



RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

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Are tattoos considered art in contemporary society and if so, are tattooists therefore artists?

In contemporary societies all over the world, tattoos are deeply ingrained into either the culture of the society itself, or the skin of its residents (Weimr, 2017). From the United States, right through to the likes of Japan, New Zealand and Russia, tattoos have varying levels of sacredness and aesthetic, but they're definitely ingrained into the cultures, with all of them having different styles and meanings.

I will be attempting to explore and answer the question of "Are tattoos considered art in contemporary society and if so, are tattooists therefore artists?". This two-part question will need to be explored by first seeing how tattooing not only fits into contemporary society, but also whether or not it's viewed as art. The subordinate second part to the question will also need to be analysed based on research findings, to see whether or not tattooists are viewed as artists, but also whether they should or shouldn't be viewed this way.

We will be taking a deeper look into the world of tattooing to see what the different types of tattoo are and which, if any, are seen as art in contemporary society. After categorising tattoos based on criteria surrounding design modalities, we'll compare these categories to the researched criteria to see what categories could feasibly be classed as art. By finding out which categories are able to produce true art, we'll then be able to move onto the question of whether or not tattoos being art makes tattooists artists within contemporary society.

By collating a range of sources, we'll be able to create a balanced, unified basis for our experiment. Whether it be the media, academic, or individual sources, each will offer a unique perspective that should feed further into the debate as a whole.

It would be best to start by first answering the question "what is the purpose of art?". The Van Gogh Experience (VGAtE, 2021) explains the function of art in contemporary society by saying "Art causes people to look a little closer at social issues, at other people and their emotions," which provides us with useful information in terms of intangible criteria that tattoos would have to meet to be considered art. So, for tattoos to make the grade as art, they'd need to have the same deeper meanings in mind during its creation, as art does. It would be difficult for tattoos to be able to make reference to social issues in a wider sense, as for the most part tattoos tend to be deeply personal and meaningful choices. But with tattoos having that deeply personal connection, there are often emotions behind the designs that clients have in mind (Day & Das, 2017).

One of the biggest obstacles to comparing tattooing in general to art, is that not all tattoos are created equal, with some people choosing designs out of portfolios or "flash" specials. Flash specials are where tattooists create a selection of small, pre-designed tattoos for clients to choose from on a specific day, often at a discounted price. In either of these scenarios, the personal meaning of the tattoo is removed from the client (Michalak, 2020). There are two other categories of tattoos that need to be discussed, and all need to be measured up to the artistic bar to help us differentiate between those that are art and those that aren't. The next to mention are client-led design tattoos. This modality of tattoo design involves a client briefing where the client and tattooist iron out all the details on exactly what is wanted from the design. After that, the tattooist goes away and creates something

to satisfy the client requirements in terms of both visuals and conveyance of meaning (CAT, 2021). The third and final category are cultural tattoos, where a design conveys a societally attached meaning. A prime example of cultural tattoos would be the Maori tribes of New Zealand, where an article (ZealandTattoo, 2017) says of Maori tattoos “Often this tattoo covered the whole face and was a symbol of rank, social status, power and prestige”.

Flash tattoos do serve a historically significant purpose to the arguments surrounding tattoos and stigma. According to (CloakAndDagger Tattoo, 2021), flash was how tattooing began. According to the aforementioned source, tattoo artwork was once called Flash due to the need for tattooists to finish quickly and work “on the move”. This was down to the illegal nature of tattooing during its infancy, with some of the taboo and stigma still attached today. Although flash can be any small, usually themed design, there seems to be little evidence of them pointing toward social issues of any kind, and with the emotion removed, it would seem that flash tattoos don’t meet much of the criteria from art’s purpose in society established earlier in the essay.

Design tattoos work differently to flash, in the sense that client-led concepts are given to the artist prior to the design stage, meaning the tattooist can draw up a design that holds the significance the client was hoping for. According to (ArtistHouseTattoo, 2021), there’s a typical process that tends to be followed when it comes to custom design tattoos. Although design tattoos meet the criteria for making others look a little closer at the person who’s had the tattoo, and sometimes even the emotion behind it. With that said, design tattoos tend to be more about self-expression than highlighting social issues, so further investigation is needed to determine whether design tattoos are classed as art or not.

Cultural tattoos are the only ones to satisfy all three criteria of the purpose of art within contemporary society. Cultural tattoos are deeply ingrained into the social issues of their cultural community, show emotion, and cause people to really look closer. A Smithsonian magazine article commented not just on tattoos being important to cultures, but also to the people that wear them (Tucker, 2010). Whether someone is a gang-member in Los Angeles, US, or a Cambodian monk, there are cultural tattoos that are not only important to the wearer, but also important to the wearer's community. As Skip Pahl of California's Oceanside Museum of Art said, "Taken as art, tattoos unite disparate cultures". Skip Pahl showed photographs taken by Chris Rainier at the Oceanside Museum of Art, which it could be argued is a sign of the art world starting to accept tattooing as a contemporary artform unto itself (NRM, 2021).

It seems clear that flash tattoos aren't in the running to be considered art due to the implied simplicity and convenience, not to mention lack of underlying meaning. Design and cultural tattoos however, both seem to be candidates for potential facets of art. Art comes in many forms, but focusing on graphical art, the first thing we tend to think of is paintings. This is because, according to Hennings & Lynch (2017), painting dates back "up to 100,000 years old". Cultural tattoos, according to this dermatologic surgery journal (Levy et al, 1979), states that "There is evidence to prove that the practice of tattooing dates to at least 8,000 years ago." By comparing the two in terms of age, cultural tattoos are in their infancy it seems. Both of these are in stark contrast to the much newer modality of design tattooing. According to Waxman (2017), "the first professional tattoo artist Martin Hildebrandt set up shop in the mid-19th century". It would stand to reason that given painting is far more widely acceptable than cultural tattoos, and cultural tattoos are slightly more widely

accepted over design tattoos, it would seem that age does indeed have something to do with how widely accepted something is.

But before we can make the differentiation between tattoo and art, it would be wise to draw a parallel in the distinctions that can be made between painting and art. There are certain qualities within paintings that appear to determine whether said paintings are classed as good or bad. EmptyEasel.com (2021) states that “Art is, and always will be, “in the eye of the beholder”. What this suggests is that art itself is subjective, and the beholder, or viewer, must find the paintings meaning from their own perspective. According to the Empty Easel article, paintings can be judged based on certain attributes or “characteristics”, which were “beauty, skill, inherent meaning, uniqueness, and fulfilled intent.” Earlier on in the essay, we discussed whether tattoos lived up to the purpose of art in contemporary society, but now by using these 5 points of judgement, we can assess tattoos in terms of artistic standards.

It should be noted that cultural tattoos tend to be more focused on historical and cultural accuracy rather than artistic standards (Medermis, 2021), whereas design tattoos are where artistic standards flourish, especially among tattooists who see their craft as something that forever needs improvement and something that requires great skill to do excellently consistently. It is clearly apparent that tattoos can in fact be art, but only those that measure up well against the 5 characteristics outlined above.

So, given that tattoos can be seen as art, does that mean all tattooists are therefore artists?

In short, the answer is no. Just in the same way that not all painters are artists, not all tattooists are either. This is because, just like painting, tattooing creates such a massive range of end-products, with some being art, and others just being imagery without

meaning. In this LinkedIn post, Uriel Dana (2018) initially defines an artist as “a person who can take something they see within and physically manifest it with their own hands”. This statement really helps to determine what art is all about, which in this context, it could be argued, is the ability to take the abstract, the intangible, and turn it into a physical manifestation of the intangible in an aesthetically pleasing way. Another key-point to highlight from Uriel Dana during his LinkedIn post would be his comments surrounding evolution of an artist. He said “The more you understand your tools the more evolved your ability to manifest itself will be”. He makes the valid point that understanding of tools and of the need to evolve are important to improve physical manifestation of the intangible. The reason tattooing and painting are being compared so heavily, is because both are skill-based art forms in their own right, each with their unique histories and implications on cultures globally. But there are also similarities. Tattoos and painting are both highly graphical forms of artistic communication, both having different styles that individual artists decide to take a special interest in. For a painter, it could be Surrealism or Post-Modern Impressionism, whereas with tattooists it could be Japanese or Traditional American. These aesthetically distinct styles have stories of their own to tell, but because of the outline similarities, many parallels can be drawn.

Outlining what makes a tattooist an artist from our findings, we can see that there are many variables at play, some tangible like skill-level and work produced, and others intangible like artistic preference or understanding the meaning behind what the client is asking for. When tattoo artists design for clients, they are not only taking the intangible idea of the client and designing a physical manifestation, but they tend to do so in a unique way. This is because any tattooist who draws up a design is going to have their unique style showing in it.

Whether it be the width of the black lines, or the shaping or shading techniques used, a

tattoo artist as opposed to a tattooist will definitely have their natural abilities shine through.

There's one thing that separates tattooists from tattoo artists, which tends to be the portfolio and end-products. This is because a tattoo artist has spent time honing their skillsets, refining their craft to ensure they're able to tattoo anything on anyone to the highest possible standard. Tattooists on the hand will be picky with what work they decide to undertake due to their limited skillsets and lack of breadth of knowledge. Tattoo artists are the ones that can undertake highly complex designs, understand the meaning behind them, and execute the design to the client's utmost satisfaction.

As for cultural tattooists, what they do is much more connected to culture and history as opposed to aesthetic and personal meaning. Because of this, they reach an artistry all their own, typically using traditional tools to ensure the same experience has been passed down from generation to generation. Their work and designs have much more to do with their cultural society than a design artist, meaning they meet the purpose for art more than design tattoos, but the aesthetic is more constrained.

It is also noteworthy how the skills of both paint-based and tattoo-based arts are passed down to the younger generation. Artists of all types have been known to take on apprentices, to help teach them the ways of their respective arts. They use this time to teach them foundational skills in an unpaid setting, while building their skillsets and self-confidence up to a standard that the artist is happy with, before encouraging them to create and share their own art with the world through whatever channels are appropriate based on the profession and community. For painters, that could be having your work displayed in a gallery, whereas a tattoo artist would be better off tattooing at conventions.

At the beginning we asked the question “Are tattoos considered art in contemporary society and if so, are tattooists therefore artists?”. We first went on to explore the first and primary part of the question, which is “Are tattoos considered art in contemporary society”. First, we looked at the purpose of art and focused on a quote that stated, “Art causes people to look a little closer at social issues, at other people and their emotions,” which then gave us our purpose and lens through which to start our investigation. We then went on to categorise tattoos into their three main design modalities, which are flash, design, and cultural tattoos.

Through determining both the purpose of art, as well on what to judge when looking at art, we determined that design and cultural tattoos both fit the bill. Cultural tattoos touched much more on the social and cultural aspect of art, whereas design tattoos really covered the personal, unique and meaningful side of art. Because they both satisfy as art in the same way that painting can be art, it became necessary to answer the secondary part of the question, “and if so, are tattooists therefore artists?” We then came to find that the best way to express what makes someone an artist came from the quote “a person who can take something they see within and physically manifest it with their own hands.” And given that tattooists have to, as part of the design process, physically manifest intangible ideas given to them by someone else, it could certainly be argued that there are artists among their ranks. But it’s also critical to note that just as not all painters are artists, neither are all tattooists. Only those that bring passion, meaning and devotion to their work and their artform become true artists.

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