BODIES OF SUBVERSION

A SECRET HISTORY OF WOMEN AND TATTOO

by MARGOT MIFFLIN

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In a culture where surfaces matter, skin, the largest organ, is the scrim on which we project our greatest fantasies and deepest fears about our bodies. Expose too much of it, and religious fundamentalists will come after you. Pierce or brand it, and you assume the uniform of the counterculture. Nip and tuck it through surgery, and you drink from the fountain of youth or buy into the beauty myth.

Skin houses the network of nerve endings that connect us to pain and pleasure, and it’s the casing that protects us from bacteria and disease. Our sense of touch inhabits its flaky top layer, the epidermis, and a second layer, the dermis, holds the ink and ash that tattooed people have used to decorate themselves for more than 5,000 years. Skin is expressive: it bears our unique pore patterns and fingerprints, and registers temperature (through chills and hot flashes) and emotion (through blushing, blanching, and goose bumps).

For women, skin is a work in progress through which we celebrate—and denigrate—ourselves; we shave our legs to achieve a childlike smoothness and smear makeup on our faces to enhance our adult sexuality; we bleach and pluck our facial hair and buy expensive creams designed to “repair” the skin and “reverse” the effects of aging. White women tan it; women of color bleach it; young women cut and scar it as a way of managing emotional pain.

No form of skin modification is as layered with meaning as tattooing, especially for women. Tattooed women of the 19th- and early 20th-centuries flouted Victorian ideals of feminine purity and decorum, gradually peeling them away like so many starched undergarments. Tattoos appeal to contemporary women both as emblems of empowerment in an era of feminist gains and as badges of self-determination at a time when controversies about abortion rights, date rape, and sexual harassment have made them think hard about who controls their bodies—and why. For these women, the significance of a tattoo can lie in the mere act of getting inked (as a form of rebellion or a way of reclaiming the body after rape or sexual abuse) or in the timing (to commemorate milestones such as marriage or divorce, or in remembrance of dead friends or relatives).
The mother of all tattooed circus ladies, 22-year-old Nora Hildebrandt arrived at Bunnell's Museum in New York in March of 1882 to display her 365 designs, tattooed by her father as a means of torture, she said, after they were captured by Indians in the Wild West. She'd been attacked by the Sioux, menaced by Sitting Bull, orphaned, saved by the legendary general George Crook, blinded and cured; and now she appeared in a museum of curiosities, scandalously dressed, to show her skin and describe her harrowing ordeal. Her story was unbelievable. And it was pure fiction.

Hildebrandt was tattooed not, as she claimed, under threat of death by Sitting Bull, but by her common law husband, Martin Hildebrandt, a German immigrant who began tattooing in 1846 and worked as an itinerant artist during the Civil War, inking soldiers in both Union and Confederate camps. In
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With the sexual revolution of the 60s, when feminists began casting off their bras as they had their corsets a half-century earlier, tattoos were rescued from ignominy and resurrected in the counterculture by women who were rethinking womanhood. The arrival of "the pill" in 1961 allowed women greater sexual independence; Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 book, Sex and the Single Girl, promoted sexual self-determination; and a little over a decade later, legalized abortion secured women's control of their reproductive futures. In 1971, the international bestseller Our Bodies Ourselves became the first book written exclusively by women about women's health and sexuality, addressing a number of previously taboo topics including orgasm, postpartum depression, and bisexuality. Not surprisingly, newly empowered women in this period started using tattoos to reflect their changing sense of self.

Women like Marcia Rasner began to see tattoos differently during this time. "When I was a girl, even men with tattoos were sleazeballs," says Rasner. "And if a woman had a tattoo she was the worst of the worst. I got married straight out of high school in 1966 and tried to be the straight housewife, and it didn't work. Five years later I dropped into the hippie generation. I got talking to this woman [in a bar] one night and she had this beautiful rose tattooed on her hand and it stopped me—I thought, she's saying something about herself there. I stepped aside from my prejudice and looked in this woman's eyes and saw the person that was in there. That was my first experience with a tattoo. And after that I just started noticing them."

Janis Joplin was one of the first celebrities to nudge tattoo toward the mainstream by showing her wristpiece—a Florentine bracelet she had drawn herself—in public and in photo shoots. She was tattooed by San Francisco artist Lyle Tuttle, who recalls, "I put a heart on her chest, and the day after her death there was a girl standing in front of the shop wanting the heart I put on her, in remembrance. Hundreds of them got the same idea at the same time."

The wristlet, Joplin told Rolling Stone, was for "everybody" and the heart was "for me and my friends."

Just a little treat for the boys, like icing on the cake," Joplin showed the tattoo on The Dick Cavett Show in 1970 (months before her death) explaining that after Tuttle tattooed her she invited him to a party where he tattooed 18 people. Tuttle, who also tattooed Joan Baez and Cher, among other celebrities, credits the women's movement with reversing the medium's postwar decline. "With women getting a newfound freedom, they could get tattooed if they so desired. It increased and opened the market by 50% of the population," Tuttle told Prick magazine. And, he said, they changed the nature of the medium: "The women made tattooing a softer and kinder art form."

But if the ranks of tattooed women were suddenly swelling, the number of female artists was not. When Sheila May began working in her husband's Kenosha, Wisconsin shop in 1966 at age 19, she knew of only a single female competitor: Painless Nell. It would be nearly 10 years before May began hearing about other women artists.

"It was radical, there was no getting around that," says May. "I don't know that I had a feminist attitude about it; I've just always been a person who went out and did whatever appealed to me. Guys would come up to the shop and I'd see them outside the window.
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and you’d hear one say to the other, “Oh my God—look! There’s a broad in there doing that!”

In 1977, May opened an appointment-only shop in L.A. that catered to women. “I would say about half the men [I worked on] got tattooed just to get tattooed, whereas almost all the women were getting a tattoo for a reason,” says May. Men’s standard repertoire—maritime imagery, military insignia, birds of prey, or slogans such as the biker motto “FTW” (Fuck the World)—advertised social status or affiliations; while women preferred decorative natural imagery and often got tattooed to mark a personal transition. “Some did it just because they thought it was pretty,” says May, “but usually there was some symbolism.”

May didn’t consider herself an artist, but she was an innovator of sorts: she used pastel colors and softened her imagery by eliminating the black outlines typically used for definition. In 1981, she began specializing in cosmetic tattooing. Historically, tattooists who did permanent makeup—and they went back to Martin Hildebrandt—left their customers with clownish splotches of rouge or solid black eyebrows. May had a subtler touch, but her colleagues wrongly warned her she would never make a living at it. Now, using delicate needlework, she applies natural-looking color to lips, eyes and brows as a cosmetic tattooist to the stars. James Hardy and the tattooist Cliff Raven, were refining their art by experimenting with Japanese motifs that legendary Honolulu artist Sailor Jerry Collins had imported to the States a decade earlier. Stieeped in the Japanese tradition, which favors bright colors and interlaced imagery framed by wind, waves, or flowers, their work generated a tattoo renaissance still flourishing today. What’s been called the International Folk Style—anchors, eagles, and pin-ups crowded helter-skelter onto backs and shoulders—was superseded by a more deliberate and coherent design concept.

Inspired by an article about Raven’s work, Vyvyn Lazonga—one of the most influential women in the field—broke into apprenticing with Danny Danzl, a retired merchant seaman in Seattle, in 1972. “Danny showed me everything he knew,” says Lazonga, who had been drawing since she was a child. “The first few years were great. Everyone thought it was so unique to have this young woman tattooing. But after that it was much harder.”

Lazonga, who says she didn’t “get” the women’s movement at the time, found her feminist consciousness raised once she hit the glass ceiling in Danzl’s shop. She watched many less experienced men being groomed and promoted over her and was often forced to use shoddy, albeit daintily customized, equipment: Danzl couldn’t be bothered to repair Lazonga’s broken machines, but he did find time to lovingly inlay them with glittering fake jewels.

“There was sexism and prejudice and I resented it,” Lazonga says flatly. “I had to use faulty equipment and I just felt jealous. The springs on the machine broke every week and I wasn’t allowed to change them [so] I wasn’t able to do good work. It was a battle with

Danny to get better technology, but eventually I did.”

Despite such obstacles, “Madam Lazonga’s” novelty as a tattoo artist and a heavily tattooed woman provided an opening for her in the tattoo world. No one could question her commitment: she shocked even tattoo insiders by getting sleeves (full arm pieces) in the early 70s. Primarily because of three phoenvixes—Hardy’s handiwork—that extended from her right shoulder to her left thigh, she was voted “Most Beautifully Tattooed Woman in the World” at the 1978 World Tattoo Convention. But there were sour notes as well: male tattooists snubbed Lazonga at conventions, and although men enjoyed being tattooed by a woman, she was routinely ridiculed. “How’d you like to fuck a thing like that?” she remembers one loiterer in Danzl’s parlor muttering to his gaping friends. “Now,” she says, “I don’t let people like that in my shop.”

It was on the merits of her artistry, not her novelty, however, that Lazonga ultimately made her name. In 1979, she opened her own shop, and has since become known for Japanese, art deco, and Victorian floral patterns that follow the natural curves of the body and enhance rather than cover bare skin. “Women are masters of illusion,” Lazonga told Skin and Ink magazine. “They always have been with makeup and clothing. A tattoo is just part of that illusion.”

While men chose visible areas for their designs, women chose “sensual” areas like the breast, lower stomach, rear, and sometimes the crotch, according to tattooist Spider Webb’s book Pushing Ink: The Fine Art of Tattooing. “Women tend to approach tattooing with an attitude of greater reserve,” Webb observed. “They do it more for their own delight than to show the thing off…Men often go into a peacock syndrome and get tattoos which will be visible indiscriminately while women often get tattoos to show to special people.”

Unlike Lazonga, who began tattooing with little formal art training, New Yorker Ruth Marten came to it after studying at Boston’s Museum School, also starting in 1972. “I had to come up with some way to support myself, and I thought that this was the ultimate drawing surface,” she says. “It appealed to me, so I bought myself a little kit.” Like many self-taught tattooists, she learned by practicing on


OPPOSITE BELOW Tattoo by Vyvyn Lazonga. Courtesy Lazonga. BELIEVE (Compliments to Jane Nemhauser), 1979. Two years before this photo was taken she chose a career in tattooing.

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artist with a scratchy voice and a trashy look appeared on the new reality show *Miami Ink* in 2005 and started working her black and gray style for the cameras, the unimaginable happened. Kat Von D quickly became the single best known tattooist, male or female, in the world.

What changed? Almost everything. The internet opened the door to a smorgasbord of designs and techniques that fed a hungry young generation of artists. Hundreds of women around the globe took up the trade and started their own shops. Reality TV shows brought tattooing into middle class living rooms and showcased many quality women artists, starting with the game-changing Kat Von D. The chick spot became the tramp stamp and lost its charm. Arm bands went out; rib and hip tattoos came in. Color got better and tattoos got bigger. Trade tattooos celebrated cooking, sewing, hairdressing, graphic design, and the sciences. A Utah mother auctioned off ad space on her forehead, earning $10,000 to pay for her son’s education; her scarlet letter is a poorly tattooed domain name advertising a casino: Goldenpalace.com. In the bestselling novel, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, the first famously inked literary heroine used a tattoo machine to brand her abuser, then hacked her way (via computer) through this feminist revenge story and onto the big screen, in two major films.

Some things didn’t change: The fine arts world continued to ignore the sweeping technical, stylistic, and conceptual developments of 21st-century...
Pat Sinatra, and Debbie Lenz taught their children to tattoo. For those invested in elevating tattooing to the level of fine art, a considerable gap in the media landscape hindered progress: there was no criticism. Tattoo magazines in the U.S. and the U.K. ran features and interviews, but rarely analysis and never reviews. Artists were anointed merely by being covered, and aesthetic evaluation usually came down to gauging authenticity: Had the artist studied the tribal art he or she practiced? Was the combination of styles or improvisation on a style true to the folk lexicon? And always: Would the tattoo hold? Deeper conceptual questions were neglected: how does one evaluate this uniquely embodied art form crossbred from design, decorative art, and fine art, created for a single buyer, incapable of being resold or permanently displayed, historically limited to a narrow iconography, bound, in Western tradition, by its lower class origins, and culturally wedded to its subcultural status? Even as tattoo art began to jump the rails of its own historical track, arriving in upscale shops and practiced by art school graduates, these rich avenues of inquiry went unexplored. Art critics didn’t care to pursue them; tattoo writers didn’t think to.

In 2005, when a tattooed writer named Marisa Kakoulas started the blog Needled.com (She now owns NeedlesandSins.com), the discourse leapt to a lively new level of sophistication. A 38-year-old lawyer with both graduate journalism and law degrees, Kakoulas combined reportorial smarts with a willingness to analyze tattooing artistically and sociologically, but not, as many writers outside the industry were doing, academically. Immersed in New York’s tattoo culture from the time she was a teenager, Kakoulas understood both the value and limits of tradition, defending Western tattoo’s folk roots while exploring its conceptual possibilities and questioning its social relevance. A post on Martin Luther King Day, for example lamented the low popularity of King tattoos compared to portraits of rapper Old Dirty Bastard. She has analyzed and even named new genres on her blog and in her books. And her writing is unabashedly feminist. She spoofed Inked magazine’s “Girl of the Day” pin-ups by running a series called “Objectified Tattooed Men,” for “gals and gays,” and drew submissions through an appeal that