

# INKING

a new

# TALE

A loud, incessant buzz of airbrushing machines, shirtless dreadlocked men, tough women and a whole lot of art—that's what you get at a tattoo convention in India. We catch up with tattoo artists and visitors at the Mumbai Tattoo Expo 2012.

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“Will it hurt too much? I want a dragon with a skull below it. And two stars also.” This is what Rahul and Yuvraj, artists of the Bengaluru-based studio, Om Tattoos, typically hear at tattoo expositions in India. Rahul knows it's time to sit down and have a chat with the curious first-timers, explaining them that more often than not, a tattoo is a permanent thing, meant to mirror a philosophy you hold close to heart.

“Dragons, skulls and butterflies are fancy, but the tattoo design you freeze upon has to mean something special to you and it's advisable that you take into consideration your career choice and family background,” Rahul advises.

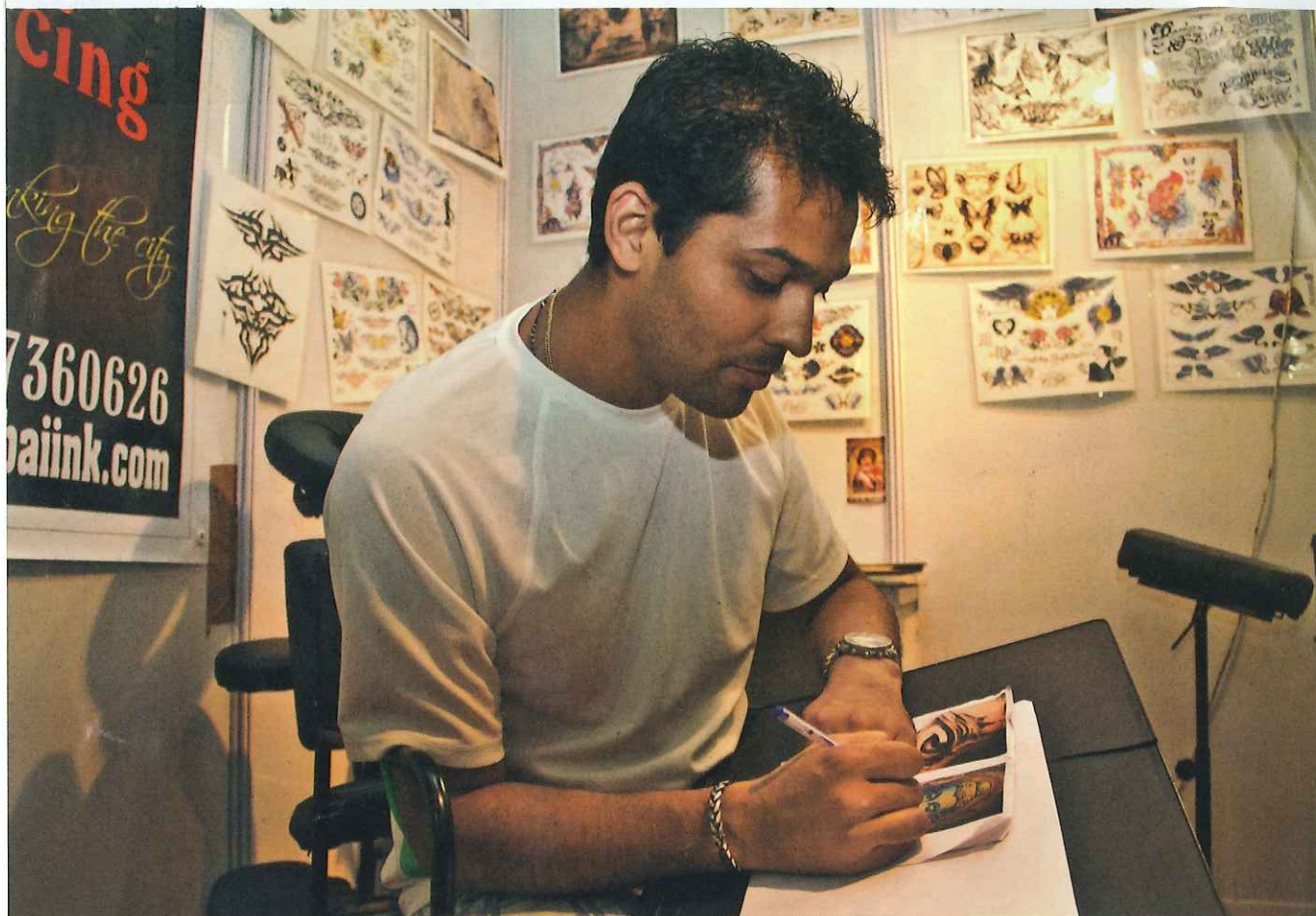
#### WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

To consult with artists such as Rahul, get all your queries answered and browse through thousands

Above: A man gets a tattoo on the sole of his feet at NH7 Weekender 2011 where a tattoo convention was held.

Left: Tattoo ink bottles at the Mumbai Tattoo Expo 2012.





Monisha Algaonkar

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of tattoo designs—all under one roof—head to a tattoo convention, an emerging hangout of the youth in India. Tattoo Republic, an international tattoo convention, saw roaring success at its debut in Pune last year, alongside the massive music festival NH7. A quirky mix of international and domestic tattoo artists delighted visitors, several of whom walked out only after getting a permanent design on their bodies. On the evening that we dropped in at Indian Ink's Mumbai chapter in June, the arena was swarmed with enthusiastic visitors, all aflutter in anticipation of their turn to get inked. Sumeet Bachher, a visitor at the expo, ended up keeping Tattoo Temple's artist Vigneshkumar busy for two whole days, thanks to the intricate design covering his entire back. Enduring the pain, he said, "The design you see is of Lord Shiva, meditating in his temple."

#### A NICHE FOR THE NEEDLE-HAPPY

We catch up with the tired-but-happy expo co-organiser Shibanni Shah, who says that the response has been better than the last two years. "We had one expo in Mumbai in 2010 and one in Goa in 2011. For the next year though, we plan to go full throttle with two expos—one in Mumbai and one in Goa. Our Mumbai editions see participation from domestic tattoo artists, but the one in Goa has a lot of international names."

One would assume that such tattoo conventions are niche, and of interest only to the tattooed community, but surprisingly, a large chunk of the visitors at the conventions are first-timers. While getting inked, they divert their attention with the help of their iPads and other gadgets. Pain and aftercare is what most people considering a tattoo

Mumbai Ink's tattoo artist at the Mumbai Tattoo Expo 2012.



Colours being filled inside the outline of a tattoo.

are worried about. Majority of the people who walk in are those without a single tattoo on their bodies. And of course, a lot of them step out proudly sporting fresh ink.

If you are expecting discounts at the expo, then you're in for a bit of disappointment, as not many artists offer one. Rachel Falcao, owner of Mumbai Ink, is of the opinion that a lot of artists charge nominally at their studios anyway, eliminating the feasibility of discounts at the expo. Rahul and Yuvraj, though, have a unique thing going on. "If you want a two sq in 'Om' symbol tattooed, then we do it for free—not just at the conventions, but at our studio as well."

We check if Pune-based artist Jitesh Gaikwad minds talking to us while he inks a brave visitor's shoulder with a design of a scary girl holding an injection. We ask Jitesh for how long he's been tattooing. "Umm, about 10 years now," he replies nonchalantly. We think he's joshing with us, because he looks no more than 20! "I began tattooing at 15 and I'm 25 now," he smiles.

Shibanni points out some major differences she encountered while interacting with Indian and international artists, "The foreign ones were surprisingly enthusiastic about the idea of a tattoo convention in India, whereas our own were hesitant." Initially, Shibanni had some harsh words to say about the Indian tattoo artists. "There are



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### THE ARTISTS AND THEIR ACCESSORIES

Artists are not the only ones you get to meet at a convention. We spent a good amount of time at the booth manned by King's Tattoo Supply, checking out the airbrushing equipment, colour bottles and other fancy instruments and accessories. "We aren't here for business; the artists don't participate in expos to buy equipment", reveals Ronak, the owner of the supply firm. "We have set up a stall here so that we get to interact with our clients—the artists. Most of our orders are placed online, and we hardly get to meet the artists. This is also a great opportunity for us to track market trends and understand what the artists want."

several good artists in India, but they were hostile towards each other. It took us a lot of convincing to get everyone together for the maiden edition of the expo." Shedding light on the reason, she says they were worried about their artwork being plagiarised. "Now, after two expos, at least they look at each other, smile and appreciate the other's artwork." She considers that an achievement.

### THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE BUZZ

Putting together such a convention is no small feat. That a good amount of cash needs to be pumped in goes without saying. "Tattoo expos in India don't prove to be cheap," Shibanni concurs, "And that



is why nobody conducts them. Forget organisers, even the artists weren't sure the expo would attract enough footfalls." In fact, they even incurred losses for the first two years. They do not have funding from sponsors in cash this year as well.

Shibanni blames social stigma associated with tattoos for the lack of sponsorship. It would not be too far from the truth to say that, for the majority of Indians, a person with a tattoo is a hippie or a drug addict. It comes as no surprise then that few want their brand to be affiliated with a tattoo convention. There is a good exchange in the barter format, though. Poitrix, a trio that performs and gives lessons on the New Zealand-originated art of poi, conducted a workshop at the Mumbai Tattoo Expo. In turn, it received a new platform for performances. There are often a good number of activities such as live performances and workshops held alongside the tattoo booths. The idea is to promote talent, and these workshops are deliberately kept free.

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While expos in India still have a long way to go before they receive visibility, adequate funding and popularity, the second edition of India Tattoo Convention is set to take place in Faridabad in October this year. This certainly spells good news for tattoo enthusiasts in Delhi NCR. With music and art festivals being conducted extensively across the country, the tattoo community is working actively so as to put Indian tattoo expos on the world map and not lag behind. With the hope of going mainstream and finally being perceived as regular, one can safely say that tattoo expos are successfully inking their way into our events calendar. ■

Below: Even horror movie characters lend themselves as tattoo subjects as is the case with *The Exorcist* tattoo on this man's back.

Bottom: People at the convention show off their tattoos.



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