

ACME TATTOO COMPANY INCORPORATED - Don Nolan's History
Bringing Bright Art to Arcade Street Saint Paul Since 1988

World-renowned full-time Master Tattoo Artist Don Nolan was born by ocean waves in Connecticut. Raised by his grandfather, Nolan began his lifelong appreciation for the sea, with its fluid angles, converging cornices, countless nuanced hues of blues and greens, canvas-filling winds and adaptable creatures. Nolan learned to respect and dance with the sea over decades that included four sailed circumnavigations of the globe.

Nolan was educated in a time and age in which cursive writing was taught and artwork was rendered on paper or canvas by human hands that held pen, pencil or paint brush. This rigor of professionalism and self-discipline has remained with Nolan after more than a half century of tattooing excellence.

Since 1955 Nolan has operated his tattoo shops in San Jose and Long Beach, California; Eugene, Oregon; Chicago, Illinois; Honolulu, Hawaii; Bremerton, Washington and three locations in Anchorage, Alaska before opening ACME Tattoo Company Incorporated in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1988. Nolan and his wife Tanika moved almost next door to their current location at 1045 Arcade Street in 1990. During these decades of expert, innovative tattooing, Nolan's honored clients have gladly traveled from New Zealand, England, British Columbia, Norway and other countries in successful search for the renowned combination of gentle approach to skin and soul and bushido-like code of perfection in artistic execution.

“There are painter who transform the sun to a yellow spot, but there are others who with the help of their art and their intelligence, transform a yellow spot into the sun.”

-Pablo Picasso

Painting the backdrop to his elementary school theatrical presentation was both his first commissioned work of art and an early experience with an art critic. Having been instructed to paint Jesus Christ and The Three Wise Men, Nolan put sunglasses over Christ's eyes, reasoning that “if there sunglasses back then, Christ would have worn them because the sun was pretty hot...” The school marm was not pleased with Nolan's advanced thinking as expressed with pen and brush.

Fortunately for the tugboat owner who commissioned Nolan to paint an image of her with her fleet of boats two decades later, Nolan's ability and interest could not be suppressed. Fortunate, too, for all of the motorcyclists and motorists who've had their rides airbrushed and pinstriped. Fortunate most of all have been the tens of thousands of Nolan's tattoo clients; glad of the fact that he did not give up art after a scolding by his grade school teacher.

Where would be millions of tattoo fans and their artists world-wide be if Nolan's unprecedented use of advanced line emphasis, shading gradation, color tonality integration and dedicated connection with both artistic subject matter and clients had been drowned? Nolan is an old sailor. He knows how to swim!

“Ancora imparo!”

-Michelangelo, at age 87

More than sixty years after painting that grade school play scenery, Nolan continues his creative improvement of the world touched by the tools held in his hands.

Heavily influenced by Picasso, Dali, Michelangelo and other great master artists, Nolan has both a reverence for genius and a sense of his responsibility to educate the next generation of artists, clients and acquaintances.

Of the uncounted Nolan-created oil paintings, only one hundred occupy shop space at ACME Tattoo Company. Of the innumerable Nolan-birthed tattoos, edge-to-edge they may well encircle the Earth. Fittingly then that those individuals who enter the doorway at 1045 Arcade Street, St. Paul may notice the photograph of Nolan utilizing a sextant to navigate aboard his 44 foot Nat Herrshoff-built sailboat. These visitors to ACME Tattoo Co. may also note the photos of Nolan at his easel, painting in oils. Turning then, the uninitiated may encounter a wise and curious man with gray beard and insightful eye framed by spectacles. That man would be the unassuming, but world-famous Don Nolan.

ACME Tattoo Company displays thousands of examples of tattoo flash in its waiting area, but there is only one Nolan in all of tattooing!

There are those contributions to humankind that can be seen for fifty or more years in bridges and buildings created of iron or bricks. Nolan's accomplishments continue to walk and talk and breathe over these same five decades. The lessons he has taught; the innovations he has made nearly universal, will live on. Great art has a soul that outlasts even the human heart!

Wall space is limited for all that could be displayed at ACME Tattoo Company. Vying for attention are items that include a poster of Peggi Schwartz (now Hurley), the winner of the National Tattoo Association's Best Tattooed Female competition at its 1986 convention in New Orleans. Hurley, a tattoo artist herself, bears a body-suit that is almost entirely Nolan-created.

A doorway frame supports a photo with signed dedication alongside Nolan's tattoo likeness of blues artist Greg Allman as rendered on the leg of the late New York tattoo artist Neil Grant.

A wall sports a photograph of the champion show horse on which Nolan restored lost neck pigment for the grateful owner. (While he operated a series of tattoo shops in Anchorage, Nolan tattooed an ID number on a sedated bear at the request of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. Nolan, always game for a new experience reported that the bear's particular aroma was unlike anything else he has yet inhaled!)

Another wall holds several photos taken by noted Chicago photographer Jeff Crisman of Nolan in the process of tattooing his large-scale art onto clients.

Above a mirror resides a photo of a Nolan client comparing their fully dinosaur-illustrated leg with that of a five-foot dinosaur bone at the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Nearby are a number of photographic images of Pablo Picasso, of tattoo art forefathers, and of Nolan with his good friends, master bike builder and painter Dave Perewits, and bike builder Donny Smith.

Close to his work station, Nolan has hung black and white prints of his documentation of early drag racers – a process he almost didn't survive on one occasion. Capturing the action of the events, the photos exhibit Nolan's ability to find the focal point with maximum impact. He brings this same sense of prioritization to his paintings and tattoos.

Framed in a back room is the cartoon image Nolan produced for the St. Paul Firefighters/Regions Hospital collaboration on CPR education.

Close to another ACME workstation, Peggi Hurley displays from a large poster her Nolan-created bull-body artwork as advertising for the Seventh Annual Massachusetts College of Art Benefit Auction.

Nolan, of course, has multiple photos of his beloved wife Tanika, Lucy the shop mascot, and of his cats, and of at least one green antique car...

All about are placed a panorama of Nolan's tattoos – large, medium and small – facing out from any spare space. When an artist has been as prolific as Nolan, no two dimensional square footage will ever prove adequate!

This evidenced successful contribution to the world of art follows a winding, but sure, continuum during which Nolan sailed, bike, photographed, served in the U.S. Merchant Marines, owned multiple tattoo shops, and tutored an entire community of tattoo artists regardless of their prior experience.

Nolan began tattooing in 1955. He was seventeen years old, and had befriended an existing tattoo artist in New London, Connecticut at the time. By 1970, Don Nolan had already accumulated fifteen years of tattoo expertise. He had also begun to resist the prevailing theories that the color spectrum was a finite entity, that outlines must be coarse and heavy, and that details should be kept to a minimum when tattooing images of animals. Heavily influenced by the oil painting techniques he followed, and his exposure to photos of tattoos worn by the clientele of Japanese masters such as Mr. Oguri, Nolan set out upon his own path. With this, Nolan opened his tattoo shop in Springfield, Oregon. His advertising flyer prophetically stated: "Man has continually sought ways in which to express his individuality. Perhaps the oldest form of this expression is found in the ancient art of tattooing, an art form that, when practiced by the professional, can be as beautiful and personal as one could desire."

Nolan had the good fortune to sell his last shop in Anchorage before the great earthquake ate it on his birthday. He decided to leave Alaska.

By the late 1970's Nolan traded his house in Bremerton, Washington for the 44 foot sailboat Shearwater. Wishing him well, his client and friend, tattoo matriarch, the late Elizabeth Weinzerl admonished Nolan, "Don't let those pirates fool with ya!" Stopping in ports to work as a tattoo artist; boarding planes to fly to land-bound tattoo shops as a guest artist working exclusively by appointment.

In late 1985 Nolan traded the Shearwater for a house in Madrid, New Mexico; on the oldest road in the USA, and in a beautiful, turquoise-rich mountainous area. Still, Nolan observes, "That was kind of a sad day – when I left my boat..."

Stating that "paradise wasn't the place to be all year," and finding that the tattoo scene was not strong in the area, Nolan left New Mexico in 1986. "I had been coming to the Twin Cities off and on while on my boat," said Nolan when asked why he settled in first Minneapolis, then finally in St. Paul. Nolan had a steady client base built in the state, and admitted to missing the change of seasons while living in the desert mountains.

Whether in search of clean, fresh artwork or eager to rehab old ink that has seen better days, ACME Tattoo Company is the venue on Arcade Street; an old route rich in history and ripe with the lives of the working people who built St. Paul.

With a gentle approach that equally sets first-timers at ease and welcomes old friends, Nolan possesses a self-assuredness earned through five decades of excellence. Despite the magnitude of his contributions, Nolan is devoid of arrogant attitude and free of fawning sycophants. Putting in full-time hours, Nolan quietly rolls ink into skin with a mastery that none other can claim.

As he is fond of saying, Nolan continues to learn his craft each day, guided by a steady flood of ideas, and a trained artist's understanding of cooperating tonal values and contrasting color combinations. Beyond this, Nolan simply will not apply a bad tattoo or rush the application of his warm art. Professional ethics and high personal principles have served Nolan well when much of the world opts for short-term convenience over long-term satisfaction!

From maple leaves to mermaids, dolphins to dinosaurs, waves to wounded veteran homages, sea serpents to sunsets, koi to copperheads, birch trees to birthdates written in well-schooled cursive script, eagles to the electric sky sparks known as lightning, flames licking from tailpipes to fawns licking from mountain streams, tigers in attack to turtles on a stroll by the tide, trains to extraterrestrials, octopi to osprey, Christ to chrysanthemums, and cherry blossoms to checker boards, Nolan and his artists at ACME Tattoo Company can accommodate most client requests.

Dreams reached for become reality! Desires met with successful commitment transformed to action leave a mark upon the soul deeper than any inked image! It is in this way that Don Nolan and ACME Tattoo Company, Incorporated contribute to a brighter future for a world beyond their walls and across all waves!