

VIKING SHIP SERIES

My Nordic interest years, 1989-1992



Norse ship in ice. 57.5" x 42". 1992

I had been interested in my Nordic heritage for a few years by 1989. Having been to Scandinavia in '85-'86, writing my regular journals using my own hybrid variant of the runic alphabet.

In San Francisco I was identified by most everyone as a swede. The autumn of '89 I was christened with the **Cacophony Society** *nom de plume* of **Svensk Runestone**. Every December with family meant indulging in customary Swedish Christmas dishes, such as Lutefisk, Dup e grytta, with Lefse, Glögg, Sylta, pickled Herring on rye crackers, Julekage, and more. Very ethnic foods that seem strange to anyone not Scandinavian, or not from Minnesota.

I was identifying with this heritage that winter of '89 on a high, resulting in some Nordic inspired artworks emerging in my sketchbooks and canvases.

The first painting of this content was derived from a vivid dream of a gaunt but strong, ancient bearded viking ancestor, who was whispering some old viking language to me from a painting that I was in the process of making...

Whoa! A painting that comes to life! — too intriguing to miss out on attempting to paint, so I got to working on a small canvas. This was December after the **Academy of Art** semester ended, so I painted this in my room in the **Mission District**.



Svafnir, 17" x 15". 1989-90.

I liked how it turned out. Different style, but staples were showing on all four sides, and I deemed this good enough to make a wooden frame, but as plain wood seemed incomplete, so runes were carved into the hard oak wood and painted red, carving different names of **Odin** — the main god of Norse mythology. This became titled *Svafnir*. A suitable name for this character, who became displayed down near the front door for years, like a guardian at the entry point, and wherever I lived for decades afterwards.

Following this Nordic theme, I had a vision, or another dream (I can't recall either one), of a viking ship caught up in a tree, as if as an archaeological find, but brought upwards not by humans, but by nature — in this case by a growing tree.

Archaeological, I say due to its austere lack of sails or mast, with only the solid wooden boat remaining after a thousand years buried.

Painted that winter (spring semester) at the Academy...



proto-longboat, 21" x 19", 1990

This small painting was a prototype for the series to come. It isn't very accurate, not studied for enough, so it appears more like a rowboat. Yet the mood is there.

I buckled down after the spring semester ended, to make a more successful version, as a more complete form of postmodern painting.

From 1990, <https://dean-gustafson.com/autobiographical/June-1990.pdf> .:

June, I was out of school,. **Brian** didn't need my help with construction that month, so I was free with art to make,. I made my signature stretcher of 57.5" x 42", and began the first of the larger Norse ship paintings. Deciding to keep the stoic motif, with more accurate boat this time.

Visiting **Green Apple** books and collecting various Viking books to facilitate this interest. The delightful **Amelia**—who was a fellow Academy student and Cacophonist—worked there and gave me discounts on books.

I attended all four parts of **Wagners Ring** that June. The romanticism of the opera influenced the painting. Though of a 19th century romanticism influence, I made some postmodern elements, such as the flat geometry in the middle with the intuitively and the vaguely astronomical wheel, the **Ross Blechner** influenced stars on dark background, and modern iron bridge in the background.

A semi-real, surreal scene was constructed. I always liked the motion and stillness

combined in this painting. Those dynamics were really what this is about; the subject matter the original impetus but became secondary. That's what I remember about rendering this.



Norse ship at Night, 1990. 57.5" x 42". (the bottom inches are cut off here)

That particular painting has been a favorite ever since. I like the way the upwards motion works. It has a solid firmament quality. The frontal view must have been influenced by the posters all over Minneapolis for the Viking exhibition, when a replica ship was at the MIA. (1981?) I may still have the button issued for that show, depicting a graphic logo of a Norse ship from the front. Sound familiar?

My viking era influences were literate that summer. Reading the highly entertaining *Njals Saga* (that Cacophony Society cohort Lance gave me), and I bought a new copy

of *The Poetic Edda*. Inspiring poetry of the Vikings times.

Flash forward to January 1991. Graduated from the Academy, I stretched a large canvas, aiming to continue the series. This one has a more diaphanous atmosphere, night time dream colors of blues and greens, and wintery. Ice like it emerged from a glacial fjord at night.



Norse ship in a fjord, 66" x 54". 1991

It's a good one, yet I don't think it's concept reads clearly enough for many viewers. Is it stuck in the trees? Is it crashed?

Still strong, and nocturnal. It doesn't matter if something is not conceptually clear to viewers. It should be open to Individual interpretations.

The next is a viking ship placed for scale and continuity of my series, but doesn't have

much to do with the painting itself. Already written about here:

<https://dean-gustafson.com/artwork-essays/PRE-ECLIPTIC%20PAINTING.pdf>

By the following year 1992 I wanted to wrap up this series, so two more were painted that year. I kept it the same size as the 1990 painting at 57.5" x 42". A good scale for many of my best works. I really dug into a brighter mood with the **Casper David Friedrich** derived icebergs. It's a well painted, more illustrated painting than the others, and arguably the best of the series. It's a strong one!

I tried a different glaze than usual of **Liquin**, made by **Winsor & Newton**, that unfortunately started prematurely showing cracks throughout the surface. It does give it a 19th century antique look, like it's much older than it is.



ice ship, 57.5" x 42".1992

Also this is the only canvas of the series to have another stretched canvas attached to its face. See the window in the sky differentiating from the others.

This also has prismatic vertical segments as if through glass, vaguely. I like it!

Eager to move on to other themes than Nordic, I felt my reputation as mainly a Scandinavian artist wasn't what I wanted permanently associated. I paint several other things too.

So how to move on while leaving behind a good series of Norse ships?

I know — Burning!



final longboat, #5. On Fire. 57.5" x 42". 1992

This last painting of the series Blazing, burning reds/oranges/yellows, contrasting the icy blues of the others. It made for a good exhibition, capped by red hot color.

Afterwards, I did keep up with Scandinavian artworks, from my 1994 visit to **Sweden** and **Norway**. Drawing runestones throughout Sweden, and Norwegian longboats at the **Viking Ship museum in Oslo**, I was in my element!

Here's my report on Swedish runestones:

<https://dean-gustafson.com/artwork-essays/Runestones.pdf>

I made a few runestone paintings after that trip. It was too irresistible after being there and sketching so many. Here they are.

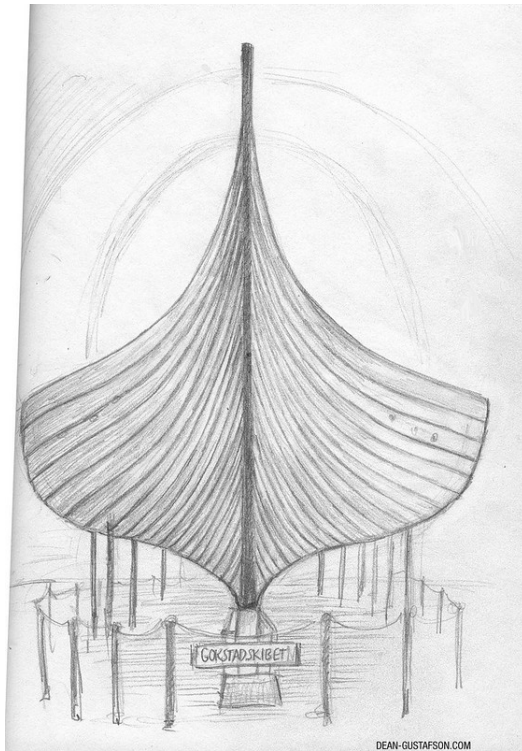


runestone at Smedby. 20" x 9". 1995 - runestone #489 Uppsala. 57.5" x 42". 2003

I thought of creating a big series of these, but I had other things to paint.

- Dean Gustafson April 2025

~ some sketches from the Viking ship museum, Oslo. 1994



The Gokstad ship. The view I painted repeatedly, now sketched live!



The Oseberg ship. - much fancier than Gokstad



details of the *Oseberg*



the lovely prow of the *Oseberg*