

THE KINGS AND QUEENS OF TATTOOS

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From kings and czarinas to pharaohs and priestesses, some of the most powerful people in history have enjoyed the beauty, exoticism and eroticism of tattoos. Their wealth, power and world travels brought them into contact with some of the best tattooists alive. It should be no surprise, then, that the best methods, designs and philosophies in the history of tattooing can be chronicled by telling the stories of some seriously high-profile flesh.

Tattooed rulers date as far back as 2160 B.C. In 1891, archaeologists excavated a mummy in Egypt that they identified as Amunet, a priestess and likely lover of Pharaoh Mentuhotep II. Amunet's arms and legs were adorned with parallel lines and orderly dots, and below her



King George V getting tattooed.



The tattooed remains of Amunet, an Egyptian priestess, were marked with parallel lines and dots and a crescent pattern below her navel believed to help with fertility.

navel there was a crescent pattern. Some historians believe the markings were used to help with fertility and the birthing process, while others believe the markings have a more carnal nature. Markings similar to Amunet's can be found on "brides of the dead" dolls that were put inside tombs to induce sexual feelings in the dead, thereby ensuring reincarnation.

Amunet's tattoos are likely the earliest example of the carnal enticement afforded by tattoos, and the practice has continued to this day. The tattoos of Pharaoh Ptolemy IV, ruler of Egypt from 221 to 205 B.C., are also connected with pleasure: The pharaoh is believed to have been tattooed with leaves that symbolized Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and merriment.

In southern Asia, tattooed royalty appeared in myths. One of the oldest folk stories, *The Hong Bang Family*, dates back to at least 2000 B.C. and tells the story of the kingdom of Van Lang, "land of the tattooed people." King Hung Vuong and other kings had their thighs tattooed with elaborate designs of demons, dragons, peacocks, fish, quails, cats and flying animals. Whether fact or fiction, the story worships tattoos as symbols of power, courage and nobility. The famous trouser-tattoo tradition continued all the way to 1886, when the last king of Burma, Alaungpaya, made it a law that all males over the age of ten be tattooed from the waist to the knees.

In 306 A.D., as a result of the rise of Christianity, tattoos fell out of favor with many of the world's civilizations. Tattoos



Tattooed royalty, clockwise from left; King Alexander I of Yugoslavia had a large eagle tattooed on his chest, Archduke Franz Ferdinand had a winged serpent on his hip, King Edward VII had numerous tattoos including a cross on his arm and extensive Japanese work, while Catherine the Great was rumored to have what were described as "obscene" tattoos.



were used mostly to identify slaves, spies, gladiators and convicts. Fortunately, not every king and queen thought of tattoos as brandings for the lower classes.

The last Anglo-Saxon king of England, King Harold II, led his troops against William the Bastard of Normandy in the famous Battle of Hastings in 1066. When the dust settled, William was renamed William the Conqueror and Harold II lay with an arrow through his eye. As was customary at the time, the dead were stripped of their clothes, which, added to the disfigurement of Harold's face, made the important duty of identifying his remains nearly impossible. It is fortunate, then, that they called forth his common-law wife, Edith Swan-Neck, to identify him. She recognized his tattoo: her name and the word "England" across his chest.

While it is unclear in what part of the world Harold received his tattoo, the location of the tattoo shop was soon to become the most important factor in getting a tattoo. For the next seven hundred years, Europeans pilgrimaged to the Holy Land and commemorated their journeys by getting tattooed with religious symbols in Jerusalem and Bethlehem (ironic, since the Christian church originally prohibited tattoos). The earliest example is Richard the Lionheart, King of England from 1189-1199, who

received a Jerusalem cross while fighting in the Crusades. Such tattoos became common practice by the sixteenth century.

By the seventeenth century, Russia's royalty had begun getting tattoos, but they were somewhat less faith-based. Peter the Great had a battleaxe on his chest, and Catherine the Great continued Amunet's tradition of using tattoos to entice sexuality. While no exact details exist, Catherine the Great's tattoos have been described as incredibly obscene. For a woman who had many young lovers and who sometimes changed her dress three times in one ball, tattoos must have offered permanence to her constantly changing lifestyle. Queen Victoria was also rumored to have an intimate tattoo. It should be noted that Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, has no relation to the piercing by the same name.

What came next was a royal ink rush that no one could have predicted, starting when Japan opened its doors to foreigners in 1854. Japanese tattooists had artistic backgrounds, and their designs were consequently more complex. The Prince of Wales, later to become King Edward VII, was one of the first to appreciate the art. Further, he may be the most important factor in ushering in an era of tattoo obsession in Europe. In 1862, like Richard the

Lionheart, Edward received a cross on his arm in Jerusalem, then moved on to more complex Japanese designs. He was regarded as the King of Fashion, having made tweed, Homburg hats and Norfolk jackets chic. Unperturbed by other royal figures' perceptions of him, King Edward VII even instructed his sons, the Duke of Clarence and the Duke of York, to get tattooed by the legendary tattoo artist Horichyo. They both received dragons on their arms around the tender age of eighteen.

After getting tattooed by Chyo, the Dukes of Clarence and York traveled to Jerusalem and got the same cross tattoo as their father had twenty years before. They even got tattooed by the same tattooist, François Souwan. The English press reported the Dukes' tattoos with exaggerated zeal. A first account even stated that they'd received anchors on their noses. The stories fascinated some and shocked others, but

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following King Edward VII's royal approval, Europe began to warm up to tattoos by the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, tattooists from all over Asia were invited to tattoo members of Europe's aristocracy, and one account from 1895 tells of long lines of upper-class girls waiting in Berlin to get tattooed by Burmese tattooists.

During this time an untold number of royals received tattoos. George Burchett, a major turn-of-the-century tattooist, recorded an extensive list of tattooed royalty in his *Memoirs of a Tattooist*. Among his clients were Queen Olga of Greece, King Oscar II of Sweden, the Khedive Abbas II of Egypt, Prince Kemal el Dine, King Alfonso XIII of Spain, Prince Francis of Teck, Prince George of Greece, the Grand Dukes Alexis and Constantine of Russia, Grand Duke Nicholas, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the Duke of Newcastle, the Earl of Portarlington, the Sixth Earl of Lonsdale, the Sixth Duke of Montrose, the Maharajah of Patiala, His Highness Bhupindra Singhi and so

on. The sultan Ibrahim of Johore had dragons, snakes, birds and leaping tigers on his arms. King Alexander of Yugoslavia had a large eagle on his chest. King Frederick had a Jerusalem cross on his right arm, dragons on his left arm and chest, and a family crest, as well as others. Princess Waldemar of Denmark had an anchor tattooed on her arm because she'd been told that all the wives of Danish sailors were expected to have one. Some evidence suggests that this was true. The majority of these royal figures were tattooed by Tom Riley, Sutherland Macdonald and George Burchett. Burchett's nickname, "The King of Tattooists," may well have been a direct result of his clientele.

In Japan, Horichyo went on to tattoo more royalty, but none have a story more tragic than Czar Nicholas II and Czarina Alexandra Feodorovna. During a state visit to Tokyo,

Czar Nicholas II inquired of the Nagasaki tattoo artists. He wanted one of the beautiful Japanese tattoos that he had read about in travel books, and he received a fairy tale creature that resembled a dragon. Years later, after the loss of World War I, it is rumored that this same tattoo helped Russian rebels identify the Czar when he tried to escape to England. The rebels then took him to Ekaterinburg, where he would be confined until he and his family were executed in the famous slaying of July 17, 1918.



King Frederik IX had numerous tattoos by George Burchett.

During World War I, as is common in wartime, tattoos were in high demand, and many world leaders got tattooed. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and his father were both tattooed in Japan. Joseph Stalin had a death mask tattooed on his chest. Winston Churchill got an anchor on his forearm and his mother, Lady Randolph Churchill, had a serpent tattooed around her wrist and both nipples pierced.

Even the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination sparked the war, had a winged serpent tattooed on his right hip. His autopsy report shows that the shot that began World War I traveled directly through the serpent's head. His great-grandfather, Archduke Rudolf, had the same tattoo; however, his was tattooed backwards over his

heart. Ferdinand would later recount that "the Arab who made the tattoo perhaps intentionally engraved the opposite symbol on the infidel," thereby inducing the poor luck that befell the Archduke Rudolf: He was found dead in 1889, lying beside his mistress. Whether it was suicide or murder is still in dispute. The tattoo both Archdukes bore, an ibis-serpent, or winged serpent, was, ironically, thought to bring good luck in ancient Egyptian culture.

While Europe's royalty embraced tattoos



Czar Nicolas II with his family.

in the late nineteenth century, the United States presidents did not follow suit. Theodore Roosevelt, with a tattoo of his family crest, is the only known United States president to have received a tattoo. Perhaps this is

because presidents are more dependent upon public image to secure their position. But in contemporary times, tattooed royals are not unheard of. Princess Stephanie of Monaco has many tattoos, including a dolphin, a flower, a chain and quite a bit of tribal work. Prince Frederik of Denmark has his nickname, Pingo, on his upper left arm and a shark on his right ankle that he got during his service in the Danish elite forces, and the recently deceased Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands bore a tattoo on his lower left arm.



"The King of Tattooists," George Burchett, tattoos a sailor.

Today, tattoos among world leaders still come as a surprise. The idea of Prince Harry of England having a tattoo is apparently striking enough to run as a story in the British tabloids. This is in part due to the fact that historians have left their stories unrecorded to keep up appearances, and consequently, many tattooed world leaders, both past and present, will never be uncovered. But it is undeniable that the kings and queens who were not afraid to publicly display their tattoos affected the societies they ruled, changing public perception of the art of tattooing forever.