



Drawing the Line

Since Don Ed Hardy came on the scene as a tattoo artist four decades ago, inking human skin has gone from the socially murky waters around wharfs and biker bars to an über hip high ground. People across the social, professional, and fashion spectrums have exposed their skin to the needle—illustrating a hard-won respect for tattooing as an art form that's often attributed to Hardy's skillful blending of classical art, centuries-old Japanese designs, and broad range of color and image choices.

His art has become so iconic that designer Christian Audigier (of Von Dutch brand fame) started an entire fashion line using Hardy's early designs: T-shirts with retro skulls and daggered hearts; swim trunks with sailor girls and tigers; rhinestone sunglasses with playing cards and dice; and hoodies with surfboards, tiger claws, and roses. But little did Hardy know that some of the fashion items were being trimmed with a product he would never put his stamp of approval on.

In 2008, investigators in The HSUS's Fur-Free Campaign informed Hardy that some of the apparel branded with his name was also trimmed with animal fur. An animal lover, Hardy responded by demanding that the company holding license to his art cease and desist. Because of his resolve, all the new products will be fur-free.

In a recent interview, writer Ruthanne Johnson spoke with the man known as the godfather of modern tattoo about his love of the form and why art and animal fur don't mix.

Q: When starting your career in the '60s, you worked in tattoo shops in San Diego. How did your experiences influence your attitudes toward animals?

HARDY: I've always had a connection to animals, but as far as tattooing, the cultural and ethnic mix and the whole outlook of everything there was so phenomenal—an openness to diversity and different ways of looking at the world. There was a global ethic and sense of ecology that was just beginning. I opened a private tattoo business where people could come in with their own ideas for a tattoo, which no one had ever done before, and among those commissions were a lot of animal [designs]. People would talk to me about what their pets meant to them or strongly identify with what they perceived to be the essential character of an animal, whether it's the strength of a tiger or a totemic aspect. I always loved drawing animals on tattoo designs.

Q: Why do you think people get animal tattoos?

HARDY: I think tattoos are generally amuletic, whether people are aware of it or not. They get them as some kind of psychic armor and spend a tremendous amount of time choosing a design. A good tattoo to me is one that makes the person feel better about themselves, and that's where animals come in. Animals are part of the energy in the world, the living things, and they are revered in many cultures for their perceived mystical powers.

Q: When you agreed to allow your tattoo art to be printed on clothing and other fashion items, did it ever cross your mind that some of the items would have animal fur on them?

HARDY: When I was approached by The Humane Society about fur being used on the clothing that has my tattoos, I said, "No, they shouldn't be doing that." Tattoos are permanent, and fur should be, too—on the animal. There's nothing creepier to me—and I've felt this from when I was a little kid—than seeing those crazy foxes biting each other, draped around some woman's neck with a bunch of jewelry underneath. It's not beautiful or artistic; it's just weird.

Animal tattoos express a kinship to that animal, and it's great to see my images getting a new life. It makes me realize they have a magnetism to them. If there is a shirt or a product with the image of an animal on [it], then that is art. But it shouldn't be the dead skin of an animal that once lived.

Q: What kind of message do you think people who wear fur are sending to others?

HARDY: It's a complete disregard for the rights of animals, and we have to realize that humans aren't what matters above and beyond anything else. This kind of thing can only go on for so long. It's not the right thing to do, and the more consciousness that can be brought forward about this, the better it will be for the animals.

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