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Tattoos come of age in Asia at Singapore show Monday January 12, 2009

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Geoff Ogilvy, of Australia, acknowledges the gallery after making an eagle putt on the ninth green of the Plantation Course during the final round of the Mercedes-Benz Championship golf tournament in Kapalua, Hawaii, Sunday, Jan. 11, 2009. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

SINGAPORE (AP) -- His parents were against it, but student Shendon Goh smiled as a tattoo of a skull with a knife through it reading "Live Free or Die Hard" was drawn on his right calf at the first annual Singapore Tattoo Show on Saturday.

"It's about being who you are," said Goh, a Singaporean who was got his first tattoo at the convention as a 21st birthday present to himself.

Goh is part of a young generation in Asia, particularly in the more cosmopolitan cities, who have increasingly embraced tattoos as a form of self-expression.

Tattoo artists from 25 countries around the world gathered in Singapore for the event that began Friday. Organizers said it was the first of its kind in Asia, highlighting the surging popularity of an art that has been practiced in the region for thousands of years.

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The three-day show - which was expected to draw about 5,000 people - featured tattoo and piercing artists, art theory seminars, equipment suppliers and fans vying to win a best tattoo contest.

"Tattooing has become so global, there are guys doing great stuff everywhere," said American tattoo artist Chris Garver of Pittsburgh whose hit reality show "Miami Ink" helped popularize tattoos in Asia. "Japan, the U.S. and Western Europe have always had a lot of high-quality tattoo artists, but now it's starting to spread."

Indigenous peoples of Japan, China, India, Thailand, Indonesia and New Zealand have used body markings as amulets, status symbols, signs of religious beliefs, and adornments for at least 2,000 years. Scientists in Europe even found tattoos on the fingers of a 5,000-year-old mummy.

In the 20th century, tattoos in most Asian societies were associated with criminal gangs and other outcast groups. But during the 1990s, tattooed music, sports and movie stars - led by hip-hop artists aping U.S. prison culture - helped bring tattoos from fringe subcultures to the mainstream.

In Singapore, it's not uncommon for a young professional woman to sport, say, a butterfly tattoo on her shoulder.

Tattoos are still frowned upon in more conservative parts of Asia, such as predominantly Muslim

communities in northern Malaysia, said Eric Kueh, 27, a tattoo artist with 71st Skin Slavery in Kuching, Malaysia.

"Some of my older relatives give me a hard time," said Kueh, whose right leg is covered in tattoos. "But for the younger generation, it's not a big deal."

As tattoos have become more widespread, so have the number of people seeking to get rid of them as they get older. Treatments have evolved to where most tattoos can be almost completely removed, said Diarna Ahmad, who helps manage Starcap Medical, a Singaporean clinic that specialized in laser tattoo removal.

"We mostly get guys who have a tattoo on their hand or neck, and now they're entering a business environment," Ahmad said.

The show was organized by Tattoo.com.sg - a Singaporean event planner run by the owners of Utopia tattoo studio - and endorsed by the Singapore Tourism Board.

Garver predicted tattoos will continue to develop ever-more complex and colorful designs as some of the world's most-talented artists are drawn to the ancient practice.

"The quality of the art has jumped incredibly since I started 20 years ago," said Garver, as hundreds of fans waited to take pictures with him. "Anybody that says tattooing isn't an art - that's just ridiculous."

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