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Scandinavian medal-making in the 1970s

Anders Nyborg's Nordic Art Medal Series forty years on

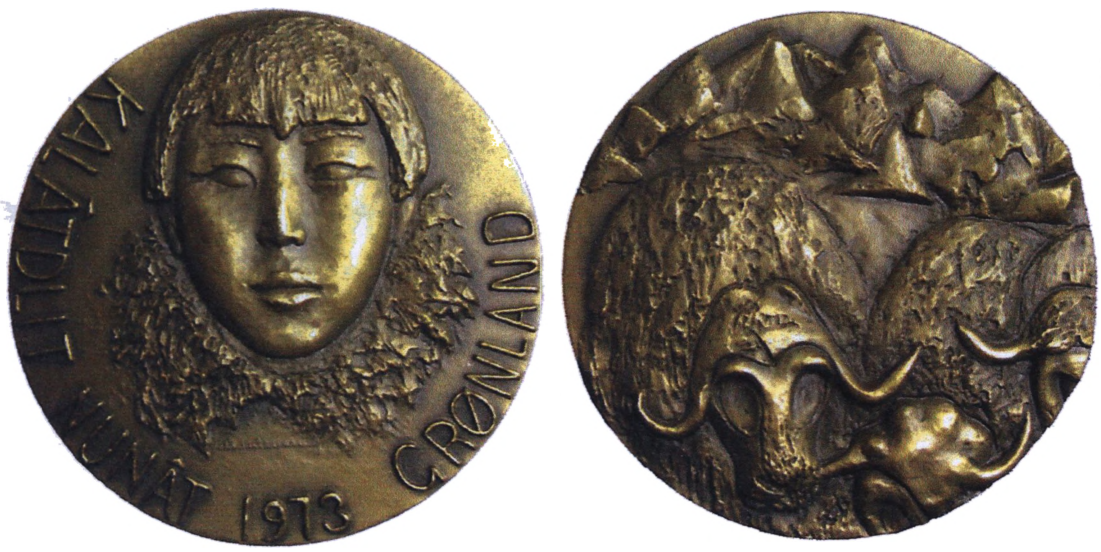
Simon McKeown

THIS YEAR MARKS THE FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY of one of the most significant enterprises in the post-war history of the Scandinavian medal: the Nordisk Kunstmedalje Serie (Nordic Art Medal Series) that ran for a decade between 1973 and 1983. By the time the series drew to a close, it consisted of 110 different medals in editions that amounted to some 420,000 pieces. These included series devoted to the life of Hans Christian Andersen, the signs of the zodiac, medals for the Danish Royal Society for the Protection of Animals, a set of medals of islands in the Baltic Sea, a series for the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, and a double medal of Henrik Ibsen. But the central programme of the Nordic Art Medal Series was the annual publication of medals that celebrated the constellation of northern lands: Greenland, Iceland, the Faroes, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.

This extensive series of art medal publishing was instigated by the Danish painter, sculptor, writer, publisher and entrepreneur, Anders Nyborg.[1] Nyborg was already a notable figure on the Danish cultural scene of the 1960s. Born in Copenhagen in 1934, the son of an architect father and sculptor mother, Nyborg set up Anders Nyborg International A/S in 1957, a publishing house specialising in books on art and architecture; he also served as a dealer of sculptures and contemporary prints.[2] Yet despite the diverse range of his cultural enterprises, Nyborg considered himself a novice in the field of the medal, an art form with which he was only passingly familiar.

The genesis of the Nordic Art Medal Series can be dated very precisely in Nyborg's memory to 6 December 1972.[3] The date is resonant because it marks Finnish Independence Day and Nyborg was among guests invited to a reception at the Finnish embassy in Copenhagen to celebrate the sixty-fifth anniversary of the secession from Russia. It was there that Nyborg observed at close hand medals by contemporary Finnish artists such as Kauko Räsänen, Kari Juva and Raimo Heino, distinctive because of their characteristic high relief, and progressive, contemporary quality. Nyborg had seen similar works before at his Finnish father-in-law's house, but the idea now arrested him that the production of such medals might appeal to a special collectors' market. The Christmas season helped Nyborg develop his idea, because, like many Danes, he was very familiar with the famous porcelain plates issued in series at Christmastime to collectors by the Royal Copenhagen and Bing and Grøndahl factories. This series, which had been a commercial success since 1908, produced festive scenes in a sentimental and nostalgic register in Copenhagen's distinctive blue glazes. It was Nyborg's ambition to establish an annual series of medals that would draw upon the commercial model of the Copenhagen plates, while sharing none of their mass-market, conservative content. Indeed, Nyborg harboured hopes that his medals might raise artistic consciousness and introduce a wider audience to the particular aesthetics and semiotics of the contemporary art medal. In Nyborg's conception, a Nordic Art Medal Series should offer annual issues of specially designed medals celebrating the individual character of the Nordic countries. The medals would be primarily visual in impact, with the verbal inscription restricted to little more than the name of the country represented and the year of publication. As such, Nyborg emphasised the role of the artist in the design of the series, and moderated redactive or didactic elements. But such an enterprise needed to grow slowly, and in the first instance Nyborg elected to publish just two medals in his inaugural edition. To launch the series, his choice fell on the two most westerly countries within the group, Greenland and Iceland.

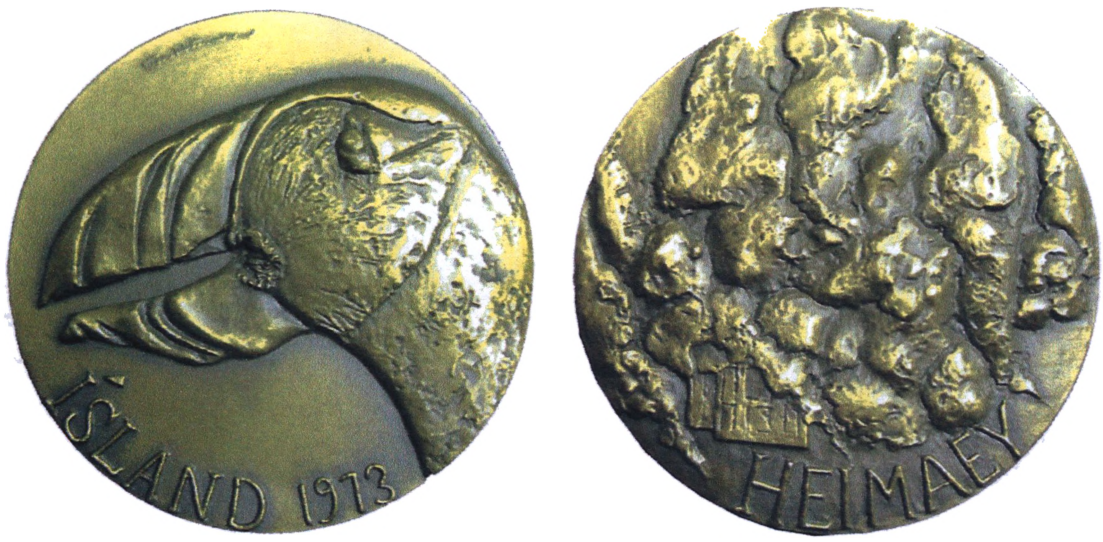
He did not allow his idea to percolate for long. Already by January 1973 Nyborg had approached his first artist for the series, and his ambitions for the project can be gauged by his choice of Eila Hiltunen (1922-2004). By the beginning of 1973 Hiltunen was firmly on the path that would make her Finland's greatest sculptor of the twentieth century: her



1. Hiltunen: *Grønland / Kalâtdlit Nunât 1973*, 1973, bronze, 70mm., private collection.

famous Sibelius-monumentti, Finland's national monument to the composer, had been unveiled to acclaim in 1967, and a smaller variant of the work was in the same year placed outside the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an artist of Hiltunen's status took some persuading before she agreed to design and execute medals for Nyborg's unproven series. In the event, Nyborg urged that he would take the artist to Reykjavík in order for her to present the medal to the Icelandic president, Kristján Eldjárn; Nyborg's blandishments prevailed, and the results of Hiltunen's work established the pattern for the succeeding series.[4] Beginning with Hiltunen's examples, the Nordic medals would measure approximately seventy millimetres in diameter, weigh between 270 and 450 grams, and would be struck in bronze by Kultateollisuus Ky of Turku, Finland, which Nyborg considered to be the most expert mint for this work in the Nordic countries.[5] The edition for each medal was to be five thousand pieces, each offered up in a presentation case; in addition, Nyborg published biannual colour catalogues for his medals under the title Kunstmedaljen.[6] Nyborg's choice of the Kultateollisuus mint proved to be just: the consistency of quality the mint maintained in striking such complex and sophisticated medals in large editions must be regarded as an outstanding technical feat.

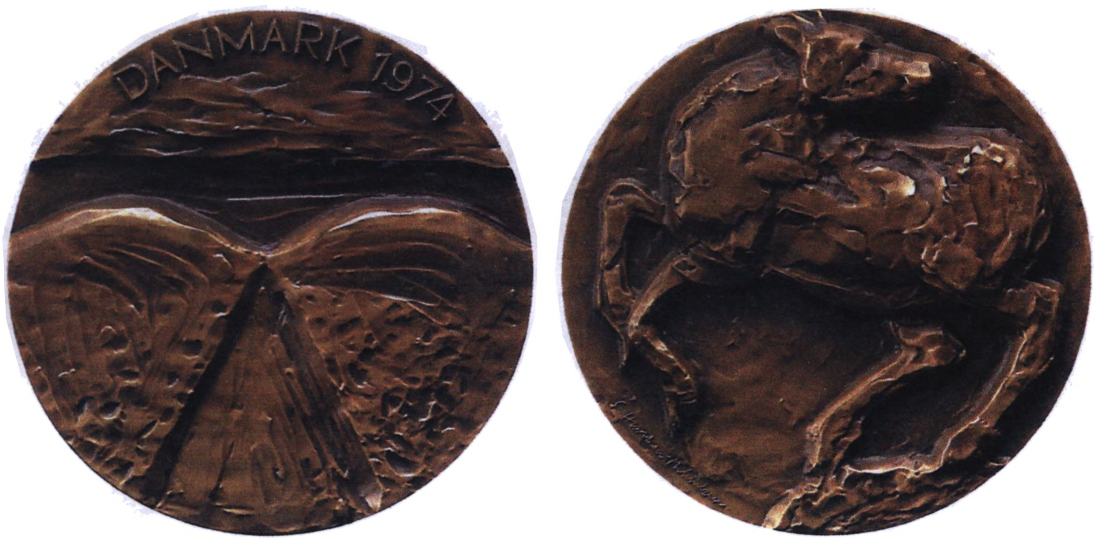
The Greenland medal for 1973 carries on its obverse a full-face portrait of a young Inuit islander, while the reverse shows three muskoxen against a mountainous landscape (fig. 1).[7] Hiltunen had opted for subjects characteristic and distinctive of Greenland, but the bold textural handling of the medal surface and the gestural modelling of the muskoxen in particular lend the medal a forceful appearance. The medal is inscribed on the obverse KALÂTDLIT NUNÂT 1973 GRØNLAND (Land of the Kalaallit 1973 Greenland). This captures Greenlandish identity at a watershed moment, because the term KALÂTDLIT NUNÂT, from the Kalaallisut dialect, underwent linguistic reform in the same year as the medal's production. Thereafter, the term became 'Kalaallit Nunaat', and it is in this form that we meet with the country's name on all of Nyborg's subsequent Greenland medals.[8]



2. Hiltunen: *Ísland 1973*, 1973, bronze, 70mm., private collection.

Hiltunen's second medal concerned Iceland and carried on its obverse a closely studied head of a puffin with the inscription ÍSLAND 73 (Iceland 73) (fig. 2). Hiltunen's choice of the puffin as a representational motif for Iceland is explained in part by the reverse, which shows a more abstract design. Much of the surface appears to be inchoate and only partly formed; towards the lower register of the field a rectangular form incised with what might be misinterpreted as windows emerges from the organic mass. The reverse is inscribed HEIMAEY, a grimly resonant name in the early months of 1973, and the key to the medal as a whole. It explains the presence of the puffin on the obverse, for example, because Heimaey, a small island group off the south-west of Iceland, is home to millions of these birds during the breeding season, providing islanders with a seasonal delicacy. But Heimaey attracted world-wide attention when fissures on Mount Eldfell, a volcanic peak on the island, erupted on the night of 23 January 1973. The subsequent lava flow engulfed the small fishing community at the foot of the slopes, destroying hundreds of homes and businesses and forcing the evacuation of thousands of islanders on small craft. While only one person perished, the destruction of Heimaey remains Iceland's greatest natural disaster of modern times, since it was only the ingenuity of the islanders in spraying the molten rock with seawater that saved the harbour area from entombment. It is this dramatic reprieve that Hiltunen depicts on the medal, the harbour jutting out from the folds of the unformed mass that has claimed the rest of the town. Nyborg felt it appropriate to issue the medal as a fundraising project for the relief of stricken islanders.[9]

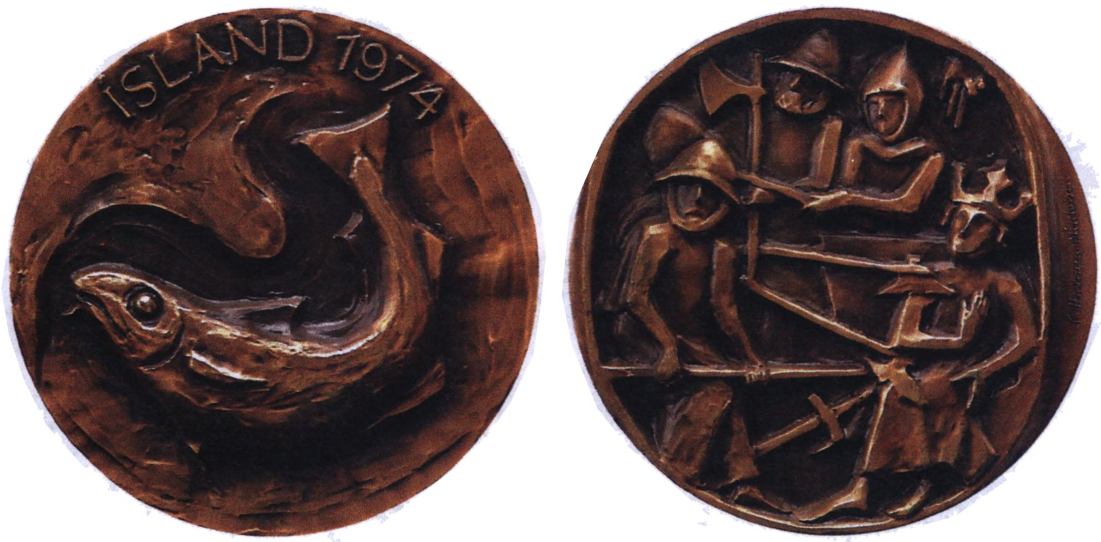
The public response to the 1973 medals emboldened Nyborg to publish an enlarged edition of medals for the 1974 series.[10] To design and execute the series, Nyborg enlisted the Danish artist Sven Havsteen-Mikkelsen (1912-99), well-known for his landscape paintings of the Nordic countries, especially the rugged terrain of Greenland, Iceland and the Faroes. Havsteen-Mikkelsen included all of these countries, plus Denmark, in the expanded 1974



3. Havsteen-Mikkelsen: *Danmark 1974*, 1974, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

series. The Danish medal bears on the obverse a landscape laid out to a strict symmetrical pattern: two hillocks swell up from the earth and are bisected by a path that leads the eye to a horizontal channel (fig. 3). Variations of patination darken the channel and highlight the rounded hill crests, and the wholly balanced and pleasing composition unfolds under the inscription DANMARK 1974 (Denmark 1974). The scene evokes a specific – and deeply historic – landscape on the Danish peninsula, namely the Danevirke dyke and Hærvejen pathway. The Danevirke is a thirty-kilometre double earthwork bastion, which was thrown up in the eighth century by King Gudfred as a defence against marauding Franks. It runs west of the modern city of Schleswig and has long been regarded as a symbol of the national integrity of the Danes against neighbouring powers. Public awareness of the Danevirke was high at the time of Havsteen-Mikkelsen's medal, since a major archaeological survey into the dyke, begun in 1968, reached its conclusion in 1974-75. This scientific study suggested for the first time that the Danevirke's function might have been more varied than mere defence and that the high sides of the structure perhaps served to form a channel along which boats were rolled on logs from one side of the Cimbrian peninsula to the other. The Hærvejen pathway is another ancient feature of the Danish landscape, a drovers' road between Viborg and Hamburg along which many thousand heads of cattle passed each year. This road intersects with the Danevirke and accounts for the design of Havsteen-Mikkelsen's reverse, which shows a beautiful rendering of a skittish calf in notably high relief.

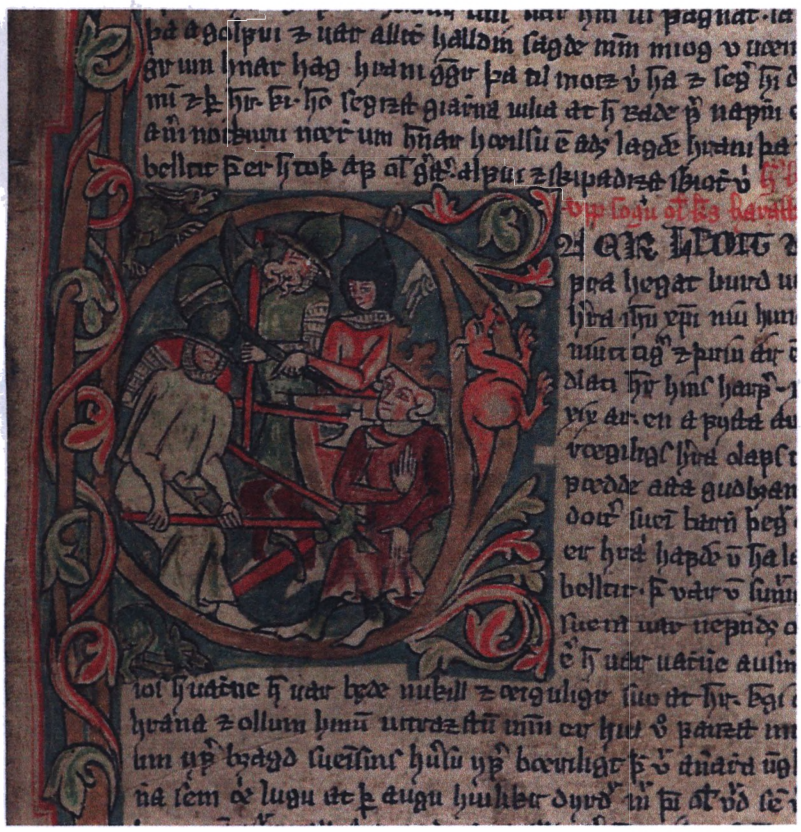
Havsteen-Mikkelsen's medal for Iceland also conflated deep historical currents with contemporary events. A major preoccupation for Icelanders in 1974 was the serious contre-temps with the United Kingdom concerning fishing rights to the waters of the north-east Atlantic, a maritime dispute that escalated into the so-called Cod Wars. Havsteen-Mikkelsen's political sympathies for the Icelandic cause can be deduced by his decision to present on the obverse of the medal a vigorously modelled



4. Havsteen-Mikkelsen: *Ísland 1974*, 1974, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

codfish, which had been for centuries a national symbol of Iceland (fig. 4).[11] The lithe energy and vitality of the fish suggest its wild and free nature, and, along with the inscription ÍSLAND 1974 (Iceland 1974), suggests that the design connotes less of an illustrative function and more of a symbolic statement. That contemporary reviewers read the medal in this way is evident; one Danish commentator interpreted the medal quite simply as a visual evocation of the 'Torskekrigen' (Cod War).[12] The ill-tempered spats between Icelandic coastguard vessels and British trawlers and warships, which were a legacy of differences dating back to the 1950s, had flared up in September 1972 in a series of boat rammings, net cutting and ugly stand-offs, and were to rumble on until 1976. As a consequence, Havsteen-Mikkelsen's medal assumes interest as an artistic documentation of political tensions of the time. It also seems to set the patriotic codfish in an historical perspective, as the reverse looks back to the Icelandic past, with a design drawn from an illuminated capital letter in the famous Icelandic manuscript, the *Flatø-bogen* (*Codex Flateyensis*, *c.*1387-94), now in the Stofnun Arna Magnussonar Library, Reykjavík (fig. 5). The letter – an Old Norse thorn – opens a passage describing 'Óláfs saga hins helga' (Olav the Holy's Saga) and shows King Olav Haraldsson (Olav II of Norway, sometimes called Olav the Holy) falling under the axes of four knights at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030. Havsteen-Mikkelsen's reverse follows the medieval composition closely. His choice of the capital thorn as a design to emulate was surely dictated by the circular medallic field; less clear are his intentions in depicting the martyrdom of the sainted king.

The Greenland medal of 1974 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the tiny community of Scorebysund on the east coast of that country (fig. 6). This was an event of particular personal pertinence for Havsteen-Mikkelsen. Born Sven Havsteen, he was still a young boy when his parents divorced; consequently he was raised by the Polar explorer Ejnar Mikkelsen (1880-1971), whose name he appended to his own. Ejnar Mikkelsen was a formidable figure



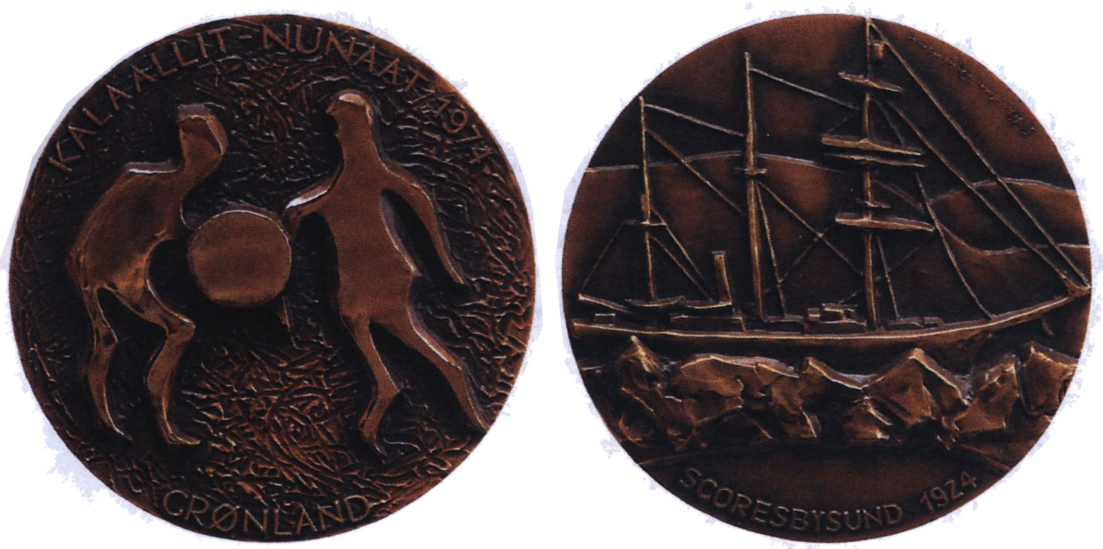
5. *Illuminated capital showing the death of King Olav Haroldsson at the Battle of Stiklestad*, from 'Ólafs saga hins helga', *Flatø-bogen* (*Codex Flateyensis*), *c.*1387-94. (Photo: courtesy of the Stofnun Arna Magnussonar Library, Reykjavík)

of near-heroic stature, and the founding of the settlement at Scorebysund was just one among his many adventures. In 1924 Mikkelsen had sailed up the east coast of Greenland in the ship *Gustav Holm*, using the early maps of the English explorer William Scoresby (1789-1857). In 1925 he arranged for the migration of eighty Inuit settlers to a new village he named Scoresbysund (or Ittoqqortoormiit in the Kalaallisut dialect), over which Mikkelsen's statue now presides. The obverse of the medal shows an ancient rock-painting of two men dancing to an Inuit drum, while the reverse shows the *Gustav Holm* lodged in pack-ice with the inscription SCORESBYSUND 1924. The medal pays tribute to the artist's foster-father; it also places him in the proud tradition of Amundsen, Bering, Nansen and other heroes of northern exploration.

For the 1975 series, Nyborg turned to the Norwegian sculptor Per Ung (b. 1933), a distinguished artist who had trained at the Statens Kunstakademi in Oslo and at St Martin's School of Art in London, where he was taught by Anthony Caro among others. Ung's series for Anders Nyborg consists of five medals representing Denmark, Greenland, the Faroes, Iceland and, for the first time, Norway.[13] Each exemplify Ung's strong linear style and clearly defined draughtsmanship; Ung's medallic surfaces also carry local passages of highly polished patina, as if the medals' surfaces have been burnished through long handling.[14] His Danish medal marks the centenary of Hans Christian Andersen's death and carries a portrait of the author on the obverse and the *dénouement* of the story of 'The emperor's new clothes' on the reverse. The Greenland medal shows two of that country's predators, a kayaking Inuit with a spear on the obverse and a polar bear and her cub on the reverse. The medal for Iceland treats the theme, according to Ung, of 'communication then and now', showing on the obverse an islander on the back of a sturdy Icelandic pony, and a reverse with a Catalina flying boat, marking the thirtieth anniversary of regular air links with Iceland.[15]

For his Faroes medal, Ung similarly contrasts the old ways of life on the islands with the

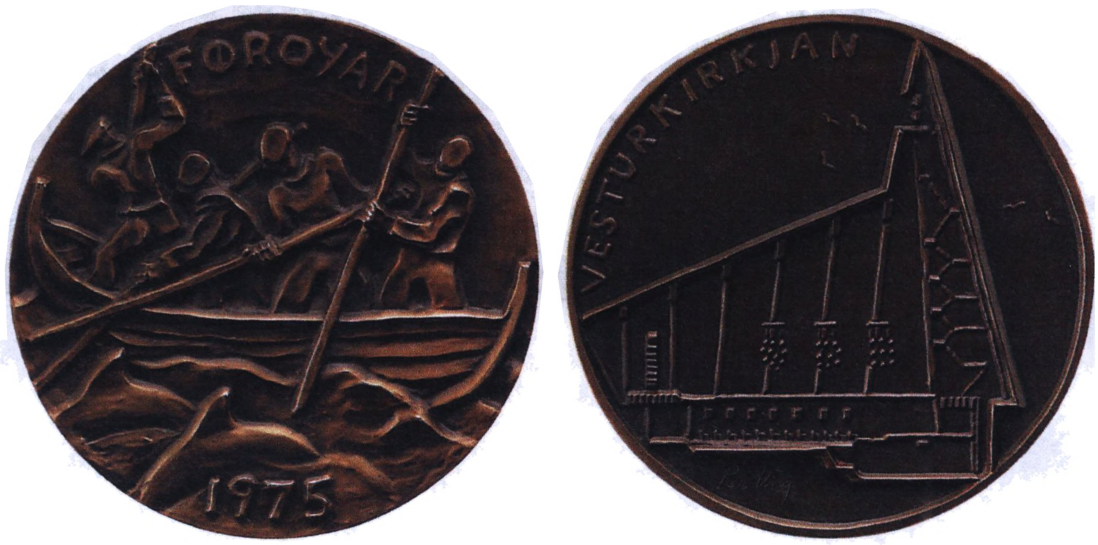
6. Havsteen-Mikkelsen: *Grønland / Kalaallit Nunaat 1974*, 1974, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.



encroachment of the modern world. To represent the former, Ung depicts a boatful of islanders engaged in the ancient Faroese tradition of the *grindadráp*, or pilot-whale hunt, in which schools of pilot-whales are encircled by boats and driven into the shallows for slaughter (fig. 7). This custom, which holds resonance among the Faroese as a defining cultural practice, was by 1975 increasingly seen as controversial, pitching the old ways of island life into conflict with the sensibilities of mainland Europeans. Ung's representation is unemotional: he shows the men in the boat as heroic of posture, but does not disguise the sharpened points of their *sóknarongul* poised above the whales' flanks. In contrast to this scene of bloodshed, the reverse presents another face of the Faroe Islands: the Vesturkirkjan (West Church) in the Faroese capital, Tórshavn. Designed by the Danish architects Holm and Grut, the Vesturkirkjan was consecrated in 1975, the year of the medal's publication, and immediately became a symbol of modernity in the Faroes. Ung chooses to show the church in a cut-away elevation, which provides a view into the building's inner workings, including the stairs leading up the interior of the forty-metre spire.

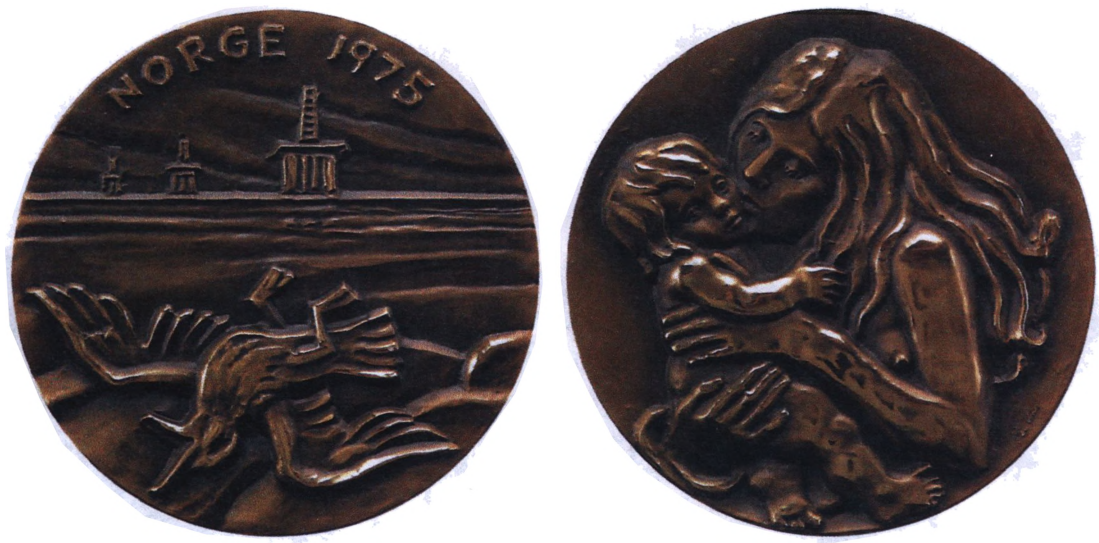
It is, however, the baleful effects of modernity that seem to have preoccupied Ung when he came to design the medal for his own country (fig. 8). The obverse, inscribed NORGE 1975 (Norway 1975), presents a view out to sea, where, advancing towards the viewer from the horizon, is a regular line of oil-drilling platforms. With great textural subtlety, Ung has succeeded in imparting a viscous and glutinous quality to the oblique line of waves lapping towards the shore. The slick that has thickened and slowed the waves has caught a seabird in its toils, and the creature lies piteously before the viewer, beak open, powerless wings outspread, a direct casualty of human exploitation of the sea's resources. Ung seems to be passing comment on the huge escalation in oil- and gas-drilling in the North Sea in the first part of the 1970s, which saw a relatively modest enterprise turn into a multinational race for rich pickings, a free-for-all of speculative drilling made all

7. Ung: *Føroyar 1975*, 1975, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.



the more urgent by the 1973 oil crisis.[16] The strong emotive image of the hapless seabird is matched on the reverse with a sensitive depiction of a mother embracing her child. Ung explained in his commentary on the medal that he intended this image to be read specifically as 'Mor Norge med det lille barnet, Norges fremtid med alle dens muligheder' (Mother Norway with a little child, Norway's future with all of its prospects).[17] In thus gendering his nation, Ung adopts a little-used trope, for although Britain, Germany, France and Sweden, among many others, have deployed well-established national female allegorical types – Britannia, Germania, Marianne, Svea and so on – Norway has no such tradition. But the rhetorical advantage of deploying Mother Norway as a national type is clear: the child's vulnerability and dependency upon its mother amplifies the implied moral that we need to protect the environment for the sake of our own generation and those that follow. Ung's depiction of the mother and child is stylistically rooted in the 1970s, most clearly in the fashionably free-flowing hair of both. But his image also taps into visual traditions of greater venerability, not least, of course, that of the Madonna and Child.[18] In particular, the compositional device whereby the mother's gaze is directed towards the face of the child, who stares out and engages with the viewer, recalls the devotional and emotive strategy of certain sixteenth-century painters such as Raphael or Andrea del Sarto in strengthening the persuasive force of the Christ-child. And although the religious template is thoroughly secularised in this context, the potency of its *didaxis* remains constant.

Nyborg continued to expand the Nordic medal series in 1976, when six medals were issued representing Denmark, Norway, the Faroes, Iceland, Greenland and Sweden, each designed by Folke Truedsson (1913-89).[19] Truedsson, one of the most important Swedish sculptors of the twentieth century, was born in Kristianstad and trained at Stockholm's Konsthögskolan under the celebrated artist Eric Grate. Truedsson came to be a key exponent of the Informalist school of sculpture, which

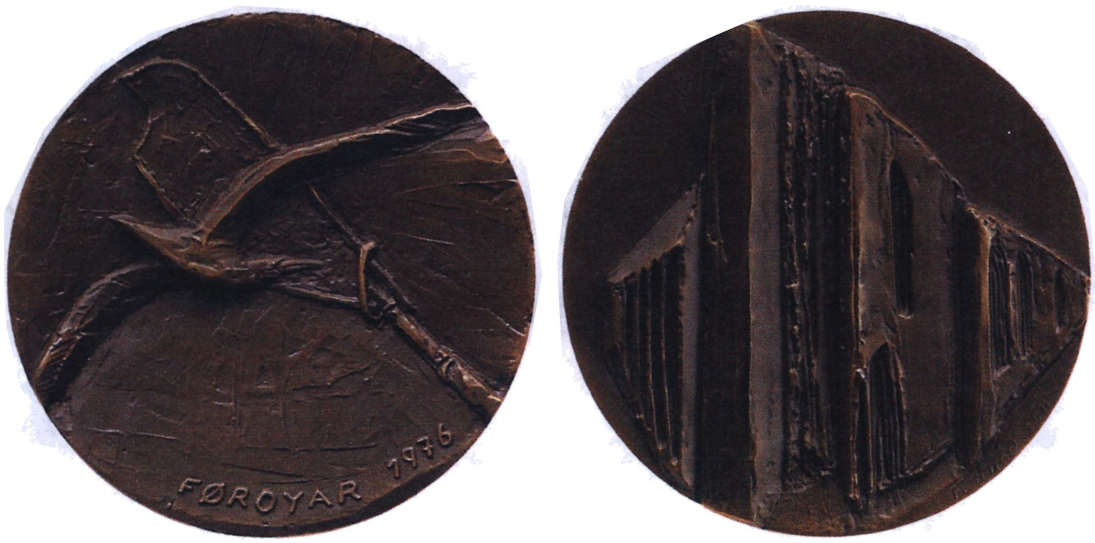


8. Ung: *Norge 1975*, 1975, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

enjoyed a considerable vogue in post-war Scandinavia, and by the time Nyborg approached him concerning the 1976 series Truedsson was recognised as his country's premier sculptor of public monuments. Where Per Ung had leant towards direct figurative depiction, Truedsson adopted an ambiguous style that combined representative modelling with more abstract handling.

The combination of a hunting scene and an ecclesiastical building, which Ung had chosen to represent the Faroes in the 1975 series, was a pattern followed by Truedsson for his Faroes medal (fig. 9). The obverse shows a seabird, apparently a gannet, attempting to escape the snares of a net on a pole. This is the *flygastong*, the traditional Faroese tool for catching birds in flight. Against this, on the reverse, we see an interpretation of the unfinished Magnus cathedral at Kirkjubøur. The medal is particularly tactile when held in the hand, with its dipping obverse and sharply ridged reverse.

Truedsson's 1976 Icelandic medal encapsulates the elemental forces of nature that dominate and define that country (fig. 10). The obverse shows a mighty waterfall, described a little vaguely in Nyborg's promotional literature as 'one of the largest waterfalls in Europe', but from appearance probably the Skógafoss cataract on the south side of the island. Truedsson expresses superbly the sense of the water's vertiginous turn over the lip of the cliff, before the great plunging torrent sinks into the river channel at the base of the medallic field. In his rendering of the falling torrent, Truedsson's working of the surface is sufficiently nuanced for the viewer to apprehend something of the supposed underlying geological contours of the cliff. The striated surface of the bronze, which Truedsson forms into grooves and gullies to express the roaring force of the water, recalls the rugged, cave-like texture he bestowed upon the labyrinthine foyers and corridors of his Nya Radiohuset (New Radio House) in Stockholm. In that celebrated commission, opened in 1965, Truedsson had succeeded in creating from moulded concrete an environment evocative of the organic, natural world, a feat he repeated



9. Truedsson: *Føroyar 1976*, 1976, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

the same year with his Hinc Robur et Securitas (Here is Strength and Security) portal for the Svenska Handelsbanken building in Gävle, Gästrikland.[20] With his Iceland medal, Truedsson opted for a more abstract, expressive motif to accompany the waterfall. The reverse shows fiercely swirling curvilinear lines collapsing in on a central point, as if looking down into the heart of a vortex. Around the edge of the field regular teeth-like scalloping is indicative of a man-made structure. This dynamic, fluid image represents a wind-turbine, a machine in which man harnesses one of the elements that play so forcefully over Iceland.

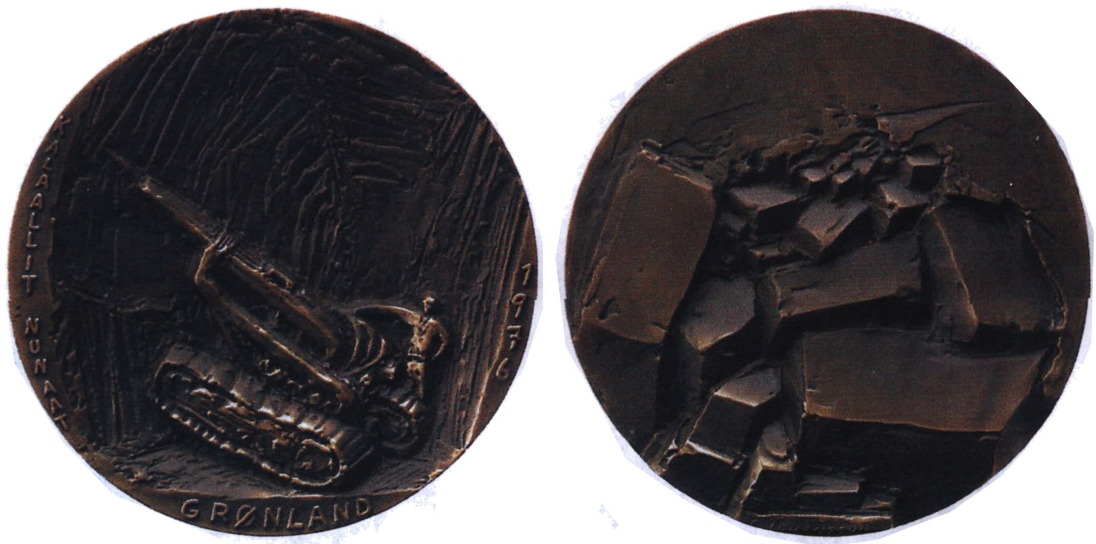
A similar oppositional relationship is played out between the two sides of Truedsson's medal for Greenland, perhaps the finest design in his series (fig. 11). The obverse shows a giant rock-drill gnawing at the cavernous interior of a Greenlandic mine. Wittily, Truedsson has defined this mining space within what amount to three exergues, which provide room for the inscription KALAALLIT NUNAAT GRØNLAND 1976. The chasm behind the drill is emphasised by the dramatic concavity of the medallic field, against which the drill stands proud and bright. An expressively rendered operative directs the work of the drill with an extended forearm, but he is dwarfed by both his machine and the huge cathedral-like space that it has opened up within the bowels of the earth. It is not too much to suggest that the drill becomes a proxy for Truedsson's own artistic agency, scouring at the notional rock-wall in the same way as the sculptor's tools excavate a fictive space within the medallic field. The reverse of this medal presents a wonderful representation of Greenlandic pack-ice splintering and groaning under its own internal pressures. Great blocks of ice are forced up from below in a densely heaving, constricted and kinetic scene. The beautifully balanced composition manages to impart a simultaneous sense of tightly composed order and chaotic natural energy, and Truedsson's reverse achieves the rare feat of combining a naturalistic landscape with compositional traits redolent of the Cubist or Brutalist aesthetic.

It is possible to gauge Nyborg's confidence of

10. Truedsson: *Ísland 1976*, 1976, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

his place in the medal market by this stage of the series' evolution, because in the autumn of 1976 he released a set of four medals that stood outside the Kunstmedalje Serie, yet were closely related to it. This was his Østersø-Serien (Baltic Islands Series), which was designed by the Norwegian sculptor Nils Aas (1933-2004).[21] The series, which was released in an edition of 1,500 sets and 500 individual pieces, featured medals for the Danish island of Bornholm, the Finnish Åland island group, and the Swedish islands of Gotland and Öland. In the promotional literature that accompanied this series, Nyborg explained that since Denmark, Finland and Sweden were represented politically through the islands, it was natural to select a Norwegian to depict them.

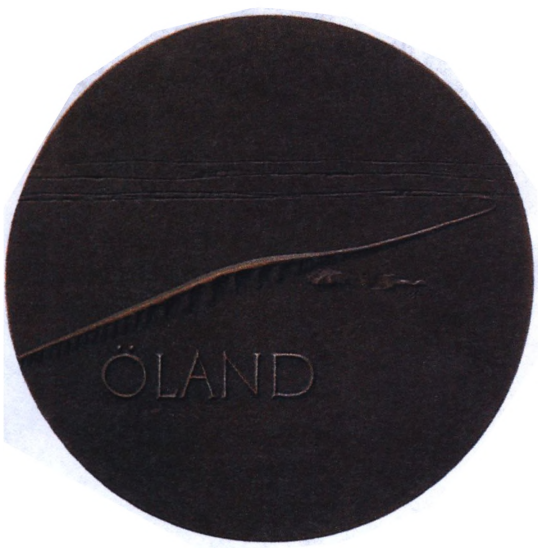
Aas proved to be a good choice. He visited each of the islands in turn and sought to capture the distinctive 'type and personality' of each, as Nyborg phrased it. In this, he must be deemed to have been successful. The Öland medal, for example, bears on the obverse a bird's-eye view of the Ölandsbron, the six-kilometre road-bridge that spans the Kalmar Strait between Öland and the Swedish mainland (fig. 12). The bridge, which was opened in 1972, is an astonishing feat of engineering, and Aas captures its elegance and sweep with great subtlety. His bridge curls round into the shallowest of incised lines: this is the landmass of Öland, low-lying and flat terrain that seems to hover between the sea and the vast sky above. It is always the unparalleled light that visitors to Öland notice, light reflected off the Kalmar Strait and the open Baltic beyond; Aas manages to convey this insubstantial quality in obdurately solid bronze. This essay in light is repeated in his Gotland medal (fig. 13). It is interesting that Aas eschews some of the obvious landmarks of Gotland, the famous medieval walls of Visby, for example, or the numerous medieval churches on the island, some of the finest in all Scandinavia. Instead, he chooses to depict a fisherman in a tiny boat, drawing in his teeming net. Again, the low profile of the island is rendered by slight incised lines along the horizon. These are repeated on the wonderfully sparse reverse, where the

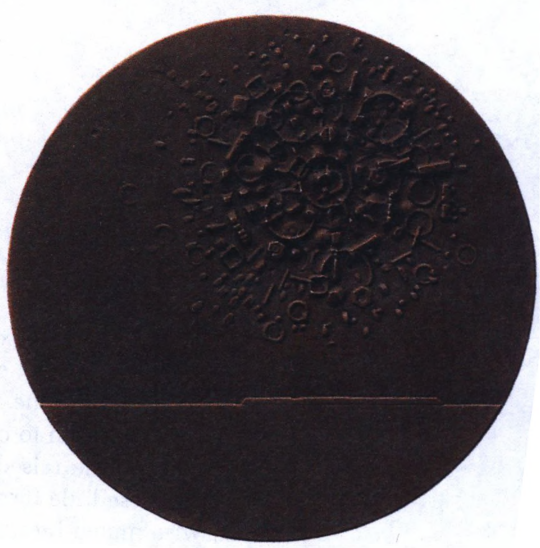


11. Truedsson: *Grønland / Kalaallit Nunaat 1976*, 1976, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

horizon lies under an exuberant cluster of what seem to be bolts, nuts, circles and oblongs, like an exploding machine. In fact, Aas noted that it was his intention to capture the brilliance of the sun, and the raised patina that highlights some of these little forms draws the eye in his otherwise muted bronze field. Aas's Bornholm medal shows a bird's-eye view of a farmstead, with its surrounding fields picked out in low relief so as to suggest ploughed land, woods and shore (fig. 14). The most impressive part of the obverse is the way Aas conveys the land shelving away under the sea, like looking down upon a shoreline from an aircraft, or perhaps (in the twenty-first century) on Google Earth. This vertiginous view was part of the conceit; the view depicted was Aas's first glimpse of Bornholm as his plane flew in over the island's north coast.[22] His reverse shows Olskar, one of Bornholm's four famous medieval round churches. Finally, the Åland medal shows on its reverse the flower and leaf of a water-lily in an otherwise empty field (fig. 15). What animates this motif, however, is the markedly warped surface of the medal, which seems to swell like a wave in the hand; the water-lily rides the swell, creating a curious illusion of movement in the bronze. This fluid feeling is carried over onto the obverse, which shows an archipelago of islands and skerries set in a tranquil sea. The raised patina on tightly paralleled ridges gives the viewer a sense of the sea's shimmer.

In all, the Baltic Islands Series is a beautiful and artistically unified set, and the medals were destined to reach a wider audience than the collectors of art medals. The year 1976 marked the 650th anniversary of the founding of Bornholm's principal town, Rønne. To celebrate the occasion a new town hall was opened, and for its garden Nyborg provided a fountain designed by Nils Aas: this octagonal fountain, known as the *Østersøfontænen* (*Baltic Fountain*), is made from Bornholm granite; its eight sides are faced by the eight 400-millimetre originals of Aas's Baltic medals. The fountain was dedicated in a ceremony attended by Nyborg and Aas with Rønne's mayor, Johannes Schou. Aas's fountain remains one of the island's cultural attractions (fig. 16).

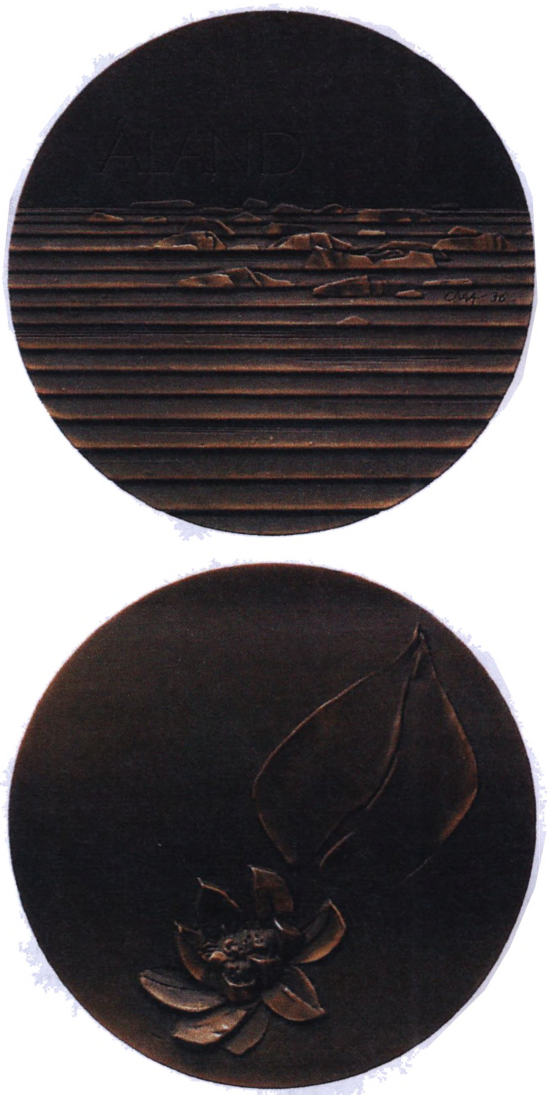




12. Aas: *Öland*, 1976,
bronze, 70mm.,
British Museum.

13. Aas: *Gotland*, 1976,
bronze, 70mm.,
British Museum.

14. Aas: *Bornholm*, 1976, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

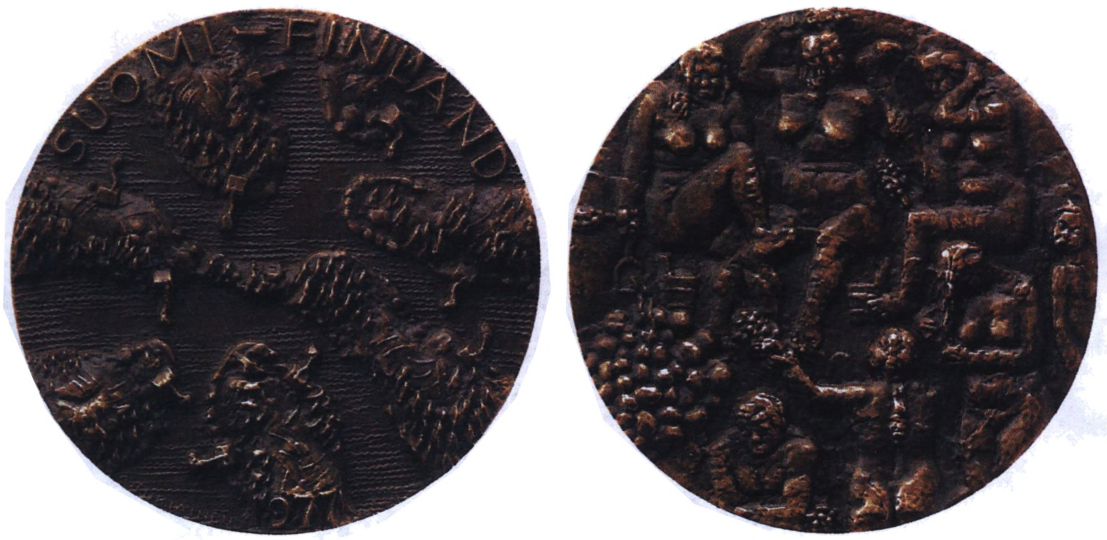


15. Aas: *Åland*, 1976, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

16. *The opening of the Østersøfontœnen*, Rønne, 1976. From left to right, an unidentified man, Johannes Schou, mayor of Rønne, Anders Nyborg, and Nils Aas. (Photo: courtesy of Anders Nyborg)

By this stage, the Nordic Art Medal Series was on a firm footing with collectors, and Nyborg felt able to play his most daring hand. The 1977 series was to consist of a suite of seven medals, for Denmark, Iceland, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroes and Finland.[23] Nyborg decided that this series should not be under the creative control of one artist, but that he would deploy the services of seven different artists, all from Finland. It was also Nyborg's intention, as he confessed many years later, to pitch his chosen artists against each other in fruitful rivalry to encourage outstanding individual performances. Nyborg's selection of artists drawn from Finland might be seen as an endorsement of that country's outstanding profile in the production of art medals over the past half century. But the entrepreneurial Nyborg had other reasons. It was part of his projection for the 1977 series that it should be launched against the backdrop of an important exhibition dedicated to the Nordisk Kunstmedalje Serie at the Amos Anderson Museum in Helsinki.[24] For added lustre, the exhibition would be opened by none other than the Finnish president, Urho Kekkonen. It was Nyborg's determination that visitors to that exhibition would be exposed to a set of medals of greater range and diversity than had been seen hitherto, and Nyborg's hopes for exemplary contemporary medals were fulfilled by several of his artistic collaborators.

Four medals from the 1977 series in particular repay close scrutiny. The first of them is the 1977 Finland medal, designed by Aimo Tukiainen (1917-96), a sculptor whose work oscillated between realist and Informalist styles. For the Finland medal, he introduced a pleasing levity, as his theme concerned the sauna as an integral part of Finnish culture (fig. 17). The obverse shows a bird's-eye view of the Finnish countryside, a pattern of islands, promontories and isthmuses set between rippling lakes. Among the jagged relief of the pine trees and clearings are little wooden huts with plumes of steam rising from their chimneys. The scene on the reverse takes the viewer into the midst of one of these saunas where we find a company of bathers –



17. Tukiainen: *Suomi / Finland 1977*, 1977, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

five women and two men – enjoying their ablutions. One of the women, seated leftmost, pours water on the stones of a *kiuas*, or sauna-stove, to generate more steam; some of her companions flick at their voluptuous forms with birch boughs.

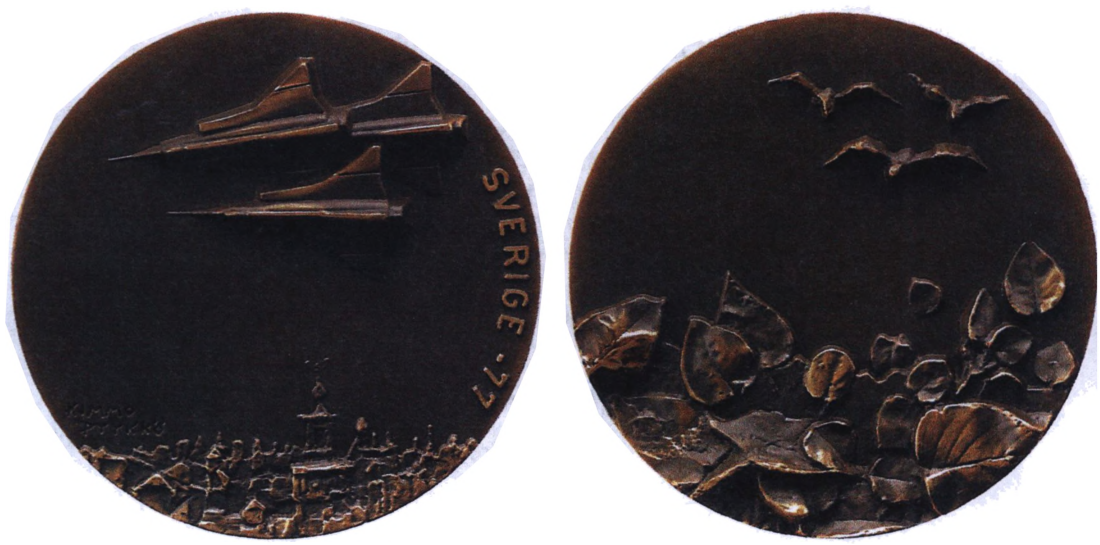
The Greenland medal by Kain Tapper (1930-2004) pushes the inscription GRØNLAND 1977 KALAALLIT NUNAAT to the medal's very rim, leaving the centre of the field to a bird's-eye view of a *hundeforspand*, or husky team, crossing snowy ground (fig. 18). The reverse brings another view from above, this time looking down upon two forms locked in ice. To the left, the straight lines of a man-made object rise at a tilt through the frozen surface: is it a piece of wood, the side of a crate, a paving block? Local heightening of the patina enhances the sense of an object surfacing above ice. The object is paired with a boulder, and some skilled modelling with the spatula insinuates the boulder's concealed bulk under the waterline. These contrasting forms, one man-made, the other natural, are set forward as unlike and dissimilar, yet their proximity establishes a formal rapport and correspondence that may offer comment upon the relationship between humanity and nature, perhaps not least the deleterious effects of pollution and human spoliation.

The Swedish medal for 1977 by Kimmo Pyykkö (b. 1940) is among the very best medals of the entire Nordic Art Medal Series (fig. 19). The obverse, which bears the inscription SVERIGE 77 (Sweden 77), shows three fighter aircraft in impossibly close formation banking over a city skyline. The city is readily identifiable as Stockholm, since the horizon is broken by the distinctive lantern tower of the Stadshuset, Stockholm's city hall. This tower, which is an icon of the city and of Sweden, is surmounted by a colossal bronze three-branched finial of the *Tre Kronor*, or Three Crowns. This enormous finial, which is evident on Pyykkö's medal, revived memories of a similar finial, which had capped the medieval royal castle before its destruction by fire in 1697. The City Hall, then, testifies to Sweden's proud history and regional power. But it is the three jets, which correlate to the crowns of the finial, that express this power

18. Tapper: *Grønland / Kalaallit Nunaat 1977*, 1977, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

more certainly in Pyykkö's dynamic composition. Their steep banking manoeuvre allows us a full view of their silhouette, the unmistakable contours of the Saab Draken, Sweden's high-performance Cold War fighter.[25] The Saab Draken was a product of Sweden's heavy defence spending of the 1950s to 1970s and formed a key part of an air force that was among the largest and best equipped in the world. Quite what the Finn Kimmo Pyykkö felt about his neighbouring country's level of preparedness against the threat from the Soviet Union is unknown, and certainly is ambiguous from the obverse of the medal alone. It is difficult to be dogmatic on this point, but the depiction of the City Hall indicates that the view beyond is towards the Kungsholmen district of the city, that is, that the jets are flying in an easterly vector. This might suggest aircraft defending the capital from an eastern threat, something of pertinence still in the mid 1970s, but also potentially disquieting to citizens of any country caught between well-armed belligerents. But perhaps Pyykkö indicates his feelings about Swedish air power more assuredly on the reverse of the medal, where the aircraft are mimetically matched by languidly flapping birds floating and soaring above the beautifully modelled leaves of a silver birch. Pyykkö's skilful management of the patina on this medal means that high gilt flashes run down the tail fins and fuselage of the Saabs on the obverse; this same bright finish glints like summer sunshine off the birch leaves. What Pyykkö sets up between obverse and reverse is a contemporary understanding of the age-old dialectic between the city and the countryside, the essential tension at the heart of the pastoral convention, where the advanced, developed, progressive ways of urban life with its technology, opportunity and energy, are contrasted with the unchanging rhythms and tranquillity of the natural world. At the heart of the medal's internal debate one senses the artist's sympathies tilting towards his leisurely, timeless birds, not the jets screaming over city roofs.

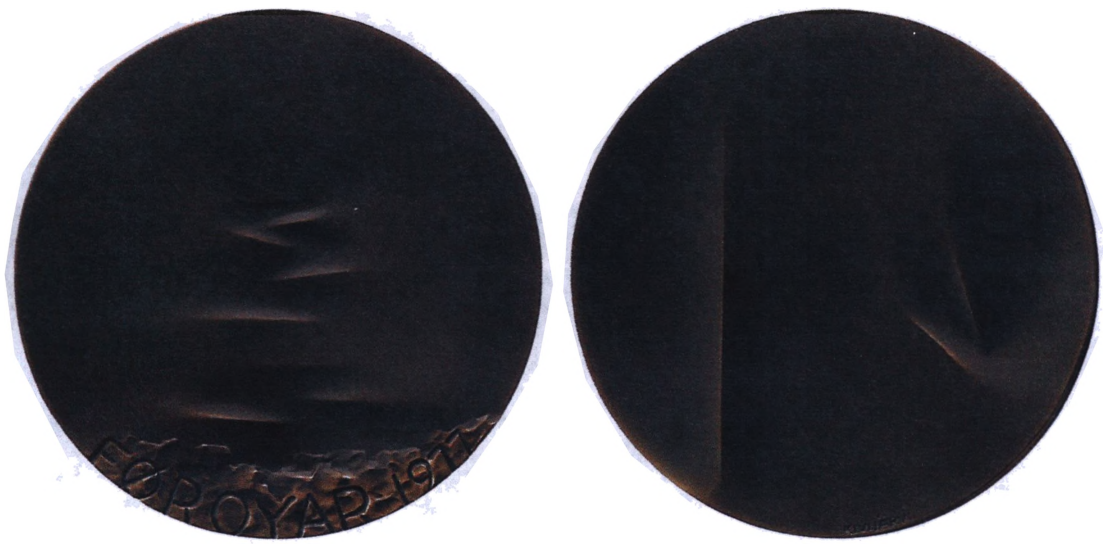
Kimmo Pyykkö's poetic medal is nearly equalled by the very beautiful Faroes medal of



19. Pyykkö: *Sverige 1977*, 1977, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

1977 designed by the important Finnish sculptor Harry Kivijärvi (1931-2010). Kivijärvi was reaching the peak of his career in the mid 1970s when Anders Nyborg approached him for the Nordic Art Medal Series. And although Kivijärvi was known for working on a monumental scale, his performance for the Faroes medal shows his command of the intimate form of the medal (fig. 20). The obverse is incised with the inscription FØROYAR 1977 (Faroes 1977) in a small curved area at the bottom of the medallic field. The inscription occupies the position given to the exergue in more traditional medals, an effect heightened by the raised register of the patina around the lettering. Above this, the medallic field is dark, matte bronze and nearly featureless. However, Kivijärvi has raised the flat surface into a plait of alternating shallow ripples, like water lapping onto a shore. The effect is wonderfully subtle, as if the artist has caused a surface of liquefied metal to tremble. This obverse is a delight to tilt in the hand, as the angle of light falling upon Kivijärvi's quivering surface transforms the scene from a misty Faroese morning to the illusion of a dramatic moonlit sea. Appropriately, for the reverse Kivijärvi presents three linear ridges rising slightly from the beautifully plain field. According to Kivijärvi, these are to be interpreted as abstractions of ships' sails, but they serve as poetic counterpoints to the rhythmic lines of the tide on the medal's obverse. The medal as a whole is a quiet and meditative piece, mysterious and compelling.

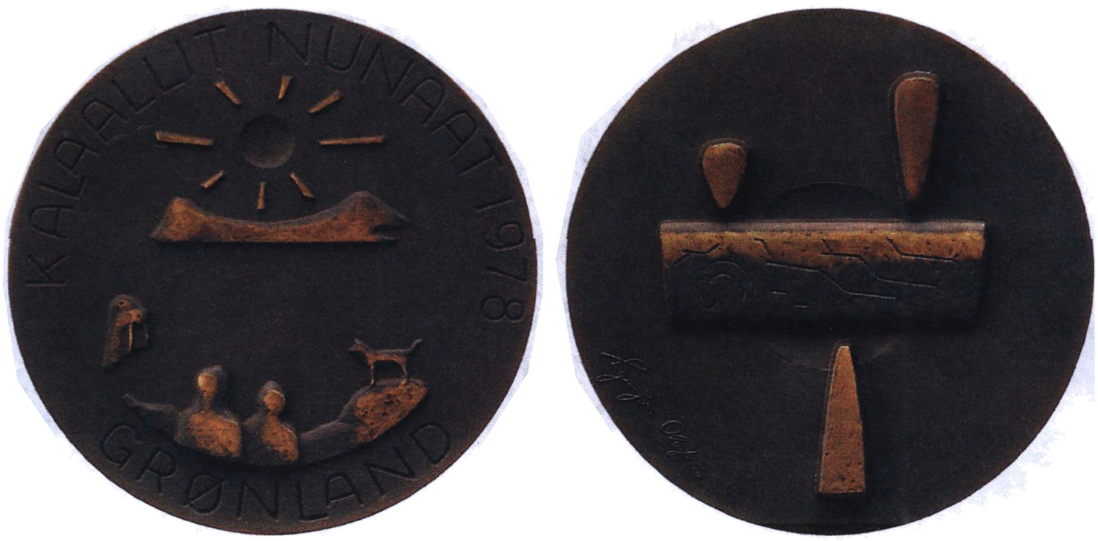
The 1977 suite marked the climactic moment of the Nordisk Kunstmedalje Serie, and Anders Nyborg knew that he had reached the summit of his ambitions for the project. Six more sets of medals were published annually between 1978 and 1983, but after 1980 Nyborg consciously wound down the intensity of the operation, dropping Sweden, Finland, Iceland and Norway from his subsequent series. Nyborg has latterly explained this move as a closer focus upon 'Det danske rige' (Denmark, the Faroes and Greenland), but it was also a response to changing circumstances. The triumph of the 1977 series was difficult to surpass, and in any case Nyborg noticed during 1978 and 1979 a certain falling



20. Kivijärvi: *Føroyar 1977*, 1977, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

off in interest in the series, with concomitant commercial implications. Production costs, already high in the specialist area of medal-making, had increased, as had the postal costs of sending out medals to collectors. But it might well be that other factors contributed to the slow end of the Nordic series.

The 1978 series saw a return to Nyborg's earlier practice of commissioning one artist to have artistic control over the project for that year. The chosen medallist was the outstanding Icelandic abstract sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908-82), whose medals featured rhythmic shallow relief forms with simple, incised linear images. The series included attractive pieces, not least Iceland's medal celebrating the centenary of the country's first lighthouse, and that of Greenland, showing islanders watching the sun breaking above the horizon after the long winter months (fig. 21). But Ólafsson's medals as a whole were cerebrally challenging, particularly the highly abstracted reverses, and the set exuded a sober restraint and subtlety that appeared understated, and even underwhelming, after the variety and vitality of the 1977 series. In 1979 Nyborg's artist was the Greenlander Jens Rosing (1925-2008), one of his country's greatest animal artists. Keeping to his lights, Rosing elected to represent each country through the depiction on the obverse of a national bird – hence, a lapwing for Denmark, a crane for Sweden, a gannet for the Faroes, and so on – and equally representative wildflowers on the reverse. The medals bear the Nyborg trademarks of fine modelling and high relief, but the artistic handling had moved towards a more illustrative mode, a legacy of Rosing's fine qualities of draughtsmanship and long-standing work as designer of Greenland's postage stamps.[26] It may have been that the focus upon natural history made the appeal of the 1979 series more selective. This, in combination with external factors, encouraged Nyborg to view the Nordisk Kunstmedalje Serie as an increasingly unviable business prospect. Still, he persisted with a full suite of seven medals for the 1980 series, which was designed by the Faroese father and son team of William and Zacharias Heinesen. William Heinesen (1900-91), an author and folklorist,



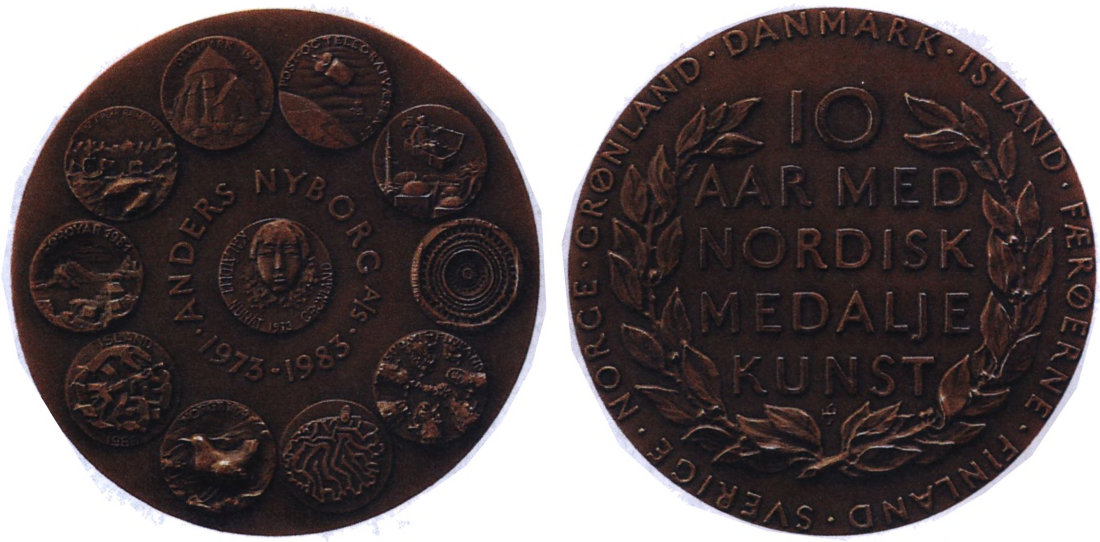
21. Ólafsson: *Grønland / Kalaallit Nunaat 1978*, 1978, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

provided Zacharias (b. 1936) with inspiration for a set of designs based upon mythological themes, which were executed in a sinewy, pictorial style that reflected in part the gripping-beast tradition of Viking art. The Iceland medal, for example, paired a monster from the *Edda* sagas with a troll; Norway's depicted St Michael fighting with the Devil.[27]

Nyborg, who had long been aware that 'things which grow so fast also wither quickly', brought his series to a close with some panache, commissioning the celebrated Danish medallist Harald Salomon (1900-90) to design a medal marking the achievements of the Kunstmedalje Serie over ten years.[25] Salomon's medal pays tribute to the work of the various artists who had been engaged on the project, as his obverse shows miniature representations of ten of the Nordic medals set around the centrally placed obverse of the 1973 Greenland medal by Eila Hiltunen (fig. 22). The inscription hails ANDERS NYBORG A/S. 1973-1983. The reverse is encircled by the names of the Nordic countries with a myrtle crown surrounding the inscription, 10 AAR MED NORDISK MEDALJE KUNST (Ten years with Nordic medallic art). It was a neat and fitting end to a decade of enterprise and invention.

Anders Nyborg's Nordic Art Medal Series must be looked back upon as an unusual cultural phenomenon. Nyborg seems to have encouraged his artists to produce whichever style of medal best reflected their work. He was strictly non-interventionist in his approach, and nor was he anxious about the marketability of one stylistic manner or thematic area over another. In this he must be seen as a great Maecenas of medal art in the Nordic countries throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, a patron with confidence in his artists' visions, and a strong supporter of their right to follow their instincts and inclinations. What is certain is that Nyborg's withdrawal from the medal scene had a serious impact on medal production that was noticed at the time.[29]

Forty years on from the issue of the first two medals, those by Eila Hiltunen for Greenland and Iceland, it is timely that the achievements of Anders Nyborg and his Nordic Art Medal Series



22. Salomon: *Anders Nyborg A/S. 1973-1983*, 1983, bronze, 70mm., British Museum.

should be marked. From the perspective of four decades, it is clear that Nyborg showed remarkable vision and no small measure of courage in conceiving of a market for high-quality art medals that did not seek to compromise the creative integrity of his artists. The thousands of medals he produced for each issue speak of Nyborg's confidence in the taste and discernment of the public. The commercial success of the series in its peak years bears out his faith in a demand for beautifully designed medals offered at affordable prices. His medals are also evidence of Nyborg's proud regionalism, celebrating the cultural diversity but spiritual unity of the northern lands. He seemed particularly to champion the smaller nations and peoples within this grouping, with an abiding interest in Greenland and the Faroes, which appeared more regularly than larger entities like Sweden and Finland.[30] In all this, it is important to recognise the spirit of Nordic self-determination presented in the medals; cultural practices of great antiquity are set alongside modern technologies, and all are expressed in languages that do not seek concessions from the growing centralisation of Europe, not least through the dominance of the English language. And although Nyborg did not want his medals to be primarily vehicles for didacticism or social comment, many of the series manage to speak eloquently of the times in which they were produced and of the distinctive manners and mentalities of the Nordic peoples in the third quarter of the twentieth century.[31]