

BODY TYPE: TYPOGRAPHIC TATTOOS or HOW I BECAME A TATTOO EXPERT WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

By Ina Saltz, author of “Body Type: Intimate Messages Etched in Flesh” (Abrams Image, 2006)

MY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE WORLD OF TATTOOS began in the most unlikely of ways.

I was traveling cross-town on the M86 bus when I spotted an interesting-looking young man with a large text-only tattoo on his right forearm; it spelled out “happy” in a typeface which I instantly recognized as Helvetica. The fact that it was in lower-case letters and so tightly kerned that the letters were touching was especially intriguing to me as a designer and a typophile. I had never seen a tattoo quite like this one—sans serif! Not being in the habit of talking to strangers in New York City, I debated mightily before approaching him...but my curiosity finally got the better of me. “Are you a graphic designer?” I asked. Why, yes, he was. “And would you mind if I took a photo of your tattoo to show my students? I teach typography at City College.” No problem. I whipped out my digital camera and managed to get one shot and to grab his proffered business card before I jumped off at my stop. That evening I uploaded the photo and went to the Web site on his business card to send him the image with a proper thank you message. Imagine my astonishment to find our entire conversation recounted on his blog!

As often happens when encountering something new, having seen one typographic tattoo, I now started to see them everywhere (it was August and a lot of skin was visible). Always searching for interesting topics for my column in *STEP Inside Design* (a professional magazine for graphic designers), I seized upon the notion of documenting this new style of tattoo: unadorned words rather than images. Fortuitously, not far away, a huge tattoo convention was happening that very weekend. I called my editor, who arranged for a press pass.

The circus-like atmosphere of the tattoo convention was an eye-opening experience for me...a hundred or so people being simultaneously tattooed; electric needles buzzing, almost drowned out by blaring rock music; tattoo competitions on the big stage; and a very eclectic crowd. I had no trouble finding examples of typographic tattoos for my article; in fact, I started to realize that this typographic tattoo thing was pretty widespread. Even after my article on typographic tattoos was published in the January 2004 issue of *STEP Inside Design*, I continued to see these tattoos everywhere: I seemed to have developed a “third eye” for these marks and an instinct for who might have one. If I saw any evidence of a tattoo, or I thought someone just might have one, I no longer hesitated to approach them: in fact, I became quite brazen! Almost all were eager to show

me their tattoos, and lost no time in exposing various body parts to give me a close-up look (however inappropriate that might have been at the moment).

Wherever I went (to a party, to the beach, to an opening or some other professional event) I discovered a typographic tattoo or someone who knew someone who had one. At the same time, there appeared to be a hyperactive public and media awareness of the tattoo world: two nationwide reality television series about tattoos debuted almost simultaneously; new upscale tattoo Web sites proliferated; and a glossy and luxe tattoo magazine, *Inked*, packed with high end advertising, launched its premiere issue. The timing seemed right for my very specialized look at typographic tattoos.

As I began to attend other tattoo conventions and follow the tattoo subculture, I noticed certain patterns. Most of the people I photographed were young, had gotten their tattoos recently, were educated in or already practicing in the creative arts, and were quite well-informed about their choice of typestyle. This was a newly defined stratum of the tattooed. These affluent, culturally aware, sophisticated, and highly educated young people were choosing to adorn themselves with tattoos consisting of typographic messages rather than imagery. Increasingly, the typography of the tattoo became the image itself. The words serve as a literal text as well as figurative art, revealing intimate beliefs, life's challenges, and value systems.

The texts of the tattoos were not at all what I expected; there were literary passages, poetry—even Shakespeare and Dante. Words have power. Words are precise and specific. That is one reason why so many of the newly tattooed have chosen to express their most deeply felt beliefs in the form of text. Words of devotion, words of defiance, words of pain, words of love...all are expressions of inner emotions made visible (and readable) on skin. Whether borrowed from literature, poetry, song lyrics, prayers, motivational phrases, names of loved ones, or popular culture, words in all their glorious forms serve as inspiration for tattoos created out of letterforms.

Adding fuel to this trend is the fact that many younger tattoo artists are often design school grads with a broad knowledge of typographic choices. They have studied letterforms, and have been trained in the nuances of letter design. Both the tattooed and those tattooing them are responding to our visually driven culture. Patrons of tattoo parlors, sensitized to the differences amongst various typefaces by the availability of many fonts on their computers as well as by our highly graphic and typographic ubiquitous daily media experiences, often design their own messages. They understand the implications of their choice of lettering style—the forms of the letters themselves have the power to amplify the meaning of the text.

The typographic tattoo trend described is also being driven in part by the new elite: celebrities in the

world of sports, film, modeling, and music who have gotten “message” tattoos and made them even more socially acceptable. These boldface names include Angelina Jolie, Johnny Depp, David Beckham, Eminem, Christina Aguilera, Lindsay Lohan, Diddy, Jon Bon Jovi, Nelly, Charlie Sheen, Tommy Lee, Melanie Griffith, Pink, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Kanye West, Sean Penn, Dennis Rodman, and almost every player in the NBA.

It became clear that the people who were getting these typographic tattoos were quite different from those who were traditionally associated with tattooing. I was surprised to find that no one had yet documented this trend. Having a lifelong passion for and involvement in the design and use of letterforms, I thought that a lengthy exploration of this phenomenon would be a worthy undertaking. Perhaps a bit of background would now be in order.

I WAS A VERY EARLY AND AVID READER. I remember being fascinated by the letterforms themselves as far back as second grade, where I often daydreamed while gazing above my teacher’s head at the lowercase and uppercase letters of the alphabet displayed atop the blackboard: aA bB cC, etc. I loved making up stories about each of these letters, which seemed to have distinct personalities and lives. For example, the capital B was a buxom lady carrying a bag of groceries. The capital letter I was a soldier, standing at attention. At age ten or eleven, somehow I acquired a broad-edged dip pen and some ink, and I loved to doodle with it, making shapes that had thick and thin strokes by holding the broad edge of the pen at different angles. I didn’t know until my first year of art school, at age sixteen, that the broad-edged pen was the classic tool used to create letterforms. Calligraphy (from the Greek, *kalli graphos*, or “beautiful writing”) was a required course at Cooper Union, where I was finally properly instructed in the techniques of letter-making...it was an art form that I hadn’t known existed, and it quickly became my favorite form of artistic expression.

I loved letterforms as an artist because they were beautiful images in their own right. I loved letterforms as a reader because they made words and sentences, they conveyed meaning and they were the instruments which “embodied thought”...what could be better? Our letters had a grand and glorious history; without them, how could civilization progress? My calligraphy teacher, Don Kunz, only allowed us to write “important” texts, as our calligraphic efforts were worthy of nothing less. He taught us that by studying the interconnected shapes of the letterforms we could learn universal principles of art, principles that applied to every artistic field: balance, harmony, rhythm.

So it is not surprising that I gravitated toward a career which allowed me to express my talents using letterforms (or typography) as a major creative tool: editorial design. For over twenty years, I worked in some pretty intellectually heady environments, as a “visual journalist,” that is, as a

magazine design director, whose job it was to amplify and clarify the meaning of the written word for the reader, using type and image. Also, while still in my twenties, I was elected President of the Society of Scribes, a calligraphic organization whose members nationwide numbered more than two thousand at one point. From 1976 until 1996, I taught calligraphy to adults in Cooper Union's Extended Studies evening program, and I continued to practice calligraphy, doing many personal and professional projects.

FAST FORWARD to August, 2003, the time of my encounter on the cross-town bus. By now, I had become a full-time professor of design, a design writer, and a frequent speaker at design and publishing conferences. My interest in that Helvetica tattoo was purely academic at that point, but I could not have foreseen how this tattoo would alter the course of my life.

What began as a simple act snowballed into a book, the first to exclusively document the phenomenon of typographic tattoos. Although I had initially planned to write about the history and appropriateness of the letterforms used to convey a particular message, (which is why I chose to include only Latin letterforms) I found myself drawn to the stories behind the tattoos, the individual and unique motivations for making such a permanent commitment. Ultimately these stories dictated the structure of the book, divided by the themes of the tattoos: love and self-love, religion and politics, homage, celebration or exorcism, memorialization, exhortation, and remembrance. I decided the stories behind the tattoos needed to be told in order to understand why people chose to put themselves through the pain and suffering that even the simplest tattoos require.

Interviewing my subjects, I discovered that their reasons for getting tattooed ranged from whimsical and impulsive to profound and deeply considered. Some tattoos were motivated by personal tragedy; others by joy. Whether tattoos were obtained to excise personal demons or to mark a rite of passage, these personal revelations fascinated me, and so the book became a different journey from the one I had expected. These narratives aroused my sympathy and compassion, subsuming my original intention simply to analyze typographic forms. Certainly, the process of producing "Body Type: Intimate Messages Etched in Flesh," (Abrams Image, 2006), transformed my sensibilities, dispelled many of my stereotypical notions, altered the ways in which I interacted with others, and sparked insights about the human condition.

I brought these stories and body art to light so that readers might consider their own beliefs and power to transform their bodies, souls, and perhaps even the world around them. Interestingly, a number of my subjects, who often were the first in their families to get a tattoo, thanked me for legitimizing their choice of expression through my work, for making it more acceptable within their familial or societal circle. Tattoos may be more mainstream than ever before, but in some

segments of society they still carry a stigma. I often find myself proselytizing (for lack of a better word), trying to convince people that, indeed, tattoos can be, and, increasingly, are, intellectual, literary and “highbrow.”

“Body Type” is currently in its third printing and has turned out to be a cult hit, especially amongst designers and type aficionados worldwide, and keeps popping up in many design blogs. I regularly receive fan mail and photos sent to me from all corners of the globe (the latest is from Tasmania). I hear about “Body Type” sightings in far-flung international bookstores as well as all the major chains and specialty bookstores, and Urban Outfitters chose to feature it in their 100 stores nationwide. Since “Body Type” was published, I have been interviewed on Access Hollywood, Fox News and CBS News, among others. “Body Type” has been recognized by the New York Public Library and the American Library Association, which both recommend it for young adult readers. I have had two shows of my photography from “Body Type,” accompanied by a great deal of newspaper and magazine publicity. I have judged tattoo competitions, and *Inked* magazine has published a six page story on my continuing work on “Body Type,” Volume Two. So I have become inextricably linked to the tattoo world, and I am continuing to collect typographic tattoos for the second volume of “Body Type,” which will be published in 2009. It is amazing how many wonderful typographic tattoos continue to find their way to me!

TRADITIONAL TATTOO LETTERING is generally one of the following: a variation of simple capitals, using a single or mono-line; a script-based style; or a “gothic” (blackletter) form. A popular twentieth century lettering style, military in its origins and usually attributed to tattoo artist Norm Collins, is Sailor Jerry lettering, consisting of an outline with filled-in double-stroke verticals. Hand-lettered and customized versions of lettering styles often reveal the personality of the tattoo artist, just as a person’s handwriting expresses his individuality. These forms may be embellished with elaborate flourishes, a common companion in the tradition of calligraphy and the lettering arts.

But the newer forms of tattoo lettering are based on typefaces widely available on computers and online. These fonts have very specific shapes, and, though they were not designed to be used for tattoos, many adapt well, as long as the artist is skilled enough to reproduce the design details faithfully.

A lettered tattoo is no easy task for the tattoo artist, though it may appear simpler than an elaborate pictorial tattoo. In fact, many artists do not take the trouble to document their typographic work, believing that lettering requires less “talent” on their part . . . however, nothing could be further from the truth. Just as type design is a profession which requires tremendous skill and training, with an eye for harmony and subtlety, the rigors of tattooing letterforms quickly

exposes the artist's level of expertise, since there is little room for error.

Some typographic forms are especially difficult to execute well: the narrow, compressed, sans serif forms of the frequently tattooed Harley-Davidson logo, for example. The spaces inside the letters (counter spaces) as well as the spaces between the letters (kerning) cannot be allowed to fill in with an errant slip of the needle. Small forms with serified details (serifs are the parts of the forms that extend beyond the end of the stroke) are also a challenge, as the serifs and stroke weights must be precise and consistent in order to appear cohesive. The smaller the letterforms, the more difficult it is for the artist to stay true to the design. Longer texts are also more difficult, since they require the ability to sustain a consistent typographic tonal weight or color throughout the passage. It is critical to take into account the shape of the body part as well as the shape it will create as it moves; a well-designed tattoo will follow these natural shapes. This can be difficult in the case of longer passages that need a consistent baseline (the line where the type "sits"); type is generally read along a straight line, but the body has no true straight lines.

In the case of text tattoos that wrap around a body part, such as an upper arm or an ankle, careful planning is necessary to ensure that the quote fits around the circumference perfectly, while maintaining consistent height, stroke width and weight, letter-spacing, and word spacing.

There are other reasons why text-based tattoos, or, as I have documented and named these tattoos, "body type," have become so ubiquitous. One is the overall mainstreaming of tattooing, which has made tattoos more acceptable in all societal strata, especially amongst young people (a recent Harris poll finds that thirty-six percent of all eighteen to twenty-nine year olds have at least one tattoo). Those getting tattoos are statistically more highly educated, making their choice of body type more likely. They also tend to be more culturally sophisticated, and to have professional occupations.

For my book, "Body Type: Intimate Messages Etched in Flesh," I interviewed and documented over three hundred people with typographic tattoos; almost every single person had a college degree (or was in the process of getting one), and many of my subjects had advanced degrees. I continue to see this pattern as I continue my research on volume two (I have interviewed and documented over two hundred additional subjects with typographic tattoos as of this writing).

Another factor driving the popularity of text tattoos is that in our increasingly celebrity-driven culture, all young people are strongly influenced by their role models: sports stars, actors, models, "celebutantes," and rock stars, many of whom have multiple tattoos. Text tattoos are extremely popular with all of these groups (the most common text tattoo is the name of a loved one, or of oneself). It is well known that Angelina Jolie, for example, has eleven substantial tattoos, most of

which are comprised of text (in several languages). Even Lindsay Lohan has four tattoos, two of which are text tattoos.

Many find the specificity of word tattoos appealing because of the importance of precise interpretation. Body type is not symbolic, pictographic or iconic: it is exactly what it says. If you want to tell the world about your devotion to Sting, what better way than to inscribe his lyrics permanently on your most valuable possession: your self? While that is only one example, the motivation for typographic tattoos represents the full panoply of human emotion and desire. From the mundane to the spiritual, from love to hate, from celebration to catharsis, these word tattoos serve to inform and proclaim the wearer's intentions.

I was drawn to study text tattoos through my love of typography as an art form. As I questioned those who had chosen to express their tattoos through words, some were, like myself, aficionados and students of the art of the letterform, educated in the graphic arts. Yet I was amazed to find so many others with no creative training who knew the names of typefaces (most often because of the availability of fonts on their computers) and who had given considerable thought to the design implications of their typographic choices. They understood that the effect of their tattooed message could be amplified and enhanced by their typeface decisions.

These stories continue to fascinate me; they are an intriguing glimpse into the psyche of individuals who have chosen to "wear their hearts on their sleeves," literally as well as figuratively. Though I myself have no tattoos (for many reasons, including a phobic fear of needles), I expect to be documenting tattoos for many years to come. Stay tuned for "Body Type Two: More Intimate Messages Etched in Flesh," which will be published in 2009.