

HISTORY OF TEMPORARY TATTOOS

A Temporary History

Cheap temporary tattoos have been around since at least the 1890s. Printed in sheets for a penny or given away as prizes in boxes of Cracker Jacks, these simple, crude transfers were printed with food coloring on nonabsorbent paper. This made it easier to transfer the designs to human skin. This method was actually developed by real tattoo artists who wanted a way to transfer complex designs to skin so they could have a guide to use for a real tattoo. This is still done today, but somewhere along the line, someone realized there was a market for temporary “tattoo flashes.” The remarkably low cost of mass-producing made them very popular as inexpensive novelties.

Tattoo You

The first generation of temporary tattoos were made by printing an image using food-coloring-based inks on a non-absorbent paper. If the paper got wet, the ink would transfer to another surface.... Human skin being one of those. Many dealers of pre-1970 non-sport cards treat bubblegum wrapper tattoos as cards. The subject matter is pretty much the same—monsters, superheroes, cartoon characters, etc.—so it makes a good fit, albeit a niche category. The fact that the bulk of these bubblegum tattoos were produced by Topps, Donruss and Fler is another attraction for collectors.

The drawback to these tattoos is because they are printed with food coloring, they are biodegradable and will deteriorate unless stored in ideal situations. Many were also damaged simply by opening the gum since they were printed inside the wrapper. Add to that, the fact that these were consumables and not collectibles, most kids licked and applied these things instead of saving them, and you have a niche hobby that can be very expensive.

Tattoos Bubble to the Surface

Pop culture temporary tattoos have been around since the 1930s or before with vintage temporary tattoo sheets of Betty Boop and Popeye still turning up fairly regularly on the secondary market. There was a real explosion in the market for licensed character tattoos following Topps’ success with a baseball set in 1960. Fler and Donruss quickly joined the fray. In no time tattoos wrapped around bubblegum were in vending machines and penny-candy counters everywhere. Early sets like Topps’ Superman and Monster Tatoo [sic] (with art by Jack Davis) were soon joined by an avalanche of licensed gum tattoos featuring Bullwinkle, Underdog, Mighty Mouse, The Lone Ranger. Almost every kid-favorite character from the 1960s and 1970s wound up as a bubblegum tattoo.

Rubbing Up to Technology

As temporary tattoos became more popular, beginning in the 1960s, companies like Letraset in the UK and 3M in America began developing more durable temp-tats. These were more akin to a decal than a simple ink transfer, and this allowed for more elaborate designs and sharper printing. The transfer principle was the same, but the tattoo cards printed this way are much more long-lasting and easier to collect.

This didn't mean the end of the food-coloring ink tattoo. Some sets, like Topps' 1988 Pee Wee's Playhouse Fun Pak, include old-school temporary tattoos for that special retro feel. The 1980s saw a mix of food-coloring tattoos with sets like The Smurfs, and high-tech temporary tattoos, some of which were peel-and-stick and scratch-and-sniff.

The Return of the Temporary

After a bit of a lull in the early 1980s, as the penny-candy market faded away, temporary tattoos in trading cards staged a comeback in the 1990s, both as full sets of tattoos and as special insert sets in non-sport collections. In the last thirty years, there have been plenty of tattoo insert cards. Everything from The Simpsons to Star Wars to Garbage Pail Kids and Rick & Morty have had temporary tattoo inserts. There have also been entire sets of tattoo designs by famous artists like Ed Hardy and Lisa Frank.

Temporary tattoos are back. However, they are not as popular as they once were. So many folks have real tattoos now that the novelty has worn off. The fact that non-sport cards are no longer aimed at kids has also lessened the appeal dramatically, too. It's a safe bet that the vast majority of temporary tattoos produced as inserts for trading card sets since 1990 were never applied to anyone's skin.

Adapted from:

Panucci, R. (n.d.). Skin Deep: A Superficial History of Tattoos and Trading Cards. Beckett Collectibles.
<https://www.beckett.com/news/skin-deep-a-superficial-history-of-tattoos-and-trading-cards/>