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## FOREIGN BODIES, PIGMENTS & CONTAGION: THE 19TH CENTURY EUROPEAN TATTOO AND RISKS TO HEALTH

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The late nineteenth-century saw a surge in the popularity of tattooing across Europe, coinciding with the development of new tattooing technology in the form of the electric tattoo machine, the emergence of a professionalised industry, and a renewed scholarly interest in the practice within the fields of medicine and criminology.

During this period, medical professionals took particular interest in the health risks associated with tattooing. Having been thought to possess therapeutic properties across diverse cultures throughout history, the tattoo now came under attack by medical science as a potential agent for the transmission of highly contagious diseases such as syphilis and tuberculosis.

This paper explores this historical moment in the development of European tattooing from folk practice to professionalised industry, combining an examination of the historical medical literature with an analysis of extant collections of preserved tattoos held in European medical museums. The practice of preparing and collecting tattoos was closely related to the scientific interest in tattooing during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tattoos played a significant role in medico-legal research across a wide range of disciplines, notably dermatology, forensic medicine, psychiatry and anthropology.

From the criminological perspective, the tattoo as a surface signifier represented a kind of peculiar 'social symptom' of underlying psychological malaise, which could be read and diagnosed from the formal aspects of the tattoo marks themselves, in a similar way that the surface eruptions of skin disorders may be read as a sign of internal disease. Paralleling the criminal-anthropological study of tattoos, late nineteenth- and early twentieth century physicians responded to the tattoo variously as foreign body, toxicity risk factor, and vector of disease.