

The Early History of Tattoo

Tattoo art has been around for a very long time. Yet despite the enormous popularity it enjoys today and the increasing interest that modern sociologists are taking in the subject, there is not much of an historical record about tattooing. The word itself is thought to be derived from the Polynesian word 'ta' which means striking something and the Tahitian word 'tautau' which translates to mean "mark something". It is generally agreed that the first tattoos were probably created by accident. A wound was probably rubbed or created by something that left it colored after it healed. The discoloration became permanent.

While no one knows exactly when tattoo began it has been agreed that the earliest known tattoo is on a mummy called Otzi or the Iceman. The mummy was found in the Ötztal Alps, on the border between Austria and Italy in 1991 by two German tourists. This Iceman is supposed to have lived more than 5000 years ago. There are approximately 57 carbon tattoos made up of dots and lines on his lower spine, behind his left knee, and on his right ankle. X-rays have determined that there may have been arthritis in these areas and that the tattoos delivered by a form of acupuncture may have been administered to relieve pain. Others believe that the designs might have been a rite of passage marking, tribal marking, a symbol of social status or personal taste.

Prior to the discovery of the Iceman, the Russians had found mummies that were estimated to be more than 2400 years old. These bodies, found in the Altai Mountains of Siberia, had more sophisticated tattoo designs than were found on the Iceman. The Siberian mummy tattoos contained both real and imaginary animal forms for purposes of decoration or identifying social rank.

In 1891, archaeologists discovered at the Thebes, the mummified remains of Amunet, an Egyptian priestess, who lived somewhere between 2160 BC and 1994 BC and who worshipped the Goddess, Hathor. This female mummy displayed several lines and dots that were tattooed around her body as abstract geometric patterns. This form of art was restricted to only women who typically were associated with a ritualistic practice.

The Egyptians forged relationships with other nations such as Crete, Greece, Persia and Arabia during the pyramid building days of Egypt. This launched the spread of the art of tattooing all over the known world. It is widely recognized that by 2,000 BC, the art of tattooing had reached Southeast Asia.

The Ainu (nomads) are credited with then bringing it to Japan. In Japan, the first tattoos were used on clay figures which have been recovered from tombs that have been dated 3000 BC or older. These figurines were marked with tattoos of magical or religious significance. The figurines helped the dead by accompanying them on their journey to the afterlife. It is believed that the figurines stood in for the dead person's living relatives.

Japan's first written record of a tattoo can be traced back to 297 AD. It has been thought that the Japanese became interested in tattoo more for its decorative value rather than any magical one.

Today, tattoo artists are known as the "Horis" in Japan. Their use of colors, perspective, and imaginative designs gave the art of tattoo a completely new look. The classic Japanese tattoo, is a full body suit. Check out this fascinating video on the horimono, or traditional Japanese tattoos.

The silk routes of China further spread the practice of tattooing.

Tattooing became very important in Polynesian culture. Here, the skill of tattooing is considered to be amongst the most intricate and skillful in the entire ancient world. The Polynesian people believed their spiritual power or life force was displayed through the tattoo that was worn. This, referred to as mana, is largely known today because of the passing down of information through legends, songs, and ceremonies. Complex geometrical designs often grew with the life of the individual until the design covered the entire body.

The tradition of hand applying tattoo, or 'tatau' has long been associated with rank and title in Samoa. Tattooing ceremonies for young chiefs are elaborate and conducted at the onset of puberty. Tattoos were meant to celebrate the young chief's ability to endure pain as well as his dedication to cultural traditions.

When the first French explorers set foot on Samoan lands in 1787, they saw men with 'their thighs painted or tattooed in such a way that one would think them clothed, although they are almost naked'. Samoan tattooing was spread to the communities of New Zealand, and which later spread back to the Netherlands.

Unlike the Japanese (who only saw the decorative value of tattoo), the Hawaiians' traditional tattoo art, or 'kaku' as it is known, was used for decoration, identity and to guard one's health and spiritual well-being. The incredibly intricate patterns, copied natural forms and covered the arms, legs, body and face of men; whereas women were generally tattooed on the hand, fingers, wrists and sometimes on their tongue.

When Christian missionaries arrived, this unique art form declined since most Christian churches have discouraged tattooing throughout early history. Today tattoos are sported by people in all walks of life and in all age brackets. Tattoos may be of simple or complex design depending on person's taste and/or budget. Portraits of loved ones or even celebrity figures have become increasingly popular while others still enjoy the styles that have been worn for thousands of years. Either way, people desiring tattoos as well as tattoo artists have never before experienced such diversity in the types of work that they can receive or do.

About the Author

Matt Bennett has been creating tattoos for more than 16 years. His shops have been award winning. Today Matt lives in southwest Florida where he specializes in doing intricate tattoos of all kinds. He has created a tattoo course for beginners through intermediate level that gives the real deal on what a person seeking a career in tattoo needs to know. You can get the course at: <Http://www.discovertattoo.com/Training.htm>

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