

Press Release

27 July 2020

Tattoo: British Tattoo Art (finally) Revealed at The Historic Dockyard Chatham

The major temporary exhibition, *Tattoo: British Tattoo Art Revealed*, was installed at The Historic Dockyard Chatham in March. A week before it was due to open, Britain went into COVID-19 lockdown and The Dockyard had to close to the public.

The exhibition has been sat in the dark for four months but, this week, The Historic Dockyard Chatham is thrilled to announce the incredible exhibition is now open.

On display in the No.1 Smithery gallery until September 2020, this exhibition offers a ground-breaking and comprehensive history of British tattooing, featuring cutting edge designers, leading academics and major private collectors to tell a story that challenges long-standing myths and pre-conceptions about tattooing when it comes to class, gender and age, whilst at the same time giving a voice to and celebrating the astonishingly rich artistic heritage of tattooing as an art form in the UK.

Showcasing the work of major tattoo artists from George Burchett, via the Bristol Tattoo Club, to Alex Binnie and Lal Hardy this is the largest gathering of real objects and original tattoo artwork ever assembled in the United Kingdom. The exhibition features items from three of the most important private collections of tattoo material in Britain, belonging to Willy Robinson, Jimmy Skuse, and Paul 'Rambo' Ramsbottom, providing a rare opportunity to display original artwork and artefacts not otherwise on public display. The exhibition also delves into previously unseen private archives that reveal hidden histories, including the incredible real story of Britain's pioneering female tattoo artist, Jessie Knight.

Tattoos are a living and uniquely three-dimensional form of art. The exhibition has responded to this with an innovative installation which literally brings the art off the gallery wall to create a 'sculptural map' of British tattoo art today. The '100 Hands Project', curated by Alice Snape of

'Things and Ink' magazine, is based around one hundred silicone arms, each tattooed with an original design by 100 of the leading tattoo artists working across the UK. The exhibit creates an important artistic legacy for future generations – an archival 'snapshot' of a form of art all too often lost to the ravages of time.

The exhibition also includes three major contemporary art commissions from three tattoo artists working in three very different tattoo traditions. Each artist has created a unique design on a hyper realistic body sculpture which speaks to the historic artefacts and artworks around it. Tihoti Faara Barff's work celebrates the modern revival of Tahitian tattooing; Matt Houston's commission is a heroic celebration of the sailor tattoo; and Aimée Cornwell, a second-generation artist and rising star in the tattoo world, illustrates how tattooing is breaking down different artistic boundaries with her own form of fantasia.

It is estimated that about one in five of the UK population is tattooed and this figure rises to one in three for young adults. And yet, whilst the visibility of tattooing in contemporary culture may feel like something new, tattoos and tattoo art have always held a significant place in Britain's history and historical imagination.

The exhibition explores this history in depth and shows that while the word tattoo may have come into the English language following Captain Cook's voyage, this was not the start of the story of British tattooing. While showcasing the rich maritime heritage of tattoos, the exhibition also shows how people from all areas of society have always been tattooed. From ruffians to royalty; from sailors to socialites; from pilgrims to punks: tattoos have been etched into bodies throughout British history.

The exhibition features over 400 original artworks, photographs and historic artifacts.

Paul Barnard, Director of Communications and Assistant Chief Executive, Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust, said:

"We are delighted to finally open the doors to the fantastic Tattoo: British Tattoo Art Revealed exhibition. The timing for lockdown could not have been worse for this show, it was a matter of days before our official opening. We produced some brilliant digital content supporting the exhibition and bringing it to life during our closure but nothing beats actually visiting it in person."

“There are long-established connections between seafaring and tattooing and this exhibition gives our visitors the rare opportunity to explore these links through some exceptional exhibits and displays. We hope many people are able to enjoy it with us safely in Chatham this summer.”

Tattoo: British Tattoo Art Revealed is curated by the National Maritime Museum Cornwall, an independent Museum based in Falmouth.

The exhibition is guest curated by Dr Matt Lodder, lecturer in Contemporary Art History and Director of American Studies at the University of Essex, supported by co-curators Stuart Slade and Derryth Ridge of National Maritime Museum Cornwall and Alice Snape of ‘Things and Ink’ magazine who curates the ‘100 Hands’.

Dr Lodder said: *“Whilst British and global museums have had a longstanding interest in Western tattooing, none have ever managed to fully combine serious academic research with access to the vast but hidden troves of tattoo ephemera kept closely guarded in private collections. In this exhibition, we have finally been able to match the most current and cutting-edge research on British tattoo history – which challenges all the most deeply-held perceptions about the practice, its origins, its extent, and its reception – with unparalleled access to the true custodians of tattooing’s history: the artists and their families who have cared for these objects and their stories over decades. Tattooing is a magical, romantic, exciting and often-misunderstood art-form, and we hope that our exhibition will communicate some of that magic to visitors.”*

The exhibition takes place within the No.1 Smithery gallery at The Historic Dockyard Chatham. Entry to the exhibition is included in an admission ticket to The Dockyard. All visits to The Dockyard need to be booked online, in advance. In line with current government guidelines, a number of additional safety measures are in place at The Dockyard this summer and visitors are advised that they may have to queue for a short time before entering the exhibition. The Dockyard holds the VisitEngland “We’re Good to Go” industry assurance mark.

Tattoo: British Tattoo Art Revealed is just one of several cultural and arts events being held at the Historic Dockyard and across Medway. The area has a vibrant arts scene, as well as a strong cultural heritage – all of which contribute to Medway’s case to bid for City of Culture 2025.

Find out more and book via: thedockyard.co.uk

Image: Tattoo: British Tattoo Art Revealed © National Maritime Museum Cornwall

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Notes to Editors:

MORE PRESS INFORMATION

Please contact Lynnette Crisp for further information on 01634 823800 or email lcrisp@chdt.org.uk

NOTES FOR EDITORS

The Historic Dockyard Chatham

www.thedockyard.co.uk

The Historic Dockyard Chatham is the only place in the world that lets you explore a complete dockyard from the age of sail and beyond. It's a unique destination that celebrates Great Britain's magnificent maritime past and unmatched contribution to the Royal Navy's shipbuilding excellence that led to worldwide command of the oceans.

Chatham offers unrivalled access to the ships that shaped the world, from a Victorian anti-slavery sailing ship, to a Second World War Destroyer or a Cold War submarine and the stories of the people who made them. From Chatham's historic buildings, from the Commissioner's House and officers' quarters to the remarkable Victorian ropery, where the rigging for HMS Victory was made, to its collection of maritime archaeology, the Dockyard forms an indispensable part of Britain's naval history and its national heritage.

As a fully accredited museum, Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust collects, preserves, researches and exhibits objects and materials connected with the history of the dockyard and its people. It studies the development of Royal Navy warship design, construction and the use of the River Medway by the Royal Navy.

Visitors to and users of The Historic Dockyard Chatham are fundamental to its purpose and the economic reuse of the site and its buildings. Its staff and volunteers play a vital role in providing a high level of service and customer care. The Trust is also involved in the on-going regeneration of Medway and The Thames Gateway, with Culture and Heritage at its heart.

As part of the Trust's strategy of "Preservation through re-use" recent projects have secured the long-term financial sustainability (on a revenue basis) of the wider Historic Dockyard site. The economic outputs from the new uses of the recently opened Fitted Rigging House as well as other activities across the site will bring the total annual

contribution made to Medway's economy to £26.3m in 2019, building on the 2012 estimate of £16m (64% growth).

COVID-19 safety

In line with the current government safety guidelines, The Historic Dockyard Chatham has introduced a number of new measures to help keep visitors safe:

- ALWAYS SEAWORTHY - advance online bookings with allocated arrival times only. Limited number of tickets each day.
- CHART YOUR COURSE - download our map onto your mobile device before your visit.
- KEEPING THINGS SHIPSHAPE - hand sanitiser stations across the site. Enhanced & regular cleaning regimes.
- TOE THE LINE - abide by social distancing rules.
- GO WITH THE CURRENT - one-way systems through galleries.
- HANDS 'OFF' DECK - contactless or card payments only.
- TAKE COVER - we ask that face coverings are worn within all covered spaces to ensure your own safety and that of others.
- WE'VE BATTENED DOWN THE HATCHES - some experiences will be closed. Interactive displays will be disabled.
- ABANDON SHIP - you should not visit if you, or anyone in your party, is feeling unwell or if you should be in isolation.

Tattoo: British Tattoo Art Revealed

Tattoo: British Tattoo Art Revealed has been curated by The National Maritime Museum Cornwall, an independent Museum based in Falmouth.

Funders:

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About the National Maritime Museum Cornwall

Located on Discovery Quay, in Falmouth on the South Cornwall coast, the National Maritime Museum Cornwall's is an independent museum celebrating our relationship with the sea. With a collection that spans The National Small Boat collection, exciting

temporary exhibitions, artworks, maps and charts, memorabilia and other objects, and a boatbuilding workshop, there is plenty to explore at this Museum.

The National Maritime Museum Cornwall is an Arts Council-funded Major Partner Museum, under the umbrella of the Cornwall Museum Partnership. Its work is supported by a wide range of generous supporters, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, the John Ellerman Foundation.