



**An Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of
the Kjarval Exhibition
The State Russian Museum,
St. Petersburg,
26 September 2013**

Your Excellencies
Ladies and gentlemen
Dear friends

For the people of the North, nature has always been a mysterious master, its moods ranging from the hard, sombre winters, when the sun dances on the ice and the Northern Lights bring ballet to the sky, to the excitement of the arrival of spring, when forests and fields bring harvest and food; a world of inspiration for poets and painters, enriching their souls, whether in Russia, Iceland or elsewhere in and near the Arctic.

Culture reflects the spirit of the people. Art reveals beauties that are hidden, unknown, showing the core of our being, how nature makes us human, life worth living; who we are; where we came from. It is the artist who guides us forward on each new journey.

Jóhannes Kjarval was in this way uniquely gifted. He gave my nation an identity it was not previously aware of. He revealed how a rock or a piece of lava could display a world of contrasts and colours, making the miniature symbolic for all of Iceland.

He was the son of a poor farmer, one of thirteen siblings, and was sent to live with relatives in an isolated eastern fjord. There, striking mountain scenery and stories of elves and fairies gave him the ambition and determination to seek something different, to enter the world of art and creation.

In his youth, Iceland was almost without painters, but by becoming a fisherman for some time Kjarval earned enough to go abroad. With the help of a few friends, who sensed his genius, Kjarval received training by studying the galleries of Europe, though life was still full of hardship and struggle.

When he returned to Iceland the challenges became even greater. The nation was then among the poorest in Europe – and yet his creative talent gave the people another world, a realm of colours and landscapes, of elves and fairies, of mountains and lava fields, making Iceland – through his art – an eternal adventure.

Kjarval presented the Icelanders with a new sense of what it means to be a nation. He strengthened our identity and courage, showed how we can be proud in the community of nations –yet he was also playful and ironic.

There are but a few artists, poets or writers who, over the centuries, have succeeded in giving their nations a new sense of themselves, bringing fresh dimensions to their culture.

Jóhannes Kjarval was, like our Nobel-Prize-winning author Halldór Laxness, unique in this respect. Both were giants in our 20th century culture; one honoured by the renowned literary prize and loved by millions of readers in many countries, including Russia, the other largely unknown except to us in Iceland and to our friends in the Nordic countries, yet connoisseurs from many art galleries believe him to be among the century's greatest painters!

It is therefore with special pleasure that we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of Russian-Icelandic diplomatic relations and the long-standing friendship between our nations, by bringing Kjarval to one of the most distinguished museums in Russia and in the whole of Europe, and we hope that this exhibition will mark the beginning of the global recognition he truly deserves.

Now our friends in Russia can witness the work of this magician of colours and experience for themselves how he turned nature into a new adventure, transforming mountains into temples of light and perspective.

Was he a painter or a poet? Are his works tales or music, truth or illusion? We can each answer these questions in our own way and enjoy the everlasting adventure of Kjarval's art.

I thank the State Russian Museum, the curator and the Reykjavík Art Museum and all those who made this exhibition possible; also the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin who has taken a

strong personal interest in this endeavour. I also bring you greetings from my wife, who has now for some years enjoyed the privilege of being a board member of this great museum.

We will furthermore be deeply honoured at the beginning of next month to welcome the Rodchenko Exhibition to Reykjavík and to attend the concert given by Vladimir Spivakov and the Moscow Virtuosi in our new concert hall, Harpa. These are events which will allow us to continue celebrating the 70th anniversary of our friendship and long-standing diplomatic cooperation.

And now I invite you all to enter the magic world of Kjarval, to walk towards the lava, feel the softness of the moss, greet the elves and the fairies, listen to the birds and the horses approaching, to enjoy the North he so uniquely created.