PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
ART MUSEUM

Teacher Resource

Gifts from the Ancestors: The Art of Tattooing

The primary source for the text in this resource is Lars Krutak, "Of Human Skin and Ivory Spirits: Tattooing and Carving" in Bering Strait from the catalog of the exhibition *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* (Princeton University Art Museum 2009).

Curriculum Connection for Grade 12

Tattooing as an art form was practiced in the Bering Strait region from ancient times through the historical period. Students and teachers may use this resource to consider the material evidence for ancient forms of tattooing. They will consider as well the ways that anthropologists use evidence from the historical period to understand ancient practices and compare the tattoo traditions of the Bering Strait with those of other ancient cultures around the world and the Alaskan Aleut peoples. Finally, they will be encouraged to reflect upon the disappearance of ancient tattoo traditions on Saint Lawrence Island and around the world.

This resource satisfies New Jersey Curriculum Standard 1.5 (History/Culture): All students will understand and analyze the role, development, and continuing influence of the arts in relation to world cultures, history, and society.

> Strands and Cumulative Progress Indicators
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> Building upon knowledge and skills gained in preceding grades, by the end of Grade 12, students will:
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> A. Knowledge
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> Parallel historical events and artistic development found in dance, music, theater, and visual art.
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> Summarize and reflect upon how various art forms and cultural resources preserve cultural heritage and influence contemporary art.
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> B. Skills
>
> Evaluate the impact of innovations in the arts from various historical periods in works of dance, music, theater, and visual art stylistically representative of the times.
>
> Compare and contrast the stylistic characteristics of a given historical period through dance, music, theater, and visual art.

Bering Strait Tattoos

Ivory Figurines with Tattoos

Small ivory sculptures dated to the Okvik/Old Bering Sea I period (ca. 200 B.C.–A.D. 600) and to later Punuk cultures (ca. 600–1300 A.D.) have been excavated that sometimes were carved in high relief and displayed prominent female anatomical features. Other prehistoric ivories are seemingly androgynous in form with appendages and bodily characteristics reduced to formless nubs that barely protrude from elongated torsos. Many of these ivory "dolls" show deeply incised lines on their faces and bodies that represent tattoos and uyaghqutat (amulet straps in the St. Lawrence Island Yupik language), suggesting that tattooing and other forms of adornment were not only traditional ancient customs; they also worked as vehicles for transforming the body, whether through aesthetic or ritual means.

Human Figure, Okvik/OBS I, Provenance unknown, walrus ivory, h. 18.6 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998-499)

Many Okvik figures combine elegant facial features and simple feather- or skeletal- like lines on their torsos that may represent garments. This unusually large figure, whose black color results from soil mineralization, has tattooed cheeks.

The purpose of these enigmatic human figurines remains unclear. Analogies drawn from the historic period suggest that perhaps they were made as children's toys, for use in fertility ceremonies, or for calling upon the "masters" of game animals. Other ethnographic parallels recorded in the early twentieth century demonstrate that human figurines could be used by their owners as personal "assistants" and "spiritual helpers" to capture prey or as "guardians" to safeguard humankind from those physical and spiritual dangers encountered in the landscape.

On St. Lawrence Island (Sivuqaq), guardian spirits communicated with their human companions in dreams and advised them of specific ceremonial activities to avoid sickness or to bring the family success in hunting. In such cases, spiritual assistants seemingly provided their human masters with a means to actively intervene in the cosmos.

Among the historic Chukchi of Siberia, guardian spirits were also believed to be embodied in specific kinds of human and animal figurines. Occasionally, these objects turned malevolent toward their owners if not properly fed with sacrifices of animal tallow and tobacco.

Androgynous Human figure, Punuk, from St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, h. 18.4 cm. Princeton University Art Museum, the Lloyd E. Cotsen, Class of 1950, Eskimo Bone and Ivory Carving Collection (1997-126)

This unusual figurine represents a male with pronounced genitalia and emerging breasts. Among the Siberian Chukchi, transgender male shamans were believed to be the most powerful. They were commanded by the ke'let (spirits, sometimes female) to put off all male pursuits at an early age when shamanistic inspiration first manifested itself. Canadian Inuit myth reveals that transgender shaman created all women. A groove, perhaps representing a charm belt, encircles the waist. The shoulder/breast design could represent beads, tattoo, or clothing decoration.

Aside from these types of dolls, guardian spirits also took the form of tattooed anthropomorphs that were placed on foreheads and limbs. Among the St. Lawrence Island and Siberian Yupiget, these stick-like figures, called yugaaq (powerful person), protected individuals from evil spirits associated with the land and sea, the spirits of strangers, and those spirits associated with unknown places where one had not previously traveled. The yugaaq of a new mother was also believed to protect infants from the machinations of evil.

Human figure, Okvik. From Punuk Island. Walrus ivory, h. 14.6 cm. Alaska State Museum

The palette-shaped torso, oval head with arching combination of eyes and nose, and asymmetric smile present a clear example of Okvik style. Slashes on the chest, patterns on the cheeks, and engraved lines radiating from a central circle on the figure's back may represent tattoos, clothing, and/or skeletal motifs. The lack of limbs on "dolls" (the term used on St. Lawrence Island) suggests their original function.

Questions for Further Discussion

How might human figurines have functioned as guardian figures?

As you may notice from the discussion above, anthropologists turn to analogies drawn from the historic period to suggest the original function and meaning of ivory figurines. The people who carved the ancient ivories lived centuries before the historic period. Why is it appropriate to use this information to interpret the past? What problems might a scholar confront in such studies?

Link to GFA website page: Using the Present to Interpret the past

It might be helpful to consider what an anthropologist does.

http://www.aaanet.org/about/WhatisAnthropology.cfm

What are the four main subfields of anthropology?

The Protective and Medicinal Potential of Bering Strait Tattoos

Bering Strait tattoo artists plied the human skin to unlock its protective potential. The St. Lawrence Island Yupiget, in particular, like many other circumpolar and indigenous peoples, regarded living bodies as inhabited by multiple souls, each soul residing in a particular joint. Anthropologist Robert Peterson has noted that in ancient Greenlandic beliefs the soul is the element that gives the body its life processes, breath, warmth, feelings, and the ability to think and speak. Accordingly, ethnologist Edward Weyer wrote, in 1932, that "[a]ll disease is nothing but the loss of a soul; in every part of the human body there resides a little soul, and if part of [the] body is sick, it is because the little soul ha[s] abandoned that part, [namely, the joints]." Thus, if one of these souls is taken away, the member or limb to which it belongs sickens and possibly dies.

For example, boys and girls were variably marked by tattoo artists underneath the lip with circles or lunettes, or at both corners of the mouth with angled cruciform elements to disguise the wearer from disease-bearing spirits. Sometimes children were tattooed with small marks at the roots of their noses if they cried too much; a crying child was considered an indication of future misfortune, specifically, that a family member would soon die. Parents also instructed their local tattooists to stitch a small line between their children's eyes if they were disobedient, or a single line that ran down the lengths of their necks if they were unhealthy.

Read this article on the history of Bering Strait Tattoos:

http://www.larskrutak.com/articles/Arctic/index.html

Questions from the reading for further discussion:

Who were the traditional tattoo artists of the Arctic? What tools and materials did they use?

How was tattooing used as part of funerary and hunting practices in the Arctic?

As you read in the article, tattoos were most common among women. What did tattoos on Arctic women mean? How do the tattoos in these photographs match the descriptions given in the text?

http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm4/results.php?CISOOP1=exact&CISOFIELD1=CISOSEARCHALL&CISOROOT=/cdmg11&CISOBOX1=Tattoos

How were tattoos used for medicinal purposes? Can you give specific examples of this practice?

Tattooing Around the Globe

Tattooing practices in the Arctic are just part of the history of tattoos. Tattooing is an ancient art practiced by many cultures and across time. Cate Lineberry comments on these diverse practices in Smithsonian Magazine, "In many cases, it seems to have sprung up independently as a permanent way to place protective or therapeutic symbols upon the body, then as a means of marking people out into appropriate social, political or religious groups, or simply as a form of self-expression or fashion statement." Read the following articles, *Tattoos: The Ancient and Mysterious History* from Smithsonian.com and *Tattooing and Piercing Among the Alaskan Aleut* from larskrutak.com; and. As you read, take note of the similarities and differences between Egyptian, Arctic, and Aleut traditions.

http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/tattoo.html

What is the evidence for tattoos in other ancient cultures, besides Alaska? What is the etymology of the word "tattoo"?

In Egypt, as in Alaska, tattooing was most commonly practiced among women. How do the imagery of tattoos and their symbolism on women in Ancient Egypt, the ancient Arctic, and among the Alaskan Aleut differ? How is it similar?

What other forms of adornment did the Aleut use?

Both the native peoples of the Arctic and the Aleuts believed that tattoos could serve a medicinal purpose. Can you describe these belief systems? Compare specific examples from these cultures of tattoos that were meant to function in this way?

To learn more about tattooing and other forms of body modification around the world, see the University of Pennsylvania's on-line exhibition *Bodies of Cultures: A World Tour of Body Modification*:

http://www.museum.upenn.edu/new/exhibits/online_exhibits/body_modification/bodmodintro.shtml

For Further Study: Tattoos Today

Tattoos have entered the mainstream of Western culture with celebrities proudly displaying them and tattoo museums—real and virtual—appearing in Europe and America. Ironically, at the same times, ancient tattoo traditions such as those of Saint Lawrence Island are disappearing. Lars Krutak is an anthropologist who has dedicated years of study to the preservation of this ancient art and other traditional forms of body modification around the globe. He documents his travels on his website larskutak.com.

To see the largest virtual tattoo museum:

http://www.vanishingtattoo.com/tattoo_museum/index.html

To learn more about Lark Krutak and his work:

http://www.larskrutak.com/articles/Last_Tattoos_SLI/index.html