

Knitting along the Viking Trail



In this exhibition, design ideas and ornamental experiments of skilled craftsmen from a thousand years ago are brought to new life, in new materials, and for a new purpose. Elsebeth Lavold, artist and designer of Swedish, Danish and Norwegian descent, spans a millennium with her unique knitwear.

But not only the end result, exquisitely designed and crafted sweaters, jackets, caps, mittens, pillows etc., is displayed. You can also see where the inspiration comes from, in the many Viking age objects that are shown in the form of photos, drawings and replicas, ranging in size from minute pieces of jewelry to huge rock carvings. Guided by the texts on the many signs, you may discover how a specific pattern may be spread all over the Viking world, and then see, and feel, how the same pattern is used, identical or interpreted, in the design of a contemporary garment.



Gothenburg, Sweden, 1999

To our present knowledge, the Vikings did not knit. The patterns, displayed in the exhibition, originally appeared on objects of stone, metal, bone and wood – all hard materials. Very few textile artifacts are preserved.

In a still ongoing process, the ornamentation on a vast number of objects is carefully analyzed, and adapted for knitting. This entailed an innovation in hand-knitting technique. The patterns are not suited for machine knitting, and with present technology probably not even possible to produce industrially.



Viking age object, swatch and finished garment



The technique itself may be used for other types of patterns, but Elsebeth Lavold's interest in archaeology, combined with the strong artistic identity of the Scandinavian craftsmen of the Iron Age, including the Viking era, proved to be the ideal foundation for exploring and developing this new field of knitting. What once was an experiment became a Project.



Buckle from Iceland

The Vikings traveled all over the world known to them, and gradually expanded it. How they themselves were influenced by, and influenced, other cultures is obvious from the historical evidence. Still, their artistic expressions remained uniquely their own. They seem to have shared a taste for entrelac and animal ornamentation, with roots in the ancient Norse religion and mythology. Elements and objects from other cultures may have been borrowed, but not artistic styles. The borrowed elements were always transformed to suit their own style and taste.

In the exhibition, the garments are presented in groups, based on the type of ornamentation. Each group is accompanied by a sign, showing the basic pattern element for the group, with photos and drawings of artifacts containing similar ornamentation, and information about their origin. Some patterns can also be seen on replicas of picture stones and other large stone or wooden objects.



All the designs have old Norse names. Quite a few of these names appear in mythological texts, and for some of them, the origin is revealed in the exhibition.



Brage was the Norse god of poetry and music, and also the name assigned to Elsebeth's husband by her cousin at their wedding. So of course, she had to make a man's sweater with that name. It may be seen in the exhibition with the name actually knitted into the garment in runic letters; another astonishing design element made possible by the new knitting technique.

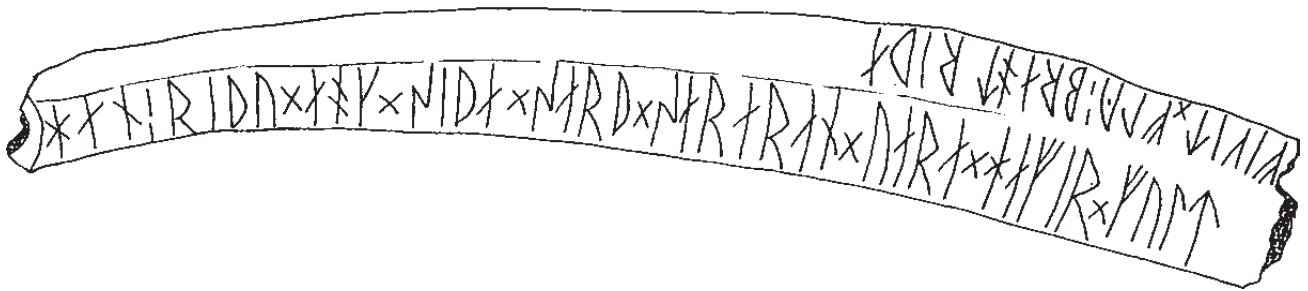
In some of the garments, ornaments from Viking age artifacts are incorporated in the overall design for their sheer beauty. Other times, the relation between the modern design and the original object is more evident. The sweater *Björn* (= Bear) is the most obvious example in the exhibition.

It is based on a Viking gravestone, a "hogback", found in Yorkshire in Northern England. It is



shaped like a typical Viking age longhouse; the upright poles supporting the roof, the braided woodwork, creating walls (which in real houses would have been covered with clay and straw), and wooden shingles on the roof. The cable between the wall and the roof is probably bark, which was used for waterproofing roofs up until the 19th century. A replica of the hogback is included in the exhibition.

Every detail that was carved into the hogback a thousand years ago was transferred onto a sweater, with one exception. The bears, guarding the roof (?), could not be included in the knitting. The obvious solution was to choose Björn as the name for the sweater.



In the summer of 1997, during excavations in Sigtuna, north of Stockholm, the archaeologists discovered a large number of bones with runic inscriptions. One of these contained the longest runic inscription ever found on a single object; 93 letters. This turned out to be a magic spell, banishing disease, and ending with the phrase "...fly away fever". What could be a more appropriate pattern for a cosy cap to keep away the cold?

The cap is included in the exhibition, but was originally produced specifically for the museum of Sigtuna, where the exhibition was shown from December 1997 to February 1998. This is a type of local adaptation that has been possible for quite a few of the exhibition sites in Sweden.

The matching mittens are decorated with a "magic rune" (Sw.: *Trollruna*) from the same bone. Magic runes do not represent a letter in the alphabet, but are believed to have been attributed supernatural powers.



Another runic inscription from Sigtuna is all about praising the King, his generosity and his great feasts. The inscription may not be overly relevant to present day, claiming, "The King is the best". But there is a Swedish proverb, ending with the words *hemma bäst* (home is best). Now, there's a nice message to display on a pillow case.



One ornament found on a large number of artifacts is the "four-knot" or St. John's Cross. This is often considered to be a Christian symbol, but it was used in pre-Christian times and must have had a pagan symbolism. It is considered to have been a symbol of good fortune, and is used in many Elsebeth Lavold designs, in a variety of ways.

On the vest *Yrsa*, the knot unfolds from the cables along the edges. On a picture stone from Gotland, an island in the Baltic Sea, the Viking age artist used the same variation to depict waves, possibly wishing the sailors good luck, or beseeching the sea to bring the men back alive. We can only speculate, but who doesn't need good luck, today as well as a thousand years ago.



All in all, *Knitting along the Viking Trail* reaches far beyond a "simple" knitwear exhibition, even if the garments provide the most extensive and colorful content. But if you are interested in history, Vikings, art or design, this is a new approach to a unique cultural heritage, interpreted and recreated for the 2000's.

