

Japanese traditional tattoos (also known as *irezumi*, *horimono* and *wabori*, terms that will be used interchangeably throughout this book) are typified by narrative topics taken from Japanese folklore, religion and the natural world, which are then embellished with complementary iconographic elements from the relevant season of the year. The motifs range from famous warriors and divinities to animals both mythical and real, and the work in its entirety tells a vivid story. The tattoos are executed with incredible dexterity by master artists called *horishi*, who take decades to hone their skills. While there are many tattoo cultures all around the globe, Japanese tattoos are certainly some of the most powerful, aesthetically pleasing and compositionally balanced. They are nothing short of breathtaking when seen in the flesh.

*The Japanese Tattoo* will look at the nation's tattooing tradition, still alive and well today, that is a continuation of the Edo-period (1603–1868) tattoo culture which proliferated among Tokyo's working class in urban *shitamachi* (downtown) areas. Tattooed people of the time included craftsmen, carpenters, firefighters, couriers and artisans, as well as street gangsters. Many of these jobs were done half naked, and in shape and function the tattoos resembled workers' uniforms.

*Wabori* originally flourished alongside the phenomenally popular woodblock print artwork of the era, called *ukiyo-e*. While the majority of these prints depicted the daily lives of regular folks in a stratified society, it was the introduction of *Suikoden*, a classic literary tale adapted from the Ming Dynasty Chinese *Water Margin*, coupled with the imagination and dexterity of woodblock artists, that really elevated Japanese tattooing into a sophisticated art form. The exoticism, heroism and mystique of the imagery, and the association that commoners made between tattoos and valour, instigated a tattoo craze. Downtown heroes such as firefighters – who were like celebrities at the time – were embellished with increasingly elaborate protective water dwellers, both folkloric and real, giving specific talismanic meanings to their tattoos.



PREVIOUS SPREAD  
Clients of the late Shodai Horikazu (Horizaku I) and his son Asakusa Horikazu, both master tattooers (*horishi*), at a *sentō* (bathhouse) in Tokyo.

ABOVE  
A client of the late Shodai Horikazu relaxes at a Tokyo bathhouse. Traditional

Japanese tattoos are considered to be a 'hidden beauty', and some of the only places to see them are the *sentō* and festivals (*matsuri*).

OPPOSITE  
Some of the most heavily tattooed people in Japan are part of the MMA and jiu-jitsu worlds.