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"Innovation happens naturally when you dream big"
Joeri Yong Park, see page 30

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Country focus

We delve deep into the digital creative scene of a different nation each month

Iceland

Iceland: the facts

The Icelandic design scene, at a glance

Creative hubs

Reykjavik and the south-west region are home to the majority of the population and therefore the majority of the creative output of Iceland. Narrowed down, the 'creative hub' would be downtown Reykjavik, where most of the country's galleries, studios and cultural events are located. Akureyri, a small city to the north-east of the country, is also home to a large number of creatives.

Design schools

The Icelandic Academy of Arts and the Akureyri Art School are the two places to study art and design at degree level. To study design further, to Masters level, you'd need to look outside the country, which is what many students do before going back to their homeland to find work for themselves.

Events

There are two main design events in Iceland. Design March is a yearly four-day design festival in Reykjavik, and Reykjavik Cultural Night is held in late August and has an interesting and diverse programme. The Icelandic Academy of Arts graduation show is also popular, and in addition the ATyp1 2011 conference will be held in Reykjavik this year.

The country

Iceland sits high above Europe on the North Atlantic Ridge. It has a relatively small population of around 320,000 people with two-thirds of those people islanders in Reykjavik and the surrounding south-west region. The centre of the country is largely uninhabited as it consists mainly of rocky mountains and icy glaciers. Despite its recent financial problems, Iceland was ranked the fourth most productive country, per capita, in the United Nations' Human Development Index of 2010.

This remote island's young, thriving design scene is home to some exciting emerging talent. **Charlotte Rivers** finds out what drives and inspires this new generation of creatives

According to Gudbjorg Gissurardottir, head of Iceland's Design Forum, there was no particular word for 'design' in the Icelandic language until as late as the 1950s. This goes some way to explaining how its fellow Scandinavian countries have had something of a head start on it within the global design scene. However, a new generation of creatives hailing from this unique island is striving to make up for that today.

Iceland is remote (it sits in the far North Atlantic) and sparsely populated (its inhabitants total around 320,000), yet it has a young, energetic creative industry both in terms of art and design, and of music. "There are a lot of positive things going on within the creative scene here at the moment," explains designer Thorleifur Gunnar Gislason. "There's been a growth boom in fashion and product design, and there's a constant growth in the music industry. All these things are connected in one way or another."

Gislason worked in advertising until the country's financial crisis of 2008, when he changed careers and started

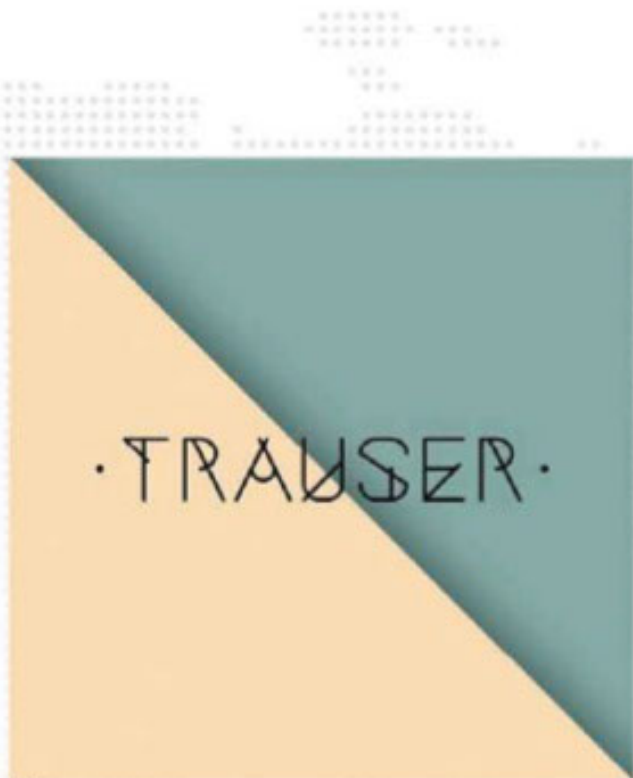
working as a freelance designer. He believes the creative boom is down to what he describes as the typical Icelandic mindset. "Constantly pushing ourselves, being curious and ambitious – I think this is true of many creatives here, we're open to everything new," he says. "Although we focus on individual authenticity and want to differentiate ourselves from one another, it's such a small society that we really find ourselves helping one another and sincere motivations are easy to come by."

Illustrator and multimedia animator Erla María Árnadóttir agrees: "I think that being ready to do what needs to be done is an Icelandic way of thinking that's been around since settlers first came to the island. To survive you've got to be able to do anything and this applies to being a designer or illustrator," she adds. "We even have a popular word here, *redda*, which means 'making things work.' Árnadóttir's work is about innocence, purity and childhood. Her style could be considered as slightly macabre, but for Árnadóttir it's just that she likes to play with the line between beauty and

02 Thorleifur Gunnar Gislason's mandala designs are the result of an experimentation with repetition and balance in his work

03 'We were scientists' is an illustration that's part of a series by **Erla María Árnadóttir** called *Children*. It was hand-drawn before being coloured and finished in Photoshop

04 Sig Vicious created this illustration for musician Goldie's album *Sine Tempus*



01

ugliness. "I can trace this back to the fact that my Mum used to make me sit and look at the mountains here and stare at the grey rocks until I saw them sparkle. This sounds strange, but I guess what I mean is that being influenced by nature in Iceland and seeing the beauty in all of it is unavoidable."

As one of Iceland's leading design lights, Siggóir M. Hafsteinnsson, otherwise known as Sig Vicious, explains that his homeland provides him with a massive amount of inspiration. "We have many things to offer in terms of creativity," he says. "You just need to look around and inhale the amazing landscape here, then you'll understand how much Iceland itself is an inspiring factor whether you're a designer, a musician or an artist. All are influenced by the powerful nature and energy within our culture."

Sitting where it does, between North America and Europe and with its Scandinavian sisters to the east, the Icelandic influences within the design scene are many and varied. As well as outside influences, its own culture and



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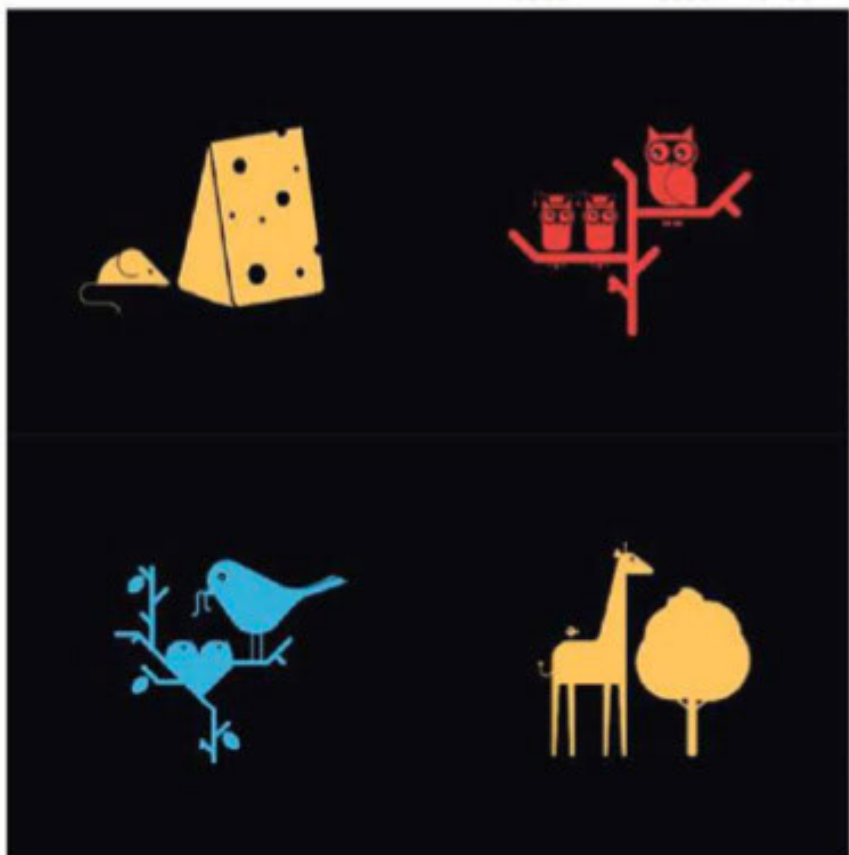


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05 A series of illustrations made by **Thorbjörn Ingason** for the Kaupthing Bank. The brief was to create simple dual-coloured images of various animals serving each other. He drew the animals in Illustrator using only circular curves to ensure a uniform look.

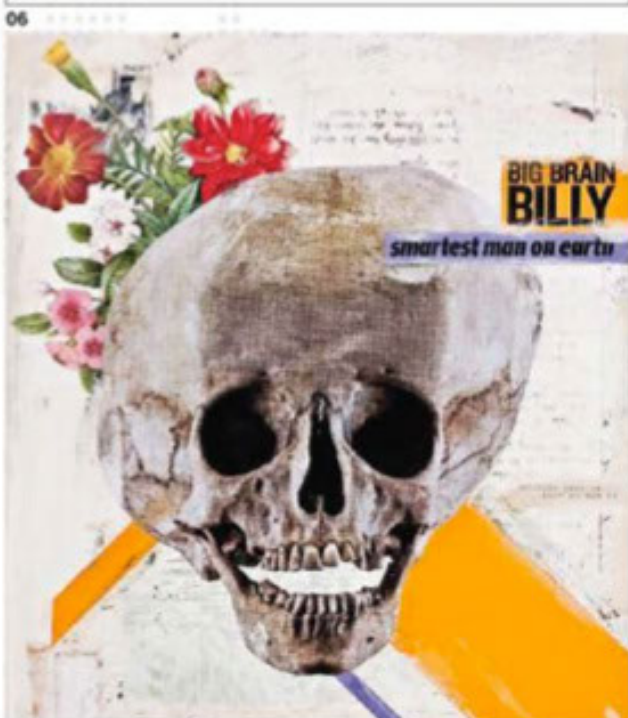
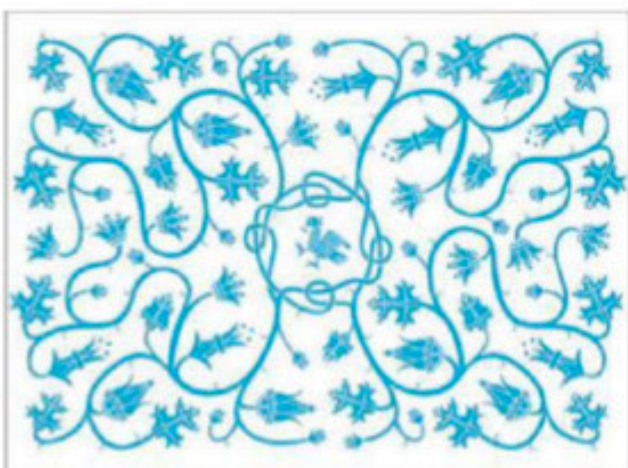


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06 'Heritage' was designed by **Gislason** and is based on a pattern from a 16th century table cloth from the National Museum of Iceland. He photographed the original tablecloth and transformed it into vectors.

07 This collage poster was created by **Jónas Valtýsson** for an exhibition titled *Freok Show*. The composition was first created in Photoshop, before Valtýsson used old books and paper to create the collage on a wooden board.

08 Högni Valur Högnasson designed this album cover for the artist Múmuki. The illustration for the cover was created using scanned imagery that was arranged into a geometric pattern.



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Photo: The Photo Agency - Mumuki

08

heritage provide much to draw from. "I think lots of people are inspired by old traditional designs; they're going back to their roots but then mixing it in with more modern looks," explains 26-year-old designer Eythor Pall Eythorsson. "For instance, we used to do pattern class in school based on traditional Icelandic pattern design and you still see this around today."

Another young Icelandic designer, Högni Valur Högnasson, agrees, highlighting the increasing popularity of traditional pattern design. "Icelanders are inspired by both modern trends and old Viking patterns and typography," he explains. "Old patterns that have been used on materials for years are now being digitised and used in other ways, and old type such as runes have been explored and used as inspiration."

But given all these influences, how does the Icelandic design scene identify itself? "I think it identifies itself as being Nordic: graphical, simple and quite Scandinavian but with a darker, mystical

twist," explains designer Thorbjörn Ingason. "Compared to other Scandinavian countries, which have a much richer design history and tradition, we're still a little behind, but we're quickly catching up."

Mixing new influences from Europe and the US together with its own heritage and traditions, and adding the inspiration gained from the country and its landscape is what makes Icelandic design unique. There is an energy in the design scene here, an enthusiasm and a boldness. As designer Jónas Valtýsson concludes: "Design is a young practice in Iceland, people are eager to do good things. There's a lot of passion and energy, it feels like the future is bright for us here. Added to this is the fact that we don't really have any great old legends to look up to, which means we're free to create our own path and our own history."



01 'Disorder Type'. **Vicious** created this typeface as a personal project.

02 'Live and Enjoy'. **Valtýsson** designed this print for a book called *Memories* that features the stories of cancer survivors. It's a digital collage made by scanning in old paper and cuttings.

03 **Eythorsson** designed this pattern for the *Worn by Worship* brand by combining isometric 3D elements with 2D elements.

04 **Freyr's** illustration for the 60th birthday of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the The Icelandic Human Rights Centre.

Four of the best The emerging Icelandic talents to watch



Sig Vicious

Professionally untrained but undeniably successful, Vicious has always had a desire to design. His work

has a feeling of the futuristic and he likes to explore symmetrical design. His clients include Horizons Music, Inside Records, Metalheadz Recordings, Northern Light Energy and Hewlett Packard. He also owns a T-shirt label 2ONCE, which, as he says "is another great medium through which I can showcase my designs."

www.digital.sys.is



Jónas Valtýsson

Hailing from a small town named Mosfellsbær in south-west Iceland, Valtýsson studied at the

Icelandic Academy of Arts. "My interest in music sparked my interest in graphic design and photography," he explains. "I'm really into exploring the visual world of music and seeing how they all interact." Valtýsson's work includes album cover artwork, book layouts and illustrations.

www.jonasval.com



Eythor Pall Eythorsson

Describing his work as versatile, Eythorsson likes to work in anything from print to logos to motion. "If there is something I haven't done I would love to do it," he reflects. "My main focus is usually on layout and logos, with some illustration too, and I also like to design typefaces."

www.eronart.net



Ragnar Freyr

A minimalist at heart, Freyr comes from Akureyri, a small city to the north-east of the country. "I like to achieve a

powerful effect or message through minimal visual communication using colour, contrast, angle and other tools from visual grammar," he explains. "I don't specialise. I might focus on something for a certain amount of time to develop skill but I like to keep it fairly open and explore new things."

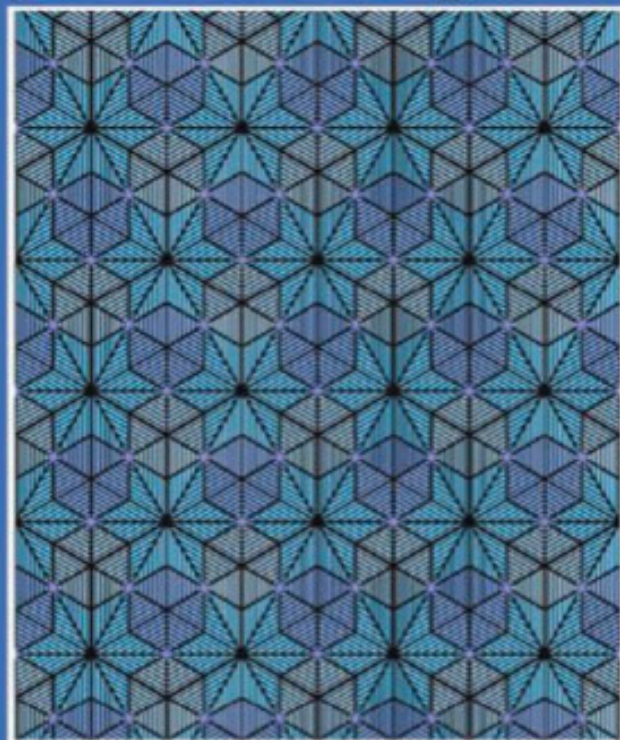
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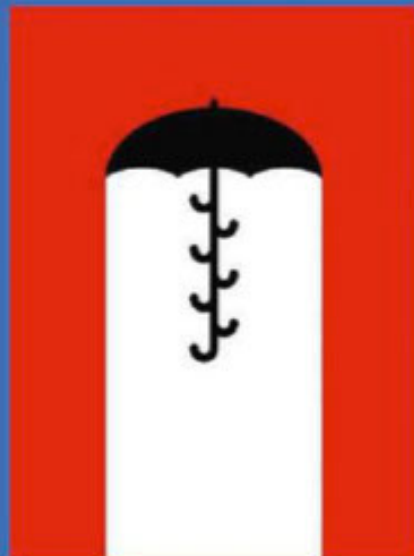
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