

Probing Question: What is the history of tattooing?

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Credit: Fred Verhoeven

You might not think the sullen, tattooed teenager skulking around your local record store has anything in common with Winston Churchill, but you would be wrong. Sir Winston, King George V, and the slaves of ancient Greece — to name a few — all have their place in the colorful history of skin decoration.

For a practice so commonly associated with youth, tattooing is remarkably old, says professor Nina Jablonski, head of Penn State's anthropology department and author of "Skin: A Natural History." "Tattoos have probably been important to people for over 10,000 years," she notes. The oldest documented tattoos belong to Otzi the Iceman, whose preserved body was discovered in the Alps between Austria and Italy in 1991. He died around 3300 B.C., says Jablonski, but the practice of inserting pigment under the skin's surface originated long before Otzi.

In Japan, tattooing is thought to go back to the Paleolithic era, and tattooed Egyptian mummies—primarily female—have been uncovered dating to the age of the pyramids. In 1948, the excavation of Siberian tombs revealed bodies over 2,000 years old decorated with tattoos of animals and mythical beasts. Egypt's international trade spread the practice of tattooing to Crete, Greece, and Arabia, and there is a history of tattooing in ancient China, as well as among Celtic and Northern European tribes, such as the Picts — literally "painted people" — and in Samoa and the Polynesian islands, where the word "tatou" originated. In fact, Jablonski explains, tattooing is as widespread as it is ancient, popping up on every inhabited continent.

With the rise of Christianity, tattooing became increasingly associated with paganism and the criminal class, and was prohibited in Europe under the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine.

In the late 18th century, the practice of tattooing became popular among British sailors around the time of Captain James Cook's voyages to Tahiti, and for a time, tattoos were present in the western world mostly on the bodies of seamen returning from the South Pacific. But the art form experienced a resurgence among the British gentry after King George V and later Edward VII were tattooed (with a dragon and a cross, respectively), and foreign courts followed the British Court's lead, sparking a rash of tattooed royalty during the nineteenth century. According to Jablonski, "Tattoos become more socially acceptable because they are visibly sported by people who are themselves socially accepted."

"People's reasons for tattooing have varied from place to place," she adds, "but their central purpose in all places and throughout time has been to convey a message of great significance through a visible symbol." In the Middle East, mourners rubbed the ash from funeral pyres into self-inflicted wounds, thereby carrying a piece of the departed

with them forever.

Tattoos have long been used as a means of identification: The Romans tattooed their criminals and slaves, a practice that was adopted by the Japanese in the early 17th century, and the Nazis tattooed numbers on the arms of Jews during the Holocaust to dehumanize concentration camp inmates and identify their corpses.

Despite these grim uses, people today primarily use tattoos to tell their personal stories, as talismans, or to memorialize a loved one. "Their permanence is their allure," Jablonski explains.

Today, actor Brad Pitt has an image of Otzi the Iceman tattooed on his arm, and the adoption of the practice by movie stars and sports personalities has taken some of the taboo out of the tattoo. Still, says Jablonski, tattooing retains its reputation as a subculture identifier, though young people are more likely to view tattoos as just another form of self-expression.

Tattoos have never been as varied in content and design as they are now. Observes Jablonski, "Classic tattoos will always have a place, but people are increasingly using their bodies to create landscape/bodyscape effects."

Whatever the direction it takes, tattooing is here to stay. "Tattoos are part of an ancient and universal tradition of human self-decoration and expression," she concludes. "They convey their messages without words and sometimes even long after death."

Diamonds may be lost or stolen—it's a tattoo that is forever.

Source: By Alexa Stevenson, Research/Penn State

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