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Copenhagen: A Review of the Meet the Vikings Exhibition

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When entering the National Museum in Copenhagen, one finds it is organized mainly chronologically, where the prehistory of Denmark is located on the ground floor. “Mød Vikingerne” or “Meet the Vikings” opened in this wing on the 26th of November, occupying three galleries attached to the permanent prehistoric exhibition. The exhibition had potential to understand the modern reception of Vikings through popular culture as was shown by the grand opening. The event was in conjunction with HBO Nordic and welcomed the Danish cast of the “Vikings” series along with Jim Lyngvild – reality tv star, designer, and artist – who worked with the museum staff; Peter Vang Petersen (whose focus is the Stone Age) and Jeanette Varberg (a researcher of the Bronze Age) instead of experts with a focus on the Viking Age² to reimagine the exhibition and created the portraits and busts featured in the display. Now the hype is over and the only “modern reception” we are met with is Lyngvild’s portraits. The exhibition has been met with much criticism, to which the museum responded that the exhibition’s purpose was to create dialogue and communication that is not limited to the current knowledge and research as well as creating an aesthetic experience for the visitors.³ As either a critic or supporter

¹ MA Student, University of Iceland;

² Søren M. Sindbæk, “Arkæolog: Jim Lyngvilds vikingeutstilling er flot, men præget af historieløs udklædningsleg,” Forskerzonen, last modified November 29, 2018,

<https://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/arkaolog-jim-lyngvilds-vikingeutstilling-er-flot-men-praeket-af-historieloes>.

³ Jeanette Vanberg, Peter Pentz, Peter Vang Petersen, “Nationalmuseet: Vi udfordrer grænserne for formidling i ny vikingeutstilling,” last modified November 29, 2018,

of the new exhibit, the fact remains that when entering the prehistoric wing, there is more than a little confusion.

It is the job of those designing the exhibition to gently guide the viewer through in the most informative and engaging, but also the least stressful way possible. If a guest feels overwhelmed, often from sensory overload, they will stop reading, reacting, and learning. Yet before the viewer even enters a gallery in the National Museum, they are presented with an impossible choice: Do they want to begin by meeting the Vikings or do they want to start from the beginning of time (the Stone Age in this case)? The “first” gallery on either end of the prehistoric wing presents the information relevant to what the viewer will see further into the display. This implies either of the galleries could be the beginning of the exhibition and there is no indication of a suggested route; Vikings or Stone Age?

The National Museum’s website suggests that the first gallery of “Mød Vikingerne” is the one featuring portraits of berserker and a völva and ends with a larger gallery which features extensive hoard finds.⁴ However, following this route and continuing through to the rest of prehistory, you will find the gallery numbers begin to count down and you are going through time backwards. The information panels in the following galleries will also be presented to you backward, forcing you to retrace your steps through each gallery. And yet, I do not recommend starting in the Stone Age because when you reach “Mød Vikingerne,” it is incredibly overwhelming. While the same introductory panel from the other side of the exhibition is also present here, you are still required to find your own way through the poorly labeled artefacts which are juxtaposed against Lyngvild’s interpretive portraits. The artefacts in the museum’s collection are given little consideration. The objects are grouped and labeled by hoard,

<https://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/nationalmuseet-vi-udfordrer-graenserne-for-formidling-i-ny-vikingeutstilling>.

⁴ “Jim Lyngvild redesigner Nationalmuseets udstilling om vikinger,” Nationalmuseet, last modified November 15, 2018, <https://natmus.dk/nyhed/jim-lyngvild-redesigner-nationalmuseets-udstilling-om-vikinger/>.

however the individual artefacts are lacking even the simple, tombstone labels. Most of these portraits feature extended labels which explain that the portraits are interpretations and modern perceptions of Vikings, but there are plenty which are not afforded the same care and viewers must infer what or who they represent.

Having described the structure of the exhibition, I wish to focus on the portraits by Jim Lyngvild as they encapsulate these “Vikings.” Each character fills only one role in his or her society. Male images greatly outnumber what we see of women in these portraits; however, it seems Lyngvild has given more consideration to the niche roles a woman could fill, differentiating between an everyday housewife and a wealthy merchant’s wife. The men, though, are given the option of being a warrior or a ruler. Only one of the male portraits does not fit this paradigm; the portrait of a father with his son. Representations such as these simplify people who were once living and thriving, and who formed the Scandinavia we know today.

Our modern views of gender identity and expression may hold no bearing over how gender was perceived historically, but these portraits are clearly labeled as men and women. Individually, the men portrayed greatly outnumber the women, and men and women never appear together in the portraits. In fact, none of the women appear with another character, existing only in isolation. Two female portraits are labeled as wives, though they are portrayed without their husbands and the focus is on their style of dress as defined by their status through their husbands. This is also true of Queen Tove, who is ornately dressed in red silk with gold brocade. Her title of Queen is due to her marriage to King Harald Blåtand or Bluetooth; he is the only husband we see, though still in a separate portrait.

The women presented in this exhibition are young or middle-aged and dressed modestly. Even the *völva*, despite the two human skulls, does not scream “outsider.” It is interesting to note that the roles given to these women do not include Mother, which may be the first role we consider when we imagine women in this historical context. Instead, they are wives and while not sexually objectified, do not challenge what may be considered conventionally attractive.

Even the völva does not appear as a stereotypical, old crone. While giving the impression of someone older, her face is devoid of wrinkles and therefore conforms to this idea of conventional attractiveness.

One of these female roles is that of the popular character of the shieldmaiden, and compared to her male counterparts, she is an interesting figure. Her hair is cropped short and she carries a helmet, sword, and shield. Despite this, she remains dressed in a more feminine manner than the male warriors and is also the only character with scars. It appears as though these scars are intended to help the viewer see her transition into the masculine role of a warrior. Because she is a woman stepping into a conventionally male role, there is a need to prove her prowess as a warrior that the male characters do not share. Beside this portrait is a male fighter; an “imperial bodyguard” who wears chain mail and also has short hair, but does not show scars or other signs of battle-wear.

As for the male portraits, they are allowed to appear with other male characters in their portraits where the women are all depicted solo. One of these is a father with his son, though he is one of the portraits not significant enough to be afforded an object label explaining Lyngvild’s interpretations. The rest are warriors and rulers; the two masculine occupations. Though not quite as savage and roguish as the Vikings Elizabeth Sklar discusses, these portraits perpetuate a similar gender stereotype as they are definitely “manly men doing manly things in a manly way.”⁵ Most of these are depicted with at least one weapon, aside from the beserkir where weapons are not clearly visible despite their inherent status as warriors. These are also the only characters which come across as sexually objectified. Lyngvild incorporates both definitions of beserkir: “bear shirt” because they wear animal heads atop their own, and “bare shirt” because the pelts are their only clothing. They crouch, not posed for battle, but fully aware of their muscularity and status as fighters of Óðinn. The rulers in the

⁵ Elizabeth Sklar, “Call of the Wild: Culture Shock and Viking Masculinities in *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999),” in *The Vikings on Film; Essays on depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc, 2011), 128.

exhibition are a nameless chieftain and Harald Bluetooth. Based on their attributes, the status of each appears quite similar; each only carries a sword and both wear the expensive colors of red and blue. Harald Bluetooth seems to be able to assert his status solely on his regal pose, with a hand on the hilt of his sword; evocative of portraits of military leaders both past and present.

The exhibition also makes use of silicon busts. One of these is used to display a glass bead necklace from Lejre, which has been interpreted as a woman's necklace. This façade is the oldest character in the exhibition and not overtly feminine. In fact, it looks more impish than human; think Billy Crystal as Miracle Max in *The Princess Bride*. The rest are all notably masculine, manly men with head tattoos and braided beards. These are not used to display artefacts, though they appear in display cases beside such historical objects. Perhaps the intention was to emphasise the stereotypical masculinity of the Scandinavian men who went on raids and gave us the impression of barbaric "Vikings," who in one of the exhibition's information panels are described as being young men of royal descent. But we can only speculate as to the busts' purpose and message when there are no labels to provide an explanation.

In portrayals such as these, it is difficult to capture the multifaceted lives of historical people. But women are not just "wives of..." For example, Áslaug in *Ragnars saga loðbróke*, is a peasant child, a beautiful wife and mother, clever in her riddle, royalty as the child of Sigurðr, a prophetess shown when she proves her lineage by through the birth of Sigurðr Snake-in-the-Eye, and once her children are men, she changes roles again and becomes a shieldmaiden. No such diversity is granted in these portraits. The image of the father does challenge some assumptions about the role of parents and kin-structure, but the other male portraits rely heavily on the stereotype of overt masculinity as a necessary quality of Vikings to be rulers and successful fighters. Such problems could be easily remedied by increased extended object labels. Without an explicit explanation, the silicon busts and portraits are left up to interpretation by the viewer. This is an important facet of presenting artwork, but history museums have an obligation to educate their audience.

This exhibition could have easily focused solely on modern reception of the Viking Age and used this to educate the public on the multifaceted roles of both men and women in Scandinavia during this time period and shatter our preconceived notions of “Vikings.” Instead, it is a showcase of portraits which challenge the material culture and present women only in roles attractive to modern society while men are pigeon-holed into being strong fighters. As a bid for increased commercial recognition, this exhibition is a great success. Yet, as an educational tool of the Viking Age, including modern perceptions of the era, it leaves a lot to be desired.

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