

Tattooing in the *Fin de Siècle*

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The art of tattooing is by no means a recent invention; tattoos and tattooing equipment have been recorded from as early as 10,000 BC. It has been said that "[tattooing] may well have been one of [man's] first conscious acts which distinguished him from the rest of the animal kingdom."¹ However, in spite of its extensive history it was not until the end of the nineteenth-century that tattooing really hit English and American cultures in full force. Originally perceived to be the indulgence of sailors and criminals, the tattoo evolved to become a trendy accessory of England's most elite socialites and America's most daring citizens. The American and English sailors bringing tattoos home, the invention of the electric tattoo machine, the artistry of early tattooists, and the adventurous and perhaps haphazard attitude of the *fin de siècle* all attributed to the wildfire nature of tattooing at the end of the nineteenth-century.

Throughout history some of the most distinctive cultures have practiced the art of tattooing. The earliest known example of tattooing comes in the form of a five thousand year old corpse known as "The Iceman." The Iceman's body is adorned with various small crosses and lines which are believed to indicate where body aches and ailments were located. The position of the tattoo marks indicate that they were applied for medicinal purposes.² Similarly, Amunet is an Egyptian tattooed mummy who sports parallel lines on her arms and thighs and an elliptical pattern below her navel. There are also many other Egyptian wall paintings and statues that seem to represent the art of tattooing.³ In parts of Europe tattooing equipment has been found that dates back to the Upper Paleolithic period (10,000 BC to 38,000 BC) which includes "a disk made of clay and red ochre together with sharp bone needles that are inserted into holes in the top of the disk." It is believed the disk served as a pigment reservoir and the needles were used to prick the ink into designs on the skin.⁴

Several Greek and Roman writers such as Plato, Plutarch, and Galen wrote about tattooing as well, though "respectable Greeks and Romans did not indulge in decorative tattooing, which they associated with barbarians."⁵ Tattooing was viewed by the Romans as a form of punishment and was used to mark slaves, criminals, and soldiers so they could not escape or desert. The Romans also provide the oldest recorded description of the tattoo process, written by a physician named Aetius; the process involves mixing an ink using elements such as bark, corroded bronze, and gall, then pricking the design into the skin with pointed needles until blood is drawn, and then rubbing ink into the wound. Aetius also recorded the first ever tattoo-removal process which essentially called for a "corrosive preparation that causes infection" that would remove superficial layers of skin and obscure the tattoo marks to some extent.⁶ Interestingly enough the Greek and Roman historians even observed Britons in the third century AD with tattoos as Herod of Antioch wrote: "The Britons incise on their bodies colored pictures of animals, of which they are very proud."⁷

With the vast history of tattooing in cultures all over the world including third-century Britain, it seems odd that tattooing would not reach its peak in Europe and America, until the nineteenth century. Religious taboo could have played a large role in tattooing's slow beginnings; in 787 AD Pope Hadrian I "forbade tattooing of any kind" and the popes who came after Hadrian followed suit.⁸ In 1888, A.W. Buckland wrote an article in an anthropological journal in which he reasoned:

Falling under the head of ornament, it seems probable that this very painful mode of personal adornment was adopted at a very early period of human history, and was at one time almost universal, falling into destitute with the advance of civilization when clothing became general, and ornaments were chosen which would not entail pain, and could be varied according to the caprice of the wearer.⁹

This is an interesting theory because it argues that humans have been interested in some manner of self-decoration since a very early age. Advancements in clothing meant that painless, alterable self-adornment was possible. This ruling by the Catholic Church and the advancement of textiles are the reason tattooing in the Christian world was unheard of before the nineteenth century.

It was through Captain James Cook of the British Navy and Joseph Banks, the ship's historian, that modern society "...came into contact with tattooing on a scale never before seen by Western eyes."¹⁰ Cook's ship, the *Endeavour*, and its crew embarked in 1769 on a journey to explore the South Pacific. It was on this voyage that Cook and Banks encountered the facial and full-body tattoos indicative of the native people of Tahiti and New Zealand. Banks recorded the process the Tahitian people used to tattoo as well as the design and placement of the tattoos.¹¹ Banks' journals as well as his tendency to entertain partygoers with tales of "...stormy seas, exotic islands, and tattooed cannibals" would plant the seeds for the tattoo craze to come.¹²

It was not long before the strange art of the South Pacific became standard procedure for servicemen in Britain's Navy:

During the nineteenth century tattooing flourished in England as nowhere else in Europe. This was due in a large part to the tradition of tattooing in the British Navy, which began with the first voyage of Captain Cook in 1769. During the decades that followed, many British seamen returned home bearing souvenirs of their travels in the form of exotic tattoos. Sailors learned the art, and by the middle of the 18th century most British ports had at least one professional tattoo artist in residence.¹³

Tattooing began in England as being "mainly prevalent among soldiers, sailors, and a certain class of civilians associated with both classes."¹⁴ Sailors were ideal candidates for getting tattooed as "the very mobility of the sailor provided the impetus required for habit and tradition to form..."¹⁵ One sailor, when asked why he got tattooed, was quoted as saying, "See...we are like sheep, and when one of us does anything we all imitate him at once, even if we risk doing ourselves harm."¹⁶ One serviceman would get tattooed, show his fellow crewmates, and then they, in turn,

would get tattooed and so on and so forth. It seemed that tattooing among British Royal Forces was even encouraged as Field Marshall Earl Roberts (bearing a tattoo himself) proclaimed that "every officer in the British Army should be tattooed with his regimental crest. Not only does this encourage *esprit de corps* but also assists in the identification of casualties."¹⁷

The growing popularity of tattooing in Britain came with the first known English professional tattoo artist, David Purdy, who opened the first professional tattoo shop in North London in 1870.¹⁸ Purdy commented, "I believe [tattooing] to be a common thing among soldiers and sailors."¹⁹ The opening of Purdy's shop meant that sailors no longer had to rely on the amateur tattoo skills of their shipmates and could instead visit a true tattoo artist. Purdy published a booklet entitled *Tattooing: How to Tattoo* in which he instructed amateurs how to sketch a design on the body ("...a good deal of rubbing out to do before you get the figure drawn correctly"²⁰), avoid tattooing on top of large veins, shave the area to be tattooed, and draw in fine lines so as the fine tattoo needles will have a good design to work from.²¹ Little about Purdy's career is known past his booklet.

The transition of the tattoo in England from a sailor's whimsy to an aristocratic trend came in 1862 when the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) had a Jerusalem cross tattooed upon him while visiting the Holy Land. Edward VII had his sons, the Duke of Clarence and Duke of York, tattooed in Japan by master tattooist Hori Chiyo as well as in Jerusalem by the same artists who had done his tattoo twenty years prior.²² This marking of royalty sent the British aristocracy into a frenzy and soon fashionable society was overrun by a "tattoo craze."²³ Historian James Bradley sums up the aristocratic interest in the permanent art, "For the beautiful people, of whatever gender, obtaining a tattoo was tantamount to buying a new frock. And unlike its rude counterpart, the operation took place in the comfortable environs of the 'studio,' the place of artists and photographers."²⁴

However, not everyone was sold on rushing out to get tattooed. Ward McAllister, a British socialite at the time, expressed his sentiments to the press:

It is certainly the most vulgar and barbarous habit the eccentric mind of fashion ever invented. It may do for illiterate seamen, but hardly for an aristocrat. Society men in England were the victims of circumstance when the Prince of Wales had his body tattooed. Like a flock of sheep driven by their master they had to follow suit.²⁵

Other opponents of tattooing are evidenced in periodicals of the time that range from the tame to the grossly libelous. An 1899 article from the *London News* screams "Tattooed to Death" and tells the story of a man passing away of blood poisoning a week after a ten-hour tattoo session. The article says the man died of blood poisoning but it does admit that "there was no evidence to show that it was caused by tattooing" and that the tattoo artist was not put on trial.²⁶ It is interesting then that the title of the article becomes nothing more than an attention-grabber as the actual content is about a man's death who *happened* to be tattooed and not a man who was tattooed to death.

An even more sensational article ran in an 1884 issue of the *New York Times* that claimed a baby had been born with marks identical to the tattoos of its mother.

The article claims "the baby is remarkable because his skin bears the same marks or tattooed figures as the mother. Not only are these figures reproduced identically on the child's epidermis, but they are in the same colors as the marks on the mother's body."²⁷ Obviously is it impossible for an unborn child to be tattooed simultaneously with its mother but the fact that such a tabloid article ran in a legitimate news source such as the *New York Times* represents a certain aura of distrust and mystery that surrounded tattooing at the time.

The skepticism surrounding tattooing along with its increasing popularity in England brought the desire to legitimize tattooing as an art. For example, Sutherland Macdonald was a flourishing and talented tattoo artist in late nineteenth-century London who understood the benefits in transforming tattooing from a vice of sailors to an indulgence of the aristocracy. Macdonald's studio was opened in 1890 in London's trendy West End so that his elite clientele "...need not remove themselves from their social milieu."²⁸ In addition to fine tattoos, Macdonald made sure his decadent customers were surrounded in their element and insured that a luxurious cushion, cigarette, or cool drink was never out of hand.²⁹ Macdonald was also the man responsible for the popularization of the term "tattooist" in lieu of "tattooer" claiming "that 'ist' sounded like 'artist' whereas 'er' sounded like 'plumber.'"³⁰ Macdonald's ability to skillfully tattoo as well as his acute business sense earned him celebrity and publications of the time hailed him as "the Michelangelo of tattooing" saying that his work was "the very finest tattooing the world has ever seen."³¹

Tattooing in the United States followed very similar patterns to those in England. Martin Hildebrandt was a German immigrant who started tattooing in America in 1846, and in 1870, he opened the first American tattoo studio in New York City. As in England, the first Americans to get tattooed were sailors, and many of the first accounts of tattooing are found in their diaries.³² Early American tattoos consisted mostly of patriotic and nautical themes that were meant to serve as good luck charms for the sailors and soldiers who sported them.³³ In a 1901 *New York Times* article one tattooist displayed an album of "ordinary work, sailors' art [that consisted of] United States shields, full-rigged ships, ladies that might represent any one of a hundred, cannons, and anchors. This is the common sort of stuff which the ordinary seafaring man wants—the more ink and the blacker, the more he thinks he is getting for his money."³⁴

Hildebrandt soon had a worthy competitor by the name of Samuel O'Reilly. O'Reilly opened his New York City tattoo studio in 1875.³⁵ Up until this point all tattoos were done by the method of hand-poking which could be as painful as it was slow. A tattoo artist would use a series of sticks with needles attached to the ends. Sticks with single-needles were used for details and fine lines whereas sticks with rows of needles attached to them would be used for washing in large areas of color. These needles were dipped in ink and then rhythmically tapped into the patron's skin until the desired tattoo was created. A skilled artist could tap the needles into the skin at a rate of two to three times per second.³⁶

O'Reilly, who in addition to being a tattoo artist was also a mechanic, reasoned that if he could invent a machine to automatically move the needles up and down then an artist could tattoo on skin as simply as he could draw on paper.³⁷ Using Thomas Edison's autographic printer as a template, O'Reilly modified the design to create the

first electric tattoo machine. After some refinement, O'Reilly patented his creation in 1891 and changed the face of tattooing forever. "The electric tattoo machine... not only quickened the process and decreased the pain involved, but facilitated greater detail and subtlety in colouration and shading. With the increased technical proficiency in tattooing itself, the quality of the drawings and paintings on which they were based also improved."³⁸

O'Reilly's career skyrocketed overnight, and he would spend the next two decades of his life traveling to major U.S. cities where he tattooed prominent, upper-class citizens.³⁹ Around the turn of the century however O'Reilly would become wrapped up in multiple, frivolous lawsuits as he sought to defend his patent rights against other tattooists releasing similar machines. In 1900 the *New York Times* ran an article entitled "Tattoo Artists at War: Dispute in the Courts as to the Rights of an Instrument," where O'Reilly brought another tattooist, Elmer E. Getchell, to court over who owned the patent to the tattoo machine. Getchell argued that "...the main part of the device was patented by Edison, and that neither man could get out a patent."⁴⁰ These successive lawsuits consumed O'Reilly's time and money.

In England the invention of the tattoo machine brought about an interesting result. Since the tattoo machine made the process less painful and seemingly less intrusive than the previous hand-poked method, tattooing became "not entirely unsuited for daring 'ladies.'"⁴¹ The *Tatler*, a British society magazine, wrote that "tattooing was a 'gentle art,' the height of fashionability."⁴² Alfred South, a tattooist, was quoted in the *Tatler* as claiming that out of 15,000 clients, 900 of them had been women. This client-base of nearly seventeen percent female is impressive and quite indicative of the "New Woman" sentiments being advocated at the time.

As tattooing in the United States became more popular it also became more acceptable for the upper classes of society. Affluent members of society began to accumulate tattoos based on fashion and artistic merit. A visiting Japanese tattooist at the time commented:

Next to the people of my own country, Americans take more interest in the subject of artistic tattooing than any other civilized people...I have traveled much all over the world, each time returning to my own country, but nowhere do the people understand as they do here the beauties of art..., for no matter where you go you will find the ordinary sailor tattooed. But the difference between tattooing and artistic tattooing is the same as that between a chromo which you hang on the wall of your stable and the fine oil painting which you hang in the parlors of your homes. It is this understanding which the Americans have.⁴³

Clearly the tattoo in the United States had shifted from ink scratches on sailors to a legitimate art form.

The writings of Joseph Banks on the tattoos of island people and the daring nature of sailors provided the long-awaited flame that would spark the tattoo revolution in the Christian world. Modern tattooing owes itself to the commitment to artistry of early tattoo artists, O'Reilly's invention of the first electric tattoo machine, and the daring nature that characterized the end of the nineteenth century. The start

of the twentieth century marked a new beginning in tattooing. Up and coming artists improved upon O'Reilly's machine and created tattoo designs that would eventually become the "traditional American" style.⁴⁴ Artists like Sutherland Macdonald who innovated the tattoo as art in a Christian world would pass on their skills to trained apprentices who would continue their businesses for generations to come.

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Endnotes

- ¹ R.W.B Scutt, and Christopher Gotch, *Art, Sex, and Symbol: The Mystery of Tattooing* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1986), 21.
- ² Steve Gilbert, *Tattoo History: a Source Book* (New York: Juno Books, 2000), 11.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Gilbert, 11.
- ⁵ Ibid., 15
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid., 16.
- ⁸ Gilbert, 17.
- ⁹ A.W. Buckland, "On Tattooing," *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 17 (1888): 319.
- ¹⁰ Scutt and Gotch, 28.
- ¹¹ Gilbert, 35-37.
- ¹² Ibid., 36.
- ¹³ Ibid., 103.
- ¹⁴ James Bradley, "Body Commodification: Class and Tattoos in Victorian Britain," in *Written on the Body*, ed. Jane Caplan (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 141.
- ¹⁵ Scutt and Gotch, 51.

- ¹⁶ "Origin of Tattooing," *New York Times* (April 19, 1896), 30.
- ¹⁷ Gilbert, 103-104.
- ¹⁸ Scutt and Gotch, 52.
- ¹⁹ Bradley, 141.
- ²⁰ Gilbert, 103.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Bradley, 146.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.
- ²⁵ Gilbert, 103.
- ²⁶ "Tattooed to Death," *London News*, May 13, 1899.
- ²⁷ "A Baby's Birth Marks," *New York Times* (March 1, 1884), 5.
- ²⁸ Bradley, 152.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Gilbert, 104.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Ibid.*, 125-126.
- ³³ Gilbert, 129.
- ³⁴ "The Gentle Art of Tattooing," *New York Times*, (July 21, 1901.) SM3.
- ³⁵ Alan Govenar, "The Changing Image of Tattooing in American Culture, 1846-1966," in *Written on the Body*, ed. Jane Caplan (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 214.
- ³⁶ Gilbert, 126.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Govenar, 215.
- ³⁹ Gilbert, 127.
- ⁴⁰ "Tattoo Artists at War," *New York Times*, (January 1, 1900), 4.
- ⁴¹ Bradley, 148.
- ⁴² Bradley, 148.
- ⁴³ "The Gentle Art of Tattooing."
- ⁴⁴ Gilbert, 130.