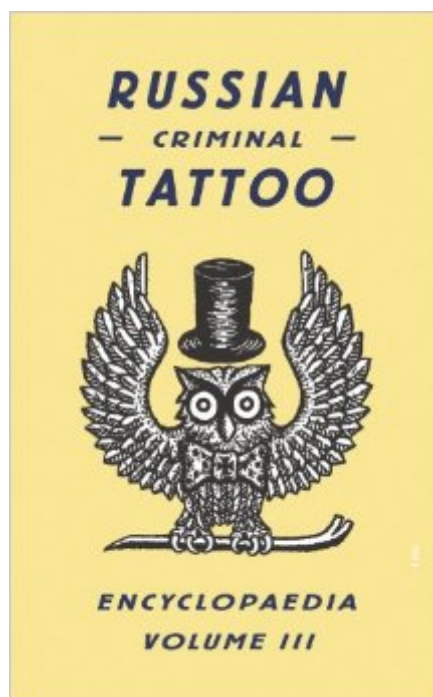


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Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volume III



Synopsis

This volume of drawings and photographs completes the Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia trilogy. Danzig Baldaev's unparalleled ethnographic achievement, documenting more than 3,000 tattoo drawings, was made during a lifetime working as a prison guard. His recording of this esoteric world was reported to the KGB, who unexpectedly supported him, realizing the importance of being able to establish facts about convicts by reading the images on their bodies. The motifs depicted represent the uncensored lives of the criminal classes, ranging from violence and pornography to politics and alcohol. A medieval knight is surrounded by the severed heads of his enemies, a naked woman simultaneously services a man and two dwarfs, a crying President Gorbachev grips a human bone between sabre-like fangs, a group of angels drink vodka with God on a cloud--the meanings of these arresting images are explained to the uninitiated eye. Sergei Vasiliev's graphic photographs show the grim reality of the Russian prison system and some of the alarming characters that inhabit it, while the illustrated criminals of Russia tell the tale of their closed society. This volume, the last in the trilogy, includes an introduction by historian Alexander Sidorov exploring the origins of the Russian criminal tattoo and their various meanings today.

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Customer Reviews

Every now and then a book comes out that illuminates a part of the world that was not only previously hidden but which could not even be imagined. Such a work is the Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia (Steidl / Fuel), featuring mostly the drawings of tattoos by Danzig Baldaev, with photos by Sergei Vasiliev, and an explanatory essay by Alexei Plutser-Sarno. In these photos

and tattoos, which I guarantee you are like nothing you have ever seen before, are reflected the horrors of Russia written on the skins of criminals. As strange as the pictures are, they are not so foreign as to eliminate sadness and tragedy; this is a book of devastation on many levels, and anyone flipping through the images will be enlightened about a very distant world, but also will be distressed and mystified. The majority of pages are Danzig Baldaev's drawings of tattoos he has collected during a lifetime as a prison attendant. The book could not be published before, but Baldaev has brought it out now as a protest of the "long time all of us lived under the leadership of villains, tricksters, and bandits." There are what are called "legitimate thieves" in Russia. They represent a robber caste, criminals who have their own code of laws and obey it. It is in some part hereditary; there are tattoos here that proclaim proudly "My father was a thief." The legitimate thieves have a strict hierarchy that extends inside and out of prison, and are reputed to have representatives in all levels of the government and police. They have special control of life in "the zone", the prison camps, where most of the tattoos are applied. The tattoos are a type of uniform and a service record. In prison slang, someone's tattoos are known as his (or her) "tail coat with medals.

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