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Tattoo businesses thrive, despite recession, as more Americans accept body art

By Patrick May
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It started at the lower back. Angels and demons and shimmering koi were taking up residence on the exposed skin of college kids and soccer moms. And from shoulder to ankle to chest and beyond, the tattoo industry has continued to surge atop the 21st century's rising tide of ink.

Largely immune to the recession's dead weight, surveys and personal stories indicate increasing acceptance for a practice once considered the domain of biker gangs and drunken sailors, and that's meant thriving growth for tattoo parlors and the companies that serve them.

"This is a trend that feeds on itself," says Ben "Monk" Valdez, owner of a San Jose shop and veteran of Northern California's thriving body-art scene. "One lady will see another lady with a tiny butterfly and say, 'That's cute. I want one of those, too.' Next thing you know, you've got millions and millions of people doing the same thing."

Nailing down the exact size of the trend is challenging, but by all accounts, it has dramatically expanded in the last few years. A 2007 Pew Research Center study, the most recent available, found that 40 percent of Gen Xers, born between 1966 and 1980, and a third of Gen Nexters born 1981-88 are sporting a tattoo, while the Food and Drug Administration estimated 45 million Americans have at least one.

Previous studies show a continual uptick in tattoo use since the mid-1990s, with some insiders claiming body art has become a billion-dollar business, with

its own TV reality shows, weekend conventions and as many as 35,000 shops nationwide.

Yet despite its growing popularity, the trade, like its history, still flies below the radar. Traditionally a sort of secret society where practitioners ferociously guarded their métier, many tattoo parlors are apprentice-based, cash-only businesses. Government oversight is meager, although health officials are working with lawmakers around the country to better regulate a business that's both booming and potentially hazardous to public health.

As tattoo historian and author Vince Hemingson puts it, body art "is one of those classic industries where almost all the artists are self-employed. And since the cost of entry is so low, and anyone can call themselves a tattoo artist, it's hard to precisely define how big it is."

There are plenty of signs, though, that a sea change has occurred, moving this centuries-old discipline from the social fringe smack into the

mainstream, much to the chagrin of old-timers who fear popularization is killing the tradition. "As soon as tattoos started getting into the shopping mall," says Hemingson, "it lost some of its roguish outsider image. Now you have families going in to get tattooed together."

The trend certainly brings more opportunity for tattooers and less stigma for the tattooed, although Americans still seem at odds. One study this year showed the public almost evenly divided about the subject of so many people getting tattoos, with older Americans far more likely to look down on the trend while younger ones were more laissez-faire.

Sheila Roberts, a 45-year-old operations director in senior care, is somewhere in the middle. Joining the fray, Roberts started getting tattoos a few years ago, but says, "I want them in places only I can see because they can be offensive to other people and cause them to stereotype you. Having them on your head or neck makes you look like a gangster."

Yet more Americans than ever seem ready for ink. Bob Baxter, former editor-in-chief of Skin & Ink magazine, says "new shops are opening every day, and professional artists can make anywhere from \$125 to \$200 an hour, while the true elite can make up to \$300,000 a year and have waiting lists two years long. The newcomers are having a bit of a problem with the recession, but for the established artists, business is very healthy."

The trend has spawned tattoo-related websites, along with a slew of entrepreneurs tapping into the industry's

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Ben "Monk" Valdez, owner and main artist of 4zeroeight tattoo... (Nhat V. Meyer, Mercury News)



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The trend has spawned tattoo-related websites, along with a slew of entrepreneurs tapping into the industry's

supply chain. The tattoo supply company SkinCandy that former San Francisco bike messenger August Worcell helped launch in 1996 has mushroomed in the past few years. "There were maybe a handful of supply companies in the United States when we first started, but it's really grown since 'Miami Ink' first aired in 2005," he says of the tattoo-crazed TV reality show. "Things really blew up after they used my ink bottles on the show."

Worcell says revenues for his Burbank-based business in 2009 broke through the \$1 million mark "and this year we're doing even better than last year. But there's also more competition, and every time you turn around, there's a new supply company.

"Even the Chinese," he says, "are knocking off my stuff now."

Contact Patrick May at 408-920-5689.

- A 2007 Pew Research Center study found that 40 percent of Gen Xers, born between 1966 and 1980, and a third of Gen Nexters born 1981-88 are sporting a tattoo.
- That same year, a Food and Drug Administration report estimated that 45 million Americans had at least one.
- A Pew survey this year found that older Americans were far more likely to view the impact of more tattoos negatively, with 64 percent of those ages 65 and older saying that more people getting tattoos has been a change for the worse. A majority of those younger than 50 says the trend hasn't made much of a difference.

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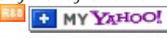
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