

## Tattoo History : France

Contributed by WaterTattoos.Net  
Wednesday, 02 July 2008

Tattooing was widely practiced among seamen, laborers and convicts during the first part of the nineteenth century. Members of the middle and upper classes, however, thought it beneath their dignity, and it was never popular among the titled and the wealthy as it was in England.

This attitude was due in large part to the influence of the Catholic Church. In the fourth century AD Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome, outlawed the facial tattooing of slaves and convicts on the grounds that it disfigured "that which was fashioned in God's image." In 787 Pop Hadrian the First prohibited tattooing on any part of the body because it was associated with superstition and paganism. The ban was upheld and reinforced by his successors.

The Church's prohibition of tattooing was responsible for the fact that it was but little practiced in Europe until it was reintroduced in the latter part of the eighteenth century by sailors who had been tattooed in the South Pacific.

Scattered reports of complications resulting from tattooing began to appear in the French medical literature during the early part of the nineteenth century. M. Rayer, the author of a work on dermatology which was published in 1835, reported several cases of severe infections caused by tattooing. In 1837 the first recorded instance of a death following tattooing appeared in a work by Parent-Duchatelet titled "De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris". Parent-Duchatelet wrote: "This operation, so simple in appearance, cost the life of an unfortunate young woman who attempted to disguise a name which she had awkwardly tattooed on her left arm. This attempt caused a serious infection which ultimately resulted in her death."

In 1853 a physician, M. Hutin, reported the first case in which syphilis was transmitted by tattooing. He wrote: "A soldier allowed himself to be tattooed by a man who was suffering from syphilis and who had chancres on his lips. The soldier was a virgin and perfectly healthy, and the tattooer only punctured his arm a few times. The Chinese ink used by the tattooer had dried up in a shell and several times the tattooer moistened his needles by spitting on them and diluted the ink with his saliva. In this way he inoculated the soldier with syphilis. This resulted in serious complications and, according to the patient, almost necessitated the amputation of his arm."

In 1861 A French naval surgeon, Maurice Berchon, published a paper on medical complications of tattooing. He wrote: "Until 1859 no author had thought of researching the medical complications which can be caused by tattooing. It was generally thought to be innocuous, or, in some cases, followed only by a transient inflammation. And yet there is much to be learned with regard to this subject. After an extensive search of the published literature I have been able to discover only six reports of more or less serious complications caused by tattooing. In addition to these, I was able to present ten additional cases in which tattooing has been followed by amputation, death, and other serious consequences. To put these medical complications in perspective, it should be remembered that in 1860 no one knew that infections and disease were caused by microorganisms. Surgeons did not wear gloves or even wash their hands before they operated. They did not sterilize their instruments, and many of them operated wearing blood-encrusted aprons. In maternity wards, doctors spread disease by examining one woman after another without washing their hands. Infections and pus were considered a normal part of the healing process following surgery, and many surgical procedures which are considered safe and routine today resulted in serious infections, blood poisoning, gangrene and death.

Tattoo artists were no wiser than surgeons. They routinely used the same needles on more than on customer without cleaning them. They mixed their ink in clam shells and diluted it with saliva. It was customary to wash of a fresh tattoo with saliva, tobacco juice or urine.

In view of these unsanitary practices it is remarkable that there were so few reports of serious complications following tattooing. At the time Berchon's paper was published, professional tattoo artists were working in all major French ports. Berchon estimated that most convicts, most sailors, and many soldier and laborers were tattooed. Thus it is probable that serious infection occurred only a few times in many thousands of tattoos.

Why, Berchon asked, does tattooing cause complications in some cases but not in others? He wrote: "most individuals we have interrogated are almost unanimous in declaring that the operation itself is harmless, but the use of certain pigments, or the unique predisposition of the patient causes certain individuals to have an unfavorable reaction."

Berchon considered this problem at some length and concluded that complications could not be caused by something in the pigments, the use of rusty needles, or by the application of saliva, tobacco juice, or urine to a fresh tattoo. In his conclusion he was ahead of his time and close to the truth. He wrote that infections were caused by "the action of organic materials which accidentally adhere to the needles and are introduced along with the needles into the skin ... The most serious dangers of tattooing are caused by contaminated needles. It is difficult to avoid this contamination because

of the number and arrangement of the needles. Their points are almost contiguous, which makes it impossible to clean them. They can easily be charged with organic matter during the many punctures of the skin which occur during the operation. This matter, which becomes putrefied or fermented during the interval between the sessions, is reintroduced into the skin and causes morbid phenomena analogous to those which occur in cases of anatomical wounds [i.e. when a surgeon operating on a gangrenous limb cuts himself with his scalpel.

Berchon's paper was awarded first prize for papers in medicine and surgery for the year 1861 by the Academy of Sciences. It came to the attention of the Secretary of the Navy, who issued an order prohibiting tattooing in the French Navy. This was soon followed by a similar prohibition in the Army.

Encouraged by the success of his first paper, Berchon continued his researches and wrote a series of articles which he later collected and published in book form under the title "Histoire Medicale du tatouage" (1869). He began by examining Greek and Roman literature for references to tattooing and found that it was mentioned by Plato, Plautus, Aristophanes, Galen, Herodotus, Petronius, Julius Caesar and scores of other ancient authors. He thus showed tattooing had been practiced in Greece, Rome, and many other ancient civilizations - a fact not suspected by his contemporaries.

Berchon also observed French tattoo artists at work, described their techniques and their designs, analyzed the chemical composition of their pigments, described methods of tattoo removal, examined sections of tattooed skin under the microscope, and considered the medical and legal complications of tattooing. He recommended that legal action be taken against tattooers whose unsanitary practices resulted in infections or the transmission of disease, and made an exhaustive search of the French penal code in an effort to find the sections under which tattooers might be charged. He thought it unlikely that it would be possible to eliminate tattooing completely, but expressed "the hope that the facts we have demonstrated will be sufficient to make clear to physicians and to the public at large the dangers, unrecognized before our study, of a custom for which there can be no rational justification in any civilized country."

Tattooing was never completely outlawed, but the fact that it was forbidden in the Army and the Navy put most professionals out of business and there are few records of tattooing outside of prisons in France during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It was a case of 'when tattoos are outlawed, only outlaws will have tattoos.'

The first written account of tattooing among convicts appeared in Cesare Lombroso's "L'Uomo Delinquente" (1876). Lombroso was a professor of psychiatry and criminal anthropology at the University of Turin. He invented the theory that criminals are throwbacks to an ancient and more primitive type of man in whom the passions are predominant and moral qualities undeveloped. According to Lombroso, such a man is cruel, cowardly, insensitive to the suffering of others, and lives only to gratify his own bestial desires. Lombroso imagined that these criminal types could be identified by a complex series of cranial, facial and bodily measurements. They were supposed to have low foreheads, small brains, heavy jaws and "remind us incontestably far more of the American Black and Mongolian races than they white races, and remind us above all of prehistoric man."

One of the easiest ways to recognize criminals was by their tattoos, and Lombroso considered tattooing so significant that he devoted an entire chapter to it. He examined 5,343 criminals and found that about ten percent of the adults and forty percent of the juveniles were tattooed. He listed and categorized hundreds of tattoo designs which, he asserted, would be of great significance in the analysis of the criminal mentality. Examples of things to watch out for were: mottoes expressing disrespect for authority or the desire for revenge; obscene words and images; tattoos on the penis (a sure sign that you are dealing with a dangerous criminal !); tattoos signifying membership in a secret criminal organization, and words written in cryptic cipher (often used for conveying secret messages). He recommended that when examining a criminal prison officials should "record carefully the themes and the number of tattoos, as well as the age of the criminal at the time of tattooing and the location of the tattoo on the body."

Lombroso believed that he had created a new science of criminal anthropology based on empirical data. But in an introduction to his collected works leading contemporary criminologist Vernon Adelman observed that "Lombroso's impact had the disastrous effect of leading criminology up a blind alley for forty years."

Lombroso's significance for the history of tattooing lies in the fact that he made the first statistical records of the frequency of tattooing and the designs among Italian convicts. He was also the first author who published reproductions of 19th century European tattoo designs. His moral judgments and pseudoscientific theories, although long outmoded, remain interesting as a record of the prejudices and misconceptions which were widely held by his contemporaries.

Numerous references to tattooing are to be found in 18th and 19th century French literature. Many of these focus on importance of a tattoo in establishing the identity of an individual. In Beaumarchais's 1784 stage play "Le Mariage de Figaro" the infant Figaro has been tattooed by his doctor as a means of identification. He is later kidnapped by highwaymen, and when he returns after an absence of many years he is able to prove his identity by showing the tattoo on his arm.

In Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables", ex-convict Jean Valjean proves his identity in court by describing a tattoo on the arm of a convict he had known many years before in prison. Jean Valjean says: "At the bend of your left arm, Cocheville,

there's a date in blue lettering tattooed with gunpowder. It's the date of the Emperor's landing at Cannes - March first, 1815. Pull up your sleeve.' Cocheville did so and a gendarme held a lantern so that its light fell on his bare arm.. The date was there."

Tattooing was used as proof of identity in one of the most sensational lawsuits of the 19th century. In April of 1854 a young man named Roger Tichborne disappeared and was presumed dead when the schooner "Bella", on which he was a passenger, was lost at sea. Some years later, relatives of those who had sailed on the "Bella" advertised for information which might lead to the discovery of survivors. In 1871 a man who had been living under the name of Castro answered one of the advertisements, claimed to be Roger Tichborne, and demanded Tichborne's considerable fortune.

Castro had done his homework well and impersonated Tichborne so convincingly and a number of witnesses identified him as Tichborne. The only apparent flaw in his story was that Tichborne had had a cross, an anchor and his initials "RCT" tattooed on his left arm. Castro explained his lack of the tattoo and the fact that he had changed his name by saying that he had suffered a severe illness which had resulted in amnesia and caused the tattoo to disappear.

After two trials, which lasted for a total of 251 days and created a sensation in the popular press, Tichborne was convicted of "stupendous impostures" and sentenced to 20 years in prison. A contemporary French journalist observed that "it is surprising that this impostor could deceive so many people and escape justice for so long. This indicates the lack of common sense and the imperfect education which are typical of most Englishmen."

Tattoos were often used in French court cases to establish the identity of the accused, for this reason French prison regulations dating from 1808 required prison officials to make detailed records of the tattoos on each convict. An ambitious survey of 19th century French prison tattooing was undertaken in 1880 by Dr. Alexander Lacassagne, a professor of medical jurisprudence at the Faculty of Medicine in Lyons. While serving as a surgeon in the French Army, Lacassagne observed many tattoos among soldiers of the African Battalions. These battalions were made up of men who had served prison terms for offenses such as murder, desertion and theft. Lacassagne found the variety and the subject matter of the tattoos fascinating. Because the tattoos were difficult to photograph, Lacassagne developed his own method of tracing them on a piece of transparent cloth which he placed on top of the tattoo. In this way he collected over 2,000 tattoo designs, many of which he reproduced in a work titled "Les tatouages, etude anthropologique et medico-legale " (Paris, 1881).

Lacassagne enumerated and classified his collection of tattoo designs according to subject matter and position on the body. Many of the designs were similar to the perennial favorites still seen today. There were stars, anchors, birds, snakes, flowers, butterflies, daggers, clasped hands, hearts pierced by arrows, names, initials and dates.

But in other ways, French tattooing was unique. Many convicts had mottoes in large letters tattooed across their chests or backs. Lacassagne collected scores of these, among which were such phrases as "Death to Unfaithful Women"; "Kill the Pigs"; "Death to French Officers", ""Vengeance; "Liberty or Death"; "Child of Misfortune"; "Born under an Unlucky Star"; "The past has cheated me, the present torments me, the future terrifies me"; "The whole of France is not worth a pile of shit."

Ambitious full-scale back pieces portrayed scenes from history, mythology and literature. Lacassagne counted over thirty tattoos featuring the Three Musketeers, and observed with approval that "I do not think it would be possible to find a better proof of the impression produced on the common people by the novel of Alexander Dumas." Also popular were portraits of Napoleon, Joan of Arc, Charlotte Corday, Garibaldi, Bismarck and other historical figures. The most popular mythological figures were Bacchus, Venus and Apollo.

The most popular erotic designs were the female bust and the nude female figure but Lacassagne also observed "a multitude of lewd images impossible to describe." Among the more unusual tattoos he reported that "I have seen tattooing covering the entire body,; one was the complete uniform of a general. I have even seen designs and inscriptions on the face. One individual had tattooed on his forehead the words "Martyr of Liberty" and a serpent; another had the prophetic inscription "prison awaits me."

He found the following words tattooed below the navel : "Come, ladies, to the fountain of love"; "Pleasure for girls"; "She thinks of me". On the buttocks: a penis with wings; a penis under full sail; a snake with its head directed toward the anus; a pair of eyes; two soldiers holding crossed bayonets and carrying a banner bearing the words "Do not enter."

He reported finding the following designs on the penis: an ace of hearts, an arrow, a lottery number, names and initials. But to his surprise, the most frequently encountered penis tattoo was a riding boot with a spur. He traced fifteen of these designs and observed many more which escaped his pen. He wrote: "It is not, as I thought at first, a sign of pederasty. All of the individuals I questioned on this point agreed that they had this tattoo so they could make the shocking play on words: "Je vais te mettre ma botte au ...." The pun, according to a contemporary English journalist, is "untranslatable, and too vile to be quoted in full."

Lacassagne did not approve of the English enthusiasm for tattooing. He wrote: "I was astonished to read in a newspaper

some months ago -- and I repeat this story with reservations -- that the Prince of Wales had an anchor tattooed on his arm while on a voyage around the world."

It is ironic that in England, where monarchs and royalty were tattooed, nothing, with the exception of a few newspaper articles, was written on tattooing during the 19th century. Lacassagne himself remarked on this: "The English have made no study of tattooing. Their medicolegal authorities only repeat what the French have written."

Lacassagne concluded by expressing the hope that his book would be a significant contribution to the new sciences of criminal anthropology and criminal psychology, as well as of value from the medicolegal point of view.

That this was in fact the case is doubtful. The pseudoscience of criminal anthropology has long been discredited. From a medicolegal point of view, tattooing was of interest only if it could be used to identify convicts. The 19th century French legal system was one of the most corrupt and repressive in the world. Tens of thousands of Frenchmen who had committed crimes which would be considered minor today were exiled for life to the horrors of the French Guiana penal colony popularly known as "Devil's Island."

His book, however, is a valuable source of information for those interested in the history of tattooing. It contains the first published illustrations of 19th century French tattoo designs and chronicles the historical origins of French prison tattoo art, which developed many unique and unusual themes. It also includes references to everything published on tattooing in Europe up to that time, and includes detailed descriptions of techniques, instruments and pigments used by 19th century tattoo artists. It has been referred to by all later writers on the history of European tattooing and remains today a classic in the history of tattooing.