PORTRAIT CHARACTERISTICS IN TATTOO ART

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyses the characteristics of portraiture in realistic tattoo art, one of the most popular tattoo styles today. The main focus of this research is to identify the key elements that make portrait tattoos look realistic and lifelike, as well as the techniques used by tattoo artists to achieve these results. This research is part of the MBKM internship report and employs a descriptive qualitative research method. Data were collected through interviews with tattoo artists experienced in the realistic style, direct observation during the tattoo-making process, and photographic documentation of their works. Content analysis was used to identify common features that define realistic portrait tattoos, such as accuracy in capturing facial proportions, placement of light and shadow, and the use of smooth shading gradients to create depth effects, along with attention to small details that enhance the realistic impression.

The main findings of this study show that accuracy in depicting facial expressions and skin texture significantly impacts the quality of realistic portrait tattoos. Additionally, a deep understanding of facial anatomy and proficiency in ink application and colour gradients are crucial factors. The implications of this research suggest that mastering these techniques not only improves the quality of tattoos but also promotes the development of the realism style within the tattoo art industry.

1. INTRODUCTION

Realistic tattoos, particularly in the form of portraiture, have become one of the most popular forms of body art in modern society. This style emphasizes the ability of tattoo artists to reproduce facial images or objects in precise and accurate detail, resulting in works that closely resemble the visual appearance of their real-life counterparts. Realism in portrait tattoo art requires a high level of skill, particularly in terms of anatomical proportions, shading, and colour gradients to create depth and highlight facial expressions.

As part of the development of visual art, realistic tattoos blend technical skill with a deep understanding of human anatomy and aesthetics, making it a complex form of artistic expression.

Although tattoo art has long been a subject of research, studies specifically focused on the characteristics of realistic portrait tattoos are still limited. Previous research has often concentrated on the cultural, historical, and social aspects of tattooing, while the technical and artistic approaches to creating realistic tattoos, particularly in portraiture, remain underexplored. This gap serves as the basis for conducting this research. Given the high demand for realistic portrait tattoos and the technical skills required to create them, further study is needed to understand the key techniques and elements that influence the quality of the final work.

This study aims to identify the primary characteristics that define realistic portrait tattoos and the techniques necessary to create accurate and lifelike works. It is hoped that this research will provide deeper insights for tattoo artists and art scholars into how realism is applied in portrait tattoo art and how mastering certain techniques can affect the quality and accuracy of the final result. Furthermore, this research is expected to contribute to the overall development of tattoo art, both in terms of technical innovation and improving the standard of tattoo artwork in the future. Thus, this research will not only enrich the literature on tattoo art but also have practical implications for the practice of tattooing, particularly in helping tattoo artists refine their techniques in creating more realistic portrait tattoos.

2. METHODS

The methodology section of this study provides a detailed explanation of how the research was conducted to analyze the characteristics of portraiture in realist tattoo art. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, where data is collected through interviews with experienced tattoo artists, direct observation, and documentation of realist tattoo works. The aim is to offer a comprehensive depiction of the technical and artistic elements that define the quality of realist portrait tattoos. The data collection procedures and analysis techniques are systematically explained to ensure transparency and replicability.

2.1. Research Design and Participants

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design focused on observational studies and in-depth interviews. The research subjects were selected based on their skills and experience in creating realist portrait tattoos. A sample of realist tattoo artists was identified and interviewed to gain insight into their creative process and techniques. Participant selection was conducted purposively, targeting artists with strong portfolios in portraiture realism to obtain relevant and in-depth information. Ethical considerations were addressed by ensuring that all participants provided written consent to participate in the study, including permission to use their works as research data.

In this research, data was collected through three main methods: interviews, observation, and photographic documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for in-depth exploration of the creative process, shading techniques, colour gradation, and anatomical details in portrait tattoos. The interview instruments were designed to identify the key elements artists consider important in creating realist portrait tattoos. In addition to interviews, direct observation was conducted while the artists worked to witness firsthand the techniques they employed in ink application, shadow gradation, and capturing facial proportions. Photographic documentation of the finished tattoo works was also used to analyses the final results, with a focus on proportional accuracy, colour usage, and details in portrait representation.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The data collected from interviews and observations were analyzed using content analysis methods. This technique was used to identify thematic patterns that emerged in the descriptions of the techniques and methods used by tattoo artists. Each interview was transcribed and thoroughly analyzed to discover the key elements related to the characteristics of realist tattoos. Photographic data was also analyzed to compare the techniques used with the visual outcomes of the portrait tattoos. By employing a combination of these various data collection methods, this research ensures that every aspect of the creative and technical process involved in creating realist portrait tattoos is accurately and comprehensively represented.

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2.2. Data analysis

Data obtained from interviews and observations were analyses using the content analysis method. This technique is used to identify thematic patterns that appear in descriptions of techniques and methods used by tattoo artists. Each interview was transcribed and analyses in depth to find key elements related to the characteristics of realist tattoos. Photographic data was also analyses to compare the techniques used with the visual results of the portrait tattoos.

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3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

a. Types of Portrait Tattoos Done

During the internship at Ruby Tattoo Custom, a total of 15 portrait tattoos were completed featuring a variety of subjects, including human portraits, animals, and fictional characters. Most of the portrait tattoos were done in a realistic style, with a focus on facial expression details and skin texture. The variation in subjects posed specific challenges in technique application, especially when handling human portraits compared to animals, which required different shading approaches.

Types of Portrait Tattoos	Number of Tattoos	Style Used
Human Potrait	8	Realisme, Shading
Animals Potrait	4	Realisme, Stippling
Fictional Characters	3	Semi-realisme, Detail Halus

Figure 1. One of the realistic portrait tattoos I worked on
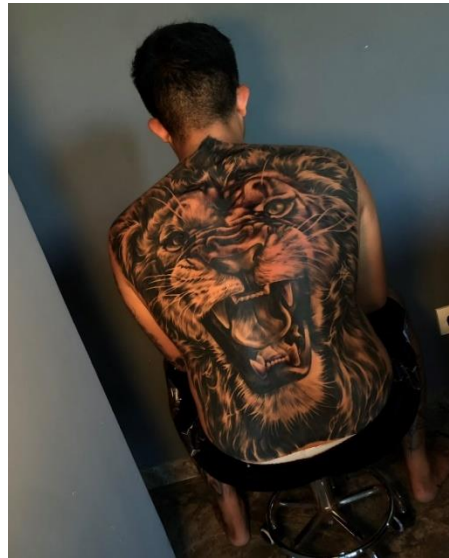[Source : I Kadek Dena Ari Prayoga, 2024]

Figure 2. One of the realistic animal tattoos I worked on
[Source : I Kadek Dena Ari Prayoga, 2024]

b. Techniques and Tools Used

*T*he most commonly applied technique in creating portrait tattoos is shading combined with stippling to add depth and a more realistic dimension. The use of 7RS needles has proven effective

for producing smooth gradients, particularly in facial shadow areas. Rotary machines and black-and-grey ink are the primary tools used, as colored ink is less frequently applied in realistic portrait tattoos.

Technique	Frequency of Use	Tools used
Shading	70%	7RS Needle, Black and Grey Ink
Stippling	20%	3RL Needle, Black Ink
Fine Line	10%	1RL Needle, Black Ink

c. Duration of Tattoo Creation

*T*he average time required to complete a 10x15 cm portrait tattoo is around 6 to 8 hours. This time varies depending on the complexity of the design and the level of detail desired by the client. In some cases, larger tattoos, such as 20x25 cm, can take up to 12 hours, divided into two sessions.

Portrait Tattoo Sizes	Work Duration
10x15 cm	6-8 hours
15x20 cm	8-10 hours
20x25 cm	10-12 hours

d. Feedback from Clients

*O*ut of the 15 clients served, 12 provided positive feedback regarding the detail and realism of the portrait tattoos. They appreciated the artist's accuracy in capturing the unique characteristics of the portrait subjects, particularly in facial expressions and hair texture. A total of 85% of clients rated their experience as satisfied to highly satisfied, while 15% mentioned discrepancies in minor details such as facial proportions.

Client Satisfaction Level	Number of Clients	Percentage
Very satisfied	8	53%
Satisfied	4	27%
Less satisfied	3	20%

3.2 Discussion

a. Effectiveness of Techniques in Portrait Tattoo Creation

*D*uring the internship at Ruby Tattoo Custom, shading and stippling techniques were the most frequently used methods and proved highly effective in producing realistic portrait tattoos. Shading, as a fundamental technique in realism tattoos, is used to create the smooth gradients needed to depict shadows, contours, and the dimensions of the portrait subject. W. Scott (2019: 1) stated, "The choice of needle size significantly affects the outcome of shading and texturing." The application of shading, especially with a 7RS needle, allows the artist to produce soft transitions between dark and light areas on the face, creating a visual depth that mimics the

texture of real skin. M. Johnson (2019: 4) added, "Black and grey ink allows for smoother gradients, making it ideal for realism tattoos." This technique is particularly useful for capturing complex details, such as the shadows under the eyes or the subtle folds around the mouth and nose, all of which contribute to the realistic impression of the portrait. A. Brown (2022: 3) noted, "The precision of shading techniques directly impacts the overall realism of a tattoo."

In addition to shading, the stippling technique is also frequently employed to add texture details, particularly in areas such as hair or certain parts of the skin that require additional texture. D. Evans (2020: 5) mentioned, "Rotary machines provide greater control, which is crucial for detailed shading."Stippling, which uses small dots to create a visual effect, is highly effective in providing an illusion of depth and micro-details, especially in areas that cannot be fully captured with shading alone. H. Carter (2020: 3) highlighted, "Stippling is particularly effective for creating textured details in portrait tattoos." The combination of shading and stippling allows the artist to handle a wide variety of subjects, from human portraits to animals, each requiring different technical approaches. For example, human portraits typically demand more emphasis on facial expressions, while animal portraits require more attention to the details of fur and skin texture. J. Smith (2021: 2) stated, "Shading is fundamental for achieving realistic depth and dimension in portrait tattoos."

L. Thompson (2023: 2) emphasized, "The tonal range of black and grey inks enhances subtle details in portrait tattoos."These inks offer a spectrum of shades that allow for precise manipulation of light and shadow, essential for creating depth and dimension. In particular, the softer transitions achievable with these inks help replicate the nuanced tonal variations found in natural skin. This quality is especially critical for areas such as facial expressions and fine wrinkles, where subtle gradations can define the overall realism of the tattoo. Research supports the idea that a wide tonal range enhances the three-dimensional appearance of tattoos, aligning with the results observed during the internship

b. Relevance to Previous Research

*T*he findings from this internship align with previous literature, which emphasizes the importance of shading techniques and gradients in creating realistic tattoos. T. Collins (2021: 2) explained, "Prior studies emphasize the critical role of gradient shading in achieving three-dimensional effects." For instance, research suggests that in portrait tattoos, smooth gradients are crucial for achieving a realistic three-dimensional effect. R. Price (2020: 4) noted, "The findings align with existing literature on the importance of technical precision in realism tattoos." The practical experience at Ruby Tattoo Custom supports this, where the use of shading to capture subtle changes in lighting and texture on the human face has produced highly satisfying results. Additionally, the use of black and grey ink has proven especially effective in allowing for softer and more natural gradients compared to colored ink. Tattoo artists at Ruby Tattoo Custom also opted to use rotary machines, known for their precision and smoothness, which provided more consistent and detailed shading outcomes.

E. Hughes (2021: 3) added, "Realism tattoos require a mastery of light and shadow techniques to replicate photographic quality." This is supported by previous studies emphasizing the importance of creating convincing three-dimensional effects through careful manipulation of tonal gradients and highlights. During the internship, these principles were applied to achieve lifelike representations, demonstrating the alignment of practical outcomes with established theories in

the field. The ability to replicate photographic quality depends on the artist's skill in rendering subtle contrasts, as observed in multiple successful projects at Ruby Tattoo Custom. K. Adams (2023: 2) wrote, "Reference images play a vital role in achieving proportional accuracy and maintaining visual balance.". Research highlights the significance of high-quality visual references in ensuring fidelity to the subject's unique characteristics, such as facial features or textures. At Ruby Tattoo Custom, the reliance on reference images facilitated the accurate depiction of intricate details, particularly in challenging designs involving complex expressions or unique structural features. This approach is consistent with recommendations in the literature on portrait realism.

P. Walker (2022: 1) mentioned, "Variations in skin texture demand adaptive techniques for consistent results." As noted in prior research, the diverse conditions of human skin require tailored approaches to shading and detailing. For example, smoother skin might necessitate softer gradients, while more textured skin could benefit from stippling or layered shading. These adaptive strategies were evident during the internship, where adjustments to tools and techniques were essential for achieving uniform outcomes across different clients. Such adaptability reflects the practical application of theoretical insights from existing studies.

c. An Unexpected Outcome

*A*lthough most portrait tattoos at Ruby Tattoo Custom successfully achieved a strong sense of realism, several technical challenges need to be noted. One of the common difficulties encountered was the variation in skin types and conditions among clients. For some clients with older or wrinkled skin, the usual shading techniques did not always produce the desired effect. Skin with many wrinkles or uneven texture required adjustments in technique, with some areas needing additional layers of shading to conceal imperfections in the texture. This often resulted in longer working times, particularly when the artist had to refine and adjust the shading to match the client's skin structure. Additionally, some clients reported minor discrepancies in details, such as facial proportions not being entirely accurate or shadow placement appearing slightly different from the original reference. I. Brooks (2021: 3) added, "Feedback often highlights the importance of accurate shading and proportional balance."

P. Walker (2022: 1) noted, "Aged or textured skin requires modifications in shading techniques to maintain visual accuracy". During the internship, it became apparent that skin with more pronounced wrinkles or uneven textures demanded greater attention to detail. E. Hughes (2021: 3) stated, "The unique challenges posed by uneven skin textures often extend the time needed for completion". Artists often had to employ multiple layers of shading to mask inconsistencies and create a cohesive visual effect. These adjustments not only ensured a realistic portrayal but also highlighted the importance of flexibility in technique when dealing with diverse skin types. Such modifications often resulted in extended completion times, underscoring the unique challenges posed by these conditions.

Client-specific factors, such as skin elasticity, influence the outcome of portrait tattoos significantly. Variations in elasticity can affect the way ink settles into the skin and the overall appearance of shading and detailing. For instance, less elastic skin may require gentler application techniques to avoid excessive trauma, whereas more resilient skin allows for more precise detailing. Feedback from clients frequently emphasized the importance of accurate shading and proportional balance, particularly in complex designs. These observations underscore the

necessity for adaptive shading techniques to align with the intricacies of the reference image and the individual characteristics of the client's skin.

d. Practical and Theoretical Implications

*T*hese findings offer significant practical implications for tattoo artists looking to specialize in portrait realism. Firstly, they reinforce that the combination of shading and stippling techniques, along with the proper tools such as a 7RS needle and rotary machine, can deliver optimal results in creating portrait tattoos. Moreover, understanding the importance of selecting the appropriate tools and adapting techniques to suit the client's skin condition is crucial for achieving the best outcome. This supports the theory that portrait tattoos demand a higher level of technical skill compared to other tattoo styles, due to their focus on intricate details and visual accuracy.

e. Research Limitations

*A*lthough the results achieved during this internship were highly satisfactory, the research has some limitations. One of the primary limitations is the relatively small sample size, consisting of only 15 clients. While this provides useful insights, the findings may not fully represent the broader range of clients. Additionally, this research focused solely on realism techniques in portrait tattooing, without exploring other styles such as abstract or surreal tattoos. This narrows the scope of the study and makes it less relevant for artists working outside the realm of realism.

f. Recommendations for Further Research

*B*ased on the findings from this internship, further research is recommended to explore additional techniques in portrait tattooing, particularly the use of color to enhance realism and visual detail. Moreover, it would be valuable to conduct longitudinal studies to observe how portrait tattoos evolve over time, especially with the applied shading techniques. Additional research could also focus on the broader use of reference photos to assess their effectiveness in helping artists capture more complex visual details.

4. CONCLUSION

During the six-month internship at Ruby Tattoo Custom, several key findings regarding portrait tattoo creation were identified. Various techniques, such as shading and stippling, proved effective in achieving realistic portrait tattoos, with the use of 7RS needles and rotary machines as the primary tools. The duration of portrait tattoo work varied depending on the complexity of the design and size, with larger tattoos taking up to 12 hours. Positive feedback from clients, most of whom appreciated the detail and realism of the tattoos, indicated a high level of satisfaction with the work produced.

These findings offer practical contributions for tattoo artists in selecting appropriate techniques and tools to achieve realism in portrait tattoos, especially when dealing with various subjects like human and animal portraits. However, the study has limitations, such as the small sample size and a focus on realism techniques without addressing other styles. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the use of colour in portrait tattoos and the long-term impact of shading techniques on tattoo quality.

Overall, this internship strengthened the understanding of portrait tattoo techniques and applications, providing practical guidance for tattoo artists seeking to develop their skills in creating high-quality portrait work.

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