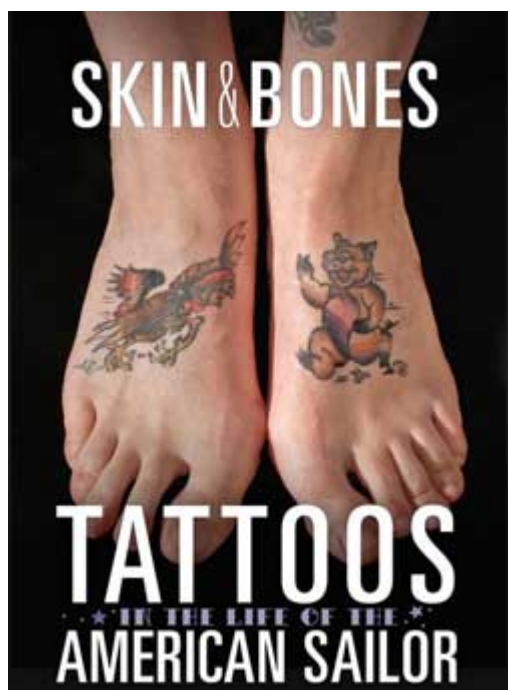


## The Ink of History



“Skin and Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor,” Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia. Curator: Craig Bruns. Reviewed at Mystic Seaport: The Museum of America and the Sea, Mystic, Connecticut.

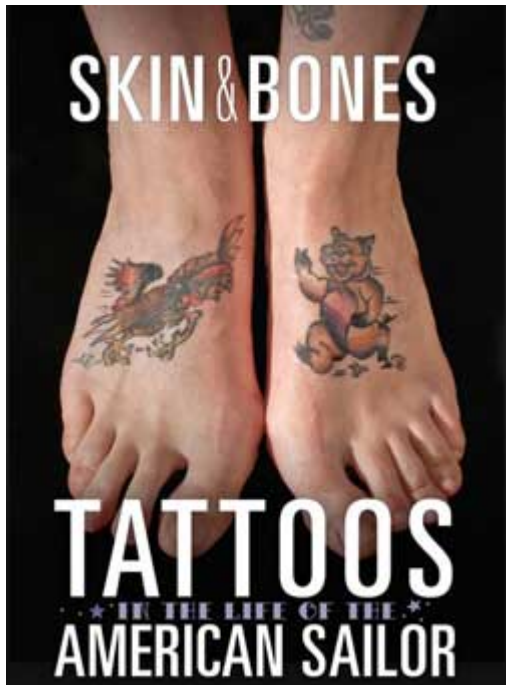
To escape the overwhelming heat of Tidewater Virginia in late May 1862, the crewmen aboard the USS *Monitor* went swimming. It was in moments like these that sailors like George S. Geer could admire their shipmates’ tattoos. Geer, who hailed from the Lower East Side of New York City, was new to the Navy, having enlisted after the start of the Civil War. Since tattoos were uncommon among landlubbers, Geer found these tattoos worth mentioning to his wife back home:

...I wish you could see the bodys of some of these old sailors: they are regular Picture Books. [They] have India Ink pricked all over their body. One has a Snake coiled around his leg, some have splendid done pieces of Coats of Arms of states, American Flags, and most all have the Crusifixion of Christ on some part of their Body...

No matter what the tattoo expressed, sailors wore their identities and philosophies on their bodies. These ephemeral records amount to a unique if underappreciated collection of American folk art and a window into the lives of a group of well-travelled working-class men.

The “Skin and Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor” exhibit celebrates sailors’ decorated bodies from colonial days through the present. The exhibit originated at the Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia in

2009, where it was researched by curator Craig Bruns. Mystic Seaport picked up the exhibit, which contains a rich collection of tools, photographs, drawings, flash (tattoo art), and other artifacts. "Skin and Bones" invites visitors to contemplate what tattoos meant to the sailors who made the decision to use their skin as a canvas.



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While sailors' memoirs are relatively rare, their tattoos provide a way to understand their lives, beliefs, and identities. Their bodies were their records. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, tattoos were as much about self-expression as they were about having a unique way to identify a sailor's body should he be lost at sea or impressed by the British navy. The best source for early American tattoos is the protection papers issued following a 1796 congressional act to safeguard American seamen from impressment. These proto-passports catalogued tattoos alongside birthmarks, scars, race, and height. Using simple techniques and tools, tattoo artists in the early republic typically worked on board ships using anything available as pigments, even gunpowder and urine. Men marked their arms and hands with initials of themselves and loved ones, significant dates, symbols of the seafaring life, liberty poles, crucifixes, and other symbols.

The difficulty with this historical source, of course, is that unless it was replicated in a painting, drawing, or photograph, the tattoo was buried with the sailor. As folk art, tattoos are intrinsically ephemeral. The "Skin and Bones" exhibit works creatively to get around this issue by substituting other sailor crafts and artifacts when images of the original tattoos are not available. Alongside the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century protection papers

are scrimshaw, wooden boxes, and linen badges whose artwork likely resembled the tattoos. Flash books, cataloguing a tattoo artist's collection of images, and photographs make it easier to represent the tattoos of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The exhibit has some of the oldest flash books from the turn of the twentieth century on display, by the artists C.H. Fellowes and C.V. Brownell. While the original flash books are kept in a protective case, the exhibit has reproductions for visitors to thumb through and get a sense of the range of images available to sailors, from the patriotic to the downright bawdy.

A big turning point for tattoos came in 1891 with Samuel O'Reilly's invention of the electric tattoo machine. Not only was the process made less painful but designs could be more elaborate. This is evident in sailors' tattoos commemorating the Spanish-American War, which included amazingly detailed depictions of the explosion of the USS *Maine*. Many sailors who participated in the 1898 Battle of Manila Bay also tattooed likenesses of Commodore George Dewey and the USS *Olympia* on their bodies. This tradition of honoring battles continued through the World Wars. As tattoos became widespread among recruits, they also entered mainstream culture and gained broader meaning and appeal. The tattoos that adorn today's inked Americans can trace their roots back to the well-traveled sailors who were likewise struggling to express their identity and mark their kinship to others.

The tattoos that decorated sailors carried many messages. They could be superstitious, such as the chicken and pigs on sailors' feet that kept them from drowning (livestock typically survived shipwrecks), or commemorative of milestones, such as crossing the equator or traveling 5,000 miles. Certain tattoos were badges of honor, and a sailor who got a tattoo prematurely could face reprimand from shipmates. Tattoos also expressed sailors' pride in their career and a unity with fellow seamen. They indicated worldliness, honored loved ones at home and friends onboard, paid tribute to religions, and symbolized masculinity. The exhibit does a great job of cataloguing the different meanings sailors gave to tattoos in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with written explanations and a documentary, but more could have been done to look back and see how these meanings have changed from the early republic through the present.

The "Skin and Bones" exhibit has the ability to draw in a broad audience—from those fascinated with early maritime or social history to tattoo enthusiasts who might be interested in seeing vintage designs. The exhibit is family friendly, incorporating a virtual tattoo booth, where an artist explains the significance of the visitor's selection while the image is projected onto their hand, and a chance to draw your own tattoo on a sailor cut-out. Though the exhibit was born in Philadelphia, the Mystic Seaport iteration incorporates the work of local Connecticut tattoo artists in a constantly looping slideshow. Unfortunately, the slideshow's placement is lost amidst the nineteenth-century materials, breaking up the otherwise chronological narrative of the layout.

More than anything else, the modestly sized "Skin and Bones" exhibit gives visitors a taste of the vast and underappreciated epidermal archive. The exhibit's mere existence is evidence that tattoos' status is rising in American culture. No longer sideshow oddities, they can now be found in the exhibition halls of respected museums. This is an exhibit for anyone interested in American folk art, tattoos, and the lives and culture of sailors.

*Editor's Note:* Although the exhibit has closed, interested readers might wish to consult the catalogue, *Skin & Bones—Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*, which contains most of the images from the exhibit along with the complete exhibit text, and supplemental essays and interviews. *Skin & Bones—Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor* is available through the Museum Shop at Independence Seaport Museum, 215-413-8615 or [cneapolitan@phillyseaport.org](mailto:cneapolitan@phillyseaport.org)