

## Learn About Tattoo History While Getting Inked at This Museum

By Anni Irish  
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Jessie Knight tattooing a client (1955). © Haywood Magee/Getty Images

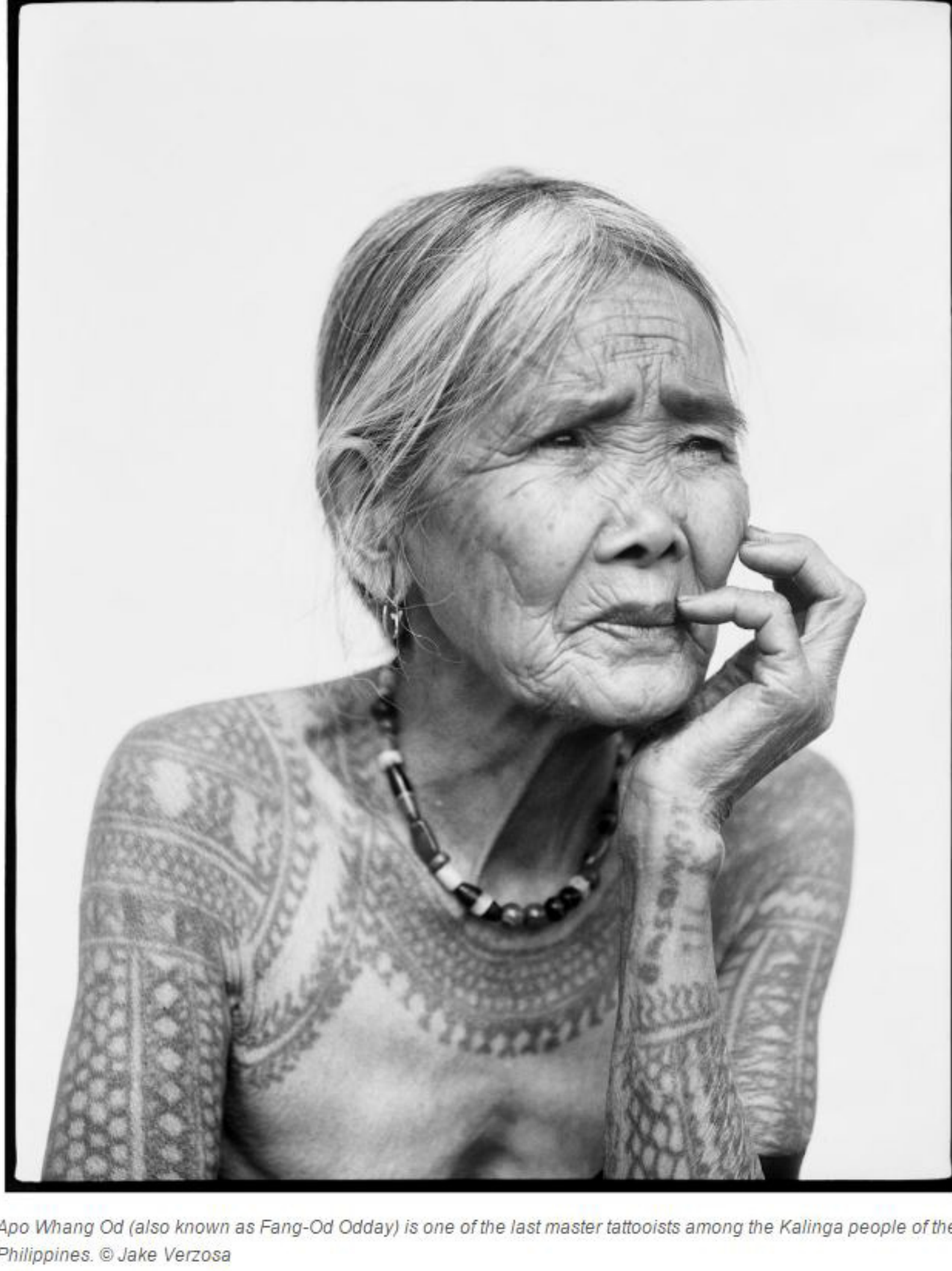
All images courtesy of the Field Museum

The history of tattooing spans over 5,000 years and across various continents, yet ink and tattoo culture haven't received the same academic and institutional treatment as other art forms with as rich a lineage. A new exhibition at [The Field Museum](#) in Chicago entitled [Tattoo](#) seeks to address that while also exploring both the complicated background to the practice as well as the contemporary aspects of it.

Curated by Alaka Wali, the museum's Curator of North American Anthropology, with help from tattoo anthropologist [Dr. Lars Krutak](#) of the Smithsonian and tattoo historian [Dr. Anna Felicity Friedman](#), *Tattoo* offers a comprehensive look at how tattooing and its aesthetics have evolved over time and been influenced by globalization. The exhibit includes more than 150 artifacts, such as a 17th-century tattoo stamp Christian pilgrims received after making the trip to Jerusalem. Plus, the project is literally bringing tattooing into the museum world by setting up a live tattoo booth with some of Chicago's best artists participating, including [Zach Stuka](#) of Deluxe Tattoo, [Stephanie Brown](#) of Butterfat Studios, [Joel Molina](#) of the Chicago Tattoo Company, and others.

Prior to its stint at the Field Museum, *Tattoo* was on view at [Paris's Musée du quai branly](#) in 2014 and at the [Royal Ontario Museum](#) earlier this year. The current iteration, which is open through April 30, 2017, hopes to set itself apart by setting up the tattoo shop and also incorporating relevant artifacts from the Field Museum's permanent

collection into the exhibition. To learn more about the background of the show, VICE spoke with Alaka Wali about the exhibit, how her training in anthropology contributed to the curatorial process, and the larger historical significance of tattoos in the US.



Apo Whang Od (also known as Fang-Od Odday) is one of the last master tattooists among the Kalinga people of the Philippines. © Jake Verzosa

**VICE: How does the *Tattoo* exhibit differ from other exhibitions you've worked on at the Field Museum?**

**Alaka Wali:** To start, the exhibition is comparative, looking at tattoo practices and aesthetics across a wide range of cultures and through time. Usually our exhibits focus on one region or one culture, but this exhibit pays explicit attention to tattoo practices in the United States and Europe—"the West"—and how these were influenced by tattoo artists and aesthetics in non-Western cultures. We've included a super-interactive element—the tattoo shop, where visitors can sign up to get an actual tattoo from some of the best-known tattoo artists in Chicago. This exhibit is very much on mission for the Field Museum, as we are committed to educating about diverse cultural practices.

**Can you talk about what artifacts appear in the exhibition, including the objects in the museum's permanent collection?**

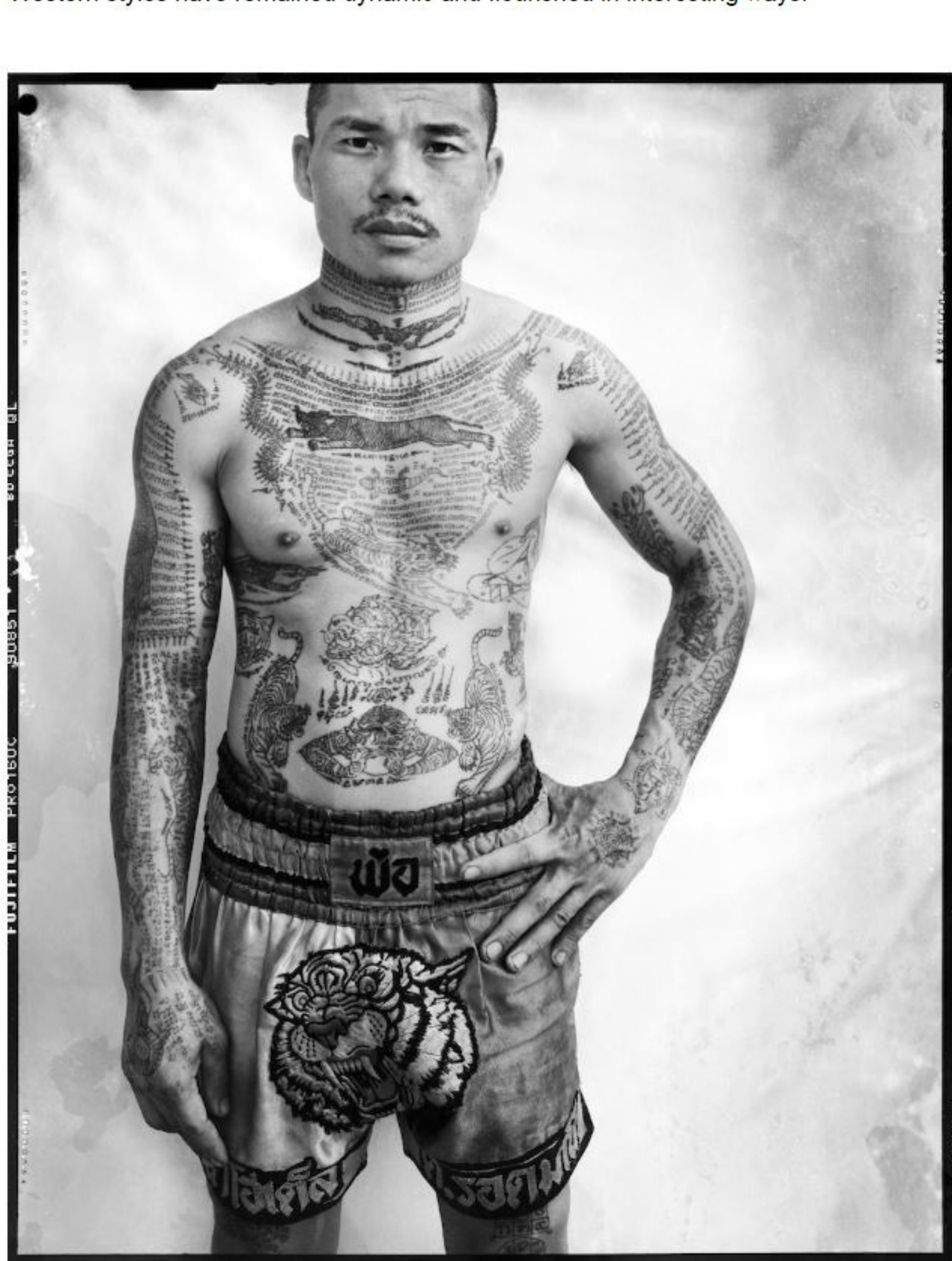
The Field Museum has included 15 artifacts from our collection in the exhibition, including five drawings on paper of tattoo designs by John Robson, a well-known Haida artist of the early 20th century, as well as a miniature figure of a Saint Lawrence Island Yupik woman with chin tattoos, small figurines carved of wood from the Makonde people of Tanzania and Mozambique that depict their distinctive style of tattoo, and a wood carved house post from New Zealand depicting the Maori tattoo form—*ta moko*. Some of the most interesting pieces in the exhibit, however, in my opinion, are the tattooed silicon body parts (torsos, legs, arms) that the original exhibit curators, Anne and Julien, commissioned for the exhibition. They represent the range and variety of aesthetic styles that characterize tattooing today as a global practice.

**In what ways do you hope this exhibit will educate the public about the history of tattooing?**

I hope our visitors understand that human creativity is boundless. We humans have long used body ornamentation to express both individual and collective identity. Tattooing falls within a spectrum of body art—everything from painting to piercing, to wearing jewelry, etc. I also hope that visitors understand that art forms and the perceptions about what "counts" as art change over time. Until recently, even though tattoo was prevalent, it was considered to be associated with marginal people or subcultures in the West—sailors, bikers, prisoners, circus performers, etc. Moving into the 21st century, it's losing its "stigma," and more people are getting tattoos for a wide variety of reasons. Also, among non-Western people, there is a reclaiming of tattoos after its suppression. Like many other art forms, tattooing is thus a dynamic and changing practice.

**How did your background in anthropology play a part curating this exhibit?**

The most important thing I was able to contribute was to make sure that the exhibition fit our mission to promote respect for cultural diversity. We tried to stay away from making simplistic comparisons between non-Western and Western tattoo, or to label non-Western tattoo practices as more "static" or "traditional" than Western practices. Non-Western styles have remained dynamic and flourished in interesting ways.



Thai Boxer © Cedric Arnold, courtesy of Galerie Olivier Waltman

**Do you have any interesting personal anecdotes about the behind-the-scenes process of curating the exhibition?**

Since I have no specific expertise on tattoo, I started learning about it when we agreed to host the exhibit. Since then, I have noticed just how widespread the practice is. Just anecdotally, I noticed so many of our staff here at the FM have tattoos, and now more and more people are not trying to hide them. However, when I talk to people of my generation (mid 50s and up in age), there is still a sense of disapproval about tattoos, so the "marginality" of the art form is still somewhat significant.

See more images from the exhibition below.

*Tattoo* is on view at [The Field Museum](#) in Chicago through April 30, 2017. For more information, [visit the exhibition's website here](#).