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The Tattoo Collectors.

Inscribing Criminality in Nineteenth Century France

In June 1929, an itinerant English purchasing agent named Peter Johnson-Saint met with one of his contacts in Paris, a Dr. La Valette, to finalise the sale of a collection of curious objects. Where exactly this meeting took place is not clear; the only reference to an address is recorded on an accession slip and simply reads “Rue Ecole de Medecine”.¹ Of course, this particular street is significant since it is at the historic heart of Parisian medical studies, home to the Université Paris Descartes and the Musée Dupuytren. But whether or not Johnston-Saint was visiting a member of the medical faculty that day, or a man who occupied himself in private practice, is not (yet) certain. Johnston-Saint did however keep a record of his purchasing activities for his employer, including a brief description of the objects he acquired, given in his journal entry for Saturday June 15th:

“I then went to see Lavalette in the rue Ecole de Medecine. This is the man who had the collection of over 300 tattooed human skins. These skins date from the first quarter of last century down to the present time; many of them are very curious and extremely interesting, consisting of skins of sailors, soldiers, murderers and criminals of all nationalities. He also has the very unique mummified head of an Arab, mummified in such a manner as to preserve the features in a most lifelike condition. He says that this was a special process of his own and is unique in mummification. There was also a galvanised human brain, the only example of its kind in the world, prepared in the laboratory of the Musee Dupuytren in Paris [...] Lavalette told me that the skins are unique, that no more could now be got under any circumstances and that each skin had taken him a long time and cost him a certain amount to cure and prepare for his permanent collection.”²

The details of La Valette’s mysterious and “unique” preservation methods, and how exactly he came to possess such a large quantity of fragments of tattooed human skin, is not revealed in Johnston-Saint’s notes. One thing however, is clear; Henry Wellcome – Victorian entrepreneur, prolific collector and Johnston-Saint’s employer

1 As is frequently the case with the Wellcome Collection archives, there are many inconsistencies and mistakes in the records – the correct spelling in this instance should be “Rue de l’Ecole de Medecine”. Indeed, there is some question as to the correct spelling of the name of Johnston-Saint’s contact; his handwritten journal entries read “Lavalette”, but are frequently typed in subsequent records as “La Valette”.

2 Peter Johnson-Saint: Johnston-Saint Reports Jan–Nov 1929. In: The Wellcome Collection Archives, London, (Saturday June 15th), p. 9.



1: Tattoo on human skin (125mm x 91mm), dated 1830–1900.

– was keen to get the particular objects La Valette had on offer for his “historic medical museum”.³ His notes, scrawled in the margins of Johnston-Saint’s typed reports, emphatically state: “these of great interest to us for certain section”.⁴ What exactly were Wellcome’s intentions for this motley collection of human remains?

Nearly eighty years later, they remain in storage at the Science Museum’s archives at Blythe House in London, and aside from the inclusion of a few tattooed skins in a small number of recent exhibitions on diverse themes, most of the collection has never been on display to the public.⁵ Henry Wellcome’s interest in the history of human health and medicine spurred his prolific collecting of a wide range of artefacts from human bones, tissue and skin, to medicine chests, x-ray machines and iron lungs, to birthing chairs and prosthetic limbs – over a million objects by the time of his death in 1936.

This paper is concerned with a small fraction of this vast collection – a mere 300 individual items housed in a single storage cupboard. These items are not objects in the commonplace sense, though like books, paper or ink they are both visible and palpable, and can be stored in physical repositories; they are traces of the lives of others, memories made flesh, inscriptions of individual identity and of institutional domination. Writing on dissection in the nineteenth century, Helen MacDonald makes the observation that; “the human body, in whole or in parts, is never just an object like any other

3 For more on this subject, see chapter 5 in Frances Larson’s engaging account of Henry Wellcome’s life and work: *France Larson: An Infinity of Things*, (Oxford University Press, 2009).

4 Johnston-Saint: Reports (as cited in footnote 2), p. 9.

5 Two of the Wellcome Collection’s preserved tattooed human skins are on display as part of their permanent exhibition “Medicine Man”: <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/medicine-man.aspx>; seven of the skins were also recently displayed in the exhibition “Skin”, also at the Wellcome Collection: <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/skin.aspx>. As I write two more are installed at the Science Museum exhibition “Psychoanalysis: The Unconscious in Everyday Life”: <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/visitmuseum/galleries/psychoanalysis.aspx>. These various mobilisations of the objects within museum exhibition contexts demonstrate perfectly the ways in which inscriptions (in this case a collection of artefacts) are “reshuffled and recombined” within the wider array of museum objects, thereby generating new interpretations and meanings.

[...] it slips between subject and object.”⁶ These “objects”, whilst possessing the defining characteristics required of object-hood, are also endowed with a latent subjectivity still visible in the tattooed trace etched indelibly into the skin – and in fact their fabrication into objects conjures another subject, that of the collector who selected, excised and



2: Tattoos on human skin (267mm x 181mm), dated 1850–1920.

prepared the tattoos for the display cabinet. Hence they are far more than merely “objects” in the simple material sense; their very existence in medical collections disrupts and dissolves these taken-for-granted categories and confronts us with the hybrid.

Where to begin then when analysing such peculiar hybrid entities? Materially, we are dealing with dry-prepared human skins,⁷ varying in size from a few centimetres square, to entire sheets of skin removed from the chests of a number of men, nipples and hair still intact. ➤ **Fig. 2** The frilled and punctured edges indicative of the drying process are common features in the collection, though some have had these edges trimmed away carefully, apparently to better present the skin as a neat parchment-like surface. Such manipulations suggest both a careful attention to visual display and a striking correspondence between skin surface and writing surface. There are interesting incongruities too; whilst a large proportion have clearly been cut into shapes that frame the tattoos in the most economic manner possible (as can be seen in Figure 1), others are crudely hewn through the tattoo-marks themselves, and so do not present perfectly intact specimens. ➤ **Fig. 3** One might speculate a number of reasons for this; the body surface and tattoos may have been damaged due to injury prior to death, a distinct possibility given that the majority of specimens are presumed to have come from sailors and soldiers,⁸ or the tattoos may have been

6 Helen MacDonald: *Human Remains: Dissection and its Histories*, (Yale University Press, 2005), p. 3.

7 At the time of writing, work is underway to establish exactly what substances have been used in the preservation of the collection, though it is speculated at present that either mercuric chloride or arsenic trioxide may be present in the skins, limiting their handling.

8 Though the only definitive evidence of this we have so far are comments in Johnston-Saints’ journals, it is reasonable to assume that the skins would indeed have come from populations under institutional purview (in barracks, military hospitals, prisons etc.), especially since it was these very populations who were the subject of late nineteenth century criminological investigations into tattooing.



3: Tattoos on human skin (209mm x 159mm), dated 1900–1920.

harvested in haste, possibly by non-medical professionals seeking to earn some money from their black-market sale to collectors. The varying degree of skill by which the skins have been removed from the body and prepared may lend some support to the latter theory – in fact, it seems more than likely that La Valette did not prepare all of the skins himself, as he claimed. ↗ Fig. 1

A material analysis of the collection raises many questions, and even suggests a few possible answers, but for clarification of the key question – why and for what purpose were the tattoos collected? – other methods must be sought. It is necessary first to locate the Wellcome tattooed skins within the broader context

of collecting cultures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In what follows, I will aim to demonstrate how the tattoos of the Wellcome Collection were collected in multiple senses and in more than one instance, in each case enacting a different conception of the tattoo and the collection. Initially, the itinerant tattooee, classically the sailor or soldier, acquires on their travels various tattoo marks as souvenirs. Further down the line, following the death of the tattooed, another collector selects, excises, prepares and collates the tattoos for a private collection, ostensibly for academic study.⁹ Time passes, academic interests shift and change – some schools of thought fall out of favour or are discredited, and tattooing ceases to be an active study concern. The collection is sold, and absorbed into yet another collection, that of the museum – the repository for curious relics of past human endeavour. Thus with each shift in location – living body, scientific cabinet of curiosity, public institution – it is possible to see that the meanings ascribed to these objects metamorphoses also, thereby complicating the question of why and for what purpose they were assembled.

⁹ It seems more than likely that there was an element of fetishisation at play behind the collection of tattooed human skin; this is an aspect of the research that I am currently exploring in my thesis.

No doubt it is impossible to ever know with absolute surety details of the lives of tattooed European sailors and soldiers, since they left behind no written personal histories – save for the words and images they inscribed into their flesh.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is with these historically obscured individuals that we must begin. The sailor’s (and to a lesser extent soldier’s) tattoo can now be regarded as iconic, both in broad cultural terms and within tattoo art practice – indeed, this category of images could now be said to represent a genre within the corpus of Western tattoo art. Collections of tattooed images bound up with seafaring life (such as those shown in Figure 2) are emblematic of early sailor’s tattoos – a fouled anchor, possibly indicative of rank; a pierced heart symbolising betrayal in love; creatures of the sea; and the bearer’s name inscribed to provide an identifying mark in the event of death. ↗ Fig.2

Commenting on the acquisition of tattoo marks by European sailors visiting Polynesia in the eighteenth century, Nicholas Thomas makes the following observation:

“Whereas objects gathered might be lost, broken or sold, and could only ever be tenuously connected with one’s person and uncertain in their significance, your tattoo is not only ineradicable and inalienable, it is unambiguously part of you.”¹¹

Thomas explicitly likens the act of becoming tattooed to a form of collecting; specifically, he views the tattoo in this context as a bodily inscription which records the trace of an encounter. It is useful here to conceptualise the tattoo with reference to Bruno Latour and Simon Schaffer as a kind of “immutable mobile”.¹² It is mobile insofar as the tattooed body travels, in this case the body of the sailor who brings home proof of an ethnographic encounter; and it is immutable by its very nature as a permanent mark. The emergence of “a novel tattoo fashion” amongst the ordinary seamen who made up the crew of Cook’s Endeavour in 1769 can be contextualised within a broader shipboard collecting culture, in which all crew were encouraged to participate in the gathering of cartographic and navigational

10 The notion of tattooing as a form of body-writing or personal memoir is explored by Philippe Artières: *A Fleur de Peau. Médecins, Tatouages, et Tatoués 1880–1910*, (Editions Allia, Paris, 2004).

11 Nicholas Thomas: Introduction. In: Nicholas Thomas et al (Eds.): *Tattoo: Bodies, Art and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*, (Duke University Press, Durham, 2005), p. 20.

12 Bruno Latour: *Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together*, 1990, p.1–32. Online: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.115.5725&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

data.¹³ Simon Schaffer has shown how the European tendency during this period of exploration and information-gathering was to interpret Polynesian tattooing as a form of writing.¹⁴ Given the scientific remit of voyages such as Cook's it is thus easy to imagine how, for the common sailor who may not possess much literacy skill, "tattooing became a form of peculiarly apt collection, an inventory of signs both mobile and exquisitely immutable."¹⁵

The tattooed skin shown in Figure 3 is an exceptional example of such a "collection" of tattoos; twenty individual designs, grouped tightly together and arranged to balance the relative scale of each image, jostle over what was one half of the chest in a space almost twenty-one centimetres by sixteen. In contrast to the traditional Japanese body-suit tattoo, which was designed both thematically and ergonomically and applied over a number of sessions to create one seamless work of art, the European individual tended to be tattooed with a number of different, isolated designs which were not necessarily thematically linked and could be added to over time. In this way, it is possible to view nineteenth-century European tattooing as a process of curio collecting – the more tattooed souvenirs one possessed, the more the body came to be viewed as "exotic" and strange. This is most evident in the case of those who took their collecting to the extreme of acquiring a full body suit. The bodies of the tattooed man or lady thus became living, breathing "cabinets of curiosities", from which they could make as living as performers at fairs, side-shows and circuses. Thus the tattooee is the first collector in a series – selecting both a design and section of skin on which to have it inscribed, and building up a unique set of images which allude to their travels and experiences. In some cases, this reference is made so explicit as to almost render itself redundant; "Souvenir du Sahara" speaks quite literally of the tattoo-as-souvenir, and is not an isolated example in the Wellcome collection. ➤ **Fig. 1** Whilst many of the tattooed designs of the sailor or soldier are repetitious and very similar stylistically, the individuality of the tattoo emerges from a combination of the context of its acquisition, the unique placement on the body,

13 Thomas (as cited in footnote 11), p. 19.

14 Simon Schaffer: "On Seeing Me Write": Inscription Devices in the South Seas. In: *Representations*, No. 97, Winter 2007, p.90–122. Likewise Schaffer offers evidence that some Polynesians regarded European writing as a form of tattooing; Schaffer's article refers to an instance during the 1792 voyage of the *Daedalus* to the Marquesas Islands in which young British astronomer William Gooch was apparently invited to tattoo a Marquesan chief. Misinterpreting the astronomer's pen and ink, the Marquesan lay down to be tattooed. Gooch later recorded this in his diary "On seeing me write, deem'd it tattooing" (p. 91). This episode reveals interestingly symmetrical affinities between European inscription devices and those of the South Seas Islanders.

15 Schaffer (as cited in footnote 14), p. 100.

the skill (or lack of) in its application, and its relation to other tattoos which are added to the collection over time.

The surge in popularity of tattooing amongst the male European working classes caught the attention of a second group of collectors during the late nineteenth century. Who exactly these men were is still something of a mystery – but it seems clear that whilst there was certainly a strong interest in the tattoo amongst prominent criminologists of the time, there appears to be no reference to or discussion of the harvesting and preparation of tattooed skin in their work → Fig.3.¹⁶

In France, the most prominent criminologist writing on tattoos during the late nineteenth century was Alexandre Lacassagne (1843–1924), carrying out detailed research into the incidence of tattooing amongst prison populations. This work involved the gathering of a considerable amount of data, which he then set about systematizing;

“By 1881 he had collected copies of 1,600 tattoo images, traced from life, mounted on specially prepared paper and carefully catalogued according to seven categories of image, ten specifications of location on the body, and so on.”¹⁷

As well as drawings traced directly from the skin of the tattooed criminal, photographs – and in some cases even the tattooed skins themselves – were collected as raw data by prison wardens, army doctors and criminologists. The criminological and medical interest in the tattoo during the last two decades of the nineteenth century derived in part from theories of *dégénérescence* and atavism which became

¹⁶ I may yet discover something which disproves this assumption, since my research in this area is ongoing. Jane Caplan makes the assertion in the endnotes to her essay “National Tattooing: Traditions of Tattooing in Nineteenth Century Europe” that; “Pathology clinics might preserve a few examples of tattooed skin, but this was not the standard recording method”, citing one German source which describes such a preservation technique; Jane Caplan (Ed.): *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, (Reaktion Books, London, 2000), p. 289. However, the 300 individual skins in the Wellcome Collection alone amount to much more than a “few” examples – and there are many more in comparable collections across Europe. The question then, is who – if not the major criminological theorists of the time – were collecting tattooed human skins? It is reasonable to assume that they had medical training as well as access to cadavers; I would put forward the suggestion that it was perhaps the surgeons and pathologists who were employed in prisons, barracks and on the battlefield who gathered this “raw data”. This supposition would follow Caplan’s observation that much of the original research which the academic studies drew upon was actually collected by “the ordinary prison or army medical officers” who were “practitioners not academics” (p. 161).

¹⁷ Caplan (as cited in footnote 16), p. 161.

popular in the French and Italian schools of criminology respectively.¹⁸ Tattooing as practiced amongst particular groups and classes of European society was considered by many scholars to represent a worrying sign of decline in the collective moral character of the populace. Already associated with “savages” in Polynesia and elsewhere, it was easy to transpose the “primitive morals” of one group onto another. Re-coded and re-inscribed, the tattoo in the European context came to be associated with criminality. However, unlike other physical features which could be scrutinised for abnormality, the tattoo presented a unique challenge, since it was not an inherited but a socially acquired characteristic. The ambiguity of the mark, and its inherently cultural nature did not escape Lacassagne, whose theories placed emphasis on the social etiology of crime: “The social milieu is the breeding ground of criminality; the germ is the criminal, an element which has no importance until the day where it finds the broth which makes it ferment.”¹⁹

The tattoo is a kind of boundary phenomenon, both physiologically and socio-culturally; it appears at the body surface, but is suspended indelibly within the flesh. Thus, it may be argued that it was the liminality of the tattoo which made it such an irresistible subject of medico-legal research. Moreover, tattoos were a highly visible sign, and viewed as such, they were invested with a kind of loquaciousness which seemed to invite interpretation; prompting Lacassagne’s elegant characterisation of tattoos as “speaking scars”.²⁰

This pithy phrase indicates a conception of tattoo-as-writing in the work of Lacassagne, a view shared by his contemporaries in the field. The first step in this classificatory project was to reify the mark into sign, by placing the tattoo into a schema alongside other “primitive” forms of writing such as hieroglyphs, pictograms, professional emblems, graffiti etc.²¹ However, whilst tattoos at first appeared to present a legible message to the outside world, their cryptic “criminal” code proved frustratingly opaque. The visual data gathered did not “speak for itself”, but required further rationalisation through, for example, the re-presentation of images as part of schematic diagrams indicating the incidence and location of tattoos on the body,

18 Caplan (as cited in footnote 16), p. 156.

19 “Le milieu social est le bouillon de culture de la criminalité; le microbe, c’est le criminel, un élément qui n’a d’importance que le jour où il trouve le bouillon qui le fait fermenter.” Alexandre Lacassagne : Les transformations du droit pénal et les progrès de la médecine légale, de 1810 à 1912. In: *Archives d’anthropologie criminelle*, 1913, p. 364.

20 As cited in Jane Caplan: ‘Speaking Scars’: The Tattoo in Popular Practice and Medico-Legal Debate in Nineteenth-Century Europe. In: *History Workshop Journal*, No. 44, Autumn, 1997, p. 129.

21 Alexandre Lacassagne, cited in Caplan: *Written on the Body* (as cited in footnote 16), p. 161.

accompanied by annotations, charts and tables, as well as descriptive and analytical texts. As Jane Caplan has pointed out, the raw data itself often revealed little more than the fact that tattooing was commonly practiced amongst the male working classes in general.²²

The bringing into being of the tattooed criminal “other” in the nineteenth century was accomplished by means of these processes of inscription. Through the amassing of visual material and theoretical speculation in accompanying texts, a “criminal class”, whose physical and behavioural characteristics could be mapped and catalogued by criminologists, gradually emerged from the effusion of data in “archetypal” form. Writing on inscription processes and power, Bruno Latour argues that; “a ‘state’, a ‘corporation’, a ‘culture’, an ‘economy’ are the result of a punctualization process that obtains a few indicators out of many traces. In order to exist these entities have to be summed up somewhere.”²³ Similarly, the criminal is “summed up” in the work of criminologists by a few physical indicators, of which the tattoo seemed to be one of the most compelling. Thus the complex, unpredictable, “deviant” human being is re-shaped into a more manageable object of knowledge in a transformative process which operates to distil essences into two-dimensional inscriptions; in this case preserving only the trace, the tattoo itself.

Whilst the tattoo may be an “inalienable and unambiguous” part of an individual human being during life, this ceases to be the case in death. Regarded as a text, it can be removed from the body upon death and preserved in the manner of pages in book. In the case of the Wellcome Collection we are confronted with just that: the assemblage of tattoos into skin-texts post mortem. Extracted from the context of the life that gave it meaning, the tattoo may be preserved, sold, re-coded and re-mobilised to the ends of others. According to Latour and others, the process of mobilisation often begins with the gathering of objects: “collections of rocks, stuffed animals, samples, fossils, artifacts, gene banks, are the first to be moved around.”²⁴ The collection is then the first “essential” inscription, and in the case of the Wellcome Collection tattooed skins, it is also their final resting place.

The nineteenth-century criminological project which devoted such energy to the collection and analysis of data on European tattooing ultimately failed to (entirely) re-code the tattooed individual as deviant, precisely because the poly-

22 Caplan: *Written on the Body* (as cited in footnote 16), p. 158.

23 Latour (as cited in footnote 12), p. 26 (my emphasis).

24 Latour (as cited in footnote 12), p. 16.

semous nature of the images themselves. Tattoos, once removed from the body – like all traces – turned out to be no more than “fragile inscriptions which are immensely less than the things from which they are extracted.”²⁵ For the tattooee and the collector of tattooed skins alike, the trace – whether a remembered experience or hand-traced drawing – was simply not enough; compulsion seems to have dictated that experience and knowledge must be etched into flesh and reified into material object respectively. Thus the tattooed and the criminologist are ironically bound by their mutual engagement with the inscription itself.

²⁵ Latour (as cited in footnote 12), p. 29.