

# Jennifer Garnett

## *Tattoos: Skin Deep Storytelling*

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In any major city of the United States, there is a tattoo shop full of first time or tenderfoot customers and returning patrons.<sup>1</sup> They are looking for that perfect design to add to their collection, or looking for a piece that reflects their personality. Both types of customers are looking for a piece of art that they will live with the rest of their lives. Has human flesh become the newest fad for canvas? Have we come to an age that has accepted the tattoo as a piece of art? Exploring the Western World's historical responses to tattooing provides evidence for the influences of contemporary designs and applications. Body modification and, more specifically, tattooing has become the "new" art form, in conjunction with its growing community of artists and patrons and the intricate designs introduced through the medium.

The earliest known practice of tattooing was found in the Ötztal Alps between Austria and Italy in 1991. The body was carbon dated to circa 3300 B.C. Consisting of a few lines and dots, the Ötzi iceman was tattooed in several regions of his body. Professor Konrad Spindler, an Austrian archeologist, attributes the designs on the man to being ornamental, having magical qualities, or perhaps to medicate or prevent ailments, as well as social status.<sup>2</sup> Egypt and Libya have also been sites of the ancient art of tattooing. The pieces found there have been attributed mainly to religion. A female mummy from Thebes (Dynasty XI 2160-1994 B.C.), known as the primordial Priestess of Hathor or Amunet, had markings that were "seemingly abstract: a series of dots, dashes and lozenges and for this reason are often dismissed as random and

meaningless."<sup>3</sup> They actually held meanings of protection and fertility. Other evidence recognizes the use of animals, beasts and fish within tattoo designs on Eastern Europe and Western Asian inhabitants of both genders between 600-200 B.C.<sup>4</sup> The traditional ancient significance for tattooing included connection or sacrifice to a deity, ornamentation that would not be lost, physical or medical protection, and passports to the afterlife.<sup>5</sup> The basic guidelines of these traditions have been followed throughout the history of tattooing amongst nearly every culture that practiced or practices the art. During the Western Expansion, the methods and meanings of tattooing in primitive cultures attributed to the contemporary understanding of tattooing. The evolution of Christian societies made tattooing fall out of popularity by calling it sinful. The art of tattooing was considered a primitive, pagan practice, and not suitable for civilized cultures.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest and most popular influence of tattooing for the modern Western world was the visit that Captain James Cook of the British Navy took with his crew to the Polynesian islands in 1769.<sup>7</sup> The Polynesian art of tattooing can be traced to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.<sup>8</sup> The origin of the word tattoo is derived from the Spanish seafarer Alvaro de Mendana who, in 1595, mentioned the artistic decorations that covered the entire bodies of the islanders. He noted the word describing the practice: "tatau," a Tahitian word meaning "to inflict wounds."<sup>9</sup> Prior to this they were merely called pricks or marks in the West.<sup>10</sup> Joseph Banks, a naturalist with Cook's expedition, describes the visual resemblance of the "black stain," also referred to as *Moko* or *Amoco*, lines around the thighs and spirals on the buttocks, as having an effect of "striped breeches." They used a "flat bone or shell, the lower part of which was serrated to form from three to twenty teeth... bound to a handle, this implement was dipped into 'the blak liquer' and, by a sharp tap on the

3 Lloyd 22

4 Lloyd 24

5 Lloyd 23

6 Ibid.

7 DeMello 45

8 Ibid.

9 Groning 93

10 DeMello 45

1 Ford

2 Lloyd 21

handle, pierced the skin with some blood.”<sup>11</sup> They would carve into the skin with an *Uhi*, cutting tool, and a *He Mahoe*, mallet, and rub a mixture of pigment made from resin, caterpillars or even gun powder into the wounds.<sup>12</sup> Banks’ notes also include lines, stars, other geometric shapes, animals and human figures worn by both genders. Women stained their lips with little design elsewhere, while men increased their collections every year. Later, sailors brought metals to the islands which replaced the use of bone or shell for the tools. The introduction of metals also made it possible for finer and more intricate work.<sup>13</sup> Members of Polynesian society regarded the work as a skilled art form. “The [tattoo artist] was considered by his country-men a perfect master in the art of tattooing, and men of the highest rank and importance were in the habit of travelling long journeys in order to put their skin under his hands.”<sup>14</sup> Social status and wealth attributed to the quality and quantity of work on the recipient. Outside of the Polynesian society, Buddhists learned their craft from tattooing those who could not afford the professional work of the Polynesian community, which contributed to the importance of the art in East Asian societies.<sup>15</sup>

The practice was eventually destroyed by missionary activity throughout Polynesia. Missionaries wanted to civilize these people by “prohibit[ing] tattooing, polygamy and other habits considered uncivilized.”<sup>16</sup> Even with these restrictions placed upon them by the church throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, sailors returned to the Americas and Europe with Polynesian tattoos, as well as with tattooed Polynesians to exhibit. Displays of these individuals were huge moneymakers and solidified the art as a primitive function among the common masses in pubs, dime museums, as well as fairs, and influenced the civilized culture to view the natives as “tattooed savages.”<sup>17</sup> The first record of an extensively tattooed person on display was Prince Giolo,

11 Lloyd 35-36

12 Lloyd 40-41

13 Lloyd 41

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 DeMello 47

17 Ibid.

known as the “Painted Prince,” who was traded and sold like a slave in several areas of Europe and eventually died of small pox.<sup>18</sup> From the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tattoos were seen as a mark of savagery, yet the explorers and sailors “eagerly received tattoos from native practitioners.”<sup>19</sup>

Displaying tattooed natives in the United States did not start until much later with exhibits of “native villages” in World’s Fairs and other exhibitions. The first tattoo artists travelled alongside the exhibits to provide souvenirs for the experience. In 1876, the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia displayed Alaskan, Hawaiian, and Samoan families in “authentic cultural environments.”<sup>20</sup> In 1893, the Columbian Expo in Chicago had a midway with exotic peoples from colonies around the world. These sorts of exhibits paved the way for human oddities including tattooed people and freaks to be shown at world’s fairs and later on at carnivals and circuses. By 1901 the first full “Freak Show” arrived at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo.<sup>21</sup> One of the main attractions for these freak shows were the presence of a person completely covered by tattoos. The most popular were of the female gender, not only because of the mark of savagery put upon the object of the male gaze, but also because this provided men with the opportunity to view a female in little clothing when it was customary for them to be almost completely covered. The first female tattooed spectacle was Irene “La Belle” Wood in 1882. The most famous was Betty Broadbent, who ran away from her family to join the circus in 1927, and by 1939 was Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey’s “youngest tattooed woman” at the age of 18.<sup>22</sup> Popular tattooed men included Prince Constantine in 1873 (of Barnum and Bailey’s Circus) and the Great Omi in 1934 (of Ripley’s Auditorium Theatre).<sup>23</sup>

Alongside these exhibits of savages, tattooing was being modified “to fit local sensibility emphasizing patriotism rather than exoticism” within

18 DeMello 47-48

19 DeMello 49

20 DeMello 48

21 Ibid.

22 Braunberger 12

23 DeMello 56

the United States. The first known professional tattoo artist in the U.S. was Martin Hildebrandt, who set up shop in New York City in 1846. He got his start tattooing soldiers from both sides of the Civil War, and “was instrumental in establishing the U.S. tradition of tattooed servicemen.”<sup>24</sup> His daughter, Nora, was the country’s first tattooed lady, but she was outshone by the, more popular Irene “La Belle” Wood.

In 1891, “Professor” Samuel O’Reilly patented the first electric tattoo machine in New York. His design was based on the perforating pen invented by Thomas Edison.<sup>25</sup> This machine allowed the use of multiple needles for outlining and shading, which, in turn, led to the use of color. Tattoos were hence cheaper, less painful, and faster to produce. “Early mechanical tattooing dove-tailed smoothly with the principles of the emerging pop culture dynamic of the age of the machine... Patrons who were engaged in the most ancient of corporeal rituals were seduced by the mechanical aura of modernity to physically interact with the visual elements of their changing society.”<sup>26</sup> This new method allowed tattooing to become readily available to the lower classes of society. Because of this, the upper classes eventually abandoned the practice, leading to the association of tattoos to the lower walks of life.<sup>27</sup>

The popularity of tattoos continued with the military, especially the Navy. Typically, the artists had no artistic training and learned most of the techniques on the circus and carnival circuits. Times of war were the most profitable for the tattoo artist with patrons wanting to establish their patriotism and memorialize their loved ones at home. Men’s magazines like *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science* were the primary vehicles promising easy money by correspondence courses and instructional information sent to the home. Milton Zeis advertised correspondence courses at his “School of Tattooing,” and Percy Waters offered instruction with apprenticeships in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> Apprenticeships have not changed much since then. They included, then like now, tracing flash designs, cutting stencils, cleaning

24 DeMello 49  
25 DeMello 50  
26 McCabe 50  
27 DeMello 50  
28 DeMello 51

equipment, fixing machines, making needles, and running errands with little or no pay. Other popular tattooists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century included Captain Coleman, Paul Rogers, Robert Shaw, Bert Grimm, Charlie Wagner, “Lew-the-Jew” Alberts and Sailor Jerry Collins.<sup>29</sup>

Flash designs became popular because they were drawn by famous artists and displayed on the shop walls, in the form of flash pages, for patrons to choose from. They were good for the artistically untrained tattooist, but bad for the patron who had limited choices and customization was rare. Many of the designs on these flash pages have become classic and popular with specific social groups. Artists would trace new designs from customers and incorporate them into their collections. Images included on flash were pin-up style girls, military insignia, ships, jokes, cartoons, fierce animals, knives and skulls.<sup>30</sup> Influences of other cultures were plentiful. Servicemen would come home from abroad with designs from other cultures. One significant contribution to contemporary tattoo designs was Sailor Jerry’s work. Sailor Jerry, a merchant marine in World War II, was influenced by Far Eastern imagery. He incorporated dragons and other Asian themes into his flash; however, his designs at the time were not as popular as the familiar patriotic themes.

The period between the World Wars was known as the “Golden Age” of tattooing. Shops became “homes away from home” where military servicemen could meet, swap stories, and compete with the amount and size of their tattoos.<sup>31</sup> Women began to be denied tattoos unless they were 21, married and had the consent of their husbands, or were proven lesbians. This period had the highest social approval for tattoos because of their patriotic motifs. Military men continued to get tattoos most often, and were trendsetters in style, imagery and placement. The placement and explicitness of tattoos could cause a soldier to be discharged from the armed forces, so servicemen adapted their choices or altered already existing tattoos.<sup>32</sup> Any sailor “worth his salt” had a

29 Ibid.  
30 Ibid.  
31 DeMello 58  
32 DeMello 51

tattoo for whom they represented achievements and a sort of protection. Superstitious and mystical ideas were tattooed on popular areas of the body while tattoos visible beyond the edges of the uniform were and still are prohibited. Some of these designs included pin-up girls on the calves or hula girls on the bicep so one could make her dance. Old staples were chest pieces of ships or eagles. A sailor would be worthy of receiving a bluebird on the chest after 5,000 miles at sea; the second after 10,000. Once they crossed the equator, they earned Neptune on their leg. And to keep them from drowning at sea, one would get a rooster on one foot and a pig on the other.<sup>33</sup>

The popularity of tattoos began to diminish in the 1960s with the lack of enlisted men looking at the military as a career. The Navy also began to actively oppose them. Tattooing was banned in areas of the United States with outbreaks of hepatitis C and regions where tattooists disregarded pre-World War II laws promoting cleanliness and age restrictions.<sup>34</sup> The Nazi practice of marking prisoners also made tattoos of returning men ill-favored. The middle class began to reject tattoos, which marked the practice as deviant. “Scientific” studies were published that associated deviance with tattoos. Society began to attribute tattoos with gangs and convicts, while imagery and style became adapted to individual subgroups.<sup>35</sup>

There were three major categories of tattoos associated with society’s outsiders: bikers, Chicanos, and prisoners. Biker tattoos were almost exclusively black and fine lined, as were prison tattoos (most bikers received their first tattoos while in prison). Harley-Davidson logos, V-twin engines, skulls, and text like “Born to Lose” or “Live to Ride, Ride to Live” were most popular. The majority of these tattoos were placed in the most visible areas of the body like arms and legs.<sup>36</sup> Chicano tattoos were similar to biker designs and began with the Pachuca gang culture of the 40s and 50s in the Southwestern states. They were usually crafted by hand with a sewing needle and India ink and thus were black with

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33 DeMello 64  
34 DeMello 66  
35 DeMello 67  
36 Ibid.

fine lines. Popular images were Christ, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and women with boldly shaded text.<sup>37</sup> Prison tattoos used the same method as Chicano tattoos and identified specific social networks within and eventually outside of the prisons. Other countries forcibly tattooed detainees, like Japan, England, Cuba, and Nazi Germany, while American inmates marked themselves voluntarily. The most popular prison tattoo is the tear drop directly below the eye, representing the number of terms spent behind bars, and in some cases, how many murders the person had committed.<sup>38</sup>

In the 1960s, Sailor Jerry opened up a shop in Honolulu’s Chinatown. Sailor Jerry never forgave the Japanese for bombing Pearl Harbor and took this non-acceptance to a new level. Oriental style tattooing was flourishing within Chinatown, and Sailor Jerry decided to “beat them at their own game” by incorporating U.S. imagery into the impressive color and shading used by the Japanese. He also took the Japanese incorporation of the entire body into consideration for his designs. His designs influenced other popular artists like Cliff Raven and Ed Hardy.<sup>39</sup>

Today tattoo regulations vary from state to state but most demand that the applicant be licensed through the health department. Currently, apprenticeships include first aid and blood-borne pathogens training, and future tattooists learn that tattooing minors is prohibited without parental consent.<sup>40</sup> In the 1960s, Lyle Tuttle of San Francisco, California, helped with the updating of regulations.<sup>41</sup> He promoted the cleanliness of needles and machinery as vital for preventing the spread of disease.

Sailor Jerry’s inspiring designs, along with the outsider sub-cultural styles, have influenced contemporary designs. Modern day tattoo designs include cultural influences from across the world representing past and present relationships through heredity as well as interest. Tribal, Sanskrit, or celestial, nearly any design idea, from an historical painting to a child’s face, has been put on human skin somewhere.

Tattoo designers have a lot more room to explore ideas, and they are

37 Ibid.  
38 DeMello 69  
39 DeMello 73  
40 AAA Tattoo Directory  
41 DeMello 78

not restricted to the flash designs that adorned the walls of early tattoo shops, yet you will still find shops today that practice in the traditional manner. Most patrons have ideas of what they want and ask that the tattoo artist design them. They are no longer forced to receive sample designs. Today, every portion of the body is considered for designs. “Sleeve” designs cover the whole arm, and “suits” cover the majority of the body. Normally these are created all at once and applied in several sittings. The tattoo artist and the patron collaborate on the design and then if the patron likes the idea they start “slinging ink” or “pounding skin.”<sup>42</sup> “There is no art more personal than a tattoo. It’s an expression that is not commissioned for a corporation or a museum or gallery, or for other, richer people. It’s for you alone. It emanates from and conveys your deepest wishes, dreams, fantasies, fears, spiritual beliefs... It commemorates big moments in your life. You are the inspiration for the image.”<sup>43</sup> The tattooist’s practice has changed from offering a service to creating a piece of art that actually means something specifically for the patron.

In his book *Customizing the Body*, Clinton Sanders includes some characteristics to consider when questioning whether tattooing is an art form.<sup>44</sup> He says that art must have an historical or cross-cultural connection to creative practices, uniqueness, and must display aesthetic characteristics and evidence of technical skill. He also says that it must be collectible. Within the tattooist sphere, one that has several tattoos by the same artist is called a “showcase.”<sup>45</sup> Sanders also suggests that the artist must have a reputation and use conventional materials. In some locations, artists still practice ancient forms of tattooing, using Polynesian techniques for example. Being the focus of academic discussion and critical attention, purchased or collected by affluent consumers, and displayed in museum and gallery settings are characteristics that describe forms of art as well. Tattoo artists today have artistic backgrounds and many have advanced degrees that focus

on the elements of art and even tattooing itself. Conventions and shows occur throughout the world where tattoo artists meet and display their works and abilities. In recent years, tattoos have begun to be accepted as an art. Intricate designs and the amazing uses of colors and shading have made bodies seem like “canvases” to be displayed in galleries. In several areas of the world, there are human tattooed skins displayed in museums, such as the pieces in the Science Museum of London. Cultural and social influences contribute to the art of tattooing, which seems to be a characteristic of fine art. This is significant evidence that this “new” art form has entered the art world.

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42 Ford  
43 Shapiro 98  
44 Sanders 156  
45 Ford

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