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Is All Art Equal?

The official definition of art, as defined by the Cambridge dictionary, is “the making of objects, images, music, etc. that are beautiful or that express feelings” which is equally vague but also pretty all encompassing. According to this definition, modification of the human body should fall into this net, however some argue that creation or modification with no apparent meaning should not be considered true fine art.

I want to discuss 3 words within this essay to explore the topic of body modification and art – they are *modification*, *cross-cultural* and *permanence*.

Body mods as a whole is an incredibly broad spectrum of different styles, techniques and alterations, including implants, scarification, tattooing, piercings and multiple others. In this essay I want to focus on tattoos and their history from very traditional body pieces and ancient symbolism, highly regarded in many cultures, to the hugely popular westernised body art that is so prevalent today. I want to explore how tattooing has changed as an artform and the stigma surrounding it, as well as how it is seen through both the western perspective and beyond, ultimately trying to figure out whether it fits into the ‘true art’ umbrella.

With the emergence of tattooing into popular culture, the stigma surrounding the artform has decreased somewhat, particularly amongst the younger generation with almost a third of the UK population aged 25-44 years old sporting a tattoo of some sort, with 17% stating that at least one of their tattoos was in a visible location according to a YouGov survey. The stigma tends to be rooted in older concepts of tattoos from generations of people whose only exposure to permanently painted skin were on prisoners, military and sailors – not the

sort of high standard, high class careers that the general population were aspiring to go into. Nowadays, tattoos are seen more as a form of self-expression and freedom, being found on an array of different people with it being widely accepted that many have tattoos both hidden and visible. Certain companies and professions that previously would have barred potential employees from being inked, have even lifted rules and regulations to include and allow visible tattoos to be on show – most recently with virgin airlines allowing flight attendants to display their tattoos openly, which is a first in the airline industry.

Modification

Modification is defined as “a change to something, usually to improve it” (Cambridge dictionary) . There can be no argument as to whether body modifications change the human body, that is half the point, however this leads to the next question - whether body modification is improving the person it is done to?

As I have previously discussed, the acceptance of tattoos has changed considerably in the last decade or two, so depending on who you ask, their opinions might be vastly different. I believe that this is more of a personal debate that depends on the individuals own unique tastes in art and tattooing itself has so many different styles ranging from minimalist to new school, to name just a few, lending each style a different sort of appeal, meaning that every single style is subject to the same critique as any other artform, be it painted, sketched or soldered. In this way, tattooing has the incredibly difficult task of pleasing its audience even after being socially accepted, so some may not go as far to say that they are improving the body.

I believe that tattoos are a beautiful way to showcase an individual's unique style and passions and that the very fact that "the body (is) becoming recognized as a tool of representation itself" (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 49) in Western society is a huge step towards a new medium of accepted art that arguably has been around for hundreds if not thousands of years.

However, going back to the Cambridge Dictionary definition of art, it merely states, "the making of... images... that express feelings" and this, I feel, can be taken two ways. In one, the image itself could express feelings – this could be from the artist expressing their own feelings through the piece or expressing a grander show of something like the current societal feeling. In the second, 'express feelings' could be referencing the feelings of the individual or audience who witness the piece of art and form opinions and feelings about and towards the image – if going by this assumption, tattoos and body modifications would be considered as 'art' just due to the emotions, positive and negative, that are elicited from the very tattoo itself.

Cross-Cultural

"Art... is something that is found in all human communities. It would be impossible to imagine the existence of man without art in some form or another..." (A. Buehler, T. Barrow, C. Mountford, 1968) it is found on murals, statues, cloth and tapestries all throughout history wherever human populations have been located. Body modification, tattooing and body art are no exception to this rule as they continue to crop up among findings from ancient civilizations.

Tattooing in its primitive form has been around for thousands of years, with the earliest found example on an actual human body being 'the iceman', found in 1991 near an area between the Italian and Austrian border. This body was carbon-dated to be around 5,200 years old pushing back the earliest date another thousand years from the previous discovery of many mummified Egyptian bodies, dated to be from around 2000 B.C – 4000 years old. This proves that the practice is not a new thing, it has always had a place throughout many of the continents; only becoming taboo when hitting westernised society where the art of tattooing and permanently marking the skin was not commonplace.

Different cultures use tattoos in multiple ways – some are used to show symbolism or religion, others to display lineage and rank within their community and whereas others act as warpaint to intimidate opponents in battle. When Western audiences first came into contact with tattoos, they were initially thought of as barbaric and unnatural which confirms Dutton's view when discussing art from different areas of the world – the west in particular having "a widespread tendency to try to exaggerate cultural differences far beyond reality" (Shiner, 2008) that unfortunately alienates anything that is not normal in their eyes.

However, looking past this cultural barrier allows us to see the wide variety of roles that tattoos play. Showing versatility and uniqueness – how one culture uses the artform may be completely different to another, as well as the techniques used to achieve the beautiful designs.



Fig 1. A man sporting tradition Maori tattoos

Māori Tattooing

Māori tattoos are facial and body art that originated in New Zealand, though it is believed that the tradition spread from other Polynesian islands. Properly referred to as Moko tattoos, they came from Māori mythology – the story of the underworld Princess Niwareka and Mataora.

After being abused by Mataora, Niwareka left him and returned to the underworld. During the journey that Mataora took to find the princess, his face paint became smeared, leading him to being ridiculed. Once he finally found Niwareka, she accepted his apology and as a gift, her father taught Mataora the art of moko tattoos meaning his face paint would never smudge again.

This ancient tradition was then passed down the generations of Māori and the intricate patterns that make up the facial and body tattoos all have some sort of special meaning, the images are never random lines, but instead symbols representing a multitude of things depending on the shapes formed and location on the body.

The Māori people use their moko to represent a whole manner of things like status, tribe, virility and rank, and these tattoos are usually an indicator of individuality and a way of

wordlessly communicating someone's identity when coming across another person or tribe.

Depending on where they are placed, it will symbolise status (being around the forehead, brows, nose or eyes), family (placed on the jaw) or work (in the cheek area) and as each moko is based on Māori ritual, the tattoos usually consist of swirling spiral and curving patterns, each one unique to the person and family. These patterns and techniques were then passed down to the new generations to continue the traditions.

Initially when Westerners first came to New Zealand, the moko tattoos were thought to be an intimidation tactic or a way to attract the opposite sex, and the markings were seen as fascinating. This unfortunately led to the Europeans killing the Māori and taking their heads back as trophies and souvenirs, forcing the Māori to cease tattooing in fear of being hunted; making the practice carry stigma for generations to come.



Fig 2. A New Zealand journalist, Oriini Kaipara, made history by becoming the first news anchor to wear a Maori moko tattoo on her chin.

As previously stated, different moko tattoos all represent different things and incorporate nature and myths into the designs, giving each one a beautiful meaning and purpose; nowadays those with Māori ancestry are beginning to bring back the tradition and adorn themselves with moko. This in itself demonstrates that moko is an artform, with rich culture and history behind it that should be celebrated.

Irezumi

The word for tattoo in Japanese is Irezumi and it can be traced back to the beginning of Japan's recorded history. Before the Edo period (1600-1868) most tattoos were based on symbolism and marks, however it was in the Edo period that more ornate tattooing began to advance into the imagery that we now see today. Irezumi usually refers to a specific style of design and traditionally the pieces were large and ornate but designed to go under clothing and be concealed in public, never on exposed places such as the head, neck or hands. This is largely due to the outlawing of tattoos from the late 19th century until the end of WW2 by the Japanese government as a way for them to raise their image and appeal to the West. This led to Irezumi becoming associated with organised crime in Japan (Yakuza), who would still wear the artwork.

Traditional Irezumi is done by hand and requires the artform of tebori tattoos – Te (手) which means hand and Bori (彫り) which is to carve.

Tebori tattoos are the traditional method of tattooing and used a thin piece of bamboo with a ranging number of needles fixed with a silk string, much like stick and poke tattoos that are popular nowadays. The technique and skills required to craft these artworks take years

to learn and master, much like any other art discipline, and typically a full body piece done in this way can take anywhere between months to years to complete, thus marking the recipient as someone who can see a task through, garnering respect from those who know of the tattoo.



Fig 3. A man getting traditional tebori done.

Shodai Horiyoshi III is a horishi (tattoo artist) who specialises in the Japanese full-body Irezumi. He outlines his artwork now by using an electric needle but did them by hand until the late 1990s and still shades and colours all his creations using tebori. His former apprentice, Horitaka, addresses the notion that because Horiyoshi III now uses electric equipment in his tattooing process, it can no longer be considered 'traditional' by stating that tattooers need to "keep themselves open to new ideas and a wholehearted, broad study of tradition" (Horitaka, 2005). Implying that just because an artform can grow and change with the times, it doesn't make it any less special just as long as the tradition is still honoured and learnt about. It would be foolish not to utilise evolving technologies that just didn't exist years ago.

In terms of the actual pieces themselves, Horiyoshi III believes his art and the creatures he draws “only come alive on somebody’s skin” (Kawaguchi, 2007), noting that once the piece is finished “the two start breathing together, in unison” (Kawaguchi, 2007). He suggests that the artwork is alive with a sacred quality, cementing the emotional connection between the imagery and bearer, and definitely qualifying as “the making of... images... that are beautiful”.

Permanence

The idea of permanence is slightly existential. Its official definition provided by the Cambridge dictionary is “staying the same or continuing for a long time” and it’s interesting to that it’s not the actual perception of permanence which would be forever or eternity which is most likely what an everyday person would say it means.

In the art world, for a design installation to be considered permanent, it needs to be in place for over a year – which, in the grand scheme of things, is not really a long time at all. This is most likely because, depending on how delicate or intricate the installation is, it is not expected to last decades or even years.

Tattoos, however, are designed to last, definitely through the lifetime of the wearer, but sometimes longer as larger pieces, like the Irezumi tattoos, can get stretched and displayed post-mortem in a way of remembrance and respect. In some ways something that is permanent could also be beautiful *because* of this permanence, if it is meant to last, it has been thoroughly thought through and crafted to retain its brilliance for many years ahead. Therefore, tattoos definitely fall under this term of permanent art and even though there are now methods to remove them, they are never quite a hundred percent successful, always leaving behind a blurred reminder.

A marketing stunt by Au vodka has recently made headlines as they opened up their 'TatAu parlour' in Swansea, South Wales. More than a hundred people queued for hours to have the Au branding tattooed on them in the form of small vodka bottles; in return they would get up to £250 in cash depending on the size and for every tattoo Au would donate £250 to Maggie's charity.

This came about due to a popular youtuber participating in a highly publicised boxing match where he was seen sporting a fake Au tattoo for \$250,000. This caused many of the general public to share that they would have gotten the real thing for free, leading to the company challenging viewers to "put their money where their mouth is" (C. Sloth, 2023) and get the tattoos.

This brings up the question whether tattooing, something that is unforgettably permanent, should be used in such a way as to promote brands or in marketing in general. Considering the traditions and symbolism that surround tattoos and the practice of it, it could be seen as immoral or non-appropriate to trivialise them to just a marketing stunt for a brand, as well as offering money for the tattoos as this encourages people to not think about the long-term persistence of the image. Tattoos should be personal and unique, they don't necessarily have to have a deep meaning, but having a carbon copy of a (usually) subpar design that a company has designed, that hundreds of other people have, diminishes the artwork to a publicity stunt, in turn diminishing the artform. I believe that tattoos should be considered and thought through before getting one – after all it is permanent.

However, in his particular case over £7500 was raised for the charity, spinning this campaign into a good cause.

In conclusion, tattooing should, in its own right be considered art.

“The common core of art (is) its peculiar form of emotional expression, the clarifying of what begins as a vague feeling”.

(Warburton, 2003)

They have so much history behind them, coming from so many different cultures; each one contributing new styles, techniques and designs into the culmination that we have today in modern society; each one eliciting differing emotion, allowing people to express themselves through art that can be carried with them.

It is also a discipline that has huge potential to expand, both as technology advances and as artists keep exploring the limits of creation and design.

The use of the human body as a canvas is something that many artists have done, both permanently and temporarily, for art or for live commentary pieces that that alone cannot discredit the artistic imagery placed on it. Alongside the facts that tattooists are so creative and have trained incredibly hard, sometimes years or decades to master their artform and create the beautiful masterpieces on the wearer makes me firmly believe that body modification, and in this case tattooing, has a place firmly in the art world.

I have gone into depths about tattoos and their history, however, the multiple styles of tattooing is a huge spectrum; as is body modification as a whole. Due to this, I want to explore this topic further with the working question along the lines of: “Should body modification be culturally accepted and normalised: and where could it go?”

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Fig 3: <https://www.authentink.com/japanese-irezumi/tebori-2/> (accessed: 15th April 2023)