

A History of Tattooing in Europe

Silke Brandt

Tattooing is as old as rock painting and bone carving, one of the earliest artistic expressions known to mankind. Discourse, though, is recent and almost entirely composed of writings by ignorant, hostile authors: conquerors, missionaries, anthropologists, criminologists. Thus, modern scientific texts differentiate between a 'vocal discourse' (created by the untattooed observer) and a 'silent' one (the tattooed display their ink, but don't talk about it). Only in the late 1980s, inked people themselves started to write about styles, meanings and history.

Ice Age Art turned Middle Ages Stigma

Tattooing is thought to be as old as 65.000 years. First European examples date back to the Upper Palaeolithic: A post-ice age bone figurine featuring skin art is displayed in the Finnish National Museum, there're famous Tyrol ice mummy "Ötzi" (Copper Age, 3300 BCE), whose minimalist designs apparently served medical purposes, and the Scythian ice mummies of Siberia decorated with elaborate animal designs (5th cent. BCE). Identical patterns were found on tools, weapons, pottery and leather. Inked lines followed the anatomy, muscle and bone structure – like traditional designs still in use: e.g. Inuit, Polynesian and First Nation tattoos. And similarly, ancient tattooing would have been an inclusive, voluntary ritual signifying maturity, cultural / tribal identity and high status.

Germanic peoples, Celts and Picts decorated their skin as did their enemies, the Romans. Later on the Northmen (Viking), Rus and Slavs – but due to linguistic difficulties and possibly faulty observation, it remains unclear whether these people were tattooed, painted, or both.

The destruction of ancient European tattooing began only decades after Rome legalised a Middle Eastern cult and then forced it upon its north-western colonies. Permanently marking one's skin is forbidden in all Abrahamic religions, and when Christianity took over, indigenous peoples' regional cultures, arts, morals, languages and social / gender roles were destroyed together with their old faiths – and the practice of tattooing.

Western Europe was christianised between 450 and 1160: Last pagan stands were in Northern Germany by the River Elbe and at Arkona on the Island of Rügen; Nordic and Baltic countries were converted even later, e.g. Karelia during inner-European crusades in the 1350s and Old Prussia / Lithuania in 1387. (Note to the margin: Tattooed Christians did exist, mainly in the diaspora. Ironically, they marked their skin to prevent conversion to Islam, where tattoos are even more severely outlawed. E.g. Coptic and Croatian historic designs can still be found on the elderly, and in Croatia currently enjoy a small revival.)

From between 1200 and 1700, testimonials are scarce – which might or might not indicate how often the ordinary person on the street sported some occasional ink. Documents tell of ladies inking their knights at court (apparently a widespread fashion), religious designs as souvenirs esp. by pilgrims to Jerusalem, or soldiers marking themselves with signs of identification.

In the Middle Ages, though, marking the body gained a more sinister, extremely negative connotation that has influenced peoples' perception up to this day: The branded offender. Extensively used on slaves in Roman times, branding had a comeback as public punishment, situated between degradation (pillory, iron choker, scold's bridle) and disfiguring bodily harm (flogging, torture, amputation). Soot or ink was rubbed in wounds created by white-hot irons often shaped in letters or forms signifying the offense, but puncturing the skin with needles dipped in ink/soot was also known. Now, more than just a religious taboo, marked skin was solely associated with criminals, outlaws, prostitutes, 'sexual deviants', traitors and deserters. Bearing a mark meant further

criminalisation, loss of status and often residency i.e. separation of family ties, expulsion from one's community – the very opposite of the significance tattoos originally had. Now, always inflicted involuntarily, they were shameful, to be hidden or masked by self-inflicted scars.

Earthly Paradise – European Seafarers in Polynesia

Though Europeans were acquainted with heavily inked foreigners as early as 1630, it was Captain Cook and the seafarers following in his wake who radically changed – and shaped – European tattooing for good.

By the 1750s, Europeans felt estranged and disillusioned by feudal society, politics, even religion and an emerging urban lifestyle. Philosophers, writers and political progressives dreamt up model societies governed by equality, contentedness and peace. Before these dreams were put to action in France, Utopia was found abroad: Europeans observed Polynesia from a colonial point of view as much as any other region visited or exploited. But this time, the societies encountered seemed to mirror the perfect nation envisioned back home – and instead of seeing Polynesians as yet another 'uncivilised barbarian', they now regarded them as a 'noble savage': in stature equal to the ancient Romans, with personalities gentle and wise, and – last but not least – a free, generous sexuality. That this perception was as unrealistic as previous negative ones didn't occur to anyone – and actually keeps being perpetuated in holiday brochures and popular culture.

Polynesians were, and some still are, extensively inked. Their designs cover almost the entire body and – like ancient European tattoos – follow its natural structures. These tattoos are a fusion of organic and abstract forms, exclusively done in black; using soot mixed with grease, hand-poked with combs and thick needles made of bone or wood. Patterns range from thin, shorter or longer lines (Melanesia, Hawai'i) over elaborate swirls and rectangular forms (Tahiti, Māori, Borneo) to broad stripes covering large areas of skin (Marquesas, Micronesia, Uapo; combined with fine lines on Samoa).



The author's customised ankle bands by Vatea, Mana Tahiti Tatau.

And not only indigenous people were inked: Cook's sailors encountered European beachcombers who once had deserted their ships and now not only mastered local languages, but lived as members of the community – including a full bodysuit. Through these translators, Europeans learned the word “tatau” – tattoo. The discourse started.

Though almost all Polynesian designs could be isolated and customised for souvenir usage and seafarers recognised local tattoos for their aesthetic value, they chose European motifs for their own skin: Real Pacific culture wasn't of so much emotional interest as their own dreams, their concept of an earthly paradise. The origin of the designs they suggested to Polynesian artists lie in vignettes (small portraits or wallpaper designs from Baroque palaces) and emblems similar to a bookplate / ex-libris or coat of arms.

Emblems feature a symbol, person, landscape or scene bordered with a frame (stark lines or wreaths and ribbons), bear a keyword above and a short description below. They were designed for use on restricted space and now placed on the body like a stamp or sticker. Most designs used for early seafarers' tattoos – such as stylised humans, animals, plants or symbols – hadn't been intended for a moving, three-dimensional canvas, they were independent of natural body lines and prone to distortion during its ageing process. Same motifs were used for miniature tattoos and those covering an entire chest or back – only the size was adjusted, not the pattern itself. Early Western bodysuits were composed of isolated pictures placed randomly over free skin, with smaller fillers (stars, dots) in between. By the end of the 19th century, bodysuits had acquired an overall design, but were arranged according to artificial forms: collars, corsets, lace stockings, uniforms, or rings, necklaces, pendants, medals. As faces and hands were left unadorned, even a full bodysuit could easily vanish under clothing.

Seafarers created a new symbolic canon: Initially, biblical themes were merged with Pacific ones – Eve became a Hula dancer, the ‘tree of life’ a tropical palm tree, the lion from the garden of Eden was now part of a colonial hunting trip, spiral patterns were turned into suns and stars. Within the next 50 years, sailors added motifs from their everyday-life: anchors, seabirds, ships, compasses and the ocean itself. And they ascribed new meanings to them: e.g. a swallow on each shoulder makes sure one always finds the way home – since swallows are only encountered near land. Other motifs indicate relationships: hearts, linked hands, roses, the dagger for honour/courage, but also betrayal of comradeship or love when piercing a rose or heart. Once the practice was brought back home, tattooists cheekily turned Middle Ages branding designs into patches of pride, and added symbols for gambling, drinking, prostitution, violence and death. Instead of being stigmatised against their will, the lower classes as well as indeed criminals marked themselves with their transgressions – the outlaw became an in-group member, the tattoo a symbol for rebellion. (Note to the margin: This development probably found its height in the contemporary Russian Prison Tattoo, an extremely complex subject worth investigating.)

One could call the new European tattoo an aesthetic innovation or unfortunate development, but the use of tattoo flash – singular, ready-made designs – has become the norm and defines the image of body art until this day.

For two reasons, contact with European seafarers almost led to the destruction of traditional Polynesian tattoo. Within years after Cook's arrival, missionaries – Protestant even more viciously than Catholic – were set on eradicating skin art, burned pattern collections and outlawed tattooing. But sailors visiting the islands were still keen on getting inked, and artists created new pattern books with westernised motifs. Early anthropologists who had learned about ‘tatau’ and travelled the Pacific to investigate its origins were disappointed to find traditional patterns gone and the practice largely discontinued.

Despite near-destruction in their countries of origin, tattoos skyrocketed to fame in the West during the early 1800s. Indigenous people as well as returned runaways were – sometimes not entirely

voluntarily – displayed at European trade exhibitions and fairs. Ethnographers and physicians started to write about it – albeit according to their own interpretations, not informed by the objects of observation. Making any realistic assessment more difficult, the tattooed displaying their ink fabricated ever-changing fantasy tales of how they got their designs – wild adventures featuring abduction by a ‘savage tribe’, forced tattooing, either getting married to a local royal or sold into slavery, and subsequent escape. That the locations of their tales seldom matched the actual designs they wore couldn’t be detected by their paying audiences.

As spectacles tend to go stale quickly, inked performers turned to side shows and – instead of telling stories – took up acrobatics, sword swallowing and knife throwing. With women making up the vast majority of tattooed performers, subtle forms of striptease were added to the repertoire. Gentlemen spectators, though, mused that inked bodies didn’t actually appear naked and often admired the skin art more than the ladies themselves.



Miss Arabella ca. 1905, Postkarten-Archiv Hannover

Around the World and Back

By 1880, christian-age European tattooing had completed a full circle and returned to its roots: the royal courts and the world of the outlawed. Apparently skipping the emerging middle class, where people might have wanted to distance themselves from degenerate court culture as well as their own origins in slave-like oppression.

First tattoo studios opened in harbour cities. European royalty took to the fashion that hadn't changed significantly from when Baroque-inspired emblems turned tattoo flash. By the early 1900s, about 80% of the British aristocracy – male and female – were inked, often heavily so. But also the stigma re-established itself: Now used less as corporal punishment than method of identification, authorities inked offenders, inmates, impoverished mothers and their new-borns (supposedly to prevent infanticide) and any other undesirable social group. Also, professional criminals wore tattoos as proud symbols of their specific careers, carrying their curriculum vitae – in secret code – right on skin.

Whereas 18th century ethnographers showed an honest interest in tattoos, the scientists superseding them were biased and hostile. Marking the skin was regarded as a relapse into barbarism, the fairground itself as much a counter-world to bourgeois society as the Pacific cultures before. Trawling side shows, slums and prisons they came with prefabricated theories about a “criminal personality” linked to poor intellectual performance and/or physical abnormalities – and to bearing tattoos. Given the localities of their research they must find their theories proved, without ever realising how flawed their methods were. Their motto was: “A tattooed person who dies without having committed a crime just died too early.” (Cesare Lombroso in his *L’Uomo delinquente*, 1876). A flood of texts was published by physicians, pathologists and criminologists, and their brutal, inhuman discourse became not just the dominant, but the only one existing. Tattooed people went silent altogether.

Despite this very public hate campaign, tattooing between 1880 and 1914 reached dimensions comparable to today. Ignored by ‘researchers’, body art reached the respectable middle class just prior to a change in political mood: even before the fascists’ rise to power, laws prohibited side shows featuring exposed – and especially tattooed – skin. Not much later in Nazi Germany, tattoo studios were closed and artists deported to concentration camps along with many of their customers. Ironically, fascists employed selected tattooists to ink members of the Waffen-SS with their blood-type (for emergencies on the battlefield), and also forcibly inscribed numbers into prisoners’ arms. After the Second World War, shell-shocked Europeans didn’t think of counter-culture, suggestive entertainment or rebellion, and skin art fell into disuse. Branded concentration camp prisoners (evoking guilt or memories rather suppressed) as well as unchallenged theories about an intrinsic link between crime and tattoos made people regard body art with abject revulsion.

A Second Comeback

Until the late 1970s, tattoos were mainly worn by inmates, soldiers, or members of biker gangs and subcultures. Though artists experimented with styles (more realistic, shaded and detailed than classic sailor tattoos), motifs had remained largely the same, and were still arbitrarily placed on the body like stamps, independent of natural lines.

In 1982, American tattooist Don Ed Hardy started to investigate ‘primitive body art’ and published original non-European patterns in Western media. The broader public had just started to regain interest in tattooing, the silent discourse became vocal and slowly the practice became respectable again. It was Hardy’s protégé Leo Zulueta, a Hawai’ian art student, who singlehandedly brought back the ancient concept of designing patterns according to anatomy: modernising traditional designs from esp. Micronesia, Marquesas and Borneo for a post-modern urban culture, he invented the Tribal tattoo. Despite becoming suddenly and inexplicably fashionable among ignorant rednecks and

'ghetto culture' in the 90s, thus losing its innovative status, the Tribal has changed artists' views on how to decorate skin and keeps sneaking into current designs.

European Tattoo Today

From the late 1990s on, interest in indigenous, especially pre-Christian European culture emerged and has been ever-growing since: outdoor museums, reconstructions of settlements and ships (most prominently Draken Harald Hårfagre), weaving techniques, tanning, blacksmiths' art, as well as social life, fashion, gender roles and paganism. Projects are led by both archaeologists / historians and laypersons – many with a background in alternative culture.

Similar to other handicrafts recreated in experimental archaeology, there's widespread interest in ancient regional European tattoo. Misinformed, ignorant historical sources and the long-term consequences of missionaries' actions reduce any respectable reconstruction to educated guesswork. Researchers have to take cues from the artefacts still in existence and to reconstruct patterns from art expressed on other material than skin. The most notable example is *Kunsten På Kroppen's* founder Erik Reime in Denmark, whose stone carving-inspired Viking dragons have fuelled the work of uncountable artists. He was one of the first to again shape European designs according to the anatomy and to reintroduce hand-poke techniques.

After a recent craze in classic sailors' tattoos, the scene is now more diverse than ever: techniques previously alien to tattooing and more sensitive to the skin's ageing process (watercolour and hyper-realistic style) or forms adverse to the anatomy (oversized bold lettering, comix), but also bodysuit and singular patterns utilizing ancient concepts, e.g. Scythian or Pictish designs.

And again, stigma follows where fashion goes: Human traffickers brand their slaves – women forced into prostitution – with inked signs of ownership. Unlike earlier, though, there's support: initiatives fund cover up tattoos for survivors, as markings are often placed where they cannot be hidden: on necks, cheeks or eyelids. Thus – for maybe the first time in history – the tattoo as shameful stigma is replaced by a self-chosen respectable one.

LOVE | HATE

Western tattoo history is in many respects a focal point where political, cultural and social changes are enacted most radically and brutally. Where there isn't much grey area between ritualistic art and stigmatisation, adornment and branding, in-groups and outlaws. We cannot turn back the clock to pre-Christian perceptions of body art, but understanding one's own preferences and prejudices is vital, even in times of liberal tolerance.

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