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Inked Australia's resident tattoo advisor Kian Forreal on changing trends

WHEN IT COMES TO TRENDS and popular tattoo movements you might find it hard to believe that 10 years ago you couldn't give a koi fish tattoo away to most people. Today it is one of the most sought after designs for a lot of people's first large tattoo, whether it's a girl or boy, sleeve or leg piece, colour or black and grey... the ubiquitous koi is the number one contender. And fair enough, if executed correctly it's a great symbol of courage and perseverance. I love doing koi tattoos and never get tired of finding new ways to make it interesting and I encourage anyone who has their heart set on this image to follow through and get this great fish tattooed on them. That said, for other people who enjoy the Japanese style and are seeking out something special for their tattoo don't overlook the plethora of other equally meaningful symbolic creatures, characters and mythologies that Japanese tattooing has to offer.

The dragon would be the first one to come to mind for obvious reasons, its strength, fierceness, wisdom, spirit and mystery are but few of the reasons people are drawn to this image and choose to have it tattooed into their skin. The dragon is the quintessential Japanese tattoo and has been for as long as I can remember and have been part of tattooing, with the magnificent Tora (tiger) in its many strong poses and the Hou-ou (phoenix) with its a colourful tail feathers coming in at a close second and third.

And yet there are many more similarly strong, wise, mischievous and mysterious creatures that often get overlooked when researching a powerful symbol for ones body. For instance there is the Kirin, a mythical horse with the scales of a dragon that is said to bring prosperity and righteousness. Shi-Shi or Foo Dog, the Lion Dog is the protector of temples, shrines and homes in the Shinto tradition and are usually seen in pairs, their purpose is to ward off evil spirits and protect good and helpful spirits, they are often seen with Peony flowers. The Kappa is a river dwelling mischievous creature that sometimes kidnaps and eats children along the riverbank among other nefarious things, throwing cucumbers in the river is one way to keep them at bay as this is their favorite food, even more so than children.

Fujin & Raijin are the respective Shinto storm gods revered all over Japan, conjuring lightning, thunder and wind by beating Raijin's drums and Fujin releasing the storm from his giant windbag that he carries over his back, they look like evil demons and are said to be the oldest Shinto gods who were present at the creation of the world. Oni is a generic term for any type of demon, humanoid or otherwise, they make a great tattoo for those with a darkside and are often seen carrying weapons and either fighting humans or tormenting them. Baku is a dream devouring creature of Chinese origin that is said to protect from nightmares, pestilence and evil, a great protection tattoo.

Kitsune or Nine-tailed Fox can be a trickster creature, the more tails they have the wiser and older they are, they are also said to be able to shape-shift into human form and meddle in human affairs. Jinki is a turtle with ears that is said to be a messenger of the gods and is regarded as one of the four mysterious spiritual beasts, Tengu are forest goblins that practice martial arts and sorcery and can shape-shift into human and animal form, they often punish those that break the Dharma and are arrogant or vain they are skilled mischief makers, Hebi are snakes and are revered and feared all over the world as gods and spiritual creatures, there are a thousand ways to make a great tattoo using a snake, and then there is well-known Hanya mask which shows the horns, anger and face of scorn that a jealous woman grows when jilted.

In addition, there are the multitude of warriors, rebels, bandits and strongmen from the popular book 14th century Chinese novel 'The 108 Heroes of the Suikoden' This book is the basis for many of the popular images in traditional Japanese tattooing from the very beginning in early Edo Japan's 'Floating World' or pleasure district. Master Ukiyo-e printmaker Kuniyoshi Utagawa immortalized this story into the national consciousness with his series of prints depicting the aforementioned legendary fighters and warriors in vivid colourful detail slaying giant beasts and snakes, fight-



ing off ghosts and demons, subduing thieves and robbers and participating in epic battles to the death. It cannot be overstated how much of an influence this story and in particular Kuniyoshi's set of prints has had on Japanese tattooing over the last two centuries.

On top of all that there are even more tales and legends portraying sorcerers, ghosts, witches and heroes fighting mythological beasts, overcoming spells and curses and outsmarting cunning tricksters. There is also the pantheon of Buddhist deities that require your attention as well; Bentzaiten (Benten) the Goddess of art, music and poetry, Kannon Bodhisattva the Goddess of Mercy and compassion, Dainichi Buddha, the Lord Supreme of Japanese tantric Buddhism, and Fudo Myo-o, is among many other things the wrathful protector of Buddhism and makes an awe and fear inspiring image, he is also the protector of those born in the year of the rooster. There are many many more, too many to mention here, but you get the idea

It may seem like a difficult task to research all this and find something that suits you but take your time, using search engines and look up some of the stuff I talked about, follow the thread and it will take you somewhere, also talk to your tattoo artist, and ask to look through his reference books

and see what grabs your attention. It'll be worth your while. Tattooing is only getting better and for me, Japanese tattooing is getting greater every day, I look forward to doing some cool and obscure designs in the near future, maybe even on you, and I will publish them here when I do.

In early April of 2010 legendary tattooer 'Crazy Ace' Daniels passed away from a heart attack in Toronto, Canada. I worked for Ace for five years and it was he whom I mentored under and learned much of my early tattoo skills from as well how to be a 'tattoo guy'. He was a character and a half and one-of-a-kind. He will be missed.

Peace

Kian Forreal is a professional tattoo artist with 16 years international experience and specialising in traditional Japanese tattoo work. 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, Surry Hills. For more, visit www.kianforreal.com or, for information on Laser Tattoo Fading and Removal, please visit www.fadeyourtattoo.com