

Chris Garver

Miami Ink Tattooist goes all Hollywood on Your Ass.

by [jasonsweet*](#) 🍷

July 30, 2005



Chris Garver is the owner of True Tattoo in Hollywood, California. He has been tattooing for 16 years. In that time he has worked for many colorful tattoo artists across the globe including such characters as Jonathan Shaw of Fun City Tattoo in New York City and Lou Sciberras of Tattoos by Lou in Miami, Fl. He finds himself heavily influenced by Los Angeles artists Jack Rudy and Mark Mahoney, but has traveled to Japan to work and study the proper way to draw Japanese tattoos. His versatility as a tattoo artist shows in his ability to execute a small rose or a complete Japanese style back piece, black and gray, color, traditional, fine line, you name it, Chris Garver can do it.

Jason Sweet: Tell me a little history about yourself as an artist.

Chris Garver: My Mom was an artist, she always would help figure out to draw things. She would give me art supplies for Christmas or my birthday. She really pushed me to be artistic because I was the only one of her kids that had any art ability.

What kind of artist was she?

Painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking.



Are you a self taught artist or do you have formal art training?

I am pretty much self taught. I went to arts high school where we had three hours of art class every day. I found that to be very helpful. I then went to a college of visual arts for about six months where I encountered a really good painting teacher by the name of Bert Hason, but I believe he has since died.

Why did you quit art school?

It was not what I really expected, I was not going to art school to get a degree. It was about trying to be a fine artist in the gallery scene and I was not into that kind of artwork. I was more interested in learning technique, but they were not teaching that there. They taught me a lot about how to bullshit about what your art means, which can be helpful, but that is not what I was there to learn.

How did you decided to become a tattoo artist?

I got my first tattoo and I decided right after that I wanted to try it. I was really into the imagery. I came up through punk rock and skateboarding and I was always drawing skulls all day long in school. Punk rock and skateboarding are really related to tattoo imagery in a way, it has to be graphic, it has to be bold and I really connected with that kind of stuff. So when I got tattooed, it was a natural progression for me to get into tattooing.

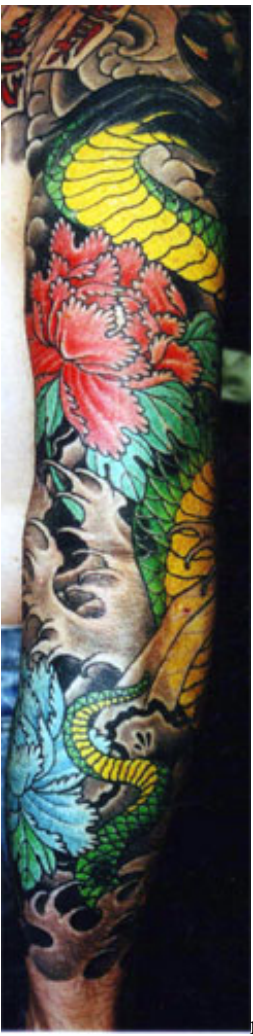


Did you serve an apprenticeship?

I apprenticed under Bud and Nancy Conte in Pittsburgh, PA. They were cool, they had a lot of work from Jack Rudy and Mark Mahoney and I broke in doing a lot of single needle and black and gray tattoos. That was a very valuable learning experience because I still do a lot of that kind of work.

After your apprenticeship, where did you go?

I moved to New York to work for the world famous Jonathan Shaw at Fun City Tattoo. I arrived there



right after Filip Leu had left.

Big shoes to fill!

Well, I was not exactly filling his shoes. Jonathan had opened Fun City as a street shop when tattooing was illegal in New York City and I worked there for two and a half years. I learned a lot about the business. Jonathan exposed me to traveling all over the world to tattoo conventions. He was really into promoting himself and us. He was the editor of International Tattoo Art magazine at the time and that really helped to promote me as an artist.

How was it tattooing in New York City while it was illegal?

The customer would have to call from a payphone on the corner and we would have to send a helper to go meet them. Then one day some cops came in and were looking around and I was getting really nervous. I asked them if they needed anything and they were like, "yeah, how much for that Jesus head?" So after that we just opened up to see what would happen and nothing happened. We were the first storefront tattoo shop in New York City at that time.

That sound like an exciting environment to work in.

I sometimes miss tattooing being illegal because it kept some of the desirable elements out of tattooing.

Tell me what you mean by desirable?

Well, since it was illegal, you were not going to get your dentist coming to get tattooed. It was more neighborhood tough guys, punks and squatters getting tattooed. There was more of an outlaw element. I

just had a tattoo consultation with a psychiatrist [before the interview], that probably would have never happened back then.

Where did you move to after New York?

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I moved to Florida and worked for Lou Sciberras of Tattoos by Lou. That was another wild experience. I worked there for two years then I went back to New York to work for New York Adorned, which was a great experience because everyone there was an awesome artist. Everyone there was better than me, so it really drove me to work hard and be a great artist too. After tattooing at New York Adorned for a couple of years, I was offered a position at Three Tides Tattoo in Osaka, Japan.

How was Japan?

I learned a lot about the Japanese style tattooing and how to make it look correct and not some American guy trying to copy Japanese tattooing. Being in Japan and experiencing their culture and seeing their temples really inspired me. I fell in love with Japan, it was beautiful. I also got to work with Chris Trevino and some amazing Japanese tattoo artists as well.

Do you feel that you gained a greater understanding of how to execute Japanese tattoo designs?

Yes. It helped me to make Japanese style tattoos authentic because you see Japanese tattoos all the time, where as here all you see are American's interpretation of Japanese tattoos.

Now there are a lot of Japanese tattoo artists imitating traditional American tattooing.

I just tattooed some Japanese tattoo artists that tattoo American traditional tattoo in Japan and they asked me to do some Japanese style tattoos on them.

Americans are getting Kanji (Japanese letters) tattooed on them, but do Japanese get English tattooed on them?

Yes and I made sure to steer them away from getting weird sayings, I tried to make sure it all made sense. They never get Kanji though. The only Kanji I tattooed when I was there was on an American tourist.

Where did you go from Japan?

My girlfriend was from Los Angeles and she moved from New York back to LA while I was in Japan. I moved out here to be with her and I got a job right off the bat with Mark Mahoney and Shamrock Social Club. I went from admiring Mark's work at the beginning of my career to actually working with him. I learned a lot about lettering from Mark. It's hard to explain but Mark Mahoney does a lot of subtle things that you would never think of on your own.

Are there any other tattoo artists that stick out in your mind who really inspire you as an artist?



I am really inspired by tattooing as an art form unto itself. One of the first tattoo artists that really motivated me a lot was Greg Irons. I really studied his tattooing a lot. Then I saw Jack Rudy and Filip Leu and I was totally blown away. As I started to do more conventions, I would meet more artists and that was inspiring as well. I met Mick from Zurich and he was another one to blow me away.

Do you feel like after all this tattooing and seeing all these tattoo artists as inspiration, that you have a Chris Garver Style?

Yes, I think I am finally there.

So if you were at a Hollywood cocktail part and some dentist came up to you and asked you to describe your style, how would you answer?

I would say, "Give me \$500.00 and I will show you."

How do you strive for a unique tattoo?

I don't. I try to give the customer what they are looking for. I think that as long as you just do your thing as an artist, your style will emerge, just as long as you aren't biting someone else's style.

It seems as if there are a lot of tattoo artists whose tattoos look like one another, almost as if they are striving for mediocrity.

I think you can just try to do your best. If there were a lot of people out there trying to reinvent the wheel, then there would be a lot of people spinning their wheels.

I think that being original can be overrated.

What other types of art do you do?

I paint and I do flash. I have not done flash in a while though. Flash is a lot of work. Painting is a lot of fun, I do not have to sell my paintings for money and I can do it in my leisure time, it is not a commercial venture. Flash can be uninspiring because you have to draw regular stuff that people would want tattooed or no one will pick it.

So now to fast forward to today, you own your own shop?

Yes, I own True Tattoo in Hollywood with Clay Decker.

How is it being a shop owner?

It's tough. I am traveling a lot and I am also the manager and bookkeeper, I am only here half the time.

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Where are you the rest of the time?

I am in South Beach in Miami, Florida, making a television show.

Tell us about the show.

I am actually tattooing on the television show. It's a show called Miami Ink, and it's on Tuesday nights on TLC.

Would you consider this a reality show?

No, it's like a documentary. I think it's close to what the motorcycle building shows are.

They really follow you through the tattoo process!

Sort of, but no one will learn to tattoo watching the show. I tend to throw out a lot of misinformation. If they film me doing anything technical, I do it wrong to throw people off.

How is it being a "to-be" television star?

It's great because I am working with a bunch of people that I worked with at Lou's 10 years ago. We have remained friends over the years. It is little difficult to tattoo with no music. There is no



"action" or "cut," it's pretty fun.

How do people contact you for a tattoo?

I am not taking any appointments until August when the show is done filming, but they can call me then.

Are you booked pretty far in advance?

No, I take people on a first come first serve basis. I do not schedule people too far in advance.

As a final question.....Since you have worked for some very interesting people over the years, tell me a funny story about working for one of those people?

CG: Lou had a really big dick piercing and these drunk girls with really big tits came walking in and Lou was like, "Let's see your tits honey."

They responded, "Well let's see your dick first."

So Lou pulls his dick out and shoves a pencil all the way through it and they start freaking out, yelling and screaming, then hey show their tits. So about an hour later, this guest artist we had from out of town was drawing up a tattoo design with the same pencil Lou put through his dick. Everybody is kind of laughing to themselves and suddenly the artist put the pencil in his mouth. Everybody was laughing so

hard, but nobody ever told him.

Thank you for the interview.

You are welcome, and if anyone wants a tattoo from me, they can call me in August at True Tattoo in Hollywood, California, (323) 462-4745, or on the net at www.truetattoo.net.