



Your Total Guide to
TATTOOS, PIERCINGS,
and BODY MODIFICATION

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K A R E N L . H U D S O N

# Living Canvases

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# Living Canvas

*Your Total Guide to*  
**TATTOOS, PIERCINGS,**  
*and BODY MODIFICATION*



*Karen L. Hudson*



SEAL PRESS

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Living Canvas  
Your Total Guide to Tattoos, Piercings, and Body Modification

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To the children who have suffered because no one was  
there to teach them what they needed to know.



*In memory of Daniel Hindle Anderson.*

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# what is a tattoo?

I'll bet when you hear the word "tattoo," the first thing that comes to mind is a picture on someone's skin. That's what this section is about: tattoos as art. But if you look the word up in the dictionary, the definition is a little different. Tattoos were originally military signals, played on drums or trumpets, to alert soldiers or sailors to return to their barracks. So how did we come to the current understanding of the word "tattoo"—meaning a mark or picture in skin?

There are several theories. One is that the word comes from the Polynesian word *tatoa*, which means "to tap." This certainly makes sense, seeing as the first tattoos were done with sticks and a group of needles that would repeatedly tap color into the skin.

Another common idea is that the word originated from the Tahitian language. When the famed British explorer Captain Cook inquired about the designs he saw on the Tahitian natives, their answer was "*tatau*." Even this theory has variations, though. Most surmise that *tatau* referred to a rhythmic tapping sound. Other sources say that it simply means "to



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mark.” However, one study offered a different view: In Tahitian, the first “ta” represents something done with the hand. Saying this twice, “ta-ta,” implies repeating a certain action. And the last sound, “u,” means color. Put it all together, and it means a repetitive act with the hand that colors. Yet another source says that none of this is relevant because the word “tattoo” existed long before Captain Cook started using it.

So, history’s not always cut-and-dry. Especially when you’re talking about something that’s been around for centuries as an integral part of almost every ancient culture that’s existed on the planet.

At some point, those cultures converged on the practice of body art, and we have what we know as the modern tattoo—something that has changed dramatically in a very short period of time, and in more ways than one.

*TIP: Tebori is the name for traditional Japanese hand tattooing that is still practiced by some artists today. The tool used is very simple—one or two rows of needles attached to a long, straight stick. The artist taps the needles against the skin in a rhythmic motion, implanting the ink into the tissue. Tattooing this way is much more difficult and slower going than with a machine, but is highly respected for its rich history. Many tattoo enthusiasts will seek out a tebori master just to experience this ancient art form firsthand.*

# 120 years of tattoo evolution

If you want a detailed history of body art in ancient times, there are some great books and websites listed in the Resources section at the back of the book. What I find most interesting about tattoo history, however, are the more recent developments—those that have happened over the past 120 years or so.

It began with the invention of the tattoo machine. In 1876, Thomas Edison patented the “autographic printer,” which was intended to be an engraver, not a tattoo machine. But Samuel O’Reilly, an American tattoo artist and cousin to British tattoo artist Tom Riley, was inspired by the engraver design to invent and patent the very first electric tattoo machine, on December 8, 1891. In 1904, Charlie Wagner (Samuel’s apprentice and the first American artist to successfully apply cosmetic tattoos) improved on O’Reilly’s design and created the dual-coil tattoo machine that has remained virtually unchanged to this day.

With the advent of the electric tattoo machine, tattoo art took an upward swing that’s been gaining momentum ever since. In 1905, a quirky man by the name of August “Cap” Coleman entered the scene with his floating tattoo shop—a handmade raft that he used to travel the Ohio

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River in search of work. Over the next fifty years, Cap Coleman made a huge impact on the tattoo industry. His bold, graphic flash-art style quickly became a favorite among collectors and artists alike, starting a trend in tattoo art that became known as “Coleman style.” He seemed to have insight that a lot of his fellow artists lacked—an understanding of how a certain design should flow with the body and how to create vivid images with very few lines, and less stress and trauma to the skin. He also was one of the first to understand the inner workings of tattoo machines, and was known to tweak and shim them until they were running as smoothly as possible.

Ironically, though, Cap Coleman—as meticulous about his art and his equipment as he was—had an aversion to personal hygiene, sometimes not bathing or washing his clothes for weeks at a time. Apparently, this didn’t hurt his business; while the artistic aspect of tattooing was evolving, there was still little thought given to cleanliness and sterilization. It was common for needles and ink to be reused from customer to customer, and the idea of wearing gloves hadn’t even been thought of yet.

Despite this, the demand for ink grew, especially among servicemen. Samuel O’Reilly was once quoted as saying, “A sailor without a tattoo is like a ship without grog; not seaworthy.” Maritime tattoos were certainly the bread and butter of most artists, and wartime seemed to perpetuate the need for declarative ink. And wartime was aplenty during the twentieth century, as soldiers from World Wars I and II and the Korean and Vietnam wars kept tattoo artists busy. During these periods of conflict and instability, tattoos also became the glue that bonded servicemen, friends, and families for life.

As tattoos’ popularity increased, so did the range of clientele. Even upscale aristocrats desired ink as a way to secretly experience the tawdry side of life. In 1936, *Life* magazine declared that 6 percent of Americans were tattooed. On March 4, 1944, Norman Rockwell’s famous painting *The Tattooist* appeared on the front cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. New York’s Coney Island had become the nation’s hub of tattooing, with little shops popping up everywhere. It seemed that tattoos had reached a virtual climax of success and acceptance—until it all came crashing down.



In 1950, the City Council of Norfolk, Virginia, home to the world's largest naval base, declared tattooing "unsanitary and vulgar" and banned the practice, forcing the shutdown of over a dozen shops. In 1961, the city of New York banned tattooing after a breakout of hepatitis B. Once the danger of unsanitary practices was exposed, it almost caused the downfall of the entire industry.

Fortunately, some very important and influential people had entered the tattoo scene just in time to save it from utter destruction. In 1960, Lyle Tuttle opened his shop in San Francisco. Tuttle's talent, experience, self-proclaimed "bullshit artistry," and keen ability to handle the media brought him to the forefront of the trade and caught the attention of many inside and outside the tattoo community.

On October 1, 1970, a most unprecedented event took place: Lyle Tuttle, in all his tattooed glory, appeared on the inside cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. The three-quarter-page photo preceded a stirring two-page article by Amie Hill entitled "Tattoo Renaissance," in which Hill used her interview with Tuttle as a springboard to create a very positive image of tattooing in a time when the art form was widely considered little less than the work of the Devil himself. That exposure boosted not only Tuttle's celebrity, but also the reputation of the industry as a whole.

Around this time, another influential artist was also making his

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mark. In 1974, Don Ed Hardy opened the country's first-ever appointment-only custom tattoo shop in San Francisco.

In 1976, the National Tattoo Association (NTA) was formed to heighten "social awareness of tattooing as a contemporary art form." In 1979, the NTA held its first tattoo convention, in Denver, Colorado. Tattoo artists who had once viewed one another as unnecessary competition, and who had guarded their secrets so carefully, were now coming together to share ideas, pushing their profession to new heights and contributing to the creation of a new era of tattoo art.

In 1982, Don Ed Hardy published a series of magazines entitled *TattooTime*, which was hailed as the "tattooer's bible." The very first edition of the magazine, "New Tribalism," showcased the bold, black designs of Bornean and Polynesian tribal tattoo art, which was the catalyst that spurred the demand for the neo-tribal designs that are still so popular today.

By this time, tattooing was turning into a pretty successful moneymaker, and more people wanted in. But the secrets of the masters were still carefully guarded, and it took a lot to squeeze anything valuable out of them without enslaving oneself to them first.

In 1988, Huck Spaulding made both friends and enemies with the publication of his book, *Tattooing A to Z: A Guide to Successful Tattooing*. Spaulding wanted to share his knowledge with the world—and then make a profit selling his tattoo supplies to anyone wanting to give it a try. Now any young hopeful with a shred of artistic talent could learn the skills privately. This outraged many in the industry—they didn't like their secrets being told, and they ostracized Spaulding for selling equipment to the general public. But love them or hate them, Huck Spaulding and his supply partner, Paul Rogers, were a huge influence on the evolution of tattoo art.

The downside of that contribution, however, was the introduction of "scratchers." These are the people who know just enough about tattooing to be dangerous. They buy the supplies, but they don't bother to sterilize them and often don't even know how. They "scratch" their friends, causing irreversible damage through scarring or the spread of infection

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and disease. Indeed, it's a slippery slope: The more readily available the equipment is and the more of a moneymaking opportunity tattooing becomes, the more scratchers emerge.

But the easy access to equipment wasn't all bad. Soon, the term "self-taught" was being used by many promising artists, thanks to the running start provided by Spaulding and Rogers. Since there wasn't any serious investment required, many contemporary artists tried their hand at this new medium, inadvertently merging styles and creating a whole new genre.

I entered the tattoo world in 1996, and I've seen a lot of changes even since then. I've seen hundreds of scratchers arrested for illegal tattooing; I've witnessed the lifting of almost every major tattoo ban—New York City, Norfolk, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Oklahoma; I've seen the increase in companies who've become tattoo-friendly instead of discriminating.

The current generation of tattoo artists is a completely different breed from that which started it all. The old-timers would say that tattooing has lost some of its charm, while the new-schoolers would argue that progress is good. Either way, both generations have contributed to the current mainstream popularity of what was once considered taboo.

*TIP: There's some conjecture about where body art is heading. In another twenty to thirty years, the currently modified masses will be past or approaching middle age. I'd like to think that we're heading toward equality for all with tattoos and body piercings, especially in the workplace. When the conservative generations are no longer in charge of big business, a more accepting and open group of people will take over. Will we see the day when even the president is tattooed and pierced? Hey, it could happen!*

## who gets tattoos and why?

*“When I first got my gay pride tat, it was because I was kinda cocky and wanted it to be an ‘in your face’ kinda thing. It eventually turned into more than that. It has become a part of me—a symbol of who I am and of the fight that gay women and men go through to have the same rights as others. I don’t even show it much anymore, because it’s more personal to me now.”*

— STACEY

You may not be shocked when you see tattoos on bikers, military personnel, or people who work in tattoo shops. But you might be very surprised to know how many tattoos are hiding under fancy suits, doctors’ cloaks, and teachers’ dresses. These days, people from all walks of life are getting marked for life. Some of them may have very small designs that are easy to obscure, but a tattoo is still a tattoo, and more and more people are getting them.

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So why do people get them? There are so many reasons; theoretically, almost everyone could have a different reason to ink themselves.

## ☞ Personal or Religious Rites

Although ritualistic tattooing is ancient history for many of us in Western society, rite-of-passage tattooing does still exist. These deeply rooted traditions are essential to many cultures, marking a significant point in one's life, such as ascension into adulthood or achieving a certain level of honor.

## ☞ Personal Expression

This is probably the most common reason people get tattooed. It's a way to represent yourself in an artistic and creative way that separates you from everyone else. Even though the person standing next to you may also have tattoos, the pictures and placement will be different, thus creating a very personal identity. You might get tattoos that symbolize your tastes in music, hobbies, or sports teams, or something that expresses what you feel inside. They say "a picture is worth a thousand words," and a person covered with tattoos is a veritable book of information without ever having to open their mouth.

## ☞ In Honor of or in Memoriam

Another top reason people get tattoos, even if they never thought of having one before, is to honor someone they love. Getting a tattoo in honor of someone, whether living or dead, seems to be the ultimate sign of devotion. Many people say that the emotional pain from losing a loved one is eased through the physical pain of getting a tattoo.

## ☞ Political or Personal Statements

Getting a tattoo that represents something you care about deeply is a powerful way to share your view with the world. Supporting certain rights or championing a cause is often a big enough reason to be inked for life.



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## ☞ Marking a Significant Event or Life Change

Sometimes circling a date on a calendar just doesn't cut it. Surviving cancer, the birth of a child, celebrating sobriety, and coming out are just some of the many reasons people choose to mark a date or event with a permanent reminder.

## ☞ Permanent Cosmetics

Permanent cosmetics are not just for vanity purposes, although they certainly can make applying daily makeup much less work! Cosmetic tattoos have answered the prayers of many battling alopecia (loss of hair, including eyelashes and eyebrows) and vitiligo (loss of skin pigmentation). Women who have had breast reconstruction after a mastectomy can get areola repigmentation, and some women simply choose to have a beautiful design tattooed over their scars, rather than opting for reconstruction.

## ☞ Artistic Interest

Some people get tattooed simply because they like the way tattoos look. They choose designs that have artistic value—sometimes patterns or pictures that follow a theme. There's absolutely nothing wrong with getting a tattoo "just because," as long as you're sure it's something you'll continue to enjoy for the rest of your life.

## ☞ Rebellion

Although it may not be the wisest reason to get a tattoo, I suppose there's always a slight feeling of rebellion in all of us when we get inked. But some people get a tattoo to rebel against society, or even to rebel against a specific person, like a parent. Unfortunately, these are the tattoos that usually turn into a regret at some point down the road.

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## ☞ Social Acceptance

Getting a tattoo simply “because everyone else has one” is probably the worst reason to do so. But, inevitably, there are those who will do so to fit in, to be cool, to imitate their favorite pop star, or for whatever other reason that has nothing to do with a sincere personal desire to be inked. You should never (never!) feel pressured to get a tattoo if it’s not something you really want for yourself.

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# fear and pain

Although tattoos are completely voluntary, it's normal to experience anxiety. Lots of people are able to shake it off and go forward with their decision, but others are held back by their fears. If you're afraid of pain, needles, blood, or simply the unknown, you're not alone! This chapter will empower you with the knowledge you need to make your foray into the world of body art an exciting and *positive* experience.

What does it feel like to get a tattoo? Does it hurt? Well, yes—to be truthful, it does. But then again, so does stubbing your toe, and I'd much rather get a tattoo than jam my toe against the bedpost. But stubbing your toe isn't crippling or traumatic—and neither is getting a tattoo.

Granted, some areas of the body are more tender and sensitive to pain than others. You may hear some people say not to get a tattoo on the ankle or wrist because it hurts more when it's close to bone. That is actually a myth. While the ankle and wrist certainly are more tender, it's because of the skin, not its close vicinity to bone. The skin in these locations—as well as the skin on the neck, under the arms, and in the sternum and/

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or breast regions—is thinner and has nerves very close to the surface. Breaking through these softer zones and into sensitive nerves is bound to cause more pain than breaking the skin on the back, upper arm, or thigh, where the skin is thicker.

When the tattoo needles first touch your skin, it's uncomfortable. It feels a bit like being scratched by a cat or stung by a bee—sharp and hot at the same time. The needles move up and down so fast, however, that you don't actually feel each individual poke. But you do feel *something*, and the longer the line the artist has to draw without stopping, the more irritating the sensation. That's how most people would describe the overall feeling of getting tattooed—annoying. Throughout the course of getting the tattoo, you may wince or clench your teeth, but that's usually the most severe reaction.

So then why do you hear stories about people crying or passing out from getting tattooed? Granted, some people are more sensitive than others, but a lot of people assume they're the sensitive type and have a low pain tolerance. It's very, very rare that a person is so sensitive that it makes them cry. When this happens, there's a good chance their body was overly stressed to begin with, or maybe they were overly sensitive and really weren't able to handle the pain.

If your body is already under some kind of strain—whether it is a physical illness, your menstrual cycle, or emotional stress—it may be wise to put off getting a tattoo. Your tolerance for pain is diminished when your body is already compromised from trying to deal with something else. This is why it's not recommended that you get a tattoo when you have a cold; or if it's been less than six weeks since giving birth or having some type of surgery or dental work; or if you've been in a minor accident. These are the kinds of things that drain your body of its pain- and infection-fighting resources. It's always best to wait until you're completely recovered before making your tattoo appointment.

By the way, fainting isn't a symptom of pain. It results from a severe drop in blood sugar, which can be brought on by anxiety or not eating.

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Therefore, it's really important to eat a healthy snack or small meal about an hour before you get a tattoo, and try not to get yourself too worked up about it. When under stress or in pain, the body releases adrenaline. The "letdown" from discovering that the process isn't nearly as painful as anticipated can cause the body to realize it has an overabundance of adrenaline, which can lead to lightheadedness or fainting. If you do feel faint during a session, tell your artist. Most likely, they'll stop and offer you a cool towel or a piece of candy to boost your blood sugar. Usually, that's all it takes before you're feeling just fine again.

The use of numbing creams, such as EMLA or lidocaine, is not endorsed by most artists. First of all, they have to be prescribed by a physician and used under a physician's supervision. Second, they take over half an hour to take effect, and then numb the pain only minimally and temporarily. The returning sensation when the numbing wears off is sometimes worse than the original pain would've been—which, as I've said, usually isn't that bad. Most artists consider numbing creams more trouble than they're worth, but if you're really set on the idea of using one, you can talk to your artist and doctor and see if something can be worked out.

The best way to deal with fear and/or anxiety is distraction. Bring a friend with you to hold your hand. Listen to music, chew gum, read a magazine, or talk with the artist. Find other things to focus on—like how cool your tattoo is going to look when it's finished!

## ☞ Get That Needle Away from Me!

Fear of needles and fear of blood are bigger obstacles than fear of pain. I can assure you that the pain isn't going to be that bad, but I can't cure you of a deeply rooted associative fear. However, knowledge is power, and it may help you to know a few things before entering the tattoo studio.

When we think of needles, we usually think of the hypodermic syringes that nurses use to give a shot. I don't like those kinds of needles any more than the next person, but tattoo needles are quite different. Understanding the differences may help you overcome your fear.



a circular needle group, or liner



flat rows, called a magnum

Tattoo needles, called sharps, are very similar to stickpins in size. You're usually tattooed with not just one tattoo sharp, but several soldered together; this is called a needle group. A needle group can consist of anywhere between three and fifteen sharps (sometimes more) and can be shaped into a circle or flat rows. Circular needle groups are generally used for outlining and are called liners. Needle groups of two or more flat rows are called magnums (or mags) and are generally used for shading. The idea of so many needles may make you shudder, but think of it this way: When a sideshow performer lies down on a bed of nails, the reason they don't impale him is because more nails means a better ratio of skin to spikes. In the same way, more needles in a needle group actually causes less pain; plus, it helps the artist get the job done more quickly, which means you get out of the chair sooner.

Another difference between tattoo needles and syringes is how deeply they penetrate the skin. A tattoo needle seeks to only break the surface of the skin to implant the ink underneath the uppermost layers. Ever get a paper cut? A tattoo needle doesn't go any farther than that. Sure, it's a little painful, but certainly nothing you can't endure.

## ☞ Don't Look Down!

If you're afraid of seeing blood, you'll hopefully be encouraged by this news: Most tattoos produce only a few drops of blood, and some produce

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none at all. For those few drops that your tattoo might create, it would be advisable to turn your head until your artist has had time to clean it up. Larger tattoos can bleed more, but there are things you can do to reduce the amount of blood loss during the procedure. (Read more about this in Chapter 15.)

If you simply can't bear to watch the procedure but still really want a tattoo, my only suggestion is that you get the tattoo in an area where you can't watch, or wear a blindfold. But if your fear is severe, think twice before making an appointment. Trust me, you don't want to freak out on your artist. (Chances are they are booked solid and don't have the time or the inclination to deal with high-maintenance clients. Frankly, that's not their job.) Master yourself and see it as a challenge to be conquered—or simply don't get tattooed.

Remember, the point of getting a tattoo is that it's something that you *really* want. If that's the case, go for it. If you're going to let excuses get in your way, then something is telling you that a tattoo is not right for you—at least not yet. Don't let anyone, including yourself, pressure you into getting one if it's not something you truly desire. A tattoo is a lifelong commitment and should never be gotten on a whim or a dare, or out of some sense of obligation.

# permanence and commitment

With all types of body art, there's a level of commitment that goes along with them, and tattoos are one of the most permanent forms of body art. The ink gets injected about one or two millimeters under the skin, which doesn't seem like much, but it's enough to make the ink become a part of your body as it heals. Sure, you can have it removed with laser treatments if you're really not happy with it, but that's a complicated and painful (not to mention expensive!) procedure that can leave scars behind.

## ☞ Magic Disappearing Ink?

You may have heard a lot of press hype in recent years about “smart tattoos” and “disappearing ink.” This refers to a new type of tattoo ink that has been developed using a technology created by Brown University scientist Edith Mathiowitz. Mathiowitz developed a microcapsule delivery system for medication, but has been working with Freedom2, Inc., to encapsulate tattoo inks instead of drugs. The premise is that the tiny polymer beads protect the body from any toxins contained in the



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