

Tattoos as Art

(1) A Definition of Tattooing

Tattoos. What is your first thought when you hear the word? A soldier? A sailor? A hippie? At one time, you might have been right. In western culture, those were the people who were tattooed. However, today the body ink industry is flourishing in all directions. Reportedly, the industry brings in more than \$3 billion dollars a year, and an increase of nearly 10 percent a year is trending. Tattooing has become a viable business. A tattoo artist with an established clientele and a good reputation can easily earn upwards of \$50,000 a year. Our question, though, is not about tattooing as a business. Our question is should tattooing be considered an art form?

So, what's the deal? Historically, tattoo studios have been perceived as shady, run-down buildings down by the railroad tracks. Now you're likely to find a tattoo studio downtown next to a Starbucks in a typical business establishment not much different from a hair salon. Traditionally, tattooing was thought to fall within the purview of men. However, the tradition is changing, and women have come to see tattoos as "emblems of empowerment . . . and badges of self-determination. . . at a time when controversies . . . have made them think hard about who controls their bodies -- and why" (Mifflin).

Although we are not surprised by women's tattoos today, that has not always been the case. During the 19th and early twentieth centuries, women who braved the tattoo parlor were thought to flout "the Victorian ideals of feminine purity and decorum." Tattooing has taken on a completely different meaning than it originally had. In the article "Tattoos in Criminal Culture," Wahlstedt notes that tattoos serve a very important purpose in a closed culture: They "contribute to the creation and maintenance of a group's identity, improves its internal cohesion, and allows it to better communicate both internally and externally" (4). We know that tattoos today do both: they provide a means of individualization, and at the same time, they build community.

Marcus Berriman, organizer of the London Tattoo Convention, notes that "Once upon a time, people associated [tattooing] with criminals and bikers and punks, but now it's mainstream." Tattoos once taboo to jobseekers are no longer a barrier to hiring. Dr. Woo, a prominent LA-based tattoo artist with more than 1.8 million Instagram followers, reports on the cultural ubiquity of tattooing. He works with people from all walks of life who are tattooed -- doctors, lawyers, politicians, kids, and grandparents.

More than 30% of Americans have tattoos, and the average number of tattoos that tattooed Americans report having is four. For some, tattooing has become a rite of passage. Popular figures have tattoos all over their bodies, and their tacit acceptance of body modification results in their fans' following suit. In the workplace, it is, however, still legal to discriminate against tattoos in the workplace. Employers are allowed to use tattoos as a basis to distinguish candidates and can require employees to cover up tattoos while on the job. However, as tattooing becomes more socially acceptable and more people become tattooed, employers may be required to justify any restrictions on tattoos.

(2) A Brief History of Tattooing

Tattooing has long been an enviable art. Matt Lodder, who specializes in the history of tattoos, believes it is important to identify tattoos as a historic “medium,” rather than a phenomenon, which values its currency rather than its longevity. The earliest tattoos are thought to belong to Otzi, the European Iceman, who was buried beneath an Alpine glacier along the Austrian-Italian border around 3250 BC. Otzi had 61 tattoos across his body, including his left wrist, lower legs, lower back, and torso

When tattooing began is unknown. Written records date the art of tattooing back to fifth-century B.C. in Greece—and maybe centuries earlier in China. Evidence of tattooing has been found in art, photography, from tattoo tools, and on preserved human skin, which is the best evidence and only direct archaeological proof of the art. It is the issue of permanence that creates a concern for the tattooist -- when a person dies and their body decomposes, so too does the tattoo, erasing any evidence of the tattoo artist’s work. While painters’ and photographers’ work can live on posthumously, the original tattoo artist’s work is lost.

According to Lodder, “the urge to communicate stories and desires by tattooing something on our skin has long been a basic human need.” But not all tattoos represented beautification. Although many cultures value tattoos, they have also served as a cruel kind of branding. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, tattoos were a mark of punishment and shame given to convicts. This practice continued through to America’s slave trade as a symbol of ownership and power and into the Holocaust, where the serial numbers tattooed on the forearms of Jewish prisoners symbolized brutality and dehumanization. Men and women were tattooed with different numbers, shapes, and symbols which identified the status, nationality, or religion of the prisoners. But despite this, tattoos simultaneously remained an attractive lure for society’s elite.

The status of tattooing has changed from being something done by the disaffected or privileged. Professor Nicholas Thomas states that “thanks to advances in technology and medical science, people no longer understand the body as something natural that you’re born with and live with. Instead, we understand it much more as something that is changeable and mutable. . . . People have all sorts of surgical interventions, medical and cosmetic This means that we now see our body as something we have a responsibility to design and make.”

Thomas further notes that there has been a return to traditional forms of tribal tattoos. Instead of being a vehicle to form an individual identity, tribal tattoos are a collective cultural project, constituting particular social markers. Sometimes they create a spectacular appearance when a tribe all share the same design. They also serve as a part of initiation or coming of age rites.

Thomas writes that people may feel that a spiritual dimension is missing in contemporary western life, and they feel attracted to the spiritual symbols of traditional cultures. Throughout history, tattoos have been acquired for religious, magical, social, and communal reasons. In some parts of the world, strong religious and superstitious significance is found in certain body markings. Despite the purpose or type of tattoo, research suggests that having a tattoo profoundly alters the way an individual is perceived.

(3) Cultural Distinctions in Tattooing

Almost every culture in the world has a history of tattooing. Some cultures used tattoos to represent bad news or shame. In some cultures, people who had broken laws or had violated cultural norms were punished by forced tattooing.

Indigenous people in North America used tattoos to celebrate passage from one life phase to another or status in the tribe. A particularly interesting practice is observed by the Inuit. These facial tattoos are made of lines from lip to chin with arrowheads on the cheeks. Women in these tribes were tattooed by elder women using bones or steel. The tattoos were made on the cheeks, chin, forehead, lips, eyes, and eyebrows and signified a coming of age and readiness for marriage. In Buddhist cultures, a popular tattoo called a *mandala*, beautiful tattoos that depict eternity and the cyclical nature of the universe. It involves tattooing sacred, geometrical patterns and designs on holy men who must have the mandala tattooed by a qualified monk.

In the New Zealand Maori culture, the tattoos -- *moko* -- have always been a part of the community's culture. Carved into the skin using chisels, these tattoos are part of a sacred tradition that connects the wearer with their family and cultural identity. Facial tattoos have been a part of Maori culture for centuries, a sacred marker of the wearer's genealogy and heritage. When European explorers first came into the Pacific, they were stunned by the patterning they saw on the faces and bodies of the island peoples. Usually, the faces of men were marked from forehead to throat, creating a mask-like effect which enhanced the bone structure, softened or strengthened the features, and confirmed the virility of the warrior or the wisdom of the shaman/orator. Women's *moko* cover only the chin. This practice continues today.

Other cultures such as the Aztec and the Malaysians used tattoos for a variety of purposes. The tattoo was a way to tell the gods that an individual existed, enabling gods to see the individual in the afterlife. In Malaysia, men were given a coming-of-age tattoo which was designed to aid them on their "berjalua" or walk about. Individuals selected from a variety of images from bulls to scorpions to fish. The Razzouk Tattoo shop in Jerusalem has continued its practice of tattooing Christians of all denominations with selected religious symbols who come by the shop on Easter pilgrimages to seek a permanent memorial of their trip. Wassim Razzouk states that he "felt the weight of carrying on and preserving this holy tradition. We are its custodians."

Japanese tattoos are among the oldest style of tattoos. Colors are significant in Japanese tattoos. For example, white is a major color in Japan that symbolizes purity and truth. Blue, which is symbol of fidelity, shows dedication to one's work. And green is a color that represents life, youth, energy, and respect for the earth. Japanese tattoos are often quite large, and the colors should be balanced across the tattoo. Tattooing was banned in the 1800's because of its use by the Japanese mafia, the Yakuza. Today in Japan, tattooing, which is a symbol of toughness, has once again become popular.

(4) Women and Tattooing

With the tattoo industry forecast for further growth over the coming three years, Mifflin says ensuring that it is less male-centric should also be seen as a priority. A 2017 poll by Statista claimed women are more likely to have a tattoo than men. Despite this, only 25% of US tattooists are women, vastly outnumbered by their (75%) male counterparts. "If you read a tattoo magazine, it's filled with naked female pin-ups," says Mifflin. "The culture still seems very biased towards men."

There is evidence that women in Ancient Egypt had tattoos. Experts speculate that images were carved into the skin so that the gods would protect their babies during pregnancy. The 1891 discovery of Amunet, a priestess of the goddess Hathor at Thebes, shows extensive tattooing across the mummified corpse's abdominal region. In 1993, a heavily-tattooed female warrior priestess dubbed the "Princess of Ukok" was discovered by archaeologists in the Altai Mountains – which run through Russia, China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan. The discovery of this 2,500-year-old corpse was particularly significant. The preservation of the skin and torso featured sophisticated illustrations of mythical beasts, including the antlers of a Capricorn. The 25-year-old princess was one of the Pazyryks, a Scythian-era tribe that saw body tattoos as a marker of social status and something that would make it easier for them to be located by loved ones in the afterlife. All these discoveries strongly suggest that tattooing not a new trend, but one of the oldest artforms on record.

In many cultures, it is believed that tattoos increased feminine beauty. In the Eskimo tribe, for example, women were tattooed according to rank and status in life usually across their faces. The tattoos depicted when a woman was ready to marry and bear children. Other tribes along the Pacific coastal region had their own unique methods, designs, and reasons for tattooing. The plains tribes like the Seminole, Creek, and Cherokee used flowers, stars, animals, and moons to indicate family status and ties to the community. Today more and more women have tattoos and are entering the tattooing profession in large numbers. Twenty-three percent of women have tattoos compared to 19 percent of men.

One person with experience of this gender imbalance is Sasha Masiuk, a successful female tattooist who made her name in Russia. Currently based in Los Angeles, she has five tattoo shops globally. "When I started tattooing, clients would meet me in person and be weirded out I was a woman. It was like I had to go out of my way to prove to them I was as good as a man."

Yet the fact Masiuk now charges up to \$20,000 for her work shows things are changing. She points to shifting attitudes in Russia as proof that tattoo culture isn't just flourishing in the West, but the East too. "When people saw you had tattoos, you were seen as dangerous or a drug addict," she reflects of her early career in Russia. "But now in places like St Petersburg and Moscow, tattoos are accepted as a way of life."

This acceptance is something Masiuk hopes will translate into more authoritarian regions of Asia, where tattoos still carry taboo connotations. For example, in Lanzhou, a city in the Gansu province of Northwest China, authorities have implemented a tattoo ban for taxi drivers just two years ago on the basis that they "may cause distress to passengers who are women and children."

(5) The Future of Tattooing

Despite this rich history, and tattoos' uniqueness as mobile artworks that walk around with somebody for the whole of their life, Mister Cartoon (March Machado) says he still encounters snobbery. "If you go to art school and say you want to be a tattooist then they still look at it like a dishonest way to make a living," he says.

"For me it was always about getting the shady type of tattoos from my neighborhood, which my mom feared were the mark of criminals, and taking them somewhere where they could be seen as luxurious and glamorous," Cartoon explains. "I wanted to really show their value. We're creating art on moving flesh, which requires so much skill. . . . If you watch someone do a tattoo, and walk away from it thinking it's not art, then you're just a crazy art snob."

Even if snobbery still exists, Mifflin insists the art and tattoo worlds are converging more and more. She credits Mexican tattooist Dr. Lakra (who has pioneered a macabre religion-fueled visual style) and Belgium's Wim Delvoye (who has controversially tattooed pigs) as two recent figureheads who have helped bridge the gap between tattoos and fine art.

The major thing separating the fine art world from the tattooists is the issue of permanence. When a person dies and their body decomposes, so does their tattoo, meaning the original copy of a tattoo artist's work is lost. By comparison, painters and photographers' work can live on in galleries, bringing these artists posthumous recognition. For tattooists, it's much more complicated. Infamously, Dr. Fukushi Masaichi, a Japanese pathologist who was deemed the "Bodysuit collector," carried out a project where he kept consenting people's back skin after they died, preserving their tattoos in Tokyo's Medical Pathology Museum.

Renowned New York-based tattoo artist Scott Campbell believes technology can finally help to level the playing field. Alongside LA-based creative agency *Cthdrl*, he has pioneered the new Scab Shop platform, which enables tattoo artists like Woo and Cartoon to sell their tattoos as NFTs (non-fungible tokens) to the general public, meaning their work can live on in the metaverse and will no longer die with its owner's flesh. The idea is for Scab Shop to be a digital art gallery that preserves tattooists' work. "Thanks to Scab Shop, I can sell my original artwork as images, just like an artist might; it really is the first time [that] tattooing can be truly transacted as a traditional art form," claims Campbell.

If tattoo artists are looking to preserve their work for posterity, tattoo-wearers can get rid of their tattoos more easily than ever. In fact, the tattoo removal devices market has been backed to grow by an "incredible" \$245 million by 2029. "Pretty soon we're going to be able to just erase and start over," adds Woo. But what this means for its status as art is another matter. Even though Woo says the industry is currently a little homogenized with overly simple Instagram-friendly floral designs, the tattoo expert is convinced his artform will continue to grow globally. He concludes: "Historically, tattoos romanticized the idea of freedom, right? To have one showed you weren't bound by social standards and could be your own person. They were the mark of the revolutionaries.

"So long as human beings want to feel free, tattoos will live on."

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