{h1}'Skin and Bones': Exhibit explores sailor tattoos at the Mystic Seaport {/h1}

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In the landscape of pop culture and professional sports, it's impossible to miss them -- they run up and down the arms of NBA star Lebron James , extend across the back of actress Angelina Jolie
and cover the body of rock icon
Steven Tyler
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They are tattoos, and they have left an indelible mark on Western culture. But while celebrities have taken tattooing to stylistic extremes, the practice might not have caught on if not for the men who worked aboard whalers, merchant ships and naval vessels in the 18th century.

After all, it was sailors who popularized the now- ubiquitous form of body art, a phenomenon explored in the Mystic Seaport exhibition, "Skin and Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor."

On loan from the Philadelphia Independence Seaport Museum , the traveling, multi-media exhibition features more than two centuries of ancient and modern tattooing tools, flash (tattoo design samples), tattoo-related art, historic photographs and artifacts that tell the story and significance of tattoos in the life of the early sailor.

Craig Bruns, curator at the Philadelphia museum , said the exhibition is a unique opportunity to relate contemporary enthusiasm for tattooing with the origins of the art form.

"Tattoos are very popular, but people don't really know where they came from," said Bruns, who completed extensive research in the development of the exhibition at the Tattoo Archive in Winston-Salem, N.C. "People across the nation have these tattoos, and the way they got to America is through sailors."

The practice in Western culture dates back to sailors of the 1700s, who were inspired by the tattoos they observed among the people of Polynesia. Far from home and with time to kill, sailors began branding themselves with a variety of images -- anchors, nautical stars, skull and crossbones -- thus creating their own unique subculture, Bruns said.

Many of those images continue to be requested today, said Blaze Schwaller , owner of the Spirit Gallery tattoo parlor in New London.

"It's amazing to look back," said Schwaller, who will be on hand to answer questions at Mystic Seaport's Tattoos and Tallships Weekend on Saturday and Sunday, July 16 and 17. "It's like a gift of ancestry."

Bruns noted that the famous red star logo of Macy's department store is believed to have been inspired by a tattoo founder R.H. Macy got while on a whaling voyage in the South Pacific.

While there are many connections between the tattoo culture of today and the 18th century, there were also dramatic differences. For one, amateurs artists used crude instruments such as sail-making or scrimshaw needles, which quite often led to infection. Because of the risks involved, sailors "had to really love that image and feel that image was extremely important," Bruns said.

In addition, sailors tended to have more practical, and, at times, superstitious motivations for bodily markings. An anchor on a sailor's forearm might be a sign that he'd served in the U.S. Navy , while a blue swallow on a sailor's chest signified that he had sailed 5,000 miles. Tattoos were also used to help identify a sailor who was lost or imprisoned, as they were described in identification papers he carried.

Other tattoos were seen as talismans on dangerous voyages. A pig and rooster on one's feet were meant to keep a sailor safe from drowning, since, according to maritime lore, the animals, which were kept in crates, would float with the debris from a wrecked ship.

By the time Samuel O'Reilly invented the electric tattoo machine in 1891, tattoos became more colorful and sophisticated, and many sailors made tattooing their profession, according to Elysa Engelman
, exhibits researcher/developer at Mystic Seaport.

Around that time, many sailors began getting tattoos of hula dancers, pin-up girls and reminders of long-distance loves. On exhibit is artist Norman Rockwell 's 1944 Saturday Evening Post
cover drawing of a brawny sailor getting the name "Betty" tattooed to his arm. Beneath the name is a long list of crossed out names.

"We laugh at that, but it's a talisman in war," Bruns said. "You want to know somebody is thinking of you back home. The sailor can't physically keep a girl, but he's trying his hardest to keep her in his mind so he feels secure."

Since then, tattoos have become even more elaborate, often reflecting a wide range of complex emotions (NBA star James has "CHOSEN1" emblazoned across his upper back). But even though many 18th century tattoos are crude by comparison, Bruns hopes that visitors to the exhibition will gain an appreciation for the true originators -- the men who sailed the seas and whose tattoos live on to tell about them.

"Skin & Bones -- Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor" is on view at the Mystic Seaport, 75 Greenmanville Ave., through Monday, Sept. 5. Open daily, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. $24, $22 for seniors 65 and older and college students, $15 for youth 6-17, free for children 5 and younger. 860-572-0711, www.mysticseaport.org.

can be reached at This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it or 203-964-2238.

Read more: http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Skin-and-Bones-Exhibit-explores-sailor-tattoos-1427146.php#ixzz1PSdEJyUq

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