Tattooing in American culture has undergone much change since it first gained popularity among American maritime professionals of the mid-nineteenth century. Following this advent, military men, as early as the Civil War, began enlisting tattoo artists to help them express their devotion to their country, solidarity among the ranks, and the depth of their bravery and heroism. Tattooed people also appeared in successful circus acts and carnival sideshows from coast to coast. In spite of this popularity among military and circus professionals, tattoos failed to garner a substantial following within the mainstream. By World War II the military had begun discouraging tattooing among the ranks and, following the decline of tattooing among servicemen, the public began to associate tattooing primarily with rebellious youths and “lower-class” citizens, including blue-collar workers, motorcyclists, street gangs, and drunks. It is this post-WWII condition of tattoo culture to which this paper refers as the traditional tattoo demographic. In the 1960s, some cities restricted tattooing equipment to use by medical professionals while other cities, including New York, banned the practice outright. Social pressures forced other tattooers, even those in cities where tattooing had not been banned, to relocate to cities more hospitable toward their profession. This evidence indicates that during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the general public was simply not prepared to accept into its ranks those who had been marked by ink.¹

However, in the 1970s the tattoo began to enjoy a more mainstream existence and at least some semblance of general acceptance. During the 1980s and 1990s tattoos began appearing on

bodies in every imaginable social group, including celebrities, business professionals, practicing doctors and nurses, and average middle class citizens, in addition to what society viewed as the traditional deviant demographic. By about 2005, tattoos had become commonplace enough that advertisers, such as Levi’s, Chanel, Converse, and Post-It, began to employ tattoos to sell jeans, designer sunglasses, shoes, and even office supplies. People even began selling their own skin as tattoo ad space for a variety of companies. By 2009, the traditional tattoo demographic – bikers, rockers, and rebels – questioned what, if anything, it meant to bear (or bare) ink. While increasing numbers of newer tattooed groups looked to have their tattoos removed or turned to alternative methods of tattooing, including black light, white, and temporary inks, the fringe demographic began to resent the new, more middle class tattoo customer, and turned away from tattoos and toward more extreme forms of body modification, such as scarification and branding. Traditional tattooing, which this article defines as the process during which one or more needles is used to inject indelible ink of varying colors into the skin in order to permanently mark the skin with some design, is dying. How did a practice that made little headway toward social tolerance in American culture for over a hundred years go from counterculture to common culture to gimmick all in a span of less than forty years? This article argues that rock musicians of the 1970s and 1980s, as the first true pairing of tattoo culture with popular culture, were responsible for catapulting tattooing into the mainstream, and, furthermore, it was precisely this pairing of counterculture and popular culture that also ultimately led to the demise of the traditional tattoo.

**Historiography**

Because tattooing has been regarded as a deviant, fringe practice for so long, before the last twenty years academics consider it a serious topic of study, and few works were published
on the subject. Most of what was written prior to the 1980s was a mix of cultural studies of tribal practices of tattooing and psychological studies conducted amongst tattooed inmates and gang members. These studies presented tattooing as either a barbaric practice of archaic, jungle tribes or an indicator of a “personal maladjustment and conflict” in tattoo bearers. Since the 1980s, however, works focused on the Western practice of tattooing outside of prisons have been published. Even in this short twenty year span in the history of tattoo literature, works about the Western tattoo have undergone significant change, reflecting the evolving cultural attitudes toward tattooing.

Texts published in the late 1980s and early 1990s tended to focus on the increasing popularity of tattoos with the middle class and drew parallels to the significance of body modification in other, usually Eastern or ancient, civilizations. However, the bulk of works from the mid-1990s to about 2005 recognized that tattoos had won a place in mainstream culture. Those works adopted a more apologetic tone, most of them noting that tattoos may have gotten their start among rougher crowds in America, but choosing instead to focus on the changing characteristics of tattoo artists and tattoo consumers. Much emphasis is placed on the increasing recognition by traditional art institutions, such as galleries and museums, as proof that the tattoo has been elevated from its socially questionable roots to a legitimate art form. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, many of the works on tattoos seem to have adopted the view that tattooing was commonplace enough that its practice no longer needed intellectual

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2 Tribal groups – Polhemus 1978 149-173, Brian 1979 48-67, Van Stone and Lucier 1974, Handy and Handy 1924, Hambly 1925; Psychological – Pollack and McKenna 1945; Yamamoto, Seeman, and Lester 1963; Ferguson-Rayport, Griffith, and Strauss 1955; Goldstein 1979a; Grumet 1983

justification; one is more likely to find coffee table books filled with colorful pictures of tattooeees and short anecdotes than scholarly works.4

Despite this vast array of works published about the tattoo, there is still a gap to be filled. Amongst all of these works only Margo DeMello manages to take seriously the members of the traditional tattoo demographic and the role they played in the introduction of tattooing into mainstream society. In her conclusion, DeMello asked whether tattooing was another trend that would fade out, and addressed the concerns about the future of tattooing voiced by older tattooists. However, most of DeMello’s research was conducted during the mid-1990s, and since the publishing of DeMello’s book in 2000, there has been no further critical analysis of tattooing, and there exists no comprehensive picture of the current state of both traditional tattoo culture and tattoo culture since its synthesis with popular culture.5

Writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at a time when tattoos had just begun to infiltrate mainstream culture, Clinton Sanders, Frances Mascia-Lees, and Rubin chose to examine the validity of tattooing’s stake in American popular culture. The authors were on the defensive and though each author used a different approach to defend the notion that tattoos ought to occupy a position in the mainstream, they all drew connections between tattooing and other forms of body modification or art that are commonly accepted in different cultures. Sanders and Vail, in Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing (1989), offered an extensive introduction to “institutional art theory” in order to focus on the tattoo’s growing presence in the traditional art community. They used the example of tattoos in exhibits and shows in galleries and museums and the rising number of traditionally trained artists

participating in the tattoo community as proof that the tattoo had earned the right to be part of American culture by garnering merit as art. In arguing this point, however, Sanders and Vail gave little thought to the actual history of tattooing, save for choosing to question the traditional tattoo community’s capacity to make informed decisions about the aesthetics of their own bodies and implying that the traditional tattoo demographic is somehow inferior to the new, more thoroughly educated crowd beginning to fill tattoo shops.\textsuperscript{6}

In both \textit{Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body and Tattoo, Mutilation, and Adornment: The Denaturalization of the Body in Culture and Text}, Rubin and Mascia-Lees respectively, chose to focus on historical forms of body modification and their relationships to the cultures in which they existed in order to explore the relationship of the tattoo to Western societies. While Rubin examined ancient and Eastern forms of body modification, such as ritual piercing in Africa and ancient Asian tattooing practices, Mascia-Lees looked at the uses of shaving, hair styling, and makeup as forms of socially acceptable and, in fact, desirable body modification in Western society. Both authors used these examples to justify the introduction of the tattoo as a form of expression or beautification in Western society. In making this justification, both Sanders and Mascia-Lee made the mistake of presenting traditional American and Western tattoo demographics as socially illegitimate practitioners of their own culture by questioning their ability to judge the appropriate applications of body modification. The authors relied on the roles of socioeconomic status and intellectual traits of more recent tattooees to explain why a large portion of the population began to tolerate tattooing.\textsuperscript{7}


Rather than using other forms of body modification to justify the practice of tattooing in Western culture, authors from the late 1990s into the year 2000 generally chose to address the changing psychology of both tattooed persons and society to explain why tattoos became increasingly more common during the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Kim Hewitt’s *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink* (1997) is a prime example of this type of analysis. Hewitt argued that a common thread exists between forms of self-mutilation, including tattooing and piercing as well as cutting, and emphasized that the desire of individuals to acquire marks of self-stigmatization expresses a change in how society perceives marginalization. She explained that Westerners, in the last half of the twentieth century, began to realize that they lived in a culture devoid of meaningful rituals, cohesive values, or a clear passage from childhood to adulthood; therefore the human body has gradually taken on greater significance in the quest to define self and society in more meaningful terms.\(^8\) Hewitt’s focus, like several other authors’ from this time period, was on the connection between the importance of body art and body modification in self-definition and cultural or artistic identity in older cultures and current attempts by tattooees to use tattoos as a mode of self-expression or artistic outlet. While Margo DeMello, in *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, did at least address the concerns and opinions of longtime tattoo artists and tattooees, she failed to utilize this information to effectively include the traditional tattoo demographic in her evaluation of the current state of tattoo culture, and instead chose to place a greater emphasis on tattoos as the newer, more middle-class demographic has come to see them. In addition, a vast majority of the works in this period, much like those from the early 1990s, relied too heavily on the growing number of formally trained artists and the higher socioeconomic status, more extensive

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education, and greater level of aesthetic sensibility of the more recent tattoo consumer base in an effort to lend credence to the legitimization of tattooing as an actual art form.

As the twenty-first century dawned, authors of scholarly works on tattooing generally moved away from trying to explain why tattoos were a part of mainstream culture and began to examine the portrayal of tattoos in popular culture. Some books, such as Karin Beeler’s *Tattoos, Desire and Violence: Marks of Resistance in Literature, Film and Television* (2005) looked specifically at the presentation of tattoos in those different modes of popular culture, while articles like “Gracious Living and the Tattoo” (2008) pointed to the use of the tattoo in the commercial industry as proof that the tattoo no longer held the stigma of deviant behavior it once had. Much like previous tattoo scholars, in an article entitled “An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos” Mary Kosut sought to classify tattoos as art by means of institutional definition and the cultural merit of recent tattooees.9 In all three cases, the authors made little attempt to do more than mention that tattoos were once associated with rebels and outlaws, but instead explained that now a more heterogeneous tattoo culture, encompassing groups from punk rockers to soccer moms and CPAs, chooses to become tattooed. The fate of the traditional tattoo demographic was either briefly mentioned or ignored completely, as if it no longer had a part in tattoo history. This is a mistake, as the story of this demographic and its relationship to tattooing, past and present, is very much related to current trends in tattooing among new tattoo devotees.

It is also during the first decade of the twenty-first century that books of value purely from a popular culture standpoint began to appear. Several books, such as *Tattoo Nation: Portraits of Celebrity Body Art* published by *Rolling Stone Magazine* in 2002, are nothing more

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than coffee table showpieces filled with pictures of tattooed pop culture icons from actress Drew Barrymore to magician David Blaine, along with a multitude of musicians. Kat Von D’s *High Voltage Tattoo* (2009) is just the latest example of this trend. Masquerading as both an autobiography and also a thoughtful look into modern tattoo culture, this book is more of a picture book featuring specific tattoos from a number of individuals, including an eight-page “Tattoo Directory” of the author’s own extensive tattoo collection, with some anecdotal text thrown in.¹⁰ As star of TLC’s *L.A. Ink*, Von D and her publishers marketed specifically to the visual interests of the show’s fan base in order to sell a few books.

Since 1980, tattoo literature has covered a variety of topics and adopted an array of approaches to present tattoo culture. While earlier authors chose to defend the tattoo and its integration into mainstream culture by merits of institutionally defined parameters of art and comparisons to ancient and Eastern body modification practices, later scholarly works tended to focus on the psychology of tattooed demographics and, particularly, the social psychology that led to the recognition of tattooing as a tolerable form of social expression or artistic endeavor. Recently, however, published works related to the tattoo have tended to focus on the portrayal of the tattoo in the media and, in many cases, these works have become less scholarly and more likely to take advantage of America’s preoccupation with popular culture. Even with this wide array of topics and approaches within the study of tattoo culture, the story of the traditional tattoo demographic and its interaction with the new tattoo demographic has been neglected. It is this process of interaction between old and new, rather than the usurpation of the old by the new, that this article seeks to address.

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Tattoos and Rock Music

Prior to World War II, the public associated tattooing with sailors and circus freaks, and, while a number of servicemen also came home tattooed with images representative of their particular company or their loyalty to the U.S.A., neither Big Band artists like Benny Goodman nor jazz musicians like Duke Ellington were mentioned in any discourses of tattooing. After the war, tattoo culture, in the minds of many, was embodied by blue-collar workers, motorcyclists, street gangs, and drunks, but musicians had still not entered the fray. As rock ‘n’ roll became popular, artists like Elvis, who made his radio debut in 1954, and the Beatles, whose American debut came ten years later, were controversial for gyrating hips and associations with drug use rather than body art. It was not until Janis Joplin, a popular musician in the late 1960s, publicly displayed a tattooed wristlet (she also had a small tattoo of a rose on her breast, which she did not usually show) that the public had its first reasons to associate musicians, specifically rock artists, with tattooing.11

During the 1970s, the number of tattooed rock musicians began slowly but surely to rise. After the recording of “Mama Kin” in 1972, Steven Tyler of Aerosmith received his first tattoo. The tattoo is on the outside of Tyler’s upper left arm and contains the words “Mama Kin” over a heart surrounded by flames.12 The members of another popular rock band, Black Sabbath, also displayed tattoos. Ozzy Osbourne, the front man for Black Sabbath acquired his first tattoo, a knife on his left arm, at fourteen, but added a significant number of pieces to his collection during his time with the band.13 In a promotional photograph of Black Sabbath used in the early

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1970s, Ozzy’s knife tattoo is clearly visible, along with another, slightly smaller and indecipherable tattoo located on the same arm.\textsuperscript{14} While many photos displaying Janis Joplin’s tattoos were taken at concerts or for interviews, the fact that Tyler’s and Osbourne’s tattoos were clearly visible in promotional prints, that is, mass-produced photographs included in press kits given to the media and subsequently printed in magazines and advertisements, demonstrates the willingness of an increasing number of rock bands to be associated with and to represent tattoo culture. That number would continue to grow with increasing speed during the 1980s.

Rock musicians of the 1980s embraced the body art trend their predecessors from the 1970s began. Members of Metallica and Mötley Crüe, two of the biggest names in rock music during the 1980s, commonly bared tattoos on stage and in promotional photos. Publicity photos taken around the 1983 release of Metallica’s album \textit{Kill ‘Em All} showed then bassist Cliff Burton with a distorted skull tattooed on his upper right arm, while Mötley Crüe’s first album, \textit{Too Fast For Love}, debuted November 10, 1981 and featured a picture of a leather-clad man with his hand in his pocket. Though the man’s hand was partially covered by a leather glove, a tattoo that stretched from the man’s hand up his forearm was easily distinguished.\textsuperscript{15} The visibility of Cliff Burton’s tattoo in promotional stills served as a connection between Metallica and tattoo culture, but Mötley Crüe’s use of tattoo imagery points to an even deeper relationship with tattooing. Not only was the band comfortable enough with the tattooed image to associate Mötley Crüe with tattoo culture, the band was also secure enough with that image to use it to market their product to consumers and potential fans. By placing tattoos on their album cover, Mötley Crüe expressed


confidence that the image would garner sales from record store browsers, whose first impressions of new albums depended on each album’s cover, rather than impede them.

The trend of rock musicians utilizing tattoos to market themselves as authentic rock and roll continued in the 1990s. During the 1990s, not only did the number of band members with tattoos increase, the number of visible tattoos on each band member began to increase as well. In a promo print from 1993, one member of the band White Zombie bared a tattoo on his upper right arm while another had his left arm tattooed from his shoulder to his elbow (known as a “half sleeve”). All six members of Guns N’ Roses, who were active in rock during the last half of the 1980s, but did not really experience fame until the early 1990s, were tattooed. This included the band’s two most famous members, Slash and Axl Rose, the latter of whom had nearly his entire outer right arm covered in addition to a significant portion of his upper left arm.

Another trend that developed during the 1990s was the increased number of tattoos on musicians from the seventies and eighties who were still active in the rock scene. By the end of the nineties, Ozzy Osbourne, who had only two tattoos visible in the promotional still mentioned earlier, had expanded his tattoo collection to include a nearly full sleeve on his right arm and significant coverage of his left. Nikki Sixx, who had been only sparsely tattooed for most of the eighties, was covered in tattoos by the late nineties. He sported two full sleeves, a full back piece, “Sixx” and “1958” across his fingers, along with numerous other tattoos. It seems that

the very artists who pioneered tattooing in the music industry had fully embraced the idea and raised the bar on tattoo exposure, to which artists of the early twenty-first century rose in force.

It is more difficult to find images of ink-free band members than it is to find them covered in it during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Members in popular hard rock bands such as Disturbed and Killswitch Engage, alternative bands like Seether and Breaking Benjamin, and punk rock bands including Sum 41 and AFI all displayed visible tattoos on a regular basis. In fact, during this period, so many rock musicians had latched onto the connection between rock music and tattooing that many established rock musicians began to lament the sheer number of aspiring musicians acquiring tattoos simply to play the rock and roll part. Nikki Sixx said of this trend, “so many bands sit back and say, ‘Okay, let’s get a tattoo…and we’ll make a quick buck because that’s ‘rock & roll.’ But it’s not a cliché to us, because it’s real.”20 It was not only older rock musicians who began to have issues with people merely trying to play the part of rock stars, either. Aaron Fink of Breaking Benjamin, whose first album Saturate was released in 2002, stated, “Kids that get full sleeves before they learn an instrument or can write a decent song in order to look like ‘rock stars’ annoy the shit out of me, you have to learn to crawl before you walk.”21 Clearly, rock musicians who saw themselves as part of the established crowd began to resent the use of tattoos as a way to present oneself as a legitimate rock musician even when one lacked the necessary skills to make such a claim, a fact which will be addressed in more detail in a later section of the article. However, the inextricable linking of tattoos with rock musicians in the minds of non-musicians also coincided with a larger trend in society – the growing public conclusion that being tattooed no longer exclusively indentified one as a blue-collar worker, biker, or gang member.

21 Aaron Fink, interviewed by Jennifer Hero.
Expanding the Boundaries of Tattoo Culture

A commonly held belief among Americans in the 1970s was that tattooing was a lost phenomenon, a curiosity of the past kept just barely alive by bikers and gang members. One exhibit on display at the Museum of Folk Art in New York City from October to November 1971 exemplified this perception of tattoo culture by restricting the “art” on display to nineteenth century tattoos of sailors and Navy men, the “heyday” of tattooing. Two police officers passing the exhibit before it opened read the large block “TATTOO!” in the window and returned with a warrant, prepared to arrest the “heathen[s]” breaking the 1961 New York City ban on tattooing.22 In spite of the public’s attitude toward tattooing, by the end of the 1970s an increasing number of citizens began seeking the services of tattooists across the country and many professional tattooers identified the influence of rock musicians as the catalyst for the change. A number of tattoo artists pointed specifically to Janis Joplin, whose televised tattooing in 1971 many blamed for increased publicity of tattooing and the cheapening of the art. Other artists noted the growing prevalence of music-related tattoos requested by customers, including album covers. One observation common among both groups, however, was that with this rise in popularity, whether caused by Janis Joplin or rock musicians in general, came an “overabundance” of tattooing in the media, including television shows and magazine and newspaper articles.23 During the 1980s, this became exceptionally clear.

One aspect of this increased media coverage was the mounting acceptance of tattooing among celebrities who were not part of the rock scene. Celebrities of all sorts, including musicians of other styles of music, actors and actresses, and professional athletes, became tattooed during the 1980s. Cher, a pop singer and actress, received only one tattoo during the

1970s, but five more during the 1980s, most of which were visible on a regular basis and all of which were visible once Cher donned her revealing stage costumes, and Johnny Depp, whose acting career began in the mid-1980s, received at least two of his tattoos over the course of that decade.\textsuperscript{24} Mike Tyson, one of the most recognizable professional boxers and athletes, began his professional career in 1985. During the late 1980s, Tyson’s displayed two tattoos on his right arm, one on his bicep and one on his forearm.\textsuperscript{25} Just as legendary tattoo artist Lyle Tuttle noted of the late 1960s and early 1970s, during the 1980s, “the role models of the day were getting tattooed.”\textsuperscript{26} The number and variety of those popular role models would only increase during the 1990s and into the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Ever greater numbers of professional entertainers and athletes, including Janet Jackson, Drew Barrymore, and Dennis Rodman displayed ever greater quantities of ink. Singer Janet Jackson had several tattoos done, including one on her lower back and one of Mickey and Minnie Mouse engaged in lewd behavior, located near the crease of Jackson’s right thigh.\textsuperscript{27} Actress Drew Barrymore’s tattoos were photographed extensively during the 1990s, and there exists a multitude of images featuring the cross on Barrymore’s ankle, the butterflies on her stomach, the flower on her hip, and the angels on her lower back.\textsuperscript{28} Dennis Rodman, whose career in the National Basketball Association (NBA) began in the late 1980s but flourished in the 1990s, might just be one of the most famous tattooed professional athletes. During his time with the Chicago Bulls, with whom Rodman won three of his five NBA championships, Rodman’s tattoos included extensive work on both of his arms, his chest, and his back, a good portion of

\textsuperscript{24} Kathryn Gay and Christine Whittington, \textit{Body Marks: Tattooing, Piercing, and Scarification} (Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press, 2002), 49.
\textsuperscript{26} DeMello, 76.
\textsuperscript{27} Gay, 49.
\textsuperscript{28} Ritz, 55.
which was regularly aired during game coverage to millions of fans each week and on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* magazine.\(^{29}\) By the twenty-first century, not only did the number of tattooed celebrities skyrocket, several older celebrities came about their tattoos for the first time. Whoopi Goldberg showed the tattoo of the *Peanuts* comic character Woodstock on her chest and Tony Danza admitted to having the comic character Mr. Natural tattooed on his bicep, though he subsequently had the tattoo removed.\(^{30}\) It seems that by the first decade of the twenty-first century, tattoos had infiltrated essentially every subsection of popular culture. So many popular icons had embraced the tattooing and were willing to share their appreciation for and affiliation with the practice that fans began to take notice and to follow suit.

As the number of tattooed celebrities rose, so did the number of average citizens electing to go under the needle, no small number of whom looked directly to celebrities for ink inspiration. Tattoo artists began to complain about customers requesting celebrity “copycat” tattoos, exact replicas of tattoos worn and displayed by celebrities. Additionally, artists received requests for tattoos of celebrity likenesses, including portraits of David Bowie and Marilyn Monroe, among others.\(^{31}\) The celebrity effect on tattooing was so great that artists began warning customers looking to emulate their idols against undergoing the tattoo process. Jonathan T. Shaw, who had been tattooing in the Greenwich Village area of New York since 1977, noted a trend of regret among young people getting tattoos in an attempt to follow body art fads seen in celebrity magazines and on television channels such as MTV.\(^{32}\) In spite of warnings, the number of tattooed Americans continued to rise. To meet this demand, the number of tattooers in America climbed from several hundred in the 1960s to nearly ten thousand in the mid-1990s, in

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\(^{29}\) *Sports Illustrated*, June 9, 1997, cover.  
\(^{30}\) Gay, 49.  
\(^{31}\) Von D, 69-100.  
spite of official bans on tattooing in cities like New York, where the thirty-five year ban remained in effect until the city council passed a bill that officially legalized and regulated tattooing in February 1997.33

Among those served by the thousands of tattooists in America, blue-collar workers, bikers, rockers, and other members of traditional tattoo demographics still occupied a large percentage. However, during the 1990s, many artists noted a diversification in the population they worked on. Artists in urban population centers such as New York, which are typically more liberal and progressive as far as trends in fashion are concerned, as well as their counterparts in more rural areas such as Indiana noted that “doctors, lawyers, and a lot of professional people” had begun entering their shops with increasing frequency.34 In fact, many more Americans of all backgrounds were seeking the services of tattoo artists. According to a Harris Poll conducted in 2003, sixteen percent of all American adults were tattooed, including thirty-six percent of those between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine, and twenty-eight percent of those between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine.35 Tattoos were becoming both popular and trendy, and in the twenty-first century, cooperate America began to take notice.

Commodification and Commercialization of Tattooing

Tattooing as an industry had grown immensely during the last decade of the twentieth-century, but, at that time, only tattooists were reaping the benefits. When business minds realized the marketing potential of tattooing, they were quick to make the most of it. American Rag, a California company that sells vintage-design-inspired clothing was created in partnership with

34 “Tattoo Art Gains Color and Appeal”
the Federated Department Stores, which owns Bloomingdales and Macy’s. The company’s creative director, Maryellen Needham, followed the Lollapalooza tour, a multi-day punk and rock music festival, with one specific goal in mind – scouting for models to be featured in an ad campaign. After taping crowd shots of moshing concertgoers, Ms. Needham and her photographer invited tattooed concertgoers to try on clothes from an American Rag wardrobe, in which the individuals would then be photographed and potentially featured in a number of the company’s advertisements.\textsuperscript{36} American Rag chose to deal with more traditionally defined tattooed groups – those who viewed themselves as rebels and actively participated in countercultural activities, such as the punk rock scene. However, other companies utilized tattooing as a marketing tool without directly engaging the traditional tattooed populace.

In 2006, Levi’s produced an ad for its Red that featured an otherwise clean-cut man seated in a padded chair while a tattoo artist works on him. The ad implies that the man’s jeans are so much a part of him that he would have them permanently inked onto his body.\textsuperscript{37} Converse used much the same two years later. One 2008 ad featured a man whose head and face were tattooed. The shirt the man wore resembled a Converse shoe featuring much the same design as the man’s tattoo, and on the man’s right arm was tattooed a classic Converse star. Converse showed that the company was an integral part of not only the man’s wardrobe, but also his life.\textsuperscript{38} Even more upscale brands hopped on the bandwagon. One ad featured in both Elle and Vogue magazines showed an otherwise unmarked and unblemished model wearing Chanel glasses and baring a tattoo of the double-C Chanel logo on her left shoulder.\textsuperscript{39} In one 2007 Juicy Couture ad, a tattooed man wearing an undone dress stood in a room of elegantly dressed women apparently

\textsuperscript{38} Converse ad, 2008.
\textsuperscript{39} Chanel ad, 2007.
primping for some formal event. The juxtaposition of that tattooed man and the un-inked women, of hard and soft, represented a synthesis of tattoo culture and high culture. Neither the Chanel nor the Juicy Couture advertisements were directed to traditional tattoo demographics. Instead, both were meant to appeal to customers of higher socioeconomic status and, apparently, higher class tastes in fashion.

Simultaneously, tattoos were also being used to sell some of the most mainstream products one could identify – office supplies. Pilot, in a 2007 ad campaign, utilized tattooing’s mainstream appeal to sell its fine point pins. One ad featured a beetle that had been tattooed with a Pilot pen and another featured a ladybug that had also been inked. In another ad, Post-It implied the effectiveness of Post-It Extra Sticky by placing a sticky covered with a tribal tattoo design on the bicep of a muscular man who is apparently in the middle of workout, judging by the jump rope that can be seen in the far left of the frame. When tattoos can be used to sell something as uncontroversial as office supplies, association of ink with rebel culture becomes questionable and the meaning of tattoos comes into question. Post-It identified and utilized what it viewed as a popular trend and, quite probably without meaning to, demonstrated exactly what many among the traditional tattoo demographic had begun to feel – that tattooing no longer identified members of that demographic as rebellious or unique. As Aaron Fink of the band Breaking Benjamin noted “tattoos used to be more of a biker thing or for people on the fringes of society, now every bar or nightclub is filled with ‘bro’s’ covered with some kind of tribal thing on their bicep, it’s more of a fashion accessory today.” Tattooing had begun to lose its original meaning, its countercultural roots, what Walter Benjamin might refer to as its “aura.”

43 Aaron Fink, interviewed by Jennifer Hero.
For Benjamin, reproduction, especially mechanical mass reproduction, eliminates the aura of art. He describes the tendency of the masses to desire “closer” proximity to things they find appealing, for example purchasing a CD in order to more personally experience the music of one’s favorite band, as “their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”44 A public that viewed tattoos as markers of individuality unique to several specific subsections of society desired to obtain that same distinctiveness. In doing so, however, the public was, subconsciously, accepting the fact that broadening the contexts in which tattooing was practiced would strip the tattoo of the very stigmatizing effect that allowed it to set apart those groups who had originally borne its marks. Thus, in their attempts to claim for themselves the escape from normalcy that tattoos offered, the public eliminated its own escape route by normalizing tattooing through widespread practice and introduction into mass reproduction of tattooing through photographs and video footage of tattoos and especially through advertisement.

While a loss of the “aura” of tattooing was recognized by both traditional and new tattoo demographics, that loss manifested itself in different ways for each demographic. Traditional tattoo demographics began the search for new, oftentimes more extreme, methods by which to capture an “aura” in the same vein as tattooing, including evermore extensive tattooing, branding, scarification, and even outright denunciation of tattooing. New tattoo demographics dealt with the loss in one of two general ways, firstly, by attempting to re-inject meaning into the practice of tattooing by adding a personal or spiritual element to Western tattooing through what Margo DeMello has termed “tattoo narratives,” and, secondly, by mitigating the permanence of the practice through temporary inks and inks visible only under certain conditions or through outright removal of tattoos.

“It’s not a rebellion when you’re selling out to another fashion salesman.”  

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Conclusion  

Tattooing has undergone much change since its introduction into American culture in the nineteenth century and especially since the 1960s. It has filled the roles of counterculture practice, mainstream trend, and cheap gimmick. Groups that once embodied the spirit of tattoo in their nature and embraced it as part of their culture no longer feel the deep connection they once had with tattooing, and groups that adopted the tattoo in the process of its cultural normalization have altered the tattoo so that it more closely coincides with the fickleness of popular culture. Rock musicians of the 1970s and 1980s, as representatives of the first true synthesis of tattoo culture with popular culture were responsible for both the infiltration of tattooing into mainstream culture that expanded the boundaries of tattooing and allowed it to enter into new spheres, such as that of art, and for the ultimate demise of traditional tattooing practices that resulted from the removal of the “aura” of tattoo in a cultural process theorized by Walter Benjamin. It may be that the only hope for the traditional tattoo to reclaim its “aura,” its meaning, and its cultural significance lies in an entirely new start. In his tirade against the trendiness of Los Angeles, including the current practice of tattooing, and the total abandon with which pop culture idolizers subscribe to it, Maynard of Tool may have said it best:

“The only way to fix it is to flush it all away.”  

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Primary


Converse ad, 2008.


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*Sports Illustrated*, June 9, 1997, cover.


Secondary


