

03

IDIOT SAVANT

{Or Avant Idiots}

By Dave Regan

Hello there, again. By now, I imagine you guys are as surprised as we are to be reading the third installment in whatever this forum of ours is, and we want to thank you for putting eyes on it yet again. Typically, this is where banter and borderline personality disorders go mano a mano, with a slightly marked degree of seriousness, so that humor and education can blend together in some kind of visceral, leamy pulp-and-kale smoothie, (paleo-friendly of course) and you can stay regular. That fact that it's on paper serves a double use....

Which is not to say that we don't like laughs, (only Canadians are repelled by laughter) but this article is a little more serious than those of previous issues. So

much so, Ish is sitting this one out, as I went into rant mode. But, I'd like to discuss something close to our hearts, and to many of yours as well, (namely those of us just showing up at the party; the younger tattooers out there) and that is the future of what we do. Bear in mind this is an opinion, it's not the only way of seeing things. I hear a LOT of people talking about this these days, seemingly incessantly. Jojo Ackermann wrote an article a few months back (Or years? Or weeks? Did he even write it?) about the importance of giving back to tattooing, and I'd like to expound on that idea. As younger tattooers ourselves, it's hard not to sound righteously didactic, or like its soapbox time, and this is definitely a springboard for a larger discussion, but to summarize...



DEFEND YOUR CRAFT

I think there are a lot of divergent paths in this business. Or industry, now; whatever you want to call it. And I say divergent paths, because as time moves on, we have started to break away from one another, our tattooing families become larger, and the translations of the old philosophies have changed tremendously. It's troubling that something so important to some of us can be such a faceless, constantly shifting thing. It certainly doesn't mean that the pure vein of Thee Ol' Magic doesn't exist, but it is tremendously diluted. It's not a pointing of a finger at any one specific thing. It's progress, it's an instant gratification age, it's a busy world, it's turn and burn, it's no retirement, ad nauseum. I get all of those things. But to see some of the absolute garbage that people proudly wear on their skin tells us that even with all of this exposure, folks are all too happy to get, and certainly all too happy to make, terrible tattoos. So why is this?

We weren't allowed to tattoo significant others' names where I started. No hands or necks without being heavily tattooed, and damn sure no faces. You wanted to apprentice out of the gate without putting in your time? Good luck. You would have had to go to the WORST spots around, because no one else would take you on. Or lose \$10,000 to some ding-dong telling you how he was King Shit on Turd Island. And when you're forced into a rough environment to start, you really have to want to do it and suck it up to get through the bullshit every day. What do you really take away from apprenticing at an awesome shop? You're handed the keys to the kingdom so that some day, you can slay the king and build a castle across the street from his? I'm glad I was treated badly to start out. I certainly didn't always handle it well, but it makes you tougher, and it sets the basis for your career. I appreciate what I have because I was forced to earn it or quit, and I still respect the first shop owner I worked for, because he gave me chance, as well as a lifelong skill set.

I also remember when I started working the counter at my first shop, all of those guys talked about WHY it was important to be tight-lipped. WHY they were so selective about the folks with whom they dealt, WHY they didn't discuss certain things in front of the clients, WHY they said no to certain types of tattoos right away. I didn't understand it all at the time, and like most of us, I wanted to reinvent the wheel before I could grasp why it was shaped the way it was. It wasn't really that they were the best dudes around either, but; they were good, they knew tattooing, and it was a first line defense. Their attitudes showed tremendous insight and foresight, and I really believe those attitudes were, and are, important.

Among other pitfalls, equipment became much easier to obtain by people who shouldn't have had access to it. We even had kiosks selling everything from power supplies to needles and ink at the damn mall in Baltimore. And sure, get your starter rig, hang out around the shop, ask questions, take what you 'learn' and go and rip



up your friends. Maybe get real good at it, and you could be the next inkmaster! It's super easy!

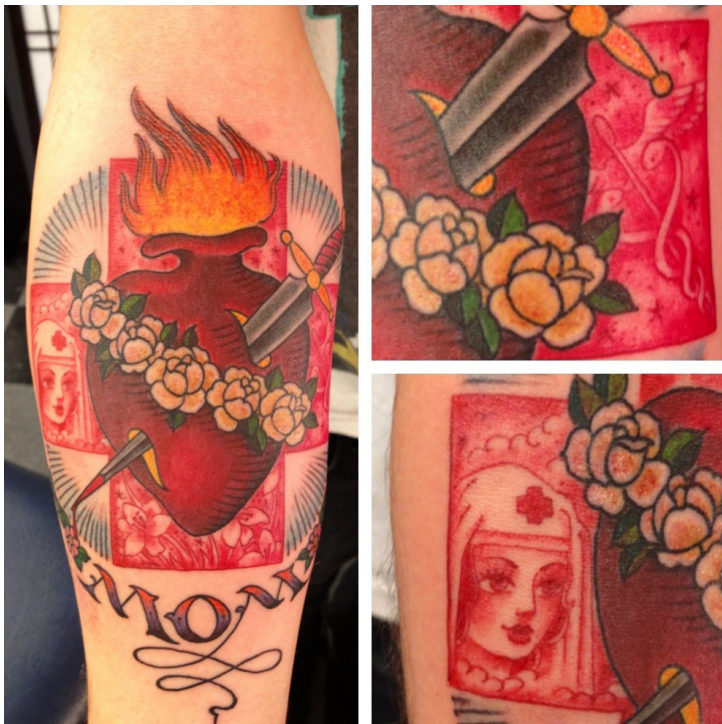
How about how many awesome companies are out there (you know, in Guizhou or Fujian) that steal machine designs, or make garbage equipment, but get by on undercutting, or how about how everyone and their brother makes machines or some miracle ink these days, or works long enough to fuck a bunch of people up before opening their own shop and having an army of apprentices? Someone buys that stuff, someone teaches those people, and ultimately, folks still get tattooed.

The same goes for the actual tattoos we are creating. For so much of what is out there, SO much of the same thing, there are an awful lot of 'atta-boys' and back-patting for what should just be going to work and doing your job. So much of the momentum that we had in the mid to late nineties feels like its just fizzled out, on the part of both the client and the artist. Standing water isn't good, it should move forward unencumbered. If things feel like they are stagnating, what are you doing with your work? I hate to use it as an example, but let's look at traditional tattooing. I say this because it represents the roots of

American tattoo heritage as a craft. It provides a number of crucial foundations for tattooing- how successful designs are built, how tattoos are efficiently made, how images are placed on the body, how to create something that stands the test of time, and it provides us effective symbols that we associate with on an almost primal level.

So, we have these rules, and we move forward. And knowing this, why not challenge yourself to create a design from one of the ones you love so much? It's a shame to see so many folks handle the same exact image over and over without trying to give anything back to it. I understand that those pieces are beautiful and timeless as they were originally made, but give it a shot? Learning by repetition can become regurgitation eventually, if you don't give something back to it. Traditional tattooing is largely borrowed designs, and it's a really good feeling to make something that has remained unchanged for such a long time, even down to some sweet ass Don Nolan stuff! It's like you're making these cool little milestone tattoos... It's exciting to do those jobs! But, the entire time these images have been around, folks still put their spin on it, and that's what has kept it fun and made it profitable for them too. (it's also what moves the art forward.) That's just an easy example; the same is true for, and can be applied to any kind of tattooing. Even the really good realism guys make work that is recognizably their own. You do something enough times to understand how it's created and then you make it yours. SHU HA RI. It's cool to tip the cap to someone, it's good to acknowledge your roots, but don't let someone else's progress be your crutch. Instead, work on strengthening your legs. Being a tattooer who can't make a good rose or successful script is like being a mechanic and not knowing how to do an oil change. Nothing that stands the test of time was ever built on an unstable foundation. And no, Freddy Corbin hasn't made all the cool roses that will ever be made. ... Just most of them.

And I know it's a mixed bag on this one, but did we all just kind of say 'fuck it' as far as what kinds of tattoos we put on and where? Making someone happy is the number one priority, sure. Making tattoos isn't just making the ones you want to do. But does that mean anything they want and anywhere they want it, regardless of how it actually works as a tattoo? How about that girl that absolutely had to have her upside-down, white script in her dead dogs handwriting across her chest, because it was for her? Or maybe the 20 year old with no tattoos except that sweet weed leaf face-jammer running around and telling their friends how tough they are; WE create that. I'm not trying to be some moral compass by any means, but isn't there a point where you have to say



“no”? Remember when dudes with face tats were scary because they would actually kill you? Instead of just trying to kill you by putting whole milk in your soy latte?

Seriously, no one out there minds tattooing hands and faces and necks on kids with no tattoos? Cranking out no-outline, solid pastel gems? Popping tattoos on that won't age for shit? Did everyone forget these things stick around? It's good to push boundaries, but they are built to be worn for a long time... making tattoos just for a portfolio picture is just plain selfish.

Or do we just do it because, shit man, they'll get it anyway, and better to line our pockets than the guy down the street? It's a damn dilemma, that's for sure. And no one is holier than thou over here, either. We're all faced with this stuff, every day. You do this and get paid. Bills gotta get paid too... But, if everyone put a foot down, things could improve. Educate your clients! Explain to them what the deal is, but come from a good place with it; people do listen...mostly. Almost out of nowhere, it seems like tattooing has become something everyone needs, and because we cater to the public and it's trends, what integrities go first? What suffers the most? Being at the mercy of the ever-changing tastes of Pinterest and Google wasn't even a concern 10 years ago, we just had George Clooney and the infamous Dusk Till Dawn sleeve.

The best summary I can give you is DEFEND YOUR CRAFT. Keep your integrity. If you don't feel good about making something, don't do it. Diversity is the mark of a good

tattooer, period. As examples, look at The Dutchman, look at Ed, look at Filip, and those guys have influenced every arena of tattooing in some way. They pushed it in their own ways, and came up with different, successful conclusions. We try to make everyone happy, but if it just feels wrong, you do have the right to refuse service. These things last a long time, and we have to remember that it's not just today that we're making something for; enough time has passed with experimenting to see what works and what doesn't. We are certainly not controlling the morality of the public by any means, as I mentioned, but where do we draw a line? Giving back to tattooing, as Jojo put it, is a huge part of the solution. Support tattooer-owned and operated projects, buy some artwork from the folks you like, get tattooed by them, support each other, and keep pushing forward together. Try to give clients the customer service they need, instead of just the customer service they want. That's how people get educated. The sad part of most of the shows and magazines out there is that they still showcase a lot of crap, and it's cancerous. It's not taking back tattooing, it was never ours to begin with, we're just trying to maintain amongst the other pirates. There is such a thing as honor amongst thieves... What do you have to contribute?

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