

**Metro**



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# Dragon Tattoo

The life and legacy of tattoo legend Pinky Yun's San Jose shop

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# House of the Dragon

*The extraordinary influence of tattoo artist Pinky Yun commemorated in new book*

BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE

**V**EHICLES BLAZE DOWN San Carlos Street in both directions near San Jose's midtown. The commotion easily overpowers the whisper of footsteps from the occasional pedestrian, only heard during the serene relief of a red light.

Just west of Willard Avenue, next to a used car lot, lies a long white building capped with a blue roof. Large banners and luminescent signs hang above the building's vast windows, announcing salons and a piñata store to passersby.

From 1981 to 2009, another sign accompanied these, now no longer there: Dragon Tattoo. Dragon was home to the late tattooist Bing Kuan "Pinky" Yun, a true legend in the industry. The walls of 1520 W San Carlos were once completely covered with tattoo designs—"flash"—his clients could choose from. That very same art has influenced a generation of tattoo artists and is the subject of a new book produced by another San Jose tattoo powerhouse.

Takahiro "Ryudaibori" Kitamura—known simply as "Taki" to most—is owner of Japantown's State of Grace tattoo shop and the principal author of *Tattoo Master Pinky Yun: The Don Ed Hardy Flash*

*Collection*, out now via Scorpion Front Publishing. In it, he writes, "In the late '90s, Pinky ran San Jose. He paved the way for larger style tattooing in San Jose and especially Asian style and imagery."

"Everyone I knew had tattoos from him," Kitamura tells *Metro*. "Maybe the first five years of my career was a lot of either finishing Pinky tattoos, tattooing next to existing Pinky tattoos, or putting background around a Pinky tattoo."

In November 2003, San Jose's now defunct *The Wave Magazine* called Yun "the most famous Bay Area artist you've never heard of."

Nearly 20 years later, that statement still rings true.

## TIGER KING

Kitamura's book has been a long time coming. In 1988, Don Ed Hardy, perhaps the most famous modern-day tattooist and San Francisco local, published a book titled *Dragon Tattoo Design*. The book contained drawings of dragon designs from over a dozen tattoo artists, including the world famous artists Sailor Jerry Collins, Horiyoshi II and Horiyoshi III. Yun also contributed.

At the time, the tattoo industry was still guarded and insular. In order to obtain tattoo equipment, the manufacturers required a referral from an artist already in their database.



Photos by John Agracoli

“So, at the time, Ed putting this book out was amazing,” Kitamura says. “Originally, there was supposed to be a *Tiger Tattoo Design*, too.”

Amid discussions for that book, Yun had given Hardy a trove of flash designs. Unfortunately, the book never came to fruition. Hardy, an avid publisher of tattoo content, always intended to release those designs. But it didn’t get any easier as he aged.

“I remember Ed for years, almost nagging himself, especially after Pinky passed, ‘Oh God, I got to do that book,’” Kitamura says. “There was a sense of regret.”

Finally, at one fateful lunch in San Francisco’s North Beach, Hardy asked Kitamura to do it. He gladly accepted.

“Ed wanted to make this book while Pinky could see it and I wanted to make it while Ed could see it. So there was a sense of urgency.”

## RAW POWER

Kitamura says he’s always been drawn to the “raw power” in Yun’s style of tattooing. That power is on full display in *Tattoo Master Pinky Yun*. It contains hundreds of drawings of dragons, eagles, tigers, panthers, horses, koi fish, soldiers, figures from folklore and so much more. Each drawing is done with a level of exquisite detail and emotion rarely seen in the American style of tattooing during that same era.

In addition to Yun’s powerful art, the book also shares some of the author’s personal experiences with the artist.

“I see volumes of his work published, but little writing by people who actually knew him and hope to add a little of the human side to this historic artwork,” he writes in the book’s foreword. “I think the current times would also welcome Pinky Yun not only as a legend of tattooing but also as a shining example of the immigrant experience. Moved to this country, worked hard, and left a legacy. Pinky Yun is the American story.”

Cash Legacy, owner of Legacy Tattoo on the Alameda—also known

**DRAGON’S LAIR** *In the new art book ‘Tattoo Master Pinky Yun,’ Yun’s Dragon Tattoo studio becomes a work of art itself.*

as Armando “Mondo” Cardenas—says he was 15 years old when he walked into Dragon Tattoo and asked for a big dragon across his entire arm. “[Pinky] whips out a toothpick, and he starts dipping it in ink, almost like a pen, and he starts sketching on me,” he says. He wasn’t expecting a freehand, or how big the artist’s vision would be. “He starts doing it around my arm, and it’s just a big-ass

dragon. The tail ended by my wrist,” he says. He ended up talking Yun down to just a dragon head.

Many of Yun’s massive pieces could be found in photographs that adorned Dragon Tattoo’s walls. In them, his clients flaunted freshly etched tattoos across their arms, back, legs and torsos. Kitamura writes that Yun kept binders to store the overflow of these client pictures. He argues those binders “certainly qualify not just as Pinky Yun history, but that of tattooing and the city of San Jose.”

“As much as Pinky’s dragons are legendary, he was really the tiger guy,” Kitamura says. Kitamura himself sports a crawling tiger from Yun on his shin. Yun simply dipped a toothpick in ink, placed 5 dots in a line, and started tattooing with no stencil. It’s a simple design that Kitamura writes in that book “has become a staple in tattoo culture” and one he wears proudly.

Not only did Yun freehand his tattoos, he was ambidextrous. Kitamura shares a tale in a book of Yun walking into a room full of other tattoo artists unfamiliar with his work. He placed a long sheet of paper on the wall, equipped both hands with a pen and began to draw two dragons simultaneously, one with each hand.

However, attempts to find any witnesses to this event by *Metro* failed. Some claimed it was a dragon and a tiger, not two dragons. Others said that Ed Hardy recounts it in his memoir, *Wear Your Dreams*. Unfortunately, it’s not there. But what’s a legend without a little bit of myth?

Regardless, there is no doubt that Yun could indeed draw with both hands. In what may have been his last interview, Yun told Kitamura and San Francisco tattoo artist Jill “Horiyuki” Mandelbaum in the summer of 2009 that he tattooed with his right hand yet drew with his left. Several tattooists told *Metro* independently from each other that they had seen Pinky tattoo with both hands, almost seamlessly switching between the two should the angle of the design and subject call for it.

## PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Yun was born in 1927 in Canton, China. He picked up tattooing around the age of 15 or 16 in Shanghai. Shortly after World War II, in 1949, he relocated to Hong Kong and began tattooing foreign sailors. In his memoir, Hardy says that Yun “ruled over an empire at his shop above the Neptune Bar in Wan Chai, the Sailortown of Hong Kong.”

“Downstairs, [the bar] had a lot of business,” Pinky told Kitamura and Mandelbaum in their book *Tattoo Artist: a Collection of Narratives*. “They closed at two o’clock. The Navy would drink and then they would come upstairs through the back door. In those times, it was non-stop. From when the ship would come in until it was leaving.”

In 1988, in his publication *Tattootime*, Hardy claimed that Yun’s Hong Kong shop “evolved into a large operation with a squad of tattooers offering cheap tattoos at breakneck speed to masses of servicemen and merchant seamen funneling through the Wan Chai nightlife district. [Yun’s] distinctive style has substantially influenced world tattooing. Artists in other seaport cities would copy his graceful drawings from the arms of passing sailors.”

During the 1950s and ’60s, Yun bounced between home base in Hong Kong and other regions in Asia. During the Korean War, he opened a shop in Yokosuka, Japan, near another United States naval base. After the war, he returned to Hong Kong. Later he opened shops in Macau and Taiwan, always with his family running things back in Hong Kong. However, speaking of Macau and Taiwan, Yun is quoted in the 1988 *Tattootime* article saying that “business was not too good in these places.”

By the time the 1970s rolled around, Yun decided to try his craft in the country that brought him so many of his clients. Of course, he chose a city with a nearby naval base: Alameda, California. There he continued to tattoo servicemen and



**FLASH PLAYER** The walls of Dragon Tattoo, coated in flash designs and photos of recently tattooed clients.

tattoo enthusiasts alike. It was here where he met Hardy. Yun designed both a dragon and a tiger, his signature subjects, and asked Hardy to tattoo them on his forearms. Hardy obliged in his shop in San Francisco.

In 1981, after nine years in Alameda, Yun moved shop to the South Bay.

## PERMANENT INK

John Bullock—colloquially known as “Tattoo John”—opened San Jose Tattoo on San Carlos street in 1978. It’s currently the longest running tattoo shop in San Jose.

“When I first opened, there were five other shops,” Bullock says. “Then after I was here for two years, it was just me. Pinky was one of the first people to come down and be competition.”

Bullock remembers driving down

San Carlos to his own shop and passing a store where he used to buy motorcycle parts. The windows and signage were covered in newspapers to obscure the new business. Bullock prayed a new tattoo shop wasn’t going to open down the street from his own. Mere days later, he passed again and saw someone on a ladder removing the newspaper. When he caught a glimpse of tattoo flash inside, he veered around the block to get a second look. That’s when he saw it was Pinky Yun.

Having been tattooed by Yun in Alameda and knowing the quality of his work, rather than worry, Bullock was delighted.

“You get so many people that come and go. In this neighborhood it’s been tattoo shops and tattoo shops and tattoo shops, but I’m always here,” he says.

Despite his delight, there remained some gentlemanly competition.



Bullock soon heard from clients that Yun had promised he'd always charge five dollars less than Bullock. At the time, the average flash tattoo was priced at 20 dollars.

"It was always competitive but not in a bad way," Bullock says, noting that he and Yun happily shared San Jose's tattoo clientele for years.

Ask nearly any other longtime San Jose tattooer and they'll tell you how influential Pinky was for them. Those who knew him all have interesting stories.

Scotty Weeks opened the Cambrian neighborhood's Marks of Art Tattoo in 1994. According to him, and many others, Yun was always generous. Weeks once attended a lunch with him and several other artists. They were determined to ensure that Yun wouldn't pay the bill.

"It was a rumored thing that Pinky would always flip the bill," says Weeks. "When we came into the restaurant,

people were walking with him. He sat down, he didn't get up to go to the bathroom, nothing. Time for the bill, Pinky had already taken care of it."

By the time he moved to the United States, Yun had an established relationship with another tattoo legend, Norman "Sailor Jerry" Collins in Honolulu, Hawaii. While the two never met in person, they consistently exchanged designs, tips and techniques. Collins did the same with many tattoo artists from around the world. The book *Sailor Jerry Collins: American Tattoo Master* contains dozens of these letters. In the winter of 1972, Yun sent Collins several designs of full back tattoos. Collins had intentions of getting one of them on his own back, but died of a heart attack in the summer of 1973. Two of the potential designs are included in Kitamura's book.

Many of Collins' designs have gone down in history, but perhaps

none as much as the classic pinup girl. However, according to Hardy, a protege of Collins, "most of Jerry's signature pinups from the beginning of the sixties were slightly transformed Pinky originals."

Yun's most famous pinup design is commonly referred to as "Suzie Wong." In the 2009 interview, he told Kitamura he had based the design from a photo taken in the Neptune Bar below his shop, of the actress Nancy Kwan, lead in the 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong*.

While Yun's artistic influence undoubtedly has a global reach, for him, tattooing was more like a family affair. Kitamura writes of Yun's wife, who helped run the logistics of the Dragon Tattoo, collecting money from clients and often bandaging them up after their appointments. Many aspiring artists wanted to learn the craft from Yun. He never took on any apprentices outside of his family.

Many of those interviewed for this story recalled his nephews Eddie and David learning in the shop from him. Often, Yun would tattoo the outline, and then one of them would apply the shading. Eddie and David both went on to open their own shops: David's Tattoo, also on San Carlos Street in San Jose, and Eddie's Skinworks, on El Camino in Santa Clara. Neither are operating today. At least three of Yun's five children became tattooists, as well. Those family members *Metro* was able to contact declined an opportunity to interview, requesting privacy.

## DRAGON STYLE

*Tattoo Master Pinky Yun* also contains many never before published photographs of Dragon Tattoo. San Jose photographer John Agcaoili shot the majority of them, some of which appear in this story. Kitamura approached him in 2009 asking for help documenting Yun's shop.

"I pretty much just tagged along with Taki on this project not knowing where it was going to go," he says.

Having never met Yun and only being vaguely familiar with his reputation, Agcaoili didn't know what to expect.

"It was like being transported in time," he says. "I was told his shop was pretty much how it was when he first moved into that space. It was almost like a mini museum."

The images Agcaoili captured beautifully portray that sentiment. Oversized sheets of paper with hundreds of flash designs accompanied by dozens of client photos leave hardly any bare space on the walls.

Later that same year, Yun finally retired. Rather than preserving the shop's flash, he and his family opted to throw it in the dumpster behind the building. Several San Jose tattooists subsequently went diving, trying to salvage as much of it as they could. Bullock of San Jose Tattoo reports having purchased a large collection of Yun flash from his wife after his death. Some of the rescued designs can be seen on display at Current Tattooing on Race Street and Black Suit Tattoo downtown. Much more is likely in the storage of other 408 tattooists.

In his contribution to the book, Taiwanese tattoo artist Jimmy Shy argues that Yun is "the pioneer and godfather of the Asian sailor-tattoo style." This newly published collection surely cements that reputation and Yun's place in both San Jose and tattoo history.

Yun passed away in December of 2010, just over a year after shuttering the shop. He tattooed for 65 of his 83 years, opting to spend the final 28 on San Jose's San Carlos Street.

The building and all its shops now sit completely vacant with several windows boarded up. Rubble covers the floor of what once was Dragon Tattoo. One window displays a large poster notifying the neighborhood of plans the building's new owner, Studio Current, has to replace it and the building next door with a mixed use apartment and commercial building.

"I wish I could have taken over the lease and kept the shop just as it was, like a piece of installation art," Kitamura writes. "The whole thing should be sitting in the Smithsonian with a placard: American Street Shop." 