



EMILIANA KONOPKA

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4527-2689>

University of Gdańsk

Faculty of Arts

Of Horses and Men Symbolic Value of Horses in Icelandic Art

O koniach i ludziach. Symboliczne
znaczenie konia w sztuce islandzkiej

Abstrakt

Konie stanowią jeden z najpopularniejszych tematów w sztuce islandzkiej. Figura konia islandzkiego (Icelandera) może być interpretowana jako część tożsamości narodowej Islandczyków: od czasów osiedlenia Islandii, konie były obecne podczas budowania państwa oraz tworzenia narodu. Stąd poniższy tekst przedstawia symboliczne znaczenie konia w Islandii poprzez przyjrzenie się dwóm strefom: sacrum (wierzenia oraz mitologia nordycka) i profanum (praca, życie codzienne). Motyw konia rozpatrywany jest tutaj zarówno w tradycyjnych przedstawieniach (w sztuce i literaturze), jak również we współczesnej narracji sztuk wizualnych (malarstwa i filmu). Wywód oparty jest na (ko)relacji konia i człowieka w Islandii, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem tego jak człowiek traktował i przedstawiał konia, oraz jak blisko żyły ze sobą te dwa gatunki na przestrzeni lat.

Słowa kluczowe: koń islandzki, Icelander, mitologia nordycka, Islandia, symbolika

О лошадях и людях. Символическое
значение лошади в исландском искусстве

Абстракт

Изображение лошадей является одной из самых популярных тем в исландском искусстве. Образ исландской лошади можно интерпретировать как элемент национального самосознания исландцев: начиная с времен заселения Исландии лошади участвовали в строительстве государства и формировании общества. В статье автор иллюстрирует символическое значения лошади в Исландии, ссылаясь на две сферы: священную (верования и скандинавская мифология) и светскую (труд, повседневная жизнь). Мотив лошади рассматривается как в традиционных представлениях (искусство и литература), так и в современном повествовании изобразительного искусства (живопись и кино). Аргументация основана на (со)отношениях лошади и человека в Исландии, с особым учетом того, как человек относился к лошади и представлял ее себе, а также насколько близко эти два вида жили вместе на протяжении лет.

Ключевые слова: исландская лошадь, Icelander, скандинавская мифология, Исландия, символика

In 2013, Benedikt Erlingsson directed his first full-length film, *Of Horses and Men*, which became known worldwide the following year. In this festival-rewarded production, Erlingsson tells a story about Iceland's most beloved and respected animal – the Icelandic horse. This particular species has been with the Icelanders “for good and for bad” since the times of the settlement and, although changing its role and function, has played an important role in the Icelandic identity and cultural heritage. The latter can be seen in visual arts, especially paintings and sculptures, executed by Icelandic artists. By analyzing Icelandic art of the 20th century, it is possible to notice numerous depictions of horses and their place in the domestic landscape of the island, as well as in farms and other circumstances, showing the long-lasting relation with the human. This relation, or correlation, is pointed out by Erlingsson in his movie. The original title of the production – *Hross í oss* – means literally “Horses in us,” which seems to underline the mutual occurrence of horses and men in their everyday life. Horses and men are intertwined, the first take part in the latter's vicissitudes, both species control and observe each other, the viewer is able to watch the scenes from both humans' and horses' perspective (“with their eyes”).¹ We, humans, are only capable of studying our own perspective. The consciousness of (having) “horses in us” has presumably accompanied the Icelanders for years, being part of both *sacrum* and *profanum* sphere.

In this essay, I will try to give an interpretation of selected works of art depicting horses. Most of the artworks are contemporary (as the Icelandic art was established no sooner than in 1900²), but I will also relate to earlier objects, especially those that exemplify old beliefs and illustrate mythology. I want to base my argument on art made by Icelanders, by which I mean artists who were born and/or raised in Iceland, but not necessarily lived there in their adulthood. What interests me here is their attitude to the animal, its place in the Iceland's heritage and tradition, folklore, beliefs and common imagination. The main aim of the essay is therefore to investigate the motif in order to find answers to such questions as: is Icelandic horse a national symbol of Iceland? How is the animal represented in art in Iceland? Has this depiction changed throughout the time? To what extent is the role of the animal symbolic? How many “horses” are there in Icelandic souls?

To analyze the motif, I will refer to the two spheres mentioned above. By *sacrum*, I mean everything that comes from the religious and spiritual: beliefs, religious customs, as well as superstitions and magic. In Icelandic case that will

¹ Sebastian Jakub Konefał, *Kino Islandii. Tradycja i ponowoczesność* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórku, 2016), 253.

² By the term “Icelandic art” I mean art executed by Icelandic and professional artists. It is usually presumed that Icelandic art history began with the establishment of the National Gallery (Listasafn Íslands) and/ or Þórarinn Þorláksson's first exhibition in Iceland. See: Ólafur Kvaran, *Þórarinn B. Þorláksson: Pioneer at the Dawn of a Century* (Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2000).

be both Old Norse mythology with pagan gods (Odin, Frey and others) but also folklore traditions (elves, giants), and monotheistic Christianity, the conversion to which in 999/1000 led to changing habits and customs. By *profanum*, I mean the natural world of everyday life: actions and routines necessary for survival, such as working, eating and procreation. Here I will focus on the settlement³ and development of agriculture on the island, legislation, and contemporary circumstances. Certainly *sacrum* and *profanum* can interweave, but what interests me most is how the figure of the horse is placed in both spheres and how it is emphasized by the artists illustrating the phenomenon.

Profanum: The Icelander – A Paramount Companion

Icelander, a horse, shares its name with every Icelander, a human. The animal of Iceland is the Icelandic horse, the Icelander. Assuming from domestic visual culture and images sent abroad, it seems that it is the horses that Icelanders are most proud of within their fauna.⁴ In this part I would like to describe this unique relation between Icelanders-people and Icelanders-horses, focusing on the similarities between the two species shown in art and literature. By describing characteristics of the breed, and the development of its image over years, I will try to underline how humans and animals mirror each other in many ways.

The Icelandic Horse – General Characteristics

A horse in Icelandic culture is not any horse. The Icelandic horse, also known as the Icelander, is a typical breed of Iceland, with its origins in the Age of Settlement. The Vikings coming from what is nowadays Norway and the British Isles took their horses with them on ships. As the journey was risky and long, and the space on the ships limited, it was crucial to take only the best speci-

³ The settlement of Iceland (*landnámsöld*) is the first period in the history of Iceland. Starting ca 870, when the first Vikings of Norwegian origin landed on the island, it lasted till 930, when newcomers fully settled down and started organizing the country. 930 is the year of establishing *Alþingi*, the Icelandic parliament.

⁴ *Katrín Sif Einarsdóttir*, “The Role of Horses in the Old Norse Sources. Transcending Worlds, Mortality, and Reality” (Master thesis written at Medieval Icelandic Studies faculty at Háskóli Íslands in Reykjavík, 2013), 23, <https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/16675/1/Horses%20in%20the%20norse%20sources%20MIS%20thesis.pdf>.

mens.⁵ Despite many circumstances caused by nature (such as harsh winters and volcanic eruptions) or humans (like sacrifices or consumption of flesh), contemporary horses are not that genealogically far from the ones brought to Iceland in the 9th and 10th century.⁶ Natural selection helped the species to strengthen and adapt to weather conditions: cold winters, heavy winds and storms. Due to that the horses have been capable of surviving Icelandic winters; their coat thickens and protects from the cold, whereas standing pose avoids burning too many calories in this difficult season.⁷

In *Horses on Pastures* (isl. *Útigangshestar*, 1929, 100 × 130 cm, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Iceland) Jón Stefánsson depicted two horses standing in the snow, probably somewhere in the Icelandic outdoor. The animals are alone in this deserted winter landscape, where remote snowy peaks and dark, heavy clouds suggest frosty and windy conditions. The horses are standing still nevertheless, as if winter cold did not bother them. All the breed's characteristics can be seen on the painting; the horses are stocky and quite small (usually from 130 cm up to 145 cm at withers), with short, strong legs, deep chests and relatively huge rumps. Their heads are big, with thick manes which are full and coarse, and such is the tail's hair. The animals seem additionally dumpy, as they are represented with their heavy winter coats that can be even double the summer size.

Stefánsson's horses look very monumental, though many would call Icelandic horses ponies, as they are by far smaller and different from continental horses. However, the breed with its characteristic traits – strong, sturdy, tenacious – became useful for transportation and works on the field, whereas its extraordinary gait, *tölt*, made the Icelandic horse popular among foreign breeders. Here, what seems to interest the painter most is the “impression of hardness and roughness”⁸ which was typical for his oeuvre; the horses, standing in hostile surroundings, remain proud and sturdy, as if to prove their natural adaptation to these conditions. They are tough, facing the rough landscape, which is a result of their strong genes with medieval origins.

As the original title indicates, the horses are on their outdoor course (*Útigangshestar*), which suggests that they have an owner. Pamela Nolf confirms that until modern times horses were kept outside during the winter season⁹, they would graze on the pastures with a minimal care from their owners, while

⁵ Pamela Nolf, “Detecting Icelandic Horse Origins,” *Icelandic Horse Quarterly*, vol. 4 (2013): 18.

⁶ Nolf, “Detecting Icelandic Horse Origins,” 22.

⁷ Gísli Björnsson and Hjalti Sveinsson, *The Icelandic Horse* (Reykjavik: MM Publisher, 2008), 38.

⁸ Emil Thoroddsen, *Íslensk myndlist. 20 listmálarar* [Art in Iceland. 20 artists] (Reykjavik: Kristján Friðriksson Publishing, 1943), 25.

⁹ Nolf, “Detecting Icelandic Horse Origins,” 23.

Daniel Bruun states that the horses that were usually left to survive winters on their own were work horses, in contrast to riding horses, which were bred with greater care.¹⁰ Thus two protagonists of Stefánsson's composition were supposedly work horses; in the times of the painting, namely around 1900s, horses were still used as help in households and also as the only mean of transportation. Since the 1950s, when cars and other machines got introduced on the island, the Icelandic horses have remained important on many farms, although nowadays they are mainly used in agritourism. Horse riding is thus considered one of the most popular tourist attractions in Iceland nowadays.¹¹

Portrait of a Horse. Humanlike Traits of the Animals

The 19th century Icelandic painters would often idealize horses; Sigurður Guðmundsson or Sölvi Helgason depicted them on the basis of their ancient representations known from Greek frescoes, as the aftermath of Danish classicism.¹² However, younger painters were more in favor of realistic and personal depictions of horses. Þórarinn B. Þórláksson, for instance, executed many pictures of Icelandic horses, such as *Pike Ward on His Horse* (see Figure 1), showing a British entrepreneur on his steed. This painting is considered the first equestrian portrait ever painted in Iceland,¹³ but to me it is a double portrait, as Þórláksson depicted the horse with exceptional attention and respect to his model. Twenty years later, Jón Stefánsson portrayed Jarpur, a bay horse known by its name (*Bay Horse*, 1928), confirming Icelandic artists' personal attitude to the horses.

This attitude can be noticed in two ways: horses have been treated either as “the most needed servants”¹⁴ or close friends.¹⁵ The basic relation between Icelanders and their horses amounts to everyday usage that makes them humans' servants, yet “very needed,” because they are appreciated as paramount companions and saviors of the Icelanders in the hardest times.¹⁶ In this way, horses were usually portrayed while working – Sveinn Þórarinsson painted these animals as a vital part of breeding sheep (*Shepherds*, 1939), whereas the

¹⁰ Einarasdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 8.

¹¹ Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir, “Hestatengd ferðapjónusta á Íslandi” (Bachelor thesis written at Operations and Business Department faculty at University of Akureyri, 2004), <https://skemman.is/handle/1946/1010>.

¹² Adalsteinn Ingólfsson, *Jór!: the horse in Icelandic art* (Reykjavík: Kjarvalsstaðir, 2011), 28.

¹³ Ingólfsson, *Jór!*, 31.

¹⁴ Björnsson and Sveinsson, *The Icelandic Horse*, 80.

¹⁵ Sigfús Örn Einarsson, “The Role of the Icelandic Horse in Icelandic History and Its Image in the Icelandic Media (BA thesis written at Humanities and Social Sciences faculty at University of Akureyri, 2010), 14, <https://skemman.is/handle/1946/5857>.

¹⁶ Sigfús Örn Einarsson, “The Role of the Icelandic Horse.”



Figure 1. Þórarinn B. Þórláksson (1867–1924), *Pike Ward on His Horse (Pike Ward)*, 1903, 46 × 36 cm, oil on canvas, National Museum of Iceland, source: www.sarpur.is.

sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson depicted horses helping with carrying packages (*Packhorse and Foal*, 1959–1963). The latter was raised in Hlemmur, one of Reykjavík’s busiest squares, which Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson interprets as “a kind of monument [...] with a form of nostalgia towards its former importance.”¹⁷ What the Icelandic art historian means by “former importance” is definitely the fact that horses lost most of their functions in the 1950s and 1960s. On the other hand, working with horses can inspire many positive emotions, not to mention friendship and attachment. Jóhannes Sveinsson Kjarval depicted a strong bond between a boy and a foal in his *Boy with Foal*, putting two young friends in a very tight frame. By physical approach of them, the sensation of their emotional closeness is intensified; the boy is holding the foal’s head with affection and kindness, and the horse seems to reciprocate. The special bond between them is also underlined by the similarity of appearance – both manes are depicted likewise, with singular brushstrokes painted in the same directions.

¹⁷ Ingólfsson, *Jór!*, 50.

Servants or friends. Regardless of the opposing character of these two attitudes, both indicate that horses were seen as humanlike, treated as if they were persons. Were they subordinate labor force or equal companions, horses have had a special, if not unique, place among other animals in Iceland. No other domestic species have been honored in that way, although there are various animals characteristic of the island: puffins, whales or arctic foxes that had been on the island before the settlers. This might be the reason why horses seem closer to Icelanders: they were newcomers just like them. On the other hand, Icelandic sheepdogs (also known as Icelandic spitz), also brought to the island with the settlers, have never played such an important role for Icelanders. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the special bond results from the conviction that horses resemble humans, and thus have human characteristics: feelings and wisdom have been ascribed to those animals.

Horse-Fights and Sexuality. Horse-like Traits of Humans

Some painters were fond of portraying horses even with temper, as being capable of human-like emotions and behavior. However, the image of savage and dangerous beasts attracted others, such as Halldór Pétursson, who “with his fondness towards the creature didn’t try to negate its untamed nature.”¹⁸ Raised among horses, the painter was aware of natural and primitive behaviors of the animals, so he depicted the whole spectrum of their possible reactions. Horse-lovers were perplexed by his images,¹⁹ but by reminding us about the wild nature of horses, Pétursson shed new light on this human-animal relation.

One of his paintings depicts a horse-fight (*Horse-fight*, 1962), a natural need of rivalry in the herd. Often provoked by humans, horse-fights were a popular form of entertainment²⁰ till the 20th century. The tradition came from Norway and was known in Iceland since the Viking times.²¹ However, as it can be read in sagas, horse-fights were also a way to resolve a conflict; in *The Story of Thorstein Staff-Struck*, they replace a physical battle between the rivals. Men singled out their best stallions to fight in their place, and the failure was taken as personal humiliation.²² Horses were therefore symbols of their owner’s strength and masculinity, bringing them honor and respect while winning, and ignominy while

¹⁸ Ingólfsson, *Jór!*, 51.

¹⁹ Ingólfsson, *Jór!*, 52.

²⁰ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 5.

²¹ Megan Benjamin, *Horses as Status Symbols: Medieval Icelandic Horses as Symbols of Masculine Honor in a One-sexed World* (Cornell University, 2008), 13, Cornell University (December 15, 2008), <http://www.meganbenjamin.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Horses-as-Status-Symbols.pdf>.

²² Benjamin, *Horses as Status Symbols*, 14.



Figure 2. A screenshot of *Of Horses and Men*, 2013, directed by Benedikt Erlingsson, source: press materials.

losing. In other sagas, the male protagonists sooner or later start fighting and their battle is not far from the furious fight of horses.²³ In this case, humans got wild and unpredictable just like animals, releasing the primitive need for blood by watching the game or even embodying the lust for fight with equally savage competitions.

A more contemporary example, yet suitable for revealing humans natural needs, is Benedikt Erlingsson's film *Of Horses and Men*, where people usually behave like animals and *vice versa*.²⁴ Take sexuality and lust; the opening scene is very symbolic: when Kolbeinn (Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson) arrives to his intended partner, Solveig (Charlotte Bøving), he is very elegant and charming, riding his representative mare. Surprisingly, the mare's arrival at the farmstead arouses Solveig's stallion that succeeds in getting out of his pen and manages to seduce the mare, ridden by Kolbeinn. This leads to an intercourse, with

²³ Benjamin, *Horses as Status Symbols*, 13.

²⁴ Konefał, *Kino*, 253.

Kolbeinn's participation (see Figure 2). What makes the symbol meaningful is that later in the film horses are also exposed to participate in the humans' intercourse, as Kolbeinn and Solveig have sex in the middle of the herd. In both scenes two species are not ashamed of letting their physical needs go in front of each other.

Both Pétursson and Erlingsson seem to remind us that men behave like animals or beasts. No matter how mannered or trained, both humans and horses are able to get out of control in most basic, primitive situations. Here, the human who is traditionally represented as master and "the tamer," is reduced to the subordinate species. As Benjamin notes, "men [are] acting no better than beasts,"²⁵ or sometimes they are even worse than them.

Sacrum: Traditional Roles and Symbols of Horses

A special attitude to horses in Iceland is based on tradition and history. The 19th and 20th centuries image of Icelandic horses stems from a number of beliefs and customs relating to the species, which created a conviction of the sacred value of the horse. Here, by aid of Icelandic sagas, I will try to list the most important roles that horses used to play in the sacred sphere of the Viking world, pointing how some of them influenced the way the species has been portrayed in art, and how they have been conceived by modern Icelanders.

Horses as Psychopomps

Before Iceland officially converted to Christianity, heathendom had been a dominant religion on the island. The Vikings believed that the bravest warriors would be honored by spending their afterlife in Valhalla, where, by Odin's side, they would be getting ready for the final battle of the gods, Ragnarök. For this reason, it was necessary to bury men with their horses and other belongings, as they would be crucial for the preparation phase in the other life.²⁶

However, dead warriors did not go to Valhalla on their own. They were transported there by Valkyries, Odin's maidens; a *Njál's saga* shows the Valkyries' arrival after a battle to choose the ones to be taken to Valhalla on horseback, while in *The Saga of Hákon the Good*, the king Hákon is also escorted on their steeds

²⁵ Benjamin, *Horses as Status Symbols*, 14.

²⁶ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 24.



Figure 3. *Fragment of the Tjängvide image stone*, runestone, ca. 800–1099, The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm, photo: Ola Myrin, Statens historiska museer, CC BY.

to the hall of Odin.²⁷ Valkyries' steeds play a role of psychopomps, transporting the souls from one world to another, or from the "conscious to unconscious realms."²⁸ Though not found in Iceland but in the mainland of Scandinavia, some ship and horse graves confirm the horses' role as psychopomps; according to archeologists, the coexistence of two symbols for the Vikings' favorite means of transport: horses and ships, can suggest their faith in being transported by one of them to another world.²⁹ Furthermore, in the Old Icelandic language, terms for ships and horses were usually interchangeably used, take a very popular kenning *fiskajarðar hestur* (fishing horse) meaning *a ship*.

The supernatural abilities of horses were required for their role as psychopomps. In many cases these magical or even shamanic traits were ascribed

²⁷ Peter Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback? Horse Burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age* (A Master's Thesis in Nordic Viking and Medieval Culture, The Faculty of Arts, at University of Oslo 2002), 78, <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/26678/7064.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

²⁸ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 35.

²⁹ Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback?*, 22.

to Sleipnir, Odin's steed.³⁰ This eight-legged child of Lóki and Svaðilfari was given to the god of the gods as a gift, and since then it has become of great importance in Nordic mythology. Unlike other children of Lóki, Sleipnir is not a negative creature; according to *Edda* it will be driven by Odin during Ragnarök, when Lóki and his other children-monsters will have to be defeated by gods and the chosen knights. What is more, Sleipnir was usually regarded as a psychopomp, as stated in some interpretations of the Tjängvide runestone (see Figure 3), on which the eight-legged horse is arriving to Valhalla with a dead warrior on his back.³¹ Katrín Sif Einarsdóttir juxtaposes these interpretations with her idea of Sleipnir as a symbol of a bier, explaining that eight legs of the horse would be an artistic vision of four people carrying the dead.³² She also links the number of the legs with the so-called *flying pace* (*skeið*), one of the Icelandic horse's gaits, which could explain both the need of showing the legs in motion and that the mythical horses (Valkyries' steeds, Sleipnir) were capable of flying.³³

Sex, Magic and Superstitions

The horse remained an important relic of the old faith; for instance, Icelanders went on eating horse flesh even after having converted to Christianity, as it was one of the conditions Althing agreed for around year 1000. Another condition, yet put to vote in a more unofficial way, was to continue the custom of offering animals, horse included, to the old gods.³⁴ The latter tradition was proved by many; sacrifices of horses were described by Adam of Bremen, but also linked to burials. *Blóts*, ceremonies of offering animals to gods and consuming their meat, are interpreted as a way to maintain a fertility cult.³⁵

The horse, especially its penis, was regarded as a symbol of fertility.³⁶ Looking closer to the Sleipnir's depiction on the Tjängvide runestone, a big phallus of both Odin and his horse can be seen (see Figure 3). Although the horse's penis is depicted in a very stylized way, as it is interwoven in decorative ribbons, typical of this type of Viking art, the symbolic function of horse's phallus was common in the Old Icelandic texts. Einarsdóttir lists *The Völsunga saga*, where the family name of Völsung is derived from *völsi* (Old Icelandic for *phallus*),³⁷

³⁰ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 35.

³¹ Ebbe Schön, *Asa-Tors hammare, Gudar och jättar i tro och tradition* (Värnamo: Hjalmarson & Högberg Bokförlag, 2004), 86.

³² Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 29–30.

³³ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 31.

³⁴ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 17.

³⁵ Benjamin, *Horses as Status Symbols*, 10.

³⁶ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 21.

³⁷ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 21.

which is the word that can also be found in the title of *Vǫlsa þáttr*, a short story depicting pagan traditions from the 9th century. The family described in the story consists of old parents, their children and two thralls (*þrællir*, slaves). When the male slave butchers a horse, the son saves its penis and takes it to the women's place in order to mock the female slave with the disgusting (to his sister's opinion) organ. However, the female slave is laughing about the joke, and the old mother decides to conserve the penis in onions and herbs. Later in the story, the whole family is praying to the horse's phallus, addressing their gods. The Old Norse god of fertility, Frey, appears also in *Hrafnkel's saga*, the main protagonist of which dedicates his beloved stallion, Freyfaxi, to the god.

Another link between the horse and its magical functions lays in the so-called *scorn-pole* (*níðstöng*). This pagan tradition, mentioned in Icelandic sagas, was probably maintained till the 14th century.³⁸ *Níðstöngar* were risen in order to both shame a rival and put a curse on him; words of the curse were curved in runes on the wooden pole, and on the top of it, an animal's head (usually a horse one) was stuck. Such poles were put in an enemy's land, aiming his house, so to curse his possessions and family, but sometimes they also related to his vices. If a horse's head was used for a *níðstöng*, the horse to be killed was of the addresser of the curse.³⁹ According to Rudolf Simek, a pole with insulting runes was a powerful *níðstöng*; however, adding a dead's horse head was of special potency, or it had a clear magical significance.⁴⁰ What is interesting is that a head used was usually that of a mare. This can be described by the concept of *ergi*, which encompasses "unmanly," the most powerful insult in the Viking world.⁴¹

In *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, Skeggi rises a pole in order to humiliate Kolbjörn, as both men were trying to get the same woman. On the pole, Skeggi portrays his enemy in a subservient sexual position, suggesting his "unmanly" nature.⁴² In another saga, *Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, Jokul warns his rival, who is supposed to take part in a duel with him, with the words: "You must now turn up to the duel if you have a man's heart rather than a mare's. And if anyone fails to turn up, then a *níð* will be raised against him with this curse – that he will be a coward in the eyes of all men [...]."⁴³ Jokul uses the rhetoric of *ergi* in order to emphasize his enemy's cowardice and weakness.

³⁸ Karl Seigfried, *How to Make a Níðstöng*, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://www.norsemyth.org/2013/09/how-to-make-nistong-part-one.html>.

³⁹ Einarsdóttir, *The Role of Horses*, 19.

⁴⁰ www.norsemyth.org, accessed November 20, 2018.

⁴¹ Baron Fridrik Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?! Or Insults in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, accessed November 14, 2018, <http://www.medievalists.net/2015/04/segja-hvada-insults-in-old-norse-icelandic-literature/>, 10.

⁴² Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 12.

⁴³ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 12.

More contemporarily, an example of *ergi* can be seen also in Benedikt Erlingsson's film *Of Horses and Men*. The abovementioned scene leads to an awkward and humiliating situation: Kolbeinn is taking part in the horses' intercourse, as he did not manage to dismount his mare on time. He is thus depicted in subservient sexual position, as if it was him being covered by the stallion. Everything is seen not only by nosy neighbors, but also by Solveig. Kolbeinn appears "unmanly," which can still be regarded as the worst trait of a man in the traditional society of an Icelandic countryside depicted in the film.

Having the film scene in mind, it is interesting to juxtapose it with Stefán V. Jónsson's painting, *Spring Play (Vorleikur)*. It was exhibited at Lækjartorg, Reykjavik, in the early 1960s and became a reason for the artist's arrest.⁴⁴ The composition with two horses having an intercourse was regarded as "violation of public decency"⁴⁵ and was heavily discussed by contemporary critics. Sentenced for spreading pornography, the artist then explained that he painted no pornography, as "no genitals are seen on the horse."⁴⁶ Stefán V. Jónsson was an amateur artist, and his style can be linked to primitivism, the movement that was inspired by everything untouched by civilization: children, mentally unstable and folk artists. Having the basic, psychical, primitive needs as a source, primitivists usually depicted subjects that were unkind to "civilized" audience. Pagan rites and customs are part of these origins, so it was natural for the painter to portray an intercourse of two animals. What was thought as pervert and inadequate in the 1960s, was part of the visual identification of fertility in the Old Norse mythology. No coincidence it happened to use the horse, a mythical symbol of fertility and sexuality.

Horses from Foreign Cultures

Nowadays, artists employ international and global motifs more often, reinterpreting the role of a mythological horse in Icelandic tradition. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Odin's favorite steed has given way to more universally known horses, such as Pegasus, centaurs or unicorns. In this case, artworks by Helgi Þorgils Friðjónsson attract the greatest attention because he exploits all these mythological hybrids in his oeuvre, sometimes combining them with other creatures: humans, dogs and other animals. In a painting from 2005 (see Figure 4), he represents a nude man and a unicorn, accompanied with birds and two mirrors, reflecting the composition in some parts. Friðjónsson has been

⁴⁴ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 52.

⁴⁵ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 52.

⁴⁶ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 53.

referring to unicorns since the 1980s⁴⁷: some of them are very peculiar hybrids mixed with other species (dogs, humans), while some are compilations of all mythological horse creatures: unicorns, centaurs, Pegasus. Sometimes they look like Icelandic horses, sometimes they are much closer to sleeker continental breeds.

A shrewd reinterpretation of mythical motifs is one of Friðjónsson's oeuvre's characteristics. However, the fact that they appeared in arts no sooner than in the 20th century does not imply that unicorns are prominent in the Icelandic tradition. It is important to underline that foreign motifs have been known in Iceland since the Middle Ages and described in Old Icelandic literature; take *Njál's saga*, where *finngálkn* (centaurs) are mentioned, or late Chivalric sagas (*Riddarasögur*), inspired mostly by continental *chansons de gestes*, where



Figure 4. Helgi Þorgils Friðjónsson (b. 1953), *Unicorn*, 2005. Photo by: Einar Falur Ingólfsson, Published by courtesy of the artist.

⁴⁷ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 85.

fantastic animals such as unicorns appear. Moreover, Icelanders contributed to unicorns' success in medieval times; they sold narwhal tusks to Europe as unicorn horns, as the tusk's shape and length looked exactly the way a unicorn horn was imagined.⁴⁸ Some of them are exhibited as "unicorn horns" nowadays, for instance in Grünes Gewölbe's collection in Dresden.

The motif of horses in Icelandic art is deeply rooted in the artists' imagination, and yet these fantastic beasts are losing their supernatural powers and magical value. Nowadays, mythological horses can be treated as a universal tool, a "transnational figure"⁴⁹ that can be applied to more than one culture. Iceland now partakes in globalization processes, so the horse becomes globalized, too. A successful Icelandic painter of our times, Erró, refers for instance to pop-culture horses, such as Disney's Horace Horsecollar (*Lovesong*, 2008).

Horse as Part of Icelandic National Identity

The two previously analyzed elements: horses as companions of Icelanders (profane, everyday role of horses in the society) and horses as a crucial part of Icelandic customs and tradition (sacred, supernatural and magical traits of horses) can lead to the statement that the Icelandic horse is an important symbol of the Icelandic nation as a whole.⁵⁰ In this part, I will give examples of horses being an important part of Icelandic national identity in relation to tradition (collective memory) and personal memories of painters.

Horse as Part of the National Landscape

Gísli Sigurðsson notices that the Icelandic landscape played a crucial role in the creation of the national identity.⁵¹ Very often Icelandic horses are depicted as part of it and they can even become an embodiment of Icelandic nature: beautiful – but unpredictable, wild – but free.

⁴⁸ www.thevintagenews.com, accessed November 28, 2018.

⁴⁹ Konefał, *Kino*, 253.

⁵⁰ Gréta Vilborg Guðmundsdóttir, "Product or Being? Development of the Image of the Icelandic Horse" (MA thesis written at Department of Design and Architecture, at Iceland University of the Arts, Reykjavik, 2014), 15, <https://skemman.is/handle/1946/19227?locale=en>.

⁵¹ Gísli Sigurðsson, "Icelandic National Identity: Icelandic National Identity: From Romanticism to Tourism," in *Making Europe in Nordic Context* (Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, University of Turku, 1996), 43.



Figure 5. Þórarinn B. Þórláksson, *Thingvellir (Þingvellir)*, 1900, The National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavik, source: Wiki Commons.

When Þórarinn B. Þórláksson came back to Iceland from his studies in Copenhagen, he spent summer in Thingvellir, sketching and painting *en plein air*. Thingvellir, the Valley of Assembly (*Alþingi*), plays a significant role in Icelandic collective memory.⁵² Here, in these special surroundings, Þórláksson places two horses, and only a building in the background can suggest people's presence in this pristine landscape (see Figure 5). The animals seem to integrate with the land; their bay coats suit the earthly colors of the moss and correlate with the blue haze of the sky and mountains reflecting in the Öxará river. All creates a harmonious scene and stillness of nature in relation to time: time has also stopped, because this place is (almost) exactly the same as one thousand years ago. Horses and buildings were “added” by the settlers, but the painter depicts them in the way they fit the surroundings perfectly.

Þórláksson depicts a fairytale-like setting of a summer night, giving lots of emotion to the landscape he was portraying, probably because he missed it while studying abroad. However, other artists would rather show the dark side of the unpredictable Icelandic weather and conditions, putting horses in the middle of it. Snorri Arinbjarnar, for example, painted Icelandic horses as one

⁵² I write more about the significance of Thingvellir and Þórláksson's painting in: Emiliana Konopka, *Pejzaż – narodowy gatunek malarski Islandii* (Warszawa: Studencki Klub Islandzki, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2017), 61–89.

of the elements, “his intention had been to treat the horse as a natural force rather than turn it into a symbol of nature.”⁵³ Þorvaldur Skúlason painted a black horse with red eyes (*Stallions*, 1941), as a proof that horses can be wild and untamable, furious and dangerous, as many Icelandic natural phenomena (avalanches, volcanoes, geysers, etc.).

Horse as an Embodiment of Freedom

An exceptional trait of the Icelandic horse, underlined by both painters and poets, is their freedom. This can be interpreted both in terms of virginity, primitivity and purity of nature, unchanged by humans despite industrialization, such as in relation to freedom of the nation. The latter is grounded in Romantic visions that spread on the island around the 1830s and 1850s. Romantic poets gentrified horses by creating their images based on glory of the past and would describe horses as brave and sturdy creatures fighting with terrible weather conditions, symbolizing a struggle for independence, deeply rooted in the Icelandic communal imagination.⁵⁴

Iceland lost its freedom in the 13th century and for the next 700 years remained under foreign rules: first Kingdom of Norway (1262–1380), then Kingdom of Denmark (1380–1918). After the First World War, Icelanders regained sovereignty in 1918, but stayed in a personal union with Denmark. They gained full independence in 1944, becoming the Republic of Iceland. In arts, differently than in literature, there was no visible independence movement *par excellence*. However, artists could relate to some ideas and symbols given by writers. For example, Erlingur Jónsson executed a sculpture of Krapí, a horse that appears in Halldór Laxness’s novel *Paradise Reclaimed* (*The Horse Named Krapí*, 1987). The Nobel Prize winner uses Krapí as a symbol of Iceland getting weaker and losing its glory under the Danish rule; at first, the horse that was given to the Danish king was strong and beautiful, resembling protagonists of the Old Icelandic literature, but once it was taken to Denmark, it became degraded to a pony⁵⁵ by pulling a carriage for children and serving on the court.⁵⁶ Here, Krapí represents a loss of freedom and Iceland’s situation during the harsh times of political dependence.

⁵³ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 55.

⁵⁴ Sigurðsson, “Icelandic National Identity,” 43.

⁵⁵ In popular texts about Iceland it is usually underlined that Icelanders get offended when somebody calls the Icelandic horse a pony. Recently, “Guide to Iceland” published a video entitled “See why you don’t mess with the Icelandic horse” that closes with words “Definitely not a pony” (produced by Haukur Valdimar, 2015), see: <https://www.facebook.com/guidetoiceland.is/videos/709900795776330/>, accessed November 20, 2018.

⁵⁶ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 68–69.



Figure 6. Tólli Morthens, *Horse*, 2008, 140 × 160 cm, source: Ingólfsson 2011. Published by courtesy of the artist.

The complicated Danish-Icelandic relations can be seen in *Horse* by Tólli Morthens (see Figure 6). The horse plays a central role in the composition, standing in an open landscape, yet with a surreal motif of a door, decorated with colorful pennants. The horse is covered by flags: Danish and Icelandic, the Danish one is on top, nearly hiding the Icelandic one. What kind of symbol can it be in 2008, when Iceland has been a free country for more than 60 years? Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson suggests that Tólli represents his personal problem of double identity. Half-Icelandic, half-Danish, he is struggling with finding his own self.⁵⁷ If so, why does he paint the Icelandic horse in an Icelandic landscape? There are other horses in the background, unsaddled and free. Only the one on the hill is “tied” to the door and decorations, as if it did not belong there. Can it symbolize (artistic) freedom of the artist?

⁵⁷ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 68.

Horse as a Memory in an Emigrant's Mind

Many Icelandic artists decided to stay abroad and work there. Studying in big centers, artists starting their careers around the 1950s and 1960s understood that the way to international success does not lead through Iceland. Louisa Matthíasdóttir studied in Denmark, then moved to Paris, but when the Second World War broke out, she left for New York. Although she would come back to Iceland for summers, her most "Icelandic" landscapes were executed in the States, painted out of memories of her native country.

Icelandic horses constituted a large part of her "memory database" from Iceland, and they appear in different compositions and combinations, yet always painted in the same, flat and simplified way. In Matthíasdóttir's *Two Horses in Landscape* the body of horses, as well as all elements of the landscape, are painted with broad brushstrokes, with intense, vibrant colors. Matthíasdóttir based her paintings on her memory, and judging by the light palette she used, it can be assumed that she thought very kindly of Iceland. This is not a poetic and somnambulist vision of a Romantic poet from the beginning of the 20th century, but a vivid and cheerful representation of longing for the country of birth.

Here, Matthíasdóttir projects her memories of Icelandic horses on her personal style and intense colors that were the aftermath of her encounter with color-field painting in New York. Horses on Matthíasdóttir's paintings get the angularity and simplicity due to her technique, but they are also represented in a way they really are: hard and undemanding. Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson wonders "whether the artist is in part creating her horse as a reification of the qualities which she connects with the country and its people,"⁵⁸ which suggests that Matthíasdóttir did not necessarily feel part of Icelandic society. Maybe the horses and other images she remembered from her childhood, were more of colorful postcards she wanted to keep in her head. However, the artist would come back to Iceland from time to time, yet had her first own show no sooner than she turned 70. Nowadays, 18 years after her death, she is one of top artists on the island, and her landscape paintings got on covers of the renewed series of Halldór Laxness's novels, becoming illustrations for the most popular Icelandic books.

⁵⁸ Tomasson, *Segja Hvada?!*, 67.

Conclusion

Icelanders often relate to their original Viking roots. Since Romanticism, seeing themselves as Viking descendants has been a part of Icelandic identity,⁵⁹ a source of pride and a demonstration of the nation's determination to establish a new country despite difficult climate conditions and other factors. So hard and resilient the Vikings were that they could only be accompanied with evenly strong and sturdy horses. This special bond between the Vikings and their horses can be proven by numerous sagas and other medieval texts, showing the importance of the species not only during the Age of Settlement, but also the following years of creating the country. Ideas and concepts created in the Viking times lay foundations for Icelandic identity and mentality nowadays, so the medieval image and role of horses had a visible impact on contemporary artists depicting the motif.

Although the Icelandic horse has lost its prestige and its profane role diminished due to industrialization,⁶⁰ the sacred elements of the horse's place in the Icelandic tradition saved the positive image of the animal in the 20th century. A strong bond with medieval past has influenced the attitude to the horse's value at present; since the 13th-century collection of laws *Grágás* horses have been regarded as valuable belongings, not to mention that they would also constitute an equivalent of wealth and their owner's status.⁶¹ Despite the fact that nowadays an Icelander's fortune is mostly represented by his house and an all-terrain vehicle, many make business on owning horses, especially in the tourist sector, which is a crucial part of Iceland's economical growth since the crisis in 2008.⁶²

Referring to tourist campaigns of Iceland, where the Icelandic horse appears more than often, it is true than the animal has become its unofficial national symbol in the 21st century. Nowadays foreigners associate the country with the most frequently reproduced images of Icelandic horses, shared them on social media and in guidebooks, which makes them globally recognized.⁶³ Tourists come to Iceland to enjoy horse-riding in open space, while breeders arrive to make businesses with local sellers. Although devoid of its sacred value and traditional purpose in the profane sphere, the species remains an important part of common imagination and visual culture of the country. However, these images are made for/ by tourists, foreigners, *the others*, who tend to have a simplified, stereotyped and subjective vision of Iceland.

⁵⁹ Sigurðsson, "Icelandic National Identity," 43.

⁶⁰ Einarsson, *The Role*, 11.

⁶¹ Benjamin, *Horses*, 1.

⁶² Sigurðardóttir, *Hestatengd*, 2004.

⁶³ Guðmundsdóttir, *Product*, 23–24.

What is the real importance of the horse in Icelandic society today? How many “horses” are there in Icelandic souls? Since the beginning of the 20th century, the species has been part of leisure and sports sphere of life, and tournaments or races are very popular among Icelanders nowadays, bringing almost Romantic pleasures of freedom, pleasure and strong bond with the animal. Moreover, the interest of tourist and foreign breeders, mostly caused by the horses’ medieval genotype, has helped in restoring the image of the Icelandic horses as a valuable stock.⁶⁴ The question is whether this value is defined mostly in economic terms, which makes the horse only profitable goods,⁶⁵ or whether it is regarded in more spiritual ways. The ancient roles of the Icelandic horses have thus survived in the contemporary world, yet they have taken a modern, globalized and up-to-date form.

Bibliography

- Benjamin, Megan. *Horses as Status Symbols: Medieval Icelandic Horses as Symbols of Masculine Honor in a One-sexed World*. Falk: Published Online, 2008.
- Björnsson, Gísli, and Sveinsson Hjalti. *The Icelandic Horse*. Reykjavik: Edda Publishing, 2006.
- Guðmundsdóttir, Gréta. “Product or Being? Development of the Image of the Icelandic Horse” (Master thesis at The Department of Design and Architecture, Iceland Academy of the Arts, 2014, advisor: Þorleifsdóttir Kristín). Reykjavik: Iceland Academy of the Arts.
- Einarsdóttir, Katrín Sif. *The Role of Horses in the Old Norse Sources. Transcending Worlds, Mortality, and Reality* (Medieval Icelandic Studies, Hugvísindasvið). Reykjavik: University of Iceland, 2013.
- Einarsson, Sigfús Örn. “The Role of the Icelandic Horse in Icelandic History and Its Image in the Icelandic Media” (Final Project in School of Humanities and Social Sciences Lokaverkefni við Hug- og félagsvísindasvið, 2010, supervisor: Meckl Markus). Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Akureyri.
- Ingólfsson, Adalsteinn. *Jór!: The Horse in Icelandic Art*. Reykjavik: Reykjavik Art Museum, 2011.
- Konefał, Sebastian Jakub. *Kino Islandii. Tradycja i ponowoczesność*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórkcu, 2016.
- Konopka, Emiliana. 2017. *Pejzaż – narodowy gatunek malarski Islandii*. In *Antologia naukowa. Islandia: Język, Naród, Natura*. Edited by Roman Chymkowski and Emiliana Konopka, 61–89. Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, Instytut Kultury Polskiej.

⁶⁴ Einarsson, *The Role*, 26.

⁶⁵ Guðmundsdóttir, *Product*, 40.

- Kvaran Orvar. *Þórarinn B. Þorláksson: Pioneer at the Dawn of a Century*. Reykjavík: Listasafn Íslands, 2000.
- Nolf, Pamela. "Detecting Icelandic Horse Origins." *Icelandic Horse Quarterly*, vol. 4 (2012): 18–23.
- Tomasson, Baron Fridrikr. *Segja Hvada?! Or Insults in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*. 2010. Accessed November 14, 2018. <http://www.medievalists.net/2015/04/segja-hvada-insults-in-old-norse-icelandic-literature/>.
- Thoroddsen, Emil. *Íslenzk myndlist. 20 listmálarar/ Art in Iceland. 20 artists*. Reykjavík: Kristján Friðriksson, 1943.
- Schön, Ebbe. *Asa-Tors hammare, Gudar och jättar i tro och tradition*. Värnamo: Fält & Hässler, 2004.
- Seigfried, Karl. *How to Make a Niðstöng*. 2013. Accessed November 20, 2018. <https://www.norsemyth.org/2013/09/how-to-make-nistong-part-one.html>.
- Shenk, Peter. "To Valhalla by Horseback? Horse Burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age" (Master's thesis in Nordic Viking and Medieval Culture, 2002). University of Oslo, The Center for Viking and Medieval Studies, The Faculty of Arts.
- Sigurðardóttir, Ingibjörg. *Hestatengd ferðaþjónusta á Íslandi*. Rekstrar- og viðskiptadeild. Akureyri: University of Akureyri, 2004.
- Sigurðsson, Gísli. *Icelandic National Identity*. In *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts*. Edited by Anttonen Pertii, 41–75. Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, University of Turku, 1996.

Emiliana Konopka – graduated from the University of Warsaw with a degree in art history and also holds a degree in Scandinavian Studies from the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. She is a co-editor of the scholarly anthology *Islandia: Język. Naród. Natura* (Iceland: Language. People. Nature) (Warsaw, 2017). As a student, she was president of the Iceland Club at the University of Warsaw. She is the creator of the Utula Thule project (www.utulethule.pl), which seeks to promote Icelandic culture and Nordic art. She is also the author of the lecture *Inne światło: Cechy charakterystyczne skandynawskiego malarstwa pejzażowego XIX i XX wieku* (Other light: Characteristic features of Scandinavian landscape painting of the 19th and 20th centuries), which has been delivered in many universities.

Emiliana Konopka – ukończyła historię sztuki na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim oraz skandynawistykę na Uniwersytecie SWPS w Warszawie. Współredaktorka antologii naukowej *Islandia: Język. Naród. Natura* (Warszawa 2017). W czasach studenckich prezes Studenckiego Klubu Islandzkiego Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. Autorka projektu Utulę Thule (www.utulethule.pl), w którym promuje kulturę Islandii oraz sztukę nordycką. Autorka wygłaszanego na wielu uczelniach wykładu *Inne światło. Cechy charakterystyczne skandynawskiego malarstwa pejzażowego XIX i XX wieku*.