

Tattooing: A Universal Language

History & Significance (part 1)

Finding the remains

No one really knows exactly how and when tattooing began. Perhaps it was the result of some accident, or a God-sent intuition. Regardless, the tattoo has decorated man throughout history, in all civilizations. Of course, it is very difficult to prove that tattooing existed in prehistoric times. Never the less, there are several indicators which help prove this was so. Pre-historic paintings in the caves of Lascaux and Eyzies in the Dordogne in France are proof of an early tendency towards adornment and decoration. In 1991 a Neolithic hunter was found trapped high in the Similaun Glaciers in the Italian Alps. This Iceman has been preserved for fifty-three hundred years bearing tattoos on his back and behind his knee. It happens thus, that the oldest intact specimen of mankind is also the oldest tattooed individual.

Almost all uncovered remains of prehistoric men display some form of primitive body-art. Neanderthal man used to inscribe red ochre patterns on the bones of the dead. This act is linked to the idea of survival after death, and the color red symbolized blood which means life. The body of the so-called, Shameless Venus (Venus Impudique), dating from the middle Magdalenian period, which is now exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme, bears red ochre markings on its bones.

Contrary to common belief, the art of tattooing flourished in the Middle East long before it was discovered in the islands of the Pacific. The Egyptians were among the first civilizations to adopt this form of art as a symbol of royalty and divinity. A mummy of the Egyptian priestess Amunet, dating from the

Eleventh Dynasty (Middle Kingdom) who lived in Thebes around two thousand years B.C. E., and worshiped the goddess Hathor, bears simple and graphic tattoos which are very similar to those found on the "Iceman." Another Egyptian priestess, known as the goddess of Tassili N'Ajjer (Inaouanrhat), bears evidence of body decoration: there are tattoos and scarification on her shoulders, breasts, thighs, and calves. Other evidence of ancient tattooing exist on the figurines of Nagada and Ballas from the upper Nile, from around the same time. These carry black zig-zag motifs on a red ochre background, the sign of fertility. Numerous other Peruvian, Egyptian and Asian mummies dating from the second dynasty were discovered in a tomb at

Deir El-Berbery. These mummies were tattooed on the arms, legs, soles of the feet, and pubic area.



a Maori warrior with Moko designs

Tattoos have always had a special meaning to their bearer. It is a form of distinguishing the chosen few from the rest of the masses. To back this up, archaeologists in 1948 uncovered a frozen burial mound in Pazyryk, Siberia. In the mound they found the five thousand year old body of a Scythian chieftain, a nomadic warrior preserved in the ice with elaborately tattooed skin. These tattoos covered both arms, one leg and spread all across his chest and back. The designs were pricked or sewed into his skin to form fish, sheep, rams, and many other mythical creatures. These tattoos are thought to have been signs of the hunter's noble birth.

So it seems that the tattooing process did not start as a mere pastime nor as something done on spontaneous impulse. On the contrary, the ancient technique used for tattooing was far more laborious and painful than what it is today, employing instruments and techniques that would make a modern electric tattoo artist quiver with the thought. Ancient Maori warriors actually chiseled designs into the skin using two-foot long bamboo sticks sharpened into needles at the top. The Eskimo drew threads darkened with soot under the skin.



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True belief, fear and magic

Around the year 1000 B.C.E. tattooing had made its mark virtually all around the globe, spreading from the Middle East to China, India, Japan and the Pacific islands. Ancient documents have proven the art form spread through trade routes. It is also possible, however, that tattooing really existed in prehistoric Japan and Alaska.

Could it be that the incised faces of statues with lines and different markings be depictions of real tattoos executed at that time? Or is it a coincidence that the same markings were observed by explorers many centuries later on the faces and bodies of Native Americans?

It can be noted that whenever and wherever tattooing is found, along any time line in the history of mankind, no matter which culture, it has always been a symbol that marks the decorated as out of the ordinary. Be it a chief, or somebody of a noble and ruling class, a warrior belonging to a certain tribe, or a slave, the tattooed man is unique.

[To be continued in the following issue]



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issue: / 1 nov. '00

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The Tattoo: Why Do We Stand Out

Right, let's get the show on the road... This here, is the first issue of the Skin Deep® kulture newsletter - one that is dedicated to the art of tattooing, body-piercing and design. The point of this newsletter is not to amuse you, but to help you look at these forms of art and design from a different perspective.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Hady Beydoun. I am a graphic designer, tattoo artist, and illustrator. The creation of this newsletter reflects my sense that there is an unfortunate lack of artistic literacy and objectivism found particularly in our generation. It is sad that we are living in a society where most people do not appreciate the essential artistic skill that is required by a professional artist at work, be it in design, tattoo or similar forms of expression. Every person has their own point of view on how to do things, and every person out there thinks they know how to do almost everything. Believe me the professionalism of this type of work is often underestimated. Ridiculous as it may seem, however I am sure that many of you know what I mean.

we always look up to achievement.

Conformity vs. individuality: How often do we dream and plan and

try hard to be different from the rest. How we each try, in our many different ways, to prove our unique identities and independent selves. We try to talk differently, act differently, look differently, interact with others in a different way from everybody else. In short, we all try to make a point, leave a mark somewhere in someone else's mind or life. We try hard to STAND OUT.

The most noticeable and efficient way to manifest individuality is by altering the way we look. We use all sorts of different accessories that in one way or another, express who we are or who we want to be. We put on make-up, wear "different" bracelets, rings, watches, clothes, drive specific cars... we get tattooed and/or pierced. We alter the way other people perceive us, leaving a lasting impression. Moreover this is not limited to physical appearance. In other words, we always look up to achievement, be it in the form of a little deed, personal or otherwise, or on a much greater scale.

Shock value: The strange, the unique, the different. The image we present is what tells others who we are.

Unfortunately, some people do not bother to go all the way with this simply because they don't feel a need to be unique; they want to conform. Nevertheless, within us all there is always a little voice that constantly reminds us of who we really are: genuine or fake.

Right now we are not concerned with those who do not find the need or the will to stand out, as they are inconsequential. Our only concern is our own culture: the tattooed and pierced circle. For those of you who feel included, read on. Those of you who stand outside this vast culture, why not try expanding your horizons? Take a little peek at the inside world around you, which many shun out of ignorance and, maybe fear...

Knowledge is the key to understanding. Instead of forming a prejudice against other people, it is always a good idea to investigate objectively. Yes, we all have our own relatively significant problems and none of us feel we have time to waste learning about things we already condemn. That is why I have made a little study on the subject of tattooing and body piercing. So, those of you who dare to explore, find some truth in the words to come. The world of tattooing is a fascinating one...



tattoo and photo by skin deep © hady beydoun

The Skin: A Kultural statement

All emotional fantasies are mirrored on the skin; the very soul can be read on that page. It is that which reflects a person's innermost feelings, dreams and desires, torment and fulfillment. It is a multi-colored universal language. It acts as a means of exchange with others. It communicates with the eye which caresses and unveils it. The skin is an envelope which both reveals and conceals.



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the nerves to form the grey matter of the fetus. The skin is not included in this stage but it does maintain close connections with the brain.

At birth, the baby's first contact with the outside world is through the skin. At the first moment, in a hostile and new environment, the baby cries and shivers, then calms down as it establishes contact with its mother's skin. We learn how to feel and learn from the outside through touch and vision. As adults we learn how to understand and appreciate what we see

outside of ourselves. We become aware of the existence of a difference between us and the rest of the outside world. We become aware of the existence of a barrier between us and others. And it is up to us how we present ourselves.

We can choose to be different, or walk like the rest. We try to set our own individual limits. In trying to be different we mark ourselves stand out. Tattooing, a form of self-expression has accompanied us since the evolution of man. It is a universal socio-cultural language, a conversation of shapes colors and sacred meanings. Civilizations from all around the world have practiced tattooing in one form or another and considered it an act of prayer, honor, bravery, patience and commitment. The ancient Maya used tattooing to become divine and would disfigure themselves to the point of ugliness in attempt to distance themselves from the rest of humanity, and thus become closer to their gods. The very

evasive and terrifying nature of "God," both then and now, proves the impetus behind a large number of the more frightening and grotesque tattoos.

Caduveo Indians felt foolish without body decorations. In south-east Zaire women of the Tabwa tribe are not allowed to get married unless they have undergone ritual scarification. In Cameroon, members of the Bafia tribe feel that they are on the level with animals without similar scarification. In one form or another, trying to be different and trying to express one's innermost feelings is a basic instinct that has accompanied man across the millennia. Today, tattooing is more than just decorative body art praised by some and criticized by others, it is a sociopsychological manifestation of the soul on the skin for all to see. It is also once more a legitimate and common form of self expression.

The naked body is a silent one. It offers no conversation. It is indistinguishable from all the rest. A tattooed body offers a conversation to the eye easily. It communicates ideas, feelings and emotions in a dialogue without words, a dialogue of images shapes and color. The tattoo is a sacred art. It is the embodiment of a belief, a strong conviction for life. It is not a garment nor a temporary make-up, but rather a life commitment. It is simply the expression of true belief.

The image many people have of a tattooed person is that of a sleazy degenerate, an outlaw, a pariah, or a biker; someone who belongs to a marginal group, a hippy or a punk. The subject of tattooing always triggers a response in people, whether revulsion or admiration. There is always a reaction based on personal prejudice. There are very few people who have no reaction towards the subject. All these factors cast a negative shadow on tattooing. However, this form of art has persisted throughout history, and is enjoying a major comeback now in our time. The streets have become a mobile gallery of skin art, offering everyone a glimpse into a world long considered underground. Elaborate monochrome patterns, intricate designs and delicate faux jewelry,

fantasy creatures, monsters from the world of death, sickness and pain, and images inspired by Van Gogh, Botticelli, and Picasso, panoramic views of landscapes, still-lives, and portraits of famous rock-stars and beloved ones are just some of the tattoos you see.

It is an art in which the tattooed person forces on his beholder his own ideas and himself without compromise. It is a way of life, a form of communication and a means of being distinguished from the rest. A tattoo puts its owner in a special class of his own and into a growing sub-kulture. The symbolic value of a tattoo differs from person to person depending on their mood, and social background and sense of themselves. The tattoo is a statement one makes of himself in the eyes of others. The shock value of tattooing is undeniably one of the reasons that drives people to the buzzing needles of the tattoo artist. This shock value lies in the fact that tattoos hurt, and this means blood, pain, and endurance, not to mention the innate beauty of a skilled tattoo created by a master artist.

In another sense, the tattoo is a form of rebellion against the ultimate certainty, death. It is in one way or another an attempt to defy death. The tattoo remains on the skin until the body decays, or if tanned could last for thousands of years...

Personal Notes: Know thyself: be Sure!

As a tattoo artist, very often I get people wanting a tattoo without knowing what. I admire those who have an idea and are looking for it; I like to help them find it, or design it for them. But what I cannot tolerate are those people who walk in and ask me, "Hey, what's the trend? What should I get? Give me your opinion please!" I mean, it's OK to ask that when you are buying clothes or choosing a gift for your mother, but for a tattoo? A tattoo is the most intimate thing one can get in this life. It is a life-time commitment. A tattoo is the expression of one's

self. It tells the viewer of who you are. It is a private statement one decides to make public. It cannot be the choice of another! Ironically, many people base their tattoos based on the choice of others!

This is a serious issue. It reflects a very serious social disease: Uncertainty. Ever since a person is brought to this life, his mind is constantly bombarded with things that make him unsure of himself, insecure about his choices. In situations at school, in family, and with friends he is taught that it is more important what others think of him than what he feels himself. In other words, he is trained (like a dog) to serve his "masters," the opinions of others. Looking at this on a daily basis, I would like to ask: How many times have you liked a piece of clothing in a shop, but did not buy it because your friends didn't like it? How many times have you ended up buying shit which you didn't really like? Is it because you were uncertain that yours was the better judgment? Why put your friends' opinions before yours? Knowing that they will put yours before theirs as well! But why is it when it comes to your own affairs, you put others' opinions in front of yours?

This insecurity is not such a big issue in the matter of clothes, because you can always discard them (although in principle it is a serious matter), but when it comes to the choice of a tattoo and where to have it on your body it is a betrayal to your own judgment to ask for others' opinions! This is your body. And this is going to be your tattoo, and your image. So follow no other's judgment but your own!

Never fail to dare, always dare to fail

How much we brag about our personal freedom of choice! We fight with our parents because we want to be treated like adults. We want to choose what we want to be in life. But when it comes down to it, do we really? Do we have the courage to be what we want to be? Do we follow our own judgment? Or are we afraid to make our own

choices? Are we afraid that others may laugh at us and mock us, afraid that we might change our mind later about whatever choice we make. How many of us are studying something because our parents or friends influenced our own choice?

It has been said that man lives in the eyes of others. True. What would the value of our achievements be if there were no one to appreciate them? However, to be self-fulfilled, this achievement must come from within. An achievement would be nothing but an empty shell if it were not the product of one's own self, but a lie. Never fail to dare, always dare to fail. Unfortunately, people are like a herd of sheep, always sticking to each other and hiding from each other, never really committing themselves to their own judgments and never daring to hold the responsibilities of their own doing. This is why some look to others for support and advice! In every aspect of their lives, they always look for someone else to tell them what to be, what to wear, what to say, how to act and think and compel others compulsively until the world is filled with others just like them!

Look around you. This is what you see everywhere; others trying to tell you what to do. Others telling you they are right and you are wrong, and how to lead your lives because they think they know better. And they don't. They turn for others to tell them what to do, who in their turn look for others, and so on and so forth until it is one whole world saturated in the misery of others. Don't believe in self-important fools who preach. No pre-written book can make your life complete.

Life is what you make of it. Don't go into something you are not passionate about. Whether you agree with me or not is irrelevant now. But know that on death's bed you will be content only if you've lived your own life. What I am trying to say is make sure your decision is one hundred percent yours! Be it in the choice of your career, or your tattoo, because both are here to stay.

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