

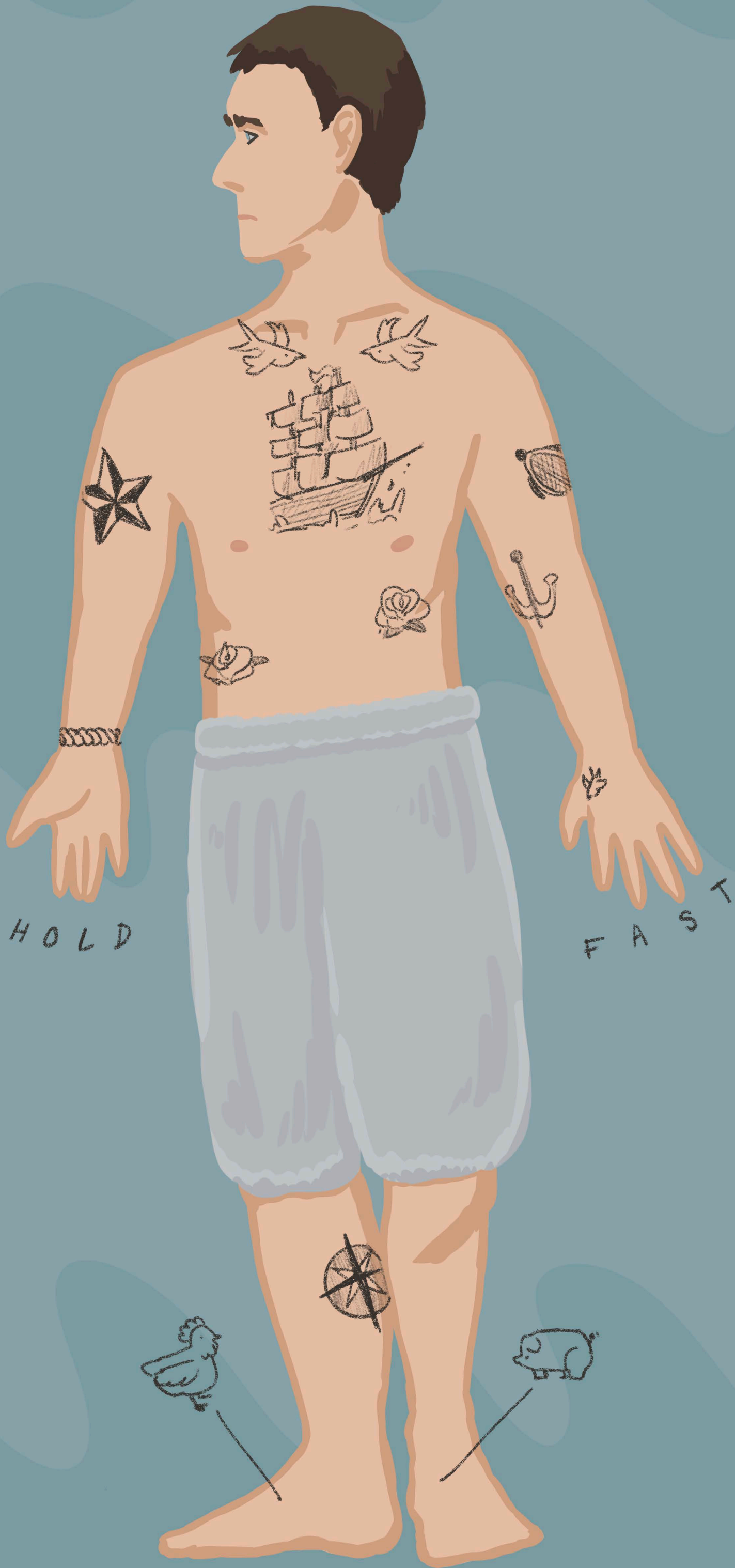
Indelible Marks: Tradition and Modernity in Tattoo Culture

In the West, tattoos are associated with sailors. A tradition beginning with seafarers during James Cook's exploration of the far reaches of the Pacific, tattoos are still a tradition in navies today.

The history of tattooing reaches far past the Age of Sail. Mummies with tattoos dating back 5,300 years have been discovered, as well as ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Indigenous Polynesians and South Americans. The oldest tattoos are often associated with healing or medicine. Dynastic era Egyptian tattoos were almost solely found on women, intended as protection during pregnancy and labor. In many cultures, the art of tattooing is passed down between generations of women. Tattoos found on Inuit people, called Kakiniit, are almost solely practiced on women. Tattoos represent coming-of-age, as women were not able to marry unless they were tattooed. As the Arctic was colonized, the Christian church forbade traditional tattoos, and practices were lost. Recently, traditional tattoos have been reclaimed. Inuit tattoo practices have remained the same for a millenia. Modern Inuit women can get tattoos that reflect the same values and meanings as women a thousand years ago.

The first sailor's tattoos came from Captain Cook's voyages in the 18th century. The word tattoo is derived from the Polynesian 'tatau' of the same meaning, imitating the rhythmic tapping that makes the marks. Sailors have always been artists at sea— knot tying, scrimshaw, sewing, and painting. Tattoo was quickly added to that repertoire, an indelible mark that differentiated sailors from landlubbers. Tattoos represented milestones— swallows for every 5,000 nautical miles sailed, turtles for crossing the equator, and different symbols for different ranks held. Tattoos also rendered flora and fauna novel to the sailors. Tigers and tropical flowers, and even mystical dragons for sailors stationed in East Asia. Until World War II, tattoos remained a sailor's trade. After the war, as thousands of men returned home with new art inked on their skin, men who set up shop during the war kept going. The bold style popular during the war became known as "American Traditional". Some of the most lasting images of the style were created by "Sailor Jerry", a Navy man who set up shop in Honolulu and kept sending his art out into the world.

I got my first tattoo the day after my eighteenth birthday. I got a swallow on my collarbone, flying with me to college and into adulthood. My own personal coming-of-age ceremony. My parents, relatively easygoing otherwise, hate my tattoos. But every stretch of ink across my skin is another way of becoming, of making my body and my history belong to me. If any readers have tattoos, or other forms of body modification, I'd love to hear about what artwork they have and why!



HOLD

FAST

KAKINIIT

