

Changed Acceptance: Tattoos, Kitsch, and Norman Rockwell

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As times change so does a culture and the values it holds. Views on all aspects of life tend to get progressive as the years go on. Turning things that were once seen as inappropriate or undesirable to being widely accepted and loved. This can be seen in all aspects of culture, even visual culture and the arts. Two seemingly unrelated practices that have a changed perception are tattooing and the understanding of kitsch.

Throughout the last century, views on tattoos have shifted tremendously in all features such as styles, techniques, symbolism, and social acceptance. Tattoo styles have changed drastically since their earliest documentation from native styles to commemorative memorials, and being used as a way to permanently decorate the body, in a way jewelry (although similar) cannot. Tattoos were predominately a sacred practice highlighting aspects of a culture, religion, and social class. As tattooing was adopted by more cultures, people began to adapt the art form to fit their specific interests. In the Western world, specifically America the individuals getting these tattoos were usually seen as lower class, outcasts, and rebels. Kitsch has a long and varied history that starts in Germany making its way to the United States just under a century ago. In the 85 years since its debut, it has been greatly discussed and interpreted and continuously evolving. It was originally associated with low-class works of art that were not thought-provoking and tended to be mass-produced. The association of the low class with tattoos and kitsch is very similar to how Norman Rockwell's illustrations were seen in his early years of production. Rockwell was an American illustrator who was known for creating a romanticized depiction of American life through a photorealistic style. The evolution of tattoo acceptance and kitsch reflects a path similar to Norman Rockwell's art. All turn towards a more positive, socially accepting, and new

understanding entirely. The painting *Tattoo Artist(Only Skin Deep)* (fig 1.) by Norman Rockwell is an uncanny comparison to how himself as an artist and tattoos both being seen as kitsch has changed with the times. The paralleled change in acceptance of tattoos, kitsch and Norman Rockwell all show that nostalgia is a strong factor in deciding what modern culture finds desirable.

Tattoos have a long history going back to the ancient Egyptians and Romans, since then tattoos have taken on pragmatic uses such as identifying something about a person and their culture. Being used to tell a story. However, in the 1800's in America, the uses were not the same. The earliest people to have tattoos in America were members of the circus. The most famous tattooed man from this time was called Captain Costentenus. He was a Greek man in P.T Barnum's circus who was introduced to the US in the 1870's ¹ (fig. 2) However, Captain Costentenus was not the only tattooed man from another country brought to the US for-profit and awe. A lot of these individuals who were brought over were from oceanic islands. The islands in mention were previously explored and written about by explorers and sailors of countries like the US and Britain.² Seeing these individuals with tattoos would further reinforce the idea of tattoos being wild, dangerous, exotic, and not for the everyday man, being borderline savage in the eyes of these early Americans. As time went on tattoo associations shifted from exotic circus members to members of the military, specifically sailors at the time of World War I and World War II. There was a slight ideological change, in the sense that tattoos were now seen as portrayals of the adventures and hardships of those in the service.³ During times of war, there was a spike in the number of people

¹ Caplan, 200

² DeMello, 47

³ DeMello, 49

getting tattooed. With a large majority of these individuals being members of the military. The style of tattoos that the members of the military were getting done would lay the foundation for what is now called American traditional tattoos. They commonly chose styles that were very patriotic, dedicated to loved ones, tributes to places they visited, and women.⁴ These could be picked out from a flash sheet, and a flash sheet would be hung up on walls, displaying the predrawn works available to be tattooed. The tattoos displayed would have bold black lines, dark shading and a limited use of color. Primarily black, red, green and blue.⁵ After the war ended, there was a steep decline in tattooing due to things like age restriction and social acceptance in the age “suburbanized” families of the 50s. In the mid 40s there was the first inkling of this change that would follow in the 50s. When a famous tattoo artist in New York was fined for the lack of sterile needles. This is the first known legal act against tattooing.⁶ Throughout the 1950s and 60s the people that were getting tattooed were the deviants of society. These deviants were commonly gang members, drunks, bikers and generally just members outside of societal standards of the white middle class.⁷ This was the common societal view until the time of the “Renaissance” in the 70s when tattoos started to be seen as more of an art form. Before a tattoo artist did not have to be skilled in any arts or have an art background. This started to change around the Renaissance, with artists from many mediums starting to tattoo. The negative connotation that came from tattoos slowly started to fade from something negative to something admirable. Many people in this time began getting tattoos that were more personal, unique, customizable, and

⁴ DeMello, 51

⁵ Demello,50

⁶ Demello,66

⁷ Caplan, 230

expressive of artistic abilities and concepts. Many pieces were no longer symbolic but just something the person liked and held seemingly no meaning other than being a piece of art appreciation. The art of tattooing has only grown since and as society continues forward so does the admiration of tattoos and the skills and time that goes into being a tattoo artist.

It is clearest to see the impact of nostalgia on tattoos every growing relevance through the style I have already mentioned, which is American traditional. American traditional similar to periods of art was given a name after years of existence. The style came to be traditional due to its prevalence in the early and mid 1900's, and the continued use of this style many years later. The style has evolved in its content but has stayed largely the same in its formal qualities of bold lines, dark shading and small color palette.⁸ There are many reasons for the style still being used today, as it ages well on the skin, the bold lines hold up after years of body changes and sun exposure, and the ability to adapt any subject matter to fit its formal qualities, and its use in subcultures. As well as tattoo artists typically being trained in other media of art. However, I think nostalgia has a large part for its relevance today. Traditional tattoos are like a collage, they tend to be independent of each other in meaning. The word commonly used to describe this is patchwork. Each tattoo can have a different meaning and relevance to the person. With age the tattoos can become stories or markers of time in one's life. This allows a style of tattoos that has long been associated with sailors, bikers, and the working class to seem more approachable to the middle class. As it's largely the middle class that has adopted the world of vintage, retro, and antiques. It's a fine line between

⁸ There is a larger array of ink colors now but even from my own experiences its not uncommon to have limited palette similar to the ones in the 1940s

something old and something vintage. So not only is there a personal nostalgia, one that is tied to the life of the wearer but also nostalgia for the subversive nature of the life of sailors, and bikers. The simplest way to describe this is that it's seen as cool, and with being cool comes some level of individuality. The growing desire for hyper-individuality is another reason noted for the changed view of tattoos and kitsch.⁹ It can create this fantasy and inspire memories of a time one has never lived.

Kitsch has a long and complex history, which continuously evolves, creating new meanings and understandings of the term. In 1998 American professor C.E. Emmers wrote about kitsch and its varying associations breaking them up into numerous classifications. Some of those being:” 1) Things that are inauthentic, or an imitation 2) Items of low quality being trashy or cheap 3) Works dependent on simpler or low emotions such as being cute or comforting 4) Things that are perceived as frivolous and decorative 5) Things that are commercialized, or cliché 6) Calculated for mass appeal and finally 7) things seen as depraved, dangerous morally wrong .¹⁰ All of these categories will be used and seen throughout the evolving history of kitsch making it an extremely malleable term. Kitsch was first seen in Germany during the 1800s. In Munich there was a major school of art known as the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. This academy was said to be able to “hold its own against Paris”¹¹, making it, the artist and ideas coming out of it fairly influential. The academy used the word kitsch to describe something mass-produced, minor works or crafts that could be sold quickly and cheaply.¹² The term is first used in English during the 1930's. It was used similarly in

⁹ FIND PAGE NUMBER

¹⁰ Emmer, 80

¹¹ Kakuzō, 186

¹² Kjellman-Chapin, 3

English and German. In English it referred to art that was seen as not real or true art due to its mass production; which for the art history cannon at the time, who emphasizes the genius artist making single profound works, lacked anything thought provoking, original or realistic. In this way of thinking it's clear that kitsch is only in reference to artworks and that kitsch works are kitsch because they lack this genuine thoughtfulness and originality.¹³ The first Introduction of kitsch to the US was through Clement Greenberg's article Avant Garde and Kitsch. Greenberg was a lover of abstract expressionism and the avant garde believing it's the highest form of culture and that kitsch is the opposite side of the same coin being culture for people who don't understand genuine culture.¹⁴ This idea is inherently elitist. The avant garde has never been accessible to the everyday person, it strives to go against the norm in such ways that it can be hard to understand. It was after this introduction from Greenberg that kitsch started to change everyday Western culture, more so than the art world.¹⁵ It would be around the 1960's that kitsch started being associated with everyday culture and specifically things that are seen as feminine. With its connection to the everyday kitsch is viewed in less art based terms and more as something that is seen as in bad taste. Which is the broadest way of taking the seven categories given by C.E. Emmers into consideration at once. It is not until the modern era that kitsch is looked on fondly in everyday culture.

Kitsch is embedded in everyday culture so much to where its almost hard to pinpoint exactly where it is. It's seen yearly when celebrating holidays, in ads, as aesthetics and in tv shows to just name a few. Why is kitsch something that is so

¹³ Kjellman-Chapin,9

¹⁴ Greenberg, 10

¹⁵ Ryynanen and Barragan, 6

prevalent when the last 80 years it's been used as ways to negatively label and critique art and culture? I believe it's directly tied to the exact things its critiques, such as comfort, nostalgia, availability, and excess. These are aspects that underlie and show up in modern culture time and time again. With nostalgia and excess being the most impactful. Nostalgia is a driving force in modern culture. The world continues to progress forward so rapidly in both positive and negative ways. This change can be extremely jarring to individuals. And what better way to cope with the present then to idealize and romanticize aspects of the past? ¹⁶ Many things now are vintage, a throwback, or antique. It becomes so easy to capture the essence of an era through material objects, with many of the objects being qualified as kitsch.¹⁷ Examples of such, 1950's valentines emphasizing lambs, cherubs and being ultra feminine. This makes sense when considering the baby boom. The 1970's sears mushroom kitchen set, (fig.3) with the typical color combination of orange and brown. Coming out of the era of hippies, war protest, and only a few years after psychedelics were banned. And all this can be seen in a department store kitchen item now turned collectable. So these items easily give way to the spirit of the time it's from, which can lay the foundations of the period one is longing for. Is someone collecting the 50's valentines, longing for a time when women were homemakers? Can the rise in popularity of the valentines be related to the very recent "trad wife" discourse? Or is the person collecting the kitchen set longing for an era they once lived or someone who romanticized it earning for the freedom, fashion, and music, that the 70's is known for. All these kitsch objects can expand so far beyond just existing and can create the environment, ideology and era

¹⁶ Emmers, 63

¹⁷ Brown, 40

someone is nostalgic for as a way to cope with the ever tumultuously present. When you progress so far forward it seems like the easiest option is to look back for comfort and inspiration. This is what kitsch provides, in its vast definitions and interpretations.

Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) is known for his photorealism and Americana in his illustrations. He documents American life through the use of relevant subjects with real sitters. He is most known for his illustrations on 300 plus covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*. In his 1944 cover of *Saturday Evening Post* Rockwell depicts a man receiving a tattoo from a tattoo artist. Although this work is titled *Tattoo Artist* the viewer does not see the face of the artist only his back, as he is seated leaning forward toward the client receiving the tattoo. The artist is dressed in clothes that at first glance seem high quality, polished, and put together. However, with closer inspection, it can be seen that the artist clothes are rather worn and lived in. With stains on the back pocket that is filled with scissors and other materials that may be used around the tattoo studio. His sleeves rolled and his pants wrinkled and unraveled at the cuff. It shows that the man, although an artist and working man still has a level of otherness and not fitting the societal standard. Many artists were viewed through this lens. Early tattooers did not have to be and most times were not trained in any other art form. They were just men who had picked up the job. The tattooer sits on a metal toolbox turned on its side with an open jar of ink and an unknown can next to his feet. The toolbox being used as a stool adds a sense of informality and impromptu. Although using needles in ways similar to a doctor lacks all of the serious precautions that would be taken in a hospital. The carelessness of placing an open jar on the ground shows the lack of sterilization and careful procedures for tattoos in its early years in the United States. This lack of hygiene

added to the mystic deviant and dangerous nature of the tattoo shop. Making tattoos only fit for the resilient and rowdy men in the military. Demello notes that these early years of American tattooing were heavily associated with the military. The servicemen would get tattooed names as a way to remember family when they were away at war.¹⁸ This is seen through the patron who is being tattooed. He sits in profile to the viewer. From his jaw to his ear there is a purple and yellow discoloration, indicating a bruise from a prior altercation. He is seen wearing a black hat with gold lettering, accompanied by black slacks with white and red trim, resembling the uniforms worn by the navy. As the tattoo artist leans over he is seen tattooing a name under what seems to be a list of women's names. With each being a prior lover's name. Getting a tattooed name, a permanent mark on one's body although frowned upon now used to be very common. This work shows the changed perception of tattoos as it happened, the idea of impulsivity of getting a person's name tattooed still exists strongly today. This shows that even if there's a changed acceptance of tattooing there is still a universal understanding that dates far back in the tattoo world. Even with the ever-changing thoughts there are still ties to its history. The crossed-out names and joking manner of Rockwell's work, making the sailor look unserious shows the shift in the 40s. This work hits on the permanence of tattoos while also noting the impulsive nature of the sitter, who time after time makes the same mistake.

Rockwell started his career with the Saturday Evening Post in 1916. He would create the same style of works, showing the "common man" with humor and goodwill, in

¹⁸ Demello, 51

the often overlooked circumstances of everyday”¹⁹ The exact reason he was popular to the masses was the reason the art world looked down on him. His work was viewed as overly sentimental and stuck in the past at a time when modernism was on the rise. He depicts the idealized American life, small towns, families and surface-level emotions. All while producing over 300 of these works for the Saturday Evening Post. This virtual removed him from the art history canon, being used only as a counter-example to what art should strive for. He was used the same way as kitsch, with Clement Greenberg even mentioning Rockwell’s illustrations in his infamous Avant-Garde and Kitsch. It was not until the late 20th century that Rockwells works were being looked back on as a way to establish what is American, Rockwell's work “played a role in shaping this sense of the past”²⁰ His works walk a fine line between propaganda/cliche and real experiences of one of the many sects of American life.²¹ It should also be said that all these images are only so real being staged with sitters and lighting, they are artificial but ring true in some ways. An oversimplification of the themes he depicts is what allowed for many aspects of his works to be taken and turned into traditional cheesy commercial products. I believe as years have gone on the aspects of his work that differentiate his from the commercial products of today is his skill. All his works are very detailed, he is able to depict the human body and face in such a realistic, automatically correct manner that you don't realize how much skill it takes to do so. It seems real and effortless. It is not until the 1999 traveling exhibition “Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American

¹⁹ Homes and Brogdon, 34

²⁰ Hennessey and Kunston, 50

²¹ It cant go unsaid that in his early career he did depict a very white narrative of the US. That does change a little bit later, but nevertheless a very white narrative

People " that there is a change in the art world view of his work. This exhibit really made way for the present understanding of his work.

As time passes, it is inevitable that things change not only in concept but also in perception. The parallel evolution between tattoos, kitsch, and Norman Rockwell's art has numerous reasons for this change, but the one common factor is nostalgia. During these early years, tattoos were seen in a negative light, being dangerous, exotic and only for the outcast of society. This was until the time of the "Renaissance" in the 70s when people began appreciating tattoos more and they were seen as an art form; making tattoos permissible by the standard at the time. By the white middle class. The perseverance of the American traditional style which is commonly associated with sailors and bikers, can be credited to the nostalgic longing for the subversive lifestyle and the patchwork nature of the style. Kitsch is anything seen as inauthentic, trashy, morally wrong, decorative, and generally just distasteful. Kitsch at first seems undesirable and not well received, but as time passes, there is beauty to be found in traditional kitsch things. Kitsch material items tend to capture the essence of an era allowing for one to create an environment that mirrors one they may be longing for. Creating nostalgic memories that never existed. A work that ties both kitsch and tattoos together is titled *Tattoo Artist*. This painting tells a deeper story through its details. The man in the painting can be seen with stained clothing, unkempt clothes with wrinkles and a seemingly unhygienic environment sitting on a metal box giving another man a tattoo. This image paints the picture of a grungier fit for the rougher crowd through its impurities. It was created by Norman Rockwell in 1944, showing the opinions of kitsch and tattoos changing as its happening in the 40s. Rockwells pieces favored the

common man, which caused his work to be looked down on and essentially stuck in the past. However, later on his works, would be used to define what is American and how does America view its past . Tattoos and Norman Rockwell demonstrate character and tell stories that preserve the past, creating a longer for a different time in American history. Tattoos, Norman Rockwell, and kitsch all support one another and the evolutionary path that made them into the now-loved art styles and techniques that we have today through their originally nontraditional practices.

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NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

Figure 1.

Norman Rockwell (1894-1978), *Tattoo Artist (Only Skin Deep)*, 1944. Cover Illustration for *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 4, 1944. Norman Rockwell Museum



Captain Costentenus, a Man with Many Tattoos on His Body. Colour Lithograph. n.d. 1 print : lithograph, printed in colours, sheet 71.8 x 51.7 cm. Wellcome Collection. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.36634841>.

Figure 2.



Fig. 3

Merry Mushroom Collection. Sears & Roebuck co. 1970-1987

<https://www.etsy.com/listing/1277314625/vintage-mushroom-canister-set-merry>