

Gallery Guide: “Inked Bodies,” Spencer Museum of Art

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Diane Arbus, “Jack Dracula, the Marked Man” (1961) (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas)

I sat for my first tattoo when I was fresh out of high school, and in the last 15 years, I’ve often reflected on how it has come to symbolize my own experiences and deliberations on life. “Inked Bodies” at the Spencer Museum of Art captures that same sense of contemplation, featuring artworks that share a small history of the enormous and time-honored practice of tattooing.

The curators of the exhibition — 2023-2024 Spencer Museum graduate interns Connor Joseph, Ariel Kim and Dominique Stringer — open a dialogue about stereotypes and stigmas related to tattooing, weaving together diverse stories from various cultures and periods. After investigating the museum’s permanent collection, the curators discovered a theme that was not only understudied in art history but one that disrupts the boundaries between “fine art” and visual culture.

Featuring artworks as diverse as the figures they portray, “Inked Bodies” includes photographs, prints and paintings featuring marginalized groups such as Indigenous, queer and incarcerated people as well as sailors and gangs. Stringer said, “What really drew me to this topic is how tattoos can tell stories and preserve memories on people’s bodies.”

The exhibition opens with a stunning 1970 photograph by Diane Arbus entitled “Tattooed Man at a Carnival.” The image reveals a performer who claimed to have been kidnapped by Indigenous people and tattooed against his will; however, the Western motifs and techniques disclose a different narrative and instead reveal the popularity of tattoos in carnival culture. “In the past, tattooing in many parts of the world was adopted as a means of punishment or otherizing people,” Kim said, “which led to its social stigma and negative reputation. However... more people have come to view them as a voluntary choice for self-expression and artistic experimentation.”



Mishima Go, "Untitled" (1972) (Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas)

A Japanese color woodcut by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi and Wada Hori Yu displays the act of tattooing on an Edo period (1600-1868) courtesan. The print, titled "Ita sō: Kansei nenkan jorō no fūzoku (Looking in Pain: The Appearance of a Kansei-era Prostitute)," depicts a woman shying away from the needle and clutching some fabric through her discomfort. The painting unveils a common practice in Japan's underground subculture, as courtesans would receive tattoos of their names, nicknames of their regular clients, or even vows, religious affirmations or personal mottos.

Alberto Vargas' 1940s watercolor and airbrushed paintings, "Untitled (gatefold)" and "Untitled (June Calendar)," unveil a popular theme found on the bodies of military men, particularly those who served in World War II. Pin-up girls and sailor girls tattooed on soldiers' bodies

and flaunted as passive objects provided escapist fantasies that helped the men demonstrate their masculinity and heteronormativity. The models' short skirts, full makeup and flirty smiles emphasized their sexuality and innocence. These images were also commonly painted onto airplanes.

“Inked Bodies” is as much about storytelling and identity as it is about tattoo art, and the practice continues to serve an important role in the 21st century as people become more comfortable outwardly sharing their histories and experiences. “This to me underscores one of the messages of ‘Inked Bodies,’ which is building community,” Joseph said.

“Inked Bodies” continues at the Spencer Museum of Art, 1301 Mississippi St., Lawrence, Kansas, through Dec. 15. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday – Friday and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. The museum is open until 8 p.m. on Thursdays. For more information, 785.864.4710 or www.spencerart.ku.edu.

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