



What is Early Celtic art?

From 500 BC, around the same time as the emergence of classical art in Greece, a very different kind of art, which today is known as Early Celtic Art, was being developed across northern Europe. It eventually spread from Ireland as far as the Czech Republic. In much of Europe it stopped being made sometime in the first century BC but in Britain and Ireland it was produced into the first century AD, with some motifs and patterns reappearing in the art of the early medieval period.

Early Celtic art was decorated with semi-human creatures, mythical beasts or hints of vegetation, blurring the boundaries between myth and reality. Complicated curvilinear motifs held the attention of the viewer, leading the eye in different directions. Such enigmatic designs sparked the curiosity of the viewer and engaged the imagination; stylized animals and humans might evoke fantastical creatures and deities. Pairs of animals depicted side by side are perhaps attempts to show the left and right hand sides of the animal simultaneously, indicating a different way of representing the world from the realism of classical art.



Decorated belt hooks were designed to catch the eye. Often, they carried pairs of animals. Here two fantastical creatures have their heads turned back and their hooked beaks open. Somme-Bionne, France 450–400 BC. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum

example, during the Iron Age simple geometric patterns – created from rectangles, triangles and circles – are found on certain types of pottery. Ring and dot patterns also feature on bone and antler artefacts like weaving combs and pottery. Much of the art was extremely well made and detailed: individual, bespoke items with an emphasis on the quality of manufacture rather than quantity such as the flagons from Basse-Yutz, France. One of the most spectacular examples is the ‘Great Torc’ from Snettisham, Norfolk. This is a technical masterpiece manufactured from just over a kilogram of a gold-silver alloy. The neck-ring comprises eight ‘ropes’, each formed of eight hand hammered wires twisted together. To achieve consistency and evenness of twist the diameter of each wire needed to be virtually identical. The two terminals, which would have been worn at the front, are hollow and were made of sheet metal and hammered into shape. Decorative details were added by hand with very fine tools. The great investment of time and effort invested in making it means that the Snettisham Great Torc is a unique object and exact replication of it would have been virtually impossible.

The fierce beasts and fleeing duckling on top of this flagon could represent some lost myth or story.



When the flagon was poured, the duckling would paddle along a river of wine. One of a pair of flagons from Basse-Yutz, Lorraine, France 420–360 BC. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum

Early Celtic art stands out when compared to other contemporary decorative traditions. For



The 'Great Torc' from Snettisham, Norfolk. With intricately decorated terminals, it must have created quite an impression when worn. Snettisham, Norfolk, UK 125–60 BC Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum

A very restricted range of metals was embellished with early Celtic art: predominantly gold alloys and bronze (an alloy of copper and tin). Many different techniques were used to enhance the effect of the patterns, such as inlays of red coral and glass to contrast with bronze, or inscribed and raised decoration to form subtle and intricate designs. Everyday materials such as iron, stone, wood and pottery rarely featured such complex curvilinear motifs.



This decorative horse-harness plate is made of copper alloy and decorated with red-glass enamel inlay. Santon, Norfolk, AD 40–75. Image: ©MAA, University of Cambridge

How was the art used?

For much of the time that Early Celtic art was made and used we have no written texts to inform us about their significance or provide clues about meaning. As a result, we are almost wholly reliant on the objects themselves and the contexts in which they are found to try to answer these fundamental questions. It is therefore virtually impossible to be certain what this art meant. By looking carefully at the objects and reflecting on the activities in which they

were used we can make more progress, especially if we ask two simple questions: what does the art do, and why decorate?

Although early Celtic art is quite diverse, it is possible to draw some connections and the objects can be categorized into five major areas of social importance or 'arenas': warfare, eating and drinking, personal appearance, horse and chariot gear, and religion. These arenas varied in importance through time.



This shield boss is decorated with stylised birds and complex interlocking patterns River Thames at Wandsworth, London 300–200 BC. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum

Decorating an object is one way to make it stand out and so give it the power to impress and influence audiences in a variety of social arenas. Ornamented weaponry, especially sword hilts and scabbards, includes some of the finest examples of Celtic art made during the Iron Age. Such objects make it clear that the ideal of a warrior was important across Europe, as can be seen from rare 'display' shields recovered from watery contexts in Britain, of which the shield boss recovered from the River Thames at Wandsworth is a fine example. Given its excellent condition and intricate designs, it is unlikely that the wooden shield it ornamented was intended for the heat of battle. Perhaps it was intended for elaborate display and posturing, to create the appearance of an impressive warrior. This might have been just as important as practical skill in battle. It is not surprising that many of the objects decorated with Celtic art were items of jewellery or containers utilised in the consumption of food and drink: people wanted to impress onlookers through their appearance or to influence others at social occasions.

Decoration also serves to animate objects. The raised pattern found on an Iron Age iron and copper alloy cauldron from Chiseldon is in the form of a cow's or bull's head. When illuminated from below by the flickering firelight, different features would have been picked out, such as the horns and flaring nostrils, acting to bring the animal to life. Cauldrons were used at feasts when people came together for special occasions. Eating food prepared in and served from the cauldron with its special decoration would have added to the drama and theatre of these events.



Artist's impression of a cauldron in use with the raised decoration of the bull's head animated by the flickering firelight. Chiseldon, Wiltshire 400–300 BC. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum

An art of ambiguity

Recent attempts by archaeologists to understand Celtic art have sought to explore its ambiguity. It has been viewed as a technology of enchantment that was able to beguile and dazzle the uninitiated viewer through its highly skilled manufacture and complexity, to the extent that they could not understand how it was made or the meaning of its decoration. Complicated interlocking designs such as those on the sword scabbard from Bugthorpe, Yorkshire with no obvious beginning or end 'trapped' the attention by leading the eye in different directions. A further question to ask is, who was the audience for Celtic art?



Copper alloy sword scabbard decorated with complicated interlocking patterns. Bugthorpe, East Yorkshire 200 – 100 BC Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum

The way in which it is often portrayed in popular books can be misleading, making the ornament seem more prominent than it actually was. For example, the mount from Stanwick, decorated like a horse's head and originally part of a wooden bucket, is only 100 millimetres high, yet it frequently appears as a full-page picture in textbooks.



This small model of a horse's head is made from sheet bronze and would have originally adorned a wooden bucket. Stanwick, North Yorkshire AD 40–80

To fully understand much of this art, a close encounter with the objects was required. Techniques such as inscribing, stippling or raised decoration acted to break up smooth surfaces, making objects highly tactile. This texturing also meant that the art caught the eye from a

distance, even with a fleeting glimpse. Yet those who experienced such art from afar caught mere hints of raised and broken surfaces when the bright metalwork caught the light. Only those with privileged access could touch and feel the objects, and spend time unravelling the complexity of the designs.



Detail of the decoration on the Great Torc from Snettisham. Image: ©Trustees of the British Museum

Summary

Early Celtic art was more ambiguous and harder to read than the realism of classical art but this was probably the intention of its makers. These were not 'primitive' artists unable to re-create their world accurately, and their art was just as

important as classical art to the early history of Europe.

Early Celtic art was designed to draw in and enchant the viewer while carrying messages about beliefs and ideas about the natural, human and other worlds. It was not static. Techniques and technologies, as well as the types of object that were decorated and the meaning and significance of the art, changed significantly over time. It is more correct to understand it as a series of 'Celtic arts' rather than a single, homogenous tradition. But together they give us glimpses into how people saw their world in the Iron Age, and how they used decoration to reflect beliefs and ideas about that world, and to show off their status and connections.

Further Reading

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