

TATTOOS

Introduction

As I'm sure you're all aware, tattoos are one of the main kinds of body modification involving the introduction of a pigment into the skin in order to produce a design. Although traditional methods vary substantially from place to place, tattooing basically involves puncturing or otherwise incising the upper layers of the dermis to create a superficial wound into which the dye can be introduced, with the skin then healing over and sealing the design in. As such, unlike some other kinds of body modification which can be later removed leaving all but a small trace such as body piercing, tattooing is a permanent form of body modification similar to scarification and branding, despite technical differences.

Today the most widely used method around the world is the electrical tattooing machine invented by Samuel O'Reilly in 1891, although traditional methods continue to be used elsewhere, notably the Polynesian hammer-and-stick method, known as 'tā moko' in Maori and the chisel-like method known as 'tebori' used in Japan.

Tattooing has been practiced worldwide: it was widespread among the Polynesian peoples and among certain tribal groups in the Philippines; Borneo; Africa; North, South and Central America; Europe, Japan, Cambodia, New Zealand and Micronesia. In some parts of the world is a socially marginal phenomenon, but in other regions where it is an integral part of mainstream culture, tattoos may be displayed on very prominent parts of the body considered taboo elsewhere, including facial tattoos such as those worn traditionally by the Ainu, the indigenous people of Japan, the Berbers in Morocco and the Maori in New Zealand.

Tattoos have undergone an upsurge of popularity in many parts of the world of recent years, particularly in Western Europe and the United States and Japan. The growth in tattoo culture has brought with it an influx of new artists, many of whom have fine arts training. Coupled with advances in tattoo pigments and the ongoing improvement of the equipment used for tattooing, this has led to an overall improvement in the quality of the tattoos being produced.

History

Tattooing has been practiced in Eurasia at least since as far back as Neolithic times, and mummies bearing tattoos dating from the end of the second millennium BC have been discovered. Tattooing is thought to go back to the Palaeolithic era in Japan, some ten thousand years ago. Many other cultures have their own tattoo traditions, ranging from rubbing cuts and other purposely-inflicted wounds with ashes, to hand-pricking the skin in order to insert dyes.

Tattooing in the Western world originated in Polynesia with the discovery of tatau by eighteenth century European explorers. The practice first became popular with European sailors, then progressively spreading to the rest of society.

Purposes

Tattoos have served, and continue to serve, a great many different cultures around the world, ranging from rites of passage, marks of status and rank, symbols of religious devotion, decorations for bravery, marks of fidelity, pledges of love, punishment, amulets and talismans and also to mark slaves and convicts, with the symbolism varying from place to place and time to time.

Today people may choose to be tattooed for cosmetic, sentimental and memorial and religious reasons and also to symbolise their belonging to specific groups, as notoriously in the case of criminal gangs such as the Japanese mafia or 'yakuza'.

One of the purposes that tattoos have been used for is to identify specific groups, one well-known case being the forced tattooing of concentration camp inmates in Nazi Germany. Tattoos can, however, be used to identify people for more positive reasons, as for example when the Maori chiefs used their facial tattoos the place of signatures on documents. Because tattoo pigments are usually buried deep enough in the skin to resist even severe burns, they are useful for forensic pathologists to help them identify burned, putrefied and mutilated bodies, which is also why it has become a trend among the US military to tattoo their identification tags onto their bodies in order to aid identification in the event of death. And for many centuries, seafarers have also used tattoos as a means of enabling identification of corpses after drowning.

Tattoos can also be used for cosmetic purposes, with a more recent innovation involving the use of micro pigmentation, otherwise known as 'permanent make-up', to hide skin imperfections and also to enhance eyebrows, lips and eyes, usually using tones which mimic normal make-up.

Finally, tattooing is used by doctors and surgeons in order to ensure that instruments are properly located for repeated applications of radiotherapy and for the areola on certain types of breast reconstruction.

Safety issues

Because it involves breaking the skin, there are a number of health and safety issues surrounding tattoos, first and foremost infections but also allergies. Owing to the risk of transmitting contagious diseases, some countries bar people who have been recently tattooed from donating blood.

Nevertheless, the use of single-use items whenever possible and the proper sterilisation of equipment and materials is now a standard part of tattooing procedures in Europe and significantly reduces the health risks involved.

As far as infections are concerned, because tattoo instruments come into direct contact with blood, blood-borne diseases can potentially be transmitted via incorrectly sterilised equipment and/or contaminated ink, including surface skin infections such as herpes simplex and other more serious infections ranging from tetanus, staphylococcus and fungal infections to tetanus, tuberculosis and HIV, and a recent study showed that people with tattoos are nine times more likely to be infected with hepatitis C.

Allergic reactions to tattoo pigments can also occur, although they are relatively rare, except for certain brands of red and green. People who are allergic or sensitive to certain metals may react to pigments in the skin with swelling and/or itching and oozing a clear fluid, but such reactions are rare. It is also worth mentioning that certain methods of tattoo removal can also release ink into the blood stream, which can be a source of allergic reactions and ultimately anaphylactic shock. The main issue concerning allergies, however, is that relating to the latex in the gloves worn by tattoo artist, which can be easily resolved by using non-latex gloves supplied by the client if necessary.

Aftercare

In order to avoid complications, tattoo aftercare is of prime importance, although opinions differ considerably regarding how fresh tattoos should be cared for: some artists recommend keeping a new tattoo wrapped up in polythene for the first twenty-four hours, while others suggest removing temporary bandaging after only two hours or less. Many tattoo artists advise against prolonged contact with hot water for the first two weeks in order to reduce the risk of fading due to the colours being washed out, but also to avoid over-hydration which prevents the healing process, although other tattoo artists recommend frequent bathing in very hot water. There is agreement, however, on the need to avoid swimming baths until the tattoo is fully healed in order to prevent bacterial infections and also to

avoid expose to direct sunlight to avoid fading. General consensus on aftercare also strongly advises against removing the scabs that form over a new tattoo.

Various products are commercially available for tattoo aftercare in order to maintain hydration and to reduce itching, although oil-based products should be used sparingly and in thin layers in order to avoid over-hydration which will lead to the scab sloughing off to early.

Finally, the amount of ink remaining in the skin at the end of the healing process is the key factor in determining the aesthetic quality of the finished tattoo, and if the tattoo becomes infected or the scab falls off too soon, then the ink will not be properly fixed and the final design will be blotchy and irregular and will require touching up.