Exhibition review

'Meet the Vikings'—or meet halfway? The new Viking display at the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen

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How does a major European museum maintain its high profile as a cultural institution when faced with dwindling public funds? The decision of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen to refurbish its Viking gallery under the direction of a celebrity designer has caused a stir far beyond Denmark. Appointed in 2017, the Museum's director, Rane Willerslev, has vowed to set this venerable institution on a more contemporary and commercially viable track. As one of his first major initiatives, he contracted the fashion designer and reality television star Jim Lyngvild to brush up the Viking Age gallery—one of the museum's most prominent international attractions, but strangely a hitherto somewhat neglected part of the display.

This is an alliance meant to attract attention. And so it has. Lyngvild has made his name by skilfully embracing the Viking idiom in everything from fashion design and cosmetics to craft beer and art photography. Danes are familiar with images of his Viking-styled mansion, complete with a neo-pagan temple, enough to stir the envy of any movie-set creator. He is also outspoken on any and every subject. He is a public icon, whom people either love or love to hate. When the likes of Lyngvild are brought in by the country's leading historical museum, and when, furthermore, it is announced that the opening of the exhibition will be combined with a launch party for the next season of the History channel television series *Vikings*, the museum is clearly angling for publicity.

The opening event has been surrounded by media debate in Denmark as well as other Nordic countries. No small feat for what is essentially a re-decoration of a four-room gallery. Critics have praised the design, but also raised a host of questions: should a first-rate archaeological museum hand such a prime opportunity to an outsider? Has it provided a celebrity and businessperson with invaluable free advertising space? Is a major public museum risking its reputation in pursuit of publicity? The answer to all of the above is yes. Whether it works remains to be answered.

Visually, Lyngvild has delivered an impressive and attractive gallery. The main display is dominated by a group of larger-than-life-sized photographs of models in dazzling period costume. These images complement display cases of archaeological finds, mostly of precious metals and mostly displayed as they were before the redecoration. The photographs are powerful, intriguing and compelling visualisations of the past. At least, until one begins to consider the details. Set on the wall behind a display case filled with silver ornaments, a 'Viking' lumberjack sits in a brooding pose. Surprisingly, he is wearing a Hungarian horseman's kaftan, complete with a silver-plated sabretache, which would have been the envy of the Carpathian Basin in the tenth century. He is a character who could well have met Scandinavians on their Russian river ventures, but here he is presented as a Viking. What is a steppe nomad doing in this gallery?

A photograph of a 'shield maiden' (female fighter) sports a post-Viking Age sword together with a Byzantine helmet and what looks suspiciously like a Chinese-style silk kimono; she would not be out of character in *Mulan* or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. A 'merchant's wife' wears a personal selection of garments including Berdal-style brooches (*c.* AD 800, West Scandinavia), a bag with 'eastern' mounts (tenth century, East Scandinavia), a large rock crystal bead (Gotland, twelfth to thirteenth centuries) and two finger rings, one High Middle Ages, the other modern (and, to add irony, featuring an image of a Bronze Age ship).

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ANTIQUITY 93 367 (2019): 256–259 https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.1

Who are these people? Some of the models wear Lyngvild's own creations; but most, it turns out, are re-enactors who have assembled their own attire. Lyngvild has photographed them out of a designer's genuine admiration for their exquisite—and certainly imaginative—hand-crafted *couture*. Neither he nor they were bound to historical accuracy, and they could never have guessed that they would one day find their images in the gallery of an internationally renowned archaeological collection.

In addition to the photographs, the display is spiced up with several life-like, if rather gory, rubber heads. Some are used to mount original ornaments, some simply to display unbelievable beards and fantastic head tattoos that evoke a heavy metal band crashing into Disney's 'Pirates of the Caribbean' (Figure 1). Put in display cases with some of the museum's finest original objects, these heads manage to steal the show completely. For all their weirdness, however, they do put an important question to the visitor: what, really, do we know about these ancient people? Yet the choice to combine the tattooed heads with a quote from a contemporaneous Arab source suggesting that 'Vikings' could indeed have been tattooed suggests that such contemplation is unintended.

The final flight of fancy is provided by a series of decorative laser-cut steel plates, set between the large photographs. Some feature genuine Viking Age decorative motifs, although none from the objects in the museum's own collection. Others are decorated with a much older seventh-century ornament, apparently selected on aesthetic grounds. How could anyone have chosen these decorative themes for a collection that houses such definitive Viking-style objects as the Jelling beaker and the Mammen axe?

Why have all these elements ended up as the highlights of the Viking gallery at the National Museum in Copenhagen? The exhibition provides no clear answers. The pictures certainly align with one remark, tucked away at the bottom of a panel of introductory text, that the exhibition "explores the borderland between fact and fiction"; but they make a poor match with the expectations raised by the title: 'Meet the Vikings'. It is even more difficult to square this with the claim on the museum's website that the displays "put a face to the housewife, warrior, berserker, völva and peasant as they probably looked when alive". With the possible exception of the faces, this gallery is a far cry from an educated guess as to how any Viking Age Scandinavian "probably looked".

The museum's response to its critics has been revealing. Press releases before the opening claimed that the whole process had been tightly controlled by expert curators. When faced with criticism following the opening, the response has shifted to emphasise that staff were intended only to curate display texts, implying that the designer, Lyngvild, was given a free hand with all other aspects of the display. In interviews, the director has stressed budget constraints, or blamed 'elitist' critics for allegedly opposing the idea of approachable and popular museum displays, diverting attention from the specific points raised. This move to distance itself from the result (and, unfairly, from the invited partner) well testifies to a sense of the museum's problems.

While knowledgeable curators have been involved, it has become apparent that most of the museum's internationally recognised period specialists, as well as experts in dress and textiles, were not consulted. Those put to work on the display were certainly aware that major staff cuts were to be announced weeks before the opening—hardly a time to come forward with objections.

The problem is not Lyngvild's. He has done a fine job at what he does best, and he has been rewarded with generous attention, acclaim and publicity. From the museum's perspective, arguably, the move to invite in a publicity-grabbing designer was a clever idea, a way to engage audiences who normally associate such institutions with boredom or elitism. Nor is it a problem to present bold, even controversial, reconstructions and visualisations. What is deeply concerning about this display, however, is the failure to match the experiment with available expertise, relegating the curators to stagehands for a designer. This reduces the display to entertainment or, worse, to an apparent confirmation of contemporary myths.

A few changes would have done much to improve the situation. Rather than relying on Lyngvild's stock photographs, for example, purpose-made reconstructions, created in collaboration with expert curators, would have been welcome. A genuine dialogue "between fact and fiction" could also have worked: short texts presenting comments by the models shown in the photographs, by the designer and by

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. A display from the National Museum's redesigned Viking gallery (copyright National Museum of Denmark).

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the curators; this would have made the terms of the experience clearer to visitors, and would have played well to the idea of a celebrity-driven exhibition.

As it is, the feel of the exhibition is that of a fashion show. Hardly any aspect of the Viking Age is showcased, except for (a dubious version of) elite dress and personal presentation. This leaves a severely amputated view of this pivotal period of Nordic history. There are warriors for sure. Kings and queens, certainly. And shamans, the museum director's personal obsession. But where are the pervasive maritime activities that made the Viking Age, well, the Viking Age? Where is the long-distance exchange, to which every hoard and metal ornament in the display testifies? Where is the rest of Viking life? In searching for popularity, this gallery reaches for populism.

The National Museum in Copenhagen has stumbled with this exhibition, not for a lack of original ideas or courage, but rather for being careless with what one still hopes to be its core values. As with many of the world's great museums, it is struggling to adjust itself to new and challenging circumstances.

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2019.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press