

MARK OF THE ANCESTORS

A new book by tattooist-scholar Tricia Allen sheds fresh light on Hawaiian tattoo traditions

By Derek Ferrar
Public Information Specialist

THE French artist Jacques Arago, who spent three weeks in Hawai'i aboard the ship *Uranie* in August 1819, wrote that during his stay, none other than Queen Ka'ahumanu asked him to tattoo her with a figure of Kamehameha on her shoulder and a hunter's horn on her posterior – then a highly popular design among Hawaiian women.

"The designs which ornamented her voluminous breast were traced with a perfect taste," Arago wrote. "She was tattooed on the tongue, the name of Tamehameha [and] the date of his death could be read on her arms; the sole of her feet and the palm of her hands, so delicate, carried figures..."

The encounter between the artist and the queen is just one of many fascinating facts revealed in the new book by tattooist-scholar Tricia Allen, *Tattoo Traditions of Hawai'i* (Mutual Publishing, \$17.95), which Allen says is the first in a series to come about tattooing customs in different areas of the Pacific.

Allen says her purpose in writing the book was to bring to light new information about traditional Hawaiian tattooing practices, which were not as well documented by early visitors and historians as the elaborate customs of such places as the Marquesas, or Sāmoa, the only island group where traditional tattooing has been practiced continuously.

"A lot of the information is so obscure," she says. "I've been researching this for twenty years, and until recently I didn't know that they had so many early original illustrations by Arago at the Honolulu Academy of Arts."

That's a key point, Allen says, because often the best-known representations of traditional Hawaiian tattooing come from



"[The women] make drawings of necklaces and garters on the skin in a manner really wonderful; their other devices consist of hunting-horns, helmets, muskets, rings, but more particularly fans and goats. Those of the men are muskets, cannon, goats and dominoes; together with the name of Tamehameha [Kamehameha] and the day of his death." – Jacques Arago, 1819. Original illustration by Jacques Arago, courtesy of Honolulu Academy of Arts.

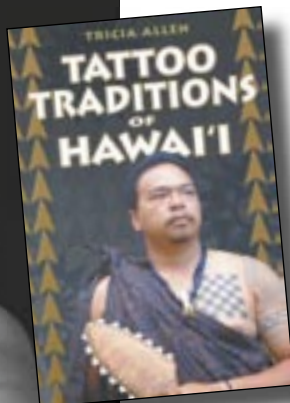
engravings included in the published memoirs of early Western visitors to the islands. However, she says, those engravings, often re-created in Europe by artists working for the printing company, were often "drastically different" from the originals drawn by the artists who were actually on the expeditions.

A number of those originals are now housed at the Academy of Arts, including many by Arago. Starting later this month, Allen will be guest-curating an exhibition of the original Arago drawings that include tattoo at the Academy's John Dominis and Patches Damon Holt Gallery. The exhibition will run from Aug. 23 – Nov. 5.

Drawing from the original artwork along with early written

accounts, the writings of native historians and other sources, Allen recounts in *Tattoo Traditions* little-known information about Hawaiian tattoo motifs and placement, as well as the tools used by Hawaiian tattooists and the markings worn by prominent ali'i. Many of the key original drawings are reproduced in Allen's book, along with the engraving versions for comparison.

When Allen first began researching Pacific Island tattooing traditions as the focus of her graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Hawai'i, she had no clue that she would one day become a tattooist herself – let alone apply more than 7,000 tat-



"My tattoos, and my 'oki mahi'ole (traditional "helmet" hair style), show the commitments that I have made to both the past and the future by taking actions in the present. They tell the story of all that I am willing to do and become, so that what is most important in life will be protected and prosper." – Solomon Ho'āheo Kaili'hiwa III, Maui archaeologist - Photo by Marsha Aguon

Exhibit of Jacques Arago's original Hawaiian tattoo images

Guest-curated by Tricia Allen
Honolulu Academy of Arts
Aug. 23 – Nov. 5
532-8701
www.honoluluacademy.org

Tricia Allen website:
www.tattoooftraditions.alohaworld.com

