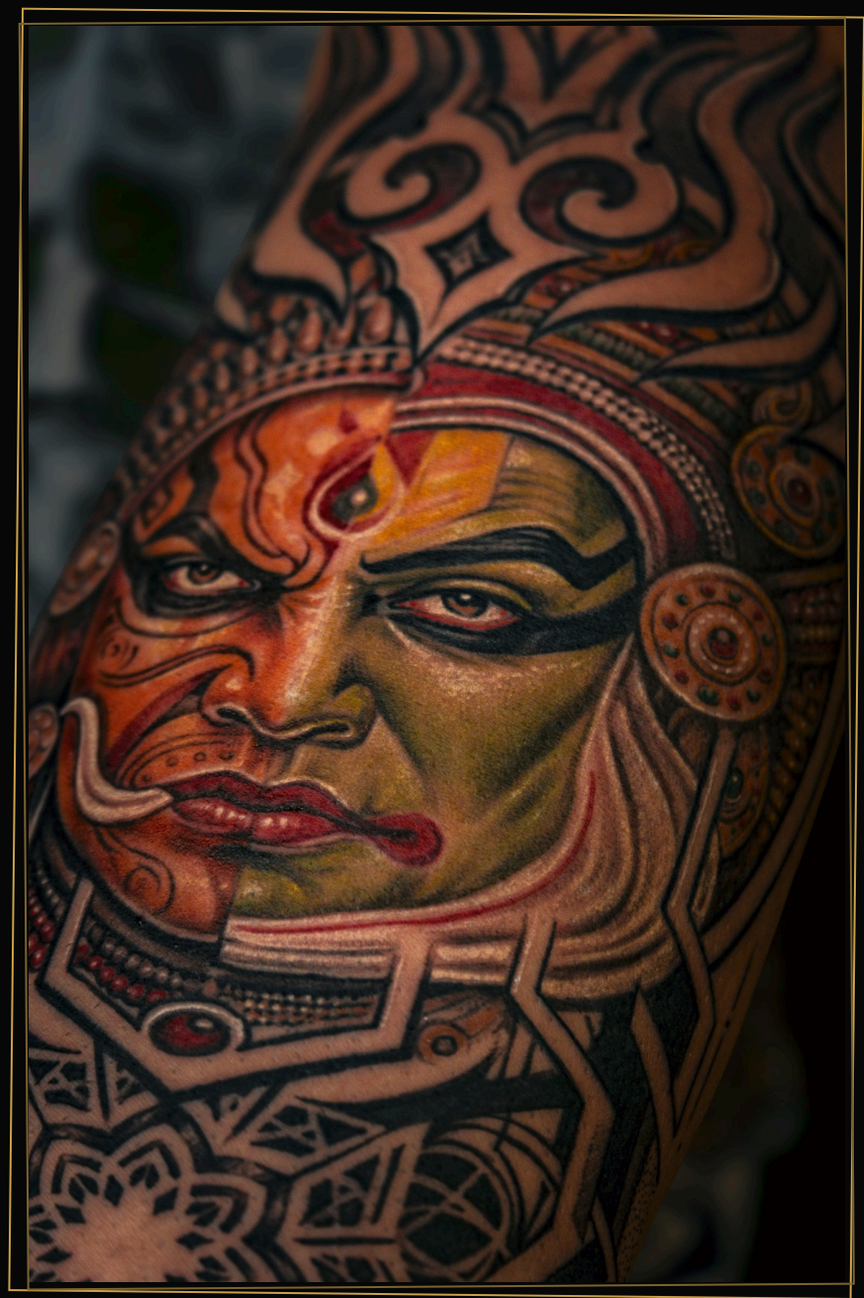


A meeting of two iconic art forms from Kerala — Theyyam and Kathakali — brought together in a single tattoo.

Rooted in ritual, heritage and classical expression, this piece explores how two distinct visual languages can coexist in harmony, creating a bold and meaningful identity on skin.



THEYYAM × KATHAKALI

Two Traditions. Distinct Origins.

The tattoo brings two faces together. The traditions behind them grew up apart, and each is worth knowing on its own terms.



I. Theyyam

NORTH MALABAR · RITUAL PERFORMANCE

In Theyyam, the performer is understood to become the deity for the length of the ritual. Faces are painted by hand, headdresses rise far above the body, and the performance takes place in the shrine courtyard, not on a stage.



II. Kathakali

KERALA · CLASSICAL DANCE-DRAMA

Kathakali draws its plays largely from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Actors do not speak: hand gestures, eyes and face carry the meaning while singers and drummers carry the text. Green pacha makeup marks the noble, heroic roles.

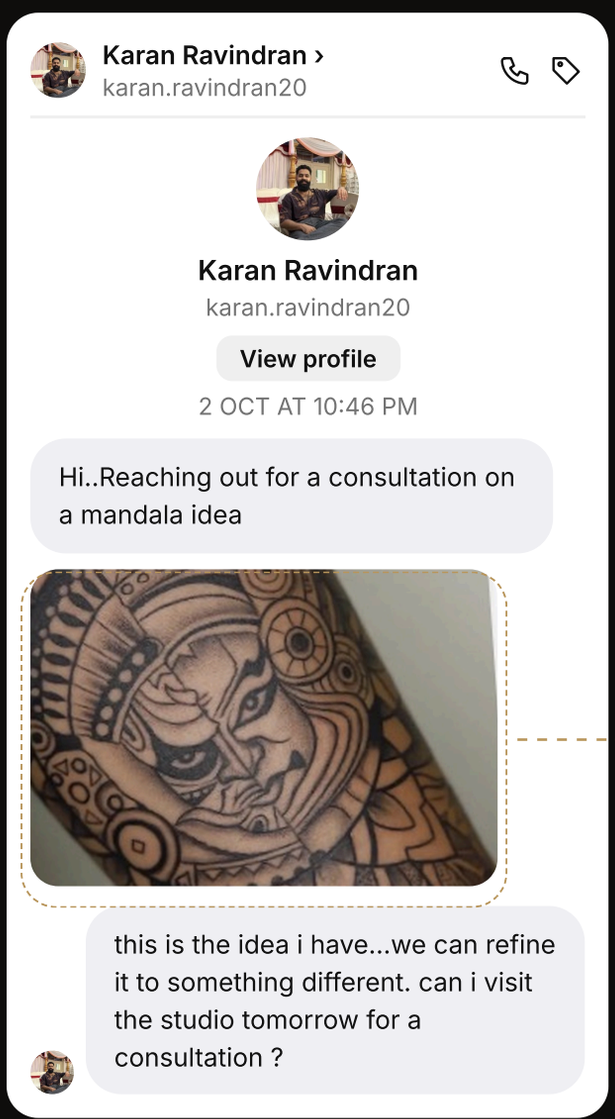
What they share is visual, not historical — painted faces that work as masks, bold colour, heavy ornament, and expressions built to be read from a distance.

Photos, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0 — I. Theyyam: SreeammuAqua · II. Kathakali: Anandukr97

Where the idea began

From reference to reality

01 — THE MESSAGE



REFINED INTO

02 — THE STENCIL



The stencil comes away, leaving the design on skin — the last step before the first line.

> *We can refine it to something different.*
>
> — KARAN, IN HIS FIRST MESSAGE

It began with an Instagram message asking for a consultation on a mandala idea, with a reference: a black-and-grey Kathakali face in mandala work.

The reference was a starting point. By the time the stencil went on, one face had become two, crowned with flame-like ornament and anchored by geometry.



Inside the COMPOSITION

01 TWO FACES, ONE SEAM

Theyyam reds and oranges on one side, Kathakali green on the other, meeting along a single line.

02 ORNAMENT

A flame-like headdress, ear discs and beadwork frame both faces as one.

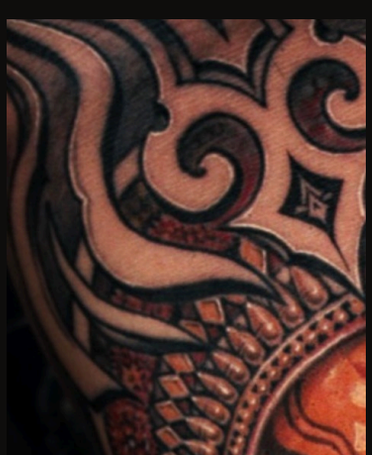
03 AT THE CENTRE

A mandala-like floral form sits below the chin, where the surrounding patterns converge.

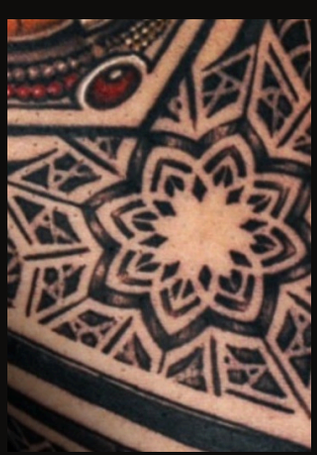
04 STRUCTURE

Black geometric bands carry the composition down the forearm toward the wrist.

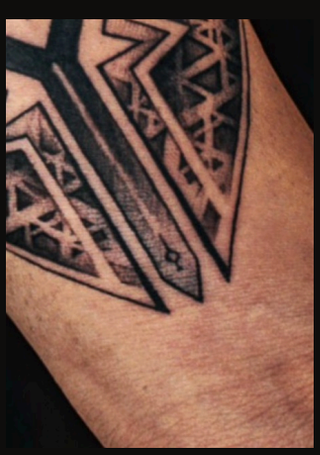
LOOKING CLOSER



Headdress. Flame forms in black, red and skin tone.



The centre. Fine linework inside a pointed frame.



Geometry. Triangular blackwork with soft shading.

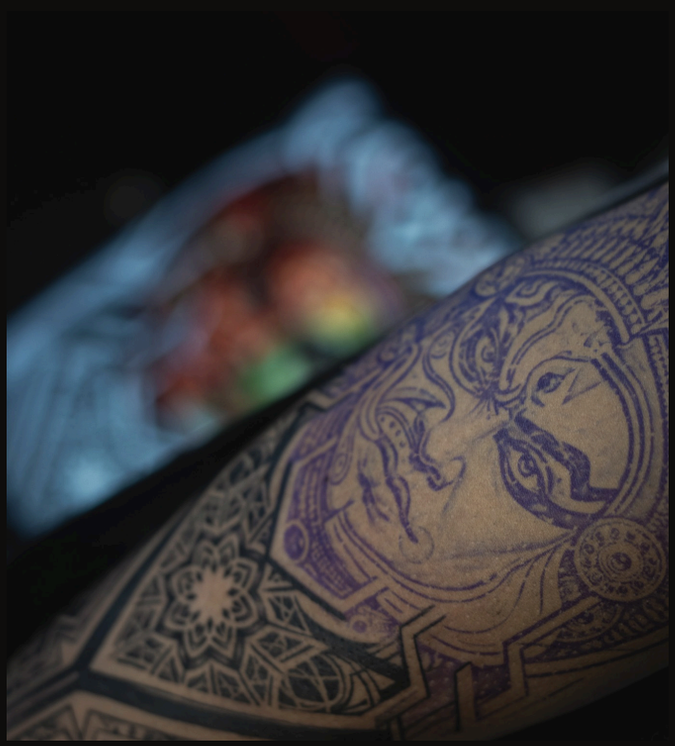
ARTIST'S NOTE

"We wanted to give a tribute to the vibrant and rich South Indian culture through this, and I hope we lived up to it."

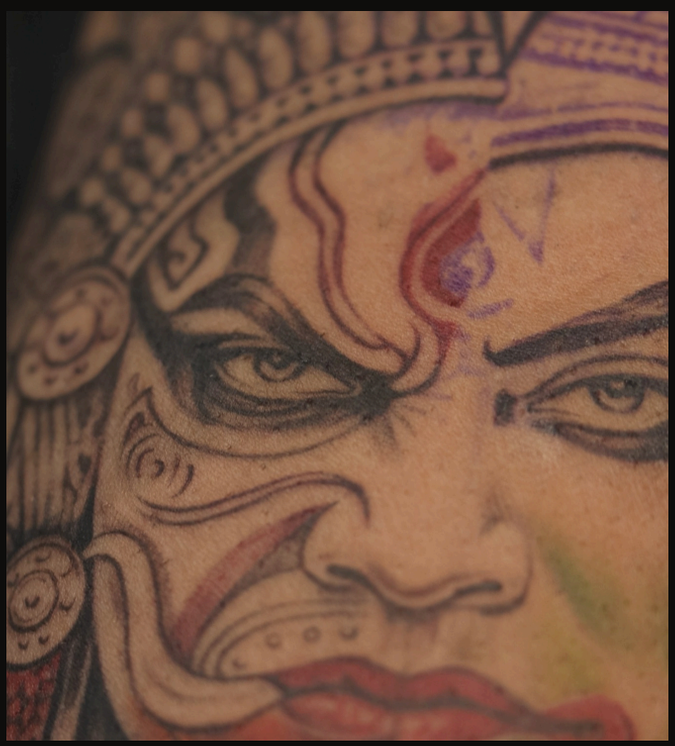
— GUNA

The day it CAME TOGETHER

ARTIST Guna | SESSIONS One | IN THE CHAIR 16+ hours | PLACEMENT Forearm



GEOMETRY
Blackwork first, while the faces stay in stencil.



LINEWORK
The eyes set in line; colour starts at the edges.



COLOUR
Green going into the Kathakali side.



IN THE CHAIR
Karan, settled in for the long sitting.

One sitting, more than sixteen hours — from geometry, to line, to colour.



THE REVEAL

Two faces from Kerala, one forearm, and a long day in the chair.

Karan before the first line, stencil on. The Theyyam half here is an edit — the real one took sixteen hours.

Beyond the ink

THE CLIENT

"I was super comfortable during the entire 16-hour inking session. Big shout-out to artist Guna for making my idea come true."

— KARAN



THE FINISHED PIECE On his forearm, done in one sitting.



INKSIDER

by bodyarts

The stories behind the ink.

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