

LIVING



Photos by BRIAN FEULNER/THE OREGONIAN

Curator Jeff Smith, pointing out the tattoos on the back of Capt Elvy, says pulling together "Tattoo: The Art of the Sailor" was challenging.

History embedded in tats

An Astoria museum exhibit shows the art and artifacts of tattoos, which sailors bore as souvenirs of voyages

By LORI TOBIAS | THE OREGONIAN

ASTORIA—

One of the great beauties of tattoos is that you can take them with you when you go.

And though that's great for the bearer, not so much for posterity's sake.

Now, the Columbia River Maritime Museum is hoping to do something about that.

"Tattoo: The Art of the Sailor" opened April 15 with more than 2,000 square feet devoted to tattoos, the tools, artists' designs, or "flash" as it's known in the world of tats.

And on display for the first time will be three journals from Capt. James Cook's 18th-century voyage to the South Pacific, the trip that inspired the tattoo culture as we know it today.

As the story goes, when Cook and his crew visited Tahiti, some of the men let the natives give them tattoos.

"Cook and others like him brought that



Watch video from the exhibit at oregonlive.com/art

information back to Europe and the United States, and shared it with people," said curator Jeff Smith. "They were fascinated by it.

"People were seeing things they'd never seen before, never imagined and it just fascinated them. So this interest in the art of tattoo just exploded. What we are showing here is that encounter and then sailors continuing that tradition of voyaging around the world, going to exotic places and bringing back souvenirs on their body of their journey."

Please see **HISTORY**, Page B2

The tattoo exhibit is not for the squeamish, museum officials say, featuring images of actual tattoo applications.

Tattoo: The Art of the Sailor

Where: Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1792 Marine Drive, Astoria; 503-325-2323

When: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; exhibit runs through Oct. 31

Tickets: \$10 adults, \$8 seniors, \$5 children 6-17

Website: crrmm.org

History: Tattoos often born of superstition

Continued from Page B1

Smith and museum deputy director David Pearson talked about putting the exhibit together for nearly a decade. But it wasn't easy.

"Most of the tattoo artifacts are in private hands," Pearson said. "There are no museum collections. We even checked with the Smithsonian and they only have one artifact, a tattoo machine. We knew we had to find it in private hands, where people are trying to take good care of it themselves. Many tattoo parlors are parlors and museums."

The process of gathering the information for the exhibit was an education in itself.

They found many tattoos hold significant meaning and were often born out of superstition.

A swallow tattoo is a sign the sailor has traveled 5,000 nautical miles, while the tattoo of an anchor signifies the sailor has crossed the Atlantic. Stars were big favorites because sailors relied on the sky to guide them home. "Hold Fast," one letter per knuckle, was a reminder to the sailor



BRIAN FEULNER/THE OREGONIAN

Deputy director David Pearson, looking at a collection of Sailor Jerry tattoo art, was instrumental in pulling the exhibit together.

working up high in the rigging to do just that.

"It was always one hand for the ship, one hand for yourself and in that order," Pearson said. "The ship always comes first."

Also big were tattoos of livestock, which sailors believed might save them.

"In the shipwrecks, they found the only creatures that

survived were roosters, chickens and pigs," Smith said. "No one could explain why. They took it to mean that somehow they had powers. A typical sailor couldn't swim, so they went to the next step. They would tattoo a rooster and pig on top of each foot, believing that it would give them the power as well to swim or walk on water and survive the

shipwreck."

The truth behind the livestock's survival was not quite so mystical. The animals were in crates lashed to the deck. When the ship went down, the crates floated, then broke apart against the breakers. The animals ended up on shore, where subsequent sailors would discover their miraculous survival.

The exhibit comes with a warning, the first in the museum's history.

"We strongly felt if we were to cover the history of tattoos we had to present the story as best we could," said Pearson. So visitors are warned: "This Special Exhibit contains themes and images of actual tattoo applications and may not be appropriate for the

squeamish or our youngest visitors."

But if there are exhibits that may have some visitors wrinkling their noses or muttering an ouch, the lure of the art is obvious, too. There's flash by famed tattoo artist Sailor Jerry, and bigger-than-life photos of Capt Elvy, an Oregonian whose upper body became a living canvas under the hands of Sailor George Fosdick. Fosdick worked out of parlors around Portland, and mentored legendary Oregonian tattoo artist Bert Grimm. There are also displays on Japanese, Hawaiian and Samoan tattoo cultures, as well as various old tattooing tools and flash from other prominent artists.

"The thing we want people to remember from visiting this exhibit is that the current interest in tattoos and tattoo designs has its roots in strong maritime traditions that really kicked off in the 18th century," Smith said.

"Even though the tattoo is permanent to the owner, it dies with the owner so the only example we have are a few photographs and the artwork the tattoo artist created, the flash. Because of the cultural and societal pressures against the practice of tattoos, it's been pushed to the underground and it's an art form that hasn't been fully recognized. It's a true living folk art."

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