



Eternal Inks

Tattoos have a long history going back to the ancient world – and also to colonialism

By Allison Hawn

While most of us would likely care to forget the pandemic as soon as is possible, a few have opted for a permanent reminder of the health crisis – in the shape of a tattoo. Some of these tattoos are meant to serve as a reminder of the year gone by, depicting motifs around toilet paper shortages, social distancing and other pandemic-related messages. But those who lost loved ones to the disease are also using tattoos to create memorials.

This is not a recent phenomenon – tattoos have long served as a way for people to express their emotions.

As a tattoo historian, I often enjoy asking people where they think tattoos originated. I hear the mention of countries such as China, Japan, “somewhere in Africa or South

America,” or Polynesia. What is interesting

is that in the past five years of holding these conversations, no one thus far has answered that tattoos could have originated in Europe or North America.

What geographical areas these answers include, and what they miss, speak to a deeper truth about the history of tattoos: What we know and think about tattoos is heavily influenced by oppression, racism and colonialism.

History of tattoos

Tattooing practices were common in many parts of the ancient world.

There were tattoos in both ancient Japan and Egypt. The Māori of New Zealand have been practicing sacred Ta Mōko tattooing for centuries as a way to indicate who they are as individuals as well as who their community is.

However, no one culture can lay the claim to first inventing the art form. Tattooing practices were known in Europe and North America since times of antiquity. The Greeks depicted their tattooed Thracian neighbors, the Indo-European-speaking people, on their pottery. The Picts, the indigenous people of what is today northern Scotland, were documented by Roman historians as having complex tattoos.

The oldest preserved tattoos come from Ötzi the Iceman, a 5,300-year-old mummified body frozen in ice discovered in the mountains of Italy in 1991. In 2019, researchers identified 2,000-year-old tattoo needles from southeastern Utah's Pueblo archaeological sites. The cactus spines bound with yucca leaves still had the remnants of tattoo ink on them.

Colonization and tattoos

Tattoo historian Steve Gilbert explains that the word "tattoo" itself is a combination of Marquesan and Samoan words – tatau and tatu – to describe these practices. The sailors who explored these Polynesian islands combined the words as they traded stories of their experiences.



The question then arises, if tattoos existed in Europe and North America since times of antiquity, why did Western cultures appropriate and combine these two words instead of using words that already existed in their own?

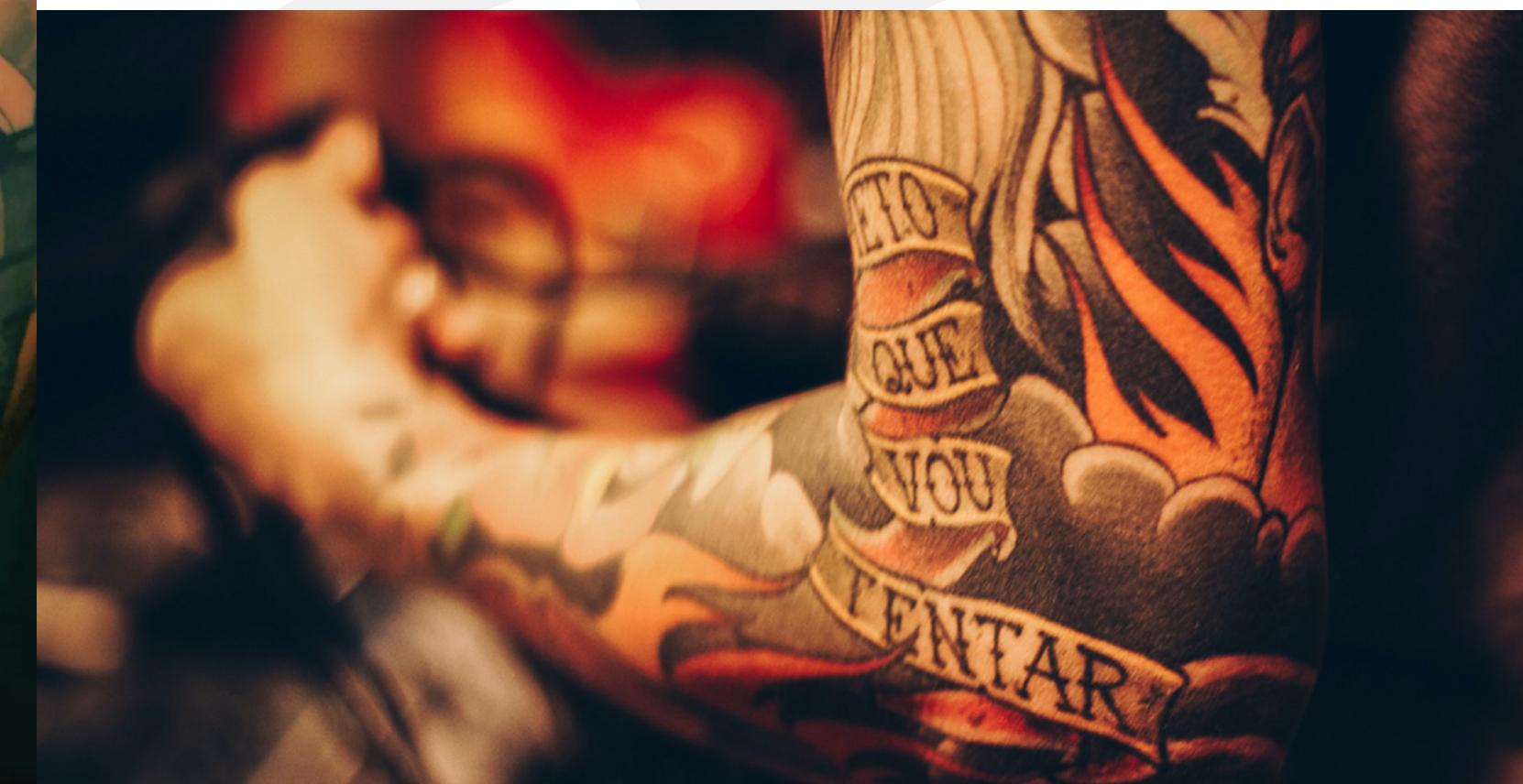
As I found in my research, somewhere around the 1400s tattoos became an easy way to draw a line between European colonizers and those colonized, who were seen as "uncivilized."

Tattooing was still being practiced in Europe and North America, but many of those tattooing practices had been driven underground by the time European colonization was in full swing.

That was in part the result of attempts to "Christianize" parts of Europe by purging towns and villages of "pagan" and nonconformist, nonreligious practices – including tattooing. As Catholic churches expanded their influence via missionaries and campaigns of assimilation beginning in A.D. 391, tattoos were frowned upon as "un-Christian."

Not like us

As Western colonizers pushed into places like Africa, the Pacific Islands and North and South America in the 1400s and 1500s, they found entire groups of native peoples who were tattooed.



These tattooed individuals were often pointed to as proof that the “untamed natives” needed the help of “good, God-fearing” Europeans to become fully human. Tattooed individuals from these cultures were even brought back and paraded through Europe for profit.

A tattooed Indigenous mother and son, kidnapped by explorers in the late 1600s from an unknown location in Canada, were two such victims. An advertisement handbill of the time read: “Let us thank Almighty God for this beneficence, that he has declared himself to us by his Word, so that we are not like these savages and man-eaters.”

People would pay to gawk at these enslaved human beings, making their captors a healthy profit and reaffirming in the minds of the audience the need for European expansion, whatever the human cost.

This kidnapping of tattooed persons had destructive effects on the cultures they were taken from, as often the most



tattooed individuals, and therefore the most likely to be taken, were the leaders and holy persons.

It is worth noting that most captives did not live longer than a few months after arriving in Europe, succumbing to foreign illness or malnourishment when their slavers did not feed them.

This “tattooed savage” narrative was pushed even further as tattooed individuals began to display themselves in carnival and circus “freak shows.”

These performers not only pushed the narrative of tattoos being “savage” or “othering” by performing as freaks, they also invented tragic backstories. The performers claimed they were attacked and forcibly tattooed by marginalized people, such as Native Americans, whom the public at large regarded as “savages.”

One such performer was the American Nora Hildebrandt. Nora weaved an account of being captured by Native Americans who forcibly tattooed her.

This was a more harrowing tale than the reality that her longtime partner, Martin Hildebrandt, had been her tattoo artist. Her tale was particularly baffling, as Nora Hildebrandt’s tattoos were mostly of patriotic symbols, like the American flag.

The voices of colonizers echo into the present. Tattoos carry a certain amount of stigma in Western societies. They can often end up being called a “poor life choice” or “trashy.” Studies as recent as 2014 discuss the persistence of the stigma.

I see tattoos as art and a way of communicating identity. In answering the question “where do tattoos come from?” I would argue that they come from all of us, regardless of what early colonizers may have wanted people to believe.

Highbrow Ink

By Katharine Schwab

Tattoos are seeing growing acceptance in the fine-art world, but the once-subversive 1,000-year-old art form doesn’t fit in so neatly.

The tattoo is no longer quite the symbol of rebellion and subculture it once was. Roughly one in five Americans has one, and that rate is much higher for Millennials than their Boomer counterparts. Popular tattoo artists such as Nikko Hurtado regularly have close to a million Instagram followers, and the stigma against tattoos in the workplace is slowly fading in many parts of the country. Another sign of America’s broadening acceptance of the 1,000-year-old art form? High-art tattoo auctions and museum exhibitions.

In November the eccentric auction house Guernsey’s, which has sold President John F. Kennedy’s underwear and Cuban cigars, offered up a collection of 1500 images by some of the world’s foremost tattoo artists for between



\$50 and \$50,000. A traveling exhibition that recently left Richmond’s Virginia Museum of Fine Arts features life-sized photographs of traditional Japanese tattoo art captured by the photographer Kip Fulbeck. In many ways, tattoos are fundamentally at odds with the fine-art world’s business model, which is based on buying, selling, and displaying objects. And yet, it seems almost inevitable that, given the popularity of tattoos, more art institutions will recognize the value of embracing the once-subversive art form.

The New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman argued in 1995 that tattoos were most interesting to the art world because of their “outsider status,” even comparing them to “self-taught art, prison art, and art of the insane.” But this shouldn’t be seen as a knock against them. “If you look through art history, there’s always an art form that’s emerging that’s not as accepted,” says Lee Anne Hurt Chesterfeld, a curator at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. One example is woodblock printing, a key influence in Japanese tattooing. “It wasn’t exactly considered museum-worthy for a long period, and now every museum

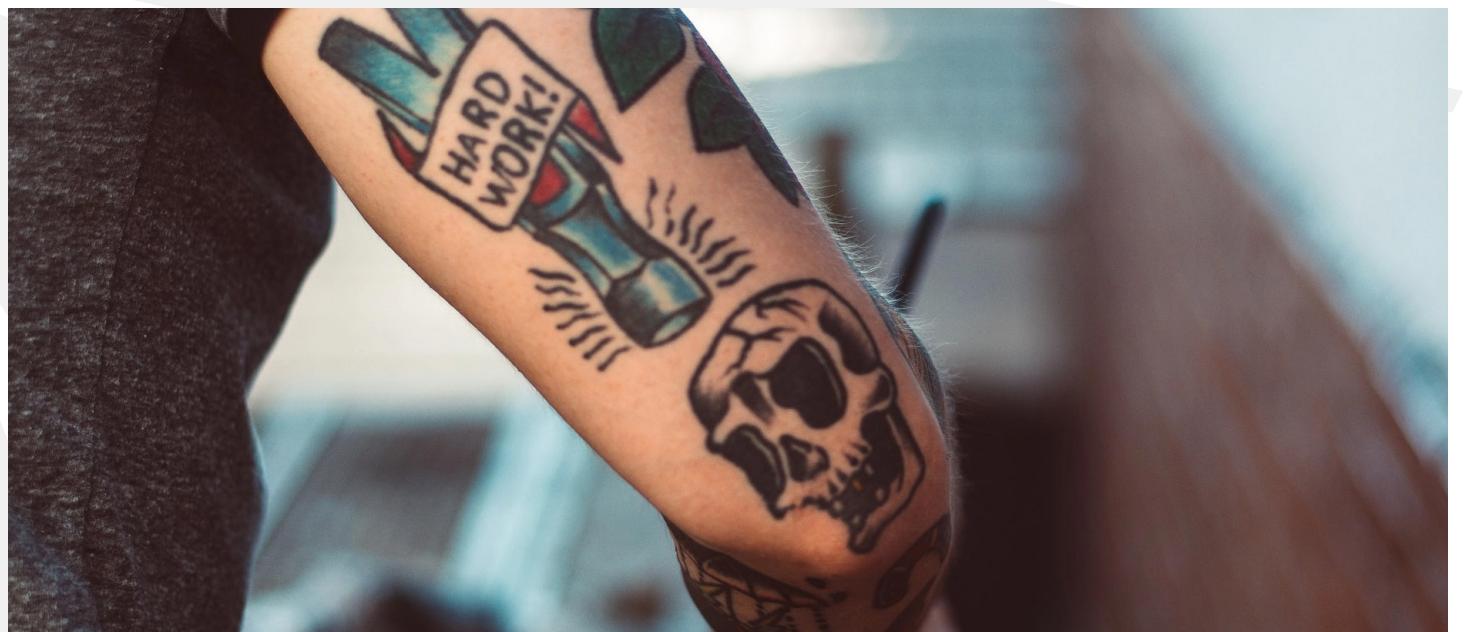
you walk into will have something related to woodblock printing,” Chesterfeld says.

But beyond the question of whether tattoos are “museum-worthy” are more practical considerations. Tattoos simply aren’t objects that can be put in a glass case or inside a frame, similar to performance art, which specifically tried to resist the museum model and commercialization of art. Sometimes, the practice of skin-grafting is used to preserve a tattoo after the owner has died, but the piece loses something essential in the process. Many artists, such as the Japanese master Horiyoshi III, believe drawings can only fully come alive on the skin. “This is why I never show my designs as so-called art,” he told the Japan Times in 2007. As a result, facsimiles such as photographs and drawings come close but fall short of capturing the visceral nature of the designs and the human histories embedded in the ink.

It’s understandable, then, why many tattoo artists feel like their work is at odds with pieces usually presented by museums and galleries. “I think a lot of the general public considers us

artists, but I don’t think the fine art world knows what to do with us,” says Takahiro Kitamura, a Japanese American artist who is famous for his large-scale tattoos and who has several works in the Guernsey’s exhibition. “They can’t own us.”





Kitamura notes an interesting divide between the more conventional artist—say, a painter, or sculptor—and the tattooer. Over the last century, tattooing has evolved away from “flash,” or pre-designed illustrations. Today,

“You get good at letting go,” says Kim Saigh, a Los Angeles-based artist who appeared on the reality show L.A. Ink. “Tattoos have a life of their own.”

considered technical craftsmen to virtuosos—an arc that mimics the evolution of tattoos and their fairly widespread acceptance. Along with Saigh, artists like Los Angeles’s Mark Mahoney and Dr. Woo have achieved celebrity status, with

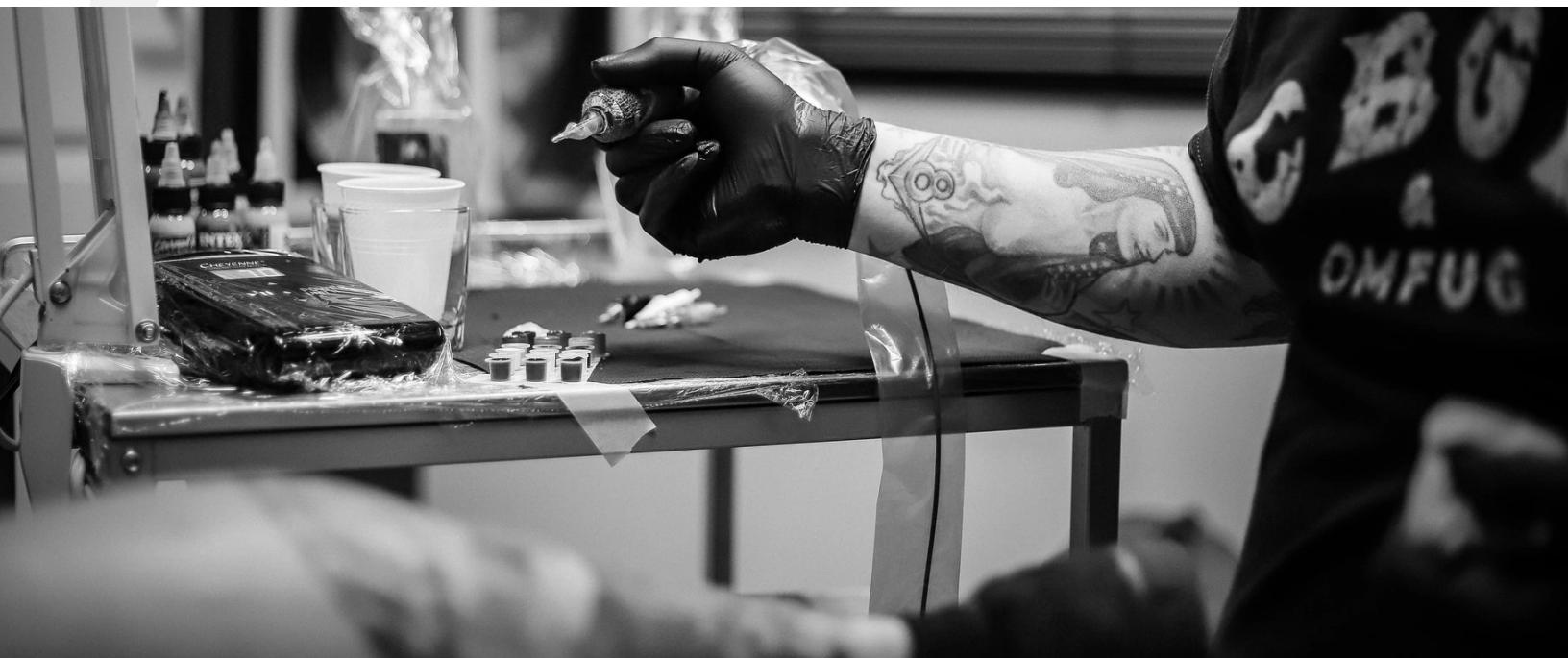
More than just beautiful designs, tattoos are reminders of the unique stories that can be told on human skin.

high-end tattoo artists can spend 30 or 40 hours (often at hundreds of dollars per hour) working on a single, custom piece and often develop close relationships with their clients. But once the tattoo is finished, their art walks out the door permanently—a fact that conflicts with the art world’s tendency to associate a piece of work with its author rather than its owner.

This kind of client-oriented artistic arrangement is reminiscent of the Renaissance-era patronage system, where a wealthy sponsor would pay the living wages of an artist in return for both commissioned work and the cultural cachet of being associated with them. In the era of Michelangelo and Leonardo, the cult of genius was born, and artists went from being

potential clients waiting from several months to several years for an appointment.

In light of this exclusivity and the growing mainstream respect for artists, it makes sense that the fine-art world is embracing tattoos. Kitamura, who curated the Virginia Museum of Fine Art exhibition, sees the show as a welcome



acknowledgement that tattoos are finally appreciated for their high-art caliber. “If the VMFA is putting us in the same museum as Picassos and Rembrandts, then I think that’s a pretty good argument that [tattoo] is an art form,” he says.

In recent years, the art world has fully opened its doors to another stigmatized form—street art. A 2011 show of graffiti at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles was the most-attended exhibition in the museum’s history, perhaps a clear sign of the general public’s interest in unconventional, yet familiar art. The same seems to be happening with tattoos: The exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts was extended

because of its popularity, and will travel to several other cities now that it closed in late November.

Bringing an intimate and personal art form such as tattoos into museums, galleries, and auctions gives the practice a new, institutional legitimacy and a special kind of accessibility. For a long time, tattoos would only be experienced by the artist and those close to the person who wore them. However slowly or messily, the art world is beginning to understand the special value tattoos have as aesthetic objects. More than just beautiful designs, they’re reminders of the unique stories that can be told on human skin.

Destination Ink

PRESENTING THREE CUTTING-EDGE TATTOO ARTISTS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE WHO ARE WORTH TRAVELING FOR.

BY CHRIS GAYOMALI

Back in March, right after getting vaccinated, I finally booked a tattoo appointment with Jenna Bouma (@Slowerblack), a Brooklyn-based stick-and-poke artist I’ve long admired. I reasoned that getting stabbed thousands of times with a tiny needle would be a perfectly acceptable antidote to the cloudy stupor of the past year. Why put it off any longer?

When I finally met Bouma a few weeks later in downtown Brooklyn, she turned out to be a free spirit with a taste for wanderlust—which made for easy conversation. For three hours we talked about everything from Japanese hardcore bands to dabbling in ceramics to international locales that we’ve been fortunate enough to visit. The tattoo (a bulldog on my belly) came out sick. But it was the conversation that jolted my smooth brain back to life. Talking to her about her travels for work made me want to immediately book a tattoo trip to some dreamy far-off destination—Oaxaca, Taipei, Rome—in hopes of adding to the collection.

In that spirit, we tapped staffers from international GQs scattered around the world for some intel on local artists: Who are the folks doing some of the coolest, most imaginative ink work in your corner of the map? Here’s what we were able to turn up.



THOMAS BENNINGTON

@Badluckveteran

Location: Montreal

Book him if you want: neoclassical black-and-white tattoos like daggers, skulls, and grim reapers—but with a sense of humor. (His grim reapers have been shown to walk dogs or kick back with margaritas.) “My work is easy to pair with other pieces,” says Bennington. “You can build a patchwork with most of my stuff.”

Be prepared for: a piece that’s one-of-a-kind, both three-dimensional and dreamy, and shaped by Bennington’s vivid imagination. “When I was first getting started, I was just trying to tattoo the way I draw,” he says of his style. “I’ve never been one to use a lot of lines. It’s more realistic drawings—the lines kind of got incorporated later just for fun. I like to be able to tattoo the way I draw with a lead pencil.”

CHAIM MACHEV

@dotstostolines

Location: Berlin and L.A.

Book him if you want: beautiful, minimalist, geometric lines that flow organically on an individual’s body—and, as in the case of clients like Machine Gun Kelly, pieces that look just as gorgeous drawn over existing tattoos.

Be prepared to: arrive with an open mind and a willingness to collaborate. “I never do sketches prior to the appointment as no one has the same body and I need to observe how the person moves,” says Machlev. “It’s all about the ceremony of connecting and designing that makes it work.”



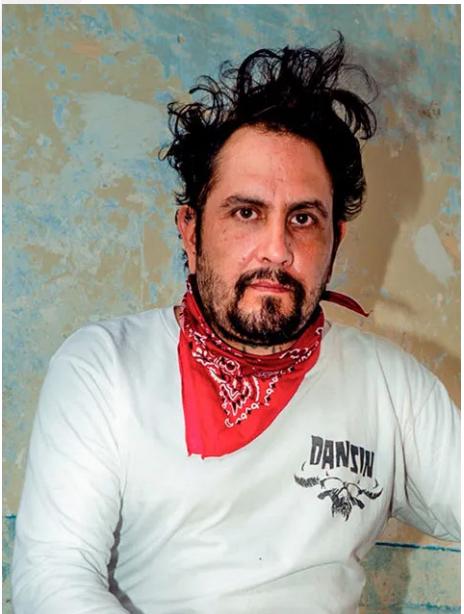
DR. LAKRA

@doktorlakra

Location: Oaxaca

Book him if you want: a piece that’s truly demented. We’re talking scorpions with skulls for heads, fire-breathing toads, and other psychedelic monsters out of a Boschian fever dream. It’s a small wonder Dr. Lakra is maybe the most in-demand tattoo artist in Mexico.

Be prepared to: submit to the process and let the good doctor’s imagination run wild. “My style is no style,” he says. “I just jump from one place to another.”



FRANCESCO FERRARA

@francesco_ferrara_

Location: Rome

Book him if you want: timeless tattoos that will look good forever. Think old-school Sailor Jerry-style flash pieces—traditional snakes, skulls, Christ on the cross—but with extra bold lines and a heavy color palette. “I take a lot of inspiration from the ‘fathers’ of traditional tattooing, such as Bert Grimm, Amund Dietzel, Owen Jensen, and many others,” says Ferrara.

Be prepared to: spend a few solid hours in the chair. These are pieces that require a lot of ink but will only get better with age: “The most important thing for me is that my tattoos remain legible on the skin over time.”



JOSH LIN

@joshlintattoo

Location: Taipei

Book him if you want: big, ornate art pieces that blend photorealism with surreal dreamscapes. Lin, who majored in fine arts in college, is the guy that all the Taiwanese chart-toppers (like E.SO, ØZI, and OSN) hit up when they need to get work done.

But be prepared to: get wait-listed for up to three years. That wait will be worth it: Once you’re in, you’re part of an exclusive club. “Most of my clients have been with me for a very long time,” says Lin. “When they’re heartbroken, they want a tattoo. When they’re celebrating something, they also want a tattoo. I have walked with them through all stages of life, from the passing of relatives, to breakups and makeups. I see myself as the supporting role in their stories.”



HORINAO

@horinao1

Location: Tokyo

Book him if you want: an extremely technical take on traditional Japanese wabori tropes—sakura blossoms, koi fish, a demonic oni mask—but with playful modern twists.

Be prepared to: give up some prime real estate on your body, as these pieces are usually large and have multiple elements going on. “If I’m working on a half-sleeve, I usually incorporate swirls, wind, clouds, rocks, and waves in the background,” says Horinao. “The focal point is the key artwork, but I’m always thinking about how to smoothly intertwine the subject with the intricate background.”