

SCRIPT: “Permanent Art”

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This audio documentary attempts to discuss Egypt’s rising tattoo community within a society that is heavily opposed to it. Three young people tell their tattoo stories – why they got them, how they got them and what people thought of them.

*MUSIC: “Lemon and Melon” by Blue Dot Sessions [00:00:00 – 00:02:35]*

Tattoos, tattoos, tattoos... We’re used to seeing them in music videos, in TV shows, and on the big screen. But lately, they’ve been on the rise in Egypt, with a tattoo community slowly growing.

*Mariam Mansour (MM): “Well the first one I got was when I was sixteen.” (:03)*

That’s Mariam Mansour, a journalism student at the American University in Cairo, who has two tattoos.

*MM: “It’s the name of my mom and it’s written in Arabic calligraphy. And the second one I got it a few years later, two years ago actually. And in order to be fair, I got my dad’s birthday in Roman numerals.” (:16)*

And how did your parents react?

*SFX: FADE IN: tattoo gun [00:00:58 – 00:01:06]*

*MM: “To be honest, they were more easy going about it than I would’ve expected. My first tattoo, my mom was actually with me, she was! And I kept nagging her, we were in Lebanon, I kept nagging her for the whole trip, telling her ‘please, please I want a tattoo. I want to get it done,’ and I think to shut me up she was just like ‘okay, let’s do it.’ but then when she heard the drilling, the buzzing of the tattoo gun she was like ‘okay you’re in it alone, I’m gonna sit outside and read a magazine!’” (:31)*

*SFX: FADE OUT: tattoo gun [00:00:58 – 00:01:06]*

And what about your dad?

*MM: “My dad actually was pretty upset that I got my mum’s name, and he’s like ‘well now it’s obvious who you love more.’ I’m like ‘of course not!’” (:10)*

So, it sounds like your parents took it pretty well!

*MM: "Completely fine! The only objection they had was the fact that it wouldn't look professional. But they were very fine about it." (:07)*

While Mariam seems to have had a smooth ride when it comes to tattoos, others do not have it so easy.

*Dina Eid (DE): "I don't have one because, well, first of all it was because my parents were going to ... they still disagree but now I don't care." (:08)*

That's Dina Eid, my friend studying economics at our university. Ever since I met her four years ago, Dina's been obsessed with the idea of getting a tattoo.

*DE: "But also because I can't think of a tattoo that I actually want for a long time, forever." (:06)*

However, Dina's parents aren't the only Egyptians opposed to tattoos. Tattoos have always been considered a taboo within Egyptian society, with most people, specifically older generations, being heavily opposed to them.

*MUSIC: FADE IN: India [00:02:16 – 00:04:42] cross fade "Lemon and Melon"*

*Ali Zeid (AZ): "Some... Some people will criticize and will just keep harassing me because I have a tattoo. I know. And that's the point of it. Our community, that's one of the things, the risks that come with it, the baggage." (00:17)*

*MUSIC: FADE OUT: "Lemon and Melon" by Blue Dot Sessions [00:00:00 – 00:02:35]*

That's my friend Ali Zeid who I met on a trip to Nepal during spring break. I remember him bringing up tattoos in one of our earlier conversations and how he's always been interested in them. During our trip, we visited Pokhara, which is one of Nepal's main touristic cities, where he decided to get his first tattoo.

*NAT SOUND: FADE IN: hotel lobby [00:02:39 – 00:02:54] cross fade with "India"*

*Ali Zeid (AZ): "One time I was sitting in the hotel lobby and I just decided I just want a tattoo. This is the time I get the tattoo. I've always thought about it. I thought it was expensive at home. When in Nepal, the currency's cheap so I thought I was rich at the time!" (:16)*

*NAT SOUND: FADE OUT: hotel lobby [00:02:39 – 00:02:54] cross fade with playing music*

While he was not discouraged by how cheap getting a tattoo would cost him, he wasn't exactly sure what design to get. He asked me and another friend to help him make that decision but none of us were of much help to him as we felt it had to be something meaningful and personal.

*Ali Zeid (AZ): "Me and the designer thought about something like om, and had a curve that represented Ganesha, is one of the Hindu Gods. So I thought about it. Then when I was looking in the glass chamber of theirs they had earrings and stuff. I found a spiral. I remembered how when I doodle I always draw a spiral in there somehow. It's like a signature for me and it represents for me it's life, everything starts from a small place then it goes around and around and around. I went there, I took the least part of my body that would've hurt" (:42)*

His right shoulder.

*AZ: "and I felt this thing and I was playing on my phone and calling other people, telling them I'm getting a tattoo! I'm getting a tattoo! I'm getting a tattoo!" (:12)*

While his friends were pretty excited for him, there's one person who may have heard the alternative facts version of the story.

*AZ: "Before I got the tattoo I called, I texted my mother telling her. I lied to her, that it's only going to stay for three years and she, the emoji of the monkey with his hands on his eyes. I know she was shocked. She always had a religious thing against tattoos because she always thought it was haram and everything." (:23)*

*MUSIC: FADE IN: Hymns of the Coptic Orthodox Church [00:04:27 – 00:05:11] cross fade with "India"*

*MUSIC: FADE OUT: India [00:02:16 – 00:04:42]*

*MUSIC: FADE IN: Ancient Egyptian Pharaoh [00:04:57 – 00:05:23] cross fade with "Hymns of the Coptic Orthodox Church"*

*MUSIC: FADE OUT: Hymns of the Coptic Orthodox Church [00:04:27 – 00:05:11]*

Haram, that's where the problem begins. Most Muslims believe that tattoos are forbidden by their religion, and with Egyptians being predominantly Muslim, that would explain why the greater portion of the society is heavily opposed to it. However, tattoos are accepted within certain communities where they serve for religious purposes. Within the Coptic community, many tattoo a small black cross on their wrists, as a sign of faith and strong pride. If we go further back in time, we'll find that Ancient Egyptians used to get religious tattoos as well. A

journal article published last year revealed four tattooed mummies at Deir el-Medina, a village once home to artisans who worked in the Valley of the Kings in the Ancient Egyptian city of Thebes, today known as Luxor. Among the findings was a female mummy heavily tattooed with sacred symbols believed to have enhanced the religious power of their owner.

*MUSIC: FADE IN: "Hickory Interlude" by Blue Dot Sessions [00:05:19 – 00:07:39] cross fade with "Ancient Egyptian Pharaoh"*

*MUSIC: FADE OUT: Ancient Egyptian Pharaoh [00:04:57 – 00:05:23]*

*DE: "Back then a lot of things happened but then, you know, Islam came and they had these rules and everything that people, you know, these are perceptions I feel like. I don't think, the tattoo, the banning of the tattoo is within the Quran, it's a hadith. It's widely believed to be true so that's why people conform." (:22) – (FADE OUT at 00:05:37.)*

A hadith refers to a collection of sayings and traditions of the prophet Mohammed. They usually come in second to the Quran in developing Islamic jurisprudence. As a result of this widespread belief that tattoos are forbidden, whether it's in the hadith or the Quran, those who have them are constantly looked down upon or seen in a negative light by many people.

*MM: "People that aren't necessarily close to me, I feel like when they see it, there's always like, the first question is "is this permanent, oh my God, like do your parents know, like it's wrong, but what about religion," so I feel like, yeah, outsiders I feel could... I always catch them looking at it with some sort of judgment in their eyes." (:21)*

Which begs the following question: why are young Egyptians so keen on getting tattoos when they result in nothing more than a hassle?

*MM: "To me, I treat my, like it sounds a bit cliché and everything, but I feel your body is like a canvas. Like you accessorize, you, you, and for me, like, tattoo is a form of art and I really like how it looks. I thought it was beautiful. I always thought sleeve tattoos looked amazing but I know I definitely wouldn't opt for that. So I just stuck to things that are small, that wouldn't be very catchy and things that meant something to me." (:32)*

Which I'm sure is something Ali would second.

*AZ: "Tattoo is, is something fine. It's a cool ink. I see it as art. Some people would say a fashion trend, some people would say a canvas, I say it represents me. That's why I chose it." (:13)*

This audio documentary was produced by Dina Sabry for the Audio Production course at the American University in Cairo taught by Professor Kim Fox in Spring 2017. Special thanks to my interviewees Mariam Mansour, Dina Eid and Ali Zeid. Music from freemusicarchive.org, bensound.com and YouTube. Sound effects courtesy of freesound.org.

*MUSIC: FADE OUT: "Hickory Interlude" by Blue Dot Sessions [00:05:19 – 00:07:39]*