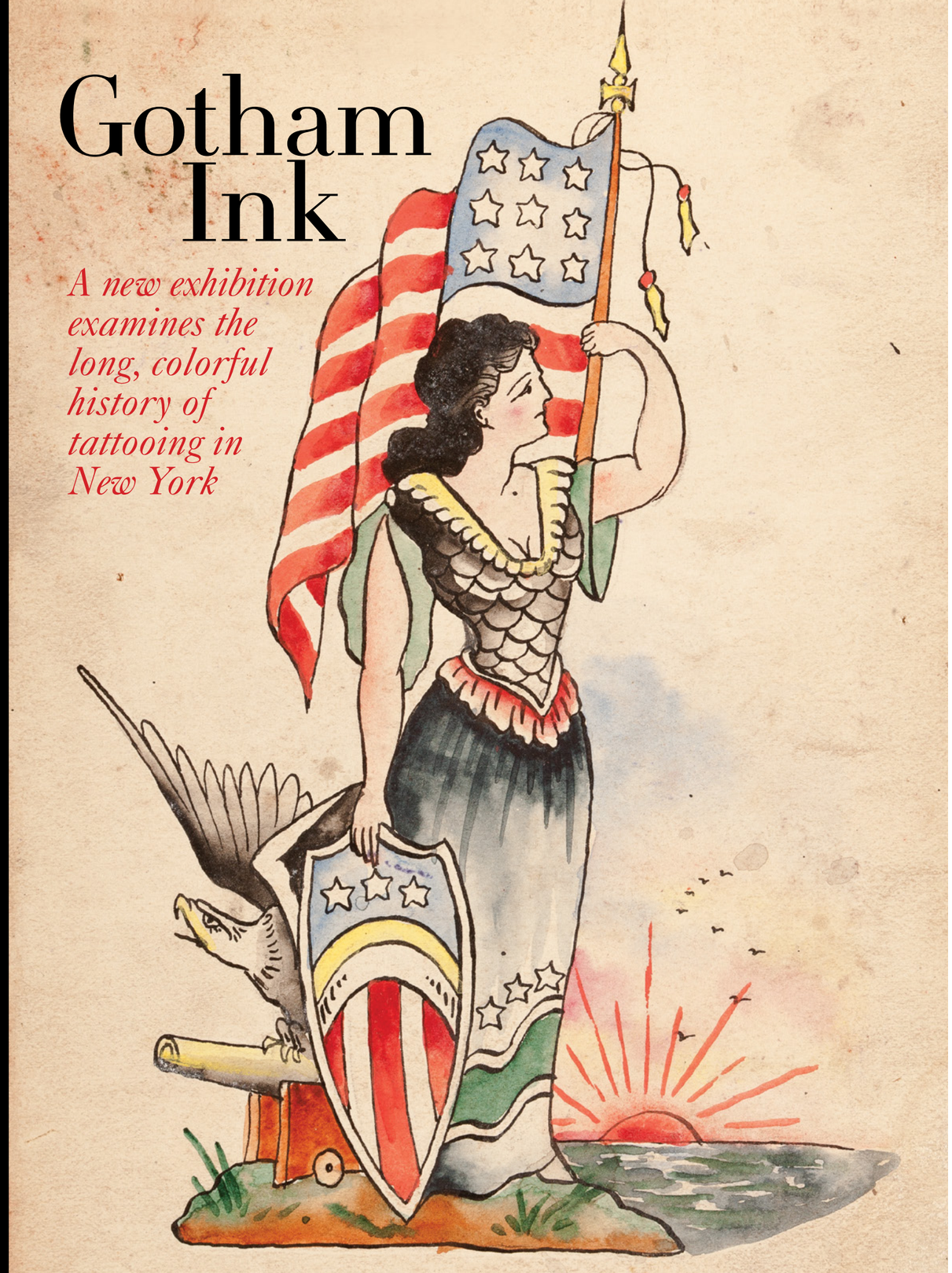
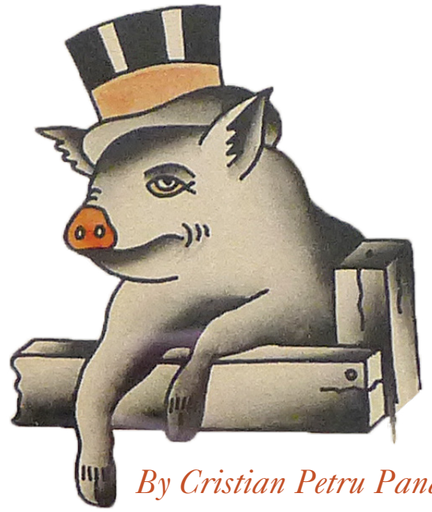
Gotham Ink

A new exhibition examines the long, colorful history of tattooing in New York





By Cristian Petru Panaite

Like the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge, a deeply familiar emblem of New York City is Macy's company logo: a single red star, in use since 1858. Yet probably few Macy's shoppers know the origin of that simple, elegant device. It is a tattoo—one that decorated a forearm of the department store's founder, Rowland Hussey Macy (1822–1877), acquired in his teens while sailing aboard a whaling ship out of his native Nantucket.

Tattoos became a familiar sight on New York streets by the early nineteenth century, appearing on the limbs and torsos of seamen who had visited Pacific islands where tattooing is an ancient practice. They have been an indelible part of the city's social fabric ever since. For New Yorkers, as for people everywhere, tattoos have served as marks of brawny pride, as symbols of bohemian chic, as badges of individualism, and more. But the tattoo trade gave certain parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn a roguish personality that, captured by artists and photographers, became part of the identity of New York as a whole. The history of tattoos in the city is full of rich lore and a cast of characters that encompasses the louche, the iconoclastic, and the cream of society. All play their parts in the story told in *Tattooed New York*, an exhibition opening in February at the New-York Historical Society.[1]

As with other New Yorkers down through the decades, sailors got tattoos for many reasons. Tattoos were a way to boast of your travels; they betrayed superstition (feet inked with pigs and roosters—animals that are not fond of water—supposedly protected you from drowning); served as mementos of loved ones; or filled the hours on long voyages. But tattoos had practical purposes for mariners, too. They could help to identify a drowned

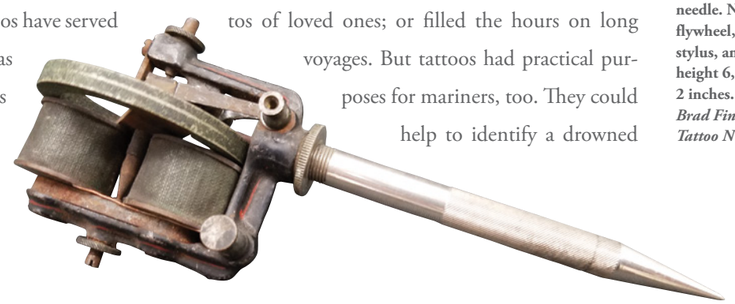


Fig 1. Columbia tattoo design, one of twenty-four in a sketchbook by an unknown tattoo artist, possibly a sailor, c. 1890–1920. Watercolor and ink on paper, (sketchbook) 7 by 5 ½ inches. *New-York Historical Society Library.*

Fig. 2. Pig wearing top hat from a flash sheet by Ed Smith, 1922. Watercolor on artist's board, sheet size 12 by 18 inches. Sailors would often tattoo pigs or roosters on their feet to protect them from drowning. *Collection of the Lift Trucks Project.*

Fig. 3. Edison Electric Pen, also known as an Autographic Pen, c. 1876. Samuel O'Reilly (1854–1909) converted Thomas Edison's original design into the first electric tattoo needle. Nickel-plated flywheel, cast iron, steel stylus, and electric motor; height 6, width 3, depth 2 inches. *Collection of Brad Fink, Daredevil Tattoo NYC.*

Fig. 4. Dagger and snake design by Samuel O'Reilly, c. 1875–1905. Watercolor, ink, and pencil on paper. *Collection of Brad Fink, Daredevil Tattoo NYC.*

body, and they could be listed among your physical traits on a Seamen's Protection Certificate—an identification document, authorized by Congress in 1796, meant to protect U.S. citizens from the press gangs of the British Navy. For the latter reason, symbols of patriotism—flags, bald eagles, snakes, and the figure of Columbia—became staple American tattoo motifs.

On land, tattooed sailors monetized their talents by either displaying their inked bodies to the public or offering their tattoo services to New York customers. Martin Hildebrandt, a German immigrant who served aboard the frigate *United States* in the 1840s, established what is regarded as the first permanent tattoo studio in the city in the mid-1870s in lower Manhattan, not far from the busy East River shipping docks. The *New York Times* published an account of a visit in early 1876. Hildebrandt's atelier was said to resemble "a tavern, with a well-sanded floor, and on the walls hung pictures of odalisques." The *Times* writer went on to describe Hildebrandt's tools and tattooing procedure—"some half dozen No. 12 needles, bound together in a slanting form, which are dipped as the pricking is made into the best India ink or vermilion"—and a book of drawings that included "a young lady, entwining herself in the banners of her country. . . Religious pieces, as the crucifixion, in true ascetic style . . .[and] Odd Fellows signs, the hand of good fellowship, faith, hope, and charity, sailors' rights, anchors, cannons, free trade, all more or less allegorically expressed."[2]

Hildebrandt told the *Times* that he most often tattooed sailors, mechanics, and farmers, but said he had been on occasion "sent for to meet a whole company of gentleman—yes, Sir, men of style, living in handsome houses—and I have tattooed the whole lot of them....Once two ladies called on me—real ladies." Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, tattoos would become something of a vogue among members of New York society, prompted by such eminent figures as the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII), his son, the Duke of York (later George V), and Czar Nicholas II of Russia. Renegade fixtures on the New York scene such as heiresses Aimée Crocker[3] and Clara Ward had tattoos, as, purportedly, did the Brooklyn-born socialite Jennie Jerome, the future Lady Randolph Churchill.

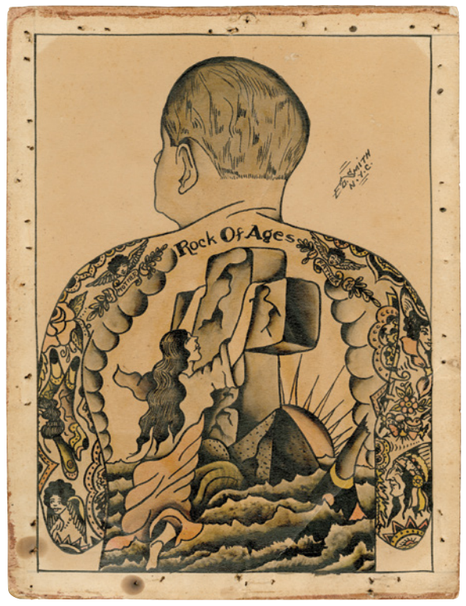


Fig. 5. *Rock of Ages* back piece design by Ed Smith (believed to be a self-portrait of the artist), c. 1920. Watercolor and ink on artist's board, 11 by 8 ½ inches. *Collection of Adam Woodward.*

Fig. 6. *Rock of Ages* by Johannes Adam Simon Oertel (1823–1909), c. 1870. Lithograph, 20 by 16 inches. *New-York Historical Society Library.*

Fig. 7. Intricate sailor tattoo designs by Bob Wicks (1902–1990), a banner painter and tattoo artist, c. 1930. The "Homeward Bound," often reserved for backs or chests, ensured sailors would return home safely. A fully rigged ship also meant the sailor had sailed around Cape Horn. Pen and watercolor on artist's board, 15 ⅝ by 18 ⅝ inches. *Ohio Tattoo Museum, Bidwell, Ohio.*

The cachet of tattoos among the smart set would wither, however, as two developments in the 1890s in New York made inked adornment widely available to the public. The first was the adaptation of Thomas Edison's electric pen for use among tattoo artists by Samuel O'Reilly, who had set up shop on Chatham Square in the 1870s. Edison's invention, patented in 1876, was a motorized wand that contained a rapidly pulsing needle, much like that on a sewing machine. When one "wrote" or "drew" on a sheet of paper, Edison's device perforated the paper—at an advertised rate of fifty punctures per second—creating a stencil that could be used to make copies. O'Reilly's alteration, which was also patented, included an ink-carrying tube—and thus modern tattooing was born.[4] At a time when technological advancements were replacing human labor, the tattoo machine had the opposite effect. It democratized the craft, making it faster and cheaper, and allowing for a new profession to flourish along with a competitive supply business for pigments, tattooing machines, and "flash."

Flash were simple tattoo designs drawn and later printed on sheets of paper that could be displayed on an illustration board, in a portfolio, or more often, on the wall of a tattoo studio as a menu of options for customers. The commercialization of flash was the second development that led to a boom in the tattoo trade. With a sheet of flash, even the least-gifted tattooist had a template from which to work. A veteran of the Spanish-American War and wallpaper designer-turned-tattooist named Lew Alberts (born Albert Morton Kurzman) is often credited with popularizing flash in the early twentieth century. By the 1940s some twenty flash sheets were being circulated between various New York tattoo artists. The origin of the word *flash* is uncertain, but it likely stems either from the ease with which a client could select one of these drawings, or to the speed with which tattoo artists could execute them—in a flash. The most famous representation of flash is the background in Norman Rockwell's playful 1944 painting *Tattoo Artist* (Fig. 9). Rockwell is known to have spent time in the Bowery shops researching the scene and the tattoo process.

More talented New York tattooists found inspiration in artworks that ranged from Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* to nineteenth-century portraits seen in the publications of the day. Two works in particular speak to the intersection of tattooing and popular art in the late 1800s. *Pharaoh's Horses*, an 1848 depiction of three snorting Arabian stallions by British artist John Frederick Herring Sr., was frequently copied by American painters. When tattoo artists picked up the image, they often added a horseshoe around the three horses as a sign of good luck. *Saved, or an Emblematic Representation of Christian Faith*, an 1876 work by Johannes Adam Simon Oertel, was widely reproduced under the title *Rock of Ages* (see Fig. 6).

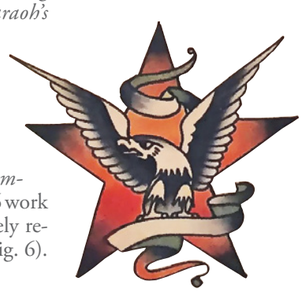


Fig. 8. Eagle and star design from Smith's flash sheet, 1922. *Collection of the Lift Trucks Project.*

Its theme of salvation, and the image of a beautiful woman clinging to a cross amid turbulent seas, was enormously popular with tattooists and their customers, despite its expense (see Fig. 5). The Rock of Ages tattoo was complex, requiring six lengthy sessions under the needle at a total cost of more than $200.

Tattooists congregated in areas of the city that served transient populations, including Coney Island—where tattooing happened seasonally alongside the rides—and the environs of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. But the Bowery saw the most action. A three-foot-by-six-foot nook rented in a barbershop surrounded by dime museums, flop houses, and bars assured a steady and diverse clientele. The Bowery's grim yet lively atmosphere below the elevated train tracks is vividly captured in Reginald Marsh's 1932 *Tattoo and Haircut* (Fig. 12). The advent of the Social Security system in 1935 produced a brief boom for tattooists

Fig. 9. ***The Tattoo Artist*** **by Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), 1944. Oil on canvas, 43 ⅛ by 33 ⅛ inches.** ***Brooklyn Museum, gift of the artist.***

Fig. 10. Bust from Smith's flash sheet, 1922.

on the Bowery, as many citizens decided the safest place to keep their number would be on their own skin. People often hid it, the *Times* reported, in a tattoo of an eagle "flaunting in its beak a scroll on which the number is blazoned."[5]

The proximity of Bowery tattoo shops to one another allowed artists to share tips and borrow techniques through close observation and apprenticeships.[6] Through the work of local fixtures like Charlie Wagner (a Samuel O'Reilly apprentice), the exotic dancer-turned-tattooist Millie Hull, the many members of the Moskowitz family, and others, a distinctive New York style evolved. Characterized by the use of heavy black outlines and vivid primary colors, the city style has been described by a veteran New York tattooist as "bold enough to be seen from across the street."

After World War II, amid the city's general decline, the Bowery became known as New York's Skid Row. Tarred by association with the neighborhood, tattooing would be linked in the official mind with undesirables and troublemakers. In 1961, following a hepatitis-B scare, the city outlawed the practice. Tattooing went underground in New York until the ban was lifted in 1997. Today New York City boasts more than 270 tattoo studios that employ hundreds of artists, many of whom have gone through formal art training. Tattooing—the art, the craft, the business—is in full blossom. As I often heard in the studios around the five boroughs, "tattooing has come full circle" and mirrors the excitement it initially brought to the city more than one hundred years ago.

Tattooed New York is on view at the New-York Historical Society from February 3 to April 30.

[1] Reconstructing New York tattoo history has its challenges. Much has been lost; fragments of knowledge have been preserved only through tales passed around from one tattooer to another. As I was once told by a New York tattoo artist: "You can have five tattooers in a room, ask them one question, and they will produce five different answers." Newspapers like the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle, New York Herald*, and *New York Times,* as well as Albert Parry's 1933 book *Tattoo, The Secret of a Strange Art*, are strong primary sources, though, like all journalistic ones, they should be taken with a grain of salt. Recorded oral histories—such as those in Michael McCabe's *New York Tattoo: The Oral History of an Urban Art*, the audio documentary *The Last of the Bowery Scab Merchants*, my conversations with Marvin and Doug Moskowitz, and email exchanges with Don Ed Hardy—proved priceless. Visiting tattoo artists in their studios around New York City has been an invaluable experience and I would like to thank all the artists I met. Online resources organized by Chuck Eldridge, Anna Felicity Friedman, and Carmen Forquer Nyssen provided a wealth of well- documented information. I would also like to thank the scholarly panel for the *Tattooed New York* exhibition, which included Lars Krutak, Mike McCabe, and Margot Mifflin. [2] "Tattooing in New York, A Visit Paid to the Artist," *New York Times*, January 16, 1876. For an interesting discussion of tattoo pigments, see *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 28, 1908. [3] For Amy Crocker, see *New York Sunday World,* June 16, 1901, and the *Washington Herald*, March 21, 1915. [4] O'Reilly's machine represented just the beginning of the automation of tattooing. Charlie Wagner, who apprenticed under O'Reilly, would patent his own machine in 1904, featuring vertical electromagnetic coils. [5] "Your Permanent Number," *New York Times*, April 15, 1937. [6] Tattooists literally worked next door to one another. The addresses include numbers 4 through 9 Chatham Square and 10 through 21 Bowery. Tattoo artist Michelle Myles of Daredevil Tattoo mapped out the locations of the original Bowery tattoo studios and provided me with a wonderful walking tour ofthe area.

CRISTIAN PETRU PANAITE *is a research associate at the New-York Historical Society and the curator of* Tattooed New York.

Fig. 11. ***Charlie Wagner Tattooing Millie Hull*** **by tattoo artist Ace Harlyn, 1939. Oil on canvas, 24 by 36 inches. Once a sideshow star, Mildred Hull became the first woman tattooist to have her own shop on the Bowery, called the Tattoo Emporium.** ***Collection of Brad Fink, Daredevil Tattoo NYC.***

Fig. 12. ***Tattoo and Haircut*** **by Reginald Marsh (1898–1954), 1932. Egg tempera on Masonite, 46 ½ by 47 ⅞ inches.** ***Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Earle Ludgin, © Estate of Reginald Marsh / Art Students League, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.***