The Fog-Swept Faroes

On this rocky archipelago, a vibrant cultural landscape blends tradition with the new—and greets visitors with unique hospitality.

By Alissa Fitzgerald

PHOTO: CHRIS RIEFENBERG/VISIT FAROE ISLANDS

Hiking the island of Kalsoy, with views of the sea stacks Risin and Kellingin ("The Giant and the Witch").

A REMOTE ARCHIPELAGO OF 18 rocky slips nestled into the North Atlantic between Iceland and the Shetland Islands, the Faroe Islands may seem an elusive destination—or at least, difficult to find on a map. First settled by Irish monks around 600 CE and now a self-governing territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Faroes today are perhaps as well-known internationally for their fortitude as for their legendary sheep and textile industries. With high mountainous terrain located just four degrees south of the Arctic Circle, visitors to the islands will be struck by the northern winds gusting daily across the archipelago, as well as the striking variations in fog—the latter of which has nearly 40 names in the Faroese language, ranging from *kavamjorki* (snow fog) to *skúlvur* (mist on mountain tops).

In the spring of 2024, ASF and Scandinavia House celebrated this distinctive archipelago in "Fog Swept Islands: Faroe Islands Culture Days," a series of programs exploring its contemporary cinema, literature and design, with panels on Faroese history and society as well as on their knitting traditions and sustainability, and the recent exhibition *Fog Swept Cargo: Art from the Faroe Islands*, featuring works by artists Hansina Iversen, Rannvá Kunoy, Tőroddur Poulsen, Hanni Bjartalíð, Randi Samsonsen, Alda Mohr Eyðunardóttir, Jóhan Martin Christiansen and Steinprent studios.

But while journeys to the Faroes may have been intimidating to mainlanders in the distant past, today they are remarkably easy to visit—flights are offered throughout North America with stopovers in Oslo, Keflavik and Copenhagen, with direct flights available daily from cities throughout Europe. More importantly, there's no better time to visit: the Faroes have a vibrant culture landscape that has flourished in recent decades, one that has grown increasingly cosmopolitan while retaining its *heimablídni*, or "home hospitality," a welcomeness to visitors that guests can experience by dining in homes of the Faroese.

A SETTLEMENT BY THE SEA

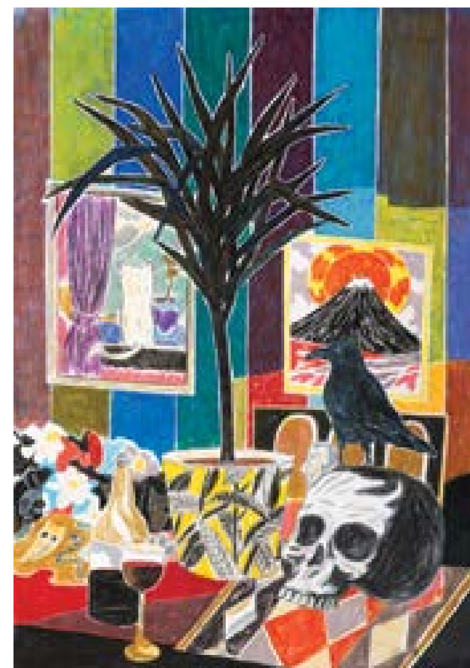
THE FIRST SETTLEMENT IN THE FAROE ISLANDS DATES back as early as from the third to fifth centuries. They were later colonized by the Vikings and became a Norwegian province in 1035, before later being integrated into the Danish Kingdom. However, the Faroese *Althing* (parliamentary council, today called the *Løgting*), first formed in the early 10th century, has been active throughout its history and is believed to be the oldest existing parliament in the world.

The name for the Faroes comes from *Færeyar*, which translates to "sheep islands." Given its high altitude, summer brings very long days while winter

PHOTO: LORI FREDRICKSON

On view from April 13 through July 6, 2024, *Fog Swept Cargo* at Scandinavia House brought the Faroe Islands' contemporary art scene to the United States for the first time.

PHOTOS: COURTESY THE ARTISTS



Works on view included Randi Samsonsen's *DROP DEAD GORGEOUS BALLS*, 2021 (above), Hanni Bjartalíð's *Untitled*, 2023 (left), and Tóroddur Poulsen's *Wavelengths*, 2023 (right).

PHOTO: MIKE BISHOP/VISIT FAROE ISLANDS

A nine-foot bronze and stainless steel statue of the Kópakonan perches in Mikladalur Harbor (top).
The Faroes specialize in air-dried fermented fish or *ræstur fiskur*, which are hung out to dry for approximately three weeks (bottom).

PHOTO: SIMON VILGERTSHOFER/VISIT FAROE ISLANDS

Many tales in Faroese folklore involve fantastical creatures and a close relationship to the sea.

brings darkness and snow, with winds that historically cut the islands off from the outside world. To survive, early settlers fished, whaled and sheep herded, which has since led to a thriving whaling industry, an astounding 70,000 sheep today and remarkable knitted textiles. In addition to practicing these trades for survival, Faroese inhabitants turned the acts of fishing, meat preservation and knitting into art forms. Distinctive food practices include *ræst*, or wind-dry meat curing.

Historically, Faroese women knitted sweaters for their husbands to wear while fishing in the freezing cold North Atlantic waters. When they returned, the women could recognize them even from a great distance simply by the sweater's design. The stories told by fire and candlelight also fueled their imaginations, leading to textile representations of themes such as the interplay of dark and light within the Faroese landscape.

As a people reliant on fishing, many of the tallest tales in Faroese folklore involve fantastical creatures and a close relationship to the sea. One of the most well-known folk tales is of *Kópakonan*, the seal woman or selkie. As the story goes, seals would shed their skin and bathe in human form under the light of the full moon. One day a man saw one of these beautiful seal women and stole her skin. She then became his wife and the mother of his children until one day finding her hidden skin and returning to the sea. The most famous representation of the *Kópakonan* is in a statue created by sculptor Hans Pauli Olsen, which guards the seaside stairs of the village of Mikladalur on Kalsoy Island.

Longing for a life left behind and its contrast to the limitations of your current life is a frequent theme in the woven art, painting and print work of the Faroese. It is often visually represented in dark and turbulent waves with slivers of light breaking through clouds. These can be found within printmaking as well as in the works of Faroese artist Sámal Joensen-Mikines, whose paintings embody an isolated place surrounded by rough waters and shifting weather, and a people deeply connected with being alone in their surroundings.

THE FAROES' GOLD

WHILE SHEEP HAVE LONG BEEN BELIEVED TO HAVE first been brought to the Faroes by the Vikings, recent evidence has suggested that sheep farming may have begun even earlier on the islands.

Today, sheep famously outnumber humans on the Faroe Islands; one old saying, "Ull er Føroya gull," translates to "Wool is the gold of the Faroes."

So why have these animals thrived here? One answer is the topography,

which is made up of volcanic rock with a layer of peat that is perfect for grazing large amounts of sheep. The mild and sometimes snowy temperatures, ever-present mist and occasionally torrential rain also make for excellent grass and peat quality. A small and sturdy breed of Northern European short-tailed sheep, Faroese sheep also naturally thrive in steep and mountainous terrain.

For many years, wool and woolen garments were the Faroes' primary export, as well as a form of local currency. In part due to the extreme conditions, Faroese sheep produce wool that contains more lanolin, a type of wax or grease which contributes to tightly knit fabric with inherent waterproof capacities. In addition to being lifesaving for early fisherman and other inhabitants, this also proved vital to the Faroese economy in the Middle Ages with the export of stockings and other goods; in the early 20th century, Faroese wool was also commissioned for Danish army uniforms. The quality of the lanolin-filled sheep yarn is so remarkable that a 200-year-old sweater was recently unearthed, fully intact, in the UK's National Archives.

As a result, knitting also became a form of creative expression and has since been interwoven into Faroese culture and society. Hand-knitted sweaters are passed down over generations, featuring traditional geometric patterns such as the *gásareydað* (goose eye), *kettunøsin* (fox head) and *hundagongan* (a pack of dogs). This has led to a modern knitting resurgence in the Faroes as skilled artisans and designers draw on old patterns to create contemporary knitwear, infusing the rugged landscapes and untamed beauty of the archipelago into their creations. Popular designers include Jóhanna av Steinum, Einstakt, Guðrun & Guðrun, REKA, Durita Thomsen and Shisa, and the yarn and knit boutique Tógvhúsið. Knitting enthusiasts are now also able to purchase Faroese yarns ranging from rugged to delicate quality from manufacturers such as Navia. There's even a knitting festival in April.

Despite this fashion revival—and the continuing widespread prevalence of sheep along the archipelago—wool and other sheep products are no longer a primary Faroese export. This has instead been supplanted by fish, which makes up the vast majority at 92.9 percent of its exports as of March 2024. It has particularly gained a reputation for its export of high-quality, farm-raised salmon, which is considered by many to be the most flavorful salmon and has become popular with chefs of upscale restaurants.

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT: ART OF THE FAROE ISLANDS

THE FAROE ISLANDS IS ITS OWN MICROBIOME WITH innumerable waterfalls and puffin-filled islands like Mykines. As a nature destination, visitors are able to experience: scenic hikes amid distinctive rock formations; secluded fjords with dolphins, gray seals and the occasional whale sightings; and, from November through February, the Northern Lights. The capital city, Tórshavn, has a vibrant nightlife and

PHOTO: DEREK MALOU/VISIT FAROE ISLANDS

At approximately 70,000, sheep outnumber the human population of the Faroes by about 40 percent (top). **Sheep shearing** in the Faroes takes place in the summer months (bottom).

PHOTO: INGRID HOFSTRA/VISIT FAROE ISLANDS

Built under the Tangafjørður sound, Eysturoyartunnilin (the Eysturoy Tunnel) features the world's first undersea roundabout.

PHOTO: ÓLAVUR FREDERIKSEN / FAROEPHOTO.COM

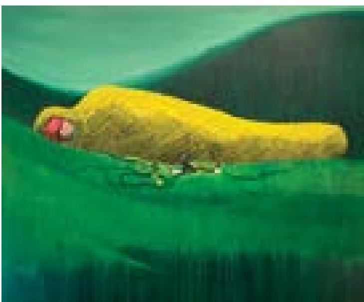
ample shopping (including of the aforementioned designer wool products), set among the turf-roofed buildings of centuries past. Food lovers will also be treated to dishes unlike those anywhere else in the world, including those derived from its long history with fermentation and from its thriving seafood industry: a few highlights include fermented cuisine specialists Ræst and the Michelin-starred ROKS. *Heimablídni* experiences—dining in the homes of the Faroese—enable guests to try traditional meals while also learning about life on the islands, through fishing, nature walks or introductions to sheep husbandry.

BUT THE FAROESE CULTURAL CONNECTION TO ITS unique landscape is perhaps most evident when exploring its visual art epicenters. These include the print house Steinprent, The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands (Listasavn Føroya) and even the newer underground roadways connecting the islands, most notably Eysturoyartunnilin, or the Eysturoy Tunnel, a large undersea tunnel connecting the islands of Streymoy and Eysturoy, which showcases artwork including sculptures and light effects within its roundabout.

When storms race through and sunlight is obscured by fog, it becomes clear how much light shaped and inspired the evolution of Faroese artwork, which only began emerging in the early 1900s. Centrally located at Viðalundin Park in Tórshavn, The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands contains the largest collection of Faroese art in the world, with both temporary exhibitions as well as permanent exhibitions dedicated to local artists from every decade. These include Sámal Joensen-Mikines (1906-1979), a pioneering painter recognized as one of the first fully professional artists of the Faroe Islands, whose works dramatically communicated concepts of death, stillness and loss. Joensen-Mikines claimed that the air's moisture refracted the light in a special way—both highlighting and leaving foreground subjects in shadow, while illuminating subjects in the background—saying that "in both cases, the light is strong yet gentle at the same time." His most famous work on view, *Aftur av jarðarferð* (*Home from the Funeral*, 1937), a larger-than-life portrait of a family returning from a funeral by sea, is both heartbreaking and grounded, with faces evoking death masks and seeming to mirror the mountains framing them from behind.

Other artists include: Ruth Smith (1913-1958), a naturalist painter known for her palette reflecting the cool light of the islands; William Heinesen (1900-1991), a famous author and poet as well as a painter, whose work often reflected the philosophy of life against defeatism and who once referred to Tórshavn as the "navel of the world;" Sigrun Gunnarsdóttir, a contemporary artist known for her unique pictorial style and colorful simplicity; and Edward Fuglø, whose sculptural work and paintings often anthropomorphize local

Sámal Joensen-Mikines' *Aftur av jarðarferð* (*Home from the Funeral*, 1937, center) at Listasavn Føroya.



IMAGES COURTESY LISTASAVN FØROYA

Edward Fuglø, *Microstate Camper*, 2008 (left); Ruth Smith, *Nes*, 1957 (right).

PHOTO: COURTESY VISIT FAROE ISLANDS

Founded in 1999 on the grounds of the National Gallery, Steinprent now attracts artists from around the world.

> Heimablídni *experiences enable guests to try traditional meals while learning about life on the islands.*

Faroese wildlife such as whales and gannets.

Located in a former late 19th-century cannery facing the harbor, Steinprent (which translates to "stone print") is a lithography workshop operated by lithographer Jan Andersson and graphic artist Fríða Matras Brekku, alongside Andersson's son Mikkjal and Louise Aakerman Nielsen. Considered highly influential in the evolution of contemporary Faroese art, Steinprent has a ground-floor gallery featuring rotating exhibitions of works ranging from mixed media to graphic arts by artists from the Faroes and Nordic countries, as well as approximately 2,000 original lithographs available for sale. Founded in 1999, the studio imports special lithographic stones from a quarry in Solnhofen, Germany, whose lack of fossils and other impurities makes them ideal for printing.

THE FAROE ISLANDS ALSO HAVE ONE OF THE MOST unusual spaces to see contemporary local art—their underground tunnels. The archipelago has 17 mountain tunnels as well as four sub-sea tunnels, built to grant access through untraversable mountains and limit the effects of weather on ferries. The newer of these feature light art installations by local artist Tróndur Patursson, creating unique effects within the darkness of their cavernous space. These include Norðoyatunnilin (the Northern Isles Tunnel), which opened in 2006 and features lit arches, and Eysturoyartunnilin, which opened in 2020 and is the largest such tunnel to date. The latter connects towns on opposite sides of the fjords—Runavík in the east and Strendur on the west side—and features the first undersea roundabout in the world. An illuminated central pillar at its center is painted sea blue, surrounded by a series of human silhouettes holding hands and lit by effects meant to resemble a volcanic fire.

The metal silhouettes are meant to mimic humanity walking from "darkness into the light," said Tróndur Patursson. "They symbolize the very Faroese idea that by joining hands and working together we achieve great things."

Alissa Fitzgerald is a freelance journalist and former chef based in Brooklyn, New York. Her work has appeared in *Food & Wine*, *Forbes InsideHook*, *GQ* and more.