



This time,

Exhibits Newsline

features two exhibitions – both about tattoos. We'll start off in Chicago, and then move to New York City.

Paul Orselli



fig. 1. Exhibition entrance.

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Exhibition

Tattoo

Institution

The Field Museum

Location

Chicago, Illinois

When's the last time your museum took a risk? The last time staff came together to pull off something difficult? What would your museum's director say if you told them you wanted to put a tattoo parlor in the middle of an exhibition space?

That's exactly what the Field Museum in Chicago has done to accompany *Tattoo* (fig. 1).

How to build a tattoo parlor in a museum (Step one: decide to do it)

"Everybody's like, 'Oh yeah of course!'" says Jaap Hoogstraten (the Field's Director of Exhibitions) of the reaction by museum administrators and staff. "And the show itself is a little surprising for

a lot of people...but it really fits our core mission in a lot of ways." (Before committing to taking the traveling exhibition *Tattoo*, or putting a tattoo parlor in it, the Field Museum evaluated the topic with their visitors.)

How to build a tattoo parlor in a museum (Step two: carefully)

Deciding to do it was the easy part for the Field. But *how* do you go about putting a tattoo parlor in your museum?

"It's a lot of work," admits Hoogstraten. "The tattoo parlor is an extension of our public relations efforts, so they [PR] actually did the programming and permitting and we [Exhibits] built the parlor according to the city's requirements." The Field's large, in-house exhibits department made satisfying the permit requirements easier to handle. "We can physically build pretty much anything," says Hoogstraten. "A lot of it has to do with capacity. It's hard to do things if you don't have the staff to do it. Luckily, we still justify our staffing by doing interesting things."

There are rules, regulations, and temporary permits that allow for

tattooing outside of permanent tattoo parlors. The museum worked closely with their safety officer and lawyers, and adhered to “all the regulations in terms of having water available and the hard floor and furniture and places to get rid of needles...and things like that,” says Hoogstraten. “So it’s logistically challenging in that you have to pull all these permits, basically special event permits, but all our tattoo artists say that the conditions in our parlor are better than at any [tattoo] convention.”

Sailor Jerry Rum® sponsored opening events for the exhibition, bringing in people from the tattoo community and lending the museum tattoo-culture credibility. Additionally, many tattoo artists have a following of fans, and the Field’s temporary tattoo artists brought their audiences with them. Each artist created custom flash for the exhibit (that’s the art you can

pick to have tattooed on you when you go to a tattoo parlor), which means the Field Museum is the only place people will be able to get these specific tattoos. “Followers of those artists were waiting to get in line,” says Hoogstraten. Tattoo appointments sold out within hours on the day the museum announced that they were open on a first come first served basis. A 1,000+-person waiting list filled within an hour after that, and the exhibit got incredible attention from the press. The tattoo parlor was supposed to close at the end of April, but was extended through the summer due to popular demand (fig. 2).

Why build a tattoo parlor in a natural history museum

Hoogstraten mentions that he thinks the idea of having an onsite tattoo parlor had come up at the traveling exhibition’s two previous venues, but never

materialized. Maybe local laws didn’t allow for temporary tattoo parlors, or maybe there just wasn’t enough will behind the idea to make it happen. But for the Field, Hoogstraten says, the parlor seemed like the perfect way to cap the exhibition. “It was an incredible launch,” he says, adding that the Field may be a natural history museum, but that doesn’t mean it can’t surprise people. “We are looking to do things that people are not expecting us to do, to reach a little bit beyond our core audience as well. This show is not a blockbuster, it’s not King Tut or anything, but it is appealing to a different segment of the population that we’re looking to attract.... To me it seems art and science are very much related. Hopefully [tattoo parlor visitors] go find some dinosaurs to look at and come back [for another visit].”

—Winifred Kehl is an independent exhibit developer and science writer.



fig. 2. Tattoo parlor inside the exhibition.

Exhibition

Tattooed New York

Institution

New-York Historical Society

Location

New York City, New York

Tattooing itself has simply been what it has always been: person, ink, image. Through the mirror of time, tattoos themselves have changed to represent different things for different people and that is what the New-York Historical Society seeks to explore in its *Tattooed New York* exhibition (fig. 3).

Tattooed New York starts with the Native-American groups that lived in New York, where tattooing was done for a variety of reasons: protection for physical ailments, protection from harm, to celebrate battle victories, etc. Europeans immigrating to this coast were astounded by the culture they encountered and were eager to share with those back in Europe.

Tattooing became very popular among sailors and men in the military service. Sailors would choose designs for a mixture of reasons. Some designs were meant to lend protection, some for showing off patriotism, and others just as a form of identification in battle. Tattooing also happened to be a popular way to pass the time on the ship when there wasn't much to do. Men weren't the only ones lining up to get inked; women did, too, which the exhibition also explores.



fig. 3. Sculpture of a woman covered in different tattoo designs. This was used as an advertising piece as well as a draw for visitors in the tattoo parlor that displayed it.

On display is tattooing equipment which saw a transformation after the invention of Thomas Edison's electric pen inspired the electric rotary tattoo machine. New York happened to be the right place at the right time for becoming a capital of tattooing, and because of this New York City is considered by many to be the birthplace of modern tattooing. A large tattooing community developed in Lower Manhattan and in Brooklyn (think Brooklyn Navy Yard and Coney Island). In all this, a style developed: black outlines, bold colors, and black shading. You can see this repeating aesthetic throughout the objects shown in the exhibition including the photos, "flash" sheets, and painting.

Starting in 1961, tattooing was banned by the New York Department of Health and the city's tattooing community went

underground. This didn't halt the constant and ever-growing stream of people seeking to get tattooed. Tattoo artists just relocated outside the city limits or operated in secret from their apartments or living rooms. The ban was lifted in 1997, and tattooing in New York City saw another large shift in styles.

The exhibition ends with a booth for live demonstrations as well as photos and objects exploring how tattooing is practiced now and its influence on the art world. Even if you miss the live demonstrations, there are still videos of the tattooing process and the sound of a tattoo needle playing in the background to create the ambiance of a tattoo parlor (fig. 4).

—Charissa Ruth is a freelance museum educator.

Have you seen an exhibition that you'd like to share with colleagues in a future Exhibits Newline column? Email me for more information on how to contribute.

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fig. 4. A view in *Tattooed New York*.