



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of the
International Conference on Architectural Glass Art
Kópavogur Art Museum – Gerðarsafn
5th April 2005

Distinguished artists, scholars,
Curators and directors,
Ladies and Gentlemen

The Icelandic landscape, a symphony of colours, the volcanoes and the lava fields, the glaciers and the geysers, the valleys and the fjords, the blackness of the sands, the greenness of the fields, the brown, the red, the grey produced by eruptions; but above all the transparency of the water, the all-embracing water, the ocean and the lakes, the rivers and the springs, reflections in blue, the remarkable light, bright summer nights, short winter days, the slow and dignified emergence of the morning in March, the gradual farewell, the arrival of darkness at the end of an autumn day – all of this has given our artists a legacy and an inspiration, guiding them on a journey to the unknown.

When glass art became an integral part of our culture, the colours and the transparency of our country enhanced the work of the artists and the nation embraced this art form, maybe because we saw in glass something so essentially Icelandic that it touched our hearts and stirred our souls.

The transparency of the ice, the clearness of the water, the reflections on the lakes, the playfulness of the rivers – all made mysterious and holy, almost sacred by the brightness of the sun, creating an unusual playground of colours and light which glass art could capture so well.

Thus this art form has enjoyed perhaps more than any other medium in modern times a particular harmony with our being, our identity, our experience.

But the experience is not just ours. So many of our visitors express the same, see in the glass art produced in Iceland something reflecting the eternal essence of our country.

This was certainly the view of my friends George Russell and his late wife Jane, the founders of the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, when they first came to Iceland a decade ago.

This has been the expression of kings and queens, presidents and political leaders, scientists and scholars who have received works by our artists.

And this has been the foundation of my own fascination with glass art ever since the early 1970s when my late wife Guðrún Katrín and I commissioned a young glass artist, Leifur Breiðfjörð, who at that time was almost completely unknown to the nation, to produce a window for our house, a window which we took with us to Bessastaðir, the Presidential Residence, when the nation two decades later decided to bring us there.

But let me tell you that although Leifur Breiðfjörð was unknown at that time he requested a price which was quite high given my income, almost a quarter of my annual salary as a professor at the University of Iceland, but the window was certainly worth it and we in the family are extremely privileged to own such an early work by this outstanding artist.

It is indeed fitting to celebrate this conference with an exhibition of Leifur's work *Andi manns, the Spirit of Man*, and to link it with three other exhibitions, first *Dialogues* by Caroline Swash, then an exhibition of contemporary Icelandic glass art and finally a special exhibition honouring the work of Gerður Helgadóttir.

Gerður was indeed a remarkable artist, a pioneer and a visionary, daring and courageous, breaking new ground in many different ways.

She worked at the forefront of modern European art but remained deeply rooted in Iceland. The museum which bears her name is a tribute to her legacy and I want once again to thank the City of Kópavogur for having honoured Gerður in this splendid way and also for its contributions to our culture by building other centres for cultural activity here on this hill.

By hosting an international conference on architectural glass art and bringing so many distinguished artists and cultural leaders together, the City of Kópavogur and the Kópavogur Art Museum once again demonstrate their global vision, their cultural ambition, their intention to make the city and the museum a centre of advanced dialogue and new inspirations. The director of Gerðarsafn, Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir, thus continues to enrich our culture.

I welcome all the distinguished artists and scholars, curators and directors who have assembled here today and hope that your deliberations and discussions will enable us to understand better how glass art can in future years continue to broaden our experience in fascinating and unexpected ways.