



Clara Kallner shows off her phoenix tattoo.



BY *adam kent isaac* | PHOTOGRAPHY BY *shannon zahale*

Once upon a time, tattoos were pretty much the domain of sailors and disreputable characters, but this isn't the case anymore. A 2007 study by the Pew Research Center found that 40 percent of people born between 1961 and 1981 are tattooed. "Ink" is no longer confined to small subcultures—now it's on people from all walks of life.

Stroll through downtown Bloomington and you'll see a veritable art gallery of tattoos, in just about every color and style imaginable. The inked now walk among us like never before.

An angel gets its wings:
Rachael Davies tattoos
Melissa Robison at
Genuine Tattoo Co.



It's a typical afternoon at Genuine Tattoo Co., and a young woman is about to be worked on.

First, the machines—one for each needle—are laid out. They look like tiny film canisters or thread spools inside a metal contraption. The artist removes a long needle from its sterile pack and fits it into a tube, which is then attached to one of the hand-held devices. It's connected to its power supply by a long cord. The needle's speed is modulated by a foot pedal, like a sewing machine.

The woman's skin is shaved with a razor and then covered in soap. Next, a pattern on paper is pressed against the skin and the design transferred. It's a dramatic pair of angel wings that cover her back. As she lies facedown on the padded table and prepares for the tattooist's needle, they chat, the way she would with her hairstylist.

Switched on, the machine begins buzzing. The outline of the wings is done in thick black ink. Then the artist fills in the shading with a different set of needles. Ink pools on the skin as it is pricked again and again. Soon the design starts to take shape. The feathers acquire depth and dimension. In a matter of hours, she'll be adorned with a design that will remain with her for the rest of her life.



A brief history of tattooing

Permanent marking of the skin has been with us for a very long time—at least since the Neolithic era (8,000-5,000 BC). A mummified man known as Ötzi, 5,200 years old, was unearthed in 1991 near the Austrian-Italian border. When researchers examined Ötzi, they found tattoos on his lower back, knee, and ankle. Scientists who studied the mummy speculate that the markings were intended to alleviate pain, since they corresponded to areas of the skeleton showing signs of stress.

Even prior to this discovery, tattooing was known to date back at least to ancient Egypt. The Smithsonian Institution has found numerous inked mummies, as well as figurines showing human figures with tattoos. The ancient Greeks, Romans, and Britons also practiced tattooing.

It was the spread of monotheism that is believed to be largely responsible for the decline of tattoos in Europe and the Middle East. The Old Testament and the Koran both forbid tattooing. However, many other cultures placed no such restrictions on the marking of the body, and tattooing flourished in the Far East, Africa, and the Americas. It was through the Asian and Pacific island cultures that tattooing returned to the West, by way of sailors who visited foreign ports, particularly in Japan and Hawaii.

To this day, the Japanese style of tattooing is popular and has influenced other schools of tattoo art. It often contains flowing visual motifs like fire and water that are used to tie individual images together, creating a sense of continuity.

King George V of the United Kingdom (1865-1963) accumulated a collection of tattoos during his days as a midshipman in the Pacific, and his son Edward VIII was inked as well. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, also a navy

man, bore his family's crest on his chest. The tattooed sailor is part of our cultural lore and nautical designs are considered classic.

In the first half of the 20th century, if you saw a man with tattoos, chances are he was in the military. In the 1950s, tattoos became a hallmark of bikers (many of them former military) and during the '60s spread to the freewheeling hippies, who were always eager



to embrace ideas from the fringes of society and adapt them in their own styles. In the 1970s and '80s, rock stars began sporting ink. During the '90s, professional basketball players brought tattoos even more into the public eye, and as the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close, tattoos have pretty much gone mainstream.

Nowadays, tattoos are considerably more diverse than the mermaids, anchors, and hearts of the past. A wide variety can be seen on Bloomington residents, from representational art to abstract designs, and some images that are downright bizarre—though they all have meaning to the people who inhabit them.

Tattoo machines ready to be assembled.

Bottles of ink.

Ink pots for dipping.



the lawyer

How many tattoos does your lawyer have? Bloomington attorney Doug Osborne has so many he's lost count. A biker/lawyer equally at home on both sides of that slash, Osborne's arms are fully covered with tattoos, of both the abstract and representational varieties. The recurring motif is death. Grinning Mexican-style skeletons peek out from behind funeral roses and blue-black tribal designs. A skull blazes in fire on his shoulder. On his forearm, a skeletal "Mr. Peanut" leans on a cane. A dialog bubble reads: "Hasta Luega." Translation: "See you later."

When Osborne was lying in a hospital bed in a coma after a motorcycle accident that nearly killed him, doctors stuck the IV needle right through the eye of Mr. Peanut's skull. "There he was, looking up at them, giving them that final message."

Skulls have long been a common theme in tattooing, often symbolizing a familiarity with death and a willingness to face it without fear. It originated with military men who faced death regularly, spread to hard-riding bikers like the Hells Angels, and is now adopted by all those who want a permanent reminder of the impermanence of life. Others just like the way



IU students and autism therapists Michael and Kim Ross.

the couple

"I've got around \$14,000 worth of tattoos on my body," says Michael Ross, 28. Michael and his wife Kim, 24, are IU students from the Louisville area who work as autism therapists, and they are both covered in vibrant, bold, colorful designs in the Japanese style.

Michael describes his arms as parallel pieces representing opposing forces. The designs are inspired by a Japanese graphic novel called *Vagabond* and the video game *Jade Empire*, as well as the traditional tattoos of the Yakuza organized crime syndicates, known as irezumi.

"The right arm is representational of the masculine: storms, the samurai, the boat at sea," he says. "The left is about the creation of life. They remind me to celebrate life, and that there are positive and negative elements in the world."

Kim got her first tattoo at 19. "I was always the kid who was drawing on my arms and hands in school and getting in trouble," she says. "I got some little flowers on my hip, and once I started, I knew I wanted to get more tattoos but I hadn't grown up in an environment where that was acceptable."

She has come a long way from those first flowers. Her arms now feature such eclectic images as a house being washed away by a flood, and an octopus wreaking havoc on a bookshelf. "It wasn't until last year that my mother found out about them," she says. But mother ultimately accepted the tattoos, and they are not an issue between them anymore.

How much do tattoos cost? For larger work, "Just to do the outline, ten to fifteen sessions, and to do the color, another fifteen to twenty," says Michael of his fully inked arms, known as "sleeves." At \$200 a session, that's at least \$5,000. But a smaller tattoo can be had for as little as \$100. Prices vary widely, depending on the design, size, placement, colors, and the reputation of the tattooist.

To be as fully tattooed as Michael is not for everyone. Patience is a necessity for the long sessions, and periodic touch-ups are required

to maintain the color. Psychological dedication is also needed: While society is more tolerant than it has been in the past, wearers of large and visible tattoos still experience judgmental comments, stares, and suspicion. "I don't care who tells you otherwise," says Michael, "if you have full sleeves, people judge you."

Michael cites an incident five years ago when he worked in media management. "I wore a suit every day, and nobody knew I had tattoos until we got a new boss and he decided to have a casual Friday. I had this debate in my brain: Should I wear a polo shirt or not? I was twenty-three and I thought, 'They'll look past the tattoos.'" In retrospect, he's not so sure. He thinks the tattoos might have undermined his image in the eyes of his co-workers.

"As much as I would like it to be a perfect world, most of my fellow employees were ten to twenty years older than me and had grown up when tattoos were associated with bikers and criminals. People still see them, to some extent, as something that will limit your career."

So, why the popularity among young, mainstream, well-educated Americans? There has been so little research on the subject that no one in the sociology department at IU would venture a scientific opinion.

Alicia Suarez, an associate professor of sociology at DePauw University, has an interesting theory.

She believes the upsurge in tattooing corresponds directly with the advances of the information age.

"We can't talk about this without talking about changes in communication like the Internet and cable TV," says Suarez.

"The dissemination of information has affected the popularity of all fashion, and tattoos are a part of fashion. The availability of trends to spread in the past decade or two has been a huge part of the popularity. The

culture of the 1960s questioning the establishment is when we first started to see body modification coming out. American culture has a way of taking things that were once sort of deviant, and commercializing them."

Suarez claims, however, that tattoos have not entirely shed their social baggage. "There's still a level of deviance associated with them. I happen to be heavily tattooed and a professor. In my personal experience in a university setting, it's definitely not fully accepted."

Does this social judgment forge a bond among the tattooed? Suarez doesn't think so. "The tattoo subculture is often seen as a homogenous group, but it's actually very varied," she says. "There are so many different camps. There's this mistaken idea that someone with a couple of tattoos has a shared bond with someone else with tattoos. It's a misconception. People with tattoos don't necessarily have anything in common. It's just another type of adornment, like makeup, or hairstyles, just another choice that people make."



skulls look.

Osborne has a tendency to wax philosophical about tattoos. "The relationship between the person getting the tattoo and the artist is almost like an intimacy. You're allowing someone to penetrate you with a needle, and you're trusting them to do it right. Just like relationships, there are breakups—you'll find someone else to tattoo you, and if you happen to run into someone who used to work on you and they see someone else's tattoo on you, it's awkward, just like having your ex see you with a new girlfriend."

Top: Doug Osborne's tattoos reflect his appreciation for the impermanence of life.

Bottom: Flames can be used to provide visual continuity between designs.

Inset: Osborne's Mr. Peanut tattoo with the message "Hasta Luega."

Photos by James Kellar



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How many tattoos does your lawyer have?



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The Rosses both sport designs that display powerful forces of nature.

the brown brothers

The roar of exhaust pipes. The flash of chrome. They're inevitably accompanied by a rolling panoply of tattoos, at least in America's popular imagination. Brothers Dustin and Nick Brown are two local boys who live to ride. Motorcycles are in their blood—their great grandfather was a biker in the 1940s. Members of the Gravel Draggers, a Bloomington-based motorcycle club, the brothers have 36 tattoos between them.

All of the art reflects their lifestyle. Dustin's include skulls, flames, and a Led Zeppelin design. Nick sports the Yamaha tuning fork symbol, spark plugs, and a jar of the pomade that he uses to slick back his hair.

The Browns spend plenty of time working on their bikes, and they're proud of their ability to perform makeshift repairs using improvised parts or unconventional techniques, a skill necessary for bikers who cover a lot of ground. Their repair service is called Brown and Company, represented by one of Dustin's tattoos. "We decided one day that we needed to make up a logo, so I went to my guy and told him I wanted a skull with a bandana on, and wrenches



Top: A man and his machine: biker and brewer Dustin Brown.

Bottom left: Nick Brown contemplates the road ahead.

Bottom right: Members of the Gravel Draggers, a local biker club.

as crossbones." The final design features fire in the background and a tiny oil leak.

Breaking up the brawny machine-and-skull-themed tattoos are some horticultural motifs. Stargazing lilies decorate both of Dustin's arms. "It's my mom's favorite flower, and I got them right before Mother's Day this year," he says. Another design features hops, one of the four ingredients used to make beer. (Dustin works at Bloomington Brewing Company.) "I've been thinking about getting the other three on there—water, yeast, and wheat."



Tattoo artists Rachael Davies, Shannon Simpson, and Zanna Schneider of Genuine Tattoo Co.

does it hurt?

And if so, how much? The answer is "yes" it hurts. Some compare the feeling to a bee sting or to scratching yourself hard in one spot for a long time. Certain areas are more painful to have worked on than others.

a kid, seventeen or eighteen. I got my first tattoo here." Born and raised in Bloomington, McClain describes himself as a former "hoodlum kid" who hung around downtown and learned the tattoo trade much like Passwaiter did. "I worked here for about five years, then spent a year tattooing in the Czech Republic, and then I came back and have been working here ever since." He's become one of the most in-demand artists in Bloomington, and his work has been featured in *International Tattoo Art*, a leading ink magazine.

Genuine Tattoo also enjoys a strong following. Opened in 1998 by Shannon Simpson, a student of the legendary Tattoo Charlie of Louisville, Genuine's artists do custom work as well as offering a gigantic selection of "flash"—completed art that can be selected by a customer at any time and tattooed on the spot. "People come here from all the surrounding towns," says Genuine tattooist Zanna Schneider. "Since we're not on the Square, we don't get as many students as Skinquake does, but we do a lot of townies."

New shops are always opening. Little Blues Tattoos, on the west side, features an artist known

the professionals

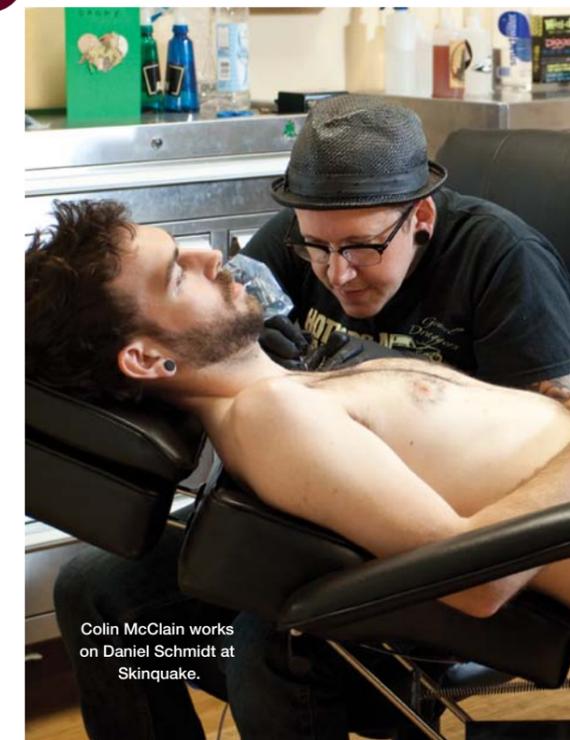
There are a half dozen tattoo parlors in Bloomington, a lot for a city of this size. They come and go. But there are two mainstays: Skinquake Precision Tattooing & Body Piercing on East 6th Street and Genuine Tattoo Company on South Walnut. These are the powerhouses of the local tattoo scene. Their tattooists have put thousands of designs on Bloomington's citizens over the years.

Skinquake owner Brian Passwaiter has arms adorned with macabre designs—their abundance a testament to his decades of experience on both sides of the needle.

"I began getting tattoos when I was not quite sixteen. I hung around a shop with bikers I knew, and that's how I got started," says Passwaiter. His

first tattoo was done by a colorful Hells Angel named Scurvy George, the president of the legendary motorcycle club's Ventura, California, chapter. "He didn't care how old you were. At that time it wasn't considered 'cool.' It was just weird... It was still just bikers and sailors back then." It wasn't long before he was doing tattoos himself. After working in California and Hawaii, Passwaiter founded Skinquake in 1994, two years after moving to Bloomington. He's since expanded his business to four locations, including one in Indianapolis.

Colin McClain is one of the resident artists at Skinquake. Youthful and friendly, his tattoos are as colorful as Passwaiter's are dark. "I got started in '99," he says. "Brian gave me my start here. I used to hang out at the shop a lot as



Colin McClain works on Daniel Schmidt at Skinquake.



Artist Ransom Haile reflects on his ink-stained past.

Tattooist Adam Burkholder of Little Blues.

Japanese-style under-sea scene on his legs. However, he deliberately spared his forearms. “I want the option of appearing conservative,” he says.

“I think I got out at the right time,” adds the genial, shaggy-haired Haile. “Tattooing has lost its edge.... It’s so common nowadays that I’m not as inspired.”

Passwaiter says there have been positives and negatives to the “mainstreaming” of the industry. “It’s good for business, of course. But the downside is that a lot of people have popped up that don’t really know

what they’re doing.” This lack of knowledge often translates to shabby safety procedures. That’s a reasonable concern and why it’s best to get tattooed at a reputable shop with professional staff, says Schneider. Safety procedures dictate that disposable needles, standard in the industry, are used one time then sent to an incinerator. And they’re sterilized in a medical-grade autoclave even when brand new. “We show them the sterile pack and the heat indicators to show that it’s been through the autoclave,” says Schneider. “We set up all the equipment right in front of them.”

According to Passwaiter, the ready access to information about tattooing made available by the Internet has led to an increase in the number of untalented amateurs setting up their own shops. Ideally, he says, a tattooist’s education should be along the lines of an apprenticeship: hanging around at an experienced artist’s shop, watching the master, doing menial tasks, and gradually learning by osmosis.

He got his first tattoo in the ’70s—a dragon on his shoulder—and continued adding more over the decades. Most of his body is adorned with ink, including an elaborate

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Tattoos have not entirely shed their social baggage.

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“I wish it was still like that,” says Passwaiter, “but at the same time, I don’t think [the professionals] have been hurt. We’re still here, and we’re not going anywhere.”

But will tattoos continue to be as popular? Or will the next generation, brought up with inked parents, view tattoos as prosaic as league bowling and evenings at the Elks Lodge?

The many inked in Bloomington think not. *

① Aaron Harmon sports a family crest incorporating Indiana state motifs.

② Dave Herr of Skinquake pays tribute to Bloomington.

③ A combination of script and designs decorate Jill McKelvy-Pierce’s arms.

④ Chelsie Wilkerson’s tattoo is an abstract shape open to interpretation.

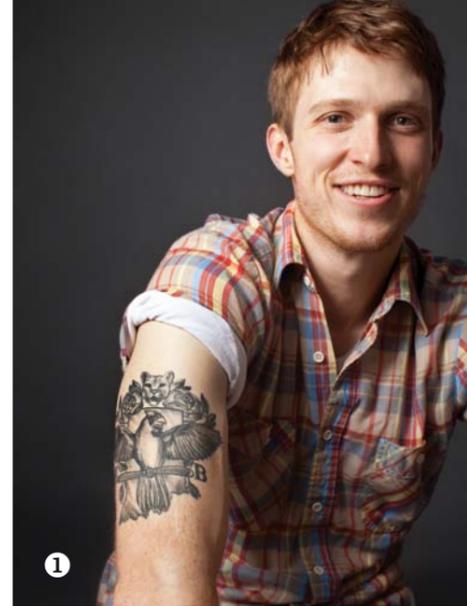
⑤ Jon and Jamie Rio—one of many tattooed couples in town.

⑥ Kevin Boas got many of his tattoos the old fashioned way—in the Navy as a young man.

⑦ Simon Kallner wears the face of counterculture icon Bob Dobbs of the Church of the SubGenius.

⑧ Comparing tattoos: Restaurant Tallent Chef Dave Tallent (left) sports a pig and Daniel Orr, FARMbloomington chef, his restaurant logo.

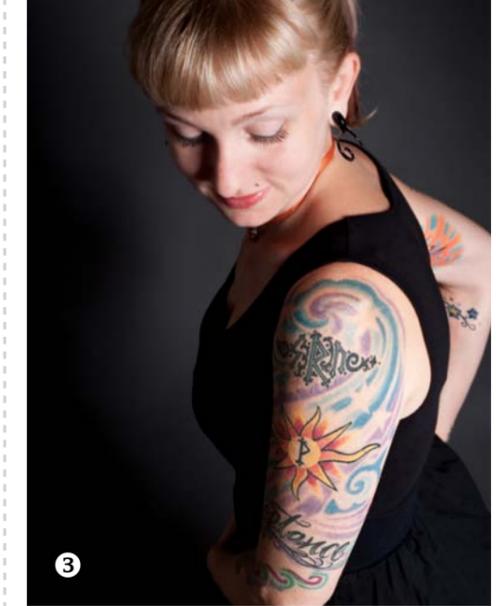
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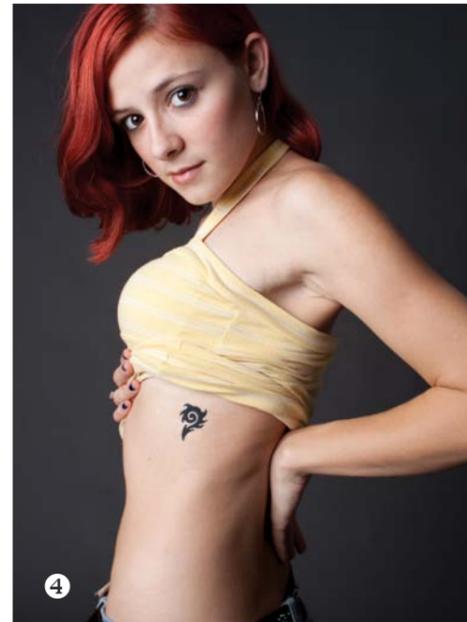
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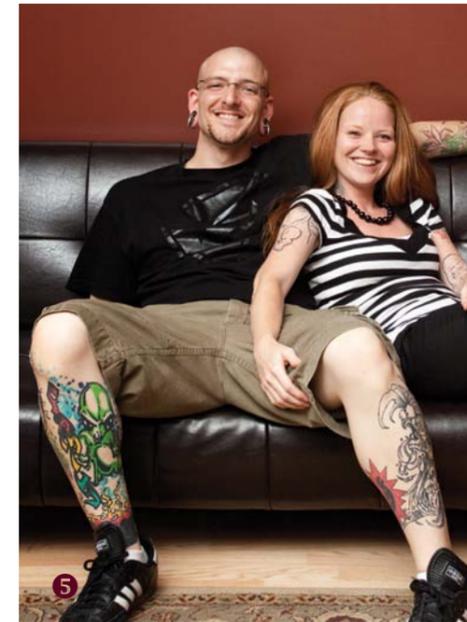
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