



Art In The Skin

People and their Tattoos

The smell of disinfectant lays like a sanitary blanket over the small, corner tattoo parlor. My hands are shaking. I'm so excited. I'm going to get a tattoo.

Eli, the tattoo artist who greets me, is helpful and friendly. He has gauges in his ears, tattoos up to his shirtsleeves, and a smile spread across his face. I spoke with him earlier on the phone regarding my potential tattoo. I was feeling impetuous. And still am. My previous tattoo was considered and planned several months in advance; this one I contemplated for less than a week. Then, on a whim, I knew I had to get it today. Because I am acting on caprice, I'm not terribly prepared. I send the picture of what I want from my phone to an e-mail the artist gives me. He goes to print it off while I fill out the forms he obligingly provides. It's all taken care of smoothly and quickly.

The place has an open layout. A counter dissects the waiting area from the tattoo rooms that look more like nooks. I am escorted to one as Eli makes light conversation with me. Despite my anticipation, I am perfectly at ease. I have been to this warm, youthful parlor before, which made me feel right at home as a college student then and still does now. All the artists

even profess my religion but are not overbearing about it. This establishes a connection and trust to the person who is about to alter my body forever.

After discussing placement, I feel the familiar sting that soon fades into the background as Eli and I talk. A few places are more painful than others especially as the process goes on. Since the tattoo is on the back of my neck, the needle has to go over my vertebrae several times. Here I grit my teeth and let Eli do the talking. Aside from that, though, it is a simple matter of waiting.

The design is a penguin done in a tribal style on my upper back. I have loved penguins all my life. They are animals that survive the harshest of conditions, live in communal harmony with one another, and partake of romantic practices like singing love songs to one another and mating for life. The penguin also has a spiritual connotation, though. In his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller describes a scenario in which he is explaining his faith to his friend. He uses penguins to illustrate by explaining that they have an "inner radar" which leads them to the proper places at the proper times. In the same way, Don's "radar" leads him to his beliefs. I deeply connected to this passage and now have the profound privilege of wearing it upon my

body.

Once it's finished I eagerly take the mirror to survey the work. It is perfect. Eli takes a picture, and I grin like an idiot. It's done. Another piece of myself has fallen into place. By pulling out an abstract aspect of who I am and expressing in the physical and tangible, I can finally define this part of me. Of the many things tattoos do for me, one of the most important is the solidification of character traits. They take the uncertain ideas floating about in my mind and make them concrete. More even than that, though, they provide a platform for me to share these important pieces of myself.

I'm bandaged and brought back to the front counter. Here I buy some organic ointment that I will have to use several times a day for two weeks. Finally I pay, swiping my card on the provided iPad—so much cleaner than a clunky credit card machine at the grocery stores. My receipt is texted to me, and I'm free to go.

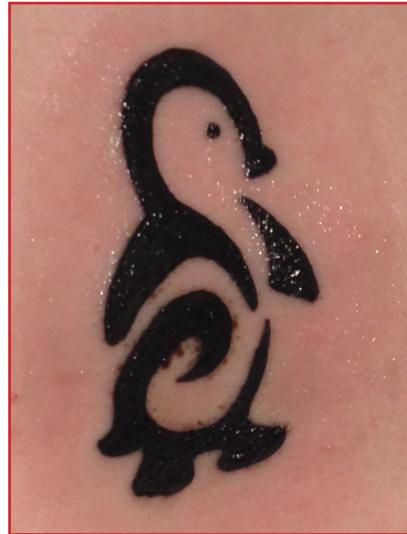
Everything about this string of decisions reflects various facets of my existentiality. From choosing the tattoo to the conversation I have during the session, the whole scenario is entirely me. The presence of technology, religion, and a more relaxed atmosphere put me at ease as well as exemplify attributes I cultivate in myself. It is experiences like this which strengthen my connection to myself and give me a clearer understanding of my identity.

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Yet for so long tattoos have been the visual markers for the class of other in Western society. Early cultures like the Picts, Egyptians, and even Hindus have participated in this practice. Later Native Americans and African tribes showed their colors to European explorers. And so, for decades—even centuries—we have related the tattoo to the savage.

Of course, in modern-day America, savage is the criminal or the high school dropout: people typically regarded as “failures” or “delinquents”. Our savages are subtle everyday deviants known for their indulgence and recklessness. Their tattoos serve merely as a visual

representation for their lack of respectability. However, in the past thirty or forty years, our society has been experiencing what has been termed as a “tattoo renaissance”. And as more and more people ink up their bodies, the old social stigmas and expectations are slipping away.



(Taken just after my tattoo was done.)

Things are changing. Society as a whole is becoming more liberal and creative. Art can no longer be confined to wall space on canvas or clay. Instead it is exploding as technology gains momentum in the twenty-first century. Now it is in cameras and on computers. And our human nature demands that we push the outermost boundaries, those final frontiers, and thus place art upon ourselves.

All sorts of people have tattoos: writers, artists, ex-convicts, stay-at-home moms, bankers, pastors, and drug dealers. Their tattoos have given me a deeper understanding of who and why they are. When you ask someone about his tattoo, he opens up. And oftentimes he will share a personal story or aspect of himself that, under other circumstances, wouldn't be brought up in casual conversation. In this way, tattoos open the door for human connection.

Unfortunately, though, this connection is not always positive. Many people still have negative opinions and poor interpretations of tattoos. There are still more conservative fields like nursing and banking which do not allow the exposure of a person's body art. Many states have passed laws saying that this cannot be the reason someone is passed over by a company, but it is often difficult to prove. The stigmas surrounding tattoos hinder both the hardworking woman who impul-

sively got a tattoo in her early adulthood as well as the creative just trying to express himself. Such difficulties persist. There have been other cases of institutionalized prejudice outside of the working world against the tattooed individual. Medical practitioners, for instance, were cautioned that “heightened awareness is needed when treating a patient with a tattoo because the presence of a tattoo may be an indicator of psychological issues.”

But as body art is being more and more popularized, such opinions are falling by the wayside. The practice is permeating all areas of society, people in all walks of life. Recent studies have found “no relationship between tattoos and deviance.” Upon asking Zach Scouten, a member of the Armed Forces, what he thought about tattoos, one of his first comments was, “Most people believe tattoos are unprofessional. I disagree. Most if not all of my fellow soldiers have at least one tattoo. As soldier[s] we are professionals. We serve this country and don’t ask for anything in return except for a little respect.”

It’s not the practice of tattooing that defines us, but the tattoos themselves. The specific images and epigraphs are meant to be shown as an illustration of our inner beings. They will be as complex as the person who bears them. But society’s reluctance will take time to dissipate. Such negative reactions are something to consider before getting a tattoo, especially one easily seen. Tattoos are often put in places where they can be easily hidden for just this reason. And the number one reason tattoos are removed is pessimistic responses from family, friends, or society as a whole.

So why do it?

Well, that’s the easy part. That’s the part researchers are looking into. Because the tides are changing with the liberalizing of society, there has been a marked increase in the practice of tattooing. One study asserted that “tattoos ha[ve] become mainstream and [are] no longer markers of deviance”. Not only are more people getting tattooed but specifically more women are getting tattooed. The primarily male-dominated practice of tattooing has experienced a major shift into the female sector. One study done by Jung Mee Mun,

Kristy A. Janigo, and Kim K.P. Johnson took 30 women over the age of 18 with tattoos and studied their experiences and thoughts. In this study, 82% of women specifically said that their tattoos were “closely related to some aspect of [their] sel[ves]”.

“It’s a personal biography... They’re just me.”

Tattoos thus express the relationship between the inner and outer self. This bond can be positive or negative and can change over time. In general, there are five main reasons a person gets a tattoo: as a connection to self, a life event, relationship, spiritual, or no meaning at all. Thirty percent of the women interviewed said that they “gained confidence and experienced changes in their self-perceptions.” And many others use “tattooing as a means for women to create personal significance.” When pressed, even those who originally ascribed no meaning to his or her body art have been known to attribute something to it later—a reminder of youthful impulsivity or decisions made in a difficult point in life.

In my case, my tattoos have layered meanings. My first one on my wrist says, “I am my beloved’s” in Hebrew. My husband has the remaining, “and my beloved is mine” from the verse in Song of Solomon. We got these tattoos shortly after getting married. So my first tattoo was due to a life event, a relationship, and a spir-



(Hebrew reads right to left. So my wrist is on right.)

itual undertone.

Currently I have only two but plan to get several more, which is actually the norm. People who get one tattoo tend to get more. It’s as if discovering this mode of expression breaks a dam inside them. Whether in expression or rebellion, art or advertisement, tattoos provide a unique outlet that typically can’t be confined to a single image or inscription.

A preschool teacher, Rowan Brumley, is only nineteen years-old and already has three tattoos, two of which are relatively large, spanning up to six inches in diameter. For her, these are deeply personal and significant. They preserve memories. She says, “Everybody loves pictures. Pictures are awesome. But they inevitably get thrown away—even if just by accident. But you can’t throw away my tattoo.” Each one reflects a different aspect of her spiritual life. Her first one is the largest because she is a “go-big-or-go-home kind of person.” It is a large water-color splash with a cross and the word “salvation” written in it. For her, this was part of the culmination of her religious experience: “It’s a personal biography,” she explained. “They’re just me. They conjoin my two lifestyles: the rock-n-roll side and the Christian. They represent me. My body is a canvas. They’re just for me.”

When I put the word out that I was writing about tattoos, lots of people opened up. Friends that I had not seen or talked to in years were sending me Facebook messages and emails with pictures in order to tell me about their tattoos. Clearly this specific art is a personal and important process. Tattoos aren’t the meaningless symbols of deviance anymore; they are a kaleidoscope of the various expressions of humanity. People use their tattoos to tell a story, to give others a quick peek into the most important aspects of themselves. They utilize them as “social billboards,” proclaiming their identities and solidifying themselves in society.