

BEHIND THE INK

Rachel Hope Allan

Tattoos are laced with connotations and symbolic meanings, whether relating to cultural tradition, protection, fashion, memorialisation or domination. As subject matter for anthropologists and sociologists tattoo is rich and bountiful, with a bold history and an intriguing future; and with the rise in popularity and acceptability of tattoo, art historians are increasingly traversing the arena of tattoo design as an art form. The once closed world of the tattoo convention has become fodder for 'reality television' and newspaper copy, and renowned tattoo artists are commanding big money and have large, loyal followings. The artists themselves are revered for their skill and style, and some for their personal aesthetic. Tattoo appears to have moved into the mainstream. New Zealanders love their body art. According to a UMR press release of a survey conducted in 2009, 36 per cent of New Zealanders under 30 have a tattoo, making New Zealand the most tattooed nation per capita in the world.³

Sitting at the heart of the story is the voyage of Captain James Cook and his voyages of exploration in the Pacific. Cook's crew is credited with bringing the word 'tattoo' to England after returning from one such voyage of discovery in 1769. Not only did expedition members bring back botanical specimens and make astronomical observations, they made observations of indigenous cultural practices such as *tatau*. Many of the crew came home with marks on their bodies from their encounters with the locals, and had also participated in the trading of mokomokai (the preserved heads of indigenous people).¹

Tattoo spread amongst seafarers as a system of meaning – including the kind of protection afforded by good luck charms – and gave rise to a whole range of sailor iconography. Sailor art was already synonymous with scrimshaw and this spilled over into tattoo design, with images of swallows, nautical stars and crossed cannons adorning biceps and the motto "HOLD FAST" inked into knuckles.²

WATCHING LONG

In 2015, I spoke to tattoo artist Matt Wilson about his art practice, tattoo culture in New Zealand and the business of tattoo.

Matt graduated from the Dunedin School of Art in 2010. His chosen major was sculpture, but he tracked into drawing. Drawing is integral to a tattoo practice. Tattoo artists are adept at recreating images from source material, but good tattooists develop their own unique line language. While Matt was at art school he started his apprenticeship. An apprentice spends hours at a light table honing their skills before any blood is shed. "I learnt the practice by standing and watching. I spent a lot of time cleaning. It is the route of the apprentice. Watching long. Also drawing lots and making stencils."

The art of tattoo is something that is handed down, and in the time-honoured tradition Matt has also taken on an apprentice. "This is the way that you learn. You can't go to tattoo school – unless you are in the United States. Some people claim to teach tattoo in weekend workshops but you can't learn this stuff in a weekend."

As with other art forms, tattoo involves stylistic and technological developments which leave their mark on the final piece. While there will always be old-school tattooists, scratchers and diggers, Matt is part of "a new breed of tattooists who are accepting new processes and reinventing the way [tattoo] is delivered."

CUTTING EDGE

Tattoo machines are beautiful. The mechanism that drives the needles into the skin's epidermis hums and purrs. The designs that cover the coils on some machines are laced with connotations relating to traditional tattooing. It is a common misconception that the needles are the ink-delivery system – in reality, ink is delivered between the needles that puncture the skin. The tattoo machine was invented by Samuel O'Reilly in the late 1800s and was based on an autographic printer invented by Thomas Edison.⁵ Traditionally, an apprentice had to learn how to make a machine as well as maintain it, but now hi-tech companies provide new and improved means of delivering ink into skin. That old vibrating buzz has been replaced with a low, sometimes inaudible hum that – anecdotally, at least – reduces the amount of pain associated with getting inked. The newer machines Matt uses have a swash-plate rotary mechanism and he believes that this mechanism is softer on the skin.

New equipment, however, is only part of the process. The expertise of the tattoo artist is still crucial. Hand speed and correct technique are necessary for delivery of the design. Body artists need good hand-eye co-ordination and physical and mental stamina. They require the mental capacity to concentrate for long periods of time and the ability to be empathetic with clients, but to not allow this to interfere with their work. They need to be conscientious and clean, keeping themselves and their clientele safe.⁶ "It's all about the training and hygiene. There's too many people with low skill levels and that don't know about – and how to go about – sterilization and minimization of infection, cross-infection and blood borne pathogens. Studios in town are pretty good. They are governed by by-laws and are checked at least once annually."

Once the preserve of bikers, hippies and women's libbers, now "tattoo[s] are synonymous with liberation from the confines of 'normal' society with all its unseen cues and rules of behavior."⁷ While tattoos still sit outside mainstream culture, increasingly they are a great leveller: Matt has found that people wanting a tattoo come from all social classes and every walk of life: "It is changing with so many more people getting awesome tattoos."⁸ Many people get tattoos because they are seen to be cool. Matt's clientele includes police, working men from the industrial area near his studio, and even a 75-year-old lady who got a tattoo featuring the embroidered roses on a favourite piece of linen.

We may accept the tattoo as a concept and as an art form but, despite changing attitudes, the tattooed person is still considered something of an outsider: Matt believes that in New Zealand "there is still an 80s association with gangs and bikies." This lingering attitude affects tattoo businesses as well as clients. "Even as a successful business, a tattooist will have difficulty in getting appropriate studio space in town and insurance for premises."

Nevertheless, a survey carried out by American Business Information, Inc. in 1996 reported that tattoo parlours were amongst the top six growth businesses in America.⁹ "Tattoo studios pay tax like everyone ... they are a business, like any other business."¹⁰ Misconceptions associated with tattoo parlours (money laundering and tax-dodging) are today a thing of the past, with many tattoo studios proving that even in a recession business is good. While many purveyors of tattoo cannot see themselves spending money on a new car or house maintenance anytime soon, they can almost always find enough 'scratch' to add to their canvas.

EMBODIMENT – MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

People get tattoos for a number of different reasons. It may be to celebrate their cultural identity, to mark a rite of passage, as a memorial, to look cool like a celebrity or sports idol, or just because the artwork looks good! Body art or decoration is like jewelry and fashion in that it is a means of social display. Some people see tattoo as an identity signifier, while others see their body as a canvas. "You buy a painting because you like it and put it on the wall – why not get one for your chest?"

There is a correlation between tattoos and addiction – some can do it just once, while others are hooked for life. The release of endorphins leaves you wanting more, and the smell of the disinfectant tweaks a want inside. Tattoos do hurt, especially those that take hours to complete, but there is a rush that you get from getting a tattoo that

is unlike any other and the subsequent 'tattoo brain,' that lasts only hours, is intoxicating. It is like swimming three kilometres, meditating for days and having a tooth pulled without anaesthetic. It is a slow, warm burn – an emotional vulnerability tied to a lifelong infection between skin and ink. Some tattoos are almost painless, but it is those that make you grit your teeth, sink into the tattooist's bench and just breathe that make you come back for more.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is a strong tradition of cultural *tatau* and *ta moko*.¹¹ Even in countries with a distinctive tattoo heritage such as Japan, there can be cultural stigma attached to an inked body. On a 2009 tour of Japan, All Black rugby players were asked to cover up while training in a swimming pool because their tattoos were considered offensive.¹² Historically, in Japan tattoo is associated with the yakuza crime gangs and businesses face losing clientele if they are seen to allow the criminal element to frequent their premises.

In New Zealand, non-Māori tribal designs including Celtic are also popular.¹³ Other 'tribes' include heavy metallers, whose designs hark back to Scandinavian Vikings with shields and axes festooning their biceps. Bikies and members of the armed forces adorn their bodies with symbols, as do circus performers and extreme athletes. For many years elite swimmers and divers have lined up, sporting tattoos celebrating their country of origin or participation at the Olympic level.¹⁴ A peculiarly twenty-first-century phenomenon has seen tech tribes and brand-loyal tribes choosing to have Nike symbols or Nintendo and PlayStation logos inked into their flesh.¹⁴

Loyalty to sports teams has always fascinated me, and the fact that some fans express their allegiance by getting sports insignia inked into their bodies has not gone unnoticed by marketing companies, which increasingly provide mesh tattoo sleeves for those wishing to express their allegiance temporarily (and more cheaply – as in the case of the 2014 Rebel Sport supporters' gear). Led by changes in sports apparel design by leading brands such as Adidas, rugby shirts have gone from being rugged, full-sleeve cotton garments to high-tech figure-hugging fabrics with short sleeves. These frequently reveal the body art of elite rugby athletes such as Sonny Bill Williams. One cannot ignore the influence that tattooed 'celebrities' have had on the acceptance of tattoo in mainstream culture. Matt says: "Some people come to me and want a tattoo like Sonny Bill for the culture behind the style, but many more just want one like SB because they think it looks cool!"

In recent times, there has been serious discussion about cultural appropriation and commodification of traditional designs as fashion motifs when indigenous designs are done on people outside of the tribe. To cite an example from sports fashion – in 2013 Nike chose to withdraw their women's running leggings featuring Polynesian tattoo designs following an uproar based on allegations of cultural offensiveness.¹⁶ Websites such as Steal her Style, a paparazzi style site, inform visitors which tattoos are worn by which celebrity. Increasingly, such sites are crediting the artists involved, and these artists quickly develop a cult following of their own.

OUT OF SIGHT – OUT OF MIND: SEXISM AND CONCEALED-NESS

For our modern-day gladiators of the sports field and tattooed rock stars, a tattoo is fine and perhaps even dandy – but is the acceptability of tattoos universal across the sexes? As in other areas of cultural practice there is a double standard, and tattooed women are viewed differently. Think Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Amy Winehouse and Miley Cyrus.¹⁶ Often tattoos are revealed, or even photoshopped in, for publicity shots of male celebrities, but photoshopped out for their female counterparts, such as Lady Gaga. Mylie Cyrus hid her tattoos until Hannah Montana was put to bed, and their unveiling signaled her fall from grace at the Disney empire. It is okay for Sonny Bill to represent his country with tattoos visible, but an air hostess similarly adorned would lose her job.¹⁸ One must question if this attitude harks back to an era when women with tattoos were the subjects of sideshow entertainment, or had associations with massage parlours, white trash and women with loose morals. It seems that our society is still based on Judeo-Christian moral norms and the deep-seated belief "that tattoos are still largely connected with channels into spiritual and demonic possession."¹⁹ The idea persists that what is on another's body will somehow affect you.

According to a 2012 *New Yorker* article, in the United States more women wear tattoo than men.²⁰ The tattooed lady has been a stalwart of the sideshow or freak show for centuries, with most of the inking being attributed to

husbands and fathers.²¹ Maud Stevens Wagner traded a date at the World's Fair in 1904 in St Louis, Missouri, to learn the art of tattoo, and became the first known female professional tattooist in America.²²

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

"The influence of social media is huge. It is the new word of mouth. It works both ways as a way to showcase work and to make you more approachable. It's important for clients to research a tattooist's work before they come in. Social media is a way to check out an artist's skill and artistry." (Matt Wilson)

Social media platforms such as Instagram, pinterest and tumblr are making tattoos more visible.²³ Visitors can see tattoos from all around the world and see what's happening at tattoo conventions. With the advent of Instagram, some tattooists are becoming world famous. Sydney-based tattooist Laura Winzer has 200,000 followers. Earlier this year, she chronicled Miley Cyrus 'fanning out' on her style – Winzer grammed hanging out with and tattooing Miley after a concert. Winzer is part of the 'new breed' of tattoo artist who utilises social media to develop their brand by sharing their life and art with their followers. Winzer is solidly booked out and travels the world doing guest spots. She is paid very well for her craft, a lot more than you would imagine. Los Angeles-based tattooist Dr Woo has 569,000 followers – once in a while he will free up a day in his calendar that sees people lining up around the block. He has recently been named Hollywood tattoo artist of 2015.²⁴ Needless to say, he is hip as hell.²⁵

GENTRIFICATION

The route to gentrification has included the popularisation of tattoo by the fashion, sports and entertainment industries and as a means to sell product. Tattoos are a "vehicle for visual semiotic."²⁶ They now occupy an interesting position in "a world in which the artwork in advertisements becomes an index for the tolerance of social commentary." Advertisements tell a story in which narrative elements must connect with the audience for a given product. Tattoos have become part of the common lingo.

Any discussion of the commodification of tattoo and the tattoo image cannot ignore the influence of Norman Collins (aka Sailor Jerry). US servicemen on shore leave in Honolulu lapped up his traditional style, one influenced by early Japanese tattoo artists or *horishis*. "The mix of shenanigans and bravado that characterized the mindset of an American serviceman on shore leave is a deep thread in Jerry's art. From 'Man's Ruin,' an image of a vixen in a cocktail glass surrounded by a dice, cards and dollar signs – to a picture of a bloody knife sticking through a heart with the words 'Death Before Dishonor' – Sailor Jerry's tattoos dealt with issues that were at once practical and elemental."²⁷ His flash art is still popular today, with its bold outlines and bright colours. Aside from being a staple in most tattooists' repertoires, Sailor Jerry's flash is emblazoned on t-shirts and jackets, and his name is used to sell rum and anything else associated with a "balls to the wall attitude of a sailor."²⁸ Ed Hardy,²⁹ a student of Jerry's, licensed his name and tattoo flash and cashed in through all the douchebags wanting a bit of tattoo swagger without the pain.³⁰ In 2009, Ed Hardy's company expected to move more than \$700 million dollars worth of merchandise.³¹

We are living in "[a] world wherein an aesthetic decorative function of artwork can be found in sites as diverse as T-shirts and cereal boxes."³² In 1990, Jean Paul Gaultier's mesh tattoo shirt brought street culture full circle into the world of couture.³³ Today, Gaultier continues to exploit the tattoo theme in product design in advertising for brands such as Coca-Cola.³⁴

The idea of branding is ancient. With roots in slavery and oppression,³⁵ the contemporary take on branding mimics advertising, with leading technology and fashion label logos competing for real estate on skin. Tattoo – once used in advertising and marketing to denote a certain class – has filtered into the mainstream and is now used to sell a range of products to (generally) upwardly mobile consumers, while retaining street cred through its associations with 'a bit of ruff.'³⁶ Think bearded hipsters selling high-priced luxury goods to yuppies. Marketers understand that consumers strive for symbolic capital.

In another case the informant came into the studio wanting a tattoo of the Oakley Sunglasses logo. When asked why, he explained that he saw another individual with this tattoo: 'this person looked really cool' (fieldnotes 8/8/96). This informant believed that the brand image represented positive symbolism, by acquiring the design in the form of a tattoo, their own identity takes on this sign value.³⁷

WHAT'S IN A WORD; WHAT'S IN A PLACE?

The shift in how tattoo is perceived has been a gradual one that has seen many practitioners change the name of their premises and forgo the term 'parlour' for 'studio' – each word has a subtle nuance of its own. The introduction of the new name was intended to 'lift' the associations that had been formed around tattooing. In the nineteenth century, the parlour was the front room – a place to receive guests, the place where high tea was served on the best china, cloaked in heavy drapes. Unfortunately, the term also picked up unwanted associations with massage parlours. Visions of hardened criminal types and skimpily dressed ladies infiltrated the minds of the majority.

Situated in Dunedin's Kaikorai Valley, Matt's premises are old-school – clean and minimal, with bright lights and walls adorned with artwork. On the morning we visited, he had just signed a lease for a shop in Princes Street in the downtown area of Dunedin. His clientele is changing and he wants a studio "which everyone will feel comfortable in." The Princes Street studio will be more boutique than his suburban quarters and will be called the Fine Line Tattoo Collective. The different environment reflects changing times and changing clientele. "Different people as clients bring different ideas about what artwork they want tattooed or commissioned."

Matt's existing clients will still come – he has bookings for major work for months ahead. While he still sees a big market for stereotypical images, tastes are changing and he gets more requests for customised work. "Some groups go through phases. Not just the men. There was a craze just recently with young women for a feather on the neck with a flight of little birds trailing off from the end of the feather. Other times it has been dandelions."

RECLAIMING BEAUTY AND THE MEDICAL TATTOO

There is a trend among some women to embrace their mastectomy by getting a tattoo to cover the scar following breast removal. Some combine reconstructive surgery with body art as a symbol of their strength and courage.³⁸ Another group of surgery veterans are amputees who get their prosthetic limbs tattooed.³⁹ And there is a growing group of older people keen to express their undeniable and indelible wishes about the end of life by having the words "DO NOT RESUSCITATE" inked on their chests.⁴⁰ Others have their 'medic alert' information tattooed on their wrists in the event that their bracelet comes off in an accident or is simply not noticed by medical staff. Another group is parents of pre-verbal or non-verbal special needs children who make use of temporary tattoos to communicate potentially life-saving information about allergies to those charged with caring for them.

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR – ENTER THE [ART] MARKET

Good Work AINT CHEAP, CHEAP WORK AINT GOOD.

Sailor Jerry Collins

When in 1896 the Prince of Wales had a Jerusalem cross tattooed on his forearm, it set off a craze for tattoo amongst the British upper classes.⁴¹ According to DW Purdy, who opened the first British tattoo shop around 1896, "Before you commence to tattoo any individual you must be able to sketch well, as it is a very difficult matter to sketch on a person's arm or on any other part of the body; you will have a good deal of rubbing out to do before you get the figure drawn correctly."⁴²

Tattoos have always been costly. "In 2008, the average hourly [rate per artist] was \$120. Today the average is \$150/hr."⁴³ Costs rise according to the skill, reputation and demand for a particular artist – a full back tattoo can start

at \$5,000. Some artists only do commission work – no walk-ins – and they charge day and half-day rates. Some people come into the studio wanting something specific, while others prefer the tattooist to open the discussion, show them different styles of tattoo and help develop their original ideas into something unique. Often clients are inspired by something they've seen on Instagram. "Some people come in and want an arm cuff they can hide under their t-shirt, but for many – after a while they come back and want just a little bit to be revealed, and then for many they keep on going."

When you approach a tattoo artist you are commissioning a professional to transform your design idea into a unique piece of artwork, which you then agree to have permanently etched onto your body. Aside from their artistry, a good tattooist has a professional working knowledge of human anatomy including how different skin types will react to ink. All this does not come cheap. Trust is integral to the client-tattooist relationship. When things go wrong, cover-ups are time-consuming and costly. Matt says: "Get it done right. Make the right decision and get the right tattoo – it should never be removed."

BENEATH THE SKIN

Although tattooing apprentices used to learn how to make their own inks, not all inks were stable and not all inks were a good idea. The ingredients used in some of the older pigment concoctions would make your stomach turn. Concrete dust, anyone? In Japan, traditional tattooists still make their own inks and needles. In America and Australia, the Food and Drug Administration tightly regulates the inks that can be used. However, in New Zealand there are only guidelines.⁴⁴ While some ink companies now offer completely vegan inks, pigments can cause reactions in certain people, especially those with fair skin.⁴⁵ Some pigments in particular cause more problems than others – red is a case in point.

The old adage that 'tattoos are forever' is somewhat misleading, as they will gradually fade and become 'soft' or 'bleed' as the body replaces the pigment as the natural process of skin regeneration takes place.

MARK OF THE TIMES

Tattoo has cemented its position in contemporary visual culture. As we enter the twenty-first century, tattoo as an art form is ever-changing and constantly in a shifting relationship of tension with societal expectations of acceptability. Tattoo design has moved from body art to become an integral part of product symbolism.⁴⁶ For some, it is little more than a fashion accessory and certain iconography has become synonymous with particular hip tribes. It has moved from the badly lit backstreet parlours of the 1980s to mainstreet studios with elaborate shop fronts, hip waiting rooms and an online presence.

Although, at least on the surface,⁴⁷ there has been a change in how tattoo is perceived, it is yet to reach 'norm core' status among particular demographic groups, and while it is acceptable for particular celebrity role models to be tattooed, there is still an underlying bias that appears when others – particularly women – are inked.

Darkroom alchemist and appographer, collector and purveyor of snippets of light, **Rachel Allan** was awarded a Master of Fine Arts with Distinction in 2013 from the Dunedin School of Art, where she now lectures in photography. Her work scratches at the surface of reality and investigates the notion of loss and fetishisation of objects. Rachel exhibits locally and internationally in public museums, project galleries and artist-run spaces.

Matt Wilson graduated from Dunedin School of Art with a bachelor of visual arts degree in 2010. When his mentor Dan Wadsworth, proprietor of Tatrix Tattoos, died suddenly, Matt took over the business and ran it successfully, winning national awards and accolades. In the winter of 2015 Matt opened a new tattoo studio, Fine Line Tattoo Collective, in the CBD of Dunedin. He continues to augment and develop his style by maintaining a strong drawing practice. Matt is passionate about dogs and the restoration of classic vehicles.

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