

# Art in the north - Tourism and Influences

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## Introduction

With this research I examine the relationship between the growth of tourism and changes in visual art in Akureyri, Iceland. Akureyri though only having a population of 16.000, is the biggest town in Iceland outside the Reykjavik area and attracts tourists who visit the northeast part of the country.

For the last 20 years, tourism has grown rapidly in Iceland and during that period of time, the practice of visual arts has grown extensively. Today, Akureyri is known for its art life, there are many galleries and numerous exhibition spaces that have different exhibitions every month. The opportunity to study a visual art is readily available, with both high schools offering excellent courses in addition to a specialized art school.

Alfred Gell once said, "the aim of anthropological theory is to make sense of behaviour in the context of social relations. Correspondingly the objective of the anthropological theory of art is to account for the production and circulation of art objects as a function of this relational context" (Gell 1998: 11). Thus, I'm not going to involve discussion of aesthetics that often seem to rule the discourse of anthropology of art, but rather examine the exchange of it here in the north with Iceland and the village of Akureyri as a focus point.

The goal of this research was to describe and analyse the demand and consumption of Icelandic art by tourists and the reaction of the artists towards that demand, relating these processes to theoretical and empirical concerns.

Ethnographic fieldwork was used to examine the experiences of art dealers, artists and the tourists themselves. In addition I compared the situations of Iceland's two closest islands; Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

My subject is limited to what Graburn (1976 :6) has called 'commercial fine arts', art which although made with eventual sale in mind, still adheres to culturally embedded aesthetics and formal standards. The customers, in the study, are

both Icelanders and tourists. There has also been a significant change of mind in Icelandic culture where people now prefer to buy Icelandic art instead of foreign reprints to decorate their home. Icelandic art has become a popular gift.

The foreigners I have interviewed have noticed and recognised this change of mind as something special. Icelandic homes and public buildings are full of local art. This visual interest Icelanders have for Icelandic art triggers the tourist to buy art because they see it as authentic. The quest tourists have for authenticity of the things they bring back home with them rules in many ways what they choose to buy (Steiner 1994).

I will exclude what has been called souvenirs and Graburn (1976: 6) categorises as art "when profit motive or the economic competition of poverty override aesthetic standards, satisfying the consumer becomes more important than pleasing the artist". This thus excludes vikings made of wood and sheepskin, and lava like ceramics, to name few.

### The field site

Iceland is an island bigger than Ireland but with a population of 270.000 individuals. Iceland gained its independence from Denmark in 1944. In some respects, one can categorise Iceland as a third world country, as imports far exceed exports. 80% of all national income is from fish but tourism is growing year by year and has now become valuable to the Icelandic economy.

Even though Iceland fits into the categorisation of a third world country due to import vs. export ratio, one cannot say that Iceland is an undeveloped country. Iceland has undertaken great changes in general for the last 50 years. The Icelandic population has become modern almost over night, mostly because of better transportation and communications with the rest of the world. The Icelandic population was quite isolated for a long time but with modern technology, Icelanders travel abroad and get to know other cultures just as others come to see them and their country.

## Historical background

Until 15<sup>th</sup> century, the main field for visual art in Iceland was the church. After the reformation, art was no longer allowed in the churches and art production was reduced for centuries. Peoples' need for artistic expression was fulfilled through crafts, and decorating/functional art.

It was not until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries before people started more commonly to go away to Denmark for education, that some started to study art. People, boats, houses and daily life were the most common subjects. It was not until later in connection with the struggle for independence and a growing of population, that Icelanders started to see the Icelandic nature as something unique and exciting to paint (Björnsson 1964: 7). The interest in landscape painting though lasted only through one generation of painters. When the romanticism of independence faded away the new generation of painters took interest in the daily life again (Björnsson 1973: 14).

Today many Icelandic artists seek their subject matter in the mystic world of the hidden people, fairies and elves of Icelandic folklore or other poetic creations. Daily life and paintings of houses are still classic and paintings of Puffins, Sheep

and Plovers are growing in popularity. Abstract paintings are also currently popular.

## Tourists influences on art

Influences tourists have had on art throughout the world is known and written about by many. Anthropologist, Christopher B Steiner (1994) has written on these influences on African art, the commodification and circulation of African objects in the international art market. Aboriginal art in Oceania has also been a popular topic in this discussion. Raymond Firth says, "the greatest influence for change in exotic art has, of course, been the impact of industrial society from the West. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Oceanic art, for example, lost much of its dynamic quality: its forms were flattened, its design impoverished, its inspiration faded. Imitation at a commercial level has often occurred, with development of tourist art, souvenir art, airport art" (Firth 1992: 35).

I on the other hand will discuss the situation in Iceland's neighbour islands Greenland and the Faroe Islands. These three islands are often visited as one by tourists and categorised together in travel guide books. The situation on the islands are similar from the point of view that they are all relatively new tourist spots and are colonies or former colonies of Denmark<sup>[1]</sup>. They are also countries inhabited by a population, which has acclimatised to the north. All three countries depend mostly on fishing or hunting as cultivated land is very scarce in all three countries. The increase of the tourist industry has thus been welcomed to these areas.

Greenland differs from the other two, as it is the only island that has indigenous people. Iceland and the Faroe Islands have only been inhabited since the arrival of the Vikings<sup>[2]</sup>.

### Greenland

Greenland is a neighbouring island to Iceland with a population of only 56.000 though it is 20 times bigger than Iceland. Greenland like Iceland, has had a recent increase in tourism, which has influenced the economies in both of the countries. G. Enel is a French anthropologist who has written about art, artists and the art market in the small East-Coast village Kulusuk. He says that the *tupilaq*<sup>[3]</sup> were formerly associated with shamanism but have taken the form of impersonal figurines. Traditionally they were made out of driftwood but today they are made out of caribou horn and walrus tusk for the tourist market (Enel 1981: 128). No one has ever found a genuine *tupilaq* so the figures the artists are making today are made to please the tourists who buy them. It soon proved that the more bizarre and alarming the figure appeared, the more fascinating it was to the European purchasers (Kaalund 1983: 67). Enel also says that opportunities for work are limited on the east coast, so the carving and selling of *tupilaq* to the tourists is welcome for one's daily needs. The increase of craftsmen from the year 1966, when there were 22 craftsmen in the area, to the year 1976, when the study was done, was over 400% or 84 of the 121 adult men in the village had become craft makers. In 1966 all the craftsmen were also hunters or had another profession, as the *tupilaq* making was only a supplement to the household. In 1976 a few of them had become full time craftsmen (Enel 1981: 129).

In 1998 and 1999 when I visited the village of Kulusuk this number had increased even further and numerous men had craft making as their main source of income.

It is obvious the influences tourism has had on Greenlandic art. The concept 'art', Kaalund states, "in the sense of non-functional decorative or art objects, was unknown in the old Eskimo society, so thoroughly where ornamentation, carving, and colour integrated into daily life and connected with implement culture and use in cultic life. Only in recent times did the Greenlanders formulate a word for art: *eqqumiisuliaat*, meaning something made that is strange. It was when Europeans began giving money for a figure or a drawing and the demand increased that this concept arose" (Kaalund, 1983: 89). Among the Eskimos is no such thing as 'art for art's sake'. Rather, art is for the sake of the people (Kaalund 1983).

## Faroe Islands

The situation in the Faroe Islands is somewhat different, as the Faroe Islands did not have any indigenous people. Young Faroese artists go to Copenhagen, and occasionally Oslo and Bergen, for their education, and so Faroese art has become a branch of the Scandinavian tradition. Thus, an outsider may soon become familiar with Faroese art, although certain aspects of it may seem unique. It may be in the Scandinavian tradition, but it has developed under exceptional conditions, just as the Faroese may be called a Nordic country living under exceptional conditions (Føroysk List, 1983: 5). The isolation of the people of the Faroe Islands and the lack of influence from the outside, inevitably leads to a kind of inbreeding among the public, the critics and the artists (Ibid.: 13).

"I have seldom seen so much art as in Thorshavn," says a traveller. In so many places and in the homes of so many people. The work of the Faroese artists is seen hanging everywhere, in public buildings, schools, banks, businesses and in private homes. The regular collective exhibitions of Faroese art draws large audiences, who like to buy and discuss art, at least Faroese art. "I have also seldom seen so little trashy art, no shallow graphics, cheap posters, amateurism or semi-amateurism on the walls in people's homes in a small Scandinavian town" (Ibid.: 14). And yet despite the support of the public, there is a lot of pessimism among the artists themselves. They are doubtful of the future of Faroese art and they fear that the small-scaled nature and isolation of Faroese art may prove to be insurmountable handicaps. In the long run, they say 50,000 people and a couple of dozen artists will not be able to sustain a living artistic culture. Naturally, there is a danger that it might stagnate and die from lack of nourishment. At the same time, it is difficult to see how things could go so wrong while the need is so great (Ibid.: 15)

## Why Icelandic art ?

Why tourists buy paintings is governed by many different reasons and differs from nation to nation, just as the choice of paintings they buy. An American told me "Icelandic art is like art in the States a hundred years ago. No one there is doing landscapes any more. That is why I would like to buy an Icelandic painting, because paintings like this have become a rarity in the States." It has also been said that to be able to enjoy the art you have to understand it and know how to appreciate it on its own terms. Frank Willett, who has studied and lectured on African art and art history, says "The only sensible way to approach foreign art traditions is on their own terms, and so as not to prejudge them we should speak

of them by their regions of origin as traditional African, Oceanic or American art" (Willett 1986: 28).

### The Icelandic art lover

For the Icelandic buyer, the artist is often what people seek. They like the paintings of a specific artist and want to own a piece by him/her. Icelanders living abroad especially think it is important to own paintings by an esteemed Icelandic artist. Icelanders are conservative in the respect that they rarely dare to buy art objects in strong colours, especially if it is meant as a gift.

The Icelandic home usually has a wide variety of art objects that have accumulated during the years, combinations of gifts from friends and family, from artists that have appealed to them during the years. Many say their taste has changed over the years and that this gives the home an interesting collection. Icelandic homes are full of art but differ from the Faroese home, which tend to have a huge collection of similar paintings. The Icelandic home more commonly has an odd collection of various objects which still makes a whole in a given home.

### Landscape and nature

Tourists are mostly drawn to paintings of landscape and knowing the location seems to play a big role in which landscape painting is chosen. They agree that the nature does not seem to be a big part of Icelandic culture and that many Icelanders are alienated from it. This can be seen by the way the Icelanders themselves dress when up on mountains or in the wilderness, which is in most cases not appropriate given place and weather. The tourists themselves say they are often better prepared for the Icelandic weather and nature and probably feel more closeness to it than many Icelanders. They know how to appreciate this unspoiled and clean nature but the Icelanders seem to take it for granted by not bothering in many cases to stop the car and walk around.

The paintings of houses, people or some figures are nice they say but the nature is what has influenced them the most when coming here and thus, a beautiful water-colour painting of a landscape is the best thing to bring back to remember this trip. People also take photos and most tourists say they have endless negatives of mountains, waterfalls and snowfields <sup>[4]</sup>.

This gives an interesting twist to Willett's theory whereas here the tourists understand the subject of the art rather than the art itself. They understand the nature on its own term and thus are able to enjoy paintings of Icelandic landscape.

Everything natural (that is coming from nature) seems to attract the tourist. In shops selling mystic merchandise, tourists look for Icelandic energy stones. Demand for rune stones has also been considerable, but a shop owner told me the stones themselves have to be picked on an Icelandic beach and hand painted. This is something she found out and did, as the imported rune stone did not sell. The tourists also find it important to know from which beach the stones came from.

The same tourist traits were shown when interviewing the artists from one mosaic and two ceramic workshops. "Items with Icelandic natural stones sell well." The tourists want all natural while everything with gold is working for the Icelandic buyer.

When buying the Icelandic pullovers, tourists in almost all cases ask for pullovers in the natural Icelandic sheep-colours. The tourists refer to these as 'calm' pullovers, their perception of the nature has transferred over to the colours of the pullovers and the natural sheep wool colours have become 'calm' like the nature itself.

Though the tourists are most likely to buy landscape art, the artists claim they would not paint anything they didn't want to paint. "But sometimes you make exceptions", one said. "Everybody has to earn a living."

### **Puffins, sheep and plovers**

After the landscape, paintings of puffins, sheep and plovers seem to be the next popular thing. Many of the artists resemble each other in these paintings which are often in a rather naïve style and frequently don't show anything more than a faceless sheep on a hill. It is common for this type of painting to be a little raw or naïve, with no shadows, or any detail and often in strong colours. These paintings also often have a humorist touch where the animals are portrayed with philosophical expressions. These paintings are very popular with Icelanders.

Puffins are maybe the most popular animal with the tourists and this is reflected in the demand for Puffin souvenirs. The American tourists, a gold smith told me, have asked so many times about small puffin amulets to for their bracelets that next summer they will start making some. These amulet bracelets are not known in Iceland and it will be curious to see the development in ten or even five years if amulets bracelets become a great hit with Icelandic youth.

### **Foreigners living in Iceland**

Foreigners who come regularly to Iceland and who stay over a certain period of time, can be more specific about what they want and allow themselves to wait for something very special to come along. Sometimes people also wait due to financial reasons, as those who stay longer or come more often tend to want bigger paintings than those who are just stopping for a few weeks.

Foreigners who lived here for a period of few years also talked about Icelanders obviously being proud of their art objects and much of the art they owned were gifts from Icelandic friends who felt it important their foreign friends got to know and appreciate Icelandic art.

### **Art influences on tourists**

The people I talked to were surprised by the quality of the art hanging in public areas. One said not a single public telephone was working in the whole country due to vandalism but at the same time there are works of art everywhere you look, paintings in the rooms of the guesthouses and sculptures both in and outside.

Many mentioned that art works in the guesthouses took them by surprise. When they chose the guesthouse, they had no idea of the art that they would find there. Of the paintings on the walls and hand made pottery plates, cups and bowls one American female tourist said, 'I think it is great and something others should think of doing. It is so nice, but still so simple and calm here, I think they should try to market themselves in this respect.' Her friend said, 'the artists

should maybe sell their stuff in the guest house or the guest house having information of the artist and where it was possible to buy some of the stuff and then the guesthouse could get some percentage of the sale.'

Not all tourists I talked to were though so economically minded, but all of them noticed the art and said they were pleased and surprised to see a painting when going to the swimming pool or the bank. They said art was all over and started to notice it right away in the Keflavík airport but did not realise until later how diffusive and general it was.

A guesthouse owner told me that due to the cost of travel to and around Iceland, most of the tourists were people with money who could afford to buy paintings and works of art to remember their stay by. Cheap souvenirs probably don't aesthetically satisfy people who have travelled much. When asked about the comments the two American women made, he said he did not use the pottery his wife makes and sells in a small shop down town as a commercial for her works, but purely because he likes it and they did not use these pieces at home.

The paintings, some painted straight on the wall, are also done by friends. He says of course he tells people where they can find these things to buy, which is quite often, but that is not the meaning of it.

## Conclusion

When thinking of Iceland, many people have an image in their head of a cold and hostile place with total darkness, polar bears, Inuit and igloos. Most people get flabbergasted when they find out the truth. Icelandic nature seems to touch a cord in peoples mind, no matter where in the world they come from. Everyone seems to be able to connect themselves to some aspect of nature; the calmness, the quietness, the cleanness, the feeling that no one has walked your way before you.

To remember their stay when they come back home, tourists like to take something with them, as proof for others that they have been places. Tourists coming to Iceland find it important or appropriate to take a piece of nature with them. Some take actual stones from the ground but most people buy their souvenirs. As I mentioned in the beginning, authenticity plays a big part in the tourist's choice of souvenirs. With works of art hanging around in so many places during their stay in Iceland, the tourist sees artworks as something special and authentic for the place. Even though the subject of the paintings chosen by the tourist is different from the subject Icelanders themselves choose and hang on their walls, the authenticity of it is the same.

Willett's theory is that to be able to enjoy art, you have to understand it. The tourists find a connection to the nature and thus like in Willett's theory are able to enjoy art as they understand Icelandic landscape paintings or art objects created out of Icelandic natural material.

Icelandic artists say the tourists' choice of subject does not affect their creativity, though exceptions are made due to special wishes or circumstances.

The influences run both ways. Tourism influences art just as art influences the tourists. With growing numbers of new artists, the demand of Icelandic buyers on the market will diminish. Icelandic art is not exactly an export product on its

own, so who knows, perhaps we might start seeing increasing numbers of landscape paintings in ten years time.

## Notes

[1] Iceland got independence in 1944 while Greenland and the Faroe Islands only have home rule, still under colonisation of the Danish crown.

[2] With exception of Irish monks which stayed in Iceland before the arrival of Nordic Vikings 870 – 930.

[3] Tupilaq is a figure made out of caribou or walrus tusk, see [www.arcticartsales.com](http://www.arcticartsales.com) for further information and illustrations.

[4] Fieldwork was conducted during the wintertime.

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