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Inked Australia's resident tattoo advisor
Kian Forreal on why the buzzwords
'custom' and 'freehand' aren't really as
buzzy as people think.

MANY YEARS AGO, WHEN I STARTED GETTING TATTOOED, YOU'D HEAR TATTOO LINGO that was rather hard to grasp the full or exact meaning of at the time. 'Flash' is one of these words and it lends itself solely to tattooing in the visual arts world (obviously we're not talking photography here).

Flash is an old grafter's term for 'flashing' something at a mark to entice them into your scam. If you were pulling a caper then you might 'flash' a pile of money you borrowed from a fellow con artist to encourage someone to invest in your 'once in a lifetime' deal. With tattooing, the 'flash' is showing a decent drawing of a tattoo on paper, all rendered nicely with clear lines and bright, solid colours, and usually several designs to choose from. The scam part was the actual tattoo you would get, no doubt a piece of shit scratched on by a part-time tattooer, full-time hustler and lifelong drunk. Most old school tattooers couldn't draw for shit so they needed flash to have a tattoo business. They would trade flash sheets as they travelled with fellow hustlers and build up a nice repertoire of decent designs. This was pretty much the first 100 years of modern, western tattooing – and this scenario can still be applied to about 80-90 per cent of working tattooers around the world today, perhaps more.

A couple of the most misused and misunderstood words in contemporary tattooing are these: 'custom' and 'freehand', and if we put them together the way they are most used we get: 'custom freehand tattoo'.

What is a custom freehand tattoo? Well, in the client's mind, it's when an artist draws a sleeve design (for example) on your skin with a pen without using a stencil or reference, and gives you an amazing one-of-a-kind tattoo that is technically perfect and that no-one else has or ever will have. Apparently it is the purest form of tattoo art. It seldom works out that way.

The linguistic reality is this: custom simply means tailored to the client's taste, wants or desires. 'Made or done to order' according to the dictionary. A custom tattoo could be a design off the wall with a slight modification – that's called 'customising'. Examples of customising are a 'flash' dragon design from a book with a tail direction changed to wrap around the arm a certain way, or a koi with some initials added to the scales to denote family members. These are customisations. It can be really simple stuff or totally complex modifications. I can't remember the last time I did a tattoo that wasn't custom. Clients we get in the shop these days rarely pick stuff from the wall and keep it as is. It certainly isn't like the old days!



KIAN'S PHOTO BY TRISTAN STEFAN EDOUARD



In contemporary tattooing, 'custom' means a one-off tattoo design drawn specifically for a client, to be used only once, on them alone. All the tattoos I execute fall into this category as they do with most custom tattoo artists.

Freehand: "done without mechanical aids or devices <freehand drawing>" is a word from about 1862. So freehand drawing denotes drawing on any medium without using rulers, guides or templates. So when I am drawing a dragon, let's say, on paper, and I am on the fifth revision and about to draw out the final version with ink on paper, I am still freehanding this dragon design. I might be layering tracing paper on top of each draft to get a cleaner and more refined drawing each time but the drawing itself is a custom freehand drawing. I don't care how talented an artist is, you will always get a better design and so a better tattoo if you draw it on paper and work it up from that. And that's where a lot of people go wrong. The amateur often thinks that to be taken seriously by the client they need to draw it right on the skin, while the client watches. A few very talented master tattooers can pull off large work in this way, but not many, and even the ones that can pull it off would do a better job if they used paper first. Now, I am not talking about freehanding in flowers or backgrounds and such as I do – that kind of skin drawing is necessary to make the tattoo follow the contours of the body and is pretty straightforward. I am talking about the main motifs; large tigers, koi, dragons, hannya masks, snakes, warriors, Buddha, and the like. These images, while they can be drawn in various colours on the skin and refined to a satisfactory level, are not going to produce the best results possible from an artist's hand.

The legendary Filip Leu, who was world renowned for drawing large Japanese designs straight onto the skin, himself went back to drawing on paper first saying that it was not only more time efficient, but was a better medium for

working up a design and creating a more powerful and beautiful image.

All of my tattoos are freehanded and fall into the freehand category, as is the case with most other tattooers that take their craft seriously.

I laugh when people come in to the shop and tell me they want a freehand sleeve done with no stencil. I refuse them politely, after I stop laughing, and when I say I draw the designs on paper first they seem disappointed! Spend five minutes trawling Facebook or the 'net for all these freehand tattoo wizards and you'll see what I mean. I can draw on skin but man, you'll get a much better design working it on paper a few times over.

There is a big misconception of what it means to be able to draw. While some folks appear to have a gift that allows them to render things on paper very nicely and realistically, it does take a lot of hard work, dedication and practice, and more practice, and then more practice. It's like running long distance, being a sprinter or going to the gym and lifting weights: you may be genetically gifted but if you don't train every day you still suck like everyone else. Anyone can learn how to draw well if they spend the time and practice daily. There are no shortcuts in drawing.

So the next time you ask a tattoo artist to 'freehand' a 'custom' sleeve for you, you'll know WTF you're talking about! ☺

Kian Forreal is a professional tattoo artist with 18 years international experience who specialises in traditional Japanese tattoo work and script lettering. He has worked all over the world and has studied under some of the leading tattoo artists of today. He is based in Sydney at Inner Vision Tattoo in Surry Hills. His website is: www.kianforreal.com For information on Laser Tattoo Fading and Removal please visit www.fadeyourtattoo.com