

Romantic and Radical

In the early years of the twentieth century, art in Iceland was in a state of flux, just as it was in mainland Europe. The relationship with Danish art was a close one, as exemplified in the symbolism of sculptor Einar Jónsson, in the Romantic naturalism of the landscapes of Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, who held Reykjavík's first ever art show in 1900, and in the landscapes and folkloric themes of Ásgrímur Jónsson, with his concentration on capturing the light in the Icelandic landscape. Jón Stefánsson, who had been a student of Henri Matisse in Paris was also influenced by Cézanne and before long more Icelandic artists followed his example. Women also made their entrance on the artistic stage: for instance Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, Kristín Jónsdóttir and Nína Sæmundsson. By the 1920s artists were experimenting with new ideas in art such as Cubism, Futurism and Abstraction. Experiments by Jóhannes Kjarval and Finnur Jónsson were particularly noteworthy: Finnur showed such works in Reykjavík in 1925. Many new artists emerged and an indication of the artistic ferment of those years is that two major exhibitions were held in Reykjavík in 1930, when the Icelanders celebrated the millennium of the foundation of the Alþingi (parliament). A total of thirty-one artists showed over 450 works.