

HOW TO GET THE PERFECT TATTOO

A Comprehensive Guide



Getting The Perfect Tattoo

Whether you're looking for your first small tattoo or you're planning out the rest of your bodysuit, your goal is the same: getting the perfect tattoo. Essentially all you need to do is match the perfect tattoo design with the perfect tattoo artist. If only it were as easy as it sounds.

Because of its relative permanency, a tattoo is not something to be taken lightly unless you already have a thorough knowledge of, and experience with, the process. They may be painful to get, but they're even more painful to remove. In tattooing, mistakes are very easy to make, and very difficult to fix. But luckily, it's easier than ever to make smart tattoo decisions, due to the wealth of information now at our fingertips.

Without doubt, the decision you make to get tattooed will affect you for the rest of your life. This guide will help you get started in the right direction.

What is a tattoo?

Technically speaking, a tattoo is a lasting pattern, picture, or mark accomplished by making punctures in the skin, into which pigments are inserted. These pigments heal into the dermis, or second layer of skin, about 1/64th of an inch below the outer surface. In healing a tattoo, a person succeeds in "tricking" their body in order to avoid scabbing, which in turn produces a very thin, almost unnoticeable layer of scar tissue. The skin cells that compose this scar tissue each encapsulate tiny bits of foreign pigment.

As the tattoo heals, the skin cells bond with the pigments as the skin produces a very thin, almost unnoticeable layer of scar tissue.

(Although we speak of tattoos as "permanent," nothing is truly forever. Tattoos only last until you cover them up with new ones, get them removed with laser treatment, or suffer the misfortune of a freak accident.)

How to Research Tattoos

A very important part of getting the perfect tattoo is being patient. Mistakes can be avoided by studying this amazing art form before taking action. Doing the necessary research can take some time. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- **Visit tattoo conventions and studios in your area**
- **Surf tattoo websites for hours**
- **Email and talk with tattooed people you know***
- **Read tattoo magazines and books**
- **Learn about art, not just tattooing**

*When talking with heavily tattooed people about tattoos, approach the subject politely. Many heavily tattooed people put up with minor public hassles like staring, whispers and comments. Tattooed women in particular, complain of strangers touching their tattooed skin. Remember to make sure someone is willing to talk about his or her tattoos before engaging them. They'll usually appreciate your tattoo etiquette and be more willing to show off their tattoos.

The Perfect Artist

Finding the perfect tattoo artist is more important than finding the right design, though many clients don't realize this. After all, if you find the right tattoo artist they will make sure you get the perfect design, whether you have it in your hand to begin with or not. If you only have a vague idea, a capable tattoo artist will be able to work with you to make that idea a reality. On the other hand, you could have a perfect tattoo design executed poorly by an incapable artist! To avoid this, here are some qualities to look for in a tattoo artist:

- Clean and sanitary
- Technical ability to apply good tattoos
- Artistic talent
- A professional demeanor
- A good reputation

Finding a good tattoo artist will take time and effort. Although you trust your friends, their opinion alone may not be adequate. Get as many good references about a tattooer as you can. It's worth repeating that every phase of the tattoo process involves being patient.

Clean and Sterile

Tattooing can be considered minor surgery: it involves the puncturing of the skin with a foreign object. Therefore, tattoo artists must always keep their work area clean, and be trained to avoid contamination from blood-borne pathogens. Here are some things to look for in your artist's studio:

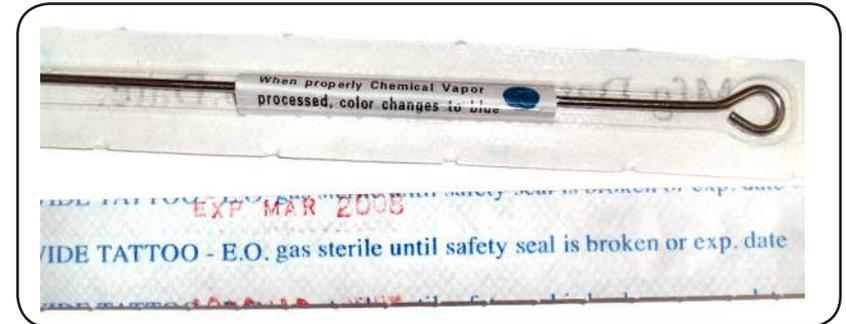
- Neat and clean appearance
- Autoclave and ultrasonic cleaner*
- Clearly labeled sharps container for needle disposal
- Plastic barriers on all tattooing equipment
- Instruments that are taken out of autoclave pouches with proper sterility indicator

*If a studio uses all disposable supplies, an autoclave and ultrasonic aren't needed to maintain safety and cleanliness. In this scenario, ask to see sealed, dated, single-use packaging on all needles and tubes (see figure x and y).

Talk with your chosen tattooist, and ask questions about these things before any tattooing begins. A responsible tattooist will know the safety concerns of their craft, and should be happy answering some basic precautionary questions. If they answer your questions clearly and show a genuine concern for safety, then you're probably in good hands. No tattoo artist should ever be annoyed that you are asking about your safety, because it's also about their safety. They don't want to contract a disease from the tattoo process any more than you do.



Sterilization Pouch



Sterile Needle



Color Coded Sterile Marker



Items to look for...

...in every tattoo shop.



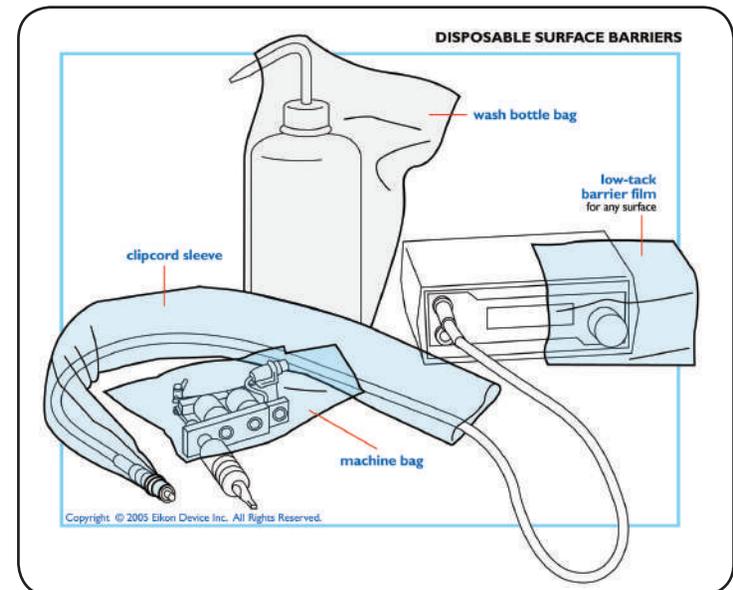
Autoclaves



Sharps Containers



Clean work area



Typical Setup

Artistic Talent

Often tattoo clients don't realize that tattoo artists vary drastically in artistic ability. Some specialize in creating complex and unique works of art on skin, while others prefer merely to copy simple pre-made designs. Each approach has its merits, and can be appropriate for different situations. Having some entry-level art knowledge will help you recognize the artistic talent level of the tattooer you're approaching. Are they the right person for the job?

Selecting a tattoo artist can be compared to shopping for a car. With a bit of background knowledge, you can easily recognize the difference between an old, beat up Chevy and a fancy new Mercedes.

Technical Ability

Artistic talent alone does not make a good tattoo. Tattoo artists need to combine their visual talents with precise technical ability. These are two distinct areas of expertise. Here are some ways to gauge the technical ability of a tattoo artist when viewing their portfolio:

- Crisp, consistent outlines
- Evenly saturated color
- Smooth blending and shading

WARNING SIGNS OF POOR TATTOOING ABILITY:

- Blurry, inconsistent outlines
- Faded, patchy colors
- Choppy, irregular blending and shading
- Obvious scarring

Remember: good art does not guarantee a good tattoo, and a good tattoo does not mean that it's good art.



Choppy Blending



Good Tattoo: Smooth blending



Bad tattoo: choppy blending



Uneven application of ink



An example of a bad tattoo



Bad Tattoo: blown out outlines



These are just a few examples of bad tattoos, for more examples of both good and bad, see pages 29-30



Bad tattoo: raised outline



Bad tattoo: blurry details

Honesty, Courtesy, and Ethics

Tattoo artists come in all temperaments. We recommend finding an artist who is honest, courteous, and behaves professionally. A quality tattoo artist should be honored that you want their artwork on your body for the rest of your life. You are giving them the ultimate compliment by requesting their artwork and letting them use your skin as a canvas. If an artist doesn't treat you well, luckily nowadays you have many choices. Of course, you also owe it to your tattoo artist to be honest about your expectations. For example, it's a matter of courtesy not to make an artist draw for hours, then skip your appointments, or to make one artist draw something and take it to another tattooer. A healthy tattoo relationship is one based on trust, respect, and commitment that goes both ways.

Artist Loyalty vs. Collection

It's common for tattoo artists and clients to form a bond. After all, you're spending time in their chair, talking, and having them change your skin forever. Despite this, you should never feel like you owe your skin to a tattoo artist. Any decision you make about your own body is completely your own to make, including mistakes. Many people like to have a diverse collection of body art. Of course, there's nothing wrong with sticking to one tattoo artist if you're happy with their work and the bond you form with them is just right.

Despite the connection that many tattooers form with their clients, a tattoo artist has no 'right' to your skin. If you choose to work with another tattooist, make sure they meet the same or higher standards as your original choice. Many people end up with tattoos that are being finished or reworked by a different artist than the

one who started them. The reworking and covering up of older tattoos is a large aspect of the tattooing art-form, so there's no need to feel ashamed or angry if you end up in that situation yourself. Just be sure to go about it in a polite and respectful way.

The Perfect Design

Only you can know what the perfect design is for you, and it's an extremely important decision to make about your tattoo. Most tattoo artists will put whatever you want on your skin to the best of their ability, because it's their job. Of course, many artists are so sought after that they can pick which client requests they choose to work on. These artists may pass on doing tattoos they know will come out poorly. Often it's necessary to find a compromise between your idea and your chosen artist's vision. Be prepared for a little give and take during the consultation process. It's often helpful to state your goals, thoughts and concerns about the tattoo, and then let the artist take it from there.

Good Tattoo Artists Know Better

While you know what you want to see on your body, tattoo artists have expertise about how tattoos look on the human body. There is a "flow" to the body based on its shapes, proportions and anatomy, which can determine how successfully certain designs work with various body parts. An expert tattoo artist knows best how to size and shape your tattoo, the best placement for it, what colors will work best, and how it will age.

One common issue between a tattoo artist and a first-time tattoo client is the size of their tattoo. Often people will make the decision to get a very small tattoo in order to test the waters. However, small tattoos usually can't hold much detail and stand a

greater chance of deteriorating over time, due to the aging of the skin. Trust your tattoo artist's advice when it comes to small tattoo designs.

Reference Material

To get the best tattoo, you may need to find and bring some reference material to the tattoo artist. He or she can look at your reference in order to incorporate the images into their own drawing style. The more choices you give the artist as reference, the more likely they are to design the perfect tattoo for you.

You can use a variety of reference materials to communicate your idea. These may include:

- **Tattoo flash (pre-drawn and mass-produced designs, meant to be copied and tattooed)**
- **Photographs**
- **Original artwork**
- **Movie stills**
- **Sculptures**
- **Your own sketches or written descriptions**



Copying Other Tattoos

Many people learning about tattoos try to find other tattoos upon which to base their own design or idea. When browsing tattoo portfolios, it's most helpful to look at the quality of the artist's work rather than the designs themselves. **Copying other people's tattoos is considered disrespectful to the wearer of the tattoo, and to the artist who designed and tattooed it.**

Many tattoos are reproductions of popular photographs or famous artwork. This is widely accepted, as long as the artist is referring to the original image, and not a tattoo of that photograph or painting.

Allergic Reactions

A very small percentage of people develop allergic reactions to some of the pigments used in tattoo inks. In recent years as the quality of tattooing supplies has risen, allergic reactions have declined. Your tattoo artist should have a basic understanding of pigment issues and be able to show you a bottle of what they will be tattooing into your skin. If you think you may be allergic to a certain pigment, you can ask your artist to tattoo of a small amount of pigment somewhere inconspicuous on your body. Then after a few weeks, have your tattooer examine the test area of skin to make an assessment. For questions about specific pigments contained in the tattoo ink, you can request a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) from the manufacturer.

A second common allergy is to latex products. If you're allergic to latex, you can request that your artist wear nitrile gloves during your tattoo process.

Distance, Patience and Commitment

If you're considering a larger tattoo, be prepared for a longer process involving multiple sessions over a span of weeks, months, or even years. You may also find that your preferred tattoo artist is not located very close to you. You may have to make arrangements to travel to your artist once it's time for your appointment. Travel is a relatively small inconvenience to endure considering the permanent nature of a tattoo. Dedicated tattoo collectors and enthusiasts often fly or drive long distances to get their perfect tattoo.

Age and Maturity

In the U.S. the legal age to get a tattoo without parental consent is 18. However, teenage years are often a time of rapid growth, change, and discovery. Thus many teenage tattoo decisions are often regretted later in life. It bears repeating that patience is vitally important to getting quality tattoos.

Projecting a Self Image

Another consideration is the image of yourself that your tattoo will portray to your family, friends, workplace colleagues, and anyone else you may interact with. Just like a painting is meant to affect the viewer, your tattoos will affect their viewers, even though you may have gotten them solely for your own enjoyment. Images of death and destruction are very powerful, as are those of beauty, but the former may lead other people to stereotype you in a negative way. Give the proper thought to the images you choose to adorn your body with for the rest of your life, and be sure that you can live with any foreseeable consequences.

Pain Management

Yes, getting tattooed hurts. People are affected in different ways, based on their individual anatomy, placement of the tattoo, techniques of the artist, and most importantly, their attitude. Relaxation and meditation techniques, such as controlled deep breathing, can help you endure the discomfort. If all else fails, remember that the art is permanent, and the pain is temporary.

Money

Getting a tattoo is nothing like shopping for a bargain at the grocery store. It's helpful to think of tattoos as an investment rather than a one-time impulse purchase. Because there is no industry-wide rate standard, each tattoo artist determines his or her own rates and policies based on what they feel their work is worth.

For small tattoos many artists simply charge a flat rate. In addition, most artists don't appreciate bargaining over their stated price. Discuss any pricing concerns in advance so there are no surprises or disputes when it's time to pay.

It's often difficult for an artist to give an exact price in advance for large, multi-session tattoos. In those situations, artists will usually request payment at the time of each session. If your budget is a concern it's helpful to suggest a spending limit in advance, when presenting your idea. This gives the artist the option to tailor the tattoo to your budget.

In the ideal scenario, money would not be a factor in any tattoo decisions. Instead the focus would be on getting the highest quality tattoo possible. In reality, however, money is a concern for most people. Therefore simply try to make the best decision for your set of circumstances. Often it's better to save up for later than to settle for something now. Remember, good tattoos aren't cheap, and cheap tattoos aren't good.

Healing and Aftercare

Sadly, poor healing and aftercare have ruined many beautiful tattoos. To avoid this, follow your tattoo artist's healing instructions very carefully. It's very important to understand how to heal your tattoo before you leave the tattoo studio. Most tattoo artists will be concerned with your tattoo healing well, and will likely have instructions for you to follow closely.

Remember that your fresh tattoo is an open wound and should be kept clean, or you'll increase the chances of getting an infection.

Infections can become severe, so always be careful with your new tattoo until it has finished healing. If you suspect an infection has occurred, do not hesitate to see a doctor or dermatologist.

Your tattoo will change slightly over time, as your skin ages. Eventually, the sharp edges of the tattoo will become slightly blurry and all pigments will become less saturated. Keeping your skin healthy will help slow this deterioration. However, all tattoos are subject to a retouch or a complete reworking after 10 to 20 years, regardless of your skin care regimen. Lastly, ultraviolet rays from sunlight will accelerate this deterioration of your tattoo, which may require touchups to be done sooner.



Good outline 3 weeks



Successful Mid-Heal



Fallout



Tattoo Scab



Portrait Tattoo

Tattoo Categories

All art, including tattoo art, falls under certain stylistic categories. Therefore, we'll only discuss the most basic and general varieties of tattoos here. Your own research will be best for finding the exact style of tattoo that you're after.

Blackwork, Black and Grey, and Color Tattoos

Perhaps the three most general classifications of tattoos are blackwork, black and grey, and color. Every tattoo that exists fits into one of these categories.

- **Blackwork tattoos** consist of solid shapes or designs made only with black ink. These originate from Indigenous cultures all over the world. There are modern variations as well, which in America, tend to fall under the category of "tribal."
- **Black and gray tattoos** consist of pure black tattoo ink which is diluted with water in varying amounts to produce a gray value scale. This type of tattooing compares very closely to graphite pencil shading on paper.
- **Color tattoos** combine black and white tattoo ink with various colored pigments to form a full-spectrum of possible colors, tints, shades, and hues. This type of tattooing compares most closely to acrylic or oil painting.



Black and Gray Tattoo



Realistic Tattoo

(Note: Myth! Color ink doesn't stay in the skin very long. - Assuming you have a competent tattooer, color inks will look great in skin for many years.)

Custom Tattoos

Custom tattoos are designed and tattooed upon a specific request from one client. These designs are usually never tattooed more than one time, on one person. You'll get the best tattoo when your chosen artist feels inspired by the art they're creating for you. Custom tattoos don't have to be huge, intricate, or expensive. They only require a capable tattoo artist, an open-minded client, and a trusting relationship between the two.

Realistic Tattoos

These tattoos are usually exact reproductions of photographs or still video images, including portraits. However, anything can be made to look realistic in a tattoo, even imaginary subjects. Often multiple tattoo sessions and layers of pigment are required to create the most impressive realistic tattoos. However, the primary concern with incredibly subtle, finely detailed tattoos is how well they hold up in the skin over time.

Traditional Tattoos

These tattoos are bold, simple designs consisting of thick black outlines and a limited color palette. Most traditional tattoo subject matter is derived from nautical, military, and motorcycle themes of the 1900s. This style has remained popular throughout the years due to its classic simplicity and historical significance.



Traditional Tattoo



Neo Traditional Tattoo



Stylized Asian Tattoo

Neo-Traditional Tattoos

As its name suggests, this genre combines many attributes of the traditional style with modern influences and techniques to form a more varied hybrid. For example, a neo-traditional design might contain the bold black outlines and simplified shapes of a traditional piece, while incorporating a broad color palette and very modern or unusual subject matter. This style of tattooing can be a great compromise for the collector who appreciates both the traditional and modern styles.

Asian Tattoos

Like the traditional American style, traditional Asian tattoos follow a very specific and distinct set of visual traits. All of the classic Asian tattoo subject matter such as dragons, geisha, koi fish, waves, and dark backgrounds contain rich cultural symbolism. It takes a certain level of dedication and appreciation for both the client and the tattoo artist to learn this meaning and method of stylization.



Rework Tattoo

Ethnic Tattoos

Other ethnic tattoo styles are Polynesian, Tibetan, Celtic, South American, Indian, and tattoos originating from any specific religion. All have rich historical backgrounds and come with their own meanings and methods of stylization. Once again, it takes a certain level of dedication and appreciation in both the client and the tattoo artist pursuing these styles.



Cover up: outline

Coverup and Rework Tattoos

As we've mentioned before, old tattoos can get covered up, or merely changed, by tattooing over them after a period of time passes. These two categories are share the same process, which is forcing new pigment into an area of skin that already has pigment healed inside it. The

new pigment mixes with the old, which can completely or partially obscure it, depending on the level of saturation and desired effect. Although coverups and reworks aren't a style, they deserve a separate mention due to the advanced knowledge needed by the tattoo artist who attempts them. Changing or completely hiding the existing tattoo requires planning, vision, and a high level of graphic cleverness, making them a specialized skill.

Cover Up Tattoo



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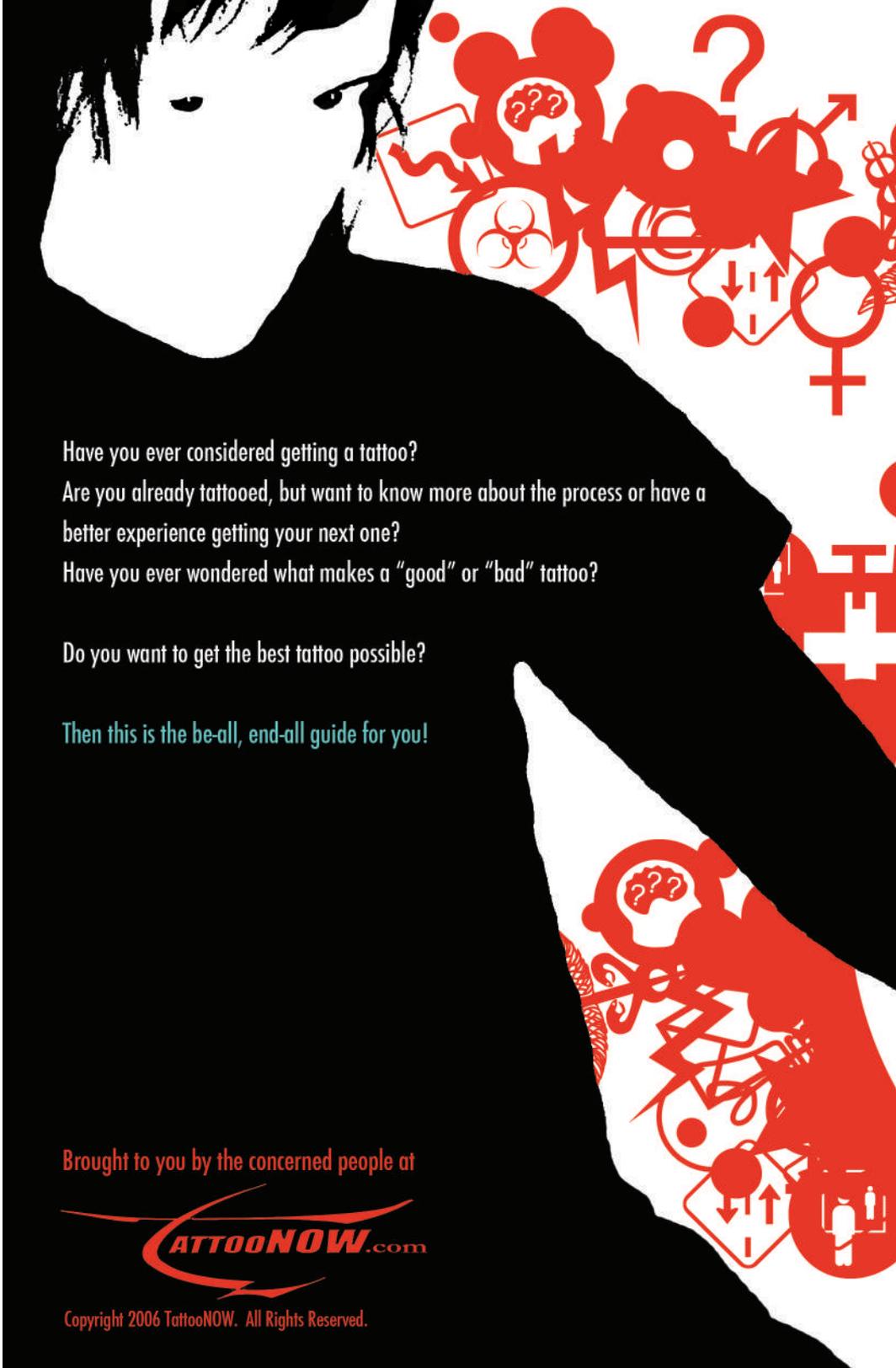
Cover up process



An example of saturated color

Conclusion

It bears repeating that getting the perfect tattoo involves thinking, learning, and patience. Those who embrace this process reap great rewards in the form of amazing body art and meaningful experiences. There are many different paths a person could take in their own tattoo journey, and there are many important factors that demand careful consideration along the way. There are trials and tribulations, and even some pain to endure before the entire process is complete. All of these things make the quest of getting the perfect tattoo fulfilling, exciting, and meaningful.



Have you ever considered getting a tattoo?
Are you already tattooed, but want to know more about the process or have a better experience getting your next one?
Have you ever wondered what makes a "good" or "bad" tattoo?
Do you want to get the best tattoo possible?

Then this is the be-all, end-all guide for you!

Brought to you by the concerned people at



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