

Swords and Symbols

In what follows I give you my excerpts of what I found in the literature and in the Net about the topic "*Swords and Symbols*". I also add my own interpretations and thoughts, and I veer off into other fields on occasion. Actually, while I'm writing this (early in 2012), there is a special exhibition on the topic in *Cluny*, France:

The Sword: Uses, Myths and Symbols

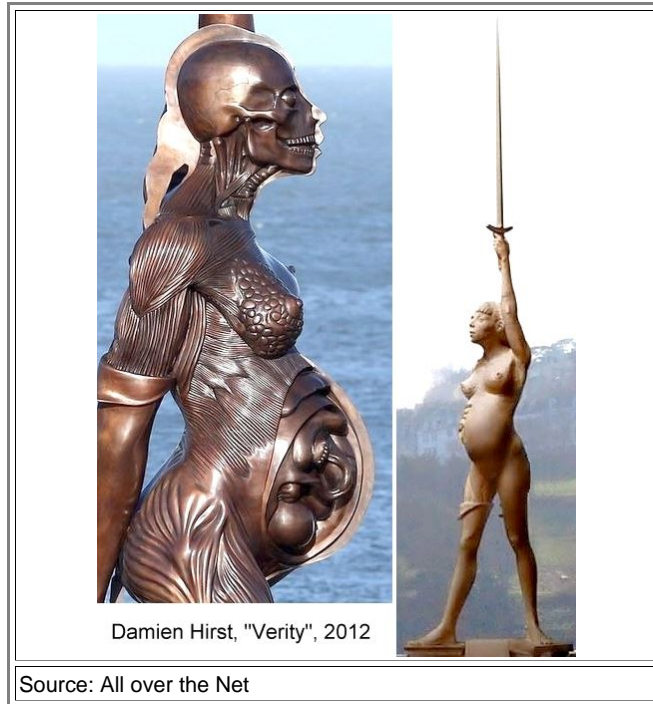
Museum of the Middle Ages

Thermal baths and Hôtel de Cluny

28 April 2011 – 26 September 2011

A little later (Dec. 2018), the "[Landesmuseum Württemberg](#)" (Württemberg State Museum) in Stuttgart features a special exhibition called "Faszination Schwert" that I cover in more detail here.

A bit surprising, perhaps, might be that swords as symbols are still used by modern artists as can be seen here:

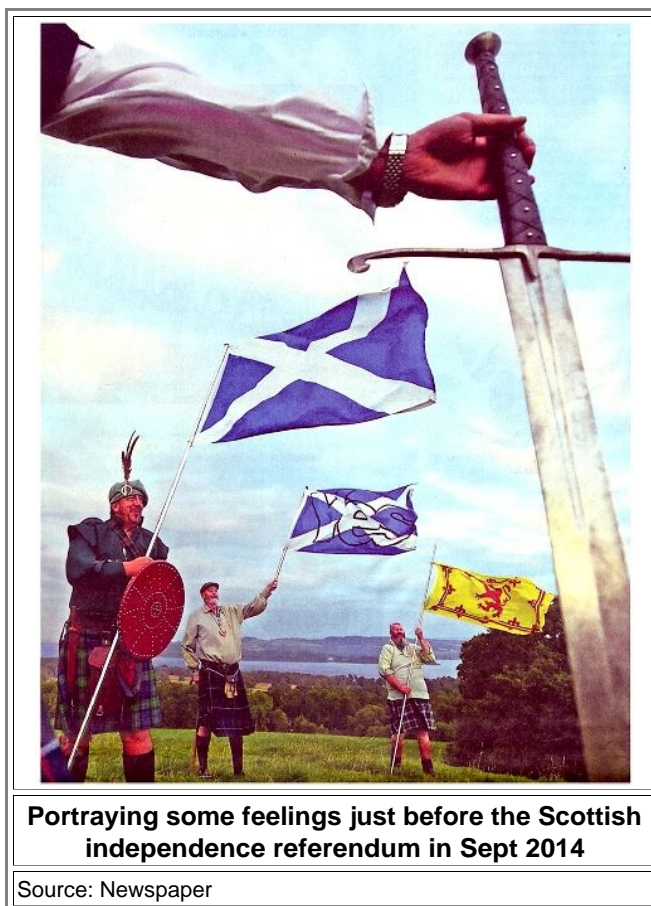


This 20 m, 25 ton bronze sculpture has been raised in the middle of Oct. 2012 in Ilfracombe, England. It got mixed reviews ("Isn't it a miracle what so much money and so little talent can produce?" R. Hughes).

According to Hirst, the title "Verity" is from the Italian word for truth. She holds the traditional symbols denoting Justice — a sword and scales. Writing on his website, Hirst said: "Without the perfect equilibrium enacted by the scales, the sword becomes a dangerous instrument of power, rather than justice". The scales, however, are not all that prominent.

Verity, in other words, is just another Justitia

Modern politics is also making use of swords as symbols:



Right now (Oct. 2014) President Obama starts another war, something he really and truly did not want to do, because the modern self-proclaimed "Caliphate" in Iraq put a few Westerners "to the sword", beheading them. Normal killing of thousands of locals somehow did not inspire the same kind of wrath. Chopping heads off with a sword just cannot be tolerated any more, except, of course, when it is done by the [friendly executioner](#) in Saudi Arabia.

Swords and Religion

But let's start by pointing out that all major **religions** use swords as symbols (after many centuries of using them in a more practical way). And a **symbol** is "[something](#) that represents something else by association, resemblance or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible". I couldn't have said it better myself.

In **Christianity** a number of important figures come with a sword. The archangel **Michael** often holds a sword in Christian art, it symbolizes the concepts of *truth*, *purity*, *equanimity*, and the *justness*, revealed in the light of Christ, it is said. Saints like Adrianus, Agnes, Alban of England, Barbara, Euphemia, Justinia, Katharina of Alexandria, Martin, Paulus, Jakobus the Elder and more have mostly a sword as attribute. But many other saints are often shown with a sword, too. Here is [St. Sebastian](#), and this link gives [Saint Gregorius](#), each with a prominent sword.

Besides the somewhat lofty reasons given above, there are at least two more reasons for this. First, many saints are martyrs and the sword symbolizes their violent death (not necessarily by the sword but often in more unpleasant ways). That is typically the case for female saints. On occasion a sword also symbolizes [plain old weirdness](#) of local yokels.

Second, the sword associates saints with power, often along the lines "[speak softly and carry a big sword](#)" ¹⁾. Let's not forget that Christianity, like Islam, was spread primarily by using the sword directly and not symbolically.

Moreover, the swords of the saints Comus, Damian, Maurice, and George have some extraordinary powers: they can fly, break rocks or make their owner invincible. Well, why not. Christian dogma, after all, requires you to believe far stranger things.

In a similar vein, we find a sword (often flaming) blocking the gates of Eden as a sign of protection. Only the pure of heart who do not want to eat from the tree of knowledge (also known as the stupid) may enter. As Genesis 3:24 ascertains, Cherubim were placed at the east of the Garden of Eden with "a flaming sword which turned every way" after Adam and Eve were driven out of their earthly paradise. **Cherubim**, according to the prophet **Ezekiel**, were a tetrad (=foursome) of living creatures: a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle plus lots of wings. One wonders what kind of genetic experiments took place inside the garden of Eden, or what Ezekiel imbibed before he had visions.

While this kind of sword symbolism might be conceived as poetic and romantic, it is also an indication that the biblical account of Adam and Eve does *not* date from the era that it describes. Whoever wrote the story knew about swords, and swords did not exist before, let's say, 3.000 BC.

- A sword in Christianity also quite often symbolizes the *power* and *might* of the Lord. It also (symbolically!) *separates* good from evil. The necessary decisions for this act then symbolizes justice. **Jesus** at the last judgement is sometimes shown with a **double edged sword** issuing from his mouth, exemplifying that the word of God is sharper than a sword. Here is a [link](#) to some large-size pictures. **Luther** called the word of God a **spiritual sword** that should guide the real swords of the authorities. That worked to some extent; the original owners of both Americas can testify to that.
- More down to earth, the shape of the typical straight double-edged swords of the crusaders (and knights before and after them) always was used as a direct *symbol of the cross*. If no real cross was handy, the faithful knight could hold up his sword to frighten off vampires and the like. This grave shows the sword=cross symbolism quite nicely:



Sword and Cross on a grave

Source: Photographed June 2021 in the cemetery next to the dome in Ratzeburg, Germany

- Here are some pictures of religious people with swords:.
Left: Eastern Icon from the 16th century showing the archangel Michael with his sword. Right top: Detail from **Hans Memling's** "last judgement". Right bottom: Picture of (to me) unknown origin.



Archangel Michael (left) and Jesus with a sword coming out of his mouth.

Source: Internet at large

Swords in Christianity
[Different large-size picture](#)



13th century ceiling painting in the Schleswig Cathedral (close to where I live)
Source: Photographed there in 2015

Swords in Christianity

[Different large-size picture](#) (with a sizeable collectiosmn of "sword coming out of Jesus' mouth")

- There is an overlap between the Christian religion with the **Jewish religion** (via the common old testament). Besides good old archangel Michael, we have also, for example, **King David** and **Judith** wielding swords. Each one beheads some adversary (Goliath or Holofernes, respectively) with his own sword. Talk about tough luck!
- ▶ The **Mormons** have a parallel to the David and Goliath story: the **sword of Laban** .
- Laban was another ancient bad guy who needed to be slain; in this case by **Nephi**, again with his own sword. "*Nephi then brought the sword with his father's family across the ocean to the Americas. The sword was revered in Nephite history and preserved until the nineteenth century, which hints at the importance of the blade.*" The quote is from a scholarly study of the sword of Laban by **Brett L. Holbrook**. The introduction part of this study gives a splendid overview of our topic here, with all the quotes and cross references I'm too lazy to include. So here is a [link](#) to the first part of that paper.
- ▶ In **Islam** a sword symbolizes the holy war or quest against the infidels, and it is a symbol for the unending *fight against your own wickedness*. This kind of symbolism is still very much alive:
 - "**Saif al Islam**", the *sword of Islam*, is the name of one of **Ghaddifis** sons and I don't even want to know what that was supposed to signify. Despite his high-powered name it seems that the Gaddafi guy was not all that successful in fighting his own wickedness. His clan, according to today's news (April 16th 2011), just used internationally outlawed cluster bombs against unarmed Libyan citizens in Misrata. He is wanted by the International Criminal Court for charges of crimes against humanity against the Libyan people, for allegedly torturing and killing civilians, and supposed to be tried in a Lybian court of law in Feb. 2013.
 - **Prophet Muhammad** gave his famous sword "**Zulfiqar**" to his cousin and son-in-law **Ali**. Archangel Gabriel brought that sword down from the heavens as some legend goes, and it symbolized the strength of Allah. Here we have the motive of a **sword as symbol of divine favor** that will come up again just below. Further details on Zulfiqar depend if you follow the Sunni or Shi'a traditions. I won't get involved in *this* except to say that small "Zulfiqar" likenesses are still worn by some Shi'a and Alevi male Moslems on a necklace. It then symbolizes *martyrdom* and *resistance against repression and inhumanity*.
- ▶ I won't go into *Buddhism* , *Hinduism* , and so on. But rest assured that swords played and play at least some symbolic role in *any* religion. That includes dead religions from, e.g. ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt. By the way, Gods and religions also come to an end and die—it's not just you and me. As the saying goes: "Scientific insights are the gravestones in the graveyard of the Gods".

As we have seen, besides all the symbolism, there was (and is) always a not-so-symbolic role to swords in religion. Ask Goliath, Holofernes or the unlucky residents of ancient Jericho who encountered [Joshua](#). They were all put to the sword, women and children included. Joshua and his crowd wanted their land, and God told him what to do. Come to think of it, you don't need to go back that far. Public beheadings with a sword (for all kinds of reasons as given by religion) are still the major source of amusement on Saudi Arabia weekends.

Sword and Worldy Power

In religion or outside it (as far as that was possible in much of history) swords were always rather unsubtle symbols for **power** plus vitality and strength. Some basic lines can be distinguished:

- The line of **kingly power**. Power to rule all the people and on occasion even your wife is bestowed on the bearer (always male) of some special sword. He didn't have to be the king, he could also be some other guy whose authority comes from possessing that special sword that somehow is connected to some supreme being. [Attila's sword](#) and [King Arthur's sword](#) are good early example for this.
- The line of **continuation of power**. The king was supposed to protect his people as *warrior*, to guaranty justice as *judge*, and often to see to the right ordering of worship as a kind of *priest*. The sword was passed on to the heir as a symbol of the *transfer of authority*, and the giving of a sword to the new king was (or still is) a widespread feature of coronation ceremonies.
- The **heroic** line. Take [Siegfried](#) or [Beowulf](#). Siegfried owned magic [Balmung](#) (In [Wagner's opera](#) it is called "*Notung*") and killed the ubiquitous dragon with it. Beowulf, of Anglo-Saxon fame, used the magical swords [Hrunting](#), [Naegling](#), and an unnamed blade against the monster [Grendel](#) and a dragon. Siegfried, from Northern lore, had to [pull Balmung out of a tree](#) where God Wotan had stuck it. King Arthur pulled it out from a stone; there are obvious parallels. Those swords gave the heroes superhuman power because their blades came from the Gods in one way or other and manifested the "*divine cutting power*" of deity.

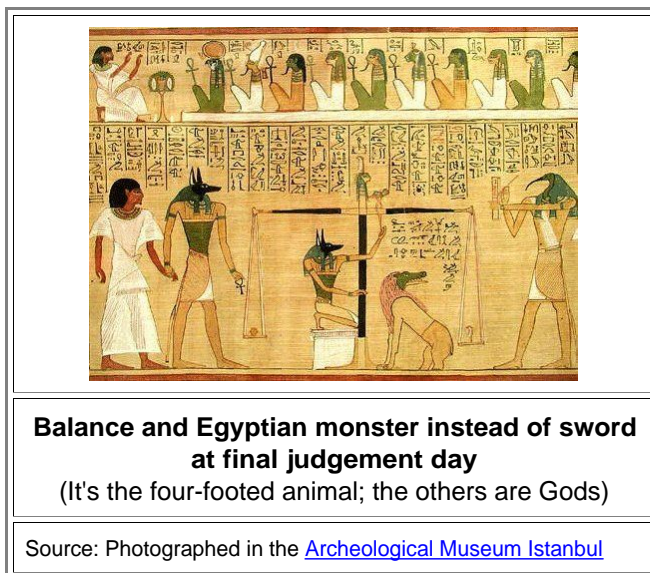
Needless to say we also have combinations of the two lines. The hero becomes king and so on.

In any case, swords symbolize *protection*, *righteousness*, and *justice*. Its possession separates the mighty from the hoi poloi. Carrying a sword might have been reserved for the high nobility; the lower ranks had just a spear.

- Swords as *symbols for justice* are common in many cultures. They certainly symbolize those *positive* values in the form of **Justitia** all over Germany (and neighboring countries). Here is one (probably from Frankfurt, but they are all quite similar).



- Interestingly the sword of justice doesn't seem to have a sheath (I have never seen a Justitia with one), i.e. Justitia comes without the [feminine principle](#). I don't know what that tells us with respect to which gender really metes out justice, or the disposition of (usually quite attractive) Justitia for a bit of fun and games in between judging all day long.
- The meaning of Justitia's balance is clear. If it tips the bad way, the sword comes into play. If you feel that a sword as a symbol of justice is a bit too violent for our peaceful times, consider:
 - It could be worse. The ancient Egyptians also used a balance for judgment day. After you died the Gods balanced your heart against a feather. Wrong swing of the balance and a monster being a mixture of a crocodile, a lion and a hippopotamus would eat you up. Proper swords didn't exist then. Personally, I would much prefer the sword to the monster.
 - What would *you* prefer as symbol of justice? Our present day symbol looks like this: **§**. Unfortunately that is also the symbol for an overbearing bureaucracy and thus a bit ambiguous.



**Balance and Egyptian monster instead of sword
at final judgement day**
(It's the four-footed animal; the others are Gods)

Source: Photographed in the [Archeological Museum Istanbul](#)

Swords in Pseudo Science

- Now let's look at swords and **Alchemy**. Alchemy proper is now dead but it was a powerful *pseudoscience* for many centuries. Its spirit survived, however, under names like "astrology", "homeopathy", "esoterics", "crystal energy" and so on and so forth.

 - "Classical" alchemy was concerned with turning lead or other stuff into gold. All you had to do was to make a philosopher's stone (of Harry Potter fame). That goal was never achieved for reasons that are entirely clear to me, my colleagues, and you - provided you have the halfway decent education [I credited you with](#). However, many alchemists (and that includes the modern ones) managed to let you keep your lead while turning your gold into their gold.
 - Whatever, in classical alchemy the sword is a *symbol of purification*. The parallels to religion are clear; I leave open who borrowed from whom. The metaphorical sword does away with the physical bondage of the spirit to the body and releases a path to ethereal (enlightened) freedom.
- Staying close to the pseudo sciences, **psychoanalysis** of the Freudian persuasion would have us believe that the sword in our dreams is a **phallic symbol**. Well - why not?

 - Guns, torpedoes, bombs, rockets, spears, staffs, trains, cigars, monoliths (including the Empire State Building in "King Kong") and old Jaguar E sports cars are phallic symbols, not to mention cucumbers, bananas, serpents and a plethora of other things all around you. So why not a sword? As much as I hate to admit it, there might even be a point to this. Wielding a sword does have a few philosophical and visual parallels to wielding the male organ. There might be even a [connection](#) Freud was not aware of.

Other researches besides **Sigmund Freud** also saw connections. Long before Freud it was believed in some cultures that a woman dreaming of drawing a sword would give birth to a boy (easy: something symbolizing a very male organ comes out of something symbolizing a very female organ). The possession of a sword, in a woman's dream, promised good fortune (easy: she would find a husband who must support and satisfy her), whereas in a man's dream, a sword falling into water foretold the death of a woman (you figure that out).
 - Arthurian legend, as seen by (female?) scientists wearing "gender glasses", has [Excalibur](#) representing the **male (phallic) principle**. The stone, for reasons that escape me, is symbolic of the **female (vaginal) principle**. Inserting the sword and pulling it out again than is symbolic for - well, you know that principle.

We might be overdoing symbolism a bit here, but up to a point it is true that the sword and the ring are major sexual symbols of ancient and present fantasy literature. The sword as the phallic symbol and the **ring as vaginal symbol**. Take "**Lord of the Rings**", as an example. *Aragorn* relates to **Anduril**, the sword that was broken and will be remade. [In other words](#): first he is impotent in both senses of the word but, with a little help from the elves, becomes potent in both ways.
 - It also goes the other way round on occasion. After the ancient super hero with his magical swords has rescued the damsel from distress, he puts his double-edged sword in the common bed to indicate that he is going to stay chaste (e.g. in "[Tristan and Isolde](#)"). Strange - but you must realize that those guys where under the heady influence of Christianity *and* they had nothing good to smoke because smoking hadn't been invented yet. Note also that the sword is always double-edged because the maiden, having had a dragon breathing down her neck most of the time, couldn't go to church as often as necessary for digging the idea of chastity, I guess.
- Enlarging a bit on this, a sword symbolizes the **masculine principle**, whatever that is outside of alchemy. There is also a **feminine principle**, of course. What we have is

Male principle Symbol: Sword	Feminine principle Symbol: Sheath
Active force Driving feature Conquering element for existence	Passive force Protective feature Nutritive/supportive element of existence
War, aggression, power	Peace, sufferance, yielding

Now you know what those philosophers (exclusively male for some reason) have been doing all these centuries. It must have taken a supreme mental effort and millennia of heavy thinking to figure those things out (look up **Schopenhauer** and women, for example). No wonder they never found the time to figure out something truly great like the [second law](#), for example.

After invoking **philosophy** or **metaphysics** into sword symbolism, things tend to get complicated. **Dualism**, meaning that everything has at least two sides to it (or "Yin and Yang"), comes in.

Your sword inside the sheath symbolizes creation (Yin). Draw it out and now it's death and destruction (Yang). Double edged swords drive this kind of symbolism even further: they stand for the general duality of nature. A sword is now also symbolic for the **penetrating power of the mind**, and encourages the wielding of a trained intellect to bring about the results we seek.

If that didn't work, you could always get your real sword out, too. Just as your sword cuts through a **gordic knot**, your intellect should cut through the problems it encounters. It was actually **Alexander the Great's** sword that cut the gordic knot, and what makes that particular sword special is that nothing seems to be known about it. I couldn't find a name or, as one would have expected, some hints that it came to him via some goddess.

Swords and Miscellaneous (Including Smiths)

We also have some very special symbols or sayings around swords.

A "**Damocles sword**", for example, might be hanging over you on occasion. Some students of mine, who come insufficiently prepared to oral Materials Science exams, may have experienced that symbolic Damocles sword right there in my office.

Then there are sayings, proverbs and metaphors like:

- Those that live by the sword will die by the sword (Bible)
- The pen is mightier than the sword.
- This is a double edged sword.
- Beat your swords into plowshares.
- Being given a blunt sword (German: "stumpfes Schwert", see below)

Süddeutsche Zeitung Nr. 230, Dienstag, 7. Oktober 2014

POLITIK

Posten. „Das ist der absolute Witz“, sagt Regine Mertens, Vorsitzende im Bonner Arbeitskreis der Gleichstellungsbeauftragten der Bundesbehörden. Wer mehr Frauen in Führungspositionen wolle, dürfe ih-

Das Gesetz gibt den Frauen nur ein „stumpfes Schwert“, so die Gleichstellungsbeauftragte

nen kein „stumpfes Schwert“ in die Hand drücken. Auch sei es ein Rückschritt, dass die Gleichstellungsbeauftragte nun „frühzeitig“ gehört werden soll. Bisher hieß es:

The law gives women only a blunt sword according to the equal opportunity commissioner

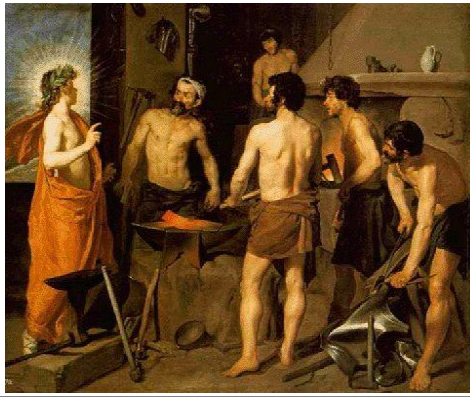
Women only get a **blunt sword with the new law requiring more women in power positions**

Three enormous bronze swords commemorate the battle of Hafsfjord in the year 872, when Harald Hårfagre ([Fairheaded Harald](#)) united Norway into one kingdom. The swords can be found at Møllebukta which is a bay area on the southern shore of Hafsfjord around **Stavanger**. The monument was unveiled by Norway's King Olav in 1983. The swords, which are about 10 meters (about 30 ft) tall, stand for *peace* and *unification*. One sword is larger than the others. This was Fairheaded Harald's sword. The swords are planted in solid rock - representing *peace*. Nobody has pulled out those beauties so far.



A last word to the *smiths* that made the swords. The first one on record is good old God **Hephaistos** (the Roman **Vulcanos**; [both deceased](#)). He was the son of **Zeuss** (the CEO of Greek Gods) and **Hera** (his official wife) but since he was a bit uncouth (probably just a budding, slightly nerdy engineer), his parents kicked the baby out of the Olympos. Those were the **good old times** after all.

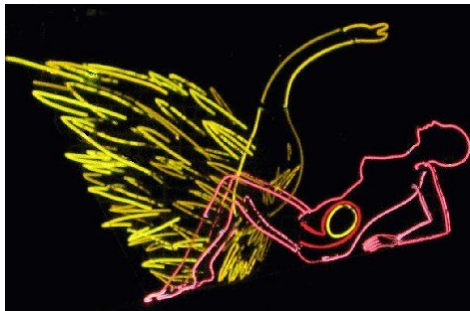
● Hephaistos survived somehow and - surprise - was later **given Aphrodite**, the Goddess of sex as far as I know. You wonder why? Easy. Hephaistos was the only God around who could actually *make* something. The rest were more of the Paris Hilton genre; they neither knew too much nor could they make very much. They were primarily concerned about their looks, bullying people, having a spot of of sodomy on occasion (just look at that piece of art I [photographed in Berlin](#); it features Zeuss right at it), partying, and cheating on each other. Hephaistos, on the other hand, learned a trade from his foster parents and made lots of useful things for the Gods. Aphrodite, of course, cheated on him so he made two golden slave **maidens** from metal, the first robots, as we usually read. I strongly suspect, however, that those maidens were closer to the inflatable beauties available nowadays from mail order shops for those days when the need arises and Aphrodite or her modern counterparts are occupied somewhere else.



Hephaistos / Vulcanos doing his thing in the smithy

Apollo (to the left) tells Hephaistos that his wife Aphrodite betrays him with Ares.
(Painting by Velazquez; Prado, Madrid)

- Alas! As the pictures show, Zeuss and his worthless crowd probably had more fun than the hard-working engineers. Nothing much seems to have changed.



Zeuss (as swan), having fun with Leda

Source: Modern sculpture; Photographed in Berlin

- Any halfway decent museum has some "Leda and the swan" painting by some major artist, or other pictures showing Zeus and his cronies having fun. Paintings showing engineers having fun are rather rare, however.
- Blacksmiths in many cultures were considered to be special and to have connections to magic and other scary arts. The better ones could become quite famous, we will encounter examples for that.
- A high-quality sword produced by a well-known smith was then worth its *weight in gold* or about 50.000 € at today's (May 2011) outrageous gold prices. It could be used as a fighting tool, sure, just as a Rolls Royce could be used for transporting potatoes or a 50.000 € luxury wrist watch for telling the time. It's primary function was to create **prestige** for its owner as a **class symbol**. It also might have been a heirloom if it didn't go into the grave with its owner.
- I have covered a lot of ground with swords and symbols but there is also the issue of **swordplay and symbols**, as I just (May 2012) found out by going to the Kiel opera². In **Wagner's "Lohengrin"**, there is a scene featuring a judgement of God or ordeal by battle. Elsa, the heroine, is falsely accused by some guy named Telramund of having killed her brother, the heir to the duchy of Brabant, and needs a hero who will fight Telramund for her in a life-and-death sword fight. God, as those imbeciles believed, would let the right guy win.
- Nobody wants to fight for Elsa. Then, in the nick of time and out of the blue, appears a mysterious knight called Lohengrin, a guy who has some strange relationship to a swan. Yes, a swan. Here we go again, except that in this case the swan is the young heir to the throne of Brabant in drag. He wasn't killed but only bewitched by Telramund's evil wife Ortrude. Anyway, Lohengrin is supposed to fight Telramund with his sword in a winner-takes-it-all (the life of the opponent, young Elsa, and the duchy of Brabant) battle. Since the actors did not wear swords or other fighting gear, I wondered how the big fight (lovingly orchestrated by Wagner) was supposed to take place.

- As it turned out, the contestants had a kind of presidential TV duel instead of a sword fight. They were taking turns jabbering away to a cheering crowd (at which staff members of the two contestants kept throwing money), and King Heinrich eventually declared Lohengrin to be the winner. It was all rather close to reality. The symbolism is clear. Sword fights, in an ordeal by battle, equals TV duels in a major elections. Well, why not? Look at Sarkozy, the French president until a few days ago. He lost. No more ruling the country, having unlimited power and money, and close encounters with Angela Merkel. I have to admit, though, that Carla Bruni (Sarkozy's wife) looks a lot better than Telramund's wife. Ortrude, however, can sing a lot better than Carla (at least a lot louder).
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- 1) Variation of the old proverb "speak softly and carry a big stick" that was made prominent by the American president Theodore Roosevelt in 1900.
- 2) Kiel, the capital of Schleswig-Holstein, one of the fourteen states of Germany, has a full-fledged opera, of course. Schleswig-Holstein has 2.5 million inhabitants, about 250.000 of which live in Kiel. So of course we have an opera, performing every day during the season. It even does [Wagner's ring](#), which then Metropolitan opera in new York City, for example, only dares to tackle about once every 30 years. In Germany, there are 80+ opera theaters, far more than in any other country and about as much as in the rest of the world combined. What that signifies I don't know - but I sure like it.

Sources

▶ I could go on for ever, but will now let it be. Here are some links to sides I visited and that contain parts of the information you find here.

- http://www.beyars.com/kunstlexikon/lexikon_8834.html
Das grosse Kunstlexikon von P.W. Hartmann (in German) has a lot to say about symbols.
- http://www.derkleinegarten.de/600_grab/640_symbole/schwert_bedeutung_der_symbole_symbolik.htm
A commercial garden things place with a bit about symbols on memorials.
- <http://www.uni-kiel.de/gza/2/Friedrich/Themenseiten/Attributte/Schwert.htm>
Some Homework or so by sports / history student Frauke (its a lady) Siever actually form my University about "Politisch-religiöse Symbolik im St.-Petri-Dom zu Schleswig" (Yes, that's German)
- http://www.scootermysdaisyheads.com/fine_art/symbol_dictionary/sword.html
Commercial site of Chris Eisenbaum; Commercial art studio..
- <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/jbms/?vol=2&num=1&id=18>
Very scholarly site about the sword of Laban.
- <http://home.tiac.net/~cri/index.html>
A lot more about those rings and swords in Lord of the Rings. Yes! **Sauron** obviously is a woman. The "eye", by the way, is also a well-known symbol of that feminine principle down there. [Here is a short-cut](#)
The mathematician Richard Harter, 76, of Highmore, South Dakota, who supplied these pages, died on April 20, 2012. It didn't bother him unduly, since, to quote him: "I don't worry about dying. It's not going to happen in my lifetime."
- <http://www.rmn.fr/english/les-musees-et-leurs-expositions-238/museum-of-the-middle-ages-thermal-241/expositions-242/the-sword-uses-myths-and-symbols>
The site to the Cluny exhibition.
- <http://www.templ.net/english/exhibitions.php#sword-power-virtue>
Site of an exhibition to the topic that already took place some years ago in Brno / Czech Republic
- <http://www.myetymology.com/encyclopedia/Sword.html>
A hodgepodge of all kinds of information including a few points to swords and symbols
- http://www.stavanger-web.com/touristinfo/swords_in_rock.htm
About the Stavanger swords.