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# World Screen

## Q&A with Ink Master's Glenda Hersh

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Glenda Hersh, co-president and co-CEO of Truly Original and executive producer of Ink Master, spoke with TV Real about the franchise, how the gameplay is refreshed each season and the human element of the show.

The ninth iteration of Ink Master premiered in the U.S. on Spike (rebranding as Paramount Network in early 2018) at the beginning of June, challenging contestants to compete in teams for the first time. The latest season sees nine teams of two represent their tattoo parlors in a bid to win the title of Master Shop. The stakes are higher than ever this season, with the winning team poised to walk away with \$200,000. And an even bigger twist in the gameplay was revealed in the second episode of the season when the contestants learned that each time a shop is eliminated, a veteran from a previous season will re-join the competition, alongside a partner, to represent their own shop. The series is distributed by Endemol Shine International.



Glenda Hersh

**TV REAL:** How has Ink Master evolved from season to season?

**HERSH:** The show is an amazing creature. It evolves, changes, reinvents itself every season, and it's been our mission to do that and make sure we continue to do that. We feel our viewers now tune in wondering, What's going to happen this season? What is it going to be like? It's never going to be like what they've seen before, and every season is a new way to structure the competition, set up the stakes, find new ways to tell the story, and that's been a hallmark of the show.

**TV REAL:** Where do you find the inspiration to change the gameplay?

**HERSH:** Our brilliant producing minds! [Laughs] We watch during the season for how things evolve, what kinds of alliances get formed, what kinds of strategies emerge, and from that we begin to say, Ah, what if we did this? What if we did it that way?

**TV REAL:** What has been your favorite season or twist in storytelling?



*Ink Master*

**HERSH:** Honestly, I'm really excited about season nine. I think this might be the coolest season ever. This year we're doing Shop Wars. It's the first time we let artists compete in pairs, and they're representing shops. The stakes are higher because not only are you competing for yourself, you're competing with your teammate; not only are you competing with a teammate, you're competing for your shop. You have the pride of shop, and then on top of it, there's \$200,000 at stake. The money's never been bigger.

What I love so much about this season is that each team is as strong as its strongest member and as weak as its weakest.

The teammates have to rely on each other and learn to work together because you both succeed and go down as a team, and that's a really interesting dynamic. Teammates win together, lose together and are eliminated together.

The twist is that every time a shop is eliminated, a new shop, including one veteran of the show, will return to fill that spot. So just when you think that the field gets smaller and the competition gets easier, it gets harder. Every time another shop gets eliminated, a new veteran returns. And that makes the game much harder, because the veterans have been there before and know the pressure and know what it's like to be on Ink Master, so they have a leg up.

**TV REAL:** Tell us about the human element of the show and what that brings to the table. What are the challenges and benefits for the series?

**HERSH:** What sets this show apart are the human canvases. People are getting tattooed, and tattoos are permanent—or relatively permanent. So, the stakes are high. On a cooking show, you can put too much pepper in a dish, it's just a dish. Here, if you give somebody a tattoo with shaky lines, they're living the rest of their life with those shaky lines. So not only are the artists competing for their work and competing in the game, they're also giving somebody a piece of permanent art on their skin. You have humans who are going to have to live with it, who are going to have to love it, so there's that dynamic.

Then, on top of that, you have the unpredictability of working with real people. It makes the gameplay very complicated. Maybe you've got a canvas who is very flexible and easy to work with, and maybe you get somebody who is very fixed in what they want and not willing to bend to what the artist wants. Maybe you get someone who's got really sensitive skin and the tattoo is very difficult to put on. Maybe you've got someone who can't take the pain and taps out. It adds an amazing variable, and an element of unpredictability for the artist, for the gameplay, for the strategy of the artist and also for the production.

**TV REAL:** How do you choose the human canvases, and what characteristics do you look for when selecting the canvases and the artists?

**HERSH:** We cast for them. We have thousands and thousands of people who would like to come on the show. It's an amazing opportunity to get one of the best artists in the country to give you a tattoo. Whether you're getting it from the future Ink Master him- or herself or from one of the other competitors, the artists we bring on the show are some of the best in the nation, so it's a chance to get a tattoo from an extremely talented artist who people might not otherwise have access to. We have a lot of people who are waiting to be canvases on the show.

In the case of the artists, we're looking for a number of things. We're looking for raw talent. We want to feature the best artists in the country. On top of that, we're looking for people who are flexible and who we think will be able to tattoo in various styles because that's all part of being an Ink Master. We're also looking for people who have an interest in playing the game because to become Ink Master, you have to have talent and tenacity, but you also have to have strategy, since there is gameplay involved. We look for all those things when we're casting. And we look for diversity. We want people from different parts of the country. Male and female, people of color. We want to reflect the community of artists and America.

**TV REAL:** What do you think are the key elements of the show's success?

**HERSH:** One, we have a phenomenal host in Dave Navarro. He's respected in so many areas, including, of course, music and the tattoo world. He really motivates the artists, and the audience loves him. And then we have superb judges. People come to see what Oliver Peck is going to say, they come to see how Chris Nunez is going to react. The audience has come to know and love our host and the judges—Dave, Oliver and Chris—and they're tuning in to see what they're going to say, how they're going to take it or how they're going to interpret it. People come back because the gameplay changes each season, it's always different, and because the artwork is amazing; you can never stop watching. I've been doing it for a few years, and I screen every cut about a million times. Every time I watch it, I think, Wow, I cannot believe they just did that in six hours! So, the surprise and the magic of the artwork is fantastic. And we have great characters. We cast artists who have interesting personalities and a great dynamic, and people love to watch how they interact with each other over the course of the season.

It's been proven over and over. We recently had a fantastic season nine premiere, with our highest premiere ratings since season five. So, we're growing. It was also the highest-rated Ink Master season premiere ever among African Americans, and it's still the number one show in its time period on basic cable.

**TV REAL:** Why do you think the show is so appealing, especially to female viewers?

**HERSH:** It's so interesting. For the season nine premiere, the viewership was 55 percent female, which is fantastic. It was the highest rating to date among women for an Ink Master season premiere. More and more women are coming to it, and for a few different reasons. First is the fact that there are so many women competing. Second, we

had our first female Ink Master last season in Ryan Ashley [Malarkey], and third, women love the strategy and the gameplay, and it's only gotten better. Women just love a good mystery, and this show has that. It's not just a straightforward, head-to-head competition. There's much more involved. There are alliances, there's gameplay, there are methods of attack and then there's, of course, great artwork.

**TV REAL:** Tell us about the spin-off series Ink Master: Angels.

**HERSH:** Ryan Ashley, our [season eight] Ink Master, and three other female competitors from season eight formed an alliance during the competition. Even though they were competing against each other, the four of them created an amazing pact of friendship and support. And that's an example of where you see the nugget of something emerging during the season and you say, Wow, there's a show in this. So, what we're doing is we're sending the four women to different cities around the country to find the nation's best tattoo artists, with each city's artists competing against each other, and the best of the best taking on an Angel. If you can beat the Angel, you get a spot on Ink Master season ten. I think viewers are going to love it. It's super fun, we meet great artists around the country, and there's some great tattooing. In part, it's casting for us as well. In season ten, not all competitors will come from the Angels show, but some will.

**TV REAL:** What does it mean for the show that season ten was commissioned prior to the premiere of season nine?

**HERSH:** It's a real testament to our network, to our partners at Spike, soon to be the Paramount Network. Spike has been an amazing believer in the show, a supporter, a co-creator, defender of it. The executives at Spike—the lead executive is Chachi Senior—are fans, they're creative partners in the show, and it's truly a testament to their support that they were willing to go ahead and order season ten before nine had even aired. They believe in the show that much, and they're willing to commit and say, Look, we know the show is great, we're signing up for the long run. It's great to have a network that is such a wonderful partner and is so willing to get behind a show and believe in it. I feel really lucky to work with them.

**TV REAL:** Do you foresee more spin-offs for the franchise?

**HERSH:** I'm always happy to have more spin-offs. Right now, we haven't talked to the network about more, so we'll see. The focus is on Ink Master, and it's on [the spin-off] Ink Master: Redemption, where you really get to delve more deeply into the human-canvas element, which is what we love about that show. And Dave is just a fantastic talent on Redemption. He helps people bring out their thoughts and feelings about their tattoos, and [viewers] get to know the human canvases a little more. And we're very excited about Angels and the potential it has. We think it's fresh, it's different, the talent is fabulous, and it's great to get to see the rest of the country. We're hoping that the franchise continues to grow and have life and that people continue to love it the way we do.