

Ink with meaning: What we can learn from the tattoos of our ancestors

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19 photos:

A history of body art – Tattoos have never been more popular, and part of the appeal is the variety of body-art traditions of the past. This portrait shows a heavily tattooed, 19th-century man known as 'the Turk'. He was an act in 'Barnum's', a European traveling circus. His tattoos were in the Burmese style, and he was said to have been kidnapped by the 'barbarians' of A tattooed.

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Story highlights

Tattoos are more popular than ever before

Having a tattoo has become a marker of individual identity

A tattoo speaks volumes about cultural background and personal identity

A new book explores the origins of tattoos and body art through the ages

(CNN)—Eight thousand years ago, a pencil mustache was tattooed onto the upper lip of a young Peruvian man. His mummified body has since become the oldest existing example of tattoo art on the planet.

Today's world is, of course, almost unrecognizable by comparison. But according to Professor Nicholas Thomas, Director of the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University -- author of [a new book about body art](#) -- the tattoo has made a powerful comeback.

"There has been an extraordinary, epochal change in the last 25 years," he says. "When I was a child in the 1960s, we didn't see tattoos everywhere. But there has been an explosion in popularity, and this tells us a lot about who we are, both culturally and as individuals."

In fact, according to some studies, up to 38% of Americans and a fifth of British adults have some type of long-term body art.

Many interlocking factors have a bearing on the popularity of the tattoo. Foremost among them is a change in the popular conception of the body.

"Because of advances in technology and medical science, people no longer understand the body as something natural that you're born with and live with. Instead, we understand it much more as something that is changeable and mutable," says Professor Thomas.

"People have all sorts of surgical interventions, medical and cosmetic. It is even possible to change your gender. This means that we now see our body as something we have a responsibility to design and make. Even something as simple as a fitness routine or a tan indicates this attitude."

[Read: Society isn't quite ready for facial tattoos](#)

A permanent stamp of identity

In addition, as global mobility leads to the increasing pluralization of society, identity is also being seen as something to be designed rather than inherited.

"People are no longer simply British or Australian or Californian," he says. "Our identities are far more particular, linked to our interests, affinities to cultural or spiritual traditions, tastes in music, and subcultural allegiances. The tattoo has become a vehicle for that sort of particular identification."

The recent surge in popularity for tattooing started in the California counter-cultural scene of the Sixties and Seventies. During the 20th Century, tattoos had become associated with criminals, sailors and members of the military, who had become dislocated from mainstream society and wanted to stamp a commemoration of that experience on their bodies.

The Californians took that trend and subverted it, inventing their own designs and viewing body ink as an art form rather than a type of social branding.

More recently, there's been a return to traditional forms of tribal tattoos. Ancient Celtic designs, or those originating in the Pacific Islands, provide inspiration for a great number of body ink enthusiasts (although it

remains unusual to see a young man with a tattoo of a pencil mustache).

In the past, however, tattoos were not used to form individual identities. Instead they tended to be a collective cultural project, constituting particular social markers. Sometimes they created a spectacular appearance when a tribe all shared the same design; in other instances, they were used as initiation or coming-of-age rites.

"In Samoa, men have elaborate tattoos inked on their thighs, buttocks and lower chest," says Professor Thomas. "It is a painful ordeal that requires a man to submit to the authority of the elders. When he emerges, he is celebrated as a hero."

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Tattoos and individualism

The Samoans, and many other traditional communities, saw having a tattoo as an important process rather than a possession. The whole body was tattooed at once, and it was rarely supplemented. By contrast, the modern tattoo enthusiast tends to view them as an expanding collection that creates permanent markers of important moments in an individual's life.

"Globalization is exposing us to a whole range of traditions from many places," Professor Thomas says. "Body art is becoming the opposite of conformity, a sort of badge of travel, or internationalism. People visit places and make them parts of themselves, so that they will forever bear marks of their unique visit."

As Jonny Depp once put it, "My body is my journal and my tattoos are my story". But does this indicate an underlying cultural anxiety? Are we literally growing less comfortable in our own skin?

"That's part of it," says Professor Thomas. "As the world opens up culturally and economically, there are fewer certainties than there ever were before, and far more multiplicity. So people are trying to invent themselves, and make it permanent."

Often, he continues, people who feel that a spiritual dimension is missing in contemporary Western life may be attracted to the spiritual symbols of traditional cultures around the world, which are often "understood naively in terms of spirituality".

[Read: Suffering from 'tattoo regret'](#)

The Christian approach towards tattoos

The decline of Christianity in the West has also had a degree of influence on the rise of the tattoo. Some streams of Christianity have condemned body art due to the perceived sanctity of the body. But this is far from universal.

During the Renaissance, for example, European devotees who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land often had tattoos of Christian symbols or scenes to commemorate the experience. Many were carried out by the Razzouk family in the Old City of Jerusalem (members of that family are still carrying out the service today).

But whatever your type of tattoo, research has shown that it profoundly alters the way in which you will be perceived. Adults with tattoos have been shown to be [more sexually active](#); to [engage in riskier behavior](#); and to have [stronger self-esteem and body-confidence](#), though this sharply declined in women three weeks after the tattoo.

Moreover, [academic studies of first impressions of people with tattoos](#) have revealed that they were expected to have had more sexual partners, be less inhibited, and to be probable thrill-seekers.

Whether tattoos are the cause or the effect of such personality types is a moot point. But one thing is certain: given that the fragmentation and diversification of modern life shows no sign of reducing, body art is going to be here to stay.

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Body Art, edited by Nicholas Thomas, published by Thames & Hudson on 13th October at £9.95

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I personally think that tattoos are a gross destruction of one's own body and I am thankful that my children have never considered following such worldly ways.

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emintey1 . Aug 23, 2015

[@comments4um](#) Me too, unless you're Popeye the Sailor.

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