

Culture in Transition: The Recent Growth of Tattooing in America

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The number of tattoo shops in the United States is increasing. Yet the practice is only marginally accepted in many areas, particularly in those states east of the Mississippi River. In the West, however, there is strong evidence that the image of the art is changing: the skill of the practitioners is improving. The designs are more diverse and esthetically complex. The clientele is different and represents a wide spectrum of occupation and social class, including mechanics, truckers, policemen, football players, corporate executives, physicians, and lawyers.

The roots of the "New Wave" in tattooing are in California, centering principally around Ed Hardy in San Francisco. At age thirty-five, Hardy is not only acknowledged as a masters artist, but is widely respected as an articulate spokesman for his profession, among his peers, veteran tattooers, and members of the academic community. Hardy holds a 1967 B. F. A. degree from the San Francisco Art Institute, and has worked with Old School masters Sailor Jerry, Doc Webb, and Paul Rogers in America, and with Hori Hide in Japan.

At the Fifth World Convention of Tattoo Artists and Fans, sponsored by the North America Tattoo Club, January 8-13, 1980, in Sacramento, it became evident why Hardy is so highly esteemed. During the first three days of the convention (which were closed to the public) tattoo artists arrived from various places around the world (including, England, Germany, Belgium, France, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia). On the third day two bus-loads of tattoo artists were taken on a tour Hardy's shop. The next day, Hardy lectured at the Artists Only Meeting, and explained the techniques which can be used to artistically cover ugly tattoos. On the fourth day, which was open to public, three out of the six winners in the tattooed male and female beauty contests had large Hardy tattoos, which ranged in content from wild boars to intricate three-dimensional fantasy murals which stretched across their shoulders, backs, and chests, and down their legs. But the placement of the designs was not haphazard. They harmoniously integrated with the musculature of the bodies that wore them. In his tattoos, Hardy reinterprets traditional American and Oriental esthetic principles and strives to create fine art.

The motto on one of Hardy's trade cards reads "Wear Your Dreams," and that's exactly what he encourages his clientele to do. He only works by appointment, and often times, he discusses the design with the client, researches it, and sketches different motifs before tattooing. As a result of his discerning manner, Hardy has a unique following: artists, filmmakers, physicians, and other professionals, many of whom view Hardy as a modern-day shaman.

Hardy was voted Tattoo Artist of the Year in 1979 at the Houston Convention. But in 1980 he didn't enter the competition. However, he was indirectly represented. Freddy Negrete, who works with Jack Rudy in a shop in East Los Angeles owned by Hardy, won the 1980 Artist of the Year Award.

During the beauty contests about eight competing tattoo artists posted photographs of their best tattoos on a wall in the General Meeting room. Later each registered artists and fans at the Convention voted on the piece that they felt had the most interesting esthetic. Freddy's featured tattoo was a large back mural, which included the Virgin Guadeloupe, set on a bed of bright roses, framed in the lower corners by a skull face and a human face, and in the upper, by flowing angels.