

MY DREAMLAND IN THE NORTH 1)

Karen Agnete Enevoldsen, later Þórarinnsson, was a Dane who married an Icelander and settled with him in Iceland. Born in Copenhagen on 29 December 1903, she was the eldest of three sisters. A sickly, solitary child, she started to draw and paint at a young age. Her prosperous parents nurtured her creativity, and at the age of 11 she started training in porcelain painting, alongside her conventional schooling, with the aim of becoming an artist. In 1925, after five years of preparatory study she entered the painting department of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, at the age of 22. Her principal tutor was Professor Ejnar Nielsen (1872-1956): as a young man he had been influenced by symbolism, and he was renowned for his strong and powerful depiction of the human figure, especially women. He stressed the importance of drawing, and used a dark palette, which was characteristic of Nordic symbolism around the turn of the century. Karen Agnete always maintained that the influences of her time at the Academy remained with her throughout her life, and that she had probably never cared to throw them off. 2)

One of her classmates at the Academy was a handsome young man from Iceland, Sveinn Þórarinnsson (1899-1977), a farmer's son from the north. He often found himself treading on the toes of the petite woman who painted behind him in class; and his repeated apologies led in due course to a proposal of marriage. 3) Many women artists of Karen Agnete's generation opted never to marry, feeling that art was of such central importance in their lives that it could not be reconciled with marriage and motherhood. Danish writer Tove Ditlevsen, who scandalised her fellow-countrymen by her outspoken critical views on the status of women, said that women were not supposed to produce anything, except children.

Karen Agnete accepted Sveinn's proposal, and after graduating in the autumn of 1929 the young couple sailed for Iceland the following spring, making their home initially with the bridegroom's parents at Kílakot in the county of North Þingeyjarsýsla. Their home was a turf farmhouse of the traditional type (then fast disappearing from the Icelandic countryside), dimly lit by paraffin lamps. In the old-style open-hearth kitchen, bread was still baked on a stone slab. Karen Agnete often said how fortunate she felt she had been, to experience life in the old Icelandic rural society before it disappeared; she saw the countryside as an Arcadia or dreamland, which inspired her artistic creativity. 4) In spite of her own urban, bourgeois roots, she appears never to have missed the comforts of city life; she found herself in such a different environment, that no comparison was even possible. 5)

In this remote rural place in the far north, the young artist found a visual world which she cherished throughout her career. It was not, however, the Icelandic landscape which appealed to her; she was more interested in the people, and animals, in the country. She left an extensive series of realistic images of people, using a dark palette and combining a psychological approach with human warmth. The subjects are often ladies of a certain age wearing Icelandic national dress, engaged in some social activity such as a coffee party or playing cards: they chat, and the artist depicts them swirling their long skirts and serving coffee from shiny bright-blue enamelled pots. She does not paint identified individuals, but “invented people,” as the artist put it. 6) Karen Agnete’s views on her subjects undeniably leads one to consider her Danish origins, as her work manifests attributes which were rarely seen in the work of Icelandic artists of the time: even in her depictions of daily life, she conveys a certain light-heartedness and subtle humour. Muggur (Guðmundur Pétursson Thorsteinsson, 1891-1924) is the only Icelandic artist who shares any common ground with Karen in depiction of everyday life; Icelandic painters tended more towards Social Realism: Gunnlaugur Scheving (1904-72) for instance.

Another category of pictures which became important in Karen Agnete’s art consists of images of flowers and still life. In these works she used a brighter, more colourful palette than in her paintings of people, and applied expressionistic methods.

After living for two years at Kílakot, Karen Agnete and Sveinn built themselves a house in one of the most beautiful and extraordinary places in Iceland, Ásbyrgi (literally Fortress of the Gods), a gigantic hollow in the landscape surrounded by vertical cliffs. In 1932 they moved into their new home, which they named *Byrgi*, with their infant son Karl Kristján. Sveinn had found employment as a forester, and this enabled both him and Karen Agnete to pursue their art, at least part-time. At that time it seemed optimistic for the couple to attempt to live by their art – and especially Karen Agnete: in 1930 only one woman in Iceland was a professional artist, Kristín Jónsdóttir (1888-1959).

In Ásbyrgi the couple lived in close proximity with nature. In the summer months, they often went out to paint all night in the midnight sun; in winter they might not meet their nearest neighbours for weeks at a time. Karen Agnete and Sveinn always shared a studio. From 1930 until the 1960s they showed their work together, at Húsavík in the north and Seyðisfjörður in the east. They later exhibited in alternate years in Akureyri in the north and in Reykjavík.

They held dozens of exhibitions during their careers. Sveinn was a prolific artist, whose work always sold well, even during the Depression of the 1930s.

In the early years Karen Agnete was not generally mentioned by name, but referred to simply as “the artist’s wife.” She painted “little, and slowly,” as she said. In some cases she would return to the same painting over a long period. 7) At many of the couple’s joint shows, she contributed only four or five paintings. Not until she was eighty years old did Karen Agnete hold her first one-woman show in Iceland, at Gallery Borg in Reykjavík in 1984. She showed thirteen oil paintings, made in 1980-84. Nonetheless, by the time of her death her career as an artist spanned six decades, and hence she left a considerable oeuvre.

From the start, Karen Agnete’s art was well received; critics deemed her a good and interesting painter. Early in their careers Sveinn and Karen Agnete chose their different paths in art: Sveinn was primarily a landscape artist, whereas Karen Agnete painted landscapes only as a background to themes of people and animals. At times she was not counted as an “Icelandic” artist, and this reflects the strong hold that landscape painting had on the mind of Icelanders.

Much has been written about artist couples, and social difficulties which tend to arise, affecting both man and wife. Karen Agnete and Sveinn Þórarinsson appear to have found a way to develop, each in their own way, as creative artists within a caring relationship, and without falling into the traditional pitfalls of “masculine” and “feminine” roles. They both maintained that collaboration in art was an impossibility: both tedious and risky. 8)

REFERENCES

1) The title of the exhibition is drawn from a poem by Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940): *Bláskógavegur*. Einar Benediktsson. Kvæðasafn. Reykjavík, 1964, p. 440.

2) Gísli Sigurðsson. “Allt var svo skemmtilegt í Kílakoti” (Everything was such fun at Kílakot) . Lesbók Morgunblaðsins. 22 December 1984, p. 23.

3) RÚV- Í vikulokin. Interview with artist Sveinn Þórarinsson by Jónas Jónasson. DR 823, 1 February 1964.

4) Steinar og sterkir litir. Svipmyndir 16 myndlistarmanna. “Listamaðurinn er nunna í klaustri listarinnar” (Rocks and Strong Colours. Profiles of 16 artists. “An artist is a nun in the convent of art”). Interview with Karen Agnete and Sveinn Þórarinnsson by Steinunn S. Briem. Reykjavík, 1965, pp. 155–6.

5) RÚV – Síðdegisútlit. “Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson.” Radio interview with the artist by Sigrún Björnsdóttir. DB 8364, 6 September 1984.

6) Gísli Sigurðsson. . “Allt var svo skemmtilegt í Kílakoti” (Everything was such fun at Kílakoti) . Lesbók Morgunblaðsins. 22 December 1984, p. 21–23.

7) RÚV – Síðdegisútlit. “Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson.” Radio interview with the artist by Sigrún Björnsdóttir. DB 8364, 6 September 1984.

8) RÚV - Í vikulokin. Interview with artist Sveinn Þórarinnsson by Jónas Jónasson . DR 823, 1 February 1964.

RÚV – Síðdegisútlit. “Karen Agnete Þórarinnsson.” Radio interview with the artist by Sigrún Björnsdóttir. DB 8364, 6 September 1984.

Comment [N1]: þetta virðist vera afgang?

