

# Landscape Painting and the Construction of “Icelandicness”. Icelandic Modern National Art *vis-à-vis* its Danish Origins

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**ABSTRACT** The article constitutes an attempt at developing a new approach to Icelandic national art, supported by an analysis of its role in the process of constructing “Icelandicness” and the Icelandic identity. It enters a dialogue with the study *Kryptokoloniale landskaber: tid, sted og rum i billeder af islandsk landskab 1874–2011* by Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, with a concurrent focus on Icelandic landscape painting of the period 1874–1944 and its relation to Danish art. The Nordic, and especially the Icelandic art was routinely overlooked in the European artistic and historical narration, including the Polish scholarly environment, but it is well worthy of a closer scrutiny. Two fundamental assumptions that define the analysis presented herein are that the modern national art of Iceland derives from the Academic tradition in Denmark and that, concurrently, Icelandic artists participated in the process of developing national identity in opposition to the Danish model. In order to find confirmation for the posed theses, methodologies close to post-colonialism and crypto-colonialism have been used, as well as ones inspired by imagology and based on interdisciplinary research in the fields of art history, history, anthropology and cultural studies.

**KEYWORDS** Icelandic art, Danish art, national identity, landscape painting, national art, post-colonialism, crypto-colonialism

**ABSTRAKT** *Malarstwo pejzażowe i konstruowanie „islandzkości”. Nowoczesna sztuka narodowa Islandii wobec swych duńskich źródeł.* Artykuł jest próbą wypracowania nowego podejścia do islandzkiej sztuki narodowej, popartego analizą jej roli w konstruowaniu „islandzkości” i islandzkiej tożsamości. Pozostając w ciągłym dialogu z rozprawą Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud *Kryptokoloniale landskaber: tid, sted og rum i billeder af islandsk landskab 1874–2011* (2012), tekst koncentruje się jednocześnie na islandzkim malarstwie pejzażowym z lat 1874–1944 i jego relacji ze sztuką duńską. Sztuka nordycka, a zwłaszcza islandzka, zazwyczaj pomijana w europejskiej narracji historyczno-artystycznej, warta jest jednak bliższego poznania. W pracy przyjęto podstawowe założenie, że nowoczesna islandzka sztuka narodowa wywodzi się z duńskiej tradycji akademickiej, a islandzcy artyści uczestniczyli w tworzeniu tożsamości narodowej pozostając w opozycji wobec modelu duńskiego. Aby znaleźć poparcie dla postawionej tezy, wykorzystano metodologie bliskie postkolonializmowi i kryptokolonializmowi, jak również inspirowane imagologią i oparte na interdyscyplinarnych badaniach z zakresu historii sztuki, historii, antropologii i kulturoznawstwa.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE** sztuka islandzka, sztuka duńska, tożsamość narodowa, malarstwo pejzażowe, sztuka narodowa, postkolonializm, kryptokolonializm

DUE to Iceland's dependence on the Kingdom of Denmark, which lasted over five hundred years, the development of Icelandic culture, especially of a national kind, was rather slow and constrained. However, the romantic atmosphere of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and vast political changes that took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century accelerated national movements in Iceland.<sup>1</sup> This led to both the creation of an autonomous Icelandic state (1918), later becoming an independent republic (1944), and the shaping of an Icelandic identity. Although it is not clear whether the Icelanders created or merely recreated their national identity,<sup>2</sup> the whole independent movement was pivotal for the evolution of Icelandic art and culture.

This paper will focus on the relation between Icelandic art and the construction of "Icelandicness".<sup>3</sup> This term shall denote not only what fits within the frame of Icelandic national identity – thus, the characteristics and values that were chosen by artists to support a sense of commonness – but also visual traits and symbols that were perpetuated in opposition to

the image of Iceland created by the others. The examples will involve the years between 1874 and 1944, namely the period of the most intensified nationalist movements in Iceland, when political ties with Denmark loosened. However, the brief analysis of the construction of "Icelandicness" in art or by artists will rely on juxtapositions with Danish landscape painting. Therefore, it is essential to underline that the "others" participating in the creation of the Icelandic image were mostly Danish artists, both those who came to Iceland to paint its landscapes and those who influenced Icelandic students at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen.

This paper constitutes a contribution to the discussion about Icelandic national art and the construction of national identity. The analysis presented herein is based on two assumptions: 1) Icelandic modern national art has its origins in academic education in Denmark, and 2) Icelandic artists participated in creating national identity in a way that opposed the Danish model. This approach is similar to postcolonialism,<sup>4</sup>

1. Icelandic history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was described by Grażyna Szelągowska: Grażyna Szelągowska, "Od kolonii do państwa niepodległego. Islandia od XIII do XX wieku," in *Islandia: Wprowadzenie do wiedzy o społeczeństwie*, ed. Roman Chymkowski, Włodzimierz Karol Pessel (Warszawa: Trio, 2009), 31–44.
2. For instance, Katla Kjartansdóttir writes about "identity crisis" and refers to research by Gisli Sigurdsson, Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, Gunnar Karlson, Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, see Katla Kjartansdóttir, "Remote, Rough and Romantic: Contemporary Images of Iceland in Visual, Oral and Textual Narrations," in *Images of the North: Histories – Identities – Ideas*, ed. Sverrir Jakobsson (Amsterdam: Radopi, 2009), 271–280.
3. Described by Kirsten Hastrup as deeply connected with the Icelandic landscape and resulting from its vital part of the local memory; she also analysed the roots of Icelandicness as something distinct from the shared Nordic past, see Kirsten Hastrup, "Icelandic Topography and the Sense of Identity," in *Nordic Landscapes: Region and Belonging on the Northern Edge of Europe*, ed. Michael Jones, Kenneth R. Olwig (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 2008), 53, 59.
4. For example Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson's way of presenting Said's Orientalism and crypto-colonialism: Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, "Imaginations of National Identity and the North," in *Iceland and Images of the North* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, The Reykjavík Academy, 2011), 322. But also Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone" category and her reflections on colonial stylistics: Mary Louise Pratt, "Introduction: Criticism in the Contact Zone," in Ead., *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1–12.

but also inspired by imagology<sup>5</sup> and based on interdisciplinary studies within art history, history, anthropology (including the concept of “the other” and “Island studies”<sup>6</sup>) and cultural studies. Traditional definitions of “nations” and “national identity”<sup>7</sup> are referred to, as well as new concepts, such as “crypto-colonialism”.<sup>8</sup> Peter Burke’s idea of “eyewitnessing”<sup>9</sup> has been found helpful in tracing the connection between images and identity-building.

#### ROMANTIC LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The Romantic tradition strengthened the position of the landscape in European painting, also by giving it an identity-building role in the life of some nations.<sup>10</sup> Due to the Romantic idea of a “return to nature” and the perception of nature as a source of spiritual renewal, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Northern European painting was

dominated by landscape paintings. Painters associated with the Düsseldorf Academy, one of the most significant art academies of the era, followed the values of the German Romantic movement by advocating *plein air* painting. Members of the Düsseldorf school favoured pristine and untouched landscapes, as well as mysterious and exuberant environs evoking various kinds of emotions. The emotional connection with nature, especially the native landscape, was a foundation for landscape painting as a means of building national identity.<sup>11</sup>

The special development of *landskabsmaleri* (landscape painting) in the Nordic countries, supported by the vast interest in the Northern nature shown by German Romantic painters,<sup>12</sup> resulted in constituting this genre as dominant in Nordic art of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nordic painters would focus on the beauty and uniqueness of their own landscapes, presenting

5. Joep Leerssen, “Imagology: On using ethnicity to make sense of the world,” in *Les stéréotypes dans la construction des identités nationales depuis une perspective transnationale*, ed. Géraldine Galéote, special issue, *Iberic@l*, no. 10 (2016): 13–31.

6. Godfrey Baldacchino, “Island Landscapes and European Culture: An ‘island studies’ perspective,” *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 2 (2012): 13–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.imic.2013.04.001>. See also Owe Ronström, “Finding their place: islands as locus and focus,” *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 2 (April 2013): 153–165.

7. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). See also Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales: Europe, XVIII e–XX e siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

8. Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud, *Kryptokoloniale landskaber: tid, sted og rum i billeder af islandsk landskab 1874–2011* (Ph.D. thesis, Københavns Universitet, 2012).

9. Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001).

10. “Landscapes have played a central role in the formation of national identities, including from within the Nordic region, through the power of images to create cultural memories,” see Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, “Nordic Nature: From Romantic Nationalism to the Anthropocene,” in *Introduction to Nordic Cultures*, ed. Annika Lindskog, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (London: UCL Press, 2020), 165–80.

11. As Peter Burke states, “landscape evokes political associations, or even that it expresses an ideology, such as nationalism,” giving example of Swedish painter Prince Eugen: “Nature was nationalized at this time, turned into a symbol of the mother or fatherland.” See Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 43. A vast study on Scandinavian national art was executed by Michelle Facos, see Michelle Facos, *Nationalism and Nordic Imagination: Swedish Art of the 1890s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

12. Andrzej Pieńkos mentions a number of German painters travelling to the North, including Christian Ezdorf who visited Iceland around 1821, see Andrzej Pieńkos,

them as a national asset, establishing favourable angles and subjects which later became characteristic visions of their own countries.<sup>13</sup> Johan Christian Clausen Dahl (1788–1857, Norwegian), Johan Thomas Lundbye (1818–1848, Danish), Marcus Larson (1825–1864, Swedish), Fanny Churberg (1845–1892, Finnish), to name but a few, commenced a tradition of constructing images of their homeland, reinforcing national pride in empires that lost their power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Denmark, Sweden) and building national identities in nation-states that were born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Norway, Finland, Iceland). Nevertheless, it is vital to emphasise the special circumstances surrounding the construction of national identity in Iceland.

According to the anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup, the Icelandic landscape became a *topos* of national identity, although its particular role was primarily underlined in Icelandic sagas. Therefore, the emotional connection with landscape results from the “logocentric” character of Icelandic culture, where stories about the first settlers written in medieval manuscripts were

virtually the only artworks on Iceland of any value before the 1900s. This can be juxtaposed with the Finnish *Kalevala* and Norwegian folklore tales which, albeit “rediscovered” in 1850s and materialised simultaneously to the nation-building tendencies in painting, were later incorporated within local landscapes.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the relatively late construction of national art in Iceland resulted from the “remoteness of the island or the feeling of vulnerability or marginality in relation to modern Europe”.<sup>15</sup> The insularity<sup>16</sup> of Iceland had therefore a pivotal impact on why the construction of its national art was belated and different, even compared with Norway.<sup>17</sup>

#### COLONISATION OF THE LANDSCAPE. ICELAND AS A “CRYPTO-COLONY”

The Romantic idea of the North, especially vivid in Germany, constructed an idea of Scandinavian nature as severe, exotic, if not dangerous and sinister. The northern outskirts, distant and still unexplored, such as Iceland, became particularly popular among the

“Poszukiwanie tożsamości kraju i narodu w sztuce norweskiej XIX w.,” in *Niepokój i poszukiwanie: Polscy i norwescy twórcy czasu przełomów*, ed. Maciej Janicki, Agnieszka Rosales Rodríguez (Warszawa: Muzeum Fryderyka Chopina, 2015), 233–249, 234.

13. Peter Burke writes about iconography of the landscapes: “There are also the typical or symbolic landscapes that represent nations by means of their characteristic vegetation, from oaks to pines and from palm trees to eucalyptus,” see Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 42.

14. These problems were presented by Andrzej Pieńkos in his articles: Andrzej Pieńkos, “Norweskie sceny z prowincji: Sohlberg, Kittelsen, Astrup i inni,” in *Niepokój i poszukiwanie: Polscy i norwescy twórcy czasu przełomów*, 251–271; Id., “Na uboczu w centrum świata: Eksperyment fiński,” in *Regiony wyobraźni: Peryferyjność w kulturze XIX i XX wieku*, ed. Marcin Lachowski (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2017), 21–42.

15. Hastrup, “Icelandic Topography and the Sense of Identity,” 73.

16. As noted by Godfrey Baldacchino, “islands are prototypical ethno-scapes,” and as such, “spearhead the study of the production of locality,” see Godfrey Baldacchino, “Introducing a World of Islands,” in *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader*, ed. Godfrey Baldacchino (Canada: Island Studies Press, 2007), 16.

17. Norway was part of Danish Kingdom until 1814, when it entered a personal union with Sweden. Andrzej Pieńkos links the rise of Norwegian national identity awareness with the current trends in Germany, but mentions penetrations of Norwegian landscapes by Danish painters, e.g. Erik Pauelsen, and interprets them as “colonial,” see Pieńkos, “Poszukiwanie tożsamości kraju i narodu w sztuce norweskiej XIX w.,” 234.

Romantic artists, as their remoteness and exoticism captured the imagination.<sup>18</sup> Caspar David Friedrich himself was allegedly fascinated by European visions of Iceland, and although he never managed to travel there, his famous painting *Sea of Ice* (1823–1824, oil on canvas, 96.7×126.9 cm, Hamburg Kunsthalle) was supposed to be a record of his ideas about the harsh and mysterious nature of the North.<sup>19</sup>

Even Nordic painters remained intrigued by the northern outskirts of their countries. With the evolution of travelling, artists based in the capitals and artistic centres located in the south of the Scandinavian peninsula (Copenhagen, Stockholm) were able to explore the lesser known regions of Nordkapp or Lappland and paint the exotic, pristine nature and its phenomena: the midnight sun and northern lights. Publications such as *Voyage pittoresque au Cap Nord* (1801–1802) by Anders Fredrik Skjöldebrand or paintings by Peder Balke fulfilled not only the painters' desire to travel and explore, but the general public's curiosity and interest in how the fringes of their own country looked like. Dissemination of such images could consolidate national pride, including in a colonial sense: what was *de facto* inhabited by the

indigenous Sámi people was *de iure* part of the Danish or Swedish Empire.

The romanticisation and exotification of the North has been recently a subject of vast discussions. The well-studied concept of “Borealism”,<sup>20</sup> bearing a complexity of imaginaries about the North, contributed to new perspectives on the North (not only the Nordic region but also Canada) through stereotypes perpetuated in the southern hemisphere. Regarding the visible differences and disproportions in representing the far North in these studies, “the Nordic” has been recently replaced with “the Arctic”, as to include indigenous cultures.<sup>21</sup> The broader perspective of Nordic colonialism(s), especially in Denmark, has been subject of various articles and publications, as to enucleate the problem of neglecting the former colonies in narratives concerning the Nordic region.<sup>22</sup>

This colonial approach is also discussed by Ann-Sofie Nielsen Gremaud in her thesis *Kryptokoloniale landskaber: tid, sted og rum i billeder af islandsk landskab 1874–2011*. As stated in the title of the dissertation, the Danish-Icelandic relation is studied within a more specific “crypto-colonial” category, presented by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld.<sup>23</sup> As such,

18. Ísleifsson, “Imaginations of National Identity and the North,” 15.

19. Nina Hinrichs, “Das Eismeer – Caspar David Friedrich and the North,” *Nordlit* 12, no. 1 (2008): 134.

20. For instance works by Sylvain Briens, see Sylvain Briens, “Boréalisme: Le Nord comme espace discursif,” *Études Germaniques*, no. 282 (2016): 179–188, and Kristinn Schram, see Kristinn Schram, “Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Québec: Presses De l'Université Du Québec, 2011), 305–327.

21. The term “arcticality” was coined by the Icelandic scholar Gísli Pálsson: “Arcticality: Gender, Race, and Geography in the Writings of Vilhjalmur Stefansson,” in *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practice*, ed. Michael Bravo, Sverker Sörlin (Canton, Mass.: Science History Publications, 2002), 275–309.

22. For example: Johan Höglund, Linda Andersson Burnett, “Introduction: Nordic Colonialisms and Scandinavian Studies,” *Scandinavian Studies* 91, no. 1-2 (2019): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.91.1-2.0001>; Magdalena Naum, Jonas M. Nordin, eds., *Scandinavian Colonialism and the Rise of Modernity: Small Time Agents in a Global Arena* (New York: Springer, 2013). Sylwia Izabela Schab analyzed the “conspiracy of silence,” in Danish historiography, see Sylwia Izabela Schab, “Zmowa (prze)milczenia,” *Czas Kultury*, no. 4 (2012): 46–51.

23. Michael Herzfeld, “The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 899–926.

a crypto-colony is not specifically a country that has been a colony as such, but has experienced an influence from a country or countries that were culturally and/or economically stronger. Gremaud explains this approach in the English summary of her studies:

The crypto-colonial perspective is inspired by postcolonial theory, but represents a variation that takes account of Iceland's distinctive position. This perspective allows the dynamics between the positioning as spiritual and cultural source on one hand and economic and political outsider on the other, to stand out. This clarifies the consequences of the emphasis on Iceland's distant past and of the utopian, dystopian, and heterotopic connotations of its geographical positioning on the modern concepts of identity.<sup>24</sup>

The perception of Iceland as a Danish crypto-colony is compared with the position of Greenland. Examples given in the thesis, such as of the *Danish Colony Exhibition* (Greenland and the Danish West Indies) and *Exhibition from Iceland and the Faroe Islands* (also known as "Tivoliudstillingen"), which took place in Copenhagen in 1905, underline the misunderstanding of Iceland's relation with the Kingdom of Denmark. The organisers intended to exhibit Icelandic and Faroese art alongside objects representing Greenland and the Danish West Indies, although Icelandic intellectuals protested against comparing their highly-developed civilisation and heritage with the primitive output of the "Eskimos" and "Negroes".<sup>25</sup> However, the idea that Icelandic cultural development resulted from medieval literature, especially sagas in original manuscripts pivotal for the whole Nordic region, was

considered by the Danish rulers as an excuse to protect this vulnerable heritage and therefore underline Iceland's subjectivity to the Kingdom. Over the years, Denmark considered Iceland as one of its "belongings" and this approach can be seen in both a condescending attitude to the people and a colonialist visual interpretation of the Icelandic land.

#### IMAGES OF ICELAND IN DANISH LANDSCAPE PAINTING

The first artistic representations of the Icelandic landscape executed *in situ* were by Danish painters, commissioned by Danish authorities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, landscapists such as Frederik Theodor Kloss, Emanuel Larsen and Carl Frederik Sørensen travelled to Iceland as part of royal entourages. Their romantic visions of the island addressed the requirements of the court, being not only a recording of the king's journey but also a portrait of the Northern outskirts of the Kingdom. The latter was also the aim of Harald Moltke, who visited Iceland at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a draftsman for Arctic expeditions. His images of northern Iceland, executed for the Danish Meteorological Institute, were probably the first artistic representations of the Icelandic northern lights.

Frederik Theodor Kloss visited Iceland in 1834, as a member of the company assisting the Danish prince Christian Frederik during his expedition to Iceland. This marine specialist executed a number of paintings presenting Danish ships by Icelandic shores (such as *The Ship of the Line "Dronning Marie" (Queen Marie) and the Corvette "Najaden" Weigh Anchor in Faxa Bay, near Reykjavik, Iceland*, 1836, oil on canvas, 81×128.5 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen), as well as lithographs presenting the details of the expedition

24. Nielsen Gremaud, *Kryptokoloniale landskaber*, 300.

25. "Judging from responses to another exhibition held in Denmark in 1905, where one of the key reasons for protest was the displaying of Icelanders alongside 'savages' such as Greenlanders, it is not unlikely that in 1900 the concern was also the issue of being associated with Greenlanders, another subjected but more strongly racialized group," in Kristín Loftsdóttir, "The Exotic North: Gender, Nation Branding and Post-colonialism in Iceland," *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 23, no. 4 (2015): 8.

(published in 1835<sup>26</sup>). Nevertheless, his most significant landscape painting from the Icelandic journey is the one of a geyser. In *The Eruption of the Great Geyser in Iceland in 1834* (1835, oil on canvas, 173×194 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen; Fig. 1), the spring dominates the composition, covering half of the landscape with its spouting waters and steam. The shape of this natural fountain refers to the rocks in the background, but even the hills shrink in relation to the geyser. The element of water and the power of nature are evident, while the human figures are irrelevant and almost invisible. Here, the painter paid special attention to the unusual phenomenon, at that time only to be experienced in Iceland.

Another student of Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, Emanuel Larsen, travelled to Iceland in 1845. Also a marine painter, who attended classes at Kloss' atelier, left a few images of Icelandic coast (such as one with a view on Snæfellsjökull, 1847), but he also showed interest in settings popular among visitors (Goðafoss, Þingvellir) and geysers (*Geyser in Eruption*, 1847, oil on canvas, 36×20 cm, The National Gallery, Reykjavík). In fact, his representation of Iceland's greatest water-spout was purchased by the Danish king Christian VIII,<sup>27</sup> and later donated to the newly established National Gallery of Iceland.

The prince's expedition and the numerous artistic presentations of Icelandic landscape in Danish art not only show interest in the island in the north, but also recall political power over Iceland. A later king

of Denmark, Christian VIII, purchased the paintings and put them in his collection, so as to symbolically emphasise "possession" of the landscape of Iceland. Lithographs based on paintings by Kloss and Larsen were disseminated in order to popularise the landscape of overseas promises; works by Larsen were, for instance, reproduced in an album entitled *Danmark i Billeder* ("Denmark in images"), published by a leading workshop in Copenhagen, Em. Barentzen & Co. between 1852 and 1856. Including Iceland among other images from Denmark strengthened its position as a colony and an "exotic" part of the Empire.<sup>28</sup>

These politically influenced images of Icelandic landscape can be juxtaposed with a more scientific, therefore more unbiased one. Harald Moltke visited Iceland as a member of an aurora expedition to Akureyri between July 1899 and April 1900. Commissioned by the Danish Meteorological Institute, he executed 19 paintings of the northern lights spotted in Iceland, most of them annotated with the date and time of the phenomenon's occurrence. Unlike in his later aurora paintings from Utsjoki (Finland), he focused mostly on the sky and the lights, leaving not much space for the land, architecture or spectators.<sup>29</sup> His memoirs and letters indicate that his attitude to the northern lights was mostly professional, since his aim was to represent them in a way that pleased his patron, Dan Barfod la Cour: "Fortunately, I have now made some paintings of the strange phenomena that are appreciated by the Director."<sup>30</sup> Needless to say, his

26. *Prospekter af Island fra sommeren 1834 foretagne rejse med prins Christian Carl Frederik* (*Prospects of Iceland from the summer of 1834 travel with prince Christian Carl Frederik*), presented in: Ebba Lisberg Jensen, Ole Lisberg Jensen, "Between exploration and tourism: Carl Irminger's Iceland travel diary 1826," *Polar Record* 57 (2021): e2. doi:10.1017/S0032247420000467.

27. Neil Kent, *The Triumph of Light and Nature: Nordic Art 1740–1940* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 206.

28. "It is by means of analogy that the exotic is made intelligible, that it is domesticated," see Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 123.

29. It is worth mentioning that during his first expedition, to Greenland, Moltke made not only commissioned paintings on geological structures, but also landscapes and representations of Inuit people.

30. From a letter written by Moltke, on 23 December 1899, in Peter Stauning, *Harald Moltke – Nordlysets Maler/Painter of the Aurora* (Frederiksberg: Forlaget Epsilon, 2011), 90.



1 Frederik Theodor Kloss, *The Eruption of the Great Geysir in Iceland in 1834, 1835*, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS266. Fot. SMK Open

mission was to represent the Icelandic northern lights in a naturalist, objective manner, as he was employed by a scientific observatory. Nonetheless, the studies of Icelandic skies by the Danish Meteorological Institute at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were also an attempt to maintain control in the colony.<sup>31</sup>

The Danish vision of “Icelandicness” is therefore a balance between an overwhelming, majestic and powerful landscape full of exotic phenomena such as volcanoes and geysers, and a primitive, remote and barren land that needs to be constantly protected by a more cultivated and empowered coloniser. The Icelanders are barely represented in these landscapes,<sup>32</sup> either as “indigenous staffage” or as co-participants in the depicted events. Hence, it may be concluded

that for the Danes, Iceland was just a land that belonged to the Kingdom and its inhabitants were not particularly different from them, as they were Danish citizens as well, albeit inferior to the visitors. Here, the crypto-colonial relationship is represented by the absent/present appearance of Iceland: it exists as a territory, but not without the occurrence of its Danish governor.

#### BETWEEN COPENHAGEN AND REYKJAVÍK: THE ORIGINS OF MODERN NATIONAL PAINTING IN ICELAND

Apart from handcraft and church ornaments, there were no fine arts on Iceland until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The dependence on Denmark correlated

31. Scientists such as Carl von Linné studying in Lapland, also participated in colonialism; see Höglund and Andersson Burnett, “Introduction: Nordic Colonialisms and Scandinavian Studies,” 6.

32. Burke presents the erasing of local people as an example of a “colonial gaze”: “Consciously or unconsciously, the artist has erased the aborigines, as if illustrating the idea of ‘virgin’ soil or the legal doctrine that New Zealand, like Australia and North America, was a ‘no-man’s-land’;” see Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 45.



both with artistic stagnation on the island<sup>33</sup> and with the fact that the only opportunity to obtain higher education remained in the capital. The first Icelandic painters studied in the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen<sup>34</sup> and they received proper artistic education under Danish professors.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, it was in Copenhagen where the National Gallery of Iceland was established.<sup>36</sup> Needless to say, Icelandic modern national art was born in Denmark; not only because it originates from Danish academic education, but also because the Danes donated works that funded the first national collection of art in Iceland.<sup>37</sup>

However, what is considered truly a milestone of Icelandic modern national painting, took place in Reykjavík. It was an exhibition of paintings by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson in 1900, the first individual exhibition of an Icelander in his native country. He went to Copenhagen in 1896 and after three years of academic education, continued his studies with Harald Foss, a Romantic landscape painter. Before finishing this additional course in 1902, Þorláksson returned to Iceland in the summer of 1900 and executed a number of landscape paintings that were later exhibited in Alþingishúsið. As a matter of fact, one of the works

33. Bera Nordal points out that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was no developed artistic scene on Iceland: Bera Nordal, "The Early Years of Icelandic Art," in *Scandinavian Modernism: Painting in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, 1910–1920*, ed. Serge Fauchereau (Gothenburg: The Art Museum, 1989), 43–43. Artists with education, such as Þóra Pjetursdóttir Thoroddsen, had no chances to start producing art professionally, which is why she established a private drawing school in Reykjavík: Hrafnhildur Schram, *Huldukonur í íslenskri myndlist* (Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2005), 67.

34. Among four pioneers of modern Icelandic painting: Þorláksson, Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson and Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, only the latter did not consider Copenhagen as an academy of his first choice, however, after being rejected to the British Royal Academy in London, he eventually enrolled at the Royal Danish Academy, see Kent, *The Triumph of Light and Nature*, 207.

35. For instance, Þóra Pjetursdóttir Thoroddsen undertook classes at Vilhelm Kyhn, Þórarinn B. Þorláksson studied in a private school of Harald Foss, whereas Jón Stefánsson attended Kristian Zahrtmann's school.

36. In 1884, Björn Bjarnarson, an Icelandic lawyer living in Copenhagen, founded the National Gallery of Iceland (Listasafn Íslands) from his private collection of works by contemporary Scandinavian, mostly Danish artists. Although the Gallery did not even have any official premises and Bjarnarson lacked the funds to maintain it, his initiative itself was a trigger for the establishment of the first Icelandic art institution. In the spring of 1885, the collection, supplemented by donations from Danish artists, was sent to Iceland and installed in Alþingishúsið, the house of the Icelandic parliament.

37. According to Sarpur, the digital database of Icelandic museums' collections (sarpur.is), the Icelandic National Gallery owns oil paintings and lithographs based by original paintings by, among others, Frederik Theodor Kloss, Emanuel Larsen, Carl Frederik Sørensen, Christian Andreas Schleisner, Michael and Anna Ancher, Peder Severin Krøyer. They were donated by or inherited from Danish intellectuals living on Iceland or befriended with Icelanders. Such as Dr. Edvald J. Johnsen, whose letters to Sigurður Guðmundsson are presented in collection of the National Museum of Iceland, see *Sigurður Guðmundsson málarí og menningarsköpun á Íslandi 1857–1874*, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://sigurdurmalari.hi.is/>.

was later donated to the National Gallery of Iceland, becoming the first Icelandic painting in the collection.<sup>38</sup> For all these reasons, Þorláksson is regarded as a trailblazer of modern national art in Iceland.<sup>39</sup>

He was later followed by Ásgrímur Jónsson, Jón Stefánsson and Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval, who focused on nature after returning from their studies abroad. It is worth mentioning that the last two gained artistic education not only in Copenhagen, but also in other European cities;<sup>40</sup> thus, the Icelandic modernity was unquestionably influenced also by European art of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if not directly, then through modern painters in Copenhagen. Nevertheless, it was Denmark that paved the way in their artistic education and Danish art was the traditional form they could oppose as modernists – especially if there was no domestic visual art tradition in Iceland, which, according to Auður Ólafsdóttir, led them to feeling a “duty to lay the foundation for one, lay the basis for a tradition, to define the content of a national art”.<sup>41</sup>

In Iceland, the construction of a national identity ran in parallel to the establishment of modern art. As such, it is intriguing whether one resulted from

another. Both were without doubt accelerated by the independence movement,<sup>42</sup> but also emerged from the tense relationship between the artistic desert in Reykjavík and the cultural capital in Copenhagen. Although modernity lay in Danish academic education and the artists’ intention to adapt foreign schooling to the Icelandic reality, the national romanticism taught in Copenhagen turned out to be crucial for the Icelanders’ appreciation of the natural beauty of their native country.<sup>43</sup> It is worth recalling that before Þorláksson’s ground-breaking exhibition, the only pictures of Iceland known from the National Gallery of Iceland’s collection had been executed by artists from Denmark and thus represented an outsider’s point of view.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF LANDSCAPE IN ICELANDIC NATIONAL IDENTITY AND IMAGINATION

First works of Icelandic modern painting were mostly examples of landscape painting. The interest in this particular genre may, on the one hand, have come from contemporary trends in Danish academic education or,

38. However, the first Icelandic work of art in the collection was a sculpture by Einar Jónsson, donated by the artist in 1902, see Nordal, “The Early Years of Icelandic Art,” 43–45.

39. For the “country’s pioneering artist,” see Kirk Varnedoe, *Northern Light: Nordic Art at the Turn of the Century* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1988), 244; “blazed the trail for modern art in Iceland,” see Ólafur Kvaran, *Confronting Nature: Icelandic Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century* (Washington D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2001), 82.

40. Jón Stefánsson studied directly under Henri Matisse in Paris, while Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval travelled to London, where he remained under enormous impression of Turner, see Nordal, “The Early Years of Icelandic Art,” 45–46.

41. Auður Ólafsdóttir, “Visions of nature in Icelandic art,” in Kvaran, *Confronting Nature*, 23.

42. The Icelandic national movement also has its origins in Copenhagen. All significant Icelandic poets, thinkers and politicians obtained their professional background in the capital. Jón Sigurdsson, the leader of Icelandic independence movement, contributed the most during his stay in Denmark. His endeavors led to the re-establishing of the Icelandic government, Althing (Alþingi) in 1867 and granting a limited constitution in 1874, handed by King Christian IX of Denmark during his visit to Iceland; this, in turn, led to announcement of Icelandic home rule in the same year. It was also thanks to Icelandic politicians and negotiators in Copenhagen that Iceland regained full sovereignty in 1918 and eventually became a republic in 1944.

43. Kvaran, *Confronting Nature*, 82.

on the other, may have arisen from a traditional bond with nature specific for Icelandic culture. Before modern visual art was introduced, Icelandic culture was mostly based on its literature, especially medieval sagas, which describe the endeavours of the first settlers on the island. Kirsten Hastrup writes about a specific relationship with the land resulting from the settlement of Iceland (Icelandic: *landnámsöld*).<sup>44</sup> Since the establishment of the country, the land and its borders were defined and remained unchanged over the centuries, which created the Icelanders as a nation, not the other way round.<sup>45</sup> Needless to say, according to the oldest laws, every man who inhabited this land had right to call himself “an Icelander”, as opposed to “the others” (Icelandic: *Útlendir menn*, literally “man from the outland”).<sup>46</sup> This is to say that no sooner had the independent movement constructed the Icelandic national movement than Icelanders felt an emotional connection with their landscape. Moreover, Ólafsdóttir suggests that the struggle for independence was “in a certain sense a new age of settlement, a starting point”.<sup>47</sup>

This cultural and historical marking of the Icelandic landscape was strengthened by the national movement, especially when it comes to the relationship with Denmark. Not to mention that the visitors and colonisers were regarded as “the others” from the geographical point of view, but also that the landscape understood as the land and the countryside<sup>48</sup> became an important metaphor of true “Icelandicness” as opposed to Danified cities.<sup>49</sup> Although artists were also interested in the cityscapes, as seen in Ásgrímur Jónsson’s images of Reykjavík, they would rather focus on places where the relationship with nature was more obvious. On one hand, they would present nature as it was, emphasising its inaccessibility, wildness and severity, and on the other, they would capture places associated with their childhood; familiar and “domesticated”. In that way, the double meaning of landscape was expressed in the modern painting: as both natural landscape (*landslag*) and a land with its own symbolic content (*landsháttur*).<sup>50</sup>

44. Hastrup, “Icelandic Topography and the Sense of Identity,” 53.

45. *Ibid.*, 56.

46. “Other: member of a dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group,” as defined by Jean-François Staszak, “Other/otherness,” in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2008, Elsevier, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/geo/files/3214/4464/7634/OtherOtherness.pdf>; Karen Oslund, “Imagining Iceland: Narratives of Nature and History in the North Atlantic,” *The British Journal for the History of Science* 35, no. 3 (2002): 313–334.

47. Ólafsdóttir, “Visions of nature in Icelandic art,” 24.

48. Tim Edensor, “Ideological Rural National Landscapes,” in *Id.*, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2002), 39–48.

49. Bera Nordal writes: “[A] national school of painting came into being, characterized by attempts to come to terms with the country’s landscapes, and the emerging conflict between the old farming society and the new urban middle class,” see Nordal, “The Early Years of Icelandic Art,” 43.

50. “The Icelandic term *landslag*, literally, landscape, conjures images of mountains, open land as well as the vista created by the dispersed pattern of farm settlement in Iceland. Another word *landsháttir*, which is a collective term used to describe the work that occurs on the land, encapsulates the sense of a living landscape; one which is never static but always in motion,” in Oscar Aldred, Adolf Friðriksson, “Iceland,” in *Landscape as Heritage: The Management and Protection of Landscape in Europe, a Summary by the COST A27 project “LANDMARKS”*, ed. Graham Fairclough, Per Grau Møller (Berne: University of Berne, 2007), 146.

## ICELANDIC LANDSCAPE PAINTING AS OPPOSED TO THE DANISH IMAGES OF ICELAND

As “the others”, Danish landscape painters focused on the outside, superficial version of landscape (*landslag*), namely only the natural elements and phenomena they could observe as visitors. At first, Icelandic painters used the same perspective: along with an artistic need for practising *plein air* painting, freshly-graduated students travelled around the country and tried academic techniques in their native environment. In that case, “the Icelandic vision of nature is an imported one”,<sup>51</sup> as they applied the attitude they were taught outside Iceland. Thus, young painters spent their summers capturing the beauty of Icelandic nature: volcanic mountains or glaciers. However, as Ólafsdóttir remarks, “Icelandic artists follow the Nordic tradition of descriptive realism only to a limited extent”.<sup>52</sup>

The Danish landscape paintings of Iceland were accessible in the National Gallery of Iceland,<sup>53</sup> so Icelandic painters could refer directly to the image of their country as rendered by the “others”. Although some of the motifs and perspectives visible in the Danish images can be traced also in modern national Icelandic landscape painting, the Icelandic vision of nature is more emotional; not only because of their national Romantic value, as seen in sublime sunsets by Þorláksson, but also in variegated impressionist depictions of the Icelandic interior by Jónsson. Two Icelandic examples taken into consideration here will be juxtaposed with two visions by Danish painters from the past century.

The first pair represents a royal visit to Iceland: *Christian IX Visits Iceland in 1874 (Off the Coast of Iceland)* by Carl Frederik Sørensen (1878, oil on canvas, 160×250 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen; Fig. 2) and *King Fredrik VIII of Denmark and Hannes Hafstein Governor of Iceland Ride to Þingvellir in 1908* by Þórarinn B. Þorláksson (1908, oil

on canvas, 48×88 cm, Listasafn Íslands, Reykjavík; Fig. 3). As stated before, Danish landscapists came to Iceland as members of royal entourages. Carl Frederik Sørensen accompanied King Christian IX, who travelled to Iceland in 1874. It was an important visit during which the king introduced a limited constitution and therefore announced home rule in Iceland. This official visit resulted in a number of marine paintings. In all of them Sørensen represents Danish ships, including the frigate *Jylland*, which dominate the Icelandic landscape. Gremaud contends that due to the perspective, the majestic ships eclipse the mountains and other elements of the Icelandic land, which indicates the power of the Danish Kingdom.<sup>54</sup> This message seems to manifest that regardless of the constitution and home rule, Iceland remained subject to Denmark, and the royal navy symbolises the political and cultural power over the seemingly indomitable Icelandic nature.

While the Danish painter focuses on the military power of the king, therefore showing the Danish ships but not the king himself, Þorláksson portrays two politicians (the king and the Minister of Iceland) as well-matched partners: they ride on horseback side by side, seen from behind, so that they are impossible to distinguish. Moreover, if Sørensen decided to draw greater attention to the ships than to the landscape of the Faxa Bay, the Icelandic painter placed human figures in the middle of nature, which dominates the composition. Here, the landscape plays the most important role, is the symbol for Icelandic relentlessness and respect for nature.

Another pair are two representations of Hekla: by Emanuel Larsen (*Hekla in Iceland* 1849, etching on paper, 12×17,4 cm, Listasafn Íslands, Reykjavík; Fig. 4) and by Ásgrímur Jónsson (*Hekla*, 1909, oil on canvas, 75×100 cm, Listasafn Íslands, Reykjavík; Fig. 5). Larsen executed a popular and often reproduced image of Hekla, a volcano which had erupted in 1845. A view

51. Ólafsdóttir, “Visions of nature in Icelandic art,” 25.

52. *Ibid.*, 28.

53. The database Sarpur mentions eleven works by Frederik Theodor Kloss and the same number by Emanuel Larsen, along with one by Carl Frederik Sørensen, accessed May 24, 2021, <https://sarpur.is/sarpur.is>.

54. Nielsen Gremaud, *Kryptokoloniale landskaber*, 107.

2 Carl Frederik Sørensen, *Christian IX Visits Iceland in 1874 (Off the Coast of Iceland)*, 1878, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KMS1129. Fot. SMK Open



from Selsund, a farm to the south of Hekla, shows the volcano spitting lava and a group of travellers on horseback, watching the eruption. Gremaud indicates that by zooming out the perspective, the artist shows the exoticness of the event and the “infernal chaos”.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, with such vision, he continued the tradition of associating Iceland with the uncanny or even frightening: until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the island was considered “diabolic”, as its volcano Hekla was linked with the “gate of Hell”.<sup>56</sup>

While the first perpetuates the vision of a “demonised” volcano, depicted in dark colours with the orange accent of the erupting lava, the colour scheme of the painting by Jónsson is far brighter and more joyful. Although in 1909 it had been at least 31 years since the last eruption in 1878, the dangerous volcano is shown from the perspective of the painter’s hometown in the region of Árnasýsla, severely damaged during the 1845–1846 eruption. Lonely houses

seem ridiculously small and powerless against the mountain towering over the landscape. As Ólafsdóttir indicates,<sup>57</sup> the Icelandic vision of the volcano is directed upwards, therefore questioning the infernal connotations from the outside. Although the bright colours and staidness give the impression of calm, the painter managed to capture the tension resulting from the presence of inevitable danger.<sup>58</sup>

Regardless of stylistic and compositional differences, the works of Icelandic landscapists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century underline the power of nature and magnificence of the elements. However, the image is almost never terrifying, expressing respect and admiration, if not enchantment, instead. What is more, Icelandic painters rarely present human figures dominating the landscape, which contributes to a universal image of nature, without any specific reference to time or individual relations with the landscape. Here, the landscape painting presents not

55. “Perspektivet og dimensionerne gør, at Hekla fremstår overskuelig, og der er nærmere tale om et spektakulært fænomen end et infernalsk kaos,” *ibid.*, 77.

56. “Already in 1593, the Icelandic scholar Arngrímur Jónsson criticizes the description of Iceland by European elites in defense of Iceland, asking the questions why no other of the great volcanoes of the world were believed to be the entrance of hell”; Tina Majonen, *Iceland: Imagined and Experienced Landscapes* (Master’s thesis, Lund University, 2018), 24.

57. “The spectator looks simultaneously ‘down the land and up to the heavens;’” see Ólafsdóttir, “Visions of nature in Icelandic art,” 24.

58. Varnedoe, *Northern Light*, 126.



3 Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, *King Fredrik VIII of Denmark and Hannes Hafstein Governor of Iceland Ride to Þingvellir in 1908*, 1908, Reykjavík, Listasafn Íslands, LÍ-6912. Fot. Wikimedia Commons



4 Emanuel Larsen, *Hekla in Iceland*, 1849, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, KKSgb12206. Fot. SMK Open

only landscape as the natural environment, but also a subjective, emotional attitude to *landsháttur*, the cultural importance of the land and nature.

## “THE ICELANDICNESS” AS REPRESENTED BY CHARACTERISTIC LANDSCAPE MOTIFS

As briefly presented before, Danish landscape painting is remarkable for its vast interest in water: Iceland is represented either from the perspective of its coast and therefore associated with the sea, or characterised by geysers, another symbol of this element’s power. The first Icelandic painters were, on the other hand, hardly interested in marine painting, as they were connected with the land<sup>59</sup> and chose to portray the mountains and lava fields instead. However, Halldór Björn Runólfsson recalls that the domination of mountains in the Icelandic landscape painting does not mean that this motif was of a national kind: “It is therefore absurd to presume that subject-matter has anything to do with the special character of Icelandic matter”.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, in this last section it will be useful to list some characteristic traits of “Icelandicness” in Icelandic landscape painting of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### A. Topographic symbols

Icelandic topography and geographical characteristics lie at the heart of Icelandic landscape painting, not only because they were constantly in front of the painters’ eyes, but also because they had an impact on Icelanders’ culture and history. Volcanic eruptions and glacial *jökulhlaup*<sup>61</sup> left a visible mark on everyday life and therefore became frequent subjects of landscape painting. They are particularly important in the *œuvre* of Jón Stefánsson, who portrayed various settings (mountains, glaciers, rivers, plains), now easy to locate in the landscape. However, having experienced pre-Cubism and learnt from Matisse, he paid the most

59. “Icelanders belonged to the land, but their fate was largely shaped by two kinds of uncertainties relating to the sea” (Hastrup, “Icelandic Topography and the Sense of Identity,” 67); “For most Icelandic landscape painters the ocean seemed too changeable, too lacking in calm, to idealize the timeless and static quality of nature” (Ólafsdóttir, “Visions of nature in Icelandic art,” 27).

60. Halldór Björn Runólfsson, “Reflections on Icelandic Art,” in *Landscapes from a High Latitude: Icelandic art, 1909–1989*, ed. Julian Freeman (Reykjavík: The National Gallery of Iceland, 1989), 21.

61. Jökulhlaup – the sudden, catastrophic release of meltwater from beneath or behind a glacier, *The Free Dictionary*, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/j%C3%B6kulhlaup>.

attention to structure, with a modernist tendency to over-exaggerate and deform. The view of Eiríksjökull (*Eiríksjökull*, 1920, oil on canvas, 93.5×113.5 cm, Listasafn Íslands, Reykjavík; Fig. 6) is an example of strong geometrisation of nature, inspired by Paul Cézanne's compositions. His style, based primarily on form, informs us above all that "Iceland's stark and massive landscape needed a pronounced formal construction".<sup>62</sup> Stefánsson's vision of Icelandic nature underlines, first and foremost, its monumentality, which leads to interpreting "Icelandicness" as connected with resilience, bravery and tenacity.

At this point, it is also relevant to recall the position of Þingvellir, the setting of the most national symbolism. The original setting for the national assembly (Alþingi) is extremely important for Icelandic national identity.<sup>63</sup> Interest in the valley in this period is related to the important events: first, the millennial celebration of Alþingi in 1930,<sup>64</sup> and the referendum on 17 June 1944, both taking place in Þingvellir. For this reason, the setting occurred repeatedly in Þorláksson's paintings, such as *Þingvellir* (1900, oil on canvas, 57.5×81.5 cm, Listasafn Íslands, Reykjavík; Fig. 7), but it was similarly important for Ásgrímur Jónsson, who executed 130 paintings of Þingvellir. Younger painters,

such as Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval (Fig. 8), confirmed the special role of the Valley of Assembly, later a national park. Like Jónsson, he painted Þingvellir many times, most often returning to this theme in the 1930s and 1940s, showing the same view in different seasons, weather conditions or different lighting. His ideas of the valley, however, go beyond the formula established by Þorláksson and Jónsson, because in his case bright colours applied with short impasto give the impression of vibrant nature (*Frá Þingvöllum (Ármannsfell)*, 1930, oil on canvas, 67.5×139 cm, The Reykjavík Art Museum). However, in their vision, the nature is static and still, as if to underline that the land has not changed since the settlement era and that Þingvellir itself is timeless.

### B. Colour scheme and mood

As seen in paintings by Þorláksson and Jónsson, the rugged landscape is composed of brownish lava fields and green mossy rocks, separated from the light-blue skies characteristic for summer nights in the North. Runólfsson emphasises the uniqueness of this blue, occurring with such intensity only in Icelandic landscape painting.<sup>65</sup> In Þorláksson's *Þingvellir*, the pale lilac-blue sky reflected in the waters of the river, and the

62. Nordal, "The Early Years of Icelandic Art," 46.

63. It is the most important place for Icelanders, a symbol of collective memory in which the building of national identity takes place. Tim Edensor, using the category of "memory space" (French *lieu de mémoire*) by Pierre Nora, gives a typology of places important for collective memory, which include, among others, significant places, that is, ones symbolising official power, and places of popular culture and gatherings (Edensor, "Ideological Rural National Landscapes," 45–49). In this case, Þingvellir is both, because despite the relocation of the parliamentary seat to Reykjavík, state ceremonies are held here to this day. As Magnús Einarsson writes, Þingvellir is "a place where culture and landscape seem almost identical to Icelanders. This place contains simultaneously a sacred and a profane dimension, by indicating a sacred inspiration and a pleasurable recreation. Culture and history are engraved in the landscape" (quoted by Hastrup, "Icelandic Topography and the Sense of Identity," 64).

64. Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, Ólafur Rastrick, "Culture and the Construction of the Icelander in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," in *Power and Culture: Hegemony, Interaction and Dissent*, ed. Jonathan Osmond, Ausma Cimdiņa (Pisa: Plus, Pisa University Press, 2006), 89.

65. "These cool blues are often to be found in the art of other nations. But it is unusual to find such bright, undiluted blues anywhere but in Icelandic art" (Runólfsson, "Reflections on Icelandic Art," 21).

5 Ásgrímur Jónsson,  
*Hekla*, 1909, Listasafn  
Íslands, Reykjavík,  
LÍ-171. Fot. Myndstef –  
Myndhöfundasjóður



6 Jón Stefánsson,  
*Eiríksjökull*, 1920,  
Reykjavík, Listasafn  
Íslands, LÍ-342.  
Fot. Myndstef –  
Myndhöfundasjóður



volcano tip on the horizon, are immersed in the thick atmosphere of a misty summer morning. A similar effect is achieved by Ásgrímur Jónsson in the representation of the Tindafjöll glacier (*Tindafjöll*, 1903–1904, oil on canvas, 80×125.5 cm, The National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík), where, in accordance with the principles of the colour perspective, the painter divided the composition into the foreground, brown-green, and the second, blue, enhancing the impression of depth and the distance from the snow-capped peak of the mountain. A luminous, clear sky appeared in

many of his paintings, giving the effect of fabulousness or mysticism.

In this case, the colour scheme, especially with its clear contrast between brown and blue, indicates the specific mood of the Icelandic landscape paintings. The method of using colour and light to create a lyrical mood originated from European *stämningmáleri* and the specific blueness can be linked with paintings by Peder Severin Krøyer, whose works were exhibited in the National Gallery of Iceland and whose symbolic representation of the Nordic evenings and summer



nights inspired the vision of first Icelandic painters, along with imbuing them with a pantheistic feeling.<sup>66</sup>

### C. Isolation

The geographical and for many years also the cultural isolation of Iceland had a significant impact on the identity of Icelanders. From the Latin word *isola* (island), in continental languages *isolation* is synonymous with insularity; but in Icelandic, the term has a different etymology: *einangrun* literally means “the sadness of loneliness”. In art, sense of isolation and peripherality was represented within mood landscapes, but Icelandic painters also tried to question their cultural remoteness, as perpetuated by the idea of Ultima Thule.<sup>67</sup> Among the four pioneers, it was Jóhannes Kjarval who succeeded: “Because of its modernism, imported from elsewhere and applied to the local landscape, his work says something about the remarkable non-insularity of this insular population, confident in the singularity of its institutions and cultural practices.”<sup>68</sup>

His success was presumably based on creating national modern art, which was simultaneously inspired by European trends and rooted in local traditions. His mysterious landscape paintings, composed of cliffs, hills, stones, and treeless fields, give the impression of being inhabited by some supernatural creatures, embodying the power of nature. For some artists, the use of folklore motifs in painting was a response to the excessive influence of external inspirations, and by referring to *landvættir* (“earthly spirits”) or *huldufólk* (“hidden people”), often colloquially known as elves, they would underline the specific relationship with the

land. Trolls, for instance, often appeared in artwork by Ásgrímur Jónsson, although the most important representative of this theme was Kjarval who “embodies the national spirit in a particularly vivid way.”<sup>69</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS

This presentation of Icelandic and Danish landscape painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century aimed to shed a light on a relationship between art and the construction of national identity. The example of Iceland, a nation-state that succeeded in political separation from Denmark at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which overlapped with the beginning of modern artistic scene in the country, was used here with the intention of indicating the conditions that grounded the imagination of “Icelandicness”. Due to the Danish pedigree of Icelandic art (academic education in Copenhagen, Danish art in the National Gallery’s first collection), the construction of “Icelandicness” was both influenced by Danish visions and opposed to the images created by “the others.” The first representations of Iceland were either based on Romantic visions of the exotic and pristine North, or regarded as a political message sent by the coloniser to the colonised land.

Although the question of Iceland being a formal Danish colony is debated, it was dependent on Denmark until 1944.<sup>70</sup> Despite the variability of its political status over years, Iceland relied on the potential for further development offered by the Kingdom and, as Germaud indicated, was strongly influenced by its crypto-coloniser. However, these particular (crypto-) colonial conditions played a significant role in Icelandic nation-building process, especially if it comes

66. John Russel Taylor, “Symbolism: The Constant Strain in Icelandic art,” in *Landscapes from a High Latitude*, 94.

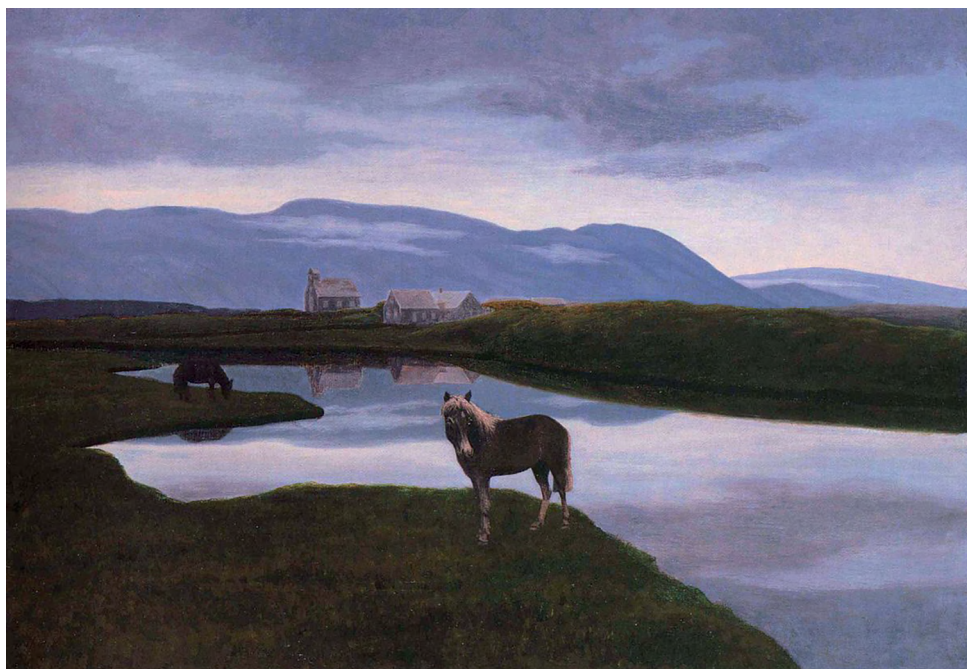
67. “As an island with a distinct name, Iceland literally appeared on the world map in the eleventh century; before that, it had appeared under the name of Thule or Ultima Thule, mentioned by the Irish monk Dicuil in 825 [...] and generally referring to an ill-defined far northern island gradually being pushed further north as knowledge about the northern fringe expanded” (Hastrup, “Icelandic Topography and the Sense of Identity,” 55).

68. Kvaran, *Confronting Nature*, 14.

69. *Ibid.*, 12.

70. Lisberg Jensen, “Between exploration and tourism,” 4.

7 Þórarinn B.  
 Þorláksson, *Þingvellir*,  
 1900, Reykjavík,  
 Listasafn Íslands,  
 LÍ-1051. Fot. Wikimedia  
 Commons



8 Jóhannes S. Kjarval,  
*On Hulduströnd*  
 (*On Hidden People's*  
*Beach*), 1935, Reykjavík,  
 Listasafn Reykjavíkur.  
 Fot. Myndstef –  
 Myndhöfundasjóður



to visual representations of landscape and therefore “self-imagining.”

It would be difficult not to agree with Germaud that the Icelandic case can be analysed from the perspective of Danish colonies, even though its position was slightly different compared with Greenland and

the Faroe Islands (which were both autonomous but not independent), not to mention former overseas possessions in India (Serampore, Tranquebar), Africa (the Gold Coast, today’s Ghana) and the Danish West Indies: Saint John, Saint Croix and Saint Thomas (now the Virgin Islands).<sup>71</sup> This approach is particularly

71. Schab, “Zmowa (prze)milczenia,” 47.

important given that the recent narrative of the Danish colonial past is focused on the non-European colonies, also in art and from a museum perspective. A temporary exhibition *What Lies Unspoken* held in the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen (6 May – 30 Dec. 2017) showed “works from the SMK collections that depict people of African descent or can be linked to Denmark’s past as a colonial ruler”<sup>72</sup> to present a new perspective on Denmark’s colonial past. Still, only paintings by Danish artists were exhibited. What is striking in this venture is that regardless of such “revolutionary” projects, the collection presented in the permanent exhibition *Danish and Nordic Art 1750–1900* does not include paintings from former colonies; for instance not a single Icelandic art work can be found there.<sup>73</sup>

As has already been stated, the Icelandic case could be juxtaposed with the Norwegian one, as both Icelandic and Norwegian independence movements originated in Copenhagen.<sup>74</sup> Given the fact that Danish painters explored Norwegian landscapes commissioned by the Danish king in the same way as in Iceland,<sup>75</sup> Norway could also be treated as a Danish crypto-colony. However, as to its geographical closeness to the continent, Norwegian national art was also shaped by national Romantic movements in

Germany, so it was more complex and broader than the isolated Icelandic art, which was limited almost exclusively to the Danish “contact zone.”

As the independence movement awoke the need for constructing national identity, the Icelandic art – first literature, then painting – underlined the most “Icelandic” treasure: the landscape. Even though “the others” interpreted Icelandic nature as unapproachable, mysterious and impossible to live in, those who had learnt how to survive in such conditions were able to notice the beauty and wonders of the Icelandic nature. Thus, Icelandic and Danish images of the Icelandic landscape differ and depend on the “insider” or “outsider” perspectives.

Therefore, the Icelandic example may be interesting in terms of tracing the particularity of creating a modern national art (as well as building a national identity) both in opposition to the “other”, that is the Danes, and inspired by the Icelanders’ own yet ancient cultural tradition. These two qualities of Icelandic art do not typify other modern movements in European art. This “identity cleft” can be studied in the Icelandic art scene even today, as many Icelanders travel between Reykjavík and Copenhagen and therefore the “Icelandicness” of their art cannot be regarded as being without Danish influence.

72. Statens Museum for Kunst, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://www.smk.dk/en/exhibition/what-lies-unspoken/>.

73. Although, according to the paper catalogue presented by Peter Nørgaard Larsen on 20 April 2022, there are over thousands of Icelandic paintings and sculptures in the SMK’s collection. Still, this state will hopefully change in the future, given Larsen’s endeavours to change the Danish canon by putting the oeuvre of Elisabeth Jerichau-Baumann, a German-Danish painter interested mostly in Orientalist subjects, on the permanent exhibition. Moreover, her works were included in “the largest exhibition about the golden age in Denmark ever,” a temporary show *Danish Golden Age – World-class art between disasters* (24 Aug. – 8 Dec. 2019), Statens Museum for Kunst, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://www.smk.dk/en/exhibition/danish-golden-age/>.

74. Especially in students’ organisations, see Grażyna Szelałowska, *Idea zjednoczonej Północy w skandynawskim ruchu studenckim I połowy XIX wieku* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1992).

75. Andrzej Pieńkos mentions Erik Pauelsen, who was sent to Norway in 1788 by order of the heir to the throne, Prince Frederick, see Pieńkos, “Poszukiwanie tożsamości kraju i narodu w sztuce norweskiej XIX w.,” 234.

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