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The Taboo of Tattoos:

Changes in Body Art during the New Deal and World War II



quickly forgotten as an oddity, but Omai, the Tahitian prince brought to England by Cook in 1774 was not as easily ignored. It was Omai who coined the phrase “tattoo,” since “tatau” was the term he used to describe his own markings.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, the English, who had encountered Prince Omai, brought their perceptions of his skin to the Americas with them, influencing the soon-to-be American citizens themselves. The Native Americans also had traditions of tattooing, usually associated with religious and magical practices. The custom of tattooing among Native Americans was also tied to death, puberty, war, and other stepping stones of life. Tattooing among these people was very common, and a 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit missionary named Francois J. Bressani stated “ this custom is so widespread that I believe that in many of these native tribes is would be impossible to find a single individual who is not marked in this way.”<sup>2</sup> Native Americans also made a practice of tattooing their prisoners of war.<sup>3</sup>

It was Commodore Matthew Perry that introduced the Japanese style of tattooing to Western society in 1853. The Japanese themselves held a custom of tattooing for hundreds of years. The first written documentation of this was found in a Chinese dynastic history written in 297 A.D. According to this text, “Japanese men, young and old, all tattoo their faces and decorate their bodies with designs.” This common tradition faded out in the coming years, and often tattooing was used to mark a criminal but also to mark love oaths, prostitutes, priests, and

Thus, the opinions of non-tattooed Westerners leading up the 1930s were shaped by these cultures. Tattoos were often seen as curiosities, or pagan and it took little time for apt businessmen to pick up on the public's fascination with tattoos. The result came in the form of circus sideshows. Sideshows usually accompanied the circus and held all sorts of attractions from midgets to the bearded lady. The most prominent form of these attractions soon came in the form of the tattooed lady. It is noted that while there were tattooed men as attractions, they seldom drew as much attention as the colorful ladies. Sideshows became so profitable that many owners were making salary bids to tattooed people in order to build their collection. It seemed to be a competition of who could have the most tattooed employees. Soon, there were tattooed sword swallows, flame throwers, dwarves, mind readers, and fat ladies. It is estimated that by 1920, over 300 completely tattooed people were employed in circus sideshows. Some earned as much as two hundred dollars a week, good money in those days, and had the joy of being able to travel.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, , 138.

With tattooed people being portrayed as “oddities,” it is no wonder that society as a whole alienated those with tattoos from participating in “normal” life. The public just was not sure how to deal with the subject of tattoos nor those who acquired them.

Tattoos

pageant, which included a swimsuit competition. Her presence shocked most patrons, but her message was clear: “I am beautiful with tattoos.”<sup>8</sup>

Tattooed women were of particular concern. Culturally, women at the time were expected to be “ladies.” The expectation for a proper lady was to hold a job until marriage, then settling down and have a family.<sup>9</sup> Articles, like the one previously mentioned, helped fuel the fire that women should not be marked. This attitude leaked into the courts. In the late 1920s, a young factory worker in Boston claimed to have been raped by three men as she was walking home from her night shift. When brought to court, the prosecutor pointed out that the young lady had a tattoo of a butterfly on her leg. According to the prosecutor, and later the judge and jury, the young lady had deemed herself a “person of sexual experience” by obtaining these marks and charges against the men were dismissed.<sup>10</sup> By the twentieth century, women who

average American citizen, were also distributed to explain the concept of the number and the cards to ordinary Americans.<sup>12</sup>



Most people were proud to be citizens of the United States and carry around their Social Security Cards and memorize their numbers, while others saw it as a step toward a form of controlling federal government. However, it became such a fad that Woolworth's, a department store, decided to use it as a marketing concept. A new wallet was produced with a special area that just happened to fit a Social Security card perfectly. Rather than print a fake card, Woolworth's used his secretary, Mrs. Hilda's Witcher's number. It is estimated that in 1943, 5,755 people had adopted Mrs. Witcher's Social Security number as their own.<sup>13</sup>

## 2 Woolworth's Card

"Social Security Cards Issued by Woolworth's," <http://www.ssa.gov/history/ssn/misused.html> (accessed April 2, 2009).

With all of these new numbers and policies to memorize, it should come as no surprise that people began tattooing these vital numbers on their bodies. After all, the U.S. government stressed the outright necessity of knowing your number. In an interview conducted in the early 1940s, artists Sailor Walter and Red Gibbons, who tattooed in a shop in Portland, Oregon, noted that their business had practically doubled since the issue of Social Security numbers<sup>14</sup>. Needless to say, tattoo artists at the time were shocked by the sudden influx of patrons to their tiny studios.

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<sup>12</sup> "1953 Social Security Pamphlet," <http://www.ssa.gov/history/ssn/ssnpamphlet.html> (accessed March 23, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> "Social Security Cards Issued by Woolworth's?" <http://www.ssa.gov/history/ssn/misused.html> (accessed March 3, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> C.W. Eldredge, "Identification," <http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/identification.htm> (accessed March 24, 2008)

This is a separation from the classic history of tattooing in the United States of America, both in the actual subject matter of the tattoos themselves and of the commonality of female patrons.

The term “studio” or “parlor” was really a euphemism describing the often cramped quarters in which tattoo artists practiced their trade. Most parlors were small rooms in a house or another business and in more rural areas, they were merely trailers. At the time, no health department regulations existed to control the spread of disease, and there were many instances where artists used the same needle on multiple patrons to cut down their cost of supplies; after all, the country was in the midst of the Great Depression.

Artists themselves derived from a variety of backgrounds. Some artists, such as Lewis “Lew the Jew” Alberts had possessed an artistic talent prior to their interest in tattooing. Lew had been a wallpaper designer before enlisting in the Navy, where he learned to tattoo by practicing on his shipmates.<sup>15</sup> Others, such as Sailor George Fosdick, Sailor Walter, and the infamous Sailor Jerry, also spent time in the military thus gaining their nickname. Many artists had served in the First World War. So many Navy men obtained tattoos and often became tattoo artists due to their exposure to cultures in which heavy tattooing was prevalent, such as the Polynesian Islands and Japan.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C.W. Eldredge, “Lew the Jew,” [http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/alberts\\_lew\\_the\\_jew.htm](http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/alberts_lew_the_jew.htm) (accessed March 24, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> C.W. Eldredge, “Naval Traditions,” [http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/naval\\_traditions.htm](http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/naval_traditions.htm) (accessed March



Immigrants also made up a good part of the tattoo artist community. Japanese immigrants who had undergone apprenticeships under artists in their home country were very common, and many of the apprentices whose time fell under American artists were immigrants as well. There really is no concrete reason for the mass amounts of foreign tattoo apprentices other than their need for money to learn an expert trade, and they usually had little regard for the taboo status pegged to many tattoo artists.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to the Social Security Act, during the New Deal, most artists worked very little. With the country in such a depressed state, they often practiced and tattooed one another, or tourists. Most artists also worked from flash, pre-made designs that could easily be copied onto the skin or slightly altered to make the tattoo appear custom. Prior to 1935, flash was mostly generic, such as a heart with lettering, simple script, or the family crest. However, after the Social Security Act, flash itself also underwent a radical change.<sup>18</sup>

Flash art transformed from dull and generic to patriotic, and expanded to meet the needs of the new wave of tattoo patrons. The American flag appeared more and more, flash specific to the branches of the military, and flash where there was space for the Social Security Number, and even one's blood type should they be taken in battle or critically injured elsewhere. This was also the era in which the classic sailor tattoo developed. Since people were proud to be Americans, they wanted to show it in permanent of ways.

[4 Oregon, August 1939](#)

"Social Security Tattoo." [www.shorpy.com/images/photos/ssn.jpg](http://www.shorpy.com/images/photos/ssn.jpg)  
(accessed March 15, 2009).

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<sup>17</sup> Gilbert, , 96.

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert, , 118.

The most popular identification tattoo of the era was the simple Social Security number tattooed in a straight line with black ink, usually because this was the least expensive tattoo available. Sometimes only costing 75 cents to a dollar, where other pieces were 2 dollars. Military men often came into the parlor asking for their Social Security number or military identification number tattooed on their arms. The tattoo was made to be visible in case they were caught without their card.<sup>19</sup>

Attitudes toward tattooed females were not the same as those experienced by men. While some women were enlisted in the military and followed their male counterparts into the tattoo parlor for a

Demello's, with proof through the placement

to get it tattooed on your body. A “changed man,” so to speak, would have realized how valuable his country was after being drafted and take pride in his country, shown by the great American flag or U.S. Army tattoo he bore on his shoulder. Patriotic tattoos suddenly exemplified masculinity, national pride, and citizenship to many military men.

As more and more men were leaving to fight in World War II, women were being recruited to take, what would normally be a man’s place, in the factories. Often, women found this to be liberating, and iconic figures, such as Rosie the Riveter, became central to the concept that women were participating in the war effort just as much as their men were.<sup>22</sup> These patriotic factory workers often received much smaller versions of the American-themed tattoos than



more patriotic tattoos, this time with a bit more of a dark undertone. Since the Vietnam War was so unpopular with the American people, profound hatred of the Vietnamese provided artists the grounds to slander them with all sorts of unflattering imagery. One artist, Sailor Jerry, who is now known around the world for his peaceful pin-ups and spiced rum, was particularly talented at this animated form of insult. In fact, he created an entire sheet of flash art in 1967 based on this concept. These images ranged from “Rice Paddy Daddy,” to “Good Cong, Dead Cong,” which could also be seen as simple re-workings of World War II’s “The Only Good Jap is a Dead Jap” flash. Politically incorrect tattoos were so common throughout this period that there

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“Wartime Tattooing,”  
[http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/vietnam\\_war\\_designs.htm](http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/vietnam_war_designs.htm) (accessed April 2, 2009).

have even been exhibition celebrating this rare war-time form of art.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1990s, suddenly tattooing experienced yet another revival, directly after Operation Desert Storm. This generation began to seek behavior that mortified both their elders and society as a whole. Grunge rock-n-roll, modified rap music, and the ability to gain fame with practically no talent sped up the process of tattoo culture. It was during the late 1990s that tattoo culture itself became more mainstream. Tattoo Magazine, Prick, Pain, and other publications had their roots in this time period. Women also had much to gain from this era. By 1996, more than half of tattoo clientele was female. Tattoo artist Big Joe Kaplan noted that he was inking more

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<sup>24</sup> C.W. Eldredge, “Vietnam War Designs,” [http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/vietnam\\_war\\_designs.htm](http://www.tattooarchive.com/history/vietnam_war_designs.htm) (accessed March 25, 2009).

hearts, stars, and butterflies on women of all kinds, including a 78 year old grandmother who wanted a raggedy Anne tattoo to commemorate her life as a doll maker. In his opinion this tattoo revival was caused by celebrities who had ink themselves, such as Cher, Dennis Rodman, and Sean Connery.

Kaplan did not only pursue the classic form of tattooing, but also cosmetic tattooing, another 1990s revival that had its roots, surprisingly, in the 1950s and 1960s Salon Era. Permanent blush, eyeliner, lip lines, hair lines, and scar cover-ups existed for decades before the 1990s, but with better machinery cosmetic tattooing became less risky, cheaper, and more practical than it had been previously.<sup>25</sup>

As the millennium ended, a new phenomenon emerged: Reality Television. Reality TV also encouraged the spread of tattoo fever. Shows such as *Inked* and *Miami Ink* allowed the everyday person into the inside world of the tattoo studio. For the first time anyone could look into this realm and observe the time, talent, and dedication needed to be tattooed. These shows eventually spawned multiple spinoffs, all featuring talented artists- even female ones like Kat Von D of L.A. Ink. Kat Von D herself is a portrait of classic beauty, just a little more colorful. All this public appreciation of art has led to the popularity of tattoo conventions, which are attended by those with and without tattoos.

While the country as a whole changed drastically from the 1930s to the beginning of the new millennium, patriotism with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the U.S. entry into conflict with Iraq seemed just as prevalent as in other times of political conflict and war. In a very similar way to World War II and Vietnam, tattoo artists once again found themselves

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<sup>25</sup> James V. O'Conner, "Tattooing: More Female Clients Enter a Formerly Male Realm," 1996

embroiled in patriotic designs, although they were much more intricate than before. Recently the art of Sailor Jerry and Don Ed Hardy, both of whom were very politically involved in the 1960s and 1970s, has made its way back to the public eye through clothing lines, books, and of course their classic flash. The only conclusion to draw is that one has to make a direct correlation between times of war and tattoo popularity.

Though today's tattoo culture is often identified through a stereotype of "artistic" and "individual" terms, ironically some of the most influential factors among Western tattooing are the national government, political patterns, and the military. Tattooing in the Western world has different social stigma than it does in other culture, especially Japanese culture in which tattooing has history beyond popular social stereotypes.

Modern public opinion about tattooing is rather hard to pin down. While most people seem fascinated with the entire concept of tattooing, others hold steadfast to the relation between tattoos and people of "lower classes." Indeed, more and more businesses are having problems recruiting employees with a "conservative and professional" appearance. Many companies are now letting small tattoos slide past dress codes, but sooner or later, these dress codes will have to change with the times, in much the same way swimsuits, skirts, and pantyhose have evolved with the times. Tattoos have slowly been accepted as a cultural normality since people from all races, classes, and positions of authority obtain skin art. The evolution continues.

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