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The Style That Came Out of Prison and Changed Tattooing: Black and Grey's Chicano Origins

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Black and grey tattooing began in California prisons and youth facilities, where Chicano inmates built machines from ballpoint pens, guitar strings and boom box parts, worked with a single needle, and thinned black ink with water to get grey. In the mid-1970s, an East Los Angeles shop called Good Time Charlie's Tattooland rebuilt its professional machines to give clients the same look, and from there the style spread to studios around the world. That is the short version. The longer one explains why the origin is so often left out.

A style developed without professional tools

Today the look is widespread: soft gradients, fine lines and portraits that resemble black and white photographs appear in studios far beyond California. It is often seen as a technically demanding approach to tattooing, one that calls for professional equipment and years of training.

The people who developed it had none of that. They worked without commercial machines, without colored ink and without a formal path into the trade, and that gap is where the style actually starts.

Fifty years on, the technique has travelled a long way from Whittier Boulevard. Today, **black and grey work in that tradition** is a familiar part of the Los Angeles tattoo scene, made by artists from many countries and training backgrounds, which shows the style's reach and helps explain why its origin is easy to overlook.

Prison tattoo origins: one needle, black ink and water

Before it had a polished name, the style was known as joint-style or prison-style, and the story of black-and-gray tattooing starts with what was missing. Tools had to be improvised by hand, and the toolkit set the terms:

- Machines: put together from ballpoint pens, guitar strings, needles and parts from old boom boxes.
- Needles: one per machine, which kept lines fine.
- Ink: black only, because colored ink was not available inside.
- Grey: made by watering the black down.

In other words, the limits of the tools became the rules of the style. Fine line and soft grey started

as what the equipment could manage, and only later became a look customers requested by name.

Freddy Negrete, one of the artists credited with taking the style mainstream, learned to draw during his time in the California Youth Authority, and he credits the style itself to the resourcefulness of people inside. His memoir carries the title of one of the era's defining images: Smile Now, Cry Later.

Good Time Charlie's Tattooland: the prison style goes professional

In the mid-1970s Charlie Cartwright, a tattooer from Kansas, opened Good Time Charlie's on Whittier Boulevard — East L.A.'s first tattoo parlour. Most of its customers were Mexican American. Many wanted work that looked as if it had been done in la pinta, slang for prison, with fine lines and black and grey shading.

To meet that demand, the owners made an unusual decision: they rebuilt their professional machines to run a single needle. A professional studio adapted its equipment to a style that had developed outside the trade, and the clients brought the imagery of Chicano tattoo culture with them.

Freddy Negrete's entry into professional tattooing

Negrete joined Good Time Charlie's in 1977. Speaking to NPR decades later, he recalled being, as he saw it, the first Chicano to get a job as a professional tattoo artist. His recollection points to how few routes into the profession existed for young Mexican Americans at the time.

Chuey Quintanar, who came up later, has described the same barrier: Chicanos had no apprenticeship route. He learned at 14 on a single-needle machine in a Long Beach garage. For artists who started that way, a paid position in a professional shop was a significant step.

Why one needle shaped black and grey realism

Kari Barba, who arrived in Southern California in 1980 and saw the shop's work, compared single-needle black and grey to drawing with a pen or pencil. That comparison helps explain what came next.

A pencil drawing builds a face from tone: light areas, dark areas and the gradual steps between them. Single-needle tattooing follows a similar logic. Thin passes of diluted ink accumulate, and form appears where they overlap. That pencil-like approach carried into later black and grey realism, including portraits and religious statuary. Quintanar went on to push the style toward fine art, including religious statuary rendered in pure tone.

Andrey Kolbasin, who works in realism in Los Angeles, says the single-needle logic still sets the ceiling fifty years on: tone does the work, and a line only marks where the tone changes.

How the style went global and lost its origins

NPR's 2018 reporting traces the journey from prison to barrio to high-end studios worldwide, and each stop changed how the style was practiced and described:

1. In prison, the name pointed straight at the source: joint-style, prison-style.
2. In the barrio, it spread informally, with artists learning in places like home garages.
3. In the professional shop, it got proper machines but kept its Chicano clients and imagery.
4. In studios around the world, it became widely known as black and grey realism, a technical label that does not name its source.

That last step is where the history loses its first chapter. The label describes how a tattoo looks rather than who solved the problem, and many people who admire the style may not realize it started with incarcerated Chicano artists and their improvised machines.

Keeping Chicano origins in the history of the style

According to NPR's account, the core methods of black and grey realism trace back to three specific facts: one needle per homemade machine, black ink thinned with water, and an East LA shop that rebuilt its equipment in the mid-1970s because Chicano clients asked for la pinta work. That development helped establish a tonal approach that remains influential in contemporary black and grey tattooing.

Discussions of the style can focus on technique and leave out where it came from, although institutions have started to correct that. From November 2017 to April 2018 the **Natural History Museum of Los Angeles** ran Tattoo, an exhibition whose Los Angeles section traced "the evolution of black-and-gray style tattoo: from early Pachuco and Chicano tattoos, to the practice of single-needle tattoo in Western correctional facilities and the streets of East Los Angeles." Flash by Freddy Negrete was among the work shown.

So the answer to where the style comes from is specific: California lockups and the Mexican American clients of Good Time Charlie's. Any account that skips them keeps the method and loses its authors.

Photo: Ron Lach via Pexels

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