

INK EVOLUTION: FROM FREAKISH TO FINE ART

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Tara Brugnoni
Drew University
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ABSTRACT

Ink Evolution: From Freakish to Fine Art

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Tara Brugnoni

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Everywhere one turns, despite culture, society, race, religion, state, socioeconomic status, age, gender, and sexual orientation, without hardly any effort, one lays his eyes on what has become the greatest and most fascinating phenomenon of our time...the art of the tattoo. The aesthetic value of these varies depending on individual preference, but one factor remains the same. Whether the tattoo is simplistic or the most ornate, special skill, technique, and experience created from a historical context are needed to render this form of fine art.

The following dissertation exists to shed light on the sources of the tattoo culture and how tattoo fine art has taken shape and rooted itself quite solidly in modernity. The reader will journey into the historical and cultural background of tattooing, enter into the world of art to discover how the elements of art define the tattoo, and read first-hand accounts through interviews of both tattoo artists and tattooed individuals to explore how the fine art tattoo distinguishes itself among the other various fine art forms.

The writer invites the reader then to navigate through a foundation of historical context that paves a unique road to the creation of the intricate beauty of the art of the skin.

In Memoriam

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Robert and Lillian Fain

Felix Brugnoni

Anton Aneson



Your immortal love is my grace!!!

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Chapter One

The Tattoo Phenomenon

Preface

Since the 1960s, there has been a tattoo renaissance in American culture. Tattoos are forcing their way into the twenty first century, mainstream society at an increasingly rapid rate. The population of those getting tattooed has been altered drastically, for tattoos that were once only identifiable on individuals like bikers, prostitutes, and outcast deviants are now sought after from upper and middle class suburban individuals of both sexes, with 40% marking white suburban women. The perception of tattoos has also evolved in that tattoos have since been considered among fine art forms.

The questions of why individuals choose specific tattoos, the number they acquire, or the reasons they commit to full body tattoo-themed “suits” lead to answers that point toward tattoos as fine art forms. Today, when speaking of tattoos, the words “fine art” appear. Therefore, the argument the author of this paper wishes to make in this dissertation is that tattooing is indeed a fine art worthy of a place alongside other art forms. Thus, the author will research how exactly modern tattoos are created, for gone are the days of blue ink tattoos taken from flash on the walls of underground tattoo shops. In fact, the tattoo venues themselves have undergone a revolution. No longer are these places located in undisclosed areas, but are in public view and are referred to as art studios or art parlors. The interior of these shops mimic high class clinical environments with the highest of health standards. At these venues, oftentimes appointments must be

made in advance and once individuals are there, they dialogue with the tattooist to create a very unique piece of art. The tattooee can often bring to the tattooist a picture which the artist then modifies through his own artistic background, or the tattooee orders a tattoo discussing with the tattooist the details and imagery he or she would like. Consequently, this process can be likened to the commissioning of a painting. The tattooist and artist create a work that is a concrete representation of an abstract concept. Both a tattoo and a piece of art can be similar in the number of hours committed to the work, the cost, and the number of sittings to execute the piece, for individuals getting a tattoo suit, for example, may sit for multiple appointments for extensive hours. With regard to the traditional artist and the tattoo artist, it is simply the canvas upon which the creation is executed that is different. It is also important to note the instruments used by tattooists and their evolutionary technological advancements.

Today, tattoos are perceived as works of art because most are not random and meaningless, but are rooted in deep historical contexts. Tattooing for most individuals has become a way of life and is a culture in and of itself. Tattoos hold meaning for the wearer in that the tattoos are laden with indelible marks of identity which contribute to the individual's life story. Many individuals who acquire tattoos, as they age, accrue an increasing number of tattoos that seemingly track the progression of their life experiences. Those who commit their bodies to extreme tattooing are not so much interested in how they appear, but what these tattoos represent. The tattoos then create a rebirth of identity through these body alterations and this new identity strives to align itself within normative society. Thus, because many individuals perceive tattooing as a

vehicle for identity, the increase in tattooing is ever growing along with the artistic approaches that create this rebirth.

The distinguishing factor of course between the artist and the tattooist is the canvas upon which the art is created. The skin is an organ and is ephemeral. Therefore, in the case of tattoos, when the organ, or the exhibitionist, dies, so too does the art. However, there are now individuals, referenced later, who plan to donate their skin to museums upon death so as to preserve and showcase their art which they painstakingly and creatively collected over time. In terms of pain, this element is also distinguishable in tattooing in that other mediums require no pain to create. However, it can be argued that some creations may draw from an agonizing experience or artworks may evoke very negative feelings on behalf of the viewer.

Art itself has also evolved in its representation. For example, the core aspect of art is that it relays narratives. So, what better canvas to tell one's story than on the body, a living breathing, interactive canvas? As the human body relates the living narrative via tattooing, the human being is entwined in the art and allows for dialogue. Thus, body art is a visual language that engages the viewer, even at a quick glance, through an indirect dialogue. These indelible marks create a lasting impression on the spectator and identify the bearer as unique.

It is first of critical importance to understand where trends in society, such as tattoos, find their source and the way in which they gain power in an ever-changing world. Generally, trends are created from an economical point of view in that culture producers are always on guard for trends that originate in outside communities, namely

those individuals/groups who reside on the fringes of society and are marginalized or stigmatized. As Clinton Sanders and Angus Vail note, “In short, the major source of innovation in popular culture is in the materials and activities of the relatively poor and powerless; the innovation flows up the stream of power” (Sanders & Vail ix). These “materials” are thus made more accessible to the larger public by redefining their image and promoting their status to the larger public. Then, the “materials” take root in society and are either positively or negatively integrated. Among these “materials,” tattoos have assimilated themselves into society through these means. Thus, the trend of tattooing has taken on a life of its own penetrating mainstream society and the art world.

The greatest dissemination of tattoos primarily found its source during a period that was known as the Tattoo Renaissance of the 1960s. Some of the major key figures in disseminating this tattoo phenomenon were public figures that were admired in culture. However, individuals’ social networks also played a predominant role in the increase of tattooing. As Sanders states, “...as more people are tattooed, more people have contact with those who are tattooed, and more people see it as reasonable and desirable to acquire a tattoo. Cultural popularity is a form of contagion” (Sanders and Vail ix).

Other contributors to the propagation of tattoos originated from various materials. Novels/memoirs were written that featured tattooed protagonists and predominant booksellers like Barnes and Noble featured many tattoo magazines that are now considered mainstream. Perhaps the most effective and influential disseminator was and still remains the media. The Learning Channel especially features hit tattoo shows like “Miami Ink” that showcase the lives of tattoo artists living in their world of art and the

ways in which they navigate this world. In fact, many tattoo artists like Kat Von D are now well-known in the celebrity arena because of their tattoos and artistry and the media coverage they evoke.

In the past decade and a half, tattoo styles and images themselves have evolved and much of this evolution was the result of advances in technology, the availability of tattoo publications, and the increasing competitiveness of tattoo conventions that seek to assert themselves into mainstream society by establishing tattooing practices as dominant.

The Cultural Evolution of Tattooing

There is no doubt that tattooing has seen a cultural shift in its status and the types of people who get tattooed in twentieth and twenty first century America. Today, as one trails the map, tattooing in some form is acknowledged and evident. In America, in particular, one cannot help but enter into a subliminal dialogue as he processes tattoos that mark most of the population. In fact, “The total number of Americans that have at least one tattoo renders some 45 million” (Statistic Brain Research Institute 1). Also, as Marzo DeMello points out, “Tattooing has been mapped and re-mapped through its history in the United States, first by nineteenth-century American servicemen and carnival exhibits; later by members of the American working class; then in midcentury by bikers, convicts, and other marginalized groups; and finally in the late twentieth century by members of the middle class” (2). Thus, the tattoo began as a primitive mark

identifying unity and inclusion in community, to a declaration of patriotism, to an outward sign of rebellion, and finally to a symbol identifying status within a complex hierarchy. With this cultural shift came a redefining of tattooing and this redefinition found its source in various belief systems popular at certain times. Each time the tattoo became redefined, it broke free of cultural ties, allowing for a new meaning to emerge. Therefore, although the meaning evolved, the image remained the same. Even the language surrounding tattooing has evolved in that when referencing tattoos of the working class, “terms such as ‘biker,’ ‘sailor,’ or ‘scratcher’ are used in tattoo magazines and articles” (DeMello 5). New age terminology, however, uses references that connote the professional tattoo or the fine art tattoo which implies the higher status of it inherent in its language. Because of these references, within the tattoo community, there exists a type of hierarchy related to tattooists. The working class references set the tattooists as mere “craftsmen” at a marginalized, outcast level akin to “white trash artists” whereas the fine art and professional references set the tattooists as “artists” at an elitist status. One can deduce then that if there is such a division in the mere language of tattooing, how much division must there exist among the actual physical representations of the tattoos themselves?

Another shift is one that has been mentioned throughout this research in that many modern tattoo artists are no longer trained through apprenticeships, as was custom, but are trained in fine art schools and thus hold fine art degrees. With this type of background, tattooing became revolutionized because the art was reinforced by theory and the body began to be perceived as a canvas upon which something more than simply

ink was transferred. According to DeMello, "...tattoos are finely executed, highly customized, and deeply meaningful; and a value system that stresses the sacredness of the body, a lifetime commitment, and a strong spiritual or emotional connection to the tattoo" (33).

Another clear shift in tattooing exists in the individuals who in fact get tattooed. "Tattoo customers named in typical media treatments include a large number of doctors, lawyers, and Ph.D.'s. Both artists and customers are portrayed as highly educated, thus emphasizing the new professional, upwardly mobile class base of the tattoo community" (DeMello 99). Tattooed individuals now come from prestigious backgrounds and hold meaningful positions in society. When these types of individuals get tattooed, the tattoos themselves are well planned out and more acceptable to the middle class. As DeMello states, "Within the tattoo community, we can see a similar transition, as another kind of renaissance displaces the image of the working class tattooed body--excessively, grotesquely tattooed--in favor of the more refined image of the middle class body, which, even when tattooed, is elegant and disciplined" (134). Consequently, more middle class individuals respect the art of tattooing and in fact seek to acquire tattoos themselves.

A major shift in the way tattooing is now perceived found its source from the perception of the tattoo from an artistic lens. As tattooing gained popularity in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, tattooing began taking root in the world of "authentic" art. The origin of the tattoo perception as an "authentic" art began in the early 1990s when tattoos were termed "low-brow art." This type of art fell between traditional art forms and popular cultural arts forms. This "low-brow art" rests in the middle of the

highly theorized art and the underground art. It denies the critics of the traditional art world and, "...create[s] an art that is self-consciously representational, dismisses the baggage of art theory, and revels in the aesthetic taste displayed in urban, street--level culture" (Sanders and Vail xi). Therefore, this type of art has found its place, despite a slightly lower status, within the art world that nonetheless took root and grew.

In terms of tattooing being perceived as an art form, the process of collective legitimation is the focal point of those who deem to title it as such. The individuals who are true tattoo connoisseurs, as Sander and Vail state, "...are central actors in the tattoo world-those who are serious and committed collectors, who spend considerable sums on their collections, who are most familiar with the aesthetic conventions of tattooing, and who patronize the most skilled practitioners of the art/craft" (xviii). Also, tattoo producers are interested in the creative approaches and level of appreciation tattoos offer.

Overall, tattoos have become a part of the twentieth and twenty first centuries and depending on location, there are more people tattooed than there are non-tattooed. A trend that was once marginalized has now made its way into society after a redefinition of its worth particularly as an art. Despite the reasons individuals choose to modify their bodies with tattoos, the main function is decorative. Using the skin as a clean canvas, the aesthetic aspect is the first thing that comes into indirect conversation with the viewer. Therefore, tattoo art is now one of the top trending phenomena of all time.

Chapter Two

The History and Evolution of the Tattoo

Preface

In the capitalist society in which twenty first century Americans live, mostly everything is objectified, purchased, and sold. With commodities increasing at a steady rate, there is truly little left sacred. The concept of objectification is usually applied to inanimate objects, but an evolution has occurred whereby animate things, such as the human body, particularly the skin, is being objectified, manipulated, and transformed. Among the commodities in the late twentieth century that has targeted consumer interest is the tattoo. Beginning in the 1960s, there has erupted what has been termed a “tattoo renaissance” whereby the skin no longer serves the sole purpose of protecting vital organs, but acts as a canvas, a billboard upon which messages are relayed to others amidst society. Individuals inscribe the body for various reasons, some of which include: imbuing a sense of individuality in society; inscribing personal narratives on the canvas of the body; identifying group affiliations and solidifying commitment to these groups via tattoos; using the tattoo as a sign of protest in a normative society; imbuing spiritual and cultural traditions on the body via tattoos; expressing sexual motivations; and displaying physical endurance (Wohlrab, Stahl, and Kappeler 89). Despite the reasons, however, the prevalence of tattooing has become increasingly high as is the desire to be tattooed with this prevalence and desire transcending culture and gender.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the concept of tattooing and how it has become such a sought after commodity in twentieth and twenty first century American culture, it is imperative then to understand the origins of this inscription. Thus, the tattoo experience can be traced through a timeline which identifies the first signs of inscription from the earliest recordings to the way in which this phenomenon took root in present day popular culture as an authentic art form.

Tattoo History Lineage: From the Iceman to Modernity

Tattoos have dated back centuries and have carried with them rich meaning. There is archaeological evidence of tattooing that dates back to the late Stone Age where tattoo-like markings existed primarily on figurines. “In terms of tattoos on actual bodies, the earliest known examples were for a long time Egyptian and were present on several female mummies dated to c. 2000 B.C.” (Lineberry 1). As cited in Sanders, “Proof of the antiquity of the practice is derived from the mummified body of the priestess of Hathor (dated 2000 B.C.) that bears parallel line markings on the stomach thought to have had medicinal or fertility functions” (9). However, a more recent discovery of inscription has expanded this date to a thousand years earlier. In Siberia, human remains dating back to the fifth century B.C. were discovered with various markings that seemingly held totemic significance. Archaeologists also have recently found tattoos on the 5,200-year-old Iceman (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). On the Iceman’s body, dots and small crosses were drawn on those areas of his body that would be susceptible to the most strain and thus deterioration. Therefore, these marks were “...on his lower spine and right knee and

ankle joints...” (Lineberry 1). As a result of these findings and those that will be mentioned later, tattoos then seemed to have healing properties used for therapeutic value and were applied to those body parts that were ailing or susceptible to deteriorating as people aged.

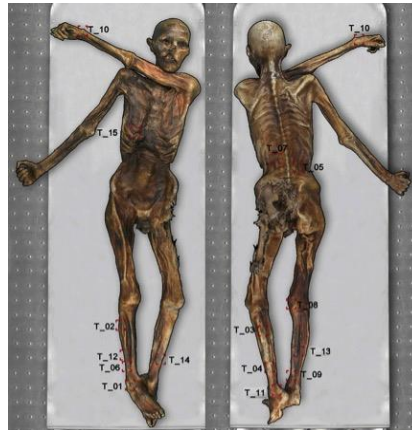


Fig. 1. This map shows the locations of all 19 tattoo clusters. (Credit: EURAC/M.Samadelli/M.Melis)

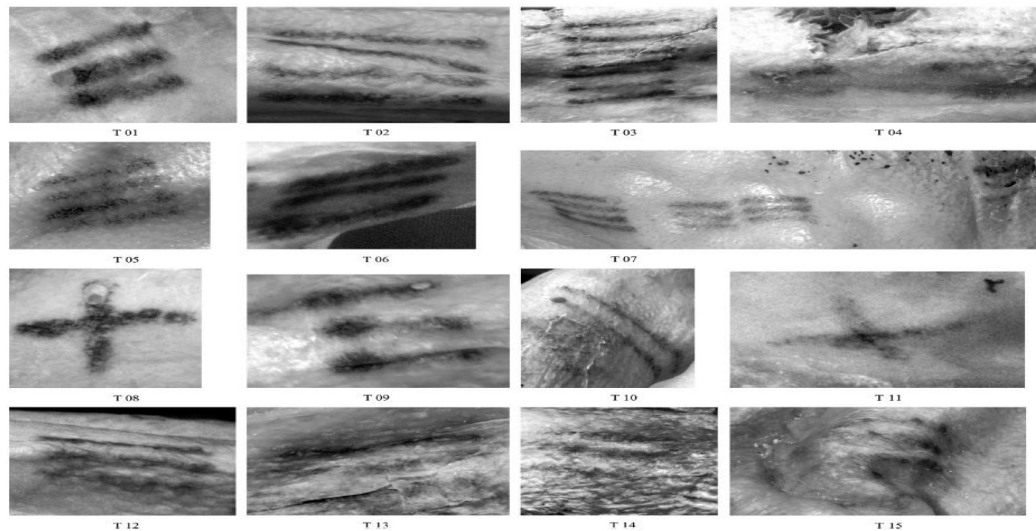


Fig. 2. A closer look at some of Iceman's tattoos. (Credit: EURAC/M.Samadelli/M.Melis)

Between c. 4000 B.C. to 1450 B.C., substantial evidence from both mummies and figurines showed that women in ancient Egypt were imbued with many bodily inscriptions. Originally, it was deduced that these tattooed women were of low status or that they were prostitutes and that these tattoos would protect women against sexually transmitted diseases. Further research, however, revealed repeated placement of these tattoos on particular areas of women's bodies, namely the thighs, abdomen, and breasts. From these prevalent and precisely imbued markings, it was thus concluded that these tattoos served as amulets or protection over women during pregnancy and childbirth. Oftentimes, a number of dots were found on the abdomen so that when the stomach expanded during pregnancy, so too would the dots. The result created a web over the abdomen that enveloped and protected the whole area of the fetus. Also common on women's bodies was the deity Bes that was tattooed on the thighs of women. This placement "would again suggest the use of tattoos as a means of safeguarding the actual birth, since Bes was the protector of women in labor, and his position at the tops of the thighs a suitable location" (Lineberry 2-3).

In terms of female body inscription, it also seemed to be commonplace that older women marked the bodies of younger girls. For these markings, the women used a set of needles in fixed wood; the needles were tied together so that detailed patterns could be created. It was also common for soot to be sprinkled under the cuts so that when the scars healed, there would be a more pronounced design (Lineberry 3). Oftentimes, this type of scarification was sought after for the aesthetic visual effect.

Aside from the Egyptians, many other cultures evidenced tattooing practices. Among them were the Nubians, the Scythian Pazyryk, the Britons, the Greeks and Romans, the pre-Columbian cultures of Peru and Chile, the Native Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Tahitians, and the New Zealanders. It is thus important to touch briefly upon the role of tattoos within these cultures.

Evidence from Nubian mummies suggests tattooing on women for the purposes aforementioned but these tattoos were blue in hue. The Scythian Pazyryk culture was evidenced to have employed tattooing: “In 1948, the 2,400-year-old body of a Scythian male was discovered preserved in ice in Siberia, his limbs and torso covered in ornate tattoos of mythical animals” (Lineberry 4). Tattoos in this culture marked status and identification within a group so that those without them were considered to be of low rank or outcasts respectively. The Britons also used tattoos to mark status and many of the tattoos represented beast-like images (Lineberry 4).

The Greeks and Romans used the word ‘stigma (ta)’ to identify inscription on the body. The negative connotation of the word ‘stigma’ as it applies to tattooing thus seems to have found its roots in this time period. ‘Stigma (ta)’ denoted branding the body with some sort of permanent mark. Although the Greeks and Romans applied the term to branding animals, the idea of ‘stigma (ta)’ seemed to correlate to the modern idea of permanently inscribing/altering the body in some fashion. In the Greek culture, as in some of the aforementioned cultures, tattoos were used to signify membership of a group, used to mark possession, especially in the case of slaves, and used as an act of retribution on those who deviated from society’s structures. These practices of tattooing were

adopted by the Romans for a span of time until the emergence of Christianity. Under Judeo-Christian faith, tattoos, as a mark on the body, violated the human body and “were felt to disfigure that made in God’s image” (Lineberry 5) and so were banned circa A.D. 306.

In pre-Columbian cultures, tattoos were also evidenced on the extremities of the body with a concentration on animal images as the designs. Evidence of facial tattooing was also found on mummies’ remains as well. In the Native American culture, facial tattooing as well as body tattooing was evident, and in China, during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), although tattoos were evident, they were only used as punitive measures for those who violated the law. Japanese men began inscribing their bodies in the 3rd century A.D. (Lineberry 5).

Celtic tattooing has been consistent and is commonly seen in modern times. “Celts developed a style of tattooing that involves intricate patterns, interwoven designs, steps, pyramids, and labyrinths. The intertwined knots expressed the Celtic belief that man and nature are intertwined and the mazes depict life’s journeys” (Shnurman 16). Many of the Celtic warriors displayed their Celtic symbols and images across their chests during war in order to intimidate their enemies.

In Central/South America, the Aztec tattoo was the most revered in that religion was intricately intertwined in each tattoo. Because the Aztec worshipped the sun, that symbol became the staple of the culture. The core body parts of the stomach and chest (and wrist) were often tattooed with the sun albeit to represent the importance of the sun

as the core of the universe against the stomach and chest as the core and seats of power to the human body.

In India/Thailand, tattoos are most commonly used as protection. Thai tattoos are also known as Sak Yant which, "...is Thai sacred geometry tattooed in the skin using Buddhist, Brahman, Animist imagery, as well as magical incantations written in ancient script" (Shnurman 15). Sak Yant has become popular especially through the celebrity of Angelina Jolie who has a Sak Yant tattoo inscripted on her back.

African tattoos, most commonly used as protection and power as many other cultures' tattoos, were created differently than traditional methods of tattooing in that the skin was actually cut open and ash/soot were poured into the wound so that when the wound healed, the dark color of the ash/soot shone through the skin. Oftentimes, though, since the ash/soot was close to the color of African skin, the effect was less than desirable although the designs made were very appealing to the eye.

In terms of tribal tattooing, it was extremely crucial in some cultures, most notably in New Zealand which will be discussed below, but it is noteworthy to state that Borneo was known for its authentic tribal tattooing which is still practiced today. In Borneo, the techniques for traditional tattooing have been relatively untouched and tattoo masters who are elderly can be seen tattooing using traditional "tools" of thorns and sticks. These authentic, traditional tattoos have been the basis for Western tribal tattoos.

One of the most notable cultures that employed the practice of tribal tattooing was the Maori of New Zealand. The Maori gained fame through their intricate facial tattoos.

The tattoos were inscribed primarily on the face because the head held great importance as it was considered the most sacred part of the body. Each facial tattoo or '*moko*' as they were termed, "...was unique to that individual and [since it] conveyed specific information about their status, rank, ancestry, and abilities..." (Lineberry 2). Each of these facial tattoos was extremely distinct and original; one could liken it to a modern day social security card. In fact, the facial tattoos were considered as important as a modern-day signature. These tattoos were given at various rites of passage to signify adult status executed through a very painful process. These *mokos* were chiseled one-eighth of an inch into the face using a serrated bone/shell. Additionally, those individuals who were heavily tattooed aside from the *moko* were regarded more highly than those without tattoos.

The *moko* (see Fig. 3) was esteemed so highly that those individuals without it were considered outcasts and disregarded as part of the Maori culture. Those with these facial tattoos were held in high regard and were considered appealing to the opposite gender. Both men and women of the Maori culture displayed tattoos, however, the particular areas for tattooing were somewhat gender specific. Most women were tattooed primarily on the lip, nose, and chin areas. Men, on the other hand, had extensive markings on the face and throughout the body. These designs were "...primarily of whorls, geometric patterns, and other non-representational, ornamental designs" (Sanders and Vail 10). As aforementioned, therapeutic value was evidenced in the placement of the tattoos on Maori women as these marks were thought to prevent wrinkles around the inscribed areas.



Fig. 3. The “moko” of the Maori.

The Maori *moko* was so esteemed that it was even considered of high rank after death. As DeMello states, “The Maori had a tradition of preserving the tattooed heads of deceased persons of nobility in order, it was presumed, to keep alive the memory of the dead” (46). Conversely, the heads of enemies wearing extensive facial tattoos were also preserved and displayed. These heads were so highly regarded that in 1770, there was essentially a barter system where Europeans traded the tattooed heads for weapons; however, this was eventually outlawed by authorities because scandal broke out. European demand was so high during tribal wars that captives were first tattooed extensively, then killed, and then decapitated so that the heads could be traded amongst the Europeans. This led to a decline by the Maori to mark their kind because of the apparent threat that they could be killed for their tattooed heads.

The purposes of tattoos in tribal society were, as mentioned above, to identify social status in community and to showcase one’s bravery to community members so as

to be an acceptable, validated member. Another predominant purpose included religious protection. Often, certain deities or spirits were thought to reside in the tattoo of the wearer so that the wearer was constantly protected. Other cultures believed that tattoos held certain supernatural powers. In most cultures in general, those who died without markings on their bodies were thought to have negative experiences in the afterlife; namely, those unmarked beings would be beaten in the afterlife or served to the gods as sustenance. Thus, the tattoo served many purposes. As Sanders and Vail state, “In addition to assuring immortality or improving one’s chances of enjoying a pleasant afterlife, tattooing in tribal cultures was often believed to ensure the bearer’s good luck; to help charm members of the opposite sex; to protect one from accident; to preserve youth; and to bring good health” (11).

In terms of the historical significance of tattooing in Japan, it is crucial to focus on Japanese tattooing as an art form. Tattooing at its best is practiced to this day most extraordinarily in Japan. In the thirteenth century, tattoos were used in Japan primarily to identify the outcasts of society. Tattoos marked criminals and reflected the nature and location of the particular crime they committed. Then, in the early seventeenth century, *trebokuro*, a particular style of tattooing, emerged where decorative markings were placed on the body in order to express one’s loyalty to another and the gods. As *trebokuro* slowly ceased because of government oppression, in the mid-eightieth century, the notable tiger motifs popular today found their origins. During this time too, a famous Chinese novel, entitled *Suikoden*, began to circulate among Japan. In this novel, 108 brigands fought against the corruption of the government and many of the outlaw

characters bore extensive body tattoos with tiger motifs. “The most popular versions were heavily illustrated with ukiyo-e (wood block) prints by well-known artists of the time, especially the famed Kuniyoshi” (Sanders and Vail 12). As a result of these tattooed characters, many Japanese natives patronized local ukiyo-e artists in order to emulate these characters from the famed novel. The images included heroic figures, creatures of various types, and many traditional images. *Irezumi*, as this type of tattooing was called, was eventually terminated under the Emperor Meiji because he thought that western visitors would view the individuals who possessed these tattoos as barbaric. On the contrary, however, Westerners found these tattoos intriguing which resulted in many Japanese tattooists, called *hori*, creating these indelible marks on “...European and American sailors, merchants, and visiting dignitaries.” (Sanders and Vail 12). Despite the fact that this type of Japanese tattooing would eventually be prohibited and become an underground practice, Japanese tattooing set the precedent in terms of color, detail, form and content. Thus, Japanese tattooing today is embedded in the western art world due to the level of technical skill it employed.

Of important note, Japanese tattooing is also known best for its full-body suit tattoos. A particular theme is usually decided upon and the creation of the full body suit is extremely intricate in design and takes great forethought and skill on behalf of the artist. Each space and curve of the human canvas is taken into account for the proper placement of each tattoo and each image tattooed creates a piece of a whole work of art strewn along the body (see Fig. 4). Today, various needle groupings are used to create desired effects of the tattoo and are done by hand instead of the tattoo machine.



Fig. 4. Sep 4, 2013 (via The Leu Family's Family Iron)
By Filip Leu (Switzerland - The Leu Family Iron)

With regard to the Pacific Islands, there are many theories that surround the notion of how tattoos became assimilated here. Some theories hypothesize that the Ainu, a certain nomadic tribe, carried the custom into the Islands. Other theories hypothesize that Samoan explorers may have adopted the practice in their travels and carried it into the Hawaiian Islands. Other theories still hypothesize that South American explorers may have carried the practice to the New Zealand region after western encounters.

Contemporary western tattooing, however, found its origins in the British Isles which certain tribal groups inhabited. Tattooing thrived in these tribal groups where men

especially were marked with animal motifs to represent their ferocity indicative of their environment. The assimilation of tattooing to the military at this time was due to presence of Roman soldiers who began to invade the British Isles. As Sanders and Vail state, “This contact with invading Roman legions resulted in the adoption of tattooing by the occupying Roman soldiers” (13). As an aside, tattooing in the Roman Empire began as a taboo in that they marked slaves and criminals; however, tattoos were looked upon more favorably with regards to Roman soldiers. Tattoos marked Roman soldiers who were worthy warriors and these soldiers quickly spread this phenomenon throughout the military. Tattooing became a trademark until the third century when Emperor Constantine prohibited this practice because it was in direct opposition to the Christian teachings that he followed. Under these teachings, the body was a temple of the Holy Spirit never to be tainted especially with such markings as tattoos. Later, the nobility of the Anglo-Saxons practiced tattooing and like the Japanese aforementioned, did so in order to express loyalty to their beloved or as a form of religious devotion. During the eighth through tenth centuries, tattooing again became a religious matter. First, tattooing was again banned because it was thought to defile God’s creation of the body, however, it then became an important marker during the period in which the Holy Land was controlled by the Muslims. During crusades, many warriors had their bodies tattooed with religious markings so that, should they be killed in battle, they received a proper Christian burial (Sanders and Vail 13-14).

The voyages of Captain James Cook in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries marked the beginning of western tattooing and were responsible for migrating tattoo

practice to the West. Primarily, the men and women of Tahiti especially had markings throughout their bodies. The tattoos on each gender were specific to each individual character and these markings consisted of shapes and lines that were specifically traced on the joints and these markings consisted of other creature motifs as well. The function of the tattoo was twofold; it had a protective and genealogical nature. As a result of this, the crew members of Captain Cook began getting various tattoos on their bodies some of which included, "...rifles and cannons and dates and words commemorating the origin and death of chiefs" (DeMello 45). These images were fairly new designs as the need for tattoos serving as a protective function decreased because of the adoption of weapons by the Hawaiians. As the British sailors acquired Polynesian tattoos, so too did the Polynesians add to their own repertoire British designs. Therefore, the crewmen were responsible for augmenting the tattoo designs of the Polynesians and bringing the tattoo to the West. Cook coined the tattoo practice as "pricking," and the islanders initially called it, "ta-tu." As DeMello states, "...tattoos were known in the West as "pricks" or "marks" (45). These terms were soon replaced with the term "tattoo" which would become the term used indefinitely. As Lineberry states, "Following James Cook's British expedition to Tahiti in 1769, the islanders' term 'tatatau' or 'tattau,' meaning to hit or strike, gave the west our modern term 'tattoo' "(4). Thus, when James Cook journeyed back to Europe, the term "tattoo" spread among Europeans and established its longevity to the present. It then became common for many Europeans to get these newly termed "tattoos."

During the war times specifically, tattooing was removed from the exotic notion and seen through a different lens. Those primarily responsible for this transition were sailors who represented many ideologies for the working class. They symbolized, "...adventure, travel, exotic lands and people, and a free spirit" (DeMello 49). Then as early tattooists strove to develop their own original designs while also integrating new technology, the transformation from exoticism to patriotism took root in the West. It was under this patriotic pretense that the concept of tattooing thrived amongst the working class.

It was unlikely that members of the European middle class subjected themselves to the practice of tattooing. Those who were primarily tattooed in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries were sailors, as mentioned above, those people who performed at-risk work, military personnel, and those of the upper class. For the upper class, tattoos were perceived as a status symbol and sought after markings that indicated nobility. For the other individuals aforementioned, many began to bear symbols of their trade so that these tattoos would protect them like they did in cultures of old. Thus, these tattoos served as amulets for the wearers. During this time, "The most popular designs were South Sea and nautical images, identification marks, (especially military and craft guild insignia), religious tattoos, marks of political allegiance, and love vows" (Sanders and Vail 15). The most notable tattoos were those worn on travelers and it was common that tattoos served as a kind of memorabilia permanently branding the traveler with evidence of where he had been.

The period between the two world wars was coined the Golden Age of Tattooing and during this time, tattooing was initially identified with patriotism. Those men who donned tattoos were instinctively thought to have some affiliation with the military at some point. Thus, if tattoos were associated with the military, it was viewed in a positive light throughout history. Consequently, military personnel were influential in setting “tattoo tone” precedents in style, imagery, and the like. Many looked to sailors because they were known to have a longtime affiliation with the art, had many sought after tattoos because of their travels, and were considered to be the best customers because, as they would get paid bimonthly, they would frequent parlors on a more regular basis than the everyman. Among the various types of tattoos that military personnel sought after, one kind of tattoo was labeled the literal tattoo. This tattoo was coined as such because many members of the community understood and interpreted the tattoo the same way. Therefore, these tattoos had an easy readability factor and were universal in appeal. “The images were derived from popular culture, the placement was visible, the lines and colors were bold, and the liberal use of alphabetic script in tattoos (the word tattoo) made them extremely easy to read” (DeMello 65). Another form of tattoo was the initial or name tattoo while popular cartoon and lucky-charm tattoos ran a close third. The most prevalent of these literal tattoos though were the identification tattoos primarily used on military personnel. These tattoos listed individuals’ names, rank, date of birth, etc. so that if killed in action, the individuals could be identified by these markings. These identity tattoos also found popularity outside of the military when parents tattooed their children after an abduction scare and then in 1936, individuals tattooed their social security

numbers onto themselves so as to remember these numbers and brand themselves permanently in identity (DeMello 65).

The introduction of tattooing in the United States originated under the guise of patriotism mentioned above. The first known tattooist in the United States was a man named Martin Hildebrand who was primarily responsible for tattooing many military personnel in the Civil War. However, Hildebrand, along with other English tattooists, namely George Burchett and Tom Riley, also administered to a new clientele that emerged on the scene; now, the “high society” or the European upper class was getting tattooed. This clientele however lasted only until World War I because of the invention of the electric tattoo machine, mentioned below, which bore the American style of tattooing with, “...strong black lines, typically made with five (or more) needles; heavy black shading; and a dab of color (first black and red, and later, green and blue became available)” (DeMello 50). Consequently, tattooing was less expensive and thus more accessible to the lower class. Tattooing became a fairly mundane practice and thus there was a diminished allure from the higher class. In 1846, Hildebrand set up a tattoo shop to service his customers and, following Hildebrand’s lead, many other pioneers of tattooing set up shops in the surrounding areas. “Other well-known American artists practicing during this period in the Chatam Square area of New York were Samuel F. O’Reilly, ‘Professor’ Charlie Wagner, Jack Hanley (The World’s Most Famous Artist), and Lewis (Lew-the-Jew) Alberts (Sanders and Vail 16). These tattoo artists, better known as mere craftsmen at that time, however, thus carried on the negative connotation that came with early tattooing because they marked lower-class citizens.

As an aside, it was also during this time that Hori Chyo, the Japanese tattoo master aforementioned, was enticed to work under O'Reilly. It was from Chyo that the modern oriental motifs took root in American culture.

Overall, it can be concluded that many cultures employed tattooing for reasons of protection, therapeutic value, a display of patriotism, and the like. Tattoos were also used to identify people within and without certain cultures. The skin was a canvas upon which people could identify themselves through their outward appearance via distinct markings on the body. Thus, through these markings, messages were delivered on the skin's canvas through elaborate, visible signs.

The Revolution of the Tattoo World

A major element in the evolution of tattooing began with Samuel O'Reilly's creation of the electric tattoo machine. With this machine, pain from tattooing was significantly reduced because it negated the use of the old-fashioned hand administered tattoos and a greater number of individuals could be serviced in a shorter amount of time due to the ease in execution from the tattoo machine (Sanders and Vail 17). Also, with this tattoo machine, a tattoo artist did not have to possess as much skill and did not have to have as much experience as they required before the advent of this machine. All an artist needed to do now was literally color in the tattoo rather than pay attention to the execution of the needles. In 1891, after Thomas Edison patented a machine that mirrored a perforated pen which punctured paper stencils to create signs and embroidery,

“O’Reilly received the first American patent for an electromagnetic tattoo machine (which he called ‘*tattaugraph*’) which was, with only minor modifications, adapted from the Edison design” (Sanders and Vail 17). Although this machine was somewhat rudimentary in design, it allowed for an increase in tattooing at a more rapid rate. In 1904, the aforementioned tattoo artist Charlie Wagner received a patent for a more progressive tattoo machine distinguishing it by its structure. This machine consisted of two coils that connected to the tube and needle. Since the advent of this machine, technology has changed very minimally.

In addition to the revolutionary tattoo machine, in the late nineteenth century, a pioneer tattoo artist, Lew Alberts, also aforementioned, played a pivotal role in what Westerners have coined “flash” designs. These flash designs are patterns that usually hang on the walls of tattoo shops/parlors to allow individuals to browse easily through tattoo designs. These designs are akin to an enormous catalogue from which to choose. Alberts created the first flash by formulating designs and these designs were disseminated to shops at the time (Sanders and Vail 17).

The Initial Fall of Tattooing in the Early Sixties

After World War II, there existed a decline in the popularity of tattooing. First, this decline seemed to be a direct result of the health codes of tattoo parlors and tattooists themselves. Famous tattooists were being fined specifically for unsanitary conditions and tattooing minors as well. The onset of these fines was the result of the end of wartime.

After the war, it was easier to enforce laws as there were fewer individuals getting tattooed due to the diminished need to express patriotism. Therefore, municipalities began to look at tattooing through an analytical lens. Upon this assessment, the need for tightened health code standards and age regulations arose which consequently led to the closing of many tattoo shops. Then, when diseases such as hepatitis broke out, tattooing was banned altogether. Military personnel also began to look unkindly upon their tattoos as they were no longer valued. Perhaps another deterrent for tattooing was the association of these marks with the Nazi practice of tattooing in identifying the victims of the Holocaust. Also, during this time, many working-class men were still acquiring tattoos, but a new mode of tattooing was beginning to take effect, a new more confrontational form, the street tattoo or the biker tattoo. The biker tattoo in particular is known for its explicitly antisocial stigma. The language itself of these tattoos is highly literal and understood by its members and some nonmembers. However, this type of tattoo defied and challenged middle class values as well as the once acclaimed patriotic tattoo (DeMello 67-68).

Chicano gang members were also gaining popularity for their homemade tattoos at this time as well. In the forties and fifties, Chicano tattooing originated in the *pachuco* gang culture. These tattoos were known to have been created with India ink, a dark black ink that can penetrate the skin if applied with a common needle. Other outcast groups also began to get tattoos so much so that tattoos began to define the ostracized of society and research at the time linked tattoos to negative behaviors. Therefore, considering all of

these elements, the negative view of tattooing not only took shape, but affirmed post World War II.

The correlation of the tattoo to the negative also occurred through its association to the prison tattoo. Prison tattoos were often done by hand using an excess of black ink. Many private symbols were used whereby only the insiders to the prison community understood the symbols. For example, the number of tears tattooed by the corner of the eye represents the number of years an inmate is incarcerated or symbolizes his crime of murder. It is a North American symbol of an inmate's suffering (DeMello 68-69).

Therefore, due to health code violations and the negative stigma attached to tattoos after World War II, it was apparent why tattooing would decline in popularity.

The Coined Tattoo Renaissance

Despite the initial fall of tattooing in the early 1960's, the 1960's proved to rally the notion of tattooing during a period known as the Tattoo Renaissance. During the mid-1960s, there was a period in time at which there existed many cultural, artistic, and technological changes that positively influenced the world of tattooing. While a negative stigma still ensued, many new forms of tattoos began to emerge that appealed to a younger audience. Young tattooists themselves now began to stand alongside older tattooists with a main distinguishing characteristic in hand, a fine arts degree. The tattoos that resulted from these fine art tattooists focused more on the exotic than previously tattooed images and this caused a greater appeal to the middle-class audience. Thus, as

soon as the middle class dabbled in the world of tattoos and it took root, tattoos were imbued with a greater sense of power and worth.

A tattooist by the name of Norman Keith (Sailor Jerry) Collins singlehandedly was responsible for the new popularity during the tattoo renaissance due to many of his pioneer contributions to the industry. Collins was a sailor in the 1920s who did what most sailors of the time did. "Sailors went from port to port, partying, drinking, supporting the local 'working' girls, and of course getting tattoos" (Shnurman 5). Collins was a known rebel and made his impact by partaking in all the unfavorable activities of sailors, but most especially was known for his full sleeve tattoos in which he shamelessly displayed. Among his contributions though, "he developed magnum style tattoo needles as well as expanding on the standard color palette to include purple, which was unheard of and a formula he kept a secret from everyone. He was a pioneer in tattoo safety and cleanliness, and tested many new pigments on himself before anyone else" (Shnurman 5). Also, Collins introduced Japanese imagery, style, theories of color, and techniques in layering into the United States. Since 1868 to the present, Westerners have always had an interest in Japanese tattooing, namely in its imagery and style. Japanese tattooing is almost an elitist form of tattooing in that it uses the whole body as part of the design of the tattoo instead of isolated parts of the body with random non-related images strewn throughout. It was Collins who influenced tattooists like Don Ed Hardy, mentioned later, which changed the tattoo milieu from that point on. Because Collins served in World War II, he designated tattoo areas in his ports of call permanently marking many servicemen. He continued tattooing in peacetime and he was notorious for incorporating dragons into his

work. His major commitment to tattooing though was the way in which he viewed the art. He sought to really legitimize tattooing as an art. “He also had a strong interest in improving tattooing as an art form and felt that most U.S tattooists were greedy, talentless copycats” (DeMello 73). In the 1960s, Collins opened a tattoo shop in New York City and consequently met Japanese and Hong Kong tattoo artists with whom he befriended. These relationships however were driven by a barter system where Collins supplied the artists with American tattoo machines in exchange for these artists’ styles, techniques, and advice. “He was especially impressed by the Japanese use of colors and shading and their focus on the entire body as a canvas for sophisticated artistic expression” (DeMello 74). Collins, therefore, used this Japanese imagery and influence in his tattoos, but kept American integrity in them as well. He focused primarily on the images in the backgrounds of tattoos and incorporated symbols of Japan in these backgrounds. What resulted was a quasi-American tattoo coined by Collins that gained popularity. Cliff Raven and Don Ed Hardy were two tattooists at the time that saw Collins’ work and quickly formed a relationship with him as they too were captivated by Japanese imagery that symbolizes to this day refinement, spirituality, and sophistication. Therefore, it can be argued that due to the introduction of the Japanese style of tattooing in the West, the renaissance of meaningful and validated tattoos emerged.

In the 1970s, there existed a pivotal shift in the perception of tattooing that led to an ever-increasing upward rise in the popularity of tattooing. This shift began with a tattooist by the name of Lyle Tuttle who brought attention to his tattoo work due to his unique designs. In the 1950s, his first tattoo shop was located on the west coast in San

Francisco and his popularity gave way to tattooing many celebrities of the time which pushed the art into mainstream culture. The designs that came out of Tuttle's shop were indeed reflective of the cultural changes that were occurring at the time as well. Prior to the seventies, most tattoos were masculine in nature, but now, they seemed on the softer side appealing to women. As DeMello points out, "But, with the peace, gay, and women's liberation movements came new designs that were both more feminine and also appealed to middle-class tastes more than the classic working-class designs" (77). The liberation of not only women at this time, but of bodies in general, paved the way for new practices in tattooing that indeed advanced the art in a positive fashion. As an aside too, Tuttle was also responsible for making tattooing more appealing in the eye of the public for he was instrumental in raising the health standards of tattooing. Thus, this level of attention on health standards also chiseled away another layer of negativity associated with tattooing.

In addition to Tuttle's contributions, Don Ed Hardy, the artist responsible for the tattoo-based clothing/accessory line today, played a major role in changing the face of tattooing in the United States which attracted many middle class members. Born in 1945 and since the age of 10, Hardy immersed himself in everything that was art. Hardy was drawn to the tattoo industry because at that time in the 60s, tattooing was an underdeveloped art. He sought to legitimize it and "...use tools and pigments in a way that hadn't been explored before and create masterpieces that could withstand artistic scrutiny in any social division" (Shnurman 8). In other words, Hardy recognized the true art in tattoo, as the author of this paper does, and made it his life's mission to authenticate

the art and make it more accessible to the public without the negative stigma. Hardy traveled to Japan and studied there with Tattoo Master Horihide (Oguri) and studied diligently the Japanese motifs, style, and technique of tattooing. He then came back to the United States where he popularized the Japanese aesthetic under the tutelage of Samuel Steward, one of the first openly homosexual tattooists who paved the way for other homosexual tattooists and fans. His favorite images were rooted in the Japanese “Hell Scrolls” which depicted macabre forms, those images one can see today incorporated in most of his works. As an aside, Ed Hardy’s tattoo art has been overshadowed in recent years by the clothing line Christian Audigier. In 2004, Audigier bought rights for over 1,000 of Hardy’s images and branded them though a clothes line. We must never forget the artist behind the brand though and realize that it was Don Ed Hardy himself that disseminated tattoo art into our culture and still promotes art painting and publishing today.

A tattooist by the name of Joseph Patrick O’Sullivan, famously known as Spider Webb in the tattoo world, was also influential in popularizing East Coast tattooing. He was particularly known as a rebel tattooist who created many edgy and innovative tattoos on unique, often risqué areas of the body. During Webb’s time, an artist named Shotsie Gorman worked with Spider Webb. In reflecting on his work with Webb he stated, “My interest has always been in late Renaissance painting and more realist kind of painting and my sculptural interest was always very abstract so I guess my aesthetic was kind of built out of my desire to take tattooing and blend it with my perception about what good quality art was” (DeMello 83). From this quote and the above artists’ work, one can see

how tattooing was beginning to be redefined and, in fact, beginning to be perceived as an art rather than a negative stigma on the body. No longer was tattooing a craft at which just anyone could try one's hand; it was beginning to involve precise technique that set the bar higher.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Chicano-style tattooing and tribalism influenced the rising popularity of tattooing. First, Chicano-style tattooing, which was once associated with convicts and gang members, was also revived. Chicano style tattoos were known for their fine-lined, monochromatic style. Two tattoo artists, Freddy Negrete and Jack Rudy, perfected these once prison associated tattoos. They used precise needlework techniques to allow fine detail that allowed for a more realistic photographic impression on the skin. Tribalism also played a role in reviving popularity in that tribal tattoos that originated in places like Hawaii and New Zealand were becoming the staple symbols in communities like the S/M leather communities, punk community, and those seen as marginalized. Consequently, the newly revived Chicano-style tattooing and the tattoos revitalized from tribal roots added to the advancements in U.S. tattooing.

The basis for this renaissance in tattooing came from past symbols that resurfaced with a new creative edge brought to life through artists' new definitions and transformations of these symbols. Thus, through the use of past symbols, the imagery was preserved, but a new style was born. As one artist stated, "...Here in the West we live in such a cultural wasteland such that people tend to gravitate toward things from the past" (DeMello 88). It was thereby with a fresh eye that the old was made new and individuals perceived tattooing from a more innovative, modern lens.

The Movements that Revolutionized Contextual Meanings of Tattoos

Individuals who get tattooed inscribe their bodies, or write themselves, for others to read at their disposal. Tattoos serve as a means of identity and establish the wearer's relationship with society. Before the tattoo renaissance, tattoos were interpreted literally in that their meanings were derived directly from the image on the body. Following the tattoo renaissance, however, the meanings of tattoos as well as their particular functions evolved. First, before the 1970s, there were only a collection of images that individuals tattooed on their bodies. Post tattoo renaissance, artists began to create unique, fine art, custom tattoos that individuals created themselves that had personal meaning to them. Some of these meanings too spoke to the larger world and the changing tides of society. As Bourdieu suggests in DeMello, "...tattoos, too, are a form of body praxis, and that men and women, gays and straights, and working-class and middle-class people will all approach tattoos differently, based on their own social positions" (140).

As a result of the evolution of tattoos after the renaissance, the meaning and aesthetics differed to such an extent that the body has now been viewed as a temple upon which tattoos are designed to decorate. Tattoos are no longer a means of desecration if they are meticulously conceived and artistically executed. In order for individuals to perceive tattoos in this light, there had to result a new definition of tattooing that deviated from the stigmatized definition associated with the working-class. The new meaning was thus derived from the cultural systems and social movements that surrounded the middle class and emerged in the seventies and eighties.

There were various movements during these times that influenced the way in which tattoos were interpreted. There existed at this time "...a revolution of human consciousness that affected how people thought about relationships, religion, work, education, and the self. Tattooing began, for the first time, to be connected with emerging issues like self-actualization, social and personal transformation, ecological awareness, and spiritual growth" (DeMello 143). Two of the leading movements that revolutionized the tattoo world were the leather and S/M cultures. These cultures focused on the self in terms of the transformation of it and the enlightenment that came from modifying the body. In fact, these movements were the source of others and, although other movements modified the practices of the leather and S/M cultures, they can be credited for their influence on the movements that followed.

The self-help movement began in the 1970s in order that the participants of this movement reach a heightened level of happiness and alleviate and/or eliminate negative behaviors in their lives. The movement employed various psychological techniques and the like to overcome obstacles that hindered a positive lifestyle. The wellness of the body as well as the mind was the focal point of the movement. Tattoos during this period served as symbols of therapy. Tattoos could be likened to vehicles or extensions of the self that concretely manifested the inner, improved self. Even today, the tattooist himself who creates tattoos from this movement aligns with the tattooee and the very act of laying hands on the body creates a very powerful element in the healing of the self. These tattoos are thus interpreted through a therapeutic framework. As DeMello points out,

“Today, tattooing is thought to give individuals the means to work out their personal and emotional issues on their bodies” (143).

Another movement that greatly influenced the way in which tattoos were interpreted was the New Age movement. In the New Age movement, individuals of the 1960s began to experiment with various religions and value systems. Holistic practices were employed and the consciousness of the time was that society and all its pitfalls could be overcome by human potential, not extraordinary means. During this time, symbols/practices were borrowed from other cultures and areas, such as “...Tibetan Buddhism, Neopaganism, astrology, tarot, numerology, Native American spirituality, shamanism, mysticism, transcendental as well as other kinds of meditation, and Eastern spirituality” (DeMello 145). Tattoos were looked upon as transformative entities and in becoming tattooed under this premise, individuals were thought to have greater freedom and self-realization. “For example, a tattoo is seen to be able to act as a talisman in times of crisis; it can unify the body and spirit; and the process of tattooing can be a rite of passage that counteracts social alienation” (DeMello 146).

Two other movements that utilized tattooing as an extension of the self or belief system were the Goddess religion movement and the Men’s movement. The Goddess religion focused on feminist spirituality, witchcraft and the like. It centered on the harmony between human and the environment and members of it employed various rituals that called upon the powers of the universe to align with the human world. Tattooing held its place during this movement because many tattooed individuals embraced this movement because they saw society as too alienating and repressive.

Because of the feminist nature of this religion too, many lesbians and straight women today wear the tattoos that symbolize non-Western ideas and Neo-pagan philosophies. The Men's movement, on the other hand, "...is especially concerned with revitalizing North American culture (seen as morally and spiritually bankrupt) through borrowing rituals and myths from non-Western cultures" (DeMello 148). Overall, the Men's movement focused on "getting back to the basics" with a conscious effort of regaining masculinity through the reestablishment of pre-technological society. The members of this movement envisioned a world where men coexisted peacefully through primitive rituals and myths. Tattooing then found its place in this movement in that in returning to primitive roots, there was a process by which a boy became a man. To symbolize that process in the past, men got tattooed as a form of ritual and rebirth into manhood. Today, one of the reasons men get tattooed does not center so much on an initiation into manhood, but because it is a spiritual act that validates their identity as men.

Yet another force that had an influence on the rise of tattooing was centered on the ecology or environmental movement. The environment and individuals' relationships with it thus defined personal philosophies that sought to find more holistic ways to navigate the environment rather than destructive ones that abused what the environment had to offer mankind. Tattooing thus found its place in this movement through the use of nature symbols that were tattooed on those who took these notions seriously. As DeMello points out, "Brazilian rain forests, Yanomamo shamans, along with Western endangered species such as whales and spotted owls have all been co-opted as symbols of the

environmental movement, and their use as tattoo designs within the tattoo community reflects the power of their symbolic associations” (150).

All of these movements then contributed greatly to the renaissance of tattooing. Although tattoos are showcased on the wearer as physical manifestations, they are read through various lenses that have impacted the way in which the wearer and the reader interpret them. Therefore, tattoos are not just representations of various movements, but manifestations of the wearer’s inner truths.

As an overall note then, in tracing the historical background of the tattoo, the reader is more clearly able to see how in fact the tattoo has taken shape and influenced the way in which individuals view this creation. In most cases, the tattoo is not merely the result of transient trends, but a unique symbol that has carried with it strength, spirituality, and power!

The Evolution of the Tattoo

Status evolution

The status of tattooing itself has also evolved. In fact, the status of a tattoo encompasses many factors that legitimize the art of tattooing and determine status. The main factor as discussed above is centered on the level of artistic prowess of the tattoo design. There are two main tattoo forms. The lowest form of tattoo delivery exists when the tattooee chooses from flash on the walls. Once the choice is made by the tattooee, the tattooist then simply places a stencil onto the desired area and literally traces the outline

on the designated part of the body and fills in the stencil with ink. This can be likened to the coloring process by which an individual merely colors in the lines of an image. The second form of tattoo delivery exists in custom tattooing, rather than one from flash. This type of tattoo is regarded as a high art tattoo. This custom work leads to the next factor of legitimacy which is based on an artist's credentials and reputation. If the artist inscribing is well-known for his/her custom work and has the proper fine art credentials, then the tattoo product is respectfully held in esteem. For tattoo artists to be esteemed, the artist himself must, in addition to having a fine arts degree, have a reputable mentor, preferably own/run a tattoo parlor in a reputable area where custom work is envisioned and executed, and be linked to tattoo organizations and groups that advocate tattoos. Another factor of legitimacy depends on the number of collected pieces by an individual. The number is seen as significant because it shows the level of dedication of the tattoo "collector." Finally, the tattoo collector's status is the last factor and is determined by how much exposure he/she has in the public eye (magazine layouts, media coverage, etc.)

Tattoo Credential Evolution

Early tattooists primarily learned the craft through apprenticeships whereby they would be hired under a tattooist for little to no pay and execute menial jobs like the cleaning of the needles or the cutting of stencils. The novice tattooist did not mind these types of jobs because he/she was still saturated in the environment and could easily emulate techniques observed. If a tattooist did not learn through an apprenticeship, novice tattooists learned by paying older, experienced tattooists. They held no artistic training

and were often sign painters or learned tattooing through carnival circuits. Many simply began tattooing because it promised easy money and that impetus far outweighed the particulars of the occupation.

In the 1970s when tattooists like Shotsie Gorman and Don Ed Hardy came into the tattoo arena with fine art training, "...there has been a large influx of middle-class, art school-trained young people entering the field of tattooing" (DeMello 84). These young artists were trained in areas like painting, sculpture, or photography which transformed the face of tattooing. Tattoos were thus viewed in light of an educational background and the art and meaning were emphasized as well as justified. Thus, the most recent avenue through which artists become tattooists is through a state-approved, bona fide fine arts program. In such a program, students take courses that focus on a more holistic approach to art. Courses individuals are required to take include, drawing on various levels, two-dimensional design, art history, painting, photography, philosophy of art, printmaking, graphic design, web design, computer graphics, color theory, etc. These courses thus focus on the historical background of the arts, the specific techniques of various art forms, the technical approaches to art, and the skills required for each area. Many tattoo artists are artists who can create much more than tattoos and who are artists by right in the other genres of art. Before these art programs though, many tattoo artists learned the art of tattooing through an apprenticeship as mentioned before. A tattoo apprenticeship was something that was formed organically between fellow tattoo artists. Most often, individuals who sought to become artists would befriend another artist and "work" with him at his tattoo shop, learning tricks of the trade as he completed what seemed nothing

of tattoo work. An apprentice would usually be a gofer for the artist, getting him coffee, washing his car, and cleaning up the shop. However, this cleaning of the shop was a key to becoming a successful tattoo artist. The apprentice would learn the importance of sterilization and cleanliness after he had cleaned a shop top to bottom and a good apprentice would know how to set up and take down a tattoo station effectively and properly. After this important task was learned, the apprentice would then pick up tricks of the trade in the actual tattooing due to his constant presence at the shop. As Shnurman states, "Apprenticeships at a shop involves hours of studying technique. Sitting silently watching how a professional uses a machine, how they apply color, how they listen to a machine...there's really no substitute for those first hand experiences" (104). Therefore, if an individual did not go to school or even if he did, apprenticeships are extremely important to learn all of the rules of the art.

As the reader can see then, the differentiation between creating fine art tattoos and simply replicating flash is in the education acquired as well as the skill executed. In the past, apprenticeships were the sole method by which to enter the world of tattooing, but today, the most sought after artists are those who hold a degree in fine art that reinforces their credibility and reputation as a true artist. With a degree, artists are thus able to call upon a vast background of theory and history to inform every creative decision in the tattoo process.

Tattoo Shop Evolution

Beginning in the twentieth century in North America, the business of tattooing originated from sub-par standards. The venues themselves that supported tattooing reflected its negative stigma. Tattoo shops were primarily in, "...small spaces located alongside barber shops, in dirty corners of arcades, under circus tents, or on carnival midways" (DeMello 59). They were hidden from mainstream society and usually known to be on the outskirts of the civilized; many of them were considered underground. Thus, these tattoo venues at the time were home for many of the marginalized of society and many individuals who were considered of lower class status including drunkards, sailors, prostitutes, bikers, and aspiring young tattooists. The atmosphere of these shops was very unwelcoming as was the language that was often sexual in nature. Most of the individuals who frequented these shops were men because especially in the 1950s, it was too liberal to allow women on the tattoo scene because of the restrictions put on the gender. In addition to that, it also did not make much sense for women to get tattoos because of the negative stigma that followed tattooing. It was thus unimaginable that women, who were told to be demure, kind, and favorable, could lower themselves enough to taint their skin with something that exemplified the total opposite of these attributes. Lesbians of the time though were somewhat "tattoo-able" because they had already transgressed sexual borders and there were no men the tattooists had to contend with after the deed of tattooing was accomplished (DeMello 61).

Today, tattoo venues are quite different from what they were in the past. Their locations are in central parts of town and there are many within a given radius. Most are

referenced as “tattoo parlors” too giving a sense of finesse even to the name itself. Also, most parlors and shops look aesthetically pleasing to the eye with custom created tattoos showcased and the artists’ portfolios laid out on coffee tables for all to admire.

Cleanliness plays a critical part in the reputation of shops/parlors as well and oftentimes, these shops/parlors mimic doctors’ offices and are held up to code with these code inspections framed for all to view. Thus, gone are the days of underground, taboo tattoo “stands” that perpetuated negative stigma.

Overall, as the reader can glean, the very nature of tattooing has been revolutionized thus assigning a higher value to tattoos. In a tattoo’s status, (today we see more high end tattoos), in the credentials added to the pool of skill, and in the physical locations of the shops, the idea of a tattoo had significantly and positively been altered to create authenticity and validity to the art.

Chapter 3

Tattoo Showcasing

Preface

In addition to understanding the history, there is intrinsic value in understanding how things are disseminated and dispersed in a culture whereby trends take hold. To that end, it is important to dissect the methods by which tattoos have been historically disseminated and also the avenues through which they have been made visible today. The most common forms of showcasing tattoos are/were in the following: exhibitions, freak shows, magazines, conventions, media, the internet, portfolios, museums, and the fashion industry.

Early Showcasing of Tattooed Individuals

Exhibitions

Early showcasing of tattooed individuals was done rather organically. Tattoo designs were first exchanged between the Polynesians and the Westerners as aforementioned, however, there was also another type of exchange that occurred. Many tattooed Polynesians were brought over to the West for exhibit. The foremost reason that these tattooed individuals were brought to the West was to juxtapose the primitive Other to the sophistication of the civilized Westerner. Therefore, with this intention in mind, these tattooed individuals were seen as savages and the perception of the tattooed Other

became associated with a negative stigma. In the United States, the displaying of tattooed individuals in exhibitions did not begin until 1876. “In 1876, with the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, native people for the first time were exhibited in the United States” (DeMello 48). The exhibitions of tattooed individuals were paramount in drawing paying crowds to see the primitive Other. Therefore, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European businessmen especially sought after attaining these tattooed wonders. The first native to be displayed was from Meangis, near the Philippines and was known by the name of Prince Jeoly. He was showcased in pubs and many other public places to attract as many people as possible. The second well known tattooed exhibitionist was Omai. On his second voyage in 1774, Cook returned to England with this Tahitian prince who was heavily tattooed. He was confiscated for his potential financial gain and displayed publicly. These Others were exhibited in what was known as “native villages” whereby individuals could observe these natives in their cultural environments. Prince Omai along with Prince Jeoly and those displayed in the native villages paved the way for what would eventually lead to tattooed individuals being displayed at sideshows and freak shows. 1901 marked the first freak show in Buffalo which consequently led to many Christian missionaries frequenting these fairs in order to identify what cultures they would need to “civilize” (DeMello 49).

Many other tattooed people were also put on display for others to see. As cited in *Tattoo Historian*, “The first tattooed European to be publicly exhibited was Jean Baptist Cabri, a French sailor who had jumped ship in the Marquesas in 1795 and was, according to his account, adopted by a tribe and tattooed on the face and body as a mark of honor”

(Sanders and Vail 15). Another exhibitionist, John Rutherford, a voyager from New Zealand, was put on display in London after he reportedly was forcibly tattooed after being captured by the Maori. By the 1850s, a rise in tattooed individuals ensued and many of them were making a business out of their body art by placing themselves as the center of exhibitions and offering themselves as objects of analysis in the medical field.

Freak Shows

The term “freak” became common when referred to disabled individuals as well as tattooed individuals that were included in sideshows. As cited in Bogdan, “Freaks, a term that includes ‘born freaks’ (those with disfiguring diseases or disabilities, as well as native people) and ‘made freaks’ (such as tattooed people) were displayed in many public arenas that drew a great crowd and offered potential for revenue” (DeMello 53). Perhaps the most common venue to display tattooed individuals was at “freak” shows. The display of tattooed individuals can be traced back to 1840 when perhaps one of the greatest contributors at this time that promoted the display of “freaks” was P.T. Barnum, the owner of the American Museum. As aforementioned, the display of these seemingly uncivilized, barbaric spectacles again reinforced white supremacy as compared to the uncivilized Other. It was common for single freak attractions to join circuses, but the organized sideshow did not gain popularity until the midcentury fading out in the fifties and sixties. The individuals who were displayed at the freak shows were greatly affected in the twentieth century with the discovery of Mendelian science. With this discovery came a better, more scientific understanding of those who were born with disfigurements, human “oddities,” and then in the sixties, the American Civil Liberties Union advocated

for the disabled so that a critical eye was cast on whoever exploited them. Thus, there was a decline in the number of genetically disfigured and disabled in these freak shows and an increase in the number of tattooed individuals, for the gap had to be filled to attract business (DeMello 54-55).

By the end of the eighteenth century, tattoo attractions showcased extraordinary individuals who were heavily tattooed. These individuals exploited themselves when they realized the financial gain offered as an oddity so much so that when the Depression struck, both men and women became tattooed in the hopes of garnishing such profit to sustain themselves. These tattooed individuals, however, did not just showcase their oddities, but they also were known to fabricate stories as to how they received their tattoos. A prominent man known to have done so was John Rutherford, mentioned before, the first tattooed white man to use stories to attract business. Rutherford told of a “native capture,” which was common, whereby he traced the story of how natives kidnapped him and forcibly tattooed his body. P.T. Barnum was also a great advocate of tattooed people and often showcased them in the American Museum and the Barnum and Bailey circus. One of the greatest attractions at that time was the Great Omi who transformed his entire body into a zebra through the use of tattoos (see Fig. 5). He was thus a great source of economic gain in the life of Barnum’s circus.



Fig. 5. The Great Omi

In terms of exhibitionists in general, as cited in Govenar, “By 1932 there were approximately three hundred completely tattooed men and women who exhibited themselves in traveling shows and urban dime museums” (DeMello 57). During this time, those who predominantly were tattooed were men, however, by the 1980s, tattooed women began to arise on the scene and took control. Of course, one could deduce that this was due to the fact that in order to showcase their tattoos, women exposed much of their body that had been considered risqué during other periods. However some,

“...tattooed women left their neck, hands, and heads free of tattoos to appear modest when wearing clothes...” (DeMello 58).

Today, at various circus sideshows, conventions, and upon special request, many heavily tattooed individuals still display themselves to the public. Among the most well-known are the self-named, The Enigma, The Catman (recently deceased), and Erik “The Lizardman” Sprague (referenced to later). The Enigma had extreme body modifications on his entire body. He has a full-body jigsaw puzzle motif, his ears are shaped into puzzle pieces, and the like. The Catman also had many body modifications, among them his entire body tattooed in a lion motif, ears shaped to points, teeth chiseled, etc.. Finally, the Lizardman’s body modifications include his entire body tattooed with a reptilian motif, a bifurcated tongue, sub dermal implants, and the like. The Lizardman began his body transformation in college when he was in the midst of creating an art project. He took that project to a whole other level when the art project became his body transformed. All three of these men in particular have been exhibited all over the world.

Thus, through exhibitions and freaks shows, tattooed individuals showcased what was considered at that time more of a “taboo” art; however, this showcasing, despite the context, allowed for individuals to be exposed more fully to the world of tattoo art.

Modern Showcasing of Tattooed Individuals

From a modern perspective, the tattoo has taken a stronger hold in society as a result of the increasing number of channels through which tattoos are showcased. Today,

there are many major contributors in the elevation of the status of tattooing. The most predominant of course is the media that covers the tattoo community at large; this leads to the celebrity of the tattoo artist. The next contributor is the tattoo magazines which began to flourish in the 1970s and 1980s. Tattoo shows or conventions, with the first convention in 1976, are the other major contributors, and finally, the internet, portfolios, museum exhibitions, and the fashion industry play major roles.

In general, the media serves as the largest portal through which tattooing is perceived and has great authority in the way in which tattooing is positively or negatively accepted. In recent years, there is a strong pool of programs that glamorize tattooing as well as the artists so that the negative stigma is peeled away layer by layer. In terms of written communication, "There are now at least eight major tattoo magazines published regularly in the United States, and articles on tattooing appear in magazines, journals, and small-town newspapers on a regular basis" (DeMello 13). The celebrity of the tattoo artist is also an important factor because the more well-known the tattoo artist, the more reputable the tattoo art becomes. Shows and conventions are also of utmost importance too because attending conventions builds for the art collector a sense of community and value among those who esteem the art. Individuals build a sense of trust and engage in a dialogue that validates and perpetuates the art of tattooing. Also, with advancements in technology, the internet has flourished in making tattoos more accessible. Portfolios have allowed for the showcasing of work, museum exhibitions have honored tattoos in their original contexts thus validating their importance, and the fashion industry has catapulted the tattoo as the latest trend.

Media

In particular, the mainstream press and media have been major contributors toward the way in which tattooing is disseminated. The press/media has a unique power in that they can be highly selective in the fashion by which materials are edited. This determines who is heard, what is published, and how the mainstream perceives what is put out into the world. The press/media ultimately decide who or what it chooses to “exploit.” Therefore, some realities are squelched while others are extolled. The press/media focuses usually on tattooed individuals and artists who take the art seriously and have created a life around tattooing. It delights in the individuals who have dedicated their bodies as billboards upon which others can read. It also lauds many credible tattooists so that they become as popular as many of the celebrities.

Magazines

In terms of the written word of tattooing, the first tattoo magazine was created by the famous tattooist Don Ed Hardy. *Tattoo Time*, as the magazine was called, launched in 1982 at a tattoo convention. This was a pioneer magazine whose purpose was to reach a more sophisticated class of people rather than those who typically got tattooed. Through this magazine, Hardy hoped to eradicate the negative stigma of tattooing that was popular to most Americans. Hardy thus took a rather educational approach in the layout of this magazine and the pages included informational lectures and the like. Thus, due to the elevated approach in showcasing, tattoos were further perceived in a positive light.

When one is considered part of the tattoo community, tattoo magazines serve as a defining factor. Individuals in this community take tattooing very seriously so that they read at least one tattoo magazine on a consistent basis. These magazines hold true to the authentic world of tattooing because many of the publications are written by tattoo artists or wearers themselves rather than from those who are outside, objective sources. There are two forms of tattoo magazines, highbrow, non-biker, and lowbrow, biker magazines. Lowbrow art magazines typically are published by companies that do not have firsthand artists or individuals who know the art of tattooing well. They typically include tattoo supply advertisements that appeal to the common folk, namely, to those who have no expertise in tattooing but who think they can become artists simply by purchasing the necessary equipment. Lowbrow magazines also include low quality pictures of tattoos from “scratchers” or those who do not have professional fine art backgrounds. These types of magazines also include nudity in the showcasing of tattoos so that the focus shifts from the art of the tattoos to sexually explicit displays. Highbrow magazines, on the contrary, such as *Tattoo Advocate*, are usually published by a more sophisticated class of trained tattoo artists. There is “...heavy reliance on references to the fine arts (painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, as well as literature and poetry), to academic disciplines (specifically, anthropology, philosophy, art history, and medicine), and to mainstream journalism” (DeMello 101). These magazines focus on articles written by well-known academics and the pictures included in them can typically be from photographers who are known outside of the tattoo community. One of the main distinctions is that in these highbrow magazines, there are lists of credited tattoo artists which have not been included in the past. Listing the names of the artists proves another degree of legitimacy

for these artists take ownership of their art thus authenticating their work. Highbrow magazines also do not advocate tattoo suppliers nor are there any advertisements for these. The quality of the paper itself is higher too, the price is decent enough to appeal more towards a middle class clientele, and there are fewer images in highbrow magazines of sexual content. “The function of the highbrow tattoo magazine is clear: to define and legitimate the differences between contemporary, middle-class versus working-class tattooing” (DeMello 103). In addition, political views and other sciences are included such as forensics whereby tattoos are utilized for identification purposes. In general, the type of tattoo community strata individuals belong to, namely, the higher or lower strata, is identified by the type of tattoo magazine they prefer to read. Magazines then play a major role in stratifying the tattoo community even though the tattoo community at large seems to send the message that all tattooed people are accepted equally.

Conventions

Another contributor to the elevation of the status of tattooing has been through tattoo conventions. The National Tattoo Association (NTA) is the leading tattoo association that is host to the annual tattoo convention in the world which draws tattooed individuals, artists, suppliers, and the general public. “Although membership is divided among professional, elite tattooists, and the working class street shop tattooists who made up its original membership, elite tattooists now enjoy the highest status within the group, whereas the organization’s ‘hard-core’ membership continues to remain working-class”(DeMello 126). Tattoo conventions take the written publications to another level in that individuals actually travel to particular venues to enter into and dialogue amidst the

art world of tattooing. However, although the art of the tattoo is emphasized, there is still an air of the fantastic. As DeMello points out, “Tattoo conventions are marked by ritual inversion, exaggeration, and excessiveness of all kinds—all attributes of the carnivalesque, or grotesque, style” (30). These conventions though entertain this fanaticism as a means of attracting audiences, but the art remains the focal point. At tattoo conventions, both tattooed and non-tattooed individuals are placed into a commercial, artistic, competitive, and social network. It is also noteworthy to point out that at these conventions, working-class tattooists are unwelcome whereas those artists who produce fine art pieces and who have fine art degrees are lauded. These conventions are filled with row after row of tattoo vendors who sell products that are related to tattoos. For example, it is common to see ink and needle suppliers as well as clothing and jewelry merchandise that are somehow linked to tattoos and non-tattoos. At many of the booths too, the individual artists are given the prime networking opportunity and thus often disseminate their business cards that state their name and the location of their shop or parlor. This information is usually written over a background of one of their best tattoos. Secondly, at these conventions, there are many booths with actual tattooists who spend the majority of the time creating art on individuals. It is not uncommon to walk among the booths and see individuals getting tattooed on any part of their body while onlookers admire the artists’ technique. There are as many individual styles as there are artists and many who try to sell cutting-edge art (i.e. 3-D tattooing).

The fact there are many individual styles lends itself to an environment of competition. The artists respect one another’s prowess, but nonetheless, there is an

underlying sense of rivalry. As the author of this paper, I conclude that if there were not an attitude of competition, the art would not progress, but stagnate and perhaps eventually die out. The very existence of competition raises the bar of creative ingenuity resulting in constant innovation. Therefore, it is crucial that these artists constantly strive for new, progressive techniques.

Also at these conventions are competitions where tattooed individuals enter themselves into a general tattoo competition. They flaunt their often scantily clad tattooed bodies across a stage for an audience and make their way up to the judge's table where they pause for a few seconds in front of each judge in order that the judges can assess the tattoos. At the end of each competition, the individuals with the best 3 tattoos are awarded with trophies as they pose for press (see Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). Finally, tattoo conventions lend themselves to building social networks. Many tattooed individuals share a sense of community as mentioned before and these conventions provide individuals an opportunity to discourse with others who share the same interests and the same appreciation of the art.



Fig. 6 and Fig. 7. Meadowlands NJ Tattoo Convention 2012

The Internet

With the ever-progressing state of technology, a last contributor to elevation of the status of tattooing is the internet. This is a most obvious contributor given the nature of the source. There are many websites that are dedicated to tattoos and many web pages that are created by tattoo artists and collectors to showcase their art. Facebook is also a prime source of showcasing tattoos and there are also many internet groups that exist that solely focus on body modifications and the logistics of them. One popular site is known as rec.arts.bodyart (RAB). This newsgroup is a type of forum in which people who have body modifications can form social networks, discuss health issues related to these modifications, and post actual pictures of their modifications. This newsgroup forum

allows these individuals a sense of community and belonging and offers them an opportunity to showcase their “art.”

Portfolios

The author of this paper would like to also include an artist’s portfolio in the showcasing portion of this paper. However, the portfolio is focused more on the sell-ability of the artist himself for employment reasons as well as sell-ability to individuals who wish to be tattooed. The showcasing of tattoos through a portfolio is perhaps the key to an artist’s talent. In this portfolio, artists evidence their work and technique through pictures of drawings, painting and colored pencil art that illustrates their understanding of art theory and composition, and of course, completed tattoo art. Many guidelines are put into place for these tattoo portfolios so as to best showcase the tattoos. For example, tattoo art should be completely healed in pictures so that redness or blood does not distort the image, the pictures should be well lit in natural light and have only the tattoo showcased, and lotion should be applied to tattoos because it enhances the colors. One’s portfolio should be taken very seriously for as Shnurman states, “Your portfolio really is a statement of what you are capable of and without a great one you can’t expect to last in this business very long” (109).

Museum Exhibitions

It is worth noting that museums are now showcasing tattoos in various exhibitions that provide great context to body art around the world. The tattoo is enmeshed in the various cultures from which they came and showcased with great historical value. The

most notable exhibit was in 2001 in New York's Museum of Natural History whereby "'Body Art: Marks of Identity' was a blockbuster of an exhibition-comprehensive in scope, dazzling in its selection of objects, and intellectually rigorous in exploring the creativity and meaning of body ornamentation in societies around the world and over time" (Kreamer 2). The beauty of these types of exhibitions is that there is a framework around this body art that showcases the cultures, history and various skill of the art. One is able to question the ideas of identity, reinvention and the like. Most of these exhibitions "...reinforce[d] many of the major themes discussed in the literature on representation and identity-how the body conveys messages about what it means to be human; how body decoration is used to identify, separate, or connect individuals and groups; how art forms and aesthetic expression feature in the creation of identities that are context-dependent and subject to change" (Kreamer 3). There are also museums that are dedicated to "everything tattoo" such as the Baltimore Tattoo Museum and tattoos are even created at these venues.

It is also worth noting that a new phenomenon is the preservation of the skin whereby some individuals now are willing their tattooed skin to museums. "The Wellcome Collection in London and The Amsterdam Tattoo Museum both feature preserved tattooed skin. And the Irish performance artist Sandra Ann Vita Minchin, who commissioned a tattooist to recreate a 17th-century painting by Jan Davidz de Heem on her back, plans to have her skin preserved posthumously and auctioned to the highest bidder" (Randall 4). Thus, the authentic and intricate tattoo is evolving into something which is sought after, valued, and preserved just as other types of fine art.

Tattoos and Fashion: The New Accessory!

In terms of the dissemination of tattoos in society, the idea of fashion and tattoos is worth particular note because today, tattoos have taken on a life of their own in the fashion industry. As Emily Randall points out, "...tattoos-much like graffiti, which in the past has been transformed from cult to collectible-are increasingly being embraced by the art world, particularly in areas where art and fashion meet" (1). As noted previously, tattoos have forced their way into almost every artistic avenue possible. They are penetrating every part of the artistic world. They are flaunted on sports athletes; they are created, corrected, and showcased on their very own television series, such as *LA INK* and the like; they are modeled on predominant actors in movies whereby storylines actually center around these tattoos so that they become quasi "characters;" they are sought after by many directors who cast individuals primarily because of their tattoos; they are painstakingly applied to actors each and every day for filming purposes, such as in the most recent television drama, "Blindspot," where the main character flaunts a full-body tattoo wherein each tattoo serves as a puzzle piece to her identity in each episode; they are showcased in perfume ads, on magazine covers; and complement greatly the fashion industry. As Amy Larocca states in *New York* magazine, "Perhaps the culture's shift toward tattoos is of a piece with our need to constantly reveal ourselves, to live in a continual flow of art-directed personal information" (80). In the fashion industry in particular, tattoos are so visually aesthetic and prominent, they oftentimes cover great portions of the body and actually take the place of clothing. This leads to the consideration of the primary purpose of clothing; it covers the body for functional purposes. More often than not though, clothing serves as an extension and manifestation

of an individual's inner self. The different types of clothes that individuals choose and the style by which they are known most often directly correlates to their personalities, interests, and fundamental values. So too, tattoos parallel this same notion of the extension and manifestation of the self. Tattoos now serve as fashion pieces in place of clothes. Granted, they are permanent pieces of fashion, but nonetheless, they are creative vehicles of the inner self shown to the world as an accessory or the main fashion piece of a person.

Tattoos on the skin in fashion and in general often capture the here and now. It is a kind of "carpe diem" that freezes a moment in time for the wearer and commemorates his/her experience or feeling at the time. They are fashion pieces that need not worry about the future look of them just as the styles of clothing at a moment in time do not pay mind to the future, but seize the now. Tattoos that individuals get oftentimes parallel their relationship to the world and how they navigate it. Therefore, when showcasing tattoos on the body as a means of fashion, tattoos serve as a creative dialogue with the viewer and yet another piece to an individual's fashion collection.

Many fashion designers themselves flaunt tattoos as fashion pieces. They also recruit many models who have tattoos to showcase their clothing line and allow those tattoos to be visible along with their trending clothes. These tattoos thus individualize the models themselves because they identify them as unique beings, not simply robotic beings modeling a line not their own. In a magazine article that elaborates on its cover of a fully nude woman whose only adornment is a full body rose tattoo, Marc Jacobs, a trending fashion designer states, "In what is perhaps the greatest fashion shift of a

generation, tattoos are now as desired as a Celine bag, a Prada shoe, or one of those long mountain-man beards” (qtd. in Larocca 80).

Tattoos are also very visible not only on the runway, but in advertisements themselves (see Fig. 8). In many of them in fact, tattoos comprise most of the advertisement and are set as the main focal point of the ads. These tattoos are a way of display either subliminally or directly. Tattooed words, for example, may serve to indirectly tell others what to do or constantly reaffirm what the self must do upon each glance. Thus, tattoos serve as a kind of affirmation of life, a constant reminder of what we are and our relationships to ourselves and others. Many tattoos in fashion seize the art of “the now,” manifest the wearer’s emotion, express the creative interests of the wearer, idolize or commemorate popular culture, commemorate achievement, self-acclimate, or serve as a prophetic testimony to others.



Fig. 8. Jean Paul Gaultier Cologne for Men

This being the case, when tattoos are displayed in fashion whether in ads, on the runway, or simply on display in the general public, they serve as pieces of art that define the uniqueness of the wearer. They set the tone for trend alerts while functioning to speak

for the wearer who needs not even open his mouth to showcase his inner life. That is the power of the art of ink and the absence of it is becoming more of a rarity.

As an aside, during Fashion Week in 2012, a jewelry designer, Pamela Love, chose to set up a pop-up tattoo parlor instead of showcase her jewelry. As Love stated, “Tattoos are the ultimate and most permanent form of adornment, and I love that about it” (Brooke 1). The author includes this to further the placement of the tattoo in the fashion industry.

In sum, with all of these contributors of tattoo showcasing not only in place but progressing at a very fast pace in society, “...It is possible that tattooists as a group of artists are contributing to the gestalt of consciousness transformation in our culture by moving it, in a more potent way, toward a more whole and tolerant sensibility than any other form of visual art...” (DeMello, 105). These contributors then have firmly rooted the art as it has never been before and has permeated society so much so that the tattoo phenomenon is on the rise at an unprecedented degree.

Chapter 4

Fine Art and the Tattoo



Fig. 9. In 2006, the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye created a work titled "Tim, 2006," in which Mr. Delvoye tattooed the back of Tim Steiner. Credit Wim Van Egmond/Studio Wim Delvoye

Preface

Considering the history, culture, and evolution of the tattoo have been set forth, the author now turns to the fine art aspect of the tattoo. In order to consider tattooing among the fine arts, there requires a need to break down the definition of fine art to gain a better understanding of how it applies to authentic tattoo art as opposed to tattoo “art” that is showcased from a lack of judgment or haphazardly acquired. From the simplest definition, a fine art is created appealing mostly to the senses, is a primarily visual art, is

judged on beauty and meaningfulness, and serves some particular function. With this most basic definition, the author begins to propose the following rationale for tattooing to be included among the fine arts.

First, tattooing appeals to many of the senses. The most obvious appeal is through sight. As stated earlier, there is an inherent visual discourse for those who simply lay eyes upon tattoos. From the images one sees, the viewer begins to build a discourse in his/her mind perhaps questioning the motivation for the tattoo or creating/assuming the reasons himself behind the individual's tattoo choice. Through sight then, the brain is stimulated to conjure many justifications of the tattoo. Also, the images, shapes, and colors themselves of the tattoo offer the viewer a smorgasbord of aesthetic experience. Thus, more often than not, tattoos afford dialogue between the wearer and another individual. The sense of hearing then is evoked naturally through the relaying of the tattoo experience through narrative. The last sense that can be applied to tattooing is that of touch. Both in applying and receiving a tattoo, touch is an extremely important factor. In applying a tattoo, the tattooist automatically engages in a somewhat intimate relationship with the tattooee. In turn, the tattooee willingly allows someone to touch, very intimate in some instances, parts of the body. This intimacy creates either a positive or negative experience depending on the circumstances and will remain with the tattooee for his lifetime.

Also, for something to be considered a fine art, it is primarily associated with visual art. In the world of tattooing, tattoos are the quintessential visual art. From a tattoo's conception, the drawing of the tattoo on the body, the coloring and shading of the

tattoo, to the contouring of the lines, the artist must visually create and execute. The product is the art which pours forth from the artist's prowess.

A fine art is also judged for its beauty as well as meaningfulness. A tattoo is considered beautiful on a subjective basis as are all considerations of beauty. What one thinks is beautiful can be considered disgraceful to another. This subjectivity applies to all art then. All art exists to strike up conversation and even produce controversy so much so that the art forms that raise awareness and dialogue are usually the most sustainable proven in longevity. However, in regards to true tattoo art, the more of a statement tattoos make due to their level of intricacy, scale, and use of color and shading, the more artistic they are considered. Many notable tattoo artists though focus their talents on how to create the beautiful rather than the outrageous. Hence, the variations in color, complexity of images, and number of hours to create all contribute to the level of beauty of the tattoo. The meaningfulness of a tattoo can also be considered subjective. It follows along the same justifications as the beauty of a tattoo. What is meaningful to one may not be to another; yet this is again what true art evokes.

Not only does judging art rely on individual perception and interpretation, but also on a working knowledge base from which the viewer can draw. Therefore, when assigning beauty and meaning to a tattoo, while subjective, custom, well-executed tattoo art can be perceived through an educational as well as artistic lens through which the other fine arts are assessed.

As an additional note, what originally differentiated a fine art was its quality of good taste; however, this quality has somewhat been revolutionized in that if an art is

perceived in bad taste, it is not discarded as a fine art, but instead hailed as avant-garde.

Therefore, in the case of the tattoo, a tattoo done in “poor taste” would be more due to the fact of content than aesthetics, but would oftentimes today be judged as cutting edge and artistic.

Tattoo art then, in appealing to the senses, being a visual art, and carrying beauty and meaning, serves a function to both the wearer and viewer and when the art is drawn from an educational source and analyzed as such, fine art is validated and sustained.

It is of crucial importance too that the reader understands further the nature of the writer’s argument. When the writer refers to tattoo art, the writer is referring to that tattoo art that is well-thought-out, skillfully executed, and masterfully created within a context of art from which both the tattooee and the artist draw. This type of art finds its source throughout history, as was noted in the history section of this paper when the writer referred to all the cultures where tattooing existed and for what purposes it did, and was the precursor to other art forms. As Enid Schildkrout states in “Body Art As Visual Language,” “Body art is not just the latest fashion. In fact, if the impulse to create art is one of the defining signs of humanity, the body may well have been the first canvas” (1). This type of art can be likened to primitive art whereby art was housed in art systems that held not only aesthetic value, but spiritual value and the like. Painting or body art in particular and tattooing in primitive cultures were executed extremely meticulously and were the earliest form of art known. “The art of primitive societies, especially in Africa, is very ancient, among the oldest in human history” (Johnson 693-694). In fact, Africa is known to be the largest depository of all types of art on earth, including rock art sites,

wall-paintings, cave-art, etc. and this art has thus influenced much of today's art in tattooing. As Paul Johnson states, "...primitive art has influenced Western painting and sculpture since the beginning of the twentieth century" (690). Schildkrout also states, "Alternatively, Western images of Africans, Polynesians, and Native Americans focused on the absence of clothes and the presence of tattoos, body paint and patterns of scars" (2). In such fine art, there is high technical quality, artistry, and deep cultural meaning. When one was tattooed, one was identified within a culture. As Schildkrout states, "First, the body as a canvas, is not only the site where culture is inscribed but also a place where the individual is defined and inserted into the cultural landscape" (338). Tattoos assured protection, spiritual connectivity, marked a rite of passage, identified group members, and the like. Primitive body art also served to enhance the body, reveal status, and express aesthetic beauty. It served to record events throughout life. "The idea of man as a painting, not only of himself but of his past, is clearly ancient..." (P. Johnson 687). Today, the intricacies, patterning, details, etc. of a work then exemplify the great skill and craft of the artist all the while paying homage to the primitive sources from which they came. Thus, the writer differentiates the kind of lowbrow tattoo art like "scratching" mentioned previously with the kind of highbrow, technical tattoo art that has characteristics of primitive inspiration. This latter kind of tattoo demands, then, a set of art rules that endure time in its shape, colors, symbolism, and historical context from which it was sourced. In these types of tattoos, there is a symbolism that is rooted in context whereby the tattoo is extrapolated but forever linked to that source and there is thus a transcendent quality to the piece of art. The intention behind the art then becomes quite clear and there is a high investment and high return for the wearer of this art. The

tattoo becomes imbued with deep meaning and that meaning is sustained for the life of the bearer. Thus, the tattoo enriches the body and extends in natural beauty. It is obvious then, that individuals who view tattoos in this light become collectors of fine art tattoos. The various motifs, images, and placement of the tattoos hold significant meaning and as D. Angus Vail states, “The images one chooses and the ways one combine them say a lot, not only about the person who has chosen them, but also about who has influenced those choices” (258). In this vein of tattoo collection, tattoos are not just random, but they are hand-selected to create some sort of connectivity or theme throughout the body as was the case in primitivism, such as the body suits of the Japanese. As Vail states, “Fine-art tattoos take into account musculature, size, shape, and texture of a given area of the collector’s body” (263). The tattoo artist must take into consideration the human canvas and conceptualize the entire work or understand how smaller tattoos will create a masterful whole while also respecting what other artists have created on that canvas. As the artist learns this, the tattooee also learns the proper way to collect. Vail states, “In becoming tattooed, the collector learns not only how well-established members of the tattoo world conceive of ‘proper’ use of form and iconography in building a collection, but also how to see him- or herself as a tattooed person” (270).

Therefore, the idea of primitivism and historical, artistic tattoos that lead to pieces in a collection differentiates the fine art of tattooing from lowbrow tattoo art. The former is the type of art that transcends time. As Paul Johnson states, “The affinities with twentieth-century European art are disturbing until we remember that decorating the body was almost certainly the earliest form of all art (as we have noted) and clearly reflects a

profound human urge to enhance natural beauty, dignity, or fearsomeness” (687). It is in this very artistic context then that the writer speaks so seriously and analytically about body art as a fine art.

The Labeling and Dissemination of Art

Now that the nature of the argument has been set forth, it is also imperative to delineate the process by which something becomes labeled as art. The process relies heavily upon the culture from which the item is introduced and the way in which the media influences the acceptance or rejection of it. When a product is introduced into a culture, there are certain “conventions” that are inherent in the product. These “conventions” are shared understandings that specify the commonly accepted and expected form and content of the art product (‘product conventions’) and the usual relationships that constrain the interactions of production personnel (‘product conventions’)” (Sanders and Vail 22). Once a product is introduced into society, consumers play a pivotal role in the dissemination or lack thereof of the product. Therefore, if the product does not follow the certain expected conventions, there may be negative consequences from the consumers and therefore the creators. Hence, when a consumer product like the tattoo is introduced into mainstream society, those creators who dare to revolutionize the craft often find resistance because they pose a threat to the accepted norms of conventional production. Therefore, these creators are met with hardship, adversity, and oftentimes, fail to market their product successfully.

When a product is introduced into society, however, and is met with rejection and constant questioning, researchers claim that only through this type of resistance does a product truly take root and flourish. This theory falls under the functional analyses of deviance which “emphasize the importance of deviance as a positive source of social change” (Sanders and Vail 22). Theorists under this rule believe that if a product introduced follows the conventional rules and is easily accepted and disseminated, the product will eventually lose its power and die out. On the other hand, if a product is cutting edge and revolutionary, and violates the status quo, cultural workers set up for themselves a creative identity that sets them apart from the rest. Thus, if a cultural worker remains consistent at maintaining his/her creative identity, the culture in which he/she produces it will eventually come to accept the product. Thus, one can begin to perceive the tattoo phenomena as to how it is now a predominant force in society.

When it comes to distinguishing an art form, there are numerous factors that shape what will become acceptable under the definition of art. As Sanders states, “The typical division of labor, the available technology, the political and economic characteristics of the larger social milieu in which the production world is embedded, and other socio-structural features shape the product and constrain the process by which it is created, distributed, consumed, and evaluated” (23).

In actually identifying an art from a craft, there are many grey areas that exist especially when it applies to tattooing. “Craftsmanship is conventionally characterized as involving an emphasis upon technical skill, client control over the production and content of the product, the creation of objects that are functional as well as decorative, and the

dominance of an occupational orientation on the part of the craft worker” (Sanders and Vail 23). The definition of art, however, under the institutional theory, states that art is “an honorific label that comes to be applied to certain objects or activities by certain agents operating in the social world surrounding artistic production, marketing, consumption, and appreciation “ (Sanders and Vail 24). Therefore, something that is defined as art follows the basic principles in that the material is perceived as art, dialogued as art through a theoretical lens, is exhibited, and is bought and sold from individuals who consider themselves as “artists.” The label of “art” on an object is what many creators desire, for once this object is labeled as such, the value of the object increases and the creator of the object is held in greater esteem. Objects labeled as “art” also imply that there is a unique prowess applied to the creation of the art on behalf of the artist. This makes the art desirable which results in a higher demand to attain it because of the creative power. Typically, the artists involved in the creation of art term themselves artist-craftsmen. Under this title, they manipulate various materials for predominantly decorative purposes, but unlike mere craftsmen, they shift their focus to the subjective beauty of an object that can be exhibited for both the pleasure and serious discussion amongst others. Tattooing was once viewed as a mere craft because of the simplicity in the generic process rendered in the application of tattoos. The “poor” environment in which tattooing was executed also added to its craftsmanship. However, in light of the above explanation of an art form, tattooing is now transitioning to the world of legitimate art. This transition finds its source in the way that tattooing is now creatively executed, the particular venues in which tattooing thrives, and the artistic prowess of the artists themselves.

In a production world that follows particular guidelines for mass consumerism and all that consumerism implies including the politics of production, “tattooing is characterized by individual entrepreneurship, decentralization, local competition, and minimal interaction among primary competitors” (Sanders and Vail 25). So, without the bureaucratic reigns on production, there is more competition among artists because they constantly raise the creative bar in order to identify themselves as unique. When applied to tattooing especially, there seems to be more creative competition than with other art forms because the materials that are used in tattooing are readily available to any individual who desires to try his or her hand at tattooing. Therefore, because of this availability, it is of utmost importance that the artist is rather reticent about his or her unique skills and gathers a clientele based on the notoriety of his or her work. This individualized uniqueness, however, has not been the case for many years as mentioned prior, for tattooing has been very idealized, stylistic, and somewhat predictable.

Thus, tattooing has undergone an extreme makeover throughout the years that has led to a validation of the art form. What was once a practice that involved formulaic designs reproduced on flash delivered by mere craftsmen is now a sophisticated process of custom designed art created by trained, often fine art degree bearing, authentic artists. This has led to a new-found desire in most individuals to seek out tattoos in order to proudly invest, collect, and showcase this fine art.

What is Art?

In order to analyze tattooing as an art, the critic must beg the question, “What indeed is art?” This question has been posed over centuries and has changed with cultures and civilizations. For example, Plato referenced art as the imitation of nature; however, with the rise of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, his notion was amended. Also, in the twentieth century, abstraction disrupted the idea that art was representational. Therefore, many have questioned whether art has to be expressive, unique, intelligent, aesthetic, etc. According to Sylvan Barnet, “Perhaps we can say that art is anything that is said to be art by people who ought to know. Who are these people? They are the men and women who teach in art and art history departments, who write about art for newspapers and magazines and scholarly journals, who think of themselves as art collectors, who call themselves art dealers, and who run museums” (1). The fact of the matter here though is that the actual types or art pieces, whether it be headdresses, sculptures, objects, etc., can be sought after and collected one day and disregarded and omitted the next. The transient nature of art is a phenomenon in and of itself. In the case of tattoos, however, the art in so much as it is embedded in the person, has longevity and staying power for the life of the being and sometimes thereafter in the case of preserving the skin after death. Therefore, it cannot be discarded or omitted based on the cultural styles of the times. That to the author is extremely telling in that tattoos are permanent and set themselves against the ever-changing tide of the times.

The concept of art in its very nature is subjective. Barnet states, “Traditionally, a work of art (say a picture hanging on a wall or a statue standing on a pedestal) is set

apart from the spectator and is an object to be looked at from a relatively detached point of view” (4). However, the experience of art has revolutionized in that there have been exhibitions of snapshots stills that capture a moment in time, paintings that question the very nature of painting itself due to the implementation of cutting-edge technique, sculptures that are considered art that use the Earth as its canvas known as Earth Art, and interactive art that “...takes over or transforms a space, indoors and outdoors, and that usually gives the viewer a sense of being not only a spectator but also a participant in the work” (Barnet, 4). In this vein then, tattooing lends itself wholeheartedly to the latter explanation in that by the very nature of a mobile canvas, tattooing transforms a space and is accessible in every space a human canvas enters. The viewer has the unique opportunity to interact with this art via the dialogue of the possessor of it thereby allowing for an interactive experience not gleaned from more traditional art forms.

What individuals deem art is also very subjective in that what the creator defines as art may be imposed on the viewer because the viewer may not consider something the creator does as art. Therefore, tattoos, pre-mid-twentieth century, not considered among the fine arts, can very well be presently due to this very subjectivity and freedom of the coinage of art.

The Interpretation of Art

Aside from the subjectivity/prejudice art carries, the essence of art also lies in its interpretation. The interpretation lies in the meaning extrapolated from a work and

“...most historians today hold that a work has several meanings: the meaning it had for the artist, the meaning(s) it had for its first audience, the meaning(s) it had for later audiences, and the meaning(s) it has for us today” (Barnet, 15). So to impose these meanings on tattooing is to understand it in terms of the tattoo and its relationship to the creator, the tattoo and its relationship to the tattooee, the tattoo and its relationship to the individuals who will view that tattoo, and the tattoo and its relationship to present interpretations. Therefore, when a tattooee and tattoo artist create together a body piece, they enter into a relationship between themselves and those who will view it in those times and in years to come; however, the interpretation ever changes. The question then begs, “Who in fact creates meaning, the artist or the viewer?” Many artists provide interpretations to their works, but in their very interpretations, they may actually serve in limiting and biasing the viewer’s experience. If the author were to create a painting and with it provide an interpretation, the interpretation automatically focuses the viewer’s attention on the exact elements the artist deems important. Viewers, however, may have their own elements they so choose to take from the painting and have every right to do so under the freedom of interpretation.

In terms of tattooing, the interpretation first becomes apparent if the tattooist and tattooee “build” a custom tattoo for whatever significant reason. In this experience, the artist plays a dominant role in creating his or her interpretation of the tattooee’s abstract description. Even if the tattooee comes to the artist with a raw sketch, the tattooist must artistically interpret that sketch, encapsulating all that the tattooee describes. The other interpretation is what the tattooee interprets from the actual tattoo and what he or she

explains to those who view that tattoo. This interpretation is based on his or her relationship with the finished tattoo and his or her emotional attachment to it. The final interpretation and albeit the most obscure and varied is the interpretation of the random viewers of tattoos. Many times, people who view this art on others do so in a rapid snapshot that marks the brain and with those rapid snapshots, interpretation comes that is limitless; unless the viewer enters into a discourse with the tattooee, he or she is left to interpret the meaning and representation of the tattoo. Therefore, according to the author, tattoo interpretation, on behalf of any involved, offers the most genuine and authentic definition of the term.

In terms of how art is born, "...a work is created not by an isolated genius...but by the political, economic, social, religious ideas of a society that uses the author or artist as the conduit" (Barnet 17). We can look then to the tattoo artist as one who extends or manifests the ideas of the time. In whatever political, social, religious society a particular tattoo artist is immersed, what he or she creates is sourced from the very ideas of those structures. On the same token, the perceivers of the art, in this case the tattoos, also create meaning and interpretation from the structures aforementioned. A view called the reception theory "holds that art is not a body of works, but is, rather, and activity of perceivers making sense of images. A work does not have meaning 'in itself'; it can only mean something to someone in context" (Barnet 17). Therefore, as it stands then, so long as one makes sense of the images of tattoos and places them within a contextual meaning, tattoos can be perceived as art and validated as such. There are a group of scholars who belong to New Historicism who believe, "Works of art are not the embodiments of

profound meanings set forth by individual geniuses; rather works of art are the embodiments of the ideology of the age that produced them” (Barnet 20). In terms of tattooing, we now live in an age of a rebirth of this phenomenon; therefore, the ideas and concepts individuals place on them create the meaning and validate the art. No longer is something viewed as a masterpiece attributing success to it due to the achievement of the artist; instead, the art holds value because of the political ideals from which it is sourced. Again, in reference to tattooing then, the work becomes art not so much based on the artistic skills of the tattooist, but by the cultural ideologies that are produced by the tattoo. Therefore, one can argue that modern tattooing is indeed art because of the political and cultural context in which it is placed.

Another concept of how to contextualize art relies heavily on where artwork is displayed. When one goes to a museum, for example, the paintings and objects displayed are “framed” within a certain context or displayed within a certain room structured around the time period from which they came. With this structuring, the artwork is taken from its original context thereby removing some of its intended political meaning and allowing for more freedom in interpretation. “In other words, it was argued that by framing (so to speak) the works in a museum rather than in their storefront context, the works were drained of their political significance and were turned into art-mere aesthetic objects in a museum” (Barnet 22). So to relate this to the idea of tattoos, while there are structured tattoo art museums and tattoo conventions that showcase tattoos within certain time periods, there is no set “frame” for the fluid, mobile tattoo that comes and goes among the fabric of society. Therefore, interpretation is not limited; it is totally free

creating the tattoo as a work of art to the viewer. There is perhaps no other art form that lends itself to as much freedom as the mobility and accessibility of the tattoo.

In terms of all art, there are both subject matter and content and meaning which in and of themselves are very different and along these lines it is vital to understand the differences as they relate to art and specifically tattoos. The subject matter of a piece of art is the actual “storyline” of the work. It is the actual happenings the viewer sees from the physical objects/images of the art. For example, a painting that shows a log cabin and lake with two swans swimming about will look like that to most people who view it based on the subject matter. The very subject matter of art also creates meaning for the viewer on a very basic level, but this level lends itself to the content or the meaning of an art piece. Once the subject matter is taken in, the interpretation of it is intertwined with knowledge and emotion that produces one’s experience of the work. As Barnett states, “The content, one might say, is the subject matter transformed or recreated or infused by intellect and feeling with meaning--in short, the content is the meaning made visible” (31). Therefore, in the art of tattooing, when people view a tattoo, they will most likely see the same subject matter; however, each viewer will create a different meaning of it based on the intellect and emotion he/she brings to it.

The form of an art is also a key to its legitimacy and meaning. As Barnett states, “...the form--including such things as the size of the work, the kinds of brushstrokes in painting, and the surface and texture of a sculpture--is part of the meaning” (32). The form of a work lends itself to various meanings because, for example, in terms of tattooing, a tattoo with bold lines versus one with lightly shaded lines creates a very

different meaning to the viewer. Tattooing, in particular, relies heavily on shading, shaping, coloring, various bold types, and lettering which allow for various interpretations. Each variation too gives evidence of the tattoo artist himself or herself and identifies his or her work.

In sum, in order to analyze properly any piece of art, one must focus on subject matter, content or meaning, material, form, historic content, the artist's intentions, what the viewer brings to the piece in terms of background knowledge, socioeconomic status, our political convictions, etc. All of this, especially in the case of tattooing, legitimizes the art form and validates its existence in the context of a fine art world.

Questions that True Art Poses

There are some basic questions one must ask too when viewing an art piece in general and especially when viewing tattoo art. The first is more introspective for the viewer and begs how the piece affects the viewer. Upon first look at the piece, does it evoke positive or negative feelings? Does it make one angry, blissful, etc. and why? These pertinent questions bring the viewer to a more analytical lens and legitimize the art experience with another layer of depth. In terms of tattoo art, many individuals have perhaps a more complex reaction to the initial intake of the art because the art is embedded into another art form, the person himself. Therefore, the vehicle on which the tattoo art is placed adds to the emotion that the tattoo art evokes. The questions of when and where the art piece was made, who the creator was, and who the creator made the

piece for are also very important. In terms of tattoo art, when and where the piece was created depends upon how old the wearer of it was when it was first rendered and at what venue the tattoo was created and executed. Another question one may ask when viewing art is how the form contributes to the piece. In terms of general art, the forms are the material used: the size, the color, and the composition. In terms of tattooing, the material is the skin, however, the types vary in terms of the roughness, softness, color of the skin, etc.; there are various types of color used, black, white, red, blue inks that vary in saturation and shading; sizes of the tattoos vary and create more/less of an impact; and the composition in terms of pattern, symmetry, etc. add to the interpretation of the tattoo art. Another question begs where the work was originally seen. In terms of tattoo art, this is profoundly significant because although the work is always viewed on the person, the actual content could be sourced from history, art history, philosophy, etc.. Therefore, in addition to the viewer appreciating the art, an additional level of source material is inherent upon first view. The context of the art here too in terms of the person as the vehicle also applies here because the new vehicle on which the art is takes the original piece out of context and allows for a more unique interpretation. The purpose that the work served is yet another question a viewer might ask. Is it to stimulate power, to emulate a likeness, etc.? In terms of tattoo art, the reasons for the purpose are plenty and varied, but the unique factor is that out of any other art form, the viewer may perhaps get the unique opportunity to ascertain any purpose because the canvas can actually interact! Yet another question centers around whether the work has been damaged, repaired, altered in any way, etc.. In terms of tattooing, tattoo art can be damaged from mistakes the tattooist might have made, it can be worn by age and sun exposure, and then repaired

through correction by another artist through manipulation of the image into something else which takes vision and skill (Barnet 34-35).

Thus, these questions shape the world of art in general, but allow tattoo art to take shape in the world of art through the answers to the questions posed.

The Tattoo Method

It would defeat the purpose of this paper if the author did not explain the general steps on exactly how a tattoo transfers from one's creative thought to one's body part. It is again worth noting, however, that the following steps are generic and while there are variations to these steps, many of these variations are held sacred and kept secret to an artist in the pursuit of one's reputation and longevity in the tattoo industry. The following steps are those set forth from the tattoo sourcebook, Into the Skin by *Scott Shnurman*, but also informed by what I have witnessed from my interviewing experiences and research.

The very first step in the tattoo process is either choosing an image from flash or drawing the image on paper. Once it is down on paper, it needs to be photocopied and through this process, the image can be magnified or minimized appropriately to fit the desired place on the body. Once the image is photocopied, any white space or anything that will not contribute to the tattoo is cut away. An artist then uses stencil transfer paper and presses the photocopy image to the stencil paper. The image is placed between the transfer paper and an ink sheet and is then placed into a thermofax, a machine that melts the image onto the transfer sheet. This process can also be completed manually through

the tracing and pressing of the image to the transfer paper, using a stencil pencil and tracing the image, or through the use of a hectograph pencil which is made of compressed ink and transfers images from one medium to another.

Once the image has been transferred, the desired body part must be prepped. Any hair from the area should be removed and the use of green soap, a disinfectant agent, is applied before and after hair removal. To discard any extra oils, alcohol is applied. Then, a solution called Tattoo Stencil Magic is applied to the clean area. This solution allows the stencil to stick to the body while maintaining the integrity and detail of the stencil. The stencil then is applied to the area and transferred onto the desired body part. It is worthy to note here that some tattooists today utilize numbing agents more frequently. These agents are applied before the tattoo process and allow for less of a painful or uncomfortable experience; however, many tattooists opt not to use the numbing agents because they either wear off quickly or diminish the pain so that the true tattoo experience is masked! It is also worth noting that tattoo placement is very important and the tattoo artist uses great forethought in placement especially if there will be additions made to the tattoo in the future. This can be likened to any piece of art whereby the artist must anticipate, manipulate, and arrange images or objects in order to anticipate the end art piece.

Before starting the tattoo machine, A&D oil is applied to the stencil on the body. This ointment lubricates the needles, allows for little friction from the tube that may rest on the skin, and allows easy wiping of blood off the skin. As a side note, there are two ways to tattoo: off the needle tip or off the tube tip. When artists tattoo off the needle tip,

nothing touches the skin except the needles. Thus needles usually reach farther out of the tube and artists have a better vantage point as to where the needles penetrate. For the artists who tattoo off the tube, the tube of the tattoo machine rests upon the skin and acts as a kind of guide for the artist. Ink usually forms a pool at the end of the tube which allows the artist to move the ink around the area especially those areas that are larger and require more ink. The only disadvantage here is that the artist's view of the needles is obscured from the tube placement on the skin, though, either way of tattooing is effective; it simply depends on the individuality and comfort level of the artist.

Akin to painting a room, artists should begin from the bottom of the stencil and work upwards. Depending on the dominant hand, artists must be sure to work from the proper angle so that the stencil does not get smeared due to rubbing. As an aside, during the entire process of tattooing, the artist stretches the skin so that the needle can penetrate the skin. Before putting needle to skin, the artist begins a "practice line" over a short line in order to get the feel of the weight of the machine and then actually tattoos the line. The artist then assesses what he or she has done to determine if he has to go over it again perhaps at a slower pace or to apply more ink. There is a constant checking and rechecking after each space is filled with ink to ensure the accuracy of color and shaping. The outlining of the tattoo needs to be done in one sitting because the lining up of another stencil to match the existing piece is usually impossible and runs the risk of a skewed image. Once the outline is assessed and all lines are properly shaded, color and shading come next. Different machines are used for this process because they run at slower speeds to ensure that they can pass over the skin repeatedly with minimal pain. The

author of this paper has stated this, but it is worth repeating at this moment because it is in this very shading and coloring that the process is unique to each artist. Therefore, the author of this paper can never report precisely the specifics of this process because many of these very techniques are kept sacred. In general, however, there are many different needle configurations, as pointed out before, and these configurations can be likened to a paintbrush. The artist uses different needle groupings as does a painter who uses different paintbrushes to get the desired effect through experimentation. Color generally is moved about the area through circular motions of the needles. Depending on the colors used for the tattoo, darker colors should be applied first because the artist does not want to taint the lighter colors while rubbing away excess ink. As the color is dispersed throughout the image, the image becomes more vibrant and more alive with each passing needle. After the artist is finished coloring the image or the artist must stop and continue at another session, the tattoo process is complete.

As the reader can see, this is a very generic explanation of the process, and the sophistication and prowess of a tattoo artist, as with any artist, comes through practice, experience, experimentation, and passion.

Artistic Styles of Tattoos

It is important to note all of the different tattoo designs or categories so that one can recognize the parallels of tattoo art to fine art in general, especially the fine art of

painting. The following styles are also referenced from the tattoo sourcebook, Into the Skin by *Scott Shnurman*.

Tattoo art can be abstract in design where the images are various shapes and have various colors with no specific defined definition of the image. Abstract tattoos were very common and popular in the 1990s and they have taken root in modernity due to the creation of dense color inks. Therefore, abstract tattoos have become very aesthetically pleasing to the eye because of the very shapes and colors. Animal tattoos and cartoon tattoos are other genres and these genres are quite self-explanatory. Many individuals opt to get animal or cartoon tattoos in homage of their favorite animal/cartoon, in homage of a beloved animal that since passed away, to pay homage to a childhood memory, or to express their strength through an image of a well-known animal that is identified with that quality. Dragons, tigers, dogs, etc. are most common animal tattoos while Betty Boop and the Tasmanian Devil are popular cartoon tattoos. Bio-Mechanical tattoos have gained popularity in the 80s with the advent of the movie *Alien* in 1979. This form of tattoo design combines the biological and the human-made forms and is usually created through layers of metallic images so that images look as if they are tearing through the skin. Many of them are created with black and grey ink which leads to the next genre, black and grey tattoo design. Tattoo designs were almost always created with black and grey because there was a limited color palette; however, individuals opt for black and grey tattoos today because of the depth and intricacies that tattoos of these two colors warrant. It takes a very skilled artist to advance in black and grey tattoos. Celtic tattoo designs are extremely difficult to execute because of the intricacies of the lines. This is a

genre though that represents meaning based on the interpretation of knot symbols and Celtic tattoos are very popular today. Closely related are Tribal tattoos that are usually black formations that have deep meaning. Many individuals seek them for this meaning rather than aesthetic quality because these tattoos can represent spirituality, rites of passage, rank, etc. Macabre tattoos are in the genre of tattoos that can be traced from the 60s when individuals were trying to be extremely rebellious. These images are self-explanatory and rely heavily on dark images that often depict skulls, bones, devils, or anything of or having to do with hell. Fantasy tattoos are common today and find their design source in gaming. Fantasy tattoos can be anything from fairies, dragons, vampires, etc., but they really find their source from the imagination. Therefore, these tattoos can be as detailed and vivid as one's imagination! Fine line tattoos are another genre that demands precision. Fine line tattoos are created usually with a single needle configuration and they require a high level of skill. Many portrait tattoos are created through fine line tattooing and the artist's main goal is to capture the real image of something. Fusion tattoos seek to do just what they imply, fuse many images into a whole. With fusion tattoos, many artists rely on images from other genres to create a whole image. The image thus has multiple layers of meaning. Hand Poke tattoos are not so common today, but they are executed using the hand, hence the name, and a sharp object that penetrates the skin with ink. Hand poke tattoos are used today in the cosmetic industry and many tattoo artists who perform these tattoos create them so well, they are unrecognizable from those created with the electric tattoo machine. Japanese style tattoos are extremely popular in Western culture and they are probably the most widespread. The reason for this popularity is because Japanese tattoos are imbued with deep meaning and

symbolism. Oftentimes, symbols, such as dragons, koi, demons, etc., can be placed on the body so that each symbol blends with one another and creates a seamless story on the person. Therefore, those who wish to commit to a sleeve or a full body suit often choose Japanese style tattoos because of their motifs and thematic style. Closely related to the Japanese style is Chinese lettering from the Japanese writing system called Kanji. Akin to Japanese style tattooing, Kanji has deep value because of its meaning. Many of these tattoos scribed on the body represent inner strength characteristics and add a level of mystique. Not many translate its meaning and affirmation because the wearer is reminded of its meaning upon glance. Dovetailing from this are lettering tattoos which are clearly self-explanatory, but hold with them again a sense of power for the wearer. Many individuals choose to get lettering of some word or phrase somewhere on their bodies that affirm some kind of power for the wearer, that pay homage to something or someone, or that laud something that is meaningful to the wearer. Again, the mystique adds a layer of enticement to these types of tattoos. Memorial tattoos are usually placed in their own category and can range from a literal letter or number or a full piece to commemorate the beloved.

Another form of tattoo is called Kirituhi. It is a form of the traditional Maori markings save the tradition, history, and value of the authentic Maori tattoo. The reason for this “replication” is because the Maori see Western reproduction of the “moko” as highly offensive because it is so valued and highly respected in the culture. Along the lines of respect, Native American tattoos are also very serious and are only begotten to honor the bloodline. Those who seek to get these tattoos are often from Native American

decent and are permitted to get these tattoos with permission from elders. Nature tattoos are just what they claim to be, but are unique in that whatever thing is chosen, it remains that no matter the time. So, nature tattoos are possibly the most recognized and accessible in meaning than many of the other types. New School tattoos are more of a modern approach to tattooing that seek to emphasize and dramatize common objects. “These tattoos typically use dramatically broad, thick line work, bright solid chunks of color, and a larger format that covers more skin area with each individual design” (Shrurman, 26). They tend to be very “in-your-face” and exaggerated. The art is very cartoon-like and plays on the perspectives of various mundane objects. Closely related to New School tattoos are Wyld Style tattoos that are akin to graffiti style and they mimic lettering and imagery understood mostly by the graffiti culture, thus they are less accessible to most. On the contrary, Old School tattoos or Sailor tattoos are those that originated from the military and they lack the detail that other tattoo styles possess. Traditional tattoos fall closely to the former in that the style of traditional tattoos primarily use few colors that look watered down and are rather simplistic in detail. Portrait tattoos are those that honor a loved one and can be placed anywhere on the body, most often in places where they are visible. It is extremely difficult to become a good portrait artist because these tattoos take great skill and technique to fully capture the image.

In the last few years, various styles of cursive lettering ranging from Gothic to Middle Eastern have been popular in tattooing and lettering, which was once used to garnish a tattoo, and has now become the focal point of, and in some cases, the main tattoo. The lettering styles themselves are not only different in font, but different in size.

The placement of this lettering also can rest upon all parts of the body, such as across the wrist, forearm, neck, back, chest, abdomen, and the like. Really, no part of the body is off limits when it comes to the written word. The content of this lettering too has evolved as well. Formerly, it was common to see single provocative words scrolled on a body part perhaps used as an affirmation of life, as stated before, or a reminder to the wearer of what that word dictates. Presently, it is not uncommon to see actual excerpts from famous texts, Bible verses, literature, lines of poetry, and the like scrolled on the body. Many of these pieces too take up a large portion of the body and have become increasingly more legible so that the body then becomes a transient teaching device that either gives advice, stirs deep thought, or inspires both the wearer and reader. According to Bill Ervolino, a *Herald News* staff writer, "...tattoo artists are keeping it real, exercising their penmanship skills to transcribe words of empowerment, literary references, and entire biblical passages onto the bodies of clients who want to be seen, heard, and read" (D1).

The bold cursive penmanship lettering finds its source from the West Coast and is rooted in the black and grey Chicano style of tattooing. As Ervolino states, "Tribal is still a bold design but the advantage with cursive is that it can be just as bold, or it can be light and feminine" (D4). Tattoos written in calligraphy, 'the art of beautiful writing,' are also widely popular because calligraphy is seemingly so rare. In fact, calligraphy was slowly becoming a lost art until the resurgence of its usage in tattooing. Some of the most beautiful written words and phrases are strewn across body parts in calligraphy and this antiquated lettering creates the most unique and bold art. Cursive lettering is bold and purposely abrasive to the viewer and is again a manifestation of the inner self. These

tattoos are not so much to beautify the body, although some very creatively do, but they serve to fulfill a message which is void or in need or reminding for the wearer.

Tattoo styles then can be traced back in history or have been created more recently, but despite the origin of their style, each has its own transcendent value and meaning that can be extrapolated from context and strong enough to stand independently and magnificently on the canvas of the body!

An Important Note to Keep in Mind

In order to comment on the artistic nature of tattoo art, it is imperative that the author of this paper defines fine art in general and parallels all of its applications to tattoo art which I have attempted to do below. It is important though to preface this by stating that in paralleling fine art and tattoo art, the author has synthesized knowledge based on observation of and conversation with tattoo artists and analysis and research of tattoo history and the tattoo industry to draw these parallels. The reason for this note is to relay that it is somewhat difficult to specifically explain ALL tattoo techniques due to artists' hesitation in revealing the well-kept secrets of the art as mentioned before. The techniques of tattoo artists are very private and often withheld because it is those very techniques that advance them and allow them to gain popularity in their careers. Therefore, it has been somewhat of a learning curve for the author of this paper in drawing informative, and what the author believes, accurate assessment of tattoo art.

The Coined Fine Arts

It is of utmost importance that the coined fine arts are noted as such so that the reader can see just how tattooing in all its artistic splendor is further validated to stand among these fine art forms.

Again sourced from the basic definition of “fine art”, among the fine arts include painting and drawing, mosaics, printmaking and imaging, calligraphy, photography, sculpture, conceptual art, architecture, creative writing, etc.. All of these fine arts can be applied to tattooing. Drawing of course applies to tattooing in its most obvious fashion. In the process of tattooing, an image is drawn onto the tattooee and then colored by the tattoo artist. However, as mentioned above, with regards to creation, the modern tattoo artist, as opposed to craftsman, can draw from the ideas of the tattooee and himself, to create a unique representation so that this image can then be transferred onto the tattooee. In this fashion, the tattooist may choose to draw directly on the tattooee “free-hand” applying color as he goes. This of course requires a more creative edge and simple drawing is brought to a more complex level. Another way in which drawing can be applied to tattooing is that many individuals bring actual art drawings to the tattooist who then transfers the image. The fine art of painting has become more prevalent in the world of tattooing in that many individuals seek notable painters’ work to either be replicated or incorporated in the tattoos rendered. Therefore, it is not uncommon for individuals to have replications or modifications of artists like Renoir, Monet, etc.. Mosaics can be applied to tattooing as it is now common for tattoos to be rendered in the form of mosaics. The tattooist creates the image to mimic a mosaic by making dark lines around

and between the entire image. The result is an image that looks pieced together like a puzzle to create a whole picture. Calligraphy in tattooing has blossomed in popularity as mentioned before in that calligraphy is among one of the popular font types for the tattooed written word. These bold block letters can stand alone as single letters, initials, create words, or be incorporated into a tattoo to enhance an image. Either way, the use of this style of writing dramatizes that which is being relayed. Photography is another prominent element used in modern tattooing. There are countless examples of tattoos that are created by a photograph brought to a parlor to be replicated in honor of someone or something. Many pictures of celebrities, pictures of scenes, stills from movies, pictures of loved ones, etc. are used to create a unique tattoo that is usually modified to make a unique emulation that incorporates the wearer's personality. Thus, photography and tattoos work in tandem to create a visual masterpiece for the eyes. Conceptual art focuses on the idea or concept of a work rather than what may be considered aesthetically pleasing to the eye or following the "traditional" standards of what is considered beautiful. This idea of conceptual art then most appropriately applies to tattooing in that many tattoos are created from an individual's idea or concept that has meaning to him/her. Some of these tattoos very well may not be aesthetically pleasing to the eye or follow the "normal" standards of beauty, but nonetheless have power for the wearer and validate his/her identity.

Considering the above analysis of fine art, the author deems it quite justified then to further align tattooing with the other fine arts. Every art form above may be incorporated in the production of tattoos thus rendering tattoos as fine art themselves. The

meticulous process by which tattooing is executed also reinforces the reality that the art is truly “fine” in its execution and production.

The Distinguished Art Forms and How Tattoos Stand Among Them

Among what are considered distinguished arts forms are painting, sculpture, and photography. Each of these forms carry with it specific techniques and elements that cause each to stand alone as a fine art form. It is thus important then to identify the key components of each art and then to juxtapose those components against tattoo art. Thus, one can more readily draw a parallel between each art and tattooing.

It is especially important to note, however, that among these fine art forms, painting is the fine art form most closely related to tattooing. Most types of painting and the very techniques and components of painting mimic the art of tattooing and most often, many tattooists, are also themselves painters. The following is a comparison of the elements of fine arts as posited by *Sylvan Barnet* in *A Short Guide to Writing about Art* to those elements of the tattoo.

Painting and Tattoo Art

The art form of painting centers around key concepts that distinguish them as valid art structures within fine art. Painting in particular centers on such things as figure painting, portrait painting, still life, and landscape. In each of these types of paintings,

there are techniques that are imposed by the artist. Also, in painting the following elements are of utmost importance: lines, type of paint, color, light, space, composition, lining, depth, shape, size, and scale of the work. In terms of painting, lines, diagonal (suggesting movement/instability), horizontal (suggesting stability/tranquility), vertical (suggesting intense stability), circular (suggesting motion/fertility), represent different concepts. The lining in tattooing is of particular importance because many times, images are stenciled on the body with black thin lines so that the artist may work within them. Other times, without a stencil, lines are drawn free-hand and act as a guide to the particular image. In terms of paint, the type of paint/ink purchased and used adds to the quality of the tattoo art. There are many brands, so it is important to know which are better and hold color longer. A good artist will undoubtedly know this and spend more money on the quality brand for best results. Ink, once it enters the skin and sits below layers, is vulnerable to breakdown. Poor quality ink can be susceptible to pooling unevenly under the skin, carried off through the body, tinting due to tanning, or fading due to sun exposure. Inks exist in three forms. The first form is pure pigment and the pigment is in powder form. Only a skilled tattoo artist should buy pure pigment because he must have the proper knowledge base to disperse the powder to create a fluid ink that will last. The second type of ink is pre-dispersed so that some molecules are left to float freely. As Shnurman states, "Some believe that because the pigment is not completely dissolved, it prevents the body from absorbing the pigment particles as it absorbs the dispersion, and leaves pure pigment behind creating a vivid, vibrant color" (62). The third and least common type of ink is ink that is fully dissolved. These inks are used to create colors that appear washed out as they are diluted. As Barnett states, "The material value

of the pigment--that is to say, its cost--may itself be expressive” (41). After all, color is the greatest contribution to a tattoo piece and the way in which it is used creates meaning in and of itself. For example, the saturation of color/desaturation of color represents meaning in tattooing and serves to focus the eye in various ways to further express the content of the work. As Barnett states, “It is often said that warm colors (red, yellow, orange) come forward and produce a sense of excitement, whereas cool colors (blue, green) recede and have a calming effect...” (42). The hue or color, the value or lightness/darkness of a color, and the saturation or the strength of the brightness of a color add to the effect of color and is highly powerful in interpretation. That is why to be a tattoo artist, one must truly understand color theory and know which colors to mix to create other colors and shades. Next, the effect of light is also of high importance in painting. Light serves to illuminate, highlight, amplify, contrast, unify, disturb, comfort, etc. Tattoo art uses light in terms of its shading technique and colors used to make an image lighter/darker. Any combination of the two produces the desired effect of light. The use of space and composition, the parts of the work, are also of importance in painting and tattooing. In terms of space, objects and figures can share space, compete for light, overtake one another, etc. In terms of composition, symmetry and elemental design, a painting or a tattoo can play with these concepts depending on the intention of the artist. Depth, which includes overlapping, foreshortening, contour hatching, shading and modeling, relative position from the ground line, perspective, and aerial and atmospheric perspective, are also key to painting, but are also present in tattoo art. Many tattoo pieces may rely on the techniques in particular of overlapping if, for example, there are cascading roses, shading and modeling that allow for shadows in any work, relative

positioning of various images/objects in a tattoo piece, especially those tattoos of a larger scale like a back piece, perspective in general and atmospheric perspective especially in pieces that depict a scene of some sort. Finally, the effects of shape, size, and scale of the work are all elements that create the world of the painting and also a tattoo art piece alike. On a side note, there is also something called non-objective painting. “Nonobjective art, unlike figurative art, depends entirely on the emotional significance of color, form, texture, size, and spatial relationships, rather than on representational forms” (Barnet, 45). It is also referred to as abstract expressionism or pure abstract art. Nonobjective art seeks to evoke more emotional and spiritual connections and interpretations based on the size, shape, color scheme, lines, texture, and finally, the title of the work that biases the mind toward one concept or another. This is noteworthy because there can also be non-objective art in tattooing. Many individuals opt for tattoos that are abstract in content, but that signify some spiritual or emotional significance to the wearer. Therefore, whether painting is objective or non-objective, many or all of the components that comprise the art can and do apply to tattoo art, thus rendering tattooing among fine art.

Sculpture and Tattoo Art

The second established fine art is sculpture. In sculpture, each piece of art is created to inspire, provoke power, provoke emulation, etc. Sculpture “...presents a strong sense of an individual or, on the other hand, of a type” (Barnet 49). If the sculpture is a portrait, usually the portrait is very true to form in terms of details of the body and face. The sculptor may add intricacies to the face especially to symbolize an attitude of the

time or the overall attitude of the individual. Idealized images are also apparent in sculpture depending on the representations of different cultures. “For example, African portrait sculpture of leaders tends to present idealized images” (Barnet 49). When idealizing an image, sculptures usually create the person in the prime of his life. When considering the art of tattooing then, many of sculpture’s same elements parallel tattoo art.

Let us begin with portrait. The more famous types of tattoos are those which serve as a tribute to a person to pay homage to him/her. Many individuals opt for tattoos that model a deceased loved one, a deceased celebrity, a living person, etc. in order that that individual remain as some sort of physical form on his/her body. Many tattooees bring to the artist a picture or the actual person whereby the artist recreates that individual on the canvas of another’s skin. These tattoos are often extremely life-like and rarely stray from the actual form of the person. Many times, the tattooee will bring in the best picture, and idealized image if one will, of the person to be tattooed onto the canvas. Therefore, this is the first parallel to portrait sculpture and tattooing.

In sculpture, the pose of the person is extremely important and carries with it high meaning and interpretation. The body stance expresses the spirit of the person for which it emulates. Many times in tattooing, the pose and the body stance of the tattoo are well thought through before execution. Drapery, volumes (spaces, body parts, etc.), truncation (usually used in a bust sculpture to signify the end of the image), medium (the material used-clay, wood, etc), technique by which the piece was shaped also contribute to sculpture. In tattooing, many images are drawn and created with drapery about them and

the volumes and truncation are well planned to create asymmetry or symmetry in the piece depending on where it lays on the body. For example, if it is a back piece, symmetry might be important, however, if the portrait is on the arm, the rounded curves of the arm must be taken into consideration and symmetry may be lost or manipulated. The medium of the body is also considered in terms of the color inks used. Whether the tattoo will be black and white/grey or color depends on the statement the tattooee and tattooist desire to make and the time period the tattoo will symbolize. To repeat, many tattoo artists have unique techniques in tattooing that are usually not revealed because those very techniques are what advance and popularize them in a very competitive field. These techniques though center around the drawing, shading, and coloring of tattooing.

Facture, “that is, the process of working on the medium with certain tools” (Barnet 51), is extremely important to sculpture as it is in tattooing. In tattooing, the artist may use or specialize in various needle types and it is important now to describe the various needle types that essentially are the “tools” of tattooing. To be clear, the “majority belief is that “tattoo needle” refers to a group of needles soldered onto a needle bar” (Shnurman 51). There are various needles with different diameters also. “Someone referring to a ‘bug pin needle’ is referring to the diameter of the needle because ‘bug pin’ is actually a numbering system used to measure needle diameter” (Shnurman 51). There are also various tapers of needles which refer to “the measure of distance from the widest part of the needle to the very tip of the needle” (Shnurman 51). Also, needles may be textured differently in that some may be polished or others dull depending on the make of the needle. Needles are grouped differently as well and their groupings determine how

the ink is dispersed into the canvas of the skin. There are three predominant needle configurations. The first is the “rounds” which are the most common and they are used for lining and shading a tattoo. The clusters of needles determine whether it is a liner or shader and tight clusters of needles are for lining and loose clusters are for shading a tattoo. The needles used for shading are usually round, but a flat or stacked set of needles are also used in shading depending on the effect the tattooist is trying to create. A flat set of needles is akin to a chisel with a number of needles at the end of it. Smaller scale flat groups of needles are used to line most tattoos, while larger scale groups of needles are used as shaders. To shade properly, however, magnums are the greatest tool. “Mags are similar to flats, but with two layers of needles, one row stacked on top of the other” (Shnurman 52). There are also various configurations of mags. Standard mags are those that when the layers of needles line up, one set fits in between another, double-stacked mags are those where the layers of needles directly align with each other, and curved/round mags are those needles that simply have a curve to them akin to an eyelash curler and when applied to the skin have less of a harsh effect. It is also noteworthy to say that depending on the part of the region, various things have been utilized as needles. “In America, a tattoo needle can be anything from a sharpened guitar string, to a sewing needle, to an over-the-counter pre-sterilized professional grade needle” (Shnurman 52). In other regions throughout history, bone, stone, ivory, or anything that could be whittled down into a point to penetrate the skin, has been utilized.

In sculpture too, volumes in terms of shaping of the piece, and silhouette, in terms of the outline are also considered. In tattooing, the volumes and the silhouette are

executed through various tools/liners to form the desired effects. Color is also crucial in sculpture and tattooing because color, whether it be from the paint or material, is utilized to create symbolism and meaning. Location/site in sculpture is also poignant because the location of the piece adds to the meaning of the work and the base on which it sits serves as the foundational meaning of the piece. Often in sculpture too, there is an optimal viewing point to truly take in the piece with all its meaning. In tattooing, the location of the tattoo on the body is of utmost importance and critically thought through before placement; in fact, the stencil of the tattoo is placed on the skin and the tattooee has the opportunity to make sure the placement is correct on the body giving the tattoo the optimal meaning. For example, questions like the following must be taken into consideration. “Does tattoo placement need the arch of the back to help signify meaning?” “Does tattoo placement take into consideration the stretching of the skin later in life?” “Does the tattoo placement require the movement of the arm to enhance meaning?” In sum, the part of the body that holds the tattoo adds to the meaning of the art and as with sculpture, there is usually an optimal vantage point to get the full effect of the tattoo.

What is also important in sculpture is the use of the environment to enhance the meaning of the sculpture in what is called nonobjective/nonrepresentational sculpture. For example, the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial by Maya Lin Wich was dedicated in 1982. This sculpture is a “pair of 200-foot granite walls joined to make a wide V, embracing a gently sloping plot of ground. On the walls, which rise from the ground level to a height of about 10 feet at the vertex, are described the names of the 57,939

Americans who died in the Vietnam War” (Barnet 55-56). Many individuals have tried to assign meaning to this structure, however; it simply exists as a place or reflection, a site for individuals to gather and remember such an important part of history and all that it encompassed. This memorial falls under the category of a primary form in which “these are massive constructions, often designed in accordance with mathematical equations and often made of earth and rocks rather than of industrial materials” (Barnet 57). There is a two-fold reason that this non-objective sculpture relates to tattoo art. First, many tattoos are created using non-representation. The meaning of the piece is very subjective and is very abstract to the viewer. Secondly though, and perhaps more importantly, most nonrepresentational sculpture is created as mentioned above by manipulating the elements of nature. Therefore, how much more natural to art then is the human body in all its natural wonder! Through the use of the natural body, art is placed and manipulated on the canvas of the skin in order to accentuate or create a piece from what already exists. The very act of creating or accentuating nature is the very essence of an artist’s skill and nature in and of itself is art in all its glory!

In sum, sculpture and all its elements is yet another fine art that can be compared to the art of tattooing.

Photography and Tattoo Art

Photography holds a very special place in tattoo art for various reasons. First, many of the elements applied to photography are also used in tattoo art as has been the

case for the other fine art elements, but a distinguishing characteristic is that many tattoos created are done so through the use of photographs. Many individuals come to tattoo parlors with photograph in hand desiring the artist to recreate that image while also embellishing the image with what the tattooee wants or the artist suggests. It is important to set the stage for photography and define its tenets. "A photograph is literally an image 'written by light.' ... All that you need to have a photograph is a substance that changes its color or tone under the influence of light and that can subsequently be made insensitive to light so that it can be viewed" (Barnet 69). In photography, what the eye perceives and what a photograph portrays differ. As Barnet states, "Human beings have two eyes that are constantly moving to track forms across and into space; they perceive through time, not in fixed units; their angle of vision (the horizontal span perceived when holding the eye immobile) is not necessarily that of the lens; their eyes adjust rapidly to read objects both in bright sun and deep shadows" (70). Many factors are thus in place that interrupt what is true to what is seen in a frozen moment, at a certain vantage point, through one lens through a camera. In photography, the photographer also imposes his perspective on the image and manipulates the environment, chooses what materials to use, chooses how to set up the image or to set himself about the image, etc.. Therefore, the photograph becomes highly subjective. Photography captures truth in moments, but these moments are manipulated by each photographer or, dare we say, artist. "All photographs are representations, in that they tell us as much about the photographer, the technology used to produce the image, and their intended uses as they tell us about the events or things depicted" (Barnet 71).

In tattoo art, a photograph that is brought to an artist serves as a template upon which his perspective is imbued. The factors that interrupt the original photograph are the artist's perspective and how he or she "attacks" the image, the artist's eye, the artist's skill, and the artist's interpretation of the photograph. There has also been a sort of evolution in photography in that what was photography's main function, providing documentary and fact, has greatly shifted to photography's aesthetic quality through manipulation. In manipulated photography, either the positives or negatives are altered in some way and most recently through the use of computers. Many images are altered to seek true perfection or altered to incorporate modern images with antiquated ones. In tattoo art, the aesthetic trumps function almost all of the time. The goal of true tattoo art is to showcase the beauty of something in the best representational way possible. In modern tattooing too, computer-generated images are oftentimes sourced and recreated by the artist. Fabricated photography is what we know as any shot that is staged or in which the environment is constructed by the photographer. In tattoo art, most often, the image of a photograph is placed in front of or around other images created by the artist. Therefore, fabricated images are created through the skill of the artist to add setting and perspective to a photograph. In photography, the photographic process is also of importance and deals with how the positives or negatives were produced, the paper type it was produced on, etc.. The physical properties are also of importance and deal with the size of the photograph, its colors, its brightness and finish, etc. and all of these properties influence the viewer. The dimensions of a photograph are of key importance and determine how a viewer's eye reads the photograph. The vantage point/angle, lens selection, focus, depth of field, lighting, contrast and tonal range also bias the viewer and

serve to create meaning. In tattoo art, the process, physical properties, dimensions, etc. are all of utmost importance and have been addressed in the previous sections of their value and place in the art.

Thus, as the reader can glean, the fine arts in particular of painting, sculpture, and photography carry with them elements that are very well applicable and in fact integral parts of tattoo art. These elements serve to advance these arts and create authenticity and creativity to the desired, artistic masterpieces!

Formal Analysis in a Work of Art

It is noteworthy also to comment on the concept of formal analysis of a work of art and how formal analysis relates to tattoo art. Formal analysis is critical in understanding a work of art and is the basis for creating meaning from the content of the piece of art. To be specific, "...a formal analysis is an analysis of the form the artist produces; that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color, texture, mass, composition" (Barnet 82). Formal analysis goes beyond description and serves rather to reflect deeply on a piece of art, to use inferences, to evaluate the piece of art, to provide statements that offer argument, to connect causes and effects, to articulate how a piece of art creates meaning, and to provoke some kind of response, albeit pleasurable in the viewer. In regards to tattoo art as mentioned before, viewers are brought into the art rather forcibly and either consciously, through active dialogue with the wearer of the art, or subconsciously, through the inner, perhaps

transient intake of the art, analyze tattoos. Viewers very well are affected positively or negatively by these tattoos and infer, evaluate, and argue what the tattoo art means based on the image and content perceived. The author of this paper admits to repeatedly, consciously, and directly questioning individuals as to why they chose the tattoo and content they did or posits questions to another observer which ignites further analysis. Recently, there has been a shift in how individuals analyze a work. Previously, it was thought that the work itself dictated the meaning to the viewer, that the viewer simply took it in and articulated the intended meaning of the artist. Recently, however, this conception has come under controversy and holds that it is not the works of art that dictate the meaning, but it is the viewers themselves, with their biased interpretations, that dictate the meaning of an art work. This theory, then, quite precisely validates the viewers in creating meaning through their own inferences, evaluations, and arguments. Also, aside from creating meaning that was once thought the sole reason for a work, an art object now seeks to reflect the power structure of society. Through this lens, the work is unmasked so to speak and the political and social innuendos of the work are thus revealed. In tattoo art especially, many images and symbols exist that either support or express deep dissatisfaction with or opposition to the hierarchy and culture of society.

Core Values in Art and their Application to Tattoo Art

When art is researched and criticized through historical and aesthetic lenses, there are certain established core values that must be met in order for the art to be legitimized. These core values can be applied to tattoo art and thus once again validate the tattoo's

place among true art. The first value is truth. “One view holds that art should be true. At its simplest, perhaps, this means that it should be realistic, presenting images that closely resemble what we see when we look at the world around us” (Barnet 178). Thus, the work must convey the truths of the image of which it seeks to replicate, but also must convey in some sort, the truths of the time, for example, the political, social, or religious ideologies. Well-thought out and executed tattoo art seeks to convey truth in its every line, shade, curve, etc. The content of a tattoo most often seeks to follow realism. Realism emphasizes common objects/subjects that we encounter on a daily basis and demands accuracy when replicating these objects/subjects. The value of the tattoo then relies on the truth transferred through the tattoo as well as the extrinsic interpretations from viewers to produce value. A work or art, namely a tattoo, “...is good if it has instrumental value; that is, the work is an instrument, improving us spiritually or morally, or giving us insight into the political system so that we can work for a more just system” (Barnet 178). The second value is intrinsic aesthetic merit from formalism. “Formalism holds that intrinsic qualities--qualities within the work, having no reference to the outside world--make it good or bad” (Barnet 179). In other words, the work has value in and of itself regardless of outside forces. In tattoo art, the very shading, patterns, color, lining, space, etc. all add to the intrinsic quality of the tattoo as a whole and by virtue of that intrinsic, aesthetic quality, the viewer is in harmony because the art piece is in harmony. Another value of art is its expressiveness. In any work artists create, they are creating art based on their inner life, the world inside of them that biases every piece of art they produce. In producing art that manifests the inner space of artists, they offer the viewer the value of feeling differently and the value of seeing from another’s eyes. Therefore,

related closely to expressiveness is the artists' sincerity, whether the product reflects the artists' vision. Tattoo artists are extremely expressive in their work and this expressiveness and sincerity, even when custom creating a tattoo, manifests the inner world and vision of the artist. As often said, even though a tattooee may come in with an image to be replicated, once the image is given to the artist and he or she sketches his or her rendition, the artist's manifestation and passion are imbued in the final image of the tattoo. The artist's expressiveness and sincerity cannot be denied or even separated just by virtue of the fact that his or her hand, and extension of his or her inner world, carries out the task. Technique is yet another value of art. Technique is the sister of realism in that many who value technique value how an artist produces something as close to real life as possible. Many individuals are drawn to tattoo art because of the realism and technique of the artist. Many portraits and landscape scenes replicated are awe-inspiring and create value to the art. Finally, originality is the last factor that creates value to art. Those who brush aside convention and leap to out-of-box thinking are oftentimes sought after and rewarded. Originality is the crux of tattoo artistry and the value that propels artists in the field. The more original the artist's technique and content, the more sought after the artist becomes in the industry.

The above values of truth, formality, expressiveness, technique, and originality seek to explain that the judgment of art is not solely based on the subjective, but also on a set of values that guide true art. To argue that a work of art is valid relies on a reasoned account surrounded by concrete values. Like all forms of legitimate art posed in this paper, the same artistic values hold true to tattoo art.

Tattoo Correction--Further Proof of Art

Tattoos are permanent which reinforces the idea that tattooists are indeed fine artists in that unlike artists who use other canvases that can be discarded after “mistakes” are made or are able to cover up any imperfections, a true artist, such as the tattooist, must be perfect at the onset. The reality of the permanence before most application and consideration of a tattoo is common, but the reality is that tattoo art, despite the difficulty, can be altered. What happens when the name of the love of one’s life is imprinted over one’s heart, but he or she acts unfaithfully during the course of the relationship? Most probably, the mere glance at this tattooed name will cause great pain, anger, and a rush of other emotions. Therefore, while tattoos are indeed permanent, many of them can be altered by true tattoo artists which furthers the notion of the authenticity of tattoo art.

In order to cover up or alter an existing tattoo, one must understand that the ink rests in the dermis of the skin, so when artists go to “eradicate” a tattoo, they are actually mixing pigments with those pre-existing pigments under the skin. Color theory thus plays a role and the artist must have knowledge of what colors mix well with others. Darker colors are often used to “camouflage” others. The true art here is in the approach of the alteration. As Shnurman states, “The best approach is to look at the old tattoo and draw your new one using shapes and lines from the old design” (95). Artists thus incorporate the pre-existing tattoo into a new one by manipulating the lines and shapes and using them to the advantage of the new image. The old tattoo is traced from the skin and another layer of paper is placed on so that the proper formations can be made. Again, this cannot be accomplished without skill and creativity of a true tattoo artist. Vibrant colors

are often used to deter the eye away from the cover-up, pre-existing lines are strengthened with color, and white pigment can be used to mix with the pre-existing ones in order to make the shades lighter.

Therefore, it is in this very eradication that true artists emerge through their prowess, experience, and knowledge of tattoo art.

Chapter 5

A Visual Discourse

The Mobile Museum

There is an inherent power in the tattoo. Throughout time, art itself has evolved in its representation and has always led to one distinguishing result, discourse. By nature, art relays narratives whether stated or implied. So, what better canvas to tell one's story than on the tattooed body, a living breathing, interactive canvas? As the human body relates the living narrative via tattooing, the human being entwined in it allows for constant dialogue about the art. Thus, body art becomes a visual language that engages the viewer, even at a quick glance, through an indirect dialogue. As DeMello states, "...I saw the primary source of tattoo power in terms of the literal ability to 'write oneself' and subsequently to be 'read' by others" (12). Because of the mobility of human beings, tattoo collectors carry with them a mobile museum from which others can peruse. The placement of the tattoo is also important as DeMello points out, "Often a tattoo's reading is determined not only on the basis of the image used but on its placement on the body as well" (64). Additionally, many collectors of tattoos have tattoo narratives that actually evolve in and of themselves as they apply new meanings to their tattoos as their perceptions change. These indelible marks not only create a lasting impression on the spectator, but also identify the bearer as unique.

The Power and Function of the Tattoo

Tattoos in and of themselves hold power that can be manifested in their shapes, colors, and images and can serve many functions. They can provide for the wearer many healing opportunities in that a tattoo can serve as an outer manifestation of inner struggle. However, this outer manifestation of the tattoo can be manipulated into something positive, thus providing constant comfort to the wearer upon a glance. In addition, tattoos can serve as a kind life tracker. As DeMello states, "...the body can act as a reservoir for a person's deepest memories" (165). The tattooed body can thus be likened to a memory keeper, a kind of cellular memory that permanently alters the cellular structure of the skin. Tattoos, in general, express innermost beliefs and can be viewed as portals to the soul. They concretely manifest an individual's abstract ideas in the various ways tattoos are represented. Particularly, the middle-class tends to view their bodies as sacred so they justify their tattoos in a way in which the tattoos are an extension of that sacredness. From this hallowed perspective, tattoos enhance the body in creativity and bring a heightened awareness to it. For women especially, tattoos seem to center around healing, power, or control. Some women accrue tattoos in order that they break from a patriarchal notion of society so that they regain control when they mark their bodies on their own volition. Also, those women who tattoo themselves heavily "...can be said to control and subvert the ever-present 'male gaze' by forcing men (and women) to look at their bodies in a manner that exerts control" (DeMello 173). Despite the reasons, however, tattoos make a permanent statement like no other body modification and the art that is the tattoo is the central focus.

Today, tattooing is laden with deep meaning and not entered into lightly. As DeMello points out, “Tattooing has become for many a vision quest; an identity quest; an initiation ritual; a self-naming ritual; and act of magic; a spiritual healing; a connection to the God or Goddess, the Great Mother, or the Wild Man” (176). The tattoo community looks upon tattoos as a means of transcending the negative realities of society in favor of a more communal, peaceful, and simplistic or primitive ideology. Tattoos are no longer just considered a fashion statement, but pieces of fine art to be preserved so long as there is life to support them.

Beginning in the 1980s, tattoo narratives became popular among the tattoo community. These narratives are simply what they seem to be, stories from the wearers themselves who narrate the details of their particular tattoo experiences. These personal narratives continue to place tattoos in a more positive light as they primarily are told by active, professional, middle-class individuals. Tattoo narratives are told by the wearer who usually articulates his story of how his life has changed post tattoo. The wearer relays detailed justifications for the tattoo which oftentimes include rich layers of meaning symbolized in the tattoo. Narratives serve as a form of self-understanding and self-actualization.

Over the course of this research, the writer had the amazing privilege and opportunity to engage in such tattoo discourses while interviewing many individuals with tattoos and tattoo artists themselves in order to extrapolate their personal definitions of art and how those definitions relate to tattooing. These following narratives provide a rich

layer of meaning in that they are the vehicles of artistic articulation. They also serve as yet another portal in which tattooing can be justified as fine art.

The following are snapshots of what was discussed during the particular interviews and with each interview, the writer's notion of the tattoo as an art was validated, especially when the writer was able to witness the process of creation or dialogue with the collector.

Erik "The Lizardman" Sprague: Tattooed Performance Artist/Entertainer

Note: Most of the following is Erik's direct phrasing from the recorded interview:

Erik was my first interview and probably one of the most fascinating tattooed individuals I had ever come in contact with and had the opportunity to engage. If one was to google his name, a myriad of pictures result. He is the individual who tattooed his entire body in reptilian motif and is widely known for his bifurcated tongue, subdermal implants, and gauged ears. He is both a tattoo collector and a performer, draws from his art history background, and does conceptual body based performance art.

Erik was a college student and studied art history in the early 1990s. He believes that tattooing throughout history has stood uniquely and strongly against fine art forms and indeed is a fine art in and of itself. He believes that the borders of fine art have been put up artificially. Whether tattooing was done in Japanese, Tribal, or Western cultures in the late 1700s to early 1800s, what happens today in an artist's studio is the same to him.

What differentiates today's tattooing is that it is more commercial and tattooing has to appeal to a certain client base, however, art is art that transcends time.

Erik made particular mention of the artist Spider Webb from the 1970s who was mentioned in the research who specialized in artwork that was literally generations beyond what would be done by artists today in tattooing but what would also be done in painting and sculpture. Tattooing is simply a medium he feels should never be classified; art IS art...period. He mentioned the Great Omi, mentioned in this paper, and the The Horseriddler, the latter of which was his personal hero from the 1920s-1940s. This man had a full body tattoo and utilized a full, conceptual, nonrepresentational art theme who unfortunately did not get enough credit for what he had done.

In terms of Erik's theory of tattoo art, he claims that a good argument can be made that tattooing is in fact one of the earliest art forms in history and that individuals have been tattooing themselves, based on mummy remains, for as long as we have been homo sapiens. Individuals have always used this medium and it has evolved because of cultural shifts in the views of tattooing. Erik makes clear too that tattooing is usually considered among the folk art forms, not the fine art forms and the differentiating lines between these are in fact bogus. The differences between these two categories he believes lies in what can be sold and what can be controlled and sold. The classification of fine art arises in an institutional art setting when people try to control a market and profit off of that market because people are duped into paying a high price for a particular art piece. It is difficult for tattooing to be considered a fine art because of the ease with which anyone can get a tattoo and many artists can replicate tattoos. Erik believes that what can be

controlled, fine art, is from classism, elitism, and greed and that tattooing is thus placed under the category of folk art because it cannot be controlled.

I asked Erik the obvious question of how he evolved into this inked enigma. He told me that it began in childhood where, without limitations from anyone or anything, he began to draw on paper, walls, and then himself. He lived in an environment where there were no restrictions on his creativity. He then experimented with body painting, costuming, and then finally tattooing, the extension of a lifetime development and a natural progression for him. When he was 18, he acquired some body modification surgeries. Then, through the influence of philosophy and the idea of transformation and the question of what it means to be human, at 21, he went from having no tattoos, to designing a full body tattoo, to beginning to acquire each section of the full body tattoo. He has sat for tattoo sessions that have totaled some 720 hours. I noticed while he was speaking to me that he had some outlining still unshaded and questioned whether he was still a work in progress to which he replied that for years, he has had the outlining on his body, actually since inception, and he oftentimes get shaded or re-shaded on an as needed basis. Over some twenty years now, he referred to himself as a giant coloring book upon which artists have imbued their skill.

As far as the reptilian motif, Erik stated that when he was questioning what it meant to be human, he wanted to explore that by trying to come up with how to look “not as human,” to differentiate himself from other human beings. He sketched many ideas, but the one that resonated with him was the reptilian theme due to its symbolism and mythical origins in human cultures. Whether it be the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the

Native American serpent that carved the Mississippi River, etc., reptiles have an innate power in the human experience so much so that there is something primal and instinctual in the way that individuals react to Erik even though he is the antithesis of the understanding of a human being. Therefore, instead of simply creating a powerful symbol, he is one himself. It is noteworthy to point out here that Erik's careful thought and execution of his tattoo reinforces the idea that fine art pieces are done under much thought, consideration, and time (see Fig. 10) and that his entire motif finds its source in a historical context.



Fig. 10. Erik “The Lizardman” Sprague and Tara Brugnoni at Orlando’s Ripley’s Believe it or Not

I asked Erik how he navigates society as the art form that he is and he said he looks to individuals in society as such, individuals. He says there is no typical day even if he does the same thing because he appreciates and looks for the nuances in each day to validate that uniqueness. He says that his interactions are more positive than negative because he believes humans have an inclination to be more positive naturally and he credits his positivity to his exposure to the media. He uses the theory in psychology that when one recognizes a face, he is more likely to be kinder to that person than had he been a stranger. Finally, because he has a theme to his tattoos and he is essentially one concept, individuals tend to perceive him as a whole work of art rather than an amalgam of images and it is in that very commitment to a well-thought-out piece that distinguishes a notable and remembered work of art. On this point, I asked Erik what he thought a proper estimate would be on exactly how much he has spent thus far on tattooing and he cringed and became rather irritated with that question. He asked me the last time I walked into a gallery, if I ever questioned the painter on how much the frame and paint were. One would never do that so the question then is irrelevant, for the focus should be on the work as a whole, not the materials that were used although they are crucial to the art. If one is asking how much it cost to produce a work of art, then one is surely missing the point of that work of art. With that being said, Erik did say that in one particular television interview, pictures and information were forwarded to an insurance adjuster who estimated that if he insured his skin, an approximate number would be a quarter of a million dollars! Hence, the value of art!

I asked Erik about one of the most novel concepts about tattooing which is the idea of permanence. He immediately relayed very profound ideas. He stated that when a painter paints a picture or a sculptor sculpts a piece of art, he can easily discard or walk away from the art and essentially never turn back. In tattooing, however, the use of one's body creates a "seriousness" to the art because there is no going back once executed and there is a sustained amount of time both the artist and tattooee must endure. He cautions though that using the skin haphazardly can be gimmicky at some times. He was fully aware that once he committed to these pieces of art, that he very well would be committed to them for the rest of his life. As an artist, one must be willing to commit to permanence, to the idea, expression, and concept; otherwise respect and validity are jeopardized.

Erik also spoke about the measure of art which is not based on how much money one produces from it. However, like all art in order to make it known, one must work within the particular parameters of the industry to become known. In Erik's case, his ability to work within these said parameters from a business aspect has singled him out and made him famous among other tattooed individuals. Like all art that seeks fame, Erik understands that he must promote his body namely in the media which demands interpersonal skills. He realizes that the media industry is a service industry and thus works that theory to the best of his ability. The media in all its forms as noted in this research has greatly impacted the dissemination and positivity on tattooing as an art and Erik thus shops his art around via the television, magazines, books, etc. and works among these systems. He thus capitalizes on his art through the interactions of people and

promotion. Thus like all forms of art, the art is appreciated once it is immersed in a society.

Mickey Mazo: Tattooed Male and Artist

Mickey Mazo is an esteemed tattoo artist who works at a tattoo shop. His story is rather unique in terms of how he became an artist and what tattooing does for his well-being. Mazo learned tattooing from his father who was a tattoo artist from high school; however, today, his father has had to stop due to health reasons. Mazo was first drawn to black and grey tattoos and he both drew and acquired them at the young age of fifteen and it has been over ten years since. He began admiring comic book characters and drawing them as a child along with anything around him that stood out. He also remembers that in ninth grade, when he had exploratory art classes, he really honed in on the art of tattooing instead of the traditional fine art forms; in fact, he really disliked these traditional forms. His first tattoo was an enormous skull across his arm, for Mazo came from a troubled past. Consequently, when he first dabbled in tattooing, he did not consider the placement of tattoos on his body and acquired them rather impulsively and wanted his tattoos to in fact isolate him from the “normal” world.

One of the major shifts that Mazo has seen during the past ten years is the reception of him and the deterioration of this isolation he so greatly desired from tattooing. The “mask” he wears through tattooing has not only been ripped off, but Mickey Mazo, the individual with the tattoos, walks through life now metaphorically stripped of his armor, conversing with many people who appreciate the art he carries. This shift again mirrors the wide acceptance of tattoos today.

One of the main issues we were discussing was also the idea of facial, hand, and neck tattoos, those tattoos that were once considered taboo but are now more common than before. I asked Mazo if he considered a facial tattoo and he said no because people in his life thought that to be too much, thus validating still the negative stigma of the facial tattoo. Mazo commented though on the fashionable and artistic aspects of facial, neck, and hand tattoos because they essentially become an accessory to the body save for the permanence of them. To this point of accessorizing, Mazo affirmed that in many advertisements now, the tattoo plays a predominant role in the campaigning of the product in that tattoos complement the product being sold.

Mazo began speaking about exactly how he tattoos. He does many custom tattoos and creates them in dialogue with his clients. He says it is very important to literally “pick someone’s brain” in order to get an ideal work of art. He learns about the interest of the clients and their preferences and styles and then infuses his artistic prowess into the tattoo. This again reinforces the artist’s creative and crucial role in tattooing art pieces.

I asked Mazo, what to me is the basis of my research, how tattooing stands among the other fine art forms. In other words, how does he view tattooing in light of all the other art forms. With no hesitation, he responded that tattooing is by far the hardest art form to execute. In tattooing, the artist works with and on a moving, breathing, living medium. The interactive discourse alone sets aside tattooing from the rest as the artist is creating in dialogue. There is no room for error and everything must be immaculate. The tattoo artist must be proficient in color theory and shading/lighting which only come from experience. A tattoo artist must learn what colors blend with other colors and points of

saturation of colors. The living medium also dictates how the artist works as well based on the medium's reactions. In addition to that, tattooing is regulated and must adhere to very strict sanitary conditions which adds more stress to the artist than does when producing any other art form. Perhaps the greatest distinction lies in the fact that various artists contribute to one human canvas over a period of time rather than any other art form that is usually completed by either one or a limited amount of people until its completion.

The art of tattooing though is what Mazo calls a guarded, secretive art form because the uniqueness dwells in the mystique of the particular artist. Most artists while teaching others will never teach an apprentice his entire skill set because that skill set is unique to him and that skill set places him apart from other artists as mentioned before in the research.



Fig. 11. Tattoo by Mikkey Mazo-Replication of “The Creation of Adam” by Michelangelo

Danielle Obsuth: Tattooed Female

I first met Danielle at a Subway near my workplace. I frequented this food chain quite often and it was she who waited on me. As she did, it was quite obvious that Danielle had many tattoos. In fact, I was distracted by them every time she asked me what meat I wanted! The tattoos of every shape and size were scrolled all over her forearms with the most noticeable on her left hand and fingers. As I became friendlier with Danielle, I commented on her tattoos and told her of my research. I asked her if she had many more not visible and she stated quite confidently, "If these are my arms, can you imagine what the rest of my body looks like?" Danielle soon agreed to discuss with me her tattooing experiences in an interview.

Danielle got her first tattoo at the age of fifteen where she had to give the tattoo artist a notarized note from her mother because she was underage. This tattoo would actually turn out to be her largest and most expensive one costing approximately \$1200 in which she sat for twelve hours. The image of this tattoo is of a dream catcher and her heritage dictated her primary reason for getting it. Her inspiration for this first tattoo was her sister who is also heavily decorated with tattoos. Danielle is now twenty two-years-old and has approximately forty tattoos that cover her arms, legs, torso, and the perimeter of her face. When asked about how she chooses a tattoo, she stated that she peruses the internet, thinks about ideas with imagination, or discusses her ideas with her artist who then modifies the creation according to his personal style. She works under one artist who had been her friend. In terms of the placement of her tattoos, she has one arm dedicated to nature themes and the other to the darker side of life. She calls her arms light and dark,

respectively. She admits that when she first began getting the tattoos, she randomly chose body parts but as she is “running out of space” she is more cognizant of the placement, especially how the tattoos will complement various pieces of clothing. Danielle has black and grey tattoos as well as those with color and stated that the color tattoos are less painful because of the process. When doing a black and grey tattoo, outlining is predominant and thus the needle pricks are constant and painful. When using color to shade, constant wiping of color exists so the needle prick pain is substituted by a more raw sensation.

Danielle estimated that she has spent approximately \$10,000 on all of her tattoos. Her longest time for the completion of one tattoo took four sessions that were four hours in length. Therefore, the amount of money and the time and dedication it took for Danielle to acquire forty tattoos points again to the level of commitment and seriousness that a collector possesses. When asked about the permanence of tattoos and using her skin as a medium, she was quick to respond that her skin is the only permanent thing she can take with her through her journey through life. Paper, canvas, and all other materials are fleeting, but Danielle is the living breathing canvas that supports the art. Tattooing for Danielle is the quintessential way to express her identity even if others may not approve. It is something in which she has full control over. As an aside, many individuals who go through trauma are heavily tattooed for the same reason. Because they feel as though their bodies were violated through trauma, they take charge of them and adorn them in an attempt to regain the control that they lost. Danielle intends on getting more tattoos to cover her whole body throughout her life; however, she was cautious about facial tattoos.

She stated that covering the face can hide one's true identity, and she did not want to simply be known as the "tattooed girl," but as Danielle, the girl with the mobile art museum.

All of Danielle's tattoos are showcased in her artist's portfolio and she dresses in such a way to showcase her tattoos accordingly. When I asked Danielle how she is accepted in society, she stated that primarily many older women mostly in their 60s tend to look disparagingly at her whereas older men compare their army/navy tattoos to hers and the younger generation is almost always accepting. These observations support the writer's research and especially validate that tattooing in the twenty first century is becoming an accepted "norm" perceived in a more positive light as it is increasingly eminent.



Fig. 12. Tattoo on Danielle's right arm- "Father Time"

Conclusion

It is with confidence then that the writer of this dissertation affirms with certainty that the tattoo is indeed a creation of true and bona fide art strong enough to stand among the other defined art forms. Tattoo art, when created purposefully and contextually, rendered professionally, and worn magnificently, marks an individual who holds a unique responsibility in being a permanent vehicle of the art. Traced through history, in its evolution and culture, tattooing has withstood the test of time validating its transcendent value and has shattered barriers so much so that it has taken firm root in the twenty first century with no signs of slowing. So long as there are eyes to see and breath to support the canvas, the art of the tattoo remains ever-present. So, when considering the tattoo, one should remember from whence it came and marvel at the intricacy and beauty of a true phenomenon.

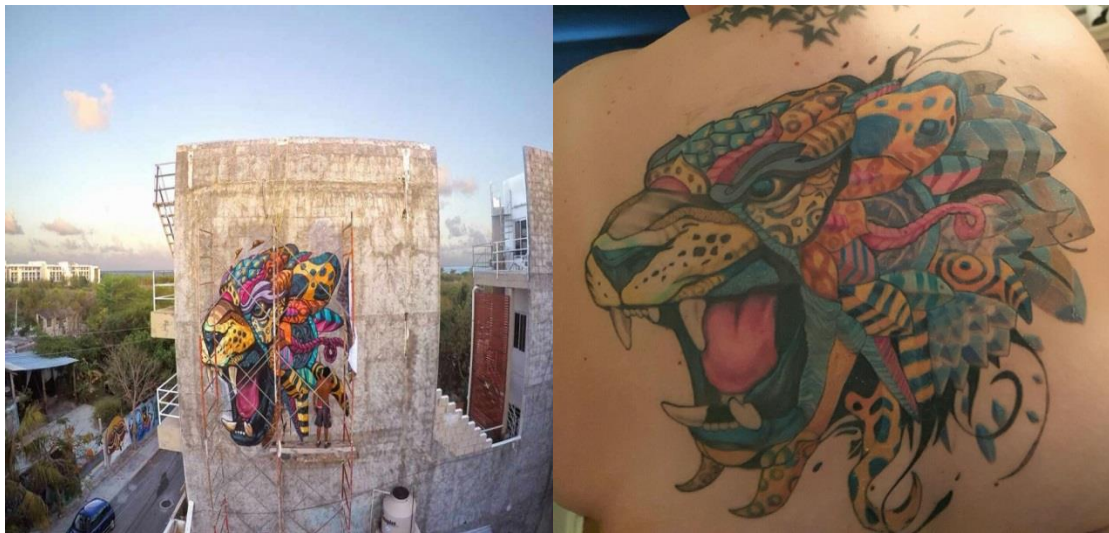


Fig. 13. Mural *Balam* in Mexico (by Farid Rueda) and Tattoo of *Balam* (a Mayan jaguar god)

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VITA

Full name: Tara Brugnoni

Place and date of birth: July 2, ; Englewood, NJ.

Parents Name: Janel and Kenneth Brugnoni

Educational Institutions:

School	Place	Degree	Date
Secondary: Immaculate Conception High School	Lodi, NJ	Diploma	May 1999
Collegiate: Felician University	Lodi, NJ	Bachelor's	May 2003
Graduate: Felician University		Master's	May 2005
Drew University	Madison, NJ	Doctor of Letters	May 2016

May 2016