

Ásmundur Sveinsson:

Art in Public

The exhibition is part of the Reykjavik Arts Festival 2002

ÁSMUNDUR SVEINSSON

ART IN PUBLIC

REYKJAVÍK ARTS FESTIVAL 2002

The exhibition Art in Public examines the work of Ásmundur Sveinsson in the light of his idea that art should be present in everyday life and not confined to museums.

During Ásmundur's student years in Stockholm, his teacher, the sculptor Carl Milles, inspired him with his ideas that art should be part of the urban environment. At the Swedish Academy of Fine Arts, Ásmundur studied sculpture in the widest sense of the word, from traditional sculpture to architectural decoration and artistic planning of public spaces. He worked with architects on commissions and was selected from a group of students to decorate the new concert hall in Stockholm, a key building in Swedish 20th century architecture.

During the early decades of the 20th century, views on the function and purpose of sculpture dramatically changed. Many artists abandoned the traditional methods of the 19th century and started carving wood and stone, instead of making originals in clay which were then enlarged by craftsmen. This signalled a return to original methods and a demand for authenticity. The period also saw a more fundamental change when sculptors started to reconstitute their art from the examples of cubism.

The turmoil surrounding World War I created a need for a redefinition of the status and role of art in society. Ásmundur recalled the upheavals, extremes and revolutionary spirit that characterised art during his Paris years and influenced him no less than his education: "When I look back, though, I realise that it was not my teachers who influenced me the most, it was my social life. My fellow students and that atmosphere, saturated with forms, experiments and creation. And cubism, or the cube style, affected me, it was in the air."

Throughout his life, Ásmundur remained loyal to his belief that art should be for the people and have its place among them. He was called the "poet of the people" in the field of art and undoubtedly this ideal was rooted in his philosophy of life no less than in the traditions of sculpture.

His attempts to bring art closer to the people took various forms. Most of his sculptures were conceived of as works for public spaces, an integral part of their environment or designed for utility. He built avant-garde houses, opened sculpture gardens by his homes and enlarged some of his major works at his own expense, to make them more accessible to the public.

The exhibition places Ásmundur Sveinsson's art into the context of the society he lived and worked in. It emphasises his efforts to shape and enrich people's lives and their environment. His life's work is also viewed in an international context to throw light on the incredible changes in society and the technological and historical developments Ásmundur Sveinsson experienced and, to an extent, participated in during his life.

Hanna Guðrún Styrmissdóttir
Pétur H. Ármannsson



1893

Ásmundur Sveinsson born on May 20th

Ásmundur grew up at his parents' farm in the north of the country with his ten brothers and sisters. It soon became clear that his mind was set on something else than becoming a farmer. "I did not dare tell my father, I thought he would become extremely angry. But I told my mother about this problem and I also told her my dream to study abroad. I wanted to become an artist." (Visir, 6. 8. 1961)

1915

Ásmundur starts his apprenticeship in woodcarving

At 22, Ásmundur went to Reykjavík and worked as an apprentice to the woodcarver Ríkarður Jónsson. There he met the artist Jónsson, who encouraged him to continue his studies.

1910

1915

1907-14

Picasso and Braque start formal experiments, later referred to as cubism

Henry Ford introduces assembly line technology

Start of World War I

1916-18

The Dada group founded in Zurich

Marcel Duchamp shows the ready-made *Fountain* in New York

October Revolution in Russia

World War I ends

Iceland becomes a sovereign country on December 1st





1919

Journeyman's examination in woodcarving

Ásmundur completed his work for the examination in the summer: a chair in an "Icelandic style" which he designed himself. The chair is decorated with motifs from Icelandic rural life and a seaman observing the weather conditions. The work received praise by the examiners and was shown in the respected Thorvaldsen's Society Shop.

Art studies in Copenhagen

In the autumn Ásmundur went to Copenhagen with the support of a benefactor. There he attended drawing courses at the Technical College and took private lessons with the painter Viggo Brandt.

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apprenticed to the
sculptor Einar
his studies.

1920

Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm

Ásmundur started studying sculpture and decorative art at the Swedish Academy of Fine Arts on a scholarship awarded by the Icelandic State. His teacher was the well known Swedish sculptor Carl Milles.

1920

1920

First international Dada congress in Berlin

German NAZI party (NSDAP) founded in Munich

1919

The League of Nations founded

try



1922-23

USSR founded

Bauhaus exhibition "Art & Technology - A New Unity" in Weimar

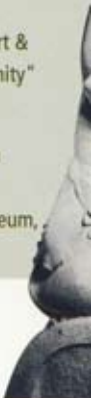
The first art museum in Reykjavik, The Einar Jónsson Sculpture Museum, opens to the public

1922

Receives
of Fine A

Works of
Sæmun

An article in Morgunblaði of the opinion with daily life inside a museum everyone can





1922

Receives the silver medal from the Academy of Fine Arts for the work *Mermaid*

Works on the first sketch of a work called *Sæmundur the Learned*.

An article in the cultural supplement of the Icelandic newspaper Morgunblaðið (11. 8. 22) said among other things: "Ásmundur is of the opinion that art should, to a much greater degree, interact with daily life. That the best solution is not to lock art works up inside a museum, but rather to have them in public places, where everyone can see them."

1925

Decorations in the new Concert Hall in Stockholm

After three years at the academy Ásmundur was "among the three best students of the university who were selected to decorate the new concert hall in Stockholm." (Mbl. 12. 2. 28). According to the newspaper's sources Ásmundur both sketched and modelled some of the decorations (Mbl.2. 10 .29). Whether his work was actually used is not confirmed. The Concert Hall in Stockholm (1923-26), by the architect Ivar Tengbom, is a key building in Swedish 20th century architecture.

1926

Ásmundur completes his studies and moves to Paris

Finishes *Sæmundur on the Seal's Back*



1924

Ásmundur marries Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir

1925

1924

The surrealist manifesto published in Paris

Lenin dies

1926

Germany joins the

1925

Mussolini becomes dictator

Finnur Jónsson experiments with abstract art



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ate. His

'Art &
Unity"
in
useum,



1928

Six months' journey in Italy and Greece

Ásmundur takes classes with Despiau

Ásmundur later said of his years in Paris: "My most important years were in Paris. There I was with the vanguard of art and studied at the Académie Scandinave. There was a lot going on at the time. Picasso, Zadkine and other masters dominated the scene. I met Bourdelle and he taught me a little, as did the sculptor Despiau, who was known for his busts. When I look back, though, I realise that it was not my teachers who influenced me most, it was my social life. My fellow students and that atmosphere, saturated with forms, experiments and creation." *The Book on Ásmundur.*

Death of Grettir, The Viking and Night in Paris

Takes part in the Autumn Salon in Paris

In the autumn Ásmundur exhibited *Sæmundur on the Seal's Back* in the open sculpture Salon in Paris. Many known artists took part, among them Auguste Rodin who exhibited the controversial *Balzac* from 1898. French critics praised Ásmundur's contribution, for example *La Revue Moderne Illustré des Arts et de la Vie* (1. 15. 29): "Among all the foreign artists, who have contributed to the Autumn Salon, Ásmundur Sveinsson is the most memorable. In his work there come together the strength and the independence of an artist, who does not only want to imitate the past and understand the value of ancient art, but also feels that art is alive and changes along with time."



1929

Exhibits in the Spring Salon in Paris

Ásmundur sent four works to the Spring Salon in Paris, all of which were accepted. Again, the critics were positive, as can be seen from a review published (6. 1. 29) in *Les artistes d'aujourd'hui*: "Ásmundur Sveinsson's art is genuine and original and grants him a place amongst major contemporary sculptors."

Art and urban development

During an interview with Kristján Albertsson, published in *Morgunblaðið* (2. 10. 29), Ásmundur expressed himself as follows: "The greatest achievement of the visual arts is a whole town, which is a coordinated work of art, made from the unity of all its parts. ... All the greatest artistic achievements in the towns of the world have come into being through the cooperation of the various crafts of the visual arts."

Moves back to Iceland



League of Nations

1929

Stalin comes to power

Stock Market Crash of October 29th

Start of the Great Depression

1928

The first five year plan implemented in the USSR





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Moves back to Iceland

1930

First solo exhibition in Iceland

Ásmundur held his first solo exhibition in Iceland in the spring, in the new building of Arnarhúsið which was still partly under construction. All Ásmundur's major works of the 20's were exhibited there. A review in *Alþýðublaðið* said: "Ásmundur's work expresses his view that art should be owned by the people. [His works] are not meant to stand in museums for the eyes of a chosen few, [but are meant to] be in public places, speak to the masses and speak the language of the masses. In this field of art, Ásmundur Sveinsson is the poet of the people." (4. 2. 30)

Entrance door of Reykjavík's Pharmacy

The large building at Austurstræti 16 was built in 1916-17. At first, the National Bank of Iceland had its offices there. The pharmacist Þorsteinn Sch. Þorsteinsson bought the building in 1925 and set up a pharmacy, designed by the architect Sigurður Guðmundsson. The entrance door is adorned with six carved images by Ásmundur Sveinsson, representing scenes from the history of pharmaceuticals.



1930

1930

1000 years' celebrations of the Icelandic Parliament

Radio broadcasts start in Iceland

to power

Crash of October 29th

Great Depression





1911

Ásmundur acquires a studio in Laugarnes Hospital

After moving to Iceland, it proved difficult for Ásmundur to find a proper studio and storage for his works. He finally obtained a place in a former hospital building. The Minister of Education, Jónas Jónsson from Hrífla, had flats furnished in a part of the building, for artists and scholars who lacked accommodation and facilities. Ásmundur and Gunnfríður lived and worked there for the next four years.

Bas-reliefs in the primary school in Austurbær

The primary school in Austurbær was opened in the autumn. A certain amount of money from the funds for the construction was dedicated to art work, to be made by an Icelandic artist. A competition among sculptors was held for the bas-reliefs on top of the main entrance of the school. Ásmundur sent four proposals representing children learning and playing. No one else entered the competition, but he nevertheless received a generous prize and was engaged to complete the bas-reliefs in cooperation with the building's architect, Sigurður Guðmundsson.

Lad and Lass



1911

Jóhannes Kjarval exhibits in Charlottenburg in Copenhagen

Nína Sæmundsdóttir's work, *Spirit of Achievement*, on the façade of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York

The board of The Ásmundur Sveinsson Sculpture Museum

Guðrún Jónsdóttir, chair

Anna Geirsdóttir

Ásdís Ásmundsdóttir

Július Vífill Ingvarsson

Director of the Reykjavik Art Museum

Eiríkur Þorláksson

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1934

*The Depression, Weather Teller
and Woman with Accordion*

1933

Ásmundur builds a house and a studio in Freyjugata in Reykjavik

Ásmundur started building a house and a studio in Freyjugata 41, for which he received a subsidy from the Government. The new house was made of concrete and designed in the spirit of functionalism, which had become a major influence in Icelandic architecture. It was designed by the architect Sigurður Guðmundsson. The front part of the house had an apartment on two floors and a small studio. An open air veranda was on the flat roof. The rear part consisted of a big hall with a delivery door and studio windows. Ásmundur dedicated himself to the building of the house for the next two years.

The Hammer, Moorland Flight and Woman with Chalice.

1935

Trip to Paris, London and Brussels

In the spring Ásmundur went on a short trip to Paris. He noticed that art was "more realistic, deeper and more quiet" than in the years after the war and that "upheavals, extremes and revolutionary spirit" were less present. On the way back he went to Brussels and saw the world fair there. He criticised the absence of Iceland at the fair and pointed out that there was "no hope that others will respect us, if we do not do it ourselves." (*Hjóna dagblaðið*, 5, 23, 35).

Binding Hay, Rest and other works

1936

Ásmundur spends the winter in Copenhagen

During his stay, Ásmundur drafted sixteen works, among which were some of the 30's: *Mother Earth, The Washerwoman, The Water Carrier and Rescue*. A new element in Ásmundur's work appeared. He became preoccupied with social subject matter. A reference to surrealism is discernible in works of the period.

Completes *The Blacksmith, Rescue and Mother Earth*

1935

1933

Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany

1934

Jóhann Briem and Finnur
Jónsson establish an art school

1935

Retrospective of Kjarval's
works on the occasion of his
50th birthday

1936

Civil war in Spain
Olympic Games in Berlin





1839

First publication on Ásmundur, *The Sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson*

Ásmundur's work at the World Fair in New York

Ásmundur and six other Icelandic artists exhibited their work at the World Fair in New York. Ásmundur's contribution, *The First European Mother in America*, was exhibited by the World Fair Committee, not in the Icelandic section. The work commemorated the arrival of Icelandic people to the western world as it is depicted in the *Saga of Þorfinnur Karlsefni*.

Sculpture garden in Freyjugata

In the summer Ásmundur placed *The Washerwoman* in his garden in Freyjugata. He soon added three more works: *Lad and Lass*, *Mother Earth and Weather Teller*. The works were all made of a mixture of Icelandic quartz and cement. Ásmundur had previously experimented with concrete, a less expensive material than the traditional one of marble or stone. He used marble cement as well as a mixture of cement and Norwegian granite. The sculpture garden aroused great interest among the public at large.



1839

Rodin's work *Balzac*, from 1898,
unveiled

Beginning of World War II



1940

Bas-reliefs in the Church of Akureyri

During the summer Ásmundur was engaged to make seven bas-reliefs of the same size, to be placed on the balcony in the Church in Akureyri, which was then under construction. The images show specific episodes from the life of Christ. They were made on the spot, from a mixture of chalk and white cement, according to Ásmundur's previously completed plan.

The Four Seasons

Ásmundur makes bas-reliefs for the University Chapel

The Main Building of the University of Iceland was designed and constructed in 1936-40. It was designed by Guðjón Samúelsson, the state architect. Particular care was taken in the design and decoration of the Chapel on the first floor. Ásmundur made four bas-reliefs symbolising the Evangelists in the vestry and on the pulpit. Furthermore, he made a bas-relief with ancient ecclesiastical symbols on the wall under the balcony.

Exhibits with the Union of Icelandic Artists

1940

1941

Bilateral defence agreement
between Iceland and the U.S.A.

1940

British military occupation of Iceland

1942

Ásmundur builds

Ásmundur acquired a plot of street Sigtún now lies. The two-storied house, with a studio under a concrete dome, is the product of Ásmundur's Greek and Turkish architectural model for Iceland, is disce

1943

Ásmundur
his second

*An Out
War and*

1942

The Icelandic College of Arts and



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ome with
son

Mother,
Woman

1944

Hell-Ride

When Ásmundur resumed his work after a break while building his house, a shift in interest became apparent. Social images gave way to literary references and he moved even further away from realism. *Hell-Ride* was an important stage in this shift. Ásmundur said about this work: "[...] the source of *Hell-Ride* is the Edda: Hell owns everything. Everything is consecrated to death, flowers, earth and people. *Hell-ride* was made during the war, when human beings were slaughtered like animals." The Book on Ásmundur.

Iron decorations for Melaskóli
primary school



1945

Decorations for Laugarnesskóli primary school

Ásmundur made 23 iron decorations for the banisters of the Laugarnesskóli primary school. The work *Child with Fish* was placed in the school's playground and the work *Lamp* in a corridor on the top floor. The school was designed by Reykjavík's city architect Einar Sveinsson.

Growth of the Earth

1945

1945

End of World War II

The UN founded

Svavar Guðnason exhibits in the Artists' Ha

1944

The Icelandic Republic founded on June 17th





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Growth of the Earth



1947

Black Clouds

1946

Ásmundur builds a studio

Ásmundur applied for a building permit for a one storey studio on the side of his house facing the street. As before, he looked for inspiration in the architecture of the countries by the Mediterranean, this time the Egyptian mausolea. The construction consisted of two parts in the shape of a pyramid, each placed on one side of the new main entrance.

Sorcerer and The Oak

1945



1945

End of World War II

The UN founded

Svavar Guðnason exhibits in the Artists' Hall in Reykjavik

1945

International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris

The first exhibition of the September Group in Iceland

1946

Churchill makes his Iron Curtain speech

The Nuremberg trials

