Flash & Flashbacks: The Enduring Art of Tattoo

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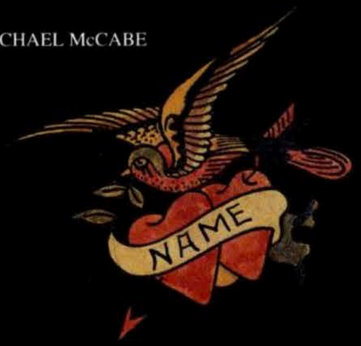


Percy Waters (publicity shot), Detroit; c. 1920; collection of the author.

For some time the practice of tattooing has been viewed by Western culture as a fringe behavior that is often best ignored—or at least underempha-

Stella Grossman, wife of the tattoo artist "Deafy"; possibly Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York; c. 1930; collection of the author.

sized. The existence and perseverance of tattooing in modern life creates a degree of social stress because it flies in the face of certain Judeo-Christian beliefs.

Stanley Moskowitz (right) and Dick Hyland; Bowery, N.Y.C.; c. 1955; collection of the author.

Marvin Lichtner

Mildred Hull on the lap of tattooer Charlie Wagner; unknown woman on right; Bowery, N.Y.C.; c. 1920; collection of the author.

In spite of this, the practice of tattooing has recently gained a tremendous degree of visibility in various areas of modern life, and has invaded the mainstream as an element of pop culture. Different venues for entertainment and information, such as MTV and the afternoon television talk shows (in their search for catchy topical material) have keyed in on the practice's new acceptability. Tattoo art is transcending the perceived socioeconomic barriers and challenging the clichés that surround it; it is no longer thought to be the exclusive property of sailors and miscreants.

The current fascination with "outsider art" has fueled the interest in the art of tattooing and the materials used to create this art. There is specific interest in tattoo artists' painted sheets of designs, known in the trade as "flash" (a carnival term meaning "visually grabbing to the public" that was adopted by tattooers). With all of the attention recently focused on tattoo art, many have wondered about the practice's history in modern society, specifically how it developed as a craft and as an art form in the twentieth century.

In the broadest sense, tattooing has been a part of the human equation for thousands of years—there is evidence indicating that the practice dates back to before the Neolithic period. Humankind's creative manipulation of the body is believed to include some of its first "cultural" acts. Early peoples labored to define themselves as belonging to specific human groups by deliberately changing the body and investing in it a new significance.[1] As behaviors became more complex, tattooing was incorporated into developing belief systems that used magic and ritual as an essential element of everyday life. The pain and permanence that is associated with tattooing elevated the social status of the practice, transforming it into a potentially magic act. Rituals that commemorated birth, growth, and death, and delineated the various phases of human life, also used tattooing, and as formalized concepts of community evolved, tattooing came to be used for purposes of identification.

"You've got to have the knowledge, you've got to know how to use the ink."

—Brooklyn Blackie
New York City tattooer, Bowery, Sands Street, and Coney Island, 1940s–1950s

With the advent of organized monotheistic faiths, specifically Judaism and later, Christianity, a new "body politic" emerged: the body itself became a new demarcation zone used to separate the old beliefs from the new. In the Book of Leviticus (in the Old Testament), it is stated that "no cuttings or markings should be made upon the flesh." This served to create a taboo that would act to define a new concept of self.

Despite Judaic and Christian prohibitions, tattooing continued to exist in the Old World. Soldiers enlisted to fight in the Crusades were known to have been tattooed upon their arrival in the Holy Land. Simple crosses were inscribed on the warriors' bodies as proof that the combatant had actually been a part of the conflict.[2]

The European expansion of the seventeenth century forced vastly different peoples and cultures together, resulting in a new dynamic. On his voyage to the South Pacific, Captain James Cook made contact with several voyager cultures in which tattooing was prevalent. The word "tattoo" (originally "Ta-Tau") was itself "discovered" by Cook in Tahiti and introduced into European vocabularies when he returned home. The term had been derived by the Tahitians from the tapping sound that was produced by the procedure.[3]

As the people of the Old World flirted with the concept of the "noble savage" and toyed with existing European taboos, there emerged among the English and French aristocracies a fleeting fascination with the tattoo habits of the Pacific peoples.[4] In a short time, tattooing took root in the maritime culture of Europe. Seafaring was risky business, for the majority of mariners were unable to swim. The stories of the magical attributes attached to tattoos influenced mariners to adopt the practice as protection from the dangers of life at sea. The image of a pig tattooed on a mariner's left instep was thought to protect him from drowning; salt pork, a staple of the early seafarer's diet, had become symbolic of life. The image of a rooster, a biblical reference to Gabriel hearing the cock crow, tattooed on the right instep was believed to ensure eternal salvation. Sailors pressed into naval military service mixed gunpowder into their tattoo pigment as a protective charm against battle injury and death.[5] Cultures of confinement, such as penal populations, also adopted tattooing, in an effort to reclaim possession of their bodies. Prisoners developed elaborate symbolic systems emphasizing specific codes and values and incorporated these symbols into their tattoo designs.

In the twentieth century, the advent of the modern age resulted in the reorientation of people's lives. Old values and beliefs became obsolete under the pressure of the changing overarching culture. Machines and mass production produced a new economic order. High-speed printing created a sea of words and imagery for an increasingly literate population. Popular culture exploded and urban centers started to develop "Fun Zones"—areas of concentrated entertainment that catered to the demands of the masses.

"It was dark [because of the elevated train]; the sun would come through but it was always dark. A lot of bars. It was loaded with bars and tattoo shops, and everything else. You had pawn shops, lots of pawn shops. You could buy any gold coin for peanuts. Every window was loaded with gold coins and guns. Guns and jewelry, gold coins, watches, loaded with pocket watches—that was in."

—Stanley Moskowitz
Bowery tattooer, 1940s–1950s, commenting on the Bowery

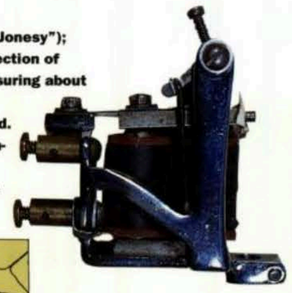
Chatham Square, on the lower Bowery in New York City, established itself early as a Fun Zone. Throughout the nineteenth century the area had been host to an assortment of entertainment enterprises. Dime museums, penny arcades, and popular theaters were all located in the area, and the large surrounding population provided ready support for these entrepreneurial efforts. Rather than dying away with the coming of the modern age, tattooing reinvented itself and integrated itself into the machine age in Chatham Square. In the late 1890s, Samuel

Citywide Photographers

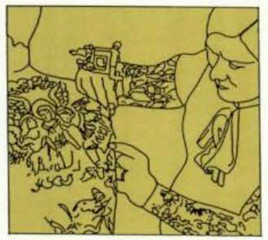
FLASH ART
Bill Jones
New York
c. 1940
Ink and watercolor on paper
11 × 14"
Collection of the author

FLASH ART
Ed Smith
New York
c. 1930
Paint on board
10 × 15"
Collection of the author

Citywide Photographers



Tattoo machine (squareback "Jonesy"); Bill Jones; N.Y.C.; 1940s; collection of the author. The machine, measuring about three inches square, rests on the back of the tattooer's hand. The needlebar and tube assembly attaches to the machine (the "iron") and is held as one would hold a pen.



O'Reilly, a young tattooer who had previously done his work by hand, modified Thomas Edison's Electric Engraving Pen into the first electric tattooing machine. O'Reilly then opened what is considered the first tattoo parlor in the United States in a barbershop in Chatham Square.[6]

As a distinctly mechanical practice, tattooing took hold in New York City during the first decade of the twentieth century. The diversity and scale of the New York population supported the fledgling craft. As a large port town, New York attracted sailors from around the globe who gravitated to the city because of the allure of the activities available around Chatham Square and on Sands Street in Brooklyn, where the Navy Yard was located. The overall economy supported a large population of wage earners who patronized businesses in Chatham Square.

"He [Charlie Wagner] worked in the back of a barbershop underneath a stairway. The stairway led to rented rooms over the barbershop where the men would go for ten cents a night. He tattooed right underneath the stairway, real, real small. He had a sponge and a bucket of water."

—Brooklyn Blackie
New York City tattooer, Bowery, Sands Street, and Coney Island, 1940s–1950s

As tattooing took root in Chatham Square, the elements of the craft began to be formalized and an industry combining the art of tattoo with the technology used to apply the designs started to develop. Charlie Wagner, who had apprenticed with O'Reilly, set up shop in Chatham Square. He quickly became noted in the area as a tattooer and producer of equipment for the trade. Lew Alberts, who had worked as a tattooer on Sands Street during this period, is credited with creating some of the first tattoo designs available on sheets of flash.

In the early part of the twentieth century, a small entrepreneurial community developed around tattooing. (Among the influences that nurtured commercial tattooing was World War I, for tattooing was most popular among military men.) Popular attractions like dime museums, where heavily tattooed people ("Canvas Backs") performed as oddities, increased the visibility of the practice, making it topical, interesting, and somewhat acceptable.

Over time, the tattoo community continued to expand, and tattooing found a home in most large American cities. Port towns and cities like St. Louis, which hosted large military populations, usually supported more than one tattooer. Individual tattooers come to be identified with the towns they worked in. Noted American tattooer "Cap" Coleman, known for the hat he always wore, worked the navy town of Norfolk, Virginia, throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Bert Grim, historically one of America's most important tattooers, worked St. Louis and the "Pike"—an amusement area near Long Beach, California, which has since been torn down—among other places. Amund Dietzel worked in Milwaukee, Percy Waters in Detroit. Tats Thomas, known for his exaggerated handlebar mustache, worked Chicago. Bob Shaw worked the Texas Panhandle and California. Sailor Jerry Collins worked Honolulu. Various itinerant tattooers traveled the carnival circuits of the country in search of a market.

"In those days you couldn't find out anything. If you asked about equipment they'd say they had it made, or they made their own. Nobody ever said nothin'."

—Tattoo Lou
New York City tattooer, Sands Street, Coney Island and 48th Street, 1950s

Tattooing continued to take hold and expand in American culture throughout the first part of the twentieth century. Within the tattoo community, there developed values emphasizing individualism, secrecy, and oral tradition. Like the trade guilds of the early part of the Industrial Revolution, the early tattoo community tightly controlled the information about the craft. Very little describing the procedure of tattooing was ever written down. Knowledge about the mechanical aspect of the art was passed along by word of mouth. Those who violated the oral tradition or the emphasis on secrecy were ostracized. Valued trade secrets were coveted and controlled by an inner circle of tattooers and became prized information. Personal status in the community could depend upon the degree of information an individual tattooer possessed and how he respected it. Elaborate schemes to trick tattooers out of their closely guarded secrets or to mislead unsuspecting novices intentionally are now an integral component of the trade's rich oral history.

Individual tattooers with mechanical aptitude improved the technology of tattooing through experimentation. In the 1940s, Bill Jones, a New York City tattooer and machinist, developed one of the best versions of the tattoo machine. His machine continues to be used today. Improvised technology provided artistic options for the community. Without a properly designed tattoo machine, the art would have been limited artistically and would eventually have faltered and stalled. Design options improved as the machine was improved. A tattooer's success depended on his ability to create vital, engaging designs that stimulated a potential customer. Tattooers in port towns were exposed to the roving members of the maritime community, tattoo designs traveled with the fleets on the flesh of the sailors, and observant port-town tattooers capitalized on the opportunity to enhance their design selection with the resultant influx of artwork. Imagery from Asia gradually worked its way into the vocabulary of tattoo through this maritime connection.

Other tattooers experimented with pigment options, exploring the possibilities of including color in their work. Tattoo art's early palette was limited to a few colors: red, green, and black. In time, as safe pigments were discovered, yellows were added. Tattooers who could combine mechanical skill with artistic aptitude tended to succeed.

FLASH ART (1T)
Sailor Jerry Collins
Date unknown
Ink and watercolor on paper
10 × 14"
Photo courtesy of Janet Fleisher Gallery, Philadelphia

Joe Painter

Joe Painter

FLASH ART (9K)
Sailor Jerry Collins
1949
Ink and watercolor on paper
10 × 14"
Photo courtesy of Janet Fleisher Gallery, Philadelphia

TATTOO PARLOR ON FIFTY-THIRD STREET

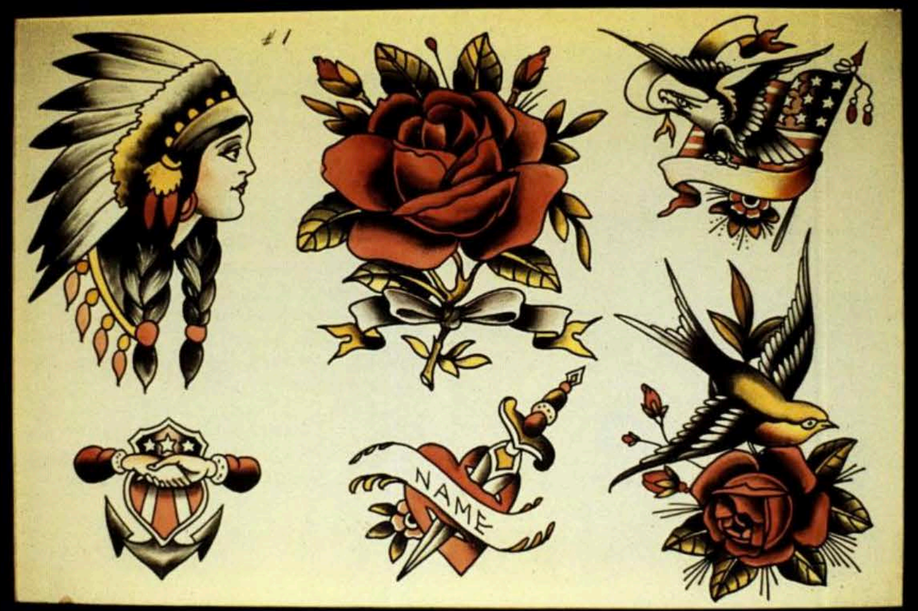
"All that is lacking in the tattoo parlor realistically set up in the Museum of American Folk Art, one flight up at 49 West 53rd Street, is the self-styled 'professor' who used to officiate in the painful, if often rewarding, art of body decoration." Thus began the review of the exhibition "Tattoo" by Sanka Knox (from an unidentified newspaper clipping in the Museum's archives). This exhibit, organized by Herbert W. Hemphill, Jr., opened on October 4, 1971, and ran through January 9, 1972.

Ninety objects were listed in the exhibition checklist, including tattoo drawings (flash art) by tattoo artists A. B. Coleman, Jack Red Cloud, Texas Bob Wicks, Buddy Mott, G. Nelson, Jerry Collins, Ed Hardy, and others; two late nineteenth-century tattooer's sketchbooks; sketchbooks from 1900 through 1914; three tattoo sketches from the sketchbook of I. E. Reiquer (c. 1870); and the sketchbook of C. H. Fellowes, an itinerant nineteenth-century master tattooer. Also on view were painted tattooer's trade signs and other contextual material, including a tattooer's chair, needles, pigment jars, and equipment, as well as paintings and prints depicting ancient tattooing practices from many cultures, and photographs of tattooers at work and of their finished products—tattooed persons, including "Prince" Constantine, "The Human Picture Gallery."

*"TATTOO," continued Knox, "is blazoned in large letters on the street parlor window, apprising the public of the museum's newest exhibition, a divertissement that explores the American way with the art in its 19th-century heyday and its practitioners.... With the opening of the show, the Pyne Press of Princeton published the contents of the rare sketchbook [*The Tattoo Book, *by C.H. Fellowes] with 'A Short History of the Strange Custom of Tattooing' by William C. Sturtevant, curator of the department of anthropology of the Smithsonian Institution."*

Over twenty years ago the Museum of American Folk Art recognized tattooing as folk art with roots as deep and an expression as full as any other. Today, many museums, art institutions, and prominent galleries have added tattoo drawings (flash art) to their holdings, and art lovers and collectors are becoming more and more interested in this vital and exciting art form.

FLASH ART
Bob Wicks
New York
c. 1930
Ink and watercolor on board
10 × 15"
Courtesy family of the artist



FLASH ART
"Cap" Coleman
Norfolk, Virginia
c. 1930
Ink and watercolor on paper
11 × 14"
Collection of the author

"It was all Army, Navy, patriotic stuff. Darker tattoos, filled in more. Tattoos had a purpose in them days. The patriotic stuff, that was their purpose, to show patriotism. Or love of their wives, girlfriends. Remembrances."

—Stanley Moskowitz
New York City tattooer, Bowery, 1940s–1950s

The designs of early tattooing are grounded in a masculine, maritime, combatant culture. There is an economy to the message that contributes to a design's success. The flash sheets found on the walls of tattoo shops are distilled collections of images that have "worked" successfully through time. Essential variations of Christian motifs, daggers, dragons, eagles, black panthers, and the obligatory heart and banner have been a part of the semiotic of tattoo for a very long time. The designs are just as popular today as they were a hundred years ago. The legacy of tattoo art weighs heavily on the development of the graphic art used in its vocabulary of form.

The techniques used to apply a tattoo to the body dictate which kind of design will succeed. When applying a tattoo, the tattooer must follow a logical progression, starting with the outline and progressing through black shading into coloring. This is why tattoo designs seem so preoccupied with outline. Without a solid outline, a tattoo will not hold up technically; the colors will lose their impact without the contrast of the outline. A bold outline makes the tattoo "pop." The instability of early color pigments forced early tattooers to rely on their outlines, and older tattoo designs are characterized by their heavy outline. For the most part, colors faded easily and quickly; if the outline survived, however, the tattoo would not be a total loss.

"Years ago when you passed a tattoo shop you knew within a block if the guy knew what he was doing. You heard those machines going. Within another block you'd smell the tattoo shop, you'd actually smell it [the distinct fragrance of antiseptic soap]. After you left a tattoo shop, the smell would stay in your nostrils for the rest of the day. Nothin' would drive the smell out."

—Coney Island Freddie
New York City tattooer, Coney Island, 1950s

Early tattooers used a lot of black in their tattoos. Delicate and bold shading techniques were used to create depth to substitute for the absence of reliable colors. To reproduce this shaded look on a sheet of flash, adept tattooers developed a technique known as "spit shading." In this technique, the artist would use two brushes when painting their design sheets, one dipped in ink for the straight black shade, the other "dipped" in his mouth to pick up saliva (which served as a toner) to create gradations of the black, indicating depth. Without spit shading, the designs on a sheet of flash would not accurately represent what the tattoo was going to look like.

Tattoo designs tended to be barometers for the visual trends of their times. Popular images, filtered through society, eventually found their way to the walls of tattoo shops, where their appeal could be used to turn a profit. Cultural image generators like Hollywood, print advertising, and newspaper comics became sources for the images used in this expanding art form. A successful tattooer had to be sensitive to the surrounding visual culture; Mickey Mouse, for instance, found his way into the vocabulary of tattoo very early in his career.

The designs of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, climaxing with the tattoo images of World War II, are considered by the tattoo community to represent the classic examples of the art. All of the complex elements of the art generally coalesced during this period to create some of the best examples of technology and graphic design. Individual tattooers used their skills to explore the technical and aesthetic options that were characterized by the historical context in which they lived. Individual examples that stretch the dimensions of the core period in both directions certainly exist, but the flash from this period typifies the classic aesthetic.

The art of tattoo has only recently gained recognition as a "popular" art form with an important oral and material history. For a variety of reasons, tattooing refused to fade away with the coming of the modern age. Rather, it reinvented itself and adapted to the demands of modern times, echoing an ancient and complex demand. Working outside the cultural mainstream, tattoo artists and craftspeople developed their technology and imagery over time in a society that was increasingly providing a foothold for new cultural forms. As an art form of power and vitality, tattooing provided an option for many persons to participate in their emerging culture. ★

Michael McCabe is a cultural anthropologist who has been exploring the history of tattooing in New York City for over a decade. He is currently working on a book of oral histories of New York City tattooers from the 1920s to the 1960s. The book will be published in 1995.

NOTES

1 Michael Thevoz, *The Painted Body* (New York: Rizzoli International Publishing Inc., 1984), pp. 23–59.

2 The pilgrimage tattoos of today's Coptic Christians of the Middle East and northern Africa are descendant of the early tattooing of the Crusades. See W.D. Hambly, *The History of Tattooing and its Significance* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1925), p. 75.

3 Tricia Allen, "European Explorers and Marquesian Tattooing: The Wildest Island Style," *Tattootime: Art From The Heart*, Vol. 5, 1991, p. 87.

4 Ibid. p. 88.

5 Albert Parry, *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art* (New York: Collier Books, 1933), p. 79.

6 Information regarding O'Reilly's shop is a part of the oral history surrounding tattooing.

OF SPECIAL INTEREST TODAY

An exhibit displaying American tattoo designs— "Flash from the Past: Classic American Tattoo Designs 1880–1965," at the Hertzberg Museum, 210 Market Street, San Antonio, Texas, 78205, May through November, 1994. Accompanying catalog published by Hardy Marks Publications.

Upcoming book detailing the life and work of an American tattooer—*Sailor Jerry Collins: American Tattoo Master*, by D.E. Hardy (Hardy Marks Publications, Honolulu, Hawaii), available June 1994.

Tattoo Memorabilia and Collectibles— Tattoo Archive, 2804 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, California, 94702, C.W. Eldridge, owner/operator.

Tattoo Museum—Philadelphia Eddie's United Tattoo Museum, 3216 Kensington Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19134.