Wearing Your Dreams:
Image and Imagination in the American Tattoo

by

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There is no body but the painted body, and no painting but body painting.

—Michel Thévoz
Introduction:

“A Profound and Desperate Urge”

Whether we look at tattoos with awe or disgust, admiration or disapproval, it is a simple fact that tattooing is practiced all over the world and has been for thousands of years, reflecting what is perhaps an innate human need to decorate the body. Preserved bodies bearing tattoos have been found that date back as far as 4000 B.C.E, and it is not difficult to imagine that if more evidence remained it would be possible to trace the practice back even further in time. Indeed, some of the oldest known representations of the human figure, like the Willendorf Venus, are painted with red ochre, suggesting that body marking was common as far back as the late Paleolithic era.

Though its roots lie deep in human history, tattooing has not essentially changed. To create a tattoo, the skin is punctured, cut, or burned, and pigment is inserted into the wound; once epidermal tissue has grown over it, the mark is permanent. In pre-industrial cultures, a mallet-like tool was used to tap a thorn, sharpened stick or bone that had been dipped in a solution of water and soot into the skin. Later, metal needles were used. Looking at a finished tattoo, we see the image through the upper layer of skin (the epidermis). The pigment itself rests in the dermis, the skin’s second layer.

The electric tattoo machine, which made the process of getting a tattoo both quicker and significantly less painful, was invented in the late nineteenth century. In 1891 Samuel O’Reilly, a British tattooist, patented a design for a machine that was
inspired by an electric engraver created fifteen years earlier by Thomas Edison (fig. 1). Edison’s machine used a rotary system to move a needle rapidly up and down; O’Reilly modified it by adding an ink reservoir. In the same year another tattooist, Thomas Riley, created a version of the apparatus that was powered by electromagnets rather than a motor. The tattoo machines in use now are similar to those designed by Riley: needles are soldered onto a metal bar, and a capillary tube sucks ink into the machine, where it coats the needles and fills the spaces between them (fig. 2).

When the electric tattoo machine was first invented, the only two colors in common use were black, made from soot or India ink, and a dull red, made from brick dust; water, saliva, or even urine were used as solvents for the dry pigment. Tattooists were constantly experimenting to find other suitable pigments, testing possible formulas on their own bodies. Many shops used mass-manufactured pigments designed for sign painting or other graphic arts. Norman Keith “Sailor Jerry” Collins (1911-1973) described how some tattooists would “spit in a box of kid’s Prang watercolors and use that for red, green, and yellow.” It was only by trial and error that tattoo artists learned how these colors would behave in the skin, about their brightness or permanence, and whether or not they might cause allergic reactions. Indeed, many pigments were used that are now known to be toxic, such as cadmium red and cinnabar. (In large quantities, these are carcinogenic; in a tattoo, they might burn or irritate the skin.) Each shop had its own recipes and
sources that were kept secret and jealously guarded from competitors; the result was
great variance in color quality. Even with so many tattooists working to find new
color possibilities, the tattoo palette was limited until the 1960s to black, red, brown,
green, yellow and white until, and it was only in the 1980s that pre-mixed pigments
designed for use in tattoos began to be manufactured and sold.

The technologies for creating tattoos have changed over time, as have the
reasons for getting them. Anthropologists have examined extensively the wide-
ranging cultural functions—magical, religious, medicinal, and social—of tattoos and
the related practices of body painting and scarification. Much has been written on
the traditions of tattooing in tribal cultures, especially those of the South Sea Islands
and New Zealand. Noticeably absent from the body of academic work on body
modification, however, are studies of the aesthetic aspect of tattoos and, until very
recently, of the role of tattoos in Western culture.

The reluctance of European and American scholars to study tattooing in the
West, as evidenced by the lack of published work on the subject, would seem to
indicate their discomfort with acknowledging such a tradition as anything but
eccentric in their own society and certainly with treating it as a subject for serious
study. This is unsurprising, considering the predominant negative opinion of

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1 Letter from Sailor Jerry Collins to Don Ed Hardy, February 9, 1972, reprinted in Don Ed
Hardy, ed., Sailor Jerry Collins: American Tattoo Master (Honolulu: Hardy Marks
2 For a comprehensive summary of the varying cultural functions of tattoos, see “General
Introduction” in Arnold Rubin, ed. Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the
Human Body (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California Los Angeles,
1988).
tattooing in Europe and America, a view that has its roots in the prohibition of
tattooing by the three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The only explicit biblical reference to tattooing is in Leviticus 19:28, which
reads: “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves”
(New International Version, 1973). This is a much-discussed passage, and it has
been interpreted in any number of ways; it is unclear, for example, whether it
prohibits tattooing in general or only tattooing in memory of the dead. Certain
Talmudic scholars, including Maimonides, maintain that reference is being made to
a Canaanite memorializing ritual in which the ashes of the deceased were rubbed
into self-inflicted wounds, creating a permanent mark, and that other kinds of
tattooing not related to these pagan mourning practices were allowable, perhaps
even commonly practiced.¹

While the New Testament does not mention tattooing specifically, passages
from 1 Corinthians have been used as further justification for the prohibition of
tattoos. Paul’s epistle declares that the body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1
Corinthians 6:19, New International Version, 1973) and warns against defiling it (1
Corinthians 3:17). Commentators have taken this to authorize various prohibitions
against abuses of body and spirit, but have often used it to regulate sumptuary and
decorative behavior. Of course, one must decide whether or not to tattoo the body
is indeed to defile it; many would argue that adorning the body with tattoos is to
celebrate it and that tattooing is no different from the wearing of makeup or jewelry.

¹ See Alan Govenar, “Christian Tattoos,” in Don Ed Hardy, ed., Tattoo Time No. 2: Tattoo
Though both Old and New Testament can be (and have been) variously interpreted with regard to tattooing, the simple historical fact is that religious authorities upheld a proscription against the practice. Islam has similar prohibitions, based also on the idea that tattooing alters the body or face of God’s creation, and opponents of the practice regularly cite the Qu’ran, where such alterations are said to be inspired by Satan, who orders his “devotees to change what Allah has created” (An-Nisa: 119).

This general condemnation of tattooing by the dominant Western religions has led the un-tattooed majority to view tattooing as transgressive and those with tattoos as a-religious, anti-social, and deviant. Unsurprisingly, then, in Western culture, tattoos are often associated with the most undesirable of groups that exist at the margins of society: criminals, gang members, circus freaks, and even the mentally ill. Hanns Ebensten points out:

Bearing in mind, also, the fact that tattoos are mentioned as distinguishing marks and thus noticed in police records and ‘Wanted’ posters, but not indicated, for example, on the pages of a passport where provision is made for just such characteristics, it is perhaps understandable that the criminal classes are still often erroneously considered to be the most widely tattooed.5

This widespread association with underclass sub-cultures and social types that have been generally viewed in a negative light is no doubt what has led to a dearth of

4 A 1968 article by Richard S. Post in The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Political Science declares: “the purpose of this paper is to show that the presence of a tattoo, or tattoos, can serve to indicate the presence of a personality disorder.”
serious literature on the subject of tattoos and a refusal to consider the artistic aspect of the marks themselves, since to do so would be tacitly to condone the practice or to admit that it has some cultural or artistic value.

This is not to say that there exists no relationship between these supposedly unsavory groups and tattooing. Many criminals are extensively tattooed, and in certain places there have developed complex lexicons of symbols amongst prisoners—there even exists an encyclopedia of Russian prison tattoos. Some gangs do have distinct emblems that members tattoo upon themselves to indicate their affiliation with and allegiance to the group. The history of tattooed performers in circus and sideshows is particularly rich and forms a vital chapter of the history of the tattoo in the United States. It is important to understand, however, that these groups form a minority within a minority. Just as one might choose to focus exclusively on the history of tattooing amongst these negatively-viewed segments of the population, it is also possible to cite a period in the late nineteenth century when tattoos became immensely popular amongst the European aristocracy and nobility.

Nonetheless, the reality is that from the time that tattooing was rediscovered in the West until relatively recently (from the 1960’s on), the majority of those westerners with tattoos were young, working-class males.

The earliest members of this group were sailors who came into contact with native peoples who practiced tattooing. In some sense, then, the history of tattoos

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in the modern Western world began with the first exploratory voyages made by Europeans in the late fifteenth century. However, it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that a significant number of people who were not sailors were made aware of the practice of tattooing. In 1769, the British explorer Captain James Cook traveled to the South Pacific, where he encountered and was fascinated by the body modifications of the peoples that inhabited Tahiti and Polynesia. There, abstract black tattoos covered the bodies of most of the men (fig. 3). Upon returning from a second journey to the islands, he brought back to England a heavily tattooed Tahitian man named Omai and introduced tattooing into the public consciousness.

It was from the peoples of the South Sea Islands that European sailors learned the technical aspects of tattooing—indeed, the very word “tattoo” derives from the Tahitian tatau, which meant “mark made in the skin” and which recalled the sound made by the repetitive tapping of a hammer on the comb used to puncture the skin in traditional Oceanic tattooing. However, the stylized geometric designs that possessed so much symbolic power for the people who had created them were meaningless to Westerners, and a uniquely Western style and iconography quickly developed. Ex-sailors opened the first tattoo shops in port towns, and a clientele that consisted largely of other seamen dictated a set of images that grew out of their military and nautical affiliations. Designs served as souvenirs of voyages, indications of rank, charms against the dangers of the sea, or reminders.

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of loved ones left at home. These images were arranged on “flash” sheets—pages of painted designs, usually organized by subject—that hung on the walls of a tattoo shop and from which customers could choose an image (fig. 4). Custom designs were virtually non-existent. In fact, only a minority of tattooists actually drew the flash they displayed; most purchased or were given sheets of designs and made stencils from these. The stencils were sheets of celluloid, and later acetate, in which the design was dotted lines made by pricking the sheet. The image would be transferred to the skin by a method not unlike the Italian Renaissance technique of spolvere that was used to transfer drawings to a prepared surface for painting. The skin was coated with Vaseline and the stencil was placed on top; powdered charcoal was rubbed over the sheet so that a pattern of dots, made as the charcoal was forced through the prick marks, would remain on the skin to be used as a guide for the tattoo.

The style in which these designs were executed was largely dictated by technical limitations and a desire for legibility. A tattoo was heavily outlined with black ink and then accented with touches of color. Tattooists focused on completing tattoos as quickly as possible and aimed for clarity and consistency. Artistry was hardly a concern; the designs functioned as mementos or talismans, and their power was in what they symbolized more than how they looked. Because of this, the tattoos were worn like badges: small, isolated images that were placed without concern for the way they might interact with the musculature of the body or with other tattoos (fig. 5). Very little attempt at innovation was made, since more

\[\text{Ebensten, 66.}\]
complicated designs were impossible to transfer to skin without a wider range of pigments and the possibility of more subtle line. Furthermore, there was no incentive to innovate: those practicing tattooing saw it as a commercial rather than a creative pursuit, and as long as the designs on the flash sheets sold, there was no need to create new ones.

The catalyst for transformation came in 1868, when the Tokugawa Shogunate fell and Japan opened to the West for the first time. Japanese tattoos resembled neither the Western nor the tribal equivalents. They were colorful, coherent images in which large areas of stylized, natural forms, such as clouds or waves, surrounded a primary subject. These mural style tattoos covered the back and often extended down the arms and legs, following the contours of the body. Subtle shading and careful compositions imbued the tattoos with a sense of volume and dynamic movement (Fig. 6). Japanese tattoos were unique in that they were primarily decorative rather than social in their function; the aesthetics of the tattoo were the principle concern of the tattooist, as well as of the person who was tattooed.

Exposure to this tradition did not by any means instantly transform tattooing in Europe and America. It did, however, expand the iconography; as sailors returned from Japan newly tattooed, others, seeing them, wanted similar images put on their own bodies. Yet with photography still a rarity, the only examples from which to draw inspiration were the actual tattoos, of which there were relatively few. The impact of Japanese tattooing was, then, limited. Large-scale tattooing was time-
consuming and simply not profitable, so for some time, the most noticeable effect of Japanese tattooing on the West was the sudden popularity of dragon tattoos.

It was not until the early twentieth century that Western tattoos began to show evidence of the East’s influence in any substantial way. The catalyst for this change was, to an extent, the growing accessibility of cameras and photography, but it was more essentially the concerted efforts of certain individuals to learn about and incorporate the Japanese style into their tattooing Sailor Jerry is the most significant of these. Having served in the navy and settled in Hawaii, he was certainly a part of the conventional sailor tattoo tradition, and indeed many of his tattoos look very similar to flash images of the time. He was, however, unique in the way he viewed tattooing: he believed that the medium had a great deal of unrealized aesthetic potential and should be regarded as an art every bit as legitimate as drawing or painting. He was also a technical innovator, and he offered up his extensive knowledge of machine tattooing and pigments in order to begin a correspondence with the leading tattooists of Japan. Using images they sent him for inspiration, Sailor Jerry forged a style that combined aspects from both the Eastern and Western traditions.

Though Collins sought to “upgrade” the profession of tattooing, his ability to create change was limited by time and place. Working in Hawaii, he was far from urban centers where his images would be seen by a larger and more open-minded public. It was not until the next generation, then, that tattooing began to be more widely understood as the art form that Collins believed it to be. One man in
particular, Don Ed Hardy, was largely responsible for the further transformation both of the tattoos themselves and of society’s view of them.

If Sailor Jerry was a tattooist who did his best to make tattoos into art, Ed Hardy was an artist whose chosen medium was the tattoo. Having graduated with a B.F.A. in printmaking from the San Francisco Art Institute, Hardy was one of the first tattooists with a formal education in the visual arts. His understanding of a wide range of pictorial traditions gave him the means to create tattoos that combined images and techniques from various traditions sources of inspiration, establishing hybridity as a creative principle that continues to characterize tattooing in America today.

This thesis seeks to track the development of modern American tattooing by establishing a trajectory from the sailor tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through Hardy’s work on the West Coast in the 1970s and ‘80s and into the early ‘90s. I will look especially at the influence of the Japanese style of tattooing as fully introduced to the West by Sailor Jerry Collins and Hardy expansion of the repertoire of images and styles. Certain recent studies (notably those by Margo DeMello and Clinton Sanders) have addressed the changing social functions of tattoos and what Arnold Rubin calls the “tattoo renaissance” of the 1970s as a cultural phenomenon. No significant work has been done, however, that looks at the images themselves; this study will analyze visually the tattoos of both Collins and Hardy, which speak of the rich and multi-pronged history of the medium and are themselves distinctly modern. Finally, having mapped the
transformation of tattoos from ritual to art, I wish to discuss the implications of the
tattoo as art object and its place in the commercial art world.
Chapter One:

“Keepers of the Images”: the Origins of the American Tattoo

When we think of tattoos, inevitably a few specific images come to mind: the anchor, the pinup, the heart that reads “mom.” These are stereotypes, but they do point somewhat accurately to the beginnings of the tattoo tradition in America. Around the turn of the twentieth century, when tattoos were first becoming popular in Europe and America, the majority of those getting tattooed were sailors, and the images that they chose to have inked on their bodies reflected their profession and lifestyle. By the time tattoos became popular among a larger demographic (though one that was still made up primarily of working class men), a limited iconography was already codified. It is possible to divide the images of this early American tattoo tradition into fairly concrete categories: inscriptions in honor of loved ones, erotic images, images related to profession or rank, patriotic images, talismans designed to ensure safety at sea, and souvenirs of places visited.

Alan Govenar describes the style in which these conventionalized images were executed:

Drawn with a directness of line and form, a folk tattoo represents its meaning in a concrete image. Ultimately, the content of the image is primary to its understanding and appreciation, regardless of the virtuosity of the drawing itself. Folk tattoo designs tend to emphasize the two-dimensional
plane of the surface on which they are drawn, although shading is often used
to create a chiaroscuro effect.\textsuperscript{8}

Heavily outlined in black and filled in with solid colors, the goal was not realism but
legibility (fig 7). A red heart, a rose, a cross—each is immediately recognizable, even
from a distance. Indeed, it was, as Govenar suggests, a form of folk art, a decorative
tradition that was developed by artists without formal training and without a self-
conscious relation to any sophisticated artistic tradition.

Long voyages at sea meant extended periods of time away from friends,
family, and lovers, and certain tattoos served to remind sailors of those left behind,
or perhaps to convince those left of a sailor’s allegiance. These tattoos generally
consisted of a name or initials, usually written in a banner (serving as a frame for the
text), often wrapped around hearts or flowers. The words “true love” might
accompany the name, or appear on their own; one common placement for this
tattoo was across the knuckles, one word on each hand. A similar tattoo could
memorialize a loved one who had died, though in this case the banner was generally
wrapped around a cross and might also include the dates of birth and death.

In contrast to these inscriptions that stood in for a wife or girlfriend were the
erotic, figurative female images, usually called pinups, which represented in a more
general way the absent gender. Perhaps the design with the most variation, many
types of women adorned sailors’ bodies; some simply embodied a generic ideal,
while others corresponded to specific clichés. In either case, the specifically

feminine sexuality of the figure was exaggerated. Parry explains, “whether it is a flyer-girl, an angel-girl, a pirate-girl, a Red Cross girl, a geisha girl, a butterfly-girl, or any other girl, her features and curves are suspiciously like those of a hefty dancer from the burlesque: sensuous, coarse, attainable.” These were tattoos of true lust rather than true love.

Certain designs acknowledged the trouble that indulging in such fantasies might cause: a pinup might include a banner reading “sailors beware,” and one popular design featuring a woman seated in a martini glass holding alcohol and cards or dice usually bore the caption “man’s ruin” (fig. 8). But more common than these warnings against the dangers of women, liquor, and gambling were tattoos that served as talismans against the dangers of the sea. Religious tattoos were common, a show of piety in exchange for the protection of God. Images of the crucifixion and Christ wearing the crown of thorns were standard, most likely because they were immediately recognizable. These were two of only a handful of designs that were executed on a large scale, often covering a man’s entire back. This placement ensured that the tattoo also possessed a more literal ability to protect: the most common punishment for misconduct on the ship was lashing, and a devout captain might refuse to whip a man’s back if it featured a picture of Jesus or other religious image on it.

The images of the face of Christ (or at least those executed by the more adept tattooists) were some of the most realistic tattoos of the time. Covering the

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back, they were large enough that more detail was possible than on the much
smaller badge-style tattoo that would be placed on an arm or leg. The hair, beard,
and lines of the face were often rendered with a great deal of care (fig. 9). Unlike
many tattoo images, images of Christ were common in other mediums and could be
used as examples; it is clear that many tattooists took advantage of this fact. In
contrast, crucifixion scenes were more complicated compositionally, and, given the
narrative depicted, the figure of Jesus is much smaller in relation to the tattoo as a
whole; the result is that, as in most tattoos, detail is sacrificed for clarity. Amusingly,
without a source from which to glean what such a simplified body of Christ should
look like, many tattooists depicted the Messiah using the conventions of
representation of the other great figurative category of tattoos: pinup girls. The
result, then, is a number of crucifixion tattoos in which Christ’s features and curves
are strangely feminine (fig. 10).

The other common religious design generally executed as a full back piece
was the Rock of Ages, an image inspired by the story of a preacher who took shelter
in a fissure of rock during a storm and was saved from drowning, purportedly by the
hand of God. A popular hymn was written in the late eighteenth century about the
miracle, and in the early nineteenth century lithographs depicting a woman clinging
to a cross-shaped rock in the middle of a stormy sea became popular (fig. 11).
Tattooists copied the compositions of these images exactly, simplifying them to suit

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*This image is striking in its similarity to depictions of Perseus and Andromeda. While there is
no reason to believe that tattooists of the time were knowingly referencing this myth, it is highly
likely that the Victorian prints of the Rock of Ages were executed with reference to or at least
awareness of the Greek myth.*
their technical abilities. It is clear why the image held particular resonance for sailors, hoping that their God would save them, too, from a stormy sea.

Most talismanic tattoos, however, were superstitious rather than religious. A swallow, for example, represented a safe return home, since the bird’s landing on a ship was understood as a sign that land was nearby. The words “hold fast,” usually tattooed across the knuckles, were supposed to ensure that a sailor wouldn’t lose his grip while in the rigging high above the deck. A pig and a rooster, two animals that can’t swim, were an ironic amulet against drowning; a man would often have one tattooed on the top of each foot. One of the most poignant of this type of tattoo was a full-back image of a ship in full sail, captioned “homeward bound.”

A counterpoint to this design was an image of a sinking ship with an inscription that read “sailor’s grave.” This seemingly morbid design might be “tattooed as a simple statement of the perilous life of the mariner and his probable fate, or worn in a kind of reverse psychology as a talisman warding off just such an unhappy end.” Either way, to admit resignation to the possibility of death at sea by wearing such a tattoo was in some way a statement of the dedication of one’s body to the profession.

Patriotic tattoos were, understandably, especially popular during times of war. Eagles and flags were ubiquitous. Military images also became popular, though the pictorial range is suggestively limited, Ebensten, writing in 1953, alertly notes:

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The modern instruments of war, the tanks, battleships, submarines, and sten-guns find no places on the bodies of the tattooed. It is the scenes of nostalgia and olde-worlde charm which the seaman or soldier relishes, and even if the sinking ship on his vignette is not a schooner but a steamship, this is at least fifty years old and almost historic. Crossed rifles still follow an archaic gun pattern. Uniforms or flags show no effort to keep up with the changing styles. No atom bomb explodes on any lusty chest.

Patriotic and military tattoos, then, illustrated a romanticized, nostalgic image of war. In an era when war had become depersonalized, characterized by destruction en masse that meant that both triumph and death had become anonymous, images that called to mind one-on-one combat were somehow reassuring. This kind of tattoo offered up a kind of hope that the individual would be acknowledged and remembered the way he would have in times past.

Certain men might wear tattoos bearing the numbers of their naval battalion or the name of their ship, as they might the initials of a lover. These were marks of commitment. In a similar show of pride, certain images represented specific benchmarks in the career of a sailor:

When you had gone 5,000 miles at sea, you got a bluebird on your chest. When you’d gone 10,000 you got the second bird on the other side. When you made your second cruise you got a clothesline with skivvies and girls’ stockings between them. If you crossed the equator you got a Neptune on your leg. . . . A dragon showed you had crossed the International Date Line and every sailor that had, or if he wanted you to think he had been to Honolulu, wanted a hula girl on his arm so he could make her dance.12
This description also points to the tradition amongst sailors of getting souvenir tattoos, iconic images of far-away places they had visited. With its extremely rich tattoo culture, Japan, after its opening to the West in 1868, became a location in which many sailors chose to get tattooed. As a significant number of men returned to the United States with tattoos acquired in Asia, tattoos that offered a new vocabulary of images and new styles of representation, American tattooists took note and began gradually to widen the American repertoire.

This surge of interest in Japanese tattooing among Europeans and Americans is ironic given the fact that the Japanese government, determined to Westernize and concerned that the new visitors to the country would view the existence of a tattoo culture as barbaric, outlawed tattooing in 1872. Realizing that tattooing was a source of Western capital, the Meiji rulers changed the law such that Japanese tattooists could tattoo foreigners, though the ban on tattooing fellow citizens continued; this legislation remained in place until after World War II, when it was lifted by the occupying U.S. government.13

As in America, tattooing had developed certain negative connotations in Japan. Specifically, many had come to associate tattooing, especially full-body tattoos, with members of the yakuza, or gangsters. While it is true that many

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13 “A high-ranking official in General MacArthur’s Occupation government saw the work of Tokyo’s Horiyoshi II (Tamotsu Kuronoma, 1914-1991), and was sufficiently impressed to request a visit to the artist’s studio. When informed that tattooing was a banned art, the officer ordered the law to be revoked, as he felt it ranked equally with other respected indigenous arts and crafts.” Quote from Don Ed Hardy, “Japanese Tattooing: Legacy and Essence,” in Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos (New York: Drawing Center, in association with Hardy Marks Publications, 1995), 62.
members of the *yakuza* did (and still do) wear tattoos, the art in fact has its origins in
the culture of the merchant class of Edo Japan and was closely related to more
widely accepted art forms, developing side-by-side with the popular woodblock
prints known as *ukiyo-e*. In Japan, tattooing is a serious art form, whose association
with the *yakuza* is misleading. The Japanese tattooist Kazuo Oguri insists: “tattoo
artists call yakuza tattoos ‘odoshibori.’ It means a tattoo that is just meant to frighten
people. The yakuzas don't care if it is artistic.” For Oguri, tattoos only meant to
frighten are something less than art, however artfully rendered.

The fact that Japanese tattoo artists have a specific word for this kind of
tattooing is revealing, and indeed the precise Japanese vocabulary for tattoos serves
to create a clear distinction between types of tattooing that might be viewed with
disapproval and those highly artistic tattooing that developed during the Edo period.
While the popular term for tattoos in Japan is *irezumi*, meaning literally “the
insertion of ink,” this referred originally to a kind of punitive tattooing practiced by
the government to mark criminals, a custom last carried out in the 1720’s. Japanese
tattooists refer to their work instead as *horimono*, which means “carved object,” and
to themselves as *horishi*, the same word used by carvers of woodblock prints. The
prefix *hori*, combined with part of the given name of the artist or the master under
which he studied, became a tattooist’s professional moniker. Oguri, for example, is
known in the tattoo community as Horihide.

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It is important to examine the unique social situation from which horimono arose and in which it flourished, in part to understand its visual achievement, but as much because it was the particular middle-class social context and appeal of Japanese tattooing, as much as its aesthetic, that registered so powerfully with American tattoo artists like Collins and Hardy who were trying in their own cultures to erase the notion of tattooing as necessarily low-class. Until the beginning of the seventeenth-century, Japan was a feudally structured state. Through the efforts of the warlords Oda Nobunaga and his successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the country was unified and a centralized government, called the Tokugawa shogunate, established in 1603. The new rulers chose the city of Edo, now Tokyo, as the nation's new capital. With this overhaul of the empire’s power structure came a restructuring of society. Previously, three distinct social strata were recognized: aristocrats, samurai, and commoners. The shogunate looked to Confucianism for an alternate division of social classes, called shinokōsho, which broke down society into warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants.\textsuperscript{15}

Not only members of the new government but individuals from all these groups came to the new capital at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Having been nothing more than a small fishing village prior to the arrival of the shogunate, Edo was then forming as the samurai counterpart to Kyoto (the Imperial center) and to the great commercial hub of Osaka, and it offered many opportunities for sudden and substantial prosperity. The merchant class especially was in a position to increase its already significant wealth in this atmosphere of rapid urbanization.

Despite this favorable economic situation, however, merchants were the victims of a certain prejudice from the ruling class. Though they were already some of the wealthiest individuals in Japan and would become even more prosperous, they were considered to be at the bottom of the social ladder because they “create[d] nothing, living only on the exchange of goods.” Regarded with distaste by the shogunate, the merchants living in Edo were subject to repressive sumptuary and other legislation.

Concerned that the laws limiting the behavior of the merchant class, known as the *chônin*, would cause the development of potentially explosive resentment towards the government, the shogunate established certain areas of Edo where these laws would not be enforced. The brothel and theater districts, then, became the quarters of the *chônin*. The merchants’ unique social situation and rapidly growing disposable income meant that these areas became a kind of “cultural cauldron” where the arts of kabuki, ukiyo-e, and *horimono* developed and thrived.

We can look to the word *ukiyo-e* to provide some sense of the atmosphere of the *chônin* quarters of Edo. *E* means “pictures of” and *ukiyo* is most often translated as “floating world”: that is, a realm in which rules did not apply and fantasy ruled. *Ukiyo* can also be taken to mean “the here and now,” which indicates a constant focus on what was new and chic, “a hedonistic preoccupation with the present moment, with the latest fashions, pursuits, and lifestyles of urban culture.”

It is important to note, however, that in this liminal social place where nothing was

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fixed and the pleasures of the current instant ruled, there was a potent sense of the
transience of things. This bittersweet understanding of the brevity of human life
shaped much of the art that came out of this world.

Prior to the establishment of the shogunate, most of the art of Japan was
commissioned by the aristocracy. The Edo period, then, was the first instance in
which there was a market for mass-produced art. With no real precedent, the
woodblock prints that would satisfy this demand developed more or less
spontaneously in the second half of the seventeenth century. While the technical
process of woodblock printing had existed in Japan since the eighth century (used
primarily to print the text of prayers and Buddhist seals), it was used in an
illustrative manor for the first time in the Edo period, alongside the text of a new
genre of literature called *kanazoshi* that “vividly portrayed the hedonistic life styles
of Edo-period urban culture.” Because this world was perhaps better depicted
pictorially than with words, the images in these books gradually began to eclipse the
text in size and importance, and finally began to be published and sold as single-
sheet prints (*ichimai-e*).

The style of the first *ukiyo-e* prints represents not only an attempt to break
with traditional *yamato-e* painting that was the art of the imperial court, but also the
way in which artists were discovering the possibilities and limitations of this new
medium as they went along. Though the prints were rarely if ever drawn and carved
by the same person, the inventor of each image had to work with an understanding

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of the way in which his image would translate to a wood block. In fact, the kind of simplification that proved necessary was particularly appropriate to the task: bold, dynamic images illustrated the world of Edo poignantly (fig). Kobayashi explains this phenomenon in describing the work of one of the first notable ukiyo-e artists, Hishikawa Moronobu:

    Moronobu turned the as-yet unrefined techniques of early woodblock printing to his own advantage, deliberately emphasizing contrasts achieved by rough-hewn lines and stark black and white compositions, and his prints wonderfully suggest the aesthetic consciousness of the Edo townsman, who was fond of frank lucidity.19

As with most things in the floating world, subtlety was not the goal. Quite the opposite, in fact—life in the chônin quarters was a kind of over-the-top performance, and the art that imitated it just as much so. This visually aggressive work that was immediately legible made ukiyo-e a perfect source of inspiration for tattoos, in which boldness and legibility are key, since the “canvas” is in motion most of the time.

    If the style of ukiyo-e prints reflected the world for which they were produced, so did the choice of images. The most common subjects were well-known geishas, courtesans, and actors or scenes from popular Kabuki plays. In the latter category, stories of heroism were especially popular. In feudal Japan, the figure of the samurai, with his code of chivalry, served as a kind of national hero.

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19 Ibid, 69.
20 Ibid, 70.
However, in the new social order of the Edo period, the samurai came to be seen by the merchant class as a corrupt oppressor. A new kind of heroic figure emerged, that of the “chivalrous commoner,” an underdog or Robin Hood figure, and stories and images of men of this sort became extremely popular.  

Of course, this kind of folk hero was not an entirely fresh invention. One of the most widespread examples of such narratives was a translation of a sixteenth century Chinese novel, the *Suikoden* (in English, “Water’s Margin”), which told the story of a twelfth-century gang of bandit warriors. Multiple editions of the book were published throughout the Edo period in Japan, each illustrated with ukiyo-e prints representing the charismatic brigands. Especially popular was the edition published in 1827 with illustrations by Utagawa Kuniyoshi depicting each of the 108 protagonists, sixteen of them with extensive tattoos (*fig.12*). Indeed, the original text describes explicitly the tattoos of four of the heroes. This edition not only spurred a widespread craze for tattoos by creating an association between tattooing and the values of strength and courage represented by the characters of the novel, but also provided much of what would become the standard imagery for Japanese tattoos: both the tattoos worn by the figures in his prints and the figures themselves.  

By this time, the ideal of the “chivalrous commoner” had become a reality in Edo in the figures of the *otokodate*, or street knights, and the *hikeshi*, or firemen. The former was kind of roving protector of the weak against injustice, and the latter played a crucial role in battling the destructive fires that constantly plagued the city,  

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with its dense population, houses built of wood and paper, and frequent earthquakes. Both the *otokodate* and the *hikeshi* were extensively tattooed, and their tattoos served to highlight their valor and courage. As Kitamura explains:

To be an *otokodate* or a fireman required an understanding that death was not merely possible but probable...This encapsulates a uniquely Japanese aesthetic, not just of bravery but also of brevity, best conveyed by the idea of *mono no aware* (‘the pathos of things’): ‘The deep appreciation of an object’s beauty, coupled with a sense of longing or sadness at the transience of that beauty. Accepting the ephemerality of all existence and understanding that its very transience renders a moment or creation more precious is a core concept of the [Japanese] culture. It is also intrinsic in understanding tattoo art.’ These men accepted and reveled in the fleeting nature of their high-risk lifestyles. Much like their lives, their tattoos were temporary, and though permanent to the bearer, ultimately destined to live only for the span of the host’s life.21

In this world of the flesh—both in the sense of the focus on physical pleasures and the understanding that the current bodily moment is all there is—this flesh art was particularly poignant.

The tattoos worn by the men of Edo drew heavily upon *ukiyo-e* images, and indeed many of Japan’s first tattooists were the carvers of the woodblock prints—fully aware of the aesthetic tradition but eager for a different medium in which they would have the opportunity to exercise more individual creativity than in the printmaking world, where they were required to copy exactly the designs of the inventor. Indeed the Edo tattoos were not simply *ukiyo-e* prints taken off the page
and transposed onto the body. They radically extended the subject matter of these images and exploited the new ground of the print-making, perhaps most remarkably in the near full body tattooing that came into fashion. Because the *otokodate* and the *hikeshi* were shirtless much of the time, their tattoos served as an alternative to clothing, and were shaped and composed to resemble fashions of the time, extending “from the torso down the limbs, traditionally open in the front and ‘vented’ around the armpit to mimic the coverage of an Edo period worker’s jacket (*fig. 13*)." 

The tattoos also resembled clothing in their all-over patterning that recalled rich brocade fabrics, especially those used to make costumes for Kabuki theater. Ed Hardy describes how the primary subjects were surrounded by environmental fields of stylized natural forms—clouds, whirlwinds, waves, rocks, etc.—that did the real work of following body contours and imparting a sense of life and movement to the finished epic tattoo. These deceptively simple and highly abstracted energy fields [were] characterized by a complex interplay of spiral forms."

It was in this respect that tattoos deviated most obviously from ukiyo-e images, in which the central figure or figures were usually placed against a solid or more simply decorated ground to clarify rather than complicate the picture space (as in the tattoo).

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Not only the background, but also the main figure of a tattoo could form a kind of patterning. The dragon, the carp, the tiger (which, though a real animal, was not indigenous to Japan and was known to the Japanese people only through legends and stories), the karashishi (Chinese lion), and the phoenix were all common tattoo designs, and their scales, stripes, curls of fur, and feathers were stylized to create an effect of patterning in the tattoo as a whole. Of course, these mythical creatures were not chosen for their formal qualities alone, but acted as symbols for the various virtues they embodied: strength, ferocity, courage, wisdom, endurance. In choosing to be tattooed with such an image, an individual hoped totemically to imbue himself with its power.

The dragon was perhaps the most common figure chosen from among these animals, especially by the hikeshi, for whom it served as a kind of amulet: “as a deity of the sea and water and impervious to fire, the men of the fire-fighting brigades believed that the tattooed image of the dragon would protect them as they fought the fires of Edo.”\(^2\) Not only a protective talisman, the dragon also stood in for one of the most popular heroes of the Suikoden, Kumonryu, who according to the text was himself tattooed with nine dragons. Of the book’s 108 protagonists, Kumonryu perhaps best exemplified the virtues championed by the chônin: a skilled martial artist, Kumonryu left a life of privilege as the son of a wealthy land owner to join a gang of bandits and fight the corrupt elite. As an alternative to the dragon, a tattoo might depict the figure of Kumonryu himself.

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\(^2\) Ibid, 62.
\(^3\) Kitamura 2007, 78.
Other heroes of the *Suikoden* commonly depicted in tattoos were Busho, who fought and defeated a giant tiger, and Kaosho Rochisin, who devoted his life after the bandit wars to Zen meditation. Known as the “tattooed priest,” Rochisin was described as having flowers tattooed all over his body. In Edo-period depictions the flowers are usually cherry blossoms, selected for the short time during which the flowers bloom and commonly used as a symbol of the brevity of life that was such an inherent part of Edo culture and especially of its tattoos. Peonies, a symbol of prosperity, are another flower commonly used in Japanese tattoos, especially in conjunction with the motif of the Chinese lion. The figures that feature most commonly in Japanese tattoos, then, were generally chosen more for the values or qualities they were seen to embody than for any purely aesthetic consideration.

Not all tattoos, however, were so lofty in their symbolism; another kind of imagery common in tattoos was drawn from the genre of woodblock prints known as *shunga*, or spring pictures, that were erotic in subject. These images ranged from more-or-less innocent depictions of courtesans with their clients to graphic caricatures of characters with genitalia for heads. These tattoos were, after all, part of the culture of hedonistic pleasure that characterized the *chōnin* quarters and existed largely in the pleasure quarters of Edo.

Whether images of inspiring virtue or of titillating vice, Japanese tattoos were (and are) visually dynamic images that are extremely colorful figuratively, if not literally. Though *ukiyo-e* prints had, by the time Kuniyoshi’s illustrated edition of the *Suikoden* was published, developed from monochrome prints with one or two colors added by hand to fully polychromatic images, Japanese tattooists (like their
Western counterparts) struggled to find pigments that were both steadfast and safe.

While Japanese tattoos today are extremely colorful, it is important to remember that most tattoos at the time were executed in black and grey, using pigment made from cuttlefish ink or burnt sesame oil and diluted with water to create various shades of grey. Varying the concentration of pigment made possible the adept representation of volume and depth through subtle variations of tone. Even when Japanese tattooists were introduced to a wider range of pigments through contact with the West, the adroit control of black and grey remained the most important feature of Japanese tattooing, with color serving only to fill in or accent the forms described.

It is not difficult to understand why these adeptly inked images, dynamically rendered and composed to reflect the flows and contours of the body, were so attractive to Westerners when they first encountered them at the end of the nineteenth century. The tattoos of sailors returning from being stationed in the Japan started a craze for Japanese work not only among the working-class men who made up the majority of tattoo clientele in Europe and America, but also among the elite of society. Certain wealthy “collectors” traveled to the Japan for the exclusive purpose of getting tattooed or paid for Japanese tattooists to come to them. Even the sons of the British King Edward VII, one of whom would become King George V, had dragons inked on their forearms while they were in Japan, giving tattoos a social caché that encouraged their spread in Britain and America. Though the integration of some elements of these tattoos into the American tattoo vocabulary was immediate, limited access to the range of images and the fact that most Western
tattooists at the time were nothing more than adept tracers at best meant that it would be almost a century before Eastern-style work of any real quality was produced outside of Japan.

Chapter Two:

“To Express Current Mythology”: Sailor Jerry and Tattoo Art
As the atmosphere of Edo Japan was largely responsible for the development of a unique Japanese style of tattooing, so the environment of Hawaii was instrumental in inspiring Sailor Jerry Collins to create a new style of American tattoo. In the years during which Collins lived and worked there—from 1933 until his death in 1973—Honolulu was a vital seaport, both commercial and military, imbued with a palpable Eastern influence. Ed Hardy describes the city as a “tropical, nautical scene, flush with the aura of the exotic, mysterious, and forbidden.” In fact, Honolulu’s Chinatown, full of bars and restaurants, strip clubs and dime-a-dance halls, licensed brothels, and tattoo parlors—a neighborhood where sailors came to get “stewed, screwed, and tattooed”—was a twentieth-century version of the pleasure quarter of Edo in which the Japanese tradition of horimono was born. In the midst of established American sailor culture in a city with an unavoidable Asian presence, Sailor Jerry was able to draw on elements from each to create tattoos that were images of his own “floating world.”

Though Hawaii became both a personal paradise for Sailor Jerry and an immeasurable influence on his art, he didn’t arrive in Honolulu until his early twenties. Born in 1911 in Reno, Nevada, Collins was raised in California but left home in his teens, working various jobs across the United States and eventually joining the Navy. He was an extremely patriotic man, and took great pride in being able to serve his country. He intended to make naval service his lifelong career.

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Initially, then, tattooing was for Collins just a hobby. He had picked up some basic technical knowledge from a tattooist he met while working in a shipyard on the Great Lakes and honed his skills as many others had: by practicing on his shipmates. However, medical problems led to his honorable discharge from the armed forces. Unable to continue his career in the navy, by the early 1930s Collins had moved to Hawaii and opened his first tattoo shop.

Though Collins had never intended to pursue tattooing as a long-term profession, he saw it as a medium that was full of unrealized potential, and he was dedicated to creating the best tattoos he could possibly produce. As he described it, he wanted to “elevate tattooing out of the gutter into respectability status.” He was disgusted by “scratchers” and “scab artists,” the unskilled tattooists who worked with the goal of making a maximum of profit with a minimum of effort and who made no attempt to improve their skills or innovate in their designs. His passionate conviction that tattooing should and could be understood and practiced as a legitimate art is one reason that so many people regard Collins as the father of the modern American tattoo.

He was one of the first American artists to be concerned both with hygiene and with minimizing the pain and trauma to the skin associated with getting a tattoo, both of which were to be crucial factors in creating a more widespread acceptance of the art. Though there was some government regulation of the conditions in tattoo shops, even as early as the 1950s, many tattooists continued to practice with

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little concern for the health of their clientele and the possible spread of disease. Reusing needles, moistening them with the artist’s own saliva, and bandaging tattoos with paper napkins swiped from local restaurants and rubber bands were common practices. Sailor Jerry’s shop was one of the first to make use of sterile gauze pads and surgical tape for bandaging and an autoclave to sterilize the needles and tubes of his machines. Collins recognized that the integrity of tattooing would be affected as much by the conditions under which he tattooed as by the images he applied to his clients’ skin.

Interestingly, though he self-consciously sought to transform the practice of tattooing, Collins for the most part did not deviate from the traditional iconography described in the first chapter of this thesis. To an extent, his continued use of imagery deriving from naval culture had to do with the fact that in Oahu, many of his clients were sailors for whom these designs still had resonance. However, this limited visual lexicon was equally significant for Collins himself, a man whose close personal connection to life at sea and all that came along with it is made evident by the very nickname he chose as his professional moniker.

It was not, then, in the realm of subject matter that Collins made his mark on tattooing, but in the way in which he executed the designs. His images were simplified and stylized so that they were bold and legible and at the same time extremely elegant, capturing with a minimum of lines and shading the essence of whatever it was he depicted. One of the most recognizable characteristics of Sailor
Jerry’s tattoos was the thick, black outline that described them; he insisted, “If you can’t do it with 7 needles make it bigger or get rid of it.”

This prominent outlining ensured that the tattoo would be legible even as the body on which it was placed aged. Collins was acutely aware of the canvas on which he worked, even on a cellular level. His own description of how a tattoo is made explains the changes that take place in the skin over time, affecting the appearance of the images embedded within:

Some of the subcutaneous cells are punctured or injured by the imbedding pigments, and during the healing process collapse and become a sort of subcutaneous connecting tissue with the quality of a scar that will hold the pigment in place. These injured cells are no longer capable of subdividing, and the surrounding cells continue their normal processes of dividing and sloughing off the surface of the skin as minute dry scales, thus fulfilling the prognosis that the human body renews itself completely once about every seven years. The injured cells do not take part in this constant process of body renewal, and with the passage of time are jostled about by the changes going on around them and are somewhat dislocated from their original positions giving rise to the appearance of line spread and fade so common with old tattoos.

For Collins, then, the thick black line was crucial. A wider line was less susceptible to distortion and would serve to “hold” any color or shading within its perimeters.

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28 Hellenbrand, Kate, ed., His Book: Sailor Jerry (Buffalo, NY: Kate Hellenbrand, 1994), 1. This is an unedited version of an unpublished manuscript written by Collins sometime in the early 1970s, which he titled: Tattoo Tales: A Book.
This heavy outlining, along with a system of regularized simplification, gave Collins’s tattoos a distinctly stylized appearance, which he called the “comic-book style.” This is not to say, however, that the images are in any way crude; in comparison to more typical flash images of the same designs, Sailor Jerry’s work much more elegantly and effectively captures the realities of the subjects depicted. Compare, for example, his rendition of a peacock with a version by an unknown artist of roughly the same era (fig. 14). Peacock feathers are comprised of many fine branches or barbs; where the flash image describes each one with a realistically thin line, Collins uses far fewer lines and broad, flat areas of color. It is the latter that far more effectively captures the softness of the feathers and the lush thickness of the bird’s tail. It is also clear how Collins’s design would read much more readily on the contoured and mobile surface of the skin.

Sailor Jerry’s pinups offer another telling example of his ability to create images that, while firmly in the realm of cartoon, recall reality with a surprising succinctness of line and shading. His women boast exaggerated curves and unrealistically round, perky breasts, and yet display a clear understanding of the female anatomy in the way the soft contours of the belly and back are modeled, with brown (rather than the typical black) shadows (fig. 15). Facialy, there is a more distant relationship with the realities of human form. Collins’s pinups have a very recognizable facial type, characterized by bow-shaped lips and overstated, arching eyebrows (fig. 16). He deliberately chose to caricature the female face, fully aware of the visual history his work at once evoked and reversed. He describes his intentions by comparing his work to the stylized depictions of women in ukiyo-e prints of
Japan: “The blank stares on their geishas were to symbolize innocent purity (certainly a dream), so why not put lovely sexy faces on them [pinups] to express what certainly is no less a dream on our part?”

It might seem self-evident that a pinup tattoo would be designed to exaggerate the sensual aspects of the female form, since the choice of such an image was necessarily sexually suggestive. However, many of the women on flash sheets from the first half of the twentieth century were strangely asexual. They are not particularly feminine or beautiful, and do not engage at all but rather seem shy or even ashamed (fig. 17). Sailor Jerry’s pinups, by contrast, are posed to display their bodies, aware of their role as seductive symbols, and, while they do not challenge the viewer by looking out at him, they avert their eyes in a way that is coquettish rather than bashful.

These women are also more ubiquitous in Collins’s body of work than in those of his contemporaries. While pinups made up a distinct part of nearly every tattooist’s repertoire, Collins incorporated them into designs which generally had an entirely separate visual and symbolic vocabulary: they bloom from roses, ride patriotic eagles, charm snakes and dragons, wrestle with panthers, and populate ships. Female figures, then, are as pervasive in Sailor Jerry’s iconography as they are in the psyche, where sexual desire is always at least latently present.

In one of Collins’s most provocative designs, a nude woman stands in front of a dagger that is wrapped in a banner containing the traditional inscription “death

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before dishonor” (fig. 18). She is literally “pinned up.” This image can be seen as especially unsettling, since it boldly questions the legitimacy of statements we make about our own moral steadfastness by implying that the constant presence of sexual desire might undermine even the staunchest principles. This is one of many variations on the “death before dishonor” theme; others omit the female figure but wittily alter the inscription, substituting “death before abstinence,” or “death before castration.” There is a playfulness here in the way Sailor Jerry plays with expectations for a design that had been repeated verbatim for decades, but it is a bitter humor. These particular images date to the 1960’s, specifically the period of wide-spread opposition to the draft during the Vietnam War. For Collins, who was so resolutely patriotic and saw military service as a the requisite expression of love for one’s country, these mottos can be understood as expressing his disgust with a declining sense of duty to America in favor of a sole commitment to the self and hedonistic pleasure. Indeed, Collins’s refusal to tattoo peace signs, calling them “cop-out symbol[s], the footprint of the American chicken,” reveals his uncritical patriotism and suggests that his alterations of traditional designs were intended not to be lightly amusing, but rather harshly critical.29

As Ed Hardy describes it, Sailor Jerry was an “extreme conservative who actively promoted an ‘America First’ viewpoint, characterized by a virulently anti-communist, racist outlook that verged on the paranoid.”30 But if Collins may have been generally racist and xenophobic, his view of the Japanese was particularly

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29 Hellenbrand, 19.
30 Hardy 1994, 12.
complex. Considering his personal attachment to Hawaii, the attack on Pearl
Harbor was for him unforgivable, and “the postwar economic ascendancy of Japan,
particularly in the financial and political control of his beloved Hawaii, seemed an
insult to him. It was a cause of resentment and animosity for life.” At the same
time, he couldn’t help but admire the sophisticated aesthetic of Japanese tattoos and
the care with which they were created; he saw in the example of Japan the possibility
of legitimization for tattooing. He was genuinely fascinated by Eastern culture and
art and simultaneously deeply prejudiced towards the people responsible for it. For
Collins, the solution to this problem was to beat the Japanese at their own game;
that is, to use the best elements of Japanese tattoos to create tattoos that would
outshine any being executed in the East.

If Collins was going to learn from these artists, he needed a reliable way to
access their work. It was increasingly possible to see tattoos not only from Japan, but
from all over the world, on the bodies of sailors who passed through the tattoo
shop, but this didn’t provide Sailor Jerry with adequate time to study the images as
he wished so that he might first imitate and then improve upon them. With the help
of two Tokyo-based businessmen he had tattooed and befriended (so in fact, a
shared interest in tattooing could overcome his instinctive xenophobia), he
established a written correspondence with the leading tattooists in Asia at the time:
Horiyoshi and Horihide of Japan and Pinky Yun of Hong Kong. In return for
photographs of their work and designs on paper, he offered valuable technical

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advice. Since most tattoos in Asia were still being done entirely by hand and with a range of pigments not much expanded beyond what was available in the nineteenth century, Collins’s knowledge of machine tattooing and pigments was of great interest to these Eastern artists.

Indeed, Sailor Jerry’s technical expertise arguably went well beyond that of any American tattooist of the time. Just as he attempted to innovate in terms of style and iconography, so he worked hard to improve the technology with which the images were created. He was constantly experimenting with different kinds and configurations of needles that would make the process of tattooing less painful and more precise, and he was personally responsible for discovering green, blue, and purple pigments that were both safe and stable.

Though he was the first tattooists to work with a full range of colors and used them liberally, Sailor Jerry stressed over and over again in his letters to other tattooists the primary importance of black in creating effective tattoos. For one thing, black was the color used to create outline, but it was also crucial in creating the illusion of volume and depth in his tattoos. Certain Western tattooists attempted perspective effects as a means to this end, but Collins was highly critical of this technique, seeing it as a last resort for tattooists who couldn’t master the use of a range of black and gray tones (created by varying the concentration of pigment in water) to suggest three dimensions. This was the forte of Japanese tattooists, who worked mostly in monochrome, but Collins used the same technique to give shape
to extremely colorful designs. For this reason, he though that “the core power of the art lay in the intelligent usage of black.”

In addition to this “water shading,” Collins created depth in his compositions through the use of distinct layers. As he described it, “the dominant design has to ‘float’ on the secondary, and the tertiary below that, floating above the quaternary black mat of infinite depth.” Take for example, a patriotic pinup (fig. 19): she stands, the volume of her body suggested by shading, in front of a background of nautical symbols, while a stylized cloud suggests a third plane even farther behind. In this case, the skin itself is “the mat of infinite depth.”

Of course, this breaking down of the image into layers is both more obvious and more dynamic in Collins’s larger, Japanese-style images (fig. 20), and indeed it was from the Eastern tradition of placing a principal figure on a decorative background that Sailor Jerry derived his technique of dividing a composition into distinct layers. He was deeply admiring of these backgrounds, and he did his best to emulate them by employing a concept that he called “nothing is the same”: “each leaf, each flower, each wind vortex has to be different and not a xerox of an adjacency.”

Collins felt that these backgrounds, characterized by all-over patterning that was full of subtle variation, were the key to creating tattoos that were really alive. Because the iconography of tattoos was so limited, the main figure or subject was

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almost inevitably going to look familiar; it was in the background that a tattooist had
the opportunity to do something original. The goal, then, was not necessarily to
make the principal image stand out from the ground. Rather, as Collins described
his intentions:

[I aim for] even distraction between principle and frame, so the eye can’t
pause to look for minute defects, and I think the viewer should have to
pedal on both eyeballs from top to bottom, right to left, and then only
remember the principal. Hell of a concept, but that’s what I’m trying to do.
There’s a hypnotic effect to that whirling background in five or more depths,
like if you look at it long enough you will see hon. Dragon blink his eyes or
breathe and swear it really happened!²⁶

This vibrancy of image, then, was not simply of aesthetic concern, but was also a
means to literally enliven the subject.

For Collins, the “hypnotic effect” was a crucial aspect of tattooing. As he saw
it, the medium itself had an essential quality of magic or mystery that he wished to
cultivate. He admired, then, the largely fantastical or supernatural character of the
Eastern iconography; the fact that Japanese images appeared exotic to Western eyes
meant that they were doubly effective at transcending the mundane. And yet,
Collins was intent on producing tattoos that were quintessentially American, even if
they drew a great deal of formal inspiration from Asian counterparts. If he used
Japanese designs, it was not a final solution but part of the process of figuring out

²⁶ Letter from Sailor Jerry Collins to Don Ed Hardy, June 18, 1971. Reprinted in Sailor Jerry
Collins: American Tattoo Master, 60.
how to create tattoos that were as powerful as the very act of marking or wearing images on the skin. What he needed, he said, was his own “‘dream culture’ of euphoric fantasia to work on.”

Christian imagery might have served this purpose, but Collins was not himself a religious man, and as he (characteristically crudely) explained, “those greasers are too emotional about their fucking saints, etc., and I don’t want no part of it.” He suggested as subjects, then, what were to him the myths and legends of America, the Western equivalents of dragons and deities: “dive bombers, Pearl Harbor attack, Hydrogen bombs, Buffalo hunts, Gen. Custer at Little Big Horn, Spirit of ’76, Washington crossing the Delaware with wooden shoes walking on polluted water, etc.” Collins never actually realized tattoos of these subjects; these images, then, remained in his mind.

Of the large-scale tattoos Collins did complete, those not based directly on designs sent to him by his correspondents in Asia were not depictions of well-known scenes from American history but rather images that relate again to his own nautical past. In the mythology surrounding the sea, uncontrollable and unknowable by man, were the figures that Collins was looking for—in particular, mermaids. In one back piece, a pair of women with stylized fish tails float, bodies turned towards one another but looking over their shoulders at two vicious, approaching sharks as though to charm them into retreat (fig. 21). In another, a mermaid rides on the back

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of an eagle that seems about to dive into the water; she is in control, driving the
eagle down towards the ocean (fig. 22). The mermaid, then, is a character with a
supernatural power of seduction that gives her the ability to control even the fiercest
of creatures.

Collins only completed half a dozen or so such tattoos in his lifetime. His
clientele limited him, since the majority of those who came to him for tattoos were
sailors docked in Honolulu only temporarily who had neither the money nor the
time to invest in such a tattoo—a full back piece might take thirty hours to complete,
with weeks in between sessions for healing, and could cost the equivalent of what
would today be thousands of dollars. However, the handful of large-scale tattoos
that Collins did produce, combining as they did the Japanese mural-style image with
traditional Western iconography, were a central to the development of an epic
American style of tattooing.

If Collins’s largest tattoos represented an important step in the evolution of
tattooing in the West, his smallest were equally innovative. He developed for his few
female clients what he called the “mini-o-graph” or “feminigraphic”: dainty images
of flowers or butterflies inked on the breast or pubic area, where skin was thin
enough that the needle did not have to penetrate so deeply and a finer line could be
used without a loss of clarity (fig. 23). For these images, Collins finally abandoned
the thick outline he insisted upon in most of his work, using a machine with only
three needles to create the thickest lines and a single needle for detail. As he

38 Ibid, 60.
39 Ibid, 58.
described it, he wanted to “stay away from any resemblance to a tattoo as far as I can and really try to set a nouveau art form on these minis.” This is an example of the way that a demographic that had not traditionally been connected with the tattooing inspired experimentation with new forms; the availability of new kinds of imagery would in turn attract an even broader clientele.

The initial interest in tattooing amongst segments of society that would not previously have considered getting tattooed, especially women and members of the middle class, was undoubtedly related to the vast transformations American society was undergoing during the 1960s and ’70s. As the children of the post-World War II baby boom came of age, a youth culture with a distinctly revolutionary spirit developed. This was the era of psychedelia, rock and roll, hippie culture, and the civil rights, black power, women’s liberation, and anti-war movements. As the conservative middle-class values of the 1950s were rejected in favor of a more liberal, liberated ideal, getting tattooed was no longer so subversive—or was perhaps subversive in a way that was irresistibly appealing.

Sadly, Sailor Jerry Collins died in 1973, before he had the opportunity fully to explore the possibilities that this new vogue for tattooing opened up. He says, in one of his last letters, “hell to think that right when tattooing is getting interesting, I have to admit that the years are catching up to me.” His innovations of style and design and insistence on the artistic potential of tattooing, however, had already left

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their mark on a new generation of tattooists—including, notably, Cliff Raven, Zeke Owen, Lyle Tuttle, Michael Malone, and Don Ed Hardy—who would continue his legacy, creating what would be called the “tattoo renaissance.”
Chapter Three:

“A More Interesting Surface”: Don Ed Hardy and the Art Tattoo

If within the tattoo community, Sailor Jerry Collins is revered as the father of modern tattooing, Ed Hardy (born Donald Edward Talbott Hardy) is admired as its enfant terrible. Hardy was born in Iowa in 1945 but raised in Southern California. He claims to have been fascinated with tattooing from an early age, spending days in the shop of local tattooist Bert Grimm from the age of ten and setting up play studios in his home where he would draw flash sheets and invite neighborhood kids to come get inked with eyeliner or colored pencils. However, his interest waned when he realized that no tattooist would give him an apprenticeship at such a young age, and so he turned his efforts instead to custom car painting, an art that—like tattooing—had an outsider status that Hardy found compelling. Gradually, however, he became interested in more traditional media and started working in charcoal and pastel on paper. He began a lifelong study of art history as well, finding inspiration in the work of artists ranging from Hieronymous Bosch to Edvard Munch to Philip Guston.

In 1963, at the age of eighteen, Hardy was accepted to the San Francisco Art Institute, where he studied printmaking with Gordon Cook. He was drawn to etching in particular, finding the technical challenge of the craft—having to “[invent] everything with the severely restricted means of the needle line”—its most compelling aspect. He recognized the connection between this process and the medium that had so fascinated him in his youth, pointing out that “a deeply bitten
etched line coming off the press on still damp paper looks like a fresh tattoo.”

Indeed, Hardy rediscovered his interest in tattooing while in art school, giving a presentation for one of his classes on what he saw as a great American folk art that had been unfairly overlooked.

Soon after, Hardy met Phil Sparrow, an Oakland, California based tattooist who introduced him to the Japanese tradition of tattooing that had been so inspiring to Collins. Hardy’s reaction to these images was similarly enthusiastic: “I immediately thought, ‘If tattooing can look like this, I’d like to do it.’” Hardy’s decision to pursue tattooing as a profession was further motivated by Sparrow’s own example: he had abandoned a position as a professor of literature at Loyola University to become a tattooist, and prior to his work in academia had spent time in Europe as part of Gertrude Stein’s social circle. Sparrow’s experience was proof that tattooing and an intellectual life were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Hardy turned down a graduate fellowship in the visual arts at Yale University and moved to Vancouver, where he opened in first tattoo shop in 1968. He quickly realized, however, that the limited instruction he had received from Sparrow had not provided him the technical expertise necessary to create tattoos with the level of sophistication he saw in images of Japanese tattooing. He left Canada for Seattle to work under the tutelage of Zeke Owen, and later moved to San Diego, where he spent four years as an apprentice to Doc Webb. Webb was a tattooist of the old

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a Don Ed Hardy, *Tattooing the Invisible Man* (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1999), 37.
b Ibid, 40.
school whose shop specialized in traditional American designs; Hardy honed his skills there by tattooing the same set of flash images over and over again.

Ultimately, though, Hardy was frustrated by the limitations of this kind of tattooing. He was an artist, and he wanted to create his own images rather than endlessly copy others’ designs. In 1969, Owen put Hardy in contact with Sailor Jerry, knowing that his general commitment to tattooing, his deep understanding of Eastern practice, and his determined efforts towards expanding the possibilities of the medium would be particularly useful to Hardy. Their relationship, mostly conducted by mail, would last until Collins’s death in 1973.

Hardy and Collins shared the sense that tattooing was a legitimate art form and that there should be a constant effort on the part of the tattooist to improve and innovate, but Collins’s influence was not limited to his philosophy of the medium. Certain aspects of his style had an obvious effect on Hardy’s work, notably the quality of bold elegance that characterized his designs, his liberal use of color, and the combination of strikingly different styles of tattooing (traditional American and Japanese) in a single piece. Indeed, Hardy reused many of Collins’s designs, though rarely without altering them in some way. The variation might be as simple as updating the hairstyle of a certain pinup girl, or it might change entirely the character of the image.

In one of Sailor Jerry’s flash designs, for example, a rat sits atop a skull with the inscription, “rats get fat while brave men die” (fig. 24). Hardy’s version substitutes “good men” for “brave men,” designating a slightly different set of values, but it is the disparity between the figures rather than the text that is most significant.
The image is clearly a dark one, though Collins’s maintains a quality of cartoon that limits our reading of it as sinister. Hardy, however, stresses the grotesqueness of the rat, giving it yellow eyes, viciously sharp teeth, exaggerated large claws, and scraggly fur; its tail snakes through the orifices of the skull in a way that is particularly macabre (fig. 25). Though Collins’s images might make strong statements, there is always a certain lightheartedness to them. Hardy, in contrast, was not afraid to create an image that was disturbing, even frightening.

Hardy’s drawing is also much more complicated formally than his predecessor’s; while Collins simply filled in his outline with gray pigment and used a limited number of broad strokes to suggest the texture of the rat’s fur, Hardy describes the animal’s coat with a complicated matrix of fine lines. He did not, then, share Collins’s belief in the importance of simplification or the end to which such simplification was supposed to be a means—a tattoo that would retain as closely as possible its original appearance as time passed. Rather, Hardy was interested by the way that a tattoo might change over a number of years, acting as a mirror for the human body’s own unavoidable transformation. He explained, “I like how they [tattoos] look when they get old—I like the whole process. . . . I say, ‘It’ll hold up the way you will.’” Like its wearer, the tattoo image is necessarily always in transition.

Hardy continued, “Part of what’s fucked up with this culture is the absolute denial of everything having to do with the aging process and death.... A tattoo is an affirmation: you put it on yourself with the knowledge that this body is yours to have

and enjoy while you’re here.” Here, then, we see an echo of the Japanese understanding of tattoo – that to mark the body is to accept, even to celebrate, the transience of our own existence in all its brief intensity. Though Hardy’s initial attraction to Japanese tattooing was aesthetically based, the philosophy of that tradition would prove to be as appealing to him as the images themselves.

It was Collins who led Hardy to this more profound understanding of Eastern tattooing, first by offering his own interpretations of its cultural context and its intricacies of composition, and later by introducing Hardy to Horihide (real name Kazuo Oguri), one of the Japanese tattooists with whom Collins had been corresponding. In 1972, Collins invited both Horihide and Hardy to Honolulu. Sometime during the visit, Horihide invited Hardy to join him in Japan and work in his shop in Gifu. This was unprecedented; no Western tattoo artist had ever been given the opportunity to work in the traditional, largely hermetic, Japanese environment.

Hardy spent five months in Horihide’s shop in 1973, during which time he gained a solid understanding of Japanese symbolism and conventions of representation, as well as learning the techniques of hand-tattooing and of creating a large-scale composition without the aid of a stencil, mapping out the design with ink and brush directly on the client’s skin. The new techniques allowed Hardy to rethink his understanding of the tattoo. He was excited by the idea that in one sense each tattoo created in Oguri’s studio was unique. In drawing the design directly on the body, the tattoo was freed from the constraints of a standardized design and made capable of interaction with the body in a new way. However, while each image
could now be custom-designed to fit the individual’s body, there was a limit to how well it might fit his character, since the designs themselves were generated out of a restricted iconography. While freehand tattooing seemed formally liberating, the limited visual vocabulary resulted in some of the same frustrations Hardy had encountered in Doc Webb’s studio in San Diego.

He was, however, inspired by the environment in which Oguri worked. Most Western tattoo shops were storefronts located in high-traffic areas that attempted to draw customers in off the street with flashy neon signs and brightly colored flash sheets. By contrast, the typical Japanese studio relied upon word of mouth for publicity and was an understated private space usually in an apartment or office building, where work was done by appointment only. When he returned to America, Hardy opened Realistic Tattoo Studio based on the Japanese model; it was the first shop in the West to offer exclusively custom work.

Back in the United States, Hardy continued to work in the Japanese style, since many of his clients were eager to take advantage of the opportunity to get more or less authentic Japanese tattoos, which had begun to find a following, without leaving the country. No longer under Oguri’s supervision, however, Hardy was free to experiment with the forms he had mastered during his time in Gifu, seeking ways to make them even more dynamic. The Japanese tattoos are composed with much greater awareness and consideration of the human form than traditional western tattoos. They engage rather than avoid the body’s contours; the swirling forms of the background, for example, might be placed so that they trace and mirror the curve of a shoulder, the bend of an elbow, or the rounded shape of
a pectoral muscle (fig. 26). Nonetheless, the principal figurative subject is usually placed on one of the broad, flat areas of the body—the back, chest, or upper arm—so that the image can be taken in at a single glance. The artist tries to situate the central figure on a flat and unified surface so that the contours of the body do not interrupt its “reading,” even as he allows the background and outlying areas of that tattoo that are merely decorative to display themselves over and emphasize the irregularities of the human body.

Hardy, however, pushed the boundaries of the relation of body and tattoo even further than the Japanese had done, particularly in designs that illustrate scenes of conflict between two or more figures, human or animal. He often refused to locate the scene on one of the more or less flat areas of the body that come closest to reproducing the even plane of paper or canvas. Wrapping the central image around the thigh or the ribs, he was unconcerned with the fact that it might not be understood from a single vantage point: either the viewer must move, or the tattooed body. But the greater innovation is that the body on which the figures are placed becomes not a passive bearer of the scene but a participant in it, as the figures seem to maneuver around or interact with the peaks and valleys of the wearer’s body, as though these are natural obstacles in the landscape in which the depicted scene is taking place.

One striking example of this compositional effect is a tattoo of a man diving after a carp (fig. 27): he is placed upside-down, wrapped around the tattooed person’s ribs, reaching out to grab the fish just as it is about to disappear into the void between the wearer’s legs. Hardy has positioned the image so that the tattooed
body itself offers a real possibility for the carp’s escape. The tattoo is not an integral image placed on a body but exists as a relation of the image and the body that bears it. Were the image to be more traditionally placed on the back or chest—areas easily suggestive of the rectangular plane of paper or a canvas—the tattoo, however impressively rendered, would be far more static, while here it takes on a thrilling dynamism, as it formally poses the question of the outcome of the fisherman’s quest.

Another example of the extraordinary interplay of narrative scene and body can be seen in a 1974 tattoo placed on a woman’s hips and steaming across her stomach. Based upon an Edo-period print by Katsushika Hokusai, the image shows a witch spitting a spray of small rats at an obviously harried warrior (fig. 28). Each of the figures wraps around a hip, neither completely legible frontally, and the flow of rats, issuing from the witch’s mouth and only momentarily interrupted by the warrior’s sword, defines the lower limit of the bearer’s abdomen. The body both holds and complicates the conflict, the pubic area literally interrupting the action, coming between the two figures. But the design also serves to reverse figure and ground, as the tattoo precisely frames the woman’s pubis, drawing the viewer’s eye to the genitalia, even as the image defines the familiar psychomachia of Western sexuality.

But Hardy’s ambitious formal imagination was not easily imitated, and while the Japanese aesthetic and Asian imagery became increasingly popular, few tattooists did any more than slavishly mimic a style that soon became a cliché. By the end of the 1970s, the Japanese imagery had become as common in tattoo shops
as anchors and pinups had once been, as tattooists turned out endless copies of designs imported from Japan without any effort to modify them or explore their visual potential. While Hardy was constantly experimenting, pushing the boundaries of the tradition, most others were simply satisfying a consumer demand with little real interest either in the tradition itself or in extending it. Tattooing in America, then, seemed headed once more for a stagnant homogeneity.

Hardy never abandoned his interest in Japanese tattooing, but what once had seemed fresh and exotic began to seem familiar and predictable, making him eager to find a new look for his tattoos. In 1977 he attended a tattoo convention in Reno, Nevada, where he met Jack Rudy and “Good Time” Charlie Cartwright, two tattooists from East Los Angeles who were working in a photorealistic “fineline” style that was essentially a refined version of Chicano jailhouse tattooing. In the 1940s and ‘50s, a tattooing style had developed among the prison inmates of Mexican descent in California and Arizona, determined by the limited tools—sewing needles and writing ink—that were all that was available to make the tattoos, usually portraits and religious scenes (fig. 29). Monochromatic and finely detailed, the style spread through the barrio in the 1950s and ‘60s. Rudy and Cartwright built on the prison tradition, using the single needle to create delicate stipple shading that imbued the images with a uniquely convincing sense of volume (fig. 30).

Hardy was eager to try working in this style. “I wanted to do all-black tattooing . . . . This was the first new form of visualization I’d encountered.” But he was concerned that his usual clientele wouldn’t be interested in imagery of this sort,
especially as it was identifiable with prison and gang culture. He knew he needed to work where people wanted tattoos in this style, and he decided to open a second shop in San Francisco’s Mission District, where he knew there was population of Chicano youth (especially those involved in “lowrider” culture) among whom this style was popular. “I opened this whole shop just to be able to do that kind of work—to put myself in the stream.”  The shop, Tattoo City, had only been open a year when it was destroyed by fire, and Hardy decided not to rebuild. But by this point, he had already accomplished what he had set out to do. He had mastered working with a single needle in black and grey, and he realized that he could make use of this mode of representation in conjunction with an iconography that would not necessarily recall the prison setting in which it developed or the gangs in which it flourished. What Hardy had gleaned from Chicano jailhouse tattooing was not so much a style as it was a technique by which he could represent nature with shocking verisimilitude.

One example is his life-size image of an iguana, frighteningly realistic, draped across the bearer’s ribs (fig. 31). This sort of hyper-realism was something new in tattoo art. Prior to this, most tattoos were stylized in such a way so the figure represented was clearly identifiable but simplified in detail and texture so it read less as a visual analogue of what it depicted than as a sign or symbol of it. But the iguana, meticulously rendered, doesn't stand for anything. It does not evoke the reality it

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Vale, 59.

A “lowrider” is a car whose suspension has been modified to allow to ride as close to the road as possible. A subculture developed in southern California in the Chicano community around the customizing and display of these cars.
represents; it attempts to suppress the fact of representation (even as it demands admiration for the suppression), offering itself as subject rather than a picture of it: a vision of the iguana, not a version of one. The startling illusionism of the figure placed on a body has an effect that is unsettling; realism becomes surrealism.

Yet this was not the only direction in which Hardy’s art moved. At roughly the same time (the late 1970s and early ‘80s), Hardy was also beginning to explore a style that, in stark contrast to the hyper-realistic mode of representation of fineline tattooing, was characterized by complete abstraction in solid black, broad strokes. This “new tribalism,” as Hardy called it, was essentially a reinvestigation and restatement of the monochromatic, non-representational tattoos of the peoples of the South Pacific, in particular the indigenous groups of New Zealand, Samoa, Borneo, Hawaii, and Micronesia (fig. 32). It was first introduced into the Western tattoo lexicon by the work of Cliff Raven, a Chicago-trained artist, who had moved to Los Angeles in the 1960s. He found what he termed its “pre-technological imagery” not only visually appealing but better suited in its often curvilinear forms to the “living, plastic three-dimensional object” that is the human body than most of the design repertoires of modern tattoo artists.  

The thick, flat, geometric designs offered yet another visual vocabulary to the omnivorous Hardy. Originally he was not himself working in the style, but actively sponsoring a friend who was, Leo Zulueta. Soon, however, the new imagery began to appear in Hardy’s own work. For many of the tattooists and tattoo enthusiasts

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48 Vale, 59.
who were drawn to the new tribalism, the appeal of the style was related to an idealization of so-called “primitive” cultures (not unlike the primitivism of modernist European artists like Paul Gaugin) and a sense that the designs expressed a “cosmography and knowledge of powers inherent in ‘nature’ which those ‘primitive’ peoples knew much more intimately than we do.” For Hardy, however, the shapes had a purely aesthetic appeal, providing him with a new set of formal possibilities to explore and incorporate—and to challenge the narrative aspect that marked so much of his Japanese-style tattooing.

As he did with all the styles and techniques he discovered, Hardy sought to understand the formal possibilities and then push them in new directions. Though he did complete a handful of tattoos that incorporated the familiar broad, flat, solid black designs, his best work in this style is arguably the small, delicate, almost filigree, adaptations of it that fit on the body like fine jewelry: long earrings that caress the neck or wiry bracelets (fig. 33). This is in some ways similar to Sailor Jerry’s “feminigraphic” tattoos, a similar change of scale and mode without any sacrificing of the formal experimentation or technical commitment that marks his other work.

Soon, however, the aesthetically restless Hardy again felt the need for color and motion in his designs without giving up the commitment to pure form, and he sought solutions, as he characteristically did, not only in the experimentations of other tattoo artists but in the traditions of painting that he had studied and valued.

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The relations of color and line as paired problems of abstraction had been an issue for modern painters, as Hardy well knew. He told an interviewer that he had “seen this show of Kandinsky’s early works,” which seems to have opened up this new set of formal possibilities for him (fig. 34). His tattoos begin to resist the sharp organization of the New Tribal imagery and integrate brilliant colors in designs that self-consciously recall and reimagine Kandinsky’s painting, though without the psychologizing of form that marked Kandinsky’s writings (fig. 35).

It was, however, this capacious knowledge of and creative response to the ways in which other artists have tried to solve the general problem of image-making, even as he recognized the particular limits and possibilities of body art, that distinguishes Hardy’s artistry. A spectacular late tattoo may be taken as a brilliant synechdoche of his career. Significantly called “The Goddess of Art” (fig. 36), this 1994 tattoo could be taken as a complete history and celebration of the forms and techniques of tattooing. The design is an extraordinary bricolage, self-consciously evoking and declaring Hardy’s own mastery of the entire tradition of tattooing.

A full back piece, the tattoo’s central figure recalls the six-armed Hindu deity Devi, a female manifestation of the divine associated with creativity. She is at once a goddess and a pin-up, with cartoonishly exaggerated breasts and shapely legs. She herself is tattooed; curvilinear designs resembling traditional Maori tattoos decorate her face, neck, and stomach, while she also has a retro American anchor on one of her arms and a simple star on a hand. A wreath of thorns, recalling the head of

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a Vale, 99.
b Vale, 65.
Christ with a crown of thorns that is a common image in Chicano religious tattoos, surrounds her neck, and she has new tribal markings on several of her shoulders. The field she is set in makes other references: a prison-style cross marks the bearer’s left buttock and Japanese “finger-waves” appear on her right hip. A stylized black panther, a common “old-school“ American design looks out from behind the goddess’s right leg, and a similarly styled swallow looks over her right shoulder, while behind her left leg are set of images that seem to recall early twentieth-century Russian art. Her hair rises in ringlets of flame that recall 1950s hotrod painting; these flames envelope a skull and crossbones that could either be medieval memento mori or merely a biker image. Rings of expressive color, like that in a Kandinsky painting, frame the goddess, while spirals of black and grey smoke obviously culled from Japanese-style backgrounds swirl behind her left shoulder.

The tattoo thus incorporates recognizable images and techniques from high and low culture, from the museum and the street, from East and West. None is given precedence, and all exist together in a coherent and carefully composed design. Revealingly, two of the goddess’s hands hold paint brushes, a gesture toward the world of high art that tattoo artists generally reject and have been rejected by, while another arm is severed at the wrist, a sign of what artists may be cut off from, either by cultural bias or their own ignorance or choice. But Hardy both knows and embraces, and the “Goddess of Art” ambitiously offers itself as a history and celebration of virtually all that has come before.

In an interview, Hardy spoke about another tattoo he had designed for a client, “who wanted this piece which was like a tribute to Sailor Jerry—a big 40’s va-
va-voom tits-and-ass nurse. And he wanted me to do it next to a lot of Tibetan tantric imagery.” The client was reluctant to ask Hardy to do it, but Hardy himself “thought it was great. I put it on him and thought, ‘This is real American tattooing’—having all these cultures floating next to each other. . . . There will probably be more and more of that; I suppose that’s kind of post-modernist: making references within the business itself.”\textsuperscript{31} That is what Hardy has done, and most spectacularly in “The Goddess of Art.”

But if that tattoo is a self-conscious evocation and celebration of the hybridity that marks the post-modern, it is arguably that fact that makes the image as tattoo less successful than some of Hardy’s other work. Here the image overwhelms the body on which it appears, drawing no particular advantage from its placement on a three-dimensional human canvas, as his very best work does. It is technically stunning and intellectually interesting, but it is purely as image that it compels, not as image recursively interacting with the body on which it is placed. But even its failure, if that is what it is, makes unmistakable the very nature and the possibility of the tattoo, reminding us of what it can achieve.

There is no denying either Hardy’s skill or importance. He has been the most knowledgeable, innovative, and ambitious of modern tattoo artists, and his seemingly effortless ability to master every style and technique has cracked open the visual vocabulary of the medium. But arguably his most important contribution is in how he has forced open the very definition of American tattooing, arguably, even of

\textsuperscript{31} Vale, 54.
America itself—not the naively racist and xenophobic America of Sailor Jerry, but an America that is actually defined by the kind of cultural fusion that exists in his art.
Conclusion:
‘A Little Piece of Walking Surrealism”

Hardy is obviously acutely aware of the aesthetic traditions his art is renewing and combining. This is not the nonacademic folk art of the navy ship or street tattoo parlor, but a new model of tattooing that is self-consciously intellectual and self-reflective, a fact obvious in his interviews and his own writings as well as in the tattoos themselves. He knows and admires the traditions of both street art and fine art, and is as likely to invoke tattoo artists like Sailor Jerry or Horihide as canonical painters like Dubuffet or El Lizzitsky. But while he thinks sophisticatedly about tattoo images as serious art, theorizing and historicizing their power, he does not go the next step to see the tattooed body itself as an integral art object. Even as his own artistry posits and produces a complex interaction between the tattooed image and the three-dimensional surface of the body that wears it, the very art historical traditions that inform his work on and with the body seem to keep him from identifying his art as a form of “body art,” as the term was used among performance artists in the 1970s.

Nonetheless, the tattoo renaissance seems to require an effort to link it to the boundary testing and breaking of this other form of modern art. At the very time (the 1970s) that Hardy and others were transforming tattooing, performance artists like Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Marina Abramovic, and Gina Pane were challenging the assumptions of fine art discourse about the nature of the art object, its relationship to the viewer, its obligation to please, and its status as a collectible
commodity, the very issues that tattooing tacitly raises. Indeed, the two forms of “body art” share more than just a name - as both seem to be mainly about making the body simultaneously subject and object. In many ways, the performance artists came very close to enacting (“embodying,” we might say) what is implicit in tattooing but what has gone unremarked: the defamiliarization both of the body and of art, and the undoing of the supposed stability of their opposition.

Andrea Juno has said that tattooing “is like a performance art form, in the sense of having a whole uncertain and kind of deep interaction between the conception, the people involved, the actual art process, and the subsequent reactions the art will provoke.”

Even the sometimes bizarrely sadomasochistic exhibitionism of much performance art might be seen to find a counterpart in the pain that tattoo artist inescapably causes but which the client must accept; the comparison, however, may be misleading, since with modern techniques the pain of getting a tattoo is minimal (or least manageable) and of limited duration, an incidental by-product rather than a desired effect.

One can, of course, over-emphasize the parallels, allowing their shared semantics to erase significant differences in intent, commitment, audience, and even ontology. Significantly, the performance piece disappears, while the tattoo, as an essential part of its unsettling nature, is something permanent (as every teenager’s parents have pointed out). But the genuine similarities allow us to see something essential about tattooing: it dissolves the distinction between subject and object and

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Vale, 67.
refuses the commodification of art. In 1970, Vito Acconci enacted a performance in which he sat, contorting himself into various poses in order to bite himself on as many parts of the body as possible. The piece was called *Trademarks*, and as Kathy O'Dell explains, “Metaphorically, he refers to the commercial practice of identifying (‘marking’) a product for the purposes of exchange (‘trade’). As Acconci bit into his flesh, he was attempting (as he states in the *Trademarks* text) to ‘stake claim on what I have.’ He proclaims his own body, in other words, to be an object with exchange value.” Tattooing does something similar, affirming the value of the body as object while resolutely remaining un-exchangeable; it cannot be appraised, auctioned off, or bid for. The act of wearing a tattoo becomes an enduring piece of performance art in which the tattooed body is the uncollectible art form, rather than the tattoo.

The connection between Acconci’s *Trademarks* and tattooing is not limited to the way that they similarly protest the fact that that art object has become just another commodity in a bourgeois consumer culture. A series of photographs of the Acconci’s performance was accompanied by a poetic text, in which he wrote:

“Reasons to move: to show myself to / myself—show myself through myself— / show myself outside.” This offers an almost uncanny definition of what tattooing does. Tattooing, in some weak sense, has always been an expression of the self in terms of

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34 O’Dell, 20.
35 The exception here that tests the rule is the collection of tattooed skins at the Medical Pathology Museum at Tokyo University, begun in 1926 by Dr. Masaichi Fukushi and continued by his son, Katsunari.
its assertion of one’s freedom to alter the body (and it is in part for this reason that the identity numbers forcibly tattooed on holocaust survivors seem so poignant and appalling) but once the range of tattoo imagery and the styles of representation became virtually limitless, tattooing could not only gesturally declare one’s freedom but act as a lens for the unconscious, as the choice of tattoo and tattooist become precisely a way to show oneself both to and through oneself. Tattooing is more uncensored than painting, freed by flying below the radar of academic discourse or critique, and so whatever can be imagined can be done. Of course, our imaginations are fettered too often by what we already know and have seen, and the majority of tattoos executed at any time come from a relatively small pool of conventional images, e.g., anchors, flowers, fairies, and hearts, images familiar to the client and that can be legibly rendered by merely competent tattooists. But the potential to do something remarkable is there in the medium, inherent in the unique interaction between client and tattooist that defines the art.

This is one explanation for Ed Hardy’s seemingly endless quest for new images and styles: so that he might be better equipped to help the client express what led to the desire for the tattoo, not merely to give the client the tattoo desired. “I strive to be technically capable of anything,” Hardy has said in an interview. “I’ll suggest ways to possibly improve someone’s idea or bring it closer to what their interior vision is... It’s always a matter of clarifying... trying to be a human camera and taking what they’re seeing on the inside and showing them x number of possibilities.” Andrea Juno, one of the interviewers, develops Hardy’s inner camera image, responding that the tattooist “function[s] as a kind of therapist, a vehicle to
help people channel their unconscious urges to the surface”—literally to the surface of the desiring body.

Perhaps Juno’s psychologizing of the activity offers an understanding that can help define the uniqueness and opportunity of tattoo art. The novelist D. M. Thomas, author of *The White Hotel*, drawing on a similar insight, has insisted that “it would be easy to imagine a psychotherapy based on the analysis of tattoos. It would not be necessary to associate from dreams; the dreams would be visible. Of course, the personality of the tattooist would be a complicating factor—and therefore an enrichment.” Complicating factor or clarifying therapist, the tattooist works to reveal the client both to himself and to the world. In this, however, tattoo art differs from other visual forms in that it is radically collaborative. The canvas does not initiate a dialogue with the artist, asking to be painted in some particular way, but the tattooed body emerges from an often complex interplay of suggestion and response that results in desire imprinted in ink upon the client’s body, and ends in dreams made visible.

In this, tattooing becomes a type of surrealism, not so much in its images (which may or may not share the visual vocabulary of surrealist art) as in the medium itself, which is a form in which, in André Breton’s phrase, “desires are made manifest.” Like surrealism, tattooing engages the unconscious and its secret desires. If its imagery is often far more conventional than the surrealists’ repertoire

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57 Vale, 53.
of dreamscape and bizarre juxtaposition, it nonetheless turns inchoate desire (for what is a tattoo if not an expression of desire, albeit a desire filtered through the lens of the tattooist’s own inevitably present personality) into color and line.

Of course, tattoo images are not really images summoned directly from our unconscious, any more than was the incredibly self-conscious art of most of the surrealists. And there could be no parallel to the surrealists’ experiments with automatic writing or drawing. Tattooing is necessarily carefully planned; and, in any case, it is the client’s unconscious desire that the collaboration seeks to express, not the artist’s.

The tattoo, however, enacts rather than represents the same “dizzying descent into ourselves” that surrealism sought to express, freeing us from repression and conscious thought and reminding us that we both have and are bodies. In fitting image to body, the tattoo artist transforms the image even as he transforms the body, as he erases the difference between them. Is the art the tattoo or the tattooed body? In 1930, Breton declared:

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But it is not inevitably so. Hardy, for example, disrupts an elaborately decorative leg panel, placing a realistic breast with an erect nipple exactly over the knee, or, in a visual gesture reminiscent of Magritte, creates a tattoo of a steaming baked potato with a melting pat of butter, the “banality” of the image establishing “the dialectical system of almost infinite richness that a thing forms with ourselves at the very moment we are considering it” (Paul Nougé, René Magritte or Images Defended, extracted in Jemima Montagu, *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art and Writing, 1919-35* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 87.

Bryan S. Turner has written about this oddity of the human body: “it would be ludicrous to say, ‘I have arrived and I have brought my body with me.” See his *The Body and Society* (New York: Blackwell, 1984), 7.
Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Search as one may, one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point.\(^{33}\)

But tattoo art should be one of the things that should help find and fix it. The contradictions Breton would have erased are exactly those that tattoo art resolves. It is an art form that celebrates the body but embraces its aging and mortality, whose representations are at once image and object, surface and depth, evoke the past and affect the future, are both conventional and intensely personal, and can be both a sophisticated pictorial system and a simple form of traditional folk art. It is an art that also offers an almost utopian solution to the fundamental contradictions of modern art, dissolving the radical difference between art object and art collector, between image and canvas, and, in the radical collaboration between the tattooist and his client, blurring the opposition between the artist and the work of art itself.

Fig. 1  Samuel O'Reilly’s electric tattoo machine

Fig. 2  A modern machine with electromagnetic coils
Fig. 3  Tattooing typical of the Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia (From Adam Johann von Krusenstern’s *Voyage Around the World*, 1813)
Fig. 4    Flash sheet by George Bigmore, c. 1920
Fig. 5 A badge-style arrangement of tattoos, typical of the Western sailor tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
Fig. 6 A Japanese bodysuit tattoo in black and grey
Fig. 7  An example of the simplified, linear style that characterized early twentieth century American tattoos
Fig. 8  A variation on the “man’s ruin” design by Sailor Jerry Collins, c. 1960s
Fig. 9  Flash design of Christ with crown of thorns by Gus Wagner, c. 1900-1905
Fig. 10  Flash design of the crucifixion by Bert Grimm, c. 1940s
Fig. 11a Late nineteenth century lithograph of the Rock of Ages, used as an advertising poster for a play of the same name
Fig. 11b  Flash design of the Rock of Ages by Bert Grimm, c. 1940s
Fig. 12  Woodblock print by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1827. The figure depicted is Kumonryu, one of the 108 bandit-warriors of the *Suikoden*. According to the text, Kumonryu was tattooed with the images of nine dragons.
Fig. 13 A Japanese tattoo composed to mimic the shape of the *happi* coat, an Edo-period worker’s garment.
Fig. 14  Flash designs by an unknown artist, mid twentieth century (top) and Sailor Jerry Collins, 1964 (bottom)
Fig. 15  Flash design by Sailor Jerry Collins, 1965.
Fig. 16  Flash design by Sailor Jerry Collins, c. 1960s.
Fig. 17  Pinup flash designs by an unknown artist, early 20th century (left) and Dainty Dotty, c. 1940s
Fig. 18  Flash design by Sailor Jerry Collins, c. 1960s
Fig. 19  Flash design by Sailor Jerry Collins, c. 1960s
Fig. 20 Japanese-style tattoo by Sailor Jerry Collins, 1968-9
Fig. 21 Custom designed full-back tattoo by Sailor Jerry Collins, 1967
Fig. 22  Custom designed full-back tattoo by Sailor Jerry Collins, c. 1967
Fig. 23  “Feminigraphic” tattoos by Sailor Jerry Collins, c. 1970
Fig. 24  Flash design by Sailor Jerry Collins, c. 1960s

Fig. 25  Flash design by Don Ed Hardy, date unknown
Fig. 26  Japanese-style tattoo with background of stylized natural forms designed to follow the body's natural contours by Don Ed Hardy, 1975
Fig. 27  Custom-designed tattoo by Don Ed Hardy, 1976
Fig. 28  Tattoo after Hokusai’s “Witch Spitting Rats” by Don Ed Hardy, 1974
A single-needle tattoo in the Chicano jailhouse style
Fig. 30 Photorealistic “fineline” tattoo by Jack Rudy
Fig. 31  Custom-designed tattoo in a monochromatic “fineline” style by Don Ed Hardy, 1980
Fig. 32  New tribal tattoo based on traditional Micronesian tattoo patterns by Don Ed Hardy (design by Leo Zulueta) 1984
Fig. 33  New tribal tattoo by Don Ed Hardy, 1984
Fig. 34  Wassily Kandinsky, “Blue Segment,” 1921
Fig. 35  Semi-abstract tattoo inspired by Kandinsky by Don Ed Hardy, 1992
Fig. 36  “Goddess of Art” tattoo by Don Ed Hardy, 1994
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