

The topic of my project is tattooing and its relevance in the history of American depictions of foreign cultures in popular American media. In the mid-nineteenth century men began performing in New York as a new kind of show; a show that involved an ex-sailor showing off his tattoos and telling the story of how he got them. This show became popular, and through the history of tattooed sideshows, readers will learn how the spectacle of white, half naked, tattooed men and women telling stories of captivity and torture among foreign “savages” reflects a variety of major topics in American history: including, American concepts of foreign cultures, American concepts of masculinity, popular entertainment post-industrialization, and American Imperialism. Tattooed sideshows were most popular in circuses and dime museums, which were seen by millions, and often focused on the exotic. These shows effectively established the image of foreign island cultures as uncivilized and in need of Western “civilization.” This kind of imagery is prevalent throughout the nineteenth century, but it is most prominent at the turn of the century with the Spanish American War. It is my contention that the imagery used in war propaganda during the Spanish American War, of foreign cultures as savages in need of western civilization, finds its roots in the tattooed man sideshow from 1838. For a long time, America has turned war into a spectacle, what my work aims to do is to place the earliest iterations of this kind of imagery within the context of tattooed man shows and the fantasies that these men and women created. Today the fantasy is the Middle-Eastern terrorist, a little over one hundred years ago the fantasy was of “savage cannibals,” waiting for white men to kidnap, eat, and maybe tattoo.

Tattoo, Circus, Spanish American War, Nineteenth Century Theatre, Captivity