

A Lisa Napoli Radio Script

The following is a radio script as written -- in raw form -- by reporter Lisa Napoli for the public radio show Marketplace. The story aired in June, 2004

HOST LEDE

This weekend at a fairground just outside Los Angeles, more than twenty thousand people are expected to gather for the third annual Tattoo Expo. These tattoo-philies pay twenty bucks a piece to commiserate, to watch tattoo artists from around the country in action, to add to their own personal collection of tattoos.

Whether you find the ancient practice of body art magnificent or deplorable, there's no way around it: Somebody's making money doing all those tattoos-whether it's the artist, the show promoter, or the maker of tattooing supplies.

Marketplace's Lisa Napoli takes a look at the indelible art that's become a trend that won't go away:

SCRIPT

(ambient full)

AT a literary salon, like this one held in Los Angeles this week, you'd expect the tattoos to have a particular sort of backstory:

Carolyn#1 :10 (cut end in brackets)

I have one tattoo, it's of a muted trumpet, it's on my wrist, (and if I turn my wrist it looks a bit like a martini glass with an olive falling out.

Carolyn#2 :4

It's from a book by Thomas Pynchon called the Crying of Lot 49.

Some stories are less high-falutin:

Cecil#1 :15

That tattoo, it's a symbol from Queen Amadallah from Star Wars Episode One, because I waited for six weeks online for tickets at Mann's Chinese theater and I got it to commemorate that adventure.

The idea of using your skin as a commemorative canvas isn't new. Tatting's been around for four thousand years. But now:

Tattoo#5 CUT FIRST WORD

It's everywhere. It's on McDonald's ads, it's on television, every artist has one, every basketball player has one.

Bob Baxter is the editor of Skin and Ink Magazine. He calls tattooing the greatest artistic movement since the Renaissance.

Used to be, when you said "tattoo" you'd think longshoreman with the word mom on his chest.

Since tattoos started going mainstream in the early nineties, you're just as likely to see a mom with a sailor tattooed on hers.

Bob#7

I think it hit the public like a fad hits the public, like low-rider pants or bouffant hairstyles.

But the fad didn't die -- and even people in the industry have been surprised. The number of shops continues to grow, and Baxter estimates there are 20-thousand artists nationwide.

He claims a third of all people between the ages of 18 to 49 sport some sort of permanent ink.

And those people are likely to be repeat customers:

It seems tattoos are kind of like potato chips:

Bob#10

Once it continues, you've got a tattoo, you've gotta have another one.

(ambi of tattoo in progress at BABA's shop) needle noise 1 or 2

Who gives you the tattoo is almost as important as what you get tattooed on you.

At Vintage Tattoo in Los Angeles, the client on the table has traveled all the way from New Jersey to get his lower stomach tattooed by the owner, Baba. The tattoo alone will cost him 500 bucks.

Baba's a well-known artist who's had his own shop since 1995 -- people learn about his work at tattoo shows, in magazines, and of course, on skin.

The walls and ceiling are papered with tattoo art. There are also snapshots of his family, a portrait of President Bush, and several official looking citations:

Baba#7 :08

That national leadership award? That blue one? That I got and see above it I got 2003 businessman of the year.

Baba#8 :04

Both of those were given to me by the Republican Party.

Baba#9 :08

For bringing new business to this neighborhood. (cut end)

Baba misses the old days.

He says the business has become "Disneyfied." Baba says people show up at the shop with the family in tow, as if getting a tattoo was just another errand, or a trip to an amusement park.

They also try to bargain down the price -- something no one used to do before tattoos went mainstream:

BABA#6

Would you look for a bargain when you were getting your kidneys replaced?

He says there are too many artists now -- and because of that, the prices of tattoos have gone down- Baba still makes enough that he can send his daughter to private school. But gone are the days of the 3 or 4 thousand dollar weeks.

But just because you can draw doesn't mean you can give a tattoo.

Bob Baxter says art students graduate from school and flood the field. They see tattooing as a way to make a living with their craft -- and become small business owners at the same time.

And there's another lure of tattooing as a profession:

Bob #1 (the second one) :13

Who wouldn't want a job where you got work about 11am, and there's an 18-year old girl pulling down the back of her pants, and she wants a tattoo of roses on her butt -- that's not a bad lifestyle.

And if it gets tedious, there's always another growth industry: Tattoo Removal.

I'm Lisa Napoli for Marketplace.