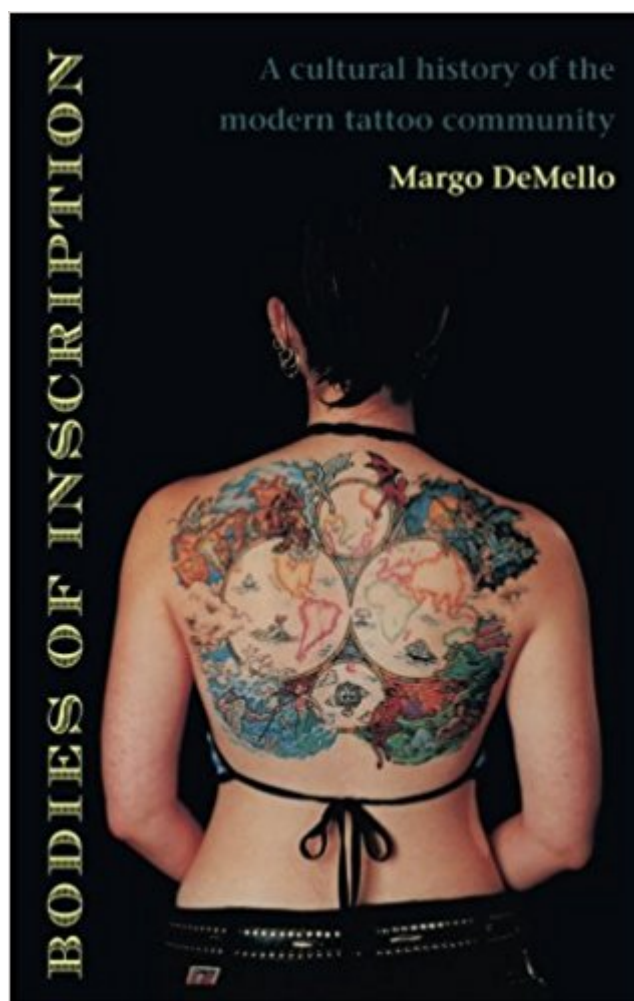


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# Bodies Of Inscription: A Cultural History Of The Modern Tattoo Community



## Synopsis

Since the 1980s, tattooing has emerged anew in the United States as a widely appealing cultural, artistic, and social form. In *Bodies of Inscription* Margo DeMello explains how elite tattooists, magazine editors, and leaders of tattoo organizations have downplayed the working-class roots of tattooing in order to make it more palatable for middle-class consumption. She shows how a completely new set of meanings derived primarily from non-Western cultures has been created to give tattoos an exotic, primitive flavor. Community publications, tattoo conventions, articles in popular magazines, and DeMello's numerous interviews illustrate the interplay between class, culture, and history that orchestrated a shift from traditional Americana and biker tattoos to new forms using Celtic, tribal, and Japanese images. DeMello's extensive interviews reveal the divergent yet overlapping communities formed by this class-based, American-style repackaging of the tattoo. After describing how the tattoo has moved from a mark of patriotism or rebellion to a symbol of exploration and status, the author returns to the predominantly middle-class movement that celebrates its skin art as spiritual, poetic, and self-empowering. Recognizing that the term "community" cannot capture the variations and class conflict that continue to thrive within the larger tattoo culture, DeMello finds in the discourse of tattooed people and their artists a new and particular sense of community and explores the unexpected relationship between this discourse and that of other social movements. This ethnography of tattooing in America makes a substantive contribution to the history of tattooing in addition to relating how communities form around particular traditions and how the traditions themselves change with the introduction of new participants. *Bodies of Inscription* will have broad appeal and will be enjoyed by readers interested in cultural studies, American studies, sociology, popular culture, and body art.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

DeMello (formerly with Univ. of California, Davis) presents an anthropological study of tattooing and tattoo communities in North America. Both a researcher and a "tattooed person" who is married to a tattooist--both "insider and outsider," that is--she describes the rigid hierarchies within tattoo communities (how tattooists jealously guard secrets from outsiders and newcomers) and engages in a broader analysis of tattoos as socioeconomic indicators. She looks at the meaning of tattoos among bikers, Chicano gangs, middle-class baby boomers, and Generation X. Modern, elite tattooists, she argues, downplay tattooing's lower-class roots in favor of new "middle-class consumption." And whereas baby boomers' traditional tattoo designs--which most now want to hide--featured lifestyle, patriotism, love, and memorable events, Generation X youth proudly display more "exotic" and "primitive" designs. An interesting, authentic account of tattoo communities; recommended for all libraries.-Chogollah Maroufi, California State Univ., Los Angeles Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Although academic, this book has much to recommend it for general collections. The tattoo community of which DeMello writes--and in which she participates--is demographically quite different from the old. It is more female, more middle-class, and more educated, whereas the earlier society of tattoo collectors was primarily working class and male. DeMello lays out some of the social history of tattooing to prepare for her discussion of the changes in tattooing in the past 20 years. From handpicked prison tattoos to the latest in today's "tribal" design, from gang symbols to feminist ones, tattoos themselves have changed to meet changing consumer demand. Some of the tensions among social groups for whom tattoos have dramatically different meanings are documented, but DeMello's major interest is in describing the new community of tattooed people, both men and women, for whom new meanings are being forged from the meeting of skin and ink. Patricia Monaghan --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Bodies of Inscription is a great book if you're looking for information on the subculture of tattoos. It features an extensive history for a whole chapter, which was a fairly large fraction of the book. It doesn't go back as far as other tattoos books go though. It starts when the Western

world began to see it in the 1700s. Another comparison between this and other tattoo books is her writing. Some use scientific vernacular while others are more layman's terms. I enjoyed that she was the later. I like that she talked to people who are members of the tattoo community and not just used examples from magazines. She says that the two most popular ways of being in the community is through tattoo conventions and magazines. As a tattooed person who isn't involved in either, I now understand why I've never felt a sense of community. The one convention I go to has a tattoo part of it and I've never been involved. This book definitely helped give insight into the subculture that I could be a part of. I found it amusing that some older tattooed people found the whole thing crazy. I would think they would be seen as elders in the group. One thing that bothered me is her focus on the middle-class tattooed person. What about the lower and upper class tattooed people? I feel like they should be included, too.

For the time that this book was written it was a good concise portrait of tattoo culture from a very aware upper middle class view point. out of date book but good for obtaining a background knowledge of tattoo culture.

Ms. DeMello spends too much time acting as her own apologist as she explains how she acquired "insider" status in the tattoo community while still remaining an impartial observer. One thing I found particularly objectionable in her book was her apparent opinion, insinuated several times, that only women with "the body beautiful" should get tattoos (much less display them in public -- horrors!) As a woman (liberated, one assumes), Ms. DeMello should know better. This is one book which is going to end up in a used bookstore rather than in my collection.

Tattoo books usually have a lot of pictures in them - at least the ones I've seen do. This book, while written very nicely, didn't have many pictures, and the ones it did have are grainy and in black-and-white. The history of the tattoo community is interesting, though I would have liked to see a bit more on how tattooing evolved from ancient times to now, instead of just from the 80's to now.

This book is an anthropological study of the modern sub-culture of tattoo fans. It briefly touches on the history of tattoos in western culture, with a focus on tattoos merging into popular/middle class culture from the 1980's onward. It is very informative, and a great read - it is not a good book for those merely seeking tattoo pictures. The one downside to this book is it is copywrite 2000, which means it is now outdated by 9 years. The community has grown and changed so much with the use

of the internet. Current trends like the newest celebrity craze for tattoos, tattoo reality TV programs, and the re-popularization of old-school tattoos are not covered.

Bodies of Inscription is a scholarly in depth look at the historical, social and political aspects of tattooing as a whole. This is not a picture book, this is a book on tattoo history and sociology. She presents her points in a clear and concise manner. The section on the history of tattooing is very informative. I began reading this book as a source for a research paper, then eventually read it cover to cover.

This is a very dry book. Much like some waning boot camper's war stories, or the villagers who told stories in The Blair Witch Project, Margo DeMello quotes herself and tells fun facts she heard from here and there, then pasted this whole giant scrapbook together. It's just a bunch of her opinions and her point of views, written by her to be the "Truth". Not to say what she wrote does not have validity, but I'd imagine, if she doesn't repeat herself over the chapters so very often (I don't know how many times she had mentioned things like "people who endorse tattoos are mostly bikers, freaks and sailors", and the repetitive mentioning of the "mom" tattoos with not much further analogy of the culture), maybe it'll be more readable. It's taking me almost a month, and I can only read less than a dozen pages each time I breathe into it. In total, she is a half-baked, elitist, self-proclaimed "insider" of the tattoo "communitas" that claims she KNOWS the community like a mother would claim to know her son. She took it too far, thinking she can analyze the biology and sociology of the situation in a third person's point of view. It doesn't matter how many American tattoo conventions she went to and how many tattoo parlor stories she had heard, this book is written BY a groupie, and is only meant to be read by her groupies. Maybe she can write news article about tattoos like an enthusiast participant of a pride parade, but this article is [holy HELL] almost 200 pages. It's 175 pages too long.

This book was ok! i was hoping for something more traditional in the designs the author gave her readers! i could have done i without the gang tattoos though!

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