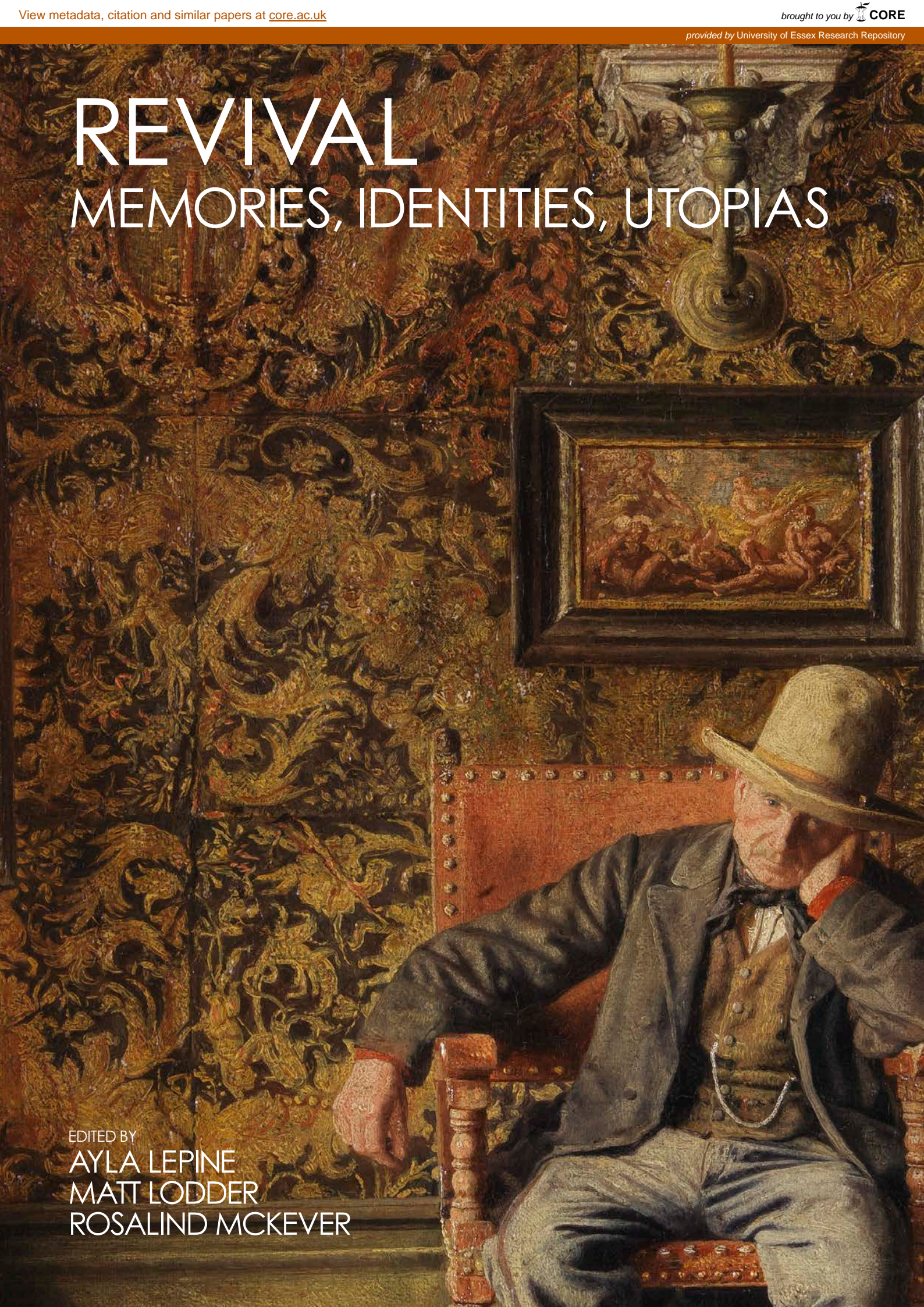


# REVIVAL

## MEMORIES, IDENTITIES, UTOPIAS

EDITED BY  
AYLA LEPINE  
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**Revival. Memories, Identities, Utopias**

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Courtauld Books Online is published by  
the Research Forum of The Courtauld Institute of Art  
Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN  
© 2015, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.  
ISBN: 978-1-907485-04-6

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Designed by Jack Hartnell

**Cover Image:**  
Henri De Braekeleer, *The Man in the Chair*, 1876 (detail).  
Oil on canvas, 79 x 63 cm, Koninklijk Museum voor  
Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.

# CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	5
Notes on Contributors	9
Acknowledgements	11
Foreword: The Interval of Revival WHITNEY DAVIS	12
Introduction AYLA LEPINE, MATT LODDER, ROSALIND MCKEVER	17
<b>I. MEMORIES</b>	
‘Nostalgia’, Matt Lodder	27
The Ghost Begins by Coming Back. Revenants And Returns In Maud Sulter’s Photomontages DEBORAH CHERRY	29
1937 and Victorian Revivalism ALAN POWERS	45
The Retrieval of Revival: Recollecting and Revising the Evan Roberts Wax Cylinder JOHN HARVEY	67
The Problem of Expiration of Style and the Historiography of Architecture MARTIN HORÁČEK	86
<b>II. IDENTITIES</b>	
‘Historicism’, Ayla Lepine	101
The New Old Style: Tradition, Archetype and Rhetoric in Contemporary Western Tattooing MATT LODDER	103
Longing for Past and Future: Cultural Identity and Central European Revivalist Glassware Designs MICHELLE JACKSON	120

Henri De Braekeleer and Belgium's Nineteenth-Century Revivalist Movement ALISON HOKANSON	135
Armenian Architects and 'Other' Revivalism ALYSON WHARTON	150
<b>III. UTOPIAS</b>	
'Anachronism', Rosalind McKeever	169
Ferro-concrete and the Search for Style in the 'American Renaissance' PHIL JACKS	171
Echoes of Manhattan in Parliament Square: Transatlantic Medievalism for the Twentieth Century AYLA LEPINE	188
Modernism and Revivalism in Italian Architecture and Design, 1935-1955 JONATHAN MEKINDA	205
Babylon Electrified: Orientalist Hybridity as Futurism in Victorian Utopian Architecture NATHANIEL WALKER	222
Photograph Credits	239

## CHAPTER 5

# THE NEW OLD STYLE: TRADITION, ARCHETYPE AND RHETORIC IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN TATTOOING

MATT LODDER



A letter from influential San Francisco-based tattoo artist Ed Hardy to a homonymous counterpart in London, Lal Hardy, dated 5th March 1990, reads:

I would like to get together and visit next time I'm in England. I'm very keen on the old time stuff' as you know, and a few of the current artists. I do think the new old style is what will be happening in the '90s, mixed in with the stuff that's been popular over the last 20 years.<sup>1</sup>

5.1  
Ira Dye, *Examples of  
tattoos depicted on  
Seamen's Protection  
Certificates*, 1989.

The very idea of a 'new old style' of tattoo art is clearly oxymoronic. And yet Hardy's letter was prescient. Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, after a period in the 1970s and 80s when tattooing in the West became ever more eclectic and experimental, an overwhelming number of tattoo artists in Europe and America returned to this stylistic genre of

tattooing which still characterises and caricatures tattooing in the popular imagination. This genre of Western tattooing has come to be known as ‘traditional’ or ‘old-school’: a limited palette of instantly recognisable tattoo designs—nautical, military, parodically hyper-masculine—from across the centuries-long history of Western tattoo practice are reproduced in thick, black lines and heavy blocks of colour with a reverent fidelity on twenty-first century bodies.<sup>2</sup>

This essay seeks to understand the consequences of this return to ‘traditional’ Western tattoo aesthetics in the contexts of Hardy’s framing of them as the ‘new old style’. What might it mean for a style to be simultaneously both old and new? Moreover, in tracing the roots of this return by documenting not only the lineages of the various iconographic traditions which make up contemporary Western tattooing’s idea of the ‘traditional’, but also the complex layers of rhetoric which bolster these designs and those who make them, I set out to examine the very concept of tradition. The slippages between the actual histories of particular design trends, and the nostalgic lens through which many contemporary Western tattoo artists and collectors view them, turn out to offer broader insights into what it might mean to call an artistic practice or style ‘traditional’ in the first place.

## FLASH FROM THE PAST

It is difficult to unpick the extent to which Hardy predicted the trend to revive older styles of Western tattooing and to what extent he helped drive it: as one of most important single figures in twentieth-century tattooing, whose scholarly-minded publications of tattoo art, culture and history did more than perhaps any other force during the 80s and 90s to bring tattooing’s oral and academic histories to a global audience, it is clear that the generations of tattoo artists who have followed him have directly or indirectly absorbed much from the stylistic and self-identificatory cues he has been so successful at circulating.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1983, barely a few months after the publication of the first issue of his ground-breaking journal *Tattootime* he had already noticed that its particular stylistic thrust—a loose, novel fusion of anthropologically-inspired blackwork tattooing and contemporary graphic design he jokingly dubbed in the subtitle to the volume ‘New Tribalism’—was apparent on the skin of convention goers. As he remembers telling his friend and collaborator Leo Zulueta: ‘We’ve invented an art movement!’<sup>4</sup>

In the editorial heading up issue five of *Tattootime*, subtitled ‘Art from the Heart’, which was in production at the time of his letter to Lal, Hardy explains that by 1991:

so many colors and technical effects have been conquered [that] the large percentage of contemporary tattooing is like any art-form: self-conscious, vapid, or kitsch that takes itself too seriously... There are some “new looks” I find very exciting, especially the interest in bold work cropping up, which like most things is a rework of something that went before. Tattooing is beginning to revamp images from its brief historical past in the west, which is

a refreshing tide, along with images adapted from remote “exotic” cultures. Discovering the exotic or power elements in our own visual heritage can be rewarding.<sup>5</sup>

What, then, is being reworked in late twentieth century American tattooing? And what is being discovered in this safari into the exotic terrains of the past? Hardy’s interest in the history of Western tattooing led in 1994 to an exhibition at the Hertzberg Circus Museum in Texas called *Flash from the Past*, and a book by the same name which compiled design sheets from the early decades of the twentieth century. Whilst the response to *New Tribalism* amongst a large proportion of other artists and collectors had been the swift adoption of the blackwork designs which make up a large proportion of the issue’s contents, articles on Norman ‘Sailor Jerry’ Collins (who had died in 1973), 77-year old Paul Rogers, on professional ethics in tattooing (urging respect for the ‘older masters of the trade’) and the deceptive complexity of tattooing lettering (in which several of the greatest Western exponents are named), did not seem to have the same immediate, widespread and considered impact on the kind of work being produced. After a decade in which many tattoo artists had undertaken a studied adherence to non-Western styles following the publication of *New Tribalism*, Hardy clearly longed for a new breed of artists and collectors to pay similar attention to the Western masters he had also championed in the early issues of *Tattootime*, and for a shift in dominant tattoo aesthetics towards a practice as interested in the visual power and symbolic resonance of Western tattoo history as in the appropriation of non-Western styles into the American tattoo vernacular.

An almost contemporaneous interview in V. Vale and Andrea Juno’s *Modern Primitives* quotes Hardy as laying out his ‘credentials as an old-school tattooer’, explaining that he is ‘part of that tradition’ of Western tattooing.<sup>6</sup> Western tattooing is basically predicated on copying and reproduction; indeed, very overt reproduction and recycling of prior forms is the very fabric of the art form. In her account of the history of American tattooing, Margo DeMello explains in a broad overview of the early decades of professional tattoo artists, from ‘the Civil War through the Korean War’, that ‘typically, tattoo customers would select designs from sheets called flash hanging on the walls of the tattoo shop’. These designs were highly formulaic, and would include ‘pinup-style images of women, military insignia, ships, jokes, cartoons, fierce animals, knives and skulls’. While tattooists did sign their own flash sheets, she explains that:

...once a new design reached a tattooist he simply copied it, altering it slightly, and called it his own. For this reason it is difficult to determine the origins of most tattoo designs. Acetate stencils, cut from the sheet of flash, were originally used to transfer the design to the body. The customer would typically have a limited number of designs to choose from, and customized work was rare. Because of the highly standardized nature of the designs, and because the choice of designs was so limited, many tattoos became classics, worn by a majority of tattooees in a particular social group. These tattoos, like other

fads, changed with the times, but certain classics, like the rose, remain popular today. ... In the early days, before flash was mass marketed and what was being sold was often poor quality work, some tattooists would copy especially nice or new designs from customers' bodies and add these to their own design collection.<sup>7</sup>

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a roaring trade developed of these flash designs, which could be ordered by mail—and a small number of suppliers quickly cornered the market, ensuring that the type of work popular in that period resonates through the ages. The tattoos in these flash sheets *look* like tattoos are so often imagined to be—though in several ways tattooing is an artistic medium like any other, its particular histories and material characteristics anchor it (in the mind if not entirely in reality) with romantic imaginations of travel, of bawdiness, of freedom, of self-expression and of transgression—notions connected, as the archetypal representations demonstrate, as much with the aesthetics as the technology of marking the skin. As Hardy himself points out, ‘the most cliché tattoo in Western society (especially to a non-tattooed person) is a “heart with Mom” ... the barbaric practice of marking the flesh with needles and pigment manifested as a literal statement of our emotional roots’.<sup>8</sup>

## SOMETHING OLD

Though flash sheets perpetuated the narrow iconographic range in twentieth-century tattooing, the fundamental motifs of the most archetypal of images can be traced back much further in history. Solid but sporadic evidence exists of tattooing in Europe back to the Roman Empire and into pre-history, and an unbroken chain of textual evidence attests to tattooing in Europe back to the 1500s.<sup>9</sup> The earliest surviving pictorial representations of tattoos on Westerners in the early modern period, found primarily in accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy Lands during the seventeenth century, almost exclusively feature designs which are strongly religious in character—the Jerusalem Cross, images of the Christ, large representations of religious architecture, and Coptic images of Mary and the Saints, though written accounts from the same period suggest a recognisably modern set of designs in wider populations.<sup>10</sup> By the time of the Napoleonic wars, seamen's records attest to an iconography of tattooing amongst the Georgian fleets which certainly prefigures much of the list DeMello describes in early flash.

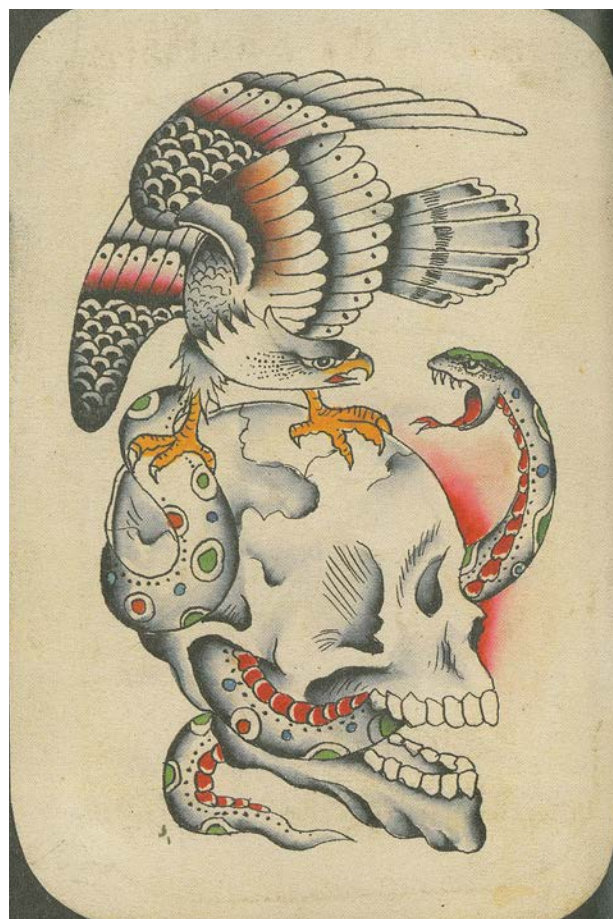
By the early years of the nineteenth century, Royal Navy Captain Edward Rotheram surveyed sailors aboard the ships under his command in the Georgian fleets, and recorded that a quarter of the enlisted men he recorded bore tattoos. Designs still recognised as archetypal tattoo motifs today—suns, moons, crucifixes, anchors and mermaids—made up the bulk of tattoos recorded.<sup>11</sup> Tattoo Historian Ira Dye's systematic analysis of the seamen's records of the American navies between 1796 and 1818 revealed that tattoo designs of the period broadly fall into categories including ‘Things of the Sea’, ‘Things of Love’, ‘Patriotic Symbols’, ‘Animals’ and ‘Flowers’, and his sketched reproductions of some



of these designs include hearts which echo the heart that would become so clichéd by the 1980s (fig. 5.1).<sup>12</sup> Other tattoo aesthetics have, by association, taken on some of these resonances, but these traditional motifs carry these significations most powerfully. (A secondary reason is simply tattooing's permanence—unlike trendy items in many other modes of art making, a tattoo cannot easily be stacked at the back of a cupboard until it comes back into vogue, thus ensuring design motifs having a much longer half-life than might be expected in other media. As one mid-century supply catalogue has it: 'Tattooing is 'as ancient as time, as modern as tomorrow').<sup>13</sup>

At the birth of a recognisably modern tattoo industry at the end of the nineteenth century—the first moment in history where Western tattooing resembles other commercial arts with shops and clients, and when tattoos are acquired in exchange for money—designs were already archetypal, and copying was fundamental. Technologically, designs usually had to be drawn on paper before being transferred to skin; technically, tattooing did not always attract the most skilled draughtsmen and thus its exponents often relied on using other artists' designs; culturally, tattooing was, in many instances, used to signal and reinforce group allegiances and thus designs were shared amongst groups and copied onto multiple bodies.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in DeMello's account of this period, American tattooing in the early decades of the professional era is overwhelmingly characterised as being a subversive and therefore ineffably romantic practice; a solidly working-class industry with a clientele of rogues, ruffians, romantics and ne'er-do-wells united by a shared disdain of societal norms and an insistence on individual or sub-cultural identity in the face of normalizing power (particularly in the de-individualising contexts of the military and the prison system). In these contexts, the act of copying designs served an affective purpose beyond its technical ones—by bearing an instantly recognisable mark on your body, it became possible to signal one's outsider status. Paradoxically, by aligning oneself through shared styles and symbologies, it became possible to express individual disdain for hegemonic forces, or, as Dick Hebdige puts it so eloquently: 'Style in subculture ... is pregnant with significance'.<sup>15</sup>

This characterisation of tattooing as uniquely a marginalised practice is hyperbolic, as the cultural history of tattooing is much more multifaceted and complex than these oversimplified conceptions suggest.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, despite the truth of a varied clientele of lower, middle and upper class people of both genders—plenty of ruffians, but plenty of the refined too—since the establishment of the tattoo industry in the 1880s this has at least been the general public's most prevalent understanding of tattooing. Indeed, it is the myth which is most interesting for the purposes of the present discussion: as DeMello references this lineage exclusively to sources reliant on the direct and indirect published and oral accounts of tattoo artists, her characterisation of the period becomes less a factual account than a valuable insight into the sense of Western tattooing's history from inside the industry. Tattooists themselves seem to perceive a characterisation of the history of their profession which is occasionally slightly at odds with what the historical record seems to reveal, but it is of course through tattooists and their lineages of apprenticeships that styles and



traditions are perpetuated. This is the ‘old style’ to which Ed Hardy refers—not only the vernacular design inventory of roses, ships and skulls that had been the mainstay of quotidian tattooing for the preceding decades even as the repertoire of tattooing broadened to finer lines and more disparate subject matter, but also the cultural rhetorics at the time of this nascent professionalization, and the associations these designs carry when produced in a particular way (as Hardy has it, ‘bold’).

## SOMETHING NEW

What, then, of the ‘new’? What, precisely, is new in this new, old style? By the end of the 1980s, Ed Hardy had noticed not only the resurgence and renewed popularity of traditional tattoo designs (which had never completely vanished), but also their fusion with another set of historic subcultural iconographies popular in Southern California at the time: the graphic culture of 1950s and ‘60s hotrod, ‘weirdo’ and ‘lowbrow’ art and small-press or self-published ‘comix’. Like tattooing, the mid-century underground graphic art of Californian artists such as Ed Roth, Von Dutch and Robert Williams is characterised by heavy black outlines, giving it an illustrative, cartoon-like appearance, and both its formal qualities and its subcultural significance make it ideal source material for tattooing into the skin.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, lowbrow art is itself citational (Hardy has admirably called Robert Williams ‘an aesthetic pirate’), feasting bountifully on the raw material of mass culture in the service of its ebullient, sardonic ends, with mass-produced cars, cartoons and comic books sliced, mutilated and mutated into grotesque and parodic new forms.<sup>18</sup> A piece of Hardy’s flash from the period, *Back in the Saddle* (1990, fig. 5.2), shows precisely his focus of interest at the time: an eagle and a snake battling fiercely around a mad, monocular skull, a long tongue drooling acid-yellow spit.<sup>19</sup> When compared to a the work on the same theme by celebrated Norwegian-American tattoo artist Amund Dietzel (fig. 5.3), who be-

5.2  
Don Ed Hardy, *Back in the Saddle*, 1991. Ink and watercolour on paper, Private collection.

5.3  
Amund Dietzel, flash design, c.1916. Ink and watercolour on paper, Private collection.



5.4  
Von Dutch, c.1956,  
photographed for the  
US teen magazine *Dig*,  
Private collection.

gan tattooing seriously in 1907 whilst taking art classes at Yale, the points of similarity and departure become apparent.<sup>20</sup>

Dietzel's flash design, from a 1916 travel book, compiles a vanitas, its muscular eagle a nationalistic allusion to American power. It is prepared with a fine detail it would have been difficult to reproduce well in the skin even for a tattooist of Dietzel's quality. Though rough on the heavy paperstock on which it has been painted with ink washes, each stroke belies a meticulous hand, carefully filling in small lines and blended shadows. The skull, fixed with a rictus grin, is long dead. The design communicates its message of struggle against death and maleficence with careful, fluid compositional poise. Hardy's, by contrast, is bolder, louder, wilder—its lines thicker, heavier and more sparse; fine detail gives way to luminous strokes of oranges, yellows and blues—and yet is, essentially, the same formal composition: an eagle, perched atop a skull which has been encircled by a hissing snake. Hardy's skull is animated, psychedelic and comically gruesome, made live by flecks of spit and a popping eyeball seemingly ripped directly from the iconic motif of 1960s hotrod pin-striper Von Dutch (fig. 5.4);<sup>21</sup> the entire ensemble at once instantly recognisable as a classic tattoo motif whose components are basically stable in the same traditional tattoo

form as they had appeared in flash back to the turn of the century, and as a warped exemplar of this contemporary hybridisation of two distinct but interrelated past styles. Twice old, completely new.

This perseverance of tattoo designs through time is not a mere stylistic affectation. Tattooing is primarily taught by way of apprenticeship, with techniques and attitudes carefully and studiously passed down from old hand to fresh blood (it is irresponsible at best and impossible at worst to learn to tattoo well without the guidance of a careful mentor), and learning to tattoo by way of a hands-on apprenticeship with a well-respected tattoo artist necessarily remains a matter of pride in the industry. As such, design tropes (as well as flash and tattoo machines) are passed from master to apprentice. Hardy, having declined an artistic fellowship at Yale in 1966, was initially trained to tattoo by an Oakland-based tattoo artist and undercover-academic by the name of Samuel Steward, who tattooed under the alias of Phil Sparrow, and who had actually learned how to tattoo from Dietzel, 'one of the great champion tattooers in America, a grand old man who worked in a tie, a vest, and sleeve garters'.<sup>22</sup> Hardy describes in his autobiography that some of Dietzel's flash hung on the walls of Steward's shop, and though it seems unlikely that his cyclopean skull was referenced directly from the Dietzel design, the fact that the similarities between the luminous retrospective piece from the 1990s and its muted, ink-washed antecedent from the early part of the century can be traced through a direct line of training and influence serves as a neat illustration of the broader cultures of patronage which are at play in the tattoo industry generally, and the fact that these symbols and their compositions are archetypal.

A section of *Art from the Heart* is dedicated to showcasing the principal exponents of the hybrid style of late 1980s traditional tattooing and mid-century lowbrow including Dan Higgs, Eddy Deutsche and Dave Lum, though Hardy explains that one artist stands out amongst this crowd.

The preeminent American master of this outlook in our time is Los Angeles tattooer Bob Roberts. Bold outlines, skilful heavy shading, crackpot humor and a clear composition have been the basis of his work. His apprenticeship in solid tattoo style with Bob Shaw and Bill Todd, fused with a rock and roll Southern California upbringing has made him the torch bearer of this redefined classicism over the past 15 years. Now a generation of tattooers, most not even born when hotrod art and underground comix first surfaced, are embracing the old styles with a vengeance. For them and their customers the look is timeless, and what tattooing is all about. Rejecting the excessive detail and avalanche of technical glitter that gluts contemporary tattooing, they're breaking out with heat, raw power and soul. It's bringing it all back home, with tattoos that look like Sailor Jerry on acid.<sup>23</sup>



Though the issue does not include any images of Roberts' work, many of Hardy's readers would have been familiar with his work due to its frequent appearances in earlier issues of *Tattootime*, and through comparison to the work of his apprentice Jill Jordan, to whom Hardy dedicates a full page.<sup>24</sup> In his enthusiastic explanations of Roberts' work, every characteristic of his 'new, old style' becomes visible in a single paragraph: lineage: 'classicism', 'timeless'; formal qualities: 'bold outlines ... heavy shading ... clear composition'; rhetorical force: 'raw power, soul'; reproduction: 'embracing the old styles'. Crucially, the crescendo of this tribute makes direct comparison of Roberts with Sailor Jerry, the most iconic of contemporary tattooers, a tattoo artist active in Hawaii between the 1930s and 1970s whose flash designs continue to be known the world over for their era-defining combination of iconographic imagery and perfect execution on the page and the skin (fig. 5.5).<sup>25</sup> This comparison is not insignificant: in the very first issue of *Tattootime* in 1982, in an article responsible for solidifying Norman 'Sailor Jerry' Collins' reputation as the archetypal tattoo artist, Ed Hardy explained that 'Collins was a classic tattoo artist: opinionated, mysterious and fiercely independent. But through focussing his humor, tremendous appetite for life and unswerving dedication to excellence upon the art he loved, he created a new synthesis that left a lasting mark on the world'.<sup>26</sup>

By aligning not only Roberts' art to that of Sailor Jerry, but also his character and attitude to his artistic practice, and by tracing his status as an artist by connecting Roberts' radical new work with the by then already legendary work of his tutors Bob Shaw and Bill Todd, Hardy reveals the strands of authenticity and authority which anchor even these radical returns and remixes to the long, storied tradition of generations of tattooers past. It is perhaps more than a coincidence therefore that the issue of *Tattootime* in which these 'Weirdo Art & American Classics' are revealed by way of Roberts, also features a lengthy first-hand of the life and work of his mentor, Shaw, who, the article explains at its outset,

5.5  
Sailor Jerry, sheet of  
flash, 1964. Ink and  
watercolour on paper,  
Private collection.

can trace his own lineage by way of an apprenticeship back to St Louis' Bert Grimm, 'one of the influential tattooers of the mid-twentieth century'.<sup>27</sup> As in Renaissance Italy, this genealogy of master and apprentice not only ensures skills, technologies, flash sheets and methods are passed down and preserved, but also acts to bolster rhetorical claims about an artists' work, lends each artist (due) credibility in the eyes of his or her peer group, and allows even radically new iterations of old styles to maintain a thread to the source material for contemporary practice back through several generations.

Hardy's interview with Bob Shaw, profiling Shaw's time tattooing across America from the late 1940s until the 1970s, is fascinating not only because it connects Roberts' wild experiments in Californian custom tattooing in the 1980s to the period of tattooing in America after World War II, but also for what it reveals about Shaw's own thoughts on novelty and revival in his own tattoo practice on the bodies of enlisted airmen at the Lackland Airforce Base in Texas back during the early 1950s. Recalling a conversation with a colleague some forty years previously, Shaw recounts to Hardy that even at the time from which contemporary tattoo artists were now plundering, there was some concern about preservation of past designs and the potential faddishness of tattoo tastes: 'They don't get the old stuff much any more, do they?', Shaw recalls being asked by a colleague, Painless Jack, in reference to designs penned in the 1920s and 30s by William Grimshaw, Percy Wagner and other now-legendary names in American tattoo history from the preceding generation (including Lew Alberts, credited by many as popularising the use of flash designs in the first place).<sup>28</sup> Painless Jack, who according to Shaw could not paint at all, 'had stuff with blue outlines and brown outlines, oil-painted stuff ... he had cowgirls, and girls standing on globes with big fat butts and flags draped around them ... real old time. Now who's gonna pick something like that?', he asked Hardy. 'Not an 18 year old boy in the Air Force'.<sup>29</sup> Already by the 1950s, tattooists were bemoaning the fickle trends of young tattoo collectors and wishing they had selected older designs from well-respected old masters of the business.

Though Shaw was clearly a talented artist and able to adapt to the changing demands of his clientele, in acknowledging these young men drafted into the Navy wanted tattoo designs different from those of their fathers he revealed a crucial feature of what would become Hardy's 'new old style' some four decades later. Revivals never simply repeat what has gone before; logically, they cannot. Instead, in the process of reviving and repeating they add successive new layers to the multi-leaved strata of the histories to which they refer. At the same time, the old style, of course, was once new, itself a rejection, recapitulation and repetition of successive revivals before it. The militaristic, patriotic vernaculars of the 1950s from which late twentieth century tattoo artists like Roberts were drawing so much inspiration—the elements to which Hardy was referring in Roberts' work when praising its classicism and tradition—were in some ways divergent from the 'old time stuff' from the 1920s and 30s which had preceded it, even if these new designs were not radical departures.

Delightfully, though certainly unsurprisingly, even this generation of tattooers from the 1920s longed for the days when their modish clients had been more discerning. In 1926, at a time about a decade after the tail-end of the last mass middle- and upper-class tattoo craze which had begun in the 1880s and whose key stylistic palettes were primarily oriental in character, an article in *Vanity Fair* magazine announced that tattooing was again all the rage. Entitled 'Modern Fashions in Tattooing', it stated: 'Tattooing has passed from the savage to the sailor, from the sailor to the landsman. It has since percolated through the entire social stratum; tattooing has received its credentials, and may now be found beneath many a tailored shirt'.<sup>30</sup> The article is particularly fascinating, as in the middle of accounts of this new boom it features quotes from an aged tattooist by the name of Professor Sharkey, who harks for the olden days of good times past:

There are those of the old order whose memory lingers fondly over the days when tattooing was a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Such a disciple of art for its own sake is Professor Sharkey, proprietor of a little known tattoo parlor at the rear of a barber shop near the New York side of Brooklyn Bridge. ... He's tattooed all the crowned heads of Europe and it was always him they called for! "Times ain't what they was"... His eyes wander over to the old prints gathering dust in the corners of the room —rare Burmese symbols, birds and strange fishes which he has gathered during his lifetime; serpents and mythological centaurs that are creations of true beauty. The best of them are jammed loosely in a stack on his desk, unappreciated by his patrons. "It is too bad to have to tattoo diving girls and Venus rising from the sea, when you have it in you to do things like these, ain't it? But I've got to live."<sup>31</sup>

This layering of novelty, while not exactly a problem for rhetorics of authenticity, certainly complicates any discussions of what the very word 'traditional' might mean in contemporary discussions of tattoo aesthetics; the very diving girls which Professor Sharkey held in such contempt seem just the kind of motif Painless Jack would be wistfully remembering twenty years later, and which would form, alongside both the militaristic designs of the 1950s and the serpents and centaurs of the 1890s, just part of the stylistic arsenal of Hardy's new old style in the 1990s. Layers of artistic source material are rejected and rediscovered like geological strata through the bedrock of history. Every previous rejection and rediscovery has compounded, leaving rich seams of style and meaning to be mined and recast in a shell of 'tradition'. The very recent past becomes unfashionable, it seems, just as the work of a generation past is rediscovered.

## SOMETHING BORROWED

These acts of rediscovery are never simple, naïve repetitions. In his critique of traditional accounts of originality and representation, *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze presents a compelling account of creativity predicated on a positive assessment of reproduction and repetition in which the (inevitable) act of making use of prior ideas is understood to enable new possibilities, potentials and powers. Repetition is productive. In his preface, Deleuze cites as indicative of this thesis the archetypal postmodern act of literary repetition, Jorge Luis Borges' *Pierre Menard—Author of the Quixote*, in which Borges famously imagines a contemporary French writer producing at a word-for-word replica of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. As Deleuze cites directly, the 'text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer'<sup>32</sup>—in the act of taking Cervantes out of time, and in the very act of repetition itself, something interesting and critical has occurred, and the anachronistic and citational move which Menard reveals something very fundamental about both our relationship as readers with texts, and as authors and artists with the texts we produce. In copying something, particularly something iconic, we create new relationships with the aesthetics of the work itself and make visible new possibilities of its formal qualities. Even though Menard's *Quixote* is exactly the same in form as Cervantes', it simply cannot be identical in its historical contexts or in its status, and in those differences lie rich and deep revelations that resonate at the most fundamental levels of our engagement with cultural production — 'the heart is the amorous organ of repetition'.<sup>33</sup> By Deleuze's account, then, repetition is a critical act. 'Each art', he concludes, 'has its interrelated techniques or repetitions, the critical and revolutionary power of which may attain the highest degree and lead us from the sad repetitions of habit to the profound repetitions of memory, and then to the ultimate repetitions of death in which our freedom is played out'.<sup>34</sup> When applied to tattooing, Deleuze's model elucidates why the reproduction of old designs is so pervasive. When a twenty-first century urban tattoo collector acquires a design taken from the flash sheet of an artist working in a military town in the 1940s, it is not a simple repetition of habit, but an act which directly and purposively conjures such a profound repetition of memory—a memory, like all memories, which is comforting, unreliable and clouded by preconceptions and experiences in the intervening period, but profound nonetheless. 'To compose *Don Quixote* in the seventeenth century', Borges writes, 'was a reasonable, necessary and perhaps inevitable undertaking; at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is almost impossible'.<sup>35</sup> To tattoo a tall ship on a sailor in 1920 was a reasonable, and perhaps inevitable undertaking; to tattoo such a ship on a millennial suburbanite is, like Menard's *Quixote*, 'almost infinitely richer'; though identical in form it is buoyed by several centuries of accumulated cultural resonance, to which the very act of repetition only adds.

These resonances are heightened by the careful technical affectations used by the best exponents of traditional tattooing currently working. Shaw explained to Hardy that 'What





5.6  
Marina Inoue, tattoo,  
2012.

I didn't like about [Dietzel's style in the 1940s] was that on a cannon, or an eagle's wings, where you would like to see the shading smooth out, it would be choppy; he'd fill the cannon in blue to compensate for it, but the eagle's wings would be real dark'.<sup>36</sup> In the 1940s and 50s, it seems that this choppy shading was something tattooers were actively striving to avoid, and even some of the best artists, like Dietzel, did not have the technical abilities to fully do justice to their designs. In contemporary tattoo practice, however, artists who dedicate themselves to working with traditional designs and who base most, if not all, their tattooing on old flash frequently employ a technique known as whip shading, in which the type of (bad) shading Shaw so disliked in the 1950s is deliberately and carefully reproduced. With contemporary tattoo equipment, it is possible to achieve smooth shades and blends that replicate almost exactly the type of effects achievable with paint or pencils, but a significant number of artists choose to deliberately make their tattoos look rough and choppy, such is their reverence to the aesthetics (of old tattooing and its associations of authenticity and history). In the work of artists such as Marina Inoue (fig. 5.6), the visibly

stippled lines of shading, showing the tracks of the tattoo needles as they have punctured the skin, reinforce the connection of these modern tattoo artists with the histories to which they refer, further emphasising the lineages of the designs and the deep respect and love for every line and mark they make.

The new old style Hardy recognised, championed and evangelised in the 1990s shows little sign of slowing down, though over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, the wildest inputs from the 1960s gave way to a much more straightforward focus on the older periods of influence. Though other styles of tattoos have risen and fallen in popularity over the past twenty years (including blackwork, black & grey, Japanese, and realism), it is the archetypal Western tattoo vernacular which has defined, and which continues to define tattooing from within and outside of the industry. In 2014, a group of tattoo artists publishing a book on early American tattoo-equipment and flash-design dealer Milton Zeis (entitled *Tattooing as You Like It*) opened their collection by explaining that he had ‘helped solidify and perpetuate the legacy of this pictorial language: images for the turn of the century that spoke of American pride, honor and tradition’. Moreover, they clearly establish their conception of their own practice and that of their peers in direct relationship to the continued relevance of the work of this colossus of tattooing, and commit themselves firmly to promoting and propagating his legacy, explaining that the ‘impact that he had registered in his own lifetime and has continued to be recognized in this generation; it will continue to blossom in the next’.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps most illustrative of the impact Hardy has had in bringing the historical art he loved to the attention of the wider tattoo industry is the 2007 book *Revisited*, published by a group of tattoo artists from New York. Predictably, Hardy’s revival has been revived. *Revisited* includes contributions of flash sheets from tattoo artists from around the world, each one a copy (to varying degrees of fidelity) of a sheet of the early twentieth-century designs from 1994’s *Flash from the Past*. Hardy himself contributes the foreword to the book, writing delightedly that the new old style still resonates, articulating that traditional tattoo designs were now more popular than at any previous points in history, and acknowledging that *Revisited*’s replication of his book is a fitting move, given tattooing’s particular history:

The enthusiasm and sophisticated artistry of the people in this volume reanimate these old favourites. They continue tattooing’s crucial tradition of copying, replicating and transforming a powerful image bank that arises from roots culture. It is keeping a strong language alive.<sup>38</sup>

The paradox at the heart of Hardy’s simple stylistic description thus turns out to be the paradox at the heart of all traditions. Traditions, of course, have a time dimension which is only retrospective. One cannot set out to establish a tradition for the future; traditions can only be demarcated around existing practices from a point in the future

looking backwards. As such, they are necessarily fantasies and constructions; stories made by omissions and commissions; tools which turn the past into something useful for the present. Moreover, traditions are cumulative—traditions can exist only by repetition, and counter to the aims of those who perpetuate them, in each repetition a tradition grows and changes. In each iteration, a tradition is made stronger by its continued survival but altered by the messy leakages between past and present, simultaneously both old and new.

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All references in *Courtauld Books Online* are hyperlinked. To navigate to a footnote, click on the reference number in the body of the text. To return back to the main text, click on the number at the beginning of the footnote.

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