



Hold still: Horiyoshi III tattoos a man in Yokohama last Wednesday. YOSHIKI MIURA PHOTO

FYI

TATTOOS

Whether covered or brazen, tattoos make a statement

By MASAMI ITO

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Tattoos have long occupied a place in Japanese society, generally in the shadows of the underworld and the realm of taboo.

Ornate to the point of beautiful, tattoos have a mystique, from the pain that comes from having them done, the courage to endure it, and their significance not only to the wearer but to the uninitiated.

More people in Japan, especially younger members of society, are electing to adorn themselves with the body art, and they're not necessarily keeping it under wraps. Some are meanwhile being inspired by famous

figures who pursue what seems like a path of independence, such as pop singer Namie Amuro, who has not shied away from tattoos.

However, prejudice over tattoos and discrimination against those who wear them persists, experts say.

How far back do tattoos go in Japan?

In theory, it is believed tattoos date to the Jomon Period (between 10000 B.C. to around 300 B.C.) as evidenced by Jomon "dogu" clay figurines with decorative patterns on their faces and bodies.

But according to Yoshimi Yamamoto, a professor at Tsuru University in Yamanashi Prefecture and an expert on tattoos, there is no physical evidence that Jomon people themselves actually had tattoos. Because of Japan's warm, humid climate, there are no mummified remains with skin intact.

In the Yayoi Period (around 300 B.C. to around 300 A.D.), the Chinese historical record "Gishiwajinden" ("Records of Wei") written at the end of the third century, says all men tattooed their faces and bodies.

Tattoos flourished in the Edo Period (1603-1867), becoming popular with people of various walks of life, including firefighters and builders.

The Chinese epic "Suikoden" ("The Water Margin") in woodblock prints, especially by artist Kuniyoshi, played a large role in increasing the popularity of tattoos among the public. In "Suikoden," Robin Hood-like bandits had their bodies fully tattooed with dragons, tigers and flowers.

But it was also during this period that tattoos were introduced as a form of criminal punishment, often marking them on their arms or forehead. In Yamamoto's book "Irezumi no Sekai" ("Tattoo: The Anthropology of Body Decoration") published by Kawade Shobo Shinsha in 2005, tattooing replaced the corporal punishment of mutilation such as cutting off the nose or ears.

"The reason why people regardless of age or gender were tattooed as a form of punishment was that it was useful in finding repeat offenders and to warn the surrounding people," Yamamoto wrote in her book.

Where did tattoos originate?

Tattoos are worldwide, but the oldest so far found were on the mummified remains of a male near the border of Austria and Italy, according to Yamamoto. It is thought to date to around 3000 B.C.

What about the Ainu and Okinawans?

Like many indigenous people, the Ainu and people of Okinawa (formerly the Ryuku Kingdom) have a history of tattoos.

Traditionally, Ainu women bore tattoos around their mouths and on the backs of their hands as a sign of beauty and adulthood. But after the Meiji government unilaterally declared Hokkaido to be part of Japan, giving it its current name, the government began an assimilation policy and prohibited various Ainu traditional practices, including tattoos.

In Okinawa, women had tattoos on the backs of their hands that were said to be a sign of adulthood and a talisman to ward off evil. But following the end of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the establishment of Okinawa Prefecture under the Meiji government in 1879, tattoos were also banned in Okinawa.

Why did the Meiji government ban tattoos?

The government officially banned tattoos because they were deemed barbarous and unsuitable for the "civilization and enlightenment" movement. Also prohibited were men and women bathing together in public bathhouses and walking around in the nude or naked from the waist up.

"Ever since the opening of Japan to the world, (the government) strengthened control over the people's appearance and customs," Yamamoto wrote. The reason for the intervention was "the Meiji government prioritized the centralization of power from a world that was (divided into) feudal domains to (create) a civilized nation."

And for more than 70 years, tattoos were banned. The ban was lifted in 1948 during the Allied Occupation.

Are there current legal restrictions?

There is no national law on tattoos, but many prefectures have ordinances prohibiting tattoo artists from taking the needle to minors. For example, Hokkaido, Miyagi, Ibaraki, Kanagawa, Gifu, Nagasaki and Okinawa basically forbid minors from being tattooed.

According to a Tokyo Metropolitan Government spokesman, the topic of whether to ban minors in the capital from getting tattoos came up in 2006 but was shelved.

"It was determined that there was no social urgency or public sentiment urging the establishment of such restrictions," he said. "It's true that more celebrities and athletes have tattoos for fashion and there is a possibility that young people may copy that. But at the moment, we haven't heard

from Tokyo residents calling the issue a problem."

The antiorganized crime law that took effect in 1992 meanwhile prohibits gangsters from forcing or encouraging minors to get tattoos.

Doesn't tattooing violate Article 17 of the Medical Practitioner Law?

Tattoos fall within a gray zone under the law, which stipulates that only licensed doctors can practice medicine.

There have recently been many cases of aesthetic salons getting in trouble for injuring customers while performing tattoo makeup procedures on their faces without a medical license. And when people get hurt, that is when tattooing has brushes with the law, said Horiyoshi III, a famed tattoo artist of nearly 40 years.

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According to Horiyoshi, tattooing infringes on the medical law but it was better to leave things as is instead of establishing a formal legal framework because it would make people go underground to get tattoos and risk the spread of disease.

"Sanitation would deteriorate and people would get sick," Horiyoshi said. "The government wouldn't be able to manage these people because they are getting (tattoos) done within their own inner circle. But at the same time, the Medical Practitioner Law would prevent officials from giving tattooing to go-ahead. That's why it's best to leave all of the responsibility up to the tattoo artist."

Horiyoshi said that as a tattoo artist, the most important thing is sterilization.

Have there been criminal cases

involving tattoos?

Yes. In an unusual case in January, a member of Japan's largest yakuza group, the Yamaguchi-gumi, was sentenced to seven months in prison for ignoring a Fukuoka bathing facility that banned entry to tattooed people, and had posted a sign to keep them out.

More common cases involve the arrests of tattoo artists whose clients

were minors in violation of prefectural ordinances.

Why does discrimination persist against people with tattoos?

In addition to historical and cultural reasons, experts agree a major factor is how the media treat tattoos, portraying those with the body art as bad. For example, last year, pop star Noriko Sakai was arrested for drug possession and the media repeatedly stressed her new bad-girl image sporting ankle and finger tattoos.

Horiyoshi argues that people who have tattoos should not automatically be associated with criminals or yakuza, despite such widespread assumptions.

"People with tattoos are not criminals," Horiyoshi said. "But the image that tattoos are scary is planted in our daily lives on TV or at pools and hot springs" that prohibit tattooed people from entering.

Many pools and spas have signs barring people with tattoos. Tattooed people also apparently have difficulty getting life insurance policies.

Is getting a tattoo painful and does it take a long time?

Horiyoshi, who has a full-body tattoo, said, "It's like stepping on thumbtacks."

But he added the pain is very difficult to explain.

And of course, the larger and more complex the body art, the more time it takes to create.

Horiyoshi said it takes about 40 minutes to draw a small peony. But most of his customers come in for multiple visits — one arm may take 10 to 20 sessions, while a whole back may take 50.

How has the tattoo culture changed in recent years?

Horiyoshi said he has seen a change "as different as heaven and Earth" in his customers over the years. He said that in the old days there were certain types of people, depending on their occupation, who got tattoos, including women in the nightclub business and yakuza.

"Now very normal people come to get engraved, and the number of girls especially increased," Horiyoshi said.

He added that people nowadays show their tattoos, whereas before they were hidden.

"In the old days, people didn't have engravings in places that could be

seen," he said. "In Japanese culture, we hid the tattoos and only showed them at the critical moment."

Tsuru University's Yamamoto said young tattoo enthusiasts nowadays don't study the history and culture of tattoos and don't understand the depth and complexity of their origins.

"Those people that made tattoos knew the risks in those days, they knew that there would be a social disadvantage, Yamamoto said. "With tattoos, there is no turning back."

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