

Celtic Tattoos

— Art, Ancestry, and Self-Identity

Story by Candice Sage

People get tattoos for a variety of reasons - from a desire for adornment to commemorating a special event or person, or perhaps the peril of a drunken dare. With Celtic tattoos becoming increasingly popular in recent years, Celtic Life International consulted three expert artists and their clients to better understand why.

Pat Fish of Lucky Fish Tattoos is a Santa Barbara, California-based artist who grew up an orphan. As a journalist, she sought out her ethnic identity at the age of 30, timed with Saturn's Return and the quest to discover one's path in life. Fish is of Scottish heritage, with Pictish roots.

Treubhan (meaning "Tribal" in Scottish), is a Brighton, U.K. Celtic artist. He was born in Glasgow and is connected to Ireland through maternal grandparents. He grew up in the Edinburgh countryside with a Scottish stepdad.

Morpheus Ravenna of Banshee Arts is an Oakland, California-based Celtic artist with several generations of Irish, Scottish, and British ancestry.

Each agrees that the Celtic Tree of Life has replaced the Celtic Cross as the most popular pattern today, and all three theorize about what characterizes a Celtic tattoo.

"A Celtic design weaves in and out," explains Fish. "It's like a crochet, with genetic and ethnic based patterns."

Treubhan echoes the definition, adding that identification with Celtic ancestry and traditions are hallmarks of integrity and authenticity.

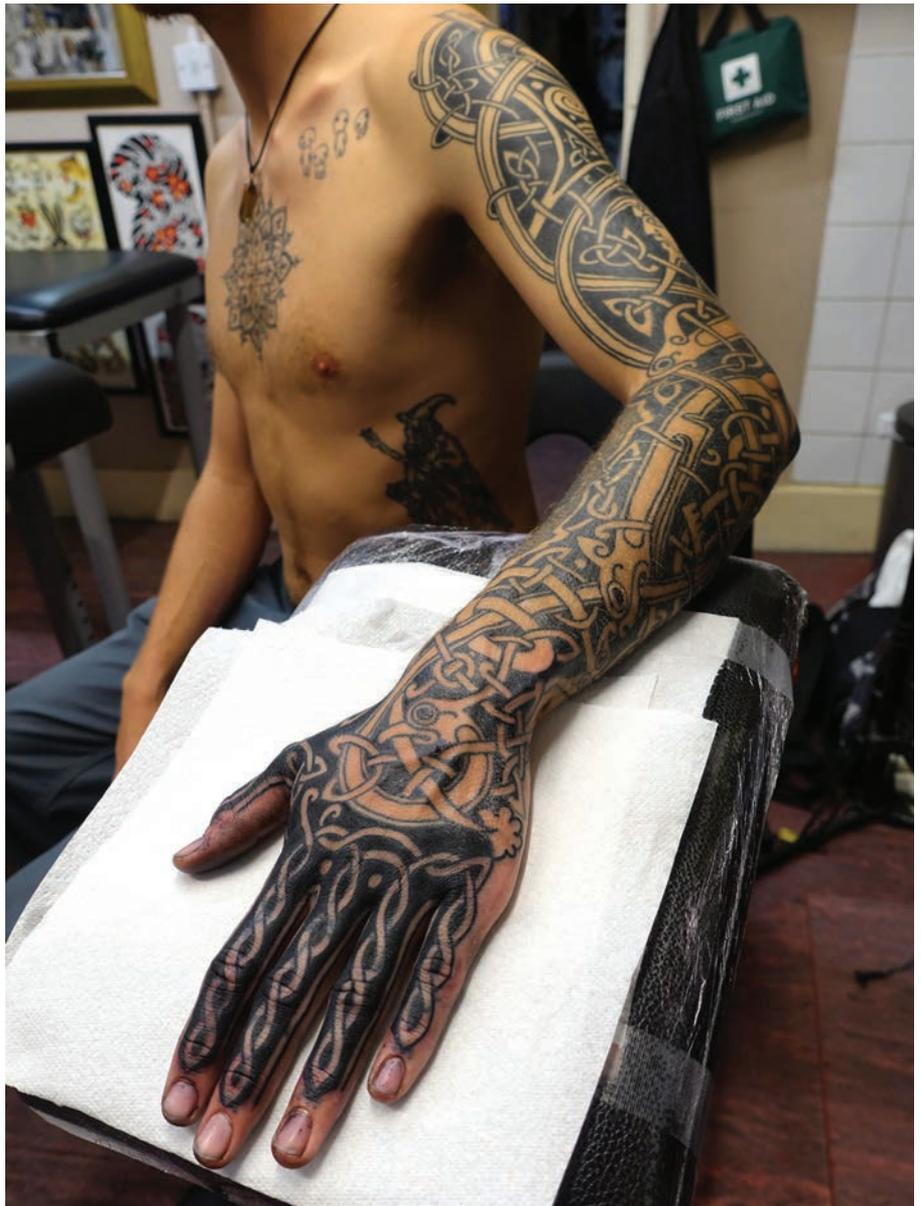
"It is really all about intention," he noted. "Both the giving of the tattoo and the receiving of the tattoo represent a connection to something bigger..."

“I believe that people are looking for a unique experience that will link them to their heritage and culture...”

Ravenna describes the spiritual aspect of Celtic tattooing as “an intimate practice, requiring a vulnerability to undergo a process that is cleansing and centering - it offers one the opportunity to step away from oneself and re-gather.”

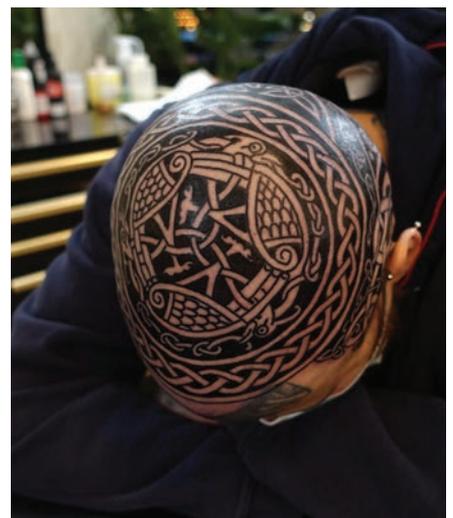
Each had different reasons for becoming a tattoo artist.

Fish has art and film degrees and has



worked as a landscape artist and as a journalist. As a neurodiverse person, being self-employed had a lot of appeal. After discovering her Pictish heritage, she experienced a change in focus. Pictish was more challenging, however, as there weren't as many resources to draw upon - only 6th to 9th century Roman carvings and text. Her confidence has grown with experience, and now she lets “people know that the tattoo has to be a certain size if it is to work.” Patterns are adapted to fit a person's body or body part to create “the best canvas.”

George Bain's book on Celtic Art from Edinburgh provided a source of inspiration for Treubhan and freehand tattoo design. At age 19, he moved to London and became an apprentice





Treubhan



Morpheus Ravenna



Pat Fish

where he was “completely immersed, it became my whole world.” He describes the thrill of finishing a tattoo as “my buzz, my high...”

Ravenna was self-taught and started experimenting with tattoo design around the age of 12. In her 30s, she devoted herself to the spiritual side of Celtic ink, training with world-renowned tattoo artist Indexa Stern in San

Francisco. She notes that the “old boy” environments of the past have changed rapidly as more female artists fell into the field.

“It is transformative, a way for people to embody their beliefs, and to shift the way that they see themselves...”

Each has had their fair share of challenging tattoos, including work on sites of “pain” - hiding self-harming scars, wounds, and the like.

Ravenna recalls a piece she created on a mastectomy scar - a quill and pen design with

the tips dovetailing into twin ravens beneath a feathered mantle; a form of The Mórrígan, the Celtic goddess of death and rebirth. The technical element was a challenge - mastectomy scars have a “three-dimensional quality, so it is like sculpting onto flesh.” A mastectomy scar is “a site of both pain and healing,” she continues, “so getting it right is important as there is so much at stake.”

Treubhan had a client who wanted to overlay Celtic patterns over other existing tattoos.

“Large scale tattoos can be scary as they are permanent. The experience is a major physical, emotional, mental and spiritual investment - both for the artist and the client.”

One of his clients now adorns a spectacular “body suit.”

“It feels like I am now in this version of myself where I am outwardly expressing what is on the inside,” she shares anonymously with Celtic Life International. “Previously, I struggled with my body because of self-harm scars and the sadness they brought on from remembering the hurt and pain I experienced. The tattoo removed attention from my past hurts and pain and now people ask me about my heritage and connect with a happier version of me. It amounts to hurting myself in a productive way, rather than the way I hurt myself as a teenager - a different take on the pain beyond sadness that is powerful and empowering, a conscious decision versus an impulse.”

And while the reasons for getting a Celtic tattoo may have changed over time, the practice itself remains pretty much unchanged over time.

“Tattooing hasn’t really gone anywhere,” notes Ravenna. “If anything, we are seeing a return to the old practices - ones that may have been forgotten, or that have gone underground. The practice is older than all of us, so all that is required is a re-remembering. And, in the process, we reconnect with our roots.”

