

# Viking Art

Dictionary of the Middle Ages, 1989

## Viking Art

The Viking Age art of Scandinavia from the late eighth to the early twelfth century is characterized throughout by the use of stylized animal motifs, ultimately derived from those that had been developed during the fourth and fifth centuries, based on late Roman provincial art. A limited range of plant motifs borrowed from Western European art were popular additions to the artistic repertoire from the mid tenth century, only to be largely abandoned in the mid eleventh century. It is notable that there existed throughout Scandinavia in the Viking Age a series of basically uniform modes of artistic expression, following well-defined conventions. Several of its style phases are also well represented in the areas of Scandinavian settlement from Iceland to Russia, but particularly in the British Isles.

Most surviving art of the Viking Age takes the form of applied art--the decoration of functional objects of everyday life, most notably personal metalwork, such as brooches. Representational art was probably always uncommon, although some sculpture, a tapestry from the Oseberg ship burial, and references in the literary sources indicate that narrative art did exist, most notably, it seems, for religious purposes. Three-dimensional images are particularly rare, although small-scale carvings of figures are known for use as gaming pieces, but larger figures existed, such as the idols referred to by Adam of Bremen as standing in the pagan temple at Uppsala. Such idols would have been carved in wood, which undoubtedly was the natural medium for Viking Age artists in Scandinavia, although little such wood carving survives, leaving us with incomplete sources for assessing their achievements.

There are, however, two groups of Viking Age wood carvings in Norway that illustrate the quality and richness of Viking art, which is otherwise now only to be seen in fine metalwork. The earliest of these, the elaborately carved objects found in the ninth-century Oseberg ship burial (now in the Viking Ship Museum at Bygdøy, Oslo), reveal the essential continuity of Scandinavian art from the eighth to the ninth century, with the beginning of Viking art being marked by the appearance of a new motif--the "gripping beast," so called because of its characteristic tendency to grip whatever is available. The gripping-beast motif developed during the second half of the eighth century, as is demonstrated by the excavation in the 1970's of a metalworker's workshop in Denmark, but it remained popular in one form or another well into the tenth century.

The last style in Viking art, the Urnes style, has been named for the eleventh-century decoration on a small wooden church (rebuilt) in the Norwegian village of that same name; at the church the visitor may still appreciate the high standards of design and craftsmanship to which Viking art aspired. Even at Urnes, in a specifically Christian context, the motifs employed are limited to stylized animals, with a few foliate details.

Between the Oseberg and Urnes styles there are generally recognized to be four further phases of Viking art: the Borre, Jellinge, Mammen, and Ringerike styles. (Each of these phases is the

subject of a separate illustrated article in this Dictionary.) The Borre and Jellinge styles were in contemporaneous use from the latter's development in the late ninth century through much of the tenth; the two styles are occasionally found on the same object. The Borre style makes further use of the gripping beast, alongside other motifs (notably an interlace pattern known as the "ring chain"), although it is adapted for use singly so that it grips its enclosing frame or its own body rather than those of its neighbors, as in the wild meales to be found in the Oseberg style. The Jellinge style's ribbon-shaped animal in profile is descended from those of the Oseberg style, and from it there developed the more massive animal (the "great beast") of the Mammen and then the Ringerike styles. It was the Mammen and Ringerike styles that made use of plant motifs, tendril patterns adopted and adapted from Anglo-Saxon and Ottonian art, alongside their variations on the native animal motifs, the meaning of which (if any) remains obscure.

The Borre and Jellinge styles were brought by the Vikings to the British Isles and to Russia, where regional variations were developed. The Ringerike and Urnes styles became established to a lesser extent in England in the eleventh century, but they had a notable influence in Ireland, where the Irish version of the Urnes style flourished well into the twelfth century, as may be seen on such masterpieces of metalwork as the Cross of Cong (ca. 1123).

The popularity of wood carving may go some way to explaining why stone carving was a neglected art in Scandinavia until the late tenth and eleventh centuries. Its eventual widespread introduction was in imitation of Western European traditions of stone monuments; Scandinavian settlers in northern England and the Isle of Man had earlier followed and modified native practices in this respect. The Danish king Harald Bluetooth may have started a fashion for stone sculpture in southern Scandinavia: he erected a great stone monument at Jelling, most probably in the 960's, but certainly between 960 and 985, bearing a runic inscription, a representation of the Crucifixion, and a "great beast" (in the Mammen style). In the early Viking Age it was only on the Baltic island of Gotland that there had existed an important school of sculpture, one that produced distinctive memorial stones lightly incised with elaborate scenes that were originally painted (as would have been most Viking Age stone and wooden sculpture). These "picture stones" display representations of Viking warriors, women, riders, and ships under sail, of particular interest to the archaeologist and student of Norse mythology, but they stand apart from the mainstream of Viking art.

The gradual conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity popularized the use of stone sculpture to commemorate the Christian dead and their good deeds, recorded in runic inscriptions borne on serpents' bodies in the late Viking styles. It was, however, the church that brought Viking art to the end of its vigorous and independent life by encouraging the spread of European Romanesque art, to which it succumbed during the twelfth century, although some of its elements were to survive in medieval Scandinavian folk art.

### **Source Citation:**

"Viking Art." *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. Ed. Joseph R. Strayer. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989. *Gale World History In Context*. Web. 6 Jan. 2011.

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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|BT2353203034