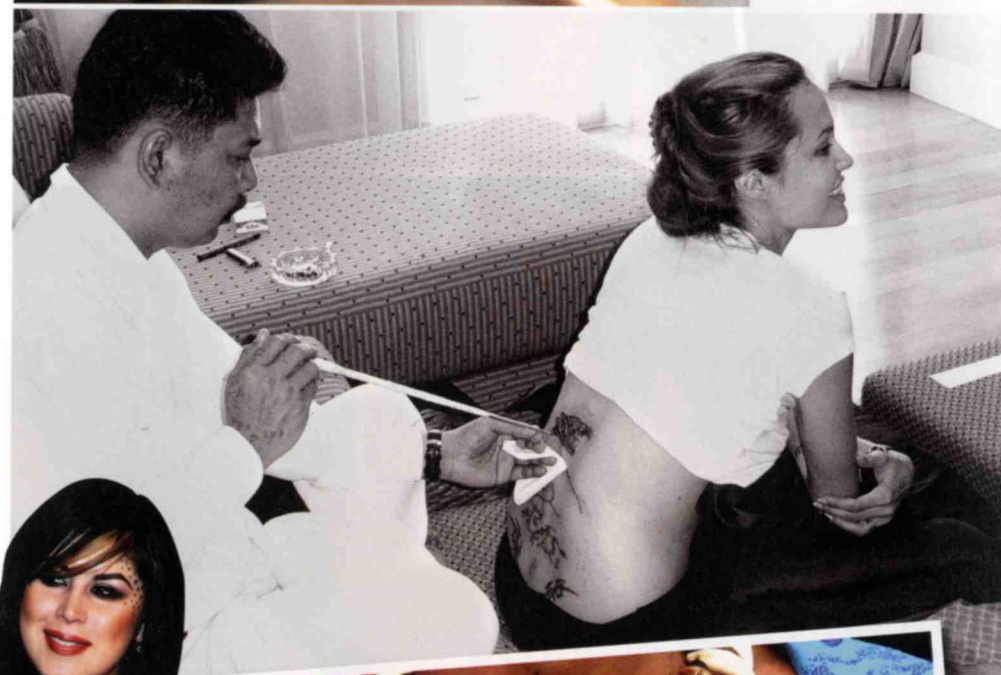


**DRAWN TO DETAIL**  
**CLOCKWISE**  
**FROM TOP** A Japanese tattoo artist executes an elaborate traditional design on a man's chest; Angelina Jolie gets a tattoo from Thai artist Sompong Kanphai; a traditional Polynesian tattoo; Kat Von D



**U**NTIL THE 1990S, having a tattoo meant that you were a sailor, a criminal or just bad news. But somehow getting inked has become the preserve of the socially mobile and A-listers everywhere. So how did this happen? The huge surge in popularity must be, in part, attributed to high-profile fans such as Lindsay Lohan, Lenny Kravitz, Drew Barrymore and Pink, with even more "conventional" celebrities like Sarah Michelle Gellar, Jessica Alba and Anna Kournikova becoming fans. Now, having a tattoo is all part of the process of being a star, along with pocket-sized dogs and monthly trips to rehab, naturally.

Angelina Jolie is the most high-profile A-list tattoo aficionado, with at least a dozen on her body. Most recently, she had her upper left arm tattooed with a list of the latitude and longitude coordinates for the birthplaces of her six children. "To be tattooed is to be different .... it's a statement," says Crash, tattoo expert and editor-in-chief of *Tattoo Artist Magazine*.

So what of the guys behind the guns? TV shows such as *Miami Ink*, which documents the ups and downs of the Florida tattoo hub, have been hugely popular and made stars of their participants. *Miami Ink*'s Kat Von D is now the biggest female tattoo artist in the western world, with clients including Green Day, Eve and Damon Dash. The show spawned subsequent series, with *LA Ink* and *London Ink* launching in 2007.

The star of the London show is Louis Molloy, a dapper, acid-tongued Mancunian famous for inking footballer David Beckham. Molloy started tattooing when he was 14, opening his own studio aged 18. That was in 1981, and he says he's never looked back. There's a long list of A-listers desperate to come under his gun, but he remains stubbornly loyal to his clientele, who return the favour. Beckham now has 15 tattoos in all, including gothic script of his sons' names, a full body portrait of his wife, Victoria, and the infamous

**MAKING A MARK**  
A model shows the almost full body work of Taiwanese tattoo artist Diao An which took him 60 hours to complete at the Singapore Tattoo Show

# Visible Ink

THESE DAYS, **TATTOOS** ARE BECOMING AN ACCEPTED ART FORM.  
HELEN RUSSELL GETS UNDER THE SKIN OF TODAY'S BODY-ART CULTURE



SIGN OF  
THE TIMES

FROM TOP A tattoo artist at work; David Beckham is a fan of body art; an elaborate winged tattoo on a man's chest



## The Japanese full-body suit takes up to 100 hours to apply and can cost up to US\$30,000

winged cross on the back of his neck that he unveiled in 2004. "I think it's fair to say no one really enjoys getting tattoos as obviously it's not a nice feeling," Molloy has said, "but David's quite good. He stays calm."

The only other artist that Beckham trusts with his flesh is Gabe from Ace Dragon, one of the best tattoo artists in Asia. In March 2008, Gabe inked Chinese characters down the left side of Beckham's torso during an LA Galaxy tour of Hong Kong, which translate as "Death and life have determined appointments; riches and honours depend upon heaven." Gabe works completely freehand, with no tracing paper, and never repeats a graphic, making him the stuff of legend in the tattoo industry. His father was a designer, so Gabe got into drawing at a young age. "A friend got a tattoo that was so bad, we joked that even I could do a better job. So I borrowed a machine from a friend who's a tattoo artist and used it to tattoo a mermaid on a friend's thigh. It turned out well, so I started from there," he explains. Gabe takes inspiration from books, his travels and cartoons, and believes the accessibility of modern tattooing is leading to greater acceptance: "More and more people are getting tattooed, so more and more artists/designers are becoming tattoo artists. That helps tattooing to become an art form, which leads to more people appreciating it as such. In recent years, talented artists are choosing to bypass a potential career in advertising or fine art to make a respectable living as a body artist."

Except, perhaps, in Japan. "When the Japanese think of tattoos, they still think of yakuza," says Shibata, a female tattoo fan from Tokyo. In the 18th century, tattoos were used to single out criminals and became associated with the yakuza, Japan's notorious mafia. Though the practice was legalised again in 1945, old attitudes still prevail. "People still think it's bad," says Hirota, a chef in Japan, who adds that tattoos are still banned in some places of work and many *onsen* (traditional Japanese baths). "If I wanted to work in an office, it would be difficult," says Hirota. Both girls still cover their tattoos at work and at the gym, and are insistent that only their first names were used to stop family members finding out that they've been inked. But Tokyo-based tattoo artist Jun Matsui thinks things are changing: "These days, the types of people getting tattoos is different," says Matsui, who specialises in tribal works. "The younger people are getting into it; it makes sense



to them somehow." In particular, the traditional Japanese *irezumi* style of tattoos is enjoying a cultural renaissance.

Horiyoshi III, whose real name is Yoshihito Nakano, is widely considered to be Japan's greatest living body artist. "He is the true master of tattoos within the tattooing community," says Crash, "and embodies what we should all strive for as tattooers. He'll be remembered and studied by future generations for his contributions to our craft." In Japan, a tattooist takes on an apprentice; Nakano was a fan of the late Horiyoshi II's work (Horiyoshi of Yokohama) and convinced the artist to take him on. Nakano was 25 at the time. Nearly 40 years later, he adopted his master's name, and has tattooed more than 7,000 people. Traditional Japanese tattoos are hand-tapped with a hammer, a bamboo needle and black Nara inks. The process is painful and time consuming, but the result is unique. The Japanese full-body suit, covering the arms, back, upper legs and chest, takes up to 100 hours to apply and can take five years of once-a-week visits to complete, costing up to US\$30,000.

So appointments with Horiyoshi III or any top-end artists are hard to come by. Molloy has a four- to eight-month waiting list. One man is due to come from Australia later this year to have a

full sleeve done, which takes 40 hours to complete and costs up to US\$4,500 ("There doesn't seem to be any credit crunch in my studio," Molloy said last month). An appointment with Gabe at Ace Dragon can take up to six weeks.

But the waiting, says Crash, is part of the process. "A tattoo is a permanent commitment and shouldn't be entered into without serious reflection," Molloy agrees, "If you don't put the thought in it's highly likely that you will regret the tattoo. Avoid romance as a motive: it's easier to get rid of a spouse than it is to get rid of a tattoo," he told *The Guardian* newspaper in 2007. Gabe suggests finding the artist who is best at doing the particular genre of tattoo you want: "tribal, traditional, old school, new school etc." Increasingly sophisticated technology has opened up possibilities and improved the quality and longevity of tattoos. Even the ink is changing, with artists using finely ground plastics such as acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) to allow more vivid tattooing, with clearer lines that don't fade and blur like older inks. Even more groundbreaking are the UV tattoos, made with an ink that is completely invisible in normal daylight but glows in fluorescent colours under ultra-violet light. Seems like there really is no better time to get inked. ■

**BODY  
AND SOUL**  
CLOCKWISE  
FROM TOP LEFT  
Tribal art by  
tattooist Jun  
Matsui; the  
freehand method  
of tattooing  
results in highly  
creative art forms