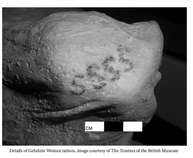
The History of Tattoo Art in the United States

The art of tattooing has held an important place in societies around the world for centuries. Each tattooed for various reasons, and it is no different within the history of the United States. Follow this timeline to see how we got from ancient tattoo practices, to what we have today.



Details of Gebelein Woman tattoos, image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum

The first evidence of tattooing dates back between 3351 and 3017 BC. Two of the six Gebelein Mummies discovered in Egypt in 1896--a man and a woman-- possess the first example of figural tattoos, or tattoos that represent objects found in everyday life. In this case, the mummies had tattoos of a wild bull, a Barbary sheep, and S-shapes that have yet to be conclusively identified.

For centuries, tattooing was used as a method to treat chronic pain such as migraines or arthritis. Lines, dots, or X's would be tattooed onto the skin of the inflicted area.

One of the earliest methods of tattooing is known as "soot tattooing," where soot is rubbed into a wound to leave a permanent mark. In 1653, Jesuit missionary Francois-J. Bressani wrote about a similar practice among indigenous tribes in Canada:

"In order to paint permanent marks on themselves they undergo intense pain. To do this they use needles, sharpened awls, or thorns. With these instruments they pierce the skin and trace images of animals or monsters, for example an eagle, a serpent, a dragon, or any other figure they like, which they engrave on their faces, their necks, their chess, or other parts of their bodies. Then, while the punctures which form the designs are fresh and bleeding, they rub in charcoal or some other black color which mixes with the blood and penetrates the wound. The image is then indelibly imprinted on the skin."

The word "stigma" (noun: a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person) originated from the Ancient Greek "στίζω," or "stizo," which means "I mark."

Edith identifies the body of King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings, illustrated by M Morel-Fatio, Tellier, Gigoux, Duaburgey, Dubois, H. Bellangé, Alfred Johannot,

Evidence of tattoos amongst soliders and warriors can be traced as far back as the first century BC. Encountering ancient Britons, Julius Caesar wrote in 50 BC:

"All Britons paint themselves with woad, which turns the skin a bluish-green colour, hence their appearance is all the more horrific in battle."

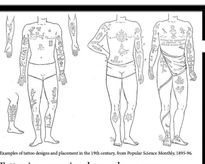
They decorated themselves with depcitions of animals and other symbols of cultural pride. These tattoos would serve both as an identifier of not only culture, but of individual identity. The legend goes that after the Battle of Hastings in 1066, King Harold II was only able to be identified by his tattoos-- "Edith and England" tattooed across his chest.

Sa Ga Yeath Qua Path Tow, King of the Maquas. Part of The Four Indian Kings drawn over by Jan Verelst, 1710. Image courtesy of The National Archives of the UK

Many indigenous tribes in North America possessed their own tattooing styles: an identifying marker and a symbol of cultural pride that could not be taken away. Their meanings and designs varied by tribe. In some cases, it was what allowed an individual into the spirit world. In the following passage, a Lakota Sioux holy man by the name of John Fire Lame Deer (1903-1976) describes the importance of this art:

"From birth to death we Indians are enfolded in symbols as in a blanket. An infant's cradle board is covered with designs to ensure a happy, healthy life for the child. The moccasins of the dead have their soles beaded in a certain way to ease the journey to the hereafter. For the same reason most of us have tattoos on our wrists – not like the tattoos of your sailors – daggers, hearts, and nude girls – but just a name, a few letters, or designs. The Owl Woman who guards the road to the spirit lodges looks at those tattoos and lets us pass. They are like a passport. Many Indians believe that if you don't have these signs on your body, that Ghost Woman won't let you through but will throw you over a cliff. In that case, you have to roam the earth endlessly as a wanagi – a ghost. All you can do then is frighten people and whistle. Maybe it's not so bad being a wanagi. It could even be fun. I don't know. But, as you see, I have my arms tattooed" (Lame Deer and Erdoes, 111-112).

The practice of tattooing among indigenous tribes saw its decline with the rise of Colonialism in North America, as tribes were forced to assimilate to European culture or be eradicated.



Examples of tattoo designs and placement in the 19th century, from Popular Science Monthly, 1895-96.

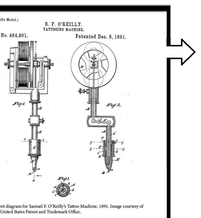
Tattooing remained popular among soldiers during the American Revolution, this time decorating their skin with Patriotic symbols such as the American Flag, portraits of George Washington, and depictions of the goddess Columbia (Perry, 82).

The tradition carried over to the Civil War. Patriotic tattoos were still popular among soldiers, but came alongside tattoos of their names on arms or chests to aid in identification of their bodies.

Photograph of Martin Hildebrandt, date unknown. Image courtesy of Nordlys and Stats.

Martin Hildebrandt began tattooing as a sailor in 1846. During the Civil War, he marked the aforementioned soldiers with their names. There are many legends surrounding his time in the war, but what we know conclusively is that he is resposible for opening the first tattoo shop in the United States, around 1875.

His method of tattooing involved a handful of .35 mm needles "in a slanting form, which are dipped as the pricking is made into the best India ink or vermilion [sic]."



Patent diagram for Samuel F. O'Reilly's Tattoo Machine, 1891. Image courtesy of the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

With the dawn of motorized technology in the late 1800's, tattoo artists began experimenting with new ways to tattoo. Common machines used by tattoists were Dental Pluggers--which were typically used to fill cavities in teeth--and adjustments on Thomas Edison's rotary-operated stencil pen.

Though not the first machine of its kind, Samuel F. O'Reilly patented his electric tattooing machine in 1891. O'Reilly had tried tattooing with both machines, but found they lacked the power to tattoo efficiently. His new machine would speed up the process and allow for one to get more of their body tattooed at a time.

"The Wonderful Tattooed Man" Frank Howard and his sister Annie, two tattooed performers from the Barnum and Bailey Circus, ca. 1890, from a German postcard.

Tattoos became more recognized in American culture due in part to its place within circuses in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Men and women displayed their fully-tattooed bodies for the amazement of crowds around the country. It was something that, in the layman's eyes, was rare and exotic--and therefore, endlessly appealing.

These tattooed performers began to legitimize tattooing as a profession.

Lyle Tuttle tattooing at 490, 7th Street, San Francisco, CA. 1968. Image courtesy of LyleTuttle.com.

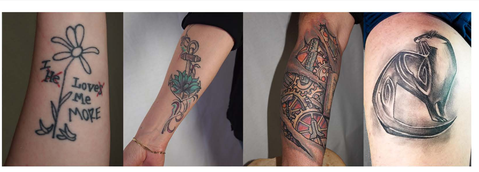
The "Tattoo Renaissance" emerged in the 1960's with the rise of popular artists such as Lyle Tuttle, Cliff Raven, and Don Ed Hardy. Celebrities began to get tattooed by these artists, further projecting tattoos into the spotlight.

Tattoos became an important part of counterculture movements in the latter half of the 1900's, displaying the wearer's resistance to cultural norms of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

Legislation in every state has now made tattooing a safe and regulated process.

Advertising for A&E's Inked, which premiered in July 2005.

In the early 2000's, TV shows such as Inked brought the world of tattooing to the forefront of American culture, further normalizing the art.



Tattooing is now a popular form of body modification for many Americans. Whether it is for aesthetic or cosmetic reasons, each piece is as unique as the person it adorns.

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