

Marks of the Ancestors

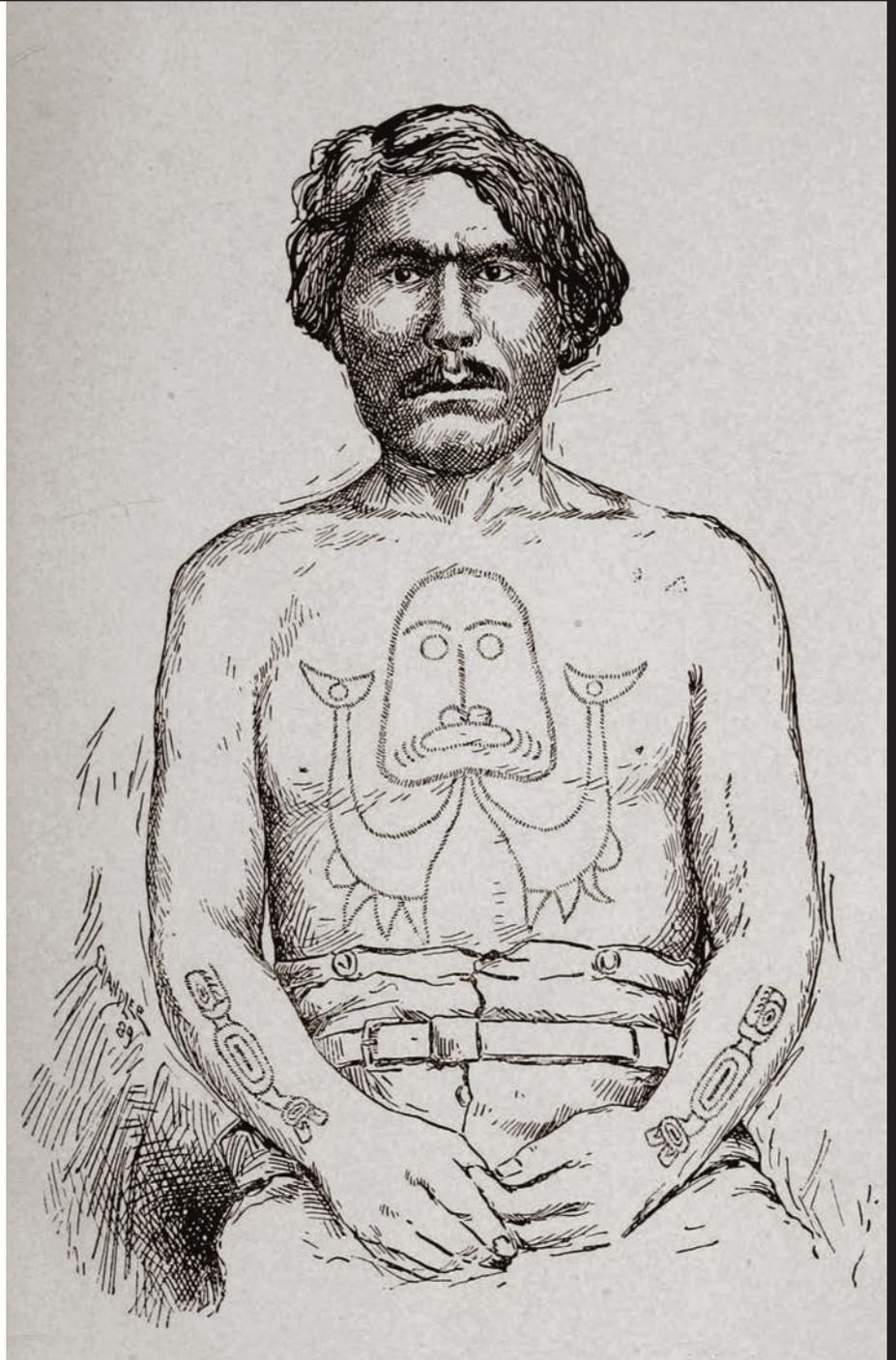
The traditional art of tattooing

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

DESPITE TATTOO PARLORS in almost every city and celebrities flashing chic subcutaneous designs, facial tattoos still carry a stigma—try landing a bank job, even suited up fancily, when you look like Ray Bradbury's Illustrated Man. In the wake of Age of Enlightenment voyages into the South Pacific, the practice reached Europe, where it has long been the domain of thugs, sailors, carnival freaks, biker gangs, and other “unsavory” folk. Some of the first New World encounters between pale faces and tattooed ones occurred along Bering Sea coastlines, during James Cook and Otto von Kotzebue's expeditions.

In Alaska, this visual language was ancient, known to Siberian Yupiit, Inupiat, Aleuts, Alutiit, Deg Hit'an, Gwich'in, Tlingit, and Haida. The earliest representation of a human face in the Arctic—a 3,600-year-old, Paleo-Eskimo carved-ivory maskette

The Haida chief Kitkun, with a codfish design on his chest and salmon on his forearms, 1886.



from Devon Island—has incised lines, a web of tattoos. Intrigued by fellow practitioners, expedition artists mostly depicted women's tattoos. “The chins of the [“Kootchin”] women are always tattooed,” wrote Alexander Murray, the Hudson's Bay Company trader who in 1847 established a trading post at Fort Yukon. Gwich'in men had honor-markings embroidered on their cheeks, for enemies killed. In northern Alaska, elderly women used bone or ivory slivers (and later, steel needles) threaded with sinew they'd blackened with soot mixed with urine, which reduces scabbing. The

skill was the same as that of sewing animal skins. In central and southern Alaska, tattooists favored a puncturing method, rubbing lamp-black into each wound pricked with a bird bone or such. Intricate marks on the forehead, lips, cheeks, arms, or legs could take several sessions to complete; the process was painful, causing treated areas to swell—as it still does today.

Designs typically comprised lines, stars, and other geometrical shapes. Inupiat who'd fought bravely in battle received *tupit*, often four parallel straight lines on each cheek. Applied after puberty, chin

St. Lawrence Islanders in a lithograph by Louis Choris, the artist on Otto von Kotzebue's expedition in 1816.

tattoos (*tavlugun*) adorned women of marriageable age. Stripes scored from the lower lip to the tip of the chin tested their pain tolerance, a virtue in a harsh environment—the wider the chin bands, the higher her threshold. Tattoos protected them from enemies or cured infertility. They denoted kin groups or regional bands or could be pure adornment.

Elaborate thigh tattoos were thought to ease childbirth. Newborns beheld beauty in them, the first thing they saw as they slid from the womb. On Kodiak, transgender men sported women's tattoos. Among acupuncture-practicing Aleuts, indelible ink distinguished female nobility.

Men's facial tattoos, sometimes miniature flukes at the corners of their mouth, showed they had harpooned their first whale. Saint Lawrence "first-kill" tattoos (*kakileq*) announced a hunter's coming of age with small dots on the joints of the neck, shoulders, elbows, hips, knees, and wrists. Both women and men also wore dot patterns in mourning and to shield them against the deceased's unmoored spirit at burials—spirits entered the body through joints. Similarly,



“guardian tattoos” served to disguise the wearer from nonhuman evil forces, which could cause sickness or death.

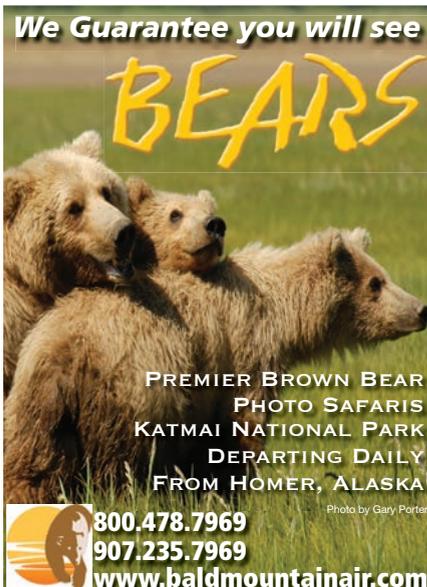
Surveying the newly acquired territory, the U.S. Navy ensign Albert Niblack noted that at ceremonies, Haida men paraded clan crests on bared chests, backs, thighs, shins, and forearms; women also proudly displayed needlepoint “bracelets.” Children were tattooed in naming ceremonies, and certain crests guarded against drowning.

In their attempt to erase tribal customs, missionaries censured body piercing, “savage” hairstyles, and tattooing, as well as ceremonies, dress codes, and beliefs. Under their influence, the United States government banned tattoos as part of the Northwest Coast potlatch in the late 19th century (repealed in 1934). The Haida

responded by engraving their lineages’ emblems on jewelry when precious metals became available. These tokens of solidarity and descent could be removed as circumstances demanded.

Heir to Tlingit and Inupiaq traditions, the Seattle tattoo artist-activist Nahaan considers traditional clan crest tattoos “permanent regalia,” manifestations of “a modern-day responsibility to our ancient identities.” Besides proclaiming identities—a universally human craving—the spidery tracings stake political claims. This explains their resurgence in a younger, outspoken, back-to-the-roots generation. “Upon our bodies,” Nahaan concludes, “we wear our history, the deeds to our lands, our access to the skies, and seas, our relatives.” 

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