

Tattoo — KRaasiruaq

IPIMNI KRAASIRUANGQ’RTUA. – I HAVE A TATTOO ON MY ARM.



Image: Sadie Coyle, 2017. Photo by Mike Haffeman.

Tattooing was once a widespread practice among Alaska’s Native societies. Anthropologists believe that arctic peoples have been tattooing themselves for at least 3,500 years, based on tattoo-like designs found on ancient depictions of the human body. Like clothing and jewelry, tattoos carried messages. They transform the skin into a palette that provides social information, spiritual protection, and medicinal assistance.

Early historic descriptions of Alutiiq people record two methods of decorating the body. One method was to break the skin with a fine bone needle and then rub the resulting cut with a mixture of spruce charcoal and blood. This created a dark blue tattoo. A second method was to run a blackened sinew thread beneath the skin with the aid of a needle. Because women were the principal sewers in Alutiiq society, and famous for their intricate embroidery, it is likely that women were also tattoo artists.

Both men and women wore tattoos. At puberty, young women tattooed their chins with fine vertical lines. These lines were a sign of adult status, marriageability, and probably fertility. Other facial tattoos included lines running from the ears to the chin, lines across the cheeks, or small round dots on the cheeks. At marriage, an Alutiiq woman might also tattoo her chest or arms as a sign of love for her husband. Other common tattoos were bands of designs that originated at the shoulders or under the arms and crossed the chest. These tattoos were signs of wealth and high social standing.

Like the practice of wearing labrets, tattooing disappeared with western contact. At least one observer noted that body decoration was becoming less common in the Kodiak region by the early 1800s. This change probably reflects western disdain for a practice that was believed to be disfiguring. Today, however, some young Native people are choosing tattoos as a way to express their heritage. Around Alaska, people are getting tattoos in the style of their ancestors. These tattoos connect people with their past.