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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

Department of Fashion & Textiles

**'The social relevance of tattoos, past and present, with relation to the 'Maori', the
'Yakuza' and 'Russian prisoners'.**

By

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Introduction

Everyone is aware of what a tattoo is. They are everywhere; especially where they are least expected. If you were to look 'tattoo' up in the dictionary it would read, 'to mark the skin permanently with patterns by pricking in a coloured ink'.¹ Tattoo is a traditional art form spread over many societies and cultures. It has spanned across many cultures bringing with it many meanings. It is not a modern invention; it has been associated with human behaviour since the ice age and has expressed extreme social attitudes throughout the past. Values, styles and techniques have radically changed over the past.

I hope to explore tattoo as an art form and the culture that has surrounded it. Throughout history tattoo has been viewed in a variety of ways. It has been understood in ways as diverse as status indicators, symbols of power worn by warriors and criminal brands. Tattoo has represented many things to many people in many places. The historical and basic attitudes, towards tattooees are what attracted me to research the subject. The remarkable creativeness of tattooing has existed for centuries and relates back as far as 4000 B.C, in the Italian Alps. Inspirations for styles and techniques have effectively developed throughout the history of tattooing. The quality and range of designs available transforms the body into shrines of fine art.

Tattoos and tattooists can not be categorised into single classes but what they can do is suggest social and sexual significance. My methodology in studying tattoo will be to examine its meanings and its use in a variety of different cultures. I aim to give an accurate account of tattooing through the ages, and suggest how the ancient art has

¹ Ref. page 220, Collins English Dictionary, published by Wm. Collins & Co. Ltd. 1981.

progressed since primitive times and how traditional techniques and designs have influenced modern social attitudes and the contemporary scene.

Information about this form of body adornment is available and indicates its practice is both ancient and widespread. 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. The oldest specimen of mankind is also the earliest known tattooed individual. He was discovered in 1991 in the Similaun Glacier, high in the Italian Alps. This had preserved the body of this Neolithic hunter for fifty-three hundred years.

Before the discovery of the 'Iceman', the first known tattoo was discovered around four thousand years ago in Egypt. Some Egyptian mummies provided the evidence, which revealed that women in particular, dancers, mistress's and singers had marks of their divine protector, 'Bes', on their bodies. As customs and traditions progressed, the art of tattooing may have spread from Egypt to the Mediterranean. By 1000 B.C the art had virtually made its way around the world, probably with interest from the Middle East along trade routes by land and sea to China, Japan, India, and the Pacific Islands.

Romans who originally hated the whole concept of tattooing eventually gave way to the art, when they invaded Britain, where it was becoming very popular. There fore, the concept spread to Rome where it flourished for centuries. A decree against the process was issued when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire, in 325 A.D. He believed that a tattoo 'disfigured' or 'distorted' what God made us to be, 'that fashioned in God's image'. This led to the deterioration of the tattoo in the west and by the middle ages it had almost met extinction.

Missionaries spreading the Christian faith had influenced many parts of the Pacific. Anthropologists arrived in New Zealand during the late nineteenth century to discover the magnificent art of tattooing. They had nearly suffocated, with only elderly chiefs displaying faded, withered examples of the art of 'moko'.

The Aleut and Eskimo natives of Alaska tattooed (See ILL.1, pg.4) and decorated themselves in prehistoric and early post-contact eras with elaborate labrets, until the arrival of missionaries in 1741 who vervently banned any rituals, superstitions or personal body adornment that offended them. Within three generations tattooing became extinct. Modern Christian teachings soon replaced ancient traditions and customs. The inspirations that natives once indulged in tattooing rituals phased out. The missionaries continued to travel to improve beliefs of primitive societies. They preached against nudity, proclaiming that it was a sin for a man to behave like a wild animal. The Japanese culture indulged in the art of tattooing to distract the eye from the nakedness of the body, which the Church thought, was animal-like behaviour. The Church felt so strongly about the technique and were determined to ban false religious superstitions from society and consequently despised the predominantly superstitious motivations for tattooing, which in some cases seems ironic, as religion was often a genuine motivation for tattooing among minorities.

ILL.1,

This man comes from the Kodiak Islands of Alaska, he not only wears a nose ornament and a labret from which three strands of beads hang, but he is also tattooed with six horizontal lines extending across the cheeks and nose.



The first tattoo parlour in England opened in 1870, in London's Holloway. David Purdy, the proprietor, was the first professional artist in the country. By this time tattoos were not only popular among sailors but were soon approved by the elite members of society. A man named George Burchett learned the art in Japan in the last part of the nineteenth century and by 1901 he had opened his own parlour in the elite area of London, "Mayfair", (See ILL.2a, b, and c, page 5, 6, 7). By this time he had worked on Lady Randolph Churchills coronation tattoos, done in royal arms and patriotic motifs. Burchett was practising at a time when women became eager to enhance their complexions. The upper class women welcomed tattooing. They flaunted their wealth to buy beauty by tinting their lips and darkening their eyebrows etc. with tattoos, (See ILL. 2d, page 8).

ILL.2a,

George Burchett opened his first parlour in 1901; here is a picture of him standing outside it. The window displays the types of designs on offer.



ILL.2b,

The tattoo artist is re-applying another name to the clients arm; maybe she is a regular customer.



ILL.2c,

Tattoo parlours are much the same these days. Most of them have the range of designs available on display in frames or glass notice boards. This is an inside look of George Burchett's parlour.



ILL. 2d,

This lady is having her lips tattooed in red. Wealthy women could afford to buy beauty; at least it saved on lipstick!



In the circumstances of the wealthy aristocracy sharp interest in the art of tattooing they allowed themselves to be decorated in such an obviously indelible and blatant manner. Tattooing flourished again, and lost its enigma. Like the art world, the tattoo has its customs and creative trends. It became an increasingly exploited commercial art.

In chapter one, a brief outline of the history of tattooing displays the extreme social attitudes, which have existed in the past. Chapter two explores the traditional art of 'moko' which explains the main motivations for tattooing in general. The Maori people were influenced by social, sexual, superstitious and aesthetic beliefs. They conveyed their beliefs by displaying them through elaborate tattooing. I have also devoted chapter three to Japanese tattooing, known as 'irezumi', with relation to the countries leading gangsters, 'The Yakuza'. It is undoubtedly one of the finest examples of the art form. The historical attitudes towards tattooing have changed radically in the past and the Japanese history emphasises the change in societies opinions and acceptance of tattooing and what it symbolised throughout the past. It has influenced Western society styles with unified designs and sensitively delicate techniques. Chapter four deals with criminal tattoos, looking at the Russian prison system. There is a lot you can tell about a person by looking at them. In Russia the prisoners invented a secret language, which they themselves only understood. One criminal could tell from another inmate's tattoo what crime they had committed. The last chapter looks at tattooing in our contemporary society and how it has progressed. As I began to read up on my subject I became very interested in the meanings and skills involved in the technique. It has widely been unaccepted and the lack of knowledge available has generated superficial myths, which may have prejudiced social attitudes towards tattooing in general. Nonetheless, most people will start to squirm anyway just imagining the tattoo process. Tattooing empowers the wearer and it is a basic statement of control. The right and the ability to alter our bodies helps explain why tattooing has grown in many parts of the world

Chapter 2

“ Association of Maori Moko”

We, as a western society, speak of nature and the natural world with contrast to human activities and thought. The relationship between a maori and their environment was a very strong spiritual one. Their strong knowledge for the environment and its resources made the maori dependent on it for survival. The environment and its resources fed their minds with ideas explaining the origin and the nature of the world. It became a source of images that were applied to human beings.

Maori ancestors originally came from the Asian mainland and lived for thousands of years in the Western Pacific. New Zealand was also known as the islands of Aeteora and its first settlers arrived in about 800 A.D from the Cook Islands, the Society Islands or the Austral islands.

Maori society was clearly based upon principle of kinship. The first born had highest rank or ‘rangatira’. Even the most eligible and ambitious of leaders could hope to rule only a relatively small territory.

The traditional art of carving has been praised as the highest achievement of maori art. The designs on such carvings expressed relationships between human beings and ancestors, (See ILL. 3, page 11). It is mainly a frontal art, with the strong belief of the

human head being sacred. Most of the carvings depicted a tattooed face in an enlarged form. There are three features seen in a woodcarving. Firstly the human figure or 'tiki', secondly the figure is combined with non-human forms for example, owl eyes staring at you and a large mouth. The third feature makes a connection with the art of maori tattoo or 'moko'. The elaborate use of curvilinear lines and spirals become dominant in 'maori moko'

ILL.3,

Here is a fine example of a maori wood carving. A Ngati Awa carver probably carved this in the Whakatane district of the Bay of Plenty in the late 1840's. The three male figures represent Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother, with their arms upraised to allow open worked spirals of light and knowledge into this world.



The moko identified with social structure, (See ILL.4, page 12), in that when the first of the family was born, in the case of a boy, he was allowed eight designs on the back of his legs, but if he had only six, the next brother was only allowed four. So by counting and tracking the amount of designs on the body, you could trace a whole family down, with relation to their status. The chief of each tribe had their faces and bodies decorated with delicate designs.

ILL.4,

This highly respected maori chief displays his status by employing a detailed and elaborate facial moko.



The most powerful figure of the tribe showed the most elaborate detail in their tattooed designs (See Ill.4, page 12). This gave rise to the ambition of all free men to have a finely tattooed face. A facial tattoo was also a kind of personal signature. Maori's believed that their personalities were imprinted on these facial marks. Chiefs signed deeds of land sales etc. to Europeans using their facial patterns as a signature. A man also personalised his face with the hope of looking more desirable to women. Along with the desire to look attractive, the personalised tattoos reflected a Maori personality, for example, one mark of Maori art on the face indicated that he was single.

Moko was such an outrageous form of body adornment that it would never be considered as beneficial camouflage. Chiefs and Warriors took advantage of their dramatic moko's by wildly shrieking their faces and sticking out their tongues which then transformed them into terrifying attackers. Moko did provide natural camouflage at times of war and gave a Maori confidence of an intimidating appearance. It also showed the person's capacity for pain and endurance.

In the case of males, the moko was generally restricted to the face but, in some cases, the men were tattooed between the waist and the knees. The waist to knee tattoo involved the decoration of swirling double spirals on either buttock (See ILL.5, page 14), stretched down to the knees in an evasive fashion.

ILL.5,

These 'amoco' designs are an example of the designs which gracefully decorated the buttocks.



For a woman, her moko was much less physical and usually only appeared on the lips and chin. Nostrils were also finely tattooed. Another popular site was between the eyebrows and central forehead. The basic motif used, comprised of linked crescents and spirals. A full-face moko in women was exceptional and rare. Moko was also observed on the neck, shoulders, other body parts such as limbs, hips and lower abdomen, but the chin remained the most popular surviving into the 1970's (See ILL.6 and 7, page 15). The technique behind moko was a very skilful one. Women preferred to be tattooed because they believed they would become much more attractive with a painted face than a naked face, which, according to them, looked old and shrivelled. . All permanent tattoos were usually completed while the person was relatively young.

III.6,

Maori women express vanity by decorating the mouth and chin.



ILL.7,

As you can see from this photograph most of the tattooing was complete at an early age. Both young and old adorned different styles of moko. Both women were from Lake Rotoiti and were photographed by William Hammond at Ruato, in 1901.



Maori religion carried the same basic characteristics of all primal religions. They followed very spiritual lives with the belief that human life, alongside the natural world, were highly praised. Their religion was based on the myth of 'Rang and Papa'. It was the story of the creation of the world. Maori religion stated that the earth and sky represented the parents of the world. The sky or heaven was father (Ranginui), and the earth represented the Mother (See ILL.3, page 11). Moko expressed the aesthetic values and the religious beliefs of the environment. Because of their religious beliefs, the tattoo serves to link the sacred beliefs. In other words, it brings them in contact with the supernatural world.

The technique of the moko consisted of a low relief design carved into the skin, using a chisel and light mallet to make the incisions. The painful operation was carried out by a 'tohunga'. The tohunga was a professional who had adopted his skills from his ancestors. His work was strongly honoured and gifts were showered upon him for his skills. The tattooist was the only person allowed to touch the face and head during the operation, as they believed that the head was sacred. The Maori himself was not allowed to feed himself and was fed using a funnel. They used a chisel and light mallet to make the incisions. Black pigment was then rubbed into the cuts, which was sourced from the soot of burnt kauri gum, or the resinous heartwood of the kahikatea. Other instruments could be used such as a comb like object from a seabird's wing bone or a piece of hardwood. The finished moko was rough to touch because of the incisions made to the face. The moko face was covered in spiral scroll, circles and curved lines. No two person's moko were the same. Some crafts men were so highly praised that the head of a dead patron was decapitated, bought, and the skins were preserved for the highly elaborate moko. A member of the family as a memorial either retrieved the heads or in the case of an enemy, they were kept as a type of trophy (See ILL.8 and 9, page 17 & 18).

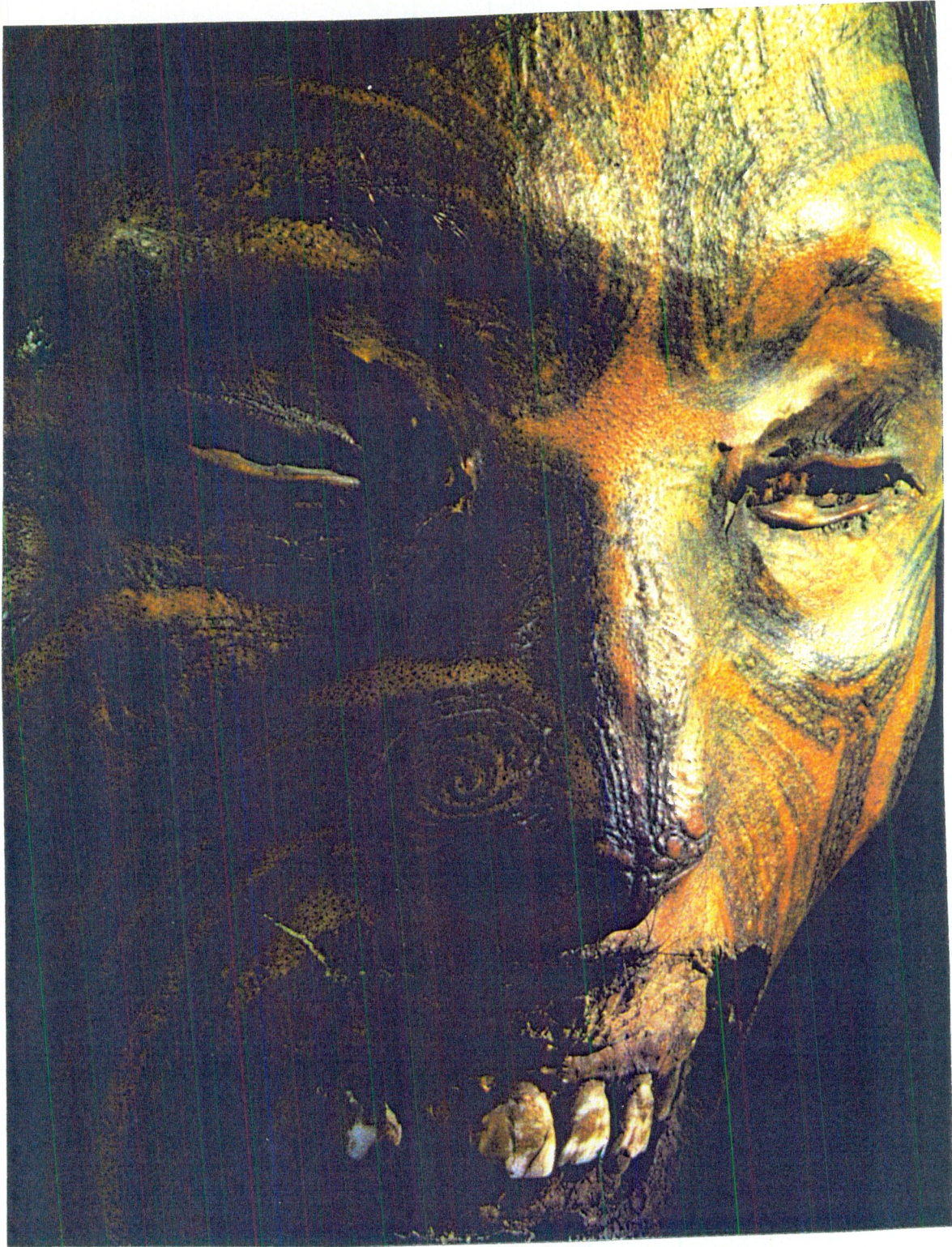
ILL.8,

This is an image of a head of a dead warrior, decapitated and preserved.



ILL 9,

This is another image of a dead warrior's head. Notice the intricate detail in the curvilinear lines.



The lines and curves followed the natural lines of the Maori's face, (See ILL.10, page 19). Elements of the curvilinear style consists of spiral chin patterns, parallel curved lines from the chin to the nose, multiple spirals from the cheek, nose spirals and a series of curving lines from the inside of the eyebrows rising above the brows and turning downwards towards the ears. The temples show rank or position in life. Moko on the cheekbones represented your rank, where you came from and who your ancestors were. The amount of spirals on the cheeks told if the wearer was married. If a Maori married again, another spiral was added to the cheek. Each design represented its own tribe or family group, rank and social-status.

ILL.10,

This Maori chief displays the curves following the natural lines of the face. Note the carved tactile quality of the design.



Some of the North islander's tattoos were made up of vertical parallel lines, which ran from above the cheekbones to the jaw and also a number of curvilinear patterns. This style of Moko was known as 'Puhoro'. An area known as 'Murihiku', which is situated in the south of the island had a strict style of entirely linear patterns. This moko consisted of two vertical lines, which ran parallel to each other across their cheeks. This brings me to the old form of moko known as 'Moko – Kuri', which was adorned by women as well as men. And comprised of short horizontal and vertical lines arranged in groups of three.

From all this evidence it is appropriate to say that the questions, "what are the possible meanings of moko", and "was it used to disguise age by marking the natural lines of the face, or to distinguish between ranks, status or tribes from each other", have been clearly answered. Moko indeed linked a person with his or her cultural heritage and social identity.

Moko served as a passage from this life to the next. It was a symbol of eternal life. This birth and death symbolism is also suggested by the fact that moko also means lizard. Maori's feared lizards because they were linked with the dreaded myth of 'Taniwha' and the very real 'tuatara'. Both a lizard and tuatara shed their skins which gave rise to the Maori belief that they went from life to death to life, and therefore, the lizard became a living example of the Maori's spiritual philosophy of life and death. The Maori believed that when they die they only abandon their bodies and their souls progressed to a higher spiritual domain.

The application of the male moko in the second half of the nineteenth century died out but the female moko still persevered. This has led to the greater importance of the female moko. Today both men and women are taking the moko as a symbol of identity. Modern moko may still have the traditional values as before, but one source of evidence, which I also learned from, was a film, 'Once were Warriors', which

looked at a twentieth century maori family struggling to live honest and proud lives. The father figure of the family bore moko, which clearly reflected his barbarious, rough and abusive personality. The eldest son of the family had been outcast by his father for protecting his mother from her husband's physical abuse. He had left home and joined a gang. On entering this gang 50% of his face was tattooed. The designs tattooed on the gang member's face trace back to the curvilinear spirals of the traditional moko.

A recent article in 'The Star' newspaper, featured the news of a well-known singer, Robbie Williams.² He had his whole life story tattooed along his right arm. A top tattoo artist, Te Rangitu Netana, decorated his arm. The tattoo artist tells the story of the millionaire chart-toppers life using Maori myth and symbolism. The meaning behind the swirling designs are only known to the singer. Robbie William's spiritual beliefs, hopes and ambitions for the future lie in the black tribal tattoo he adorns. (See ILL.11a & b, page 22).

²Ref. 'The Star' newspaper, Friday 5th, 1999, page 3.

ILL 11a,

Robbie Williams having his
Tattoo engraved into his arm.



ILL. 11b,

These photographs feature the
singer, Robbie Williams. The
Maori style tattoo on his right
arm tells the story of his life,
his spiritual beliefs, plus his
hopes and ambitions for the
future. Only the singer knows
the true meanings behind the
swirling symbols tattooed on
his arm.



In the last twenty years, however, through the of contemporary tattoo artists, moko designs have become popular again, among tattoo lovers in America and Europe.

Chapter 3

Japanese Tattooing regarding the Yakuza gangs

The traditional art of Japanese tattooing was known as 'irezumi'. It was a very complex and beautiful form of tattooing which was applied with a lot of skill. Months of hard work transformed the naked body into a masterpiece, (See ILL. 13, page 26). The style of 'irezumi' is now in decline but can be seen on men working on building sites, beaches and criminal gang members such as the 'Yakuza'.

The early designs of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries indicated differences in rank and later became primarily ornamental and decorative in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was a time when merchants were not allowed to shroud themselves in fine silks or gold and silver, it was only the nobles who could indulge in such lavish items. In conflict to this the merchants gratified themselves in secret tattoos which they hid under what seemed a plain kimono but was actually embroidered in gold inside. Later in the next century, tattoos were classed with the lower and criminal classes because they had now become little more than an implement of punishment. Criminals endured in tattoos, which marked the forehead and the areas around the eyes, which indicated to the public that the person had committed a crime. A criminal was isolated and rejected by the public as a result.

Fishmongers and gangsters were associated with the lower class. Geishas, which were a form of female prostitute, were tattooed with amazing elegance, usually on the back. The classical art of Japanese tattooing has deserved a strong reputation as a fine art. The art of irezumi has adopted the same admiration as moko, to the extent that in Japan irezumi has its own gallery, where the skin of dead patrons are preserved and on display, (See ILL 12, page 25).

ILL.12,

A Japanese museum dedicated to displaying elaborate examples of irezumi may fascinate some people, while others are disgusted by the scale of the designs. They may find them too overpowering and aesthetically offensive.



ILL. 13,

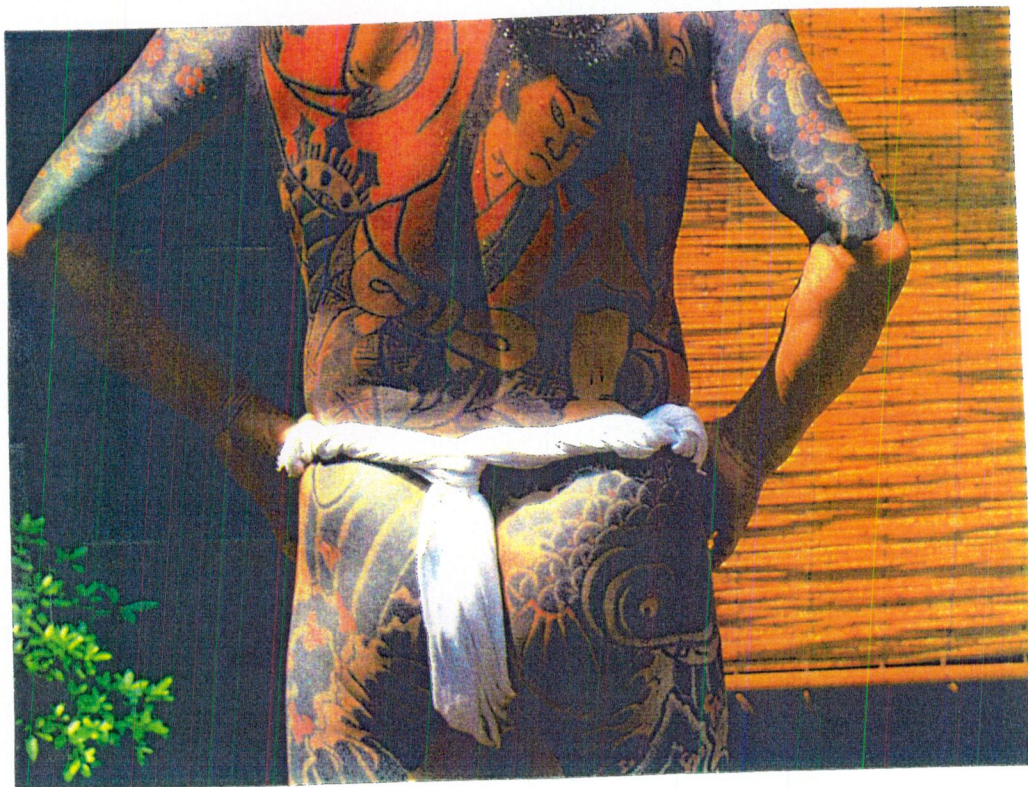
This is an image of the beautiful form of irezumi; you can see why it takes months to complete. A lot of hard work and skill went into perfecting the art of irezumi.



The general attitude of Japanese people is that tattooing 'clothes' the body and gives personality to its nakedness. The nude body is considered defensive and ugly, where as in western society it is considered as a beautiful creation of the world. A finished irezumi tattoo covers the entire back, buttocks, and both arms to the elbow and the upper thigh leaving the middle of the chest, stomach and abdomen undecorated, (See ILL.14a- 14g, page 27, 28, 29& 30).

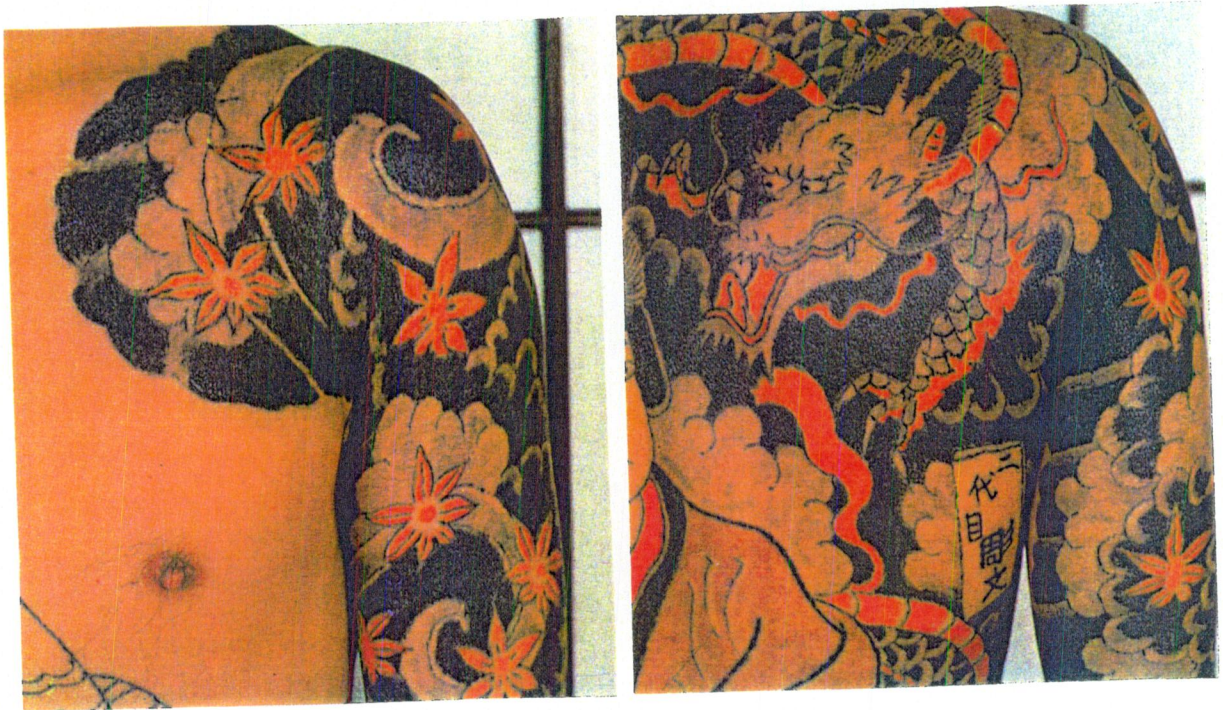
ILL. 14a,

This is an image of another finished irezumi tattoo.



ILL. 14b and 14c,

The arm of an irezumi patron is tattooed from the shoulder to the elbow.



ILL.14d,

The tattooed leg of a Yakuza member is tattooed from the waist to the knees.



ILL. 14e,

This is an image of the art, which covered the entire buttocks.



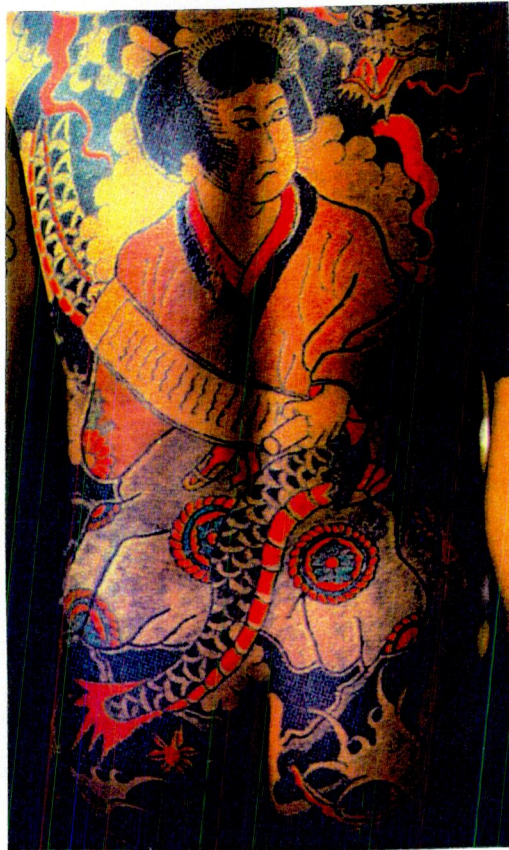
ILL. 14f,

The neck, head, the lower parts of the arms and from the knees down are the only parts of the body, which is not tattooed.



ILL. 14g,

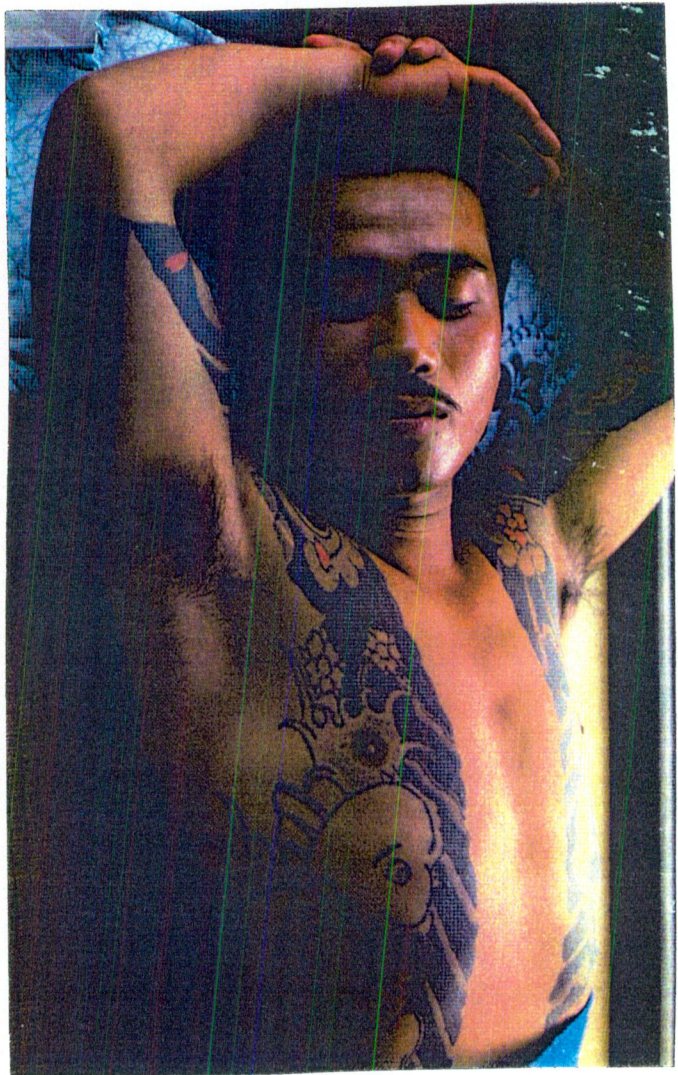
This is a full back tattoo, which has become a canvas of art.



To get the whole parts of the respected irezumi done costs thousands of pounds, which made it difficult for labourmen to afford. It takes more than a year to completely decorate a whole body. The artists have done large collections of traditional patterns from which the client chooses. As with contemporary tattoos, the design is outlined in black pigment (See ILL. 14a and 14b, page.37 and 28) and then the variety of coloured dyes are applied. The artist uses a number of triangular shaped gouges and chisels in his right hand, which is rubbed against the brush full of dye, (See ILL. 15a and 15b, page 31). This is held in the left hand, and then pushed up under the skin with the coloured dyes as soon as the thick clear line has been achieved with the chisel and brush.

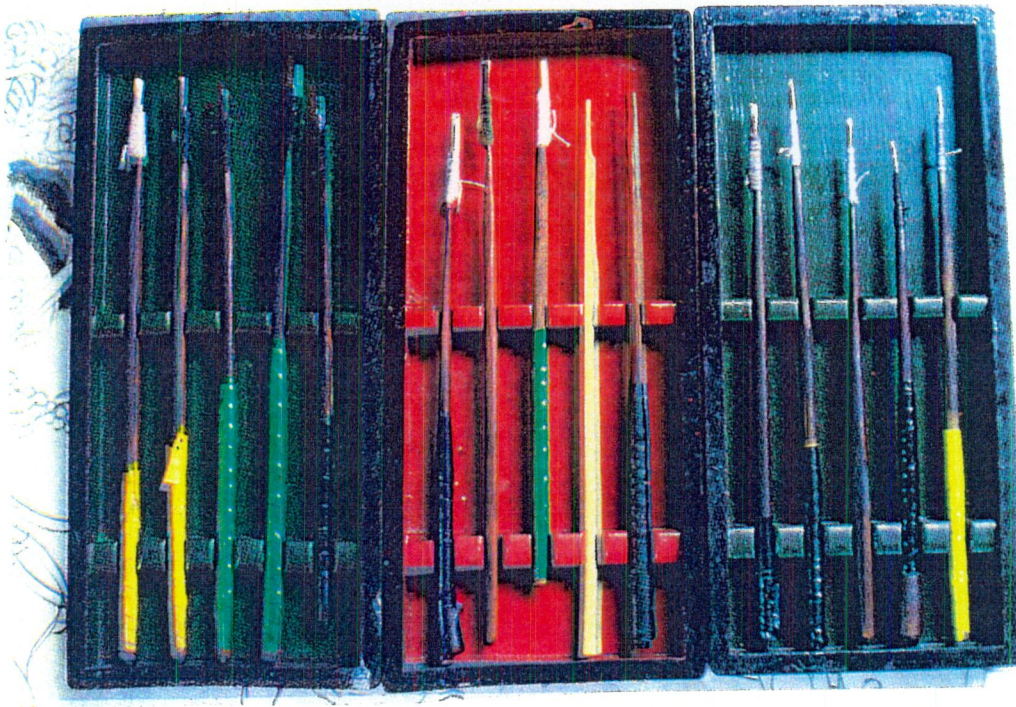
ILL. 15a and 15b,

The outline of the design is first done in black pigment. Any other areas that will be shaded in are done so.



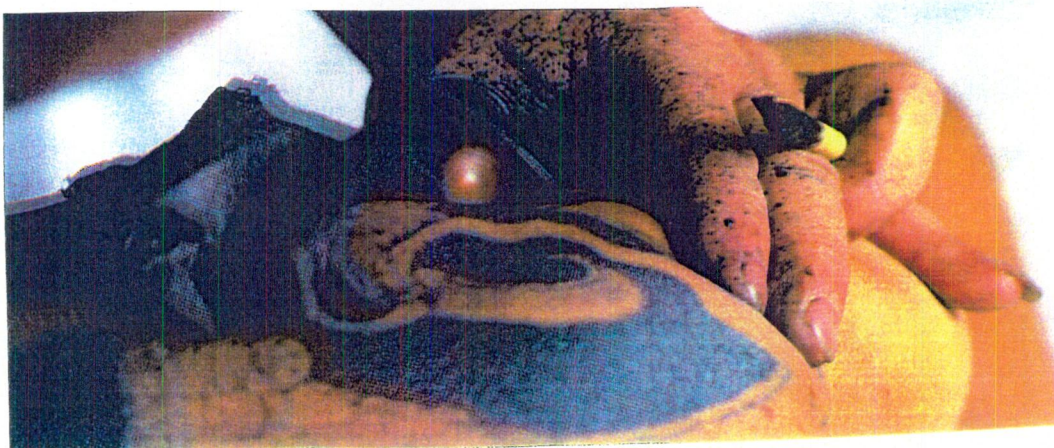
ILL. 16a,

The tattoo artists would regularly use this kind of instrument to prick the skin and push the dye in under the skin.



ILL. 16b,

The amount of time it took in having a tattoo applied this way resulted in a lot of pain and in some ways represented courage and strength.



The designs include motifs of the dragon, which represents strength and knowingness, the carp, folk heroes, Chinese motifs and Japanese gods. Designs also depict landscapes, floral designs, famous lovers, young men and snakes, (See ILL. 17a, b and c, page 33 & 35). Two famous artists named Hokusai (1760-1849) and Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) are responsible for the designs, (See ILL. 18, page 36).

ILL.17a,

Looking at this tattoo reveals the detail in one design. The dragon played a huge spiritual part in some peoples lives.



ILL. 17b,

With movement of the body some designs can come to life as the tattoo artist always considered the area of the body being tattooed.



ILL. 17c,

You can see from this image how the black pigment appeared blue under Japanese skin.



ILL.18,

This is a Japanese print depicting 'The Dragon tattooed Shishin engaged in a fight by Kuniyoshi. It dates back to the Edo- Period, (1600-1868).



The colour source for the designs have been taken from the Edo-Period (1600-1868), (See ILL. 17a, b and c, page 27-29). The dominant tint is black which appears blue under Japanese skin. Green and light blue are used along with a beautiful red which is the most painful to apply and therefore only a small ratio of it was applied. Vermilion is used to define detailed areas. The backgrounds to each design are a bluish grey, which may vary in intensity to give the design a speckled or textured effect. In contrast to this a deeper blue or red may be used to define the appearance of birds, flowers and faces. Unlike the Europeans the Japanese tattooists could perfect their designs giving them tone and perspective.

The clients body dictates the form of the design, again the curvilinear technique resembles that of the maori and the curls and swirls of Art Nouveau. There is intelligence behind a Japanese irezumi. The artists even considers the natural lines and motions of the body when applying the designs. In some instances, on the moving of muscles on a tattooed body, you might see a tree blowing in the wind, a fish swimming slowly or the graceful swoop of a bird on the wing, (See ILL. 17a, b, and c, page 32). It is truly an amazing form of art with the fact that they consider the body as a moving creation and can produce movement in their designs by doing this.

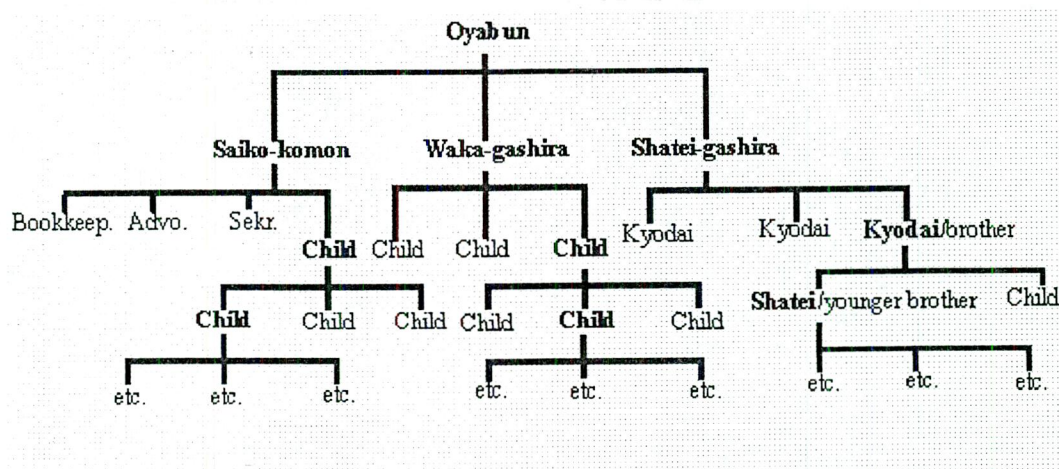
From the years 1868 to present, the modern period, it is understood that the basic clientele of irezumi is close to that of the Edo-Period (1600-1868) which was essentially members of the urban lower classes. The Yakuza gang was known to bear irezumi. You may ask the question, where does the criminal interest in tattoo come from? Gangs create an ideal world for themselves, with there own language, dress codes, and leadership hierarchy. Most gang members are literally self-created; as may be evident in their muscular bodies and by the scars they bear. They provide visual proof of having survived combat conditions. Gang culture provided the opportunity to become a man in the classical sense- to display courage, to build codes of masculine honour and again to be a combat hero. Pain as the price for the construction of physical manhood is also signified by tattoo.

The Yakuza is an all men society dating back as far as 1612. The first gang of yakuza did not become known until the middle of the 1700's. Their members included the 'bakuto', who were the traditional gamblers, the 'tekiya', who were street peddlers who controlled fairs and markets. A third group known as the 'guerntai', who were hoodlums, were added to the gang in the post World War II era. Members of the group derived from the same background, poor, landless, delinquents and misfits. Once the group had collected a large group of members, they began to form families. The leader of each family was known as the 'oyabun-kobun'. He acted as a father figure providing and declaring advice, protection and help. The 'kobun' acted as the

child swearing a devoted loyalty and service to the 'oyabun' when they needed it, (See ILL. 19, page 38). Two types of Yakuza exist, clan-yakuza and freelance-yakuza. Freelance Yakuza is a yakuza that does not commit any big crimes and belongs to a little group of hustlers. Clan-Yakuza can be compared to the Sicilian Mafia "family". They have been known to tip the police of about crimes that the freelance-yakuza haven't commit.

ILL. 19,

This family tree shows rank and status of the men in the Yakuza gang. Everyone obeys its gangleader, but it's always the Oyabuns word that counts.



In Yakuza society if a member of the group is imprisoned for any reason, he gains recognition and authority for it. The Yakuza have built their empire making a living from unlawful business such as gambling, drugs, prostitution and loan sharking. Most of their money is made from gambling, mostly from dice games. Many members of the group run bars and restaurants that keep a room for the strict purpose of gambling.

The prostitution of young girls, most of whom are younger than eighteen, can make some groups more than a million dollars a month from this type of business. Men pay a membership fee of about a thousand dollars. Once a member, a man has his choice of many young girls, which he chooses by looking at photographs. It costs about two hundred dollars for a date and up to a thousand dollars again for sex.

Most of the money made from the above business is used to buy weapons. A Yakuza territory is very important to them. If a member from another territory imposes on another's, they protect it using violence. The Yakuza are one of the country's biggest social problems. They are known world-wide and feared by the general public because of their involvement in illegal businesses and the killing of innocent citizens in their personal battles.

For our purposes the most significant trait of Yakuza membership was a tattoo, (See ILL. 13, page 26 and 14a-g, page 27-30). No statistics show that many people, who are not gangsters associated with Yakuza groups, bear tattoos. Supposedly the tattoos originated as a means of guarding against would-be infiltrators and informers. The use of tattoos also came from the criminal aspect of bakuto in the 1700's. Criminals were usually tattooed with a black ring around the arm. For every ring tattooed it represented each offence committed. Tattoos soon became a test of strength undergoing hundreds of hours of pain for the complete back tattoo. The tattoo also represented a misfit, always unwilling to adapt themselves to society.

Japanese tattooing or irezumi has a very high reputation among people throughout the world. It is regarded as an acceptable tradition of Japanese art. It would be true to say that a tattooed person and their society recognise that the tattoo is an exaggerated

statement that challenges the principles of Japanese culture. In Japan a strong character is not well thought of. If a tattooed man is certain of what he likes and what he doesn't like, he will not be able to adapt and compromise in the manner his culture finds both necessary and attractive. Many of the tattooed people put themselves together differently. They do not structure any presumed inner man, they structure the outer.

Chapter Four

Russian Prison Tattoos

This chapter is dedicated to the little-known art of tattoo design in prison camps of the former Soviet Union. Subject to the harsh conditions, the prisoners developed a complex language of prisoner slang, secret hand signs, and tattoos to allow themselves to communicate secretly. Tattooing first became common practice in Russian prisons and Stalinist Gulags, in the late 1930's to the 1940's. The Ministry, who were like the Russian F.B.I, had long studied the secret language spoken and written by criminals and prisoners for Internal Affairs, who hoped to understand it in order to improve their ability to reduce crime. Tattoos played an important part in this underground secret language of criminals and prisoners in the Soviet Union. In the 1920's, the Soviet researchers discovered the highly developed sub-culture of tattooing.

The Russian prison population was one of the largest in the world. Thirty five million people were incarcerated between the mid- 1960's and 1980's, twenty to thirty million of these prisoners bore tattoos.³ Each tattoo conveyed to other prisoner's information about the prisoner, which gave messages like, "Don't mess with me, I am head of all prisoners in this prison camp" or "Don't confide in me- I may not be trustworthy." The latter message would be the most common example of a tattoo that would be applied forcibly, without the consent of the prisoner receiving the tattoo.

The images adorned by the prisoners gave a clear view into the background of the wearer, with relation to their rank within social system of the jailed. The tattoos symbolised the wearers disregard for official justice and punishment. The phrases and

³ Ref. Alix Stewart Lambert, www.word.com/place/russia_tattoos/, 16/10/98, page 1 of 3, 'Russian Prison Tattoos.

images adorned by a prisoner mock the political system with the idea that they would never “reform” within the jails. Alix Stewart Lambert a criminologist, also stated, “For a convict, prison is a crime college”⁴ As for female inmates and gang members, “People are wild animals”⁵. The prisoners didn’t care about Soviet laws, the only rules they followed were the ones they made up in their heads. Many of them had no destiny.

Not too much is known about the actual drawing of tattoo in these prison camps, although we are guaranteed that the conditions are unlike those in typical tattoo parlours in the rest of the world. Because the prisoners had no access to normal tattoo ink, they had to resort to using burned shoe leather and urine. Despite the difficulties the prisoners had, the tattoo designs were often very interesting, complex and scary, (See ILL. 22d, page 49). Tattooing in prisons was done in secrecy, away from the prison wardens. If you were caught with any tools for tattooing, they were immediately confiscated. Another way to be caught was if your tattoo was sore or infected, you would be punished for abusing government property.

The prison tattoos showed Christian and non-religious themes, (See ILL.20a and 20b, page 43 & 44) In Russian terms a cross can mean subordination or slavery. Some prisoners were forced by other inmates to bear some tattoos as warnings or punishment for their crimes; for example sex offenders are usually tattooed with a dagger running across their shoulder blades and through their necks. It is a well-known fact for hatred against rapists and peadeophlyes.

⁴ Ref. As above, page 9 of 3.

⁵ Ref. As above, page 9 of 3.

ILL. 20a,

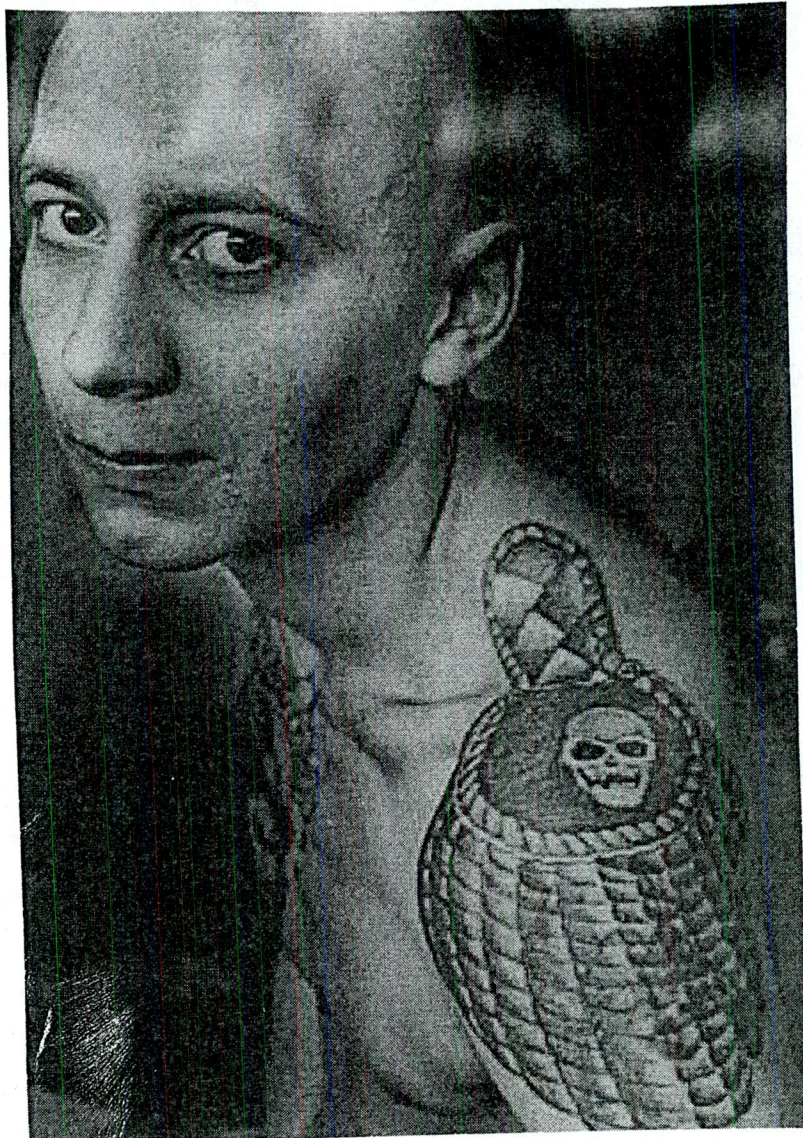
Religious images played
a huge part in Russian
prison tattoos, The Virgin
Mary with Baby Jesus etc.



ILL. 20b,

Non-religious themes feature also,

Like military badges and symbols

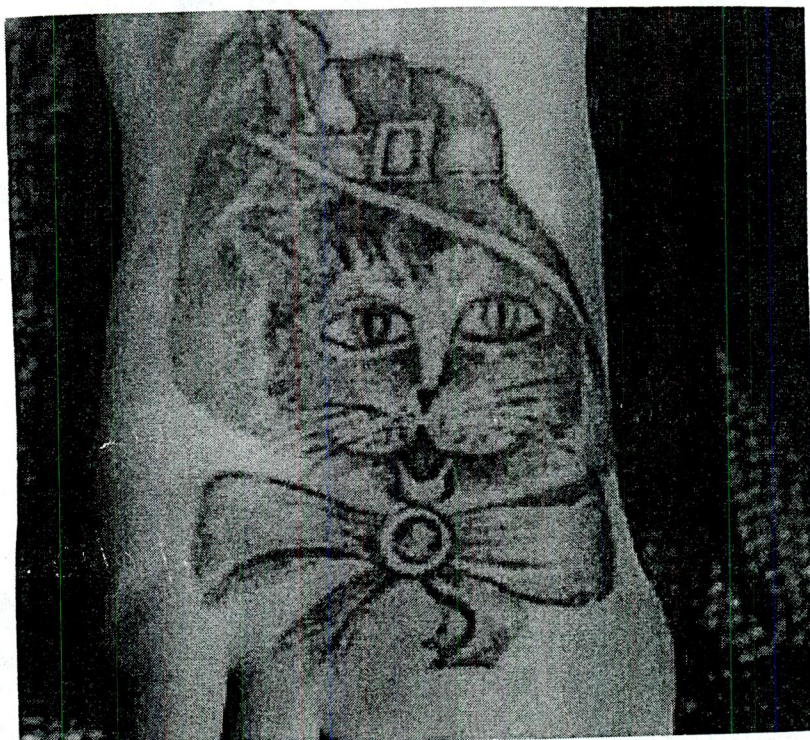


The mark of a church on the chest of a prisoner indicated that prison was the only home for a thief. Each spire represented each year the prisoner had spent inside or the number of times they had been to prison.

Nazi imagery was very common in Russian prisons. A SS. Insignia indicated that the prisoner hadn't confessed to his crime, (See ILL.20b, page 44). They often signified the criminals accomplishments and other aspects of the inmates life history, for example, it could signify that the prisoner was associated with Nazi's or whether they had a criminal history etc. The presence of a cat tattoo represented that the prisoner was a thief. If the prisoner was involved in a group crime he bore several cats, one cat signified that he was alone in the act. The head of a tomcat indicated and brought luck to the thief and also stated 'not to mess with the tattooee', (See ILL. 21, page 45). If a prisoner believed they were innocent and should be free they got an image of birds flying over the horizon tattooed on them, (See ILL. 22a, page 46). Barbed wire adorned across the forehead signified a life sentence without the possibility of parole, (See ILL. 22d, page 37). Skulls also represented life sentence and signified that you were a murderer. Some of the common tattoos for the leaders of camp prisoners were subclavial "stars". A tattoo with an illustration of a monster, represented extremism and anarchism of the one who had the tattoo.

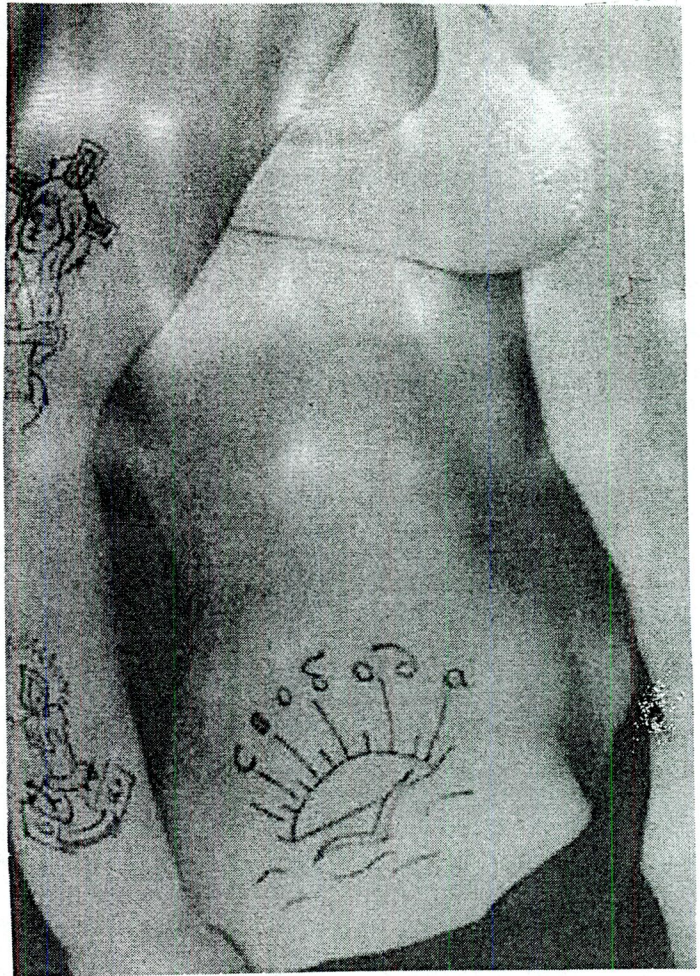
ILL. 21,

To be tattooed with a 'tomcat', you were a thief. No one would mess with you, it signified that you were a first class criminal thief.



ILL. 22a,

This woman believed she
was innocent, hence the
tattoo of the free flying
bird tattoo.



All of the above images were chosen by the prisoners themselves, usually from popular art or traditional Russian icons, (See ILL. 22a, b, c and d, page 38 & 39). The above images were converted into private social and political language that could be understood by fellow prisoners or ex-cons on the outside. Throughout history the reasons, styles and techniques of tattooing have developed amazingly. It is important to categorise tattoos and tattooists because human activities are very regularly complicated and different to each other. What we can do is indicate the sexual, social and superstitious reasons surrounding the amazing art form that tattoo has become.

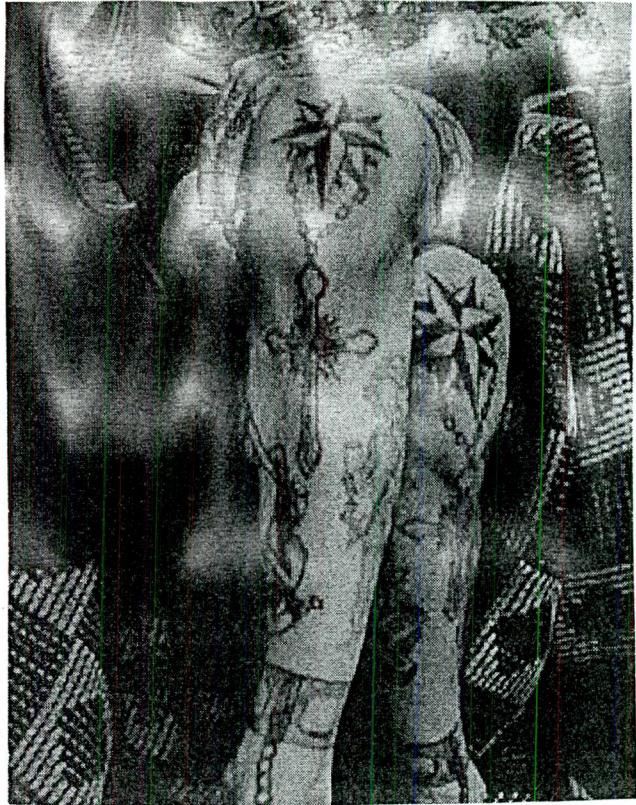
ILL.22b,

This is an image of a prisoner bearing the symbol of a cross. This signifies bondage, lower rank in society or slavery. Some tattoos are forcibly applied to the prisoner as a sign of punishment; for example a sex offender can be tattooed with a dagger running across their shoulder blades and through their necks. This way other inmates would know of their crime and would become isolated.



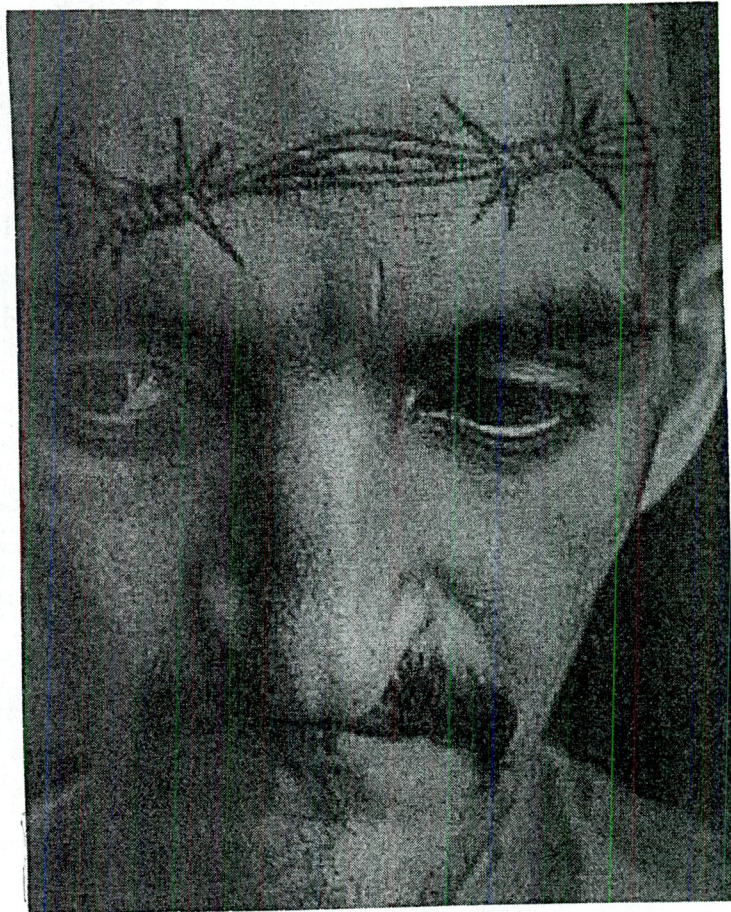
ILL.22c,

The star on this prisoners knee represents how long a prisoner has spent in prison. Each point represents every year that the prisoner has spent inside.



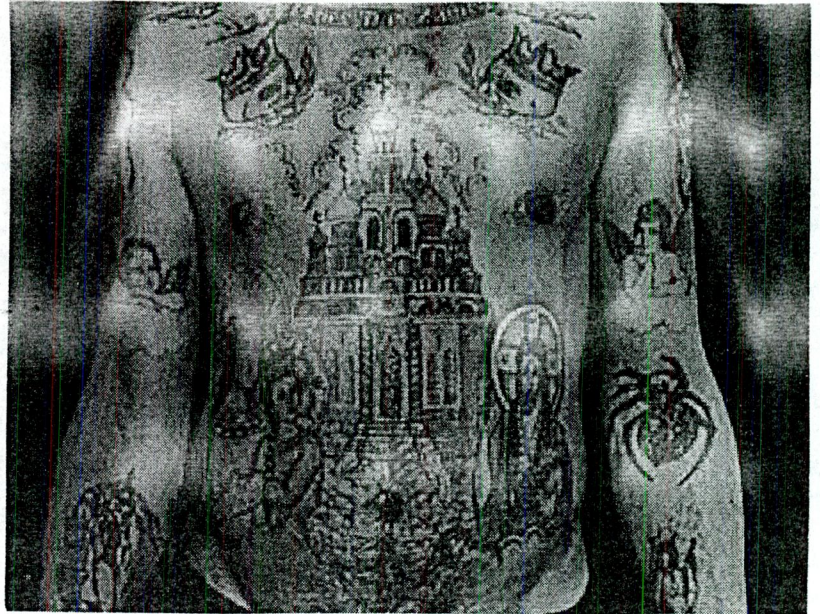
ILL.22d,

Barbed wire tattooed across the forehead signifies a life sentence without the possibility of parole.



ILL. 22e,

This prisoner has so many
Tattoos on his body it obvious
That he has been involved in
Crime and has obviously been
Imprisoned for a lot of them.
The spider tattoo on his left
in-arm, signifies that he may
have been or still is involved in
drug-addiction.



Chapter 5

Contemporary Tattoos

Since the early 1960's, the practice and quality of tattoos improved so much throughout much of America, that it has been called 'The Tattoo Renaissance'. Concepts as well as subject matter and techniques developed and continually influence Europeans. A Euro-American style has developed over ten to twenty years. From this, The Tattoo Renaissance (See ILL. 23a & 23b, page 51) emerged and continually develops. An international folk style, (See ILL.24a & 24b, page 52), which was a collection of many varied designs often applied to one client by numerous artists, resulted in confliction of styles. The range of designs and sizes would question whether the renaissance was originally an improvement on previous tattoo styles at all. This style was characterised by a pretentious mass of competing designs, which often paid little attention to the natural contours and forms of the body, and therefore proved to be quite large in size and subject matter; for example, roses merged into serpents which became feathers, crying eyes and American flags etc. Not only did these designs look aesthetically conflicting; they were often gaudy looking to the client. It was in the 1960's that the tattoo guild of America was formed. Committed talented tattooists who were willing to adapt and develop with changing social and economic conditions set it up. Though informal, it really improved the art. Everything from technique, to maintenance of equipment, and trade secrets on how to improve designs, were shared. Not unlike tattoo artists today, practitioners before the renaissance had very little training and usually learned from observation of other tattooists.

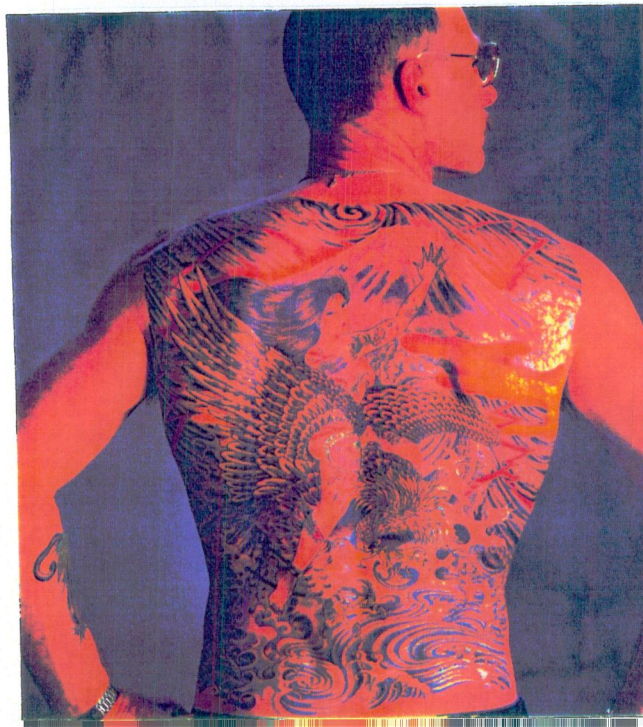
ILL. 23a,

This back tattoo is by Bob Roberts, 1986. Most of his clients are musicians and punks. This mans tattoo features a woman on a merry-go-round; there is great depth and tonal values visible in this design.



ILL. 23b,

This is a tattoo by Ed Hardy 1985-1986. Hardy identifies with his own style of tattooing, which express his experiences. This image shows a woman sitting on an eagle with a volcano in the background.



ILL. 24a and 24b,

These images deal with a lot of different styles, sizes and images. There is a relationship between the design and the forms of the body. These tattoos are from International folk style.



The International folk style, (See ILL.23a & 23b, page 51) phased out from around 1960, which gave way to a new avant-garde tattooing style. This was a time of liberation from the repetitious and standardised designs, to the new designs. They included new conceptions, with the reinterpreting of old designs. The emergence of this new style has made large changes to the industry. Sterilisation of equipment is now practically global, access to information, equipment and supplies are a lot easier and the traditional designs available have been expanded to include Japanese tattooing, fine-line, tribal designs and the clientele has branched out. It was unusual that these changes in styles were occurring, considering that tattooing became prohibited throughout many American states during the 1950's and the 1960's, like Orlando, Florida. It was prohibited because it seemed safer to have a tattoo done under the supervision of medical attention. Up until the late 1970's tattooing remained illegal, except under medical supervision.

The Tattoo Renaissance in America was pioneered by two main artists: Phil Sparrow and Sailor Jerry Collins, (See ILL. 25, page 54) whose innovative work during the 1950's not only improved standards but also inspired other artists to explore designs. The new approach to the art improved relationships with their clients and also created a professional image of tattooing by demanding thorough hygienic conditions. The excellence of these artists out-standing work stimulated a creative and competitive atmosphere throughout the West, (See ILL. 25, page 54). The phenomenon of tattooing improved internationally.

ILL. 25,

Sailor Jerry Collins tattooed this mans stomach in 1964. His work was an inspiration to many artists and he also inspired the healthy competition which spread throughout the West.



There are now large collections of historical styles, which give the client a greater selection to choose from. From this variety the tattoo artists can develop their own style and indulge in tattooing that they are comfortable and well skilled at. Tattoo conventions take place throughout Europe and America. The biggest event in Europe is The Tattoo Expo held annually in Dunstable, England. The festival is organised to promote tattooing but there is also an important social aspect. The Expo is like a live animated illustration of characters, colours, images and designs. It has been running for six years now. The participants and the artwork produced, display new subject matter incorporating ancient and traditional as well as modern, futuristic designs, (See ILL. 26, 27, & 28, page 55, 56 and 57). Expo reflects the improving contemporary scene. The perspective, tones and expression achievable are very impressive. There

are much more colours available now, which helps the artist to record clearer and more distinct information. Contemporary tattooing can achieve results as vivid as any visual image on paper or canvas.

ILL.26,

Image, style and scale vary at the 'Tattoo Expo', in Dunstable, England. The tattoos are designed and finished at the expo, you can walk around and watch the work in progress. This lady shows an all over back and arm tattoo. The tropical water design displays an underwater image with vibrantly coloured plants, fish and creatures.



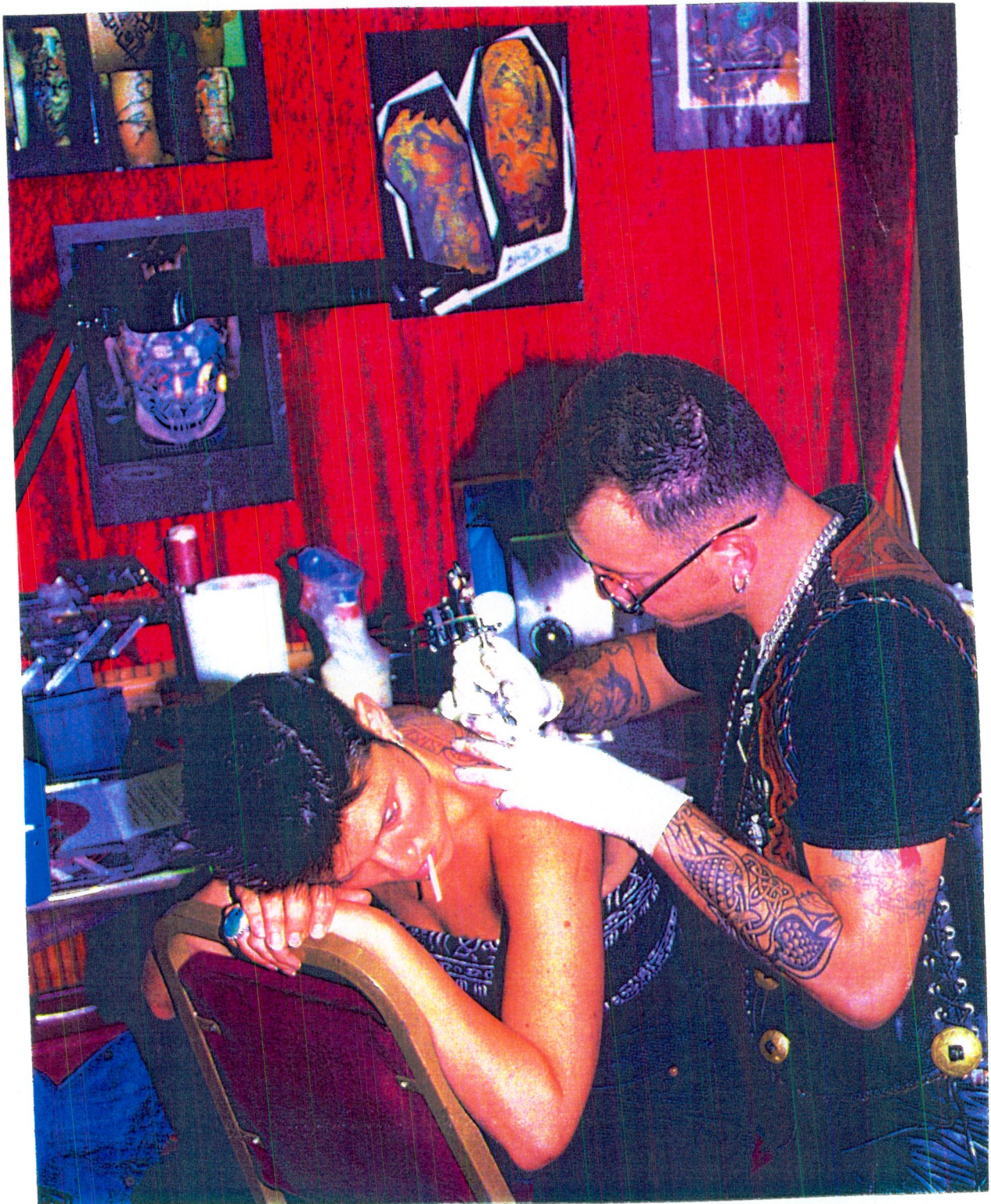
ILL.27,

This lady displays a high thigh tattoo. The thigh is painful to have tattooed because it sits on the bone. The dolphin design is made up of three colours, blue and black.



ILL.28,

This is an example of a stand at The Tattoo Expo', you get a great chance to see what goes on in a tattoo parlour.



As I mentioned in chapter two, the first example of tattooing was discovered in Egypt over four thousand years ago and was worn exclusively by women. Throughout history women have had as much to do with tattooing as men did. However women do not indulge in it as much as men in contemporary society. An increasing amount of women have indulged in it, recently, as it has become a fashion trend. A woman might want to keep her tattoo a secret. Tattooing can be discreet and elegantly sexy. Symbols like roses butterflies and ladybirds can be quite feminine. Women can contradict the idea of enhancing their beauty by applying a tattoo and then hiding it from society. Women sporting tattoos can reflect the change occurring in societies roles, another example is women becoming mechanic or presidents. In contemporary society roles are being reversed. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion but it seems quite ironically narrow minded to me that someone could accept and appreciate a tattoo if it is adorned by a man but rebuke with disgust at the sight of a female tattoo.

There are a variety of people acquiring tattoos in contemporary society. Many tattoos are a symbol of affection for example, tattooing the name of a partner or family member. A tattoo can signify membership of a gang, interest in music or association with a club. The choice of design and 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, buttocks or shoulder. They are usually small and delicate to compliment the body while providing intimate personal pleasure. Men usually prefer large- scale designs located in clearly visible places, the most popular places are the arms, chest and back. Tattooees allow their skin to become a canvas for body art.

When I picture a tattooist, I picture a large man with either long hair or a bald man. He wears a sleeveless black tee shirt with 'Megadeath' printed on the front of it. He may have a mistache or beard and five earrings in one ear. There are thousands of tattoo parlours around the world. To join this culture as an artist is no easy task. Often

one would have to be accepted into the social group and then go through a long process of apprenticeship. Learning the history and the traditions of tattoo is important to most, and is almost mandatory for those artists who want to gain recognition. The culture is inside, circular and surrounding, and to become part of it you must learn about the art. Tattoos skills and knowledge of the trade must still be obtained by spending time in apprenticeship; some professionals have art or university art skills. The new generation of recruits to the industry, are essentially interested in the medium not the economic factor. Some tattooists may have been patrons to rock stars, or film stars. 'Te Rangitu Netana', the tattoo artist that tattooed Robbie Williams, indulges in high economic security as a result of tattooing this famous person, and have become internationally renowned for it, (See ILL.11a & b page 22, Robbie Williams). They have such a constantly increasing repertoire of designs to choose from, and can recreate any design the client themselves may have designed.

The modern western method of tattooing employs an electric hand held tattoo machine. It resembles a heavy metal ball-point pen and sounds like a dentist drill. It is operated by a foot pedal with a variable speed controlled by a rheostat and is determined by the tattoo artist depending on desirable work being done. There are two types of machine, one for outlining the design and another for shading in. Most tattooists don't penetrate the skin enough for it to bleed. However some people will tend to bleed more than others, some may heal slower and some clients may react to an allergic reaction to the inks used.

There is a myth that tattooing is a very painful process. The level of pain depends on many things, the placement of the design and pain threshold. It is less painful to have

a tattoo done on a fleshy part of the body, like the buttocks, shoulder, or biceps. Bony areas like the ankle, hips and spine tend to be a lot more painful. Most tattoo artists refuse to tattoo the face and hands in order to avoid offensive attention to the client or themselves. A visible tattoo on the face or hands may influence a person's ability to get a job. A lot of employers will not employ someone with such tattoos. The tattooee does not look very presentable; for example someone with a tattoo serving food does not look very pleasing or inviting.

Standard designs are applied using acetate stencils, which can be re-used. Usually you can enter a parlour and chose a design from the artist's portfolio, the bigger and more detailed, the more expensive. A heavy black outline is first made; the rest is then filled in from a colour palette of usually, red, blue, green, yellow and brown.

Reproducing an artwork on someone's skin can caused problems for a tattoo artist. A tattoo artist develops his or her own style of working. Some tattoo artists may be put off by an outside design as it may not tie in with their own style of working. It is worrying to the extent that it may cause the artist problems in the reproduction of a design. Any mistake in colour or placement was immediately apparent. It was not easy to hide errors. Nowadays tattooists have an unlimited palette of commercial colours to chose from so the colours can be blended more evenly.

All professional tattooists should be professional about their job by checking instruments regularly for repair and most important hygiene. Each tattooist has there own level of technical and trade secrets, these include the mixing of pigments, sources for designs, equipment, supplies and the construction and maintenance. The duration for a tattoo depends on the design. A small rose tattoo may take only fifteen minutes to finish whereas a full back tattoo can take weeks or months. A five-inch-square tattoo would take one to three hours to complete. Most of the inks used by tattoo artists today are hypo-allergenic, but there have been formal complaints to the colour red as it tends to heal a lot slower and tends to be itchier than other colours. A bandage is applied to help the healing process. After this puss, blood, and some of the

ink will seep out to form a scab, which falls off within a week. Within a few weeks the skin heals fully for the client to reveal their tattoo. Prices vary depending on the tattooist, the size and detail of the tattoo. Some artists may charge by the hour, or they may estimate based on the tattoo's design, placement and size. Arms and legs are usually the most popular parts of the body to be tattooed, and the cheapest.

Nowadays tattooing is not considered permanent since the removal process was introduced. Until recently, the removal process was fairly gruesome, relying on surgical incisions, dermabrasion, or chemical salabrasion, which often were unsuccessful in removing all traces of a tattoo. A laser treatment is now available and the results have been successful. The machine sends out short bursts of laser energy that are absorbed by the tattoo ink, this in turn breaks up the particles of tattoo pigment, which in turn again is broken down by the body. The process is expensive depending on the scale of the tattoo and detail of design. A two-to-three inch tattoo would probably take twenty minutes; a three-to-five inch can require up to three treatments. Large-scale tattoos would be tackled bit by bit, taking it in ten-by-ten inch sections.

From a technical point of view tattoo artists have a lot to learn with technology improving all the time. They must also learn about the anatomy, colour, line, and form and also to perfect their use of the medium. Like the art world the tattoo domain has its own historical values, customs, and creative trends.

Conclusion

I hope to have covered the art of tattooing by analysing three tattoo sources. Having studied them I have isolated the social and aesthetic meanings behind tattoos. The meanings behind tattoos are complex and superficially similar methods have diverse ends. Thus, Maori moko tattooing expresses the status of a wealthy and admired warrior, the irezumi tattoo that the Yakuza bear symbolises membership of a gang and the Russian prison tattoos represent what crime has been committed or how many years have been spent in prison. Tattooing in some societies is the most important of the arts, and in many cases is termed a fine art. Most of us have forgotten that perhaps the first works of art were dedicated to the combination of form and colour, which was carried out on the skin.

Tattooing is permanent, well as good as if you can't afford laser treatment, and should be considered carefully. Remember first impressions last, a tattoo acquired at fifteen will be interpreted in the same way at fifty. Many people who regret their tattoos acquired them at an early age when many of them had them done as a symbol of rebellious youth, non-conformity or immature humour. The art of tattooing was always associated with the lower working class and has however expanded in recent years to include many middle class well-educated patrons who consider tattooing as an artistic form of expression. In my opinion I would associate it with hippies, bikers, soldiers, criminals and clubbers. It is because it has become a fashion whim that I think it may have become popular among the middle class. I believe that it is a way in which human nature can explore colour. Tattooing is a way to transform the physical appearance of a person. It almost becomes a badge of individuality. We wear a certain trend of clothes to portray a type of image, the same happens to a tattooee. Tattoos should not make a statement that the possessor is a sub-cultural criminal or an anti-social thug. Society should explore tattooing as a way of design or art form and not look into the psychological meanings behind it.

Tattoos like so many other social activities must always be considered as an individual matter. The main reason why people argue over tattoos is because it permanently marks the skin. In order for it to be accepted it needs to be understood, this way it can be appreciated for its social and personal values.

It is clear that the art of tattooing is not a dying or decaying skill. I believe that there will always be enthusiastic clients with various backgrounds. The future of tattoo remains as undefined as its history. Hopefully it will receive the recognition it deserves and will be given status as an 'artform'.

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- ILL. 22b- The star represented how many years you spent in prison.
- ILL. 22c- Barbed wire tattoos signify a life sentence.
- ILL. 22d- The spider on this man's arm represents drug addiction.

Chapter Four: Contemporary Tattooing

- ILL. 23a- A tattoo by Bob Roberts, 1986.
- ILL. 23b- Tattoo by Ed Hardy, 1985-6
- ILL. 24a- International Folk style tattoo, by Bert Grimm, 1930's- 1940's.
- ILL. 24b- International Folk style tattoo, by Bert Grimm, 1940's.
- ILL. 24c- This prisoner has a lot of tattoos, each having their own significance.
The spider tattoo symbolises drug addiction.
- ILL. 25- Tattoo by Sailor Jerry Collins, 1964.
- ILL. 26- An example of some of the tattoos seen at the 'Tattoo Expo'.
- ILL. 27- A woman modelling one of the designs on display at the 'Tattoo Expo'.
- ILL. 28- One of the stands at the 'Tattoo Expo'.

List of Footnotes:

- * ¹ Ref. page 220, Collins English Dictionary, published by Wm. Collins & Co. Ltd. 1981.
- * ²Ref. 'The Star' newspaper, Friday 5th, 1999, page 3.
- * ³ Ref. Alix Stewart Lambert, www.word.com/place/russia_tattoos/, 16/10/98, page 1 of 3, 'Russian Prison Tattoos.
- * ⁴ Ref. As above, page 9 of 3.
- * ⁵ Ref. As above, page 9 of 3.

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