

said that since I am a diabetic the safest coloring agent I should choose was India ink."

In Astoria, Queens, which is fast becoming the epicenter and apotheosis of urban cool in terms of restaurants and social trends, tattooing is a flourishing practice among maverick artists and contemporary bohemians. Johnny Gallo, the owner and operator of Painless Steel Tattoo, located at 23-15 Steinway Street, has created over 100,000 tattoos for people over a 22-year period. "A lot of people think only low-class 'skells' get tattoos," he says, "but that's simply not the case, at least not any more. Among my clients I've had doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers and architects. As far as I'm concerned, the most important skill any tattoo artist must have is the ability to draw really well; all of my works are created by my own hands."

While Gallo adheres to few rules and regulations, there are certain images and symbols he refuses to imprint on clients. "I won't do upside down crosses or swastikas, also I like to stay away from gang symbols and icons, they can always be a source of trouble if rival gangs seek our your services. It creates kind of a conflict of interest," he says. According to Gallo, the demand for tattoos is seasonal in nature. "Every year around early April, business picks up. People are getting their bodies toned and buffed for the summer months and they want something new and sexy to show off at parties and the beach. This trend usually starts to taper off around the middle of October as colder weather sets in."

Based on over two decades of experience, Gallo is often times reluctant to tattoo the names of loved ones on his clients. "I had a guy come here to my shop; he was married for over 27 years and wanted his wife's name tattooed on his arm. I wasn't too keen on the idea of doing it, but I gave him what he wanted. A month later I ran into him on the street and he told me his wife had just filed for divorce. It's weird, but whenever you have the name of your romantic partner put on yourself, it's almost a curse on the relationship."

Gallo maintains his small shop with efficiency and cleanliness. Prominent among his tools of the trade is a small autoclave (hot steam sterilizer) that he uses for his non-disposable instruments. Standing just over six feet, and with his arms festooned with tattoos, Gallo gives a general overview of his tattoo practices and policies. "Nobody, and I mean nobody, gets a tattoo from me if they're under 18 years of age, I always ask for ID."

Although he is reluctant to quote specific prices for his work, the size, physical location and coloring agents, along with the time involved, are all, according to Gallo, factors in determining the cost of a tattoo. While requests for images of Christ are common, dragons remain an ever-popular image for would-be tattoo recipients. "In evaluating his profession, Gallo sees himself and other tattoo artists as unconventional record-keepers of history. "Right after 9-11," he notes, "There was a sudden burst of interest among people, particularly cops and firemen who were first responders at Ground Zero, in getting tattoos of the twin towers. I guess in a real sense, it gives you a sense of belonging and allows you to always remember an event that defines your generation."

ENTER THE DRAGON

A sign of social status, a stigma of shame, a code among spies, a mark of slavery and a message of virility—throughout recorded history, all of these attributes, and more, have been represented by tattoos. An art form to some and a defilement of the human body to others, tattoos are nonetheless components of every society throughout the world. Derived from the Polynesian term "tatao," meaning to tap or mark someone, the word tattoo was coined in western culture by English explorer Captain James Cook in 1769.

The prevalence of tattoos in early human culture became dramatically apparent in September of 1991, when German tourists in the Austrian Alps discovered the now famous "Ice Man," Otzi. An examination of his remarkably well-preserved 5,700 year-old corpse revealed that this ancient European hunter and tribesman had 57 carbon tattoos on his lower spine and left knee.

Along with its role of defining tribal affiliations, and serving as a good luck charm in religious rites of fertility, tattoos also played a grim yet practical role. For centuries, sailors were routinely tattooed with their names in order to provide proof-positive identification of those who drowned at sea. This tradition, which continues today among members of Great Britain's Royal Navy, explains why so many tattoo parlors flourish in port cities around the globe.

Among world religions, tattooing elicits a broad spectrum of responses. Concerning this art form, there is no consensus of opinion in Christianity, which views the practice as a non-moral issue. Yet this tolerance is noticeably absent in Judaism, which forbids the practice of tattooing. In the Torah, Leviticus chapter 19 verses 28, states, "You shall make no gashes in your flesh for the dead, or incise any marks on yourself." Maimonides, a twelfth-century Jewish scholar and theologian, defended this prohibition, citing the fact that it was common for those who practiced pagan religions to tattoo themselves with the names of various gods and incantations. From an historical standpoint, tattooing took on an even more sinister cultural context during World War II, when millions of Jews and other alleged enemies of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich were tattooed and marked for death in Nazi concentration camps throughout Europe.

While the acceptability of tattoos ebbs and flows widely within the evolving zeitgeist of given societies, this unconventional art form and counter-culture proclamation of inclusion and/or 'alienation attracts a growing number of adherents. In 2006, the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology published the results of a telephone survey taken in 2004. Their findings indicated that 36% of Americans ages 18 to 29, 40% of those between 26 and 40, and 10% of individuals in the age group of 41 to 64 had at least one tattoo. Conducting an online survey in 2008, Harris Interactive estimated that 14% of Americans have a tattoo. Demographically, gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals top the chart in regard to tattoos, with an estimated 25% of their number having body markings. In the case of gender, men are still slightly ahead of women in the area of tattoos, with percentages of 15% and 13%, respectively.

The modern-day practice of tattooing in the United States started in 1891 with the inventor, Samuel O'Reilly. Operating out of Manhattan's Chatham Square, a section of Chinatown that also included the infamous Five Points neighborhood, he incorporated Thomas Edison's electric rotary engraving device to insert colored inks and dyes under the skin. While tattooing increases in popularity on an almost daily basis, it also presents considerable health risks, not the least of which is Hepatitis C, which can be transmitted by the use of non-sterile instruments, unsanitary penetration techniques and coloring agents. Often overlooked in the process of tattooing is the presence of diabetes among prospective clients. Vanessa Williams, a Brooklyn-based social activist and diabetic, urges prospective tattoo clients to get medical clearance before getting a tattoo. In displaying her own prominent body markings, Williams says, "My doctor told me to be very careful about getting tattooed. He