

Historical artist Sven Lindauer seeks to set the record straight about the Vikings

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Not just raids and bloodshed



The Vikings were master shipbuilders, who traveled to the far corners of Europe and beyond. All images by Sven Lindauer

ERIC STAVNEY

Mukilteo, Wash.



Artist Sven Lindauer, a proud Norwegian American, began his career as a magazine illustrator.

Sven Lindauer laments the lack of books on Norse history at the time of the Vikings.

As he told me when we discussed his new book, *The Arts and Crafts of Ancient Scandinavia*, “many of the stories you hear about the old times, the Vikings ... burning villages and robbing people—that was something blown out of proportion.”

Being of Norwegian heritage, he saw the opportunity to set the record straight, to get “the truth out about how these people really were.” Lindauer used his own art and craft as a historical landscape artist to create paintings just like murals and tableaux you may have seen in museums depicting a cultural scene from long ago.

Lindauer began his career as a magazine illustrator. He enjoyed the diversity of themes and topics he got to work with, and he remembered the rich history of the Old West in the area where he grew up.

Lindauer was invited to study with John Clymer, a renowned artist of the historical West, doing covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*.



*The cover of *The Arts and Crafts of Ancient Scandinavia* depicts a ninth-century stonecutter.*

“Clymer’s wife would do the historical research, and they would travel and go from location to location. John would paint small studies, oil studies on location,” says Lindauer. “That was a changing point in my career, when I decided that I was going to start to really focus on history.”

His rendition of historical scenes so impressed National Geographic television executives, that they asked him to work for them.

“My career went to the next point, where I was traveling to different places around the world and painting ancient history from many different cultures for the TV show and documentaries.”

That led to his work for the United States Marshals Museum in Fort Smith, Ariz., which opened in 2019.



Each of Lindauer’s paintings depicts a specific setting in a variety of settings that show the arts and crafts of shipbuilding, sailmaking, pottery production, and mead fermentation.

Years before the museum work, Lindauer decided to research his own heritage, especially the period between 800 A.D. and 1100 A.D.—the time of the Vikings. He found “mostly stories about bloodshed and barbarians.”

“I knew that wasn’t really true. That’s not what this culture was about. So I took on the whole project and decided to do a significant amount of paintings for a book. Research it. Write the text. Put it together and publish it myself ... this is something I’ve been working on for almost seven years.”

He sought out people who he thought looked Scandinavian or of Celtic-Germanic descent and noted how they moved, what kind of personality they exhibited. These were the people Lindauer invited to model for his paintings. He supplied the costumes and props, all based on what’s been found in archeological digs from the Viking Age.

Lindauer shot hundreds of photographs of his models working, farming, weaving—the crafts he wanted pictured in his book. If he didn’t have the props, such as a stone carving, he found the real thing in museum collections. If he didn’t know how certain implements were used, he watched them in action at Viking reenactment festivals.

Although Lindauer’s paintings are based on historical fact, it took his formidable talent and experience to envision each scene, direct his actors to stand, chop, and carve in a multitude of positions, and ultimately assemble these elements into the 21 scenes he painted.



*Scandinavian-American Viking reenactors served as the models for the subjects in *The Arts and Crafts of Ancient Scandinavia*.*

The paintings are the focal points of Lindauer's new book, with explanatory text on the left and pictures on the right. His pictures are incredibly detailed and include little surprises like a Norwegian forest cat on a windowsill or two strange saiga antelopes with downturned snouts.

After presenting each painting, Lindauer shows close-ups of the painting in the next two pages.

"I knew that if we broke down sections of each painting into vignettes, we're able to explain the story segment a little bit more," such as an angled Sámi knife, a fjord horse, or a pet ferret.

Each painting depicts a specific setting in a variety of countries the Norse visited, from Ireland and Scotland in the west to Finland in the east, and as far south as the Netherlands and Poland. His point is to show that the Norse traveled widely, and the arts and crafts of shipbuilding, sailmaking, pottery production, mead fermentation, Skaldic poetry-writing, to name a few, were all part of Norse settlements.



For his models, Lindauer sought out people of Celtic-Germanic descent, who looked like Vikings.

The text is printed in an unusual typeface, reminiscent of blackletter, the style employed by monks and scribes in the 1100s. As you read, you can hear the history teacher or the museum docent coming out in Lindauer's prose, which is aimed at a high school reading level.

Lindauer is especially proud of the book binding, for he hopes his book will become a collectible.

"The binding is very important because the pages are heavy and they're full of color. Ten years from now, this book won't fall apart."

The Arts and Crafts of Scandinavia is but the first of a five-part series planned about the Norse. Lindauer is working on future books on sports and agriculture, politics and the Althing, and love, life, and language.

You can order a book at lindauerart.com or buy limited editions of his paintings. Lindauer also has a Facebook page (The Arts and Crafts of Ancient

Scandinavia), which offers pictures from inside the book and shows some of the actors he used as models.

Lindauer says Arts and Crafts was meant to be a “coffee-table book,” and so it will be. But more likely you’ll find his book at the dining table where kids are writing a report on Vikings, or perhaps in the hands of a toddler, where a parent is explaining what is going on in each of the paintings.

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