

Marked Women

by [Deborah Rudacille](#)

Circus freak. Drug addict. Biker chick. Whore.

Tattooed women have heard it all—or seen those judgments reflected in the stares of people on the street, in restaurants, in offices—anywhere that bold ink on women is viewed as a badge of infamy.

"You're such a pretty girl," a salon client once told Vanessa Vale. "But I can't stand to look at you with all those tattoos."

When Michele Stuart-Johnson came home with her first tattoo twenty years ago, her mother gasped. "You look like a ruffian," she said.

Jade Gorman says her husband hates her tattoos. Shamia Johnson's spouse thinks multiple tattoos on women—including hers—"are unladylike."

Trai Dagoucon was inked for nearly a decade before either of her parents caught a glimpse of her tattoos. Both were appalled, for different reasons. "The only people who had tats in her world were bikers and wrong-side-of-the-tracks-type people," Trai says of her Southern mother. For her Asian father: "It's gangsters."

So why do these women eagerly transform themselves into walking canvases?

Beauty. Identity. Power.

"This is my body," says Dawn Peck, president of the Maryland chapter of the Gypsy Queens, a nationwide organization dedicated to promoting positive images of tattooed women. "And I will do what I want with my body."

What does a woman's life look like? What images, colors, shapes, and patterns define the ever-shifting contours of female identity? Butterflies, flowers, cherubs, kittens. The face of a somber little girl. Dragons, pinup girls, tribal markings. A skull with dripping vampire fangs and pink bunny ears. Leaving behind a relationship, a bad habit, a way of life; celebrating an enduring tie, a joyful event, a triumph of the will or heart: All can inspire a piece. But so can the purely aesthetic desire to claim a particularly powerful image and to make it your own.

"It's hard to generalize because everybody is unique," says tattoo artist Johnny Love (né John Garancheski), who says that he has inked far more women than men in his decade in the industry. "Guys will get more violent tats, stuff from the horror/gore genre. As a rule, women want smaller, more feminine images. But plenty want outrageous stuff."

His Glen Burnie shop, Tattooed Heart, is a custom operation. Unlike most tattoo parlors, his has no flash—commercial designs—hanging on the walls. Instead, customers come in with a picture, a photograph, or just an idea. Love and his staff help them craft that into an intensely personal image that will last a lifetime. "It's art that's living and breathing," he says. "It's inside your skin cells. It's not just hanging on walls."

The one thing he actively discourages, particularly among young women, is inking the name of a lover or spouse. "We always try to talk them out of it," Love says.

Still, relationships inspire many women's tattoos. "I was madly in love with a boy, and he inked a cross on my finger with India ink and a needle," says Dawn of her first tattoo, received at 16. The relationship lasted two weeks, and the wound became infected. "I was scared I would have to get my finger cut off."

Jade got her first tattoo—a gypsy woman's face on her upper arm—at 38, in the wake of a breakup. Shamia got most of her tattoos during a year of intense marital conflict that ended in divorce. "I wanted to express my own freedom," she says. One of the pieces was also a prayer for better days to come. "I got my grandparents' names tattooed on my ring finger," she says. "They were married for sixty-six years when my grandmother passed. I did it for luck." Apparently, it worked; she has since remarried.

Dawn has the names of her husband and children inked with hearts and flowers on her lower back. Jade's mother, siblings, nieces, and nephews all have a family symbol inked on their wrists. She, her older sister, and her namesake niece all sport the legend "one love" in the same spot on their inner arms. "I guess a lot of my tattoos represent bonding in one way or another," Jade says. "I like sharing tattoos with people I love."

Ink can express ethnic bonding. "I have six paw prints on my thigh," says Shamia. The image has a risqué street name—Baltimore Pussy Prints. "It's an urban black thing, and a lot of Baltimore women have them. My girlfriend and I got them together."

Some of Trai's tattoos represent her efforts to come to terms with her "culturally enigmatic" ethnicity—part Southern white, part Asian. The imperial dragon and phoenix on her back is a tribute to her grandfather, a half-Filipino/half-Chinese Bataan Death March survivor.

A tattoo can celebrate life passages—such as the name "Grace" inked on Dawn's wrist to anticipate the birth of her first grandchild—but it can also mourn. Sometimes an image serves as reminder of a hard-earned life lesson, such as a beautiful poppy with the word "poison" snaking across a banner beneath. "You earn a tattoo," says Dawn, and she's not just talking about the pain inflicted by the instrument.

"Life is beautiful, but hard," agrees Jade. "When I see photos of myself before I was tattooed, I sometimes feel nostalgic—like I was a clean slate. Pure. Now I'm marked."

Writer Deborah Rudacille and the women of the Maryland Gypsy Queens will participate in the art exhibition/reading event *Entangled: Art & Word*, on September 19th from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Jordan Faye Contemporary @ case[werks], 1501 St. Paul Street, Suite 116.