

New radicalism and the beginning of the abstract

During World War II (1939–45) Iceland was largely cut off from mainland Europe. A non-combatant nation in the war, Iceland was occupied first by British and then by US troops. Many young artists, who might otherwise have gone to Europe to study, went instead to the United States where they came into contact with many avant-garde European artists in exile.

Back in Iceland, established artists continued to develop their art and important shows were held which expressed radical philosophies, such as a joint exhibition by Þorvaldur Skúlason and Gunnlaugur Scheving in 1942. But it was not until the war was over, in August 1945, that the Icelanders had an opportunity to see a new style.

Svavar Guðnason, who had gone to Denmark in 1935 and remained there throughout the war when the country was under German occupation, had established himself as a leader of Danish abstract art. On his return to Iceland he held a major exhibitions of abstracts which caused a sensation and had a huge impact. Shortly afterwards some of the artists who had been in the USA returned home – among them Nína Tryggvadóttir, Kjartan Guðjónsson, Kristján Davíðsson, Jóhannes Jóhannesson and Valtýr Pétursson. In 1947 these artists, together with a few of their elders such as Þorvaldur Skúlason and Sigurjón Ólafsson, held a "September" exhibition. It heralded a new period in Icelandic art and abstraction – with the focus on form, free expression, and a new exaltation of children's art. With the September exhibitions of the late 1940s, a new generation made its mark with new and radical ideas about the role and importance of visual art.