CHAPTER 1

TATTOOS AND THE TATTOOING ARTS IN PERSPECTIVE

An Overview and Some Preliminary Observations

Punctured

The historical progression, meaning, and significance of tattoos and the tattooing arts are neither smooth nor unified, and actually can be considered as varied and punctured as the skin on which the tattoo is placed. A smooth or unified account is elusive in part because of the wide variety of cultures in which tattooing has been practiced, from Japan and the South Pacific to ancient Greece. Moreover, there is evidence of tattooing that can be traced to the Bronze Age, and our historical grasp of such pre-literate culture is highly speculative. Further, tattooing methods have likewise varied: there have been simple methods of creating skin images by cutting the skin and then rubbing ashes into the wound, and there have been more complex methods associated with inserting ink into the skin. Still, notwithstanding the
sprawling territory stretching out ahead of us in this volume, in this chapter we address four areas that may prove useful for philosophizing about tattoos: history, cultural meaning, individual meaning, and self-expression.

History

The English word ‘tattoo’ is most likely adapted from the Tahitian word *tatau*, meaning ‘marking something,’ but also has obvious affinity with the Polynesian word *ta*, which means ‘striking something.’ There are good reasons to believe that tattoos go back at least to the Bronze Age (and possibly even Neolithic times). In the 1990s, between Austria and Italy, a frozen human body was recovered bearing fifty-seven tattoos; it is estimated that the man died somewhere around 3200 BCE. It is possible that the body marks were in some ways medicinal or used in a practice of healing; however, it could also be that tattoos were decorative and bearers of meaning in terms of rank and identity. There is also reason to believe that tattooing took place in ancient Greece, Persia, and among the ancient Britons and Gauls, as well as in Africa, in the Americas, and throughout Asia. Sometimes the skin markings were colored marks, and at other times simple blackened lines. Below is an account of tattooing by a doctor, Aetius, who practiced medicine in Constantinople and Alexandria during the reign of Justinian (527–565). The tattoo is referred to as *stigmata*, and, while there is reason not to associate the tattoo with a stigma or mark of shame, it is interesting that in his medical notes Aetius also offers instructions on the removal of tattoos:

They call *stigmata* things inscribed on the face or some other part of the body, for example on the hands of soldiers, and they use the following ink. [The recipe follows] Apply by prickling the places with needles, wiping away the blood, and rubbing in first juice of leek, and then the preparation … In cases where we wish to remove such stigmata, we must use the following preparations … When applying, first clean the stigmata with niter, smear them with resin of terebinth, and bandage for five days … The stigmata are removed in twenty days, without great ulceration and without a scar.

Tattooing came to be shunned in Christianized Europe during the Middle Ages, the reason for this stemming partly from the Old Testament teaching in Leviticus: ‘You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on
account of the dead, or tattoo any marks upon you’ (19:28). Contemporary scholars propose that this was to help distinguish the Jews (and thus their monotheism) from surrounding polytheistic cultures. Also, in the New Testament, there is a line in Revelations that has been interpreted as implying that Christians should not use tattoos. A scarlet women is described as follows: ‘On her forehead was written a name of mystery, ‘Babylon the Great, mother of harlots and of Earth’s abominations” (17:5). While Christians in the Middle Ages and throughout the seventeenth century in Europe did engage in some tattooing – pilgrims to Jerusalem would sometimes get a Jerusalem tattoo, and it was not unusual for Christians to have the names Jesus, Maria, Bethlehem, and others tattooed on their bodies – it was not a major practice. And the rather negative Biblical portrait of body painting accounts for why Christian missionaries discouraged tattooing throughout Asia, including Polynesia, which is probably the site of the longest-standing cultural tradition of tattooing. When Europe emerged from the Christian Medieval Era into an age of voyages of discovery (as well as trade and exploitation), Europeans rediscovered the tattoo. The first modern record of tattoos dates from James Cook’s expedition to Tahiti in 1769.

In many of the Polynesian cultures, the tattooing process tested the endurance of the male population. Tattooing became a ceremony. Puberty usually prompted the inauguration of this intensive process, which took from a few weeks to months to complete. The rebirth of tattooing in the Western world also reincarnated this masculinized history. Around the 1930s, the popularity of tattoos surged among the sailor community. Sailors endured the pain of the tattooing process as a contemporary way of asserting their masculinity over their peers. It soon became a competition for dominance, as no sailor could be perceived as weak. Tattooing also became evident during the Victorian era in European armies (though it was not as widespread as in European navies). For example, as men re-entered civilian life in Britain, the tattoo became known as working class jewelry.

Tattooing in America has had a mixed history. Predictably, European Americans saw the elaborate tattooing by Native Americans as a sign of their primitive (namely, uncivilized and barbaric) way of life, but tattooing during the Civil War seemed to be an acceptable expression of loyalty. Thus, tattooing slowly became an American folk art during the late nineteenth century. Tattoos were featured in the context of carnivals and circuses, but they slowly became integral to some elements of popular culture. Common icons in the early 1900s included hearts, women, flowers,
animals, ships, birds, serpents, the American flag, the Christian cross, and so on. Toward the middle of twentieth century, up to the 1960s, there were a host of standard tattoo characters: Bugs Bunny, The Road Runner, Betty Boop, Mickey Mouse, Mighty Mouse, Maggie and Jiggs, Mutt and Jeff, and even The Pink Panther.

Some comments are in order in terms of sexuality and tattooing. Tattoos intrigued the famed sex researcher Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956). After befriending a tattoo artist, Kinsey interviewed sailors and patrons at the tattoo parlor to determine the sexual urges behind tattooing. Samuel Steward has noted: ‘Kinsey was quite interested in this confirmation of our jointly-developed theories about tattoos and the assertion of masculine status, narcissism, and the sexual aftermath of a first tattoo.’

Though Kinsey focused mainly on sexual motivations behind tattooing, he also brought up a unique feature of tattooing around his time – the assertion of masculine status. Competition among what society considered the ‘degenerates’ fueled the need for tattoos. If one sailor was getting an anchor on his forearm, then all of his shipmates were right behind him to receive one as well.

Interestingly, the art of tattooing seems to have been a predominantly female practice in Ancient Egypt, breaking the stereotype of tattooing as inherently masculine. Female mummies from Egypt with tattoos were often assumed to be prostitutes, but a high priestess named Amunet has been found among other tattooed women, showing that women of all social classes likely were tattooed. The cosmic nature of tattoos – to protect the holder against illness or to ward off bad omens – also applied to the struggles of pregnancy and birth in women’s lives. Net-like dot tattoos around the abdomen illustrated the custom of wrapping mummies in bead nets as a way of containment; the tattoo would imbue magic to help carry the baby throughout the pregnancy. Mummies have also been found with the symbol of Bes – a deity believed to protect women during labor and birth – on their upper thighs. The role of the tattoo as a safeguard during pregnancy and birth seems to vouchsafe that in Ancient Egypt tattooing was a custom reserved for women.

Tattoos also played a punitive role in history. Greco-Roman cultures would use tattoos as a way of marking prisoners and slaves, visually symbolizing their inferiority. This tradition continued through to the twentieth century. The Nazis tattooed Jews in Auschwitz and other concentration camps with identifying numbers, usually on their arms. Prisoners today tattoo themselves to take control of their convict and marginalized status in society, which could, in a way, be viewed as a voluntary punishment.
The blend of tattoos received in prison and in the outside world represents a very real juxtaposition of incarceration and freedom. We’ll say more about the history of tattoos as we move on to the cultural meaning of the tattoo.

Cultural Meaning

In her brilliant book, *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, Jane Caplan rightly notes that establishing a cultural identity is one common and important role the tattoo has played throughout history:

The tattoo occupies a kind of boundary status on the skin, and this is paralleled by its cultural use as a maker of differences, an index of inclusion and exclusion … The tattoo has been taken to mark off entire ‘civilizations’ from their ‘barbarian’ or ‘savage’ neighbors; to declare a convict’s criminality, whether by branding him as a punishment or because he has inverted this penal practice by acquiring voluntary tattoos (thereby, ironically, marking himself); and more generally to inscribe various kinds of group membership, often in opposition to a dominant culture.

As noted earlier, we have reason to believe that tribes on virtually all continents have used skin images as a mark of identification, from the Celtic and Germanic peoples of Europe to Japan and Polynesia. These images have also had roles within tribes of identifying particular practices (religious devotion, or warrior or healer status), histories (ancestry, images symbolizing bravery or victory, recovery from illness), positions of leadership (domain of power or allegiance), and availability to mate (symbols of fecundity), and have even served as devices designed to protect the bearer of the tattoo – in this context the tattoo is seen to have magical powers to ward off evil or bad luck, thereby functioning as an amulet. And, as Caplan suggests, paradoxically, tattoos also have been used both to mark criminals to identify them as having been subject to punishment and by criminals or gangs themselves as a sign of their dangerous power over others, including rival gangs.

To see the powerful role of tattoos in establishing cultural meaning, consider seventeenth-century Japan. Around this time, *ukiyo-e prints*, *irezumi*, and the Kabuki Theatre drastically rose in popularity as forms of counter-culture in the Imperial world. *Irezumi*, the name for Japanese...
tattoo art meaning ‘the insertion of ink,’ contrasts with *ukiyo-e* (‘images of the floating world’), which describe Japanese woodblock prints. The merchant middle class relished this new culture that freed them from the rigid social system. The narratives of all three art forms depict the ordinary life of the time, which began to alter the imperialized ethos of Japan’s cultural identity.⁷

This shift shows that art can mirror its audience and simultaneously alter them, though this was not the initial role of Japanese tattooing. *Irezumi* began as a punitive procedure, but, in an attempt to put a positive spin on the tattoo and the tattooing arts, Japanese tattoo artists adopted for themselves the term for woodblock carvers – *horishi*. This shift also separated tattoos from their previously negative connotations and solidified the connection between tattoos and woodblock prints. Soon after, tattooing became an expression of love. Lovers began to exchange tattoos of small dots, representing ‘love tokens,’ which some claim to be the predecessor to the modern popularity of tattooing names of loved ones.

The important point to stress here is that tattoos have a cultural dimension that is not necessarily subject to private interpretation. Though the cultural sea may ebb and flow, cultural norms can control how society collectively interprets common imagery. The image may be permanent, but, contrasting, the meaning or interpretation of the image is fluid. Let us consider the example of a young German soldier who, in the early 1940s, decides to get the swastika tattooed on his forearm and views it as a symbol of his national pride. For a brief time, in German-controlled territory, that may well be its meaning. But, after World War II and the exposure of Nazi crimes, the world views the young solider’s tattoo as a symbol of genocide (even though he may never have killed anyone). Certain images have such enormous weight (a crucifix, a star of David) that their meaning resists privatized meaning (it would be hard to claim that a crucifix tattoo on one’s chest is a symbol of one’s passion for fair-trade coffee), but some symbols that are quite trenchant (for example a skull) can shift in meaning if there is a sufficient culture or subculture to support it (a skull tattoo might well identify its bearer as a Deadhead, for example).

Here are another two examples of what we’re getting at concerning the cultural meaning and interpretation of tattoos. Ancient Polynesian societies required tattooing as a way to anchor the organizations within their society, regulating everything from politics to religion. To these ends, the tattooing process seems to also have been representative of the
overarching social institutions. The Maori tattooing tradition from New Zealand has recently risen in international popularity, but its roots are very traditional. Moko (facial tattoos) and other tattoos depicted pivotal moments in a person’s life, as a visual guide to the individual’s history.8

Correspondingly, the tattoo process can be as utilitarian as the actual resulting image. Samoan Pe’a is a very ritualized process. The intricate design of the body tattoo is always expertly symmetrical. The tattooing process involves multiple assistants, each with distinct responsibilities, with prayers being recited or sung throughout the whole session, and it can take several days to complete. The tattoo process is often overlooked in this respect. Achieving a type of revelation during the process is often regarded as more important than the final image. The tattooing process can, thus, vary in importance, depending on what aspect of the process is valued the highest. As stewards of superstition, sailors banded together through tattooing as a way to ward off potential harms. In their early forms, tattoos conjured up a sense of magic, which is still alive today. Some sailors, for example, get ‘H-O-L-D F-A-S-T’ tattooed on the fingers of their hands to prevent them from falling into the ocean, or get roosters and pigs tattooed on their feet – these hydrophobic animals are known for quickly finding land if thrown overboard.9

From the early 1950s to the early 1970s, the bearer of a tattoo tended to be perceived in North American and European societies as existing on the margins of society, whether he (most tattooed people at this time were men) was a sailor, convict, or belonged to a gang. At this time, tattoos seemed to be strong markers for conformity and non-conformity in some segments of society. They became unifiers to others with tattoos; long hair and beards were initially symbols of hippie culture counter to traditional culture, but these images of defiance became distinguishing characteristics for the collective. Today, tattoos seem to be less of an indication of marginalization or counter-culture and increasingly part of the mainstream, thus allowing for a greater role of the personal meaning of tattoos.

Contemporary redefinition of the iconography and ideology of tattoos creates a new discourse about tattoos, and many would claim that some tattoos are fine art. It seems that the tattoo is no longer steeped in the stigmatized murk, but has higher significance. The role of the tattoo is malleable, as tattoos have never constituted a consistent marker in Western society. Using the foundations of American tattoo design and history as a point of departure, the emerging youth, trained in the fine arts, pump a breadth of creativity and skill into contemporary tattooing.
Individual Meaning

Alongside a tattoo’s cultural meaning is its individual meaning. Tattooing can simply entail a customer walking into a shop and choosing an image off a sheet, which is straightforward, yet unoriginal. But it is more commonplace for tattoos to have individual natures and meanings, and these begin with an appreciation of the sheer individuality of the skin markings. It could be argued that, on a basic level, each tattoo is inherently individualistic, even those that are sheet-bought. If we consider tattooing as an art form, the tattoo is an image composed on a cellular level, and each person’s individual DNA makes the cellular medium different in each case. Tattoos are beyond reproduction in the sense that the medium is a living body. Consider the generic images: if one hundred people were to pick the same image and all corresponding tattoos were executed identically, there would still be one hundred unique tattoos. The imagery can be replicated but, as DNA is unique, the tattoo is non-reproducible. This is in many respects in line with individualism, which asserts that an individual is beyond reproduction.

In addition to the inherent physical individuality of the tattoo, tattoo artists have defended their art as purely individualistic: a person may be tattooed in a way that reflects their individual dreams, their particular loves, or specific events of fulfillment or loss (one of us has a tattoo commemorating his love for his grandfather), or that involve symbols that are so esoteric that their ‘public meaning’ is unavailable.

Tattoos might also represent an existential, individual act. While there are temporary tattoos (usually in the form of body stickers, which produce sometimes waterproof but temporary images), tattooing is more typically perceived by society as involving permanent or semi-permanent images. Once a tattoo, and its associated context, is created, it cannot be undone, or it cannot be undone without severe laser treatments. There is, in a sense, an inherently existential, individual nature to getting a tattoo: the decision to be tattooed is one that will mark you as an individual indefinitely.

Self-Expression and Double Skin

Intimately connected to individual meaning is self-expression. We noted above some different means of creating skin images. Consider the fascinating process in which inks are applied to the skin by inserting metallic
chemicals that the body then tries to repel. Through the healing process, the body seals off the pigments because they cannot be rejected and the barrier from the inks allows the tattoo and the body to (as it were) ‘adapt’ to each other. This underscores Jane Caplan’s description of the tattoo as ‘something rejected from which one does not part.’ In this latter model, the tattoo is, paradoxically, both the visible image itself and the underlying markings beneath the skin.

The tattoo becomes a double skin, in a sense. In its very nature it juxtaposes interiority and exteriority – which might be a factor in the fascination and controversy it creates. It is a physical object – the ink used in the drawing takes up tangible space – but it is also an inferred object, an image. The physical barrier between the ink and the skin draws attention to the exterior of our skin while also sectioning off access to the interior. That being said, a tattoo is still an inferred object. It is a skin image.

Rarely are tattoos thought of as objects separate from skin, but more as a collection of colored cells part of the larger grouping of cells we call our skin. This might be likened to optical illusion drawings in which it is possible to see two images – the rabbit-duck, for example. It is possible to see one or the other, but not both at the same time. One cannot simultaneously see a tattoo as a separate physical object and also part of the skin. The image itself is easily distinguishable, but it is difficult to visually discern whether the tattoo is inked skin or a separate object entirely.

The position of a tattoo underneath the skin but visually on top of the skin also seems to assert its nature as a double skin. Caplan notes the tattoo’s position ‘as a particular elaboration of the skin’s surface, an indelible insertion that is both visible and out of reach.’ Paradoxically, the tattoo’s permanence seems to be a way of achieving a sort of quasi-immortality. Our bodies cycle through cells every seven years, but the tattoo remains. Thus, as our bodies change, the tattooed image lives on, forever marking its position. The skin as a makeshift canvas changes every seven years, with each iteration essentially a different medium to portray the image. The visual sense is always subject to alterations, but a tattooed visual seems unalterable.

An alternative to the double skin theory is to think of tattooing as a process beyond decorating an exterior, and instead creating the skin as a surface. In this process, one may consider tattooing as a bodily expression of one’s inner thoughts – the exteriorization of one’s internal ideas without repression. This position can be better understood if it is considered to stem from self-infliction. Adopting the position that regards tattoos
as self-mutilation for a moment might allow us some insight. In this line of thought, consciously displaying one’s inner psyche through a series of self-inflicted markings involves debasing oneself while having power over the debasement, but through this attaining elevated clarity of consciousness. This concept of the revelation of one’s inner self seems to be the means through which the West has adopted tattoos as an art form. The almost ritualized notion of creating the skin as a surface might be seeded in the line of thought that to be oneself one must create the self, and so to be tattooed is to become subjected to one’s own self.

Inescapable Seriousness

We conclude with an observation about the serious nature of tattoos. Altering one’s skin in ways that are permanent or semi-permanent has a seriousness to it that is inescapable. This is because of the foundational character of skin itself as marking the very boundary of our identity in the world, and also the skin’s function as an organ, embodying or instantiating our sense of being in the world. The foundational character of the body, and thus the inescapable seriousness of tattooing, comes out in this puzzle put forward by the sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln: How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg? Answer: four. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg. The point is that there is a reality to the body; its parts are stubborn and resist relabeling.

We hope we have made clear that tattoos can have competing cultural (public) and individual (private) meanings, and that the body resists relabeling through tattooing, according to the double skin theory we talked about. Still, a permanent mark on one’s skin has an inescapable seriousness to it such that, even if you had the words ‘This is not serious’ tattooed on your arm, it would still be very serious indeed. If you actually have a tattoo with these words or are planning on getting one, you should read this book.

NOTES

1 For good introductions to the history of the tattooing arts, see Jane Caplan (ed.), Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Steve Gilbert, The Tattoo


6 Caplan, Written on the Body, p. xiv.


9 Steward, Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos, p. 78.

10 Caplan, Written on the Body, p. 64.

11 Ibid., p. xiii.