

also slowly building the child's self-esteem so that around the age of five, the child is confident enough to stand on his own two feet and start to create alliances with his or her peers. (Of course, breast-feeding assists this process greatly although is not necessary as long as the child receives heartfelt hugs which can come from either parent.)

Problems arrive when a child is "rejected" from the breast too early or continues to suckle from the breast long after the time they go to school. In the former case, the mother may be physically or emotionally absent or her time may be taken up with other children or her work. The child quickly learns to become independent and in denial about the need for help or support, fearful of further rejection. Despite the fact she may be self-assured and professionally successful, such women may distrust close relationships, especially with other women. She may have difficulty enjoying the pleasures of Mother Earth, such as provided by food and may seek spiritual oneness with the Great Mother while probably believing she doesn't deserve such love.

On the other end of the spectrum is the woman who never left her mother's breast. Initially, she is dependent on her mother for self-assurance but, due to circumstan-

es, the roles become reversed with an unhealthy co-dependency developing between mother and child. My story falls into this category. As a shy child, I hid behind my charismatic mother, but as time went on, her presence eclipsed my developing self-esteem until I lost myself. Even after my mother died, I tended to attract women in whose shadow I hid. Only in the presence of the cancer was I able to see my pattern and, with great determination, stand firmly on the Earth and say: "See me, I've arrived!"

During the period of diagnosis and treatment — covering some six months — many wonderful events took place. A close relationship was healed bringing great joy to my life. I bathed in the love and support of friends and family, especially my dear husband who was with me every step of the way. I also rewrote many sections of my new book, reflecting my own experiences and insights. But the greatest gift was the fact that I reconnected to and fell in love with the most important person in my life, namely, myself. ☺

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## Crone Body

by Pat Hanson



### TATTOOS & OLD WOMEN: SEXY OR VERBOTEN?

When I ask women my age what they think about tattoos, I get a rather varied reaction. Here's just some of what I heard at the last Crone's Counsel last fall.

- "When I grew up, the only people who had tattoos were sailors, bikers, convicts, uncivilized natives or sluts. I do not fall into any of those categories."

- "I love tattoos on everyone, young and old. I find it ballsy when women do it. One of my friends has the most beautiful rose vines going up her long long legs. Ya-hooo!"

- "I see them as self-abusive and limiting, putting oneself into a visual cage. What's the point of branding? What's the point of using a tattoo as 'identity?' What's the point of identity? At my age, I'd rather blend into the one being that includes us all."

- "A friend has a tattoo of the Japanese character for "grace" on the inside of her upper arm. It is quite lovely when I catch a fleeting glimpse of it on her arm."

- "Tattoos that are original are beautiful and can be sexy."

In many cultures, tattooing serves as a rite of passage, a symbol of coming of age, or a turning point in one's life. So, will they become part of croning ceremonies in the future? Will older women ritualize their entry to this phase of their lives? A study by Oxygen Media revealed that in 2012 more women than men were getting inked, that 59% of people with tattoos are female and 40% of them got tattooed with a friend along, making the experience a bonding one.

#### History of Women and Tattoos

The history of tattooing goes back many thousands of years, and has been commonplace in a vast variety of cultures. Egyptian mummies have been found bearing tattoos. Mayas, Incas and Aztecs used them in religious ceremonies. Ancient Asian nomads brought tattooing to Japan, where it continued to spread. European and American soldiers who visited tattoo parlors in port cities brought the practice to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



In *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoos* (2001, 2013 powerHouse Books) Margot Mifflin chronicles the saga of skin as signage with interviews from both tattooed women and female tattooists. Facts from her fascinating herstory include:

- In Victorian society women wore tattoos as custom couture, among them Winston Churchill's mother who had a serpent on her wrist.

- In 1904, Maud Wagner — the first well-known modern female tattooist — traded a date with her tattooist husband-to-be for an apprenticeship.

- Tattooing among women began to rise in the 1980's at the same time as cosmetic surgery, was seen by some as a protest against such surgery.

- Breast cancer survivors in the 1990's began tattooing their mastectomy scars as an alternative to reconstructive surgery.

- Tattoos are gaining more and more popularity with women, who for the most part see them as taking control of their own lives and bodies and ignoring earlier gender stigmas about the art form. Yet gender and stereotypes are still closely linked. Men tend to have them in visible places on their arms and upper body, whereas women keep them in more private areas such as ankles and lower back.

## I visit an Ink Festival

"Eeww ... no thanks," several of my women friends said when I invited them to accompany me to The Ink at the Bay Tattoo Festival on the Monterey Fairgrounds last summer. So I went alone, tape recorder and camera in hand, stopping to chat with every woman who looked to be over fifty. Their comments were fascinating.

**Carlinda** (pictured at right) and now years old, got her first tattoo at the age of 53, and now has full body suit — as well as a husband she met ten years ago at one of these festivals. "People see only my arms, and don't know I'm covered completely." She showed me three cancer ribbons she'd had to honor friends who have died included one pink one on behalf of her 85-year-old mother who'd just had a mastectomy. "Am I worried about my skin aging? No. I wear moisturizer daily (it makes the ink look better) and use sunblock regularly," she commented matter-of-factly.



**Claudia**, 77 (top right) got her first tattoo at the age of 71 in honor of her grandson Joe who passed away unexpectedly at 21. Her grandson's (middle, right) is an image of an Indian feather falling, with four berries attached to that represent her other grandchildren. She'd never had negative feelings about tattoos, but hadn't ever thought of anything permanent she



wanted on her body. When her grandson died, she felt that she just had to do a tattoo memorial to him. Her second tattoo was a year ago in honor of her son who passed away at the age of 50 of pancreatic cancer. She chose for her leg a skull & crosshairs on a surfboard to memorialize her adult son, a surfer. Claudia's final thought left me with



*Many women today use tattoos as a way to assert control over their body image.*

this thought to ponder. "A lot of people choose tattoos to honor those who have died. Imagine if all of the losses from Iraq war were memorialized in skin art everyone could see."

Pam, now 56, got her first tattoo forty years ago in 1973. At the time, she was not even eighteen and got a fake ID in order to get tattooed and she's been getting them ever since. Her brother owned a shop and needed someone to practice on. She says, "The industry is awesome, the people are awesome and we care about each other. We run into each other everywhere." She has no regrets, "I wouldn't change anything. You're not a virgin anymore when you've had your first tattoo."

## Practical Matters

So what is the experience of getting a tattoo like? How does one care for a tattoo?

All of the women I spoke with admitted the inking process involves some pain. Since pain is so subjective, comparisons are difficult. The large majority of women I spoke found the final

product was worth it, and discovering their ability to transcend the discomfort was just as important.

"I was 20 when I got my first Tattoo," said Jane Doe. "It was an interesting experience. People tell you it's the outline that hurts the most, but for me it was the filling-in process. But once it is finished you have a small work of art that is uniquely your own, that you can keep as long you like!"

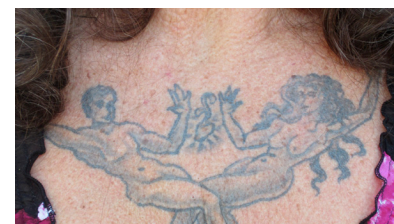
Care of one's tattoos is important. Ink looks better when it is moisturized (which is why many worry about tattoos on older skin) and most women with tattoos regularly use non-perfumed creams and sunscreen religiously. Hair can be an issue as well, so women with tattoos often share or wax, or see electrologists for a more permanent solution.

## Crones Talk about Tattoos

In my informal survey of Crones Counsel members I found about a 50-50 split between those approving of them, and those rejecting them. Crones accepting them saw the beauty and the artistry involved, and welcomed it as a form of self-expression.

Many of the older women I spoke with found them sexy, and some even felt the experience of getting one erotic. "I consider skin art to be very appealing, even sexy on women, depending on the art," said one crone I talked to. Another responded, "Yes they are erotic and artistic if done well and appropriately."

On the other hand, concerns about what tattoos would look like on aging skin were a subject of revulsion to many of the older women who categorically reject tattooing. One admitted, "I know that I would grow tired of it and I would want to have it off. Besides, my body is aging now and it would look really silly on my body at this age." Another commented tartly, "The thought of getting wrinkly and flabby with tattoos meandering around just doesn't appeal to me at all."



*Another common application is tattoos instead of reconstructive surgery after mastectomies.*

I also ran into a lot of comments about "looking one's age." One woman summed up the negative response to the question "Do you think older women should get tattoos?" by saying "Definitely not! Looks like they are trying to be 'in' with the young crowd. They're not a pretty sight on sagging skin."

Others had more artistic concerns. One woman commented, "I don't like to see beautiful skin

covered with big pictures. I love the look of beautiful skin at any age ... its colors, the textures, the shapes. I don't want to be distracted by a colored picture."

Another agreed, saying, "I like the look of unadorned skin. It is

beautiful in its simplicity. It looks healthier and cleaner. Even without these considerations I haven't seen one [tattoo] that appeals to me. It is a fad and I am not interested in joining the parade."

But not everyone sees older skin with tattoos as a turn-off. Sex therapist Dr. Patti Britton's recommends tattoos to some of her older clients. "A strategically-placed tattoo can be a symbol that life, even sexuality, stays alive if we let it" Some of the older women spoke of this aspect of

tattooing as a way of expressing themselves — at whatever age. “I did not design my tattoos with my sex appeal in mind, but my partner on the other hand thinks that they are sexy and loves that I have them. I love seeing women who have tattoos. It’s a little bit of expression that they show, and I love to get to know them by their body art.”

Others have a more long-term perspective. Jennifer, now 54, received hers during a relationship with an “hang around biker dude” when she was 35 in what she sees now as “one of my wild-child phases. Sadly, the relationship ended badly... but the tattoo is still there!” Her current partner wants her to remove it; but as it is located on her inner thigh would make it painful to remove. “It was one of the most erotic events of my life. I think of my tattoo as a remembrance of another lifetime, as well as a moment of deep connection to a tribal past where humanity wasn’t as confined as we are today. If I wasn’t in relationship with someone who dislikes them, I’d have several more tats!”



Tattoos clearly aren’t going away, and the face of body art is changing, with more women and even crones choosing this path. But it’s clearly not for everyone, as I found out for myself. As I was leaving the conference I ran into a college administrator I knew sporting a gauze bandage on her right ankle, “THE BEATLES” peeking through the saran-wrap covering. When I mentioned this article she asked me, “So when are you going to get your first tattoo?” Struck by the audacity of my own interest, I answered, “Me?” I gulped, “uh, uh ... not today, I’m still thinking about it.” ☺

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## Still Practicing

by Merideth Allyn



### LOST AND FOUND

**T**he Saturday early morning sun hit my five-year-olds’ golden hair and sprayed a bright halo that seemed to shimmer and surround his sturdy little body. The sky was azure, and the air was summer sultry, sweet with the scent of honeysuckle and sundry-colored wildflowers growing near the water’s edge. Rustic fishing boats were bobbing gently in the shade of ancient Cypress trees. The sunlight also revealed dense foliage and zillions of thick pink and green water lilies. The lily pads appeared to suffocate the teeming fish and reptile life swarming beneath the sometimes deep, sometimes shallow water. Fishermen came from miles around to cast their lines into the ten-thousand-acre expanse of algae-filled lake and marshes. Eagles and hawks flew high, and my heart soared as I breathed deeply of the freedom I felt.

My son, in the “expert” care of two adult friends, pushed off in a boat at eight o’clock in search of

“the perfect lunch spot.” Hours passed, and I became concerned; by noon I feared the worst. Overwhelmed with anxiety (now bordering on terror,) my imagination ranged out of control. Had the boat tipped and dropped my beautiful son into the blue, green, and brown bowels of the now-malevolent water? Had he become embroiled in a nest of mating venomous snakes? Was he frightened and crying for me? No more Eskimo or butterfly kisses? No more hugs, bedtime stories or prayers? No more tying of a wayward sneaker lace?

At three o’clock I saw a boat approaching but with only one rower. No sign of my son or my other friend. When he brought the boat to shore, he said (as if nothing was amiss) that they had indeed found the “perfect picnic spot.” I was furious, but relieved that I could now be on my way to retrieve my son, and off we set.

But, alas, that journey was far from simple. There were multi-