

Backpiece is our unique tattooist's opinion column. Any professional tattooist can write one. Happy, sad, bitter or twisted, we don't mind! If you would like to get on your soapbox, drop us a line telling us what you would like to write about. Include your studio details and we'll get back to you. E-mail: editor@totaltattoo.co.uk or write to: Backpiece, Total Tattoo Magazine, P.O. Box 8273, Bishops Stortford, Herts, CM23 3YD.

Illustration: Mr Benjamin, Tradition 180', Derby



Backpiece

I'm sure some of you have heard of Thomas Lockhart and Vince Hemingson's documentary movie and website 'The Vanishing Tattoo'. I have not as yet seen the movie but I have perused the website some (www.vanishingtattoo.com), reading and looking at the pictures. I got the gist of it in any case. This whole idea led me to thinking and coming to a few of my own conclusions. First off, most tattoos are authentic in one sense or another, whether they are done by a guy in a kitchen with a homemade machine and rudimentary inks on his friends or a by well-established 'artist' on a high street for large cash. Some would argue the former is even more 'authentic' than the latter. The Oxford English Dictionary defines authentic as being of undisputed origin and 'genuine'. When someone comes into your tattoo shop and asks for a classic design, be it hearts and flowers, name and a cross, an Asian dragon, a black panther, a fish, an eagle, a snake, a tiger, a ship, and dare I say it, even tribal... this is real, genuine, authentic tattooing. These are powerful symbols in the tattoo lexicon and to treat them as so much 'flash' just for the masses, well, this disrespects tattooing and perhaps the person who scoffs at this better learn how to flip burgers instead.

Some will argue that tribal doesn't belong in that list. I argue otherwise as it's been around for a long while, adorns the bodies of hundreds of thousands of people around the globe and has made tattooing accessible to people with little creative thought or taste. This has made us all very well off indeed, in so many ways. Tribal has evolved on its own into a worldwide phenomenon much like Coca Cola and Britney Spears. I am speaking of Leu Zulueta type tribal, of course, black, spiky little pieces that fit over the backsides of cute girls in Hong Kong as much as in London. They wrap around the ankles of 30-something moms from LA to Sydney and adorn the biceps and shoulders of tough guys in every city of world. (Thanks George Clooney and Quentin Tarantino!) To not call this natural tribal evolution 'authentic' would be foolish.

To mimic something without heart, or to exploit something simply for a pay cheque, this is what drains the power out of a tattoo and rescinds its authentic status. Make no mistake, most people coming through that shop door are looking for a real experience. If anyone deprives them of that, it's us the artists who do. Copying a Maori tattoo out of a coffee table book does not make that a real genuine tattoo, nor does copying a page out of a Horiyoshi book make it real a Japanese tattoo. Think about the history that a simple western design carries with it, such as a sailing ship with a banner and wreaths... what an icon! Even now it carries much weight and history and can communicate a plethora of meanings. That is if you make it with heart. Hence my saying that the scratcher with little technical talent and lots of passion can compete in the authenticity department with

a talented artist who doesn't give a fuck. Without naming names, this is how several big name artists of today became big name artists. It's all about how you think about it and that goes for every tattoo you make. The same way simple food prepared with love tastes better than fancy produced food, tattoos created with love and meaning feel and look better and are, of course, more authentic.

In my travels I have discovered an ugly truth; that many street shop tattooers don't like tattooing anymore. They have little or no respect for their customers because they think that by choosing a design off the wall, or by picking a simple flash piece, these clients are somehow not deserving of a real and/or good tattoo. The joke is on us, of course. This attitude is helping to weaken the tradition of good tattooing. It is causing many people to exploit and ruin the trade by allowing under-educated 'tattooers' a very large foothold in the business without the proper history lesson and due respect owed to tattooing. We all need to rethink what it is we are actually doing. I have heard it said that if one wants to stay true to the game then one should get tattooed at least every six months, to indeed remember

exactly what it is we are doing. As a practitioner of this theory I highly recommend it.

I have tattooed spiritual travellers on the beaches of Thailand, I have tattooed US Marines en route to war in Iraq,

drunken Swedes in the red light districts of Scandinavia, worker bees in suburbia, party people in Ibiza, creative types and crims in big cities and everything in between. They all share one common trait. Not a single one of them was looking for or wanted a fake tattoo. They all wanted realness, genuine quality and authenticity. On my own quest to provide these things I asked myself the one haunting question that changed it all. "Would I want to get tattooed by me?" After much reflection, I changed my attitude to many things and decided on a new course, a course that prescribes that sometimes a guy just wants a plain eagle from the wall, without a flaming 8 ball and a 3D geometric background, an eagle that represents basic things to a basic person, and you know, that's cool. That's what it was all about, and still is, in most places where we call tattooing more real than it is here.

The tattoo is not vanishing, it is only being fucked like a cheap whore. We all need to show more love and respect to this magnanimous lady and put her back on her feet where she belongs, for she has been good to us for so long and for so many, artists and aficionados alike. We owe it to her. Keep it real.

Kian Forreal
www.tattoopusher.com

I asked myself the one haunting question that changed it all. "Would I want to get tattooed by me?"