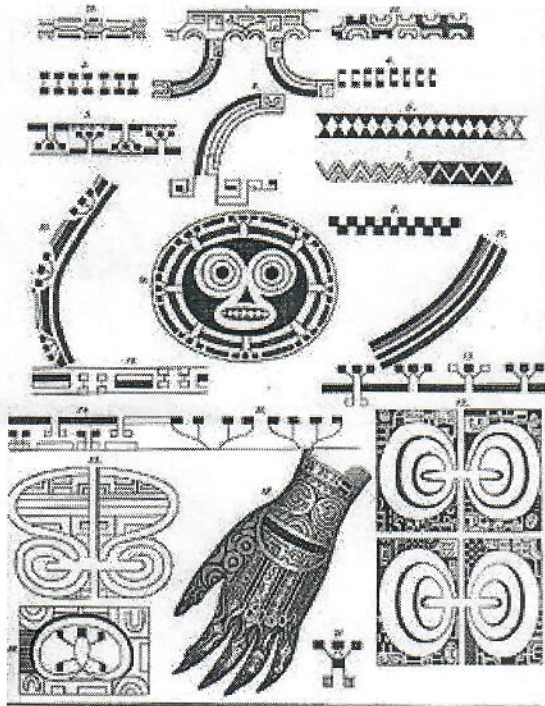


Tattoo History Source Book: Polynesia

by Tricia Allen and Steve Gilbert

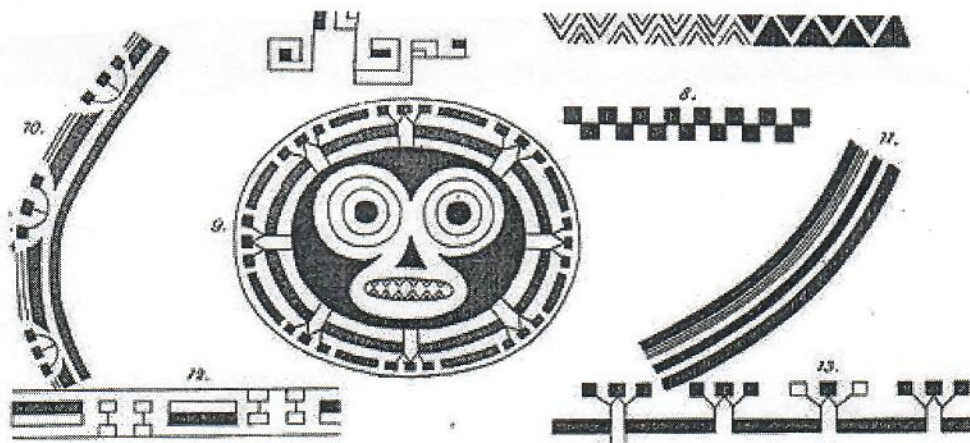


Polynesian tattooing, as it existed before the arrival of Europeans in the South Pacific, was the most artistic tattooing in the ancient world. It had evolved over thousands of years throughout the islands of the Pacific and, in its most highly developed forms, was characterized by elaborate geometrical designs which were often added to, renewed, and embellished throughout the life of the individual until they covered the entire body. In beauty and complexity ancient Polynesian tattooing rivals the best work of modern masters of the art.

Where did it come from? And why was it so highly developed in Polynesia? For the answers to these questions we must look to the geography of the Pacific islands and to the history and culture of their inhabitants.

We can imagine the amazement of 18th century European seafarers when, after months at sea, they saw the tropical islands of the Pacific with their lofty volcanic peaks, wide valleys, fertile soil, lush vegetation, and secluded coral lagoons teeming with brightly colored fish. It was a stunning natural beauty of a kind never before seen by European eyes.

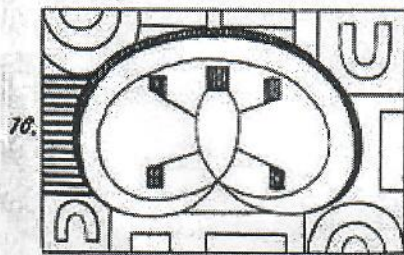
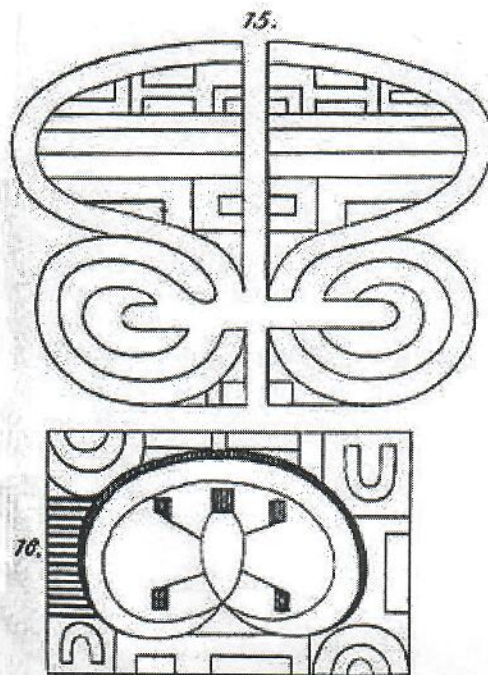
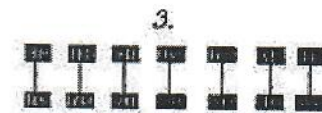
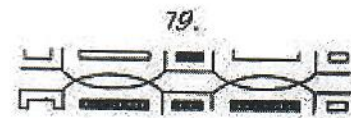
Isolated and protected from natural enemies, predators and disease, the Polynesian seemed the prototype of the mythical noble savage living in a state of innocence. The men were tall, handsome, phenomenally strong and courageous in sport and war. The women were sensuous, seductive and uncontaminated by puritanical inhibitions. Unlike the inhabitants of many other parts of the world, Polynesians did not spend their days struggling to obtain the bare necessities of life in a hostile environment.



Instead, they devoted most of their time to more interesting occupations: warfare, the sensuous pleasures, the dramatic arts, ceremonial singing and dancing,

swimming, fishing, feasting, canoe building, and religious festivals. They excelled at arts and crafts. Everything they made was decorated: canoes, bowls, war clubs and tools. Even their bodies were punctured with elaborate designs. Tattooing was a natural part of their life and art; they had the time, the temperament, and the skill to pursue it and bring it to a high degree of perfection.

European seafarers who visited the Pacific during the 18th and 19th centuries recognized the fact that the inhabitants of the islands must have had a common origin. They spoke related languages, were of similar appearance, and shared many cultural traits. But where did they come from, and how did they navigate the thousands of miles of uncharted ocean between the islands? For over two hundred years academics and popular writers concocted a bewildering variety of theories to answer these questions, but only within the last few decades has the accumulated evidence of discoveries in archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology and botany made it possible to piece together an accurate picture of the migrations of the ancestors of the Polynesians.



Anthropologists believe that Polynesia was settled by the descendants of a people who originated in Southeast Asia and gradually populated the islands of Northern Melanesia, moving on to New Guinea about 50,000 years ago. A few of the larger islands adjacent to New Guinea were settled significantly later, approximately 11,000 years ago. By 3,000 BC the inhabitants of these islands had developed agriculture, fishing techniques, and sophisticated water craft capable of long ocean voyages. Within a span of only 300-400 years these ancient voyagers (often called Lapita peoples after a type of pottery they produced) successfully colonized the majority of the islands in Melanesia: the Solomons, Hebrides, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. By 1200 BC a Proto-Polynesian culture was beginning to develop in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. Here, over a period of some thousand years, the Polynesian language, culture and art evolved. Not long before the time of Christ these early Polynesians

embarked on an unprecedented feat of navigation, voyaging over thousands of miles to discover islands which lay far beyond the horizon. Between 200 and 600 AD they sailed east, establishing settlements in Tahiti, the Marquesas, Easter Island, Hawaii, and most of the approximately 100 smaller habitable islands of the Pacific. About 1,000 AD they settled in New Zealand, the largest and southernmost of the Polynesian islands.

As they made their way across the Pacific they left a record of their travels in the form of pottery and other artifacts. The pottery, which was characterized by fine craftsmanship and a refined sense of proportion, was produced from about 1500 BC to the time of Christ and has been discovered at many archaeological sites throughout Melanesia to Tonga and Samoa. This pottery provides evidence of the existence of a widespread culture, termed Lapita, which was ancestral to the later

Polynesian cultures.

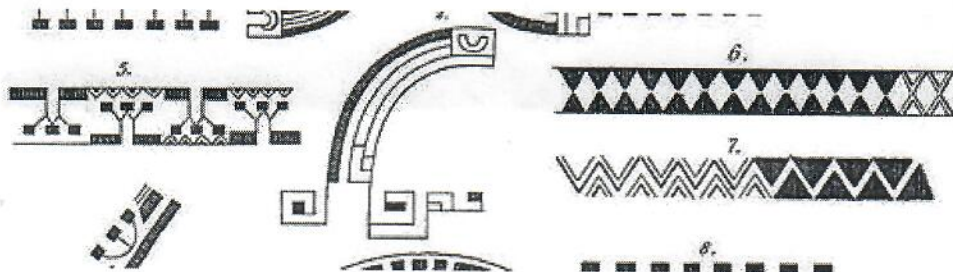
Lapita pottery designs (after Jennings).

Lapita pottery is of special interest for the history of tattooing because it provides us with the oldest evidence as to the nature of the ancient Polynesian tattoo designs. Much Lapita pottery bore incised decorations consisting of V-shaped elements, interlocking geometrical patterns, and stylized motifs resembling masks and sea creatures. Similar motifs are found in tattoo designs throughout Polynesia, and even the technique of incising the designs as a series of closely spaced punctures or stipples suggests that the technique used in the decoration of pottery was similar to that used in tattooing.

Figurines decorated with similar designs have been found together with tattooing instruments at many Lapita archaeological sites. The instruments, some of which are over 3,000 years old, consist of flat, chisel-shaped pieces of bone measuring two to four centimeters in length and filed sharp at one end to form a comb-like series of pointed teeth. Such an instrument was attached to the end of a long wooden handle. The artist dipped the instrument in a black pigment made of soot and water and executed the tattoo by striking the instrument with a small mallet. This technique, which is not found in any other part of the world, was common throughout the Pacific and is still used today by traditional tattoo artists in Samoa.

Although the production of Lapita pottery had ceased by the time of Christ, the art of tattooing became more and more sophisticated. According to ancient legends, variations of which have been recorded in Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, two female tattooists introduced the art of tattooing to Tonga and Samoa. They embarked from Fiji chanting "tattoo the women, but not the men,"² but in the course of their voyage they encountered a variety of misadventures ranging from stubbed toes to encounters with hurricanes and giant man-eating clams. By the time they arrived in Tonga, they had become confused and were chanting "tattoo the men, but not the women."

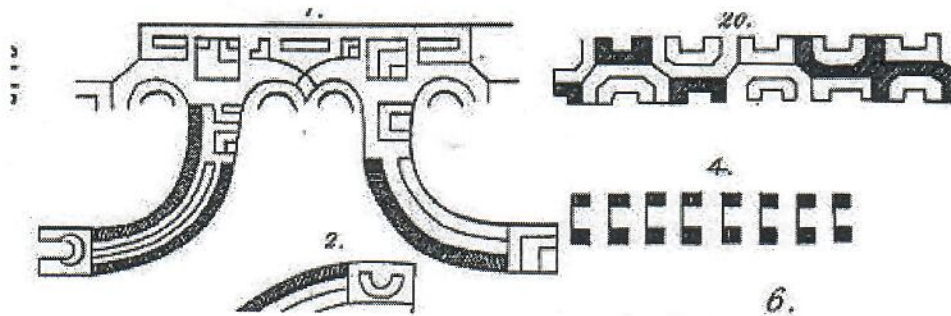
It was in Tonga and Samoa that the Polynesian tattoo developed into a highly refined art. Tongan warriors were tattooed from the waist to the knees with a series of geometrical patterns consisting of repeated triangular motifs, bands, and areas of solid black. The tattooing was executed by priests who had undergone a long period of training and who followed strictly prescribed rituals and taboos during the process. For the Tongan, the tattoo carried profound social and cultural significance.



In ancient Samoa religious ritual and warfare were the popular pastimes, and tattooing played an important role in both. The tattoo artist held a hereditary and highly privileged position. He customarily tattooed young men in groups of six to eight during a ceremony attended by friends and relatives who participated in special prayers and celebrations associated with the tattooing ritual. The Samoan warrior's tattoo began at the waist and extended to just below the knee. Samoan women were tattooed as well, but female tattooing was limited to a series of delicate flower-like geometrical patterns on the hands and the lower part of the body.

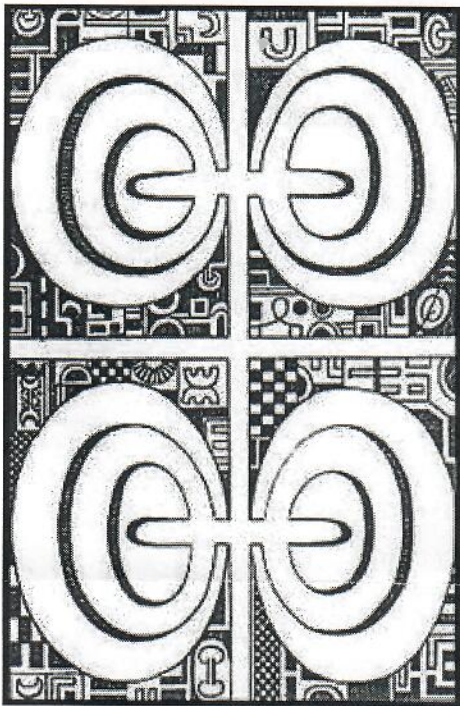


About 200 AD voyagers from Samoa and Tonga settled in the Marquesas. Here, over a period of more than a thousand years, one of the most complex Polynesian cultures evolved. Marquesan art and architecture were highly developed, and Marquesan tattoo designs, which in many cases covered the entire body, were among the most elaborate in all of Polynesia.



By 1,000 AD the Polynesian peoples had successfully colonized most of the habitable islands east of Samoa. Distinctive cultural traits evolved in each of the Polynesian island groups, and by the time of European contact the peoples of the various islands had their own unique languages, myths, art and unique tattoo styles. Polynesian tattooing is briefly mentioned in European ships logs dating from the 17th and early 18th centuries, but it was not until the first voyage of Captain Cook in 1769 that it was described in detail by Cook's naturalist Joseph Banks, who was one of the more enlightened of the early European visitors. Tattooing was also described and illustrated by a few of the naturalists who accompanied later 18th and early 19th century explorers, but most Europeans took little interest in Polynesian art and culture. In many Pacific islands the first European settlers were missionaries who opposed tattooing because of its association with native religious practices which they saw as superstition and sorcery. Hard on the heels of the missionaries came colonists who squabbled over possession of the islands, plundered the natural resources, and forced the natives to wear European clothing and work at menial jobs. Because tattooing was associated with the traditional Polynesian way of life it became a symbol of resistance to European influence and was outlawed by many colonial regimes.

Ironically, as tattooing was dying out in the Pacific, it was becoming popular among westerners. Before Cook's voyages tattooing was virtually unknown in Europe. Members of Cook's crew were the first Europeans to acquire Polynesian tattoos, and the fad spread quickly in the navy as sailors returned home with tattoos as souvenirs of their travels to distant lands. Sailors learned the technique from Polynesian artists, practiced it on board ship, and later retired to establish tattoo parlors in European port cities. Tattooing is the only form of Polynesian art which has been widely adopted and imitated by westerners.



It was not until the latter part of the 19th century that western anthropologists made an effort to inquire into the significance of tattooing within the context of traditional Polynesian life. A few papers on Polynesian tattooing appeared in anthropology journals around the turn of the century, and about the same time several anthropologists wrote books which included descriptions of Polynesian tattooing. Unfortunately, however, what we know of Polynesian tattooing is only a small fragment of the whole. The vast majority of the designs, together with the wealth of associated traditions, myths, and religious observances have been lost forever. And we know little of the significance of tattooing as it was perceived by the Polynesians themselves; we know it only as it was seen through European eyes.

PS: Tattooing in Polynesia today.

The only Polynesian culture in which traditional tattooing has survived without interruption is Samoa, where the tolerant attitude of the German colonials during the first decade of the 20th century made it possible for the Samoans to keep the tradition alive and pass it on to their descendants. In recent years Samoan tattooing has enjoyed a renaissance in connection with a renewed interest and pride in the ancient Samoan language and culture.

In other parts of Polynesia tattooing is once again flourishing as well. Today, many Islanders are taking pride in their cultural heritage and reviving many of the ancient arts, including the traditional Polynesian tattoo. Contemporary artists are utilizing modern electric machines to recreate tattoo designs inspired by the old illustrations, wood carvings, and other arts of ancient Polynesia. The tattoo today in Polynesia is a statement of personal identity, of affiliation with and respect for the traditional culture, and sometimes still a mark of defiance of colonial powers.

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Book makes its mark on art of tattoo

By GREG AMBROSE

Special to the Star-Bulletin

EVEN the most obtuse individual has probably noticed the revival of the ancient art of tattooing sweeping through Polynesia.

While many of the enthusiasts have only a skin-deep interest in the inking of their flesh, others seek a connection with their culture and their Polynesian family and forebears.

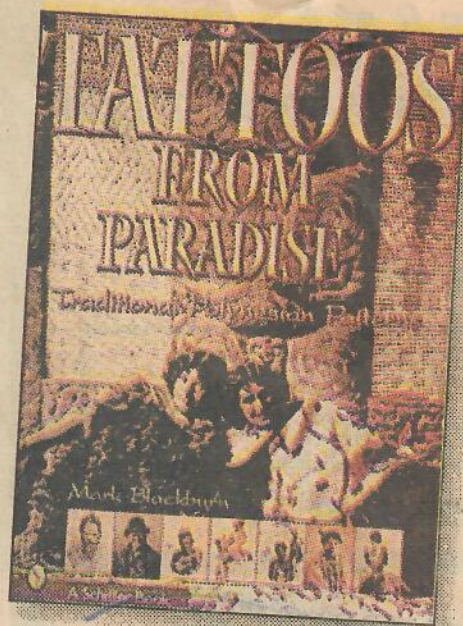
For all those who lack the scholarly discipline to pursue the historical accounts of the art of tatau, Mark Blackburn has done the difficult research for them. All they need to do is open a copy of "Tattoos From Paradise: Traditional Polynesian Patterns" and be amazed at the artistic talents of the ancient Polynesians.

Blackburn, who has an art gallery and second home in Hawaii, has let his en-

chantment with all things Polynesian inspire him to acquire an impressive collection of Polynesian art and historical images and writings. In "Tattoos From Paradise," Blackburn shares his incredible trove of historical art and love for Polynesian cultures with readers.

Each chapter selects an island group, such as the Marquesas, and provides a brief but informative essay on that society's history, culture, religious beliefs and the effects of contact with the Western world. This provides a context for an insightful perspective of the social, cultural and religious significance of tattooing to the ancients, an examination that is greatly enhanced by the lavish illustrations and photographs.

"Tattooing From Paradise" is certain to provide insight to anyone who has wondered why people would decorate their flesh, and inspire those who are already enamored of the practice.



REVIEW

► "Tattoos From Paradise: Traditional Polynesian Patterns"; by Mark Blackburn (Schiffer Publishing); 208 pages; \$69.95

TATTOOING GREEN TURTLES

The implantation of pigments under the skin to form indelible marks can be traced back to Paleolithic times, however the word "tattoo" is of comparatively recent Polynesian origin. Although sea turtle designs were incorporated into the tattoos of early Polynesians and other Pacific islanders, there is no record that the turtles themselves were ever tattooed by such people.

In November, 1975, I had two captive-reared Hawaiian *Chelonia* (average wt. 2 kg) tattooed in an effort to develop a permanent and practical secondary identification method for use in growth and migration studies of naturally occurring immature green turtles. Mike Malone, skilled artist and owner of China Sea Tattoo Company in downtown Honolulu, applied the tattoos using a custom-built electric vibrating apparatus with four converging needles. Black carbon ink was implanted in the white skin adjacent to the anterior edge of the plastron. The tattoos consisted of HAWAII #1 and HAWAII #2. No discomfort was exhibited by the turtle while being tattooed, and Mike expressed the wish that all of his customers would remain so motionless. Upon completion, petroleum jelly was applied to the areas. Mike informed me that humans are instructed not to go into the ocean for one month, or until the tattoo is completely healed, because salt water can draw out the pigment. Because this would be impractical for sea turtles, I waited only 10 hours before returning the animals to their floating cages.

In two weeks time the scab which developed over each tattoo sloughed off and healing appeared complete. The pigment remained intact and clearly visible. During the following two months, however, the tattoos gradually faded and disappeared.

Additional experimentation with sea turtle tattooing seems warranted. Implantation needs to be tested at different skin depths, and with zinc oxide and other light colored pigments in areas of dark skin. If a technique is perfected, a battery operated tattooing apparatus suitable for field use could be constructed.

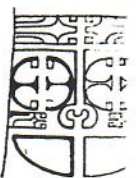
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GIAN PAOLO
BARBIERI
Tahiti
Tattoos



kept shut up under the watchful eye of her mother, who wished to preserve her virginity. But the two brothers were determined to seduce her. They invented the new art and tattooed themselves with the design known as "Tao Maro". Mata Mata Arahua and Tu Ra'i Po' were thus able to lure Hina Ere Ere Manua away from the place where she was being jealously guarded. She, too, wanted the new decoration so she eluded her mother's supervision and was finally able to get herself tattooed.

That was the supernatural origin of tattooing, first practised by the sons of the god Ta'aroa, the principal Tahitian divinity. They taught the art to mortals, who found it extremely attractive to be tattooed and used it widely. The two sons of the god Ta'aroa, Mata Mata Arahua and Tu Ra'i Po', became the patron spirits of the art. These illustrious forerunners were always invoked before a tattooing session began so that the operation would be successful, the scars would heal quickly, and the patterns would be pleasing to the eye. As a reminder of this legend, images of the two gods were conserved in the Marae of the Tahu'a, the skilled practitioners of the art. This particular form of traditional culture has been passed down uncontaminated from one generation to the next on our islands for no outside influence has been able to alter the methods used or the way in which designs are applied to the skin.





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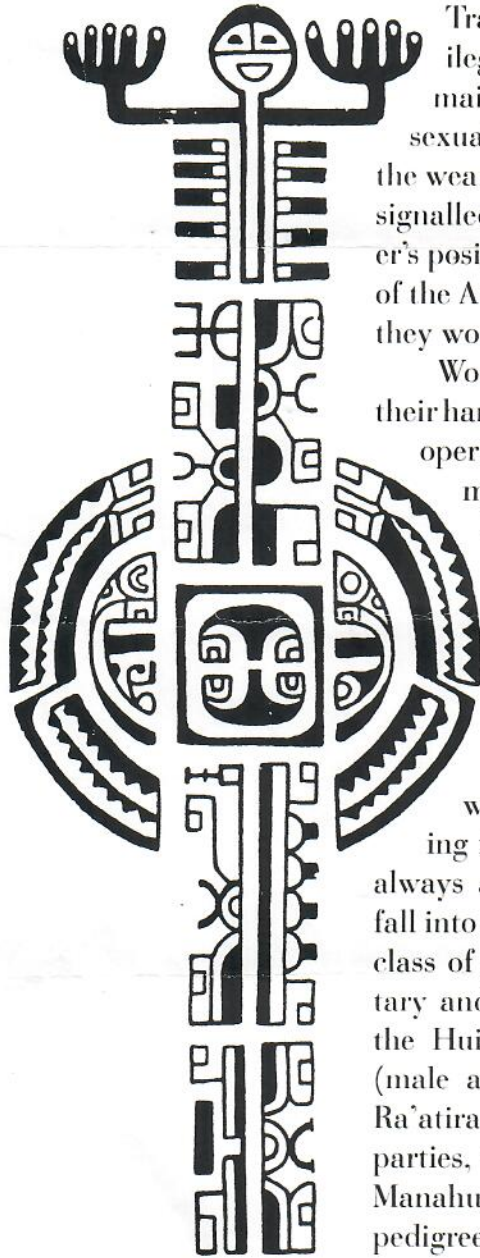
THE HISTORY OF ATTOOING IN POLYNESIA

It is necessary to go right back to the dawn of Māohi civilization to trace the beginnings of tattooing in the Polynesian archipelago. The practice was originally widespread in the Society Islands, where it reached the greatest heights of artistic perfection, and was also favoured by the inhabitants of the Marquesas Islands and the Maoris. Actively discouraged by the religions which arrived from the Western world, tattooing became so little practised in Tahiti that the skill was forgotten. For that reason we had to turn to our neighbours in the Pacific, who had resisted the pressures of history, to relearn the lost art. The renaissance of tattooing took place in Tahiti, with the help of Samoan practitioners, at the Tiurai celebrations in 1982. It was an important occasion on which Tahitian culture rediscovered its roots and pledged itself to the conservation of Polynesian customs.

The origins of tattooing are unclear, for the origins of the custom go back beyond early Māohi culture to the fabulous age of the Polynesian creation myths. According to a local tradition, the practice of tattooing in Tahiti has a divine source. During the Po' (the dark age), tattooing was created by the two sons of the god Ta'arua, Mata Mata Arahua (He Who Makes Marks with Charcoal) and Tu Ra'i Po' (He Who Lives in the Dark Sky). The two gods belonged to the same group of craftsmen as Taere, a highly skilled god, and Hina Ere Ere Manua (Hina of the Quick Temper), the eldest daughter of the first man, Ti'i, and the first woman, Hina. As she was growing up, Hina Ere Ere Manua became "Pahio", and was



THE REASONS FOR TATTOOING



Traditionally, tattooing has always been a privilege of the more eminent social classes. The main purposes of decoration were to enhance sexual attraction, to exalt the life force and to give the wearer a godlike appearance. Social ranking was signalled by tattoos that corresponded to the wearer's position in the community under the supervision of the Ari'i. When initiates acquired greater prestige, they would get new tattoos.

Women had fewer tattoos than men, and only their hands, arms, hips, thighs and feet underwent the operation. Designs for women, being purely ornamental, were more elegant and better drawn.

Men often had tattoos all over their body, including on the neck and ears. Only the face was left untattooed, with the exception of the occasional warrior or priest who might wear a special emblem on his forehead or lips. Tribal chiefs would have a stunning array of body decoration. For men, tattoos were often a kind of medal, awarded for daring in war or to mark a special event, and were always an affirmation of cultural identity. Tattoos fall into four categories: those belonging to the social class of gods, priests and Ari'i, which were hereditary and restricted to their descendants; tattoos of the Hui Ari'i class, Arioi'i, exclusively for chiefs (male and female); tattoos of the Hui To'a, Hui Ra'atira, Ia To'ai class, reserved for leaders of war parties, warriors, dancers, rowers and so on; and Manahune class tattoos, for individuals with no pedigree or an unremarkable family history.