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Book Reviews



ANGLO-SAXON ART. By Leslie Webster. Pp. 256, Illus 150. British Museum Press, 2012. Price: £18.99. ISBN 978 071412 809 2.

This book presents an overview of the entire spectrum of Anglo-Saxon art, which flourished over seven centuries, herein defined as AD 400–1100. That is quite a tall order for such a relatively compact volume, which is also crammed with gorgeous illustrations, mostly in colour, comprising photographs of objects from major collections, chiefly from Britain but also from the Continent. Many images of artefacts are presented as larger than actual size, or specific enlarged sections are featured, inviting detailed study. The mid-ninth-century silver Strickland disc brooch, which is a showpiece of a number of Anglo-Saxon decorative techniques and also an exemplar of the essence of the design structure which persisted throughout the whole Anglo-Saxon period, is aptly illustrated as an enlarged image on the front cover: a promise of the visual treat inside.

The publication comprises seven main chapters, presented largely in chronological order, with each referring to a key theme. After an excellent, concise introduction, the opening chapters offer an induction into the defining features of Anglo-Saxon art, particularly the characteristic structures and decorative themes, especially animal art, that persist throughout its long tradition. This reviewer is pleased to see that the reader is guided through the subtle visual ‘language’ and styles of Anglo-Saxon art, the intense busyness of which can overwhelm novice and academic alike.

Chapter 1 sets out the proposal that decorative elements were assimilated from many other cultural sources, which were then transformed and integrated into the Anglo-Saxon repertory. This is developed in the ensuing chapters which address the diversity of cultural influences and forces at work in effecting these transformations. The emphasis throughout is upon the cultural contributions to Anglo-Saxon art and not of its influence on other styles, for instance, those of the Irish or the Picts, although these are briefly referred to.

The following three chapters address the assorted inspirational strands which interweave to create a distinctive Insular style: early provincial Roman art; the impact of Roman Christianity; Celtic, Byzantine, and Eastern influences. The fifth chapter is concerned with how Anglo-Saxon art, both secular and spiritual, was a vehicle for expressing aspects of wealth, power, and status. Chapter 6 deals with the mission of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics and their contact with Continental influences, which were instrumental in regenerating an array of art forms in the later centuries; most particularly the impetus of the Benedictine reform movement. The final thematic chapter reviews the invigorating

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impact of Viking art styles. A concluding afterword examines the inspirational legacy of Anglo-Saxon art which continued beyond the Norman Conquest up to the present.

The Staffordshire Hoard has been fascinating the public since its discovery and this well-timed book will encourage the popular audience to explore other Anglo-Saxon artefacts for the first time. The text is highly readable and assisted by a glossary (pp. 248–51), rendering it accessible to the interested non-specialist. This publication is also a useful reference volume for students and researchers. A bibliography and web resource (pp. 248–51) for each chapter will also prove of lasting value, particularly to anyone engaged in finds research.

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