

SOME SCANDINAVIAN MATERIAL IN THE ROYAL SCOTTISH MUSEUM, EDINBURGH.

by Malcolm Baker and Naomi Tarrant.

When the Industrial Museum of Scotland – later renamed the Royal Scottish Museum – was founded in 1854 it was intended to be not a ‘Museum of Scottish Industry’ alone, but a ‘museum of the Industry of the world in special relation to Scotland’ and to show in its ‘Exhibition Galleries’ both the ‘raw, workable and accessory materials on which Industrial Art is exercised’, and the finished products themselves. Already in the first few years of its existence examples of objects manufactured by traditional methods in various Scandinavian countries had been acquired and these form the basis of the modest, but varied, collection of Scandinavian woodwork, silver, costume, textiles, jewellery, glass and ceramics.

Boxes figure prominently among the wooden objects and the collection includes eight examples from Iceland and Norway, their decoration ranging from chip-carved geometric ornament to lavishly painted plant scrolls. In accordance with the original aims of the Museum many of these were, at their date of acquisition, of modern manufacture but some earlier examples were soon added. Among the Icelandic boxes, decorated with carved interlacing, one, for example, is dated 1828. Another dated piece, somewhat isolated in the context of our collection, is a Swedish almanac of 1745 with a runic calendar.

A number of characteristic forms of Scandinavian eating and drinking vessels are represented in the Museum’s collection. Several examples, such as the four Icelandic porridge bickers, are of coopered construction, bound with wooden rings. Another distinctive type is the bowl with horse’s head handles of which the museum possesses specimens from Norway, some with elaborate painted inscriptions. Decorated with a similar inscription is a wooden scoop dated 1768. Also from Norway are two fine birch root tankards, each supported on three lion feet. These latter pieces are complemented by a silver gilt tankard, made by the Bergen goldsmith Jan Reimers about 1670 and resting on similar lion supports. Its cover is engraved with rich plant forms of the sort that influenced some English silversmiths such as John Plummer of York who made some splendid tankards

following the Scandinavian pattern. Swedish silver drinking vessels are represented by a tankard conforming more closely to the north German baroque style and made in Stockholm in the early 18th century. This, like two Swedish beakers — one on the characteristic ball feet — is lavishly embossed with a band of plant scrolls.

Implements used in the making and cleaning of cloth form another important group of objects, decorated in a wide variety of different styles. In addition to several Swedish distaffs the Royal Scottish Museum has twelve Scandinavian mangle boards, several of them dated. Particularly attractive in appearance are four Icelandic examples in which inscriptions form an integral part of the overall design. Norwegian styles are represented by pieces decorated with chip-carved geometric ornament, each with a handle in the form of a stylised horse. Within this group one example is dated 1748 and another 1845. By contrast some of the Museum's mangle boards are carved not with traditional ornament of this kind but, like the silver already mentioned, with motifs drawn from contemporary baroque and rococo styles. One such piece — probably Norwegian — is dated 1764 and decorated with a figure of Hope beneath a canopy of the type more typical of the early years of the century although the presence of some rococo scroll work confirms the date painted on it.

Although in its early years the Museum was acquiring material representative of manufacturing techniques of different cultures from an ethnographical point of view, by 1900 the European sections at least were tending to concentrate on objects that illustrated the history of design and different decorative styles. This is clearly apparent not only in the more recent acquisitions of silver and woodwork but also in the development of the museum's collection of costume, embroidery and textiles. Although the costume collection is somewhat uneven it contains some good as well as a few unusual items. Among the early acquisitions was an Icelandic woman's dress of the 1860s, later supplemented by a bride's dress and a festival costume. Of particular interest is a group of costumes from the Faroe Islands that includes a fisherman's outfit of sheepskin jacket, trousers and knitted wool jersey and a woman's costume dating from about 1880. Closely associated with the costume collection is a range of Scandinavian jewellery some of which in the future will be shown with the appropriate dresses.

The embroidery is mostly work from the 1930s and 1940s collected by the Needlework Development Scheme from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden and given to the Museum in 1962. There are one or two earlier pieces including a portion of a linen wall hanging embroidered in wool which formerly hung in the tent at Thingvellir where the Althing was held. This is thought to have been assembled in the late 18th century from several pieces of slightly earlier date and has been in the collection since 1858. There are unfortunately no samplers from any of the Scandinavian countries.

Modern Scandinavian decorative arts are also represented in the Museum's collection of textiles. In 1950 A.B. Stobo of Stockholm generously presented a group of printed fabrics based on patterns by some leading Swedish designers and interest in contemporary work is also reflected in the acquisition in 1976 of a modern hanging by the Danish weaver Tustra Wefuing.

Similar acquisitions have been made in the field of ceramics and glass. In the Museum's extensive collection of porcelain are several pieces made by the Royal Copenhagen Porcelain Factory and our modern continental glass includes examples from both Sweden and Denmark. Earlier developments in Danish glass are to be seen in a range of vessels dating from the 19th century, acquired in 1977.

Although the Royal Scottish Museum's Scandinavian holdings can in no way claim to be among the major collections of such material they do contain a wide range of objects and decorative styles. Among these are some interesting items which would certainly merit the attention of those concerned with the material culture and decorative arts of the northern countries.

RECENT SCANDINAVIAN ACCESSIONS IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

Stephen Holland

The 500th anniversary of Uppsala University in 1977 was marked by the publication of a number of commemorative works, which we have acquired for the Library. An excellent overall