



Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.  
The Gravity of Weight

## Tattoos: The Skin as Canvas

The body becomes a personal tapestry.

Posted January 26, 2023

### KEY POINTS

- Tattooing the body with indelible pigments has been around worldwide for centuries but has become mainstream recently.
- Tattoos can reflect an act of rebellion, personal identity or group affiliation, reclaiming the body after surgery or injury, and punishment.
- Techniques for application and removal are more hygienic now, but complications, including infection and allergic reactions, can occur.



Mechanic Tattooing, 1870s. Techniques of tattooing have changed over time, but the art of tattooing is centuries old.

Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC. Credit line: Gilman Collection, Museum Purchase, 2005. Public Domain.

When our story by Roald Dahl opens after World War II, the tattoo artist Drioli is a disheveled old man who has fallen upon hard times. While walking, he passes an art gallery featuring paintings by Chaim Soutine, his old friend. When he and Soutine, then a young, impoverished artist, were drunk more than 30 years earlier, he had convinced Soutine to paint a picture directly on his back—"I am the canvas"—and taught him the art of tattooing the image.

Desperate now, Drioli enters the gallery, and about to be forcibly ejected, flings off his shirt. The owner, so taken with the image, "the colors as bright as ever," and signed by Soutine, seduces Drioli into agreeing to let him purchase it. Removing the tattooed im-

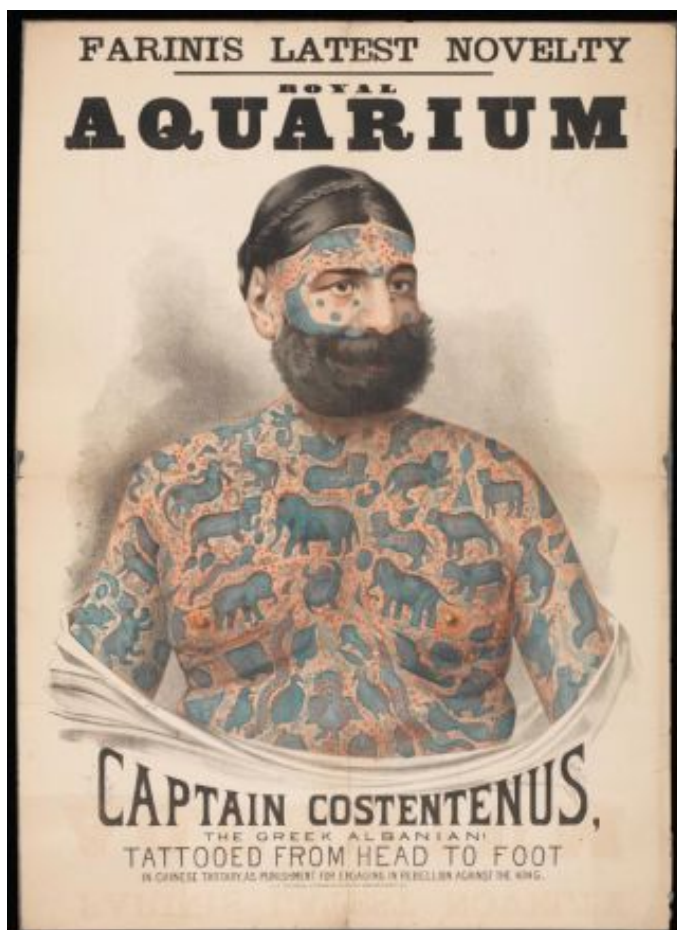
age from Drioli's back, though, comes at a price.

The ending of this gruesome short story is left vague. The author leads us to believe the painting survives; Drioli does not. (*Skin*, 1953, 2000).

What, though, do we know about the skin as a canvas? Skin is the body's largest organ and its most visible. As such, it provides a decorative surface, i.e., a veritable "ever-changing personal tapestry" and "social placard" for painting, tattooing, scarring, and piercing (Jablonski, 2013).

It is also our boundary between the body and the environment and can reflect our health, age, and cultural identity (Jablonski).

No one knows when tattooing the skin began because skin deteriorates, but some sources suggest it has existed for 5,000 years (Zhitny et al., 2021) or even much earlier (Schmidt, 2013). Remnants of tattoos are found on Egyptian mummies from the Second Millennium B.C. (Sperry, 1991)



Captain Costentenus, a man with many tattoos inflicted on him as punishment for rebelling against the King. H.A. Thomas Lithographic Studio.

Source: Wellcome Trust Collection. Public Domain.



Te Mutu: portrait showing detail of moko design, Tauranga, New Zealand. Watercolor by H.G. Robley, 1864. Tattooing was common in tribes in the Pacific.

Source: Wellcome Trust Collection. Public Domain

The earliest written mention (Sperry) appears in the *Old Testament* (Leviticus 19:28): "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on account of the dead or tattoo any marks upon you."

Captain James Cook found "indelibly painted" people during his travels to the Pacific in the 18th century. The word "tattoo" derives from a Polynesian word (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Tattoos are "the first social network...simultaneously both public and private...static and fixed." Every movement potentially transforms them (Murphy, 2013). Some people prefer their

tattoos visible while others prefer to keep them hidden.

Throughout history, tattoos have served different purposes, including establishing individuality and creating a nonverbal personal narrative, identifying group affiliation by signifying membership in or exclusion from a group, rebelling against authority, and testing one's endurance for pain (Schmidt; Wohlrab et al., 2007). Sometimes, tattoos are used to "reclaim" the body after illness, injury, or disfiguring surgery (Murphy).

Tattoos have also been used to brand slaves or prisoners as punishment (Schmidt).

The most notorious use of tattooing occurred by the Nazis at Auschwitz—a "dermatological symbol of man's inhumanity to man" (Hoenig, 2011, a). Initially done by a metal stamp and later by a needle that pierced the skin and inflicted serial numbers on an inmate's left forearm, this dehumanizing procedure was extremely painful. No anesthesia was used, and the technique was hardly sterile. It had been instituted to facilitate the identification of the enormous number of corpses whose clothes had been removed (Hoenig, a; US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). At one camp, forced laborers were tattooed with the letters NL, which stood for the German word for "concentration camp" to prevent their escape (Hoenig, 2011, b).

Because of the words of Leviticus, many Jews believe tattoos are forbidden by Jewish law. One Jewish woman, though, in memory of the Holocaust, has appropriated images of the horrors and tattooed her entire body (Truesdell, 2015)—a "parchment for memorialization" (Murphy).



Some young Jews are asserting their identity by the use of tattoos. This one woman, called "Spike," has tattooed images of the Holocaust all over her body.

Source: Getty Image. Photographer: Anacleto Rapping, Los Angeles Times. Used with permission.

Tattooing involves a repetitive, mechanical piercing of the epidermis with needles that introduce permanent pigments into the dermis layer (Torre-Castro et al., 2022). The process causes a typical erythematous and inflammatory reaction that heals over time (Sperry, 1992). The tattoo's color varies with the pigments, especially the metallic salts used, but the "exact composition" of tattoo inks is not fully regulated (Torre-Castro et al.). Tattoo inks are considered cosmetics, and "little is known of the toxicological risks" involved in using these mostly organic pigments, including heavy metals (Laux et al., 2016).



A Japanese Samurai warrior with tattoos. Vintage photo from Japan, 1890. Tattoos were often used to include or exclude people from a specific group.

Source: Universal History Archive/UIG/Bridgeman Images. Used with permission.

As tattooing has gone from being “maverick involving social fringe groups” to “mainstream,” (Laux et al.), regulations have focused on hygiene and the prevention of infections. There is, though, always the risk of contaminants and impurities, including infected ink, as well as “pigment overload” (Serup et al., 2016). Bacterial infections, including staph and strep, are common enough since the skin's surface is not sterile, but viral infection with hepatitis B is also possible. Further, hypersensitivity and allergic reactions to tattoo pigments can occur (Torre-Castro et al.).

Though tattoos are permanent, removal is possible. Even famed 19th-century humorist Mark Twain wrote of using a candle and needles, a tech-

nique he had used years earlier to remove warts, to burn off a tattoo he had grown "tired and ashamed of" (Scharnhorst, 2004).

Tattoo removal, often due to "tattoo regret" (Klein and Kenedi, 2018), which is seen in up to 50 percent of people (Laux et al.), is now done by laser. Considerably safer than previous techniques, it is still not without difficulties, including possible blistering, scarring, pain, paradoxical darkening, allergic reactions, and bleeding (de Moll, 2018), and may require more than 10 treatments (Laux et al.).



Pintados of the Vasayas, 1595. Author: Boxer Codex. Tattoos have been used as decoration throughout the world.

Source: Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain

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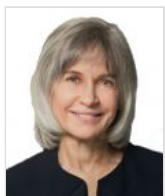
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