

ARTS & BOOKS

Tattoo boom

By Claire PESLHERBE & Ségolène PRADEAU

The tattoo industry is flourishing in the US, and particularly in Illinois, where a law dropping the legal age to get a tattoo from 21 to 18 was passed last year.

The oldest traces of human tattoos have been found in Japan, from 10 000 years ago. Depending on the times and culture, tattoos have been marks of social rank or religious belief, as, for instance, in India, where people had forehead tattoos denoting their caste. But tattoos have also often forcefully marked slaves, convicts, and concentration camp inmates. And until recently, tattoos carried a negative connotation in Western culture, as a hallmark of outcasts. Even nowadays, people with tattoos are often looked down upon by others, and many tattoo bearers claim to have been discriminated against when looking for a job.

However, public opinion seems to be changing fast, as many different kinds of people are now getting tattooed. Statistics are telling.

In 1999 the word "tattoos" was ranked by the search engine Lycos as the eleventh most popular search term, in 2000 as the seventh, in 2001 as the fourth, and in 2002 as the third.

A study made by *Life* magazine in 1936 assessed that 10 million Americans, that is, about 6% of the U.S. population at the time, had at least one tattoo. In 2003, a Harris Poll estimated that 16% of the American people had been tattooed once or several times.

A study made by the American Academy of Dermatology in 2006 shows that 24% of Americans between 18 and 50 have at least one tattoo. The same survey shows that 36% of people from 18 to 29 are tattooed.

This new fashion seems very egalitarian. The percentage of men (16%) and women (15%) tattooed is almost the same. Likewise, the difference in number of tattooed people according to their ethnicity is not significant: 16% of white people, 14% of black people & 18% of latinos are tattooed.

The industry is booming: according to the most recent surveys, a new tattoo parlour opens daily, and the number of tattoo parlours nationwide is up to 20,000. Tattooing is said to be one of the fastest growing retail ventures of the last decade.*

Nowadays, tattoos are more of a fashion statement than anything else; people get tattoos mostly for aesthetic reasons. Given the fad, lawmakers have had to adapt. In Illinois, their main concern was to prevent young adults from seeking "back alley" tattoo shops. Such shops, which tattoo with non-sterilized equipment, pose a serious health risk.

Sources: * www.vanishingtattoo.com "Tattoo Facts & Statistics". Vanishing Tattoo is a website dedicated to tattoo culture.

"Body of Art," *Red Eye* 28 September 2006. (*RedEye Magazine* is an edition of the *Chicago Tribune*) <http://redeye.chicagotribune.com/>

"Lower Age for Tattoos Welcomed," *The Register-Mail Online* 11 November 2005.

Tattoo Life Magazine: www.tattoolife.com