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Tattoo for Life and Afterlife

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**Tattoo for Life And Afterlife**

At the age of 34, Erik Turney passed away in his sleep. He was survived by his loving wife, Candice, and two young boys. Candice, the unsuspecting widow, made an unusual and previously unheard of request. Rather than send Erik’s body straight to a crematorium, she asked that his tattooed skin be removed and preserved forever.

If you ever wondered where this idea came from, it wasn’t concocted from some sick, dark fantasy by a bunch of goths. It was discussed over a few pints of beer at a local pub among working professionals until someone made it happen. That someone was Kyle Sherwood.

The then-20-something year old was a mortician just like most of his family before him. He grew up around Chagrin Falls, Ohio and followed in the footsteps of his father, Michael, and his grandfather, Gene.

The fateful night tattoo preservation was born, Kyle was with his dad and a few friends—an ER surgeon, a lawyer and another funeral director. One thing turned into another and soon they were discussing the rise in tattoos, the increasing social acceptance of it, and famous words by the actor Johnny Depp: “My body is my journal, and my tattoos are my story.”

The conversation evolved when someone said it would be cool if they could save their tattoos.

“It started out as a joke,” Kyle said. “But then we started thinking about it and we said, hm, that’s not a bad idea. What if you could?”

Once an activity that preoccupied countless human civilizations—preparing the dead body for the afterworld—the activity has now become an afterthought or has been shunned entirely. It was an honour to prepare the body of your loved one for the afterlife. Now, it is someone else’s job.

People aren’t burying their dead as much anymore, instead opting to send the body to a crematorium and have the ashes returned to them in an urn. The rate of cremation is at an all-time high, surpassing the rate of burial for the second year in a row, according to the National
Funeral Directors Association. Around half of Americans chose cremation over burial in 2015, a 20 percent increase from 2010.

The re-emergence of tattoos—Harris Poll found that roughly three in 10 Americans have tattoos and almost half of all millennials have some ink on them—and the shift in attitudes toward what to do with the dead has spawned this unique form of memorialization: tattooed skin preservation.

Two years ago, I came upon the product of this morbid trend at a Las Vegas Tattoo Convention dubbed the “Biggest Tattoo Show in the World.” I was visiting my friend, Andy, who I knew since middle school. He had moved to Las Vegas to chase his dreams of becoming a tattoo artist. The tattoo shop where he worked had a booth at the convention and he was busy with clients.

During his break, we walked around the 91,600-square foot convention hall. Andy called me over to a few frames hung up on the wall of a booth. There were about a dozen frames hung on the walls with colored drawings on different shades of off-white paper. It was cut out in oddly-shaped forms. A bright light illuminated the painted canvas within, giving an impression of veneration or praise.

The mosaic outline of wrinkles on skin could be distinguished from the canvas drawings. It took moments to realize that the skin of a corpse was hung up on the wall like a Picasso. That was my first introduction to the macabre art.

Shall we their fond pageant see?
Lord, what fools these mortals be!
—A Midsummer’s Night Dream, William Shakespeare, Act III, Scene 2, 116-117

Throughout history, people wondered in vain about what would happen to them after they died. The Ancient Greeks believed in Elysium, the Christians believed in Heaven, and the Buddhists believed in reincarnation.

The Ancient Egyptians embraced the afterlife, believing there was an eternal life after death. The Egyptians tried to emulate life as close as possible for their dead because they believed there was no better time than living. They practiced mummification in order to preserve the body in as
life-like a manner as possible. This require removing all of the organs from the body and preserving it in natron, a kind of salt, that would serve as a dehydrating agent. When the coffin containing the mummified body was placed in the middle of a tomb or the foot of a grave, they would align the spot with food, wine, jewelry and pets—all the luxuries of living that they thought could be taken with them to the world beyond.

In tormenting about death, people have also looked for ways to cheat death from time immemorial.

The Holy Grail was a fantasy created in literature so that people could speculate and yearn for a vessel that had the bewitched properties to provide happiness and eternal youth.

When the Spanish conquistador Ponce de Leon set sail for Florida, he found out about a ‘fountain of youth’ from the natives, and went searching in vain. This restorative fountain was indeed true in some form. It turned out to be a pool of mineral-laden fresh water in a mangrove swamp on the island of Bimini in the Bahamas.

In Christian liturgy, worshipers recited the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe...the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting,” eternal life after the second coming of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the dead. Though Christians believed that your mortal soul would go to Heaven or Hell, they also longed for life that continued after death.

It was rumored that Walt Disney had himself cryogenically frozen (that myth was debunked) in order to wake up in some distant future when the technology was advanced enough to give a person a second chance at life.

Lastly, the multi-billion dollar tech giant, Alphabet’s Google, has created the California Life Company, or Calico, which has been tinkering with extending human life spans since 2013. The company has been shrouded in secrecy, and it was still unclear if they made any significant progress.

The chances of getting a living person on Mars is higher than reversing death, but mortal fools are still searching on.

It was a mutual friend of Candice and Kyle that connected the two. When Candice reached Kyle Sherwood over the phone, the clock was ticking. It was over 24 hours after Erik’s death and the body begins decomposing immediately.
She asked him to do the procedure, but Kyle was reluctant. The then-26-year-old mortician performed the procedure only once before.

“It’s not fully done yet,” Kyle said to her.

Erik had several tattoos on both of his arms and a few parts of his body. He loved tattoos so much that in place of a traditional wedding ring, Candice and he got a wedding band inked on their left ring fingers. And as a tribute to his young son, Hunter, he had a tattoo inscribed with his son’s name inside a heart pierced by an arrow.

“Listen I know they're not up and running, but I gotta get that tattoo—I want my son to know how much his dad loved him,” she said.

Even if the process did not work, Candice said she would be happy knowing that his body went toward helping someone in the future get their tattooed skin preserved.

After the initial idea of tattoo preservation was brought up at the bar, some of the men decided to turn words into action. They found a very rich backer who helped them start a nonprofit called the National Association for the Preservation of Skin Art (NAPSA). In order to get your tattooed skin preserved, people had to pay a $115 fee to join the organization, and then pay yearly dues of $60, similar to insurance, until you die, which could be a very long time.

Kyle’s father, Mike, was on board with the rest of the group at first (he later backed out and the nonprofit shut down—not many people were willing to pay for something until they died). Mike was the person who would talk to funeral directors and embalmers. Plus he and his son had worked on the preservation process together.

All they needed was to try it out. They found a willing volunteer in Charles Hamm, a bald, muscular and tattooed businessman, who wanted to be part of the action. He was eager to see if this would work so he elected to have the procedure done on himself.
He had lost lots of weight and he wanted to get the excess skin removed. He asked a tattoo artist to draw a small flower on the skin he marked for removal. A plastic surgeon operated on him, removed the skin and sent it to Kyle’s lab.

It worked.

Instead of battling the inevitable, the outcome every person faces, tattoo enthusiasts have embraced it in life, immortalizing a moment of time on their skin. They have taken it a step further and embraced that life will not continue forever, but their tattooed skin can.

In a short story written by British novelist Roald Dahl called “Skin,” he told the story of Drioli, a well-off man who met a young, poor but talented artist named Chaim Soutine. Drioli loved the young man’s paintings so much so that he asked the artist to tattoo a landscape painting on his back along with a portrait of his wife Josie “so that it will be there always.”

Years had torn Drioli and Chaim apart. Eventually, Drioli fell out of fortune and became a vagrant. One day, Drioli passed by a Parisian gallery window and noticed the familiar paintings of Chaim, his long ago friend. Chaim had reached the success he dreamed of. Drioli went inside the gallery but was immediately spurned by the wealthy patrons inside. He said that he knew the artist and lifted his shirt to reveal the tattoo on his back.

One man offered Drioli 200,000 Francs for the painting. The bidder sweetened the deal by offering him all the luxuries known to man though the bidder said that Drioli had more value when he was dead. This was an ominous warning because the whereabouts of Drioli became unknown. A few months later, a varnished painting similar to Drioli’s tattoo showed up at an auction.

There was value in death. Particularly with the growth of the celebrity tattoo artist, tattoo as a form of art has become more apparent by the growing trend of tattoos. A tattoo can be an illustration, a photograph or text that has material or immaterial value depending on the beholder.

“With the amount of money people spend on tattoos, why not go for it?” Kyle said of skin tattoo preservation. “You could be burning a tattoo of Van Gogh on your back” once it goes to the crematorium.

Kyle has a few tattoos of his own. Since he started the company, Save My Ink Forever, three years ago, he has helped hundreds of people reunite with their loved ones through their skin.
Kyle and his father were the only morticians in the United States to offer the service of tattooed skin preservation, and their company was the only place to come up with formulas that worked.

After constant insisting, Kyle still refused to divulge his coveted “secret sauce,” the formulas and chemicals used for the three month long preservation process.

This is what he did tell me: A funeral home or a family contacts him to request his services directly. Most funeral directors have never heard of the process, but they will inquire if the family asks. Kyle will talk at length with the family and funeral directors to explain how the process works, the terms of payment, and what part(s) of the body they would like removed.

For a 5x5-inch piece, the price starts at $1,599 and goes up $100 per inch. This includes the removal of the tattoo, the preservation process, the materials for framing, the UV glass inside the frame, and any taxes and shipping costs.

Once the family agrees to go ahead, he will send them a single form, which asks for the permission to excise tissue, a section asking to identify where on the body is the tattoo along with a brief description of the tattoo, and an indemnification clause.

Once the form is signed, the body is sent to an embalmer who removes the tattoo. Since the body could be anywhere in the U.S., the local funeral home could get this done after the body is embalmed.

Kyle sends the embalmer an instructional video in “MythBusters” fashion. Set to Mozart’s Serenade No. 13 in G Major playing in the background, Kyle uses a pig to demonstrate how to hold the scalpel and how to cut the skin.

Kyle instructs the embalmer to use a Sharpie to draw a circle around the skin art, within two inches or more around the tattoo. Kyle delicately traces the outline with a scalpel, which he sinks in just below the epidermis layer, the outermost part of the skin. He then proceeds to pick up one end of the skin and scrape beneath the layer, slowly cutting away at the dermis, the layer below the epidermis where the connective tissues, hair follicles and sweat glands are.
The person slowly pulls up the layer of skin with his free hand as he cuts along the connective tissue at a 45 degree angle to keep from puncturing a hole in the skin or from taking too much of the subcutaneous tissue with it. He pulls and cuts until the skin separates from the body, just as the allegro fades.

“Skin art excision complete.”

The skin is the largest organ of the body, making up about 16 percent of a person’s body weight. When we die, the skin cells survive the longest, pulling all the water that it can from the air through osmosis, even though the decomposition process starts immediately. Skin cells can stay alive for many days after the body dies though it can tighten and turn leathery. When the skin becomes dry, it shrinks and curls up around the edges.

That is why it is important to get the skin to his funeral home within 48 to 72 hours to ensure “optimal skin conditions,” he said.

While the embalmer is excising the skin, Kyle sends a kit to the funeral home within the next day. The kit contains a sealed plastic container and within it, a pouch that has their homemade dry preservatives. The tattoo is dipped into the pouch with the preservatives and coated as best as possible.

When the tattooed skin arrives at his funeral home it undergoes the preservation process almost immediately. He has three patents on certain parts of the process, though he hasn’t patented the process as a whole. He said that it was such an obscure thing, that if it did reach mass popularity he would consider it. Since it’s at an at need basis, there are times when he receives requests or he’s fielding non-serious inquiries.

He acknowledged that once he receives the tattooed skin, some liquids were involved though he did not reveal more than that. The fat tissue is removed during the process so that the specimen is left with the actual epidermis layer of the skin at the end.

“It’s uncharted territory,” he said.
There were two methods of skin preservation: a dry and a wet method.

The dry method is similar to leathering animals.

The skin must first be removed from the flesh. The skin is peeled back using fingers or a knife. The skin is then pulled off the hide using a fleshing machine or tools. This requires scraping the subcutaneous bits, veins and membranes until the hide becomes a white, smooth surface. In the case of a bovine animal, the flesh is then salted, brined or frozen within the first few hours or else it will begin to decompose. After 24 hours, the skin is soaked in water.

The hides also need to be tanned so that it can absorb moisture that would easily allow an individual to mold the leather.

It is either vegetable tanned, meaning it is soaked in water and combined with oak, chestnut, tan oak or hemlock for four days; mineral tanned, soaked in chromium sulphate for up to 24 hours; or brain tanned, soaked in animal brains blended with water for up to 24 hours in room temperature.

After the tanning is complete, the leather needs to be thoroughly rinsed to ensure any chemicals and dyes were removed. The leather is then hanged out to dry.

In the second method of skin preservation, the wet method, the skin is extricated from the body in the same way as the former method and kept in a glycerin or formalin alcohol.

Though Kyle developed this process at home, there have been countless artifacts of preserved skin tattoos around the world. The largest collection of human skin tattoos is at the Wellcome Collection at London’s Science Museum, which boasts around 300 pieces of tattooed skin dating mostly from the 19th century. The Department of Forensic Medicine at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland has around 60. There are smaller collections around Europe, the U.S. and Australia.
"As is often the case, the museum acquisition records are sketchy," Dr. Gemma Angel, a tattoo historian and anthropologist in the UK, told Vice. Gemma worked with the pieces at the Wellcome Collection for her doctoral thesis.

She said that some of the pieces came from hospital doctors who kept the tattoos as souvenirs while some claim the skin came from inmates in prisons.

Another collection can be found at the Medical Pathology Museum at Tokyo University. Dr. Masaichi Fukushi, a Japanese pathologist, was known as “Dr. Tattoo” though he never bore tattoos of his own. He was a slight man with browline glasses, severe eyebrows, a crown of baldness, and a serious disposition. He became fascinated with tattoos when he found that tattoo ink on the skin eradicated the skin lesions of syphilis.

Through his research on the human skin in the early 20th century, he began collecting an archive of Japanese tattoos, known as Irezumi, through photographs and human hides. How he received those hides were controversial. Historians said that he performed autopsies on corpses at hospitals to remove the skin and research ways to preserve it. He also paid to finish full body tattoos on people who could not afford it so long as they allowed him to take their skin when they died.

He amassed over 3,000 photographs and 2,000 skin canvases although much of it was lost in World War II. Around 105 skins survived and were still at Tokyo University.

When Erik’s tattooed skin arrived at Kyle’s funeral home, he had a few chances to get it right.

He received several pieces so he tested the smaller tattoos first. He needed to figure out the right length of time for the preservation process. If he kept it there for too short a time, the skin would start to decompose. If he kept it there for too long, the tattoo would fade from the skin.

After he tried the formula on the second piece, Kyle felt he had found the right timing. It took him three months.

His third tattoo was the Hunter heart tattoo, named after Erik’s youngest son.
When he took the skin out of the preservation formula, it was thin like paper. The process also made the tattoo clearer because it helped pull the ink onto the surface. When a living person has a tattoo, it eventually fades because the ink sinks into the epidermis layer.

Candice and her son received the tattoos that Kyle helped save. The tattoos were currently hung up on the wall of their living room.

Since then, Kyle has preserved around 300 pieces, though the Hunter tattoo was his the most memorable.

“At this point, one of the only things that he has to remember his dad by is his tattoo,” Kyle said. “This helped reassure me why we’re doing this.”

He said he was not doing this to fulfill people’s ego or fantasies. Most of the people who request this are the family members or spouses of the deceased. Through his preservation process, he was easing the most primal of human fears: reconciling the living with the idea of death.

“That’s why people have their favorite casket,” Kyle said. “Everyone has certain things that make them feel better about it.”

Burial manners have evolved over time. The Ancient Greeks placed their dead in single graves or tombs after performing elaborate rituals. The deceased were prepared to lie in state and carried through a procession to a family tomb, where the body was offered jewelry, weapons, vessels, and animal sacrifices for their dead. After 1100 BC, cremation upon a pyre became the custom. When the Roman abandoned the old gods for Christianity, that changed too. Christians practiced interment—burying the dead—and cemeteries grew larger. Why do you need the body from this life, when you have the afterlife to enjoy, they preached.

In this modern age, people have found different ways to memorialize the dead. It was common to keep a lock of hair or an urn of cremains, but people became more creative with how they commemorate their deceased loved ones. There were now fingerprint jewelry and thumbprint charms. In Puerto Rico, grieving families held funeral stagings, in which they would place their loved one’s body in a position that mimics their hobby or natural habitat.
People have customized grave markers and tombstones with their favorite memory or hobby or activity of that person. Kyle said that tattoos are different because they have much more meaning to a person when they are living.

“With a tattoo, you don’t need to put a bass on a headstone,” Kyle said. “You have a tattoo and that’s it.”

When I initially looked into this practice, I thought that this was another vanity project. It would have been great if we could keep Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart alive in some form. His body ended up being shoved in an unmarked mass grave. But if they weren’t Mozart, who cared? I thought it was a way for people to not only shove the fact in your face that they died, but also that they wanted you to remember it and live it day by day.

Then I realized that most of the requests that Kyle received were from family members—spouses, mothers, fathers, children, and grandchildren. They wanted a piece of their loved one because it had so much sentimental value for them. They felt connected to the person. It gave them closure.

The deceased were loved and remembered in this way for it. Memory was the ultimate form of immortality.