

How Tattoos Went From Subculture to Pop Culture

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BREAKING NEWS



EDITION

THE BLOG

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Let's face it, tattoos have burst onto pop culture and have taken over the current media scenery. TV shows based on the tattoo industry are springing up on major networks, social media pages for tattoo culture are numbering in the millions of followers, and you would be hard pressed to take a walk on the street and not see several people sporting leg tats or arm sleeves. Not to mention all the pieces you see on the beach! Tattoos have become a mainstream part of society.

Today, 36 percent of Americans aged 18-25 have at least one tattoo, according to a report

done by the Pew Research Center. That's more than one third of America's young adults! It comes as no surprise that the tattoo industry is the sixth fastest-growing retail business in America, as determined by the *U.S. News & World Report*. This has obviously translated to online interest as well, as there are more than 147 million tattoo related searches each month on Google.

How did this industry achieve this status though? Tattoos have certainly been scrutinized in the past and a visible feature that was once taboo has now become... normal?

Twenty five years ago, tattoos were actually quite common... on sailors, prison inmates, and members of tough motorcycle gangs. If you looked at accountants, pro ping-pong players, or shoe salesmen though, it would have been pretty rare to find some ink. So what happened?

Ironically, tattoos have been around since the beginning of human history. The word tattoo is thought to be derived from both the Polynesian "ta" -- meaning "to strike" -- and the Tahitian "tatau" -- meaning "to mark." So when and where did the tattoo originate? The answer to this question may remain a mystery, but scientific evidence proves that tattoos have been a part of human culture for thousands of years.

In 1991, German hikers on the Oztal Alps (near the border between Italy and Austria) discovered the mummified remains of a prehistoric human. Carbon dating would prove that the human, named Ötzi, had been mummified more than 5,300 years ago. While Ötzi was discovered with primitive tools and arrows, his most unique feature was that his body was adorned with no less than 57 tattoos, all the way from his upper neck to his ankles.

Findings like this continuously have proven that tattoos have been a part of human societies since their inception, as parts of rituals and cultures throughout history and across the globe.

Fast-forward to 2005. Our society still held prejudices against tattoos and, while some people were getting them on their own, no one would say tattoos were a part of pop culture. What changed this? The moment tattoos stepped into society's limelight can be pinpointed to a very specific event: the launching of the first popular tattoo TV show, "Miami Ink". A legendary shop on South Beach, "Miami Ink" housed a unique mix of talented and charismatic tattoo artists. Before this show, only the minority of people with tattoos knew what the inside of a tattoo studio was like. People weren't privy to the amazing work being done there or to the dynamic personalities and various styles of different artists. It made for good TV though, so *Miami Ink* owner, Ami James, linked up with a major network and ran this reality TV show in his shop. It was a huge success and it changed everything.

Nine years later, *Miami Ink* has had six seasons and been aired in over 160 countries. Spin-off shows based on other shops (*NY Ink* and *LA Ink*, most notably) as well as Contest-Format shows (*Ink Master*) have also been largely successful. The shows opened the channels for the average Joe to look into this "underworld" of tattoos. To realize that the art is impressive, beautiful, and attainable. Every person can have an amazing tattoo. Every person can have

their own unique tattoo. Having a tattoo can be an expression of who you are. Or what you believe in. Or something you cherish. Or just something you thought was fun. The prejudice, not having disappeared completely, is certainly greatly diminished.

Tattoo artists became celebrities. Artists like Ami James, Tommy Montoya, Kat von D, and Megan Massacre became famous for their appearances on these shows. Their art was suddenly the focus of mainstream media and their skills were known to all. Everyone wanted to get inked by them. So, naturally, other celebrities started getting inked by them. Rihanna, David Beckham, Angelina Jolie, and Adam Levine, are several examples of mainstream media icons that have tattoos and openly display them. It's a part of who they are now. And fans of these and many other celebrities are now getting inked just like their idols.

Enter social media. Another game-changer for the tattoo industry. The same artists that gained celebrity status on the tattoo TV shows are now followed by millions of people on these platforms (and some of these followers don't even have any tattoos of their own!). These same popular artists, or the individual users themselves, can identify new artists -- the up-and-comers -- that impress all with their unique and groundbreaking designs. Tattoo conventions are exploding in popularity, as everyone wants the chance to meet their favorite artists, post a picture with them on their profiles, and maybe even get a tattoo! And tattoo shops are now the place of legend -- the home of major tattoo artists and a site to see in and of itself.

So what's next? The internet will naturally allow the tattoo industry to continue evolving in ground-breaking ways in order to deliver the best possible content and services for the millions of tattoo-culture followers out there. The gap between the tattoo fan and the artist will get smaller and smaller with these new internet-based platforms and we can already see this trend in sites that offer crowd-sourcing for tattoo designs, such as [Tattoodo](#), where people are linked to artists from all over the world in order to obtain customized tattoo designs. Together with the growing mainstream tattoo community, we anxiously await to see the crazy ways this industry will continue to develop and take over pop culture.

This post is co-authored by Victor Chateaubriand.

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