

# The Grit is Gone

How the commodification of modern tattooing exchanged a growth space for a safe space.

It seems now, more than ever, corporations and entrepreneurs alike have leaned into the fact that, in the age of overconsumption, it's not enough to just have solid products or services. Quality looms in the background like a jazz song, while the experience and form takes center stage. Businesses big and small alike are looking to not just have customers, but a cult-like following, centering the emotional value of their business/ products, in hopes that it results in long-term commitment to their product/service. The commodification of various art practices and mediums has contorted the sanctity of story telling, community building and belonging for the sake of products and services being bought and sold. This is especially evident in how modern tattoo marketing exists, on various social media platforms. Many young artists find themselves propping their practices up on being a modality of healing, transformation, and self realization. Though well intentioned there is such a concept of too much of a good thing, artists unknowingly prevent clients from accessing the soul deep change they desire, by standing between the client and their own breakthrough by positioning themselves as the practitioner of healing instead of the facilitator. While we (tattooers of 10 years and under) pride ourselves on taking “softer” approaches compared to tattooers before us, this softness exists at the expense of the grit necessary for these internal changes to occur, and for the tattoo medicine to take effect.

Why made western tattoo culture so “hardcore” in the first place? The lore begins around the 1700’s. By the time tattoos surfaced within white communities in western shores, they were

often hailed by sailors, explorers, and those who wore life long souvenirs of their travels. In early documentations by James Cook, a British royal navy officer who led expeditions across the pacific and souther oceans in the 1770's, he made notes of tattoo in polynesian, referring to those that offered themselves to the pain of application (and the concept of tattoos generally) as brutish and "savages" for engaging with such a practice. Despite these initial assumptions, both his seamen and Cook himself got tattooed by polynesian tattooers, and during their multi-year long voyages, learned to tattoo themselves using the same stick and poke method they'd witnessed during their journeys. Despite the initial idea of tattoos being for those that were deemed as "uncivilized" by Cook, amongst other European scholars and explorers who encountered tattooed people during their travels, tattooing was revered as antiquated & recognized as a known cultural art form amongst multiple communities and ethnic groups. As more explorers (and colonizers) continued to visit, trade with, and eventually commune with these indigenous folks, transculturation occurred, and tattoos for the sake of souvenir became as common as tattoos for the sake of belonging. "The choice to be tattooed reveals a personal willingness to alter the body to reflect a love or admiration of an adopted society– whether the travelers residence be transitory or permanent." (Herlihy 2012, p23) Though, this idea did not survive the post enlightenment age. The point of tattoos as a class and humanity divider began to permeate in European culture by way of "evangelical writings that came out of missionary settlements in the early to mid nineteenth century problematized those with tattoos, an even more caustic denigration of tattooed people, rooted in scientific racism...". These ideas were supported by academic writing the alleged scientific differences between those who were and weren't heavily tattooed. Due to this scientific racism, the assumption of one having an affinity to deviance and crime if they had tattoos became increasingly popular especially if tattoos were not in recognizable western styles. "One can find significant parallels between the emergence of taboos against the acquisition of non-western tattoos and fear of sexual relationships between white and non-white people."(Herlihy 2012, p384) Tattoos with native imagery became other

and subsequently demonized for existing beyond the bounds of whiteness. This made tattoos an effective tool for white people to signify themselves as being other or on the fringes of white society, knowingly (and unknowingly) being perceived as transgressive by mainstream white society. This is where “old school tattoo culture” as we know it begins to develop. As a white male dominated industry since its inception, many white tattooers became characterized by their tough as nails nature, with the aesthetic & lifestyle to match. Understanding why so many modern artists have leaned into a care based response, begins at what this approach has been in response to.

In indigenous communities tattoo wasn't a trial of intimidation and endurance, but being initiated into a new phase of life or state of being. Indigenous folks shared cultural markings with these explorers as a means of establishing community, comradery, and a sense of belonging with their visitors / new community members. There was room for both the difficulty of submitting to the discomfort, and the joy of the physical and internal changes taking place. This duality existed in balance, not in contrast to each other. When those choosing to bear the mark aren't able to lean into their own internal strength , due to the process of overcoming being interrupted by the practitioner, all the weight now falls on the tattooer, attempting to ensure the ongoing comfort of their client at the price of tattoo medicines' impact. Capitalism & the commodification of art prioritizes the significance of convenience & comfort, at the expense of what could be obtained on a soul level. Positioning ourselves as more important to the process than we truly are only does both ourselves, our art, and our clients a disservice.

The necessity of overcoming challenging experiences is essential to our self actualization, all the more so when altering the human form. “... research led to the understanding that the studied narratives shared the commonality of tattoos as conduits for exposing invisible, unquantifiable,

and hidden mental scars, regaining control of mind, body, and heart, creating intimate connections, and transformation.”(Bell 2023, p27) . In the words of 17 year tattooer and tattoo history Sharky Pitts “I don't know what this tattoo may have cost you.”. Of course there is the exchange of capital that occurs for modern tattoo services, however, many tattooers, unless told by their clients, don't know what life experiences, hardships, or success led them to our chairs and under the calming buzz of our machines. There is no contesting that clients deserve to be tattooed in spaces where they feel heard, understood and respected, however; this can be achieved without sacrificing the grit that is built by enduring the tattoo process without ongoing over-accomodations in the name of facilitating a “safe space”.

While it is an undeniably positive thing to have tattoo practitioners that prioritize clients feeling heard, prioritized, and comfortable by all means necessary, we are doing both ourselves and our clients a disservice by attempting to correct the harsh nature of old school tattooing with the opposite extreme of being overly compensating and operating our practices and business the way commercial businesses do. We interrupt the process of becoming by not allowing folks to traverse through the experience, with us being a guide, instead of being in support of the journey. Maintaining that the clients experience is of utmost importance, and protecting the sanctity of the process of enduring and overcoming. The client must do the work for themselves, and we must facilitate the space for the work to be done.

Sources

[Tattoos and Trauma: Are Tattoos Healing for Trauma Krystal Bell Portland State University](#)

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