

## Celtic Influences in Insular Art

Insular Art (also known as Hiberno-Saxon Art) was unique to the British Isles and Ireland during the early medieval period, c.600 – 900 AD. This style is evident across different mediums, such as illustrated manuscripts, stone monuments, and metalwork. The style was heavily influenced by Celtic art and traditions, as well as Germanic and Anglo-Saxon designs and ideas. An additional element was Christianity, which became a new influence to the British Isles during the early medieval period.

Insular artworks combine decorative elements such as interlacing knotwork. This interlace can often include animal or zoomorphic designs which can be associated with the Celtic knotwork of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.<sup>1</sup> Of the Insular Celtic style Martin Goldberg, Senior Curator, Scottish History and Archaeology, National Museums of Scotland has said, '*One thing that does link Celtic Art is a fascination with fantastic creatures. It ties together these very disparate art styles*'.<sup>2</sup> This fascination with creatures and beasts continues throughout the new art of the Medieval period, often combining earlier pagan designs with Christian messages. Other key identifiers of the Insular style include geometric patterns, trumpet-spirals and triskeles. Beasts and animals can often be intertwined in a complicated interlace pattern, or even make up part of the rich lacework themselves.<sup>3</sup> The images often contain complex designs to draw in the onlooker. This is greatly evident in the illustrated manuscripts of the period. Many of these decorative styles can be attributed to the earlier Celtic La Tene style which developed in Late Iron Age Europe in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Animal imagery and interlace had previously been used in metalwork and was, therefore, one element to be drawn from existing styles to be intrinsically combined to produce eye-catching and meaningful imagery. Insular art containing Celtic elements was used in both secular and religious artefacts. Prominent Insular artworks to feature Celtic influence include the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Book of Kells, the cross-slab at Nigg and the Tara Brooch.

Insular stone monuments with Celtic decoration appear to have been widespread and common. The 8<sup>th</sup> century AD Bewcastle Cross (Cumberland) is situated in north-west England, historically an ancient Celtic territory. Examples of many similar monuments exist, particularly within the northern and western parts of the British Isles. The crosses contain religious symbolism, however, Celtic pagan imagery is also clear. The Bewcastle Cross contains Pictish hunting scenes as well as Christian imagery.<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Cramp tells us that '*the precursors for these [stone crosses] were the upright incised stele of Early Christian Gaul, western Britain, and Ireland with their inscriptions and Christian symbols...or crosses of arcs*'.<sup>5</sup> Classical writers, such as Julius Caesar, identify Gaul as a homeland of the Celtic peoples,<sup>6</sup> who gradually spread east and north across Europe. Their ideas, styles and beliefs are thought to have entered the British Isles via networks of interaction<sup>7</sup> and trade. Similar Celtic ideas existed in Gaul and the British Isles, with Celtic still be spoken in both in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD,<sup>8</sup> however, the definitive Insular art style only developed in Britain. This artistic independence illustrates an individuality held by the indigenous people of the British Isles, encompassing their Celtic identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Emilia Henderson, 'Early medieval interlace – a distinctive or ubiquitous feature?', *British Library: Medieval Manuscripts Blog*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2020, <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2020/10/early-medieval-interlace.html> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> October 2024]

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Alvarez, 'Early Medieval Celtic Art in Britain and Ireland: A Curator's Perspective', *Medievalists.net* 2024, <https://www.medievalists.net/2015/11/early-medieval-celtic-art-in-britain-and-ireland-a-curators-perspective/> [Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> October 2024]

<sup>3</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), pp. 159-160

<sup>4</sup> Catherine E. Karkov, 'The Bewcastle Cross' in *The Insular Tradition* ed. by Catherine. E. Karkov and et al, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 14-15

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Cramp, 'The Insular Tradition: An Overview in The Insular Tradition' in *The Insular Tradition* ed. by Catherine. E. Karkov et al, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 293

<sup>6</sup> Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Brief History of the Celts* (London: Robinson, 2003), p. 2

<sup>7</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts a Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 142

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 142

Barry Cunliffe tells us that:

*Celtic Art was far more than purely decorative art-for-art's sake. The choice of motifs and their arrangement will have held meaning to those who could interpret them.*<sup>9</sup>

Celtic designs were likely utilised to attract the native community to aid Christian conversion. As Ó Carragáin points out, images and texts of the existing communities would be used so that the messages could be easy to comprehend.<sup>10</sup>

Existing designs were greatly incorporated into Insular art through early monasticism and the Celtic church, which produced much Insular religious art.<sup>11</sup> For example, the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD silver chalice from Ardagh, Ireland.<sup>12</sup> It is also logical to assume that existing artists would draw on the '*traditions of their native art*'<sup>13</sup> whilst creating new designs.

Archaeological evidence from across the British Isles suggests that the Anglo-Saxons were '*significantly influenced by the art and customs of their new lands*'.<sup>14</sup> This is clear through the borrowing of ideas and designs of indigenous communities to create a new individual style different from those taking route on the continent from which they had left. Insular Art remained a strong powerful and informative style significantly influenced by Celtic Art.

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<sup>9</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts a Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 67

<sup>10</sup> Robert Brown, 'Exploring the Theology of the Bewcastle Cross: Then and Now, Based on Bewcastle Lecture, 28th July 2012, Bewcastle Church', on *Academia.edu*, 2012, [https://www.academia.edu/1829958/Exploring\\_the\\_Theology\\_of\\_the\\_Bewcastle\\_Cross\\_Then\\_and\\_Now](https://www.academia.edu/1829958/Exploring_the_Theology_of_the_Bewcastle_Cross_Then_and_Now), [Accessed 18/10/2024] p. 1

<sup>11</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts a Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 107-109

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 109

<sup>13</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), P. 160

<sup>14</sup> Rosemary Cramp, 'The Insular Tradition: An Overview' in *The Insular Tradition* ed. by Catherine. E. Karkov and et al, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 288

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