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Jónas Jónsson and his Precepts for Icelandic Art

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I, Guðni Tómasson, hereby certify that this dissertation, which is 14.838 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Introduction

This dissertation is concerned with nationalism and art in Iceland, focusing on the early 1940's. At that time the drive for national independence was at its height in Iceland and coincided with the drive towards a nationalist culture throughout Europe. The creation of a distinctive nationalist culture became a clear feature of the political landscape in Germany, Italy, and Spain. In part this was a feature of the rise of Fascism in these countries, and the desire to construct a clear racial identity expressed in cultural artefacts. Iceland was not immune to these developments, and the politician Jónas Jónsson (1885-1968) sought to create the conditions wherein Icelandic artists would give expression to the essential nature of the nation in their art, thereby increasing the nationalist sentiments of their countrymen. This fact allies Jónsson's programme to some extent to those Fascist ideologies throughout Europe, and this alignment will be examined here in relation to developments in Germany.

Jónsson's aesthetics, nationalism and rhetoric will be looked into, and a possible art theory constructed from his writings on art, which were published in newspapers, where he argued heavily with progressive artists. Owing to the fact that Jónsson set up two exhibitions in Reykjavík in 1942 of what he considered to be "acceptable" and "unacceptable" in Icelandic art, a comparison of his rhetoric regarding visual art will be drawn with that of the regime in Nazi Germany. There, only five years earlier, similar but more famous exhibitions were set up representing "degenerate" art, as opposed to "German" art. By looking at the

works that Jónsson selected for his unusual exhibitions, and the writings he supplemented them with, an attempt will be made to see what role he wanted the visual arts to play in the context of Icelandic nationalism and the nation's progression towards full independence from Danish rule. Before turning to the exhibitions themselves though, an historical overview of the evolvement of modern Icelandic nationalism will be given, and an introduction to the controversial persona of Jónsson and his policies on cultural matters other than the visual arts.

The attempts of Jónsson to influence Icelandic art, and his precepts in the matter during the 1940s, provide us with a miniature example of an attempted political control over the visual arts and an emphasis on utilizing the cultural artefacts produced by the nation's artists for raising the nationalistic sentiments of the Icelandic public. These attempts have to be seen in relation to similar ideas on the European continent, especially in Germany, although the Icelandic attempt was considerably smaller in scale, limited to Jónsson's own initiative and was ultimately a failure.

For a better understanding of modern nationalism in Europe I have referred to Eric Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality*. Concerning the development of Icelandic nationalism, the most important scholars in recent years have been historians Gunnar Karlsson and Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, who have devoted their time and energy to a certain reassessment of the implications of Icelandic nationalism. Hálfðánarson's recent book, *The Icelandic nation state: origin and finality*, is probably the most complete work on

the development of modern nationalism in Iceland, although the visual arts do not feature greatly in the book.

There is still much ground that remains to be covered in the field of Art History in Iceland. The only substantial attempt to write an historical account of the visual arts of the country is thirty years old.¹ Several shorter texts; books on individual artist or periods, and shorter articles have none the less been helpful.² Historian Guðjón Friðriksson's three volume biography on the axis figure of this dissertation, Jónas Jónson, is an important source regarding the politician. For political developments in the Arts in Nazi Germany, Stephanie Barron's book *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* has been the most valuable of those I have looked at, and the most comprehensive account on the subject to date. Other accounts, such as Peter Adam's *Art of the Third Reich*, have also helped in the understanding of the aesthetics and rhetoric of the Nazi regime and the utilization of art in raising patriotic sentiments.

Finally it should be noted that quotations from sources in Icelandic have been translated by the candidate.

¹ Björn Th. Björnsson. *Icelandic Art in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Draft for a Historical Overview*. 2 vols. Reykjavík, 1964 and 1973.

² Examples of these are: Ólafur Kvaran. *Jón Engilberts*. Reykjavík, 1988. Halldór Björn Runólfsson. "Reflections on Icelandic Art" *Landscapes from a High Latitude: Icelandic Art 1909-1989*. Julian Freeman (editor). London, 1989, 21-91. Júlíanna Gottskálksdóttir. "Pioneer at the Dawn of a Century" *Þórarinn B Þorláksson: Pioneer at the Dawn of a Century*. Reykjavík, 2000, 9-32. Björn Th. Björnsson. *Þorvaldur Skúlason*. Reykjavík, 1983.

Chapter 1:

Historical Overview on the Development of Modern Nationalism and the Visual Arts in Iceland

The 19th century in Europe was the age of growing nationalistic sentiment which reached its pinnacle in the earlier part of the 20th century. Though a secluded country in the North-Atlantic Ocean, Iceland was in every respect part of this wave of nationalism, in spite of its distance from the mainland. But the Icelandic struggle for independence was not undertaken by violent struggle, as it was in so many other cases. This rural miniscule nation was in no way equipped or ready to fight the Danish monarchy for its independence, so thankfully the path of reasoning and negotiation was taken instead of violence. The rhetoric of the Icelandic nationalist leaders was nonetheless based on ethnic reasoning, and cultural arguments for independence were frequently voiced.

Since 1262, Iceland had been under the rule of foreign kings, first the Norwegian and then the Danish. But due to the cultural heritage of the Icelandic Sagas³, many 19th century Icelanders viewed the period of autonomy before 1262, the so-called Free State, as a golden age, and a model of national independence which the nation was meant to strive for and revive. In accordance with German theories of nationalism which the Icelandic elite and students came into contact with in

³ The Icelandic Sagas are secular stories preserved in medieval manuscripts, the earliest dating from the 14th and 15th centuries. There are about 40 anonymous family sagas dealing mostly with feuds that take place from around the time of Iceland's settlement in 874 until 1050. The Sagas are considered the basis of Icelandic literature and contributed vastly to the reasoning put forward by the nationalistic movement in the 19th and 20th century as signs of the nation's past greatness before it came under foreign rule of the Norwegians and Danish.

Copenhagen in the early 19th century, Danish rule was seen as a hindrance to the cultural and economic prosperity of Iceland. The theories of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) concerning the natural surroundings of human societies, and the importance placed on language in the creation of nations were of central importance to the development of Icelandic nationalism. Clear national boundaries, a vibrant native tongue basically free of dialects, and the almost total ethnic homogeneity of the Icelandic people contributed to the fact that the independence movement of the 19th century was not challenged politically at home, and the issue became almost synonymous with the concept of politics in Iceland.⁴

The supposed exploitation of Iceland by the Danes was often strongly exaggerated to further nationalistic causes⁵, and the men of independence in the modern period subscribed to the ideas of autonomy and freedom of their ancestors of the medieval Free State, and referred to them constantly in their task of raising the nationalistic awareness of their countrymen. The struggle for independence was seen as a renaissance of the Icelandic freedom in the middle ages, and the men and women of the earlier period were seen as glorious, free and independent. The medieval period of autonomy stood in direct contrast to the decaying state of the country and nation in later ages, under foreign rule and monopolistic trade. Thus, when discussing the poets from the Age of the Sagas, the central figure of this study,

⁴ Gunnar Karlsson. "The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland" *Ethnicity and Nation Building in the Nordic World*. Sven Tägil (editor). London, 1995, 36-42.

⁵ Gunnar Karlsson. "Icelandic Nationalism and the Inspiration of History" *The Roots of Nationalism: Studies in Northern Europe*. Rosalind Mitchison (editor). Edinburgh, 1980, 85.

politician Jónas Jónsson, wrote in his *History of Iceland for Children* published in 1915:

In the Age of the Sagas the Icelanders surpassed all other Nordic nations in everything concerning poetry. In those days there were many men in this country who could recite witty stanzas for any occasion. But above these were the great poets who achieved fame and fortune with their poems wherever they went. The poets turned the art into an industry and the poems into an export commodity. ... Few were as respected abroad, as the poets that travelled between kings, praised them in their poetry, and were rewarded with positions of rank, gifts, placements at court, fine clothing and rings, decorated armament or fully loaded ships.⁶

As we shall see, Jónsson considered a lot of the output in the Icelandic arts of the 20th century to be a distant echo of the glorious days of the Icelandic Free State, and it should be noted that Jónsson's nationalistic version of Icelandic history was the basic reading in history in the elementary schools of Iceland for more than half a century.⁷ Through his books on Icelandic history for schoolchildren, Jónsson contributed greatly to the task of raising nationalistic sentiments in the hearts of generations of young children.

It was in the fourth decade of the 19th century that things started moving in the direction of the independence of Iceland. The ideas of the distribution of power disseminated during the revolutionary period in Europe started to have an impact on the politics of Denmark, and the Danish king had to meet the demands of his subjects for greater involvement in the politics of the kingdom; demands which were also voiced in the peripheral island of the north. Historian Guðmundur Hálfðánarson has pointed out that in this period the Icelandic political leadership

⁶ Jónas Jónsson. *History of Iceland for Children*. Vol.1. Reykjavík, 1915, 73.

⁷ Gunnar Karlsson. "The Goals of Teaching History: A Historical Survey and Thoughts on Future Policy" *Saga: tímarit Sögufélags*. Vol. 20 (1982), 184.

made the choice not to take part in the democratic reforms implemented in Copenhagen:

When we look at the history of Iceland we see that in the early 19th century [the Icelanders] were repeatedly offered to take part in democratic developments in Denmark – first by sending representatives to the Danish body of class representatives and later to accept a Danish constitution with restricted privileges – both ideas getting a dull response in Iceland. In the period between 1830 and 1850 the Icelanders made a *choice* to be considered a separate nation and from then on they clearly strove towards the goal of establishing their own nation-state. ... The most remarkable fact about the idea of Icelandic independence was that there were no arguments raised against it in Iceland.⁸

The claims for immediate and full independence were unrealistic in the first half of the 19th century when Iceland only had a population of about sixty thousand, but over the following decades important steps were nonetheless taken in the direction of independence. Thus in 1845, an elected parliament, Alþingi, assembled for the first time in Reykjavík. It was named after the earlier assembly of the Free State, founded in 930 which had survived in some form until 1800, and assembled in the nationalistically important Þingvellir [Parliamentary Fields]. In 1851, Icelandic political leaders voiced their most verbal and direct protest to Danish rule when the country's most renowned leader of the liberal-nationalist movement, philologist Jón Sigurðsson (1811-1879), supposedly stood up against a Danish emissary to say “We all oppose!”, to the idea of the full integration of Iceland as a county into the Danish kingdom.⁹ In 1874, on the millennium of the country's settlement, the

⁸ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson. *Icelandic Nation State: Origin and Finality*. Reykjavík, 2001, 37.

⁹ It should be noted that these words and what would later be called “the spirit” of Jón Sigurðsson echoed through later periods of the struggle for independence. A painting of this event dominates the hall of the building where the meeting took place, which happens to be Iceland's best known secondary school in Reykjavík, and is therefore likely to have stirred nationalistic emotions in young people ever since.

Icelanders were presented with a constitution, and in 1904 the country achieved Home Rule and a ministry was set up in Reykjavík to take care of Icelandic affairs.

On the 1st of December 1918, with the Act of Union, Iceland and Denmark were declared free and independent states of each other, but were to remain in a union under the same King, and Denmark was to take care of Iceland's Foreign Affairs. This arrangement was meant to be unilaterally terminable for both countries after 25 years, but the provision never came to test. Diplomatic communications became impossible to uphold in the spring of 1940 when Denmark and Iceland were occupied by German and British forces respectively, but the Icelanders waited until June 1944 to establish a democracy. It has been pointed out that the slow, gradual and peaceful process of seeking independence was not least thanks to the tactics of Danish authorities in the issue:

For most of the long-drawn secessionist struggle, the [Danish] government strategy in Icelandic affairs took the form of an organized retreat, where the royal authorities attempted to come to terms with its impatient Icelandic subjects at every turn. Thus, the Danish government did not fulfil every fancy of the Icelandic nationalists, but was accommodating enough to sustain a firm belief in the bargaining process.¹⁰

The struggle of the tiny nation was therefore never in any real danger of being opposed by the Danes by economic or military means, and the fact that the process took such a long time probably benefited the Icelanders in their building of a modern nation.

¹⁰ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson. "Icelandic Nationalism: A Non-Violent Paradigm?" *Nations and Nationalities in Historical Perspective*. Guðmundur Hálfðánarson and Ann Katherine Isaacs (editors). Pisa, 2001, 7.

The visual arts in the modern age are a recent practice in Iceland. The men who tried to establish themselves as artists in Iceland in the 18th and 19th centuries were few, and the market for their efforts was non-existent. The attitude they met in the stagnant Icelandic society was one of conservatism and incomprehension. Only at the beginning of the 20th century were the foundations of a bourgeoisie society becoming stable enough to support artists in Reykjavík. The best known example of an artist working in the 19th century was Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833-1874) who had the nickname “painter” added to his name, a fact that demonstrates his uniqueness in the daily life in Reykjavík when he returned from Copenhagen in 1858. Guðmundsson was classically trained at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art in Copenhagen, a draughtsman as well as an oil-painter, but his greatest contributions to the growing nationalistic sentiments in Icelandic society in the period are likely to have been his designs for a popular traditional Icelandic costume for women that is still worn by women on ceremonial occasions, and the foundations he laid for the establishment of the National Museum of Iceland.

Sculptor Einar Jónsson (1873-1954) contributed greatly to the growing nationalistic sentiments in Icelandic society in the early 20th century. With financial support from the Icelandic parliament Jónsson was able to study sculpture in Copenhagen where he came under the influence of the Danish-Icelandic Neoclassical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844) and started working on public monuments of Icelandic men of importance and historical events. Such works by Jónsson were placed in prominent places in Reykjavík. Examples were sculptures of the first Icelandic settler Ingólfur Arnarson, 19th century hero of independence Jón

Sigurðsson and of the Danish King Christian IX presenting the important constitution to the Icelanders in 1874. As soon as the visual arts came into contact with influences from Europe they were put to the task of creating a national historical consciousness and pride in the hearts of the Icelandic public.

Þórarinn B. Þorláksson (1867-1924) is usually considered to be the founder of the modern Icelandic painting and his exhibit of oil paintings in Reykjavík in the year 1900 was a completely new endeavour in the cultural life of the town. Þorláksson is mostly known for his landscapes, especially his tranquil views of the most sacred place in the consciousness of the Icelandic nation, Þingvellir, a theme that the artist often represented in the calmness of the Icelandic summer night.



Ill. 1 Ásgrímur Jónsson. *Hekla* (1909). 150x290 cm. Lí 171. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association. The painting is a good example of the elevated and idealised Icelandic nature, as represented in the works of the “pioneers” of the early 20th century.

Two other painters should be named at this point, the landscape artists Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876-1958) and Jóhannes Kjarval (1885-1972). These two artists went about their most popular common subject matter, Icelandic landscape, in totally different ways. Jónsson's stylistic range was varied, but his popularity with the general public was based on his romantic and idealised oils (Ill. 1), while Kjarval's eccentric and expressionistic handling of Icelandic nature was viewed with scepticism at first but became popular during the 1930s, a popularity owing a lot to the cult-like figure of the artist, who became a living legend in the urban life of Reykjavík. Jónsson and Kjarval were well established when the cultural disputes initiated by Jónas Jónsson would start in the fifth decade of the 20th century, and in spite of their often unorthodox experimentation (especially in the case of Kjarval) their popularity could be said to have bought them a certain kind of inviolability from the criticism of the politician. Jónsson voiced his admiration for their "exceptional" work in general, shortly before he started his criticism on other Icelandic artists.¹¹ Instead Jónsson would turn his attention to younger and less established artists when it came to criticising the visual arts.

It is important to remember that some of the "pioneers" of modern Icelandic painting, for example Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and Ásgrímur Jónsson chose at the outset of their careers relatively conservative routes in their studies in Denmark. This has been pointed out in the case of Þorláksson, the first modern painter in Iceland, who was trained within in the academic framework of the Royal Danish

¹¹ Jónas Jónsson. "The Peaks and the Flatness" *Tíminn*, February 27th 1941.

Academy of Fine Art in Copenhagen and in a conservative private art school run by Danish landscape painter Harald Foss (1843-1922). Thus Þorláksson and Jónsson were trained in a conservative romantic tradition of landscape art in Denmark that was at the time under attack from more realistic and naturalistic currents, which were popular in several other private schools of the Danish capital. The Icelandic landscape tradition founded by the “pioneers” as therefore, from the outset, out of key with the progressive trends of the country it originated from and in close connection with nationalist romanticism in Denmark.¹² They were also in key with “a strong resurgence of nationalist, isolationist sentiments” that has been highlighted in Scandinavian painting after 1890.¹³ When this tradition was rebelled against in Iceland, at a later date by the subsequent generations of painters, this fact was no longer acknowledged and the art of the “pioneers” was seen as a spontaneous response to Icelandic landscape. These ideas of the autonomy of Icelandic art would feature greatly in Jónas Jónsson writings on “acceptable” Icelandic art later on.

As we shall see, the young visual arts in Iceland would be considered by many an instrument for furthering nationalistic sentiment among the Icelanders and contribute to the cause of Icelandic nationalism, which in spite of its peaceful outlook “had the same propensity for violence as any other ethnic nationalism, because its ultimate goal was not negotiable and its inflated rhetoric on the

¹² Júlíanna Gottskálksdóttir. “Pioneer at the Dawn of a Century” *Þórarinn B Þorláksson: Pioneer at the Dawn of a Century*. Reykjavík, 2000, 18.

¹³ Kirk Varnedoe. “Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century” *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century*. New Haven, 1988, 15.

character of the nature of the Icelandic nation invited a sense of racial superiority.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Guðmundur Hálfðánarson. “Icelandic Nationalism: A Non-Violent Paradigm?” *Nations and Nationalities in Historical Perspective*. Guðmundur Hálfðánarson and Ann Katherine Isaacs (editors). Pisa, 2001, 10.

Chapter 2:

Jónas Jónsson and his Politics of Culture and the Arts

Jónas Jónsson, who was and is commonly known as Jónas frá (from) Hríflu (his birthplace) was, without a doubt, one of the most influential politician in Iceland in the 20th century. Opinions still vary on Jónsson in Iceland, long after his death, but no matter what one thinks of



III. 2 Jónas Jónsson. Photograph by Jón Kaldal.

his controversial persona and historical heritage, credit has to be given to the fact that he was an incredibly energetic and vocal voice in Icelandic politics, and he had an enormous impact on what was then an underdeveloped society. He was, paradoxically, both a pioneering radical and a conservative politician. Jónsson played an important role in the development of the political system in Iceland through his involvement in the creation of two major political parties, the Icelandic Progressive Party and the Social Democratic Party, that were both founded in 1916. By doing this Jónsson wanted Icelandic politics to become something more substantial than a constant and tiresome argument about the country's relationship with the monarchy of Denmark.¹⁵

¹⁵ Guðjón Friðriksson. *Carrying the Sword in One Hand and the Plough in the Other: The Story of Jónas Jónsson*. Vol. 1. Reykjavík, 1991, 77.

Jónsson dedicated the greater part of his political career to working within the Progressive Party, where he was the party leader from 1934-1944, during the controversial episode that will be the focal point here. As a member of parliament in 1922-1949 and as minister of Justice and Church Affairs in 1927-1932, Jónsson's influence was enormous, especially considering that he did not obtain a higher rank. But he often exercised his power through parliamentary committees and boards and by pulling strings underneath the surface of public life to obtain his goals in political issues.

Despite its name, the Icelandic Progressive Party was a party in the middle of the Icelandic political spectrum for the bulk of the 20th century, and therefore it held a dominant position when it came to the formation of governments, a position largely implemented by Jónsson.¹⁶ The party has always had strong ties with the rural areas of Iceland, although these have become weaker in recent years. Jónsson wanted to strengthen the competitiveness of the countryside against the ever-growing lure of the urban centre of Reykjavík. Moreover, he strove to increase the level of education in the countryside and alleviate the “monopoly of higher education” which he considered Reykjavík to hold.¹⁷ It is therefore understandable that when it came to the visual arts he wanted the nature of the countryside portrayed in an idealised manner, as we shall see later.

¹⁶ Guðjón Friðriksson. *The Lion Roars: The Story of Jónas Jónsson*. Vol. 3. Reykjavík, 1993, 159.

¹⁷ Guðjón Friðriksson. *The Minister of Justice: The Story of Jónas Jónsson*. Vol. 2. Reykjavík, 1992, 23.

One important aspect of Jónsson's character must be mentioned here, before a discussion about his cultural arguments commences; his relentless opinion-making through his journalistic efforts. A year after the foundation of the Progressive Party, the party organ daily, *Tíminn*, was published for the first time, a brainchild of Jónsson. He was never an official employee of the paper but his access to it was virtually unlimited. Jónsson's ideas in cultural matters in the 1940s were mainly put forward on the pages of *Tíminn*. His countless articles between 1917 and 1942 contributed vastly to the popularity of the paper, and the Progressive Party.¹⁸ The vibrancy of the press, in an Icelandic society of roughly 130.000 inhabitants during the 1940s, is highly significant. The multiple newspapers issued in Reykjavík all had strong connections to party politics and this would crystallize in the heated discussions about culture. Added to these were journals and magazines that were published periodically and sometimes joined in the cultural discussions.

The parliamentary Board of Education was another important institution that Jónas Jónsson guided to existence, although the idea had originated in the mind of Sigurður Nordal (1886-1974), a professor of literature and an ardent admirer and scholar of Icelandic medieval culture. Nordal served as the first chairman of the board and was a close friend of Jónsson at the time of the board's creation, but their friendship would become severely compromised later on, especially in relation to the cultural arguments of the 1940s. The Board of Education was created in 1928 along with a Fund for Culture; the year after Jónsson came to power as a minister.

¹⁸ Guðjón Friðriksson. *The Latest Headlines: The History of the Media in Iceland from the Beginning to our Times*. Reykjavík, 2000, 135.

The board had a great significance for the livelihood of artists and the development of culture in Iceland in the period after its establishment. The laws for the board stated a few of its functions in the following paragraphs:

- a. To allocate the yearly parliamentary funds for the rewarding of poets and artists.
- b. To purchase for the nation works of art with the possible funds provided on the yearly budget.
- c. To provide supervision over the art collection of the nation and to prepare, by whatever means possible, the building of a National Gallery of Art in Reykjavík.¹⁹
- ...
- e. To allocate annual scholarships which will be funded by the State Treasury for students abroad. The scholarship should be awarded for the funding of studies that are most needed in the country at any given time, unless there is a case of an obvious special skill of a student involved. Otherwise the funding should be determined on the basis of the student's talents, motivation and temperament. The board should, by whatever means possible, and with the help of envoys abroad, ensure that the persons receiving the scholarships use the funds and their time wisely ...²⁰

These laws clearly show that the Board of Education was meant to be a very powerful tool of administration in cultural and educational affairs in Iceland. The finance provided was meant to be spent in accordance with the rural policies of the administration that established the board, and the actions of the board were to be as practical and wise as those of a well functioning agrarian household. The task of building a suitably large and diverse group of intellectuals, artists and civil servants

¹⁹ The National Gallery of Iceland was founded by an Icelander in Copenhagen in 1884 with mostly Nordic works in the collection, the first Icelandic works only joining the collection in the beginning of the 20th century. One of the aims of the gallery was the hope that it would support the struggle for independence and it has been pointed out that Danish landscapes of Icelandic nature had an impact on the "pioneers" of Icelandic art at the outset of their careers. See: Júlíanna Gottskálksdóttir. "Icelandic Pioneers and Nordic art around 1900" *Íslenska sögubíngið 1997: Ráðstefnurit*. Vol. 1. Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson og Eiríkur K. Björnsson (editors). Reykjavík, 1998, 200-202.

In 1916 the Gallery became a department in the National Museum but with the creation of the Board of Education it came under the administration of the board. Housing issues were a major restriction on the development and operation of the Gallery; it was for instance housed for decades in the Parliamentary building. These issues were not resolved until 1987, when the Gallery moved into its current residence.

²⁰ *The Governmental Records for Iceland*. Section A. Reykjavík, 1929, 7-8.

for the nation was to be undertaken by the board that would later become Jónas Jónsson's power base in his dictums on culture and art. The board's power over funds for the arts was increased in the state budget for 1940, after Jónsson became the chairman of the board, when honorary subsidies for artists which had formerly been integrated into the yearly budget, were placed under the authority of the board.²¹

Jónsson's criticism on cultural and artistic issues of the Icelandic nation in the 1940s were first substantially developed in a series of newspaper articles that he called *A Time of Rest in Arts and Literature* and published in *Tíminn* in December 1941.²² However, it is true to say that Jónsson had been critical of Icelandic culture in the years preceding these articles. As the head of the Board of Education, a post he had occupied since 1934, Jónsson was a powerful figure in the politics of Icelandic culture, and as a man interested in educational matters, he would now commit himself forcefully to the task of 'correcting' the country's cultural landscape. The degeneracy of the world wars and the uncritical acceptance by Icelandic artists, writers and poets of foreign "art-religions" had in Jónsson's opinion created "four branches of the same river: In literature there is the movement of sexual fantasy and pornography, in architecture the style of boxes, in sculpture the style of blocks and in painting the making of blots."²³

²¹ Gils Guðmundsson. "Jónas Jónsson and the Board of Education" *Andvari* (1985), 92.

²² Jónas Jónsson. "A Time of Rest in Arts and Literature" *Tíminn*, December 6th, 13th and 18th 1941.

²³ Jónas Jónsson. "A Time of Rest in Arts and Literature" *Tíminn*, December 18th 1941. It must be noted that Jónsson's expressive style can not be properly translated in this case. In accordance with centuries old Icelandic guidelines of poetry and rhyme-making he begins all his names of the styles with the letter K, a

Before he turned fully to criticising the visual arts in Iceland, Jónsson, publicly criticised several writers and poets of Icelandic literature. The best known example of this was writer Halldór Laxness (1902-1998) who would go on to receive the Nobel Prize in literature in 1955. Jónsson was convinced that Laxness was giving an incorrect and ugly account of rural life in Iceland in his works, as well as being worthy of criticism for being on the wrong side of the tracks in politics. Jónsson had the means to punish Laxness for his political beliefs and in 1940 Jónsson slashed the yearly funding to the writer dramatically. This event was met with outrage among artists and writers, and Laxness refused to accept the money provided for him. Instead he established a fund that he called A Fund for the Protection of Intellectual Freedom of Icelandic Writers.²⁴ Jónsson was also certain that publications by left wing publishing houses were funded with money from the Soviet Union, although attempts to prove such funding in the 1940s have been fruitless.²⁵ The publication of books by left wing individuals and companies was seen by Jónsson as “one of the most cunning undertaking of Icelandic communists.”²⁶

An interesting example of the cultural politics of Jónsson was his opposition to the publication of the Icelandic medieval Sagas with modern day spelling, a plan undertaken by Halldór Laxness among others. This was seen by Jónsson as an

stylistic feature that may very well have impressed many of his readers at the time, but at the same time made his opponents in the matter furious.

²⁴ Guðjón Friðriksson. *The Lion Roars: The Story of Jónas Jónsson*. Vol. 3. Reykjavík, 1993, 178.

²⁵ Aðalheiður Inga Þorsteinsdóttir. *The Quick-freezing of the Human Soul: The Conflict between Jónas Jónsson and Intellectuals and Writers on the Political Left Wing*. Dissertation in History, University of Iceland, 1999, 55.

²⁶ Jónas Jónsson. “The Quick-freezing of the Human Soul” *Tíminn*, August 29th 1939.

attempt “to drag the medieval literature into the mire”²⁷ and a new law was passed on the matter, allowing only the state to publish the heritage. Nonetheless, modern editions would be allowed shortly after the laws came into existence. The language of the Sagas that Jónsson was keen on maintaining was not in any way original and was of course just a compromise created through the centuries, but an idea of linguistic purity and correctness seems to have been at the centre of Jónsson’s ideas on the matter and they were similar to his ideas on the purity of Icelandic visual art that he would later champion. His views in cultural matters were conservative and the Sagas, which in a way were the basis of Icelandic national identity, were not to be tampered with. The publications were to be controlled by state owned publications that were in direct competition with privately owned companies, and under the direct control of Jónsson and the Board of Education. But soon the visual arts would move to the centre of Jónsson cultural criticism.

²⁷ Jónas Jónsson. “The Ancient Literature into the Mire” *Tíminn*, October 11th 1941.

Chapter 3:

The Exhibitions of 1942 and Jónsson's Precepts for Icelandic Art

This subdivided chapter will deal with the two exhibitions that Jónas Jónsson set up in Reykjavík in 1942. By looking at the texts that Jónsson published before and after the exhibitions and the works that he chose to display, an attempt will be made to construct his art theory. Reactions to the exhibitions will also be explored.

When Jónas Jónsson started his attacks on several visual artists in Reykjavík in the spring of 1942 and dictated his precepts for Icelandic art, the country was occupied by a foreign army.²⁸ Iceland was all of a sudden being drawn into the contemporary international society of nations, both politically and culturally. Even though Jónsson agreed to the military protection of the British and later American forces, he strongly disliked some of the side effects of the military presence. The increasing urbanisation was seen as a negative development, rural people started flocking to the towns for employment offered to them by the foreigners.²⁹ Conservative voices in Icelandic society became worried about the Icelandic nationality in a sea of change. Full independence from the Danish monarchy had not yet been achieved.

²⁸ On 10th of May 1940 the British Army occupied Iceland because of its strategic position in the North Atlantic Ocean. In 1942 an agreement was reached between Icelandic officials and the government of the United States of America regarding the military defence of the country. The agreement is still in effect and a NATO base is still in the country.

²⁹ Guðjón Friðriksson. *The Lion Roars: The Story of Jónas Jónsson*. Vol. 3. Reykjavík, 1993, 196.

Modern movements and developments in the arts were just starting to reach the country through a few Icelandic artists who had travelled abroad for education. Art historian Björn Th. Björnsson saw the upheaval created by the occupation and the sudden progression of Icelandic society into modernity, as a major factor in the clash of a backward romantic and national aesthetics on the one hand, and the reactionary attitudes based on foreign art movements on the other.³⁰ The modernisation which the occupation brought about and the tension between rural and urban areas, surely added to the strains of this miniscule underdeveloped society in trying to cope with modernity, foreign influences and ideas. The dispute regarding the visual arts in 1942 was very much a part of these strains.

Artists at the time, who had travelled abroad, sometimes pointed out the backwardness of their fellow countrymen when it came to cultural matters. One of them was composer Jón Leifs (1899-1968) who lived in Germany and wrote this criticism of Icelandic arts in 1937:

Many foreigners consider contemporary Icelandic poetry to be a mere echo or impersonation of foreign 19th century poetry. They do not feel Icelandic poets uphold the heritage of ancient Icelandic poetry, nor that they are preserving or developing it. Some Icelandic artists that are considered important or even famous back home are disregarded by foreign specialists, who on the other hand consider other artists, less esteemed in Iceland, to be very promising.³¹

Jón Leifs was among the Icelandic artists at the time that took in modern influences, but was met with incomprehension when he tried to present his work to audiences in his homeland. The same would be true of many of the artists that

³⁰ Björn Th Björnsson. *Icelandic Art in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Draft for a Historical Overview*. Vol. 2. Reykjavik, 1963, 209.

³¹ Jón Leifs. "Iceland from a Foreign Perspective" *Iðunn* (1937), 63.

would be criticized by Jónas Jónsson in 1942, and these words of Leifs seem to represent their feelings of discontent.

What turned Jónas Jónsson's attention from criticising the left wing literary circles of Iceland towards some of the country's visual artists in 1942 were probably three things in particular. *First* there were two addresses from artists to the parliament, concerning the purchasing policies of works of art by the Board of Education; these addresses were subsequently published in some of the newspapers. The first address was signed by 14 artists, of whom most were of a younger generation of artists, but two of the so called "pioneers" signed it as well, Ásgrímur Jónsson and Jóhannes Kjarval. Here the artists complained about their fruitless efforts of their representative, painter Ásgrímur Jónsson, to be allowed to take part in the choice of artworks the board was meant to buy for the national collection. At the time the selection was in the hands of the five politicians on the board, and the artists ridiculed this situation by comparing it to the idea of having illiterates choosing books for the National Library. The artists also accused the board of "demanding monotony and going for watered down versions of artistic movements that prevailed in Europe generations ago" and for suppressing the individuality of younger artists.³² Responses from the parliament to this address were sparse, and a left wing journal, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, proclaimed that this was because of the discipline chairman Jónsson had over the members of parliament, especially the

³² "The Purchasing of Art by the Board of Education: An Artists' Address to the Parliament" *Morgunblaðið*, May 7th 1941. An interesting point in this address is the reasoning the artists used for the development of modern Icelandic art, which they construed as a development from the decoration of medieval manuscripts; therefore giving their activity a historical basis and justification by tying it to the heritage of the Sagas.

members of his own Progressive party, which he also chaired at this point.³³ An entry from the minutes of the board shows that the address was not considered worthy of an answer by the members, who found the address full of “arrogance, malice and deceptions.”³⁴

After Jónsson had published his controversial articles on art in December 1941, where he ridiculed current trends in modern art, architecture and literature (see chapter 2), a second and more severe complaint to the parliament was published in April 1942. This was signed by 66 artists (only 11 visual artists), poets, musicians and actors from the Federation of Icelandic Artists. Against Jónsson’s accusations claiming that several of the artists were tools of foreign Bolshevism, the artists emphasised that their opinions on politics were diverse. They stated that the “judge of the high court of Icelandic Art” needed objectivity and calmness, instead of propaganda and a battle-temperament, for his judgements. Jónsson’s actions were considered to be caused by a “dictatorial lack of self-control” and deemed “unworthy of a civilised society.”³⁵

The *second* factor that is likely to have contributed to the fact that Jónas Jónsson went ahead with his two exhibitions of 1942, were claims put forward by several artists regarding the accounting of funds provided for the purchase of art for the national collection. These accusations were put forth by the painter Jóhann Briem

³³ Kristinn E. Andrésson. “Artists Send a Complaint about the Board of Education to the Parliament” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*. Vol. 1 (1941), 3.

³⁴ National Archives of Iceland. *The Minutes of the Board of Education I (1928 -1946)*, 255.

³⁵ “66 Members of the Federation of Icelandic Artists Send a Forthright Address to the Parliament” *Morgunblaðið*, April 16th 1942.

(1907-1991) who at the time was the President of the Federation of Icelandic Artists, in an interview in the spring of 1942.³⁶ The accusations were later repeated in the complaint that the 66 artists sent to the parliament. Jónsson was even accused of spending the earmarked funds on food and drink for his guests at political functions.³⁷

The *third* aspect that is likely to have triggered Jónsson's attacks on visual artists in 1942 was a collective exhibition held in the autumn of 1941 in Reykjavík. This exhibition was seen by the editor of the left wing journal *Tímarit Máls og menningar* (strongly disliked by Jónsson) as a "joyous testimony of the increasing maturity and diversification of Icelandic art."³⁸ In the cultural supplement of the country's largest newspaper, situated on the right wing of the political spectrum, it was considered to be "the best exhibition ever held in this country."³⁹ These views of praise were not shared by the head of the Board of Education, Jónas Jónsson. In his discussion of the exhibition of 1941 he talked about what he called the "restless division" of young Icelandic artists, many of whom Jónsson was sure were communists:

These men are convinced that in the future it will be acknowledged as a law that works of art will only be validated, if they are ugly, tedious and poorly produced. Only in such a world could these men come into their own, in spite of their lack of talent, special training and general culture.

³⁶ "The Dispute between Icelandic Artists and the Chairman of the Board of Education" *Vísir*, March 24th 1942.

³⁷ "66 Members of the Federation of Icelandic Artists Send a Forthright Address to the Parliament" *Morgunblaðið*, April 16th 1942.

³⁸ Kristinn E. Andrússon. "Artists' Exhibition" *Tímarit Máls og Menningar*. Vol. 2 (1941), 98.

³⁹ Emil Thoroddsen. "The Art Exhibition of 1941" *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, October 12th 1941.

Jónsson went on to complain that the exhibition was not as comprehensive as the artists involved claimed, and that almost half of working artists in the country were not allowed to take part. In this article it is also important to note that Jónsson uses the derogatory term “picture makers” to discuss the art and opinions of artists he dislikes.⁴⁰ Later Jónsson would also differentiate between “poet” and “versifier” to point out his likes and dislikes in the output of certain artists.⁴¹

These three factors triggered what were to be Jónsson’s most controversial moves in his arguments with artists and poets in his political career and, in hindsight at least, his most blatant attack on artistic freedom: the two exhibitions he set up in the spring of 1942. The first one was set up on the 28th of March 1942 inside the parliament building in the centre of Reykjavík.⁴² Subsequently, this “Exhibition of Ridicule”⁴³ as it was called in the press, was taken down and placed in a small display window in a woollen store in the centre of Reykjavík. Naturally in this setting, the small exhibition received greater attention, while a left wing newspaper proclaimed that Jónsson had moved the exhibition because he did not have the permission from the parliamentary president for the endeavour.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Jónas Jónsson. “A Time of Rest in Arts and literature” *Tíminn*, December 18th 1941.

⁴¹ Jónas Jónsson. “Poets and Versifiers” *Tíminn*, March 31st, April 2nd, 9th and 11th April 1942.

⁴² The art collection of the Icelandic nation was scattered at the time in several public buildings and the halls of the Parliament were the place where most of them could be viewed, of course mainly by the members of Parliament themselves.

⁴³ Since the former exhibition that Jónas Jónsson set up in 1942 was commonly referred to by this name in the newspapers, it has been chosen here. The term “degenerate art” was sometimes used in the dispute, but it was rare and usually in relation to modern European art movements.

⁴⁴ “Jónas Jónsson’s Exhibition of Paintings in the Gefjunn Display Window” *Alþýðublaðið*, April 26th 1942.

After a few days in the display window, the art works in the “Exhibition of Ridicule” were replaced by works that the chairman of the Board of Education considered appropriate examples of Icelandic art, an exhibition that seems to have received so little attention and discussion that today it is uncertain what precise works were displayed, the artists are named in newspaper articles but not all the titles of the works. The works on the “Exhibition of Ridicule” are a different matter, to enlarge his audience Jónsson had these works printed in his party organ *Tíminn*. The front page of the issue on the 3rd of May 1942 featured five of the six ridiculed works under the heading “*Icelandic modern art*” - the only instance in the history of Icelandic journalism when the visual arts have received such a generous attention.

The exhibitions, assembled from works in the national collection, were the idea of Jónsson himself, but exhibited with the consent of the other members of the Board of Education. When a left wing paper inquired about the backing of other members of the board to the idea, only one member gave a clear denial of involvement.⁴⁵ It is on the other hand doubtful that Jónsson went through a lot of painstaking curatorial trouble and thought in setting up the two exhibitions, but the works nonetheless reflect his likes and dislikes when it came to the production of Icelandic art.

⁴⁵ “Does the Board of Education Support Jónsson’s Exhibition?” *Alþýðublaðið*, April 30th 1942.

Chapter 3.1:

The Works on Display

The exhibitions that Jónas Jónsson set up in the parliament building and in the display window in Reykjavík in the spring of 1942 were not accompanied by any catalogues and the only official comments that came from the initiator of the exhibition were put forth in his newspaper articles. Because the shock effect of the former exhibition was greater than the later exhibition, the works in the “Exhibition of Ridicule” were discussed more thoroughly in the papers and were, as was mentioned earlier, reproduced as illustrations.

Most of the artists, whose works Jónsson chose for his “Exhibition of Ridicule”, were of a young and upcoming generation of artists. The painter Þorvaldur Skúlason (1906-1984), who was turning 36 years old at the time, received the dubious honour of having two of his works displayed in Jónssons’s exhibition. These were Skúlason’s *Harbour* (Ill. 3) and his still-life *By the window* (Ill. 4).



Ill. 3 Þorvaldur Skúlason. *Harbour* (1938). 115x 150 cm.

LÍ 585. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

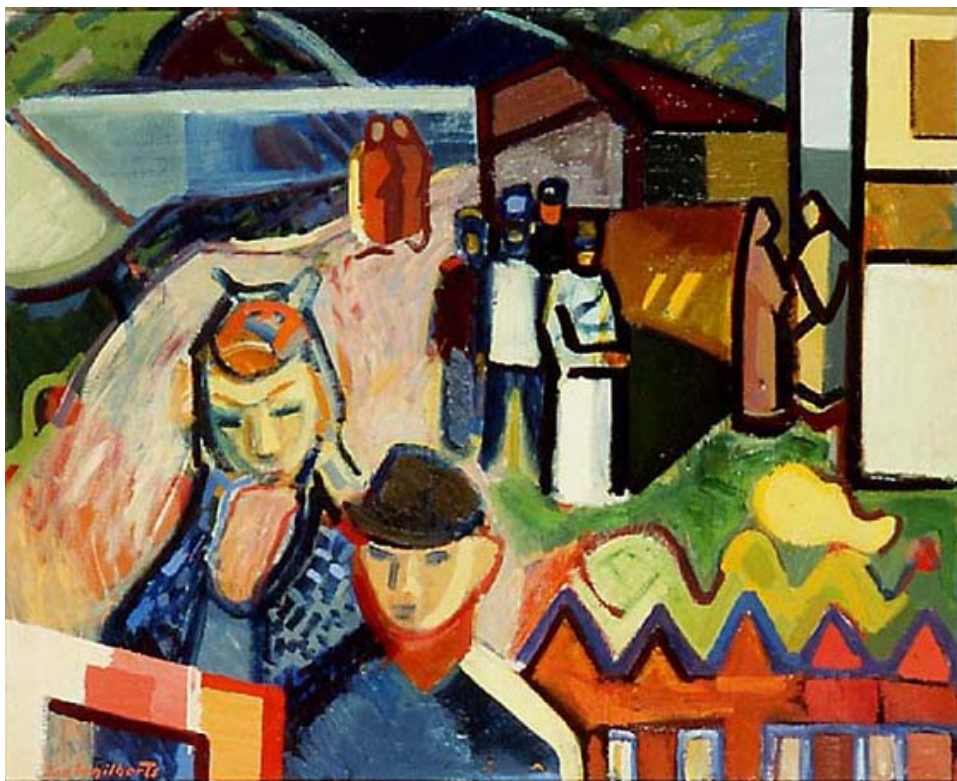
The former work was bought by the board while it was under Jónsson's chairmanship. In the *Harbour* the artist simplifies his subject matter considerably and the work represents an intermediary stage in the artist's evolution towards his later abstraction. Influence from French modern masters is evident. The colouring can be linked to the fauvists, the formal simplicity seems influenced by Cézanne and the spatial flatness can be seen as a heritage from the early cubist paintings of Braque and Picasso. Skúlason came into contact with the works of these artists both during his academic training in Oslo and his stay in Paris during the 1930s.⁴⁶



Ill. 4 Þorvaldur Skúlason. *By the window* (1940). 85 x 70 cm. LÍ 619. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

Skúlason's still-life *By the window* (Ill. 4) also bears witness to the formal simplifications that the artist is aiming for. Such formalistic experiments and the diagonal composition are likely to have contributed to the dislike of Jónsson and may have influenced his choice of the work for the exhibition. Realistic accuracy gives way to contemporary influences from European modern art that were seen to be contaminating Icelandic art.

⁴⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson. *Þorvaldur Skúlason*. Reykjavík, 1983, 32.



Ill. 5 Jón Engilberts. *Evening in a seaside village* (1937). 116 x 142 cm. LÍ 591.

© National Gallery og Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

Evening in a seaside village (Ill. 5) was a work by another young painter, Jón Engilberts (1908-1972). As this painting bears witness to, Engilberts was strongly influenced by European expressionism; he was for instance known for his graphic works. The colouring and black outlining suggest this, and the composition links the work to the influence of Edward Munch, whom Engilberts revered and was strongly influenced by during his studies in Oslo.⁴⁷ The subject matter here is likely to have irritated Jónsson; instead of rural landscapes and heroic portrayals of Icelanders, the artist took a rather bleak look at survival in slowly developing urban eras. Engilberts was among a group of young artists who found their voice during the early 1930s, when he took sides with the working classes and portrayed their

⁴⁷ Ólafur Kvaran. *Jón Engilberts*. Reykjavík, 1988, 11.

destitution. His paintings from the early 1930s of the working classes marching in demonstrations were probably reason enough for his inclusion in Jónsson's exhibition, since these works could easily be connected with communist ideology.

Jónas Jónsson considered these three works by Skúlason and Engilberts as “direct imitations of the most uninspired and miserable aspects of French degenerate art in recent years.”⁴⁸ Since Engilberts' work should be linked to German and Nordic expressionism and not “French degenerate art”, this harsh judgement has to be considered wrong.



Ill. 6 Jóhann Briem. *Lying woman* (1935). 75 x 105 cm. Lí 591.

© National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

⁴⁸ Jónas Jónsson. “Poets and Versifiers” *Tíminn*, April 9th 1942.

The nude *Lying Woman* (Ill. 6) by Jóhann Briem was of a particularly vulgar nature according to Jónas Jónsson. Briem was currently the President of the Federation of Icelandic Artists, that had strongly criticised Jónsson's cultural policies, and this fact no doubt played a part in Jónsson's public disgust for Briem's work. Jónsson gave the following account of the reactions of the members of parliament when they saw the work in the exhibition:

The members of parliament said of this painting: that if all women were as poorly built, resembling arthropods and with the colouring of garbage on the flesh, then soon the senility ideal of Tolstoy would come into realization. All the adoration that men have for women would evaporate immediately and become nothing but disgust and boredom.⁴⁹

Jónsson probably associated this nude by Briem directly with Gauguin's exotic women, works that he despised because of their primitive nature. Primitive art, filtered through the developments of early 20th century European art was a highly unfitting ingredient of Icelandic art according to Jónsson. These views have to be seen in relation to concepts of the ethnic purity of the Icelandic nation and a preference for the ongoing protection of the national Icelandic identity, based on the pureness of the language and racial integrity.

Yet another young artist, Gunnlaugur Scheving (1904-1972), was ridiculed by Jónsson in his exhibition, by the inclusion of a portrait of schoolmaster *Hjörtur Snorrason* (Ill. 7). The schoolmaster had recently passed away when Jónsson asked Scheving to paint the portrait for the board. Therefore Scheving had to use photographs of his model. When the work was returned by the former

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

headmaster's school where it was supposed to be located, Jónsson said that the painting looked like a "hole-pricked clod of clay"⁵⁰, proclaimed that there was no likeness between the subject and the outcome on the canvas, and included the portrait in the exhibition. No doubt, Scheving's own criticism of Jónsson and the board influenced the choice of work.⁵¹ The artist later gave an account in the papers of this business experience with Jónsson and complained about the strange fate of the work and its inclusion in the show.⁵²



Ill. 7 Gunnlaugur Scheving. *Hjörtur Snorrason* (1939). 65 x 50 cm. LÍ 603. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

⁵¹ See: Gunnlaugur Ó. Scheving. "Artists and the Board of Education" *Alþýðublaðið*, April 25th 1942.

⁵² Gunnlaugur Ó. Scheving. "One Example of the Business between Jónas Jónsson and the Artists" *Alþýðublaðið*, May 3rd 1942.



Ill. 8 Jón Stefánsson. *The Bull of Þorgeir* (1929). 101 x 134 cm. Lí 408.

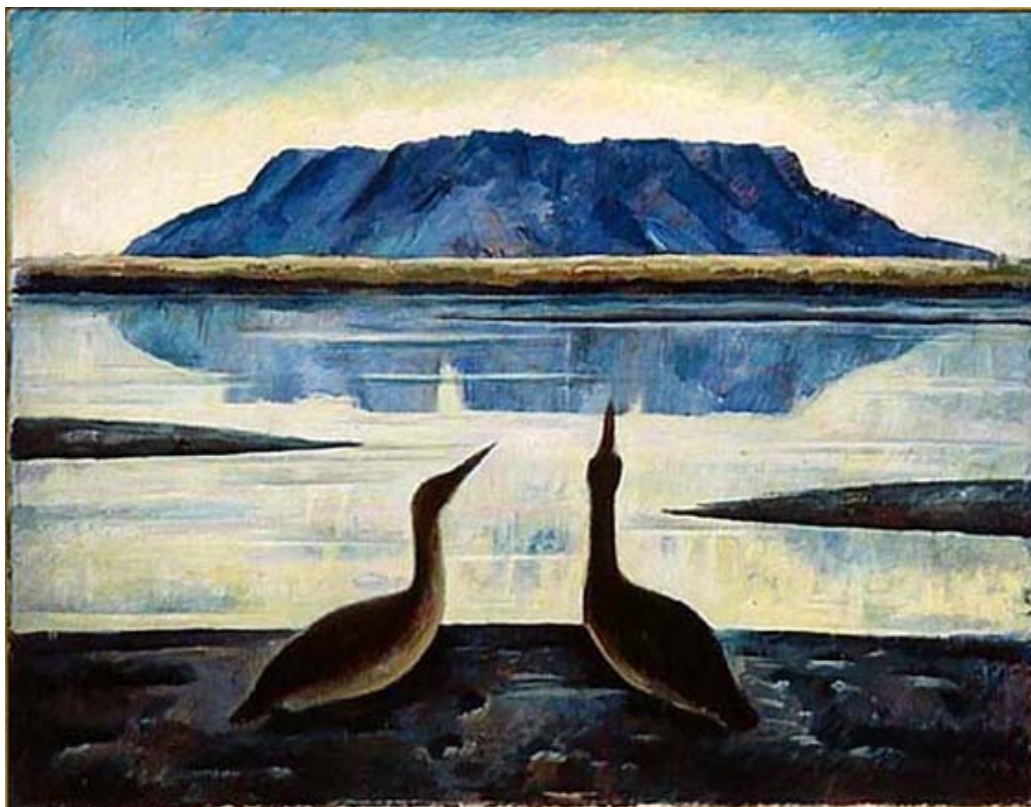
© National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

One of the artists displayed in Jónsson's efforts to influence Icelandic art was in a unique position because his works featured in both the exhibitions that the politician set up. This was the painter Jón Stefánsson (1886-1962), who was of the generation of "pioneers" in Icelandic art, starting their career in the beginning of the 20th century. Stefánsson's painting *The Bull of Þorgeir* (Ill. 8) was according to Jónsson the worst of all the works he chose on display. Bought in 1931 for the national collection by the Board of Education under the chairmanship of Jónsson's former friend Sigurður Nordal, it was selected by the artist himself, and was therefore, in Jónsson view, an ideal example of why artists should not be allowed to take part in the choice of works of art for the national collection. He considered the

work “so crude, repulsive, and untrue in all its nature, that it will forever be considered unfit for public and private venues.”⁵³ *The Bull of Þorgeir*, based on an event in a folk tale, is far from being Stefánsson’s best work. Most of his landscapes, influenced by Cézanne, are much more accomplished, balanced and composed, but Stefánsson got to know the ideas of the French master when he studied with Henri Matisse in Paris in 1908. Art historian Halldór Björn Runólfsson has traced the influence of Cézanne in Icelandic art through Stefánsson in the works of several Icelandic artists up until the Second World War. Here he sees a new vision in the production of Icelandic landscapes, in a certain type of “peasant art”, a vision that “called for the rejection of romantic idealism and emphasised instead a kind of severity, in composition, choice of colours and subject-matter.”⁵⁴ This side of Stefánsson’s art is likely to have pleased Jónas Jónsson, despite the loss of overblown romantic sentiment.

⁵³ Jónas Jónsson. “Poets and Versifiers” *Tíminn*, April 9th 1942.

⁵⁴ Halldór Björn Runólfsson. “Reflections on Icelandic Art” *Landscapes from a High Latitude: Icelandic Art 1909-1989*. Julian Freeman (editor). London, 1989, 30.



Ill. 9 Jón Stefánsson. *Summer Night (Loons at the banks of Þjórsá)* (1929). 100 x 130 cm.
LÍ 366. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

Turning away from the works on display in the “Exhibition of Ridicule”, and to the works in the acceptable exhibition⁵⁵, the work chosen here to represent the appropriate side of Stefánsson’s output, as Jónsson might have seen it, is perhaps not the clearest example of Cézannes’ influence, but it was a work that Jónsson admired.⁵⁶ Stefánsson’s *Summer night (Loons at the banks of Þjórsá)* (Ill. 9), captures an idealised Icelandic nocturnal atmosphere very well. The simplified horizontal structure of the painting owes tribute to Cézannes’ art and the cool shades of blue seem a heritage from the works of earlier Icelandic “pioneers” such

⁵⁵ As mentioned above it is sometimes unsure what exact works were displayed in the second exhibition. When this is the case I have chosen works by the artists in question that were already in the national collection and, where evidence is available, were to Jónsson’s liking.

⁵⁶ Jónas Jónsson. “Poets and Versifiers” *Tíminn*, March 31st 1942.



Ill. 10 Ásgrímur Jónsson. *Bleiksárgljúfur* (1917). 85,5 x 64,5 cm. LÍ 97. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

as Ásgrímur Jónsson and Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, who were also included in the later exhibition of Jónas Jónsson.

Jónsson was an ardent admirer of the “pioneers” of Icelandic painting and he publicly voiced his admiration of the landscape painting *Bleiksárgljúfur* (Ill. 10) by Ásgrímur Jónsson⁵⁷ and this is why it is chosen here in this proposed reconstruction of Jónsson’s second exhibition. It is perhaps an unusual example of early Icelandic landscape art,

since it does not emphasise the more frequently underlined vastness of Icelandic nature. The vantage point is narrow and perhaps reminiscent of Norwegian fjords. The romantic idealization of the country’s nature is nonetheless evident.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*



Ill. 11 Jóhannes Kjarval. *Hrafnabjörg II* (1930). 111 x 161 cm. LÍ 410.

© National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

The emphasis on the vastness of Icelandic nature in landscape paintings and the preoccupation of Icelandic painters with the mountains of the country is clearly evident in a work chosen here by another “pioneer”, Jóhannes Kjarval. Seen from a place particularly important to Icelandic national identity, the ancient parliamentary home Þingvellir, Kjarval’s *Hrafnabjörg II* (Ill. 11) was to Jónsson’s liking.⁵⁸ Kjarval’s expressionistic and extremely individual landscapes were at the time becoming very popular and would provide the artist with the status of the quintessential Icelandic artist.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*



Ill. 12 Sigurður Guðmundsson. *Arnlfótur Ólafsson* (1857). 65 x 55 cm. LÍ 378. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

Portraiture formed a big part of the second exhibition of 1942. Despite the fact that painter Sigurður Guðmundsson had been dead for almost seventy years, Jónsson admired his works enough to include him in his second exhibition of 1942. The work he chose was a portrait of the 19th century priest and member of parliament, *Arnlfótur Ólafsson* (Ill. 12). Jónsson proclaimed that this portrait was so true and accurate, that while the model was alive, his friends used

to greet the painting through an open window in Reykjavík, because they thought it was the politician himself.⁵⁹ This story gave validity to the painting according to Jónsson. The work is in a reasonably successful 19th century realistic style, but was not in any key with modern trends and developments of the 1940s when Jónsson hailed it as the ideal Icelandic portrait.

But other portraits were included in the second exhibition, a fact which reflects the importance Jónsson placed on that genre of the visual arts. Þórarinn B. Þorláksson's *Self Portrait* (Ill. 13) was somewhat different from the one by Guðmundsson. Þorláksson, a "pioneer" of Icelandic painting at the turn of the 20th century, presented himself as a serious man, in a rugged romantic fashion. The

⁵⁹ Jónas Jónsson. "Ugliness or Beauty" *Tíminn*, May 9th 1942.



Ill. 13 Þórarinn B. Þorláksson. *Self portrait* (1924). 23 x 18 cm. LÍ 652. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association



Ill. 14 Ríkarður Jónsson. *Þórarinn á Hjaltabakka* (1941). 42,5 x 42 cm. LÍ 7058. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

almost heroic appearance of the visionary artist in the year of his death may have impressed Jónsson, who chose the portrait despite its miniscule size.

One of the functions Jónas Jónsson saw in art was the role of remembering men of importance. For this he demanded accurate and realistic portrayals and found such a representation in the works of sculptor Ríkarður Jónsson (1888-1977). The skills of the craftsman were surely to Jónsson's liking, and as in the plaster example chosen here (Ill. 14), the representation of prominent farmers were surely welcomed by the politician.

The remembrance of Iceland's great men was important for forming nationalistic sentiments and in the creation of a collective memory. Painter Gunnlaugur Blöndal (1893-1962) was an important portrait artist and his painting of poet *Einar Benediktsson* (Ill. 15) was probably to Jónsson's liking.



Ill. 15 Gunnlaugur Blöndal. *Einar Benediktsson* (1932). 95 x 75 cm. LÍ 430. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association



Ill. 16 Freymóður Jóhannesson. *Halldór Vilhjálmsson* (1938). 232,5 x 150,5 cm. LÍ 513. © National Gallery of Iceland / Icelandic Visual Art Copyright Association

If one work should be chosen to represent Jónsson's preference it would probably be the portrait of schoolmaster *Halldór Vilhjálmsson* (Ill. 16) by Freymóður Jóhannesson (1895-1972). This work prompted Jónsson to write a short article on historical paintings in 1941,⁶⁰ but it was not exhibited in the second exhibition in

⁶⁰ Jónas Jónsson. "Historical Paintings" *Samvinnan*. Vol. 7 (1938), 99-100.

1942 since it probably would not have fitted into the display window. In it the two important genres, idealised Icelandic nature and heroic portraiture come together, while the development of the countryside and the progression of rural educational establishments is evident in the background.

Chapter 3.3:

Jónsson's Theory of Art

Jónas Jónsson's opinions on modern European art were best put forward in one of his articles in December 1941. He saw the *fin de siècle* contributing to the decline he considered evident in the visual arts of the 20th century, where ugliness and imperfection became desirable instead of beauty and nobility. Without naming any names he discussed the imperfections of some of the modern pioneers in the visual arts of Europe, all of whom he saw unfit as the leaders of modern art. One of these pioneers, clearly Gauguin, went and lived among the "brown nations of the tropical countries of the earth taking their imperfect art as his model." Another, evidently van Gogh, was mad and cut off his ear and was therefore unfit to lead artistic progress. The third "prophet", presumably Picasso, saw all existence built on cubes, while the fourth one, probably the poet Marinetti, named his artistic style after the future and a painter under his influence, Balla, found this future by painting a dog on a leash in a strange way. Jónsson was sure that if the powerful nations of the world would have kept the peace in the first half of the 20th century all this "degeneracy in artistic matters would have evaporated like the dew of morning under the shine of the rising sun, because of the natural health of the human race."⁶¹ Here he does not bore his Icelandic public with details, names of artists or movements, but his personal dislike for contemporary -isms in the visual arts is evident. These words and others that Jónas Jónsson wrote in the *Tíminn* newspaper during his dispute with the visual artists of Iceland, and the way he

⁶¹ Jónas Jónasson. "A Time of Rest in Arts and Literature" *Tíminn*, December 6th 1941.

presented his artistic ideas by setting up the two exhibitions, make a comparison with Nazi Germany and the fight against “degenerate art” by Nazi leaders both necessary and interesting, even though the differences in scale and ambition are many. Such a comparison is important for an understanding of Jónsson’s views.⁶²

At the time of the exhibitions of 1942 a direct comparison between Jónas Jónsson and Adolf Hitler was made by poet Tómas Guðmundsson (1901-1983) in an article published in a left wing journal *Helgafell*. In this short article, which was, to a large extent, a mockery of the cultural policies of Jónsson, Guðmundsson made a sharp comparison between the rhetoric found in Hitler’s speech given at the opening of the German House of Art in Munich in 1937, and Jónsson’s views on Icelandic art. Guðmundsson was sure that the German dictator would clearly have taken sides with Jónsson in the “war of nerves that has arisen in Icelandic art.”⁶³ This article was not answered in public by Jónas Jónsson, who was usually quick to defend himself when criticised. Writer Halldór Laxness was in no doubt that Guðmundsson’s comparison showed that Jónsson was the Icelander “who perfectly represented the Nazi-nature of the epoch” and called Hitler Jónsson’s “big brother”,

⁶² The comparison to the Nazi crusade against art is based on the following sources: Stephanie Barron. *“Degenerate Art”: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. Los Angeles, 1991. Peter Adam. *Art of the Third Reich*. New York, 1995. Alan E. Steinweis. *Art, Ideology & Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theatre and The Visual Arts*. Chapel Hill, 1993. David Elliot. “A Life-and-death Struggle” *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators*. Dawn Ades (editor). London, 1995, 270-276.

⁶³ Tómas Guðmundsson. “Lighter Issues” *Helgafell*. Vol. 2 (1942), 89. Large parts of this article were later quoted in discussions in the parliament. See: *Parliamentary Records, 1942*. Volume C. Reykjavík, 1946, col. 476-477. Earlier articles seem to have pointed out the dictatorial role that Jónsson was subscribing to himself in matters of Icelandic culture. Without naming the politician, this seemed to be the object of the game in an article published in 1940 by Halldór Laxness. See: Halldór Laxness. “Dictatorship and Culture” *Timarit Máls og menningar*. Vol. 1 (1940), 16-24.

whom he imitated in his crusade against art and lacked only the “power to rub out the artists.”⁶⁴

The Nazi crusade against modernism in the visual arts and what was called the degenerate influences on German art started with the Nazis’ rise to power in 1933, and reached a high point in the two exhibitions of 1937 in Munich, *Entartete Kunst* and *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*. The German example was of course far more advanced and organized an attack on artistic freedom than the rather sporadic exhibitions that Jónas Jónsson set up five years later in Iceland. While the task of correcting the visual arts was undertaken by several high officials in Germany, the Icelandic example was the criticism of almost a single politician against what can be considered as the representatives of a growing modernism in Icelandic art and artistic diversification, while the Nazi regime set up several organizations for the control of the visual arts.⁶⁵ The ideological issues regarding the role of art in increasing the nationalistic sentiments of the public, and therefore the idea of the utilization of the production of cultural artefacts, were nonetheless shared in both instances.

As was noted earlier in connection with Jónsson’s views on modern European art he shared his thoughts on the degeneracy of many modern artistic styles with the leaders of the Nazi regime. The German dictums on art were nonetheless far more

⁶⁴ Halldór Laxness. ““The Sad State of an Icelander”” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*. Vol. 1 (1942), 2-3.

⁶⁵ Examples of these were local groups of the Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur established in 1929 and the Reichskulturkammer established in 1933 that served as an umbrella organization for all the arts in the Third Reich. The most prominent officials that took direct action in the cleansing of the “German temple of art” were Harold Rosenberg, Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Ziegler and Adolf Hitler himself.

expansive and developed than those of Jónsson. His protests against Icelandic artists taking up foreign “artistic beliefs” can be compared to the deep rooted hatred of “cosmopolitanism” that was such a big part of Nazi rhetoric. But the anti-Semitism that featured so greatly in the cosmopolitan scare in the Nazi cultural rhetoric did for not feature in the rhetoric of Jónsson. In both cases art was supposed to be produced for the natives of the country and foreign –isms were considered inappropriate for that task. The appropriate art was seen as purely evolving from the national character, nature and spirit, without any influence of alien trends, developments or movements. Cultural Bolshevism, a loose and easily manipulated term, was in both instances a major worry in the contamination of national art production. It is perhaps best to view the similarities and differences in a schematic fashion (Table 1).

Table 1: Similarities and differences between the rhetoric of Jónas Jónsson and Nazi aesthetics

<u>Similarities in rhetoric:</u>	<u>Differences in rhetoric:</u>
Strong dislike for modern –isms in art. Stability and classical values in art were called for.	More importance was placed on racial qualities in the artistic output in the German example.
The goal of art was to support nationalistic sentiments. Art had societal functions.	Anti-Semitism was of great importance in German example.
The “trueness” of art was emphasised. This found outlet in realism and romanticism, which was idealised.	Clearer threats were directed against artists in German example. Clearer actions were taken, other than the exhibitions themselves.
Degeneracy was traced back to the First World War.	
The parties were highly judgemental about artists’ talents and lack thereof.	
Emphasis was placed on “degenerate” / “ridiculed” art being an act of Bolshevism.	
A uniformed view of reality was promoted. This was for example to be found in the promotion of “correct” forms and colours.	
By criticising “degenerate” / “ridiculed” artists the authorities were freeing other artists from under the modernists’ suppression.	
Public opinion was sought. The public was asked whether the developments of modernism were suitable. The exhibitions had educational value, according to the initiators, teaching the difference between beauty and ugliness.	

Table 1 clearly shows the similarities of thought between the Nazi regime and Jónas Jónsson when it came to precepts for national art in Germany and Iceland. The ideas were shared, but the attempts of dealing with them and enforcing the policy were of course overwhelmingly more serious and developed in Germany. The idea for the Icelandic attempt of controlling the arts was nonetheless clearly comparable to the German example because of shared ideas and worries.

Jónsson thought fondly about the works of art created by the Icelandic “pioneers” of the early 20th century, like for instance the works of painter of Ásgrímur Jónsson and sculptor Einar Jónsson, both whose works he considered to “reflect the grandiose nature of the country and the psychic nature of the nation.”⁶⁶ These words clearly show a sense of racial uniqueness of the Icelandic nation proposed by Jónsson, certain racial elements of a mythically pure and positively unique nation, that were meant to be upheld in the outlook of nationalist art. These ideas are clearly parallel to similar German myths found in Nazi ideology.

Jónsson’s preference of art was for that of the 19th century but not the current trends in European art of the fifth decade of the 20th century. Landscapes were to be descriptive, idealised and reflective of the importance he placed on the prominence of the rural countryside. They were to be provincial and each geographical vantage point in a landscape painting was to be identifiable. The love of the country was meant to find an outlet in landscape paintings and therefore contribute to the raising of national identity. The land that had fostered the Icelandic nation deserved a “correct” (idealised) representation.

When it came to portraiture, important men were also supposed to be correctly represented. They had given their services to the nation and therefore the nation’s artists should give them due respect, by truthfully representing them. Portraiture was in key with the importance placed on the autonomy of the Icelandic nation, a

⁶⁶ Jónas Jónsson. “A Time of Rest in Arts and Literature” *Tíminn*, December 6th 1941.

way of emphasizing the fact that the nation could run its own affairs. In an article published in 1938, Jónsson made it clearly evident that the visual arts were meant to support the building of a nationalistic historical consciousness. Heroic deeds by the nation's best men were supposed to be truthfully documented. The reason for this article was the creation of two life size portraits (one of which is Ill. 14) that a young painter, Freymóður Jóhannsson had recently finished, through the mediation of Jónsson. His idealised and precise manner was to Jónsson's liking. Jónsson saw great use in such potential: "The numerous, ingenious Icelandic artists should, in continuation of their portrayal of Icelandic nature, start to portray the life of the nation, its work, victories and losses that make up the story of the nation."⁶⁷ The role of art was therefore one of documentation in a romantic manner; a creation of a collective memory of the nation. The fact was that during this period Icelandic artists were increasingly turning towards a portrayal of the life of the nation, as was evident in the works of painters who turned towards working class life for subject matter during the depression, but they did not always share the rose tinted view of Jónas Jónsson.

There seem to be four main traits discernible in the preferences and criticisms of Jónsson of the visual arts in Iceland at the beginning of the 1940s. The *first* would be his preferred nationalistic utilization of the arts. An infusion of national sentiments in the hearts of Icelanders was made the goal of Icelandic art. The *second* seems to be a fear of foreign influences from the modern day -isms of

⁶⁷ Jónas Jónsson. "Historical Paintings" *Samvinnan*. Vol. 7 (1938), 100.

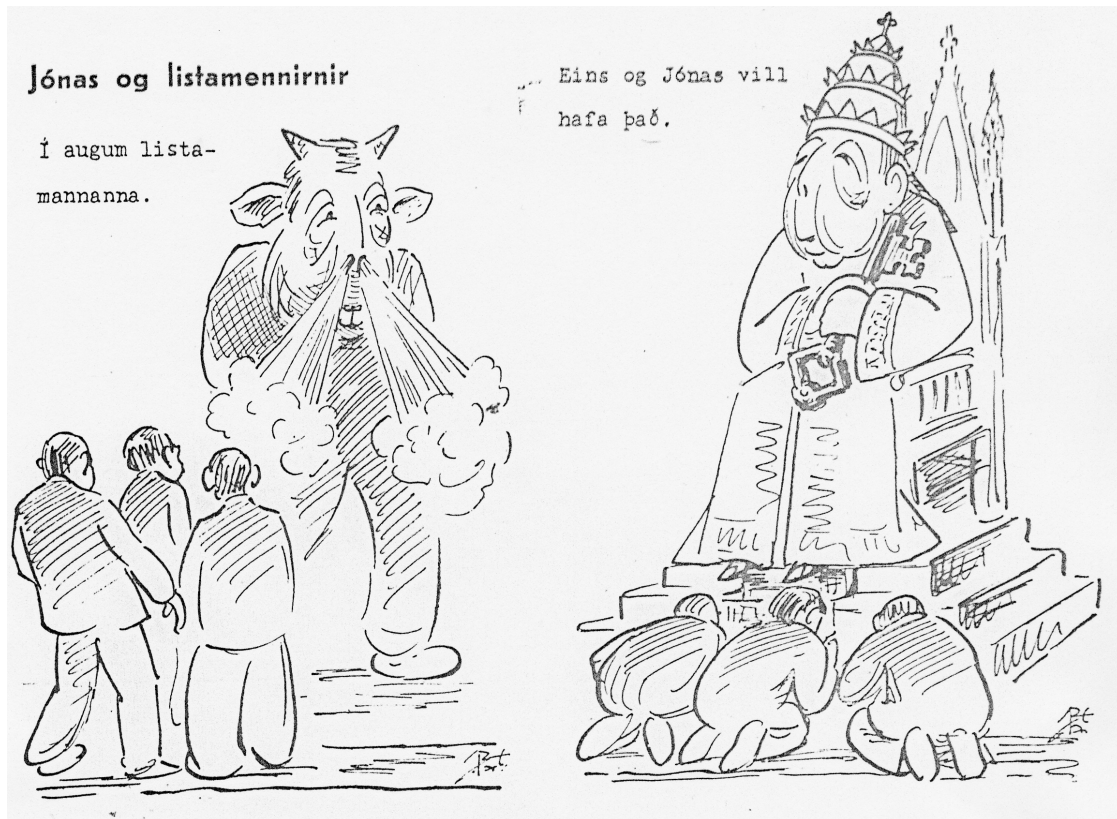
modern European art that in a way finds outlet in Jónsson severe anti-communism. Icelandic art was meant to evolve without the influence of external contaminating elements. The *third* is a fondness for realism and an ideal correctness, and the *fourth* an old fashioned taste, a romantic aesthetic, which shows itself in Jónsson's preference for 19th century art and the naturalistic landscape of the "pioneers" of Icelandic art from the beginning of the 20th century. Compared to the recent trends and developments in modern art that many of the younger Icelandic artists were trying to import, such aesthetics were clearly backward and conservative.

While the artistic disputes in Iceland in the 1940s were in climax, Jónas Jónsson was slowly losing his influence as a politician. Kristinn E. Andrésson (1901-1973), an editor of a left wing journal *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, stated that in the dispute about visual art Jónsson did not "fight for any artistic movement, neither good nor bad, but rather only the last remains of his own political power."⁶⁸ This view was probably partly correct, but the dispute about the visual arts in the 1940s in Iceland nonetheless revolved around the interdependence of art and politics. The exhibitions were to a large extent a reaction to the criticism Jónsson had received for his policies within the Board of Education, but his utilitarian ideas about the function of art in the creation of national sentiments were after all of central importance. These ideas were comparable to the importance placed on the official art of the Third Reich.

⁶⁸ Kristinn E. Andrésson. "The Accusations of Artists" *Tímarit Máls og menningar*. Vol. 1 (1942), 5.

Chapter 3.3:

The Reactions to the Exhibitions



Ill. 17 "Jónsson and the artists: In the artists' eyes - The way Jónsson wants it to be."

Caricature from Spegillinn.

As expected, the reactions of Icelandic artists to Jónsson's exhibitions were harsh and these were expressed in those newspapers and journals in Reykjavík that Jónsson did not control. The only artist who had been directly attacked and responded in the newspapers was Gunnlaugur Scheving, and beside the general accusations made against Jónsson, his answers revolved mostly around the strange fate that his painting had received from the chairman of the board (see chapter 3.1). A more detailed and stylized reaction was however written by Scheving in a left wing journal *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, in an article called *The Fear of Culture*.

Here the painter dissected Jónsson's writings on art and was especially offended on behalf of the great European artists that Jónsson criticised, men like van Gogh and Gauguin. Scheving regarded Jónsson's taste for art as "a curious mixture of lustrous paintings and mildewed romanticism"⁶⁹ and considered it evident what the politician wanted the nation's artists to do: "Shut up and listen."⁷⁰ These words clearly show the level of discontent with which the artists reacted to Jónsson's criticism of and the authoritarian role that they believed he had taken on for himself.

The right wing newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, was particularly responsive to the undertakings of Jónas Jónsson in the dispute. The editor of the paper, Valtýr Stefánsson (1893-1963), who was married to painter Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888-1959), was open-minded when it came to the visual arts. *Morgunblaðið* proclaimed:

The undertaking of the chairman with this window exhibition and his other acts of foolishness towards the artists will at least serve one useful purpose: he will get the well-deserved judgement of the nation for his ignorance and vulgarity. The modern art [in the "Exhibition of Ridicule"] will be discussed and written about, and become public domain of the nation on its way to maturity.⁷¹

The arts critic of the paper, painter Jón Þorleifsson (1891-1961), was not represented on either of Jónsson's exhibition. He nonetheless signed both complaints that the artists sent to the parliament and was strongly disliked by Jónsson both for his writings on art and his support of the artists. Jónsson

⁶⁹ Gunnlaugur Ó. Scheving. "The Fear of Culture" *Tímarit Máls og Menningar*. Vol. 3 (1942), 34.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 39.

⁷¹ "A Unique Art Exhibition Undertaken by the Chairman of the Board of Education" *Morgunblaðið*, April 26th 1942.

considered himself a benefactor of Þorleifsson, who on the other hand was confident of the victory of the arts against Jónsson's attacks:

History has taught us about various power-starved dictatorial mongers that have wanted to subdue literature and the arts. But the results have always been the same. The artists and poets have broken their shackles and the dictators have been overcome. Here the results will be the same. True art can be attacked temporarily, but it can never be domesticated for evil, for obvious reasons. Art is for enjoyment, not for utilization.⁷²

Poets and writers responded to the attacks of Jónas Jónsson with the same weapon he had used to back up his own opinions, the pen. This was no surprise, as many of the country's writers had argued forcefully with Jónsson on matters of style in Icelandic literature and financial grants, before the visual arts became the focal point of Jónsson's cultural attention. One of them was the poet Steinn Steinarr (1908-1958), who beside from writing newspaper articles also wrote poems in reaction to the politician's actions.⁷³ In his defence article for the "Exhibition of Ridicule" in the left wing newspaper *Nýtt dagblað*, Steinarr was triumphant on behalf of the artists Jónsson exhibited:

To point to these works of art to cause shock and alarm is tantamount to pointing to all that is best and the most beautiful in European modern art for the same purpose. ... It is always dangerous for political plotters to lay their cards on the table and give their arguments over to the common sense of the people.⁷⁴

⁷² Jón Þorleifsson. "Jónas Jónsson and the Nation's Affairs of Art" *Morgunblaðið*, May 7th 1942.

⁷³ These poems describe the strange situation in which artists could find themselves in this period, examples of them are: *Two Ghosts* and *Song for an Artists' Congress 1942*.

⁷⁴ Steinn Steinarr. "The Painting Exhibition of the Board of Education" *Nýtt dagblað*, April 29th 1942. It should be noted that both sides in the dispute made rather unreliable references to public opinion in the matter. Jónsson made numerous remarks in an article following the exhibitions about how harsh judgements were voiced by the public in front of the display window housing the "Exhibition of Ridicule." In a typical rural fashion, Jónsson quoted a farmer asking why painter Jóhann Briem had not "wiped the mildew of his woman" before he painted her. See: Jónas Jónsson. "Ugliness or Beauty" *Tíminn*, May 9th 1942. These remarks reflect the smallness and provincialism of Icelandic society and a national taste for such fables.

Steinn Steinarr also took up the defence of the painter Þorvaldur Skúlason, who had been severely attacked by Jónsson with the inclusion of two of his works in the “Exhibition of Ridicule.” In an article in a left wing journal *Helgafell*, Steinarr defended Skúlason, pointed out his strong individual style and took pride in connecting him to the modern trends of European art. He noted the growing distance between Icelandic visual arts and literature, said that art was becoming increasingly independent of literal connotations, and voiced his opinion that painting was no longer a “dead copy of living surroundings.” Here was a clear modernistic renunciation of narrative elements in art. His final comments in this article seemed like a solemn wish for a growing artistic understanding of his countrymen:

Nobody has to be afraid of the deception that many people consider modern art to be based on. It is not possible to deceive people in the long run. As soon as people develop an awareness in this field, they will surely be able to discern between good and bad, in the same way that multitudes of people can immediately distinguish between good literature and bad literature, no matter who says what, and despite state intervention.⁷⁵

The most sentimental arguments put forward against Jónsson’s dispute with Icelandic artists came from his old friend, literature professor Sigurður Nordal, who had served as the first chairman of the Board of Education in 1928-1931. Nordal was among the 66 artists who signed the complaint against Jónsson, who in return considered Nordal as one of the greatest agitators among them. Here the argument sometimes took on a much more personal outlook, although the dispute was heated. Nordal wrote open letters to his former friend, on the pages of *Morgunblaðið* where

⁷⁵ Steinn Steinarr. “Painter Þorvaldur Skúlason” *Helgafell*. Vol. 3 (1942).

he regretted the mistakes he considered Jónsson to be making. These letters are written in a strangely personal style, almost in a fatherly considerate tone, and Nordal's sadness is evident:

You [Jónsson] don't have a clue how naked you appear before your readers. ... You can not go on like this, Jónas. Everyone will see this has gone too far, even your most loyal readers, though the support of your followers is worth less to you than your own mental state.⁷⁶

But Nordal's criticism of his old friend would become more severe. After the exhibitions had been taken down Nordal made another comparison between Jónsson and the most famous contemporary dictator of the European continent:

[Jónsson] considered opinions different from his own to be an upheaval against society ... and quickly dubbed the name of communist on every person that he disliked. "It is I who decide who is a Jew" one of the Nazi leaders of Germany is meant to have said. With this method there are no limits to where Jónsson's infringements can come down.⁷⁷

These words emphasise the fact that Jónsson mixed his severe anti-communism with his ideas of the utilization of the visual arts for nationalist causes and a dislike for foreign contemporary artistic movements when it came to the visual arts. Communism and cultural Bolshevism were terms used freely by him to label those who did not conform.

The most powerful effect that Jónsson's dictums on art had on the Icelandic arts was probably the raised awareness the disputes created in the circles of serious artists about the role of the artist within society and the sacredness of artistic production, safe from the guidance of political forces. Only a few days after

⁷⁶ Sigurður Nordal. "A Letter to Former Minister Jónas Jónsson" *Morgunblaðið*, April 21st 1942.

⁷⁷ Sigurður Nordal. "The works reek" *Morgunblaðið*, May 13th, 1942.

Jónsson set up his “Exhibition of Ridicule” in Reykjavík, composer Páll Ísólffson (1893-1974) wrote an article called *The Duty to Art* in which he suggested that artists should hold their first Artists’ Congress, a plan that came to fruition the following autumn.⁷⁸ Although by then the dispute was slowing down, the first resolution of the Congress opposed “any form of intellectual constraints” and proclaimed “direct and indirect measures taken by authorities to influence artists’ choices of form and subject matter to suppress all creativity in the sphere of art.”⁷⁹

Another sign of the triumph of the visual arts in the dispute of artists and Jónas Jónsson was the appearance of the so called *Listamannaskálinn* (The Artists’ cabin), a gallery that would be the most popular exhibition venue in Reykjavík for the next quarter of a century. Soon after the dispute, it was erected next the parliament house itself, opened in 1943 and was a sign of the victory of the arts over Jónsson’s attacks. The cabin’s placement was no doubt a clear reminder of this. The gallery would, for instance, feature controversial abstract art exhibitions during the 1950s, no doubt to the frustration of Jónsson.

The diminishing political power of Jónas Jónsson was another outcome of the dispute on the Icelandic visual arts. When the next Board of Education was elected in the fall of 1942, Jónsson stayed on, but two of his archenemies in the matter were elected onto the board as well. Valtýr Stefánsson, editor of a right wing

⁷⁸ Páll Ísólffson. “The Duty to Art” *Morgunblaðið*, April 29th 1942.

⁷⁹ Kristinn E. Andrússon. “The First Congress of Icelandic Artists” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*. 3:3 (1942), 187-188.

newspaper became the new chairman and Kristinn E. Andr sson, a socialist and an editor of a left wing journal, joined the board as well. As mentioned above, these men had written against J nsson's attempted suppression of the visual arts. His overpowering influence within the board was over and the dispute with the artists also became a pretext for younger forces within his own Progressive party to isolate him within the party and his influence there soon dwindled.⁸⁰ It should finally be noted that J nas J nsson continued to have strong opinions on art and artistic matters during the coming years, still seeing the attempts of Bolsheviks to contaminate the cultural life of the nation in every corner of Icelandic arts.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Gu j n Fri riksson. *The Lion Roars: The Story of J nas J nsson*. Vol. 3. Reykjav k, 1993, 206.

⁸¹ An example of this is an article that J nsson wrote against art historian Bj rn Th. Bj rnsson, whom J nsson considered a dangerous bolshevist, and his gallery that supported the development of abstract art in the 1950s. See: J nas J nsson. "One is Lead out – Another one in" *Landv rn*, October 15th 1951.

Conclusion

In a speech given on the Icelandic national day of independence, the 17th of June 2003, the prime minister of Iceland, Davíð Oddsson, voiced yet again the opinion of many of the nation's past leaders, that Icelandic independence was an "ever on-going process."⁸² The comment shows that the Icelanders still consider the independence a fragile and sacred thing that must be kept safe. In some instances the visual arts have no doubt contributed to this task throughout the 20th century; for example, in the works of many landscape artists that have represented Icelandic landscape in an idealised and elevated fashion, throughout the period. Many of these artists have nonetheless often been outside the main currents of Icelandic art in the 20th century. Generally, Icelandic art, like so much of the century's western art, has been neatly organized in a modernistic fashion into movements and developments, following each other in a progressive manner after a closer connection was formed between Icelandic and western art in the years following the dispute of the early 1940s.

The Second World War increased greatly the interrelations between Iceland and the outside world. Transportation and communication became gradually better and these developments had an impact on cultural matters, as well as on other spheres of society. Disputes about art and the role of art in Icelandic society were far from over in 1942 and artistic developments in western art continued to stir the art world

⁸² Davíð Oddson. "Speech" *Morgunblaðið*, June 19th 2003.

in the country. An example of this was a ferocious argument that revolved around the presentation of Icelandic abstract art at an international exhibition in Rome in 1955. This struggle was between different generations and groups of artists, where the older generation wanted to protect a “national heritage”, while the younger artists wanted to present Icelandic abstract art which related to foreign artistic developments. Here the younger artists gained the upper hand and the Icelandic contribution was based on abstract works, while the Icelandic government withdrew its funding and renounced all responsibility of the works sent to the exhibition, with a formal letter to the Italian government.⁸³ These arguments were a continuation of the disputes of the 1940s and a sure sign of the fact that the relationship between Icelandic art and current ideas of western modern art were not resolved.

The nature and landscape of Iceland seems to be an ongoing theme in Icelandic art. But as the visual arts have become more diverse, the ways of dealing with landscape have also changed and developed. Myriad artists have of course taken a romantic view of the nature of the country and represented it in an idealised fashion, but these have mostly been provincial and amateur artists standing outside the prevailing artistic movements that have dominated the artistic life in Iceland in the decades following the disputes of the 1940s.

⁸³ Ólafur Gíslason. “Strict Fields and Big Dreams” *Dream of pure form: Icelandic abstract art 1950-1960*. Ólafur Kvaran (editor). Reykjavík, 1998, 71.

Abstract art was the first form of ‘modernism’ properly introduced in Iceland in the latter part of the 1940s.⁸⁴ The painter Svavar Guðnason (1909-1988) introduced abstract art in Reykjavík in 1945, but it was not until the beginning of the 1950s that abstract artists gained the upper hand in the arts scene in Reykjavík. Þorvaldur Skúlason, one of the artists “ridiculed” by Jónas Jónsson, would place himself at the forefront of acquainting Icelandic viewers with the current trends of geometric abstraction in the 1950s. The pivotal role that geometric abstraction gained in that period seems to prove that the attempts to create a nationalist Icelandic art ultimately failed; the attempts that reached a high point in the arguments of Jónas Jónsson a decade earlier.

Living in Iceland today, one seems to become more and more aware of the sentiment in Icelandic society, that nationality and national identity has to be reflected upon and discussed in a world of ever growing internationalism, and this certainly finds an outlet in public discussion and in the media. For Icelanders it is perhaps true what writer Guðmundur Andri Thorsson, an astute observer of Icelandic national identity, wrote the day before the Icelandic Independence day in 2003: “When feelings for the homeland grow number, calls for affection for it grow more extreme.”⁸⁵ Whether this development will find an outlet in Icelandic visual arts in the coming years we shall have to wait and see, but the most severe political

⁸⁴ It should be noted that as early as 1925 painter Finnur Jónsson exhibited paintings in Reykjavík in an abstract-constructivist style. This early undertaking did not have an impact on other Icelandic artists and Jónsson himself turned to more conventional subject matter.

⁸⁵ Guðmundur Andri Thorsson. “The Idea about Iceland” *Fréttablaðið*, June 16th 2003.

attempt in the 20th century to utilize the visual arts for the nationalistic cause was ultimately unsuccessful.

Jónas Jónsson tried to guide Icelandic artists into contributing to nationalistic sentiments. This was a task that many artists had been undertaking in the years before 1942 and would continue to do so after that date. But in trying to control their output and isolate Icelandic art from what he considered the foreign ‘art religions’ of modern art movements, Jónsson failed. His attempts in these matters were in line with, and seem to have been somewhat influenced by, similar undertakings in Nazi Germany. The shared goal in both these attempts was to steer the nation’s artistic production away from the influence of European modernism and promote an art developed from a mythically pure essence and nature of the country and nation. But Icelandic art was bound to become further entwined in the development of western art in the 20th century. The proposed idea of Icelandic art growing independently and spontaneously on its own, without any foreign influence and because of the uniqueness of the country and the nation, was from the start a naïve and narrow-minded idea. For a modern nation living in a closer connection with the outside world than ever before, foreign influences were bound to have an impact on the artefacts produced in the Icelandic visual arts.

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Note: The names of Icelandic authors are listed alphabetically, following their first names, in accordance with Icelandic tradition. The titles of articles and books are translated where needed, but the Icelandic titles are given below in brackets.

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Synopsis

In the first half of the 20th century attempts were made by political forces in Europe to utilize the visual arts to develop the nationalistic sentiments of the citizens of several countries. The most famous example of this is the German one, where the Nazi regime promoted certain artists while it suppressed and attacked others. Another example, and a lot less known internationally, were attempts made by Icelandic politician Jónas Jónsson to influence the artistic output of Icelandic artists in the beginning of the 1940s. These took place shortly before Iceland became fully independent from Danish rule. In addition to his writings on the subject, Jónsson also used methods similar to those in Germany of exhibiting works that he deemed “acceptable” and “unacceptable” in the output of several Icelandic visual artists. Although these exhibitions and the disputes that arose between Jónsson and a group of Icelandic artists were in part an answer to the criticism that the artists put forth against Jónsson and his Board of Education, they were mainly a struggle about the interrelations of art and politics. While artists under the influence of contemporary currents in the arts reacted harshly to Jónsson’s attempts to control their output, it was clear that the politician wanted to utilize the arts for a nationalistic cause in Icelandic society and he wanted the nation’s art to stand clear from foreign art movements that he saw as unfitting for Icelandic art. His ideas therefore touched on ideas about the ethnic purity of the Icelandic national identity, that cultural artefacts were meant to reflect. Ultimately the ideas of the isolation of Icelandic art from current developments in western art were unrealistic, as the country was developing closer ties to the outside world in the Second World War.



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