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September 2009

## Dimitri Tatouages

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Dimitri



Dimitri



Steph D with his family



**“My second biggest influence is the Teletubbies. I never missed an episode and my whole creative universe revolves around them”**

Dimitri HK

**F**rench tattoos often have this certain *je ne sais quoi* that bears witness to the artistic nature of the country itself. In the affluent Parisian suburb of St. Germain-en-Laye, the tattooists at Dimitri Tatouages have been tattooing witty, colourful stories onto skin for 15 years. Their artwork is in the tradition of the French *bandes dessinées*, a creative ‘comic strip’ artform that blends perfectly with tattoo imagery.

St. Germain-en-Laye paints a classic picture of France: An old centre with a medieval church in the market place, cute bistros and flower shops; bustling with elegantly dressed people, who are browsing in classy boutiques. You would never guess that this, one of the wealthiest suburbs of Paris, is the home of a tattoo studio that has its roots in punk rock music... but it is. Ten minutes walk from the metro station you will find Dimitri Tatouages, where Dimitri HK and his old pal Steph D have worked hard to build their reputation as one of the prime shops for getting highly original tattoo artwork.

In co-operation with some other French and international tattoo stars they have curated a number of exhibitions and published a series of books on tattoo designs and cartoon-style artwork. The books ‘Le Full Cana Jikken’, ‘Body Suits’, ‘Tattoo Handbook’ and ‘Tattooman! Bang!’ Dimitri HK’s mind-blowing sketchbook, are among the most creative and crazy publications on the tattoo scene. The books, which feature paintings and tattoos by people like Jee Sayalero (Human Fly Tattoo), Safwan (Imago Tattoo), Lea Nahon, Ed Perdomo (Stardust) or Gotch (Harizanmai), are absolute must-haves for anyone remotely interested in creative art.

Dimitri HK and Steph D are first-class examples of how creativity and chaos often go hand in hand. And they are a lot of fun too, which I found out to my cost when I interviewed them. Read on to see how they managed to ‘sabotage’ our conversation and yet simultaneously reveal lots of information about their careers and views on tattooing.

# Dimitri Tatouages

**Total Tattoo:** Can you tell us about where you are from and what life was like when you were growing up? What did you do before you became a tattoo artist?

**Dimitri HK:** In school, my teachers soon had enough of me and kicked me out. I decided to pursue a career as an oyster taxidermist, but their life expectancy kept on rising, which slowly pushed me into unemployment and finally alcohol, drugs and prostitution!

**Steph D:** I grew up pretty normal in a suburban working class family. My grandfather used to paint as a hobby. In school, my marks were really bad, except in drawing, and when I applied for a spot in one of the few government art schools, I was selected as one of 20 successful applicants out of 300. I guess I was



Dimitri



Dimitri



➔ lucky! After that I graduated in graphic design and public relations and worked in advertising for a few years. When I had to go to the army to do National Service, I actually worked in the 'Department of Comics'.

**TT: You are joking, right?**

**SD:** No, it's true. We drew cartoons about serious topics like 'Drugs are Dangerous!' and 'Don't Drink and Drive!'

**TT: That's hard to believe! Anyway, how did you guys meet? You both were into punk music, right?**

**DHK:** I have been playing in the punk rock band Happy Kolo for 14 years. The Rolling Stones used to support us on our stadium tours. And I got to know Steph because he used to deliver pizza to us and, whenever his bike was stolen in our real bad neighbourhood, I had to drive him back to the pizzeria. That's how we became friends...

**SD:** Well, we've known each other since our teens, from going to concerts and stuff. You should know that Dimitri is more chaotic than me. I am the organised one. Sometimes too much, actually, but we complement each other, I suppose.

**TT: How did you first come into contact with tattooing? And why did you decide to become tattoo artists?**

**DHK:** Ah, as a kid I had to go to Confession every Sunday. My parents were very proud of my piety! And the priest had a tattoo on his inner thigh, which I got to see frequently and up close.

**SD:** Ha ha! Dimitri actually started tattooing his punk friends in his kitchen as a youngster and I watched, of course. He opened his shop quite soon afterwards. After work, I used to hang out there, talk to clients, solder needles and so on. We used to draw together one night a week also.

**TT: Did either of you do a tattoo apprenticeship?**

**DHK:** No, I was beaten up so often in school and was always covered in bruises. So I decided it would be easier for everybody if I just tattooed my whole body myself.

**TT: Very thoughtful. And how did your career go on from there? Where does your artistic and creative influence come from?**

**DHK:** My biggest influence was the American tattoo artist Dave Lum; unfortunately I never met him. Closely followed by the Teletubbies; I never missed an episode and my whole creative universe revolves around them.

**SD:** I have worked with Dimitri since 1997. He is not really like a boss. We complement each other as artists. Dimitri used to put in too many details, while I kept it too simple for the sake of readability. I guess that comes from working in advertising, where everything has to be clear in a split second. Then our work slowly became more similar: Now, Dimitri does clearer tattoos, while my work got more realistic and detailed. Our philosophy is 'Shock and Awe!' The





Dimitri



Dimitri

first look must blow you away and then, when you look at it more closely, you appreciate the detailed work.

**TT: Do you work in other media?**

**DHK:** My shop is right next to a cemetery, so I work with decaying flesh; nothing sexual, of course!

**TT: I can't see a cemetery here...**

**SD:** I worked in countless media before: pencil, oil, acrylics, graffiti, airbrush. My work as a tattoo artist is just an extension of what I have always done. It's just another tool.

**TT: Colour is so prevalent in your work. Do you actually do black and grey stuff?**

**DHK:** Damn, here come the technical questions. I have to be more serious for that, right? Sure, I prefer colour, but if something looks better in black and grey... Why not?

**TT: You both do very complex compositions which tell entire stories, like a whole comic book on the skin. Does that require a lot of preparatory drawing? And where do your crazy ideas come from?**

**DHK:** The ideas usually come from the client. I am pretty good at understanding what they



Dimitri

Dimitri



actually want and I do a few quick sketches for them. My imagination then does the rest. Actually, I am greatly inspired by cosmetic surgery. Every time I see a nice pair of boobs, I get loads of ideas! And I use a lot of mint-flavoured chewing gum, nicotine patches and non-alcoholic beer...

**SD:** Usually I do one small freehand tattoo in the morning, because I simply don't have the time to prepare a drawing for every single tattoo anymore. In the afternoon I work on bigger pieces, often sleeves. For those I do sketches. There is no other way. But I still change a lot when I am actually tattooing, so it is kind of an evolutionary process. Sometimes I will even change parts that are already tattooed, which is possible when you work with colour. French clients have changed a lot in the past 10 to 15 years. They now consciously seek us out and bring their own ideas. Their stories, often with a serious background, are then turned into tattoos – which are occasionally funny – by us.

**TT: You often collaborate with each other, in drawing as well as tattooing. How did this come about and what makes it so special?**

**DHK:** I love collaborations. That's why we started the swingers' club [www.aroundthecaps.com](http://www.aroundthecaps.com). It's a great thing, I tell you!

**SD:** Actually that's our publishing company. It's all about exchanging ideas with people from different backgrounds and ways of

Dimitri  
combining pop by design and pop art



Steph



thinking. This started with our travels and around conventions. I often work in Spain with Jee Sayalero or in Canada. That's how you meet artists whose work you otherwise never get to see. Then we start developing ideas together.

**TT: Your shop is in St. Germain-en-Laye, an expensive area with lots of conservative people. Why here?**

**DHK:** There's nowhere else in the world with such a high ratio of nice butts per square mile! Haven't you noticed? I have been in St. Germain for 15 years and it still amazes me!

**SD:** Dimitri doesn't even tattoo that many girls. Most of them come to me! But strangely enough lots of my clients now are foreigners, often Spanish, Canadian, English or German. Dimitri services more locals.

**DHK:** That's nonsense! My customers come from a lot further away and I get a lot more girls than him.

**TT: You work at many international conventions, like Milan, London, Barcelona and so on. What do you like about conventions?**

**DHK:** I do between three and eight conventions a year. They are about having fun and drinking with friends. The worst thing about them is waking up in a





➔ strange place next to a fat bearded man. And I am still waiting for someone to organise a convention in the south of France at Cap d'Agde, the famous beach for nudists and swingers. That would be very nice!

**TT:** I'd go to that one too! Two last questions for you, Dimitri HK: Why don't you like teddy bears? And what does the 'HK' in your name mean?

**DHK:** Teddy bears are so-o-o hairy. Brrrr... And whoever can guess what 'HK' means will get a free cruise holiday to Hawaii paid for by Total Tattoo!

**TM:** I will have a serious discussion with the management about that, I think. [Before you ask, Mick, the answer is 'no'! - Sally, Editor]

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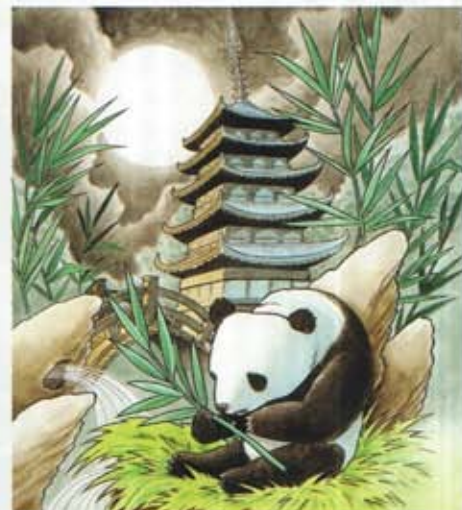


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