

Metro

CAMBRIAN INK

THIRTY YEARS IN THE SKIN GAME WITH SCOTTY WEEKS

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INKED IN FLESH

*Marks of Art Tattoo celebrates 30 years
of body art* BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE

Greg Ramer

OLD SKOOL Artwork by Sailor Jerry can be found on the walls at Marks of Art.

GREEN LAWNS and pruned trees stand in front of single-family homes on either side of Union Avenue, the heart of the partly unincorporated neighborhood of Cambrian Park. The homes sprawl for blocks in all directions with schools, restaurants, strip malls and parks scattered among them. Surrounded by Los Gatos, Campbell and San Jose's Willow Glen and Almaden neighborhoods, it is the stereotypical California suburb.

In 1994, a tattoo shop was the last thing residents would have expected to open there, let alone be successful.

But Scotty Weeks did exactly that when he opened Marks of Art Tattoo.

"I was the first shop that I can remember that branched off of West San Carlos, El Camino and downtown," Weeks recalls. "I didn't have seedy neighbors or anything like that. I was next door to a Baskin-Robbins!"

Weeks remembers his residential neighbors expressing shock that a tattoo shop was in such close proximity. Since that opening, tens of thousands of customers have been tattooed at what has become the second longest operating tattoo shop in San Jose.

I first met Weeks in reporting another Metro feature on San Jose tattoo legend Pinky Yun. In the course of researching that piece, and another about Japantown's State of Grace, I learned many previously

undocumented stories. So I decided to focus on writing about South Bay tattooing. To lay my foundation, I launched a podcast, *Tattoo 408*.

Weeks was my first interview for the podcast but the second one that actually aired. Through it and many other conversations, Marks of Art's legacy became clear. Additionally, I learned that the only Garden City tattoo shop with a longer lifespan—San Jose Tattoo on West San Carlos—played a critical role in Marks of Art's success.

SCOTTY'S STORY

Weeks was only 16 years old when tattooing first caught his eye. Always more concerned with art, cars and psychedelic drugs than his studies

at New Valley Continuation High School in Santa Clara, he related to the imagery of tattoo art and the outsider status it conferred in those days.

"It was the bad boy thing," Weeks said in our interview. "Not everyone had tattoos back then, except for bikers, servicemen, troublemakers, things like that."

He started out by dipping a single needle in ink and manually inserting it into his friends' skin—colloquially known as "stick and poke." Soon, he learned how to make a homemade tattoo machine and, according to Weeks, all his friends began asking for tattoos.

"All of a sudden my mom started getting phone calls from parents," Weeks told *Tattoo 408*. "I was told to stop, but I didn't listen to anybody."



Later, a friend of Weeks' obtained a tattoo kit from tattoo supply company Spaulding and Rogers, a difficult feat in the 1980s without the referral of an established tattooist. However, despite the upgrade, the quality of body art wasn't up to par. So, at the age of 17, Weeks sought out "Tattoo" John Bullock of San Jose Tattoo, one of the only shops in San Jose at the time.

Initially, Bullock wasn't interested in sharing the techniques of his craft, a common sentiment among tattooers even today. But after weeks of silently watching as Bullock worked, Bullock finally caved and agreed to teach under two conditions: no questions during business hours—and no asking the same question twice.

"If I had questions about anything,

I'd go down there, wait until the end of the night or early morning, tell him what my issue was—and he'd show me," Weeks recalls. "John was the only one that was willing to show me anything."

Bullock saw potential in Weeks' drive and enthusiasm. "He went and took an airbrush course at an art supply place that used to be down the street and did some really nice airbrush stuff," he told me in his *Tattoo 408* interview. "So he made moves in that direction."

For the next 12 years, Weeks would tattoo independently while also maintaining a day job. He worked from his own home but also frequently participated in events across California and beyond. In a June 1993 issue of the *Chico Enterprise-*

Record, his name stands apart from all other artists slated to attend the "third annual Tattoo Collectors Extravaganza." Their names were all followed by their shop affiliation, while Weeks is simply listed as "Scotty Weeks of Santa Clara."

That would all change just one year later.

THE PLUNGE

When Weeks got let go from his day job in 1992, he used a huge chunk of his severance to pay his rent for the next ten months. Relieved of that financial burden and armed with his remaining severance, he could finally try tattooing full time.

He continued tattooing from home while also working a couple

days a week at Tattoos R Us on West San Carlos. Dissatisfied with the experience, Weeks realized he needed to open his own shop. Scouring the streets of Santa Clara and San Jose, he found a small place with reasonable rent near the corner of Union and Foxworthy Avenues. After Weeks smoothed over the landlord's concerns about having a tattoo shop for a tenant, Marks of Art officially opened.

"The first month was kind of scarce," Weeks says. "But the second month started picking up."

In August of 1994, the *San Jose Mercury News* wrote about Marks of Art, noting that the store had served 125 customers in its first two months.

That article and a segment of the popular KSJO talk show *Lamont &*



Greg Ranar

BODY WORK Since leaving his day job in 1992, Scotty Weeks has made a living adorning his clients.

Tonelli broadcast live from Marks of Art itself helped take the clientele from scarce to constant, often crowding the building until the early morning hours.

"After those two things at the beginning of me being open, business never stopped," Weeks says. "It was almost like it was being handed out to me."

"I was always busy at Marks of Art," says Robert Klem, one of the studio's first tattooists. "It was a solid street shop, open late, and slammed on the weekends."

The word soon spread beyond the 408 as well. Without the Instagram algorithm, tattoo magazines were key in establishing a reputation as both a shop and a tattooist.

"We'd send in ten, 20 photographs apiece," Weeks recalls. "They put two out of the 20 photos in the magazine, but you got two more pictures by Klem and three more pictures by

[another artist]. There'd be six photos from Marks of Art alone."

Soon artists from around the country were calling the shop asking for guest spots. Weeks was willing and asked them to mail printed photos of their tattoos. After assessing the quality of their work, Weeks accepted a lot of them. Some of those guests turned into resident artists.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Lesley Mullins was first tattooed at Marks of Art 20 years ago. Shortly thereafter, she was offered a part-time job to help around at the shop two nights a week while attending beauty school. Though she left after graduating, she kept up her involvement in San Jose's tattoo scene. She was thrilled when her current job of Marks of Art shop manager—the position that keeps the shop running smoothly behind

the scenes—opened up in May 2022.

"It was calling me," she says. "I've known different people through the years that have worked here. I just love the community."

A sucker for any aspect of San Jose's cultural history, she'll readily brag to anyone willing to listen about Marks of Arts' tenure and legacy.

"There's so many people that come in," she says. "Whether they're getting tattooed themselves or they're bringing their friend or their kid, who say they got their first tattoo here 20 years ago."

Albert Flores has been tattooing at Marks of Art for the last three years of his 17-year career. He has always admired the quality of tattoos from Marks of Art since the beginning of his career. Recently, he discovered a list written by Weeks in preparation for the 30th anniversary party containing names of all the tattooers who had worked at Marks of Art.

"I was amazed at how many good

tattooers had been through here," he said. "To be in that lineup next to these guys was fucking amazing. It's San Jose history."

Some of the artists on the list cut their teeth at Marks of Art and left to open their own shops. Klem moved to Santa Cruz after leaving Marks of Art and eventually opened O'Reilly's Tattoo Parlour, which became one of the most popular and reputable shops in the coastal town. Taki Kitamura opened the internationally recognized State of Grace in San Jose's Japantown. And well-known neo-traditional tattooist and tattoo machine builder Thad Ritchey went on to open California Electric Tattoo in Santa Cruz.

Rob Vincent, a tattooist for almost 18 years, became aware of Marks of Art near the beginning of his career because of Ritchey. "I paid attention to what Thad was up to. He's a great artist."

LEAVING A MARK

If you asked Weeks in 1994 if he thought that shop would still be in business in 2024, he likely would have laughed. Reaching a 30-year anniversary for any locally owned business is an accomplishment, especially in tattooing. Bullock's San Jose Tattoo is the only shop in the South Bay that has been operating longer.

"I've worked in a bunch of shops that have shut down," says Vincent, who has now spent over half his career at Marks of Art. "Thirty years of business is amazing. Thirty years of being in one spot—you picked one spot in the middle of a neighborhood that's hard to find, and you're still doing it? It's quite a statement."

It's hard to imagine him simply as "Scotty Weeks of Santa Clara" now. Marks of Art is inextricably linked to his name and, by extension, San Jose tattoo history.

"I think Marks of Art has been in business this long for one reason and one reason only: because it has been run by Scotty," Vincent says, describing Weeks as "a consistent, kind, caring and fantastic person to work for. I learned a lot working there and have very fond memories of my time spent there. I am forever grateful for Marks of Art and Scotty Weeks." 