



Marked in midlife

A GROWING NUMBER OF WOMEN ARE CELEBRATING BEING COMFORTABLE IN THEIR OWN SKIN BY GETTING A TATTOO



I used to have a bias against women with tattoos. I'd think of them as a cry for attention whenever I spotted the markings of a "tramp stamp" peeking out of the backside of a woman's jeans. I considered those ubiquitous rose ankle tattoos as misguided youthful indiscretions — the result, no doubt, of one too many margaritas on a week-long Cancún binge. But a couple of summers ago, while swimming with a fortysomething friend who still looks great in a bikini, I eyed the crescent moon on the curve of her hip and immediately thought, *I have to have one*. Suddenly, the idea of a tattoo wasn't trashy after all. In fact, it seemed the perfect way to mark my passage into midlife, a time when I've never been more comfortable in my own skin. It carried just the right whiff of rebellion to indicate a defiance of social conventions. Yes, getting a tattoo at 48 would declare to me — and to the world — that I could still be unpredictable, even a little edgy. It was a sure sign I was a woman with stories to tell.

I'm not alone in my desire to mark the geography of my skin for the first time in middle age. Women over 40 are the fastest growing demographic opting for tattoos, according to Michael Atkinson, an associate professor at the University of Toronto who spent five years researching the Canadian tattoo industry for his book, *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art*. At least nine per cent of Canadian women sport a tattoo, but "given the range of estimates and anecdotes I have seen, I'd say the figure is more like 20 per cent," observes Atkinson. "A lot of older women say they wanted to get one when

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BY ANNE BOKMA

they were younger, but it wasn't culturally acceptable then, so they're getting it now."

New York feminist critic Margot Mifflin, author of *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, agrees. "It's no longer considered scandalous. Now it's simply a form of embellishment and self-expression, one that can give women a feeling of power over their own bodies," she says. "For a lot of middle-aged women, tattoos are still linked to countercultural ideas, so even if they no longer have much of a counterculture bite, tattoos still have that association for women who want to spring free in middle age."

Once the preserve of sailors, bikers and prisoners, getting inked has lost much of its outlaw status. Even Sarah Palin reportedly sports a tattoo on her ankle. Shows such as A&E's *Inked* and TLC's *Miami Ink*, which depict life in tattoo shops, have exposed more people to the world of tats. But the pinnacle moment for mainstream acceptance of tattoos might have occurred 12 years ago when Mattel introduced Butterfly Art Barbie with a tattoo on her tummy. Today, tattoo parlours have been elevated to "studios" and tattooists to "artists." Improved hygiene standards and the presence of a growing number of female artists have also helped attract formerly wary women.

Perhaps the biggest appeal of body art for midlife women is the way tattoos can declare individuality. They represent life experiences, both celebratory and tragic: a milestone birthday, freedom after divorce, finding a new love, the death of a loved one, coming out, making it through menopause, surviving a major illness — even as a way to beautify mastectomy scars.

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conversation pieces and countercultural totems, valentines to lovers and memorials to the dead," writes Mifflin. "[They are] personal history manifested physically, in marks that can't be hidden."

Much of Sue Aldis Simpson's personal story is evident in the six tattoos she's gotten since turning 40. A nurse in Hamilton, Ont., Aldis Simpson says tattoos are like "scrapbooking for big girls — they let you carry all your important stuff with you." The 47-year-old mother of five has an image of a goddess tattooed between her breasts (representing both motherhood and the healing profession she belongs to); a tattoo of her new husband's family coat of arms on her left shoulder (after weathering two difficult divorces, she is now remarried, saying, "It makes me feel part of his clan"); an Arabian horse on her upper left thigh (she is a competitive endurance rider and the horse is a reminder that "you can fly without wings"); a praying mantis on her back that's a memorial to a girlhood friend

who died young; a dragonfly on her back that symbolizes "the metamorphosis of coming up from being isolated under water and emerging into the wider world"; and a Celtic symbol on her upper right arm that "stands for healing and femininity."

At first, she was worried the goddess peeking out of her cleavage might compromise her professionalism and make her older patients uncomfortable. "But what I found was many of my female patients were intrigued and fascinated and very positive. They'd tell me they wished they had gotten a tattoo when they were younger. I think they are tired of always being the good girl."

Aldis Simpson herself grew tired of living up to other people's expectations, and her tattoos are a way to reassert her independence. "As soon as I turned 40, I wanted more body art. With age comes audacity," she observes. "I am much more confident now and feel fully grown up. In my thirties, I worried about being a good mother and wife; in my forties, I

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stopped trying to conform and came into my own. Getting the tattoos was part of that.”

For women facing the vicissitudes of aging, tattoos have an undeniable youthful and sexual appeal. “A lot of men find the confidence that comes with getting a tattoo sexy — tattoos can have an erotic, sneaky thrill,” says Atkinson. “Getting one later in life sends the message you’re not ready to fade into the background and watch reruns of *Murder, She Wrote*. They’re a small act of defiance.”

Nina Gremo, who runs Gypsy Rose Tattoos in Calgary, says 60 per cent of her clients are women over 40 from all walks of life — teachers, homemakers, lawyers, grandmothers and doctors. “A lot of women in their forties and fifties are having a rebirth of their sensuality,” asserts Gremo. “Blame it on shows like *Cougar Town*. These women want to feel and act young and have a good time. Getting a tattoo helps them do that.”

Karyn Mierau’s vintage-style tattoo of birds and flowers, spreading from her heart over her left shoulder and halfway down her back, is certainly an emblem of her rebirth in midlife. When she turned 40 six years ago, the caseworker and mom of two in Waterloo, Ont., lost 50 pounds, got dreadlocks at 43, ran a half-marathon at 44...and got inked. “My kids were grown and didn’t need me anymore and I was searching for adventure, so I did all these different things,” she explains. “I think my tattoo is just beautiful and it shows that I’m proud of being who I am at this stage of my life. I spent a lot of years being invisible and now I don’t mind attracting some attention and being a bit of an enigma: I’m a caseworker with dreadlocks, a church lady who has a tattoo. I don’t want to be put in a box.”

Traditionally women get smaller tattoos than men and choose more feminine designs (hearts, flowers, butterflies, unicorns, fairies, shooting stars and dragonflies are popular). They also tend to put them on easily concealed parts of the body — the ankle, shoulder blade, tummy, hip or lower back. But according to Atkinson, women are now taking more risks — going bolder, bigger and showing off their tattoos. They may not be opting for skulls and crossbones or daggers dripping blood, but women *are* fond of Celtic arm bands, favourite quotations, Asian symbols, tribal and zodiac symbols, and pin-up girls (Betty Boop is a retro favourite).

Elizabeth Beckett, a 64-year-old Hamilton adjudicator who got an image of a leaping red gecko emblazoned on her lower left leg when she was 55, says the tattoo simply makes her feel good and is a reminder to be joyful. “I wanted a tattoo just for the pleasure of it. It’s pretty — it’s sort of like wearing a brooch. And it’s cheaper than a face-lift.” She says the toughest decision was determining where to put it. “I wanted it to be somewhere on my body where I could see it when I’m in the old-age home — I wasn’t getting it for someone else’s pleasure, only for my own.”

Ah, the old-age home. The singular complaint of those who object to tattoos seems to be concern about how they will look on aging flesh. “People will say, ‘What about when you’re 80?’” says Gremo of Gypsy Rose. “I tell them tattoos are like stretch marks — just part of who you are. And besides, when you’re in your eighties, you’ll probably be more concerned about having hip replacement surgery than how your tattoo looks.”

One of the advantages of getting inked later in life is there’s less chance you’ll regret it. A study published in 2008 in the *Archives of Dermatology* revealed that more women than men opt for tattoo removal later on because of the negative social stigma and a desire to dissociate from the past. Older women, by contrast, are more likely to be cautious and less impetuous about being tattooed.

I certainly am. After settling on the idea of getting a blackbird on my shoulder blade (my favourite song lyrics are: “Take these broken wings and learn to fly” from The Beatles’ “Blackbird”), I booked an appointment with a tattoo artist to sketch some designs. I’m taking my time, doing my research and making certain I get an indelible image I’ll want to carry with me to my grave. **M**

tips on tats

- ♥ **Choose your design carefully** Remember, you have to live with it for the rest of your life.
- ♥ **Research the artist** Ask to see the artist’s portfolio of designs. Request references from previous clients.
- ♥ **Be safe** Tattoos carry the risk of infection, including hepatitis B and C and HIV. Health Canada guidelines state that tattoo artists must use prepackaged, pre-sterilized disposable needles and sterile equipment. The artist should also put on a fresh pair of latex gloves before the procedure.