



GYPSEY HILL, OWNER OF AMERICAN BEAUTY TATTOO IN BELLEVUE.

Decorating Her

Women Tattoo Artists in Seattle

BY TERA SCHREIBER / PHOTOS BY INGRID PAPE-SHELDON

“Jill has changed my life forever,” says Diana Olson, client and Girl Friday for “Gypsy” Jill Greenberg, the owner and primary artist of American Beauty Tattoo in Bellevue. Diana, a sweet, blond 20-something, came to Gypsy Jill to cover up a regrettable tattoo on her back of a big naked lady — a tattoo she acquired at the tender age of 15 in Las Vegas. As she grew older, Diana realized that the tattoo didn’t express what she wanted to about herself. She felt that it was degrading to women and she was ashamed of it.

So she traveled to the Puget Sound area to meet the legendary Gypsy Jill, who specializes in tattoo cover-ups and lectures nationally on the subject. Jill is a striking woman with a gorgeous smile and many specialties, including interpreting stories into art and mentoring young women. “I believe in happy endings,” says Jill, “and in second and third chances — and in being your own heroine.”

Diana now proudly displays a graceful cat on her back, inspired by a childhood pet that she loved dearly. No trace of the naked lady remains. Jill, who once thought that her artistic talent would lead to a career painting murals on walls, sees these transformations as opportunities that allow her clients to become the heroines of their own stories.

As a specialist, she takes a journey with her clients to discover the body art that is right for them. You will find no samples of flash art on the walls of American Beauty Tattoo to copy. Jill creates a new work of art for each client. “I draw out their stories,” she says.

Client Vidya Sekhar confirms Jill’s talent for storytelling through her art. “She brings poetry to life on the skin,” says Vidya, who came to Jill for a tattoo. “I wanted to do something loving for myself,” Vidya explains as she shows off the art Jill is continuing to color. “So I started this tattoo on Valentine’s Day.” She described an image she had in her mind to Jill, and Jill created a magnificent magical scene of two hands opening and emerging into a butterfly. This poetic image covers a large surface on Vidya’s back. “We do a lot of magic tattoos here,” says Jill. “People come here to tell stories and work on magic tattoos.”



VYVYN LAZONGA, OWNER OF MADAME LAZONGA'S TATTOO AT PIKE PLACE MARKET.



DIANA OLSON, ASSISTANT TO GYPSY JILL OF AMERICAN BEAUTY TATTOO IN BELLEVUE

Gypsy Jill is not only special because of the amazing relationship she has with her clients and the profound artistic talent and technical skill she brings to her profession. She is one of only two women tattoo artists in the Puget Sound region who have been in the business for more than a quarter century.

Back in the early 1980s, when she first apprenticed as a tattoo artist, Jill worked in a world where women were considered eye candy and served to draw clients into the shop. "It was a female submissive situation," she says. She was expected to dress provocatively, serve drinks and color in the lines that the male artists laid down. Because tattoo artists must apprentice to work, the male-dominated tattoo profession set the rules for the entry of women artists.

Now the owner of her own shop, things could not be more different for Jill than when she entered the business. She has been clean and sober nine years, is in school studying counseling and substance abuse, and provides a place that is not just a tattoo business — but a refuge. "American Beauty Tattoo is a sanctuary studio for artists to work on projects their busy shops would not allow them to do, and for clients to talk about the images and ideas in their heads." Jill's goal is to help clients work with imagery — no matter how stark — in a positive way. She seeks to help them use the images to become the people they want to be. Vidyia attests to this fact. "Jill is mentoring me and moving me to the next stage in my development."

More than just a support to her clients, Jill has become a mentor to other women in tattoo. She is a founder of the Women's Tattoo Forum, a professional group of women tattoo artists whose mission it is to record, teach and create "tattoo herstory — the fascinating and unique stories" of women in tattoo.

In October 2008, the Women's Tattoo Forum held its first art show showcasing the artwork of some of its members, including a presentation featuring women's tattoo history, at Kaladi Brothers Coffee on Capitol Hill. With more guests than the hosts could have imagined, the standing-room-only crowd spilled out of the gallery into the coffee shop's other seating areas. The theme, "As We'd Decorate Her," gave the artists a chance to create unique pieces of art around the single theme of a woman's curvy silhouette. The Women's Tattoo Forum hopes to make this an annual event, giving the



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artists a chance to show their skill in other mediums. Jill was proud of the event and delighted by the turnout.

"There are approximately two hundred female tattoo artists in North America," says Jill. The industry is about 20 percent women. "Most are working in shops owned by men. I am looking for a way we can know each other and support each other rather than the old way where men told us what to do."

Tattoo artist Jacqueline Beach is a hip, sharp-as-a-tack, energetic woman who has had the pleasure — she would call it both a luxury and an honor — of working only with women tattoo artists. One of the artists at Madame Lazonga's Tattoo in the Pike Place Market, Jacqueline laid down her first ink on a client in 2003 as an apprentice at that shop. She appreciates the good fortune that has come to her from the hard work of her predecessors. "I'm spoiled," she says. "I learned from a woman. The women who came before me broke down those boundaries and allowed women like me to learn from other women."

Jacqueline has become the resident "tattoo historian" for the Women's Tattoo Forum. With a master's degree, experience teaching college courses and a past job in editing, she is a natural for the job of researching the connections and stories that comprise the evolution of women in tattoo. She tells the stories of the grandmothers of the tattoo profession with a mix of reverence and passion. "These women who were tattooed before World War II were some of the first feminists," she declares. "They actually lived feminism every day of their lives — they didn't just talk about it!" By getting tattooed heavily, she argues, these women freed themselves from societal norms.

Jacqueline is collecting the photographs and stories of every woman tattoo artist who has ever tattooed in the Puget Sound area. Additionally, she has put together some elements of a worldwide "herstory" of tattoo that starts with a 1500-year-old Peruvian female mummy. Stories she has found of circus women and of the first fully tattooed woman to participate in the Miss America Pageant in 1939 portray a very subversive tattoo culture in modern times.

And today? "The culture of tattoo has changed," she admits. The macho roots of tattoo — with bikers, criminals and Marines as the primary clients — have grown a new crop of more mainstream

customers such as rock stars, athletes and other celebrities.

Vyvyn "Madame" Lazonga, who has been in the tattoo profession since 1972, agrees. "Tattooing has become art for the masses," she says. With her gentle manner and her youthful appearance, the only way one would know that she has been in the profession for 37 years is the extent of the art on her body. Vyvyn notes that tattooing has changed dramatically in the decades she has been involved. Some of the changes are positive, such as greater awareness of blood-borne pathogens and safety measures to prevent the transmission of disease. With the growing sophistication of the profession, more responsibility has accrued to the artists for business management and keeping up with industry standards.

Once voted "the most beautiful tattooed woman in the world," Vyvyn exhibits the artistic influences of traditional Japanese art and nature. But Vyvyn did not become successful because of her pretty face. "I built my reputation on my art and my ethics," she asserts. She simply worked harder and went the extra mile to prove herself in her industry. "I ate, slept, and breathed tattoo," she says.

Despite her trailblazing past, Vyvyn never considered herself a feminist. "When I started, I didn't know anything about women's lib," Vyvyn laughs. It was only when she left the wing of her male apprentices that she learned about double standards and gender discrimination firsthand. Still, it's hard to argue with her success. Madame Lazonga's Tattoo, Vyvyn's all-woman artist tattoo shop in the Pike Place Market, is a thriving business by any standard.

Christy Brooker, who loves her job as a tattoo artist at ArtCore Studios in Georgetown, is another success story. "It's the coolest job in the world!" she raves. She enjoys working for herself, gets to travel the world for tattoo conventions, and has the pleasure of using her artistic skills every day. Though her parents didn't necessarily understand their daughter choosing to work in a tattoo shop when she was 18 years old, it's hard to think they are not proud of her now.

Christy has been in the tattoo profession for 10 years and also has built a solid reputation for herself that transcends her gender. "It's not necessarily a man's profession anymore," she says. "In my current shop, I am treated like an equal to the other artists, who happen to be men." Yet

she confesses that it wasn't always this easy for her. She admits to working in at least one shop that was a little "rough" on her as a woman. In that shop, she had to become accustomed to sexual innuendo and language that she would not consider appropriate for most workplaces. It's a little hard to imagine it, but this sweet smiling, articulate woman says that her defense at the time was to summon the guts to stand her ground and even show her own rough side to gain the respect of her colleagues. It's a time she doesn't miss.

All of these artistic women agree that the Seattle area is unique in its appreciation of tattoo. "Seattle is a tattoo mecca!" says Vyvyn. No doubt it's the convergence of a thriving art scene and rebellious spirit that makes Seattle so tattoo-loving.

Christy says that her clients include "everyone from punk rock street kids to dentists to accountants." She reflects, "I think there are more professionals coming to get tattoos now. It's more acceptable."

Jacqueline believes that Seattle is one of the most competitive tattoo markets in the country. "If you aren't a skilled artist, you'll never make it here," she warns. "This is not a spare-time job. It's a serious profession."

It's also a profession that is seeing an increase in women. In the 1970s, Seattle had just one woman tattoo artist. Today, there are at least 15 women artists working in tattoo shops all around town. More and more of these women are apprenticed by other women. And for those who haven't had the pleasure of working with other woman artists, the Women's Tattoo Forum provides that professional support. "It's a great way to find women who can relate to the issues that affect you as a woman artist," confirms Christy. "We all need our girls."

If there has ever been a bias against women tattoo artists, it's from the other artists — not the clients. "I have only had one guy walk in and say that he didn't want a girl to tattoo him," says Christy.

Gypsy Jill agrees. "Women like to be tattooed by women," says Jill, "and men like to be tattooed by women." Consequently, these woman artists never have a shortage of canvases on which to work. ■

Tera Schreiber is a freelance writer who sports a handful of gorgeous tattoos thanks to some amazing woman artists.

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