



**UNIVERSITY
OF ICELAND**

Paint like a man, woman!

**Women, gender and discourse on art in Iceland from the
late nineteenth century to 1960**

Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir

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Doctoral Committee:
Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, supervisor
Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir,
Jean-Philippe Antoine, Anna Jóhannsdóttir

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Abstract

Unlike most other academic disciplines in Iceland, there has been little or no research in art history using feminist methodology and theories in which the concept of gender occurs. A critical review of the methodology applied in analysing the discourse on art is thus long overdue. The objectives of the research are threefold: 1) to analyse the discourse on art from the latter half of the nineteenth century to 1960 in relation to gender and feminist methodology, 2) to analyse how gendered separation of artforms was applied in the discourse, and 3) to analyse how women reacted to gendered discourse on art (or silencing) and the discrimination they faced in the fields of culture and the visual arts.

Emphasis is put on analysing the discourse on art in newspapers and periodicals where, as is shown, the emergence of art historical discourse took place during the most important formative period in Icelandic art. The thesis argues that the art historical discourse that thus emerged was fundamentally gendered, defining Icelandic art as the product of male geniuses. The unique, national and original were masculine qualities and the antithesis of the feminine impressionability and lack of independent creative powers. The thesis therefore supports the large contribution of research of feminist art historians in an international context as to how gender is a key aspect in analysis of artworks. Likewise, the research shows that despite the special position of Iceland in a political and art historical context, the national, male-oriented discourse on art during the period further undermined the recognition of Icelandic women artists and their cultural eligibility in their native country—and even pushed them out of their country to a place where they were often taken more seriously as artists.

Furthermore, the thesis shows the gendered discourse and discrimination of art genres, where the art creations of women, including handicrafts, were considered as “women’s domain” while painting and sculpture were men’s domain. Finally, the thesis throws light on the important struggle of women artists and women in general who fought against the gendered discourse and discrimination in the fields of culture and art. Firstly, they emphasized the diversity of women’s art creations by erasing the boundaries of art forms. They considered “women’s domain” to be an important legacy in culture and art history and pointed out that women had been pioneers in various ways in the fields of home industry, design and applied arts, as well as in fine arts. Secondly, women, such as women artists and women’s rights activists, were pioneers in their writing in women’s periodicals on the contribution of women

to art and culture; and thirdly, they emphasized cooperation and networking of women within Iceland and Denmark in the fields of art and women's rights as a basis for what women would gain during the following decades—and what had already been gained.

Útdráttur

Ólíkt flestum öðrum fræðigreinum á Íslandi hafa rannsóknir í listfræði lítið sem ekkert stuðst við feminíska aðferðafræði og kenningar þar sem hugtakið kyngervi kemur fyrir. Gagnrýnin endurskoðun á aðferðafræðinni sem beitt er í orðræðu um myndlist er því löngu orðin tímabær. Markmið rannsóknarinnar er þríþætt: 1) að greina orðræðu um myndlist frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til 1960 með tilliti til kyngervis (e. gender) og feminískrar aðferðafræði (e. feminist methodology) 2) að greina hvernig kynjaðri aðgreiningu listforma var beitt í orðræðunni 3) að greina hvernig konur brugðust við kynjaðri orðræðu (eða þöggun) um myndlist og mismunun á sviði menningar og lista.

Áhersla er lögð á að greina orðræðu um myndlist í blöðum og tímaritum, en í ritgerðinni eru færð rök fyrir því að á þeim vettvangi hafi farið fram listsöguleg þekkingarsköpun á mikilvægu mótunartímabili í íslenski myndlist. Ennfremur að sú listsögulega orðræða sem þar varð til hafi verið kynjuð og hafi beint og óbeint mótað hugmyndina og skilgreininguna á íslenski myndlist og hinum karlkyns snillingi. Hið sérstæða, þjóðlega og frumlega voru karllægir eiginleikar en andstæðan kvenlæg áhrifagirni og skortur á sjálfstæðum sköpunarmætti. Ritgerðin rennir því stoðum undir þær fjölmörgu rannsóknir feminískra listfræðinga í alþjóðlegu samhengi sem hafa sýnt hvernig kyn er lykilatriði í greiningu á listaverki. Að sama skapi sýnir rannsóknin fram á að þrátt fyrir sérstöðu Íslands í pólitísku og listsögulegu samhengi, gróf hin þjóðlega, karllæga orðræða um myndlist á tímabilinu undan viðurkenningu á íslenskum myndlistarkonum og menningargengi þeirra í heimalandinu og ýtti þeim jafnvel út fyrir landsteinana þar sem þær töldust oft fullgildari á sviði myndlistar.

Þá sýnir ritgerðin fram á kynjaða orðræðu og aðgreiningu á listformum, þar sem listsköpun kvenna, m.a. hannyrðir, var talin „svið kvenna“ en málara- og höggmyndalist karllægar. Loks varpar þessi ritgerð ljósi á mikilvæga baráttu myndlistarkvenna og kvenna almennt á tímabilinu, sem börðust gegn kynjaðri orðræðu og mismunun á sviði menningar og lista. Í fyrsta lagi lögðu þær áherslu á fjölbreytileika listsköpunar kvenna, með því að afmá mörk listforma. Þær gerðu „svið kvenna“ að mikilvægri arfleifð í menningar- og listasögu

kvenna og voru brautryðjendur með ýmsum hætti á sviði listiðnaðar, hönnunar og nytjalistar sem og á sviði hinna fögru lista. Í öðru lagi ruddu konur brautina með skrifum sínum, s.s. í listum og í kvenréttindabaráttunni, í kvennablöðum um framlag kvenna til lista og menningar og með þátttöku í kvennasýningum; og í þriðja lagi með áherslu á samvinnu og tengslanet kvenna innanlands og utan á sviði lista og kvenréttindamála sem grunn að þeirri baráttu sem átti sér stað næstu áratugi á Íslandi — og því sem hafði þegar áunnist.

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Preface

This research has been a long journey and has had a long gestation period, much longer than the write-up of the thesis. Through education, teaching and scholarly work in art history, my perspective has taken many changes over the years, which is considered normal and necessary. But my interest in women's contribution to different spheres of history, arts and culture was immediately aroused while attending history courses at the University of Iceland (BA degree completed in 1995) and continued during education in art history at the Sorbonne–Paris IV (licence, maîtrise, and finally DEA/Master II, completed in 2013).

After returning to Iceland, one of the things I taught (2003–2015) was methodology in art history, including feminist methodology, along with other courses connected for instance with the diverse contributions of women in art history. But one point in particular sprang to mind: when I exhibited works—in this case works by Icelandic artists—without specifying the creator, it proved very difficult for many to figure out the gender of the artist on the basis of colour use, form and choice of material. On the contrary, the so-called masculine and feminine often tended to alternate. I then started to scrutinize increasingly the gendered discourse on art and gender, discovering an exclusionary factor for women artists and the grounds for discrimination. I realized that I had myself referred to sources that were full of gendered discourse, without giving them particular attention. It was thus not sufficient to review the research of others but instead to be open for a review of my own perspective: to examine in a new light something that was considered achieved and proven in art history. This thesis has taught me valuable lessons, both professionally and personally.

While writing, I attended conferences and seminars connected to the research, and an unmissable venue was the annual conference of the *Association for Art History* (AAH), in particular the symposia on feminism and women in art. Travel grants from the Centre for Research in the Humanities enabled me to attend these and I am very grateful for that support. In 2016, I attended a two-day Summer Symposium organized by AAH on *Gender in Art: Production, Collection, Display* at Loughborough University in Loughborough, UK, with professor Marsha Meskimmon and professor Katy Deepwell as keynote speakers, where many doctoral students in art history gave lectures. Two years later, at the association's symposium in London, one of the key lecturers was the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock. It was at the 2019 AAH conference in Brighton that I got the opportunity to introduce my project in the session *Danger! Women reading*, directed by art historian Victoria Horne. While attending

these conferences, which filled me with enthusiasm, it was clear to me that fertile discussion on feminist art history was lacking in Iceland.

I hereby want to thank the many who provided me with encouragement and criticism, and who showed interest in the subject. Particularly important to me was cooperation around the project *In the Aftermath of Suffrage. Women as cultural and political agents in Iceland, 1915–2015*, funded by the Icelandic Research Fund, Rannís. The project was directed by Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir and Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir and on the original research team were also Þorgerður Þorvaldsdóttir and myself. Þorgerður Þorvaldsdóttir, historian and gender specialist who died in 2020, had a fiery enthusiasm for her area of interest and was a great inspiration to me. Historian Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir took over her role and carried it out with singular professionalism. Funding from the project allowed me to concentrate on the doctoral project for three full years.

In addition to the thesis my contribution to the project consisted of three papers. Two of these I presented at the *Humanities Conference* at the University of Iceland, Reykjavík, in 2016 and 2019. The third I published in the peer-reviewed periodical *Saga*, in 2022. Furthermore, I took part in a book project published in Icelandic in 2020, *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga*, which covers a hundred years of women's suffrage in Iceland, with the pressing novelty of discussing women in a wide political, cultural and social context. I was fortunate to be able to be part of the project for the period 2017–2020; the many meetings linked to the project were very helpful, providing innumerable ideas and new angles for my research.

The time spent together and discussing with other doctoral students in the university's facilities certainly proved to be a necessary resource for a lonely researcher. In this context I must mention “the one who shall not be named”, the pandemic, which certainly played a part and often tested my endurance.

The person who deserves the most gratitude is Professor Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, whom I was fortunate enough to get as a supervisor. I could benefit from her extensive knowledge and she performed her supervision with interest, attention and singular patience. Her encouragement definitely proved important through ups and downs alternated during the doctoral process over a long period of time. I also express many thanks to other members of the doctoral committee: Jean-Philippe Antoine, a visual and sound artist, critic and philosopher, Professor of Aesthetics and Contemporary Art Theory at the Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis; Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Professor of History; and Anna Jóhannsdóttir, artist and art historian. Their comprehensive knowledge in their specialty areas was immeasurable for

pluridisciplinary research of this kind, and it was a privilege to have them on my doctoral committee. I am extremely grateful to all of them for their accurate reading and scholarly comments, along with their encouragement over the years. Lowana Veal must not be forgotten either: always ready to help by reading over and editing the English text, suggesting good changes and observations, as well as having great understanding and patience.

I give heartfelt thanks to my late parents, Jóhanna Dahlmann and Guðmundur Ásgeirsson, for their care and unceasing encouragement, and for infecting me with interest in history and art history. I have thought a great deal about my mother, who died in January 2021: Despite her great academic abilities in school, she was not allowed to study further because she was a woman. Her regret has shaped me tremendously, perhaps the greatest stimulus for the subject matter of this research. My three daughters—Jóhanna Clara, Mathilda Evelyne, and Magdalena—have been a great inspiration to me. I dedicate this work to them, in the hope that they will take the place they choose in the future; to allow themselves to be heard. Last but not least, I want to thank my most powerful supporter, my husband Bertrand, who has untiringly encouraged me to continue, with great patience and understanding. His equitable vision, interest in my project and spreading of the gospel has been like a compass when I was regularly filled with doubt that *gender inequality* can and will be resolved.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. En garde

Iceland's young women!
There is still much to bridge:
To keep track of everything, true to the cause.
Be en garde, win more victories
For the social good.
For more maturity.

The primary objective of this research is to analyse the public discourse on art in Iceland from the late nineteenth century to 1960 as gendered and gendering. This verse from the poem “Á kvenréttindadaginn” (e. Women’s rights day), composed by María Rögnvaldsdóttir in 1957, applies in many ways to all the period in question in this thesis.¹ It says that although a great deal has been accomplished in half a century, a plethora of issues still exist for women, which also applied to women in art. The poem was composed to mark the 50th anniversary of the *Icelandic Women’s Rights Association* (i. Kvenréttindafélag Íslands) and the first large women’s art exhibition in Iceland was also held in 1957 to celebrate the occasion; the event was covered by women’s periodicals, as well as by other newspapers, and women’s artistic creativity in the fields of visual art, handicrafts and literature was described and celebrated.² A retrospective exhibition of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s works was held the same year at the newly opened National Gallery and several Icelandic women artists, such as Júlíana, had made a definite impression on foreign grounds. It could be said that by this 50-year anniversary many milestones had been achieved.³

The goal of the women’s exhibition in Iceland was in fact the same as that of the first European women’s art exhibition held in 1895 in Copenhagen, in which many Icelandic women took part to demonstrate the *diversity* of women’s art creations that had not received enough

¹ The poem was published in the women’s periodical *Nýtt kvennablað*, see María Rögnvaldsdóttir, “Á kvenréttindadaginn, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 18, no. 2 (1957), 1.

² Elsa E. Guðjónsson, “Kvenréttindafélag Íslands 50 ára”, *Húsfreyjan*, 8, no. 1 (1957), 13–15; “Afmællissýning K.R.F.Í”, *19. júní*, 7, no. 1 (1957), 43–44; “Fjölbreytt listsýning í tilefni 50 ára afmælis Kvenréttindafélags Íslands”, *Morgunblaðið*, January 27, 1957, 6.

³ Prior to Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s exhibition, retrospectives had been held of the works of Jón Stefánsson (1954), Jóhannes Kjarval (1955) and Ásgrímur Jónsson (1956).

attention elsewhere. Even if spoken to as such in the mainstream press, women were not a homogeneous group, and neither were women artists, but they were forced to use this approach as a “vestibule” or, at its best, *antichambre*, in order to enter the mainstream public arena.⁴

By no means were all women united, nor did they agree on the position and role of women; the period under study is full of paradoxes when it comes to the women’s question and women artists. In the half century preceding 1957, Icelandic women’s agency had strengthened considerably. They had obtained suffrage in 1915 and had increasingly sought education during the next decades at home as well as abroad. But while the formal rights had been granted, another principle applied to the public discourse on women and their *cultural citizenship*.⁵ The *cultural citizenship* of an individual is thus a measure of the extent to which the individual is considered valid, is recognized and has the means to influence the culture.⁶ In the case of women artists, one can use the concept to investigate whether the contribution of women is conditioned by gender and thus lies outside the definition in public discourse—on the pages of newspapers and periodicals—of what can be considered as cultural, artistic values, and thereby has a formative effect on public opinion and cultural national consciousness. Even if greater participation by women was essential, it did not necessarily lead to changes in *gendered* discourse on art, where gender is to be understood as being socially created and thus cultural.⁷ It is in fact not just a question of getting coverage, or more coverage, of women artists in the mainstream public press, but also of analysing the discourse from a gendered and feminist perspective and see what characterizes the coverage and what are the discursive themes.⁸

The contribution of women to art can be visible (e.g. by participation in exhibitions and coverage of them) and promote the belief or illusion of their *cultural eligibility*. Thus the gendered discourse on art often reflects the paradoxes and development in the circumstances

⁴ In French, the expression *faire antichambre* means *to wait quietly to be received*, which is somewhat symbolic too.

⁵ Here, one can point out the many diverse approaches in a collection of articles on culture and citizen rights, in Rosemarie Buikema, Antoine Buyse and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (eds.), *Cultures, Citizenship and Human Rights*, Routledge Advances in Sociology (London: Routledge, 2019); Nick Stevenson (ed.), *Culture and Citizenship* (London: SAGE, 2001).

⁶ The concept of cultural eligibility (*menningargengi* in Icelandic) can also be used to guide pressing research on cultural diversity, e.g. the contribution of groups/individuals to a nation’s culture with respect to sexuality, ethnicity, disability, class and status. See, Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Um menningargengi, kynjaða orðræðu og sanna íslenska myndlist”, *Saga*, 69, no. 2 (2022), 82–115.

⁷ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis (1986)”, Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 28–50.

⁸ A quarter of a century passed between the first private exhibition of a woman artist— Júlíana Sveinsdóttir in 1957— and the second one, in the National Gallery, namely the 1982 exhibition of Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959).

and position of women, along with attitudes towards them, and it is neither linear nor continuous.⁹

1.2. Thesis objectives and questions

The overall objective of this pluridisciplinary thesis is to deconstruct and analyse gendered discourse on art in Iceland from the late nineteenth century to 1960 and to determine the main discursive themes in the reception of women's art in the mainstream public debate.

This thesis will firstly provide a critical reading of Icelandic art history and argue that when "revisioning" Icelandic art history, the question of gender and a feminist approach are of critical importance, not only to deconstruct gendered assumptions in public discourse on art but also to look at gender in a wider societal context to determine the nature of the society in which art was produced and discourse forged. Taking note of what feminist art historians have shown to have taken place in other countries, it considers the peculiarities of the gendered discourse on art in Iceland.

Secondly, this investigation will scrutinize *the gendering of art forms* as reflected in the discourse on art and examine at what point it became an exclusionary factor for women within the arts of painting and sculpture. Yet women emphasized the so-called "women's domain" or the minor arts, e.g. textiles and embroidery, both as important history and women's heritage on which to build and develop applied arts, new forms and materials in a pioneering way. This also applied to many other artforms, such as fine art, which will also be scrutinized.

Thirdly, the research sets out to assess how women responded and reacted to the male-dominated discourse in art and culture and the silencing of women artists. This evokes the question of how the struggle for women's rights in society affected the gendered discourse on women's art in the mainstream public discourse. Did the increased rights of women perhaps spawn a stronger marginal discourse? In direct continuation, it is possible to ask what the meaning of national identity really involves in gendered cultural terms. Was it at all possible for women to be accepted as representatives of Icelandic art? Or could it be argued that they stood a better chance of being recognized as Icelandic artists on foreign grounds than at home?

⁹ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir and Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, "1916–Hún fór að kjósa", *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 35–89. See also, Geneviève Fraisse, *La controverse des sexes* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, Presses Universitaires de France 2001), 35–36; Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson World of Art, 2012), 71.

This investigation does not propose a comprehensive audit on women artists, their works and the analysing of them, nor a marginal history outside the mainstream narrative. Indeed, this is the first study in Icelandic art history that uses feminist and gender theoretical methodology to deconstruct the public discourse on art. Such a study is essential in order to promote research in this field and create a new basis for discussion in Icelandic art history; or rather, in art histories.

1.3. Theoretical framework and historical overview

1.3.1. On art history in Iceland

Icelandic art history in the first half of the twentieth century has been considered as linear, and written in stone. Consequently, this thesis enters into a critical dialogue with existing research in the field. Art historian Björn Th. Björnsson's canonical history of art in Iceland, *Íslensk myndlist á 19. og 20. öld. Drög að sögulegu yfirliti* (e. Icelandic Art in the 19th and 20th Centuries. A draft of a historical overview) was published in two volumes, the first in 1964 and the second in 1973, and covers the period from the nineteenth century up until the end of the 1940s. This was the first comprehensive history of Icelandic art, a gigantic feat of one man as it was to a large extent based on original research. The work remained one of the staple writings of Icelandic art history for decades, a real canon, and indeed is still used as a reference. Therefore, this thesis will explore if it reflects the discourse that had developed during the whole period of study.

It was not until 2011 that the five-volume *Íslensk listasaga* (e. Icelandic Art History), covering the late nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, was published. This publication, which was long overdue and a big step for a small academic field, was written not by one art historian but by fourteen, nine of whom were women. The aim of the work in 2011 was not to be a critical analysis but rather an art history review to "update" and fill in the gaps, from the 1940s on, where Björn's art history ends.

Here, as before, Icelandic art history was written from a linear view of phases, as well as styles, movements and topics. Women artists *are* documented in both publications, but naturally there is much more coverage of women artists in the newer work, as far more women artists appeared on the scene in and after the late 1940s. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable gender imbalance in the new edition, both in terms of the length of coverage and

the emphases. As one of the authors of the work, it was my overall sentiment that it would be difficult to bridge the half-century-long gap that had formed between these two works. It was mainly the approach that the period from the late nineteenth century to 1960 in Icelandic art history was considered “complete”, with nothing to add or review, that reinforced this sentiment. Deconstruction of the male-oriented canon within art history was long overdue and pressing, but it was clear that it was not enough to add women to the canon in an attempt to equal the gender ratio (which many considered sufficient, and still do); the gender bias lies much deeper, in the gendered discourse on art, and needed to be uprooted. This led me to methodological questions, such as a feminist approach and the use of the concept of gender in art historical discourse.

Contrary to other countries, discourse on art in Iceland during most of the period of study was not carried out by art historians in specific art history reviews or scholarly articles in cultural periodicals but by scholars of various other subjects, politicians, writers and, later on, artists, most of whom were highly influential with respectable positions in cultural or political fields.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, it was not until the late 1940s that the first two art historians contributed to the art historical discourse. But as this thesis will demonstrate, the public discourse in the press had a great influence on the shaping of the Icelandic canon and the nation’s cultural consciousness.

Furthermore, art history as an academic discipline was non-existent in Iceland, and only became an independent academic discipline at the University of Iceland in 2005. Indeed, it still remains a small discipline and is disadvantaged in comparison to what is known in other countries. Thus, in spite of increasing awareness of gender in art history during the last decades in Iceland, a feminist, gender approach to art historical discourse has largely been ignored and, overall, the discipline remains one of the last fields within the humanities and social sciences in Iceland where a critical approach to gender has yet to be applied. The knowledge and influence of the pioneer Anglo-Saxon literature in feminist art history is notably limited in Iceland and many of the pivotal works of feminist art historians have not yet been translated or published. Rarely have they been the subject of discussion until the last two decades, when

¹⁰ Ólafur Rastrick argues that “public intellectuals” were particularly dynamic in public discourse between 1900–1930. See, Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin. Menning, fagurfræði og pólitik í upphafi tuttugustu aldar* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2013), 13. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir discusses *national-educators* (i. þjóðfræðarar) in the public discourse as *public intellectuals*. See, Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur. Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900–1930* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2004), 80. In this thesis the term “public intellectuals” will be used.

citations occurred more frequently.¹¹ However, even though the contribution to the debate within art history consists of isolated cases, the influence of feminism in visual arts from the 1970s and 1980s to the present is quite discernible in the works of several Icelandic women artists.¹²

An increasing number of monographs on Icelandic women artists in the visual arts, crafts and design have been published over the past two decades. Yet they are much rarer, smaller in scope and less of a “research in depth” than those of their male colleagues, let alone the selection of masters in Icelandic art history, and are rarely performed with a gender and feminist approach. Shedding light on Icelandic women artists and correcting the gender bias in art history has been the main objective in the writings of women art historians as a sort of mandatory opening move, or first step.¹³

Hrafnhildur Schram has written extensively since the late 1980s on women artists, notably those from the late nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, but has also written considerably on women artists closer in time.¹⁴ Furthermore, women’s exhibitions and catalogues from 1975 to 2015 have served as an answer to the gender ratio critiques in the art world and to highlighting women’s contributions to art. All of these have been very important contributions.¹⁵ In the last two decades, moreover, there have been a significant number of student essays in art history at the University of Iceland as well as in the Iceland University of the Arts; in these universities, feminist methodology has been taught as one of many in art history. Unfortunately, these unpublished student dissertations and essays have not reached the public domain for discussion.

¹¹ It was only in 2021 that an Icelandic translation was published of Linda Nochlin’s milestone article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, Linda Nochlin, “Hvers vegna hafa ekki verið til neinar miklar listakonur?”, transl. Margrét Elísabet Ólafsdóttir and Guðrún Erla Geirsdóttir, *Hugur*, no. 31 (November, 2020), 127-150.

¹² The Icelandic visual artist Svala Sigurleifsdóttir wrote several articles on women artists in the newspaper *Vísir* (1977 to 1978) and was one of the first to indicate feminist art historians in public discourse, like Linda Nochlin and Lucy Lippard. See also, Anna Ólafsdóttir Björnsson, “Konur og myndlist fyrr og nú” [interview with Hrafnhildur Schram], *Vera*, 4, no. 6 (1985), 14–16.

¹³ See, on the contribution of women artists to the revival of art in Iceland at the end of the nineteenth century, in Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar, 31 (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1993).

¹⁴ Hrafnhildur Schram, “Þáttur kvenna í listvakningu á Íslandi á 19. öld”, *Skírnir*, no. 171 (Spring 1997), 260–264. Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2005).

¹⁵ It should be mentioned that an exhibition was held in Nýlistasafnið (The Living Art Museum) in 1994 with posters from the American feminist group Guerrilla Girls, see “Samviska myndlistarheimsins. Sýning á veggspjöldum Guerrilla Girls í Nýlistasafninu”, *Morgunblaðið. Menning og listir*, April 16, 1994, 2C–3C. That same year, the first art museum dedicated to a woman artist was opened. The woman in question was Gerður Helgadóttir and the museum is located in Kópavogur (Gerðarsafn-Kópavogur Art Museum). See “Gerðarsafn opnað”, *Morgunblaðið. Menning og listir*, April 16, 1994, 3C.

If seeking out the forgotten women artists has been the focus in Iceland during recent decades, research has also attempted to integrate various art mediums. In Icelandic art history, the question of the schism between crafts and fine art is as important as it has been throughout Western art history from the Renaissance on. Consequently, it has been emphasized that Icelandic art history does not begin with the so-called “revival” or “dawn” of Icelandic art with the first exhibition in fine arts and landscape paintings in 1900, but with the dawn of settlement in the country.¹⁶

Áslaug Sverrisdóttir argues that due to the progress of industrialization in nineteenth-century Europe, the role of traditional rural handicrafts was re-evaluated in the period 1850–1930. Active participation of women within the home-industry movement is documented, as is their participation and contribution to domestic industrial exhibitions.¹⁷ A similar approach is applied in Arndís S. Árnadóttir’s research on the changes in modern domestic interior design in Iceland over the period of 1900 to 1970, and raises an interesting question about gender and the aesthetic reform, in terms of the history of art and crafts.¹⁸ Although the gender approach and feminist methodology is not the objective in these investigations, they are nonetheless an important contribution in the aligning of the margins within Icelandic art history, art and crafts. This applies to “non-valid art” such as handicrafts and other minor arts, as well as photography, which is an important factor, not only in terms of artistic creation, trade, and education but rather to make women approved as independent individuals in the public sphere, from the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹

1.3.2. *History, gender and national identity*

As stated earlier, while prominent in various other disciplines, feminist methodology and the concept of gender history—in the spirit of the criticism of the grand narrative—have not been

¹⁶ Þóra Kristjánsdóttir, *Mynd á þili. Íslenskir myndlistarmenn á 16., 17. og 18. öld* (Reykjavík: JPV, Þjóðminjasafnið, 2005).

¹⁷ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Mótun hugmynda um íslenskt handverk 1859–1930. Áhrif fjölpjódlegra hugmyndahreyfinga* (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2011), 5–6.

¹⁸ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, *Nútímaheimilið í mótun: fagurbætur, funksjónalismi og norræn áhrif á íslenska hönnun 1900–1970* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2011), IX–X and 22.

¹⁹ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir has researched the contribution of Icelandic women photographers for decades, and Linda Ásdísardóttir has done a compilation of photographs by Icelandic women in “Konur ljósmynda”, *Betur sjá augu: ljósmyndun íslenskra kvenna 1872–2013*, ed. Bryndís Sverrisdóttir (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, Ljósmyndasafn Reykjavíkur, 2014), 7–35. See also, Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Tvö augnablik. Ljósmyndasýningar kvenna”, *Fegurðin er ekki skraut. Íslensk samtímaljósmyndun*, eds. Sigrún Alba Sigurðardóttir and Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir (Reykjavík: Fagurskinna, 2020), 109–130.

systematically applied in the analysis of art history in Iceland. This is one of the reasons why an interdisciplinary approach has been chosen here. The thesis is situated at the intersection of art history and cultural history. Most important is to take note of the literature by Icelandic historians on the social role of women, the construction of gender and the ideology of different roles that men and women played in society, especially in relation to the beginning of the women's rights struggle and the nationalist era.²⁰ Yet it should be underlined that the emphasis does not lie in women's history but rather in art history, though with a gender and feminist approach.

Gender historians in Iceland, such as Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir and Sigríður Matthíasdóttir have been greatly influenced by historians such as Joan W. Scott and Judith M. Bennett and their fundamental gender analysis in the historical disciplines since the 1980s.²¹ Erla Hulda traces how ideas about the social role of women were shaped through debates on education and women's schools in the late nineteenth century. Two main questions were asked: what effect discussions about women's education and women's schools had on conceptualizations of gender, and how women themselves reacted to this dispute and what impact they had on it. Looking into gender, the debates from 1870 to 1903 revolved around the radical women's liberation discourse and domestic ideology. Central to these debates on the education of women were the ideas about *the nature of women*, the definition of *femininity*, and women's position in society as standard-bearers of language and culture. At stake was the cultural importance of women as mothers and child-rearers.²² As this thesis will show, the

²⁰ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútmans konur. Menntun kvenna og mótun kyngervis á Íslandi 1850–1903* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun, RIKK, Háskólaútgáfan, 2011). Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “Sögulegir gerendur og aukapersónur: kyngervi og sagnaritun þjóða(r)”, *Saga*, 57, no. 1 (2019), 53–86; Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “Nýr söguþráður. Hugleiðingar um endurritun íslenskrar stjórn málasögu”, *Saga*, 52, no. 2 (2014), 7–32; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*. See, on gender as methodology in history, in Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, ““Gender” sem greiningartæki í sögu”, *Íslenska söguþingið 28.–31. maí 1997*, vol. II, eds. Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson and Eiríkur K. Björnsson (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands, 1998), 252–258.

²¹ Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*. Joan W. Scott, *La citoyenne paradoxale: les féministes françaises et les droits de l'homme*, transl. Marie Bourdè and Colette Pratt (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998); Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters. Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). See also, Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History. Men, Women, and Historical Practices* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Irma Sulkunen, “Biography, Gender and the Deconstruction of a National Canon”, *Gendering Historiography. Beyond National Canons*, eds. Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser (Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 2009), 65–77.

²² Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútmans konur*, 347–356. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “Sögulegir gerendur og aukapersónur”, 67–68. There are a large number of research studies on femininity in gender studies. See e.g. Dorothy Smith, *Texts, facts, and femininity: Exploring the relations of ruling* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993); Mimi Schippers, “Recovering the feminine other: masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony”, *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007), 85–102. In the book *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga*, the history of women as voters is traced, along with various angles to their campaign issues and victories from 1915–2015, including their

masculine/feminine dichotomy is also a leitmotif in the discourse on art during the period of study and the feminine and femininity used to devalue women's contributions, serving as a sort of *cap of invisibility*.

The cultural and historical relations of Iceland as a Danish realm have influenced Icelandic narratives and placed Iceland in a specific historical context, and furthermore in an art-historiographical context. Iceland was a dependency of the Kingdom of Denmark. It obtained home rule in 1904, became a sovereign state in royal union with Denmark in 1918 and an independent republic in 1944. Copenhagen was Iceland's capital for nearly five centuries from the middle of the fifteenth century until 1918, and continued to be so, to some extent, until the founding of the Republic of Iceland in 1944.

To deconstruct gendered assumption in art history also means a revision of national narratives, as art and culture are some of the many manifestations thereof and historians have looked at the interaction between cultural politics and the forging of the Icelandic national identity in the twentieth century. From the end of the nineteenth century, a huge number of changes—including cultural changes—occurred within Icelandic society, with growing urbanization, other aspects of modernization and the rise of a bourgeoisie as the ruling middle class in matters of politics and the economy. The question and definition of Icelandic national identity was central in public discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson has discussed the construction of national identity and the construction of the Icelander, revisioning nationalist narratives and arguing that modernity was full of paradoxes. Hence the modern Icelandic national identity reflected conflicting views of conservatism—traditional rural community—and liberalism.²³

The Icelandic independence movement engendered a new national consciousness through the construction of a cultural and national identity and the question of gender revolves around it. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has investigated the construction of gender in Iceland, along with the construction of national identity. She analyses nation-building in Iceland and the

contribution to various issues, such as education and culture in general. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir et al. *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020).

²³ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið – uppruni og endimörk* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2007), 197–198. See also, Iceland as a crypto-colonial society, with reference to anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, in Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, “Ísland sem rými annarleikans. Myndir frá bókasýningunni í Frankfurt árið 2011 í ljósi kenninga um dul-lendur og heterótópiur”, *Ritið*, no. 12 (2012), 7–29. Iceland's depiction as a place of otherness is discussed through theories of alternative spaces, such as that of Foucault's heterotopias. See also, on national identity and external images of Iceland (and Greenland) through the ages (with concepts such as the North, utopias, nationalism and colonialism), and the development of the discourse of exoticism on the two islands, in Sumarliði Ísleifsson, *Í fjarska norðursins: Ísland og Grænland. Viðhorfasaga í þúsund ár* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020).

interplay between the nation-building and first-wave feminism in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The image of the nation was defined during these formative years of Icelandic modern society and is highly revealing of the ideological basis of the Icelandic nation state. This is clearly stated in the connection between national identity and the social position of Icelandic citizens, as it was the bourgeois, educated male citizen who ranked highest, defined as “the true Icelander”. The same did not apply to other groups in society, such as women; at that time, issues such as their rights, nature and role within the future Icelandic nation state were being addressed.²⁴

It has been pointed out how the language and literary heritage became the cornerstone for the political struggle for independence in Iceland.²⁵ The debates concerned the role of art and culture in the nation’s development—although literature always took up the most space in the arts.²⁶ Ólafur Rastrick argues that the discourse on art and aesthetics in Iceland led the way to establishing a new understanding of art, which was also in accord with bourgeois culture. He discusses the interconnection between culture and politics in Iceland from the close of the nineteenth century to 1930 and draws on ideas developed by Michel Foucault on forms of power relations, and in particular on his notion of governmentality. Here, the emphasis on ideas concerning the social role of arts is a major element, while the governmental approach to art and culture was defined by objectives aimed at raising the community’s level of civilization so that it would compare to other nations. Ólafur notes that the “true work of art” and the “representation of the beautiful” are related to the idea of the civilized individual.²⁷

Concerning *the revival of art*, the cultural notions of gender, art and nationality have often been overlooked in previous research. In the same way as the nation state was male, this thesis will investigate the new masculine nation which replaces the feminine colony (the subordinated, dependent), and if it is reflected in gendered, nationalist discourse on art during the period of study.²⁸ The role of Icelandic artists was important in the construction of national

²⁴ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 371.

²⁵ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Var Ísland nýlenda?”, *Saga*, 52, no. 1 (2014), 42–75; Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 146–147; Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Ólafur Rastrick, “Culture and the Construction of the Icelander in the 20th Century”, *Power and Culture. Hegemony, Interaction and Dissent*, eds. Ausma Cimdina and Jonathan Osmond, vol. I (Pisa: Edizioni Plus, Pisa University Press, 2006), 101–117.

²⁶ In theatre, one can see another obvious manifestation formed of contrasting views. Magnús Þór Þorbergsson has discussed Icelandic theatre (1850–1930) as a central site for the formal cultural representation of national identity and its importance in shaping it. Magnús Þór Þorbergsson, *A stage for the nation. Nation, class, identity and the shaping of a theatrical field in Iceland 1850–1930* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 2017), 4 and 12–16.

²⁷ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 271–274.

²⁸ Brenda Lafleur, ““Resting” in history: translating the art of Jin-me Yoon”, *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 217–227. See

identity, along with the importance for Iceland to have geniuses in this field and to shape the discourse around them. This occurred in a parallel way to that in literature. Feminist literary scholars have been pioneers in literature research in Iceland for decades: for example Helga Kress, Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir and Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir have argued this by analysing gendered discourse of old and new times and the reception of women's works in an androcentric literary tradition.²⁹

What the thesis will study is the fact that it appears as if women artists, like women in general, were not “included” in this social role of the arts. Furthermore, the question is whether women artists were not considered to be able to create “true works of art”, and consequently not seen as civilized individuals? Were they excluded when it comes to shaping the cultural, national identity? In the same ways as Sigríður Matthíasdóttir argues: the true Icelander was male, women were thought not to possess the characteristics of the “true Icelander”, and to a large extent women's self-image was built up as the opposite.³⁰ The ideas and prevailing rhetoric of the true Icelandic art and artists were thus conditioned by gender and prevented women from enjoying cultural citizenship and meet their need “to belong”. Hence, the position of Icelandic women as cultural citizens was in many ways different from that of political citizenship that was based on legal rights, as the discourse on art revolved around geniuses and legends but was not subject to the laws of democracy or citizenship.³¹

also on citizenship and nationalism, gender and nationalism in Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997). Nira Yuval-Davis, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

²⁹ See, in e.g. Helga Kress, ““Bækur og “kellingabækur”. Þáttur í íslenskri bókmenntasögu””, *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 39, no. 4 (1978), 369–395. Helga Kress, *Óþarfar unnustur og aðrar greinar um íslenskar bókmenntir* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2009), 258–297. Helga Kress, “Kona og skáld. Inngangur”, *Stúlka. Ljóð eftir íslenskar konur*, ed. Helga Kress (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1997). Helga Kress, “Searching for Herself: Female Experience and Female Tradition in Icelandic Literature”, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, vol. 5, *Histories of Scandinavian Literature*, ed. Daisy Neijmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, American–Scandinavian Foundation, 2006), 503–552. Helga Kress, *Speglanir. Konur í íslenskri bókmenntahefð og bókmenntasögu. Greinasafn* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands. Rannsóknastofa í kvennafræðum, 2000); Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir (ed.), *Sögur íslenskra kvenna 1879–1960* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993). Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, *Kona verður til. Um skáldsögur Ragnheiðar Jónsdóttur fyrir fullorðna* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan, 1996). Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, “Konur og listsköpun”, *Íslenskar kvennarannsóknir* (Reykjavík: 1985), 7–14; Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, *Pvílíkar ófreskjur: vald og virkni ritdóma á íslensku bókmenntasviði* (Reykjavík: Sæmundur, 2021). Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, *Bókmenntagagnrýni á almannavettvangi: vald og virkni ritdóma á íslensku bókmenntasviði* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, 2016).

³⁰ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 365–373.

³¹ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “Nýr söguþráður. Hugleiðingar um endurritun íslenskrar stjórnmálasögu”, *Saga*, 52, no. 2 (2014), 7–32.

1.3.3. Feminist art history

The *doctrine* in feminist art history since the 1970s has largely been American and British. In the last decades there have been collective publications on the subject of feminist art history with a growing number of academic papers and research studies from all over the world. However, it varies according to country when (and whether) this implementation had taken place, and explains why the same research questions and references have regularly cropped up in recent decades.³² Feminist art history has not yet been included within the discipline of art history: even if academia in general has recognized both feminist studies and women's studies, it has not "radically changed the ideologies and aesthetic frames of art history".³³ Gender inequality is still a "struggle" for feminist art historians and is still widespread.³⁴ And different concepts and theories in feminist art history have more or less failed to develop significantly in Icelandic art history.

Most writings of feminist art historians will mention the ground-breaking essay of American art historian Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971).³⁵ This was an "opening salvo of the feminist movement in art history" not only in re-evaluating and rediscovering women's contributions to art, but also as a feminist critique of the academic discipline of art history.³⁶ The exclusion of women from art history, Nochlin claims, resulted from systematic exclusion—discrimination—from the institutions and systems that

³² Patricia Mathews, "Politics of feminist art history", *The Subjects of Art History. Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 94–114; Fabienne Dumont (ed.), *La Rébellion du Deuxième Sexe. L'histoire de l'art au crible des théories féministes anglo-américaines (1970–2000)*, Collection Oeuvres en Sociétés-Anthologies (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2011), 24–31.

³³ Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe (eds.), "Preface", *Feminisms is Still our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), xiii–xiv.

³⁴ Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art, History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1; Victoria Horne and Lara Perry (eds.), "Introduction. Feminism and Art History Now", *Feminism and Art History Now. Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 3–5.

³⁵ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", published in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, eds. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 344–366 and in *ARTnews* (January, 1971), 22–39 and 67–71, and reprinted regularly since then. Here, Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", *Women Artists. The Linda Nochlin Reader*, ed. Maura Reilly (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 42–68.

³⁶ Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen (eds.), "Introduction", *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789–1914* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 1. Profound shifts occurred in the methodology of art history that Nochlin generated in her writings in the following decades, in terms of the continuing problem of gender in art history. See, Linda Nochlin, "Starting from Scratch. The Beginnings of Feminist Art History", *Women Artists. The Linda Nochlin Reader*, 188–199.

controlled the training and exhibitions.³⁷ Furthermore, Nochlin argues that *femininity* alone disqualified women artists from greatness, and that the definition of the concepts of *genius* and *greatness* in art is a determinant factor in the non-inclusion of women artists in art history. Nochlin suggests relying on both historical research and *public social structures* to call for a *paradigm shift* in art history, the discipline itself, rather than seeking candidates for the status of “great woman artist”, as that could lead to recuperation in the negative sense.³⁸ An extensive amount of literature on the topic of women artists and their work has demonstrated clearly that women have played a significant role in the production of visual arts for centuries.³⁹

A first step for feminist art historians (and also those who did not define themselves as such) was nonetheless to fill in the gaps in historical knowledge, with the rediscovery of women artists of the past, their lives and their art.⁴⁰ Another milestone occurs with Griselda Pollock, who has been of particular importance as a leading scholar of feminist history since the late 1970s in the UK, and her early publications had a stirring influence on feminist scholarship.⁴¹ Pollock and Rozsika Parker, with their book *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (1981), played a turning point in the feminist study of art history as they move beyond the recuperation of neglected women artists in favour of analysing *femininity* as an ideological position.⁴² In this way, they unveil the discursive theme of the discipline of art history as gendered and gendering.⁴³ Art was in the hands of men, whereas for instance handicrafts and textiles were

³⁷ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, 42–68.

³⁸ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, 42–68.

³⁹ See e.g. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women artists 1550–1950* (New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, A.A. Knopf, 1976); Lucy Lippard, *From the center: feminist essays on women's art* (New York: E. Dutton & Co. 1976); Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (London: Picador, 1979); Svetlana Alpers, “The Renaissance. Art History and Its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art”, *Feminism and Art History. Questioning the Litany*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York Westview: Harper & Row, 1982), 183–199.

⁴⁰ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, “The Feminist Critique of Art History”, *The Art Bulletin*, 69, no. 3 (1987), 326–357; Yves Michaud (ed.), “Introduction”, in *Féminisme, art et histoire de l'art* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts 1994), 11.

⁴¹ Hilary Robinson reports that in 1972 the Women's Art History Collective was formed as an independent reading group, focusing on Marxist critique and continental philosophy. The eight members included Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, Tina Keane, and Lisa Tickner. See, Hilary Robinson (ed.), “Historical and Critical Practices. Introduction”, *Feminism, Art, Theory. An Anthology 1968–2014* (Malden MA, Oxford UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 130.

⁴² *Old mistresses* is a quotation from the first feminist exposition in the United States, in Ann Gabhart and Elizabeth Broun, *Old Mistresses. Women Artists of the Past*, in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore [exhibition 17th of April to 18th of June, 1972]. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013). See also, Victoria Horne and Lara Perry (eds.), “Introduction. Feminism and Art History Now”, 13–14.

⁴³ See also, on the central role of gender in art history, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), “Introduction: Feminism and Art History”, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 1–18. Teresa de Lauretis builds on the Foucauldian model to understand gender and feminist deconstructions.

thought of as “women’s sphere”: the great art and the artist became “the opposite to everything that was defined as a feminine stereotype”.⁴⁴ Later, Pollock has reasoned that if an actual feminist methodology is at issue, it must involve a stance, a *feminist intervention*: a review of the discipline itself and unveiling of the gendered discourse and discursive themes.⁴⁵

At this time of the third wave of feminism, under the influence of the post-modernism of the 1980s and 1990s, the social context of art and the artists was emphasized for understanding and recognizing women’s contribution to culture, with gender questions such as the social construction of femininity and sexual differences.⁴⁶ At the same time, post-structuralist theories were endorsed for the uncovering of the relationships between gender, power and knowledge, which were seen as critical for deconstructing art practices and art history.⁴⁷ The theory from the French School, or the *French Theory*, invaded the theoretical ground, most notably Jacques Derrida and the term of *deconstruction* and Michel Foucault’s theoretical work on the discourse and analysis of the social system.⁴⁸ Some say that it is not the least of “paradoxes” that all the feminist contributions to the history of art are inseparable from the invasion of *French Theory* in the Anglo-American world: “patriarchal figures” holding an emancipated feminism.⁴⁹ And some feminist art historians have criticized those who have used *patrilineage* to “legitimate” their writing by referring to male writers, such as Derrida and Foucault, instead of choosing a matrilineage of artists and theorists.⁵⁰ This is of course a valid point, considering also that feminism and gender research, influenced by poststructuralist

Teresa de Lauretis, “The Technology of Gender”, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 1–30.

⁴⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 80; Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius, Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 38–40.

⁴⁵ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988), 1–17. Griselda Pollock, “Encounters in the virtual feminist museum: Time, Space, and the Archive”, *Feminisms is still our name*, 105–139; Victoria Horne and Lara Perry, “Introduction. Feminism and Art History Now”, 13–14.

⁴⁶ Linda Nochlin, “Introduction”, Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power, and Other Essays* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), xi; Nanette Salomon, “The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission”, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 344–355; Lisa Tickner, “Feminism, Art History and Sexual Difference”, *Genders*, 3 (Fall 1988), 92–128.

⁴⁷ Michelle M. Lazar (ed.) “Politicizing Gender in Discourse: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as Political Perspective and Praxis”, *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 9–11. See also, Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, collection Tel (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2016), 35–106.

⁴⁸ In addition, Jean-François Lyotard, the postmodern condition and the end of the *grands récits*; and Jacques Lacan’s structure of the unconscious. All of these investigations owed a lot to Marxist models of culture and ideology. See, Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 501.

⁴⁹ Yves Michaud (ed.), “Introduction”, 12.

⁵⁰ Mira Schor, “Patrilineage (1991)”, Hilary Robinson (ed.), *Feminism, Art, Theory. An Anthology 1968–2014*, 159–164. See also Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Feminist Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.

perspectives, are being increasingly challenged.⁵¹ However, as this thesis will demonstrate, in art history, like in other academic disciplines, language plays a major role in the making of knowledge and the distribution of power.

1.4. Methodology, theories and concepts

The *fabrication of knowledge* in art history maintains “systems of power and powerlessness” like many feminist art historians have argued in the Foucauldian sense.⁵² Even if Foucault made few references to women or to the issue of gender, his writings are a key element, as he focused in particular on the idea of discourse or discursive practices.⁵³ For him, it was critical to trace the effects of power structure: how it acts and who has access to it, as well as how knowledge is presented and deployed in society.⁵⁴

This research focused primarily on discourse on art in newspapers and periodicals as these are the main documents and sources of information about Icelandic art and artists for the whole period of study. As a result, as this thesis will demonstrate, the public press in Iceland had a powerful, leading role in value-laden coverage to exalt the true artists as the representatives of the nation. The male-centric Icelandic canon and the nation’s cultural consciousness were shaped primarily through coverage in newspapers and periodicals.⁵⁵ Furthermore, due to the fact that writing on art in Iceland was scarce until the 1940s and 1950s,

⁵¹ However, “matriarchal figures” came from France as well. In the 1970s, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), by Simone de Beauvoir became a reference for second-wave feminism and influenced Anglo-American feminists. Even if Beauvoir did not really examine gender and art, she induced analysis and questions on the construction of gender, rejecting the ontology of women and biological difference while affirming the cultural construction of men and women. Other “matriarchal figures” were also part of the *New French feminism*: the writings of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, to name a few, were exported to the USA, becoming an American appropriation of the lecture. See, Fabienne Dumont (ed.), *La Rébellion du Deuxième Sexe*, 5–6 and 24–25; Dani Cavallaro, *French Feminist Theory. An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2003), 119–125.

⁵² Anne d’Alleva, *Methods and theories of Art History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2013), 138–139. See also, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), “Introduction: The Expanding Discourse”, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 1–25. Geneviève Fraisse argues that it is crucial to reveal the male domination and make it “visible” to others, to say that it exists, as it is by no means obvious *because* it is masculine. See, Geneviève Fraisse, *La sexuation du monde. Réflexion sur l’émancipation* (Paris: Presses de Sciences PO, 2016), 49–67. See also, Michelle M. Lazar, “Politicizing Gender in Discourse: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as Political Perspective and Praxis”, 7.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, 35–106.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault introduces the idea of *gouvernementalité* in one of his lectures at the Collège de France (1977–1978). Michel Foucault, “Leçon du 8 février 1978”, Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours de Collège de France, 1977–1978*, collection Hautes Études (Paris: EHESS, Gallimard, Seuil, 2004), 119–138.

⁵⁵ Personal correspondence will only be cited on a few occasions. An exception is made e.g. with the personal correspondence of Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen to demonstrate her connection with influential women in Denmark in the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

and by narrowing the selection of references only to those on public discourse on art, it was possible to have a wider timeframe and thereby obtain a good basis with which to analyse the main discursive themes.

The publishing of papers in Iceland began just before the middle of the nineteenth century and later many were published. Most of them were published in Reykjavík but papers and periodicals also came out in Akureyri, Ísafjörður and Seyðisfjörður, as well as Winnipeg in Canada (*Lögberg, Heimskringla*) and further afield. In addition, the first women's periodicals were published in Iceland in 1895—*Framsókn* (1895–1901) and *Kvennablaðið* (1895–1919)—while *Freyja* (1890–1910) was published in Winnipeg, Canada. The second decade of the twentieth century is marked by the appearance of the first political newspapers in Iceland (*Morgunblaðið, Tíminn, Alþýðublaðið* and *Vísir*), variously branded by cultural politics.

Art critics and articles on art in newspapers and periodicals became more common and varied in the 1940s and 1950s, mirroring artistic, political and cultural political aspects. Women's periodicals continued to be published, such as *Brautin* (1928–1930), *19. júní* (1917–1929), *Melkorka* (1944–1962), *Nýtt kvennablað* (1940–1967) and *19. júní* (1951–). The period of the 1940s and 1950s thus became much more diverse in terms of sources and documents on public discourse on art. While the main emphasis of the research on that period continued to be focused on discourse on art in newspapers and periodicals, a few exceptions were made when it comes to sources, e.g. the two-volume art history *Íslensk myndlist* by Björn Th. Björnsson, published in 1964 and 1973, which also resulted in an exception in the timeframe also. Certain arguments lie behind this, as the thesis argues that Björn's *Íslensk myndlist* represents a confluence of the gendered discourse that had been shaped in newspapers and periodicals over the whole period of study, and was to have a great influence as an art historical canon during the following decades.

Feminist art historians have long criticized the canon of Western culture, the canon which is forged in *writing* on art (and *exhibiting* art in museums and galleries), and have for instance argued that gendered discourse on art had actually been introduced at the time of the Italian Renaissance and had become a norm for centuries—and was maintained as such.⁵⁶ Notably, reviews of the twentieth century did not feature a single women artist; women were excluded from recognition in modern art, thus demonstrating complexity and the paradoxes

⁵⁶ Nanette Salomon, “The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission”, 344–356.

between the increased rights of women, their visibility and their participation with the gendered discourse in the mainstream press.⁵⁷

As the feminist philosopher Geneviève Fraisse reasons, it is the canon, the discourse, that creates the genius, and the only way for the myth of genius (male) to survive is through binary opposition.⁵⁸ With such binary opposition, it is not sufficient that the gender ratio is equal, for instance in art history, if the discourse on the contribution of women artists is outside of the definition of the master. On the contrary, the main role of women artists is to be the opposite of the male genius, to tout higher art, or at best as an exception from one's own gender.⁵⁹ This is clear, for instance, from research on the reception history of the works of men and women, on which more emphasis has been laid in recent years, and will also be in this thesis, in deconstructing the gendered discourse on art.⁶⁰

Although the concept of the genius has changed and developed through the centuries, and differs to some extent according to country and culture, the fact is that the genius is nearly always male. This is also the subject matter of Pollock in *Differencing the Canon. Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (2006). The *Truth* and *Beauty* are two of the guiding principles in art and aesthetics and Pollock has pointed out that as long as feminist art historians take up the discourse without criticism, this will only confirm the structure of the canon.⁶¹ Pollock also maintains that it is not enough to just throw light on the diverse art creations of women that were frequently looked down on in the hierarchy of art forms, or add them to the canon, but rather that the canon itself needs to be deconstructed.⁶² Pollock defines the canon as gendered discourse, and proposes "a shift from the narrowly bounded spaces of art history as a disciplinary formation into an emergent and oppositional signifying space we call the women's

⁵⁷ See also Eleanor Tufts, "Beyond Gardner, Gombrich, and Janson: Towards a Total History of Art", *Arts magazine*, 55, no. 8 (April 1981), 150–154; Hilary Robinson (ed.), "Introduction", 6; Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 3; Linda Nochlin, "Women, Art, and Power", 2–3; Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), "Introduction: Feminism and Art History"; Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ Geneviève Fraisse, *La controverse des sexes*, 35–36, 138, 153 and 173. See also, Griselda Pollock's theoretical models for the critique of the canon. Pollock underlines the necessity of deconstructing both binary opposition and the *mythology* where the canon is represented as a mythic structure. See, Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon. Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6–9 and 23–29.

⁵⁹ Nanette Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission", 351. See women artists as "fantastic exceptions" in Katy Deepwell, *Women artists between the wars*, 10. See also Greer, *The Obstacle Race*, 151–207.

⁶⁰ Anne Lie Stokbro, "Jagten på...det feminine", 276–301; Marie Laulund, "Pionergenerationen", 20–45. Bonnie G. Smith argues that the profession of history was masculine and rigid, as opposed to the illogical femininity and feminine amateur historical writing. See, Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History*.

⁶¹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 9.

⁶² Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 23–29. See also, Hubert Locher, "The idea of the canon and canon formation in art history", *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, eds. Matthew Rampley, Thierry Lenain et al. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 31–37.

movement which is not a place apart but a movement across the fields of discourse and its institutional bases, across the texts of culture and its psychic foundations”.⁶³

In this research, if the main emphasis will be on deconstructing gendered discourse on art and, thereby, the shaping of the cultural canon and its masters and geniuses in Iceland, this thesis will reveal women as agents in multiple ways. Consequently, in the thesis it is not a question of victimization of women, but rather about emancipation versus domination: the concept or the phase of *emancipation* disclaims and identifies the domination and is eager to change it. However, like Geneviève Fraisse argues, it is crucial to reveal the male domination and make it “visible” to others, to say that it exists, as the denial, in feminist matters, “paralyzes the strategies of emancipation”.⁶⁴

The German sociologist and philosopher Habermas defined *public* and *private sphere* in the late 1960s. By delving into the historical development of these, Habermas built his analysis on the assumption that the public sphere had undergone changes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when France, England and Germany had moved in the direction of bourgeois democracy, where the bourgeoisie would meet and discuss, which played an important role as counterbalance and restraint on the part of the government.⁶⁵ Habermas has been criticized for framing the public sphere with rich emphasis on bourgeois men and ignoring the fact that the public sphere in the nineteenth century was based on the exclusion of women, minority groups and the lower classes.⁶⁶

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century gender ideology of domesticity endorsed the separation of public and private spheres. The “cult of domesticity” was an ideal of the *true womanhood* and placed women within the home, defined as a private, female sphere, in opposition to the public economic and political sphere of men. The First World War raised the

⁶³ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 26.

⁶⁴ Geneviève Fraisse, *La sexualisation du monde*, 49–67 and 81. The fourth chapter of Fraisse’s book, “Émancipation versus domination. Lecture de Jacques Rancière”, is in fact an extended debate which started with French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who criticized the tendency to think *domination* instead of analysing *emancipation*, as revealing the domination does not necessarily lead to the *elimination* of it.

⁶⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, transl. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991). The book originally came out in 1962 under the title *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*.

⁶⁶ Nancy Fraser offers a feminist revision of Habermas’ historical description of the public sphere and claims a broader use of private and public spheres, domestic not only being the *interior of the home* and public *anywhere outside the home*. See, Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), 19–51. Fraser proposes multiple publics and argues that the repressed groups have always found “subaltern counterpublics” as parallel discursive arenas or counterdiscourses. See, Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, *Social Text*, no. 25–26 (1990), 67. Griselda Pollock theorized the gendered spaces (Modernity and the spaces of femininity), in *Vision and Difference*, 50–90.

expectations that women's traditional social roles could change, with spaces opening up to women in various ways, but domesticity and motherhood (also referred to as housewife ideology) were emphasized in the interwar period as essential, both for the good of the family and the State. Even if this rigid dichotomy *was* a part of the cultural milieu, women transcended the dichotomy of domesticity in multiple ways.⁶⁷

In the same vein within art history, Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen have criticized the gender bias and many scholars' uncritical adoption of Habermas' *separate spheres* and point out that many feminist scholars have, unfortunately, opted to acknowledge only parts of Habermas' public sphere. They demonstrate that the uncritical adoption of the framework "threatens to deny women's agency and fragment a feminist collective, two perilous phenomena for the field of feminist art history".⁶⁸ Women's active participation was in the public sphere, through which they negotiated: the private sphere was not only a female space or the public sphere a male space. In the same way, women's contribution to art and culture cannot be reduced to "domestic art" of the female, private sphere.

As well as women's contribution to art, this women's agency includes active involvement through women's associations and women's periodicals, which acquire particular weight in this thesis in order to show the lesser-known (unknown) writings on arts and culture.⁶⁹ The writings in women's periodicals were a means to respond to silence on the contributions of women to arts and culture in the mainstream public discourse and also generally on their subjects, which played a major role not just in Iceland but in many countries. Thus, feminist art history is to a large extent to be found in women's periodicals and print culture.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ June Hannam, *Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 9 and 63–73. During the interwar period in Britain, as Hannam argues, while some women's organizations supported domesticity and sought to improve women's status at home (also called New Feminism), other feminists emphasized equal rights and public politics for social change, such as women's suffrage, considering the focus on domesticity and motherhood rendered it difficult for women to escape traditional roles. See also Fiona Hackney, "Reimagining Homes, Housewives, and Domesticity: Introduction", *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain 1918–1939. The Interwar Period*, eds. Catherine Clay, Maria DiCenzo, Barbara Green et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 207–209; Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens. Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928–1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

⁶⁸ Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen (eds.), "Introduction", 1–10. See also, Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough (eds.), *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006).

⁶⁹ Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen (eds.), "Introduction", 1–16.

⁷⁰ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard emphasized another approach for a feminist art history, stressing women's agency in culture "as artistic agents", whether it was their contribution through art, writing or reception. See, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), *Reclaiming Female Agency*. Victoria Bazin and Melanie Waters have redressed the significance of women's periodical culture, women's writing and publishing, prior to the recognition of feminist discourse within the academy in the 1970s. See, Victoria Bazin and Melanie Waters, "Mediated and Mediating Feminisms. Periodical Culture from Suffrage to the Second Wave", *Women: A Cultural Review*, 27, no. 4 (2016), 347–358. See also, Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like*

The concept of *textility* will be introduced in the thesis, as a reference to *text* and also *textiles*: the intertwining of important aspects as a big step towards the idea of emancipation for achieving cultural citizenship. Firstly, *textility* refers to the diverse artistic creations of women, not just in painting and sculpture but also in the devalued lesser arts, such as handicrafts. Secondly, it refers to women's writings in the marginal discourse in women's periodicals as emancipation, where the contribution of women artists is evaluated and historicized. And thirdly, through women's art exhibitions, exposing various artworks. Hence, by *textility*, diverse women's artistry enters the public sphere, blurring the distinction between private and public and the separation of artforms: the question of women transcending the hierarchy of art is essential.⁷¹

However, this demarcation between handicrafts and fine art took a long time, and was a gradual development that extended into the latter half of the twentieth century.⁷² Moreover, given how different Icelandic society and culture were to that of other countries that built on a centuries-old fine art tradition, the question arises of whether it is legitimate to target the "beginning of Icelandic art history" with the first public exhibitions of fine art in 1900 and the first landscape paintings. Therefore, transcending the hierarchy of art is an optimal approach for defining Icelandic art history in a different way. Embroidery, needlework, art and crafts are an important "thread" in art history and women's history, and represent an important heritage documented by women. Therefore, many feminist art historians, critics and artists have challenged art history's constructed categories of art, and focused on the traditions of the minor arts, domestic arts and utility production by women.⁷³ It is important to point out that needlework is a maternal genealogy (mother–daughter) that challenges the paternal descent (father–son).⁷⁴ Today, in Iceland, textiles, embroidery and other handicraft traditions have

a Woman, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Katy Deepwell, *Women artists between the wars*, 321.

⁷¹ The National Gallery of Iceland would not however be an independent institute until 1961 (previously, the Education Board had dealt with matters relating to the gallery).

⁷² This is also linked to the fact that the National Museum and the National Gallery were in the same building until 1987, which also affected how items were registered and defined and in what context they were exhibited.

⁷³ Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Rozsika Parker has pointed out that it is actually the marginalization of women's work that has come about because of the separation of the craft of embroidery from the fine arts. Similarly, she points out and seeks out sources in her research in women's periodicals, works of art and letters on how embroidery is an important factor in women's history and their creativity, and also how these strengthen the bonds between women. See, Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London, New York: Tauris, 2010). See also, Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 9.

⁷⁴ Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art", *The Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter, 1973), 18–23. Patricia Mainardi, *Quilts: The Great American Art* (San Pedro, CA: Miles & Weir, 1978).

become “a valid method” in the works of contemporary artists.⁷⁵ In this way, women’s artistry moved from the marginal domestic to the central, public sphere, with new forms of expression which in turn have generally influenced the artistic expression of both female and male artists.⁷⁶

In the same vein as *textility*, and the fight for women’s *cultural eligibility* in Iceland, the concept of “parrêsia”, which refers to the theories of Foucault, will also be addressed. Parrêsia (pan-rêsia) is a positive concept of female agency, replacing women who were judged as outcast, the maverick or *pariah*. Parrêsia involves talking in complete honesty, opening one’s heart: parrêsia contains the true sincerity.⁷⁷ As Foucault divulged, *parrêsia* actually has a longer history, back to the Ancient Greeks, but the concept is of political nature: to review and reassess for instance the association between democracy and truth.⁷⁸ Foucault referred to the Greek Polybe, and the democracy of classical Athena which consists of three factors—*dêmokratia*, *isêgoria* and *parrêsia*—along with participation by all (*dêmokratia*), equality (*isêgoria*) and free speech (*parrêsia*). The participation of women in art, exhibitions and the discourse on art is in part *parrêsia*, which again is the basis for building up *dêmokratia* and *isêgoria*. In the discourse of some women—but not all—there is no fear, but a “*franc-parler*”, a sincere tone and intention which can be a real threat. Foucault specified that telling the truth is not enough to be a *parrêsia*, but to take a certain risk, a risk which concerns the very relationship he/she has with the one he/she is addressing.⁷⁹ The *truth* is a leitmotif in discourse on art in Iceland during the period of study, but the one who speaks the *truth* is not a woman but a man. As Foucault argued, it concerns the problem of “*Wahrsager*” (always a male) as Nietzsche defined him, the one in the society who is considered to have the potential to tell “the truth”.⁸⁰ In the same way, is it only men who capture the truth, the *accepted* truth and the *accepted* knowledge.

The first generation of feminist art historians belittled the differences between women, but the next generations analysed the differences and the diversity.⁸¹ Feminist art historians have explored intersectional perspectives of the concept of identity, such as class, race and sexuality. However, “mainstream” feminist theory has been criticized for being a white canon,

⁷⁵ The third-wave feminist women artists adopted handicrafts as ideals of new domesticity, celebrating domestic work in the 1970s on.

⁷⁶ Ingar Brinck et al. (eds.), *Från modernism till samtidskonst: Svenska kvinnliga konstnärer*.

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité* (précédé de *La parrêsia*), eds. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2016), 79–84. We can translate parrêsia in English as *free speech*, but Foucault talks about *franc-parler*.

⁷⁸ Frédéric Gros, “Introduction”, Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité*, 11–18.

⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité*, 12–13 and 26.

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité*, 104–106.

⁸¹ Fabienne Dumont, *La Rébellion du Deuxième Sexe*, 24–25.

addressing neither intersectional perspectives nor the non-Western, non-Caucasian factor.⁸² Similarly, there are also tensions within feminist writings that arise from the notion of *homogeneity* or *collectivity of women*.⁸³

To address and label “women artists” specially is, of course, also “to be disqualified by sex from membership to the group known as “artists””.⁸⁴ In spite of the fact that this thesis refers to *women artists*, they do not represent or imply a single *homogeneous* group, as diversity within the collectivity of women must be acknowledged. Likewise, women’s exhibitions are mentioned even if there is no such thing yet as men’s exhibitions. Concerning this point, the *sample* of women differs geographically and culturally: different aspects can be considered more important or, on the other hand, justified and explained. For instance, it is mandatory to indicate and define the “sample” of women artists in this research: Iceland remained highly homogenous from the settlement in the ninth century AD until the twentieth century, while around one percent of the population of Iceland in 1900 was of Danish heritage.⁸⁵ Therefore the *intersectional subjects* are not related to race during the period of study, but to the class system, gender and the structure of society. This thesis emphasizes women as individuals as well as their collective power and struggle. The women who will be discussed in the next chapters each have a unique story: some were married with children but more frequently these women were childless, unmarried or both—and some were queer, though seldom openly.

⁸² Marsha Meskimmon, “Chronology through Cartography: Mapping 1970s Feminist Art globally”, *WACK!, Art and the Feminist Revolution*, eds. Lisa Gabrielle, Cornelia Butler et al. (Cambridge, MA: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, MIT Press, 2007), 322–336; Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists (1993)”, Hilary Robinson (ed.), *Feminism, Art, Theory*, 185–198.

⁸³ Hilary Robinson (ed.), “Introduction. Feminism, Art, Theory. Towards a (Political) Historiography”, *Feminism, Art, Theory. An Anthology 1968–2014*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Malden MA, Oxford UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 5. Griselda Pollock argues that if the term “women artists” is used, we differentiate the history of art by proposing artists and “women artists”, assuming a difference, a reductive definition of women artists. See, Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 33. According to Malin Hedlin Hayden, the *arguable* tradition of grouping women artists, initially successfully, now tends to maintain the sex bias as an impulse that often narrows the art production of women into “one grouped voice”. See, Malin Hedlin Hayden, “Women Artists versus Feminist Artists: Definitions by Ideology, Rhetoric or Mere Habit?”, *Feminisms is Still our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices*, eds. Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 57–83.

⁸⁴ Griselda Pollock, “The Missing future. MoMA and modern women”, *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 43.

⁸⁵ Gunnar Karlsson, *History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 234.

1.5. Overview of the thesis

The timeframe under study is from the late nineteenth century to 1960, with the emphasis on 1900–1960 as an important formative period for Icelandic art and discourse on art: 60 years of implied “maturity” in Icelandic art history, which are considered “complete” and unalterable. The thesis is hence divided into several developmental periods, in which the discourse on art, the status of art, and the position of women are reviewed.⁸⁶ If such a timeframe is broad, it is primarily because of how few sources exist on art prior to 1900 and how the discussion on art and its environment was—until the 1940s and 1950s—drear and small in scale for a long time, unlike in most other countries.

The starting point of the study is not least defined by the first women’s periodicals, *Framsókn* (1895–1901) and *Kvennablaðið* (1895–1919). At the same time it includes the first Icelandic woman who studied art in Copenhagen, Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, from 1873–1875. Furthermore, 1875 is the year that Thorvaldsen’s statue, “autoportrait en pied”, is unveiled in the centre of Reykjavík, and Thorvaldsen—who had a Danish mother and Icelandic father—is hailed by the nation as a genius and “the son of Iceland”. In this thesis, this is claimed to be an important intercept and beginning, not because of the appearance of the work itself in public space, which is nonetheless a turning point in Icelandic art history, but rather in a symbolic, picturesque and gendered way. At the same time, a discourse is introduced about fine arts in Iceland and the great need for the nation to have a genius in the field. And meanwhile, an important group of Icelandic women is forming—a real pioneer generation—that had a great impact on other women in the country, notably the first women artists.

The thesis is structured in chronological order. This approach is certainly open to debate. Yet, by going in chronological order and looking at the traditional phases of art history from a completely different viewpoint, it is possible to present a new viewpoint. The thesis is written in English, and as mentioned previously, the feminist methodology and theories in which the concept of gender occurs have not been used before over such a long time period—or even at all in Icelandic art history. There is a need to look for a balance between those who know the traditional, linear art history but have not read it from a perspective of gender and feminist

⁸⁶ In addition, a reference to the definition of periods and the shaping of art is George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1962); he proposes the theory that it takes 60 years to fully develop art, like in the life of an artist, and takes a 15-year development period each time.

methodology and those who are not acquainted with Icelandic art history but have knowledge and experience of gender, along with feminist art history and methodology.

Art historian Selma Jónsdóttir was the first woman to complete a doctoral degree at the University of Iceland in 1960, a milestone that the great majority of women had been waiting for, and marked a certain breakthrough. That same year, a section devoted to Icelandic women artists in the women's periodical *Melkorka*, which involved gathering together several women artists as a reference to women in Icelandic art history, was also significant. In addition, even if challenged by several women's historians and feminist scholars, the time period up to 1960 in Iceland has been regarded as a certain period of stagnation in the women's movement. Therefore it has not seen as much research conducted with a feminist and gender lens as the period from the 1970s onwards, which is referred to as women's liberation, political activism and the *real* beginning of more consciously feminist art—a feminist art history. In this thesis, it is argued that in many ways, women in the 1970s took over the struggle that had been going on for decades, in the form of *textility*, within art and culture.

Following the introduction (Chapter 1), the thesis is divided into three main chapters in chronological order, with the objective of getting a new perspective on traditional phases in Icelandic art history. The first part in Chapter 2 starts with an introductory section on Icelandic art in the nineteenth century to 1900, at a time when the definition of the fine arts and crafts was still ambiguous. The first Icelanders who became educated in art did so around the middle and late nineteenth century, but few pursued art after returning from their study and they were met with apathy and ignorance. Obviously and likewise, the writing on fine art in Iceland is scarce in the middle and latter half of the nineteenth century, with few exceptions. This period is related to a certain pre-art historical period and the early beginning.⁸⁷ However, in the late nineteenth century, with the formation of the bourgeoisie and growing middle class—albeit quite moderate—conditions gradually changed to become more favourable for fine art and artists.

As the thesis argues, there was a vocal call for the totally Icelandic genius in fine art, “patrilineally”, as Bertel Thorvaldsen's successor. As in other countries, the question of gender was similarly mandatory. Women should not only be good wives and mothers but also virtuous, according to Christian ideals of women's chastity and obedience; yet a great deal was

⁸⁷ It is necessary to distinguish here between *art historical discourse* and *texts*, as well as published, public, official *speeches* on several occasions throughout the period in question that were related to occasional artistic events. In this regard, the line is often blurred in the Icelandic context.

happening. The first Icelandic women studied painting in Copenhagen; they also learned photography and continued to be decisive in the field of handicrafts. The lack of separation of art forms in Iceland was in fact crucial for women, as becomes obvious with their participation in the so-called industrial exhibitions. They also took part in a large Nordic women's exhibition with their paintings and handicrafts, in 1895 in Copenhagen. Furthermore, two women's periodicals that were established in 1895 proved to be an important platform for underlining women's contributions to art, as well as being helpful for considering their role at that time. From 1895 onwards, it is argued that there were *separate spheres* for women and men in periodicals and an increasingly gendered nature of the division between art and craft. At the end of the century in Iceland, a group of Icelandic women had emerged who represented a real "pioneer generation" like the one in Denmark, and had notably studied and lived in Copenhagen.

Chapter 3 of the thesis revolves around public discourse on art in Iceland from 1900 to 1945. At the turn of the new century there was an appeal for the revival of Icelandic art. The nationalist discourse on art is related to the works of the three male pioneers: Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, Einar Jónsson and Ásgrímur Jónsson. During this period of Icelandic art history in the making, the discussion continues to focus on the independence movement in Iceland, the construction of the national identity and the construction of gender in a cultural context. The national and social role of women artists, and indeed women in general, was not envisaged, as can notably be seen in the festivities, in 1930 and 1944. Women got the right to vote in Iceland in 1915 and around that time three Icelandic women artists who were educated in Copenhagen stepped forward and exhibited here in Iceland and also abroad, to good acclaim: Kristín Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson. But as before, women also made their mark in fields such as handicrafts and photography.

A certain turning point occurred in 1916 with the founding of the *Art Society* (i. Listvinafélagið) and the first public art exhibition in Iceland, held in Reykjavík in 1919, which represents the beginning of the gendered reception history of art whereby the works of women and men are compared. The same "three pioneers of Icelandic art" were honoured. Hence, women's work had not been *bypassed*, but the "selection" of male artists is still omnipresent in the mainstream press with increased emphasis on the true Icelandic (male) artist, virility versus femininity, as representing the true Icelandic art and artists. Yet, sisterhood or sorority continues to take place in "side" discussions in the women's periodicals. However, with the new times and new art, modernist discourse in an international context would have a far-reaching impact

on art history writing after the Second World War in Europe and in Iceland, where it meets the nationalist ideas of the great modern male artist.

In Chapter 4, the topic of discussion will be the post-war period, from 1945 to 1960. This period is considered by some to be the pinnacle of art, with the arrival and initiation of modernism and abstract art in the mid 1940s and the 1950s. This is the period of the Cold War, which is reflected in bitter disputes in the cultural field in Iceland as elsewhere. In the same way, art history as a discipline was in the process of being born in Iceland when the first two Icelandic grant recipients in art history, Selma Jónsdóttir and Björn Th. Björnsson, returned home. The conflict about the position of women became an underlying thread in the 1950s. On the one hand, housewife politics prevails but on the other, women were entering the public scene; they were increasingly attending education, in Iceland and abroad; more of them chose to live differently than the generation of women before them; an increasing number of women artists were emerging; and women's periodicals continued to be crucial for promoting women's contribution to art and culture and politics in general.

As in previous decades, women continued to hold exhibitions in the field of handicrafts and needlework exhibitions became common in the 1940s; the sharp distinction between the art of women and men partly appeared in discussions on these. Yet, women artists in the abstraction and geometric art of the fifties were certainly more "eligible" in the modernist discourse on art in the international context and their works were exhibited and reviewed. As a result of the attention in foreign newspapers, Icelandic women artists such as Nína Tryggvadóttir and Gerður Helgadóttir found their way onto the pages of the Icelandic newspapers more often, as a substantial number of those reviews are translated from foreign media. At the end of the thesis the two-volume art history *Íslensk myndlist* by art historian Björn Th. Björnsson is discussed in which, as this thesis argues, the gendered discourse with its inception in the late nineteenth century comes together in one place, interwoven with gendered modernist discourse on art in the late 1940s and 1950s in Iceland and abroad. Finally, a few important points should be mentioned before proceeding further. In this thesis, the decision was made not to include any direct quotations to the original texts and citing the text only in the thesis author's own translation. This is, though, done with some exceptions, when for instance Icelandic words for key terms appear in brackets.

Regarding the substantial visual material that has been selected for the thesis, there are no image references in the text. Many might find this strange, i.e. that visual material is actually complementary in art history. The reasoning for this is that the emphasis is on gendered

discourse, rather than the works of the artists: it is not about analysing art works but rather the discourse on art. At the same time—and is intentional—it encourages readers to consider how a work can be imagined in regard to the discussion on those who are being discussed. Examples of work by the artists of the period covered by each chapter appear at the end of it, along with other visual material that is linked to the discussion in question.⁸⁸

In Iceland, a person's last name indicates the first name of their father (patronymic) or in some cases mother (matronymic) in the genitive, followed by -son (e. son) or -dóttir (e. daughter). Non-Icelanders are referred to by their surname (family name). When referring to Icelandic artists and authors in this thesis, their first names (given names) will be referred to, as is customary in Iceland. However, in the bibliography, Chapter 7, all authors, regardless of nationality, are listed under their surname.

2. PRELUDE: ART AND CULTURAL RENAISSANCE IN ICELAND (1875–1900)

2.1. Genesis of art

Until the end of the nineteenth century, fine art was hardly visible in Iceland: the country neither boasted resplendent buildings, theatres, palaces, churches or museums, nor was there much musical composition, musicians, or trained singers. On the other hand, Icelanders prided themselves on the Icelandic language, medieval Icelandic Sagas and past glories. However, though it was never the case that no art production was practised in the country—it is clearly part of human baggage from the beginning—fine art was in no way comparable to that in other Northern European countries.

Various kinds of arts and crafts had been practised in Iceland ever since its settlement in the early Middle Ages, both by men and women. From the outset, women would have decorated the home and, after Christianisation, churches, with embroidered ornaments and other artefacts. Nunneries, which became important women's cultural centres, could be mentioned

⁸⁸ There are many shortcomings in information about the size and dimensions of the work (sculptures, paintings, reliefs) of women artists, along with the recording of them (which is in itself a matter for research). For these reasons, the information in the list of figures is sometimes limited. It should be mentioned that the oil paintings are all on canvas, unless stated otherwise.

here, but after the Reformation in 1550, when the convents were disbanded, handicrafts and embroidery were practised at the bishoprics.⁸⁹ Attributes remain a problem, and despite the mention of several women in references on artistry in handicrafts, one could assume that they had been far more numerous, e.g. in their contributions to illuminated Icelandic manuscripts.⁹⁰

The Reformation in Iceland coincided with the Renaissance period. During that period in Europe, most notably in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, art forms such as painting and sculpture in newly founded art academies, with their emphasis on drawing as the foundation for everything, were distinguished from arts and crafts. The role of artists in society was changed from that of a skilled artisan producing crafts to that of an artist, creating works of art. The origins of art history's focus can be traced to humanists who began to look at the personalities and work of exceptional individuals—the learned, gifted individual—and the desire to celebrate Italian cities.⁹¹

The “father of art history”, Giorgio Vasari, represented a certain beginning of modern art history with his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, first published in 1550 with an enlarged edition in 1568, which gave more prominence to painting.⁹² This was surely one of the most influential writings on art of the Italian Renaissance in which, as many art historians—notably feminist art historians—have argued, Vasari introduced the idea of progress and a canon, whereby great (male Florentine) artists represent the highlights of art history, namely with Giotto (and the rebirth of art, *rinascita*) and the “three great artists”, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael.⁹³ However, Vasari *did* mention several women artists and he noted that women had contributed to art creation during each period. But women are mentioned as the exceptions, and it is clear that question of gender is from the outset an

⁸⁹ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, *Íslenskur útsaumur* (Kópavogur: Háskólaútgáfan, Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2003), 8–10 and 55–68. Elsa E. Guðjónsson, “Með silfurbjarta nál. Um kirkjuleg útsaumsverk íslenskra kvenna í kaþólskum og lútherskum sið”, *Konur og kristmenn. Þættir úr kristnisögu Íslands*, ed. Inga Huld Hákonardóttir (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1996), 119–162; Þóra Kristjánsdóttir, “Margrét hin oddhaga, hreinferðuga júngrú Ingunn og allar hinar”, *Kvennaslóðir. Rit til heiðurs Sigríði Th. Erlendsdóttur sagnfræðingi*, ed. Anna Agnarsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 2001), 89–98. See also substantial sources on women, art and convents in Iceland in Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir, *Leitin að klaustrunum. Klausturhald á Íslandi í fimm aldir* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands og Sögufélag, 2017); Anna Sigurðardóttir, *Allt hafði annan róm áður í páfadóm. Nunnuklaustrin tvö á Íslandi á miðöldum og brot úr kristnisögu* (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 1988).

⁹⁰ Selma Jónsdóttir e.g. argued that the picture of the crucifixion in the Jónsbók manuscript could be the work of the sisters at Reynistaður. See, Selma Jónsdóttir, “Gömul krossfestingarmynd” (An Icelandic Medieval Illumination and Related Antepedia), *Skírnir*, 139, no. 1 (1965), 135–137 and 140.

⁹¹ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 17.

⁹² Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (it. *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*) also known as *The Lives* (it. *Le Vite*).

⁹³ Nanette Salomon, “The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission (1991)”, 344. See also, Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art across time* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 470; Hans Belting, *End of Art History?* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 8.

integral part of the discourse on art.⁹⁴ So too are the exclusionary practices based on the separation between fine arts and crafts traced back to the Renaissance, with the rise of academies and universities which eliminated women artists and denied them access to the basic training necessary for professional artists; women were dilettantes and never candidates for greatness.⁹⁵

When addressing the art historical narrative in Iceland, it is inevitable to consider the cultural and historical relations of Iceland as a part of the Danish realm and at what point it has influenced Icelandic narratives. Advocates of Icelandic nationalism saw Iceland as an equal partner in a composite monarchy, and Icelandic students in Denmark celebrated and predicted the end of Danish rule.⁹⁶ But Copenhagen had little in common with Reykjavík, which had gained municipal rights in 1786, with a population of less than 1000 in 1840.⁹⁷ And even if Danish authorities may have seen and treated Iceland not as a colony but rather as an integral part of the Danish state, that does not mean that Iceland was untouched by nineteenth-century colonialism. In the colonial dichotomy the world was divided into “us” and “them”, the “civilized” and the “uncultivated”.⁹⁸ Icelandic society differed in many ways from that in other Northern European countries and was geographically isolated, and even though policies and trends that were flourishing among the European middle class reached Iceland, they naturally took heed of the special circumstances in Iceland.⁹⁹ Once again, this puts Iceland in a different context to its neighbouring countries when it comes to fine art. However, in the late nineteenth century, with the formation of the bourgeoisie and growing middle class—albeit quite moderate—conditions gradually changed to become more favourable for fine art and artists.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* (a new translation by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella) (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford University Press, 1991), 339–343. See also, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 9.

⁹⁵ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, 52–57 and 67–68; Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 50–82.

⁹⁶ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Ólafur Rastrick, “Culture and the Construction of the Icelander in the twentieth Century”, 101–119. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið. Uppruni og endimörk*, 197–198.

⁹⁷ Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, “Fólksfjöld- og byggðápróun 1880–1990”, *Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun 1880–1990. Ritgerðir*, eds. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Svanur Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1993), 87.

⁹⁸ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Var Ísland nýlenda?”, 75.

⁹⁹ Anna Agnarsdóttir and Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, “The Historiography of Early Modern Iceland” (fr. L’historiographie islandaise et l’époque moderne), *Nordic Historical Review (Revue d’Histoire Nordique)*, no. 20 (2015), 75.

¹⁰⁰ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Íslensk þjóðfélagsþróun á 19. öld”, 20–27.

A few artists had been academically trained but deserted art after returning home, as in Iceland there were no grounds to speak of for painting or sculpture.¹⁰¹ Obviously and likewise, there is almost no writing on fine art in Iceland until the latter half of the nineteenth century, and even then it is a rather modest contribution. The first scholarly works on fine art can be found in the writings of Helgi Sigurðsson. He initially started to read philosophy, then law at the University of Copenhagen, but changed to medicine before he enrolled in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1842. In addition to his multidisciplinary studies, Helgi became the first Icelander to learn photography, the so-called daguerreotype.¹⁰² He returned to Iceland and abandoned his studies, and settled at his family's farm, Jörvi in West Iceland; it was probably there, around 1846, that he wrote his treatise on painting, though the study was not published at the time.¹⁰³ His essay was, in all likelihood, an effort to gain more understanding of the value of fine art here in Iceland, which was poor.

Helgi Sigurðsson discussed the nature and different types of drawing and painting, claiming that skills and techniques are a linchpin of all arts and crafts, such as perspective drawing which is discussed at length. The aesthetic value of the painting consists of what Helgi termed “einkennileiki” (peculiarity), i.e. the distinctive features of objects, and art is seen as a product of the Spirit, and even as works of genius, though without referring to any artist. Helgi's point of view could be seen in many ways as classical, notably that art is the imitation of nature in which we find Truth and Beauty.¹⁰⁴ However, it has to be emphasized that his writings were devoid of an art historical approach or of any analysis, linear evolution or history which had

¹⁰¹ See, f.ex., Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm (1749–1821), Ólafur Ólafsson (1753–1832) and Gunnlaugur Briem (1773–1834). Gunnlaugur graduated from the Royal Danish Academy, took up sculpture—probably the first Icelander to do so—and studied at the same time as Bertel Thorvaldsen and became good friends with him, but their paths divided when Thorvaldsen went to Rome. At the same time, Gunnlaugur studied law at the University of Copenhagen, then returned home to Iceland, but did not continue to pursue art, instead becoming the district commissioner. See, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Listvakning á 19. öld”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. I. Landslag, rómantik og sýmbólismi, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 19–22; Þóra Kristjánsdóttir, “Listir og handverk á 19. öld”, *Saga Íslands*, X, ed. Sigurður Líndal (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Sögufélag, 2009), 429.

¹⁰² Gunnar Harðarson, “Inngangur”, *Helgi Sigurðsson. Ávísun um uppdráttu- og málaralistina* (Reykjavík: Crymogeia, 2017), XI–XXXV. See also, Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, “Daguerreotýpur á Íslandi og fyrstu ljósmyndarnir”, *Árbók Hins íslenska fornleifafélags*, 79 (1982), 141–153. Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, “Icelandic Photography 1846–1946”, *History of Photography*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 1–9.

¹⁰³ The manuscript is preserved in Landsbókasafn, National and University Library of Iceland, Lbs. 337 fol. Helgi Sigurðsson, “Ávísun um uppdráttu- og málaralistina”, *Þekking—engin blekking. Til heiðurs Arnóri Hannibalssyni í tilefni af 70 ára afmæli hans 24. mars 2004*, eds. Erlendur Jónsson, Guðmundur Heiðar Frímannsson et al. (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2006), 305–335; Gunnar Harðarson, ““Skuggsjá sköpunarverksins”: Um fagurfræðileg viðhorf í ritgerð Helga Sigurðssonar, Ávísun um uppdráttu- og málaralistina”, *Skírnir*, 178 (Autumn 2004), 320–339.

¹⁰⁴ Gunnar Harðarson, “Skuggsjá sköpunarverksins”, 326–338; Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, “Daguerreotýpur á Íslandi og fyrstu ljósmyndarnir”, 141–153.

been discussed in art historical discourse since the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance. On the other hand, the potential influence of Hegel in Helgi's writing should be kept in mind, both in terms of philosophical thought and also as characteristic of nineteenth-century German thought, grounded in Johann Winckelmann's earlier writings on Greek art.¹⁰⁵ Winckelmann's aim, as Hegel argued, was not the usual kind of artist biography, but an attempt to extract "the very nature of art". Hence Winckelmann became the "father of archaeology", though he has also been considered the "father of modern art history".¹⁰⁶

Another rare example of aesthetic writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century is by Benedikt Gröndal who had received an education in aesthetics and the Greek language but had no academic training in art. Like Helgi, he saw classical Greek culture as the archetype, the excellence of art, along with the Italian Renaissance, and speaks also highly of Winckelmann.¹⁰⁷ In 1853, Benedikt defined the work of Thorvaldsen—who is the only nineteenth-century artist to whom he refers—as some kind of "genius standard" on beauty, proportions and perfect harmony, in the spirit of the Ancient Greeks.¹⁰⁸ Benedikt's interest in classical aesthetics and poetry is combined, with poetry playing the largest part. Thus, the writings of Helgi and Benedikt reflect a similar approach and emphasis on art regarding aesthetic value and skills in painting and drawing (including techniques such as perspective drawing), along with the contribution of the Greeks and Romans and classical aesthetics as a starting point for Western culture, not least an emphasis on the intersection between the nation's past and various artefacts of the cultural heritage.

2. 2. Art, cultural renaissance and tableaux vivants: Sigurður Guðmundsson, the painter

Thorvaldsen was hailed as a national hero in Copenhagen when he returned home from Rome in 1838. That year marked the beginning of a fierce debate between Icelanders and Danes about whether Thorvaldsen was an Icelandic or Danish genius, with Icelandic students in Copenhagen pointing out that Thorvaldsen had got his talent from his Icelandic father, who had mastered the craft of wood carving. It has been noted that the romantic admiration of geniuses in

¹⁰⁵ Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History. Discipline Departures* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5.

¹⁰⁶ Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, transl. Caroline Saltzweid and Mitch Cohen (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 128–131.

¹⁰⁷ Benedikt Gröndal, "Um vísindi, skáldskap og listir á miðöldum", *Ný sumargjöf*, 5 (1865), 113–143.

¹⁰⁸ Benedikt Gröndal, *Kvæði og nokkrar greinir um skáldskap og fagrar menntir* (Copenhagen: Egill Jonsson, 1853), 50, 60–61 and 94–98.

nineteenth-century Iceland was primarily connected to authors and poets.¹⁰⁹ But now, as this thesis argues, during the whole period of study, there was a vocal call for a truly Icelandic genius in fine art. It was not enough to have a part in one, as in the case of Thorvaldsen, and initially, great hopes were pinned on “the genius”, Sigurður Guðmundsson, *the painter* (i. málari).¹¹⁰

In 1849, when Sigurður went out to study at the Royal Danish Academy in Copenhagen, he was only aged 16.¹¹¹ The previous year a museum had opened with Thorvaldsen’s works. Built between 1838 and 1848, this museum was inspired by classical Greek architecture, and built around an inner courtyard where the artist is buried.¹¹² Sigurður began studying drawing with one of the leading Danish sculptors, Jens Adolf Jerichau, professor and later director of the Royal Danish Academy, but also attended lessons at the preparatory division of the Academy (Elementarskole) and at the private school of Professor Gustav Friedrich Hetsch. Sigurður then entered the so-called ornament school in the Royal Danish Academy, as well as later studying drawing and painting, which shows the interest he had in the decorative arts and design (goldsmithery, silversmithery, etc).¹¹³ Hetsch was influential in the field of design and has been called the first Danish designer, wanting to link fine art and decorative art. With Hetsch, the useful and the beautiful merged into one and were held in high regard, as was later the case with Sigurður and is also apparent in Helgi Sigurðsson’s treatise.¹¹⁴

During his course in Copenhagen, Sigurður became very taken by the Danish art historian Niels Laurits Høyen, who held lectures in art history at the Royal Danish Academy.

¹⁰⁹ See, Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn. Brot úr íslenskri menningarsögu* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, háskólaforlag Máls og menningar, 1998); Þórir Óskarsson, “Frá rómantík til raunsæis 1807–1882”, *Saga Íslands IX*, ed. Sigurður Línadal (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Sögufélag, 2008), 329–337 and 398–399.

¹¹⁰ Benedikt Gröndal writes that Sigurður Guðmundsson was always called “Sigurður genius” (Siggi séni) by his fellow Icelanders in Copenhagen at that time. See, Benedikt Gröndal, *Dægradvöl* (Reykjavík: Forlagið, 2014), 203.

¹¹¹ Páll Briem, “Sigurður Guðmundsson málari”, *Andvari*, 15, no. 1 (1889), 2.

¹¹² Sigurður had apparently said that he had learned the most there, by observing Thorvaldsen’s works at the Museum. See, in María Kristjánsdóttir, “... þegar maður vill læra einhvirja íþrótt sem maður er náttúraður fyrir...” *Málarinn og menningarsköpun. Sigurður Guðmundsson og Kvöldfélagið 1858–1874*, eds. Karl Aspelund and Terry Gunnell (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, Opna, 2017), 158–159.

¹¹³ Sigurður’s education and references to this are very vacillating. According to the newest sources, he attended the ornament school at the Royal Danish Academy in 1851 and 1852 and then the free drawing school until spring 1853. In 1853, Sigurður is accepted in the school of plaster model painting and then to the highest level in the model school in January 1854. Sigurður is thus in the preparatory school for one and a half years and in the lower classes of the Academy for two and a half years. See, María Kristjánsdóttir, “... þegar maður vill læra einhvirja íþrótt sem maður er náttúraður fyrir...” 164–179.

¹¹⁴ This adage on the useful and the beautiful also applies, though, to the legacy of the Enlightenment, where utility and beauty were combined, as can be seen in Tómas Sæmundsson, “Ávarp”, *Fjölnir*, 1 (1835), 1–18. See in Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Listvakning á 19. öld”, 24; Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, *Til gagns og til fegurðar. Sjálfsmyndir í ljósmyndum og klæðnaði á Íslandi 1860–1960* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2008), 22.

It was the cultural heritage that was important, and one can assume that this influenced Sigurður.¹¹⁵ The social role of the art became the driving force in Sigurður's work when he returned to Iceland. And if a nation was to make moves towards the present time, awoken from numbness and look to the future, it was necessary both to have a history and to know about the cultural heritage from ancient times.

When Sigurður Guðmundsson returned to Iceland in 1858 after about nine years in Copenhagen, he brought with him ideas about national progress and edifying the general public.¹¹⁶ Sigurður Guðmundsson wrote an article in *Þjóðólfur* (1862), in which he encouraged the setting up of a national museum in Iceland that would contain old objects but should also be a museum for "all fine arts".¹¹⁷ In a national museum of antiquities of this kind, it would be possible to collect old weapons, stools, cupboards, equestrian tack, costumes, furnishings, tools, tapestries and paintings. And it so happened that Helgi Sigurðsson, his predecessor at the Royal Danish Academy, rose to the challenge and donated to the museum 15 old items in his possession. This gift resulted in the founding of Antiquarian Collection (i. Forngripasafn) a year later, on February 24, 1863. Sigurður Guðmundsson became its first curator.¹¹⁸

But it was not enough to set up a collection if no history or records of art creations existed. Sigurður Guðmundsson actually made the first known attempt to record Icelandic art history, and even though it was never finished it is illustrative of the attitude towards the arts. The extensive knowledge that Sigurður had gained through his research can be gleaned from the essay, which also refers to manuscripts and old sagas that possessed descriptions of Icelanders' handicrafts. The remarkable thing about Sigurður's draft (records of objects and references to sources but not a complete text) is that he emphasized Iceland's historical past and old cultural heritage from the settlement to the present, and covered the nation's art creations in the broadest sense (manuscripts, wood carvings, costumes, wall hangings, weapons, tapestries and paintings) without any distinction between artefacts of various origins. Both women and men had participated and contributed to this history with their skills in such art creation ever since the settlement. Here, Sigurður tries to subsume paintings and visual

¹¹⁵ Lárus Sigurbjörnsson, *Þáttur Sigurðar málara: brot úr bæjar-og menningarsögu Reykjavíkur* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1954), 18–19.

¹¹⁶ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, "Listvakning á 19. öld", 16–17 and 26–28.

¹¹⁷ Sigurður Guðmundsson, "Hugvekja til Íslendinga", *Þjóðólfur*, April 24, 1862, 76–77.

¹¹⁸ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, "Listvakning á 19. öld", 22.

material of very different kinds since the time of the settlement, all of which “could rightly be called paintings”.¹¹⁹

It is interesting to see that Sigurður Guðmundsson, Helgi Sigurðsson and Benedikt Gröndal were beginning to write on art history at a similar time, with growing Icelandic nationalism. The neo-classical influence in Icelandic nationalism and the mirroring of Greek and Icelandic culture can be seen in the writings of both Benedikt Gröndal and Sigurður Guðmundsson. Sigurður was moulded by classicism in his education in Denmark, including through Hetsch and the foundations that Winckelmann and others had laid in the eighteenth century.¹²⁰ Similarly, Sigurður accumulated the material culture of the Icelandic Middle Ages as a base for cultural renaissance in Iceland, at the same time building on the Ancient Greek heritage as a model in the spirit of Neo-Classicism—but as before, there is no reference to an art master, either from the Renaissance or contemporary times. There is little division between handicrafts and fine art in the following two decades, and when Sigurður and Helgi instigated the Antiquarian Collection in 1863, the aim was the preservation of Icelandic cultural heritage to convince others and the nation itself of the historical value of Icelandic culture and artefacts.

Sigurður Guðmundsson was a great progressivist, in many ways ahead of his time, and had grand ideas for the country and its people. He became passionate about theatre operations in Reykjavík, and was a pioneer in the field of theatre, painting backdrops and various other items relating to theatrical operations and even composing plays himself. Sigurður argued that it was possible to educate through theatrical performances and to strengthen nationalism in the theatre through ideas related to the trends in campaigns for national theatres elsewhere in nineteenth-century Europe: a cultural nationalism reflecting views of the benefits of the theatre for nations.¹²¹ Here, he depicts images in terms of *tableaux vivants*, in the form of staged nationalism with scenes from ancient Icelandic literature, so that the historical painting becomes alive.¹²²

Although women are more or less invisible in this genesis of discourses about art and culture in Iceland, the broader discourse was certainly gendered. Opinions and propaganda had

¹¹⁹ Sigurður Guðmundsson, “Um íslenska kúnt að fornu og nýju fljótleiga gért til að lesa í samsæti meðal kunningja”. The manuscript is preserved in the National Museum of Iceland, SG05–1.

¹²⁰ Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, ““alt meir Grískt en Rómverst”. Menningarviðleitni Sigurðar málara í ljósi nýklassíkur”, *Málarinn og menningarsköpun. Sigurður Guðmundsson og Kvöldfélagið 1858–1874*, 65–92; Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Ólafur Rastrick, “Culture and the Construction of the Icelander in the 20th Century”, 101–119; Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Íslenska þjóðríkið*, 197–198.

¹²¹ Magnús Þór Þorbergsson, *A stage for the nation*, 80–92.

¹²² Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, “Alt meir Grískt en Rómverst”, 65–92.

been afloat for a long time on how women should *behave*, what their *role* was, and even what clothes they should wear to be a credit to the nation. Before returning to Iceland, Sigurður had researched the history of the traditional apparel of Icelandic women and written an essay on the subject in 1857, in a journal published by several Icelanders in Copenhagen.¹²³ In his article, Sigurður emphasized the necessity of designing a new costume for Icelandic women and of departing from what he saw as the unpatriotic, tasteless costume. Hence, foreign apparel and influences had appeared as part of the traditional Icelandic clothing, and had gained popularity long after they had come to an end in their countries of origin (e.g. Denmark, France).¹²⁴ Instead of the foreign influence, Sigurður endeavoured to look to the origin and take up what in his view were the more elegant costumes of previous centuries, and in the article he specifically referred to the clothing of women in the Icelandic sagas. At the same time as explaining his preferred female costume, he defined the national role of women and addressed them directly: “Now you can see, Icelandic women, how important it is that you have a sense of the beautiful and national, because it is indeed your duty to entrench these virtues and maintain them. It is after your image that Iceland is named, the *fair mountain woman*.”¹²⁵

The representation of Iceland as the *Mountain Woman* (i. fjallkonan) became the central national symbol in Iceland.¹²⁶ In the 1850s, Sigurður designed the festival costume for Icelandic women (i. skautbúningur), which consisted of a jacket, skirt and hat; another one for everyday use and special occasions (i. húfubúningur); and the so-called tunic (i. kyrtill), around 1870.¹²⁷ In the informal drawing college that Sigurður ran, one of the things he did was to teach young women to design patterns for embroidering and to assist with the sewing of national costumes

¹²³ Sigurður Guðmundsson, “Um kvennbúninga á Íslandi að fornu og nýju”, *Ný félagsrit*, 17 (1857), 1–53. Sigrún Helgadóttir points out that no two costumes were identical. Then designers came along who built on the old, but these costumes were their own works and thus cannot be considered national costumes in the strictest sense. See, Sigrún Helgadóttir, *Faldar og skart. faldbúningurinn og aðrir íslenskir þjóðbúningar* (Reykjavík: Heimilisiðnaðarfélag Íslands, Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, Opna, 2013), 177–178.

¹²⁴ Sigurður Guðmundsson, “Um kvennbúninga á Íslandi að fornu og nýju”, 39.

¹²⁵ Sigurður Guðmundsson, “Um kvennbúninga á Íslandi að fornu og nýju”, 44. *Fjallkonan* has been translated in English as the *Mountain Woman* and also as the *Lady of the Mountain*. Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir considers the Icelandic women’s costume to be the image of national beauty and vision, even around 1826. See, Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, *Til gagns og til fegurðar. Sjálfsmyndir í ljósmyndum og klæðnaði á Íslandi 1860–1960* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2008), 33. It is worth mentioning here that Marianne (France), Germania (Germany) and Britannia (Britain) are known female national symbols, but in Scandinavia there are also Mother Svea (Sweden) and Suomi-neito, the Finnish Maid (in Finland). See, e.g. Johanna Valenius, *Undressing the Maid: Gender, Sexuality and the Body in the Construction of the Finnish Nation*, *Bibliotheca Historica*, no. 85 (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2004); Art, *Nation and Gender: Ethnic Landscapes, Myths and Mother-Figures*, eds. Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch and Tricia Cusak (New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹²⁶ Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “They Had a Different Mother: The Central Configuration of Icelandic Nationalist Discourse”, *Is there a Nordic Feminism? Nordic Feminist Thought on Culture and Society*, eds. Drude Von Der Fehr, Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Bente Rosenbeck (London: UCL Press Limited, 1998), 92–98.

¹²⁷ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, *Til gagns og til fegurðar*, 21–34 and 51–91.

which he had redesigned; in this way he also assisted with the spread of the costume and preservation of the knowledge.¹²⁸

A grand commemoration festival was held at Þingvellir in Iceland in 1874 to celebrate the (alleged) 1000 years of the country's settlement. The Danish king travelled to Iceland to attend the ceremonies, and many women wore the new national costume, which in many ways was symbolic.¹²⁹ Opinions differ on Sigurður's costume design from a feminist perspective. Hence, there are those who see Sigurður as trying to engage women to participate in Icelandic nationalism and the battle for independence; nationalism thus shaped the position of women to the apparel and their political position in the struggle for independence, thus contributing to build the identity of Icelandic women. In nineteenth-century Europe, clothing had a nationalist-political role.¹³⁰ Others see the costume as a symbol of the domesticity of the Icelandic woman, and her role as a mother and a wife.¹³¹ A woman should be the icon of the nation, objectified in clothing, and thereby also the national femininity, in Icelandic costume that was neither Danish nor under the influence of other foreign fashion.¹³² Thus women were first and foremost an inspiration for Sigurður's cultural creativity and were assigned a preservation role for his remembrance and works such as the national costume, and were entrusted with the role of orchestrating and materializing his ideas.¹³³ Hence, even if one can see it as traditional emphasis on women's apparel and looks, as *tableaux vivants*, women participated and *had* a nationalist role, and took part in the festival in 1874.

Despite everything, a small group of his most fervent male supporters and friends became disappointed with the genius Sigurður Guðmundsson, who was nevertheless always called *the painter*. Despite leaving behind numerous paintings that bear the mark of great talent,

¹²⁸ Elsa Ósk Alfreðsdóttir, “...vjer erum allir meir en vjer vitum leiddir af tilfinningum kvennfólksins”, Sigurður málarí og konurnar í kring”, *Málarinn og menningarsköpun. Sigurður Guðmundsson og Kvöldfélagið 1858–1874*, 297–335. One of Sigurður's drawing students, Guðrún Gísladóttir, had stood for the publication that included sketches from Sigurður of the Icelandic costumes he designed. See, Guðrún Gísladóttir, *Um íslenskan faldbúning: með myndum eptir Sigurð málara Guðmundsson* (Copenhagen: S.L. Möller, 1878).

¹²⁹ Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “They Had a Different Mother: The Central Configuration of Icelandic Nationalist Discourse”, 92–98.

¹³⁰ Margrét Guðmundsdóttir, “Pólitísk fatahönnun”, *Ný saga*, 7, no. 1 (1995), 29–37; Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, *Til gagns og fegurðar*, 48–49.

¹³¹ Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “Nationalism, Gender, and the Body in Icelandic Nationalist Discourse”, *Nora. Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 5, no. 1 (1997), 3–13.

¹³² Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, *Til gagns og til fegurðar*, 21–34 and 51–91.

¹³³ Elsa Ósk Alfreðsdóttir, “...vjer erum allir meir en vjer vitum leiddir af tilfinningum kvennfólksins”, 297–335, here, 334. In this regard, a contemporary of Sigurður, Páll Briem, wrote that Sigurður was one of the first to talk about the nature of men and women on an equal footing, “... long before anything was known about the demand for equal rights for women”. See, Páll Briem, “Sigurður Guðmundsson, málarí”, *Andvari*, 15, no. 1 (1889), 11.

it was his “female” subject matter that became the antithesis of Thorvaldsen.¹³⁴ His interest in women’s costumes, drawing instruction for women, the theatre and making backdrops did not fit the myth of the “son” of Thorvaldsen. This was manifested not least in 1875, a year after the death of Sigurður Guðmundsson, when the bronze cast of Thorvaldsen’s self-portrait was ceremoniously unveiled in the centre of Reykjavík—in a small-scale heroic Elysian Fields.

2. 3. Statues of great men and women’s status: Bertel Thorvaldsen

On November 19 1875, the 105th anniversary of the birth of sculptor Thorvaldsen, a bronze cast of his self-portrait was unveiled at Austurvöllur in Reykjavík.¹³⁵ This was a major event and important for many reasons, which need to be emphasized. Firstly, this was the first artwork that was set up in public space in Iceland and marks a certain beginning, or watershed, that was happening in Icelandic art history in 1875, at a time when Reykjavík was taking on “more of a town look”. According to *Íslensk listasaga* (2011), this date marks the beginning of modern art in Iceland.¹³⁶ Secondly, Austurvöllur, a square in the heart of Reykjavík, was made specially for this occasion and would become, as has been noted, a certain “immortal field” or *elysium* for national heroes and great men, whereas before this time sheep could be seen grazing on the grassy knoll there.¹³⁷

The statue was a gift from Denmark to the Icelandic nation to mark the 1000-year anniversary of the Icelandic settlement the year before, and shows Thorvaldsen in work clothes. By his side is Elpis, the Greek goddess of Hope, on whom he is leaning. In *Þjóðólfur* (1875) it says it “looks like his whole expression and the form of his face is characteristically Icelandic.

¹³⁴ On his return to Iceland, Sigurður painted altarpieces and portraits to order, as well as advertising courses for children and young girls in drawing. See, advertisement in *Þjóðólfur*, January 31, 1859, 44. Dagný Heiðdal has pointed out that Sigurður had taught drawing to 14 girls at that time. See, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 18–19. See also, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 18. Sigurður left behind over 100 portraits from the years 1848–1867. See, Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Íslenskir ljósmyndarar 1845–1945/Photographers of Iceland 1845–1945* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, JPV, 2001), 12.

¹³⁵ Bertel’s mother was Danish, Karen Degnes from Jutland, but his father, Gottskálf Þorvaldsson, was Icelandic, from Reynistaður in Skagafjörður. Gottskálf had learned the craft of wood carving in Copenhagen and had lived there ever since. Bertel Thorvaldsen was born in Copenhagen. According to Icelandic custom, Bertel should have been Gottskálfsson, the son of Gottskálf, but Danish custom is similar to that elsewhere in Europe and so his surname became Þorvaldsson (Thorvaldsen).

¹³⁶ See, Ólafur Kvaran, “Formáli”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. I, Landslag, rómantik og sýmbólismi, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 8; Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Listvakning á 19. öld”, 15.

¹³⁷ Thorvaldsen’s statue was at Austurvöllur 1875–1911, then it was replaced by a statue of independence hero Jón Sigurðsson. See, Jón Karl Helgason, *Ódáinsakur. Helgifesta þjóðardýrlinga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2013), 8–9.

Inventiveness, stamina and gentleness, as well as masculine pride, appear to radiate out of the whole picture, as these were the main features of the man”.¹³⁸ Pompous eulogy and reverence towards the artist himself and his personality seem to take precedence over the work itself or art historical discussion. Most of the texts published in journals were public speeches made for the occasion by officials and are therefore quite flamboyant, but they do nevertheless reflect the *zeitgeist*, the veneration of an acclaimed, Icelandic artist.

Pjetur Pjetursson, the bishop of Iceland, said in his speech that Icelanders could quite rightly call Thorvaldsen “compatriot” or at least “half-compatriot” because his father was Icelandic. In a similar vein, poet Steingrímur Thorsteinsson defined the essence of Thorvaldsen’s genius and his importance for the Icelandic people, stating that “we as Icelanders salute Thorvaldsen as one of the prime geniuses of all centuries and times”, reflecting “the gentle, childish and feminine with the virile and magnificent”. At the same time he found reason to claim that while Thorvaldsen had deviated from Nordic mythology and history, his works were marked by a brilliant and purely Nordic appreciation of austerity and naked beauty.¹³⁹

Icelandic romantic nationalism became part of a larger international wave, from the esteemed Greek art to the Romantic idea of a Northern spirit in Thorvaldsen’s work. The agrarian society met the bourgeoisie and town planning in a symbolic way. The Austurvöllur square is in front of the Dómkirkja cathedral, which itself contained another artwork by Thorvaldsen, a christening font that the artist himself had donated at the peak of his fame, to “his native land for the purpose of culturing” and was consecrated July 14, 1839.¹⁴⁰ The cathedral itself had been built in the Neo-Classical style, for which Thorvaldsen had been the main representative in Danish art.

The idea of an Elysian field had a long history, where mortals—or at least the heroic—could rest after death, along with statues of great men in art history.¹⁴¹ Hence in Iceland, as in the neighbouring countries, the discourse related to national identities “where nationalism and an androcentric viewpoint join together”.¹⁴² Men belonged to the public sphere, in different fields and activities, and many of them had a high status. Women, on the other hand, belonged

¹³⁸ “Thorvaldsens-hátíðin”, *Þjóðólfur*, November 24, 1875, 1–3.

¹³⁹ “Thorvaldsens-hátíðin”, *Þjóðólfur*, November 24, 1875, 1–3.

¹⁴⁰ Þóra Kristjánsdóttir, “Listir og handverk á 19. öld”, 436–437. Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir believes that the idea of Austurvöllur square as a central point came from Tómas Sæmundsson in 1835. See, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Listvakning á 19. öld”, 15–17.

¹⁴¹ Jón Karl Helgason refers to *Ódáinsakur* in Eiríks Saga, which he feels somewhat reminiscent to the Ancient Greek Elysian Fields, where chosen descendants of the gods and special heroes moved after death: a symbolic dwelling place of deceased (remarkable) individuals (Jón Karl Helgason, *Ódáinsakur*, 7–8 and 93–100).

¹⁴² Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Listvakning á 19. öld”, 15.

to the private sphere and had a particular women's status that was related to their contribution as mothers and as moral role models. An illustrative example is perhaps provost's widow Sigríður Jónsdóttir, who was buried in 1843. Bjarni Thorarensen composed a toast in her memory:¹⁴³

Sigríður showed,
in all morality,
from where she got her roots,
now she is planted,
by God, the Lord,
in His field of immortals

As the poem shows, Sigríður was exemplary in “moral qualities”, rather than in her doings or achievements.

And now, last but not least, there is the third and most crucial stage, which is the discourse on gender and art that is sparked here. When the statue of Thorvaldsen is *unveiled*, the ideas people (men) had about magnificence were also *unveiled*, in very androcentric discourse. Furthermore, as this investigation will demonstrate, a quite similar discourse on art and male artists will become a discursive theme during the whole period under study, peaking with modernism in Iceland in the late 1940s and 1950s. The search for the Icelandic (male) genius in art continued, and along the same lines the role of women, their behaviour and appearance continued to be discussed rather than their actions and accomplishments. And as many feminist art historians have shown, *canons* actively create a patrilineal genealogy of father–son succession and masculine creativity.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Bjarni Thorarensen, “Erfiljóð um Sigríði Jónsdóttur”, *Skírnir* [viðauki/annexe], 17 (1843), 12. In Icelandic: “Sýndi það Sigríður, í siðferði öllu, af hverjum rótum var runnin; nú er hún gróðursett, af Guði Drottni, sjálfs hans í ódáins akur”.

¹⁴⁴ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 5. Pollock alludes here to Jacques Derrida and “différance”. See also Mira Schor, “Patrilineage (1991)”, 159–164.

2.4. Moderating the modern woman: the art of behaving

2.4.1. Women's agency, art and education

Developments in women's position, along with attitudes towards them, are not continuous or linear from oppression to freedom.¹⁴⁵ History goes in waves and relates, among other things, to “male anxiety”, which occurs regularly and is related to social changes.¹⁴⁶ As reflected in this chapter, these changes are met with counterbalance or what can be called “retour à l'ordre”, a need for *moderating the modern woman*. This is in fact a connecting thread running through history in its multiple aspects. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, when women are making themselves increasingly approved in various public spheres, e.g. in art and in writing, they are met with counterbalance. Therefore, gender needs to be examined in a wider context to see what effect it has on the discourse on culture and art.

Department of women and religious doctrine were part of patriarchal ideologies for centuries in the Western world. In Iceland, a few books on behaviour and instruction booklets were published at the end of the eighteenth and particularly in the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁷ These were in many ways congruent with the viewpoint that prevailed in general in other Nordic countries where Rousseau's writings had great effect.¹⁴⁸ Women's role was that of a submissive daughter, mother and housewife. They were naturally inferior to men, lacking both the intellectual capacities of men and the ability to contribute to art.¹⁴⁹

Many art historians have noted that in the nineteenth century, restricted access to art education was an effective form of discrimination. When the first academies were founded in Europe, women were excluded and the only option was private tuition, which was expensive and low standing as it was not comparable to academic teaching. The Royal Danish Academy

¹⁴⁵ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 22–23; Geneviève Fraisse, *La controverse des sexes*, 35–36.

¹⁴⁶ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 71.

¹⁴⁷ The perfect woman is, above all, a good housemaid, clean, frugal, god-fearing and an obedient housewife. These values were in full force around the mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, reading ability could “lead the woman astray”. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 80–98; Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, 85.

¹⁴⁸ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, “Ligestillingen”, *Män i Norden. Manlighet och modernitet 1840–1940*, eds. Jørgen Lorentzen and Claes Ekenstam (Riga: Gidlunds Förlag, 2006), 231.

¹⁴⁹ Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 66–86 and 171; Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 6–7.

in Copenhagen was founded in 1754; like other places in Europe, education in ateliers and studios was no longer viable. At this point in time, women artists were almost an unknown phenomenon in Denmark, even though the names of 24 women artists appeared in *Weilbachs Kunstnerleksikon* (1877–1888). Women were not officially banned from entering the Royal Danish Academy, but as it says in *Kunstakademiets Historie 1750–1904*, education and intake into the Academy were not thought “to be of any use to them”.¹⁵⁰

Thus women’s art schools were initially established because women had to receive a different kind of education. It was not considered appropriate for women to study human anatomy from live nude models.¹⁵¹ Hence the conditions of the art academies, with their high priority on drawing from the live nude model—which had, since the Renaissance, been the most highly regarded form of painting—excluded women from the possibility of creating great art.¹⁵² In fact, drawing was the beginning and end of everything, not least the ability to capture Truth and Beauty. As Geneviève Fraisse has argued, the right to draw the male nude presupposed the capacity to “see truth” itself, the right to explain rationally without bringing up psychological or hysterical considerations; by not allowing women to see nudity, they were barred from the possibility of “seeing the truth”.¹⁵³ Fraisse refers to Friedrich Nietzsche, who had the following to say about women and the truth, in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (1886): “From the very first, nothing is more foreign, more repugnant, or more hostile to woman than truth—her great art is falsehood, her chief concern is appearance and beauty.” The truth is thus a stranger to women.¹⁵⁴

Dilettantism, as opposed to *professionalism*, became the mark of feminine nature. Women’s paintings were considered weak (imitation) and a good painting was always masculine. Women artists were no longer exceptions, and the number of women artists increased throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁵⁵ But what is important in this context is also the struggle by women artists for increased rights in various spheres, as will be discussed later.

¹⁵⁰ Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co. De malende damer. Elever fra Vilhelm Kyhns tegne- og maleskole for kvinder 1863–1895* (Ribe: Ribe Kunstmuseum, Sophienholm and Johannes Larsen Museet, 2007), 24–29.

¹⁵¹ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 35. Finland had been the first of the Nordic countries to grant women access to its Academy of Fine Arts in 1848, while in 1864 formal teaching started for women in the Royal Institute of Art in Sweden. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 26.

¹⁵² Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, 53; Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 35 and 87–90.

¹⁵³ Geneviève Fraisse, *La sexuation du monde*, 80 and 90.

¹⁵⁴ Geneviève Fraisse, *La sexuation du monde*, 95.

¹⁵⁵ In 1863, women accounted for 5.3% of exhibitors in France, but in 1889 they were 15.1%. Women were more numerous in the decorative arts, 27.8% in 1870, 43.6% in 1889. See, Denise Noël, “Les femmes peintres dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle”, *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 19 (2004), 2–12. See also, Catherine Gonnard and

Initially, the discussion on the position of women in nineteenth-century Iceland focused on women's education: what suited them, what the nature of women themselves was, and what sort of education would be useful and provident to the nation. Formal opportunities for girls to the same kind of education as boys were restricted until the nineteenth century neared its end.¹⁵⁶ It was not until an article appeared by Páll Melsteð in 1870 that any real discussion about female education began to take place.¹⁵⁷ Historian Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir claims that the discourse that follows is similar to what took place in the neighbouring countries. Thus, women's education also played a social role and revolved around the role of the housewife: the image of the good woman who loves her native country and language, is an obedient wife to her husband, and is warm-hearted and motherly.¹⁵⁸ The idealization of mothers as upbringers, protectors of culture and the Icelandic language—these are what spark the patriotic feelings of sons.¹⁵⁹

Schools for girls were set up one after another in the years 1874–1883 and the main emphasis was on handicrafts and housewifery.¹⁶⁰ An important influence here was the women's school innovator Natalie Zahle in Copenhagen, who in 1852 set up the school Frk. Zahles skole, for the daughters of public officials and the bourgeoisie. Zahle's idea and aim with the teaching was that women should find their vocation as women but also take into account their own desires, which was unlike most common attitudes on women's education. Women's role and duty in society, whether at home or outside it, were important, as was emphasizing accuracy, diligence and proficiency, which prepared women for professions, such as teaching.¹⁶¹ A dominant attitude that prevailed until well into the latter part of the nineteenth century was that

Élisabeth Lebovici, *Femmes /artistes, artistes/ femmes. Paris, de 1880 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2007), 12.

¹⁵⁶ It was not until 1880 that it became mandatory in Iceland for all children, both girls and boys, to learn how to write and calculate. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 2011, 110–118 and 153–154. Educational establishments were few: only the grammar school Lærði skólinn, or the Latin School, located in Reykjavík since 1846 (though the history of the school can be traced back to 1056), and *Prestaskóli* in 1847. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 21, 68 and 99–108.

¹⁵⁷ Páll Melsteð, “Hvað verður hjér gjórt fyrir kvennfólkið”, *Norðanfari*, March 19, 1870, 24–25.

¹⁵⁸ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 104–105, 128 and 152–154.

¹⁵⁹ Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “Þeir áttu sér móður. Kvenkenndir þættir í mótun íslenskrar þjóðernisvitundar”, *Fléttur I. Rit rannsóknastofu í kvennafræðum*, eds. Ragnhildur Richter and Þórunn Sigurðardóttir (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan, Rannsóknastofan í kvennafræðum, 1994), 81.

¹⁶⁰ Sigríður Th. Erlendsdóttir, *Veröld sem ég vil. Saga kvenréttindafélags Íslands 1907–1992* (Reykjavík: Kvenréttindafélag Íslands, 1993), 18–19. But women had to wait to get into the Latin School. Though the rules were relaxed for women in this school in 1886, they did not have the right to a stipend in this school or to work as public officials at the end of their examinations. It was first in 1904 that women were granted entrance to higher secondary schools. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 148–170, and 336.

¹⁶¹ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 104–105.

girls and boys from a poor background—particularly girls—gained little benefit from schooling.¹⁶²

Radical women’s liberation discourse emerged in full force in Iceland in 1885, when Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir published the first newspaper article on women’s rights written by an Icelandic woman. It was entitled “Nokkur orð um menntun og réttindi kvenna” (e. A few words on women’s education and rights), signed by “a young girl from Reykjavík”, with the conclusion in the following issue and signed by “Æsa”. This contribution was a watershed in the rights’ struggle of Icelandic women. Bríet wanted freedom and education for women, so that they could work with what they longed to do and were capable of doing, and argued that marriage should not be regarded as their calling.¹⁶³

Women did have some exponents amongst men, which proved important although their opinions were divided and often ambiguous.¹⁶⁴ A liberal movement in Iceland in the 1880s furthered the discussion on women’s rights and their status in society.¹⁶⁵ In 1882, widows and other unmarried women, who stood for their estate or were financially independent, were granted the right to vote (but not stand) for local councils and parish committees.¹⁶⁶ Hence, a great deal was happening with the women’s cause in the last decades of the nineteenth century, but at the same time gendered discourse in all aspects of society continued to repress women, in an attempt to moderate the modern woman.

Not only was Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir the first woman in Iceland to publish an article, in 1885, but she also held the first public lecture by a woman, once again on women’s rights and the situation at that time.¹⁶⁷ This was on December 30, 1887, and in the lecture, Bríet traces the position of women through the centuries. She frequently mentioned femininity and how women who had opinions on politics and other issues were considered *unfeminine*, particularly if they attended public meetings and even more so if they expressed themselves.¹⁶⁸ Such views towards

¹⁶² Sigríður Th. Erlendsdóttir, *Veröld sem ég vil*, 30–41.

¹⁶³ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, “Nokkur orð um menntun og rjettindi kvenna”, *Fjallkonan*, June 22, 1885, 42–47.

¹⁶⁴ Several articles appeared on the woman question written by men who recognized the demands of women’s education. See Gunnar Karlsson, “Um kvenréttindavilja íslenskra sveitakarla á 19. öld”, *Fléttur 2. Kynjafræði–kortlagningar*, ed. Irma Erlingsdóttir (Reykjavík: Rannsóknastofa í kvenna- og kynjafræðum við Háskóla Íslands 2004), 127–147.

¹⁶⁵ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútmans konur*, 69.

¹⁶⁶ Sigríður Th. Erlendsdóttir, *Veröld sem ég vil*, 17–19.

¹⁶⁷ The lecture was published a year later, and the subtitle of the book says that this is “the first lecture by a woman in Iceland”. See, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, *Fyrirlestur um hagi og rjettindi kvenna sem Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir hjelt í Reykjavík 30. des. 1887. Fyrsti fyrirlestur kvenmanns á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1888).

¹⁶⁸ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, *Fyrirlestur um hagi og rjettindi kvenna*, 1–19.

women's rights activists were widespread in Iceland's neighbouring countries.¹⁶⁹ In her lecture, Bríet referred to *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill.¹⁷⁰ Mill's writing had a great impact on suffragists, women and men, all over the world and also on the opinion that women's oppression was interwoven with the social and cultural moulding of women; as Bríet mentions, femininity was part of this. The work had been translated into Danish the same year by Georg Brandes, who also wrote a preface to the book. However, when Brandes published the Danish literature canon on "men of the modern breakthrough" in 1883, no woman writer is mentioned in the work.¹⁷¹

The discourse of men who advocated women's rights was often ambiguous, and this must be borne in mind in the discussion of the public discourse and the review and reception of women's cultural production. The first public reception and critic of Icelandic women's literature appeared in the press at the end of the nineteenth century. Before this time, women are rarely mentioned as cultural producers in public discourse in Iceland, and it is actually not until women began publishing their own poetry, novels and fiction that named women appear and the first public criticism of their work emerges.¹⁷²

Torfhildur Hólm was the first Icelandic woman who can be termed a professional writer and was also the first Icelander to make a career of writing.¹⁷³ Torfhildur had become a childless widow at the age of 30 when she moved to Copenhagen and then to the New Iceland colony in Canada, where her writing career began.¹⁷⁴ Her first short stories were published in the Icelandic–Canadian paper *Framfari* (1877–1880), but as well as being a pioneer in women's literature, she also became the first Icelandic woman to edit and publish a periodical, *Draupnir*

¹⁶⁹ Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian, *Créatrices en 1900*, 65. Thomas Galifot, "La femme photographe n'existe pas encore positivement en France! Femmes, féminité et photographie dans le discours français au XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle", *Qui a peur des femmes photographes? 1839–1945*, eds. Marie Robert, Ulrich Pohlmann and Thomas Galifot (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, Hazan, 2015), 47.

¹⁷⁰ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, "Earning One's Living. Debates on Femininity in Iceland in the 1880s", *Rhetorics of Work*, eds. Yannis Yannitisiotis et al. (Pisa: Plus–Pisa University Press, 2008), 45–62. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, "The Modern Woman: A Representation of the Unfeminine", in *Myndighet og medborgerskap. Festskrift til Gro Hagemann på 70-årsdagen 3. september 2015*, eds. Kari H. Nordberg, Hege Roll-Hansen, Erling Sandmo and Hilde Sandvik (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2015), 157–171; Georg Brandes' introduction in his Danish translation of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, in *Kvindernes underkuelse* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1869).

¹⁷¹ Georg Brandes, *Det moderne Gjennembruds Mænd. En række portrætter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1883).

¹⁷² Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir, *Skáldkona gengur laus. Erindi níttjándu aldar skáldkvenna vð heiminn* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2021), 23–25 and 80.

¹⁷³ Helga Kress, "Searching for Herself", 503–552, here 518–520.

¹⁷⁴ Some Icelanders preferred to emigrate in the hope of a better life, and the exodus from Iceland to America—some 15 percent of the Icelandic population—can be estimated as taking place between 1870–1914. Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 234–238.

(1891–1908), published in Canada.¹⁷⁵ In her writing, Torfhildur did not take the easy path, as her first novel was a historical one that was published in 1882 about the life and work of Brynjólfur Sveinsson, an Icelandic bishop in the seventeenth century. That a woman could publish fiction was rare enough, but for a woman to write historical novels on notable men was almost unthinkable.¹⁷⁶

Jónas Jónasson's review in *Þjóðólfur* (1882), about Torfhildur's book on bishop Brynjólfur, began by saying that it was "rather new for us Icelanders that a woman here in Iceland becomes an author". He stated that while Torfhildur's short stories are well written they are "a product of weak and excited imagination, so that they exceed all boundaries of real truth". Jónas concluded by saying that women can be part of literature, if they have the education to do so, but then more needs to be put into it than has come from women up till now.¹⁷⁷ Thus at the beginning of criticism on women's cultural production, a negative value is immediately assigned to their artistic creation, where gender is more a subject of discussion than the contribution in question.

The same applies to women's literature as to other art creations: women are strangers to the truth, and as such (and as weak women) there is no room for greatness or in fact artistic creativity for women.¹⁷⁸ Even if Torfhildur was given a stipend by the Icelandic parliament in 1891 for writing, it aroused much opposition in parliament and in the press, and as a result, the stipend was reduced and changed to a widow's pension.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, when Torfhildur returned to Iceland after spending 13 years abroad, she continued to write but also taught handicrafts, drawing and painting in Reykjavík, as she had done in Copenhagen and in Canada.¹⁸⁰ Despite decades of tuition in different countries, little was made of her contribution to art and handicrafts or to her teaching.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁵ Torfhildur Hólm, *Draupnir*, 1, no. 1 (1891), [title page]. *Draupnir* was then followed by the journal *Dvöl* (1901–1917).

¹⁷⁶ This book was followed by another on Bishop Jón Vídalín (1891–1892) and finally a book on Bishop Jón Arason (1896–1902). Helga Kress argues that Torfhildur's novel on bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson is not only the first Icelandic novel by a woman but also the first historical novel in modern Icelandic literature. See, Helga Kress, "Searching for Herself", 503–552. Helga Kress, "Á hverju liggja ekki vorar göfugu kellíngar", *Óþarfar unnustur og aðrar greinar um íslenskar bókmenntir* (Reykjavík: Bókmennta- og listfræðastofnun Íslands, 2009), 269.

¹⁷⁷ Jónas Jónasson, "Nýjar bækur. Brynjólfur Sveinsson byskup", *Þjóðólfur*, July 24, 1882, 64–65.

¹⁷⁸ As later time Icelandic women literary scholars have pointed out, such as Helga Kress, "Sökum þess ég er kona", 129–130.

¹⁷⁹ Helga Kress, "Searching for Herself", 503–552.

¹⁸⁰ Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 38–43.

¹⁸¹ Dagný Heiðdal says that Torfhildur's diaries and drawings indicate that she had learned to paint with oils and had also copied many pictures and worked with Icelandic landscape. She taught drawing and painting to women in Canada 1888–1889, and when Torfhildur came to Iceland in 1889, she taught e.g. drawing, in particular flower

A gendered attitude can clearly be discerned in the public discourse in Northern European countries, whether relating to women's rights, arts and culture, religious matters and philosophy, or to anthropology, natural science, medicine and biology.¹⁸² Religious doctrine and writings on the deportment of women were replaced partly by another gender struggle based on scientific discoveries: the biological discourse became one of the recurrent verses in public discourse on women.¹⁸³ What is noteworthy in this context is not least that it was considered scientifically proven that women could not create art—yet ironically, this was precisely the time that women were asserting themselves in the art world and entering the public sphere slowly but more firmly than before.

The same articles on the biological discourse subject were circulated, translated and published in Iceland as in other parts of the Nordic region, as well as many other European countries, not involving any change from previous centuries but with even more emphasis on the innate incompetence of women for art creation: women cannot naturally create anything or do anything original, but can only copy and imitate others (men).¹⁸⁴ In fact, the creative woman was unnatural, incomplete, a “third gender”, while marriage, motherhood and procreation could cure this anomaly.¹⁸⁵ In this way, the idea arose that women can either create or procreate. Hence through the centuries, until the late nineteenth century and, as this thesis argues, during the whole period of study, the art historical discourse is two-pronged: the art of being a (male) genius and the art of (female) behaving.

studies and silk paintings, painting on cushions and neckties, and also needlework. See, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 38–43.

¹⁸² Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, “Ligestillingen”, 229–258.

¹⁸³ Bente Rosenbeck claims that women in the nineteenth century had become more “a part of natural history than cultural history”. See, Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, “Ligestillingen”, 230; Lisa Tickner, “Féminisme et histoire de l’art: une affaire à suivre”, *Féminisme, art et histoire de l’art*, ed. Yves Michaud, Collection Espaces de l’art (Paris: École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1994), 50; Pil Dahlerup, *Det moderne gennembruds kvinde* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1983), 35; Geneviève Fraisse, *La controverse des sexes*, 35–36.

¹⁸⁴ See, in the journal *Suðri* (1884), a translated lecture by Harald Höfðing, a Danish philosopher and professor at the University of Copenhagen, in “Kjör kvenna á ýmsum tímum og hjá ýmsum þjóðum eptir Dr. Phil. H. Höfðing, prófessor við háskólann í Kaupmannahöfn”, *Suðri*, March 8, 1884, 23–24. See also a translated article by the English doctor and scientist Benjamin Ward Richardson. It says that women have achieved certain abilities, they are good at copying and repeating, but when it comes to women’s achievements, it is rather an exception, an exception that proves the rule. See, “Verksvið kvenna”, *Fróði*, December 18, 1886, 185–190. In a translated article by Thomas Chase, professor in moral philosophy at Oxford University, Chase considered that most women have a different form of intelligence to men, such as greater talent to “imitate”, and thus they are good actresses, musicians and copyists. See in, “Gáfnamunur karla og kvenna”, *Lögberg*, August 22, 1895, 2.

¹⁸⁵ The Italian doctor Ferrero explains that celibacy alters and probably cripples the feminine personality. If a woman is neither mother nor wife, she is an *incomplete woman* or as Ferrero called it, “the third gender”. Many of the women who managed to make a name for themselves or a place in art were unmarried and childless, as mentioned earlier, and here was a scientific explanation of the women who were “exceptional” to their gender. See, Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian, *Créatrices en 1900*, 34–35 and 55.

An example of this is an article by Steingrímur Stefánsson cand. phil. in 1894 an extract from a lecture he held about Cesare Lombroso's research. Steingrímur considered Lombroso to be the most important anthropologist of the time and that men were now beginning to see at what point it was contrary to nature for women to have to labour or work a lot. On the other hand, woman reaps the benefit of the culture that the man has created, more than the man himself, and the woman now feels better than ever before and can enjoy "the fruits of the man's work". By far the most sensible thing for the woman to do is to not talk about politics but to wait until the values of the culture result in her favour, "and be charming".¹⁸⁶

Steingrímur's article was answered by Margrét Jónsdóttir Benedictsson in the Icelandic-Canadian paper *Heimskringla* in Winnipeg.¹⁸⁷ Margrét criticized item by item the so-called "science" that was presented there about women and argued that it was shameful that an editor should publish such an article. The nonsense in this article by Steingrímur reaches a peak when it is argued that scientists wanted to let women off work so they would be *beautiful*. Women also want their men to be handsome: should they not also be let off work? Margrét said that the so-called values of the culture that "reactionary bags" have provided to women consisted of "sending them to a cloister, burning them for magic, fondling them and making them prudish"—and in that way used women's dependence to destroy them. According to Margrét, many men considered women to be the "decoration of their men", hung up on a wall to be a "wallflower"; she urged women to take part in politics and assured them that they would not become "uglier because of that".¹⁸⁸

In her lecture in 1887, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir had discussed the undesirable, unwomanly women who abandoned the calling of being women or housewives, and how the society saw them as *pariahs, outcasts*.¹⁸⁹ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir has also pointed at this, referring as well to the so-called pariah femininity, when women take on undesirable attributes, unfeminine or masculine.¹⁹⁰ However, it was a very important step when women started to answer and react to the abovementioned articles on their alleged traits, and took on the role of referring there to the theories of Michel Foucault—"parrêsia".¹⁹¹ When women such as Margrét

¹⁸⁶ "Ný hlið á kvennfrelsmálinu, útdráttur úr fyrirlestri eptir Steingrím Stefánsson, cand. Phil í Chicago", *Lögberg*, 7, no. 59 (1894), 2–3.

¹⁸⁷ Maggie J. Benedictsson, "Ný hlið á kvennfrelsmálinu", *Heimskringla*, September 29, 1894, 2–3.

¹⁸⁸ Maggie J. Benedictsson, "Ný hlið á kvennfrelsmálinu", 2–3.

¹⁸⁹ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútmans konur*, 190–191; Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, *Fyrirlestur um hagi og rjettindi kvenna*, 29

¹⁹⁰ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútmans konur*, 89–90. See also, Mimi Schippers, "Recovering the feminine other", 85–102.

¹⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité*, 79–84.

and Bríet responded boldly, unafraid of saying “the truth” despite it being predictable that they would be accused of pariah femininity, these were the voices of democracy and truth.¹⁹² In the ethos of Foucault’s theories, democracy involves the participation of everyone, and equality and free speech (*parrêsia*) reign.¹⁹³ The participation of women in the discourse is a part of *parrêsia*, *women’s agency*. In the discourse of some women—but not all—there is no fear but rather a sincere tone and intention, no compromise, and it is especially interesting when it comes to women who wrote away from their home country, in a kind of “liberating exile”. Margrét was one of those Icelandic women, a pathfinder in new territories. Born in Iceland, she went to North Dakota in 1887, then to Manitoba. Together with her husband, the poet Sigfús B. Benedicsson, she started the Icelandic monthly journal *Freyja* (1898–1910), dedicated to the concerns of women and the first and only women’s suffrage periodical published in Canada at the time.¹⁹⁴

The voices of women were of course highly diverse, and the voices that spoke up in public were in “various kinds of tones” and did not all challenge conventional attitudes; there were “a multiplicity of feminisms accessed and constructed by women” during this period.¹⁹⁵ In this respect, it should be pointed out that at the same time as women were defined as biologically different, some women wanted to deny the differences while others argued that *because* they were different, they had the right to take part in politics to gain the same rights as men.¹⁹⁶

Similarly, as Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir maintains, emphasizing femininity acknowledged in reality hegemonic masculinity, which entails women themselves obtaining hegemony, but not the women who considered femininity to be, for instance, shackles. Women who judged their fellow women as unwomanly—or outlaws or pariahs—when they spoke in public and demanded equality were promoting femininity and were thus acknowledged by the majority of men. Thus, it was not just men who called women unwomanly but also their fellow women, including those who were in the vanguard for education and rights of women but had

¹⁹² Frédéric Gros, “Introduction”, Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité*, 11–18.

¹⁹³ Michel Foucault, *Discours et vérité*, 26.

¹⁹⁴ “Skæðadrífa”, *Nýja öldin*, April 30, 1898, 167. Kirsten Wolf argues that Margrét Benedicsson’s periodical *Freyja*, “may have had an impact on the decision in 1916 to grant women in Manitoba the provincial suffrage for the first time in Canadian history”. See, Kirsten Wolf, “Til varnar mannúð og jafnrétti”, transl. Gauti Kristmannsson, *Skírnir*, 175 (Spring 2001), 119–139. Apart from women’s suffrage, *Freyja* included other issues such as stories and verse, along with travelogues of foreign women to Iceland.

¹⁹⁵ Meaghan Clarke, *Critical Voices. Women and Art Criticism in Britain 1880–1905* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 126.

¹⁹⁶ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, “Ligestillingen”, 234; Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, ix–x; Sigríður Th. Erlendsdóttir, *Veröld sem ég vil*, 29.

different opinions and positions on femininity. Women were thus critical of each other, and thought they would get more respect from the dominant sex if they agreed with the opinions of men. Hence, it is by no means the case that all women who spoke up were *parrêsia*. Many did speak up, even if they “adapted and played the role in domesticity and of femininity”.¹⁹⁷

2.4.2. Women’s periodicals and *textility*

The women’s periodicals published a variety of material from the onset. They were radical in different ways but had in common, from the very beginning, documentation and highlighting of women’s contributions in various fields (when others did not). Thus they served as a counterbalance to the masculine, cultural public discourse on the arts and literature, even though we have to wait until 1895 to see two periodicals published in Iceland which were particularly intended for women. Mother and daughter Sigríður Þorsteinsdóttir and Ingibjörg Skaptadóttir were the first female editors and began publishing the women’s periodical *Framsókn* on 8 January 1895, which came out until the end of 1901 (though in 1899 they sold the paper to Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir and Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir in Reykjavík).¹⁹⁸

The review *Framsókn* covered a wide variety of issues, but dedicated itself in particular to women’s rights—especially the education of women—as well as focusing on the financial independence of married women; for instance, they covered the difference in salaries between men and women and whether it was “just”.¹⁹⁹ There was a lot of overseas news, including that of women’s associations. One can find subjects such as poetry and short stories, mostly by women, Icelandic or foreign, as well as translated foreign articles on diverse topics and coverage of exhibitions and museums overseas, as mother and daughter sailed regularly to foreign parts, especially to Norway but also to Denmark.²⁰⁰ Sigríður and Ingibjörg accepted

¹⁹⁷ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 209–215. See also, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “Earning One’s Living”, 45–62; Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters. Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, 10.

¹⁹⁸ *Framsókn* was published monthly at Seyðisfjörður in the East Fjords. Ingibjörg Skaptadóttir was born in Copenhagen, the daughter of Sigríður Þorsteinsdóttir and Skafti Jósefsson, who was the editor of *Norðlingur* in Akureyri and later *Austri* in Seyðisfjörður. The women had written articles in Skafti’s papers and Ingibjörg Skaptadóttir had both worked with her father and then with her brother Þorsteinn on the paper *Austri* that first came out in 1891. It was thus more likely that women who were connected in some way to newspaper publishing (through father, brother or husband) had the opportunities to write articles in the papers and make themselves heard.

¹⁹⁹ “Er mismunurinn á launum karla og kvenna, rjettlátur?”, *Framsókn*, 3, no. 7 (1897), 26–27.

²⁰⁰ See, an article on an exhibition in Bergen, Norway, in “Nokkur orð um sýninguna í Bergen”, *Framsókn*, 4, no. 6 (1898), 21–23, etc., *Framsókn*, 4, no. 8 (1898), 29 and also the article on a (then newly opened) museum, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, “Merkilegt listasafn”, *Framsókn*, 4, no. 8 (1898), 29–39.

articles from outsiders, both from women and men, though women in particular were encouraged to write. Housework and childrearing were featured regularly.²⁰¹ Temperance in the spirit of the I.O.G.T (e. Independent Order of Good Templars) which was established in 1884, was another important topic in *Framsókn* and in women's associations in general in Iceland, like in their counterparts in the other Nordic countries.²⁰²

One month after the first issue of *Framsókn* came out, women's rights activist Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir started publishing and editing the periodical *Kvennablaðið*, also in Reykjavík. The material in *Kvennablaðið* is also very diverse, including general articles on women's rights and on the finances of married women, as well as on women's associations in Iceland and abroad. Although the main emphasis in articles in the women's magazines was connected to the home and housekeeping in general, there was also some coverage of women's rights, culture and of course handicrafts.

The aim was to reach a broad range of women: the subject matter ought to be linked to the home and childrearing, while topics such as weaving and woollen work would also be covered. But entertaining stories would be published as well, along with material like that in "foreign magazines"; *Kvennablaðið* would not however include "political articles".²⁰³ While the women's periodical *Framsókn* was more political in its address, by proceeding cautiously, Bríet reached out to a wider group of women.²⁰⁴ As has been previously mentioned here, it is notable that foreign articles from various directions were translated from English, Norwegian or Danish into Icelandic. Thus translation became another form "of public expression that enabled women to gain access to the world of letters, writing from the margins at the cutting edge", and was done widely in Europe.²⁰⁵

Starting in 1895, the *Icelandic Women's Association* (i. Hið íslenska kvenfélag) also produced an annual, published until 1899. The Women's Association was founded in 1894 and the goal was to fight for women's rights, such as suffrage, but also to promote women's contributions to various fields, including art and culture.²⁰⁶ In the first issue, it is mentioned that this women's association had come together especially to support "the university issue", and to

²⁰¹ "Heimili vor (eptir norska kvennablaðinu "Nylænde")", *Framsókn*, 1, no. 3 (1895), 12. The paper *Nylænde* was a Norwegian women's paper published in Oslo (1887–1927) by Norsk Kvinnesaksforening (e. Norwegian Association for Women's Rights).

²⁰² "Mentun og menning", *Fréttir frá Íslandi*, 15, no. 5 (1888), 43.

²⁰³ See, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, [Háttvirtu kaupendur!], *Kvennablaðið*, 1, no. 1 (1895), 1–3; Ingibjörg Skaptadóttir and Sigríður Þorsteinsdóttir, "Framsókn", *Framsókn*, 1, no. 1 (1895), 1.

²⁰⁴ Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, "Á réttir hillu. Fyrstu íslensku blaðakonurnar", *Spássián*, 2 (Spring, 2011), 28–34.

²⁰⁵ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century*, 72.

²⁰⁶ Sigríður Th. Erlendsdóttir, *Veröld sem ég vil*, 21–26.

focus on the building of the first university in Iceland so that it would no longer be necessary (for their sons) to go to Copenhagen to study.²⁰⁷

In Denmark, as in Iceland, women's writings took on the women's rights issue at the end of the nineteenth century. Suffrage was covered more extensively in Denmark, especially after the founding of the *Danish Women's Society* (d. Dansk Kvindesamfund) in 1871 by Matilde Bajer and her husband Fredrik Bajer. Their magazine, *Kvinden og Samfundet*, was established in 1885. That same year, the *Women's Progressive Union* (d. Kvindelig Fremskridtsforening) was established: this was a more radical women's organization and confronted the *Danish Women's Society* which was not considered sufficiently radical. There was also the *Women's Suffrage Association* (d. Kvindevalgretsforeningen), founded in 1889 with both male and female members, and the women's periodical *Hvad vi vil* (1888–1894). The input of women, in the form of newspaper articles and publications, was strong and important, and the suffrage campaign in Denmark is interestingly interwoven with the arrival of Danish women artists into Danish artistic life in the mid-1870s.²⁰⁸

The concept *textility*, as stated in the Introduction, is used in order to combine several characteristic aspects of the parrâsiastic role of fighting for women's right to enjoy *cultural citizenship*, which was to last for the next decades. Firstly, it includes the diversity of women's art creations without separation of fine art and handicrafts; secondly, the writings in the women's periodicals on women's contributions to art and culture, and reactions to gender inequality, notably in art and culture; and thirdly, these aspects are linked to the networks formed by women within Iceland and between countries, which among other things entangles their collaboration in the area of diverse women's associations that are involved with the arts as well as with women's rights issues, and to collaboration around art and handicrafts exhibitions. Here, arts and handicrafts become a joint women's platform.

It was in April 1896 that a woman artist, Kristín Vídalín Jacobson, was featured in the newly founded *Kvennablaðið*.²⁰⁹ This is the first time in Iceland that a whole article is published and dedicated to a woman painter. The article, written by the editor, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, said that two Icelanders are now "learning sculpture overseas and one will have completed training in wood carving, but we can hardly expect to have any other use for them than that they

²⁰⁷ Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir, "Háskólamálið", *Ársrit hins íslenska kvenfélags*, 1, no. 1 (1895), 18–34.

²⁰⁸ Marie Laulund, "Pionergenerationen. Da kvindelige kunstneres samfund blev til", *100 års øjeblikke. Kvindelige kunstneres samfund*, eds. Charlotte Glahn and Nina Marie-Poulsen (Copenhagen: SAXO, 2014), 21–24.

²⁰⁹ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Íslensk listakona", *Kvennablaðið*, 2, no. 4 (1896), 25–26. There are several versions of Kristín's surname, such as Jakobsson, Jacobsen or Jacobson as written in this thesis.

can be a credit to their nation abroad, which could go either way”.²¹⁰ She continued: “The same does not apply to the woman artist that *Kvennablaðið* now features ...”²¹¹ Bríet told about Kristín’s arrival in Copenhagen, where “a famous Danish painter” had seen her picture and was so fascinated that he considered it natural for her to go to the Academy. However, many preparations were needed in order to get access: she got the best teacher for the job, then one year later, in 1890, she entered the Women’s Art School (Royal Academy’s *Kunstskolen for Kvinder*, founded in 1888), where she stayed for two years and earned a lot of praise.²¹² After her studies, Kristín returned home and married the parliamentarian Jón Jakobsson. They lived in Reykjavík, where she later began teaching drawing and painting. As far as teaching is concerned, she was, Bríet claimed, the best in the field, “as perfect as can be, and as entertaining to the students as she is useful. One may thus rejoice that Kristín has started teaching this, and it is desirable that she can continue as long as possible for the advantage and culture that it brings to our land”.²¹³

This article about Kristín Vídalín Jacobson is remarkable in many ways and a milestone in art historical discourse. Firstly, the achievements of Kristín are praised, and mention is made of her unexpected talents in drawing and painting, i.e. her brilliance and the praise she got from esteemed teachers in Copenhagen and Danish cultural life while she was studying. She also received buckets of praise for her teaching and its cultural benefit for Iceland. The article was not meant to be an art historical analysis, as the wording was neither pompous nor gendered—it was intended as an overview and pointed out that in Iceland there was already a well-educated woman artist, about whom no one had previously written. Secondly, the article gave importance to drawing and painting as the foundation of most handicrafts, of both men and women. Here, the preparatory study is important for both crafts and art but there is no demarcation—and in fact the education is beneficial for all kinds of artistic creation.

Even though in general, across Europe, it was still rare for individual women artists to have *entire articles* devoted to their work, by the 1890s they were routinely included in reviews of group exhibitions, even though in mixed shows the main focus was often on the male

²¹⁰ These artists were Skúli Skúlason, who in 1893 was the first Icelander to receive a stipend to learn wood carving and sculpture in the Royal Danish Academy in Copenhagen (but did not graduate from there); Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, who in 1895 received a stipend to learn painting; Einar Jónsson, who received a stipend that same year to learn sculpture. See, Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 144; “Af Alþingi”, *Stefnir*, 1, no. 16 (1893), 62.

²¹¹ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, “Íslensk listakona”, 25–26.

²¹² *The Women’s School* was originally located in Amaliegade 30, but in 1897 it was moved to Charlottenborg, taking up rooms in the Exhibition Building. In 1908, it merged with the Royal Danish Academy, allowing men and women equal access.

²¹³ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, “Íslensk listakona”, 26.

artists.²¹⁴ What can be identified to the situation in Iceland is that writing in *genres* that crossed the boundaries between journalism and literature seems to have encouraged other categorical transgressions, because it is in late nineteenth-century women's literary journalism that we most notably find the concept of *art itself* being redefined. Thus, it is not just applicable to Iceland but also to other countries where art theory had not become as academic as in Germany and France. In the UK, women art critics had written less about the *Old Masters* and more about the contemporary art scene—and what's more, women also wrote about the work of women artists.²¹⁵ Art history was presented to women as a sympathetic avenue for cultural and intellectual expression: art history's lack of coherent professional status rendered women's participation in the field unremarkable, and thus unalarming.²¹⁶

This is an important factor and differs from earlier art historical discourse and art historiography, as other art theorists were busy with “the thing of the past”, the perfect past, but far fewer were interested in the here and now, exactly at the time when the number of women learning painting and showing their work in public increased greatly. Fraser also points out that women who wrote about art in newspapers discussed not only the fine art but also various types of craftsmanship, the decorative arts and the domestic arts, catering not just for the elite but for the general populace.²¹⁷ This is also relevant to Icelandic women's periodicals at the end of the nineteenth century, as Icelandic women had to reach out to many women and thus the material was mixed.

²¹⁴ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century*, 172.

²¹⁵ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century*, 137.

²¹⁶ Elizabeth C. Mansfield, “Women, art history and the public sphere: Emilia Dilke's eighteenth century”, *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789–1914*, eds. Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen, 189–203; Amy M. Von Lintel, “Excessive industry: female art historians, popular publishing and professional access”, *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture 1789–1914*, 115–116. This may explain the quite astonishing fact that it was a woman, Eliza Foster, who provided the first translation of Vasari's *Lives* into English in 1850, signing the book as Mrs Jonathan Foster. See, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. Translated from the Italian of Giorgio Vasari, with notes and illustrations, chiefly selected from various commentators, by Mrs Jonathan Foster, vol. I–II (London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1850–1852). Very little was known about Foster, and some art historians have even doubted her existence. At the time of publication, it was apparently widely felt (by male critics), that Mrs Foster's annotations had left “much room for improvement, and that a new translation was needed”. See, Amy M. Von Lintel, “Excessive industry: female art historians, popular publishing and professional access”, 115–116 and 125, note no. 8. An important number of women who, in spite of everything, wrote about art in the nineteenth century, and their important contribution, like Foster, who presented, according to her modest word, only what she was “able to present”. See, Patricia Rubin, ““Not ... what I would fail to offer, but ... what I am able to present”: Mrs. Jonathan Foster's translation of Vasari's *Lives*”, *Le Vite del Vasari: Genesi, Topoi, Ricezione*, ed. Katja Burzer et al. (Florence: Marsilio, 2010), 317–331. See also, Jean-Philippe Antoine, “Une nomade en chambre: Dame Frances Amelia Yates”, *Un siècle d'historiennes*, eds. André Burguière and Bernard Vincent (Paris: Éditions des femmes-Antoinette Fouque, 2014), 334–348. The book *Un siècle d'historiennes* is a tribute to twenty women art historians, from different countries, since the nineteenth century.

²¹⁷ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century*, 137.

What is essential here is to investigate when women's writing on art and exhibitions appeared in public discourse. Criticism of the position of women had already been brought up in all the Nordic countries around the mid-nineteenth century: women had been writing both novels and memoirs for a long time—even if Iceland fell behind in this sense—whereby *femininity* was discussed in one way or another, typically under the influence of Romanticism. Women were quite noticeable in Copenhagen cultural life, as well as in Stockholm in the first half of the century where they participated or stood for so-called *salons* where great minds, both women and men, discussed literature and the arts.²¹⁸

But it seems that art criticism was not at a high level in Iceland, and those who wrote reviews were also criticized, generally for their ignorance. An article published in *Dagskrá* (1898) described how advances in the field of arts and criticism were still meagre in Iceland, with the exception of poetry which stood above other forms of art, in reality no matter how one looked at it. There were men who have “experimented in the art of painting and sculpture with varying success, and there even exists a gallery with foreign examples of the *so-called* fine art. It is unparalleled that anyone *pretends* to have some knowledge in the field, not to mention doing it in reality”. On the whole, in Iceland there was a great lack of knowledge for writing reviews about art, “whether in criticism or praise”.²¹⁹

2.5. Going places: women's artistry and agency

2.5.1. Women, art and crafts: the modern genius and la femme mondaine

Although the arrival of a statue of the half-Icelandic Thorvaldsen had been hugely celebrated in 1875 and was significant in an art historical context, it was no less important that it was at this point and in the next decades that the first Icelandic women went abroad to study art. But perhaps a clear example of the silencing at that turning point was that when the statue was unveiled, 24 “well-bred women” had been assigned the task of preparing and decorating for

²¹⁸ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Núttímans konur*, 68; Anne Schott Sørensen, “Taste, manners and attitudes—the *bel esprit* and literary salon in the Nordic countries c. 1800”, *Is there a Nordic Feminism? Nordic feminist thought on culture and society*, eds. Drude Von Der Fehr, Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Bente Rosenbeck (London: UCL Press Limited, 1998), 121–147; *Plumes et pinceaux. Discours de femmes sur l'art en Europe (1750–1850). Anthologie*, eds. Anne Lafont et al. (Paris: Les presses du réel, INHA, 2012).

²¹⁹ K., “Listamenn og dómar um þá”, *Dagskrá*, February 8, 1898, 367 and K., “Listamenn og dómar um þá”, *Dagskrá*, February 12, 1898, 372.

the great celebration. Þóra Pétursdóttir and Þóra Jónsdóttir, first cousins, were two of the women chosen for the work. In 1875, Þóra Pétursdóttir had already been studying art in Copenhagen for two years.²²⁰ Her sister Elínborg had also studied art in Copenhagen but only for a short time.

The mother of Þóra and Elínborg was Sigríður Bogadóttir while her father was Pjetur Pjetursson, bishop of Iceland from 1866: the same Icelandic bishop who said, in a public speech in 1875, that God had given Thorvaldsen a natural talent.²²¹ The sisters' childhood home was at Austurstræti 16 in the centre of Reykjavík, adjacent to Austurvöllur square and the Dómkirkja cathedral. Þóra and Elínborg, like other daughters of public officials, had received a fitting education in the home of their parents, a *bourgeois* education; these daughters learned for instance how to do needlework, sing, play an instrument, draw and paint.²²² The Icelandic women who were educated in the arts were not supported by external bodies, but instead came from society's upper classes and were in possession of a good general education. Þóra and her sister Elínborg had received tuition at home in Danish—which was widely spoken and written in Reykjavík—along with English and French. Their home was full of culture, with a large collection of books, both in Icelandic and foreign languages, which the family owned, in addition to which were magazines in Danish and French.²²³

Women who wanted to study fine art in Copenhagen could choose to go to a private school; the painter Vilhelm Kyhn ran the most important of these in Copenhagen, in drawing and painting for women. His students included Marie Luplau, Emilie Mundt, Johanne Krebs, Marie Krøyer, Agnes Slott-Møller and Anna Ancher.²²⁴ Kyhn's students accounted for more than half of the 100 women artists who were born from around 1849 till about 1869. The courses ranged from short to long (several months to several years), and the great majority of his

²²⁰ As Þóra was the daughter of Bishop Pjetur, her name has either been written Pjetursdóttir or, in more modern Icelandic, Pétursdóttir. The preparatory committee also included e.g. Þóra Jónsdóttir (Þóra Pétursdóttir's first cousin) who went out five years later, learned photography and probably studied fine art in Copenhagen in a private school for women, as her oil paintings indicate. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 76–79; Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, ““Þóra: ‘huldukona’ í íslenskri myndlist””, *Vera*, 5, no. 1 (1986), 8–10.

²²¹ Sigríður Bogadóttir was a playwright, who wrote the oldest surviving play by an Icelandic woman (1873–1874). See, Helga Kress, ““Það er ekki ljósunum að því lýst”. Um leikrit Sigríðar Bogadóttur, Gleðilegur afmælisdagur, fyrsta Reykjavíkurleikritið og elsta leikrit sem varðveist hefur eftir íslenska konu””, *Skírnir* 189 (Spring 2015), 218–248.

²²² Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Núttímans konur*, 110–118 and 153–154.

²²³ Sigrún Pálsdóttir, *Þóra biskups og raunir íslenskrar embættismannastéttar*, 13–68; Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 23; Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 54–79. A surprising amount is known about the life of Þóra Pétursdóttir, most notably thanks to her correspondence, family history and social position. Þóra's diaries and sketch books are in the National Museum of Iceland, and some of her works are in the National Gallery of Iceland.

²²⁴ Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co.*, 26.

students were unmarried daughters of the bourgeoisie; many of them married late or not at all, and were childless.²²⁵

Elínborg studied with Kyhn for a short time in the first half of 1873.²²⁶ Little is known about Elínborg but Þóra had received some instruction in drawing from Sigurður Guðmundsson, the painter, before that time.²²⁷ Her watercolour on paper in her sketch book from 1873, *Kvosin í Reykjavík*, where the Dómkirkja, Tjörnin lake and the grammar school *Lærði skólinn* could be seen, is considered to be the oldest picture of Reykjavík done by an Icelandic artist.²²⁸ Þóra sailed to Copenhagen in September, 1873; before that time she had been to Copenhagen in 1866, but travelled during the following years to England and Scotland as well as Germany and Sweden (1874–1880).²²⁹

The same year that Þóra and Elínborg sailed to Copenhagen (1873), women had begun applying to the Royal Danish Academy but were turned down, the excuse being that the teaching and tuition would be useless for women and could only benefit male students. In addition, when the aforementioned Marie Luplau and Emilie Mundt applied for entry two years later, the rejection was based on them having attended lessons in live nude model drawing, and

²²⁵ Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co.*, 10–12 and 24–29. It was in 1876 that a school of drawing and decorative art for women (d. Tegne- og Kunstindustriskolen for kvinder) was set up in Copenhagen by the *Danish women's association*. The aim was to provide women with instruction and training that could prove useful to them in the textile industry, for making pottery and porcelain and also for decorating, and thereby increasing their participation in employment. See, Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað—mótun sjónarmiða til nútíma listiðnaðar 1918–1938”, *Söguþing 2012*. 4. íslenska söguþingið 7.–10. júní 2012. Ráðstefnurit, ritstj. Kristbjörn Helgi Björnsson (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun, 2013), 21–31.

²²⁶ Anne Lie Stokbro enumerates students in Kyhn's school 1865–1895, and “Thora Pjetursdóttir” and her sister “Elinborg Pjetursdóttir” are named. According to Stokbro, Elínborg studied in Kyhn's school in 1873, before her sister Þóra, but only studied for a short time. See, Anne Lie Stokbro, “Vilhelm Kyhns tegneskole for kvinder ca. 1865–1895”, 6–11. Sometimes, Þóra's name is written Thora Pjetursdóttir. This is done to facilitate both Icelandic spelling and pronunciation; many Icelanders abroad changed the spelling of their name for that reason. Dagný Heiðdal states that when Þóra is in Kyhn's school there were 8–10 girls there, mostly Danish but also Norwegian. See, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 24.

²²⁷ Karl Aspelund and Terry Gunnell, “Stiklur úr ævi Sigurðar Guðmundssonar málara”, *Málarinn og menningarsköpun. Sigurður Guðmundsson og Kvöldfélagið 1858-1874* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn, Opna, 2017), 26. Þóra's sketch books contain primal sketches, pencil drawings and watercolours from around 1873–1881. Þóra drew and painted landscapes all over Iceland and abroad. See, Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 69, 73, 87, 89, 95, 97, 98 and 100.

²²⁸ Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 57–59.

²²⁹ Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th., 192 and 299. Þóra wrote to her brother Bogi, 11, 14, and 19th November 1873, and lived at Lille Tovegade. Þóra mentioned as well that one of her drawings, the Cathedral of Thronhjem, Norway, had been published in Lord Garvagh's book, *The Pilgrim of Scandinavia* (1875), in which Garvagh wrote: “I enclose a sketch of this ancient edifice, drawn and given to me in Iceland by a lady.” Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 398. See Garvagh, Charles J. S. G. C., *The Pilgrim of Scandinavia* (London: S. Low, Marston, Low & Searle, 1875), 32–33. See also, a letter from Garvagh to Þóra, dated July 27, 1873 (Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192).

that therefore it was not possible to teach men and women together. Moreover, the refrain was simply that due to “lack of space”, it was not possible to accept women.²³⁰

Kyhn, a landscape painter, had originally been greatly influenced by classicism through his teacher and the Golden Age painter Eckersberg at the Royal Danish Academy, but later Kyhn became more influenced by the art history professor Høyen on remarkable Danish art and national romanticism in the spirit of the theories of N.F.S Grundtvig, who besides being a Danish pastor was also an author, poet, teacher and philosopher. Few had more influence on how Danes thought about their nationality than Grundtvig, who with his writings and ideas on education defined the meaning of being Danish (d. danskheden).²³¹ In 1885, Kyhn published a small booklet on drawing instruction, *Om tegneundervisning*, where he noted that there are a great number of women artists, whom he called “strolling paint boxes” (d. Spadserende Malerkasser). Kyhn claimed that most of them will say that they are not practising art, but only doing it for pleasure. Nonetheless, Kyhn thought that there were a large number of talented women, although he doubted that there were many who had the qualities needed to become an artist.²³²

One must bear in mind that Kyhn had in a way his reasons, as he was very experienced and had “lost” many talented female students. Furthermore, Kyhn perceived that women did not get much support from their families, society did not take much notice of them, they were not taken seriously and were not admitted into the Royal Danish Academy.²³³ On the other hand, his words to Anna Ancher are well known: after marriage, Kyhn advised her to concentrate on being a housewife and mother, and to put painting to one side.²³⁴ The great majority of those who managed to pursue their artistic creativity never married and never had

²³⁰ Anne Lie Stokbro, Anna Ancher og co., 24–26; Inga Christensen, “Early 20th-Century Danish Women Artists in Light of De Beauvoir’s The Second Sex”, *Woman’s Art Journal*, 9, no.1 (Spring-summer, 1988), 10–15; Anne Lie Stokbro, “Vilhelm Kyhns tegneskole for kvinder ca. 1865–1895”, *Danske Museer*, 19, no. 3 (2006), 6–11.

²³¹ Grundtvig was a great psalmist and was considered one of the leading Danish authors. His contributions lay from major works in theology, literature, politics and history to educational thought and practice, as well as to social reform. His ideas caused a national awakening in Denmark in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the idea that progress came with the education of the lower classes, i.e. farmers who preserved the same Danish national culture. See, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Hver er ég? Þjóðernisleg sjálfsmyndasköpun á tímum Sigurðar málara”, *Málarinn og menningarsköpun. Sigurður Guðmundsson og Kvöldfélagið 1858–1874*, eds. Karl Aspelund and Terry Gunnell (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, Opna, 2017), 37–38.

²³² Lise Svanholm notes that Kyhn taught at least 75 women in his career of 30 years. See, Lise Svanholm, *Maleren Anna Ancher. Et kunstnerliv I lys* (Copenhagen: Strandberg Publishing, 2014), 33–34.

²³³ Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co.*, 9–12 and 22.

²³⁴ Lise Svanholm, *Maleren Anna Ancher*, 42; Nina Damsgaard and Trine Grøne, “POWERKVINDER! Når kunst flytter grænser. En udstilling i et komplekst felt”, *Passepartout. Skrifter for Kunsthistorie. Kvinder i kunsten*, 117–134.

children.²³⁵ Ancher was very fond of her old teacher, as their correspondence implies, but she did not take his advice to abandon painting and became a well-known artist, one among few women artists and one among few married women to do so.²³⁶

Women who went out to study in Copenhagen and lived there for a while remained a cohesive group. When Icelandic women returned home, many of them became very active, as modern women: The connection to Denmark and Danish women had been decisive for them, as was the case for Þóra and many others.²³⁷ Þóra's correspondence with Danish acquaintances after her return back home to Iceland in 1875 is quite compelling, notably with her teacher, Kyhn, as well as with many of the women who she got to know during her studies, who we will discuss later.²³⁸

The collaboration of the 24 women in the preparatory committee for the unveiling of Thorvaldsen's statue resulted in the setting up of a women's charity association, the *Thorvaldsen's association* (i. Thorvaldsensfélagið) on the same day, 19 November 1875. Þóra Pétursdóttir and Þóra Jónsdóttir became founding members of the association and both are examples of the many pioneers in the operations of Icelandic charities which were based on a foreign model, i.e. on the education and welfare of poor girls. The women in the association were active in philanthropic societies and charities and thus strengthened their position as wives and mothers.²³⁹ This has been pointed out and is a known fact in academic art circles. But the pioneering work of these women, of whom Þóra Pétursdóttir was one, was much more diverse and important and extended far beyond that range in the public sphere; in essence, they were a pioneer generation.²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co.*, 16 and 123–135.

²³⁶ Lise Svanholm, *Maleren Anna Ancher*, 42.

²³⁷ See, e.g. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “Kona með brilljant höfuð. Kvenfelsið og tvíburasystkinin Elín og Páll Briem”, *Hugmyndaheimur Páls Briem* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, Sagnfræðistofnun, 2019), 79–112. As examples, Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason, Elín Briem and Björg C. Þorláksson (see later) can all be named here. They were educated abroad, lived for a time in Copenhagen and worked in one way or another in e.g. women's education and women's rights.

²³⁸ Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192. Letters from Kyhn, in January 1875 and in April 1875.

²³⁹ Thorvaldsensfélagið has been operating as a women's association continuously since 1875. Membership of the association was limited to a particular group of women, an *elite*, from public officials, respected and wealthy families. See, Hrefna Róbertsdóttir, *Reykjavíkurfélög: Félagshreyfing og menntastarf á ofanverðri 19. öld* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Sögufélag, 1990), 47; Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 144 and 176–177.

²⁴⁰ See also, women artists as pioneers in the nineteenth century in Anu Allas and Tiina Abel, *Creating the self. Emancipating woman in Estonian and Finnish art* (Tallinn: Art Museum of Estonia, 2020); Anne Wichstrøm, *Kvinneliv, kunsterliv. Kvinnelige malere i Norge før 1900* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2002); Sigrun Åsebø and Janeke Meyer Utne, “The Voices of Kitty L. Kielland”, *Kitty Kielland*, ed. Inger M. L. Gudmundson (Stavanger: Stavanger Kunstmuseum, 2017), 285–292.

Icelandic women found their ways to engage in modernity. In Copenhagen, women artists from Iceland as well as other countries were far from their homes; women who studied together and interacted with each other tried either to compromise or define their space between that of a respectable woman (feminine) and a Bohemian (modern woman). Elizabeth Wilson has pointed out that, generally speaking, new space opened up for women, between the feminine and the Bohemian, i.e. shops, coffee shops, theatrical performances, etc.²⁴¹

Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir is a good example of such a modern woman. Born in Ísafjörður in 1870, she lived with her father's sister in Copenhagen when she was twelve years old for two years and got her first drawing lessons there; her oldest drawings are from 1882–1883.²⁴² Kristín spent the following years with her family in Ísafjörður, then returned to Copenhagen in 1889, lived there for the next two years and studied drawing and painting.²⁴³ She was presumably in some of the private schools for women. In September 1892 she returned to Iceland and painted in the West Fjords and advertised “lessons in drawing and painting” in Reykjavík in the autumn. Kristín also went to Germany 1902–1905 and seems to have travelled widely, as some of her paintings from that time are from Dresden, Meissen, Munich and Nuremberg. Nothing is known about her schooling there, but three of her paintings are pictures of models which are almost certainly school works from those years. Kristín was a very talented drawer and considered further education in art after her stay in Germany.

Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir lived as an artist and intended to go far, leaving behind 14 sketch books (1882–1905); she never stopped during that period, as her life was interwoven with creating art, and she had the opportunity to dedicate herself to the trends and upsurge that were part of the European art scene at that time. But fate had other plans, as her sister Sigríður Krabbe died in childbirth on Christmas Day 1905, only 30 years old, and Kristín went straight back to Iceland to bring up her sister's children for almost a year. Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir never married and never had children.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Elizabeth Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture. Cities, Culture, Women* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001), 72–89.

²⁴² Hrafnhildur Schram refers to a letter that Kristín Krabbe wrote to her brother back in Iceland, about the talents of Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir as such a young girl. The letter is remarkable because Kristín is compared with the genius Sigurður Guðmundsson: “She is more of a genius than our Sigurður [Guðmundsson, *the painter*], and you should apply for a stipend from a national fund or the Ministry to educate her”. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 104.

²⁴³ Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir took private lessons in drawing and painting in Copenhagen, 1890–1892 (and may have studied in the Royal Danish Academy, Women's School) as well as in Germany, 1902–1905. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 104–105; Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 61.

²⁴⁴ Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 104–108.

It is easy to see from Kristín's work how talented she is and a promising artist of the time. *Neðstikaupstaður, Ísafjörður*, a small format oil painting from 1895, shows her great talent. This is an impressionist landscape, a modernization of the Icelandic landscape, with short, broken brushstrokes, light effects, and blurred lines. Her approach to Icelandic landscape in impressionist style shows an original, personal view without nationalist implications, nor is it romantic in any way. Kristín's *Kona við píanóleik*, or Woman playing the piano, from 1905, is a completely different work. Though it departs from the timeframe of this chapter, it fits well into the end of the nineteenth century. This piece of work was done after her stay in Germany (1902–1904) and apparently the model is a German friend.²⁴⁵ The work shows a woman playing a grand piano, in an opulent living room in a private house; behind her on the easel is a picture of Beethoven, the walls are lined with paintings and drawings, and there are photographs on the shelves.

Many women artists manifested their modernity in their work, emphasizing their education, travels, sociability—in short, *la femme mondaine*—as well as the domestic, family life. Hence the separate spheres in the binary gender ideology were not separate in actual practice, as the domestic and private sphere has always been public in some ways.²⁴⁶ Yet women artists were criticized for the restricted space that was seen in their works, and their circle of women.²⁴⁷

Hence, it can be argued that when women artists painted the restricted, domestic space, they were often seen, or their work analysed as such, as “being a part” of it, while the male artists (for instance the impressionists) were *not* part of it but rather “outside of it”, like an onlooker. Like Linda Nochlin argues, for some women the spaces of femininity might also have actually served as sites of “intellectual and creative production, even of political militancy”.²⁴⁸ This *interior*, for Kristín, reflected a rich culture, education, the outside world. It surely reflects the private space of the woman and her bourgeois life, and in a way it is a work about both femininity and modernity.²⁴⁹ However, this space is not the antithesis of the public, spaces of

²⁴⁵ Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 112.

²⁴⁶ Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood and Stacey Linn Kamp, “Introduction to Historical and Archaeological Perspectives on Gender Transformations: From Private to Public”, *Historical and Archaeological Perspectives on Gender Transformations: From Private to Public*, ed. Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood (New York: Springer, 2013), 1–20.

²⁴⁷ Linda Nochlin, in her article on impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, points out those “spaces of femininity”. See, Linda Nochlin, “Mary Cassatt’s Modernity”, *Women Artists. The Linda Nochlin Reader*, 200–201. See also, Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the spaces of femininity”, 50–90.

²⁴⁸ Linda Nochlin, “Mary Cassatt’s Modernity”, 207.

²⁴⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt* (London: Jupiter Books, 1980), 27; Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 38; Linda Nochlin, “Mary Cassatt’s Modernity”, 219.

thought, the patriarchal sphere, or the “antithesis of the spaces of thought and action in public”. The women artists who were represented were independent and took on the new women’s role. This is in line with what male artists painted and did, such as Kr. Krøyer and Viggo Johansen, when they came together in the evenings. Those artists painted their “immediate environment”, which included messages, reflecting their education, travels, cultural background, freedom and artistic contributions—in the same way as did women artists.²⁵⁰

It is important to look at women’s artistic creation in a broad context. If fine art, such as painting and sculpture, opened a door for women—a door as big as a needle’s eye—photography was a more accessible medium, and women had a greater chance of asserting themselves in that field. Many considered that photography only involved mimicking or copying the truth, i.e. vacuous ingenuity. It was possible to learn the technique, but creativity or ingenuity were not involved; undoubtedly this was part of the explanation of why women had access to photography, which did not require a university art education. Furthermore, it was impossible for photography to be integrated to the canon of fine art. Therefore, not only did women get a place to modulate the new media in art, and as an art form, but they also became financially independent and professional. Thus, photography became essential for women to enter the public sphere: Camera Obscura, as a room of one’s own.²⁵¹

Compared to other countries, photography gained a foothold in Iceland relatively late, as there was little market for it, the materials were expensive and difficult to obtain, and portraits were rarely done. The oldest photographs preserved in Iceland were taken by a French mineralogist in 1845.²⁵² Icelanders gained proficiency in photographic techniques around 1860, though some had practised it before that time.²⁵³ The photographer who was most productive in Reykjavík in the latter half of the nineteenth century was Sigfús Eymundsson, who had studied photography in Bergen, Norway, from 1864 to 1865. He is prominent in the history of

²⁵⁰ Marie Laulund, “Pionergenerationen”, *Susette Holten født Skovgard. Den glemte søster*, eds. Anne-Mette Villumsen and Teresa Nielsen (Viborg: Skovgard Museet, 2013), 37–42.

²⁵¹ This refers to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). See, e.g. Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, *Betur sjá augu. Ljósmyndun íslenskra kvenna 1872–2013* ed. Bryndís Sverrisdóttir (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2014), 7–35.

²⁵² These were two daguerreotypes from 1845 by the French mineralogist Alfred L.O.L Des Cloizeaux (1817–1897) of a cluster of houses in Reykjavík. See, Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, *Ísland í sjónmáli. Franskir ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1900* (Islande en vue. Photographes français en Islande) (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, JPV, 2000), 12–22.

²⁵³ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, “Svipmyndir af landi og þjóð: Myndefni 1750–2000”, *Hlutavelta tímans: menningararfur á Þjóðminjasafni* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2004), 315. Helgi Sigurðsson, who was mentioned earlier, was the first Icelander to study photography and Siggeir Pálsson learned the trade in Oslo in 1857.

Icelandic photography and has been called a pioneer in Icelandic landscape photography.²⁵⁴ Sigfús, who was esteemed and wealthy, ran a photography studio in Copenhagen and then opened a studio in Reykjavík in 1867 and became active in culture and commerce.²⁵⁵

As in drawing and painting, women who studied photography came from upper-class, wealthy families. Nicoline Marie Elise Weywadt was the first woman from Iceland to learn photography; she studied in Copenhagen 1871–1872. Nicoline worked as a photographer in the East Fjords, in Djúpivogur 1872–1881, and established there the first photographic studio in eastern Iceland. Nicoline was a merchant's daughter of Danish background, and the house at Teigarhorn was built by the Weywadt family around 1800. She used a wet plate collodion process, a tricky technique that requires developing to be done immediately after taking the photograph, and did not take up the dry plate technique until 1888, when she went to Copenhagen specifically to learn new techniques in photography. Nicoline was therefore operating a photography studio at the same time as Sigfús Eymundsson, and for a long time she was the only working photographer in the East Fjords. She took primarily portraits, as was the fashion at that time, of people from all over East Iceland, but she also took photos outside in Djúpivogur, as well as in Seyðisfjörður and Eskifjörður—pictures of the villages and growing settlements she visited.

Nicoline took over the Teigarhorn premises in Berufjörður after the death of her father, and opened a photography studio which she operated from 1881 to 1900. She looked after her mother until the latter's death, and brought up her niece, Hansína Björnsdóttir. Hansína learned photography from Nicoline and in Copenhagen, 1902–1903, and then took over the photography studio at Teigarhorn, along with her husband, and ran the photography studio from 1902 to 1911. Nicoline died in 1921, unmarried and childless.²⁵⁶

Other Icelandic women learned photography in Copenhagen in the last decades of the nineteenth century and worked as photographers in Iceland afterwards. One of these was Anna Schiöth, who opened and ran a studio in Akureyri from 1878 to 1898; for most of this time she was the only photographer in Akureyri. The studio was in an annexe to her husband's bakery, and she used his name to introduce her operation and market the products, though he worked

²⁵⁴ When living and working in Copenhagen, Sigfús was there at the same time as Benedikt Gröndal, who considered Sigfús to be “intelligent and an artist”. See, Benedikt Gröndal, *Dægradvöl*, 203.

²⁵⁵ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Sigfús Eymundsson myndasmiður. Frumkvöðull íslenskrar ljósmyndunar*, ed. Steinar Örn Atlason (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2013), 43.

²⁵⁶ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Íslenskir ljósmyndarar 1845–1945*, 210 and 296. Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, “Svipmyndir af landi og þjóð: myndefni 1750–2000”, 316; Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, 8–9.

the whole time as a baker. One should also mention Anna Ólafsdóttir who worked in photography (1893–1899), Margrét Möller who operated a photography studio for one year (1894–1895) in Eskifjörður, and Anna Klausen who took over Margrét’s studio in 1897. Margrét also had a photography studio in Stokkseyri for one year, and then left it to her cousin Lára Ólafsdóttir who took over the photography shed in 1897 after studying photography in Copenhagen.²⁵⁷

It was not uncommon for childless, unmarried women, such as Anna Ólafsdóttir and Nicoline, to create a niche for themselves or even manage a photography studio or work with photography for a longer or shorter period. Another possibility for women to become “approved” within photography, and hence the public sphere, was to run a photography studio that had a connection with the name of their father or husband, like with Anna Schiöth.²⁵⁸ Yet another possibility for women was to work together or to leave the photography studio to another woman, or to provide guidance and support to women, as we have also seen in painting.

This cooperation between women who ran photography studios was considerable, but there were also women with relatives in photography who started working in the field. Photography was flourishing in the last decades of the nineteenth century in Iceland and the Nordic countries. Of 20 photographers in Iceland, there were 5 women before 1895, which is a high ratio compared to their participation in professional life in general; moreover, their contribution and activity was much more remarkable than has been revealed.²⁵⁹ It can be considered strange how much acceptance there was about their entrance in photography, which was at odds with women’s contribution in other areas. But in light of what has been elaborated here and will be discussed in the next chapter, it could be argued that this was due precisely to the fact that it was a craft, a new medium, free of burdensome tradition and definition—at a time when the hierarchy of art, the distinction between art and crafts, was becoming firmly established at the end of the nineteenth century.

²⁵⁷ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Íslenskir ljósmyndarar 1845–1945*, 104–106, 274 and 290; Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, 8–9.

²⁵⁸ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi*, 106.

²⁵⁹ Before the turn of the century, women made up one third of photographers in Denmark while in Sweden the proportion was 40% just after 1900. Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, 9–10.

2.5.2. Gendered divisions of art and crafts: the National Gallery

A certain turning point occurs in the distinction between fine art and crafts with the foundation of the National Gallery of Iceland (i. Listasafn Íslands) in 1884. Up until then, women had been active participants, e.g. in industrial exhibitions where they had shown for instance paintings as well as various handicrafts. From the point of view of women artists, a certain watershed and exclusionary aspects entered the picture, which arguably happened in two steps: First, the distinction between fine art and crafts introduces a negative attitude towards handicrafts, which at that point in time are considered inferior (and the specialty of women) in the hierarchy of art and which belong to the past; and secondly, the modern approach of cultural identity of the nation, with a fine art museum, eventually introduces a national canon and art history in the making. Hence the distinction is also related to gender, in that handicrafts and everything related to women's artistry became exclusionary and, in fact, the antithesis of fine art.

Ever since 1855, Icelanders had taken part in a considerable number of multi-national trade exhibitions and exhibited handiwork and textiles, as well as the products of fishing and agriculture. At this time, the concept "trade" was used for objects that were made both by hand and by machine. The first industrial exhibitions in Iceland and abroad in the latter half of the nineteenth century were of a general nature and little distinction was made between the items on display. The exhibitions were held with the intent and purpose of presenting the craft culture in the broadest sense, along with innovations therein. But it is noteworthy that there were generally many exhibitors at the exhibitions in Iceland, from all over the country and in fairly equal sex ratios.

In the neighbouring countries in the latter half of the nineteenth century, flamboyancy and a nationalist tone characterized the many trade exhibitions intended to show the best that nations could offer in industry, science, technology and the arts. The Danes, Norwegians and Swedes participated in many trade shows on the premise of the National Romantic Style, in which they emphasized the handicrafts of rural society. Icelanders also participated, as citizens of the Danish State, in many trade exhibitions in Copenhagen and further afield. And generally, Iceland got a reasonable reception and coverage overseas, and the Icelandic objects even won prizes.²⁶⁰

²⁶⁰ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, "KONUR SENDIÐ OSS ÚRVAL...", *Framlag kvenna til iðnsýninganna í Reykjavík 1883 og 1911*", *Söguþing 2012*, ed. Kristbjörn Helgi Björnsson (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun, 2013), 2–6.

The first *industrial exhibition* was held in Reykjavík in 1883, in the building of the Children’s school, on the initiative of the *Reykjavík Craft Union* (i. Iðnaðarmannafélagið in Reykjavík).²⁶¹ A great diversity of items could be seen there: food such as fish and meat products; tools; paintings, carvings, carpentry items, weaving, sewing and woollen goods. Homespun woollen cloth represented the majority of the items, as for centuries woollen cloth and knitted goods had been Icelanders’ export products, though as Áslaug Sverrisdóttir has pointed out, the finishing touch of knitted goods had not been considered perfect.²⁶²

In the public discourse, the high participation of women was mentioned and welcomed.²⁶³ Out of over 120 contributors who got some sort of recognition for their items, half were women. The first prize was a silver trophy, then bronze, and then an honorary certificate, *diplôme d’honneur*; it can be discerned that 31 individuals received the first prize, of whom 17 were women. The viewpoint of the judging committee had been to give prizes as equally as possible to women and men, and women’s decorative objects were held in high regard. Little was said in the Icelandic public discourse about the national tone of the objects or about their nationalist role, as was the case in other countries.²⁶⁴

At this exhibition there was no distinction between handicrafts and painting; everything was shown together under the title “trade”. A number of oil paintings were exhibited, and three women and one man got a prize for them: Þóra Pétursdóttir, Ástríður Melsteð and Benedikt Gröndal got the silver trophies for their paintings and Sigríður E. Sæmundsen a bronze trophy for two paintings.²⁶⁵ Þóra was exhibiting her oil paintings—five in total—in public for the first time in Iceland. An article stated that foreigners considered the artworks presented in the exhibition had not “reflected great skill”. However, they thought that the painting of “the bottle and glass by Þóra Pétursdóttir was the best of them”. On the other hand, as the article says, some of the broidery, knitting and clothes made by women had been done “with great

²⁶¹ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, “KONUR SENDIÐ OSS ÚRVAL...”, 2–6.

²⁶² See, e.g. “Sýningin”, *Fróði*, 4, no.113 (1883), 1–2. See also, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 66–67; Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, “KONUR SENDIÐ OSS ÚRVAL...”, 3–6.

²⁶³ See, e.g. “Sýningin”, *Fróði*, 4, no. 113 (August, 1883), 1–2.

²⁶⁴ See, “Iðnaðarsýningin í Reykjavík”, *Ísafold*, September 22, 1883, 95–96. See also, Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, “KONUR SENDIÐ OSS ÚRVAL...”, 3–6.

²⁶⁵ “Iðnaðarsýningin í Reykjavík”, *Ísafold*, September 22, 1883, 95–96. Four women had paintings at the exhibition: Sigríður E. Sæmundsen, who then lived in Copenhagen, had six pictures (which were for sale); Ástríður Melsteð had three paintings (a flower study and two portraits); Sigríður Einarsdóttir Magnússon from Cambridge had two paintings, including one of an Icelandic farmstead; and Þóra Pétursdóttir had five paintings. In addition to these women, Benedikt Gröndal exhibited 15 oil paintings (and 5 drawings), and Ólafur Eiríksson exhibited 24 pictures. See, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 67–68; *Skrá yfir muni á iðnaðarsýningunni í Reykjavík, er opnuð var 2. ágúst 1883* (Reykjavík: 1883).

ingenuity”.²⁶⁶ The contribution of Þóra, who worked in both handicrafts and painting, is a good example of an artist who made no distinction between these art forms and considered them equally important.

The same year, in 1883, Þóra and Sigríður Jónassen opened a drawing school in Reykjavík. Þóra taught drawing and painting but Sigríður embroidery.²⁶⁷ At the *Industrial Exhibition*, Sigríður had exhibited embroideries and wood carvings and, like Þóra, received first prize for them. Their students were young, unmarried women and teaching took place once a week.²⁶⁸ It could thus be said that during those years, women were active in the arts and culture in various ways. In 1886 the sisters Þóra Jónsdóttir and Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir, together with their cousin Þóra Pétursdóttir, published an ambitious and innovating work on women’s handicrafts in Icelandic with approximately 300 patterns and explanations.²⁶⁹ It was a guide to different “feminine embroideries”, and was the first book on this subject that was published in Icelandic.²⁷⁰ It was particularly aimed at girls who had not had any instruction in handicrafts and when it was published, an advertisement appeared about it in *Fjallkonan*, in which the three women claimed: “It will not be denied that women’s handicrafts have regressed a great deal in Iceland in recent times, and anyone who looks at women’s handicrafts at the museum [the National Museum] can ascertain this.”²⁷¹ They also pointed out that purchase of fabrics, clothes and ornaments from overseas had increased, even though those were often of inferior quality and more expensive, in addition to which various handicrafts were no longer practised.

Honouring the legacy of Icelandic handicrafts was an important message to women, which was indeed done in women’s periodicals such as *Framsókn* and *Kvennablaðið*, and handicrafts as a feminine form of domestic creativity became an important aspect in the work of Þóra Pétursdóttir and other women. Þóra kept up with what was current in the field of art and crafts abroad, as shown by innovative works, written by women, that were in her possession.²⁷²

²⁶⁶ “Íðnaðarsýningin í Reykjavík”, *Fréttir frá Íslandi*, 10, no. 1 (1883), 35–37.

²⁶⁷ Girls were the majority of students in the drawing school, but some men were also specified during this period. In 1884, there were 16 girls aged 13–28, of wealthy parents. Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 33–34.

²⁶⁸ Sigrún Pálsdóttir, *Þóra biskups og raunir íslenskrar embættismannastéttar*, 125–126. See on Sigríður Jónassen in “Íðnaðarsýningin í Reykjavík”, *Ísafold*, September 22, 1883, 95–96.

²⁶⁹ Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 75–76; Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 44.

²⁷⁰ Þóra Pétursdóttir, Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir og Þóra Jónsdóttir, *Leiðarvísir til að nema ýmsar kvennlegar Hannyrðir* (Reykjavík: Sigm. Guðmundsson, 1886), 1–8.

²⁷¹ “Bækr”, *Fjallkonan*, August 16, 1886, 60.

²⁷² Pattern books, published in Copenhagen and imported to Iceland from the seventeenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, were a major influence on women’s artwork as many were owned by women in the nineteenth century. They contained images of a great variety of patterns and lettering, providing models to work

Thus, Þóra had gathered various foreign sources on needlework. Among books in Þóra's possession was the key work *Encyclopedia of Needlework* (1886) by Thérèse de Dillmont. Dillmont was an Austrian writer, designer and needleworker, a pioneer in the field who introduced various new techniques. Dillmont's Encyclopedia was first published in French, was then translated into various languages, and "remains a standard work for the history, practice and teaching of needlework techniques".²⁷³ Another book in Þóra's collection was Lady Marion Alford's *Needlework as Art* (1886). Alford, like Dillmont, played a major role in the revival of needlework.²⁷⁴ In addition, the revival was also driven by Marion Alford and the Royal School of Art Needlework, established in 1872 in London.²⁷⁵ Yet another book in Þóra's possession, *Decorative Needlework*, was written in 1893 by May Morris, an artist, embroidery designer and editor, who was the younger daughter of William and Jane Morris.²⁷⁶

Until the foundation of the National Gallery of Iceland (i. Listasafn Íslands) in 1884 little distinction had been made between handicrafts and arts, as can be seen e.g. at the 1883 Industrial Exhibition a year before. In the eyes of some, it became urgent not only to establish an art museum but also for the country to acquire professionals in fine art. The nationalist tone was reflected in an article written by Björn Bjarnarson, where he expressed the idea and the importance of founding a national gallery of art.²⁷⁷ Björn was born in Copenhagen, his mother was Danish, but his lineage on his father's side was Icelandic. Björn finished a law degree in Copenhagen in 1883 and subsequently became the District Commissioner for Dalasýsla and then a member of the Alþingi parliament.²⁷⁸ Writing in 1884, Björn Bjarnarson recapped how galleries and museums are of great value: not only were they places of entertainment, they were also necessary and "completely unmissable if science and fine art are to flourish". He threw open the idea of establishing an "oil painting museum home in Reykjavík" and said that he had

from. An Icelandic eighteenth century pattern book, *Sjónabókin frá Skaftafelli*, was compiled by Jón Einarsson in Skaftafell. This was a great rarity, with varicoloured patterns. Þóra Pétursdóttir got to own this. See, *Handíðir horfinnar aldar. Sjónabók frá Skaftafelli. Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 116* (An Icelandic eighteenth century manuscript pattern book), edited and introduced by Elsa S. Guðjónsson (Reykjavík: Elsa S. Guðjónsson, 2009), 11–15.

²⁷³ Ruth P. Hellmann, "Thérèse de Dillmont and her Encyclopedia of Needlework", *The Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*, 59 (1976), 20–29.

²⁷⁴ Lady Marion Alford (Marianne Margaret Egerton), *Needlework as Art* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1886).

²⁷⁵ Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 193. See also, Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (eds.), *What Is a Woman to Do? A Reader on Women, Work and Art c. 1830–1890*, CISRA, 13 (Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts) ed. J.B. Bullen (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011), 261.

²⁷⁶ May Morris, *Decorative Needlework* (London: Joseph Hughes & Company, 1893).

²⁷⁷ Björn Bjarnarson, "Söfn vor", *Heimdallur*, 1, no. 7 (1884), 110–111.

²⁷⁸ Selma Jónsdóttir, "Listasafn Íslands 100 ára. Ágrip af sögu safnsins", *Listasafn Íslands 1884–1984: íslensk listaverk í eigu safnsins* (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 1985), 7–18.

asked various painters in Copenhagen to donate paintings to this museum. Björn mentioned that amongst the painters who have promised pictures are Thorvald Niss and Janus la Cour “and they are considered the best painters in Denmark”.²⁷⁹

On 16 October 1884, an announcement appeared in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, saying that Björn Bjarnarson had now taken the initiative of establishing an art gallery in Iceland, and that day became the founding day of the National Gallery of Iceland.²⁸⁰ Fifteen works that were part of the founding gift are listed, but in the wake of the announcement Björn Bjarnarson managed to collect about 40 paintings to take to Iceland.²⁸¹ It was not until a year later that the newspaper *Þjóðólfur* published news about Björn’s new venture, when some of the works arrived in Iceland by ship. It is stated that the works were by “famous artists, and some extremely expensive”, a claim supported by stating the prices of the works mentioned.²⁸² The painting collection was first shown in the Children’s school in Reykjavík and later in the rooms of the parliament building. Only one Icelander, Sigurður Guðmundsson, had a work in the Icelandic collection: a portrait of the mathematician Björn Gunnlaugsson, from 1859.²⁸³

Björn Bjarnarson’s article was an invocation to found a special national art gallery and display a collection of fine art paintings, comparable to those in other countries of cultural excellence, for contemporary artists to look to the future, not the past. Canonical listing defines the writer’s own position, and in the late eighteenth century this order became for a while the logic of the modern museum. Displaying the canonical frame of reference, the museum was to become the most important institution for the formation of art historical canons. Moreover, in the course of the nineteenth century, *national canons* were to become more and more important throughout Europe and it became common practice to collect and display works of art according to national or regional “schools”.²⁸⁴ Consequently, art history fabricated a “hierarchy within

²⁷⁹ Björn Bjarnarson, “Söfn vor”, *Heimdallur*, 1, no. 7 (1884), 110–111.

²⁸⁰ Íslenzkt myndasafn“, *Þjóðólfur*, 27. júní, 1885, 99. See also, “Söfn landsins”, *Suðri*, July 16, 1885, 82-83; Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Listvakning á 19. öld”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21.* 2011), 32-33; Selma Jónsdóttir, “Listasafn Íslands 100 ára”, 8.

²⁸¹ Selma Jónsdóttir, “Listasafn Íslands 100 ára. Ágrip af sögu safnsins”, 8.

²⁸² “Íslenzkt myndasafn”, *Þjóðólfur*, June 27, 1885, 99.

²⁸³ This work of Sigurður Guðmundsson, a pencil drawing, is however registered in the National Museum of Iceland (Þjms. Mms 164). Amongst those whose paintings were there were the aforementioned Janus la Cour and Thorvald Niss as well as the Danish painters Peter Kornbeck, Peter Severin Krøyer and the Swedish Gotthard Werner. Selma Jónsdóttir, “Listasafn Íslands 100 ára. Ágrip af sögu safnsins”, 7–18. Different figures have been mentioned over the years about the number of works in the foundation, but in the end, the museum’s founding consisted of 53 paintings. See, Heiða Björk Árnadóttir, “Listasafn Íslands”, *Saga listasafna á Íslandi*, ed. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson (Reykjavík: Rannsóknasetur í safnafræðum við Háskóla Íslands, 2019), 12–13.

²⁸⁴ Hubert Locher, “The idea of the canon and canon formation in art history”, *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe, Art History and Visual Studies in Europe. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, eds.

which the identity of the nation could be privileged within the diverse and conflicting visual cultures present in Western Europe”.²⁸⁵ This nationalistic aspect applies to the Nordic countries as well as to France, Germany, England and many other countries.

However, the Icelandic collection of fine art in 1884 was in some ways of a different nature. The collection consisted largely of Danish works and the commonest subject is Danish landscape, notably its forests and plains, in traditional, academic style: some are direct offshoots of the Golden Age of Danish painting in the middle of the century, while others show the influence of French realism of the 1880s. To a certain extent one can see that the collection is linked to the ongoing tendency in royal art collections for centuries to present the most distinguished artists, reflecting their cultural richness and power. So even if national canons became more important, the aim with the collection can also be related to the necessity, in times of nationalism and the independence movement, to show the outside world that even Iceland possessed a valuable collection of art, albeit on a very small scale. No attempt was made to present a unified art history and no works are shown that indicate a way forward to the next century. Nonetheless, the collection had an effect on many, especially as a form of encouragement for artists and promoting contemporary art that Björn Bjarnarson wanted to see here. Once again, this was a herculean task and the vision of one individual.²⁸⁶

Even if the change is modest and the development gradual, the new collection of fine art represented the first step in distinguishing fine art from the crafts, from Iceland’s old heritage. As an example, this can be seen in the establishment of these two different museums in Iceland, the Antiquarian Collection in 1863 and the National Gallery in 1884, which in turn would introduce a canon, both in the art form and art history, and result in a new approach of cultural identity of the nation.

On the other hand, and quite interestingly, two of the Danish artists who owned works in the founding gift to the National Gallery are women: Anna Ancher, whose 1886 pastel work

Matthew Rampley, Thierry Lenain, Hubert Locher et al. (Brill’s Studies of Intellectual History, vol. 212 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 37.

²⁸⁵ Philip Hotchkiss Walsh, “Viollet-Le-Duc and Taine at the École des Beaux-Arts”, *Art History and Its Institutions. Foundations of a discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 86.

²⁸⁶ Bera Nordal, “Stofngjöf Listasafns Íslands”, *Stofngjöf Listasafns Íslands. Afmællissýning*, ed. Bera Nordal (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 1994), 7–17. It should be mentioned, in the context of the vision of one individual, that Þorlákur Ó. Johnson, merchant, held an exhibition of copies of paintings by foreign artists in 1879. This was the first time that such an exhibition was held in Reykjavík, but it did not gain much attention. Þorlákur and his wife Ingibjörg Bjarnadóttir also had a collection of foreign paintings that they had bought in England and sold in their shop. As Dagný Heiðdal points out, there was some market for and interest in prints of the works of foreign masters at this time, around the same time that the National Gallery was established. See, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 68–69.

Fiskehandlerpige, a portrait of a female fishmonger, was donated by the artist to the National Gallery in 1887, and Louise Christine Ravn-Hansen, who in 1886 donated the oil landscape painting *Skovinteriör fra Gelskov*, from 1885, to the National Gallery; these were the first artworks by women artists in the collection.²⁸⁷ In the public discourse, and in fact all the time up until now, no one seems to have found this noteworthy; many writers at the end of the nineteenth century and later were too preoccupied by the smallness of the collection, which included exclusively foreign works, rather than divulging who the artists were or their work.²⁸⁸

Ancher and Ravn-Hansen became esteemed artists in Denmark, though of the two women, Ancher was the more famous. Ravn-Hansen, who was known for her landscape painting and her paintings *en plein air*, showed her work at many exhibitions, including the *December Exhibition* (d. Decemberudstillingen) and the *Spring Exhibition* (d. Forårsudstillingen) in Charlottenborg.²⁸⁹ Both Ancher and Ravn-Hansen studied painting with Kyhn in Copenhagen; Ancher studied from 1875 to 1878, but Ravn-Hansen studied at the same time as Þóra Pétursdóttir, or 1871–1874. Thus, their paths undoubtedly crossed at some point and it can be assumed that given the strong connections formed between the women in the school, they had influenced Þóra's attitudes.²⁹⁰ But not only was Ravn-Hansen an esteemed artist: with artist Johanne Krebs in the vanguard, she was one of 23 women artists who signed a petition to the Danish parliament *Rigsdagen* in January 1888 to open a special women's art school, at the same time as an open letter from these women was published in the liberal newspaper *Politiken*.²⁹¹ That same year, in October, women were granted admission to the Royal Danish Academy, to a special women's division or Women's Art School.²⁹²

Another interesting point is that in 1884, Björn Bjarnarson was the founder and editor of a women's periodical in Denmark, *Vort Hjem*, which started in January 1885, before author Johanne Schjørring took over as editor, under new ownership.²⁹³ It would be appropriate to

²⁸⁷ "Málverkasafnið", *Dagskrá*, 1, no. 74–75 (1897), 295; Matthías Þórðarson, *Málverkasafnið. Skrá eftir Matthías Þórðarson* (Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðjan H.F., 1922), 6. The works in the National Gallery: Anna Ancher, *Fiskehandlerpige*, 1886, pastel, 36 x 24, LÍ 25 and Louise Ravn-Hansen, *Skovinteriör fra Geelskov*, oil, 63 x 40, LÍ 34.

²⁸⁸ Valtýr Guðmundsson, "Framfarir Íslands á 19. öldinni", *Eimreiðin*, 6, no. 3 (1900), 212.

²⁸⁹ Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co.*, 32 and 132; Claudine Stensgaard Nielsen, "Louise Ravn-Hansen", *Dansk kvindebiografisk Leksikon*, kvindebiografiskleksikon.lex.dk.

²⁹⁰ In Þóra's correspondence, one letter was found from Ravn-Hansen, dated October 26, 1901 (Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 192).

²⁹¹ Hanne Flohr Sørensen, "Johanne Krebs (1848–1924)", in *Kvinfo*.dk.

²⁹² Marie Laulund, "Pionergenerationen. Da kvindelige kunstneres samfund blev til", 24–25.

²⁹³ "Vort Hjem", *Suðri*, December 11, 1886, 132; Heiða Björk Árnadóttir, "Listasafn Íslands", 50 (citation no. 2). The paper was the predecessor of the Danish paper *Hjemmet*, which is still published.

conclude that this link between Björn Bjarnarson, Schjørring and Þóra Pétursdóttir had helped in relation to the donation of works by Ancher and Ravn-Hansen to the National Gallery in 1885 and 1886. Here it appears to be nothing out of the ordinary that the founding gifts included work by two women artists. Firstly, one might guess that only man who wanted to bring Iceland closer to modern times and fine art would proceed cautiously. Secondly, few had opinions of the works, which were all by foreign artists. From this, one might deduce that the national, and the shaping of the national canon which would continue to be formed over the next decades, had not been fully initiated, although the distinction between arts had been. Rather, it is much more related to the first Icelandic artists who appeared later.

The industrial exhibition in Copenhagen in 1888, in which Icelanders participated, received fairly wide coverage in papers and journals in Iceland. The Icelandic parliament, Alþingi, had refused to support the Icelandic participants, particularly because of lack of interest.²⁹⁴ Out of a total of 22 exhibitors from Iceland, 3 were women.²⁹⁵ Participation by women had thus decreased, while the negative discourse on Icelandic exhibition items in general did not exactly encourage participation. Icelanders had their own opinion on the trade exhibitions and the discourse was reflected in a mixture of “mania and inferiority”, of outstanding craftsmanship or lack of the same. However, it was especially Icelanders’ participation in multi-national exhibitions that aroused insecurity and a negative, irascible tone.²⁹⁶ In this regard, when it came to promoting Icelandic products, history and culture abroad, everything came down to individual initiative, when interest was limited.

Sigríður Einarsdóttir Magnússon, Þóra Pétursdóttir’s friend, took on collecting Icelandic objects and showing Icelandic handicrafts at the exhibition in *The Women’s Building* in Chicago in 1892. Before that, Sigríður had also been behind the organization of a special exhibition of Icelandic handicrafts in London in 1884 and had tried to market Icelandic woollen cloth and Icelandic handwork from the viewpoint of the National Romantic Style, as in Scandinavia and

²⁹⁴ “Iðnaðarmenn á landi hér”, *Lýður*, December 24, 1888, 29–30; “Sýningin í Khöfn”, *Fréttir frá Íslandi*, 15, no.1 (1888), 25–27.

²⁹⁵ “Sýningar í Höfn”, *Þjóðólfur*, June 15, 1888, 110. In *Þjóðólfur* it says that it would be better for Icelanders to hold an exhibition in their own land or in a country other than Denmark. In the author’s opinion, the country was shown contempt and the contribution to the exhibition gave a false image of the nation (“Sýningin í Kaupmannahöfn”, *Þjóðólfur*, July 28, 1888, 138). Many agreed with the article, and thought that the humble exhibits put Iceland to “great shame”. See, “V. Bjargræðisvegir”, *Fréttir frá Íslandi*, 15, no. 1 (1888), 16–27.

²⁹⁶ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, “Af áhrifum fjölpjódlegra hugmyndastrauma á íslenskt handverk á tímabilinu 1880–1920”, *Frændafundur 6*, fyrirlestrar frá færeysk-íslenskri ráðstefnu í Þórshöfn 26.–28. júní 2007, eds. Magnús Snædal and Turið Sigurðardóttir (Tórshavn: Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, 2008), 257–268.

farther afield.²⁹⁷ However, the initiative and the organization of Sigríður— an Icelandic woman resident in England—in collecting and exhibiting Icelandic handicrafts at a large world exhibition in 1893, when no-one had shown any comprehension or interest, was publicly denounced in the Icelandic papers.²⁹⁸ Sigríður was criticized, not quite unfairly, for paltry items in the Icelandic part of the exhibition, in addition to which she had made errors about Iceland’s history and had been liberal with other facts, such as the origin and history of the exhibition items.

Þóra Pétursdóttir came to her defence with an article in *Þjóðólfur* (1894), arguing that it was not possible to expect one individual to do a superb exhibition of Icelandic handicrafts. Sigríður deserves praise for her contribution and initiative, and the Icelandic division had, for instance, received an honorary medal for spinning:²⁹⁹

We women should then league together and send good quality spinning and other handicrafts to the next exhibition, which will be hosted in Copenhagen ... there you—or at least inhabitants of the Nordic countries—will see that here one can get beautiful work no less than in other countries, and could in this way perhaps produce, over time, an industry for many.

Even though women’s participation in industrial exhibitions is documented in the late nineteenth century, their real contribution to art and handicrafts is not assessed as appropriate and is either silent or ambiguous in the public coverage of the exhibitions. Conversely, the women’s periodicals *Framsókn* and *Kvennablaðið* published many articles on contributions of women to art and handicrafts, and the discourse does not reflect any separation between art and handicrafts. In fact, there was good coverage of handicrafts, such as knitting and embroidery,

²⁹⁷ “Hannyrðasýningin íslenzka í Lundúnum”, *Ísafold*, November 26, 1884, 186; Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, “KONUR SENDIÐ OSS ÚRVAL...”, 2. That article also says that after the coverage, the Icelandic exhibition had aroused even more notice, the goods sold well and the Icelandic handicrafts had got the bronze medal at the exhibition. See, “Hannyrðasýningin íslenzka í Lundúnum”, *Ísafold*, November 26, 1884, 186.

²⁹⁸ Matthías Jochumsson, who was otherwise very women-friendly and defended women publicly, had attended the exhibition in Chicago and waxes eloquently on *The Women’s Building*, but says that the Icelandic items in the exhibition in 1893 were “exceedingly poor”, like garments from old women’s costumes and a few belts but not new ornaments or new work. This was “all that represented Iceland in the world exhibition, and it came from a woman in England”. See, Matthías Jochumsson, *Chicagó-för mín 1893* (Akureyri: Prentsmiðja Björns Jónssonar, 1893), 145–147. See also, criticism from Hafsteinn Pjetursson, “Chicago-brjef III”, *Lögberg*, October 25, 1893, 1–2.

²⁹⁹ Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, “Um frú Sigríði Magnússon og sýning íslenzkra hannyrða”, *Þjóðólfur*, March 9, 1894, 46–47. Þóra had married Þorvaldur Thoroddsen in 1887, and taken up his name, Thoroddsen.

along with women's exhibitions, e.g. the first women's trade exhibition in Iceland of the *Icelandic Women's Association* in the summer of 1896 in Reykjavík.³⁰⁰

The search for Icelandic artists was now pressing. For those who considered studying abroad and wanted to pursue their art but did not come from wealthy homes, the only way to do this was to get a grant, either from individuals or the Alþingi. In 1895, grants were provided to two men who thought of going abroad to study art: these were Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and Einar Jónsson.³⁰¹ Before he went overseas, Einar Jónsson had attended courses on painting and English run by Torfhildur Hólm in Reykjavík, while Þórarinn B. Þorláksson had learned in the drawing school run by Þóra Pétursdóttir.³⁰²

At the end of the century, drawing tuition in Iceland was thus mostly in the hands of women, as besides Þóra and Torfhildur, women artists such as Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir and Kristín Vídalín Jacobson taught drawing and painting.³⁰³ In the same way as in Denmark, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, drawing schools in Reykjavík, proved to be an extremely important meeting place—in essence a community—where women who had become educated in painting disseminated their experience and knowledge. The names of almost 40 Icelandic women are listed as getting some sort of instruction in drawing and painting at the end of the nineteenth century, in Iceland or abroad. During the period from 1873 to 1909, nearly twenty women attended art schools abroad.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ See, “Íðnaðarsýning og útsala hins íslenska kvennfjelags”, *Framsókn*, 2, no. 9 (1896), 34–35.

³⁰¹ “Alþingi VI”, *Fjallkonan*, August 13, 1895, 1; “Alþingi VIII”, *Fjallkonan*, August 26, 1895, 1.

³⁰² Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 40–43.

³⁰³ An advertisement from Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir appeared in *Ísafold*, October 7, 1893, 272. Dagný Heiðdal reports that drawing tuition started in *Kvennaskólinn* 1891–1892, when Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir taught drawing, amongst other things, and Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason taught for almost the whole period 1893–1901. Elín Briem also taught there; she later became the school's principal. Men also taught drawing, one of those named being Sigurður Guðmundsson. In the *Latin School*, drawing was taught 1877–1878 by Benedikt Gröndal, Þorvaldur Thoroddsen and Bjarni Sæmundsson. It should also be mentioned that Þóra Pétursdóttir and Torfhildur Hólm both taught drawing and painting and both shared an interest in old handicrafts, about which they were very knowledgeable. Torfhildur appears to have been teaching painting on velvet and with “bronze colours” during the years 1890–1899, which Dagný Heiðdal says had especially been more akin to handicrafts than traditional drawing tuition. See, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 37 and 40–45.

³⁰⁴ Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 71; Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 18. To this it could be added that e.g. Kristín Þorlákssdóttir Bernhöft first learned from Þórarinn B. Þorláksson before 1895 and also studied at the drawing school of Kristín Vídalín Jacobson in the winter 1897–1898. She then went to Copenhagen to learn painting, but it is not known which private school she attended.

2.5.3. *The Refusées' sphere: women's exhibitions, reception and reactions (1895–1900)*

As argued above, the women's periodicals were in multifarious ways instrumental in the women's struggle: they strengthened solidarity among women and informed them about issues related to their conditions and struggle. The main reason for the publication of these first women's periodicals was that women found that their affairs were either not sufficiently well understood or were indeed silenced in the mainstream public press. Likewise, there was a call to create a venue for women artists to exhibit together at an exhibition of diverse art forms.

In the same year that Icelandic women's periodicals first came out, in 1895, a large Nordic women's exhibition *Kvindernes Udstilling Fra Fortid til Nutid* was held in Copenhagen. The incentive for the exhibition was the World Fair in Chicago in 1892, where a special women's division had been set up and aroused great interest.³⁰⁵ The exhibition was held in the so-called Den Frie Udstillings building: a building owned by a group of radical artists, *Den Frie*, which was founded in 1891 to protest against the selective admission requirements for the exhibition building Kunsthal Charlottenborg, and became a sort of Danish version of the French *Salon des Refusés*.³⁰⁶ In this case, in 1895, it was the exhibition of the works of the *Refusées*.

It was women from the *Danish Women's Society* who took the initiative to hold the exhibition. The main role of the women's art and culture exhibition was to draw attention to the wide variety of women's art work in Denmark and its colonies, and to show how capable modern women were. The main emphasis was on crafts, trade and industry but the focus was wide-ranging, from art, music and literature to education and school, philanthropy and the home.³⁰⁷ Most exhibitors were Danish women artists, as well as Norwegian and Swedish, and a special division was set up for Danish colonies: Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and the West Indies.³⁰⁸

Þóra Pétursdóttir took the initiative to write to the author and suffragist Schjørring and asked if the Icelandic women could participate in the exhibition.³⁰⁹ Emma Gad, who was the

³⁰⁵ Marie Laulund, "Pionergenerationen", 37.

³⁰⁶ Marie Laulund, "Det blev der skrevet i 1891. En receptionshistorisk analyse af de kvindelige kunstneres bidrag til forårsudstillingerne i København i 1891", *Passepartout. Skrifter for Kunsthistories. Kvinder i kunsten* (ed. Teresa Nielsen), 19, no. 36 (2015), 76–78 and 91. Marie Laulund, "Pionergenerationen", 39.

³⁰⁷ Anne Lie Stokbro, "Jagten på... det feminine", 283–288.

³⁰⁸ *Fortegnelse over Kvindernes Udstilling Fra Fortid til Nutid 1895* (Copenhagen: Nielsen & Lydiche, 1895).

³⁰⁹ *Pjms. P. og P. Th.* 192.

driving force for the women's exhibition *Kvindernes Udstilling Fra Fortid til Nutid* in 1895, wrote to Þóra, as well as Krebs, on the preparation of the women's exhibition. Three other Icelandic women resident in Copenhagen became responsible for the Icelandic division: Þóra's sister, Elínborg Pétursdóttir Thorberg; Kristín Jónsdóttir Krabbe, who was married to a Dane, Professor Krabbe; and Sigríður Jónassen, Þóra's friend and colleague, who had run a drawing school with her. From their point of view this provided an opportunity to eliminate prejudice against Iceland and promote Icelandic women's contribution to art and culture. Icelandic costumes, women's silver jewellery (which was at that time only crafted by men), knitted goods and many types of embroidery were chosen for the exhibition.³¹⁰

Those who selected the work were for example Danish women artists like Krebs, Ancher and Krøyer for the fine art section, and for the literature section, Schjørring, Axelline Lund, and Elisabet Grundtvig.³¹¹ And contrary to what was most often the case, Þóra—who had married Þorvaldur Thoroddsen in 1887, taken up the name Thoroddsen and did not stop showing her work—also exhibited at the exhibition.

Þóra, Elín Stephensen and María Finsen were responsible for selecting the Icelandic works for the exhibition, and together they published an article in 1895, to challenge all Icelandic women to participate in the exhibition with various kinds of embroideries and silversmithery.³¹² Furthermore, in an article in the women's periodical *Framsókn*, Þóra encouraged Icelandic women to attend the exhibition as it could be assumed that the exhibition would “greatly increase the respect of men for the works of women and their implementation of these”.³¹³

The names of all the Icelandic women, a total of 81, as well as the names of all women participating and the multifaceted items that were sent from Iceland, are listed in a special register from the exhibition which included Þóra's oil painting of Þingvellir and a wide variety of objects in the field of handicrafts.³¹⁴ Þóra wrote an article in November 1895 for the women's periodical *Kvennablaðið* in which she specified the works of the Icelandic women who

³¹⁰ Guðjón Friðriksson and Jón Þ. Þór, *Kaupmannahöfn sem höfuðborg Íslands*, vol. II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2013), 388.

³¹¹ Þ. og Þ. Th. 193. See also, Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co.*, 132.

³¹² Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, Elín Stephensen and María Finsen, “Áskorun til íslenskra kvenna”, *Ísafold*, March 2, 1895, 75. See also, Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, “Sýningin í Kaupmannahöfn”, *Ísafold*, March 16, 1895, 83.

³¹³ Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, “Sýning kvenna, frá eldri og nýrri tímum”, *Framsókn*, 1, no. 3 (1895), 11.

³¹⁴ These 81 Icelandic women were living in Iceland and Denmark, but included as well several Danish women resident in Iceland. The title given of Þóra's oil painting is *Udsigt fra Lovbjærget over Egnen ved Thingvalla* or *View from Lögrétta over the area of Þingvellir*. See, the catalogue, *Fortegnelse over Kvindernes Udstilling Fra Fortid til Nutid 1895*; Bogi Th. Melsted, “Kvennasýningin í Khöfn 1895”, *Eimreiðin*, 2, no. 1 (1896), 60.

participated and stressed the importance of the exhibition for Icelandic women, not least to dampen the prejudice of Danes towards Icelanders, who as a result would get a much better impression of Icelandic handicrafts than before.³¹⁵

Women's participation in the exhibition was dear to the heart of a few Icelandic men too. The Copenhagen-based scholar Bogi Th. Melsteð thus argued that if on the one hand foreigners were to get the most accurate opinion of the Icelanders, "and if the nation desires to gain some esteem amongst other nations", it would be best done by taking part in overseas exhibitions as much as possible. Bogi praised the contributions of Icelandic women in the exhibition in 1895, which in his opinion was very successful, "and is perhaps the first time that Icelanders have taken part in an exhibition in another country, and there is true pride in this". He then continued: "Think about this: if men in Copenhagen had held a general trade fair and Icelandic men had participated in this. Even if they had been fighting for their lives, they would not have done as well as the Icelandic women in the women's exhibition."³¹⁶ Bogi Th. Melsteð showed singular initiative in this discussion and as he mentions, *Kvennablaðið* discussed the exhibition in detail and, most importantly, named the women exhibiting and described the various kinds of handicrafts.³¹⁷ He also mentioned that the oil painting of Þingvellir, by Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, was the first oil painting by an Icelander shown in public overseas.³¹⁸

The women's exhibition in 1895, the first of its kind in Europe, was in many ways a success. Firstly, women got a rare opportunity to exhibit everything that they had to offer in very different fields, e.g. art, handicrafts, and literature. Another significant aspect was the collaboration of women, not just in each country by itself but also in a wider, international context. Thirdly, this collaboration was energizing: It aroused self-confidence in women and

³¹⁵ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Kvennasýningin norræna", *Kvennablaðið*, 1, no. 11 (1895), 81–83.

³¹⁶ Bogi Th. Melsteð, "Kvennasýningin í Khöfn 1895", *Eimreiðin*, 2, no. 1 (1896), 56–63.

³¹⁷ See, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Kvennasýningin norræna", *Kvennablaðið*, 1, no. 11 (1895), 81–83. See also about the exhibition in Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Stórkostlegt fyrirtæki", *Kvennablaðið*, 2, no. 3 (1896), 23–24.

³¹⁸ Furthermore, Ingibjörg Skaptadóttir og Sigríður Þorsteinsdóttir, editors of the women's periodical *Framsókn*, published news about the exhibition several times. See "Kvennasýningin í Kaupmannahöfn", *Framsókn*, 1, no. 8 (1895), 30–31; "Kvennasýningin í Kaupmannahöfn", *Framsókn*, 1, no. 10 (1895), 38–39; "Árangur kvennasýningarinnar", *Framsókn*, 2, no. 2. (1896), 7. Þóra drew very early in Þingvellir and her oldest picture is from 1874. Þóra painted an oil painting of Þingvellir as early as 1883 (an original painting), becoming the first Icelander to do so, and painted another one in 1895. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 64–65. Dagný Heiðdal says that this painting from 1895 of Þingvellir is a painted copy of Þingvellir by August Schiött (1823–1895). Schiött's painting can be found in the National Gallery (L.Í. 73), registered in the collection in 1896. See, Dagný Heiðdal, *Aldamótakonur og íslensk listvakning*, 1992, 29.

encouragement for their struggles that now needed to continue in various areas in years to come, e.g. in art and politics, where their collective power was a key factor.³¹⁹

Like other rural communities in Europe and elsewhere, the industrial revolution had challenged Icelandic society to re-evaluate traditional handicrafts. That meant both the preservation of traditional handicrafts and the promotion of home industry.³²⁰ In the neighbouring countries, when applied arts flourished in the latter part of the nineteenth century, jobs that were considered suitable for women became available in the textile industry, pottery and porcelain.³²¹ The term home industry (d. Husflid) refers to crafts done in the home for personal use or for sale, including textiles (knitting, weaving and embroidery). One of the factors of home industry was applied art (embroidery, or needle painting), handmade or factory-produced practical art, defined as artistic handicrafts.³²² But as was also the case in other art genres, platforms such as women's exhibitions proved to be very important for diverse handiwork and art creation, both for cultural expression and contribution.

In the wake of the exhibition in 1895, the women's associations in both Denmark and Iceland had become stronger. Thus, for example, the *Ladies' Crafts Association* (d. Damernes Kunstflidsforening), founded in 1900 by the author Emma Gad, was soon changed to *Danish Crafts Association* (d. Dansk Kunstflidsforening) and men were invited as well. The aim of the association in Denmark was to promote the importance of the applied arts and the home industry of women, and to bring women's industry to the forefront at exhibitions.³²³ Influences from the

³¹⁹ Here, it is important to remember how well connected Þóra Pétursdóttir was to influential Danish women, who at the same time campaigned for increased rights and conditions of women artists as well as the rights of women in general, i.e. suffrage. Þóra's correspondence includes a number of advocates of women's rights in Denmark at that time, such as woman author Johanne Schjørring. See, Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192, 296–298. Þóra published an article in honour of Schjørring in *Kvennablaðið* (1897); she had, as Þóra underlines, always expressed goodwill and kindness towards Icelandic women—and because of that, Icelandic women were invited to attend and participate in the 1895 women's exhibition in Copenhagen. See, Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, “Skáldkonan Johanne Schjørring”, *Kvennablaðið*, 3, no. 10 (1897), 73–74.

³²⁰ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir points out that it was Matthías Matthíasson who had first introduced the idea of home industry in an article under the title, “Hannyrðasmíðar”, *Ísafold*, February 19, 1890, 57. The idea was borrowed from national associations for home industries in the Nordic countries in the latter half of the nineteenth century, while attention was also given to the applied arts movement which, as previously stated, originated in the UK in the middle of the nineteenth century and spread out across Europe and further afield. See, Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli. Heimilisiðnaðarfélag Íslands í hundrað ár*, ed. Anna Lís Rúnarsdóttir (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 19–38, 272–273.

³²¹ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað”, 21–31.

³²² Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli*, 19–29.

³²³ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað”, 21–31. It should be mentioned that the distinction between home industry (d. husflid) and applied arts (d. kunstflid) was often unclear long into the twentieth century, but in connection with *Danish Crafts Association* it was undoubtedly akin to tapestry. See also, Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli*, 19–29.

English *Arts and Crafts movement* were prominent in Denmark, as can be observed in the *Danish Crafts Association*.

Both movements supported the revival of traditions and rekindled the taste for the beautiful in women's handicrafts and for their participation in the economy. One has to bear in mind that the predominant ideas in the *Arts and Crafts movement* pinpointed the separate spheres of work of men and women: men did metalwork, glass cutting, plaster work and wood carving at workshops, whereas women made e.g. textiles and embroideries. Furthermore, in 1907 Morris's daughter, May Morris, felt compelled to found the *Women's Guild of Arts* with embroiderer Mary Elizabeth Turner, as the *Art Worker's Guild*—established in 1884 and associated with the ideas of the *Arts and Crafts Movement*—did not admit women.³²⁴

Yet, as historian Zoë Thomas points out, in spite of the gendered division and the professional status of “women art workers” being subject to debate, arts and crafts opened a window for women and gave them important opportunities, both in courses and jobs—and not least, women formed extensive networks. At the same time, as Thomas argues, respect for applied arts and women's handiwork increased.³²⁵

In Denmark, painting exhibitions drew a great deal of attention and much was written about them in newspapers and magazines at the end of the nineteenth century. With the women's exhibition *Kvindernes Udstilling Fra Fortid til Nutid* in 1895 in Denmark, as in many neighbouring countries, women artists tried to get themselves approved in fine art. It was of course crucial for women artists to expose their work publicly. Furthermore, it is important to note, that with the diversity of contribution to art and culture at the exhibition, women did not make a clear distinction between fine art and handicrafts. Meanwhile, art was not seen that way by the male art critics: fine art was considered a masculine domain and women were encouraged with gendered discourse to focus on handicrafts.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, art critics in newspapers and magazines had to take on a new breed of artists and exhibitors, namely women artists. In 1870, art critics in Denmark, as elsewhere, were men, who had either not discussed the work of women artists or disparaged it, as can be seen in the classic coverage of exhibitions: “In addition were works by women.” They tended to be grouped together, in the form of several lines on those “ladies”,

³²⁴ Zoë Thomas, “At Home with the Women's Guild of Arts: gender and professional identity in London studios, c. 1880–1925”, *Women's History Review*, 24, no. 6 (2015), 938–964. Thomas traces the importance of the “women art workers” who formed their own guild in 1907, as the *Art Workers' Guild* remained a men-only club until 1964.

³²⁵ Zoë Thomas, *Women art workers and the Arts and Crafts movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

or “group of painting ladies”; women artists did not receive as much or as detailed coverage as their male counterparts and their careers or education are rarely described.³²⁶

An exhibition was held in Kunstforeningen in Copenhagen in 1891, entitled *11 Kunstnerinder*, or 11 women artists. This was the first group exhibition of women artists in Denmark and consisted of works from artists such as Ancher, Krebs and Luplau. An unnamed critic in Danish *Morgenbladet* says that the exhibition was noteworthy as only works by women were exhibited there. The contribution of the women was praised, and deemed to be no worse than that of men. When the works at the exhibition were discussed, it is predominantly in a gender-neutral way, although as Anne Lie Stokbro claims, words such as understanding, faithful, diligent, humble and unconditional were used to describe them, all “female characteristics”.³²⁷

But another tone came from the critic Jens Petersen at *Dagbladet København*, who had a completely different reaction and expectations. Firstly, no women were mentioned by name in the review and none of the works were picked out for further analysis. Instead, the whole group was taken as one entity, and Petersen frequently mentions his disappointment that there is nothing “particularly feminine” at the exhibition: “It is not feminine in the sense that it does not express a special feminine world of experience, nor does it cultivate a special feminine language. In other words, the art of women is the men’s.” Petersen then says: “We all know that when a lady starts to paint, it’s just like a lady who starts studying: They usually achieve more rapid progress than men. Until a certain point. It’s just like something goes wrong: namely, when they are going to produce something. But—reproduce on the other hand—that they can do”.³²⁸

Thus, this attitude is very much in the spirit of that which is interwoven with biological discourse on women of the late nineteenth century: women artists cannot *create* work, but they can *copy* work and “adopt” the creativity and inventions of others (male). Danish women reacted to this critique and prejudice by Petersen, in the women’s periodical *Hvad vi vil* (1891) and one wrote, anonymously, an explanation of why women’s artworks resemble the works of

³²⁶ Anne Lie Stokbro, *Anna Ancher og co.*, 10–12 and 107–108.

³²⁷ Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på... det feminine”, 278–280. Marie Laulund claims that among the critics, very few questioned the justification of women artists and dismissed women’s art; the majority focused on the women’s artworks and made apparently gender-neutral reviews. See, Marie Laulund, “Det blev der skrevet i 1891”, 94.

³²⁸ Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på... det feminine”, 280.

men. Men were the art teachers, the masters, the art critics, and added to that was a lack of self-confidence in the women and doubt by the men with whom they had to deal.³²⁹

Concerning the women's exhibition in Copenhagen 1895, reference can also be made to the critique by Niels Vinding Dorph who wrote on art for *Politiken* in 1893–1902. Dorph actually says that in the women's work, femininity was greatly lacking and that in the future, women artists must distinguish themselves better from men.³³⁰ In *Berlingske Tidende*, art critic C. B. says that in the exhibition there were only a few landscape paintings and just a handful of them attracted any attention, but “maybe it is that the men's energetic and excellent activity in this field scared away the women artists” so that they looked for their subject elsewhere, and “maybe, the landscape painting is not for the other sex”. Thus, on the one hand it is stated that this is a welcome opportunity to discover women's art, and on the other the women are criticized for a lack of *special feminine aesthetics* that would distinguish them from men and their art.³³¹

Despite their presence on the artistic scene in exhibitions and in public discourse, like in 1891 and 1895, women artists were totally ignored when art historians Julius Lange and Karl Madsen wrote their reviews of nineteenth century Danish art in 1895 and 1901. Lange named four women in his 1895 review of art history, while Madsen, in *Nyere dansk Malerkunst* (1901), wrote almost nothing about women artists.³³² However, and consequently, what Danish public galleries or museums *do lack*, and *do not include* are the works by women artists from the “pionergenerationen” which represents up to 130–140 women artists, born in the period from the 1840s to the 1870s.³³³

What is important in the Icelandic context, and will appear later, was the amazement of male critics at the number of women who exhibit their work publicly, and the fact that they had to accept this new reality. In the wake of this, one can discern in the discourse firstly the emphasis on feminine aesthetics, the feminine touch, in the works of women—and mentioning especially “a defect” when that femininity is lacking—and secondly on their incompetence in doing convincing landscapes that is also linked to “their tendency” to reproduce and copy, while

³²⁹ Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på... det feminine”, 281 and 300, citation no. 10; Marie Laulund, “Det blev der skrevet i 1891”, 77.

³³⁰ Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på... det feminine...”, 287–289.

³³¹ Marie Laulund, “Det blev der skrevet i 1891”, 76–79 and 91; Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på... det feminine”, 283–289.

³³² Julius Lange, “Udsigt over Kunstens Historie i Danmark (1895)”, *Udvalgte Skrifter af Julius Lange*, vol. I, eds. Georg Brandes and P. Købke (Copenhagen: Det nordiske Forlag, 1901), 1–87; Karl Madsen, “Nyere dansk Malerkunst”, *Vort Folk i det nittende Aarhundrede i Billeder og Text af danske Kunstnere og Forfattere*, ed. Vilh. Østergaard, vol. III (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901), 323–343.

³³³ Marie Laulund, “Det blev der skrevet i 1891”, 76–79 and 92–94. Marie Laulund, “Pionergenerationen. Da kvindelige kunstneres samfund blev til”, 24–26. Marie Laulund, “Pionergenerationen”, 37.

lacking originality. Thirdly, the emphasis on a certain homogeneity of women's work is encouraged, with special women's exhibitions, and women artists becoming an entity, while numerous art historical surveys on women artists are published by male (and female) art historians from the 1850s to 1900.³³⁴ At the same time, emphasis is laid on the individual, the modern man, in the political and artistic sense. As Geneviève Fraisse argues: when changes happen in society, from a feudal system to democracy, the debate on the "exceptional", on the impossibility of the female genius, "will serve to reformulate the rule of the common woman, similar to all the others".³³⁵

Concluding remarks

The discussion in Iceland on the situation regarding women and women's education had become an important campaigning issue in Iceland in the 1870s. The first radical women's liberation discourse started in full force in Iceland when the first article by a woman on women's rights was published in 1885, authored by Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, in which she discussed the great need for women's education. This emancipation can be seen as the women's role of "parrêsia", referring to the theories of Michel Foucault; free speech, or "parrêsia", is frank speaking, especially the participation of women in public discourse, as democracy involves the participation of everyone. Indeed, an important platform is created when the first women's periodicals start seeing the light of day in Iceland in 1895, on the one hand *Framsókn* and on the other *Kvennablaðið*. The impact of the women's periodicals on the women's struggle during the whole period of study cannot be overestimated, notably in highlighting women's contribution and, counterbalancing the masculine, cultural public discourse on the arts and literature.

Before the time of the women's periodicals, at the same time as the statue of Thorvaldsen was unveiled in 1875 (along with the androcentric discourse on the male genius), Þóra Pétursdóttir had completed two years of art study in Vilhelm Kyhn's private school for women in Copenhagen. This private school, like others for women, was not just essential for the art education of women but was also a joint venue for forming networks with other Nordic women who had similar opinions. Thus, Þóra met other women artists, who would become

³³⁴ Linda Nochlin, "Starting from Scratch. The Beginnings of Feminist Art History", 191.

³³⁵ Geneviève Fraisse, *La controverse des sexes*, 103.

famous and at the same time campaigned for increased rights and improved conditions of women artists.

In addition, in the late nineteenth century, photography proved to be important as a more accessible craft for women: a new medium, free of burdensome tradition and definition on the male genius and outside the fine art hierarchy. The lack of separation of art forms in Iceland was in fact crucial for women, as becomes obvious with the first industrial exhibition held in Reykjavík in 1883, in which exhibition items were extremely diverse and participants were equal in terms of the number of men and women exhibiting. In these, Icelandic needlework and embroidery are treated as equally important as fine art. The contribution of Þóra Pétursdóttir, who worked in both painting and handicrafts, is a good example of a woman artist who made no distinction between these art forms. The National Gallery of Iceland was founded in 1884 and represents the first step in distinguishing fine art from the crafts. It was considered even more pressing for the nation to establish its first Icelandic, national, contemporary (male) artists. From the point of view of women, a certain watershed and exclusionary aspects now progressively entered the picture, with a negative attitude towards everything related to women's artistry—becoming, in fact, the antithesis of fine art.

Whether in Iceland or Denmark, there was a call to create a venue for women artists to exhibit together. A large Nordic women's exhibition, the first one in Europe, was held in 1895 in Copenhagen, with the goal of displaying a great variety of women's art creations from the Nordic countries. In this way, women's exhibitions, women's catalogues as well as women's periodicals become pressing as a form of emancipation in what can really be called the public *sphere of the Refusées*. Several Icelandic women participated in the preparations for this. In the public art criticism in Denmark, one can discern in the discourse on the women's exhibition the emphasis and call for the special "feminine", as a positive comment on the work of women (and criticism when it was greatly lacking), women's tendency to reproduce and copy instead of being original, and on women artists as a homogenous group, the opposite being the individual, modern man, in the political and artistic sense. All these factors would appear in the discourse at the turn of the century and in the next decades in public discourse on art in Iceland.

However, the start of women's collaboration and networking proved to be important for the various kinds of women's struggles. At the end of the century in Iceland, a group had emerged of Icelandic women who had notably studied and lived in Copenhagen. These women would play a large part in various types of art creation and in maintaining the cultural heritage

of women in handicrafts—along with the campaign for equality in the fields of culture and art, as both cultural and political citizens, combining all aspects of *textility*.



Figure 1 Frederick W. Warbreck Howell (1857–1901), *Statue of Thorvaldsen at Austurvöllur, Reykjavík*, 1883–1885. The National Museum of Iceland, Lpr–2918.



Figure 2 G.W. Alexandersen (1843–1931), *Portrait of Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen*, circa 1875. Þóra is wearing the Icelandic national costume, *skautbúningur*, designed by Sigurður Guðmundsson, the painter, 1858–1869. The photograph is taken in a studio at Vesterbrogade 43, Copenhagen. The National Museum of Iceland, Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 168–1.



Figure 3 Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen (1847–1917), *Þingvellir*, 1883, oil, 39.5 x 48.5 cm. The National Museum of Iceland, Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 53.

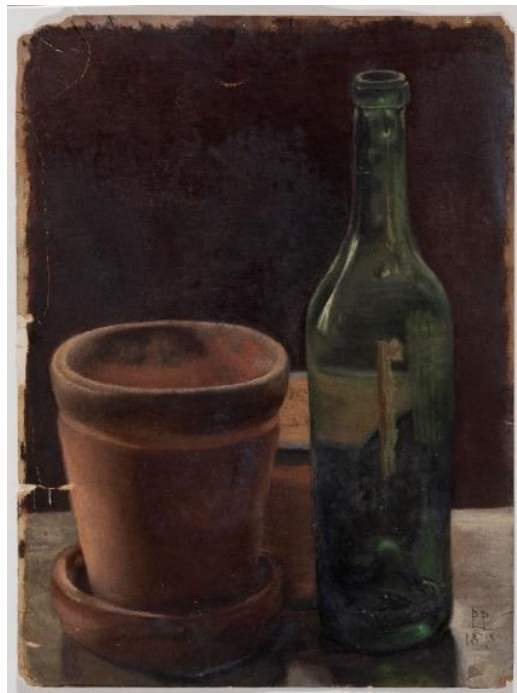


Figure 4 Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen (1847–1917), *Flaska og blómapottur* (e. A bottle and a flower pot), 1875, oil (on paper), 36.7 x 27.5 cm. The National Museum of Iceland, Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 56.



Figure 5 Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen (1847–1917), *Bessastaðir og Keilir*, 1881, gouache, 14 x 21 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 8079.



Figure 6 Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen (1847–1917), *Pingvellir*, 1895, oil, 107.5 x 86 cm. The National Museum of Iceland, Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 50.



Figure 7 Sigfús Eymundsson (1837–1911), *Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen's drawing school*, 1884. The National Museum of Iceland, Mms 9234.



Figure 8 Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir's article on Kristín Vídalín Jacobson (1864–1943), "Íslensk listakona" (e. An Icelandic woman artist), *Kvennablaðið*, 2, no. 4 (1896), 25–26.



Figure 9 Kristín Vídalín Jacobson (1864–1943), *Sólveig Pétursdóttir Eggerz*, oil, 55.5 x 40.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 9204.



Figure 10 Sigfús Eymundsson (1837–1911), *Kristín Vídalín Jacobson's drawing school in Reykjavík*, class 1897–1898. The National Museum of Iceland, Mms 10886B.



Figure 10 Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir (1870–1944), *Kona við píanóleik* (e. A woman playing the piano), 1905, oil, 73.5 x 57 cm. Private collection. Photograph: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 11 Kristín Þorvaldsdóttir (1870–1944), *Neðstikaupstaður, Ísafjörður*, 1895, oil, 21.2 x 28.5 cm. Private collection. Photograph: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 12 Nicoline Weywadt (1848–1921), *Djúpavogshreppur* (Djúpivogur), 1873–1874. The National Museum of Iceland, F1–157 Th–21 Þjms.



Figure 13 Nicoline Weywadt (1848–1921), *Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir Malmquist*, 1888–1902, dry plate. The National Museum of Iceland, Th–1116.

3. WOMEN AT THE VANISHING POINT (1900–1945)

3.1. Revival of Icelandic art (1900–1915): Gendered landscape and nationality

In the discourse on art at the turn of the century, many did not think much of the art creations of earlier centuries, especially the nineteenth, unless it happened to involve to some extent the contribution of Sigurður Guðmundsson, regarded as “the only painter of the century”, although he had, unfortunately, left behind very little as a painter, having become “completely absorbed” in the ethnographic history of the Icelandic costume. There was also “the foreign collection of paintings” of the National Gallery and Thorvaldsen’s self-portrait in Reykjavík’s centre, “the only sculpture in the country”.³³⁶ However, this negative opinion of nineteenth-century art changes and is replaced by the idea of progress, which is reflected in more public support, even to art—albeit on a small scale—and an appeal for the actual beginning of Icelandic fine art. The discourse on art includes words such as dawn, revival and renaissance, reiterated in most writings in the following decades and up to the present day.

Hence, what happened before in art is overlooked, notably the late nineteenth century with the aforementioned women artists. An exception here is an article by Benedikt Gröndal claiming that no one had ever stipulated that painting should be somewhat general “until a short time ago: there then arose a great deal of energy in womankind, so that each tried to be better than the last at painting, and managed fairly well with most and amazingly well with some paintings, though most were painted from other pictures and few were of nature.” And he adds: “Now that will probably come to nothing again”.³³⁷

Icelandic artists who had received stipends from the Alþingi to be educated in art in Copenhagen returned home: painters such as Þórarinn B. Þorláksson as well as sculptor Einar Jónsson.³³⁸ Þórarinn, who had previously learned drawing from Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen in Reykjavík, went to study in Copenhagen in 1895 and is presented as the first Icelandic landscape painter with his exhibition in 1900, entitled the “first landscape art exhibition of an

³³⁶ Valtýr Guðmundsson, “Framfarir Íslands á 19. öldinni”, 212.

³³⁷ Benedikt Gröndal, “Reykjavík um aldamótin 1900”, *Eimreiðin*, 6, no. 3 (1900), 186.

³³⁸ Ólafur Kvaran, “Brautryðjendur í upphafi aldar”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. I. Landslag, rómantík og sýmbólismi, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 46; Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 149.

Icelandic artist” and showing the country’s famous historical locations, such as *Pingvellir* (1900).³³⁹ A symbolic work for the beginning of landscape painting in Iceland.

Ásgrímur Jónsson, who was living in Copenhagen and had studied painting at the Royal Danish Academy, opened an exhibition of his work in 1903. In *Ísafold* (1903) it is noted that his paintings show that Icelanders had “gained” the artist that “Icelandic nature had been waiting for, who understands Icelandic nature and can interpret it so that every child can see that it is Icelandic nature.”³⁴⁰ The sculptor Einar Jónsson, had exhibited at the Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition in Copenhagen, in 1901: a work entitled *Útlagar* (e. The Outlaws), a subject from Icelandic folktales, and in the spirit of the nationalist turn-of-the-century art. This work gained favourable reviews in Iceland and it is mentioned that this plaster cast by Einar should be carved in marble in Rome, like Thorvaldsen’s work, *Jason med det gyldne skind* (e. Jason with the Golden Fleece), from 1803, as that same year Einar had received a stipend from the Alþingi to go to Rome.³⁴¹

Ever since the beginning of the twentieth century, it has been emphasized that Þórarinn and Ásgrímur were the first Icelandic painters to make art their main profession and Einar Jónsson was the first Icelander to take up sculpture as a profession.³⁴² The works of these so-called “pioneers of Icelandic art” were thought to manifest the true characteristics of the Icelandic nation and as Ólafur Rastrick argues, the works of these artists rose in importance in the context of the nation’s self-image.³⁴³ This beginning is one of the traditional stages on which Icelandic art history has been based, and has had a formative influence on national and gendered discourse. It must be examined from that viewpoint.

Landscape painting and art became intimately related to ideas of tradition and nationalism, and in fact not many Icelanders had had an eye for the beauty of the Icelandic nature before that time, although nature had certainly played a key role in the shaping of Icelanders’ national consciousness, in terms of the poems of the nineteenth-century.³⁴⁴

³³⁹ “Myndasýning”, *Ísafold*, December 19, 1900, 311. See also, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Brautryðjendur í upphafi aldar”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. I. Landslag, rómantík og sýmbólismi, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 90.

³⁴⁰ Jón Helgason, “Ásgrímur málarí Jónsson”, *Ísafold*, October 24, 1903, 257

³⁴¹ “Útilegumaðurinn”, *Sunnarfari*, 9, no. 8 (1901), 64. See also, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Listvakning á 19. öld”, 28–33 and 46–49.

³⁴² Ólafur Kvaran, *Einar Jónsson myndhöggvari. Verk, táknefni og menningarsögulegt samhengi* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2018), 20–27 and 34–47.

³⁴³ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 150–151.

³⁴⁴ One of the *Fjölnir* men, Tómas Sæmundsson, had complained bitterly in an article in *Fjölnir* (1837) about Icelanders’ remissiveness on ancient culture and the country’s nature, as well as the lack of information for

However, foreign travellers had shown interest in the country's nature and landscape. Negative ideas about Iceland had been predominant from the Middle Ages until the mid-eighteenth century, but changed in the latter half of that century to romantic notions of nature and Iceland's magnificent landscape, its sublime beauty and awe-inspiring society of the Middle Ages.³⁴⁵ In the Danish, English and French research expeditions in the nineteenth century, talented and respected artists took part in drawing, painting and taking photographs of Icelandic landscape—places such as Þingvellir and Geysir, as well as volcanoes like Hekla. Here, it is important to point out that in the founding donation to the National Gallery in 1884, which was covered in Chapter 2, the main subject matter of Danish painters had been Danish landscape, and a lot of emphasis was put in the discourse on the “foreign collection” which, however, also included drawings, watercolours and oil paintings. These were therefore among the first actual landscapes in art of Icelandic nature.³⁴⁶

As already mentioned, the first painting of Þingvellir by an Icelandic artist was made by Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen in 1883. Sigfús Eymundsson's photographs of Þingvellir and other spots in the country are also considered to be the first of these places and shaped the view of his contemporaries and the artists who followed.³⁴⁷ Hence, Icelandic photographers were photographing Icelandic landscape before 1900, and Sigfús Eymundsson and also Noline Weywadt were two of these.³⁴⁸ In this way, the vision of foreigners and the art creations of women are ignored, along with other art forms such as photography and needlework.

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Icelanders adopted the following notion of the course of its national history. There was in essence a *cycle of history* that started with the Golden Age during the so-called Icelandic Commonwealth (930–1262), with the founding of the Alþingi, and the glorious period of Old Icelandic literature. This was

progress in general. See, Tómas Sæmundsson, “Eptirmæli ársins 1836, eins og það var á Íslandi”, *Fjölur*, 3 (1837), 3–33.

³⁴⁵ Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Í fjarska norðursins*, 149–207 and 228–231.

³⁴⁶ Frank Ponzi, *Ísland á 19. öld. Leiðangrar og listamenn* (Nineteenth-century Iceland. Artists and Odysseys) transl. Ólafur B. Guðnason (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1986), 22–23; Þóra Kristjánsdóttir, “Listir og handverk á 19. öld”, 436–437; Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Í fjarska norðursins*, 149–207 and 228–231. Several works from Iceland (drawings, watercolours and oil paintings), including by Frederik Theodor Kloss, e.g. *Við Öxará* (Þingvellir), 1876 (oils), August G. Schiött, *Við Þingvelli*, 1872 (oils) and Emanuel Larsen, *Geysir*, 1847 (oils). See, *Stofngjöf Listasafns Íslands. Afmælisýning*, ed. Bera Nordal (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 1994). See also, Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1945*, 15, 36–43 and 58.

³⁴⁷ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Sigfús Eymundsson myndasmiður*, 43.

³⁴⁸ Furthermore, Magnús Ólafsson travelled widely around the country from the beginning of the twentieth century and took many stereoscopic pictures of the landscape, and photographer Ólafur Magnússon enlarged and hand-coloured or monotoned his landscape photos in an artistic way. See, Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, “Svipmyndir af landi og þjóð”, 318–319.

followed by the declining period (1262–1550) and the debasement period (1550–1750); and finally by the restoration period (1750–1900), with its battle for independence and national awakening. In this context, it is important to look at an example of art historical analogy similar to that which Vasari maintained five centuries earlier, from the glory and perfection of the Ancient Greeks to the murky Middle Ages, prior to the Renaissance and its masters. Furthermore, the Golden Age was also linked to the strong, masculine Viking: the virility that was manifested in politics and the nation's culture.³⁴⁹

In political terms, Iceland obtained home rule in 1904.³⁵⁰ This coincided with the biggest social changes since the settlement, with growing urbanization, a society on its way into the world of industrialization, and essential changes for the growth of fine art in Iceland. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the National Gallery started acquiring its first Icelandic works.³⁵¹ The first one was *Útlagar* by sculptor Einar Jónsson in 1904, which was greeted to great acclaim by Icelanders, particularly because as mentioned before, the subject matter came from Icelandic folktales.³⁵² The next Icelandic work acquired by the National Gallery, and also the first painting by an Icelandic artist in the collection, was the landscape painting *Áning* (e. Repose) by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson in 1911.³⁵³ A statue of the national hero Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) was ordered from Einar Jónsson and set up in Reykjavík; it was unveiled on the anniversary of the poet's birthday, November 16, 1907, and great effort was made to make the day as ceremonial as possible, with speeches and poetry composed for the occasion.³⁵⁴

When it comes to landscape painting and nationalism, Icelandic artists were influenced by transnational nationalistic trends. Yet it is clear that Iceland is special in a number of ways

³⁴⁹ Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson points out that generally it is the romantic vision of nature that is dominant in texts on Iceland for the whole of the twentieth century and up into contemporary times, whereby the land and the splendid nature are glorified. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Í fjarska norðursins*, 255–257. The old Golden Age and the immediate future of the nation after the turn of the century and this awareness is interwoven with organized history lessons in schools in which writings by historian Jón Jónsson Aðils and other nationalistic historians comprised part of the teaching material. See, Jón Jónsson Aðils, *Íslenzkt þjóðerni. Alþýðufyrirlestrar* (Reykjavík: Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1903), 241–260. See also, Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn*, 39–40; Gunnar Karlsson, “Markmið sögukennslu. Söguleg athugun og hugleiðingar um framtíðarstefnu”, *Saga* 20, no. 1 (1982), 173–222; Ingi Sigurðsson, “Sagnaritun í anda rómantíkur og þjóðernishyggju”, *Íslenzk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. aldar* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Sögufélag dreifing, 1986), 75–89.

³⁵⁰ Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 years*, 280–291.

³⁵¹ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Brautryðjendur í upphafi aldar”, 76–109.

³⁵² It was Ditlev Thomsen, a Reykjavík merchant, who at the bequest of the artist bought the work in 1904 and gave it to the Icelandic nation, where it first appeared in the entrance hall of the Alþingi (“Útilegumanninn”, *Fjallkonan*, August 3, 1904, 124).

³⁵³ The work was also a donation from several Reykjavík residents, but was not bought by the gallery itself. See, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Brautryðjendur í upphafi aldar”, 109.

³⁵⁴ Ólafur Kvaran, “Brautryðjendur í upphafi aldar”, 69. The first works that were bought with national funds and were not donations were added to the collection in 1915. These were two paintings by Ásgrímur Jónsson, two by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and one by Jóhannes S. Kjarval. See, Heiða Björk Árnadóttir, “Listasafn Íslands”, 12–13.

in an art historical context, for example in a belated fine art tradition, which then becomes characterized mostly by landscape painting, which in turn is related to cultural and national identity as well as nationalism. One can find parallels in Norway and Finland. In the same way, Norwegian and Finnish landscape painters sought to identify the distinctiveness of their countries and capture the national character. Finland was struggling for independence from Russia, and gained it in 1917, while Norway broke out of its union with Sweden in 1905. In spite of the presence of women artists as landscape painters, this genre of painting was dominated by men and considered to be male.³⁵⁵ Three masters composed the vanguard of Finland's cultural and political identity: composer Jean Sibelius, landscape painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela, and the author Juhani Aho. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the cultural movement *The Young Norway* (n. Det Unge Norge) sought to build national identity, with composers such as Edvard Grieg, writers Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, and romantic nationalist artists such as J.C. Dahl, Erik Werenskiöld and Frits Thaulowl. Moreover, the painter Harald Sohlberg epitomizes the relationship between landscape painting and Norwegian national identity.³⁵⁶ These were all male, heroic figures, who were considered to support the construction of a national identity.³⁵⁷

Likewise, looking through the lens of critical feminist, postcolonial and art historical theory, one can find parallels in Canadian art history. Thus, Brenda Lafleur has pointed out that Canadian art history has been dominated by the glorification of a group of male painters known as the Group of Seven. The supremacy of this group overlaps with Canadian nationalism and the forging of a national identity during the 1920s and 1930s. The Canadian landscape became,

³⁵⁵ See, on women artists in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Estonia, in e.g. Anne Wichstrøm, *Kvinneliv, kunsterliv. Kvinnelige malere i Norge før 1900*; Anu Utriainen, "Finnish Women Artists in the Modern World", Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki (FNG Research), 5 (2019), 1–18; Anu Allas and Tiina Abel, *Creating the self. Emancipating woman in Estonian and Finnish art*; Anna Lena Lindberg, *Konst, kön och blick: Feministiska bildanalyser från renässans till postmodernism*; Eva-Lena Bengtsson and Barbro Werkmäster, *Kvinna och konstnär i 1800 talets Sverige* (Uppsala: Signum, 2004).

³⁵⁶ Xander Brett, "Nationalism in the Landscapes of Harald Sohlberg", *Fika*, June 3, 2019, fika-online.com; Sue Prideaux, "The landscape painters who invented Norway", *Apollo*, May 4, 2019, apollo-magazine.com.

³⁵⁷ As the years 1889 to 1908 are generally considered in Nordic art history as a nationalist period, art historian Vibeke Røstorp has called this the creation of the *mythe de retour* and pointed out that more than 380 Norwegian and Swedish artists were in France around 1900, contrary to what others have maintained. Hence, the new perspective on the art in Sweden around 1900 underlined systematically the discourse of *the retour* from France and the creation of a new, artistic national school of their own. See, Vibeke Røstorp, *Le mythe du retour. Les artistes scandinaves en France de 1889 à 1908* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitets förlag, Eidos, 26, 2013), 408–410.

through various cultural and political institutions, “virtually institutionalized” by the Canadian government, such as through the purchases and sponsored touring exhibitions.³⁵⁸

Hence, trying to establish its own power separate to that of Britain, Lafleur argues in gender-related terms that the aim was to change its status from a “feminine colony” to a “masculine nation”. Therefore, landscape paintings of the Group of Seven served to counter the British colonialist discourse of cultural and national superiority, depicting the male artist as an explorer, settler, in untouched, rough landscape, which differentiates itself from the earlier, softer landscape of the Old World. The art of the Group of Seven was used by those institutions as an instrument to impose a “vision of country on the country” as the “real Canadian landscape”, where its artists were untainted by imported artistic styles and conventions.³⁵⁹ Here are all the factors that also characterize the discourse on landscape, nationality and a masculine nation in Iceland. The interconnection between culture and politics in Iceland, as well as a growing conviction of the national importance of supporting the arts, became evident between 1910 and 1930. The idea that culture was not only an individual mode of expression but also a service to society was ascendant and the aim was to build up a system to support the arts and utilize them for the benefit of society.³⁶⁰ The artist’s duties are to attempt to capture the country as a perfect imitation, the nature as the resource of the nation, and the country will thereby itself become the resource and property of the nation. The great “Saga artist” is a settler, a hero, virile, masculine, the strong individual.

This is in line with what historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has argued: that Icelandic women were in fact not defined as fully fledged members of the emerging nation state in the period 1900–1930. From a gender perspective, the “nature” of the Icelandic nation was predominantly masculine. Women were thought not to possess the characteristics of the “true Icelander”. That identity applied above all to urbanized middle-class men who gradually acquired power in the new nation state; the true Icelandic nature, i.e. physical strength, intelligence and clear thinking, was not regarded as one of the common qualities of women. In fact, it has been convincingly argued that the identity of women was constructed to a great extent as an antithesis of the “individualism upon which the identity of the Icelander was based”.³⁶¹ These notions became important aspects of the national hero as well as those of the

³⁵⁸ Brenda Lafleur, ““Resting” in history: translating the art of Jin-me Yoon”, *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 217–227.

³⁵⁹ Brenda Lafleur, ““Resting” in history: translating the art of Jin-me Yoon”, 217–227.

³⁶⁰ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 146 and 152.

³⁶¹ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 365–373.

great writer or the great artist. This attitude has to be kept in mind when considering the idea of the artist, his social role, the benefit of his art and his cultural contribution to society.

As a guiding principle of Western art history, the gendered discourse is apparent when it comes to ideas on the genius and the binary opposition—virility or masculinity—versus femininity.³⁶² However, the nationalist discourse seems to aggravate gendered discourse and is an even greater excluding factor. And as would be seen later, in the following decades: as women artists (or women’s cultural contribution in general) are not part of the true, Icelandic art, they are released from their bondage when exhibiting overseas.³⁶³ Women artists seem to get more positive comments in foreign reviews. It is paradoxical, but there they are seen as Icelandic, a part of the Icelandic nation, and enjoy more cultural citizenship “away” from their homeland.

3.2. *Textility*: women’s legacy and agency

3.2.1. *Combining all aspects of textility: Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen*

The concept *textility*, as stated in the Introduction and in Chapter 2, comes of use when examining the struggle for cultural citizenship, as a basis for what was to come and what was gained. It refers to the blurring of the demarcation between art forms and the blurring of the public and private spheres for women, as well as that of geographical barriers. As stated before, women’s voices were not uniform and conflicting views could be heard, from conservative to progressive, as women interpreted the “women’s question” in various ways, whether it was “women’s nature”, femininity or women’s rights. This applies in Iceland and in an international context.³⁶⁴ Yet despite conflicting views, when looked at as a whole, one can in fact talk about discursive formations in women’s periodicals from the first publications of Icelandic women at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the many common denominators in the women’s periodicals in Iceland, as well as in neighbouring countries, was the desire to establish and document a women’s history and the role they played in “constructing feminist identities and

³⁶² Katy Deepwell, *Women artists between the wars*, 262–266.

³⁶³ Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, *Nationalism, Gender and the Contemporary Icelandic Women’s Movement* (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1992), 164–207.

³⁶⁴ Marianne Dekoven, “Modernism and Gender”, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 174–175.

communities”.³⁶⁵ Women actively negotiated their situations to produce distinctive interventions in their own cultural context.³⁶⁶ In particular, the intention was to do justice to the women who had been controversial or had not gained enough coverage despite their contributions, and to defend these women.³⁶⁷

With the above-mentioned aspect in mind, it is worth looking at the traditional stage of Icelandic art history, which has become firmly established, from a different viewpoint: that of gendered discourse and gender during that time. From the time when pioneers in Icelandic art stepped forward, the distinction between the art creations of women and men became gradually sharper: Fine art was done by men while art and crafts, such as textiles, were the realm of women, and always associated with domesticity and femininity. High art and the fine artist had “come to mean the direct antithesis of all that is defined by the *feminine stereotype*”.³⁶⁸ Thus women continued to be labelled as “dilettantes” in art.³⁶⁹ Now and then, a few sentences about women who went abroad to study slipped into the mainstream press, but then the trails disappear and it is very difficult to find any references to them, let alone to their work.

The word “home industry” (i. heimilisiðnaður) appeared in discussions in Icelandic papers, primarily in conjunction with innovations and advances. Summer courses were offered in Copenhagen for Icelandic women by Emma Gad and the *Danish Crafts Association* at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the purpose of promoting interest in applied arts. During the period 1901–1910, 28 Icelandic girls received free schooling. The courses influenced the art and practical education of Icelandic women, and with them came influence from the *Arts and Crafts movement*; women thus contributed to the shaping of modern applied arts in Iceland in the first decades of the twentieth century.³⁷⁰

In Iceland, the network that had formed between Danish and Icelandic women turned out to be as important as ever in a variety of ways and is discussed in an article by Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir in *Kvennablaðið* (1901). Around the same time, a similar connection is set up between *Danish Crafts Association*, *Thorvaldsen’s association* and the Women’s school (i.

³⁶⁵ Victoria Bazin and Melanie Waters, “Mediated and Mediating Feminisms”, 347–358.

³⁶⁶ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old mistresses*, 170; Charlotte Foucher Zarmanian, *Créatrices en 1900*, 82–89.

³⁶⁷ Several recent studies have revealed that women’s writing was much more extensive than previously thought. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “Sögulegir gerendur og aukapersónur”, 53–86.

³⁶⁸ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 80.

³⁶⁹ Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen, “Introduction”, 6.

³⁷⁰ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli*, 19–29; Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað”, 22.

Kvennaskólinn) in Reykjavík.³⁷¹ Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen wrote an article in *Framsókn* (1900), suggesting e.g. that handicrafts should be sold to foreigners in Reykjavík, at a Trade Bazaar at Austurstræti 6 (maintained by the *Thorvaldsen's association*).³⁷² The bazaar with Icelandic trade sold items including cloth for men's clothing, brocade spreads, silver items and needlework, and in 1902 was part of a bazaar run by *Danish Crafts Association* in Copenhagen, where silver items, woollens and baldering were popular products.³⁷³

Increased interest and a wider selection of handicraft courses and tuition became apparent in Iceland in the first decades of the twentieth century and women became more visible in the public arena by teaching handicrafts and running both handicraft shops and sewing workshops. Like Thorvaldsensfélagið, the women's school *Kvennaskólinn* (where tapestry and brocading were among the crafts taught) plays a major role in this important cooperation between Danish and Icelandic women, and thereby in the participation of women in the public arena in industry and art creation. It could be argued that from the beginning of the twentieth century, women's schools had shaped art and the practical education of young Icelandic women in the spirit of aesthetic ideas of the applied arts movement and new opportunities to promote Icelandic industry.³⁷⁴

But it was no less important for women's progress that they take up the pen in order to stand guard for Icelandic women and answer certain criticisms and misrepresentations abroad. Thus the Norwegian Ida Hansen, editor of the periodical *Kvinden og Hjemmet*, wrote that Icelandic women in history had been deprived of the education that men got from their journeys abroad, and as the Icelandic women had not travelled overseas "they became narrow-

³⁷¹ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir discusses the importance of this relationship between Icelandic and Danish women in "Samband milli danskra og íslenskra kvenna", *Kvennablaðið*, 7, no. 4 (1901), 25–26. See also, Arndís S. Árnadóttir, "...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað", 21–31.

³⁷² See, Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir, "Íslenzkur iðnaður", *Framsókn*, 6, no. 3 (1900), 10–11. As mentioned earlier, the Thorvaldsen's association was one of them, where artist Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen devoted her energy, while *Hið íslenska kvenfélag* (e. The Icelandic Women's Association) was another, which had powerful women associated with it. In 1904 the women's association *Hringurinn* was founded, with artist Kristín Vídalín Jacobson as president. The Nordic associations focused on the teaching of home industry and handicrafts, with exhibitions and sales of items linked to national traditions; this later became a model for the activities of the Icelandic associations in the first decades of the twentieth century (Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli*, 19–38 and 272–273).

³⁷³ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, "...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað", 21–31. The Danish periodical *Kvinden og samfundet* writes in 1901 that "Thora Thoroddsen had sent Icelandic jewellery", such as belts, brooches and buckles, to a women's exhibition in Odense, Denmark, in 1901, and that they were for sale there. See, "Kvindernes Kunststilling i Odense", *Kvinden og samfundet*, 17, no. 15 (1901), 57. The person responsible for Kvindernes Udstilling was Sophie Breum, and the emphasis was on literature, art and handicrafts by women, with reference to the Women's exhibition in 1895.

³⁷⁴ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, "...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað", 24–31.

minded”.³⁷⁵ Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen wrote a reply that appeared in the Danish periodical *Kvindernes Blad* (1900) and a little later in *Framsókn* in Iceland. Þóra corrected what she claimed were Ida’s misconceptions and said that on the contrary, for many centuries Icelandic women had actually gone abroad, and travelled widely “as is reflected in their needlework” which showed signs of influence from southern cultures.³⁷⁶ That same year, Icelandic women were encouraged to send display items to the *1900 Paris Exposition* (fr. Exposition Universelle).³⁷⁷

Þóra, who had moved in Copenhagen in 1895 to live with her husband, Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, continued to gather all kinds of sources on cultural history, textiles and embroidery, as well as on the history of medieval craft in Iceland and Denmark.³⁷⁸ She wrote well-researched articles, published both in Icelandic and Danish periodicals, e.g. *Vort Hjem*, which was now edited by Emma Gad, and *Kvindernes Blad*.³⁷⁹ Sources in Denmark also indicate that she carried out historical research on tapestry from the Middle Ages in Iceland, along with altar cloths, antependia and chasubles.³⁸⁰

Þóra exchanged letters with Albert Frank Kendrick, a textile historian, expert in medieval history and keeper of the Department of Textiles in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, who worked at the museum from 1897 until 1924.³⁸¹ She appears to have asked

³⁷⁵ Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, “Nokkur orð um utanfarir og listiðnað íslenzkra kvenna á fyrri öldum”, *Framsókn*, 6, no. 7 (1900), 25–27. Ida Hansen was the editor of *Kvinden og Hjemmet* (e. The Woman and the Home), published 1888–1947, in Iowa, produced for Scandinavian women living in North America.

³⁷⁶ Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, “Nokkur orð um utanfarir og listiðnað íslenzkra kvenna á fyrri öldum”, 25–27. Thora Thoroddsen [Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen], “Nogle Ord om Islandske Kvinders Udenlandsrejser og Kunstflid i Sagatiden”, *Kvindernes Blad*, May, 24, 1900. *Kvindernes Blad* was a supplement to the Danish newspaper *Nationaltidende* (1876–1961).

³⁷⁷ “Frá Parísarsýningunni (eftir Frú Linu Holm)”, *Framsókn*, 7, no. 3 (1901), 10; “Frá Parísarsýningunni (eftir Frú Linu Holm)”, *Framsókn*, 7, no. 4 (1901), 14–15; Jarprúður Jónsdóttir, “Íslenzkur iðnaður”, *Framsókn*, 6, no. 3 (1900), 10–11; “Sýningarmunir”, *Framsókn*, 5, no. 5 (1899), 18–19. *Þjóðólfur* reports that the Icelandic section of the exhibition had received a great deal of attention and was mentioned in French newspapers such as *Le Figaro* and *Le Matin*. See, “Íslenzku munirnir í París og frakknesku blöðin”, *Þjóðólfur*, June 8, 1900, 107; “Ísl. sýningardeildin”, *Þjóðviljinn og Þjóðviljinn ungi*, December 22, 1900, 189. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson points out that old handwork was prominent, i.e. wood carving but also embroidery, weaving, gold and silver work, not to mention the national costume. See, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, *Í fjarska norðursins. Ísland og Grænland*, 247. Yet, in *Fjallkonan*, it says that the Icelandic exhibition in the Danish exhibition hall was “a disgrace” to the country, “as was to be expected”. See, “Útlendar fréttir”, *Fjallkonan*, June 2, 1900, 1.

³⁷⁸ Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 193.

³⁷⁹ Þóra Thoroddsen [Thora Thoroddsen] and Nanna Ring, “Guldbroderi”, *Vort Hjem*, vol. 3, ed. Emma Gad (Copenhagen: Det Nordiske Forlag, 1903), 429–460. See also, articles by Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, “Ísland (a og b)”, *Fyens Stiftstidende*, April 9, 1901; “Íslanske Haandarbeider”, *Kvindernes Blad*, January 27, 1904; “Husflid og Kunstflid (paa Island)”, *Atlanten*, 14 (1905), 125–128; “Husflid og Kunstflid (paa Island)”, *Atlanten*, 15 (1905), 129–134.

³⁸⁰ Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 193. Þóra has written on a note, *Diplomata Islandica*, IV, 107 (e. The Arnamagnæan Manuscript Collection).

³⁸¹ From Kendrick to Þóra, letters dated January 23, March 15 and 27, 1899. Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 192.

Kendrick for some photos of the celebrated French Bayeux tapestry, and it was he who sent her a copy of Lady M(arion) Alford's *Needlework as Art* (1886). In exchange, Þóra advised him on a chasuble in the Victoria and Albert collection that had been newly bought from Denmark, as Kendrick had doubts on the year of origin and history of the chasuble, and asked Þóra for her opinion.³⁸² At that time, Þóra had for some time had a book in the making, as revealed in the correspondence with Kendrick, and had applied for funding and received a grant of 300 Danish kroner, which was signed by the administration of *Julius Skrikes Stiftelse* for the publication of a book on the history of women's needlework.³⁸³

As well as gathering knowledge about Icelandic needlework and handicrafts, Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen took part in organizing women's exhibitions, herself exhibiting both painting and handicrafts. She was active in various women's associations in Copenhagen, furthering many of the diverse women's struggles with her contribution, combining all aspects of *textility*. Þóra was also an active member of various women's associations in Copenhagen. In 1897, Axelline Lund founded and became the head of the women's cultural association, *Cirklen*, inspired by the women's exhibition *Kvindernes Udstilling Fra Fortid til Nutid* in 1895.³⁸⁴ In 1899, Lund introduced the idea of a meeting and to invite the Icelandic women writers and artists to Copenhagen, and Þóra and her sister Elínborg wrote an article in *Kvennablaðið* to promote the proposed offer.³⁸⁵ Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir described *Cirklen* in an article in *Framsókn* as an association that included the "cream of all the spiritual brains of women in Copenhagen, as women of literature and women artists have their sole origin in the association".³⁸⁶ In 1901, Þóra was chosen as the delegate of *Cirklen* in the *Women's Council* (d. Kvinderådet) in Copenhagen, which was established in 1899 as a domestic umbrella organization and a part of the *International Council of Women*.³⁸⁷

³⁸² Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 193. Letters from Kendrick in the year 1900. See also Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 192.

³⁸³ Þjms. Þ. og Þ.Th. 193.

³⁸⁴ Axelline Lund is in Þóra's correspondence, see, Þ. og Þ.Th. 192,

³⁸⁵ Þóra (Pjetursdóttir) Thoroddsen and Elínborg Pjetursdottir Thorberg, "'Heimboð frá kvenfélaginu 'Cirklen'", *Kvennablaðið*, 5, no. 8 (1899), 57.

³⁸⁶ Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir, "'Kvenfélagið 'Cirklen'", *Framsókn*, 5, no. 2 (1899), 5–7.

³⁸⁷ Letter from Axelline Lund to Þóra, inviting her to the society, dated December 7, 1901. Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th, 192. See also, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Íslenskar konur í Kaupmannahöfn (með myndum)", *Kvennablaðið*, 7, no. 6 (1901), 41. Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir wrote that it was mostly due to Þóra "that the association *Cirklen* started to invite Icelandic women south to Copenhagen, as she had done her part in arousing the knowledge and friendly sentiments of Danish women to Iceland and Icelandic women, both with articles in periodicals and more". See, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Heimfélag kvenna (The International Council of Women)", *Kvennablaðið*, 5, no. 8 (1899), 59–60.

Correspondence was important for women, in order to form and maintain networks for discussion. Among Þóra's correspondents was Johanne Münter, one of the pioneers in the Danish women's rights movement.³⁸⁸ Münter was a member of several women's associations, a vice-president of the *Danish Women Suffrage Federation* and also of the women artists' association *Cirklen*.³⁸⁹ Þóra wrote to Münter, expressing interest for Iceland to become an auxiliary to the *International Woman Suffrage Alliance* (IWSA), founded in 1904 in Berlin.³⁹⁰ Münter then wrote to Carrie Chapman Catt, the American women's suffragist leader and founder of both the *League of Women Voters* and the *International Woman Suffrage Alliance* (IWSA), about Þóra's interest in collaborating. Catt replied to Þóra on behalf of the IWSA, as president, on 27 May, 1905 and wanted Þóra to advance the movement for women and organize an Icelandic Woman Suffrage Association "that would become allied with our International Association" and to attend the large women's assembly in London in May 1906.³⁹¹ What is remarkable is that Catt wrote a letter on the same day to Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir and that in fact, Münter and Catt had obtained Bríet's name and address from Þóra.³⁹² Thus, it happened that Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, like Þóra, was invited to attend the assembly of the IWSA (which was finally held in Copenhagen but not London, in June 1906), and it was Bríet who eventually gave a talk on the rights and position of women in Iceland, especially on how municipal suffrage was obtained in Iceland (1882). In *Kvennablaðið*, Bríet reported from a meeting of the Alliance that she attended in Copenhagen and mentioned Catt and Münter, who was in charge of the reception committee in Copenhagen.³⁹³

As previously defined, *textility* includes women's various artistic creations, women's exhibitions and their employment opportunities, as well as women's questions and women's rights in politics and in cultural matters. In 1905, the *Dansk Koloniudstilling*, or the Danish Colonial Exhibition, was organized in Copenhagen. Greenland and the Danish West Indies were

³⁸⁸ Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192. Letter from Louise Ravn-Hansen to Þóra, October 26, 1901.

³⁸⁹ Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192.

³⁹⁰ Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192.

³⁹¹ See, letter from Carrie Chapman Catt to Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, May 27, 1905 (Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192).

³⁹² See, letter from Münter to Þóra, M 24 (Mars/May), 1905 (Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192).

³⁹³ Auður Styrkársdóttir, "Mér fannst eg finna sjálfa mig undireins og eg var laus við landann". *Kvennabaráttan á Íslandi og alþjóðlegt samstarf*", *Saga*, 50, no. 1 (2012), 35–77, here 53–60. In *Kvennablaðið*, Bríet reported from a meeting of the Alliance that she attended in Copenhagen. See, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Kvennastórfundurinn í Kaupmannahöfn í sumar", *Kvennablaðið*, 12, no. 11 (1906), 84–86. Here, Bríet discussed in particular Carrie Chapman Catt. Sigrún Pálsdóttir argues that Þóra was not very interested in founding a women's rights association in Iceland, but at that time she was suffering from ill health. See, Sigrún Pálsdóttir, *Þóra biskups og raunir íslenskrar embættismannastéttar*, 198–199.

included, as well as Iceland and the Faroe Islands.³⁹⁴ The run-up to the exhibition was such that in the year 1904 the *Danish Crafts Association*, with Emma Gad at the helm, decided to set up exhibitions of hand-crafted wares from the Danish colonies. Þóra had corresponded with Gad in the preparation for the exhibition in 1904 and wanted to use the opportunity and exhibit Icelandic handicrafts there (embroidery, needlework and old jewellery).³⁹⁵ The exhibition was to be housed in the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen.³⁹⁶

As it turned out, however, this exhibition became a hot topic and sparked off much controversy. What mostly irked the Icelandic students in Copenhagen was that Iceland was called a Danish colony. Icelanders considered themselves to hold a special place in terms of the Danish colonies and dependent territories.³⁹⁷ The exhibition opened on 31 May 1905 and proceeded in a considerably changed form to that which was originally intended. Its name was changed, to the benefit (and great relief) of the Icelanders, and was called the *Danish Colonial Exhibition as well as Exhibition for Iceland and the Faroe Islands* (d. Dansk Koloniudstilling, samt Udstilling for Island og Færoerne).³⁹⁸

While much has been written about this exhibition, the angle that has not been examined sufficiently, in consideration precisely to these nationalistic tendencies and choosing one group but excluding another, is that it was supposed to be not least a representation of women's handicrafts and to arouse attention to them. The exhibition was under the leadership of Emma Gad, the one who had notably provided free lessons in handiwork for young Icelandic girls, and the profit, if any, was supposed to go to this teaching.³⁹⁹ But in the eyes of Icelanders, it was “an unremarkable exhibition that the Danish handicrafts association has stacked together, and no sensible person would even consider using it for a base for any judgement of our culture”.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁴ *Dansk Koloniudstilling (Grønland og Dansk Vestindien) samt Udstilling fra Island og Færøerne* (Copenhagen: 1905).

³⁹⁵ Þjms. Þ. og Þ. Th. 192,193.

³⁹⁶ Besides the councillor, Emma Gad got representatives from each country to help her; the Icelandic representatives were e.g. Helga Vídalín, living in Copenhagen and a good friend of Gad; Elínborg (Pétursdóttir) Thorberg, also living in Copenhagen. See, Guðjón Friðriksson og Jón Þ. Þór, *Kaupmannahöfn sem höfuðborg Íslands*, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2013), 390–391.

³⁹⁷ Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, “Af reiðum Íslendingum. Deilur um Nýlendusýninguna 1905”, *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?*, eds. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé and Sverrir Jakobsson (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2003), 135–150; Margrét Jónasdóttir, “Skrælingjasýningin”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, July 9, 1994, 9–10.

³⁹⁸ Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, “Af reiðum Íslendingum. Deilur um Nýlendusýninguna 1905”, 135–150.

³⁹⁹ “Íslensk sýning í Kaupmannahöfn 1905”, *Austri*, December 31, 1904, 157. Emma Gad had also founded the women's magazine *Kvindernes blad* (1905) and it should be mentioned that the same Emma Gad was redactor of the women's periodical *Vort Hjem*, which Björn Bjarnarson had started in 1884 (see, Chapter 2).

⁴⁰⁰ Guðmundur Benediktsson, ““Nýlendusýning” í Kaupmannahöfn”, *Gjallarhorn*, January 6, 1905, 3.

Yet, unlike many, some Icelandic women saw it in a constructive way, forming networks with influential women in Denmark. Þóra most certainly did not sit twiddling her thumbs during her years in Copenhagen, and managed to form a network with cultural pioneers, like powerful women in Denmark also did. *The Icelandic Women's Rights Association* (i. Kvenréttindafélag Íslands) was founded in 1907, with Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir as the first chairwoman. Bríet and other women from the association founded the *Women's Reading Club* (i. Lestrarfélag kvenna) in 1911 in Reykjavík, but the model came from abroad, as such clubs were operated widely in Europe, including in Copenhagen.⁴⁰¹ Both of these became an important platform for women's campaigns in various ways, including that of women's handicrafts. In her writings, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir discussed the importance of home industry as, for instance, an employment opportunity for women.⁴⁰² Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, another active participant in the *Women's Rights Association*, held a public lecture on home industry, and mentioned the discussion on Icelandic *peasant art* which appeared in the journal of the English *Arts and Crafts movement*, *The Studio* (1910), and was dedicated to the applied arts from Sweden, Lapland and Iceland. Inga Lára said that the old Icelandic arts and crafts stand on equal footing with those from the neighbouring countries: they are one aspect of home industry and very comprehensive.⁴⁰³

The impact of both the home industry movement in Iceland and the *Arts and Crafts movement* is reflected in the foundation of the *Icelandic Handicraft Association* (i. Heimilisiðnaðarfélagið) in 1913. The initiative came from the above-mentioned women's reading club in Reykjavík, and they recruited both men and women. Along with economic and social progress, one might say that the aim of setting up the association had been based on nationalistic views linked to the struggle for increased national sovereignty for Icelanders. What is perhaps noticeable is that a man was chosen as president of the committee, and of the 34 founding members, 21 were men. On the other hand, the idea was not least to increase the

⁴⁰¹ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, "Nýjar hugmyndir eða hefðbundin gildi? Mennta- og fræðsluviðleitni Lestrarfélags kvenna í Reykjavík", *Íslenska söguþingið 30. maí–1. júní 2002. 2. íslenska söguþingið*, eds. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir and Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, Sagnfræðingafélag Íslands, Sögufélag, 2002), 445–456. The journal of the reading group, *Mánaðarritið*, was started in 1912. In the same way as abroad, this women's space was crucial for them to reflect on their place in the social order and their lives, because it was still considered dangerous for women to read as it was a threat to the domestic order. See, Stefan Bollmann, *Women Who Read Are Dangerous*, ed. Nicole Langtot, transl. Christine Shuttleworth (New York: Abbeville Press Edition, 2016).

⁴⁰² Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Íðnaðurinn og konurnar", *Kvennablaðið*, 16, no. 4 (1910), 25–27.

⁴⁰³ Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, "Um heimilisiðnað á Norðurlöndum. Erindi flutt fyrir Alþýðufræðslu Stúdentafélagsins í Reykjavík 28. apríl 1912", *Andvari*, 37, no. 1 (1912), 34–63. See also, on the newly founded Heimilisiðnaðarfélag Íslands, in Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, "Heimilisiðnaðarfélag Íslands", *Kvennablaðið*, 7, no. 19 (1913), 51–52.

opportunities for the general public, men and women, to bring in income by encouraging the production and sale of items useful in daily life. The *Icelandic Handicraft Association* provided courses and tuition to men, women, young people and children, including in carpentry and weaving, bookbinding, basket-making and brush-making.⁴⁰⁴

It has been argued that during a short “glorious period” of five years, from 1907–1911, “women really seemed to be entering politics and the public sphere.”⁴⁰⁵ However, it has also been argued that in the years 1911–1912, a division arose regarding attitudes to women’s rights and a harsher tone on femininity appeared in public discourse when women acquired full citizenship.⁴⁰⁶ Nevertheless, as has been explained here, the importance of women’s contributions in the form of *textility* should not be overlooked as an important precursor to this short period, 1907–1911, and the following decades. These can surely be considered glorious years of women’s collaboration, and the cooperation between Icelandic and Danish women—which had begun at the end of the nineteenth century—turned out to be highly productive, as a precursor and a basis for the major impact that was going to come. However, interwoven with this is the struggle for women’s rights: a call for the rights and roles of women in shaping society and making full use of their civil rights, such as enjoying cultural rights. It actually went hand in hand that although the discourse on the nature and the role of women had increased, women’s resistance was always present, as can be seen for example in the women’s periodicals.⁴⁰⁷

3.2.2. *Of mainstream discourse and marginal, parrêsiás and mothers of geniuses*

There was a sharp distinction between women’s periodicals and the dominant discourse in the male-oriented press. In fact, it is quite tangible in an article by Einar H. Kvaran in *Ísafold* (1912), where he depicted Icelandic women as being apathetic and indifferent, as they had for instance not written about their campaign in “the papers that the nation reads”.⁴⁰⁸ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir hotly answered this, stating it had now been proved with these words that

⁴⁰⁴ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli*, 45–69 and 272–275.

⁴⁰⁵ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 196–202 and 373.

⁴⁰⁶ Auður Styrkárssdóttir, *Barátta um vald. Konur í bæjarstjórn Reykjavíkur 1908–1922* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Háskólaútgáfan, 1994), 39–47; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 203, 234–239, 363–367.

⁴⁰⁷ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir and Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, “1916. Hún fór að kjósa”, *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 33–93.

⁴⁰⁸ E. H. [Einar H. Kvaran], “Kvenréttindabaráttan á Englandi”, *Ísafold*, Apríl 27, 1912, 93.

Icelandic women were not looked upon as part of the nation.⁴⁰⁹ The notion of a division between the women's periodicals and the paper that the "nation reads" is apparent. Outside of the latter, no discourse was considered valid: women's discourse was described as marginal whether it concerned politics, women's rights, art or culture.

The role of Icelandic nature as the painter's source material was adapted to the rhetoric of nationalism by the artists themselves, but as Ólafur Rastrick argues, "even more so by those who wrote about their works".⁴¹⁰ In fact, one could say that the artists themselves did not start to express themselves publicly on art until the 1930s, as will be discussed later. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the shaping of the discourse on the arts and the artists is in the hands of men from other areas of society, i.e. a group of several "public intellectuals" or national educators—men who were particularly dynamic in public discourse between 1910–1930.⁴¹¹ These actors in the public sphere have been defined in a Habermasian way as intellectuals who "engage spontaneously in public discourse with the intention of promoting general interests".⁴¹² However, naturally it is questionable whether that had actually been the goal, taking into consideration the discourse on the arts and culture.

Yet the Icelandic male public intellectuals had no knowledge of the genre and had neither practised painting nor studied art history, but all the same took control, and thus discourse was shaped to a certain extent in a different way to that of other countries, but likewise much in the spirit of the discourse there in general—on the genius, the hero, masculinity. In a way, as art history was a non-existing discipline at that time, women could more easily write about art and culture from another perspective. When women are discussed in the Icelandic women's periodicals, it is done on completely different grounds to that in the mainstream papers. There, the singularity of women is discussed, the woman as an individual, her background and her activities. Nonetheless, women's writings in the women's periodicals had hardly any effect and were not found in the mainstream male public discourse.

In the mainstream discourse on art and culture, not many articles either by women or about women were published. In 1907, Þóra (Thora) Friðriksson wrote a remarkable and comprehensive article in the cultural periodical *Skírnir*, the oldest Icelandic periodical (started in 1827), on one of the masters of art history—the artist Rembrandt—as his 300th anniversary

⁴⁰⁹ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, "Þingið í sumar", *Kvennablaðið*, 18, no. 3 (1912), 17–18. See also, Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 234–239.

⁴¹⁰ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 150–151.

⁴¹¹ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 13.

⁴¹² Nancy Fraser, *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, 67.

was being celebrated in the Netherlands at the time she had been there. What attracts attention here is that this prestigious, male-oriented periodical published an article written by a woman.⁴¹³ Secondly, that the article is on one of the great (male) masters in art history, published in a periodical which printed very few articles about art. And thirdly, that the article can be defined as scholarly, with reference to two renowned monographs on the artist in French, one by the Dutch art critic Carel Vosmaer and the other by the French artist and art critic François Émile Michel. In the article, Þóra described the career and life story of Rembrandt and his main works, representing an overview of the life of the artist along with his work.⁴¹⁴

Women trailblazers were held up as models in the women’s periodicals and some in fact were the subject of discussion—even rather detailed discussion—in other papers. In the autumn of 1907, Ásta Kristín Árnadóttir became the first woman to be admitted to the Copenhagen Technical College (d. Det Tekniske Selskabs Skole). From there, she went to Germany, to complete the examination in master craftsmanship “in one of the best ateliers in Hamburg”, and was the first Icelandic woman to complete a vocational education, in 1909, and at the same time the first Iclander to do so. Furthermore, Ásta showed her master painting of craftsmanship in Reykjavík, “to great acclaim”.⁴¹⁵ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir felt that the dinner held in 1910 in Ásta’s honour in Reykjavík was a harbinger of new times, as was the fact that so many women came together at the gathering “to honour this outrider and our pioneer”.⁴¹⁶

Nevertheless, the rules and traditions are such that women are wives and mothers, at best mothers of great men and male geniuses, like in the revolutionary short story by Ólöf Sigurðardóttir, *Móðir snillingsins* (e. Mother of the genius), which was published in 1910 in the

⁴¹³ It should be noted that in fact several women published articles in *Skírnir* in 1907, which was quite exceptional. Björg C. Þorláksson wrote about illegitimate children and their mothers and Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir on the history of women’s rights in the USA. See Björg Þ. Blöndal (Björg C. Þorláksson), “Barnsmæður”, *Skírnir*, 81, no. 2 (1907), 172–179; Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, “Ágrip af sögu kvenréttindahreyfingarinnar”, *Skírnir*, 81, no. 4 (1907), 342–359.

⁴¹⁴ Þóra Friðriksson, “Rembrandt. Í tilefni af 300 ára afmæli hans”, *Skírnir*, 81, no. 1 (1907), 35–53. Þóra Friðriksson was a writer and author of one of the first French textbooks in Icelandic. In addition, she was one of the main motivators of the establishment of the Alliance Française in Iceland in 1911, and was honoured by the French government as Officier d’Académie (1909), Officier de l’Instruction Public (1926) and Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur (1928).

⁴¹⁵ “Ásta Árnadóttir”, *Austri*, June 18, 1910, 82; “Ásta Árnadóttir”, *Unga Ísland*, 5, no. 7 (1909), 49–50; Anna Sigurðardóttir, *Vinna kvenna á Íslandi í 1100 ár* (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 1985), 446. It should be mentioned that Ragnheiður Berthelsen (b. 1884–?) went to Copenhagen at a similar time and was admitted to Copenhagen Technical College (1907–1911) several months after Ásta Kristín Árnadóttir, where she completed her journeyman’s examination in cabinet work—and was the first Icelandic woman to do so—and then became qualified as a master craftsman. This sort of work was a complete one-off for women, as is the fact that Ragnheiður worked both in Paris and Copenhagen with cabinet-making, and was the only woman to do that in both cities during the time she worked there. See, Guðjón Friðriksson og Jón Þ. Þór, *Kaupmannahöfn sem höfuðborg Íslands*, vol. II, 332–333).

⁴¹⁶ Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, “Ásta Kristín Árnadóttir”, *Kvennablaðið*, 16, no. 5 (1910), 33–35.

Akureyri paper *Nýjar kvöldvökur*. It was considered very daring for a woman to write such a short story during that period, and one could say that this was the first story on women's rights in Icelandic literature. The heroine in the story wants to become a mother of a fine man, but as a single mother who intends to rise above the traditional role of women and bring up her son by herself.⁴¹⁷ Ólöf was a women's rights protagonist who composed feminist poetry, even if little of it appeared in print. In a world of geniuses, Ólöf was small but longed for their consent, firstly to know whether she was on "the right path", and secondly that her creations could thus potentially become viable with their acceptance.⁴¹⁸ In that sense, in order to have an opportunity for viability and visibility, the contribution of women to literature and poetry composition is completely parallel to that of women in art.⁴¹⁹

The idea of "the artist museum" was linked to the so-called life-and-work narratives of the artist, even a mausoleum like the nineteenth-century Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen.⁴²⁰ The idea of a gallery to honour an artist also existed in Iceland, both in the long-lived idea of "another Thorvaldsen", fully Icelandic, which links to the nationalist discourse, and to the aim of asserting the artist culturally towards Denmark. Sculptor Einar Jónsson was the subject of much discussion in Iceland; he had been living in Berlin 1909–1910 and then in Copenhagen. Einar had told the Icelandic authorities that he wanted to donate his works to the nation if he could get a suitable housing for them. This was initially refused by both the Alþingi and the Reykjavík town council.⁴²¹ But the praiseworthy coverage of Einar and his work in the patriotic papers of Icelanders in the New World, such as *Lögberg* (1913) in Winnipeg, played its part. There, for instance, it said that Icelanders needed to treat Einar well as he was living in cramped quarters in Copenhagen, and it is pointed out that Icelanders had "for the most part lost Thorvaldsen" and the same must not happen with Einar.⁴²²

In 1915, the Alþingi agreed to provide finance for building a gallery for Einar's works in Reykjavík and Einar moved back to Iceland. But that appropriation was not enough, and

⁴¹⁷ Helga Kress, "Searching for Herself", 503–552. As Helga Kress points out, the ideal man of desire in Ólöf's story is "no ordinary man but an artist". Helga Kress, "Þetta ólukku dót. Um útgáfusögu Ólafar Sigurðardóttur frá Hlöðum og sjálfsmýnd hennar sem konu og skálds", *Heimaslóð. Árbók Hörgársveitar*, 12 (2015), 21–39. See also, Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir, "Skyldan og sköpunarþráin", *Sögur íslenskra kvenna 1879–1960*, ed. Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993), 924–925.

⁴¹⁸ Helga Kress, "Þetta ólukku dót", 21–39. Helga Kress, *Speglanir*, 365–372.

⁴¹⁹ Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, *Bókmenntagagnrýni á almannavettvangi*. Auður Aðalsteinsdóttir, *Þvílíkar ófreskjur*.

⁴²⁰ Marteen Liefoghe, "Buildings for Bodies of Work: The Artist Museum After the Death and Return of the Author", *Architectural Histories*, 7, no. 1 (2019), 1–13.

⁴²¹ Ólafur Kvaran, "Brautryðjendur í upphafi aldar", 74–75.

⁴²² Sigurður Júlíus Jóhannesson, "Hjá Einari Jónssyni", *Lögberg*, October 2, 1913, 4–5. See also, "Einar Jónsson", *Lögberg*, April 9, 1914, 1.

donations from individuals and companies were needed to complete the project. Great emphasis had been put on the spirit of the struggle for independence and “the nationalistic appeal” in coverage of Einar’s work, and the decision of the Alþingi in 1915 provided even further encouragement to that interpretation. The gallery was built at Skólavörðuholt, and Einar had the schematic idea regarding its appearance. The building contained a gallery, a studio and the artist’s apartment, in a double-storey house that reflected the modernist trend in architecture and was thus a radical building for Iceland, and has been argued as marking a “turning point” in the position of the State to the role of the fine art in Icelandic society.⁴²³

It was this same year, on 19 June 1915, that women succeeded in their battle for suffrage. In the middle of all the confusion of the First World War, Icelandic women—like Danish women—got the right to vote, which undoubtedly filled many Icelandic and Danish women with enthusiasm.⁴²⁴ Denmark was neutral in the war, yet all the same the war had a great influence on Danish society. However, the Royal Danish Academy kept operating during the war years, albeit with difficulty as far fewer men applied to the school because they had been called up to serve in the army. Nonetheless, there were also other battles to fight, such as equality in Danish artistic and cultural life. The idea of the foundation of the *Danish Women’s Artist Association* (d. Kvindelige Kunstneres Samfund, or KKS), was reportedly born on the steps in front of the Thorvaldsen Museum in a conversation between the painters Marie Henriques and Helvig Kinch. As Danish art historian Marie Laulund describes, one can easily visualize the two women in front of the sculpture museum with Thorvaldsen’s life work, and his mausoleum, with “the national symbol of artistic genius” at the back.⁴²⁵ In the same way, this image puts art history in Iceland into perspective, abridging it in a fairly “illustrative” way. The invitation was sent to women artists and artisans who had exhibited publicly three times and as a result, twenty-five women artists signed the invitation in 1916. The driving forces since the beginning had also included Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen, Anna Ancher, and many others and at the founding meeting on February 7, 75 women were enrolled as members of the KKS.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Ólafur Kvaran, *Einar Jónsson, myndhöggvari*, 174–179.

⁴²⁴ Suffrage, however, was dependent on conditions and restrictions, as initially only women aged 40 and over had the right to vote, but they got full electoral rights in 1920. It also took time to get them to the polls, as only 30 percent of women voted in the national elections to the Alþingi in 1916 when they were eligible to vote. This figure increased gradually, from 3,500 in 1916 to 29,000 in constituency elections in 1937. It should be noted that restrictions at this time had been lifted for women who received rural support, and there was a lowering of the minimum age for voters from 25 to 21 years. See, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1937. Stjórnmal og kreppuáratugur”, *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 211.

⁴²⁵ Marie Laulund, “Pionergenerationen. Da kvindelige kunstneres samfund blev til”, 21.

⁴²⁶ Helvig Kinch was chairwoman for two years, then Marie Henriques took over in 1918. See, Marie Laulund, “Pionergenerationen. Da kvindelige kunstneres samfund blev til”, 27–31; Lene Burkard, “100 års øjeblikke”, *100*

The main aim of establishing an association for Danish women artists was to achieve equality with male artists, as it was clear that women's cohesion was a necessity. The *Artists Painters Association* (d. Malende Kunstneres Samfund) had been established in 1909 but excluded women artists, who were usually referred to as *Ladies* (d. Damer) rather than painters or artists (professionals). In 1908, the Women's Art School merged with the Royal Danish Academy, thereby allowing men and women equal access and also to receive the same teaching. But "sex discrimination was obvious", as women had no political impact in the Academy, neither in the Academy Council nor the school council or scholarship committee, which still enforced a hierarchy between male and female artists; the Academy was also criticized for not awarding scholarships to women artists.⁴²⁷ And it was in this environment that the incremental victory for women is celebrated but similarly, the gender inequality in art is met, in that the first Icelandic women artists—who would later work with art their whole lives—were studying in Copenhagen.

3.3. Women's suffrage, women-landscapes and new colonization (1915–1930)

3.3.1. Picture three women in 1915

The photograph *Þrjár konur við Ölfusá* (e. Three women by Ölfusá), taken in the summer of 1915 by the Icelandic photographer Sigríður Zoëga, can be interpreted as a multi-faceted reference to the period 1915 to 1930. This is firstly because of the year the picture was taken, which was about the same time as women gained suffrage. Secondly, Sigríður captures landscape in an original way in Icelandic photography, with three women in the foreground. Thirdly, it raises a question on women's role and femininity, women's rights, domesticity and

års øjeblikke. *Kvindelige kunstneres samfund*, eds. Charlotte Glahn and Nina Marie Poulsen (Copenhagen: SAXO, 2014), 9–10.

⁴²⁷ Marie Laulund, "Pionergenerationen. Da kvindelige kunstneres samfund blev til", 29–31; Nina Damsgaard og Trine Grøne, "POWERKVINDER! Når kunst flytter grænser. En udstilling i et komplekst felt", *Passepartout. Skrifter for Kunsthistorie. Kvinder i kunsten*, 117–134, here 122. Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen became the first woman to be a member in the Academy Council, in 1912, but she had before that been one of the first women to be accepted in the Women's Art School, in 1888. In 1924, but not before, women were eventually allowed to draw models in the nude in the school. Lene Burkard, "100 års øjeblikke", 12. A pencil drawing of Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen by Júlíana Sveinsdóttir from 1928 is part of the collection of the National Gallery of Iceland (LÍ-6944).

modernity. The three contemplative women by the Ölfusá river are at the threshold of new time, thoughtful over the changes that were to come. Many women stepped hesitantly into the future and the discourse of the bad influence of foreign trends and the city on the nation's women, coupled with Icelandic femininity, is all-encompassing in the years to come. *Þrjár konur við Ölfusá* could also refer to the position of women and the space that they created for themselves in arts and culture, in the shelter of multi-faceted obstacles in Icelandic society.

It has been pointed out previously what a good arena photography was for women. The training was short and gave not only a possibility to earn money and thus independence but also to create art in a newish medium with a short history. The first woman in the group of professional photographers in Reykjavík was Gunhild Thorsteinsson, who opened a photography studio with Helga Thorsteinsson in 1905 and competed there with esteemed photographers such as Sigfús Eymundsson and Pétur Brynjólfsson.⁴²⁸ As art historian Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir has pointed out, there was a clear work division, and the young women who worked for instance for Pétur Brynjólfsson were disadvantaged in that they were not allowed to take photographs and there was some reluctance to teach them that: Pétur himself, or his male assistants, saw to all of the photography, but the young women saw for instance to retouching and all the finishing.⁴²⁹

It was actually at the studio of Pétur Brynjólfsson that pioneer photographer Sigríður Zoëga started to work and learn photography in 1907, remaining there for four years before going to Copenhagen. There, she worked for a time in Nora Lindström's studio, as well as Rosa Parsberg's studio 1910–1911, besides attending a short photography course in the Copenhagen Technical College in 1911.⁴³⁰ It was after having placed an advertisement in the German photography journal *Der Photograph* and having got an answer from esteemed photographer August Sander in Cologne, Germany, that she was hired as an assistant in his studio in 1911. Sigríður spent three years there and learned everything pertaining to photography (developing, retouching, enlarging, and toning) as well as accompanying Sander on photo shoots. Furthermore, when he was not there, she worked independently and developed artistic photography.⁴³¹

⁴²⁸ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1945*, 48, 67 and 196.

⁴²⁹ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, "Sigríður Zoëga ljósmyndari í Reykjavík", *Sigríður Zoëga. Ljósmyndari í Reykjavík*, ed. Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2000), 14.

⁴³⁰ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1945*, 330.

⁴³¹ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, "Sigríður Zoëga ljósmyndari í Reykjavík", 16–29.

Sigríður Zoëga returned to Iceland in 1914 and opened a studio in Austurstræti 14 in Reykjavík. The building burnt down soon afterwards in a huge conflagration and Sigríður lost everything. She then bought Pétur Brynjólfsson's studio in Hverfisgata 18 with her friend Steinunn Thorsteinsson and founded the studio Sigríður Zoëga & co.⁴³² Sigríður had always been primarily a studio photographer and worked with orders—the “outdoor shots” in the first photographs she took during the early years of her career were taken in another context, and were the exception rather than the rule.⁴³³ However, these noteworthy photographs, as well as her studio portraits, play an important part in the history of photography and should also do so in Icelandic art history. Sigríður introduced new trends in Icelandic photography and in that way was linked to Sander and the German schools and bears witness to an exquisite sense of form, which is shown in the clearest way when she interweaves landscapes and portraits: nothing is superfluous there, and the approach is sharper and more objective than the soft focus of pictorialism that was dominant in art photography at that time.

Much has been written about Sander's photograph, *Jungbauern* (e. Young farmers) from 1914 and more often than not this image is treated as an icon in the history of photography. Three young men stop on their way to look straight at the camera. Walking along a country road on their way to a dance, they wear with confidence elegant clothes for the occasion, all of them wearing a hat, suit and tie, and even carrying a walking stick in a bourgeois way. But behind them, we see a rural landscape, not a city. Sander himself was attracted to the men's “closeness to the nature”, but of course their way of dressing leaves us intrigued, as does the date; the carelessness of this summer of 1914, on the eve of the First World War. Cultural historian Michael Jennings maintains that the photograph captures what he describes as the “momentum of the transition away from the land and into the cities”.⁴³⁴

In the same way one could say that the aforementioned photograph taken in 1915 by Sigríður Zoëga, *Þrjár konur við Ölfusá*, captures a certain *period of transition* in Icelandic society.⁴³⁵ This photograph is not only an extension of the landscape painting in Iceland, as analysing the photo as such would simply be reducing the artist's work to an imitation of other

⁴³² Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1945*, 330.

⁴³³ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, “Sigríður Zoëga ljósmyndari í Reykjavík”, 66.

⁴³⁴ Michael Jennings, “Agriculture, Industry, and the Birth of the Photo-Essay in the Late Weimar Republic”, *October*, no. 93 (Summer 2000), 32. The photograph *Jungbauern* (1914) was published in Sander's *Face of Our Time* (g. Antlitz der Zeit) in 1929, a book containing 60 portraits taken 1910–1929, which is also known under the title *Three Farmers on Their way to a Dance* and belongs to his photographic documentation of the German people, *People of the Twentieth Century* (g. Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts). See, Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “August Sander. Portrett”, *August Sander. Portrett* (Reykjavík: Ljósmyndasafn Reykjavíkur, 2002), 2–13.

⁴³⁵ The photo is taken on film but not on glass plates, which was the norm in the studio.

trends, simplifying and bypassing the originality, the creativity, the novelty. The notion of Icelandic women leaving the farms and the rural areas, the traditional meeting the modern—like the young farmers in Sander’s photo—is symbolic precisely for the discourse on the town and the countryside. Women disagreed and were by no means united about the place and role of women in the emerging nation state: Many were hesitant about stepping into the future. The two women on the right look at the river Ölfusá, as still as the summer evening itself, but the one on the left, sitting on the ground, on the black sand, looks aside, over the land, something else has caught her attention. What will happen, or what is happening? The transition, or the birth of the *New Woman*, the modern woman, can be seen here. Sigríður is herself this modern woman, well-travelled, an independent woman photographer who had studied in Germany with one of the leading photographers; she is approaching her thirties and at that time was running a respectable photography studio, unmarried and childless. Sigríður’s portrait photography was characterized by much that resembles Sander’s approach, especially in the first years after returning home.⁴³⁶ Yet, Sigríður manages to separate herself from Sander’s influence by creating her own easily recognizable style in Icelandic photography and implementing innovations that are hers alone.

Sigríður never married but had a daughter in 1925 with the artist Jón Stefánsson. Sigríður and her colleague Steinunn had a deep friendship: not only did they work together from 1915, but they also lived together from the 1930s until Sigríður died in 1968. Thus it has been maintained, from the viewpoint of the history of sexuality, that the relationship between Sigríður and Steinunn can be easily classified as “romantic friendship”, a term coined in the early twentieth century, and that their relationship extended beyond the boundary of friendship and professional collaboration.⁴³⁷

Around 1915, at the time when Sigríður Zoëga’s photograph of the three women was taken, *three women* appeared on the art scene in Iceland who all dedicated their lives to fine art. These were Kristín Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson. Kristín Jónsdóttir became the first Icelandic woman to take a final examination in art in the Royal Danish Academy in 1916. Kristín’s first solo exhibitions were in *Nya Konstgalleriet* in Stockholm in 1916 and in Christian Larsen Kunsthandel in Copenhagen in 1917. In Iceland, she held her first two solo exhibitions in Akureyri, 1914 and 1915. That year, Kristín exhibited in Reykjavík with

⁴³⁶ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, “Sigríður Zoëga ljósmyndari í Reykjavík”, 33–34.

⁴³⁷ Íris Ellenberger, Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir and Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, “Meira en þúsund orð. Ljósmyndun og rómantísk vinátta við upphaf tuttugustu aldar,” *Saga*, 57, no. 1 (2019), 7–17.

another Icelandic painter and friend, Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (called Muggur), who had studied at the Royal Danish Academy at the same time. Kristín did original landscapes in oils, such as from North Iceland, where she spent her childhood.⁴³⁸ In fact, it is the local paper *Norðurland* in the north from where Kristín traces her roots that feels compelled to point out her achievements. *Norðurland* (1915) referred to the Danish *Politiken* in its writing about Kristín, reporting proudly that paintings by her had been shown at the Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition, and that one of them had been bought: “This shows that the Danes respect her paintings more than they do usually when newcomers to the art scene are involved.”⁴³⁹

Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s childhood haunts were the Vestmannaeyjar islands, which would later play a major role in her landscape paintings. Júlíana Sveinsdóttir had studied drawing with a fervent women’s rights activist, Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason, in the women’s school, *Kvennaskólinn* in Reykjavík; Ingibjörg was rector of the school from 1906 to 1941, and Júlíana reaped great encouragement from her to continue in the art field. After finishing *Kvennaskólinn*, Júlíana studied art with Þórarinn B. Þorláksson before she went to Copenhagen in 1909 to a private school of the brothers Gustav and Sophus Vermehren and then to the private school of Agnes Jensen in 1910–1911. She was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy in 1912 and completed her studies a year later than Kristín, i.e. in 1917. In Copenhagen, she exhibited at the Georg Kleis gallery in 1917 and a year later, in 1918, at the Autumn Exhibition in Copenhagen.⁴⁴⁰

The third artist, Nína Sæmundsson, started her preparatory studies in the Copenhagen Technical College, before entering the sculpture division of the Royal Danish Academy, and completed her studies there in 1920; that year, the National Gallery of Iceland bought one of her works, *Sofandi drengur* (e. Sleeping boy), which had been shown at the Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition in 1918, and which the Danish papers said was considered to be both “good and modern”.⁴⁴¹

It is worth keeping several points in mind. These three women completed their education at the same schools as their male peers, studied at either similar time or, at the same time as

⁴³⁸ “Íslendingurinn fremstur”, *Norðurland*, June 6, 1914, 81. It says here that the Icelander Kristín Jónsdóttir had achieved excellent results in the painting division of the Royal Danish Academy, for “particular commitment and diligence in the course”. Out of all the students, she was the only one to receive this honour.

⁴³⁹ “Akureyri”, *Norðurland*, May 1, 1915, 52.

⁴⁴⁰ Hrafnhildur Schram, “Ímynd landsins”, *Íslensk listasaga frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. II. Þjóðerni, náttúra, raunveruleiki, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Forlagið, Listasafn Íslands, 2011), 113–114.

⁴⁴¹ Hrafnhildur Schram, *Nína Sæmundsson 1892–1965. Fyrsti íslenski kvenmyndhöggvarinn* (Reykjavík: Crymgea, 2015), 30–32.

Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (Muggur), Jóhannes S. Kjarval and Ríkarður Jónsson, and exhibited during the next decades at solo exhibitions in Iceland and abroad, but they also showed their work at joint exhibitions with their male peers in Iceland and abroad as well as being discussed in the main discourse. On the other hand, they had difficulty attracting stipends from the Alþingi for their education in Copenhagen, and in reality received little understanding overall up till 1919.⁴⁴²

Here it could certainly be said that these three women artists—Júlíana, Kristín and Nína—were a trio of pioneers, who were due to play a large role in the decades to come. They were the first women to open a field or an occupation and trigger development, so “pioneer” must surely also apply to women like them and at the same time to women photographers such as Sigríður Zoëga.⁴⁴³ They were thus certainly “settlers” who began “new colonization” in Icelandic art. But it is precisely in the writings about them, in gendered and gendering discourse on art in the mainstream press, that the discrimination occurs. The concept of three (male) pioneers in art, as has been mentioned earlier, became a guiding principle that was always linked to male artists in Iceland and this continued to be the case in the mainstream discourse. Hence if women artists in Iceland were not *bypassed*, their art was used to tout the higher art, in this case, the true Icelandic art.⁴⁴⁴ That said, Sigríður’s photograph of the three women, in 1915, must further reflect not only the multifaceted reference to the contemporary world, art and the position of women, but above all their expectations of the changes that awaited them and that they themselves were involved in realizing, as pioneers.

3.3.2. The Art Society (1916) and the first general art exhibition in Iceland (1919)

There was a growing focus on supporting culture and art in Iceland in the second and third decades of the century, notably by founding a special association in 1915. In Iceland, the small group of artists and “friends of the art” felt a need to strengthen the arts in Iceland. The idea was not to establish an association of artists as an adversary to the recognized palate, as

⁴⁴² Kristín Jónsdóttir applies in 1911 but is unsuccessful. See *Alþingistíðindi* 1911, B. I, 204, 222–223, 228 (B. II, 455). Kristín and Júlíana both applied in 1913 but neither got a stipend (*Alþingistíðindi* 1913, C: 1333, 1336, 1342, 1365–67, 1431, 1678, 1766). Kjarval got a stipend (for his further education in Copenhagen) and Einar Jónsson as well (*Alþingistíðindi* 1913, A. 23). In 1915, Kristín Jónsdóttir is one of those who received a stipend to complete her further education in Copenhagen (*Alþingistíðindi* 1915, A: 585). Furthermore, a stipend is also granted “to buy paintings by Icelandic artist painters” (*Alþingistíðindi* 1915, A, 28).

⁴⁴³ Hrafnhildur Schram, “Ímynd landsins”, 113–114. Hrafnhildur Schram, *Nína Semundsson 1892–1965*, 30–32.

⁴⁴⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old mistresses*, 170.

happened widely in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, but rather to educate about art.⁴⁴⁵

Those who attended the meeting in December 1915 on the possible establishment of an art society—and who invited others to it to discuss the position of art in Iceland and its future, as an article in *Lögrétta* (1915) reports—were painter Ásgrímur Jónsson, sculptor Einar Jónsson, master builder Guðjón Samúelsson, painter Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and sculptor Ríkarður Jónsson, together with the meeting Chair, Professor Jón Helgason. Two women artists were also members of the group and attended the meeting; they are named in the article without title, i.e. “Kristín V. Jakobsen Miss”, and “Sigríður Björnsdóttir Miss”.⁴⁴⁶ According to a draft of the society’s regulations, the purpose was to “strengthen the knowledge and interest of Icelanders in fine arts” and to make it easier for art enthusiasts to “follow the progress of foreign arts” and to also futher the knowledge of Icelandic art overseas. Increased knowledge of art was supposed to be achieved by lectures, by showing pictures of known artworks with “descriptive accounts”. The association was also supposed to form contacts with foreign art associations, partly to get paintings on loan, but it was also possible to buy foreign periodicals on the arts at that time.⁴⁴⁷

The society, which was given the name the *Art Society* of Iceland (i. Listvinafélag Íslands) was founded February 3, 1916.⁴⁴⁸ Anyone who had an interest in the arts could become a member and the founding members numbered 27, of which 7 were women.⁴⁴⁹ Ríkarður was the society’s first Chair, but other members included photographers Sigríður Zoëga and Steinunn Thorsteinsson and some of the society’s lectures were held at their workshop.⁴⁵⁰

There was considerable difference between the society’s rules and purposes and the public discourse on art and artists in the mainstream papers. The papers thus caution against

⁴⁴⁵ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, ““Að efla þekkingu og áhuga Íslendinga á fögnum listum...”. Um starf Listvinafélags Íslands”, *Árbók Listasafns Íslands* 1989, 2, ed. Bera Nordal (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 1990), 16.

⁴⁴⁶ “Listmentafjelag Íslands”, *Lögrétta*, December 15, 1915, 203. Marie Laulund has pointed out that Danish women artists were also specified or “titled” as Miss or Mrs, in a membership list in 1893, in the Danish Art Association—an association that was founded in 1842 but only started accepting women artists in 1892. See, Marie Laulund, “Pionergenerationen. Da kvindelige kunstneres samfund blev til”, 33. Sigríður Björnsdóttir learned drawing from Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and continued in the private school run by Harald Foss in Copenhagen 1903–1905. She also studied in the private school run by the couple Bertha and Niels Vinding Dorph, besides working for the esteemed porcelain manufacturer Bing & Grøndahl in Copenhagen. Sigríður was the first educated Icelandic woman potter. See, Hrafnhildur Scram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist*, 121 and 133–149.

⁴⁴⁷ “Listmentafjelag Íslands”, *Lögrétta*, December 15, 1915, 205.

⁴⁴⁸ *Listvinafélag Íslands* has also been translated as *The Icelandic Society of Art Lovers* and *The Friends of the Arts*, but in this thesis it will be translated as *The Art Society*.

⁴⁴⁹ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 155.

⁴⁵⁰ “Listaskálinn og þriðja listasýningin”, *Morgunblaðið*, October 28, 1922, 2. Among those who held lectures on behalf of the *Art Society* were university-educated, respected public intellectuals, such as Matthías Þórðarson; Alexander Jóhannesson, assistant professor at Háskóli Íslands; and Guðmundur Finnbogason, psychology professor. See, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Að efla þekkingu og áhuga Íslendinga á fögnum listum...”, 12–31.

foreign influence and art movements, claiming that artists have a duty to work against them, to create an Icelandic movement and ideals, but nonetheless to teach Icelanders to appreciate the art of other nations.⁴⁵¹ During World War One, new avant-garde art movements (cubism, futurism, expressionism) flourished in Copenhagen like elsewhere in Europe around and after the war, as a response of the artists to the tragedy of the war. Yet, the emphasis in Iceland was on the national, the uniqueness in Icelandic art. In this respect, the most important aspect is that a sovereign Icelandic state in personal union with the Danish Crown was established on December 1, 1918.⁴⁵² In March 1919 Icelandic artists were encouraged, in a special address in the paper *Lögrétta*, to send their best artworks to the “first public art exhibition in Iceland”.⁴⁵³

According to an article in *Lögrétta*, the purpose of the *Art Society* with its first exhibition had been to give a good overview of the stage that Icelandic art was at, “for knowledge and awakening, as much for the artists themselves as for others who visit the exhibition”. Such an exhibition was expected to become “the predecessor of public Icelandic art exhibitions” and would be held annually in Reykjavík. The article also says that participation had been beyond expectations; artworks were shown by 17 artists, and the art exhibition was held in the Children’s School in Reykjavík. Painters Ásgrímur Jónsson and the young Jóhannes S. Kjarval had the most paintings on display. Kjarval had studied painting with Ásgrímur before going to London and then Copenhagen, entering the Royal Danish Academy in 1913 but finishing his studies there at the end of the year 1917. At the same time, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Kristín Jónsdóttir exhibited their works, as well as Nína Sæmundsson.⁴⁵⁴

In the coverage of this first public exhibition, Ásgrímur Jónsson’s art is said to be changing, and that modern trends are having an effect on him though his “vitality and artistry are too great for him to stop doing beautiful pictures ... Ásgrímur will always be a great painter but ought to stick to white glaciers and green hillsides”. The messages are therefore clear in the main discourse as to what the subject matter and the role of the artist should be. However, it is interesting that the first discourse about the three women artists is in a completely different

⁴⁵¹ “Málverkasýning Ásgríms”, *Morgunblaðið*, April 16, 1916, 7.

⁴⁵² Gunnar Þór Bjarnason, *Hinir útvöldu: Sagan af því þegar Ísland varð sjálfstætt ríki árið 1918* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2018), 320–343 and 351–354.

⁴⁵³ “Ávarp til íslenzkra listamanna”, *Lögrétta*, Mars 5, 1919, 33.

⁴⁵⁴ “Listasýningin”, *Lögrétta*, September 3, 1919, 1; Júlíana Gottskálsdóttir, “Að efla þekkingu og áhuga Íslendinga á fögrum listum...”, 21. It is worth mentioning that Ríkarður Jónsson, Kjarval, Kristín Jónsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson all got a stipend for studying in Rome. It is clear from the debate in Alþingi on stipends to artists in 1919 that at that time there was much more interest in supporting artists, art and culture in general with increased funding, which was therefore a complete change from what had been the case in previous years, from 1911–1918, before Iceland gained sovereignty. See, *Alþingistíðindi* 1919, A.1139.

form. It said about Kristín Jónsdóttir's works that most of her pictures were rather heavy and stiff: "She lacks lightness and joy. But it may well be that she has not got her best pictures at the exhibition". On the other hand, Nína Sæmundsson is said to have "applied herself better and her works were well done and likeable". However, they did not show "any sign of independent creativity, as they were done during her school years. But they are very pretty, as far as they go." Nína's work was "fine and dandy" but "not original" and Kristín Jónsdóttir "lacks dexterity and originality, but has diligence and considerable skills".⁴⁵⁵ Júlíana Sveinsdóttir is said to lean decidedly towards the newest trends in the art world but that "can be blamed on the prevailing attitude of the century rather than the artist...".⁴⁵⁶ Another review says that overall, the paintings of Júlíana and Kristín would "scarcely have aroused much attention, as they stood very much behind the more advanced paintings in the exhibition". However, Kristín's painting *Sunnudagskvöld í sveit*, "can, for example, be considered a passable painting in many ways".⁴⁵⁷

Here, right at the beginning, a certain theme in the discourse is formed and sharpened. Originality is considered a masculine quality, and the reverse of originality is suggestibility, lack of independent creative ingenuity whereby the women artists do not manage to break away from the influence of their school years. Typically, they are diligent and have skills that manifest themselves like some kind of soulless craftsmanship. Coverage of the women artists consists only of several lines and frequently includes the afore-mentioned common feminine characteristics. The true Icelandic art is therefore already conditioned by gender. When it comes to male artists, however, eccentricity and originality in life, work and achievements shines through, without the aesthetic aspects of their works being specified in any way. The originality appearing in the artists' works is frequently the idiosyncratic: It is peculiar and original in a positive way, and shines out. The same does not apply to the "eccentricity" of women artists.

As knowledge of art history was poor in Iceland, the approach and analysis are more in the spirit of analysis of the (male) personality of the artists rather than analysis of their works. Hence, sculptor Ríkarður Jónsson described the young artist Jóhannes S. Kjarval as follows:⁴⁵⁸

Jóhannes [Kjarval] is a big man in stature, almost 3 ells in height, and ancient in appearance.

Looks like an Icelandic mountain seen from the back. His face is pale, somewhat rough-hewn,

⁴⁵⁵ "Listasýningin í Reykjavík", *Skeggi*, October 15, 1919, 1–2.

⁴⁵⁶ "Listasýningin í Reykjavík", *Tíminn*, October 8, 1919, 318–319.

⁴⁵⁷ "Um listasýninguna í sept. 1919", *Morgunblaðið*, November 13, 1919, 4.

⁴⁵⁸ Ríkarður Jónsson, "Jóhannes Kjarval málarí", *Tíminn*, June 7, 1919, 198–199.

a lot of hair, dark, not frizzy. He is usually somewhat heavy and thoughtful, with a deep, clear voice.

It appears that Kjarval was so true to his art that he took on the image of Icelandic landscape, integrating into his own work. Similarly, Kjarval was also a “music composer in colours” and “he sings the praises of the mysterious beauty with his paintbrush. His originality is mostly inherent in this”.⁴⁵⁹ Here it is worth looking in context at how language style and descriptions in dissimilar texts appear to have merged, as if the literary heritage and national discourse are interwoven with the discourse on art and artists.

In this respect and in connection with gendered landscape in art, it is worth examining the speech given by Guðmundur Finnbogason at the opening of the exhibition in 1919.⁴⁶⁰ Guðmundur was not just part of the exhibition committee, but vanguard of the public intellectuals at this time and had become a psychology professor at the University of Iceland and an editor of the esteemed periodical *Skírnir*.⁴⁶¹ His speech crystallized the definition of Truth and Beauty, the artist, the Icelandic nature and culture: this was certainly a ceremonial speech, though here the tone is also set for what would be heard in writings about Icelandic art in the years that followed. And it is precisely this discourse about Truth and Beauty that confirms the structure of the canon.⁴⁶²

Guðmundur perceived that various sites in Iceland appear in the works of some of the Icelandic artists. The role of the artists “is to make this wealth the permanent ownership of the nation, to capture the distinctiveness and beauty on canvas or to cast in metal and stone”. Guðmundur said that with the new Icelandic art, a “new colonization” (i. nýtt landnám) was beginning, and similarly that the exhibition would hopefully be “valid testimony [to the public] that we already had several settlers (i. landnámsmenn)”.⁴⁶³ The art is thus new colonization in the hands of the (male) settlers, but the nature is subordinate and feminine, like passive subject matter, and is seen as an antithesis to culture.⁴⁶⁴ Beauty and distinctiveness are part of nature,

⁴⁵⁹ See also a similar description on Ríkarður Jónsson, in Haraldur Hamar, “Ríkarður Jónsson myndhöggvari (með mynd)”, *Syrpa*, 6, no. 1 (1918), 43–45.

⁴⁶⁰ Guðmundur Finnbogason, “Ræða við setningu fyrstu almennrar íslenzkrar listasýningar í Reykjavík, 31. ágúst 1919”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 2, 1919, 2.

⁴⁶¹ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 80. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir describes Guðmundur as a national educator, a term that is equivalent to public intellectual.

⁴⁶² Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 9.

⁴⁶³ Guðmundur Finnbogason, “Ræða við setningu fyrstu almennrar íslenzkrar listasýningar í Reykjavík, 31. ágúst 1919”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 2, 1919, 2.

⁴⁶⁴ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Af heimamönnum, túristum, trönum og þrifæti. Íslenskt landslag og samtímaljósmyndun”, *Fegurðin er ekki skraut. Íslensk samtímaljósmyndun*, eds. Sigrún Alba Sigurðardóttir and Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir (Reykjavík: Fagurskinna, 2020), 49–76. See also, Carol Bigwood, *Earth Muse: Feminism*,

including the *unspoiled woman*.⁴⁶⁵ This connection is seen clearly in a lecture of Alexander Jóhannesson, where nature is personified as a woman and reference is made to her grace and majesty, the virtues of the soul; but the painted woman, or the painted beauty of women wearing make-up, is unnatural grace.⁴⁶⁶ It can almost be said that here, the undesirable foreign influence appears as painted beauty of women and thus defiles the beauty and the “Icelandic distinctiveness”. Yet in 1920 Alexander Jóhannesson held a lecture for the *Art Society*, in which the main objective was to increase the art knowledge of the general public about the new movements, such as “expressionism”, “futurism” and “cubism”.⁴⁶⁷

The “largest” exhibition of Icelandic art on foreign grounds was presented in 1920 at the exhibition of five Icelandic painters, *Fem islandske Malere*, in the Georg Kleis gallery in Copenhagen, held by the *Dansk Islandsk Samfund* which was commemorating its 100-year anniversary. This presentation of Icelandic art was designed to increase the knowledge amongst Danes of Icelandic art, with works by Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson, Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, Kristín Jónsdóttir, and Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (Muggur); landscape paintings were the most common, though there were also a considerable number of portraits. As will also be the case in the next decades in the foreign press, art was expected to be distinctly Icelandic, with Icelandic artists who had “gone their own way”.⁴⁶⁸ These were attitudes that were adopted in the nationalist discourse on art in Iceland, but bypassed French influences. Here, however, it was Kristín Jónsdóttir who got the most positive coverage in Danish papers, as the artist who had “best preserved the Icelandic hue”, which in Denmark had actually made her more respected, and it showed that in this woman there is “potential for a very competent painter”.⁴⁶⁹

More growth was occurring in fine art in Iceland, especially with the arrival of the *Art Society*, which led to greater coverage of the arts in the form of articles and lectures for the general public, as well as increased opportunities for exhibitions for men and women.

Nature and Art (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993); Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to a Male as Nature is to Culture?” in *Feminism, Art, Theory. An Anthology 1968–2014*, 17–26; Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Michelle Z. Rosaldo, “Woman, Culture, and Society. A Theoretical Overview”, *Woman, Culture, and Society*, eds. Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 17–42.

⁴⁶⁵ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 13. As Françoise Héritier argues, it is through a division into body and mind, nature and culture, sensible and intelligible, that the masculine subject has tried to emerge from an undifferentiated link with the first one (the Mother). See, Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin. La pensée de la différence* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1996), 194–195.

⁴⁶⁶ Alexander Jóhannesson, “Erindi um feegurð”, *Andvaka*, 1, no. 2 (1919), 136–142.

⁴⁶⁷ “Alþýðufræðsla Stúdentafélagssins”, and “Dr Alexander Jóhannesson”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 9, 1920, 3.

⁴⁶⁸ “Meddelelser om D.I.S.s Virksomhed”, *Meddelelser fra Dansk-Islandsk Samfund*, 2 (1920), 10–12.

⁴⁶⁹ “Íslenska listasýningin í Kaupmannahöfn”, *Morgunblaðið*, April 18, 1920, 1–2.

Following women's suffrage in 1915, women were optimistic but were faced with multi-faceted contradictions. In the wake of growing discourse on the arts and more artists, the discourse became harder and more gendered, when even more separation occurred between the amateur and the learned, handicrafts and the fine arts. The gender of the artist was the main issue in public discourse and in the attitudes of those who "shape and govern" the discourse on the true Icelandic art and artists.

3.3.3. "Fui ibi" (I was there), Sigríður Erlendsdóttir (1881–1955)

A few weeks before the first general art exhibition in Iceland was held by the *Art Society*, this advertisement appeared in the newspaper *Vísir* in July 1919: "Mrs. Sigríður Erlendsdóttir is holding a painting exhibition in the K.F.U.M. building these days. Many beautiful paintings are there, and city dwellers should take the opportunity of looking at them and buying."⁴⁷⁰ This exhibition must have been considered an event and aroused discussion, this being the first private exhibition of a woman artist in Reykjavík. Jóhannes S. Kjarval had also exhibited at the K.F.U.M. building in May that year, and would exhibit there again in the autumn.⁴⁷¹ As discussed before, Kjarval had already become prominent in the Icelandic art scene. On the other hand, Sigríður Erlendsdóttir is completely unknown and it would be difficult to find any information about her artistic career if it were not for several advertisements on her painting exhibitions in the years 1919–1925, a photograph taken around 1920 that shows Sigríður with one of her works, and finally, a small flower painting from 1918.⁴⁷² But it is not least an art review and coverage written by two highly regarded men in the artistic scene on her private

⁴⁷⁰ See, *Vísir*, July 13, 1919, 3. All kinds of cultural activities took place in the KFUM building in Amtmannsstígur (opened 1907), which were characterized not just by Christian activities, as other societies and associations were also allowed to hold meetings there. The country's largest library was also in the building.

⁴⁷¹ See the advertisement in *Morgunblaðið*, May 21, 1919, 2.

⁴⁷² Sigríður's parents were Halldóra Soffía Hinriksdóttir Hansen and Erlendur Magnússon, a goldsmith who ran a workshop at Þingholtsstræti 5 from 1870 until his death in 1909, when their son Magnús Erlendsson took over. "Erlendur Magnússon gullsmiður", *Óðinn*, 9, no. 6 (1913), 45–46. Recently (May 2021 and November 2022), after finding and contacting some of the descendants of Sigríður's brother Hendrik, two works by Sigríður were found: Two still lifes, flower paintings, one from 1918 (water colours), with the initials S.E and another flowerpainting (oil) with her name, Sigríður Erlends. Here, Sigríður showed much greater skill in handling colours, shapes and textures in the flower paintings than in realist portraits. However, these two paintings, along with the photograph of Sigríður with the portrait of her brother, are the only references found on her works. Further research is needed to look for potential other works by Sigríður.

exhibition in 1925 that was most revealing about the attitudes towards women artists who dared to “enter the stage”.⁴⁷³

Sigríður Erlendsdóttir was married for a time to Þorkell Clementz, a mechanical engineer, and they lived in Iceland, apart from one year (1913–1914) when they lived in Copenhagen.⁴⁷⁴ When Sigríður held her private exhibition in 1919, the couple had already separated.⁴⁷⁵ It was often the case that women who had learned or practised art, either in Iceland or abroad, stopped pursuing their artistic ambition after marriage and the birth of children, and thus the art of painting most notably became a kind of past life, a forgotten life that few knew about. Sigríður, however, had let her dream of becoming an artist come true when she was aged almost 40, divorced and childless. She had no previous training in the art of painting. But bearing witness to her singular boldness and courage, she did not let that deter her.

Only a month after Sigríður’s first private exhibition, at the end of August 1919, she went to Copenhagen and started an art course, but in what manner or in which school is not known. Sigríður was first recorded as living at Wiederweltsgade 7, where she called herself Sigrid Christine Clementz and registered herself as a woman art painter, or *kunstmalerinde*. By spring 1920 she had moved to the women’s home at Helgolandsgade 8, calling herself Sigrid Christina Erland, woman painter, or *malerinde*.⁴⁷⁶

When returning home from Copenhagen, Sigríður held a private exhibition of almost 30 paintings in the summer of 1920, at her childhood home, Þingholtstræti 5. She now lived there with her mother, Halldóra, and her brother Magnús. According to an announcement in *Morgunblaðið*, the works were mostly flower studies as well as several portraits. It also mentioned her earlier exhibition of 1919, stating that “it was considered then, as expected, that there was an amateur look to the pictures”, as she had had virtually no education in how to paint. Nevertheless, there were “certain improvements” which promised something more,

⁴⁷³ Kjarval, “Málverk eða listaverk”, *Vísir*, October 23, 1925, 2–3; Valtýr Stefánsson, “Sýning Sigríðar Erlendsdóttur í húsi K.F.U.M”, *Morgunblaðið*, October 25, 7.

⁴⁷⁴ See, “Søg person”, kbharkiv.dk., København Stadsarkiv (e. Copenhagen City archives).

⁴⁷⁵ In 1913 the couple lived at Lindargata 7 (*Bæjarskrá Reykjavíkur*, 1913, 27). In 1917 they lived at Þingholtsstræti 5, with Sigríður’s mother and brother (*Bæjarskrá Reykjavíkur*, 1917, 62), but it seems that Sigríður and Þorkell were no longer living together in 1919 (*Bæjarskrá Reykjavíkur*, 1919, 68).

⁴⁷⁶ Sigríður is registered as Sigrid Christine Clementz in Copenhagen in August 1919 in the police records, which acted as some kind of population register (“Søg person”, kbharkiv.dk. København Stadsarkiv). In the spring she moved to the women’s home at Helgolandsgade 8, and started calling herself Sigrid Christina Erland (“Søg person”, kbharkiv.dk., København Stadsarkiv). A special home for young single women was operated at Helgolandsgade 8. Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir wrote an article in *Kvennablaðið* (1919) which said that many Icelandic girls knew that home and had lived there. The cornerstone of the home called *Bethania* had been laid in 1889, built on the initiative of Regitze Berner. See, Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, ““Værnehjemmet” í Kaupmannahöfn”, *Kvennablaðið*, 25, no. 11 (1919), 83–84.

especially in regard to the flower studies. In addition, it said that since then she had “lived overseas and pursued a course in painting; this can be seen in her new works which are much better, and a clear improvement.”⁴⁷⁷

From the coverage, one might speculate that perhaps it had been especially because of the criticism and discussion of her exhibition in 1919 that she went abroad to study. That instead of letting her dream of painting fade away, Sigríður made a resolute decision to go to study art in Copenhagen. The exhibition in 1920 thus received much better reviews and publicity than the first one, in addition to which it should be mentioned that Sigríður’s exhibitions got a special mention in the paper of the German–Icelandic friendship society, *Mitteilungen der Islandfreunde*, where she is named along with the exhibitions of Ásgrímur Jónsson and Eyjólfur Jónsson (Eyfells) the same year.⁴⁷⁸

It is not unlikely that the photograph of Sigríður Erlendsdóttir at the easel that photographer Þorleifur Þorleifsson took is from the same time that the exhibition took place in 1920 at Þingholtstræti 5.⁴⁷⁹ At a bourgeois home in the middle of the living room stands Sigríður, a self-confident woman artist, with one of her works on the easel. Dressed in a heavy skirt down to the ankles, a blouse buttoned up to the neck, she poses for the photographer, glances up from her work—she is painting a portrait of her brother Magnús Erlendsson—and looks straight at the camera. This is a professional portrait, whereby Sigríður defined herself as a woman artist and got a professional photographer home to her studio to take a picture. From the portrait of her brother, one can certainly see that she did not have a long art education behind her. Yet, there is something incredibly fascinating and unique about her pictorial interpretation which is reflected in the portrait of her brother, a personal approach that falls outside categories.

It is impossible to analyse Sigríður’s art on the basis of two works, but it arouses curiosity and the need to know more about further works by her. Artists who have not had much formal art education have frequently been called amateur, and make an effort to imitate acknowledged art, whereas those who are naïve devise their own imagery. A sizeable group of folk artists (male) or the so-called outsider artists, naïve artists, have gained a seat as a notable part of Icelandic art. But as the preceding examples show, it was frequently women who fell into the category of *amateur*, the category of oblivion, *despite* having an art education.

⁴⁷⁷ “Málverkasýning”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 28, 1920, 1.

⁴⁷⁸ “Nachrichten aus Island”, *Mitteilungen der Islandfreunde*, 9, no. 1–2 (1921), 27.

⁴⁷⁹ Þorleifur Þorleifsson had a photography studio at Pósthússtræti 14 (1911–1916), and then, in 1917, a photography studio at Hverfisgata 29, and then ran a studio with Óskar Gíslason at Kirkjustræti 10 in the period 1922–1926, all in Reykjavík. See, Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1945*, 378.

Sigríður next showed her art in 1923 at the fourth joint exhibition of the *Art Society*, in its pavilion at Skólavörðuholt; she exhibited one work, a flower painting, which she called *Holtablóm*. Artists who also had works at the exhibition included Ásgrímur Jónsson, Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, Kjarval and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir.⁴⁸⁰ There was a varied selection of works and artists shown at the exhibition and nothing is mentioned about Sigríður Erlendsdóttir's work in reviews about the exhibition. After exhibiting with the pioneers of Icelandic art in 1923, Sigríður held the third private exhibition of her works, in the autumn of 1925 at the K.F.U.M. building. Sigríður appears to have entered the vestibule of the art scene, having exhibited publicly in Reykjavík and with the most respected artists.

It is one of the big names, Kjarval himself, who found himself compelled to write specially about Sigríður's exhibition, in an article that he called "Paintings or works of art". It is cause for celebration that such a great master should write about the woman artist Sigríður, but a closer look reveals that the article is full of sarcasm.⁴⁸¹ Kjarval said that the exhibition is "a greater event in Icelandic painting than we have been accustomed to up till now". Although the exhibition is poor at first, "onlookers are gradually greeted with the unbelievable—art at a very high stage of development". The exhibition also contained lesser works, "attempts, or groping for what is involved in the concept—the true art". Kjarval mentioned Sigríður's painting of Hornafjörður, the picture of "a cat" but also "eternal art phenomena like the cow". Sigríður illustrates in such a way, said Kjarval, because "she has found her limitations in that, but she does not compose what is difficult to understand in her best pictures". The uncommon which can be seen in Sigríður's exhibition is "the uncorrupted beginner's feel", but from this it follows that it became natural for Sigríður to paint and thereby gain independent skills, which then appear "in masterful luck in two flower studies" which are akin to "the best in Eastern and European art".

Only two days after Kjarval's article is published in *Vísir*, it is the new editor of *Morgunblaðið*, Valtýr Stefánsson, who took up the pen and discusses Sigríður's exhibition.⁴⁸² Neither before nor later had Sigríður Erlendsdóttir, or any other woman artist, had such an "introduction" and coverage of her works—and from greatly respected men in Icelandic cultural

⁴⁸⁰ "Listvinaffjlagið", *Morgunblaðið*, September 23, 1923, 3.

⁴⁸¹ Kjarval, "Málverk eða listaverk", *Vísir*, October 23, 1925, 2–3.

⁴⁸² Valtýr Stefánsson, "Sýning Sigríðar Erlendsdóttur í húsi K.F.U.M", *Morgunblaðið*, October 25, 7. It should be mentioned that Valtýr was the husband of woman artist Kristín Jónsdóttir. In 1925, Valtýr was the newly appointed editor of *Morgunblaðið* and now and again wrote about art, which he continued to do for the next 25 years. On his initiative, the cultural insert *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* started to appear on 4 October 1925. See, Jakob F. Ásgeirsson, *Valtýr Stefánsson: ritstjóri Morgunblaðsins* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 2003), 223–229.

life to boot. It should be noted here that painter Kristín Jónsdóttir, Valtýr's wife, had held her first private exhibition in Reykjavík the year before, in the Nathan & Olsen building. Writing about Sigríður's work, Valtýr claimed that most are at the level of a complete beginner and it is difficult to discern anything else in the pictures "than fumbling and the style and imitations of the ignorant". The recommendations of Valtýr to Mrs. Sigríður were that if she "intends to pursue making paintings from now on, she must above all come to realize that she still has the greatest part of the learning period left to do". In the conclusion of the article, Valtýr said—and it could thus be argued that this had been the motivation for his article—that it was rather ill-fated "that a man like Kjarval should do Sigríður such a disservice, and humiliate himself, by writing such nonsense about her exhibition". He wrote that the artistic taste of the public in towns was "sufficiently muddled as it is and those who have made art their life work should least of all resort to such nonsense as *Vísir* published by Kjarval the day before yesterday".⁴⁸³

If the writings are scrutinized, they show Kjarval's ironic attitude in denigrating both Sigríður as a person and her works: that Sigríður had found "her limits" in the subject matter that "she herself considers beautiful" (but is not accepted in the true Icelandic art), but not that which is hard to understand, for instance in pictures of a "cow" and "cat", which are referred to in a denigrating way in both articles. Yet Kjarval's irony reaches a peak when he said that Sigríður's exhibition is a "larger event" than was the custom in Iceland, and the art was at a "high stage of development", the best "in Eastern and European art". In this way, Sigríður, who was in her 50s, is referred to as a "woman child" who had drifted into the public (exclusive) art field. Similarly, Valtýr says that it is a reduction for Kjarval (the great master) to say these things about the exhibition and to praise it (despite the ridicule), as well as directing paternal advice to the immature woman artist on her next step.

After this eventful year, Sigríður seems to have put painting exhibitions on the shelf. Over the next decades, her name appeared in advertisements for teaching. From the time she was 20, she had taken on various kinds of teaching at her home in Þingholtsstræti 5, including in various handicrafts.⁴⁸⁴ Sigríður's mother, Halldóra Hinriksdóttir, died in May 1932 and her brother Magnús Erlendsson shortly afterwards, that same year; they had all lived in Þingholtsstræti 5. She lived alone in Þingholtsstræti 5b until the mid-1940s, and it appears that

⁴⁸³ Valtýr Stefánsson, "Sýning Sigríðar Erlendsdóttur í húsi K.F.U.M", *Morgunblaðið*, October 25, 1925, 7.

⁴⁸⁴ See *Vísir*, March 17, 1923, 4. Sigríður also regularly takes on guitar teaching to students. See advertisement in *Vísir*, September 26, 1925, 5; *Vísir*, September 10, 1927, 1; *Vísir*, January 7, 1932, 4; *Vísir*, September 30, 1940, 3.

the last advertisement linked to Sigríður Erlendsdóttir was worded such in 1944: “Teach how to play guitar. Sigríður Erlends, Austurhlíðarvegur, by the Sundlaugarnar swimming pools.”⁴⁸⁵ Sigríður died in 1955.

The art career of Sigríður Erlendsdóttir, who seems to be the first woman to hold a solo exhibition in Reykjavík and even exhibited with the big names, finished here with the wave of a hand after a six-year period in the art field. This is not only a descriptive example of the *destructive gendered discourse* (which is not related at all to art criticism, positive or negative) that is reflected in the mainstream press by reputable men, but not least of the fact that the coverage is *decisive*. In fact, to such an extent that no one has discussed or even heard about the woman artist Sigríður Erlendsdóttir for a whole century. Likewise, it is sad that this *destructive discourse* has become her only posthumous reputation and the reason why she is discussed here.

3.3.4. On women’s collectivity, textility and masculine originality

The *Art Society* organized group exhibitions on a regular basis, seven art exhibitions in total, from 1919 to 1927, and provided older and younger artists with an opportunity to expose their works. Furthermore, Icelandic art began to be documented in an art historical context in books, albeit very gradually, which continued in the years that followed, with the intent of emphasizing that Icelanders, like other cultured nations, had an artistic past. Without past history, contemporary art lacked the roots it needed to become an authentic expression of Icelandic culture.⁴⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the founding laws of the *Art Society* stated that its activities were intended to revolve around the fine arts in a “narrow sense”.⁴⁸⁷ Already in 1919, virtually the whole exhibition consisted of paintings, drawings and sculptures while no provision was made for handicrafts and home industries.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁵ See *Vísir*, November 4, 1944, 4 and *Vísir*, October 2, 1948, 6.

⁴⁸⁶ The *Art Society* published some small volumes, consisting of essay collections on Icelandic art. Matthías Þórðarson, director of the National Museum, was approached, and three of his essays were published in the first volume of *Íslenzkir listamenn*, which came out in 1920, while another five essays appeared in a later volume in 1925. This art historical overview in two volumes covers eight artists, from the end of the seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century; artists such as Helgi Sigurðsson, Thorvaldsen, Ólafur Ólafsson, Þorsteinn Illugason Hjaltalín and also the self-taught artist, Arngrímur Gíslason, but no women are mentioned. Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzkir listamenn*, vol. I–II (Reykjavík: 1920–1925). See also, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Að efla þekkingu og áhuga Íslendinga á fögnum listum...”, 19.

⁴⁸⁷ “Listvinafélag Íslands”, *Vísir*, February 6, 1916, 4.

⁴⁸⁸ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli*, 103–106.

Interest dwindled in the *Art Society* around 1924: members were becoming very discontented, and towards the end it was becoming increasingly difficult to set up exhibitions, because of increased ideological conflict within its ranks, which centred on the role of art. In reality, the disagreement became the forerunner of an acrimonious dispute in cultural matters. Here, not only the separation of fine arts and crafts is reflected, but also the narrow definition of the artist: between the known, educated artist, young and old artists, but also professionals and amateurs.⁴⁸⁹ In previous years, the group of artists had been more diverse, but now there was a change: The above-mentioned story concerning Sigríður Erlendsdóttir is a good example of that and reflects the obstacles and prejudices, sometimes insurmountable, for women.

When Sigríður showed her paintings in the *Art Society's* exhibition in 1923, as mentioned before, other artists who showed paintings included Kjarval, Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, Nína Sæmundsson and Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (Muggur).⁴⁹⁰ Guðmundur exhibited the embroidery work *Adam og Eva í Paradís* (e. Adam and Eve in Paradise or the Fall from Grace) which he had done during his stay at Vífilsstaðir, a health care centre for tuberculosis sufferers. In a review on the exhibition, painter and goldsmith Baldvin Björnsson said that the work was a “fine inspiration for women and could be encouraging for them in order to attempt to compose designs for their needlework, or to get Icelandic artists to do so. Icelandic handicrafts would then become valuable ...”⁴⁹¹

It is interesting to come across such positive criticism on an embroidery work at an art exhibition of the *Art Society*, as embroidery was excluded from fine art and had, before and later, been regarded in a negative sense as a women's craft. Does it perhaps make a difference that a male artist did it? When a male artist enters “the realm of women”? Is it a sample of “feminine characteristics” in a work of a male artist, whose deviation from the norms of masculine creativity were “condoned”?⁴⁹² But here we also come to important aspects that are highly reminiscent of the attitude to Sigurður Guðmundsson, the painter, in Chapter 2.

Guðmundur died young and thus had a short career in art, but was considered by many as one of the country's most promising artists. His uniqueness was especially apparent in that he was a multimedia artist. He illustrated playing cards, did illustrations for folktales and

⁴⁸⁹ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Húsprýði og sýningarhald”, *Íslensk listasaga*, vol. I, 172–175. Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Að efla þekkingu og áhuga Íslendinga á fögrum listum...”, 12–31; Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 162–165.

⁴⁹⁰ “Listvinaffjlagið”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 23, 1923, 3.

⁴⁹¹ Baldvin Björnsson, “Listsýningin”, *Morgunblaðið*, October 3, 1923, 2–3.

⁴⁹² Christine Battersby, “The Architect as Genius: Feminism and the Aesthetics of Exclusion”, *Alba*, 1, no. 3 (June–July, 1991), 11.

published illustrated children's books including, in 1921, an adventure of a princess and a prince, *Sagan af Dimmalimm Kóngsdóttur* (e. The Story of Princess Dimmalimm) which he illustrated himself using watercolours. He also did wood carving and colourful collage works, as well as religious paintings, e.g. altarpieces.⁴⁹³ Guðmundur worked with all kinds of materials and methods, not least venturing into the “more feminine fields” of art creation, e.g. embroidery and other needlework, and thus not distinguishing between the feminine (needles, thread, fabrics) and the usual masculine (landscape, oil paintings). This caused incomprehension in his contemporaries, who did not take him seriously as an artist and saw him as a dilettante.⁴⁹⁴ And perhaps it is because of this that he started to put more focus on landscapes after 1921, and joined Jón Stefánsson and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir in painting pure landscapes, without human figures.⁴⁹⁵ In a similar way as Sigurður Guðmundsson the painter, he was not in line with the desired masculine art, that of the pioneer and genius in Icelandic art. And likewise, as some have pointed out in connection with Sigurður, Guðmundur was described in references of the time as supporting women's suffrage.⁴⁹⁶ The “feminine” in art creations and art forms thus also had an effect on men and the coverage of their art, though never in the same way as women, as can be seen notably by positive criticism on Guðmundur's embroidery work at the art exhibition of the *Art Society* in 1923.

The focus on the fine arts, i.e. painting and sculpture, was not restricted to Iceland, and in the neighbouring countries women were bypassed and the discourse gendered. Thus women had to take action to present themselves at special women's exhibitions and at the same time arouse attention to the silencing of women's contributions. In 1920, the *Women Artists Retrospective Exhibition* (d. Kvindelige Kunstneres Retrospektive Udstilling) was held in the Den Frie building in Copenhagen. Directed by the *Danish Women Artists' Association*, KKS, this was its first large exhibition. There was a varied selection of works at the exhibition, including ceramics, embroidery, weaving and more, as well as paintings and sculptures.⁴⁹⁷ The

⁴⁹³ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Brautryðendur í upphafi aldar”, 137–143.

⁴⁹⁴ Kristín Guðnadóttir, “Í leit að listrænu frelsi”, *Guðmundur Thorsteinsson–Muggur* (Reykjavík: Listsafn Íslands, 2021), 22.

⁴⁹⁵ Kristín Guðnadóttir, “Í leit að listrænu frelsi”, 89–95.

⁴⁹⁶ The newspaper *Heimskringla*, which was published in Winnipeg, tells about Guðmundur Thorsteinsson, who arrived in New York on 23 October 1915 and looked at a “women's parade”. He was amazed that the women in New York “should only now try to bring about something that Iceland had already done, which was the right to vote for women. Mr. Thorsteinsson is a man who supports suffrage, and said that Iceland's women had been granted absolute voting rights last June”. According to Guðmundur, men in Iceland had considered it a matter of course, and women in Iceland had gained the right to vote “effortlessly”. See, “Verzlunarskip frá Íslandi komið til Ameríku”, *Heimskringla*, November 4, 1915, 5.

⁴⁹⁷ Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på ... det feminine”, 289–293.

goal was, as before, to create a platform like 1895 for women in different arts and their contributions, but the main objective of KKS had been not less to safeguard the rights of women artists and professionalism and thus to respond to the inequalities in the field of art.⁴⁹⁸ Kristín Jónsdóttir participated in the exhibition and showed two works, one of them an oil painting and the other a watercolour.⁴⁹⁹

What springs to mind when looking at the ambitious exhibition catalogue is firstly the focused desire to write a history of women artists, and to shed light on those forgotten artists from long ago. This is for instance reflected in the short introduction by the sculptor and painter Agnes Lunn in which she said that “throughout history, women artists have struggled like men to become professional artists”.⁵⁰⁰ Lunn explained that in order to show how often women artists were likely to be neglected, one could begin by naming many women artists from previous centuries. After these, a description is given of Danish women artists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who had work at the exhibition; their older and newer works are specified and even which of their works had been bought by the *Danish Royal Painting Collection* (d. Den Kongelige Malerisamling) in Copenhagen.⁵⁰¹

The number of women artists was no longer a conundrum, as art historian Anne Lie Stokbro points out. Some (male) art critics found something “humble and modest” in women’s art, but on the whole, they found that porcelain, embroidery, weaving and so on were the women’s most “distinctive effort in the field of the world art”. Others said sarcastically that women artists “should first and foremost have our sympathy”. In addition to the gendered public discourse by art critics on the 1920 exhibition, the discourse reflects also the increasing institutionalization of the arts and a sharper division between the fine arts and handicrafts such as embroidery and other needlework.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁸ Ellen Tange, “Kvindernes fremtidige kunsthistorie. KKS og fællesudstillingerne”, *100 års øjeblikke. Kvindelige kunstneres samfund*, 303–335; Lene Burkhard, “100 års øjeblikke”, 9–26.

⁴⁹⁹ See, *Kvindelige Kunstneres Retrospektive Udstilling, Den Frie Udstillings Bygning* (Copenhagen: 1920), in Danmarks Kunstbibliotek, kunstbib.dk. Kristín Jónsdóttir is named Kirsten Stefanson in the catalogue (she has also been referred to in Denmark as Kirsten Stefansson Jonsdottir). Kristín got married to Valtýr Stefánsson in 1918, and used his family name on this occasion. The two paintings she exhibited were *Udsigt fra Skærklit. Island*, 1916 (watercolours) and *Mit gamle Hjem paa Island*, 1919 (oil painting).

⁵⁰⁰ Agnes Lunn, “Indledning”, *Kvindelige Kunstneres Retrospektive Udstilling*, 1920, 3–19.

⁵⁰¹ These include Diana Ghisi and Anna Van Bouckel, from the sixteenth century; Madeleine Masson (born Gérôme), Elisabetta Sirani and Gesina ter Borg (Borch) from the seventeenth century; and from the eighteenth, Angelica Kauffman, Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and Caroline Watson. See, *Kvindelige Kunstneres Retrospektive Udstilling. Den Frie Udstillings Bygning*.

⁵⁰² Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på ... det feminine”, 289–299.

As Stokbro argues, destructive and irrelevant comments can be found in the public press on women artists, and this distorted discourse maintains the review on women artists and their work on a “lower level”. But in spite of the criticism, the exhibition in 1920 in Copenhagen showed that women artists had now gained a permanent place on the art scene and that their works reflected the new modernist trends in art and the influence from France and Germany in the same way as happened with male artists.⁵⁰³ In this context, concerning *textility* in other countries, many women artists asked themselves whether they should exhibit just with women or with men also. The conclusion was usually that “exhibiting collectively” could be the answer, particularly in this period, as women had been comparatively ignored in the art world, with a few exceptions.⁵⁰⁴ In Germany, women’s contribution to the cultural in the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) was important and women artists participated actively in modern culture. A real *Frauenkultur* existed: women wrote books and articles, edited journals, produced art, and formed women-only clubs and reading groups. These groups gave women a platform from which they could let their voices be heard. Hence, Weimars’s *Frauenkultur* was a significant feature of the context of women’s art practice and emphasized women’s cultural agency. Yet the contribution of these women in art history was marginalized and they were occluded by the “German modernist canon”.⁵⁰⁵

The concept of *textility* encompasses the collaboration of a variety of women artists in an international context, blurring the lines between craft and art. Here for instance it could be pointed out that in Weimar, Germany, the Bauhaus school of art was founded by Walter Gropius in 1919, and can be traced from the English Arts and Crafts movement. In spite of Bauhaus being described as an egalitarian community, after the preliminary class women were directed into the weaving workshop, regardless of their interest, as weaving was considered a lesser art than painting and sculpture (men’s domains) that were seen as too demanding for women; in Walter Gropius’s opinion, in the hierarchy of art and design, textiles were to be “women’s work”. Hence, the modernity of Bauhaus was not reflected in avant-garde ideas of gender but rather in more traditional ideas.⁵⁰⁶ Nevertheless, with weaver Gunta Stölzl as a director and textile artists such as Anni Albers, it was the weaving workshop at Bauhaus that became

⁵⁰³ Anne Lie Stokbro, “Jagten på ... det feminine”, 292–293.

⁵⁰⁴ Katy Deepwell, *Women artists between the wars*, 2–3 and 12.

⁵⁰⁵ Marsha Meskimmon, *We weren’t modern enough. Women artists and the limits of German Modernism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 2–9.

⁵⁰⁶ See, Anja Baumhoff, *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus: The Politics of Power at the Weimar Republic’s Premier Art Institute, 1919-1932* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), 19.

the most successful one, both in terms of remarkable experiments in abstraction as well as ensuring the financial survival of the Bauhaus school.⁵⁰⁷ In the same vein, *textility* as well as the concept *parrêsia* can include the emancipation of multi-talented women artists in the Russian avant-garde (1910–1930), which contributed in a dynamic way to a new aesthetic language: artistic innovation in theatre and costume design, mass-produced textiles and graphic design (posters, books and journal covers).⁵⁰⁸

3.4. On foreign influence on art, modernity and the “chosen few”

The opposition to foreign trends and movements was strong in the 1920s in most areas of society, such as art and culture, where the reception and comprehension of international art was frequently not at all positive. Now a period began where Icelandic art was presented abroad to a greater extent than before, and it was seen as acceptable if it was considered to show signs of being totally Icelandic but not under foreign influence. Similarly, the foreign art that some were trying to introduce in Iceland aroused differing views, with many questioning its legitimacy or necessity.⁵⁰⁹

Yet, if the cultural scene in Iceland was quite different from other countries, notably characterized by the absence of avant-garde activities and movements, the context is more complex, as Benedikt Hjartarson and Hubert Van den Berg argue. Even though the emphasis was on the tradition of Icelandic painting and the discourse reflected the fear of foreign influence, it “did not exclude the possibility of looking toward the European isms as points of orientation, as the cultural debates of the period bear witness to”. In addition, dwelling and working abroad gave Icelandic artists the opportunity to “gather knowledge of new aesthetic trends and to work in a more progressive cultural environment”. However, as Benedikt and Van

⁵⁰⁷ Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, *Bauhaus Textiles: Women Artists and the Weaving Workshop* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998); Elisabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler, *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective* (London: Herbert Press, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019). In industrial design, one can mention the contribution of metal designer Marianne Brandt, designer and architect Lily Reich, and photographer Lucia Moholy.

⁵⁰⁸ Elitza Dulguerova, “Women in the Russian avant-garde”, *Women in abstraction*, ed. Christine Macel and Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska (Paris: Centre Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne, 2021), 76–89.

⁵⁰⁹ In that regard, the *Art Society* contacted Den Frie in Copenhagen in 1925, and it was Thorvald Krabbe, who was on the exhibition committee, who took the initiative on this. A total of 200 works were sent to Iceland for the first exhibition of foreign paintings, which was held in June 1925. But despite such a large event in Icelandic cultural life, visitors to the exhibition were fewer than expected. See, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Húsprýði og sýningarhald”, 173–176.

den Berg claim, the Icelandic interest in the avant-garde focused on its aesthetic methods and techniques rather than its modes of aesthetic activism.⁵¹⁰

Icelandic artists had been introduced to avant-gardism in Copenhagen, France and Germany and for instance both Jón Stefánsson and Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (Muggur), had had their work published in the art periodical *Klingen* (1917–1919). This was a modernist art magazine founded and edited by artist–designer Axel Salto.⁵¹¹ Finnur Jónsson was also linked to the group of artists responsible for the publication and in his works from this period one can see the influence of both expressionism and geometric forms, as well as the obvious influence of Kandinsky.⁵¹² Finnur exhibited these new-fangled works in 1925, both at an exhibition at *Café Rosenberg* in Reykjavík and at the spring exhibition *Der Sturm* in Berlin, where he exhibited a total of eight paintings. These were abstract works in the spirit of Russian and German constructivism and thus part of the avant-garde movement of the period.⁵¹³ Hence, Finnur Jónsson became one of the pioneers of abstract art and was the first to show such works in Iceland. Yet he turned his back on his experiments related to avant-garde constructivism as soon as he returned to Iceland in 1925.⁵¹⁴

During the 1920s, instead of the progressivism of nineteenth-century Europe, the feeling was more akin to cultural pessimism and similar ideas gained support in Iceland. One of the people who considered that contemporary Western culture was becoming impoverished was the German philosopher Oswald Spengler. Spengler thus made a clear distinction between the terms “culture” (vegetation and a creative power) and “civilization” (the decline in the city),

⁵¹⁰ Benedikt Hjartarson and Hubert Van den Berg, “Icelandic artists in the network of the European Avant–Garde: The cases of Jón Stefánsson and Finnur Jónsson”, *A Cultural History of the Avant–Garde in the Nordic countries, 1900–1925*, ed. Hubert Van den Berg et al. (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012), 229–230.

⁵¹¹ Þröstur Helgason, *Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur móðernismi: lítil tímarit, landafræði, menningarsaga* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Hugvísindasvið, íslensku- og menningardeild, 2015), 75–76.

⁵¹² See, Benedikt Hjartarson “Af úrkynjun, brautryðjendum, vanskapnaði, vitum og sjáendum. Um upphaf framúrstefnu á Íslandi”, *Ritið*, 6 no. 1 (2006), 79–81. Benedikt Hjartarson, “The Early Avant–Garde in Iceland”, *A Cultural History of the Avant–Garde in the Nordic Countries 1900–1925*, eds. Hubert Van den Berg, Benedikt Hjartarson et al. (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2012), 615–630.

⁵¹³ Björn Björnsson, “Finnur Jónsson. Listsýning”, *Vísir*, November 28, 1925, 2. Finnur Jónsson had originally trained as a goldsmith but then studied painting with the modernist Olaf Rude in Copenhagen 1919–1921, and later attended the school of the revered Oskar Kokoschka who taught at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Dresden. Finnur enrolled next in the newly established school *Der Weg: Schule für Gestaltung*, which was run by the painter and photographer Edmund Kesting. See, Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, “Nýr sjónarheimur”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. II. Þjóðerni, náttúra og raunveruleiki, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 37–39.

⁵¹⁴ Benedikt Hjartarson, “The Early Avant–Garde in Iceland”, 615–630. Benedikt Hjartarson and Hubert Van den Berg, “Icelandic artists in the network of the European Avant–Garde: The cases of Jón Stefánsson and Finnur Jónsson”, *A Cultural History of the Avant–Garde in the Nordic countries, 1900–1925*, eds. Hubert Van den Berg et al. (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2012), 229–247.

connecting the declining civilization to aspects such as democratic development and the women's rights movement which were happening in the large cities.⁵¹⁵

The discourse of the feminine in the mid 1920s reflects a return to what has been referred to as *housewife ideology*: that the future of the Icelandic nation was based on women's role as mothers and housewives and, as mentioned before, became intertwined with conservative nationalism and traditionalism during the inter-war period.⁵¹⁶ Interwoven in all the discourse was the discussion of where Icelandic society was headed, in connection with retrogression and corruption, and whether it would not be better to structure Icelandic contemporary society in the spirit of rural society from the old days.⁵¹⁷

The fear was also linked to the corruption of femininity, the masculinizing of the feminine, and was reflected for instance in the more conservative women's periodicals such as *Hlín*, in which articles appeared on the connection between women's liberation and the degeneration of culture in the inter-war years. A question mark was set with women as creative artists, because of the fundamental differences between the sexes, both by men and women, in the same way as had always been done and which was also reflected in the discourse at the end of the nineteenth century. On the nature and role of women, it is notable that Sigrún Blöndal said that women have intuition as the opposite to reasoned judgement, and that women lacked creative power, originality, and inventiveness.⁵¹⁸ Ideas like this on the fundamental differences between men and women—rationality and reasoning as male qualities and emotions and insight as female qualities—flourished in the inter-war years. Articles of a similar nature were written for example by Aðalbjörg Sigurðardóttir in *Eimreiðin* (1926) and Sigurlaug Knudsen in *Hlín* (1927).⁵¹⁹ Femininity was in danger and foreign influence in disequilibrium had a bad effect, whether concerning women, art or literature—or generally speaking, culture and society.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁵ Árni Hallgrímsson, "Menning, sem deyr?", *Iðunn: nýr flokkur*, 13, no. 1 (1929), 49–64. See also, Sveinn Sigurðsson, editor of *Eimreiðin* (1928), who considered that equal rights of women and men lead to a general decline of the culture. See, Sveinn Sigurðsson, "Þjóðlygar og þegnskylda", *Eimreiðin*, 34, no. 3 (1928), 249–263. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir discusses this in "Menningardeilur og kvenleiki á árunum milli stríða", *Kvennaslóðir. Rit til heiðurs Sigríði Th. Erlendsdóttur sagnfræðingi*, ed. Anna Agnarsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 2001), 446–447.

⁵¹⁶ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, "1926. Kvennasamtök", *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga*, eds. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 133–163; Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, "Kvennahreyfing millistríðsáranna og átökin um hlutverk kvenna innan þjóðríkisins", *Fléttur 2. Kynjafræð—kortlagningar*, ed. Irma Erlingsdóttir (Reykjavík: Rannsóknarstofa í kvenna- og kynjafræðum við Háskóla Íslands, 2004), 103–111. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 2004, 374.

⁵¹⁷ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, "Menningardeilur og kvenleiki á árunum milli stríða", 446.

⁵¹⁸ Sigrún Blöndal, "Um eðli og hlutverk kvenna", *Hlín*, 10, no. 1 (1926), 89–121.

⁵¹⁹ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 301–315.

⁵²⁰ See, on foreign influence in art in Iceland and the avant-garde, in Benedikt Hjartarson and Hubert Van den Berg, "Icelandic artists in the network of the European Avant-Garde. The cases of Jón Stefánsson and Finnur

In this quite contradictory period, ideas like these also aroused strong responses. In those years, women gained more and stronger advocates, not only in politics but in many other areas.⁵²¹ Björg C. Þorláksson, who came forward and added impetus to the discourse concerning the attitude voiced in *19. júní*, emphasized that women possessed as many mental abilities as men and had the right to work outside the home.⁵²² Björg became not only the first Icelandic woman to complete a doctoral degree, but the first doctorante in the Nordic countries to do so at the Sorbonne University in Paris, on 17 June 1926.⁵²³

Thus, the discourse of women was complex and multi-faceted, never a unilateral, all-or-nothing discourse, as exchange of opinions was obviously of a varied nature and women were trying out new roles. Interwoven into this discourse on foreign influences is, once again, the Golden Age in Iceland. Sigurður Nordal was under the influence of German cultural history, in particular Herder, who was one of the main theoreticians of contemporary nationalist ideas, and had great influence on Icelandic intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵²⁴ In Sigurður's mind, literature was a reflection of the national character and at the same time proof or justification of the nation state.

But this was not within the capabilities of everyone: it was the “chosen few, the esteemed poets and national poets, who have everything at once: the inspiration, the desire and the power”.⁵²⁵ With Sigurður, the main emphasis was on the original romantic values of the genius, the great author and the highly educated person.⁵²⁶ Hence, the discourse on art and culture continued to focus on the strong individual, and was even more powerful than before. Sigurður wrote that within the field of literature, people should prepare “for the coming of the

Jónsson”, *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic countries, 1900–1925*, eds. Hubert Van den Berg et al. (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2012), 229–247. Benedikt Hjartarson, “Af úrkynjun, brautryðjendum, vanskapnaði, vitum og sjáendum. Um upphaf framúrstefnu á Íslandi”, *Ritið*, 6, no. 1 (2006), 79–119.

⁵²¹ See, Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, “Hnignun og mannfækkun”, *19. júní*, 10, no. 2 (1927), 26–28 and in *19. júní* 10, no. 3 (1927), 41–43.

⁵²² Björg Þorláksson, “Um eðli og hlutverk kvenna”, *19. júní*, 10, no. 3 (1927), 34–37 and in *19. júní*, 10, no. 4 (1927), 51–55.

⁵²³ Björg-Caritas Thorlakson [Björg C. Þorláksson], *Le Fondement Physiologique des instincts des systèmes Nutritif, Neuromusculaire et Génital* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1926). See, Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, *Björg. Ævisaga Bjargar C. Þorláksson* (Reykjavík: JPV, 2001), 178–184. Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, “Að breyta heiminum. Hugmyndir Bjargar C. Þorláksson um kvenréttindi og önnur þjóðfélagsmál”, *Björg. Verk Bjargar C. Þorláksson*, ed. Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir (Reykjavík: JPV, 2002), 45–66. Much more needs to be examined in Björg's contribution with her doctoral thesis in the fields of physics and medicine which is outside the material of this thesis, but it is safe to say that it was in many ways very original and ahead of its time. Björg was f.i. very keen on the effect of diet on health, and published e.g. a book on nutrition: Björg C. Þorláksson, *Mataræði og þjóðþrif* (Reykjavík: Ísafold, 1930).

⁵²⁴ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 24–26 and 46–50.

⁵²⁵ Sigurður Nordal, “Viljinn og verkið”, *Vaka* 3, no. 3 (1929), 257–269, citation 261.

⁵²⁶ See e.g. Helga Kress, “Mikið skáld og hámenntaður maður. Íslenski skólinn í íslenskri bókmenntafræði”, Helga Kress, *Speglanir*, 385–399.

genius”.⁵²⁷ He referred to writer Halldór Laxness as the new genius and delved into Laxness’s work *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (e. The Great Weaver from Kashmir) from 1927.⁵²⁸ Laxness—who was frequently called by that name—had not only become the model for other young writers but was also very influential during the following decades in the general discourse on arts and culture in Iceland.

3.5. The Great Weaver(s) from Iceland

At the same time as the *Art Society* focused to a greater extent in the 1920s on a narrow sense of what should be exhibited and who should exhibit, women continued to exert themselves for innovations in the field of handicrafts and to preserve the history of these. Yet what shows that differing opinions remained within the *Art Society* is that there was still some collaboration with arts and crafts.

In the years 1918–1938, several women ran weaving studios in Iceland, where all sorts of cloths were woven to decorate the home, most of which were upholstery covers, curtains, cushions and tablecloths made out of Icelandic wool. One of these women was Karólína Guðmundsdóttir, who went to Copenhagen in 1920, attended a summer course run by *Danish Crafts Association* and worked at a weaving studio in that city until 1922 when she returned to Iceland. Karólína exhibited weaving and baldering embroidery at the first general Icelandic exhibition of home industry and handicrafts in Reykjavík in 1921 and concurrently held a private exhibition in the house of the *Art Society* in 1923; she is usually considered a pioneer of the new tapestry, and her contribution in the art industry is important in Icelandic Design History.⁵²⁹ She also participated at the *Women’s Trade Exhibition* (i. Iðnsýning kvenna) in the Children’s school in Reykjavík in 1924 and showed weaving, including cloths. Home industries took pride of place at the exhibition and there was a wide selection of items by women.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁷ Sigurður Nordal, “Um ritdóma”, *Eimreiðin* 31, no. 1 (1925), 69. See also, Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn*, 8–9.

⁵²⁸ Sigurður Nordal, “Bókmenntaþættir”, *Vaka* 2, no. 1 (1928), 88 and 94–95. See also on the subject, Þröstur Helgason, “Móðerníská tímaritið Birtingur”, *Ritið*, 15, no. 2 (2015), 147–179.

⁵²⁹ At this exhibition, both tapestry (d. kunstbroderi) and home industry could be seen, as well as crafted wooden items and many other items. See, L.V., “Heimilisiðnaðarsýning. Landssýning”, *Alþýðublaðið*, June 1, 1921, 1. See also, Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “Ofið í metratáli eftir pöntun móðernistanna”, *Karólína vefari*, ed. Sigrún Kristjánsdóttir (Reykjavík: Borgarsögusafn Reykjavíkur, 2021), 29–36.

⁵³⁰ See, “Frjettir”, *Ísafold*, June 21, 1924, 4. Karólína was Chair of the *Home Industry Association* 1923 and ran a weaving studio for half a century in Reykjavík. Karólína’s weaving was in demand from the 1930s at her weaving studio (upholstery curtains for public buildings) and she paved the way in the making of hand-woven upholstery and curtains made out of Icelandic wool, with models in Icelandic patterns. See, Gerður Róbertsdóttir, “Vandað

Karólína Guðmundsdóttir set up two courses that marked a milestone in the reforms of The *Home Industry Association*. Firstly, she got sculptor and master woodcarver Ríkarður Jónsson to teach carpentry in 1924, with Sigríður Björnsdóttir, who helped with the wood carving course; both had been among the founders of the *Art Society*. Secondly, a two-month course in weaving taught by artist Júlíana Sveinsdóttir was organized, in the autumn months of 1924 and 1925.⁵³¹ As the advertisement for the weaving course worded it, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir had gained “a good reputation for her textiles in Copenhagen”.⁵³² Júlíana had started making textiles in 1920 from Icelandic wool, which she dyed herself and sold as furniture upholstery and covers, and she ran a weaving room at her house in Nyhavn, Copenhagen, for 30 years, starting in 1936. Júlíana had become enchanted with Italy, going there for the first time in 1918, and was introduced to mosaic, fresco and gobelin weaving of the early Renaissance. Júlíana went to Florence and Rome in 1926 and the year after, she started studying fresco and mosaic art at the Royal Danish Academy, with Elob Risebye. She studied weaving as well in the newly established Department of Weaving in the same Academy and attended classes under Astrid Holm.⁵³³

Júlíana thus worked early on in several different art forms, and continued to do so. She had taught drawing and weaving to earn her living in Copenhagen, but later on she considered weaving and painting as equally legitimate artforms. However, she was not the only woman artist to do this. Júlíana was part of Astrid Holm’s closest circle, as was the painter Ebba Carstensen. They all worked with textiles alongside painting, either alone or in collaboration, and formed a real women’s artist colony in Horneby, Hornbæk, in Denmark as there were also other women artists there.⁵³⁴ Both Holm and Carstensen had summer houses there and Júlíana

handverk á vélaöld: um þátt frumkvöðulsins og athafnakonunnar Karólínu Guðmundsdóttur í að þróa nútímalegan vefjariðnað á Íslandi”, *Saga*, 60, no. 1 (2022), 7–15; Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað”, 21–31; H.Á [Hólmfríður Árnadóttir], “Karólína Guðmundsdóttir vefkona”, *Hugur og hönd*, 10, no. 1 (1975), 44–45.

⁵³¹ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “...að kenna íslenskum stúlkum iðnað”, 21–31. There are many indications of good cooperation and friendship between Karólína and Júlíana from Karólína’s years of study in Copenhagen, but in addition they were cousins. See, Arndís S. Árnadóttir, “Ofið í metratali eftir pöntun móðernistanna”, 30

⁵³² St. H. “Vefnaðarnámskeið”, *19. júní*, 8, no. 2 (1925), 16

⁵³³ Hanne Abildgaard, *Astrid Holm & Co.* (Hellerup: Øregaard Museum, 2019), 234; Hrafnhildur Schram, “Ímynd landsins”, 123–124.

⁵³⁴ Astrid Holm, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Ebba Carstensen knew each other from the activities of KKS, as well as through teaching and study in Copenhagen. Júlíana later sat on the KKS committee 1938–1949 and on the exhibition committee 1944–1957. Astrid was one of the founding members of KKS in 1916 and one of the founders of the Artists Sketching School (d. Kunstnernes Croquissskole), which was founded in Copenhagen in 1919 by several artist organizations, notably KKS. The model of such a school could be found for instance in Paris, and one of the innovations in this school was that artists (women and men) were allowed to draw live models, which had been an objective of KKS since the time it was founded in 1916. Astrid was school principal from 1919 until her death in 1937. She had learnt textile art in 1920 and established a textile design department in the Royal Danish

visited Holm frequently from the time she bought the house in 1926. Júlíana then bought Holm's house in 1937 after the latter's death.

In Denmark, the women's arts association KKS celebrated its tenth anniversary in 1926 and held an exhibition, *Dansk–Norsk–Svensk Kunsthåndværk*, in the new Danish Museum of Art and Design (d. Kunstindustrimuseet) in Copenhagen. Astrid Holm was one of the women who arranged the exhibition, which earned favourable reviews in the press, as many art critics looked at needlework as a field in which women “distinguished themselves” to a greater extent. The exhibition was a big step for KKS and for the art industry as a whole, and it led to the founding of the *Danish Handicraft Association* in 1928, which a year later held another exhibition, *Nyt dansk og forbilledlig gammel Textilhåndværk*, also in the Danish Museum of Art and Design. A hundred women exhibited there—including Júlíana, who got very positive reviews for her contribution—along with six men. One of those who had embroidery works at the exhibition was the aforementioned Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (Muggur) who had died in 1924.⁵³⁵

Júlíana exhibited her weaving there for the first time in Denmark, and as art historian Hanne Abildgaard points out, became a pioneer in weaving and was known as such in the 1930s. However, as Abildgaard argues, the biggest obstacle on the road to recognition for Júlíana, Holm and their women artist friends and contemporaries was the gender segregation at that time, which was grounded in the contemporary view of gender and gender roles. At this time, art education for women was not the reason for gendered assumptions; rather, it was the fact that they were referred to as belonging to women's communities, and were cut off from being able to enter the camaraderie circles in the all-encompassing, male-dominant art scene.⁵³⁶

When it came to landscape painting, Júlíana was very exacting in her choice of locations, whether these were in Denmark or Iceland. In Iceland, she chose her childhood haunts in Vestmannaeyjar rather than the country's known landmarks such as Þingvellir, and it was there, in 1926, that she held her first exhibitions in Iceland, at the K.F.U.M. building in

Academy. None of these three were married, and Carstensen was the only one who had a child, a daughter, Astrid. See, Hanne Abildgaard, *Astrid Holm & Co.*, 246–248 and 289–294; Hrafnhildur Schram, “Svart grjót, blátt haf”, *Júlíana Sveinsdóttir. Vefur lands og líta*, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2003), 22.

⁵³⁵ *Selskabet til Håndarbejdets Fremme* was in fact an umbrella organization for the various handicraft associations in Denmark. Ellen Tange, “Kvindernes fremtidige kunsthistorie”, 305–306; Lene Burkard, “100 års øjeblikke”, 17. The name of the museum changed in 2011 to Designmuseum Danmark.

⁵³⁶ Hanne Abildgaard, *Astrid Holm & Co.*, 310–312.

Vestmannaeyjar and later that same year in the premises of the *Art Society* in Reykjavík, showing both paintings and weaving.⁵³⁷

Sculptor Ríkarður Jónsson wrote about Júlíana's exhibitions in *Vísir*, saying that Júlíana was an outstanding textile artist; she taught weaving, which was good, but he wanted to see more "Icelandic subjects" in her weaving. Ríkarður drew attention to the fact that her works had mostly got varying reviews in Iceland, but that some had seen that this was a case of great tenacity, know-how and concentrated artistic power. Júlíana had not let the fairly severe reviews affect her and worked quietly year after year to achieve her goal. "This modest young woman had now come so far in her art that many snobs can let it suffice to grovel in a remote hut and glance at the promising manor that Júlíana herself has cultivated and is proud of".⁵³⁸ Clearly, Ríkarður had been appalled at what he referred to as the "fairly severe reviews" that Júlíana had received, without however referring precisely to her—it seems that this was generally the case. In regard to these positive writings of Ríkarður, it is worth mentioning a few points. Firstly, Ríkarður was a good friend of Júlíana and had studied with her in Copenhagen. Secondly, Ríkarður was a well-meaning craftsman, both a sculptor and master woodcarver, who wanted to coordinate wood carving and sculpture as well as to resurrect the Icelandic wood carving tradition. His work was thus highly diverse: ornaments, utensils and sculptures.⁵³⁹ As mentioned previously, he was also positive about linking the operations of the *Art Society* with tuition in crafts, and therefore he was not as inclined to accept a narrow definition of the fine arts and handicrafts as many others were.

In 1927, an article about Júlíana Sveinsdóttir was published in the women's periodical *19. júní*; it focused on the works she exhibited in Copenhagen that year and referred to the praiseful reviews about the exhibition that appeared in the Danish papers. Júlíana exhibited a total of 70 paintings and drawings, and the article referred to them by saying "the most eye-catching are the Icelandic paintings"; Júlíana had "rich literary talent" displayed in her works, while the Icelandic nature is illuminated in her paintings, "according to the truth". The article in *19. júní* concluded by stating how pleasing it was when Icelandic artists got a good reputation abroad for their work, like Júlíana had done.⁵⁴⁰ Thus a year after her solo exhibition in Iceland, which did not attract much attention or coverage in her native country, Júlíana received on the

⁵³⁷ Hrafnhildur Schram, "Ímynd landsins", 113–117.

⁵³⁸ Ríkarður Jónsson, "Júlíana Sveinsdóttir listmálari", *Vísir*, December 2, 1926, 4

⁵³⁹ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, "Nýr sjónarheimur", 19–23.

⁵⁴⁰ "Júlíana Sveinsdóttir listmálari", *19. júní*, 10, no. 7 (1927), 108–109.

one hand dazzling reviews for her works in the Danish press, and on the other hand these reviews were specifically mentioned and translated in the women's periodical *19. júní*.

The shaping of the woman artist's self-image, self-concept and self-identity is reflected in the 1920s. During her career, Júlíana painted nearly twenty self-portraits, the first one most likely in 1916. This had been a theme rarely seen in the works of Icelandic women artists.⁵⁴¹ Her self-portrait from 1925 reflects a great deal of self-examination. She is wearing colourful clothes and a hat. In the spirit of the times, it is boyishly laid-back, with hair cut short, minimal feminine qualities and characterized by changed societal status, independence and freedom. Júlíana holds a paintbrush and always defined herself as a woman painter. At the same time, this harsh self-examination does not in any way detract from the originality and innovation of this artist, firstly with her self-portraits and secondly with her textile works. She approached her textile works as an artform in the same way as her paintings, in a manner that was as innovative as it was progressive, built up of geometric and biological forms, though she herself said that she had not been inclined to the abstract movement.⁵⁴²

Júlíana lived in Denmark at the end of her studies, with the exception of 1929–1931 when she lived in Iceland. At this point, she was trying to revamp her art and in many ways these were difficult years for her, which can be seen in her self-portraits, for instance from 1931 where, as before in 1925, she looks unabashedly and self-critically at her own being and awareness. This self-portrait is much darker in every way than that from 1925, with dark colours and the palette limited to a few earth tones. This is the woman artist who is seldom satisfied with her own work and even denotes depression and dysphoria.⁵⁴³ But she had also trodden unconventional paths, being an unmarried, childless woman living in Copenhagen, and considered herself better off—in terms of her art—far from her native land.

Women's self-image was certainly being shaped in the 1920s to 1930, and was reflected in art and literature. Women were increasingly considering themselves worthy enough to put themselves in the foreground in their works.⁵⁴⁴ Previously this had been a men's domain and women's autobiographies clashed with the ideas of what makes a life and what not, which face deserves eternal life in a self-portrait and which does not. Does a woman have the right to put

⁵⁴¹ Hrafnhildur Schram, "Svart grjót, blátt haf", 18–19.

⁵⁴² Hrafnhildur Schram, "Ímynd landsins", 122–124.

⁵⁴³ Hrafnhildur Schram, "Ímynd landsins", 113–124.

⁵⁴⁴ One could mention that the first autobiography of a woman, Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir—who besides being a former editor of the women's periodical *Framsókn* was also in the frontline on women's rights—was not published until 1925. The next autobiography by a woman, Guðbjörg Jónsdóttir, came out in 1929. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, "Sögulegir gerendur og aukapersónur", 77.

herself “forward” and consider herself immortal through her work? Henceforth, women artists were increasingly adopting self-portraiture, reflecting a search for identity as well as definitions of femininity.⁵⁴⁵ And for Icelandic women, the respect that Júlíana earned as a woman artist abroad was extremely important and one could certainly call her a pioneer, both as a renowned painter and as the “great weaver from Iceland”.

3.6. Virility going viral: Icelandic art abroad (1927–1928)

The first substantial, collective art exhibition of Icelandic art abroad, *Udstilling af islandsk kunst*, was held in December 1927 in Charlottenborg, Copenhagen—the same year that Júlíana Sveinsdóttir held her solo exhibition in Den Frie Udstillings building. This exhibition, which is often regarded as a big step in Icelandic art history, was also a travelling exhibition and even went to some cities in northern Germany, ending in Berlin which was considered great prestige.⁵⁴⁶ A group of Icelandic artists displayed their work on foreign ground—and it certainly marked a turning point. Therefore, it is important to analyse the discourse in Iceland and abroad on Icelandic art and artists in order to get a different view of its revealing aspects on the basis of gendered and nationalist discourse.

Those who organized the exhibition and played a major role in the selection of works, and who accompanied the works to Denmark, were the Danish–Swiss journalist Georg Gretor, who had travelled around Iceland in 1926 as well as meeting Icelandic artists, and Matthías Þórðarson, who was both director of the National Museum and the supervisor of the National Gallery.⁵⁴⁷ The Danish art historian Poul Uttenreter assisted in setting up the exhibition, along with the artist Jón Þorleifsson and also Júlíana Sveinsdóttir. The exhibition was intended to show the work of the oldest painters, from Sigurður Guðmundsson and Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, as well as that of younger artists to demonstrate the advances made up to that day.⁵⁴⁸

On show were paintings and drawings by a total of twelve artists, of whom two were women, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Kristín Jónsdóttir. No sculptures were shown but in addition

⁵⁴⁵ Marsha Meskimmon, *We weren't modern enough*, 235–238.

⁵⁴⁶ The exhibition ended with a certain culmination point in Berlin, in the gallery for modern art, Neumann–Nierendorf. “Íslenska sýningin í Þýskalandi—íslensk list hefir öðlast sæti í listasögu heimsins”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 14, 1928, 3.

⁵⁴⁷ It should also be mentioned that Matthías Þórðarson was an antiquarian and also in charge of the National Gallery from 1908 to 1947, or for almost 40 years, as the National Gallery was still a division of the National Museum and not independent.

⁵⁴⁸ “Ísl. umferðasýningin. Hefir íslensk list eftirtektarverð sjerkennti?”, *Morgunblaðið*, November 22, 1927, 3–4.

to drawings and paintings, wood carvings from the National Museum and silver items were on display. Both Matthías and Gretor were subject to considerable criticism due to their choice of works at the exhibition and were particularly criticized because the works of the youngest artists were bypassed. Here, the grumblings that had arisen in the art discourse could be heard clearer than ever.⁵⁴⁹

Many statements about the exhibition in Copenhagen were translated and published in Icelandic papers. Gretor announced his expectations, which appeared in *Morgunblaðið* (1927), and especially wanted to show the “idiosyncrasies” of Icelandic art, “that are not seen anywhere else”, because these “idiosyncrasies are a sign of national features”, and if foreign art critics set eyes on them as “artistic value”, then “the way is cleared for Icelandic exhibitions abroad”.⁵⁵⁰

But not all of the Icelandic artists participating in the exhibition had this “idiosyncrasy of Icelandic art”. An article by Gretor, translated into Icelandic, appeared a little later under the heading “Three Icelandic painters”. There, he claimed that the art in the sparsely populated Iceland is only a quarter of a century old and it was astonishing “what a high level it has reached”, in the hands of the three best painters in the country, namely Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson and Kjarval. Ásgrímur has “a perceptive feeling for the main aspects of the landscape and can depict them with vigour and masculinity”, while Jón Stefánsson is “somewhat younger than Ásgrímur” and perhaps a “better painter” and the Icelandic painter who has the most “development potential”. Gretor then discussed the third master, Kjarval, also “a greatly esteemed painter”. It then says that Kjarval has developed peculiarly and totally “non-academically”, despite his education at the Royal Danish Academy, and although he is guilty of being a “versatile artist” and experiments with different styles and methods, he is, out of the three Icelandic painters, probably the one who is “the most Icelandic in his art”. Gretor said that if those three artists had “a whole parish of admirers” in Iceland, discussing “which of them is the best painter”, the Icelanders should rather stand proud over having in their possession three such gifted painters, “in the first generation of Icelandic artists”.⁵⁵¹

Although Gretor mentioned foreign influence on the art creations of some Icelandic artists, he took up and kept to the idiosyncrasies of the Icelandic discourse—the three artists—whereby their work is described as natural wonders, they themselves as a resource in the

⁵⁴⁹ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Húsprýði og sýningarhald”, 179–180; Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, “Listamannadeilur”, *Í deiglunni 1930–1944. Frá Alþingishátíð til lýðveldisstofnunar*, ed. Bera Nordal (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Mál og menning, 1994), 139–152.

⁵⁵⁰ “Ísl. umferðasýningin. Hefir íslensk list eftirtektarverð sjerkennt?”, *Morgunblaðið*, November 22, 1927, 3–4.

⁵⁵¹ “Þrír íslenskir málarar”, *Tíminn*, January 26, 1928, 17.

ownership of the nation, and in their hands Icelandic nature and landmarks become truer than the subject itself.

Not much is translated in Icelandic papers about the works of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Kristín Jónsdóttir, but it is said that Kristín's paintings show "entertaining details" and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir is said to be a "vibrant and pleasing painter", in many ways with a similar understanding of Icelandic nature as Jón Stefánsson. But in some of Júlíana's paintings, "it is as if fine feminine exquisiteness complements all the colours". Besides being vibrant, which has especially been attributed to men in Icelandic discourse, Kristín is also said to be "more idiosyncratic", while in addition some of her works were "reminiscent of a novel by Knut Hamsun".⁵⁵² One can conclude that such a comparison to "the style genius", "the great writer" and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1920, Hamsun, has few precedents.⁵⁵³

The "alleged" foreign influence on Icelandic art in discussion of the exhibition abroad, notably by the French, was criticized in Iceland in the papers in submitted articles. Foreign critics were said to have no sense or understanding of Icelandic art, which could be seen when they touted the work of Kristín Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Jón Stefánsson but not, for instance, Kjarval.⁵⁵⁴ This is the same leitmotif as before, and if the foreign discourse does not match the discourse and "selection" that is characteristic in Icelandic discourse, it is because of the lack of knowledge of foreigners who knew nothing about Icelandic art. It is in no way possible for many to see the foreign influence on Icelandic male artists, but conversely these influences were discernible in the work of women artists.

What perhaps stands out the most in the 1920s, and will become prominent in the following decades, is that Icelandic women artists were released from the bondage of the narrow, masculine, nationalist attitudes to artists in Iceland when they exhibited abroad. Thus

⁵⁵² "Íslensk málaralist", *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, February 5, 1928, 36–39. In the same paper, two translated statements about the Copenhagen exhibition were published, one by the author and art critic [Einar] Otto Gelsted and the other by the Danish painter and art critic Danneskjold-Samsøe.

⁵⁵³ "Knut Hamsun sjötugur", *Ísland*, 3, no. 30 (1929), 2.

⁵⁵⁴ "Íslenska sýningin í Þýskalandi—íslensk list hefir öðlast sæti í listasögu heimsins", *Morgunblaðið*, September 14, 1928, 3. Greter had written an introductory pamphlet on Icelandic art for the exhibition in Germany, which received some criticism. Georg Greter, *Islands Kultur und seine junge Malerei*, Hrsg. von der Nordischen Gesellschaft (Jena: Diederichs, 1928). See criticism in, Guðmundur Einarsson, ""Morgunblaðið, Georg Greter og "bók" hans"", *Vísir*, May 2, 1928, 3; "Íslensk málaralist", *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, February 5, 1928, 36–39; Þengill Eiríksson, "Meðferðin á íslenskum málurum. Sýningarhneykslið. Skrif danskra miðlungsmanna", *Vikuútgáfa Alþýðublaðsins*, July 11, 1928, 2–4; "Íslenska listsýningin", *Morgunblaðið*, April 1, 1928, 2; "Íslenska sýningin í Þýskalandi", *Morgunblaðið*, April 27, 1928, 3. See, an article in *Morgunblaðið* (1928) referred to a German paper when the exhibition was held in Königsberg, where it claimed that Jón Stefánsson was the best Icelandic artist, and the most virile. See, "Íslenska sýningin í Þýskalandi. Úr blaðadómum um sýninguna í Königsberg", *Morgunblaðið*, August 8, 1928, 2.

Júlíana got a different type of criticism, attention and coverage in foreign papers than in those in Iceland and in a more gender-neutral way, whereby her landscape paintings were considered “Icelandic”, something that pertained only to the landscape paintings by men in the coverage in Iceland; the same could be said about Kristín’s landscape paintings.

A certain peak of the masculine and feminine dichotomy in discourse on art can be observed in the late 1920s, when in fact virility went viral in art in the works of the true Icelandic male artists in connection with presentations of Icelandic paintings abroad. Their artistic creations were also completely Icelandic, and there were even comparisons, competitions, about which of the artists was the most Icelandic. They were strong and independent, not reliant on foreign influence, not academic. The women painters showed nice details, accuracy, tasteful work and interpretation—feminine exquisiteness. In Iceland, it seems as if women artists were criticized both for being too educated and academic, and as a consequence (of that and their gender) were not original—they were too influenced (or foreign) by their education.

In the UK, the foreign French influence had been frowned upon by locals. The same applied to gendered, nationalist discourse on art, which had parallels in all of the neighbouring countries. During the inter-war period, words such as *vitality* or, in its most masculine form, *virility*, was a key word in the vocabulary of artists and critics.⁵⁵⁵ As Christine Battersby has argued, the modern usage of the term genius has parallels in most countries. One of these geniuses handles his art with virility, the embodiment of masculinity itself—which most definitely applies to the discourse on the genius in the 1920s and the decades that followed. Likewise, another type of genius is the one who both marks the boundary between the old way and the new way within the tradition. The one “who gives the rule to art”, deriving from the philosophy of Kant. Yet another genius is the romantic one, the psychological type, unlike other men however talented, on the borders of sanity and madness. Furthermore, Battersby’s definitions also include the national hero who is, and corresponds to, the totally Icelandic artist, which became another term for virility in art.⁵⁵⁶

In Germany, even in modern Berlin, the danger of too many women artists was the same as elsewhere. In *Die Frau als Künstlerin* (1928) by Hans Hildebrandt, deep concern is expressed about the increased competition—and if women were not just weaker by nature, physically as

⁵⁵⁵ Katy Deepwell, *Women artists between the wars*, 262–266.

⁵⁵⁶ Christine Battersby, “The Architect as Genius: Feminism and the Aesthetics of Exclusion”, 9–17.

well as intellectually, said the author, they could be “a real threat”.⁵⁵⁷ Hildebrandt’s *Die Frau als Künstlerin* is nonetheless a watershed in twentieth-century scholarship on the theme of women as artists, documenting the increasing presence of women in the arts in Germany during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, at that time more women artists became the subject of brief reviews and studies. Women critics and patrons supported women’s art practice, which also indicated female agency, both in the socio-political sphere and in cultural life.⁵⁵⁸ Yet, looking at how women artists were discussed in the newspapers and art journals during the interwar period, like in England, the remarks were often “part of larger distinctly gendered patterns in how value judgments were employed to praise and condemn women artists’ works”.⁵⁵⁹

3.7. Prelude to the founding of a Republic (1930–1944)

3.7.1. Gender arrogance, Reykjavík young women and the millennium of the Alþingi

In the years prior to the millennium festival of the Alþingi in 1930, the one-thousand-year anniversary of the Icelandic parliament, one can see from the writings of women that they intended to play a large part, for instance by being active participants at the festival, getting seats on the preparatory committees and thereby becoming fully valid citizens. However, the reality was such that the public discourse about the impending festival, the preparations and participation—and in fact in general in the late 1920s—was gender-divided. This is reflected in the mainstream discourse and women’s periodicals, as well as in ideas on the true Icelandic art (male) and handicrafts (female), the definition of the genius (male) and the art of (female) behaving and apparel.

Women’s handicrafts continued to take up a great deal of space in the women’s periodicals in Iceland, as the common heritage of all women that could be “traced” many centuries back—and an argument of women’s contribution to the nation as cultural citizens. Most women agreed about this history and legacy, and how it was remembered. However, there was a difference in emphasis: On the one hand there was home industry as part of housewife

⁵⁵⁷ Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Kvinna i avantgardet. Sigrid Hjertén. Liv och verk* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2017), 300–301.

⁵⁵⁸ Marsha Meskimmon, *We weren’t modern enough*, 231–232.

⁵⁵⁹ Katy Deepwell, *Women artists between the wars*, 4.

ideology—in the 1930s many women’s associations considered it their role to strengthen the knowledge of country housewives—and on the other hand there was the public women’s struggle, in which handicrafts were part of women’s artistic creation, a centuries-old heritage that reflected women’s history in particular.

Halldóra Bjarnadóttir, a pioneer in tuition in handicrafts who became active in public life in Iceland and advocated for woolworking skills, felt strongly about the Icelandic textile heritage, and was keen to see needlework taught in Icelandic schools.⁵⁶⁰ With Halldóra at the helm, the emphasis in the women’s periodical *Hlín* continued to be put on home industry and housewife ideology, and as with many other women’s associations, welfare matters were also important factors.⁵⁶¹ In *Hlín* (1926), Halldóra thus drew attention to the fact that a *Home Industry exhibition* would be held in the ceremonial year of 1930, and that everything that had characterized a good Icelandic home, in the past and present, needed to be exhibited, “so that Icelanders find the stimulus to make their home more national, more Icelandic in appearance”.⁵⁶² In 1927 there was a crisis meeting within the *Home Industry Association*, and those responsible for the society were actually accused of not doing enough for the national element. Matters boiled over and as a result, the association strengthened its relations with women’s associations throughout Iceland, with Halldóra in charge and with greater emphasis put on the distinctly Icelandic and the national.⁵⁶³

Though she had opposing views to much of what was written by more conservative women in *Hlín*, Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, editor of *19. júní*, drew attention to women’s handicrafts as another goal for 1930. She considered that women should make sure that in 1930, “a quality edition” of Icelandic weaving, needlework and carving would be published.⁵⁶⁴ In the article, she reminded her readers that a great treasure is stored in the National Museum of Iceland, and

⁵⁶⁰ Halldóra was a schoolmistress at the Akureyri Grammar School (1908–1918), and one of the founders of the Handicrafts Association of Northern Iceland in 1915. See, Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, “Formáli að 2. útgáfu af Vefnaðarbók”, *Vefnaður á íslenskum heimilum á 19. öld og fyrri hluta 20. aldar*, ed. Elín S. Sigurðardóttir (Blönduós: Heimilisiðnaðarsafnið, 2009), v–vi.

⁵⁶¹ It turned out to be extremely difficult and complex for women to fulfil demands on “appropriate femininity” while at the same time maintaining that they were modern, political individuals and had the right and duty to participate in public life and politics (Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 367).

⁵⁶² Halldóra Bjarnadóttir, “Heimilisiðnaðarsýningin 1930 og undirbúningur hennar”, *Hlín*, 10, no. 1 (1926), 76–80.

⁵⁶³ Halldóra was a candidate for the women’s party in national elections in 1922 and 1926. She directed the Federation of Icelandic Handicrafts Association from 1927–1936 and was the editor of the women’s periodical *Hlín*, the annual journal of the Federation of Women in Northern Iceland (1917–1961). She gave part of her collection of different woollen articles and tools for wool work to the Textile Museum in Blönduós, opened in 1976. Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, “Formáli að 2. útgáfu af Vefnaðarbók”, vii–viii.

⁵⁶⁴ Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, “Íslenzkar konur og Alþingishátíðin 1930. Erindi flutt á aðalfundi Bandalags kvenna 26. maí 1926”, *19. júní*, 9, no. 7 (1926), 50–51.

that there is little that attracts more attention and admiration “than the work that the old women, our foremothers, have left behind”.⁵⁶⁵ The need to discuss and trace the history of women’s handicrafts in the women’s periodicals in Iceland was still a large factor in the struggle to commemorate the contribution of women to art in Iceland in bygone centuries.

The Icelandic exhibition in 1927 and 1928 was in a way a turning point in promoting Icelandic art abroad, and also, one could say that the first period of Icelandic modern art was now coming to an end.⁵⁶⁶ In 1929, Þorkell Jóhannesson, professor in history, wrote for instance about the state of Icelandic art history—which he stated was not much explored—and the abject state of the National Gallery: the need to emphasize art and have a gallery devoted to art that would be a sufficiently complete collection which could give a comprehensive view of Icelandic art. Þorkell epitomized the position of Icelandic contemporary art, referring to avant-gardism in Iceland as “a sign of new times” in art. However, he did not say one word about Icelandic women artists, but referred to women in general, i.e. the servitude of women “which no longer exists”. And what was the reason? Yes, now women could have short hair and crew cuts were fashionable and a sign of women’s liberation.⁵⁶⁷

Thus, the avant-garde movement of men and the hair fashion of women are parallel; the progress in the spirit of the new times is reflected in this, even if opinions on the contribution of women to art and culture were not at all supportive. It could be said that there are two approaches here, as before, on the art of being a genius and the art of (female) behaving and apparel: the art of the pioneers of art and the writing of art history and the other on the handicrafts and women, along with their history and access to their works in the National Museum.

This discussion about women who followed foreign fashion trends, as opposed to the discussion about innocent country girls who were close to nature which had started a decade earlier, turned out to be even more prevalent in the 1920s, often called the Roaring Twenties, and it took place in Iceland as elsewhere in Western societies. The discussion focused on Iceland and the new “modern woman”, the so-called “Reykjavík young woman”: the young Reykjavík women who had close-cropped hair, smoked and took on board previously unknown

⁵⁶⁵ Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, “Íslenskur listiðnaður”, *19. júní*, 12, no.10 (1929), 153–154.

⁵⁶⁶ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Húsprýði og sýningarhald”, 179–180.

⁵⁶⁷ Þorkell Jóhannesson, “Íslensk list”, *Samvinnan*, 23, nos. 3–4 (1929), 297–319.

liberties, e.g. in clothing and make-up. The Reykjavík girl became the opposite of the Icelandic, innocent woman who was close to the role of mother (and nature).⁵⁶⁸

Women's contribution to art and culture was not the subject of much debate. However, a harsh critique that drew attention to the gender discrimination appeared in the powerful women's periodical *Brautin* (1928) on the distribution of artist grants by the Alþingi.⁵⁶⁹ The subversive article, on two Icelandic women artists, said that Nína Sæmundsson and Soffía Stefánsdóttir were pioneers in their field here in Iceland: "Nína Sæmundson has studied abroad and lived there; she has earned the best reputation and carries the reputation of Iceland widely around the world with her works. But the Alþingi has never provided her with any study grant or recognition." Mention was also made of Soffía Stefánsdóttir, who had been referred to as a pioneer of Icelandic carving, saying that she had applied for a grant to go overseas for further study but had been rebuffed. The article then states:⁵⁷⁰

The government and representatives at the legislative assembly of the nation were supposed to be so generous, to not go so far in gender arrogance as to provide an art grant purely on the basis of gender. But now, sadly, it appears that it was done this way. All sorts of adventurers were funded to go abroad, variously to "study", as it was called, or to travel around, and it was quite probable that men in Iceland had formed an association to stave off women from being able to utilize their talents.

In this hard-hitting article, gender inequality in the arts is criticized openly, with the use of words like "gender arrogance" (i. kynferðishroki).⁵⁷¹ In *Brautin* a year later, emphasis is laid on how it is important for women to stand up for themselves and write articles as they are greatly discredited if they arbitrarily allow men to influence the whole of society, as "those

⁵⁶⁸ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 246–249, 256–258 and 280–288. Sigríður Matthíasdóttir discusses this in "Menningardeilur og kvenleiki á árunum milli stríða", 446–447; Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, "1926. Kvennasamtök", 133–163; Bára Baldursdóttir and Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, *Krullað og klippt. Aldarsaga háriðna á Íslandi*, Safn til Iðnsögu Íslendinga, vol. XVII (Reykjavík: Iðnsaga Íslendinga og Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2018), 342–354.

⁵⁶⁹ Y., "Tvær listakonur íslenzkar", *Brautin*, 1, no. 22 (1928), 4.

⁵⁷⁰ Y., "Tvær listakonur íslenzkar", *Brautin*, 1, no. 22 (1928), 4.

⁵⁷¹ The term "gender arrogance" had in fact already seen the light of day in the written word. *Olnbogabarnið* (1891) by Ólafur Ólafsson, on women's liberation and the rights of women, was a quite radical lecture that said that women are underdogs in the human ash pit but men are spoiled children—which is considered normal. Men possess "gender arrogance", as Ólafur calls it, and they consider themselves above women. See, Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, *Nútímans konur*, 298–304.

influences are sometimes less beneficent for the spiritual development and advances of the nation as a whole”.⁵⁷² Furthermore, another article in *Brautin* the same year, on Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s painting exhibition in Reykjavík, said that her exhibition bears testimony to her “great artistic talent”, and moreover, Júlíana was “the only artist who had learned mosaic” in Iceland.⁵⁷³

The millennium festival of the Alþingi was held at Þingvellir in the summer of 1930 to celebrate the one-thousand-year anniversary of the Icelandic parliament, and proved to be significant (and symbolic) in many cultural aspects. After the Alþingi was discontinued at Þingvellir in 1789, a festival was held at Þingvellir in 1874, as mentioned in Chapter 2, to celebrate the millennial anniversary of the Icelandic settlement, along with Icelanders’ first constitution and limited legislative and financial control of the Alþingi parliament. Once again, Þingvellir played a leading role in 1930.

With the millennium festivities, the notion of cultural uniqueness arose, drawing inspiration from the literary heritage and proclaiming the dawn of a new Golden Age for Iceland. The festivities had the goal of strengthening the self-image of the Icelandic nation, both as an international hallmark of the small young state, Iceland, and to bolster the self-confidence of the nation and convince it of its own excellence.⁵⁷⁴ The celebration aroused attention from foreign climes, as more than 50 official guests came from at least 14 countries, along with journalists, politicians, and other visitors. The celebration at Þingvellir, June 26–28, was attended by about 30–35,000 people and reflected the common pride of the people, the awareness of an illustrious past and optimism that better times lay ahead, in the spirit of the Golden Age before 1262. However, not everyone agreed that the festival had been for the whole nation or had preserved the whole history. The dissent revolved around the set-up of the festivities: Not about the festivities being held, but rather that women considered they had been ignored at the celebrations and bypassed during all of the planning.⁵⁷⁵ The festival was supposed to show Iceland in the light of the Golden Age, for instance with historical exhibitions and Icelandic wrestling, but despite the controversies in previous years on the definition of national

⁵⁷² “Blaðavald kvenna”, *Brautin*, 1, no. 50 (1929), 1–2.

⁵⁷³ “Málverkasýning”, *Brautin*, 2, no. 9 (1929), 2.

⁵⁷⁴ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1930—ár fagnaðar? Um afstöðu kommúnista til Alþingishátíðarinnar”, *Kvennaslóðir. Rit til heiðurs Sigríði Th. Erlendsdóttur sagnfræðingi*, ed. Anna Agnarsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 2001), 430–432.

⁵⁷⁵ Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur*, 262–272; Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, *Nýtt fólk. Þjóðerni og íslensk verkalyðsstjórnsmál á Íslandi 1901–1944* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2008), 221–245. Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1930—ár fagnaðar?”, 430–432. Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1946. Vongóðar í nýju lýðveldi”, *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga*, ed. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 254.

culture, there seemed to prevail a certain “cohesion” on the organization of the festival.⁵⁷⁶ Yet it was in many ways a gendered manifestation of the masculine, nationalist discourse, i.e. what can be considered as true Icelandic literature, remarkable men, Icelandic art and definition of a nation.

Besides the festivals at Þingvellir, two large art exhibitions were held in Reykjavík as well as a large number of solo exhibitions, so that never before had so much of Icelandic modern art been displayed.⁵⁷⁷ The main painting exhibition in 1930, “Listsýningin”, was held in an exhibition room that was erected for the occasion in Kirkjustræti at the back of the Alþingi parliament building in Reykjavík. About 250 works by 16 artists were shown, of which the majority were landscapes and many of Þingvellir.⁵⁷⁸ Several artists had not been pleased with the management of the main exhibition and set up another exhibition after founding an association of “independent artists”. Their exhibition, *Sýning óháðra listamanna*, at Landakot was of course much smaller in scale, but nonetheless 15 artists exhibited a total of 197 works there.⁵⁷⁹ The artists who exhibited included the likes of Kjarval—who had works at both of the main exhibitions—but the exhibition was different in the sense that it included new artists, not all of whom had received an education in the field of art. A greater variety of material could also be seen there, e.g. wood carving by Soffía Eiríksdóttir and her father, Eiríkur Stefánsson.⁵⁸⁰

Yet, as Emil Thoroddsen pointed out in an article on the art exhibition of the Alþingi celebration, public art exhibitions had not appeared to be very popular in Reykjavík at this point in time, “neither amongst artists nor the public”.⁵⁸¹ In Emil’s view, the *Art Society*, which had

⁵⁷⁶ The artists who oversaw the festival were Einar Jónsson, Ríkarður Jónsson, Guðmundur Einarsson, Baldvin Björnsson and Tryggvi Magnússon. See, Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, “Nýr sjónarheimur”, 13.

⁵⁷⁷ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, “Nýr sjónarheimur”, 8–10.

⁵⁷⁸ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Landið, maðurinn og hugarheimur hans”, *Í deigluinni 1930–1944. Frá Alþingishátíð til lýðveldisstofnunar*, ed. Bera Nordal (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Mál og menning, 1994), 39–40.

⁵⁷⁹ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, “Nýr sjónarheimur”, 8–10; Magnús Jónsson, *Alþingishátíðin 1930* (Reykjavík: H.F. Leiftur, 1943), 369.

⁵⁸⁰ H.K. “Sýning óháðra listamanna”, *Vísir*, July 13, 1930, 5. In the two exhibitions, several artists exhibited paintings of Þingvellir. Kjarval notably had painted at Þingvellir (for the first time in the summer of 1929) as well as Jón Þorleifsson, Jón Engilberts, Eggert Laxdal and Kristján H. Magnússon. Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Landið, maðurinn og hugarheimur hans”, 39–40.

⁵⁸¹ Emil Thoroddsen, “Íslenska listsýningin 1930”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, July 13, 1930, 209–211. The *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* was a supplement of *Morgunblaðið*, published weekly (from 1925–2009) and dedicated to writings about art and culture. Emil was the first Icelander to study art history at Copenhagen University, after having studied painting in Iceland from Ásgrímur Jónsson. He then changed course and decided to study music instead in Leipzig and Dresden in the years 1921–1925 and became known as a composer. Emil wrote on art for *Morgunblaðið* in the years 1926–1933. See, “Merkir Íslendingar (Emil Thoroddsen)”, *Morgunblaðið*, June 16, 2018, 38.

initiated annual exhibitions, had dwindled to nothing and finally died out, both because of insufficient attendance and insufficient participation by the best artists.⁵⁸²

The role of the artists was important and was supposed to be for the benefit of the nation, but it seems that this role was still being directed at male settler artists—the original masculine pioneers. And if acrimonious disputes on the intake of art and its roles for the nation reflected the discourse in the 1930s, they also reflect the sharp discourse of the male–female dichotomy, even more than before. In the lead-up to the Alþingi celebrations, a great deal of coverage in the women’s periodicals was devoted to the importance and history of women’s handicrafts which were supposed to have generous space at the celebration in 1930, especially with the initiative of Halldóra Bjarnadóttir. The *National Exhibition* or *Landssýningin* had been underway for a fairly long time, and the nation’s home industry associations set up exhibitions all over Iceland, with the main exhibition in Reykjavík; this had about 2,500 exhibits, the majority of which were by women though men also contributed to it, and was very well attended. Besides Halldóra, the exhibition committee included the women artists Sigríður Björnsdóttir and Kristín Vídalín Jacobson.⁵⁸³ Under the direction of Halldóra, this exhibition excluded all foreign influence, such as that of learned tradespeople and also the silk-embroidered landscape pictures (needle paintings) in the spirit of applied arts that many women did but were considered too foreign; thus Halldóra’s objective with the exhibition was to give the truest picture of Icelandic home industry. The majority of the exhibition items were textiles, but some were gold items. Most of this was women’s work but some of the items were ascribed to men, such as wool work, spinning, carding and tufting, as well as weaving, knitting and items made of horse hair.⁵⁸⁴

The exhibition in 1930 brought together the ideas of the *Home industry* and revealed commonalities with the national romantic view of rural handicrafts as manifested in the other Nordic countries. The same movements made an important contribution to creating a new role for traditional handicrafts, with both aesthetic value and connotation of nationalistic symbolism. In industrial exhibitions, the idea of cultural uniqueness of medieval literary heritage was not an important factor but a notion of *progress*, discouraging interest in traditional handicrafts with nationalistic status. This was mostly due to the tensions arising from the Icelandic campaign

⁵⁸² Ragnar Ágeirsson, like Emil, wrote that “the exhibition of the Art Society stranded because of the estrangement of the artists themselves, which was damaging both for the art and the public—and not least for the artists themselves”. See, Ragnar Ágeirsson, “Í Kirkjustræti og í Landakoti”, *Tíminn*, August 9, 1930, 168–169.

⁵⁸³ Magnús Jónsson, *Alþingishátíðin 1930*, 368.

⁵⁸⁴ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Handa á milli*, 108.

for independence, which fuelled a negative response at home to participation in international exhibitions.⁵⁸⁵

3.7.2. Þingvellir/Paris (1930): On mothers, art, landscape and escape

In spite of the striking discourse on femininity in 1930 and the gender-dividing discourse on art and women's handicrafts, Icelandic women artists were indeed quite prominent abroad as in Iceland, and attracted varying degrees of attention. In the summer of 1925, the *Art Society* bought the sculpture *Móðurást* (e. Motherly Love) by Nína Sæmundsson. A picture of the work and the woman artist appeared in the woman's periodical *19. júní*, which said that Nína had gained more recognition abroad than most others. At the Autumn Exhibition in Paris (fr. Salon d'Automne, Grand Palais) in 1924 she had exhibited the work *Móðurást*, which had got pride of place and aroused so much attention and admiration that she had even "henceforth been granted self-judgement" over which works she would show. The article stated proudly that one "might expect that she will later work a great deal and bring fame to her nation and country".⁵⁸⁶

The sculpture was cast in bronze and sold to the *Art Society*, and during the months that followed, attempts were made to raise the capital needed for the purchase, for instance by grants from individuals and companies, but also by organizing events, i.e. lectures, with entrance fees. Alþingi paid half the purchase price, and a message from the *Art Society* to the Alþingi stated that the purchase of the work "would be the most powerful lever for the recognition of very good and true art with our nation and for the stimulation for young artists". It was the sincere wish of the *Art Society* that the work *Móðurást* would be set up in a "thoroughfare" and it expressed the opinion that an artwork in such a space would have a dignifying and beautifying effect on people and their surroundings.⁵⁸⁷

In fact, this corresponded to the idea of beautifying the city with artworks in public spaces and was related to an acropolis, namely an Acropolis of Icelandic Culture at Skólavörðuholt, which had come to the fore around the time when agreement was obtained from the Alþingi to erect the Einar Jónsson museum and gallery a decade earlier. Einar's sculpture museum, *Hnitbjörg*, at Skólavörðuholt had been inaugurated in 1923 and was

⁵⁸⁵ Áslaug Sverrisdóttir, *Mótun hugmynda um íslenskt handverk 1859–1930*, 5–6.

⁵⁸⁶ "Nína Sæmundsson", *19. júní*, 8, no. 7 (1925), 49–50.

⁵⁸⁷ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 200.

supposed to be part of Iceland's acropolis and the cornerstone of Icelandic culture.⁵⁸⁸ According to the idea of architect Guðjón Samúelsson, the acropolis revolved around building a square where there would be official buildings, an art gallery, archaeological and natural history museums, and an assembly hall for various cultural events and artworks installed in public spaces.⁵⁸⁹ Yet, from the time that the *Art Society* had decided to purchase *Móðurást*, the work had been on display in the association's temporary home at Skólavörðuholt. The work was neither set up on the Acropolis of Icelandic Culture in Skólavörðuholt nor handed over to the National Gallery but remained under the ownership of Reykjavík town and was set up in the so-called the Mothers' Garden (i. Mæðragarðurinn), intended for mothers with their children, in the middle of Reykjavík in 1930, without much ado or public attention.⁵⁹⁰

Perhaps Nína Sæmundsson's work, *Móðurást*, can be seen primarily as a paradox in the discourse on women, as part of the ideological debates on the nature and role of women in national discourse during the inter-war years, i.e. housewife ideology, but also as a symbol of the modern woman. The sculpture of mother and child is certainly a classical subject in art history but in many ways Nína Sæmundsson was a multi-faceted iconoclast as a woman artist. She was the first woman sculptor in Iceland to make art her profession; this was the first work by a woman in public space in Iceland; and the work was neither of a national hero nor with national, historical or religious connections but instead it depicted a naked mother with her child and was by a woman sculptor. In fact, it is quite the opposite of the sculptures of remarkable men in public spaces, which reflected nationalism and masculinity.

This well-educated artist, unmarried and childless, had gained recognition for her art in New York, Paris and Copenhagen. After Nína Sæmundsson had shown her works, in Art Center in New York (1926), she held a solo exhibition in Kingore Gallery in New York (1929); in 1930 she submitted a proposal for a work over the Park Avenue entrance of the Hotel Waldorf Astoria in New York and won with the project *Afrekshugur* (e. The Spirit of Achievement) which was unveiled in 1931. The work, an Art Deco-style sculpture 263 cm in height, depicts a naked, winged nymph who, on tiptoe, makes herself ready for flight; the sculpture is a symbol of ambitious ideas and forward-thinking and reflects courage, boldness and freedom. Around this time, Nina had settled in Hollywood, and started living with scriptwriter Polly James.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, "Nýr sjónarheimur", 12.

⁵⁸⁹ Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 202–204.

⁵⁹⁰ Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, "Húsprýði og sýningarhald", 177–178; Hrafnhildur Schram, *Nína Sæmundsson, 1892–1965*, 82.

⁵⁹¹ Hrafnhildur Schram, *Nína Sæmundsson 1892–1965*, 99–100 and 107–111.

Another Icelandic woman artist showed her works in exhibitions in Paris in 1930: Ingibjörg Stein H. Bjarnason. Ingibjörg was the daughter of Þorleifur Bjarnason and Adeline Rittershaus. Þorleifur was the brother of Ingibjörg H. Bjarnason, the first woman to take a seat at the Alþingi and sat there on behalf of a special women's list from 1922 to the year of the Alþingi celebrations in 1930. Ingibjörg Stein's mother, Rittershaus, was of German origin, a scholar in old Germanic dialects, and also a campaigner for women's rights. Adeline went to Iceland in 1897; she had got a grant to learn Icelandic and literature, and to write her doctoral thesis on Icelandic Folk Tales (deu. *Die neuisländischen Volksmärchen*, 1902). She and Þorleifur married in 1899.⁵⁹²

The couple Þorleifur Bjarnason and Adeline Rittershaus separated shortly after Ingibjörg was born and she grew up with her mother in Switzerland. Ingibjörg got a good, varied education and learned languages, chemistry and art. She married a young man called Theodor Stein and took up his name. They moved to Berlin, where Ingibjörg studied art, but the marriage did not last long. She then went to Paris, where she got to know a young artist, Gyula Zilzer, became pregnant and had a daughter, Vera, in 1927. At that time, Ingibjörg had become a single parent. She applied for Icelandic citizenship and received a grant from the Alþingi to study art in Paris. At that time, Paris was the stamping ground of European avant-gardism: There was great exuberance in this capital of modern art, with many foreign artists.⁵⁹³

Ingibjörg and the Belgian artist and art critic Michel Seuphor became acquainted in Paris, and according to his account in his biography, it was he who found this “beautiful bird from the North” in the Montparnasse neighbourhood. Ingibjörg held a solo exhibition in the autumn of 1929 at the *Galerie Povolotzky* in Paris, but little is known about the works that were exhibited. Ingibjörg participated also twice in the exhibition *Salon des indépendents* in Paris in 1929 and 1930. Ingibjörg and Seuphor rented an apartment in a Parisian suburb, Vanves, and met there among others the artists Piet Mondrian and Joaquín Torres-García, who together came

⁵⁹² James C. Albisetti, *Schooling German Girls and Women. Secondary and Higher Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 255. Rittershaus was one of the first women to complete a doctoral degree at the University of Zurich and the first tenured “privatdozent”, a *Venia legendi*, in the philosophy department there. Rittershaus argued that feminism was the product of the Nordic people, and suggested that the traditionally weak, passive image of women was a foreign imposition that led even the great German writers to produce inadequate female figures instead of looking back to the strong, individual women of the sagas. See, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly, *Beauty or Beast? The Woman Warrior in the German Imagination from the Renaissance to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 246; Peter Davies and Walter de Gruyter, *Myth, Matriarchy and Modernity: Johann Jakob Bachofen in German Culture 1869–1945* (Berlin, New York, Göttingen: Hubert & Co, 2010), 92.

⁵⁹³ Dóra S. Bjarnason, *Brot. Konur sem þorðu* (Reykjavík: Benedikt, 2019), 39–95.

up with the idea of founding *Cercle et Carré*.⁵⁹⁴ According to the Spanish art historian M. Lluïsa Faxedas' article on women artists in *Cercle et Carré*, four other women besides Ingibjörg took part in the first meetings in the spring of 1929: Sophie Taeuber Arp, Alexandra Exter, Florence Henri and Adya van Rees.⁵⁹⁵ The aim of *Cercle et Carré*, founded in 1929, was to form a strong group of abstract avant-garde artists as a counterbalance to surrealism, which was dominant at that time.⁵⁹⁶

At the only exhibition that the group held, at the *Galerie 23* (23, rue de la Boétie) in 1930, there were 46 artists of whom 10 were women.⁵⁹⁷ The group published three catalogues during the exhibition; Ingibjörg's name appeared in the first, as one of the exhibitors, and similarly as a founding party, and it was said that she had submitted three works. In the first exhibition room of four, on the same wall, works were exhibited by Wanda Wolska, Ingibjörg Bjarnason and Willi Baumeister. It can certainly be said that she is one of the first Icelandic artists to have exhibited abstract works; not only that, but she exhibited in Paris, which was the capital of the arts at that time, and with the group of avant-gardists.⁵⁹⁸

Ingibjörg's relationship with Seuphor broke up soon afterwards, in 1931. She moved to Iceland in 1933 where she opened the beauty salon *Vera Simillon* at Laugavegur 15, utilized her chemistry knowledge and started to make creams which she sold under the brand of *Vera Simillon*: this was a great entrepreneurial project for Ingibjörg but she had also earned a living in Paris at the Institut de Beauté, Place Vendôme, and had made creams that she sold.⁵⁹⁹ However, no more is known about her art career as a painter, which seems to have ended at this point.

⁵⁹⁴ Michel Seuphor, "Le je de je. Vingt tranches de vies racontées par Seuphor", *Seuphor*, ed. Herbert Henkels (Antwerpen: Mercatorfonds, 1976), 317–322. See also Dóra S. Bjarnason, *Brot. Konur sem þorðu*, 94.

⁵⁹⁵ Woman artist Marcelle Cahn is also present at the group's meetings, later that year (1929), in Café Voltaire, Paris. See, M. Lluïsa Faxedas, "Women artists of Cercle et carrée: abstraction, gender and modernity", *Woman's Art Journal*, 36, no. 1 (Spring Summer 2015), 37–47.

⁵⁹⁶ Lynn Boland, "Inscribing a Circle", *Cercle et carré and the international spirit of abstract art* (Georgia: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia), 2013, 42–47. There, Ingibjörg Bjarnason was called Ingibjoerg H. Bjarnason, which is her aunt's name, a suffragist and the first woman to become a member of the Althingi, parliament of Iceland. This has caused a lot of misunderstanding and confusion.

⁵⁹⁷ These were Ingibjörg Bjarnason, Marcelle Cahn, Alexandra Exter, Vera Idelson, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Adya van Rees, Francisca Clausen, Nadia Chodasiewicz-Grabowska (later Nadia Léger), Nechama Szmuskowicz and Wanda Wolska. See, M. Lluïsa Faxedas, "Women artists of 'Cercle et Carrée': abstraction, gender and modernity'", 37–47.

⁵⁹⁸ It is not known for certain whether two or three works by Ingibjörg were shown at the exhibition, but it is known that only one work by her was preserved. This work was owned by Ernst Schwitters, and a picture of it appeared in the catalogue *Das grosse Dadaglutten: Die Sammlung Ernst Schwitters* (Hannover: Sprengel Museum, 1998), 174. See, Dóra S. Bjarnason, *Brot*, 102.

⁵⁹⁹ Dóra S. Bjarnason, *Brot. Konur sem þorðu*, 127–128; "Vera Simillon segir frá reynslu sinni sem fegurðarsjerfræðingur", *Morgunblaðið*, March 1, 1939, 4.

M. Lluïsa Faxedas underlines the gendered discourse on art in *Cercle et carré* and argues that while this “openness” within the group made it possible to welcome many artists, notably women, the debate between advocates of radical abstraction and those who sought a synthesis between abstraction and figuration was based on Seuphor’s discourse (and that of other abstract artists and critics), reflecting the contemporary understanding of the male/female dichotomy.⁶⁰⁰ What remains is that Ingibjörg achieved her place in Icelandic and foreign art history as an avant-garde artist in Paris in 1930.⁶⁰¹

If we look back to the position of women artists in Iceland around this time, it is worth examining both the subject matter of women in art and also the public procurement of their works. Women artists were perhaps no longer “rare birds” in 1930, but it could be said that the work of women in art had seldom been considered modern or progressive, nationalist or political: women artists were not considered sufficiently original or creative, regardless of style or movement, and surely this affected their self-image as artists. The opportunities they got overseas took them further than those they found in Iceland and in the national discourse on art, as a cross-section of the year 1930, and the years either side of it, shows us. Kristín Jónsdóttir, as art historian Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir points out, seems to have put her easels in the sacred historic place, Þingvellir, around 1930, as Kristín exhibited ten works from Þingvellir in her exhibition in Reykjavík 1931.⁶⁰² The fact, which says more than many words, should be mentioned that purchases destined for the National Gallery in 1930 consisted of 53 works by 21 artists, all by men.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰⁰ M. Lluïsa Faxedas, ““Women artists of “Cercle et carrée”: abstraction, gender and modernity””, 40.

⁶⁰¹ Paris was in many ways a better place for women artists who were trying to impose themselves in the world of art, and in the 1920s many women of foreign descent (e.g. from Europe, the Nordic countries and North America) were studying and working there. However, like Marlène Gossmann points out, this was difficult in a society which imposed “a mask on women, that of modesty, discretion, of the schoolgirl following in the footsteps of her master”, but at the same time it shows at what point courage was needed for women artists, as Gossmann argues, e.g. in *Cercle et carré*. Marlène Gossmann, “Autour des artistes femmes du groupe Cercle et Carré”, *Histoire de l’art*, 63 (October 2008), 101–110.

⁶⁰² Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Landið, maðurinn og hugarheimur hans”, 39–40.

⁶⁰³ “Innkaup til Listasafns Íslands”, *Í deigluinni 1930–1944. Frá Alþingishátíð til lýðveldisstofnunar*, ed. Bera Nordal (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Mál og menning, 1994), 200–201.

3.7.3. The (foreign) woman artist, as the significant Other, and her (Icelandic) artist husband

Icelandic women artists thus appear to have been enjoying more cultural citizenship in foreign climes around 1930, but the same cannot be said about the reception of foreign women artists in Iceland. They were even a fraction lower than Icelandic women artists. The foreign women artists who had migrated to Iceland at this time were mostly Danish, and had met their artist husbands in Copenhagen, and had difficulty—like many other women artists—working “by the side of” or rather, in the shadow of their husbands. The couple Sveinn Þórarinnsson and Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson (born Enevoldsen) held a joint painting exhibition in 1930 in Reykjavík, but usually only the husband’s name is referred to.⁶⁰⁴ In an announcement of their exhibition in the newspaper *Alþýðublaðið*, the heading said: “Sveinn Þórarinnsson and his wife” and moreover, the announcement only claimed that Sveinn Þórarinnsson “has been studying abroad. He has showed his work publicly [in Iceland], once before”.⁶⁰⁵ Not a single word on Karen Agnete.

In Emil Thoroddsen’s review of the same exhibition in *Morgunblaðið* in 1930 the headline said: “Painting exhibition: Sveinn Þórarinnsson and his Mrs”.⁶⁰⁶ A closer look at Emil’s article reveals that we are confronted with a different binary opposition to the *Icelandic–foreigner* in art, when he compares the works of the couple Sveinn Þórarinnsson and Karen Agnete: “At first glance, there seems to be a considerable convergence of the spouses’ works ... but a closer look reveals how the couple differ ... Sveinn is the more vigorous of the two, as he should be. The large painting of *Herðubreið* [an Icelandic *tuya*] describes well the best qualities of this artist. This is the image that people remember, inspiring and decorative, ruthless as truth itself, because there is no sweet-coloured synchronization drawn over those true, clear forms”. Emil included the following description of Karen Agnete’s work, which is an illustrative example of much that was discussed about artistic couples, where it appears impossible to discuss the woman artist without naming her husband (this however is not the case the other way around). Hence, Karen Agnete has “a gentler approach” more subject to the”

⁶⁰⁴ Karen Agnete had spent five years of preparatory study in Copenhagen before she entered the Painting department at the Royal Danish Academy, where she and Sveinn Þórarinnsson were classmates. Sveinn had also spent several years of preparatory study in Iceland before going to Copenhagen and entering the Royal Danish Academy. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson. Draumalandið mitt í norðri* (Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur–Kjarvalsstaðir, 2012). Hrafnhildur Schram, “Ímynd landsins”, 156.

⁶⁰⁵ “Sveinn Þórarinnsson og frú hans”, *Alþýðublaðið*, November 17, 1930, 4.

⁶⁰⁶ Emil Thoroddsen, “Málverkasýning. Sveinn Þórarinnsson og frú”, *Morgunblaðið*, November 22, 1930, 2.

influence of the school” than Sveinn and is perhaps “more educated. It can be said that the power of nature dwells in his works, but hers [Karen Agnete’s] are shaped by skill ... This is obviously a woman artist who knows what she is doing”. Sveinn is, it seems, a vigorous, true artist, captivating the true image of an Icelandic mountain and landscape, the truth itself as a matter of fact, whereas Karen is the opposite, gentle, too influenced by the academy to become a true artist, and unfortunately does not have the gift to create with the power of nature, like Sveinn.

Admittedly, a few years later, in 1936, both of them were accepted into the painting section of the *Association of Icelandic Artists*. Because it was an honourable event, the artists being accepted were listed in some newspapers.⁶⁰⁷ However, though Sveinn Þórarinnsson had his full name listed, Karen Agnete is only presented as “his Mrs” on the list. This was a baffling approach seen in three different Icelandic newspapers.

There are known examples in art history where women artists lived in the shadow of their husbands, women artists and “their more famous artist husbands”, who, as a married couple working in the same field, exhibited their work together.⁶⁰⁸ Conceivably, some would draw the conclusion that foreign women artists—wives of Icelandic artists—were disregarded. And they would be correct, as this is not an unknown fact.⁶⁰⁹ Oddly enough, it has been discussed without extensive or thorough consideration as being the lay of the land. Both as a woman and a foreigner, she naturally seems to be unable to paint, understand and know Icelandic landscapes and nature.⁶¹⁰ As at the beginning of the century, it was considered that not everyone—neither women nor foreigners—was capable of depicting the true Icelandic landscape.

3.7.4. The New Woman

In the Alþingi ceremonies in 1930, it was not only Icelandic women who were disregarded but also those who disagreed and protested against the nationalist discourse, isolationism, and

⁶⁰⁷ “50 nýir félagar í Bandalag íslenzkra listamanna”, *Nýja dagblaðið*, August 25, 1936, 1 and 4.

⁶⁰⁸ Inga Christensen, “Early 20th-Century Danish Women Artists in Light of De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*” *Woman’s Art Journal*, 9, no. 1 (Spring–Summer, 1988), 10–15.

⁶⁰⁹ Hrafnhildur Schram, “Ímynd landsins”, 156.

⁶¹⁰ Another example of coverage of an artist couple can be seen in *Vísir* (1937): “The art exhibition of Magnús Árnason and his wife is still open (in the *Markaðsskáli*). An article on her by painter Eggert Guðmundsson must wait due to lack of space today” (“Listýning”, *Vísir*, December 9, 1937, 3). Yet again, the name of the Icelandic husband is mentioned but not that of the wife, Barbara Moray Williams Árnason.

cultural and political conservatism. Radical left-wingers had taken a stand against it and Einar Olgeirsson was of the opinion—aired in the paper he edited, *Réttur* (1930)—that such a remembrance ceremony touted “thousand-year oppression” and that this was not a festival for the whole nation. The history of the Alþingi was a history of oppression of the Icelandic underclass.⁶¹¹ The Great Depression, the accession of the Nazis in Germany in 1933, and not least the rise of socialism had an effect on Iceland, and politics took a turn to the left, which in part wanted to see more social realism reflected in the subject matter of the artists, and had parallels in international art.⁶¹²

In Iceland there was a call for alternative subjects to landscapes, which many considered hackneyed, having been the backbone of the painting exhibitions for the last two decades.⁶¹³ In the 1930s, Icelandic artists began to pay more attention to urban life and people’s surroundings, while the difficulties of the life of the working class were interpreted to a greater extent. This could be seen in the afore-mentioned exhibition of “the independent artists” at the Alþingi celebrations in 1930 in Reykjavík; human presence entered the picture plane. Artists such as Gunnlaugur Scheving and Snorri Arinbjarnar brought an anti-romantic interpretation to Icelandic reality and painted the harbour and life there, but also the wage battle of labourers. Gunnlaugur’s paintings showed poverty, the economic crisis of the 1930s and poor living conditions of the working class, while artists such as Jón Engilberts followed the labourers on these issues and took part in their struggles. Other artists who did not take an active part in the struggle nevertheless worked on paintings connected to the work of labourers.⁶¹⁴

The periodical *Nýja konan* (e. The New Woman) was published as the organ of the *Communist Committee of Icelandic Women* from 1932 to 1935 and edited by Hallfríður Jónasdóttir. *Nýja konan* was defined in the paper of the same name as a working-class woman who was fighting for her freedom, and the paper was dedicated to her.⁶¹⁵ In this radical paper,

⁶¹¹ See e.g. Einar Olgeirsson, “Erlendir menningarstraumar og Íslendingar”, *Réttur* 11, no. 1–2 (1926), 9–24. See also, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, *Nýtt fólk*, 221–245. Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1930—ár fagnaðar?”, 430–440. In connection with the discourse on Icelandic Marxism, Benedikt Hjartarson has pointed out that men such as Einar Olgeirsson were initially favourable about avant-garde art but became silent in the mid-1930s and changed to the style of social realism. See, Benedikt Hjartarson, “The Early Avant-Garde in Iceland”, 615–630.

⁶¹² Þröstur Helgason, *Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur módernismi*, 13; Ólafur Rastrick, *Háborgin*, 245–246.

⁶¹³ Ragnar Ásgeirsson, “Málverkasýning í höfuðborginni”, *Alþýðublaðið*, October 21, 1933, 2. Ragnar Ásgeirsson, “Í Kirkjustræti og í Landakoti”, *Tíminn*, August 9, 1930, 168–169.

⁶¹⁴ Sigurjón Ólafsson did sculptures such as *Verkamaðurinn* (e. The Worker) in 1930 and Ásmundur Sveinsson made a substantial amount of sculptures on working people in the 1930s. See Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, “Landið, maðurinn og hugarheimur hans”, 35–47; Gunnar J. Arnason, “Áskoranir nútímans”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. II. Þjóðerni, náttúra og raunveruleiki, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 200–203.

⁶¹⁵ “Nýja konan”, *Nýja konan*, 1, no. 2 (1932), 4; “Þú verður að berjast”, *Nýja konan*, 2, no. 1 (1933), 1–2.

it is the works by the esteemed German woman artist and political activist Käthe Kollwitz that are particularly noteworthy.⁶¹⁶ At the opening of the Icelandic art exhibition in Berlin in 1928, Kollwitz had been present as one of the invited guests; at that time, she was both a respected artist and the first woman to be elected as a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts, with a full professorship.⁶¹⁷ This remarkable artist depicted the horrors of the First World War, hunger, poverty and the horrendous conditions of the working class in her drawings, prints, etching, lithography, woodcuts and sculpture.⁶¹⁸ Some of her works were published in the review *Nýja konan*, in 1932 and 1933 (in total, six of Kollwitz's works were published), such as the chalk lithograph *Mutter mit Kind auf dem Arm* (e. Mother with child in her arms, 1916), the woodcut *Das Opfer* (e. The Sacrifice, 1922), and Kollwitz's etching, *Selbstbildnis mit der Hand an der Stirn* (e. Self-portrait with Hand at the Forehead, 1910).⁶¹⁹

Kollwitz's work and activism were ideal for the propaganda in *The New Woman*, reflecting the truly deep compassion for the poor and the working class, the political anti-war message, and the radical and revolutionary ideas presented on women's questions: articles on the poor conditions of working-class women and their low wages, and on the building of more children's playgrounds, day nurseries and nursing homes in rural areas.⁶²⁰

The so-called "red culture" had become firmly established and as stated previously, the periodical *Réttur* was part of this from the latter half of the 1920s. But with the founding of an association of revolutionary writers, in 1933, the politics of the Communist movement started to link to literary culture in the country in a systematic way, as in the periodical *Rauðir pennar* (1935–1938), or the *Red Pens*. However, many did not belong to the Communist Party, while

⁶¹⁶ Kollwitz and her work had already been referred to, e.g. in an article by Einar Olgeirsson in *Réttur* (1927) on proletarian art. See, Einar Olgeirsson, "Öreigalist. Anton Hansen", *Réttur*, 12, no. 2 (1927), 200–209. *Réttur* (1933) also published a list of all the scholars and artists who had been fired from their positions with the rise and take-over of Hitler. Kollwitz was one of many who were fired from the Academy of Arts in Berlin, formerly the Prussian Academy of the Arts, and was prohibited to exhibit her work. See, Einar Olgeirsson, "Annáll þýzku ógnarstjórnarinnar", *Réttur*, 18, no. 2 (1933), 110–113.

⁶¹⁷ "Íslenska sýningin í Þýskalandi. Íslensk list hefur öðlast sæti í listasögu heimsins", *Morgunblaðið*, September 14, 1928, 1–3.

⁶¹⁸ See on Käthe Kollwitz work and life in, Elizabeth Prelinger, *Käthe Kollwitz* (New Haven, London: National Gallery of Art, Washington, Yale University Press, 1992).

⁶¹⁹ See e.g. *Das Opfer*, in *Nýja konan*, 2, no. 6 (1933), 5; *Mutter mit Kind auf dem Arm*, in *Nýja konan*, 1, no. 6 (1932), 1; *Selbstbildnis mit der Hand an der Stirn* in *Nýja konan*, 2, no. 1 (1933), 1.

⁶²⁰ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir argues how different social groups, including women, found meaning in the revolutionary message of Communism, such as in the images of women. Furthermore, Ragnheiður argues how the Icelandic Communists were successful "in translating international communism into Icelandic", explaining the strength of the Icelandic Communist movement. See, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, "Rússnesk bylting á Íslandi? Um innflutning kommúnismans, jarðveginn og pólitískt þýðingastarfi", *Ritið* 17, no. 3 (2017), 47–68.

the authors Laxness and Þórbergur Þórðarson were avowed left-wingers and participated in the iconoclasm against cultural conservatism.⁶²¹

A new era had begun in art, as painter Jón Þorleifsson wrote in the periodical *Listviðir* (1932).⁶²² Basing the beginning of Icelandic painting on the landscape paintings by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and Ásgrímur Jónsson at the turn of the century, once again a “new colonization in Icelandic painting” (i. nýtt landnám fyrir íslenska list) had begun, now with Jón Stefánsson and Kjarval. Jón noted that Júlíana Sveinsdóttir has done “remarkable paintings” and Kristín Jónsdóttir “shows progress” and paints “more diverse subjects” than just landscape, and that much may be expected of her in the future. It should be mentioned here that at this time Kristín Jónsdóttir was in her mid-40s. Hence, neither Júlíana nor Kristín are included in the group of settlers or pioneers.

A picture of Kristín’s work from 1931, *Við Þvottalaugarnar* (e. At the Laundry Pools), appears with the article, but not in relation to new “diverse subjects” like work of a social character. Yet Kristín’s painting points to the arduous conditions of women over the centuries, many of whom had to journey a long way to wash clothes—in this case in the hot pool in Laugardalur in Reykjavík, something that had never before been a subject of a painting in Iceland.⁶²³ Furthermore, another painting of Kristín’s of a social nature, on the hard life that women had to deal with, was painted as early as 1914: this was *Fiskverkun við Eyjafjörð* (e. Fish processing at Eyjafjörður) painted at the time when landscape paintings were dominating and it was not considered appropriate to depict commoners, let alone women.⁶²⁴ Thus Kristín was the first artist to depict women at their daily work and the difficult life they had to live. In this painting, Kristín shows hard-working women processing fish; this was a unique, original subject at this time as landscape, devoid of people, was supposed to take pride of place and be the main subject. In *Fiskverkun við Eyjafjörð*, several women are seen bent over, gutting fish, while a man stands in the middle and watches them work. The composition of the painting emphasizes the man in the middle as an overseer, while everyone around him, with the exception of one woman, is bowed down with work.

⁶²¹ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, *Nýtt fólk*, 274.

⁶²² Jón Þorleifsson, “Íslensk málaralist 30 ára”, *Listviðir*, 1, no. 2 (1932), 11–14. The paper *Listviðir* published many articles on women in general in all the fields of culture. The periodical only came out three times in 1932 and was edited by Olga Hejnæs.

⁶²³ Jón Þorleifsson, “Myndlistafélagið”, *Listviðir*, 1, no. 3 (1932), 21.

⁶²⁴ Hrafnhildur Schram, “Ímynd landsins”, 106–107.

In 1932, Jón Þorleifsson was to write regularly about art exhibitions as an art critic in *Morgunblaðið*, and generally wrote under the name of Orri. This was a new venture for Iceland as before that time the coverage of art in *Morgunblaðið* had been mainly in the form of news, like in other newspapers. In addition, from the 1930s onwards, painters started writing to a greater extent in the public domain on Icelandic art, and in a different way to that of the first three decades. But they, like others, were divided in their opinions. The painter Guðmundur Einarsson published his articles in the daily paper *Vísir* and emphasized art that reflected the true Iceland and was suspicious of the influence of foreign trends and movements and Jón Þorleifsson's more liberal viewpoint of the new trends in painting.⁶²⁵ Such disputes—and different views on art in Iceland—became even more intense and prominent in the 1940s.

But at the same time, and also during the following decades, everyone could agree on the genius talents of Kjarval, no matter where they stood in politics. Renowned men competed in describing their enthusiasm for him while also encouraging a building to be built for his work. Laxness discussed Kjarval in *Rauðir pennar* (1935), in particular because of his recent birthday; here, Kjarval is described as “in the forefront of the world's painters”. Yet, Kjarval's masterly works were inaccessible to the public, and to hide them was like “hiding a poem of the chief poet akin to the national hero, Jónas Hallgrímsson”. In the same way, the whole nation “is the rightful owner of this genius”, and Kjarval's works should be accessible to all in a special palace.⁶²⁶ This same year, in 1935, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir received first prize for her textile art in the *Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles*.⁶²⁷ And in 1936, Júlíana exhibited paintings, mosaic and textiles in Reykjavík, and as noted in *Morgunblaðið*, “no one other than Júlíana” had submitted mosaic pictures in Iceland. Júlíana's simplified landscape paintings aroused amazement, as she now emphasized colour rather than forms and motifs, which was quite new and daring.⁶²⁸

⁶²⁵ Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, “Listamannadeilur”, 145–150.

⁶²⁶ Halldór Kiljan Laxness, “Kjarval”, *Rauðir pennar*, 1, no. 1 (1935), 157–159.

⁶²⁷ Júlíana's textiles were diverse (e.g. rugs, cushions, covers, and material for curtains and clothes) and she says in an interview in 1936 that she wants to draw people's attention to modern handweaving like that which can be seen e.g. in France and the other Nordic countries, emphasizing that the Icelandic wool which she uses a lot can compete with the best available material. See, “Málverka- og listvefnaðarsýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Nýja Dagblaðið*, August 18, 1936, 2.

⁶²⁸ Jón Þorleifsson [Orri], “Málverkasýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur í Mentaskólanum”, *Morgunblaðið*, August 23, 1936, 7.

3.7.5. On fraternity, (male) artists' disputes and women's "quarrels"

After the difficult years of the Depression, a great transformation occurred in the 1930s in Iceland: art and literature were booming and the discourse was very vigorous.⁶²⁹ Yet one has to bear in mind that 1939 was the year that the Second World War broke out. Iceland is a country without a military and was not subject to either the devastation or disasters that many countries had to put up with, nor did it experience the German occupation. Iceland was, however, occupied by the British on May 10, 1940, and a year later, a military defence agreement was made with the USA and the American military settled in the country. This played a part in Icelanders' sense of nationalism and the independence struggle with Denmark, and had a great effect on Icelandic culture and politics. And it was accompanied by conflicts and confrontation.

During World War II, Icelanders could apply for grants from the Education Board (i. Menntamálaráð) to study at universities and institutes overseas; for instance, about 100 Icelandic students went to the USA during the war.⁶³⁰ This was not least a new opportunity for women to obtain an education abroad, even though they were in the great minority of those who did so. The artists Nína Tryggvadóttir, Louisa Matthíasdóttir, Kjartan Guðjónsson, Drífa Viðar, Jóhannes Jóhannesson, Kristján Davíðsson and Valtýr Pétursson went to the USA. Louisa Matthíasdóttir and Nína Tryggvadóttir managed to get into the American art scene and were connected to New York their whole lives.⁶³¹

Artists' disputes continued, one of which being the dispute between artists and the Chair of the Education Board, Jónas Jónsson.⁶³² The start of government intervention into art matters can be traced back to 1928, when laws were issued at the Alþingi on an Education Board and Culture Fund (i. Menningarsjóður). The latter's role was to see to the purchase of art works for the State and also to have overall supervision over the nation's art collection and preparations for the building of a national gallery in Reykjavík. The government's interest was thus very noticeable in artistic life, and it also distributed grants to artists and artistic life. Factionalism

⁶²⁹ Gunnar J. Árnason, "Áskoranir nútímans", 204–209.

⁶³⁰ Haukur Ingvarsson, "'Einn beztí grundvöllur fyrir þróun gagnkvæms skilnings er listin...". Hjörvarður Harvart Arnason og stríðsupplýsingaskrifstofa Bandaríkjanna á Íslandi í seinni heimsstyrjöld", *Saga*, 58, no. 1 (2020), 101–105.

⁶³¹ Jón Proppé, "Abstraktið kemur til Íslands", *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. III. Abstraktlist, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 22–24.

⁶³² Jónas, who had studied at the Ruskin College in Oxford—a worker's college set up in 1899—had a great influence on Icelandic cultural and political life in the 1940s but became a very controversial man in his time; he was the chairman of the Progressive Party for a decade and the Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs from 1927 to 1932 before he became the Minister of Education. See on life and work of Jónas in Guðjón Friðriksson, *Saga Jónasar frá Hriflu*, vol. I–III (Reykjavík: Íðunn, 1991–1993).

began: the accusations of artists revolved around Jónas being incompetent in his work, including in art purchases for the National Gallery. Although Jónas was not autocratic, he was very much in charge during his period of power between 1934 and 1942.⁶³³

Writers and poets were very powerful in the artists' dispute, as it also revolved around political grants—who (men) got a grant and who (men) did not. But the main reason for the dispute with Jónas was that artists felt that much more was bought of the so-called national art that was to Jónas's liking than of work by younger artists who were treading new paths. In fact, what was at issue was not least the interrelations of art and politics as the artists experienced it. In 1941, artists demanded, with an address to the Alþingi in *Morgunblaðið*, that more professionalism should be involved in guidance in the purchasing of art works by the Education Board and that people with knowledge should handle it. A total of 14 artists signed the address, of whom 3 were women: Kristín Jónsdóttir, Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson and Nína Tryggvadóttir.⁶³⁴ Nína was then “an up-and-coming woman artist”, had exhibited at a student exhibition in the Charlottenborg palace in Copenhagen and had received “praiseworthy coverage in Denmark”.⁶³⁵

This dispute led to callous writing of letters and articles and Jónas tried to justify the Board's art purchases, to which the artists immediately responded.⁶³⁶ In these articles, Jónas discussed the Icelandic artists he liked and also those he disliked, the “blotch artists”, and had exhibitions set up in two rooms in the Alþingi at the end of March 1942, which showed, as he put it himself, “thoroughly modern works”, a few paintings owned by the National Gallery by Jón Stefánsson, Jón Engilberts, Gunnlaugur Scheving, Þorvaldur Skúlason and Jóhann Briem. This exhibition proved to be a subject of great ignominy and Jónas wrote an introduction and guidance on it, speaking of “French Decadence” and artists working for “Communists”.⁶³⁷

The article led to an angry response, and a new address was signed by 66 members of a new association, the *Federation of Icelandic Artists* (i. Bandalag íslenskra listamanna, BÍL), which was made up of artists, writers and poets, actors and musicians. Two women artists

⁶³³ Gunnar J. Árnason, “Áskoranir nútímans”, 204–206; Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, “Listamannadeilur”, 147–150.

⁶³⁴ See “Listaverkakaup mentamálaráðs. Ávarp til Alþingis frá listamönnum”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 7, 1941, 5; “Ávarp frá listamönnum”, *Nýtt land*, 4, no. 18 (1941), 1; “Myndlistarmennirnir eru óánægðir með menntamálaráð”, *Alþýðublaðið*, May 7, 1941, 2.

⁶³⁵ “Hún er málarí”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, January 17, 1937, 16.

⁶³⁶ “Svar Mentamálaráðs til myndlistamannanna þrettán”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 20, 1941, 5; “14 listamenn svara Mentamálaráði”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 22, 1941, 5

⁶³⁷ Jónas Jónsson, “Skáld og hagröðingar”, *Tíminn*, Mars 31, 1942, 98. Jónas Jónsson, “Skáld og hagröðingar”, *Tíminn*, Apríl 2, 1942, 102. Jónas Jónsson, “Skáld og hagröðingar”, *Tíminn*, Apríl 9, 1942, 106–108. See also, Guðjón Friðriksson, *Saga Jónasar Jónssonar frá Hriflu*, vol. III, 201–202.

signed (Kristín Jónsdóttir, Nína Tryggvadóttir) but also two women writers, as well as one musician and six actresses.⁶³⁸ It was no longer acceptable to have the exhibition in the Alþingi building; Jónas reacted harshly to this as he had to move his so-called “exhibition of ignominy” from the Alþingi building to the window display of the shop *Geffjun* in Aðalstræti—and certainly many Icelanders who looked at the works in the window agreed with him about the new art.⁶³⁹ A week later he replaced the works, and put up another exhibition in the window, consisting of works of the artists who were “acceptable”, exemplary in their art creations, such as Sigurður Guðmundsson, Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, Ásgrímur Jónsson, Ríkarður Jónsson, Gunnlaugur Blöndal and Kjarval (along with one “acceptable work” by Jón Stefánsson).

This led to much anger and many people wrote to the papers. Wherever they stood in politics, artists condemned the conduct of Jónas and he lost his position of power in the Education Board after the Alþingi elections in 1942. However, the dispute continued amongst the various groups, both within and outside art, and new attitudes were clamouring for attention.⁶⁴⁰ In the wake of the artists’ dispute, the first artists’ assembly was held, and publication of an art periodical, *Helgafell*, started in 1942, in which authors and artists became active in the discussion on art.

These disputes on national art and the new trends and avant-garde movements, as well as the politicization of art, certainly had a formative influence on the art discourse in Iceland up to the 1960s.⁶⁴¹ Many scholars, from various areas of expertise, have focused on which male artists and writers were victims and which were not, as well as their political views, e.g. whether they were revolutionary heroes or conservatives in this cultural war. Some have pointed out the similarity between Jónas Jónsson’s Exhibition of Ignominy and the Nazi’s exhibition *Degenerate Art* (Entartete Kunst) in Munich in 1937; this opinion first emerged in the writings of the poet Tómas Guðmundsson in *Helgafell* in April 1942.⁶⁴² According to Tómas, similar attitudes to art can be seen in the writings of Jónas Jónsson and in the speech by Hitler at the opening of the exhibition in 1937. Although there are certainly some similarities to the emphasis

⁶³⁸ “Út af vítaverðu framferði Menntamálaráðs”, *Morgunblaðið*, Apríl 16, 1942, 3 and 6. Writers Þórunn Magnúsdóttir and Margrjet Jónsdóttir; Helga Laxness musician; and actresses Emilía Borg, Arndís Björnsdóttir, Þóra Borg Einarsson, Regína Þórðardóttir, Alda Möller and Anna Guðmundsdóttir.

⁶³⁹ Jónas Jónsson, “Er þetta það sem koma skal?”, *Tíminn*, April 26, 1942, 141 and 144.

⁶⁴⁰ Guðjón Friðriksson, *Saga Jónasar Jónssonar frá Hriflu*, 202–207; Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, “Listamannadeilur”, 147–150.

⁶⁴¹ See e.g. Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, “Listamannadeilur”, 145–150; Gunnar J. Árnason, “Áskoranir nútímans”, 204–210; Ólafur Rastrick and Benedikt Hjartarson, “Cleansing the domestic evil. On the Degenerate Art Exhibition Reykjavík 1942”, *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1925–1950*, eds. Benedikt Hjartarson, Andrea Kollnitz et al. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 879–902.

⁶⁴² Tómas Guðmundsson, “Léttara hjal”, *Helgafell*, 1, no. 2 (1942), 88–90.

on narrative art and nationalist art (and the raging opposition against modern styles) which reflects the volatile political and art political situation in Iceland at that time, today it is particularly dubious to compare two completely different manifestations—one of them the horrendous philosophy of the Nazis on ethnic purity and the exile, imprisonment and extermination of artists in the Third Reich, the other on Icelandic national identity and art and Jónas's "installation" of the works of five artists in the small window display of the shop *Geffjun* in Aðalstræti.

But what has been lacking is to direct attention at the work of women artists, regardless of their political party or views, as their work seems on the whole to be "neither nor", neither acceptable nor unacceptable in art, neither national nor modern. In spite of the presence of the three aforementioned women artists, and although the hard disputes in cultural life supposedly "brought the artists together" in the campaign for a more professional environment, the dispute revolved completely around men against men and points to the gender arrogance already mentioned in *Brautin* in 1928. In fact it was the women artists who were excluded from the discussion. The question of women's absence has rarely been explored. Hence, the real "ignominy" was not towards some male artists (or writers), but to women artists in general, being more accepted and receiving a better "welcome" abroad.⁶⁴³

The women's periodicals did not take part in the heated political art discussion but seem instead to have distanced themselves from it. Their sisterhood or *sorority* continues as ever with coverage to tout the achievements of Icelandic women artists such as Kristín Jónsdóttir, "the first woman from Iceland to have completed an education in that field", and who now, "as a mature woman, is regarded as one of the best artists of the nation".⁶⁴⁴

Despite the "solidarity" of a group of artistic women and men, to a certain extent it is particularly striking that a strong "fraternity" formed around the main masters of Icelandic culture and art. Poet Steinn Steinarr wrote about Þorvaldur Skúlason, who was "an Icelandic

⁶⁴³ From 1930 to 1944, 220 works by men and 18 works by women were bought for the National Gallery. It was not until 1932 that one painting by Júlíana Sveinsdóttir was bought; this was followed by the mosaic work by Júlíana in 1933. One painting by Kristín Jónsdóttir was bought in 1936 and two works by her in 1939; one work by Inger Löchte Blöndal was bought in 1938; four works by Barbara Árnason were bought in 1940, as well as two by Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and one by Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir; and one by Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson was bought in 1941. Work by the young Nína Tryggvadóttir was bought in 1943 and another in 1944, along with one painting by Kristín Jónsdóttir. It should also be mentioned that it was not until 1943 that the National Gallery bought a painting of Þingvellir, which Kristín Jónsdóttir painted in 1937. See, "Innkaup til Listasafns Íslands", 200–205. As mentioned before, Kristín exhibited ten works from Þingvellir in her exhibition in Reykjavík, in 1931. See, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, "Landið, maðurinn og hugarheimur hans", 39–40.

⁶⁴⁴ "Íslensk listakona", *Nýtt kvennablað*, 2, no. 3 (1941), 3; "Sigríður Björnsdóttir", *Nýtt kvennablað* 3, no. 3 (1942), 1–2.

modern artist in the guileless sense of this word”. Steinn said that the influence of Matisse, Braque and Picasso is obvious in Þorvaldur’s works, “but those influences are neither greater nor more damaging than the influence of Hamsun and Hemingway on Halldór Laxness, for example”. That which characterizes his art is his expression, both “systematic and original”, his paintings “radiate” and his personality is “the virility of a living man”. Þorvaldur was thus similar to the modernist poets, the strong personality who did not want to make light of his tasks, who was virile, original and, at the same time, the first Icelandic painter of modern art—a torchbearer.⁶⁴⁵

Irigaray claims that man has been the subject of discourse, in theory, morality or politics, even as the gender of *God*—the guardian of every subject and every discourse—is always masculine and paternal in the West. Irigaray argues that we must challenge the necessity of the monolithic *Law(s) of the Father*.⁶⁴⁶ It could be said that with modernism, the father–son patrilineage described above (and the “three or four great pioneering figures”) changes into brotherhood or fraternity (from brother to brother). This comprises either several artists or a group of artists, whereby they influence each other, whether in the same art genre or another one. Derrida makes it evident from this angle that the friend is always a man, never a woman, and that the highest form of friendship concerns men. As a result, these friends will have found themselves to resemble one another, as “brothers”, and the question is more of a democratic tonality, i.e. that “fraternity” itself is naturally associated with the democratic ideal (as in the French national motto since the Revolution, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*).⁶⁴⁷ This applies to the discourse of the genius and the nation’s favourite son: he is described in a very similar way in a quite similar ideological structure, in gendered discourse on art and culture, in spite of a different historical and geographical context.

The house Unuhús, at Garðastræti 15 in Reykjavík, had gained a respectable place in the Icelandic cultural context as an “art centre” and was a focal point of the cultural life in Reykjavík from the beginning of the twentieth century, remaining so until 1947—first with Una

⁶⁴⁵ Steinn Steinarr, “Þorvaldur Skúlason málarí” (in *Tveir íslenzkir listamenn*), *Helgafell*, 1, nos. 4–6 (1942), 202–203. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida discussed fathers, brothers and fraternity, including philosophy as “phallogocentric heritage” from Plato as well as in Freud or Lacan, in Kant as well as in Hegel, and Heidegger. See, Carole Dely, ““Jacques Derrida: The Perchance of a Coming of the Other woman. The Deconstruction of “Phallogocentrism”, from Duel to Duo”” in www.sens-public.org. English transl. Wilson Baldrige, October 31, 2007.

⁶⁴⁶ Christine Battersby, “Just jamming: Irigaray, painting and psychoanalysis”, *New feminist art criticism. Critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 128–137.

⁶⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, transl. by George Collins (London, New York: Verso, 2005), 232–239 and 278–279. See also Christine Battersby, “The Architect as Genius: Feminism and the Aesthetics of Exclusion”, 9–17

Gísladóttir, after whom the house is named and who rented out cheap accommodation and provided food for poor artists, and then with her son Erlendur Guðmundsson, who took over from her. Those who were regular guests at Unuhús were the modernist group, i.e. the writers Laxness and Þórbergur Þórðarson, art collector and publisher Ragnar Jónsson í Smára, painters such as Þorvaldur Skúlason, Svavar Guðnason and Kjarval, the composer Jón Leifs, and the poet Steinn Steinarr. However, other guests included the writer Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir and the two young women painters, Louisa Matthíasdóttir and Nína Tryggvadóttir who had met in Paris 1939 and became good friends.⁶⁴⁸

The young promising artist, Nína Tryggvadóttir, returned home after a four-year course in Copenhagen, 1935–1939, and a short period of study in Paris, and held an exhibition in Garðastræti 17 (adjacent to Unuhús), at the end of 1942 for which she got a lot of praise. Thus the painter and art critic Jón Þorleifsson (Orri) wrote that she “mostly avoids” painting that which other painters have focused on, i.e. Icelandic mountain landscapes, and her paintings are “not pretentious”.⁶⁴⁹ And Laxness wrote eloquently about Nína’s works, which were “art creations, but not imitations of mountains”.⁶⁵⁰ Instead of endless imitations of mountains in art, here was someone new in the nucleus of Icelandic artists who pursued art creation in the “image-poor environment here in Iceland”. In Laxness’ writings, it is clear that Nína was an additional member to the group composed of Laxness himself and the artists and writers who fought most against the nationalist landscape vision that had been prevailing, and which was part of the art politics and political disputes in the years that followed. Nína was thus part of the Unuhús group. In addition, she painted portraits of some of them, including Kjarval, Steinn Steinarr and Laxness, and was highly appreciated: she was on the “right path”, and had got their consent, acceptance and hence visibility in the main discourse and the cultural elite.

A large number of young Icelandic artists had gone overseas during the war and the first years after it ended; part of the explanation for this is that the year 1939 marked a milestone in the history of art tuition in Iceland as the Icelandic College of Crafts (i. Handíðaskóli) was founded. It was headed by Lúðvíg Guðmundsson and under the guidance of art teacher Kurt Zier, a refugee from Nazi Germany; the groundwork for art tuition was thus laid in Iceland, and

⁶⁴⁸ Jón Proppé, “Abstraktið kemur til Íslands”, 20–21; Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að þjóna sannleikanum: Um list Nínu Tryggvadóttur” (Serving the truth: The art of Nína Tryggvadóttir), *Nína Tryggvadóttir. Ljóðvarp* (Poetcast), eds. Birta Guðjónsdóttir and Ólafur Ingi Jónsson (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2015), 47–48.

⁶⁴⁹ Jón Þorleifsson [Orri], “Málverkasýning Nínu Tryggvadóttur, Garðastr. 17”, *Morgunblaðið*, December 4, 1942, 5.

⁶⁵⁰ Halldór Kiljan Laxness, “Listsköpun, ekki fjallaefirhermur”, *Þjóðviljinn*, December 4, 1942, 3.

emphasis was laid on design and practical courses.⁶⁵¹ Soon afterwards, in 1942, a special art division was established—and what indicates that Nína was “one of the group” is that Nína was hired to teach there, alongside Þorvaldur Skúlason. In spring 1942, the name of the school was changed to the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts (i. Handíða- og myndlistaskólinn). It bore success, as only four years later the course was recognized by the Royal Danish Academy that validated entry without a test. People could then become fully fledged students after the first year.⁶⁵²

Erlendur’s friendship was important to Nína, and he supported her “both in word and deed”. In the same way, it was Ragnar Jónsson í Smára who in 1942 invited her to exhibit her work next door to Unuhús, in a house he owned that was not completely finished.⁶⁵³ Much has been written about the influence and importance of the fertile discussions on literature and art in general which took place at Unuhús. For instance, Laxness allegedly said that Nína’s flawless art under the label of abstractionism had come about because of the discussions that occurred in Unuhús, while the reason for her abandoning the “dull colour mix” of the Royal Danish Academy was because of the (male) discussions that occurred in Unuhús. And after two years, under this influence in Unuhús, “the major change that had occurred in the development of the woman artist” became manifested in her exhibition in Reykjavík in 1942, along with her search “for artistic expression that became mature during this time”.⁶⁵⁴ In fact, Nína had already, in 1939, started to go her own way, as can be discerned in her works, but less in the discourse on her art.⁶⁵⁵ But as before, when it comes to women artists, the story revolves around women who are influenced by men and not the other way around. In addition to much being made of the influence on Nína by those who frequented Unuhús, one can also assume that the multiple influence of the artists on each other had been reciprocal and fruitful: that influence can be bi-directional.

⁶⁵¹ Bera Nordal, “Aðfaraorð”, 10–11.

⁶⁵² Bragi Ásgeirsson, “Að leiðarlokum”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, May 22, 1999, 14–15. In 1965, legislation was passed at the Alþingi on the school, and became a milestone in art education in Iceland. See, Jón Proppé, “Abstraktið kemur til Íslands”, 24–25.

⁶⁵³ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að þjóna sannleikanum: Um list Nínu Tryggvadóttur”, 47–48.

⁶⁵⁴ Halldór Laxness, “Nína Tryggvadóttir í minningarskyni”, *Nína í krafti og birtu*, ed. Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1982), 3–6. See also, Halldór Laxness, *Yfirskygðir staðir: ýmsar athuganir*, (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1971). This is also reflected in Björn Th. Björnsson’s Icelandic art history, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

⁶⁵⁵ See, e.g. Hrafnhildur Schram, “Nína Tryggvadóttir. Líf hennar og list”, *Nína í krafti og birtu*, ed. Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1982), 16.

3.7.6. Cross-section and diversity of the year 1943

A great wave of enthusiasm became apparent in the wake of the “artists’ dispute” (i. Listamannadeilan), when the *Association of Icelandic Artists* (i. Félag íslenskra listamanna, F.Í.M.), founded in 1941, erected the Listamannaskálinn gallery in 1943 for the purpose of holding exhibitions.⁶⁵⁶ The first exhibition was held the same year. Even if it was not a particularly grandiose gallery, it was an important place at a time when an increasing number of artists were entering the scene, a total of 23, and the exhibition represented a major breakthrough. The artists included Kristín Jónsdóttir and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, as well as Karen Agnete Þórarinsson, Greta Björnsson (born Agnes Margareta Erdmann) and sculptor Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir.⁶⁵⁷

A review in *Vísir* (1943) on the exhibition said that Icelandic art is different from the art of other nations. There is no mention anywhere here of the women artists, but Ásgrímur’s peers, Jón Stefánsson and Kjarval, are said to “stand, if one can say that, each to his own with him. On the one hand the trusty, very strong personality of Jón, serious and honest and ruthless in his demands on himself”. On the other hand there is the “virtuous Kjarval, who seems to play with the subject matter and play around, losing himself in unrestricted colour ecstasy”.⁶⁵⁸

Parallel to the exhibition, Emil Thoroddsen penned the art book *Íslensk myndlist. 20 listmálarar* (e. Art in Iceland. 20 Artists).⁶⁵⁹ The work also includes a chapter by painter Gunnlaugur Scheving which is a quite honourable attempt at modern art history writing. As the editor, Kristján Friðrikson, said in the preface, the purpose of the book was to be an “introduction to Icelandic painting, both amongst Icelanders and those of other nations”. It contained the works of 20 artists, from Sigurður Guðmundsson to younger artists of that day.⁶⁶⁰ The articles were also published in English, with the ambitious aim of arousing the interest of foreign parties and nations to Icelandic art. Emil said that the first “professional Icelandic

⁶⁵⁶ The predecessor of the *Association of Icelandic Artists* was the *Painting division of the Federation of Icelandic Artists* (i. Bandalag íslenskra listamanna, B.Í.L.) that had been founded in 1928. Its founding members numbered 15 in total, of whom 2 were women, Kristín Jónsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson. Six women—Barbara Árnason, Greta Björnsson, Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, Karen Agnete Þórarinsson, Kristín Jónsdóttir and Nína Tryggvadóttir—are registered as members in the oldest preserved membership register of FÍM when members totalled 31. See, Kristín G. Guðnadóttir, *Að finna listinni samastað. Þættir úr sögu Félags íslenskra listamanna* (Reykjavík: FÍM, 2022), 49–56.

⁶⁵⁷ “Fyrsta málverkasýningin í hinum nýja skála myndlistarmanna opnuð í dag”, *Þjóðviljinn*, April 3, 1943, 1.

⁶⁵⁸ B.G., “Sýning myndlistamanna”, *Vísir*, April 21, 1943, 2 and 7.

⁶⁵⁹ Emil Thoroddsen, *Íslensk myndlist. 20 listmálarar* (Reykjavík: Kristján Friðriksson, 1943).

⁶⁶⁰ Kristján Friðriksson(ed), “Formáli útgefanda”, *Íslensk myndlist. 20 listmálarar* (Reykjavík: Kristján Friðriksson, 1943), 5.

painter” had been Þórarinn B. Þorláksson who, when returning home, began to paint the first Icelandic landscape paintings. Emil acknowledged that foreigners had previously painted Icelandic landscapes, but “with the eye of the tourist”. However, Þórarinn was the first to see the land “with the eyes of a local: this is our land, these are our mountains and our valleys, the land that we know and live in”. Emil then stated that “the vanguard of Icelandic painting” was made up of Kjarval, Jón Stefánsson, Ásgrímur Jónsson and Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, along with Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (Muggur).⁶⁶¹

It is strange that despite better conditions in the art field, more growth and many artists, little had changed in the discourse on art, which even became more gendered. Emil discussed artists Kristín Jónsdóttir and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, “the first women artists who made art their profession”. Kristín is described as doing “remarkable landscapes”, where the emphasis is put on pinpointing “accuracy and amusing details”. He said that this “feminine devotion” with beautiful “small items” also characterizes her later paintings, where she chooses her subject matter from Icelandic society and labour, but there the whole structure becomes bigger, the form more “decorative”. The colour handling is always “tasteful”. Here, some aspects of the social character of some of Kristín’s works are noted, but by the same token their importance is reduced by words such as decorative and tasteful. Emil then said that all of Kristín’s methods had undergone changes, and that she had taken up “a new boldness in her handling of colours”.

Júlíana is said to have “particular capabilities”, and that her handling of planes had quickly become “bold and strong”. Emil regretted that not more of her works had been exhibited in Iceland, as Júlíana was living in Copenhagen, but noted that at the same time as practising painting, she had done textile art “and took the initiative in that field both in Iceland and abroad”.⁶⁶²

Emil waxed eloquently about Sveinn Þórarinsson and Karen Agnete Þórarinsson, but they only got one column in the book, as a married couple rather than separate artists. Emil said that as Karen Agnete is Danish, she was different from other Icelandic painters. However, Emil considered that Karen Agnete’s landscape paintings “bear witness to an educated taste in art and a secure sense of form” and her works show “particular talents”. Like with Júlíana, words such as “particular talents” are used, which in reality are difficult to define: an exception rather than exceptional.⁶⁶³ Emil also mentioned young artists such as Nína Tryggvadóttir, who

⁶⁶¹ Emil Thoroddsen, *Íslensk myndlist*, 8–13.

⁶⁶² Emil Thoroddsen, *Íslensk myndlist*, 15–16.

⁶⁶³ Emil Thoroddsen, *Íslensk myndlist*, 19–20.

recently had returned from her studies abroad and was quite promising: “Her landscapes and figures show excellent schooling and a greater development and surety of purpose than are to be expected in one so young.”⁶⁶⁴ It should be mentioned that pictures of five of Nína’s works are shown in Emil’s book—this must be considered an interesting innovation when a young woman artist is being discussed.⁶⁶⁵

Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir and sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson had got married in 1924. She was the breadwinner, sewing, while Ásmundur was studying in Stockholm and Paris. They also travelled together to Italy and Greece in 1928. Gunnfríður started to mould clay, particularly portraits, after she returned to Iceland in 1931.⁶⁶⁶ She held an exhibition in the *Kringla*, an extension of the Alþingi building, in 1934, and shortly afterwards was awarded a grant which she used for a three-month course in Copenhagen in the Royal Danish Academy under sculptor Einar Utzon-Frank.⁶⁶⁷ The fact that Gunnfríður was married to an esteemed sculptor also enters the picture, and thus the discourse about her also falls into the category of women artists, Icelandic or foreign, in the shadow of their more respected artist husbands, as has previously been pointed out.

In the women’s periodical *Nýtt kvennablað* (published from 1940 until 1967), an article appeared in 1943 about Gunnfríður under the heading “Sérkennileg listakona” (e. Odd woman artist). The title of the article is in reality an allusion to another article with the same heading by painter Jón Þorleifsson which appeared in 1932 in *Listviðir* and was about Gunnfríður, and included the word “odd” that had appeared to upset many women.⁶⁶⁸ Jón’s article says that Gunnfríður is an “odd and special woman”, and most of her artistic career has been different to the norm of artists in general. The article also mentions that Gunnfríður had supported herself with sewing, both here in Iceland and abroad, where she had lived for a period of ten years (in Stockholm and in Paris). She had also visited most of the European countries and stayed for a while in Greece and Rome.

The motive of the article in *Nýtt kvennablað* was, however, no less to defend Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, who had three sculptures at the aforementioned collective exhibition. The author argued that rules were broken by the exhibition committee, as a mark was put beside

⁶⁶⁴ Emil Thoroddsen, *Íslensk myndlist*, 20, see also in English translation, 31.

⁶⁶⁵ Emil Thoroddsen, *Íslensk myndlist*, 150–155.

⁶⁶⁶ Einar Falur Ingólfsson, “Listsköpun Gunnfríðar”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, October 25, 2009, 54.

⁶⁶⁷ “Menntamálaráðið hefir úthlutað listamannastyrknum”, *Nýja dagblaðið*, Mars 2, 1934, 1.

⁶⁶⁸ M.J.K., “Sérkennileg listakona (grein um Gunnfríði Jónsdóttur myndhöggvara)”, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 4, no. 4 (1943), 5–6; Jón Þorleifsson, “Sérkennileg listakona”, *Listviðir*, 1, no. 3 (1932), 11.

Gunnfríður's sculptures in the exhibition catalogue: this mark “denoted that they were not taken on the agreement of the committee, but rather that she showed them herself at her own risk. The committee washed their hands!” The article also said that Gunnfríður deserved “total support from all of us”, not only for her required courage but because of her talents and, more importantly, “in the belief and trust in the artworks that she still has to do”.⁶⁶⁹ A cover picture of Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir's sculpture *Ung stúlka* (e. Young girl) adorned the front page of the issue *Nýtt kvennablað* with the article on Gunnfríður in 1943.

Furthermore, *Nýtt kvennablað* regularly published works by women artists on the front page, the first being a work by the English-born artist Barbara Moray Williams Árnason: the woodcut *Brjóstmylkingur* (e. Child at my breast) from 1939. Barbara had studied art at the Royal College of Art in London and was married to an Icelandic artist, Magnús Á. Árnason. She was particularly known as a printmaker, but had mainly worked with book illustrations, drawings, oil paintings, watercolours and textiles; she had also taken an active part in exhibition management.⁶⁷⁰ At the same time, it was early in 1943 that *Nýtt kvennablað* published an interview with the woman artist Kristín Vídalín Jacobson.⁶⁷¹ No mention had been made of her artistic career in public discourse for almost half a century, or since 1896 in *Kvennablaðið*. However, the interview in 1943 was not about her as a woman artist but rather about her as one of the founders of the women's association *Hringurinn*, as the previous year Kristín had been conferred with the grand knight's cross award for her contribution to welfare matters. Nevertheless, the introduction of the article said that Kristín was “the first who went abroad to learn the art of painting at the Women's Art School in Copenhagen”. But after she married, she stopped painting for the most part and said that “painting, changing nappies and seeing to the demands made on housewives” were not compatible. Kristín said that when she had been a young girl in Copenhagen, she had been very sick and promised that if she recovered, she would put her effort “to some extent into helping the sick and the poor, the destitute who lack both good health and money, as I have never been lacking in money”.

It was also in this year of 1943 that Inga Lára Lárusdóttir—a pioneer women's rights activist, and editor of the women's periodical *19. júní*—became the first woman to write a scholarly article in a historical publication. Inga Lára wrote a chapter on weaving, knitting and

⁶⁶⁹ M.J.K., “Sérkennileg listakona (grein um Gunnfríði Jónsdóttur myndhöggvara)”, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 4, no. 4 (1943), 5–6.

⁶⁷⁰ Jón Proppé, “Horft aftur fyrir abstraktlistina”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. III. Abstraktlist, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 256.

⁶⁷¹ G. St., “Frú Kristín Vídalín Jacobson form. Hringins”, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 4, no. 2 (1943), 6–7.

sewing in a book on the history of Icelandic industry which was published in two volumes. Inga Lára said that in fact this material is so comprehensive and varied “that scarcely anywhere else would there be richer resources to draw on, whether in relation to trade history in general or the trade history of individual nations”.⁶⁷² From way back in the Viking era, women had spun and woven wool and linen, and weaving had undoubtedly been the specialty of women’s work that had had the greatest meaning here in Iceland—not least as currency and export products, until knitting came into the picture as an export product at the time of the Danish Monopoly 1602–1787. It continued to be an important export product until the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Inga Lára pointed out that men also wove after the new looms arrived and learned how to handle them from foreign weavers who brought the looms with them to Iceland. It had been a natural division of labour at the fabric factories in Reykjavík for women to spin while the men wove. Embroidery was a multi-faceted discipline of women’s handicrafts; women first learned this in the home and then in the women’s schools, which however had more and more of a foreign tinge.⁶⁷³ Inga Lára felt that women’s handicrafts had been subjected to a considerable backlash, and encouraged housewifery schools to arouse the attention of students to that which earlier generations had done to enhance the beauty of the home: with Icelandic models, an ethnic choice of colours in weaving and embroidery.⁶⁷⁴ Inga Lára had herself attended classes in handicrafts in Denmark and Sweden, and had received a grant from the Alþingi in 1930 to go to the Nordic countries and England to learn about old Icelandic handicrafts in museums abroad.⁶⁷⁵

Inga Lára had been keen to record this history since the mid-1920s, and in fact this had been the main objective and leitmotif in women’s periodicals ever since 1895; this concept of *textility* had thus begun with Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen and appeared in various ways and numerous articles in women’s periodicals over the next decades.

⁶⁷² Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, “Vefnaður, þrjón og saumur”, *Iðnsaga Íslands*, ed. Guðmundur Finnbogason, vol. II, (Reykjavík: Iðnaðarmannafélagið í Reykjavík, 1943), 154–192.

⁶⁷³ Inga Lára referred to sources such as *Leiðarvísir til að nema ýmsar kvenlegar hannyrðir*, by Þóra Pétursdóttir, Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir and Þóra Jónsdóttir (1886) and A. F. Kendrick, *English Needlework* (London: A & C Black, 1933).

⁶⁷⁴ Inga Lára Lárusdóttir, “Vefnaður, þrjón og saumur”, 154–192

⁶⁷⁵ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “Sögulegir gerendur og aukapersónur”, 67–68.

3.7.7. The visitor's eye and the arts in Iceland (1942–1944)

As already mentioned, the Americans took over the British Occupation in Iceland in 1941 and remained until the end of the war, and both the British and American occupations had a great effect on Icelandic society, including in arts and culture. The USA wanted to present itself as a cultural nation on a par with European nations such as France. If the Nordic countries had been important countries in relation to the outside world in the previous decades, for instance in terms of art education, Icelanders were now looking more to the West and the cultural activities of the Americans became more frequent, partly due to reciprocal visits of Icelandic and American artists and intellectuals.⁶⁷⁶

The Western–Icelandic art historian Hjörvarður Árnason (Hjörvarður Harvard Arnason) had come to Iceland from the USA and influenced public discourse on arts and culture during the two years (1942 to 1944) that he was in the country. Hjörvarður was born in Canada but his parents were Icelandic and had migrated there in 1898. He was sent to Iceland to work for the United States Office of War Information (OWI), not just as a respected art historian but also because he spoke Icelandic and knew about Icelandic culture. The role of OWI was to channel information between military authorities and civilians at home and abroad, with emphasis on cultural programming.⁶⁷⁷ A painting exhibition under Hjörvarður's direction opened in Listamannaskálinn gallery in April 1944 with American watercolours, the majority from the Whitney Museum of American Art, though coloured prints of American and European paintings were also shown. The exhibition enjoyed great popularity and was attended by 4,000 visitors.⁶⁷⁸ Subsequently, there was another milestone in the tremendous increase in collections of English books, notably on the arts and culture, which could be referred to.⁶⁷⁹ In the 1930s, most foreign books in Iceland had come from the Nordic countries. For instance, Jón Helgason

⁶⁷⁶ Haukur Ingvarsson, *Fulltrúi þess besta í bandarískri menningu* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2021), 190–196 and 429.

⁶⁷⁷ Hjörvarður studied literature at the University of Manitoba, then studied literature, English and writing at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in 1929. He got a grant to study classics and art history at Princeton in 1934 and worked for a while after that at the Frick Collection in New York. See, Haukur Ingvarsson, “Einn beztí grundvöllur fyrir þróun gagnkvæms skilnings er listin...”, 76–105.

⁶⁷⁸ “Ameríkönsk málverkasýning”, *Fálkinn*, 17, no. 15 (1944), 2 and 15; “Upplýsingardeild Bandaríkjustjórnar heldur Málverkasýningu”, *Morgunblaðið*, April 12, 1944, 9; Haukur Ingvarsson, “Einn beztí grundvöllur fyrir þróun gagnkvæms skilnings er listin...”, 92–100.

⁶⁷⁹ Haukur Ingvarsson, *Fulltrúi þess besta í bandarískri menningu*, 20–21. There was also an exhibition that the British Council organized on British graphic arts (such as etching) in 1943, along with a diverse selection of works and a presentation on English literature at the same time. See, “Breska myndasýningin í Reykjavík”, *Fálkinn* 16, no. 23 (1943), 2; Campbell Dodgson Esq., “Sýning nútíma grafískrar listar enskrar”, *Fálkinn*, 16, no. 24 (1943), 11.

wrote articles on art in *Heimilisblaðið* (1943–1945), including a reference to the writings of the art historian Reginald H. Wilenski, and it was also here that the name Giorgio Vasari finally appeared in a periodical in Iceland.⁶⁸⁰

Hjörvarður held lectures on art history at the University in Reykjavík, and far and wide in Iceland; this proved to be of great interest to many, and articles written by him appeared in periodicals and newspapers, both in Iceland and in the USA, where he presented Icelandic artists.⁶⁸¹ Eventually Hjörvarður was persuaded to discuss Icelandic art, and undoubtedly there would have been expectations on how he would approach that task. When he was interviewed in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (1944), he admitted being diffident about expressing himself on Icelandic art as he had never lived here, but considered there was a similarity to the history of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, which had previously been under Spanish control. Both in the Netherlands and Iceland, landscapes prevailed which “reflected the knowledge and love of their mother country”; like Icelanders, the Dutch knew the landscape well and “demanded that it would be descriptive of their interpretation in a certain way”.⁶⁸²

Hjörvarður pointed out that many of the younger artists in Iceland were turning to new subject matter and that interest in art in general was greater now than before, and although he mentioned no names, he claimed that quite a number of art enthusiasts and art collectors were in Iceland at that time—a situation that in many ways could be likened to the Renaissance period.⁶⁸³ But along the same lines, it was the knowledge about art and art history which was

⁶⁸⁰ Jón Helgason, “Málaralist III. Angiolotto Bondone kallaður Giotto”, *Heimilisblaðið*, 32, nos. 6–7 (1943), 95–97 and 101; on Vasari in “Málaralist VI. Albrecht Dürer”, *Heimilisblaðið*, 33, nos. 1–2 (1944), 14–18; “Málaralist IX. Titiano Vecelio öðru nafni Titian”, *Heimilisblaðið*, 34, no. 3 (1945), 43–45 and 53.

⁶⁸¹ Haukur Ingvarsson, *Fulltrúi þess besta í bandarískri menningu*, 190–196. Haukur Ingvarsson, “Einn beztí grundvöllur fyrir þróun gagnkvæms skilnings er listin...”, 89–105; Hjörvarður Árnason, “Nútíma byggingarlist”, *Jörð* 4, no. 5 (1943), 383–389; B.G., “Háskólafyrirlestar um nútíma-málaralist: Hjörvarður Árnason flytur 3 erindi fyrir almenning, á ensku”, *Vísir*, Mars 19, 1943, 2. Three of his lectures were delivered and published in *Helgafell*, discussing the main art isms in Europe and the USA, from the Renaissance to impressionism, but in the lectures he also tried to include and present contemporary art at a time when it was not yet particularly visible in Iceland. See, “Höfundatal Helgafells (Hjörvarður Árnason)”, *Helgafell*, 3, no. 1–4 (1944), 157. Hjörvarður Árnason, “Listastefnur í Evrópu og Ameríku. I. Endurreisn til rokokó”, *Helgafell*, 3, no. 1–4 (1944), 102–112; “Listastefnur í Evrópu og Ameríku. II. Klassíska, rómantíska, realismi”, *Helgafell*, 3, no. 5–10 (1944), 316–326; “Listastefnur í Evrópu og Ameríku. III. Þróunarferill impressjónismans”, *Helgafell*, 4, no. 2 (1945), 134–142.

⁶⁸² Hjörvarður Árnason, “Íslenzk myndlist”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, July 2, 1944, 306–310. Hjörvarður later became director of an esteemed establishment, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, from 1951 to 1961 and wrote a well-known publication on modern art, *A History of Modern Art. Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (H. H. Arnason) which was first published in 1968.

⁶⁸³ Markús Ívarsson collected art works from as early as 1920, knew many of the artists well, and owned 200 art works when he died in 1943. The works he collected included those by younger artists, i.e. Þorvaldur Skúlason, Snorri Arinbjarnar and Gunnlaugur Scheving. Another person who deserves a mention is Ragnar Jónsson, who supported many artists and had a large collection of artworks, while Ragnar Ásgeirsson was a great supporter of Kjarval besides owning a large collection himself. See, Bera Nordal, “Aðfaraorð”, 14.

lacking in Iceland. Furthermore, Hjörvarður argued that there was a great risk of isolation in Iceland: the fear and objection that “such would pose a risk to the development of pure Icelandic or idiosyncratic, national art” was a misunderstanding as foreign influence never prevailed. In the article’s conclusion, he claimed that older art in Iceland had been influenced from abroad, e.g. Icelandic manuscripts from the late Middle Ages, including multiple influences from French Gothic art, but also that various foreign influences could be seen in tapestries, e.g. from the seventeenth century.⁶⁸⁴

This viewpoint on foreign influence was met with scepticism by some in Iceland, as had been the case for decades, and which has been pointed out previously as some kind of leitmotif. A fine example of this is the difference in how Guðmundur Finnbogason wrote about Einar Jónsson becoming seventy in 1944 and how Hjörvarður Árnason wrote on the same occasion. Guðmundur considered that Iceland’s nature had shaped the art of Einar Jónsson, as can be seen in the columnar basalt in his works and also in the form of Icelandic mountains, and he emphasized that Einar was independent of the direct influence of older art—and hence his art was “thoroughly Icelandic”.⁶⁸⁵

Hjörvarður gave a talk on the radio about the artist Einar which soon after appeared in print in *Fálkinn*.⁶⁸⁶ Although Hjörvarður trod carefully and linked Einar with the literature heritage and his “knowledge of the land and its history”, he also said that Einar was one of “the most original geniuses in the history of sculpture” in Iceland, and it was simply “an ancient truth that no artist has ever been independent of older art”. In this respect, Hjörvarður “dared” to link certain aspects of Einar’s art with platonic features in the works by Michelangelo, where the opposition and tension between the Divine and the earthly in humans is manifested; even when it comes to male geniuses, the influence came from elsewhere, from another male genius.

Hjörvarður’s articles in *Morgunblaðið* on Icelandic art, and in *Fálkinn*, were remarkable in many ways, particularly in the detachment that he had from Icelandic art and how he puts it in an international context, in relation to subject matter, foreign influence, the importance of art collectors and knowledge of art history—aspects that were treated in a completely different manner in articles in Icelandic papers and periodicals on art and literature. Yet little is

⁶⁸⁴ Hjörvarður Árnason, “Íslenszk myndlist”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, July 2, 1944, 306–310.

⁶⁸⁵ Guðmundur Finnbogason, “Einar Jónsson sjötugur”, *Fálkinn*, 17, no. 19 (1944), 4–5.

⁶⁸⁶ Hjörvarður H. Árnason, “Einar Jónsson sjötugur. Útvarpserindi flutt 11. maí af Hjörvarður Árnason”, *Fálkinn* 17, no. 20 (1944), 4–5; Haukur Ingvarsson, ““Einn beztu grundvöllur fyrir þróun gagnkvæms skilnings er listin...””, 93.

mentioned of the role of women artists in, for instance in American art history or European art, or indeed in his articles on art.

The discussion about modernism and abstract art in the USA may not least be linked to the writings of art historian Alfred H. Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which was opened in 1929. In his famous work *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), he mapped radical movements in art from 1880 to 1935 but reduced diversity toward an ultimate goal, the abstraction. Art historians such as Marlite Halbertsma have made reference to Barr's famous schematic overview, on the cover of the *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition catalogue, which simplified the development of modern art to a handful of movements and artists (white males of certain nationalities) chosen in modern art history; this was a schematic pursued at that time by museums of modern art when collecting art objects after the Second World War.⁶⁸⁷ In Barr's writing, the concept of the artist was for instance an adventurer, explorer, individualist, entrepreneur: terms which were "coded in modern culture as masculine", a culture that gained new heights in the 1940s, with abstract-expressionism and its male masters. This is also the beginning of a new era with important retrospectives, monographs and catalogues in the USA on the great masters of art history, published notably by museums and galleries.⁶⁸⁸ This was an approach and discourse that would have a far-reaching impact on art history writing in modernist Europe after the Second World War, where ideas on the male genius and the legend behind him were held in high regard. And in Iceland, the gendered national ideas of the genius in public discourse on art and culture meet the international ideas of the great modernist male artist.

3.7.8. Celebration of the founding of the Republic of Iceland

Iceland became a republic in 1944, and a big festival was held at Þingvellir on 17 June to mark the anniversary of the birth of national hero Jón Sigurðsson. In a similar way as the Alþingi millennium in 1930, Þingvellir can again be regarded as the meeting place of the Icelanders or, as Guðmundur Hálfðanarson points out, a "lieu de mémoire", a national symbol for Icelanders to celebrate what the nation has in common while at the same time demarcating how Icelanders

⁶⁸⁷ Marlite Halbertsma, "The call of the canon. Why art history cannot do without", *Making Art History. A Changing Discipline and its Institution*, ed. Elizabeth C. Mansfield (New York, London: Routledge, 2007), 16–31. See also in Griselda Pollock, "The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women", 47.

⁶⁸⁸ Art historian Alfred H. Barr Jr. established the oeuvres of modernist masters such as Picasso and Matisse in monographic projects. See, Griselda Pollock, "The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women", 47.

differed from other groups. Hence, memory and history play an important part in all national constructions, which are generally based on the idea that the modern nation is the outcome of a long historical process. The celebration at Þingvellir was not connected to internal strife or class struggles of the past, but rather to one moment in time, one will and national unity at a sacred space.⁶⁸⁹

Substantial discussion of Icelandic art history, on the occasion of the art exhibition at the celebration, appeared in the newspaper *Vísir* in 1944.⁶⁹⁰ The article, written by the painter Bjarni Guðmundsson, traced Icelandic art history and its characteristics from the Middle Ages, through illumination in manuscripts, primitive portraits and art expression, concluding that more talent and beauty was evident in the applied arts done by common people. Thorvaldsen is not considered an Icelandic artist, and it is claimed that luckily, he had grown up with Danes and thus had the opportunity to flourish instead of landing up bitterly poor here without opportunities. At the same time, it is stated that Sigurður Guðmundsson can hardly be claimed to be one of the first Icelandic painters, despite his education, as he did not leave any traces in modern art. It is Þórarinn B. Þorláksson who is claimed to be “the father of Icelandic painting”. The discussion then proceeds to Einar Jónsson, Ásgrímur Jónsson, Kjarval and Jón Stefánsson as being the pioneers of Icelandic art. Furthermore, Bjarni said that “by far the most remarkable sculptor in Iceland”, with the exception of Einar Jónsson, is Ásmundur Sveinsson. The article also said that Ásmundur had had housing difficulties for a long time and had built himself a house in Freyjugata which was “overburdening him financially”, as the art of sculpture was an expensive pursuit and the sales opportunities for such artists were few. At the same time, it was a stigma on Icelandic culture that the government did not support such sculptures with orders.⁶⁹¹

As far as women artists are concerned, the article says that Kristín Jónsdóttir and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir were “the first Icelandic women who make painting their life work”. Kristín aroused attention early on “for feminine sensitivity, fineness and taste” but then gradually began to take on the subject matter with “a masculine approach”. Júlíana Sveinsdóttir was different, especially in painting structure, although “a great deal of feminine charm” can be seen in her

⁶⁸⁹ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, ““Þingvellir: An Icelandic ‘Lieu de Mémoire’”, *History & Memory. Studies in Representation for the Past*, 12, no. 1 (Spring–summer, 2000), 4–29. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, “Þingvellir og íslenskt þjóðerni”, *Milli himins og jarðar. Maður, guð og menning í hnotskurn hugvísinda*. Lecture delivered at the Humanities Conference of the Faculties of Religion and Philosophy, October 18 and 19 1996, eds. Anna Agnarsdóttir, Pétur Pétursson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), 406–412.

⁶⁹⁰ Bjarni Guðmundsson, “Íslenszk myndlist”, *Vísir*, June 17, 1944, 17–23. The art exhibition in Listamannaskálinn gallery featured 28 artists, including 5 women. See, e.g. in Orri [Jón Þorleifsson], “Sýning Fjelags ísl. myndlistarmanna”, *Morgunblaðið*, June 23, 1944, 8.

⁶⁹¹ Bjarni Guðmundsson, “Íslenszk myndlist”, *Vísir*, June 17, 1944, 17–23.

paintings. Brief mention is made of Nína Sæmundsson, and also the woman artist Karen Agnete (though always at the same time as her husband, the painter Sveinn Þórarinnsson). She is said to be a remarkable painter though “because of her choice of material and treatment must be considered as a Danish painter”.⁶⁹²

It appears that in many ways the outcome had been the same in both celebrations, during 1944 and 1930: a gathering of men. Considering the optimism that can be seen in these articles and the pride of women’s victories over the preceding decades, it is easy to understand the disappointments, as women were circumvented at the celebration in Þingvellir. However, there was in fact one “woman’s voice” that could be said to have been heard, which was that of the poet Hulda (Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind), who in 1944 submitted her poem *Hver á sér fegra föðurland* (e. Who has a more beautiful homeland) to a poetry competition to mark the founding of the Icelandic Republic. She won the competition, along with another poet, Jóhannes úr Kötlum, who sent in *Land míns föður* (e. My father’s homeland). However, Hulda’s poem was recited by a man, actor Brynjólfur Jóhannesson, at the celebration in Þingvellir, whereas Jóhannes recited his award-winning poem himself, causing outrage among women.⁶⁹³

The festival celebrations in 1944 were in fact two-pronged, one for men and another for women, with the National Convention for the *Women’s Rights Association* that began on the anniversary of suffrage on 19 June. The women put emphasis on making their demands known and notably, the *Association of Icelandic Artists* was encouraged to provide a grant from the Education Board’s funds to sculptor Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, in recognition of her art. This was done on the initiative of Hulda (Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind), the award-winning poet.⁶⁹⁴

This is understandable, given the negative attitude and writing about her, as mentioned earlier, and also how the women’s periodical *Nýtt kvennablað* (1943) defended and condemned the discussion on Gunnfríður’s work and art creations. An interesting exception should be mentioned here and as is argued in this thesis, women artists often got more attention and a different kind of coverage overseas than they did in Iceland. A headline in *Þjóðviljinn* (1944)

⁶⁹² Bjarni Guðmundsson, “Íslensk myndlist”, *Vísir*, June 17, 1944, 17–23.

⁶⁹³ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1946. Vongóðar í nýju lýðveldi”, 254. From Rannveig Kristjánsdóttir’s point of view, the most painful disappointments were that the absence of the Mountain woman “bears unequivocal testimony to the lack of the male-dominated festival committee on the esteemed virtue of the gender-logical thought”. Rannveig Kristjánsdóttir, “Fjallkonan hopar af hólmi”, *Þjóðviljinn* (Kvennasíðan), June 22, 1944, 3. The women’s periodical *Framsókn* had published a poem by Hulda at the outset of her career. *Framsókn* expresses thanks to the unknown young woman, Hulda, for this poetry. See *Kvöldkyrrð*, poem by Hulda (Unnur Benediktsdóttir Bjarklind), published in *Framsókn*, 7, no. 11 (1901), 41–42.

⁶⁹⁴ Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1946. Vongóðar í nýju lýðveldi”, 256; Sigríður Th. Erlendsdóttir, *Veröld sem ég vil*, 213; “Konurnar krefjast raunverulegs jafnréttis”, *Alþýðublaðið*, June 28, 1944, 4.

said that in the art periodical *Victory* in the USA, “work by an Icelandic woman artist had drawn attention”. In this magazine, an article by Hjörvarður had appeared about the collective exhibition of Icelandic artists in 1943 which had been held in Listamannaskálinn gallery, and pictures of the works at the exhibition were included in the article. *Þjóðviljinn* said that it was a picture of the work by Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, *Landsýn*, which had attracted the most attention.⁶⁹⁵

Similarly, one could call it symbolic that in 1944 it was the work *Móðurást* by Nína Sæmundsson which adorned the cover of the women’s periodical *Nýtt kvennablað*.⁶⁹⁶ One can certainly say that the public discussion of the work on motherly love, which recurs again and again, had become symbolic for the struggle of women to draw attention both to their artistic creation, visibility and women’s rights.⁶⁹⁷ Moreover, it is evocative of the concept of creation versus procreation, as an opposite, and the discordance between fatherhood and motherhood; thus, the male genius can be both a father and a creative artist, whereas a woman has to choose—though without motherhood, she is considered incomplete.

Concluding remarks

In the discourse on art at the turn of the century, many did not think much of the art creations of earlier centuries, especially the nineteenth, unless it happened to involve to some extent the contribution of Sigurður Guðmundsson, the painter, as well as the “foreign collection” of paintings of the National Gallery and Thorvaldsen’s self-portrait in Reykjavík’s centre. However, this disappointment towards nineteenth-century art changes and is replaced by the idea of progress, which is reflected in art. Hence the “first landscape art exhibition of an Icelandic artist” was held in 1900 when Þórarinn B. Þorláksson showed the country’s famous historical locations, such as the work *Þingvellir* (1900). Þórarinn is presented as the first Icelandic landscape painter, then came the painter Ásgrímur Jónsson who held an exhibition in Reykjavík in 1903, while Einar Jónsson became the first Icelandic sculptor, holding his first exhibition in Copenhagen in 1901. The landscape and Icelandic nature now appeared to be entwined in art and nationalist discourse.

⁶⁹⁵ “Höggmynd eftir íslenska listakonu vekur eftirtekt”, *Þjóðviljinn*, July 24, 1944, 2.

⁶⁹⁶ *Nýtt kvennablað*, 5, no. 1 (1944), cover page.

⁶⁹⁷ See e.g. a photography of *Móðurást* on the cover of the *Nýtt kvennablað*, 5, no. 1 (1944).

By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Icelanders had become influenced by the discourse of foreigners, such as the idea of the Golden Age of Icelanders that was also linked to the strong, masculine Viking settler and the virility that was manifested in “the true Icelandic” in politics and the nation’s culture. History was evident, with the citing of the Icelandic Commonwealth as a reference, then a period of decline and then a “revival”, with cultural optimism in literature and art and Icelandic geniuses in art in the making. One can find parallels to gender-related terms used in Iceland for landscape paintings that are related to cultural and national identity, as well as nationalism, in Norway, Finland and Canada. And if in the neighbouring countries, the discourse on art is gendered, gender is also the underlying theme in the *nationalist* discourse in Iceland and becomes an even greater excluding factor for women and their cultural contribution.

It is imperative to look at the concept of *textility* that is introduced in this thesis—namely, an important weapon as a struggle for women’s cultural citizenship—as a basis for what was to come and what was gained. Women’s voices were not uniform, but one of many denominators was the desire to document and establish women’s contributions to art and culture. The collaboration of Icelandic women with the Danes continued, notably with the *Danish Crafts Association* in the first decade of the twentieth century, which contributed to the shaping of modern applied art in Iceland under the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement that was prominent in Denmark; this resulted in the foundation of the *Home Industry Association* in 1913. Þóra Pétursdóttir—a member in various women’s associations in Copenhagen—took part in organizing women’s exhibitions, herself exhibiting both paintings and handicrafts, publishing well-researched articles and combining all aspects of *textility*. However, women’s writings in the women’s periodicals were rarely referred to in the mainstream public discourse nor, with few exceptions, did their writings appear in male-oriented cultural periodicals. Likewise, the contribution of women to literature and poetry composition is completely parallel in terms of the reception of their works in the mainstream public discourse.

The year 1915 was also a turning point in the women’s rights struggle, when Icelandic women got the right to vote in Iceland. Furthermore, three Icelandic women artists who were educated in The Royal Danish Academy stepped forward and exhibited here in Iceland and also abroad, to good acclaim: Kristín Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, and Nína Sæmundsson. But as before, women also (and mostly) made their mark in fields such as handicrafts and photography, like photographer Sigríður Zoëga. This is an important time period in terms of

the *transition* for the modern woman, and likewise for the shaping of self-image and self-identity. Nonetheless, this period is rich in paradoxes, where the acquired legal rights changed little when it came to gendered assumptions in art and culture.

The *Art Society* was set up in 1916 and marks a certain milestone. Its first exhibition in 1919 was also the first collective public art exhibition in Iceland held in Reykjavík in which the “three pioneers of Icelandic art”—Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, Einar Jónsson and Ásgrímur Jónsson—were honoured. Exhibitors also included a new generation of artists, i.e. Kristín Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson, together with Jóhannes S. Kjarval. In the same way as through the centuries, originality was considered a masculine quality that did not apply to women artists. Júlíana, Kristín and Nína are more prone to influence, and as a result their works are inferior to those of other (male) artists. In contrast, when it comes to male artists, the idiosyncratic and the original in terms of the work, life and personality of the artist shine out. The “new colonization” in art was in the hands of (male) settlers. The *Art Society* organized seven group exhibitions in total (1919 to 1927), providing older and younger artists with an opportunity to exhibit their works, but along the same lines, the definition of the concept of art is narrowed and more gender-related. The story of Sigríður Erlendsdóttir is a good example of the prevailing attitude and reflects the destructive discourse, which became decisive and insurmountable. The position of women in the art world in Iceland and neighbouring countries throws light on why they still had to respond to inequalities in the field of art and to take action to present themselves at a special *Women Artists Retrospective Exhibition* in 1920, held in Copenhagen; this was the first large exhibition of the KKS.

The increased number of women in general in the public sphere aroused fear of changes and imbalance of the roles of the sexes, and even the future of the country and the nation. This is reflected for instance in the more conservative women’s periodicals on the fundamental differences between men and women, such as a question mark in regard to women as creative artists, which had also been reflected in the discourse at the end of the nineteenth century. Conservative ideas like these also aroused strong responses in the women’s periodical *19. júní*. Interwoven in this discourse is the focus on the strong individual, both in culture and politics, but even more expected and awaited is the arrival of the genius in art and literature.

At the same time, the *textility* reached a new dimension in Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s art and career, with exhibitions in Iceland and Denmark, campaigning for the rights of women artists in Denmark, and working with textiles and mosaic alongside painting. Yet Júlíana did better at earning respect for her work in Denmark than in the mainstream press at home. This is reflected

in the gendered, nationalist public discourse in Iceland, concerning the first substantial, collective art exhibition of Icelandic art abroad (1927–1928) in Copenhagen and several cities in Germany; the emphasis is on the “idiosyncrasy” and the true Icelandic works of the three Icelandic painters—Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson and Kjarval—as well as their vigour and masculinity in their true Icelandic works. The works of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Kristín Jónsdóttir lie outside the definition of true Icelandic art. Moreover, the discussion of avant-gardism and modernity is also gender-related and is reflected in vanguard male artists and short-haired women (their apparel and behaviour).

And if Icelandic women had great hopes and demands to be part of the planning of the millennium of the Alþingi in 1930, they were bypassed. Men were in the main roles at the same time as also generally taking part in the organization of the festivities. As before, one could actually say that the opportunities for women artists were more promising in foreign climes in 1930. This applied notably both to Nína Sæmundsson and to Ingibjörg Stein Bjarnason.

In Iceland in the 1930s there was a call for alternative subjects to landscape in painting. In the mainstream public press, the words of the art elite—predominantly composed of poets, authors and a few artists—weighed heavily in public discourse, with a regular call to build a museum, an independent collection of paintings, which in fact revolved mostly around housing Kjarval’s works (or those of other male pioneers in art). Although everyone could agree on the genius talents of Kjarval, no matter where they stood in politics, different views on art in Iceland became even more intense and prominent in the 1940s. Disputes between artists and the Chair of the Education Board revolved around too much being bought of the so-called national art work by younger artists who were treading new paths and too little of the work by older artists. Yet, as argued in this chapter, women artists were not connected in any way to the discussion about what was “acceptable” as art and on who was not “acceptable” as an Icelandic artist: it seems on the whole that their works were “neither nor”.

The brotherhood or fraternity (from brother to brother) is omnipresent in the discourse on the great male artists. Þorvaldur Skúlason was a forerunner in modern art in Iceland, and is described as a strong personality, virile, original and intelligent. Nína Tryggvadóttir got high praise for her works, becoming part of the modernist group of writers and artists (i.e. Þorvaldur Skúlason, Kjarval, Laxness and Steinn Steinarr), who fought the hardest against the vision of the nationalist landscape that had been prevailing: she gained their consent, acceptance and therefore visibility in the main discourse. Yet when it comes to reception of Nína’s work, the story revolves around the old refrain: that women artists are prone to influence by male artists

and not the other way around. And even if in 1943, Emil Thoroddsen gave a good explanation of Nína's work in the art history book *Íslenzk myndlist. 20 listmálarar*, describing her as a young and "quite promising" artist, he also used words such as accuracy, details, femininity, decorative and tasteful to describe Kristín Jónsdóttir's work.

It was also in 1943 that Inga Lára Lárusdóttir became the first woman to write a scholarly article in a historical publication, a chapter on weaving, knitting and sewing in a two-volume book on the history of Icelandic industry. One could say that documenting of women's handicrafts, their story and contribution to Icelandic culture had been both the main objective, in the form of *textility*, and a leitmotif in women's periodicals ever since 1895. Yet, considering the optimism in the women's periodicals and the pride of women's victories over the preceding decades, it is easy to understand the disappointments, as women were circumvented in festivities at Þingvellir related to the New Republic in 1944. The same gendered public discourse took place in relation to the discussion on art: the art exhibition held in Reykjavík in 1944 to celebrate the event put Einar Jónsson, Ásgrímur Jónsson, Kjarval and Jón Stefánsson in the limelight, but as far as women artists were concerned, the works of Kristín Jónsdóttir and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir arouse attention for the feminine, the sensitive, good taste and charm.

The modernist discourse in an international context would have a far-reaching impact on art history writing in Europe and the USA after the Second World War; in Iceland, the idea and definition of the modernist male genius met the nationalist ideas of the great male artist who is "thoroughly Icelandic" in his art.



Figure 14 Þórarinn B. Þorláksson (1867–1924), *Þingvellir*, 1900, oil, 57.5 x 81.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1051.



Figure 15 Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876–1958), *Tindafjöll*, 1903–1904, oil, 80 x 125.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1008.



Figure 16 Einar Jónsson (1874–1954), *Útlagar* (e. Outlaws), 1898–1901, plaster, 218 x 105 x 142 cm. The Einar Jónsson Museum, Reykjavík. *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Forlagið, Listasafn Íslands, 2011), 47. Photo published with permission from the National Gallery of Iceland.



Figure 17 Sigríður Zoëga (1889–1968), *Þrjár konur við Ölfusá* (e. Three women by Ölfusá river), 1915, film photograph. The National Museum of Iceland, SZ1–31725.



Figure 18 Sigríður Zoëga (1889–1968), *Starfsmenn beykiverkstæðis Jóns Jónssonar, Reykjavík* (e. Carpenters at Jón Jónsson's workshop in Reykjavík), 1917, dry plate photograph. The National Museum of Iceland, SZ1–4086.

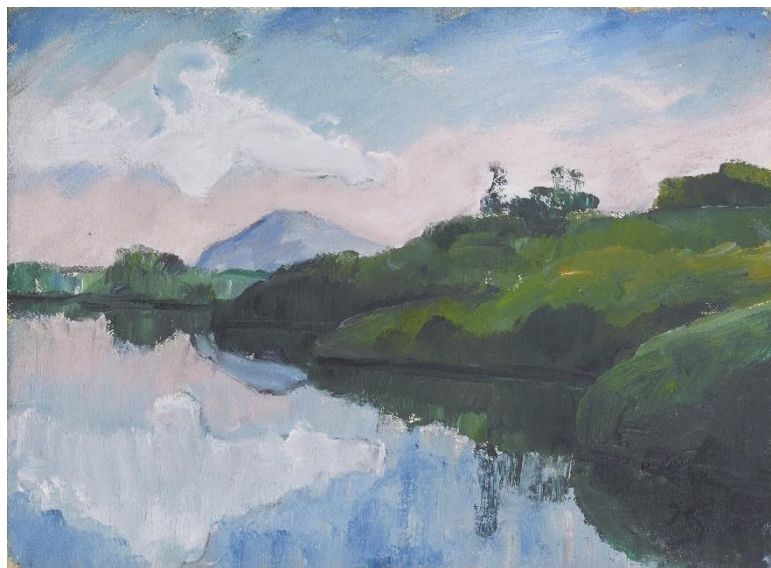


Figure 19 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), *Frá Slútnesi* (e. From Slútnes), 1914, oil, 22 x 30 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 102.



Figure 20 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Eiríksjökull*, 1922, oil, 62.5 x 80 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 172.



Figure 21 Magnús Ólafsson (1862–1937), Sculpture by Nína Sæmundsson (1892–1965), *Kentár rænir ungri stúlku* (e. Centaur kidnapping a young woman), exhibited at the first general exhibition of the *Art Society* in 1919, in Reykjavík's Children's School. Reykjavík Museum of Photography, MAÓ 1555.



Figure 22 Jóhannes S. Kjarval (1885–1972), *Landslag* (e. Landscape), 1925, oil, 50.5 x 99.7 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 9364/1005.



Figure 23 Sigríður Björnsdóttir (1879–1942), *Skál* (e. Bowl), 1940, 10 x 3 cm. The National Museum of Iceland, L 143. *Blómavasi* (e. Flower vase), 1940, 26.5 x 11 cm. The National Museum of Iceland, L 144.



Figure 24 Þorleifur Þorleifsson (1882–1941), *Sigríður Erlendsdóttir with a portrait of her brother*, circa 1920. Dry plate. The National Museum of Iceland, ÞP 457.



Figure 25 Sigríður Erlendsdóttir (1881–1955), *Blóm* (e. Flowers), 1918–1924, oil. Private collection. Photograph: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 26 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), *Gullfoss*, 1920, oil, 65 x 75 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 356.



Figure 27 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), painting en plein air at Gullfoss, 1920. Morgunblaðið Photographic Collection.

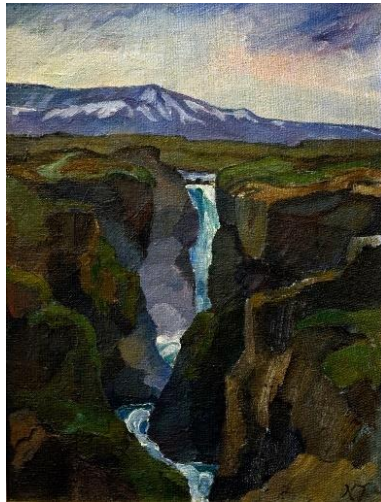


Figure 28 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), *Útsýni yfir Glerárfoss* (e. View of Glerárfoss), oil, 50.5 x 38 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 5727.



Figure 29 Jón Stefánsson (1881–1962), *Eiríksjökull (Skúlaskeið)*, 1920, oil, 93.5 x 113.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 342.

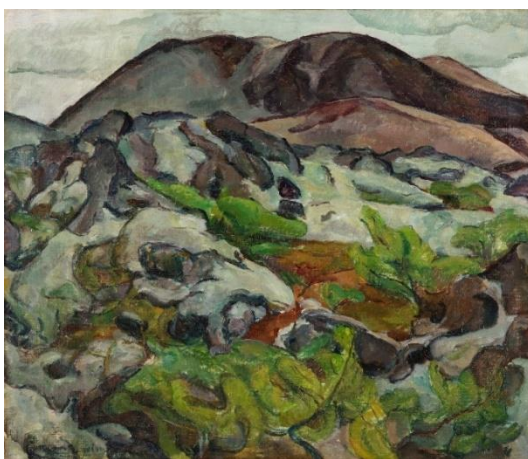


Figure 30 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Íslenskt landslag. Grábrók* (e. Icelandic landscape. Grábrók crater), 1925, oil, 55.5 x 63.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 6303.



Figure 31 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Frá Vestmannaeyjum* (e. From Vestmannaeyjar), 1926, oil, 54 x 65 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 213.

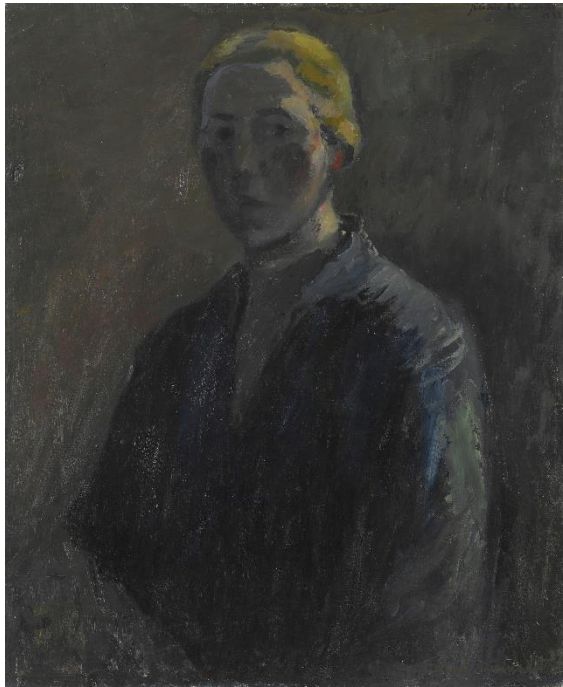


Figure 32 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Sjálfsmynd* (e. Self-portrait), 1931, oil, 76 x 63 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1070.



Figure 33 Nína Sæmundsson (1892–1965), *Móðurást* (e. Motherly love), 1924, 157 x 50 cm. Situated in the *Mæðragarðurinn* (e. Mother's Garden) in the centre of Reykjavík. Reykjavík Art Museum. Photograph: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 34 Nína Sæmundsson (1892–1965), *Deyjandi Kleópatra* (e. Death of Cleopatra), 1925, concrete sculpture, 72 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 7101.



Figure 35 Nína Sæmundsson (1892–1965), *Afrekshugur* (e. Spirit of Achievement), 1931 (stands over the Park Avenue entrance of the Hotel Waldorf Astoria in New York). *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. II, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Forlagið, Listasafn Íslands, 2011), 141. Photo published with the permission of the National Gallery of Iceland.



Figure 36 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), *Þingvellir*, 1935, oil, 55 x 70 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 8011.

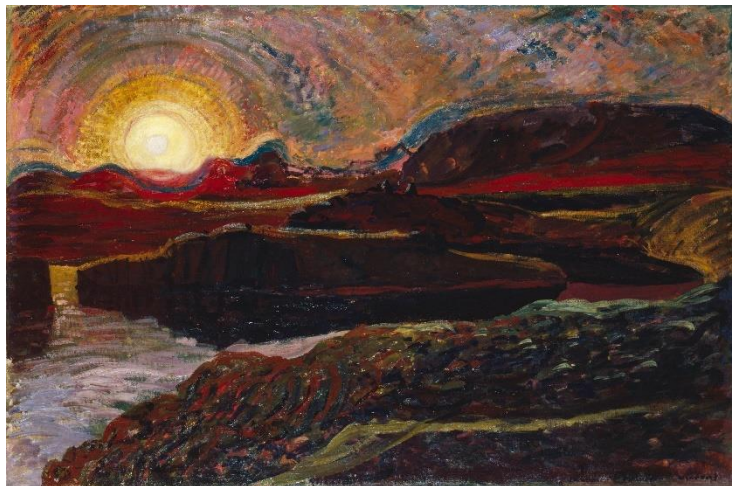


Figure 37 Jóhannes S. Kjarval (1885–1972), *Sumarnótt á Þingvöllum* (e. Summer night at Þingvellir), 1931, oil, 100 x 50 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 418.



Figure 38 Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson (born Enevoldsen, 1903–1992), *Amma mín* (e. My grandmother), 1926, oil, 160 x 85 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 638.



Figure 39 Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson (1903–1992), *Skógarmynd* (e. Picture of a forest) oil, 95 x 100 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 942.



Figure 40 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), *Við Þvottalaugarnar* (e. At the Laundry pools), 1931, oil, 100 x 123 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 459.



Figure 41 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), *Fiskverkun við Eyjafjörð* (e. Fish processing at Eyjafjörður), 1914, oil, 79 x 105 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 103.



Figure 42 Jóhannes S. *Kjarval* (1885–1972), *Fantasía* (e. Fantasy), 1940, oil, 103 x 151 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1211.



Figure 43 Jóhannes S. *Kjarval* (1885–1972), *Fjallamjólk* (e. Mountain Milk), 1941, oil, 106 x 150 cm. A.S.Í. Art Museum, LA 40/688.



Figure 44 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Konumynd* (e. A woman), 1938, oil, 84 x 64 cm. Borgarnes Museum, LB 57.



Figure 45 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Frá Ólafsvík* (e. From Ólafsvík), 1942, oil, 100 x 88 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 686.



Figure 46 Louisa Matthíasdóttir (1917–2000), *Nína Tryggvadóttir í Sante Fe* (e. Nína Tryggvadóttir in Santa Fe), 1943–1944, oil. A.S.Í. Art Museum, LA 84/732.



Figure 47 Drífa Viðar (1922–1971), *Kurteisir fletir* (e. Polite forms), oil, 83.5 x 69.5 cm. Private collection.



Figure 48 Drífa Viðar (1922–1971), *Konan mín í kofanum* (e. My wife in the hut), oil on masonite, 64.5 x 49.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1570.



Figure 49 Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir (1889–1968), *Dreymandi drengur* (e. Dreaming boy), 1931, concrete sculpture, 39 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 7131/131.



Figure 50 Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir (1889–1968), *Landsýn. Landnámskonan* (e. Vision of land. The Settler Woman), 1940 (in front of Strandarkirkja, Selvogur), 200 cm, granite sculpture. *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. II, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Forlagið, Listasafn Íslands, 2011), 221. Photo published with permission from the National Gallery of Iceland.



Figure 51 Barbara Árnason (born Morey Williams, 1911–1975), *Brjóstmylkingur* (e. Child at my breast), 1939, paper. Gerðarsafn–Kópavogur Art Museum, LKG 1680/135.



Figure 52 Cover pictures of the women's periodical *Nýtt kvennablað* in 1943: from the left, two woodcuts by Barbara (Morey Williams) Árnason (1911–1975), *Gamall sveitabær* (e. An old farm) and *Brjóstmylkingur* from 1939. On the right, a bust by Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir (1889–1968), *Ung stúlka* (e. Young girl).

4. PAINT LIKE A MAN, WOMAN! (1945–1960)

4.1. New times in the new republic?

4.1.1. *The entry of modernism, its masters and its antechamber*

While other nations had to wrestle with the horrific consequences of the war and the post-war reconstruction, the Allied occupation had led to improvements in the living standards of the Icelandic people. The country opened up after the war and many more Icelanders, including women, sought education home and abroad, including in the arts. This was also the modernist period when new styles and movements set their mark on Icelandic art and culture. But if this new modern art overturned ideas of what had previously been considered the true Icelandic art and culture, did it have an effect on the discourse on women artists? Or did the gendered discourse that women artists had known from before endure? Had the gendered definition of the true Icelandic artist changed? Were women artists more eligible in the vanguard of modernism, or perhaps asked to wait in its antechamber? This chapter considers the complexity and paradox of modernism. We see the persistence of the gendered discourse in the male-dominated art scene. But at the same time a great deal was happening among women, more than any time before. Indeed, Icelandic women artists abroad were achieving fame for their country. Looking at women's textility, the *parrêsiatique* role appeared in the public sphere in a myriad of ways, manifesting as fighting for women artists and women in general, as well as for their cultural citizenship in Iceland.

In Icelandic art history, modernism has been considered to have fully gained a foothold in 1945 with the exhibition of Svavar Guðnason's work in the Listamannaskálinn gallery in Reykjavík. Svavar's works were in the spirit of surrealism and abstraction, together with a bold use of colours: in short, something completely new, as the discourse of the time reflects.⁶⁹⁸ In his article in the newspaper *Þjóðviljinn*, Björn Th. Björnsson pointed out that the artist had now returned home after a decade abroad, to invite "people to enjoy the fruits of his work". Björn, who himself had been abroad studying art history, said that it is certainly pleasing to return to Iceland and find how artistic life is blossoming like never before and how one major event

⁶⁹⁸ Jón Proppé, "Abstraktið kemur til Íslands", 8–15.

follows another, i.e. Kjarval's painting exhibition that winter. Svavar's works do not have a visible subject, writes Björn, and thus "the same applies here as in music, which also is abstract, and the viewer must thus create a personal understanding and connection with each and every painting".⁶⁹⁹ And one can certainly say that "this music" surely recalls an old chorus, an old refrain, which is now becoming even more entrenched in the discourse on art.

Svavar is described as a master of modernism, and Björn says:⁷⁰⁰ "Overall, it seems to me that most paintings are painted with an unusual force: it is the voice of a young man who responds to the call of life with daring and masculinity. His choice of colours rarely succumbs to a deathly calm, and each painting has a new, virile message to convey." In Björn's review, an image is depicted of a young man with "masculine attributes", daring, determined, with a virile message that manifests as never before, as the antithesis to the hesitant, indecisive, feminine.⁷⁰¹

In 1945, Svavar Guðnason had already exhibited at the Autumn Exhibition in Charlottenborg (1935, 1936 and 1938) but he was in fact more or less self-taught. Svavar went to Copenhagen at the beginning of 1935 to start studying at the Royal Danish Academy, but only for a few months. Nína Tryggvadóttir had also started studying in Copenhagen in 1935, and stayed until 1939, while other artists studying at that time included Þorvaldur Skúlason and Jón Engilberts. Armed with a grant from the Alþingi, Svavar went to Paris in 1938, attended classes in the art school of the esteemed artist Fernand Léger, but abandoned the course soon after starting it. Nína Tryggvadóttir was also studying in Paris in 1938–1939, as was Lousia Matthíasdóttir, but they returned to Iceland at the outbreak of the war. The same applied to Þorvaldur Skúlason: he had been in France but returned home because of the war in 1940.⁷⁰²

Svavar himself said in an interview:⁷⁰³ "In my opinion, schools are much too rigid and ensnare the young artists in the grip of pre-determined opinions on art and artistically accepted ethics. Ethics, which is reactionary but not progressive, and clashes with personal freedom and restrains advancement. I look at it so that self-education is the healthiest in the companionship of chosen artists and other liberal, non-judgemental people." Svavar's exhibition of 1945 certainly had a great influence on the new generation of artists in Iceland.⁷⁰⁴ During the years

⁶⁹⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson, "Nokkur orð um sýningu Svavars Guðnasonar", *Þjóðviljinn*, August 28, 1945, 3.

⁷⁰⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, "Nokkur orð um sýningu Svavars Guðnasonar", *Þjóðviljinn*, August 28, 1945, 3

⁷⁰¹ See the aligned discourse on Svavar in Þorvaldur Skúlason, "Málverkasýning Svavars Guðnasonar", *Þjóðviljinn*, August 28, 1945.

⁷⁰² Jón Proppé, "Abstraktið kemur til Íslands", 26–26.

⁷⁰³ Orri [Jón Þorleifsson], "Svavar Guðnason opnar listsýningu", *Morgunblaðið*, August 19, 1945, 5 and 7.

⁷⁰⁴ Jón Proppé, "Abstraktið kemur til Íslands", 11–13.

that followed, numerous articles on the new art appeared that prepared the groundwork for education and definitions of art as well as its purpose, and defended this powerful message for more than a decade: the painting could be good even if it was not figurative, or was not connected with the title and the known reality.

In Björn Th. Björnsson's aforementioned article, Svavar Guðnason is named as being in the vanguard, as the new master of the powerful message of contemporary art, while by his side are the masters Þorvaldur Skúlason and Kjarval.⁷⁰⁵ Þorvaldur had in fact been considered the first to dedicate himself to this new art in Iceland. They were the "blotch artists", as politician Jónas Jónsson had called them and was discussed in Chapter 3. This new style of abstract art in Iceland was the antithesis of what had previously been considered the true Icelandic art, i.e. depicting the Icelandic nature and landscape, and thus artists became divided into factions.⁷⁰⁶ Whether in literature or art, this was a revolution in form, both for the atom poets and the abstract painters, and the same applied to other art disciplines where modernism began making inroads, i.e. in music, architecture, drama and film. Literary scholar Dagný Kristjánsdóttir expresses it such that the painters had to a great extent taken on the modernist bang before the atom poets but nonetheless, then as before, it was the discourse on literature that was the centre of attention, with writer Laxness as the highest Pope.⁷⁰⁷ And as such, and similarly, he had a great influence on the discourse on art in the 1940s and 1950s.

As a matter of fact, it was not just Svavar Guðnason who had received praise for his work abroad in 1944 and 1945. On the occasion of Nína Tryggvadóttir's solo exhibition in the *New Art Circle* in New York in November 1945, many foreign newspapers published positive reviews of her art. Nína was the first Icelander to hold a solo exhibition of her paintings in New York, but prior to that Nína Sæmundsson had held the first solo exhibition of sculptures by an Icelander in New York more than a decade before. *Morgunblaðið* reports that in the review by *The New York Times*, it is noted that Nína Tryggvadóttir had shown "semi-expressionist, semi-abstract paintings, masculine in vigor ... So forceful is the work that it is difficult to identify it as work of a woman artist, a golden-haired young girl. The work reveals an individual color sense and personal dynamic approach". According to *Art Digest*, Nína Tryggvadóttir shows "an original approach to the material and unusual sentiments". There, it says that with this "daughter

⁷⁰⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, "Nokkur orð um sýningu Svavars Guðnasonar", *Þjóðviljinn*, August 28, 1945, 3.

⁷⁰⁶ Þröstur Helgason, *Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur mótternismi*, 9–13.

⁷⁰⁷ Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, *Kona verður til*, 382. Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, "'Konan er ekki til', segja þeir'", in *Sögur af háaloftinu: sagðar Helgu Kress 21. september 1989*, eds. Ástráður Eysteinnsson et al. (Reykjavík: 1990), 16–22. Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, "Konur og listsköpun", 7–14.

of Iceland, Tryggvadóttir”, the most abstract and half-abstract paintings and still lifes are found. She “is not cowardly with the colours, uses them liberally and wisely, creates space and form with daring brush strokes”. Reference in *Morgunblaðið* is also made in the article to the coverage in *The New Yorker*, which said that her works “are more closely related to the leaders of German expressionism, including colour moderation in emotions”, which the writer of the article imagines “is a Nordic characteristic”.⁷⁰⁸

Here it is emphasized that the woman artist shows moderation in emotions, and she is praised especially for powerful masculine (and Nordic) paintings. Thus, the masculine in the works of a woman painter becomes a sign of quality and approval, and consequently a reference to boldness and originality which was rarely seen in the coverage of women’s art before abstraction appeared on the scene. On the other hand, Nína expressed herself through many different media over the next decades and notably, she designed the set and costumes for the ballet *The Soldier’s Tale* by Stravinsky at the MacMillan Theatre in New York in 1946.⁷⁰⁹

In the summer of 1946, Nína moved back to Iceland and that autumn she held an exhibition at Listamannaskálinn gallery in Reykjavík. *Þjóðviljinn* said that the “impressive Icelandic woman artist” will open a painting exhibition in Listamannaskálinn gallery after a three-year sojourn in the USA, where she received great praise from known critics for her art works. Nína belongs to a group of “our most original artists of the younger generation. Her works are magnificent, original and rich in content. They are the fruits of great talent, efficiency and perfect understanding of the cultural value of contemporary art. Those who wish to discover what is happening in the contemporary art world should not fail to see Nína Tryggvadóttir’s painting exhibition”.⁷¹⁰

Svavar Guðnason took part in an annual collective *Autumn exhibition* of abstract painters, *Høstudstillingen*, in Copenhagen in 1948 and on that occasion an interview was taken with him for *Þjóðviljinn*. Svavar says that he is now considered one of the leading abstract painters in Denmark, “but that movement stands highest there of all the Nordic countries and even further afield”.⁷¹¹ The interview with Svavar was accompanied by translated comments

⁷⁰⁸ “Lofsamleg ummæli New York-blaðanna um málverk Nínu Tryggvadóttur”, *Þjóðviljinn*, January 30, 1946, 5 and 7. The article in *The New York Times* is written by Howard Devree, “Strangers within our gates”, (November 11, 1945, 51). Devree talks about “masculine vigor”, and says that Nína’s work is so forceful, “that it is difficult to identify it with J.B. Neumann’s [the owner of the gallery] latest discovery in person, who turns out to be “Tryggvi’s daughter—a golden-haired young girl!”.

⁷⁰⁹ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að þjóna sannleikanum: Um list Nínu Tryggvadóttur”, 49.

⁷¹⁰ “Nína Tryggvadóttir opnar málverkasýningu”, *Þjóðviljinn*, September 26, 1946, 1 and 8.

⁷¹¹ “Það er náttúrulegt fyrir listamanninn að ganga í lið með því sem er nýskapandi. Viðtal við Svavar Guðnason sem hefur hlotið mjög lofsamlega dóma í dönskum blöðum”, *Þjóðviljinn*, January 20, 1948, 5.

from Danish newspapers on the collective exhibition and Svavar's works, including from *Politiken*, which said that works by Carl-Henning Pedersen and Svavar Guðnason have the "greatest effect." The "masculine paintings" by Svavar are described, and similarly the paper *København* said Svavar's works "radiate with masculine prowess and power. The colours are strong and pure, always beautifully coordinated without any emotionality".

As before, the masculine vigour and power, the strong and pure colours, are the opposite of female emotionality. The painting, as Griselda Pollock argues, becomes "privileged in modernist discourse as *the* most ambitious and significant art form because of its combination of body and trace, which secure by metonymy the presence of the artists".⁷¹² The masculine archetype is not least related to American abstract expressionism in the 1940s and the myth of artist Jackson Pollock. As argued by Andrew Perchuk, Pollock's dripping style in paintings became a metaphor for masculinity.⁷¹³ Drawing on the work of French philosopher Sarah Kofman, Griselda Pollock argues that the "cult of the hero" is aligned with "the first ego ideal, the father" and a woman artist cannot so easily fulfil "the paternal-heroic role of ego ideal". The "grandes figures" of modernism are all men: the high-modernist culture is defined as masculine.⁷¹⁴

To "paint like a man" makes Nina more eligible on the art scene, both in Iceland and abroad. Furthermore, in Iceland her friendship with the likes of Þorvaldur Skúlason, Svavar Guðnason and Laxness weighed heavily from the time she was a frequent visitor to Unuhús in the mid 1930s and 1940s. This group stood united through the artists' disputes during the war years, and has had a great influence on how she has been discussed in Iceland: one could say that this is the first time that a woman artist gets so much coverage—which is also positive—in Icelandic newspapers and periodicals. Certainly this puts the above-mentioned, entrenched definitions on originality, ingenuity and gender ideology in a certain disorder. Yet, as before,

⁷¹² Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History", *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, eds. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 142. It should be mentioned that an important exhibition was held in Iceland in 1948, when Danish artists associated with Helhesten in Denmark and Høstudstillingen showed their works in the Listamannaskálinn gallery and were thus a powerful addition to Icelandic abstract artists (Svavar Guðnason with his friends, namely Else Alfelt, Asger Jorn, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Ejler Bille, Richard Mortensen and Robert Jacobsen). Jón Proppé, "Abstraktið kemur til Íslands", 52–65. Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson argues that this movement must be regarded as the first avant-garde in the visual arts in Iceland. Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, "The Birth of a Vanguard. Icelandic art 1940–1950", *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1925–1950*, ed. Benedikt Hjartarson et al. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 272–286.

⁷¹³ Andrew Perchuk, "Pollock och efterkrigstidens maskulinitet", *Den maskulina mystiken: konst, kön och modernitet*, ed. Anna Lena Lindberg (Lund: Studentlitteratur AB, 2002), 169–192.

⁷¹⁴ Griselda Pollock, "The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women", 29–55.

even if women artists were mentioned in the mainstream public press, they were rather the exception than the rule. The discourse on the arts became as gendered as ever.

4.1.2. *Avant-gardism, abstraction and art education*

If few women had pursued visual arts before the war, the same applied as in the postwar years: boldness, courage and support were most important, and if not support from the immediate vicinity then stipends from the State. Increased education of women in the arts and the number of them in the late 1940s and 1950s led to more visibility of women in the art scene in Iceland, including in exhibitions that marked a watershed in Icelandic art history with the introduction of abstract and geometric art. But although they were certainly more accepted in abstraction, as it was not as easy to associate the works with femininity, the concept of avant-gardism was masculine and in the spirit of the gendered discourse that was characteristic of the previous decades.

In 1946, the Icelandic government allocated 141 study grants (of which 29 went to women), and 13 of which went to the arts (of which 4 went to women).⁷¹⁵ One man got a grant to study art history at the University of Copenhagen, Björn Th. Björnsson, but he had already studied art history at universities in Edinburgh, London and Gothenburg (without a grant). A year later, Selma Jónsdóttir received a grant to study art history in the USA.⁷¹⁶ Two years later, in the spring of 1948, Selma held three lectures on modern art on behalf of the *Association of Icelandic Leisure Painters* (i. Félag íslenskra frístundamálara). Selma's first lecture mostly discussed the history of art from the days of the Egyptians to the present time of modern art.⁷¹⁷ And in autumn, Björn Th. Björnsson held public lectures on art history, including on Icelandic art in the Middle Ages on behalf of the *Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts*.⁷¹⁸ These were very well received and were considered a novelty, while public interest in art had grown stronger.

⁷¹⁵ “Námsstyrkir mentamálaráðs: 350 þúsund krónum skift milli 141 manns—225 manns sóttu um styrki”, *Morgunblaðið*, April 13, 1946, 2 and 12. The grants were split into “new grants” and “continuing grants”, and here they are combined. The four women artists were Guðrún R. Sigurðardóttir, Nína Tryggvadóttir and María H. Ólafsdóttir (in painting) and Kolbrún Jónsdóttir (in sculpture). In April 1947, of 144 there were 27 women who received a grant. In art there were 11 recipients (of whom three were women: Guðrún R. Sigurðardóttir, Kolbrún Jónsdóttir and María H. Ólafsdóttir) and in art history, Selma Jónsdóttir and Björn Th. Björnsson. See, “144 nemendur fá styrki frá Mentamálaráði”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 9, 1947, 5 and 12.

⁷¹⁶ Jón Proppé, “Abstraktið kemur til Íslands”, 22–24.

⁷¹⁷ “Selma Jónsdóttir, listfræðingur, flytur fyrirlestra um nútímalist”, *Fálkinn*, Mars 26, 1948, 3.

⁷¹⁸ “Stórmerkilegir fyrirlestrar um íslenska list”, *Vikan*, 11 no. 40 (1948), 15. It says here that these “extremely remarkable lectures on Icelandic art” show that “Icelandic art has been continuous and in organic development from as far back as the settlement until past the Reformation”.

Until then, the discourse on art had almost entirely been shaped by the writing of public intellectuals, male artists and published writers, along with self-appointed critics from the ranks of (male) newspaper readers. Knowledge and scholarly discourse on international art history thus progressed with the arrival of H.H Arnason, as discussed in Chapter III, and with Selma and Björn.

When Second World War broke out, Europe closed off and the USA became the only option for Icelandic art students besides Denmark. The *Association of Icelandic Leisure Painters* had laid the foundation for the establishment of a private art school in 1946, and Reykjavík School of Art was founded in 1947. This was another turning point in Iceland, yet young artists craved for study overseas at a time when the country had finally opened after the isolation of the war.⁷¹⁹ Paris now had great attraction for young Icelanders and became the capital of abstract art, from “lyrical abstraction” to the “purest” geometric abstraction. During the period 1947–1957, the following Icelandic artists were in Paris for longer or shorter periods, although this list is by no means exhaustive: Hörður Ágústsson, Gerður Helgadóttir, Eiríkur Smith, Benedikt Gunnarsson, Guðmunda Andrésdóttir, Valgerður Hafstað, Hafsteinn Austmann, Nína Tryggvadóttir, Þorvaldur Skúlason, Valtýr Pétursson, Þorsteinn Þorsteinsson, Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, Jóhannes Jóhannesson, Guðmundur Benediktsson, Sverrir Haraldsson and Kjartan Guðjónsson. The artists were familiar with contemporary art periodicals such as *Cimaise* and *Art d’aujourd’hui*, and many frequented Galerie Denise René in Paris and followed the group of artists that formed around it. The group was also familiar with the writings of art critics and the theorists of geometric abstraction, such as Léon Degand who wrote, among other things, *Témoignage pour l’art abstrait* (1952).⁷²⁰

So several Icelandic women artists were among those who went to Paris, and in fact there was a sizeable group of women artists engaged in abstract art in Paris, at the time that Denise René, Lydia Conti, Colette Allendy and Florence Bank ran the main art galleries in Paris that exhibited contemporary art. It is thus understandable that an unknown author particularly mentioned the visibility of women artists in an article in *Le Rayonnement des arts* (1949): “We do not know very well why, but it is a fact: the fair sex has a weakness for abstract art.”⁷²¹

⁷¹⁹ Anna Ólafsdóttir Björnsson, *Myndlistaskólinn í Reykjavík 1947–1987* (Reykjavík: Myndlistaskólinn í Reykjavík, 1987).

⁷²⁰ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. III. Abstraktlist, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 73–75.

⁷²¹ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 71–72; Catherine Gonnard and Élisabeth Lebovici, *Femmes/artistes, artistes/femmes*, 258–266.

The radical, modernist September Exhibitions (i. Septembersýningarnar), in which many Icelanders participated who were either studying or had studied overseas and had been introduced to abstract art, started in Iceland in 1947. Initiated by Jóhannes Jóhannesson, Valtýr Pétursson, Kjartan Guðjónsson and Þorvaldur Skúlason, who wanted to present the new painting in Iceland, the first September Exhibition showed works by Jóhannes, Valtýr, Kjartan, Kristján Davíðsson and Nína Tryggvadóttir, as well as works by Gunnlaugur Scheving, Þorvaldur Skúlason, and the artist couple Tove Ólafsson (born Thomasen) and Sigurjón Ólafsson. The exhibition catalogue was in fact a *manifesto* and included, among other things, Kjartan's article on abstract art that was close to the nucleus of art itself, as the period of imitation was over.⁷²²

In 1948, Þorvaldur Skúlason wrote about the independence of the art work in the exhibition catalogue for the September Exhibition. This was the start of some kind of introduction and presentation of abstract art by the youngest painters. Þorvaldur defined the construction of an art work, or what is called "composition" in French, and which numerous artists would later title their artworks. According to Þorvaldur, one must not just focus on whether the work is about something, i.e. has some image from reality. Therefore, this was not a question of "motive" but rather about the "overall construction of works, rhythms and nuances of colour".⁷²³

These radical September Exhibitions numbered four in total (1947, 1948, 1951 and 1952) and reflect the rapid changes taking place in Icelandic art. The exhibition in 1947 aroused a great deal of attention and reactions from older artists and the general public, and also marks the beginning of the avant-garde style in Icelandic art, with unconditional declaration of style and innovative works (though from various directions) and dynamic discussion on art on the pages of the newspapers. Thus some were of the opinion that imitation art or a kind of pastiche was at issue, e.g. of Picasso's works, with poor results, and considered that the young artists were "on the wrong path".⁷²⁴ Two women artists, Nína Tryggvadóttir and the sculptor Tove Ólafsson, had works at the first exhibition. Nína's works were in the late-cubic style but Tove's works were figurative or objective and got more positive reviews.⁷²⁵ Kurt Zier compared the paintings of Nína and Kjartan Guðjónsson in his article, saying that Nína's works "lose their

⁷²² Jón Proppé, "Abstraktið kemur til Íslands", 52–59.

⁷²³ Þorvaldur Skúlason, "Formáli. Septembersýningin 1948", *Septembersýningin* (Reykjavík: 1948), 1–3.

⁷²⁴ Orri [Jón Þorleifsson], "Septembersýningin 1947", *Morgunblaðið*, September 12, 1947, 2; Guðmundur Gíslason Hagalín, "Leikmannsþankar um list IV. Líf og list", *Alþýðublaðið*, November 6, 1947, 3, 5 and 7.

⁷²⁵ Guðmundur Daníelsson, "Septembersýningin 1947", *Vísir*, September 12, 1947, 2.

impact” but Kjartan’s paintings “become even stronger”—stronger in construction and form. Zier was more positive in his attitude to Tove although he had not been able to discuss her works in his article because “space doesn’t allow it”.⁷²⁶ In the September Exhibition in 1948, Jón Þorleifsson is also well disposed to Tove though he points out that it would have adorned her work of a man and woman better if she had made a greater distinction in the bodily structure of man and woman, which “as we know are dissimilar”.⁷²⁷

The September Exhibition in 1948 also bore signs of the stylized figuration of late cubism. There were still strong reactions, but it did not arouse as much attention as the previous one. The next exhibition, held in 1951, was another turning point, with a new generation of Icelandic artists who, amongst other things, had studied in Paris and became a launching pad for geometric abstraction or concrete art, and who stood united behind a contemporary, new art. During the 1951 exhibition, it is specifically stated in the paper *Víðir* that Nína Tryggvadóttir is not exhibiting at the show and that this is “a great disappointment for her admirers. Where Nína is, something new and captivating always happens”.⁷²⁸ But on the other hand, at the next and last exhibition in 1952, geometric abstract works were displayed by Nína Tryggvadóttir and Guðmunda Andrésdóttir, along with Valtýr Pétursson, Þorvaldur Skúlason, Karl Kvaran, Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, Kjartan Guðjónsson and Sverrir Haraldsson.⁷²⁹ Yet not everyone agreed about the value of abstract art, and some found that the young artists were only imitating abstract paintings of foreign artists—which the others in turn said that the figurative painters did.⁷³⁰

If one looks at the visual arts in Iceland, the important participation and contribution of women artists to modernist art and the beginning of avant-gardism can be seen, along with their important contribution in the previous decades when women and men exhibited together. However, when interviews with the women artists themselves are examined, together with the attitude to women in general and the discourse on them in the mainstream press, a completely different reality comes to light.

⁷²⁶ Kurt Zier, “Septembersýning tíu listamanna”, *Þjóðviljinn*, September 10, 1947, 3-4.

⁷²⁷ Orri [Jón Þorleifsson], “Septembersýningin”, *Morgunblaðið*, October 24, 1948, 11-12.

⁷²⁸ J.R.E. “Hugleiðingar um Septembersýningu 1951”, *Víðir*, 23, no. 28 (1951), 3.

⁷²⁹ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 68-100.

⁷³⁰ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 101 and 107.

4.1.3. Women artists as parrêsias, and the continuity of textility

The housewife ideology had been predominant in cultural and political discourse during the interwar period, and these ideas lived on for some time; the mother and housewife roles were directed at young girls, and the 1950s have even been called the housewives' Golden Age. But on the other hand, democracy and the civil rights of women were in the firing line all over the world, and the idea about equal rights of men and women became more central in the discussion in Iceland as well as abroad. As Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir has pointed out, although women were still overlooked in Icelandic history—and the 1960s in particular are discussed in connection with the masculine political history—this period was by no means one of stagnation when it comes to women.⁷³¹ Various changes happened during this period, and the groundwork for ideas was laid that later provided the basis for the more radical second-wave feminism.

Women's periodicals continued, now more than ever, to reflect diverse voices. Lively discussions about women's rights and the contribution of women in the various fields of culture took place in the women's periodicals *Nýtt kvennablað* and *Melkorka*.⁷³² The publication of the latter started in 1944. It was a socialist feminist periodical with quite radical articles.⁷³³ Like all the women's periodicals, *Melkorka* regularly covered handicrafts as the heritage of women through the centuries, but also the innovations that were occurring in applied arts. Furthermore, *Melkorka* regularly published pictures of work by women artists on the front page, as *Nýtt kvennablað* had done before.

Despite great profusion in the publication of periodicals and discourse on culture and the arts, women's periodicals continued to be defined as *women's periodicals*, irrespective of the diversity of cultural material they offered, and they were never referred to in "general" cultural discourse. One of these was *Embla*, which started in 1945 and was also published in 1946 and 1949 (three issues in total), with the aim of printing women's writings and to present them in this special platform for women. The so-called "women's pages" started to appear fortnightly in newspapers and were not supposed to tout women, unlike the women's

⁷³¹ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, "1956. Hvað er þá orðið okkar starf?", *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga*, ed. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 277–341.

⁷³² Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, "1946. Vongóðar í nýju lýðveldi", 227–272.

⁷³³ The title of the periodical is symbolic, as *Melkorka* was an Irish female slave, purchased by Icelandic Viking Höskuldur in the tenth century, who transported her to Iceland, where she was then granted freedom. She had a strong character, like a number of women in the Icelandic sagas, and was in fact the daughter of an Irish king.

periodicals, but rather to reach women readers; yet again, these women's pages were separate from the mainstream male discourse of the papers.⁷³⁴

If more "women's voices" were heard in the newspapers, this was also the case for the radio as it was rare for women to be heard there. Starting in 1945, women from the *Icelandic Women's Association* and *Icelandic Women's Rights Association* directed their own weekly programme in the State Radio, in which many interviews with remarkable women occurred and highly diverse discussion took place.⁷³⁵ In the same way as with the newspapers, these were "women's programmes", and many considered them to be yet another marginal platform with a women's prefix, as was seen in the paper about radio programmes, *Útvarpstíðindi*, in 1945: that this is a good addition to the women's pages of the newspapers, and "if this goes well this arrangement will become popular with the women".⁷³⁶

It was not only in the field of painting and sculpture that women exhibited their artistic creations. As in previous decades, they continued to hold exhibitions in the field of handicrafts and needlework. These became common in the 1940s. In this respect, it was almost only the women's periodicals that could be relied upon for coverage. Many women taught needlework and exhibited their own work, but there were also exhibitions of the students of women teaching needlework.⁷³⁷ And it was not just paintings and sculptures of the male artists that were exhibited in the Listamannaskálinn gallery. Hildur Jónsdóttir was one of those who exhibited there in 1945: she had taken a needlework course in Copenhagen and started teaching in Iceland in 1940, and her student exhibitions were well attended.⁷³⁸ A Nordic exhibition of handicrafts and applied arts was held in Listamannaskálinn gallery in 1948 with an Icelandic section, while

⁷³⁴ These included "Móðir, kona, meyja" (e. Mother, woman, virgin) in *Dagur* in Akureyri, "Kvennasíðan" (e. The women's page) in *Þjóðviljinn*, "Kvenþjóðin og heimilið" (e. The women and the home) in *Morgunblaðið* as well as "Kvennasíða" (e. Women's page) in *Vísir* and "Kvennadálgur" (e. Women's column) in *Tíminn*. Everything with the woman prefix was lumped together: women's culture. Such women's pages could also be seen before 1945, such as in *Fálkinn* (1928–1933).

⁷³⁵ Women's voices were in the great minority in the early years of radio broadcasting of the Icelandic State Broadcasting Service (ISBS), which started in 1930. Between 1940 and 1945 there were no women's programmes scheduled and women's voices were heard less and less often on the radio. In the summer of 1945, a group of women from *Icelandic Women's Association* and *Icelandic Women's Rights Association* decided to encourage the board of the radio to schedule a women's programme on the radio; as a result, the women's programme "Kvennatíminn" was scheduled once a week, under the auspices of the two associations. See, Arnheiður Steinþórsdóttir, "Þegar konur lögðu undir sig útvarpið. Dagskrá Kvenfélagsambands Íslands og Kvenréttindafélags Íslands í Ríkisútvarpinu 1945–1954" (unpublished BA essay in History, University of Iceland, 2019).

⁷³⁶ "Hið helzta úr dagsskránni", *Útvarpstíðindi* 8, no. 12 (1945), 278–279.

⁷³⁷ Just to name a few of many exhibitions, both teacher and student exhibitions or solo exhibitions. "Hannyrðasýning" (the sisters from Brimnes, Hólmfríður Einarsdóttir and Sigurlaug Einarsdóttir), *Alþýðublaðið*, May 6, 1948, 3; "Hannyrðasýning", *Vísir*, June 9, 1948, 3; "Hannyrðasýning" (Júlíana M. Jónsdóttir), *Vísir*, May 5, 1948, 5.

⁷³⁸ "Hannyrðasýning Hildar Jónsdóttur", *Vikan* 11, no. 21 (1948), 10.

another Nordic handicraft exhibition also took place in the Listamannaskálinn gallery that same year but without participation by Icelanders.⁷³⁹ Although advertisements placed by the women themselves about their exhibitions appeared in the newspapers, those exhibitions were virtually only discussed in the women's periodicals.

One could argue that a translated article in *Melkorka* (1947) by Austrian doctor and psychotherapist Alfred Adler summed up in a nutshell the situation on the relationship between the sexes and the division of work between them: that everything that is wonderful or great has generally been given the masculine characteristic but the less important and incompetent the “feminine”.⁷⁴⁰ This corresponds completely with the women's rights stance and the spirit of the articles and attitudes that were appearing in *Melkorka*. Adler is best known for his theories and practice of individual psychology, on the importance of feelings of inferiority which according to him play a key role in personality development. Thus, feelings of superiority and inferiority were often gendered and inferiority was systematically embedded in women, despite their achievements in various fields. It is interesting to approach femininity with that aspect in mind, i.e. his connection with the deeply rooted inferiority complex observed quite often in interviews with women artists. Or as Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949: “For the individuals who seem to us most outstanding, who are honored with the name of genius, are those who have proposed to enact the fate of all humanity in their personal existences, and no woman has believed herself authorized to do this.”⁷⁴¹

In 1947, shortly after the start of the September Exhibition at which sculptor Tove Ólafsson exhibited her work *Mother and child*, she received praise for her art and exhibition in Copenhagen in Danish newspapers. *Morgunblaðið* reported on the exhibition of Tove and Jón Engilberts in Copenhagen: that Tove Ólafsson, “the wife of Sigurjón the sculptor”, and Jón Engilberts had sent art works to Denmark to an exhibition that the artists' association *Kammeraterne* held there. Tove, who was Danish and resident in Iceland with her Icelandic husband, is named like other foreign women artists married to Icelanders. Yet, Tove was the first woman and the first sculptor to become a member of the artists' association *Kammeraterne* in 1944 and she got very positive reviews in the Danish newspapers *Politiken* and *Berlingske*, as reported in *Morgunblaðið*. For instance, the art critic in *Politiken*, Walter Schwartz, said that

⁷³⁹ “Norræna listsýningin verður opnuð á morgun”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 3, 1948, 2; “Norræna heimilisiðnaðarsýningin”, *Vísir*, July 14, 1948, 4.

⁷⁴⁰ Alfred Adler, “Sambandið milli kynjanna” (transl. F.B.), *Melkorka*, 4, no. 1 (1947), 22–24.

⁷⁴¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Picador, 1988), 713.

he greatly admired “what a powerful female image the lady had managed to sculpt in Icelandic dolerite”.⁷⁴²

Despite positive reviews, Tove seemed to want to make little of it in an interview on this occasion in the Icelandic women’s periodical *Femina* (1947). There, Tove is questioned about her work and working methods, but at the end of the interview she asks the writer of the article: “But do you think that people are at all interested in seeing pictures of my works ... The number of people who appreciate this type of art is relatively few, I feel. And you shouldn’t maintain that this is only the case here. It is the same in Denmark. Yet things are changing fast.” The response of the article’s author is similar in tone but more grounded: “Yes, at least it doesn’t hurt to introduce readers to one of the few women who work with sculpture in this country.”⁷⁴³ A year later, in 1948, Tove got the Eckersberg Medal in her “native” country, at a very formal ceremony, for the dolerite sculpture *Mother and child*.⁷⁴⁴ This was an award associated with the father of Danish painting, and is the highest public award granted for art in Denmark.

A cover photo of a work by Júlíana Sveinsdóttir appeared in *Nýtt kvennablað* in 1947. The same issue contained an article on Júlíana, translated from Danish, by a painter and professor at the art academy in Copenhagen, Elof Risebye.⁷⁴⁵ Risebye, Júlíana’s former teacher and a friend, said in the article that Júlíana had managed “to become the best of Icelandic women in the painting field” and “a leading, respected woman” in Denmark. However, Júlíana was little known “to the general public in Iceland and has not obtained recognition”. Risebye was in many ways Júlíana’s benefactor in art but nevertheless, he did not go further than evaluate her art *within* the group of women artists.

As stated earlier, Júlíana had, as an artist, an honourable situation in Denmark, which consisted of her sitting on various boards, committees and councils. An article on Júlíana in *Morgunblaðið* (1947) said that she has received the highest annual award of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, the Eckersberg Medal, which she was awarded in 1947; at that time, only one Icelander had got that award, the sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson in 1939. Júlíana had gained accolade for a painting *From Vestmannaeyjar* (or Elliðaey, 1946) that she exhibited at the Spring Exhibition in Charlottenborg in 1947. Júlíana obtained the place of honour for her

⁷⁴² “Höggmyndir Tove Ólafsson fá góða dóma”, *Morgunblaðið*, November 1, 1947, 6; “Viðurkenning fyrir listaverk”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 6, 1948, 4.

⁷⁴³ “Fjörugrjótið er skemmtilegt viðfangs. Viðtal við frú Tove Ólafsson myndhöggvara”, *Femina*, 2, no.1 (1947), 3 and 14.

⁷⁴⁴ In addition, Tove Ólafsson also got the Tagea Brandt’s travel scholarship in 1960.

⁷⁴⁵ Elof Risebye, “Íslenzkur málari í Danmörku”, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 8, nos. 1–2 (1947), 1–5.

painting and aroused great interest, which also happened at the Autumn Exhibition in Copenhagen that same year.⁷⁴⁶ The Copenhagen papers praised her works at both exhibitions, even if reviews were limited to her gender. For instance, *Berlingske* said: “Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s art has made progress in recent years. With these paintings, she is equal to the best women painters in Denmark!”⁷⁴⁷

It is also mentioned in *Morgunblaðið* that Júlíana had received a travel scholarship, Tagea Brandt (d. Tagea Brandt Rejselegat), the year before, an award that was only presented to women who excelled in their field, like art or crafts. Moreover, the article said that Júlíana enjoyed great respect in Denmark, not just for her paintings but also for “her outstanding textiles”, and that she has drawn attention to Icelandic wool.⁷⁴⁸

Here, like in interviews with Júlíana later on, it can be seen that her art and contribution were more valued in Denmark than “at home”. Although Júlíana received high praise in Iceland, the contradictions are obvious when it comes to acknowledgement of the contribution of the Icelandic woman artist. In May 1949, Júlíana exhibited her works at the *Exhibition of the Nordic Artists Federation* in Copenhagen, but now with Danes in the Danish division instead of with Icelanders. In *Þjóðviljinn*, this is said to be because she had now become a Danish citizen.⁷⁴⁹ That fact appears to have hurt many. Two months before the 1949 exhibition, Júlíana is asked in an interview whether she is an Icelandic citizen or Danish; Júlíana stated she was primarily an Icelander but in fact would prefer to be titled “world citizen”.⁷⁵⁰ Which she most certainly was, both Icelandic and a world citizen, as she donated one of the mosaic works that were shown at her exhibition to the National Gallery.⁷⁵¹ In fact, in 1946, in order to receive the Tagea

⁷⁴⁶ V. St. [Valtýr Stefánsson] “Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, list hennar og vefnaður”, *Morgunblaðið*, December 24, 1947, 3. In the summer of 1946, Júlíana had notably painted at Þingvellir and showed the result in 1947 at the Autumn Exhibition in Charlottenborg. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, “Júlíana Sveinsdóttir: Endurfundur við landið”, *Tvær stærkar/To stærke. Júlíana Sveinsdóttir & Ruth Smith* (Tórshavn: Listasafn Føroya, 2015), 9–27.

⁷⁴⁷ The Danish State Museum of Art purchased the painting, which was the sixth painting by Júlíana. Hrafnhildur Schram, “Júlíana Sveinsdóttir: Endurfundur við landið”, 9–27.

⁷⁴⁸ V. St. [Valtýr Stefánsson], “Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, list hennar og vefnaður”, *Morgunblaðið*, December 24, 1947, 3.

⁷⁴⁹ “Íslenska sýningin þótti fersk og sterk”, *Þjóðviljinn*, May 29, 1949, 8.

⁷⁵⁰ “Íslenzki listmálarinn Júlíana Sveinsdóttir opnar málverkasýningu í dag”, *Þjóðviljinn*, August 27, 1949, 8.

⁷⁵¹ “Höfðingleg gjöf Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Þjóðviljinn*, September, 10, 1949, 8; Margrét Ólafsdóttir, “Listsýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Tíminn*, September 10, 1949, 4. Júlíana developed her creative textile art in a very interesting way. Júlíana wove three types of rug. Her rag carpets were woven from scrap cloth, in which she gains formidable skills in this branch of textiles. Her single-comb or flat textiles are rugs of different sizes, colours, and patterns, like the small ones—so-called *plaids*—for tables and walls and larger ones which commonly hung on walls. These flat textiles were woven from Icelandic wool and the patterns were always abstract (either organic forms or geometric). The third textile medium was *rya rugs*, which had a long history in the Nordic countries but were revived in Finland for textile art in the first half of the twentieth century. *Rya rugs* were disposed both on floors and walls. Icelandic wool and Icelandic natural dyes thus became Júlíana’s hallmark, along with a limited palette of colours, simple forms and abstract patterns. Even if Júlíana herself hotly denied being into abstract art,

Brandt's travel scholarship that was granted to Danish women who excelled, Júlíana had to apply for Danish citizenship, which was certainly a very sensitive issue.

In October 1949, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir held an exhibition in Listamannaskálinn gallery in Reykjavík. Besides paintings (such as landscape paintings from Þingvellir she made in 1946) and tapestries, two mosaic works were shown as well as coloured chalk drawings and watercolours.⁷⁵² Several women wrote about the exhibition and had nothing but praise for her, especially for her textile art and for her use and presentation of Icelandic wool both in Iceland and abroad, together with natural dyes that were made out of Icelandic plants. In the women's periodical *Nýtt kvennablað* it is stated that Icelandic women can be "proud of having such a representative of art and culture".⁷⁵³ Aðalbjörg Sigurðardóttir wrote that Júlíana has been known and recognized as an artist for a long time in Denmark and her textile art items had made their way to exhibitions all over Europe, by way of the *Society for the Promotion of Handicrafts*, and received extremely good reviews.⁷⁵⁴ It must be added here that Kjarval also wrote a praiseworthy review in *Vísir* on the exhibition and Júlíana's works, notably her paintings, some of which he considers almost abstract.⁷⁵⁵

The women's periodicals continued with their main role, which was to encourage other women, to lift them up, as the poem by Guðrún Stefánsdóttir in *Nýtt kvennablað* (1949) says. The poem was dedicated to the sculptor Nína Sæmundsson, who was now also a painter, as she had started to paint after the war. The last verse says:⁷⁵⁶

The art is to your country
gentle but strong,
it always owns Nína
and all her art works.

her textiles are definitely modernist and pioneering. See, Harpa Þórsdóttir, "Ofið úr íslenskri ull", *Júlíana Sveinsdóttir. Vefur lands og líta*, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2003), 39–55.

⁷⁵² Hrafnhildur Schram, "Júlíana Sveinsdóttir: Endurfundur við landið", 9–27.

⁷⁵³ "Listmálarinn Júlíana Sveinsdóttir", *Nýtt kvennablað*, 10, no. 6 (1949), 12.

⁷⁵⁴ Aðalbjörg Sigurðardóttir, "Sýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur", *Morgunblaðið*, September 8, 1949, 6.

⁷⁵⁵ Jóhannes S. Kjarval, "Málverkasýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur", *Vísir*, September 1, 1949, 5.

⁷⁵⁶ Guðrún Stefánsdóttir, "Nína Sæmundsson myndhöggvari—listmálarí", *Nýtt kvennablað*, 10, no. 8 (1949), 9. The poem in Icelandic is: "Listin er landi þínu, ljúf í senn og sterk, það eignar sér alltaf Nínu, og öll hennar listaverk".

Despite more visibility in the art genre in the 1950s, it is striking how many women artists were frightened of self-aggrandisement and made little of their feats and contributions, although the women's papers tried to make them more visible. An article on three women artists appeared in the hard-hitting women's periodical *19. júní* (1952), the annual journal of the *Icelandic Women's Rights Association*.⁷⁵⁷ One of the women featured was Vigdís Kristjánsdóttir and her exhibition of her gobelin-weaving works in Reykjavík, which was the first time that gobelin weaving done by an Icelandic woman was shown in Iceland.⁷⁵⁸ In the interview, Vigdís described how she had decided to go to Copenhagen to study in autumn 1946 and was accepted into the Royal Danish Academy; in 1949 she had three paintings at the Charlottenburg Exhibition. Vigdís then learned gobelin weaving from Thordis Eilertsen, who was the best-known Danish gobelin weaver, and her dream was to be able to work "without interruption on her art" and "perhaps give my countrymen something that is better to have than not have".

Interviews with women and the coverage they get is of a completely different kind in the women's periodicals than in the mainstream periodicals and newspapers, not only in quantity but in form. Drífa Viðar's interview with Nína Tryggvadóttir in *Melkorka* (1949) was actually the first interview of its kind on what it really means to be a woman artist. The interview is a dialogue between two women artists in which the experience of women in the arts field is examined. In the beginning of the interview, Drífa emphasizes that Nína is the first Icelandic woman to hold a solo exhibition of paintings in New York, in 1945, and has recently set up a second solo exhibition at the New Art Circle in New York. It says that Nína is now married to the artist Alfred L. Copley (also known as L. Alcopley) and is living in New York.⁷⁵⁹

In the article, Nína is asked point-blank whether it was more difficult for women than men to venture out into the art field. Yes, says Nína, "to begin with it's more difficult for women to be funded, and women don't get as high a salary as men if they want to earn a living as well as study...". But the greatest difficulties are "concealed in the old habits that society offered women".⁷⁶⁰ Questioned on whether men have less belief in women than men in the art scene, Nína says yes, that is so, and it is thought "that it is not worth it to fund a woman to study, as

⁷⁵⁷ The women's periodical *19. júní*, which had been published during the years 1910–1929, was not under the auspices of the *Women's Rights Association* until it began again in 1951.

⁷⁵⁸ S.J.M., "Þrjár listakonur", *19. júní*, 2, no. 1 (1952), 21–26.

⁷⁵⁹ Drífa Viðar, "Viðtal við Nínu", *Melkorka* 5, no. 3 (1949), 93. Drífa had also written an article on Nína Tryggvadóttir in *Melkorka* in 1946. See also, Drífa Viðar, "Listakonan Nína Tryggvadóttir", *Melkorka*, 3, no. 2 (1946), 50–52.

⁷⁶⁰ Drífa Viðar, "Viðtal við Nínu", *Melkorka* 5, no. 3 (1949), 93

her art career could be shorter. If she marries and has children it even stops, at least to begin with”. Women are “less secure in society. Men less often need to decide whether they should choose their home or their art, but the woman must eventually choose between them, and usually it is the home that is chosen”.

Drífa asked whether it is difficult to harmonize the housewife role and the art of painting. Nína thinks that it is possible, “but not to do both of them wholeheartedly”. Questioned as to whether the woman artist is not taken seriously in her home, Nína says that “the woman artist is perhaps taken seriously, if her art is profitable, but that is rare. Women are considered to have equal rights in society, but they do not have them ... A man and a woman who take the same art course do not have the same opportunities at all ... But this may change with time and with a more perfect society”.⁷⁶¹

Drífa and Nína were both actively emphasizing the working environment of women artists in the interview. Drífa had studied art at the Art Students League in New York in 1943, at the same time as Nína and Louisa Matthíasdóttir, and they became good friends. In fact, here it is possible to talk of a trio of modernist women artists who kept track of each other in their lives and their art.⁷⁶² Drífa also studied in a private school run by the artist Amédée Ozenfant in New York in 1943, and then with Hans Hofmann, as did Nína and Louisa. Her student works from the New York years 1943–1945 consisted of abstract paintings, which puts her in the group of the first Icelandic abstract painters.⁷⁶³ Drífa went to Paris and studied there with Fernand Léger (1946–1947). She was a multi-talented woman artist who, besides taking interviews and writing art and literary critiques for *Melkorka*, was also a poet and a writer, as well as a political campaigner.⁷⁶⁴

Thus, Drífa did not just know Nína herself well but also the art environment, the position of women artists, attitudes to them, their experiences and their obstacles, both overseas but especially in Iceland. In Drífa’s interview with Nína in *Melkorka*, an image is depicted of a widely travelled, independent woman artist, together with photos of her works, a description of her education and her exhibitions, and the words “that she is one of our leading artists”. But

⁷⁶¹ Drífa Viðar, “Viðtal við Nínu”, *Melkorka* 5, no. 3 (1949), 93.

⁷⁶² Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Ljóðræn abstraktlist”, *Íslensk listasaga. Frá síðari hluta 19. aldar til upphafs 21. aldar*, vol. III. Abstraktlist, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, Forlagið, 2011), 256–260; Jón Proppé, “Abstraktið kemur til Íslands”, 23–24.

⁷⁶³ Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, “Þriðja konan”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, October 19, 2009, 6–7.

⁷⁶⁴ See, Aðalheiður Valgeirsdóttir, “Drífa Viðar (1920–1971). Heimur lita og tóna”, *Drífa Viðar. Myndlistarsýning í safnaðarsal Neskirkju 16. ágúst–22 nóvember 2020*, 3–11. Shortly before Drífa Viðar died, long before her time, she held her first solo exhibition in Bogasalur in the National Museum, in 1971.

similarly, the image depicted here was of the dissimilar attitudes that prevailed about the woman artist on the one hand and the male artist on the other and thus one can say both through the questions of Drífa Viðar and the answers of Nína Tryggvadóttir, what was being discussed was an open letter, a direct call for a change. At the same time, it reflects a stronger awareness of gendered assumptions in the art scene.

When this interview was taken, Nína Tryggvadóttir had just arrived in Iceland in 1949 to fetch her belongings but was then later the same year called to the American embassy in Iceland and prevented from going back to the USA. However, she cannot resist the temptation to go back there, but is put in an isolation camp for immigrants at Ellis Island for several weeks before being deported back to Iceland. Around this time, there was a great deal of unrest surrounding the “red threat”, and Nína, an artist and reputed communist, was considered part of it. In 1952, she moved to Paris with her husband Copley and her young daughter, and it was not until 1959 that they could go back to New York.⁷⁶⁵ Therefore it could truly be said that she had been a victim of the Cold War in this foreign setting.

In order to compare interviews of a completely different nature and a different kind of approach in the women’s periodicals and the mainstream periodicals, another interview will be examined that was taken with Nína Tryggvadóttir for *Líf og list* (1950), which was edited by Gunnar Bergmann and Steingrímur Sigurðsson.⁷⁶⁶ Here, Nína is a representative—or rather, a supporter—of contemporary art which underlines the aesthetic definition of the art work and the new approach in the spirit of abstract art. Nína says that the artist must not “be isolated from the people and the nation”, and that the art of painting is like literature, “extremely accurate science, and all art is in close contact with society at any given time. It is thus completely unsatisfactory to paint only the exterior appearance of the objects, but not mention at all the mysterious secrecy that lies within them ... The painting, the impartial art, should live its own life, without being an imitation”.

The abstract art that some call “blotch painting”, says Nína, “and even worse, exists because people are looking for something else in the pictures, which doesn’t exist there, and

⁷⁶⁵ Hrafnhildur Schram, “Nína Tryggvadóttir. Líf hennar og list”, *Nína í krafti og birtu*, ed. Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1982), 30; Jón Proppé, “Abstraktið kemur til Íslands”, 58. It has been pointed out that Nína was refused a visa on political grounds, at the time of the McCarthyist witch-hunts, which was related to the fact that she had written a children’s book (*Fljúgandi fiskisaga*) which was seen as a criticism of the US naval air base in Iceland. After an attempt to go New York and days in detention, she was deported to Iceland, where she stayed for two years. See, Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að þjóna sannleikanum: Um list Nínu Tryggvadóttur”, 37–56.

⁷⁶⁶ ““Málverk á að lifa sínu eigin lífi”. Viðtal við Nínu Tryggvadóttur, listmálara”, *Líf og list*, 1, no. 4 (1950), 3–6.

become disappointed when they don't find it". When Nína is asked about how she feels about contemporary art in general, she replies: "One could say that the paintings of our time are painted more spontaneously than according to a plan. Of course, people often go off course in their search, but as with the Viking Leifur the Lucky (Leif Erikson, Leifur heppni) when he found a new continent when he intended to go to Greenland, a new world sometimes opens up to a person, without the person having intended to leave the old one. And a person never settles in new countries (i. nemur ný lönd), unless the person dares to venture out to sea!"⁷⁶⁷

It is impossible not to see the connection with her earlier interview on the position of women artists in the paper *Melkorka* the year before, which was so radical and personal. Here, Nína does not talk in a radical way on the hindrances and gender inequality that prevails in the art world, and Nína as a person does not come forward here; rather, the questions that are directed at her are general, about the status of modern art and especially Icelandic art, in order to get her agreement that "Icelandic art" is on the right track.

Nína Tryggvadóttir's affirmation that artists must "settle" in new territories may at first seem to take on and maintain the male-oriented national discourse on art in Iceland. Here it is worth pointing out a few particulars that pinpoint the opposite. Firstly, Nína is a woman who used the androcentric wording "to settle", or exploring new territories, which until then had only been used *about* pioneer male artists in Icelandic art and *by* men who wrote about them. Secondly, she imbued the word with the meaning—in a gender-neutral way—that in order for necessary and normal development to occur in art creation, artists must be open to new trends and styles instead of becoming stuck in one belief. A unilateral vision and discourse on Icelandic art, with its male settlers, could in fact signify claim and control of a certain artistic style (and gender), while Nína's new territories refers to introducing avant-gardism both in art and in ideas of gender.

Moreover, the interview showed how well Nína was versed in theoretical discourse on abstract art and furthermore, it was radical in that Nína criticized the one-sided approach and discourse on modern art in Iceland, with her "frank speaking" in a parrêsian way; women artists were exploring and innovating in various art forms and styles, and continued to work in the spirit of textility, as they had done ever since the end of the nineteenth century.

⁷⁶⁷ ""Málverk á að lifa sínu eigin lífi". Viðtal við Nínu Tryggvadóttur, listmálara"", *Líf og list*, 1, no. 4 (1950), 3–6.

4.1.4. *The National Museum, the genius and the friend of the guardian spirits*

It was 1950 when the National Museum of Iceland opened on Suðurgata in new premises and the National Gallery formally opened on the upper floor of the building in 1951.⁷⁶⁸ Art historian Selma Jónsdóttir became the director of the National Gallery after finishing her MA degree in art history at Columbia University in New York, where she worked on her master's thesis under the guidance of three notable art historians: Meyer Schapiro, Fritz Saxl, and Francis Wormald.⁷⁶⁹ Although the National Gallery was still under the National Museum, the opening of the gallery was an important step, as now greater emphasis was put on collecting contemporary art for the National Gallery and Selma was an educated art historian who had an open mind towards modern art, though art history of the Middle Ages was her area of expertise. Nonetheless, it is naturally remarkable that a woman should get this advancement and become the director of the gallery for the next decades, though it often proved difficult to be the only woman in a world of men.

At the inauguration ceremony, the third *Listamannaþing* (e. Artists' Assembly) was opened in the National Museum, as was a collective exhibition of Icelandic artists. In an article in the periodical *Líf og list* (1950), author and artist Steingrímur Sigurðsson discussed the retrospective exhibition of the works of Icelandic artists, which was supposed to provide an overview of the development of modern art in Icelandic in the twentieth century. The article defined Barbara Árnason's woodcuts in a very gendered way, saying they are "executed with feminine finesse and taste". Nína Tryggvadóttir was described as having "intelligent, exquisite artistic taste together with natural temperament" and he praised Júlíana Sveinsdóttir's works, saying that her art "must surely become long-lived, as she has managed to achieve a great deal in a simple form". Steingrímur described Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson as managing "to interpret the resignation of a poor woman who has experienced a lot in life in a lively, convincing manner

⁷⁶⁸ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, "Ég er alltaf að leita. Viðtal við dr. Selmu Jónsdóttur listfræðing", *19. júní*, 10, no. 1 (1960), 9–10. The National Gallery, which had been set up in 1916 as a division of the National Museum, later came under the control of the Education Board. The National Gallery does not get its own curator until 1950, in new premises; that year, Selma oversaw the Gallery and was then employed on a permanent basis as its director. However, the Education Board continued to govern issues relating to the National Gallery until 1961, when the National Gallery became an independent establishment.

⁷⁶⁹ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, "Ég er alltaf að leita. Viðtal við dr. Selmu Jónsdóttur listfræðing", 9–10. Schapiro, who was one of the pioneers of social art history and insisted on a social character within Marxist cultural theory practice, had published the work *On the Nature of Abstract Art*, which was first published in *Marxist Quarterly* (1937). Griselda Pollock, "Women, Art and Ideology: Questions for Feminist Art Historians (1983)", *Feminism, Art, Theory. An Anthology 1968–2014*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Malden MA, Oxford UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 150.

not dissimilar to that which the German artist Kollwitz uses for the fate of a poor, helpless common woman”. Here is an artist who shows “unusual artistic understanding of Icelandic folk belief”. And “although Mrs Karen is Danish in lineage, she manages to depict a totally Icelandic picture from the elf world of the legends”.⁷⁷⁰

Karen Agnete was the subject of similar remarks in the art criticism of Ragnar Jónsson (also called Ragnar í Smára) in the literary review *Helgafell* (1954). The article referred to a collective exhibition where Karen Agnete showed her work, along with others including her husband Sveinn Þórarinnsson; Ragnar said in the article that Karen Agnete had “strived to become an Icelandic artist” and some of the “wife’s” paintings on Icelandic nature, folklore and stories are “convincing” for a “foreigner”.⁷⁷¹ Which is a similar approach and wording as mentioned earlier for what was used for Danish–Icelandic women artists two decades earlier.

Another important cultural milestone in 1950 was the inauguration of a new, elegant National Theatre (i. Þjóðleikhús). On the occasion of the event, Lúðvíg Guðmundsson, the head of the Icelandic School of Arts and Crafts, donated to the National Theatre a dolerite sculpture, *Piltur og stúlka* (A boy and a girl, also known as *Maður og kona, or Man and woman*), by Tove Ólafsson, in the presence of a crowd of people, and the sculpture was installed in the theatre foyer. The work was later placed in a closed corridor of the theatre, contrary to the wishes of the donator of the work. The new location resulted in great rows, because it was considered a great disgrace for both the work and the artist herself.⁷⁷² Magnús Á. Árnason said that the art work was initially accepted with thanks, and thereby became the property of the nation, and that it was not up to the custodians of the National Theatre “to do what they like with the art work, and the least they can do is to return it”.⁷⁷³ The dispute ended such that the work was returned and Lúðvíg Guðmundsson then assigned it to the Reykjavík Art Board to do something about it.

Nonetheless, by 1950 it can be said that women artists were starting to be noticed to a certain extent in some cultural periodicals, such as *Líf og list*. For instance, there were

⁷⁷⁰ Steingrímur Sigurðsson, “Evrópusýning íslenzkrar myndlistar”, *Líf og list*, 1, no. 9 (1950), 3–11. That Kollwitz should be named here is understandable and the article’s author is doubtless referring to the exhibition of Kollwitz’s works that was held in 1950 in Gallery Ásmundarsalur in Reykjavík, which was organized by Gunnar Sigurðsson and Ásmundur Sveinsson. This consisted of almost 200 works that had done the rounds of the Nordic countries. As mentioned previously, Kollwitz’s art was discussed several times and work by her appeared in the women’s periodical *Nýja Konan* (e. The New Woman). See, Þóra Vigfúsdóttir, “Käthe Kollwitz”, *Melkorka*, 3, no. 1 (1946), 17–18.

⁷⁷¹ Ragnar Jónsson, “Sýning Nýja myndlistarfélagsins”, *Helgafell*, 6, no. 4 (1954), 40–44.

⁷⁷² Magnús Á. Árnason, “Tove Ólafsson og Þjóðleikhúsið”, *Þjóðviljinn*, December 28, 1954, 4.

⁷⁷³ “Listamannaþing”, *Líf og list*, 1, no. 2 (1950), 3–4.

illustrations by a young artist, Guðmunda Andrésdóttir, a short story by writer Svava Jakobsdóttir, and on the front covers of the papers there were drawings and photos of poets, writers and artists; Nína Tryggvadóttir was on the cover of one issue with an interview with her in 1950, but others were men, i.e. Laxness, Steinn Steinarr, Tómas Guðmundsson, Ásgrímur Jónsson and Jón Stefánsson.

However, it was an uphill struggle, when it came to women artists as cultural settlers—let it suffice to take a cross-section of the discourse in Iceland in 1950. That year, the fraternity of Icelandic modernism is solidified, e.g. in Laxness’s writings in a monograph on Kjarval published in 1950.⁷⁷⁴ As mentioned before, in the art world after the Second World War, the emphasis of collectors and museums was on the monographic approach that “reinforces a masculine narcissistic identification” and played a big role in the “cult of hero”.⁷⁷⁵ Laxness starts by honouring and emphasizing that the pictorial art had lived for centuries in the work of Icelandic needlewomen and the gap between the ancient art and the new “was bridged by nameless women” in the form of “cushion-covers, tapestries, saddle-cloths, altar frontals and fine choir-copes”. They should have “a place of honour in the history of world art”, even if their contribution was not appreciated in Iceland. Laxness emphasized that later movements did not reach Iceland “thanks to the country’s poverty”, its isolation and its “stupidity and sluggishness of response”, and thus Renaissance never made itself felt.

If emphasis was put on nameless foremothers now enjoying some special “place of honour”, it was not at all the case that they continue to be nameless, as the discussion and discourse on the genius and the master was, despite everything, a continuation of the discourse that took place with landscape paintings in previous decades. This is even more evident when the discourse by Laxness continues. Kjarval became the pupil of Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and Ásgrímur Jónsson, “pioneers in the land of a hitherto unknown pictorial art”. Those artists were “talented settlers in virgin country and their schooling was substantial enough for all that it was not *le dernier cri* in Paris”. Laxness said Kjarval is “an outstanding artist”, who “always reveals something of the genius”. He is “a pioneer and a blazer of new trails”. Along with his two elder contemporaries in art, Kjarval came back to this artistic wasteland, “discovered Iceland and settled it”, as far as modern painting is concerned. But Kjarval’s settlement “is so extensive that

⁷⁷⁴ Halldór Laxness, “Kjarval”, *Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1950), 5–28. The English translation of the text is by Alan E. Boucher, from where the citations here come, 29–51.

⁷⁷⁵ Griselda Pollock, “The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women”, 38–39.

had no other Icelandic painter existed in this century, Iceland would still have earned a place among the nations of the world in art, simply because he lived and worked here”.

Laxness finished his article on Kjarval with the words: “Jóhannes Kjarval has played a part in this conquest that will prompt later generations, no less than ourselves, to conclude that here a bosom friend of the guardian spirits of the land has been at work.”⁷⁷⁶ It is impossible not to relate those words also to those of Steingrímur Thorsteinsson some 85 years earlier, on Thorvaldsen in 1875. Furthermore, Laxness’s eulogy on Kjarval was in the spirit of the discourse on settlers, geniuses and pioneers who had become firmly established since 1900 with the true Icelandic landscape paintings.

Such attitudes on the Renaissance can also be seen in an article by Laxness, who had “set the tone” in *Þjóðviljinn* (1948). There, he said that Paris was the capital of contemporary art and Rome was now the capital of the past. European cultural history, and the so-called acknowledged and public aesthetics, was “yet another of the remains of the Renaissance” and its aesthetics and art “targeted at the aristocracy”, but the public in Western Europe had little interest “in the physical images of Greek gods and goddesses”, though it had proposed “the public scale of our future and still proposes it to unscrupulous reactionary arts’ universities and other stultified research institutes”.⁷⁷⁷

Not only did Paris become the only seat of contemporary art, which suited “the public” better, but rather the older art was only understandable to the educated upper class in the spirit of the Renaissance. Once again it was maintained that contemporary art is better suited to the common people than older art, and that abstraction was more to their liking, but as mentioned earlier, this was not at all the case, neither in Iceland nor in other places in Europe. In addition, as mentioned previously, the reception and development of modernism in Iceland from the 1930s had been marked by opposition and attacks, especially regarding nationalist conservatism and the growing emphasis of left-wing intellectuals of socialist realism.⁷⁷⁸ Furthermore, like the French art critic and writer Charles Estienne pointed out in an article in 1950, geometric abstraction had in fact become “academic”, a well-established style.⁷⁷⁹

⁷⁷⁶ Halldór Laxness, “Kjarval”, 5–28. See also, “Thorvaldsens-hátíðin. Mynd Alberts”, *Þjóðólfur*, November 24, 1875, 2–3.

⁷⁷⁷ Halldór Laxness, “List í Róm”, *Þjóðviljinn*, December 12, 1948, 7.

⁷⁷⁸ Þröstur Helgason, *Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur mótternismi*, 13.

⁷⁷⁹ Charles Estienne, *L’art abstrait, est-il un académisme?* Collection le cavalier d’épée (Paris: Éditions de Baune, 1950). See also, Serge Lemoine, *Art concret* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000), 13

But what is perhaps ironical is that what is reflected in Laxness's writings is in fact a return to the divine gift of the genius, without a need for teaching, in the spirit of Vasari from the Renaissance period, and the biographical writings in which ingenuity is innate. As mentioned earlier, Nanette Salomon has discussed this: the biographical writing on geniuses in a linear chain of events that was characteristic for art history writings in the 1950s.⁷⁸⁰ So even if one can draw the conclusion that a genius such as Thorvaldsen, with his connection to Rome and Neo-Classicism, is maybe *a dépassé* in Laxness's mind, and the Renaissance destructive to modern art, the discourse has not changed and is even more Vasarian than ever.⁷⁸¹

But the indication that Thorvaldsen did not have the same standing as before in public discourse appeared in an article in *Nýtt kvennablað* (1952) where it is said that the work *Móðurást* by Nína Sæmundsson is not sufficiently prominent in Reykjavík, and asked if it would not be right to move the statue south into Hljómskálagarður and be “in the vicinity of the statue by Albert Thorvaldsen”. It is in many ways a turning point that the article argues that Nína's work should be given a home beside the self-portrait of Thorvaldsen, as such would have been unthinkable previously. But on the other hand, in the 1950s everyone has forgotten Thorvaldsen, the Danish–Icelandic genius, and his self-portrait in Austurvöllur had been moved in 1931 to Hljómskálagarður Park, to the “Garden of the Forgotten” as it could be called. Tjarnargarður was also the ultimate home of the aforementioned work by Tove Ólafsson, *Piltur og stúlka*, which had been returned by the National Theatre.⁷⁸²

⁷⁸⁰ Nanette Salomon, “The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission”, 344–355.

⁷⁸¹ However, this is not universal and it should be mentioned here that writer Guðmundur Kamban wrote an article about Thorvaldsen in *Helgafell* (1954), where the main theme is that Thorvaldsen's father had been Icelandic but his mother Danish. Guðmundur said that in a newish publication that had been published about Thorvaldsen in Denmark, it had been maintained that he had “inherited his artistic endowments—from his mother. But why inherit it? The gift of genius does not get inherited”. Nevertheless, the article points out the decisive impacts that his father Gottskálk had had on Thorvaldsen's artistic creation and career. See, Guðmundur Kamban, “Bertel Thorvaldsen og faðir hans”, *Helgafell*, 6, nos. 1–2 (1954), 43–54.

⁷⁸² “Móðurást eftir Nínu Sæmundsson”, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 13, no. 3 (1952), 4.

4. 2. Modernist women and art (1950–1955)

4.2.1. Gerður Helgadóttir and Nína Tryggvadóttir

In Iceland, Gerður Helgadóttir was one of the modernists, a representative of the new contemporary art, and had received, along with Nína Tryggvadóttir, much more coverage in Paris and interest in her art creations overseas than any other Icelandic artist. Although they were discussed in the Icelandic papers, it seems that a certain awkwardness had surfaced with entrenched gender ideology in the arts, the feminine–masculine dichotomy, and fragments of old ideas about the master, originality and the genius in art.

Gerður Helgadóttir had exhibited with four other Icelanders—Guðmundur Elfásson, Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, Valtýr Pétursson and Hörður Ágústsson—at the first joint exhibition of Icelandic artists in Paris that took place at the *Galerie Saint-Placide* in 1950. Following on from this, the quintet exhibited in the esteemed joint exhibition *Salon de Mai*.⁷⁸³ Gerður at this time was only 22 years old, had studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence with Romano Romanelli in 1947, but had then gone to Paris in autumn 1949 to the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where she studied with the sculptor Ossip Zadkine and in 1950 started to take lessons at his private school in Paris.⁷⁸⁴ The writer Thor Vilhjálmsson, who wrote about the exhibition in *Þjóðvilinn* (1950), mentioned Gerður Helgadóttir, “daughter of composer Pálsson”, who is “very young and extremely hard-working”, but claimed that Guðmundur Elfásson was also studying with Zadkine and is “blessed with wonderful talents and the most likely to achieve great feats in his art genre”.⁷⁸⁵

Gerður Helgadóttir held her first solo exhibition in Reykjavík in 1952 in Listamannaskálinn gallery, which was a turning point in geometric modern sculpture in Iceland.⁷⁸⁶ Gerður had already held two important solo exhibitions in Paris by this time. The first one was in *Galerie Colette Allendy* in the spring of 1951, where she had moved from making cubist reliefs and sculptures in clay to entirely abstract art. Only one month later she started to make geometric iron sculptures painted in black. In her second solo exhibition in

⁷⁸³ Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, “Fréttir”, *Líf og list* 1, no. 3 (1950), 3 and 21.

⁷⁸⁴ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 94–95.

⁷⁸⁵ Thor Vilhjálmsson, “Íslenskt listsýning í París”, *Þjóðviljinn*, May 4, 1950, 5. As mentioned here, it would often be said during the following years that Gerður Helgadóttir was “the daughter of composer Helgi Pálsson”.

⁷⁸⁶ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að beisla tómið. Höggmyndalist Gerðar Helgadóttur”, *Gerður. Meistari glers og málna* (Kópavogur: Gerðarsafn, Listasafn Kópavogs, 2010), 9–25.

Galerie Arnaud, 1952, she showed those iron works for the first time; these included structures on the floor, on pedestals, but also mobiles hanging from the ceiling.

On Gerður's solo exhibition in Reykjavík, artist Hörður Ágústsson, who became influential in the field of art and wrote a lot about the arts and exhibitions in the 1950s, says that as an artist, she had been "acknowledged straight away at a young age" and that "was deserved". Her exhibition, and especially her last works, her geometric iron sculptures, "guarantees her the same seat amongst Icelandic sculptors that Valtýr [Pétursson] has amongst painters: she bodes new times".⁷⁸⁷ Gerður's exhibition attracted a lot of attention, as traditional works in the figurative style from her school years were exhibited as well as her ironworks. The artist Valtýr Pétursson, to whom Hörður refers, had become an art critic at *Morgunblaðið* and had nothing but praise for the exhibition and Gerður. He said: "The Viking nature and her hard work is an honour to the nation as a whole. Boldness and courage characterize her work, along with the charm of feminine consideration that only those who possess emotions and intuition are given. Her art is devoid of unnecessary meticulousness and speaks a purely pictorial language." There is a distinctive blend of the feminine and the masculine and it is hard to argue "charm" and "feminine consideration" in Gerður's iron sculptures, characteristics which must be considered contrary to former definitions of the Viking nature.⁷⁸⁸

This same year, 1952, a book on Gerður's work was published with an introduction by the poet Tómas Guðmundsson; this turned out to be the first book that was published about a woman artist in Iceland, although this is not mentioned in either the article or the book. In the introduction, Tómas said that the ancient pictorial art of Iceland was still much less known to the world than "the old literature which brought fame to our country". Icelandic art had been reborn during the present century in the new republic and was arousing "more and more attention in the eyes of the world".⁷⁸⁹ Tómas waxed eloquently about Gerður and described her as one of the "youngest and most remarkable representatives of progressive Icelandic contemporary art", using words that have not often been used previously about women artists, such as "brilliant gifts" and "her untiring efforts", and stated that those who get to "know the intelligence and diligence of this likeable woman artist will not miss the opportunity of following her art career".⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁷ Hörður Ágústsson, "Listsýningar veturinn 1952–3", *Vaki*, 2, no.1 (1953), 55–61.

⁷⁸⁸ Valtýr Pétursson, "Listsýning Gerðar", *Morgunblaðið*, September 25, 1952, 8.

⁷⁸⁹ Tómas Guðmundsson, "Formáli", *Gerður Helgadóttir: myndir. Sculpture. Nokkrar ljósmyndir af verkum úr brenndum leir, gipsi, steini og járn* (Reykjavík: Listsýn, 1952), 1.

⁷⁹⁰ "Tvær ungar listakonur", *19. júní*, 3, no. 1 (1953), 10–11.

In 1953, Hörður Ágústsson announced the formal arrival of geometric abstraction to Iceland, saying that now “a new period in Icelandic painting is beginning” with the exhibition of geometric artists in the winter of 1952–1953. Hörður wrote that undoubtedly, Valtýr Pétursson deserves “the honour of being a pioneer of the new attitudes in painting”, referring to the fact that Valtýr had exhibited several paintings at the September Exhibition in 1951, which were considered to be “the first sign or messenger of the new pure, abstract art”. Hörður then discussed Karl Kvaran and “the treatment of his wonderful exhibition” that he had held. Hörður said “that never had such a gifted young painter, who appears for the first time, received such bad reception”. It is not least annoying because of that which “Karl has above the rest of us: to not offer an exhibition before he can show [that he is] a solid, independent artist”. It is therefore fairly clear from Hörður’s writings that geometric abstraction still meets little understanding from exhibition visitors, despite everything, and the revolution was not over in art politics.

Perhaps it also says more than many words about the peak of the introduction of geometric abstraction that in 1953, an ambitious exhibition was held in the gallery Listvínasalurinn: a collective exhibition of French contemporary art, directed by Hörður Ágústsson.⁷⁹¹ The gallery Listvínasalurinn had been founded in 1951 by Björn Th. Björnsson and Gunnar Sigurðsson in the building occupied by sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson at Freyjugata 41.⁷⁹² Not only was this the first time that an exhibition came straight from Paris, but the older masters were shown equally with the newest trends and movements. The exhibition displayed drawings, lithographs and laminage, works by great artists, artists who had studied in Paris and were the representatives of new attitudes and trends in art history, i.e. works by Kandinsky, Herbin, Jean Arp, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. However, in this respect the most noteworthy aspect was that work could be seen by artists who at that time were big names in Paris: those who were consecrated in the Galerie Denise René, for example Dewasne, Deyrolle and Vasarely and Danish artists such as Robert Jacobsen and Richard Mortensen, who played a large part in presenting concrete art to the Nordic countries.⁷⁹³

Hörður Ágústsson wrote a long, informative article on the art of painting in the periodical *Vaki* (1952), tracing the influence of social makeup and progress on artistic

⁷⁹¹ The artist Hörður Ágústsson directed this initiative though many others took part. The gallery Listvínasalurinn became an important venue for geometric abstract art in general, and its leading figures also wanted to provide information on art and culture in general—to be in charge as a grassroots movement.

⁷⁹² Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 79.

⁷⁹³ Hörður Ágústsson, “Listsýningar veturinn 1952–3”, *Vaki* 2, no. 1 (1953), 60.

creation.⁷⁹⁴ This was an enlightening and instructive article for the general public, covering art history far and wide in a legible way, describing how art history had developed in the direction of contemporary art, i.e. abstractionism, and how such art should be approached, as it was so different to older trends and movements. The article includes pictures of works by foreign and Icelandic artists, though none by women artists. The same applies to art as to “other phenomena of society at that time: all shackles of enslavement are untied and new growth appears in the life of the nation, along with better economic conditions and a growing sense of independence”.⁷⁹⁵

Hence, in spite of developments in art and women’s rights, it cannot be ignored that due to more male-dominated and gendered discourse in the mainstream press and periodicals on art and cultural matters in general, the women’s periodicals had to react even more strongly. In the 1950s, in *19. júní*, like in *Melkorka*, writers, poets and women artists were featured on a regular basis with descriptions of their education, lists of exhibitions and pictures of their work. The words used in the discourse in the women’s periodicals on such matters were completely different to those in mainstream papers: words such as gifted, intelligent and hard-working women artists, originality and pioneer role, or gender-neutral words. Reference was made to positive foreign comments about women artists when they were exhibiting overseas—comments that did not often make their way into other discourse in Iceland.

A good example is an article in *19. júní* (1953) which discusses two young women sculptors, Gerður Helgadóttir and Ólöf Pálsdóttir. On Gerður, the article said that she is greatly sought after for exhibiting her works, but that she can not accept all the invitations. The article also recounted the praiseworthy comments on Gerður’s works at the exhibition in Brussels in 1953, but that year Gerður exhibited her work also at important solo exhibitions in France and Germany. The artist Ólöf Pálsdóttir “seems to intend to achieve unusually rapid success in her art career”, which can be seen in the fact that one of her work that was shown recently at the Charlottenborg Exhibition in Copenhagen had appeared in the Danish papers, and one of Ólöf’s works shown there was especially noted such that it “took one pleasantly by surprise” that the artist is “independent, full of ideas and daring in her art”.⁷⁹⁶

This same article in *19. júní* also said that Gerður was one of the many artists to send a proposal for “a memorial to an unknown political prisoner” in London in 1952 and became one

⁷⁹⁴ Hörður Ágústsson, “Um málalíst”, *Vaki*, 1, no. 1 (1952), 6–36.

⁷⁹⁵ Hörður Ágústsson, “Um málalíst”, *Vaki*, 1, no. 1 (1952), 33.

⁷⁹⁶ “Tvær ungar listakonur”, *19. júní*, 3, no. 1 (1953), 10–11.

of the 68 who received a prize for her work. As a result, Gerður got to exhibit her work at a large joint exhibition in the Tate Gallery, along with other prize winners. In fact, the newspaper *Vísir* (1952) had reported this competition such that four Icelandic sculptors had sent pictures to the competition that was organized by the London ICA (The Institute of Contemporary Arts). These sculptors were the esteemed older artists Ásmundur Sveinsson, Sigurjón Ólafsson and Guðmundur Einarsson and the young Gerður Helgadóttir, and the result thus perhaps embarrassing because she was awarded.⁷⁹⁷ A tiny paragraph can be found in *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* on the award of the young Gerður Helgadóttir, but she received more coverage in *19. júní*.⁷⁹⁸

With her first solo exhibition here, it is clear that Gerður would later have a great influence on sculpture in Iceland during the years that followed, both on younger and older sculptors. In the 1940s, Ásmundur Sveinsson had become distanced from figurative and nature-related art and in 1951 changes started occurring in his work that could be directly traced to the influence of Gerður on contemporary art in Iceland and abroad, such that he began working with metal and retreated from wood and stone.⁷⁹⁹ But overall, one must also remember that the influence of her style that she “brought home” was a turning point in the introduction of abstract art in dissimilar art forms. However, in 1953, at the same time as French contemporary art is shown in Iceland, an article by the well-known instigator of geometric art in Paris, Michel Seuphor, is published in the French periodical *Art d’aujourd’hui*, in the edition dedicated to art in the Nordic countries.⁸⁰⁰ Seuphor was previously discussed in connection with the Icelandic woman artist Ingibjörg Stein Bjarnason, abstractionism in Paris and the group *Cercle et carré* at the beginning of the 1930s. Talking about Gerður Helgadóttir’s art, Seuphor says that Gerður Helgadóttir is very well known in Paris, and that her “intelligent sculptures” have been exhibited in *Galerie Arnaud* and in the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*.⁸⁰¹

The intensity of abstract art in the discourse on art at that time is perhaps best worded by Seuphor, who wrote in *Art d’aujourd’hui* (1954) that abstraction has become an international language “that has extended to all countries and created a pictorial brotherhood, some kind of new society of believers, whereby the doctrine consists of the freedom to express oneself in the

⁷⁹⁷ “Íslenzkir listamenn taka þátt í alþjóðalistkeppni”, *Vísir*, December 11, 1952, 1.

⁷⁹⁸ *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, May 10, 1953, 284. There, it says: “Gerður Helgadóttir sculptor participated in a world competition for a monument for the unknown political prisoner and got a prize for it. The competitors numbered about 3,500 in total.”

⁷⁹⁹ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 95–99.

⁸⁰⁰ “Frönsk grein um unga, íslenska málara”, *Morgunblaðið*, January 7, 1953, 2.

⁸⁰¹ Michel Seuphor, “Islande”, *Art d’aujourd’hui*, 4, no. 7 (October–November, 1953), 16–17.

best way possible”. These words from Seuphor’s article appeared in *Morgunblaðið* (1954) in a translated coverage of the praiseworthy reviews that Nína Tryggvadóttir had got when she exhibited her abstract works in 1954 in the *Galerie Colette Allendy* in Paris, where she was living at the time. Seuphor said: “Her art is pure and powerful. Nína Tryggvadóttir is undoubtedly one of the most noticeable personalities in the art of her nation. I am moved by her vibrant art. Her grandeur, health and strength evoke complete trust.”⁸⁰² In this article in *Morgunblaðið* there is also a discussion about the good review of Nína Tryggvadóttir’s exhibition that appeared in the prestigious art periodical *Cimaise* (1954), by the very important art critic of the 1950s in Paris, Roger van Gindertael.⁸⁰³

Out of all the many painters who are exhibiting in Paris at this time, Gindertael named Nína Tryggvadóttir and also another woman artist, Alexandra Lubchansky. Without doubt, “Tryggvadóttir is closer to the fundamental rules of abstraction than the other two. They seem to be natural for her”.⁸⁰⁴ This is intriguing and rarely seen, in that Gindertael names two women artists as the most remarkable artists in Paris, in the harsh competition in that city. The same article in *Morgunblaðið* talked about the review in the March–April edition of *Art d’aujourd’hui* (1954) by the German art historian Herta Wescher, an expert and pioneer in discussion of collage as an art form, on Nína Tryggvadóttir’s collage in which the unconscious and the meditative are intertwined.⁸⁰⁵

Hence, both Nína and Gerður had important benefactors among the influential male artists and art critics abroad. There was continued coverage on the praiseworthy foreign reviews of the two women artists and in *Helgafell* (1955) it was about Gerður Helgadóttir, who had recently had an exhibition of her works in Paris. The article said that French art historian Michel Ragon had written about her in the periodical *Cimaise* and said that an artist who chooses to work out of iron puts her/himself in all sorts of danger and plays “the role of the magician’s student”. The young artist lets “the sparks fly” and it “is almost strange to see this small young woman, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, amongst all the tools that she uses. I don’t know any other woman sculptor who dares to tackle iron, yet Gerður looks very gentle”.⁸⁰⁶ It also said there that “the city of Paris has not wanted to be left behind either. It has already taken Gerður into its fold and undoubtedly considers her to be one of its best sculptors”. Here, despite

⁸⁰² “Málverk Nínu Tryggvadóttur góða dóma í París”, *Morgunblaðið* [II, aukablað], November 11, 1954, 18.

⁸⁰³ “Málverk Nínu Tryggvadóttur góða dóma í París”, *Morgunblaðið* [II, aukablað], November 11, 1954, 18.

⁸⁰⁴ “Málverk Nínu Tryggvadóttur góða dóma í París”, *Morgunblaðið* [II, aukablað], November 11, 1954, 18.

⁸⁰⁵ “Málverk Nínu Tryggvadóttur góða dóma í París”, *Morgunblaðið* [II, aukablað], November 11, 1954, 18.

⁸⁰⁶ “Galdraneminn Gerður (M. Ragon)”, *Helgafell*, 7, no. 1 (1955), 127–128.

extolling the Icelandic artist, there are still problems with the masculine and feminine in art. On the one hand, Gerður is a magnificent exception to her gender, a daring artist, while on the other she is gentle, and hence feminine and *petite*.

4.2.2. *The National Collection and grants for granted (1945–1960)*

During the 1950s, Icelandic women artists continue as never before to study and exhibit their work overseas, in known and esteemed galleries, both in joint exhibitions and solo exhibitions. However, women's education and activity in the public arena did not appear in changed discourse in the mainstream press, but did so in a more active way in the marginal women's periodicals. When looking at the position of art, and especially women, it is worth keeping the following in mind in terms of inequalities in the funding system and purchase of art works. Firstly, it was the provision of grants in Iceland that seldom ended in the hands of women; secondly, few works were bought from them; and thirdly, in the all-encompassing male art scene, the gendered discourse in Iceland was, as argued here, an underlying cause of synergetic aspects, notably the two aforementioned factors.

In the above interview with Drífa Viðar in *Melkorka*, Nína Tryggvadóttir had pointed at the fact that women had more difficulty getting grants than men did. What must also be noted here is that when women got grants, they were always in the lowest category while male artists and writers took the top seats. Women artists who contemplated study abroad or a grant to pursue their art had to depend on grants from their family, friends or other individuals. For example, Gerður Helgadóttir received a grant in 1949 and 1950 from the *Women's cultural- and memorial fund* (i. Menningar- og minningarsjóður kvenna) which had been set up in 1945 (first grants given in 1946).⁸⁰⁷ Even if small, the establishment of a fund intended to educate women says more than many words about the situation regarding funding for women and was moreover an acknowledgement and encouragement for them.

The artist salaries that were assigned in 1950 went to Ásgrímur Jónsson, Ásmundur Sveinsson, Jón Stefánsson, Ríkarður Jónsson and Kjarval (9,000 kr). As before and in the following decades, it was the poets and writers who got the highest grants: Laxness, Tómas

⁸⁰⁷ Védís Jónsdóttir, "Menningar- og minningarsjóður kvenna", *Nýtt kvinnablað* 6, no. 5 (1945), 10–11. "Menningar- og minningarsjóður kvenna", *Nýtt kvinnablað*, 17, no. 6 (1956), 8. At the request of Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, the *Women's cultural- and memorial fund* was set up, but it was her daughter, Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, who got this process going after her mother's death. The aim of the fund was to empower women through higher education.

Guðmundsson and Davíð Stefánsson (15,000 kr). Júlíana Sveinsdóttir got 5,400 kr and Gerður Helgadóttir 2,400 kr.⁸⁰⁸ In 1952, Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson and Kjarval were transferred to the highest category with Laxness and Tómas Guðmundsson, but unexpectedly Kristín Jónsdóttir gets in the next category along with Ásmundur Sveinsson, Gunnlaugur Scheving, Gunnlaugur Blöndal, Finnur Jónsson, Ríkarður Jónsson and others (9,000 kr). Those in the lowest category included Gerður Helgadóttir, Barbara Árnason and Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir (3,000 kr).⁸⁰⁹ Here it may be added that Nína Tryggvadóttir does not get granted a salary in either 1950 or 1952.

Melkorka stood up for the remarkable women who were bypassed in the grant allocation. In 1952, there was harsh criticism in the periodical that Nína and three other women had not received an artist's grant from the government. The women in question were painters Karen Agnete Þórarinsson and Nína Tryggvadóttir, the sculptor Tove Ólafsson and the author Þórunn Elfa Magnúsdóttir. It said that all these women "had made substantial contributions to art and culture in Iceland" and had all previously obtained recognition from the artists' fund. Nína is "highly educated and has had good reviews at exhibitions far and wide abroad", while Karen Agnete Þórarinsson had also held independent exhibitions one after the other. And Tove Ólafsson is a "popular, admired women artist and her dolerite sculptures from the rocks on the beach at Laugarnes have won acclaim countrywide".⁸¹⁰

The article said that women's associations must respond to this behaviour of the majority of the allocation committee regarding these four women artists, and that one can almost conclude that "the committee had looked at it such that as married women, they were being supported by their husbands and consequently no artistic evaluation of their works is considered". The article finishes with these words: "How has it happened, has the women's rights cause not been waged in Iceland for a period of 50 years? Something seems to still be a long way off, that the thought of equality has not been recognized by half of society."

In *Nýtt kvennablað* (1956), women who obtained an artist salary that year are enumerated. In addition to the seven women writers and six actresses, artist salaries were also received by the women painters Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, Kristín Jónsdóttir and Karen Agnethe

⁸⁰⁸ "Úthlutun til skálda, rithöfunda og listamanna á þessu ári lokið", *Tíminn*, June 9, 1950, 1.

⁸⁰⁹ "Úthlutun listafjár", *Alþýðumaðurinn*, February 12, 1952, 3.

⁸¹⁰ "Úthlutun listamanna", *Melkorka*, 8, no. 1 (1952), 15. *Líf og list* also tells of the allocation of grants for artists and says that some of our finest poets have been ignored, e.g. Jakob Jóh. Smári, Snorri Hjartarson and Jón Helgason, and also criticizes that young painters, such as Nína Tryggvadóttir and Sigurður Sigurðsson, had been eliminated, despite the reputation that they had received overseas, Nína in the USA and Sigurður in Finland. See, "Listamannastyrkir", *Líf og list*, 1, no. 3 (1950), 12 and 22.

Þórarinnsson, and by the sculptors Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir and Ólöf Pálsdóttir.⁸¹¹ As before, none of them entered the top tier of male-only grants.⁸¹² Those respected and renowned women artists of the older generation never managed to get into the highest category for the artists.

According to the minutes of the Education Board, 48 works by men were bought between 1950 and 1953 but only 8 by women. In the years 1955–1957, 50 works by male artists were purchased but only 2 by women artists.⁸¹³ Even as a director of the National Gallery from 1950, Selma Jónsdóttir only made proposals on art purchases, but at the end of 1953, Jón Þorleifsson and Þorvaldur Skúlason were hired, so-called advisors on art purchases for the Education Board, and put forward proposals twice a year.⁸¹⁴ As seen in the minutes, the same men were chosen for the selection and exhibition committee—apart from Selma, it was virtually only men who were in the forefront of artistic life. These were Þorvaldur Skúlason, Jón Þorleifsson, Svavar Guðnason and, later, Finnur Jónsson and Ásmundur Sveinsson.⁸¹⁵

In Selma Jónsdóttir's collection of letters from 1946 to 1966, her great friendship with Nína Tryggvadóttir, and also Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, can be discerned. Selma encouraged them as much as she could and tried for instance to purchase works by them, whether for the National Gallery, for individuals or for herself. In one letter from Nína Tryggvadóttir (1960), Selma is asked how it is going to get “the men on the Education Board” to buy her works. In the period 1950–1960 it often proved difficult for Selma to get the works that she wanted for the Gallery, and it is clear that she alone did not have the final power of decision on the male-dominated council.⁸¹⁶ When looking at the period 1945 to 1960, one can see that the National Gallery

⁸¹¹ “Þessar konur hlutu listamannalaun í ár”, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 18:4–5 (1957), III.

⁸¹² In the top category in 1956 there were only men, 14 in total, including the artists Ásmundur Sveinsson, Ásgrímur Jónsson, Gunnlaugur Blöndal, Gunnlaugur Scheving, Kjarval, Jón Stefánsson and Ríkarður Jónsson (all with 18,000 kr). Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Kristín Jónsdóttir were in a lower group (with 11,000 kr) and some even lower still, e.g. Nína Sæmundsson (7,500 kr). See, “115 fá listamannalaun í ár”, *Alþýðublaðið*, April 25, 1956, 2. In 1957, the top 20 were all men, in the two top categories. For example, Ásgrímur Jónsson was in the top category, and is joined there by a group of poets and writers—Laxness, Davíð Stefánsson and Gunnar Gunnarsson. Artists were included in the next highest category, as before—Ásmundur Sveinsson, Kjarval, Gunnlaugur Scheving, Gunnlaugur Blöndal, Jón Stefánsson and Ríkarður Jónsson. See, in “Úthlutun listamannalauna 1957. Ásgrímur í heiðurslaunaflokk. Guðm. Böðvarsson, Ólafur Jóh. og Steinn Steinarr í fyrsta flokk”, *Þjóðviljinn*, April 27, 1957, 12 and 4.

⁸¹³ See, Minutes of the Education Board (i. Gerðabækur Menntamálaráðs, 1945–1960) from the National Gallery of Iceland.

⁸¹⁴ See, Minutes of the Education Board (October 26, 1953). Those on the committee were Valtýr Stefánsson (chair), Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason, Pálmi Hannesson and Barði Guðmundsson (May 4, 1950).

⁸¹⁵ See, Minutes of the Education Board (September 9 and 21, 1954). In the Minutes of the Education Board (December 7, 1954), Björn Th. Björnsson is recorded on the proposed publication of Icelandic art history.

⁸¹⁶ See 2007, A. 3. 2. Letters from Nína Tryggvadóttir (1952–1968). 2007 and A. 3. 1. Letters from Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1946–1966). Borgarnes Museum.

purchased 250 works for the gallery, of which 32 were by women, or almost 13 percent.⁸¹⁷ A similar proportion is seen regarding artist salaries, but women artists were also always in the lowest category.

In the 1950s, women were “pointed back” to the home and marriage: the mother role was extolled as their future work but not work outside the home after marriage—men are the breadwinners and women are supported by them.⁸¹⁸ In addition to the long-lived “breadwinner concept” there is a deeply rooted gendered discourse on art and its masters, which has always existed and reinforced the justification that male artists should receive grants and salaries, and their works be purchased for the national collection and by art collectors.

4.2.3. *On women’s taste, handiworks and effeminated artists*

Kristín Jónsdóttir’s solo exhibition in Listamannaskálinn gallery (1952) provides an opportunity to examine different attitudes towards women artists in women’s periodicals on the one hand and the mainstream periodicals aimed at the general public on the other. The women’s periodical *Nýtt kvennablað* published a picture of the largest work in the exhibition, *Kvöld í baðstofu* (A night in the living room).⁸¹⁹ In *Alþýðublaðið*, Kristín is described as “one of the country’s best-known artists who has taken part in numerous collective exhibitions both here in Iceland and abroad”. However, Kristín had not held a solo exhibition in Reykjavík during the last 20 years.⁸²⁰ *Þjóðviljinn* said that Kristín Jónsdóttir is one of “our older painters”, and that she and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir were the first Icelandic women to work as professional painters. A long interview with Kristín appeared in *Morgunblaðið* and it is said that Kristín is

⁸¹⁷ During the period 1945–1960, 250 works were purchased, 32 of which were by the following women artists: Kristín Jónsdóttir (4), Gerður Helgadóttir (4), Tove Ólafsson (1) Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (6), Nína Tryggvadóttir (8), Nína Sæmundsson (1), Barbara Árnason (1), Karen Agnete (1) Guðmunda Andrésdóttir (2), Valgerður Hafstað (1), Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir (1), Ólöf Pálsdóttir (1) and Vigdís Kristjánsdóttir (1). See, unpublished catalogue from the National Gallery of Iceland of purchased works, between 1945 and 1960.

⁸¹⁸ Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, “1956. Hvert er þá orðið okkar starf?”, 278–279 and 323–331. In 1940, 7% of women worked outside the home, but this percentage was 18% in 1950 and 19% in 1960. It should also be said that more working-class women worked outside the home than married women from the bourgeoisie, where the husband was supposed to be the breadwinner. But from 1900 until 1970, women took on all kinds of additional work, including at home, e.g. handicrafts, music teaching, laundry, sewing, etc. See, Gerður Róbertsdóttir, *Hjáverkin. Atvinnusköpun kvenna í heimahúsum 1900–1970* (Reykjavík: Borgarsögusafn Reykjavíkur, 2015), 15 and 33.

⁸¹⁹ *Baðstofa* was a living room and a bedroom in old Icelandic farmhouses. See a picture of the work in *Nýtt kvennablað*, 13, no. 4–5 (1952), I. See, “Móðurást eftir Nínu Sæmundsson”, *Nýtt kvennablað*, 13, no. 3 (1952), 4.

⁸²⁰ “Kristín Jónsdóttir opnar málverkasýningu í Listamannaskálanum”, *Alþýðublaðið*, May 15, 1952, 8; “Málverkasýning Kristínar Jóns-”, *Þjóðviljinn*, May 16, 1952, 8.

exhibiting 60 oil paintings, most of them painted over the last two to three years, but a few from further back.⁸²¹

A review of Kristín Jónsdóttir's exhibition is written by Steingrímur Sigurðsson in *Líf og list* (1952), and is hauntingly reminiscent in ways analogous to many articles written at the end of the nineteenth century on women artists.⁸²² Moreover, it is an antithesis of the Icelandic male masters, notably the veneration of Kjarval. The article begins with two words, “Women paint!”, with an exclamation mark. There, it says that this is happening all over the world, as well as in Iceland, and it is becoming fashionable for women to paint. No less surprising is the tone of amazement that women should paint at all, which was also the reaction of many at the end of the nineteenth century, though the discourse is much more forthright and flippant than before. Steingrímur said that some women had in fact practised art since before the First World War and that one of them is Kristín Jónsdóttir, “who recently held an exhibition of many years of her handiwork in Listamannaskálinn”. This “handwork” is of all ages, “and thus the exhibition provides a good overview of the working procedures of the lady. Kristín belongs to the older generation of our native painters, obtained academic training in art, and is one of the very few Icelandic painters to have completed examinations from an art academy”; this must be considered an honour or “not an honour, because the work and the person who creates it is always the one who counts”.⁸²³

Steingrímur stated that the exhibition “unfortunately shows that Kristín is strangely adamant regarding all of the obnoxious obstructions that tend to cling to those who have unconditionally been subjected to the rigid discipline of a stagnant Danish art academy”, and though her work is both older and newer, it is clear that Kristín “has not learned and not forgotten anything”. Steingrímur goes on to conclude that what applies everywhere in all “the pictures” is Kristín's emphasis “on trivia, so much emphasis on bothersome and incongruous trivia that the pictures do not become a whole, or at least not a picture! This tasteless meticulousness with unnecessary trivia, this pretend naturalism, flattens out most ‘pictures’,

⁸²¹ Á. Ó., “Myndin og ég erum eitt. Samtal við Kristínu Jónsdóttur listmálara á málverkasýningu hennar”, *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, May 25, 1952, 169–172.

⁸²² Steingrímur Sigurðsson, “Sýning Kristínar Jónsdóttur”, *Líf og list*, 3, nos. 1–6 (1952), 22. In an article in 1950, Þorvaldur Skúlason had recalled the reception of the first September Exhibition that was held in 1947, when ten “klessumálarar”, or blotch artists, held a collective exhibition. There was as much criticism here and downplaying of artists as French critics had previously done with impressionist artists—they had not shown their art any understanding—and it was the same with abstract art, and so Þorvaldur asks: are the French critics haunting us? But likewise, one could ask whether the nineteenth-century attitudes were also haunting Icelandic women artists. See, Þorvaldur Skúlason, “Ganga franskir listgagnrýnendur aftur?”, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 11, nos. 1–2 (1950), 122–127.

⁸²³ Steingrímur Sigurðsson, “Sýning Kristínar Jónsdóttur”, *Líf og list*, 3, nos. 1–6 (1952), 22.

making them banal and ineffective”. In Steingrímur’s opinion, the works at the exhibition “do not stand up, are not an inspired total creation, but rather affect the viewer as stiff copies, without choice of motive, without opposites of colours, without harmony. One sometimes feels that the author of these handiworks has walked out to a scene (maybe when the weather is good) and looked in all directions, begun to paint and tried to get all of Iceland’s mountains onto the one canvas”.⁸²⁴

Here, the words “art” or “art of painting” are not used, but instead the discussion is about the “handiwork” (i. handavinna) or “handwork” (i. handverk) of this woman artist in her mid 60s, a pioneer, who had made the art of painting her life work. Steingrímur even sets the word “picture” in inverted commas. There was still an enormous amount of discussion about the impressionability of women after they had studied at the academy, and subsequently their copying of others’ works in figurative art, because of a lack of initiative and independence, because of tastelessness, emphasis on trivia and accuracy, lack of overall creation and inspiration: Danish Academy, or academia as a whole, is as the underlying evil. The source of the foreign influence mattered, though: whether it was Danish “academic” or French “abstraction”—and of course gender mattered too. Now it seems as though the lack of education is regarded favourably (to men only though) around the same time as many women are educated in the arts, having finally been given the opportunity to do so.

This “woman’s handiwork”, as it appears in the article on Kristín’s exhibition, becomes a guiding principle, as does women’s taste and tastelessness; their role and responsibility should be the tasteful home. In an article from 1950, Björn Th. Björnsson pointed out that the link between art creation and the public had ruptured in the wake of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. Factory production had replaced the applied arts of the artisan, empty goods where profit was the only goal. Björn said he is convinced “that the time is not far away when all the poor junk, which is now very evident, will make way for beautiful objects, and ideas on art in a person’s everyday life will win out”.⁸²⁵ He was not least talking about applied arts, as around that time modernism had also made inroads into applied art, such as ceramics here in Iceland, while at the same time there was more demand for modern, handmade, Icelandic giftware.

Both here and internationally, the old handicraft traditions were certainly going through a revival with modernism, i.e. abstract forms including stained glass, mosaic art and also

⁸²⁴ Steingrímur Sigurðsson, “Sýning Kristínar Jónsdóttur”, *Líf og list*, 3, nos. 1–6 (1952), 22.

⁸²⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, “Fagur listviðburður”, *Vísir*, May 27, 1950, 4.

ceramic art (or pottery). Pottery was booming in the 1940s and 1950s, both in Iceland and in the international arena.⁸²⁶ The couple Gestur Þorgrímsson and Sigrún Guðjónsdóttir (Rúna) set up the pottery firing *Laugarnesleir* in 1947 in Reykjavík. At that time they had recently returned from an art course at the Royal Danish Academy, and made pottery items in the spirit of abstract art and under the influence of Picasso, who worked in Vallauris.⁸²⁷ *Funi* was a pottery that started operating in 1947 and was founded by sculptor Ragnar Kjartansson along with Ragna Sigurðardóttir and others. Many artists, women and men, went there to decorate, both in *Funi* and later on in *Glit*, which Ragnar founded with others in 1958.⁸²⁸ One of the artists who worked at *Funi* was the author and artist Ásta Sigurðardóttir. Ásta wrote an article in *Líf og list* (1951) that reflects fear of foreign, cheap merchandise and production: “Lately, the attitude of artists to the artistic value of ceramics has generally changed, somewhat for the better, partly because many fine painters have turned to ceramics decoration, even those who have worked in painting. For instance, one could name the world-famous painter Picasso [...].”⁸²⁹

Unfortunately, as Ásta argued, the few companies appear to run their ceramic workshops only for profit, and manufacture almost only “ugly junk to fob off to the public [...] The taste of the ordinary person here in Iceland is rather poor, which is not at all surprising when considering the huge number of irresponsible, totally incapable charlatans who have pushed their bad ‘art’ onto the public and fleeced them”. Thus, the articles by Björn and Ásta are different in that she talked about profit-making manufacturers and generally “about public taste” which is poor, and that they do not know how to identify good handiwork, but she did not discuss the “better homes” or women bearing responsibility for tasteless homes.

In 1952, Björn also discussed women’s handicrafts in the more conservative women’s periodical *Húsfreyjan* (e. The Housewife), under the heading that “all national art is bad, all

⁸²⁶ Guðmundur Einarsson and Lydia Pálsdóttir (born Zeitner) were pioneers in pottery in Iceland. In the late 1920s, Guðmundur had been doing an art course in Munich, Germany, and Lydia completed her course in pottery at the same place. Influenced by the Art Deco style and *The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts* in Paris in 1925, they highlighted the new modern style in decorative art. The couple established the first pottery workshop in Iceland in 1927 and named it *Listmunahúsið*, though it was often called *Listvinahúsið*. The multi-talented woman artist Sigríður Björnsdóttir also worked there. In 1929 Lydia Pálsdóttir came back from a three-year course in ceramics in Munich and a pottery kiln was crafted that same year in Germany and transported to Iceland. Lydia threw the items, i.e. formed out of clay, on rotating wheels. See, Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir, “Nýr sjónarheimur”, 23–24; Eiríkur Þorláksson, “Guðmundur frá Miðdal og upphaf leirmunagerðar á Íslandi”, *Listvinahús. Guðmundur frá Miðdal. Leirmunir 1930–1956* (Kópavogur: Arctic Books, 2006), 2–13.

⁸²⁷ “Laugarnesleir”, *Vikan* 13, no. 19 (1950), 1 and 3. See also, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Picasso. Keramik/Ceramic/Céramique* (Hannover: Fackelträger-Verlag, 1957), 23; *The Picasso Museum, Paris. Paintings, Papiers collés, Picture reliefs, Sculptures, and Ceramics*, eds. Maire-Laure Bernadac, Michèle Richet et al., transl. Alexander Lieven (New York: Abrams, 1986), 199–210.

⁸²⁸ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Innlit í Glit (1958–1973)”, *Sagnir*, 33 (2021), 10–22.

⁸²⁹ Ásta Sigurðardóttir, “Um keramik (leirmunalist)”, *Líf og list*, 2, no. 1 (1951), 7–9.

good art is national”.⁸³⁰ The national in art, with a direct link to national discourse, therefore appears to be bad whereas e.g. modern art is an honour to the country and thus national. Björn said that the efforts of Sigurður Guðmundsson, the painter, from the latter half of the nineteenth century aroused the attention of many women, and perhaps “rescued more than we realize as towards the end of the century we were hit by the Danish deluge, the hollow dingbats devoid of beauty that the Danish–German ladies and the Icelandic–Danish piled into their living rooms in order to show off. I don’t need to conjure up any pictures of such rooms, as they still exist in certain homes”.

So it seems that Sigurður had saved Icelandic women from a lack of taste, yet it also seems that there was still a lot to do and a need still remained to stand guard—a role which Björn appears to have taken on with this article. Björn then said that the impetus to applied art was manifold, and that a woman does not only sew cushions or wall hangings as “a pastime but because of a deep, often unconscious impulse to create art, which is within every person”. In these, the “mutual understanding and cooperation must be established between craftswomen and the best of the nation’s artists, so that once again this remarkable applied art can be brought onto an organic basis.”⁸³¹

From this article, this descriptive discussion of women’s handicrafts and applied art is not least conducive to the demarcation of art and crafts in a gendered way. It is obvious that there are women and handicrafts on the one hand and male painters—the nation’s best artists—on the other. This is “pottering” by the women, a pastime that has little to do with art creation and reflects the discourse of the nineteenth century when the characterization of women’s art was therefore in fact “an extension of their domestic and refining role in society”, as Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock have pointed out.⁸³² Thus “the destructive stereotyping” reflects clearly the separation between public and private spheres of art.⁸³³ Yet, when men entered a field such as pottery in modernist times, the field subsequently gained more attention and weight in the fields of art and culture. In ceramics, it could be said that in modernist discourse, the same applied as to painting and sculpture.⁸³⁴ The masculinity is such that the man creates, throws and moulds the clay while the woman is in “the decorative”, i.e. feminine, field.

⁸³⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, “Öll þjóðleg list er slæm, öll góð list er þjóðleg. Hugleiðingar um hannyrðir”, *Húsfreyjan*, 3, no. 3 (1952), 18–25.

⁸³¹ Björn Th. Björnsson, “Öll þjóðleg list er slæm, öll góð list er þjóðleg. Hugleiðingar um hannyrðir”, *Húsfreyjan*, 3, no. 3 (1952), 18–25.

⁸³² Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old mistresses*, 9.

⁸³³ Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old mistresses*, 13.

⁸³⁴ Griselda Pollock, “Painting, Feminism, History”, 142.

The modernist's attitude to design was quite male-oriented. Arndís S. Árnadóttir raises an interesting question about gender and the aesthetic reform related to the history of art and design. In fact, it is not only a question of mapping the periphery of fine art and “lesser arts”, but also of separate spheres for women and men, or domestic–public dichotomy, and how women are also related to the discourse on the home, beauty and taste. Arndís's research shows that in Iceland we can find both nationalistic views towards domestic aesthetics and strong links to the Nordic home and industrial art, following the same trends in terms of aesthetic reform and, later, in functionalism in housing and domestic design. As already argued, ideas about the reformation of crafts and home industries, along with the promotion of industrial art, were elementary precursors of the design of the twentieth century, with the important contribution of women. Yet women are almost totally invisible in the history of design that is quite male-oriented, all of which asserts that men were responsible for the production while women were “consumers” and “formed the taste”.⁸³⁵

Like in other countries, the centrality of “feminine” is widely displayed in Iceland to define the perfect woman, but in the same way it is used as never before in a derogatory way in discourse on modern art. Furthermore, the word “decorative” has certainly been used for women's art, and has been labelled and considered bad taste in an international context. However, the term “modernism” is polygonal and paradoxical, as it is not just women artists who are excluded but also men “who are guilty” of feminine, decorative art creation, and present the unmanly man as the opposite to contemporary art.⁸³⁶ As argued by Richard Meyer, the “identification of interior decoration with femininity extends not only to women but also to effeminate, homosexual, or otherwise, *unmanly men*”. As Meyer says, “metaphors of deviance, decadence” are a leading thread through modernist disregard of the decorative, like Le Corbusier in his *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (1925), where he underlined that modern decorative art has no decoration, and expressed his antipathy to “the abominable small perversion”, the desire to decorate everything.⁸³⁷

Here it can be pointed out that with the arrival of modernism in Iceland, condemnation and marginalization of queer people seemed to be more prominent in the 1950s than before,

⁸³⁵ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, *Nútímaheimilið í mótun*, 16–26.

⁸³⁶ Marianne Devoken, “Modernism and Gender”, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 175–176.

⁸³⁷ Richard Meyer, “Big, Middle-Class Modernism”, *October* 131 (Winter 2010), 69–70. See also, Peter McNeil, “Designing Women: Gender, Sexuality, and the Interior Decorator, c. 1890–1940”, *Art History* 17, no. 4 (December 1994), 639.

which was also the case in the neighbouring countries. Although public debate about homosexuality among Icelandic men increased during the 1950s, and generally in the 1960s, it became increasingly cruel and relentless.⁸³⁸ This underpins the view that during the “modernist decade” in the 1950s, the distinction between the feminine and the masculine becomes even clearer and sharper, as the public discourse on art certainly shows. Hence, the purification of art “abstracted” not only the visual references but everything related to femininity. This is particularly interesting when taking into consideration that the modernization of gender roles was fundamental to modernity itself.

4.2.4. *Avant-garde, avant-tout or signs of decline in Icelandic art?*

When the abstract art—especially geometric abstraction—reached its peak, the gulf deepened both between the “ordinary people” in the country and art and also within art itself, between the older and younger artists. This was reflected in art politics and political disputes in the pages of newspapers and periodicals.

It is notable, and bears witness to courage, that woman artist Kristín Jónsdóttir provided a contribution in the discourse on contemporary art in *Helgafell* (1954), in which she encourages the public to open their eyes to the new art of young artists, though she herself had been subject to much criticism as a woman artist of the older generation: “But you, my young comrades, who have caused scandals, you, who have chosen for yourself the difficult role of abandoning trodden paths in search of new values in art; you, who are creating a new aspect in the history of Icelandic art, parallel to what is now happening in all the cultural nations of the continent, I expect you to withstand storms of antipathy and prejudice, just as you have luckily circumvented all the attitudes that are irrelevant to art.”⁸³⁹ It is not unreasonable to assume that many others should have been affected by antipathy and prejudice in art when it comes to women artists, especially those who did not relinquish themselves to abstract art. But here it should be noted that in the wake of writing these articles, Kristín Jónsdóttir did not get more weight as a woman artist but rather a mark of respect as “the one” who draws attention to—and thereby endorses and supports—the controversial contemporary art.

⁸³⁸ Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, ““Sjoppa ein við Laugavegin [..] hefur fengið orð á sig sem stefnumótsstaður kynvillinga”. Orðræða um illa kynvillinga og listamenn á sjötta áratug 20. aldar”, *Svo veistu að þú varst ekki hér. Hinsegin sagnfræði og hinsegin saga á Íslandi*, eds. Íris Ellenberger, Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir and Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2017), 147–183.

⁸³⁹ Kristín Jónsdóttir, “Nokkur orð um myndlist”, *Helgafell*, 6, no. 3 (1954), 13–17.

It is clear that not all women thought that women artists should embrace the abstract. A discussion on Icelandic home industry being in a deep low appears in *Melkorka* (1952), where the author of the article, Sigríður Arnlaugsdóttir, says that contemporary Icelandic women artists “paint abstract paintings that we don’t understand, and we sit and sew Danish cross-stitch patterns that the Danes have long ago discarded. Is it not possible to bridge this gap?”⁸⁴⁰

Abstraction and geometric art were supposed to be a universal language, but actually consisted of a very closed group. Pen Dalton has argued that modernist art “disassociated itself from any other legitimising or critical discourses and valued its autonomy, only allowing that criticism which came from its own traditions and practices”.⁸⁴¹ The so-called “Rome dispute” (i. Rómardeila), reflects very well the situation in art and politics as it was in 1955. The background was such that factionalism had become prominent in art politics. The Cold War divisions led to even more intense debates in the male-dominated political and cultural realm in Iceland than was the case in many of the neighbouring countries. Concerns about the influence of Americans on Icelandic culture prevailed, namely American popular culture, as the military base (set up in 1951) had a tremendous role in society.⁸⁴²

If some considered modern art as imitation and unpatriotic art, geometric art had advocates in the right places, which meant that it managed to become firmly established and the style became dominant. A group of abstract artists stood together, even though not everyone within the group could agree in politics. That group gained the upper hand in the *Association of Icelandic Artists* in 1954: Svavar Guðnason became Chair, Valtýr Pétursson treasurer and Hjörleifur Sigurðsson secretary. A split then developed between the artists, the older and younger, and new associations were founded. Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson, Jón Þorleifsson, Jón Engilberts and Jóhann Briem founded the *New Art Society* (i. Nýja myndlistarfélagið) while the *Association of Independent Artists* (i. Félag óháðra) was made up of Finnur Jónsson, Guðmundur Einarsson and Ríkarður Jónsson.⁸⁴³

In October 1954, it was announced in the papers that an exhibition of Nordic contemporary art would be held for the first time in Rome in the spring of 1955, in which Nordic art from the last 50 years was supposed to be shown. Later, there were disputes over who should

⁸⁴⁰ Sigríður Arnlaugsdóttir, “Danskur og íslenskur heimilisiðnaður”, *Melkorka* 8, no. 2 (1952), 38–39.

⁸⁴¹ Pen Dalton, “Modernism, art education and sexual difference”, *New feminist art criticism: critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 45.

⁸⁴² See, e.g. Haukur Ingvarsson, *Fulltrúi þess besta í bandarískri menningu*.

⁸⁴³ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 100–107. See also, Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, *Kona verður til*, 366–367.

be on the selection committee; this consisted of Svavar Guðnason and Þorvaldur Skúlason, along with Gunnlaugur Scheving. All three were considered to lean too much towards contemporary art. This selection committee chose 25 artists and their work was shown to the public in Listamannaskálinn gallery before being sent to Rome, to “soften the atmosphere”. Kjarval had the most works, but other paintings were shown by Gunnlaugur Scheving, Kristín Jónsdóttir, Þorvaldur Skúlason, Svavar Guðnason, Sigurður Sigurðsson, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Snorri Arinbjarnar, and sculptures were exhibited by Ásmundur Sveinsson, Sigurjón Ólafsson, Magnús Á. Árnason and Gerður Helgadóttir. Most of the disagreement focused on the young artists.

The Rome exhibition was intended to provide an overview of the development and history of contemporary Nordic art, but when it came to the crunch, abstract art and the young artists in the Icelandic contingent got more space. As could be seen in the public discourse in the newspapers in Iceland, many considered the choices of the selection committee to be scandalous, as signs of decline in Icelandic art.⁸⁴⁴ The government immediately put a halt to support for the exhibition, and consequently no senior officials were present at the exhibition opening in Rome. The Icelandic representatives were Laxness, Svavar Guðnason and the composer Jón Leifs, as well as the chosen artists.⁸⁴⁵ This proved to be one of the hottest topics in the Icelandic art world, before or since, and everyone had an opinion. Yet, as mentioned before, the (male) artists’ disputes in the 1940s, as in the 1950s, reveal another important issue, namely that male artists and writers were mostly criticized from a viewpoint of art politics and politics in general—whether they were in the right party or followed the correct *ism*. This was first and foremost a disagreement amongst males, as women were not discussed in this respect: art politics or political emphases were of no importance to women, even if they took sides and had an opinion in the disputes.

Several cultural and art periodicals started to appear in the 1950s, including *Birtingur* (1955–1968), which had the objective to be the main messenger of new attitudes in cultural matters. The main task of those who were behind *Birtingur* was to create a path for more diverse cultural life in the country by opening an Icelandic cultural platform for new trends and movements while at the same time tending to and strengthening Icelandic culture. In the opinion

⁸⁴⁴ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 103–107; “Íslenzk sýning í Róm”, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 16, no. 2 (1955), 118.

⁸⁴⁵ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 103–107; “Listamennirnir og þjóðin”, *Helgafell*, 6, no. 4 (1954), 1–5.

of Þröstur Helgason, even if Icelandic modernism was “belated”, it proved to be “a strong force in the uprising against the cultural conservatism and isolation that prevailed in Iceland around and after the mid-twentieth century”.⁸⁴⁶ Þröstur categorizes *Birtingur* as a “modernist periodical” which rebelled against traditional forms of expression and thus supported innovation not only in art and literature but also in cultural activities and in the cultural debate in general. Even though little Icelandic cultural magazines were usually short-lived and struggled for their existence, *Birtingur* survived the longest of those modernist magazines and was “without doubt the most influential”.⁸⁴⁷

The model of the periodical was undoubtedly the periodical of contemporary art in France, *Art d’aujourd’hui*, but as it says in *Birtingur*, to some people it was meant to be a “parallel” to the Russian periodical *Inostrannaja Literatúra*.⁸⁴⁸ *Birtingur* contained, amongst other things, translated articles from *Art d’aujourd’hui*, interviews with the leaders of geometric art in Paris and with well-known art critics, but the main material was literature and poetry, along with diverse cultural material, i.e. discussion on foreign and domestic art exhibitions, art criticism, theatre, contemporary music, the history of architecture, etc.⁸⁴⁹

A year after Kristín Jónsdóttir’s article on contemporary art in 1954, Þorvaldur Skúlason wrote an article in *Birtingur* on geometric abstraction, where he defined how image construction is conjectured in abstract art, based on the theory of formalism. Þorvaldur stated that all art is in close contact with “the thought and emotion of its contemporaries” and hence, “interprets the spirit of the period rather than the outer appearance of it.”⁸⁵⁰

However, if art does reflect a “spirit of a period”, in the modernist discourse the discussion revolved, as before, about the same “chosen” Icelandic artists and thus the role of the nation in erecting a building to house their work. The poet Snorri Hjartarson drew attention to Kjarval’s 70th birthday and the retrospective exhibition on that occasion of “the master’s work” in the National Gallery in an article in *Tímarit Máls og menningar*.⁸⁵¹ Sparked off by Kjarval’s exhibition, Björn Th. Björnsson had his say in *Birtingur* (1955) on erecting a national

⁸⁴⁶ Þröstur Helgason, *Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur mórernismi*, 9–12.

⁸⁴⁷ Þröstur Helgason, *Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur mórernismi*, 9–12. See also, another approach of the avant-garde in Iceland, with increased focus on the avant-garde in the periphery, in Benedik Hjartarson, “Anationalism and the Search for a Universal Language. Esperantism and the European Avant-Garde”, *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, *Avant-Garde Critical Studies*, 30, eds. Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2014), 267–303.

⁸⁴⁸ “Erlend tímarit. Inostrannaja Literatúra”, *Birtingur*, 2, no. 3 (1956), 37.

⁸⁴⁹ Þröstur Helgason, *Tímaritið Birtingur og íslenskur mórernismi*, 78 and 345–347.

⁸⁵⁰ Þorvaldur Skúlason, “Nonfigúratíf list”, *Birtingur*, 1, no. 2 (1955), 5–6.

⁸⁵¹ Snorri Hjartarson, “Kjarval sjötugur”, *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 16, no. 3 (1955), 195–196.

art gallery, saying that “with unity and cohesiveness, we can consider that we deserve to enjoy a man such as Jóhannes Kjarval”. At the same time, Björn urged the building of an independent national art gallery, emphasizing that the existing National Gallery on the top floor of the National Museum was by no means suitable for housing the work of art masters.⁸⁵² Björn asks: “Where should Ásgrímur’s donation of a grand collection be housed, where Riseby’s collection of Muggur’s paintings, where the works of Jón Stefánsson, where [Gunnlaugur] Scheving and where the progressive group with Þorvaldur and Svavar in the vanguard? I am not asking for an answer here, as it is obvious: the building of an Icelandic art gallery is the only solution.”⁸⁵³ The article from 1955 is in reality similar in nature to the article by Halldór Laxness in 1935, two decades earlier, about erecting a gallery for Kjarval’s works, which aroused consideration as a consequence of the article’s author having seen an exhibition of Kjarval’s works. Laxness had wanted a palace for Kjarval, a palace to store the “dearest jewel of Icelandic culture” and as “a legitimate asset and the demand of the whole nation, like other resources of the nation”.

Björn Th. Björnsson had also, six years previously, written an article in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* (1949) on the necessity of building a national art gallery. The reason for the writing and encouragement was, now as before, Kjarval and the exhibition of his works that had just ended in Listamannaskálinn gallery, with attendance that reached 5,000. Björn argued that the development over the last three to four centuries had increasingly made art dependent on wealthy individuals instead of the “society as a whole”, and its role in society had deteriorated to the same extent. Björn considered that the State had a good collection of art works that it had bought, but they were rather poor and their choice in the hands of people variably qualified for the task, and the works were hardly visible to the public. Björn then pointed out that the above-mentioned Dane, Riseby, had promised to donate to the Icelandic State his great collection of works by Guðmundur Thorsteinsson, Muggur (about 60 paintings), and as “soon as a public gallery is built, it will be intended for that place”.⁸⁵⁴ The necessity of owning a new, independent, national gallery in Iceland is discussed, but the spark to the

⁸⁵² Björn Th. Björnsson, “Opinbert listasafn á Íslandi”, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 10, no. 2 (1949), 132–148. Björn Th. Björnsson, “Íslenzk þjóðlist. Hugleiðingar vegna sýningar Kjarvals”, *Birtingur*, 1, no. 4 (1955), 1–5.

⁸⁵³ Björn Th. Björnsson, “Íslenzk þjóðlist. Hugleiðingar vegna sýningar Kjarvals”, *Birtingur*, 1, no. 4 (1955), 1–5. Riseby had a great collection of Muggur’s work (Guðmundur Thorsteinsson) and donated it to the National Gallery in 1958.

⁸⁵⁴ Björn Th. Björnsson, “Opinbert listasafn á Íslandi”, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 10, no. 2 (1949), 132–148. Björn referred to drawings, or rather the final project of a young Icelandic architect who studied in Copenhagen, Skarphéðinn Jóhannsson, which included designs for an art gallery. Björn published them with the article and went in detail over a possible execution of such a work from the drawings, himself suggesting a location of such a national art gallery in Laugarás, in Laugardalur.

discussion was the exhibition of one master, not Icelandic artists in general. Kjarval was one of the big names in Icelandic art history, one of the “big authors in our cultural history”, in reality “a sovereign in Icelandic art”.⁸⁵⁵ No woman artist is named in these articles, neither women artist pioneers nor Kjarval’s contemporaries, such as Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, Kristín Jónsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson. And the foremothers stay nameless and their place of honour invisible.

It is not possible to leave the year 1955 without mentioning that in the autumn it was announced that Halldór Laxness had got the Nobel prize for literature, the first Icelander (and still the only one) to do so. Icelanders paid tribute to the great master who filled them with pride, and the reception by the nation was singular, as could be expected; this was a great victory “for Icelandic contemporary literature, national culture and the battle for independence”, as the front page of *Þjóðviljinn* put it.⁸⁵⁶ However, the nation “as a whole” was not asked for its response to the great tidings. In *Birtingur* (1955), Laxness was hailed by artists from the genres of writing, acting, music and art, who describe their admiration and praise the master Laxness in quotes of various length. Fourteen men in total.⁸⁵⁷ The same can be seen in the periodical *Nýi tíminn* (1955), which “turns to some authors, artists and leaders in cultural matters” and tells them the news about Laxness getting the Nobel Prize; their comments were published in the paper under the title “The whole nation celebrates!”⁸⁵⁸ From 21 men. However, in the women’s periodical *Melkorka* (1955), unlike all the other papers and periodicals, the front cover featured a picture of the mother of Halldór Laxness, Sigríður Halldórsdóttir, not the Nobel prize-winner himself.⁸⁵⁹

4.2.5. *Lyrical—as in hysterical—and “small town politics”*

Nína Tryggvadóttir was one of the few women artists discussed in *Birtingur*, and may have aroused a great deal of attention for her clear stance on the status of contemporary art in Iceland. In the interview in 1950, as mentioned earlier, she had already pointed out that the artist had to dare to “venture out to sea”, discover new trends, and that in Iceland, the discourse on art was stagnant rather than in line with international styles.

⁸⁵⁵ Jón Karl Helgason, *Hetjan og höfundurinn*, 207.

⁸⁵⁶ “Halldór Kiljan Laxness fékk bókmenntaverðlaun Nóbels 1955”, *Þjóðviljinn*, October 28, 1955, 1.

⁸⁵⁷ “Listamenn hylla Laxness”, *Birtingur*, 1, no. 3 (1955), 1–5.

⁸⁵⁸ “Öll þjóðin fagnar”, *Nýi tíminn*, 15, no. 31 (1955), 3 and 11.

⁸⁵⁹ “Sigríður Halldórsdóttir” (cover page), *Melkorka*, 11, no. 3 (1955), 65.

Thor Vilhjálmsson took an interview with Nína Tryggvadóttir, which appeared in *Birtingur* (1955). The article reflected two kinds of attitude, one being the attitude of Icelandic artists who lived overseas and were conscious of the diversity of international art, the other being Icelandic modernism in art, which was characterized by black-and-white discourse on abstract and not abstract art. Nína says that it appears to her as if “the informed here in Iceland” are mainly those who know about the movement, the geometric abstract movement, which is mainly interpreted by a group of artists who have been associated with the known gallerist Denise René in Paris, such as Auguste Herbin, Jean Deyrolle, Victor Vasarely and the Danish painter Richard Mortensen. In Iceland, most young painters followed the views of these men. But Nína says that there are “at least 10 trends in Paris today”, the work of various painters who stand opposed to geometric abstract art. Thor said that many of the younger artists talk about Herbin. To which Nína answers: “He is an old man.”⁸⁶⁰

When the discussion moves to the status of contemporary art in Iceland, Nína says that people “revolt in Reykjavík to what has conquered in Paris,” and that it was necessary for artists to be in Paris and “rid themselves of the petty beliefs and not to repeat what has been done before”. Paris is brutal and there, one rids oneself of “small town politics”. Thor Vilhjálmsson appears not to comprehend what Nína is referring to. He refers to the Rome exhibition the same year and the grand dispute on it in the press, and asks Nína what she feels about the vitriolic disputes that have raged over whether abstract art has “the right to exist”. Nína says that that battle is long over, it is like “people fighting over whether the earth rotates, maybe some people in the north of Iceland disagree that it turns”.⁸⁶¹ What Nína was really saying was that art was small-town politics here in Iceland, the revolution was long gone, and much more was happening at that time.

Women artists in the abstraction and geometric art of the fifties were surely more “eligible” in the avant-garde discourse because it was more difficult to link their work to femininity. Yet, the gendered discourse on women artists neither changed nor was it replaced with the long-over revolution; this is partly reflected in *Birtingur*. Hence, in the discussion about Nína’s abstract geometric works in this exhibition in Listamannaskálinn gallery Hjörleifur Sigurðsson wrote:⁸⁶²

⁸⁶⁰ Thor Vilhjálmsson, “Viðtal við Nínu”, *Birtingur*, 1, no. 3 (1955), 17–20.

⁸⁶¹ Thor Vilhjálmsson, “Viðtal við Nínu”, *Birtingur*, 1, no. 3 (1955), 17–20.

⁸⁶² Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, “Listsýningar vor og haust”, *Birtingur* 1, no. 3 (1955), 14–15.

Nína Tryggvadóttir's art has changed somewhat in recent years. The outer appearance of the man and the environment which she has created has in the main disappeared from her work, but instead the effects of the landscape and mood swings are very strong. Nína is an admirer of rich emotions, and lets them have a strong influence on her actions [...] she is sometimes tempted to let her emotions go too far.

In the same article and the same centre spread in *Birtingur*, there was discussion about another solo exhibition in Listamannaskálinn gallery of abstract geometric works of the artist Karl Kvaran, described as “one of the most serious painters of the younger generation. He does not play with his colours, and he doesn't lack courage to tackle those problems (of abstract art). His thoughts are clear, and he is enviable in terms of technique. These should suffice Karl as provisions for greater feats”.⁸⁶³

The discussion still seems to have focused on the nature of woman, even in connection with abstract art or, here, geometric art: words such as mood swings, turbulence, emotionality, as opposites to the serious, courageous, balanced personality of the male artist. Nína's style changed to become more like so-called lyrical abstraction. Yet, as soon as women artists departed from the geometric style in the mid 1950s in painting and sculpture, the attitude towards their art changed. In fact, their departure from geometric abstraction towards “lyrical abstraction” was considered to render them more “volatile” and “unstable”, as they did not espouse one art form and one belief: they were atheists among believers. The gendered discourse is partly reflected in *Birtingur*, even in the abstract work of Nína Tryggvadóttir. In this context, it is as if “lyrical” becomes a synonym for “hysterical”, especially in regard to the above-mentioned comments on mood swings and emotionality.⁸⁶⁴

Some time after this critique, there is mention of the exhibition of Nína Tryggvadóttir in Listamannaskálinn gallery in *Melkorka* (1955) and that she is “considered to be one of the leading painters of the younger generation in Iceland”. The writer in *Melkorka* had nothing but praise for Nína Tryggvadóttir, and emphasized how women are proud of this intelligent, hard-working woman. The discussion refers to Nína, who says herself, with the same emphasis as before, that in art there is nothing that is called “a last word, abstract art form no more than any

⁸⁶³ Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, “Listsýningar vor og haust”, *Birtingur* 1, no. 3 (1955), 14–15.

⁸⁶⁴ Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, “Listsýningar vor og haust”, *Birtingur* 1, no. 3 (1955), 14–15

other, and that in contemporary art the attention of the artist is directed more inwards, into the soul, instead of looking at what the eye sees and getting one's ideas from it".⁸⁶⁵

With the aforementioned critique of Nína's exhibition, it is not illogical to examine other women abstract artists. Valtýr Pétursson wrote eloquently in *Morgunblaðið* (1956) about the first solo exhibition of Guðmunda Andrésdóttir, which was held in Ásmundarsalur in Reykjavík.⁸⁶⁶ Valtýr said that it is rare to see "such a flawless exhibition" by an artist who holds a solo exhibition for the first time" and that it shows that Guðmunda is "a born painter". The exhibition shows signs of great progress by the artist, and her formalism sometimes has "a romantic tone, which is however held in check by logical thought".

Hörður Ágústsson covered both Guðmunda Andrésdóttir's and Hjörleifur Sigurðsson's exhibitions in *Birtingur* (1956). There, it says:⁸⁶⁷

Hjörleifur is the man with the most integral personality of those who belong to the youngest generation of Icelandic painters. This exhibition of his proves that. He is a solid painter who knows what he's doing ... Hjörleifur's pictures are not curved lines: all lines are straight and give the paintings a quiet, calm tone. The same applies to the colours: they are often light brown or yellowish brown and are not extreme. Everything points to the same: the beauty of tranquillity. I have never seen such a perfect exhibition.

He described Guðmunda Andrésdóttir as "a fully formed personality with a decisive countenance, a decisive expression. The theme of her paintings is unlike that seen in Hjörleifur's pictures, not as peaceful. Triangles are common in her pictures: sharp corners that jar, but these are counterbalanced by colours that are womanly mild, delicate, almost decorative". In the best paintings at the exhibition, Guðmunda's personality is utilized to the utmost but in others, "there appears to be greater influence from other painters; she has adopted their taste but does not say enough herself. I want to congratulate the woman artist for good results."⁸⁶⁸

Straight lines were the bottom line in art, and everything else was womanly, mild and delicate, decorative. An interview with Guðmunda in *Tíminn* (1956) reveals that after a two-

⁸⁶⁵ "Nína Tryggvadóttir", *Melkorka*, 11, no. 3 (1955), 81.

⁸⁶⁶ Valtýr Pétursson, "Sýning Guðmundu Andrésdóttur", *Morgunblaðið*, October 3, 1956, 2.

⁸⁶⁷ Hörður Ágústsson, "Tvær sýningar í Listvínasalnum", *Birtingur* 2, no. 3 (1956), 32.

⁸⁶⁸ Hörður Ágústsson, "Tvær sýningar í Listvínasalnum", *Birtingur* 2, no. 3 (1956), 32.

year course in Sweden she had studied for one and a half years at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, with the French painter Gustave Singier, from whom she says she learned a lot.⁸⁶⁹ She then went to l'Académie Ranson from 1951 to 1953.⁸⁷⁰ But what are the abstract artists trying to interpret, she is asked? Guðmunda Andrésdóttir is on a similar vein to Nína Tryggvadóttir and comes up with a completely different—and more open—opinion than many in the contemporary artist group.⁸⁷¹ Guðmunda said that artists paint first and foremost from inner necessity, from a need to create, and “of course the attitude of a person in art is shaped by external influences, the nature, the life around a person. It is laughable when people talk about the painting being in a world of its own, where no external influence is possible. In art, all influences to which a person is subject are actually crystallized, a person’s whole experience is reflected in them”. Thus, this is a similar approach and understanding of modernism to what Nína had used before about the artist who strives for “inner necessity” and is shaped by “external influence”, as opposed to the narrow formal interpretation of many other artists.

But now more doubtful voices began to be heard on geometric and abstract art, this time within the abstract group itself. The painter Sverrir Haraldsson said that the oil painting itself is also exhausted—something which art historian Björn Th. Björnsson was not ready to second in his interview with Sverrir in *Dagskrá* (1957). Sverrir was adamant in the interview that “people are divided into two categories, the abstract painters and the others, but there are no fewer dabblers in abstraction than in the figurative”. One thing is missing in the discourse, which is to “distinguish between good and bad abstract painters. It is doubtless because the war over the new ism has been so vitriolic here in Iceland that there has hardly been time for such a reckoning before now. But I think now it is about to begin”. In Sverrir Haraldsson’s opinion, unlike the early days it is not the role of artists today “to paint solely for the rich upper class which has nothing else to do but to follow art. Our people are the working commoners, and we must behave ourselves in such a way that we enjoy what we do, if it is worth something”. But if the lack of the general public’s understanding of art is at issue, it is “the fault of the artists themselves and they are to blame if art in the present day does not obtain a social foothold”.⁸⁷²

⁸⁶⁹ J.Ó., “Í listinni speglast öll reynsla manns. Spjallað við reykvíska listakonu sem sýnir verk sín í Listvinasalnum”, *Tíminn*, October 6, 1957, 4.

⁸⁷⁰ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Tónauga. Um list Guðmundu Andrésdóttur”, *Guðmunda Andrésdóttir: tilbrigði við stef*, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2004), 37–54.

⁸⁷¹ J.Ó., “Í listinni speglast öll reynsla manns”, 4.

⁸⁷² Björn Th. Björnsson, “Þróun mannlífsins mun enn sveigja listirnar með sér. Björn Th. Björnsson spjallar við Sverri Haraldsson listmálara”, *Dagskrá*, 1, no. 2 (1957), 40–49.

Björn agreed that art is for the general public but in no way, in his opinion, has abstraction become the norm as “the revolt is still happening”.

In fact, this attitude of his is partly reflected in the fact that the National Gallery had acquired three new pictures, which *Morgunblaðið* described as “two by famous French painters, one by Ásgrímur”.⁸⁷³ Ásgrímur had just died and a short obituary on him could be found in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* (1958). The paintings were handed over to the museum by the *Listasafnsfélagið*, or the National Gallery’s association or art club. One of the works by “famous contemporary painters” was by Hungarian painter Victor Vasarely, who was known for his geometric abstract art and considered a pioneer of optical art that has been associated with Galerie Denise René in Paris. The article stated that the National Gallery’s association, which at that time was newly founded, gave the National Gallery a work by “the third famous painter, the French master Auguste Herbin”. The article maintained that the society had always had the goal of acquiring works of art for the Icelandic nation “by living, recognized foreign artists” and the intention was to hand over “one art work a year to the National Gallery”. It was Gunnlaugur Þórðarson, Chair of the National Gallery’s association, who handed over the pictures, and art historian Selma Jónsdóttir gave thanks on behalf of the National Gallery.⁸⁷⁴

At the same time, Hörður Ágústsson followed closely what was happening in Paris, including the so-called “newsletters from Paris” published in *Birtingur*, as well as interviews with known abstract artists, e.g. Jean Deyrolle.⁸⁷⁵ Hörður Ágústsson also published an interview in *Birtingur* (1957) that he took with Denise René and, moreover, with the notable elderly abstract artist Auguste Herbin.⁸⁷⁶ That same year in *Birtingur*, readers are encouraged to get hold of the French periodical *Art d’aujourd’hui*, “which is undoubtedly the most remarkable art periodical published in the world today”.⁸⁷⁷ Subsequently, two translated articles, which originally appeared in 1956 in the French periodical, are translated and published, written by the editor, André Bloc, and two regular critics of the publication: Léon Degand, “France’s most

⁸⁷³ “Listasafn ríkisins eignast þrjár nýjar myndir. Tvær eftir fræga franska málara, eina eftir Ásgrím”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 16, 1958, 20.

⁸⁷⁴ Gunnlaugur Þórðarson, “Listasafnsfélagið og mynd Herbins”, *Alþýðublaðið*, February 14, 1957, 4. As mentioned earlier, Elof Riseby—who had collected works by the painter Guðmundur Thorsteinsson for many years—donated a substantial gift to the National Gallery in 1958, consisting of 46 paintings by the artist. See, “Listasafninu gefnar myndir eftir “Mugg”, *Fálkinn*, August 15, 1958, 3; “Listasafni ríkisins gefnar 46 myndir eftir Guðmund Thorsteinsson”, *Alþýðublaðið*, August 6, 1958, 8.

⁸⁷⁵ Hörður Ágústsson, “Fréttabréf frá París”, *Birtingur*, 2, no. 1 (1956), 29–33. Hörður Ágústsson, “Rætt við Jean Deyrolle”, *Birtingur*, 2, no. 3 (1956), 24–28; Hörður Ágústsson, “Viðtal við Herbin”, *Birtingur*, 3, no. 4 (1957), 10–17.

⁸⁷⁶ Hörður Ágústsson, “Spjallað við Denise René”, *Birtingur*, 3, no. 1–2 (1957), 39–42.

⁸⁷⁷ See, *Birtingur*, 3, no. 1–2 (1957), 14.

influential critic at the moment”, and Roger Bordier. The matter under discussion revolved around whether there was conceivably a “crisis in painting”.⁸⁷⁸

Yet, as before, the traditional two polar disputes on art in Iceland had not changed, as if the revolution was still going strong. Jónas Jónsson from Hrifla, former Chair of the Education Board, reacted in 1959, as in the 1940s, putting forward his views that the Education Board had bought too many “blotch paintings” and that “blotch masters” had revolutionized the *Association of Icelandic Artists*. A national art museum was sorely needed, according to Jónas, to provide for instance “protection for the successors of Þórarinn, Ásgrímur, and Kjarval in the extermination war of the blotch people”.⁸⁷⁹ As mentioned before, everyone could agree on the genius talents of Kjarval, no matter where they stood in politics, and apparently also on the absence of housing the works of Icelandic women artists.

4.2.6. *Blurring boundaries in art*

As this thesis argues, during the whole period of study women artists did not focus on one art style or movement; and in the 1950s, they continued to blur the boundaries of different artforms, as in their eyes (and those of some male artists too) modernism was more about diversity than one style. Two of those who were continually searching were Nína Tryggvadóttir and Gerður Helgadóttir, who were unafraid of treading new paths as they did not regard abstract art or geometric abstraction as a belief, or the truth.

A change of style occurred in Gerður’s art creations after 1953, with more immateriality and cosmic reference, delicate sculptures with fine steel wires. This departure from geometric abstract art did not go down well with many, and few were enamoured when she exhibited the works with the artist André Enard in Galerie Arnaud in Paris in 1954 and in Iceland in 1956, where she displayed drafts of designs of a stained-glass window. Gerður had trained in window-making at the Jean Barillet glass workshop in Paris in 1954 and both she and Nína were under the influence of the revival of ecclesiastical art among modern artists in France. Gerður’s first stained-glass commissions were for the Grund old people’s home in Reykjavík and Hallgrímskirkja church at Saurbær in Hvalfjörður from 1955 to 1957.⁸⁸⁰

⁸⁷⁸ André Bloc, Léon Degand and Roger Bordier, “Er kreppa í málaralistinni?”, *Birtingur*, 3, nos. 1–2 (1957), 14–29. The articles were translated by Kristján Sigurðsson) and were first published in *Art d’aujourd’hui* in 1956.

⁸⁷⁹ Jónas Jónsson, “Listasafnsbygging Gylfa Þ. Gíslasonar”, *Mánudagsblaðið*, February 23, 1959, 4.

⁸⁸⁰ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Andans konur. Nína Tryggvadóttir og Gerður Helgadóttir. París–Skálholt” (Women of the Spirit. Nína Tryggvadóttir and Gerður Helgadóttir. Paris–Skálholt) (Hveragerði: Listasafn Árneseinga, 2009), 1–

The 1950s are full of contradictions in terms of the discourse on art and its emphases. After the war, there was more cooperation between artists and architects, which consisted for instance of various types of art decorations on works that were done on walls, in windows and on the exterior of buildings. The pure form of the concrete art was not limited to painting but also sought dissimilar art forms, with increased focus on cooperation and unification of all of the visual arts.⁸⁸¹ Yet like before, there was an undermining of women's contributions to those various artforms, which had in reality always blurred the separation between fine art and art and crafts. The modernist discourse took over—in a masculine way—what had long been discussed as the “minor arts”, as women's domain, i.e. the link between art and life, utilitarian art and art industry, but which were now condoned by male presence. With increased interest in this holism of the modernists, some of the women's domains, such as textile art, gained more support and more weight, particularly if they were linked to abstract art or the pure forms in some way. And especially if they had received positive coverage or were exhibited somewhere abroad.

Nevertheless, few women got the task of doing a work in a public building and working with architects; it was primarily Nína Tryggvadóttir and Gerður Helgadóttir who did so. A competition was held in 1957 for decorations for the new cathedral at Skálholt, which had been one of Iceland's main cultural centres in past centuries but was only consecrated in 1963. Two Danish businessmen, Edvard Storr and Louis F. Foght, donated the windows, which were supposed to be worked on by an Icelandic artist.⁸⁸² In the spring of 1958, Gerður Helgadóttir's proposal was placed first, while Nína Tryggvadóttir was runner-up. In total, Gerður worked on 35 windows, in association with the Oidtmann workshop in Linnich, Germany.⁸⁸³ In Skálholt, Gerður's windows are reminiscent of the delicate thread she added to the sculptures she showed

15, see listasafnarnesinga.is. Gerður Helgadóttir participated twice in *Salon d'art sacré* in the 1950s. Later, the woman artist Eyborg Guðmundsdóttir would also participate twice in *Salon d'art sacré* in the 1960s. All religious art (fr. art sacré) went through a revival in France in the 1950s. The first stained glass church window that was done completely by an Icelandic artist (Gerður Helgadóttir) in an Icelandic church was in the church at Saurbær in 1956. Writing about the exhibition in 1956, Jón Þorleifsson said about this first draft: “I do not know why a sculptor who has never touched painting has been entrusted with such a difficult work” (Jón Þorleifsson, “Listsýning Gerðar Helgadóttur og André Enard”, *Morgunblaðið*, November 25, 1956, 16).

⁸⁸¹ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 120–130. The discussion in Chapter 3 should be mentioned here, and also the concept of *textility* which encompasses the collaboration of a variety of women artists in an international context, blurring the lines between craft and art, such as in Bauhaus. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the Bauhaus school directed women students to the Weaving workshop in Bauhaus in the 1920s and 1930s, regardless of their interests, textiles being derived from “women's work”—which painting, sculpture and architecture were not.

⁸⁸² “Stórgjöf til Skálholts”, *Alþýðublaðið*, August 14, 1959, 9.

⁸⁸³ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Andans konur”, 1–15.

in Paris in 1958; these were largely abstract, but based on ecclesiastical symbolism and numbers. Nína often designed windows for churches, private homes and the National Museum of Iceland but in 1961, she was given the task of making a mosaic mural for the chancel wall of Skálholt Cathedral. Both Gerður and Nína were respected contemporary women artists who decorated the church in the spirit of contemporary art.⁸⁸⁴

As art historian Ásdís Ólafsdóttir argues, Gerður and Nína were artists who expressed themselves through many different media. There was hardly an art genre that Gerður did not touch with her creative energy. Thus, in Paris in the 1950s, Gerður made a living from designing and making furniture: she made an iron relief for the café *Le Benjamin* on the Rue de Rivoli in Paris, and also three reliefs and lamps for the restaurant *La Pergola* on Champs-Élysées.⁸⁸⁵ Gerður was a sculptor but also an artist in collage, gouache and mosaic, designing furniture, jewellery and ecclesiastical objects, and windows in nine churches in Iceland and Germany. Likewise, Nína was a painter who also made collages, wrote and illustrated children's books, took photographs, made mosaics, designed textiles and costumes, and worked in glass from 1953, notably for the National Museum of Iceland and churches in Germany; all of which were reminiscent of her paintings and collages.⁸⁸⁶ It can be said that this is the leitmotif in the works of women for the whole period discussed in this thesis, when artistic creation looks to many media and connections between paintings and sculptures to stained glass, textiles, photography and various types of applied arts.

As before, women were also in the vanguard when it came to advances in more modern applied arts. Icelanders took part in the *International Art and Crafts Exhibition* (deu. Deutsche Handwerksmesse) in Munich, in 1955, where exhibits included—in modernist style—silver items by Ásdís Sveinsdóttir and tapestries by Barbara Árnason.⁸⁸⁷ Barbara had recently started making tapestries and after returning home she and Ásdís Sveinsdóttir exhibited silver items and tapestries together in the National Museum; there were 13 tapestries in total, some of which were made out of canvas and then cut-out pictures from other material in various colours were fastened with hooks onto the cloth—this was a novelty in Iceland.⁸⁸⁸ Ásgerður Búadóttir had

⁸⁸⁴ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Andans konur”, 1–15. Gerður constructed a total of 15 windows, on the numbers and forms in a book by René Gilles on religious symbols in ecclesiastical art. See, Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 124–125.

⁸⁸⁵ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að beisla tómið. Höggmyndalist Gerðar Helgadóttur”, 9–25.

⁸⁸⁶ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Andans konur”, 1–15.

⁸⁸⁷ Arndís S. Árnadóttir, *Nútímaheimilið í mótun*, IX–X and 162–163.

⁸⁸⁸ “Nýstárleg listiðnaðarsýning í Þjóðminjasafninu. Barbara Árnason og Ásdís Sveinsdóttir sýna þar veggteppi og silfursmíði”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 24, 1955, 16.

won a gold medal in 1956 for her wefts, two tapestries under the title *Girl with a bird* (1952) in the eighth *International Art and Crafts Exhibition* in Munich, which was an event described in most of the country's newspapers.⁸⁸⁹ Besides Ásgerður, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Barbara Árnason also exhibited at the Munich exhibition, along with Vigdís Kristjánsdóttir.⁸⁹⁰ Barbara was a highly versatile artist and a pioneer in the field of textiles, graphic works and wall decorations from 1952 to 1961, and decorated several buildings, including the children's school Melaskóli in Reykjavík.

A great surge was occurring in textile art and in 1958 Drífa Viðar took an interview with Ásgerður Búadóttir for *Melkorka*.⁸⁹¹ That year, Ásgerður exhibited her work in the Hverfisgata Gallery, along with paintings from artist Benedikt Gunnarsson; her wefts still had reference to nature, but soon after the exhibition they became more constructivist or geometric.⁸⁹² Ásgerður had studied in the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts before she went to study for three years at the Royal Danish Art Academy in Copenhagen, which Vigdís Kristjánsdóttir had also done the same years. However, at that time no instruction in textile art was offered at the Academy.⁸⁹³ In the interview, Ásgerður is said to have chosen textile as an art form “over the paintbrush”.⁸⁹⁴ Drífa asked in the interview with Ásgerður whether she only has little time for art creation “with the work of the housewife”, but Ásgerður says she can easily do it and has time to do so.⁸⁹⁵ The message is that it is entirely possible to practise art, despite being a woman and a housewife, and that this is an encouragement to other women.⁸⁹⁶

Icelanders first exhibited applied art jointly with the other Nordic countries at the important *Nordic applied arts exhibition*, or *Formes Scandinaves*, in the Louvre in autumn

⁸⁸⁹ “Íslenzk kona hlýtur gullverðlaun fyrir handvefnað”, *Alþýðublaðið*, May 18, 1956, 7–8.

⁸⁹⁰ Ásgerður also participated in the 9th International Art and Crafts Exhibition in Munich in 1957.

⁸⁹¹ Drífa Viðar, “Myndvefnaður Ásgerðar Búadóttur. Viðtal við listakonuna”, *Melkorka*, 14, no. 2 (1958), 46–47.

⁸⁹² See, Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, *Veftir. Ásgerður Búadóttir* (Akranes: Uppheimar, 2009), 48–50. Along with formal wefts, in the 1960s Ásgerður Búadóttir began to use the rya pilework technique.

⁸⁹³ Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, *Veftir. Ásgerður Búadóttir*, 44.

⁸⁹⁴ Drífa Viðar, “Myndvefnaður Ásgerðar Búadóttur. Viðtal við listakonuna”, *Melkorka*, 14, no. 2 (1958), 46–47. During a trip to France in the summer of 1949, Ásgerður is said to have been influenced by the Gobelin tapestry by Jean Lurçat in the church at Assy as a modern art medium; Lurçat played a major role in revitalizing the old French tapestry tradition at that time (see, in Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, *Veftir. Ásgerður Búadóttir*, 45).

⁸⁹⁵ Drífa Viðar, “Myndvefnaður Ásgerðar Búadóttur. Viðtal við listakonuna”, *Melkorka*, 14, no. 2 (1958), 46–47.

⁸⁹⁶ Here, it should be mentioned that only a year later, an article by Drífa Viðar was published in *Melkorka*, where she strongly criticized other women's periodicals for not publishing more trenchant articles on equality and women's rights but instead concentrating on froth. She said: “We have access to everything, as much as men, and we are raised in equality. We get the same education and can pursue anything, e.g. after finishing secondary school education.” But then she adds: “But we end up in the kitchen, at least here in Iceland in a modern society, whether we like it or not; it becomes the life work. And even if you happen to be endowed with the gift of being a genius in mathematics, you do not get any role other than stirring the soup pot for what is left of your life if you are stupid enough to get married.” See, Drífa Viðar, “Um kvennablöð, leikhús og leiklist”, *Melkorka* 17, no. 3 (1961), 78–81.

1958; the exhibition had long been considered to mark a milestone in “Scandinavian design”, which from that point on became a known trademark.⁸⁹⁷ Icelanders had 15 artists there, including silversmiths, furniture-makers and tapestry artists. Júlíana Sveinsdóttir exhibited tapestries using geometric forms—as well as others with organic forms.⁸⁹⁸

If the heyday of amateur photography was beginning, began, at the same time clearer lines were drawn between professional photographers and amateurs who set up groups and clubs. It is more difficult to discern the role of women in photography and seems odd that women appeared to withdraw from the trade of professional photographers yet at the same time did not take a very active part in the upsurge of amateur photography which was happening at that time.⁸⁹⁹ Nonetheless, several women photographers specialized in portraiture and in the 1950s and 1960s, five or six studios were run by women out of a total of 58.⁹⁰⁰ At the Nordic photography touring exhibition, which started in Copenhagen in 1949, Sigríður Zoëga and Steinunn Thorsteinsson were among the Icelandic professional photographers who participated, but Jóhanna Sigurjónsdóttir and Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir, who established the photography studio ASIS in Reykjavík in 1947, also sent in photographs to the same exhibition.⁹⁰¹

Jóhanna Sigurjónsdóttir had studied in New York in 1944, while Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir and Hanna Brynjólfssdóttir, who later joined them at ASIS, were the first recipients of the journeyman licence in Reykjavík in 1930, and at the same time the first women in Iceland to get it.⁹⁰² Herdís Guðmundsdóttir was the only woman who participated in 1947 in the exhibition by the *Iceland touring association* (i. Ferðafélag Íslands), established 1927, but in 1952 at another exhibition of Ferðafélag Íslands in Listamannaskálinn gallery women were

⁸⁹⁷ The exhibition *Design in Scandinavia* from 1954 was a touring exhibition in the USA and Canada. See, A. Remlov, *Design in Scandinavia: an exhibition of objects for the home* (Oslo: Kirstes Boktrykkeri, 1954). At the Nordic applied arts exhibition in Paris that took place from 7 November 1958 to 31 January 1959, exhibitors included Ásdís Sveinsdóttir with her jewellery creations, while textile works were exhibited by Ásgerður Búadóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Guðrún Jónasdóttir. See, Arndís S. Árnadóttir, *Núttímaheimilið í mótun*, 165–171. See also, “Norræna listiðnaðarsýningin í París hlaut góða dóma. Og ekki síst íslenzku verkin”, *Vísir*, Mars 5, 1959, 4.

⁸⁹⁸ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Formbylting”, 127–128.

⁸⁹⁹ Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, 14–15.

⁹⁰⁰ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir named 23 women as professional photographers from 1845–1945, in addition to 23 women who worked in the field of photography. See, Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1945*. Linda Ásdísardóttir says that until 1945 there were 24 women who worked as professional photographers in Iceland, compared with 100 male photographers. See, Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, 7–35.

⁹⁰¹ Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, *Ljósmyndarar á Íslandi 1845–1945*, 2001, 222–223, 234–235, 330–331 and 352–353. The Nordic travelling exhibition was then set up in Listamannaskálinn gallery, in Reykjavík 1950. See, “Sýning norræna atvinnuljósmyndara”, *Fálkinn*, Mars 24, 1950, 2.

⁹⁰² Linda Ásdísardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, 14–18.

5 out of 54 participants. These were, in addition to Herdís, Anna Þórhallsdóttir, Ingibjörg Ólafsdóttir, Sigríður Níeljóhniúsdóttir and Sibyl Urbancic.⁹⁰³

In 1954 a photography exhibition was held by the *Amateur photography association* (i. Ljósmyndafélag Reykjavíkur) which included works by both professional and amateur photographers. Anna Þórhallsdóttir and Elín Hróbjartsdóttir had pictures there, the only women out of a group of 37.⁹⁰⁴ Anna Þórhallsdóttir was a trained singer, a graduate from the Juilliard School in New York, but was also an amateur photographer. In 1954 she took a series of pictures of a solar eclipse in Reykjavík and showed them at the exhibition. Her photos were considered phenomenal and their fame travelled worldwide. In fact, so far that the photographer Edward Steichen, who was also the director of the Department of Photography (1947–1961) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, ordered three of Anna’s solar eclipse photographs.⁹⁰⁵

What is remarkable is the network of women that was formed in the photography studios; as mentioned earlier, this was a medium which was to women a more congenial discipline than the traditional painting and sculpture, and women got recognition in that field more easily and faster than in other arts. However, women photographers consistently received paltry coverage in the general histories of the medium (from the 1950s to the late 1990s), which represents a gender bias whether in terms of numbers of artists, texts and illustrations or photographic criticism and theory, or in terms of collections and exhibitions of their photographs.⁹⁰⁶

The year 1957 was quite eventful in the field of art. An exhibition was opened of the works of younger and older students of the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts, from the time of its founding in 1939. The newspaper *Morgunblaðið* says that everything from “knitted art to graphic design” can be seen there. Three day departments are said to be operating at the college (a teaching department, the women’s applied arts department and the department of practical

⁹⁰³ “Hálft fimmta hundrað mynda”, *Þjóðviljinn*, September 20, 1947, 4 and 8. Herdís Guðmundsdóttir was an amateur photographer from 1930 but also ran Amatörvinnustofa G. Ásgeirssonar in Hafnarfjörður in association with her husband, Guðbjartur Ásgeirsson. The landscape photos by Ingibjörg Ólafsdóttir are particularly interesting, pure and beautifully composed; she was in several hiking groups and hiked both up mountains and onto glaciers, well equipped with cameras. The amateur photographer Lilý Guðrún Tryggvadóttir should also be mentioned, along with her photo collection that she worked on for a decade at *Sigríður Zoëga & Co.*

⁹⁰⁴ “Um 40 ljósmyndarar sýna samt. um 100 ljósmyndir”, *Vísir*, October 19, 1954, 8; “Bæjarfréttir (Ljósmyndasýning)”, *Vísir*, October 20, 1954, 2.

⁹⁰⁵ “Um 450 myndir á sýningu FÍ”, *Vísir*, October 31, 1952, 1; Anna Þórhallsdóttir, “Sólmyrkvinn 30 ára”, *Morgunblaðið*, June 30, 1984, 36–37. See also, Linda Ásdísasardóttir, “Konur ljósmynda”, 16.

⁹⁰⁶ Naomi Rosenblum, *History of Women Photographers* (New York and London: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2010), 7–12. See also, *Qui a peur des femmes photographes? 1839–1945*, eds. Marie Robert, Ulrich Pohlmann and Thomas Galifot (Paris: Éditions Hazan, Musée d’Orsay, 2015).

art), but there were also a large number of afternoon and evening courses.⁹⁰⁷ The exhibition was therefore very diverse and was reminiscent of much from the earlier trade exhibitions, where the more equal participation of women and men at the exhibition was demonstrated and more interest was seen in various medias. Furthermore, it is interesting to look at the first large women's exhibition in Iceland, in the light of Júlíana's exhibition and her textile art that same year.

4.2.7. *Women artists "as the crown of creation" (1957)*

An important event took place in 1957 when a large women's exhibition, *Afmællissýning K.R.F.Í.*, was held on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Icelandic Women's Rights Association (i. Kvenréttindafélag Íslands) in the National Museum. An article in the newspaper *Vísir* on the exhibition said: "It was considered daring at the time, when several women got together under the leadership of Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir and founded the Icelandic Women's Rights Association. The women not only met opposition and scepticism from the majority of the men, but what was even worse, a lack of interest from their fellow women." But changing habits in society and a wave of awakening amongst women had meant that society now enjoyed to an ever-increasing extent their artistic talents, which were previously hidden under ash like a fire in a stove, but now flare up and burn brightly. The aim of the exhibition was that "exhibition guests get the best overview of women's contribution to art creation, in painting, sculpture, applied arts of all kinds and literature—that part is largest".⁹⁰⁸

The women's periodical *Húsfreyjan* covered the exhibition and named the women who took part.⁹⁰⁹ There were paintings by eleven women artists: Barbara Árnason, Greta Björnsson, Guðmunda Andrésdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, Karen Agnete Þórarinsson and Nína Tryggvadóttir exhibited oil paintings and watercolours, three paintings each, and Nína Tryggvadóttir also showed a stained-glass window. Sculptures were exhibited by Gerður Helgadóttir, Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, Nína Sæmundsson and Ólöf Pálsdóttir. Vigdís Kristjánsdóttir exhibited tapestry and silversmithery and hand-painted pottery could also be seen in the exhibition. A comprehensive sample of women's writings, old and new, could be

⁹⁰⁷ "Í Handíða- og myndlistaskólanum má margt læra, allt frá listprjóni til auglýsingateikunar", *Morgunblaðið*, September 25, 1957, 3.

⁹⁰⁸ "Listsýning Kvenréttindafélags Íslands", *Vísir*, January 29, 1957, 5.

⁹⁰⁹ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, "Kvenréttindafélag Íslands 50 ára", *Húsfreyjan*, 8, no. 1 (1957), 13–15.

seen on a long table that ran the length of the room: these consisted of novels, plays, memoirs, poetry, children's books and academic writings, as well as periodicals and anthologies.

The exhibition catalogue, which was compiled by Valborg Bentsdóttir, contained a fairly coherent record of writings in books and booklets by Icelandic women from around 1800 till 1956. A whole 530 books were enumerated by about 215 authors, “and this shows just how much women have contributed to Icelandic literature over the last 150 years”.⁹¹⁰ During that exhibition, women recited original poetry and book chapters on several evenings, as well as giving talks in the exhibition room on art and literature, while in *19. júní* (1957) it is said that Selma Jónsdóttir had given a lecture on Icelandic women artists.⁹¹¹

The daily paper *Morgunblaðið* also covered the exhibition and said that this was the first time that women have held a collective art exhibition. The aim of the exhibition was to “work towards the development and knowledge of Icelandic women to full equal rights of women and men, and to achieve better conditions for women in all ways. Moreover, it has encouraged women to use their rights and influence in public life”, and it is noted that the Women's Cultural Fund was supposed to have provided grants to 100 young women. Issues covered by the association included women's wages, individual taxation of couples, child protection and education; these were recalled on a special blackboard at the exhibition on which some stages in the women's rights battle of Icelandic women were tracked.⁹¹²

The Minister for Culture and Education, Gylfi Þ. Gíslason, wrote about this women's art exhibition in *Alþýðublaðið* (1957). The coverage of the exhibition was very positive and constructive, which Gylfi welcomed, and said that the women's struggle for increased rights had been effective, adding that the women's exhibition underlines that the “contribution of women to Icelandic culture—especially literature, visual arts, applied arts and music—is greater than people have generally realized”. But he then said at the end of the article that women's contribution to Icelandic culture is also of another nature: “The share that women have had in the feats that men have done is invaluable: a woman is often behind what is best

⁹¹⁰ Displays of books by women were something of a novelty and had only been done once before, in 1944, at an event organized by the women's section of the political party *Alþýðuflokkur* in Reykjavík at which 300 books by 130 women were displayed. “Merkileg sýning á bókmenntum íslenzkra kvenna”, *Alþýðublaðið*, December 5, 1944, 2 and 7.

⁹¹¹ “Afmælissýning K.R.F.Í”, *19. júní*, 7, no. 1 (1957), 43; “Kvenréttindafélag Íslands 50 ára”, *Húsfreyjan*, 8, no. 1 (1957), 13–14.

⁹¹² “Fjölbreytt listsýning í tilefni 50 ára afmælis Kvenréttindafélags Íslands. Eingöngu sýnd listaverk og listmunir eftir íslenzkar konur”, *Morgunblaðið*, January 27, 1957, 6. Unfortunately, nothing else has been found on the topic of Selma's lecture.

done, even if it is not attributed to her. And that is how it has always been, since God gave love to the man's heart. A good woman is the crown of creation.”⁹¹³

When looking at such comments, at the start of the article one deciphers positive rhetoric, encouraging, that raises hopes of finally changing attitudes towards women's contributions to art and what looks like a revision of the dominant narratives within the realm of public discourse on art and culture. It is at first an uplifting discourse, but is then reduced to dampening rhetoric, taking a step backwards, pushing women back into the shadow of the “real geniuses”, as if women lose track of their limitations and modesty for fear of overestimating themselves. Thus, the article is not about women's actual contribution to art, as producers, in an article on a women-only exhibition, but rather about their contribution through others: women living vicariously, in the society of great men (or women's vicarious lives and contributions). Linda Nochlin speaks of “patronizing encouragement”, and in reality this reflects the attitude to women that Nochlin uses as an example in her article, where she refers to Mrs Ellis from the mid-nineteenth century, when women “were warned against the snare of trying too hard to excel in any one thing”, as it does not suit women “to excel in something”; instead, it is better to do a great many things tolerably well, as anything else is considered, as Nochlin words it, as “selfishness” or “egomania”.⁹¹⁴

Not all women were of the same opinion, however, about the merit of the exhibition, though most felt it timely and expectations were great. The author Málfríður Einarsdóttir considered it to actually be more of a book display than anything else, an amateur look to applied arts, e.g. in painted items made out of porcelain, paintings and weaving, including by Barbara Árnason who was highly educated but unfortunately, though, “foreign”.⁹¹⁵ And historian Nanna Ólafsdóttir found it was an unremarkable exhibition although she thought the book register was good.⁹¹⁶ Writer Valborg Bentsdóttir reacted to Nanna Ólafsdóttir's writing and was dissatisfied with what she called ungratefulness, saying that some women who participated in the exhibition “had not had any other choice than scarce or irregular leisure hours while others had trodden the thorny path of the artist. Nevertheless, all of them had shown, each

⁹¹³ Gylfi Þ. Gíslason, “Listsýning kvenna”, *Alþýðublaðið*, February 1, 1957, 5.

⁹¹⁴ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, 57–58 and 67.

⁹¹⁵ Málfríður Einarsdóttir, “Tvær listsýningar kvenna”, *Melkorka* 13, no. 2 (1957), 55.

⁹¹⁶ Nanna Ólafsdóttir, “Litið um öxl”, *Melkorka*, 13, no. 1 (1957), 6–8.

with their own contribution, “that Iceland’s culture would be less if the hands and brains of women were not involved”.⁹¹⁷

A familiar theme appears here: the need of women to apologize for the contributions at the exhibition, although they were comprehensive and ambitious, and even for the women who took part. Moreover, there is the need to convince other women that art and culture in Iceland was poorer without their contribution—something that should have been obvious to everyone in 1957. But from the above-mentioned reaction of the Minister for Education and Culture himself, it is obvious that this was not at all the case, which shows how the gendering discourse on art is not linear and how vital it was for women to be en garde for backlashes.

That same year, in autumn 1957, a retrospective exhibition was held in the National Gallery on the works of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir. In 1955 she had been elected as artists’ representative to the board of the Danish Royal Academy. Furthermore, she had got many prizes, both for her paintings and her textiles, and had thus long created a name for herself as a tapestry artist in the Nordic countries when she won the Gold Prize at the Milan Triennial IX that was held in 1951. This was the greatest recognition that Júlíana got as an artistic weaver and the first award that an Icelander had got for artistic design at an international exhibition.⁹¹⁸

It was once again Drífa Viðar who took a remarkable interview with Júlíana on that occasion in *Melkorka*.⁹¹⁹ The exhibition shows, said Drífa, “pictures of the artist, thistles in a vase, pictures of men and women, landscape, still lifes, bright sunlight and shadow of an arboretum in Denmark. Livestock. An evening mist closing in. And in each picture, the balance of colour and event: and that event is maybe one rock, sea, black boulders. The woman artist becomes a poet”. It must be said that seldom or never had these words—that a woman artist is a poet, has a gift for poetry and fiction—been seen in public discourse, while Drífa herself revealed her poetic talent well. She continued by saying:⁹²⁰

⁹¹⁷ Valborg Bentsdóttir, “Afmælissýning K.R.F.Í”, *Melkorka* 13, no. 2 (1957), 55–57. Nanna answers again in another comment, same issue, underlining that she had not found the exhibition selection good enough and that the exhibition space was too small for such a large project. See, Nanna Ólafsdóttir, [Athugasemd], *Melkorka* 13, no. 2 (1957), 57.

⁹¹⁸ Dagný Heiðdal, “Íslenskur listmálari í Danmörku”, *Júlíana Sveinsdóttir. Vefur lands og lita*, ed. Ólafur Kvaran (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2003), 27–37. Júlíana had at this time been a member of the *Danish Women Artists’ Association* (KKS) and had also been on the committee of KKS from 1935 to 1949 and taken part in their exhibitions. Júlíana thus worked towards the main objectives of the association, which were to draw attention to women artists and their works, improve their access to grants, and to form networks as well as an incentive group for women artists. In addition, she had been on the boards of the Autumn Exhibition 1938–1939 and the *Charlottenborg Exhibition* from 1941 to 1949.

⁹¹⁹ Drífa Viðar, “Litið inn á málverkasýningu Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Melkorka*, 13, no. 3 (1957), 68–72.

⁹²⁰ Drífa Viðar, “Litið inn á málverkasýningu Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Melkorka*, 13, no. 3 (1957), 68–72.

It is primarily the simplicity that makes these pictures and people sense their ignorance in relation to these works and bears witness to the strength, restraint and impressionability of the woman artist. It most resembles standing against natural forces, that the works are one natural force. Everything that doesn't matter is obliterated. The play of the surfaces in this misty colour or reddish-yellow colour that shines is great and decisive.

But Júlíana said herself that she is praised and that there is always praise in the papers: "One doesn't know what's happening when it comes to such compliments." Júlíana then asks Drífa: "Do you not think this is an ugly picture?" and points to a self-portrait, one of the works at the exhibition.⁹²¹

In another interview, this time in *Morgunblaðið* (1957), Júlíana Sveinsdóttir was insecure and very defensive; this interview is illuminating in a multi-layered way and provides us with answers to many important questions on women artists. Firstly, she says: "I am not a poet, young man, not a writer. I try to let others see only what has moved me, try and interpret what has impressed me. Is it not possible to say that in Icelandic? Impress me?" Secondly, the interview reflects some kind of apology for her absence from Iceland. The title of this interview is in itself a reference to her herself: "I have always longed to come home and defend my absence from the country." Thirdly, when talking about her self-portraits and asked what she sees in them when she looks at them, she replies: "Powerlessness." That is a big word, says the author of the article. "Yes, but not too big. Should I tell you when I started painting seriously? It was in 1946. Yet I have held a paint brush for almost half a century. I have become an old woman ..."⁹²²

Women artists, such as Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, belittle their contribution in so many ways. Absence, not sufficiently Icelandic, not deserving to be called a writer, displeasure with one's own work: in one word, powerlessness in this woman who has held a paint brush for nearly half a century. In fact, there is very little that is as descriptive and describes as well how this powerlessness has come about as the centre-spread interview with Júlíana Sveinsdóttir. A column written anonymously, *Velvakandi*, had been put on the same centre spread in

⁹²¹ Drífa Viðar, "Litið inn á málverkasýningu Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur", *Melkorka*, 13, no. 3 (1957), 68–72.

⁹²² "“Mig hefur alltaf langað að koma heim og verja fjarveru mína frá landinu” segir Júlíana Sveinsdóttir í rabbi um svart grjót og rauðan hatt", *Morgunblaðið*, September 11, 1957, 6.

Morgunblaðið and glorified several male Icelandic artists. The column's author started by saying how he can still remember when he walked into the Louvre in Paris and stood in front of Van Gogh's paintings, how everything else in the museum faded away, so stark is the beauty of these paintings.

It then says: "The same happens to me each time I look at paintings by Ásgrímur, Jón Engilberts, Kjarval and Jón Stefánsson." These "honourable men" are just as "thoroughly Icelandic as before" but "the weather has sent the whole lot on the wrong path and there they roam with a compass and a ruler and express themselves with international triangles and polygons and rave about the charms of Paris. One could certainly mark the importance of the men by what gap would be left if we had not benefitted by them. And Icelandic art would not have risen so high if the Icelandic nation had not raised these four". The writer then moves on to an exhibition that is ongoing in the Hverfisgata Gallery, where one of "our most honourable men, the hero Jón Engilberts, now has an exhibition. It is fun to be an Icelander for the hours that a person spends inside there these days".⁹²³ Though there is criticism here of the Icelandic "ruler artists" and geometric abstraction, in both groups—older and younger—there is a familiar theme, i.e. heroes and honourable key men, who were thoroughly Icelandic (i. rammíslenskir), resident in Iceland, and provided true Icelandic art. They were the pinnacle of Icelandic art. Everything that Júlíana apparently was "not".

In fact, it is pointed out in many places that she was not sufficiently known to Icelanders, having lived a long time in Denmark, and that that can be seen in her art. In an interview in *Þjóðviljinn* a few days later in 1957, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir said that although some people, especially younger people, call her work abstract, she herself did not regard herself as such a painter. She then said the following about her painting, *Þingvellir*: "This painting here, it's from Þingvellir. I sat there one evening, it was in 1946, and I was painting this picture. All of a sudden, this little cloud appeared, this red cloud here," over the mountain Ármannsfell, and there is also "the rock face and here the green grass, that was a beautiful evening", said Júlíana. The writer of the article then asks her whether it could be said that it "is an influence from the Danes to use so much green colour". Júlíana answered that "no Dane uses such a colour, never this green colour". She said that she first painted in Þingvellir in 1946, but so many Icelandic artists had painted there" and therefore it would always be different.⁹²⁴

⁹²³ Velvakandi (writes from daily life), "Reglustikuliðið frá París", *Morgunblaðið*, September 11, 1957, 6.

⁹²⁴ "Alltíeinu kemur þetta litla ský, þetta rauða ský herna". Í fjórar mínútur með Júlíönu og myndunum hennar", *Þjóðviljinn*, September 15, 1957, 6.

Another article about the exhibition in the paper *Frjáls þjóð* (1957) reported that Júlíana had lived for a long time in Denmark, and it thus should come as no surprise that considerable influence from Danish art appears in her works. Some may even have got the idea, when viewing her paintings for the first time, that this was a Danish painter but not an Icelandic one. It reminds one more, it said, “of the Danish step-mother than the Icelandic mother”. Yet if some people had initially thought that in the beginning, they surely would think differently around the time they had finished looking at Júlíana’s exhibition, because her paintings had “the soul of the Icelandic mother”.⁹²⁵ Hence, this coverage on Júlíana in the mainstream press sounds like doubts on national loyalty, or even female chastity, and overshadows her contribution to art over the last forty years.

Ragnar Jónsson also discussed Júlíana Sveinsdóttir in *Nýtt Helgafell*. He began by applauding the Education Board for holding retrospective exhibitions of “the works of our best artists” and that the exhibition of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s works gives young and old “the chance to get to know the life work of one of the pioneers of Icelandic art”. Ragnar then said that various pillars run through her art, “but her Icelandic nature is strong and genuine, and the exhibition thus shows the clearest mark”. In spite of new trends that have emerged in art, the artist “had kept her place in all the upheaval, perpetuated the Icelandic core and been faithful to her form of art”. In Ragnar’s view, this bears witness to an artist “who knows her limitations and does not take on too much. Thus, her work has been so positive, as is evident. Over her pictures lies a calm current, languor, peace and delightful equilibrium, along with feminine patience and sensitivity”.⁹²⁶

This is also a familiar theme in terms of coverage of women artists. Júlíana had perpetuated the Icelandic core, despite having lived overseas for decades, but at the end of the article come words such as “languor”, “peace”, “feminine patience” and “sensitivity”. Not least was it important for Júlíana Sveinsdóttir to “know her limitations”: she had achieved a lot because she knew her limitations and did not take on too much. It is acceptable to take up space for oneself, but it may not be so big that it overshadows others and it is for others to decide how big the space is when discussing art. The discourse is almost enchanting at first, then becomes dampening, reductionist. This is also reflected in *Morgunblaðið* on the coverage of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s exhibition: that Júlíana Sveinsdóttir “did not take on too much when she

⁹²⁵ Haraldur Hamar [H.H], “Sýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Frjáls þjóð*, 6, no. 36 (1957), 2.

⁹²⁶ Ragnar Jónsson, “Myndlist. Yfirlitssýning á verkum Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur í Listasafni ríkisins, 14. sept.–6. okt. 1957”, *Nýtt Helgafell* 2, no. 4 (1957), 202–204.

dedicated herself to art. In Denmark, where she has lived for long periods ever since she started her education, she has gained such a reputation that for many years she has been one of the best-known painters in that country”. Nonetheless, she is connected by “loyal and indissoluble bonds to her native country” and “Iceland lives in her paintings”.⁹²⁷

If, as before, there is discussion about whether Júlíana is Icelandic or Danish in her art, there is a similar debate about whether her artworks are abstract. But it is also a sensitive issue, as the abstract movement “pertained” to the younger generation of artists and there were few who fulfilled the criteria that lived up to that name. Abstract forms can always be found in Júlíana’s weaving, although rarely is mention made of that word in connection with her weaving at that time. However, Nína Tryggvadóttir was an exception, writing in *Morgunblaðið* (1957) that Júlíana was one of the leading painters that Iceland owns, and that few painters “have sensed the Icelandic landscape better” than Júlíana. On Júlíana’s weaving, Nína said that abstract weaving that is closely related to abstract modernism in art can be found in it, and that it is one of the best that she has seen. Nína then writes “Welcome home, Júlíana”, and congratulated her on the success of her work.⁹²⁸

Valtýr Pétursson also wrote laudably about Júlíana’s exhibition, but there is a question, he says, about this grand silence about her and her work and why Júlíana did not occupy the place that she deserved in Icelandic art. This was actually timely and meaningful, a “question of conscience” (i. samvizkuspurning) for Icelanders—the real conscience of the nation in art. That Júlíana, as a painter, had maybe been obliged to live in Denmark because her paintings were different to other Icelandic painters, where the landscape, “a mountain view”, was the main factor. Her textile art had kept her name alive and is world-class, and Júlíana was one of “the most remarkable women of our times”.⁹²⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson wrote a very positive article on this milestone of Júlíana’s and writes in detail about her weaving and the respect she had earned in Denmark.⁹³⁰ Hence, it can be said that it was not until the exhibition in 1957 in Iceland that Júlíana’s textile art attracted a great deal of attention, along with her life work as an Icelandic woman artist.

The year 1957 seems to give us a number of illustrative examples on gendered public discourse on art in Iceland. Valtýr Pétursson’s works were exhibited in 1957 in a special

⁹²⁷ “Sýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Morgunblaðið* (Reykjavíkurbref), September 15, 1957, 9.

⁹²⁸ Nína Tryggvadóttir, “Listsýning Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur. Abstrakt list úr íslenzku bandi”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 14, 1957, 3.

⁹²⁹ Valtýr Pétursson, “Yfirlitssýning á verkum Júlíönu Sveinsdóttur”, *Morgunblaðið*, October 1, 1957, 6.

⁹³⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, “Júlíana Sveinsdóttir”, *Nýi tíminn*, October 10, 1957, 4 and 8.

“exhibition window” run by the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* and are discussed in the paper. Valtýr Pétursson’s art was “masculine and hardy”, and although he had spent a lot of time abroad, especially in Paris, that influence had surprisingly little effect on his art “because the man himself is so steadfast and unlikely to be prey to new isms”. If some influence from southern Europe can be detected, “it is the Icelandic climate and robustness of the Nordic race that has the upper hand”. It is the male artist from the rugged North, with the robustness of the Nordic race, who manages to harness the south: he is not gullible, always independent.⁹³¹

This is reminiscent of much of what was written about Thorvaldsen’s art in 1875: on the Nordic nature of the artist that is equilibrical, and that he was an Icelander who harnesses the south (the feminine, gullible) and the Nordic (masculine, robustness, intractability). It was actually this description that caught the attention of the satirical journal *Spegillinn*. An extract from *Spegillinn* said sarcastically that luckily, “the Icelandic climate and robustness of the Nordic race” has tolerated and still tolerates a little of the “French breeze, as all imitation is foreign to an independent artist”.⁹³²

The year 1959 marked the seventieth birthday of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, and artist Svavar Guðnason wrote a complimentary article about her in the women’s periodical *Melkorka*.⁹³³ He mentioned her education, the respect and awards she had earned in Denmark, and her work with different judging committees, councils and executive committees in that country. Svavar considered her to belong to the group of the main pioneers of new art genres in Iceland and it was very fortunate that those pioneers succeeded so well with their efforts—and in fact it was perhaps no coincidence “that exemplary people were selected in the vanguard, and it should come as no surprise, if thinking about it, how much courage and energy was needed to risk starting this experiment”. Nonetheless, Svavar said that “in Iceland, in her mother country, I feel that Júlíana is not valued as much as she should be, or as might be expected, though it could be said that this is to some extent understandable as she has lived and worked abroad for the greater part of her life, though it could be said that her art has become increasingly understood recently”.

Admitting to not being able to answer the question of what was most remarkable about Júlíana’s paintings, Svavar then said that the characteristic is that “it is always clear what is important”, whether the painting is from Vestmannaeyjar or of flowers in a window by Øresund.

⁹³¹ “Listkynning Mbl. Valtýr Pétursson”, *Morgunblaðið*, February 24, 1957, 1.

⁹³² “Úr heimi myndlistarinnar”, *Spegillinn*, 32, no. 3 (1957), 63–64.

⁹³³ Svavar Guðnason, “Júlíana sjötug”, *Melkorka*, 15, no. 3 (1959), 74–75.

At the same time, Svavar asked Júlíana “to excuse these few words. I congratulate Icelanders—not least the young—on having her on this birthday of hers, and wish Júlíana herself to live as long as possible”. Svavar Guðnason, who was one of the most esteemed artists here in Iceland and in Denmark, was very aware of how respected Júlíana Sveinsdóttir was in Denmark. It must be said that this tribute of the artist to seventy-year-old Júlíana with her long and successful career, published in the women’s periodical *Melkorka*, is in many ways remarkable, but unfortunately rare at the time. What is perhaps noteworthy here is that although Svavar named her as one of the group of pioneers, he was hesitant and in fact did not trust himself to define or describe either Júlíana’s work or her personality. This would have been unheard of with other (male) pioneers, and in fact was a leitmotif in writings about male artists by men—but as before, this did not apply to women artists, even after a long and successful career.

4.3. Women artists and cultural citizenship

4.3.1. *On recognition in foreign countries and shattered self-esteem*

Although gendered assumptions were a guideline in the international context as well as in Iceland, for the 1950s as well as the whole period under study, as argued in this thesis Icelandic women seem to have enjoyed more neutral and open-minded assessment of their art abroad. In the international context, their cultural citizenship was more activated there than “at home”.

Nína Tryggvadóttir, who was living in Paris at that time, held an exhibition in the respected Galerie Arnaud in 1956. Nína had begun to work in stained glass in the mid-1950s, and held a solo exhibition of glass works at Galerie La Roue in Paris at the end of 1958—this was the first time that an artist had devoted a whole exhibition to abstract glass works in that city.⁹³⁴ Nína participated every year in the esteemed exhibitions in the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* in Paris during the period 1953 to 1957 and exhibited at solo exhibitions and numerous collective exhibitions all over Europe. Seuphor continued to be a strong supporter of Nína Tryggvadóttir and wrote a book about her that came out in Icelandic in 1958. In the book, Seuphor said that Nína played a splendid role in modern art and that the couple, Nína and Alcoplay, had taken “an active part in the shaping of abstract art in Paris”.⁹³⁵ Writing about

⁹³⁴ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að þjóna sannleikanum: Um list Nínu Tryggvadóttur”, 51.

⁹³⁵ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Ljóðræn abstraktlist”, 187–188.

Nína, Seuphor said that when it comes to Icelandic abstract painters, “the most powerful of them” was a woman, Nína Tryggvadóttir, and her painting was “solid, powerful, sound”.⁹³⁶

Nína Tryggvadóttir lived in London during the period 1957 to 1959 and held a solo exhibition in Institute of Contemporary Art (1958) and also in Drian Gallery (1959). But gendered discourse is never far away and a critic of the British art magazine *Apollo* (1959), which is referred to in *Morgunblaðið*, said for instance about the work of Nína Tryggvadóttir, “that finally we have a woman painter with work that is not too decorative or too refined.” Nína’s paintings are very colourful and a long way from “being up in the clouds”.⁹³⁷ But the critic in *The Times* emphasized that Nína Tryggvadóttir was “the only Icelandic artist who enjoys international recognition. Her imagery is characterized by formal abstraction that is particularly linked to [Serge] Poliakoff, although her arrangement in broad forms that resembles stones is considerably looser and the colour and handling more powerful”.⁹³⁸

At the same time, Nína’s paintings were sometimes compared to the French–Russian artist Nicolas de Staël. Nína denied any influence from that direction, and rightly so, as the colourful and substantial works that she exhibited in New York were done before de Staël showed his first work of this kind in the years 1949–1950. This was confirmed by Seuphor and in 1948 Nína exhibited paintings in New York “that resembled those that the painter de Staël did several years later”. Furthermore, he wrote that “though she has made a niche for herself within a group of the most progressive artists in Paris, at that venue she is no follower”. Art historian Ásdís Ólafsdóttir argues that there was no direct link, but Nína “paid for being in the shadow of her more famous male colleagues on the mainland”.⁹³⁹ However, this was not a one-off, but rather one of many leitmotifs in the discourse on art: that male artists are influential and women artists are under their influence—not in the noble, patrilineal way, but as impressionable, susceptible women.

In 1958 Gerður Helgadóttir, who was already well known on the art scene in Paris, exhibited with Valgerður Árnadóttir Hafstað in Galerie La Roue in Paris. Gerður had exhibited

⁹³⁶ Michel Seuphor, *N. Tryggvadóttir* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1958), 14–15. In the comprehensive book *L’Art abstrait*, Seuphor considered Nína to be the most important Icelandic abstract painter. Michel Seuphor, *L’Art abstrait* (Paris: Maeght, 1971).

⁹³⁷ “Nína Tryggvadóttir hélt þrjár sýningar erlendis á sl. ári. Vinnur nú að gluggum í kirkju í Þýskalandi”, *Morgunblaðið*, August 27, 1959, 6.

⁹³⁸ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Ljóðræn abstraktlist”, 188.

⁹³⁹ Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Ljóðræn abstraktlist”, 188. As Ásdís Ólafsdóttir points out, as masculine bias was ongoing, she was overshadowed by her male colleagues and for that reason the acquisitions department of the Museum of Modern Art decided against purchasing a work by Nína in 1961. See, Ásdís Ólafsdóttir, “Að þjóna sannleikanum: Um list Nínu Tryggvadóttur”, 56.

there earlier that year, but this was the first time for Valgerður.⁹⁴⁰ When a group of Icelandic artists participated in the eighth Nordic exhibition in Gothenburg in 1958, Nína Tryggvadóttir exhibited glassworks and was named “Iceland’s best artist” by one of the critics in Sweden, and one who deserved without doubt the “most substantial contribution” on Iceland’s part.⁹⁴¹

That same year, an Icelandic artist who had aroused attention in New York, Louisa Matthíasdóttir, is discussed in *Morgunblaðið*; Louisa exhibited her work in Tanager Gallery and the article refers to the known art critic for *Art News*, James Schuyler, who wrote there “that the woman artist has achieved an amazing grasp of the form of the human body in her paintings” and that in the paintings of her daughter, Temma Bell, “the stamp is bold and devoid of sentimentality—the material and equilibrium of the painting appears to be the most important ...”.⁹⁴² Louisa had held an independent exhibition in New York in 1948, in the group exhibition room of Jane Street Gallery which she had founded with several young painters, including her artist husband, Leland Bell. *Morgunblaðið* also wrote that the painter and critic Elaine de Kooning had written about the exhibition in the November edition of *Art News* and said for instance that “an Icelandic woman artist, who studied in Paris and with Hans Hofmann in New York, is exhibiting at the moment very original paintings of life here at her first independent exhibition”.⁹⁴³

The conclusion of the article on Louisa Matthíasdóttir in *Morgunblaðið* notes that she had achieved remarkable art victories in the hard competition that prevails in the art realm in the USA and that it should be expected “that the leaders of Icelandic painting should have the decency to get some of Louisa’s works back home to Iceland and to give Icelanders the chance to become introduced to this idiosyncratic woman artist who is not one for pushing herself forward in the manner of some of them who have less talent”.⁹⁴⁴

The women’s periodicals such as *19. júní* were now regularly publishing pictures of works by women artists, along with articles on them. Front cover pictures of women artists appeared in *19. júní* from 1951 to 1970, along with pictures of women in other artistic fields: Nína Sæmundsson (1951), Tove Ólafsson (1952), Greta Björnsson (1953), Kristín Jónsdóttir (1954), Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir (1955), Ólöf Pálsdóttir (1956), Nína Tryggvadóttir (1957) and

⁹⁴⁰ “Íslensk myndlist í París”, *Alþýðublaðið*, Mars 1, 1958, 2

⁹⁴¹ “Hvað sögðu Norðurlandablöðin um þátt Íslendinga í Gautaborgarsýningunni?”, *Þjóðviljinn*, May 7, 1958, 7 and 10.

⁹⁴² S.A.M., “Íslensk listakona fær góða dóma í New York. Louisa Matthíasdóttir hefur haldið þar tvær sjálfstæðar málverkasýningar”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 9, 1958, 11.

⁹⁴³ “Íslensk listakona fær góða dóma í New York”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 9, 1958, 11.

⁹⁴⁴ “Íslensk listakona fær góða dóma í New York”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 9, 1958, 11.

Gerður Helgadóttir (1959). There is a feature on Júlíana Sveinsdóttir in *19. júní* (1958), which drew attention to how much prestige she was enjoying in Denmark, and how she also has been sitting on the council of the Academy in recent years, in addition to which she had become the “first Icelandic artist to tackle mosaic and fresco painting”.⁹⁴⁵ In the same issue, the Danish–Icelandic Elsa E. Guðjónsson drew attention to the contribution of painter Sigurður Guðmundsson and the Icelandic women’s national costume.⁹⁴⁶ This article is written with great knowledge of the subject as Elsa became an expert on traditional Icelandic embroidery; she left behind a large number of articles on the subject, which were a wonderful scholarly addition to the articles and reviews that had appeared in the women’s periodicals for decades.⁹⁴⁷

Increased emphasis was put on beautifying the environment with sculptures in public spaces in Reykjavík, which also provided artists with an opportunity to do works for public buildings. Sculpture is especially seen in public spaces and is generally funded by public bodies, but public art was actually not recorded in Iceland until after 1950, and many changes occurred after 1955. In the first half of the century these were memorials to dead men, as the State was only interested in art that centred on remarkable men in events in Iceland’s history. But similarly, many disputes arose over public opinion and what should be erected in public spaces: the most famous of these disputes were over Ásmundur Sveinsson’s *Vatnsberinn* and then Nína Sæmundson’s *Hafmeyjan*.

Most of Ásmundur Sveinsson’s works had been ordered by community associations. The Reykjavík mayor, Gunnar Thoroddsen, was part of the *Reykjavík Beautification Association* (i. Fegrunarfélag Reyjavíkur) which was set up in 1948; one of the first things this Committee did was to buy *Vatnsberinn* (e. The Water Carrier) by Ásmundur Sveinsson. This statue was not at all similar to what the public were used to: though it was simple in form, it was a cumbersome, massive statue that underlined the difficult toil of the women who carried water year-round to every household in town and are groaning under the weight. The work was supposed to be set up in the middle of Reykjavík, but loud acrimonious protests resulted in the work ending up for a while at Ásmundur’s home in 1954 (and it was not set up again until 1967). Ásmundur had strong backing and a special association was founded (i. Ásmundarfélag), to promote the distribution of his works. For instance, publications and articles on Ásmundur

⁹⁴⁵ Sigurður J. Magnússon, “Júlíana Sveinsdóttir”, *19. júní*, 8, no. 1 (1958), 7.

⁹⁴⁶ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, “Sigurður málarí og íslenzki kvenbúningurinn”, *19. júní*, 8, no. 1 (1958), 13–18.

⁹⁴⁷ Elsa had completed studies in costume theory, art and art history at the University of Seattle in 1945 and had then completed a master’s degree in these disciplines, together with the history of the Middle Ages, in 1961.

were written by Björn Th. Björnsson and Halldór Laxness which, according to art historian Gunnar J. Árnason, “finally clinched his position in Icelandic artistic life”.⁹⁴⁸ The animosity in this matter is in some way related to the fate of Nína Sæmundsson’s *Hafmeyjan*.

Nína Sæmundsson, who had moved back to Iceland in 1955 after 40 years abroad, was now approaching her late sixties. In *Melkorka* there is a short piece about Nína, who opened an exhibition of 30 sculptures and paintings in Bogasalur in the National Museum and as the article said, it was eight years since she had last held an exhibition.⁹⁴⁹ The year before, the National Gallery had purchased the work *Á hverfanda hveli* (e. Maelstrom, from 1935), which was shown at the exhibition; Guðmundur Einarsson said that her work bears a “mark of great maturity and skill”, along with a search for a new form, albeit it is “sometimes somewhat far-fetched, but always with feminine charm and great skill”.⁹⁵⁰ Overall, as it is worded in *Vísir*, Nína Sæmundsson has “carried Iceland’s reputation far and wide with her genius works and will hopefully continue to do so, with increasing renown for many years to come”.⁹⁵¹

Abstract art was still a dominant style in Iceland in 1955, though the public were still not at all happy with the movement, not least in the public space. Nína had some projects in Iceland, and it was the city government and Reykjavík Art Works Committee (i. Listaverkanefnd Reykjavíkur) that bought her work *Hafmeyjan*. The Committee had been founded on the anniversary of Reykjavík town, 18 August 1954, with the task of making proposals to the town council and mayor on choice and location of sculptures and decorations in ornamental gardens and in other open areas, as well as on the decoration of public buildings, inside and out, with sculptures, paintings, or other art works. On the Committee were poet Tómas Guðmundsson, along with art historian Björn Th. Björnsson, art historian Selma Jónsdóttir, economist Sveinn Ásgeirsson and Vilhjálmur Þ. Gíslason, who was Chair of the *Reykjavík Beautification Association*.⁹⁵²

After the travels of the plaster model of *Hafmeyjan* from California, Nína started work on a new version in Florence in 1957 and a bronze cast of the work was then transported to Reykjavík. *Hafmeyjan* was unveiled in Reykjavík on 29 August 1959, where it sat on a grey marble stone in the Tjörninn lake in the city centre. Many considered this to be a fitting tribute

⁹⁴⁸ Gunnar J. Árnason, “Áskoranir nútímans”, 237–244.

⁹⁴⁹ “Nína Sæmundsson myndhöggvari”, *Melkorka*, 11, no. 3 (1955), 70.

⁹⁵⁰ Guðmundur Einarsson frá Miðdal, “Listsýning Nínu Sæmundsson”, *Vísir*, October 12, 1955, 3.

⁹⁵¹ “Frá listaferli Nínu Sæmundsson”, *Vísir*, October 21, 1955, 3 and 10. See also, Minutes of the Education Board (February 11, March 18 and June 25, 1954), on the purchase of the work *Á hverfanda hveli*, or Maelstrom, from 1935.

⁹⁵² “Stofnuð listaverkanefnd Reykjavíkur”, *Tíminn*, August 24, 1954, 3.

to the artist and her return home, but by no means everyone was satisfied on the issue. It was primarily the *Association of Icelandic Artists'* exhibition committee that expressed their displeasure with the decision publicly in papers, pointing out that they had not been approached for proposals concerning the choice and location “of the sculpture that now disfigures the Tjörnin in Reykjavík”, as they were quoted in *Alþýðublaðið*, and had not listened to the *Association of Icelandic Artists* exhibition committee that had the right to make proposals on the location of art works in public spaces.⁹⁵³ On both the exhibition committee and the Board of the Association, there were only male artists.⁹⁵⁴

Despite this displeasure, *Hafmeyjan* stayed put in the Tjörnin lake, though only for a few additional months. On New Year's Eve 1960, it was blown up and parts of the statue lay like pieces of wood on the ice-covered Tjörnin. Inevitably, suspicion was directed at the men who had protested the most about the location of the statue, but they denied doing it. The Icelandic satirical periodical *Spegillinn* covered the matter, like all the newspapers, and said: “We shall consider that *Hafmeyjan* had been abstract, as we artists wanted it to be, but that it had only become more abstract than before, smashed into an even greater art work with new, unknown forms—but to discover new and new forms is the purpose of art, otherwise it is of no cultural value.”⁹⁵⁵ According to a letter sent to the periodical *Nýtt Helgafell* (1959) about the work, all the Committee members had unanimously supported the transportation of the work to Reykjavík, “except for the female art historian”.⁹⁵⁶

In a similar way to the tone of the whole article, disparaging words are used to describe the whole Committee and it is underlined that the only woman member—Selma Jónsdóttir—had been against the work. It is certainly astonishing that this was the case, but the opposition to the work was vocal in newspapers and periodicals; this seemed to apply especially to a small group of men, as little was heard from women. The article in *Nýtt Helgafell* (signed only by the initials P.B.) also says that in fact it should take no one by surprise that the work of Nína Sæmundsson had suffered this fate. And in fact the initial response to the news had been “to

⁹⁵³ “Hafmeyjan. Yfirlýsing frá sýningarnefnd Félags íslenzkra myndlistarmanna”, *Alþýðublaðið*, September 19, 1959, 5.

⁹⁵⁴ On the board of the *Association of Icelandic Artists* were Sigurður Sigurðsson (chairman), Benedikt Gunnarsson and Valtýr Pétursson. On the exhibition board were Sigurður Sigurðsson, Þorvaldur Skúlason, Jóhannes Jóhannesson, Karl Kvaran, Hjörleifur Sigurðsson, Ásmundur Sveinsson, Sigurjón Ólafsson and Magnús Árnason. Representatives at the Annual Meeting of the Icelandic Artists Association (BÍL) were: Sigurður Sigurðsson, Jóhannes Jóhannesson, Kjartan Guðjónsson, Karl Kvaran and Hörður Ágústsson. See, “Aðalfundur Félags ísl. myndlistarmanna”, *Morgunblaðið*, December 2, 1958, 23.

⁹⁵⁵ “Gróðamelsbréf”, *Spegillinn*, 35, no. 1 (1960), 17.

⁹⁵⁶ B., “Úr einu í annað”, *Nýtt Helgafell*, 4, no. 3–4 (1959), 228–229.

laugh at the final destiny of the poor mermaid”, as the work had no business being in this country.⁹⁵⁷

Twelve days after this evil act was performed, various newspapers were sent an anonymous letter written by one of the perpetrators who, as the letter pointed out, were more than one; the letter was published by *Morgunblaðið* and *Þjóðviljinn*, among others.⁹⁵⁸ The letter said that the “initiator” of the act of blowing up the *Hafmeyjan* statue had found himself forced to write a few words about it, “because of the sharp discussion”. The letter said that it had not been “the work of a crazy kid” with “uncontrollable appetite for damage” but rather had been “executed by a group consisting of a few people, with precise deliberation and preparation” and that the greatest care was taken to prevent accidents to people.

The letter also said that an act like this did not “comply with the social rules of Icelanders” but for a long time, harsh criticism had been directed at this statue and its location and it was alleged that this was “an emergency measure”. Although Nína Sæmundsson has “proved that she is a true artist who is a credit to her profession, it is clear that she has failed this time”. This statue, “this awful freak”, must surely “abuse people’s sense of beauty and bring shame on town and country”.

Svavar Guðnason, who was the chairman of BÍL (*Bandalags íslenskra listamanna*, or The Federation of Icelandic Artists) condemned the action and said that no one had the right to destroy an art work, except for its author. It was never discovered who the person or people were who took part in the action. But it is known that this unprecedented act greatly affected many people, not least the artist herself. Nína Sæmundsson later said about the incident: “I am not ashamed of it [*Hafmeyjan*] but it hurts me that it is not set up again. That someone should commit to injuring my child deliberately is too dreadful to think about. I was deeply affected by it, and something died inside me that will never live again.” It says in the interview that her eyes fill with tears when she recalls the incident, then says: “In autumn I intend to have an exhibition here in Reykjavík. Both of sculptures and paintings. I don’t feel properly at home in Iceland after all the years abroad, but I would be content if I could just get some proper working space. Iceland is so beautiful, and here everything is on its way up. I am proud of my fellow Icelanders when I see what has been achieved in a few decades. If they continue to develop in

⁹⁵⁷ B., “Úr einu í annað”, *Nýtt Helgafell*, 4, no. 3–4 (1959), 228–229.

⁹⁵⁸ “Verkið “unnið af fámennum hóp eftir nákvæma yfirvegum og undirbúning”, *Þjóðviljinn*, January 12, 1960, 1 and 3; “Sprenging Hafmeyjunnar: Unnið af fámennum hóp eftir nákvæma yfirvegum og undirbúning”, *Morgunblaðið*, January 12, 1960, 1 and 19.

a similar way, they can be happy and elated ... I wish the best for Iceland and all Icelanders—God knows that.”⁹⁵⁹

As previously stated, Nina lived for years with scriptwriter Polly James in Hollywood. When Nína moved to Iceland, she had a close relationship with the piano player Sesselja Stefánsdóttir. Little is known about their relationship, but some have claimed that it was not well seen by citizens in Reykjavík; and might even have been one of the reasons why *Hafmeyjan* was destroyed.⁹⁶⁰ This sad event and shameful spot in Icelandic art history, or history in general, was not covered in the women’s periodicals. Once again, it should be mentioned that a solo exhibition of Nína’s works was not held in Iceland but in Charlottenborg in Copenhagen in 1960, which showed her well-deserved honour on the foreign scene.⁹⁶¹

4.3.2. Selma Jónsdóttir: Art historian and multifaceted pioneer

It is strange that nothing was written about the fate of *Hafmeyjan* in the women’s periodicals, as if a general silencing on the matter had prevailed and people were afraid to take a stand in writing. However, there was continued positive coverage on women artists and perhaps even more than before, like in *Melkorka* (1960), where pictures were published of the work of nine women artists. Although the coverage of the women artists is not comprehensive, this is an indicator to a group of women who are telling stories, heroic stories.⁹⁶² The article stated that “purposeful art”, i.e. whereby women take the learning path and gather trends and isms from other countries in order to use them in Icelandic art, did not start before the first half of the twentieth century.⁹⁶³

The article not only discussed the acknowledged women pioneers, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Kristín Jónsdóttir, but also the very first, Kristín Vídalín Jacobson. Other women artists follow in their wake, in some kind of short analysis of the art history of Icelandic women. Moreover, the considerable contribution of the foreign women artists who married Icelandic men is spotlighted. Finally, it should be said that gobelin and applied arts were treated as visual

⁹⁵⁹ Nína Sæmundsson held her last private exhibition in the National Museum’s Archery Hall (Bogasalur) later this year, 1963. See, Hrafnhildur Schram, *Nína Sæmundsson 1892–1965*, 143–153; S. S. B. “Nína Sæmundsson myndhöggvari segir frá lífi sínu og listferli”, *Vísir*, June 18, 1963, 8–10.

⁹⁶⁰ Kolbrún Bergþórsdóttir, “Nína í Hollywood”, *Dagblaðið-Vísir*, November 6, 2015, 18–19.

⁹⁶¹ Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir, “Höggmyndir í Reykjavík og New York”, *Konur sem kjósa. Aldarsaga*. ed. Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2020), 392–393.

⁹⁶² “Nokkrar íslenskar listakonur”, *Melkorka*, 16, no. 1 (1960), 18–21.

⁹⁶³ “Nokkrar íslenskar listakonur”, *Melkorka*, 16, no. 1 (1960), 18–21.

arts; women contribute greatly to these, and have always done so, but now many women had made a niche for themselves, attracted attention and won prizes overseas. Nevertheless, it must be considered odd that in the article written only a short time after the sad fate of *Hafmeyjan*, Nína Sæmundsson is not named.

That same year, great tidings came in women's history, or as *Húsfreyjan* words it: "At long last the event has happened: a woman has written and defended a doctoral thesis at the University of Iceland." This was art historian Selma Jónsdóttir, who became the first woman to earn a doctorate from the University of Iceland for her thesis, and *Húsfreyjan* "congratulates Dr Selma for the recognition that she has received for her fine work, that amateurs will read for pleasure no less than the learned. Hopefully, her work will stimulate intellectual Icelandic women to action".⁹⁶⁴ This notable turning point, historical tidings no less—that the first woman shall defend a doctoral thesis at the University of Iceland, and what's more a remarkable thesis—was reported in many newspapers.⁹⁶⁵

An interview by Elsa E. Guðjónsson with Selma Jónsdóttir in *19. júní* "revealed" that in her thesis *Dómsdagurinn í Flatatungu* (An 11th-century Byzantine Last Judgement in Iceland), she researched engravings on 13 wooden boards, the remains of a large mural that would have been in a hut at Flatatunga in Skagafjörður. These boards were kept at the National Museum. The pictures on the boards had "posed a considerable enigma", but based on the subject matter and style of the pictures, Selma demonstrated that these carved wooden boards from Flatatunga had originated as part of a medieval Last Judgement scene in the Byzantine style, and that the style was closely related to the art that developed in the Monte Cassino monastery in Southern Italy after the mid-eleventh century.

It also said in *19. júní*: "Dr Selma has performed her scientific work in private and it thus came as a great surprise to many when she presented her doctoral thesis in the latter half of winter 1959." It then came to light, as Selma says in the interview, that few had known about her earlier research.⁹⁶⁶ In direct continuation, Selma said she was of the opinion that in Iceland some further relics of the Byzantine influence in the eleventh century must surely be found, as there had been great chieftains at that time and they had been in close connection with the world outside and open to innovations. The remarkable man, "great farmer or chieftain in Flatatunga,

⁹⁶⁴ "Dr. phil. Selma Jónsdóttir", *Húsfreyjan*, 11, no. 1 (1960), 34.

⁹⁶⁵ "Doktorsvörn Selmu fór fram í gær", *Þjóðviljinn*, January 17, 1960, 12; Selma Jónsdóttir, *Býsönsk dómsdagsmynd í Flatatungu* (Reykjavík: Almenna Bókafélagið, 1959).

⁹⁶⁶ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, "Ég er alltaf að leita. Viðtal við dr. Selmu Jónsdóttur listfræðing", *19. júní*, 10, no. 1 (1960), 9–10.

who undauntingly had such a large picture made, new both in subject matter and style. Who, for instance, would have wanted to set up a large abstract mural here in Reykjavík 20–30 years ago?”⁹⁶⁷ At the end of the interview in *19. júní*, Selma says that she is “always searching”, and that here in Iceland there are so many historical art projects to grapple with, such as contemporary art that is enjoyable “to follow, to see what is happening today, and all the new things that are emerging with the contemporary artists, both at home and abroad. Perhaps the period of contemporary art is the most striking in all the history of art”. In the *Melkorka* interview with Selma Jónsdóttir, it is mentioned that she is “not only the first Icelandic woman but also the first Icelander to complete a university degree in art history”.⁹⁶⁸

At that point in time, Selma had been director for a decade and in the interview she covers the history and development of Icelandic art over half a century and discusses the turning point of 1951 when the National Gallery opens in new premises in the National Museum and ordinary people were given the chance to get to know Icelandic art and see the art works that had been bought as well as several foreign works. The National Gallery had a dual role: to present Icelandic art, both in Iceland and abroad, and to introduce foreign works here in Iceland: this was an important task and a requirement “to nurture the taste of the nation for good art”.⁹⁶⁹

The most urgent tasks in the future, Selma says, are to build a new art gallery. Several funds had been set up that were destined for Kjarval’s substantial donations that were supposed to be used for a Kjarval building, but the artist himself, says Selma, did not want a special gallery, and she adds: “Special collections petrify like night trolls, become a dead man’s house. All good art tolerates comparison well: art should be compared to other art, whether it be older or younger”. In addition to the importance of erecting a national gallery, Selma says that other municipalities should also erect art galleries that would become a “cultural boon” to them. Selma also says that art “is no leisure pastime” and that it requires undivided attention, and thus artists should be provided with annual salaries for one or two years.⁹⁷⁰

By that time, Selma Jónsdóttir had been head of the National Gallery for ten years and had introduced many novelties, besides being a pioneer in the field of art research and museum practice in Iceland. The National Gallery became the site of a systematic collection of Icelandic

⁹⁶⁷ Elsa E. Guðjónsson, “Ég er alltaf að leita. Viðtal við dr. Selmu Jónsdóttur listfræðing”, *19. júní*, 10, no. 1 (1960), 9–10.

⁹⁶⁸ Guðrún Einarisdóttir, “Viðtal við dr. Selmu Jónsdóttur listfræðing”, *Melkorka*, 16, no. 1 (1960), 17. This is also mentioned in *Nýtt kvennablað*, 21, no. 1 (1960), II.

⁹⁶⁹ Selma Jónsdóttir, “Þróun íslenskrar myndlistar í 50 ár”, *Vísir*, December 14, 1960, 24–28.

⁹⁷⁰ Selma Jónsdóttir, “Þróun íslenskrar myndlistar í 50 ár”, *Vísir*, December 14, 1960, 24–28.

art. Nonetheless, it is fairly clear that it was the work of the younger artists that Selma recommended, though the Education Board did not always agree and had the last word.⁹⁷¹ Yet it was also in 1960 that Iceland first took part in the Venice Biennale, when works by Ásmundur Sveinsson (3 sculptures) and Kjarval (10 oil paintings) were selected; these works were chosen by a special selection committee composed of Selma Jónsdóttir, Sigurður Sigurðson, Valtýr Pétursson and Hjörleifur Sigurðsson.⁹⁷²

It was not until 1961 that the National Gallery would become an independent body; that year, the Education Board completely ceased all dealings with the Gallery. When this happened, two applied for the position of director, the art historians Selma Jónsdóttir and Björn Th. Björnsson, and Selma was engaged. In the wake of this, Selma concentrated on reorganizing the National Gallery, partly with the purchase of more modern Icelandic art.⁹⁷³

4.4. *Íslenzk myndlist*: confluence of gendered discourse on art

Ragnar Jónsson, who has been mentioned in connection with Unuhús, as an art critic, and an influential cultural entrepreneur at this time, had donated his large art collection, most of which consisted of work done after 1930, to the *Icelandic Confederation of Labour* (i. Alþýðusamband Íslands, A.S.Í.) in 1961.⁹⁷⁴ This collection of an individual was of great value, a generous “gift to the people”. Ragnar got Björn Th. Björnsson to write the history of Icelandic art, and when

⁹⁷¹ In the years 1958–1960, 65 works by male artists were bought but 18 by women. See Minutes of the Education Board (1958 to 1960).

⁹⁷² “Myndir eftir Ásmund og Kjarval á Biennale”, *Vísir*, May 16, 1960, 6. The first Icelandic woman artist who was Iceland’s representative at the Venice Biennale was Steina Vasulka (Steinunn Bjarnadóttir Vasulka) in 1997.

⁹⁷³ See, “Miklar breytingar á Listasafni ríkisins”, *Tíminn*, April 16, 1961, 16; “Tveir sækja um forstöðu Listasafnsins”, *Tíminn*, June 25, 1961, 2; “Selma Jónsdóttir veitir Listasafninu forstöðu áfram”, *Alþýðublaðið*, July 2, 1961, 3. Changes now occurred such that a special National Gallery Board, or *Listasafnsráð*, was elected, composed of artists who were selected by their fellow artists. However, this immediately became a matter of dispute as not all artists had eligibility to vote or were eligible for office on the Board. Among the artists to whom this applied were Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson. See, “Einkennilegar kosningar myndlistarmanna”, *Núttíminn*, September 16, 1961, 1. Artist Finnur Jónsson also wrote about this and in a letter sent to *Morgunblaðið* he criticized that these two women artists shall not be on the electoral roll. See, Finnur Jónsson, “Kosning í safnráð”, *Morgunblaðið*, September 26, 1961, 15. This is answered two days later by Sigurður Sigurðsson, Chair of the *Association of Icelandic Artists*, in an interview in *Vísir*: “Finnur [Jónsson] says that missing from the electoral roll are two Icelandic women artists who have achieved fame abroad. Now, it is just the case with these two fine women that they have lived overseas for years, and are they not foreign citizens? Is it right that they have electoral rights here in Iceland? See, “Kálgarður og kosningar í listasafnsráð”, *Vísir*, September 28, 1961, 9–10.

⁹⁷⁴ The collection of 1961 contained 120 works, but some time later another 27 works were added. Of the total of 147 works in Ragnar’s collection, only 13 are by women (of which 8 are by Nína Tryggvadóttir). See, Kristín G. Guðnadóttir, “Til að mennta almenning í málalari”, *Gjöfin til íslenzkrar alþýðu* (Gift to the people), ed. Elísabet Gunnarsdóttir (Reykjavík: Listasafn A.S.Í, 2019), 14–42 and 240–247.

the first of two volumes came out in 1964, Ragnar presented 5000 copies of it at a ceremony, stipulating that the proceeds of the book should go towards the building of an art gallery, for the *Icelandic Confederation of Labour*.⁹⁷⁵

As mentioned above, *Íslenzk myndlist* was published in two volumes, the first in 1964 and the second in 1973. This was the first comprehensive history of Icelandic art, covering the period from the late nineteenth century up until the late 1940s. Indeed, it is still used as a reference in Icelandic art history. It should be mentioned that the first word in the title of Björns's art history is *Drög* (e. Draft), a safety net in case something was missing, and of course that is the case in art history: not everyone can be named. But it is not only that many women (and some men) were missing. The most important factor is that the gendered discourse on Icelandic art, which has been traced here from the latter half of the nineteenth century and has been unveiled and analysed, is confirmed and documented in this very formative art history, the canon of Björn Th. Björnsson, and that even today it has a part in maintaining the gendered discourse of the time period that has been discussed here. And as a *Draft*, it surely opens the possibility of creating more than one version.

In his Icelandic art history, *Íslenzk myndlist*, Björn explained how the emergence of interest in art and art revival during the second half of the nineteenth century was driven by upper class women, “the daughters and wives of officials”.⁹⁷⁶

In fact, they were the ones who made up the bourgeoisie in Reykjavík. They had a reasonable amount of spare time, the will—or vanity—to educate themselves as was the fashion abroad, and were the only ones to have living room walls on which to hang pictures. In state of mind, their husbands were still half farmers, absorbed in farming tasks and national issues.

Women from prosperous homes in Iceland who studied art in Copenhagen are characterized as amateurs, dilettantes, women who only studied art abroad because it was a fashion, a tradition within the bourgeoisie. Björn cast their studies aside as a leisure activity with limited value—such a craft was only intended to decorate walls in their own homes (while

⁹⁷⁵ “Ragnar Jónsson gefur A.S.Í. 5000 eintaka upplag listsögu til byggingar listasafns”, *Morgunblaðið*, May 28, 1964, 6 and 8. See also, Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist á 19. og 20. öld. Drög að sögulegu yfirliti*, vol. I (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1964), 5. Björn taught art history at the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts in Reykjavík (1950 to 1984) and lectured on art history at the University of Iceland from 1974 to 1993.

⁹⁷⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 45.

their husbands were busy with national issues and worldly troubles). As can be discerned in Björn's words, the separate spheres—the public sphere and the private sphere—were clearly defined and gendered. The contribution of women artists in the nineteenth century to the arts is almost completely bypassed.

Björn acknowledged that women in Iceland played a major role, albeit behind the scenes. He refers to their contribution to the pioneering work of Sigurður Guðmundsson the painter regarding the national costume and “feminine national handicrafts”.⁹⁷⁷ And he mentions that Þóra Pétursdóttir Thoroddsen, together with the sisters Jarþrúður Jónsdóttir and Þóra Jónsdóttir, had published *Leiðarvísir til að nema ýmsar kvenlegar hannyrðir* (1886), a handbook on embroideries. In this context, he also points out that the drawing tuition was mostly in the hands of women at the end of the nineteenth century, women such as Þóra and Torfhildur Hólm.⁹⁷⁸ He informs the reader that Þóra taught Þórarinn B. Þorláksson before he sailed to Copenhagen in 1895 to study at the Royal Danish Academy, but makes no mention of her as a woman artist, even though in the same year, she showed her painting of Þingvellir at the women's exhibition, *Kvindernes Udstilling fra Fortid til Nutid* in Copenhagen.⁹⁷⁹

When discussing Torfhildur Hólm, Björn says that she had received some training as a painter in America, “as was the custom of fine ladies abroad”, and that she taught the sculptor Einar Jónsson in the winter of 1891 before he went to study in Copenhagen. But Torfhildur “was a childishly romantic soul”, Björn explains, and Einar served “as a good listener, not least for her self-pity, which overflowed at times.”⁹⁸⁰ In a way, this discourse is reminiscent of what Jónas Jónasson said in 1882 about Torfhildur's short stories: that they were well written, yet a “product of a weak and excited imagination, so that they exceed all boundaries of real truth.”⁹⁸¹ Björn thus reiterates what had been said about women artists in the previous decades, without making any deliberate effort to revise.

In a similar vein, Björn reverberated the discourse on art during the first half of the twentieth century, discussed in the previous chapter. He claimed that to have “an eye for the beauty of nature” was the essence of the art revival, equated with art and artistic skills.⁹⁸² In the summer of 1900, the painter Þórarinn B. Þorláksson painted *en plein air* at Þingvellir, among

⁹⁷⁷ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 45.

⁹⁷⁸ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 45.

⁹⁷⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 56–57.

⁹⁸⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 61.

⁹⁸¹ Jónas Jónasson, “Nýjar bækur. Brynjólfur Sveinsson byskup”, *Þjóðólfur*, July 24, 1882, 64–65.

⁹⁸² Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 7.

other places, and this was, according to Björn, the “first time that an Icelandic painter sets up an easel there”.⁹⁸³ Ásgrímur Jónsson was persuaded to become an artist in his struggle “vis-à-vis Icelandic landscape”.⁹⁸⁴ The Icelandic nation was finally getting the artists it had been waiting for, who were called to take on a “national cultural role”. Ásgrímur’s art “involved a completely new settlement”.⁹⁸⁵ The beginning of the art of painting is linked to *the subject matter*, Icelandic nature, in the hands of male painters, which was where “the division” actually happened.⁹⁸⁶ What also underlines this emphasis on appreciating Icelandic nature is that Björn even considered the backdrops that Sigurður Guðmundsson, the painter, made (1862) depicting Icelandic landscape, were a certain beginning of the art of painting in Iceland, and that these were the “most notable paintings left by Sigurður” rather than for example his portrait paintings.⁹⁸⁷

According to Björn, it was not until the third decade of the twentieth century that women artists such as Kristín Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson emerged, and he maintained that these women were no “living-room artists, who dabbled with their art in their spare time” but rather they were all well-educated and worked professionally.⁹⁸⁸

However, Kristín Jónsdóttir does not get much coverage. Björn describes her artistic creations as a “delicate play of the colours” but then says that despite this, rarely did her pictures “possess the personal cordiality with which she is greatly imbued”. Nevertheless, Björn emphasizes that it is “always the beauty of the gentleness or the charm of the peculiar that arouses her need for expression”.⁹⁸⁹ Björn adds that “the warmth” can be found especially in her flower paintings and still lifes.⁹⁹⁰ Not only does this wording recall the gendered discourse on women artists since the 1920s, but also from the women’s exhibition in 1895 in Copenhagen, when women artists were criticized for lacking “female characteristics” in their works. The femininity, as depicted by Björn, is the gentleness, warmth, cordiality and charm. Thus Björn repeats the discursive theme discussed in the previous chapters where the personality of artists is described more according to their gender than their work, as if their work is the embodiment of their gender and personality.

⁹⁸³ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 57.

⁹⁸⁴ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 74

⁹⁸⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 76.

⁹⁸⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 7.

⁹⁸⁷ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 39 and 40.

⁹⁸⁸ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. II, 273.

⁹⁸⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 150.

⁹⁹⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 150.

When discussing one of Kristín's most notable paintings, *Konur við Þvottalaugarnar*, Björn said that she managed to make the women and their actions match the tone of the environment in "a light, entertaining, way". According to Björn, this work therefore had no social character or reference to the hard labour of women and working. Kristín rarely looked for the "spectacle" (i. stórbrotna) in her works but rather to the "beauty of the gentle and the charm of the peculiar".⁹⁹¹

What raises particular attention and wonder here is that Björn wrote that Kristín had been the wife of a "powerful nationalist, a housewife in a large home that was frequently full of guests, and careful about the upbringing of her children" but nevertheless had not discarded her "childhood dreams".⁹⁹² Kristín is a wife, a mother, circumscribed by the domestic sphere as was the custom of the women artists in the nineteenth century, decorating their homes while the husband was "busy with national issues". Another point which Björn found necessary to mention when supposedly covering the art of Kristín is that she became "open to new trends" and tried to comprehend the new art.⁹⁹³ This was certainly true, but is in no way related to her own works or development of her artistic creation. It must be considered striking that the contribution of Kristín Jónsdóttir is reduced at the end as a proponent for abstract art.⁹⁹⁴

Júlíana Sveinsdóttir was unmarried and childless and therefore escapes the rhetoric of domesticity. But none the less, she is depicted as a woman artist. Júlíana gets much more coverage and much more praise as an artist than Kristín. Björn points out that Júlíana had been in "continual self-examination" during her art career, and looked for instance at other mediums than painting: mural painting (la fresque) and textile but "there she managed to let her rich material reap the full benefit". Júlíana's textiles, according to Björn, had perhaps made her "an even greater name in the Nordic countries" than her paintings, since as a textile artist she was part of a "less populous group".⁹⁹⁵ It is undisputed that Júlíana was a pioneer in textile art, but why is her importance as a painter overshadowed by that? Björn states that her textiles are not abstract, as "her art training is in a completely different field" and these forms are simply "random".⁹⁹⁶ Most of all, the gendered separation of artforms is applied here, and textile was a

⁹⁹¹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 150–151.

⁹⁹² Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 152.

⁹⁹³ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 152.

⁹⁹⁴ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 150–151.

⁹⁹⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 171.

⁹⁹⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 171.

medium that women were permitted and encouraged to adopt, much more so than the masculine domain of painting.

Nína Sæmundsson, like Júlíana, was unmarried and childless. Björn waxes eloquently about Nína in the early stage of her artistic career, until the time when she settles on the west coast of the USA.⁹⁹⁷ Judging by her works, Björn argues that she would never have been in the group of Nordic abstract sculptors—perhaps she would have remained in “moderate expressionism” in Europe—but that her voyage west to the USA had changed her art.⁹⁹⁸ And he claims that it is disappointing to see how Nína’s talents went in that direction. Björn had a similar attitude to Nína’s art as to that of woman writer and artist Torfhildur Hólm; Nína is found guilty of a “childishly emotional tendency”, though she was “extremely dexterous” and had a clear sense of texture and thus was “ideal for popularity in the West”.⁹⁹⁹ In her works, everything is done to imbue with the outside, the surface, “and sweetish charm”.¹⁰⁰⁰ She had relented to the power of the “sweet superficial form, such as the *Hafmeyjan* which had been set up in the Reykjavík lake and reaped such a famous but unworthy end”.¹⁰⁰¹ But she “is a child of today, if one can say that,” writes Björn, “and her art an instrument dependent on the changeable influences that the times bring with them”.¹⁰⁰² Nína is subjected to a hefty dose of Björn’s criticism for not pursuing abstract art—the “childish emotional tendency”—and her works made in the USA had a “sweetish charm”. That she held her own, regardless of the newest trends in art, made her a woman child and not an independent artist.

There is an interesting chapter devoted to “four foreign women artists”, Barbara Árnason, Greta Björnsson, Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson and Tove Ólafsson. Such a chapter should be a matter for celebration, because as mentioned in the previous chapter, not only did several women artists live in the shadow of their husbands, but even more so foreign women married to Icelandic artists. Yet, the chapter is ambiguous. In his introductory words, Björn says that during their study abroad, Icelandic artists have long been “successful at marriage”, and that many foreign women had moved to Iceland with their Icelandic artist husbands.¹⁰⁰³ The women had proved to be “the strongest life partners” and thereby provided untold contributions to the work of their husbands, “as few destinies demand more self-sacrifice and

⁹⁹⁷ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 203–206.

⁹⁹⁸ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 206.

⁹⁹⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 206.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 206.

¹⁰⁰¹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. II, 1973, 209.

¹⁰⁰² Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. I, 208.

¹⁰⁰³ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenzk myndlist*, vol. II, 221.

understanding than that of the lonely road of the artist”.¹⁰⁰⁴ However, Björn specified that although it is a general rule that the art of foreign artists actually bears the tone of their origin, the works of those foreign women artists “deserves no better home than in Icelandic art history”.¹⁰⁰⁵

Björn praised the wood engravings of the English woman artist Barbara Árnason, along with her watercolours and book illustrations, such as for children’s books. She was a cherished artist, he writes, which “is seldom the case with foreigners”, and can be best illustrated such that the *Association of Icelandic Artists* honoured her fiftieth year in 1961 with a retrospective exhibition of her works.¹⁰⁰⁶ According to Björn, Barbara’s works were “a perfect reflection of herself, her temperament, behaviour and interplay, between which there are no boundaries”.¹⁰⁰⁷ The reputation that Barbara has left behind everywhere, he says, was that she “was both a polite woman and an honest fellow”.¹⁰⁰⁸

One of her largest works was for Melaskóli school, which Björn emphasized, was a “mural decoration” (i. veggskreyting) but not a “mural painting” (i. veggmálverk). Barbara started to display here more of a “decorative charm” by turning to appliqué, disappeared “from painting” and went over to “pure decorative arts”.¹⁰⁰⁹ The word “decorative” is encompassing when Björn discusses Barbara’s work in different art forms: it is used in a derogatory way in the modernist discourse, as before, to describe the feminine, as the opposite to contemporary male art.

Similarly, the works of the Swedish woman artist Greta Björnsson, the wife of the master painter Jón Björnsson, bear the characteristics of “her mild, meticulous style” and her ecclesiastical works are “decorative, in the spirit of decorative arts”.¹⁰¹⁰ Her art shows an “unequivocal tone of the field out of which she has grown: benign, Swedish decorative arts, images that are considered more appropriate for decorating homes to delight the eye than spiritual survival” and are altogether “untouched by the upheaval of the new art”.¹⁰¹¹ Here, a guiding principle reappears, on foreign influence from the homeland: the feminine decorative works had no business outside the walls of the home.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 221.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 221.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 228–233.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 233.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 233.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 232–233.

¹⁰¹⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 226.

¹⁰¹¹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 228.

In addition to the gendered discourse on women, it is somehow difficult to write separately on artists' couples women artists have to "share columns" with their artist husbands, as mentioned in a previous chapter. Hence, Danish artist Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson had exhibited beside her husband, the "lively and colourful personality Sveinn Þórarinnsson".¹⁰¹² In Karen Agnete's work, her "womanly modesty, calm consideration, warmth and humour never disguise their form". But "though she mourns it least herself", her chapter has become shorter than her husband's, and she "stood to one side beside her husband".¹⁰¹³

This discursive theme can also be seen in Björn's coverage of Danish sculptor Tove Ólafsson, in which her husband, sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson, also appears.¹⁰¹⁴

Where Sigurjón was not bound to any chains of heredity or tradition, Tove on the other hand was fairly fixed in her bourgeois origin. Her art had its foundations in the classical academic tradition, where the human body—or more to the point, the woman's body—was the a to z of all subject matter, in a lyrical interpretation and far from everyday nudity of the reality.

In Tove's work, all is derived "from the same source: the gentle, feminine strength that does not need to be accompanied by effort, but is perfected in its tranquillity".¹⁰¹⁵ Tove is bound by the academic tradition (and the bourgeoisie foreign origin) but Sigurjón is the strong, independent artist who breaks with all traditions. But due to "the influence of Sigurjón and the surroundings", she looks to a different material than plaster and clay and chooses Icelandic dolerite.¹⁰¹⁶ Tove "entices out of this cold stone the cordiality and human warmth that she herself possesses".¹⁰¹⁷ On the other hand, Icelanders' view of art was so bound to naturalism that "even the feminine and sweetness in Tove's art" did not manage to capture the attention of many.¹⁰¹⁸

As discussed in the previous chapters, the same applied to Icelandic artistic couples the women stood in the shadow of their husbands. For instance, sculptor Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir had to endure both harsh criticism and—to an even greater extent—silencing. Therefore, it must be

¹⁰¹² Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 222.

¹⁰¹³ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 225.

¹⁰¹⁴ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 234.

¹⁰¹⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 234.

¹⁰¹⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 234–235.

¹⁰¹⁷ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 236.

¹⁰¹⁸ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 235.

said that although it is newsworthy that she does get a little coverage in Björn's art history, if the condescending tone in his writing about her is examined, one must ask why. Björn said that it is rare, but in the case of Gunnfríður, "the spirit came over her", as she describes herself, when she cast her first work in 1931.¹⁰¹⁹ Björn makes little of it, and says that what must have had a greater effect on her was that she had lived amongst clay and sculptures for a whole decade in the studio of her husband, sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson. Furthermore, Gunnfríður had also spent a lot of time amongst the intellectuals and artists in their home and "she had perhaps found that she stood a little apart from that group, unless she did something herself".¹⁰²⁰

Björn then says: "It is true that despite lack of skill and clumsiness of many kinds, such amazingly good things appear in Gunnfríður's pictures that a person starts believing in her original ability."¹⁰²¹ Yet her work *Landsýn* reflects only "embarrassing clumsiness".¹⁰²² Björn adds that Gunnfríður was also "rough in temperament, so that she often reminded one of the descriptions of women from olden times, loyal to those she admired but equally irascible to those she disliked."¹⁰²³ Gunnfríður appears here as the opposite of the feminine women artists who Björn describes; she had a temper and the self-confidence to make her dream of becoming a sculptor true in her 40s. This coverage on Gunnfríður evokes partly the woman artist Sigríður Erlendsdóttir, who was discussed earlier, and the harsh critique she got in the 1920s. Björn's writing is somehow in line with the patronizing, dampening discourse on a woman artist, with the message that women should not lose track of their modesty (femininity) and overestimate themselves.

Nína Tryggvadóttir is the only woman artist named as a modernist: she "broke new ground in many areas", stepping forward as an assertive recruit; Nína "avoided mixing her emotions with the colours as much as she could".¹⁰²⁴ According to Björn, her portraits of the "gifted heads" (i. gáfuð höfuð) of Steinn Steinarr, Laxness and Kjarval made her the "court painter" (i. hirðmálari) of Unuhús, the house in which the modernist group was a regular guest and to which Björn refers as the "academy".¹⁰²⁵ The selected works by Nína in Björn's book are a portrait of Halldór Laxness and one of Steinn Steinarr (but not Nína's portrait of art

¹⁰¹⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 270.

¹⁰²⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 270.

¹⁰²¹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 271.

¹⁰²² Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 272.

¹⁰²³ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 271.

¹⁰²⁴ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 274.

¹⁰²⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 277–278.

historian Selma Jónsdóttir, from 1945).¹⁰²⁶ All in all, it can be said that Nína Tryggvadóttir gets good coverage and a praiseworthy legacy. However, even if Nína’s paintings are discussed in the book—and several of them selected—the emphasis is on the originality of her glass works.¹⁰²⁷ In the same way, the weaving in the discussion of Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s work was her greatest contribution to art. And that was despite both women being respected and well known as painters abroad—something that, for instance, Kjarval was not.

In terms of Björn’s writings, it is especially words like “romantic” which are negative when describing the male artist and his work, as the opposite of virility. In this way, one can read about the “romantic temperament” of Einar Jónsson and the romantic nationalism in the works of Guðmundur Einarsson.¹⁰²⁸ For example, Björn said that in some of Þórarinn B. Þorláksson’s landscape paintings from the beginning of the century, “romantic tinges” occur.¹⁰²⁹ But at the same time, this deviation was “condoned”, as Björn says that this is more likely to be “mediating influence than a personal insight” and that Björn was never aware of “sickly sentimentality” in romantic tinges in individual landscape paintings by Þórarinn”.¹⁰³⁰

Perhaps the greatest difference, and the most descriptive, between Björn’s deliberations of the masculine and feminine in art is when he discusses Kjarval’s artistic career. The “magician Kjarval” is discussed as “the great master” who “the nation acquired as a sovereign gift”.¹⁰³¹ Kjarval has “expanded the Icelandic world in all directions ... king of the lava ... the colonist of the distance in the nearness”.¹⁰³² Kjarval is “monumental” and “has not gained any successors in Icelandic art. He stands alone, between centuries, yet is so sweeping that our modern history would not be fully told without him.”¹⁰³³ Here is the “vision of the genius”, the painter Kjarval, who confirms “how very poor we would be in the country without such men”¹⁰³⁴.

This description evokes high-pitched descriptions of Thorvaldsen in public discourse in 1875, in which the artist is godlike, a genius who has no equal. In fact, the gendered discourse on art that had formed in the previous decades is crystallized in Björn’s writing, from the time that he considers the three great masters to be Kjarval (the father), and the modernists (sons)

¹⁰²⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 274–276.

¹⁰²⁷ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 282–287.

¹⁰²⁸ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 64 and 213.

¹⁰²⁹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 57–58.

¹⁰³⁰ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. I, 86.

¹⁰³¹ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 245.

¹⁰³² Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 246.

¹⁰³³ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 237.

¹⁰³⁴ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslensk myndlist*, vol. II, 237.

Svavar Guðnason and Þorvaldur Skúlason. Svavar reflects the Nordic temperament of the artist, “full of Viking-like unruliness” and steps “where no one has stepped before”.¹⁰³⁵ Þorvaldur is both Icelandic and a “world-class artist”, and no one has “prevented Icelandic art from becoming wilderness vegetation” like he has.¹⁰³⁶ Björn says that few men have had such an effect on their male colleagues ... with the urgency of international artistry and the relentless renewal that is encompassed in his works”.¹⁰³⁷ In the final words of his book, Björn says that after the Second World War, a new era began in art, with new attitudes and a changed world, and in Iceland, this was most clearly reflected in the exhibition of the September Group in 1947; the art of the modernists became a factor in a “social shaping force”.¹⁰³⁸ In effect, this could be considered as the culmination of a linear progress of art history.

When *Íslenszk myndlist* was published in 1964 and 1973, various things were happening with women in Iceland.¹⁰³⁹ In 1970 a group of Icelandic women founded the *Redstocking Women’s Liberation Group* and the periodical *Forvitin rauð*. In 1975, the UN’s International Women’s Year, a large Women’s Exhibition was held in Iceland, where for instance women’s handicrafts such as embroidery and textile were in the foreground, with a consciously political message: feminist art and women’s *parrêsia*. In the same way as gendered discourse on art in Iceland had been underlined as a discursive theme from the late nineteenth century, women’s periodicals and women’s exhibitions continued to interweave women, art and women’s rights.¹⁰⁴⁰ In parallel, this can be perceived as the continuity of women’s *textility* in Iceland as well as a in an international context.¹⁰⁴¹

¹⁰³⁵ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenszk myndlist*, vol. II, 291 and 308.

¹⁰³⁶ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenszk myndlist*, vol. I, 50.

¹⁰³⁷ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenszk myndlist*, vol. II, 31.

¹⁰³⁸ Björn Th. Björnsson, *Íslenszk myndlist*, vol. II, 309–310.

¹⁰³⁹ In the 1960s, the participation of women in the public domain increased, along with the proportion of women working outside the home. Yet there were salary differences between the sexes, and women’s work was low-paid work. The majority of married women were still economically dependent. See, Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, “1967. Vinna, læra, kaupa”, 345–349.

¹⁰⁴⁰ In women’s periodicals in the 1960s, three main threads were discernible: conservative ideas (especially older women) where mothering and housewifery prevailed; moderate women’s rights activists; and radical women’s rights activists who wanted to go the whole way, demanding a shake-up and review of roles. See, Gerður Róbertsdóttir, “Nútímavæðing kvenleikans? Viðhorf kvenna til jafnréttismála 1960 til 1969” (unpublished master’s thesis in history, Háskóli Íslands, 2007), 67.

¹⁰⁴¹ See, e.g. Victoria Bazin and Melanie Waters (eds.), “Mediated and Mediating Feminisms”, 347–358; Agata Jakubowska and Katy Deepwell, *All-women art spaces in Europe in the long 1970s*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 19–46.

Concluding remarks

The description of a master of modernism is a given and, as before, resembles a familiar theme (regardless of style and movement) concerning the landscape paintings and true Icelandic artists, whereby an image is depicted of a young, masculine man, daring, determined, as the antithesis to the hesitant, indecisive, feminine. The concept of the “three great artists” still remains in the new republic. This new modern art overturned ideas of what had previously been considered the true Icelandic art and culture, and thus people became divided into factions. The gendered discourse, however, did not change as regards any of these groups. At the same time, Nína Tryggvadóttir got positive reviews in American papers for her solo exhibition in New York in 1945, and was complimented for “masculine paintings”. Thus, in the art scene the masculine in the works of a woman artist becomes a sign of quality and approval, and consequently a reference to boldness and originality which was rarely seen in the coverage of women’s art before abstraction appeared on the scene.

The increased number and visibility of women artists in the visual arts field do not tell the whole story, though. The conflict about the position of women became an underlying thread in the 1950s, even if it is often defined as the housewives’ Golden Age and the idea about equal rights of men and women became more central in the discussion in Iceland as well as abroad. Inferiority was systematically embedded in women, despite their achievements in various fields, as can be seen in the interviews in the women’s periodicals. At the same time, women’s periodicals such as *Melkorka* and *19. júní* became essential as a venue for counter-discourse that opposed the mainstream male discourse and reflected a stronger awareness of gendered assumptions in the art scene, which was also of a completely different nature to those in other mainstream periodicals and newspapers. The concept of textility has been used here to analyse these trends and, as in previous chapters, has been linked to Foucault’s concept of parrêsia. However, this discourse was depreciated, and women’s periodicals were not defined as cultural or literary.

The first Icelandic grant recipients in art history, Selma Jónsdóttir and Björn Th. Björnsson, returned to Iceland and start to make their presence known in writings and lectures on art while Selma, in an all-encompassing male-dominated art world, became supervisor of the National Gallery. Paris, the capital of abstract and then of geometric abstraction, now had great attraction for young Icelanders, and during the period 1947–1957 several Icelandic artists,

including Gerður Helgadóttir and Nína Tryggvadóttir, lived there. Their contribution was fundamental, whether at home in Iceland or internationally.

Yet the fraternity of Icelandic modernism in the late 1940s and 1950s is solidified. Coverage of male artists and their work is further analysed according to the personality of the artist, but in the most gendered way, with the alleged characteristics of men and women. There is still discussion on how women artists are prone to influence, and subsequently their copying of others' works. The coverage of Kristín Jónsdóttir's solo exhibition in 1952 is reminiscent to many articles written at the end of the nineteenth century on the reception of women's contribution to art and culture, and is in stark contrast to the veneration of Kjarval, Kristín's contemporary.

The sharp distinction between the art of women and men partly appeared in discussions between on the one hand, the “domestic art” and women's taste and tastelessness (and foreign influence) and on the other, the male artists of the nation, in painting and sculpture (and literature). The gendered discourse on art is in fact a return to the divine gift of the genius, who does not need teaching, and the biographical writings in which ingenuity is innate: the discourse is even more in the spirit of the art historical writings in the Renaissance period than it was before, even if Thorvaldsen did not have the same status as before in the eyes of modernists. Femininity was used in derogatory terms and was reflected in the modernist discourse on art. Yet, at the same time as the abstract and geometric styles in art reached a peak in Iceland in 1953, Nína and Gerður exhibited their work overseas in known and esteemed galleries, and received praise for their work, getting more coverage there than any other Icelandic artist abroad.

Nína Tryggvadóttir was one of the few women artists discussed and interviewed in the all-male periodical, *Birtingur*. Conscious both of gender bias on the art scene—on which she, in the *parrêsiatique* role, comments in *Melkorka*—as well as the diversity of international art, she aroused a great deal of attention for her clear stance on art in Iceland. This was difficult for those engrossed in modernist discourse on the arts to acknowledge. Yet as soon as women artists departed from the style in the mid-1950s in painting and sculpture, the attitude towards their art (and also that of several male artists) changed. In fact, their departure from geometric abstraction towards “lyrical abstraction” was regarded as a betrayal. The discussion on women's art still seems to have focused on words such as instability, turbulence and emotionality, as opposites to the serious, courageous, balanced personality of the male artist. However, in this context it is strange that with the integration of art and society as well as the

unification of all of the visual arts, as an important point of emphasis of modernist artists, attention is pointed in particular at the work of men—even though, as this thesis argues, during the whole period of study women artists blurred the separation between fine art and applied art, and carried out pioneering work in the 1950s: or, in fact, during the whole period of study.

Even though “woman’s handiwork” becomes a guiding principle in the mainstream public discourse on art, this is designed to maintain demarcation more firmly between fine art and applied, especially when it comes to art in the 1950s. This is not least clear in the discussion of the first large women’s art exhibition in Iceland, held at the National Museum in Reykjavík on the 50th anniversary of the *Icelandic Women’s Rights Association* in 1957, with women’s artistic creativity in the fields of art, handicrafts and literature. The refrain is their contribution through others, of great men, a leitmotif and discursive theme, in Iceland as well as in the neighbouring countries. Also in 1957, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir held the first retrospective exhibition of a woman artist in the National Gallery. In fact, it is pointed out in many places that on the one hand, her art is more Danish than Icelandic and on the other, her paintings are depicted as “feminine” and that her exhibition bears witness to an artist “who knows her limitations” and that is why she succeeds in a positive way. Yet the male, abstract painter “from the North” is vigorous, masculine, independent, and far too Icelandic to be influenced by new isms.

In the two-volume art history review *Íslensk myndlist* by Björn Th. Björnsson, the gendered discourse which, as this thesis argues, has its inception in the late nineteenth century comes together in one place and is carved in stone. With the concept of the “three great (male) artists”, a selective canon of painting and sculpture is all male. Even though there *is* coverage of women artists in Björn’s art history, contrary to many of the Western art histories, the discourse on art is in the spirit of international gendered discourse on modernist art but is also deeper because of local, nationalist, and fraternal selection in Iceland, in which gender is also an underlying theme. Yet, looking at women’s *textility*, like in the women’s periodicals, women in the *parrêsiatique* role appear in the public sphere in a myriad of ways, fighting for women artists, and women in general. Hence, the groundwork was laid for the more radical second-wave feminism.



Figure 53 Svavar Guðnason (1909–1988), *Tröllaborg*, 1944, oil, 81 x 100 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 4893.



Figure 54 Svavar Guðnason (1909–1988), *Íslandslag*, 1944, oil, 88 x 100 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 719.



Figure 55 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Komposition*, 1947, oil, 80 x 95 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1171.



Figure 56 Þorvaldur Skúlason (1906–1984), *Gríma* (e. Mask), 1947, oil, 65.5 x 50.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 4402.



Figure 57 Tove Ólafsson (born Thomasen, 1909–1992), *Móðir og barn* (e. Mother and child), 1946, dolerite, 68 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland), LÍ 7066/66.



Figure 58 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Frá Vestmannaeyjum (Elliðaey)*, 1946, oil, 82 x 90 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 778.

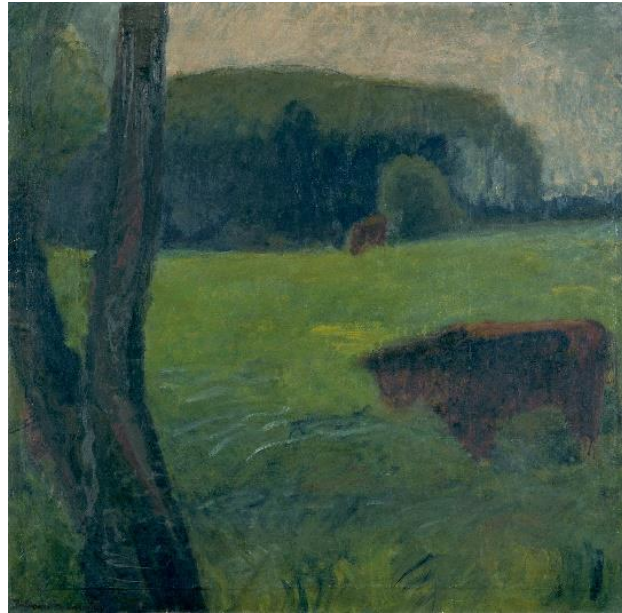


Figure 59 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Sumarmorgunn í Horneby* (e. Summer morning in Horneby, Denmark), 1944, oil, 94 x 96 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 4821.



Figure 60 Vigdís Kristjánsdóttir (1904–1981), *Vorgróður Íslands* (e. Iceland's Spring Flora), 1957, textile/tapestry (shown at the women's exhibition in Reykjavík, 1957), 85 x 105 cm. ASÍ Art Museum, LA 375/1023.



Figure 61 Vigdís Kristjánsdóttir (1904–1981), *Mósaík* (e. Mosaic), 1958, textile, 124 x 67 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 6216.



Figure 62 Sigurhans Vignir (1894–1975), *Tove Ólafsson* (1909–1992) at the inauguration of the new National Theatre, April 20, 1950 (i. Þjóðleikhúsið). At the inauguration and opening of the exhibition, Lúðvíg Guðmundsson, the head of the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts, donated to the National Theatre a dolerite sculpture, *Piltur og stúlka* (e. A boy and a girl, also known as *Maður og kona*, or Man and woman), by Tove Ólafsson. Reykjavík Museum of Photography, VIG 0676 B 002 2-1 jpg.



Figure 63 Barbara Árnason (born Morey Williams, 1911–1975), *Grasakonur* (e. Women herbalists). Originally a mural decoration (oil on wood), for a pharmacy in Reykjavík (i. Apótek Vesturbæjar), 1956–1958. Photo published with the permission of Gerðarsafn–Kópavogur Art Museum.



Figure 64 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Abstrakt*, 1951, bronze cast, 66 x 43 x 36.5 cm. Gerðarsafn–Kópavogur Art Museum, LKG-647/3057.



Figure 65 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Abstraktion*, 1952, metal, 80 x 56 x 39 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 7209/209.



Figure 66 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Abstraktion*, 1952, metal, 91 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 7079/79.



Figure 67 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Komposition*, 1953, collage, 32 x 24.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 4303.



Figure 68 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Komposition*, 1952, metal, 47 x 29 x 35 cm. Gerðarsafn–Kópavogur Art Museum, LKG 3800/3190.



Figure 69 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Óþekkti pólitíski fanginn* (e. The unknown political prisoner), 1953, metal, 50.8 x 27 x 30 cm. Gerðarsafn–Kópavogur Art Museum, LKG 667/3077.

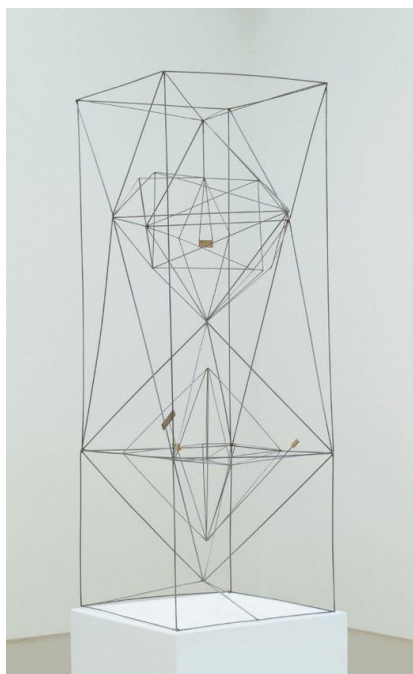


Figure 70 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Skúlpturn*, 1954–1956, metal/brass, 129 x 52 x 69 cm. Gerðarsafn–Kópavogur Art Museum, LKG 665/3075.



Figure 71 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Vinnustofa Gerðar í París* (e. Gerður's atelier in 9, rue Campagne Première, Paris), 1956. Gerðarsafn–Kópavogur Art Museum, GH 172.



Figure 72 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Komposition*, 1951–1952, oil, 35 x 37 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1273.



Figure 73 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Komposition*, 1954, lacquer on masonite, 136 x 122 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1040.



Figure 74 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Abstraction*, 1955, collage, watercolours, ink on paper, 28 x 21.5 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 5922.



Figure 75 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Komposition*, 1956, oil, 37.5 x 45 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1172.



Figure 76 Gunnar R. Ólafsson (1917–1965), *Nína Tryggvadóttir*, 1954–1955. Reykjavík Museum of Photography, GRÓ 021 049 1-2.



Figure 77 Þorvaldur Skúlason (1906–1984), *Komposition*, 1954, oil, 121 x 90 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 3588.

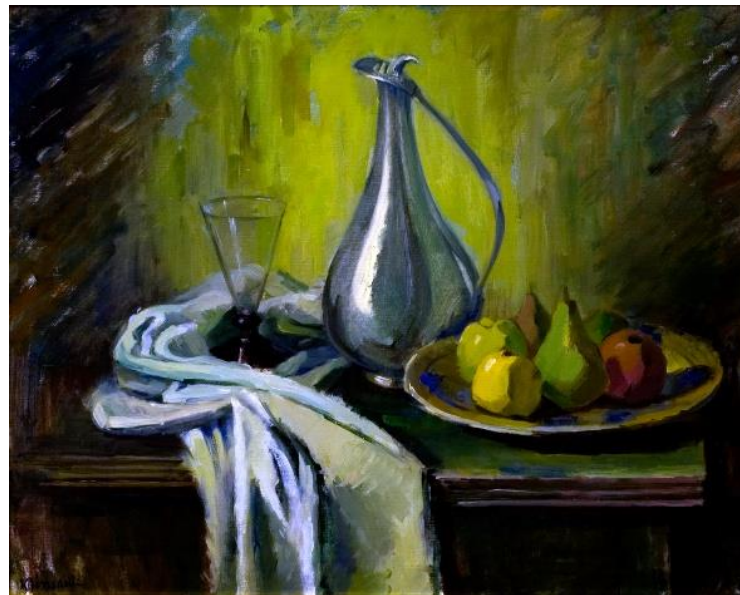


Figure 78 Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888–1959), *Tinkanna og ávextir* (e. Tin pitcher and fruits), 1951, oil, 60 x 75 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 947.



Figure 79 Sigrún Guðjónsdóttir (1926–) and Gestur Þorgrímsson (1920–2003), *Pottery by Gestur and Sigrún at Laugarnesleir (1947–1953)*. Gestur made the pottery items and Sigrún painted them. Pottery items were shown at the exhibition *Dvalið hjá djúpu vatni. Rúna–Sigrún Guðjónsdóttir* (e. Staying by deep water. Rúna–Sigrún Guðjónsdóttir) in Hafnarborg–the Hafnarfjörður Centre of Culture and Fine Art, 2014. Photograph: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 80 Guðmunda Andrésdóttir (1922–2002), *Komposition*, 1955, oil, 80 x 55 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1066.



Figure 81 Guðmunda Andrésdóttir (1922–2002), *Komposition*, 1959, oil, 70 x 70 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 1155.



Figure 82 Ásgerður Búadóttir (1920–2014), *Stúlka með fugl* (e. A girl with a bird), 1951, textile. Borgarnes Museum, Lb 334.



Figure 83 Anna Þórhallsdóttir (1904–1998), *Betlehemsstjarnan*, or *Sólmyrkvi*, June 30, 1954 (e. Star of Bethlehem, or Sun eclipse in Reykjavík). This picture series by Anna travelled widely, appearing in many papers. A copy of one of these photos was bought by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. Reykjavík Museum of Photography, AÐÓ 003 085 2-1 jpg.



Figure 84 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Veggteppi* (e. Tapestry), textile, 132 x 137 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 4811.



Figure 85 Júlíana Sveinsdóttir (1889–1966), *Veggteppi* (e. Tapestry), 1957, textile, 141.5 x 93 cm. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 6315.



Gunnar Rúnar Ólafsson (1917–1965), *Júlíana Sveinsdóttir in front of her tapestry at her exhibition at the National Gallery of Iceland, 1957*. Reykjavík Museum of Photography, GRÓ 021 063 2-1. jpg.

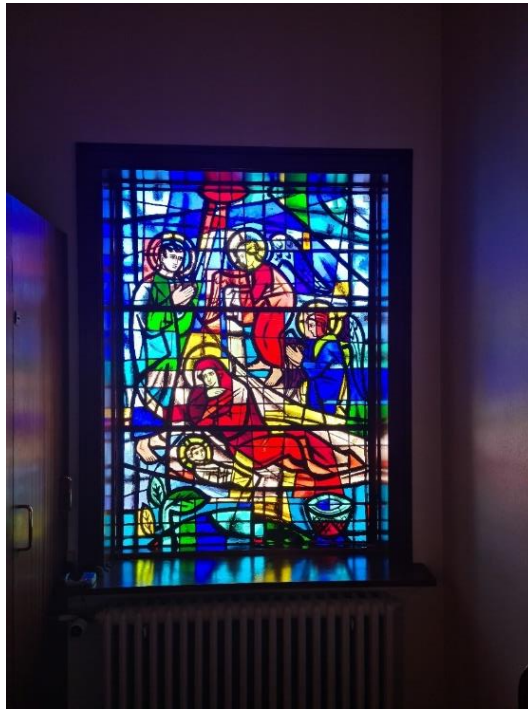


Figure 86 Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), *Fæðing Krists* (e. Nativity), 1955. A stained-glass window for a chapel in Grund, an old people's home in Reykjavík. Photograph: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 87 Stained-glass windows by Gerður Helgadóttir (1928–1975), from 1957, in Hallgrímskirkja in Saurbær, Hvalfjörður, Iceland. Photograph: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.

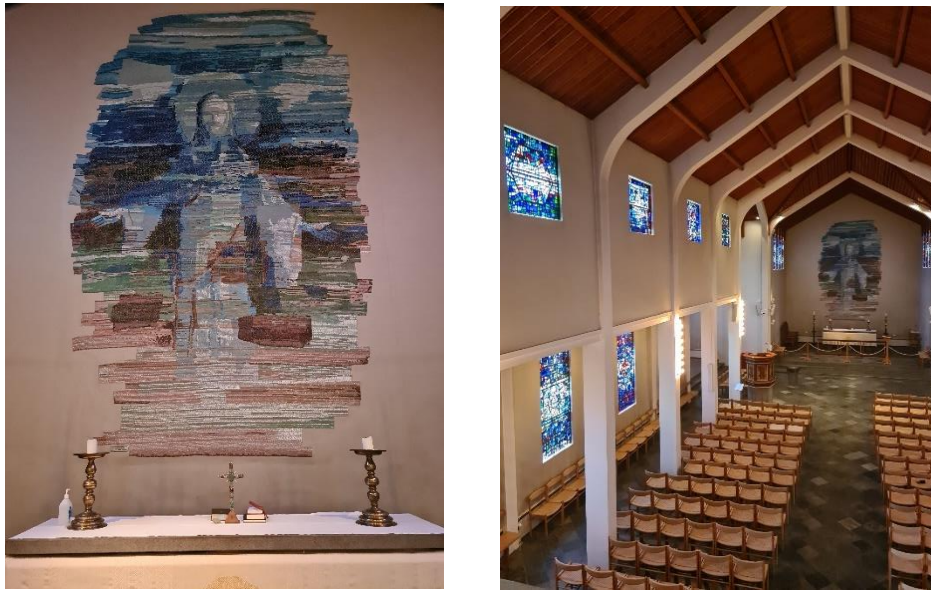


Figure 88 *Skálholtskirkja* cathedral, chancel. Mosaic by Nína Tryggvadóttir and stained-glass windows by Gerður Helgadóttir. Photographs: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 89 Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968), *Three stained-glass windows in the National Museum of Iceland's building*, done 1960–1962. Pictures from left: *Kristnitakan* (e. The Adoption of Christianity in Iceland, around 1000 AD), *Kvöldvakan* (e. Evening in an Icelandic farmhouse), and *Landnámið* (e. The Settlement of Iceland, Viking ships under sail, around 870 AD). Photographs: Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir.



Figure 90 Nína Sæmundsson (1892–1965), *Á hverfanda hveli* (e. Maelstrom), 1936, 100 cm, concrete sculpture. The National Gallery of Iceland, LÍ 7081.



Figure 91 Björn Björnsson (1889–1977), Nína Sæmundsson’s sculpture, *Hafmeyjan* (e. The mermaid) in the lake Tjörninn in the centre of Reykjavík, 1959. The National Museum of Iceland, BB1 1716. “Vandalism at a high level” was the headline of the back page of *Morgunblaðið* after *Hafmeyjan* had been blown up on the night of January 1 (“Skrílmennska á hástigi”, *Morgunblaðið*, January 3, 1960, 16).

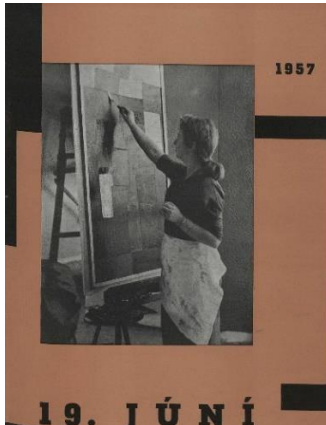
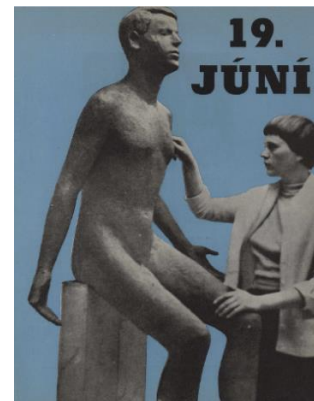
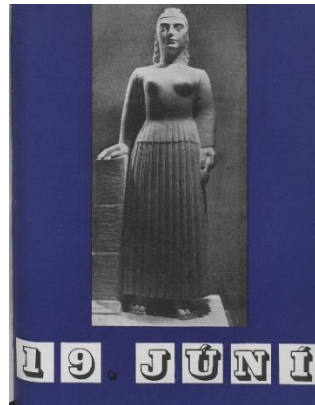
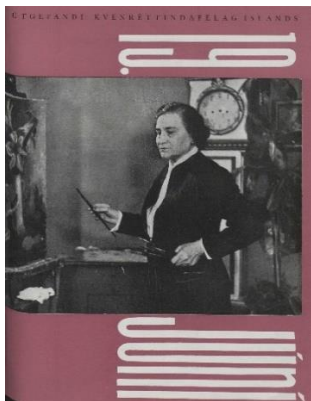


Figure 92 Cover photographs of women artists and/or their works in the women's periodical *19. júní*, from 1951 to 1959. At the top, from left to right: Nína Sæmundsson, *19. júní*, 1, no. 1 (1951); Tove Ólafsson, *19. júní*, 2, no. 1 (1952); Greta Björnsson, *19. júní*, 3, no. 1 (1953); Kristín Jónsdóttir, *19. júní*, 4, no. 1 (1954); the work *Landsýn* by Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, *19. júní*, 5, no. 1 (1955); Ólöf Pálsdóttir, *19. júní*, 6, no. 1 (1956); Nína Tryggvadóttir, *19. júní*, 7, no. 1 (1957); motif from a tapestry by Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, *19. júní*, 8, no. 1 (1958); Gerður Helgadóttir, *19. júní*, 9, no. 1 (1959).

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis argues that deconstructing the *point of knowledge production on art* from a feminist perspective reveals its gendered assumptions during the period of study. The research focused primarily on discourse on art in newspapers and periodicals, as it was argued that the *knowledge* of art history, the canon and artist *greatness* were forged through gendered public discourse.

The arguments put forth in the thesis address the gap in knowledge on many of the questions international feminist art historians have been asking for decades on how gender is a key element in analysing the works of art. The question of gender in Iceland is parallel with that of neighbouring countries and is in many respects equivalent to what feminist art historians have pointed out in other countries with a much longer—and indeed richer—art history tradition. Hence, the thesis argues that during the whole period of study, the discourse on art and culture was two-pronged: the art of being a (male) genius and the art of (female) behaving.

The study shows that throughout the period, *the gendering of art forms* was intertwined with the gendering discourse on art. This also has international links, as many feminist art historians have pointed out, reflecting an effective way to belittle women's contributions in the hierarchy of art. Even though the change is modest and the development gradual, the foundation of the National Gallery of Iceland in 1884 represents the first step in distinguishing fine art from the crafts. During the next decades, everything related to women's artistry was old heritage, women's realm, the antithesis of fine art.

The concept *textility* is introduced in this thesis in order to combine several characteristic aspects of women fighting the gendered discourse and the gendering of art forms. Firstly, it pertains to the diversity of women's art creations, the blurring of the demarcation between art forms; secondly, the writings in the women's periodicals, on their contributions to art and culture and women's exhibitions; and thirdly, these aspects are linked to the networks formed by women within Iceland and between countries, which among other things entangles their collaboration in the area of diverse women's associations that are involved with the arts as well as with women's rights issues. The important collaboration of Icelandic women with the Danes continued, notably with the *Danish Crafts Association* in the first decade of the twentieth century. This contributed to promote the shaping of the home industry—and, consequently, modern applied art in Iceland—under the influence of the *Arts and Crafts movement* that was prominent in Denmark. As argued, women during the whole period of study

furthered many of the diverse women's struggles with their contributions, combining all aspects of textility — an important weapon in the battle for women's cultural citizenship.

Women's position is presented in this thesis as the women's role of "parrêsia", referring to the theories of Michel Foucault and free speech, or frank speaking, as democracy implies the participation of everyone, including the participation of women in public discourse. The "truth"—considered a stranger to women—appeared in the hands of Icelandic women *parrêsius*. As this thesis shows, on the one hand there was the continued silencing of the contribution of many women artists in the public male-oriented discourse on culture and art, and on the other, their contribution to art and culture had been circumscribed by their gender. During the period of study, women responded and reacted to public male-dominated discourse (or silencing) on art and culture in a parallel discourse that took place in women's periodicals; these constituted an important platform in which women's contributions in various fields were depicted when the first women's periodicals started to appear in Iceland in 1895.

The start of women's collaboration and networking proved to be important for the various kinds of women's struggles and was a key factor in the coming years and during the whole period of study. At the end of the nineteenth century in Iceland, a group of Icelandic women emerged who had studied and lived in Copenhagen. A large Nordic women's exhibition *Kvindernes Udstilling Fra Fortid til Nutid*, was held in 1895 in Copenhagen with the goal of displaying a great variety of women's art creations from the Nordic countries. Icelandic women participated in the preparations for this, and many took part, mostly exhibiting textiles and embroidery. The women artists exhibition, *Kvindelige Kunstneres Retrospektive Udstilling*, was the first large exhibition of the *KKS, Danish Women's Artists Association* in Denmark, and was held in Copenhagen in 1920 with a varied selection of works at the exhibition. Like in 1895, an ambitious exhibition catalogue epitomizes the focused desire to write women's art history, as it traces the history and discusses the works of women then and now.

The first large women's art exhibition in Iceland, at which women's artistic creativity in the fields of fine art, handicrafts and literature was described and celebrated, was held at the National Museum in Reykjavík in 1957, on the 50th anniversary of the *Icelandic Women's Rights Association*. Referring again to the poem by María Rögnvaldsdóttir at the beginning of the thesis, there was still "much to bridge" and the necessity to "be en garde, win more victories". The leitmotif or the message in mainstream public discourse was, as before, that women should know their limitations and not excel in one genre, in a society of great men. Yet

the women's collaboration and the integration of craft with art was indeed also a way for women artists to undermine the founding pillars of the myth of the solitary male artist genius.

Many feminist art historians, critics and artists have challenged art history's constructed categories of art, instead focusing on the traditions of the minor arts, domestic arts and utility production by women. Therefore, transcending the hierarchy of art is an optimal approach for defining Icelandic art history in a different way. Textile art, embroidery, needlework, art and crafts are an important "thread" in art history and women's history, and represent an important heritage documented by women. Even if there was a difference in emphasis in women's periodicals, on the one hand home industry as part of housewife ideology to strengthen the knowledge of country housewives and on the other hand the public women's struggle, women agreed on handicrafts as a part of women's artistic creation, a centuries-old heritage.

As this thesis argues, a certain turning point came about when the bronze cast of Thorvaldsen's self-portrait was unveiled in the centre of Reykjavík in 1875; when this happened, a gendered discourse on the art and the genius is also unveiled in Iceland. Thorvaldsen became the criteria and model of the genius in Iceland in art: the virile, Nordic, strong, magnificent, national genius in fine art. Initially, great hopes were pinned on "the genius", Sigurður Guðmundsson, *the painter*, in some kind of patrilineal, national discourse. However, Sigurður Guðmundsson did not fit the myth of the genius, and his "female" subject matter became the antithesis of Thorvaldsen—this in fact would later become a leitmotif in the discourse during the decades that followed.

At the turn of the new century there was an appeal for the revival of Icelandic art, with the emphasis on a beginning, in the hands of "three pioneers": the painters Ásgrímur Jónsson and Þórarinn B. Þorláksson and the sculptor Einar Jónsson. The landscape and Icelandic nature now appeared to be entwined in art and nationalist discourse. The *revival* is in fact a starting point whereby what happened before in art—the "distorted" vision of foreigners and women's art creations—is overlooked. The Golden Age of Icelanders during the so-called Icelandic Commonwealth was linked to the strong, masculine settler: the virility that was manifested in politics and the nation's culture. The Golden Age was followed by a period of decline and then a *renaissance*, with cultural optimism in literature and art, reflecting the cycle of history and several aspects during the Renaissance period in Europe, such as the emphasis on the gifted individual artist, the genius.

The first public art exhibition in Iceland that was presented as such, held in Reykjavík in 1919 by the *Art Society*, represents the beginning of the gendered reception history of art,

whereby the works of women and men are compared. The “three pioneers of Icelandic art”—Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, Einar Jónsson and Ásgrímur Jónsson—were honoured in the mainstream public discourse as they were considered to make truly Icelandic works. The exhibitors also included three Icelandic women artists who had been educated at the Royal Danish Academy: Kristín Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson. Three women were now stepping forward in the art field, from the same school as their male colleagues, exhibiting with them and making art their life-long career. The exhibition also included Jóhannes S. Kjarval, who graduated from the Academy in Copenhagen around the same time. The gendered discourse related to him is quite revealing concerning ideas on the genius and the shaping of the genius in the discourse.

Here, discursive themes are constructed and established. Firstly, the special, the original, and the true Icelandic were considered masculine qualities that did not apply to women artists, but the antithesis to these is feminine impressionability and lack of independent creative talent. Secondly, ever since the discourse on Thorvaldsen in 1875, the male artist has been linked to the (northern) masculine creative power and originality, whereas the antithesis was the woman, the feminine (southern) that was equivalent to impressionability and lack of creative talent. Thirdly, the discussion of the women artists only consisted of several lines and frequently comprised the above-mentioned, joint, feminine qualities. In contrast, when it comes to male artists, discussion was more likely to describe their life, work, and their endowments than the works themselves. In this way the discourse on art takes account of the nationalistic literary discourse: artists were described as “the great poet” or compared to the people from the sagas. Thus, in the coverage of this first general exhibition, Júlíana, Kristín and Nína are considered by some to be more prone to influence, with their works being neither original nor reflecting independent creativity, and as a result they are inferior to the works of other (male) artists. Here the tone was set for what would be seen in writings about Icelandic art in the years that followed, the male artist being the settler in Icelandic art history. The obvious peak of the masculine and feminine dichotomy in discourse on art in the late 1920s is quite noticeable and in the Icelandic mainstream press, the *idiosyncrasy* of Icelandic art was emphasized, represented in the works of the best “three” Icelandic painters—Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson and Kjarval—who depicted landscape with masculinity and vigour, and were thus thoroughly Icelandic. The concept of “the three great artists” continued, with the only changes being the replacement of one male artist by another over the next few decades.

Deconstructing gendered assumption in art history also means a revision of national narratives, as art and culture are among its many manifestations. Interwoven into this discourse on foreign influences and the decline of the Icelandic culture is a focus on the strong individual, both in art, literature and politics. In the nationalist discourse, intertwined with ideas of masculinity and femininity, the true Icelandic art is conditioned by gender in a similar way to how Icelandic women were in reality not defined as fully valid members of the nation state. Thus, the issue is not just about the creation of a political, national hero. The role of Icelandic artists was important in the construction of national identity, along with the importance for Iceland to have geniuses in this field and to shape the discourse around them. As is shown in this thesis, women artists were not “included” in the social role of the arts and were not considered to create “true Icelandic works of art”. In that sense, the contribution of women to literature and poetry was completely parallel to that of women in art in terms of the reception of their works in the mainstream public discourse.

In the same way as the nation state was male, the new masculine nation (with settlers, explorers) replaced the feminine colony (the subordinated, dependent), and was reflected in gendered, nationalist discourse on art during the period of study. Ideas about the master and genius in art are both national and international, but an important aspect is the cultural and historical relations of Iceland as a Danish realm, which places Iceland in a specific art historical context. It is also argued that the gendered discourse on art in Iceland is to a certain degree national while in many respects parallel to what feminist art historians have shown to have taken place in other countries. And when it comes to landscape paintings, Icelandic artists were influenced by transnational nationalistic trends. Furthermore, in that respect it is possible to examine Iceland in an art historical context with other nations and find parallels, where gender-related terms characterize the discourse on art, landscape paintings, national identity, cultural eligibility and a masculine nation.

However, it is argued in this thesis that the masculine, nationalist discourse aggravates gendered discourse on art and is an even greater excluding factor. It is also argued that due to this nationalist discourse in Iceland, even if it is paradoxical, women artists seem to enjoy a greater cultural citizenship as Icelanders on foreign ground. It is the gendered, nationalist discourse on art and the definition of the true Icelandic (male) artist that pushes women out of the way—and to other countries. The period under study is important in terms of the transition for the modern woman, and likewise for the shaping of self-image and self-identity. Nonetheless, the paradox shows that the development in the circumstances and position of

women, along with attitudes towards them, is not linear and continuous. This is reflected in the discourse on arts and culture and, as this thesis argues, women did not enjoy *cultural eligibility*, due to discrimination through gendered discourse on art and culture.

Although the dominant subject matter in the late 1920s—Icelandic landscape and the “national”—continued to prevail as time went on, there was an increased interest in other subjects in the 1930s. The rise of socialism had an effect in Iceland and is reflected in the subject matter of the artists, such as urban life and the difficulties of life faced by the working class. However, women’s works were considered neither nationalist nor of a social character. As this thesis has pointed out, the art political controversy in the 1940s between the supporters of national (older) art and the proponents of the work by younger artists who were treading new paths—not least in the 1950s during the Cold War, notably with the “Rome dispute” in 1955—revolved completely around men against men. Furthermore, in the many writings about these disputes, attention has never been drawn to the fact that women artists were never identified in either group, even if they had taken a stance.

This thesis argues that a progressive approach or thinking in terms of new styles and movements in art does not necessarily lead to avant-garde ideas on gender. In the continuity of gendered discourse on art lies the paradox of modernism. In Icelandic art history, the so-called entry of modernism into Iceland has been considered to occur in 1945, when the new modern style in art overturned ideas of what had previously been considered the true Icelandic art and culture. However, this thesis shows that the gendered discourse did not change regarding any of these issues. The writings and the discourse on art were in fact both a return to the divine gift of the genius and the biographical writings in which ingenuity is innate and a linear chain of events. Coverage of male artists and their work was further analysed according to the personality of the artist, but in the most gendered way and the male artists are, as before, settlers or explorers in art. The male genius, the master in art, is daring, original, determined, with a virile message that manifests as never before, the antithesis to the hesitant, indecisive, feminine. The concept of the “three great artists” (and the three great pioneers) remained: Kjarval is the first one, the father, the link where the original and the older come together, the unique one who has no equal, while Svavar Guðnason and Þorvaldur Skúlason are also in the vanguard, masters of the contemporary art. As far as women artists are concerned, Kristín Jónsdóttir arouses attention for her paintings that reflect her taste, feminine sensibility and finesse, and Júlíana Sveinsdóttir’s paintings are subject to a great deal of feminine grace, besides being decorative and tasteful—the antithesis of true Icelandic, masculine art.

Yet, women artists in abstraction and geometric art were more “qualified” in the avant-garde discourse in the international context, where their works were exhibited and reviewed, as it was more difficult to link their works to feminine characteristics or to interpret them based on gender, when they do not represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality. However, the gendered discourse prevailed. Nína Tryggvadóttir gets very positive comments in the foreign press, notably on the masculine in her works, which becomes a sign of quality and approval. During the 1950s, Nína and Gerður Helgadóttir exhibited their work overseas in known and esteemed galleries, both in joint exhibitions and solo exhibitions, and got more coverage there than any other Icelandic artist. At the same time, geometric abstraction became more prominent and reached a peak in Iceland. However, in Iceland, as well as abroad, it was still considered possible to discern femininity in women’s work in the most derogatory way, and with words related to “women’s nature”—feminine qualities, such as emotionality and impressionability, as opposed to the serious, independent, balanced personality of the unique, male artist.

Nína Tryggvadóttir aroused a great deal of attention for her clear stance, firstly concerning the gender bias in the art world, as described in the women’s periodical *Melkorka*—the first of its kind—and secondly, conscious of the diversity of international art, pointing out that the revolution of the modernist in art in Iceland was over in other countries. But in the case of women artists (and some men also), departure from geometric abstraction towards “lyrical abstraction” was considered to render them even more “volatile” and “unstable”, as they did not espouse one art form and one belief—they lacked resilience. In fact, lyrical became a sort of synonym for hysterical. This thesis points out that during the whole period of study, women artists did not focus on one art style or movement and blurred the separation between fine art and applied art. Women artists such as Gerður Helgadóttir and Nína Tryggvadóttir continued to blur the boundaries of different artforms, as in their eyes art creation was more about diversity than one belief or one style. In this way, women continued to make themselves approved and carried out pioneering work, whether in painting, sculpture, photography, ceramics, glass art or textile art, as well as participating in exhibitions in Iceland and abroad with their works in more untraditional media.

If the emphasis on different art forms had been held in high esteem by women artists, at least since the end of the nineteenth century, it mattered whether the blurring of artforms came from women or men. The modernist artists sought to focus on cooperation and unification of all of the visual arts, art and life, i.e. in public spaces and buildings, resulting in more attention and increased value of the various medias. Even though a great deal is happening for women,

the 1950s have often been defined as the housewives' Golden Age, and this can be discerned in the gendered discourse on art and culture. The separation between public and private spheres of art creation partly appeared on the one hand in discussions of women's taste and the tasteful home as women's responsibility and on the other, of the male artists as masters in Icelandic art. This is perhaps best seen in the fact that although masculine tributes for women artists were perceived as a compliment, men certainly did not receive compliments for knitting, weaving or embroidering like women. In 1957, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir held the first retrospective exhibition of a woman artist in the National Gallery, exposing her paintings, textiles and mosaics. In reality, attention to Júlíana's textiles in Iceland was first aroused with this exhibition: Júlíana's paintings are said to reflect a delightful calmness, feminine poise, and susceptibility, while in the mainstream press, the discourse on the vigorous, masculine and truly Icelandic male artist is all-encompassing.

This thesis shows how a critical re-evaluation and gendered analysis on the modernist discourse on art in Iceland is long overdue. Firstly, the continuity of concepts and framework still remains in public discourse on art, while the construction of artist "greatness" is reinforced in even more gendered discourse than before. Secondly, and paradoxically, it is argued that despite the introduction of many innovations in trends and styles, along with more women artists on the art scene—both abroad and in Iceland—modernism and modernists consisted exclusively of selected male artists. And thirdly, the distinction between art and crafts, the progressive evolution since the late nineteenth century, forms an even bigger gendered gap between the so-called modernist cultural discourse in newspapers and mainstream periodicals and the women's periodicals during that period, even though modernist artists in geometric abstraction emphasized the relationship between art and society, with the aim of levelling out the distinction between the fine and applied arts.

The gendered discourse in Iceland was an underlying cause of synergetic factors of discrimination in art and culture in general. Firstly, a call for erecting a gallery for the works of selected male artists—but no women artists are mentioned. Secondly, when the urgent need of recording Icelandic art history is discussed, mention is only made of selective Icelandic male artists. Thirdly (and consequently), the highest grants went for the most part to the same male artists, poets and writers. Women artists were bypassed or got lower stipends, regardless of their contributions to art and culture. Even though artists and authors seldom became rich in the worldly sense—in fact, quite the contrary—the coverage and selectivity created more respect in the community, which of course gave the few chosen masters a much greater chance of

selling their works (to art dealers and public collections), exposing them (and writing about them) and receiving stipends.

Even if this rigid dichotomy *was* part of the cultural milieu, women transcended the dichotomy of domesticity in multiple ways. The findings in this thesis confirm the impact of the women's periodicals on the women's struggle during the whole period of study as a counter-discourse to the mainstream press, and how they fought back against the gendered dominant discourse, notably on art and culture. The voices heard in women's periodicals were of course not uniform but revealed multiple positions and certain paradoxes. Women claimed increased rights and many conquests were won, although a backlash could certainly be detected regularly during the whole period of study. The growing number of women in general in the public sphere aroused fear of changes and imbalance of the roles of the sexes, the future of the country and the nation, and foreign influence on women regarding trends and appearance. Hence, the nature of women was still being debated and a question mark was set with women as creative artists, as had been maintained for centuries and was reflected in the discourse at the end of the nineteenth century. Conservative ideas like these viewpoints, found amongst men and conservative women, also aroused strong reactions.

In women's writings, three main threads were discernible: conservative ideas, where mothering and housewifery prevailed; moderate women's rights activists, who wanted to hold on to the old values but add to these women's employment and participation in society; and radical women's rights activists, who wanted to go the whole way and review the roles. In spite of differences in emphasis in the women's periodicals, on the one hand home industry as part of housewife ideology and on the other hand the more radical women's periodicals related to women's nature, femininity or women's rights, one of many denominators was the desire to document and establish women's contributions to art and culture: to recover from oblivion those women whose paths were lost or silenced in the mainstream press. However, this discourse as a by-product was depreciated, and women's periodicals were not defined as cultural or literary and rarely referred to in the mainstream public discourse. Therefore, the depreciation is in fact multi-layered, whether in terms of women artists or of women writing about women artists.

When women discussed art, their discourse was of a different nature to that in the mainstream public discourse: women's discourse was more gender-neutral and women were particularly diligent at pointing to the education of the women and their work, and also at following their coverage in foreign papers. This confirms a certain acknowledgement that can be referred to and appears to make women more self-confident in writing. Emphasis was laid

on women as *individuals* who were entitled to such coverage, as well as the *group dynamics* that form when women stand together. Furthermore, women wrote with confidence about women's textile art, needlework and embroidery and the history of these, where they seemed to be on home ground, as this is a history that they knew very well and have shaped themselves: this was women's heritage, irrespective of where or whether they stand in the women's rights' struggle. They responded to inequality, discrimination, and gendered discourse in general in many areas of society as part of the wider context on the right of women, as citizens, to enjoy both cultural eligibility and political rights.

One could say that women's emancipation and reactions to gendered discourse on art were of two kinds: firstly, women responded to the invisibility of women artists in the mainstream public discourse, coupled with the lack of their coverage, by writing about them themselves—a joint theme with which all women could identify. Secondly, they reacted directly to gendered discourse in art, and stood up for women artists who were bypassed in the grant allocation, though these reactions became more apparent in the late 1940s and the 1950s. In step with the increased number of women artists, the women's periodicals published articles and interviews with women artists more regularly, along with their work or portraits of them, notably on the front page. Yet, many women believed that women artists should not make a claim for more space or public attention in Iceland, and thereby positioned themselves close to the “nationally” elected masters of art. And the women artists themselves considered that they had no right to attention and even made little of their works and accomplishments.

This thesis throws light on the important struggle of women artists, from the late nineteenth century to 1960, which corresponds to the time frame of this thesis. In 1960, art historian Selma Jónsdóttir, who was still directing the National Gallery and would continue to do so in the years to come, defended her doctoral thesis at the University of Iceland, the first Icelandic woman to do so. Women had waited a long time for such a milestone and it was welcomed enthusiastically. As was pointed out, setbacks and contradictions in women's milestone victories in art and culture also included the symbolic fate of Nína Sæmundsson's *Hafmeyjan*. Unlike Thorvaldsen, who was neither born in Iceland nor set foot on Icelandic soil during his lifetime, the women artists who were born and raised in Iceland, such as Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, Nína Sæmundsson, Gerður Helgadóttir, and Nína Tryggvadóttir, did not miss the opportunity to show their work here whenever it arose and to pay generous tribute to their Icelandic origin. Yet their Icelandic loyalty is questioned, as this is more than anything else the primary concern, even more than their international recognition.

In the 1960s Iceland entered a period of upheaval in art, with new styles and movements, as well as the ideas (concepts) behind the work and experimentation with art forms and medias. Moreover, the emphasis was also on breaking down boundaries between fine art and popular art—something that women artists had highlighted since the late nineteenth century, as revealed in this thesis. Unceasingly during the whole period under study, albeit long ignored, women laid the groundwork for the emancipation of women artists on which the more radical second-wave feminism would be built in the 1960s and 1970s. A worthy research topic would be to what extent—and indeed whether—gendered discourse was maintained in the decades that followed, in which the concepts of *textility* and *parrêsia*, via various artforms, exhibitions and periodicals, were interwoven with the position of women at any given time and were crucial in linking the first wave of the feminist movement to the second, during which time the feminist art movement emerged. To a large extent, feminist art history is to be found in women’s periodicals, and hopefully will be mapped in a global, transnational context to a more inclusive understanding. The concept of *cultural eligibility* can also be used to explore cultural diversity with intersectional perspectives: the contribution of groups/individuals to a nation’s culture with respect to gender identities in the plural, along with sexuality, ethnicity, disability, class and status.

The thesis argues that the gendered discourse on art directly and indirectly shaped the *idea* and the *idealization* of the Icelandic character of the (male) artist, the genius, along with the role and the value of art for the nation. This idealization, which was forged in the discourse on art during the study period, produced a canon and shaped frameworks of concepts and ideas of the master. The text, wording and discussion of previous decades is continually repeated without critical thought, manifesting as the truth itself. In the gendered discourse which had its inception in the late nineteenth century, the nationalist discourse and century-old definition of the true, Icelandic (male) genius come together in one place—in Björn Th. Björnsson’s two-volume art history review *Íslensk myndlist*, interwoven with gendered modernist discourse on art in Iceland and abroad. The gendered discourse, together with the notion of sexual difference in all spheres and social institutions, is interwoven in artistic creation and it is in fact impossible to separate the discourse on femininity and virility from the discourse on art. Or by paraphrasing: if art history is about gender, the discourse will reflect that, whatever the style, isms, or period.

Challenging embedded, gendered, discursive tradition that has become “truth” itself can cause angst or threat to the dominant discourse of cultural importance of a nation and its heroes.

This *point of knowledge* and discourse on art and culture can be so subtle yet so ingrained in people's minds and in nations' "mémoires" that its legitimacy is not questioned, but becomes a conviction of one's cultural knowledge, like a poem that a child learned by heart in her/his childhood and can still recite in old age. Yet, as this thesis demonstrates, the discourse on art cannot just be dismissed as the mere "product of one's time"—long-gone gendered attitudes, without aftermath for later times—as these attitudes are conducive to maintaining a centuries-old, gendered discourse on art.

6. ÁGRIP

Síðustu áratugi hefur á Íslandi verið leitast við að varpa ljósi á framlag myndlistarkvenna, þekktara og óþekktara, gera úttekt á verkum þeirra sem og að leiðrétta kynjaslagsíðu á ýmsum öðrum sviðum myndlistar. Hins vegar hefur feminískri aðferðafræði og kyngervishugtakinu innan listfræðinnar ekki verið beitt markvisst í orðræðugreiningu eins og hefur verið áberandi m.a. í íslenskri kvenna- og kynjasögu og feminískri bókmenntafræði á síðari árum.

Meginmarkmið þessarar þverfaglegu ritgerðar (á sviði listfræði og sagnfræði) er þrjúþætt: 1) að greina kynjaða orðræðu um myndlist á Íslandi frá síðari hluta nítjándu aldar til 1960 út frá kyngervi og feminískri aðferðafræði, 2) að greina áhrif aðgreiningar á listformum, í orðræðunni um myndlist, í hin kvenlegu svið s.s. hannyrðir og handverk og karllægar fagnar listir og 3) að greina hvernig konur brugðust við kynjaðri orðræðu (eða þöggun) um framlag sitt til lista og menningar í opinberri meginumræðu, og um málefni þeirra almennt.

Lögð er áhersla á að hin svonefndu aðskildu svið, þ.e. almannasvið (e. public sphere) og einkasvið (e. private sphere) séu samsett úr margræðum rýmum, m.a. þeim sem konur sköpuðu sér. Auk feminískrar aðferðafræði og beitingar kyngervihugtaksins eru þrjú hugtök leiðandi í ritgerðinni. Fyrst ber að nefna hugtakið textílleiki (e. textility), orð sem felur í sér *texta* og *textíllist*, sem kynnt er hér til sögunnar til að sameina nokkra einkennandi þætti í baráttunni fyrir meiri sýnileika kvenna á sviði menningar og lista. Í því felst í fyrsta lagi áhersla kvenna á fjölbreytta listsköpun án aðgreiningar listforma, með sérstaka áherslu á aldagamlan menningararf kvenna á sviði hannyrða sem og útgáfa sérstakra kvennablaða. Ennfremur þátttaka í kvennasýningum í tengslum við samstarf á sviði lista og menningar jafnt sem kvenréttindamálum á innlendum og erlendum vettvangi.

Annað hugtak er sótt í smiðju Michels Foucault, sem notar orðið *parresia* (fr. *parrêsia*) um þau sem hafa hugrekki til að segja hið sanna umbúðalaust (fr. *franc-parler*) á opinberum vettvangi. Að baki liggur meðal annars hugmyndin um mikilvægi þess að lýðræði feli í sér þátttöku allra og í ritgerðinni er vísað til mikilvægis þátttöku kvenna. Hvort tveggja textílleiki og *parresia* fela í sér margþætta baráttu fyrir því sem skilgreint er í ritgerðinni sem *menningargengi* kvenna (e. cultural eligibility). Menningargengi einstaklings er þá mælikvarði á að hvaða marki einstaklingurinn er tekinn gildur, er viðurkenndur og hefur færi á að hafa áhrif á vettvangi menningarinnar: í tilfelli kvenna, hvort framlag þeirra til menningar og lista sé skilyrt af kyni í opinberri orðræðu á síðum dagblaða og tímarita. Í ritgerðinni er hugtakið menningargengi kynnt með það að markmiði að sýna fram á að þrátt fyrir sýnileika hafi kynjuð orðræða um verk myndlistarkvenna staðið í vegi fyrir menningargengi þeirra til jafns við karla.

Andstætt öðrum löndum var umfjöllun um myndlist á Íslandi ekki í höndum listfræðinga eða listgagnrýnenda lungann úr tímabilinu sem hér er til skoðunar, heldur ýmsum öðrum, s.s. fræðimönnum, stjórnámálönnum, rithöfundum og listamönnum. Þó það hafi ekki verið algilt, og ýmsir aðrir komi við sögu, voru þeir nær undantekningarlaust karlkyns. Megináhersla er lögð á að greina meginorðræðu í blöðum og tímaritum, því á þeim vettvangi mótuðust hugmyndir um karlsnillinginn og sanna íslenska myndlist og var sú þekkingarsköpun inngreipt í menningarvitund þjóðarinnar á tímabilinu sem um ræðir.

Ritgerðin skiptist í þrjá meginhluta, auk inngangs og niðurstöðukafla. Í öðrum kafla eru færð rök fyrir vissum upphafspunkti árið 1875 í orðræðunni um mótun hugmynda um norræna snillinginn í hinum fögru listum, þegar bronsafsteypa af sjálfsmynd Thorvaldsens var afhjúpuð við hátíðlega athöfn í miðborg Reykjavíkur (Austurvelli). Breið skilgreining á listsköpun og menningararfi þjóðarinnar skipti í raun sköpum fyrir konur á Íslandi eins og kemur m.a. í ljós á fyrstu iðnaðarsýningunni Reykjavík árið 1883. Kynjahlutfall þáttakenda var jafnt og íslenskar hannyrðir (og handverk almennt) sýnt til jafns við málalartist og teikningar. Jafnvel þótt þróunin sé hæg er stofnun Listasafns Íslands árið 1884 fyrsta skrefið í þá átt að aðgreina myndlist og handverk. Annar mikilvægur tímunktur er árið 1895 en þá hófu göngu sína tvö kvennablöð á Íslandi, *Framsókn* og *Kvennablaðið*. Í lok aldarinnar hafði myndast hópur íslenskra kvenna sem stundað hafði nám og búíð í Kaupmannahöfn og myndað tengsl við danskar frammákonur á ýmsum sviðum. Það samstarf stuðlaði m.a. að mótun heimilisiðnaðar á Íslandi, sem og þátttöku í stórri norrænni kvennasýningunni árið 1895 í Kaupmannahöfn.

Á fyrstu áratugum tuttugustu aldar, eins og greint er frá í þriðja kafla, varð áherslan á goðsögnina um hina þjóðlegu gullöld fyrirferðarmikil og tengdist hugmyndinni um hinn sterka, karlmannlega einstakling sem endurspeglast í orðræðunni um myndlist á sama hátt og í stjórnamála- og menningarumræðunni. Áhersla var lögð á gildi listar fyrir land og þjóð, félagslegar skyldur og hlutverk myndlistarmanna í mótun sjálfsmyndar þjóðarinnar sem hvíldi þó að því er virðist einungis á herðum karla. Hin sanna íslenska myndlist var bundin við viðfangsefni (íslensk náttúra og sérkenni) og listamanninn (kyn, þjóðerni). Þjóðernisleg orðræða markaði því vissu upphaf á fögrum listum eða svokallaða listvakningu sem var einkum í höndum „þriggja brautryðjenda“ sem menntaðir höfðu verið í Konunglegu dönsku akademíunni í Kaupmannahöfn: málara Anna Ásgríms Jónssonar og Þórarins B. Þorlákssonar og Einars Jónssonar myndhöggvara. Framlagi kvenna til lista og menningar á níjtjándu öld var hins vegar varpað fyrir róða.

Upphaf eiginlegrar viðtökusögu má rekja til þess þegar þrjár myndlistarkonur stigu fram á sviðið eftir lokapróf í Konunglegu dönsku akademíunni á árunum 1916–1920. Kristín

Jónsdóttir, Júlíana Sveinsdóttir og Nína Sæmundsson sýndu með íslenskum starfsbræðrum sínum, hérlendis og erlendis, og gerðu myndlist að ævistarfi sínu. Með því að ákvarða orðræðupemu birtist hið frumlega, þjóðlega, íslenska sem karllægur eiginleiki. Atgervi karla var lýst í anda þjóðhetjunnar, landnema sem námu land í ókönnuðu landi myndlistar, höfðu réttan skilning á íslenskri náttúru og drógu hana fram í verkum sínum með karlmennsku og þrótti. Myndlistakonur voru sagðar líklegri til áhrifagirni, verk þeirra voru hvorki frumleg né báru vott um sjálfstæðan sköpunarkraft, hið íslenska né þjóðlega, heldur kvenlega næmni, þokka og fínleika sem og góðan smekk. Kvenleikinn var undirliggjandi þáttur í þjóðernislegri orðræðu íhaldssamra afla (karla og kvenna) og skyldur konunnar voru bundnar við heimilið, móðurhlutverkið og hjónabandið.

Um 1930 má greina vissan hápunkt í orðræðu um hið kvenlæga og karllæga í myndlist. Og þrátt fyrir ný viðfangsefni, strauma og stefnur og breytingar á hinu pólitíska sviði, þóttu verk myndlistarkvenna hvorki hafa félagslega skírskotun né vera í anda raunsæis eins og verk karla. Almenn séð er orðræða um myndlist afar kynjuð á millistríðsárunum og sem fyrr fléttast þverþjóðlegar kynjahugmyndir í gegnum orðræðuna á því tímabili sem hér um ræðir. Þó svo stórsagan, þjóðríkið, tímabil sjálfstæðisbaráttunnar og mótun þjóðernislegrar sjálfsmyndar setji Ísland í einstakt pólitískt og listsögulegt samhengi er hægt að finna hliðstæður í öðrum löndum með svipaða nýlendustöðu þar sem áhersla var einnig lögð á náttúru og landslag, landnema myndlistar í karllægri þjóð. Í ritgerðinni eru færð rök fyrir því að það sé þessi kynjaða, þjóðernislega orðræða um myndlist sem gróf enn frekar undan menningargengi kvenna í heimalandinu.

Á sama hátt og hinn mótsagnakenndi móðernismi fimmta og sjötta áratugar tuttugustu aldar, sem fjallað er um í fjórða kafla, fól í sér ný viðhorf í stefnum og straumum í myndlist og öðrum listum almennt, lifðu rótgróin kynbundin viðhorf til myndlistarkvenna áfram góðu lífi í orðræðunni sem verður jafnvel enn karllægari en áður. Hið karlmannlega, norræna, ramm-íslenska, varð að forsendu fyrir hið nýja, móðerníska og framúrstefnulega. Og það þrátt fyrir aukna þekkingu almennt á alþjóðlegri listasögu með framlagi fyrstu listfræðinganna á fimmta áratugnum og þeim sjötta. Húsmæðrahugmyndafræðin endurspeglast einnig í tvískiptingu einka- og almanna sviðs listsköpunar, þar sem smekklegr heimili voru í verkahring og á ábyrgð húsmæðra en myndlist þjóðarinnar í höndum karla.

Hins vegar var margt að gerast og sífellt fleiri konur stunduðu listnám á erlendum og innlendum vettvangi. Í alþjóðlegu samhengi með tilkomu abstraktlistar og geómetríu höfðu þær nú fleiri tækifæri til brautargengis, einkum þar sem erfiðara var að tengja verk þeirra við kvenleg einkenni eða túlka þegar horfið var frá hinu fígúratifa og skírskotun í ytri veruleika.

Engu að síður var, eins og sjá má í meginorðræðunni, enn hægt að greina í verkum þeirra kvenleika, áhrifagirni, og tilfinningasemi. Í ritgerðinni eru færð rök fyrir því að í fyrstu íslensku listasögunni eftir Björn Th. Björnsson sem kom út í tveimur bindum á árunum 1964 og 1973 komi saman á einum stað sú kynjaða orðræða sem hófst seint á nítjándu öld, skilgreiningin á hinum sanna, íslenska (karlkyns) snillingi, sem sýnir glögggt hvernig endurtekið orðalag getur öðlast sterkt sannleiksgildi sem erfitt getur reynst að afbyggja. Eins og þessi ritgerð rökstyður er það hin kynjaða, karllæga, þjóðernislega orðræða um myndlist sem mótaði með beinum og óbeinum hætti hugmyndir og skilgreiningu á íslenskri myndlist og snillingnum, hlutverki hans og gildi fyrir þjóðina. Hugmyndin um kynjamun á öllum sviðum samfélags er samofin listsköpun því að kyn ákvarðar í raun greiningu á verki, hvort heldur í inntaki eða formi, sem var forsenda kynbundinnar mismununar og stóð í vegi fyrir menningargengi myndlistarkvenna. Margar þeirru urðu hins vegar fullgildari og viðurkenndari sem myndlistarkonur á erlendum vettvangi en í heimalandinu.

Í anda *textílleika* er því haldið fram að allt tímabilið hafi leiðarstef myndlistarkvenna, og kvenna almennt, máð út skilin milli listforma og þær héldu áfram að láta að sér kveða í málalartist, skúlptúr, ljósmyndun, keramik, glerlist eða textíllist, tóku þátt í sýningum hérlendis og erlendis. Það er þó með abstraktlistinni og geómetríunni, og áherslu á heildarhyggju í listum, sem hin ýmsu óhefðbundnu listform fá aukið vægi og gildi. Raddirnar sem heyrðust í kvennablöðunum voru ekki einróma og varpa ljósi á ólíka afstöðu, til húsmóðurhlutverksins, kvenréttinda og kvenleikans. En óháð því var sameiginlegt keppikefli að skrásetja sögu kvenna m.a. í hannyrðum fyrr og síðar og framlag til lista og menningar almennt. Orðræðan um listir er annars eðlis en í karllægri meginorðræðu: kynhlutlausari með áherslu á að greina frá menntun kvenna og starfsferli þeirra og einnig fylgja eftir jákvæðri umfjöllun um þær í erlendum blöðum.

Áherslan var lögð á konur sem einstaklinga en einnig mikilvægi samstöðumáttar þeirra sem hreyfiafls breytinga. Þær voru ekki með einstrengingslega sýn á stíla og stefnur heldur litu á ólík verk myndlistarkvenna með hlutlausum hætti þegar allt logaði stafna á milli í meginorðræðunni um listpólitík. Í takt við aukinn fjölda myndlistarkvenna á fimmta og sjötta áratugnum birtu kvennablöðin oftast greinar og viðtöl við þær ásamt myndum af verkum þeirra og af þeim sjálfum. Sjálfsöryggi kvenna jókst og kvennablöð eins og *Melkorka* og *19. júní* endurspeglu sterkari vitund um mismunun á sviðið lista og menningar og þar var stigið fastar til jarðar. En kvennablöðin voru aftur á móti ekki skilgreind sem menningarlegs eða listræns eðlis og sjaldan vísað til þeirra í almennri þjóðfélagsmæðu. Það eitt og sér leiddi af sér villandi listsögulega ritun.

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