

## TATTOOED BEAUTY: A PACIFIC CASE STUDY

by Adrienne L. Kaeppler



Recent feature articles in the "Style" section of prominent newspapers (e.g. *Washington Post*, February 7, 2000) and in other popular media such as television suggest that tattoo has become high fashion. Entire novels are built around tattoo, such as Akimitsu Takagi's *The Tattoo Murder Case*. The back cover reads: "The human canvas for a famous tattoo is destroyed, the tattoo stolen, along with the torso."

When Westerners first came into contact with Pacific Islanders, they were amazed at the widespread use and complexity of tattoo. In the novel *Moby Dick*, Melville describes Ishmael's initial meeting in a New Bedford Inn with Queequeg, the harpooner, "a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South, where he was the son of a King" (Melville 1851: 150).

Meanwhile he continued the business of undressing, and at last showed his chest and arms. As I live, these covered parts of him were checkered with the same squares as his face, his back, too, was all over the the same dark squares.....Still more, his very legs were marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms. It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaleman in the South Seas, and so landed in this Christian country. (*Ibid*:115).

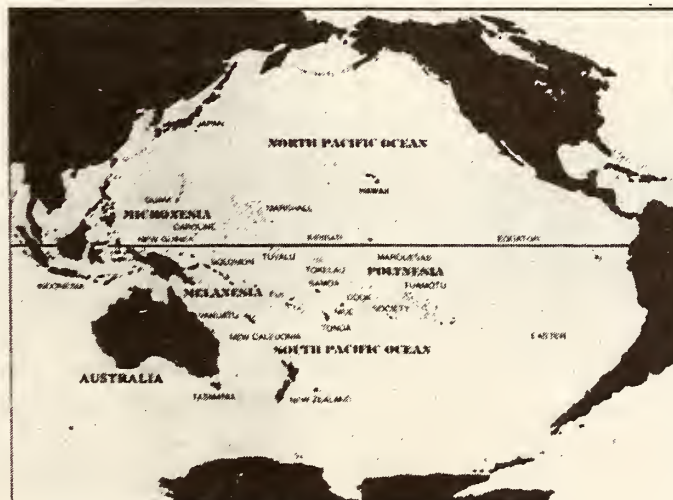
In the West, tattoo became the domain of sailors, adventurers, and prison inmates. In Japan, it carried an association with the criminal element known as "Yakuza" (McCallum 1988:128-129). Today, not only have the wearers of tattoo changed,

but tattooers, once considered craftsmen, are now considered artists.

One of the seminal events that helped make tattoo "respectable" in the academic world was a symposium in 1983 held at UCLA on "Art of the Body." Arnold Rubin's edited book, *Marks of Civilization*, based on this symposium, included papers on topics ranging from tattoo in ancient Egypt to historic and contemporary tattoo in Asia, North America, the Pacific Islands, as well as the tattoo renaissance in the USA. This volume remains the best academic book for serious study of the history and social significance of tattoo cross-culturally.

To the wearer, tattoo not only enhances the beauty of the human body, but marks social status, conveys symbolic hidden meanings, and proclaims its maker's artistic ability. Contemporary tattoo in western culture is often an individualized statement of revolution or modernity, but this was not the background for traditional tattoo in Polynesia and Micronesia, where tattoo signified group identity and conformity with the norms of a widely-accepted or even high-status group.

The Polynesian term, *tatu*, is the origin of the English word tattoo. It was carried to its high points among the New Zealand Māori, and in the Marquesas, where high-status men were completely tattooed. Considerable portions of the body were also tattooed in Sāmoa, Tahiti, Hawai'i, Easter Island, and elsewhere. Many Polynesian tattoo designs are derived from designs found on Lapita pottery found in Polynesian archaeological sites dating at least 2000 years ago (Green 1979). The antiquity of tattoo in Polynesia is unquestioned.



### POLYNESIAN TATTOOING

Polynesian tattoo was done by dipping a prepared tattooing implement—made of bone, turtleshell, or seashell hafted to a handle—into a black dye. The tattoo artist placed the instrument on the skin, striking it with a



mallet or other hammer-like implement. This broke the skin and implanted the dye. It also caused the blood to flow, causing considerable pain.

### Marquesas Tattooing

In the Marquesas, tattoo seems to have been intimately associated with gender, wealth, and status, but not necessarily chiefly rank. It marked one's association with a particular group of warriors, graded associations, "chief's banqueting societies," or groups of entertainers called *ka'ioi*, as well as the ability to pay the tattooer's fees and capacity to endure pain. Acquisition of tattoo in honor of special events such as chiefly rites of passage, victories in battle, or participation in feasts, commemorated the event and symbolically represented it.

In organizing the tattoo designs, the body was divided into zones which were then divided into smaller spaces (figure 1). Patterns, often named, were fitted into these spaces. There was an overall symmetry in the zoned composition on each side of the body, but within the zones the designs were often asymmetrical. Women were tattooed on the hands, arms, wrists, feet, ears and lips.



Figure 2

Although it is possible that design models were used, such as the decorated wooden legs and arms found today in museum collections, there is no first-hand evidence that these objects were tattooing models (figure 2). Marquesan tattoo-related designs also appear on barkcloth skull wrappers and on wooden plaques covered with barkcloth. A scholar of tattoo, Carol Ivory (1990), relates the fish designs on the barkcloth skull

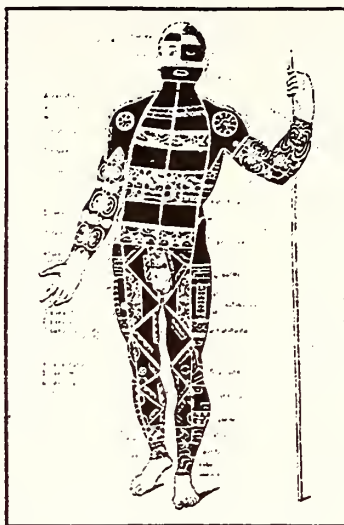


Figure 1

wrappers to fish designs worked into tattoo and with warriors—fishers of men.

### Māori Tattooing

Māori tattoo (*moko*) has fascinated outsiders since the voyages of Captain James Cook, when Cook's artists depicted several tattooed individuals (figure 3). Māori facial designs were carved into the skin with adze-like implements, much like wood carving to which it can be related both in design and technique. The technique used for female tattoo and men's body tattoo was similar to tattoo techniques elsewhere in Polynesia. Women's tattoo was limited to the lips and the chin (figure 4), while men's body tattoo was between the waist and the knees

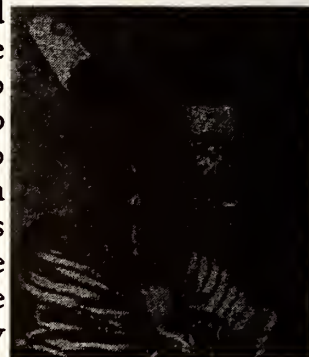


Figure 3

(figure 5). Facial tattoo was especially important for high-born men of chiefly rank. These individuals were *tabu* (sacred) during the operation and thus could not eat in the normal way. They were fed with carved feeding funnels decorated with tattoo designs.

Rather than designs that associated men together in groups, as in the Marquesas, Māori designs were individualized. Māori chiefs drew their facial tattoos



Figure 4

as signatures to sign documents during the 19th century. As in Marquesan tattoo, Māori designs were divided into zones and these further divided, giving an overall symmetry. Jackson (1972:70) and Gathercole (1988:175) see this symmetry as the pairing of life with death, or of *tapu* (sacred) with *noa* (not sacred), elements of Māori culture that together expressed the unity of nature and culture. The design elements and their organization within the zones, however, were often asymmetrical, giving it the autographic quality noted above. Tattooing styles varied from tribe to tribe and region to region, as well as over



time. Although the classical curvilinear style of tattoo predominated during the nineteenth century, both vertical and horizontal parallel lines were also found, sometimes overlaid with curvilinear designs (such as on figure 3).

The association of Māori tattoo with carved figures is also seen in the carved houseposts of meeting houses, where the buttocks of the ancestral



Figure 5

figures have tattoo designs, echoing the tattooed buttocks of important men. The tattoo of this area of men's bodies is also found in Sāmoa, where tattoo generally extends from above the waist to the thighs.

Tattoo is publicly exhibited when a man accompanies a high-ranking female dancer. He tucks up his wrap-around skirt to show his waist tattoo and the thigh tattoo below. In Tahiti, tattoo was applied to the buttocks of both men and women, sometimes blackening the buttocks completely. This emphasized the underarching crescent shape of the lower buttocks; other crescent designs were placed above the blackened areas. In both Sāmoa and Tahiti tattooing was associated with puberty; it was universal in Tahiti, but in Sāmoa apparently only men of certain status required it.

### Hawaiian Tattooing

In Hawai'i, in contrast to most other Polynesian areas, tattooing was decidedly asymmetrical (figure 6). The term for the technique was *kakau i ka uhi*, literally, "to strike on the black," but the organization of the designs had names. For example, a tattoo that made the right side of the body solid black was *pabupahu*. The Maui chief Kahekili, descendant of the thunder god Kanehekili, had this tattoo as did his warrior chiefs and household companions. In addition, Kahekili's head was shaved on both sides of the central hair crest and tattooed with *hoaka*, crescent designs. Overarching and underarching crescents are tattooed asymmetrically on the left shoulder of the Hawaiian man depicted by John

Webber on Cook's third voyage. Elaborate tattoos were applied to one arm or one leg (figure 7). Women were tattooed on the back of the hands, sometimes on an arm or leg, and occasionally the chest. Tattooing the most tender parts of the body, for example the tongue, was practiced to commemorate the death



Figure 6

of an important chief. It is likely that Hawaiian tattooing was a protective device, applied in conjunction with chanted prayers, capturing the prayer in the tattoo, thus offering permanent protection. The right arm especially needed sacred protection and help, as it was this bare arm—raised in a crescent—that threw the spear. Likewise, tattooing a row of dots around an ankle was a "charm" against sharks. In pre-European times, tattoos were protective genealogical devices, usually applied asymmetrically. In post-European times, at least some of them became decorative and

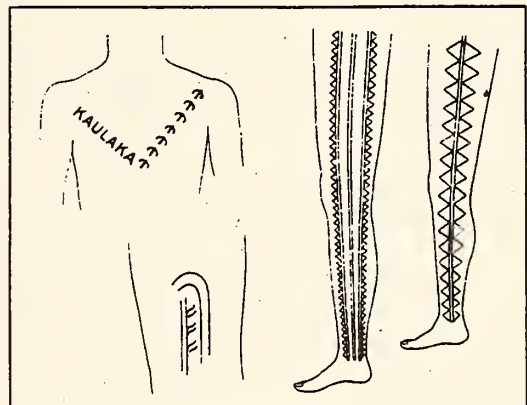


Figure 7

symmetrical, and included exotic motifs of European origin—hunting horns, goats, and lettering.

### MICRONESIAN TATTOOING

In the Marshall Islands in Micronesia, people believed that the gods of tattoo gave tattoo art to the Marshall Islanders especially to make them beautiful, and gave them the following message:

You should be tattooed so that you become beautiful and so your skin does not shrink with age. The fishes in the water are striped and have

lines; therefore, also human beings should have stripes and lines. Everything disappears after death, only the tattoo continues to exist; it will surpass you. The human being leaves everything behind on earth, all his possessions, only the tattooing he takes with him into the grave.

A tattooer's inspiration was regarded as a gift from the gods and he required complete silence while he drew the preliminary design. Offerings of food and mats were presented a week before the tattooing took place. The gods were called upon the night before and if an audible sound in agreement was not heard, the operation was not undertaken; if the gods were not heeded, the ocean would flood the island and the land would disappear. The Marshallese noted that "tattoo did not change or disfigure forms, it harmonized with the form in decorative designs and brought out beauty."

Tattoo enhanced the body as an object to be admired and evaluated apart from its temporary ornaments and clothing. Besides being a decorative device urged and sanctioned by the gods, tattooing was embedded in social and economic life. Marking a boy's elevation to manhood, the beauty of his tattoo attracted women to his manliness, demonstrated by his ability to endure pain. Parts of the tattoo are usually covered by clothing and can only be seen at intimate times. The great chiefs had the finest ornamentation, and face tattooing to cover the wrinkles of age was a prerogative of the chiefs. Chiefs' wives had the fingers and backs of their hands tattooed. Wealth was also necessary and the extent and beauty of the designs were dependent on offerings to the gods and the necessary payments to the tattooer in food, mats, and a feast.

Tattooing began with a great chief and then moved on to the commoners. A drawing implement made of the tail feather of a tropic bird or the midrib of a coconut leaf was used for the preliminary drawing. The tattooing chisels, made of fish or bird bones, were of two sizes (depending on the desired fineness of the lines), dipped in dye made of burned coconut sheaths mixed with water, placed on the skin, and struck with a mallet of the mid-stem of a coconut leaf or other piece of wood. The blackness of the sea swallow (noddy tern) was emulated for color, and the lines of a butterfly fish were the model for the design. The Marshallese word for tattoo (*ao*) means to draw lines; and straight and zigzag lines

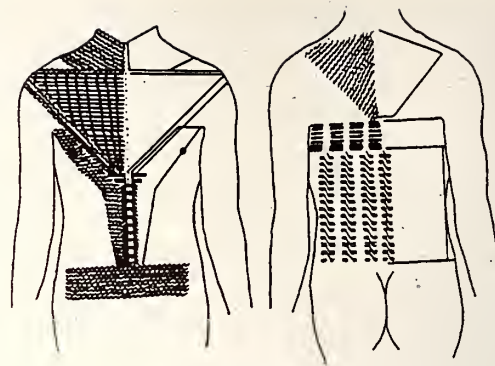


Figure 8

were the basic elements. As described and illustrated by Krämer (1906), a breast and back tattoo took about one month and was very painful (figure 8). The body swelled and the tattoo was rubbed with coconut juice medicine and covered with healing leaves. When the preliminary drawing of the design was finished, songs accompanied by drumming and hand clapping were performed to overcome pain, and the face of a tattooed man was covered with a special mat. A man's tattooing ornamented the chest, back, arms, shoulders, neck, face, thighs, and genitals, depending on preference, rank, and wealth, while a woman's tattoo ornamented her shoulders, arms, and hands.

## CONTEMPORARY TATTOO

In the past, tattoo in the Pacific Islands located a major aesthetic form in the body itself, one that revealed the importance of an individual's social status. In contemporary global society, tattoo is more likely to indicate a person's individuality while drawing on traditions from around the world.

As tattoo has become more accepted in Western culture, it has been used in remarkable ways. After the adoption of Christianity by the New Zealand Māori, a Māori artist enlivened a sculpture of the Madonna and Child with the most beautiful decoration, that is, with tattoo. And on April 29, 2000, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London held "Tattoo: A Day of Record." The advertisement depicting Māori tattoo invited the public to "come to the V & A and have your tattoos photographed for inclusion in the Museum archive. You will be granted free entry by showing your tattoos at the Exhibition Road entrance" . The twentieth century in the West has witnessed an evolution of tattoo from its use as identifying marks by prison inmates to adornment for film stars as well as a



revolution from declass  to high art. Who knows where the 21<sup>st</sup> century will lead?

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I would like to thank the following for permission to publish the photographs in the print edition of *AnthroNotes* and on the internet ([www.nmnh.si.edu/departments/anthro.html](http://www.nmnh.si.edu/departments/anthro.html)):

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, Figure 2; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Figure 9; Anonymous private collection, Figure 6; and from Mark Blackburn's *Tattoos from Paradise* Figures 1, 3, 4, 5, 7.

#### Photo Captions:

Figure 1. Design organization for a Marquesan male tattoo. Originally published in Karl von den Steinen's *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst*.

Figure 2. Wooden arm from the Marquesas Islands decorated with tattoo designs. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

Figure 3. Tattooed M ori, drawn by Sydney Parkinson during the first voyage of Captain James Cook.

Figure 4. Watercolor of a M ori woman by General Horatio Gordon Robley.

Figure 5. Watercolor of tattooed M ori men by Joseph Jenner Merrett.

Figure 6. Colored engraving of a Hawaiian chief from Beechey's *Voyage Autour du Monde*.

Figure 7. Drawing of Hawaiian tattoo motifs by Augustin Kr mer, 1897.

Figure 8. Drawing of breast and back tattoos from the Marshall Islands by Augustin Kr mer. From, *Archiv f r Anthropologie*, Vol. 30, 1904.

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