



LGBTATT00

Connecting to community & identity through body art



TATTOOING IN LGBTQ COMMUNITIES

"Tattooing is the opposite of self-harm," Mia/Max says, pressing a vibrating needle to their own arm. "When you're oppressed, your body isn't yours any more. Tattooing is a way of taking it back."

Although its origins are far older, tattooing made its first serious mark on the U.S. in the late 1700s; the protection papers issued to American sailors to avoid British impressment often included tattoos as identifying information. An unique tattoo meant a sailor could prove beyond doubt that his papers belonged to him. By the 1950s, American tattooing had spread to prisons and motorcycle gangs; in the 1970s and '80s, tattoos began to gain acceptance as a fashion statement among a wider variety of people. And as of a 2012 Harris Interactive study, 16% of the American population has a tattoo. And the rate among LGBTQ people is almost twice as much, at 32%. They're taking their bodies back, and finding artists they can trust to take the journey with them.

Previous page: Tattoo Sioux tattoos a hummingbird design onto apprentice Nic Tharpa's head. This page: Mia/Max tattoos a spiral, representing the 'rat maze' of mental illness, on their own arm.

MAKING SPACES

Say “tattoo parlor” to someone who’s never been in one and they’ll probably picture a cramped, grimy room with flash sheets lining the walls and burly, heterosexual men armed with huge needles. Most people getting a tattoo would like to know the shop they’re attending is clean, but for women and LGBTQ people, other kinds of safety are a concern as well.

Tattoo apprentice Nic Tharpa works at Brilliance Tattoo in Allston, Boston, a shop that prides itself on being a comfortable and inclusive space. All the staff but Nic, who is non-binary, are women, an intentional choice in the face of a predominantly male tattoo industry. The walls are sparsely decorated and painted black, and the music tends towards soft and away from screamo. Aside from the buzz of tattoo machines, the place is startlingly quiet; in the other room, one of the artists explains tattoo aftercare in a whisper to a nervous, androgynous client.

Top left: Brilliance Tattoo is located in Allston, a neighborhood of Boston, a short walk from Boston University.

Bottom left: Lucky’s Tattoo and Piercing is located in the middle of Cambridge in Central Square. Bottom right: Boston Barber and Tattoo Co. is located in Boston’s Little Italy, the North End.





Piercer Zach Torrin (L), the owner of Lucky's Tattoo & Piercing, took a similar approach for the business' two locations in Northampton and Central Square, Cambridge. The Central Square location just opened this March, and making sure the shop was clean, minimalist, approachable, and LGBTQ-friendly was one of his main priorities.

"I'm never sure how out to be," he said, explaining that he had to weigh his own safety with his desire to make LGBTQ clients feel welcome. His wife's encouragement has made him feel more comfortable being out at the Cambridge location, which wasn't as familiar to him as the "big queer scene" in Northampton where he grew up. When hiring artists and front desk staff for Lucky's' second location, he chose people who would also be dedicated to making the shop feel safe.

A few months later, Zach's efforts have paid off. He said he Cambridge Board of Health was surprised and impressed by the clean, fresh-looking space, and Lucky's has been getting many clients who came because they heard online or from friends that the shop was LGBTQ-owned.

"I got out of the shops for a while. It was way too male-dominated," said Gavi Hahn, a tattooer at Lucky's Tattoo & Piercing. After a stint doing print- making, she moved back to the Boston area with her wife, a fermentation expert who works for Samuel Adams. Though she still has complaints about male tattooers, she says Lucky's is more progressive than the last place she worked.





Previous page, clockwise: Gavi's workstation after a tattoo session.
Nicole works on a design with client Liza.
Gavi & shop receptionist Callie chat before her tattoo.
This page: Left, Nicole traces a pencil sketch into a line drawing to turn into a stencil. Right, Callie's jackalope tattoo is still raw.



Another tattooer at Lucky's, Adrianna Malliarou, said "Clients who followed me from [the last place I worked] have noticed I seem a bit happier." The environment at Lucky's — both the space and the people — make it easier for her to work the way she likes.

"Tattooing should be a collaboration between artist and client," she said. "I want to give people the option to experience their tattoo as a ritual or rite of passage, something quiet and calm if that's what they need."

But the appearance of a space isn't everything. At Boston Barber and Tattoo Co., a more conventional tattoo shop with a motorcycle hanging from the ceiling and copies of Playboy Magazine available in a rack on the wall, apprentice Nicole Errico eases first-time clients of all genders and sexualities through the process like she's been at it for decades. She makes LGBTQ-specific space online — she's one of the co-administrators of a Instagram page, [thosefuckingays](#), for women who date women.



Mia/Max's partner Noah (L) doodles in his sketchbook while they (R) ink a spiral into their arm.

'I'M VERY LIGHT-HANDED - LIKE AN ANGEL.'

Gavi Hahn



This page: Gavi puts the finishing touches on the linework for Callie's jackalope tattoo.
Next page: Chelsea compares her fresh tattoo from Tiffany Garcia to the dog toy on which it was based.



BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Usually, though not always, the images people choose to have tattooed on them have a personal meaning. Chelsea came to Boston Tattoo Convention this April to meet with Tiffany Garcia, a queer tattoo artist from California, to get matching tattoos of a stuffed dinosaur with one of her partners. She and Matt co-parent a rescue dog named Elinor, who they adopted after Elinor rolled her dog wheelchair up to Chelsea's human one at a pride parade. The dinosaur is Elinor's "baby."

"It's the only toy she won't tear up," Chelsea said. "It's the perfect image to represent her." The purple dinosaur is one of many; Chelsea has a leg dedicated to funny tattoos, a memorial portrait of her last dog, and a half sleeve of a peacock, to name a few. They show her favorite colors, media she loves, and images that help define who she is.

College student Mia/Max's tattoos say a lot about who they are, too. Scattered across their body are a plethora of them: some self-administered, some professional, and some by their dad, who made money as a self-taught tattooer while homeless in NYC.

"My dad taught me everything I know about tattooing," they said. Their dad has been teaching them and their sister about tattooing since they were kids. A history of self-harm made Mia/Max reticent to tattoo themselves, but they gradually adjusted to the idea. Today, Mia/Max's identity is inscribed on their body in images and text that refer to their gender and sexuality, their family, and their love of horror movies.





The words “not gay as in happy, but gay as in fuck you” run along the side of one of their feet. It’s usually “queer as in fuck you,” but tattooing their own foot hurt so much that they lost focus and wrote “gay” twice. But they don’t seem to mind.

“Tattoos should be accessible. They’re life-changing,” they said. Mia/Max tattoos other people, asking only for snacks or reimbursement for supplies in exchange, hoping to share the feeling of renewal and self-determination that getting tattooed gives them.

“My tattoos reflect me in a way that my body without tattoos does not,” college student Matthew said. “They made me more confident in myself and made me love my body more.” His first tattoo was a direct reference to Matthew’s relationship with his body and identity, represented by the words “Love thy melanin”. Since then, he’s been collecting a series of floral tattoos. He says the flowers represent his connection to masculinity, softness, and growth right now, but the meaning of the designs has changed over time for him, and he expects it to continue to change as he develops as a person.

“They’re literally part of your body and they’re going to be part of your identity forever,” he said.

Left: Tattoo Sioux lines up a stencil for Nic’s tattoo. Right: Matthew sits on the radiator in his Medford apartment, showing his finished forearm flowers and in-progress chest piece.



Cameron, who works at a higher-ed diversity and inclusion center, has some gender-related floral tattoos as well. As a non-binary person, they use floral patterns in their clothing and tattoos as a feminine element to counterbalance the masculinizing effects of testosterone on their body. Tucked among the flowers on their forearm lies a pink triangle, which is a symbol that harkens back to the 1990s AIDS activist group ACT UP and to the label Nazis used to mark LGBTQ people during the Holocaust.

"When it's pointing one way it represents femininity," they said, "but when my arm is bent it points the other way and becomes masculine...A lot of my tattoos were part of my transition process."

A watercolor bee can also be seen on Cameron's forearm. The bee is for Cameron's friend Kim, who's also trans and is the chief apiary inspector of Massachusetts.

"Bees are matriarchal," Cameron said. "They only really need the males for genetic diversity."

Female insects who have little use for men also feature in one of Cameron's partner's tattoos. A black widow and a praying mantis frame the landscape of Winchester, Virginia, where feminist activist Sarah's alma mater is located.

"College is where I found my queerness and my identity," she said. "I wanted to get something that represented all the growth I went through in college." All Sarah's tattoos connect to queerness, womanhood, and survivorship in different ways, coming together to demonstrate an aesthetic and identity she describes as "spooky femme."

"In high school I was in a relationship with a cis man who refused to let me dress how I wanted," she said. Being a spooky femme is both a political act and a restorative one, she said. "It's a form of reclaiming my body, to have the ability to do what I want with my body."





Sarah's first two acts of reclamation were tattoos referencing Sylvia Plath, who she said she relates to as a woman with mental illness who has a hard time fitting in. Retail worker Charley has also chosen tattoos from media they relate to; their first tattoo was a quote and image from *The Little Prince*, a book they loved in high school.

Another quote lines their bicep in capital letters: "BOLD, BRAVE, AND FORTHRIGHT." It's a lyric from "Iowa," a song by non-binary folk-punk musician Mal Blum, whose music Charley loves. The song, Charley said, is about how running away from your problems doesn't really work.

"I showed it to Mal at one of their shows in Boston," they said. "We're on a first name basis now." They got the Iowa tattoo around the same time their partner Max May got their queer tattoo.

Max May's tattoo says "gay as in happy." They got it with the intention of having a tattoo that announced to the world that they were queer. Their parents aren't supportive of Max May's identity as a queer nonbinary person. Max May's mother is worried that being LGBTQ means Max May will always be sad and alone.

"I'm happy because I'm gay," they said. "I wanted something that said I was obviously queer."





Journalism student Tréa said she she didn't want her first tattoo to be special. Someone told her she should should get one she didn't care about first, so she could learn about the process and be better informed before investing in a tattoo that meant a lot to her. She originally planned for these antlers to be a reference to the music video for Fall Out Boy's "Sugar, We're Goin' Down," but now they're just a pretty design to her. Her second tattoo means a lot more to her; it's a handpoked teapot by one of her friends, who is also LGBTQ. She chose it off a sheet of designs her friend posted on Instagram.

"I couldn't decide between a strawberry and a teapot," she said. "I'm so bad at making decisions." She deliberated for a week about which one to get.

"The day of the appointment, I still hadn't decided," she said. "I said to myself, 'I'm gonna make myself a cup of tea and decide.'" The decision made itself after that. "My family is wicked Irish...we make tea for everything."

Tréa has plans for many more tattoos, all with personal significance. One of her next ones will be a drawing of the sign at the entrance of the sleep-away camp she went to every summer for ten years.

"That camp was like my second home," she said. She'll carry part of that second home with her forever. "[Getting tattoos] is about feeling at home in your body."