

Tattooists create permanent artwork on human canvas, exhibiting special care

By CLAUDIA D. NEWCORN
SPECIAL TO BEE CREATIVE

The art of tattooing, around for thousands of years, has gone mainstream as a fashion statement, with celebrities and models sporting designs on virtually every area of the body.

Bob Sherman, who with his wife, Angel, owns Femme Couleur in Gustine, added tattooing to the salon's list of services earlier this year.

"We knew that many people, particularly women, do want a tattoo, but want to get it in a safe, clean, and properly maintained environment," he says. "We have been proven right."

Considered part of the visual arts profession, tattoo artists (also known as tattooists, tattoo designers and tattooers) do more than inscribe images on people's bodies.

"There are many other parts to the job," explains John Arballo, tattoo artist for Femme Couleur. "You need to learn the whole other side of tattooing - about cleanliness, sterilization procedures, proper space maintenance, how to deal with people, and how to select your inks."

While no formal degrees are required, California Assembly Bill 186 (passed into law in 1997) established sterilization, sanitation, and safety standards for persons engaged in the business of tattooing, permanent cosmetics and body piercing. The law requires that tattoo artists obtain a Certificate of Registration from the county in which they practice. To register, applicants must:

- Be at least 18 years of age
- Provide proof of vaccination for (or evidence of immunity to) Hepatitis B, or provide a certificate of vaccination declination
- Provide proof of completion of a Local Enforcement Agency- approved health and safety class
- Demonstrate, by examination, knowledge of basic tattooing, permanent cosmetic and/or body piercing techniques, universal, precautions, health and safety precautions, sanitation and sterilization techniques designed to prevent cross contamination

Jeremy Smart, a body artist who works with four other tattooists at Blasting Zone in Turlock, observes that "there didn't used to be much regulation, but now it has become mandatory. It's for the safety of the customers. We take courses to meet the certification requirements, as well as other classes to make sure we are up to date about techniques and regulations."

Most tattoo artists have some sort of artistic background and break into the business through personal connections and networking.

Arballo, practicing for over nine years, says he always enjoyed art and design. He took college art courses and ran his own business for several years.

"Most tattoo artists first start as apprentices," he explains. "It's hard to break into (the business). To find a mentor, you have to be persistent and show you have a real passion for the profession before they'll consider taking you on."

Smart, who has been practicing for a decade, adds that "there is no (traditional) school for this job. You're either born into it or throw yourself into it."

The Alliance of Professional Tattooists (<http://www.safe-tattoos.com/>) estimates there are more than 10,000 tattoo artists in the U.S. It's an extremely competitive field with high turnover.

There are two main types of tattoo designers: those who do custom work, which are large pieces that require many hours or even days to complete, and those who produce smaller, more standardized designs, which can be done in as little as half an hour.

The tattoo artist cleanses the region of skin to be tattooed. Using a tattoo pen (a special instrument that can hold a number of vibrating needles filled with ink) the tattooist injects ink under the skin to create the image. Because each person's skin type is different, tattoo artists must decide beforehand what colors will work best with a client's skin.

A stencil is often used for the outline, then the image is completed freehand. Once the tattoo is complete, the area is cleaned again and covered.

Arballo, who specializes in black and white tattoos, says he likes the opportunity for permanent artistic expression.

"Tattoos are a very personal thing and it's very flattering when a person asks me to do a piece of art that will be a part of their life forever," he says. "They select a design from my digital portfolio or pay me \$100 per hour and ask me to do it freestyle and choose a look for them." Arabello notes that many of his clients are women ranging from 30-70 who appreciate the clean, comfortable salon environment.

Smart describes his and his fellow artists' works as "body modifications" which encompass not only tattooing, but piercing, branding, and scarring. "We're very professional and do a lot of custom and freehand work, as well as having portfolios people can choose from," Smart says.

The majority of clients pick from existing designs. Some have original ideas in mind and bring their own sketches with them to the studio, or ask the artist to design something for them on the spot. This requires tattoo artists to be flexible, original, and good at creating new designs.

In addition to strong artistic ability and a solid knowledge of safety practices, mechanical ability

is important because tattoo artists have to set up and operate the tattoo pen and other equipment of their trade.

"You also need problem-solving skills," Arballo says, "and a good ability to communicate. Sometimes a person comes in and has no clear idea of what they want and you have to work with them to extract their vision to create a design."

Because a majority of tattoo designers work for themselves, they also need to be able to deal with general business issues.

Femme Couleur is currently hiring an understudy for Arballo, as well as a cosmetologist. Interested applicants can contact owner Bob Sherman at (209) 854-3496. Blasting Zone is not hiring at this time.

For more information, visit the following Web sites:

Tattoo E-zine - <http://tattooz.net/>

Online Tattoo School - <http://tattoo-school.com/>

American Tattooing Institute - <http://www.tatsmart.com/>

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