

## **Tattoo**

A whiff of knee-trembling eroticism – more particularly homoeroticism, has long infused the aura of tattoos. It's perpetuated by the myth of Orientalism, amidst wafting clouds of cigarette smoke, clandestine male bonding and initiation rites, hidden continents and dark secrets, the forbidden and outcast, the inextricable link between pleasure and pain. Necessitating the physical penetration of male flesh, a tattoo is an international language transgressing the vernacular. Conjuring the mystique of sailors in exotic ports and harsh seas, or moonlit prison cells, where camaraderie meets tribalism, amidst the purity of rebel subcultures. When the state repressed diverse sexualities, the tattoo became an esoteric sign opening the possibility of sensual liaison. This is the power captured so eloquently by Jean Genet.

'Modern Primitives' is the catchall expression for a cornucopia of trendy fetishes. Piercing and its counterpart tattooing are the most popular fetishes and, interestingly, have long attracted a significant number of female adherents. Now tattoos are verging on social acceptability; but what has been lost?

For some, a tattoo represents a ritual of individual expression and self-distinction. Others want the opposite, desiring to be part of a group. There are those who love tattoos as art and cover themselves to enhance their physical beauty, while others despise their physiques and seek to change their appearances.

Some macho cranks want to test their pain threshold. Actually, depending on which part of your anatomy you decide to affix your tattoo, it's not necessarily much more painful than a prolonged dental appointment.

You may simply find tattoos sexy on others and hope it will work for you.

Choosing your tattooist is worth careful consideration. Many tattooists resemble mad-axe murderers, skinhead basilisks or Charlie Manson look-alikes, at first glance. Don't be put-off by apparent tattoo craziness – those obligatory body suits that go with the trade. This is a sign that they take their craft seriously, and likewise their reputations and customers. There is now a plethora of tattooists, but distinguished artists are rare. Good tattooists will have served an apprenticeship of three to four years, practicing on themselves or pigs' carcasses.

## **Tattoo Diaspora**

Scarring the body with permanent markings is a custom dating back to the origins of civilization. Bodies of European hunter-gatherers, preserved since the Ice Age, are marked by crude dot-patterns. These were acquired by slashing the flesh with sharpened stones and poking charcoal into the bleeding wounds, which heal leaving carbon scar marks. A harsh and ancient time is evoked when Homo sapiens lost most of their body hair, revealing the flesh as a living canvas upon which members of nascent communities could etch mutually recognisable insignia. Archaeologists have linked codified patterns to shamanistic doctors, who inscribed their patients.

From Ancient Egyptian civilization BC 2000, tattoo art emerges with religious significance. Female mummified corpses (XI Dynasty) are decorated with dark blue dots, on arms, legs and abdomens. Sometimes sharpened bamboo sticks were used to indent markings below the skin's surface. Only slowly was an extensive range of non-toxic ink colours developed. Tattooing spread west across the Mediterranean and east to Persia and Arabia. Around BC 2000 it emerged in Asia and China. The Burmese inherited the art from southern China and created more elaborate designs. Polynesia and Borneo established tattooing from BC 1100. Tattooing spread across the Pacific with the Polynesian Diaspora (BC 450) reaching New Zealand around 900 AD. Inca and South American Indians began tattooing in the twelfth-century.

Arabs used to tattoo the foreheads of girls, removing it with quicklime when they married. In Nagas (eastern India)

married couples were each tattooed with identity marks. Pain thresholds were tested using the technique invented by Thompson Indians in British Columbia. Adolescents adopted tattoos to symbolise puberty in Paraguay. Eskimo girls underwent a painful ordeal with needle and thread tattoos. Turkish women used to tattoo dots on their chins.

## Tattoo Taboo

There are frequent references to tattooing in The Bible. It must have been used in Jewish communities because it was prohibited by Moses, *'You shall not gash yourselves in mourning for the dead; you shall not tattoo yourselves.'* – Leviticus, 19:28. Religious tattooing was very important to early Christians: *'Let no one make trouble for me, for I bear the marks of Jesus branded on my body.'* – Galatians, 6:17 (similar references occur in Revelation).

Roman historian: Cicero, describes the Pheraen bodyguard as, *'Compunctum notis Thraecis,'* (*'Pricked by the marks of Thrace.'*) In the second century, Tertullian observed that tattooing women was customary among Britons, Picts and Scots. Virgil and Seneca note the Roman habit of tattooing slaves and criminals; Caligula regularly ordered his subjects to be tattooed for his entertainment. Christian Emperor Constantine banned facial tattoos, and in 787 AD, the Northumberland Synod banned all tattooing of Christians.

This didn't stop medieval monks keeping the custom alive. Coptic tattoos on arm and legs were extremely popular with the Crusaders. Turks learned the technique from Nestorian monks and showed their appreciation by marking their Christian slaves. Thevenot says on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1685, *'Having our arms marked as ordinarily all pilgrims do...following the Latin rite.'* In 1862 the Prince of Wales had a cross of Jerusalem tattooed on his forearm. Through the centuries, witches were puncturing themselves with blue or red, marks of Satan.

During the thirteenth-century, Marco Polo reached China; noticing the locals, *'have their skin marked with the needle in patterns representing lions, dragons, birds and what not, done in such a way that it can never be obliterated.'* Three hundred years later, Spanish explorers frequently refer to Indians of Haiti and Central America as having flesh pierced with 'cursed effigy'. In particular, extensive tattooing of blue fish on bodies and faces was recorded among Polynesians. On his South Pacific tour, Captain Cook says of Polynesians:

*'Both sexes paint their bodies, Tattow, as it is called in their language. This is done by inlaying colour of black under their skins, in such a manner as to be indelible.'*

Thus, Europeans acquire a word: tattow, derived from the Polynesian "ta" for knocking or striking, in the application of tattoos.

Japan was also big on tattooing, adorning faces and bodies, since 200 AD. It was used to signify rank among the upper classes, but later became unfashionable, until revived by the lower classes as a substitute for clothing. Woodblock artists like Hiroshige and Hokusai designed special patterns aimed at perfecting tattoo craft. In 1891 Chiyo of Yokohama, the master of Japanese tattooing practiced his art on Tsar Nicholas of Russia.

## Friggin' in the Riggin'

As an island civilization built on naval power, it's not surprising that tattooing returned to Britain with a vengeance, via well-travelled mariners. Sailors returned from the Orient decorated with exotic beasts and dragons, which soon inspired craftsmen to copy the trade here. The bravery of a *topman* (don't ask!) or for sailing round the *Horn* (tut!) was rewarded with a full-rigged ship on his chest. An anchor signified cruising the Atlantic (get you!) A crucifix on the back would save a man from flogging!

The adoption of patriotic symbols by soldiers seems to have begun with American troops during their Civil War. Another amusing tradition was the tattooed freak as a circus sideshow, which began in 1691, when William Dampier brought "Painted Prince Jeoly" to display in London. Later P. T. Barnum displayed Georg Constantine, whose body was covered from head to toe with Burmese tattoos. As the spectacle became less rare and exotic, its circus popularity declined, sighing its last breath in 1932, with M. S. Stevens – the tattooed fat lady. Notable toffs who had tattoos include Lady Randolph Churchill (Winston's American mother) who had a snake around her wrist.

S. F. O'Reilly invented the electronic tattooing machine in 1875, which was patented in 1904. It worked on a rotary principle, but an electromagnetic reciprocating machine (which has changed little up to the present day) replaced this. Charlie Wagner's shading tattoo machine was patented in 1904. What had previously taken many hours was now achievable in minutes.

From the 1890s, demand for tattoos increased in Britain and the Japanese master, Hori Chiyo, opened a shop in London. However the biggest influence on the western tattoo trade of the twentieth-century was an American known as "Lew the Jew". In 1900 he quit his job as a wallpaper hanger to work as a tattooist in the Philippines. As late as the 1930s, about half of all tattoos in the US were based on his wallpaper designs.

### **So You Want a Tattoo...**

Uh, what a cliché! Yet you can hardly pick-up a magazine now without finding a patronising and platitudinous feature, telling you: think carefully about what you want, remember it's with you for life, don't rush into it while drunk, make sure the tattooist uses appropriate hygiene precautions, look at examples of his past work, etc... Since you're reading QX, we'll assume you're beyond all that pap!

The "Modern Primitives" thing (from the title of a RE-Search picture book on tattooing and piercing, which caused some minor controversy a decade or so ago) has become a cult movement in Britain and the US. From maverick tattooists like Mr Sebastian and Alex Binnie, to performance artists like Franko B. and Ron Athey, to the chic-est cat-walks in town, we're fast reaching the stage where no self respecting queer would be seen, lacking a tattoo. While you may procure a tattoo just because it's fashionable and sexy – as good a reason as any, it's easy to understand why tattoos express a deeper, lifestyle statement. In a society, which increasingly forces conformity into a system dominated by work and money, a tattoo is a statement of individual non-conformity, harking back to primitive culture. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari elucidate:

*'The primitive territorial machine codes flows, invests organs, and marks bodies. To such a degree that circulating – exchanging – is a secondary activity in comparison with the task that sums up all the others: marking bodies, which are the earth's products. The essence of the recording, inscribing socius, in so far as it lays claim to the productive forces and distributes the agents of production, resides in these operations: tattooing, excising, incising, carving, scarifying, mutilating, encircling, and initiating.'* (Athlone/Viking, 1977)

In other words, every individual has a basic right to do as she/he likes, with her/his own body - regardless of the rules, expectations and moral impositions of the rest of society; a salient point.

### **Chris Barber**

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