

Thom DeVita, 85, Dies; Revolutionized the Art of Tattooing

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Thom DeVita at his home in Newburgh, N.Y., in 2014. “His work was original and expressionist, full of this kind of crazy vitality that was very different from the contained and careful look of tattoos,” one expert said. Credit David Gonzalez/The New York Times

10 There was a time in New York City when, if you wanted to get inked, you had to know a guy. Tattooing was banned by the city's Health Department in 1961 after the practice was blamed for an outbreak of hepatitis. The ban lasted until 1997. There were just eight or so artists who operated from their living rooms or at kitchen tables in squalid corners of the city, like the Lower East Side. Your choice of art was limited: patriotic symbols, a declaration of love, or an anchor or other recycled image from the craft's seafaring tradition.

15 Then there was Thom DeVita.

While other tattoo artists offered a rigid set of images and styles, he designed one-of-a-kind tattoos, blending high art, primitivism, Japanese designs and classic Americana.

20 But getting a DeVita tattoo was always a gamble: What you saw on the wall wasn't necessarily what showed up on your arm. “I don't tattoo like a stamp, each one exactly the same,” Mr. DeVita said in a 1991 interview for the magazine *Tattootime*.

Mr. DeVita, whose unconventional aesthetic helped usher in the modern era of tattooing, died on April 5 at 85 at his home in Newburgh, N.Y. His wife, Jennifer DeVita, said the cause was complications of Parkinson's disease.

25 In New York City, Mr. DeVita's apartment near Eighth Street and Avenue C was one of the
earliest custom tattoo shops, where clients could paint their bodies with original artwork. He
was also arguably the first American artist to create tribal tattoos, abstract graphic designs,
which he borrowed from designs he found in National Geographic magazine and an image
he saw on a New York City manhole cover.

30 "Thom was absolutely unique because he had a vision of what tattooing could be," said Don
Ed Hardy, a former tattoo artist who also owns a clothing and accessories brand. "His work
was original and expressionist, full of this kind of crazy vitality that was very different from the
contained and careful look of tattoos."

35 If a customer asked for a simple black panther, Mr. DeVita might add bright red scratch
marks around the claws, or embellish an image of a rose with dark radiating spider webs. His
tattoos were bold, stylishly crude, abstract. They are often replicated by tattoo artists today.

"I was so blown away by the fact that he had his own distinctive hand-drawn flash," Mr.
Hardy said, referring to the stencils that tattoo artists display for clients. "It opened my eyes
to the fact that you could broaden the idea of what people wanted in tattoos."

40 If Mr. DeVita's illustrations were revolutionary, so was his placement of designs on the body,
said Scott Harrison, a tattoo artist and one of Mr. DeVita's customers.

"The standard for tattooing was that you placed the stencil in the center of the body part," Mr.
Harrison said. "But Thom would place it with compositional attention and follow the lines of
the body where it would have the most attention and power."

45 Mr. DeVita was also known for layering tattoos — an effect that mimicked the ripped posters
and overlaid graffiti common on buildings in the East Village. His flash was displayed not on
sheets of white paper, but on fruit crates and milk crates and pieces of plywood he found in
the street.



50 Mr. DeVita's hands, tattooed when getting inked in New York was against the law. Credit David Gonzalez/The New York Times

"His shop was a folk art environment, and was totally unique from other shops," Mr. Harrison said. "It was like walking into an art museum."

55 Thomas Paul DeVita was born in Manhattan on May 20, 1932, and grew up in East Harlem. His father, Thomas DeVita, an immigrant from Sicily, worked in a butcher shop at a hospital. His mother was Anna Traub. Thom dropped out of elementary school and never attended high school. He worked for a short time in a scrap metal yard but spent his late teens and early 20s in jail for armed-robbery in the Bronx in 1950.

By the late 1960s, he had moved to Alphabet City in the East Village, where he worked as a live model for art schools. He began creating art to impress a potential girlfriend.

60 "I had to be something, so I told her I was an artist," he told The New York Times in 2014. "I had to show her I was an artist, so I started doing some artwork."

He wound up selling his work in Washington Square Park.

65 Mr. DeVita never received formal training in tattooing. He learned the craft by observing tattoo artists who inked his body and through trial and error. He got his first tattoo around the age of 17, he said, from William Moskowitz in the Bowery. Later, he got a large tattoo of a dragon on his back from Huck Spaulding, who founded Spaulding & Rogers, a large manufacturer and distributor of tattooing machines and equipment.

70 In his early years Mr. DeVita drew his clientele from the Puerto Rican and Chinese enclaves near the Lower East Side and included jailbirds, artists, and working men and women. When asked in a 2012 documentary if it was his designs that drew his customers in, he was blunt.

"No," he said, "I was known for \$30 tattoos. I was doing blue-collar workers, and guys who didn't work."



Tattoo Age: Thom deVita (Part 1/5) Credit Video by VICE

75 He never tattooed legally in New York, and while his eccentric shop could feel cluttered at times, his needles were known to be clean — sterilized in an autoclave he kept in his apartment. A sign that hung on his wall read, “Wash your hands as neat as a pin, circus clowns are marching in.”

“Even though tattooing is illegal in New York, I treat it like it’s legal,” he said in 1991.

80 Opinionated, contrarian and at times withdrawn, Mr. DeVita struggled with a lifelong tremor, which could cause him to flinch. He learned he had Parkinson’s disease, which caused his hands to shake, in his later years.

“He developed all these techniques to mitigate or enhance the shaking,” Mr. Harrison said.

85 “He could use it as an expressionistic tool. It’s like a Coltrane solo that gets too dissonant, but then you bring it back to the melody. Those are the best ones.”

A lover of dogs, Mr. DeVita entered one of his Staffordshire bull terriers, named Champion Reetuns Iron Duke, at the Westminster Kennel Club show from 1981 to 1984.

He moved to Newburgh in 1990. His wife is his only immediate survivor. His younger brother, Ronald, died in 2012.

90 Mr. DeVita stopped producing large-scale tattoos around 2001, but continued to tattoo his signature on clients at conventions — still for \$30 — and continued to draw, paint and sketch until shortly before his death.

“He kept chipping away at it,” said Nick Bubash, a protégé and friend of Mr. DeVita’s. “He never stopped.”

95 Alain Delaquérière contributed research.

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