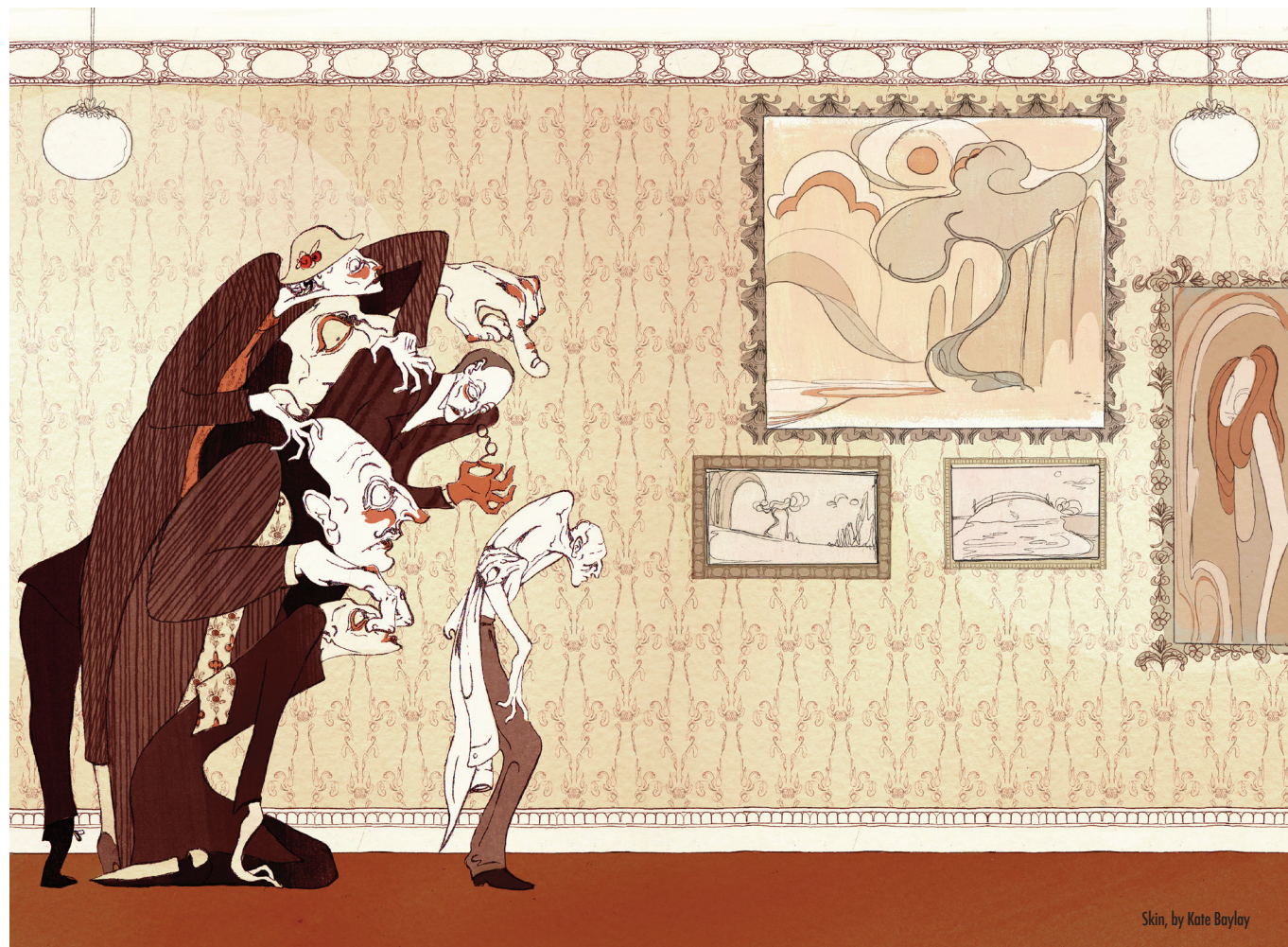


CRIMINAL

WORDS: GEMMA ANGEL



SKINS

Picture right. Tattooed human skin (A629): A 'collection' of portraits and butterflies tattooed over part of a chest. In the 19th century, the European individual tended to be tattooed with a number of small designs which could be added to over time, building up a unique collection of souvenirs and experiences. Photograph: Gemma Angel, 2012. Object no. A629, courtesy of the Science Museum London.



When I was a child, my favourite Roald Dahl story was *Skin*, a macabre tale of an old tattooist named Drioli, who has a magnificent work of art tattooed on his back by the famous painter Chaïm Soutine.

One day he happens upon an exhibition of the dead artist's work in a fancy Paris gallery, and recalling the tattoo on his back, he decides to go in and take a closer look. Having fallen on hard times and now reduced to begging for a living, he isn't welcome among the wealthy art patrons – until he reveals the original artwork permanently inked into his skin. The gallery owner immediately offers him a large sum of money for the tattoo, "But how," Drioli asks, "can I possibly sell it?" After some discussion, he is made an offer by one of the art collectors to perform as a living picture gallery at his hotel, where he will be able to live a life of luxury in return.

Drioli accepts, and a few weeks later, a "nicely framed and heavily varnished" picture by Soutine, matching the description of Drioli's tattoo, turns up at an auction in Buenos Aires. As a child, I remember the shiver of morbid delight I felt reading the outlandishly ghoulish ending – but I never would have dreamed that such a thing as preserved tattoos actually existed. Now, as a researcher studying just that, I wonder whether Roald Dahl drew inspiration from personal experience of seeing such a collection.

For the past three years, I have been working on a collection of 300 tattooed human skins that belong to the Wellcome Collection in London. Dating from around 1850-1920, the collection was sold to Wellcome by a Parisian doctor calling himself 'La Valette' in 1929 – but these tattoos aren't 'works of art' like the tattoo in Roald Dahl's story. They weren't collected as exemplary tattooed masterpieces by eccentric art enthusiasts. These objects precede the now commonly held Western perception of tattoos as 'art', belonging to a time when tattooed natives were still being exhibited across Europe at world fairs and exhibitions, and tattoos were capturing the attention of another group of enthusiastic collectors: criminologists.

The 19th century in Europe witnessed an explosion in the interest in tattooing, and in 'criminal' tattoos in particular. But did the research of early criminologists really reveal a 'dangerous tendency' among their tattooed subjects? Or were they themselves largely responsible for creating the disreputable image of the tattooed criminal that endured long into the twentieth century, and which still has resonance today?

The period from around the mid-19th century onwards was an interesting time in the history of Western tattooing. Influenced by the accomplished artistry of Japanese tattoo masters, the first successful professional tattooists were beginning to emerge in the UK and the US, with some counting royal and aristocratic patrons among their clients. Following the introduction of the electric tattoo machine in 1890, the procedure became quicker and less painful, which in turn improved the broader appeal of tattooing.

Despite this revival, there were many who saw the practice as not only

undesirable, but as a sign of the underlying 'primitive morals' of the tattooed. Criminologists in France and Italy carried out detailed studies on the tattoos of the men they saw in prisons, making drawings, taking photographs and tracing tattoo designs directly from the skin. A huge amount of images were collected in this way, in an attempt to categorise and interpret the tattoos of their criminal subjects. In April 1896, the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso published an extract from his study of prisoners' tattoos in *Popular Science Monthly*, titled 'The Savage Origin of Tattooing'. Lombroso condemns the contemporary fashion among English women of the middle classes for being tattooed on the arm, before going on to explain his own views on tattooing:

"After this study, it appears to me to be proved that this custom is a completely savage one, which is found only rarely among some persons who have fallen from our honest classes, and which does not prevail extensively except among criminals, with whom it has had a truly strange, almost professional, diffusion; and, as they sometimes say, it performs the service among them of uniforms among our soldiers. To us they serve a psychological purpose in enabling us to discern the obscurer sides of the criminal's soul, his remarkable vanity, his thirst for vengeance, and his atavistic character."

But Lombroso's claims weren't supported by figures. Based on his observations, only 15% of prisoners were found to have tattoos.

This wasn't the "extensive diffusion" he claimed. Interestingly, Lombroso and his contemporaries never carried out any control studies of the tattoos of ordinary men and women (among tattooed women, only prostitutes were studied), and where he did come across instances of traditional tattooing – for instance, pilgrimage tattooing in Loreto – he dismissed it as survival of 'primitive' influences.

The Wellcome tattoo collection reveals a range of tattooed images and sentiments, from circus strong men to fouled anchors, to nudes and regimental crests, portraits, images of animals and memorial tattoos for loved ones. Many of the tattoo tracings made by criminologists share resemblances with the preserved tattoos, they are crudely executed with hand-held needles, in simple black with occasional flourishes of red, and they often possess a simplicity of design and sentiment. Common tattooed statements such as "Enfant du malheur" (child of misfortune) and "pas de chance" (no chance) appear both in the writings of criminologists and in the Wellcome Collection.

While it is possible that at least some of the 300 preserved tattoos came from the bodies of criminals, the images themselves tell a far more ambiguous story – these men were also sailors, soldiers and tradesmen, people whose experiences and stories have been largely excluded from history. From the writings of criminologists such as Lombroso, we only ever have a partial view of European tattooing in the 19th century. The tattoos of the ordinary men or women were selectively erased from their studies. These people did not leave behind any memoirs – instead, they tattooed their life stories onto their bodies. The Wellcome tattoos are not so much preserved works of tattoo art – they are fragmentary pieces of personal history, written in ink on skin. ♥

For more information on the Wellcome Collection, visit lifeand6months.com