NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

CRAFT/METALWORK

"The Art of Tattooing - and it's social relevance"

by

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INTRODUCTION

Most people are aware of what a tattoo is, which is fundamentally "to mark permanently (on the skin) with figures, by pricking in colouring matter".

The phenomenon of tattooing is not a modern invention as one may think, but has been associated with human behaviour since the ice age and has evoked extreme social attidues throughout the past. It was essentially the checkered history and contrasting radical attitudes concerning the ritual of tattooing which attracted me to research the subject and attempt to identify historical motivations, and how they influence contemporary tattooing today.

Motivations, styles and techniques have dramatically evolved throughout the history of tattooing, and the quality of design achieved today transforms the body into a living canvas of fine art. It is thought that the enigma of tattooing, portrays essential subconscious motivations, which I will investigate among other fascinating aspects such as aesthetic visual qualities, and social customs and pressures.

However, as human activites are invariably complex and diverse it is impossible for one to catagorise or generalise all tattooees and indeed tattooists into a single definite class, but rather suggest the sexual, social or superstitious connoctations surrounding the facinating art of tattooing. My aim is to give a succinct yet accurate account of tattooing through the ages, and

suggest how the ancient art has progressed since primitive times, and how traditional techniques, designs and attitudes have influenced the contemporary tattooing scene, and modern social attitudes.

As I began researching through material and observing elaborately decorated tattooees, I found myself becoming an avid and fascinated tattoo-art enthusiast, for regardless of one's individual personal opinions, tattooing is undisputably a skilled art form. Tattooing, considered to be a private indulgence with almost voyeuristic connoctations, has unfortunately been widely socially unaccepted, and a lack of knowledge has generated superficial myths which may have prejudiced social attitudes towards tattooing in general.

In chapter one, a brief historical outline of the history of tattooing displays the extreme social attitudes which varies since the eighteenth century from repugnant antipathy to volitional enthusiasm, which may succinctly summarise the contrasting contemporary opinions on the art of tattooing. The history of tattooing is so diverse and fascinating that I could have dedicated the entire thesis to exploring historical social aspects, motivations, techniques etc. I have dedicated chapters two and three to discuss Maori tattooing known as Moko and Japanese irezumi tattooing. In my opinion, the entire concept behind Moko epitomises the main motivations for tattooing in general.

The Maori people were influenced by social, sexual, superstitions and aesthetic beliefs and consequently displayed these beliefs through a powerful indiom of visual expression in the form of elaborate tattooing.

I devoted a chapter to discuss Japanese tattooing for two main reasons. Tattooing has had a checkered history internationally and the radically different attitudes throughout Japanese history emphasises the change in society's opinions and acceptance of tattooing and what it symbolised throughout the past: punitive branding, symbols of wealth, affiliation with an undesirable subcultural fraternity, erotic sexual symbolism etc. Japanese irezumi is undisputably some of the finest examples of tattooing worldwide and continues to influence western tattooing styles with unified designs and sensitively delicate techniques. Techniques through the ages are discussed in chapter four and show the development from using animal bones to modern electric needles. I felt it was essential to visit a professional tattooing establishment myself to see the type of image portrayed, the clientele, the standard of hygiene etc.

By interviewing several tattoolsts and many tattooees, I was able to derive an accurate conclusion for myself and experience the professional nature of tattooing, and the numerous possible motivations which I include in chapter five. Human nature is so diverse and profound that I found it naive to accept previous psychological theories, that

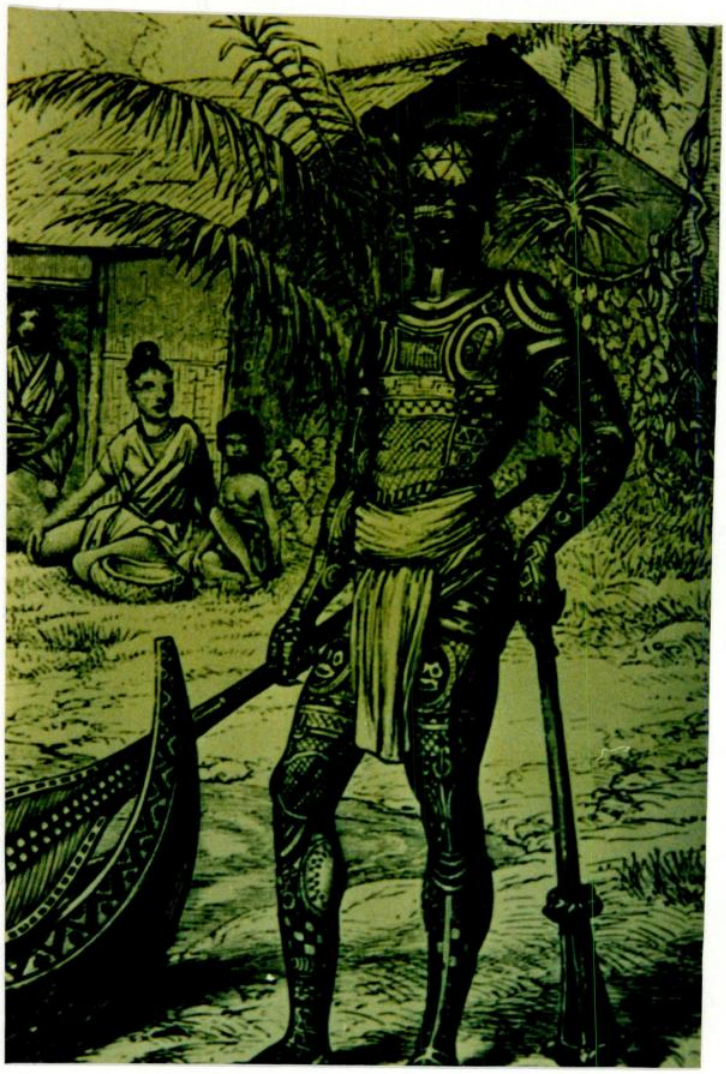
tattooing is performed for purely sexual reasons, without investigating through research and interviewing for myself. By compiling questionaires and having a wide cross-section of people including: tattooists, tattooees, potential employers, police and prison officers, answering various questions I feel I have established that the motivations for tattooing are as individual as the tattooees themselves.

CHAPTER ONE: THE HISTORY OF TATTOOING

Europeans believed that they discovered the facinating art of tattooing in the eighteenth century, when explorers such as Cook and Banks returned from voyages to uncivilised worlds with magical tales of mysterious tribes who resembled inordinate human canvasses of art.(Ills. 1) The phrase "tattoo" derived from a Tahitian word "tatu" and the Polynesian phrase "tattooing" meaning to strike was introduced by Cook into the English language. There is substanciating evidence that tattooing had been practised as early as The Ice Age prior to 8,000 B.C. Bodies have been discovered in many parts of the world including Europe, displaying traces of inscribed marks of black and red pigments. Sharply filed flints and needles which were found may well have been used as tattooing instruments. Statuettes discovered all over the world. e.g. Egypt and New Zealand suggest that tattooing was definitely favored.

Some of the earliest examples of tattooing from over 4,000 years ago discovered in Egypt suggest that tattooing was fashionable but was exclusively indulged in by women. As customs and traditions spread, the art of tattooing may have progressed from Egypt throughout the Mediterranean.

Tattooing evolved ubiquitously, perhaps in many cultures as a further extension of ephemeral body painting favoured by various primitive societies.



(Ills. 1) This primitive Tahitian was the type of curious sight discovered in the eighteenth century by Cook and Banks.

It would seem logical that aesthetically conscious tribes such as the Hageners and The Nuba tribes would indulge in removable body painting for social as well as aesthetic reasons. Throughout their male society, individuals could improve their status according to their personal achievements and abilities, and were not born into a fixed hereditary social status. One could also, therefore degenerate to social levels of insignificance, unlike the women whose status was permanent. Their social roles, once they were mothers and wives, did not change and possibly this resulted in them acknowledging this fact aesthetically by adorning themselves with incessant body decorations, such as tattooing.

The permanence and salient visual qualities of tattooing may be justifiably rebuked by many as a horrificly drastic technique, but dark skinned tribes explored and developed further forms of permanent body decorations by performing scarification or cicatrization rituals.

Tattooing existed as early as 2000 B.C. in Asia, and examples are found in many areas such as Burmah and China. The Chinese adopted a checkered attitude not unlike the Japanese, and tattooing developed from camouflage for fishing to the branding of criminals during the thirteenth century.

Romans who originally abhored the concept of tattoing eventually succumbed to the cult which was fashionably thriving in parts of Britain. Consequently, the technique

was spread to Rome where it flourished for centuries. Authorities rigourously imposed a ban to ostracise the rapidly spreading fashion. Christianity was declared the official Roman religion in A.D. 325. Emperor Constantine repugnantly forbade all facial tattooing which he said disfigured and mutilated 'that fashioned in God's image' (1, p. 52).

Catholic authorities continually tried to make the art illegal during the middle ages, hoping that tattooing would eventually phase out completely, which is probably why tattooing diminished, almost to extinction throughout Europe. Missionaries travelling to primitive areas to spread the Christian faith, induced the eradication of tattooing to levels of near extinction throughout much of the pacific. Anthropologists arrived during the late nineteeth century to discover the magnificent Polynesian art of tattooing, practically suffocated, with only elderly chiefs displaying faded, withered examples of the art, crippled by the arrival of Christianity.

The Aleut and Eskimo natives of Alaska adorned themselves with tattoos and elaborate labrets, until the arrival of converting missionaries who vehemently eradicated any rituals, superstitions or personal adornments which offended them. Tattooing declined, and eventually became extinct within three generations. As late as 1938, a group of missionaries converted the entire population of Bellona in the Solomen Islands to the Seventh Day Adventist

Christianity and consequently destroyed, the art of tattooing which once thrived.

Contrary to popular belief, they did not merely refrain the natives from conducting tattooing ceremonies. The art was eventually phased out because the superstitions, myths and spiritual beliefs which once inspired the natives to indulge in tattooing rituals were eventually eliminated, ridiculed and rebuked resulting in ancient tradtions and customs being replaced by modern Christian teachings. The Church's main concern appears to have been the overwhelming physical ostentatious decoration the natives indulged in. tattooing radically transformed one's physical appearance and according to The Church, it was a licentiously immoral sin to mutilate and disfigure oneself deliberately.

The missionaries travelled to improve the moral beliefs of primitive societies and to introduce them gradually to civilised western behaviour and etiquette. They preached against nudity, proclaiming that it was a sin for man to behave as only primeval animals would, without modesty or morality. Consequently while certain cultures such as Japanese have indulged in tattooing to distract from the raw nakedness of man which they believed was degradingly animal-like, the missionaries may have believed that disfiguring oneself with indellible, illnatured tattoos was degenerating these people back into savages. The Church was vehemently determined to ostracise false religious superstitions from society and therefore scorned the

predominantly superstitious motivations to cover one-self in tattoos, which sometimes seems quite ironic as religion was often a genuine motivations for tattooing among certain minorities e.g. The Chicanos and The Mohave American Indians. In Victorian times, however, ladies were frustrated by a lengthy assumed taboo on face painting among women of high social status as lower class women were exploring cosmetics "assuming the gaudy paints of loose women".(1, p.62) The upper classes flaunted their wealth and ability to buy "beauty" by reddening their lips, darkening eyebrows etc. with tattoos. Tattooing in various form was flourishing in England, despite the fact that it was declining drastically elsewhere due to the arrival of Christianity.

However, George Burchett - a master tattooist who studied the art in Japan, brought tattooing to London's elite Mayfair and in 1901 affluent members of society including Lady Churchhill eagerly sported coronation tattoos with royal coats of arms and patriotic verses.

I find it quite surprising that the wealthy aristocracy succumbed to what may have been merely fickle fashionable whims, and allowed themselves to be decorated in such an obviously indelible and blatant manner.

Tattooing was no longer an enigma - it became an increasingly exploited commercial art.

British sailors returning from The Far East and south seas developed the techniques and established commercial tattoo establishments. The first professional tattoo shop in England was set up in Holloway, London in 1870 by David Purdy. The art was overwhelmingly popular in England for a period and not only among sailors.

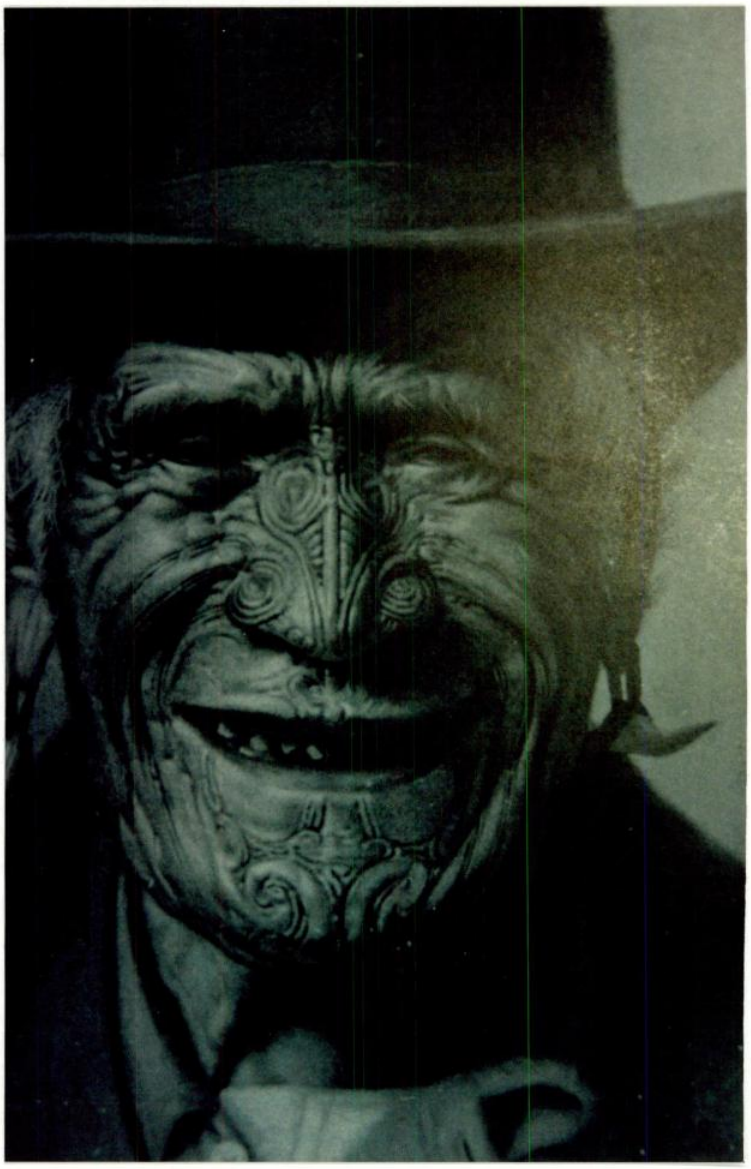
Japan became feasible to the West in the nineteenth century and the magnificent Japanese irezumi techniques were influencing western society. It was not exclusively confined to subordinate or prolitariat classes, as members of the aristocracy, and consequently the gentry were now sporting the latest fashion accessories: tattoos. Hori Chujo - the Shakespear of tattooing tattooed The Duke of York, George V, The Duke of Clarence and Tzar Nicholas of Russia, among others.

The general contempory concensus is that tattooing can be very garishly common, and was practically exclusive to the lower classes of society.

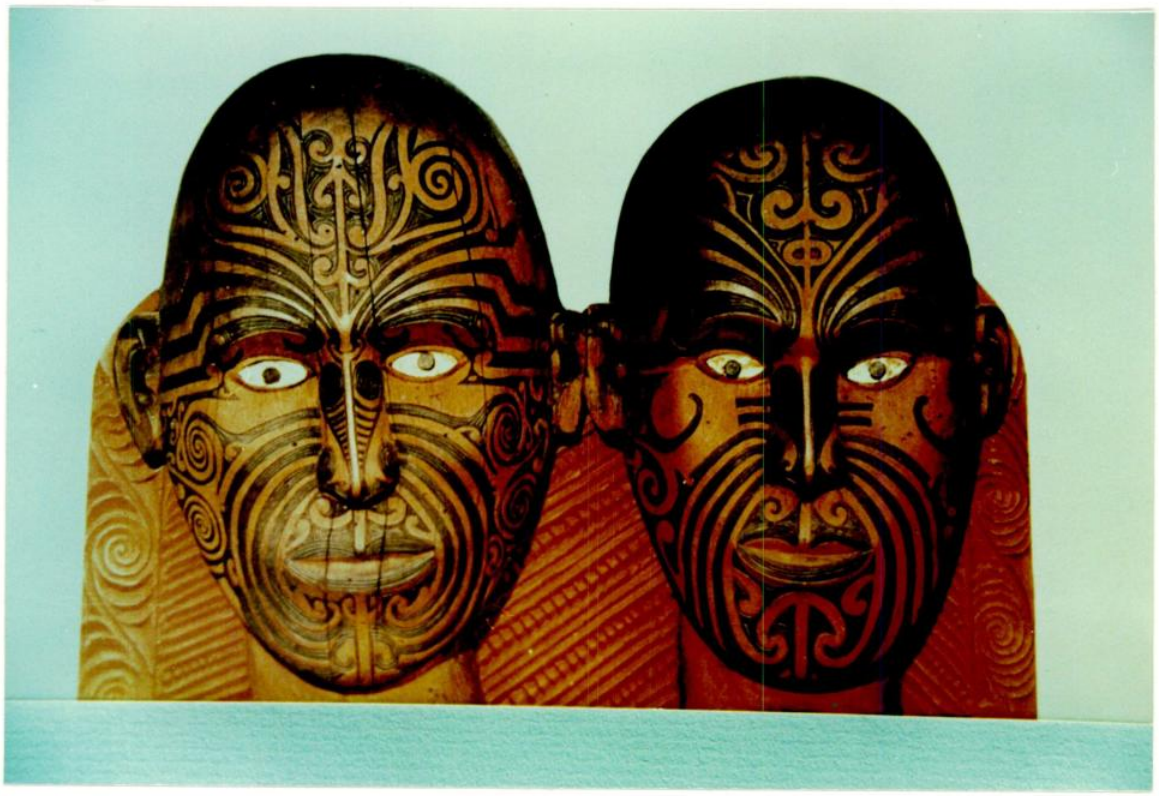
CHAPTER TWO: MAORI TATTOOING: MOKO

The techniques involved in tattooing have varied inevitably as the art developed, but have always employed pricking and puncturing beneath the skin with various types of needles. The Maori techniques of tattooing known as Moko, first introduced by Cook and Banks, was different. 'Complexity of design, involving hatching, meanders and spirals' (1,p.61) were carved instead of pricked into the skin which resulted in smooth ridges and channels, sometimes resembling the cicatrisation performed by many dark skinned African tribes.

The technique, exclusive to Polynesia is known as tattowing (which means to strike or knock). It involved preparing a black pigment made from burning carbon from an oily nut usually used for candle-making, and rubbing this pigment into a low relief design carved into the skin with a chisel made of animal bone. Bird bones or hardwood chisels were also used and were driven into the skin with a type of miniature mallet. The end result was not only indellible but also quite tactile and rough to touch.(Ills. 2) The tattoos possed a curious quality and resembled wood carvings,(Ills. 3) Moko was used to decorate wooden carved figures often of ancestors regarded with great social esteem and consequently, it has been suggested that Moko is a symbol of attempting to achieve the ultimate level of social distinction., which are also a part of Maori culture, or delicate 'foliage of old chasing upon gold or silver' (1, p. 61)



(Ill. 2) Maori chief with delicate facial moko. Note the carved tactile quality of the design.



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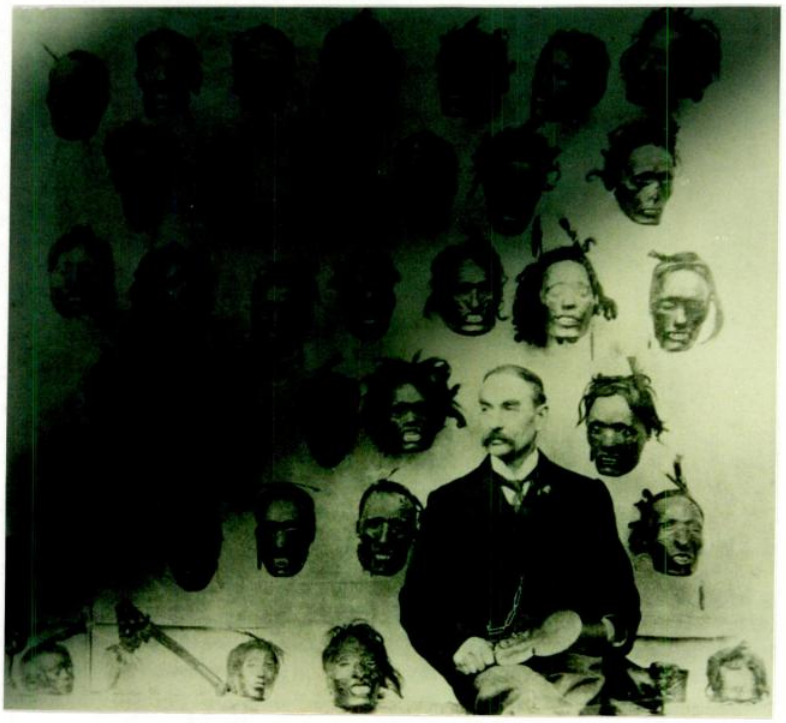
(Ill. 3) Maori wood carvings decorated with facial Moko, carved in 1899 by Ratoiti

(Ill. 4) Detail of amoco designs which gracefully decorated the buttocks

honoured, and gifts were showered upon him in payment for his skills. Some craftsmen were so highly renowned, that the corpse of a dead patron with highly elaborate Moko were bought, and the skins were preserved. Maori warriors, if killed by enemies were carelessly abandoned if they were of low status and a Papatea (plain face, untattooed) but if they displayed Moko, their heads were carefully decapitated and embalmed. The heads if not returned to the family as a memorial, was pillaged by the enemy as a type of trophy.

Europeans who originally were repulsed at the discovery of Moko, became so fascinated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that decapitated heads were often sold to European traders who knew that collectors and museum curators would pay exorbitant prices for them. (Ills. 5) The first head was bought by Banks in 1770 much to the vehement reluctance of the natives. The sale of heads became infamous and reached inordinate preportions, and consequently became illegal. A law was passed in 1831 prohibiting the importation of heads into New South Wales.

It has been suggested that captives during horrific tribal wars of the 1820's may have been deliberately tattooed, then decapitated to sell to traders.



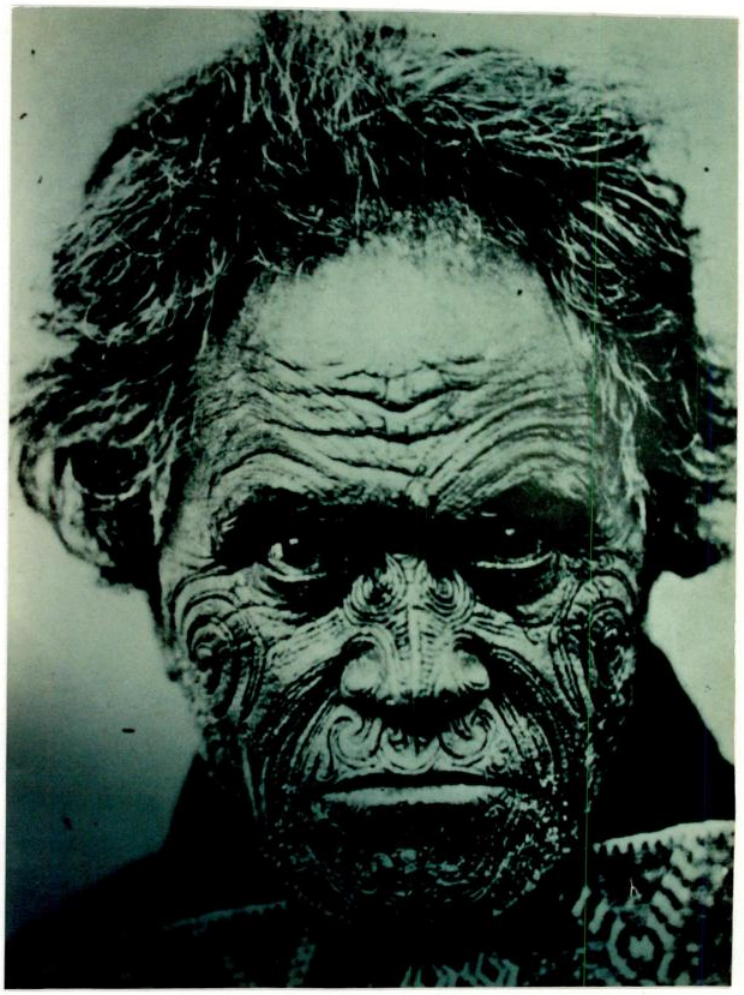
(Ill. 5) Major General H.G. Robley with his collection of Maori heads displaying fine exampels of Moko, 1902, Surrey, England

The origins of Moko, particularly the facial carving still remain quite ambiguous yet several motivations have been suggested why The Maori people indulged in such a dramatic and salient art form These motivations 'hover between the fetish of tactility, the stamps of authority, society's signalling system, and the mark of heroes' (5 p. 131).

Moko, like other Polynesian tattooing illustrated status and social rank distinguishing slaves from nobility, with the chief's facial Moko displaying the most exquisite delicacy and skill. Although elaborate facial Moko was permitted for all free men, the quality and abundance of design indicated those of higher status.(Ills. 6) The men considered themselves sexually attractive to women and the facial Moko was considered to bestow a type of agelessness to the patron.

Moko was such an outrageously disconcerting form of adornment that it would never be considered beneficial as camouflage. Chiefs and warriors must have been motivated by the possible ferocity of the conspicuous designs and relished exposing their body tattoos, exploiting their dramatic appearance by wildly shrieking, grimacing and sticking out their tongues which transformed them into terrifying perilous looking attackers.

The Maori people had many cultural and spiritual motivations for Moko. It displayed not only symbols of rank but also expressed their sexual and aesthetic values



(Ill. 6) This highly respected Maori chief displays his status by emplying a detailed and elaborate facial Moko.

and represented their reverence towards the spiritual world.

The application of Moko was a spiritual ritual, and not merely an acquiring of aesthetic attributes. A respected ceremony took place and there were stringent rules, the person being tattooed was obliged to obey. He declared by oath to respect these rules and was subject to certain taboos. He was forbidden to communicate with anyone other than the tattoo artist. He could not touch his face or head which was sacred and could only be touched by the tattooist. He was not permitted to feed himself. The Moko was a display of Maori social and cultural identity. The facial tattoos are a symbol of marital status for women, yet they seemed willing to follow traditions, simply "because it is the Maori way" (12, p. 175). Perhaps the transition from ephemeral body painting portrays a deep spiritual affiliation. The permanence of the Moko may have been an unmistakable sign of succumbing devotion to the spirits, to ensure an ascention into the afterworld and symbolising a supernatural 'link between the natural realm of decay and the human realm of continuity and cultural permanence' (12, p. 175)

The intricate linear quality of Moko has also been associated with weaving which may be incorporated with a traditional myth involving Mine-nui-te-po, The Goddess of Childbirth, and consequently may symbolise fertility or

mortality, similar to undertones portrayed in Hawaian Mo'oo tattooing. Moko, it is believed meant lizard in certain contexts, which may be relevant as the Maori people were terrified of lizards, both in mythology and reality. The lizard may be a living example of the Maori spiritual philosophy of life and death. When we die we do not deteriorate completely but simply progress from this life, abandon our mortal body and transcend into higher spiritual domains. The lizard sheds it's skin to grow a new one and perhaps the Maori people believed this was a symbol of the insignificance of mortal life which may have been expressed through Moko. By employing a tattooed facade they may abandon 'one mask in order to assume another' (12, p.176). it is believed by many anthropologists that the tuatara, a type of lizard regarded with a strange almost venerated type of fear may have some significant motivations for Moko. Perhaps the literary similarity may be exploited out of context but tara was the Maori phrase for genitals and the reason why Maori men indulged in genital tattooing has always remained obscure. It is possible that it may have symoblised the passing of one life to another with both spiritual and reproductive connoctations. On a spiritual level, tuatara ~~note :~~ sheds his skin - we shed our mortal bodies and ascend to the spiritual world, where flesh and blood is rendered insignificant. From a rudimentary physical point of view, the seed of life originates from the genitals, and thus creating a new life, from an old one.

There have been numerous attempts to justify and comprehend the motivations for Moko and many anthropologists have derived theories to question, or attempt to explain why Maori people ostentatiously embellished themselves in what may appear to be a hideously savage and drastic adornment.

Personally, I believed that Moko motivations may not be as complex and diversified as Western anthropologists suggest. In my opinion, Maori people displayed immense stocisim in bearing pain, first allowing hair to be plucked from their bodies and designs carved into their face for essentially aesthetic reasons. Although social and spiritual motivations should not be dismissed, I believed the vanity of Maori people was a predominant factor, (Ills. 7) just as we would beautify ourselves less painfully today with cosmetics, jewellery etc.

Whatever the motivations definitely were, the Maori tribe must have possessed sincere and unadulterated respect for their cultural and religious beliefs to express such fervent and sumissive respect in such an excruciatingly painful manner.

The arrival of the Missionaries induced an obvious decline of Moko. The last fine example disappeared when Chief Tawhiao died in 1894.

(Ill. 7) Maori women express a certain vanity by decorating the mouth and chin with a monchromatic tattoo, which they believe makes them attractive and betows a type of ageleness to the bearer

CHAPTER THREE: TATTOOING: IREZUMI

In the late thirteenth century, Marco Polo encountered various forms of tattooing while travelling through Asia, but examples of Japanese tattooing are evident from as early as 10,000 B.C. Attitude and beliefs have varied radically throughout Japanese history and one would need a deep antropological understanding to appreciate many social and pyschological implications of the art. Ceramic figures known as dogu (Ills. 8.a & 8.b) thought to be from the Jomon Period (10,000 B.C. - 300 B.C.) depict facial markings which may represent early examples of tattooing, especially the tradition of mouth tattooing. "Men young and old, all tattoo their faces and decorate their bodies with designs" (12 p.115) during the Yayoi Period (300 B.C. - A.D. 300). Tattooing originally was thought to have been a form of camouflage, and protection while hunting or fishing The Wa, who are fond of diving into water to get fish and shells also decorated their bodies in order to keep away large fish and waterfowl" (12 p. 117). Tattoos became a display of status, indicating one's rank by various sizes and positions of designs.

Attitudes changed dramatically and throughout certain stages of the Kofun Period (A.D. 300 - 600) the act of tattooing was thought to be reserved for savage barbarians and criminals. Tattooing was no longer an expression of aesthetic beauty, but a punitive form of degradation and sentences often imposed facial tattoos "I will exercise

8.a 8.b

(Ills. 8 a. & b.)

Japanese ceramic dogu figurines from the Jomon period (10,000 B.C. - 300 B.C.) depicting linear markings thought to be examples of tattooing.

great bounty and remitting the penalty of death, sentence thee to be tattooed" (12, P.118). The criminal was consequently ostracised from society for life by his indellibly marked eyes and forehead. Punitive forms of tattooing were abolished for a period, but there is evidence that it was employed from the thirteenth century onwards. Although it was a more compassionate form of punishment than previous sentences of death or cutting off an ear or a nose, it was a permanent stigma which branded the criminal for life and caused irrevocable damage to the image of tattooing as an artform.

The punitive tattoos were usually quite basic markings, but sometimes they indicated the type of crime committed. The criminals probably tried to disguise their markings by over-tattooing and perhaps, this encouraged people to associate tattooing with the subcultural element of society. The Japanese style of tattooing with which we are familiar with today evolved during the Edo Period (1600 - 1868) where once again tattooing became acceptable to many. The authorities however, did not reject the concept that tattooing was a form of punishment and rebuked those who now favoured tattoos in representational as well as pictorial forms, for it became fashionable to display love pledges on arms and inner thighs. the notion that only lower class members of society indulged in tattooing can be misleading.

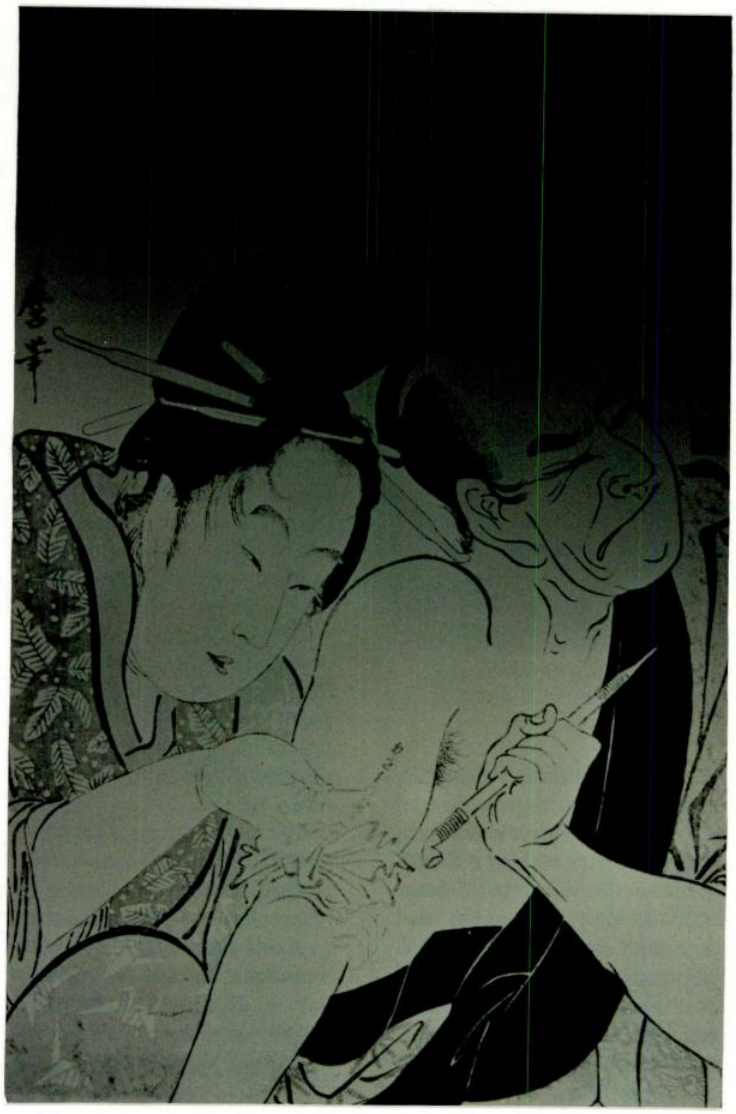
During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries merchants forbidden to wear lavish silks, brocades or expensive jewellery which were exclusively worn by the nobility, resorted to wearing expensive private tattoos, secretly decorating an arm or thigh. The fashion eventually spread within ranks of nobility and aristocracy. (Ills. 9)

Edo tattooing not only developed in attitude, while people flaunted their individuality, but also aesthetically. The quality and techniques improved, imagery and subject matter developed and tattoos now covered large areas of the body.

It was the stigma which was important to the "decent" society, the scale was irrelevant as they frowned upon any form of tattooing with obvious antipathy, believing that one who acquired a tattoo automatically ostracised themselves to a permanent inferior social rank.

Full body tattoing flourished from the eighteenth century and was often associated with the fourteenth century Chinese literature The Shui-hu Chuan which reached Japan in the eighteenth century. It vividly relayed tales of outcast rebel sung Chian and his Robin Hood-like companions. The relevance of this literature, is that a number of the main characters were heavily tattooed.

In many Edo wood block prints we see various examples of characters sporting flamboyant and ostentatious body tattoos, (Ills. 10.a & 10.b) depicting dragons, and



(Ills. 9) Azamino of Onitsutaya Tattooing Goritara
Japanese woodblock print by Utamaro from the Edo Period (1600-1868) depicting a wealthy merchant grimacing with pain as he acquires a fashionable private tattoo

10.a

10.b

(Ill. 10a.) Tattooed Japanese warrior displaying vivid tattoos.

(Ill. 10b) Japanese print - Edo Period depicting <u>The Dragon tattooed Shishin engaged in a fight</u> by <u>Kunijoshi</u>

warriors etc. Personally, I find it quite ambiguous whether artists such as Kuniyoshi and Hokusai were trying to inspire tattoos to become fashionable or were merely depicting already complex designs they have have previously seen.

Many different groups of men became patrons for tattooing, though invariably most clients appeared to share rogueish tendencies and most tattooed clientele 'reflected the boisterous high spirits' (12, p. 124) of rowdy firefighters, palanquin carriers etc.

The Modern Period (1868 - present) was a period of great development, particularly during the first decades of the nineteenth century, when the Shogun government was abolished to restore the emperor as head of state (Historians refer to this as The Meiji Restoration). Irionically every effort was made to abolish all tattoing establishments as the new central authorities were extremely concerned about westerners perceiving Japanese as barbaric savages displaying "gaudy patterns of line and colur ... injected into their precious skin" Cook, 1,p. 164).

However, these Westerners, (not unlike today) were fascinated by this great Japanese art form and themselves indulged in participation. I previously mentioned the British Monarch George V and Nicholas Tzar of Russian among

other members of nobility were willingly tattooed by Japanese craftsmen, as well as sailors. The authorities condoned foreigners but vehemently attempted to suppress Japanese citizens to be tattooed.

One would imagine that the tradition among western sailors to lavishly embellish themselves with every type of tattoo from the predictably mundane to garish vulgarity, would also be found among Japanese militarists, but it was quite the opposite. The rigourously conservative forces were totally against tattooing, not only for aesthetic reasons, but rather the anti-authoritarian and rebellious connoctations it implied.

Tattooing only became legal, but not necessarily socially accepted when Japan was defeated in World War II in 1945. Japanese tattooing is perceived as an enchanting art form by many westerners, yet dismissed socially with consternation by the Japanese themselves, resulted in many master craftsmen dying without passing on their traditional skills. It is, in my opinion quite paradoxical that world wide the Japanese irezumi is regarded as possibly the finest example of the art form and yet the Japanese generally regard tattooing as a subcultural mode of expression essentially associated with lower class fraternities, ostracised from elegant society.

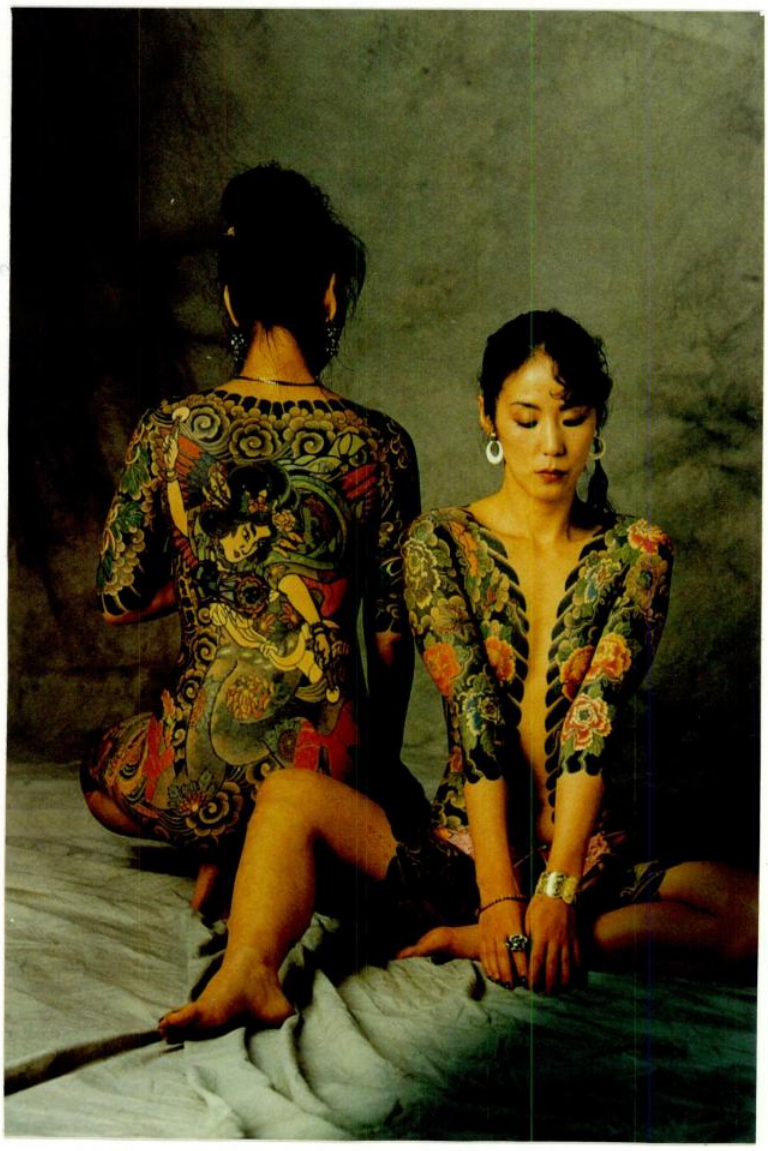
Even today, it is widely dismissed that tattoong in unison with the Yakuza - the contemporary undesirable element of

Japanese society including criminals, drug dealers and prostitutes, but I believe that this is not entirely accurate, although I am unaware of any definite statistics to prove otherwise.

The Japanese style of Irezumi is essentially a unified large scale deisgn. During the Edo Period, the entire upper torso was often tattooed, but this design modified slightly, (Ills. 11) and more recently, there may be an untattooed area, allowing designs to be disguised if necessary by clothing and subsequently the tattoo usually stops above the elbows and on the upper thighs.

The tattoos can be extremely sensual and caress the naked body not unlike painting on a canvas, and the raw nakedness is replaced by a curious almost synthetic or artificial looking clothing. Nudity was rarely considered to be beautiful in Japanese mythology, and was thought tobe almost uncivilised and animal-like "horrible is the sight of the naked body, it does not have the slightest charm". (R. Brain, 9, p.56). Perhaps nudity is considered vulgar in Japanese traditions as it rarely depicted in art and in erotic paintings. The Japanese were aroused by layers of garments which was thought to arouse sensual desire as each layer was removed, to eventually reveal a lover's nakedness and vulnerability.

It has been suggested that lower classes in the nineteenth century exploited tattoing as a substitute for clothing,



(Ill. 11) Japanese body tattoos which are flamboyant yet modified by allowing the designs to be discreetly disguised by clothing if necessary.

but it seems ironic that people unfortunate enough, not to be able to afford clothing could possibly afford to employ the highly skilled services of an irezumi artisan to tattoo them!

The procedure is time-consuming, intricate and consequently full body tattoos cost thousand of pounds as they can often take several months to complete.

Western tattoo designs may consist of any conceivable subject matter which the patron desires and many clients design their own. The Japanese client chooses a design from the artist's book. The art of tattooing is respected as a traditional art form, predominated by 'the sort of canons typical of such traditions' (12, p. 129) and the Japanese minority who do not condemn tattooing as subcultural indulgence, accept with unquestionable pride and satisfaction the pre-set designs, handed down through posterity. Consequently, offensively bizarre, rebellious or anti-authoritarian tattoos are not commonly seen.

The flamboyant desire for individualism common among western society is not usually an integral part of Japanese culture.

The tattoos evolved essentially from the Edo Period and the stylised compositions are influenced by traditional artists such as Kunigoshi. The subject matter may include: warriors, dragons or Buddhist Gods which initially may be considered visual proclamations of violence or

anti-conformity. However, virtually all the images can be seen in earlier examples of Japanese art. This subject matter is derived from the Ukiyo-e tradition. One would assume that irezumi would become banal and predictable as traditional designs are dogmatically repeated but on the contrary, the Ukiyo-e tradition have such an abundance of lavish designs and motifs that it is an inexhaustible resource for the tattooist and his clients. (Ills. 12)

The colours also succumb to a traditional palette of mainly greens, blues and reds which was used moderately as it was extremely painful to apply. Vermillion reds accentuate details, while backgrounds are intense but subtle.

Great care and consideration is employed when designs are executed and perspective is handled particularly sensitively. Professional irezumi craftsmen can create meticulous detail and an illusion of various intensities by their extraordinary ability to exploit light and shade. Unlike many crude western designs, the natural curve of the body and indeed the flexibility of the skin itself dictates the design and often tattoos seem to vivaciously come alive when muscles and sinews move and give the impression of 'a tree blowing in the wind ... a fish swimming slowly ...' (1, p.66)

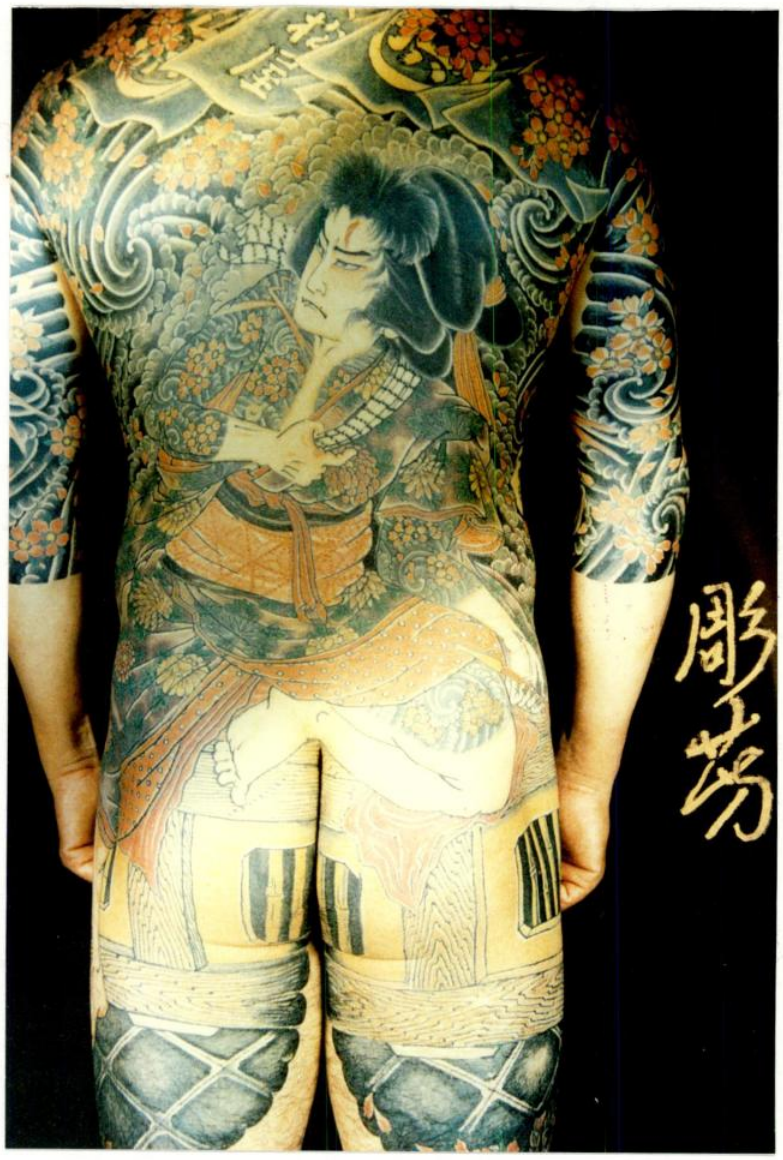
When the subject matter has been decided, the irezumi artist outlines the design and the arduous painful task of filling in is completed during numerous sessions often

(Ill. 12) A collection of tattooed bodies displyaing the inexhaustable abundance of designs from the Japanese Ukiyo-e tradition

taking months to complete. Presumably the patron would need periods to convalese from the pain and also to acquire enough money to pay for the next costly session!

The most indicatively elaborate area of the design covers the back, probably because this is the most manipulative area, and gives the artist a better scope for design. As the client cannot see the tattoo, it is consequently believed that the motivations for tattooing are generally to impress others with an ostentatious display. Although Europeans interested in the art of tattooing consider irezumi to be some of the finest examples of tattooing worldwide. The Japanese in general abhor tattooing and it's subcultural connoctations. It would be naive to think that the Japanese should be proud of irezumi merely because it is part of their heritage, for indeed, in Ireland we are justifiably vexed when foreigners expect every Irish citizen to have red hair and dance to ceile music!

Japanese people may be repugnant towards tattooing for various justified reasons. The enigma surrounding tattoing may disgust certain people, who dismissively assume that the ritual of allowing oneself be tattooed, reduces the patron to a hideous subcultural status. It may be a question of aesthetics which disgust many people. Irezumi is undisputably salient in scale and design and while some may find the entire concept of the designs fascinating, others may find them profoundly offending to the eye. (Ills. 14) It has been assumed that irezumi contributed



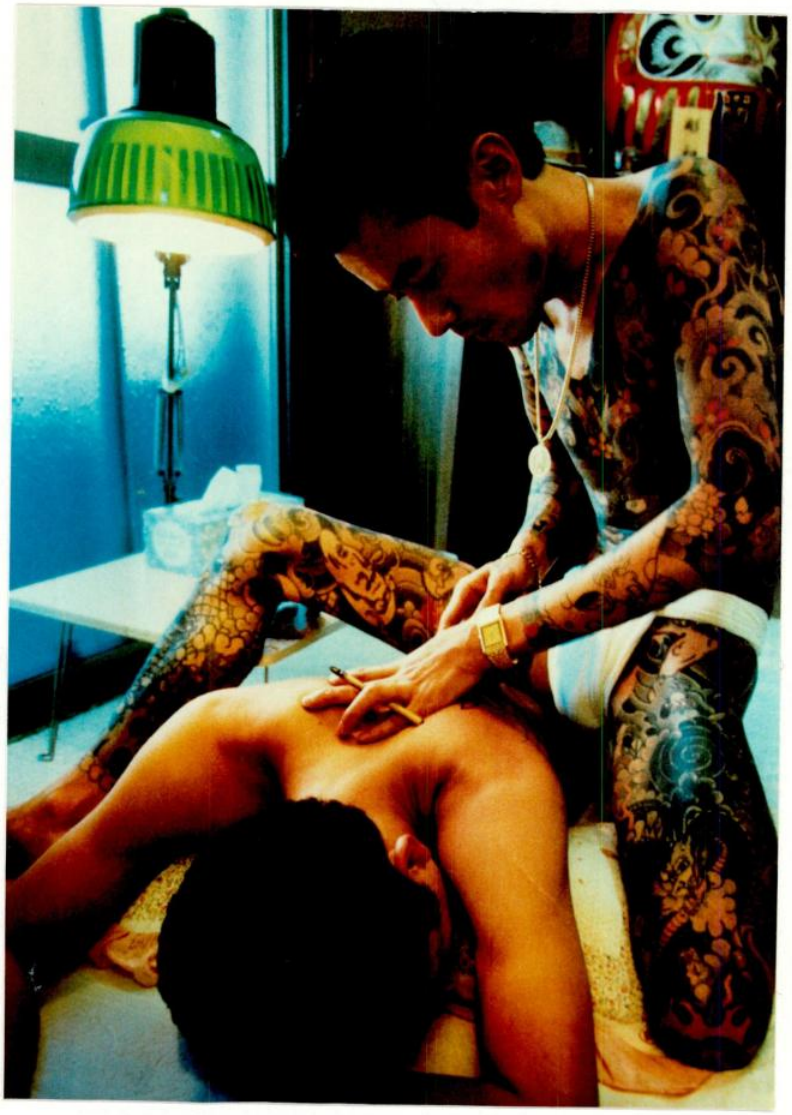
(Ill. 13) Decorative back tattoo which is the most indicatively elaborate area of the design, as it is the most manipulative area of the body giving the artist a wide area to work on.

(Ill. 14) A Japanese museum dedicated to displaying elaborate examples of irezumi may fascinate many, while disgusting others who find the scale of the designs over-powering and aesthetically offensive

considerably to Japanese culture but, contrarily tattooing was to an extent esoteric, and practised only among certain minorities. In my opinion this proves what a powerful media of expression it is, for very few Japanese would have no opinion whatsoever, and would passionately admire or in many cases vehemently diplore them. Although Japanese artists still employ the traditional tattooing instrument of a bamboo stick containing needles,(Ills. 15) irezumi has disseminated away from it's origins and in contemporary societies, probably possess few traditional Japanese cultural values.

Personally, I believe that the military attitude of the Japanese prevented the spread of tattoo to the extent of it's popularity in Westen society. Traditional teachings of Confusius abhorred any indications of rebellious anti-conformity or anti-social behaviour. The Japanese seem to possess a more passively subdued philosophy for living, and even among teenagers and adolescents, there does not seem to be the desire so common in Western society to express individualism or to outlandishly display anti-authoritarian symbols and opinions. Whether through fear, acceptance or upbringing, rebelliousness is not common in Japanese society. Perhaps the negative connoctations implied by tattooing would make certain

people feel disrespectful, for there is a strongly believed notion in Japan, that one's body is a gift from one's



(Ill. 15) A contemporary Japanese irezumi artist who still employs the traditional techniques using a bamboo stick containing several needles.

parents, and to alter or transfrom it in any indellible way would be a bad reflection on one's parents.

CHAPTER FOUR: TECHNIQUES

Techniques involved in tattooing have developed quite dramatically since first performed in pre-historic times. Inevitably, the techniques varied, but the process was virtually the same. Contemporary tattooing techniques have become generally standardised internationally with the use of electric needles, but originally, there were four basic techniques. The skin is punctured and indellible colour pigments are injected into the minute cavities beneath he epidermis. when the skin heals, the design is visible through the outer, almost transparent layer of skin. Thus, tattooing would be ridiculously discreet on dark skinned people, and the first basic tattooing technique: using primitive scoring tools to cut ridges into the skin, (Ills. 16.a) then rubbing in a dye was more predominantly favoured among dark skinned tribes, and these scarification or cicatrisation rituals were widely performed for social and aesthetic purposes. (Ills. 16.b)

The use of sharp needle-like instruments dipped in colour pigments was the most common primitive tattooing method, from which sophisticated modern tattooing developed. The Egyptians were said to have used gold needles but virtually anything organic and needle-like were used as tattooing instruments. Examples of tools, known as ta were used in The Marquesas Islands and consisted of human or bird bones filed to various sizes to achieve different fine lines, which were later filled in with solid blocks of colour consisting mainly of soot prepared from roasted nutshells.

(Ill 16 a.) One of the earliest primitive methods of permanent body adornment known as scarification or cicatrization involved scoring deep ridges into the skin, then rubbing in a dark pigment, which appears to have been excruciatingly painful to apply.

(Ill. 16b.) The finished tactile scarification technique, popular among primitive dark skinned tribes as flat tattooing was discreet. These rituals were performed for social and aesthetic reasons

Most ta were around three inches long. Simple striking tools used in Borneo consisted of a pricker and a striker. The pricker was essentially a wooden, tapered handle with several short needles to puncture the skin. the striker was a crude iron rod partially covered with string. The ink was generally a concoction of soot, sugarcane syrup and water, which was smeared into designs carved deeply into wooden blocks and pressed onto the skin. Thorns and fish bones were used in Haida to dip into the coloured pigments and pierce the skin. By the late nineteenth century, the Haidans progressed onto using less painful European type needles. Ancient Britons injected a pigment consisting of herb juices into their punctured skin which produced a predominantly blue pattern consisting mainly of various animal designs. It is believed that the word Briton derives from a Breton phrase meaning 'painted in different colours' (1, p. 67)

A burning technique was at one time used in Greece and also in some Pacific Island. The tattooing instrument used to inject the colour pigment was fired to a red heat. This method is believed to have been used as an effective punitive branding technique for criminals. A more bizarre European practice involved a dramatic technique where small quantitites of gun power exploded on the skin, resulting in an invariably obsolete design. The eskimos had a unique method of sewing the skin by drawing a soot covered needle and thread beneath the outer layers. A drastic technique

was practised during the mid nineteenth century by carving a sharp edged motif into wood, and with one powerful blow, striking the wood block onto the skin.

Colour pigments have also varied throughout the centuries. Early primitive tattoos were virtually always monochromatic. The monotonous black pigments usually consisted of carbon in various forms derived from, smoke from oily nuts or burnt wood. Surprisingly red ochre was not widely used, although it was favoured extensively for ephemeral body painting. The Japanese are believed to have pioneered the development of different colour pigments improving permanence and vibrancy of the designs.

The introduction of the electric needle improved the standard of tattooing dramatically "raised the aesthetic standard, shortened the procedure for the customer and facilitated the work of the tattooist". (11, p. 18) The first electric tattooing instrument was invented in New York by Samuel O'Reilly and consisted of three small needles which vibrated in a brass tube. An improved version using up to six needles was patented by O'Reilly's cousin in 1891. Contemporary tattooing instruments although quite basic, result in quite sophisticated finishes. The traditional Japanese irezumi artists still abhor the electric instruments, which they believe insult the age old traditions. A bamboo stick containing two needles for initial outline and up to thirty needles for the infill of colour pigments is still employed.

A skilled tattooist employing electric instruments is capable of controlling voltage and consequently the speed. The optimum speed achieved may reach between two thousand to three thousand jabs per minute if necessary. This inevitably reduces the pain involved considerably.

The artist draws the design (or less skilled tattooists may use transfers or stencils to accurately reproduce a design from a flash collection which would be considered diplorable by skilled artisans). The actual tattooing procedure is divided into two parts" outlining the tattoo usually with a delicate black line (Ills. 17) and later the process of infill, where colours are applied. The instrument is dipped into the colour pigments and applied by continuous jabbing of the needle. The artist continually wipes away excess pigment and the skill is essential at this stage as the colour spreading combined with the rapidity of the instrument tends to obliterate the needle head. (Ills. 18)

The level of pain varies with each individual patron, and reaction varies from an annoying (and sometimes soothing, cathartic) type of itch or tickle to anguished levels of excruciating pain. The levels of pain usually depend on the individual skin sensitivity and proximity of the design to bone or fleshy areas. When the tattoo is completed the distinctly painful area is treated with antiseptic creams. The degree of sensitive pain lessens daily, and the area is generally recovered in a week.

(Ill. 17) The initial outline technique which generally involves applying a delicate black line.

(Ill. 18) The infill stage of tattooing where the artists skill is essential as the excess colour pigment tends to obliterate the needle head.

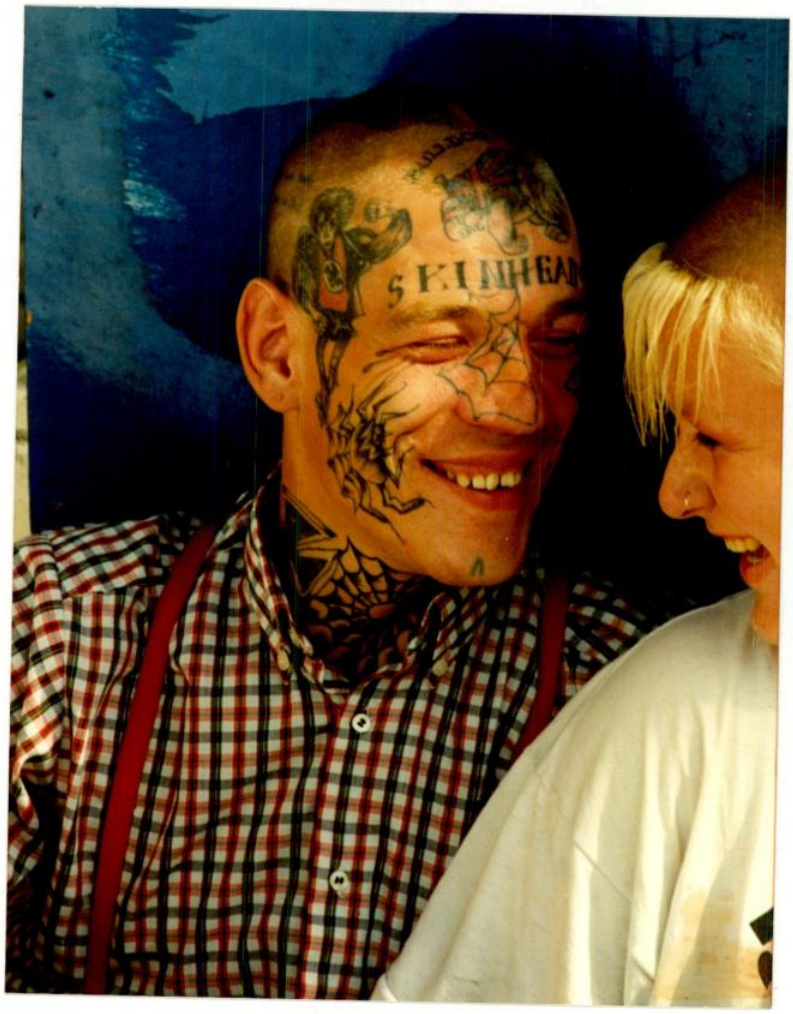
The client inevitably decides what type of tattoo is going to adorn their body, but the tattooist must employ an air of reassurance and concern to create a relaxed an comfortable relationship between them as it is important that the tattooist takes time to discuss designs and locations to understand the client, and produce exactly what they want. The client is usually unknown to the tattooist but a subtle display of hospitality and professionalism is part of a necessary ritual to assure that total depersonalisation of the client does not occur, as this could lead to tension and conflict between the client and the tattooist. Every individual artist will undoubtedly have different personalities, but it is generally accepted that conversation, humour, interest and concern puts the client at ease which is essential. The tattooist will also display his expertise and professional attitude by taking time and care preparing pigments, adjusting the needle etc. which proves to the client that he is important and is not being rushed. Tattooing is a serious activity and should be treated accordingly. The display of awards, certificates articles etc. concerning the artist, and signs reinforcing the regulations of the tattooist (i.e. no tattoing done on face, or hands. You must be eighteen to get a tattoo. No drunks, etc.) creates an aura of professionalism and stresses that tattooing is a visually extreme art from which is not to be treated with flippant disrespect. The tattooist is providing a professional service and in return expects his client to

behave in an equally professional manner by remaining motionless and relaxed. A client who jerks, smokes or attempts to constantly observe the tattooist not only proves to be an annoying distraction, but can often dictate the quality of the finished design which demands rigid stillness at all times. This is one of the main reasons why a tattooist will refuse to tattoo anyone who is intoxicated by drink or drugs. Not only do they lose full command of their senses, which may result in them later regretting their tattoo, but they also are not in full control of their bodies which invariably interferes with the tattooing process.

Many reputable tattooists such as Brendan Harte refuse to tattoo areas which cannot be covered up if necessary such as the face, neck or hands. Our face is our greatest and revealing ambassador it nakedly confronts the world. (Ills. 19.a) Displaying such publicly blatant tattoos may be regarded as an agressive protest against society and consequently the tattooee will often be discriminated against when applying for jobs or going to clubs or pubs.

Personally, I believe that it is not only aggressively anti-authoritarian to blatantly emblazon one's face with imagery and statements, but it is an act of vulgar stupidity which ostracises the bearer from society. These tattoos which are often overtly anti-social, are not only aesthetically offensive, but can be violently insulting by

displaying statements of hatred (i.e. swastikas, "niggers out", "skinheads" etc.). Society will always be reluctant to accept these egregiously vulgar, negative public declarations (Ills. 19.b) and consequently tattoo artists refuse to encourage or be assocated with such crude exhibitionism. Hand and face tattoos could create the wrong type of advertising for an artist who does not want to be associated with creating a negative image of his art. This could have an extremely negative impact on his reputation and may also increase public antipathy towards tattooing in general. Tattoees who flaunt obscene, anti-social or immaturely humourous designs must be prepared to be a constant object of ridicule and derision, and this type of tattooing is often amateurly exectued using a needle and indian ink, as few professional artists would consent to do it. The art of tattooing is popularly accepted among many in contemporary society and thus the artist is generally guaranteed economic stability from tattoing clients who respect the art and are concerned about what permanent design adorn their body. The tatto establishment is surrounded by sheets of various designs knows as flash covering every available wall space which the client may choose from, or indeed he amy design his own. Most tattooists are equipped with a small machine which translates a drawing into a transfer which may be applied as an outline. Skilled artists can easily reproduce drawings by hand if necessary and generally welcome original designs which relieve them of the monotomy and



(Ills. 19 a & 19 b)
Facial tattoos which are blatantly offensive.

boredom of repeating previously drawn designs all the time. The tattooist is essentially providing a service for the client where often technical ability can be more important than creative talent, but the techniques involved are not as difficult to learn as one might think and it is often the artistic creativity and imagination which separates good tattooists from great tattoo artists, especially if the client is unsure about what exact design he would like.

Although the process of tattooing is quite painless for many the location is a serious consideration, as the proximity of the tattoo to boney areas can often by very painful to apply, and fleshy areas are less sensitive to pain. The level of pain involved varies from each individual person, but generally depends on the location of the tattoo, the skill of the tattooist and the quality of the equipment. The outline is the most painful part and the infill colour pigments are consistently less painful when being applied. Ironically enough, most tattooists agree that women seem less bothered by the pain than men. Perhaps psychologists would suggest that this is due to the fact that women are more accustomed to pain through childbirth. It is probably more accurate to assume that women may have thought more about the implications of tattooing before they acquire one and consequently prepare themselves mentally before the process begins.

Many tattoo artists find cosmetic tattooing and over tattooing, a refreshing challenge. Certain types of birthmarks and blemishes can often be tattooed with a skin colour pigment to camouflage the mark or may be disguised by a conventional design. Over tattooing requires skill and creativity to be successfully executed. it is generally amateur tattoos and names of previous loves which are covered up as they are a source of embarrassment to many, and quite a few clients are disheartened to discover that there is no magic pigment which can successfully disguise dark coloured and black pigments. I feel that the constant requests for over-tattooing and the surgical removal of tattoos reflects the fickle and immature nature of many once enthusiastic tattooees, who did not consider the social implications induced by the permanence of tattooing, and consequently regret that they succumbed to previous juvenile whims.

The demand for surgically removing tattoos is so great in Ireland, that it has become part of a public health system, with a constant waiting list. Those who cannot contain their embarrassment for months while on the waiting list are forced to pay exhorbitant fees to private clinics. The majority of disenchanted tattooees who go to get their tattooes removed, disfigured themselves at an early age with crude indian ink markings. The now, obliterated dirty looking marks often attract antipathy to the bearer, and are considered a constant source of shame and embarrassment in later life. Wives are infuriated by previous

girlfriend's immortalised names, potential employers are disguisted by anti-authoritarian slogans. Quite a number of people who get tattoos removed are requested by their employers to do so, especially waiters and waitresses who are thought to lower the tone of a respectable establishment by serving customers with vandalised hands! Around 25% of patients are women who also tend to display crude amateur indian ink tattoos which they later regret. The process of surgically removing tattoos has thankfully progressed from the previously employed drastic technique of dissolving the skin with acid based solutions or dermabrasion techniques penetrating the skin with a rotating wire brush, which invariably resulted in scars generally considered to be more aesthetically offending that the original tattoos.

The first official medical report for removing tattoos was said to have originated in 54 A.D. by Scribonius Largus and involved applying a concoction including: heads of garlic, sulphur, bronze coins, urine, breat milk and honey! (13, p.156).

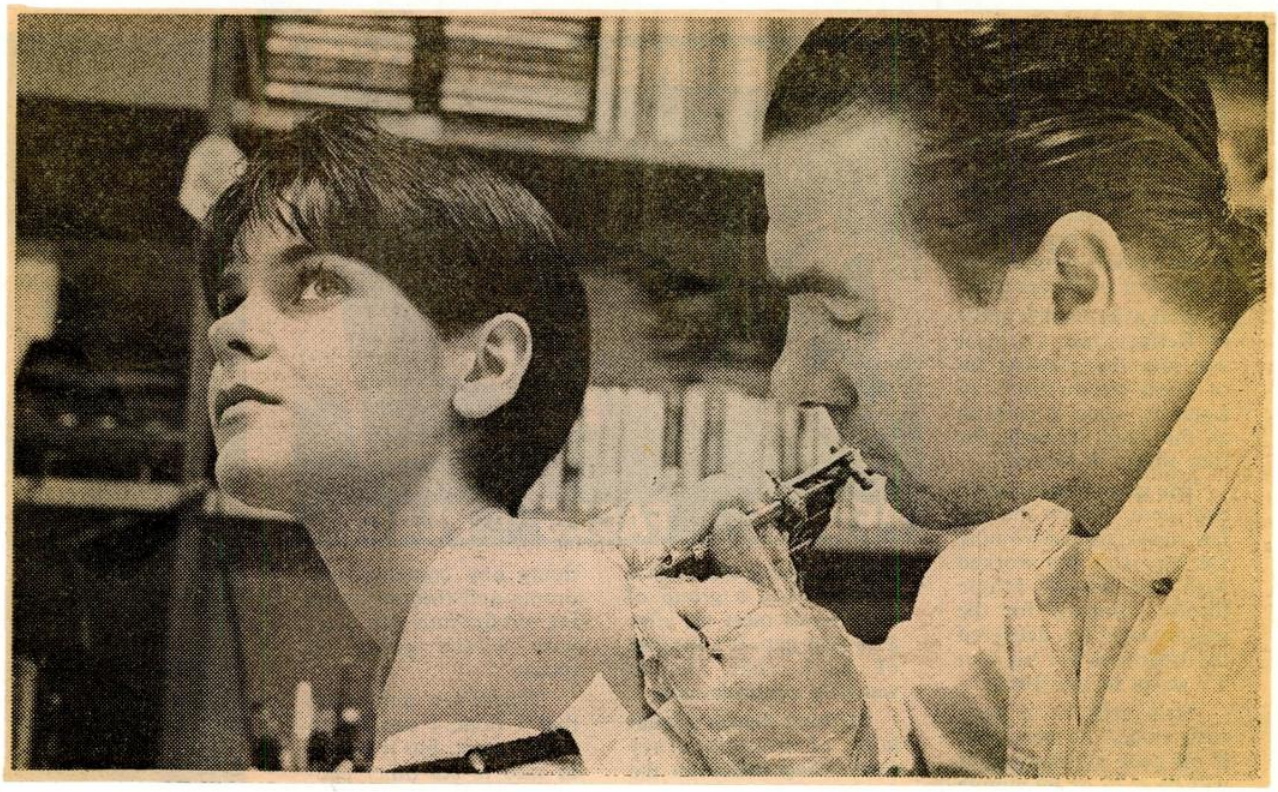
The tattoos are removed by a serious of excisions performed under local anasthetic if necessary. The tattooed areas are replaced by skin grafts if the area is relatively large and unfortunately, the scar which replaces the tattoo can often be more aesthetically offending than the original markings. The scar varies with each individual, and many people who have healthy fast healing skin are left with a

relatively faint red blemish, resembling a burn. It is not unusual for a tattooist to be asked to tattoo over a scar, especially by older clients whose skin has lost a lot of it's elasticity and healing properties. A more successful method of removing tattoos is employed throughout America and parts of Europe, the nearest being Scotland. The tattoo is dissolved by a Ruby Laser and the chances of having a conspicuous scar afterwards is minimalised. The need has been recognised in Ireland and a Ruby Laser is currently being installed into St. James Hospital, Dublin. Many uninformed people may envisage the tattoo parlour as a sordid, squalid, backstreet establishment frequented by undesirable degenerates of society. The modern professional tattoo establishments are however, scrupulously hygienic and impressively decorated with a plethora of flash design sheets decorating the studio. It was once part of the tattoing image, predominantly catering for a blue collar clientele, to create an interior which was sufficiently clean but did not resemble a hospital and was "a mixture of a clinic and a chinese brothel". (Les Skeuse, 6, p. 82),to give the studio a certain character and almost smutty ambience. It is imperative that establishments are impressively sanitary, as many potential tattooees are concerned by health risks, such as the possible risk of infections, hepatitus and in recent years, fear of contracting the AIDS virus has worried many. Several years ago, when the AIDS virus was originally identified, there was an obvious decline in the number of enthusiasts but today, one need only visit a

reputable establishment to be reassured that the risk of infection is virtually impossible.

A good tattooist will follow a simple rule of never using anything twice, including needles, pigments, tissues and protective gloves and purposely disposes of previously used equipment in front of a client to assure him. (Ills. 20) It is technically possible for AIDS to be transmitted via the tattoo needles, but with the nescessary precautions taken, there has been no official evidence that any AIDS victim contracted the virus in this manner. When the tattoo is complete, the artist issues a list of verbal and written care instructions to the client.

I feel that it is quite alarming that there is no official recognition of tattooing and any individual may set up a commercial establishment regardless of his abilities. There are no official laws, associations or guilds to enforce regulations or standards and consequently, all artistic, sanitary and economic matters are dealt with at the individual artists' descretion. Do governments dismiss the tattooing clientele, as a class of subcultural citizens who do no merit laws of protection, or could it be that tattooists maintain such a professional standard, that customers are assured satisfaction and safety?



(Ill. 20) Dublin tattooist Brendan Harte displays essential sanitary standards and follows the rule that a good professional tattooist never uses anything twice. Note the protective gloves for both the client's and the tattooist's benefit.

CHAPTER FIVE: MOTIVATION

There are many different motives for being tattooed but usually the main reasons are a result of three predominant factors: superstition, status and sexuality.

Superstition primarily evolves from fear and ignorance. We can today dismiss primitive tribal superstitions as basic uneducation but there are probably many contemporary superstitious beliefs induced by religion, fear of the unknown, supernatural phenomena etc. "Man is the only animal that knows it is going to die, thus was invented God" (13, p. 63). Death, for many of us, probably evokes the greatest fear of all. Is there an afterlife - heaven and hell and more importantly, does our behaviour in this world predestinate our eternal place in the afterworld?

Many primitive tribes believed that the physical body served as a temporary tabernacle for the immortal spirit. To many cultures e.g. The Newar population of Bhaktapur, our mortal being is a transient state which determines our fate in the more important immortal afterlife. Tattoos were not only a significant means of identity, they were believed to impress the God's and act almost as passports to a future immortal sanctuary.

The ceremony of applying the Newar tattoos known as Puja does not involve any rituals indicating social rank, marital status, nubility or the transition of childhood to adulthold. (Ills. 21.a) The various images:- traditional architectural patterns, flowers, birds, Hindu Gods and

(Ill. 21a.) Newar women applying Puja tattoos to beautify themselves and thus impress the gods.

Goddessess were to beautify themselves and consequently please the Gods. Not all tattoos are actually beautiful but "all have religious merit and therefore an inherent spiritual beauty ... It is beautiful and it is necessary to have a wound in this life because it will be good for the next life": (12, p. 139). Among various American Indian tribes e.g. The Mohave, the tattoo was a symbol for God to avoid misunder- standing on Judgement day. It was culturally important to them that the tattooing ritual was performed by a respected priest or priestess as it was a highly significant religious ceremony. The untattooed were subcultural and would not be saved. This seems quite ironic as tattooing phased out and eventually became extinct among The Mohare when the missionaries arrived and banished tattooing as superstitious, when it was, in my opinion, comparible to one wearing a scapular or miraculous medal. Hindus once believed that parents could not recognise their children in the afterworld, if they were not tattooed.

Tattoos were believed to guard aginst illness and death, as primitive man rarely believed that any force other than the call of divine spirits could afflict pain or death. Consequently, I believe that tattoos were often drastic forms of good-luck charms to ensure the patrons safety and well-being.

Ignorant socieites adorned themselves with various tattoos believing that they induced magical powers to protect them.

It was sometimes believed that certain ingredients in the colour pigments iteself would increase the supernatural properties of the tattoo.

In Arab countries, tattoos were indulged in not purely for ornamentation, but also to encourage supernatural spirits of protection. Arabian tattooists were usually female and often they mixed the milk of lactating women into the colour pigments, preferably from a mother nursing a daughter (whose milk is believed to contain soothing properties) to evoke magical qualities which would consequently be bestowed onto the wearer of the tattoo. While the design was being applied, verses of a prayer of protection known as The Koran was repeatedly chanted for greater protection. Superstition was also evident when on the third day of menstruation, Arabian women tattooed around their navel, believing that it would induce pregnancy.

There are countless examples of worldwide superstitions which suggest that the majority of primitive tattooing was a result of irrational belief and religious fears.

Ainu women believed that facial tattooing not only preserved eyesight, but fooled the dreaded spirits of illness into assuming that they were powerful goddesses.(Ills. 21.b) A German doctor in the late nineteenth century tattooed his entire back, as he believed that the carbon particles in the pigments filtered through

(Ill. 21 b) Ainu women tattooed their mouths to fool evil spirits of illness into assuming that they were powerful goddesses.

his skin and attacked the conditions provoking his agonising arthritis. Primitive cultures often depended on the totemic connoctations thought to be prevoked by tattooing e.g. the ancient Britons mainly tattooed animal motifs to assume the qualities of those animals : the agility of the snake, the ferocity of the lion etc.

In many parts of the world, particularly in certain African societies, tattoos have a more profound social significance than a symbol of superstition or aesthetics.

Throughout numerous primitive cultures such as Borneo in Indonesia, permanent changes were recorded by scarification or tattoing. Boys became men when they could prove their required hunting abilities which in turn, was displayed with ornate hand tattoos. A tattooed finger indicated that the wearer helped to kill an animal. A fully acknowledged hunter was bestowed the honour of a full hand tattoo. Many women e.g. the Abipoine society in Paraguay had their social status displayed with various levels of facial tattoos. A repulsed missionary once recorded:

> "... at puberty, the girls are tattooed at intervals is, shut up for several days ... while their chins were tattooeed in straight lines. The Abipoire think their daughters are ornamented by being thus mangled ... and prepared to bear the pains of parturition in the future ... every woman has a different pattern on her face ... those most highly painted and pricked you may know to be of high rank and noble birth". (1, p. 51)

As we have seen in Moko tattooing, Maori and indeed Polynesian tattooing was often associated with status and social rank within a community, the more tattooed an

individual was, the higher his social status was. Priestchiefs were the most respected members of society, and consequently, they possessed the most elaborately ornate design. Tattooing often signified the nubility of a girl and was a social statement recognising their future biological role in the community. In New Guinea, the artist is an older woman, perhaps symbolising one passing on a tradition or knowledge. After the ceremony, the girl is ready for marriage and to have children and consequently, the important parts of here anatomy - symbolically and biologically: the breasts and stomach, are the most elaborately tattooed. Further tattoos may symbolise the girls engagement and marriage.

Tattoos provided a permanent mark of identification which we still see in contemporary society. People sometimes pledge allegiance to a group, country or society etc. which gives them perhaps a sense of security and pride. There has been a naval tradition of tattooing since the eighteenth century which may have served as an identity symbol through the ages.

Sailors have often been the first to be introduced to and influenced by novel fashions or crazes from their journeys abroad, and undisputably, they were responsible for introducing and spreading the art of tattooing throughout the West, when they returned from voyages to the south seas during the eighteenth century.

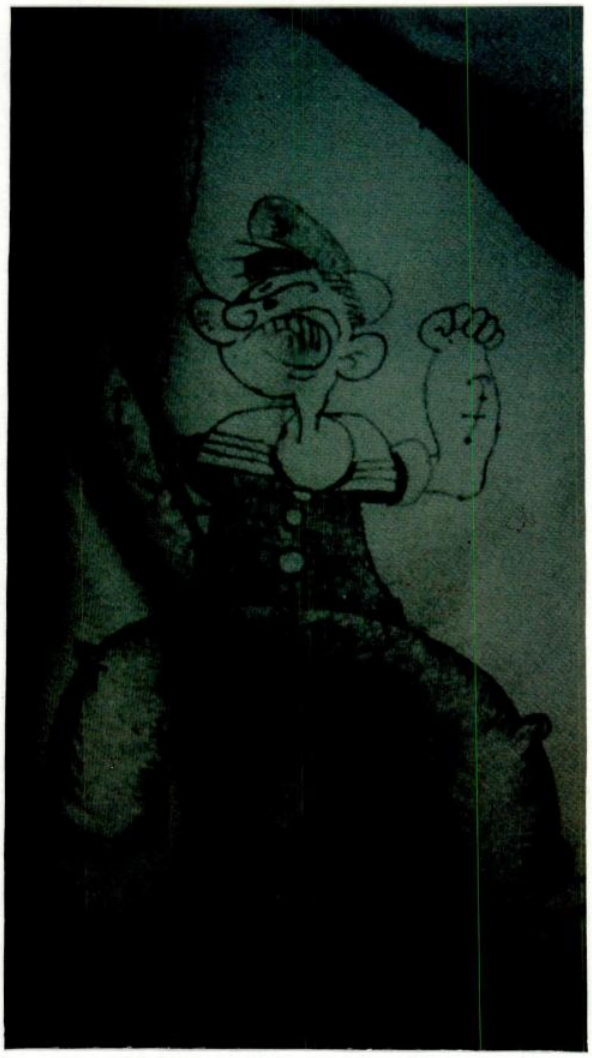
Tattooing soon became a naval tradition and what originated as a mere fashion developed into a symbol of superstition. Naval tattooists became popular, and although some were skilled practitioners, other were generally amateur pricksters which did not seem to bother most sailors. The emphasis seemed to be on quantity rather than quality, and I am of the opinion that most sailors were indifferent about what the design portrayed, but felt a safe sense of affiliation with their fellow saiors once they displayed some form of tattooing asserting their masculinity and conforming to a ritual which in my opinion seemed to serve almost as an initiation symbol.

It seems only logical that temporary tattooing parlours were set up onboard vessels and permanent establishments at sea ports, as the demand among sailors was steadily increasing and they did not wish to wait until the next oriental voyage to acquire a new tattoo. Tattooing believed to have been restricted exclusively to lowly sailors of little intelligence, was surprisingly indulged in by many officers who usually stated that they later regretted succumbing to such irrational immature whims. Ironically, I believe that these officers probably influenced many impressionable young navy recruits to follow their examples and flaunt tattoos.

It has been suggested that the main reason why tattoing was so popular among sailors originated from superstitious beliefs. Sailors apparently regarded tattoos as good luck

charms to ward away the treacherous evil spirits of the oceans. it was claimed by a U.S. naval spokesman in 1919 that there was a definite decrease in tattooing due to superstitious beliefs declining as a result of better education among naval recruits. However, I find this inaccurate as tattooing was immensely popular among soldiers, sailors and pilots during the second world war who were thought to have acquired tattoos to demonstrate a superstitious insignia to protect the bearer from death. In my opinion, superstition may have been rampant but I believe that the fundamental motivation was to display a rowdy and often obscene sense of humour (Ills. 22) reflecting a boisterous and childishly stag sense of mentality. I think that showing-off to fellow sailors and girlfriends was more important to them than guarding themselves against marine demons. The subject matter chosen by sailors to emblazon their bodies promotes this idea, as naval tattooing is generally an idiom of expressing tawdry, extrovert and sexually suggestive designs reflecting the bawdiness and immaturity of sailors who deface themselves permanently for the sake of a joke. The buttocks and genital area provides the greatest opportunity to express amusing and suggestive obscenities. (Ills. 22.a)

Naval tattooing is important in the general history of tattooing as sailors helped spread the art and were indeed the precursors of modern tattoing but in my opinion, the



(Ill. 22) Sexually suggestive naval tattoo displaying an obscene yet childishly stag mentality.

lack of design preparation, and the indifference expressed when acquiring tattoos has resulted in naval tattooing being repetitively mundane and predictably crude. I believe it is this type of visually unimaginative agglomeration of designs (Ills. 23.a) which people became accustomed to seeing and consequently assumed a negative attitude towards tattooing in general. If naval tattooing was not suggestively obscene, it was mawkishly sentimental (Ills. 23.b) with an average of 30% of all sailors dedicating their first tattoo to their parents, perhaps still seeking parental approval while paradoxically asserting their masculinity.

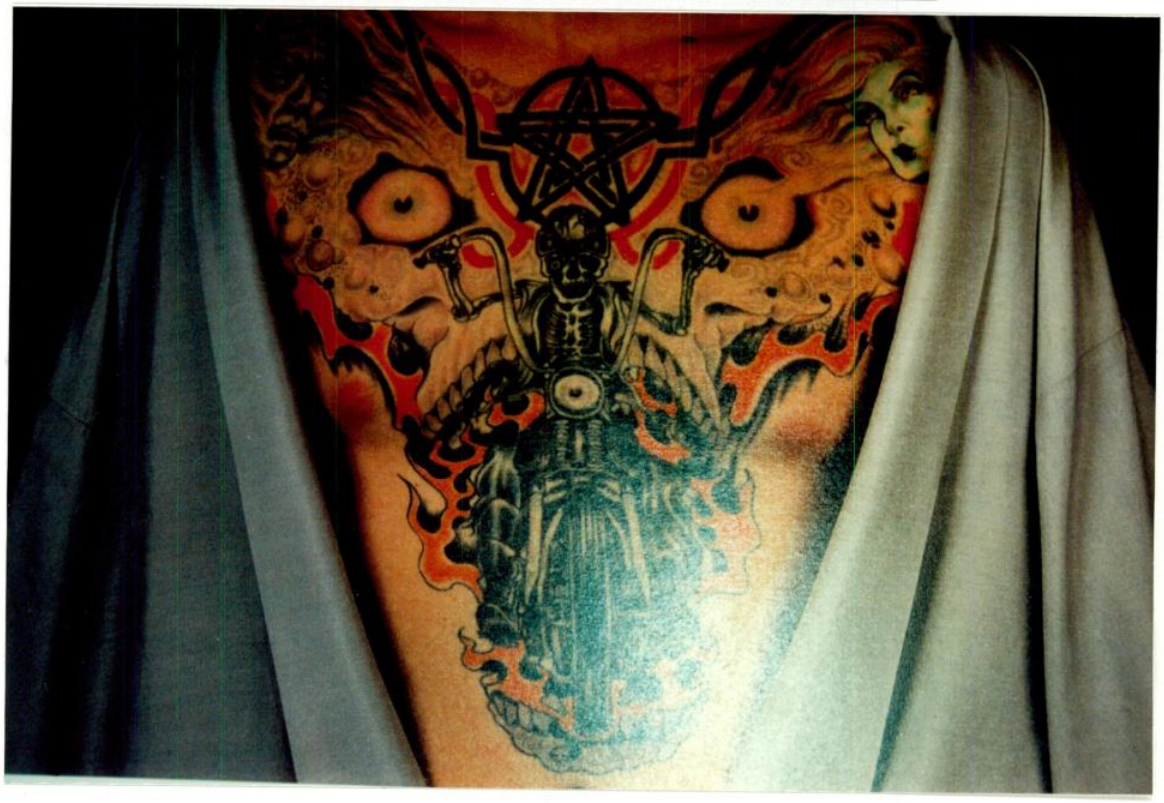
It was quite popular in the early twentieth century to tattoo a symbol of one's profession e.g. a miner's logo or a naval squadron. Even in contemporary society we see crude yet effective examples of allegiance: "spurs for the cup", "british bulldog - and proud", or political statements e.g. tattoos sympathising with Irish terrorists "Tiocfaidh ar la". Gang tattoos are common in many societies today often conforming to anti-authoritarian, elaborate initiation ceremonies. Serious bikers have always indulged in tattooing. (Ills. 24.a) Although few are outlawed from society, to the extent that bikers such as The Hell's Angels would be, it is a symbol of group affiliation and pride in their identity. It seems obligatory for every Hell's Angel to be tattooed, (Ills 24.b) and the more he acquires, the more acceptance and admiration is bestowed upon him. The tattoos are part of

(Ill. 23a.) A mundane agglomeration of unimaginative and disjointed designs suggest that the sailors in general were more concerned with the quantity rather than the quality of their tattoos.

(Ill. 23b.) Quite a mawkishly sentimental tattoo for a masculine sailor to acquire!

24.a

24.b



(Ill. 24a.) A flamboyant biker tattoo symbolises group affiliation and pride in identity while deliberately intending to shock or outrage society from which he feels estranged.

(Ill. 24b.) It seems obligatory for every Hell's Angel to be tattooed, and the more he acquires, the more acceptance and admiration is bestowed upon him.

uniform just like a leather jacket! "An angel without his colours feels naked and vulnerable like a knight without his armour" (15, p. 127). The uniform is symbolically anti-conforming and aggressive. It is synonymous with intolerance of society and hostile pride, and acts as a membership badge of unity for outcasts and outlaws. The subject matter and position of the tattoos must be blatantly flamboyant "in order to shock or outrage society from which the victim feels estranged" (13, p. 113). Tattooing regarded as a rebellious symbol of anti-authoritarianism quite ironically can symbolise the opposite in fact. 'Paradoxically, even the non-conformist possesses the urge to identity with his own minority group' (13, p. 74) Chicano youths in Mexico and America indulge in tattooing, not to display individualism, but to imitate street gangs or Pachucos. If you are not tattooed, one's bravery and loyalty is doubted and one may be dismissed as a coward "a tattoo was symbolic of manhood ... there is considerable peer pressure if you don't get tattoos; tattoos are a test of loyalty". (12, p. 210)

Contemporary tattoos can often symbolise a negative status symbol, and conforming to some minorities can be extremely anti-social. A tattoo may often act as a membership badge affiliating the wearer into a criminal or anti-social minority. The extrovert ostracised member of society who wants to flaunt his rebellious non-conformist tendencies paradoxically conform to predictable, unimaginative tattoos (Ill. 25.a) deliberately attempting to repulse and

patronise society. Blue dots on the face and hands indicate the bearer spent a term imprisoned or would like society to assume that he did, to fear him. It may seem narrow-minded to assume that tattooing is automatically associated with criminals, and studies in certain borstal and reform institutions confirmed that delinquents or criminals are more likely to be tattooed than non-delinquents. As many as 75% of inmates in certain prisons studied, displayed some form of tattooing, amateur or otherwise. Many delinquents appear to generally be indifferent and do not care if they disfigure themselves for life with mawkishly amateur markings or perhaps it is because tattooing is generally prohibited in criminal institutions that entice rebellious offenders to prove their aggression and anti-authoritarian anger. (Ills. 25.b) Could it be the sheer monotony and boredom of being confined in an institution for months or years? (Ill. 26 a.)

There is no definite evidence to associate tattooing with drug abuse, but from observation and interviews with several policemen, many drug addicts display tattoos and amateur indian ink dots and markings. A study of a group of addicts in America disclosed common symbols including: dots, (perhaps borstal marks) insects and spiders thought to be disguising syringe scars, and arrows and syringes pointing to veins.

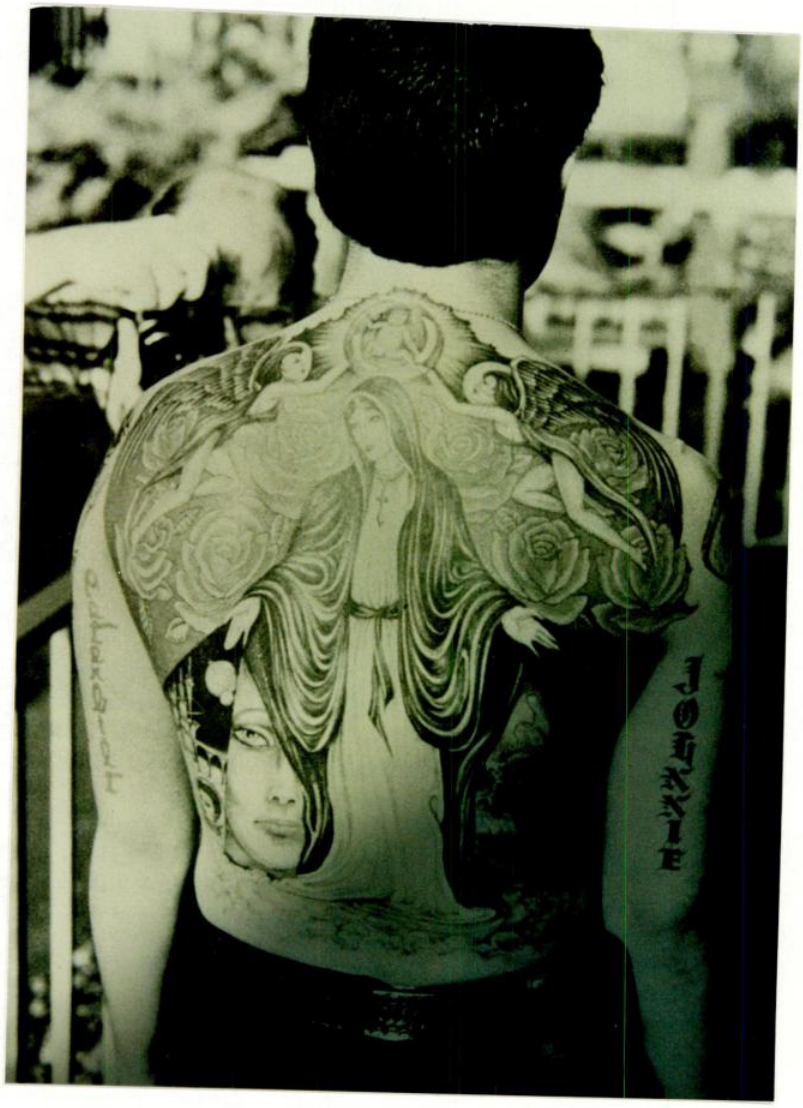
Most prison tattoos are monochromatic as they are generally produced with a needle and basic indian ink. It is not

25.a

25.b

(Ill. 25a.) Tattoos can act as a negative membership badge demonstrating the wearer's aggressive criminal tendencies. These rebelliously amateur markings deliberately attempt to repulse and patronise society.

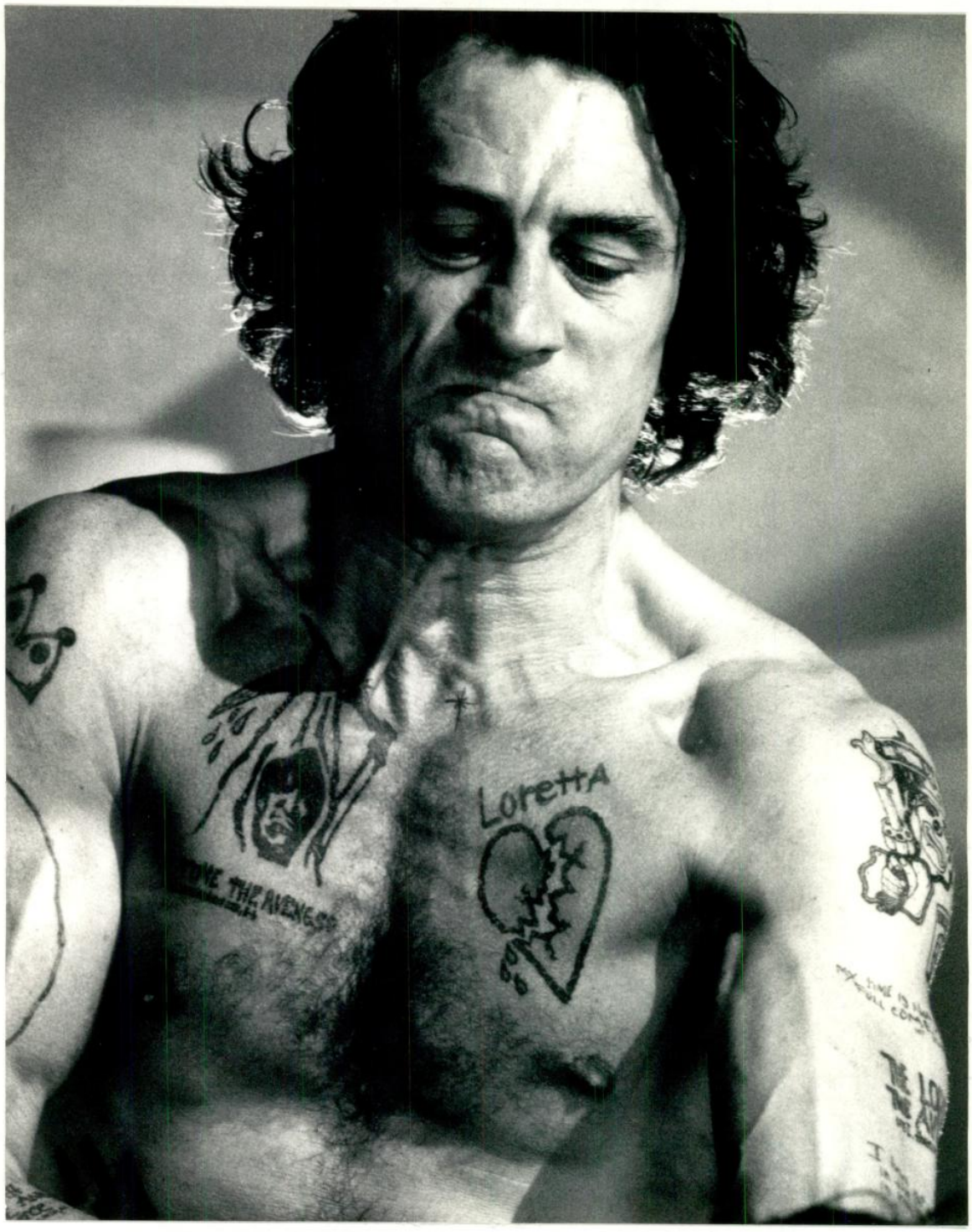
(Ill. 25b.) Aggressively mawkish disfigurements to display aggression and anti-authoritarian anger. Perhaps as a result of rebelliouness or sheer boredom?



(Ill. 26a.) Although the majority of penal tattoos are amateurly employed, some inmates develop a skill while being confined for months or years and produce magnificent examples of tattooing. Ironically enough many of these designs have strong religous themes.

usually the design that asserts one's anti-social agression but the actual presence of crude markings carelessly executed in an immature haphazard manner. (Ills. 26.b) Immaturity is a basic factor behind many rebellious tattoos. The majority of tattoos which are anti-social are acquired when the patron was experiencing youthful rebellious tendencies, and in many cases, maturity developed as one grows older may result in a lot of shame and regret in later life as one is permanently branded. Many people experience the opposite, in fact and display their aesthetically offensive and amateur tattoos as a souvenir of their wild rebellious youth, almost with pride as one would reminisce over photographs. It is assumed by pyschologists that quite often permanent immaturity throughout life may be a result of a mental or personality disorder. It should not be accepted that "The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal, or a degenerate ... tattooed men who are not behind bars are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats .. (Adolf Loos, 12, P. 255). There are also numerous psychological theories concerning the sexual aspect of tattooing.

Throughout the history of tattooing, there have been very strong sexual connoctations, though perhaps not as intense as psychologists would have us believe. Primitive tribes often believed that tattooing enhanced natural charisma and beauty and consequently made one more sexually attractive e.g. women in Nagaland were obliged by traditional laws to

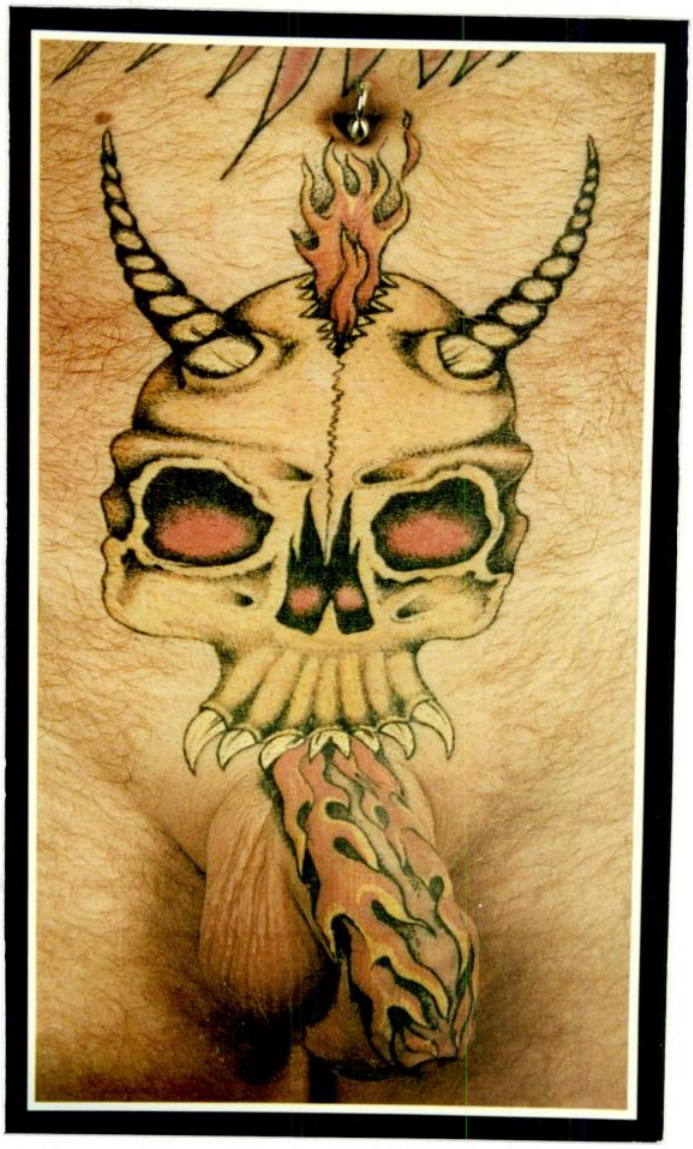


(Ill. 26b.) The aggressive expression epitomises the anti-authoritarian rebellious connoctations of the carelessly executed, crude tattoos.

indulge in facial tattoos to be considered nubile. Burmese males employed leg tattoos which apparently made them automatically sexually attractive to women in their tribes. As Chesser once wrote "why should women be satisfied with anything less than the best desire - stimulating technique" (12, p. 77). The Maori tribe demonstrated man's inherent human desire to be sexually attractive, by covering their faces and bodies with rhythmically designed Moko. In fact tattooing has had strong sexual connoctations throughout history. Many tribal tattoos such as Maori buttocks tattooing emphasise erogenous zones and were intended to provoke visual eroticism which would suggest that tribal tattooing may have been used as a sexual stimulant as sensuous lingerie or jewellery may be used today.

Throughout many tribes sexuality was often associated with body painting and tattooing. The Toba tribe of South America painted themselves to display to their partners that they were sexually aroused. Many markings were said to be sexual symbols e.g. the Desana tribes painted their faces with crossed lines and circles indicating drops of semen as a symbol of intimate friendship. When a shaman was trying to heal someone, he smeared designs in red paint on the patient's body 'to attract the sexual attentions of the healing spirit' (1, p. 126). Cook discovered that primitive tribes had no inhibitions about their bodies and flaunted their naked tattooed bodies without any modesty, saying that "parts of the body which civilised people are

(Ill. 27) Throughout history, and also in contemporary society, many people find it sexually arousing and highly erotic to make love to a tattooed body.



(Ill. 28) Flamboyant and sexually suggestive genital tattoos are still employed today, and were also indulged in throughout the past.

most anxious to conceal are decorated" (Cook, 12, p.76). It was often common among certain tribes such as the Maori people to tattoo their genitals. Japanese men favoured genital tattooing and proudly display the subtle yet extremely erotic effect of the full detail becoming visible when the penis is erect. Tattooing was considered to be highly erotic to the Japanese and many sensuous painting depict amatory scenes of tattooed lovers. The association of tattooing with sexual arousal is also evident throughout Japanese literature. One particular eighteenth century novel portrays the delight of a wealthy Japanese lady 'making love with lower-class men with their patterned bodies' (1, p. 126). It was also known in Japan to tattoo intimate erotic designs in white so that the designs only became visible when the skin was flushed with excitement or after a hot bathing session. Even in contemporary society many people would be sexually around making love to a tattooed body, (Ills. 27) and consequently genital tattooing is still performed today. (Ills. 28.a & b.) The Karma Sutra advises all women to become skilled in sensual cosmetic arts including tattooing to excite and stimulate a partner.

There have been many psychological investigations of human behaviour questioning the sexual motivations, subconscious or deliberate, of tattooing. Post-freudian psychologists promote tattooing with very strong sexual connoctations. Ebensten suggests

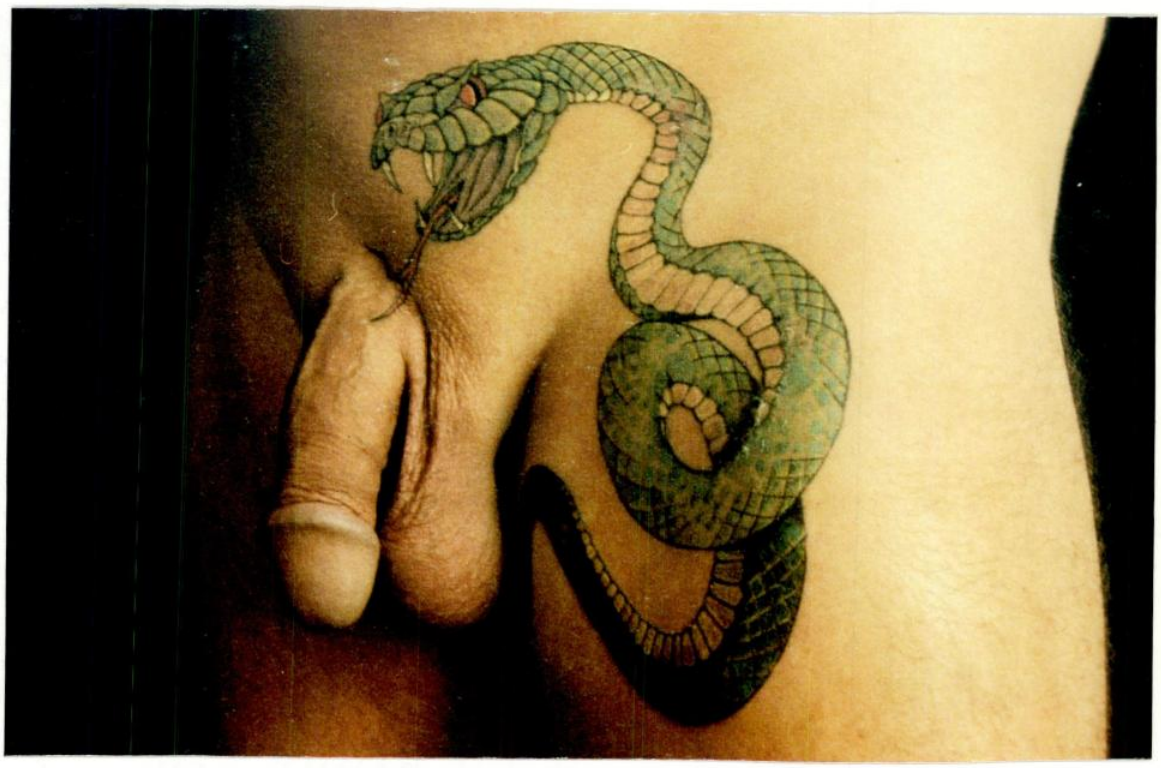
> "The young man's first experience at the tattooist and with the sexual act resemble each other closely. Around both clings an aura of having committed something dirty and common. Both are acts upon completion of which he considers himself to have attained manhood. Both embrace a strange sensation of pain with unfathomed pleasure. Both are experiences which he may keep hidden from his parents but about which he brags with his companions" (12, p.77).

This is one of the few psychological theories regarding tattooing that I would agree with for generally I believe that investigators of human behaviour such as Parry or Freud did not highlight that many tattooed people do not possess perverted or homosexual tendencies and get tattooed for many reasons other than sexual gratification. Parry claimed that sexuality was evident in every aspect of tattooing which I do not agree with. (Ills. 29) He compares the tattoing instrument which injects it's fluid pigments into the skin to an 'ejaculating penis' the long sharp needles, the fluid injected into the 'pricked' skin, the two participants, one active and sadistic, the other passive and masochistic ..." (12, p. 77). He maintains that the tattooing process reflects the intimacy of the sexual act and that a main motivation is to compensate for a lack of sexual satisfaction. I find it very hard to believe that a man who was so sexually frustrated that he resorted to tattoing would not resort to a lover or even a prostitute instead if his motivations are purely sexual. I feel it is quite inaccurate to claim that people get tattooed essentially because they are sexually aroused by the process. It may be true in some cases but it is

(Ill. 29) Tattoos may be blatantly sexually suggestive orexplicit, but sexuality is not the only motivation for tattooing, and is not always evident.

certainly not the only reason for being tattooed.

The fact that the tattoo act is an intimate encounter usually between two men has been exploited suggesting that tattooing is essentially a homosexual ritual. Personally, I cannot believe that people who are supposedly well-educated and broad-minded could ever entertain such a blatantly ridiculous thought. Most men would probably prefer to be tattooed by a female tattooist, however these are very rare. It is true that the tattooist caresses and fondles the skin of his clients but so do physiotherapists, masseurs, hairdressers etc. who also provide personal, but apparently socially acceptable services. It has also been suggested that genital tattooing generally imply, homosexual tendencies, but why should the possessor of a genital tattoo be dismissed as a homosexual when a penis is also essential to indulge in hetrosexual activities? (Ills. 30) There is probably an element of the tattooing society who would pertain to kinky whims and perhaps indulge in tattooing because they are homosexual (Ills. 31) or maybe enjoy the sexual titilation it provides, especially on private areas such as genitals or buttocks, but to accept theories which generalise all possessors of tattos, especially genital tattoos to be kinky, perverted or homosexual would be extremely naive. Bromberg tried to jusitfy a theory that a feeling of tremendous guilt inevitably follows the first tattoo, by using Freud's castration complex:. The infantile fear that the father will be jealous of a son's penis as a potential rival to



(Ill. 30) Genital tattoo which is inevitably sexually suggestive, but should not be assumed to be a definite symbol of homosexuality.

(Ill. 31) There is an element of the tattooing society who flaunt homosexually suggestive tattoos but they are however, a minority.

himself for the wife's affection and will therefore want to cut it off. The idea that tattoos exude sensuous and aesthetically sexual qualities is highlighted by Bromber's writings. Perhaps by emplying The Castration Complex, he suggests that the son would consider himself far more masculinely sexually attractive than the father with his strong youthful attractiveness and recently acquired sexually stimulating tattoo and thus would be a threat to his father for the mother's affection and attention. Bromber also suggests that "instead of the inference of an incestuous relationship, there is the suggestion in the subconscious that the tattooing act was a form of homosexual seduction" (12, p. 78).

There have been numerous attempts to prove this theory such as a detailed investigation conducted in a New Zealand borstal for girls in the '70's. This investigation proved that 60% of the offenders were tattooed and 90% of those admitted to lesbian behaviour while being imprisoned. In my opinion this fails to be a reliable justification of a theory when the girls were completely ostracised from any male contact and consequently could not relieve themselves of sexual frustration in a hetrosexual manner to prove otherwise.

I do believe that there are strong sexual connoctations associated with most tattoos but certainly not to the degree that physchiatrists and psychologists would have us believe. The tattooing instrument is invariably a phallic

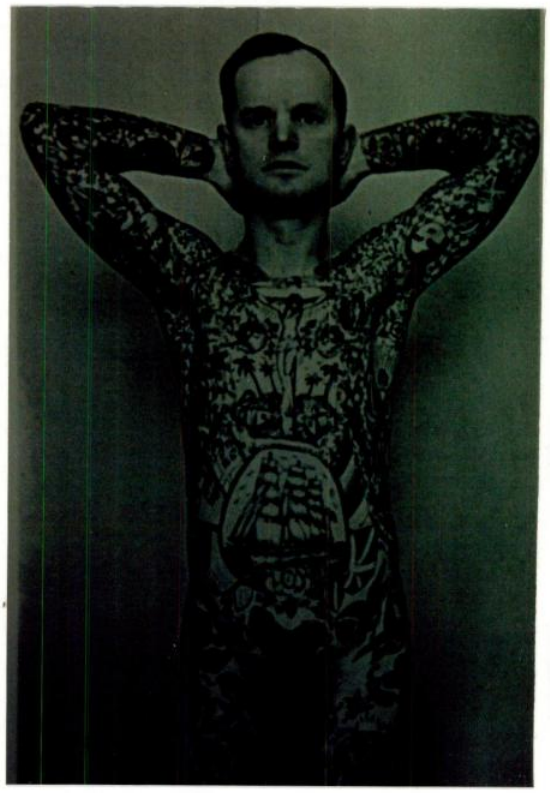
shape, but perhaps the symbolism has been exploited beyond accuracy. Not only is the tattoo generalised as an unconscious representation of a penis both to men and women, psycho-analyists would have us assume that there is also a prominent anal element in tattoing. According to Suanna Haigh "there is surely a definite relationship between the impulse of th child to smear itself with faeces and that of the adult to have himself smeared with indelible paint I feel that in many cases the innate human desire to be attractive is portrayed by tattooing. Women and men want to be attractive and sexy. I think that it is the visual impact of the tattoo which may be to imply "I'm macho, cool and sexy!" or "I'm so feminine I have a butterfly and pretty roses on my shoulder" that exudes sexuality and not necessarily the tattoing process itself. Certain people will always want to possess tattoos for many reasons regardless of the ritual necessary to acquire them, and I feel that too much attention has been paid to the actual process of tattooing and there has not been enough respect or critical reviewing of the aesthetic visual qualities of the tattoo, for indeed the skill executed today and the subject matter offer an abundant variety of extremely high quality professional designs which have proved to be a refreshing change from the banal and repetitive designs previously dominating the tattoo scene. (Ills. 32 a. & b.) As with any trend, craze or phenomenon, it is often basic human nature to exploit an idea when possible for commercial rewards.

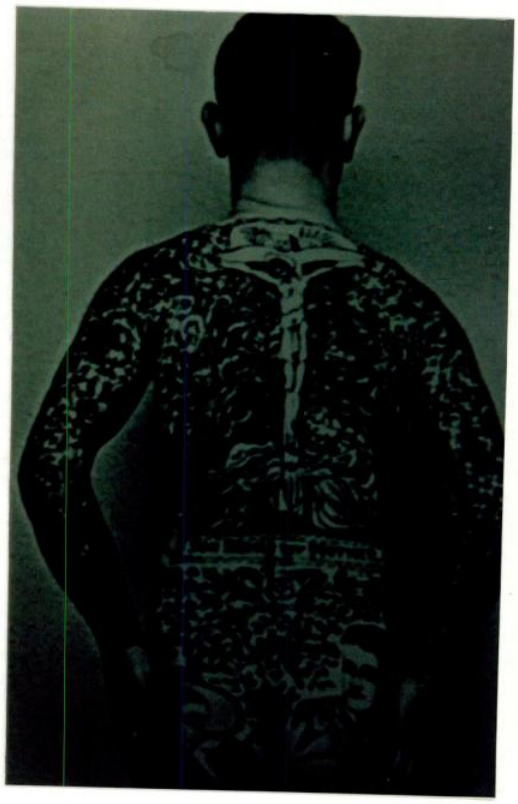
(Ill. 32a.) Brilliantly executed back tattoo with unusal subject matter which is a refreshing change from previous repetitive and banal designs

One of the first examples of tattoos being exploited for money was the trading of Maori heads, in New Zealand during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the mid-nineteenth century another commercial opportunity developed throughout Western society. Heavily tattooed men and women who exploited the fact that they were ostracised from society, assumed entrepreneurial spirits and joined circuses and freakshows to exhibit themselves to curious audiences.

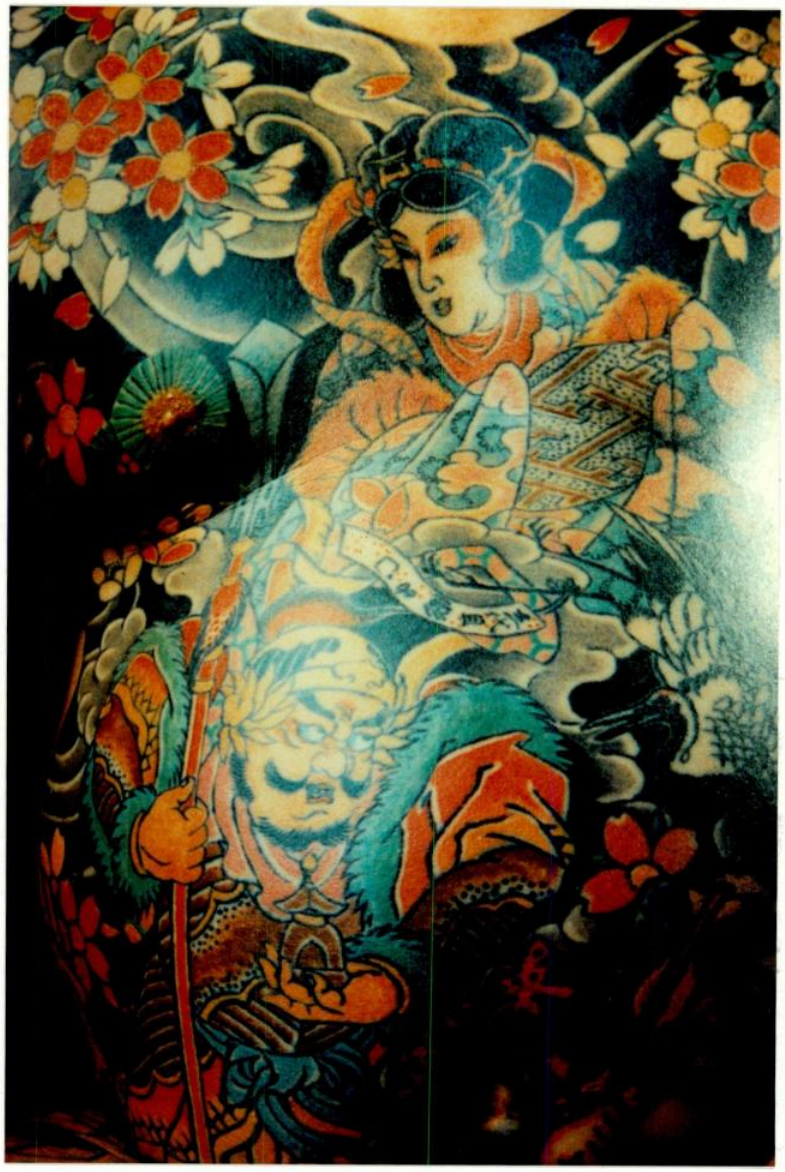
The tattoos generally were an agglomoration of crude and sometimes grotesque designs (Ill. 33 a. & b.) which rarely displayed any sensitivity or imagination towards the composition or natural curves of the body unlike Japanese body tattooing. (Ill. 34) The emphasis seems to have been on quantity rather than quality, and in my opinion the motivations were to startle audiences by the abundance of designs rather than impress them by the aesthetic quality. Circuses favoured giving tattooed freaks regal titles to attract the gullible crowdes e.g. Prince Constantine, The Great Omi etc..

Barnum's Prince Constantine was one of the most sensationalised tattooed men promoted by a circus. He was surrounded by mystique claiming that he escaped from months of tortue by Chinese in Burma. He was in fact an Albanian who covered himself in tattoos to earn fame and fortune. Constantine inspired other heavily tattooed men and women to join circuses which were exceptionally popular





(Ill. 33a.) (Ill 33b.)
An agglomeration of crude and quite grotesque designs, with no apparent sensitivity or imagination. The aim seems to be to shock an audience rather than impress them with aesthetic beauty.



(Ill. 34) The Japanese body tattoos were carefully and sensitively designed to flatter the natural form of the body. Note the tasteful decoration around the nipple.

throughout America and Europe during the nineteenth century and there was certainly money to be made for it was said that Constantine earned $1,000 per week during the 1880's.

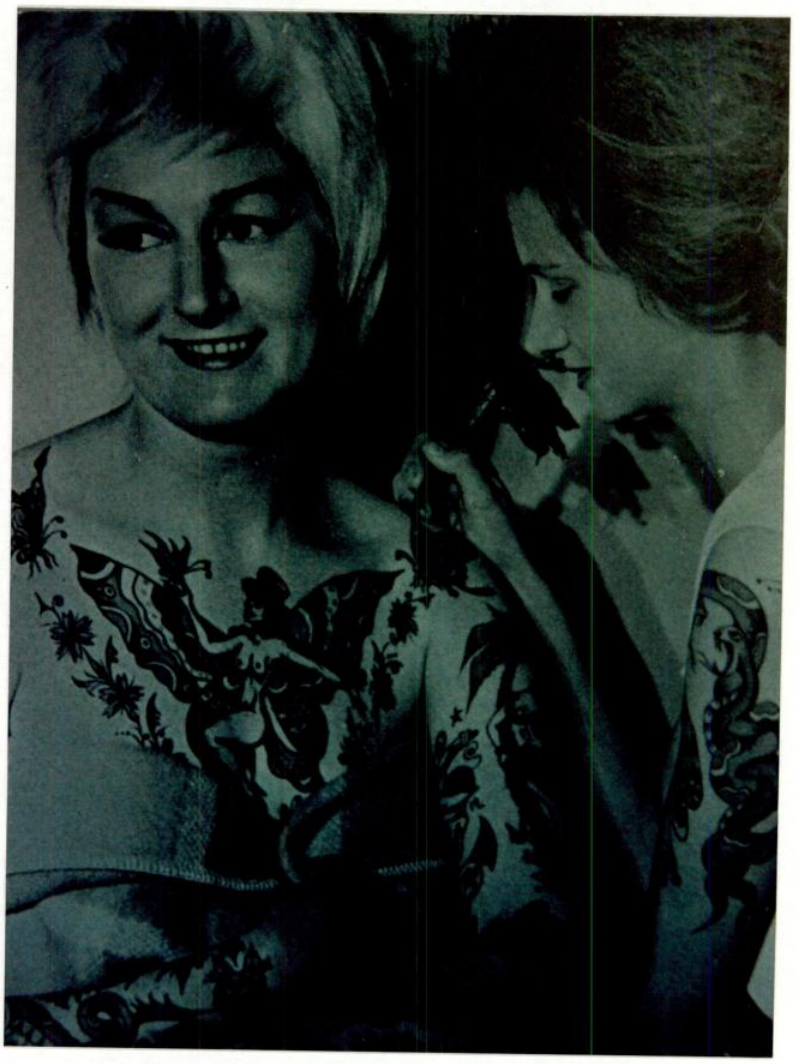
American indians were often promoted as The genuine tattooing examples but in fact most of them who joined freak shows were as guilty of fraud as many of the others. women especially, were known to stencil designs on with temporary paints which were touched up each week, but in general most tattooed exhibitors were genuine. The "Great Omi" (Ill. 35) who performed with Bertram Mill's Circus between 1934 and 1938 was probably the most famous of all circus tattooed freaks. He was tattoed by George Burchett who promised never to reveal his true identity which made people even more curious and eager to see him. He was in fact a high ranking British army officer who came from a considerably wealthy background. Although one would assume that only people who desperately needed the money would resort to such extreme practices to earn a living. His whole body was covered in symmetrical zebra-like blue-black stripes each around one to two inches wide. His skin was surgically removed from his face and head to ensure that his hair would not grow, and replaced by skin grafts. The completion of the bizarre monochromatic design took years of constant tattoing. These people who allowed themselves become freaks of nature must have regretted the permanence of tattoing in later life. What does one do when the

(Ill. 35) The Great Omi - probably the most famous of all circus tattooed freaks.

circus dismisses you? Many like "The Great Omi" eventually suffered inevitable nervous breakdowns. Cindy Ray (Ill. 36) was an Australian model who was not only one of the most famous tattooed women, she was a tattooist herself who invented a tattoing instrument which became popular world wide. Cindy's career was at it's peak during the late '50's and '60's and in 1960 she succinctly explained the level of success she had achieved "when I worked as a waitress I was paid $27 for 40 hours work. When tattooing I can make $80 in one evening" (6, p. 85).

Although Cindy Ray is said to have been the most famous tattooed woman ever, according to The Guinness Book of Records the most tattooed lady in the world is officially Rusty Skuse (Ill. 37) who was an owner of the oldest tatto establishment in Britain which is still in business today, since 1939.

Heavily tattooed men and women still exist. However, the fascination for circus freaks has thankfully diminished and today people tattoo themselves for personal satisfaction rather than commercial ventures. (Ill. 38 a. & b.) Modern society has so many more entertainment outlets than 100 years ago which may have caused the interest in freakshows to decline. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these circus shows were a bizarre escape from reality and the monotony of daily life for many, which resulted in them being extremely popular among the proletariat classes.



(Ill. 36) Cindy Ray -
"The Classy Lassie with the Tattooed Chassis"

(Ill. 37) Rusty Skeuse who according to The Guiness Book of Records is the most tattooed woman in the world.

(Ill. 38a) Contemporary heavily tattooed man who indulges in the art for his own personal pleasure.

(Ill. 38b) Contemporary back tattoo

CHAPTER FIVE: CONTEMPORARY TATTOOING

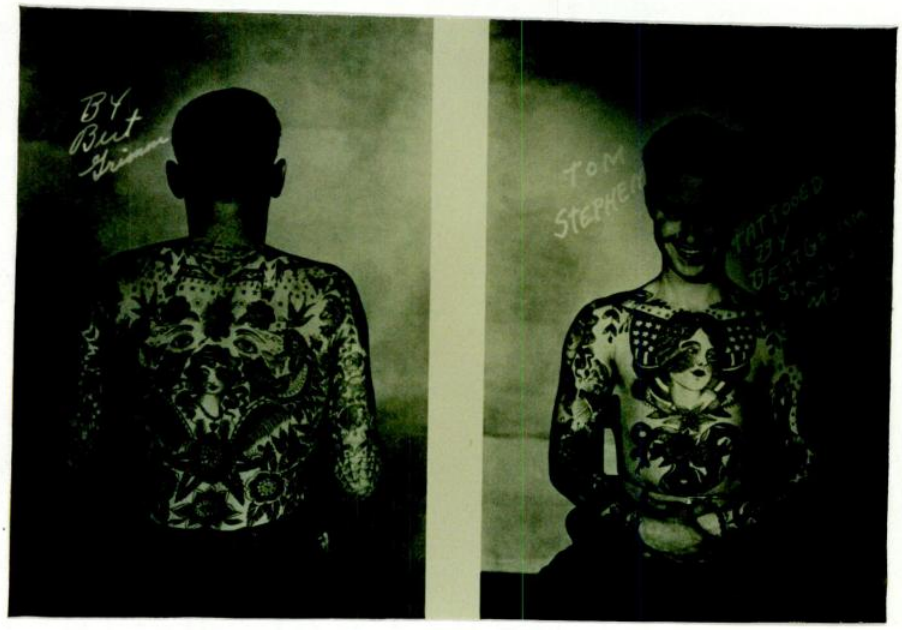
Tattooing has had a long yet checkered history with techniques, designs and disciplines evolving to such an extent that contemporary tattooing is no longer considered by everyone to be a crude, subcultural, socially unaccepted indulgence. Most detailed investigations of tattooing have been written by anthropologists who have explored historical and primitive forms of tattooing.

I feel that modern theories on tattooing should be investigated and personally interpretated, for if one was to accept submissively, without questioning these theories for ourselves, tattooing and it's blatant connoctations may be dismissed as symptoms of psychopathology! Whilst admiring psychologists such as Freud and Levi Strauss, I believe that we should use their deductions to help us form our own opinions, rather than assume that their theories are the only correct interpretations, I think it is impossible to generalise every tattooee into an essentially sexual catagory, subconscious or otherwise, as I feel it may be degrading, as the tattooing phenomenon encompasses a vast variety of people who are tattooed for many reasons, often other than sexual. There is no longer male domination evident among tattoo enthusiasts and today the female clientele is certainly increasing.

Since the early 1960's, the practice and quality of tattooing improved so dramatically throughout much of America, that it has been called <u>The Tattoo Renaissance</u> . Concepts as well as subject matter and techniques developed

and has continually influenced Europeans. In the last 10-20 years, a predominantly Euro-American style has developed which represents an 'essentially proletarian rootstock' (13, p. 233) from which The Tattoo Renaissance emerged and continually develops. An emergence of an international folk style, which was initially a collection of many varied designs often applied to one client by numerous artists resulting in a confliction of styles, (Ills. 39) designs and sizes would question whether the renaissance was originally an improvement on previous tattoo styles at all. This style was frequently characterised by an ostentatious agglomeration of competing designs which often paid litte attention to the natural contours and forms of the body, and consequently proved to be quite startling in size and subject matter e.g. roses merged into serpents which became feathers, crying eyes and American flags etc. and not only did these designs look aesthetically conflicting, there were often garishly unflattering to the client and personnally I think that they often appeared to be unnaturally grubby and synthetic in appearance.

The tattooing guild of America was formed in the 1960's and was pioneered by committed talented tattooists who were willing to respond and develop with changing social and economic conditions, and though informal, it radically improved the entire phenomenon of tattooing. Members shared technical trade secrets of how to improve designs,

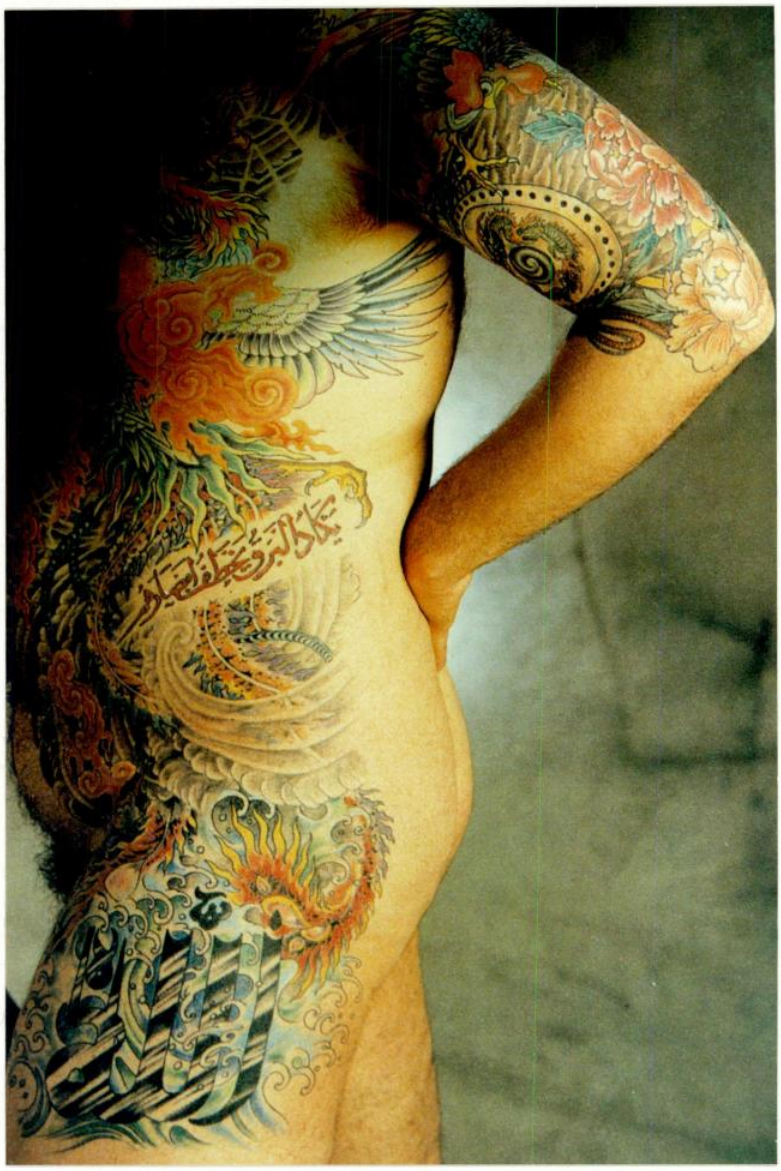


(Ill. 39) An example of The International folk style of tattooing in the early 1960's which was initially a collection of many varied designs applied to one client, often by numerous artists. Consequently resulting in a confliction of styles, designs and scale.

techniques, maintenance of equipment etc. European tattooists were generally more reluctant to share skills and information, which may have resulted in the slower development and improvement of the quality of designs and originality.

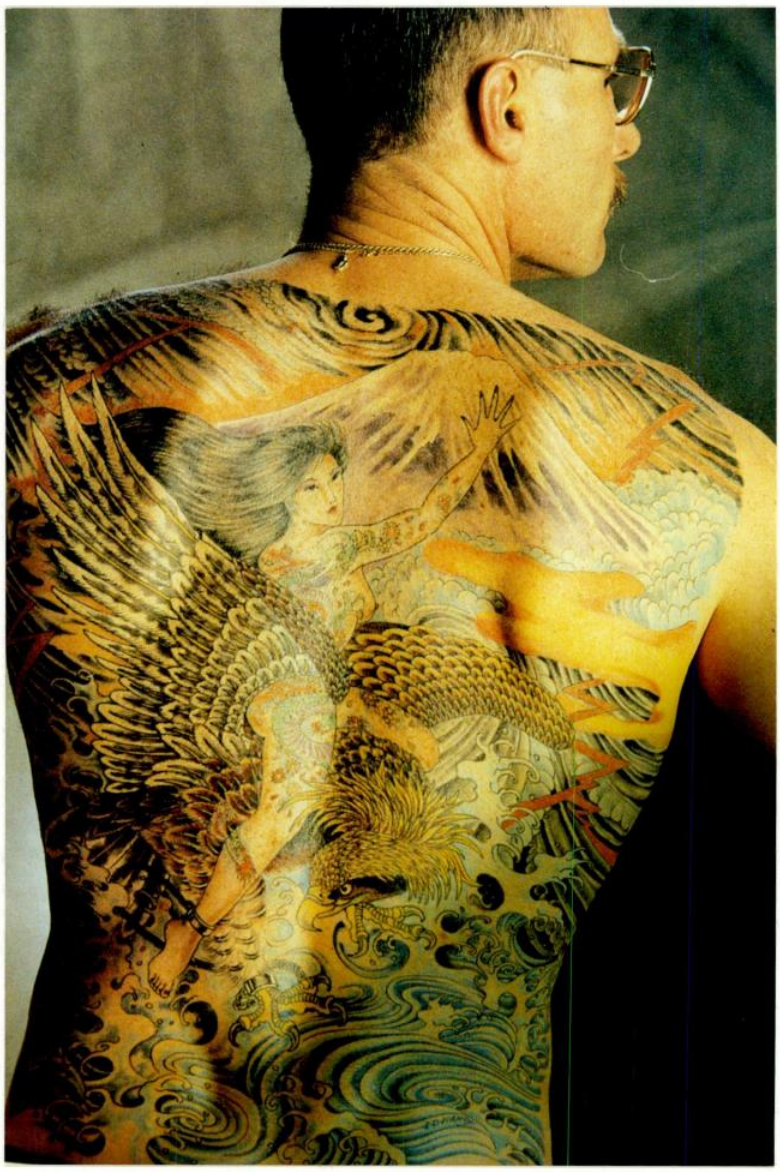
Not unlike many tattoo artists today, practitioners before the renaissance had very little formal training and usually learned from watching other tattooists. Some enthusiasts responded to advertisements to learn from books but consequently failed to achieve a professional standard.

The once popular International folk style phased out from around 1960 and gave way to a welcomed, refreshing avant-garde tattooing style. The once familiar agglomeration of disjointed insensitive designs were replaced by an inexhaustable collection of non-traditional invigorating tattoos which were indeed large but well planned and aesthetically unified. (Ills. 40.a & 40.b) Subject matter diversified and accommodated all imaginative tastes. Futuristic imagery of fantasy characters (Ills. 41 a.) and science fiction (Ills. 41.b) are incorporated into vivid designs and ostentatious experimenting continually provides original, inspiring sources. Traditional imagery associated with irezumi (Ills. 42.a) or primitive tribal styles (Ills. 42.b) were explored and used as sources of further design inspiration. At last consideration and planning was taken before final designs, colour schemes and placement of the tattoo was applied.

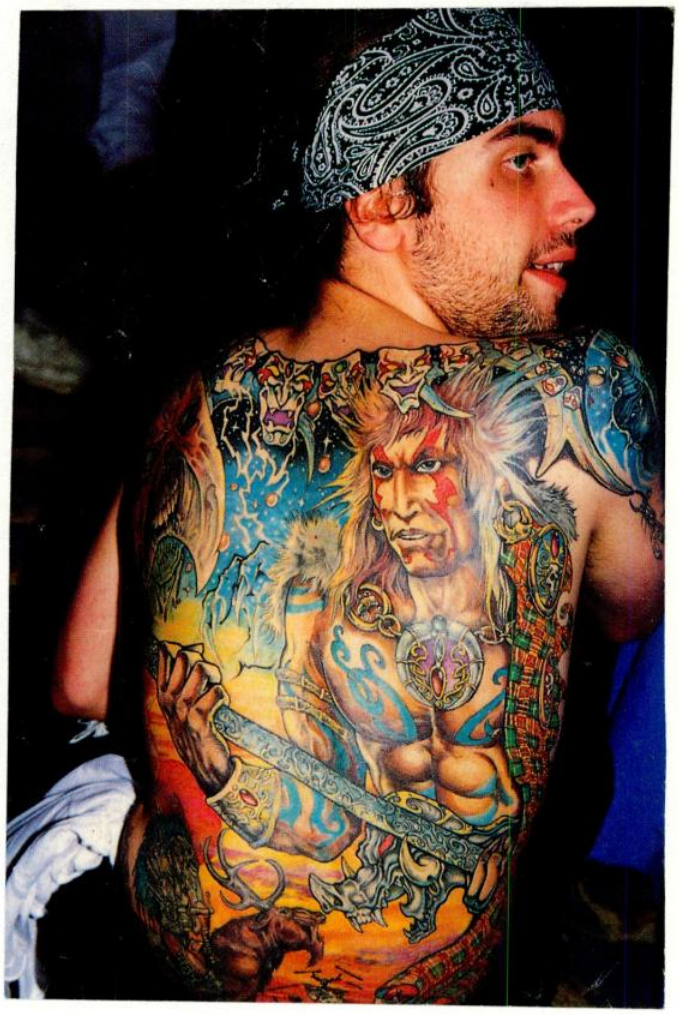


(Ill. 40a) An ostentatious body tatto which is undisputably flamboyant but is indeed sensitively planned and professionaly executed.

(Ill. 40b) A large scale back tattoo with marvellous tonal qualities which is generally aesthetically unified and very well planned.



(Ill. 41a) Extravagant imagery including futuristic fantasy characters.



(Ill. 41b) Vivid, exciting body tattoo with fantasy creatures and science fiction characters.

(Ill. 42a) Modern interpretation, exploring traditional Japanese irezumi designs.

(Ill. 42b) Traditional imagery associated with primitive tribal styles are explored and used as sources of contemporary visual interpretation.

Tattoo by Lyle Tuttle

Equipment and materials were extensively available and regular literature and tattooing conventions kept artists well informed of new designs, trends and techniques. Many tattoo apprentices obtained professional artistic training and acquired university art degrees before being enticed into the world of tattooing.

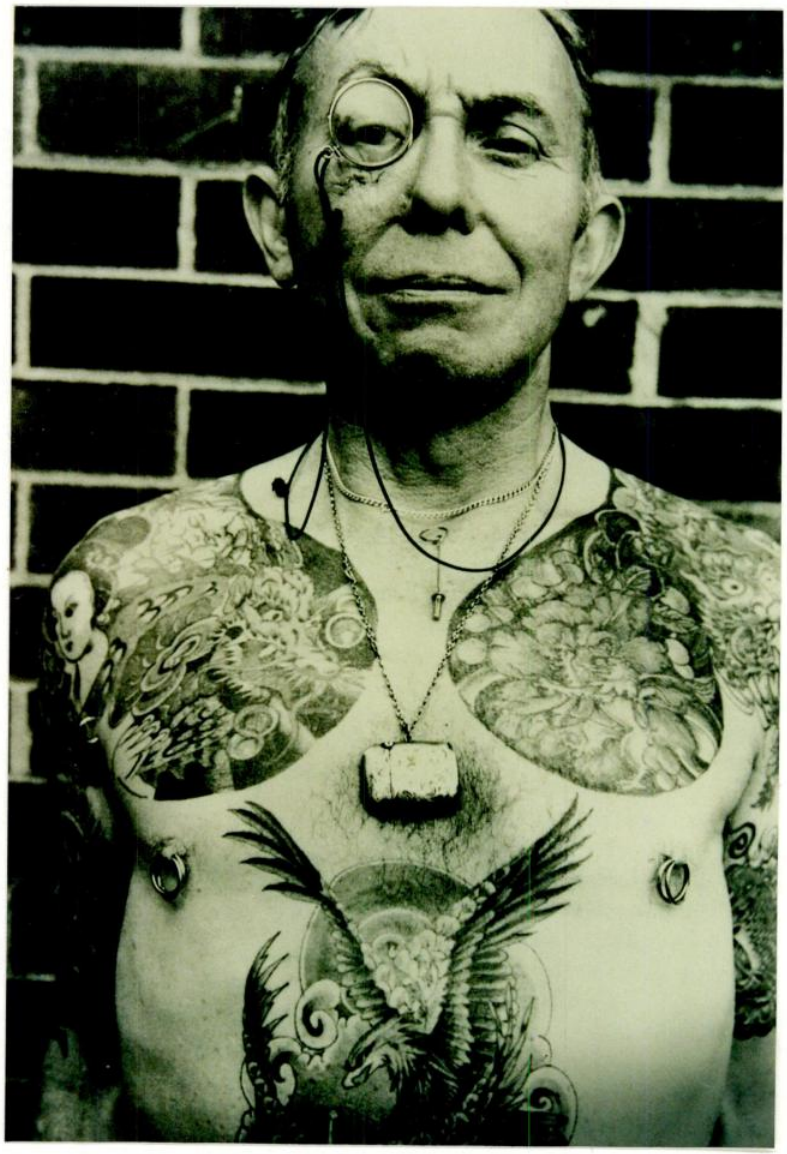
The emergence of this avant-garde style not only radically improved designs, but also dramatically improved hygiene standards, which ensured minimal infection. It is quite ironic that these developments took place as tattooing became prohibited throughout many american states during the 1950's and 1960's. The U.S. government oficially discouraged tattoing as late as 1970 when in Florida, tattooing was illegal, except under medical supervision. The tattooing renaissance flourished throughout most of America but particularly centred along the west coast. Perhaps, the relaxed liberal lifestyle often associated with California was responsible for tattooing being excepted and explored. It may very well have been for economic reasons as military and industrial prosperity along the west coast during the 1950's saw a population increase and indeed economic improvement, which have been an incentive for tattoo artists to flourish to developed areas where there was an obvious demand for their work.

The tattoo renaissance in America was originally developed by two main artists: Phil Sparrow (Sameul Steward) and Sailor Jerry Collins (Norman Keith) whose innotaive work

during the 1950's and 1960's not only improved standards but also inspired other artists to explore techniques and designs with vivacity and zealous enthusiasm. Their innovative approach to the art improved relationships with their clients and also created a responsible professional image of tattooing by demanding scrupulously hygienic conditions.

The tattoo renaissance provided a generation of talented and innovative artists such as Lyle Tuttle, Spider Webb, Jamie Summers etc. but probably, the two seminal artists are Ed Hardy and Cliff Raven, who epitomise the true spirit of professional tattooing combining a bohemian lifestyle with recognised qualifications (Raven received a B.A. in fine Arts and Hardy received a B.A. in printmaking.) Professional qualifications are not the only requirement to be a good tattooist. Artists such as Hardy and Raven are genuinely fascinated by tattooing and see it more as a way of life, than merely a job. The discipline of dedicated, serious tattooing requires peremptory mental demands as well as technical abilities and cannot be considered as merely a profession, but as a genuine vocation 'it is impossible to be a serious artist who occasionally tattoos' (12, p. 258) I believe that to become a master tattoo artist, one needs more than outstanding artistic abilities. The most renouned artists seem to possess a passionate obsession to create what are undisputably works of art, and to explore and develop the medium both

aritistically and technically. The excellence of these artist's outstanding work stiumlated a creative and competitive atmosphere throughout the West, and indeed improved the image of tattooing internationally. There is a philosophy behind tattooing which is displayed by the respect and admiration given to traditional styles and disciplines of historic tattooing. Irezumi designs provide unexhaustable creative potential and have often been encorporated into modern contemporary designs, successfully juxtaposing futuristic subject matter with traditional Japanese composition and sensitivity. (Ills. 43) Tribal and primitive influences are also encorporated into designs affiliating traditional forms with contemporary imaginative originality which results in enthusiastic and personal idioms of expression which may be adds individualised or traditionally stylised as the client desires.(Ills. 44) This fusion of historical and modern styles not only provide clients with an abundant selection of imagery to choose from, but also reflect great veneration for traditional techniques, designs and cultures. The variety and individuality of styles also enables the established tattoo artist to develop their own personal style and indulge in the type of tattooing they are most comfortable with and skilled to perform. Although the average tattoo artist must succumb to their clientele's whims and taste, famous established artists can employ a purely personal style and choose to do work which fulfils their artistic capacity.

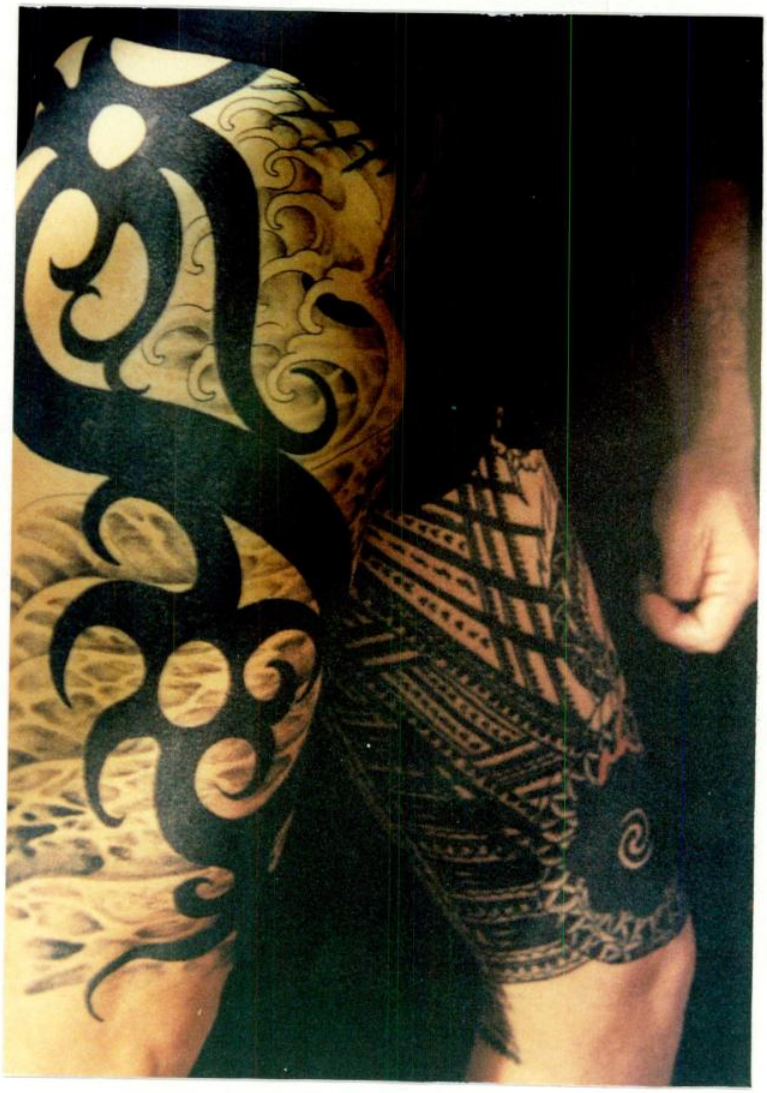


(Ill. 43) This civil servant has adorned most of his body with creative tattoos, juxtaposing traditional Japanese composition with contemporary subject matter. The tattoos took 137 days to complete and he delights in shocking others (especially when he wears his monacle!)

(Ill. 44) Modern punk tattoo by Cliff Raven, who used primitive Samoan tattoo designs as an influence for this tattoo.

Lyle Tuttle became associated with exploring Samoan style tattoos encorporating large-scale mono-chromatic geometric stripe patterns. Cliff Raven produced many examples of Japanese style body tattoos but felt technically inadequate and referred clients requesting this style to Ed Hardy, while he like Tuttle explored primitive designs. He earned such a respected international reputation that he was not forced to reproduce mundane repetitive designs and indulged in commissions which he found challenging and visually stimulating. (Ill. 45) He developed a range of personalised yet traditionally influenced designs, 'a compendium of traditional Japanese, late hippie, and black designs' (12, p. 239). He was often identified by monochromatic primitive designs, sometimes softened by grey shaded areas, as well as exploring full colour tattoos. Although it is essential for artists to acquire a personal style of their own, it is important for them, in my opinion to be quite liberal and refrain from producing a variety of designs which may sometimes challenge their own personal electicism, for although they are artists, they are also providing a service which must be dictated by the client.

Tattoo conventions are organised regularly throughout Europe and America. The biggest event in Europe is The Tattoo Expo held annually in Dunstable, England. The festival is organised essentially to promote tattooing but there is also an important social aspect. People can express themselves confidently without expressing guilt or



(Ill. 45) Monochromatic primitive style tattoo with shaded grey areas by Cliff Raven.

feeling inferior, as one who is heavily tattooed may often experience in everyday society. The Expo is a bizzare event which has a magical aura almost like a live animated illustration. The characters, colours, images and designs are so diversified that one may feel as if they are surrounded by a living storybook. The Expo is quite a recent festival and has been running for six years now. The whole area is littered with tattooists who seem haphazardly set up, however, no amateur tattooists are permitted to tattoo at the event which assures those who indulge in acquiring new designs of a professional result. Competitions such as Best Biker Tattoo or Best Punk Tattoo reflect the general class of contemporary tattoo enthusiasts who may appear to be regarded as degenerates of society just having a laugh. The participants and indeed the artwork they display convey a serious attitude of admiration and respect for the art. The standard is excellent and displays the infinite variety of refreshing new subject matter encorporating ancient and traditional as well as modern, futuristic designs.

The stunning quality of the tattoos displayed at Expo reflects the constantly improving contemporary scene in general. The visual images obtainable are brilliantly executed and a good tattooist can obtain amazingly subtle (Ill. 46) or indeed vivaciously flamboyant designs to satisfy individual clients requests. (Ill. 47 a. & B.) The perspective, tones and expression achievable are incredibly impressive and contemporary tattooing can achieve results

(Ill. 46) A good tattooist can obtain amazingly subtle tonal qualities. Feather tattoo by Jamie Summers.

(Ill. 47a) Some of the more vivaciously flamboyant tattoo designs on display at Expo 91

(Ill. 47b)

as sensitive and vivid as any visual image applied to paper or canvass. It may be the high standard capable of producing delicate tasteful designs which continually attracts women to indulge in tattooing.

The first example of tattooing discovered in Egypt over 4,000 years ago was exclusively for women and as I previously mentioned, women have indulged in tattooing no less than men throughout the checkered history of the art. In contemporary society, however, women generally do not favour tattooing to the extent that men do. Although there are an increasing amount of women who admire and indulge in tattoing, they are certainly a minority group in contemporary society.

It has been suggested that women who are tattooed usually are influenced by a male partner and to a certain extent, this theory may be true, but to dismiss every tattooed woman as a clone of a tattooed sweetheart would be narrow-minded and invariably degrading to women.

To presume that women who are tattooed are trying to assume a macho masculine appearance would be ludicrously naive. It may be quite true that a significant amount of lesbians would favour tattooing but that does not mean that tattooing among women automatically exudes strong lesbian sexual tendencies.

Contemporary surveys have found that tattoing is quite rare among women but the aesthetic quality of the tattoos in

general, is of a relatively high standard. (Ill. 48)

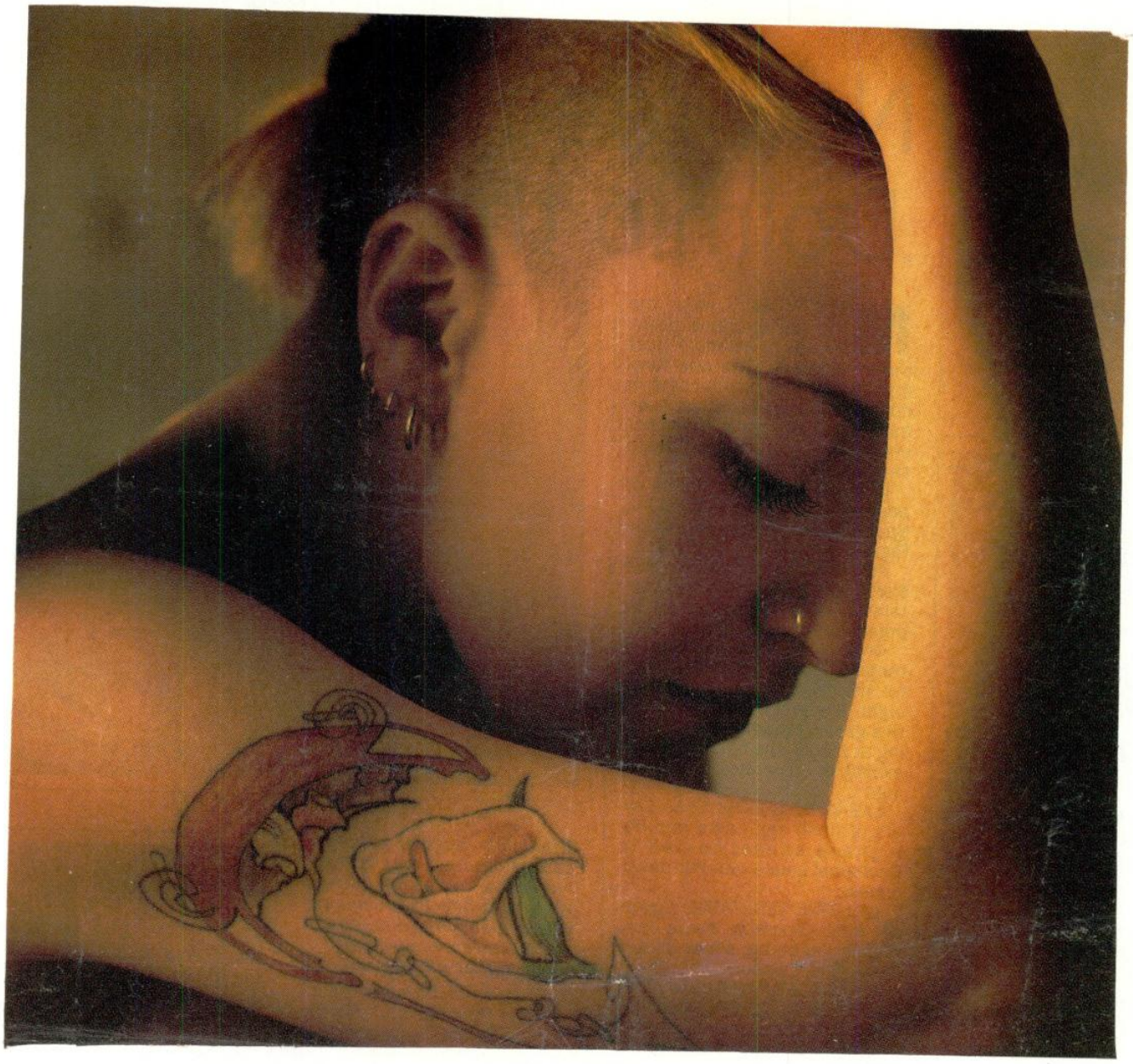
Female tattoooing quite often is far less blatant than one would expect and often a woman may possess a secret tattoo that nobody would know about. Perhaps the negative image of female tattooing in contemporary society would patronise certain women to remain secretively anonymous. Although many individuals would find tattoos extremely attractive on women, society generally rebukes such rebellious and masculine practices. Cindy Ray relates in her book The story of a tattooed Girl some of the unpleasant experiences she has had.

She was blatantly advertised as a freak of art, not nature as Miss Technicolour or The Classy lassie with the tattooed chassis and developed a sarcastic philosophy wondering why people would consider her a freak and shout obscenities at her "fancy being married to that .. that tattooed lady is no lady" etc. (p. 159 Skin Deep)

A woman may wish to keep her tattoo a secret to surprise and delight a lover as a symbol of intimacy known only to them. Indeed tattooing dismissed as such a genereally aggressive and blatant form of art can be surprisingly discreet and elegantly sexy. Tattoos may be exquisitely dainty and petite and ironically subtle roses, butterflies etc. can be surprisingly feminine. (Ill. 49).

It is particularly rare to see a heavily tattooed woman, in today's society, as any woman covered in ostentatious

(Ill. 48) Tattooing is quite rare among women, but the aesthetic quality of the tattos in general is of a relatively high quality.



(Ill. 49) The tattoo is quite large yet maintains delicate, feminine qualities

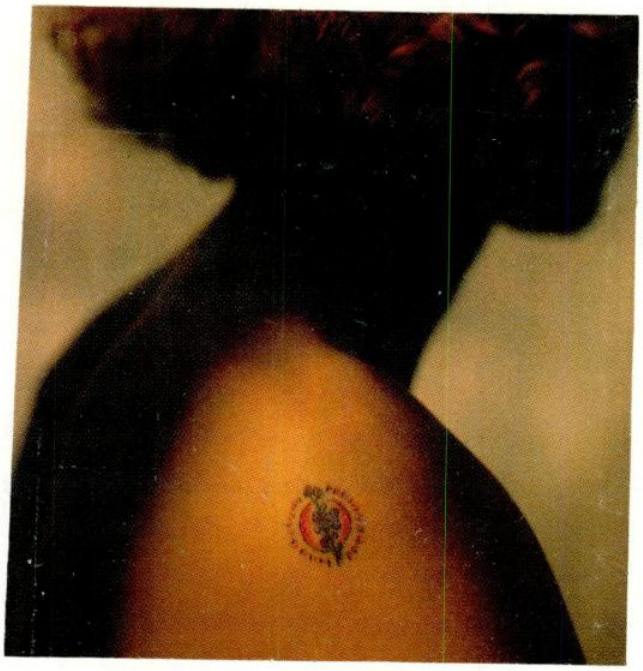
designs usually did so for commercial motivations to make money as a curious exhibitor. A heavily tattooed woman to most people, has an even more curious appearance than a man, probably due to clothing and physical size.

It seems quite ironic that women who are tattooed believe that it enhances their natural beauty yet many are reluctant to expose them to society. Perhaps the secrecy is the actual attraction to many.

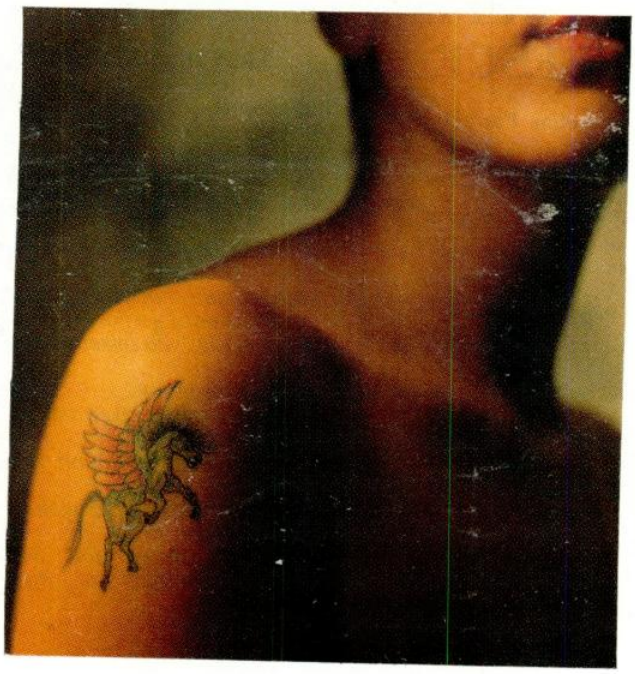
Women may be patronised by the sexual connoctations associated with tattoing through history e.g. Japanese and Dutch women whose tattoos were fundamentally 'for hire' symbols. The quality and techniques of tattooing have improved so much in recent years that many confident women are showing us that it is time to come out of the closet! Around 20% of Irish tattoo artist Brendan Harte's customers are women, and his female customers display with delight, their newly acquired artistic attribute. The most popular areas among females for tattooing at this time seems to be the shoulder areas which can be elegantly exposed or disguised when necessary. (Ill. 50 a. & b.) Brendan refuses to tattoo women's forearms however, "I won't do that, they're to difficult to hide if you need to, in work etc ..."

I find it quite amusing that society expects women to have some bizarre reasons for tattooing themselves. The gender may be different but why should the motivations be? Women

50.a



50.b



(Ill. 50 a & b)
The most popular area among females for tattooing at this time seems to be the shoulder area, which can be disguised when necessary.

want to communicate the same visual messages as tattooed men. They want to be sexually attractive, rebelliously anti-authoritarian, seek a group affiliation etc. just like men. Why should psychologists, society and indeed other women strive to discover some hidden mystical connoctations simply because tattooing is associated with a predominantly male society.

Probably the most acceptable form of tattooing among women would be in the discreet form of cosmetic suergery. Lips, eyebrows, beauty spots may be highlighted and accentuated with discreet delicacy or indeed blatant exhibitionism if desired. Birthmarks and blemishes can often be disguised quite successfully by tattooing a skin colour pigment over the affected area. Temporarary tattoos have become popular in recent years and have been made glamorously fashionable by many e.g. Cher & Linda Evangelista although it would be sacriligous for a dedicated tattooed patron to even consider them, it gives people especially women the opportunity to succumb to fashionable whims and trends and flaunt tattos as fashion accessories rather than social statements. The patron may be as fickle and whimsical as she desires and remove the tattoo as easily as one would remove jewellery.

In contemporary society we are bombarded by examples of physical perfection that one is expected to aspire to. The beauty industry preys on people's insecurities especially women's, and from every aspect of society, the media,

films, advertising etc. we are being conditioned to believe that there is an expectation to make ourselves beautiful and thus socially acceptable. Fat is ugly! Men should be strong, women must be pretty. It is certainly true that one feels more confident and relaxed when we look our best, as Charles Darwin once said "it is a perfectly natural desire to advise and often to exaggerate whatever nature may have given us" (9, p. 179). However, those of us who do not comply to the stereotypes of contemporary society should not be content to be considered inferior. Perhaps some women employ tattoos as vehicles of blatant expression demonstrating that they will no longer tolerate this social pressure to succumb to conventionalised expectations of beauty or be ostracised from fashionable circles.

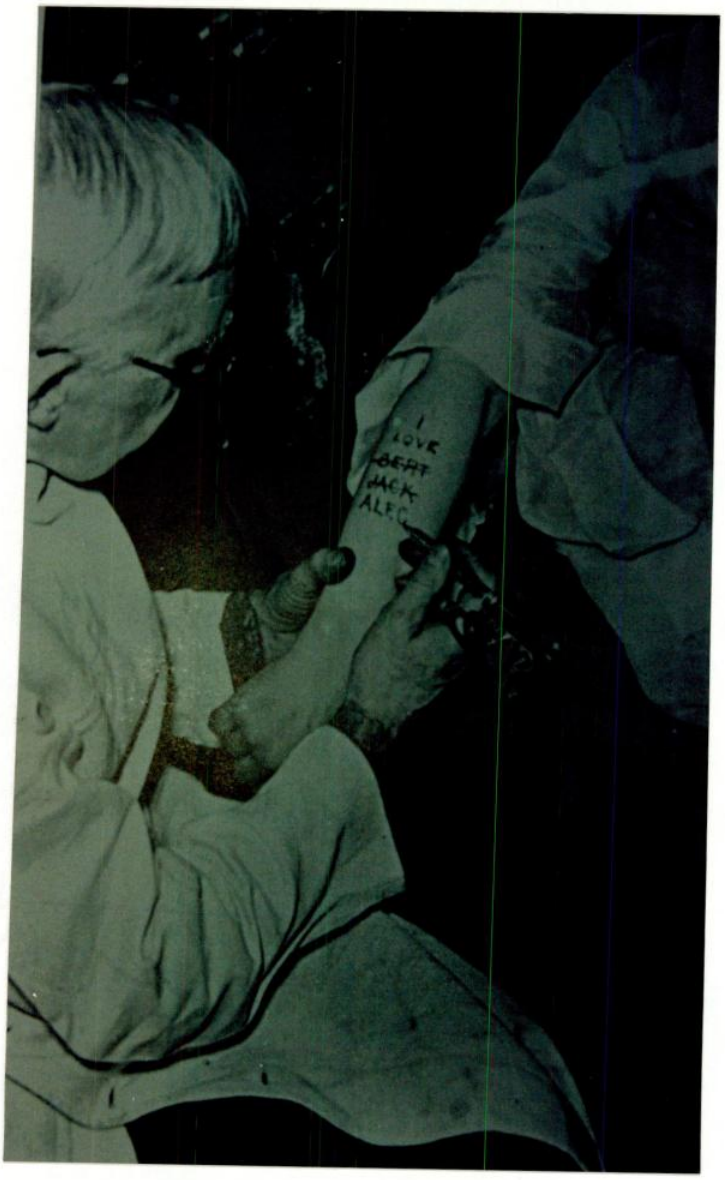
Ironically, while society is harassing us with ideals to strive towards, the fundamental ideal is to express individuality. In contemporary society roles are being reversed. Women can be plumbers or presidents, men can grow their hair long and be house-husbands! Women sporting tattoos is an extention of this liberation among the sexes. Every one is inevitably entitled to their own personal opinions but it seems quite ironically narrow minded to me that someone could accept and appreciate a tattoo if it adorned a male body but rebuke with disgust a tattooed female, which questions have social attitudes progressed as much as one would like to think? Negative attitudes regarding women and tattoos have resulted in countless

myths and speculations arising from the latest sensationalised scare in Ireland suggested that a respected Dublin Hospital has linked problems in pregnancy with tattooing. Fifty two tattooed women were surveyed, over a 12 month period. Seven of the births were premature and two infants were stillborn. The newspaper article explaining this survey however, failed to highlight that forty eight of these women displayed amateur tattoos and generally came from a deprived background.

There is such a variety of people acquiring tattoos in contemporary society that it cannot be accepted that all motivations may be generalised into a sexual or rebellious catagory. The reasons are as diversified as the clientele.

There are however, some predominant factors which motivate recipients. Many tattoos are a symbol of affection, incorporating the name of a partner friend or family member. These type of designs are usually quite predictably sentimental and traditionally mundane in design.

Surprisingly enough, many people still request tattooists to immortalise the name of a loved one in the form of a tattoo although unfortunately most tattoos last a lot longer than the relationships! (III 51) Tattooist Brendan Harte suggests a novel idea to clients "to get the name in Chinese letters then you can tell anyone it's their name .."



(Ill. 51) George Burchett tattoos yet another lover's name, proving that unfortunately, most tattoos last a lot longer than some relationships!

A tattoo may convey the recipient's group identity displaying an affiliation with a club, type of music or gang etc. The Harley Davidson insignia has probably been one of the most popular reproduced tattoo designs throughout contemporary tattooing, as tattooing is practically obligatory within motorcycle gangs. Group identity is increasingly displayed by musically influenced tattooing especially since the 1960's with so many musical cultures emerging (e.g. hippies, punks, mods, psychobillies etc.). A tattoo such as a horoscope or favourite flower etc. can often symbolise an expression of self-identity. The tattooee may wish to encorporate some significant personal element into the design to portray a deep individual significance.

Contrary to psychological belief, I am of the opinion that most people who are tattooed, are motivated by the vivid aesthetic qualities and decorative visual enhancement of the designs. I feel that the majority of contemporary tattooes do not wish to display any profound messages or statements but rather are impressed by the aesthetic value of tattoos, and of other people's reactions to them.

The choice of design and body location is an important factor to be considered, and invariably the individual perception of the function of the tattoo often dictates the location and the subject matter. Women generally tend to choose more private and discreet locations than men such as their breast, buttock or shoulder. The tattoos which are

usually delicate and quite small may be intended to compliment the body while providing intimate personal pleasure. Women who prefer large scale body work still tend to choose feminine, aesthetically pleasing designs, which flatter the body and do not intend to startle or disgust others.(Ill 52 a. & b.) It is generally accepted that men prefer larger designs located in clearly visible areas, the most popular being the arms, chest or back, to assert masculinity, affection or self-identity. The standard achieved by contemporary tattooists is excellent and has come a long way since the naval days of pierced mum & dad hearts and popeye anchors. Although there will always be a number of mundane, unimaginated tattoos being produced, often being no less than an agglomeration of disconnected graffitti, more people are becoming design concious and are treating their bodies with a meritorious respect. Their skin is a type of canvas for body art, and therefore the design should be considered thoroughly before committing oneself to a permanent design. Contemporary tattooists have such a constantly increasing repetoire of designs to choose from, or indeed can recreating any design the client themself may design, that there should be no excuse to exhibit mundane tiresome tattoos.

Tattooing is as much a visual form of art as painting, photography etc. and it is, in my opinion, antiquated to dismiss a tattooee who chooses to use their bodies as a medium of visual expression, as a delinquent or pervert. I

(Ill. 52a) Although this tattoo is quite large it is not aesthetically offensive or startling.

(Ill. 52b) A large yet flattering feminine tattoo which enhances the body.

feel that amateur indian ink markings, which often lead to the bearer being ostracised from society, should not be catagorised with professionally skilled pieces of visual art portrayed by good tattooing. The process, and the permanance of the design may be similar but the motivations and suggestions are incredibly different.

CONCLUSION:

Every individual will have their own personal interpretation of tattooing: the pheonomenon, the process and most significantly the visual impact. Opinions will inevitably vary from ambiguity to antipathy, from indifference to inordinate admiration but what is consistant is the predominant fact that tattoos have never been totally socially accepted and probably never will be.

'They look dirty!' many people claim that 'only hooligans wear tattoos!' The general consensus may be that tattooees are not ambitious and will never get on in life. While everyone is entitled to their own opinion I feel it is humiliating and degrading to ostracise people in this day and age, from normal society because they acquired a synthethic decorative feature to their bodies which society will not accept. One may not agree with this, but it unfortunately must be considered if one is contemplating acquiring a tattoo.

In my opinion, many tattooes suffer relentless pangs of shame and regret in later life because they did not fully consider the permanence of tattooing. Once a tattoo is applied, it becomes an inherent physical feature for life and although one can get them surgically removed, these orperations are not always successful. It is essential that one considering being tattooed thoroughly considers the location as well as the permanence of the design, and most importantly the design itself which may be amusing when acquired but may be deeply regretted in later life.

Tattooing is a committment and should not be treated carelessly as a mere fashion whim. First impressions generally last and unfortunately an anti-authoritarian tatto acquired at fifteen will still be interpreted as an anti-social statement at fifty however misconstrued the case may be. It is unfortunate that most people who regret their tattoos acquired them at an early age when many were displaying symbols of rebellious youth, non-conformity or immature humour which at the time may have appropriately expressed adolescent sentiments but become increasingly shameful in later life. I feel that it is not surprising that tattooing is frowned upon in a society which considers nudity to be immoral. In my opinion the thrill of getting a tattoo can often be a more important priority than the actual design, which results in designs remaining predictably banal and unimaginative. I am not dismissing sentimentality as unfashionable or ridiculous but there are endless ways of expressing emotions than resorting to the exhausted hearts and dagger motif.

As I have previously mentioned the possibility to create powerful imaginative designs is inexhaustible, as virtually any image which can be produced on paper or canvass may be reproduced in the form of a tattoo, and I believe should be recognised as a skilled medium of expression. Is tattooing blatantly abhorred because it is essentially regarded as a poor man's art? Does art really mean profit in contemporary society? Many works of art and indeed pieces

of modern art (which sometimes make me curious what exactly are the requirements of being considered Art) are sold for obscene amounts of money, but tattooing is personal with no obvious material value. Would tattooing be accepted as a respected art form if it could be sold for inordinate prices? Some tattooists are attracted to the art because they do not wish to succumb to 'the petty and trivial aspects of an artist's life - playing gallery politics, producing irrelevant commodities, installing insignificant shows ...' (12 p. 256). Perhaps tattooees are ostracised as subcultural characters because they do not envy and aspire to the plastic-people mentality of the fashionable art scene.

If tattooing was elevated to a standard meritorious of being fine art, the tattooee would not be a victim of shame and embarrassment in later life. One's personal opinion concerning the antithesis of the human body will inevitably dictate personal opinions regarding tattooing. The first theory originates from Judeo-Christian beliefs and claims that the body should not be disfaced or violated, because it was fashioned in God's image and is a living temple for our souls. The second opinion is that our bodies are a vehicle of expression and should portray our individualities.

Tattooing though not always aggressive or intentionally distasteful is generally an assertion of non-conformity to views, attitudes and conventional values society dictates.

The clientele has expanded in recent years to include many middle class well educated patrons who have evaluated tattoing for themselves as a worthy form of artistic expressions. It has been suggested that both extremes of society aristocrats and rebels of society, unite in asserting their non-conformity through tattoing but I disagree. In my opinion tattoing seems to be far more popular to minorities who are considered unequal in society e.g. hippies, bikers, punks etc. than to wealthy established members of society. These people are probably regarded as sub-cultural because they genuinely seem not to care what other people think of the image they portray and generally live life in a bohemian manner. (Ill. 53)

I believe that it is a subconscious element of human nature to explore colour, and indulging in tattooing is one method of doing this. People often need to transform their physical appearance to assert individuality. By assuming certain clothes, hairstyles etc. we are portraying a type of image which is what happens when one is tattooed. If the image is misinterpreted it is not always the tattooes fault. The final analysis should be that a tattoo is only a tattoo! An essentially skin deep design which should not make a statement that the possessor is immediately a subcultural criminal or an anti-social rebel. Perhaps we should concentrate on the aesthetic sumptuousness of designs rather than explore the psychological meanings and theories to enable us to accept, if not admire the art of

(Ill. 53) People constantly stare in horror, yet he seems to delight in the attention, and appears generally indifferent about other's reaction.

tattooing. It is evident that tattooing is not a dying skill, and I believe that there will always be a responding and enthusiastic clientele with various backgrounds, levels of intelligence and interpretations of tattooing. Consequently, it is virtually impossible to specifically generalise tattooing in the future, and perhaps one day, it will be regarded as a form of modern yet accessible art, which it deserves to be.

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1. To camou[illegible]

2. To secure [illegible]

3. To enc[illegible] difficult phase in life

4. To [illegible] fertility

5. To [illegible] death

6. To [illegible] and

7. To [illegible] allow [illegible] to as[illegible] the rec[illegible] successi[illegible]

8. To terror[illegible]

9. To make [illegible]

Footnotes

1. Definition of Tattooing - p. 754, Chambers Dictionary.

2. The motivations for tattoo have always been as varied as the designs themselves but generally may be catagorised into one of the following groups:

   1. To camouflage an unclothed body when hunting

   2. To secure a place in heaven

   3. To ensure an easy passage through difficult phases in life such as puberty and pregnancy

   4. To prevent disease and injury and acquire fertility

   5. To propitiate malignant spirits at time of death

   6. To acquire special characteristics through totemism and ancestor worship

   7. To acquire the special respect of the community to allow the individual to climb the social ladder and to assist the retention of class privilege e.g. by the recording of prowess on the field of battle, successful trading or fishing expeditions etc.

   8. To terrorise the enemy on the field of battle

   9. To make the body sexually interesting

   10. To express sentiment (patriotism, love, friendship, anti-authoritarianism)

   11. To register incidents of personal interest, places visited etc.

   12. To achieve personal or group identity (primitive tribes, gangs, sailors)

   13. To make money (circus sideshows)

   14. To register important personal medical data i.e. a blood group" (13, Chap. 1)

3. Quote from Susanna Haigh in 1934 volume of Psychoanalytic Quarterly: (12, p. 232)

4. Judeo - Christian Theory (12, p. 207)

5. DOYLE, Eddie, Pregnancy & Tattooed Women The Irish Times, Feb. 19, 1992. Page 11

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