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Made to last

Once the preserve of the Towie set, permanent make-up is going mainstream. We investigate the brow tattoo trend

Sarah Jossel Published: 2 August 2015



(Florian Sommet)

Everlasting make-up, “wake up beautiful”, “natural enhancement” — these are just some of the phrases you’ll find if you search the web for “permanent make-up”. If you think “Scouse brow” and “life sentence”, then perhaps it’s time to look a little closer.

“The treatment should enhance your features, not overpower them,” says Debra Robson, who offers permanent make-up at her clinic in Harley Street, London. Karen Betts, another practitioner, says: “The sign of a good treatment is a natural, groomed effect that looks like individual hairs.”

Also known as micropigmentation and semi-permanent make-up, eyebrow tattooing is not the same as a traditional carbon-ink body tattoo. While it involves the same process — a tiny oscillating needle depositing colour beneath the skin — the difference is in the size of the pigment. “For cosmetic treatments, we use fine-grade mineral pigment that breaks down and fades within two years,” says Thorpe. Body artwork involves larger molecules that have much more staying power.

“When I started out 27 years ago, eyebrow tattooing was barbaric,” she says. “We had only three pigments: I had to mix black, red and white to get the right shade, and I could never achieve the same colour twice. Plus, we used battery-operated machines that would often die halfway through.”

Today, there are more than 30 pigment shades for blonde brows alone. The colour can be custom-blended to match your skin tone, and that battery-operated machine has been replaced by a hi-tech tool that adjusts the needle frequency to suit the tolerance of your skin, says Betts. It’s also a two-step treatment: after the initial colour and shape, you have a follow-up appointment a month later for any fine-tuning to the thickness and shade. According to the Nouveau Beauty Group, which specialises in permanent make-up training, brow treatments account for 70% of permanent cosmetic procedures in the UK.

Thorpe says almost 50% of her clients seek her help because their brows have started to look a bit rubbish from overplucking or threading. She says threading can distort the hair follicle, allowing hairs to grow in every “wrong” direction possible. The other half are split into those undergoing cancer treatment and those with health issues such as alopecia or an underactive thyroid. “So many women come in undiagnosed, complaining about brow hair loss. I send them to get their thyroid checked before they have anything done.”

Age is another big factor: “Your facial muscles droop as you get older, which means your eye area drops slightly.” She says brow tattooing is a sneaky way of achieving that extra lift and is a lesser step for anyone contemplating a facelift.

Others turning to the tattoo are yoga bunnies and sporty sorts. Priya Kapoor, the PR manager for Kiehl’s, exercises five times a week and describes her tattooed brows as “groomed and enhanced, yet natural”, even after a cardio workout.

“Drawing on brows can be time-consuming,” Robson says. “A lot of my clients are looking for ways to reduce their routines.” Her last visitor was seeking an alternative to waking up at 5am every day to pencil in her brows.

She has noticed a surge of clients requesting Cara Delevingne brows. Other names big in the brow world are Nigella Lawson, Brooke Shields and Megan Fox. Betts rejects the idea of following fashion. “It’s about a client’s face shape, skin tone, hair colour and personality.”

As for the pain factor: “Honestly, my clients tell me tweezing is more painful,” Thorpe says. “But because we’re tattooing over acupuncture points, you may feel like you want to sneeze.”

Angela Connell, a PA and researcher undergoing chemotherapy, visited Thorpe. “I only realised how big a part my brows played in my look when I started to lose them,” she says. “It’s more uncomfortable than painful, but I’d take a lot more pain for the perfect shape I’ve now got.”

Is there anyone who shouldn’t have their brows tattooed? “I send people away all the time,” Thorpe says. “If you’re not 100% certain, wait. The brows are there for up to two years, so you

want to be sure.”

If you're unhappy about your brows and can't quite get the hang of a brow pencil, but think brow tattooing will be too big a step, start with HD Brows, a service that includes tinting, shaping and filling them in. It's a great way to experiment before you take the plunge. If you're unhappy about a few gaps, tattooing may not be for you, either. Thorpe suggests trying RapidBrow Eyebrow Enhancing Serum (£37). “It reactivates the hair follicle, which may be all you need.”

And finally, price. Don't try to cut corners. “Products, pigments and good training are expensive and this should be reflected in the cost of the treatment,” Robson says. “I would question anything under the £500 mark.” After your first treatment, the top-ups will cost about £295. Expensive? Yes. But is it worth it for round-the-clock flawless brows? Many would say yes.

Who to see

Debra Robson LDN

London W1

debrarobsonldn.co.uk

From £550

Sophie Thorpe

London SW3

sophiethorpe.co.uk

From £550

Karen Betts

London W1. Other locations include Nottingham, Cheshire, West Yorkshire

karenbetts.co.uk

From £595