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社会热点系列
Need to Know Series

刺身与纹身

Body Piercing and Tattooing

Paul Mason

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Piercing and tattooing

Body piercing and tattooing have probably never been as popular as they are today. Tattoos especially seem to be everywhere – actresses from Roseanne Barr to Drew Barrymore, musicians such as Mary J. Blige and Eminem, and athletes such as Dennis Rodman, David Beckham and Mark Philippoussis, all have tattoos.

Piercings can be harder to spot – often they are hidden under clothes – but you only have to walk down a high street in London, New York or Sydney to see a variety of people with nose studs, **navel** rings, and pierced eyebrows and tongues.

Less than 50 years ago in the West, body piercing and tattooing were nowhere near as common. Teenagers in the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, would have found it much more difficult to get piercings and tattoos than they do today. For one thing, there were far fewer tattoo **parlours** and piercing studios. For another, people had a very different view of piercings and tattoos. One woman who was a teenager in the 1960s remembered: 'I desperately wanted to have my ears pierced. It seems nothing today, but at the time it was a very big deal. My mother told me – very clearly and many times – that having your ears pierced was "common" and "**sluttish**". She made it pretty clear that if I came home with pierced ears I might as well pack my bags and leave, as I'd have brought shame on the whole family.'

This woman wears a piercing in her nose as part of her costume.



Pierced noses, eyebrows, navels and other body parts were so unusual that most people would have been amazed to hear about them. Tattoos were more common than piercings after the Second World War, but were mainly associated with men serving in the Army or Navy.

In the recent past – even twenty years ago – piercings and tattoos were seen as a way of rebelling against polite society, so it is easy to think that they have always been like that. This is not the case: from **Polynesian** chiefs to the cream of Edwardian society, from the rain forests of South America to the household of Queen Victoria, body piercing and tattooing have a long and varied history.

Soul diva Mary J. Blige is one of many musicians who sport tattoos.

“One must *be* a work of art, or *wear* a work of art.”

(Oscar Wilde)



What are piercing and tattooing?



Body piercing

Body piercing involves pushing a sharp object through a person's skin, so that it goes under the outer layer and comes back out through the skin in a different place. Various objects – today usually metal jewellery – can then be put into the hole to keep it open. After a while the flesh around the hole heals up naturally, and the jewellery can then be changed.

Soft flesh – an earlobe, for example – is most suitable for piercing, but almost any part of the body can be

pierced. Noses, eyebrows, cheeks, **nipples**, navels, lips, tongues – all these and more are pierced by fans of body piercing. Why people choose to have their body pierced is much harder to explain than how it is done.

Many people have piercings done as a kind of body adornment or decoration – eyebrow rings among Western teenagers, for example, are purely decorative. In some cultures a piercing may have a special significance, such as showing that a boy has reached maturity and become a man.

Tattooing

Tattooing is the practice of making a visible design under someone's skin. Tattoos are made by putting ink through the outer layer of skin, into the layer beneath.

This second layer, which is known as the **dermis**, moves very little during a person's lifetime and does not break down, so tattoos are **permanent**.

There are various ways of getting tattoo ink into the flesh, but all involve piercing or cutting the skin.

Today this is usually done using an electric-powered device that pushes a needle up and down, piercing the skin on each downstroke and injecting a small amount of ink into the flesh.

Most people's tattoos have special significance to them, making each tattoo personal to the individual.

Other, less permanent, tattoo-like skin markings are also sometimes used.

These include henna tattoos and transfers, which are applied to the skin and eventually rub off.

Mel C. from the Spice Girls has a tattoo in Chinese characters meaning 'girl power' or, literally, 'woman' and 'strength'. Her mother has the same tattoo.



History of body piercing

Piercing has been practised around the world for many centuries. Sometimes people in the past were pierced purely for personal reasons: Cleopatra, for example, is said to have had one of her nipples pierced because it was **inverted**. She did not like the way it looked, so had the nipple pierced and would put a tiny, smooth stone in the hole to make her nipple stick out.

Coming of age

Other piercings have been done as a way of marking a significant event in someone's life: the moment when a boy became a man, for example, or when a woman got married. In Central Africa, ancient tribal customs suggested that a woman would be more valuable as a wife if she had had a particular piercing. Girls who were about to become women attended a special ceremony at which the piercing was performed. The ceremony included a **symbolic** sacrifice of their girlhood, or virginity.

This Ancient Egyptian bust shows that people were wearing earrings at least 4000 years ago.



Portable currency

One type of piercing was done as a way of storing wealth. In the days of sailing ships sailors needed to store their money in a way that was both easily available and useable in any country at which their ship called. So they had their ears pierced, and into the piercing went a gold ring. Gold could then be shaved off or added to the ring as needed, and gold could buy goods in whichever port the ships docked.

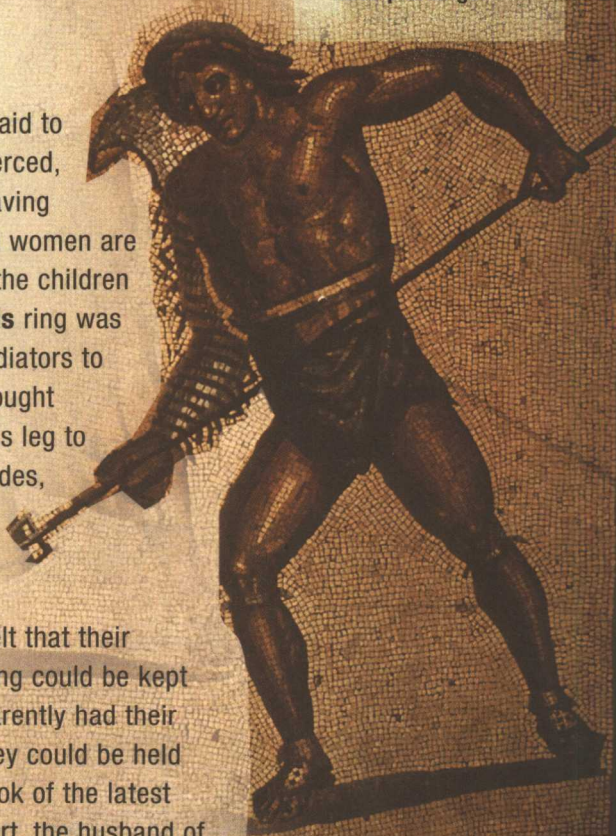
Protective piercings

Gladiators in the Roman arenas are said to have had the ends of their penises pierced, for two reasons. First, to stop them having children with lower-class women (rich women are said to have sometimes paid to have the children of famous gladiators). Unless the **penis** ring was released it was impossible for the gladiators to have sex. Secondly, a gladiator who fought naked could strap his penis against his leg to keep it out of the way of swinging blades, spears and other weapons.

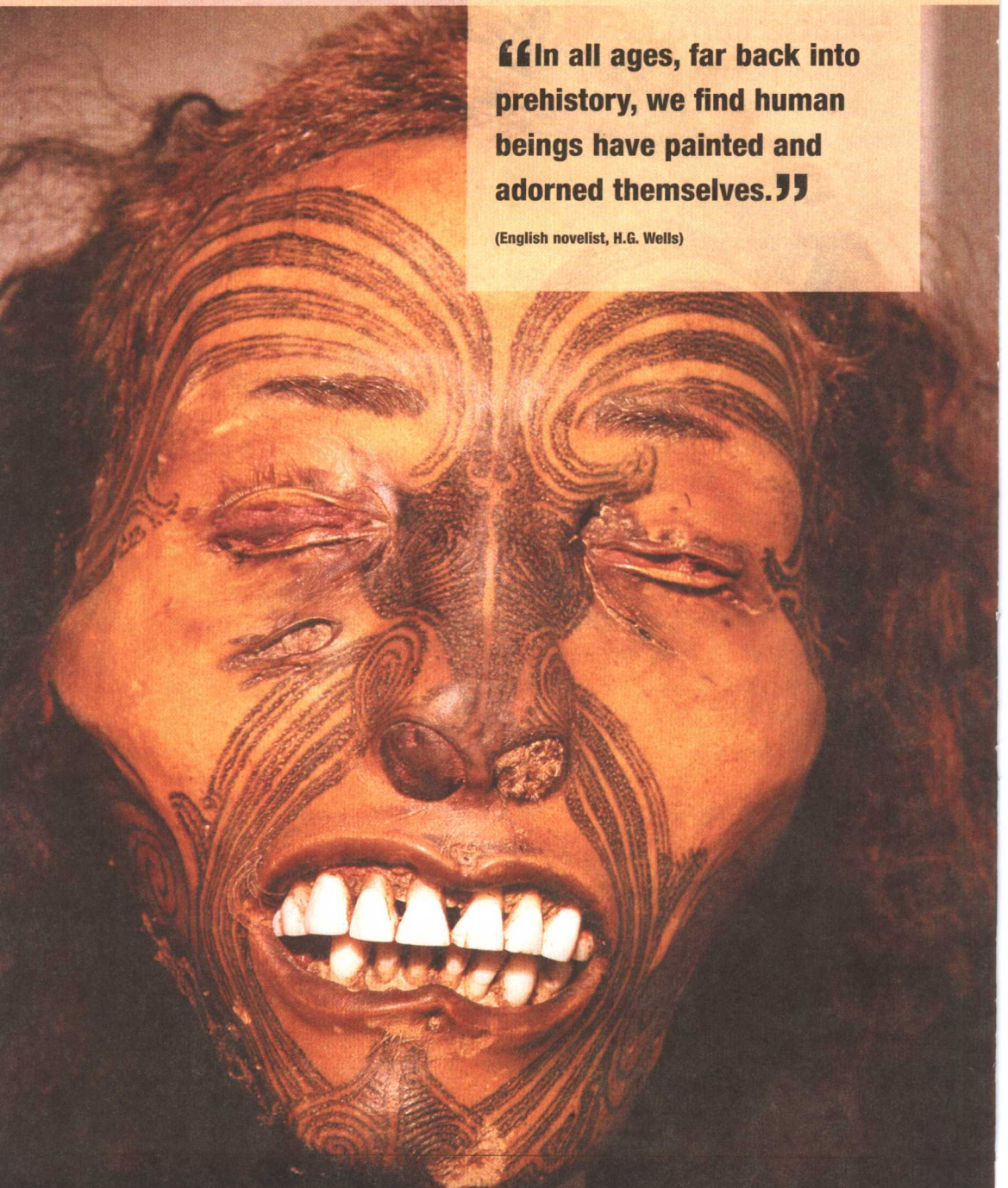
Fashion victims

In Britain many Victorian gentlemen felt that their trousers would hang better if everything could be kept smart below the waistline. Some apparently had their penises pierced with a ring so that they could be held in a position that wouldn't spoil the look of the latest fashionable trousers. Even Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, is alleged to have had his penis pierced.

A Roman gladiator. Some gladiators were known to have piercings.

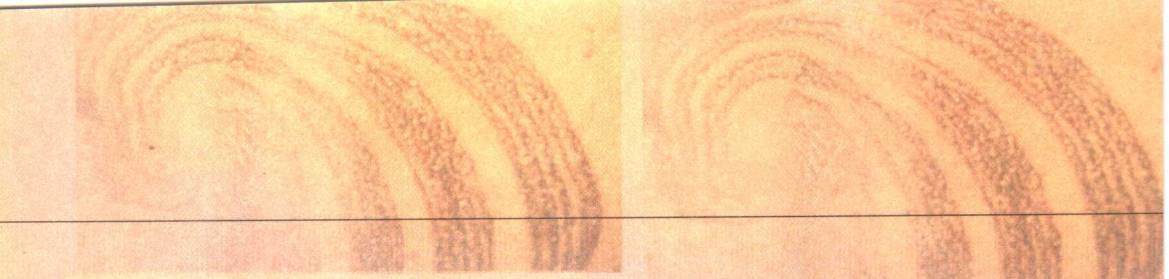


History of tattoos



“In all ages, far back into prehistory, we find human beings have painted and adorned themselves.”

(English novelist, H.G. Wells)



No one knows for certain when the first tattoo was done. Skin usually rots away after death, so it is very difficult to know when tattoos were first made. Evidence of ancient tattoos has come mainly from places where bodies have been **mummified**, preserving their skin and leaving behind the design that the mummified person wore in life.

Preserved skin

In 1993 an ancient mummified body was discovered in a high, windswept area of Siberia, in Russia, known as the Pastures of Heaven. The mummy was of a woman, who became known as the Ice Maiden. In life she had been a priestess. Probably because of this, her skin was covered in bright blue tattoos of animal figures, representing the creatures her people would have relied on for food. The Ice Maiden had been frozen in the Siberian ice for over 2400 years, making her one of the oldest known tattooed ladies. There is evidence that Ancient Egyptians had tattoos even earlier than the Ice Maiden, in about 2000 BCE.

Left: The mummified head of this Maori chief shows the face tattoos he wore in life.

And in 1992 a mummified, tattooed man's body was found in the European Alps, on the border between Italy and Austria. The Ice Man, as he became known, had been buried in a glacier for roughly 4000 years, making his tattoos as old as the Ancient Egyptian ones.

Tattooed warriors

About 2000 years after the Ice Man was first buried in his glacier, invading Roman armies reached northern Britain. There they encountered Pict warriors, who lived in the area that is now Scotland. The Pict fighters were covered in blue tattoos, and were so fierce that the **Roman legions** could not subdue them. Instead the Romans were forced to build Hadrian's Wall along the northern border of England, to keep out their tattooed enemies.

The purposes of these ancient tattoos are not certain. They may have been purely for decoration, but are more likely to have been a sign of a person's rank, or position. Having a tattoo today can be painful; it may have been more so then, and tattooing would have been a dangerous process because of the risk of a cut becoming infected.

History of tattoos

Tatau

For hundreds of years the islands of the Pacific Ocean – especially Samoa, Tahiti, New Zealand and Japan – have practised the art of tattooing. The word ‘tattoo’ almost certainly comes from a Tahitian word, *tatau*, meaning ‘to mark’. Tattooing is still common in the Pacific, though some styles of tattoo have begun to die out.

New Zealand

The Maori men of New Zealand once tattooed their faces with fierce-looking patterns, while women wore tattoos on their lips and chins. These face tattoo designs were carved into the flesh using a bone **chisel**, after which ink was placed in the cuts. This caused terrible facial **swelling**, with the result that men could not eat properly for some time. Instead they were fed liquid food through **funnel**-like tubes. People who have their tongues pierced today can have similar difficulties, and are often unable to eat anything but baby food for days after their piercing.

Today, only a few Maori people tattoo their faces; instead they may use face paint on special occasions to mimic the tattooed designs their great-grandparents wore.



Samoa

On the Samoan islands, tattooing was a mark of a man's ability to bear pain. This is still true today, and not just for Samoan men! In Samoan society a man without tattoos would have been thought a complete weakling.

Samoa tattoos were applied using a special comb. The teeth of the comb were dipped in ink then tapped into the skin, puncturing it and leaving the ink in the flesh beneath. A complicated design could take as long as six months to finish, and was applied in a specially built tattooing hut. Once the tattoo was finished, the hut would be burnt.

Japan

Japanese tattoos are famous, incorporating many different colours to create some of the most **intricate** designs in the world. Traditionally, people who had full-body tattoos in Japan belonged almost entirely to an organized group of criminals called *yakuza*. Even a simple Japanese carp tattoo on a person's shoulder can take months to finish, and full-body tattoos have always taken years to complete.

Many *yakuza* had tattoos that covered their entire bodies, ending only at the neck, wrists and ankles.



History of tattoos

Into the West

Although people in ancient Europe had once tattooed themselves, the practice had largely died out by the 17th century. Then, in 1769, Captain Cook's voyage through the Pacific brought his sailors into contact with tattooing. Some of Cook's men brought home a permanent souvenir of their visit to the South Seas in the form of a tattoo.

“A sailor without a tattoo is like a ship without grog [alcohol]: not seaworthy.”

(Samuel O'Reilly, a famous New York City tattoo artist)



At the time, sailors were just about the toughest, most **unruly** and uncontrollable people around. Ever since Cook's explorations, tattoos have been associated with sailors. This is perhaps the reason tattoos gained a **disreputable** image.

People in Europe and North America became fascinated by tattoos. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tattooed Indians or Pacific Islanders drew great crowds of people who were willing to pay to see their unusual skin markings. It was not long before an increasing number of tattooists began to set up shop, offering to give people tattoos. Their best customers were sailors and soldiers – far fewer people from outside the armed forces wanted to have tattoos.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many people looked down on tattoos, thinking them a sign that someone was badly behaved and anti-social.

Left: Yet another tattoo is added to a sailor's already colourful skin in a New York tattoo studio.

The US government even tried to limit tattoos among the armed forces – 1909 recruitment regulations stated: 'indecent or obscene tattooing is cause for rejection.' This regulation caused a mini-boom in the tattooing industry in the 1940s, as young men flocked to have clothes put on their rude tattoos so that they could join up to fight in the Second World War.

The Great Omi

Perhaps the strangest tattooed person ever was a **fairground** star called 'The Great Omi'. Omi – whose real name, Horace Ridler, was known only to a tiny number of people during his lifetime – had been an officer in the British Army, and came from a respectable, middle-class background. A series of financial disasters left him almost penniless, and he decided to turn himself into a **freak-show** star. Starting in 1927, the Great Omi was tattooed all over to look like a zebra. The tattoos on Omi's face and head alone required 15,000,000 needle pricks, and the entire process took over a year. His tattooist noted dryly, and with massive understatement, that the tattooing 'must have caused some pain and distress'.

Motivations

Today there is usually more than one reason behind a person's decision to have a tattoo or piercing. People give many different reasons for deciding to modify or decorate their body in some way.

Rebellion

Years ago almost the only people who had tattoos were the tough and uncontrollable: sailors, soldiers, **Hell's Angels** and criminals. Having a tattoo marked a person as an outsider, someone who did not play by the rules. Tattoos and piercings are still unusual enough for people who have them to be seen as rebels. People who are especially heavily tattooed or pierced look different: they have rebelled against the usual rules about how a person should look.

Rites of passage

A rite of passage is a ceremony or event that marks a change or turning point in someone's life: becoming an adult or getting married, for example. The actress Pamela Anderson once said that 'tattoos are symbolic of the most important moments of your life'.

Of course, as time goes by, tattoos and piercings can take on a different meaning. Pamela realized this herself, when she imagined the day when: 'my sons' first girlfriends come over and I'm all wrinkled up in a chair with tattoos all sagging down to my ankles.'

Aspirations

Some people use tattoos as a way of showing what they are aiming for. Several sportsmen and women, for example, have had Olympic rings tattooed on their bodies to show how much they want to compete in the Olympic Games.

Love

Some people have the names of their loved ones tattooed on their skin. This is not without risk: 'Mum' and 'Dad' are pretty safe, but other loved ones can change. Almost all professional

“I go all the time now – once every four months. It's very addictive.”

(US comedienne, Roseanne Barr)