



## Tattoos

by Tina Gianoulis

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This tattoo created at the Ambrosia Tattoo Gallery combines a Zodiac element with the colors of the rainbow flag. Courtesy Ambrosia Tattoo Gallery.

The art of decorating the body with permanent pictures or symbols by driving ink under the skin with sharp implements is an ancient one, with many different meanings in many different cultures. Tattoos have been discovered on mummified bodies thousands of years old.

Our word "tattoo" is derived from the Polynesian word *tatao*, meaning "to tap," and it describes the technique by which sharp spines laden with color were tapped into the skin to make tribal designs. Captain James Cook, the first white explorer to visit the Polynesian islands, brought the word back to Europe, along with, no doubt, some examples of the tribal art on the chests and arms of his sailors.

The first electric tattoo machine was invented by American Samuel O'Reilly in 1900, ushering in a new age of popularity for tattoos in the United States. Most tattoo artists were immigrants and their customers were still largely outside the mainstream of society.

The mainstream had a fascination with the art of tattoo, however, as evidenced by those who lined up at carnivals and sideshows to see the spectacular body art of the tattooed man or lady. Still, for all their fascination, most of the respectable members of the sideshow audience would never have considered getting a tattoo themselves; tattoos were low-class and associated with criminals, sailors, and drunks.

Although tattoos may be applied to set the wearer apart from society, they may also affirm the wearer's membership in a group or tribe. Tribal tattoos, such as those of New Zealand's Maori, are a sort of totem, a symbol of strength and membership in society earned through pain.

These kinds of tattoos have been adopted by many groups on the fringes of society, such as prison inmates and gang members, who wish to symbolize their membership in a fraternity or sorority of outlaws.

Tribal tattoos began to be reclaimed in the 1980s by rebellious punks and by gays and lesbians, and tattoos have continued to gain popularity among those in the counterculture.

Some use tattoos along with piercings to make a shocking statement that announces their alienation from society. Others choose tribal symbols in an effort to formalize their subculture, such as gays and lesbians who wear tattoos of pink and black triangles so that they will be recognizable to other gays.

Still others use tattoos as a sort of psychological ritual, using the pain of the tattoo to create a visual symbol of other pain. It is not uncommon among lesbian breast cancer survivors, for example, to tattoo a significant symbol around a mastectomy scar.

For gay men, tattoos can be part of erotic costume. There are dozens of gay tattoo web sites, offering erotic tattoo designs for the courageous gay exhibitionist.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.