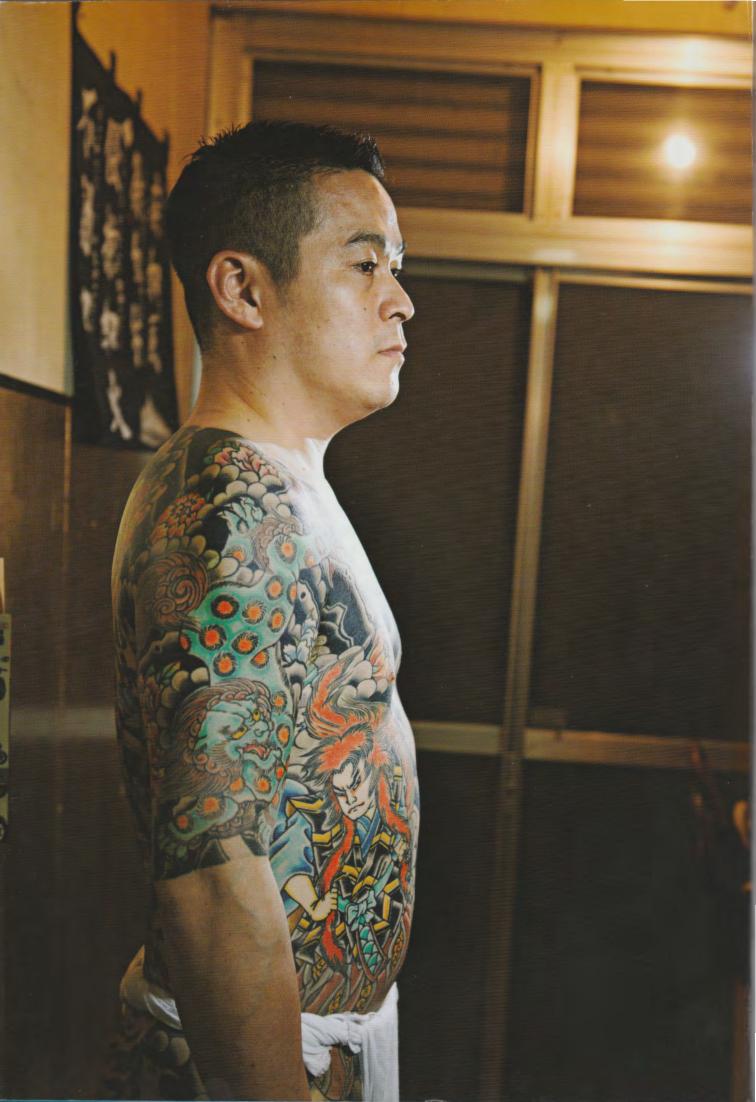
### TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TATTOO



# WABORI

TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TATTOO





### FOREWORD

This anthology of oral history is intended not only as a showcase for the work of these traditional tattoo artists, but also to give the reader a glimpse into the psychology of Japanese traditional artisans. For most Japanese craftsmen, the *seishin*, or the psychological aspects, of the work are of paramount importance, and more relevant than the technique itself. These priceless interviews shed light on some of the most important tattoo master's experiences learning, to mastering their craft; and their use of language, dense with allusion and philosophy is indicative of the *shokunin* (artisan) lifestyle and ethos. Furthermore, the conversations give the reader a glimpse into their personality -- they are often very opinionated, and extremely proud of their work, but simultaneously humble to their clients and have a typically downtown sense of humor.

These interviews illuminate the fact that this type of craft doesn't exist in a vacuum, and understanding the culture that surrounds the work substantially increases the appreciation for the work itself. I hope this book will be an important resource for both artists who have perhaps even met many of the people in this book, as well as potential clients and tattoo aficionados who would like to know more about the Japanese tattooing industry, straight from the mouths of the masters themselves.

I have also included interviews with Motoharu Asaka, as the culture of wood block prints and tattoos are intimately connected, and Shoko Tendo, a daughter of a yakuza boss to get a client's perspective. These interviews were conducted over a span of 6 years, many masters were interviewed several times, each time, with increasing candor, for which I am truly grateful. As a result, this book is the most extensive collection of oral histories and interviews with Japanese tattoo artists compiled in English. Some people mentioned/ whose work is featured in the book have since passed away.





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# INTRODUCTION

Japanese traditional tattoos are typified by a single large narrative or symbolic subject taken from Japanese iconography, which is often embellished with other complimentary elements. The motifs used range from protagonists from folkloric tales, religious deities, to animals -- both mythical and real -- which are then complimented with flowers and maple leaves, and smaller iconography, taking into account the seasonal compatibility of the main subject. While there are many tattoo cultures all over the world, Japanese tattoos are certainly some of the most powerful, aesthetic and holistically balanced, and are nothing short of breathtaking when seen in the flesh.

This book will look at the tattooing tradition that is a continuation of the Edo period tattoo culture, however, there are many regional cultures and communities that have their own culture of tattooing that have existed autonomously from the Edo traditional tattoos.



Although it hasn't been proven, it is thought that tattoos in Japan have existed since the Jomon period (about 10000BC to 300BC), based on archeological markings on *haniwa* clay figures, which are speculated to be tattoos. In the following Yayoi period (300BC to 300 AD), Chinese travellers who came to Japan chronicled observations of tattooed Japanese people in a historic manuscript called the *Wei Chib*, which describes Japan in the Wei dynastic period. Into the Kofun period, (250 to 538), Japanese rulers had taken on much of Chinese ideology, and Confucian Chinese beliefs had permeated Japanese cultural values. Accordingly, tattoos were looked upon negatively, and seen as a barbaric practice.

There is also evidence of tattooing being wide spread with women in the Ryukyu Islands (the islands in the region in between the current Kyushu to Taiwan, including Okinawa) who marked their hands and wrists, as well as the women in Ainu indigenous communities in Northern Japan, who tattooed their mouth, cheeks and arms.

However, it was in the Edo period, in the area that is now downtown Tokyo, that the culture of Japanese tattooing flourished, spawned from the merchant and artisan culture of the time. Edo was the newly urbanized capital of Japan, developing rapidly in an era of peace, and new wealth. Culture thrived in many guises, such as literature, ukiyo-e woodblock prints and kabuki theatre, to cater to the economic prosperity and disposable income of those even in the lowest social stratum.

Under the prevailing Tokugawa shogunate class system, which was in place from 1603, there was a hierarchy that saw samurais at the top, followed by farmers, artisans and finally merchants at the bottom, although artisans often had the role of merchants as well, as they sold their own wares. Those of the working class were restricted to the marshy *shitamachi* (downtown) area of Edo (where Asakusa is now), where they were segregated from the ruling class who lived in the uptown regions (where West Tokyo is now). Hence, the art and entertainment of the district; the kabuki theatre, the woodblock prints, the festivals and the region's huge red light district, the *Yoshiwara*, was purely for the commoners, by the commoners, creating an independent culture in contrast to the high culture of the elite.



(Right) A group of elaborately tattooed Japanese men standing under a waterfall, 1955 (Photo by Three Lions/Getty Images) (Left) Tsuzoku Suikoden Goketsu Hyakuhachi-nin no Hitori; Utagawa Kuniyoshi, The Trustees of the British Museum



Tattoo Association Outing, (right) Sanja Matsuri, 1970 MARTHA COOPER PHOTO

It was also in this stratified society that the seeds of Japanese tattooing were planted.

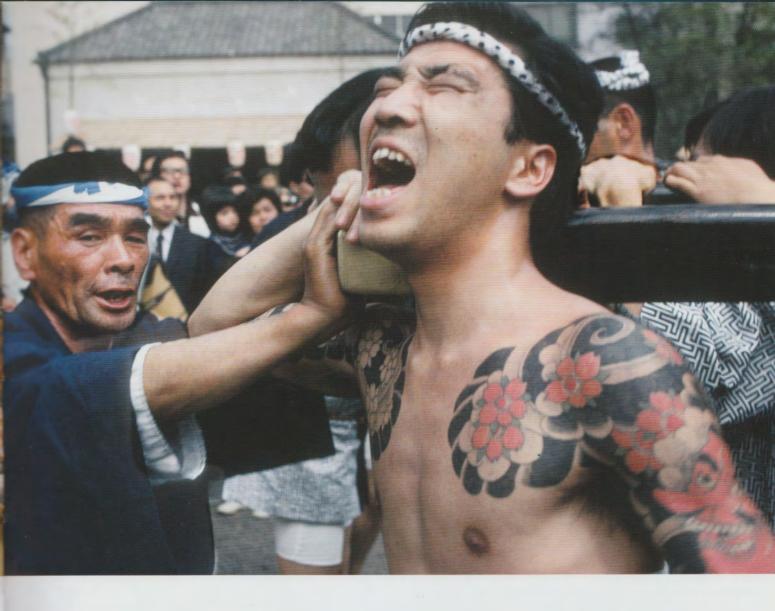
During this time, criminal tattooing had become an official punishment for perpetrators of crimes until 1870. These tattoos, referred to as *irezumi*, were commonly bands around the arms, or the Chinese symbols for dog, or "aku," (bad, evil) which was tattooed on their foreheads one stroke at a time. Some criminals got cover-ups on their arms to hide the markings.

Meanwhile, the courtesans that worked in the Yoshiwara district, (the entertainment quarter that housed up to 300 prostitutes) were also some of the first purveyors of tattoos. Some of the girls got a small dot, called *irebukuro*, on the hand for their favorite clients, or for the particularly devoted, they even got their lover's names, or initials.

Additionally, during the Edo there were many street gangs, such as the *kyokaku*, and the archetypal *otokodate* who were involved with gambling, and extortion, and had a vehemently anti –authoritarian stance. These gangs were basically ruffians but occasionally protected the commoners against the violence of low ranking samurai, and hence became exalted in the popular imagination as downtown heroes, and protectors of the working class. Some of these outlaws were putatively tattooed with a sutra for Amida Nyorai (the historical Buddha).

The denizens of the *shitamachi* downtown, such as the craftsman, carpenters, firefighters, palanquin bearers, and artisans, all of whom fall under the term *shokunin*, as well as the outlaws and the firefighters were the first tattoo aficionados. Many of these jobs were done half naked, hence the tattoos were shaped like traditional workers outfits and were spurred by the phenomenally popular wood block prints of the time that depicted the daily lives of downtown citizens; from the latest kabuki stars, to street landscapes to bathhouses, to popular courtesans.

It was the introduction of *Suikoden*, the classic literary tale from China, coupled with the imagination and skill of the woodblock artists that really elevated Japanese tattooing into a fine craft. The story of Suikoden follows 108 courageous and honorable bandits,



some of whom were tattooed, who tried to topple the corrupt ruling government. Their ultimately sacrificial plight, and heroism resonated with the Edo downtown folk -- many who felt solidarity with their resentment towards authority. Seminal wood block artists like Hokusai, and Kuniyoshi made homages to these protagonists, and depicted their tattoos as large, meticulous works of art, complete with a powerful background. It was precisely this impact and the mysterious appeal of this imagery, and the association that the commoners made with tattoos and heroism that instigated a tattoo boom. People such as firefighters, whose work was based on bravery started to get increasingly elaborate tattoos of motifs like protective water dwellers, hence attributing specific talismanic meanings and mystical powers to the tattoos themselves.

The tattoos were, and still are made with *sumi*, or black ink made from soot made from the oil extracted from vegetables or wood, such as pine, and it is the sumi that gives Japanese tattoos their subdued characteristic hue. The block of sumi is ground on a stone, and inserted with a tool made of needles attached to bamboo (although nowadays this is more commonly stainless steel). The colors were pigments sourced from minerals and vegetables, and were limited, and even now, many traditional masters favor the simplicity of using the black, gray and vermillion color ways in their tattoos. As the popularity of the tattoos rose, the designs themselves developed accordingly and became more embellished and beautiful. Tattooists, even today, will draw directly from one of these wood block prints, and they form the basis of the classic Japanese tattoo.

Asides from Hokusai, and Kuniyoshi, there are tattooed protagonists in the works of Toyohara Kunichika, Utagawa Kunisada, and Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. Many made designs specifically for tattoos, and Kuniyoshi even had tattoos himself.

Moreover, tattoos could also be seen in Edo kabuki, especially on the underdog protagonists, such as those in the plays of the famous kabuki dramatist, Kawatake Mokuami, such as *Benten Kozo* (an honorable thief) and *Danshichi Kurobei* (an otokodate/ fisherman).

When Commodore Matthew Perry and his four ships sailed into the harbor at Tokyo Bay, in 1853, Japan opened up to world trade, after an isolationist period that lasted over 200 years. The Meiji period (1868-1912) saw an end to feudalism and brought about rapid modernization, with an initial period of intense westernization. The Japanese government banned tattoos, as they were concerned about the critical scrutiny of the foreigners who might be repelled by this seemingly backwards practice. During the prohibition, the craft remained alive, albeit in a subterranean manner, and ironically, rather than disgusted, many foreigners including George V and Nicholas II received tattoos while in Japan. However, the ban wasn't officially lifted until the American occupation, post WW2, after one of General MacArthur's staff went to Horiyoshi II's studio. However, despite legalization, the negative image of tattoos has since remained.

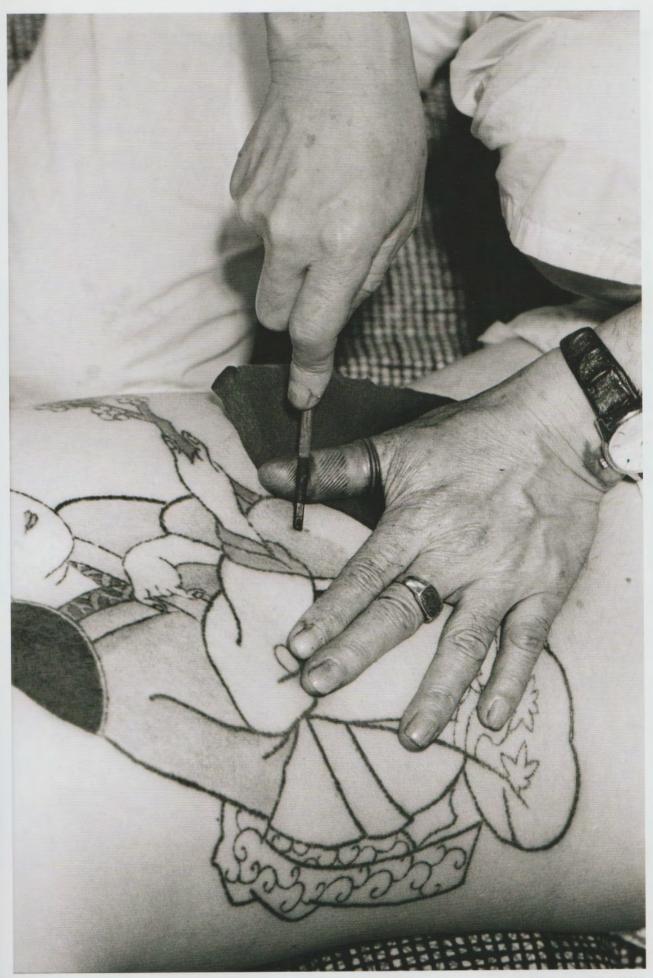
It was after WW2 that the yakuza, or Japanese mafia proliferated, as did their love of tattoos. Ostensibly yakuza are offshoots of the otokodate, as well as the kabuki mono rebels of Edo, but became increasingly powerful in Japanese society, becoming involved with extortion, the sex industry, weapons smuggling, as well as legitimate business. Yakuza literally means 8-9-3 which is a losing hand of a gambling game, the objective of which is to get 19. The yakuza would get tattooed, sometimes under order from a superior, to prove their adherence to the group and as a symbol of loyalty and bravado. Some groups even necessitated it, and getting tattooed was a kind of initiation rite. However, despite what the majority of Japanese people believe, there has always been a large contingency of artisans, carpenters and other shokunin who were fully tattooed, as well as tattoo masters who refuse to tattoo underworld members as well. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the yakuza were the staple clientele for several traditional artists until a few years ago.

It is because of the associations with the underworld that there is such harsh, socially sanctioned discrimination against tattooed people in Japan, despite most tattoo artists saying that their yakuza clients are extremely minimal, to zero of late, replaced more so by tattoo fans, who appreciate the aesthetic. Because of this, much too often the beauty, and craftsmanship of Japanese tattooing is overlooked by mainstream Japanese culture, and is not considered worthy of contemplation. As such, the industry has remained in the shadows, despite western tattoos become all too popular and fashionable. Most tattooists still operate out of apartments in a somewhat secretive manner, and many are extremely difficult to find, even when armed with an address.

This book will look at some of the most important masters of the craft today, and is in homage to their dedication and perseverance in keeping this tradition alive.

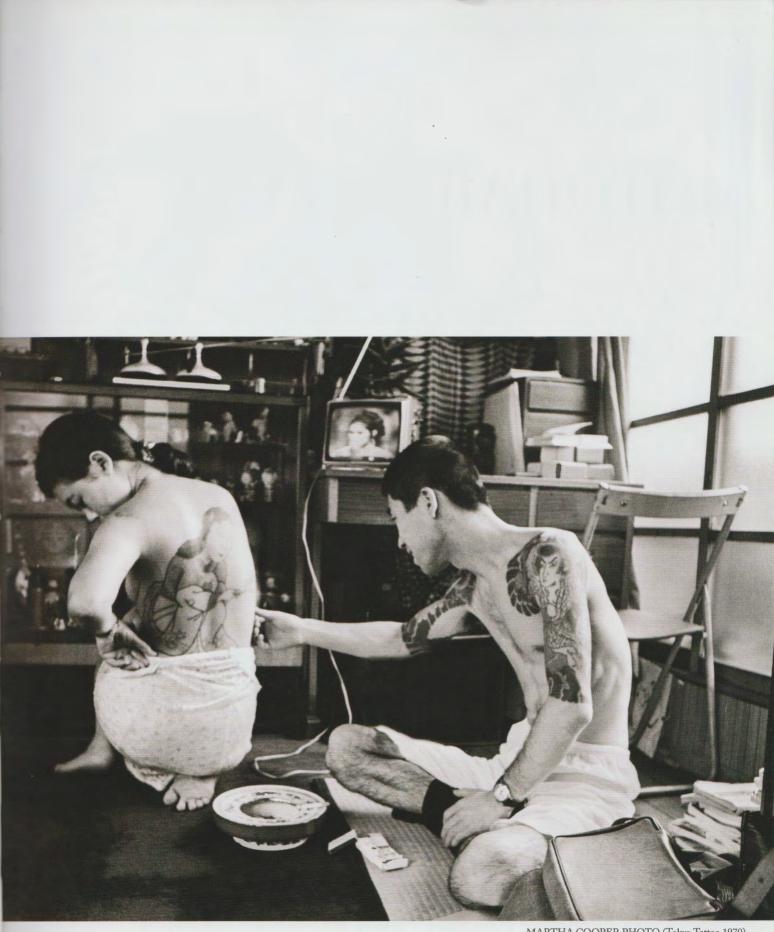
#### A note on the terminology:

Wabori refers to traditional Japanese tattooing, in that classic motifs are used, although the method used, i.e. machine VS *tebori*, (hand poked method) varies greatly between the *horishi* (tattoo artisans). Most use a machine for the *sujibori* (outline), and the *bokashi*, (gradations) are done by hand, although what technique is used is up to the individual artisan. Quite often masters refer to *yobori* (western tattoos) as "tattoos" and Japanese tattoos as *horimono* (a honorific way of referring to tattoos). Although artists and clients a like still use the term, *irezumi* is considered to be a more derogatory or crude way of referring to tattoos.



Horibun I Tattooing in his studio in Okachimachi, 1970 MARTHA COOPER PHOTO





MARTHA COOPER PHOTO (Tokyo Tattoo 1970)

### MOTOHARU ASAKA

#### What was your initial contact with the world of tattooing?

One of my students was doing tattoos, and I was in contact with Horiyoshi III, I wrote him a letter and then he got me to go to the London convention.

#### When did you start making wood block prints?

When I was in primary school, I started doing mokuhanga (wood block prints) as an elective school subject in Bunkyo-ku for three years in a row and in high school, I did a solo exhibition in a rented classroom. There is a famous ukiyo-e (wood block print) artist in Kyoto and I was offered the chance to go and see him. I went to Kyoto to train as an apprentice when I was 17 years old, until the time I was 33 years old. With this kind of work, if you don't do it for 10 to 15 years, you cannot get competent. It takes about 15 years to get confident in your ability.

#### Does your teacher decide you are ready, or you?

In an apprenticeship, you do 7 years of training and that includes things such as cleaning, toilet scrubbing, and small jobs and then after that, we practice carving. When the teacher says 'OK, you are almost ready' -- there is a saying called "Nen ga akeru," (to start a new year) -- and from the next year you will be a craftsman. At this point onwards, you don't get any pocket money, but you can sell a piece of work for a certain price.

#### Did you do a live-in apprenticeship?

No, from my era that kind of thing had finished -- I borrowed an apartment and was going to and from there.

#### Can you describe a day of being in an apprenticeship?

The teacher's wife was also running an *izakaya* (Japanese pub), so the wife was asleep during the morning. I was working silently during the morning and was helping my sensei and practicing. After that, I was doing things like buying cigarettes and getting the wood. I was doing all the odd jobs for my teacher and also for his wife, like buying her leeks for cooking!

#### So you were watching and learning?

Yes, historically, craftsmen were told to "steal"! But lately, the teacher shows the students everything, but if you do that the sensei's work stops. It was the norm that you don't ask questions, whereas young people nowadays ask so many questions that you have to stop your own work in order to answer them, for 30mins to an hour. It is really time consuming.

#### How long does it take to make one piece?

Around a month. The *Tenma Hajun* project for Horiyoshi III took two months though.

#### Do you do many artist collaborations?

Not really, I did one with an American University art teacher and also did an illustration that (director/actor/artist) Beat Takeshi (Kitano) designed. I will do anything if commissioned though.

#### What wood do you use?

Mountain cherry -- it is really hard and heavy so you can produce thin lines.

#### What are the characteristics of your work?

I can carve anything, but I focus on beauties and human characters, as well as the national treasures. I do things that not many people can do.

#### How many colors are used in these? I use about 20 colors or 30 colors.

#### What are the most popular prints?

The Aka Fuji (Red Fuji -- Hokusai's Gaifū kaisei) and Kanagawa's Great Wave (Hokusai), as well as the beauties.





Why do you think foreigners at the time were so fascinated by ukiyo-e? Ukiyo-e was introduced at the World Fair, and during that time, there was only black and white printing in Japan and Europe. Even when color printers were developed, with ukiyo-e, when you turn it over, the color seeps through the back of the paper, and it is only ukiyo-e that has this kind of technology to permeate the paper elements like this.

So when you look at ukiyo-e, first you look at the back -- with a machine printer there is no picture on the back. It has a kind of warmth, as it is hand made, whereas when they are printed with a machine, they appear cold. Rice paper has a kind of warmth and kindness. Rather than just painted on top, you get the feeling that it has seeped inside. Maybe that is why it was so lauded. Also, all the Edo commoners were portrayed in the prints.

#### What kind of colors do you use?

The colors are all plant and mineral colors, like the Yamagata safflower, which was used for lipstick; it is natural plants and mountain minerals.

#### What happened to the woodblock print culture after the Edo period?

Going into the Meiji period, the craftsmen were still around, but the printing technology from the west improved and there were color printers, so this ukiyo-e culture began to die out, and not sell. In the Taisho era, there were *Shin hanga* (20th century woodblock prints) and Ginza's Shosaburo Watanabe (a print publisher that supported the shin hanga movement) created a boom. In the Meiji, because they weren't being shown so much, the colors didn't drop as a result.

#### Who is the most influential master for you?

Utamaro. When I saw his beautiful ladies, I wanted to carve the works of these famous people.

#### How many people are doing woodblock prints now?

With woodblock genres, there are beauties and landscapes and if you can't handle the training for 10 years, you can't do beauties and that is the case with most people. Most people quit half way through, so there are only 4 or 5 in Tokyo and Kyoto that are able to do woodblock prints of beauties, whereas there are 20 that are able to do landscapes. After the war, Japan became an academic society and forced everyone to study. In countries like Germany, they looked after their craftsmen and artisans, whereas in Japan, they were treated like idiots.



Everyone wants their kid to go to university. It is the tide of the times. There is a revival of crafts, but they find half way through they can't afford to eat! I have a lot of people who are interested, so I hold a class with 30 people, but for people that want to live off it, it is difficult.

#### How about the government?

There is the Agency for Cultural Affairs, and the Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, which provide support, but it is so minimal. There are a total of 50 Tokyo and Kyoto craftsmen, but only 4 million yen total in subsidies for the year, so to divide that between us it amounts to very little. If the government protected us, the technique would survive. For myself, I need to go overseas and give workshops at places like tattoo conventions and do exhibitions at galleries.

#### How did you enjoy the London convention?

The tattoo artists use a lot of Kuniyoshi, Kunisada and Toyokuni work, so they are interested in the Edo period crafts, and I got them to carve as well, and it was really fun and enjoyable. I was really overwhelmed at the amount of people at the tattoo convention and everyone was great and polite. It was different to the image people have of tattooing in Japan because we have the image generated by the Toei yakuza films. Because of that, when I told some students that I was going to a tattoo show, they were so shocked. I see tattooing as an art, but some people don't understand that, and in Japan it is really difficult. I really want to state the message that tattoos are a beautiful art from the world of ukiyo-e. Horiyoshi III explained to me that tattoos are actually something really great and I participated twice in the Tattoo Night (event) in Yokohama.

### At the end of the day what is the most appealing thing about doing ukiyo-e?

That you can do *nihonga* (Japanese classic painting) national treasures yet also, these kinds of western revivalist wood blocks, so I have this confidence that utilizing wood blocks I can create anything -if there is a commission, I will try it, from the difficult to the easy. I went to Europe for the first time at 61 years of age, and around my age people are thinking of retiring! Whereas for me, now is the beginning. I have the heart of a young guy and I don't want to think about my age and I'm not taking any holidays either.





(Left) Asaka's collaboration with Takeshi Kitano, (Right) Blue Moon, Asaka's collaboration with Moira Hahn.





### SANJA MATSURI

Japanese traditional matsuri, or festivals, are provincial gatherings held on certain days of the month, usually relating to Shinto or Buddhist days of significance. Entire towns turn into epicenters of chaos, with the often religiously ambivalent townsfolk celebrating with a rarely seen fervor that can go until the early hours of the morning.

Matsuris are the best place to see and experience modern Japanese culture intermingling seamlessly with the traditional legacies. The usually reserved townsfolk drop their inhibitions, dancing, cheering and drinking in their best summer yukata kimonos and traditional happi coats. If nothing else, there are huge parties accompanied by the primordial beat of the taiko drum. Some of the more unique festivals involve monks and locals in a trance, stepping over coals in fire-walking rites, as well as rampant penis worshipping with wooden phallus effigies at fertility festivals.

Sanja festival is the third largest festival in Tokyo, and possibly the most exciting, taking place in the Asakusa downtown district that is lauded for its traditional atmosphere. In reality, the locals are usually tucked away from sight in the many tea and craft shops, away from the bedlam of tourist droves. Mid May, however, sees the Sanja matsuri bring out the fierce parochial pride of this area with a gusto that represents the true character of downtown Japan.

Historically, Asakusa is an area that occupied what was the downtown during the Edo period, an era when cultural and hedonistic endeavors flourished. The region, then and now houses artisans, craftsmen, carpenters, firemen and the yakuza. Home to traditional tattoo artists, the neighborhood unites lovers of *horimono* with a sense of celebration.

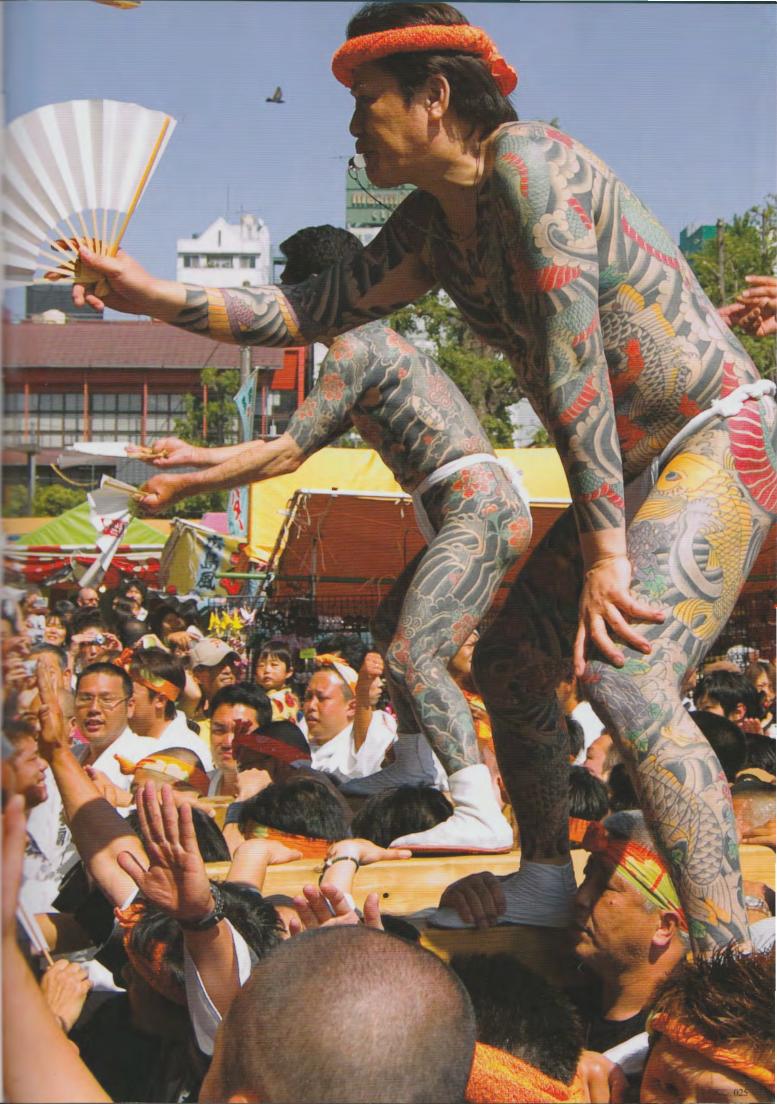
Over the three days, there are geisha performances, drums, street stalls, plenty of drinking and, on the third day, a climax with *mikoshi* (portable shrine) parades and hundreds of locals and visitors gathering around cheering. Spirits run so high, that quite often fights break out, although this show of machismo is also seen as part of the Sanja festival spirit.

It is one of the rare occasions that people with traditional Japanese tattoos can be seen in their full glory, as many wabori masters operate in innocuous, little apartments in the area. Quite simply, to actually display one's tattoos is illegal. As Tattoo BURST magazine's former editor, Ms. Kawasaki, says; "To show *irezumi* in public is kind of seen in the same vein as taking a piss in public, it's an offense to public sensibility." However, Sanja seems to be one of the very few occasions where locals are given pardon from this censorship. Walking around are many locals in their traditional festival garb, with the legs heavily adorned and often basically naked, aside from their *fundoshi* loincloths, baring full coverage by artists such as Horikazu, Horiyoshi III, Horikazuwaka, Horicho, and Horicho II. In fact, Sanja is the very best place to see top-tier traditional work in a nonstudio environment.

As Horitoku says, "If you want to study traditional Japanese tattoos, you need to have a sophisticated understanding of Japanese culture and aesthetics in order to replicate the art successfully. Visiting places such as sumo wrestling matches, kabuki theater shows and festivals such as the Sanja is the best way to experience these things."

Moreover, artists such as Horiyasu, who has a studio in the middle of Asakusa, insists, "I could have set up a studio anywhere, but as a horishi, Asakusa is seen as a kind of top spot, with its historical context and concentration of top talent. I felt I had to set up there."

The festival itself is of Shinto background, beginning with a religious ceremony, performed by the head priest of the Senjoji temple. It is a homage to the fishermen who found a statue of goddess Bodhisattva Kannon in their nets in 628 A.D. The main temple at Senjoji, in the center of Asakusa, houses this statue. The climax of the event is the parading of mikoshi handcrafted with meticulous care, embellished with carvings of dragons, and effigies covered in gold leaf.









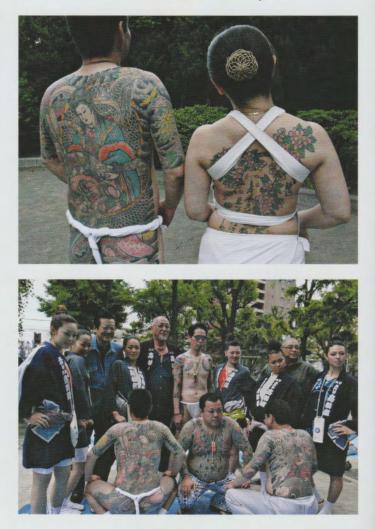
Since it is believed that these shrines temporarily house spirits, the parading of the mikoshi is essentially giving these spirits a tour of the neighborhood.

Many of the clients in the vicinity have received work -- either full body or touch-ups -- by the late Horikazu, who could be seen strolling around with an charismatic air, in wooden *geta* (clogs), while his clients follow him around, somewhat subserviently. His studio was in the heart of the downtown district.

Horikazu's work is typified by incredible density -- immaculately detailed but always elegant, displaying a sophisticated understanding of compositional harmony. He points out that "the colors are perfectly subdued, true to Japanese traditional sensibilities," and seeing his work in the flesh is nothing short of breathtaking. Although, he says half-jokingly, "If you want to see my best work, go make a jail visit."

Horicho II who also has a studio in Asakusa says that clients will get tattooed specifically to show them off at Sanja. "Even though my studio is here, I have only gone to Sanja three times in 16 years! Everyone who loves matsuri will pass through during Sanja and get together to carry the portable shrines, and people who aren't involved directly in Sanja Masturi per se still want to go to see it as spectators. While these people are here in Asakusa for the festival, they all want to get tattooed."

"It was really common that all the young guys would all come in within the week of Sanja and get their pieces completed. So when you go to the festival, you can see guys with their tattoos that are red, healing and still swollen! They all want to show off. Sanja matsuri is in May, so there are people that only come in April. They wear their festival coats, so they just get tattooed in the visible places like the full sleeves. We would nickname this Sanja-bori!"





Left top, Horiyoshi III work, Left bottom, the late Horikazu and his clients.

ARI HELMINEN PHOTO





ARI HELMINEN PHOTO





# HORIYOSHI III

#### Can we talk about your history?

I first saw a tattoo when I was around 10 or 11 years old, at a public bath. The impression I had was that it was amazing, in that I was seeing people completely otherworldly, like seeing an alien. They were entirely covered, from their necks to their ankles. I didn't have the perspective that I was seeing human beings!

When I was 16, I started getting a serious interest in tattoos. I first started going as a client, and then I was doing it myself. Unlike now, there was absolutely no information. Now there are magazines, and there is the Internet. I started over 40 years ago, there was no information, so I had no choice but to think how to do it myself -- but it really doesn't go all that well! I was getting tattooed as a client, but I really wanted to learn, so I asked to become an apprentice. I was constantly knocked back, but because of a stroke of good timing, I was finally accepted.

#### What goes on in a Japanese apprenticeship?

I think it's different to European or American apprenticeships; you become part of their family. Cleaning, washing, you do the lot -like a servant. You help with everything, and get taught a little bit in regards to work. You help with absolutely everything, it's not just learning. You can't say no. It's kind of a feudalistic relationship; what your superior says to you is the word. However, the challenge of overcoming these elements, which are rigid and difficult, is the charm of being an apprentice.

#### Describe a typical day of your apprenticeship.

You wake up at 7:30 and eat breakfast in the mess hall. Then you clean, and make the sumi. At 8 a.m. we would open the door for the clients. There were no such things as bookings; it's first come, first served. So some people would turn up at 6 a.m.

When we opened, the people who had never been would have a consultation, and while they were having their consultation, my teacher would come in. When there were no clients it would be free time—but it's never free. I was always drawing, or making needles, or sharpening them, making tools, and always cleaning.

#### How many years do people apprentice for?

It's not fixed, with me it was ten years, but usually everyone does 3 to 5 years, but you can't learn it in that short a time.

### When you asked your sensei to take you on as an apprentice, how did you approach him?

I was going to get tattooed by Horiyoshi, so I sent a letter out, and there was no reply, and then I sent it again, and again, still no reply.

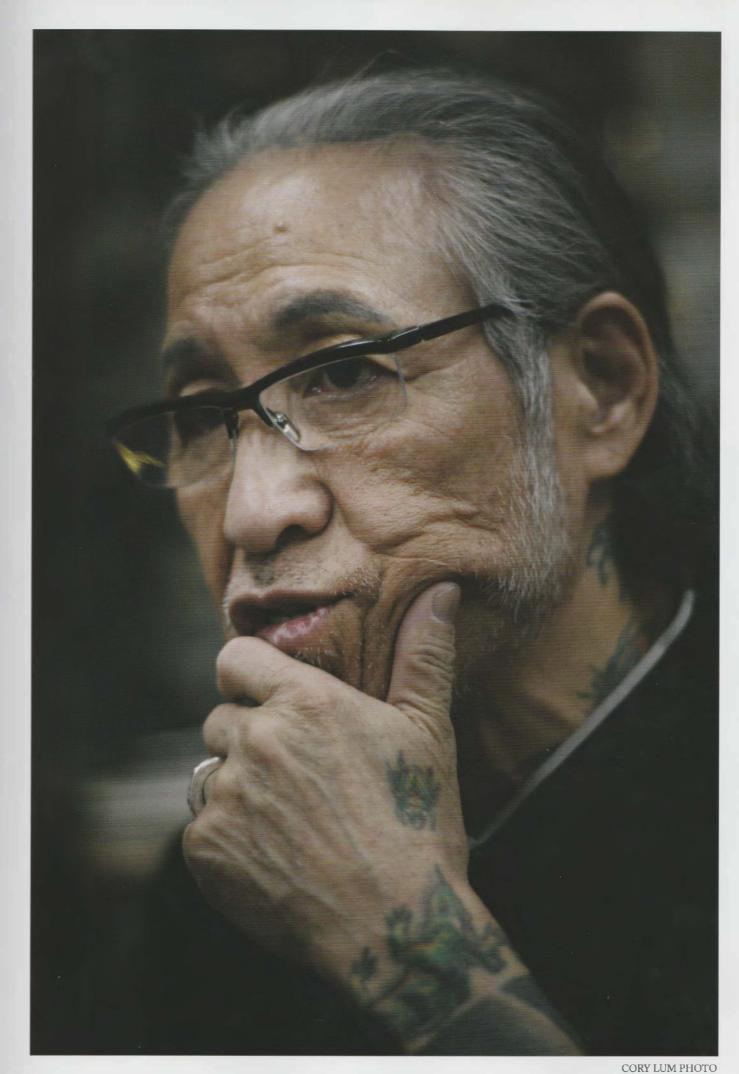
#### Is it normal to send out letters?

The best is an introduction, actually.

#### What did you write in the letter?

Firstly, a self-introduction. I wrote explaining that I was working as a tattoo artist, but in my own style and that I was amateurish. As such, I didn't really know which parts of my work could be improved, and I couldn't seem to progress as a result. So I explained I would like to be an apprentice. Seeing there was no reply, I went there and asked directly. When I was talking to him, he came to realize that I was quite serious, and that despite working at the time, I was prepared to become an apprentice and not make any money.

He thought that was admirable, so he accepted. Horiyoshi II was actually on a trip, and because of that I was able to become a student. When I talked to Horiyoshi II later he said that he wouldn't have accepted me had he been there, so it was good timing. Basically, 90 percent of life is timing and luck. People with bad timing and bad luck are basically fucked.





#### So how did you know it was time to call yourself a horishi?

When Horiyoshi told me to be Horiyoshi III, I basically did it because he told me to. It's hard to say when you will get told, and when you go about becoming independent. Also, it's not necessarily the right time.

#### What is the dynamic between the tattooing families in Japan?

Before, there was very little communication. Now there is a lot of cross-communication. Craftsmen usually kept things secret, such as the technique and materials.

#### How about now?

Are there still those secretive aspects? Not really, so it's becoming less fascinating. It used to be that Japanese craftsmen really hid their techniques, so when they died you didn't know how they made their craft, as they didn't write it down. They only taught by explaining [their techniques] to apprentices or their son.

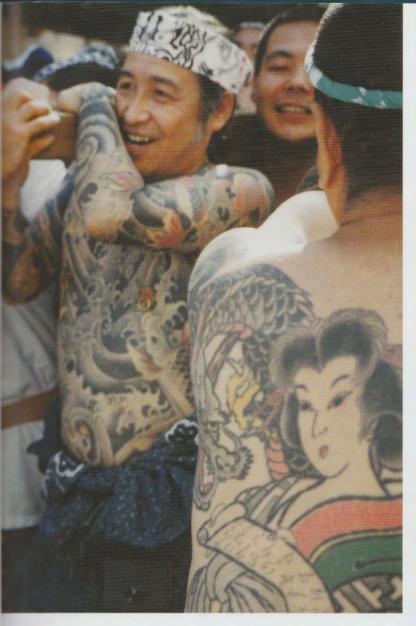
#### When you were starting, who was getting tattoos?

Yakuza and other underworld types and artisans, not businessmen. Maybe 60 percent were yakuza, and the rest were craftsmen, construction workers, or laborers. Now it's nearly zero. It's a little sad. Matsuda Osamu, a tattoo researcher and Hosei University professor who researched Japanese traditional tattoo culture, said that Japanese traditional tattoos are something that is outlaw or counterculture in nature, that they shouldn't be socially acceptable as that would be sacrilegious. I think that kind of theory holds true.

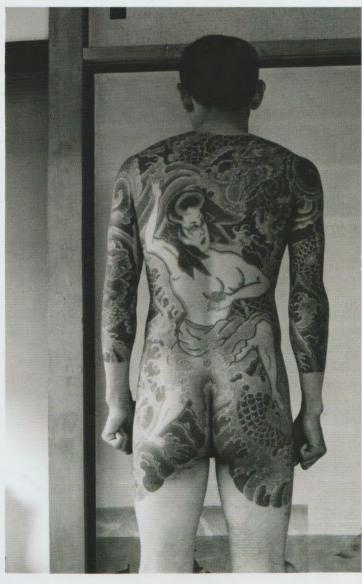
There were a lot of rebels previously; well, even if they weren't outlaws; they had that kind of spirit. Now there is nothing like that, it's mostly people into the fashion, and the industry they are from is different too. The designs and the placement are also different. Nowadays people want to the tattoo to be seen, to be conspicuous. Nowadays, people get tattooed so that people can see it, so they show it really conspicuously, and in doing so the charm of the tattoos disappears.

#### How did the yakuza treat you?

Now it's not so much the case, but they used to really take good care of you because you are decorating their bodies. If you really improve them, they want to do good for you. Tattoos are permanent, and they have a job in which they have to appear cool. They really treated me well; they would invite me to meals and give me pocket money. I once got a tip that was more than the price of the back piece.







(Left) Horiyoshi III tattooing Horiyoshi II's head, early 70s. (Top) Gumyouji festival in Yokohama, (Right) Work by Horiyoshi III from around 1973

### Now that tattoos have become a fashion accessory for some, do you think the fascinating elements have gone away?

Yes, if it is purely for fashion. It's the same as putting spice in a bowl of ramen—or, say, if you are a woman, finding guys who are a bit dangerous attractive, rather than a guy who walks like a robot and has his shirt totally buttoned up. There is still that villainous aspect that is appealing.

#### How do you feel about its popularity?

It's not that it's popular now, it's just more visible. That sense of secrecy is lost, and it's become a bit cheap. Previously there was an image that it was for a particular type of person, an outlaw activity, and when that is gone, so is a certain charm associated with it. For example, if you meet someone quite ominous, they have something about them that is fascinating, the charm of being someone scary, and when that is gone, they are just a regular guy. With irezumi, that was one of the fascinating aspects, and that is gradually eradicating. If everyone has tattoos, it stops being special.

#### Does that bother you?

I mean, what can you do? It's the current new wave culture. I think it's fine, it's not like the world is going to stop just because I don't approve! The good things last, and the bad things fade away, that is the essence of it; time produces resolutions.

#### Who is your longest client?

I have a few that have been coming in for ten years, as they only get tattooed once a month.

#### And the most memorable piece of work?

I actually get asked this quite a lot, but I remember them all, as I'm really putting my fullest effort into each piece.

#### What is the most difficult thing about doing Japanese tattoos?

The most difficult thing in art is the overall balance and the various gradations. In Japanese tattooing, for example, with a dragon, even if you can draw it, you need to ascertain what kind of dragon it is. I think Japanese traditional tattooing is really difficult if you want to learn it properly because it is the world of instinct.

Even if you read 100 Japanese culture books you can't memorize Japanese tattoos. There is history, custom, culture, and a sense of seniority. And there are rules within Japanese tattooing that you have to adhere to. Including myself, there is no Japanese tattoo artist who understands Japanese tattooing completely. It is really that difficult.

#### How do you achieve such balance in your work?

It's a sense once you get used to it. For example, a flower looks unnatural if you tattoo it straight across, even though there are flowers that grow straight. But if it is at an angle it seems more natural.

# What are the fundamental differences between Japanese and Western tattoos?

Nowadays, it's pretty much the same, but basically with Japanese tattoos, there are a plethora of things which are set. For example, top and bottom, left and right, the seasons, day and night, there are lots of meticulous rules, and from there, one design is created. Western tattoos have a lot more freedom, for example, say there is a plastic bottle, you can say, "Let's do this!" If you did this in Japan, it would be 'What the hell is the meaning of this?' Meanings are essential, so there are lots of rules.

### How do you feel about other styles of Japanese that aren't traditional, such as Filip Leu's?

As a culture it is really good when you see, say, Art Nouveau and Art Deco. For example, in the Meiji period, the Japanese were wearing kimonos whilst wearing Western hats and shoes, and the foreigners were wearing Western suits with geta [the traditional Japanese shoes]. It wouldn't be considered strange then. So it's a kind of amalgamation of culture. Likewise, Filip's work is a kind of culture, and it is very admirable.

# How do you feel about people that don't understand the meaning and insert a tattoo?

Yeah,...I that is ok too, the meaning can come later. If you are just doing it for fashion, there doesn't have to be a meaning necessarily.

#### What have been some changes in the tattoo industry over the years?

Because the tattoo population has increased, the information has proliferated. Accordingly, the number of people who want to tattoo has increased. Tattoo supply stores that sell colors, and tools sell to absolutely anyone by mail order. If you have the tools, you can start tattooing that day, regardless if you are good or bad, whether you have knowledge or not. From this environment, some talented people are born, and then there are cases that people completely mess up as well. I can't always say it's bad, or good, it's the individual's responsibility, so I can't pass judgment.

Horiyoshi II tattooing one of Horiyoshi III's school friends, while Horiyoshi II's apprentices look on.

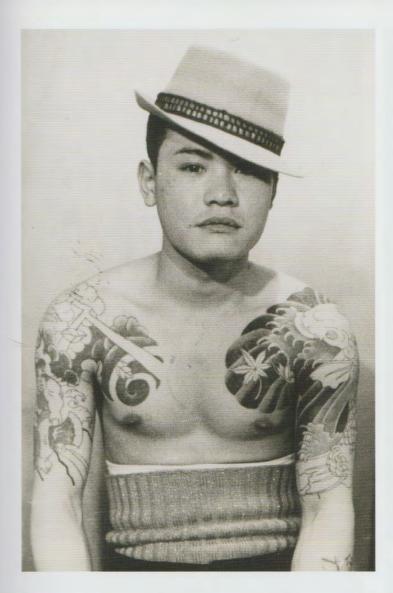
(R) Left, Azabu Horiyoshi, Right, Yokohama Horiyoshi at a bath house.





(Top) Horiyoshi III with an apprentice, friend and Horikin. (bottom) Horiyoshi III's apprentice tattooing, at the current Isecho studio.





(R) Work by Horiyoshi II (bottom) Left, Horiyoshi I, centre unknown, Horiyoshi II,





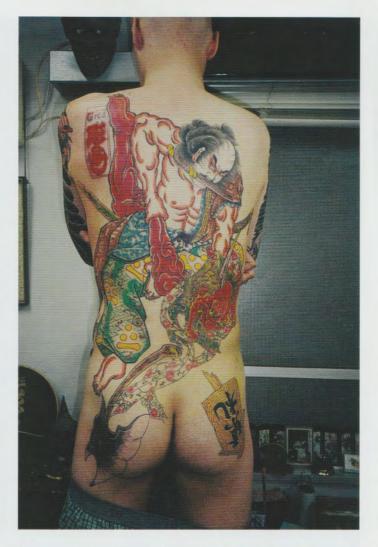














Recent work by Horiyoshi III

#### What direction would you say the Japanese tattoo scene is going?

It is hard to say, as they take a lot of influence from the world, the Japanese tattoo scene is just copying overseas. I don't really like it, so I take the Japanese path of "going my way".

### How about the things people want, have they changed?

The most popular motif is the dragon, and that is synonymous globally. It's not so much that people want different things, but the number of designs has increased. There are so many more choices; previously there were only 5 gods that people would get tattooed; now there are 20 or 30. There is such a proliferation of designs now, in response to the fact that more tattoo artists are around now, and they want to express their individuality.

### Do you think it's going back to Japanese traditional?

Yes, but more so than Japanese being popular in Japan, it's just an international trend, like wa (Japanese) is "in" now. It's just a reflection of things from the West being so popular up until now, and humans begin to want different things. If things that weren't around up until then suddenly appear, they appear fresh, and Japanese like to sensationalize everything, that's all it is. I mean, the fact that American tattoos became so hot is just reflective of Japanese people going ecstatic over it! This is typically Japanese: to get overly excited over something, and then get over it quickly too.

But the only thing with irezumi is that if you "get over" it, it's actually quite a problem as they don't just go away. With clothing and fashion, you can just change, and put it in the far recesses of your closet, but tattoos don't quite go that way.

#### How does one go about learning tebori?

You definitely can't look and learn, you need do it yourself. Experience is the pinnacle of knowledge. Instead of 'learning', you have to get used to it. A machine will move the needles automatically, whereas with tebori, you are doing it manually, and to reach the point where you can move it like a machine is very difficult. It's the same as a baby not being able to write words, even as an adult if you don't write regularly, you become incompetent. Say you go to a calligraphy school, they will teach you the absolute basics and they can charge a substantial sum. It's a good business because essentially it's you that has to learn. If you go to school for ten years doesn't mean you learnt anything.

Everything in life is a result of how much you persevere. It the same with boxing -- even if you get taught, if you aren't doing it yourself, you aren't going to get any stronger. You just have to do it. It's not something you can listen to, and learn off a textbook. Tattooing tebori is the same, even if you have a teacher, you won't learn anything, I mean it's the same with machines, they say that the machine teaches you, not a teacher, but even so, you need to learn by experience.

### Are you worried that tebori will disappear?

No, there are many people who think in the opposite direction. If there are tattoo artists using machines there will always be people that will want to do it by hand. I don't know in percentages, but people that love Japanese traditional tattoos want to do tebori, and people that want to be "artists" use a machine. Not to suggest that people who makes machines just want to make money, there are people that want to master machine building, it's not as simple as that. But people who want to do tebori really like irezumi and protecting traditions -- this isn't to say tebori is better than a machine.

There are many people that are wanting to learn tebori, and so they buy the kit, they just didn't know how to make the tools, how to make the needles, so I've made this information more accessible. In the future, there are even more people who will want to do it; as things get digitalized, there are still people who want analog things, people who go against the tide. Think of paper. You can make as much as you like with machines—to make it by hand is really time-consuming and physically taxing, and there is little financial incentive. But there are still people who want to train to make handmade paper, and I think it will never disappear. There are people who seek out these kinds of things—not everyone, obviously—but there are those who have a kind of resistance to plentiful things. They want something really fantastic. They cherish the positive aspects of doing it by hand.

#### What is the difference in the actual work when doing it by hand?

It's hard to say with words. You can get a certain characteristic flavor with tebori that you can't with a tattoo machine. Technically it is so difficult, so mastering this is the main appeal. The color of the sumi (Japanese ink) is slightly different, it's hard to tell unless you are professional. I think that with making things though, doing it by hand is the best, regardless of whether it's furniture or jewelry. He you do it by hand, each piece has a lot of originality; if you produce it mechanically you can possibly duplicate the same thing. The characteristic flavor of tebori can't be replicated with a machine.

If you use a machine, when you are finished the work is 90 percent complete. But with tebori, no matter how much you work on a piece, it is only 80 percent complete, but that lack is what makes it appealing. After five or 10 years, the tebori tattoo matures, but with machines, there is no maturity time. With tebori it is like the sumi is living under the skin. That's a big difference. Also, in doing tattoos by hand, there is the charm of spending each other's precious time together. No matter how good the tools and materials are, if you don't take the time, you won't get a good result. And tebori in particular is really partial to this ethos, as you aren't relying on the



(top) Horiyoshi III's back on the left, Right, Horiyoshi II. (below) Horiyoshi III tattoo, approx 1975



power of a machine—you are purely using your own senses.

### If a foreigner, or a local for that matter wants to learn wabori what should they do?

This is really difficult, rather than trying to learn wabori they should try and learn Japanese culture in its entirety, the seasons, history, learning all these things is the start of doing Japanese tattoos. Without that knowledge, you can perhaps copy wabori, but you can't actually do it. Even in Japan, the people that can do wabori is practically zero, you really need to know all aspects of Japanese culture.

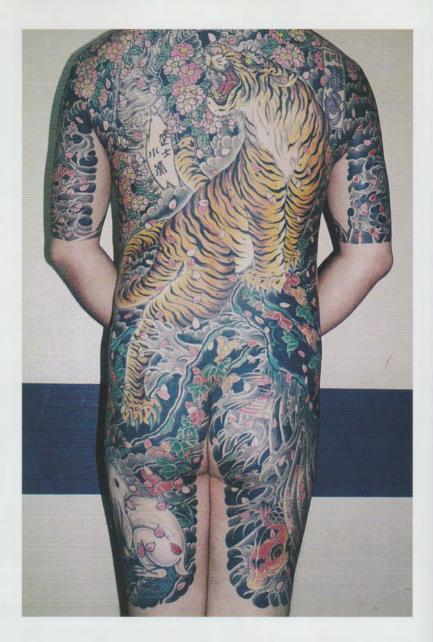
It depends on how they will most effectively learn, some may understand by going to a museum, some may get it from going to a library, that is the choice they make. I feel the best is to look at different books. There are DVDs and videos, but even inside within this, not all the information is correct, some of it is mistaken. I can see if something is wrong, but that is because I studied.

So don't trust everything, question if it is truthful, so then you can know the truth.

Not only in the world of tattooing, but any world, there are generations of people before you, and at the end of that lineage is you. You have to continue that. You take that, improve it, and take it to the next generation. That is the same in any world, Arts, politics, sports, if that disappears, there is no progress.

You need that sense of responsibility, that is the most important thing, if that is not there, you can't make good work.

For me, it is most important not to get lazy. People kill each other, and people save each other, they love and they kill each other, so it's important not to make enemies, to not feel revenge, and to not hold grudges. If there is a sense of responsibility you will get that result, it's a really simple thing.



#### Where does one start?

Read Japanese cultural books, Japanese Buddhism books, books on the world of samurais and merchants. In Japan, all these cultures are totally different, the world of traders, peasants and tattooing isn't a singular culture, it's an amalgam of various cultures, the culture of men, women, knowing the kimono patterns, the hair styles. These change according to the era, so in order to draw an illustration you need to know these cultures. By the time you can actually tattoo irezumi knowing these facets, you are an old man! If it's a case of copying Kuniyoshi, Yoshitoshi, Hokusai, one can look at the works of traditional masters who can draw properly; but in order to ascertain whether they are doing it correctly, you need to know the culture. To actually tattoo is quite easy and anyone can do it.

If you have the tools and the clients, it's entirely possible, but if you want to do something with meaning that is correct and has a story, you have to study. Even with tribal, it was something that originally had meaning. Meaning is essential for things that people create, and in contrast there is the existence of the word *mu-imi* (meaninglessness). The world of meaninglessness is no good...



If you have a desire to learn Japanese traditional, find out what is good and bad, as well as the social repercussions and risks. Read a lot of books, and fully ascertain whether you can walk this path, and whether it's for you. Don't just do it out of curiosity; for a human to alter another person is a huge responsibility. Don't take this lightly, if you tattoo someone terribly you are changing their way of life forever. Realize that you are doing a job that has these kinds of responsibilities, and then decide whether you can do it or not, and for how long you can persevere. Learn yourself, and if it's necessary, find someone to guide you.

#### Which ukiyo-e artists do you get influence from?

Hokusai, Kuniyoshi, Yoshitoshi, Kyosai...in terms of Japanese illustrations Kanou Hougai, Soga Shouhaku.

#### When did you first see a Western tattoo?

Probably when I was 25 years of age in Yokohama at Horiyoshi's. There weren't so many foreigners in Japan, and not so many Japanese going overseas, unlike now.

#### How did you meet Ed Hardy?

He came to Japan and I did a *bonji* (Japanese Buddhist script) tattoo on him for free. When he went home, he called me and goes, "I forgot something important!" and he told me about the Rome convention, saying that I should come. I told him, "You know Azabu's Horiyoshi? You should invite him. There are many people superior to me. I can't go out first." He said, "Azabu's Horiyoshi refused." And I said, "There are others." He said, "No, I don't want others." Then he said, "Do you like spaghetti?" So I went.

#### What did you think of the tattoo work in Italy?

Well, up until then, I only had the image of Mickey Mouse tattoos in my head, but when I saw the work, I was astounded. It was the first time I had seen machines at work as well.

When I returned to Japan, I thought I would like to learn to use a machine too, and after two years I started using machines. I also saw that Japan's way of doing things was no good, and we had to think more about sterilization. So I made a tebori kit 20 years ago where the needles could be removed and sterilized. Before, the tools with Japanese style tattooing used to be bamboo or wood, and I changed the lot to steel. Before that, no one used steel, but now everyone is copying me, because you can sterilize it. I have been using these tools for 30 years plus, and have been getting good result, so over the last 5 to 6 years, these steel tools have become prolific. I only thought of Western tattoos as childish scrawling before, but then I saw it was a really artistic world. At the time, there were no huge pieces, but piece by piece it was something we couldn't do in Japan.

And I thought it was amazing, and had the perspective to think if we are lax, Japan will be taken over. But now that is really becoming reality!

# So when you came back and you started using the machine, how did you find it?

They were not like today's machines—they were totally crap. I didn't know how to use one, so I did trial and error on my feet and my wife's arms.

# How would you like society and the tattoo industry to change in the future?

To leave behind the truly wonderful aspects of irezumi tradition, and for it to return to the source -- to the basics. Everyone is trying to stand out, and to be noticeable, but I think there is something more important that we need to protect. Realizing this is the primary fascination of tattooing. If you constantly try to show off your charming points, by making a statement; "These are my good points!" conversely it becomes quite the contrary. I think things like that are for people to discover, not for you to advertise. In Japan, there is a custom of *kenson* (modesty, humility), to dismiss praise, but to have good attributes. I think that is a lot better than saying "This is great, isn't it?"-- the more you get told something like this, the more you are totally put off!

You tattoo a lot of Buddhist motifs, such as the divinities and animals associated with these gods, how does Buddhism affect the Japanese psyche? 80 to 90% of Japanese people are believers of Buddhism. I don't think they believe that the gods and deities actually exist, but the gods exist as an entity like Maria or Christ. But there is also the world of Zen, which I really admire, as there are no gods nor deities, it is training for yourself to become psychologically strong. Zen doesn't idolize anyone; to train oneself is the world of Zen, it is a fight within oneself. Even if there are numerous gods, in the end it is your strength. Even if you go to the gods and ask for money, it is not like they make you rich. Even if you want to cure an illness, and you pray everyday, it's not like you get cured, to become well is your own strength, to become rich is by your own determination. It gives you power to become determined.

The world of Zen is not the gods, but you rely on yourself to get power. As humans, this is the most important thing, and this is the basis of Buddhism. You can't get anywhere by relying on people.

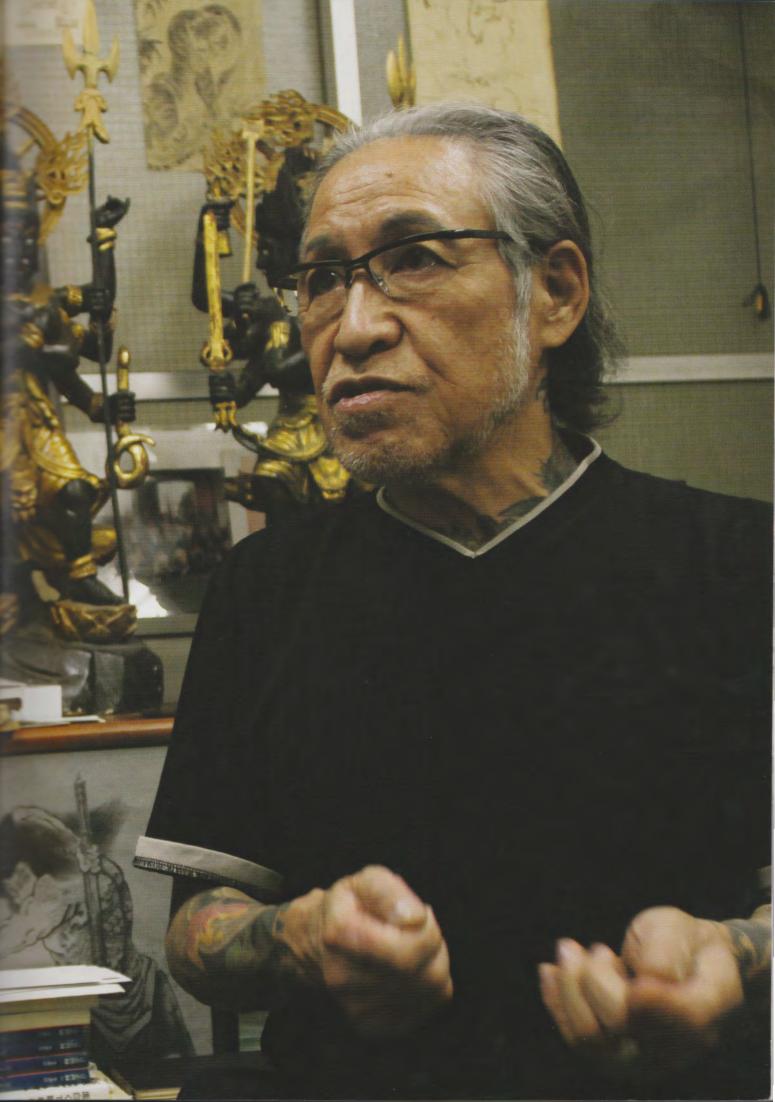






Recent work by Horiyoshi III





## What Buddhist motifs are the most common in tattooing? Kannon, Fudo Myoo, Senju Kannon, and Fugen Bosatsu.

Are people really concerned with the meanings? A lot of people actually don't know them!

#### So they like the appearance of the gods?

Yes, or they like the names -- they sound cool! For example, Ashura or Yasha -- the word itself is cool! They mightn't know who he is, but once they know the meaning, they are attracted to that deity even more. There are two types of clients, people that like the meaning, or people that like the word, and look up the meaning because of that. Conversely, they don't know the meaning or the word, for instance, they think *Fudo Myoo* or *Kannon* riding a dragon looks cool.

# Has the depth of knowledge in regards to Buddhism changed over the years?

There were many people who didn't know what *bonji* (Japanese Buddhist script) was, but everyone knows this now. It is one of the design motifs now, even with clothing or accessories, it has become part of daily life. Bonji is actually from *Mikkyou* (Esoteric) Buddhism, and was part of a world that only monks knew, and now that has become common knowledge.

#### Isn't the look more important than the meaning?

With real Japanese traditional tattooing, the philosophy is stronger. Now it is more fashionable, whereas before, to hide it was the basis. Now it is more common to have a tattoo and show it; more than a psychological thing, it is an aesthetic or fashionable thing.

#### What do you like to do personally?

There aren't that many Buddhist motifs that I dislike. The philosophical aspect is so strong, so it's not like there are ones I like and dislike, they all have a role and all of them are important.

#### At the end of the day, why do people want to get tattoos?

A simple desire to decorate themselves. You don't want to wear something dirty, you don't want something the same as everyone else. Only one thing is different, you want something individualistic, same with hair, you don't want to be the same as everything.

Mainly for improving themselves aesthetically, and the notion of belonging. People also have a tendency to cause pain, and to receive pain; they might not like tattoos, but they have these inner tendencies, which will manifest themselves somewhere. In this world humans always have sadistic or masochistic tendencies, whether they choose to acknowledge it or not. If tattoos didn't hurt no one would do it. Also there is this feeling of bravado, that you want to brag because you endured it. And there's a self-satisfaction as well.

### What is the appeal of tattooing that has continued over your career?

No two jobs are the same, and the more you do it, the more difficult it is, and you can never be complete. Each job is good because you try hard, but after a week or a month, you think you want to make a better piece, and reflect on how you could have improved it, and it repeats like this. It is the same as any person making something -whether it is a house, a sword, kimono, or a bowl.

That what you are doing for work is fun. It is the job I sought out. I think most people, like businessmen, don't want to work; they work in order to live and to make money. They have no choice. People who make things, such as sculptors and illustrators, they like it, so they can do it. If they didn't like it, they wouldn't do it, even though they wouldn't be able to eat. To be able to make a living doing what you like is the ultimate joy.

#### What other jobs asides from tattooing fascinate you?

People that live against the tide of that era, those that maintain traditions despite the progress of science and culture, they go in the other direction, for example people that make paper by hand.

#### What are future dreams for you?

I have hopes, but I know they are actually unrealistic, like to join a temple and write script, and to leave the *ukiyo* (floating world), but that is simply impossible.

Up until now, I have been working in this world for a long time, so I'd like to do something in return, to give back, in terms of designs and way of thought. Even if you do something for yourself, eventually you die anyway.

#### What has been your biggest success?

I haven't succeeded yet, maybe when I finish my life, that is when I can say whether I've succeeded or failed.

#### What is success?

It means being satisfied.

#### As an artist is it best to not feel satisfied then?

I can't be satisfied with what I did yesterday, and today, otherwise I won't progress, which essentially means you can't be satisfied. The point at which you die, it's how much your sense of satisfaction has risen. Life is a series of introspections.



CORY LUM PHOTO

# HORIHIDE

#### Is there a particular way in which you compose your work?

Most people do the entire outline first; I just tattoo it as I go along, one part at a time. I do the nose and the eyes and then tattoo it. The clients wonder, "Does it really work out when you tattoo it like this?" I tell them, "Of course it does – if the tattoo and the illustration is different I will give you your money back!" That is the amount of confidence I have. I do this every day and my master taught me like this as well, and times like this, I think this technique really came in handy. This is what other tattoo artists aren't able to do; for example, they will outline the tattoo of the whole thing, for example a carp, and then do the scales last. In my case, I will do the face first and do it part by part. I'm not bragging, but maybe it's only me that can tattoo in this way...I tattoo part by part and I can do it quite quickly.

#### So you were tattooing like this ever since you were an apprentice?

Yes, it was really strict when I was an apprentice. Any artisan trade such as carpenters or anything, you had to do a live-in apprenticeship for 5 years, it didn't matter if you could tattoo or not. You had to do the full five years living with a master. The first two years, you were doing the grunt work and you didn't learn anything. You would clean outside with a broom, and wipe the inside of the house with a cloth, you would do it all. When the master starts work, you sit still, kneeling next to him, and watch him -- he won't teach you verbally, it is more that you "steal" the technique. He will not say, "Do it like this and this," you have to steal with your eyes! After the 2nd year, gradually he lets you work the needles and there is no substitute for human skin, so he would let me practice on his leg. He would say, "Hey it hurts!" and hit me if I made him bleed.

### My god, how nerve-wracking.

Yes, I was definitely nervous, and I would tense up, and he would tell me to relax and do it. He was really strict, but that was really a matter-of-fact thing. This was in the post-war era, when these relationships were feudalistic and honorific, and it was almost a given that we would be hit. On my fourth year, I was allowed to tattoo my first client. The fifth year, I would try and earn money so I could pay back the amount that I had received in terms of eating and learning how to tattoo.

#### So you were practicing on your teacher's leg?

Yes, and also my own. But I got told that if I use ink, I will run out of space, so I was just doing it with the needles. If you go into the bath, about three days later, the outlines come out red, although you can't see it regularly.

#### At the time, was it all live-in apprenticeships?

Yes, there was no such thing as apprenticeships where you just go for the day. It was really not until about ten years after I apprenticed that the system changed, and you could just go for the day. In fact, the system where you live-in is basically slowly eradicating. I wasn't even allowed to drink and smoke at my master's place during my apprenticeship! I would hide in the toilets to have a cigarette!

#### When you were an apprentice, what was a typical day-to-day schedule?

I would wake up in the morning, and then I would finish my meal and then I would clean and get the tools ready. I'd see who had a booking -- back then, it was by booking only, so I would know what they needed done, so I would prepare accordingly. If I knew it was someone who wanted an outline, I would just grind the ink for that, and prepare the needles and put them in a bag with their name on it. At the time, your master was really like a king. Say he said something that was blatantly wrong, you wouldn't correct him, it was really as he said.

#### And then how about the tools?

During that time, there were no needles specifically for tattooing, we were using sewing needles and the configurations were different according to the artist. There might be some that use a rounded tip; there were many different methods.





There is a needle shop in Nihonbashi, first I was taken with my teacher, and he told me which ones to buy, as each one is specified by symbols and numbers. Eventually, I was told to go and get them, and I would get on the train on my own.

Colors didn't exist in Japan at the time, so the pigment which we used was meant for Japanese classic painting and is actually poisonous when inserted into the body as it is a mineral. In order to rectify this, you would have to boil it every day for a week and remove the mercury that floats up to the top until it doesn't come out anymore. Then we would dry it and soak it in *shouchu* (a type of Japanese alcohol) and then use it on the clients. However, because it is mercury and produces red, the client would still get a temperature.

#### Who was your first client?

With my first client, my master did the outline. I got told to relax, and not be nervous. During those days. It was mostly firefighters, construction workers, carpenters and sushi chefs, occasionally there were yakuza too, but actually they were quite rare! It was mostly people working during the day. Construction workers and firefighters do the most dangerous work climbing up tall buildings, and they have seen their friends fall and die, so they get tattoos for protection, to ward against bad luck. For example, they will get an eagle thinking that they won't fall, but fly. They were really into the meanings and get things that ward off bad luck like a Hannya – if a human is scared of that face, evil will be scared too. People get their birth year, or the god that correlates to that year.

They all have meanings and young people today are completely oblivious to those meanings. Usually, if someone has a master, they learn these things, but people who are tattooing cause it's fun; they are doing something meaningless, so they do meaningless tattoos, even if they are technically amazing.

Like, in Japan, there are seasons. For example, snakes up until May are hibernating, right? But there are people that tattoo snakes that are surrounded by cherry blossoms -- especially people that didn't have a *sensei*. Or carps that go upstream up a waterfall are teamed with chrysanthemums and peonies. This is also a mistake, they only go upstream in October in the beginning of Autumn, so you would see maples then. It is really fixed. *Karashishi*/ peonies, dragons/ chrysanthemums, these are really set, like people really mess it up, like a dragon with the cherries, and dragons with peonies is a huge mistake. It is a traditional craft from the Edo period. In order for people to not get this wrong, I made a book. I would get mails literally every week. Tattoo artists have no motifs either so they asked for them. I didn't really want to, because the sketches are for my clients, but that many people asked me, so I finally agreed.

What do you like to tattoo personally? Samurai, the fighting samurai.

### How about the things people get tattooed, has that changed?

No it hasn't. For example, people who want luck will get a carp or a dragon.

# Can you tell us about your relationship with Sailor Jerry and how that came about?

For us artisans, the 2nd and the 15th are days of rest, so I went to Asakusa to look at the magnificent art on the temple. When I went one time, there were three American GIs walking around with short sleeves. They had tattoos with color in them, and I was really astonished, and I asked them to show me.

Before they came to Japan, they had a week off and went to Hawaii and got tattooed by someone at the port. They said they had the tattooist's business card, and that was Sailor Jerry.

After that, I bought an English language book and wrote letters to Jerry in English, for about 4 years. I wrote saying there are no colors in Japan. He said he wanted Japanese motifs, and told me to come to Hawaii and in exchange for designs he would give me the colors. Like this, I got the colors and because the consistency of the colors are really different to sumi, I was told it's probably really difficult to insert these into the skin.

I was watching him tattoo his clients with a machine and the colors went in really easily and smoothly. I was so surprised and found it amazing. He taught me how to use a machine, and I practiced on Jerry's leg -- first the outline, and then the color, and I was like, "This is great!" He gave me machines and colors as a present and I went on back to Japan. And that was the beginning of machines and colors in Japan and I was the first to bring them in! Suddenly, all the horishi in Japan wanted colors and were completely gob smacked and were like, "Wow, these are rainbow colors!" They were so shocked and asked me to split some with them. I was given a lot of colors and I gave them some, and I taught them how to mix them. Up until then, if the design was a chrysanthemum or a peony, there was only red and the leaves were black. I could suddenly tattoo green leaves and it was really considered amazing, and everyone called me -- absolutely everyone -- asking me to give them some. I told them that I didn't have that many colors, and they even offered to pay, so I sent Jerry a letter, requesting colors for the sake of the Japanese tattoo industry. He told me to go to National or Spaulding and I bought them from there.

# But if everyone was tattooing tebori, weren't they having difficulties inserting the colors too?

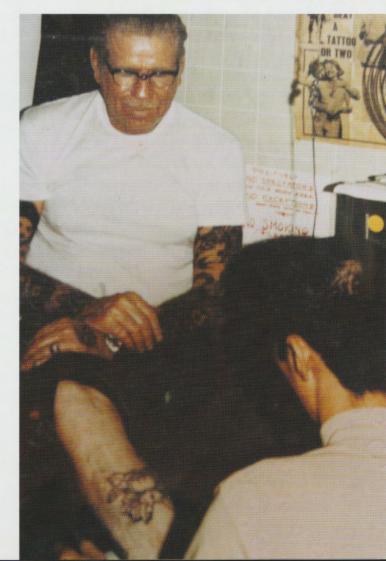
Yes, they came over and watched me with the machines and I told them to buy them from National and Spaulding.

# But when you saw the tattoos on the GI's, you thought the colors were great, but how about the design?

Oh, it was like a sew-on patch. For example, Mickey Mouse, or the mark of the army group of the G.I., or a grave with "Mom" written on the grave stone, or a "Fuck you" and another guy showed me a dotted line, like dot, dot, dot, and then "Cut here!" I found it so funny! I actually chuckled; it had no meaning! But the colors were amazing and I really wanted them.

And then when you went to Hawaii; how did you get there? Oh, by plane! A plane with propellers, it took over ten hours!

Horihide tattooing Sailor Jerry in Hawaii



#### Now it is about four hours!

I couldn't get over how long it took, and the engine was so noisy! I really thought the world is so big and was awestruck. I got to Hawaii and Jerry picked me up in his car. We went to his house to drop off my bags first and he showed me Pearl Harbor! I was like, "Oh I'm so sorry, I really do apologize" and he said, "Oh that's not your fault!"

#### So did Sailor Jerry have a translator then?

I studied a lot of English and in Gifu there were Marine Corps with 3500 people. When I was 17, they wanted an 18 year old driver, but you didn't need a license as long as you could drive because it was the military. I loved cars, so I lied and said I was 18. I was told by the general that I was really good at driving, so I should become his personal driver -- not in a truck but in a jeep. I was told to understand basic English, and to comprehend what things like "Wait" means. So every day, I would write on a piece of paper and try and learn. I was there until I was 19. But I was told by Sailor Jerry that my English was full of G.I. slang, and it was not on! He told me not to use those words, but I had no idea that they were bad; he told me the words I shouldn't use.

#### How long were you in Hawaii?

Ten days, the second time I went, Des Connolly from Australia joined us too, as I got told that he really wanted to meet me. And I was told there is a guy who was really into Japanese tattoos and that his name was Ed Hardy and a photographer (the tattooist) Mike Malone, so we went together and had fun. During that time, I tattooed Ed Hardy and Mike Malone on that hard floor as Jerry didn't have tatami (traditional Japanese flooring). I just did the outline as I only had tebori tools with me.

#### Then when did Ed Hardy turn up in Japan at your place?

After that, there was Zeke Owen, and I became good friends with him, and I went to San Diego because he has a studio out there. Close to there was Ed Hardy's studio, who also learnt from Zeke, so it was after I went to Hawaii for the second time. He said he wanted to learn Japanese tattooing and to come to Japan, and I was like, "I will think about it." He wanted to learn tebori and the illustrations.

After San Diego, I went to Oregon, and Seattle. After a month, I went to San Francisco to meet up with Ed Hardy. Sailor Jerry told me, "If you are coming back this way, could you please drop by Hawaii?" I told him I would go, but Hardy was so excited, he said he wanted to go straight away and that we could go to Hawaii anytime. So we got a direct flight. Then two weeks later, Sailor Jerry died on his Harley and his wife gave me the call. I really wanted to see him, it was a real pity we couldn't meet him for the last time. Without him, these vibrant tattoos wouldn't exist in Japan, as well as the machine work. There are even people who can't tattoo without machine, and this is all because of Sailor Jerry. I really wanted to tell him what had happened in Japan, thanks to him. I wanted to see him a last time.

#### Was your studio an apartment?

Yes, in Japan it was all home studios. Either in the artist's own home or they would hire a room in another apartment. It was like this because tattooing was made illegal and there were no street shops, so it's a remnant of that.

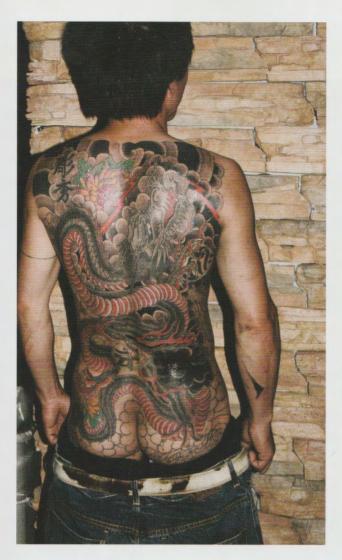
So you were surprised when you saw street shops in places like Harajuku? Yes, well, that was recent -- I just thought the times have changed. It used to be a real underground hidden job and mostly word of mouth. There was no sign, and no phone book listing, it only changed these past 20 years where you would see a street sign with a phone number on it. However things like signs, if you were really talented and had a name, you didn't need one. You would get work regardless, from a lot of clients.

I really went all around Japan, because I was called to go, even without advertising. My clients were great -- they were moving street signs, and people would ask them where they got their tattoo and I would get called to go over and they would have gathered a few clients for me. So I've tattooed everywhere in Japan except for Hokkaido and Okinawa. I really love to travel, especially places next to the sea because Gifu prefecture isn't next to the water, so I was happy to go.

When I would tattoo yakuza groups, I would stay in a hotel for six months to two years and tattoo them all; they paid in advance of course. The people who do physical work are actually a lot stronger than the yakuza because the yakuza are just playing around all the time, living hedonistically whilst the laborers have more physical and mental strength.

#### Any anecdotes you care to share?

I was tattooing a man upstairs at a yakuza office, and a guy from a rival gang came in yelling and brandishing a samurai sword. I was in the middle of tattooing, when this guy comes in and chops off my client's arm. Blood sprayed all over my face, like a shower, and the bone was showing through, his arm was dangling by a thread! But when you are that injured, you are conversely anaesthetized from the pain- he just got right up and ran after the guy....later in hospital he begged them not to amputate his arm, cause I had just tattooed it!



#### What are the difficulties in doing tebori?

With tebori you need to know the technique and you can't have that explained to you, you can only know it by tactile sensation. Once you master it, it's fine, but with a machine, when Jerry first taught me, it was so easy. The colors would just go in so easily, I really thought it was amazing.

#### What is the most appealing thing about tebori though?

It's totally different. If you compare machine and tebori tattooing, side by side, the machine work looks a bit weak. Then there are clients who don't want machine work as well, they don't want it unless it is by hand, and machines are more painful. Zeke and Ed Hardy tattooed me, but it's damn painful because they are fast and they cover so much area quickly. It really was painful! When I went to America and saw Ed Hardy tattooing his client's backs, I was surprised that they would sit through that pain! With Japanese people even if it is tebori, if they are sensitive, they will really hold their breath and stiffen, and then ask for a cigarette break. The Americans really had guts! I didn't think Japanese people would want to sit through something like that, I even wondered if they were a bit masochistic, they would sit there with such an expressionless look in their faces like it was totally fine, ha ha.

#### When did you see American tattooing get so popular in Japan?

Maybe it started 30 years ago, and gradually started to get more and more popular. For example, in the past, ladies were getting Japanese motifs like chrysanthemums and peonies, but from 20 years ago, they would get roses and so on -- things like black cats on the top of their breasts.

In the beginning, it was mostly people in the sex industry but now it really surprises me, the kind of people that get tattooed! Like, people working in a hostess club -- one girl would get one, and then the lot would, or you know girls that work in Pilipino bars? They would come in and get make up! They wanted make-up that they didn't have to apply every day, so I would tattoo it the same color as their hair, kind of brown. They would do their own make-up and I would just tattoo on top.

#### Who was getting tattooed at the time?

The people that would get a big tattoo were basically geisha. There was a geisha that won a prize at the Texas tattoo convention; she was even in the newspaper. A Japanese journalist was there and it was in the Japanese media as well, so when I went back to the airport, a guy from Nihon TV was waiting there, and asked if we could go on TV. It was a quiz show with loads of celebrities. They posed the question, "This person won a number one prize, can you guess what for?" No one guessed correctly, and when she took off her clothes, and everyone was so surprised. Someone from Yomiuri TV was also there and wanted to do live tattooing. Because of that geisha girl, I got quite a few press requests from newspapers, magazines and TV shows.

#### What would you say is the best thing about being a tattoo artist?

My best memories are getting friendly with the ladies I have tattooed on my travels! With my female clients, they are so embarrassed because they have to expose their skin to me when I am tattooing them, but that awkwardness goes and we get friendly so quickly, it's really strange. They would ask me out after work. They would ask me if I had been here before, and if I say 'no', they would ask if I had a day off. Then they would kindly offer to guide me. And then it would be like, 'Instead of going to your hotel, why don't you come to mine and tell me some stories!' It's quite a strange thing. Tattoo artists do well with women, I guess it is because we are seen as being in a strange, mysterious world and it piques their curiosity.





# HORITOKU

#### When did you first see a tattoo?

Maybe in primary in school? I thought it was really cool, I was in the countryside in Hokkaido, and I am from there. I came to Tokyo in junior high school.

#### How did you start as a horishi (traditional tattoo artist)?

I taught myself. I wasn't anyone's student, I think it was rare for that time, but I wasn't really thinking to become a horishi -- I was just playing around in junior high school. Eventually it escalated and I wanted to use color, so I went to a horishi to get tattooed, and while I was getting tattooed, I watched and stole the technique.

#### Who were your first clients?

Just friends of friends coming word of mouth, but nowadays it is the same thing, it has just escalated.

#### How did you improve in the initial stages?

I just practiced, tattooed a lot of people, and went to places like matsuri (traditional festivals), like Sanja, where I could see people's work.

#### What did you do for tools at the time?

When I was just playing around, I was just using chopsticks and putting needles on them, and wrapping them with thread and putting ink on them. When I started, it was predominantly only tebori artists (in the industry). Everyone in the past was using bamboo, it is a perfect flexibility for tattooing.

I was gradually perfecting and altering the technique for making tools. In the past, I would get glue and place the needles on rice paper and wait until the next day for it to dry. Then I would layer it, and then wrap it with thread, and was using those needles until they wouldn't work anymore. Next there was Sellotape, so after glue, I would layer it on tape and layer it on three times, but actually that is really bothersome. I was using this technique for a really long time, after that there was bond that could glue metal, and it is so easy to use.

#### Where do you get the needles?

I went to a needle factory, needles called *beads bari* are the most narrow and we used that for a long time but it is still too wide, so I don't like to use it as is. I would get a few and grind them with a grinding tool to make the best needle tip and strength. In the past, the needles would snap quite easily, and if it is that hard, it's no good because it will scar the skin when you flick the tebori tool up. So I would order them and get them customized just for me.

#### How about the ink?

I am using overseas ink now, but in the past it was pigment. There was an art supply business for Japanese paintings and the owner would research pigments and would tell me, "This color will probably be broken down by the body, and won't be harmful." He let me know a lot of things, and gradually he told me about tattoo inks. He said, "Overseas they are using these things, it is ink that is in a bottle!" This is about 30 years ago.

The only problem is, when you do it with tebori, too much goes into the body, because it is the consistency of ink, and not pigment. When you are flicking up the skin, the ink is absorbed by the skin so it needs to be done with a machine.

The elements are too fine. Now I use National or whatever, but I get the inks with the most viscous texture, stuff that tattoo artists don't really want to use. If I give them to my apprentices who use machines, they tell me it won't enter the skin with a machine, or you can, but you need a certain kind of technical knack to do it.

### What is the biggest difference between tebori and tattooing by machine?

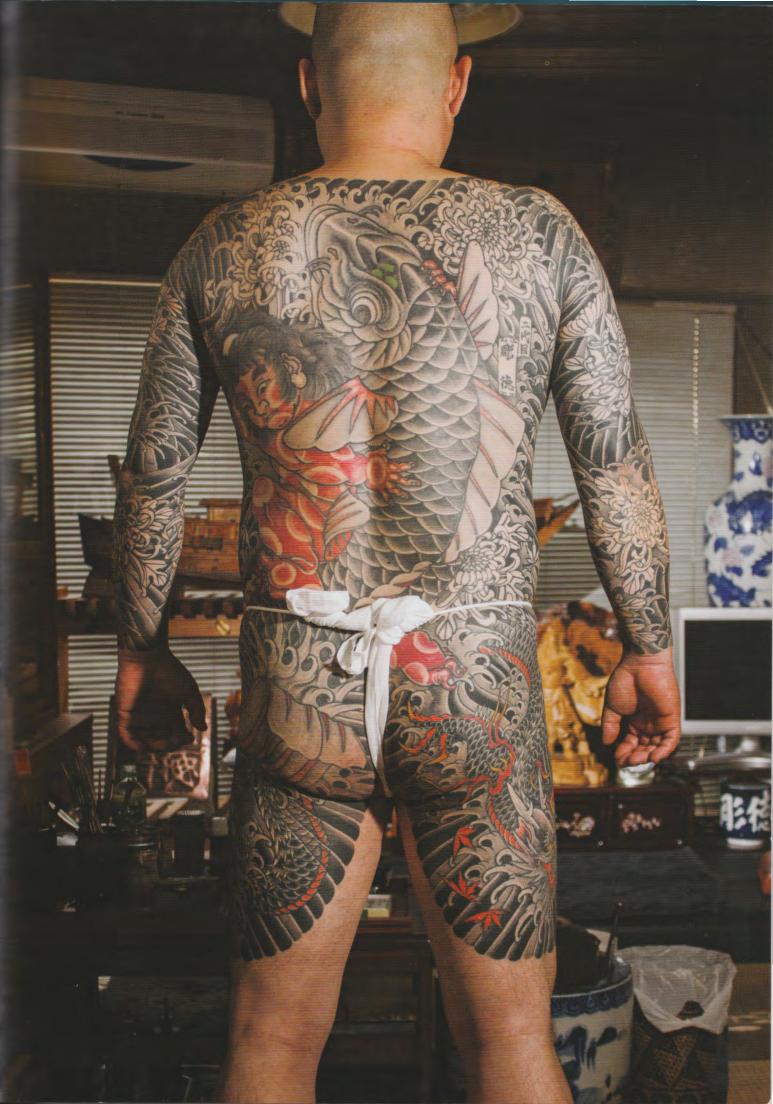
The brilliance of the colors, and the longevity, when you insert the black it turns out bluish, it is a kind of color that doesn't come out with a machine, as you need to insert it quite deeply.













Mid 90s piece on a man working in agriculture.

#### Can you describe your color usage?

I like this black, white and this vermillion – it is really beautiful, it is a color that was used from the past and really suits black.

#### You are really known for your white.

To get it really vibrant, if it's not tebori you can't get this kind of white with a machine, lately I am doing a lot of gold dragons though.

#### What is the appeal of Japanese traditional work?

It is a tradition from long ago -- I guess that is the appeal. It is the appeal of the sumi.

#### What is your favorite motif?

Dragons, even with western tattoos if there is a dragon, I will be interested. There is no limit as it is something imaginary.

#### What do your clients want nowadays, motif wise?

With Japanese traditional work, I guess they like dragons and carps. Dragons are really difficult, first it is cherries, peonies and carps but things like dragons that don't exist are really difficult.

#### If someone says "you can do anything," what kind of things do you ask?

I ask them what their preferences are -- do you want something strong looking, or something beautiful like a woman? Or something valiant like a dragon, or a *karashishi*? Like this, I can filter down the choices.

In the past, I would get more people telling me to do what I am most competent in, although orders like that are the most difficult. Usually, the client decides now because there is so much information, whereas in the past there were no magazines. Conversely, clients in the past would know that a certain artist is good at human characters, or someone is good at outlines, or gradations, or if new colors came in -- they would know this kind of information.

#### What would you tattoo for someone who wants to get stronger?

Something from *Suikoden*, and for someone who wants something beautiful, a courtesan or *tennyo* (Buddhist angel); they are the representative motifs.

In the past, the clients were really into the meanings, but nowadays, they aren't really into them at all. People in the past were really concerned if something was unlucky. For example, a morning glory (flower), if you tattoo the whole thing, in the morning it will bloom but at night it will wilt, so they will ask me not to fill in the whole thing, and leave open one leaf or a petal. Or they will ask me to leave one bead open for prayer beads on the wrist, or on the neck because it is like being strangled. Nowadays, the clients like the visuals and don't really talk about whether it is lucky or not.

#### Do you communicate with other horishi?

I don't myself, but my students have those kinds of connections. With myself, it is within my family only -- if a tattoo artist wants to come over to visit, I will meet them anytime, but unless they turn up, I won't go to them.

# I was tattooed by you over 10 years ago and I didn't know how to find you again!

Yes, I think that is one of the "cool" aspects of Japanese traditional tattooing, to not have a street sign because it is a hidden job.

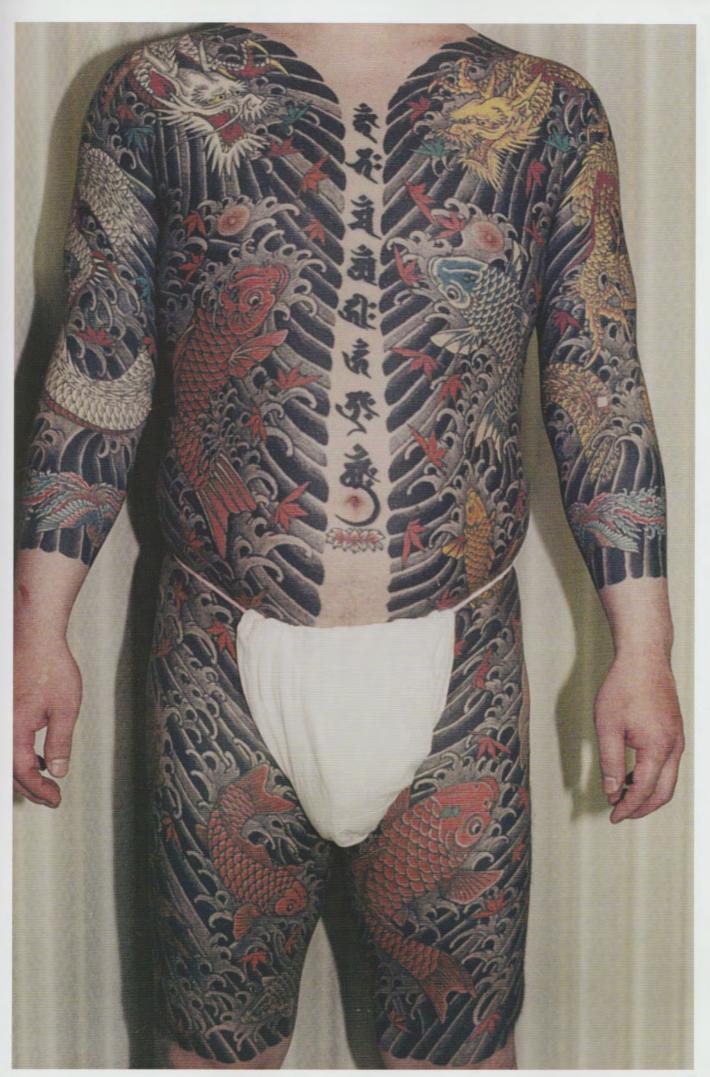
In the past, I really hated doing interviews too.

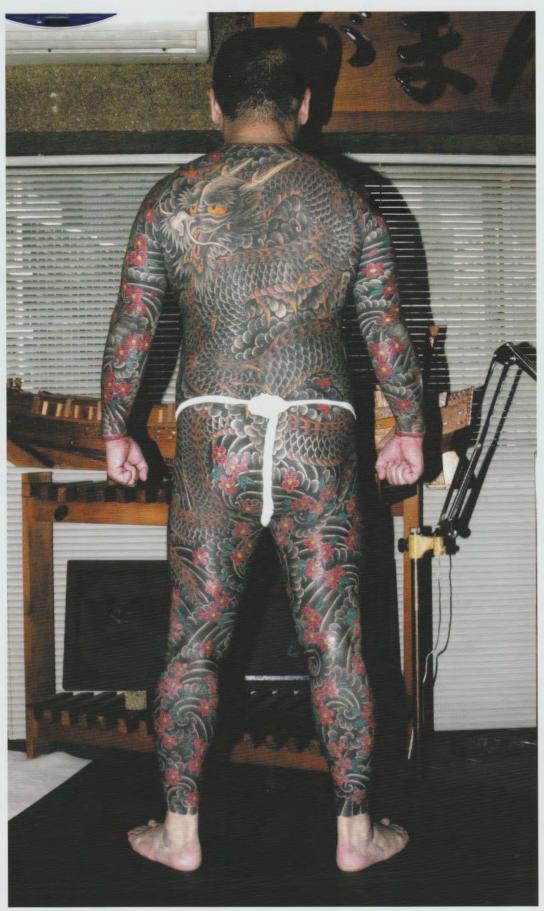
#### Do you enter conventions?

I don't enter them, and never have. They are fine. I have never entered, but it is good for the students, like a study group! But for people like myself, it nothing to do with us. For artisans it is a battle with oneself, so by looking at other people's work, your own work will become diluted. I think it is the same with everyone. You need to focus on your own work. If you start looking at other people's work and take their good parts, it will stop being your work and less pure.

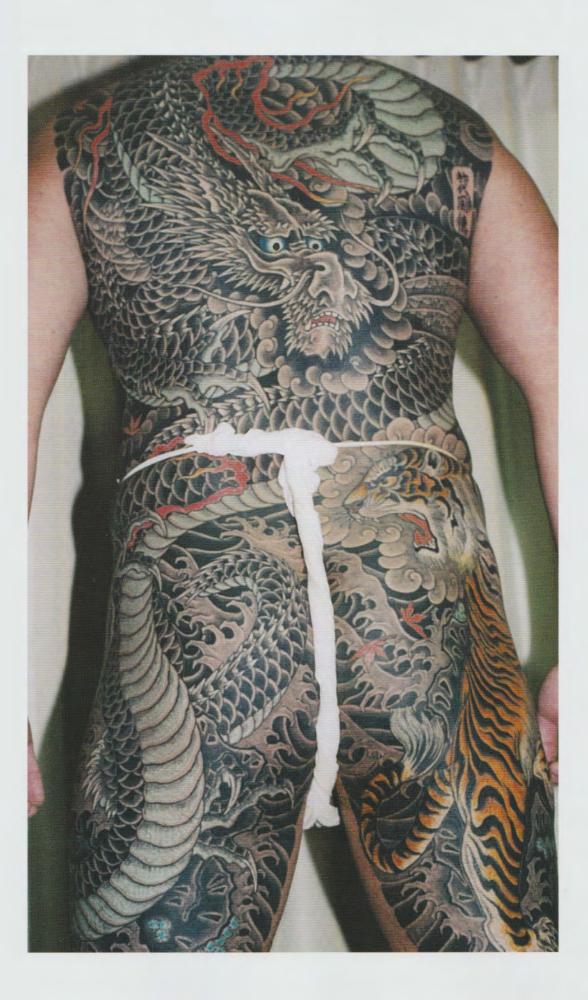
#### What direction do you feel the Japanese tattoo industry will go?

What will happen in the future, I'm not too sure, but I think the ones that will remain, will be the people protecting traditions, no matter if they are young or old. I definitely don't think it will go in the direction of (western) tattoos.





Body suits from around year 2000



#### Are their parallels between Japanese traditional crafts?

I think there are some places where they overlap, these artisanal crafts.

#### A lot of tattooers consider themselves to be artists though.

I had a student that had graduated art school and became my student, but when I got him to draw, it was bit different. You need to lose everything and study Edo era prints, otherwise you won't be able to do Japanese traditional tattoos -- when they use perspective in their sketches, the impact of the tattoo disappears.

#### Do people ever ask you for a bargain?

Occasionally, and I tell them, 'Sure I can make it cheaper...but the work will be of a lower quality, and it might hurt too! I have no colors! The needles are a bit out of shape, 'Ha ha...

#### When you first started where were you first getting references?

Ukiyo-e books and I also went to the Kanda book district. I would go with Horitoshi and would tell him to scour one side of the road and I would search the other side. We would spend one day and allocate it for looking for Kintaro references. And if Kanda didn't have anything, we would go combing libraries and copy things from there. For *Fudomyoo* or Buddhist motifs, if there is a good scroll, I can use it for reference or if there is a statue, I will take a photo and sketch it.

#### But nowadays, you can find most things in magazines.

That is no good, if you don't have the original, people are already altering it and tattooing it, so you don't know where it has been changed. There are publishers that produce books and a certain tattoo artist will get Kuniyoshi and make it into line drawings. I wanted to have a look, so I called them, and I told them I want to buy it, and the publisher said, "If someone like you saw it, you probably wouldn't think much of it." He dropped some off and told me not to pay for them, and I looked at the sketches and they were no good. It sells well though.

### So if people are referencing off other peoples works, do you see magazines as a bad thing?

Yes for sure, for our work, we are copying that era's illustrations and that era's ukiyo-e designs. If you do an ukiyo-e motif with the bra sticking out, you might see that and not think anything, but if people of the Edo era saw that, they would really wonder what the string on her shoulder is! There are lots of things like this. When you see ukiyo-e designs you really have to ascertain things like what is this *obi* (kimono sash) tying? Where does it go and why? Why is a kimono is tied a certain way and why the sleeves are like that? What is this wig? And if you don't understand these things you can't draw the designs.

In order to understand this, you need to see the kabuki and sumo and see the *chonmage* hairstyles in real life. Or say things like flowers, if you see it with your eyes, you can understand what is going on. But it isn't that easy to see a courtesan or a geisha, or a samurai for that matter, ha ha! Period dramas on television replicate costumes quite closely though. I mean, if you gave a girl of that era and put panties on her, it's really a bit odd, so it's whether the horishi of now know this, even knowing what kind of underwear the geisha wear.

I really encourage people to study the culture and when horishi like this are around, Japanese culture remains and they can teach their apprentices. However, when these people disappear, the culture will finish.

Even if you teach your apprentices things, they see too many things at places like conventions and become friends with people who don't know culture. If they study, they gradually get it. It's like the same with (western) tattoos and knowing about Polynesian roots, or people in Thailand knowing their culture, what the meanings are in the spiritual, cultural and ethnic sense.

## What is the best advice you can give to someone overseas learning wabori?

To throw away the perspective of oil painting.

#### Who is the most important ukiyo-e artist for you?

I think in terms of illustrations, Kuniyoshi is really strong and accessible.

With Azabu's Horiyoshi, he used Yoshitoshi a lot, his work is a lot more detailed than Kuniyoshi and sometimes the work employs perspective as he was a painter during the Meiji era, but it's really hard to convert these prints to tattoos. Unless you really know Japanese art, it is hard to convert, with layman's knowledge it is impossible. For example, Hokusai's art is like that as he didn't want to be copied by other people.

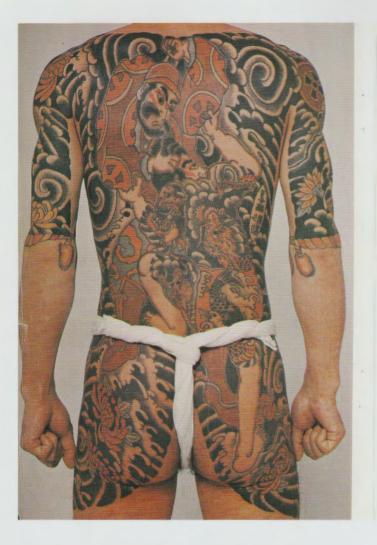
#### How long does it take to do a body suit?

It really depends on the design, and also if the client asks me to do it quickly or with less money, you can make the clouds with less detail, like make three large clouds, instead of ten. For clients like that, you have to compromise yourself and tattoo like that.









#### When did you first start seeing western tattoos in Japan?

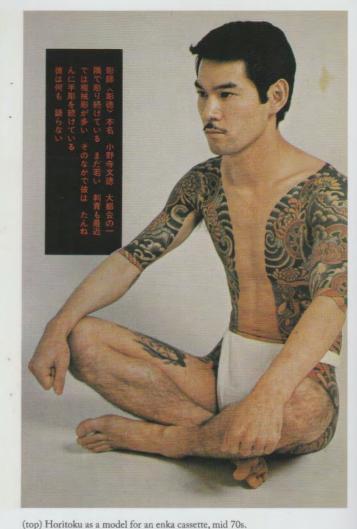
I wanted to try it, because other Japanese horishi weren't doing western tattoos, but I couldn't draw those kinds of illustrations, so I decided to find an illustrator via a photographer I knew. I told him to ask one of the two most famous illustrators of the time, which was Yokoo Tadanori, or Akira Uno if they would be into doing an illustration, and I would do the tattoo in tebori and find the female canvas. Akira Uno accepted -- there wasn't money involved, but we wanted to do it for press. It was so rare to see a western tattoo, and so we had a lot of people that wanted to do interviews with us. During that time, Bonten Taro was doing new things too and when I met him, he was like, "Ah, you did it first!" -- he was probably looking to do something similar.

After that, a bunch of tattoo apprentices came to me, asking to be my apprentice; people like Kishi and Uchiyama saying they want to do Japanese style work.

#### How many apprentices do you have, and what are their obligations?

I have around 20, I think, such as Uchiyama, he is now doing design work, Kishi and one went to America, and Ikebukuro's Horitoshi, but he now has his own family.

They need to protect tradition and Japan's Edo era culture. If they forget that and their eyes are wandering to (western) tattoos, then the illustrations end up weird.



Work by Nihonbashi Horikan (right) Work from around the year 2000.

#### How does one enter your family?

Generally, an introduction, or someone saw a magazine or they heard a rumor and then they call me, and then I ask them to come in, and have a talk.

#### How do you determine whether you will take them or not?

I ask them if they like illustrations, and observe what kind of personality they have and whether I think they will last. If they seem alright, I get them to come in.

The speed at which they learn differs according to the individual though, even if you teach them the same thing, one person has talent and over the years, their technical ability rises quickly. But no matter how many years it takes, they can call me if they need to know something but I have a lot of apprentices, so they teach each other and they learn quickly like that.

#### So by entering a family it is quite beneficial?

Yes, I think by having that name, no matter where they go, they can carry that.

Now tattoos are so fashionable are you surprised? I never thought it would be like this!

#### How does it make you feel?

I guess its OK, fashion is fashion. Conversely, in a prison, or a public bath, a person's horimono is the only "label" that they had because everyone is wearing the same thing. Those kinds of people were really common in the past, it is the ultimate status brand, and if you get a terrible piece you would probably get laughed at too. If someone went to a tattoo artist with a name, even if they are lower rank, they would get treated nicely by their superiors. So they can benefit from various ways -- in that way it is kind of the same.

### Do you feel that if you get a tattoo from you, it's kind of like a status symbol?

Yes, I think so.

### Where did the connection between yakuza culture and tattoos come about?

Horishi would make designs to get rid of penal tattoos from places where criminals were exiled, like Sado Island. That criminal image continued -- that notion that irezumi is something for scary people, something that criminals get. Nowadays though, regular people are walking around showing their tattoos off, so it isn't obvious who is who – if a yakuza member did that too, they look the same as a regular person walking around showing their tattoos off, so there is no notion that doing something like that is scary anymore. In my case, I get regular people too, and this has been the case since the tattoo boom.

#### Do yakuza girls get tattooed too?

Yes, I have also worked on the wives too, but it's not like they have to get tattooed, it's up to the individual.

### With the motifs, is it up to the individual, no matter what group they are in?

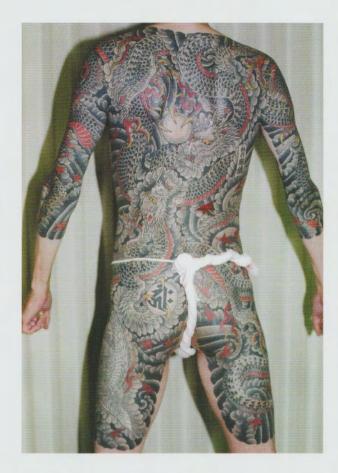
Yes, occasionally they will get what the superior has, or conversely there are superiors who will say, "Don't get the same things as me!" In the past, the superiors were paying for the underlings -- it was a good era -- but they were like, "If you run away, peel your skin off and leave it behind. You can never run away!"

### Say if you are tattooing the yakuza, and you tattoo the very top, does that mean you tattoo the young ones too?

Sometimes, but usually it is more like they get the young ones to go somewhere cheaper or something like that. In the past, the syndicate probably paid but nowadays I think they are paying themselves, so they probably want to go somewhere less expensive.

#### What makes a good tattoo?

Sumi and the backgrounds. The area around the tattoo, there are meanings within these backgrounds. To separate heaven and earth, water and rocks. This background is really important for people and focused on, whether it is Japanese or western painting – the background is important.

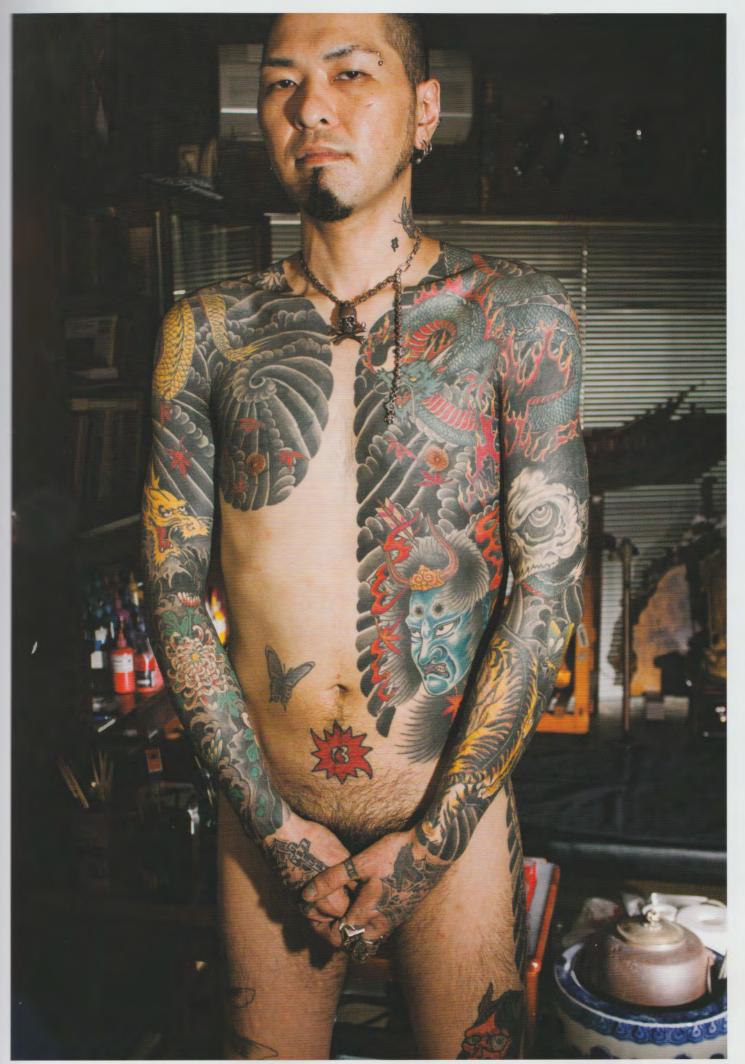












# TOKAI HORIHIRO

#### Can you tell us about your past?

I started when I was around 30 years old and have been tattooing until today! I am 71 years old now. I have been doing the same thing, the whole time, it is just a big long repetition! (laughs) Up until then, I was working at a sign makers place as an apprentice. I was helping there and around that time, I naturally came to understand the feelings of an artisan.

#### Can you describe what the psychology of an artisan is, exactly?

That work is number one and you need to progress positively. It is the same mentality as a traditional tattoo artist, for myself anyways, it might be different for other people. It is a competitive world, and if you can't do good work, you don't get paid.

#### When did you first meet Horiyasu?

He came to me because he wanted to learn electric machines, it was a time there were none. This was in Iwate. I could feel the tide of the times and I wanted to switch to a machine and I was using a machine that Ed Hardy gave me to do the thin gradations and the rest was by hand.

#### What were the characteristics of your machines?

It was a magnet. When Ed Hardy came to Japan (to Horihide's) I was 27, and he tattooed my back.

I came to understand the configurations while I was using his machines and how they were set up, and how you could customize them. I asked Horiyasu if someone could make them and he got someone straight away, and together we figured out what was working and what wasn't. We also figured out how to make the needles and made them all ourselves too and I was using these for ages. Making needles is a total hassle, especially when your eye sight becomes bad.

If you talk about the characteristics of the machines, if you say it really broadly, I was doing tebori for a long time. I feel that most machines are somewhat vibrating on the surface of the skin, with a sliding motion, whereas with mine, the rotations are really slow and it is powerful. The goal is to have the needles enter the skin really strongly. This makes the movement closer to tebori, to be able to use thick sumi.

I am doing traditional Japanese tattoos, so I use thick, tough looking lines. It isn't like a modern tattoo with delicate lines, which are beautiful when you first tattoo it, but after 4 or 3 years it fades, the lines and the gradations look dissolved. With wabori, to show the gradations beautifully, the lines are important, it needs to look full bodied and alive from a distance.

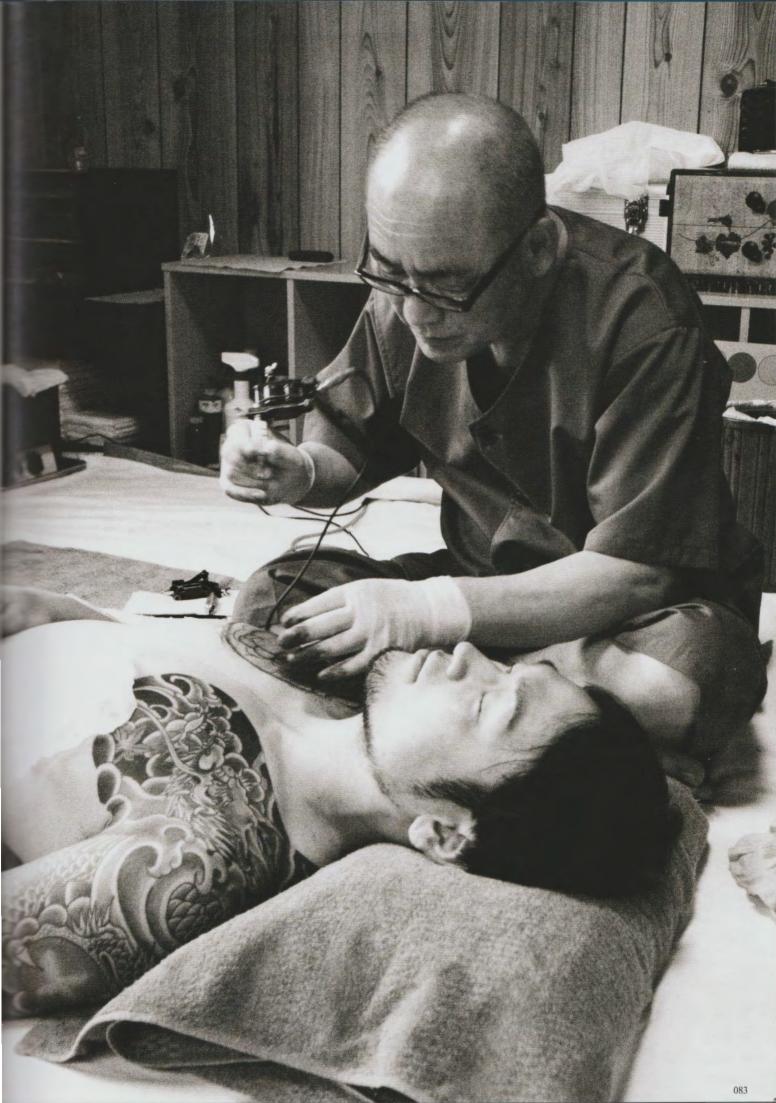
Horiyasu is able to do detailed work, and I think it is good that he finds what he is good at and extends that. It is something I couldn't copy, people are different and individualistic. For myself, I am an old school horishi and I go for impact and that is the most important thing for me. If you can make a line, even a single line less and get the same effect the client has to suffer less and it is efficient. But there are a lot of ways of thinking in relation to this.

# But over the years, would you say that in general, wabori is getting more and more detailed?

Yes, over the last ten years there are very few people that do true wabori. It has been maybe even 20 years for those tendencies. I get a lot of tattooers coming to my studio to see my work and also get tattooed and the way they color and things like this is different. This isn't to say it is wrong or bad, for our generation, there was little chance to see western tattoos, so it is the influence of that. Also back then there were no colors. It is a natural progression.

#### When did you first see a tattoo?

When I was in my 20s. It was just like *tekiya* (peddlers) ink. It wasn't like there was a huge impact when I saw it. The reason I started was because it was an era when holiday villas were popular and I was a subcontractor.

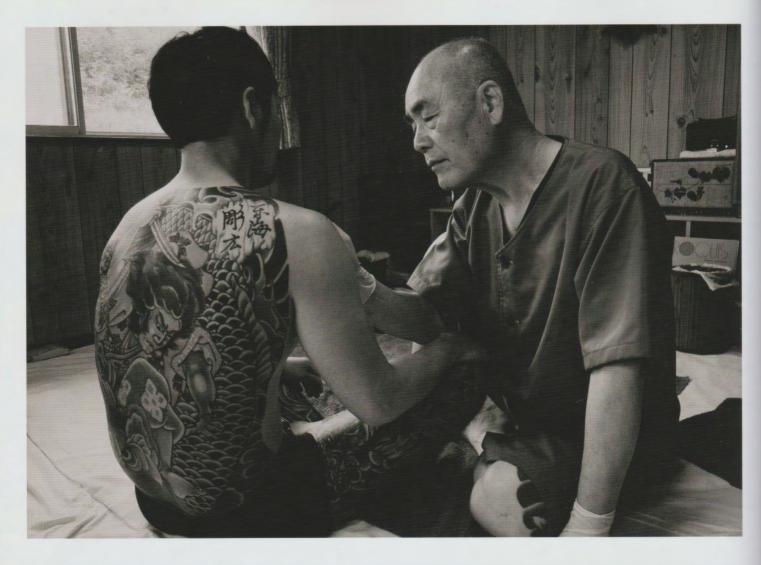












It was an era when the economy was good and I was young and buying a bunch of cars. I was making a road on a volcanic mountain and with really soft soil, and it was really expensive and I got into tons of debt and completed it, but instead of going on with it, I wanted to do something else. The people next to us were yakuza and at the time I really loved illustrations, and *nihonga* (Japanese classic painting). I was drawing, and they said if you are this good at illustrations why don't you become a tattooist? and they let me tattoo them. There were no sketches at the time but (actor) Bunta Sugawara's *Mamushi no Kyoudai* film was really a hit back then (a 70s yakuza film) and I just grabbed that poster, ha ha,...it is a total manga world. I can't believe I was working like that, one after another! ha ha...

#### Did you not have a teacher?

Horihide. I had no colors at the time, and he offered to introduce us to colours and needles and things like that. It's not like he taught me how to tattoo, but he would give out colours, and needles and would suggest I do something in a particular way, and gave me sketches as I had none. So in this way I consider him to be like a sensei. I wanted to experience it too, so I got him to tattoo me. During this time, Ed Hardy was in Japan to learn wabori.

## If you were introduced to colors by Ed Hardy what were you doing for colors before that?

I was doing a lot of work without color. I would say before I met Horihide I was an amateur though, not an artisan but the times were good and I had no problems with clients. I was getting the underling, young yakuza. They still weren't matured and going to Horihide, it was guys who would just drop by and say, 'Hey can you tattoo me today?' (laughs) It was just kids.

#### How did they find you?

All word of mouth. Eventually the syndicates would invite me and gradually I ended up being a tattooist only tattooing the yakuza, not people with respectable jobs -- in fact, I had barely ever tattooed people like that. Every day it was a different syndicate and I would rotate per week and that continued with cycles that could last for years.

And then as an artisan you get knowledge and skills eventually; even if you aren't that good, if you are told you are good, you become good, ha ha... I think the turning point was when Horiyasu was in Iwate and he called wanting to be introduced and asked to be an apprentice. I was like, I'm not into the teacher-apprentice style, even now, I hate that hierarchical style, I just want to be friends.



I said that it is fine to meet and I was so surprised, he turned up that day! He stayed for a week. We were out at the golf range, I overheard him talking to his wife on the phone that he wouldn't go home until I taught him! During that time I hadn't even thought about teaching anyone, but when I overheard that, I realized he is really serious and I decided to rethink things. From the next day I let him take photos and gave him the colors and the machines. He said he was able to make the machines and he got them made in about three days. We made a lot of changes in the rotations to get it to rotate really slow and strong, and that was difficult to achieve. For close to 20 years we were using this machine. Nowadays I use Ed Hardy's tattoo machine but we need to customize it ourselves.

So, in this way, Horiyasu is someone that I grew up with.

### But usually when there is a kind of apprentice relationship with traditional tattoo masters are there obligations?

Not in my case, but there are families, and you can make a profit and there is that style -- to make an organization.

#### Who are your clients now?

Around 90% are regular people. As soon as I stopped travelling around and started working from home, around 10 years ago, I started to get regular folk. Up until then, I was travelling constantly. I would sleep at home 2 or 3 nights for 30 years. I would go over and then they get my hotel and travel expenses, and at night they would pay for my massages -- they paid for it all. They treat you really well. When you reach the hotel they take your bags and when you wake they are waiting in the corridor, and when you drive they would fill your tank to the top. But when you hit 60 years old, you feel your age.

#### Weren't you nervous in the beginning?

No, not at all! I already entered this world under those conditions so it was common sense. It was a time when the syndicates really had pride and there was never any issues with money and they would feed you and make sure you stay in nice hotels. It was really fun. With some groups, the places I have the longest affiliations with, I have seen the boss change three times. In twenty years the guy that was holding my luggage became the top. During this time, the people that first looked after me have passed away though. The (yakuza) organization itself has changed as well, the economy isn't any good either. Regular people have their own work but the difference is whether they come in once a week or once a month, but they would complete their work.



#### What do they want tattooed?

I don't think that has changed, but they just want Japanese traditional. What they want is up to the individual. I will tattoo mything though, and I will make sure I can do it, because if you can't do that you are not an artisan. Like, you can't say 'Oh I don't have a sketch for that!' Personally, I like human and living things. Rather than nice things, I like fierce things.

#### How do you achieve the balance in your work?

It is easy, actually. If there is a tiger or an animal with four legs you do it vertically and then look at the body of the person. If their hips are narrow, I will ascertain the balance and imagine it in my head.

If you do the lines too straight there is no atmosphere, so occasionally you make it a bit bent. And you have to think if it is this thick, after three years it might be bit thicker still, so I calculate that in my mind and see if his skin is one that absorbs ink or one that doesn't absorb it. Then I set the needles according to that, and approximate after three years how thick the lines will be. For example, if you don't calculate that with the hair on a human character, after three years they will end up a bit clumpy so you need to use thinner needles. When you tattoo people who dissipate ink, it is easy to do gradations, the body does the work for you.

#### Where do you get references from?

I have no interest in ukiyo-e actually. I think it is beautiful but I don't really want to do it myself. I think the fact that I'm not interested means that I have no sense for it, which means I can't add to it in any way and would just rely on the trace. It would just look rigid like a bunch of lines with no movement, like a doll standing there.

However for Horiyasu, he can do it with movement, we have different sensibilities. I think this is something you are born with, and it is necessary to find what you are good at, then you can live off that.

#### When did you first see a western tattoo?

When Ed Hardy was here. I can say he is amazing at illustrations. My impression of him is whenever I went over to Horihide's he was constantly drawing. He was a good man and he was thin back then! During that time, Ed brought Spaulding colors and tools and because he was at Horihide's, I was one of the early ones to get that kind of information. In this way, I was able to find out about the needles and the companies overseas. It was great that I could get that information from him. When he went home, he left all his machines at Horihide's, and he gave two to me, it was really good timing. Because of that, during my career, I hardly had to use those old pigments.

#### What did you think of the actual tattoos?

When I saw it in reality, and became friends with (western) tattoo artists, I can really say that it is a totally different world. Even if we try and do it, the perspective is like copying and maybe the shape is there, but there is no sense of humor or reality that is inherent in western tattoos. Rather than doing something unsatisfactory, it is better to pass it on to some guys who have a tattoo shop nearby. For people that want western tattoos, they won't go wrong by going to a western tattoo artisan. It is good for the tattooist and also the client. I think it is an amazing world and I respect it and acknowledge that it is difficult. People who are good at western tattoos are excellent and very skilled.

#### What is the fascination of wabori to you?

It is amateurish, and the balance is off and the illustrations are amateurish (laughs). It is really old school. It is really wabori-ish and great! The illustrations are really amateur, even I think that, we are artisans not artists. There is a certain atmosphere in that though:

#### How else has western tattooing affected the Japanese tattoo industry?

When I was travelling I would tattoo 4 people a day, and we would use the same needles. With the colors, if you leave it for a bit, there is blood inside and it would mold and we would just mix it. During the time it was just a matter of fact thing. Then western tattoos came in and for the first time we learnt of sterility. At first, we really thought 'What on earth are you talking about?' It was only 20 years ago that people become more aware and I thought, if you think about it, they are right. Now it is common sense, but that is a cultural difference. So that is a huge side merit of western tattoos coming into the country. Also the needles. We had to do everything in the past and now there are companies that make needles just for tattooing overseas and the fact that an entire company just makes such things, means that they make products that are suitable. For us, to use those makes us feel secure. It is an era that if you pay, you can buy such things.

#### Are you surprised to see all the street shops in fashionable places?

It is a good era. The level of management is really high, and they are really good to us as well. If a good color comes out with a good reputation they will send me a set for free all the time. It means that I am able to use the best things, and I am really grateful for that.

#### What is the best thing about being a horishi?

That I can do something I love. Before I would do 4 or 5 clients a day and it was ten at night when I would finish, and the last night I would go to the next prefecture. I would tattoo in Tsuruga.



Then I would go to Kansai, to Suzuka, Hashimoto, Wakayama and then a month is over.

#### But how many yakuza were there?

I would tattoo and tattoo and it was endless. One after the other, it just went on and on. Nowadays there are fewer, and the power of the organizations are diminishing.

#### Don't they want to be inconspicuous nowadays?

Yes, but in the past if you entered a group you would have to put in ink, but now there is nothing like that. It is just the culture changing according to the era. I think it is really important for the groups to be conscious of this change. If someone doesn't want to be tattooed they shouldn't have to either. Before, the boss would tell someone and there was an order, like a number. They would pay cash that day, then when I would leave, my car boot was filled with presents, it is totally unthinkable now.

#### Where did you like?

I liked Hokuriku's fish and Kansai beef!

#### How else has things changed?

The world has changed -- the level of common sense has really risen, if you don't take this work seriously and work hard you won't remain,

it doesn't matter what kind of work you do -- this is fundamental. When you see young people and they have a huge ego and use foul language, they are simply mistaken -- you need to look after your clients and you are being trusted with their bodies and you must do the best work. When you repeat this, this is the way you get trust over several years and this slowly becomes transmitted to the clients, and they will say 'If you go to him, you won't regret it.' For example, the client might want a dragon and they might think, 'I want a face like this, and hands like this' but they trust you and lie flat. Seeing his body, whether his arm is thin or thick, I can do a dragon according to my instinct.

If a customer comes in and goes against your advice and insists he wants a huge dragon but he has skinny arms and you do it, that isn't good. That means the client doesn't trust your judgment. You want someone who is so happy after you tattoo them, and says to you, 'I am so glad I asked you!.'

That it is becoming a difficult industry to survive means that it is a chance to rise to the next level. The people who persevere will survive and better work will remain. Up until now, it was an era that anyone could work, and so I think these changes are good; only the real ones survive. The people who rise can do so with confidence.















# HORIYASU

### When did you first see a Japanese tattoo, and what were your impressions?

When I was around 9 or 10, in a *sento* (public bath). Even during that time, it wasn't common that you would see tattooed people in public baths, as there was a separation in society between people in criminal organizations and "regular" citizens. The impression it left was, how would you say it? Extremely powerful! It had a lot of emotional impact on me, and I got a more cumulative interest in tattooing after I started getting them myself.

# When you saw the tattooed person, did you instantly assume it was a yakuza member?

Well, this is in the Kansai prefecture 50 years ago, and that world was entirely separate to "normal" people. Even so, it looked very cool, I think it is something that resonates with the Japanese soul, even from that young age.

#### When did you first get tattooed yourself?

When I was 20 or 21 years old? When I was in Kofu prefecture, and I was doing morning baseball, my colleague removed his shirt and was tattooed. The feeling of attraction I had to Japanese tattoos since I was a child was revived, and I asked where he had it done. The illustration and outline was probably Horiyoshi II, and Horiyoshi III did the color gradations. It was done *donburi* style and was really powerful.

## Isn't that kind of lucky you went to a legendary master to get tattooed straight away?

Yes, ha ha...maybe it is a good coincidence and good timing. During those times, Japanese traditional tattoo artists were limited in number, it's not like now, where there are plentitudes of artists. It was a really specialized job and it was something that was considered to be a level much higher to regular artists, and even within these brilliant artists, Horiyoshi II's name really stood out. During those times, it's not like you look in the telephone book and call the tattoo master, how did you initially meet Horiyoshi? Oh, I had to receive an introduction via my friend.

#### What is the difference between Horiyoshi II and Horiyoshi III's work?

Horiyoshi II illustrations were similar to that of Shodai Horiyoshi, whereas when it went to Horiyoshi III, the colors, illustrations and tattooing style changed dramatically. The colors were more brilliant, and he was able to utilize a wider variety of motifs in the illustrations, coupled with his outstanding technical skill.

### Is it true that you used to make samurai swords before becoming a tattoo artist?

Yes, I was a sword smith for 16 years, starting when I was 21 years old, a year after I started getting tattooed. I was in Iwate prefecture at the time. My friend who was the friend of the sword smith asked me to help him. At the time I liked swords too, I collected them. I would go around 8 in the morning and you can't use an electric light because the blade reflects sunlight, so using the early morning soft sunlight, I would sharpen blades until night. Therefore, during the summer, you can work for longer, until 6, and during winter, you can only work until 4. I was working without electric lights the whole time.

#### What exactly does the work entail exactly?

Polishing the blades, removing things like rust and rendering the shape beautifully, and to show the exquisite nature of the surface. I think to show this beauty, is the skill and talent of the sword smith.

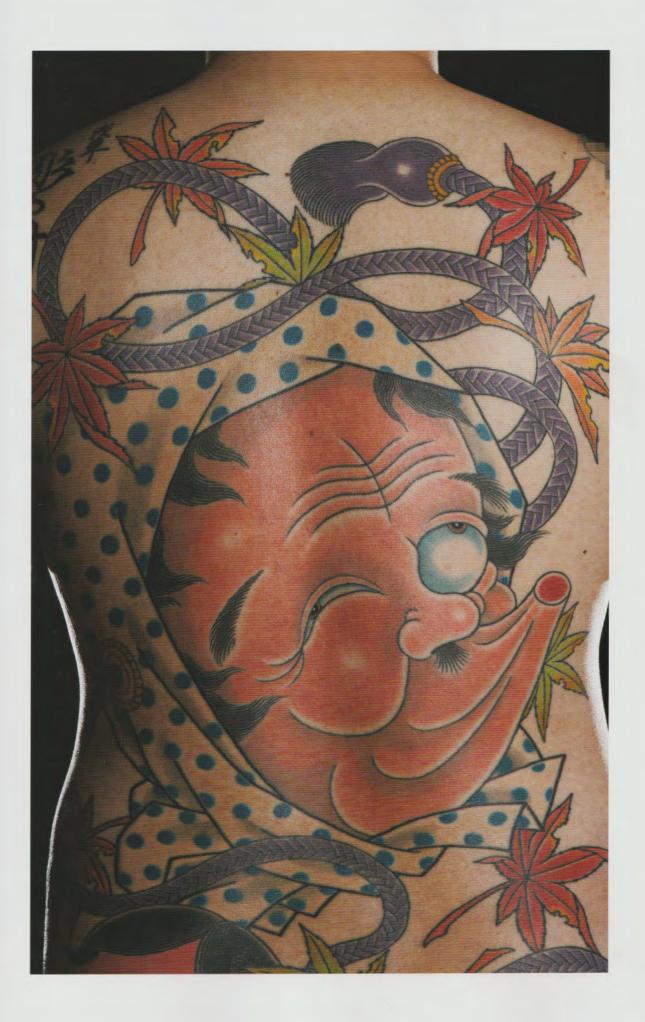
#### Who was buying blades?

Hobbyists, similar to collectors, however they are extremely expensive, both the blades themselves and to pay for me to sharpen the blade. The blade itself, the sky is the limit -- there are some that are worth millions and some that are priceless, the oldest ones are from the Heian period, around 1300.

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How long were you doing this for? 15 or 16 years.

#### How long did you want to be a tattoo artist for?

Since I was getting tattooed myself, but I went into the blade apprenticeship first. However, blades are a luxury and if there are no clients, you can't survive, no matter how skilled you are. When I was starting there were many blades, but for 15 or 16 years, that really dwindled, it is sad, but you just have to change gears and move onto the next thing. Subsequently, I moved into the direction of tattooing and I also think that is a good thing too.

### Did you find it psychologically challenging to go from being a sword smith with great skill for 15 years, and then to go back to scratch as a tattoo artist?

Yes, very much so, however because I was working with blades, so the notion of working with needles and to sit all day wasn't that hard to transition into.

#### How did you learn?

I was learning myself, but I didn't know where to get machines, colors, needles, I didn't know anything, but in Morioka city there was a horishi who is a bit older, and I was going to him and watching and learning. After a year. I was able to obtain a machine, although at first I was doing it by hand.

I was introduced to Gifu Horihiro and he told me how to set up the needles and how the machine moves. I went from Iwate prefecture to Gifu prefecture numerous times to learn. He did the outlines and the color with a magnet machine, the rest by hand. When I saw the speed in which he works, I was astounded. Eventually, by watching these masters, I started to make my own machines.

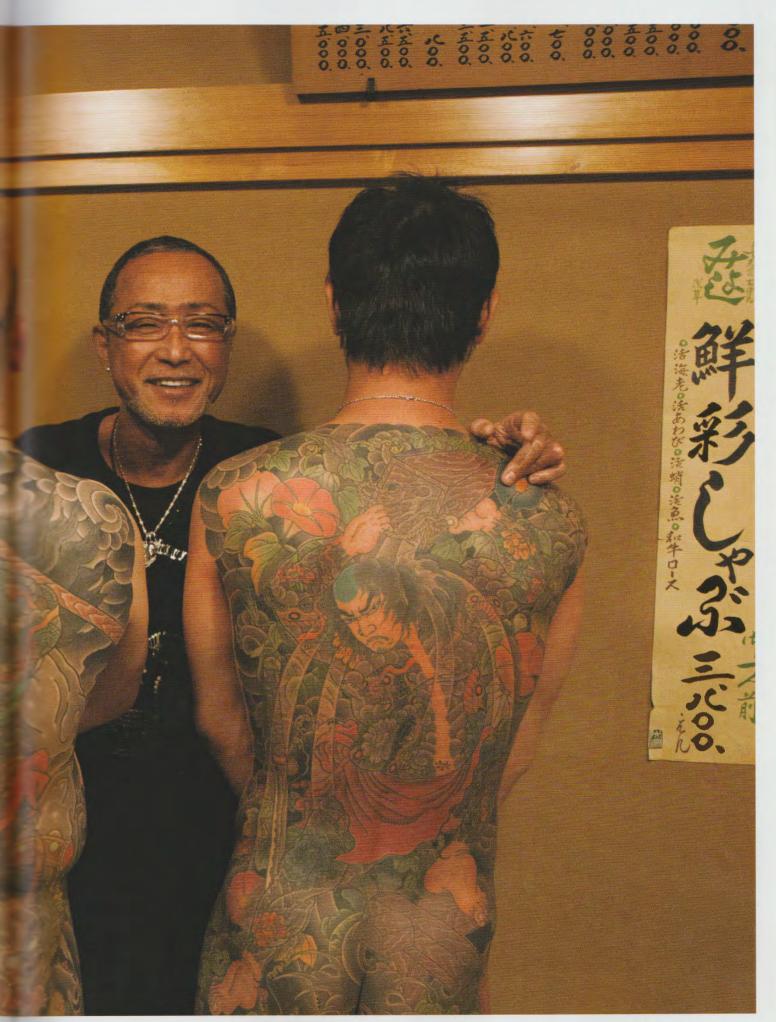
## When did you start to the achieve the compositional perfection of your work?

Ha, ha, it's not perfect! I started to feel comfortable after around ten years, the machine configurations are really difficult, and you are never satisfied with your work. Until the day you die, you are perpetually training. Last year, I started to use a coil machine. I went to Gifu Horihiro's place and he switched to a coil machine, even though he is ten years older than me and I was really impressed by his work ethic and his perseverance. He can work quickly and the gradations are well done as well, and so taking a cue from that, I started as well.

#### Who were your initial clients?

I started in Asakusa, although I was tattooing out of my house for a few years before that in Ibaraki prefecture. Because I opened a studio in a suburb where I didn't know anyone, a lot of my clients at the time were from other prefectures and saw my work in a magazine, or things like this.





Asakusa is rife with yakuza, but they don't really come to me, for local gang members, they go to tattoo artists that have been around for a long time in the area that the syndicate already has relationships with. It's not like I am separating, nor denying them though.

As a result, I have mostly craftsmen, architects, construction workers, artisans and drivers coming to me. Historically, construction workers thought tattoos were cool, and dapper, and I think it is a continuation of this. I think for these types of artisanal people with Japanese blood flowing through them, if they see Japanese tattoos, they begin to want them.

#### What kind of motifs do these craftsmen want?

Human characters like those from Suikoden, samurai characters, dragons and craps. They like the story, as well as the aesthetics.

#### How about women?

The most common case is that the husband is fully tattooed and then the wife gets work as well, but it's pretty rare I tattoo women, especially as I don't tattoo small pieces at all.

Generally, it's getting more mainstream and I am getting younger people who are beauticians, hairdressers, or what not. The perception of people in crime organizations getting tattoos, or people in the shadows is diminishing. It's getting more fashionable. Conversely, the restrictions of people with tattoos in places like pools, hot springs, gyms is getting worse -- it is banned at some beaches.

## Isn't that ironic that tattoos are getting fashionable and acceptable, but the restrictions on tattooed people are getting worse?

Yes, basically there are a really small amount of tattooed people who commit crimes and then there is a tendency for everyone who has tattoos to be seen as a criminal. However the reality is, people who don't have tattoos are also committing a lot of crimes!

### What are the fundamental differences between Japanese and Western tattoos?

Wabori is something traditional, so there are lots of meanings that go with it. As the body is a whole canvas, there is a tale for each piece. Ukiyo-e woodblock illustrations are the basis, and the background, such as the clouds, and water is of paramount importance. I use the work of Kuniyoshi, Hokusai, Kunitoshi. The work I use the most for reference is Kuniyoshi, the work is intense and there is a movement in the work. When I saw Western tattoos, everything was basically different to Japanese, also the way the tattoos were inserted, the shading, the use of color, the use of detail, the designs, that was interesting. I liked seeing the difference, and how it could influence me.

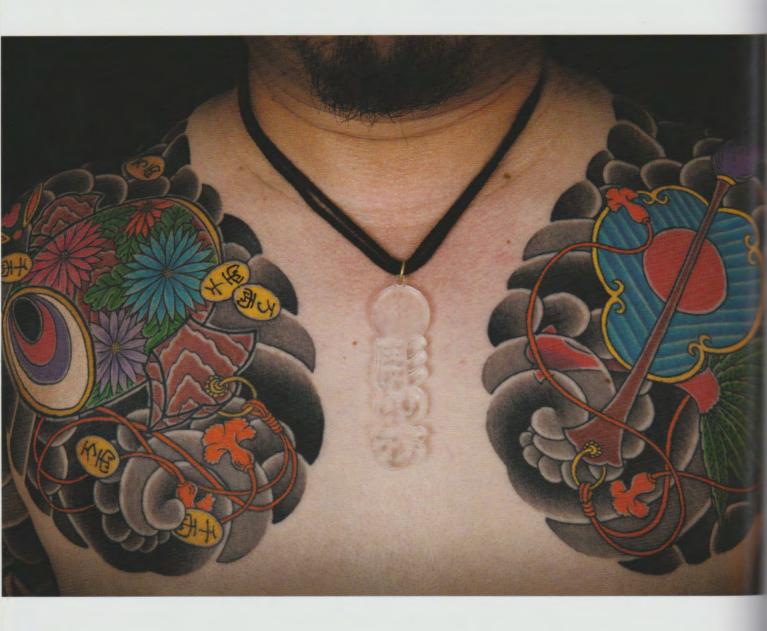
#### Why do your clients get tattooed?

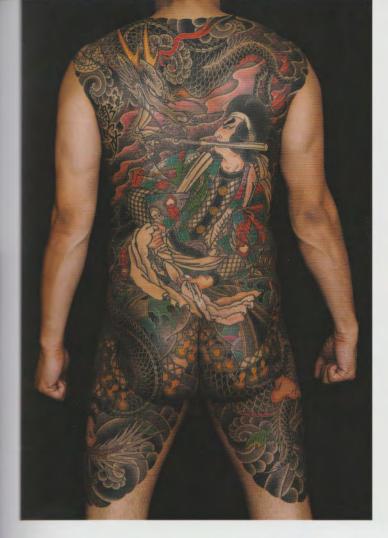
I was touched by some clients, someone who lost their kid to a car crash, or are fatally sick, they put their after-death name, then an image of Kannon. They can change their lives like this. Tattoos can be somewhat lighthearted, you can get them as souvenirs, but many Japanese put them in often at a turning point, like if they lose a kid, and can't move on, when things are tough. During times like this, they often insert ink to make them strong.

#### How does this make you feel?

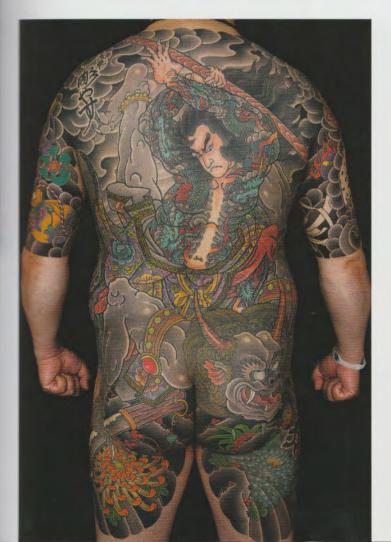
I feel a lot of responsibility as a result. But because I feel responsibility, I make sure each line is given my fullest attention. When I am tattooing, I can forget everything and become immersed. I can feel fulfillment, and the client's joy.

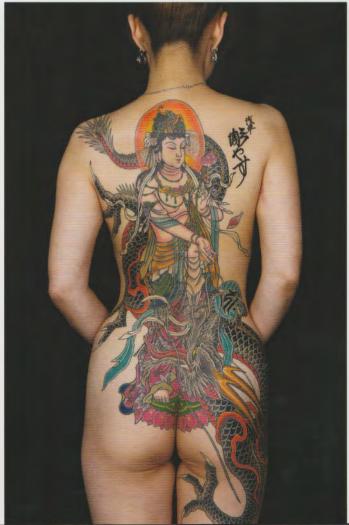












# HORIMITSU

#### Where does traditional Japanese tattooing come from essentially?

It is the influence from China (and the classic tale) Suikoden. Japan originally had small one-point tattoos but (the protagonist of *Suikoden*) Kumonryu Shijin was said to have his whole body tattooed. Wood block artists like Kuniyoshi and Toyokuni used this story as the basis for their work, so you can say Suikoden is the roots of Japanese tattooing. You can also see the protagonists of folk legends in regular illustrations from China with tattoos. From there, Japanese tattoo artists put in an elaborate background and made it into a scene that depicts the night.

#### What makes a good traditional Japanese tattoo?

When you look at it from afar and you can see the motif properly. If you can't tell what it is unless you go really close, that is no good in terms of Japanese tattooing. Lately hobbyists are looking at tattoos and accordingly, there are detailed beautiful tattoos, but with wabori (Japanese tattoos) you get them to scare people, so strangers aren't looking at the work up close -- you need to be able to see it from 3 meters away.

If it is something to scare something, you need to tattoo in a way that is ominous, and if you put in light background, the only reaction you will get is, 'Oh it's pretty' and that's it. That is no good!

#### Why do regular, non-yakuza people get tattoos in Japan?

There are many people getting western tattoos for fashion, but with Japanese traditional, it is people wanting to get something historical, or for religious reasons, like for example, they want (the Buddhist deity) Kannon Bosatsu, or people that want to be protected by a deity will get the animals used by that deity. For example, creatures like the *kirin*, the bad dream eating *baku*, the *bakutaku* or the basic ones are the *shishi* and dragons.

Tattoos also have meanings of memorializing someone, or protecting someone. Or the person wants to become strong or progress, for example, the carp that becomes a dragon, which symbolizes maturation and progression. Someone will get a carp, then a half dragon/ koi, then a complete dragon in three stages to suggest progress. They might want to get stronger or change -- regular people who get these tattoos want to stand out from the rest.

#### Did you ever find Japanese tattoos ominous yourself?

At first, I wasn't that scared of tattoos, and when I went to *sento* (public baths)as a kid, there were so many tattooed people and I was fairly nonchalant. One time, a huge guy who had a huge skull with snakes oozing out (a *nouzarashi*) came into the bath and I found that so frightening, I couldn't get close to him. I was drawing a lot during that time, but I was astounded that a design could be so grotesque. At that point, I realized that tattoos are actually something scary, and became really interested in them.

#### What is the nouzarashi, exactly?

The snakes are protecting the skull -- in the Sengoku era there were no graves and their bodies weren't cremated, they were just left there and sometimes people will steal the blades and the armor. To give a memorial they would cover the skull with water and there were snakes close by, so it is a kind of memorial image.

#### How have the tattoos changed?

In the past, in terms of designs, there were a lot of basic ones, for example with Suikoden, characters like Kumonryu and Kaosho were common and it was always set, whereas nowadays, even if it is a Suikoden motif, the clients will go and research the various characters that appear and would get different things.

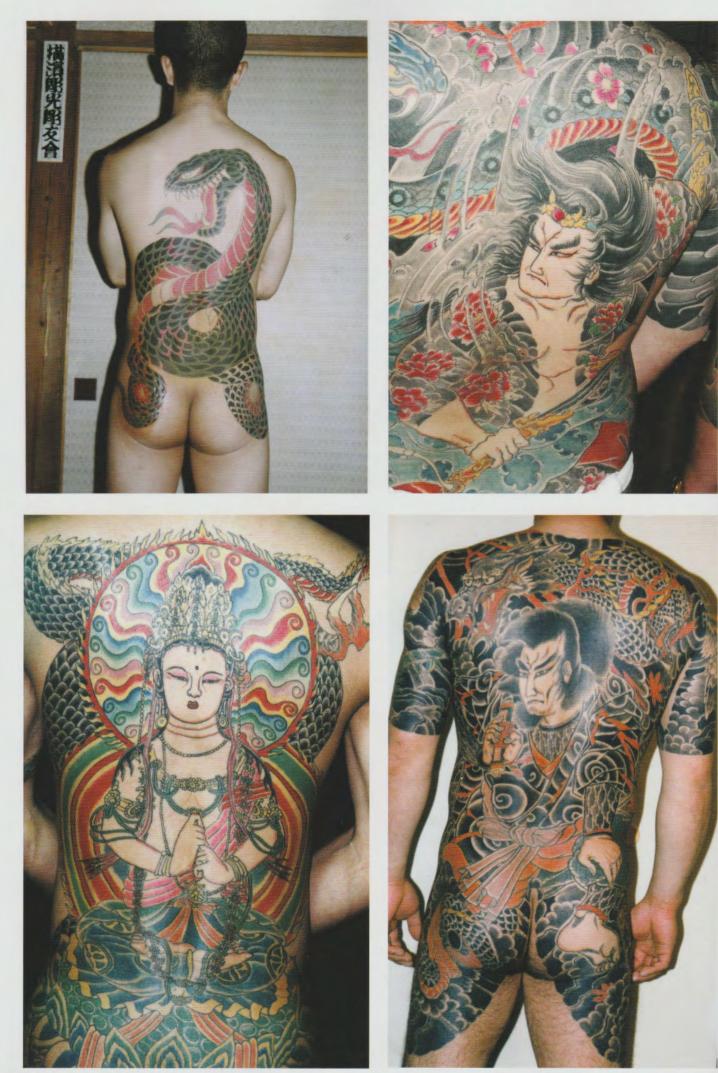
## Do people generally read the explosively popular manga of Suikoden and get inspired by that?

I will tell them that is manga, but there is the proper folkloric tale in history so they should draw from that. Even if there are no illustrations, I can recreate the protagonists and research to make their costumes according to that era.

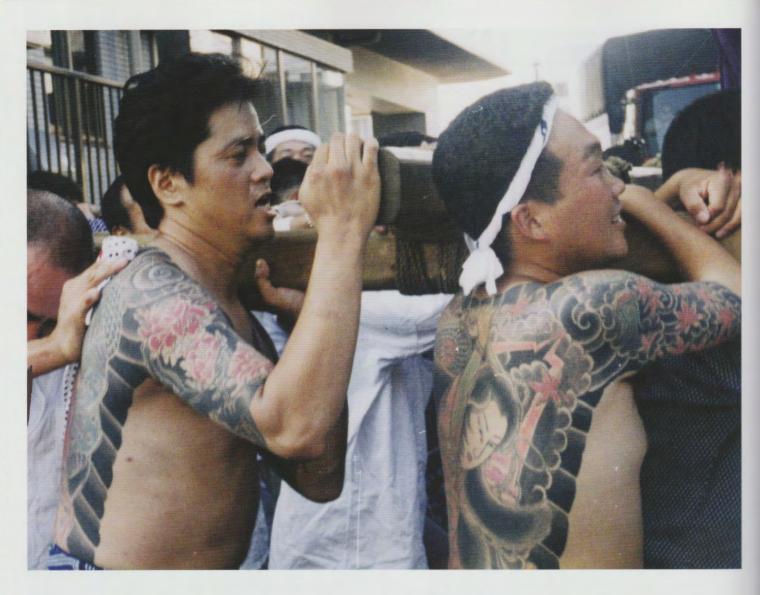












For example, with Orochimaru, he usually has a snake behind him and he is in front casting a spell, however as this is the year of the snake, I will bring the snake to the front. With a dragon there are several types, like ones that cause havoc and ones that attack, and ones that are used as a servant by a deity, and according to that I will change the shape and the face.

#### Can you tell us about the sumi ink you were using?

I only use sumi, never grey ink, and use Itsutsuboshi (literally 5 star) from Kobaien (a famous sumi store) from Nara prefecture. They simmer rapeseed oil, not regular oil, and it is hard to grind actually. The resulting ink is smooth and not bad for the body; conversely, the easier it is to grind, the resulting sumi is viscous. I use a machine to grind the sumi though and put them in syringes for single use.

#### Can you tell about your backgrounds?

In the past, it wasn't common to have these elements in the background where it was transparent or blurry. Personally, I don't like to use these things that much in my work, but nowadays it's common to have water on the subject and you can see through it. In the past, especially with Japanese traditional, it was basically hooligans doing it and often people that knew nothing about illustrations -- it was people who like to tattoo, but would learn about the drawings afterwards. I think that is the reason they were so basic before. Nowadays, the artists really study!

#### How did the traditional backgrounds come about?

In the past, criminals were getting marked with bands around their arm as a form of punishment. For example, with the arm, by having these open gaps (for example, between the waves and the clouds), it shows that the person isn't getting the tattoo as a cover up of these punishment markings.

For things like the *munewari* (the front of the tattoo is open like a strip down the front) it is an aesthetic sensibility. The client might like the shape of the background edges and want to show it off beautifully. If you run out of space on the body, the person will fill this gap in though. It is said that the tattoo artist Horiuno pioneered the munewari shape.



#### What are the characteristics of the tebori tattoos?

The resulting work is deep. It is the same as clothing and being **really** particular with the stitching. Also, the older the work is, you get more depth, because I am using a technique called *hane-tsuki*, where the ink goes in really thickly into the same place. By using this technique, as time goes on, it blends to the body and gets more deep in colour.

#### Do you use a machine for the outline?

Yes, I was doing the outlines by hand at first but when you tattoo by hand, you can't tell where you are tattooing essentially, you can't see the line. With a machine, you can tattoo from various angles, whereas with tebori, you only insert the ink in one angle. Also in terms of speed, a machine is faster, but I only started to do the outline of the tattoo with a machine in 1980. Everyone was already using a machine and I knew about them and that they are easier to use. I only started importing them 16 years ago though from places like National and Spaulding.

#### How did you start?

When I was young, I was at a *sento* (public bath), I saw tattooed people and was really fascinated. I was drawing since I was young, and learnt classical ink painting, and I was the type of person that could see an illustration and draw it straight away, but I didn't really learn to tattoo. There was no internet nor magazines, so I was looking at people's tattoos, and figured it out by observation, but I took the round about road. In fact, I didn't even know how to line up the needles and started by practicing on my leg and my friends. I didn't know the motifs either, so I was tattooing anything. At first I was tattooing *nukubori* (the subject without the background) as I initially couldn't figure out how to do the backgrounds, so I would go check out people at the sento and would remember like that.

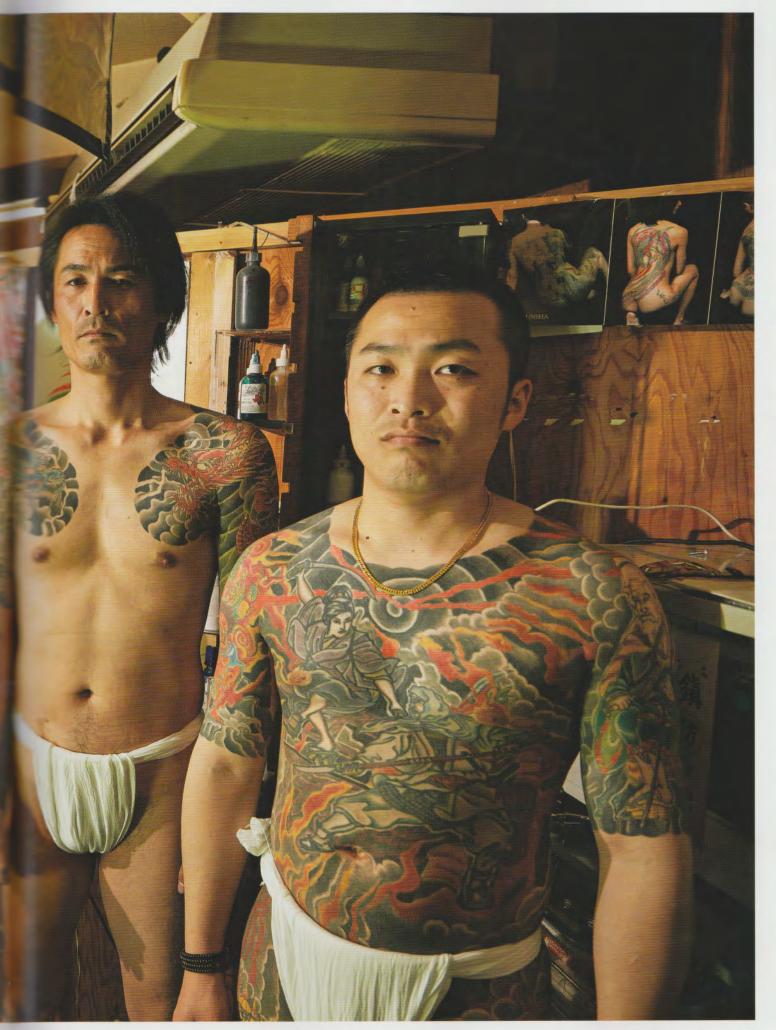
#### At first, what were you using for reference?

I was looking at ukiyo-e woodblock prints such as those of Toyokuni, Kuniyoshi and Hokusai. I would go to bookstores and went to Kanda (bookstore district) a lot, but it wasn't so easy to get the prints. I would also go to exhibitions at museums.









#### How long does it take to get competent?

Around 5 years, I would say. After 5 years I started to use my name, but prior to that, I didn't have one.

#### What are the characteristics of Japanese traditional work?

The difference in Japanese and western tattooing is that western tattoos depict the day -- they don't put things around the subject, and are vibrant and light. With Japanese traditional, the waves and the clouds are black and depict the night, so if you separate them broadly, I think that is the illustrative difference.

#### When a yakuza member wants a tattoo, what do they want, essentially?

Usually the person himself would decide the motif, but for example, if there was a syndicate that all had Suikoden heroes, then they would have to get a Suikoden character, although there are 108 characters to choose from. Or, once I had a group that had to choose a design that has a tiger in it. According to the region, there were specific syndicates, but I would get clients from all over. A lot of horishi are specific to one group, but I didn't like being tied like that. I am really stubborn and I don't like being told what to do from when I was young!

#### How do they treat you?

They are really proper, the higher up they are, they are really polite; the unformed delinquents don't seem to know how to behave, but the ones higher up, their greetings are really proper.

#### Did you ever get into situations?

When I was young, I was really a fighter. I never had any problems with tattooing but in my regular life I would often get into situations, my body is covered in knife scars. I've been stabbed in my stomach, cut all over the place to the bone! I really don't listen to people, ha ha...As a student I was doing Kendo and athletics and up until 30 I was doing martial arts, but I got busy with work so I stopped.

#### How many hours do you tattoo a day?

Everyday, I tattoo two hour stints and start at ten and tattoo one person. From one o clock, I tattoo four people and finish up at nine. Lately I get tired, so I will try and finish by seven o clock because I am old now.

#### How old are you?

62, and I turn 63. In about 2 or 3 years, I will be tattooing for 50 years!

#### In the 60s was there a tattoo industry per se?

No, and I had nowhere to actually tattoo either, so I was constantly travelling everywhere until I was 30, to places where they were doing construction, dump-like places and I would tattoo people there and then go to the next prefecture. I would stay 3 to 4 years at a place and then move on. It was all yakuza then, so they would arrange all the clients beforehand and then they would arrange a place to sleep.

#### In which direction do you think Japanese tattooing culture will go?

Everyone is doing one points and western tattoos, and it's trendy, and that is all good and fine, but I won't go in that direction.

I want to do traditional tattooing that people won't hate! It is not just old things, I also permeate good contemporary things and make sure not to tattoo the same designs -- if it is the same character, I try to make the next tattoo even better than the last. If you want heavy wabori, come to me, and if you want just pretty stuff that people will say, 'Oh how pretty!' maybe they can go elsewhere.

I don't know about the industry though, lately there has been a lot of problems with a certain politician in Japan cracking down on tattoos, whereby tattooed people are not allowed to be a government worker. As a result, clientele getting regular tattoos really decreased, maybe up to 50%. All the tattoo artists hate him, as regular people don't want to get tattoos anymore. It's really extreme -- even celebrities and sports stars have them nowadays!

Horimitsu studio in Yokohama







## HORINAMI

#### How long have you been tattooing?

Around 26 years? I started because my ex-husband was fully tattooed. When I was a student, I deferred for 2 years because I failed to get in to art university the first time, and during that era, there were massive student protests and all the schools ended up not accepting students for a while.

In the meantime, I got married, had kids, divorced and started to look into Japanese tattoos and found that I was able to get into them quite easily as I was interested in classic Japanese style art.

#### Can I ask how old you are?

You can't ask that! I feel like I'm 38!

#### Ok then, when did you start?

Hang on, that's another way to ask my age! ....Ok, I started when I was around 30. At first, I had a teacher in Shinjuku and was studying under him for 6 or 7 years. At the time, the world of Japanese tattoos was a totally different world, it was completely the world of yakuza. I knew two yakuza bosses and was quite blessed to have their support and they let me practice on them.

## You have also studied under the painter Ozuma Kaname, how did you meet him?

Ozuma sensei saw something of mine in a magazine and he wanted me to model for him, and so he got my contact details off Keibunsha publishing.

I met up with Ozuma and modeled for him, and since then, I have been studying with him. Ozuma sensei was also a close friend of Horiyoshi III, and he explained my situation to him, and finally I became a student of Horiyoshi's.

#### What aspects of Ozuma's work are you attracted to?

Ozuma paints beautiful Japanese women in an exquisite way and portrays them beautifully.

He really looked after me and taught me to draw, every day, all day. He basically said, "Just draw anything and everything." He was partial to drawing nude figure studies and then progressed to kimono-clad women.

#### What is the appeal of Japanese traditional tattooing?

I liked Japanese traditional culture from when I was very young -like Japanese dancing and shamisen (Japanese classic lute) and was always good at Japanese painting as well. Even if I was working as a horishi, I was still playing the koto (a Japanese traditional stringed instrument) as well. I was never teaching students and can't do it full time, as I am tattooing most of the time, but I still felt really supported by koto music.

#### Are there any parallels you can draw between these traditional cultures?

The characters that appear in koto music lyrics and themes, and the characters that are used as Japanese tattooing motifs overlap. So I will tattoo whilst playing koto music or if I'm illustrating, I put on earphones and immerse myself in that world. The songs aid my imagination and become my inspiration for my illustrations, and give me the power and strength to tattoo in my own style. That is how I progressed in Japanese style work, I would take into account my studies with Ozuma and Horiyoshi III and then utilize my imagination for each sketch. For example, if I'm doing an illustration where the subjects are fighting, I will play a really high tempo song played with a koto with 17 strings. If I am tattooing maples, I will listen to a song that depicts maples, such as the Dance of the Fallen Maple Leaves-the tempo is fast and just listening to it evokes images of Japan's scenery and maple leaves floating in the wind. Then if you tattoo human characters into a scene like this, their faces come out splendidly. Having said that, at the time, I might be very pleased with the sketch, but in 5 years' time, I don't like it at all! It is just a repetition of this process.





#### When you first started who were your clients?

I don't really like to say this, but there was no one else asides from yakuza; every single person was a yakuza member!

I had a lot of these kinds of connections. I went to reform school for a while and one of the other student's dad was a boss of Shinwa-kai syndicate. Also, my father used to own a building, and coincidentally on the second floor there was a yakuza office – he didn't know, he just bought the building and they were already there. I was running a shop in the basement of the building when I was in the 20s and because I was the landlord's daughter they were quite kind to me. When I started as a tattoo artist, they even let me practice on them too. The boss was killed though -- it was all over the news, I really feel like I have an unbelievable past!

#### What about now, who are your clients?

Nowadays a lot of fashionable kids are getting them. It was around 15 years ago that "one-points" and western tattoos like roses became popular. They get it either for fashion, like they think it's cute to wear with swimmers and so on, or some want to become psychologically stronger. It's all good and relevant. However, I do feel that the kids now are good kids, but they are also a bit clueless, like they will get a peony and then go sun-baking! Even if you tell them not to! Or they come in all ready sunburnt to the point they have a temperature! Why don't they have any common sense? I don't know if they are good kids, or dim kids!

I think western tattoos have their good aspects and Japanese tattoos also have their great points, but I want clients to know both and gain a better understanding.

#### How many yakuza clients do you have now?

Japan is an island country (hence closed and thinking is conservative) and there is the notion that yakuza equals irezumi, and yakuza are bad. However now I have zero yakuza clients-- it's sad! No one wants Japanese traditional now! It is predominantly because of the recession, they feel the economic tides the most.

#### Did the yakuza care about the meanings of the motifs?

Yes, they might be partial to something like a fighting motif to make them stronger, but they just make up their own meanings.



Like, for a phoenix or a *tennyo* (Buddhist angel) they will tell me they fly to the heavens, or a chrysanthemum represents death, so they don't want these motifs. But if you look at old tattoo books, chrysanthemums symbolize strength! When a client comes in and decides what a meaning is on their own, it can be a hassle. But there were a lot of these superstitions in the yakuza world.

#### Who decides what motifs a yakuza gets?

Under the boss, there are *kumicho* (regional bosses) and they look after a lot of the younger yakuza in their own office, and usually it is these regional bosses or the brothers that decide.

How many female tattoo artists were around when you started? No one during my time.

#### L it hard to be a female in this industry?

The clients were conscious of it, because it was so unusual. But artually, I think even when I wasn't very good I was getting clients because of this, although I was doing it so cheaply when I was just starting, like three thousand yen (23 pounds) for an hour or two. I was paying Shinjuku Horimasa 70,000 yen a month (around 550 pounds) as an apprentice fee – this is 20 years ago and it was a huge sum. For the sumi ink and the colors and one machine, he made me pay him 500,000 yen (around 4000 pounds). I didn't know where to get anything, and there were only 5 colors in Japan and I didn't know how to order them. He said he would tell me, but I had to pay him per color. I was really sad and desperate but I couldn't even cry I was so exhausted. It was a really hard time for horishi then, although maybe I have had it the toughest cause I am a female! Horishi nowadays have it good.

#### Why did he make you pay that much just to tell you where to get colors?

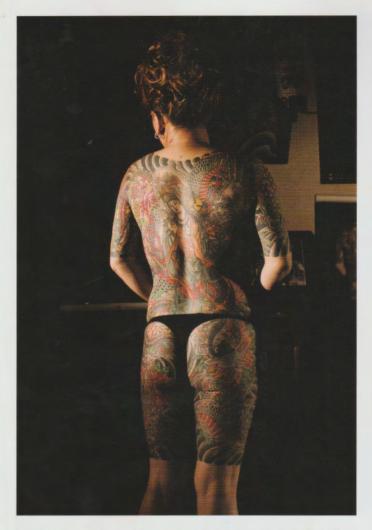
There was no information during those times, no internet, no magazines. Tattoo artists would get ink that was used for traditional Japanese paintings and put it inside their bodies and see what colors would stay put. If the color was rejected by the body, or it was poisonous, their body parts might swell up.

They had to study hard and have these experiences, so they made their students pay for their troubles. Of course it is nothing like that now. However conversely, the reason there are crappy tattoo artists now is because it's so easy to get machines now, then diseases spread and the reputation of our industry is degraded.

> Horinami with Ozuma Kaname at a gathering at the Teikoku hotel around 1993 (below) Horinami on the koto. (left) Horinami with the paintings of her by Ozuma Kaname.







It's too easy to get machines now, and they haven't studied at all, so they will tattoo *Kannon Bosatsu* (Buddhist deity) and the hair is that of a courtesan.

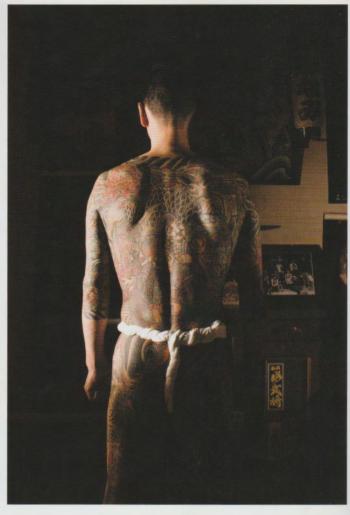
There are really basic Japanese facts, like for Japanese girls hairstyles, there are different types for young girls, then a bit older, then when they get married they will get a bun called a *bunkin takashima*, you need to know the very, very rudimentary facts like these in order to do Japanese tattooing. Someone actually brought me an illustration of a Kannon with a courtesan's hairstyle, and asked to be my apprentice. Naturally, I declined.

## Of course your experiences with Horiyoshi were more pleasant, can you tell us about your relationship with him,?

I was studying under him for ten years, but only going once a month. I would just go to his desk whenever he had a spare moment. I would stay all day and he would fix my designs. Horiyoshi can really transmit the coolness and beauty of traditional Japanese tattoos.

#### Do you get any discrimination now as a female tattoo artist?

No, I think I was lucky because my will was strong, if I was weak, I wouldn't be here as I am now, I would have been caught up in drugs or ended up a yakuza girl. You need to be able to ignore and overcome the whispering of the devils! I never gave in to these because I was so fervently into tattooing. In my mind there was only tattooing.



Which ukiyo-e artists do you look at when drawing your sketches?

I go to temples and look at the illustrated books. I also use Hokusai manga. He is individualistic-- I think I'm also influenced by Horiyoshi because he uses Hokusai a lot, but there are a lot of things in there that you can use as sketches. From there you can make it your own work, by redrawing, redrawing and redrawing which can be difficult, joyful and exhilarating.

It isn't so easy to reconfigure the work so it is yours, for example, to embellish the hair of a divinity, so when someone steals your work it is unforgivable. I also study calligraphy. I like people who study and persevere, and if people don't study to this degree I don't accept that they are traditional tattoo artists.

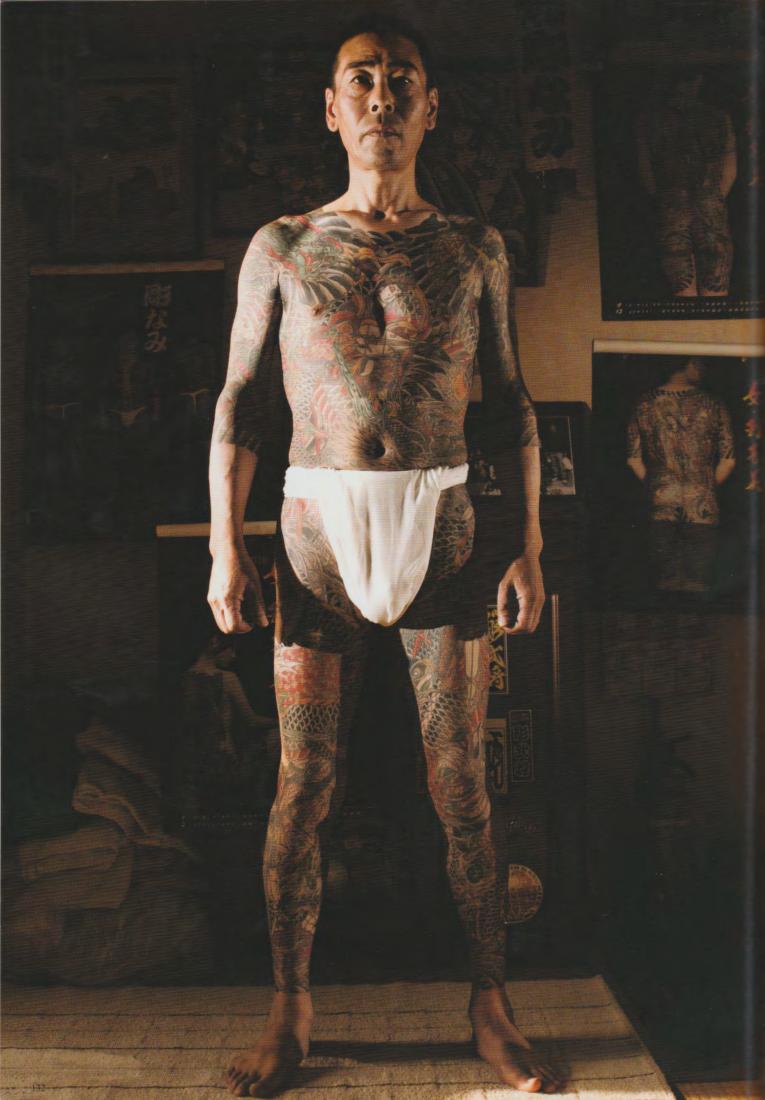
#### What is the most difficult aspect of drawing Japanese tattoos?

You cannot draw something beautifully when you are down in spirit. Like when a tattoo artist does a lot of amphetamines, and he tries to do a beautiful Buddhist deity, it never comes out right. The gods won't allow it!

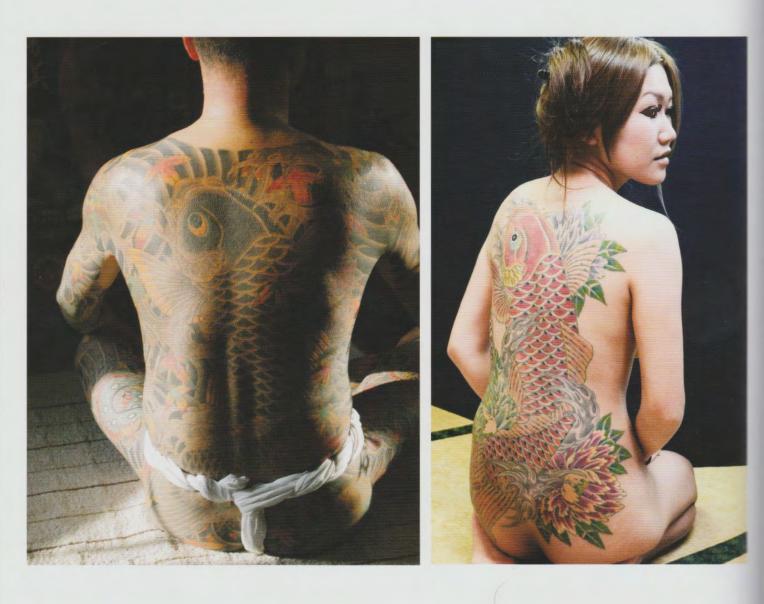
#### What is the best thing about being a horishi?

When the client looks into the mirror and looks really pleased -that is the most satisfying thing. When they say "It's so great I went to you." That is the ultimate joy.











Quite often tattoo masters develop a close relationship with their clients as their pieces take several months, to several years to complete. Many arrange annual BBQs, beach gatherings and onsen trips for their clients.











## HORICHO II

#### Do you work with machine or tebori (hand poked) style?

I work tebori style because I am Japanese and I want to work in a characteristic style of working that is from Japan, and I will continue to tattoo in this way while I am physically able to! I occasional have the feeling that I want to work with machine, and do more realistic tattoos, but there are so many people who do that already.

However, I use machine for the line work -- that is the way it has been done since my teacher's time. To do everything in tebori makes the outline a bit staggered, and there are few people that want to take the time to do the whole thing only in tebori.

## What is the basic difference in the outcome of the tattoo when you insert it by hand?

When you do the whole thing with a machine it is faster, but when you tattoo with tebori, as the years go on, the work is definitely different to machine insertion. I mean, there are globally brilliant artists and the quality of the ink and the machines have improved, so it might seem there is not much difference, but the overall atmosphere of the work is definitely different.

When a tattoo is done with tebori, it blends with the skin and becomes deeper -- it is hard to put into words exactly -- they just have a kind of wabori (Japanese traditional tattoo) atmosphere. Even if you do a Japanese style tattoo, when you use a machine, it is different. For example, at a Japanese festival when the festival-goers are carrying a *mikoshi* (Japanese portable shrine), and you see a piece done by machine, alongside a tebori piece, you can definitely see the difference.

To be hyperbolic, the work with tebori might even seem unrefined, but the machines are so good that the work looks like *nihonga* (Japanese classic painting) and looks like paint, or a sticker, and when it gets exposed to the sun, it fades like a sticker. With tebori, on the other hand, the color gradually concentrates and blends with the skin. It is to do with the depth of the needles -- we gently flick up the skin and the ink goes in underneath, as opposed to a machine that is on the surface.

#### Is that atmosphere also a result of the sumi (ink)?

Yes, the viscosity and texture is different to tattoo ink. I get the sumi from Kyoto at a specialized store that makes it, and it is very high quality and is even used for name plates. There are individualistic preferences between horishi, so there are some that like the bluish black sumi, whilst others prefer the brownish ink.

#### Is it also the appeal of doing things by hand?

When you do it by machine, I mean no disrespect, but the machine moves on its own, and assists you, whereas there is the sensation with tebori that you inserting each time, one movement by one movement, which is something I really appreciate.

#### What is the difference between the two terms "horimono" and "irezumi"?

Oh it's really subtle! Usually for Japanese traditional, people refer to it as *borimono*, or *sumi wo ireru* (to insert ink) they want to make it sound more specialized and exclusive. "Irezumi" is used more so by people that aren't from that world, like people who say "Oh my god, that person has *irezumi*!" in a derogatory way.

## When you were a student, what was the most difficult aspect of learning tebori?

To get used to that sensation of flicking it up when inserting the ink, and maneuvering the smaller details. Because of this flicking motion, after a year, the gradations blend with the body and the result naturally becomes really smooth and blends with the skin. However, there are times that doesn't go well.





#### Can you tell us about the apprenticeship?

When I wanted to be Horicho I's student, I heard rumors that he doesn't take apprentices. I was wondering what I should do. There was a shop his sister was running, and people would ask there and get refused by her, so you couldn't even get to the Horicho I, so I decided to be his client.

I went 3 or 4 times and then asked to be an apprentice, and brought enough money so I could wait outside his door for three days. He said he wouldn't take on apprentices but asked me to bring in some illustrations, so when he would tattoo his client he would have a look. He was like, "Oh you won't continue anyways, so why don't you come over?"

#### Can you describe his personality?

He is strict, and if you are five minutes late, he would say, 'Go home' -- the horishi of the old days were people like this. In terms of his work, his backgrounds are really characteristic. His main subject is individualistic, but overall when you see his work from afar, rather than having that yakuza-like impact, his work is more beautiful, and is dapper. I think that is what he is aiming for, so the clients usually say that the background composition is good, and his sumi gradations were outstanding.

#### Was he importing machines?

I wasn't around during this time, but when I see letters, he was an inbetween for the importation of machines, but I don't know if he was the first to be doing this. There were hand made machines already present in Japan, but they would break easily. He was ordering Cindy Ray's machines via letters, like a translator.

#### Can you tell us about Horicho I's museum?

He would cut out the pages from magazines like *Jitsuwa Document* (a yakuza tabloid magazine) and write comments on them; like "The scales are the wrong way', or there would be a tattoo of an emaciated **Fu**do-myo and he would write comments like, 'Is this Fudo on amphetamines?' It was an era were tattoo artists were really like a king.

#### When did he tattoo until?

He dropped once from a stroke, and was told he would be stuck in a wheelchair, but he rehabilitated and started tattooing again. He was doing it til I took over when he was 65 years old.

#### Who were some other historically relevant artists?

Horikin, and Bonten were hanging out together and in the past, tattooing was really secretive. They initially decided not to have students, but eventually they all had families in the end. Then Horiyoshi first came about during this time, and in Asakusa there was Horisada -- Horicho I would go over and watch him work, and then would sometimes tattoo his clients when he wasn't available because it was an era when a tattoo artist would go away travelling for long periods of time. Another famous guy of that time was Horiyoshi II in Azabu.

#### How long were you an apprentice for?

I was going into the studio for 5 years and after moving here it took another 5 years, and after that, I took over as *Nidaime* (the second). I was told to take over by my teacher as he was going to retire and once I take over as his successor he can't work anymore, according to the old school system. He finished off the clients he was working on at the time, but after that, he announced his retirement and passed everything to me. There are other places where there are Nidaime, and *Sandaime* (the Third), but in our case, he goes by the traditional system where he ends once the student takes over.

It is the same as kabuki when someone inherits the name. If it is an *Ichimon* (family) it is different and you can have students all over the place but when you take the nidaime title, and inherit the name, there is only one, and when there is a nidaime, they don't make a Sandaime (the third).

#### Isn't that amazing pressure seeing how legendary Horicho is?

Sure, there are many clients who only wanted my teacher to work on them, right up to his retirement, and he would gradually push them to me. Then, slowly, I would make my own clientele base.

#### Can you describe a typical day for an apprenticeship?

You wake in the morning before the teacher, and then make the meals, he was a late waker so around 10am actually, and pack up and then get ready for work. After that, I would draw for a while and in the old days it wasn't disposable, they were using a sponge, so I would go exchange the water and sponges every 20 minutes! In between all this, I would draw.

There were days when there were so many clients coming in and out, that my teacher didn't even get to see the drawing I had worked on, so I would go in early the next day so he could check it.

#### What are the characteristics of his work that are evident in your pieces?

The background; I am following Horicho I's background style. With the illustrations, I would look, copy and gradually change it, or make it more realistic, but the background is the key point.



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#### Can you tell us about your colors?

I purposely make them a bit old looking, and degrade it -- the inks nowadays are too pretty so I mix them, and make them look old. Also, in terms of designs, I don't make the tattoos too detailed so you can see what they are from afar. If you get naked, I want to make the tattoos, so you can see the face of the subject clearly, so I will purposely make the faces big. The overall balance is good when it is tattooed on the body and I am conscious of the lines.

#### Who were the clients during that time?

Yakuza, artisans, carpenters, painters, and people in the sex industry! Recently that has changed, I get more regular people -- even a university teacher, and a politician, although, it is a real secret. Lately, there are very few scary people now, and the inner-city yakuza don't come very often, although the regional yakuza still come in; evidently, the tide and circumstances are changing. In our case however, sensei wouldn't tattoo the local yakuza -- only the ones from out of town cause if you go outside and bump into them, it is a hassle, like, "Lets go drinking!" and he can't even walk down the road picking his nose! If it is his day off, and he is eating soba noodles, they will be like, "Look! He is eating that soba! He must be not busy these days!"

He will only tattoo them if he likes the person, but if one person goes to him, they all tend to want to go to him, so he tends to focus on the yakuza from Sendai and Ibaraki prefectures and there is that kind of connection since way back.

## When they come from other regions, do they come from one syndicate, or they just tend to come from all over the place?

Up until recently, I would go up, and tattoo people from the same group, like, for example, in Yamanashi prefecture, I would do 3 at a time, but lately they will come independently, and it is not like before, where I would get asked to go somewhere by someone who is of rank and has that responsibility.

#### I heard a rumor that times are so tough for the yakuza it is hard for them to afford full body suits...

Well, it's not like I go over and they do things for me anymore, so I get them to come here now. They would get me a room in a hotel or an apartment, or house, and take me out at night, but now they don't do that so it's better they come here. Also, in Japan there are many horishi now, so they don't have the mentality that they have go to someone from another prefecture.

#### Do you ever feel intimidated?

No, but the first time I went, lets just say they leave an impression on you! My teacher knows the superiors and will even tell them off, get angry and hit them when they aren't sitting still!

#### What is the ratio of "regular people" VS yakuza clientele?

Nowadays, it is about 30% yakuza, whereas previously it was 70% yakuza. Or alternatively, there are a lot of people that don't tell me they are in a syndicate, but previously, they would leave their business cards, but nowadays it is more likely that don't tell me. So I feel this kind of relationship is weakening, I don't know if this is the way of the world now.

#### Isn't it a bit melancholy?

Yes, actually. My relationship with the client often ends once the work is done.

#### How about girls at the time, were they getting tattooed?

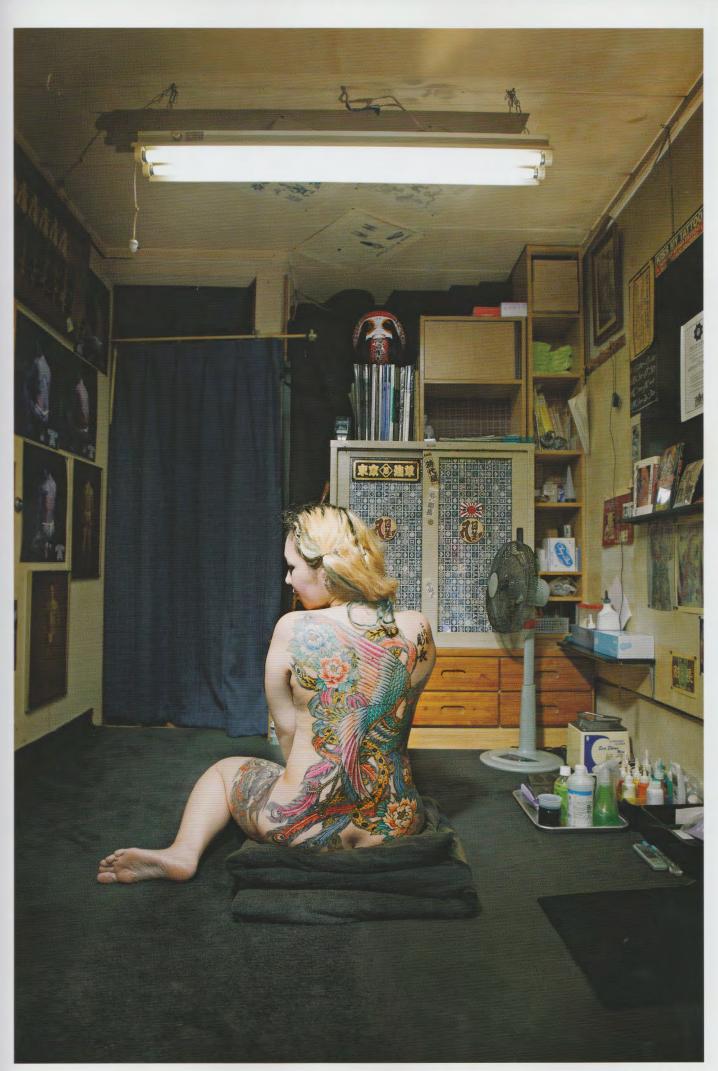
Nowadays, girls get them light-heartedly, for fashion, but before there had to be a kind of reason, like they were the girlfriend of someone scary but nowadays they just get tattoos for fashion. People who like larger pieces tend to like the aesthetic. Before, there were many from the Yoshiwara district (the local red light district). There were many that would get tattooed as the more they were tattooed, the likelihood of them succeeding is higher. There are many clients who are tattoo fans and would ask them to get more ink. This is more just the leaning of Japanese perverts more than Yoshiwara culture, per se! There are clients who are fans of tattooed girls, they are normal themselves and probably don't have any tattoos, but they like to fantasize that the girl is a yakuza guy's girlfriend or something like that.

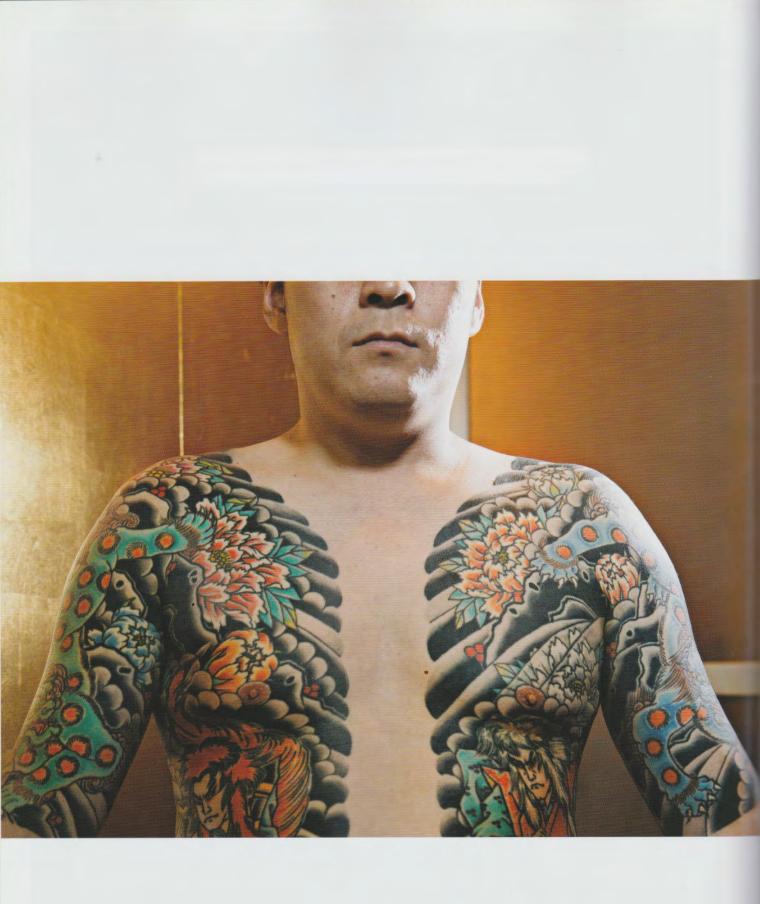
#### How do you feel as tattoos have become so fashionable?

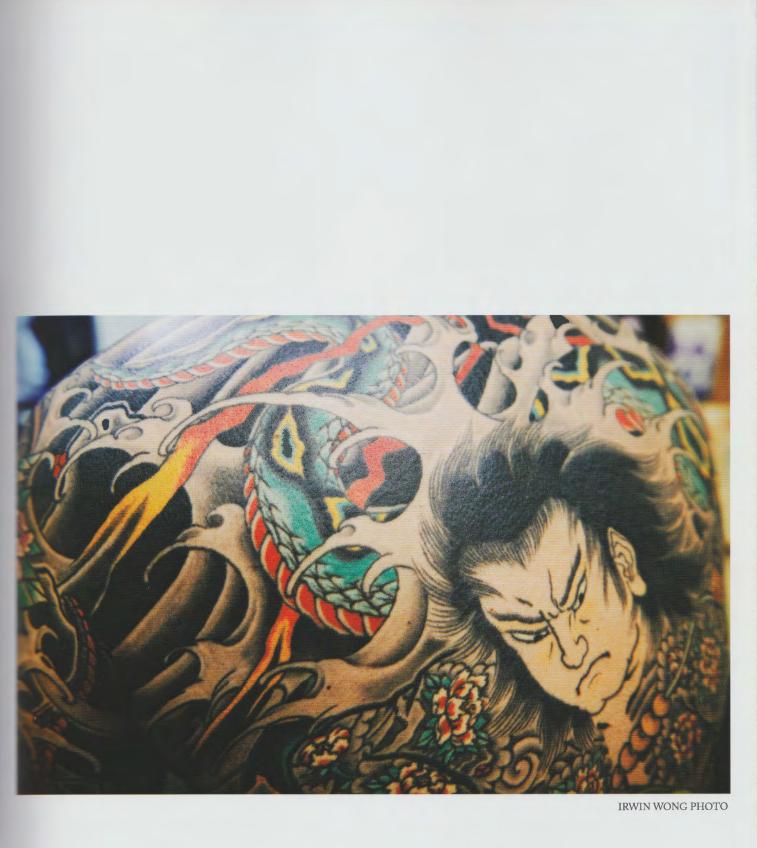
It is good, but at the same time I am Japanese, so I don't think its so appealing or cool to wear it out in the public, for Japanese traditional anyways. If it is a western tattoo it's fashionable and cool to show it off, but for Japanese traditional tattoos, if you are wearing a short sleeve T-shirt and walking around, I don't think that is particularly cool for a Japanese person to do that.

#### So it's the appeal of hidden beauty?

Yes, like the patterning on the backside of a kimono cloth, it's beautiful because you only see a glimpse of it. I understand people want to show it off, but I wish they would do that sparingly!











訪ねて

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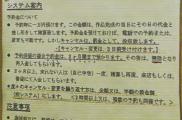












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**IRWIN WONG PHOTO** 

#### So basically, when should you show the tattoos off?

At traditional festivals and when we have gatherings for the tattooed clients. Then, we can show each others off. I guess it is when everyone gets together, like going to the beach and drinking, however, when they are on their own, they usually hide it.

#### Where do you get inspiration from in terms of ukiyo-e illustrations?

For tattooing, there are a lot of vertical pieces due to the shape of the body, so rather than Hokusai whose work is predominately horizontal, most tattoo artists are more into the Kuniyoshi style, in terms of the composition -- they wouldn't use the work as is of course, that is not interesting. However, the color usage with tattooing and ukiyo-e is not the same, and my style is old school so I try not to use a lot of colors.

#### What kind of motifs do you like?

I like human characters like Suikoden and samurai images. But in terms of wabori, dragons and carps are the most popular historically.

#### Do the clients like the meanings or the aesthetic?

There are a lot of people who like the meanings nowadays, but for example, when you tattoo images like religious deities such as Kannon Bosatsu, you can say, "This is the god of something or another," but for human characters, there are people who mistakenly think that if they tattoo them, that it signifies something. For example, the folkloric *Suikoden* characters resist against the government and become outlaws and slowly die one by one. I tell them this is the story behind Suikoden, but they think there is a specific meaning behind the motifs. There are people that want a dragon and I put in a human character that goes with the dragon, and people that want irezumi within irezumi, (characters that have tattoos themselves).

#### Do regular Japanese people know the tale of Suikoden?

It was after I started tattooing that I read it, but there was so much text, so I started with the manga and then I started to read the text which describes each character. I think the clients primarily like the visuals and many don't know the names of the characters. If you are talking about motifs, there is Kannon and things from folklore, and dragons to bring rain -- Japanese tales are often lucky, so people like motifs like *Kintaro*, but in terms of Suikoden, people want those characters because of the Kuniyoshi illustrations.

#### What is the basic reason your clientele want tattoos?

There are some that want a tattoo when their work is going well, for example, on their back, and after 5 years, if the business is going successfully, that person would then get the front. Or I had a client with two kids and he got two carps, things like this.

#### Are you worried that tebori artists will "die out"?

I don't think it will change, there will be people who always like that style and lately in Japan, tattoo artists go overseas and do conventions and use their "Japaneseness" as a weapon and will tattoo a lot of Japanese motifs even if they don't do Japanese style work back at home! Then they come back and realise the worth of their own country and suddenly respect it and want to learn tebori.

#### What is the most difficult thing about working in Japan?

The social aspects, like when a Japanese tattoo artist changes his work place -- everyone around here knows me so it's fine, but unlike a street shop with a sign outside, I am working in a room, so there are people who probably think I am a yakuza member as there are people like that coming in and out too. So that is difficult.

#### How do you feel about the work of overseas artists who specialize in Japanese tattoos?

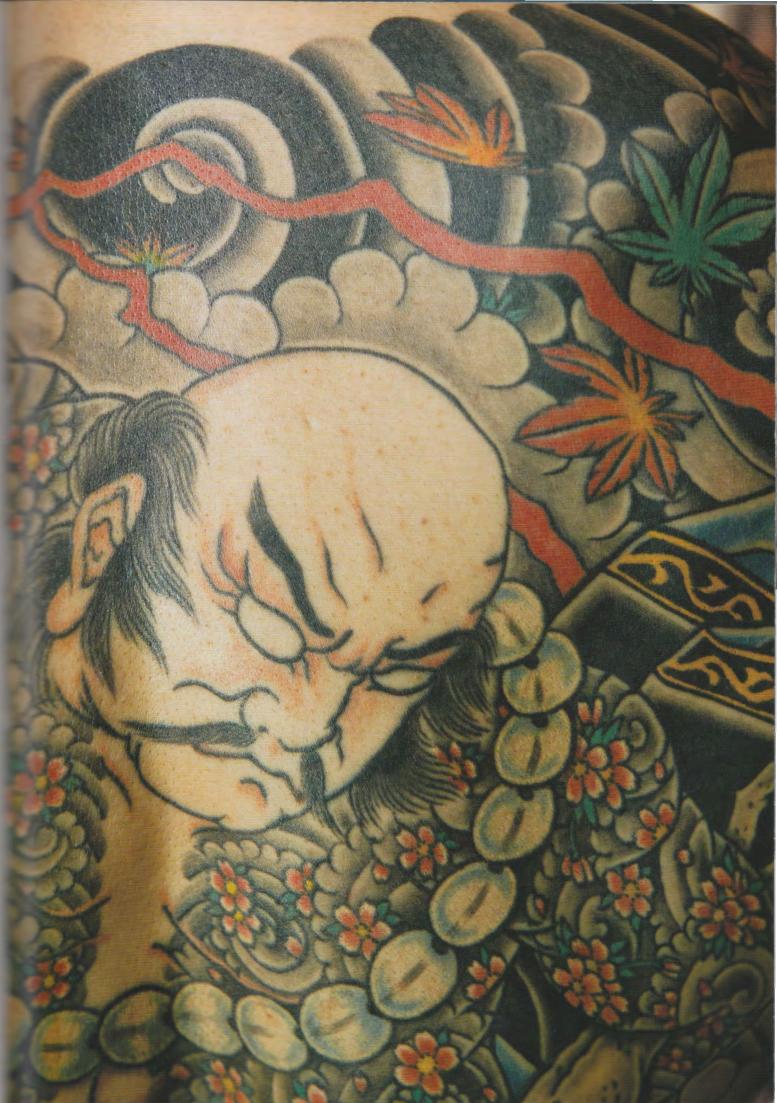
I think that artists overseas who really train and study are so much more accomplished than people than people in Japan who don't do it properly -- the foreigners are more Japanese than Japanese. Their sensibilities are slightly foreign, but recently, kids in Japan who use machines copy overseas artists work, so conversely Japanese people are going that way instead.

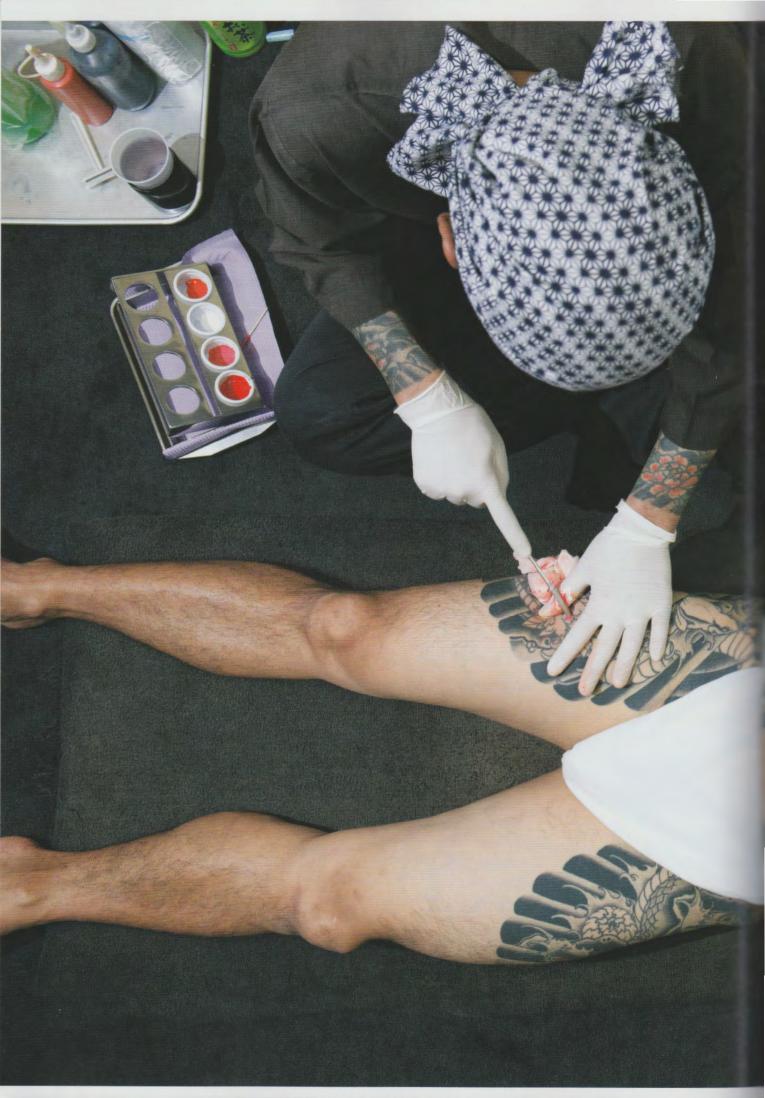
### Is there a kind of cache to being based in the Asakusa area? There are so many top tier artists here and is home to the Edo period's traditional downtown.

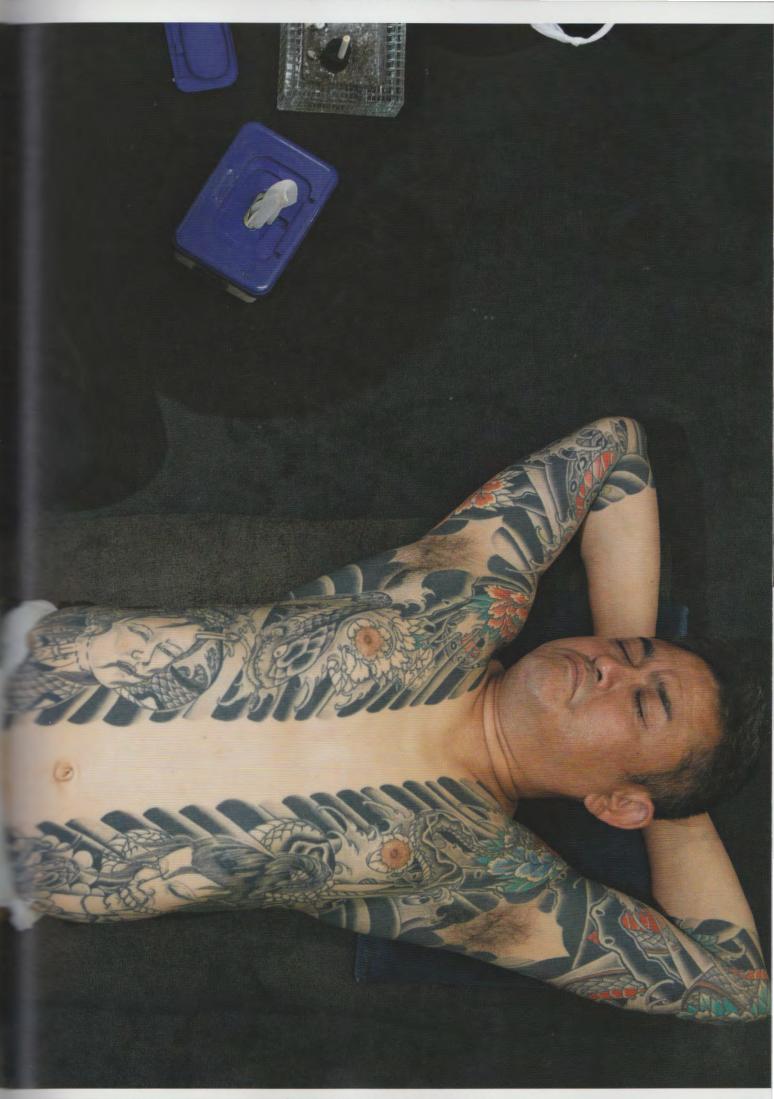
There is the notion that for Japanese tattooing, Asakusa is the center of this culture. I was originally in Yokohama which is a port town and there was this type of tattooing tradition there as well from before, and I liked working there, but people who come from the Tohoku region, and my clientele from other prefectures have the opinion that Japanese tattooing is an Asakusa thing. I do take that into account and also there is this kind of atmosphere here that really suits Japanese traditional tattooing. It is different to somewhere like Kyoto, which is also Japanese but slightly more sophisticated, whereas Asakusa it is more rough and downtown.

It might also be because people who love mikoshi (carrying shrines at the Japanese festivals) are here and it is a town that doesn't have much resistance to Japanese tattooing. Conversely, if you go to Shibuya or Harajuku they won't have a problem with western tattoos. Also there are many carpenters and craftsmen here.

There is also the idea that Asakusa has many Japanese traditional tattoo artists, and is hence competitive -- if you survive here, you have to be good.











# NAKAMURA

### You use an unusual technique of tebori called shamisen-bori -- instead of poking the ink in, the movement is like scooping and pressing the ink in. Who else uses this technique?

All I know at the moment, is myself and my apprentice. With shamisen-bori, I can tattoo really small details, even a small dragon. With the Kanto tattoo style, it is hard to tattoo very small things.

I think that the machine is less effort, you don't get as tired and I don't mean to be rude, but anyone can do it. You can make money, so everyone will probably go in that direction but for us, we are not tattooing just for money, we are tattooing because we like it. Even if it wasn't making money, I would still tattoo.

#### Do you feel Japanese tattooing is a culture you would like to preserve?

Yes,... however, more than that, because it is the (tattoo) culture that I was taught personally, I feel that it is my role to preserve that and leave that behind. It isn't the perspective that I want to protect culture on the whole though. I think I was chosen in a way -- well, I guess that is a kind of culture, and it is something I undertook and will surely leave behind. I feel that is my destiny.

There is no point in taking this (*shamisen-bori* technique) to the grave, no one will benefit from that! I have no desire to take things to the next world with me. Everything I know, I want to leave behind and that is because I was also taught, so I feel that that is my role. Therefore, I will also teach my students properly, but I don't want to teach people who are thinking lightly, it is really deep.

It is really different to machine work -- I think it is acceptable to think it is something different all together. With a machine, you can basically tattoo after an hour without being taught. Even if you are great with a machine, even after a month, you still won't be able to tattoo tebori; not even ten cms. I think, if you can make a needle after a year, you are fast; usually you don't even know how to line up the needles or anything.

## What kind of ink do you use do get this rich black colour in your gradations?

*Kobaien baika* ink, the ink is important but also the grinding stone is important too. Even if the ink is good, if the grinding stone is no good, the particles are too big, and that means it doesn't enter the skin so well. You really need to grind good ink with a good stone, and do it by hand. There are ones like the Chinese *Tankei* grinding stone, which costs about 300,000 yen, you need to use a good one like this.

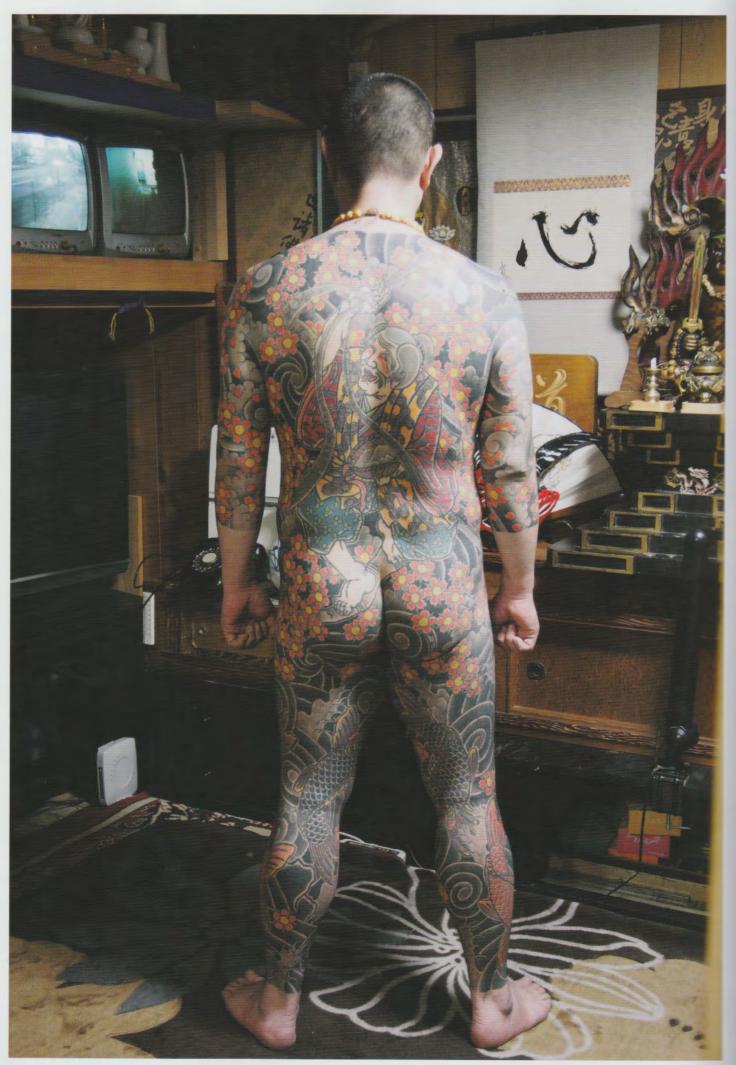
#### How can you tell if it is suitable or not?

You just know, but you need to try it, as you can't tell just by touching it. When you put the ink on the stone, you can tell straight away if the stone absorbs it or not and sticks; bad stones leave a slippery surface, and when you grind it, it is like sliding on a tile. You need to buy and try it first, and I do have a lot that weren't suitable. I look everywhere for them, and there are also individuals who also own some and sell them. There are two types, ones that are meant for use, and ones that are purely for decoration. The expensive ones are 10 million yen.

#### What colors are you using?

Only powder. The mix is ethanol for disinfectant, pure distilled water, saline water and Listerine mouthwash. The Listerine has a kind of elasticity and it stops it from drying out. What you use is an individual preference and a lot of it is a trade secret. For me personally, I don't mind telling you everything because it is from this point onwards that people can start. Quite often in Japan, it is the case that people hide what kind of sumi or what kind of needles they use because they don't have confidence in themselves, but then people can't even begin! I am confident, so I can tell you everything and I don't feel that I will be defeated. It is more interesting to work like that.





#### How do people sit when you tattoo them?

I had a person who moved around so much, that even an inch took forever, while some people sweat so much, the bed is drenched. They are like prawns that are brought up from the water and jump around-- they bend! Some people come in for a 3 hour appointment and then they go home after 5 minutes, like "Oh dear! Wasn't this a 3 hour appointment?" and they say, "Maybe next time!" -- there are a lot of people like that. Some people come in drunk, or drink Oranamin C (vitamin drink). Of course it doesn't work, but they talk themselves into it. Some people ask for painkillers, but of course I won't give them that, and there are some that, if I just give them water and tell them it is anesthetic, it works for them. I guess it is psychological.

#### If yakuza aren't getting tattoos, who are your clients?

From around 2 or 3 years ago, I was getting all types; real estate guys, gasoline stand guys, really all types of people. Burst and Tribal (tattoo magazines) did interviews with me, and then I started to get so many regular types, even a guy from Shikoku prefecture who comes here on a bus for ten hours. I am grateful for that, so I persevere, and tell them they can stay in the studio and I finish the piece in a week. I can do a back piece in a week.

#### Can you tell us how you started as a tattoo artist?

I didn't want to become a tattoo artist at first. I was initially just getting tattoos and then gradually, as I got to know about them, I became interested, and then entered this world through that. My teacher is from Shikoku prefecture, I met him in my late teens and his work was splendid, so I became drawn to tattooing as well.

#### How did you learn?

I wasn't a direct student per se, it was a case of watching and learning; I was predominantly self-taught. Before I saw this master's work, I really only thought tattooing was something like doodles. However, when I saw his work, I was really surprised at how incredible his work was, I was astounded and thought, "You can make illustrations like that with needles?!"

#### How do you layer the needles?

13 in 3 layers, or in 2 layers or 11 needles in 2 or 3 layers. There are three classes of grouping, the very thin lines called *hosobori*, or *kebori*, the middle, which are chubori and the very thick lines, which are called *futobori*. I can tattoo small motifs if I tattoo the outline using 3 needles, instead of 7, as I need to tattoo the hair as well. But actually, it is really fun. I think the joy of doing tebori is that it is a physical skill. I never get sick of it, no matter how many hours I am tattooing.

#### What is the difference in color?

It is really thick -- if you make the comparison to painting, it is the difference between the actual painting and a photograph of that painting. There is a sense that it is real, and that is the difference between machine and tebori. You need 10 years to be able to do tebori. With a machine, the movement is up and down, whereas with tebori, you are flicking it up, you pull the skin up and bring the ink inside, so the amount of ink inserted is thicker. When that is the case, there is a sense of depth and the work doesn't fade. With a machine, after a few years the color fades, but with tebori there is nothing like that, it might take decades. With a machine, you are relying on the strength of the machine, so you aren't aware of the hardness of the human skin and how this differs in various parts of the body, but if you tattoo by hand you are really aware of this. You can tell the condition of the person.

#### What are the characteristics of Japanese traditional work?

Basically, there is a storyline within the illustration, such as the old Japanese tales like *Ikkyusan*. It isn't just tattooing something, they all have a story. I draw my own illustrations, and I don't copy other work, so if a client asks for something, I can do it. I have about 200 sketches that I haven't tattooed yet, and usually the clients pick from these.

#### Do the clients like the meanings behind the tattoos?

For *koi* (carp), there is a saying, "Itsudemokoi" (come whenever you will) there are meanings within the actual words. For example, carps that are on a chopping board supposedly stay still, so likewise, when you are in a situation, you don't flip around. I don't know about young tattoo artists, but people around my age are usually into stories like *Kintaro*, and things that depict luck.

#### Can you describe your style?

I am trying to emulate the tattoos of the past, lately they are becoming very new, including the illustrations, but I am studying the tattoos that have been around from the past, and am not trying to change it too much. I want to change the illustrations, but the Japanese tattoo form is something that I definitely don't want to change. I look at Kuniysohi, and Hokusai and I won't copy them, but will use them for the basis for my work. I can make illustrations based on text I have read, so I have a lot of sketches.



Do your clients mostly know of you through word of mouth introductions? Yes, say, one person I tattoo has five friends, then it spreads like a pyramid. But I won't tattoo women. In Japan, it is not respected, and women who get tattoos for their men, when their kid goes to school or to a pool then it is a real hassle. The child gets discriminated. That person might be OK with being tattooed but when I think of the child, because of the parents the child has to suffer. I get feelings of guilt afterwards. There are cases I might tattoo a woman, such as they already have a tattoo that is too hideous and I will have to fix it. Usually for new people I will decline, which I guess is like running away and they just go elsewhere anyways, but if they are old, and have finished bringing up their child, and love tattoos, then I will accept. I have to listen to their reasoning, and make a judgment based on that, but I will refuse girls in their 20s who are just into the vibe.

#### Can you talk about discrimination?

It exists because (in the past) there were punishment tattoos for people who did wrong, like the symbol for "dog," to suggest that they aren't human. So there is that notion that bad people get irezumi. The mass media likes to introduce tattoos as something negative, it is not seen as an art. Even if we are this tattooed I don't really announce that I am a tattooist, I often hide it and will say I am a driver, or a carpenter. I had to buy this house because they wouldn't lend it to me. The situation isn't improving, even though Japanese young people are getting them for fashion, but the Japanese perspective on tattoos haven't changed. For the regular Japanese person, they don't know the difference between a western tattoo and wabori, it is the same thing for them. You can't go to a sauna or pool or a bath, and I think it is actually getting worse. You could go to the *sento* (public bath) before, but nowadays it is stricter.

Nowadays, people are getting machine tattoos but soon they will really suffer. In my 20s, I could show people my tattoos, in my 30s I hid them a bit, in my 40s I was hiding them more, and by my 50s I definitely don't show them!

## Was Japanese tattooing in the past, a way to cover up punishment tattoos?

Yes, they would cover the rings with a "7" (tattoo length). That was around for sure. There is also the theory that tattooing was also a commoner's resistance to the samurai class, for example, the samurai were allowed to do *seppuku* (ritual suicide) but the commoners



weren't allowed, so by getting tattooed, they would brag that they could do something so painful, and it wasn't just the samurai class. It was people like carpenters and firefighters. I think this theory is true, it shows that they could endure and not lose out to the samurai.

## Was there a Chinese tattoo culture? For example the protagonists in Suikoden had tattoos.

In Chinese tattooing, there are no gradations, it is only the outlines and Kuniyoshi and Kunisada put in these gradations. So Kuniyoshi and ukiyo-e illustrators rearranged them in a way that is Japanese and they became tattoo motifs. They are the roots of Japanese tattooing. Before that, Japanese tattoo culture consisted of one points. The basis of wabori is *ukiyo-e* (wood block prints).

#### What is the basis of good work?

If you compare old tattooing illustrations to now, they are not very good but they are strangely appealing, and that is the fascination of hand made work. I feel that the sketches are the basis so I am really studying and focusing on that, but when I look at old illustrations they aren't so great, like the heads are really large. For wabori, I feel that this can only be done by hand. I am not saying machine work is bad but for wabori it needs to be done with tebori, and if it isn't done by hand, you won't get the atmosphere of wabori. I have seen a lot of electric tattoos and I tried machine tattooing on my body to see what the pain is like, but it isn't in the same league. Just because it is a Japanese motif doesn't make it a Japanese tattoo. It is the attention to detail that Japanese have, the skilled handiwork -- the combination of this and the Japanese illustrations makes for a Japanese tattoo. Machine work is clean, even more than tebori, but I feel no attraction to it at all, so when foreigners like Japanese tattooing they are probably into the handiwork.

If the work is done with a machine, there are many people overseas who do that already. If there is an electricity blackout, machine artists will cease to be tattoo artists. When there is a black out I am a real tattoo artist!

If there is no tebori, there are no traditional Japanese tattoos. There might be the shape if you use a machine, but it won't be traditional. I don't think the culture will disappear though, if the machine guys knew the appeal of doing it by hand they will know it is something that you can't even express with words.



Next to the sketches, I think the most important thing is the outlines, so if you use machines for the outlines, that is outrageous. If the outline is strong, the tattoo will be strong too.

#### Can you tell us about the use of humor in your work?

I will sometimes insert humorous elements to give the piece comic relief if the client lets me; for example, something like insects and frogs in a hidden spot.

#### Like shunga (erotic wood block prints)?

Well, no one has asked me to do shunga but if you are going to, you might as well do a whole back. Of course I want to because I am a horishi but no one has asked me yet!

#### Why do people want dark motifs?

There are people with ghosts following them around! They probably like things that are grotesque or scary. I don't understand personally, but they find pleasure in showing off gross things like this, and the reaction, the surprise. It is the same as when you are kid and you bring a frog out of your pocket.

#### Do you network with other artists in Kyushu?

There aren't that many parallel relationships between tattoo artists in Kyushu, because they don't want to get copied. They don't want their technique stolen, so there were no side networks.

In the past, you can really tell whose work was whose, whereas now, you can't tell who did what work. I know my work and all the Kyushu people know my work, whereas other tattoo artists copy Horiyoshi's book so you can't tell whose work belongs to who, there are definitely different skill levels but the illustrations are the same. People in the past had a lot of pride in their own illustrations. I don't put my own name on my tattoos, unless I specifically get asked to. Everyone else does but I never have -- I really don't have a need because I know that it is my work and it gets in the way!

I was only drawing for ten years from 20 to 30 years of age and didn't tattoo at all. Then the next ten years, I was tattooing but not taking any money actually, so I have only been professional for 15 years!

### That is amazing, considering there are many professional tattoo artists that have studios after 2 years.

With tebori, that is impossible, you can't even make the needles after 2 years.

#### Can you tell us about your underworld clients?

I had many yakuza clients in the past, maybe 90% but now it is getting strict and they can't eat. If they can't eat neither can't I, so I tell them to get a grip! Especially in this town, there were all these issues in the newspaper with Kyushu yakuza which was actually right here, and they were getting killed or going to jail.

If you have clients that are yakuza, you really need to have the technical skill otherwise they will complain. So for machine artists, maybe they don't have the skill to tattoo them. I have real confidence in my work, so I don't get told anything.

#### How do the yakuza treat you?

The yakuza treat me like an emperor, if I am walking along town, they come to greet me and when I am in the bath house they greet me. With the yakuza, the higher up guys aren't that weird, they are quite proper, but you get a lot of weirdoes with the young guys and people group them together, but the guys at the top aren't like that at all. I don't have deep connections with them asides from business; I am a worker so I can't have deep affiliations with them, but without the syndicates, it is hard for tattooing to have any legitimacy. There was a tattoo boom with young people, but up until then, the syndicates were upholding and protecting tattooing.



# HORITOSHI

### What is the difference between tattoo work done by hand and work done with a machine?

For the outlines, machines are very useful. My personal opinion is, however, that as the years go by, the color holds better with tebori. In other words, the ink goes deeper into the skin, whereas with the machine, it is rapid and doesn't enter the skin as deeply.

## Nowadays anyone can get kits from online. But how did you get your supplies years ago?

We found out that there were good, inexpensive colors, so I would get a translator and I would go to the American Trade Center. I would get a Japanese letter translated into English and then I would send that letter to the U.S. and wait for a reply, which at the time took a month. Then they would send a catalog, then I would send back an order. It would take two months for the items to arrive! It has only been over the last 25 years that artists have done overseas orders. Prior to that, we were developing our own color pigments and tools, such as the needles, which, in itself, would take five years to learn as well.

#### Where would you get the needles?

We were using needles that were used for sewing Japanese clothing. We would cut the sewing needle according to a specific length to suit our needs, but we would need a specialist to do that. They took advantage of me and would tell me that I had to order over 10,000 needles and they would charge a lot. During my time it was a really difficult world.

#### When did you first see your first Western tattoo?

Perhaps around 30 years ago? I was mostly seeing them in photos. But Lyle Tuttle appeared on Japanese TV around 30 years ago! There was a show called *Kijin Henjin*, and he was wearing a gown—it's like a quiz show where the audience has to figure out what the person's job is—and when he removed the gown, he was tattooed all over. He had a lot of tribal ink, and a lot of various styles of tattoos, and it was like, "My goodness what a mishmash of work!" It was a mess—even on his hands. But to be tattooed to that extent means that he went through a lot of painful hardships and has perseverance. I think that is quite admirable to have that huge area tattooed, I am not nearly that tattooed.

You have a large family with many students, many of whom work in the same apartment building as you. How many deshi do you have exactly? Twelve, I think. When someone wants to become my student, of course, I need to meet them first. So they come in and we discuss what they want to do and their experiences. Then I decide if they are appropriate for the job. It is not the case that the more students you have, the better; I just try to get the best quality people, and if you have a few that is really enough. Every day, someone comes in, in rotation, even if they are already working independently, I still get them to come in. When they first start, I teach them things like the having manners and respect for the clients, and the way to communicate and answer the phone. I really start from scratch, and knowing those things are the absolute minimum requirement. I only let my students tattoo small things after five years. After 10 years, they can work at the most rudimentary professional level, although there are, of course, individual differences.

### Much has been said about how Japanese society looks negatively on tattoos. How do you feel that the social standing of people with tattoos has changed in Japan over the last 10 years?

Over the last 20 years it has improved. It was worse before you really couldn't show them in public before. People in yakuza organizations, even in summer, were wearing full sleeves. Nowadays there are a plethora of young people with full sleeves wearing them with T-shirts, and that is indicative that society is getting used to seeing them, gradually. But still, there is the dark history of Japan, with hundreds of years of prohibition, so I feel that it will take hundreds of years to improve. Tattoos were banned under Japanese law and it was only in 1948, thanks to General MacArthur that the prohibition was lifted. I think it will take another 230 years for things to normalize and become like overseas.







### In addition to being refused entry into various places and being looked down upon, what are some other ways the negative image of tattoos affects people lives here?

In addition to the limitations in the workplace, you can't get life insurance, unless you get the cheapest type. I actually applied for insurance with my wife and was refused numerous times. You can't donate blood. If you want to get a loan, it's difficult, because tattooing is legally ambiguous—this is despite the fact that we have to pay taxes. Thirty years ago, when I wanted to borrow this studio, the first three places refused because I am a tattoo artist and so I had to pretend I was doing something else.

Probably if you were honest, you wouldn't get a credit card either. Socially we might be respected as artists or tattoos might be seen as a kind of fashion, but with the establishment, it is really difficult. I personally feel like things are getting worse. Additionally, in Japan, we have the situation where there has been a sudden increase in tattoo artists and there are many people who aren't doing it properly and they cause trouble—these people are really increasing. In response to this, the government cracks down on tattoo artists.

#### What would it take for Japan to change its view on tattooing?

When I talk about social change, I feel that Japan would need someone like a brilliant, vanguard medical professor to respond to the government until something changes. There was someone in academia like this, but he is old, close to 90, and not so active anymore. I personally feel that we need ministerial authorization and approval even though it is not exactly considered illegal to be a tattoo artist. It is not actually authorized under the Ministry of Health and Welfare. If they change their stance, so will the police. As far as this doesn't change, tattoos will continue to have a shady image. If artists have to pass a licensing exam—where only people who understand sterility pass—that would be ideal. I think it is impossible for Japan to have this. It's my last wish, but within in my lifetime I think it won't happen.

#### When you started tattooing, did you have a lot of yakuza coming in?

Since the beginning, 80 percent of my clients were "organization" people. The authorities are getting strict, so the number of underworld clientele I have coming in has dropped to 30 percent, which is a remarkable decline. They are really clamping down on yakuza, so I think this number will only decrease more.

#### Were they coming in from one syndicate, or from various places?

No, they were from various families. If there is a fight, and they know someone from another family is coming to get a tattoo before or after their session, they will cancel, so I need to plan accordingly. However, because the police are so tight now, things like gang wars are not common anymore. While the amount of yakuza clientele has dropped, the number of regular people wanting tattoos has increased, so it hasn't affected me too much. Somehow I have survived the decline.

#### What kind of motifs do yakuza want?

They will only consider traditional motifs. For example, if they get flowers they have to be chrysanthemums, peonies, maples, and sakura. They will not get anything else. So you see the young people nowadays getting whatever tattooed, they will never do that because they hear from their bosses and superiors about what motifs are good—if they put in an American motif, they will probably get told off by the elders. In my studio, I only do traditional large pieces, so people that want the fashionable small things don't come here. But I can observe with the people around me that small tattoos are increasing now, and I guess that is a type of tradition too—but very different to what yakuza consider to be traditional.

#### What kind of people other than yakuza were getting tattoos?

There were a lot of craftsmen, construction workers. But, actually, they would like the same kinds of motifs as what the yakuza like.

#### Do you think it's okay for a traditional art to become fashionable?

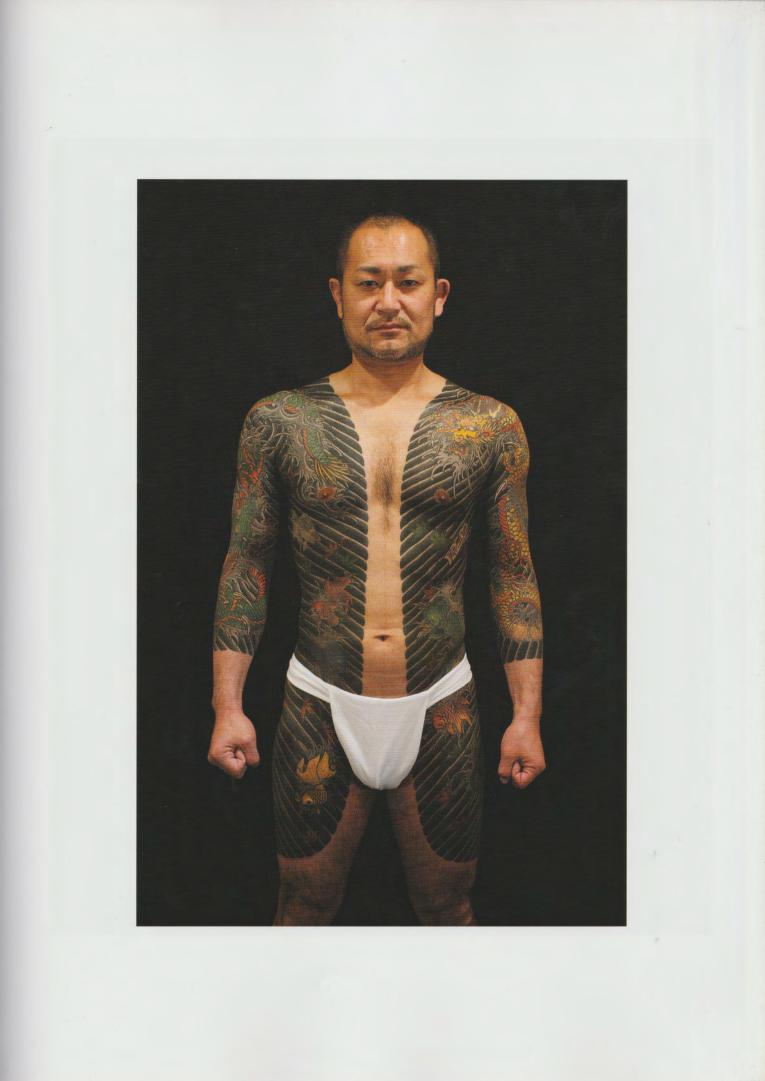
When you say it is a Japanese tradition, to make it too faddish and fashionable isn't that great. But, consequently, if we don't borrow the strength of those fashionable people, Japanese society won't change. In that regard, I think that young people are really trying hard to change this image cause if the young kids are always hiding their tattoos, it will always be seen socially as something bad. I think in order to balance things out, to walk around showing tattoo is actually a good thing—as long as the work itself follows the rules of tradition. I'm not really into the idea of having Japanese traditional tattoos and foreign tattoos fused together.

#### At the end of the day, why do people get tattooed if it is such a hassle?

The fascination and appeal of tattooing is more powerful, I guess. And once they put it in, there is no point in regretting it! Of course, it is an individual decision, so it is hard to say in a word, but someone might be weak and by getting a tattoo wants to become strong, or change his life.

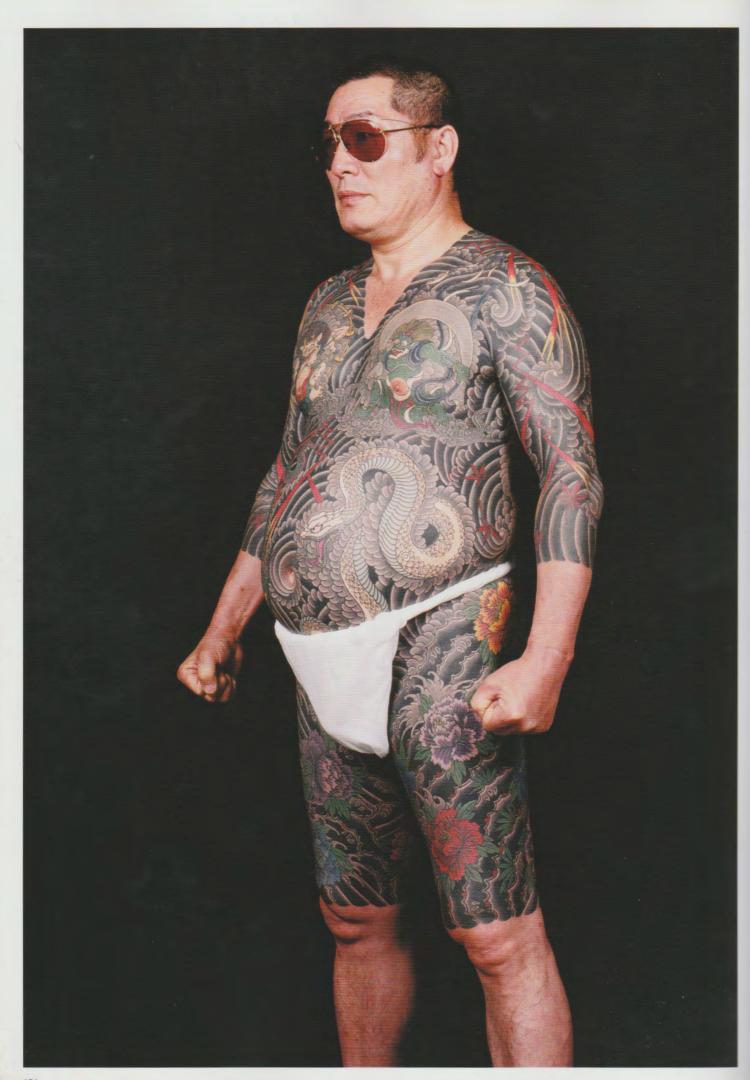


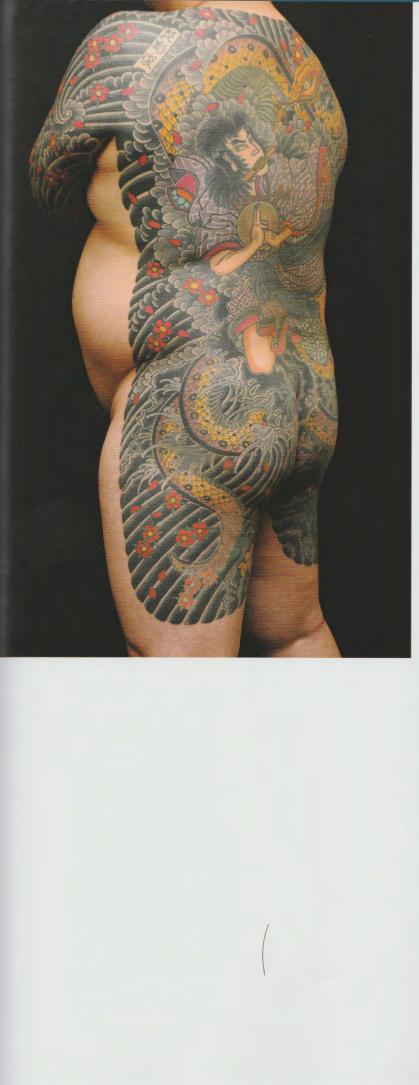
















# HORIHISA

#### What are the characteristics of the ink you use?

I use a Nara prefecture's *baikaboku*, which is "plum flower" in kanji. Also the fragrance of the ink when you grind it is very nice. *Nataneabura* is the most expensive, and can cost 24000 yen. There are types, ones you grind by hand and by machine. The sumi lasts for a long time. There are two types, the brown and blue types; I use the brown type, but it is up the individual preference of the tattoo artist in regards to what they use. There is also *Itsutsuboshi* (lit. 5 star) and that is also great. It was originally used in the Edo period for calligraphy on Japanese rice paper for things like letters. I also use this for the gradations and the blue label grey wash.

#### What kind of motifs do you use a lot in your tattoos?

I like human characters. I tattoo a lot of women and also Japanese *Jiraiya* motifs. Usually the clients like the aesthetics and then they go into the stories, they don't usually know the story lines at first. I have about 300 types of stories, there are some with bad and good luck and I explain these to the clients.

#### Why do people get unlucky motifs?

There are ones like *Dairokuten Maou* (Buddhist) demons, ones that break the scroll of *Hannya*, but young people like these and are fascinated by them.

#### How has your work changed over the years?

Your eyes get more sophisticated if you see a lot of things, in the beginning, like 20 years ago, I might think something looks good, but then I look at the work now and they look strange to me, and there is a huge difference -- but I think everyone is the same in that respect.

#### Are there any trends?

Not really, in terms of wabori, but I don't end the frame with prayer beads anymore, I think that that was a kind of fashion. In my opinion, the *mikiri* (edging) marks the end of the tattoo and if you put a prayer beads on the outside, it makes no sense, so I don't do it. Old people will also say that it symbolizes "to choke." Also, if people want to extend their ink, for example from their forearms to their wrists, it looks strange.

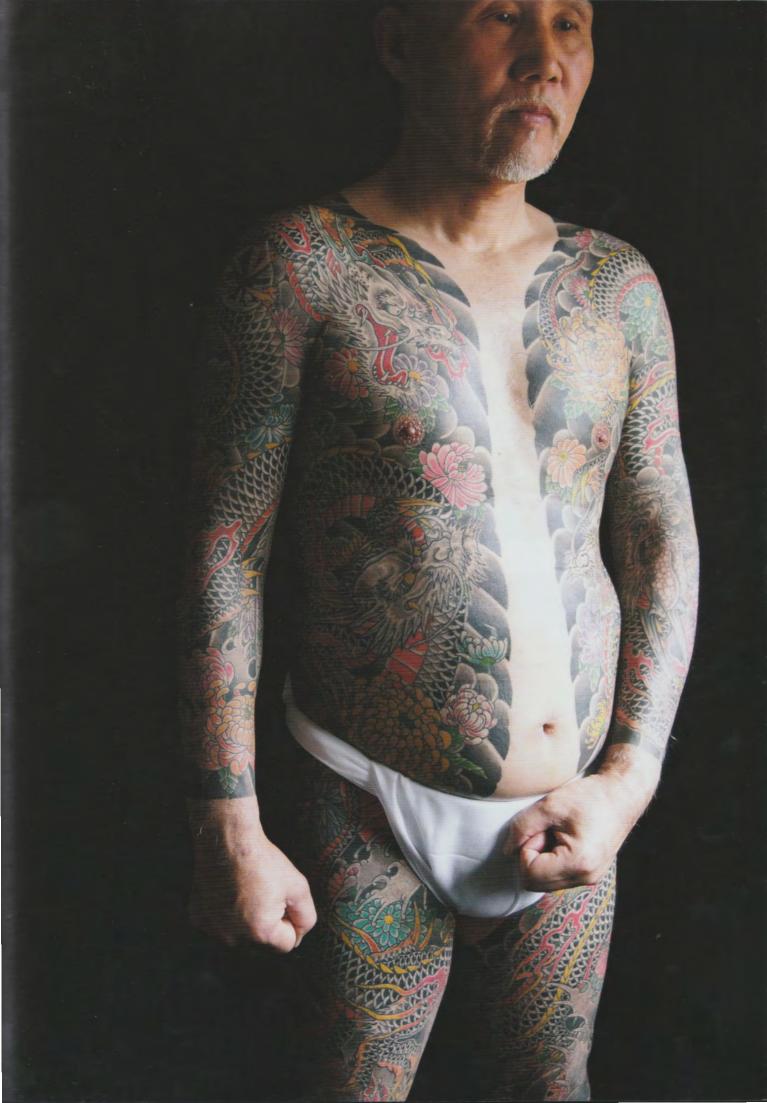
#### Are there meanings in the way the tattoos are shaped?

There are standard patterns, for example, the shape which is called the *jinmei* looks like a jinmei outfit when you wear it. They all have names, for example, the ones that are filled in like a t-shirt to the ankles is called a *donburi*, but the most common is a *nukibori* which is a subject with no background. The clients will try it out and start with small spaces, so for example, if someone does their arm, they might like it and extend to their whole body, so I will keep that in mind. The length of the endings is called a *gobu* (lit. 5 parts) *shichibu* (7) *hachibu* (8) and *kyubu* (9). In order to make the work balanced, we tattoo the arms and legs in the same length. The Japanese mafia usually have gobu, and in the past the seven and eight was prevalent with construction workers.

Ed note: (5 is above the elbow, 7 is around 5 cms down the forearm, around the length of a *happi* coat or kimono, a 9 is around 5 cms above the wrist).

#### Can you tell us about the backgrounds?

This is a historical culture within wabori, the bottom are waves, and rocks, the top is clouds, and wind. If you put a wave on top of a Hannya, that makes no sense to me. The clouds and the wind comes at the top, and in the waves there are carp and water dwellers. There is a set way of doing things, according to the storyline. You can't do it all over the place, as it will lose its meaning, and the good aspects of the tattoo will degrade. The sense of compositional balance comes from this. The Kanto and Kansai regions are different. The Kanto style is shallow and Kansai is deep, as in the tattoo goes above the nipples for Kanto and below the for Kansai. For myself, I adjust the work according to the body, for example, if he has short or long arms. I will make the work balanced according to that.





I am not too concerned with regional styles in my case, I don't think other artists are that conscious of it either.

# Do you have festivals in Kumamoto like Sanja where everyone shows off their tattoos?

In September, there is a festival in Kumamoto and in the last 50 years everyone was showing their tattoos and there were also many yakuza who would show their dapper work but nowadays that is totally prohibited. Fighting and tattoos are the fundamentals of matsuri!

# Do you feel obliged to pass on tradition?

Yes, I have a few apprentices and I feel that the name was given from my teacher and I want that to continue. My obligation isn't such a large thing, like to pass on the Japanese tattoo on the whole, I think rather, it is my responsibility to pass on the name of my teacher to the next generation.

# What is the dynamic between yourself and your students?

They are in their 20s and 30s, but I learn from them too. It's not like I am 100% and I feel like I have things I need to learn too. We have a meeting and drink sake. They really are a family. Together, it isn't just my mind only, I have access to many different opinions.

# How do you feel about the Japanese tattoo scene now?

Japanese tattoos have changed and is mixed with western and eastern, whereas I feel 1 am totally into Japanese. I don't want to distort the Japanese style that was done from before. There are famous artists that do this mix, and I don't see eye to eye so much with these people. For example, if you do Japanese you need to do it properly, it's like wearing western shoes with kimonos.

# Do you feel that you can do totally Japanese work with a machine?

My teacher was doing it by hand, but in the past, the system was paying per work done. The notion that you charge by the hour came in later. Tebori takes a lot of time and using the particular machines I use, I can utilize the benefits of doing tebori. So for me, to use a machine is a business thing, and I am worried about the sterility nowadays, even though the tebori tools are changeable, before there were people using the same tool and then only sharpening the tip.

# How did you start?

My brother was in Fukuoka and I was a driver -- I went over and he was getting tattooed, and when I saw his arms I became interested and got my back done. My brother's tattoo was the first that I ever saw. It wasn't completed straight away so over 2 years, I was commuting, and the artist who tattooed me was Horihisa I.



(Top) Horihisa and his apprentices at a local fetival in Kyushu. (Right) Horihisa I's work on Horihisa's back.

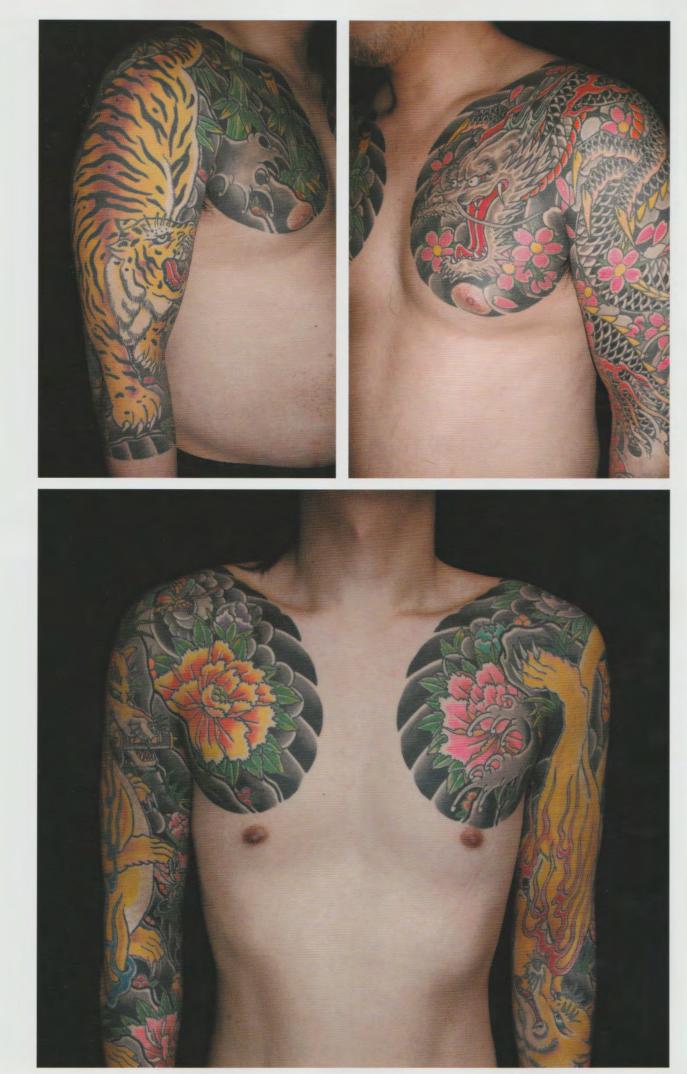
Even after I had finished the tattoo I was going over for fun, and he was like 'Why do you keep turning up?' I told him I was interested and he asked if I wanted to try it. He wasn't showing me from one to ten though, he would just give me a machine and said, 'You should see how it is made,' and I pulled it apart and studied it. So by seeing how his machines were constructed, I started to make them by copying his, using things like aluminum, stainless steel and things that don't rust. So I was using a homemade machine. In the beginning, it was a string of constant failures, and it took about three years to get a decent machine. But when I did, it was like, this is it!

# Why don't you tattoo yakuza?

I was a salary man in a distributions company and my brother was the boss, and I didn't want to cause him any problems by having these people come in and out, I didn't want repercussions on my brother. I was mostly hiding it, and only tattooing during the night, and then gradually I got sucked in. While I have been tattooing for 23 years, I consider 10 years to be training. Most of my clients are construction type people and those who work at night at host clubs.

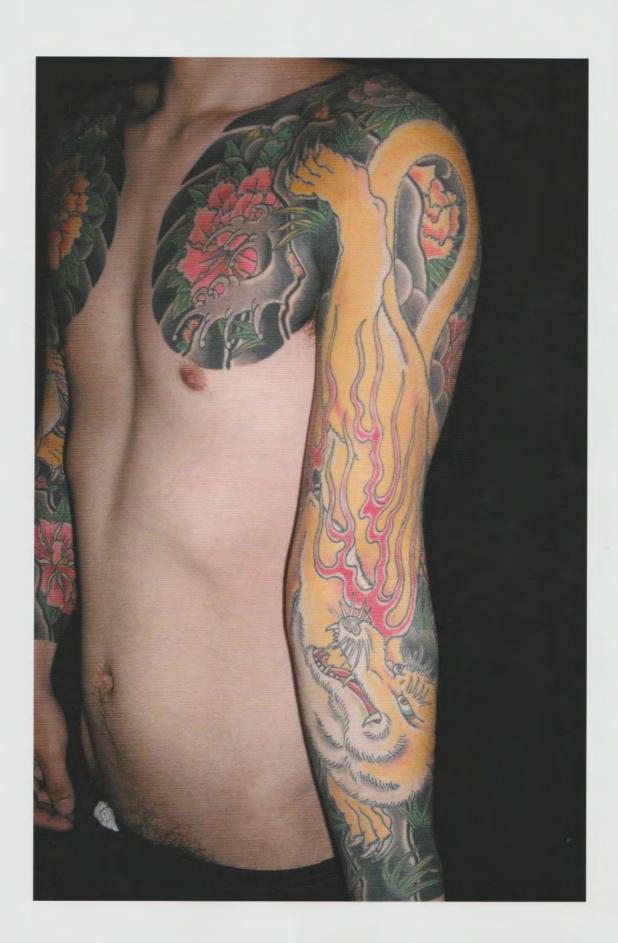






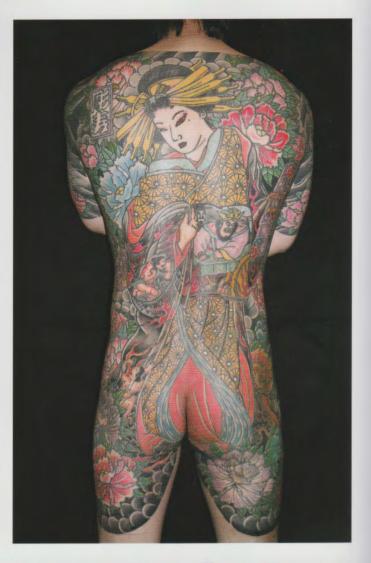




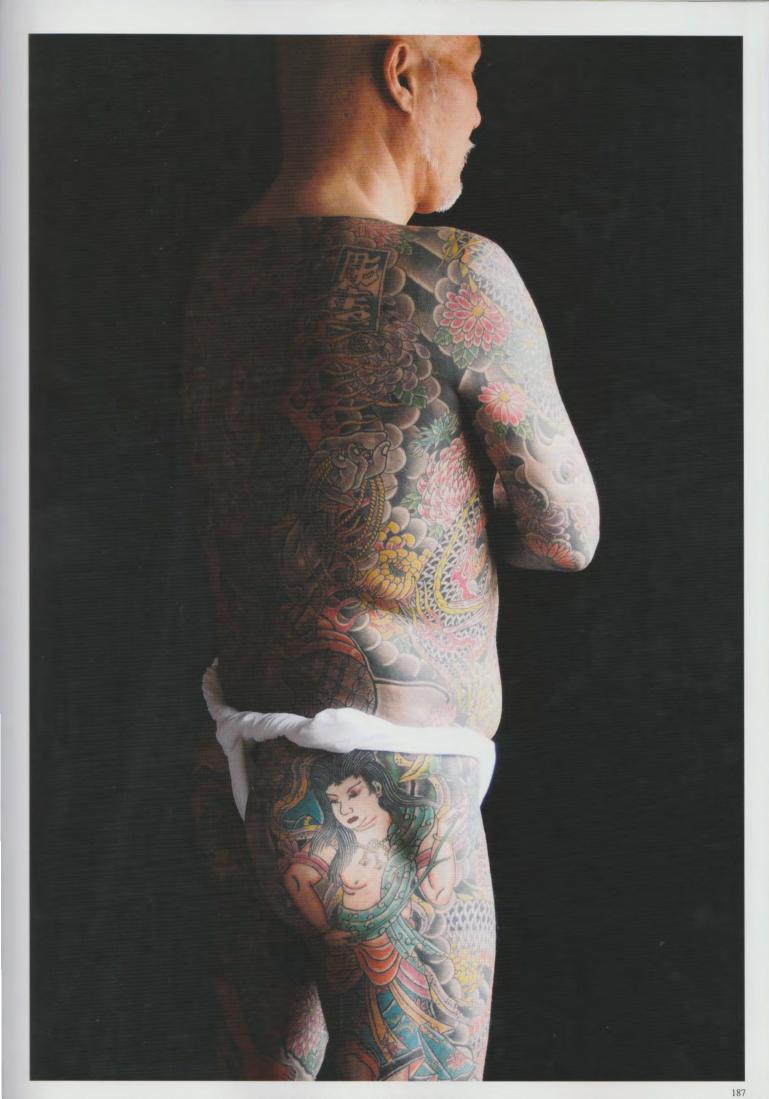












# HORIHITO

## Can you describe your style?

Sumi and *shu* (vermillion), I tend to use a lot of basic colors like reds that relate well to the black. These are Japan's time honored colors, and I try to use these as much as possible.

# How did you start?

I really felt that tattooing was all I could do. When I was young, I was always getting up to no good and I was really a lost cause. In the past, Japanese traditional tattoo artists weren't exactly good citizens, (laughs), for example, you definitely wouldn't have an university graduate becoming a tattoo artist. This is really the truth. When I started, there weren't that many tattoo artists in terms of population numbers either, so I thought to make a living doing this. Asides from this, I really loved the illustrations.

I started when I was 17 and I am 49 now, so basically 32 years. I am self taught and was only doing tebori. When I compare the tattoo industry now and then, nowadays there are so many people doing it. What you can say about Japanese traditional tattooing is that it has meaning, and lately it is common that people don't know the meaning and get the tattoo because it looks cool. So when they do the *mikiri* (edging) there are rules and they don't know this and insert the tattoo and there are many cases like this.

### How have your clientele changed over the years?

In the past, it was mostly yakuza getting tattoos and nowadays this is becoming regular people. There are many people getting western tattoos and then get into Japanese tattooing after that and there are many people getting them for fashion. However, I tattoo traditional Japanese tattoos and I never tattoo any one point tattoos.

# What is the process of getting a tattoo by you?

People come in and then we discuss what the client wants, and then I make the sketch and work according to that. In terms of the order of the tattooing, I conform to the client's needs but usually I start with the painful parts first, so the rest is easy.

So, I start with the back and then do motifs according to what fits with this. According to what motif I use in the back, will determine what I tattoo in the arms.

# Are there people who don't come back?

Yes there are many, some get caught and locked up, and there is a gap of a few years, but actually there are few people who finish the work to full completion!

There are less yakuza but they aren't increasing either. Personally, I want these kinds of people to get tattooed and I actually think the people who know the good aspects of Japanese tattooing are these kinds of people. It is the sense of spirit, and the sense of tradition. They are concerned about the meanings of the tattoos, for example with the *koi* (carp), the word "koi" can also mean "come whenever," so when the carp is on the chopping board, the carp is prepared to die whenever. Or they might be into the illustrations that depict things like *seppuku* (ritual suicide).

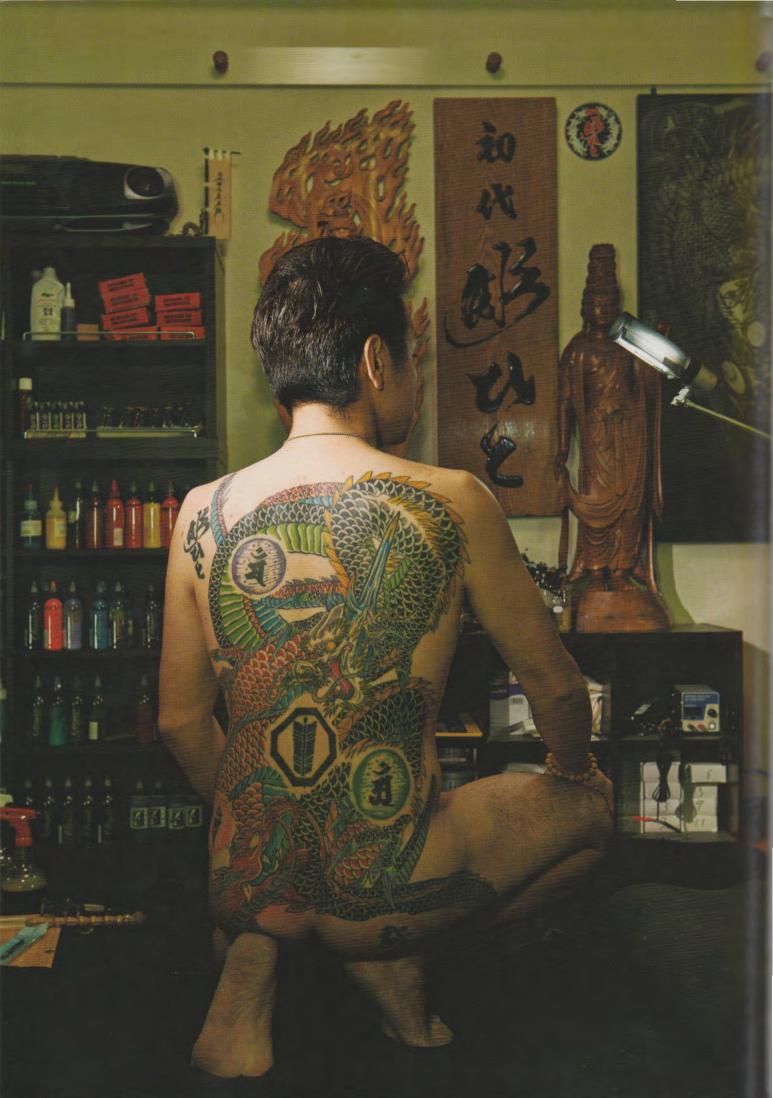
# Were you influenced by the Toei films?

No,...I was doing bad things from when I was a kid and I really feel that it was the only road for me, but I think there are people who like yakuza films and they want the same motifs or they want the same tattoos as the famous yakuza.

# Is it still an initiation rite?

No, there aren't things like that anymore, but in Japanese history, there were firefighters and yakuza, and *bakuto* (the gamblers.) That is an absolute historical fact, so the *bikeshi* nowadays are firefighters and that culture doesn't exist anyone, but the bakuto are the yakuza and they get tattoos.





The firefighters would get a tattoo and it is like a burn -- it is hot and you get a temperature; it is a mark to say, "I won't give in to the heat of fire, I won't be beaten by something like fire." Likewise, for the yakuza it is a way to show that they will live by this path, it this feeling that is expressed in the tattoo.

There are people that believe that you will be protected by your tattoo, but what do you think? It's not like if you get a tattoo you become stronger! I think it is more like pride in being Japanese.

# How do you feel about modern tattooing?

There are too many people who get half assed tattoos, it is something that isn't Japanese and it isn't a (western) tattoo either, it is a mix between the west and east.

# What is the most popular motif?

Dragons, they are popular. There are ones like *Shouryu* that rise, the black dragons have the waves. I'm not too sure what artisans want as they are regular people, but for right wing groups they want things like cherries and things that have the beauty of impermanence, and images of seppuku. I get a lot of right wing people too, to be honest, I am probably Japan's most nefarious tattoo artist! I can really say this with confidence, my character is not good! (laughs)

# Does it go together, that sense of nationalism and getting a Japanese tattoo?

The people who get Japanese tattoos, they are rather proud of being Japanese, and I am happy for this.

# Asides from traditional festivals are there gatherings for tattoo enthusiasts in Japan?

Once every two years, I put on an event called Irezumi -sai. 2000 to 3000 people get together and it is like a convention with music at Kasawaki Club Citta, (an event space). People who like Japan's traditions really like festivals -- it is basically like Brazil's Samba, it is basically about having a raucous time and having fun -- there is no such thing as a sad festival. Encapsulated in these festivals is the Edo spirit which is also expressed in tattooing as well.

# Can you tell us about Japan's history of punishment tattoos?

Horimono and irezumi are different. Criminals were marked with thick black lines, but for these, they use different Chinese characters so it is a totally different word. We are doing horimono or *shisei* (literally meaning "to prick blue") and it is totally different to irezumi -- the Chinese of which means "to insert ink." 20 years ago there was a listing in the phone book listing which stated tattoo work was irezumi, and I made a complaint.

The cultures are not related as the criminal markings were not done by tattoo artists and have no meaning.

# Can you tell us about the needles you use?

I make them and put them in the jig, basically if you have a needle and ink, you can tattoo. I was putting in orders at a Hiroshima needle factory but now they have needles specifically for tattoo artists. Usually I am using a 13, 13 and 13 set up.

I started to use a machine 17 or 18 years ago, I was one of the early ones to use a machine. Then colors appeared on the scene, and at the time there were no good machines. I was ordering from America. I use machines for the outlines as it is clean, you can tattoo a straight line in one shot. For the client, you can do a large area quickly, whereas if you do it in tebori it takes longer and costs more for the client.

# What are the good aspects of tebori?

Everyone talks about the qualities of tebori, but actually that quality is the sumi ink. Sumi is different to ink and diffuses, so when you first insert it, it is initially small dots and then the gathering of dots becomes black. The thinner parts have less dots. As the years go on, the ink diffuses, you can say that the more the tattoo ages, the more flavour it gets.

# Can you tell us about the Yoshitoshi severed heads?

With samurai there is a retirement day, according to the numbers they beheaded, so it is something like you take the others head off and you are the winner -- it symbolizes victory. I really have a lot, I used to love them. I like grotesque things, they give me energy; like how far can I go with this?

# Can you tell us about the discrimination?

I think overseas, Japanese tattoos are respected, but in Japan, the opinion towards tattooing is dropping; like, "Tattooing is for bad people and is a bad thing"-- and that notion is getting worse. The situation now is that you can't go to the beach, to the pool, or to an onsen. However, there is also the history where people like the Japanese police were being protected by the yakuza as well. After the war, they would act as de facto police and fight certain people to uphold order. But even so, there is still the notion that yakuza are bad and tattoos are bad. It is not like everyone with a tattoo is bad, and it is not like all yakuza are bad either, you can't group them like that, there are a lot worse people too!













# HORIMASA

When did you first see a tattoo, and when did you want to become a tattoo artist yourself?

Probably when I was 20, I was in a band and my friends had tattoos. I had no desire to have any myself though, at the time.

I became interested not long after though, and got my first ones at a tattoo shop in Tokyo -- some small tattoos, a cross and a devil. After turning 30, I met my wife who had a tattoo machine, and she was tattooing kanji and small one points on Brazilians. After watching her, I thought I would have a go. Initially, I was using a rotary machine, and was tattooing with a machine for 5 years before I started doing tebori, in a different studio.

# When did you start tebori and what inspired you to start?

I saw Horiyoshi III's photos for the first time, which inspired me to start practising tebori. I saw one of his dragons on someone's back, and it was impressive. It sparked my interest in Japanese tattoos.

#### Before that, whose work did you admire or reference?

Various American artists' flash, and the work I saw browsing though magazines like Tattoo Burst.

#### Whose work do you look at now?

I used to study other peoples work, but now I try not to, otherwise my own work becomes too similar. I will look at tattoos as reference perhaps, but not really study them in great detail.

Why did you teach yourself as opposed to going through an apprenticeship? It was simply a case of not knowing anyone. Usually, you might become the apprentice of the person you receive tattoos from, but I didn't have anyone like that, and I didn't know any horishi in the neighborhood.

# How long did it take for you to make tattooing a viable job for you?

5 or 6 years, the first 2 years I supported myself with other jobs. I don't feel that I'm that accomplished in tebori now, but I feel that I have been tattooing clients at a decent level for the past 2 years, although I feel like I have a long way to go.

## What is the difference between tattooing by hand or by machine?

The colors; the gradations and the black *sumi* (ink). A definite difference emerges as the years go, a certain flavor.

### Do you ever tattoo with a machine?

It depends on my client's requirements, if they want to complete their tattoo in a hurry, I will use a machine and for those who have time, I will use tebori.

# What is the appeal of Japanese traditional to you?

As with tattoos overseas, Japanese tattoos have a long history and have numerous meanings, it is enjoyable to study these and learn the significance behind each piece -- the illustrations and the line work is very specific in Japanese tattooing.

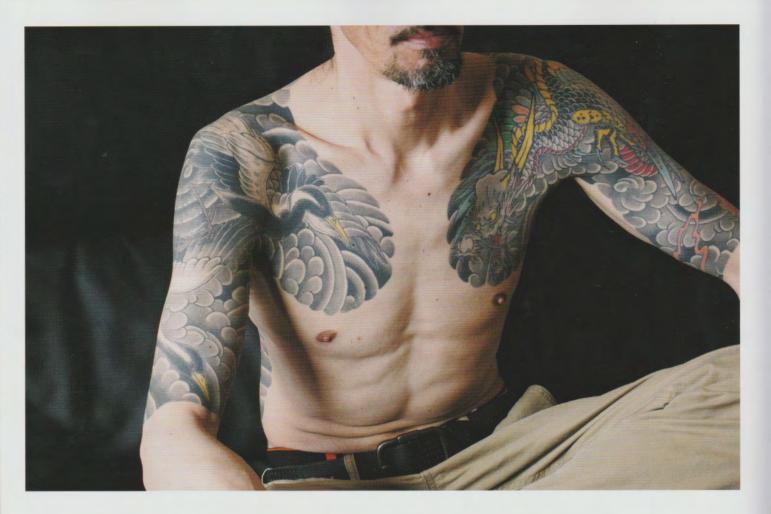
# Where do you get inspiration from for your work?

Ukiyo-e illustrations. Japanese motifs are fundamentally based on various ukiyo-e illustrations, and if we don't refer to those as the basis, the tradition of tattooing becomes diluted. If you are as good as Horiyoshi III and start making your own original prints, that is great, but there are people who don't understand the basics yet and try to make their own original work and change it. I don't really like this, so I try and use ukiyo-e as my basis, and not manipulate it too much.

# So you feel like you have a responsibility to uphold traditions?

Yes precisely, otherwise I feel like I can't say I am a horishi specializing in Japanese traditional irezumi.





### Which particular artists do you look at?

Kuniyoshi for his outlines, Hokusai for his animals, Yoshitoshi for his line work as well. A lot of the Japanese tattooing is based on his work, so I study his work for things like the kimono lines.

# What other things are important?

The hands and feet are really important. I look at various books for good material, and practice these. Also the eyes. The other body parts are fine to use as is, but if you slightly change the feet, hands and eyes, it can really become your own work.

## Can you tell us about the tools for tebori?

In the beginning, I was using a Horiyoshi III kit, and then gradually began to have pieces custom made to suit my needs, such as the pipe. I found a factory and started getting pieces made there to a suitable length. The needles, I use various tapers but I can't say too much because it is confidential!

# Are people conscious of the meanings when they come to you?

Yes, there are many people who really study the meanings of the motifs before they come to me and understand them thoroughly. Up until 2 or 3 years ago, there were a lot of clients who were OK with a tattoo and any tattoo, but now they are much more knowledgeable. Occasionally, I get clients who know more than me.

# What are the most common motifs in your work?

The most common are human characters, like samurai, particularly samurai wearing armor, and ninjas -- characters that handle dragons and tigers. Irezumi is something that has an impact when seen from afar, whereas I feel that tattoos look good close up.

# Do you get people asking you to do 'whatever'?

I tell these people, 'Go home and please return after you have decided!' They usually come in decided though, I talk to them and sometimes I make suggestions if I feel there is something more appropriate for them.

### When did you start doing illustrations?

I enjoyed drawing since childhood, but was not serious about it until I started working as a tattoo artist. Prior to working as a horishi, I was playing around doing various things, but since I started tattooing, I really focus my time on drawing or looking at reference books.

# Who are your clients?

Usually blue collar workers, and people working in construction. There is an organization of people who carry shrines at Japanese temples, and they are often my clients as well. About 10 % are yakuza -- I don't really like them. Usually my clients are local, but recently some come in from further or occasionally overseas. I don't advertise, so they either come via introduction, or see my homepage.





# What kind of trends have you seen recently?

The trend is going back from one point tattoos to Japanese tattoos. When a person gets an one point tattoo, it is a question of whether it is going to look good in ten years time. I get asked to do tribal quite often, but in ten years when they are 50 or 60 years old, is tribal going to look good? Foreigners might look really good with tribal at that age, but for Japanese, I think traditional looks better and I try and get people to change their minds and get irezumi instead.

I still do western tattoos however, and if I talk to my clients and they still insist on getting them, then I will take requests, it is only about 10 % of my clientele though -- usually they go another shop. increasing more. You can easily obtain everything you need, all you need is to buy the tools, make a business card and then if you say you are a tattooer and then you become one. These types of people will only increase even more, but those who are not skilled disappear, and of course the good artists remain.

# How do you feel about the social discrimination in Japan against people with tattoos?

You get tattoos knowing the risk and understanding the consequences, so what can you do? If you absolutely feel the need to go to an onsen, you can just hire a private bath.

# How has the industry changed?

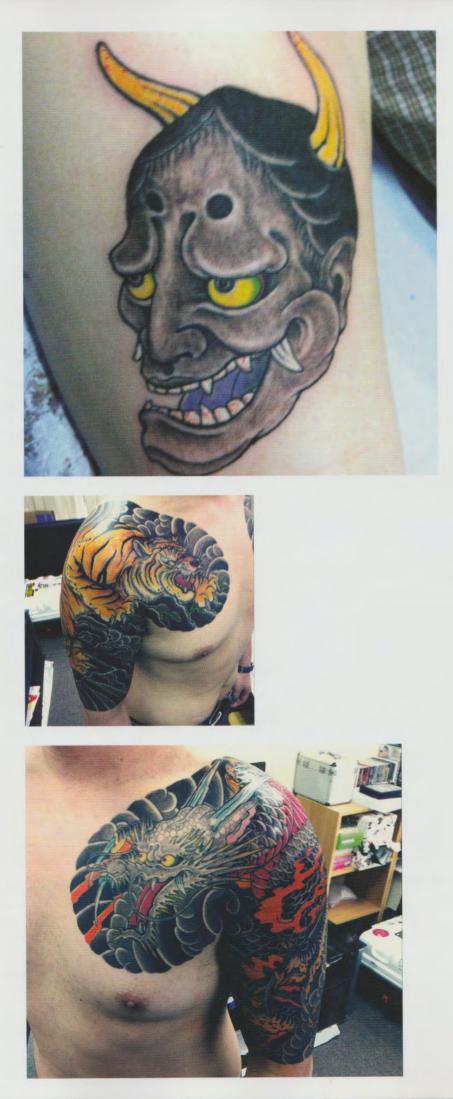
The number of horishi has increased phenomenally and it is only











# HORIKAZUWAKA

# When did you start?

When I was young, I was always helping my father, Horikazu -- he didn't teach me as such, so I had to teach myself. I had the tebori tools and started making money from tattooing since I was 13 years old, and I was working at night. When I graduated primary school, my classmates and I had to write down our future dreams for a yearbook, and I wrote, "I want to be a traditional Japanese tattoo artist."

# Are most of your clients locals?

Although I am based in Asakusa, my clients come in from all over Japan, purely word of mouth. I advertised once in Tattoo Burst magazine, but that was it.

# What is your schedule like?

I have about 5 clients from noon, and work for about 12 hours. When I am really busy I will start at 8 and go til 11, and tattoo each person for about 2 hours. One client came in every single day for an entire year, for one or two hours sessions, until his body suit was completed.

#### Why do your clients get tattooed?

I have some clients, they don't want to get a tattoo at all! They are being basically ordered to get one by their superior. However, nowadays, I also get people getting tattoos for fashion, and get onepoints like butterflies, and one of my clients requested a Medusa, times really are changing.

# What kind of motifs do you tattoo the most?

I decide the motif according to the client's personality. If the guy is excessively hard, or nasty looking, I insert a soft design. If the client doesn't look all that convincing, a more aggressive, or strong design will be used. The most common motifs for me are dragons. I don't know why, I just love dragons. I was always doing bad things, so I like (protective) mythical gods and goddesses as well.

# Can you tell us about tebori?

I do the outlines with machine, but the rest with tebori. With tebori, after 10 years, the work is even more beautiful, whereas, with a machine the quality degrades. The beauty of Japanese tattooing is that the colors and vibrancy improves as time goes on -- it doesn't degrade, rather it just gets more beautiful as it ages.

Ed note: Photos from a festival the photographer and I attended in 2009 with Horikazuwaka and his friends. Many of the people shown here have work by the late Horikazu, Horikazuwaka's father who passed away shortly after. The photos show work by both Horikazuwaka and Horikazu.



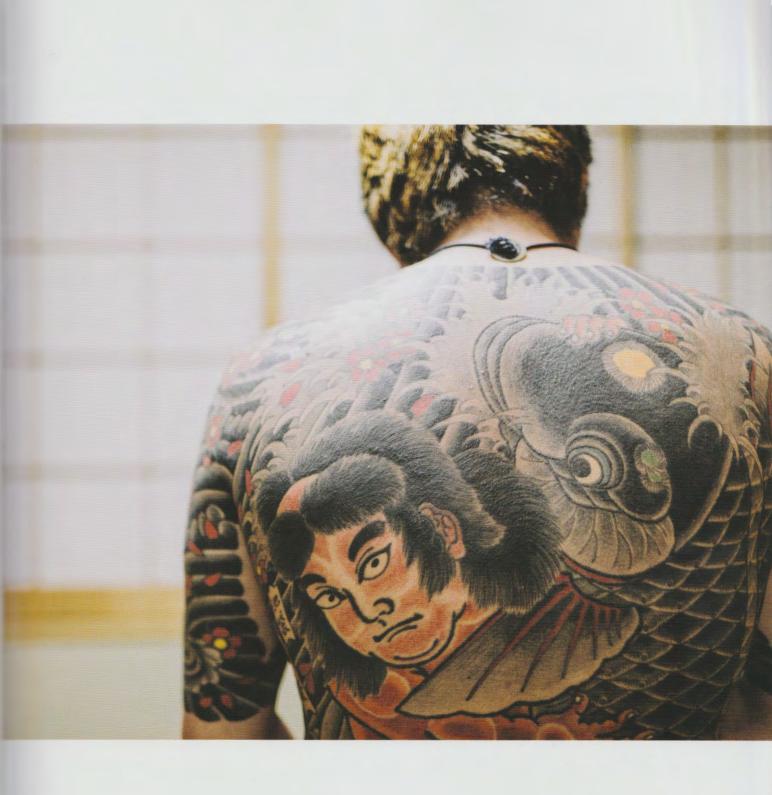
Entire chapter: MICHAEL RUBENSTEIN PHOTO







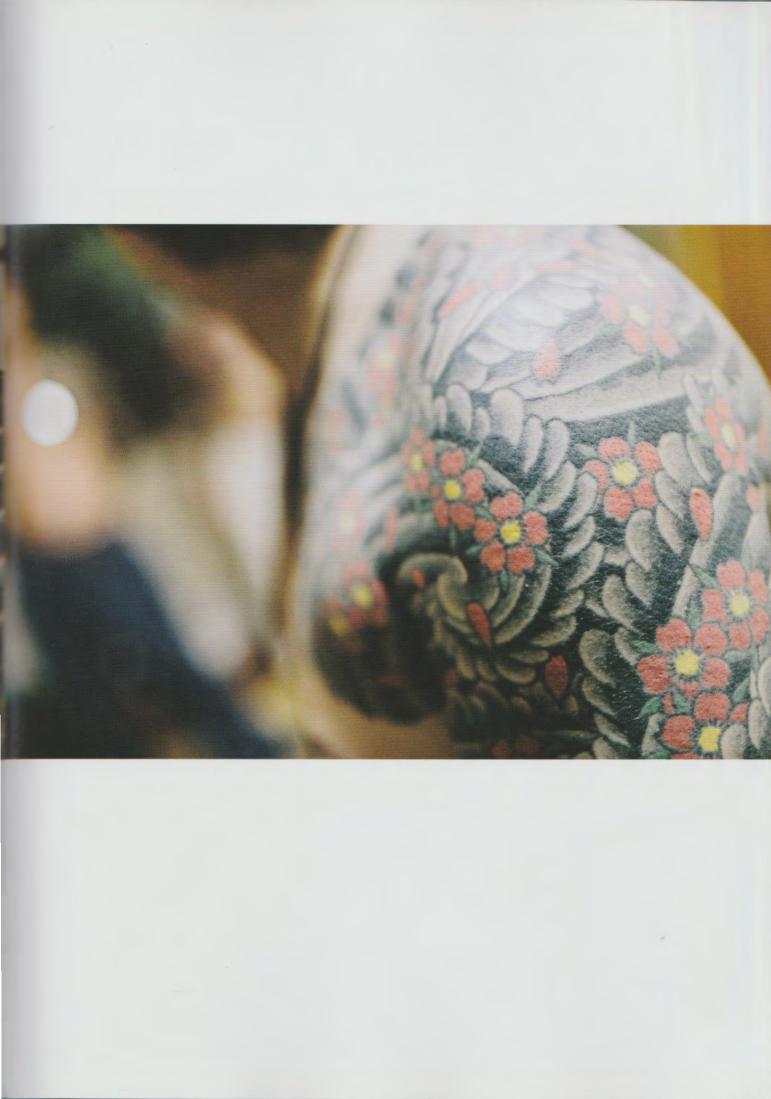






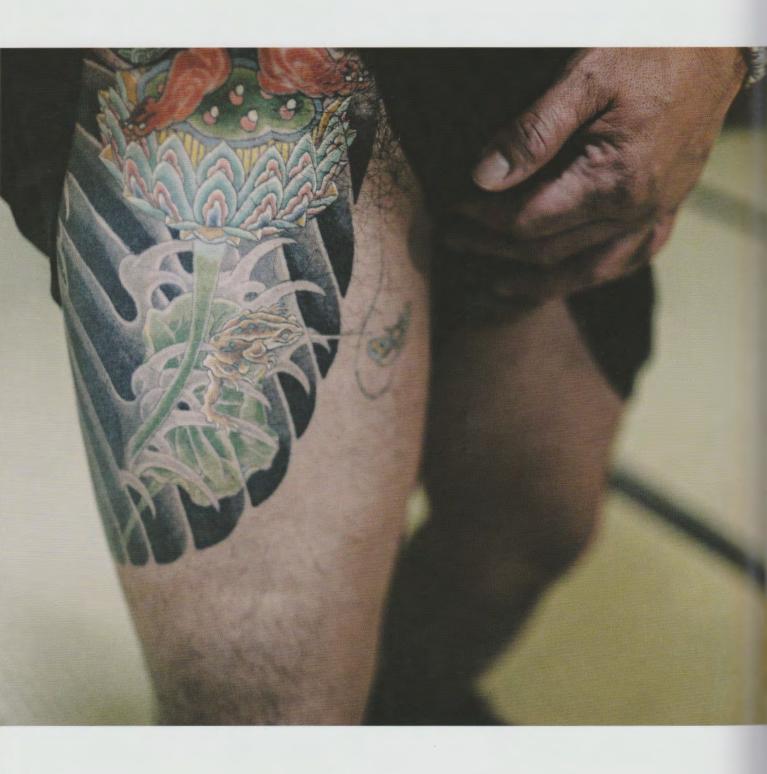


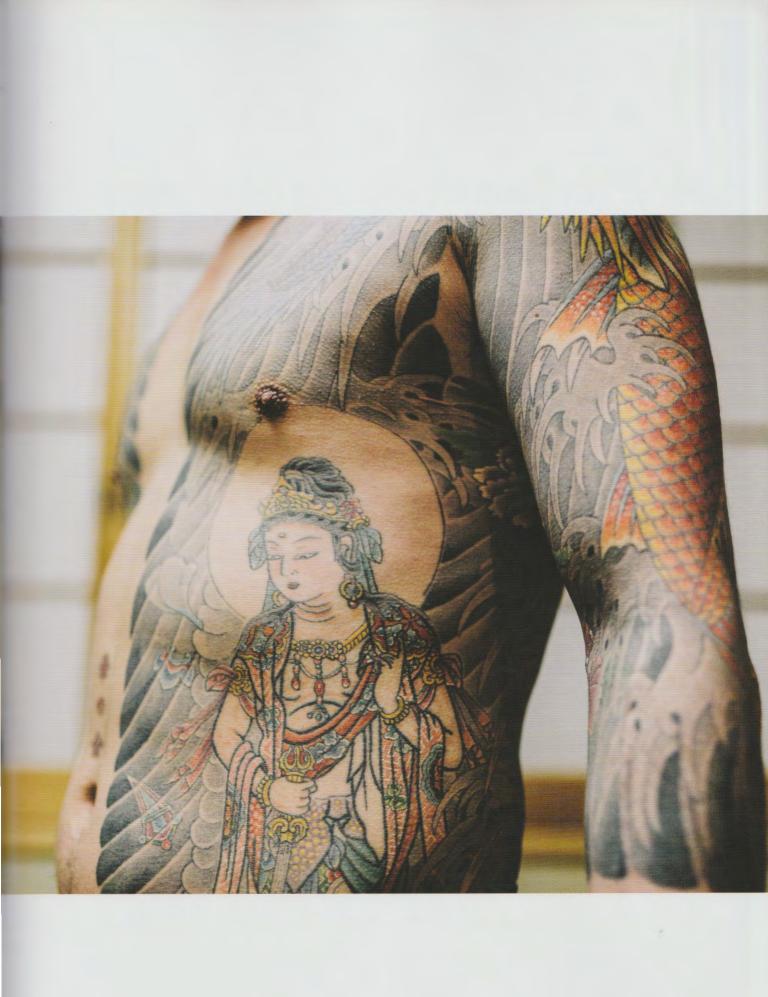




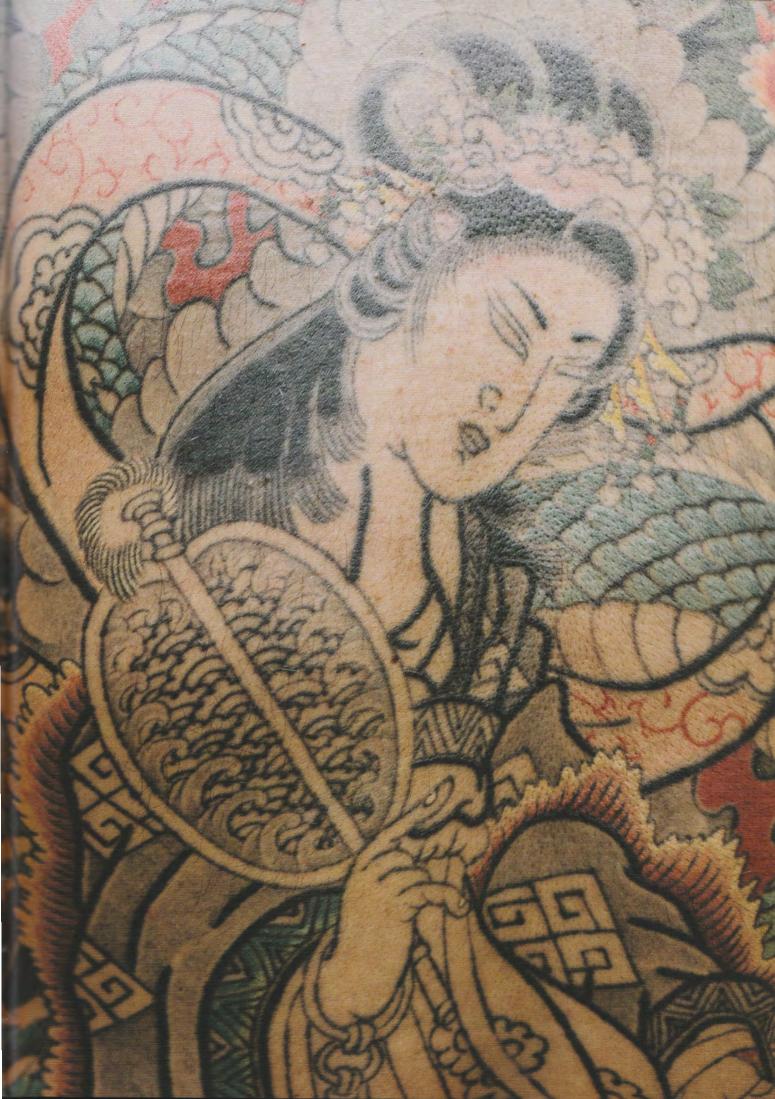












# HORITSUNA

# How did you start?

I wanted to be a *shokunin* (artisan) and during the time, I was doing a shokunin job but it wasn't something that I was doing by myself. At the time, everyone around me had tattoos as well, and I wanted to try tattooing. I didn't have a real *sensei* per se, but I learnt on my own, and when I had developed enough to a certain level, I was introduced by various people to other tattoo artists. In that way, I felt like I was taught by a lot of different people, rather than being affiliated with a family. I consider everyone who taught me a little bit, to be my teacher.

I started doing illustrations only after I became a tattoo artist, and the job I was doing before that wasn't related to art or design either. I always liked art and the notion of an art form that stays with you was appealing. In the beginning, I wasn't that deeply into it, but once I started, the difficulty of tattooing, and it's depth really drew me in, and I totally fell into it. I was somewhat infatuated and when I realized, I had become this age already!

# During the time, who were you influenced by?

It was quite a while ago that I started tattooing -- around 18 years ago -- and in Japan, there were many people doing wabori (Japanese tattooing) by hand, and I was influenced by everything. I was doing tebori first, so I actually studied (western) tattooing way after, it was when I opened this studio that I first started to study machines.

#### Are you interested in the folkloric stories that make up the subject matter?

When I was studying tattooing, I would also study these stories, of course -- to do Japanese traditional, you need to know them. Rather than an interest, it was more that I had to research them for the clients who ask about them, but the more you learn about them, the more you get fascinated in these things, and also the wood block prints.

# Describe your style.

I tattoo both *wabori* (Japanese traditional) and western tattoos, and I am incorporating western tattooing techniques into my tattoos such as the color schemes. According to the work I am doing, I might put in more colors, as Japanese traditional tends to be really simple. Many traditional Japanese artists tend to not use many colors but I use a lot. I will also change the shape of the *mikiri* (edging) and I think that it is because I am bringing in overseas influences. It is my interpretation of the Japanese style. I think it is a good thing that western tattoos are influenced by Japanese work, and vice versa.

Tradition is also really important to protect, but I think to get influence from somewhere, and create something new as "art" is a really a good thing too. For example, with Fillip Leu, the motifs are Japanese designs, but he creates his own world by blending the mikiri and the background. The technical skill is really high and I think it is fantastic. I see Japanese artists that copy, well, I shouldn't say "copy," but are influenced by him -- including me. I am really impressed, not only by his illustrations but also his technique, and the way he uses all the technical aspects that are available now, and also his speed.

# Can you tell us about the motifs?

In Japan, they tend to use the same motifs like human characters and dragons and so on, and that is set -- you choose from the range available, it's not about making new designs. However, the tattoo artists express their own individuality within that, for example, with a dragon, I think everyone tries to express their own individuality using that motif.

Conversely, according to a family, there are places that basically continues the work of the teacher, using his illustrations and like that, they will protect tradition.

However, I want to be a craftsman -- so it is up to the client's request, and I wish to fulfill all the client's wishes -- it isn't about the will of the tattoo artist. I think that is fine.





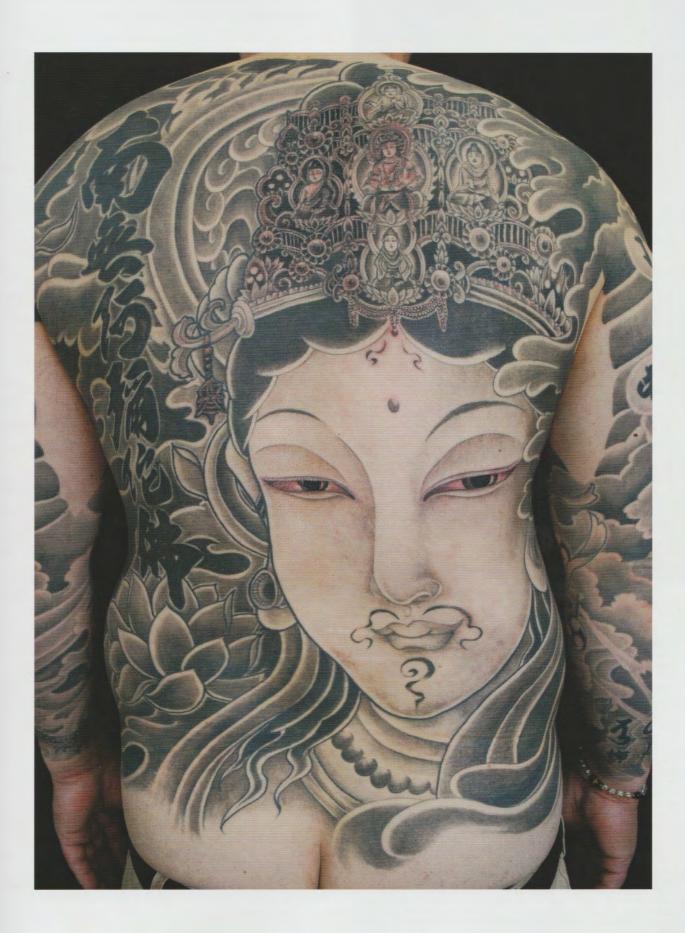
## Who are your clients?

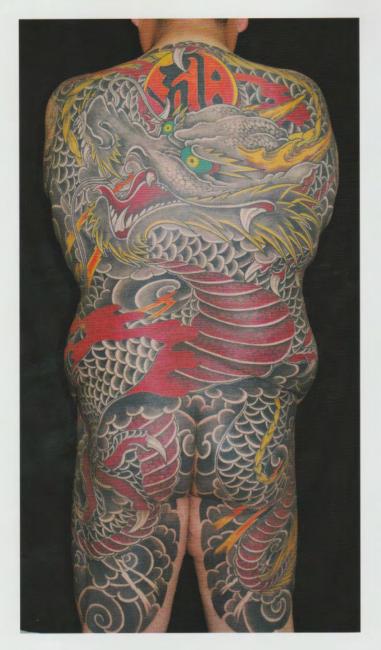
I get a lot of guys but close to here, it is a young person's town, with a lot of clothing and fashion, so I tattoo the staff of these shops, musicians, or people who are working on their own or have their own company -- these people are common, so I think the age of the clientele has gone up in that respect.

I do tattoo yakuza, but not so many lately because of legal reforms. They want Japanese traditional and start with large pieces like full backs and both arms. Or I get people who want continuations, for example, people that have been released from prison. They usually want standard designs and are quite forthright in what they want and don't wander, like 'Maybe I want this, or maybe that.' Asides from those kinds of people, there are a lot of people in construction. However lately, there are people who are tattoo fans who are aware that Japanese traditional tattoos are amazing -- even with people who were only getting western tattoos before.

## Can you tell us about the discrimination?

I think it is getting better compared to 10 years ago. Maybe if you go to the suburbs, it might still be bad, and if you want to get married you should keep it secret from your partner's parents, or you lose your job -- things like this still exist, but I think it'll get better. If you ask me about personal experience, there is a culture of going to hot springs, and you can't go in with tattoos, but actually there are a few places that are OK, you just need to find out before you go to see if it is OK or not. I think that people show them off more in Osaka; America-mura (district) is a fashion town, so everyone walks around covered in tattoos and if you are here, your perspective gets skewed. I think even within Osaka, America mura is special in this way.





# Can you tell us about the mood depicted with the subjects?

More than beautiful, there are probably more scary things perhaps, or courageous things as tattoo motifs. There are also beautiful things like courtesans and phoenixes as well, but they are often used as the sub characters in Japanese tattooing, for example, there is the main subject and then you would choose to embellish that subject with flowers or things like that. In Japanese tattooing, the back is the main subject and then you tattoo the legs and arms according to the main back motif. For example, the *namakubi* (severed head) goes with snakes and ghosts, and are usually used as a sub characters.

But say with flowers, chrysanthemums are more common than sakura and peonies -- they are kind of dark, and are used at funerals and yakuza will want things like chrysanthemum petals all throughout the piece, so when a yakuza guy gets killed on the street, the flowers depict a funeral -- there are a lots of stories like this. There are also things like namakubi and *Hannya*, which are considered to protect against bad luck, so even things like this are perceived to be good things in Japanese tattooing.

# Can you explain the tebori process?

The needles are sewing needles, not for tattooing and it is a bit softer than stainless. There are many people nowadays who use stainless steel needles that are made for tattoos, even if they are doing tebori. People like myself, that are using a traditional method, use sewing needles still. In the past, the needle was wrapped with rice paper and fastened with glue -- it was really traditional, but I use bond and tracing paper -- the big change is that the needles have to be disposable, so I make the tools really simply so they can be thrown away after one use. Everyone really differs, so there is no one way. It is the notion to continue tradition, but to include new technology.

In terms of configuration, today I will use 9 and 8, so there are 17 on two rows, but sometimes I use three layers with 30, in order to cover a lot of area thinly. This changes according to the tattoo artist. I split the work between the two and three layered technique; for the detailed parts or parts I want to put in color thickly, I use two layers, and the black and grey thin gradations I use three layers. I also change the number of needles, like, the fewer needles there are, it is easier to do detailed work.

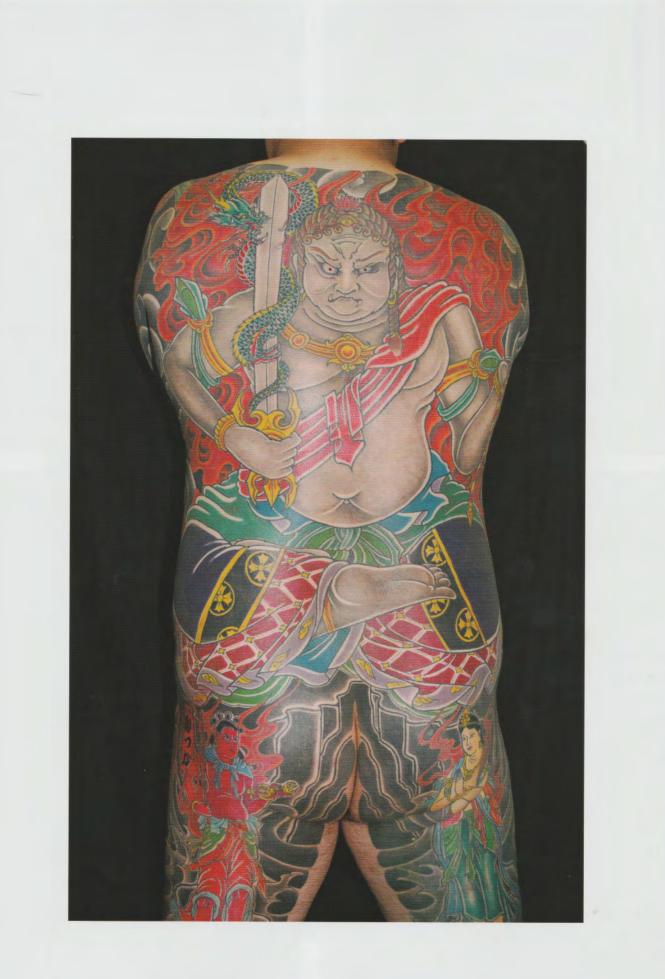
For the tebori tool itself, (the stick), some people use stainless and I tried that as well, but it is way too heavy and hard to use. I tried to make it shorter but that wasn't working either, so I keep this part wood, which is hard and longer than most peoples' but I put it in the autoclave and cover it with tape so the blood doesn't touch the wood. I still use the traditional method of wrapping with thread, which is the same as before.

# Do you do the outline with machine?

Yes, it takes ages and the thickness is hard to control but there are a few tattoo artists I know that do the outline by hand, but in my case, I do a lot of machine work as well, so I don't see the benefit of doing the lines by hand too.

# What is the difference between machine and by hand?

When you tattoo by hand, it is deep. These colors can be produced with a machine as well, so it's not like just by doing it by hand, it is good tattoo, but when someone really skilled does tebori. I think there is a certain depth and colour. For example, colours that stay for five to ten years and when they age, they get even more flavor.













# HORIREN

# What are the similarities between traditional tattoos and other traditional crafts?

If you don't constantly work, you lose your flow, so you can't take really long breaks if you are a craftsman.

And, I even though it's becoming less frequent, I think it's the same as someone like a carpenter in terms of the system of doing an apprenticeship, and that hierarchical system.

# Who are your regular clients?

Definitely blue collar workers, like carpenters, and also the most common are the people that work at traditional Japanese festivals with *mikoshi* (portable shrines). They are a type of craftsman too.

# What do they want tattooed?

Dragons and carps are really common, but if you are talking about human characters, Buddhist deities, and the protagonists of Suikoden.

### When people come to you, do they have an idea of what they want?

I don't advertise, or list my place anywhere, so it is really word of mouth. So my customer will tell the next person that I am good at a particular thing. So we start with a meeting, and I get them to look at all my books. Some people look at my references all day, literally, and I don't encourage them to decide straight away.

I get them to go home and think about it -- they usually are quite conscious of the meanings though.

# Why do people get tattooed?

The most common is to put motifs to do with their birth year, for example, if they are born in the year of the monkey, they will put in the (Buddhist god) Dainichi Nyorai, or their child's birth year. Or they will decide based on the meanings of the animals themselves, for example, for protection, or personal progression. For example, to become stronger, they will insert a god that represents strength.

# What is the most fascinating aspect of wabori to you?

That it can be for protection, and that it disappears, like when you die, the work disappears as well, and you don't leave it behind.

# When did you first get into the tattoo world?

When I was in Australia travelling on my own, I was walking along and found a tattoo shop, and went straight in! I was in Sydney, when I was walking around Kings Cross.

# What did you get tattooed?

Agh,...I don't want to say!! A really small dragon....

What, why did you go to Australia for that? Yes, I know...ha, ha, I still have it...

# Then what happened after that?

I got tattooed there, and went travelling around Australia on my own, and I just put in a bunch, here and there, with gusto. I was in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Darwin. If I saw a tattoo shop, I would just go and put in a tattoo. Because it was tattoo flash work with a price on it, that's what I thought tattoos were about. But because I was an illustrator at the time, when I was on the plane going home, I thought, "Why didn't I put in an original?" It was a real regret!

Around that time, I thought to become a horishi, but because I was a material artist, I held on for another six years. My mother was sick, so I needed to support her financially. After she became better, I basically quit, and I went straight into tattooing. During the time, I was only doing one point tattoos, for about 8 years. From 5 years ago, I changed direction.

### Did you ever have a teacher?

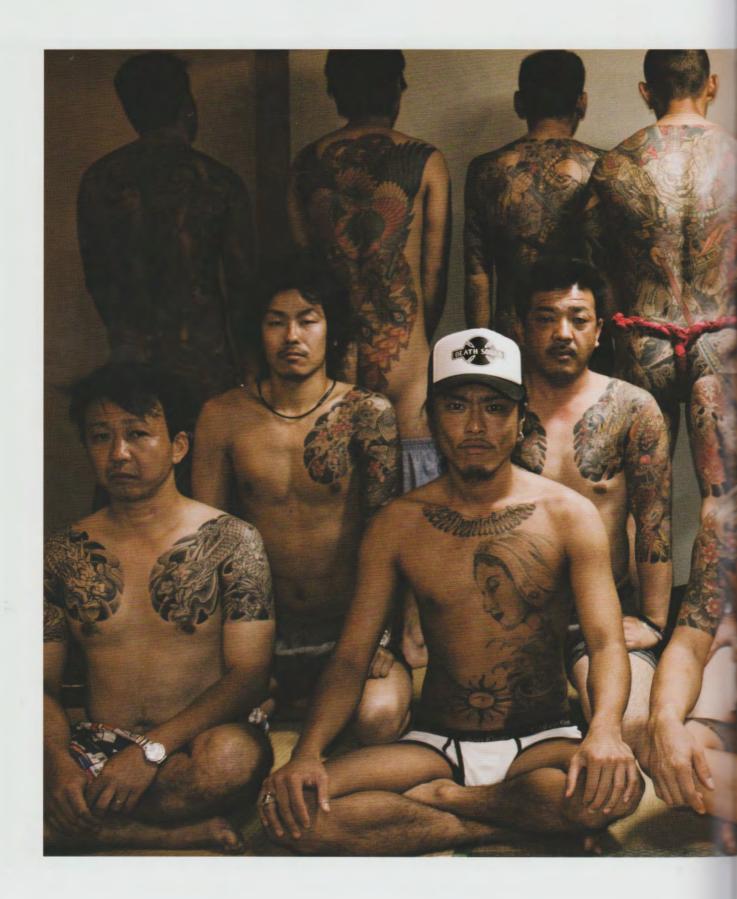
No, never. At the time there was no internet, so I really was just looking at magazines like Tattoo Burst, and Jitsuwa Document (the yakuza journal), ha ha!

I was looking at the works of Horiyoshi III, Horiwaka and the works inside Jitsuwa Document.











IVAN TOSCANELLI PHOTO

But occasionally there are some astonishingly terrible pieces in there! Yes, really, but you can actually learn from that, in both a negative and positive way!

# At what point did you feel comfortable calling yourself a professional horishi?

Oh, at the point that I took on a name, the name "Horiren," because up until then I didn't have a name. I got asked by a client to put my name in the piece, and I hadn't thought of it, and he was the first client who paid me properly. Up until then, it was people who had just paid me 2000 yen per hour, to cover the cost of the needles. He paid me the amount a regular horishi earns, and told me, 'You can earn a living as a horishi now, so please put your name in the piece.'At this point, I was given the confidence to work as a horishi.

# Were you ever working in a shop?

No, no...out of a house. I didn't even know how to work at a shop, or approach one either.

### Why did you want to learn tebori?

I guess because I'm Japanese, and when you see it in videos and books, you really want to try it.

### What is the most advantageous aspect of tebori?

A type of nostalgia? It is a type of fine arts, ...where you are inserting one needle at a time. When it's a machine, it seems like the machine is moving on its own, with tebori there is a certain beauty in the fact that you need to insert it manually, or the colors won't go in the skin easily. It's a really meticulous job. For example, if you are making a sweater, you can knit it by hand, or just through a machine, and the feeling and heart in it is really different. It is like a craft.

# But tebori takes so long to learn?

Yes, even now I'm still studying.

# How long does it take for you to do it to a professional level?

Not before two years. Because of the speed, and the sumi gradations are really difficult and it is really hard to do gradations over a large area.

# How long did it take to use a machine?

To be honest, I was tattooing myself for three hours, then I took a client...I will use a machine now if they are in a huge hurry; or if I have a client that I started with a machine, then I'll continue using one, because if you add tebori, the appearance changes.

# Do the colors hold well with tebori?

It's hard to say, it is said that that is the case, but I actually think it's the sumi ink that is holding up well. But in terms of colors, it's a lot to do with the maker of the color, and the person's skin. But I think it is harder to degrade with tebori.

# Do you make everything yourself?

Yes, but the bamboo, I buy myself, from Saitama. It is light and has elasticity, and is somewhat kinder to the skin. I used a metal tool before.

# How does Japanese society see tattoos?

There is still a lot of discrimination. Once I got kicked out of my house for being a horishi. When I was in Hasuda town, I was an artist, and the landlord leased the place to me, but when I started tattooing, I was featured in a magazine and they found out about it. The police and the landlord came over, and told me to leave. I really love houses, and I would go into the real estate agent to get a house, and no one would lease to me. So, I just bought this place. They won't give me life insurance either. The way tattoos are seen has changed slightly though, by the general public. Ten years ago, if you had a small tattoo on your arm, even though they will stare at it now, before they would quite obviously avoid you. Now they might look at you, but they aren't that scared.

The municipality is seeing it more lightly, I find it amazing that sometimes I'm in the local newspaper.

# Who do you respect?

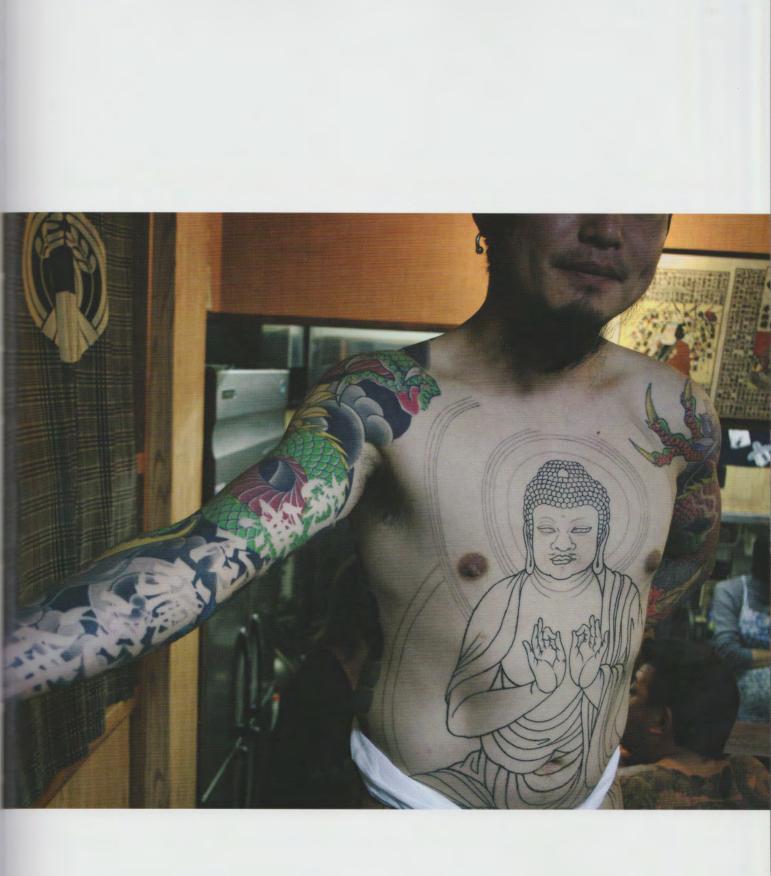
Horiyoshi III, because of his psychology and philosophy towards tattooing. His motivation supersedes other horishi and he studies so much, and thinks about tattooing 24/7. I really think he is the most well read tattooist. And Horiyasu for his technique. It's unbelievable.

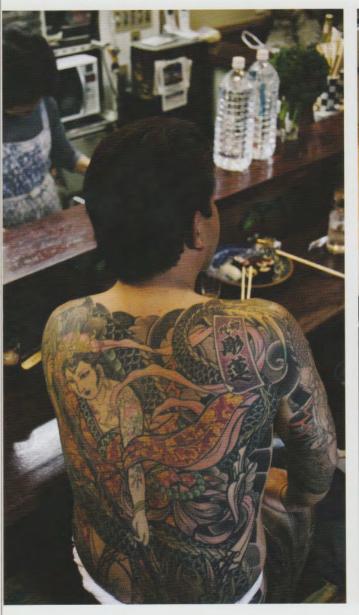
# How does a person learning Japanese improve if they are not in Japan?

I would suggest just living here for a bit, so they can experience the nuances with the seasons. We are a nation of season lovers, it would be great for people to know about the beauty of the seasons, and also the Japanese paintings (*nihonga*). Don't look at other tattoos, look at painters -- you will improve manifold.

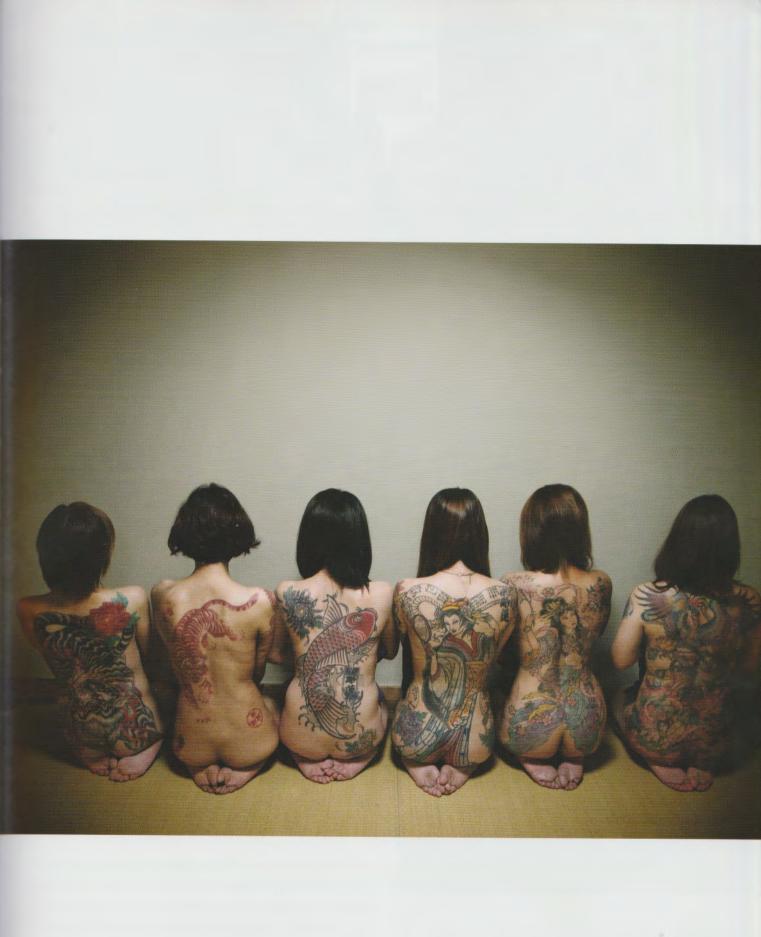
# Which ukiyo-e artists do you study?

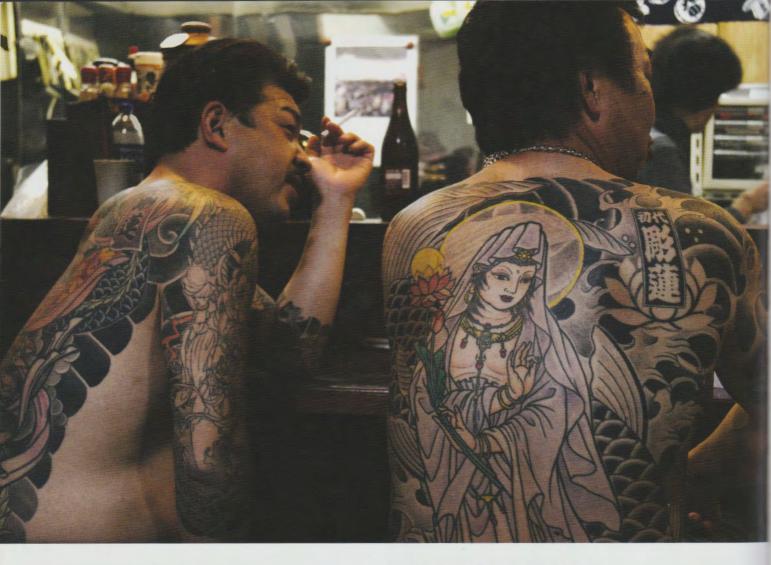
Kyosai, Hokusai, Yoshitoshi, and Kuniyoshi, but Kyosai is number one. The number of his works and the energy is phenomenal. I think it's amazing that he drew a Buddhist deity a day. Not only is he good at what he does, he is tough, and perseveres.











# Do you think tebori is a disappearing art?

No, I think it will only become more popular. The world's tattoo scene is really focusing on tebori, so maybe it will be non-Japanese that will take up tebori, like Chinese, Koreans or Taiwanese, and occasionally there are westerners as well. If people focus on this, I think the number of people that do it will increase.

# Did you ever have a sensei?

For illustrations, I am learning from Ozuma Kaname... I basically just asked him, but I had to get the permission off Ryushi, his oldest apprentice. I'm still in my first year, and am still in the stages of learning how to mount the silk properly.

### What do you like about his work?

His ability to do gradations. If I could bring that into my tattoo work, it would be spectacular.

# What direction do you think the Japanese scene will go in, in the future?

It's a really difficult question. At the moment it's quite chaotic with people saying they do Japanese, or Western, and eventually I think people will just get their own characteristics. Even the way I tattoo is traditional Japanese, but I'll also do one points.

# Is it difficult to work as a female horishi?

I'm not really conscious of it. I usually hide the fact that I'm a female horishi, and when my clients will come in, they are really surprised. If the name is in English, there might be a he or a she, but in the Japanese magazines, I don't really make a point of including it.

# So you haven't really been discriminated against because you are a female?

No,...I haven't had that at all!

### How about socially?

I'm really not conscious of it, like I was originally an artist and doing it on my own.

But, for instance, say you are buying a house, and you need a loan, if you are a female or male, the amount is completely different. You can really call this discrimination, and for things like tax issues, if you are a male, they will ask to see a year's worth of activity, and with me, it was 7 years.

If you do work like this, there are repercussions for females doing a job like this. It's strange, because the work we are doing is the same.

# What is the most interesting thing about the western tattoo scene? They really talk quite candidly about the technique and inks, that is really amazing.

Japanese tattoos are not really colorful, the amount of colors we use is limited. They look like they are having fun with colours and it's beautiful.

# What do you think about foreign artists that do Japanese tattoos?

Oh it's great, in the same way, I have tattooed a Virgin Mary, I think they have artistic vision. I'm jealous of the fact that tattooing is so close to the galleries overseas.

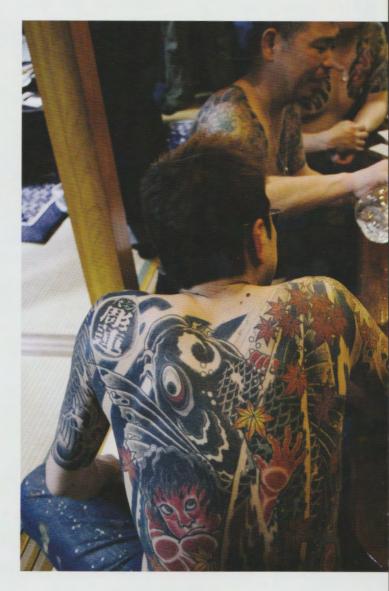
In Japan, museums and galleries are really difficult. It's a shame because as a ethnicity, tattoos have been around for so long, but it's not even seen in that way. Like with Jomon era *haniwa* pots. I want people to know that it has been around as a cultural institution.

# Do you consider yourself to be a traditionalist?

No, I'm more progressive, ...like for example I see the works of Kyosai and there is English in the text, or Fudo Myoo eating meat, he will openly display contemporary life in his illustrations, and I don't think it's a bad thing to put in the stimulation of what's going on now. Maybe that is the basis of progression.

# What's the best thing about being a horishi?

That there is a human connection, I feel responsibility, so I really look after people. The connection between people is really purely a tattoo thing, especially if someone comes for one, two, three years. They feel pain, we drink together, we will go eat together, so sometimes I feel they are closer than my family, my friends and my partner. And it's forever,... that you are part of someone's "forever." It's a real relationship of trust.



# SHOKO TENDO

# Why did you decide to write your book of memoirs, (the best selling) Yakuza Moon?

When I was a child, my father was a yakuza boss and I was living in a new residential area and we had a detached house, I mean, it is the countryside so it is cheap, but we had several cars and a Harley, and we stood out. Quite often, the neighbors would say "Don't play with that kid, or hang out with her." And so when I was a child, I had no friends, so I would love to read books, or draw, so originally it is from there.

When my dad collapsed, we became poor and lost everything, and the house. During that time, I needed money and the highly paid jobs were in the night entertainment industry, I didn't have education or anything, so that was all I could think of. So I went into that world, and it was the era of the economic bubble so I was receiving fantastic tips but even so, it was hard to keep up with the debt. When I realized, I was already living that kind of lifestyle for ten years.

When my parents died, and I divorced, and became alone and for the first time, I realized I was truly alone. I had no house to return to and I really thought what should I do? I was in my late 20s, I can't be an entertainer forever. Up until then, I had to work to pay off debt and it was only for money but that point on, I could do something that doesn't necessarily make a lot of money but something I actually wanted to do. It was really limited in terms of what I could do. I had a lot of tattoos and Japanese society is really strict towards tattoos, so I could only do something by myself.

I thought, what did I want to do as a child? I thought, 'That's right, it was books.' I thought maybe I should write my reflections in a book. I decided to write a book about the first half of my life. It is probably really melodramatic, but in that midst, I think there are a lot of parts that someone can read and go, 'Oh me too, me too,' and can empathize with what I have to say. For example, the readers may have experienced violence from men, they can't recover from the death of their parents, they have experienced depression, they have failed suicide attempts, they were once a delinquent, they have gotten hooked to drugs... I think that everyone has something close to these things that they are worried about. I started writing this thinking, if they can interpret the book according to their feelings, and they find solace in that, it would be wonderful.

# Your book is often uncomfortably graphic and addled with drug abuse, rape and violence. What was the most difficult parts for you to write about?

Writing about the sexual aspects of the book openly was extremely difficult. People who read this really want to know about these things. They really want to know about things that are unpleasant. There are books like this, but up until now, the books I've read, when the woman writes about sex, and drugs, that area is fuzzy. It will be ambiguous, like, 'We would do something, and then when I woke up, he was there." That's not honest, is it?! People really want to know about what happens in these instances. I felt that if I didn't write about these things it would be purely self-serving, so I really suffered when I was writing it.

#### How difficult was it to break from drug abuse?

It was so difficult, it was agonizing. I already had the instinct that I want to quit. But around me, at the time, everyone was so into it, that they felt that they weren't even human if they weren't wasted, they had no feelings of guilt. In my case, in the environment I grew up in, if you are involved in drugs, you get excommunicated, you would have to get your finger cut off, so I had that perspective already. Every time I took something, I was like, "This is the last, this is the last," but when it runs out, you really suffer.









# Is it risky writing about the yakuza, did you get any repercussions?

No, actually, I got some correspondence from them as well. After the penal laws changed, and I could get letters from jail, the most frequent opinion that was across the board was, "I'm really impressed that you managed to write it so candidly. I could really empathize because it wasn't written romantically."

# In the Toei films, and abroad, the image of the yakuza is of the chivalrous bero.

With yakuza films, there is always a hero and a filmic ending. The reality is not like that at all, it is gritty, and harsh. So I really wrote about what goes on beyond, when you lift the lid, how much my mother agonized, and had so many arduous ordeals over my father. In the films, the yakuza wife is really on the ball. Incredibly head strong, and won't budge, with an energy that says, 'Even without my husband, I can manage.' The truth is different. My mother was scolded, she hid in the toilet and cried. It was really like that.

When I see those films, I'm sorry to say, it is just a film. The reality is not cute at all. Before the Showa era, admittedly there was that kind of heroic yakuza, but in today's era, it is not that cool.

# In the book, you talk about getting a tattoo when you were 21 years old. It was one of the things that empowered you and signified an end to your dependence on violent men, and gave you the strength to move on -- can you tell us about the process of getting the tattoo?

The tattoo master was really fast and did my whole back -- just the **subj**ect-- in a week, every day for three or four hours. Most people after the second day would get a temperature but strangely, even though I'm a girl, it seems like I have directly inherited my father's **b**lood. I have the perspective of my father, as opposed to a regular female. I really thought I couldn't be having a temperature and resting, I was worried that I would be laughed at, and everyone would be saying, "See, she can't take it and is resting." I think these aspects **aren't** what you'd call female common sense! My dad's blood is thick.

# Japanese society is so strict against people with tattoos, how has your life improved because of it?

The best thing about getting tattooed, is that you are really satisfied. When I was a child, I was constantly surrounded by people with a lot of tattoos, so if the person doesn't have any ink, it seems strange to me. It is common sense that someone would have ink to me.

I was watching an overseas movie at midnight and there was a scene where a bunch of university kids are trying to hit on as many girls as possible and they are on the beach --but not a single guy has a one point tattoo. I found that so bizarre. I mean, if you go to a university where there are a lot of players, isn't it obvious that some are going to have tattoos? I have that kind of perspective. Conversely, by seeing tattooed people, I am calmed.

Is there anything about growing up in a yakuza family that is favorable? Yes! There are a lot of favorable things about growing up in a yakuza family! For one, their manners are impeccable. And when I'm talking to someone, I am really good at reading what they are thinking, or from their eyes, tell what kind of person they are. From their facial expressions, I can see if they are trying to fool me, so in that way it is very advantageous. It makes me very calm. The yakuza are extremely strict with manners, and I can understand more than other normal girls parts of the male psyche, although sometimes that can be to my detriment too. I also understand the hierarchy of relationships and when to refrain from saying something. I think my dad taught me these things. For example, I really know when not to say something... I'm grateful for that.

# What is some advice you could give to young people?

What I can say, and it may seem like common sense, or that I am bragging, but kids nowadays are too spoilt. The kids are given everything and the parents take them everywhere. They are parent and child, but that line is blurred and it's more like friends... It's not wrong, it might be friendly and great, but for me, I don't ever want to have that kind of relationship with my children. They won't be able to part forever. Parents aren't here forever. Don't ever think that they will live for such a long time, and live life like that, then you can think independently what you need out of life. I was always conscious of my parent's mortality. Most kids don't think of such morbid things, but I always thought that. And I would always cry at night, but it worked out for the best as in reality, I did lose my parents in my 20s. Just say a mother makes dinner for a child, they won't eat together. The child is emailing and doesn't even notice when the food is getting cold and won't even say "Grace" together and the parents don't say anything. If it is the yakuza, you will probably get excommunicated straight away!

# Is it difficult to be a single mother in Japan?

It is incredibly different if you are single mother from the beginning, or a single mother because you got divorced. From before, there is an unpleasant expression, 'a bastard,' which has scandalous connotations. This persists. It is the same as the perception towards tattoos.

# What are you most grateful about?

The fact that I am alive. I had a failed suicide attempy at 25 years of age. My heart stopped three times. And I still didn't die. After that, my physical condition deteriorated, and I still didn't die, so I realized that to live my life until it is time to go, is a really wonderful thing. I think it's because my parents really did their best in bringing me up.





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# THANK YOU

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# About the author

Manami "maki" Okazaki is a freelance writer from Australia. Her articles on tattoo culture can be seen in her two books, Tattoo in Japan, and Horiyoshi III X Japanese Buddhism. She has also contributed to the Tattoo Bible Book, and Bizarre's Body Art book. Her tattoo related editorial pieces can be seen in Tatowier magazine, Skin Deep, Tattoo Master, Inked magazine (US version), Tattoo Life, Skin & Ink, Tattoo Burst, the Japan Times newspaper, Tetovani, Asian Geographic, Cover magazine, INK publishing for various in-flight magazines, Bizarre magazine, Tokyo Journal, Si Samui, Japanzine, Waseda University English language textbooks and the Horimasa gomineko book (the interview in this book first appeared there). She has also produced documentaries for Singapore's Mediacorp, Dr Lakra (fixer) and spoken at the Foreign Correspondent's Club on Japanese tattoo culture.



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# WABORI, TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TATTOO

is a collection of interviews with some of the most skilled and important Japanese traditional tattoo masters alive in Japan today. The interviews are a no holds barred insight into this subterranean industry, filled with information and filmic anecdotes.

The book is lavishly decorated with hundreds of gorgeous photographs, as well as personal archival material spanning over decades.

Wabori, Traditional Japanese Tattoo is the most comprehensive English language anthology of Japanese classic tattoo artisans to date. This book will serve as an extensive resource for fans of dense, full body coverage, executed in the traditional Japanese style.

