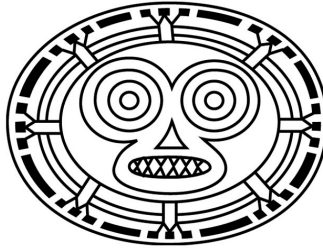




## Tattoo Clue – Polynesian and European Tattoo History

Tattooing involves placing ink permanently under the skin epidermis. It has been practised among many cultures, including the Egyptians, Celts, and American natives, Eskimos, Japanese, south east Asians and Pacific Islanders. The earliest form of tattoo has been found on a European 'Iceman' dated about 5 300 years old.



### Polynesian tattoos

The Polynesian term ta-tau translates roughly to strike or mark. Various islands in the South Pacific used tattoos to indicate social standing, social customs, adulthood and courage. Sometimes, tattooists worked on groups of people at the same time – particularly for males undergoing adult initiation. The tattooist would work quickly on one body, moving to the next person and so on, leaving each one to recover slightly before working on them again. Tattooing was also accompanied with ceremonies consisting of religious leaders, music, dancing and specially constructed huts or tents.

Finely detailed tattoos were normally reserved for the chiefs, their family and the upper classes. These were produced by highly skilled tattooists, while females and lower classes of society were worked upon by apprentice tattooists (which often meant longer sitting periods, greater pain and less intricate patterns!)

Traditional tattooing tools consisted of a wooden handled comb made of bone or shell with three to twenty sharpened needles. A pigment was usually made from the soot of burnt candlenut (tiari) mixed with water or oil. The needles were dipped in the pigment, then placed on the skin. The handle was tapped with a wooden stick, so the needles punctured the skin and inserted the pigment below the epidermis. While straight lines are rarely found in nature, many Pacific area tattoo patterns tended to consist of rectangles, triangles and lines. This may be for aesthetic reasons or it may have reflected their navigational skills.

### Hawaiian tattoos

Generally, Hawaiians were tattooed on opposing body parts (eg the right chest and shoulder with upper left leg). Their motifs tended to be chequered patterns and triangles.

### New Zealand /Maori tattoos

Initially, it is thought that Maori tattoo patterns consisted of short lines and crosses, which evolved into spirals and linear patterns. Tattooing around the face was often in a style called *moko* where deep grooves were chiselled into the skin. Moko was common on men and women, although women had moko restricted to the chin and lips and men were often marked over the whole face. The chiselling tool was usually made from albatross bone and later from metal when Europeans

settled in New Zealand. The chisel was dipped in ground charcoal (burnt rimu, kauri or kapara), mixed with water or fat and tapped into the skin. The pigment was black, but appeared dark blue due to the reddish transparency of human skin tissue.

Chiselling mokos was very painful and it usually took one to two days to complete. Sometimes women would only have their chin and lower lip done, as they could not endure the pain again to have their upper lips marked. Others completed the job with needle tattooing, which left ink, not a deep groove and was less painful.

### **Tahitian tattoos**

In Tahiti, tattoos would indicate female sexual maturity, social restrictions such as food taboos, genealogy and rank in society. Generally, males were more heavily covered in tattoos around the thighs and buttocks, while women were marked on the thighs and arms.

### **The Marquesas Islands tattoos**

Marquesans display the greatest coverage of tattoos. Men from the Marquesas could have patterns that covered the entire body. These were tattooed by marking an outline with charcoal, then tattooing with the ground ink. It often took a week to complete the full body tattoos, or they may have been completed in small sections, depending on the person's achievements and status. Females were normally only tattooed on the arms, legs and upper body. Tattooing was often followed by more than a week of inflammation, fever and swelling, sometimes being treated with the juice of a banana stem as a healing ointment. Occasionally there were deaths from infection or shock.

### **Native Americans**

Native American tribes used thorns as their puncturing needles and soot or berry juice for pigment. Eskimos used soot-covered thread, which was passed through the skin's epidermis to form the pattern.

### **European explorers and tattoos**

Although tattooing was practised amongst Celtic races, it had disappeared by the time of Captain Cook on HMB *Endeavour*. When the Celts were converted to Christianity, tattooing died out as it was thought that the human body was made in God's image and should not be altered. James Cook reported on the 'tatau' (which became tattoo in the English language) amongst the Pacific Islanders. Cook's own crewmen and subsequent English crews started getting tattooed. Sailors adopted the practice eagerly and tattooing spread to other occupations. There was an exchange of tattoo patterns between the English and Polynesians, each culture tattooing the other so both cultures cross-fertilised tattoo patterns.

Sydney Parkinson – the artist on HMB *Endeavour* noted that Tahitian tattoos had “a lively bluish purple, similar to that made upon the skin by gunpowder”. Indeed, sailors began tattooing themselves on board, using gunpowder and needles. Designs were generally simple stars, hearts and initials. Over time, other designs such as flags, anchors, palm trees, ships, Neptunes and mermaids became popular designs. Tattoos were seen as charms, which would ward off storms, shipwreck, shark attack and the evil eye as well as protecting from drowning, plague and venereal disease. Roman Catholics had crosses on their arms to ensure they were buried in consecrated ground.

Omai was a native from the Society Islands who travelled back to England on HMS *Resolution* I and was popular with Royalty and the upper classes. While some scholars linked the renewed interest in tattooing to Omai, his only visible tattoos were on his wrist and on buttocks, which were unlikely to be displayed in public back in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century! It is thought that the resurgence of tattooing was due to a new enthusiasm for eastern cultures.