

COMPOSITION
AND FLOWS in
Tattoo

Jesús Larreal

Introduction

This guide was born from practice.

It began as a personal study, a way to organize ideas, analyze processes, and better understand how to approach the design of the body. Over time, that material became something I wanted to share, with the intention of making more accessible information that is often learned in a scattered way or after years of experience.

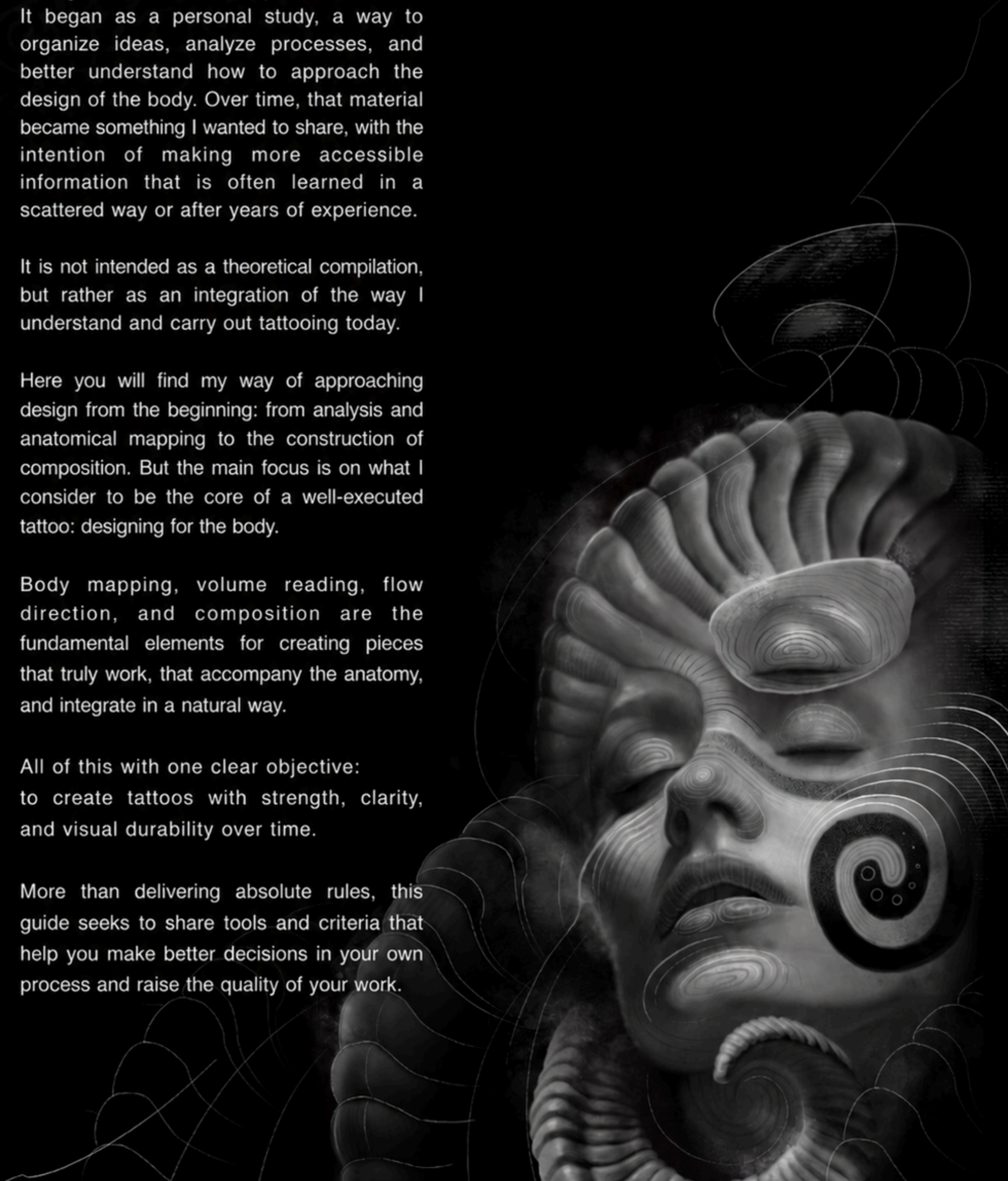
It is not intended as a theoretical compilation, but rather as an integration of the way I understand and carry out tattooing today.

Here you will find my way of approaching design from the beginning: from analysis and anatomical mapping to the construction of composition. But the main focus is on what I consider to be the core of a well-executed tattoo: designing for the body.

Body mapping, volume reading, flow direction, and composition are the fundamental elements for creating pieces that truly work, that accompany the anatomy, and integrate in a natural way.

All of this with one clear objective: to create tattoos with strength, clarity, and visual durability over time.

More than delivering absolute rules, this guide seeks to share tools and criteria that help you make better decisions in your own process and raise the quality of your work.



Index

Introduction

Chapter 1: Body Mapping

- Reading the body
- Extracting the 2D body model

Chapter 2: The Design

- Flow and antiflow
- Stylization of the body
- Contrasts and use of negative space
- Intention and focal point
- Visual hierarchy
- Contrasts and use of negative space
- Level of detail and readability
- Thoughtful design over time

Chapter 3: Work Methods

- Technique and injection
- Value construction
- Creating a set of greyscales
- Scarring and longevity

Chapter 4: How to Find an Artistic Identity?

- Fuel your inspiration
- Technical mastery



Chapter 1

Body mapping

The body is not a flat canvas. Forms change with posture and tension. Therefore, the goal is not simply to place a design, but to compose with the body.

Body mapping helps identify which areas support the design's readability, which should be avoided, and how to redistribute elements to maintain clarity and visual flow.

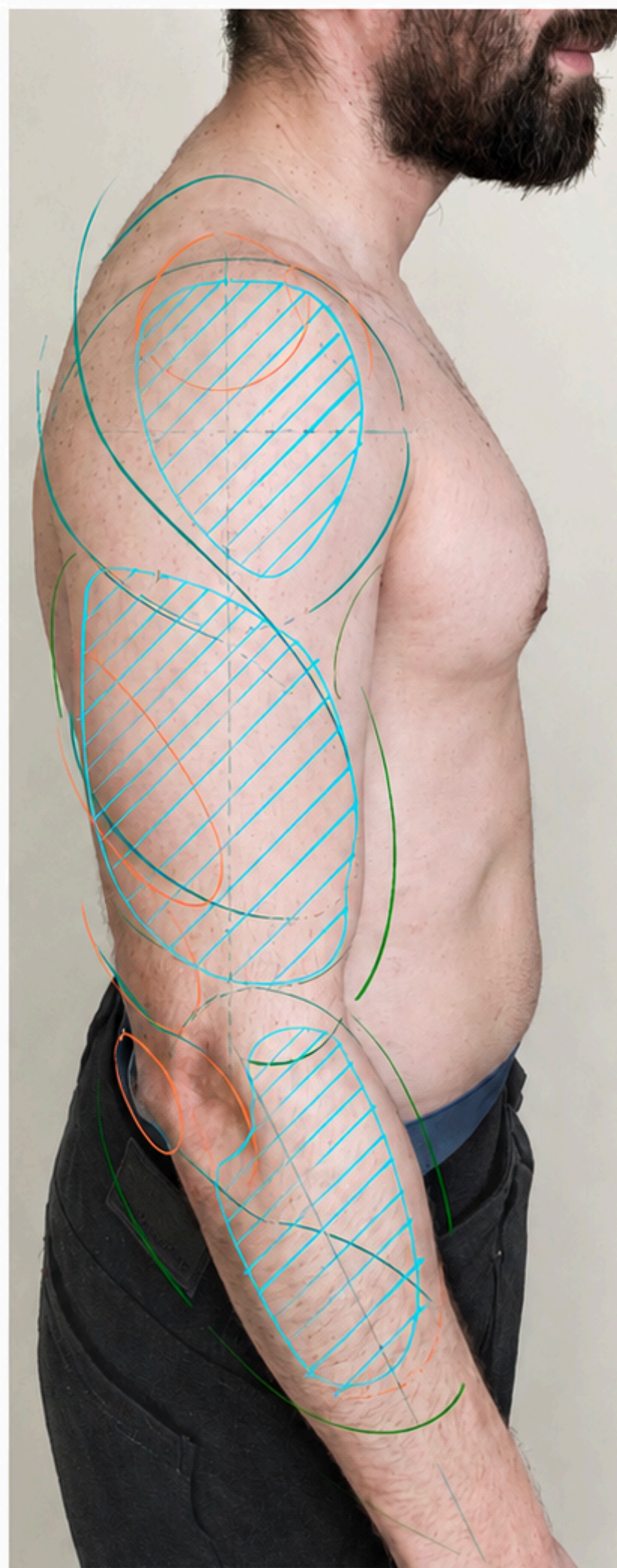
The first step is to read the body as a sculptor would: identify planes, volumes, and natural lines.

- Convex or concave areas determine how the design expands or deforms.

- Flat areas, on the other hand, offer greater visual stability. These are where the points of highest attention should be placed to ensure the design remains legible.

- The most irregular or transitional areas are reserved for secondary elements or connections, allowing the flow of the design to integrate naturally with the anatomy.

All of this can be traced directly onto transparent film placed over the body, using a marker to record flow lines, anatomical divisions, and the body's natural directions. This mapping helps you understand how the design behaves visually with the anatomy, guiding composition and also helping you strategically decide where to interrupt or break that flow.



One of the most common mistakes in tattooing is starting to design without first analyzing the anatomy and the area being worked on.

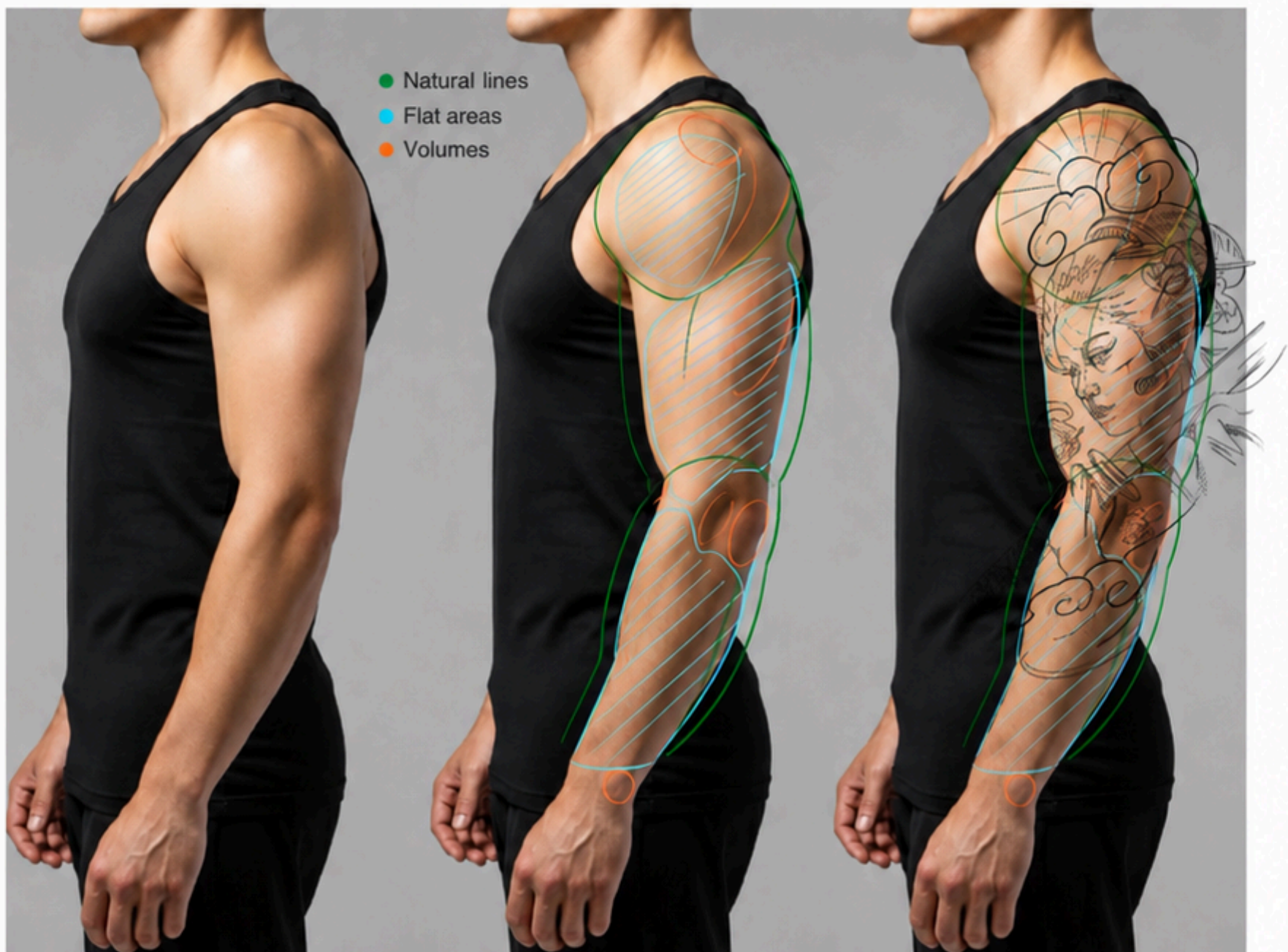
In this example, some areas marked in light blue serve as stable points for main elements, while others should be used as transition or connection zones.

The body also has natural directions that can be used to reinforce the flow of the tattoo.

Muscle lines, the inclination of the bones, and anatomical curves create visual paths that help guide the eye.

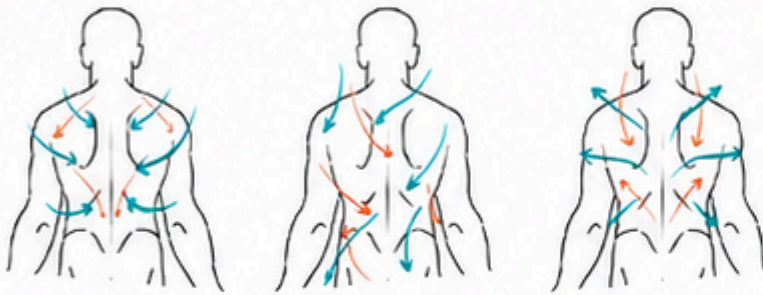
When the design follows these directions, the composition feels more organic and fluid. When it doesn't, the tattoo can feel stiff or disconnected from the anatomy.

Another important aspect of body mapping is understanding how certain areas expand or compress visually within the design. Rounded areas tend to open up shapes and alter proportions, while flatter areas offer greater visual stability. This directly influences the placement of faces, geometric shapes, or elements that require maintaining precise proportions.



In the torso, the starting point is the body's central axis. Both on the chest and on the back, the midline (sternum or spine) serves as the structural reference for organizing the composition.

From this axis, we can decide whether the design will be **symmetric, asymmetric, or radial**. In centered compositions, it is essential to respect this line to avoid deviations that break the natural flow.



In the chest, the structure is conditioned by the pectorals and the clavicle. These forms create diagonal directions that can open the design toward the shoulders.

In the back, however, the spinal column and shoulder blades create a wider and more stable system.



In a chest design, the nipple should not be used as a focal point. Due to its natural shape and contrast, it tends to draw the eye automatically, so the composition should work to divert and redistribute it toward other points of interest. A good design integrates the nipple without competing with it.

- Natural lines
- Flat areas
- Volumes



Materials to use for extracting the 2D model of the body.



You can use transparent **plastic film**, the same one used to wrap food. This material has the advantage of easily adapting to the curves and volumes of the body, allowing you to mark anatomical lines on it.

In my case, I usually apply several layers of film around the area to be worked on to give it greater structural strength. This helps prevent it from expanding or shrinking too easily during the extraction process and model transfer. By using multiple layers, the film retains some of its natural flexibility but gains stability, making the preservation of proportions more precise.

Another alternative is **transparent adhesive film**, such as contact paper, commonly used to line surfaces or notebooks. Unlike traditional plastic film, this material is stiffer and less elastic, which helps preserve proportions better and reduces certain deformations when transferring the model to digital or paper format.

The choice of material depends on the type of study you want to conduct and the level of precision required. Plastic film is usually more convenient for adapting to complex areas, while contact paper offers a more stable surface for projects where greater structural control is needed.



For the body extraction and analysis process, I use different colored markers to visually organize the information on the film and facilitate anatomical reading.



The film must be strategically cut according to the area of the body using scissors. The goal is to open and expand the surface without affecting the continuity of the design, seeking cut lines that can then be closed naturally. This allows the design to be worked on comfortably in a 2D plane and ensures that, when reassembled on the body mold, the connections align and the flow remains integrated around the entire piece.

Application of transparent film

Before designing, it is essential to translate the three-dimensional body into a comprehensive two-dimensional working plane. This process allows capturing with accuracy the proportions, tensions, and real directions of the skin.

1• The film is placed over the area to be tattooed, working as a second skin, and it is secured without folds to capture with precision the proportions and real directions of the body area.

2• Lines are drawn that follow the anatomy; curvatures, division between muscles, and natural flows.

These lines are the structural foundation of the design. They determine where the composition should flow.



The film is removed and digitized to obtain a 2D model faithful to the real behavior of the skin.



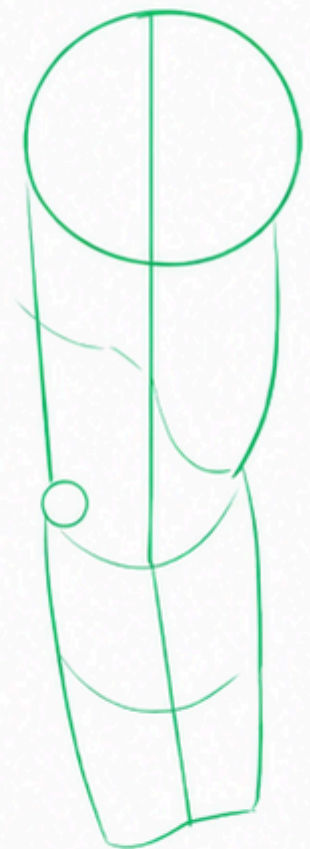
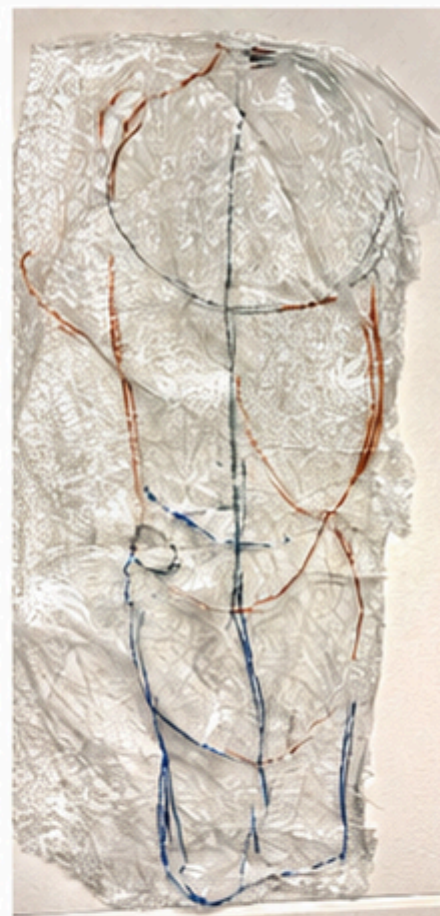
The film can be photographed or scanned to work digitally.



It can also be used as a base to develop the design by hand.



Working on this model prevents assumptions. It allows designing with precision, respecting the anatomy, and ensuring that the tattoo not only works on paper but also flows correctly on the body.

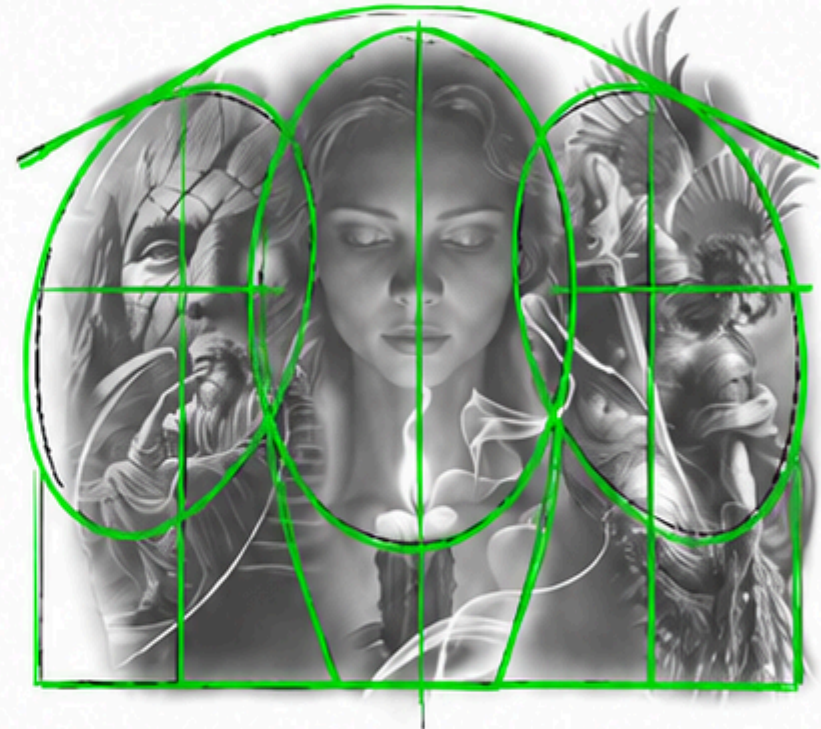


Extracting 360 degrees of a leg

- 1** The process consists of completely wrapping the limb with several layers of film, creating a flexible surface that is stable enough to work on.
- 2** Once in place, the main anatomical lines are marked directly on the film. This step is important because it allows understanding the limb as a complete volume and not just as an isolated front or side view. In this way, the design can be conceived from the body's entire flow, anticipating how the shapes connect around the whole piece.
- 3** Then, the film is carefully cut—usually along a front or strategic line—so it can be opened and laid flat on a planar surface.
- 4** When unfolded, we obtain a 2D extraction of the limb's 360 degrees. We can digitize it or use it by hand in a similar way to design on this structure.



With this already-open template, it is possible to build the design directly, organizing connections and closures much more controlled. This makes it easier for the tattoo to wrap correctly around the leg or arm, avoiding awkward cuts, misalignments, or compositions that lose continuity when transferred back onto the body.



1 WRAP
the limb



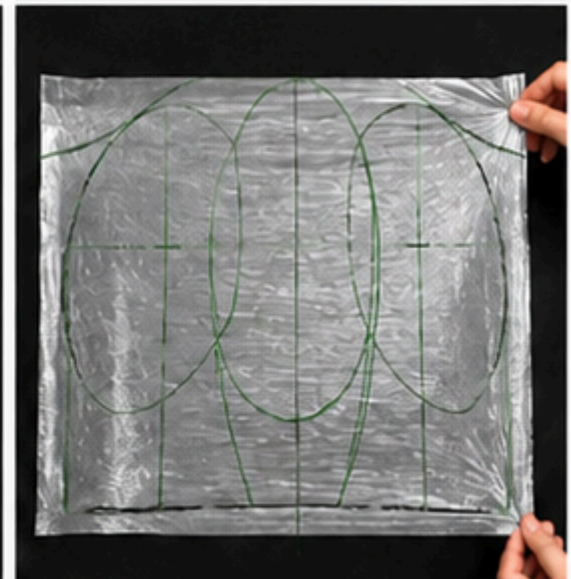
2 MARK
on the film



3 CUT
strategically



4 UNFOLD
and obtain the 2D



Chapter 2

THE DESIGN

In this part, we focus on understanding how to respond to that map with design decisions.

Everything analyzed so far—volumes, flat areas, natural lines, and flow directions—has no value on its own if it doesn't translate into concrete design decisions.

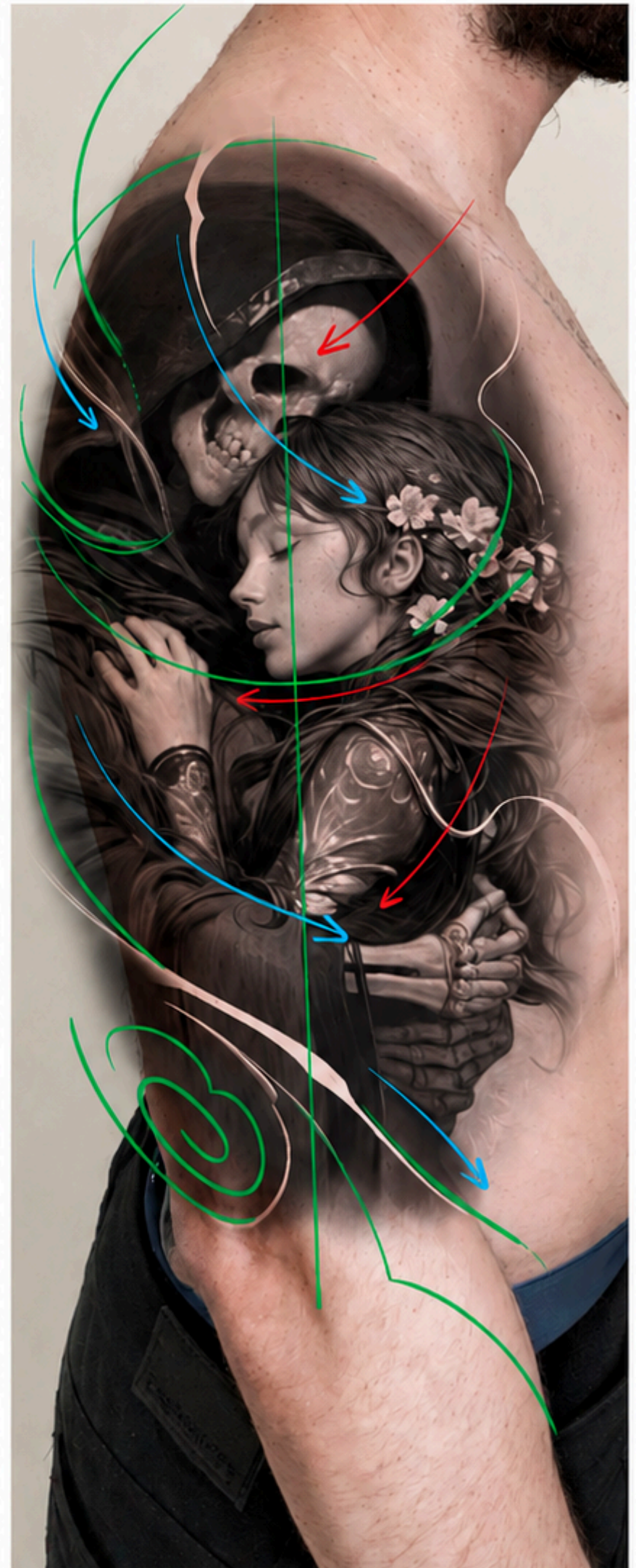
A good tattoo depends on how that idea is organized: what's emphasized, what's **simplified**, and how it's distributed visually across the body. Designing is about establishing **hierarchy**, guiding the eye, and creating a clear visual reading even from a distance.

Every design starts with an **intention**: what you want to show and where you want the eye to look first. From there, a visual hierarchy is built by organizing the elements according to their importance.

The use of **contrast** and un-tattooed spaces allows the design to breathe and be understood clearly. **Rhythm** and **flow** help guide the eye, making the tattoo follow the body's natural movement.

It's also key to control the level of detail so the design isn't oversaturated and can be read even from a distance. **Transitions** connect the elements to each other, avoiding abrupt cuts and creating continuity.

Every design must be thought about in time: how it will age and how it will look in the years to come.

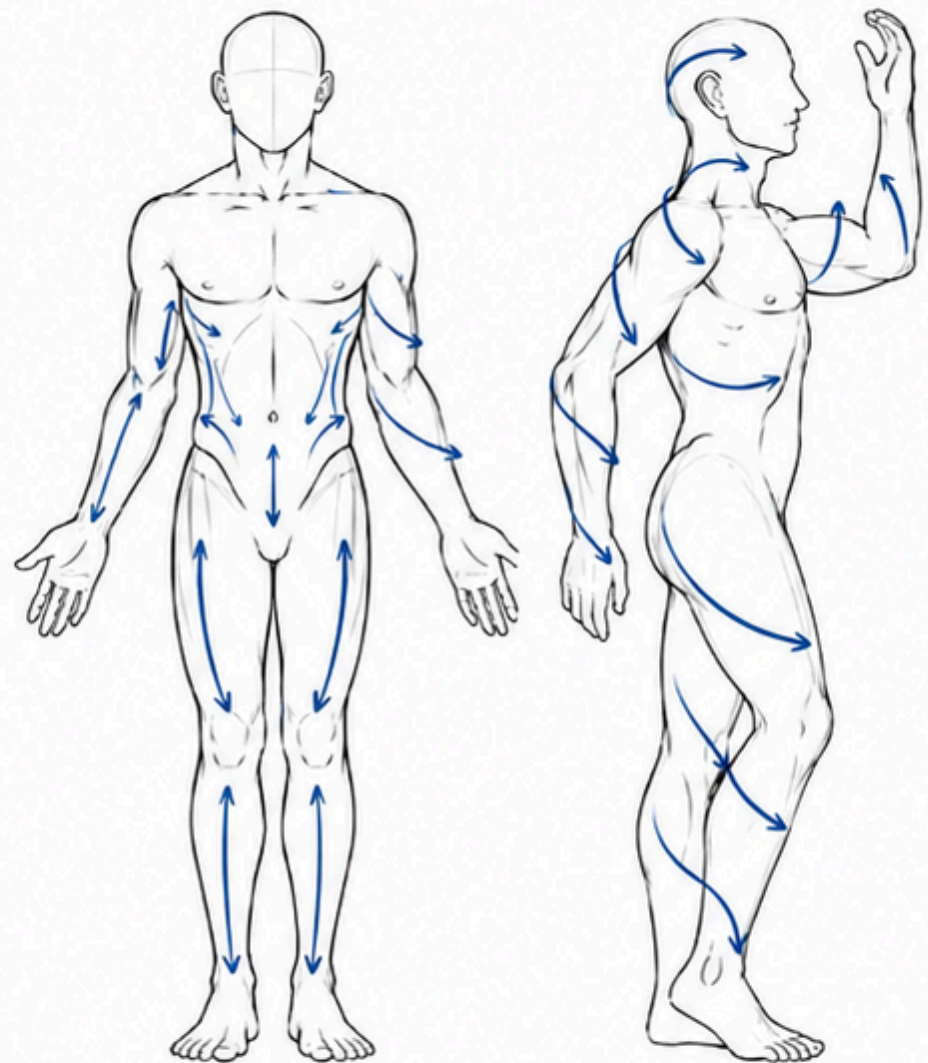


General flows and compositional direction

It usually works best when the main elements point toward the front of the body. This creates a more natural visual reading and follows the general direction of the body's movement.

For this reason, in side compositions it is common to use faces in three-quarter view or slightly in profile, facing forward. This helps prevent the composition from “fighting” the body's natural flow.

In some flat or stable areas such as the inner forearm, the calf muscle, or behind the shin, the body has less visual torsion, which allows for more symmetrical compositions, centered elements, or faces looking directly forward without breaking anatomical harmony.



Flow and antiflow

Once the volume of the body is understood, the next step is to define the flow: the natural direction in which the design should move across the anatomy.

Flow is not an arbitrary line, It comes from reading the body structure, the inclination of the muscles, the tension lines, and the body's natural movement.

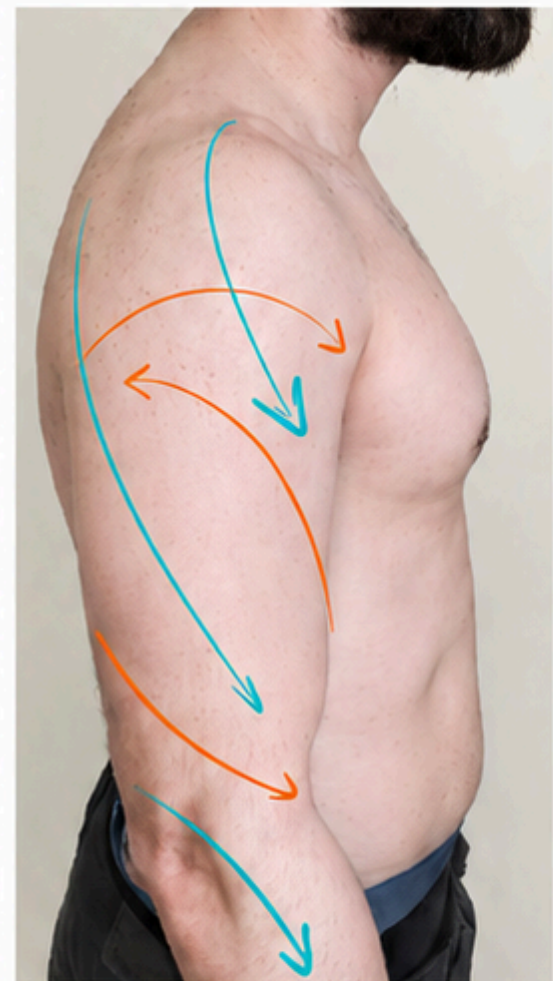
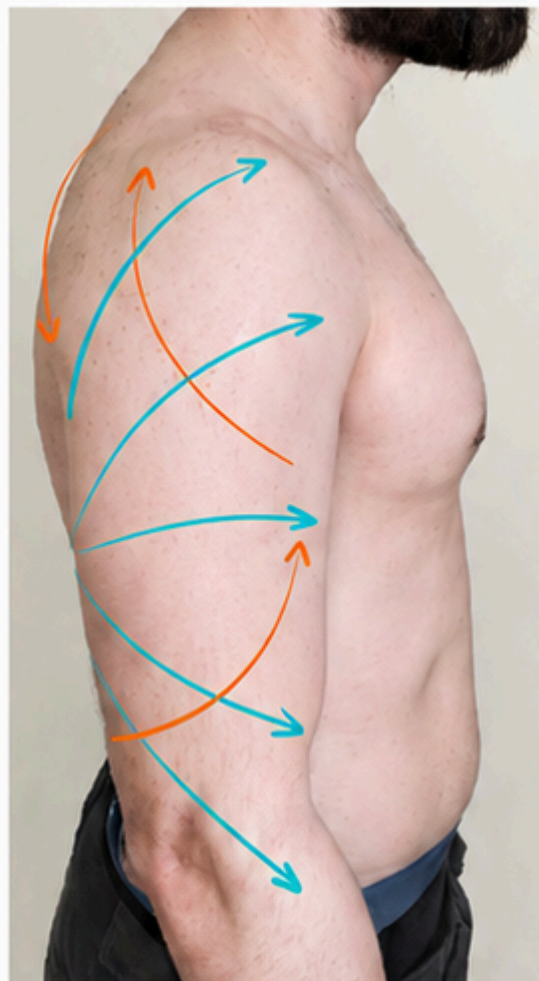
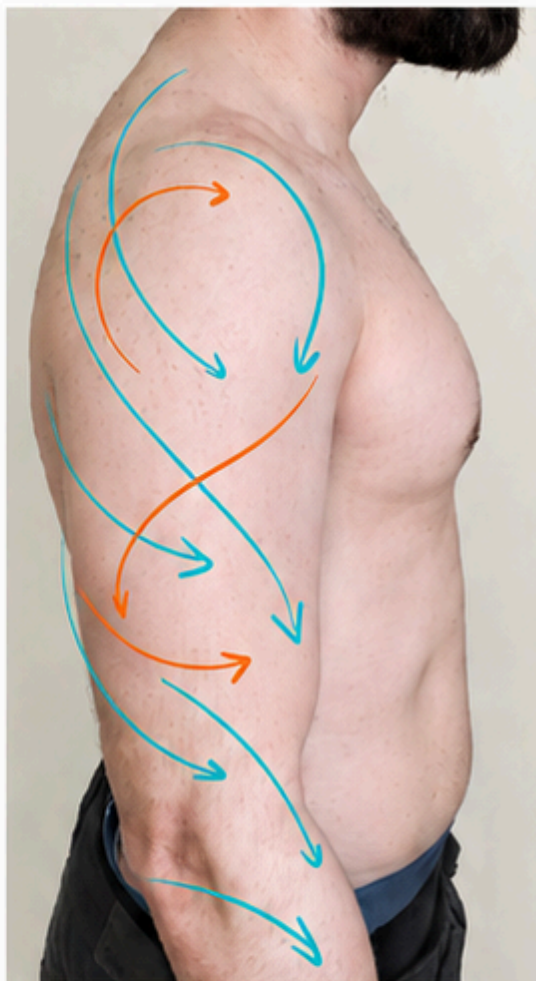
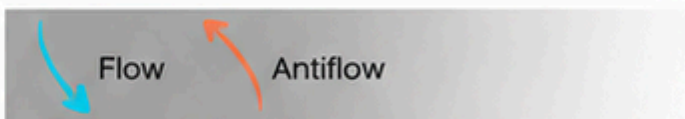
To visualize it, you can draw guide lines or arrows directly on the skin or on the previously extracted 2D model. These lines indicate where the design travels, how it moves, and how it will be read visually.

The images show three flow structures that I frequently use on the arms. These are not rigid rules, but directional systems that help organize the composition according to the type of project.

Each one responds to a different logic; some structures follow the body's natural flow, generating harmony and continuity.

Others introduce variations in direction, creating controlled tension. And others allow for more dynamic or narrative compositions, guiding the eye through the design.

The choice of one structure or another will always depend on the concept, the design elements, and the final intention of the piece.



Antiflow consists of intentionally breaking the dominant direction of the design. When used correctly, antiflow can:

- **Create points of emphasis**
- **Avoid overly predictable compositions**

The balance between flow and antiflow is what defines a mature composition.

Antiflow should not be seen as a mistake, but as controlled tension. Its purpose is not to compete with the main structure, but to strategically interrupt it in order to redirect the gaze. This allows for creating clear visual hierarchies and prevents the eye from automatically scanning the entire piece.

In practical terms, antiflow is usually applied in secondary elements or transitions: changes in direction in lines, shadows, or abstract shapes. When done well, it introduces dynamism without breaking the overall cohesion.

Antiflow works in a similar way to a rest or syncopation in music: it interrupts the expected rhythm to create contrast and variation.

Too much antiflow creates visual noise and confusion. A total absence, on the other hand, creates stiffness. That's why the key is to dose it: use it as an accent, not as a foundation.



Example of flow and visual path in the design

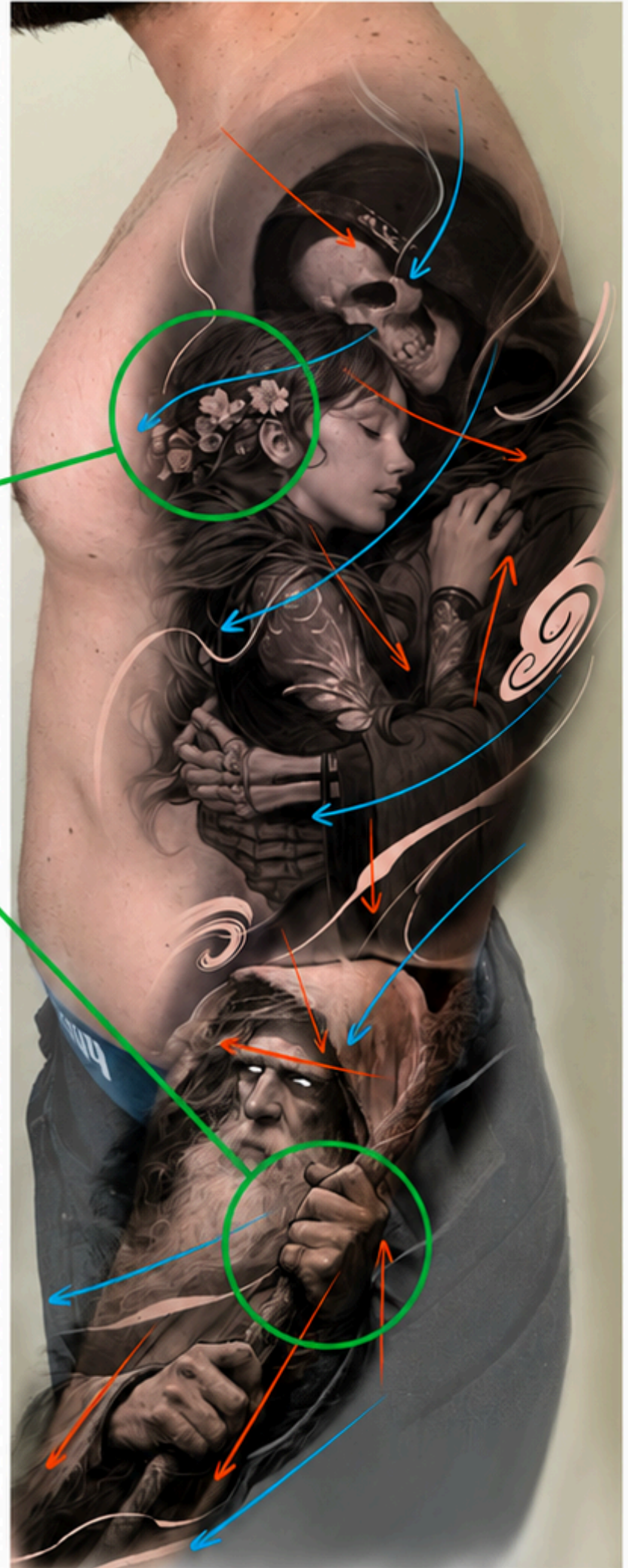
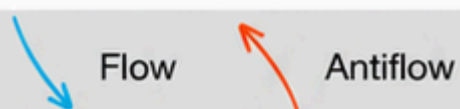
In a composition, the elements should not feel isolated from each other. Every shape, direction, or point of interest can be used to build a visual path that supports the overall flow of the design.

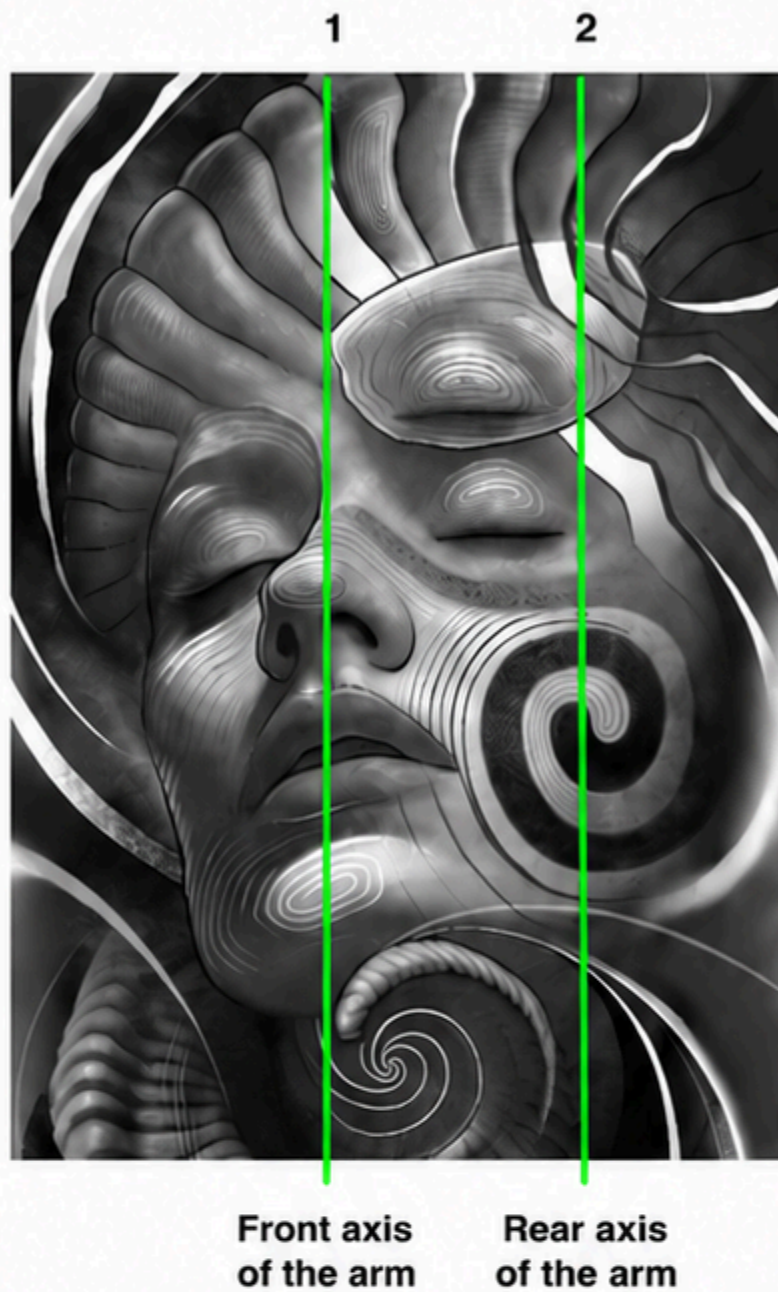
In this case, the gaze of death creates a direction that is then continued and reinforced by the flowers on the girl's head. Although both elements are separate, they share the same visual trajectory that naturally guides the viewer's gaze through the composition. This type of connection helps the design feel more integrated and fluid.

The wizard's staff introduces an opposite and stronger direction, creating contrast against the overall movement of the design. This is added to the girl's gaze and the inclination of the hood, which momentarily redirect attention and create a point of visual tension.

In this composition, much of the design follows a main downward and curved flow that supports the anatomy and guides the gaze. However, some elements intentionally break that path to create visual tension and prevent the composition from feeling too predictable.

This type of “breaks” can be used strategically to add drama, direct attention to specific areas, or create a sense of resistance within the composition.

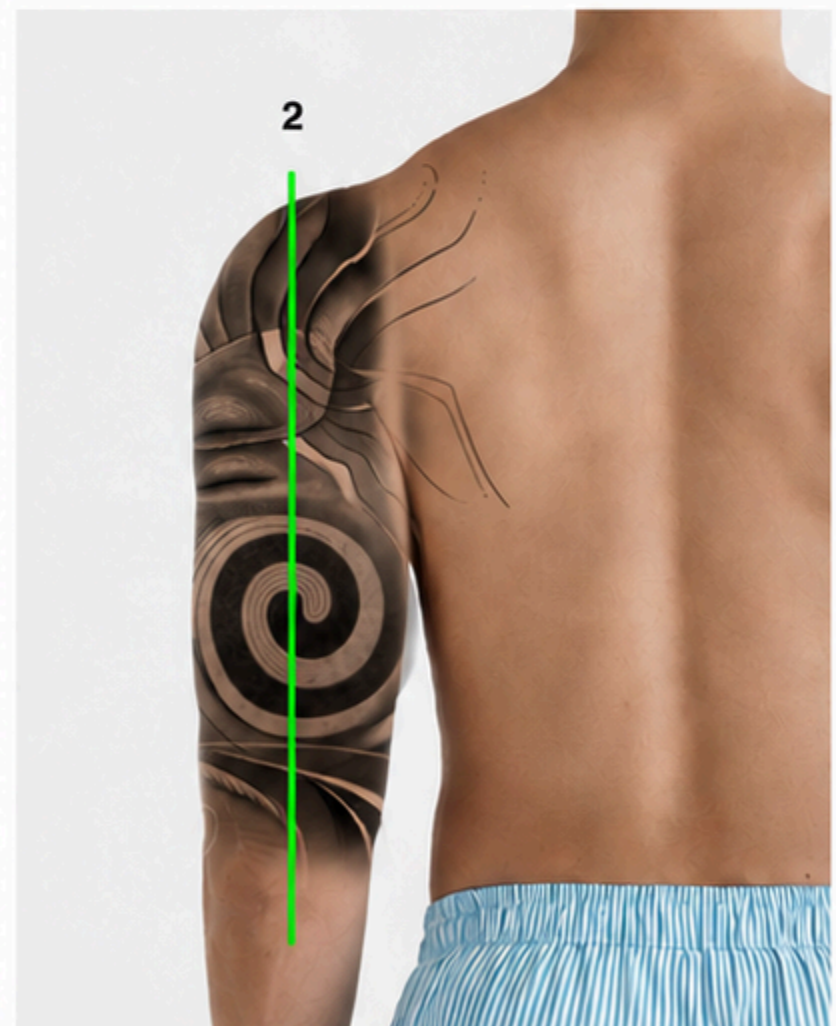
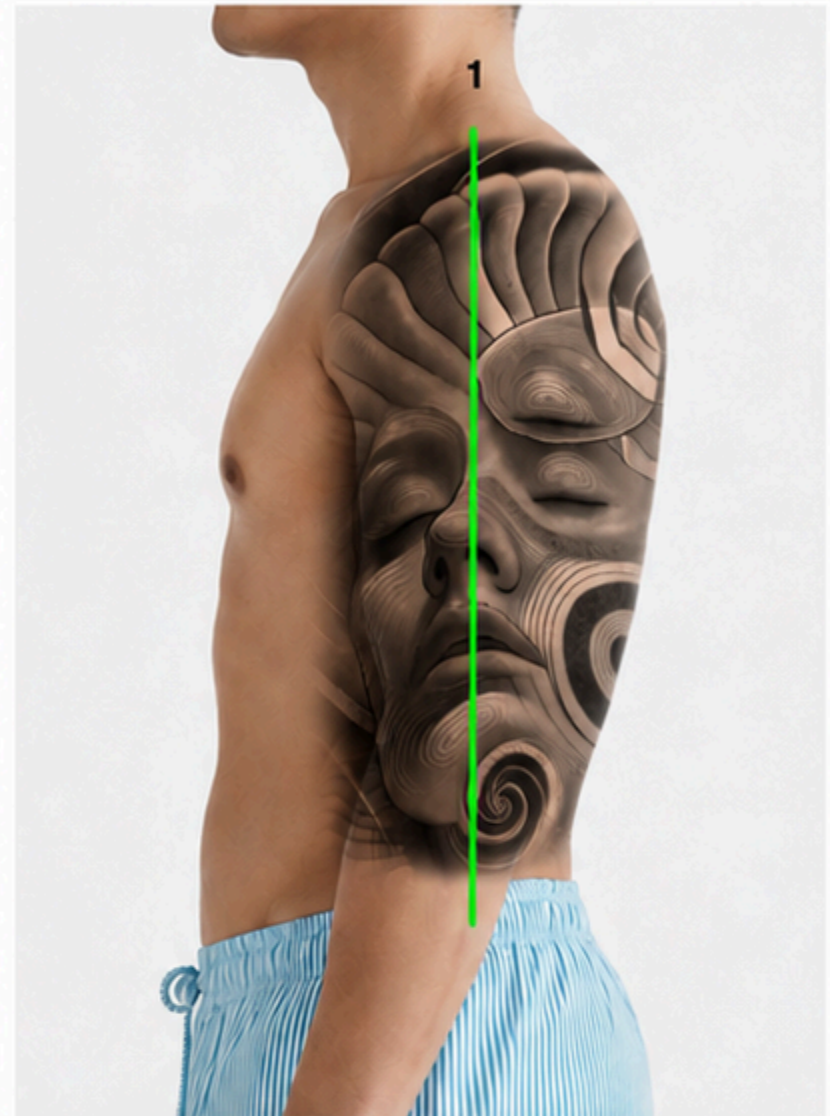




The body is constantly in motion, which is why the tattoo must maintain a clear reading and a solid composition from any perspective.

On the arm, it's important to consider both the front axis and the rear axis. What happens in the biceps must work together with the triceps and the back view of the arm, maintaining relevant visual information and a composition that works anatomically from both angles.

A tattoo that only works from the front loses strength when the arm rotates. On the other hand, when the composition is designed in 360 degrees, the design integrates with the body in a more natural, fluid, and anatomically coherent way.



In certain areas such as the arms, the natural curvature of the body can visually stretch the image, causing certain elements to appear deformed once applied to the skin.

For this reason, in many cases it is useful to slightly adjust the design before printing it. Although it may look compressed on paper, adapting it to the cylindrical shape of the body visually restores its normal proportions.

Stencil compression usually ranges between 5% and 15%, depending on how tubular the surface is. While the cylinder on the upper arm or forearm usually requires more adjustment, it is preferable to slightly compress the image before applying it.

A common example occurs with faces. When a portrait is applied directly to a tubular forearm, the natural curvature of the arm can cause the face to look stretched.

ORIGINAL DESIGN ON FLAT SURFACE

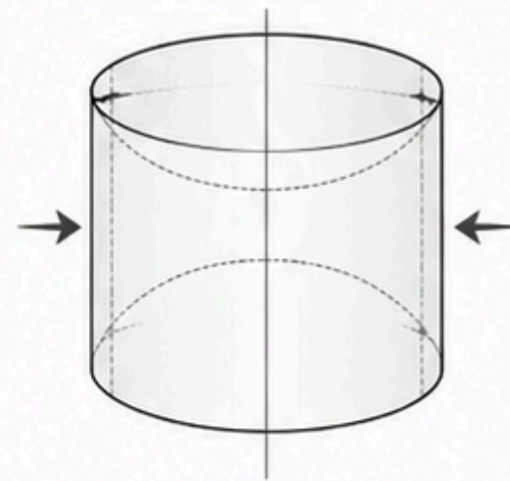
Correct proportions
on a flat surface.



The face looks
longer and
narrower.

The proportions
are not natural.

KEY CONCEPT



On cylindrical
surfaces, the skin
expands laterally
and compresses
the design on
the edges,
**altering its
proportions.**



Solution:

Slightly adjust the design before
printing the stencil so that, once
applied to the volume of the
body, it visually restores its
correct proportions.

WITH PRE-COMPRESSION ON THE ARM

By adjusting the design before the stencil,
the anatomy corrects the distortion.



The face
restores its
natural visual
proportions.

The same design does not work the same on all bodies

It usually works better to use compositions in three quarters, partial profiles, or slightly inclined directions. This type of orientation adapts better to the natural flow of the body and prevents the design from looking twisted or visually unstable.

On people with less pronounced musculature and a relatively smooth surface on the upper arm—especially in the area between the shoulder and the elbow—it is usually possible to work more symmetrical compositions or designs that face directly forward.

Very pronounced **musculature** can produce visual distortions on certain elements, especially in areas such as the upper arm, where a foreshortened face or feature can lose proportion when adapting to the volume of the muscle.

In contrast, on bodies with **flatter surfaces** or smoother transitions, there is more freedom to work with complex compositions without the design suffering as much distortion.



In these examples, **the differences between each anatomy** require constantly rethinking the design structure. Some elements need to be moved, compressed, expanded, or even change direction in order to maintain a balanced reading. The goal is not to keep the same design on every body, but to preserve its visual intention by intelligently adapting it to each anatomy.

Body stylization

Through the direction of the lines, contrast, and the distribution of visual weight, it is possible to modify the perception of anatomy. The tattoo not only accompanies the body: it can reinterpret it.

Vertical compositions tend to elongate the extremities, guiding the gaze along a continuous path that stylizes the volume. On the other hand, horizontal or expansive elements generate a sense of width, making an area appear more robust or solid.

Diagonals and curves, on the other hand, introduce dynamism and allow the eye to follow a more organic path, better adapting to the body's natural transitions.

In this context, visual continuity is essential. A design that flows with or strategically respects the joints can either fragment or unify the reading of the body.



Continue...

This is only an introductory sample of the complete guide.

Behind this project there is extensive work of research, study, and information gathering focused mainly on design, composition, and tattoo technique.

The complete guide will include 45 pages and will further explore topics such as body mapping, flow, anatomical composition, value construction, greywash technique, ink mixing, execution methods, and creativity applied to developing a personal artistic voice, along with perspectives from influential artists within tattooing.

The full version will be available starting June 30 through my website, with an approximate price of 5 USD / 5,000 CLP.