



Figure 1. Alexander G. Law, Viking Ship Model (1957), Mystic Seaport Museum, 1966.311

Imagined Vikings: Alexander G. Law's Viking Ship Model

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Of the 25 Alexander Law miniatures in the Mystic Seaport Museum collection, only one depicts the graceful and iconic form of a Viking longship (Figure 1). The model depicts the type of vessel used by Vikings circa 900 A.D., showcasing the longship at a moment when the crew is shifting from using the sail to oarsmen, possibly to change the direction or speed of the ship.

Because it depicts this dynamic moment, it is significant that Law included the oarsmen, even though many of his other works are void of any human subjects. As such, 35 miniature Vikings are included—30 at the ready to begin rowing, and five scattered across the deck.

Unusual, too, for Law's works is the addition of an interior riser within the glass. The riser slightly elevates the model from its base, and it is thoughtfully decorated with various longships that once sailed the bitter Scandinavian seas.

While three figures are attending to the rigging, the two figures at the prow tell a story evidently happening outside of the display case. On the left, the red-haired figure points, his gaze set far beyond the barrier of the glass case; beside him, his compatriot climbs over the portside edge of the vessel, steadying a spear in his left hand. But what could the group of Vikings be hunting with such diligence? Maybe they're running low on food after being at sea for an extended period and the shadow of a large fish has caught a crew member's hungry eye, or perhaps a whale has sidled up next to their ship—putting both the vessel and their lives at risk.

Model maker Alexander G. Law began making miniatures in 1933. His miniature ships have earned him lasting national acclaim. Law's models are unique because, rather than being mounted on a traditional cradle, they are built atop velvet-lined



Figure 2. Oarsmen preparing to start rowing





Figure 3. Illustrations along the edge of the riser portray various longship styles

drawers designed to hold a book about the ship (Figure 1).¹ His intent was to create a truly holistic piece of art. Law saw himself as inventing a new, blended form of miniature:

While it is true that the ships are the central theme, they supply only the drama and miniatura. The hand-drawn period maps incorporate the art of cartography, the book adds bibliography, and the miniature human figures, sculpture. The accuracy of detail and period representation require exhaustive research, which leads to a true history of man's efforts to master the sea. Design and

the art of the cabinet maker tie the whole together into beautiful gems of maritime fine arts.²

Law's models uniquely meld art and scholarship together in such a way that inspires the viewer to flesh out the scene so carefully crafted.

Much of what we know about these vessels comes from archaeological studies of Viking ship burials, and Law was likely particularly influenced by the excavation of the Ladby Ship, discovered in 1934 in a burial mound on the island of Funen, Denmark. Although the wood had rotted away, archaeologists were able to reconstruct the ship



Figure 4. At the prow

based on in situ iron rivets and the imprints of planks in the soil.³ Since Law's time, a number of additional Viking ship burials have been found throughout Scandinavia. These, along with other Viking research and the 1960 discovery of the Norse site of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, have continued to fuel interest. That fascination continues to compel scholars, writers, and artists to explore and reimagine the Viking past and its impact on history and culture.

Law once wrote, "All my life, I had been fascinated by the wooden wind ships and the iron men who manned them, by maritime history—the naval engagements, voyages of discovery, the high

drama and the lore of the sea."⁴ It is a testament to his vision of the model as fine art that it offers us imagined Viking lives as well as a precise reconstruction of their vessel.

Endnotes

- 1 Alexander G. Law, January 15, 1957, Mystic Seaport Museum Correspondence Files, 1966.309-328.
- 2 Law, January 15, 1957.
- 3 "The Ladby Ship," Vikingeskibsmuseet, accessed December 8, 2023, <https://www.vikingeskibsmuseet.dk/en/professions/education/the-longships/findings-of-longships-from-the-viking-age/ladby>.
- 4 Law, January 15, 1957.