

From Personal Tattoos To “Global Ink”

Area Photographer Publishes New Book On Long-time Interest

BY KELLY HARRIS

Teenaged girls keep diaries. Adults call them journals. Some people pen books. Some ambitious writers choose screenplays as outlets. There are others who choose an exploding art spin by celebrating life events on themselves.

Claudia Schwab, freelance writer and photographer for The News-Gazette, documents the worldwide fascination for body art storytelling in her new book, “Global Ink.” During her worldwide journeys to film festivals and other treks, she’s documented the growing popularity of tattoos.

In vogue during many eras of our civilization, tattoos showed status, religious beliefs and love. Tattoos were used for punishment in some cultures.

On the Austrian-Italian border, the Tyrolean “Iceman Otzi” was buried beneath an Alpine glacier around 3250 B.C. There were 61 tattoos on his body.

Fast-forward to 1891 and modern tattooing tools. Samuel O’Reilly invented the electric rotary tattoo machine in New York City. That same year in London, England, Thomas Riley invented the first coil tattoo machine.

Tattoo art once seemed the stamp of circus people, people in the military, bikers or people who woke with one after a long weekend. Now spanning all socio-economic levels, this body art provides unique insights into people and their passions.

When asked why she chose this topic, Schwab replied, “Fascination, curiosity and it’s intriguing.” She began photographing interesting tattoos on her many travels. After Schwab shared her travel photos with Rockbridge area photographer Ellen Martin, Martin suggested she present the photos in a Lexington art gallery show. This, in turn, led to another show in Buena Vista, both in 2014. With the urging of Andy Wolfe, president and creative director at Mariner Media in Buena Vista, Schwab began work on a full-color book. This book tells stories of people in everyday walks of life.

“Tattoos are highly personal,” Wolfe said. “What were they thinking? What is the backstory? ‘Global Ink’ shows unique story lines. This generation of tattoo art is well thought out by the receiver since simple tattoos can easily cost as much as \$350. Plus they will be with you forever.”

Wolfe encouraged Schwab as a photojournalist to delve into the history of some of the people she’d photographed. She ended up retracing many of her steps by contacting and interviewing people she’d met and taken pictures of over the years all over the world.

As she worked through her project, Schwab began telling the stories in vignettes. Often,



THIS PHOTO of Claudia Schwab was taken by Nicolas Peron in Burgundy, France.

these included the circumstances of her encounters with her subjects. This free-flowing writing style reveals multiple facets in many of the personalities she photographed. She got to know her subjects on many different levels than most people would who might chat with others in store lines, on trains and such.

“Many times, it’s for art’s sake - because they liked this or that design or flower or whatever or to fill a space or balance one side with another,” Schwab explained about some of the motivations behind what people chose as their tattoos. Often, she discovered there was much more to their body art than people might be able to see at first glance. The subjects of her book seemed eager to tell their stories.

In Beaulieu, France, for instance, Schwab met vendor Jean-Louis Szilagg. He explained about his playing cards’ tattoo with the pinup woman on one of the cards. Exquisite in color and detail, each of the four cards was for a member of his family with each one’s birthday written above the cards.

Her sleeveless black shirt exposing a striking tattoo, Emily Fisher, barista in a Seattle, Wash., café, sported a large tattoo of a 1930s piece of art that intrigued her called “Nu au Squelette.” It is approximately 12 inches tall on her upper arm. “When she realized I was interested in photographing her tattoo, she kindly obliged,” Schwab said. Along with her birds in flight and other tattoos, Fisher showed the Sanskrit words, “Jai Guru Deva Om,” or “I give thanks to you heavenly teacher.” John Lennon sang the words in Sanskrit in the song, “Across the Universe.”

Some tattoos are works in progress. In Boulder, Colo., Schwab met Robert Logsdon, who got his first tattoo at age 16. After Schwab noticed the samurai on horseback on his arm with the original dragon tattoo just above, he revealed the really big tattoo on his back. It was a huge dragon covering almost his entire torso. “So then I realized he obviously had a dragon motif going on,” Schwab said, as his other ink was revealed

and hearing he’d named his 12-year-old son Dragon.

“I was surprised by many of the things people have told me subsequently to my photographing them,” Schwab said. People like Colleen, the woman in “Star Wars” leggings she met in a Virginia hospital room who revealed she had a tattoo beneath. This cool, mod woman, in fact, is a nanophysicist, she later told Schwab.

In Lexington, she met Alex Hoefer, a chef, who has a vivid Emmett Kelly clown tattoo on his leg. “It’s just another piece of my very large and extensive Emmett Kelly collection,” said Hoefer. “I love this tattoo.”

Schwab never really thought about people donning tattoos in terms of introverted or extroverted personalities. “I guess most of these people are outgoing rather than into themselves but I don’t think that means they are necessarily what I’ve always termed as extroverts. There are a lot of people that have tattoos in very private places,” she said. “And yes, some of these people did and still do surprise me - that they even have tattoos.”

Schwab participates in her stories. The more questions she asked, the more tattoos were revealed, and the more reasons for them. People are proud of their body art. Ink tends to tie people together in a unique way.

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Claudia Schwab will be signing copies of “Global Ink” this Saturday, Nov. 26, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at The Bookery in Lexington. Joining her will be her granddaughter, Bridget Hamel, offering henna tattooing.

Schwab and her granddaughter will also be at Blue Phoenix Cafe in Lexington between 2 and 4 p.m. that day.



SEATTLE BARISTA Emily Fisher displays the tattoo on her arm as she talks about her love for the famous 1930 piece of photographic art “Nu au Squelette” by Hungarian-French photographer Ergy Landau upon which her tattoo is based.



AT LEFT, the tattoo of famous clown Emmett Kelly is shown by Alex Hoefer, a chef in Lexington at the time the photo was taken. ABOVE, the dragon tattoo on Robert Logsdon’s back is the largest example of a dragon motif on the Boulder, Colo., carpenter’s body.



COLLEEN BUCHANAN reveals what “lies beneath” her Star Wars leggings --- a tattoo displaying her nickname. She’s a nanophysicist at a California university.



FRENCH market vendor Jean-Louis Szilagg, who has multiple tattoos, sells fresh produce on a warm summer day at his stand at a farmer’s market in Beaulieu, France.