

Tatt-who? An Essay on the History of Tattoos

A tattoo is a permanent mark or design made on the skin by a process of pricking and ingraining an indelible pigment into the punctures or by raising scars. This is just a concrete definition; however, to many a tattoo has more of an abstract, personal meaning. Tattoos symbolize individuality, experiences, status, religion, and art. They come in many shapes, sizes, colors, designs, and styles. The history behind the tattoo is just as fascinating as the tattoo itself. Whether flaunted or hidden, sought as art or bought out of a whim, the tattoo has left its mark on generation after generation (Krakow). The purpose of tattooing varies from culture to culture, person to person, and its place on the time line. The essay will examine the following eras: BC and tribal, 20th century, and modern.

It is noted that tattooing (a Tahitian word meaning “to mark something”) has existed since 12,000 years BC. As noted in “A Brief History of Tattoos,” women in Borneo tattooed their symbols on their forearm indicating their particular skill. If a woman wore a symbol indicating she was a skilled weaver, her status as prime marriageable material was increased. In tribes, tattoos around the wrist and fingers were believed to ward away illness and bad



spirits. In recorded history, the earliest tattoos can be found in Egypt during the time of the erection of the great pyramids. As the Egyptians expanded their empire, the art of tattooing spread along with it. The civilizations of Crete, Greece, Persia, and Arabia

picked up and expanded the art form ("A Brief History of Tattoos). The Greeks used tattooing for communication among spies by identifying them and showing their rank. Romans marked criminals and slaves, a practice still carried on today.

Around 2000 BC tattooing spread to China. Historic Asian culture believed that the wearer of an image calls the spirit of that image. For example, the ferocity of a tiger would belong to the tattooed person. The Ainu are noted for introducing tattoos to Japan where it developed into a religious and ceremonial rite. Dayak warriors who had "taken a head" had tattoos on their hands ("A Brief History of Tattoos"). The tattoos garnered respect and solidified the owner's status for life. Polynesians developed tattoos to mark tribal communities, families, and rank. They brought their art to New Zealand and developed a facial style of tattooing called Moko which is still being used today ("A Brief History of Tattoos"). There is evidence that the Mayan, Incas, and Aztecs used tattooing in rituals as well as the isolated tribes of Alaska.

In the West, early Danes, Norse, and Saxons tattooed family crests (a tradition still practiced today). In 787 AD, Pope Hadrian banned tattooing, yet it still thrived in Britain until the Norman Invasion of 1066 when the Normans disdained tattooing. As a result tattooing disappeared from Western culture from the 12th to the 16th centuries. While tattooing diminished in the West, it thrived in Japan. Originally, it was used as a means of identifying criminals. First offenses were marked with a line across the forehead, a second crime was marked by adding an arch, and a third offense was marked by another line. Together these marks formed the Japanese character for "dog". Anthropologists argue that this was the original "three strikes you're out" law. In time,

the Japanese escalated the tattoo to an aesthetic art form. The “body suit” originated around 1700 as a social reaction against strict laws concerning conspicuous consumption. Only royalty were allowed to wear ornate attire. As a result of this, the middle class adorned themselves with elaborate full body tattoos. A fully tattooed person wearing nothing more than a loin cloth was considered “well dressed.”

In 1691, William Dampier re-introduced tattooing to the West when he brought to London a heavily tattooed Polynesian known as the Painted Prince. He was put on a money-making exhibition and became the rage of London. It had been 600 years since tattoos had been seen in Europe. Soon, the upper-class were getting small tattoos in discreet places. For a short time, tattooing became a sensational fad. In almost every early culture, tattooing symbolized status. In the BC and tribal eras of history, tattoos played an important role in ritual and tradition.

Just like the times, tattooing in the 20th century took an enormous turn. Evolutionary scientist, Charles Darwin, wrote many papers, one which included an analysis of tattoos. For tattooing to be mentioned in such distinguished company made many people re-look at the art, finding that they were standing at the dawn of a new era in indelible history. Initially, the tattoo craze began to diminish. What kept tattooing from becoming more widespread was its slow and painstaking procedure. Each puncture of the flesh was done by the hand the ink was applied. Paul Sace arguably states that the most significant factor to the re-emergence of the ancient art of tattooing would have to be the electric tattoo machine. In 1891, Samuel O'Reilly patented the first electric tattooing machine which was based on Edison's electric pen that punctured paper with a

needle point. The basic design with moving coils, a tube and a needle bar, are the components of today's tattoo gun. The electric tattoo gun allowed anyone to obtain a reasonably priced and readily available tattoo.

As the average person could easily get a tattoo, the upper classes turned away from it. By the turn of the century, tattooing had lost a great deal of credibility. Tattoo artists worked in the sleazier sections of the city. Heavily tattooed people traveled with circuses and were labeled as “freaks.” The societal view of tattoos was so poor for most of the century that tattooing went underground. There were no schools to study the craft, there were no magazines, and there were no associations or advertising. In order to find out where to go and who to see for quality tattoos, one had to be familiar with the scuttlebutt.

The birthplace of the American style tattoo was Chatham Square in New York City, a seaport and entertainment center attracting working-class people with money. While tattooing was declining elsewhere in the country, here it flourished. Husbands tattooed their significant others with examples of their best work. They played the role of walking advertisements. At this time, cosmetic tattooing became popular (i.e. blush for cheeks, colored lips, and eyeliner). With World War I, the flash art images changed to those of bravery and wartime icons. In the 1920s, with Prohibition and then the Depression, Chatham Square lost its appeal. The center for tattoo art moved to Coney Island. Tattooing experienced a revival during the Roaring 20s and the Suffragist movement; it became *en vogue* among the upper classes to have a tattoo. Not all women enjoyed such freedom, and society did not necessarily endorse this trend. For example,

in the late 1920s, the conviction of a rapist was overturned because a small butterfly tattoo was found on the victim (Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn). Both the judge and jury agreed that the tattoo had sexual implications and as a result, it was held that the woman was in part responsible for misleading the man who raped her.

Across the country, tattooists opened shops in areas that would support them, namely cities with military bases close by, particularly naval bases. In the 2nd World War era, tattoos were known as travel markers, almost like the stamps one sees in a passport booklet. "A Brief History of Tattoos" notes that after World War II, tattoos became further denigrated by their associations with Marlon Brando-type bikers and Juvenile delinquents. Tattooing had little respect in American culture because those who were tattooed were seen as social outcasts and troublemakers.

Tattooing was sent reeling on its heels when in 1961 there was an outbreak of hepatitis. Though most tattoo shops had sterilization machines, few used them. Newspapers reported stories of blood poisoning, hepatitis, and other diseases. The general population held tattoo parlors in disrepute. A health code violation went into effect and the tattoo shops at Times Square and Coney Island were shut down making it incredibly difficult to get a tattoo in New York. It was illegal and tattoos had a terrible reputation. Because of fear and the negative social view associated with them, few people wanted a tattoo. In the late 1960s, the attitude towards tattooing changed. During the Sexual Revolution, tattooing enjoyed a resurrection among radical women who were rethinking their gender role (including rock stars such as Janis Joplin) as noted by Hawkes, Senn, & Thorn. Amy Krakow states that thanks to Lyle Tuttle, the tattoo

became an amiable art form among the 1970s counterculture. Tattoos see-sawed in their acceptance in the 20th century but nevertheless were popular icons.

Today, tattooing is making a zealous comeback. It is more popular and accepted than it has ever been. Current tattoo artist, Tomas Garcia, says that “all classes of people are coming in to get tattoos, from Senators to new mothers to doctors to grandparents to kids who just turned 18.” This rise in popularity has placed tattooists in the category of “fine artist” garnering a respect not seen for over 100 years. Current artists combine the tradition of tattooing with their personal style creating unique and phenomenal body art. Through the lens of figurational sociology, today tattooing is interpreted as a pro-social and affectively regulated act of communication, rather than a pathological instance of self-injury (Atkinson). The 21st century is experiencing what some call a second “Tattoo Renaissance.” As part of this revolution in the popular cultural significance of tattooed flesh, tattooing is escalating to unprecedented levels of popularity among a vast array of social groups. Once a long-standing symbol of the underclass, this “body project” is now a floating signifier of a full panorama of social statuses, roles, and identities. More so than in any previous era, Michael Atkinson notes that tattoos are “pregnant” with cultural significance. Women especially have played an enormous role in the culture of tattoos. It can be argued that women today become tattooed for two reasons: the refusal to obey appearance norms and for the gender nonconformity that it displays. Throughout history tattoos have signified membership in a clan or secret society. Even today groups like the Hells Angels tattoo their particular group symbol. Contemporary music scenes exemplify the tattoo phenomenon. “Straight-edge” youth use their bodies as a canvas for their

moralistic beliefs. According to Demello, the tattoos reflect the power of their symbolic associations as they preach against premarital sex, drugs, smoking, and alcohol. Tattoos have blossomed into a form of self expression and individuality.

Tattoos have appeared throughout history as a ritual art, pagan decoration, art to mark a rite of passage, art to inform, forbidden art, blue-collar art, popular art, and erotic art (Krakow 2). Two reactions seem to be possible in persons who see a tattoo on someone. One is complete fascination, a feeling that here is the ultimate stud, the great macho, the sexual satyr, the Marlboro man, the far-traveling sailor, the incomparable sadistic master, the criminal just released from prison. The other is a complete revulsion: the tattoo represents the epitome of sleaze, of low-class background, of cheap vulgarity and bad taste, everything that intelligence and sophistication have conditioned society to despise (Steward 10). From body painting to scarification, piercing to the less permanent wearing of jewelry, hair styles to make-up, to the emergence of cosmetic surgery, people have always striven to change their appearance. For millions of people throughout time, tattooing has been one of the most popular forms of permanent body art. Tattooing as an art form has over the years been claimed by many countries, tribes, and ethnic groups. In many cases it is the same scenario of what came first - the chicken or the egg. It will probably never be known exactly who were the first people to mark their skins, but what is definite is that tattooing has tattooed itself in history as a significant identifier.

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