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# Tattoo World

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# **TATTOO WORLD**

By

Agnieszka Marczak

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

The Department of Anthropology

The Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2007

# TATTOO WORLD

An Undergraduate Honors Project Presented

By

Agnieszka Marczak

To

The Department of Anthropology

Approved:

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Project Advisor

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Date

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Chair, Department Honors Committee

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Date

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Department Chair

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Date

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a holistic look at the world of tattoo. It covers the history of the practice in three major world regions, Europe, Asia and the Pacific, from the earliest known references to tattooing to modern day tattoo culture that spans the globe. It also provides a discussion of some of the major issues that surround the practice, including such topics as tattooing in relation to the body, authenticity, commodification and meaning, functions, medical and legal concerns and the impact of technological developments on the practice, and the increase in popularity of tattooing in recent decades.

## **Introduction**

The ancient practice of tattoo is a fast growing popular fashion in the Western World. This so-called tattoo renaissance that has been taking place in the United States since the mid 1980s can clearly be seen all around us. Tattoo shops can be found almost anywhere and, especially among young people, visible tattoos are much more prevalent than they ever were before. This explosion of the practice of tattooing has generated a lot of scholarly as well as popular interest. Books, articles and multi-media recordings on the topic abound but very few of them take a holistic approach to the practice.

My interest in this subject was spurred by its popularity among many of my friends. I, as an outsider who did not have any tattoos, wondered ‘why?’ It seemed to me at first that this was just another trend, invested with no more meaning than a fashionable hair cut or pair of jeans. The difference here was that this particular trend was permanent; therefore, it seemed to me that getting a tattoo was a particularly stupid thing to do. Who would be caught dead today wearing what was considered the height of fashion ten years ago? And a tattoo, while it might be cool today, is forever. But, the more I delved into the subject, the more I began to realize that people have a myriad of motivations when it comes to getting a tattoo.

It is true that some, maybe even the majority of Westerners who get tattooed and even those who practice it, are ignorant and naïve about its meaning and the issues that surround the practice. Nevertheless, there is a significant group of people in the worldwide tattoo community who are dedicated to exploring issues of meaning, cross-cultural exchange, purpose, and history of tattooing. Tattoo masters from various cultures who have traditionally practiced the craft are now connected via the internet to vast

communities of tattoo enthusiasts and have become celebrities in the tattoo world. This has brought up issues of appropriation, consumerism and authenticity.

I wanted to explore not only the origins of the tattoo, but also its remarkable spread and rise in popularity in the last several decades in the West, as well as the reasons why the practice and its practitioners are often relegated to the lowest social classes in society. I was especially interested in the case of New Zealand/Aotearoa, where I lived for six months while researching this project. As the home of the Māori, who are part of the Polynesian cultural complex, Aotearoa has seen one of the most intricate and culturally embedded tattoo cultures in the world. With the arrival and eventual colonization by European powers, the islands, now named New Zealand, were taken over by Europeans, whose own tattoo history was also quite ancient but had long ago fallen from favor. The commingling of these disparate attitudes about the purpose and meaning of the practice of tattooing is a subject that, thus far, has not seen much study. Indeed, I was interested to see just how tattoos were perceived in New Zealand in the context of the world wide tattoo resurgence that is taking place in Western countries, especially among young white men and women.

Like any new observer of the phenomenon, I was limited by my own inadequate knowledge of the history of tattoo culture around the world and how these histories affected the different ways that tattoos were perceived. I endeavored to dig deeper and bring a holistic approach to the study of tattoo practice in order to understand all of the issues surrounding this unique custom. I have attempted to understand tattooing from every perspective: from the histories in various cultures to the history of exchange and appropriation in modern times to topics as varied as the raging debates within the tattoo

community about the meaning, purpose and significance of the tattoo, the impact of the electric tattoo machine, health issues and basic concepts about the body, and the commodification of the tattoo in both designs and process.

### **Cultural Context: Prehistory to Contact**

In order to understand the myriad of beliefs and attitudes as well as the diverse manifestations of the tattoo across cultures and to obtain a better grasp of how those beliefs and attitudes came to interact in the ways that they did, a knowledge of tattoo history and the cultural context is invaluable. This section explores the most ancient evidence of tattoo cultures in the three major regions where it was practiced from prehistory to the time that each of these areas began to have contact with and, more importantly, began to be influenced by the rest of the world. For Europe, that is up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when explorers began to return to Europe with tales of “mark’d savages.” In Asia the early history continued until the opening up of Japan in 1853, and in the Pacific it ended with the voyages of Captain Cook several decades earlier.

### **Europe**

Evidence for tattooing in ancient Europe prior to written records from the Greeks and the Romans is scarce and open to differing interpretations. Tattoos do not lend themselves very well to preservation in the material record. Nevertheless, there is some archaeological evidence that tattooing did take place, especially among the more eastern tribes. “Bowls with traces of black and red pigments and sharpened flint instruments were discovered in the Grotte des Fees (Fairy Grotto) in Chatelperron, France,” (van Dinter



2005:24) as well as in caves in Scandinavia and Portugal. These could have been used as ancient tattooing tools. Another cave in France, known as Grottes du Mas d'Azil (Cave of the Azil Farmhouse), yielded still more evidence of prehistoric tattooing dating from 12,000 years ago in the Upper Paleolithic. In particular, seven different tools were identified by archaeologists Saint-Just Péquart and Marthe Péquart as tattoo implements (Image 1). These tools included an ochre “‘pencil,’ ground into this shape and somewhat polished” (Green 2007), a lump of ochre, a bone “crusher,” a cotyloid (hip socket) bone apparently used as a small cup, stained both with a blackish and reddish substance, a somewhat polished bone with the cancellous (inner spongy) tissue removed stained with ochre, “which seems to be a sort of generalized spatula. Bone needles, 8 to 11 cm in length, some extremely thin and fragile, with a small groove that goes almost to the point, which might have been used, as the Péquarts noted, to ‘channel ink into the flesh’” (Green 2007). Along with these tools, the finds included a flattened lump of ochre paste. Green (2007) writes that “initially, the ochre was mixed with some earth and a binder that made it malleable. It was kneaded by hand onto something flat to make it into a plate shape. Small amounts of the soft red paste were then removed...by inserting the needles into the paste,” which would function like a sort of inkwell for the tattoo needles (Green 2007). Although these material remains are intriguing, and the archaeologists themselves identified these implements as tattoo tools, we have no tattooed human skin preserved from this time period; therefore, it cannot conclusively be said that these instruments were not used for some other purpose. Prehistoric images of people with lines on their faces and bodies such as the Precucuteni Madonna of Bodești-Frumusica (Image 2.1)

could represent people with tattoos or they may just have been decorative embellishments only existing in the images themselves.

The earliest conclusive evidence for tattooing among the prehistoric peoples of Europe comes from Ötzi, the Iceman, who is believed to have lived 5300 years ago. His body, found high in the mountains along the Austro-Italian border, is so well preserved that scientists were able to discern his tattoos and speculate about their purpose with some confidence. His tattoos include small crosses on the back of his left knee and short lines on his ankle, wrist and lower back (Images 3.1, 3.2 and 4). Since these areas are normally covered by clothing, it is assumed that they did not signify status. Analysis of these particular areas of the mummy's body revealed that the tattoos were applied to joints that showed signs of rheumatism and arthritis, leading researchers to conclude that the tattoos had a therapeutic function and were applied to relieve pain. "Anthropologists believe a traditional healer made incisions in Ötzi's skin on the afflicted areas, placing medicinal herbs in the wound, which were burned with the point of a heated metal instrument. The charred residue was incorporated in the resulting scar" (van Dinter 2005:26). Unfortunately, Ötzi is a one-of-a-kind find, and there is no way to know whether tattooing had any other functions in this time period.

It is known from written Greek sources that many of the Eastern European and Central Asian tribes of the Scythian-Siberian culture (Images 9 and 10) such as the Dacians, Thracians, Illyrians, and Pazyryk tattooed themselves. Archaeological evidence suggests that these tattoos marked high status and were only given to certain individuals. These cultures developed around the art of horse riding which allowed them unprecedented military advantages and allowed them to overrun neighboring tribes and

rule large swaths of land stretching from Central Asia to the Eastern Balkans. It is also believed that it allowed them to have much wider contacts throughout Asia.

“Archaeological discoveries confirm that the Pazyryk had contact with the Chinese and the Persians” (van Dinter 2005:28).

In 1993, mummified bodies dating from about 2500 years ago were discovered in burial mounds in the Pazyryk Valley in the High Altai Mountains of western and southern Siberia (Images 5, 6 and 7). Among them were two warriors, a male and a female, who were intricately and beautifully tattooed. Their well preserved skins show a variety of fantastical and stylized animal motifs that resemble the motifs incorporated into their jewelry and utensils found in their tombs. The tattoos cover their arms, legs, and shoulders and are so refined and sophisticated that “only recently could their quality be equaled in Europe” (van Dinter 2005:28). There are representations of tigers, deer, snakes, mountain goats, and fish as well as mythical creatures. Analysis of the depth of the tattoos suggests that the technique used to create them was the skin pricking technique as opposed to the sewing-in technique favored by the Siberian tribes and the Inuit. This might indicate that this particular tattoo culture was more influenced by indigenous Southeast Asian tattooing such as that done in Burma. The quality of the tattoos rivals that found in Burma at the time and the representation of real and mythical animals is also a common feature of traditional Burmese tattoo (Image 8.1). If these tattoo cultures are related, then we can also guess at the possible purpose of these warrior tattoos. In Southeast Asia tattoos were considered magical and were applied for protection and good fortune while hunting and fishing; the same might be true of these Pazyryk tattoos (van Dinter 2005:28). The fact that tattoos were only found on two of the

warriors in the burial mound suggests that they were indicators of a special status in that society and were probably given only to important individuals.

According to Herodotus, the Scythians also tattooed themselves, and it is most likely that their wide-ranging contacts across the continent is what spread the practice and art of tattooing from Asia into Eastern Europe as they encountered different tribes who were eager to copy the highly stylized and beautiful tattoos of these warriors (van Dinter 2005:26-30). Tribes more firmly rooted in Europe, like the Thracians of Eastern Europe, the Agathyrsi of what is now Transylvania, and the Dacians and Illyrians of the Balkan region, were also known to tattoo themselves. Depictions on Thracian vases from around 500 BC show tattooed women. The Greek historian Athenaeus, provided one possibility for the origins of tattooing among the Thracians. He wrote that the Scythians invaded Thrace and humiliated local women by marking their bodies with blue dots. After the Scythians left, these women covered their shameful markings with decorative designs (van Dinter 2005:30). Although it is impossible to know if those events really did take place, it is known that the Scythians dominated Thracian culture and were possibly even the ruling elite in Thrace (Angela Murock Hussein, personal communication, December 11, 2006). This suggests that the Scythians were most likely responsible for introducing tattooing and for spurring the development of a local tattoo culture in Thrace. A shared deer motif also points to some definite relationship between Thracian tattoo and Pazyryk tattoo. A Thracian vase from the fifth century BC exhibited in the Louvre in Paris depicts a woman with deer tattoos that resemble those of the Pazyryk warrior mummies, suggesting definite links between the tattoo styles of these two groups of people (van Dinter 2005:30). The story of the Thracian women also parallels the development of

Japanese tattoo much later. Although these tattoo cultures did not have any contact, it is interesting to note that the gorgeous and intricate full body suit tattoos of Japan originated as ways for former criminals to hide shameful punitive tattoos.

During the periods of Greek and Roman domination of Europe, indigenous European decorative tattooing, which was considered a barbaric practice (barbarians being those who did not speak Greek and later Latin), gradually diminished and, according to some scholars, simply died out. The practice was instead put to another use – the marking of slaves, criminals, and soldiers – either as punishment or for administrative purposes. Many of the negative Western attitudes about the practice of tattooing, as well as many of the traditional Western tattoo clichés stem from the uses that were employed by the Greeks and Romans. Convict tattoos, military tattoos, and devotional tattoos in addition to the tradition of tattoo removal all have their origins with the Greeks and Romans (van Dinter 2005:29-33).

Punitive tattooing was introduced to the Greeks by the Persians, who in 512 BC invaded Thrace and marked their “slaves, convicts and prisoners of war by tattooing letters on their foreheads” (van Dinter 2005:31). The Greeks then began to mark their slaves with forehead tattoos, and there are multiple references to the practice in Greek literature. Van Dinter writes that the Greeks used the word “stigma” for tattoo. The word’s original meaning referred to the markings of a snake but it soon came to signify a mark of shame, a meaning that endures today (2005:31). Furthermore, the plural of the same word, “stigmata,” carries a specific Christian connotation, referring to the wounds of Christ.

Romans used tattoos as a means of control to identify soldiers, gladiators, prisoners, and slaves. From the fourth century BC all Roman recruits were tattooed with emblems of their units on their left forearms and their date of enlistment on their right wrists. This allowed soldiers from different units to be distinguished from one another as well as strengthening the bonds between the men within the units. Tattoos were also used as punishment to humiliate offenders and forever brand them. A punitive tattoo was essentially a life sentence. After embracing Christianity around 313 AD, Emperor Constantine (r. 306-37 AD) forbade the tattooing of the face, which he believed was created in the image of God and should not be mutilated. From that point, prisoners and gladiators were marked on their calves or hands. Slaves were tattooed with letters such as 'F.H.E' for 'Fugitivus Hic Est,' meaning "This one has (once) escaped" (van Dinter 2005:30). In the Byzantine Empire, punitive tattoos were used well into the late ninth century. Documents reveal that Emperor Theophilus (r. 829-42) "punished two monks by having twelve lines of obscene verse tattooed on their foreheads" (van Dinter 2005:32). Although Roman tattoos were mainly punitive and administrative, devotees of some religious cults in the pre-Christian era would be tattooed with ivy on their chests in order to signify their devotion to the goddess of fertility, Cybele, and to Attis, the god of growth and vegetation (van Dinter 2005:29-32).

During the Greek and Roman eras for the first time in recorded history, tattoos were used as state-sanctioned punishment, not decoration. Therefore, this era also saw the first attempts to remove stigmatizing marks in a tradition that continues today with the advent of laser tattoo removal. Greek and Roman literature is rife with tattoo removal potions and remedies although many were highly dangerous and often deadly. Their

existence in the record shows that there was a real and often desperate need for tattoo removal (van Dinter 2005:30).

With the expansion of the Roman Empire in the first century BC, Romans came into contact with a variety of Northern European, Germanic, and Celtic tribes whose body art and tattoo traditions were significantly different from their own. These tribes may have inherited the tattoo practices from the earlier Eastern European tribes such as the Scythians or the Agathyrsi, or their tattooing may have been invented independently of these influences. Upon invading what is today southern Great Britain, Julius Caesar wrote that the native people color their bodies blue for battle. Van Dinter writes that “based on this story, the nineteenth-century Irish historian William Betham had concluded that the name Britannia was derived from the ancient Celtic word meaning ‘land of the painted people’” (van Dinter 2005:32).

Two sources specifically mention tattoo-like body markings among the British tribes as observed by the Romans. The first comes from Herodian, a Greek historian serving Rome as a civil servant, who was writing at the end of the second century and describes a practice that more resembles branding than tattooing among a group of people he calls the ‘Caledonians,’ but it is generally assumed that he meant the Picts. The Picts were a tribe that invaded the Roman province of Britannia from the north together with the Scots. Herodian wrote, “They ‘draw figures of animals or symbols on their skin by pressing hot iron onto their limbs, causing great pain, and over this they rub the sap of a plant’. The sap of the woad plant created the blue colour” (van Dinter 2005:33). Van Dinter points out that Herodian never visited the British Isles and that his reports are second and third hand and that the application of the plant sap may have just been to ease

the pain of branding (2005:33). The Roman poet Claudian recounts the defeat of the Scots and the Picts in a poem written in 402 AD. He describes the Picts as having “crude images cut with iron” on their bodies (van Dinter 2005:36) (Image 11.1).

Around 600 AD, the Spanish Bishop Isidore of Seville wrote that the Picts derived their name from their practice of “decorating their bodies by rubbing the sap of local plants into pricked designs.” The word “Picts” is believed to be derived from the Latin *pictus* meaning “painted.” Isidore wrote that it was the Pict warrior elite that distinguished themselves from the rest of the population by their vivid, colorful tattoos and that the Scots also tattooed themselves (van Dinter 2005:36). Tattooing is thought to have been widespread among the elites of the Celtic, Gaullic, and Germanic populations of Europe, but information is scarce. In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, Ahmad ibn Fadlan wrote of the Scandinavian Rus’ tribe, who he encountered in the course of his travels, “describing them as tattooed from ‘fingernails to neck’ with dark blue ‘tree patterns’ and other ‘figures’” (2006 Tattoo History) so the practice must have gone back much farther in history (Image 8.2). These cultural traditions of decorative tattooing were for the most part stamped out with the arrival of Christianity. Religious tattooing, in contrast, was exempt from this ban.

The Picts disappeared from the British Isles after numerous defeats by the Vikings and an almost complete annihilation by the Scots and took their tattoo traditions with them. Almost 500 years passed before tattooing was even mentioned in European literature again. One famous story described the tattoos of King Harold II of England, who was the last Saxon king, defeated by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 AD. Stripped of his clothing and royal regalia and his face badly mutilated,



Harold II was finally identified by the tattoos of the names of his wife and country on his chest. This may have been a continuation of the tradition of elite tattooing of the Picts of the British Isles, or it may have been a common practice passed down from the Scandinavian origins of the Saxons. No further information has been found about purely decorative tattooing in the Middle Ages to answer these intriguing questions. Medieval texts do, however, mention religious tattoos with some frequency (van Dinter 2005:37).

Heinrich Suso (1295-1366 AD), a Dominican priest, had the name of Jesus tattooed over his heart. In 1503 a German girl whose face and body were covered in religious symbols was exhibited. "She was said to have received these symbols in excruciating pain during a mysterious illness," and van Dinter proposes the idea that, in this case, the tattoos were meant to heal the girl through the power of their religious symbolism (2005:37). Some popular Christian tattoos were those of the fish, the cross, the Greek letters 'X' (chi) and 'P' (rho) which stood for the initials of Christ, the Latin letters 'JN' for Jesus of Nazareth, and the Lamb of God. Regarding tattoos and other permanent body markings, the Bible is unclear. Leviticus 19:28 states, "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the Lord." This decree, however, was meant to distinguish the Hebrew people from surrounding tribes who would tattoo themselves in remembrance of their ancestors (2005 Tattoos and Religion).

Today, presumably due to the prohibition in Leviticus, there is still a stigma about tattooing within the Jewish faith, even though the wearing of clothing made from two different materials, the trimming of beard and hair, and other such prohibitions that are also included in Leviticus are usually ignored. In Paul's letter to the Galatians (6:7), he

writes, “From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” This could refer to sacred religious tattoos or stigmata. On the one hand, tattooing could be viewed as the desecration of the body, which is sacred because man was made in the image of God, and therefore altering it permanently goes against God’s will. This is an attitude adopted mainly by orthodox Catholics who associated tattooing with heathens and pagans. On the other hand, tattooing of religious symbols could signify one’s devotion, the pain of the process meant as a sacrifice for one’s faith. “These contrasting attitudes led the church to adopt a policy of tolerance towards religious tattoos” (van Dinter 2005:38).

During the Middle Ages, another form of devotional tattoo, the pilgrim tattoo, began to gain popularity. Pilgrims visiting holy sites were ritually tattooed as proof that they had completed their pilgrimage. This practice existed from at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Bethlehem and Jerusalem and probably dates back much farther to the Medieval Crusaders. Some examples of pilgrim tattoos include those of William Lithgow, who, while on pilgrimage in Jerusalem, asked a monk to tattoo the crowns of England and Scotland with the inscription, “Vivat Iacobus Rex,” on his right arm as an expression of loyalty to King James, whom he recognized as the head of the church. A Count Alexander zu Pfaffenheim was tattooed with a cross on his thigh in Jaffa in 1553, and one Otto Friedrich von der Goben was tattooed with a crucifix and other images in 1675. Even much later, in 1862, King Edward VII of England (who was not yet king at the time) had a Jerusalem cross tattooed on his arm (van Dinter 2005:36-38). These examples, although illuminating, are not enough to provide an accurate idea of how widespread the practice was among ordinary people. Could this be a continuation of the

time-honored tradition of elite tattooing or are the sources necessarily skewed towards the famous and wealthy because of their status in society? Today religious tattoos are popular with many groups of people. In the U.S., this is often seen in Chicano communities, whose members have traditionally used images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, sometimes in full back pieces (Images 28.1, 28.2 and 29).

Pilgrim tattoos continued to be tolerated in Medieval Europe because of their spiritual nature, but examples of non-religious tattoos also existed. It is recorded that in 1609, a London medical-astrologer named Simon Forman “made the characters of Venus, Jupiter and Cancer on his left arm and right breast” (Rosecrans 2000:46). Although the source, his 1611 *Volumen Primum*, does not describe the method by which he did so, it makes clear that the marks were permanent. Forman believed that through the application of specific astrological signs to certain parts of his body at a specified time, he would be able to have control over his own destiny. This type of body marking, if indeed it was a tattoo in the modern sense, suggests an altogether new type of classification of tattoo that is also very ancient: that of the magical tattoo. Jennipher Rosecrans writes that “Corporal alterations like Forman’s were not unknown in the early modern period. In fact, writing on the body, both permanently and ephemerally, was fairly common in magical, medical and religious practices. Although tattooing itself was not a widely practiced custom in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, there was an array of subcultures that authorized certain types of somatic marks and tattoos” (2000:48). Mostly these subcultures were those of the occult and were tied to the “magical renaissance” of the early seventeenth century. By the time of the European explorations of the fifteenth century, however, tattooing was no longer common in Europe as the indigenous

decorative practices had been wiped out by the Catholic Church, and only a few instances of religious and magical tattooing survived in very specific contexts (Rosecrans 2000:47-50).

Early European explorers who encountered tattooing in other cultures called the practice “prick’d drawings” (van Dinter 2005:40) and were astonished by these markings. Missionaries, who arrived with many of the explorers and conquistadors, were much less surprised for their training had included instruction on these ancient customs and “their written accounts include frequent references to the tattooing practices of the Moors, who occupied the Iberian Peninsula until the fifteenth century” (van Dinter 2005:42). Clearly tattoos had been a factor in European history for a very long time before contact with outside cultures. What this contact did, however, was to reinvigorate the ancient traditions and coalesce the various minor tattoo subcultures that had continued to exist on the margins of society into a true European “tattoo culture,” and this can be considered the basis for modern tattoo culture in Europe and North America.

### **Asia**

Japanese and Chinese tattoo styles have had an enormous impact on the modern global tattoo culture. The proliferation of far eastern Asian derived images like dragons, koi fish, Chinese and Japanese characters, wind and water bars, and even the very notion of the body as a canvas for a gigantic body-suit tattoo in contrast to the more European badge-like quality of tattoos has done much to revitalize the custom and give it an artistic legitimacy that it did not have before, in Western eyes at least (Images 17.1 and 17.2).

Around 500 BC, Confucius preached a moral code that civilized people were to live by. These tenants included honor and respect for parents and ancestors. Any willful mutilation of the body such as the shaving of body hair or tattooing was seen as an insult to one's family and community. The Chinese distinguished themselves from the "wild tribes" on their periphery and the lowest social classes within their own society by disdaining customs that were common among them, including tattooing (van Dinter 2005:56-59).

The first report of an Asian tattooing culture appears in Chinese literature around 200 BC and describes the Yue people who decorated themselves with tattoos in order to protect themselves from dragons and sea monsters. Tattoos were also common among Chinese slaves, criminals, prostitutes, servants, concubines, and soldiers. These tattoos were meant for identification and to show ownership as well as for punishment. For example, if a concubine was found to be unfaithful, her eyebrows would be cut away and the wound filled with pigment. Those convicted of stealing would have a small ring tattooed behind the ear while a man convicted of repeated adultery would be tattooed on the forehead (van Dinter 2005:56-59). No one with a facial tattoo was allowed within the limits of the city, so once a person was tattooed they were effectively relegated to marginality. Warlords exploited this in order to build up their armies, kidnapping farmers and tattooing them immediately so that they had no choice but to remain in the army. As a consequence of their prevalence in the army, tattoos began to lose their stigma on the fringes of society, and tattooed people began to add their own designs to the existing ones (van Dinter 2005:59). Van Dinter writes of "beautiful, realistic tattoos of mountains, rivers or animals, and even anti-government slogans" that were the major motifs of these

self-applied tattoos (2005:59). Eventually, tattooing caught on among the upper classes of Chinese society where elites would have images of mythical beasts or texts tattooed on their backs and chests. Pre-cut woodblocks with hundreds of needles protruding from them were used as stamps to inscribe the same design over and over, suggesting that certain designs were very popular. A story from the ninth century tells of a government official whose nearly full body snake tattoo was so realistic that he would terrify unsuspecting persons by suddenly ripping off his clothes and revealing it (van Dinter 2005:60).

A major influence on tattoo culture in China and Japan was the fourteenth century Chinese novel *Shuihu zhuan* (also known as *Shui Hu Zhuan*) which relates the adventures of a gang of bandits, some of whom were tattooed. The stories of these bandit heroes are believed to be based on actual events that took place sometime around 1120 AD (2006 Heroes of the Suikoden). The gang's leader had a punitive tattoo on his face, another bandit attributed his superior fighting skills to the nine dragons on his body, and a third had tattoos so beautiful that it made him irresistible to women (van Dinter 2005:60). The heroes' Robin Hood-style adventures made the book very popular and influenced young men to get themselves tattooed. This trend was short-lived in China, and tattoos were never quite able to shake off the negativity surrounding them. Today, tattooing is still associated with low social status and the criminal element in China, and most ordinary ethnic Chinese do not get tattooed.

The book's greatest impact on tattoo history, however, was its contribution to the development of the Japanese body-suit tattoo style (Images 31.2). Translated into Japanese as *Suikoden*, the novel became very popular in Japan in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1805 the Japanese writer, Takizawa Bakin wrote a new version of the story that was illustrated by the *Ukiyo-e* woodblock print master, Hokusai Katsushika. During the Edo Period (1603-1868), this adaptation became a great success among the urban population of Japan. According to Heroes of the Suikoden, “it produced a kind of craze like the Beatlemania in the sixties. Everything connected with the Suikoden was suddenly *iki* – cool, trendy,” mostly because of the rigidity of Japanese social classes at the time (2006). The combination of the great economic prosperity enjoyed during this time and the inability to move up the social scale made this story about heroes who dared to challenge the entrenched powers very appealing. The amazingly vivid woodblock illustrations by Katsushika and subsequent ones for an 1827 version of the book by Kuniyoshi, who is today considered the best print-maker of his time, sparked the imagination of the working classes (Images 32.1 and 32.2). Tattoos became popular among prostitutes, construction workers, and firemen, who were admired by the public for their bravery but also feared for their rough and wild behavior (2006 Heroes of the Suikoden).

Prior to this flowering of decorative styles in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, tattoos in Japan were used only as degrading punishment. Those convicted of extortion, fraud, or theft were tattooed on the upper or lower arm or on the forehead. The upper classes could avoid this fate while those of the lower classes were punished by tattooing a line on the forehead for each conviction until the character for “dog” was formed after three transgressions (van Dinter 2005:60-62). As in China, a tattoo was a life sentence that made it impossible for a person to return to normal society, so criminals began to cover their tattoos with figures that were purely decorative, such as flowers or animals. This form of punishment also increased the number of bandit gangs who lived outside the

social hierarchy, terrifying the populace, so that finally in 1870 punitive tattooing was made illegal (van Dinter 2005:62).

Increasing demand for more intricate and detailed tattoos, reflecting the intricacy of the *Ukiyo-e* prints (Images 32.1 and 32.2), led to the formation of a group of professional tattooists, many of whom began their careers as printmakers. Even the Japanese terms for ‘tattoo master,’ *horishi* or *horimono-shi*, reflect the close link that tattooing had with woodcarving. *Horishi* means ‘woodcarver,’ and *horimono* is the term for ‘the fashioning of objects’ (van Dinter 2005:66). Japanese tattooists soon became known the world over for their excellent designs and unmatched execution. A tattoo master’s kit contained over 50 different instruments, “including handgrips with shafts ending in between one and 30 needles” (van Dinter 2005:67). The tattoos were done in five basic colors: black, green, indigo, red, and yellow; white face powder was sometimes used but designs in this color were only visible if the skin reddened. The body suit tattoo left the lower legs, lower arms, and the middle of the chest empty of designs so that the tattoos would not be visible while wearing a kimono, allowing the tattooed person to move about freely even in social circles where tattooing was frowned upon.

With the arrival of Admiral Perry in 1853, Japan was forced to open up to the outside world, and soon Japanese tattoos became known the world over and were very much in demand by European aristocracy. This was the beginning of Japanese influence on world tattoo culture, an influence that continues to this day despite the fact that tattooing is no longer very fashionable in Japan. It is mainly practiced by a small minority of enthusiasts, including most notoriously, the Yakuza, or Japanese mafia (Image 31.1).



### **The Pacific**

Although tattooing has been practiced among a variety of peoples throughout time and space, nowhere in the world has it been as important to the cultural heritage of a people as in the Pacific Islands of Oceania. According to legends, the practice is an ancient custom and probably, like the people of the islands themselves, originated in Asia. Unfortunately, as with many non-Western societies, there are no local histories of this practice so that the origins and functions of tattoo in the Pacific cannot be known for certain. What is known from archeological data is that the practice dates back at least as far as 1200 BC with the Lapita people who “colonized the Solomons, Hebrides, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa where the art of tattooing was continued” (Winman-Rudzinski 2003:24). According to Winman-Rudzinski these people used “flat chisel-shaped pieces of bone that were roughly two to four centimeters long and were sharpened at one end and resembled a comb” (2003:24). These bone tattoo tools were dipped in pigment made of soot and water and tapped with a mallet to embed the pigment into the skin. This basic technique varied little among the different people of the Pacific Islands, suggesting that the art and technology of tattooing predates the spread of people throughout the Pacific. Tattooing was vital to the many different cultures that inhabited these islands and was deeply “embedded in a social system, with which cosmology and religion were closely integrated” (Kuwahara 2005b:32). The art of tattooing manifested itself throughout the region in various but also very strikingly similar ways.

In Polynesia, the area within the triangular points of New Zealand/Aotearoa, Easter Island/Rapanui and Hawaii, tattooing was done using a skin-pricking technique that required a “stick with a piece of bone with sharpened teeth attached to the

end....Tattooists from the more advanced tattoo cultures of New Zealand, Samoa and the Marquesas Islands used a wide variety of instruments, from tattooing combs with three to six sharp teeth...to combs with 60 teeth” (van Dinter 2005:137). These instruments were dipped in black liquid, usually made of the smoke from an oily nut mixed with water and other components, and struck rapidly with a mallet so that they penetrated the skin. In some instances, ink was rubbed into the wounds after they had been made.

The Māori of New Zealand/Aotearoa took tattooing to its most extreme with their gorgeous spiraling facial tattoos known as *moko* (Image 13). One explanation for the purpose of these tattoos is that the designs have been compared to the function of European heraldry with the distinction that “whereas the coat of arms attested [to] the merits of ancestors, the moko illustrated the merits of the person decorated with it” (Winman-Rudzinski 2003:39). Each person’s moko was unique, and the designs signified status and were also a history of that individual’s achievements. These tattoos were worn proudly and contained aspects of identity so that when Europeans arrived bringing with them writing and documents, Māori chiefs signed them with exact copies of their moko designs.

Tattooing was an important part of the culture of these various peoples. It was used to mark the status of an individual, to project a ferocity and prowess in battle (especially with the Māori Moko, or facial tattoos), for mourning the dead, and as a rite of passage for both sexes. Being able to endure the excruciating pain of being tattooed proved that a boy was ready to become a man and would not flinch in battle and that a girl was ready for the duties of childbearing that made her a woman.

Most designs in the Pacific were geometric rather than figurative. Lines, swirls, spirals, checkers, and large areas of solid color characterized the tattoo style of the Pacific Islands. Each culture had its own style, with the Maoris of New Zealand known for their graceful and symmetrical curved and spiraled patterns, Samoans known for their intricately lined “trouser tattoos,” Hawaiians known for their asymmetrical checker and triangle patterns, and Marshall Islanders known for their intricate zigzag “chain mail” tattoos (van Dinter 2005:175) (Images 33.1, 33.2 and 33.3).

Early Western explorers were astonished by these designs, and a few of them may have gotten themselves tattooed, bringing the design back to Europe and causing a stir in European society. The practice spread among sailors and soldiers and eventually even became a fad for the upper classes in the late nineteenth century. As for the state of indigenous tattooing in the Pacific, within 100 years of Cook’s voyages, the tattooing cultures of the Pacific drastically declined and all but disappeared due to the influence of missionaries, who took it upon themselves to eradicate customs that they considered unacceptable. Along with cannibalism, idolatry, and human sacrifice, the custom of tattooing was also targeted (van Dinter 2005:175-177).

Today, a revival of ancient tattoo customs is underway, most notably in Tahiti, where the practice had been absent for about 150 years. Kuwahara writes that the revival of traditional tattooing “occurred with the cultural revitalization movement in Tahiti in the 1970s and 80s when modernization and urbanization in Tahiti took place with mass migration from the remote islands and from outside French Polynesia to Papeete due to the installment of nuclear testing facilities...and an international airport in Faa’a” (2005b:29-30). These independence and revitalization movements “emerged from the

rejection and contestation of French culture and the desire to regain an indigenous past. The customs and practices particular to their land, including language,...dance, music, art and crafts and sport were regarded as essential...and started being taught at school, at home and in the community” (Kuwahara 2005b:30). The traditional tattoo culture of Tahiti was an integral part of this cultural revival.

### **Acculturation and Exchange: From Contact to the Modern Day**

Although stories of tattooed natives found their way to Europe during early explorations of the Portuguese and Spanish in Latin America and the Pacific, this practice failed to make much of an impact outside the sailing culture. This could be due to a variety of reasons. Given their close historical contact with the Moors, who also tattooed themselves, the Spanish explorers may not have seen anything too exotic in the practice. Moreover, perhaps the European consciousness was not yet open to understanding or interested in the indigenous customs of the people they encountered. European explorers were there principally to take what they could and conquer the “savages,” not to assimilate into their culture in any way.

Tattooing re-entered the European consciousness in the eighteenth century with the voyages of Captain Cook and other explorers of Polynesia. It was the botanist Joseph Banks, who traveled with Cook, who introduced the word ‘tattoo’ from the Tahitian word *tatau*, meaning “to strike” (possibly of onomatopoeic origins from the striking sound made as the tattoo was applied) (Scutt & Gotch 2003:33-44).

As trade with these areas increased, there was a correspondingly large increase in the number of Westerners who had gotten tattoos abroad and upon returning home were

able to display these designs for profit. Following the successes of several notable tattooed men including Joseph Rutherford and 'Prince Constantine,' who made their living as sideshow exhibits, the European public soon became more accepting of tattooing (van Dinter 2005:43). Nevertheless, the practice was still relegated to the margins of society. It was most common among sailors, soldiers, workers, miners, criminals, and prostitutes and did not become fashionable for the elite class until the end of the nineteenth century. The low social status of tattooed people caught the attention of several medical researchers in the late nineteenth century, who posited that tattoos, because of their commonality among criminals, were an outward sign of a deviant personality and that "the more persistent the criminal, the more he was tattooed" (van Dinter 2005:45). This contributed to the European notion that linked tattoos with deviance and criminality.

Van Dinter (2005) writes that "soldiers and sailors brought new life to the European tattoo culture by seeding it with non-Western ideas" (43). A few years after the opening up of Japan in 1853, intricate and beautifully stylized tattoos became all the rage among the elites in Europe, a fad that lasted from about 1880 to 1920. The quality of these tattoos distinguished them from tattoos that were common among the lower classes, and wealthy Europeans, including some royalty, traveled to Japan in order to get tattooed by some of the world's best tattoo masters. According to van Dinter, "it was even said that visiting Japan without being tattooed by Yoshisuki Horitoyo...was like visiting Rome and not seeing the Pope" (2005:47). The most remarkable aspect of this was that a practice that had been the sole domain of the working class was adopted by the upper class; whereas, in most instances, fashions tend to trickle down from the elites to the

lower classes. This might have been an indication of the changing relationship between social classes that continued to evolve into the twentieth century with the almost complete elimination of class boundaries in the Western World. DeMello points out that with the invention of the electric tattoo machine in 1891, the practice of tattooing became much more widespread among the working classes and, consequently, may have eventually led to the abandonment of the fad among the upper classes (2000:50).

In 1846, the first professional tattoo shop in the United States opened its doors in New York City. The artist's name was Martin Hildebrandt, and most of the people he tattooed were military personnel, typically getting patriotic tattoos as well as "pinup-style images of women, military insignias, ships, jokes, cartoons, fierce animals, knives and skulls" (DeMello 2000:52). This is the classic imagery of traditional American tattooing (Images 26.1-27.2). This clientele changed little until after the end of WWII. Tattooing was seen as unacceptable for women, as something a "nice girl" did not do, and was only acceptable for working class males who were either soldiers, sailors, laborers, criminals, "carnies", or drunks (DeMello 2000:59-62).

The Golden Age of Tattooing in the United States took place between the end of the First World War and the end of the second. This was a time when tattooing had "its highest level of social approval due to its link with patriotism" and the military (DeMello 2000:63). These tattoos were literal and highly "readable;" they included not only obvious imagery such as ships and anchors but also names of loved ones and lucky charms. Servicemen were frequently also tattooed with their own "name, service number, rank, and date of birth" (DeMello 2000:65) paralleling Roman usage of tattoos thousands of years before. Identification tattoos were not just found in the military, however. After

the 1932 kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby, worried parents had their children tattooed, and when the first Social Security cards were issued in 1936, some people had their numbers tattooed. A number of Americans got their blood type tattooed when, in 1955, the assistant Secretary of Defense suggested that all citizens do so in case of an attack on the United States (DeMello 2000:65-66).

By the 1960s, many areas began to ban tattooing due to outbreaks of hepatitis, forcing the closure of many shops across the United States. The practice of tattooing was also impacted by the knowledge of Nazi tattooing of Jews during the Holocaust (Image 34), which some suggest contributed to its loss of popularity in the United States. As the middle class abandoned tattooing, new forms were emerging, including biker tattooing (Image 14.1), prison tattooing (Image 14.2), and Chicano tattooing. “Tattooing in this period became a form of defiance, a challenge to both emerging mainstream middle-class values as well as to the traditional form of patriotic and love-inspired working-class tattoo” (DeMello 2000:67). American tattoo culture began to become increasingly fractured among a variety of subcultures with their own distinctive styles and imagery. At the same time, tattooing began to be associated once again with the criminal element, deviants, and the socially marginal.

The roots of the tattoo renaissance began in the 1970s, a time when tattooing was strongly influenced by the social changes taking place in American society. The counterculture, gay and lesbian rights, the civil rights and Black Power movements, and women’s liberation had a large impact on the changes in the imagery of American tattoo culture (Images 24.1, 24.2 and 25). Peace signs, yin/yangs, dolphins, mushrooms,

marijuana leaves, and flowers entered the repertoire of most tattooists, who now began catering to more middle-class values and tastes (DeMello 2000:75-84).

The 1970s and 80s also saw the development of two new styles that continue to influence tattoo art today: Chicano-style and tribalism. “Chicano-style tattooing refers to the fine-lined, monochromatic style of tattoo that has been prominent among gang members and convicts since at least the 1950s....In the 1980s...it was discovered by and embraced by the middle class” (DeMello 2000:84). Tribal style refers to bold, abstract designs that are derived in part from the indigenous tattoo styles of places such as Samoa, Borneo, and New Zealand (Images 16.1 and 16.2). These designs were meant to “complement the body rather than deny it” (van Dinter 2005:50) and became very popular with the punk rock scene as well as the S/M and leather communities. During this period there is also a shift in the ranks of tattoo artists from those who were self-taught craftsmen to educated art school graduates. This raised the over-all quality of professional tattoo work as well as legitimizing it as an art form to be appreciated like any other fine art.

Tattooing in the United States today is a hodgepodge of a myriad of influences from all over the world. The traditional “Old School” style has seen a resurgence recently while tribal and Japanese styles continue to be popular. Other genres and subgenres include “Lettering, Graffiti, Celtic, Kanji/Oriental, Fantasy/Fairies and Angels, Biomechanical, Cartoons and Pin-ups, Portraits...Religious/Mythological” (van Dinter 2005:51-52) and Modern Realism (Images 15.1-28.2). The most recent fad in tattooing is the use of UV sensitive inks that are invisible under natural light but glow under black



light. These inks are either used in combination with traditional inks to embellish an image or are used alone for a discreet invisible tattoo (Images 30.1 and 30.2).

### **Issues In Tattoo Culture**

#### **Commodification, Authenticity and Meaning**

Tattooing in the West takes place in the context of an exchange of goods and services embedded in the capitalist system. Any adult with the right amount of cash can get anything they like tattooed on their body for whatever reason they choose. This exchange is the same as any other commodity exchange. Once the transaction is performed, however, the permanence of the tattoo makes it at once very different from other commodities.

Writing about the Victorian era, James Bradley states that “tattooing signified more than a financial transaction in the realm of commodities. For the individual, it was an act at once intimate, emotive and symbolically significant. It encoded irremediably, at the boundary between the body and the world, nothing less than social relations” (2000:137). “The newly commodified tattoo was the product of colonialism. Their ‘ethnic’ tattoos were on par with those acquired as souvenirs...as such, the tattoo obtained in the colonial realm was tantamount to the physical appropriation of the subject culture. Likewise, the ‘influence’ of Japanese tattooing...amounted to the appropriation of an aesthetic” (Bradley 2000:152-153). The quality, size, and ornateness of a tattoo was, in Victorian times, a symbol of a person’s ability to consume. “There was nothing

trivial about this form of tattooing, for it indicated the depth to which economic relations infiltrated the tissues of the body” (Bradley 2000:153-154).

Thus, the tattoo was at once a commodity and an appropriation of an indigenous culture while also having a deeper meaning for the person being tattooed. Similarly, tattoo flash, the tattooer’s standard catalogue of images, can be considered to be devoid of meaning and the most commodified spectrum of the business as it consists of designs that are applied and reapplied on different people for different reasons. Because meaning is constructed by the person being tattooed, the same image may mean different things to different people.

A tattoo’s meaning is not only constructed by the wearer but also by the observer and the specific cultural context. Historically, tattoos had meaning in and of themselves if the wearer and observer were situated within the same culture. That is – an anchor tattoo in nineteenth century England meant the wearer was a sailor and an English observer would understand the meaning. Today, tattoos are so varied and contexts are difficult to assume, so meaning must be constructed by the wearer and explained verbally to the observer. Otherwise, the observer may come away with a completely different understanding of the meaning of the tattoo than the wearer is attempting to project or may even be hard pressed to find any meaning at all.

This point of view is challenged by some tattoo artists who feel that meaning ought not to be constructed by the wearer, and that since tattoos are a visual medium, they should be clearly understood just from their graphic qualities. They believe that this construction of meaning only legitimizes tattoos that in actuality have no real meaning to the wearer and were chosen simply for their attractive design. The attitude is often

repeated by the untattooed and tattooed alike – that a tattoo only makes sense if it has meaning to the wearer. In this context, an elaborate construction of meaning from virtually nothing in order to legitimize a pretty but meaningless tattoo makes sense.

### **The Impact of Technology and the Medical and Legal Concerns**

Technological changes have greatly impacted the process of tattooing as well as its rise in popularity, beginning with Thomas Edison's electrically powered stencil pen in 1875. Although the pen's "intended use was to transfer designs onto textiles by pricking holes in paper in the required pattern", Samuel O'Reilly modified the machine in 1891 and patented it as the first tattoo machine (van Dinter 2005:48).

Invention of the tattoo machine decreased much of the pain associated with getting a tattoo. Did it also decrease the tattoo's significance by making it easier, less dangerous, and more accessible? "The [new] technique ignored the penetration of the outer skin that was essential to the operation, and pain was virtually eliminated" (Bradley 2000:148). Without the possibility of infection and great investment in pain, the tattoo might have become nothing more than a fad. Does this necessarily mean that in cultures where traditional techniques are still used, the tattoo has a deeper meaning? Even without a great investment in terms of pain, there is a monetary and time investment. For heavily tattooed persons the uncertainty of how a certain strata of society will receive them or even whether they will be barred from some kinds of work because of their tattoos are considerations. This would suggest that the difference between a person with tattoos and a tattooed person, the former being able to easily hide the fact that they are tattooed while

the latter must embrace the tattoo identity wholeheartedly because they are more visibly tattooed, is reflected in the depth of meaning they ascribe to their tattoos.

Prior to the invention of the modern tattoo machine, some of the biggest health worries about tattoos had to do with the pain, swelling, and bleeding associated with traditional methods of tattooing, as well as the possibility of infection of the wound afterwards. This gave rise to a variety of prohibitions or taboos about tattooing that attempted to minimize the possible negative effects. For instance, Māori women were prohibited from eating greasy foods after getting their lips tattooed and were told that if they attempted to look at or touch their tattoo before it had completely healed, it would disappear. The tattoo process was also fraught with a variety of rituals and prohibitions that were strictly followed to ensure that harmful side effects were as minimal as possible. The rituals and customs varied from location to location, but their ultimate purpose was to ensure that the process of tattooing did not cause any permanent damage (other than the intended skin pigmentation).

Today, pain, swelling, and bleeding are minimized through the use of the electric tattoo machine, but the possibility of infection is still a serious consideration. Tattoos have been linked to hepatitis B and C, HIV, the herpes simplex virus, tetanus, and staph and fungal infections. Hepatitis C is of greatest concern because tattoo needles do not usually carry enough blood to transmit HIV. While the other infections are not life threatening, Hepatitis C is a viral infection for which there is no cure, and it usually leads to fatal liver disease. It is “considered a major public health risk because it is a silent disease, which lies dormant for decades before it flares up” (Peck 2003:69). According to Dr. Robert Haley, chief of epidemiology at the University of Texas Southwestern

Medical Center, “People who had do-it-yourself tattoos have a three times greater risk for hepatitis C than people without tattoos....People who get tattoos at commercial tattoo parlors have a nine times greater risk” (Peck 2003:69). One of the most famous cases of infection spread by tattoo needles involves actress Pamela Anderson who in 2002 accused her ex-husband drummer Tommy Lee of giving her hepatitis C via an infected tattoo needle that they shared to get each other’s names tattooed on their ring fingers in lieu of wedding bands. This accusation caused a furor in the media, and new questions were raised about the safety of tattooing.

In addition to concerns about the safety of the process of tattooing, allergic reactions to the pigments and metals in certain inks, although usually minor, are another medical concern. Such reactions can cause swelling, itching, and oozing of clear liquid from the tattoo. In rare cases, a susceptible person could go into anaphylactic shock, a hypersensitive reaction that could be life threatening, although this has never been documented in the United States.

Another health concern about tattoo inks, is that in some cases the metal in the inks can interact with magnetic fields produced by MRI scanners and burn the skin or distort the image. This reaction is exceedingly rare, but it has been documented. In an article published in the American Journal of Roentgenology, Ratnapalan, et al. states that “all three reported cases...had dark black tattoos that caused a burning sensation during MRI. The ink used for black or dark brown tattooing may contain compounds of iron oxide that have ferromagnetic properties and may cause burning during MRI, especially if the design is in loop patterns. The other pigments used for tattooing—namely carbon (black), titanium dioxide (white), copper phthalocyanine (blue, green), and indigoid

(red)—did not seem to have ferromagnetic effects when tested with a magnet” (2004).

Additionally, homemade tattoos have a higher likelihood of experiencing these reactions because of higher concentrations of metals in the skin. They recommend that the medical community be aware of these possible effects when dealing with patients who have dark tattoos. It is possible that this side effect will become more common as more and more people become tattooed or as already tattooed people age and begin to experience health problems that require the use of an MRI. This side effect, although not life-threatening, can be problematic, with some patients choosing to get a tattoo removed in order to permit an MRI scan (Ratnapalan, et al. 2004).

Because of the concern over the spread of disease as well as dominant views of tattooing in the U.S. as a low-class, foolish, and deviant practice, tattooing was made illegal in many states. In 1944, a tattooist by the name of Charlie Wagner was fined by New York City for failing to sterilize his needles. This is the first known legal action against a tattooist in the United States. Age restrictions had been in place prior to WWII, but following the war, “many municipal authorities began to take a closer look at tattooing, and newly tightened health and age regulations forced the closure of many shops across the country” (DeMello 2000:66). Many tattoo artists worked together with authorities to tighten regulations and discourage so called “scratchers” in order to gain some legitimacy for their profession. Today sterilization laws almost everywhere in the US require that tattoo artists sterilize all equipment and surface areas and use only disposable needles.

### **The Body as Canvas and the Functions of Tattoo**

The tattoo as a physical object inscribed on the skin exists in an ambiguous position, being both on the surface of the body as well as imbedded into the very fiber of the skin. In this way, a tattoo has an interesting duality that is not existent in other forms of body modification and adornment. A tattoo, unlike body painting, is permanent. It becomes part of the wearer's skin, but it also bears the qualities of the superficial, the superimposed.

In the West, especially, tattoos are viewed as something external imposed over the natural body. The unadorned and unaltered body is constructed as the natural state and any willful changes wrought on its surface are by definition cultural inscriptions. This makes sense from a Western perspective where the intellectual and philosophical traditions that support and inform these views come from the Greeks, who idolized the unadorned athletic body. As such, anything other than that "natural" ideal was necessarily an unnatural modification. This tradition of thought continued with Christianity where the belief was that the unadorned body was made in the image of God and was therefore the base structure onto which all things (clothing, body art etc...) were imposed. Even more modern thinkers such as Foucault describe "the body as 'the inscribed surface of events'" (Mascia-Lees 1992:147), continuing the concept that the markings of a body come from an external source and must be inscribed onto it.

This perspective captures only one tradition of thought, as Benson observes, "every culture's ideas about the body both reflect and sustain ideas about the broader social and cultural universe in which those bodies are located" (2000:234). The ancient

notions of what is natural and unnatural to the body in Western society are now challenged by medical science, which incorporates a variety of “unnatural” solutions to health problems such as pacemakers, replacement limbs and the like. Moreover, it must be understood that many non-Western cultures view the body in a completely different light. In many societies, the tattoo is not an outside inscription on the surface of an already complete body but an external manifestation of the internal. The tattoo’s purpose, therefore, is to explain or display a person’s internal self on the outside of the body, cementing and solidifying the internal by marking the external. From this perspective, the unmarked body can be constructed as the unnatural because it bears no reflections of what is internal.

The tattoo has had so many different functions throughout history that it is hard to come up with a definitive list. Tattoos have been used as rites of passage, to mourn the dead, as decoration, for protection, to harness magical powers, to proclaim membership in a group, to proclaim one’s defiance of social norms, to heal the mind/body split, as punishment, and to record the events of one’s life.

In indigenous practice, the ordeal of getting a tattoo signified a person’s readiness to become an adult. This was one way that the tattoo was used among the Māoris of New Zealand. People in Hawaii would also mark their bodies in remembrance of their dead spouses or much loved kings. This purpose is still in use today, as many people get the names or images of deceased relatives tattooed on themselves in remembrance. The tattoo has always had a decorative purpose, even when its main purpose was different, since tattoos are generally considered to be beautiful and appealing. No one would willingly get a tattoo they considered ugly. But in some cultures and for the most part in



Western society today, tattoos take on a decorative quality. They are meant to enhance the wearer's beauty and attractiveness. Women usually get feminine tattoos that are meant to be attractive to men, while men will get more masculine tattoos in order to attract women. Additionally, interesting and visually pleasing tattoos will also bring the wearer much admiration and interest from both sexes, who will wish to know all about it, thus increasing the wearer's popularity overall. This motivation is certainly a large factor in the popularity of tattoos among Western youth today.

Tattoos among the Burmese and among ancient groups of people in Central Asia were well known for having magical qualities that brought the wearer protection or increased their powers for whatever purpose they wished. Today, this is still practiced among pagan and Wiccan wearers of tattoos in the Western world who choose to tattoo various symbols for their purported magical qualities. The number of people, however, who actually believe that tattooing a specific symbol will protect them or make them more powerful is very small. More often than not, these tattoos have a different purpose – to proclaim membership in a specific group.

Tattoos are very powerful symbols of membership because of their permanence. Their prevalence as identifiers for gangs underscores that concept since, as with a tattoo, membership in a gang is often a lifelong commitment. Tattooing of religious symbols connects one to a religious group, gang symbols connects one to a gang, cultural revival tattoos connect one to all other members of that ethnic group, and so forth. While being inclusive, tattoos also function to the contrary by clearly being exclusive as well. In the modern world, tattoo wearers will be excluded from certain types of occupations, often depending on the size, type, and style of their tattoos. A giant swastika on the forehead

included the wearer in a neo-Nazi gang, but also excluded him from regular society. It also proclaims that person's defiance of social norms, another purpose of tattoo in modern culture. Tattoos and those who wear them are still considered to be slightly different from those who are not tattooed. They are perceived as more on the fringes, on the cutting edge, than other people, and a certain type of tattoo will proclaim that "edginess," that defiance of social convention.

Healing the mind/body split is something posited by Mercury as a possible purpose of the tattoo in the modern world. She writes "the advent of cyberspace has created a rootless, placeless society, accessed by the seated and thinking. One's place is nowhere or anywhere...the physical body never interacts with anyone. A result of this statelessness is psychic and physical numbness. Tattooing, piercing, implanting, and branding are means of jump-starting sensate functioning that has lost its capacity for feeling" (2003:88). People who subscribe to the 'new primitives' subculture and philosophy often cite this as a purpose for their various body modifications.

Historically tattoos were used as punishment among the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Chinese, and the Japanese. There have also been more modern manifestations of this use, including the tattooing of Nazi concentration camp prisoners and Saddam Hussein's alleged tattooing of people opposing his regime.

Tattoos are used as a record of one's life so that with every significant event another tattoo is added until the skin is the story of the person in it. People get tattoos to remind them of achievements as well as their lowest points so that they are able to put the past behind them. This use is common today and is often combined with the mourning purpose of tattoos.

## Conclusion

By their very nature, tattoos may seem superficial. They are created by imbedding inks into the skin, they are on the surface of the body, they are often more decorative than otherwise, and their growing popularity means that many people get themselves tattooed without considering any of the larger issues surrounding tattoo culture. Yet, upon closer inspection, it is easy to see that the tattoo is more than just a superficial mark. It is not only on the skin but in it, embedded in the living skin, making it unique among all art forms. It not only carries meaning and identity but also creates them; it defines boundaries between groups and creates group solidarity. Recently, tattooing has been at the foreground of cultural revivals across the indigenous communities of the Pacific as they reclaim practices that were destroyed in the era of colonialism.

It is easy to see and acknowledge the importance of the practice of tattooing in various non-Western cultures such as those of the Pacific Islands, but the tattoo's impact on Western culture is more than just a fad for young people. The history of the practice ties us to our most ancient of ancestors because, as Charles Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man*, "Not one great country can be named, from the polar regions in the north to New Zealand in the south, in which the aborigines do not tattoo themselves." The very ancient roots of this practice and its pervasiveness across cultures and through time are unique to the tattoo. It is one of humanity's most ancient practices, one of the few customs that has survived into the modern world.

Changes in technology as well as society have shaped and changed the art of tattooing, but its essence, its mysterious duality, and its permanence have continued to fascinate people all over the world. I believe that its uniqueness as an art form and the

layers of meaning that can be taken from or imposed upon the tattoo have contributed to its continued survival from prehistoric times to the present despite powerful opposition and concerted efforts to wipe out the practice. There is something deeply human about the need to define oneself by physically modifying the body to fit what one perceives as being inside oneself or what one perceives as the “natural” state of the body. Making the decision to get oneself tattooed is the decision to turn one’s body into a text that can be “read” by others, and the tattoos that one chooses to get will determine how one is “read” by others. This, like any other adornment, gives one power over how one will be perceived and is an empowering aspect of tattooing.

The world of tattoo today is very different from what it was in the past, yet common themes remain. The tattoo continues to fascinate us to no end; why else is the topic given so much attention? And its popularity seems ever on the rise. We cannot know what is in store for world tattoo culture in the future, but it will surely continue to be a part of the human experience as it has for millennia.

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