Cultural Daily

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The Culture of Tattoos

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, June 24th, 2020

In the 21st century, tattoo culture entered the mainstream like never before. For a significant number of humans, the ancient form of body modification provides a unique means of self-expression. Tattoos have become so ubiquitous, especially among young people, that the industry is now America's sixth fastest-growing retail business.

Tattoos are often highly personal, representing an individual's love for music, nature, superheroes, or something else altogether. Modern tattoos can even serve a tangible purpose. For instance, pizza aficionados in Russia who dared to get the Domino's logo inked on their body were awarded free food in a 2018 marketing promotion. Those marketers underestimated their audience, however; the promotion was shut down early as hundreds of hungry Russians rose to the challenge.

Tattoos are equal parts art and a means of making a statement. The stereotypes associated with tattooed individuals, labeling them as criminals, hipsters, or both, no longer apply in contemporary society. Rather than a product of the counterculture, the bulk of tattoos are now a mainstream commodity.

That doesn't mean tattoos have lost their edge, however. In modern tattoo culture, nearly every subject and art style is fair game. Today, they can be created with glow-in-the-dark ink or even infused with the ashes of a departed loved one. Let's explore how tattoo culture can retain its authenticity in the face of mainstream popularity.

I Am That I Am: Tattoos and Personal Identity

Tattoos represent more than just what some see them as, and they are both ornamental and meaningful. On the surface, a tattoo of a butterfly may seem to be just that, a lovely winged creature. Yet that tattooed butterfly could also serve as a reminder of a particular, beloved place or represent one's occupation or passion.

Indeed, personal expression is the core concept behind all forms of body modification in contemporary society, from hair dying and cutting to body piercing and tattoos. And within tattoo culture, personal expression is nothing new. Ritualistic tattoos were the norm among our inked ancestors, the world's oldest known ornamental tattoos dating back to about 4,000 BCE, was discovered on an indigenous Chilean mummy.

Every tattooed human (or mummy) requires an artist's skill, and not just any artist will do. Our ancient ancestors likely had to make do with a single artist who was able to perform tattoo work. In

modern times, there seem to be as many tattoo parlors as there are people who want tattoos. Not every artist is created equal, however, in regard to craftsmanship and professionalism.

Regarding Artists, Style, and Place

The tattoo industry is financially lucrative thanks to the art form's popularity but also because customers are willing to pay top dollar to be tattooed by world-tier artists. The world's most expensive tattoo artists charge upwards of $400 per hour and are typically booked several months in advance. Prices may increase if the artist is designing a custom tattoo, which is the norm in tattoo culture.

When searching for the right tattoo artist, his or her style is an important consideration but not as important as hygiene. Every tattoo comes with a risk of infection, so proper hygiene is paramount to the tattoo experience. In addition to skin infections, individuals may experience an allergic reaction to dyes and inks. For this reason, tattoo parlors take steps to ensure a sterile environment by using surgical steel grade instruments and brand new needles for every customer.

But tattoo parlors aren't the only places the world is getting inked. Underground tattoo culture is also alive and well, in which amateur artists without a tattooing license perform work on willing individuals. Thanks to the ability to order tattoo equipment online, even these underground artists can keep customers safe by using sterile needles, wearing gloves, and covering the work surface with saran wrap or a similar material.

Cultural Representation in the Mainstream and Beyond

The simple existence of an underground tattoo culture indicates that, where tattoos are concerned, "culture" should be pluralized. Various subcultures have embraced tattooing, yet these groups vary considerably in regards to style and beliefs. For instance, tattoos among the rockabilly counterculture tend to adhere to a throwback style of the legendary Sailor Jerry. Conversely, metalheads are likely to get inked with more grim imagery including snarling wolves and human skulls.

Therein lies some of the inherently beautiful aspects of tattoo culture. One of the most attractive aspects of tattoo culture is how every subset has embraced cultural diversity. Just as cultural diversity is a crucial part of the healthcare industry, it is equally celebrated and revered among all corners of the tattooing world.

In some ways, tattoo culture itself is a subset of the healthcare industry, as all forms of body modification should be performed with customer health and safety in line. What's more, tattooing is also a form of therapy for many individuals who proudly consider themselves part of mainstream tattoo culture.

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