

Nature, Nostalgia, and Narrative: Material Identity in Icelandic Design

Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir
Iceland Academy of the Arts

Abstract – This paper studies design objects in two tourist outlets in Reykjavík from the perspective of material culture studies and anthropology. The two cases are put into context with public discourse on Icelandic design in general, with a particular emphasis on the genre of product design. It discusses the rather recent development of Icelandic design as a cultural commodity, while looking at it as a cultural agent of identity formation. The paper highlights the relationship between product design and souvenir objects and points to issues of the past that seem to prevail, both public discourse and the production of Icelandic contemporary design.

Keywords – Material culture, design, souvenir, identity, Iceland

Introduction

The Design Centre emphasises the importance of design in the culture and image of Iceland and the Icelanders.¹

This paper is about objects, along with the images, identities, and ideologies they cannot escape from. It is an anthropological approach to the circulation of cultural commodities, a field with quite a long history where objects are studied as agents of social relations, as generators of power relations, and as loci of negotiations of images and identities.² Material culture studies have also dealt with manufactured objects as tangible forms of human relations in their widest form. Most recently, scholars within the fields of anthropology and ethnology have become more and more interested in how people attribute meaning to objects of everyday life, including issues

¹ *Iceland Design Centre* 2008.

² Appadurai 1986; Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Myers 2001; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Price 1989.

of mass consumption, home decorations, gifts, art, souvenirs, and contemporary design.³

In this paper I will discuss contemporary design in Iceland as it appears in tourist settings as well as written publications with particular emphasis on product design. It is the result of fieldwork conducted in Reykjavík over a period of several months in 2008 and 2010, with a case study of two outlets.⁴ One is the museum shop at the National Museum, and the other is Kraum, a design shop in the heart of Reykjavík.⁵ The two shops differ from each other in many respects, for instance, in the range of goods as well as the types of products on offer. However, of primary interest is what they share, which could be described as narratives of Icelandic nature and culture. The first shop is situated inside the National Museum building, which inescapably suggests a national context for the objects it displays. In addition, it is housed in a building that has particular historical connotations. The second is situated in the heart of the city centre, presenting itself as a fashionable shop exclusively for contemporary design. It is (like the museum shop) housed in a historical building that serves as a monument to the history of industry in Iceland (it is also the oldest building in Reykjavík, dated 1762). In both cases there is a strong attraction for tourists, and both shops embody a strong sense of the past.

In my discussion I will emphasize product design more than other subcategories of design. It is the most common type of design found in the two shops, though jewellery and fashion design are also quite common. I frame the particular branch of product design as souvenir objects, for the explicit reason that they are contextualized as such by

³ Miller 1987; Buchli 2002; Attfield 2000; Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell 2007.

⁴ During the fieldwork, a discourse analysis was made of printed newspaper material as well as television material in the period 2007–2010, in addition to an analysis of published text in Icelandic on Icelandic design. Questionnaires were sent out by email to seven professional Icelandic designers, many of which were followed up by more in-depth interviews. Numerous other informal discussions were held with professional designers and other relevant stakeholders during the time of the fieldwork.

⁵ These particular shops are used as a case study in this article for the distinct presence of contemporary design objects framed in a tourist setting. Numerous other outlets were included in the study, but these two were the most appropriate for the overall aim of the INOR project, offering interesting material for the study of Icelandic identity through design objects.

their promoters and because they are obviously directed at foreign tourists (though they also attract Icelandic buyers). By studying contemporary design as a cultural agent of identity formation, I will shed light on the postcolonial dilemma of identity formation in Iceland and the constant need to build an identity on a remote past. I seek to place the object, or what I would like to call “the design souvenir,” as a vehicle through which to explore the particular images and identities that it embodies. By treating Icelandic design as souvenir I intentionally blur the two categories into one (“design” on the one hand and “souvenir” on the other). The two phenomena have much in common, not just the way they are framed in the tourist market of cultural commodities in Iceland. Hence, I will dislocate design objects from the usual aesthetic or art-and-design historical and theoretical studies, and rather present them as just one of the many aspects of the material culture of everyday life.

Design and Its Relation to Souvenirs

While studying the circulation of art and craft objects and their domestic, national, and international trajectories, special attention is given to the social relations that revolve around their production, presentation, and consumption when they move from one context to another. To understand the relationship between design and souvenir, it is useful to introduce briefly some of the relations between art and souvenir, since the two categories of art and design share so much.

Outlining the history of anthropological interest in art and aesthetics in non-Western societies, Raymond Firth notes how “exotic” art has frequently been regarded as fixed by conventions or unalterable styles, but that thanks to modern studies, these misconceptions have been discarded, giving way to theories that show that the alleged “traditional” has often been a product of an early contact with Western industrial influences.⁶ When academic interest shifted from lamenting the supposedly contaminating contact with the West causing the degeneration in quality and aesthetic character of “primitive art,” scholars began to look in a more positive manner at the hybrid forms and changes in art genres, recognizing socio-political and economic factors in artistic production, including the significance

⁶ Firth 1992: 34.

of individual agency and innovation.⁷ The term “tourist art” was coined in 1976 by Nelson Graburn in his study of “changing arts—of emerging ethnicities, modifying identities, and commercial and colonial stimuli and repressive actions.”⁸ As Jules-Rosette notes, tourist art begins as a particular expression by the artist, and then its meanings expand with the scope of the audience.⁹ The term has been used to signify the emergence of a new art making, by copying, imitating, or faking objects popular to the Western buyer, since the production is almost entirely aimed at foreign consumption or export.

The focus of debates in today’s anthropology of art is directed at the trajectory—or the “traffic”—of art objects in colonial and postcolonial settings, rather than their explicit meaning. Following the circulation of these objects, special attention is given to the social relations that revolve around their production, presentation, and consumption when they move from one context to another. Issues such as the production of value (aesthetic as economic value) and the commoditization of non-Western art in a global market of cultural goods have also been given much attention.¹⁰ This has drawn attention to the emergence of new forms and the flexibility of previously existing ones, allowing for the development of the categories of “tourist art,” “souvenir art,” and “airport art.” In the context of this study, “design souvenir” should also belong to the same set of categories.

Although it can be argued that Icelandic design objects can hardly be treated in the same manner as tourist art in non-Western societies, with all its complex art-historical and colonial connotations, I find the comparison useful. In both cases the objects in question can be seen as the output of a *negotiation* between producers and consumers, where local identities and foreign expectations are materialized in certain products. After all, Iceland also carries its colonial past and is going through a post-colonial phase of identity construction, where narratives of the past are a leitmotif.

⁷ See for example Graburn 1976; Layton 1981; Coote & Shelton 1992.

⁸ Graburn 1976: 2.

⁹ Jules-Rosette 1984: 230.

¹⁰ See for example Jules-Rosette 1984; Steiner 1994; Marcus & Myers 1995; Errington 1998; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Thomas 1999; Myers 2001.

NATURE, NOSTALGIA, AND NARRATIVE

But what is a souvenir, then? As an object it is, of course, closely linked to tourism, where it can be seen as an interface between the producer's identity and the consumer's expectation or imagination of what that identity might be. In Susan Stewart's view, the souvenir plays a fundamental role in providing an authentic experience for the tourist:

The double function of the souvenir is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote present experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present. The present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating to compare to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent. This referent is authenticity. The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and the exotic.¹¹

The souvenir as a cultural phenomenon has been studied mainly in non-Western societies, specifically in the context of art and craft objects that are made particularly for the tourist market.¹² Entailed in the study of souvenirs in relation to art and craft are complex issues that address questions of modernity, aesthetics, authenticity, historicity, and cultural heritage, and these are mingled in a thoroughly commodified and globalized market. In a similar way, Fred Myers notes how "art objects are bought, sold, and displayed as valuable because of the ways in which they are understood to represent or embody or instantiate carrying regimes of value."¹³

Material culture studies as a discipline seeks to study the interrelationship between people and the physical world at large. In sum, it is the kind of study that examines the relationship between human subjects and the objects they create as mutually constitutive.¹⁴ In the same manner, design occupies itself with the relationship between people and the world that surrounds them, embodying the

¹¹ Stewart 1993: 139–140.

¹² Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Jules-Rosette 1984; Marcus & Myers 1995; Myers 2001; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Price 1989; Steiner 1994; Thomas 1991; Price 1989.

¹³ Myers 2001: 53.

¹⁴ Attfield 2000: 35.

Zeitgeist of each time period. Design is a complex and multifaceted term, embracing fashion design, graphic design, service design, product design, experience design, furniture design, system design, and architecture, amongst others. The output of such a variety of fields is extremely diverse and belongs to various spheres of culture (often overlapping), combining technical skills with creativity and innovation. In an attempt to distinguish design objects from other artefacts in a world of everyday material culture, Judith Attfield describes design as “the practice that produces ‘things with attitude,’ the material culture of innovation driven by a vision of change as beneficial.”¹⁵ Hence, design is a dynamic and hybrid category; its multiple meanings shift constantly depending on its surrounding context. In this particular study, the tourist context will be emphasized more than other contexts of design, such as aesthetics, use-value, and design-historical or industrial contexts.

It is common to see high-quality design objects displayed next to mass-produced bric-a-brac and kitsch in Icelandic tourist or gift shops. Many professional designers lament this development and complain that the only marketing channel for their products is the souvenir shop. The tendency to create close links between souvenir and design is, however, not limited to the commercial sector. Another example is a recent design competition announced for an official city souvenir of Reykjavík, hosted by the Iceland Design Centre for the city municipality. Its purpose is to design a new and characteristic souvenir for Reykjavík, based on the city’s slogan of “Pure Energy”—referencing the energy of the city’s “nature, water, culture and creativity.”¹⁶ This blurs the lines between the two categories and makes both ambivalent. Craft, however, is commonly known as tourist merchandise, especially in non-Western tourism, and design is constantly growing as a tourist trade in the Western world. Craft is very apparent in Icelandic tourism—in fact, it has flourished in the tourist market in the last few decades with a heavy emphasis on being

¹⁵ Attfield 2000: 33.

¹⁶ Iceland Design Centre, <<http://honnunarmidstod.is/Frettirogyvidburdir/Lesafrett/1630>>. Original text: “Keppnin er öllum opin og felst í því að hanna nýjan og einkennandi minjagrip fyrir Reykjavík. Verðlaunatillegan skal endurspegla vörumerki Reykjavíkurborgar, Reykjavík—Pure Energy. Vörumerkið vísar til þeirrar hreinu orku sem Reykjavík býr yfir í fleiri en einni merkingu: í náttúrunni, vatninu, menningunni og sköpunarkraftinum.”

handmade and from natural materials. Furthermore, publications on Icelandic design commonly refer to the close link between design and craft because industrialization came relatively late to the country, thus preserving traditional craftsmanship and cultural heritage. In addition, references to “authenticity” are attached to craft and design objects in the outlets in question, either in implicit or explicit ways. Judith Attfield describes authenticity as “the legitimacy of an object or experience according to established principles of fundamental and unchallengeable ‘truths,’” and how it “depends on particular, apparently unchanging belief systems of authoritative knowledge that distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic as a natural matter of course.”¹⁷ In that way, the souvenir can play a fundamental role in providing an authentic experience to the tourist. Just as the search for an authentic experience becomes stronger in today’s world of mass tourism, so the search for the authentic artefact becomes critical. However, it is not my intention to discuss whether design souvenirs in Iceland are authentic or not, since I do not believe that such a debate would be plausible in the context of this study. Therefore, I choose to move beyond limiting binaries such as “authentic–inauthentic,” “true–false,” or “back–front” and follow Bruner’s standpoint of looking at tourist productions for “what they are in themselves: authentic—that is, authentic tourist productions that are worthy subjects of serious anthropological inquiry.”¹⁸ This statement is, in many ways, in opposition to other former studies whose aim is to look “backstage” or uncover the staging of authenticity to unravel the “real” meaning of signs and interactions between hosts and guests, as Dean MacCannell proposes in his study *The Tourist*.¹⁹ What is of interest, however, is the strong emphasis Icelandic designers and other stakeholders in the field seem to put on the importance of the representation of national cultural heritage, which is, in fact, the main driving force of the souvenir market on a global scale.²⁰

¹⁷ Attfield 2000: 78.

¹⁸ Bruner 2005: 5

¹⁹ MacCannell 1999.

²⁰ Public associations, trade unions, shop owners, politicians, education institutions.

Historical Perspectives of Design in Iceland

Design is a relatively young profession in Iceland's cultural history, even though some of the earliest professional designers can be traced back to the turn of the 19th century. It has not enjoyed the same development as design in other Scandinavian or European countries, growing at a slower pace and bearing very loose connections to the sectors of production and industry. As an example of the field's young age, the Icelandic term for design, *bönnun*, was first used in the year 1963 by an engineering company, and in subsequent decades was generally attached to engineering and technical solutions.²¹ However, the neologism was invented almost a decade earlier by the Vocabulary Committee of the University of Iceland (Orðabókarnefnd Háskóla Íslands), with its etymology in the word *Hannarr*, based on the Norse mythology of *Völuspá* (the prophecy of *Völva*).²² The dwarf *Hannarr* had the skill of creating anything with his practical knowledge and craftsmanship. Hence, the relationship to craft and innovation is emphasized from the very birth of the term in the Icelandic language.

The profession's pioneers received their education and training in Germany and Denmark, creating a designscape built on craftsmanship and references to cultural heritage, as was often the case in Europe at the time.²³ As Arndís S. Árnadóttir states, Icelandic designers only occasionally participated in Nordic and European design exhibitions or fairs in Europe during the 1950s, and they received little support from the Icelandic authorities.²⁴ Only in the last few decades have Icelandic designers officially been promoted in the international context, and now institutions, museums, ministries, and professional associations systematically provide more and more domestic exposure. An important steppingstone for the profession's development was the establishment as late as 1999 of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, which

²¹ Gíslason & Stefánsdóttir 2007: 13.

²² Magnússon 2000 (no page numbers; this reference is to the last page of the catalogue).

²³ Magnússon 2000.

²⁴ Árnadóttir 2003.

today is one of the mainsprings for the development of the field in the country.²⁵

The Iceland Design Centre has, in the last few years, made a point of the importance of design for society as a whole, promoting design as “relevant in all sectors of the economy, from construction, production, the fisheries, tourism and food production to services and the knowledge industry.”²⁶ Judging from public discourse, Icelandic design seems to have not yet fully gained general support and understanding from the Icelandic authorities, since much of this discourse revolves around explaining and justifying its own existence. Discussing the position of Icelandic design versus Scandinavian design, Guðbjörg Gissurardóttir states that “Icelanders could be likened to the adolescent in the group: full of hormones, wracked by growing pains, and fighting vigorously for independence.”²⁷ Much of the discourse around the profession during the 1950s and the 1960s is still prevalent in today’s discourse, where questions about the nature of design or what design can contribute to society and the economy are as much an issue today as they were half a century ago, as is evident in the comprehensive catalogue to the exhibition *Mót*.²⁸

Most published sources on Icelandic design emphasize the significance of the extremely fast and revolutionary socio-economic and cultural changes in the 20th century. It was an era of shifting social structures and a changing economy, in which a rural peasant society transformed into a global and modern cultural society in an unusually short period of time compared to other European countries. In that period, Iceland obtained its independence from Denmark, which in turn led to an era characterized by the need to define the nation’s identity as citizens of a sovereign country. A second wave of identity construction (usually feeding on nostalgia) has now hit Icelandic shores as part of mainstream reactions to globalization. It is clearly evident in many cultural spheres, such as music, fine art, literature, and contemporary design. This is reflected

²⁵ The department awards BA degrees in graphic design, fashion design, product design, and architecture.

²⁶ *Iceland Design Centre* 2008.

²⁷ Gissurardóttir 2007: 11

²⁸ Magnússon 2000.

clearly in recent exhibitions on Icelandic design, as well as being explicitly discussed in published exhibition catalogues:

In our ever-shrinking world, the uniqueness of each nation is becoming less tangible. We will only be able to set ourselves apart and create our own special status by being true to our inner consciousness, creative power, and heritage.²⁹



Figure 1. Products made of fishskin and lambswool at Kraum shop.

In the same way, the majority of exhibition catalogues and other published material on the subject address the profession's young age, and most of them are occupied with addressing the question of the "character" of Icelandic design.³⁰ The search for identity seems to be at its peak and references to a cultural past and Icelandic nature are leading that search. Questions such as, "What is unique about

²⁹ Gunnlaugsdóttir 2007: 7.

³⁰ Birgisson 2003; Elínardóttir et. al. 2007; Guðmundsdóttir & Sigurðardóttir 2005; Ingólfsson 2004; Magnússon 2000; Sigurðsson 2004; Ingvarsdóttir 2009.

Icelandic design?”³¹ and “Can the Spirit of the Nation make itself known in an ice-tray, a clothes-peg, a pair of jeans?”³² are exemplary of today’s discourse on Icelandic Design.

Some writers even go so far as discussing “the Icelandic design gene,” supposedly rooted in the unique “energy” of Icelandic designers; “boldness”; and “creative power.”³³ This demonstrates the fact that there seems to be some kind of a common will, a consensus, to attribute qualities and characteristics to “Icelandic design” as a natural category, with surprisingly little opposition or critique of homogenization, nationalization, or essentialism. It is important to note, however, that this discourse also surrounded many other fields of Icelandic culture up until the economic meltdown in 2008, where the success of Icelandic businessmen, for example, was explained by similar references. And even though Icelandic design is commonly understood to convey traits of international appearance, this very internationality also seems to be understood as an obstacle in fine-tuning the harmony, or the image-construction, of Icelandic design today.³⁴

Narratives of Nature and the Past

By choosing the two outlets, Kraum and the museum shop of the National Museum, I want to focus attention on the relationship between design and souvenir, and attempt to draw lines between this study and other studies that discuss the relationship between art and souvenir, particularly in non-Western societies, as described above. Both locations are successful tourist shops, where goods are obviously directed at the foreign buyer, although never excluding local buyers. In addition, many of the objects on display are explanatory, or even pedagogical, in their attempt to serve as mediators of what it means to be Icelandic. When browsing through the variety of objects on display in the two shops, there seems to be a remarkable consensus of content, or concept, of what is labelled as “Icelandic

³¹ Gunnlaugsdóttir 2007: 7.

³² Ólafsdóttir 2005 (no page numbers).

³³ Gissurardóttir 2007: 12.

³⁴ Ingvarsdóttir 2009 (no page numbers).

design.” A vast majority of the artefacts bear explicit references to Icelandic nature and cultural heritage, often embodying narratives or storytelling in their packaging or label. This does not mean that all the objects look the same; indeed, most of them reflect a strong sense of the individual designer. The homogeneity that I refer to lies in the very subject matter on which a considerable amount of Icelandic designers seem to base their work. This subject matter could perhaps be best described as *the past*, with various representational forms and themes that draw on disappearing cultural forms, craftsmanship, and customs. References to Icelandic nature are also evident, either with direct references to certain geological phenomena and well-known locations in the country, or with the use of local material, such as wool, lava, or fish skin.

This is not only apparent when looking through the variety of goods in Reykjavík; it is also in most of the publications on Icelandic design. In this way, entire exhibitions have been curated around the two concepts of nature and heritage, such as *Ómur* (Resonance): “The pieces on display are shaped by landscape and cultural heritage, forces which are then renewed, developed and adapted to new demands and situations.”³⁵ Furthermore, the majority of the designers interviewed for this study mentioned Icelandic folklore (tangible and intangible) when asked what they thought characterized Icelandic design. Some mentioned that it should be about the “awareness of where we come from, or who we are,” and others reported that Icelandic designers should build on their extremely rich cultural heritage, such as oral tradition and folk tales, specific local material, old craftsmanship, and nature. Those who think it is too early to say what characterizes Icelandic design still accept the idea that Icelandic design embodies an intrinsic Icelandic “tone” or “harmony.” In the same way, headlines such as “Unique Icelandic Currents” or “The Icelandic Harmony” are commonly found in newspaper material, and the claim for ethnic characteristics being presented in design is strong.³⁶ This development resonates well with the above discourse on the consequences of globalization and the flattening out of cultural differences. In addition, a considerable emphasis is placed on cultural heritage and

³⁵ Ólafsdóttir 2005.

³⁶ *Fréttablaðið* 12 Mar. 2008: 22; *Fréttablaðið* 18 Nov. 2008: 8; *Morgunblaðið* 22 Nov. 2008: 8; *Morgunblaðið* 1 Mar. 2009: 18; Þórðarson 2005.

NATURE, NOSTALGIA, AND NARRATIVE

the particularities of Icelandic folklore, material, and natural resources in the curriculum of the Iceland Academy of the Arts, resulting in a yearly course with the title “Icelandic Design Is a Special Harmony.” It is taught in collaboration with the National Museum, where students of product design work with the museum collection of folkloric objects with the aim of designing new products inspired by the old ones. Some of the products coming out of the course are chosen for production and are for sale in the museum shop.



Figure 2. Products at the National Museum shop.

Many of these are also available in other outlets around the country, including the international airport. In this way, one is left with an idea of the supposed origins of Icelandic culture, hardly escaping references to the past when looking at the array of products on sale.

As Judith Attfield notes,

originality is one of the most highly valued attributes in a world where technology enables the effortless production of

an infinite number of clones to be reproduced from the prototype.³⁷

It is exactly this demand for distinction that the design souvenir fulfills, both on the producer's as well as the consumer's end. Just as Western tourists go to Africa to buy an authentic wooden mask, so they travel to Iceland to shop for an object that in some ways answers the desire to obtain an authentic Icelandic object. Being a part of the North, Icelandic products also fulfill the Western desire for an "untamed energy" that is often thought to be a Northern quality, portrayed by an undisciplined force where the remote and the exotic are materialized and embodied in design souvenirs. References to the cold, snow, and Arctic animal life are also indicative of this.

According to some salespeople, the most popular objects for foreign consumption are those made from traditional materials, such as fish skin and wool. Both materials form an intrinsic part of Icelandic cultural history and relate to the "primitive" survival of the Icelandic people in this harsh and ruthless country. Both have also suffered a status loss in Iceland's economy and culture, but are now experiencing an upsurge in their importance and significance in economic as well as cultural terms. This transition relates to the economic history of Iceland and becomes clearly evident during the current crisis, where traditional material and know-how have been revived and their cultural and economic value reconstructed. Design products from fish skin are reportedly the most popular commodity in one of the shops, and foreigners seem to be drawn to all kinds of objects made from the material, such as shoes with references to *sauðskinnsskór* (traditional Icelandic shoes), handbags, accessories, or even lamps made from entire dried bodies of codfish, while explaining to the salespersons that they have not seen anything like that elsewhere.

³⁷ Attfield 2000: 80.

NATURE, NOSTALGIA, AND NARRATIVE



Figure 3. Cod lamps at Kraum shop.

Other examples of objects referencing nature and animal life are raven hangers, necklaces made from sheep horn, and whale tooth hangers.



Figure 4. Accessories made from sheep horn.

Furthermore, traditional Icelandic wool sweaters are a top priority when it comes to buying a souvenir in Iceland. The most popular ones are handmade by Icelandic women in a traditional fashion, or re-designed under the brand of Farmer's Market. In the latter case, an elaborate label is attached to the clothing explaining the uniqueness of the Icelandic sheep as a breed: The purity of the strain has been protected by centuries of isolation and a total absence of contact with other breeds of sheep. By the same token, the wool it produces has no counterpart anywhere.

Each collection bears the name of an Icelandic farm, and carefully states that it is "hand-knitted Icelandic wool." Ironically enough, those sweaters are hand-knitted in China, or, at least, were at the time of this study.

By using sheep wool, sheep horn, fish skin, and sometimes lava, designers use natural materials that represent "Icelandicness" in the sense that they are inseparable from the country's culture and nature. The history of the Icelandic sheep has often been treated as symbolic of the history of the Icelandic people, marked by isolation and endurance. In this way, the packaging or the labelling takes over the role of the "middleman," or the salesperson, where there is no longer a need for personal communication in trading as is the case in many non-Western tourist markets of cultural commodities. Another example of direct references to nature can be found in the recently launched product design company Heima, whose statement is to capture the various meanings embedded in its title: "home," "homeland," or the sense of "belonging."³⁸ Issues of nature, however, are not only important to Icelandic design; nature has also played an important role in Scandinavian design, as stated in an article on nature and identity in the book *New Scandinavian Design*.³⁹ In an interview with a lecturer in graphic design at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, Magnússon states that nature in Iceland has influenced designers differently from the other Scandinavian countries:

We did not only apply Modernism to nature the same way the Scandinavians did. There are no trees here to work with, and

³⁸ Heima, <<http://heima.eu/info.html>>.

³⁹ Cabra & Nelson 2004: 94–97.

we never developed the same kind of craftsmanship or industrial techniques [involving wood and natural materials] (brackets in original).⁴⁰

Magnússon also discusses the influence of light:

There is no question that light in Iceland is different from the other Nordic countries. It has to do with our climate. The light that plays across an island surrounded by the heavy seas and cloudy storms is very different from the light on the Scandinavian peninsula. In general, I have the feeling we dramatize light more than the Scandinavians do and have a tendency towards stronger contrasts—softness is not an Icelandic quality for sure!⁴¹

Another common trend in today's variety of design souvenirs references a culture of narrative, poetry, and folkloric tales, seeking to embody narrative in themselves, either in their own physicality or by explanations on their packaging and labels. These are explanations of where materials originate from, or they could be micro-stories of the origins of the symbolic object that inspired the new design object. Sometimes these are told directly by salespersons to possible buyers. In this way, design souvenirs tend to explain themselves by bearing references to other pre-existing forms in the cultural history of Iceland, thus creating a link to a remote past. These narratives could be understood as metanarratives, stories of the very existence of Icelanders as a nation. According to Edward Bruner, metanarratives are the largest conceptual frame within which tourism operates, and without being attached to any locality or to any particular tour they are usually taken for granted.⁴² He explains how "metanarrative refers to a story that places a frame around all cultural performances."⁴³ It is an abstract idea that is thought to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge.

⁴⁰ Magnússon 2004: 95–96.

⁴¹ Magnússon 2004: 95.

⁴² Bruner 2005: 21.

⁴³ Bruner 2005: 206.

Narratives of the past seem to be as important for locals as for foreign buyers, since the claim of building on local cultural heritage and a disappearing past stands out in domestic media discourse on “Icelandic design.” Following this, the manager of Kraum reports in a newspaper interview that the shop “hosts what Icelanders care for the most: woollen sweaters, sheepskin, cod and salmon, apart from that fertile spirit that only exists in this country.”⁴⁴ Through design, Icelanders remind themselves of who they are and where they come from, in addition to safeguarding cultural heritage by revitalizing old and disappearing forms through contemporary design. In addition, narrative as a phenomenon in itself is a distinct characteristic of traditional Icelandic culture, where telling stories and reciting poems was the main leisure activity (and sometimes artistic form) in farms up until the industrial revolution and urbanization. Examples of objects in this style are included in the product series of Heima, where a considerable emphasis is placed on conveying cultural heritage with narrative text on the products’ packaging:

Our great grandfathers created beautiful shelves from simple wooden planks by carving decorations that covered the surface. The wood was usually from humble origins—either fire or driftwood. The shelves were then presented as a gift to loved ones, or maybe to soften up the parents of a future wife.⁴⁵

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed contemporary design products as they appear in tourist settings in Iceland, as well as in public discourse. I have conducted the study within the realm of material culture studies and anthropology, pointing out resemblances between the trajectory of non-Western art in a global context and the trajectory of Icelandic design. Design as a distinct profession in Iceland is a young profession, having only recently taken root in the country’s culture and economy, and it carries a discourse of identity and nationality along with it. However, design artefacts in tourist outlets are not only directed at the foreigner, but also the local buyer. The claim for

⁴⁴ Bogadóttir 2008.

⁴⁵ Heima, <<http://heima.eu/bookm.html>>.

identity, a common theme in today's globalized world of cultural commodities, begs for attention. One of the strongest themes of identity I have come to find in the Icelandic context is the narrative of nature and the past. This is practiced to such a degree that one has the feeling of being on a cultural tour around Icelandic history when browsing through the variety of design products. This could also be understood as a characteristic of a post-colonial dilemma of not knowing "who we really are," or as a reminder of "where we come from." After all, Iceland also carries its colonial past and is going through a post-colonial phase of identity dilemma. In this way, one can understand how design objects can be seen as vehicles for identity production, image-making, and as physical manifestations of what it means to belong to a group, or for that matter, to a nation.

References

- Attfield, J. (2000). *Wild Things. The Material Culture of Everyday Life*, Oxford: Berg.
- Appadurai, A., ed. (1986). *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Árnadóttir, A. S. (2003). "Iceland towards Scandinavian Design," in *Scandinavian Design Beyond the Myth. Fifty Years of Design from the Nordic Countries*, eds. W. Halén & K. Wickman, Stockholm: Arvinius Förlag, pp. 87–91.
- Birgisson, H., ed. (2003). *design.is* [Publisher unknown].
- Bogadóttir, H. (2008). "Kraumandi íslensk hönnun" [Sizzling Icelandic Design], *Morgunblaðið*, 19 May, p. 1.
- Bruner, E. (2005). *Culture on Tour. Ethnographies of Travel*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Buchli, V., ed. (2002). *The Material Culture Reader*, Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Cabra, R., & Nelson, K. E., eds. (2004). *New Scandinavian Design*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Clifford, J. (1988). *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Coote, J., & Shelton, A., eds. (1992). *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Elínardóttir, Þ. E., Yngvason, H., & Gissurardóttir, G., eds. (2007). *Magma/Kvika—Íslensk samtímahönnun* [Magma/Kvika—Modern Icelandic Design], Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur.
- Errington, S. (1998). *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fréttablaðið (2008). “Verðmætin eru í hönnun” [The Value of Design], 12 Mar., p. 22.
- Fréttablaðið (2008). “Að finna hljóminn í íslenskri hönnun” [Striking the Right Note in Icelandic Design], 18 Nov., p. 8.
- Firth, R. (2001). “Art and Anthropology,” in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, eds. J. Coote & A. Shelton, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 15–39.
- Gíslason, H., & Stefánsdóttir, S., eds. (2007). *Hönnun. Auðlind til framtíðar* [Design. Resource for the Future], Reykjavík: Listaháskóli Íslands.
- Gissurardóttir, G. (2007). “Design and Business,” in *Magma/Kvika—Íslensk samtímahönnun* [Magma/Kvika—Modern Icelandic Design], eds. Þ. E. Elínardóttir, H. Yngvason, & G. Gissurardóttir, Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, pp. 9–12.
- Graburn, N. H. H. (1976). “Introduction: Arts of the Fourth World,” in *Ethnic and Tourist Arts. Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*, ed. N. Graburn, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1–32.
- Guðmundsdóttir, G., & Sigurðardóttir, S., eds. (2005). *Ómur. Landið og þjóðin í íslenskri hönnun* [Resonance. The Country and the Nation in Icelandic Design], Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands.
- Gunnlaugsdóttir, G. L. (2007). [No title], in *Magma/Kvika—Íslensk samtímahönnun* [Magma/Kvika—Modern Icelandic Design], eds. Þ. E. Elínardóttir, H. Yngvason, & G. Gissurardóttir, Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur, pp. 6–7.
- Halén, W., & Wickman K., eds. (2003). *Scandinavian Design Beyond the Myth. Fifty Years of Design from the Nordic Countries*, Stockholm: Arvinius Förlag.
- Heima (2010). Retrieved from <<http://heima.eu/info.html>>, accessed 11 Jan. 2010.
- Heima (2010). Retrieved from <<http://heima.eu/bookm.html>>, accessed 11 Jan. 2010.
- Henare, A., Holbraad, M., & Wastell, S., eds. (2007). *Thinking Through Things. Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, London: Routledge.

- Iceland Design Centre* [Leaflet] (2008). Reykjavík: Iceland Design Centre.
- Ingvarsdóttir, E. (2009). “Íslensk hönnun og manngert umhverfi” [Iceland Design and Man-Made Environment], in *Íslensk samtímahönnun. Húsgögn, vörubönnun og arkitektúr* [Icelandic Contemporary Design. Furniture, Product Design, Architecture], ed. E. Ingvarsdóttir, Reykjavík: Crymogea.
- Jules-Rosette, B. (1984). *The Messages of Tourist Art. An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Plenum Press.
- Layton, R. (1981). *The Anthropology of Art*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- MacCannell, D. (1999). *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Magnússon, G. O., ed. (2000). *Mót. Hönnun á Íslandi—íslenskir hönnuðir* [Form. Design in Iceland—Icelandic Designers], Reykjavík: Listasafn Reykjavíkur.
- Magnússon, G. O. (2004). “Nature and Identity,” in *New Scandinavian Design*, eds. R. Cabra & K. E. Nelson, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, pp. 94–97.
- Marcus, G. E., & Myers, F. R., eds. (1995). *The Traffic in Culture. Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Morgunblaðið* (2008). “Andinn, landinn og brandið” [The Spirit, the Moonshine, the Brand], 22 Nov., p. 8.
- Morgunblaðið* (2009). “Séríslenskir straumar” [Uniquely Icelandic Trends], 1 Mar., p. 18.
- Myers, F., ed. (2001). *The Empire of Things. Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Ólafsdóttir, Á. (2005). “There’s God in the Barbed Wire, Granny (Megas),” in *Ómur. Landið og þjóðin í íslenskri hönnun* [Resonance. The Country and Nation in Icelandic Design], eds. G. Guðmundsdóttir & S. Sigurðardóttir, Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands.
- Phillips, R., & Steiner, C., eds. (1999). *Unpacking Culture. Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Price, S. (1989). *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- Sigurðsson, Á., Sigurðardóttir, S. E., & Hjaltason, P., eds. (2004). *Transforme. Icelandic Design: The New Generation* [Publisher unknown].
- Steiner, C. B. (1994). *African Art in Transit*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stewart, S. (1993). *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thomas, N. (1991). *Entangled Objects. Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Þórðarson, J. (2005). “Íslensk hönnun er sérstakur hljómur” [Icelandic Design Has a Unique Sound], in *AVS. Arkitektúr, verktækni, skipulag* [Architecture, Technique, Organization], 26(3), pp. 38–39.