

Tradition of Tattoo Art in Early Native American Cultures

Credit for the name “tattoo,” based on the Tahitian word “tatau,” may belong to Captain Cook but the art was not confined to the South Seas. Tattooing has been a historical tradition dating back to early times among Native Americans.

Just as tattoos have been found on Egyptian mummies and the frozen body of a Bronze Age man, the mummified bodies of women found in Greenland showed tattoo lines over the eyebrows and on the cheeks as well as some on the chin. Another female mummy had dots, lines and heart images on the arms and hands.

What Tattoos Signified

As you might expect, Native American tattoos marked a warrior for his heroism on the battlefield, a hunter for his feats, or a young brave for his rite of passage into manhood. Animal tattoos were associated with the power of that species and some portrayed spiritual symbols in keeping with beliefs that everything in nature was endowed with a spirit. Women’s tattoos were typically meant to enhance beauty and in some cases indicate marital status. They could also identify the tribe that individual belonged to.

How Tattoos Were Applied

The early art was primitive and therefore painful. One method involved dipping a sinew thread in charcoal, pushing an awl below the skin, and drawing the thread through. Another began with a stencil. Needles or finely sharpened bones were used to prick and bloody the skin. Then charcoal or a dye of red, blue or yellow was rubbed in so the wound would heal in that design and shade.

Nations Known for Tattooing

Although this art was widespread among tribes across North America, two of the best known for tattooing were the Cree and the Iroquois.

Plains Cree and the Woodland Cree made up the large northern Algonquin tribe that lived as nomadic hunters, following the migration of game and fish in their territory. Cree men could tattoo their chest, arms or entire body while the women restricted designs to lines on the face, particularly around the lips and chin.

Perhaps the most famous of the tattooed Iroquois were three of the four “Indian Kings” who came to visit London in the 1700s. Oil portraits that you can view at http://www.vanishingtattoo.com/tattooed_indian_kings.htm show the multiple tattoos of these “Kings”, standing beside their clan totem, that is a wolf, bear and turtle, with their weapons: a gun, a club and a bow. You will not see facial or body hair since it was customary for the men to remove any growth.

Crosshatches on the face of Iroquois men related to success in battles and small marks on the thighs kept track of how many enemies they had killed. Iroquois women tattooed for practical reasons, sometimes to relieve the pain of a toothache.

Many of the written records on tattooing among North American Natives come from Jesuit priests who reported on what one called the “bizarre custom” that the church discouraged. For historical details, you can also read “Tattooing of the American Indians,” written in 1909 by American anthropologist A. T. Sinclair.

Sources:

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