

ANOTHER CODE AGAINST THE GONE: (welcome to the times)

“For the background shading (in these prints) I broke with tradition. Observance of tradition is definitely important but it is important to open doors to further development. Still, I can’t escape an ever-so-slight feeling of spitting in the face of a tradition that I respect and continue to rely on.”

-HORIYOSHI III (*One Hundred and One Demons of Horiyoshi III*)

ANTECEDENT.

In the Western World there has been an influx of popularity among those who wish to participate in the realm of body modification. It has become common to see youth pierce their ears, nose, eyebrows (and so on), and tattoo themselves - in Europe and North America this new tradition has been periodically referred to as neo-tribal and/or modern-primitive.

The first tattoos appeared in the Western world on the arms of sailors arriving back from Polynesia (1). The word tattoo, is a borrowing of the word “tatau,” which literally means “to mark,” or “strike twice,” (the latter making reference to the traditional methods of applying a design directly to the skin). The first syllable “ta”, meaning “hand”, is repeated twice as a reference to the repetitive nature of the action. And the final syllable “u” translates to “colour.” Also notably in Polynesian tattooing, the instrument which is used is called a “hahau,” the syllable “ha” meaning to “strike or pierce.”

Tattooing throughout the world has become extremely popular and along with it, the culture that it once embodied has become more globalized. With no indigenous history of tattooing in the West, designs are generally stolen from those who have been developing a visual language for centuries, and systemically integrating them.

Much like Western music and the punk movement (2) prior, this intense surge of modification has also struck Japan. But unlike the West, Japan’s history of body adornment is extensive. Irezumi (3), or more respectfully horimono (4), for spiritual and decorative purposes, is thought to extend back to at least the Jomon or paleolithic period (5). Some scholars have suggested that the distinctive cord-marked patterns observed on the faces and bodies of this period are representative of tattoos but this claim is

(1) circa 18th century

(2) mid-to-late 1970’s

(3) to insert ink - associated with the yakuza

(4) to engrave or to carve - denoting tattoos of the more “artistic” esthetic

(5) circa 10,000 BC

by no means “of one mind.” Up until the Edo period (6), the role of tattoos varied greatly. During this time, tattoos were not only a means to mark the punished, but also served as means to bind lovers in marriage. It was during this time, however, that Japanese decorative tattooing began to develop into the flourishingly beautiful art form it is known as today.

It is interesting to note, that the recent surge in popularity of body adornment does not seem to continue the traditional Japanese esthetic (meticulously hand-pricked, flowering Utagawa-style design), but rather the youth is opting to be tattooed with small Western-style designs such as Disney characters, skulls and bleeding hearts or modernized versions of Japanese designs.

FORWARD.

Traditionally irezumi body suits cover the entire body. While there are several different patterns including the kame (7), the tattoo will usually extend from the neck to below the buttocks and some portion of the arms and chest. More specifically the exceptions of the suit would be: six to four inches from the ankle and wrists (hands and feet not to be tattooed); the neck and face; and a roughly three to four inch strip down the chest (8)). A client may choose to have a katate-bori (9), however the tattoo will be referred to as a katate-ochi, indicating that the only real design is a complete body suit (noted above).

Customary tradition requires one to find a horishi (10). In more modern times a horishi may publicize themselves through either fliers or the internet, but in the most traditional sense one must be introduced to the horishi by a current or past client. One must then visit the horishi, who will decide whether or not to tattoo the potential client.

In all cases the horishi is referred to as a Sensei (11). All matters after his decision to tattoo the client, are handled in the most formal manner. Depending on the horishi, the client may choose his design - or not. Older more experienced horishi may strictly work off instinct while younger more inexperienced ones may be more willing to create a dialogue between the client and themselves. Upon the decision, either the artist will start immediately, or draw the design on the skin using sumi (12) or, more commonly, a felt tipped pen in more modernized studios. The primary instrument of the horishi is a wooden handle with metal needles attached by a silk thread in bundles, varying from two to ten, depending on the thickness of the line to be incised.

The instrument is inked and dragged lightly over the skin to draw the outline, then the hari (13) are inserted into the skin, in a tapping manner, to pierce the skin creating an open wound in-which the ink fills. Once the out line is finished the horishi begins the final process of the design, called bokashi. Several techniques encompass this process, the first being called tsuki-hari, or imo-hari. This is a extremely simple technique but cannot guarantee depth, therefore it is generally used to to colour large areas.

(6) 1600-1868 AD

(7) turtle back

(8) customarily because of kimonos worn during the Edo period

(9) only an arm or shoulder tattooed

(10) a Japanese tattoo artist

(11) a master

(12) ink

(13) metal needles

When a more precise shading effect is desired, a technique called hane-bari is used. This is where the needles are inserted at an angle and a sort of jumping motion is used. If an excessive amount of blood is shown, it is considered “bad form,” and the horishi takes no responsibility for this. It is seen as the clients fault and the client will generally be asked to leave and not return.

The completion of a irezumi suit may take upwards of two to twelve years, depending on the clients attendance (if he shows up roughly twice a week, then the suit may potentially be completed in under two years). During the process, a bond is generally made between the horishi and client. Clients return, mostly around the time of holidays, to present their horishi with gifts of gratitude. Occasionally certain horishi will hold “reunions” for their clients, where a celebration will occur. There seems to be a common belief shared by those who wear irezumi that clients do not own the tattoo, but rather that the client has become a canvas for their horishi and his artwork.

Considered to be a trade passed down, generally from father to son, at an early age one becomes what is referred to as a deshi (14). Ranging from around two to five years, or longer, the deshi lives in the studio of the horishi - keeping books, cleaning, cooking, grinding pigments and so on (this process that the deshi goes through is called heya-zumi, “living in the room”). Towards the completion of the heya-zumi, the deshi begins to tattoo daikon (15), and then fill in blocks of colour on his masters clients. Only when the deshi has become an accomplished tattooist is the family name of his horishi passed down to him. Horishi generally exist in similar family groups to the yakuza (16). While there is normally only one oyabun (17) in the area, his apprentices will take his family name upon maturity. The name adopted of all horishi, begin with the character “horu - (to engrave or to carve),” and the second part of the name being taken from their masters first.

BLUEPRINT (UTAGAWA SCHOOL).

To articulate and discuss the design esthetic of irezumi, and/or horimono, is to directly create a discourse revolving around the Ukiyo prints of the Edo, and to latter extent the Meiji, period(s). Roughly two-thirds of the prints from this time were produced by the Utagawa school (18). The school was a group of Japanese woodblock printers led by Toyokuni I, who took over after Toyoharu's death. Toyokuni I, raised the group to become the most famous and powerful school and collective of artist of the time. The schools founder Toyoharu adopted the Western-style of perspective. His immediate followers, Utagawa Toyohiro and Utagawa Toyokuni I (who later took lead, after Toyoharu's death) adopted bolder, more sensuous styles than Toyoharu and specialized in different genres.

The most remarkable pupil of the Utagawa school, is Kuniyoshi. Born during the Edo period, in what is present day Tokyo (1797), to a silk dyer named Yanagiya Kichiemon - upon birth was given the name Yoshisaburo. Once of age, Yoshisaburo joined the

(14) apprentice

(15) radishes

(16) a traditional organized crime group(s) in Japan; as of 2005, there are some 86,300 known members

(17) parent / boss

(18) notable students of the Utagawa school are as follows: Hiroshige, Kunisada, Kuniyoshi and Yoshitoshi

Utagawa school to study (19). As custom, Toyokuni I (the head of the school at the time), gave the name Utagawa Kuniyoshi, to Yoshisaburo (this being a combination of both Toyokuni I and his, Yoshisaburo, birth name).

Come 1814, Kuniyoshi ended his apprenticeship and moved towards a professional career as an independent painter and print-maker. From between 1815 and 1817, he produced only kabuki prints (20) in full colour. These not only gained him little to no recognition but brought minimal shame to Utagawa school - that had so much hope for his success. The economic situation turned desperate for Kuniyoshi and forced him to sell tatami rugs (21). However, during this time he did produce pictures of bijinga (22) and experimented with large textile patterns and light-and-shadow effects found in Western art, although his attempts showed to be nothing more than an imitation (not proving that he truly understand the fundamental concepts behind Western teachings).

Come the 1820's a true individual style started to emerge through the production of a number of heroic triptychs (23). And in 1827 Kuniyoshi received his first major commission for the series, "Tuszoku Suikoden goketsu hyakuhachinin no hitori (One Hundred and Eight Heroes of the Suikoden)," based on the incredibly popular Chinese tale, the "Shuihu zhuan (24)." - These prints formed the basis for the designs of full body suits, of the time and of to-day. These prints were often copied, or the horishi would draw a new illustration to the story, for an irezumi suit. The Suikoden series became extremely popular in Edo, and the demand for Kuniyoshi's warrior prints increased, gaining him entrance into the major ukiyo and literary circles.

PATTERN (SYMBOLISM).

Perhaps the most ubiquitous of all Japanese mythological beasts, and certainly the image which has frequently been tattooed in the West, is the dragon. Symbolically it denotes wealth and it is a monster which draws strength from all the creatures forming it. It is a serpent that has the horns of a deer, the scales of a carp, the four clawed talons of an eagle, the nose of a goblin and whiskers and a moustache to accompany the flames growing from its shoulders and hips. Because it lives in both air and water, it is considered to offer protection from fire. For this reason it was often chosen by Edo period fire fighters who tattooed themselves superstitiously for protection in their work.

It may seem unusual for such official and important figures as fire fighters to have irezumi when it was so frowned upon in Edo society but sources claim that originally they were "gangs," of otherwise unemployable "individuals" hired by the government to fight a large fire. It was only later that they were organised into groups and became Edo's first fire department (25). The fire fighters became one of the groups outside the yakuza to be closely associated with irezumi. It is still common today for fire fighters and construction workers to be heavily tattooed along with the yakuza.

(19) age 14, 1811

(20) woodblock prints themed around warriors

(21) woven soft rush straw; floor mats

(22) beautiful women / woman

(23) a picture or relief carving on three panels

(24) 14th century BC

(25) 1629, during the Meiji period

Another tattoo, which is very popular amongst Japanese fire fighters for its protective qualities, is the Koi. It is often portrayed swimming upstream on the river of someone's back and is considered to be perhaps the strongest symbol of bravery. An ancient Chinese tale tells of a carp which swam up a waterfall to become a dragon at the top. The watery connections are of obvious appeal to fire fighters. However, perhaps the bravest aspect of the Koi is that once caught it will lie unflinching on the chopping board, awaiting death.

Another popular category of tattoo is that of religious deities (26). Fudo, the guardian of hell is a particularly popular character. Fierce looking and surrounded by flames, he holds a sword to knock down his enemies and a rope with which to bind them.

Yet another popular religious tattoo is that of the prayer "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo" (Hail to the Lotus Scripture of the Good Law). It "derives from the fanatical Nichiren sect of Buddhism founded in 1253 AD, whose six million followers today are still much addicted to chanting and drumming. Their belief is that one perfect and sincere utterance of this single prayer will ensure rebirth in Nirvana, or Nothingness."

There is often a hope to acquire the attributes of one's tattoo, so it is not surprising that along with the supposed heroes of the "Suikoden," the popularity of other folk heroes are simultaneously prevalent. One of the most common designs also seen is of Kintaro, also known as Kintaro. This mythical sort of superhero has powers of strength and perseverance. He is usually shown to be bright red and battling a giant carp. The legend of Kōtarō is central to the festival of "boys' day," and so again the notion of being brave and masculine comes into tattooing.

Depicted often breast-feeding, Kintaro's mother is popular design for women, along with illustrations ranging from female Goddesses and other such deities and designs thought helpful in the aid of childbirth. The eastern dog/lion - Korean dog (koma inu) and Chinese lion (kara shishi) - have become a symbol of guardianship and therefore are often found (in stone form) outside Japanese temples. During the Meiji period especially, this symbolic image became a one of which women of the era would tattoo on their stomachs to protect themselves during childbirth.

The notion of contrasting the yin (27) and yang (28) in the aesthetics of the Japanese tattooing is an essential part of the horishi's design. This ability illustrates his skill in creating the essential balance, and it is for this reason, extraordinary background designs are developed on most irezumi. When there is fire in the main picture, one will usually find rivers or waves in the background. One may also see clouds, thunder, lightning, beautiful peonies to counteract ferocity and maple leaves to symbolize Japan.

(26) a god or goddess; divine

(27) chinese; passive female principle of the universe; associated with earth, dark, and cold

(28) chinese; active male principle; creative; associated with heaven, heat and light

THE SUPREMACY OF GUIDANCE.

Norman Keith Collins, better known to most as “Sailor Jerry,” (b. 1911, d. 1973) is considered to potentially be one of the most forward thinkers in the realm of modern-tattooing. He not only introduced hospital-quality sterilization (single use needles) but expanded the array of colours available by grinding his own pigments and re-created needle formation (to cause less trauma to the skin). He is also simultaneously credited for the introducing American style tattooing to Japan and vice versa. Collins would trade Western needles and machines for Japanese designs and flash (29).

By age 19 he enlisted in the US Navy, where he served as a merchant at varying ports during the Second World War and often tattooed at the ports, he was stationed at as well. Through his time spent at the ports in South Asia, he became introduced to Japanese irezumi. However, it was not until 1960 when he opened his last tattoo shop in Honolulu’s Chinatown (30) that his interest in Oriental tattooing really developed.

Collins was the first Western tattooist to use the idea of filling in backgrounds with waves and clouds to create whole body tattoos. He caught the interest of Don Ed Hardy who would later go on to form a close friendship with Horiyoshi III and to publish the first Western pictures of Japanese tattooing, in “TattooTime” magazine in 1980.

Don Ed Hardy felt a lot more positively about irezumi and his experiences of Japan than Collins. Hardy wasn’t interested in beating the Japanese but rather redefining the American tattoo culture. He wanted to take tattooing off the streets and give it more credibility as an art form and he found that in Japan, tattooing was already a private encounter between artist and client with a great deal of ritual involved.

The increased desire to fit the “rock persona” that America had created, has brought a new style of tattooing to Japan. This trend was perpetually increased over the years through the punk movement and heavy metal. These personas that were projected, embedded the ideology that tattoos enabled the youth to set themselves apart from their parents.

To-date in Japan, there is no dialogue between those who opt to tattoo on the “street level” with electric needles and those who practice traditional Japanese horishi.

FINIRE.

The motivations, methods, designs and culture(s) revolving around the realms of tattooing and irezumi, seem to-date to still maintain a balance of separation - although similarities are still prevalent in the “why” regards. A sense of belonging, a feeling of confidence, all of these ideals still enable one to feel more comfortable and confident in their own personal skin. Though the modernization of irezumi is to Western eyes undeniable; the rigid tradition, ritual and spiritual condensations that encompass

(29) a tattoo design printed or drawn, on cardboard or paper
(30) capital of the US State, Hawaii

the act are still in perfect accordance.

In an attempt to remove some of the social stigmas that contemporarily surrounding irezumi and tattooing (in mainstream society in Japan), Horiyoshi III (31) opened up communication channels between the two groups by organising the Tokyo Tattoo Convention (32).

One would think that since young people in Japan are leaning more and more towards Western-style tattooing in favor of irezumi as a fashionable decoration, irezumi would be struggling to find a market and it would be essential to modernize and modify the art form. However, tattoo artists and clients with both irezumi and tattoos claim that irezumi is still extremely popular (seeing as Horiyoshi III has introductory appointment list ranging a year long).

Yakuza still seem to make up a large part of a horishi's client base and are more likely to prefer irezumi because of its traditional associations. However, increasingly, the people interested in irezumi are foreigners.

In a similar way to other cultural activities, calligraphy (33) and sumo (34), young Japanese are bored by the ritual and the time taken to perfect irezumi, and instead are buying into American culture and tattooing history. But it seems that foreigners are fascinated by the ritual aspect and the unique style of irezumi and are hurrying to receive it. This is bound to have a significant effect on the future of irezumi and is likely to make it world famous and therefore less socially unacceptable in Japan, as well.

(31) a prominent figure head and stylistic revolutionary in irezumi; began to bridge gaps between irezumi and tattooing in the West (b. 1946)

(32) started 1999 and ever since has been running periodically

(33) Japanese calligraphy, heavily influenced by Chinese calligraphy; script; handwriting

(34) contact sport where two wrestlers attempt to push one another out of a ring

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