The Practise of Tattooing

Serup J, Kluger N, Bäumler W (eds): Tattooed Skin and Health.

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**Tattoo as Art, the Drivers Behind the Fascination and the Decision to Become Tattooed**

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**Abstract**

For many people, getting a tattoo is like purchasing art, and many professional and famous tattooists are artists who are acknowledged by colleagues and authorities. The history of tattooing goes back for thousands of years, and the reasons for getting tattooed are many. These permanent markings are always personal, they can be plain or elaborate, and they serve as amulets, healing and status symbols, declarations of love, signs of religion, adornments and even forms of punishment. Drivers behind the fascination of acquiring a tattoo may fall into four main groups, namely healing, affiliation, art and fashion.

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**Introduction**

We usually remember past history and associate tattoos with bikers, sailors and criminals, but today, tattoos can also be considered as fashion, aesthetics and art. A general acceptance of tattoos is on the rise in western countries, although in some communities, it is still seen as a negative practice. Females have in recent years become more visible in the industry, and more women are tattooed. It can be estimated that 15% of women are tattooed in contrast with 13% of men. As a result, the industry is more open and not as ‘dangerous’ as it once was.

In today’s society, individuals can build their own status and identity because they are no longer born into a social status. In the pursuit of finding their identity, a lot of young people choose to get a tattoo. People from all parts of society are tattooed, including lawyers, doctors, priests, and nurses. Some consider that tattoos are for those who live on the edge, but they are so much more than risky behaviour and social stigma. They still involve identity and communication but also can represent art and fashion.

The reasons for getting tattooed are many. A tattoo can be a symbol of both individuality and group affiliation. From a psychological point of view, the reasons for getting a tattoo are complex. The industry is constantly being analysed by social anthropologists, psychologists, media scholars and art historians, and the results of these analyses can be as individual as the reasons why people get tattooed. However, tattoos are mainly acquired simply for the sake of vanity. Every individual has his or her own reason for getting tattooed. Two people can choose the same design
and have totally different reasons as to why they want to have that particular design. Tattoos show us that today’s society is free, diverse and constantly changing. We have attempted to divide tattoos into 4 main groups as follows: healing, affiliation, art and fashion.

**Healing**

For some, having a tattoo is a form of healing. These individuals want to have control over pain caused to their bodies, physically or psychologically. It may be a form of controlled self-injury in which they can talk to an outsider (the tattooist) and at the same time feel controlled pain. The design often involves symbolism for strength or change, a life motto, or a memory. For these individuals, being tattooed is all about owning their own body and making their own choices, which can weigh up to the traumatic experiences from the past.

**Affiliation and Sense of Belonging**

Some people have tattoos involving symbolism and a sense of belonging. These tattoos can be a symbol of belonging to a particular group, such as a football team, a music logo, a family, a religion, or a criminal gang, especially for young individuals who are trying to find their identity. In today’s society, identity is of high importance and is shown off. Often, individuals want to feel unique and special and at the same time, they want to have a sense of belonging (fig. 1, 2).

**Art**

For others, tattoos are art, similar to a piece of jewellery for others to admire. People allow themselves to get tattooed simply because it’s beautiful. They choose a tattoo artist based on his or her ability to create art both on canvas and on the
body and may travel far and pay a lot to get a tattoo from a specific tattoo artist. Some ‘collect’ this art and choose to be tattooed by various artists to amass a collection of tattoos on their body, while others stick to one tattoo artist who can decorate their entire body (fig. 3).

Younger people, professional artists and especially women are now seeking to be in the tattoo profession. They are often educated in the arts and can hold separate art exhibitions in addition to their actual tattooing practice. For the artists, this is an opportunity to make a living from their art, when paintings often can be difficult to sell. To ‘use the body as canvas’ is an expression that is used even by galleries. The difference is that tattoos on the skin are not appraised because they are not sellable and are only valuable to the wearer. They cannot be sold like paintings and sculptures at an international art auction.

Previously, tattooing at galleries was mainly considered performance art in the form of live tattooing, but recently, tattoos such as graffiti have gone from cult to art status and have been adopted by the art industry, especially in areas where art and fashion meet. The Musée du Quai Branly in Paris has welcomed this and hosted an exhibition in May 2014, the ‘Tatoueurs, Tatoués’, or ‘Tattooists, Tattooed’, to explore tattoos as an artistic medium. This exhibition had tattoos specifically designed for the exhibition by internationally known tattoo artists.

**Fashion**

In the last decade, tattoos have become increasingly visible in popular culture via television (TV) shows, such as Miami Ink, and LA Ink. In addition, idols, for example, those involved in sports and music, have presented tattoos as being fashionable. The fashion industry has picked up this trend by making clothes and perfumes that are tattoo-related, such as Ed Hardy, Diesel, and Gaultier. Trends spread quickly via social media. Those who choose tattoos based on fashion are often those who regret and want to cover up or remove them with lasers.

Idols are important as drivers. The tattoo world has always had tattoo artists who were idolised and admired. From early on, they called themselves professor, for example, Professor George Burchett, by whom sailors travelled from afar to get tattooed. Even the King of Denmark travelled to receive a tattoo from him. In the 1960s–1970s, Lyle Tuttle from San Francisco, CA, USA, was a prominent tattooist. He has tattooed famous people, including Janis Joplin, Chuck Norris, Cher and Peter Sellers and has been on the cover of Rolling Stones Magazine. He even ended up in Times Magazine, swimming from Alcatraz along with the Danish photographer, Bjoern Andersen. In recent years, TV shows have helped to popularise tattoo artists in the media, such as Kat von D, Ami James, and Lois Malloy. TV shows have greatly impacted those individuals who want a tattoo, and the designs shown on TV quickly become trendy.

People may choose a tattoo artist that they idolise or admire. Clients who really study the business often choose a tattoo artist based on what they want. Tattoo artists specialise in work styles more often than before. Some only do
black/grey realism, while others only do old school, new school or Japanese. Based on talent, clients select a special tattoo artist in the same way one would choose an architect or an artist. The preparation and planning that these clients do in advance is impressive. They often travel around to conventions to see different pieces and search the Internet and Instagram to find the right tattoo artist. With the Internet, access to the best artists and the best quality has had a huge impact on the tattoo business.

Fashion also includes history and inspiration from the past. Tattoos have a long and interesting history, and many individuals want a tattoo performed in the traditional way, by hand with thorns, bone, or bamboo or sewn into the skin. Designs are often symbols from the old days that are of historical significance, and old designs from the South Pacific Islands have been well documented due to Captain Cook’s voyages of discovery. Old wood carving designs are also turned into tattoos (fig. 4). Sailor tattoos remain popular. These designs are getting new lives in peoples’ quests for original tattoos. Today, hipsters look to the 1950s to find inspiration for their designs.

Fig. 4. Norwegian design inspired by the Urnes Stave church and the runes of the Hávamál. Photo: Øygarden.