

The art of ink | Kitsap Week

Tattoo artists are serious about their body of work

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Erin Ashleigh of The Clinic Tattoo shop in Bremerton creates artwork on a client's arm. She's known for bold

By **LESLIE KELLY**

Sound Publishing

Teachers have them. Grandmas have them. Even your boss might have one.

We're talking tattoos. They're not just for sailors and bikers anymore.

In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, about one in four Americans has a tattoo. That's up from one in eight just 20 years ago.

What's the reason? Those in the industry have different opinions. Regardless, local tattoo artists say they're busier than ever.

Erin Ashleigh, owner of The Clinic Tattoo in Bremerton, averages about six to eight clients a week. One other female tattoo artist works with her and an intern is learning the business. They work exclusively on women.

"Most people can only sit for about two or two-and-a-half hours at a time," Ashleigh said. "So if they're getting anything bigger than just a small tattoo, they'll begin it on one day and then we finish up the following day."

Ashleigh thinks the increased interest in tattoos can be attributed to their mainstream popularity.

"It used to be that people who got tattoos did so to be excluded (from the main population)," she said. "Now they're doing it to be included."

Tracy Lang, who has the Ryderville Ink tattoo shop on Bainbridge Island, thinks tattoos became more mainstream once television reality shows began to feature tattoo artists and competitions.

"After that, it was normalized," Lang said. "But on TV, it's all about the drama, when actually, tattoos go way back to ancient Greece."

At that time in history, she said, prisoners were marked with a "T" tattoo, so that when they re-entered society, everyone would know they'd



committed a crime. Once they were out of prison, criminals began to mark each other to alter the Ts into something less identifiable.

During the 17th century in Japan, tattoos grew to be an art form when woodcut artists began to create skin art markings similar to their woodcuts.

Ironically, Lang had been a fine artist for 30 years working with woodcut prints before entering the tattoo business about three years ago. Her tattoos are all designs that she creates herself and include an Asian flair with sumo brush work.

“I’ve always had an interest in tattoos,” she said. “I grew up in a household where I had a very close perspective on tattoos. As early as 6 or 7, I was watching people getting tattoos.”

On Bainbridge, she has clients of all ages, but many of them are in their 40s or 50s or older — a 70-year-old woman got a hummingbird tattoo on her ankle.

“With the people I see, they are at a point in their lives where they’ve had success,” she said. “Now they’re doing what they want for themselves and they really don’t care what people think.”

She doesn't use what's commonly known as "flash" — mass-produced tattoos that are basically a stencil.

"That's the kind of stuff that military guys would get way back when," she said. "Today, most tattoos are real artwork."

Ashleigh would agree. While she displays "flash" in her shop for people to look at to get ideas, she creates original artwork for her clients.

Both women say that generally, people come in with an idea or a drawing they've found somewhere. From that, they design an original work outlining the flower or design that has been picked. Color choices are made and then a time is set to begin the work.

In Poulsbo, at Woodwork Tattoos, Kyle Wood has a four- to five-month waiting list. So, when his customers come in the door, he knows they're ready. "They've had plenty of time to think about it," he said. "I don't question them."

Often, they've come in with a concept and he likes to begin working directly on the skin, with a simple drawing using a Sharpie.

He's not convinced that tattoos have only recently gone mainstream. And he thinks the increased interest in tattoos is "all relative."

"There's more media out there now," he said. "People have more ways of communicating so maybe we're just hearing about tattoos more."

Throughout Kitsap County, the cost of tattoos runs about \$150 to \$200 an hour. Tattoo artists also said that they usually require a deposit, just to ensure that the client is serious about getting a tattoo.

"Once they put money down, that means they've thought it through and they plan to actually get it," Ashleigh said. "The deposits deter those who aren't ready yet. But I always speak with them about how this is a permanent decision and they need to be ready for that and for the pain."

Speaking of pain, tattoo artists are upfront that tattoos can be painful. Often, the feeling is compared to a cat scratch, sunburn or needle prick that is continuous.

"Basically, while we're working, we don't talk about the pain," Ashleigh said. "If they seem anxious, I try to divert the conversation. And I tell them to take some ibuprofen beforehand."

As far as Lang is concerned, if someone is too focused on the pain, or keeps changing their mind about what tattoo they want, they're not ready.

“That’s a sign that they shouldn’t be getting one,” she said. “And it’s those people who often back out at the last moment and I end up wasting my time.”

Wood doesn’t charge an hourly fee for his work, but rather it’s by donation for any of the seven artists who work at Woodwork. Generally, his larger work takes about four to five hours and can run \$500 to \$800.

“We’re different here,” he said. “This is a place where artists express themselves.

There really aren’t any rules.”

He began drawing as a child, but stopped in high school. While he was in the Army, he began again and actually tattooed others in a tent in Iraq while on deployment.

“It wasn’t the most sanitary conditions and I wouldn’t recommend it,” he said.

The most painful places to get a tattoo are where the skin is thin, including wrists, anklebone, collarbone, ribs and spine.

Lang’s tattoo artwork is often created from nature, with trees, birds and flowers. She does have younger clients who want nature tattoos to remind them of the island when they leave for college. And she’s done mother and daughter duos with the same matching art.

She has a line of temporary tattoos for the children of those who come in to get tattoos, or for those who want to just try it out.

With Ashleigh, the tattoo designs she creates are bolder, brighter and often contain portrait work, or tattoos that are in memory of a loved one who has passed. She creates female portraiture and flowers as well.

And she was once a part of a group who played “tattoo roulette.”

“We’d throw ideas into a hat and then pick one,” she said.

That’s how she ended up with the beaver and a pair of lips on her body.

On her neck, she bears a keyhole and a key, which is a tribute to her grandmother who collected keys.

Tattoo artists throughout Kitsap County said they have been asked to create tattoos to which they've said no. Included were swastikas and some off-color prose or nonsensical words.

And there are places that some of them won't work, like inside the lip and too close to genitalia.

For Wood, he wants his business to be a place where self-expression, for both the artist and the customer, is the key.

"It's like going into a Mexican restaurant and asking for Chinese food," he said. "When someone comes in here, they don't come in because they want us to copy someone else's work. They come in here for us to create."

Most tattoo artists learn the trade by interning for a year or more with a licensed artist. Artists must be licensed by the state Department of Licensing, but they are not governed by the Department of Health. The businesses must have local business licenses and are routinely inspected by state licensing officials.

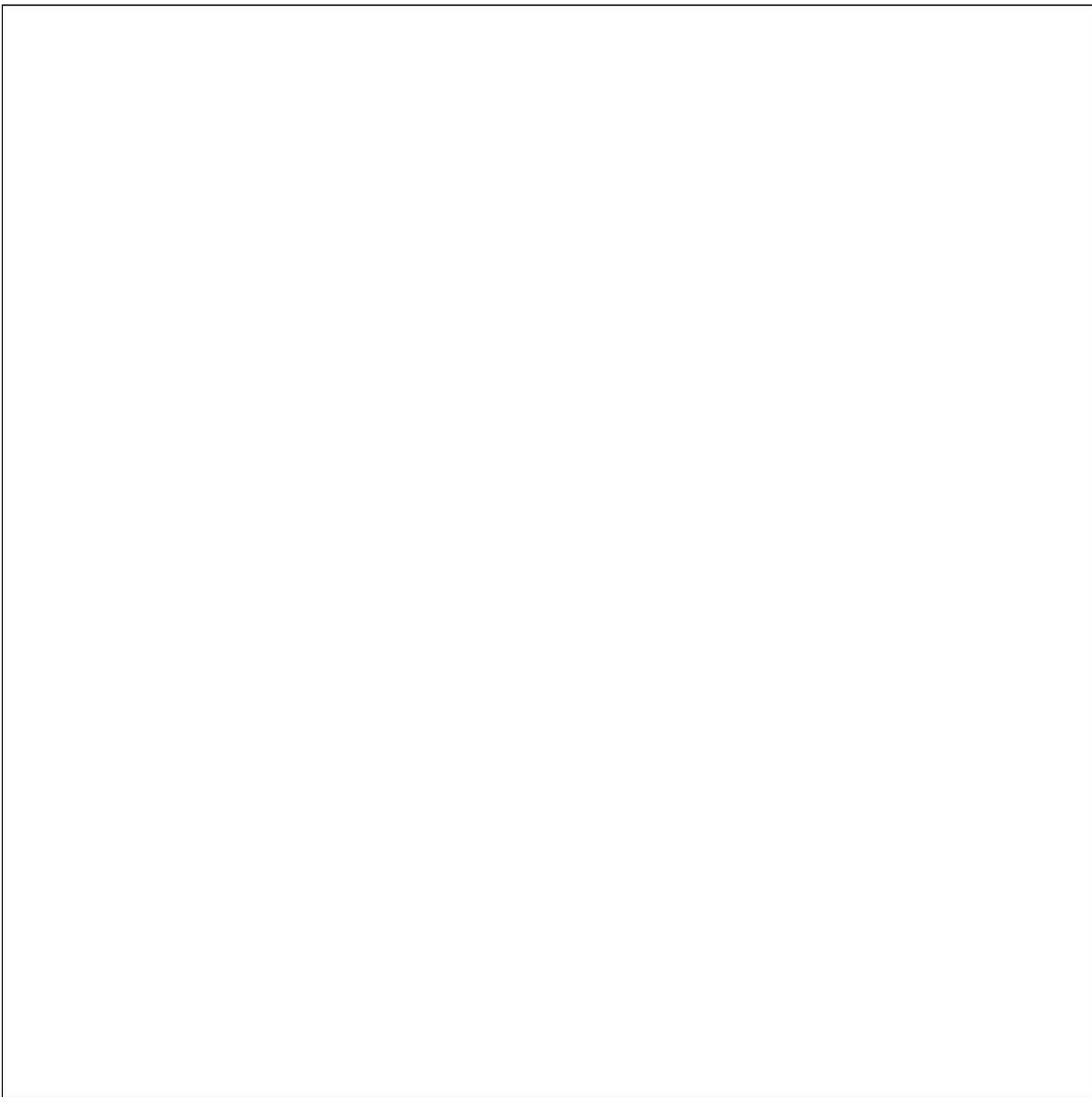
For many clients, one tattoo often leads to another.

Sometimes, Ashleigh said, people want more tattoos because they just want more art. Other times, they actually get addicted to the endorphin rush from the pain.

"We like to say that it takes a lifetime to figure out what you want for your first tattoo and five minutes to decide on the second one," Ashleigh said.

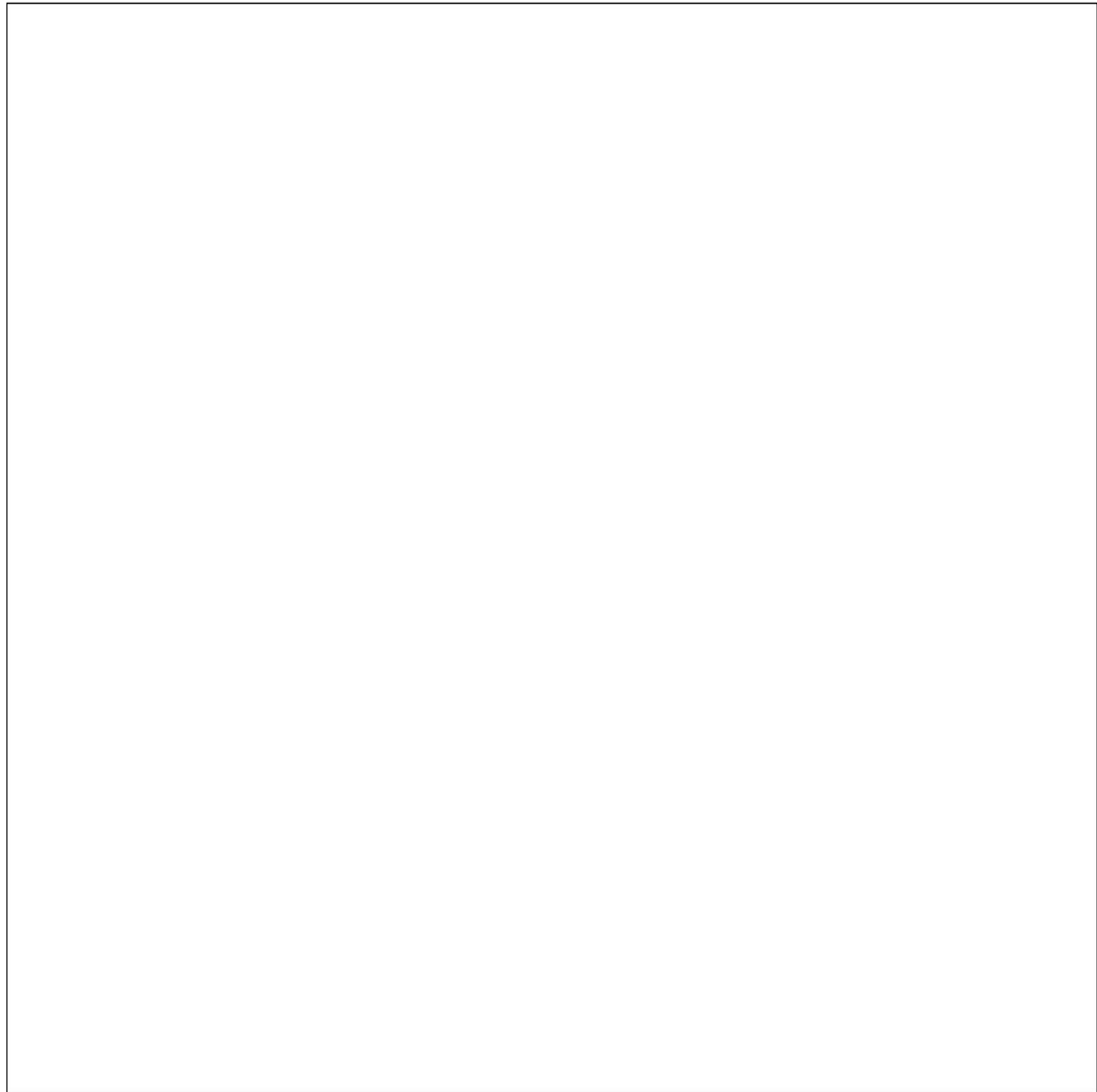
Above, Erin Ashleigh, tattoo artist in Bremerton, paints a possible tattoo design. Photo: Leslie Kelly / Sound Publishing

A small hummingbird and flowers are among the work by Tracy Lang, tattoo artist on Bainbridge Island. Photo: Leslie Kelly / Sound Publishing



Kyle Wood poses in his Poulsbo tattoo studio, Woodwork Tattoos. He uses a Sharpie to draw his work freehand on clients' skin before tattooing. Photo: Leslie Kelly / Sound Publishing

Tracy Lang, owner of Ryderville Ink on Bainbridge Island, studied as a fine artist creating woodcut prints before becoming a tattoo artist. Photo: Leslie Kelly /



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