



SPECIAL REPORT: THE ART OF COLLECTING

Tattooing Makes Transition From Cult to Fine Art

By Emily Randall

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LONDON — Late last year, the British model Kate Moss revealed a personal fact that intrigued not only the fashion and celebrity media, but also the art world.

The revelation went beyond the acknowledgement from Ms. Moss, one of the most photographed women in the world, that she had tattoos. It included the claim that the swallows on her haunch were the work of the German-born British artist Lucian Freud, who had died the previous year.

In a rare interview published in the December issue of *Vanity Fair* magazine, Ms. Moss pondered the financial value of that tattoo: “It’s an original Freud. I wonder how much a collector would pay for that? A few million? I’d skin-graft it.”

The numbers might sound surprising, but a nude portrait of Ms. Moss, painted by Mr. Freud in 2002 while the model was pregnant, sold three years later at Christie’s in London for €3.92 million, or about \$5.14 million at current exchange rates. The mention of a skin graft put the spotlight on the relationship between tattoos and fine art — and by extension, art collection.

Until recently, the integration of tattoos into the art world was mostly confined to performance art. In 2000, for example, the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra paid four prostitutes the price of a hit of heroin and filmed them having single black lines tattooed across their backs. But today, tattoos — much like graffiti, which in the past decade has been transformed from cult to collectible — are increasingly being embraced by the art world, particularly in areas where art and fashion meet.

For the introduction in 2011 of *Garage* magazine, for instance, the editor Dasha Zhukova commissioned artists including Jeff Koons, Dinos Chapman and Richard Prince to design tattoos. One version showed part of a nude model whose private parts were covered by a green butterfly sticker created by the English artist Damien Hirst. Taking off the sticker uncovered a butterfly tattoo, also designed by Mr. Hirst.

Prestigious art institutions like the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris have taken note. The museum is planning an exhibition in May 2014 called “Tatoueurs, Tatoués,” or “Tattooists, Tattooed,” to explore tattooing as an artistic medium. The show will include “works produced specially for the event by internationally renowned artist tattooists, body suits on canvas and volumes comprising imprints taken from living models,” the museum said in a news release.

Two exponents who are bridging the art and tattoo worlds are the artist Duke Riley, based in New York, and the London-based tattooist Maxime Büchi. Mr. Riley, who trained in painting and sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Pratt Institute in New York, describes himself as a “fine artist and tattooist.” His growing success as an artist has “elevated” his status as a tattooist, he said.



A design by the artist Duke Riley called "Laugh Now, Cry Later." Duke Riley

Mr. Büchi, a London-based tattooist and the editor of *Sang Bleu* magazine, which is available at the Tate Modern in London and the Colette store in Paris, says the Internet has made it possible to browse a huge online catalog of tattoo art. While he claims to dislike the term “tattoo artist,” he said that an increasingly discerning public had bolstered demand to be inked by someone whose work in other media is sold, exhibited and recognized.

In addition to being an exhibition space, the Internet provides opportunities for marketing and self-promotion in a rapidly changing field. Twenty years ago, Mr. Riley said, tattooists learned a wide range of styles to demonstrate mastery of the craft. Today, by contrast, there is a sharp increase in tattooists seeking to establish unique artistic identities.

As with contemporary art, questions about originality and copyright have emerged. Some see imitation in the field as part of a collective tattoo tradition, while others are more protective. Mr. Riley is sanguine about the subject — when his work is copied, he said, he is flattered. Mr. Büchi said he felt “honored” when copied, but he acknowledged the complexity of the issue. “If you are creating a style which is so specific that nobody imitates it,” he said, “then you are clearly doing something wrong. But it’s a delicate thing.”

Mr. Büchi spoke of a “license” of sorts, an agreement between those who are inspired and influenced by one another. “That’s different from someone seeing a design of mine online and passing it off as their own,” he said.

As for Ms. Moss’s musings about reselling tattoos, Mr. Riley said that skin grafting had come up in conversation “at least once a week” in his Brooklyn parlor, East River Tattoo.

The preservation of skin art is already a reality. The Wellcome Collection in London and the Amsterdam Tattoo Museum both feature preserved tattooed skins. And the Irish performance artist Sandra Ann Vita Minchin, who commissioned a tattooist to recreate a 17th-century painting by Jan Davidsz. de Heem on her back, plans to have her skin preserved posthumously and auctioned to the highest bidder.

In 2006, the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye created a piece of work titled “Tim, 2006,” in which Mr. Delvoye tattooed the back of a man, Tim Steiner, and signed it. In 2008, it sold to a German art collector for €150,000, which was split between the Zurich gallery which had sold it, the artist and the model. Mr. Steiner displays his skin several times a year, and has given consent for his skin to be framed after his death.

Preserving skin posthumously is likely to become relatively common by the time the 20-year-olds of today enter old age, Mr. Riley said, particularly considering the monetary investment involved with collecting high-end tattoos.

Such thoughts can veer toward the sinister. Ilse Koch, the wife of a Nazi commandant during the Holocaust and one of the first prominent Nazis to be tried by the U.S. military, was accused of having taken souvenirs from the skin of concentration camp victims with distinctive tattoos. In Roald Dahl’s 1952 short story “Skin,” a destitute man enters a gallery and displays a portrait tattooed on his back by a now celebrated painter, leading to a bidding war and an unsettling ending.

A more likely scenario, Mr. Riley said, is that family members would choose to preserve the tattoos of loved ones. For Mr. Büchi, however, tattooing is not art to be passed on through generations. “The value of a tattoo lies in the fact that it does not belong to the artist in that way,” he said. “To preserve it would be to devalue it. Its value is that it will die with you.’

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