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More skin, less ink

Tattoos are trendy but permanence is passe, thanks to laser removal

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A short history of tattoos.

12th Century B.C.: Polynesian cave dwellers carve symbols into their flesh to ward off demons.

18th Century A.D.: Captain Cook's crew get hip to mutilation on their South Pacific voyages.

Late 1960s: Janis Joplin lances the tribal barrier and gets branded in the name of rock.

1974: Cher splits from Sonny and celebrates with a big butterfly.

2004: Laser technology allows Cher to Turn Back Time.

Update: Two years later, Cher is still trying to turn back time at the laser studio, discovering that it takes a lot longer and can be more painful to remove tattoos than to get them. She is not alone.

Now that tattooing has crossed over from the mark of Cain to a full-blown hipster fad, with an estimated one-quarter of young North American adults thus branded, the race is on to remove, revise and rebrand. Isn't that the perfect definition of pop culture? Permanence is now officially passe and commitment only skin deep.

Dr. Gerald Boey, director of Arbutus Laser Centre in Vancouver, is seeing this trend play out in technicolour. He removes two or three unloved tattoos each day at his West Broadway clinic, and for every patient who gets one zapped, he advises another not to bother. The tattoo is too big, Dr. Boey tells them, or too colourful. It will take too long, cost too much -- live with it.

Often, they cry in his office -- both those who are losing a tattoo and those forced to keep one. "There can be a lot of emotion wrapped up in it," he tells me. "Some of them have been waiting a long time to be free of it."

And a short time can feel really long if the Betty on your bicep took off with Bob, which brings us to the top of the Don't list in the tattoo rulebook: Don't immortalize your lover. In fact, these days many reputable



Dr. Gerald Boey of the Arbutus Laser Centre removes a tattoo from the back of Mirella Stefanucci using an ink-destroying laser.
Photograph by: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun

tattoo artists balk at carving a name on to your arm or a vow across your heart, and not only because those cheesy "tatts" have gone out of style. They don't like the odds -- that you'll go crying to the laser centre, and it's going to hurt.

Of course the more time and money you've got to spend, the more fun you can have cleaning up your dermatological *trompe l'oeil*. And where else to look for inspiration than Hollywood, where one good botch deserves another. Take Pamela Anderson, who (among other tatts) has a blueish ring on her finger that used to say Tommy but now reads Mommy. A rough, blurry Mommy, which is perhaps appropriate.

That's the thing about revision -- it's all about compromise, just as in life.

Angelina Jolie did a more artful job obscuring the Billy Bob tattoo on her right forearm. After some laser touch-up, she covered it with an Arabic phrase meaning "strength of will." Which sounds like she really, really means it this time. Provided the translation is correct.

That's another tricky thing about tattoos -- the temptation to be cryptic, which can end up just being stupid. Witness the rash of Kanji and Hanzi messages in Asian script that can be lost in translation when hapless Caucasian tattoo artists miss a simple stroke.

It happened to Britney Spears, who ended up with "strange" branded down her neck instead of the intended "mysterious." And there's the woman who got "Crazy Diarrhea" in Chinese characters across her lower back. For a chuckle at their expense, visit Hanzi vigilante blogger Tian Tang at www.hanzismatter.com.

Mirella Stefanucci, of Mirella's Touch of Class in Burnaby, is one of a growing number of local tattoo artists who work closely with laser clinics to help clients repair old, faded, botched or just plain annoying designs. Recently, she sent a young woman to the Arbutus clinic for precision touch-up of a tattoo done at another parlour, a large fairy figure dancing across her lower back.

"She likes the tattoo but the fairy's face, hands and feet are poorly drawn. They look amateurish," says Stefanucci. "So Dr. Boey is removing those parts and once she's well healed, I'll redo them."

She has worked with Boey several times, including on an old tattoo of her own -- a faded 25-year-old black cross she got when she was 17. Boey likes nothing better than to see one of those crude, old-time tatts come walking into his clinic.

"In three or four appointments, it will be completely gone," he tells me. "The more professional the tattoo, the harder it is to remove, especially if it has lots of green, yellow and blue ink."

A big job can take 10 or more appointments, with lengthy healing time in between. The cost is anywhere from \$30 to \$50 per square inch per treatment, which can mean over \$1,000 to remove a colourful four-inch butterfly. It's not unusual to spend 10 times the tattoo's original cost to get rid of it.

And even then the results might be uneven, which is why Boey spends as much time discouraging some patients as lasering others. He also stays in close touch with local artists, exchanging information on new inks and techniques that may influence clients' choices down the road. He strongly advises against the deeply saturated colours that give skin the look of stamped pleather, for example, and counsels novices to start small and black.

Although he worries about "the over-tattooing of America," from the point of skin damage and infection risk, he's upbeat about future options. There is a new "laser-receptive" ink being tested by a U.S. dermatologist that is formulated for ease of removal. Until it's on the market, though, he cautions people against getting a tattoo they don't intend to keep -- for life.

And start with quality, adds Stefanucci. "The best way to find a good tattooist is word of mouth," she advises. "Look around. If you see a beautiful tattoo on the street, ask where they got it done."

There are a lot of artists who aren't, she notes. Anyone can show you a nice tattoo album -- full of other artists' work, or their own very best. You might not see a botch till it's on you.

But on the whole, she says, the people who walk through her door are increasingly savvy about their body art, putting a lot of thought and creativity into designs imbued with personal meaning.

"Back when I was starting out it was a whole different attitude. People would come in and look up on the wall and go, 'I'll take this little red devil.' "

Now those little devils are being blasted to smithereens at the laser clinic, along with boring butterflies and ex-lovers and Asian jibberish and jokes you might have thought were funny, once -- like the little guy pushing a lawnmower across your pubic hair, or the footprints on your back.

Boey has seen it all and erased most of it. At which point none of it's funny. You can tell by all the crying.

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