

## **Tattoo artists hone craft as art gains acceptance in society**

Sarah McCallister

Drawings of naked women and skulls adorn the walls next to images of angels and crosses. The sharp buzz of instruments interrupts the easy-going rock music playing throughout the shop. One man grimaces in pain.

Just another Saturday afternoon at the shop.

Iron Brush, located at 1024 O St., has been tattooing and piercing Lincolniters for 7 1/2 years.

Owner Tyson Schaffert explained the shop's name, saying that the tattooing device is often called an iron; thus, the artists are creating art, or painting, with an iron brush.

And according to a January 2007 Pew Research Center report, more than a third of 18- to 25-year-olds are now choosing to act as the canvas.

"There's no better way to express myself than through something permanent," said Paige Juhnke, a junior advertising major at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Juhnke, a Lincoln native, is among this generation of young adults whom the report refers to as Generation Nexters. Members of this generation are striking out and defining themselves by getting inked.

For an art form that used to be stereotypically limited to the wildly rebellious sailor or biker, tattoos are becoming more accepted in our modern society.

"I definitely think they're more socially acceptable. That's totally changed," Juhnke said. "I don't think people see tattoos in a negative light anymore."

"A lot of people who wouldn't have had them do now: doctors, lawyers," said Nate Deal, a tattoo artist at Iron Brush.

While the trend of tattoos is gaining in social acceptability, the practice is nothing new. According to a Jan. 1, 2007 article at Smithsonian.com, humans have been tattooing their bodies for thousands of years; the earliest evidence of tattoos comes from a 5,200-year-old frozen mummy named "Iceman," which was found along the Italy-Austria border in 1991. Since then, cultures throughout history have been permanently marking their bodies with a variety of designs serving a variety of purposes – ranging from status symbols to signs of religious beliefs to forms of punishment.

While the rationale behind modern tattoos may have changed over time, they still reflect deeply personal ideals.

Carolyn Novak, a 20-year-old English major at Doane College, sat on the benches at Iron Brush Saturday afternoon, awaiting her turn for a tattoo. Novak was preparing for her

third tattoo, having gotten one every year since becoming of legal age. Her previous two, she explained, were to honor or remember other people, but this one would be different.

“This tattoo is for me,” Novak said. Novak planned to have a charm bracelet with various charms depicting different aspects of her life inked on her ankle.

Juhnke, who got her tattoo in August 2008 at Iron Brush, has the word “faith” in Russian on her right foot. The image not only expresses her Russian heritage, but also the importance of faith in her life.

The experience of getting a tattoo can also serve as a bonding experience. Geri Fleming and Michelle Mostek of Creston, Iowa, now in their 40s, have been friends since childhood. Four years ago, when in Lincoln for a Nebraska football game, the pair got matching small, pink hearts on their left ankles. On Saturday, they were once again in the Iron Brush waiting area, preparing to be inked again, this time with Fleming getting three stars on her foot and Mostek the word “Huskers” on her ankle, above the pink heart.

The inspiration behind getting tattoos, however, might not be as personal as the resulting art itself. Multiple shop patrons and employees alike agreed that part of their reasoning for getting tattoos in the first place stemmed from the fact that friends or family members had them. Novak, for example, said that all of her older siblings had tattoos. Kevin Straw, who was in the process of having negative-space thorns drawn on his left upper arm, said his father has a number of tattoos, and Straw was “always fascinated by them as a kid.” Iron Brush front-desk worker Nick Fogerty got his first tattoo from Schaffert at the age of 18 or 19 after a couple of his friends began adorning their bodies.

No matter what the rationale behind getting a tattoo, there are always things to be wary of.

Novak said when people see her tattoos, they often say things such as, “You’re going to go to work like that?”

“You have to be careful,” she explained. “You have to think about (your) future career.” While much of society is becoming more accepting of body art, some areas remain traditional, passing judgment on tattooed individuals, Novak said.

Health concerns are another, more imminent danger that sometimes accompany tattoos.

Straw, as he lay on his stomach, wincing at the work being done on his left arm, recalled an elderly woman who frequented the restaurant at which he worked. She had a particular distaste for tattoos and was sure to make her feelings known to Straw. But the woman had good reason: Her son had been tattooed by someone other than a licensed professional and gotten hepatitis as a result.

That’s why you go to the pros, Straw said.

And Iron Brush takes pride in their pursuit of providing safe tattoos. In their Frequently Asked Tattoo Questions pamphlet, the shop makes it explicitly clear that they use new needles for each client, stringently disinfect their work areas after each use and sterilize their equipment to the best of their capabilities. Furthermore, a sign hanging above the swinging doors that lead to the back warns clients against entering the tattooing/piercing area unless they are the one being tattooed/pierced in order to prevent contamination of the sterile work environment.

But cleanliness doesn't stop at the door; clients have the responsibility to cleanse and care for their tattoos after they leave the shop. Upon the completion of her "Husker" tattoo, Schaffert reminded Mostek to leave her bandage on for two hours, at which time she should wash the tattoo with soap and water and, finally, coat with a thin layer of LubriDerm multiple times each day.

During the two to four weeks it takes a tattoo to heal, people are advised to keep away from oil-based lotions, such as Vaseline, refrain from picking or scratching (dry, flaking skin is a normal part of the healing process), and to avoid sunlight and long soaks in the bath or hot tub. These actions increase the possibility of infection as well as the likelihood of skewing the tattoo art itself.

While, comparatively, the pain incurred while receiving the tattoo is of trivial significance, it is often at the forefront of clients' minds. Schaffert said that among his most-asked questions are, "What does it feel like?" and "Will it hurt?"

"It's just a feeling you can't describe," Mostek said.

Schaffert agreed. Often, he said, clients will come in, ask what being tattooed feels like and be unsatisfied when he can't supply a clear answer. After their tattoo is completed, then, he asks them to describe the feeling – more often than not, they are unable to explain the sensation they just experienced, Schaffert said with a smile.

"It's more of an annoying, hot, dragging pain," Schaffert said, struggling to find the right words. "It feels like the buzzing (of the iron), if that makes sense."

The level of pain can vary depending on the size and placement of the tattoo. For example, according to an Iron Brush pamphlet, areas with more muscle, such as the upper arm or calf, will hurt less than bonier areas, such as the elbows or ribs. Furthermore, sensitive areas, for example, places you are ticklish, will sting a bit more when being inked.

One might think that after having gotten as many tattoos as some of the artists around the shop, the feeling would become routine. These tattoo veterans, however, disagree.

"You *never* get used to the pain," Deal said as he worked on Straw's arm. Straw agreed as he winced in pain.

“Just wait until I start filling in with black,” Deal taunted.

Such joking reflects the laid-back, friendly atmosphere of the shop.

Schaffert started Iron Brush in early 2002 after the previous shop he had worked at closed. This time, Schaffert said, he wanted to do things his own way.

All the people he hired, and who currently work there, were people he knew and had been staying in communication with over the years.

“The most important thing is hiring the right people,” Schaffert said. “These guys are perfect, fantastic, in every way.”

Fogerty explained from the front desk how all of the shop employees were pretty normal guys, many of whom have families and live relatively conventional lives outside the shop. They were just a group of friends running their own business.

The business of tattoos, that is.

Tattooing turned out to be a natural choice of profession for Schaffert.

“I always wanted to be an illustrator,” he said. Tattooing is artistic, mechanical and involves meeting a wide variety of people, Schaffert explained, making it perfect for him.

Deal had a similar explanation as to why he tattoos for a living.

“I’ve always been interested in tattoos, always been interested in art,” he said. “(The two) just kind of went hand in hand.”

An artist typically must work for a couple of years as an apprentice before gaining the ability to tattoo on his or her own.

Deal first found out about a position at Iron Brush seven years ago through some friends who worked in the shop. After being hired, he went through his two-year apprenticeship under Schaffert and has been tattooing on his own for the last five years.

“Tattooing is incredibly difficult to do,” Schaffert said. An artist needs at least three to five years of experience before they can be considered a good tattoo artist, he said. Because of the immensely challenging nature of the profession, Schaffert has developed a theory.

Tattooing saves itself, he said. It saves itself for those only those artists who really want to do it.

“You have no choice but to be completely dedicated,” Schaffert explained. “You can’t find someone who doesn’t care.”

This, then, benefits the client, Schaffert said. When someone goes to a professional to get tattooed, they don't have to worry about how much effort will be put into their piece.

Therefore, when choosing a tattoo artist, a potential client can shift their efforts toward selecting their tattooer based on artistic styles instead. Deal recommends those interested in getting inked should always look at the artist's portfolio in advance.

"It's the most important and most forgotten aspect of tattoos," he said. "(You should) never be scared to talk to the artist."

Schaffert described the tattoo industry as "always expanding, always creating." It's like the car industry, he said, in a sort of post-modern, transitional phase: A car will always have the same basic structure of four wheels, but makers continue finding new, better, more efficient ways to run the vehicle. Similarly, tattooing today demonstrates basic traditional elements combined with modern trends and innovations.

Tattoos are evolving, he said, but he doubts they will ever reach a "perfect" phase.

But for now, the artists of Iron Brush are doing the best they can.

A steady stream of customers enters the shop. Some scan the walls, looking for tattoo ideas among the images of scantily-clad women, roses and hearts, but most crowd the counter, examining the artists' portfolios and negotiating tattoo designs and prices.

One woman begins to second-guess herself, and decides to return later. Another considers bailing on a wedding she planned to attend later in the afternoon in order to get her ankle inked instead.

Nobody pays mind to the sharp buzzing breaking through the easy-going rock music drifting throughout the store. Or the faces in the back clenched with pain.

Yep, just another day at the shop.