

FAITH, HOPE & LOVE

SAILOR TATTOOS

The Maritime Museum has an extensive collection of tattoo designs from the interwar period. They were made by tattoo artists as a kind of product sample. Stars, sailing ships, anchors, roses, scantily clad women or the name of a loved one...

Many sailors are tattooed, but not all. So what defines a sailor tattoo? What do people aim to express with the motifs they have chosen? Why does someone decide to get a tattoo?

Sailor tattoos are not only decorative, but also reveal something about the person wearing them. The tattooed skin expresses various notions of gender and sexuality.

Why is it that so many sailors throughout the years have tattooed images of women? Why are there almost no designs featuring men?

The sailor tattoos – and, not least, the many female images – have contributed to forming our image of both sailors and masculinity. The old motifs have been given new life due to the fact that they are now used by all types of women and men. Sailor tattoos are no longer anchored out at sea.



Sailors and tattoos

When Europeans began sailing the seas, sailors were inspired by their encounters with people who were "painted".

Life at sea was tough and the tattoos could not only constitute a way for the sailor to gain entry into the on-board community, but could also form the basis for their new identity.

In the beginning, sailors mainly tattooed each other. Back then tattoos were handmade. Around one hundred years ago, professional tattoo artists started using electrical tattoo machines.

At the time of the turn of the 20th century and for the subsequent several decades, tattoos were considered both a signifier of class and as something that was presumed to testify to a life of debauchery and moral depravity. Tattooed people were seen as deviants and sometimes also as dangerous.

The class aspect was also noticeable on board. Ship's officers maintained a high social status and, for most of them, getting a tattoo was unthinkable. If an officer had a tattoo, it indicated that he had reached that position the hard way.



The bleeding heart

The classic motifs of sailor tattoos are of a tangible, sentimental and almost existential character. They encompass the eternal questions and powerful emotions such as longing, fear, love and friendship.

In the rough and strenuous environment at sea, it was not always possible to open up and talk about your feelings. Homesickness, the longing after loved ones and the fear of death were, therefore, something sailors refrained from discussing with one another.

The imagery of the tattoos became a zone free of such restrictions; on your skin you could express all of that which went unspoken.



All these women

The female motifs were plentiful and varied. Among the designs and on the men's bodies, mythical mermaids, exotic geishas, scantily clad dancers and faithful fiancées could be found.

Sailors were a male collective who lived together during long periods of time and under special circumstances. Many shared a cot with someone on the opposite watch, and the men washed and changed their clothes together.

Perhaps the tattooed female images were a way of indicating that there were no threatening desires that would interfere with the male fraternity. Women on the skin sent a message to their colleagues that said, "I'm interested in women, not men".



Dream and reality

By having tattoos of desirable women, men could create the perception that they were more masculine, both to others as well as to themselves. The tattoos showed women they had met in real life, but just as often they depicted women whom they had only encountered on the silver screen or in their dreams.

The motifs express different feminine ideals. The fluctuations of fashion are even noticeable in the tattoo art. It is also clear how the motifs move in the direction of women in ever increasing states of undress. On the other hand, the older tattoos were probably at least as sexually provocative in the context of their time.

Inspiration came from many sources. Inspiration for new images and combinations was also gleaned from visits to foreign harbours.



Tradition and renewal

The large sailing ships remained as motifs long after they had been replaced by steamships. The full-rigged ship on the chest became a way to connect one's own identity as a sailor to the time when large ships sailed the seas.

In recent decades there has been a change in the idiom of tattoos. A lot of the well-known motifs are now increasingly rare. Instead, new motifs such as block and tackle, rigs, lanterns and other nautical objects have made their entrance into the imagery of sailor tattoos. It is still possible to see traces of the old hand-made tattoos in the modern sailor tattoos. Many current tattoo artists have revived the old style from the first decades of the 20th century.

The classic sailor tattoo style, Old School, can be recognised in the harsh shadows, sharp outlines and the limited palette used: usually red, blue, green and black. The motifs have relatively simple structures and are separated from each other.



Circuses, smoking rooms and barracks

In Europe and the USA, tattoos have primarily been common in environments where men have lived surrounded by other men. They could be sailors, soldiers or navvies. The tattoos often symbolised longing and friendship.

The history of tattooing amongst women in Europe is less well-known. It was seen as unsuitable for women to get tattoos. Some tattoo artists required married women who wanted tattoos to have their husband's permission. Tattooed women were commonly associated with prostitution and an immoral lifestyle.

At circuses, women covered in tattoos were an attraction that pulled in large audiences. These women are now seen as heroines. Within the tattoo world they are considered to have contributed to popularising the art of tattooing.



Texts in English



Fleeting butterflies

The women who displayed themselves at travelling circuses or variety shows around the turn of the 20th century often had tattoo motifs such as roses, vines, swallows and butterflies.

Judging by the museum's own photographs from the 1930s and 1940s, we know that these motifs were also popular among sailors. Those who worked on the ships or in the port environment often chose to have tattoos of butterflies, swallows and roses.

Symbols and idioms are seldom static. Today, roses and butterflies have, to a large extent, found their way back onto female bodies. In our time, a woman can choose to highlight her "femininity" by using the same motifs that, less than one hundred years ago, were used to fortify and express "masculinity".



Intimacy

Getting tattooed constitutes a surrender of sorts. The act of being tattooed involves exposed skin, close contact and, not least, trust. Many who have been tattooed also form a bond with their tattooist. Thus, long-term and deep relationships can form between the tattooist and frequent customers.

At sea there is also a physical as well as a spiritual closeness between sailors. This intimacy has sometimes been attributed with queer undertones. The sailor culture of the early 20th century has been romanticised within homosexual communities. The tattooed sailor has inspired homoerotic depictions of masculinity in art, popular culture and advertising.



Professionals and amateurs

Having a tattoo done was time-consuming and expensive; the larger and more intricate the tattoo, the higher the price. A sailor who had a tattoo done in a studio had to be prepared to part with a large amount of money.

Those who did not have enough money had to tattoo themselves or enlist the help of friends on board. Many tattoos are the result of pastime activities.



Workers art

Folk art, fine art or workers art? The debate about how tattoo art should be labelled is far from new. As early as the 1960s it was discussed as to whether tattooing should be viewed as an art form in its own right.

The tattoo artists came from the working classes and were not artistically trained. Those who had a clear idiom and a talent for drawing could still find an outlet for their creativity in their tattoos.

However, tattoos are today seen as works of art, and the motifs are presented as an art form in books and exhibitions. Some tattooists see themselves as artists and, as such, enjoy a high status. Others, on the other hand, wish to maintain the connection to tattooing's simple origins, and prefer to refer to tattooing as workers art.

Having tattoos is no longer seen as particularly provocative. The provocative power in the tattooed body has consequently diminished; although it has far from vanished.



Tattoos adrift

The association between tattoos and danger, that once existed, has, nowadays, been downplayed, and tattoo designs have now become something that turns up in all sorts of places: on shoes and bags, in advertising and on various objects. The drawings of famous tattoo artists, flashes, have become strong brands that show up in various different contexts.

The tattooed sailor has, with time, been transformed into a commercialised cliché that adds a romantic and adventurous glow to everything from kitchen roll to bicycles.



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