

THE SECRET LIFE OF TATTOOS

Meanings,
Shapes and
Motifs

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THE MARITIME WORLD

It is true that the Ötzi mummy showed just how far back the history of tattoos takes us – right back to the earliest times of humanity's existence. But what we are really interested in is having a more modern and up-to-date understanding of what those who have some kind of tattoo on their skin are saying to us today. And as we turn towards more recent times, our first stop is at sea.

Not surprisingly, some of the most traditional and popular tattoos over the centuries have been linked to the maritime world, one of the birthplaces of tattooing. The oceans have historically been seen as worlds of passion and adventure. Since time immemorial, tattoos have been a way to capture and communicate the stories of this world and today, their meanings are internationally recognised. Tattoos of this type come and go like the tides. They become fashionable, only to fall into oblivion, until they appear once again. But be that as it may, we can affirm that maritime theme tattoos are an essential classic among lovers of the sea and tattoos.

In the following pages, then, we will try to discern the meaning of some of the most common tattoos of the maritime world, some of which also involve seafaring history, to some extent. This is actually just a few of the many types of tattoos that the sea world has seen its environment create. As we have said, the maritime world has traditionally been a veritable nest of creativity for tattoos, even being one of the areas where the art of drawing on the skin has historically had greater presence.

ANCHORS

When it comes to tattoos, the anchor is undoubtedly one of the main references to the seafaring world. In reality, however, its metaphorical significance means its use as a symbol transcends far beyond the realm of the sea.

The anchor represents stability and the return to land after a sailing trip. For this reason, sailors and seafarers confer the meaning of good fortune onto them. The anchor represents firmness and stability, for that is its function: to keep the ship steady so that it does not drift away. In the same sense, sailors associate having the anchor symbol tattooed onto them with being protected from misfortune, as it implies protection and security.

The anchor also has a sentimental meaning, as it is the bond that unites us and holds us to those we love. For this reason, we will often see an anchor with a specific person's name written on it.



COMPASSES

Another classic tattoo design – one of the most popular – the compass is also directly related to the maritime world, and to travel in general. Like the anchor, sailors consider the compass to be a symbol of protection and guidance, as well as good luck.

Without a compass, there is no destination to head for, just as there are no objectives to meet. For this reason – beyond its relationship with the maritime world – wearing a compass on your skin connotes the need for a guide when you are lost, either in your personal life journey in general or, more specifically, in a love affair or sentimental relationship.

Conversely, a person who has a tattoo of a compass may also be telling us that they know exactly which path they are taking in life. It can be a way of expressing that they intend to accomplish a goal that has been set.





SWALLOWS

Having a tattoo of swallows has been a popular choice among sailors for time immemorial, since they are often the first birds to be seen from ships when close to land after a voyage out to sea. In days when there were no other technological methods, seeing swallows meant that the journey had happily come to an end.

Furthermore, for North American sailors, getting a tattoo of a small swallow meant having travelled 5,000 nautical miles, a fact that gave them status and an aura of good fortune. This actually dates back to ancient Egypt, where it was believed to be a bird that guarded the soul of the deceased.

Today, as well as its maritime meaning, having a swallow tattoo is seen as an emblem that will help you find your way in life and, if you embark on a great journey, adventure or enterprise, you will get back home or reach a successful point without encountering problems. The swallow is also one of the few birds that chooses its mate for life, so it is also a symbol of fidelity and of having found a soulmate to share life with.

SAILORS

In addition to symbols that arise from experience, adventures, myths and legends of the sea and sailing, another classic tattoo is a depiction of the sailors themselves. They are often accompanied by nautical knots, anchors, compasses, rudders or other tools used on boats.

No hidden meanings are to be sought here, but simply the pride of belonging to the group. In short, it is a simple and direct way of affirming yourself as a sailor or, in any case, declaring yourself a lover of the sea and the maritime world.



MAFIAS, THE WORLD OF PRISON AND THE MILITARY, AND URBAN TRIBES

Already on our journey through the world of maritime tattoos, we have seen that one of the main reasons for getting a tattoo of this type is to have a visible demonstration of belonging to a group. Let's also not forget that one of the main characteristics of a tattoo is that it lasts forever. Despite the fact that there are now techniques that allow them to be removed, the initial intention of those who get a tattoo is that it should be for life. A tattoo is perhaps a moment in life, but it is a mark that stays forever. This is what makes them so special.

For this reason, various groups, gangs, mafias and urban tribes have, in tattooing their members, seen a way to demonstrate not only their belonging to the group, but also their eternal loyalty.

Many of these gangs live off crime and even confrontation with each other, so wearing an identifying tattoo becomes both a source of pride and an epidermal feature that can be dangerous. Not surprisingly, theirs is sometimes a life or death struggle to hold on to territory, influence or illegal businesses... A life of feuds and revenge, of dominators and the dominated. On so many occasions, it is a life on the wire, dedicated to drug trafficking, robberies and other forms of livelihoods that take place outside the law. And when this is the case, the meaning of some tattoos is directly linked to prison life. It is perhaps here that the tattoos take on their most covert and, at the same time, their most chilling significance.



FIVE-POINTED CROWN (LATIN KINGS)

Here we have what can be called a classic among classics, in terms of street gang and criminal organisation tattoos. The tattoo of a five-pointed crown, often gold or yellow, is the symbol of belonging to the Latin Kings, a Hispanic street gang that was first established in the United States and has since spread all over the world. It is a dangerous gang, made up of Puerto Ricans, Ecuadorians, Dominicans and Colombians and it is difficult to get out of. Like the tattoo, membership is for life.

INITIALS IN CAPITAL LETTERS

Within the world of crime and extremist movements, we often see letters that are also worth further inspection. Some of the most common groups of letters that are frequently displayed on the knuckles of the fingers are:

EWMN: *Evil, Wicked, Mean, Nasty*. Indicating that the person is hateful, malicious, selfish, and tough. Surely, there is nothing more to add...

M: related to the Mexican Mafia.

ACAB originated in English prisons and means: *All Cops Are Bastards*.

MS13: this refers to the dangerous Mara Salvatrucha, a Latin American criminal organisation that was created in the city of Los Angeles around 1980.



HANDS TOGETHER IN PRAYER

Another tattoo that is commonly seen among street gang members and prison inmates, mostly of South American Catholic origin. The two hands held together in prayer clearly evoke communication with God. With this, the wearer is saying that, despite the vicissitudes of life, they want to stay on the path of faith.

The two hands held together in prayer can be combined with dates and/or names. If so, the hands can take on other meanings, such as keeping a deceased loved one present in their prayers, or to demonstrate their fidelity to a loved one and their commitment to do everything possible to keep that love alive.



FIREARMS

Without a doubt, a tattoo displaying some kind of firearm, usually a pistol or a revolver, is a way of conveying aggression and violence. It tends to be a common tattoo among members of a gang or mafia group, as well as people with a violent background.

But like so many other symbols that have been adopted in the first instance by criminal groups, it has also made its leap into popular culture. Displaying a weapon on their skin may also tell us about how the wearer wants to assert their defences. At the same time, it connotes a certain amount of strength and self-confidence, as well as the ability to never be left unprepared – the conviction that there is no better defence than to attack.





BULLDOG

The bulldog has become a very popular tattoo, and is directly related to military life. Its meaning depends on whether the tattoo is of an English, American or French bulldog.

During the First World War, the American bulldog became popular among the US Marines who, in addition to having it tattooed on themselves for its association with strength and power, it was often worn as a memorial to their fallen brothers-in-arms. Since that time, it has been a recurring feature, indicating the fact of having served in the legendary US military.

The English or British bulldog, perhaps the most popular of all, is also very present in the imagination of tattoo lovers. In the United Kingdom, it is widely used as a symbol of national pride, and is even associated with Winston Churchill and Britain's defence against Nazi Germany.

Finally, the French bulldog. Despite having also originated in England, it was quickly adopted as a sign of French identity, so that today, in the form of a tattoo, it can be a symbol of French national pride.

CHAINS

Here, we put chains next to shackles and padlocks, not to explain their relationship with the prison world, but actually to refute this meaning that many people mistakenly associate with this type of tattoo.

Far from the meanings we have explained – in relation to crowns of thorns or barbed wire – in principle, chains have no direct meaning in relation to life behind bars or to crime in general. That said, they do have a metaphorical meaning that relates to a lack of freedom, to the fact that the wearer feels trapped or bound by some difficulty in life.

Alternatively, we can find tattoos of broken chains where the meaning is the precise opposite, that is, that the wearer has managed to overcome a situation that made them feel trapped.

BLACK PANTHER

The black panther tattoo is directly intrinsic to the United States' contemporary history and the struggle for the rights of racial minorities – mainly the black community, since one of its best known and historically most active radical groups was *The Black Panthers*.

The group (which also organised itself politically as The Black Panther Party) had a logo that featured a black panther – not only referring to the animal's colour, but also to its vigour and ferocity. The Black Panthers were particularly active between 1969 and 1972, and their actions ranged from monitoring the well-established racist behaviour of the police to providing free breakfasts in poor black neighbourhoods. The movement has always been surrounded by controversy: for some, a genuine revolutionary movement for racial liberation; for others, a criminal group with sinister aims.

Be that as it may, having a black panther tattoo can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it may express a desire to convey strength and ferocity; on the other hand, it may be a symbol of sympathy with minority communities' fight for equal rights.



1%

The 1% tattoo sums up a curious story or way of understanding life. In the United States, a large part of society associates motorcycle gangs with crime.

Their big motorbikes, leather jackets, worn-out jeans, long manes of hair and intimidating Mad Max appearance, along with the influence of their iconic imagery, have made bikers a group that is generally frowned upon across the breadth of American society.

But it is clear that in reality, bikers who have dedicated their lives to crime are in the minority – it is estimated that only about 1% of them have committed a crime. It is for this reason that many of the *clean* motorcyclists have adopted this hallmark.

81

We have just talked about the meaning of the 1% tattoo within biker gangs, but there is another number that refers to one of the most famous gangs and, this time, they really are always involved in controversy for their alleged criminal activities.

The gang in question is the *Hells Angels*, whose members often get the number 81 tattooed in reference to the position of the initials of the gang's name in the alphabet. H for *Hells* (letter number 8) and A for *Angels* (letter number 1).

The Hells Angels are known for always riding spectacular Harley-Davidson motorbikes. They were first established in California around 1948 and today they have members all over the world. Particularly memorable is their ill-fated intervention during a Rolling Stones concert in the late 1960s, where they were supposedly providing "security services" and where an African-American lost his life...



EROTICISM AND LOVE

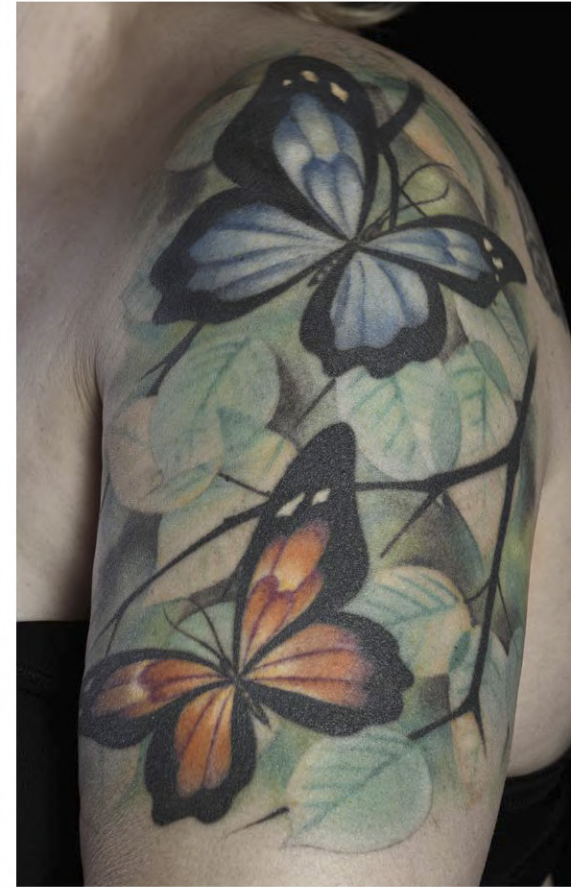
All facets of life have a place in the world of ink on skin. And that which refers to the most intimate, voluptuous and pleasurable also has a place in tattoo lovers' imaginations.

Sexuality, eroticism, love and fertility have always been areas where art has found various ways of expressing itself: sometimes explicitly, at other times using images with symbolism that might go back years and which originated in ancient and even ancestral beliefs and cultures. And the art of tattooing, of course, has also found its own ways of expressing itself in this area.

Some folks opt for explicit tattoos about their loved one or their sexual orientation or practices. There are also a series of classic tattoos which, while their meanings are not always obvious, they are highly suggestive.

Here, the metaphor is almost always present. The taboo becomes natural and the most atavistic theme becomes beauty that is skin deep. It is an imaginary game where suggesting is more important than showing, and where the ink secretly tells us about what most describes the nature of our being.

So here we enter the territory of eroticism and love.



BUTTERFLIES

The butterfly, this graceful and lightweight being, is a symbol of change and of delicate femininity. Their metamorphosis has captivated virtually all cultures of mankind, and they are associated with beauty, freedom, fragility and transmutation of the soul.

But this is not its only meaning. For Japanese culture, for example, the butterfly is associated with femininity and youth. In Japan, tattooing two butterflies together speaks of marital bliss and happiness.