The New York TimesThe New York Times

Please Don’t Swat the Bug Tattoo

By NEIL GENZLINGER JULY 15, 2011

Naked-flesh season is in full swing in New York, with people letting theirs hang out of skimpy bathing suits, half-buttoned shirts and distressed shorts. But a lot of that flesh isn’t as naked as it used to be. These days, it has tattoos on it.

And that raises all sorts of etiquette questions, or at least enough to fill up this column. If some conspicuously tattooed stranger plants himself across the aisle from you on the subway, are you supposed to look at him/it/them? If you have a tattoo of, say, a naked woman on your biceps, are you required to cover it up if someone under 17 without accompanying parent or adult guardian passes by? And what about the tattoo artist? If a customer comes in asking for a tattoo of some pithy phrase that includes a dangling modifier, is the tattooer obliged to correct the grammar?

Questions of this importance require more expertise than your City Critic, who is tattooless, possesses. So he spent a few hours last Monday with Ami James, a big name in the tattoo universe because of his reality shows “Miami Ink” and, new this summer, “NY Ink,” which is on TLC on Thursday nights and is filmed at Mr. James’s new parlor on Wooster Street in SoHo.

Your City Critic brought along a couple of acquaintances who know more about tattoos than he does because they are carrying some ink: Suzanne O’Connor, a colleague at The New York Times, and Gregg Mozgala, an actor. The idea was to have Mr. James assess their tattoos, talk about his own rather numerous tattoos, share some observations about the state of the art and then see if together we could hammer out a Code of Ethics for an Increasingly Tattooed World.

Mr. James, who learned some of his skills in New York's tattoo underworld back before tattooing was legalized in 1997, has some unexpected ideas for a guy who is covered in tattoos and makes his living putting them on other people. "Not everybody needs a tattoo," he said. "It's not for everybody. Just like not everybody needs to ride a motorcycle."

There are plenty of tattoos he won't do these days, though he may have when he was unknown and hungry. "Job stoppers," for instance: anything on the hand or above the neck that you can't cover up during a job interview, since plenty of employers rank tattoos right up there with drunken party pictures on Facebook. Anything negative, like a swastika. ("If you put 'white pride' on someone, you're part of that," he said.) No children, even with parental consent — too much permanence at too young an age.

Oh, and don't turn up at the shop expecting Mr. James to make any decisions for you. "People come in and say, 'What should I get?' " he said. "And I say, 'Nothing.' "

Mr. James liked Ms. O'Connor's tattoo, a rose on the right arm, even though the stem winds down to her hand, a job-stopper violation. Mr. Mozgala's first tattoo, an intricate and somewhat scary combination of a luger, a cross and a crutch that he said was an interpretation of a dream he had, impressed Mr. James because of the line-shading technique the artist had used. A second tattoo, of a belligerent-looking rooster, just below that on Mr. Mozgala's arm received a lukewarm review.

"Technically, it's not so sound," Mr. James said, noting that the shading becomes a little sloppy after the rooster's head.

He saved his sharpest criticism, though, for his own work: a koi fish on the arm of an apprentice in the shop, Billy DeCola, which Mr. James gave him eight or nine years ago. "I'm really not happy with it," Mr. James said. What doesn't he like about it? "That I'd do better now."

We talked about the differences between skin in Miami and skin in New York: It's less sun-hardened here, which makes it easier to work with. We talked about who's getting tattooed these days ("I tattoo housewives more than anything," Mr.

James said) and where (the ribs). And then we came up with some rules. Well, we came up with Part 1; your City Critic kind of made up Part 2 on his own.

Code of Etiquette, Part 1:

The Involuntary Viewer

It is acceptable, though not mandatory, to look unobtrusively at a stranger's tattoos.

It is also acceptable to ask about a stranger's tattoos, especially if you have one or more of your own. "It's the new conversation piece," Mr. Mozgala said. (Three reasons a tattoo is a better conversation-starter than a dog: doesn't need to be walked, doesn't need to be fed, won't tear up your furniture.)

It is not acceptable to swat a stranger's tattoo because you mistake it for a bug, or to rub it to see if it comes off.

Code of Etiquette, Part 2:

The Tattoo Owner

Since we have established that it is acceptable for strangers to look at your tattoo, common courtesy requires you to display the entire thing. If you have, for instance, the tail of something visible on your bare midriff with the rest of the creature located somewhat farther south, dress, or don't, accordingly.

Since we have established that it is acceptable for strangers to ask about your tattoo, if the story behind it begins with "My sisters and I got really drunk at a bachelorette party," invent a better story.

Your City Critic realizes that some questions posed at the start of this column are not answered by this code of etiquette. Cover up the naked lady, but leave the grammar uncorrected. We all need reminders of our imperfections.

E-mail: citycritic@nytimes.com

Ariel Kaminer is on leave.

A version of this article appears in print on July 17, 2011, on page MB4 of the New York edition with the

headline: Please Don’t Swat The Bug Tattoo.

© 2016 The New York Times Company