

on campus: Tattoos Shown At Art Centre

An exhibition of tattoos is now on view at the UNB Arts Centre. The drawings in this exhibition were commissioned in the summer of 1970 from Bob MacLean, a tattoo artist in Halifax, and the exhibition is organized by Luke Rombout, Director of the Owens Arts Gallery at Mount Allison. Prof. MacLean, as he calls himself, works in an area where one would expect to find a tattooist. His workshop is on Barrington Street, under the Macdonald Bridge and near the harbor. He was born in Halifax in 1942. His father was a Petty Officer in the Navy, and MacLean grew up in the tough dockyard section of the city. He remains in this neighbourhood happily and by choice, although during the summers he travels to a number of country fairs, particularly those near the sea. He has made a detailed study of his craft and when asked why he calls himself professor, replies, "I profess to know everything there is to know about tattooing."

MacLean was a protege of Charles Snow, a tattoo artist who worked for many years in Halifax, and died there a few years ago. Many of MacLean's designs stem from Snow, from whom he learned the art, and inherited designs, which frequently 'travel' from one tattooist to another. MacLean works in the now traditional method of using battery-powered electric needles for the skin punctures, and printing inks for colouration. The process is relatively simple. The skin is cleaned with alcohol, and then a design is placed upon it. This is done either freehand or with the reverse of an acetate engraving in which charcoal can be rubbed which is then pressed upon the skin. After



Tattoo

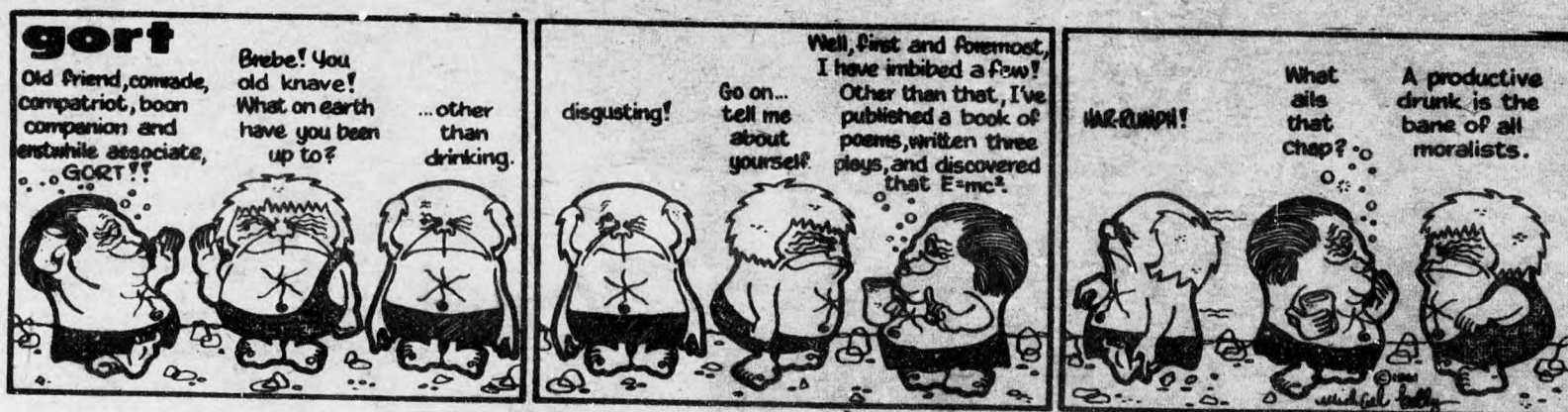
the outline has been punctured, coloured ink is applied (also with needles) and then wiped off. The latter method is exactly the same as colour intaglio printing on a metal plate. During the whole process, the skin is stretched as much as possible, and kept very tight. After the design is executed it is covered up with a tissue or light bandage. Under no circumstances is the tattoo to be touched for a few days - no washing is 'allowed' in the area. Usually a scab forms, which comes off after a few weeks. Needless to say, the infection incidence is high, due to the often unsanitary conditions in a shop.

The process is very quick - small tattoos are done in a matter of minutes, larger ones take up to fifteen or twenty minutes.

The imagery of the drawings in this exhibition are not terribly complex and can be categorised easily. More or less, they fall into the following sections: military and naval, erotic and sexual, religious, fantastic, and utilitarian.

The latter category would include those tattoos, for instance, which consist of an individual's name. Some tattoos have traditionally been identified with figures of the underworld. The butterfly or an eagle carrying away a woman, for example, are symbols we find often tattooed on thieves and pimps respectively. Others are overtly erotic. The daggers or swords penetrating roses represent phalli and values. Nudes rising from the centre of flowers may be interpreted in the same manner.

Bruno Bobak, Director



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