

Cultural *métissage* – Tattooing
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Discussion of the use of tattoos among Native-American Tribes

Included in Vol. 1 of the Jesuit Relations is a description of the Native Americans written by **Joseph Jouvency, S.J.**¹ Following is a discussion of the Native-American practice of tattooing.

. . . many impress upon the skin fixed and permanent representations of birds or animals, such as a snake, an eagle, or a toad, in the following manner: With awls, spearpoints, or thorns they so puncture the neck, breast or cheeks as to trace rude outlines of those objects; next, they insert into the pierced and bleeding skin a black powder made from pulverized charcoal, which unites with the blood and so fixes upon the living flesh the pictures which have been drawn that no length of time can efface them. Some entire tribes – that especially which is called the Tobacco² nation, an another, which is called the Neutral nation – practice it as a continuous custom and usage; sometimes it is not without danger, especially if the season be somewhat cold or the physical constitution rather weak.



Louis Nicolas, S.J., an Ottawa – from *The Codex Canadensis*
Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada:

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/codex/026014-1101-e.html>

In 1641-1642, Jérôme Lalemant, S.J., discussed the culture of the Neutral Nation.³

They dress their pelts with much care and skill, and study to beautify them in many ways; but still more their own bodies, upon which, from the head even to the feet, they cause to be made a thousand different figures with charcoal pricked into the flesh, upon which previously they have

¹ *JR*, Vol. 1, pp. 279, 281.

² The Tobacco Nation was known as the Petun Nation. They lived on the Bruce Peninsula in Georgian Bay. After the destruction of Huronia in 1650, the remnants of the Huron who did go to Québec with the Jesuits fled northwest with the Petun. They are often referred to as the Wendat or Wyandotte.

³ *JR*. Vol. 21, p. 197. The name Neutral Nation refers to the fact that the Nation remained neutral in the wars between the Huron and the Iroquois.

traced their lines, – so that sometimes one sees the face and breast ornaments with figures, as are in France the helmets, breastplates, and gorgets of military men; and the remainder of the body is appropriately decorated.

Antoine Denis Raudot was co-Intendant of New France, serving with Jacques Raudot, his father. While he was in New France, he wrote a series of letters about the Native Americans. According to his biography in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, his letters were probably based on memoirs of Louis Laporte, *sieur* de Louvigny, and Charles de Liette. Raudot would have also gained information from missionaries, military officers, and others who travelled to the Great Lakes. There is no evidence that he ever visited the Great Lakes. Following is his description of how the Native Americans tattooed themselves:⁴

As for the men . . . They all go bareheaded and tattoo on the body several different figures, using two three fish or animal bones, well pointed, which they tie, separated from one another at the end of a piece of wood. They soak these fish bones in a sort of black pain, which they make with crushed soft charcoal and with water, or in vermilion, or in diluted red earth, and they force them in the skin so well that they go in in at least two or three millimeters. The paint that they carry remains there, and the figures that they compose never go away. This pricking is not done without much pain, the spot becomes swollen and sore and even forms a small lump before it heals; the pains that they suffer when they wish to have these marks on their bodies do not keep the savages from making all those sores even in the most sensitive places. There are some nations who tattoo themselves more than others, and among those nations there are some men to have the body and face entirely tattooed.

In 1749, Peter Kalm described the designs and materials used by the Huron for their tattoos and body painting:⁵

Many of them have the face painted all over with cinnabar; others have only strokes on it on the forehead and near the ears; and some paint their hair with the same material. Red is the color they chiefly use in painting themselves, but I have also seen some who had daubed their face with black. Many of them have figures on the face and on the whole body, which are stained into the skin, so as to be indelible. The manner of making them shall be described later. These figures are commonly black; some have a snake painted on each cheek, some have several crosses, some an arrow, others the sun, or anything else their imagination leads them to. They have such figures likewise on the breast, thighs and other parts of the body; but some have no figures at all.

The Use of Tattoos by French Canadians

Circa 1690, Pierre Charles de Liette described the Illinois Tribe and the use of tattoos. Included in his description was the fact that Daniel Joseph Amiot *dit* Villeneuve had tattoos on his back.⁶

They are tattooed behind from the shoulders to the heels, and as soon as they have reached the age of twenty-five, on the front of the stomach, the sides, and the upper arms. There is here a certain Villeneuve, who has half his back tattooed in the same manner.

⁴ W. Vernon Kinietz, *The Indians of the Western Great Lakes 1615-1760* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1972), translation of Letter 24, pp. 343-344.

⁵ Peter Kalm and Adolph B. Benson, editor and translator, *The America of 1750 – Peter Kalm’s Travels in North America – the English Version of 1770* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., unknown date, two volumes), p. 472.

⁶ Theodore Calvin Pease and Raymond C. Werner (editors), *Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, The French Foundations 1680-1693 (Volume 23 of the series)* (Springfield, Illinois: Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1934), p. 328 – *The De Gannes Memoir*. Pierre Charles de Liette was the nephew of Henri and Alphonse Tonty. See his biography in the DCB online: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/liette_pierre_charles_de_2E.html



Tattoo on the arm of a re-enactor

Photo courtesy of Fort Ticonderoga Website:

<http://www.fortticonderoga.org/education/reenactors/montcalm/milice>

On 17 October 1749, Peter Kalm described how the Indians “painted” or tattooed themselves. Several French traders had the Indians “paint” or tattoo them.⁷

I have related before that the Indians paint various designs on their bodies and that these are put on in such a way that they remain as long as the natives live. On their faces they paint figures of snakes, etc. Several of the French, especially the common people, who travel frequently about the country in order to buy skins, have in fun followed the example of the natives. However, they never paint their faces as the natives do, but another part of the body, as their chest, back, thighs and especially their legs. The designs they paint are made up of stripes, or they represent the sun, our Crucified Saviour, or something else which their fancy may dictate. As a rule the natives who are masters of the art adorn the Frenchmen. The color most used is black, and I do not recall seeing any other. Men who accompanied me, told me that they also use red paint and that black and red are the only colors used. The red dye comes from cinnabar, which they here call vermillion. The black dye is made as follows: one takes a piece of alder, burns it completely and allows the charcoal to cool. Then the latter is pulverized. The natives do this by rubbing it between their hands. Then one puts this powder into a vessel, adds water to it, and allows it to stand until it is well saturated. When they wish to paint some figures on the body, they draw first with a piece of charcoal the design which they wish to have painted. Then they take a needle, made somewhat like a fleam, dip it into the prepared dye and with it prick or puncture the skin along the lines of the design previously made with the charcoal. They dip the needle into the dye between every puncture; thus the color is left between the skin and the flesh. When the wound has healed, the color remains and can never be obliterated. The men told me that in the beginning

⁷ Peter Kalm, pp. 577-578.

when the skin is pricked and punctured, it is rather painful, but the smart gradually diminishes and at the expiration of a day the smart and pain has almost ended.

On 8 October 1758, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, Montcalm's *aide-de-camp*, described the use of tattoos in a detachment of 950 Canadians.⁸

On the eighth the Chevalier de Lévis returned from St. Frederic. He found 950 Canadians, and this detachment is composed of the good kind, almost all *voyageurs*. One recognizes them easily by their looks, by their size, and because all of them are tattooed on their bodies with figures of plants or animals. The operation is long and painful. The figure is outlined by pricking the skin with a needle and printed in by burning powder in the holes. One would not pass for a man among the Indians of the Far West if he had not had himself tattooed.

⁸ Louis Antoine de Bougainville and Edward P. Hamilton, editor, *Adventure in the Wilderness – The American Journals of Louis Antoine de Bougainville, 1756-1760* (Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), p. 288.