

# General history of tattoos history essay



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In ancient African culture, people wanted to be tattooed even though their skin was dark making colored tattoos difficult to see. In order to suffice themselves they developed a technique called scarification which is done by lifting the skin and cutting it with a knife. For many it is simply a form of expression but history shows that there are reasons that some may have never considered, such as the medical purposes for getting tattoos.

There has been much controversy over what the importance of getting a tattoo is? There are so many answers to this question; however, it is only truly answered by the individuals who get them. For many it is simply a form of expression but history shows that there are reasons that some may have never considered, such as the medical purposes for getting tattoos. Although they are becoming more and more popular, tattoos have been a form of artistic, spiritual, and medical expression for centuries.

During an interview with Catina Fitts, a recipient of tattoos, she stated “ the symbolism of my tattoos are I have a puzzled heart on my back with two pieces missing representing my father and myself as being the missing pieces to my heart, a heart bracelet with a name on it representing unconditional love on my left leg, on the inside of my right leg a flower with a hummingbird representing my deceased mother because she loved flowers and the bird represents her, my God daughters name and birthday on the inside of my left wrist, three hearts on my left arm with my kids name inside each heart, and the words “ Family First” on the front of my right shoulder because in my world family always comes first.”

Tattoos date back for centuries. Over the course of time, archaeologists have found evidence of the existence of tattoos on mummified remains as well as other artifacts. According to (Lineberry, 2007), it was believed that the first evidence of tattoos existed in ancient Egypt where tattoos date back to 2000 B. C. and were found only on female remains. This has since been disputed with the discovery of Iceman in 1991 (Smithsonian Mag, 2007). This frozen mummy had markings on his spine, knees, and ankles. After recently discovering the Iceman from an area in the Italian-Austrian border in 1991 and reviewing his tattoo patterns, the date was been moved back a greater distance of a thousand years to the time of his carbon-dating of around 5, 200 years old. Historians have also found clay figurines depicting Japanese individuals adorned with elaborate body art dating back to 5000 B. C.

Another art of tattooing is known as Scarification which dates back thousands of

years ago, and is considered to be a long and very painful ordeal. As a rite of passage both the male and female gender are given tattoos in order to signify their transition into adulthood. If the person does not show signs of pain they are thought to have a profound inner strength and will, and are considered a source of pride for their parents. If the person does not cry they acquire much respect to themselves and their family. The art of scarification is practiced throughout life to acknowledge various milestones (Cream, 1999). Scarification, also known cicatrisation, is a rite of passage that is practiced with the use of razors or thorns which cut the skin to produce keloids, or an excess growth of scar tissue at the site of a healed skin injury in similar patterns on the body which compliment their purpose. The practice

of rubbing Ashes into the scar as soon as the skin is cut caused the wound to swell and would also extend the healing process. This technique results in a heavier contrast with the skin after the healing process is complete.

Scarification is still practiced today as it was across multiple regions in Africa in the past. These regions include the Congo, Ghana and Nigeria. The ritualistic nature of scarification is steeped in the spiritual cultural of Africa(Cream, 1999).

It was once thought that these were merely artifacts but later revealed to be depictions of actual individuals (Vanishing Tattoo, 2011). Tattoos have also been very prominent in Celtic history, with records indicating the existence of tattoos as far back as 1200 B. C. (Designboom, 2010). History has shown that tattoos have existed in many cultures for many years, each with its own unique significance. Despite the fact that tattoos have existed for centuries, they have often been shunned by many societies. When asked what her family thought of her tattoos, Mary Woods stated, “ My family was not very approving because I was raised in a Christian home.” Many historians would ignore the evidence of the existence of tattoos, because they had a negative connotation associated with them. Even in today’s more laid back culture, some individuals are looked down upon for adorning their bodies with art (Designboom, 2010).

## **Tattoos as an art form**

In many cultures, tattoos were a sign of rebellion. In fact, in Japan, it was believed that tattoos were used as a form of punishment for criminals (Vanishing Tattoo, 2011). Because this form of punishment became more prominent, many criminals and outcasts adorned their bodies further by

choice. This led to what is now known as prison tattoos. To them, it became a symbol of courage; because tattoos were not only painful but they were outlawed with the exception of tattoos given as punishment. Prisoners would seek out any means possible to add to the artwork already placed on their bodies. It was not long before these individuals donned full body suits of elaborate art work (Vanishing Tattoo, 2011).

Although Japanese tattoo artists often had to perform their art in secret, they have been revealed as masters of their art. They were known to have introduced color and elaborate design work into the world of tattoos (Vanishing Tattoo, 2011). It is believed that tattoos were also used as a form of punishment in Ancient Greece and Rome. Known to only be worn by outcasts were the tattoos of early North America. Criminals would often adorn their bodies with symbols of what they most desired. These tattoos were often depictions of a spiritual nature or symbols of gang affiliation. This showed the individuals' complete commitment to the gang of which he was affiliated (Designboom, 2010).

Circus performers often covered their bodies in tattoos to attract a crowd, which also caused increased popularity in the late nineteenth century. People would flock from miles away just to get a glimpse of the completely tattooed individuals who were often displayed as side shows. It was also very common for tattoo artists to travel with the circus since this was how they made most of their money. The circus provided an exceptional source of advertising since the artists work was proudly displayed in many of the side shows (Vanishing Tattoo, 2011). The art form of tattoos was not always worn by criminals and outcasts. Sailors and military servicemen would often return

home adorned with tattoos of a rather simplistic nature, which they believed signified their travels abroad. In New Zealand, “ the Maori used their woodcarving skills to carve skin” (Designboom, 2010). Their tattoos reflected their refined skills of master artistry. These tattoos are said to be symbolic of one’s status or line of descent. The tattoos of the Maori are said to be very unique in that they include intricate spirals on the face that were not only tattooed, but scarred into the skin creating ridges and grooves (Vanishing Tattoo, 2011).

Most of the men in the Maori culture were tattooed as it was seen to be attractive to women and intimidating to opponents in battle. Polynesian tattoos are said to be “ the most difficult and skillful tattooing of the ancient world” (Designboom, 2010). In Africa, they would use a different form of tattooing which was actually a form of scarification. Since they had a darker skin tone, it was more difficult to create tattoos of color which could be seen. Instead, they would make small cuts in the skin in the form of whatever design they desired (Designboom, 2010).

Although many tattoos are very artful in nature, they often hold a more significant meaning to those who wear them. When asked the question, do you think tattooing will ever be totally accepted as art? Jay Short states, “ I feel as though it will never be fully accepted as an art because you will always have those people who consider it as something that certain types of individuals do.”

## **Tattoos as a form of spirituality**

In many cultures, having tattoos showed an individual's social status. In Pazyryk culture, the elaborate nature of a tattoo often reflected one's status. These tattoos were rather ornate, depicting animals and monsters. It is said that they had "magical significance" but many believed they were merely ornamental (Designboom, 2010).

The Greek writer Herodotus stated "tattoos were a mark of nobility, and not to have them was testimony of low birth." However, many English explorers returned home with tattooed Polynesians to show at fairs, in lecture halls and in dime museums, to demonstrate the height of European civilization compared to the 'primitive natives' (Designboom, 2010), this had an adverse effect. After some time had passed, tattoos became very popular with the British Navy, with tattoo artists taking residence in almost every British port. In Samoa, tattoos were a symbol of leadership roles and would show their ranks within their society. Much like the British's disgust with the Polynesians, the Spaniards were appalled by the depictions of devils on the natives of Peru (Lineberry, 2007).

In Thailand, Monks would apply tattoos to individuals "incorporating magical powers to the design while they were tattooing" (Designboom, 2010). These tattoos were known to have significant healing powers to the individuals who received them. To be tattooed by a monk was highly sought-after. The Celts were a culture that used tattoos as a significance of their tribe. The designs were primarily spirals and knotwork, or complex braids, signifying their journeys and the paths they had taken in life. Celtic designs continue to gain popularity among the youth of America, although they do not hold the same

meaning that they once did (Designboom, 2010). Much like the Celts, Native Americans recognized those thought to be outstanding warriors with tattoos. Tattoos were often used to show marital status on the women in the Inuit tribe.

In the Middle East, many individuals were tattooed as a form of spiritual worship. Although in modern times tattoos are typically done as a form of artistic expression to show individuality, the tribes of Indonesia have stayed true to the original style and symbolism of their tribal affiliation throughout history. They were able to preserve their traditions; because until recently, they had very little contact with the outside world. By sheltering themselves from outside influence, they were able to keep true to their culture and beliefs (Designboom, 2010). In ancient times, tattoos took a more protective role.

### **Tattoos as therapy**

In many cultures, tattoos were not only ornamental but served as protection against negative forces; and were used as a form of therapy. The tattoos of Iceman were said to be of therapeutic nature. According to (Lineberry, 2007), the patterns of the tattoos on Iceman were in a manner indicating they were used to alleviate joint pain. Many of the markings are in places that are traditionally associated with the practice of acupuncture. It is believed that the markings were made permanent to aid in self treatment. By marking one's body in permanent ink, it is easier to identify where to place the needles for future use.



In a similar manner, the tattoos of ancient Egyptian women gave evidence that their purpose was to protect the woman during childbirth. Many times the patterns were located around the abdomen, on top of the thighs and the breasts (Lineberry, 2007). Before historians discovered this to be the reason, it was thought that women who had venereal diseases were marked as a sort of warning (Lineberry, 2007). In a similar manner, Hawaiian people received tattoos to protect their health and their spiritual well-being (Designboom, 2010).

In modern times, tattoos are used in radiation therapy. This is done for the purpose of marking the treatment area of the patient. For physicians to deliver a precise treatment to any specific part of the body over an extended amount of time it is essential to trace the area of the body in some way. This gives medical professionals the ease of knowing which areas of the body have already undergone treatment. This can be a difficult decision for a patient to make given the negative connotation tattoos have in our society. Although they are permanent, they also have a very positive symbolism as they are a tool in the treatment of cancer. Another example that has become increasingly popular is the tattoo depicting DNR (or do not resuscitate). Many people have decided to have this tattooed somewhere easily visible on their bodies so when the unforeseen happens, there will be no question as to what their wishes are.

History has revealed that the reasoning behind getting tattooed is almost as diverse as the tattoos themselves. For centuries people have been marking their bodies as a form of expression, spiritual symbolism, and treatment of ailments. Tattoos have ranged from the elaborate, intricate designs to the

simplistic, symbolic designs. The popularity may come and go but the history will always remain. What will the next century reveal in the ever increasing history of tattoos? As stated by Darryl, Owner of In Da House Tattoos, “Tattooing will always be around in some form. Even if it declines in popularity there will always be a part of the population who feel the need to get tattoos. The designs and styles will change with what is considered popular culture at the time even though it seems like a repeating pattern; many of the former designs are coming back now, just like fashion.”