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THE ARCHIVIST FACING THE CHALLENGE: CLASSIFICATION AND ARCHIVING OF TATTOOS AS SPECIFIC FORMS OF ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTS

Abstract

The present study, based on four published articles (Sundberg, Kjellman (2017); Wright (2009); Calano (2012) and Dyvik, Welland (2018)), attempts to find answers to two fundamental questions: How is it possible to organise tattoos as a modern form of records and whether, given their specifics, it is possible to archive them? Presenting some organisational solutions offered by the above papers dealing with tattoos of Russian and Soviet prisoners, Polynesian and Filipino natives, and American Iraqi and Afghan war veterans, the author disputes the widespread use of the term 'body as archive' as scholarly inadequate and metaphorical at best. He finds several ways to classify tattoos, exposing the aboriginal connotative model as the only one capable of representing tattoos in their entirety, which is a prerequisite for accurate description in the archival process.

Key words: *tattoo, record, classification, connotation, archiving expose*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, a debate has arisen among researchers as to what should be classified as a document[2]. Up until now, most people have thought of a document as nothing more than text written on some piece of material.

The introduction of modern IT systems, on the other hand, brought pieces of information that can function as a document without having to be in the traditional physical form of a document. This led to the notion that any piece of information can be hidden in different objects and that the content determines an object's meaning and not its appearance or medium (Buckland, 1997, as cited in Sundberg & Kjellman 2017, 21). This eventually opened the door to the recognition of the tattoo as a document, according to which the tattoo is a document 'meaning something, such as a memory, an event, a person and an identity' (Sundberg & Kjellman, 2017, 21), whilst Calano states: 'A work on Polynesian tattooing tells us that tattoos are artefactually understood to be a registration of a ritual event' (Calano, 2012, 99), meaning that it emphasises the so-called contextual, or hidden, side of tattoos and tattooing, which I will discuss later.

Though it may not seem so at first glance, the practice of tattooing is very old – some form of pre-tattoos have been found on humanoid figures dating back to the Palaeolithic, such as the 40,000-year-old figure named 'Löwenmensch' from the Hohlenstein Mountains on the Austro-German border (Encyclopedia of Stone Age art, 2022, Chapter Discovery) as well as on well-preserved mummies. The oldest preserved European mummy, named 'Ötzi' and found in the Tyrolean Alps, is covered with 61 tattoos. They were made with soot or ash ink, and the majority covered the hunter's legs (Wikipedia, 2023, Chapter Europe). Even mummies found elsewhere were decorated with tattoos. It is noteworthy that tattoos were also found on mummies in ancient China, despite there being a negative attitude toward tattoos; the Chinese viewed them as barbaric. Tattoos were marked on the faces of convicted criminals to act as a warning to the populace. Tattoos were also known in ancient Egypt, where, initially, only women were tattooed, presumably for medical reasons; on the islands of Samoa in the Southern Pacific, from where the western world got the word tattoo from 'tatau' (to mark, to pierce); as well as in ancient Greece and Rome; in the former to stigmatise criminals and others from the lowest part of society, in the latter to mark soldiers and weapons manufacturers, as well as slaves to prevent escapes.

With the advent of Christianity, the practice of tattooing disappeared, but reappeared in the 16th century. Sailors who went away on transoceanic voyages often brought home with them tattooed natives from faraway exotic lands as 'souvenirs' (History of Tattoos, 2023).

Tattoos were also known to the Polynesians, once scornfully referred to as 'uncivilized peoples'. The 19th century American writer Herman Melville described them in his debut novel, the semi-autobiography *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846), as well as in its sequel, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), where (according to the author) tattooing and cannibalism go hand in hand. While the mere sight of tattoos gives the author goosebumps, we now know that tattooing held deep meaning for the Typee tribe as it was a sign of belonging to their community. They used a unique system of tattoos with which they marked individual members of their tribe at a certain time or age, depending on their gender and always in line with tribal rituals. One could argue that tattoos were a form of non-verbal communication among the tribesmen. Each tattoo had a specific meaning and only all of them together as the whole made the individual unique.

2 Sundberg and Kjellman use the term document, whereas Wright prefers the term record. I use both as interchangeable.

In his study of the traditional tattooing of the Kalinga ethnic group in the Philippines, Mark Joseph Calano emphasises the importance of understanding the rituals associated with tattooing, which form the basis of social relationships in the community. These 'public rituals with symbolic meanings reinforce a sense of identity and solidarity within a particular society' (Calano, 2012, 99). The tattoo is an important symbol in the process by which a member of the Kalinga tribe, male or female, transitions from one stage of life to another. Calano classified these rituals according to the model introduced by Arnold van Gennep, namely: rites of separation (e.g. at birth), rites of passage (at the transition from childhood to puberty...) and rites of inclusion (e.g. of young men into a warrior class...) (van Gennep, 1962, as cited in Calano, 2012, 100).

It is evident from the writings of Herman Melville that white people did not understand this deeper dimension of tattooing, which they found exotic and a sign of savagery. Kirsten Wright thus notes that 'tattoos became another curiosity and specimen to collect' and that it was the explorer Robertson who first described Tahitian tattooing as 'a very particular custom' (Wright, 2009, 100).

Some white seafarers even wanted to imitate the aborigines and had a tattoo made to their liking without understanding the meaning of the difference between the Polynesian original and their custom made copy. On the other hand, the Polynesian natives often forcibly tattooed white sailors who had jumped whaling ships and fled to the Pacific islands to prove their belonging and integration into the new society. If they refused to become tattooed, the natives would either drive them out or kill them. Forced tattooing was also known to North American Indians in the 17th and 18th centuries, who captured white women and children and held them for monetary ransom. Before releasing them, they had the hostages tattooed (Wright, 2009, 102).

2. THE HUMAN BODY AS A REPOSITORY FOR TATTOOS

Seen through the eyes of an archivist, the human body can be understood as a kind of personal repository, a personal fonds[3], or perhaps a collection, that is constantly changing as new documents are added to it at well-defined places on the body. When the space eventually runs out, the person dies and with them their personal document collection.

At the beginning of the 20th century, tattoos were not common in the western world. In the United States, tattooed individuals displayed their tattoos as an attraction in circuses and amusement parks for the poor. It was not until the 1950s that tattooing became more widespread among seafarers and members of the lower classes.

In the 1970s, tattooing began to spread to other segments of the population, particularly among rebellious youth in the United States during the Vietnam War. The most common tattoo of that era was that of the peace sign. Since the 1980s, however, tattoo fashion has been spreading inexorably, with the western world slightly ahead of the east, where communist regimes have long established 'morality and order'. Recently, celebrities from the world of music, film and sports who have come up with tattoos to be imitated by their admirers, are influencing the fashion of tattoos. Thus, each new decade has its own popular motifs, and today tattoos can be found everywhere: from entertainers and athletes to health workers, teachers, managers, archivists and many others. Although today's tattoos mostly have their meaning as a separate document, they rarely combine into an all-inclusive narrative about a person's life.

3 I find the use of the word 'archive' inappropriate, which I will discuss later.

The popularity of tattoos gained ground particularly after 1970 among previously atypical groups. Rubin believes this is due to the increasingly educated 'tattoo artists' who have taken the stigma away from tattooing, while at the same time these individuals have enough artistic talent to try a variety of tattoo styles, such as Classic Americana tattoo, New school tattoo style, Japanese tattoo style (e.g. Irezumi) and Portraiture tattoo (Ellison, 2022).

3. SCIENTIFIC STUDIES ON TATTOOS

In the study *The Tattoo as a Document* (2017), Kristina Sundberg and Ulrika Kjellman examine the tattoos of prisoners in the prisons of former Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. They conclude that individual tattoos can be understood as documents, comparable to archival documents, which testify to an individual's identity - his position in society, lived experiences and actions. Like any archival document, the tattoo can have different functions.

The authors state that the tattoos of Russian and Soviet prisoners can be interpreted as memory banks, and that the tattooed body can be viewed as an archive in which the events of the tattooed person's life are stored forever along with the relationships that shaped them. They emphasise that this is a powerful communication tool within a particular group, in this case prisoners (Sundberg & Kjellman, 2017).

Before discussing the aforementioned prison tattoos, the authors briefly discuss tattoos in the western world. Since the very beginning, tattoos were used to mark marginalised social groups that Anglo-Saxon literature often refers to as 'the other'. This negative attitude towards tattooing was particularly reinforced in the 18th century when the first white explorers discovered Polynesia and the tattooed indigenous people who lived there. In the 19th century, the police practice of determining the identity of criminals and minor offenders by means of their tattoos became very common. If the tattoo was an identifier for the police, it was a mark of identity for criminals. By way of 'reading' tattoos, it is possible to understand how a person's 'professional career' has developed within a criminal group or organisation and/or their personal life path.

If we assume that the tattoo is a document drawn on the human skin and stored there, then the question of the organisation of images on the body arises. In his work *The Discipline of Organizing*, Robert J. Glushko talks about four ways of organising items: organising physical items; information about physical items; digital items and information about digital items (Glushko, 2013, Chapter 1).

When we look at the tattooed body through the eyes of an archivist and think about the ways in which individual tattoos can be 'organized', we can ask which of Glushko's organisation types we would classify tattoos into. A tattoo can be something physical, a concrete drawing inked on human skin, so it would fall into the first category. However, it may be imaged content, a photographic or digitised record of the original, and therefore belonging in one of Glushko's remaining categories.

4. THE ORGANIZATION OF TATTOOS

Is organising tattoos even possible, physically or otherwise? In a way, if by organisation we mean the very process of creating tattoos, it is. In many cases, the tattoo has a specific place on the body, take for example the Native American tattoo.

In every tribe, there is a specific person who draws tattoos and this person knows when, where and how to draw them. In this case, a tattooed person is a passive object. Even prison tattoos, described by Sundberg and Kjellman (2017), are the work of a single prison artist. The authors of the study view this as a logical, though also voluntary, contin-

uation of obligatory tattooing of those prisoners in Tsarist Russia who were sentenced to forced labour.

In Soviet Russian prisons, prisoners were divided into four main categories: professional criminals, amateur criminals, prisoners who collaborate with prison authorities (they can be compared to 'inmates' in American prisons), and the lowest of the four, passive homosexuals. Tattooing among prisoners, which became widespread in the late 19th century, evolved into a complex language of symbols that must be 'decoded'; the rules of such decoding were spread by word of mouth and were not known to everyone. A grouping of tattoos on an individual's body 'read' as his biography as well as his 'professional' career; it also determined the individual's position in the prison hierarchy. Woe befell the prisoner who got a wrong tattoo in order to counterfeit his life story and prison experience. His cellmates would exact revenge in the most violent way imaginable.

The authors of the above study analysed two tattooed persons in detail. They first presented their tattoos with a photo – a digitised copy of the original, so to speak, and described them accurately; this description can be compared to a content description of an archival document. They then analysed the content of the tattoos and highlighted the distinction between the denotative and connotative meaning of the drawing on the skin. The denotative meaning is the precise description of the drawing as perceived by the eye, while the connotative meaning is the story 'told' by the tattoo. For example, a church or a cross on the prisoner's chest means loyalty to the criminal guild (i.e. the prisoner is not a traitor, does not cooperate with the authorities). I believe that such organisation of tattoos, which takes into account the story behind the tattoo and is therefore based on its denotation *and* connotation, is the best way and the only one that allows for a full understanding of what is being drawn. This is a prerequisite for an accurate description of the tattoo - a document - in the process of archiving.

The authors found similar functions of tattoos in American prisoners, namely as an attempt to establish identity under certain circumstances. It seems that in both cases of prison tattoos the context functions as the main principle of classification or organising, i.e. as a deeper, possibly symbolic meaning of the tattoos.

Thus, certain tattoos signify the number of crimes committed, a cat's face indicates someone who is a thief, and so on. As a good practice, according to Clinton R. Sanders, the authors adopt the categorisation of tattoos, as is otherwise known in commercial tattooing, which distinguishes five categories: 1. a tattoo as a symbol of interpersonal relationships, 2. a tattoo as a sign belonging to a group, 3. a tattoo depicting a person's interests or activities, 4. a tattoo displaying a person's identity, e.g. horoscope sign, and 5. a tattoo as decoration.

Sundberg and Kjellman easily place Russian Soviet prisoner tattoos in the first four categories, while the fifth somehow has no place in the prison environment. Similarly, Dyvik and Welland classify US military tattoos from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan:

> *'As communicative devices, tattoos can offer important insights into a person's experiences and lifeworlds, as well as being markers that enable wider society to "read" (however in/accurately) particular identity "cues" such as class, social status, aesthetic preferences, and broader life experience'* (Dyvik & Welland, 2018).

According to Sundberg and Kjellman, tattoos can also be arranged on the principle of man-woman or in relation to their specific roles: 1. informative, 2. communicative, and 3. social.

Dyvik and Welland's (2018) study of the military tattoos of American veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars once again testifies to the importance of the context in which

tattoos are created. The tattoos, which veterans can post on the Warink.org official website, are classified according to three recurring themes: loss and grief, guilt and anger, and transformation and hope.

Historically, military tattoos generally fall into three categories: those that signal military affiliation, those that act as a mark of bravery (medals), and those that serve as proof that someone took an active part in the war. In each of these classifications, they emphasise the importance of both the drawing on the skin and the story that accompanies that drawing. The authors see the particular value of war tattoos in their ability to depict the horrors of war, which they compare to the expressiveness of Picasso's *Guernica*.

> '*/V/eterans featured on the site variously explain their tattoos as homages to their time in the armed forces, as dedications to those who they served alongside (and oftentimes lost), as commemorations of particular battles, and as personal messages to themselves "after" war.*' (Dyvik & Welland, 2018)

So when we think about the organisation or classification of tattoos as well as their archiving, we have to ask on what principle tattoos are organised: by pertinence or provenance? In this case: what is the human body anyway?

Sundberg and Kjellman tend to think that the human body, on which tattoos proliferate, is a kind of archive.

> '*As a collection of documents displayed on a human body, the tattoos function as an archive of evidence of actions, and events as well as memories of those actions and events /.../ Since the documents, i.e. the tattoos, are bound to the individual body, the body can be seen as a personal archive, a biography of sorts or like a personal diary.*' (Sundberg & Kjellman, 2017, 32)

In their view, it is therefore a personal archive/biography/journal of the individual, which lives for as long as the body 'carrying' the tattoos. They are a specific form of documents.

How are tattoos generated? In the process of tattooing the ordering/organisation of the 'archive' follows a certain time-based and logical order, whereby the danger of anyone unwittingly or carelessly mixing up the tattoos/documents or changing their order in the sense of a different or maybe more likely sequence does not apply. However, changes are also occurring in this area: nowadays it is possible to remove a tattooed document by means of a laser that disintegrates the ink pigment to the point where the body can take over the ingestion of the leftover particles on its own.

Nevertheless, seen through the eyes of an archivist, this would signify a serious interference with the untouchability of the original order and a violation of the provenance principle. On the other hand, one must not forget the tattoos that are the work of different artists, which is especially true for today's tattooing. Several different artists create the same type of archival material until a collection is formed that, from the point of view of an archivist, has the value of a personal fonds. In this case the principle of pertinence prevails.

5. THE QUESTION OF TERMINOLOGY

At this point I would like to call attention to the problem of terminology that I indicated at the beginning. The word archive is often used in relation to tattooed bodies, i.e. tattooed body as archive. Sundberg and Kjellman quote André Lepecki's article 'The Body as Archive: Will to Re-enact and the Afterlives of Dances' where he speaks about 'bodies as archives while he discusses how the dancing body has a capacity to archive past work' (Lepecki, 2010, as cited in Sundberg & Kjellman, 2017, 20).

Calano also adopts this terminology and asks himself: 'But to what extent do *batek*[4] serve as an archive of culture for the group[5]?' (Calano, 2012, 112) He also quotes Foucault and Derrida, who contemplate the tattoos of the Kalinga tribe as philosophers. According to Derrida, the term archive has several meanings: 'On the one hand, it is commencement that evokes the writing of the archive /.../ on the other, the archive carries a certain untranslatability that makes it disjointed and incomplete' (Derrida, 1996, as cited in Calano, 2012, 112).

But then again, Sundberg and Kjellman say the following in their introduction:

> In relation to tattooed bodies, we will use the concept of archives as follows. As a collection of documents displayed on a human body that functions both as evidence of actions and events and memories of those actions and events. Both evidence and memory are building blocks to an identity, in this case the criminal identity. The fact that the documents, i.e. tattoos, are bound to an individual body, make them form a *personal biography of sorts*, like a *personal diary*. The understanding of this both abstract and tangible *archive* is to be found in the life of the individual that carry this "*archive*"... (Sundberg & Kjellman 2017, 21)[6]

For my part, I find the above to be a very general and imprecise use of the term archive, which we often find in other authors as well. Sundberg and Kjellman seem to be aware of the problem because they use different terms to describe the same thing - a collection of documents (tattoos) on a person's body.

We could only speak of an archive in the traditional sense if tattooed people were systematically archived, similar to how we store physical documents. Since we cannot do this with the originals as the body cannot be archived, it would be necessary to make accurate photographic representations and subsequently take care of their proper archiving as well as the material protection process.

The expression 'the body as archive' or 'body archive' can therefore only be understood figuratively, as a metaphor, and not in a strictly scientific sense.

6. ARCHIVING TATTOOS

The above considerations lead us to the traditional understanding of the archive as an institution dedicated to the collection, selection, description and preservation of the documentary and archival material, with the aim of granting users access according to their desires or needs.

This type of archiving is mentioned in Kirsten Wright's study, which focuses on the collecting and archiving of Polynesian native tattoos known and described by European sailors after 1769, when Captain Cook 'discovered' the practice of tattooing in Tahiti.

Calano's study also talks about the indigenous people, this time Filipinos, pointing out that they are a particular form of society that is unfamiliar with the Western concept of the archive, so in these communities the body becomes a sort of storehouse of important life events and rituals that are symbolically captured in tattoos. Hence tattoo is a form of individual and collective memory (Calano, 2012, 99).

The first documents about tattoos appeared, according to Wright, when explorers, anthropologists or missionaries wandered among the Polynesian natives. The tattoos were hand-copied flat on the paper with little regard to the location of the tattoo on

4 *Batek* means 'tattoo' in the Kalinga tribe, North Philippines.
5 The word 'group' refers to the Kalinga tribe of the Philippines.
6 Emphasis mine.

the body or to the person 'wearing' the tattoo. Nor were they interested in the tattooed person's relationship to other tattooed or non-tattooed people from the same community. Later, the drawing was replaced by photography, and this is where most of the manipulation and alteration took place. The tattooed individual usually posed, the environment was falsified to appear as wild and uncivilised as possible, photos were retouched or even drawn on. Explanations were limited to descriptions of isolated body tattoos and the context was completely neglected (e.g. the rituals associated with tattooing, the reason for tattooing, the meaning of tattoos, their hierarchy...). In general, these early documents on tattooing provide more information about the authors of the documents than they do about the tattoos, and even less about their context, the study author points out. Valuable information about the origin of tattoos is thus lost forever (Wright, 2009, 105–106).

Calano also emphasises the importance of knowing the rituals associated with tattooing: 'These rites embody the basis for social relations in the community' (Calano, 2012, 99–100). He says, for example: '/M/ale tattoos are a powerful image since they are constitutively connected with being a warrior' (Calano, 2012, 104). Interestingly, aesthetics also play a considerable role in the Kalinga tribe, especially when it comes to tattooing women, which the tribe members believe makes them more beautiful.

Hierarchy plays an important role in tattoos, notes Calano. A young man starts with a single tattoo and then rises in the hierarchy. The number of his tattoos multiplies, his body becomes increasingly covered with drawings, which intensifies his position in the community: his reputation grows (Calano, 2012, 100).

A similar situation is found among the Polynesians: the title page of Melville's novel *Typee* shows a young Polynesian, whose body is still relatively natural, parading just a few tattoos.

In contrast, just a few years later, Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) portrays a Polynesian headhunter named Queequeg: '/A/t last /he/ showed his chest and arms. As I live, these covered parts of him were checkered with the same squares as his face; his back, too, was all over the same dark squares (...) Still more, his very legs were marked (...)' (Melville 1851, Chapter 3.). Since the man had been tattooed from head to toe, we can conclude that he was an important member of the tribal community, which is confirmed in the novel.

Judging by the above description, tattooing in indigenous communities occurs according to a well-defined timeline, accompanied by well-defined rituals. The tattoos are therefore precisely arranged and classified, members of the tribe know very well which is a 'smaller', i.e. less important, and which is a 'larger' or more valuable tattoo. The bodies are painted according to a well-known scheme, which is not automatic, because to get a tattoo one has to make an honest effort and demonstrate, for example, that one is a particularly brave soldier. So, if one were to look at the tattooed body of a young native through the eyes of an archivist as his personal fonds or collection, one could say that the principle of provenance applies here. Nothing is random, the creator of the collection/fonds is one person, there is no moving about or removal of tattoos, original order applies all the way through.

In her study, Wright talks about yet another category, the so-called circus tattoos, which were popular in the United States between 1870 and 1900. Archival photographs and 'memorabilia' of individuals whose bodies were heavily tattooed were put on display at the circus. After 1900, when the tattoo machine was invented, the number of tattooed people began to increase rapidly and they were no longer that interesting (Wright, 2009, 107). In this case, too, the context of the tattoos was not

documented and cannot be reconstructed today. However, it is very likely that they were intended for commercial purposes. Individuals got tattoos because they expected to be of interest as 'exotics' to circuses and similar forms of entertainment industry in the United States at the time.

7. THE TATTOO ARCHIVE

In her study, Kirsten Wright also presents the so-called tattoo archive, which apart from the ambitious name has little to do with a serious archive. So she notes right at the beginning:

> '*Thus, fundamental archival principles of original order and provenance are not used. In particular, the concept of describing the original order of the records and the recordkeeping system they were part of (and the people or the organization who created the records) is not followed.*' (Wright, 2009, 107)

The Tattoo Archive was founded by the American tattoo artist Chuck Eldridge, who collects and stores tattoo material donated by tattoo artists. The material comes from a wide range of sciences and disciplines, from anthropology and archaeology to the history of the circus and medicine. Wright notes that the material is not properly explained, which makes it difficult for the user to place it in the right context, or not at all. 'While the Tattoo Archive allows the history of tattooing to be traced, this history is without culture or context of any sort' (Wright, 2009, 107).

8. INCLUSIVE ARCHIVES

While Wright doesn't pay too much attention to the tattoo archive, she is intrigued by another, fairly new form of archiving that she calls the inclusive archives. It was given this name by the increasingly widespread practice of tattooed people in the western world using the Internet to describe and 'archive' their personal tattoos. The internet offers websites for tattooed people such as www.tattoos.com or www.bmezine.com. These sites allow people to upload descriptions and photos of their tattoos, with the descriptions including personal tattooing experiences. The generic photo site Flickr (www.flickr.com), went a step further and offers both services, except that the description of the photos is done differently, through personal tagging (Mc Kemmish, 1996, as cited in Wright, 2009, 108).

Folksonomy is the name of this relatively new marking method, which Robert Matoh and Aljoša Koželj, students of library, information and book science, define in their joint seminar work as a

> '*/.../ /r/esult of personalizing information and objects (anything that has a URL address) for (easier) later retrieval. Labelling or "tagging" takes place in a digital social environment, i.e. an environment that is accessible to all. In contrast to traditional object tagging, metadata in folksonomies is not only generated by experts, but primarily by content creators and users, so freely chosen keywords are used instead of tags from a controlled dictionary. Folksonomy (the term is a combination of the words "folk" and "taxonomy") is therefore a user-generated taxonomy (although the term "taxonomy" may not be the most appropriate here).*' (Matoh & Koželj 2008)[7]

According to Wright, the method, which was developed in 2004, is finding its way into archives, museums and libraries,

7 Emphasis mine.

> *'as a way of providing a different type of access to their materials /.../ folksonomy and user tagging can be used to bridge the gap between professional descriptions (e.g. those used by curators, archivists and art historians) and user-generated descriptions (those by users or viewers of the records).'* (Trant & Wyman, 2006, as cited in Wright, 2009, 108)

Since the fashion for tattoos has literally exploded these days and people without at least one tattoo are fast becoming the exception, a new problem arises in the area of archiving. Archivists will need to consider which tattoos will be treated as documents of enduring value and which will be discarded, as well as what type of archiving is most appropriate. At the same time, we must not forget that with tattooing in all walks of life, the number of those who want to get rid of their tattoo 'jewellery' forever is also increasing.

9. CONCLUSION

There are countless tattoos these days and many ways to organise them. The four studies on which this article is based represent tattoos of very different subject areas: tattoos of prisoners in the prisons of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, and, for comparison, tattoos of American prisoners; Polynesian and Filipino indigenous peoples' tattoos (with the mention of North American Indians), circus tattoos, and finally tattoos of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in the United States.

Regardless of the area or period in which the tattoos were created, it has been proven that a tattoo can only be properly understood and interpreted as a document if both the drawing and the history associated with it are available. The denotative and connotative meanings of a tattoo go hand in hand and allow for their proper understanding and appreciation.

Since this has often not been the case in the past, we can agree with Derrida's contention that the painted body, whether we call it an archive or something else, is always surrounded by a veil of 'untranslatability'. Instead, the term 'lost in translation' could be used. In the case of the early explorers of Polynesia and their lack of understanding of the native tattoo culture, we are saddened to find that almost everything has been lost in translation except for a (frequently staged) photograph or drawing of the tattoo.

The question of archiving tattoos opens up many possibilities: either using the classic method of imaging (photography) or modern electronic technologies, together with a 'story' explaining the origin, circumstances and peculiarities of the tattoo; or the most recent method of Folksonomy that seems to have prevailed in museums, libraries, and other archival institutions in the United States.

In a country where popular art has always had its place of honour alongside genuine, serious art[8], folksonomy can be understood as a sort of American parallel to everything that bears the mark of popular – music, art, entertainment, and the like. It remains to be seen whether the method will prove to be a real help in archiving (and consequently finding) documents in the future or whether it will end up causing a great deal of confusion.

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8 The Hungarian-American illusionist Harry Houdini, who in the first half of the 20th century overwhelmed the masses with his incredible escapes from seemingly hopeless situations, is a good example.

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