

The Language of Tattoos: 130 Symbols and What They Mean

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This visual, informative guide decodes 130 popular symbols from the contemporary tattoo scene. Lavish illustrations make it a great resource for anyone contemplating some new body ink, or who is curious about tattoo history and the meaning behind the hearts, devils, and animals snaking over the communal epidermis.

Summarizing how this once uncommon art form reflects public fascination with print culture, the book shows how the contemporary tattoo canon incorporates cross-pollinating aspects of three distinct styles: Western traditional, with its nautical and outsider group roots; Japanese irezuma, influenced by wood block prints, Noh theatre, and religious and cultural symbolism; and Mexican American black-and-gray fine line tattooing. It is organized by symbolic meanings and includes images that are easy to read, like crying hearts and phoenixes, as well as those that must be deciphered, like a pot-bellied, large-testicled Tanuki toting a magnum of sake that denotes boldness, wealth, and a certain trustworthy mischievousness. It acknowledges that tattoos often embody personal storytelling and can have intense individual and subjective meanings, but also shows how symbols arose in various cultures, and evolved into what is now a “codified business complete with an intoxicating mythology.”

The Language of Tattoos is an entertaining field guide to the expanding tattoo tapestry that surrounds us.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (November / December 2022)

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