Final Paper Western Pasts

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Final Paper Western Pasts: Celtic Art

# *Introduction*

The art associated with the people of Celts is known as Celtic Art. Celts are the people who communicated in Celtic languages from prehistoric times to the modern era. When it comes to Celtic Art it is a rather difficult term to describe, the reason behind being the fact that it covers an expansive period of time, culture and geography. A case can be created of artistic continuity from the Bronze era to the Neolithic era. Nevertheless, the archeologists mainly use the term “Celtic” to define the European Iron Age. This era talks about the culture behind the European Iron Age dating back to 1000 BC forward. It was until the subjugation by the Roman Empire of the majority of the concerned territory. The art historians usually start to refer to Celtic art when the Le Tene period initiates. Another term that is used for it is the Early Celtic Art, this stretches to the Britain era[[1]](#footnote-1). When talking about the Early Medieval art of Ireland and Britain, this was the time when masterpieces like the Book of Kells and other noteworthy works of art were created that are known and appreciated to this day. This is what Celtic art evoked in the communities of the English-speaking world. It is known as Insular Art in the history of art and is said to be the Golden era of Celtic art. It is deemed as the best part of the Celtic art age but does not cover the whole age. There are more eras to be put under consideration like the Celtic art of the middle ages, which was also inclusive of the Scotland art known as the Pictish art. This paper will be discussing the development of Celtic Art. By doing so some reflection on the cultural and societal aspects of the time will also be mentioned and finally, light will be shed in regards to the comparison between Celtic art and Roman art.

# *Discussion*

# *Background*

The significant influence of non-Celtic foundations was absorbed by the Celtic art styles. Those non-Celtic basis were obtained by either subjugations or trade of others or of themselves. However, the retention of preference of the geometrical decorations on the figurative subjects was present, in fact, it was often stylized on an extreme level. Spirals, energetic circular forms, and triskeles are distinctive. If narrative scenes ever appeared they were under the outside impacts. Book of Kells and Gundestrup can be taken as a good example of the influences from outside. Majority of the material that has survived over time is made of precious metal, this fact without a doubt gives a misleading image. Other than Insular high crosses and Pictish stones, the large monumental sculptures, even if they have carvings to decorate, are considered quite rare.

Generally, it can be said the Celtic Art is ornamental. The reason behind it is the fact that they usually had perplexed symbolism, deviating away from straight lines. Other than that, rarely did the art form portrayed symmetry. Celtic art has taken inspiration from different cultures showcasing and using a variety of styles and methods. The essence of other cultures can be seen in the spirals, lettering, key patterns, human figures, plant forms, and knotwork[[2]](#footnote-2). The Celtic art over the broad geographical and chronological span has showcased an exquisite and beautiful sense of balance. In the development of patterns, as well as who the patterns were laid out. Rounded forms are set so any positive and negative occupied spaces and areas get in harmony. When surface texturing and relief were done, the work predicts that there were meticulous restraint and control portrayed. Another fascinating fact is that irregular and awkward shaped surfaces were covered by circular and round patterns specifically designed for that job. One can see the establishment and growth in that era just by putting the artwork under consideration.

The terms also cover the visual art of the Celtic revival which is dated from the eighteenth century to the modern era. It all started as the mindful hard work of the Modern Celts. Majority of them were from Ireland and the British Isles, it all initiated to pivotally portray nationalism, self-identification, and above all, it gained popularity beyond the Celtic realms. The method and the essence of the style can still be seen in different popular forms. For instance, the motifs that were imitated were taken from the earlier eras present in tattoos and Folk art to the Celtic cross funerary. Coming to the later arts, they were more based on the Insular than the Iron Age. Late Le Tane vegetal art on the Art Nouveau movement dated from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century in France can be taken as another influence for the Celtic Art.

*Hallstatt Culture*

The earliest times of the arts and crafts of Celtic is known as the Hallstatt era. It was initiated in the site which was located in the Salzkammergut, on the sideways of the village of Hallstatt in Austria[[3]](#footnote-3). Even though this culture was situated near Austria but it spread across central Europe. They were basically divided into an Eastern and a Western zone. The Hallstatt can be seen fully in the burial sites of the chiefs and the wealthy nobles. These areas were inclusive of significant quantities of meticulously crafted pottery, tools, jewelry, artifacts, and various other objects. Hallstatt art which was from Central Europe was mainly popular for its really good quality iron weaponry and tools. Along with all this, there were ornaments and objects that were made of bronze as well. Further, certain items made of silver and gold were also discovered from this era. The art was mainly influenced by aggressive Mycenean culture and art. The Celts took in this culture as they were passing by the area around the Black Sea.

The site that was located in Austria was discovered by archeologists in the nineteenth century. In this site, there was a big burial area discovered, which can be called a graveyard if one looks at form today. In this area, there were heaps of hoarded artifacts found. They ranged from spears, weaponry to bronze and metal jewelry like brooches, rings and so on[[4]](#footnote-4). The weaponry that was found also was inclusive of various helmets, axes, daggers, swords, and the now famous winged Halstatt axe. Shield plates were also discovered, it was also observed that the swords were quite heavy with crescent-shaped hilts. The brooches also had a safety pin so it can be worn safely. Pottery was also found but it was not painted and was not as good as the Roman Pottery[[5]](#footnote-5). Additionally, one of the most unique discovery would by the body of a German chief. It was wrapped in a silk cloak, and one can see the link of two different dynasties as it was obvious the cloth was made in China.

Even though the Hallstatt era was under the influence of many cultures and evolved over the span of time, the method of Halstatt art was mainly geometric. It was more like the era's trademark. It all reformed and changed over the course of time, but the advancement was based on technical improvements, not aesthetic enhancements. Later on, the influence of Greeks completely went away, the Halstatt’s would break up the smooth surfaces and then made use of colors to make an impact. The motifs that were created by them carried different spiral designs, animal and bird shapes, however, there were few plant shapes seen as well. One could clearly see rigid symmetry as the shapes and figures were more likely to be in pairs.

*La Tene Culture*

Coming to the next Celtic art type, it was known as La Tene. There was a site found located in the La Tere Village situated in Switzerland. This is the shift of the Celtic Art to the Western side. When the site was first discovered over 2500 objects were recovered mainly made of metal. This was the time when people started to bury the dead bodies instead of cremating them. Among the 2500 objects, the majority were weaponry. An abundant amount of swords, shields, and spearheads. The other objects that were found were brooches, artifacts, and other tools. Since people started to bury the bodies, geologist and archeologists hit the jackpot. There were many ornaments, tools, and objects found in the burial areas. In the olden days, people were buried with their belongings and necessities. It was said that they will help and come in handy in the afterlife of the deceased[[6]](#footnote-6). La Tene can be seen as the rising point of the Celtic Era, this was the time when substantial development was seen. The art was flourishing and new techniques and styles were coming forth in light of the items that were getting discovered. This fact showed how widespread the Celtic culture was and how fast was it establishing.

La Tere culture was the period when a more mature version of the Celtic Art was witnessed. Great development and maturity could be seen in Italy and France. Some notable masterpieces from the La Tene era were a wealth of goldsmithery, there were absolutely breathtaking gold artifacts seen like collars and torcs. Other than the gold artifacts iron objects were also seen. The La Tene work initially took inspiration from the formal motifs that were imported from Italy, Caucasus and Greece. However, the western European Celtic metalworkers soon formed their own style. They made their own interpretation of various abstract flowing patterns. The result was a major upgrade from the round art they use to form. Now their work was more intricate and was mainly based on vegetable; leafy palmette forms, vines, acanthus leaves, tendrils, and lotus flowers were put together in conjunction of vines and spirals[[7]](#footnote-7). The essence of patterns was still familiar to what they use to do but was much more advanced. The Celtic art in the La Tene era also had intricate designs of various animals like the owls, serpent heads, wild boars and so many more. Apart from that these patterns and artwork was usually in a combination of red or some other color, this was present on the weaponry of the Celtic warriors portraying power. People often ask that if the Celts made pottery or not, to which the answer is yes. However, ceramic wear was the strength of the Greek.

Amid the later period of the La Tene era, the Roman legions came in and took over the majority of the Celtic tribes on the continent vanquishing everything and making Europe fall under the Roman administration. Britain was also conquered and treated in a similar way. Only Ireland was left behind. The Celtic culture, art, and language declined in the time frame, the only place where it could be freely practiced and made was Ireland, and even there it was not thriving like the olden days. Later on, finally the Barbarian tribes took over the Roman Empire. With the collapse of the Roman Empire an era originated to this day it is called the dark ages in history. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the initiating of Christianity in Ireland laid the foundation for a renaissance in the Irish Celtic Art. First, the Celtic metalwork was regenerated, the second was the phase of production of beautiful and mighty Illuminated Gospel Manuscripts. At third comes the glorious free standing Sculptures, the High Crosses of Ireland. Unlike the things created in the past like weaponry and jewelry, the new creations coming forth were based on religious beliefs. Even though the workers continued using the spiral techniques, knotwork and various other designs of their pagan past, the muse of the work were different now[[8]](#footnote-8). There might be thought that the Celtic Renaissance was because of the Church, which is not true. The fact that Ireland was spared from both the Romans and Barbarians is also one of the reasons a revolution came. The evolution was also seen in the techniques that were used by the metal workers.

*The Difference between Celtic and Roman Art*

Both the Celtics and Romans lived around the same time, before and after Christ. It will be fair to say that both empires were quite skilled when it came to creating masterpieces. The difference in the way both the empires worked and created is not based on the variation of the things that they created. They both made jewelry, tools, silverware, artifacts, household items, swords, shields, pottery and so on. The Romans also made various mosaics and painted many pictures, which the Celts did not, but both the empires tried to make simple, functional yet beautiful objects in the best way they could. The difference was also not in the materials that they used, because both the dynasties used metals like iron, gold, silver metal, stones, glass, and bones, wood and so on to make objects. The main difference was in the style, method, and technique that was used by both the empires. Times changed and the styles changed as well, but the difference stayed constant.

The Roman style is quite clear and easy to describe, it is realistic and takes inspiration from the Greeks. They mainly like to feature Gods and people and at times animals and plants too. On the other hand, Celtic Art is more difficult to describe and put into words. Their work is part way amid realistic and abstract. Their work does portray real things but it is mostly hard to tell what is real and what is not[[9]](#footnote-9). There work is more about shapes, which are more evident and somewhat easier to understand. There are certain historians who claim they have seen birds in Celtic art, but unfortunately, the Celts did not have their own writing so it cannot be said with confidence that, that is the case. Contrasting from them, the Roman style is more logical and rational.

# *Conclusion*

It is safe to say that the Celtic Era saw a great height and then saw an almost demise as well, but through all that managed to scrape by. The art is still seen as magnificent to this day by the archeologists and historians. There were great development and establishment seen over time as well. The era also predicts luxury and the use of weaponry is evident. The rich culture, society, and economic ups and downs are evident throughout different eras. The Celts made Abstract art divine and to this day it is a way to project suppressed emotions. The art might be difficult to understand back in the day, but today it projects great meticulousness and meaning.

# End Notes

1. Gibbons, Joel. *Early Celtic Art: From Its Origins to Its Aftermath*. Routledge, 2017.
2. Day, Neil. "Creating Celtic art using fractal image generation." In *2016 IEEE International Conference on Multimedia & Expo Workshops (ICMEW)*, pp. 1-6. IEEE, 2016.
3. Fernández-Götz, Manuel. "‘Celts: art and identity’exhibition:‘New Celticism’at the British Museum." *Antiquity* 90, no. 349 (2016): 237-244.
4. Champion, Timothy. "Celts: Art and Identity. Edited by J. Farley and F. Hunter. British Museum Press, London, 2015. Pp. 304, illus. Price:£ 40.00 (bound);£ 25.00 (paper). isbn 978 0 7141 2835 1 (bound); 978 0 7141 2836 8." *Britannia* 47 (2016): 421-423.
5. Hunter, Fraser. "Coping with changing worlds: the roles of Celtic art in central Britain in the Roman period." (2018): 69-72.
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1. Gibbons, Joel. *Early Celtic Art: From Its Origins to Its Aftermath*. Routledge, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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7. Brennan, Michael N. "The Lindisfarne Gospels: The Art of Symmetry and the Symmetry of Art." In *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, pp. 157-165. Brill, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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9. Brennan, Michael N. "The Lindisfarne Gospels: The Art of Symmetry and the Symmetry of Art." In *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, pp. 157-165. Brill, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)