

mad artists and tattooed perverts: deviant discourse and the social construction of cultural categories

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American tattoo history confirms that definitions of deviancy are always in flux. Until the last two decades of the twentieth century, academics recognized tattooing as a semiotic representation of pathology and deviancy. Recently, tattooing was designated as a meaningful way to modify the body and a valuable cultural form. Much like the social construction of the aesthetic category of asylum art, some institutional experts are currently redrawing tattoo as aesthetically legitimate. The historical developments of asylum art and tattoo art are juxtaposed to elucidate how institutional discourses and structural changes effect the categorization of both individuals and the objects they produce. Emphasis is placed on how cultural boundaries shift over time, illustrating the relativity of deviance, changing conceptions of art, and the recently elevated status of tattoo within some milieus.

The history of tattooing in America reveals how the meanings and functions of aesthetic-cultural practices traverse social

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boundaries. Much like the tango, which migrated from the brothels of Buenos Aires to the tony cabarets of Paris in the early twentieth century, tattooing has undergone many “voyages” (Corradi 1997). It has crossed continents, cut across class and gender lines, and hovered between high and low cultural milieus. Tattoos were a symbol of exoticism for the leisure classes at the turn of the twentieth century; a source of pride and patriotism for military men serving in World War I and II; and a mark of differentiation and affiliation for prisoners, gang members, punks, carnies, and other socially and self-proclaimed deviants for over a hundred years.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, tattoos are increasingly commonplace within mainstream, middle-class American culture and can be found upon the bodies of white-collar professionals, college students, and soccer moms (Atkinson 2002, 2003; DeMello 1995, 2000; Irwin 2001; Kosut 2000; Vail 1999).¹ Traditionally used by non-Western societies as a symbol of social rank,² tattoos are similarly employed to hook designer clothing to contemporary American consumers in search of cool. Another significant sign of tattoos’ shifting cultural status is that tattoo art and artifacts are being exhibited under the rubric of art in galleries and museums, and are “collected” by tattoo aficionados as fine art for the body (Vail 1999).

Although some tattoo artists working in the early and mid-twentieth century may have referred to the products of their labor as art (see McCabe 1997), the general public certainly did not. For the majority of the twentieth century tattoos were read as an embodied mark of otherness and were commonly associated with criminality, mental illness, and deviant subcultural groups. Those outside of the tattoo community

¹Although there has been an increased interest in tattooing among the middle-classes, the contemporary tattoo population is quite heterogeneous. A tattoo has numerous meanings and is located within a broad range of social contexts. As Steward (1990) fittingly observes, individual motivations for getting a tattoo are extraordinarily varied including: narcissism, sadomasochism, gang affiliation, existentialism, celebration, decoration, nationalism, and ethnic identity. Social class, gender, race, sexuality, occupation, age, and geographic location all influence individual tattoo experiences.

²The traditional meanings and functions of tattoos in non-Western societies have been well documented by anthropologists and sociologists (see Brain 1979; Ebin 1979; Favazza 1996; Gell 1993; Hamblly 1927; Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 1992; Rubin 1988; Sanders 1989).

typically viewed tattoo as an eyesore or exotic curiosity, not an art form.

Although tattoo art and artifacts are currently undergoing a period of institutional acknowledgment, this is not the first time that tattoos have been displayed for cultural consumption. On his second journey to the South Pacific, Captain James Cook returned to England with a heavily tattooed Tahitian prince named Omai, who became a combination sideshow exhibit and media star (DeMello 2000; Krakow 1994; Oettermann 2000). Other heavily tattooed Polynesians were subsequently displayed as "savages" in a variety of exhibitions, from dime museums to world fairs throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is different about tattoos' current institutionalization phase, however, is that experts are displaying tattoo ephemera under the auspicious heading of art. This bestows tattoo culture with a historically new form of institutional quasi-legitimacy.

The term quasi-legitimate refers to what I describe as tattoos' current liminal status. Tattooing has been granted a degree of academic legitimacy through recent scholarship, and tattoo artifacts have attained aesthetic-cultural legitimacy via exhibitions in major cultural institutions in the highly influential New York City art world. In addition, tattoo art has been shown in a variety of galleries under the headings of both art and outsider art. Notwithstanding, tattoo art has yet to be exhibited in primary art museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art or the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as a "high," "fine" or "legitimate" art form. These terms refer to artistic products that have been distinguished as culturally valuable according to criteria established by cultural elites (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1984; Peterson 1979; Zolberg 1990). Thus, at this point in time, tattoo art has not entered the "center of the gatekeeping system," and is aptly described as quasi-legitimate (Crane 1987:136).

Like tattoo culture, artists also have ties to the social periphery. Artists have been characterized as intrinsically different from those within the general population dating back to the perceived connection between creativity and pathology in ancient Greece, the eighteenth century Romantic myth of the "mad genius," and the discovery of the art of the insane in the twentieth century. In fact, the emergence

of tattoo art as an aesthetic category shares much with asylum art. Both tattooists and patients who exhibited creativity went through similar institutionalizing processes in which their aesthetic products and/or individual characteristics, were constructed as deviant, marginalized, categorized, or were simply ignored, only to be subsequently "discovered" by experts as having aesthetic-cultural value.

This article explores the relationship between tattooing and deviancy by examining how categories are created and modified within institutional discourses. Criminological, psychological, and sociological theories are juxtaposed to elucidate how academic fields have linked tattooing with behaviors defined as deviant. In addition, the correlation between mental illness and creativity is examined, revealing that the stereotype of the mad artist is comparable to the notion of the tattooed deviant. In both cases, experts categorically define and establish individuals, the objects they produce, and the cultural realms they inhabit as evidence of otherness. This examination highlights how aesthetic-cultural categories are constructed, as evidenced by the recognition of asylum art and tattoo art as legitimate by institutional gatekeepers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Post-structuralists emphasize the relativity of all forms of knowledge, placing import on the relationships among power, discourse, and institutional systems (see Foucault 1969). In this vein, the work of Gilman (1982, 1985, 1992), Foucault (1973, 1975), and MacGregor (1989) illustrates how definitions of deviance, madness, and creativity are respectively produced within a matrix of expert discourses and frameworks. Such institutionally-based classifications reflect the social conditions in which they emerge and are historically and culturally grounded. Definitions of mental illness, like definitions of deviance, are protean. As Foucault (1973) reveals, experts have redefined madness over the course of centuries. During the Renaissance, mental illness was a culturally integrated or normalized social problem, as the concepts of madness and reason were not dichotomously separated. However, by the nineteenth century scientists theorized madness as an individualistic "moral" failure and condemned

the insane to asylums (Foucault 1973). During the twentieth century, the asylum-era approach to treating mental illness gave way to an emphasis on observation, recovery, therapeutic remedy, and the notion of mental illness as a treatable disease. Thus, conceptions of mental illness and disease reflect medical-scientific discourses that are structurally rooted.

Transformations in the scientific realm may be compared to transformations in the arts (Crane 1976; Zolberg 1997). Sociological analyses of the arts range from considering art objects and their values, to examining the art object in the context of social processes (Alexander 2003; Becker 1982; Wolff 1981; Zolberg 1990). However, most sociologists agree that “artistic practice is situated practice” (Wolff 1981:137). In other words, art is produced by individuals who are influenced by ideological, historical, material, and structural forces. The creation and reception of art (who gets to make it, who gets to see it, and in what context it is exhibited), along with the perceived inherent cultural value of the objects (authentic or inauthentic, high or low) are processes that are embedded within the social world. Similar to conceptions of deviance and madness, material cultural objects and their meanings do not exist independently of dominant discourses and institutions.

The production-of-culture perspective acknowledges that art objects are constructed within many social fields. Production-of-culture researchers begin with the premise that a network of cultural specialists and institutional organizations shape the nature and development of art (Becker 1982; Crane 1987; Peterson 1979). Becker’s *Art Worlds* (1982) is classic example of this approach. An art world consists of all the people whose work is necessary to produce a work of art—from the assistant who stretches a canvas, to the exhibition coordinator who decides where a painting will be hung. Included within art worlds are those who determine the value of art. Critics, dealers, and other aestheticians devote much attention to deciding what is or is not art, and who is or is not an artist (Becker 1982). According to Becker, “any object or action may come to be legitimated as art,” depending upon institutional consent that follows procedures and rules of legitimation (1982:163).

No cultural form is assumed to be inherently legitimate from a social process perspective. Instead, institutional legitimacy

rests in the hands of powerful gatekeepers. In "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston," DiMaggio (1982) explains how dominant status groups developed their own art forms and the institutional apparatus to support them. Prior to the formation of non-profit institutions such as The Museum of Fine Arts, traditional paintings or fine art were displayed alongside "bearded women, dwarves and Chinese curiosities" (DiMaggio 1982:195). However, with the emergence of an institutional high culture, legitimate art became clearly defined and separated from the art of the masses based on the criteria of established and powerful networks. Correspondingly, in *Creating Country Music* Peterson (1997) reveals how a particular amalgamation of aesthetic formulas came to be recognized as a legitimate country sound. Peterson traces country music's initial creation process through the latter stages of commercialization by focusing on the mechanisms by which music is judged and evaluated, the effects of financing, the impact of technology, and the roles of gatekeepers and consumers. Central to Peterson's analysis is what he refers to as the "fabrication of authenticity" (1997). He argues that establishing a particular musician or musical form as authentic plays an integral role in the development of what we recognize as country music. This phrase is used ironically as Peterson asserts that authenticity is not inherent in a particular performer or genre.

Work within the production-of-culture perspective examines how cultural networks and gatekeepers produce distinctive objects that come to be categorized as authentic or legitimate. While scholars have noted tattoos' rise in cultural popularity and value (DeMello 2002), and conceptualized tattooing as fine art (Vail 1999) or body art (Atkinson 2003), they have avoided examining the process of how tattoo has undergone re-inscription by cultural elites. This analysis draws from poststructuralist theory and the production-of-culture perspective, emphasizing how experts have both discovered and legitimized tattooing within roughly the last decade.

METHOD

While this article relies heavily on a critical analysis of key texts and discourses, data is also derived from extensive ethnographic research. Since 1996, I have immersed myself

within different tattoo scenes, employing both participant observation and in-depth interviewing to get a closer look at transformations that have taken place in American tattoo culture. Hundreds of hours in the field, including undergoing the process of getting five tattoos, has helped me to not only understand tattoo culture, but to "define the group the way the group defines itself" (Williams 1996:32). Over the past eight years, I have hung out in tattoo studios, attended tattoo conventions, and talked to tattoo artists and aficionados. While the majority of my research was conducted within the New York City metropolitan area, I also attended tattoo conventions in Richmond, Virginia, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Toronto, Canada, where I interviewed, observed, and interacted with the attendees. Some interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim, while others were reflexively pieced together from field notes.

Because I am interested in how those outside of tattoo communities view tattoo art and culture, I also attended public lectures, gallery and museum exhibitions, and tattoo art performances. This gave me an opportunity to examine how cultural experts and gatekeepers presented and discussed tattooing. I paid attention to the context and display of objects, and also carefully observed the audiences at these events, which were often made up of an interesting mix of tattoo and art world insiders. For example, at a recent tattoo "Art Fusion Experiment" in October 2005, held in a private art institution located on Manhattan's swank Gramercy Park, I witnessed two cultural worlds colliding when elderly, tweed-clad museum patrons rubbed elbows with heavily tattooed and pierced 20-year-olds in black latex and platform boots.

In-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis were utilized in the analysis of three distinctive areas: (1) aficionados, (2) gatekeepers and experts, and (3) media. By using multiple data collection methods or what Denzin (1978) refers to as "triangulation," I acknowledge that any individual method (qualitative, quantitative, or historical-comparative) has its strengths and weaknesses. In this vein, combining methods ostensibly adds scope and breadth to a study. The category of aficionados refers to tattooed individuals, tattoo artists, and those active in the tattoo community. The category of gatekeepers and experts includes

curators, exhibition coordinators, researchers, academics, and critics who have either played a part in organizing tattoo exhibitions, or have reviewed and written about tattoo art and culture. Lastly, media includes literature emanating from within the tattoo community, websites, mainstream newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, television programs and documentaries, informational and didactic text accompanying tattoo exhibitions, and the content of tattoo exhibitions. Analyzing and comparing the content of media from inside the tattoo community, mainstream media accounts, and cultural experts allowed me to explore the similarities and differences in tattoo discourses. I paid particular attention to the nomenclature and language that each of these communities uses to describe tattoo culture.

TATTOOS AND DEVIANCE: SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

The historically deviant or “outsider” status of tattoo culture in the United States throughout most of the twentieth century, can be attributed to not one, but a cluster of structural contingencies and circumstances. That tattoos are believed to have originated from within “primitive” or “uncivilized” non-western cultures,³ are associated with the eccentric world of carnivals and sideshows, commonly found in prisons, and have been associated with dodgy urban neighborhoods catering to servicemen looking for illicit fun, are a few factors that keep tattoos tied to the cultural margins. Within the academy, tattoos have been linked to criminal and pathological behaviors for well over a century.

In the late-nineteenth century, European criminologists advanced the theory that deviant behavior is the result of biological factors. Although since debunked, their influence clearly resonated in popular and scientific conceptions of tattoos throughout the twentieth century (Caplan 2000; Gell 1993). For example, Cesare Lombroso linked tattooing to degenerate behavior in *Criminal Man* (Gilman 1985). According to Lombroso (1911), tattooed criminals could be

³Colonialism had a major impact on the modern history of tattooing in the West. However, research indicates that tattooing was present in Europe long before tattoos were “discovered” in the South Pacific during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Durkheim 1995; Gustafson 2000; Jones 2000; MacQuarrie 2000).

comparable to tattooed “savages” because they shared a lesser sensitivity to pain compared to civilized people within the general population (Caplan 2000; Gell 1993). French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne, a contemporary of Lombroso’s, also affiliated criminality to the presence of tattoos. Differences in interpretation generated a heated debate between 1880–1914 and numerous articles on the subject were published in European medical and criminological journals (Caplan 2000).

Parry’s *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art as Practiced Among the Natives of the United States* (1933), continued the tradition of viewing tattooing as a sign of deviant behavior. Parry postulated that American people were drawn to tattoos due to sexual deviation and dysfunction. For Parry, the relationship between tattooing and homosexuality was blatantly apparent. He argued that homosexuals openly “extol their perversion” via tattoos (1933:26). Likewise, criminals and soldiers who had “tattooed pictures of the most lubricious inspiration” were “homosexuals who deny their perversion by insisting, often with blatant obscenity, upon their normality” (1933:26). This early psychoanalytic-based account connects tattoo with a range of deviant behaviors, from mental illness to criminality.

Psychological studies from the 1960s–1990s are clearly influenced by prior research, as the connection between tattoos and mental instability is continually confirmed. One characteristic these articles share is their unsound methodological practices and the subjective biases of the researchers. For example, some focus exclusively on tattooed male psychiatric patients imprisoned within state hospitals and prisons (Caplan et al., 1996; Gittleson et al. 1969; Hamburger 1966; Loimer and Werner 1992; Newman 1982; Post 1968). This highly select group of individuals is typically described as being more likely to exhibit personality disorders than those found within the general population. As Sanders (1989) observes, the conclusions of these reports are not notable as the study populations are found within institutions. The tattooed individuals under investigation were already diagnosed and labeled as psychopathological, or were convicted of committing a crime.

In addition to questionable methodological practices, other researchers demonstrate an obvious prejudice against

their subjects. A prime example can be found in Post's (1968) article "The Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorders," in which all motives for getting a tattoo are reduced into one of three deviant sexual categories: the "exhibitionist element," the "masochistic element," and the "sex-symbolism" inherent in the tattooing process itself (1968:519). Post is not alone in claiming that the presence of a tattoo is somehow indicative of homosexual inclinations and suppression of sexual desires (Grumet 1983; Yamamoto et al. 1963). In each of these cases, one historically deviant outsider (the homosexual) is linked with another (the tattooed person). In Newman's (1982) study, prejudice appears to overwhelm sound judgment as tattoos are described as "garish marks" that are comparable to "brands that are used to identify livestock" (1982:231). This perspective is hauntingly reminiscent of the use of tattoos to number Jews in concentration camps, a contributing factor in their dehumanization.⁴

In other examinations the motivations for getting a tattoo are typically characterized as negative. For example, Hamburger asserts that the prisoners he examined got tattoos because of "an inability of the ego to establish identity" in adolescence (1966:62). More recent and less disapproving investigations suggest that the desire to tattoo oneself may be the result of deficiency. Some connect tattoo to extraversion, indicated by the presence of low levels of cortical arousal and a need for constant stimulation (Copes and Forsyth 1993; Favazza 1996).

Notwithstanding, recent research suggests shifts in academic interpretations of tattooing are evident. Often less castigating, they reflect the current popularization and institutional elevation of tattoo culture. The most noteworthy of these studies are based on ethnographic research and document changes in tattoo status and demographics. For example, DeMello (2000) presents a cultural history of the American tattoo community, focusing on how tattoos' meanings have changed since the 1980s, making it more attractive to the middle-classes. In a

⁴As a result, Jewish prisoners suffered what Goffman (1961) refers to as "personal defacement" causing the pre-institutional self to be whittled away through the defilement of the body, thereby facilitating the formation of an institutional identity. To be sure, the employment of tattoos by the Nazis has fostered the historical negativity surrounding tattoo culture in the West.

similar vein, Irwin (2001) centers her analysis on middle-class 1990s tattooees and how they negotiate “moral passages” through face-to-face interactions to maximize the potential benefits of becoming tattooed (54). Vail (1999) also focuses on how tattooed people, or “collectors,” process and interpret their changed identity and bodies. Like DeMello (2000) and Irwin (2001), Vail contributes to the demystification of tattooing and semiotically elevates tattoos’ cultural status by classifying some tattoos as “fine art.” Other important contributions to the expansion of tattoo research have taken into account the gendered nature of tattoo culture by exploring the role of women in tattoo history (Mifflin 1997) and the agentic reclamation discourses of extreme female body modifiers in the 1990s (Pitts 1998; 2003). Arguably, Atkinson (2003) presents the most comprehensive treatment of contemporary tattooing to date. As a sociologist, ethnographer, and tattoo aficionado, Atkinson situates tattoo practices within a sophisticated historical, social-psychological, and cultural framework, deliberately avoiding the rhetoric of deviance. This burgeoning body of work demonstrates a paradigmatic shift in academic approaches to tattooing through the explicit ejection of deviant-based stereotypes that prevailed for over a century.

THE MAD ARTIST: CREATIVITY AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Just as those within tattoo communities were, and still are, considered to be on the cultural periphery, artists have always been associated with non-normative behavior. Since antiquity, artists, particularly poets and painters, were thought to possess innate characteristics differentiating them from others. From Aristotle to Freud, the creative mind was framed, examined, and diagnosed as diseased, damaged, and different. For example, in ancient Greece, creativity was linked directly to corporeality as not only a product of the body, but as a sign of pathology (Gilman 1982, 1992). In the centuries following artists were regarded as socially and biologically abnormal.

During the Renaissance, the link between insanity and genius was revived to elevate the role of the artist (Gilman 1985; MacGregor 1989; Bowler 1997). Marcilio Ficino, leader of the Platonic Academy in Florence, advanced Plato’s theory that poets went through mental states characterized

as "madness of a divine origin" (MacGregor 1989:74). While Plato believed that the poet enters periods of madness, this madness is a particularly favorable state of creative genius (presumably different than someone who is a simply a madman). Likewise, creative madness or genius, as with melancholia, was not regarded as insanity in the clinical nineteenth century usage of the term, but rather had a range of meanings from strangeness to eccentricity (Becker 1978).

It is during the Romantic Period that the link between genius and madness shift, and the popular ideology of the "artistic genius" emerges (Becker 1978; Bowler 1997; Cubbs 1994). As a leading intellectual and cultural movement, Romanticism advanced the notion of rebellion and embraced the world of fantasy, dream, and transcendence. This period represented a paradigmatic shift that questioned the principles of rationalism and empiricism promulgated during the Enlightenment. As Cubbs notes, Romanticism "also preached a dissatisfaction with the mundane everyday world which it believed could only be redeemed through the mysterious transforming powers of the artist's individual imagination" (1994:77). The myth of the Romantic artist as a social and artistic nonconformist who lived in isolation from the mainstream was born. Whether regarded as rebel, misfit, eccentric, divine visionary, suicidal painter, or brooding poet, the trope of the Romantic artist has been a mainstay within art history discourse for the last two centuries (Cubbs 1994).

Extremely influential in shaping conceptions of insanity and creativity, Romanticism was succeeded by other efforts to advance a link between the two concepts. By the turn of the nineteenth century, with the birth of the modern asylum and the subsequent development of the field of psychopathology, French asylum reformer Phillippe Pinel, recognized the artistic inclinations of some patients. According to Bowler (1997), the art of the insane "signified a vestigial link to sanity, an insight which subsequently led the famous reformer to a nascent recognition of the potential therapeutic value of art" (13). In 1845, Pliny Earle, a co-founder of American asylum psychiatry, spoke out against the inhumane and isolationist treatment of patients, claiming that their aesthetic products (typically prose) were proof of their innate humanity (Gilman 1992). Earle claimed, "the only

difference between the sane and the insane, is, that the former conceal their thoughts, while the latter give them utterance" (Gilman 1985:220–1). While nineteenth-century clinicians did not recognize the creations of patients as legitimate art, they continued to explore the relationship between creativity and psychopathology.

Cesare Lombroso's, *Genius and Madness* (1864) was the first study to scientifically link artistic genius to insanity, kindling a major debate (Becker 1978; Gilman 1985; MacGregor 1989; Bowler 1997). Like his biological approach to criminality, Lombroso alleged that artists were hereditarily predisposed to insanity. As Cardinal observes, Lombroso found that artists were "ten times more prone to mental disorders than the average man: genius was accordingly to be seen as a type of psychosis." As a result, "the equation "genius = madness" passed into common currency with alarming speed" (Cardinal 1972:16). Besides studying the essential characteristics of hospitalized patients, Lombroso also analyzed the artwork of the mentally ill to isolate and categorize its perceived unique attributes. Although Lombroso's (1864) methods and hypothesis are indefensible, *Madness and Genius*, has contributed more toward shaping the popular conception of artistic genius than any other single publication (MacGregor 1989).

This brief historical overview of the relationship between madness and artistic creativity delineates shifting discourses and practices within the context of changes in scientific realms and aesthetic paradigms. Just as the idea of a tattooed deviant has transformed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the idea of the mad artist also has been subject to redefinition and interpretation. The following section compares the discovery of tattoo art and asylum art, emphasizing similarities and differences in the construction of two aesthetic-cultural fields that have been traditionally tethered to the social periphery.

ASSYLUM ART AND TATTOO ART: DISCOVERING CULTURE

Bowler (1997), Peterson (1997), and Zolberg (1997) assert that the discovery of aesthetic-cultural objects is characterized by a process of redefinition anchored on the notion of authenticity. After the works are deemed authentic or legitimate,

institutional acknowledgment ensues. Tattoos' discovery is akin to the discovery of the genres of asylum art. Although each art form has its own unique history, characteristics, and organizational structure, comparing trajectories of institutional discovery patterns reveal that there are some similarities between genre transformations.

As conceptions of mental illness changed over time, both clinicians and art historians began to seriously examine the aesthetic products of the institutionalized. However, the publication of *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* in 1972, by German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, signaled an influential shift in the approach to patients' aesthetic products. While not the first work to analyze objects created by the insane within the context of formal aesthetic jargon, Prinzhorn's voluminous study—containing 187 reproductions culled from 5,000 drawings, paintings, and sculptures from over 450 patients at the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic—compared images made by patients to canonized works of art. As Gilman (1985) and Bowler (1997) observe, the works that Prinzhorn chose were aesthetically congruent with art recognized by cultural elites of that time period. After explaining the various psychological components of "pictorial configuration" in the first section of the book, Prinzhorn presents ten case studies of "masters." In addition to offering biographical and clinical information about the artists, a detailed descriptive analysis of individual works, employing the rhetoric of the art historian, accompanies each case. It is particularly significant that Prinzhorn compares his patients' work to canonized artists such as Vincent van Gogh. Although Prinzhorn was not the first psychiatrist to study patient art, he unquestionably set a conceptual precedent. His data, the impressive collections of works he amassed, and his educational background in art history also lend credibility to his conclusions. For these reasons, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* heralds the official institutional discovery of the art of the insane.

The enormous influence of Prinzhorn's (1972) book, which was favorably reviewed and widely discussed, permeated beyond clinical circles to inspire some of the most influential twentieth century artists of the era. Surrealist writers and visual artists, such as André Breton and Max Ernst, were especially moved by the images they encountered (Bowler 1997;

MacGregor 1989). According to MacGregor, the arrival of the *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* generated a “considerable reaction” among Surrealist painters in particular, becoming something of an “underground bible” (1989:281). Jean Dubuffet, known as the champion of “l’art brut,” or raw art, recognized asylum art as having a salient affect on not only his own artistic endeavors, but an “enormous influence on modern art” as well (MacGregor 1989:292).

While asylum art’s discovery is in large part attributed to the *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (Prinzhorn 1972), as discussed previously, other historical and social forces influenced its arrival in the art world. Nonetheless, comparing patient’s artworks with canonized master works facilitated the acceptance of asylum art as a legitimate aesthetic field. Interestingly, tattoos also have been recently linked to the fine art world in a number of ways. Newspaper and magazine accounts of tattooing often use the term art to describe the practice or use a skin-as-canvas metaphor (Greenberger 2002; Leonard 1998) to advance the idea that the body is a legitimate artistic medium. In addition, the tattoo community has embraced similar discourse. For example, the nomenclature tattoo artist (rather than tattooist or tattooer) and tattoo studio (rather than parlor or shop), are commonly used today in print and online media generated from within the tattoo community itself. However, one of tattoos most significant ties to the mainstream art world is the profusion of academy trained artists entering the profession.

The contemporary artworld has undergone significant changes within the past few decades. One of these transformations, a dramatic increase in the number of university-trained artists in the 1970s and 1980s, may be linked with the emergence of tattoo art as an aesthetic category. Some academy-trained artists are choosing tattooing as a way to support themselves and their struggling art careers, or are becoming full-time tattoo artists rather than attempt to enter the over-saturated and seemingly impenetrable contemporary art world. According to Finney (1997), one late 1980s estimate placed the number of trained artists per year as having doubled as compared with those who graduated in the 1970s. Even though the number of galleries also grew within that period, “the country’s art schools and programs were turning out more trained artists than the art world could

absorb (Finney 1997:76). Within this climate it is not surprising that art-school grads have migrated into the tattoo profession. As a result, the discourses and techniques acquired in various art programs influenced the creation of new tattoo styles such as New Skool and Bio-Mechanical, as well as a commitment to innovation and experimentation. The practices and conventions of the fine art world have infused the profession of tattooing.

While tattoos have long been recognized for their aesthetic value within tattoo communities, influential cultural gatekeepers were rather late on the scene. A defining moment in tattoo art's legitimization process occurred in 1995, when Soho's The Drawing Center, a prestigious non-profit art institution presented "Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos." This exhibition of Western tattoo flash and its Asian influences marked the first major New York City tattoo exhibition under the distinguished heading of art. When displayed within a gallery context, the meanings and functions of the objects were officially recognized as having aesthetic value. The majority of the drawings in the exhibit came from private collections and had never been viewed in a legitimate high art environment prior to that time.

Although the exhibition treated tattoo flash⁵ as art, the accompanying catalogue also placed it in an historical and ethnographic framework. In its forward, director Ann Philbin described the tattooers as artists, but characterized tattoos as a "quintessential *folk* art tradition." The reason for this distinction stems from the unique history of tattoos and its evolution within the twentieth century. Older flash is differentiated as folk because of its outsider attributes commonly associated with craft: It was transmitted through a generational apprenticeship system; represented by recognizable, simplistic two-dimensional iconography (hearts, snakes, flowers, etc.); and associated with groups of people who share an experiential or cultural bond (Govenar 1995; McCabe 1997). On the other hand, contemporary tattoo flash has insider credentials; it is often created by academy

⁵Flash refers to drawings of tattoo designs that are commonly found on tattoo studio walls. Flash comes in two varieties, standardized images that are sold commercially, or images drawn by tattoo artists themselves.

trained artists, consists of singular, rather than standardized works, and is part of an oeuvre that intentionally challenges aesthetic boundaries and moves in innovative directions. Thus, "Pierced Hearts" presented a unique combination of both insider and outsider objects and discourses. Tattoo flash was viewed seriously as an art form in the influential New York art world, bringing tattoo a step closer to legitimization as art.⁶

Four years later, in 1999, New York City's South Street Seaport Museum hosted an exhibition entitled "American Tattoo: The Art of Gus Wagner," at the same time as The American Museum of Natural History presented "Body Art: Marks of Identity," which prominently included tattooing. Although these exhibitions differed in content and scope they shared one essential commonality: the designation of tattoo as art in an ethnographic and historical institutional context. Alan Govenar, tattoo historian, researcher, and collector, described "Body Art" as "a major breakthrough for the museum to show its outstanding collection and to create a context where that work could be understood."⁷ Approximately half of the objects in the exhibition were culled from the museum's permanent archives. Although some of the artifacts had been previously exhibited, this was the first time The American Museum of Natural History placed tattoo culture under the rubric of body art. It was also the first time objects documenting modern American tattoo culture were presented in such an elevated realm. Even though the settings were not primary New York art museums, such as the MOMA or Guggenheim, American tattoo made its debut as art in a venerated institution visited by a large mainstream audience.

The exhibition titles "Body Art" and "The Art of Gus Wagner," are significant as they communicate an aesthetic frame in which the public can conceptualize the objects. Prior to viewing the diverse range of artifacts in the exhibitions, audience members who were unfamiliar with tattoo culture or its institutional status were explicitly informed that

⁶The exhibition traveled to other legitimate art institutions such as the Williams College Museum of Art and Joan Lehman Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami.

⁷Transcribed from a public lecture given at New York City's South Street Seaport Museum in November 2000.

the objects they would see had been granted a degree of artistic merit by cultural gatekeepers, regardless of their utilitarian or historic nature. Just as Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1972) was influential in establishing the field of asylum art by explicitly connecting patients' works to the art world, these New York City tattoo exhibitions elevate tattoos' status to art. While I am not suggesting that tattoo art is a genre universally accepted by all fine art gatekeepers, it is evident that tattoo's aesthetic-cultural value has been redefined within institutional discourses and frameworks. The discoveries of asylum art and tattoo art affirm that "new art is not always newly made, but may exist unrecognized as art until redefined" (Zolberg 1997:57).

CONCLUSION

The discourse of deviance is an important component in analyzing the emergence of tattoo as a quasi-legitimate art form. Unlike other aesthetic-cultural forms that made the transition from marginality to mainstream legitimacy, such as jazz, folk art, and photography, tattooing has been uniquely beleaguered by a long-established and powerful public aversion to the practice (Sanders 1989). However, tattoos have not only risen in status to become moderately popularly acceptable, in some milieus, tattoos have achieved an elevated degree of aesthetic value. The tattoo/deviance connection makes tattoo art's cultural climb both a unique and significant event.

Like the pseudo-scientific myth of the mad genius, the notion of the tattooed deviant is an enduring construct. The historical relationships among art, creativity, and various physiological maladies demonstrates the relativity and fluidity of cultural beliefs. The discovery and sanctioning of asylum art as legitimate is comparable to the recent discovery of tattoo as an art form. Both tattoo and asylum art went through lengthy institutionalization processes wherein experts suggested that the products individuals created or adorned their bodies with were evidence of some form of illness. Just as clinicians shifted from viewing the art of the mentally ill as indicative of pathology to an art form with recognizable aesthetic value, some cultural experts, namely museum and gallery curators, are now determining that

tattoo art and artifacts also have value. Tattoo, a previously ignored and marginalized practice, is undergoing a process of cultural re-inscription. New meanings of tattoo are being generated by exhibitions that reframe tattoo as art. Long-standing and commonplace associations between tattoo and criminals or psychopaths still linger, yet they reside alongside new representations and discourses.

When scientists in the early part of the twentieth century spoke on behalf of artist-patients, essentially vouching for the value and legitimacy of their creations, they brought about the institutional acknowledgment of asylum art. Soon, members of the most influential artistic circles, gallerists, collectors, and artists themselves, recognized the value of the art of the insane. Recent international exhibitions in galleries and museums suggest that cultural experts are now speaking on behalf of tattoo culture. However, whether or not tattoos will ultimately have a substantial influence on twenty-first century art worlds is open for debate. What is significant at the present time is that the discourse of artistic elites is entering the publics' imagination, potentially playing a role in the process wherein a cultural practice may be further transformed.

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