

ice  
landic  
design  
&  
archi  
tec  
ture



# Design and architecture

From fish-leather lamps to high-tech prosthetics, lava chairs to smartphone design, originality, resourcefulness, individualism and innovation continue to shape Icelandic design, whether in form, function or use of materials. Much like the nation, Iceland's design tradition is very young – its term for design, hönnun, came about in the 1950s. The lack of tradition has proved to be a great advantage, ensuring freedom and even creative anarchy.

In recent years, the field has been rapidly blossoming, growing from its craft-based roots and into fundamental industry involving thousands of people and significantly contributing to the economy. Quality design is now reaching every branch of industry, enhancing its competitiveness in the global market. Moreover, design is finally recognized as an integral aspect of Icelandic culture. The Museum of Design and Applied Art was opened in 1998. Its role is to collect and preserve Icelandic design, especially from the beginning of the 20th century to present day, as well as conducting academic research.

Combining faith in technological progress with an almost primeval connection with nature, Icelandic design is contradictory, reflecting the geographical contrasts of this small yet dynamic island with its austere landscape, volcanic activity, gigantic glaciers, harsh weather conditions and richness of natural texture. This is for example evident in global fashion brand STEINUNN's striking pieces, and Aurum's jewellery, which celebrates the sturdy yet delicate flora.



Steinunn Sigurðardóttir, steinunn.com



Aurum jewellery, aurum.com | Studiobility, bility.is

In the early 20th century, the first architects and designers began seeking education to Europe. The nation's fight for independence inspired them to look to tradition. Again today, folklore, heritage, history and a touch of nostalgia influence designers, attempting to define and celebrate a national identity in a globalized world. Anna Gudmundsdóttir's scarves feature an Icelandic 18th century carving pattern, traditionally used for Christmas bread; Studiobility's Huldufolk Paver is a whimsical concrete garden or pavement tile, allowing elves from Icelandic lore, access to the world of humans via a tiny embedded staircase; filigree jewellery, which accompanies the national costume, has been revived, and the print of the traditional woollen lopi sweater are applied by graphic designers on everything from napkins to neckties.



While limited manufacturing possibilities make production more difficult, opportunities on hand-made and custom-made items have soared, being a major international trend. Moreover, interior and furniture design is thriving thanks to outstanding know-how and an adequate number of factories. Also, small knitwear companies collaborate with young designers such as Vík Prjónsdóttir on extraordinary blankets and other woollen goods inspired by folklore and nature.

Lack of available materials is another challenge, urging designers to think creatively and seek new possibilities. Wool however remains a trusty material, now with a fresh approach. Made from felted wool, Kúlan by Bryndís Bolladóttir can assume various roles, for example a peg, toy, hotplate, ornament or stool; Farmers Market has revamped the lopi sweater. Also, fish-leather has huge potential, already popular with fashion houses and sportswear companies around the world. Product designers enjoy a fruitful collaboration with the farming community, creating innovative products from traditional ingredients such as blood sausage and dairy product skyr. Last but not least, Róshildur Jónsdóttir's fishbone model kit, Something Fishy uses readily available material, which otherwise would have been discarded. At the same time, it honours the age-old tradition of playing with bones, and is environmentally friendly.



Vík Prjónsdóttir, vikprjonsdottir.com

Eco-consciousness incidentally plays a fundamental role in Icelandic design, as manifested in the recycling and repurposing of objects, as well as the utilization of remnant materials. Studiobility creates coffins and urns from recycled paper; Sruli Recht uses local materials such as horse skin and horse hair; multiuse plates Hellur are made from surplus glass; Hrafnkell Birgisson's Hoch die Tassen is a series of fantastic reclaimed



Bryndís Bolladóttir, bryndisbolladottir.com | Farmers Market, farmersmarket.is | Hrafnkell Birgisson, hrafnkell.com | Sruli Recht, srulirecht.com

cups perched on glass stems; textiles company Rendur offers colourful garments from unused, remnant thread; RAKI Design for examples fashions pegs from coffee cups and candleholders from saucers.



The Icelandic design industry continues to forge a strong identity with droves of promising graduates from The Iceland Academy of the Arts, brimming with curiosity, optimism and daring. Opening its doors in 2001, the majority of its instructors are professionals, making it the focal point of the design community. The faculty furthermore includes numerous foreign professors, ensuring an international discourse. IAA graduates better reflect their national identity than previous generations whose only option was studying abroad. Of course, many people still choose to study at abroad, which is also important.



Sígga Heimisdóttir, siggaheimis.com

Many more designers and companies enjoy international success, including product designer Katrín Ólína, with her enchanting, colourful world. Sígga Heimis, noted for her colourful, functional product design, contributes to the Icelandic design community by sharing her experience. High-tech prosthetics company Össur is a leader in the field; gaming company CCP creates the virtual world of EVE ONLINE by consciously cultivating excellent product designers, fashion designers and graphic designers.

The Iceland Design Centre, established in 2008, has raised general awareness and understanding of design. It promotes the field and provides information locally as well as abroad, nurtures innovation and ensures development. An annual, four-day festival, DesignMarch is among its primary undertakings. Showcasing fresh or classic pieces, it is a wonderful platform for designers to meet the media, the public as well as foreign guests. All across Reykjavik, in warehouses, shops, galleries and restaurants and even in the streets, a wide variety of events, lectures and exhibitions reflect the field's versatility.



Katrín Ólína, katin-olina.com | Hugdetta, hugdetta.com | Össur, ossur.com | Raki, rakidesign.is



# Fashion Design

Contemporary Icelandic fashion design can be defined as European avant-garde: unconventional, rebellious and embracing a new way of thinking.

A blossoming industry, fashion designers enjoy immense creative freedom, not constrained by tradition and ideas of classic clothing, as their colleagues in most other countries. Neither does the handful of existing manufacturers call for a particular look, form or use of materials.

In 2010, approximately 70 fashion designers, brimming with passion and a pioneering spirit, had graduated from the Iceland Academy of the Arts. Its advent, a decade ago, has already made a huge impact, increasing general appreciation of fashion. Pop-up markets, an initiative by the designers themselves, establishing a closer bond between them and their customers.

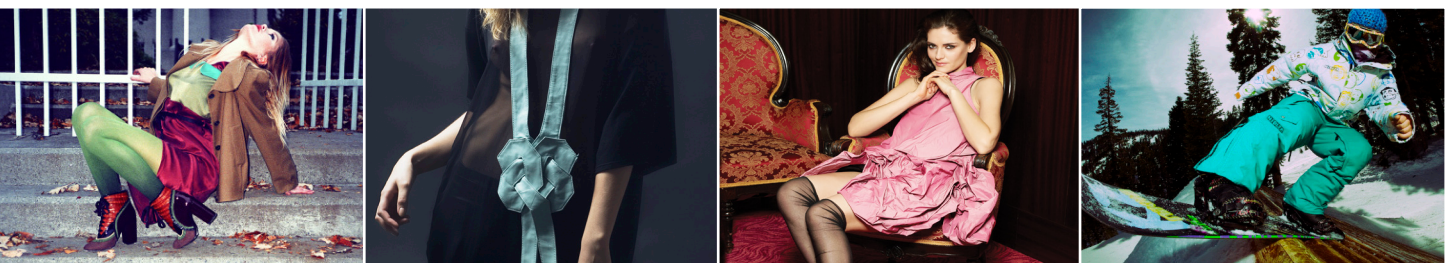
Whether Iceland's dramatic glaciers and volcanoes or their grandmother's living room, nature, history and heritage influence its leading fashion designers. The traditional lopi sweater is also being revamped with new designs and lighter materials.

In fact, knitwear is predominant, as Iceland has an age-old knitting tradition. The few existing manufacturers specialized in that, and their collaboration with up-and-coming fashion designers.

Last but not least, companies in the outdoor clothing industry continue to expand and flourish. Iceland's unspoilt spectacular landscape undoubtedly plays a part therein.



Hildur Yeoman, hilduryeoman.com



Kron by KronKron, kronbykronkron.com | EYGLO, birkiland.is | ELM design, elm.is | Nikita, nikitaclotthing.com

as well as in production, constantly seeking new accessible materials, including sand, leaves, paper and food, exploring the possibilities that lie therein.



# Product Design

Bold individualism, innovation, and experimentation are key characteristics of Icelandic product design. In recent years, designers have been forging a collective vision, shaped by limitations in material supply as well as in production, constantly seeking new accessible materials, including sand, leaves, paper and food, exploring the possibilities that lie therein.

An example of this is a model making kit of Icelandic fish bones, which can be assembled and painted in various ways, encouraging creativity and imagination. A modern and innovative product, at the same time it is made from local natural materials that would otherwise have been discarded. Moreover, it celebrates Iceland's legacy.



Aðalsteinn Stefánsson and Aleksei Iskos, kraum.is

Similarly, product designers often seek inspiration to myth, folklore and nature. Hangers assume the shape of the raven, with its folktales and rhymes, and pegs simulate a whale's tooth.

Icelandic product design also focuses on the present, with a fresh, critical approach. Its eco-conscious products include coffins and urns from recycled paper; luxury products from local materials, such as horse skin and horse hair; plates made from surplus glass or old porcelain cups perched on glass stems.

Perhaps the greatest opportunities lie in the flourishing collaboration of product designers and the farming community, developing alimentary products. Students at the IAA work with farmers, creating innovative products from traditional ingredients such as rhubarb, blood sausage and dairy product skyr.



Tinna Gunnarsdóttir, tinnagunnarsdottir.is | Jón Björnsson, bjoss.com | Hafsteinn Júlíusson, hafsteinnjulusson.com | Snaefrið and Hildigunnur, snaefrid.is



# Architecture

Still in its infancy, the vast majority of Icelandic architecture dates no further back than the late 20th century. Contemporary architects therefore are not burdened by heavy tradition, which is stimulating and exciting. Iceland is a small nation, inhabiting a small island with limited resources. Therefore, their greatest challenge is using this to the nation's advantage; finding beauty in simplicity.



Studio Granda, studiogranda.is

Building methods and lack of materials such as timber, limestone or brick, has shaped the field. Through the centuries, turf and rock were the only material, until the revolutionary advent of concrete in the 20th century, which was ideal for Icelandic conditions. As a result, Icelandic edifices are generally massive, heavy blocks of concrete. Lighter materials, such as glass or timber, are rare.

Sometimes the concrete buildings reflect other building styles, for example Gudjón Samúelsson's gothic-style Landakot church. Samúelsson, Iceland's first architect designed numerous other iconic buildings including the National Theatre, Hallgrímskirkja Church, and the University of Iceland.

Moreover, Icelandic architecture must respect the island's open landscape, making every structure visible, impacting the environment. The nation leapt from the Middle Ages into modernity at the speed of light, resulting in a rather diffuse architectural style. Today, architects are, for the first time working on creating a coherent city structure, both functional and aesthetically pleasing and never trespassing visual boundaries.



Manfreð Vilhjálmsson architect, vaarkitektar.is | Högna Sigurðardóttir architect | Landslag, landslag.is | Kurt og pí, kurtogpi.is



# Interior and Furniture Design

Clean lines, simple forms and natural materials play a fundamental role in contemporary Icelandic interior and furniture design. Wood, stone and glass are principal ingredients in interior design whereas avant-garde synthetic materials such as plastic and PVC are all the more evident in furniture design.

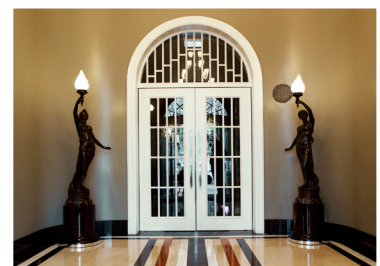
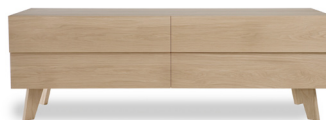
Furthermore, the creations of Icelandic interior and furniture designers are practical and easy to produce. Nonetheless, as opposed to other local design fields, it has access to numerous factories and excellent know-how. Iceland's furniture design history reaches to the mid-20th century, with skilled designers returning from studying in Europe. The industry experienced a boom between 1950 and 1970, but as soon as Iceland joined EFTA, the industry all but died out. Since the turn of the millennium, the industry has been experiencing a great revival.

Today, domestic as well as international markets offer great opportunities for Icelandic designers, who increasingly pursue their share. Producing on a relatively small scale is an opportunity in itself. The global market is turning from mass-production and towards unique items, which is in fact Iceland's stronghold.

The industry faces an ever-increasing general appreciation of quality design. The furniture for Harpa, Reykjavik's new concert and conference center, is locally designed and manufactured.



Rut Káradóttir, rutkara.is



Chuck Mack, chuckmack.com | Erla Sólveig, epa.is | Go Form, goform.is | + arkitektar, plusark.is

The field is influenced by current affairs and customers' needs. Environmental concerns play a fundamental role, with recycling, repurposing and better use of materials. They are often inspired by nature and folklore, with a dash of humour.





# Graphic Design

Graphic design has been taught in Iceland at a university level for many years, giving the field time to mature. Graphic design has Iceland's oldest design guild, FÍT, which was founded in 1955. Each year, 30 graduates join a burgeoning profession of more than 400 graphic designers, driven with ambition and passion. Icelandic graphic designers take on wide range of tasks, for example advertising design, font design, illustration and web design. Among recent opportunities is smartphone design; numerous Icelandic firms are already designing for iPhone.

Icelandic graphic designers are perhaps best characterized by their versatility: choosing to take on every aspect of the field, allowing for a much greater know-how and experience than their colleagues abroad. They rarely specialize in a particular field.

Icelandic landscape, culture and tradition are a great source of inspiration for graphic designers. They often do a spin on the traditional lopi woollen sweater print, using it for everything from neckties to napkins. Icelandic Clip Art is a collection of stock images illustrated with vernacular Icelandic imagery. Illustrated pamphlets for the National Museum of Iceland revive household items of a time gone by.



Siggi Eggertsson, siggieggertsson.com



Katrín Ólína, katrin-olina.com | Gunnar Vilhjálmsson, gunnarvilhjalmsn.net | Siggeir M. Hafsteinsson, sigvicious.com | Hörður Lárusson, larusson.com



# Textile Design

While 20th century Icelandic textile design classifies as Scandinavian, contemporary Icelandic textile design has a much more international flavour, while influenced by its roots.

In the past, the focus was on art, whereas the contemporary textiles are much more versatile and functional, intended for household objects or clothing, often collaborating with designers from related fields.

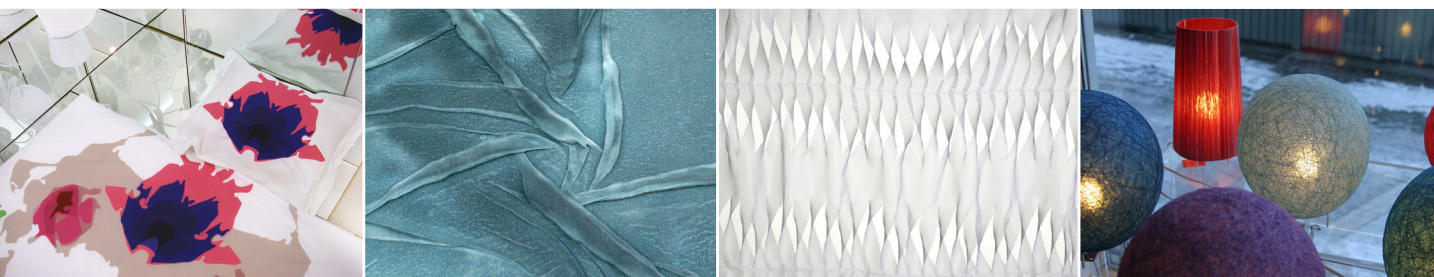
Almost all Icelandic textiles are hand-made. In the mid 20th century, textile production flourished but by 1990 it had all subsided. No equipment is currently available for textile production or printing, except for knitwear on a minute scale. The Textile Guild is working on improving matters, recently opening a collective space, with numerous studios and a shared workspace.

Of late, inspiration from culture and nature has been increasingly evident, especially in design intended for clothing. The Icelandic wool is a fundamental ingredient, but given a new dimension and purpose. The decorative leaf cut bread, one of a few exclusively Icelandic patterns, dating to the early 18th century, finds its way to scarves and garments.

Recycling and eco-consciousness are evident in textile design, including enchanting lampshades hand-made from twisted twine and colourful garments from unused, remnant material.



Brynja Emilsdóttir, brynjaemils.com



Scintilla, scintillalimited.com | Aðalbjörg Erlendsdóttir, budda.is | Anna Guðmundsdóttir, annadesign.is | Brynja Emilsdóttir, brynjaemils.com



# Ceramic Design



Guðný Hafsteinsdóttir, gudnyhaf.is

In recent years, Icelandic ceramic design has continued to shift its focus from art towards design. Approximately 50-70 designers work in the field, almost exclusively women – a remarkable fact since it entails hard physical labour.

Iceland has no ceramics factories, meaning that every piece is handmade on a small scale, whether cast, spun or otherwise created. This endows them with exclusivity and character. Imported white clay is the predominant material, bestowing creations with brightness and purity.

Many ceramic designers are inspired by the great contrasts of Icelandic nature. Current affairs are also a constant source of inspiration. In the wake of Iceland's recent economic collapse, they have been responding to an increasing demand for practical design objects, as opposed to decorative art. Similarly, increased eco-consciousness has heralded even better use of materials, recycling and repurposing.



Björg Juto, kraum.is | Ólöf Erla Bjarnadóttir, kraum.is | Aurum, aurum.is | Kristín Sigfríður Garðarsdóttir, subba.is

Everyday objects are given a new and humorous role, fashioning pegs from coffee cups, candleholders from saucers, and espresso cups from ordinary water glasses.



# Jewellery Design

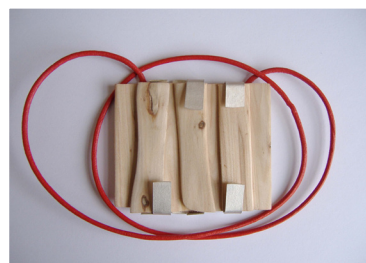
Icelandic jewellery design is an ever-growing branch, blossoming with versatility and grace. This volcanic island's resilient, striking flora provides the primary source of inspiration.

In recent years, there has been a shift from rougher forms to lighter, delicate ones. Precious metals such as gold and silver continue to be most popular but more importantly, a whole range of new materials is being applied: steel, wood, nylon, leather, plastic and Plexiglas to name a few. Unique Icelandic materials such as fish leather, rocks and lava are also frequently used. Eco-consciousness is manifested in better use of material as well as a more conceptual way. Moss-encrusted jewellery thus begs the comparison of the value of precious stones and unspoiled nature.

The gold and silver filigree, accompanying the national costume, is an exemplary source of inspiration from the national heritage. Not too long ago, the skill faced extinction. The rising need to determine and emphasize Iceland's uniqueness is a major trend in jewellery design. Ranging from grandmother's old carved board to the works of a leading 20th century sculptor Gerdur Helgadóttir, the sources of inspiration are endless, inviting a modern modern twist.



Kria, kriajewelry.com



Aurum, aurum.is | Dóra Guðbjört Jónsdóttir, sparkdesignspace.com | María Kristín Jónsdóttir, mariakristin.com | Helga Mogensen, helgamogensen.com





The Iceland Design Centre promotes Icelandic design, locally as well as abroad. Our aim is to nurture innovation, ensure development and thus enhance competitiveness, design being a vital and profitable aspect of the Icelandic economy.

Various Icelandic designers, further information on [icelanddesign.is](http://icelanddesign.is)



Iceland Design Centre  
Vonarstræti 4b | P.O.Box 590  
[info@icelanddesign.is](mailto:info@icelanddesign.is)  
121 Reykjavík | Iceland  
[icelanddesign.is](http://icelanddesign.is)