

Cross-pollination: Nordic design interlaced with other cultures



Rings incorporating designs such as ravens, runes and wolves show cultural influences beyond the Nordic.

PHOTO: JONAS ANDERSSON/STUDIO 101
COMPOSITION BY ALLAN LORING

David Jón Fuller

Cultural cross-pollination is nothing new — in the so-called “Dark Ages,” the vikings were agents of cultural exchange as well as raiders and pillagers.

This was thrown into sharp relief for Jason Bellchamber, a metalsmith of Scottish and English descent in London, ON, when he visited the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa/Hull.

“I’ve done viking pieces as well as Celtic pieces since about 1995, when I started really spe-

cializing in Celtic designs,” he says. “One of the things that inspired me to do viking pieces was that in 2000 my wife and I went to the Museum of Civilization in Hull, and there was a huge viking exhibit of artifacts from Scotland, Iceland, England, Ireland, Greenland, as well as a couple of the rivets from l’Anse aux Meadows.

“So when I saw that, seeing some of the artifacts and reproductions there was just really inspiring. One of the things that I really enjoyed seeing was two ravens, holding a triskele and

a whalebone that came from Greenland, and I saw that as a combination of Native American culture and as well as viking culture.”

Bellchamber says his first forays into ring-making were exploring the art and designs of the First Nations peoples of the Pacific Northwest. “But,” he says, “I felt I couldn’t justify selling those because it’s not my heritage.” He credits his mother with encouraging him to explore his Celtic background.

It’s not always easy to separate Nordic and Celtic motifs. For example, he says, “Knotwork in Celtic design had roots in Scandinavian art. I find viking knotwork and motifs have a beginning and end, whereas Celtic knotwork tends to be continuous.

“The vikings, through trade and, shall we say, ‘establishing themselves,’ in Britain, Scot-

land and Ireland, influenced Celtic art from the fifth century to the 10th century.”

Aside from actual contact between ancient peoples, a number of symbols seem to take on importance independently. “For example, there is the raven,” he says, “which is very important in [Pacific] West Coast design, as well as being the Celtic sun god Lugh’s familiars and Odin’s ravens, Huginn and Muninn.”

Bellchamber isn’t the only jeweller who has different motifs on offer. Paul J. Badali, master jeweller and President of Badali Jewelry Specialties, has been working in gold and silver for roughly 30 years. In addition to pieces based on Egyptian, Celtic, and Nordic designs, his company makes pieces inspired by the *Lord of the Rings* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

One of the company’s features is the “rune ring” in which

custom messages are carved in runes — but first they are translated into Icelandic. Alaina Manning, Product Manager for the company, says, “Paul is very interested in ancient cultures and researching the vikings. When he first started research on the language, with the intention of making jewellery, he tried to find a book on ancient Norse and found that the closest language was Icelandic.” Given the relative isolation of Iceland, the written language stayed nearly the same over many centuries. “Icelandic is the closest modern language to Old Norse,” says Manning, who does some of the translation. “We use Icelandic to translate the phrases for the most accurate rune meanings.”

The specialty rune rings are their most popular item, she adds, though their sales have increased across the board.

Bellchamber says of his continuing exploration of motifs and designs, “I’m fascinated by the convergence of culture. Through my research I know that one culture doesn’t just come in and erase the other — it comes in and if one culture’s taken control or at war, it’ll mix in with the civilization there, so you’ll get a combination of them.”