

Mariusz Snopek

University of Opole

New Fashion, New Trends – the Modern Aspect of Tattoos in Prison Creativity

Abstract: The article concerns the phenomenon of prison tattoos. It can be recognized that the modern tattoo outside of prison in Poland is going through its “boom”, which was started in 1989, and since the new millennium has begun to be treated as art at the highest artistic level. As a result of this, also prison tattoo has begun to evolve. According to the concept of transmission, prisoners transfer all patterns from freedom to the prison environment and there they adapt them to the prevailing conditions. Therefore, the broached issues oscillate around both the traditional symbolism of prison tattoos, and their modern aspect. The article also describes the history and importance of the prison tattoo artist, whose position – due to interest among prisoners in the aesthetic tattoo – has increased significantly.

Key words: prison tattoo, prison subculture, reasons for body decoration, symbolism and functions of tattoos, prison artist, fashion in prison.

Introducing thought

Prison creativity can manifest itself in the form of sculptures, paintings, drawings, cutouts, embroidery, poetry, novels, etc. For a few basic reasons (as described in the presented text), body tattooing in the environment of incarcerated people cannot be regarded as artistic activity. Nonetheless, modern prison tattoos (despite their pejorative meaning) can be categorized as a kind of creativity – like other products of prisoners, such as ballads and songs of subcultural content, material artefacts, so-called *fajans*, decorative letters, etc. (Szaskiewicz 1997 p. 147–169).

A tattoo – in defining the concept – is a purposeful, voluntarily done (with exception to certain cases where a tattoo is forced) design on the skin using a variety of techniques, fulfilling different functions and having various meanings to its holder. It is performed by injecting a dye under a densely punctured or cut skin, usually on a previously drawn, or copied design on the body (Snopek 2009a, p. 18).

Taking as a criterion the environment in which the phenomenon of tattooing is practiced (which in turn determines its most important elements, i.e. techniques and methods of performance, their function, role, significance and symbolism of the tattooed designs, the person tattooed and tattoo artist, as well as covering or removing tattoos) we can specify the following types: artistic tattoo, amateur tattoo, prison and tribal tattoo, military and accidental tattoo.

In Poland (in the context of the tattoo understood according to the definition above), we can only talk about the first three types. For obvious reasons, the tribal tattoo should not be included, while the concept of an accidental tattoo is known only in medical science and applies to complications arising from various body injuries (Braun-Falco et al. 2004, p. 988–989). The phenomenon of a military tattoo in Poland in recent years has almost completely ceased to exist. Persons serving in the army, if they have tattoos done, they do it mostly outside of the unit. This directly affects the lack of consistent and characteristic specificity for this phenomenon, which was perceived primarily (though not exclusively) in the content of tattooed designs. Formerly, a military tattoo was performed by soldiers in the military unit, which is why the subject was usually characteristic of this environment, and concerned mainly military or love matters (Snopek 2009a, p. 7–8).

This article applies only to the phenomenon of prison tattoos.

Due to the criterion used, i.e. the time space in which tattoos were done (and mostly occurred in the environment discussed here), one can distinguish traditional tattoos (classical) and modern tattoos.

The concept of the traditional (classical) prison tattoo should be understood as designs that were made almost since the inception of prison tattoos in Polish penitentiary institutions. In contrast, the concept of modern tattoos refers to tattoos that were created in the last twenty years, because since 1989 permanent murals on the skin among incarcerated people have taken on a new meaning.

Due to the subject-matter of the article, I would like to devote special attention to modern motifs, and only generally present traditional designs. As a result of the increasing prevalence of and desire by prisoners to have aesthetic tattoos, the role of the prison tattoo artist has also changed, which is also the subject of this paper.

When defining the concept of the prison tattoo¹ one should note several important elements. First of all, it is characterized in that it is performed on

¹ Usually, in prison language, a tattoo is called *ink*, while the tattooing process has adopted the term *getting buzzed*.

the premises of penitentiary institutions. Therefore, it relates only to persons detained in such institutions (an exception to this may be the phenomenon of the criminal tattoo – which is discussed later in the paper). Moreover – in the context of prison tattoos – very strong emphasis is placed on the function and importance that a specific design is to fulfil. Most motifs performed in prisons have particular significance, followed by members of the subculture; however, it is worth explaining that not only persons belonging to informal prison groups can get tattoos done on their body (Snopek 2009a, 184–262; Snopek 2009b, p. 328–336).

Historical background of prison tattoos

Body painting, decorating and tattooing dates back to prehistoric times. During the Palaeolithic (40–14 thousand years BC), natural dyes and sharp etching-needles were used to perform ornamental motifs on the skin. Figurines found in Hungary and Romania, which have decorative marks on the body, are from the Neolithic period (4000–1700 BC). Many researchers of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods argue about whether they were merely transient drawings on the skin, or tattoos. However, it is certain that in long-past ages “man was more decorated than he was dressed” (Jelski 1993, p. 29).

Tattooing was performed already more than 8000 years before our era – during the Ice Age. In many caves in different parts of the world (France, Portugal, Romania and Scandinavia) tools were found that served making permanent marks on the skin – these were sharply pointed flints and needles made from animal bone fragments, which had traces of black and red pigment (Bojarski, Trzaska 2000, p. 14).

The process of tattooing spreading in Europe began in the late 18th century. This was influenced by political, social and cultural changes, progress of civilization and the migrations of populations, which led to the mixing of the different races, their traditions and customs. Opinions on this subject among archaeologists and ethnologists are still divided. Some researchers believe that tattooing originated independently in different places, others – that it was a spread through the migration of cultures (Jelski 1993, p. 29).

In the context of the historical conditions of the functioning of the prison tattoo phenomenon, it should be noted that its practice aroused much controversy. After all, historical facts are known, which used tattooing as a form of punishment. This form of stigmatization was to permanently exclude convicts from society.

In European penitentiary systems, stigmatization (as a form of punishment) depended on the system of government and the country. Starting from the 17th century in some Western European countries it began to fade away. In Germany, the last documented stigmatization was done in 1695, while in France it was

around 1835. In several countries, this type of punishment was practiced on the most dangerous criminals even until the second half of the nineteenth century. In Russia, prisoners who were located in Siberia had the letters *KT* (*katorżnik* [*a forced labourer*]) burned or tattooed on them. This phenomenon occurred until 1864. In the British Army until 1869 mainly deserters were stigmatized with a tattoo (the letter *D* was tattooed on the forehead), as well as soldiers of criminal tendencies (the letters *BC* (*bad character*) were tattooed on the forearm). In the early 20th century in some western countries, it was sought to restore the punishment of stigmatization against people who committed particularly serious crimes. It was proposed to place on their back a tattoo in the form of a chronological list of crimes committed and the names of the institutions they were in. This proposal was rejected by the public, recognizing it as barbaric and grotesque (Jelski 1993, p. 128–136; Gołąbek 2005, p. 258).

History shows that as the tattoo formerly served, among others, as forced stigmatization of convicted people, now prisoners do so voluntarily (with certain exceptions, i.e. performing tattoos under duress or strong pressure on injured prisoners – Przybyliński, 2005; 2007; Snopek 2009a). Persons placed in penitentiary institutions voluntarily mark their bodies, thus showing that they are (among others) a part of the prison community, exposing themselves in the future to any kind of marginalization (Snopek 2009c, p. 379–385).

Types of tattooed motifs in the incarcerated environment

Tattoos done in penitentiary institutions have a determined, intricate and complex symbolism. Each design has a specific meaning. In addition to the designs themselves, their location is also essential – one design placed on different parts of the body may be interpreted in a heterogeneous manner (in such cases, not the design, but the location determines its symbolism).

Although the prison tattoo is a popular phenomenon, arousing quite a high and continuously increasing interest, this has not been reflected in literature on the subject². Apart from a few articles (Wentland 1994, p. 62–66; Jamrozek, unpublished materials, source: own archives), a detailed analysis of the phenomenon has been performed only three times, i.e. an attempt was made to clarify the symbolism of prison designs, to classify the multiplicity of forms occurring, to describe the transformations that have occurred and still occur in this phenomenon, as well as describe the reasons for performing, removing and

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² Body tattooing – in considering the phenomenon in many aspects, i.e. pedagogical, psychological, social, cultural, etc. – it is still an unrecognized area of human existence (see: Lombroso 1891; Tarczyński 1997; Lew-Starowicz 2004).

covering tattoos. I encourage the reader to analyze the distribution of sources in the literature cited; here – just as a reminder – I shall provide the most important assumptions of this classification.

The first to conduct a detailed analysis of the phenomenon was Maciej Szaszkiwicz (Szaszkiwicz 1997, p. 128–142). In writing about the designs occurring in the prison environment (treating them as tattoos occurring among the representatives of *the prison subculture*³) the author listed the following categories of tattoos:

- *criminal*, that have been separated due to the many links between criminal and prison worlds; this category includes symbols of criminal specialties, allowing members of *subculture* groups to recognize each other efficiently; they are most commonly used in thief environments,
- *prison-elite*, which includes symbols covering *prison elite* standards, defining rules for their application (for example, who can and who cannot wear them, what requirements one should meet before making the tattoo, what merits one must have, position in the group, etc.),
- *environmental*, which are not covered directly by *prison elite* standards, but ones that characterize this environment (this is an important manifestation of the *prison elite* environment); these are symbols, signs, drawings and inscriptions depicting emotional states, life attitudes, declared ethical values and tastes characteristic of the *prison subculture* environment; this category is the largest group of tattoos.

A further detailed description of the phenomenon of the tattoo was done by Sławomir Przybyliński (2007, p. 50–51) by dividing prison designs into:

- *subcultural*, which are directly related to the *prison subculture*; having such a tattoo shows belonging to the *mainstream of the second life*, while unauthorized tattooing of this design threatens with dire consequences; the author notes that these tattoos are usually located on the face, so that they are visible to others,
- *criminal*, which undoubtedly complement the contents of *subcultural* tattoos; these designs reveal a person's criminal history; tattoos from this group are performed both in the free life and the incarcerated life,
- *artistic* motifs are made for aesthetic purposes and reflect freedom trends; they do not have much in common with the typical *subcultural tattoos*, because their main goal is to show the artistic value of the drawing made on the body; it is worth noting that the author was first to see the importance of

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³ The prison subculture divides convicts into various categories of prisoners. One of the most common and recognized divisions in Polish penitentiary institutions distinguishes prison elite (called by themselves “git-people” or “people”) and non-elite prisoners (vulgarly termed by prison elite as “suckers”, “non-people”) and “victims” (vulgarly termed by prison elite as punks, faggots, etc.).

aesthetics in the phenomenon of the prison tattoo, which had thus far been overlooked.

The third classification (Snopek 2009, p. 184–241) divides prison tattoos into:

- *subcultural*, in connection with the *second life in prison*; this mostly refers to the tattoos of *prison elite* people, while forcibly done designs on *victims* or persons excluded from the subculture are omitted here⁴ (they also belong to the category of *subcultural tattoos* as they are done under duress by – usually – *prison elite*) and *crooks* (however, this is justified, because statistically, the *prison elite* group is significantly prevalent),
- *criminal*, which are characteristic of the criminal environment; this is the only kind of tattoo associated with prison, which can be done outside the penitentiary institution and which holders can also be persons who are not imprisoned or in a detention centre; nonetheless, these tattoos are often done by persons already convicted and who reside within a prison facility,
- *defining* – are the largest group of tattoos encountered in penitentiary institutions; despite the fact that they are most often practiced among members of informal prison groups, they have also become very popular among people who are not identified with the *second life*; tattoos in this group express: *character traits* (including taste, professed ideas, religion, etc.), *emotional states*, and *criminal life history*.

The first classification pointed towards designs associated primarily with the prison subculture, which in the current circumstances is not sufficient. The second division of prison tattoos divides designs according to – it would seem – two different criteria: *subcultural* and *criminal tattoos* refer to the criterion related to the content of designs, while *artistic* to the criterion related to the quality of their making. However, it should be noted that the author – aside from aesthetic values – also indicates that these are motifs which express freedom trends, thus it can be regarded that this also includes content. For many reasons, artistic tattoos are (according to the results of the author’s research⁵) found only outside of prisons, where in addition to the competences of the tattoo artist, the tools and working conditions are also important, which are limited in penitentiary institutions. My classification has been done mainly in order to – by determining an appropriate criterion for division – reflect and sum up the multiplicity of tattooed motifs and to minimize the possibility of assigning one design to several categories.

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⁴ Both of these meanings should not always be perceived equally, because not every convicted person excluded from the subculture must become a victim, i.e. they may lose the status of prison elite and be relegated to the position of non-elite.

⁵ Research has been conducted since 2005; a detailed description of the methodology can be found in: Snopek 2009a.

Reasons for permanent body marking

There are at least a dozen reasons for having body tattoos done. However, in analyzing the above classifications (and modern trends) the basic reasons for performing tattoos by prisoners can be as follows:

- *criminal* are done mainly for communication purposes; they serve as a sign of profession and criminal occupation, and thus are intended to provide information to people from their environment, etc.,
- *subculture* designs are tattooed to highlight their position in the group, and in order to subordinate, stigmatize or to exclude other prisoners,
- *environmental* tattoos are done to express ones attitudes to life, characteristic for the group in which the convicted person participates, and with which he identifies himself, not the individual attitudes of the prisoner,
- *artistic* designs are tattooed for aesthetics and to emphasize the originality of the holder of these motifs (this may also include tattoos from the fourth group of transformations)
- *defining* tattoos are done to externalize one's (usually individual, not group) personality traits, emotional states and criminal life history, i.e. events associated with the rogue occupation.

Other reasons for tattooing may include, among others: the desire to impress both convicts and (after leaving prison) women, fear of exclusion from the prison community, as well as the sense of loss and desire to engage in any activity, an attempt to fill up free time, etc.

Traditional symbolism of tattooed designs

According to the previously presented original classification, the symbolics of particular tattoos shall be provided briefly. Each of these groups focuses around it specific designs, which function in the environment of incarcerated people. This part of the text presents only the traditional symbolism of tattoos, which means designs that have not changed their meaning or look. These tattoos – despite the passage of years – have the same meaning as in the past, and their form and location have not changed. Designs which have undergone any transformations will be described in the next section of the article. In the following characteristics I shall present only a few selected motifs, and in order to learn the full symbolism I refer the reader to specialized literature (Snopek 2009a; 2009b, p. 328–336; 2009c, p. 379–385; 2011a, p. 103–119; 2011b, p. 252–276, 2012, p. 78–105; Przybyliński 2007).

Subcultural tattoos are associated with the second, informal life of prisoners. *The prison subculture* is one of the inherent elements of penitentiary institutions. Tattoos from this category indicate affiliation (mainly) to *prison elite* and are their identifying mark.

Cynkówka is one of the most well-known and widely used designs in penitentiary institutions. It is a dot tattooed next to the left eye, which identifies a *prison elite* person. In order to have the right to tattoo a *cynkówka* it is necessary to belong to the *prison elite* group, which must be *earned*. However, it is worth noting that in recent years, this rule is not completely observed. Often, owners of such a design are people who are uninitiated in *prison elite*.

Military distinctions are tattooed usually on the shoulders, but they are also done on other parts of the body. The higher the rank, the higher the penalty of imprisonment. *Military distinctions* determine the prestige of the holder – one bar represents one year's imprisonment, while one star symbolizes three years. The contours themselves determine the number of years left to serve a sentence. Today, as in the case of *cynkówka*, a design is often tattooed by persons who do not identify themselves with *prison elite* – this is connected with less strict compliance with the rules of the *second life*.



Fig. 1. Military distinctions of a prison major – traditional prison tattoo

A *crown* tattooed on the left side of the chest signifies a *git-person*, who is acclaimed in his environment. The *cobra* is a symbol of an informal group, called *crooks*. Here, it is important that *crooks* unite mainly persons who are relegated from *prison elite* – there also have a negative attitude towards them. Additionally, the group of *crooks* is also joined by *non-elite* in order to *equalize the forces* against *prison elite*. This design is placed on different parts of the body, but most often it is done in the middle of the chest. Until recently, this was the only design common among the subculture of *crooks*. Currently, tattoos characteristic of this group also include the scorpion (the design has long been closely associated with the prison environment, but originally not identified with any informal group) and a keyhole tattooed on the neck.

Other tattoos from the subculture group are motifs, which are now extremely rare, as in part they have stopped being done. They are mainly related to

exclusion from a subculture (done under duress), and not, as in the case of the above designs, with the participation or prestige of the holder. The first of them is a crossed-out half-moon. It distinguishes a person, who steals from his friends (*prison elite*) prison money or other material goods, thanks to which he is excluded from the subculture. This design has come to be commonly called: *półksiężyc przekreślony – złodziej spalony* (*crossed-out half-moon – thief uncovered*). The second motif of this group is the *cross*, understood in the context of *crossing someone out*. Holders of such designs are those, who (according to *prison elite*) are characterized by a high helplessness in life. The cross is usually tattooed in visible places. In contrast to the half-moon, it is done mainly on *victims* (dropped to the bottom of the prison hierarchy). Tattoos on people excluded from the subculture or *victims* are very rare. Stigmatizing people excluded from an informal group or *victims* using a tattoo was mostly practiced until the mid-nineties of the 20th century. At present, situations of forced tattooing are rare.

Criminal tattoos are designs mainly related to criminal specialty, especially thieves (Ciosek 2007, p. 354–355). With these tattoos, criminals can communicate by *illustrating* their trade, e.g. a person for hire. As previously mentioned, these tattoos can be also done in the free world.

Among the designs in this category is a dot tattooed on the larynx, signifying an *alcoholic*. A convict having such a design informs others that he is willing to cooperate in exchange for alcohol.

An *anchor*, tattooed on the most visible body parts (hands, forearms, etc.), signifies a thief stealing handbags, briefcases, etc. *on the town*. The tattoo has come to be known as the *Otter*.

A dot located (only) on the knee means *I'll never kneel before the police*. In the criminal (and prison) environment, this is a sign of steadfastness before the police and (in the case of incarceration) prison service. It symbolizes a person who is not only physically resistant, but also steadfast and trustworthy – companions can be sure that this person will not turn on them, for example, during testimony.



Fig. 2. Criminal tattoo. A dot tattooed on the knee ("I'll never kneel before the police"), together with the abbreviation H.W.D.P. to highlight the importance of the meaning toczka – traditional prison tattoo

Defining tattoos constitute the largest group of designs encountered in penitentiary institutions. Although the most commonly practiced among members

of informal prison groups, they have gained popularity also among people unidentified with the *second life*. Tattoos of this group – as a reminder – express: character traits (including tastes, professed ideas, religion, etc.), emotional states, and criminal life history.

Character traits that are expressed by convicts are e.g. loyalty towards other fellows. The design that shows *trust* to a given person is presented with a closed pair of lips. According to prisoners (holders of such a design), an incarcerated person having such a tattoo must first earn it.



Fig. 3. Mocking figure of the devil – traditional prison tattoo

It is rightly claimed that in prisons, the type of a so-called *tough guy* is popular (arousing the greatest respect among prisoners). To further highlight characteristics that demonstrate masculinity, strength (both physical and mental), as well as cunning, all sorts of figures are tattooed, e.g.: monsters, devils, strongmen, skulls, reapers, aggressive animals, etc. Many presentations from this group shows the criminal life of the convict as well as steadfastness in action, e.g. figures with a gun, axe, knife, etc. This category also includes horns tattooed on both sides of the forehead, to emphasize the *bad character* of the holder, and, in a sense, to deter potential enemies.

Undoubtedly, some of the most common designs that can be seen in prisons are the images of women (Przybyliński 2011, p. 93–103), mostly presenting their heterosexual preferences of the tattoo holders. The faces and figures of dressed women symbolize a *lover of women*, known for his many erotic conquests and, thus for his great erotic experience. They may also be signs and symbols related to the topic of love or erotic. On the other hand, acts have an erotic context and are treated as a decoration. These designs often take the form of vulgar-erotic. Images of strong-women, women warriors are also often tattooed, both in the sexual context and highlighting the strength and courage of their holder.



Fig. 4. Inscription "I love you Sylwia" – traditional prison tattoo

Prisoners in penitentiary institutions often carry out motifs associated with gambling (for example, cards or dice). Thus they express their personality traits, showing a dismissive attitude towards life. These elements are mostly tattooed along with the other figures – clowns, jesters or women. They have a mocking tone and symbolize *the game of life* – both in the literal sense (playing with death) and figuratively (death here means imprisonment). Gambling is also connected with the design called *Zguba* – a tattooed woman, playing cards, a bottle of alcohol, a gun and a gallows. This tattoo indicates that women, gambling, alcohol, and a bandit's life lead to quick death.

Many convicts, to emphasize their individuality and originality, place not only aesthetically done tattoos on their bodies (more on this later), but also – directly understanding the notion of originality – logos of well-known companies, such as *Nike* and *Adidas*. These tattoos can also mean a person who keeps up with trends, seeking to be (in his own way), elegant and neat.

The tattoo also expresses, for example, a penchant for eating – for example, a dot placed above the navel means a *glutton*, a person who likes to eat. Besides this, many tattoos show sympathy, for example, for some sports clubs, music bands, films, as well as lifestyles, preferred tastes, etc.

Emotional states that inmates in penitentiary institutions express through tattoos are, for example, designs showing *prison martyrdom*. This is a category of tattoos often used in isolated institutions. This group includes such images as *a break in one's life*, which was mostly done on the inside of the forearm, right by the hand, and now it can be placed on different parts of the body (e.g. on the finger, penis, etc.). This tattoo is in the form of a dash-dot-dash and marks a break in life of freedom, caused by imprisonment in a penitentiary institution. Often right next to such a design, additional motifs are placed, such as: the date of conviction and the town, where he is serving imprisonment, different slogans, maxims, symbols, etc.

An interesting design included in this category is also the tattoo in the form of cobwebs. It symbolizes both imprisonment in penitentiary institutions, as well as the *imprisonment of human weaknesses* (alcoholism and drug addiction).

An inherent element of tattoos encountered in prisons are designs expressing the desire for revenge. Many inmates *live* for revenge on those guilty of their incarceration (this mainly relates to the police, court, and sometimes also the family). Motifs that show thinking about revenge are, for example, the snake or rose wrapped around a sword.



Fig. 5. Symbol of desire for revenge – traditional prison tattoo

Prisoners permanently capture their *criminal life history* in various ways. Most often they carry out symbols of penitentiary institutions where they have been or are at currently. For example, the *butterfly* is a symbol of the Detention Centre in Warsaw Mokotów, and the *beetle* – the Prison in Mielęcin.

This category of tattoos also includes dots located on the bones of the fingers and the areas between them. One dot on the bone signifies one year of imprisonment, and one dot between them means one month.

The presented designs are the most common motifs encountered in penitentiary institutions. These are tattoos (regardless of their assigned category), which identify their holders in varying degrees. By analyzing many motifs that are placed on the bodies of convicts, one can distinguish, among others, who a given person is, what he specializes in and what his position is in the hierarchy. Symbolism is one of the most important (if not the most important) element of the prison tattoo. Mainly as a result of it, permanent drawings created in conditions of social isolation are so mysterious, and yet so characteristic of this environment.

The above description intentionally does not include a detailed description of tattoos in the form of inscriptions and acronyms (more in: Snopek 2009a, p. 217–241). However, it is worth knowing that in penitentiary institutions they are extremely common. It can be concluded that there are as many designs of this type as traditional tattoos in the form of drawings. In contrast to drawing and punctuation tattoos, their symbolism is evident in a sense, because thanks

to them prisoners in an almost direct way express their traits, attitudes, etc. All letter tattoos in their message may contain the same content as drawing and punctuation designs. Most of them are done in Polish, English and Latin. Several words and maxims are common with errors (especially those in English and Latin). Although the awareness of their existence, convicts still cling to the traditional prison spelling.

Modern approach to prison tattoos

Until the end of the 1980s, the contents of prison tattoos were very much the same. After the collapse of the communist system, changes occurred in the *prison subculture*, which in turn directly affected permanent marking of the body. Tattoos began to be re-interpreted, new symbols created, often changing the meaning of old ones. Tattooed motifs, their symbolism and appearance, gradually began to undergo changes. A period was initiated in which tattoos began to be subject to new rules, and their meaning and appearance began to depend on the changing times⁶. An important issue is that currently many designs are interpreted by convicts in their own way, which may cause ambiguity of one symbol.

Based on the material collected during research, the general transformations, which have taken place in the phenomenon of the prison tattoo, have been classified. It was found that these transformations can also set trends in the future. The classification distinguishes designs, which:

- changed their location on the body,
- symbolism has changed or another has been added to the original meaning,
- original appearance was, for various reasons, changed or developed,
- origin came about in recent years, relating to the isolated world to a greater or lesser extent.

The first three groups of transformations relate directly to traditional prison tattoos, i.e. they are designs based on classical designs. The fourth group of tattoos constitutes new designs, which have no direct connection with traditional motifs.

The first category includes, among others, a tattoo that is very common in the prison environment, but most often it is still poorly described by researchers, i.e. the dot tattooed on the hand between the thumb and forefinger. This is a very common motif, belonging to the category of *criminal tattoos*. This tattoo signifies the thieving profession of its holder. Historically, this dot (in prison language the dot is usually called *toczka*) was done on the right hand, which was to make identification easier when greeting by shaking hands. Currently, this design is done on the left hand

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⁶ In addition to the symbolism, the approach to certain rules relating to owning specific designs has also changed, i.e. the standards enabling to tattoo a specific design has stopped been observed so rigorously (mainly – as described earlier – subcultural tattoos, e.g. *cynkówka* or military distinctions).

(also between the thumb and forefinger), and when located on the right it means a person who likes and practices masturbation (so-called *wanker*). This change caused a lot of people to remove or hide the tattoo from the right hand and have it done again on the left. This tattoo is very often enriched by additional motifs, such as: *half-moon* (*Night thief*), the word *Dux* (*Prince of thieves*), etc.

Additionally, this category includes:

- five dots – signifying membership of the *prison elite* (*subcultural tattoo*) community; formerly it was tattooed near the left eye, currently it is usually done of the outer side of the wrist of the left hand,
- *lover* – a dot placed in the middle of the forehead, indicating an attractive person – this applies to both the physical appearance and criminal attractiveness; currently, this design is positioned not in the centre of the forehead (as was the case in the past), but on its upper part; the design belongs to the category of *tattoos defining* the personality traits of the holder.



Fig. 6. Flowers tattooed on the chest – contemporary motif



Fig. 7. Indian feathers – contemporary motif

The second category includes tattoo designs such as:

- *the heart* – placed under *cynkówka* it once meant a *trouble maker*, or the leader of the *prison elite* group; nowadays, this motif is most commonly tattooed on convicts who are *In love with prison elite*, i.e. members of an informal prison group that indulges in *subculture*, strictly abides by its rules; this design belongs to *subcultural tattoos*,
- *tears* – tattooed near the eyes (from the outer or inner side), or on other parts of the body (then with the image of the eye), fall into the category of *tattoos defining prison martyrdom*; *tears* symbolize *Weeping for lost freedom* or *A man never cries* (note that these meanings are opposites); currently – as mentioned earlier – the importance of many motifs are interpreted by convicts in their own way, a *tear* is interpreted also as *Longing for one's mother*, *Weeping for one's late father*, etc.,
- *sleepers* – this design belongs to *tattoos defining personality traits*; *sleepers* are in the form of dots located on both eyelids and signify a person, who is alert, cannot be surprised (even when asleep); there are also other interpretations of this design, e.g.: *The eyes see, the ears hear, the lips are silent* or they may mean a person who likes to sleep,
- *a break in one's life* – this motif, without losing its original meaning, can also demonstrate *subcultural* belonging; in some groups it has been accepted that this design located on the left hand signifies a *prison elite* person, while on the right hand – a *non-elite* person; when it is on the left hand, it should be classified as *subcultural tattoos*, while on the right – like before – as *defining tattoos*),
- *P.S.M.* – an abbreviation belonging to the category of *defining tattoos*; it should be interpreted as: *I remember mother's words* (often positioned right next to the *break in one's life*) or *I will avenge mother's words, I fuck only teenagers*, etc.; it is worth noting that it is the most variously interpreted – its meaning (like in the case of, for example, *tears*) depends on the interpretation of holder,
- *K.T.M.* – an abbreviation, which in addition to the traditional meaning of declaring love to one's mother (*I only love my mother*), can also be interpreted as *I only love teenagers, I only love married women*; this tattoo belongs to the category of *defining tattoos*,
- three dots – i.e. *Three Principles of the Minor: A minor does not crack, A minor persecutes whores, A minor is always with the people*; currently, this design is interpreted in various ways, for example: *Hygiene, I do not kneel before the police, Be with family*; in penitentiary institutions and detention centres, the meaning in relation to juvenile convict-recidivist has mainly been adopted, i.e. *Listen, clean and do not whine* (however, this meaning largely depends on the penitentiary institution); the design belongs to *tattoos defining personality traits*,



Fig. 8. Modern shaded tribal (tribal – tribal design)



Fig. 9. Biomechanics placed on the thigh – contemporary motif



Fig. 10. Tattoo inspired by biomechanics – contemporary motif

- four dots – this tattoo is a result of the transformation of the *Three Principles of the Minor* and signifies the *Four Principles of the Minor*,
- five dots – aside from the original meaning, this tattoo symbolizes imprisonment and powerlessness – popularly it has been named: *Four corners*, *fifth thief* or *Trapped thief*,
- *black rose* – formerly the design meant a person with a history of venereal disease; currently, it also symbolizes a desire for revenge (*a tattoo defining* the convict's emotional state); nowadays, the *red rose* most commonly symbolizes a history of venereal disease, which is often enriched by various additions, for example, the image of a woman in order to more precisely illustrate the meaning of the tattoo,
- *extension* in the form of (only) lightning – besides the original meaning (voluntary extension of imprisonment or an attempt to) the tattoo also signifies *A strong head-blow*.

The third category includes tattoos such as:

- *anchor (otter)* – the traditional design (signifying a thief stealing handbags, briefcases, etc. *on the town*) has been added various symbols to highlight the thieving profession (e.g. a shark means a person without scruples, inflexible, unfeared in his activities)
- *H.W.D.P. [Fuck the police]* – an abbreviation, which is often seen with additional letters: *H.W.D.P.i.S.W.*, which means *Fuck the police and prison service*; the origin of the design is explained by convicts with the fact that one of prisoners was brutally beaten by an employee of security; the abbreviation falls into the category of *defining tattoos*.

In the fourth and final category are tattoos that have been created over the past few years⁷. These are new designs which, in different intensities, are related to the isolated world. Currently, the tattoo, also in penitentiary institutions, has become an individual matter of each person. Increasingly, one may observe in penitentiary institutions a fashion for aesthetic tattoos, which in the opinion of prisoners are to look good. These transformations also apply to supporters of the *prison subculture*. Many prisoners want to have unique designs, original and one-of-a-kind. It is also less likely that designs are copies from ready templates, and more often they are designed individually. Works done well have become desirable in prisons – with equal contour, properly shaded, and sometimes also (if possible) colourful. These tattoos can be divided into two categories.

The first of them (although sometimes their contents refer to prison motifs), are designs without any symbolism, treated only as an ornament of the body. Tattoos from this category – as perceived by prisoners – are considered of a high artistic level, a work of art. The most popular tattoos in this group include:

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⁷ The fourth group of transformations distinguished by the author are artistic tattoos in S. Przybyliński's classification.

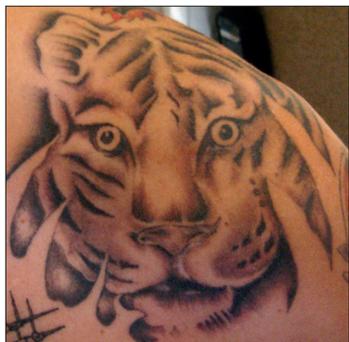


Fig. 11. Tiger – contemporary motif



Fig. 12. Contemporary shaded skull – design emphasizing strength and bravery of the holder

- naturalistic motifs,
- motifs associated with different cultures,
- *biomechanics*⁸.

The second group of designs are tattoos that relate directly to the isolated world, but done at a much higher standard than traditional prison designs. Therefore, they enjoy great interest of residents of prisons. These designs mainly include motifs from the category of *defining tattoos*:

- personality traits, expressing e.g. bravery, strength, sexually explicit content, defining the prisoner's religion and of a mocking tone,
- emotional states, expressing e.g. prison martyrdom, etc. (full classification in: Snopek 2009a, p. 184–241).

It is worth noting that despite the growth in the popularity of some designs, at the moment, tattoos that are typical of the prison environment still dominate (especially among the most enthusiastic supporters of *the prison subculture*). This

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⁸ These are complex designs, shaded, with no specific shapes or colours.



Fig. 13. Lover – contemporary motif



Fig. 14. Colourful clown – contemporary motif

is associated mainly with the attitude of prisoners towards decorative tattoos, as well as the small number of people who know the secrets of proper tattooing, i.e.



Fig. 15. Contemporary design of a web (symbol of imprisonment) – contemporary motif

improving in drawing and having their own tools, i.e. the device, inks, designs, etc. (Snopek 2009a, p. 242–262).

The meaning of the prison “artist”

As already mentioned, permanent marking of the body has largely become an individual matter of every prisoner. Similarly, with the increasing popularity of aesthetic tattoos in penitentiary institutions, the importance of the prison tattooer has also increased. Each such person, in order to acquire customers, and thus special favours, he must submit to their needs.

Currently, which somehow results from the latter, many prisoners are not satisfied by gray, fuzzy and chaotically arranged designs. Most (not just the young, but also older – both in terms of age and prison *seniority*) would like to have more and more impressive motifs. In the mind of many prisoners, the tattoo must not only look aesthetic, but also differ from the drawings of co-inmates. Therefore, in recent years, the position of the tattooer in the environment of incarcerated people has increased significantly.

According to prisoners, the prison tattooer, in order to gain recognition, must continuously perfect his skills. Prisoners, who want to do tattoos *professionally*, must meet a number of important elements, which include, among others:

- having own tools, inks and original projects,

- education (school or independent) in drawing,
- experience in tattooing.

The tool that the tattooer uses in penitentiary institutions is the so-called *dziargałka* (usually made of a pen, needle and walkman engine), or *kolka* (usually consisting of a spring or a needle and matches). More complicated, requiring a larger number of elements, is the *dziargałka*, more practical and efficient, because thanks to the engine it performs a greater number of injections⁹. Many tattooers test the prepared tools on their body, but with the passage of time (practice and experience), almost everyone can select the right thickness of the needle and ink colour without testing.

Dyes are usually inks and gels from pens, and soot¹⁰. Tattoos done in penitentiary institutions are most often (though not always) light and dark blue in colour, as well as dark gray. There are also designs done in red and – rarely – green. Colourful works are exceptions. Tattooers have few professional inks supplied from outside the prison, which allows to obtain tattoos of varying – intense – colours. Such a tattooer advantage allows a prison artist to attract a large number of customers.

Often, tattooers have a large number of tattoo designs, but the most desirable are original catalogues. This is very important, because the prospective customer can evaluate the artistic ability of the performer. A direct assessment can be made by looking at the tattooer's works done on the skin of other inmates. Due to the fact that news travels fast in penitentiary institutions, prisoners very quickly obtain information about a tattooer performing interesting designs.

According to prisoners, the prison artist, to become a good tattooer, apart from experience, needs to practice drawing every day. Increasingly, prisoners want works that are different from their inmates, so experience in designing own, completely new designs, is undoubtedly useful. Practicing drawing, in addition to improving artistic skills, also affects the way a design is placed on the customer's body. Only few tattooers can redraw a design, without copying it onto the skin first. Preferred are designs drawn on the body, as they will always (even minimally) differ from other tattoos.

Apart from the above mentioned elements, for many prisoners, the commitment of a tattooer to his work is also important. According to respondents, for a tattoo to be at a very high standard, the tattooer must put all his *soul* into making it.

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⁹ Presently, work using the *kolka* has almost completely stopped, resulting in frequently calling it *dziargałka*. However, there are still tattooers who perform designs only using the *kolka*, for example, in detention centres, where it is problematic to get the relevant elements to build a *dziargałka*. Besides this, many prisoners (tattooers) use the *kolka* due to their own preferences.

¹⁰ Soot is obtained mostly from burning rubber from the soles of shoes, etc.

Another characteristic feature of the work of a prison tattoo artist is the ability to inject dye under the skin. It is important that, aside from the tattoo, scars do not remain, which may be caused by too intense and deep puncturing of the skin, or also the use of blunt needles. Besides, it sometimes happens (though rarely nowadays) that the tattooer does not inject the needle under the skin deep enough, which results in a fading picture. It is significant, because prisoners often don't care for a freshly done tattoo, so even its good performance often does not bring the desired effect.

Prices for performing tattoos vary. A prison tattooer may even perform extensive designs for his friends for free or for half the due price. While *strangers* pay for the service either in cash (the price depends mainly on the size of the design), or, most often due to the lack of it, in so-called *prizes* (which are mostly cigarettes, sweets, drawing materials, as well as professional inks for tattooing).

In addition to material goods, tattooers may gain very large influences for their activities. Becoming increasingly valued artists, they gain more favours, which often results in the fact that life in the isolated world is much easier for them.

Prisoners – in their perception – adorned with aesthetic designs, feel more individual and original from their fellow inmates, whose bodies are tattooed with traditional, gray prison *inks*. Therefore, many convicts wait even up to several months to find a good tattooer, who is right for them. The waiting time depends, among others, on what department (or prison) the tattooer chosen by a prisoner is in.

Criminal tattoo as a specific form of group and individual expression

Through tattoos prisoners gain the sense of freedom in two ways (Snopek 2011a, p. 103–119). The first relates to the sense of group cohesion, and the second to a sense of personal individuality. To determine exactly what it should be, the last, simplest division should be made, i.e. into tattoos:

- of a negative nature, i.e. with pejorative outcome, and
- of a neutral nature, i.e. of the same content as those that may be encountered outside of prison – without negative meaning.

Tattoos of the negative nature are undoubtedly *prison elite tattoos* (Szaszkiewicz), *subcultural tattoos* (Przybyliński, Snopek) and *criminal tattoos* (Szaszkiewicz, Przybyliński, Snopek) and *defining tattoos* (Snopek). Tattoos of a neutral nature are *artistic tattoos* (Przybyliński) and part of the tattoos from the fourth category of transformations (Snopek).

Tattoos from the first category – referring them to the feelings of prisoners – provide a sense of freedom, understood as a form of rebellion, standing in

opposition to statutory, legal and formal regulations. These are tattoos that enable to “escape” from the regulated, imposed prison life. These designs belong to the criminal environment, members of the *prison subculture* or also to penitentiary offenders and prisoners, who exhibit hostile and aggressive behaviours. Thus, to a large extent, they are also an expression of group cohesion, an emphasis of values and norms prevailing in a given group.

Designs from the second category give a sense of freedom, understood as individuality in a gray and monotonous prison world. In this case, the tattoo is to serve, like in conditions outside of prison, body ornamentation, and not stigmatization. Designs are done mainly for the need to be original and unique in the homogenous world of prison isolation. This tattoo is a form of freedom for prisoners, of expressing themselves and their views.

However, it should be clearly indicated that any form of body adornment in penitentiary institutions is negatively perceived. Firstly, the prison tattoo (mainly due to historical circumstances of the Polish prison tattoo) is strongly rooted in the *prison subculture* and among repeated offenders; secondly, it is done in unhygienic conditions, using tools that are not intended for such treatments.

However, just as outside of prisons, we should distinguish the criminal tattoo from the artistic and amateur tattoo; also in the environment of social isolation we should distinguish tattoos of a negative nature from those of a neutral one. One should not see all prison tattoos from the same perspective, it is a different case if the prisoner has *criminal* designs and another when they are so-called *artistic*. Often lasting pictures on the skin “say” more about a prisoner than he would say about himself. Therefore, a person holding *subcultural* motifs is different than one who tattoos designs that are unrelated to the prison environment.

The phenomenon of the prison tattoo is considered equally and always pejoratively. For obvious reasons, one cannot talk here about affirmative aspects. One should above all look at the permanent marking of the body dualistically. To be able to do this, first one must learn about them, and not ignore and belittle, because in the prison environment, it is inseparable, indivisible and still evolving. Exploration will enable a rational and individual approach to prisoners, without exposing them to marginalization and, what would be the consequence, getting rid of stereotypes that hinder proper interactions. Prisoners having tattoos of a neutral nature should be subjected to other procedures than those with *criminal* or *subcultural* designs. This is because the former convicts have different reasons for permanent body marking than the latter. In this situation, it should be made possible to enable the former to satisfy the needs of a sense of individuality and expression of identity, and in relation to the latter – counteract crime or *subculture* (including its manifestations). Distinguishing prison tattoos would enable the individual treatment of prisoners, for whom different social rehabilitation actions would be taken.

Conclusion

Tattooing the body in an environment of people sentenced to social exclusion has been practiced for many centuries – without a doubt, it must be assumed that it is a regular part of the informal activity of incarcerated people.

One of the most important elements of prison tattoos – especially the traditional – is their symbolism. Most tattooed designs have a code known only to a specific group. Undoubtedly, this is a feature which distinguishes it from other types of tattoos. Intricate and complex designs make criminal *ink* be considered as some of the unique and also sophisticated means of communication. Symbols, both in the form of drawings, as well as the alphabet, are extremely important in the isolated world.

Today, permanent body decorating in the environment outside of prison is very popular, and enjoys ever-growing interest. The tattoo, in itself, long ago became a part of pop culture – formerly mysterious and mystical, today – generally available and omnipresent. Everything that appears in the *tattoo world* outside of prisons, i.e. all fashions, trends, etc. after a short time is reflected in decorating the body in penitentiary institutions. Along with the development of the artistic tattoo in conditions outside of prison, interest in the aesthetic tattoo in penitentiary institutions has increased. Many important ideas and concepts have penetrated into the isolated world from the free world. Often, before being placed in penitentiary institutions, prisoners obtain information about tattooing from professional tattooers and from people who have been tattooed professionally. In addition, they also obtain information from specialist magazines on this topic. People sentenced to imprisonment or a detention centre transfer (or show) the relevant information to other prisoners, which in turn contributes to the formation of new concepts of body adornment in prison conditions.

Currently, in addition to the most common causes of undergoing tattooing, such as: membership in a prison subculture, fear of *prison elite* (and hence the desire to comply), a sense of loss, to impress both prisoners and (after leaving the penitentiary institution) women, fashion should also be mentioned. Fashion has caused that the prison tattoo is no longer seen as a sign of group membership, and – in the opinion of the respondents – it has gained the status of an element that highlights individuality and originality.

For this reason, one could venture that the phenomenon will not be discontinued, it will grow and take on new forms. Without a doubt, any changes lead to its development and growth in popularity, even among the prisoners not identifying themselves with the second life in prison.

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