



National Museums in Iceland

Arne Bugge Amundsen

Summary

Iceland was not established as an independent state until the twentieth century. Nevertheless cultural enterprises like museums and collections were important elements in the nation building process in Iceland during the previous century. The museums chosen for this report have heavy references to the cultural and political struggle in Iceland to become acknowledged not only as a part of the Danish(-Norwegian) empire but as a nation with a separate and distinguishingly different past.

Icelanders, both in Iceland and in Denmark, had a part in the ideological and political struggle for establishing a national identity. Not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a certain political independence developed in Iceland. Museum initiatives started among Icelanders academically trained in Copenhagen in order to create separate collections of objects related to Icelandic national history (museum 1) or to make it possible for Icelanders to experience Danish and international art of high quality (museum 2). When Iceland became an independent state with its own national institutions in the early twentieth century, the Icelandic state used the two museums as important vehicles for developing a national identity and for securing public access to, control of and listing of both the historical and archaeological remains of the nation's past and public access to the works of new generations of national artists. The interaction between national museums, the Parliament and the Government has been very close during the twentieth century, and the focus of the national museums has been on the preservation of the national identity and on the display of the works of national artists.

At its re-opening in 2004, the National Museum of Iceland continued its earlier strong emphasis on displaying and narrating the history and the genealogy of the nation through the centuries. At the same time, museum authorities introduced another perspective: Iceland as a young nation of immigrants with a vivid interaction with foreign countries past and present.

Summary table, Iceland

Name	Inaugurated	Initiated	Actor	Ownership	Type	Values	Temporal reach	Style Location
The Antiquarian Commission The National Museum of Iceland (1911)	1863	1863	Private initiative, Parliament	State	Archaeology, Cultural History	Icelandic history	Time of Settlement (870s) to the present day	Several attics in Reykjavik until 1950. In a modern building outside city centre after 1950.
The National Gallery, 1916-1961 part of 1)	1884	1884	Private initiative, Parliament	State	Art	Icelandic and International	Mainly 19 th and 20 th c. Art	The House of Parliament until 1950 when it moved to National Museum of Iceland. Moved again in 1987 to the modern style Fríkirkjuvegur 7 located by the City pond.

Introduction

Reviewing museum history of Iceland makes it necessary to give a more extensive survey of the political and cultural history of the country. The first more permanent settlers in Iceland were refugees from Norway, but among them were also persons of e.g. Celtic origin. The first wave of settlement took place in the period ca. 870-930. However, relations with Norway continued to be quite close. In 930, the first common assembly, the *Alþingi*, was established. Around the year 1000, the *Alþingi* accepted Christian religion as the official Icelandic religion and in 1152-1153, Iceland was included as part of the Norwegian Archbishopric of Nidaros.

As a consequence of the political processes in both late medieval and early modern history in Scandinavia, Norway and Iceland became parts of the so-called Kalmar Union from 1397 and later of the Danish Empire established under the rule of the House of Oldenburg since the late fifteenth century. Iceland had, since 1262, been under the sovereignty of the then independent Kingdom of Norway. Under Danish rule Norway, to a certain extent, both kept and developed separate legislation and economy, while Iceland from 1602 was the object of Danish trade monopoly. The monopoly was formally abolished in 1783, but for all practical reasons continued into the nineteenth century. In 1814, European Post-Napoleonic politics resulted in Norway being established as a separate country with its own constitution while Iceland for decades remained an integrated part of the Kingdom of Denmark.

A rural population dominated nineteenth century Iceland and natural disasters and medical epidemics had, by 1800, heavily decreased the population to ca. 40,000. Slowly, the population started to increase and an urban centre developed during the first decades of the century, but with few institutions aside from administrative ones. In 1900, the population of Iceland had increased to 78,000.

During the nineteenth century, Icelandic elite educated in Copenhagen took part of the new European romantic ideologies of national integrity and individuality. Hence, the demands on Icelandic national and political separatism were vividly argued and continuously agreed. In Iceland the small group of intellectual and cultural elite were looking for distinct expressions of national identity following the traditional nineteenth century thematic standards: language, landscape, material culture, historical remains, popular narratives, myths, and ethnic origin. An important arena for developing national identity was literature and art. Many of the leading members of this Icelandic elite were poets and writers, and they expressed their opinions and strategies in their own journal, called *Fjölnir*.

A political independence movement also developed, with *Jón Sigurðsson* (1811-1879) as the most prominent member. In 1843, a new, consultative parliament – the *Alþingi* – was founded. The end of Absolutist rule in Denmark in 1848 meant the establishment of a Danish Constitution and Parliament and for years relations between this Parliament and the *Alþingi* were heavily disputed. Not until 1874 did Denmark grant Iceland home rule, a separate Constitution and its own separate Parliament. By the end of the nineteenth century, the various efforts made on behalf of Iceland had their desired result. The revised Constitution of 1903 gave Iceland its own Government and a minister for Icelandic affairs, residing in Reykjavík, was made responsible to the *Alþingi*. In 1918, both countries signed an Act of Union recognizing Iceland as a sovereign Kingdom in personal union with Denmark. From 1918, Iceland had its own national

flag. Its foreign affairs and defence interests were represented by Denmark. This personal union was ended in 1944, when Iceland was declared a republic (Hjálmarson 1993. Ødegård 1998).

National museums in Iceland

Due to its political development as a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, the museum situation in Iceland was distinctively different from the one in Norway during most of the nineteenth century. In contrast to Norway, Iceland had kept a spoken and written language of its own, a fact that became an important point of departure for the development of a strong national identity during the nineteenth century. This fact also explained the strong emphasis on myths, folklore and sagas as symbolic highly valued elements in the national cultural identity developed in Iceland and with numerous expressions in museum collections and artistic and literary works. On the other hand, Iceland had no museums or museum collections of its own, and all archival and museum collections related to the history of the country were kept in Copenhagen. During the centuries under Danish rule, Icelandic material had been continuously included in the Royal Collections of the House of Oldenburg formally established in the middle of the seventeenth century. Objects from Iceland were also collected by the Royal Committee for the Preservation and Collection of Antiquities (*Den kongelige Kommission for Oldsagers Bevaring*), established in Copenhagen in 1807 with the Historian *Rasmus Nyerup* (1759-1829) as its Secretary, and by the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities (*Det kongelige Museum for Nordiske Oldsager/Oldnordisket Museum*), established in 1819, and later on the National Museum of Denmark (*Nationalmuseet*), founded in 1849 on the basis of the Royal Collections (Jensen 1992. Skandinaviska museiförbundet 2000/2004).

Another central institution for Icelandic historical objects was the *Arnarnagnæan Manuscript Collection*, bequeathed by Icelandic scholar and antiquarian *Árni Magnússon* (1663-1730) to the University of Copenhagen in 1730. Typically enough, the leader of the nineteenth century independence movement in Iceland, *Jón Sigurðsson*, worked in the Arnarnagnæan Manuscript Collection during his years in Copenhagen in the 1830s, and parts of his cultural and political legitimacy obviously had its origin in his intimate knowledge of the Icelandic medieval saga and law manuscripts. However these manuscripts were not included in an Icelandic museum collection but transferred to the University of Iceland (www.arnastofnun.is).

Enshrining the origins of Icelandic society, and preserving a written language closer to modern Icelandic than Shakespeare is to modern English, the Saga literature served as both inspiration and justification during the Icelandic struggle for independence. The first claim made by Icelanders after achieving independence in 1944 was not unexpectedly the return of ancient Saga manuscripts (Greenfield 1989). Icelandic authorities had, in fact, claimed the right to parts of the manuscript collection since the 1830s, and the first “repatriation” of a small part of the documents took place already in 1925. 1,807 Icelandic manuscripts were transferred to Iceland between 1971 and 1997 (Nielsen 2002) after years of hard political negotiations, but as the total number of manuscripts being preserved in Icelandic archives and institutions exceeds tens of thousands, we understand that the Copenhagen collections were important but hardly the only sources of repatriation. From the 1500s, Icelandic Sagas and literature engaged and spread to the European academic society (Sigurðsson & Ólason 2004).

Several of those manuscripts, regarded as the culturally and historically most valuable, have been put on display in the National Library in Reykjavík, but central historical manuscripts are also to be found in the National Archive, the National Museum and the Árni Magnússon Institute (Sigurðsson & Ólason 2004). The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies was established in 1972 as an academic research institute answering directly to the Ministry of Education and keeps some of the most important *medieval* manuscripts. A carefully selected range of those are permanently on display in the Culture House's featured exhibition; *Medieval Manuscripts – Eddas and Sagas*. The Culture House, former premises of the National Library, is however not a museum, but a "heritage building" – regarded as one of the most beautiful in Reykjavík – serving as "a common centre for Icelandic cultural heritage institutions with high-quality exhibitions on selected national treasures" (www.thjodmenning.is. www.arnastofnun.is). All Icelandic Sagas are, moreover, available online due to a digital project involving both the Árni Magnússon Institute and the University Library of Iceland (<http://sagnanet.is/>).

Worth mentioning in the context of national museum narratives is a small but intricate exhibition at the Reykjavík City Museum in the old city centre. *Reykjavik 871±2* is an exhibition based on archaeological excavations of the ruin of one of the first houses in Iceland. It examines the life and works of the first settlers and was awarded "Best Design of Digital Experiences in Museums" in the Nordic countries by Nodem in 2006 as a three-dimensional image demonstrates how the hall may have looked. An exhibition guide discusses accounts of the exploration and colonisation of Iceland (www.minjasafnreykjavikur.is. www.reykjavik871.is).

Case studies in chronological order

In 1863, the national museum of Iceland was formally established. The specific background for the establishment was a donation of 15 antiquities from the vicar Helgi Sigurðsson with the explicit condition that it should be included in a new, Icelandic national museum. A certain funding was granted from the Government in Copenhagen, and even more from the Alþingi after 1874. The museum started to build up a historical collection and to register Icelandic material kept in Danish Museums. Jón Árnason (1819-1888) was its first curator. Jón Árnason had, from 1848, also been the librarian at the newly established National Library in Reykjavík. He was highly influenced by German scholars Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and their collections of popular narratives and myths. Between 1862 and 1864, he published substantial volumes of folkloristic material from Iceland still being regarded as classical editions of their kind (e.g. *Íslenskar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri - Icelandic Folktales and Legends*, ed. Leipzig).

Shortly after Jón Árnason was appointed to be the manager of the museum, a second curator was employed, the painter Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833-1874), who at an early stage argued the necessity of building up an antiquarian collection in Iceland. The museum was named the Antiquarian Collection (Forngripasafns Íslands) until 1911, when the name was officially changed to the National Museum of Iceland (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands).

Before it was installed in a separate building in 1950, the National Museum was housed in different buildings in the capital, among others the Reykjavík Cathedral (until 1879), the House of Corrections, the Parliament (from 1881), the National Bank and the National Library. In 1944, when Iceland was declared a republic, the Government decided to build a new National Museum. Its location was Suðurgata 41, just outside the city centre where we find a modern building of

three floors stretching over an elongated rectangular base with a low, stylized tower attached to the rear end. The entrance is unexpectedly located at the rounded short wall on the opposite side, thus the museum building is referred to as “stylish” and “sleek” (www.thjodminjasafn.is).

As a result of its central role in building up an antiquarian collection, the National Museum also became administratively responsible for all archaeological sites in Iceland. All archaeological finds were, by law, declared national property and should be delivered to the National Museum to be conserved and included in the museum collection. As a consequence, the National Museum has also played a major role in archaeological excavations in Iceland. In 2001, the *National Archaeological Heritage Agency* was finally established. This institution succeeded the National Museum as administrative responsible for the archaeological sites (Sverrisdóttir & al. 1988).

The National Museum also owns and keeps old Icelandic buildings in different parts of the country. The first building to be listed in the Historic Buildings Collection was a chapel in 1930. At present, the Buildings Collection consists of more than forty different edifices, including turf houses, turf churches, stone and timber buildings and wooden churches (Sverrisdóttir & al. 1988. Björnsson 1994).

The largest public collection of images – prints, postcards, photographs and portraits – in Iceland is part of the National Museum as well as the ethnological and folkloristic collection covering both rural and urban topics. Iceland’s largest public collection of images is preserved by the National Museum. The collection consists of approximately 4 million photographs, mostly taken by individual photographers in the period 1866-1993.

Regarding the ethnological and folkloristic collections, their original focus was the pre-modern agrarian society in Iceland with emphasis on old working methods and the use of traditional Icelandic tools and utensils. In the early 1980s however, the focus started to shift from old agrarian culture to modern and urban life and culture. The ethnological archives of the National Museum contain approximately 15,000 accounts and some specialized collections (Sverrisdóttir & al. 1988. Björnsson 1994. www.thjodminjasafn.is).

In 2004, the National Museum of Iceland was re-opened after having been closed for several years of refurbishment. In 2003, the museum authorities explicitly marked a distance from the older way of displaying: “Whereas formerly objects and their history were paramount, explained by referring to [suggestion:] sagas and tales, now the history of Iceland itself will be brought to the forefront, with the exhibits serving to highlight that history. (...) The exhibition design is based on museum visitors discovering the answer to one all-important question: How does a nation come into being?” (Þjóðminjasafnið 2003: 21).

On its official web-page, the museum articulates its role in this way: “The role of the National Museum is varied, reflecting its legal obligation as national centre for the preservation and management of cultural heritage, cultural research programmes and promulgation of knowledge and information which relates to the cultural heritage of the nation” (www.thjodminjasafn.is/english). The permanent exhibition is strictly chronological. In 2006, the European Museum Forum rewarded it a special commendation as being the best museum in Europe that year.

The official guidebook of the new permanent exhibition is structured along the chronology of the exhibition. In some introductory remarks, however, the museum authorities also reflect on how the new exhibition should be interpreted. The emphasis is still predominantly on the

development of the Icelandic Nation and its “uniqueness as the youngest nation in Europe”. At the same time the continuous development of a nation is underlined as well as the fact that in a period when immigrants to Iceland have increased in number, it should be remembered that the first Icelanders also were immigrants eventually forming “a single nation” (Making a Nation 2008:10-11).

Iceland also has a *National Gallery* that was founded as a private collection open to the public in 1884. The first collection consisted of donated pieces of art, mainly by Danish artists. The collection was owned by *Björn Bjarnason* (1853-1918), an Icelandic lawyer living in Copenhagen, and established with the explicit aim of giving his fellow countrymen the possibility of studying fine art in a separate gallery. In 1900, the collection consisted of 74 paintings and 2 sculptures, mainly by Danish artists.

A work made by an Icelandic artist was not acquired for the collection until 1902, when a sculpture – ‘Outlaws’ – by *Einar Jónsson* (1874-1954) was included. This acquisition took place at the same time as Einar Jónsson was granted a two-year stay in Rome by the Icelandic Parliament. In 1909, Einar Jónsson had his own atelier and private residence in Reykjavík paid for by Parliament. In return, he agreed to donate all his artistic works to the State of Iceland. Accordingly, his inclusion in the collection of the National Gallery was closely connected with the political and cultural strategy of developing a new generation of national artists in Iceland at the beginning of the century. Most of the works of the sculptor are in public places and in the Einar Jónsson Museum, which was officially opened in Reykjavík in 1923 (www.skulptur.is/index.e.html).

In 1911, the collection acquired its first painting – ‘Repose’ – by *Þórarinn Þorláksson* (1867-1924). He had also been awarded a grant from Parliament to study abroad. Þórarinn Þorláksson was mainly interested in painting Icelandic landscapes and historical sites, like Þingvellir, where the old Icelandic Alþingi had gathered.

Continuously expanding, mostly by private donations, the National Gallery stayed an independent institution until 1916 when the Parliament of Iceland decided to make it a part of the National Museum. The National Gallery was housed in the House of Parliament in Reykjavík until 1950, when it was transferred to the new building of the National Museum.

In 1961, the National Gallery was made an independent institution with a new and separate location from 1987 drawn by Iceland’s most famous architect Guðjón Samúelsson (1887-1950) responsible for several important institution buildings in Iceland. The Gallery is defined as a national museum in Iceland. The central part of the collection is Icelandic art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and thus the collections aim at presenting the key works of national artists in the formative period of nation-building. In addition, the collection includes international art and works by modern Icelandic artists are continuously acquired. At present, the collection consists of approximately 10,000 works (<http://www listasafn.is/>).

An important part of the National Gallery collection today is the works by *Ásgrímur Jónsson* (1876 - 1958). Painting in an Impressionist style, he mainly painted Icelandic landscapes but he also made illustrations of Icelandic sagas and popular folk tales. Returning permanently to Iceland in 1909 after several years of study abroad, he became very influential to other Icelandic artists, especially with regard to landscape painting. After Ásgrímur Jónsson’s death, his works and his home were donated to the Icelandic nation and a separate museum was inaugurated in

1960. However, the Ásgrimur Jónsson Collection was changed into a section of the National Gallery in 1988.

Important themes in the National Gallery's collection of early nineteenth century Icelandic artists are national landscapes, heroes both from the time of the first Norse settlement and from the Icelandic national and cultural independence movement in the nineteenth century, as well as motives from the Saga literature, popular narratives, religion and myths - in short: The artistic motives of highest symbolic value in the nation-building of Iceland (Kvaran & Kristjánsdóttir 2001).

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