

Irish Miniature in the Context of Culture Ornaments of Celtic Origin

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Motto: " 'Illuminated manuscripts' means, for the Irish people, a starting point of the imagination, which embellishes, which forgets about itself up to the absurd. Looking at the miniatures, it is hard to imagine something more refined and closer to perfection" (Edward Quaille¹)

Abstract: The article comprises brief appreciations about the importance and contribution of the Miniature Art to the development of the culture, art and civilization of the Middle Ages. The small Celtic island – Ireland has influenced in a great manner the European creations and the miniature manuscripts from the 6th – 9th century. As surprisingly as it may seem, the majority of the manuscripts are essentially dominated by the abstract approach, which is close to the non-figurative creations. The testimony of this approach is represented by the Irish ornaments of Celtic origin, that are unique, complicated, non-repeatable, and full of unforeseen, which prove an unending fantasy and a great technical virtuosity.

Keywords: Celtic, Kells, Knots, spirals, Irish

Journey into the culture of the miniature

The Irish style has, at its roots, the development of the medieval miniature on the entire European continent, beginning with the Carolingian Renaissance. Powerful and original, the miniature art appears first of all in

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¹ Edward Quaille, *Illuminated Manuscripts: Their Origin, History and Characteristics, A Sketch*, by Edward Quaille, WITH TWENTY – SIX EXAMPLE FROM BOOKS OF HOURS IN HIS POSSESSION, LIVERPOOL, HENRY YOUNG AND SONS, SOUTH CASTLE STREET, 1897; Digitized Archive in 2011 with funding from Brigham Young University, ISBN – 3 – 1197 – 00140 – 0636, Chap. Styles of Illumination subsequent to A.D. 1000, Anglo-Saxon-Irish, p. 66.

Ireland, then in England and later on in the Flemish and French workshops. It is the art of one age, the Medieval Age, where it knows its beginning, its top and its decline and it appears at the beginning of two ages, Antiquity and Middle Ages. **The origin** of the Miniature is in the Antiquity, in the Egyptian and Greek papyrus, in the Oriental art². The main inspiration **sources** of the Miniature are:

- Byzantine Art, as depository and continuer of the Ancient art, under its Hellenistic form.
- Christian Egypt, from which it loans its hieratic and conventional character. Egypt being one of the most complex and fascinating cultures of the humankind, with the most religious people, with art inspired from religion, with its first cosmogonist conceptions about universe, mystics and sacred symbols.
- From Syria and Armenia comes the vividly coloured art.
- The art of the Orient represents another influence that powerfully manifests itself after Spain was conquered by the Arabs in 711, by luxuriant and refined ornaments.³

The European Middle Ages aspires towards renewal and assimilation, imprinting a unique character to the miniature. The artist from the Occident addresses to a greater extent to the heart and aspires towards the emotional, while the Byzantine artist, through his harsh creations with a dramatic face, addresses to the spirit and aspires towards the divine essence.⁴

In Ireland, being the only Celtic country that was not conquered by the Romans, the miniature created here was encouraged by the entering of the Christianity in the 3rd century, influencing the miniature in Europe, contributing in an essential manner to the development of art in the Middle Ages.⁵

An important role in the spreading of Christianity and in the promotion of miniature art on the Continent belonged to the Irish Missionarism (5th – 7th century) accomplished by the wondering monks known under the name of 'scotti peregrinii' or 'Iro-Schotten'. These, going all over Europe, contributed to:

- The spreading of Christianity in Ireland in the 3rd century, in Northumbria in the 5th century (England nowadays), in the Franc Kingdom in the 5th – 7th century (Germany nowadays) – where it begins with the moment of the Christianity of King Clovis in

² V. Cartianu, *Miniatura irlandeză*, Ed. Meridiane, 1976, p. 5.

³ V. Cartianu, V. Dene, *Miniatura Medievală în Anglia*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1980, p. 5-7.

⁴ V. Dene, *Miniatura franceză*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1983, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

496, then in Switzerland, France, Austria and the Czech Republic of nowadays.⁶

In 432, Patricius was sent from Rome to Ireland, Patricius who later on will become Saint Patrick, the founder of the monasteries Durrow, Derry and Arnagh – which becomes the ecclesiastic capital of Ireland.

- The promotion of culture and art by creating scriptoriums, workshops and monastic establishments: Kells, Durrow, Deer, Lindisfarne, Ierna, St. Galen, Luxeuil, Fulda, Tours, Corbie, etc. These will become the schools and universities of the future, searchers of scholar and disciples from other countries.⁷
- Introduction to the Irish writing and language. Through the Irish missions, Europe knew a 'peaceful Celtic invasion', from the west to the east. A curiosity of the Latin palaeography is the Irish writing adopted in England, dominated for centuries by the Romans (44 – 410). Thus, the language that will become the official language of England has at its basis the Irish language, not the Roman one. In Germany, the Irish writing is kept until the 8th century.⁸

The Irish pilgrimages mark the cultural currents of the 7th and 8th centuries and prove how active the circulation of people and ideas was. Certain names of Irish pilgrims deserve to be recalled: * Colum – Chile, who became St. Columba in 550, the founder of Kells Monastery – in old Irish Kennans, Latinised Cenadae, Cenannus and then Kenlis. 'The Book of Kells' was written here, which is a masterpiece and a jewellery of the Irish miniature.⁹

- The Irish Bishop Killian, who founded the Monastery St. Gall from Switzerland, one of the manuscripts kept here is the 'Scottice Scriptu', written with Irish characters.¹⁰
- Wendelin – son of an Irish king, who became St. Wendelin of Trier, worshiped by the Eastern and Catholic Orthodox churches.

An important part was also played by the exodus of culture people who were searching for tranquillity, which they did not have anymore on the Continent, seeking refuge in Ireland, where a non-Romanised Celtic was spoken. The historian Beda (672 – 753), in his work 'Ecclesiastic History' presents us these active scholars, preoccupied by 'Studia major' – the art of illustration and ligature of books.¹¹ Scholar Dunstan (Canterbury), Aethelwlof (Winchester), Oswald (York) organised cultural collaborations

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁸ V. Cartianu, *Miniatura Germană*, Ed. Meridiane, 1982, p. 8.

⁹ www.galeriadearta.com/dictionar/artamerovingiana159.html

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

¹¹ Beda, 'Historia Ecclesiastica', III, 27, citat de Martin Mc. Namara în = 'Psalter Text and Psaltes Study in the Early Irish Church', Proc. R.I.A, Dublin, 1973, *op. cit.*: 1980, p. 18.

with France, they found the Anglo-Normand School and supported the miniature art.

Summary of the ages that have marked miniature art: The Byzantine Age – which keeps the preference for allegory, the Merovingian Age (5th – 6th centuries), which keeps the powerful Celtic – Irish influence. The Carolingian peak, 9th – 12th centuries, and the Paleologic Renaissance, 13th – 15th centuries, equivalent with the historic Byzantine end, influencing painting: Cimabue, Giotto, Duccio. To these, we add the ages of the schools from the continent, especially the French, Italian, Spanish, Flemish ones, the ages of the insular schools, Hiberno-Saxon and then Anglo-Norman, the schools from Bohemia and Werden. These schools have kept, permanently and reciprocally, the connection with Ireland. The Carolingian age comprises the most important and durable accomplishments linked to the name of Charles the Great (771 – 814), claimed both by the French 'Charlemagne', as well as by the Germans 'Carl des Grose'. In the opinion of the historian Will Durant: 'the most just and illuminated reign that Europe had ever since Theodoric the Great 'is the one of Charles the Great.'¹² The essence of the Carolingian Renaissance, under the reign of Charles, consists in:

- The conciliation of Christianity with the ancient wisdom, being the link between
 - The classic culture
 - The Occidental humanity (12th – 13th centuries)
 - The Renaissance humanity.¹³
- The merit to have united for the first time all Teutonic nations.
- The merit to imprint an administrative and religious unity in Europe.
- He supported and encouraged art, education and culture.

After 30 years from the death of Charles the Great, by the Treaty of Verdun – 843, France, Italy and Germany are established. In England, the Irish influence is very powerful for two centuries (6th – 7th), being the first country that benefited from the Irish mission. Later on, it defines the Hiberno-Saxon style, balanced, temperate.¹⁴ In France, the Irish influence is kept only in the Merovingian miniature, then it gets a full autonomy, ending abruptly with Jean Fouquet. The French miniature is receptive to the influence of Flemish and Italian Renaissance. The Flemish influence replaces the religious idealism with the optimistic realism and new aesthetic concepts appear. The gothic style, with its touch of realism, will put its seal also on the creation of miniature books.¹⁵ The German miniature knows its peak in the

¹² Will Durant, *L'Histoire de la civilisation, L'âge de la foi*, Paris, Payot, 1952, *op. cit.* 1982, p. 11-12.

¹³ Jacek Debicki, *Istoria artei, pictură, sculptură, arhitectură*, tradus de Corina Stancu, Ed. Enciclopedia, RAO, București, 1992, p. 70, 80.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹⁵ V. Dene, *Miniatura franceză*, p. 23.

Ottonian age. It keeps the Celtic, German, Oriental, English and Italian elements, which arrive from Sweden up to Sicily. The Irish writing is kept until the 9th century, although the 'Carolingian Majuscule' had appeared.¹⁶

Miniature knew ages of great mastery and originality. The great scholar scientist N. Iorga considers the miniature as 'a synthesis between the most interesting and fertile of the Hellenistic heritages, passing through the Roman simplification and being inspired by a very special style of Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt.'¹⁷ The miniature manuscripts are spread in all countries, influencing each other with elements: Celtic – Irish, Roman, Byzantine, Oriental, Anglo – Saxon, Carolingian, Ottonien, Anglo – Norman, Flemish, Italian, Spanish and Mozarabic.

Miniature gets enriched in time with laic, philosophical, scientific, literary themes, also enriching the repertoire of other artistic genres: stained glass, engraving, easel painting. The religious subject is simplified and humanized. It comes to a perfect balance between: imagination, tradition, realism, to which one associates: virtuosity, spontaneity and the free sketching of the drawing.

In the 15th century, around the Renaissance age that will follow and will replace the medieval ascetics and severity, having as its essence the ennoblement of the human being, during this time an individual note is manifested in the miniature, it passes from anonymous artists to artists who have a name and a reputation. The taste of the public does not change that fast, which explains the persistency of the miniature until the 17th century.¹⁸ The great number of books in the Irish style was not only created on the island, but also on the Continent.

The Palaeographer E.H. Lowe, studying the medieval manuscripts from several countries from Europe, notices an enormous production of Irish Books, emphasizing the huge role of the Irish scribes and painters. All the advanced studies of Lowe are gathered in his work 'Codices Latini Antiquiores', which is a palaeographic guide for the manuscripts created before the 9th century, drawn up by the author from 1926 until the end of his life, in 1969. (The work has 12 volumes). Only in Germany, he studied 400 manuscripts in 67 libraries from 49 cities and found out that half of the manuscripts were Irish and Anglo-Saxon, brought by 'Iro-Schotten', those 'scotti peregrini', or the Hibernics.¹⁹

¹⁶ V. Cartianu, *Miniatura Germană*, p. 46.

¹⁷ N. Iorga, *Ancien art et vieilles modes*, Paris, Ed. Gambert, 1926, *op. cit.*, 1983.

¹⁸ Hanns Swaronski, *Manuscrits à peintures, romans, et gotiques*, Collection UNESCO de l'art mondial, Paris, New York, 1959, *op. cit.*, 1980, p. 19.

¹⁹ Elias Avery Lowe, *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, Part II, Great Britain and Ireland, Oxford at the Calderon Press, 1926 – 1969, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 21.

The Celtic essence

Ireland, named Ivernia in the Antiquity, was inhabited by the Pretans and afterwards populated by the Celts, Welsh, Fir-erem, people of Ireland, who bring a superior culture. The Proto-Celts used bronze. During the second Iron Age, known under the name of 'La Tène', the artistic creativity of the Celtic genius reaches its peak. The objects brought to light by the archaeologists were qualified as 'a glory of the barbarian world and a huge contribution of the Celts to the European culture'.²⁰

The Celtic archaism reflects an Indo-European inheritance written in the Irish and Hindu legal treaties. In Ireland are also found numerous customs attested in Ancient India. The Indo-European beliefs have survived in the Welsh world until the 18th century also in India even up to our times. The archaism of the Celtic culture shows the continuity of certain religious ideas from the proto – history until de Middle Ages, proving an amazing cultural continuity.(20)²¹

There is no autochthonous written text about the religion of the continental Celts, because of the ritual prohibition of the writing, the only written sources are the Greek – Latin ones from the Welsh – Roman age. The insular Celts produced an abundant epic literature after their conversion to Christianity, prolonging the tradition of the pre-Christian mythological tradition. Archaeological discoveries prove the archaism of the Celtic culture and the continuity of the religious idea from proto-history to the Middle Ages. A part of these ideas belonged to the religious thesaurus from the Neolithic. These ideas were taken in an early age by the Celts and were partially integrated in the Indo – European theological system.

The Celts gave a huge importance to the sacred space and to the symbolism, 'the Centre of the World'. We mention some examples of Indo – Celtic parallelism:

- Fasting – as a mean of enforcing a legal request and
- The magic – religious value of the truth

²⁰ M. Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, vol. 2, cap. XXI, *Celți, germane, traci și geți*, Ed. Universitos, Chișinău, 1992, p. 136 – 138, Despre preistoria celtilor a se vedea: E. Sprackhoff 'CENTRAL EUROPEAN URAFIELD CULTURE AND CELTIC LA TENE', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 1955, p. 257 – 281; G. Devoto 'ORIGINI INDEUROPEENE' Firenze, 1962, p. 389; Stuart Piggott, 'ANCIENT EUROPE', Edinburgh, 1963, p. 215 and THE DRUIDS, London, 1968, p. 9 – 24, 62

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 139 – 141, see: G. Drumezil 'SERVIUS ET LA FORTUNE', 1942, P. 221 ; Myles Dillon 'THE ARCHAISM OF IRISH TRADITION', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 33, 1947, p. 245 – 264; C. WATKINS 'INDO-EUROPEAN METRICS AND ARCHAIC IRISH VERSE', *Celtica* 6, 1963, p. 194.

The Indo-Celtic elements, to which they are added the Indo-European, the Indo-Iranian and the Italic – Celtic ones have survived thanks to some powerful priest colleges, depositories of sacred traditions.²²

The Celtic social three-folding – we find it in Ireland after the conversion to Christianity and it is written by classic authors and in Irish documents. Thus, under the 'rig' authority (Sanskrit – Ray, Latin – Reg), the society was made of: 1. The druid class (dru-uit), meaning 'the High Scholars', priests, jurists, keepers of tradition, dominated everything. 2. The military aristocracy, owner of the land (in Irish 'flaith', in Welsh 'vlato', in German 'gewalt'), meaning power.

An important source is the work 'DeBello Gallico VI, 13' in which Cesar presents the Celtic Pantheon in a Roman interpretation, having a good knowledge of the Celtic creeds and traditions. In what concerns the value of the testimonies of Cesar, Eliade recommends the hypercritical work of Michael Rambaud.²³

To conclude, the measurement of the Celtic genius results from the perseverance of the maintenance of archaic elements and their continuous revalorisation from Antiquity until the Pre-modern Age. The Celts are the heirs of a proto-history especially rich in creations, they are also the holders of some pure and original artistic traditions.

Insular art – Irish ornaments of Celtic origin

The Irish show us what miniature art exactly means, art of whose blossom is overlapping with the impulse offered by Christianity. In comparison to the realist style of the Antiquity and in comparison to the Byzantine style which shows us how the art of the ancient Greeks was, the Irish miniature style has its own features.²⁴ The true inheritance of the insular art is not given by the stylistic characteristics, but by the fundamental rupture from the classical approach. By renouncing to rigid conventions, the artists treated composition in a free manner, spontaneously, thus the multitude of expression possibilities and the appreciation towards the nonfigurative creation. The Irish miniature shocks through its specific Irish **abstractionism**, being a surprising and early anticipation of the abstractionism. The amalgam of symbols generates a certain eremitism, but at

²² *Ibidem*, p. 139, 140, *Despre religia celților*; Jan de Vries 'La religion des Celtes', 1960, p. 157 ; Mario Duval 'Les Dieux de la gaule', 1976, the new revised edition of the work published in 1957; Fracoise Le Roux 'La religion des Celtes' în : *Histoire des Religion, Encyclopedie de la Pleiade*, I, 1970, p. 780 – 840.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 141, 440, see: G. Drumezil 'L'ideologie tripartite des Indo – Europeenes', Bruxelles, 1958, p. 11; Regarding the value of Caesar's statements, see: Michel Rambaud, 'L'art de la deformation historique dans les commentaires de Cezar', (2nd press run, revised and enriched) Paris, 1968, p 328 – 333 ; G. Drumezil 'Mythe et Epopée', I, 1968, p. 602 – 612 (for the epic tradition); G. Devoto 'Origini indeuropee', Firenze, 1962, p. 389

²⁴ Quail Edward, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

the same time it generates astonishment and admiration. The Celtic ornaments – the cross with 8 circles, the entrelac (entrelacs = elements linked and crossed), triskelion (the triscele = ornament with 3 lines that leaves from the same point), pointille = dot lines, simple spiral, broken, dual (the dual centred spiral), double (a double spiral); the nods (knots = named curls without end or 'the work of angels'), all these have set the grounds of large abstractization.²⁵

This tendency appears from intellectual reasons, or spiritual ones, or magic ones. In the aesthetics of pre-history, it is hard to establish if abstract art followed figurative art or preceded it. The art is either purely abstract, or figuratively – abstract, as it is the case of Irish miniature. Misses Françoise Henry, Celtic researcher of the early Irish art, critic and historian of art, member of the Royal Irish Academy (R.I.A), has brilliantly emphasized the old Irish art 'Even in the objects of the Christian cult, the Irish ease through the symbols of the old cults abolished through the evangelisation of the island. The author finds the survival of this purely abstract ornamental art, who defeated Europe even since the end of the Palaeolithic. 'For thousands of years, this art has never ceased to imitate nature, being preoccupied only by the infinite combinations of decorative motifs.'²⁶

Quaile thinks that the authors of the miniatures must have had instruments of an exceptional finesse in order to reach this rare perfection, which is difficult to follow even with our own eyes. He also says that 'by examining a miniature from 'The Book of Kells' counted on a piece of 1 cm and 158 interlacements.'²⁷ The Irish art was also labelled as '**impressionist**' by the critic Masai F. – 1947, given the originality of the aesthetic revolution. It is also considered '**expressionist**' because it just presents the vision of the artist, which gives the accomplishments a reduced degree of communicability.'²⁸

Art historians usually group insular art as part of the Migration Period art movement as well as Early Medieval Western art, and it is the combination of these two traditions that gives the style its special character. Most insular art originates from the Irish monasticism of Celtic Christianity and the period begins around 600 AD with the combining of 'Celtic` styles and Anglo-Saxon (English) styles. The influence of Insular art affected subsequent European medieval art, especially in the decorative elements of Romanesque and Gothic manuscripts. Surviving examples of Insular art are mainly illuminated manuscripts, metalwork and carvings in stone, especially

²⁵ V. Cartianu, *op. cit.*, p. 27, 31.

²⁶ M. Brion, *Arta Abstractă*, Biblioteca de Artă, Biografii, Memorii, Eseuri, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1972, p. 92 – 103.

²⁷ Edward Quaile, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁸ F. Masai, 'Essai sur les origines de la miniature dite irlandaise', Ed. Erasme S.A., Bruxelles, 1976.

stone crosses. The best examples include the Book of Kells, Lindisfarne Gospels, and the Book of Durrow.

The Insular style is most famous for its highly dense, intricate and imaginative decoration, which takes elements from several earlier styles. From late Celtic art come the love of spirals, triskeles, circles and other geometric motifs. These were combined with animal forms probably mainly deriving from the Germanic version of the general Eurasian animal style, and also from Celtic art, where heads terminating scrolls were common. There is no attempt of representing depth in manuscript painting, with all the emphasis on a brilliantly patterned surface. In early works, the human figure was shown in the same geometric fashion as animal figures, but reflections of a classical figure style spread as the period went on.²⁹

Background

The true legacy of insular art lies not so much in the specific stylistic features mentioned in the last section, but in the fundamental departure from the classical approach to decoration, whether of books or other works of art. The barely controllable energy of Insular decoration, spiralling across formal partitions, becomes a feature of later medieval art, especially Gothic art, in areas where specific Insular motifs are hardly used, such as architecture. The mixing of the figurative with the ornamental also remained a characteristic of later medieval illumination; indeed, as far as the complexity and density of the mixture, insular manuscripts are only rivalled by some 15th century works from the final flowering of the Flemish illumination. It is also noticeable that these characteristics are always rather more pronounced in the North of Europe than in the South; Italian art, even in the Gothic period, has always retained a certain classical clarity in forms.³⁰

It can be said that the Insular style arises from the meeting of their two styles, Celtic and Germanic Animal style, in a Christian context, being aware of Late Antique style, especially in their application to the book, which was a new type of object for both traditions, as well as to metalwork. Although many more examples have survived than of large pieces of metalwork, the development of this style is usually described in terms of the same outstanding examples.

Geometric motifs

● "Eight-Circled Cross"

Following the genealogy text is the "Book of Kells", the only full portrait of Christ facing the book's only "Carpet" page. This is also referred

²⁹ *** Illuminated Manuscripts, Ed. Romanesque Art, 1999, cap. Insular Art, p. 24.

³⁰ Charles Gidley, „The Book of Kells“, Del Mar, CA92014, U.S.A., Ed. By ARIANA BOOKS ISBN 978-1-60863-720-1, 2011, p. 10.

to as the "Eight-Circled Cross" page. Carpet pages are fully ornamented representations of precisely balanced geometric patterns, densely, embellished with discs, spirals and interlacing. These somewhat mysterious artistic forms may have had their origins in Coptic and Oriental art.³¹

This is considered to be an iconic symbol for Christ. Note the profession of "triskelia" and triple spirals, ancient Celtic symbols for the cycle of birth, life, and death, as well as the page's presentation of the cruciform motif. As a composite image of Christian iconography, this page symbolizes human salvation through Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection.(Fig.1)



Fig. 1 The Carpet Page, "Eight-Circle Cross", "Book of Kells"

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.

● **Spirals.** Spirals show the accomplishment of an individual to balance his inner and outer self and reflect one's personal spirit. The pattern also symbolizes the Cosmos, Heavens and Water (waves). An example is the Triskel, the pattern is believed to stand for the Holy Trinity or the Triple Gods/Goddesses of the ancient Celts which is similar to the Trinity Knot.

Celtic artworks have always been famous for their geometric motifs. Some of these outstanding works date back to 3000 BC and can still be found today on stone carvings.³²(Fig.2)



Fig. 2

The picture shows a single clockwise spiral. This design has the oldest history and is the most recorded of the motifs. In some culture, the single spiral may symbolize growth, expansion and even cosmic energy. For instance, the ancient inhabitants of Ireland used the spiral to represent the sun and a tightly wound, clockwise spiral to signify their shrinking winter sun.(Fig.3)

This loosely wound anti-clockwise spiral is a symbol of the large summers sun.(Fig.4)



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

³² *Ibidem*, p. 54.

The dual centred spiral is also frequently used in stone carvings. It has associations with motifs from other cultures such as the Yin Yang symbol. It signifies the duality of nature and balance.(Fig.5)

A double spiral is used to represent the equinoxes, the period of the year when the length of the day and night are the same and they occupy twelve hours of the entire day.(Fig.6)



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

The Christian monks in earlier times used this Triple centred spiral in their illuminated manuscripts. The design originated as a symbol of the Triple Goddess, pre-dating Christianity.³³(Fig.7)



Fig. 7

A curiosity of Prehistoric art, during the Neolithic period is represented by the female statuettes from Cucuteni-Tripolie, with spiral ornaments, with abstract styles, with no intention of figurative contamination. Only specialists can explain this similarity with the Celtic spiral in such an early period.³⁴(Fig.8) Brion, signals the art of Celts and Germans, but during

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 55,56.

³⁴ romaniaistorica.ro and artaandcraft.ro

the 2nd Iron Age. The author states that because of their abstraction, their art conflicts with the Seythian art and with hieratic arts.³⁵



Fig. 8. Female Statuettes-Prehistoric Art, Neolithic period, Cucuteni-Tripolie

Knots

Celtic knots are complete loops without any beginning or end, this neverending style is called pure knots. The knots vary from simple to complicated ones. The use of only one thread highlights the Celts' belief in the interconnectedness of life and eternity. They strongly believe in the symbolism reflected in Celtic knot works from the old Celtic myths and legends.

In earlier times, elaborate designs were mainly used for decorative purposes. However, overtime, people began to come up with their own interpretations, and began to understand the designs at a deeper level. They saw the constant interlacing as the physical and the spiritual crossing of paths, expressing permanence, and the endurance of life, love and faith.

The Celtic knots were the creation of Celts in the early Celtic Church who resided mainly in Ireland. Around AD 450, Christian Celtic artwork was influenced by pagan Celtic sources which incorporated an additional knotwork category of life form motifs. The Celtic knots then spread to the Scottish Highlands and Europe via missionary expeditions. This traditional culture of knotworks in manuscript painting was passed down orally with

³⁵ M. Brion, *op. cit.*, p. 94, 102.

non-existent written records.³⁶ Many groups of people began to embrace Celtic art form. These groups included the Irish, Picts, the Scots of Dal Riada and the Northumbrians. Celtic knotwork then underwent some form of adaptation and assimilation with other cultures. An example of this would be the Anglo-Saxons, Welsh and other religious communities who created the "Hibemo-Saxon" tradition, which incorporated Saxon and Pictish abstract beast forms into early Celtic knotwork. The early Irish works were consistent in the concept of unending loops, while Germanic and Roman adaptations had loose ends in some occasions. Celtic knotworks became the style of that time.

This Celtic golden age of the 7th to 10th centuries began its decline after the Normans' invasion. In the more Gaelic areas, the Celtic tradition continued, as these Gaelic aristocrats continued to patronize Celtic decorated ornaments. The Celtic culture was looked back as the glory of the ancestors of these people, with knotwork becoming an extent the symbol of political and cultural identity.³⁷ Celtic knotworks were created for secular and religious purposes. It was meant for decorative aims to ornate Bible manuscripts and monuments like Celtic crosses and jewelry. The early Celts began this legacy of knotworks that consisted of animals and spirals, drawn with such detail that they became known as the "work of angels".

Each knot meant a virtue like strength or love. Celtic books like the *Book of Durrow* illustrates the early Irish style where ribbons are coloured in a certain way. The *Book of Kells* is renowned as an indispensable source of classic Celtic knots and ornaments, decorating the four Gospels. These books show many variations of Celtic knot works such as interlacing, spiral patterns, key patterns, rope work and plaiting, which are geometric patterns. Researchers have been trying to discover the secret of knotwork patterns, to find out if there is any particular significance behind each intricate design. In fact, the Celts did not assign special ideas or concepts to the patterns, but used them mainly as decorations on sculptures and jewelry or to fill up empty spaces in illuminated manuscripts. However, the interlaced patterns reflected the belief of the Celts in the interconnectedness and continuity of life. Over time, modern meanings have been attached to certain designs, but these are based mainly on personal interpretation and may vary between countries and between individuals.³⁸ The same pre-Christian designs found their way into early Christian manuscripts and art work with the addition of depictions from life, such as animals, plants and even humans.

³⁶ Richard Gameson, *The design and decoration of insular gospel-books and other liturgical manuscripts*, The Cambridge University Press, ISBN 9780511978029, Press-ed by Richard Gameson, 2016, cap. 8, p. 225, 226.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 231-235.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 1, 2.

J. Romilly Allen has identified "eight elementary knots which form the basis of nearly all interlaced patterns in Celtic decorative art". There is no evidence to indicate that a knot had any specific philosophical or religious significance beyond perhaps the most obvious, that being the intricacy capable in the work of humans, itself reflective of the intricacy of natural forms. The Celts themselves left very little in the way of records, and most symbols are interpreted by archaeologists and other scholars who study the symbols in context. Some ancient Celtic symbols have changed in meaning over time, having been influenced by the introduction of Christianity and the influence of their cultures.³⁹



Fig. 9. More knots

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

This Shield Celtic knot has a protective significance. Found on the shields of warriors, children's clothes, the ancient Celts also believed that the knotwork can protect the sick.(Fig.10)

The Triquetra Knot is also known as the Trinity Knot. It is used by the Christians to stand for the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. However, this information may not be entirely accurate because the Catholics of Ireland were the first to use the design as a reference symbol of the Trinity⁴⁰. It is believed that Celts use this Celtic Cross as a symbol of faith.(Fig.11)

This knotwork shows 8 hearts bounded by a Celtic circle. If one closely looks at it, one will find the rune of love "X" hidden within the design. The Celtic Love Knot is believed to be able to enliven relationships, heighten passions and attract true love.(Fig 12)



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

A sacred symbol of the Celts, The Triskele represents the eternal rhythm of life that mankind is part of. This ancient symbol represents the trinity of life and was adorned as their most sacred symbol.⁴¹ The main significance of it was that it symbolizes the Goddess in all her forms ~ Maiden, Mother and Crone.(Fig 13)

This amulet design symbolizes peace, Ancient Celts used to wear it, hoping to attain peace in themselves and in relationship to the others.(Fig 14)

The Irish Shamrock is the traditional symbol of the Trinity.(Fig 15)



Fig.13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 60, 62.

Mathematical observations

There are many types of knotwork in various religions or groups. However, below are the observations that distinguish Celtic knots from others:

1. The strong diagonals in Celtic knots are based on the 3:4:5 triangle, otherwise known as the right-angle triangle.
2. At almost every corner of any Celtic knot, we can see pointed spades. This is done so as to connect the cord element to fit a corner.
3. The interlacing of the cords is consistent; they alternate between "overs" and "unders" which ultimately contributes to an overall spiraling look.
4. The basic pattern repeats itself.
5. The path of Celtic knots is continuous. This means that if we cut a single cord, pull the two ends, and the panel tightens, then it is a Celtic knot. If it unravels then it is interlaced.⁴²

Celtic animal symbolism

Among the most familiar sights in Irish art are Celtic animal symbols:

- The people of ancient Ireland used Celtic animal symbolism to attempt to understand the otherwise incomprehensible natural cycles of the Earth.
- Celts revered Nature itself, be it in the form of plants, animals, or elements.
- They believed the animals were there to teach them how to live in harmony with Nature.
- Elite Irish families used animal symbolism on their Coats of Arms.
- The early Celts believed animals arose from the fantastic Otherworld where elves and fairies came from.

Celtic animal symbolism arises from an abundant body of lore, tale, and song and draw upon mythology as old as that of Greece or Rome.

- Celtic animal symbols are not insignificant slices of distant history, but a living link extending from ancient Celts to nowadays Irish people.
- *When one admires Celtic animal symbols, one must remember that they are exactly what they say they are: symbols. They are not inserted for mere adornment; they are there to represent those aspects of each animal that the Celts honored.*
- *To understand Celtic animal symbolism is to understand the art and what the artist attempted to bring across in his work.*

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 64.

In the greatest example of medieval illuminated manuscripts, the *Book of Kells*, the four Evangelists were frequently depicted as Celtic animal symbols: Matthew the man, Mark the lion, Luke the calf, and John as the eagle.⁴³

Final considerations

Irish miniature had a huge role in the formation of European culture, making possible the conciliation of Christianity with ancient sapience, being a link towards the essence of the Renaissance, which created the connection between classical culture, the Occidental humanity of the 7th – 13th century and the Renaissance humanity. The contribution brought to the world by the small Celtic island saved the Mediterranean during barbaric centuries. All Irish manuscripts remain a creation of the Celtic genius manifested through fantasy, through giving up on rigid conventions, by an inexhaustible imagination; all these things personalize and make the Irish miniature unmistakable. If the 'Book of Durrow' marks the beginning of miniature, the 'Book of Kells' represents the peak, being the jewelry of Irish miniature, which incites even nowadays the interest of specialists. If we were to compare the total of Churches and of manuscripts, the manuscripts represent a much higher number, they impress us through harmony, grace, elegance, as the imagination aims towards perfection, and the ornaments have a sculptural precision.⁴⁴ Like an arch over time, as the Celts capitalized the magic and religious value of the truth, Franz Marc appreciates the art of the future: 'it is our religion and truth and it is pretty profound and solid in order to produce the greatest style, the greatest re-evaluation of the form that the world has ever seen.'⁴⁵ The interest of the academic world for the study of manuscripts was and currently is, as it is proven by the researches from the past 50 years, accomplished by specialists such as: Rosen, Ruge, Werner Blau, Susan, Biolletti, Bernard Meehan, T.D. Kendrick, etc. who have studied and examined the manuscripts: Kells, Lindisfarne, Kildare etc.⁴⁶

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⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 27, 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁴⁵ M. Brion, *op. cit.*, p. 109 (Franz Marc-Aforism 1920).

⁴⁶ Susan Bioletti, Rory Leahy, John Fields, Bernard Meehan and Werner Blau, *The examination of The Book of Kells using micro-Roman Spectroscopy*, *Journal of Raman Spectroscopy*, 2009, p. 1043-1048.

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