

## Body art comes out of the parlor

By Hunter Drohojowska

**W**hat do the Tlingit, the Yoruba, the Nuba, the Baule, the Maori, ancient Egyptians, the historic Japanese and contemporary Americans have in common?

Body art. At least that's the opinion of Arnold Rubin, associate professor of art history at UCLA, who coordinated last Friday and Saturday's symposium there, "Art of the Body."

Rubin, who claims there has been a tattoo renaissance since the early 1960s, brought together 15 scholars from around the United States and England. "There's never been anything like this before," he said. "It's the first time ivory tower academics have attempted to deal with the remarkable forms of body art."

The symposium was originally researched as an exhibition, which was canceled, according to Rubin, because it was "too controversial."

"It's practically the only medium of art still around that arouses strong feelings," Rubin declared. "It's the exoticism of people with lumps on their faces, holes in their lips and ears, and skulls compressed into different forms." Not to mention the exoticism of some of the tattoos.

Rubin's interest in contemporary American tattoos is the result of four years of field work in sub-Saharan Africa. Rubin, who both wears and executes tattoos, found his connection there.

"I felt that what I'd learned about what art is, and does, in those societies had to be introduced to what art is, and does, in our society," he explained. "I wanted to find ways to translate what I learned in Africa to the living breathing social context of late 20th-century America."

Most of the distinguished scholars at the symposium spoke about tattoos. Adrienne L. Kaeppler, curator of oceanic ethnology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of

Natural History, discussed the relationship between Hawaiian tattoo and bark cloth designs. Peter Gathercole, deputy dean at Darwin College, Cambridge University, talked about "moko" worn by the Maori of New Zealand; Donald McCallum, associate professor of art history at UCLA, talked about the historical and artistic dimensions of the Japanese tattoo; Robert Bianchi, associate curator for the department of Egyptian and classical art at Brooklyn Museum, examined the art of tattoo in ancient Egypt; and Allan Govenaar, who wrote a book and made a film about a tattooist, "Stoney Knows How," discussed early Christian tattoos.

What emerged from these presentations was the hoary, primal urge of human beings to have images marked permanently on their bodies. The traditional reasons came forth as aesthetic or erotic, protective or religious — all of which qualify as motivations for those being tattooed today. The symposium's audience included the committed academics and the curious observers, as well as a number of contemporary tattoo artists — the core of Rubin's "tattoo renaissance."

There is a saying among these young tattooists — "Ancient as time, modern as tomorrow" — and all who attended the symposium expressed attachment to the primal roots of their art.

One of them, Leo Zulueta of San Francisco, had arms tattooed with serpentine bands of pure black, inspired by the designs of Borneo. A black skull screamed from his forearm. "It's so great to see this kind of academic support for what we're doing," Zulueta said.

Ed Hardy, a body artist from San Francisco who tattooed Zulueta, agreed. "One of the things I like about tattooing is the sense of being connected to a whole lot of

other cultures." A black hawk spread its wings above Hardy's button-down collar. His forearms were covered with rolling waves, curving tigers and bright colored designs from the time he spent studying with a tattooist in Japan. Today, Hardy is considered a master in the field.

Hardy and Zulueta are editor and art director, respectively, of a new magazine, *TattooTime*. Hardy brought 20 copies of the maiden issue to the symposium and quickly sold them all at \$6.95 each. The



Arnold Rubin, associate professor of art history at UCLA, is flanked by tattoo artist Ed Hardy, left, and Leo Zulueta, two members of what Rubin has termed the "tattoo renaissance" group — older, better educated, affluent and increasingly female.

cover features a nude male model discreetly posed, and his entire right leg — from ankle to waist, including buttocks — is tattooed. A snarling red snake spirals upward amid a Samoan pattern of black and white geometrics. The spectacular design, created by Hardy, could easily stand up to anything conceived by the Yoruba or the Maori.

Hardy is famous for his large-scale designs, which may cover an entire leg, back and even an entire body. He works only on commission and never repeats a design. Although the tattoos can cost up to thousands of dollars, Hardy has a waiting list.

Clearly, as Rubin noted, this is a departure from the old hearts and anchors done cheaply down at the docks. Hardy, Zulueta and many others are part of what Rubin enthusiastically endorses as "the

first wave in the new revolutionary sensibility in art."

"It used to be that the tattoo was for blue collar, young males, undergoing an identity crisis," Rubin explained. "Tattooists now are working for older, better educated, affluent and increasingly female clients."

Last November, Expo Tattoo was held in Long Beach and drew more than 600 participants from around the world. "The point was to create a tattoo space," Rubin said, "a crossover of society — doctors and motorcycle gang members, gays and suburban housewives. It was a marvelous kind of community which spans the normal class-based organization of society."

The reason for this tattoo phenomenon? "Global consciousness," Rubin explained. "Somehow, it's now possible for a stockbroker to

identify with a samurai warrior. Or to reach inside his or her own consciousness and come up with something he or she wants to wear."

Jamie Summer nodded her head in agreement. A tattoo artist who first worked with Hardy and, like him, graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute, Summer now lives in New York, where an exhibition of her tattoo-related drawings, sculptures and an installation opens at the New Museum on Feb. 15. "My work has a different intent than the other tattooists," said Summer, who claimed she had the gift of clairvoyance. "By the time people come to me, they're not coming for just a tattoo, they're coming to work on themselves." She creates her tattoos after numerous "readings" with a client, and refers to a tattoo as "a personal talisman to use for deeper understanding of self-realization." Summer wouldn't display any of her personal tattoos, but Rubin showed slides of beautiful abstract patterns cascading down the backs of different individuals.

Not all of the art historians agreed that the tattoo could be accepted as high art. Quite a number, however, were overheard asking prices of the young tattooists.

Before his final presentation Rubin had one surprise statement to read. It was something of a grandstand, a remarkable proclamation prepared for the Expo Tattoo: "The tattoo is primal to the visual arts. Beginning as abstract maps of spiritual visions, records of the "other" world, tattoos were originally icons of power and mystery designating realms beyond normal experience... In decadent phases, the tattoo became associated with the criminal — literally the outlaw... Today, the realm of the outlaw has been redefined: the wild places which excite the most profound thinkers are conceptual."

The proclamation's author is former California Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr.