



-- Japanese Tattoos: History & Symbolism -- It is thought that tattoos were a part of Japanese culture as mind-stretchingly far back as twelve thousand years ago. Currently it is believed that this far back, they were used as status symbols, decorations on the body that held spiritual or social significance – although their meaning and connotations would change quite incredibly down the passage of millennia.

Just as the Romans did, Japanese society began to use tattoos to forcibly brand criminals in 300BC, and there are some historians who argue that by approximately 1600 AD tattoos had become favoured by the lower classes and scorned by the gentrified.

Between 1868 and 1945, the practice of tattooing was even banned by the government and became an exotic, underground culture. It was during this period that Japanese tattoo art and the Japanese mafia, the Yakuza, became inseparable concepts for many, a connection that lingers to this day and bears evidence in that many tattooed people are still forbidden to use the services of most public baths, hot springs and even some fitness centres and gyms in Japan.

It was during what is known as the 'Edo' period, between 1600 and 1868, that Japanese tattoo art developed the style that it is renowned for today – koi, dragons and samurai in complex designs that stretch across a torso or an arm, intricate and full of colour.

The evolution of this style owes huge debt to the influence of Suidoken – a Chinese novel hugely popular in its' own time, which made its way over to Japanese audiences. The story was one of manly courage, warrior bravery and rebel bravado; it was accompanied with woodblock printed illustrations in lavish detail that showed men with bodies covered in images of dragons and monsters of myth, tigers, flowers and religious symbolism. It did not take long for these illustrations to occur on real bodies as a result!

It is even argued by some that the woodblock artists responsible for the pictures took up the practice of tattooing themselves, translating their talent for imprinting designs onto flesh by using many of the same materials that they would have employed for their first artistic profession – chisels, gouges and ink. The traditional style of tattooing thus developed, and it's hallmark art – altogether, it is known now as Irezumi.

To this day there are specialist tattooists trained in this method, who are greatly respected and very much in demand - but be warned; the process is hugely expensive, far more painful than tattooing with modern needles and a full body suit in the most desired traditional style will take as long as five years on a week-by-week basis to complete – this is not something you can book to do as part of your two week trip to Tokyo!

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It is, as ever, fun to note the irony that many modern day Japanese youths are fascinated with getting Traditional Western and Tribal style designs – cultural crossover is as prevalent in the East as it is in the West! Our own love for the art-work born on the other side of the world is evidenced in the Japanese style tattoos of thousands of westerners, and the fact that many established tattoo studios looking for a solid reputation will try to keep in residence a tattoo artist with a particular skill in the Japanese or Chinese style.

Some incredible artists of the genre to look up include Matt Skinner of Golden Lotus Tattoo in New York, Don Sergio of Nezumi tattoo in Madrid and Steven Wrigley of Irezumi tattoo in Glasgow.

Credits: Photo - [Missty](#) , Writer - [Rachel Kennedy](#)