

## **Etched on the Skin: The different meanings of tattoos over time**

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Historically, the body is seen as an important tool of meaning. In this sense, changes in one's appearance have become more and more common. The study of the body, especially of body image, leads to an understanding that it is unstable and changeable, and there are interactions between physiological, libidinal and social aspects (Schilder, 1994).

In this sense, tattoos appear as an important attempt to change one's appearance by "marking and expressing identities, roles regarding gender, class, age group, lifestyle and other groups people belong to" (Leitão, 2004, p.3). In this form, tattoos would mean an individual's search for authority over his/her own body, which is understood as a "shapeable surface according to the presupposition of freedom of action and determination of one over himself/herself". (Ibid, 2004, p.3).

Schilder (1994) highlights the complexity of this attitude once it triggers not only a change to the body, but also to one's body image. Therefore, tattooing is not only a change in one's appearance but also an objective alteration of body image. Thus, it is of utmost importance to recognize the different significances of tattooing across time.

In order to attain this knowledge, it is necessary to delve into the literature which gives accounts of many different historical periods, in search of a way to understand the way in which tattooing was and is seen and manifests itself. For this reason, a review of the literature was carried out through data collected from books, magazines and publications available online.

Every nation, according to Marques (2009), knows of tattooing, which, although either forbidden or widely accepted, depending on location, is as ancient as humanity. Marques (1997) mentions accounts on the first man found in a good state of preservation, dated 5300 B.C., who had indelible marks in several places. The author also reports on the discovery of several tattooed

mummies in ancient Egypt, such as princess Amuet of the XI Dynasty, whose body was marked with many drawings associated to fertility.

Nevertheless, Paim and Strey (2004), when making reference to the accounts of Marco Polo's travels around Asia in the 13th century, especially in a region called Cancigu, saw it was common for the peoples there to tattoo their bodies with permanent drawing of a variety of images.

Macedo, Gobbi and Waschburger (2009, p.97) emphasize that the tattoos, among other forms of body marking, have distinctive roles according to the culture they were in. In summation, they were used as a "symbol of belonging to a tribe, a lucky charm or a symbol of initiation and social recognition". However, also according to these authors, in the Middle Ages, these body practices started to be forbidden since they were not compatible with a sacred body made in God's own image. Therefore, tattooing was characterized as a perversion of the body in relation to the divine teachings.

In the Renaissance, tattooing went through a transitionary period in which one can see, as Maroun and Vieira (2008) report, that body perception changed being then explained through art, anatomy, physiology and other scientific fields. As such, studies started looking for better ways to reach a healthy body, apt for work, moving away from the ideas of the previous period.

Leitão and Eckert (2001) say that it was the navigator James Cook who helped in the propagation of tattooing through his voyages by introducing, with the help of other sailors, the art of tattooing on the European continent and in many other civilizations. Cook, in 1769, traveling through Tahiti, discovered tattooing and wrote in his log about this practice, which was a common one among those who were from that place. According to Marques (2009, p.24) James wrote the following excerpt in his log: "Men and women paint their bodies. In their language they call it *tatau*. They inject black pigments under the skin in a way that the drawing becomes permanent." According to this author, the word used for the paintings comes from an "onomatopoeia of the sound made when the tattoo is being made", thus the English word "tattoo". (Ibid, p.24)

The tattoos were made in a rustic manner by means of primitive manual tools, which made the process slow and painful. However, with the evolution of machines, the old procedures of dermopigmentation were modernized, mainly

with the invention of a tattooing machine – created in 1891 by O'Reilly in New York – which helped in the popularization of the technique. (Caruceht, 1995, quoted by Leitão & Eckert, 2001)

After several modifications occurring over time, as well as the facilitation of its execution, tattooing has become more accessible to a greater number of people. In this sense, this facilitation provides a basis for a deep eccentricism of this art, especially in the XIX century, when people with tattooed bodies appeared in travelling shows along with other “bizarre people and animals”. (Ferreira, 2008, p.71)

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, prostitutes and soldiers adopted the practice of tattooing, which reached particular importance in prisons. This adoption, according to Perez (2006, p.180), caused tattooing to be associated with criminality, “having two senses: as a means of belonging and a social stigma”.

The greatest modification of this public occurred in the 1950s and 60s. At that time, tattooing started to be used by “gangs and as an emblem of counter-culture movements, such as the hippies and, later on, the punk movement” (Leitão, 2004, p.4). In spite of still being seen as connected to social norms contrary to the established and accepted standard, and associated to a lifestyle connected to misbehavior and vandalism, it was no longer tied only to those of the lower social classes.

In Brazil, as in the rest of the world, modern tattoos were introduced at the ports. This transpired in the 19th century by means of English and American sailors and was disseminated among the sailors, prostitutes and all types of delinquents (Marques, 2009).

It was not until July of 1959 that a Danish man, known as Lucky, or Knud Harld Likke Gregersen, arrived here and was the first tattoo artist to settle in Brazil (Leitão & Eckert, 2001; Marques, 1997, 2009) .

One of Lucky's best-known clients was the surfer José Artur Machado, or Petit – who Caetano Veloso paid tribute to in his song “Menino do Rio” (Boy from Rio), theme of the soap opera “Água Viva” on Rede Globo TV in 1980. This song, which made reference to a dragon tattooed on Petit's arm, helped tattooing leave the port region and the stigma of a marginalized art form and

become popular among the young people of the southern region of Rio de Janeiro. (Leitão & Eckert, 2001; Marques, 2009).

Leitão (2004) claims that from then on tattooing acquired a new meaning. The acceptance by society is, little by little, becoming a reality and tattooed bodies continue to become more and more common in all layers of the Brazilian population. Even so, according to this author (2004, p.4), when referring to the change in the meaning of tattooing today, he talks of the “loss of some of its worst transgressive signs and of its incorporation with socially accepted aesthetical possibilities”.

Currently, a dissemination of this practice is seen, especially among teenagers and young adults “as a way to imprint, in a bodily manner, their singularity in today’s scene” (Macedo *et al.*, 2009, p.98). These young people, according to Ferreira (2007, p. 320) intend to “recognize the marked body as a possible connection with others, along with other aesthetical possibilities and stylistic decisions”.

When observing the changes in values related to tattooing since its historical origin until its widespread use today, one can note changes in the context in which it is/was inserted and in the modification of views about it. As such,, it becomes possible to look into several meanings and senses since the time of discrimination, until today, as an aesthetically accepted beauty technique.

From this study of the bibliographical productions on the way tattooing is/was seen and manifested in different times of history, it became possible to see that this is a theme for which answers are still being sought. Therefore, further studies which seek to delve more deeply into the understanding of the relationships of this attitude to the body in all of its senses and meanings are necessary.

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