

Museology and the Icelandic museum field

Collaborations and development

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Abstract: *Since the birth of the Icelandic museum in the nineteenth century they have played a vital role in the local heritage sector. Starting as expressions of national pride during the independence movement from Denmark, the three central museums, the National Museum of Iceland, The National Gallery of Iceland and the Icelandic Museum of Natural History, have played a vital role in the professional work of museums. They promote collaboration and institutional development, most recently by enabling the establishment of Museology at the University of Iceland. Tracing the history of the museum field, this article seeks to demonstrate the vital role of museums within museology at the University of Iceland. With continued collaboration, museum professionals and the museum studies program can promote positive change in the Icelandic heritage sector.*

Keywords: museums, museology, Iceland, collaboration, research, heritage

The Icelandic museum field has played a key role in innovative developments within the heritage sector, and in particular the three central museums, the National Museum of Iceland, The National Gallery of Iceland and the Icelandic Museum of Natural History. They have greatly impacted the professional works of museums in the country, promoting collaboration and professional development, including at a university level. It is this latter aspect which is the focus of this article. In the early 2000s, there was a growing need

for an academic platform from which to facilitate and encourage changes within the museum field. A committee was established, consisting, amongst others, of eight museum representatives, which organised a museology programme at the University of Iceland. Since then, the programme has worked closely with the Icelandic museum field. The academic staff collaborates with museum professionals on instilling graduating students with a deep understanding of the needs of the field. This collaboration will be explored further below.

THE BIRTH OF THE ICELANDIC MUSEUM FIELD

The birth of the Icelandic museum can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the increased demands for sovereignty. Icelandic officials, Danish governors and well-established farmers began work towards a centralized Icelandic government (Karlsson 2000). At the same time, Icelandic nationalists in Copenhagen gained a new leader, Jón Sigurðsson, later to become the leading force of the independence movement. Icelandic society changed drastically in the ensuing years. People began moving to Reykjavík from the countryside, the population growing fourfold in 1860–1900. By the 1920s, the population had expanded to 17,000, having been 1,500 in the mid-nineteenth century (Friðriksson 1991). This shift marked the beginning of the formation of the Icelandic middle classes, the increasing strength of the Icelandic independence movement and the accompanying nationalistic ideals. Iceland was shifting slowly towards full independence from Denmark.

One of the challenges for the Icelandic independence movement was to create a national identity which the public could rally behind. People needed to be educated on what it meant to be Icelandic. Museums had an important part to play in this respect, as they were monuments to that which made Icelandic culture and history *unique*. They presented physical, historical proof of the nation's inherent right to independence. Furthermore, they instilled in the public (especially the growing city population) aesthetic, cultural and historical tastes and mind-sets. Only by understanding and protecting the past, could Iceland move towards a modernised future (Amundsen 2011, Hafsteinsson 2015). In the

subsequent years, three central museums were established.

The first museum, the *Forngripasafnið* (Antiquarian Collection) was formally founded in Reykjavík in 1863. Its founders were Jón Árnason, Sigurður Guðmundsson, and other members of the *Kveldfélagið* (The Evening Society). Sigurður had called for such a museum the previous year in an article, “Hugvekja til Íslendinga” (“A call to Icelanders”, in the *Þjóðólfur* newspaper, 24 April 1862), arguing that not only folk-tales, books and manuscripts should be collected, but also other kinds of cultural artefacts illustrating the lives and conditions of average Icelanders throughout the centuries. During his studies in Denmark, Sigurður had familiarized himself with the museum practices of *Det Kongelige Museum for Nordiske Oldsager* (later the National Museum) while under the direction of Christian Thomsen. Sigurður himself arranged the first exhibition of the museum in the loft of Reykjavík Cathedral, along lines previously developed by Thomsen. *Forngripasafnið* later became *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands* (The National Museum of Iceland) and was responsible for the preservation and exhibition of all Icelandic antiquities and cultural history (Hafsteinsson & Björnsdóttir 2017).

Subsequently, *Listasafn Íslands* (The National Gallery of Iceland) was founded in 1884 by Björn Bjarnarson (1853–1918), an attorney and assistant to the Royal Bailiff in Denmark. Its aim was to encourage local cultural progression and public understanding of visual art. To this effect, Björn collected about 74 artworks as the founding collection for the museum. These artworks were mainly by Danish artists. In 1916 the Icelandic Parliament decided to make it a department of *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*. The arts collection was formally opened to the public at *Þjóðminjasafn* in 1951 after having

previously been on show in the Icelandic Parliament building.

Hið íslenska náttúrufræðifélag (The Icelandic Natural History Society), founded in 1889, had as one of its main aims to establish a museum of natural specimens. It opened to the public in the same year, and was for 58 years engaged in collecting and exhibiting the society's collection at various locations in Reykjavík. In 1947, *Hið íslenska náttúrufræðifélag* ceded its collection to the state in return for appropriate housing. Full completion of these terms is still pending. In 2017 an agreement was signed that guaranteed an exhibition space for the museum in a newly built second storey of Perlan. This is an important milestone for the Museum of Natural History, enabling them to finally provide the Icelandic public (and tourists travelling to Iceland) with an educational exhibition about Icelandic nature.

PUBLIC SUPPORT AND EXPANSION OF THE MUSEUM FIELD

All three museums were initially met with limited public support. While the nationalist premises were enough to gain enough political support to have the museums established, the majority of people simply did not see these endeavours as a priority in such times of hardship. All three museums were kept under unsatisfactory circumstances in various places around Reykjavík until 1906–8, when the *Safnahúsið* (literally: museum house) was built. It was to house all the major Icelandic museums, *Fongripasafnið*, *Landsskjalasafnið* (National Archives of Iceland), *Náttúrugripasafnið* (Natural History Museum) and *Landsbókasafnið* (National Library). It arose as a testament to the values of Iceland, as a country recently gaining home-rule: that Iceland was a nation with unique culture (particularly literary

heritage) and they had the capacity to build up their own country, without Danish intervention (Hálfðánarson 2009).

The great transformations in Icelandic society, during the inter-war years, which included post-war economic growth, industrialisation of the fishing industry and rapid urbanization, led to growing interest in regional history and the establishment of smaller historical museums around the country. The first regional cultural history museum was established formally in Ísafjörður in 1941, followed by dozens of others over the next forty years. The first open-air museum was established in 1954 at Árbær, outside Reykjavík (Hafsteinsson 2015).

Despite the important milestones achieved after the independence of Iceland, there was still a gap in the museum sector around professional training and a deeper understanding of international developments. Pioneering museum studies programmes, including the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (established in 1966) raised the levels of expertise throughout the museum sector and set the course on a global scale. Such academic developments would arrive much later when museology became part of the University of Iceland curriculum.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MUSEOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

Museology was for a period taught as part of an undergraduate program in ethnology/folklore studies at the University of Iceland. In the summer of 2006, the School of Social Sciences assembled a committee whose aim was to organise the establishment of a postgraduate museology programme at the department. The committee was composed of eight museum representatives: The National Gallery of Iceland, The National Museum of



Fig.1. Four students of museologi at the University of Iceland that were among the first to graduate from the MA programme. From left: Bergsveinn Þórsson, Arndís Bergsdóttir, Heiða Björk Árnadóttir and Skúli Sæland. Photo: Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson.

Iceland, Reykjavík City Museum, Icelandic Institute of Natural History, Museum Council of Iceland, The Icelandic Museum Association, and the Association of Museologists. The main initiators of the committee were Rakel Halldórsdóttir, museologist and former director of The Museum Council of Iceland, and Terry Gunnell, professor of folkloristics. Both noted two central reasons for further strengthening studies in the field. On the one hand, experience with the teaching of the subject had proven fruitful, and students had expressed great interest in participating in additional museology courses. In particular, the students mentioned the ways in which museology can

be connected with opportunities on the job market as a reason to further advanced study in the field. Such a programme would meet the students' expectations concerning career options following graduation. This emphasis also corresponds with regulations regarding the University of Iceland, in which relevance to the job market is encouraged through the availability of professional development programmes. On the other hand, the changing work environment of museums also played a part, in relation to which the Museum Act Number 106/2001 calls for the increased facilitation of professional practices. Moreover, in 2003–2008, the National Museum of Iceland

began to formulate a policy on the preservation of national heritage, which encourages national museums to initiate discussions with the University of Iceland with the aim of building a study programme geared toward museum needs.

The committee published a report on postgraduate museology studies in spring 2008. The report listed the main premises for the programme, and eight central goals. The goals revolve around preparing students for professional work at the museums and work in the field of cultural heritage, offering professional development programmes to museum employees, building a bridge between academics and the museums, and stimulating research and the research competence of students and museum staff.

In autumn 2008, the position of assistant professor of museology was advertised and Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson was consequently hired. Hafsteinsson has a PhD degree in cultural anthropology from Temple University and long experience in museum work. Moreover, Hafsteinsson had been assistant at the University of Iceland Art Museum, and worked as a specialist at the National Museum of Iceland, and served as member of the board and then head of the Icelandic Museums Association. Hafsteinsson also served as director of three museums: Reykjavík Museum of Photography, the National Film Archive and the District Culture Centre in Húsavík. Up until 2016, Hafsteinsson taught museology and had various administrative roles in the field. That same year Guðrún D. Whitehead was hired as assistant professor of museology. Whitehead has a PhD degree in museology from Leicester University and she has also acquired diverse experience in museum work. Both are active researchers and both have published their findings in international peer-reviewed journals and books. Hafsteinsson

and Whitehead place emphasis on offering a study programme where international and interdisciplinary theories and discussions are contextualised in terms of the Icelandic museum landscape. This emphasis calls for considerable cooperation with the country's museums. The aim is to bolster students' job opportunities, as well as to underline the academic, professional and practical aspects of the studies.

In 2011, the first student began doctoral studies in museology, and since then, five students have entered the PhD programme. Of these, one student completed her studies, namely, Arndís Bergsdóttir, who in August 2018 defended her dissertation "Absence comes to matter: Entangled becomings of a feminist museology." From autumn 2009, 69 students have graduated, 31 with a diploma degree and 38 with a master's degree. The gender ratio of graduates is the following: five males and 58 females. Many of the MA graduates have gone on to work in museums, occupying varying positions, and others have pursued further studies. Students from other university fields have also entered the museology programme as a minor to their main studies: For example, students in education, archaeology, art history, cultural studies, ethnology, and from other fields, which underlines the interdisciplinary basis of museology. Final dissertations and papers written by students on the MA and PhD level have furthered the Icelandic museum field, providing important academic insights into the history and professional works of museums.

From its inception, the study programme has offered students the option of distance education. Importantly, a large number of distance learning students were individuals already working in the museum sector, seeking to increase their academic understanding of

the museum field. Until 2015, the ratio of on-site and distance students was relatively equal, however, the number of distance students began to rise quickly thereafter across the social science departments of the University of Iceland. In light of this development, a decision was made to structure the study programme wholly in terms of distance education and all museology core courses are now offered within the distance education programme. The programme seeks to present diverse teaching methods regarding lecturing and study projects. On campus meetings form the basis of each course and involve one to three-day lectures delivered by experienced specialists from the museums, as well as practical projects and assignments. On campus meetings have been organised in close collaboration with many museums around the country. In view of above-noted changes, the museology department is in the process of re-evaluating the entire study programme, the structure of courses and the ways in which to best arrange relationships with collaborators.

An international perspective and comparison with the Icelandic museum field can have a significant impact on the local heritage field. The museology programme at the University of Iceland seeks to foster this by receiving support from international academics. In 2011, associate professor Ane Hejlskov Larsen and associate professor Vinnie Nørskov from the University of Aarhus taught a course for museology students and museum staff. Furthermore, the Fulbright Program have granted funds which have allowed three scholars to teach at the department, namely: Steven C. Dubin, professor at Columbia University, Robin Grenier, associate professor at the University of Connecticut and John Bodinger de Uriarte, associate professor at Susquehanna University. International scholars

have also held talks on behalf of the department at various occasions.

A museology research centre was founded at the University of Iceland in 2011 and works as an autonomous unit within the Social Science Research Institute. The research centre places rich emphasis on bridging the university community and the museology field, and focuses on conducting diverse research from the outset. There, students and museology graduates are offered an opportunity to engage with research-related projects and professional development projects, through courses, conferences and forums, as well as publishing various texts, among other things. The research centre has supported various museums around the country and participated in applications for funding with regard to projects that aim to facilitate the museums' professionalism. In 2015, the research centre published the book *Byggðasöfn á Íslandi* (Icelandic Cultural Heritage Museums), which contains fourteen papers on the same number of museums. At the end of 2017, the centre also published a digital textbook on museum professionalism, which is specifically tailored for the course "Best Practices" and focuses on the particular context of Icelandic museums. This year, 2018, will see the publication of a similar historical overview collecting 24 papers on the history of Icelandic art museums. The publications are part of course material for museology students and form the foundation and impetus for further studies in the field. In addition, it is worth noting that the publication activities of the research centre also figure as means to connect international theoretical and methodological discussions within the field of museology in terms of the local practices of Icelandic museums, in relation to which published material in the Icelandic language is scant.

110 WHAT NOW? FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

To summarise, it can be seen, that over the last decade the museology programme has lived up to the expectations set out for it when it was established. Foundations have been built for a new academic perspective on museums and other cultural practices, offering students an opportunity to acquire knowledge and sharpen their critical thinking skills, opening toward possibilities for exciting professional careers, and not least, museums and other parties interested in cultural affairs have been provided with a platform through which the professionalism of museum practice can be further facilitated. However, many challenges lie ahead, centrally in terms of strengthening the necessary relationship between the museology study programme and international universities and museums, student's motivation to engage with research requires increased attention, as well as encouraging closer collaboration with museums, by finding ways in which to more prominently integrate museums into the museology study programme. The aim is that jointly, museum professionals and the museum studies programme can promote positive change within the local tourism sector generally and the museum sector specifically.

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