

The Himalayan

ON S A T U R D A Y

Inking underway as tattoo fever takes over Capital

Tattoo artists and enthusiasts gather for Nepal's biggest tattoo convention



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To the low background hum of countless, buzzing machines, the opening morning of the 9th International Nepal Tattoo Convention saw scores of early arrivals rolling up their sleeves, contorting themselves across tables or dropping their trousers to expose various sections of flesh to the needles at hand at Heritage Garden, Sanepa. Others stood to watch or flick through catalogue books for something particularly inventive or original that they might copy on themselves. With over 200 tattoo artists, both local and international, working in a dazzlingly diverse range of styles, the scene was similar throughout on April 26 as the spirit of ink engulfed the venue.

Art speaks for itself

A decision to become a tattoo artist might not always be financially rewarding, but artists like Ogre Kalodimas, from Sake Tattoo Crew in Germany believe, one can't really put a price on the experiences gained, the places travelled, the people met, the memories made and the art witnessed.

It's Kalodimas' fourth time at this particular Convention, and happens to be the only convention that he attends as he has stopped going to any other tattoo gatherings of such magnitude. "I used to go to at least 20 conventions a year, now it's only one and it's this."



At his booth in the Convention, he was bent over the upper left portion of his customer's back. He was carefully shading a geometric circular design of what would become one of the many Mandala shapes that would fill the entirety of the client's back.

The circular shapes that Kalodimas was so engrossed in inking was the Buddhist and Hindu spiritual symbol that denote balance, eternity and the never-ending circle of life. Kalodimas prides himself in the intricate design and the spiritual subtexts of the Mandalas. In fact, he even believes that "much of my designs have come to be more layered over the years after my visits to Nepal, which has allowed me to witness the importance of Mandalas and its significance firsthand."

The latest design that he is working on, as per Kalodimas will take the entire three days to finish. "So, in a way I have already got my three days at the Convention covered," he says

showing us a small picture of what the complete result would look like on a customer's back.

Like Kalodimas, a lot of the artists have a busy three days ahead of themselves as they already have had their work cut out for them—so much so that one of the artists also has the need to have a personal assistant to flex the artist's muscle and stretch his skin or that's at least, what the self-proclaimed 'skin stretcher' Ganga claims.

Ganga, who has barely a portion of skin left to be inked, is an Australia-born tattoo enthusiast. He had previously been a *sadhu* in Varanasi before settling (at least for now) in Indonesia. He has come to the event for the first time along with Indonesian artist, Herpianto Hendra. "I am here to help Hendra out and even let him relax a bit," says Ganga who himself has had Hendra, by means of hand-tapping technique, tattoo both his hands, stretching from his wrists to the tip of his fingers.

Hendra, on the other hand,

has got a striking tattoo on his neck, that is referred to as a 'Ukir Rekonq', an elaborate symbol of the Dayak Tribe from where he hails. His style is based on the *bunga terung*, or the traditional hand-tapping style using motifs drawn from his own tribe, the Dayaks.

He first begins by drawing the shape that a customer wants on his skin with an orange marker. Then he wears a flashlight around his head to underline the orange markings with black ink before using the hammer, wooden staff, bamboo needles and ink to permanently carve the body. Although lesser painful than the traditional buzzing needles, it takes twice as much time, which is why it doesn't come off as a shock that he would need someone like Ganga to flex his muscles every now and then.

As soon as one enters the main hall, Sacrifice BCN from Spain is one of the first booths to reveal itself to the visitors.

The booth is dominated by fig-



ures of designs reminiscent of the old-school traditional tattoo arts with bold lines, bright colours and iconic designs of roses and anchors, and even the Japanese-styled images of Samurais and Geishas. The artist in the booth is Ciscoksl, a Spanish graffiti and tattoo artist, who is comfortable with both colour and black-and-white tattoos. Although, he has participated in a number of conventions before, it is his first in Nepal. "I am enjoying the overall vibe here and although it's my first time I have been able to socialise with fellow artists from all over the world despite my poor command over English," he explains.

First timers

Alongside the many tattoo world veterans attending to the various stalls and discussing their artworks, there were also some experiencing the magic of the Nepal Tattoo Convention for the first time.

Nirmal Lohani, 28, from Pokhara was attending the Convention after five months spent in India at the tattoo school, Aliens Tattoo. "I always had an interest in tattooing, and had also

dabbled in it slightly. I started getting into tattooing seriously a year ago, and found the tattoo school Aliens Tattoo online. And I am finally back in Nepal to start my own professional journey," he shares.

Lohani is set to start working with Rudrakshya Tattoo at Nepal, but has no plans to make or get any tattoos at the Convention. But as a long-time follower of the tattoo culture, the Convention was a different experience for him altogether. "Seeing all these artists that I have been following for a long time in real life has been a totally surreal experience," he admits.

Meanwhile, Indian tattoo artist Neelix Bihani, 28, has been in Nepal for the past two months working with Nepali tattoo studio Razoné Tattoo. "I've known Razoné from Razoné Tattoo for three years, and I work with him whenever I visit Nepal," he says. A professional tattoo artist for the past 11 years, Bihani is an avid traveller which he considers essential for "exploring new things and learning different styles".

"Nepal is the first place I visit whenever I start my travels," Bihani informs, but despite his history with the country, this is his first experience of Nepal Tattoo Convention. And he found the gathering to be "totally of next level—there are artists from all over the world coming together for this event." He will also be making tattoos for clients at the Razoné Tattoo booth.

To ink or not to ink

Visitors at the Convention could be seen flipping through the artists' portfolios on display, taking videos of the stalls placed side-by-side and gathering around exciting sights on display.

Shivam Sharma, a 22-year-old tour guide, was present at the event with some minimal markings visible on his forearms. Showing a tattoo of an aeroplane icon tracing across a straight dotted line, he comments, "I had this tattoo drawn at last year's Nepal Tattoo Convention. It represents the popular visual icon of an aeroplane in flight, from start to a destination. Over the year, the dotted lines began to merge together as the ink began to spread. So, I was planning to cover this up with a forearm sleeve."

Sharma's idea was to get a semi-realistic image representing the Mansalu trail, which had



made a deep impact during his trek there. However, he has changed his mind as he found the idea too cost-prohibitive.

Popular media personality Sahana Bajracharya was also present at the event, and could be seen taking pictures and talking to attendees with much enthusiasm. Although she has been visiting the Nepal Tattoo Convention since 2014, she is still ambivalent about the prospects of getting a tattoo for herself.

"I feel that getting a tattoo is something that is done spontaneously. And every time I visit the Convention, I think that I should get a tattoo but never end up doing so," she shares. At the same time, she thinks that a tattoo has to carry some meaning, and she has been thinking of what image she would prefer for herself.

"Tattooing is a really complicated art form. Most people understand it as just a decoration but when you get into it you realise that people are drawing out so much of their lives in their tattoos, from their culture to their own personal attachments," she explains.

Tattoos and more

The Nepal Tattoo Convention 2019 was also the venue of a number of vendors for different things associated with art and tattooing—from tattooing supplies to tee-shirts with artistic prints.

Biju Shrestha from Buddhism Clothing has been a part of the Convention since its second edition, offering art lovers tee-shirts printed with a variety of artistic designs, all of them "with a touch of Nepalism".

Started in 2011 primarily as an export company, Buddhism Clothing has been a part of different conventions and fairs in countries like Canada and Germany, Shrestha informs. But he has found the best customers at Nepal Tattoo Convention. "Visitors at the Convention value the quality of products we provide. Most other places, customers tend to haggle over prices with no regard for the quality we are offering. But at Nepal Tattoo Convention, they not only like our designs but value them in the price they are willing to pay," he claims.

Nepal Tattoo Convention is on till April 28.

