

SMITHS, SINGERS AND SHAPESHIFTERS: CELTIC ART OF THE BRITISH ISLES



Wandsworth shield boss

Great nations write their biographies in three manuscripts: the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art [and] the only quite trustworthy one is the last.

[John Ruskin]

Celtic Art is one of the most beautiful and complex manifestations of human response to natural forms. Concerned with the decoration of a wide range of objects from drinking flagons and weapons to the covers of sacred books, the rhythmical energy and shifting, sometimes near-abstract forms represent an expression of concepts and beliefs as well as a functional response to the shape and use of the object to be decorated.

The lecture concentrates on the particular development of the Celtic style in the British Isles, where it survived long after the coming of Rome had extinguished it elsewhere. Starting around 300BCE with the earliest examples of a distinctively British and British-made design, we will explore the interaction of pure Celtic ideas and techniques with elements drawn from Roman, Pictish and eventually Anglo-Saxon cultures, culminating in the great flowering of the 7th century AD sponsored by the Celtic Christian Church.

[Celtic Art] *is full of contrasts ... full of paradoxes, restless, puzzlingly ambiguous*

[Paul Jacobsthal, **Early Celtic Art** 1944]

FURTHER READING:

The literature on all aspects of Celtic art, life and society is vast and at times contradictory. These are some of the most interesting and/or relevant books; all should be available in libraries, from Amazon or both. Those marked * I would recommend as essential reading to anyone interested, others are more specialised. All have extensive bibliographies of their own for the truly obsessed!

George Bain **Celtic Art: the Methods of Construction** 1996 [Constable]

John Collis **Celts: Origins, Myths and Inventions** 2003 [The History Press]

*Barry Cunliffe **The Celts: A Very Short Introduction** 2003 [Oxford University Press]

*Julia Farley & Fraser Hunter (eds) **Celts: Art and Identity** 2015 [British Museum]

Duncan Garrow & Chris Gosden **Technologies of Enchantment?: Exploring Celtic Art** 2012
[Oxford University Press]

Miranda Green **Celtic Art: Reading the Messages** 1996 [Everyman Art Library]

*D.W. Harding **The Archaeology of Celtic Art** 2007 [Routledge]

*John Haywood & Barry Cunliffe **The Historical Atlas of the Celtic World** 2001
[Thames & Hudson]

*Lloyd & Jennifer Laing **Art of the Celts** 1992 [Thames & Hudson (World of Art series)]

B. Maier (transl. C. Edwards) **Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture** 1997 [Stuttgart]

*Ruth & Vincent Megaw **Celtic Art: from its beginnings to the Book of Kells**
2001 (revised edition) [Thames & Hudson]

Felix Müller **Art of the Celts: 700BC-700AD** 2009 [Mercatorfonds, Brussels]

Barry Raftery **Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age** 1997
[Thames & Hudson]

Alice Roberts **The Celts: Search for a Civilisation** 2015 [Heron Books]

*Ian Stead **Celtic Art in Britain before the Roman Conquest** 1996 [British Museum]

In addition the DVD of the BBC's 2015 series **The Celts: Blood, Iron and Sacrifice** by Alice Roberts and Neil Oliver's series is available on Amazon.

SLIDES:

Slide 1:

Battersea Shield 350-50 BC (bronze, glass) [British Museum]

'Carpet' page from the Book of Durrow 650-700 AD (vellum)
[Trinity College Library, Dublin]

Slide 2:

New lamps for old

Changes in interpretation of linguistic-based Celtic migration studies

Map 1: Outward spread of language and art from Central European homeland c.1989-92

Map 2: Eastward spread from Atlantic seaways (Spain, Ireland, Western France and Britain)
c.2010-14

Slide 3:

Barbarian heroes

The ‘Deal Warrior’ 200-150 BC (skull with bronze headband or ‘crown’) [British Museum]

Double-headed plaque from Tal-y-Llyn hoard c.47-78 AD (brass)
[National Museum of Wales, St Fagan’s Museum]

The Dying Gaul 50-150 AD (marble, copy of Greek bronze original, late 3rd century BC)
[Capitoline Museum, Rome]

Slide 4:

Great twisted golden necklaces

Clevedon torc terminal 150-50 BC (gold) [British Museum]

Snettisham Great Torc c.75 BC (gold, silver & copper) [British Museum]

Snettisham ‘Grotesque’ or ‘Marriage’ Torc c.75 BC (gold, silver & copper) [British Museum]

Slide 5:

High-spirited and quick for battle

Hammersmith sword and scabbard c.300 BC (iron) [British Museum]

Llyn Cerrig Bach plaque 200 BC - 100 AD (bronze)
[National Museum of Wales, St Fagan’s Museum]

Kirkburn sword and scabbard 300-200 BC (iron, bronze, glass, horn) [British Museum]

River Thames spearhead 200-50 BC (iron, bronze) [British Museum]

Slide 6:

Insular design

Wandsworth shield boss c.300 BC (bronze) [British Museum]

Torr’s pony cap 300-200 BC (bronze) [National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh]

Pony bit from Attymon, Co. Galway 50-150 AD (bronze) [National Museum of Ireland, Dublin]

Slide 7:

Given to the river?

Witham shield c.300 BC (bronze, coral) [British Museum]

Orlando Jewitt **Drawing of the Witham shield for John Kemble's 'Horae Ferales'** 1863
[British Museum]

Battersea shield upper roundel (comparative detail; see **Slide 1**)

Slide 8:

Mirror, mirror

St Keverne Mirror 120-80 BC (bronze) [British Museum]

Aston Mirror 50 BC - 50 AD (bronze) [British Museum]

Birdlip Mirror 50 BC - 50 AD (bronze) [Gloucester City Museum]

Desborough Mirror 50 BC - 50 AD (bronze) [British Museum]

Slide 9:

Through the looking glass

Holcombe Mirror 50 BC - 70 AD (bronze) [British Museum]

Slide 10:

Through a glass darkly

Old Warden Mirror c.70 BC - 50 AD (bronze) [The Higgins Art Gallery & Museum, Bedford]

Slide 11:

Cheshire Cat Style

Battersea shield: detail of central boss (see **Slide 1**)

Stanwick Hoard: mounting for harness or bucket 75-50 BC (copper alloy) [British Museum]

Snowdon bowl 0-50 AD (bronze, glass enamel)
[National Museum of Wales, St Fagan's Museum]

Dragonesque brooch c.50-150 AD (bronze, enamel) [British Museum]

Slide 12:

Expanding horizons

Staffordshire Moorlands (Ilam) pan c.200 AD (bronze, polychrome enamel)
[British Museum]

Sutton Hoo hanging bowl c.600 AD (bronze, silver, gold, niello, enamel, millefiori glass)
[British Museum]

Slide 13:

Brooches of gold having crystal inserted in them

Tara brooch c.700 AD (silver-gilt, gold filigree, glass, enamel, amber)
[National Museum of Ireland, Dublin]

Hunterston brooch c.700 AD (silver, gold, amber) [National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh]

Slide 14:

Triskele to Trinity

Lagore belt buckle 700-750 AD (bronze) [National Museum of Ireland, Dublin]

Moylough belt shrine c.700 AD (bronze, silver, leather, glass, enamel)
[National Museum of Ireland]

Ardagh Chalice c.700-750 AD (silver, gold, glass, amber, enamel) [National Museum of Ireland]

Slide 15:

The work of Angels

Book of Kells: Chi-Rho monogram c.800 AD (vellum) [Trinity College Library, Dublin]

Lindisfarne Gospels: Gospel of St Luke, initial letter 700 AD (vellum) [British Library]

Slide 16:

Celtic Revival

Brian Boru's Harp (Trinity College Harp) 1350-1450 (wire-strung cedar wood with brass pins)
[Trinity College Library, Dublin]

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres **The Dream of Ossian** 1813 (oil on canvas)
[Musée Ingres, Montaubon]

George Waterhouse & Co. **'Tara Brooch' replica advertisement** 1851 [V&A]

Slide 17:

Men's souls and the universe are indestructible

George Henry & Edward Atkinson Hornel **The Druids: Bringing in the Mistletoe** 1890
(oil on canvas) [National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh]

'Authentic Celtic' tattoo 2015

Slide 18:

Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight

Capel Garmon firedog c.50 BC - 50 AD (iron)
[National Museum of Wales, St Fagan's Museum]

Slide 19:

*They use few words and speak in riddles ...
hinting at things and leaving a great deal to be understood*

Aylesford bucket 75-25 BC (bronze, iron, wood) [British Museum]



Snettisham Hoard L in situ
1990