

Tattoo History : North America

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Most nineteenth century scholars took no interest in North American native tattooing. In 1909 the American anthropologist A.T. Sinclair surveyed the literature and noted with dismay that "one of the great difficulties in treating our subject is that details or even mention are so often absent when the practice must have been common. Even the slightest hint is sometimes of value." In his definitive paper, "Tattooing of the American Indians", Sinclair surveyed the records of tattooing in each geographical region of North America, but in many cases came up only with fragmentary one-liners such as "The Algonquin tribes everywhere seem to have practiced the custom."

Some of the most interesting descriptions of pre-Columbian tattooing in North America were written by 17th century French explorers and missionaries in Eastern Canada. A typical example is the French explorer Gabriel Sagard-Théodat's account of tattooing among the Hurons, written in 1615:

But that which I find a most strange and conspicuous folly, is that in order to be considered courageous and feared by their enemies [the Hurons] take the bone of a bird or of a fish which they sharpen like a razor, and use it to engrave or decorate their bodies by making many punctures somewhat as we would engrave a copper plate with a burin. During this process they exhibit the most admirable courage and patience. They certainly feel the pain, for they are not insensible, but they remain motionless and mute while their companions wipe away the blood which runs from the incisions. Subsequently they rub a black color or powder into the cuts in order that the engraved figures will remain for life and never be effaced, in much the same manner as the marks which one sees on the arms of pilgrims returning from Jerusalem.

Numerous brief references to tattooing are found in writings of 17th century Jesuit missionaries whose reports were forwarded to Paris each year and compiled in volumes titled Jesuit Relations. Jesuit missions were scattered throughout eastern Canada, and missionaries reported that tattooing was practiced by almost all of the native tribes they encountered. In 1653 the Jesuit missionary Francois-J. Bressani reported:

In order to paint permanent marks on themselves they undergo intense pain. To do this they use needles, sharpened awls, or thorns. With these instruments they pierce the skin and trace images of animals or monsters, for example an eagle, a serpent, a dragon, or any other figure they like, which they engrave on their faces, their necks, their chests, or other parts of their bodies. Then, while the punctures which form the designs are fresh and bleeding, they rub in charcoal or some other black color which mixes with the blood and penetrates the wound. The image is then indelibly imprinted on the skin. This custom is so widespread that I believe that in many of these native tribes it would be impossible to find a single individual who is not marked in this way. When this operation is performed over the entire body it is dangerous, especially in cold weather. Many have died after the operation, either as the result of a kind of spasm which it produces, or for other reasons. The natives thus die as martyrs to vanity because of this bizarre custom.

Native North American tattooing was frequently associated with religious and magical practices. It was also employed as a symbolic rite of passage at puberty ceremonies and as a distinguishing mark which would enable the spirit to overcome obstacles on its journey after death. Such an obstacle might be an apparition which blocked the spirit's path and demanded to see a specific tattoo design as evidence of the spirit's right to enter the next world. An example of such a use of tattooing is found among the Sioux, who believed that after death the spirit of the warrior mounts a ghostly horse and sets forth on its journey to the "Many Lodges" of the afterlife. Along the way the spirit of the warrior meets an old woman who blocks his path and demands to see his tattoos. If he has none, she turns him back and condemns him to return to the world of the living as a wandering ghost.

Therapeutic tattooing was practiced by many native tribes. The Ojibwa, for instance, tattooed the temples, forehead, and cheeks of those suffering from headaches and toothaches which were believed to be caused by malevolent spirits. The tattooing ceremony was accompanied by songs and dances which were supposed to exorcise the demons.

Tattooing was also used to honor warriors who had distinguished themselves by bravery in combat. Writing in 1742, the Reverend John Heckwelder of Pennsylvania described an aged warrior of the Lenape Nation and Monsey Tribe as follows:

This man, who was then at an advanced age, had a most striking appearance, and could not be viewed without astonishment. Besides that his body was full of scars, where he had been struck and pierced by arrows of the enemy, there was not a spot to be seen, on that part of it which was exposed to view, but what was tattooed over with some drawing relative to his achievements, so that the whole together struck the beholder with amazement and terror. On his whole face, neck, shoulders, arms, thighs, and legs, as well as on his breast and back, were represented scenes of the various actions and engagements he had been in; in short, the whole of his history was there deposited, which was well

known to those of his nation, and was such that all who heard it thought it could never be surpassed by man.

Other Europeans reported the use of tattooing to record achievements in war. In the Jesuit Relations for 1663 it was reported that an Iroquois chief known to the French as Nero bore on his thighs 60 tattooed characters, each of which symbolized an enemy killed with his own hand. And in 1720, James Adair wrote of the Chikasas: " They readily know achievements in war by the blue marks over their breasts and arms, they being as legible as our alphabetical characters are to us."

One of the most interesting accounts of native American tattooing was written by Jean Bernard Bossu (1720-1792), a French naval officer who between 1757 and 1762 traveled on foot up the Mississippi Valley to what is now Alabama and lived for several months with the Osages. He described his travels in *Nouveaux Voyages aux Indes Occidentales*, (1768), which contains a wealth of information on the food, clothing, medicines, and customs of the natives. Bossu's work was well received and widely read in Europe. A reviewer writing in 1768 praised him for his veracity and simplicity of style, remarking that "we see in this work man as he was at the beginning of society, for these nations which we call savage are very civilized."

Unfortunately, there are few surviving illustrations of North American native tattoo designs. The first illustrations which show tattooed natives were published in the Jesuit Missionary Francois Du Creux's *Historiae Canadensis seu Novae Franciae* (1656) There is, however, no reason to think that the tattoo marks seen in these engravings are accurate representations of native designs. The European-style figures, capes and backgrounds make it clear that the artist worked from imagination and from written descriptions rather than from life. Another artist (probably Charles Bécart de Grandville of Quebec) apparently copied and tried to improve on the *Historiae Canadensis* illustrations by supplying the figures with appropriate native props such as tobacco pipes, tomahawks, and loin cloths. De Grandville's drawings, originally published in *Codex Canadensis* (1701) have since been widely reproduced as the first pictorial record of native tattooing in North America.

In 1593 Captain John Smith wrote that the natives of Virginia and Florida had "their legs, hands, breasts and faces cunningly embroidered with diverse marks, such as beasts and serpents, artificially wrought into their flesh with black spots." The most accurate early illustrations of these tattooed Florida natives were made by John White, a British artist, cartographer and explorer who, in 1585, sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh on an expedition to establish a settlement on Roanoke Island in the territory of Virginia. White was an accomplished illustrator who made hundreds of valuable drawings of the natives and the flora and fauna of the region. In 1590 many of his drawings were published in Thomas Hariot's *Briefve and True report of the New Found Land of Virginia*. In a curious appendix to Hariot's work, White included several drawings of elaborately tattooed Picts to show "how that the Inhabitants of the Great Britannie have been in times past as savage as those of Virginia." White's original paintings are now in the British Museum.

One of the best examples of native American tattooing has been recorded in an oil portrait of Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow, painted in 1710 by the English artist John Verelst. Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow was one of four Mohawk chiefs who visited London in 1710 as part of a delegation led by Peter Schuyler, a member of the New York Indian Commission who hoped to persuade Queen Anne to assist the British colonials in their conflict with French Canada. Schuyler had the chiefs make speeches in which they promised that their own people would assist the British troops. The mission was a success and the Queen was finally persuaded to send the expedition.

The tattoo designs seen in Verelst's portrait are of special interest because Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow was one of the last of the Mohawk chiefs to be tattooed. During the American Revolution his descendants allied themselves with the British and for the most part gave up tattooing and other native traditions. His grandson, Joseph Brant, was the most prominent Mohawk of his day. He was educated at Dartmouth, was fluent in English, Latin and Greek, as well as three native languages, and played a major role in public life as a spokesman for his people.

The only scholarly first-hand account of native tattooing in North America was written by James G. Swan, a native of Boston. In 1849 Swan left his wife, two children and a prosperous ship-fitting business to live among the natives of the Pacific Coast. Described by his biographer as "a self-taught scientist, runaway husband, promoter, teacher, essayist, town-boomer, probate judge and alcoholic," Swan was unique among early settlers in that he considered the natives worthy of respect and attempted to write an account of their rapidly vanishing culture. In this he was far ahead of his time; there was no established discipline of anthropology when Swan wrote his first essays, and his classic *Pacific Northwest*, published in 1857, was the earliest history of the area and remains vivid and readable today.

The Haida were among the most accomplished of all North American native artists and craftsmen. Their totem poles, canoes, and dwellings were embellished with traditional designs associated with mythical and totemic themes. In 1874 Swan's monograph *The Haida Indians of Queen Charlotte's Islands, British Columbia* was published by the Smithsonian Institution of Washington DC, and in 1878 his "Tattoo Marks of the Haida" appeared in the Fourth Annual Report of the American Bureau of Ethnology. Swan had hoped to obtain a government grant to support further studies of native tattooing, but not surprisingly, the US Government was not interested in spending money to decipher the ancient meaning of tattoo designs. Swan's classic monograph, "Tattoo Marks of the Haida", which he financed himself, was the one and only serious study of native North American tattooing.

The following selection is taken from "Travels in the Interior of North America, 1751-1762", by Jean Bernard Bossu. Translated and edited by Feiler. Copyright 1962 by the University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma. Reproduced here by kind permission of the University of Oklahoma Press.

I should like to tell you about an event which will seem strange to you, but which, in spite of its insignificance, could be very useful to me during my stay in America. The [Osages] have just adopted me. A deer was tattooed on my thigh as a sign that I have been made a warrior and a chief. I submitted to this painful operation with good grace. I sat on a wildcat skin while an Indian burned some straw. He put the ashes in water and used this simple mixture to draw the deer. He then traced the drawing with big needles pricking me till I bled. The blood mixed with the ashes of the straw formed a tattoo which can never be removed. ... They then told me that if I traveled among the tribes allied to them, all that I had to do to receive a warm welcome was to smoke a peace pipe and show my tattoo. They also said that I was their brother and that if I were killed they would avenge my death....

I cannot tell you how much I suffered and how great an effort I made to remain impassive. I even joked with the women who were present. The spectators, surprised by my stoicism, cried out with joy, danced, and told me I was a real man. I was truly in great pain and ran a fever for almost a week. You would never believe how attached to me these people have become since then... It is a kind of knighthood, to which they are only entitled by great actions. These marks multiply their achievements in war. One so tattooed without such deeds is degraded.

Later in his narrative Bossu describes an unusual case of primitive anesthesia and tattoo removal. An Osage man who had never taken part in battle had himself tattooed with the image of a tomahawk in order to impress his intended bride. An assembly of chiefs decreed that the miscreant should be punished by having the tattooed skin cut off with a knife, but Bossu volunteered to remove the tattoo by another method. Bossu wrote:

I gave the false hero a calabash bowl full of maple syrup, into which I had put some opium. While the man was asleep, I applied some cantharides [Spanish fly, a blistering agent] to the tattoo on his chest and then added plantain leaves, which formed blisters or tumors. The skin and the tattoo came off and a serous fluid was secreted. This type of operation amazed the medicine men, who knew nothing of the properties of cantharides, although they are very common in North America.

The following selection is taken from James Swan's *Tattoo Marks of the Haida* (1878).

In February 1879 I was fortunate enough to meet a party of Haida men and women in Port Townsend, Washington, who permitted me to copy their tattoo marks.

The tattoo marks of the Haidas are heraldic designs or the family totem, or crests of the wearers, and are similar to the carvings depicted on the pillars and monuments around the homes of the chiefs, which casual observers have thought were idols. These designs are invariably placed on the men between the shoulders just below the back of the neck, on the breast, on the front part of both thighs, and on the legs just below the knees. On the women they are marked on the breast, on both shoulders, on both forearms, from the elbow down over the back of the hands to the knuckles, and on both legs below the knee to the ankle.

When the Haidas visit Victoria or the town on Puget Sound they are dressed in the garb of white people and present a respectable appearance, in marked contrast with the Indians from the west coast of Vancouver Island, or the vicinity of Cape Flattery, who dress in a more primitive manner, and attract notice by their more picturesque costumes than do the Haida, about whom there is nothing outwardly of unusual appearance, except that tattoo marks on the hands of the women, which show their nationality at a glance to the most careless observer.

Almost all of the Indian women of the northwest coast have tattoo marks on their hands and arms, and some on the face; but as a general thing these marks are mere dots or straight lines having no particular significance. With the Haidas, however, every mark has its meaning; those on the hands and arms of the women indicate the family name, whether they belong to the bear, beaver, wolf or eagle totems, or any of the family of fishes. As one of them quaintly remarked to me, "If you were tattooed with the design of a swan, the Indians would know your family name."....

Although it is very easy to distinguish the Haida women from those of other tribes by seeing the tattoo marks on the backs of their hands, yet very few white persons have cared to know the meaning of these designs, or are aware of the extent of the tattoo marks on the persons of both sexes.

It should be borne in mind that during their festivals and masquerade performances the men are entirely naked and the

women have only a short skirt reaching from the waist to the knee; the rest of their persons are exposed, and it is at such times that the tattoo marks show with the best effect, and the rank and family connection are known by the variety of designs.

Like all the other coast tribes, the Haidas are careful not to permit the intrusion of white persons or strangers to their Tomanawos ceremonies, and as a consequence but few white people, and certainly none of those who have ever written about those Indians, have been present at their opening ceremonies when the tattoo marks are shown.

My information was derived from the Haidas themselves, who explained to me while I was making the drawings, and illustrated some of the positions assumed in their dances by both sexes. As the Haidas, both men and women, are very light colored, some of the latter, full blooded Indians too, having their skins as fair as Europeans, the tattoo marks show very distinct.

This tattooing is not all done at one time, nor is it everyone who can tattoo. Certain ones, almost always men, have a natural gift which enables them to excel in this kind of work. One of the young chiefs, named Geneskelos, was the best designer I knew, and ranked among his tribe as a tattooer. He belonged to Laskeek village on the east side of Moresby's Island, one of the Queen Charlotte group. I employed him to decorate the great canoe which I sent to the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1879, for the National Museum. I was with him a great deal of the time both at Victoria and Port Townsend. He had a little sketch book in which he had traced designs for tattooing, which he gave to me. He subsequently died in Victoria of smallpox, soon after he had finished decorating the canoe.

He told me the plan he adopted was first to draw the design carefully on the person with some dark pigment, then prick it in with needles, and then rub over the wound with some more coloring matter till it acquired the proper hue. He had a variety of instruments composed of needles tied neatly to sticks. His favorite one was a flat strip of ivory or bone, to which he had firmly tied five or six needles, with their points projecting beyond the end just far enough to raise the skin without inflicting a dangerous wound, but these needle points stuck out quite sufficiently to make the operation very painful, and although he applied some substance to deaden the sensation of the skin, yet the effect was on some to make them quite sick for a few days; consequently, the whole process of tattooing was not done at one time. As this tattooing is a mark of honor, it is generally done at or just prior to a Tomanawos performance and at the time of raising the heraldic columns in front of the chief's house. The tattooing is done in open lodge and is witnessed by the company assembled. Sometimes it takes several years before all the tattooing is done, but when completed and the person well ornamented, then they are happy and can take their seats among the elders.

It is an interesting question, and one worthy of careful and patient investigation, why it is that the Haida Nation alone of all the coast tribes tattoo their persons to such an extent, and how they acquire the art of carving columns which bear such striking similarity to carving in wood and stone by the ancient inhabitants of Central America, as shown by drawings in Bancroft's fourth volume of Native Races and in Habel's investigation in Central and South America.

The tattoo marks, the carvings, and heraldic designs of the Haida are an exceedingly interesting study, and I hope what I have thus hastily and imperfectly written may be the means of awakening an interest to have those questions scientifically discussed, for they seem to me to point to a key which may unlock the mystery which for so many ages has kept us from the knowledge of the origin of the Pacific Tribes.

The following selection is taken from The Haida Indians of Queen Charlotte's Islands, British Columbia by James Swan (1874)

The custom which prevails among them, and seems to be a distinctive feature of this tribe, is that of tattooing their bodies with various designs, all of which are fanciful representations of animals, birds, or fishes, either an attempt to represent in a grotesque form those which are known and commonly seen, or their mythological and legendary creations. A recent visit of a party of these Indians to Port Townsend has enabled me to study carefully a variety of their carvings and tattoo marks, and to ascertain with accuracy their true meaning and signification.

I have forwarded to the Smithsonian Institution, to accompany this memoir, several carvings in wood and stone; and, in order the better to describe them, I have made sketches illustrative of these carvings and also of various tattoo designs, which were copied by me from the persons of the Indians, and also have caused photographs to be taken to still further illustrate this subject...

The designs which I have copied and described are but a portion of the whole which were tattooed on the persons of this party; but the limited time they remained did not enable me to make a very extended examination. Enough, however, has been obtained to show that this subject is one of great ethnological value, and if followed up with zeal and intelligence would be certain to produce interesting results.

The method by which I determined with accuracy that meaning of these various carvings and tattoo designs was by natural objects, by alcoholic specimens of frogs and crayfish, by dried specimens, by carvings of bears and seals, and by pictures, and by the mythological drawings of similar objects which I had previously obtained and determined among the Makahs. The Haidas, in explaining to me the meaning of their various designs, pointed to the articles I had, and thus proved to me what they meant to represent.

The tattoo marks of the codfish, squid, humming bird, etc., never could have been determined from any resemblance to those objects, but by having the specimens and pictures before me they could easily point each one out. Nor was I satisfied until I had submitted my drawings to other Indians, and proved by their giving the same names to each, that my first informant had told me correctly. The allegorical meaning, however, will require for determination time and careful study. Indians are very peculiar in giving information relative to their myths and allegories. Even when one is well acquainted with them and has their confidence, much caution is required, and it is useless to attempt to obtain any reliable information unless they are in a humor of imparting it..

I will not, at this time, press further this discussion, upon a subject which to perfectly understand will need extended observations to be made upon the spot, and would require an explanation that would carry me beyond the limits to which I propose to confine myself in this present paper. I trust that it will be sufficient for me to have shown that the subject of the carvings in wood and stone and precious metals, the paintings and tattoo marks of the Haidas, is one of very great interest, and one which not only never has been properly explained, but never properly understood. When we reflect on the great number of centuries during which all knowledge of the interior of the Pyramids of Egypt was hidden from the world, until the researches of Belzoni discovered their secret treasures, and until Champollion, by aid of the Rosetta Stone, was enabled to decipher their hieroglyphic writings, may we not hope that the knowledge of the ancient history of the natives of the northwest coast, which has so long been an enigma, may be traced out by means of the explanation of the meaning of the symbols such as I have been enabled to discover in part, and have in this paper described.

This very brief memoir, made during the visit of a party of Haida Indians for a few weeks in Port Townsend, will serve to show what could be effected if the Government would empower some person here, and appropriate sufficient funds to be expended in these ethnological and archaeological researches.