

## From Sketch to Sculpture - Drawings by Ásmundur Sveinsson

As a rule, young children learn to speak through a simple process of practicing how to express themselves and their thoughts. Unavoidably children make a great number of mistakes during their first years, often to the amusement of the grown-ups, but within a few years most children learn to understand and use a language – even more than one at the same time – without consciously following any methodology, and essentially without having any idea about how this happens. Learning to express yourself and understanding others through the use of language simply seems to be a natural process that takes a certain time, and the knowledge needed to use a language cannot be gained in any other way.

The desire to draw seems to be as natural for the individual as the desire to speak, and one of the best known art teachers of the 20th century, Kimon Nicolaïdes, maintained that there was only one right way to learn to draw – the natural way of practice and training. He thought that this method had nothing to do with pretense or technique, and that aesthetics and other concepts were irrelevant in this context. The method was only based on the act of correct observation, and to notice the object through all the senses, if possible. If the art student missed this process and did not practice drawing on the basis of observation, it would haunt him later on, and then he would probably have to go back again and again to this initial stage of artistic creation<sup>1</sup>.

The drawing is an essential tool for the artist, the sculptor no less than the painter. In addition to the general training of mind and hand, the sense of form and completion that the drawing gives each artist that uses the medium, it also often conveys the first ideas of shape, size, spirit and expression of each project, that eventually lay the foundation for a completed work of art.

Ásmundur Sveinsson grew up on a small farm at Kolsstaðir in the County of Dalir, and took part in the general work of the farm with other family members. He thus did not enjoy the privilege of being able to study art in his youth, although he is known to have been good with his hands and carved out some interesting items as a teenager.<sup>2</sup> Ásmundur first got the opportunity to begin to learn to draw when he came to Reykjavik in 1915, 22 years old, to begin an apprenticeship in woodcarving – and from that time on the drawings can be said to have come forth in abundance.

The digital registration of all the drawings in the collection of The Reykjavík Art Museum – Ásmundarsafn has recently been completed, and it is a great advantage finally to have good access to this part of the artistic creativity of the sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson based on the latest technology. The drawings number almost 2.000 and cover a wide range of subjects; model studies, devotional drawings, form studies, portraits, abstract sketches and a variety of other things – among them quite a number of drawings that can be related to specific sculptures, that Ásmundur Sveinsson created during his long and prolific career.

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<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to the book *The Natural Way to Draw* by Kimon Nicolaïdes, that was first published in 1941, and has been used as fundamental textbook in the teaching of drawing ever since all over the world. Nicolaïdes was a teacher at the renowned Art Students' League in New York in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Matthías Jóhannessen, *Bókin um Ásmund*, (Published by Helgafell, 1971), pg. 29.

These drawings are not of a great number, in view of the long and active life of the artist. At a first glance the greatest number of the drawings can be related to the period of study in the life of Sveinsson, first at the Industrial School in Reykjavík, where his teacher in drawing was Þórarinn B. Þorláksson, one of the pioneers of the visual arts in Iceland at the beginning of the 20th century, then to his year in Copenhagen, and then to the prolific time he spent studying in Stockholm. But there are also drawings from his years in Paris, from his travels in Southern Europe, and finally from the time he was working in Iceland, although only a few of these can be tied to the later decades of his working life with full certainty. It must be assumed that at this time the formal vision of the artist had developed in such a way that he did not feel the need to use drawings in preparing his sculptures to the extent that he had done earlier.

It is clear that Ásmundur Sveinsson put great emphasis during his years of study on developing his drawing skills, and that he seems to have used the methods that Nicolaïdes was to describe years later, focusing all his senses on the subject, and looking for ways to express what he sensed in the best possible way, whatever the subject. To Sveinsson the eternal search for the essence of the subject is one of the most important attributes of each artist, and this can be seen in his drawing just as in other works he created. Ásmundur Sveinsson guided budding artists later in his life, and to emphasize this point he often quoted the words of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin: „There is no such thing as beauty, only the search for beauty.“ But Sveinsson added – from his own heart – that the search itself knew no boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition **From Idea to Sculpture – Drawings by Ásmundur Sveinsson** presents a few examples of the eternal search for beauty, that was the essence of the drawings of Ásmundur Sveinsson. The selection gives only a small insight into this rich collection of drawings, where a selection has been made among the works based on subjects, that can be identified throughout the collection. Hopefully there will be more exhibitions in the future based on the treasure-trove, that these drawings represent.

A considerable part of the drawings that Ásmundur left behind is bound into nearly thirty books or volumes of sketches, which are naturally not as easy to exhibit as the ones done individually. Consequently a number of drawings are shown in the exhibition through photographs, but the sketchbooks themselves can be seen in glass tables for further study.

The drawings of Ásmundur Sveinsson have not been exhibited to a great extent, but give various opportunities to study further the career and artistic development of the artist. The drawings may in the future become subject to increased attention among those interested in getting to know a previously little known chapter in Icelandic art history and in the oeuvre of this great artist. This exhibition presents the first steps along that road.

Eiríkur Þorláksson, art historian.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthías Jóhannessen, *Bókin um Ásmund*, (Published by Helgafell, 1971), pg. 13.