

# BODY TYPE

An exploration of "intimate messages etched in flesh" TEXT AND PHOTOS BY INA SALTZ

"The word represents my integrity as an artist. So few people really have integrity. It's the way my daddy raised me: your word is your bond. I wanted my tattoo to look historical but not Old English, like what everyone else has."

"I have ten tattoos, but these particular tattoos are really important to me; they are lyrics from the song 'Violet' by Courtney Love when she was with Hole... it's a song that was always in my head. It helps me to remember a time in my life when I was a little rave kid, having fun, with no responsibility; life was good. I wanted foot tattoos: I think about the words more because I see them more."

"I have had a lifelong obsession with Mr. T. I also like the fact that the words can be read as 'pitiful.' The letterforms are based on Sailor Gothic. My tattoo was designed by type designer Christian Acker."

**W**ords have power. Words are precise and specific. That is one reason why so many of the newly tattooed choose to express their most deeply felt beliefs in the form of text. Words of devotion, words of defiance, words of pain, words of love—all are expressions of inner emotions made visible (and readable) on skin. Whether borrowed from literature, poetry, song lyrics, prayers, motivational phrases, names of loved ones, or popular culture, words in all their glorious forms serve as inspiration for tattoos created out of letterforms.

There are other reasons why text-based tattoos, or, as I call these tattoos, "body type," have become so ubiquitous. One is the overall mainstreaming of tattooing, which has made tattoos more societally acceptable, especially amongst young people (a recent Harris poll found that 49 percent of all 18- to 29-year-olds have at least one tattoo). And statistically, those getting tattoos are more educated than the average person, making their choice of body type more likely. They also tend to be more culturally sophisticated, to work in professional occupations, and to be more affluent.

For my book, *Body Type: Intimate Messages Etched in Flesh*, published last year by Abrams Image, I interviewed and documented more than 300 people with typographic tattoos; almost every single person had a college degree (or was in the process of getting one), and many of my subjects had advanced degrees. I continue to see this pattern as I research volume two of *Body Type*.

Another factor driving the popularity of text tattoos is that in our increasingly celebrity-driven culture, young people are strongly influenced by their role models: sports stars, actors, models, and rock stars, many of whom have multiple tattoos. Text tattoos are extremely popular with all of these groups, with the most common text tattoo being one's own name or the name of a

loved one. It is well known that Angelina Jolie, for example, has 11 tattoos, most of which are text (in several languages). Even Lindsay Lohan has four tattoos, two of which are text tattoos.

Many find the specificity of word tattoos appealing because of the importance of precise interpretation. Body type is not symbolic, pictographic, or iconic; it is exactly what it says. If you want to tell the world about your devotion to Sting, what better way than to inscribe his lyrics permanently on your most valuable possession: your self? While that is only one example, the motivation for typographic tattoos represents the full panoply of human emotion and desire. From the mundane to the spiritual, from love to hate, from celebration to catharsis, these word tattoos serve to inform and proclaim the wearer's intentions.

I was drawn to study text tattoos through my love of typography as an art form. As I questioned those who had chosen to express their tattoos through words, some were aficionados and students of the art of the letterform and educated in the graphic arts. Yet I was amazed to find so many others with no creative training who knew the names of typefaces (most often because of the availability of fonts on their computers) and who had given considerable thought to the vernacular implications of their typographic choices. They understood that the effect of their tattooed message could be amplified and enhanced by the typeface.

Though I was chiefly interested in the choice of typeface and its role in communicating the text, I could not help being drawn into the stories behind the tattoos. Ultimately those stories (the substance) became inextricably bound with the typefaces (the style). They are an intriguing glimpse into the psyche of individuals who have chosen to "wear their hearts on their sleeves," literally as well as figuratively. *Inked* has asked me to share some of these stories, which have never before been published. I know you, too, will be intrigued.





"This means 'truth is freedom' in Latin; it is an overall mantra that bleeds into all areas of my life. It means that I try to make the thought and the action as pure and unpolluted as possible. People ask me about it, and I like the fact that it makes them consider what the meaning might be. I chose the typeface Gotham because it is simple and clean and strong, but it can also recede; its geometry is really beautiful."

"This is my son's name."

"This tattoo, a phrase that usually refers to truck drivers, is about being responsible for my form-making as an artist. I make everything that I design; many artists don't make the components of their art. Almost everything I do has a custom aspect to it."

"This is a word from Shelley Jackson's Skin Project. I'm also a writer and I know Shelley through her ex-husband; I wanted to be a part of her work. John Berry [a type expert] picked out the typeface, Monotype Bell. It had to be somewhere that my parents couldn't see but I wanted it to be a decent size. I figured it out on the computer and gave it to the artist."

"'Etre en paix' means 'to be at peace' in French; it reflects my French ancestry. I'm a journalism major so I wanted words rather than an image. Any time things are particularly stressful, I think about what it means, and it calms me down. It has a double meaning, because it is also what they would say on a gravestone. I'm also an avid cyclist, and when I am out cycling I always feel at peace. The tattoo shocked my identical twin brother when I got it on our 21st birthday. I wanted to set myself apart."

"This goes back to the relationship with my mom. My parents have been divorced since I was 4; she has raised me with tough love. She had a tough childhood so that's how she was raised. For a long time I was angry; we fought so much. But the tattoo made me feel like I was beginning to understand her. The artist and I worked out the pierced effect based on lettering from a book."

“This is a nickname my friends gave me.”

“This tattoo is a Lichtenstein artwork; it is a tattoo to reinforce my idea of independence. It was on the wall of a place I lived with a friend, and after I moved out it became a statement about living on my own. It also helped me to feel better about myself; I moved to a place where a lot of people had tattoos and it made me feel like I was cool and I fit in.”



“This is my only tattoo; it is the last line from e. e. cummings' intro to his last book of poetry, *New Poems*, published in 1938. I was very depressed after a series of painful events: I lived right next door to the World Trade Center and saw way too much when the towers were attacked, two of my close friends died unexpectedly some time after that, and then I had a major medical crisis and was in a coma. I got the tattoo to remind me that I have to stay away from unhealthy things. I used to have a hard time living with questions; cummings made me feel comfortable living with questions.”

“I got the first alphabet when I was 23, before I was a designer; I wanted something timeless. The artist drew it by hand. The second is in a typeface called Volta Bold, and the last is Trade Gothic Bold Condensed. This tattoo has come to define me, partly because my name is not particularly memorable and people often got it wrong. Then a client suggested using ‘Alphabet Arm’ as my credit, and when I started my own company, that’s what I called it: Alphabet Arm Design.”

“This is my fourth tattoo, my first in New York City (I am from Barcelona). It is hard to translate but it means loosely ‘let me alone to dance.’ To me it means that this is my life and I can do whatever I want; it says this is who I am and I have my freedom in life. I wanted the letterforms to look like I am making a statement.”



“These two words are my motto: love to live, live to love.”

“‘Beba’ is just a nickname that runs in my family; my mother and my sister and I all call one another ‘Beba.’”