



The Art of Tattoo

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A Modern History of Tattoo Art

By the nineteenth century, tattooing had grown immensely popular in the Asian world. In fact, the English word *tattoo* traces its roots to *tatau*, the Samoan word for body art. In Japan, tattoo artists were known as *horishi*, a word that roughly translates in English to “carver.” But in 1872 the Japanese government banned tattooing as immoral. Still, a vast network of underground tattoo artists thrived, thanks mostly to the desire of criminals known as the Yakuza to have their bodies tattooed.

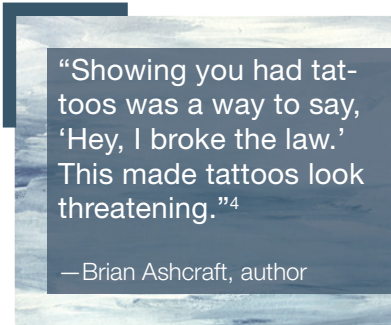
This desire stemmed from several factors. For one, tattooing was illegal, and Yakuza members were always looking for ways to break the law. But it was also painful, which means it took a degree of toughness to submit to the art of the *horishi*. Indeed, the Yakuza were more than willing to flaunt this evidence of their courage. And it was permanent—meaning it marked the wearer for life as a Yakuza. Brian Ashcraft, an author who explores Asian culture, explains:

When tattoos were outlawed in 1872, anyone who had them was, by default, a criminal. Showing you had tattoos was a way to say, “Hey, I broke the law.” This made tattoos look threatening. Even though the ban was lifted after World War II, those connotations remained—and, for many, continue to this day. But as one Japanese tattooist explained, “We must be thankful to the Yakuza for keeping this country’s tattoo tradition alive.” That’s true: When

tattoos were outlawed and tattooists were under the real threat of being arrested for their work, the underworld kept them employed.⁴

Inspired by a Novel

In rendering their art, many Japanese tattoo artists took inspiration from the novel *Suikoden*, which tells the story of Chinese outlaws who challenge an authoritarian regime during the twelfth century. (In English, the novel's title is translated as *The Water Margin*.) Although versions of the novel had been produced in Japan as far back as the 1500s, it was a late-nineteenth-century publication of it that caught the interest of the Yakuza, who appreciated the outlaw ways of the characters and wanted to wear the tattoos described in the text. The readers of the novel were particularly taken with the illustrations by artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi, who sketched the heroes with colorful full-body tattoos. Describing Kuniyoshi's artwork, journalist India Stoughton says,



“Showing you had tattoos was a way to say, ‘Hey, I broke the law.’ This made tattoos look threatening.”⁴

—Brian Ashcraft, author

One of the most popular of Kuniyoshi's 75 illustrations . . . depicts a scene from a story about a former fisherman and smuggler named Ruan Xiaowu who, with his two brothers, joined the bandits of Mount Liang. His tattoo of a fierce leopard, which is described in the original novel, is shown . . . peeking out from under subtle monochrome patterns that evoke the animal's pelt and cover the hero's entire back, as he engages in a dramatic underwater fight with an enemy general intent on capturing the bandits.⁵

Among the images inked onto the bodies of the Yakuza were mythical beasts such as dragons as well as real-life



Utagawa Kuniyoshi's illustrations, such as this nineteenth-century woodcut of a warrior with full-body tattoos, inspired the Yakuza and horishi to explore bold, colorful tattoos that covered large portions of the body.

ferocious animals, including snakes, leopards, and tigers. The *horishi* also exhibited a lighter touch, rendering images of flowers and friendly birds. Moreover, their work was colorful. And perhaps most significantly, the *horishi* did not limit their work to the biceps of their clients. They regarded the full body as

their canvas, extending their art from the neck to the heel. As Ashcraft says, “The full body suits, with their intricate designs and elaborate backgrounds, must have looked like artistic marvels to foreigners. No wonder they influenced a generation of talented Western tattooers.”⁶ Indeed, the body art created by the *horishi* has influenced tattoo artists well into the twenty-first century.

Tattooing in the Bowery

The full-body tattoos rendered by the *horishi* may have been popular among the Yakuza, but it would take another century before tattoo clients in the West would be comfortable with the notion of being permanently inked virtually from head to toe. In the late 1800s tattoo artists in America were confronted with a much different type of clientele. Tattoo studios were typically located in port cities, and their clients were invariably sailors on leave who made their way into town with pockets full of cash, thanks to the ship’s paymaster. Sailors landing in New York Harbor found what they needed in the city neighborhood known as the Bowery and, in particular, in the Bowery’s Chatham Square.

At the time, Chatham Square was the center of a bustling New York nightlife with dozens of saloons, gambling houses, theaters, burlesque halls, and tattoo studios, all located within an area of a few blocks. One of those studios was owned by tattoo artist Samuel O’Reilly, who was so busy rendering tattoos for sailors and other customers that he found himself unable to keep up with the demand.

O’Reilly accommodated his clients as best he could, but like other tattoo artists of the time, he was limited by the rudimentary tools available to him. These tools consisted of needles attached to wooden handles. The artist dipped the needle tips into ink, then used the needles to puncture the skin of the client. Working slowly, the artist spent hours fashioning the tattoo into the layer of skin known as the dermis. The dermis is the second layer of

skin, about 0.125 inches (3 mm) below the top layer, known as the epidermis. The dermis, which is about 0.08 inches (2 mm) in thickness, is much softer than the epidermis, so it is able to absorb the ink of the tattoo needle. Therefore, the tattoo artist needs to first puncture the tough epidermis, then push the ink into the dermis.

O'Reilly knew that he could earn a higher income if he could work more rapidly—the faster he could complete a tattoo, the faster he could seat the next client in his chair. In 1891 he searched for a machine that could help speed up the tattoo process, and he soon discovered an apparatus known as the electric pen.

Edison's Electric Pen

The device had been developed sixteen years earlier by Thomas Edison, one of history's preeminent inventors, responsible for producing such innovations as the electric light bulb, the movie camera, the phonograph, and the alkaline battery. As he tinkered in his laboratory in West Orange, New Jersey, it is unlikely Edison envisioned the impact the electric pen would have on tattoo art over the course of the next century.

The device, which was connected to a source of electricity, shot a jolt of current through the brass barrel of the pen. Inside the barrel was a cam—essentially a slide that moved up and down. At the end of the cam was a needle. The cam moved the needle quickly in an in-and-out motion, enabling the user to cut through a sheet of paper, creating a stencil. By placing a clean sheet of paper beneath the stencil, then rolling ink over the stencil, the user could make a copy of what he or she had just written—or, certainly, dozens of copies. Edison received a patent for the electric pen in 1876. It was mostly used by office workers to make duplicates of their correspondence.

O'Reilly modified the electric pen, replacing the machine's needles with tattoo needles. By using the new machine, tattoo

Tattoos and the Circus

During the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, it was rare to find people in America and Europe wearing full-body tattoos. Mostly, tattoo clients such as sailors and assorted roughnecks wanted no more than their biceps tattooed. But anybody who visited the circus in those years was virtually guaranteed to see a man or woman wearing full-body tattoos. These men and women had their bodies tattooed to earn livings as circus performers.

One of the most famous of the tattooed women of the era was a performer known as La Belle Irene, whose body was decorated by tattoo machine inventor Samuel O'Reilly. As art professor and tattoo historian Steve Gilbert recounts, "La Belle Irene . . . made her London debut in 1890, claiming to be the first completely tattooed woman ever exhibited in a circus. Her decorations included an artistic assortment of flowers, birds, hearts, cupids, scrolls and sentimental inscriptions borrowed from the ornamental commercial art of the day."

Following World War II, the practice of exhibiting tattooed men and women in the circus all but died out. They had been performers in what were commonly known as freak shows, which also featured performers who had been placed on exhibit to showcase their physical oddities, such as morbid obesity, dwarfism, or unusual height. By then, the public had come to view freak shows as demeaning to the performers, and circus owners responded by eliminating the shows.

Steve Gilbert, *Tattoo History: A Sourcebook*. New York: Juno, 2000, pp. 135–36.

artists could insert, withdraw, and reinsert the needle into the dermis at a much faster pace because the needle was now propelled by an electric charge. In fact, O'Reilly's machine was capable of making up to fifty punctures per minute—much quicker than an artist could accomplish with just his or her fingers to manipulate the tattoo needle. (Today's tattoo machines, which are still based on the concept of the electric pen but have undergone significant technological advances since O'Reilly's time, are capable of making up to 3,000 punctures per minute.)

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