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Women in Tattooing: Historical Significance and Lasting Influence

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Abstract

For centuries, the contribution of women in art and creative industries has been overlooked. This is particularly seen throughout the history of tattooing, with female tattooed bodies being misinterpreted, sexualised, or dismissed by modern society despite its deep cultural origins. This poster explores the historical significance of women's tattooing practices, their cultural impact, and the barriers they have faced within the tattooing industry. Historically, women's tattoos have held significant cultural and societal meanings across civilizations. In Ancient Egypt, tattooed female mummies were initially dismissed as prostitutes, and therefore not investigated until recent years, rather than recognized for their spiritual and ritualistic significance. Similarly, Māori women wear sacred tā moko to signify status and strength, while Inuit and Dulong women received facial tattoos as rites of passage and protection. These historical examples highlight how women's tattooed bodies have often been sites of both personal and communal identity, reflecting broader themes of gender, power, and cultural continuity. Later in history, the 19th-century Western fascination with tattooed women in freak shows sharply contrasted with the deep cultural reverence found in Indigenous traditions as tattooed women were seen as commodities for public consumption. Despite their historical presence, women have had to navigate substantial barriers within the professional tattooing industry. The field has been predominantly male-dominated, with women facing exclusion, harassment, and gatekeeping in the tattoo industry. In answer to this, women-only and queer-friendly tattoo studios are on the rise, particularly in Ireland and the UK, providing safe spaces for marginalized artists and clients, shifting the power dynamics within the industry. Female Indigenous tattooists are also reclaiming their space by reviving practices almost lost to colonisation. Influential figures such as Whang-Od Oggay, the last mambabatok (tattooer) of the Kalinga community, and Hovak Johnston, an Inuk woman leading the resurgence of traditional Inuit tattooing, exemplify how women are spearheading the preservation and transformation of cultural tattooing practices today. In the professional tattoo industry, Tattooing clearly extends beyond aesthetics—it serves as an assertion of identity, autonomy, and resistance against societal norms. Women's tattoos have historically functioned as markers of self-definition, protection, and cultural transmission. As the industry evolves, the recognition of women's contributions to tattooing is essential in ensuring that it remains an inclusive and empowering art form. Acknowledging and celebrating women's roles in tattooing, past and present, affirms their rightful place in shaping the future of the industry and reinforces tattooing as a powerful testament to personal and collective histories.

Keywords: women's history, bias, gender, tattooing