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A bloody practice

Pilot whale hunt in the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands

Abstract The purpose of this article is to illuminate some of the issues that arise when a museum exhibits a work of art which some people would consider politically incorrect. The preceding case is a painting of a pilot whale hunt from 1944 by the artist Sámal Joensen Mikines. It is on display in the permanent collection at the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands. Pilot whale hunt is a very old practice on the Faroe Islands, which has received criticism from abroad over the last couple of decades, going so far that even cultural heritage has been vandalized. This is something that the museum needs to take into consideration, and therefore when the critique and number of foreign guests is at its highest, the painting is taken down due to security reasons. Taking a painting down because of its motif is a moral dilemma and the decision rests on a balance between the security issue and the aim of being a democratic museum.

Keywords fine art, pilot whale hunt, culture, critique, vandalism

1. Introduction

A painting by the Faroese artist Sámal Joensen Mikines depicting whale hunting is on display at the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands. Pilot whale hunting is an old practise on the islands, and for the last couple of decades this has caused a stir abroad. There have been several campaigns, demonstrations and activist groups condemning the hunt, and some of the critique has affected cultural heritage. This is something that the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands needs to take into consideration when displaying the dramatic painting.

The article addresses this difficult issue and puts some of the museums thoughts and measures into words. Firstly the background of Faroese art history, the role of Mikines and his paintings of pilot whale hunt will be introduced. This is followed by the art historical importance and references in the painting. After this the dilemma of displaying a painting of pilot whale hunt will be described. This is both an interesting and difficult issue to address, and the role of the museum has to be taken into consideration. As a cultural institution a museum can play a special role as intermediary of a difficult subject. But the question is at what cost. The museum has to measure the advantages and disadvantages to make the most sensible decision for the safety of the artwork, the selection offered the guests and the representation of Faroese art.

2. Faroese art history, Mikines and pilot whale hunt

From a historical viewpoint, fine arts in the Faroe Islands are quite a modern phenomenon. It is not until the late 1930s that Faroese art reaches a high level; artists travel abroad, educate themselves and are able to live of their art. From this point in time, art on the islands developed so greatly that less than thirty years later one can speak of a distinctive, national mode of expression (Wivel 2011, 375). The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands has a comprehensive collection where it is possible to experience some of the best art the Faroe Islands have to offer. There are around 130 artworks on display in the permanent exhibition, all by Faroese artists or artists who have a connection to the islands.

When entering the permanent exhibition the first large room is dedicated to the father of Faroese art Sámal Joensen Mikines (1906–79). Mikines is considered to be the founder of the modern Faroese art movement, giving

Faroese art its own name. As his surname indicates, the artist came from Mykines, the westernmost island in the Faroese Archipelago. Mikines studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen from 1928–32. Apart from stays in the Faroe Islands, he lived and worked in Denmark most of his life.

With his pioneering works in Expressionist art, Mikines portrays Faroese life and nature with emphasis on melancholia, pain, seriousness and nature. His paintings show life in a traditional Faroese society from a historical viewpoint. Primarily he paints landscapes and people on his home islands. Sixteen paintings are on display in the permanent collection at the moment: several landscapes and portraits, a Biblical motif, people in grief and two paintings depicting an old practice on the Faroe Islands, namely pilot whale hunt. One painting is from 1942 and a preparation for paintings to come. The other painting is from 1944 and quite large in size, on loan from the Faroese Parliament.

Around 800 long-finned pilot whales are slaughtered annually on the Faroe Islands. The practice is deemed sustainable, as this is 0.1% of the population. The hunts are non-commercial and organized on a community level. Many Faroese people consider the pilot whale hunt as an important part of their food culture and history. Records of pilot whale hunts date back to 1584. During the cut of a pilot whale's spine its main arteries also get cut. Because of this, the blood colours the surrounding sea red. Anti-whaling groups often use these vivid images in their campaigns against the hunt. The blood-red sea can have a shocking effect on people.

All this drama and monumentality has been an inspiration for Faroese artists for decades. Just like the slaughter itself can induce a reaction, the scene reproduced in an artwork can be shocking. Especially Mikines' painting of the pilot whale hunt from 1944 is quite dramatic. This is something the National Gallery has to take into consideration. These considerations will be discussed later in the article. First the importance of the artwork will be explained, and thereby why the museum has such a dramatic painting on display.

3. The importance of the painting

3.1 Background

When Mikines finished his art degree, he moved back to the Faroe Islands. In 1938 Mikines returned to Copenhagen, presumably because he felt isolated on the islands and missed an artistic and metropolitan environment.

Mikines' paintings had been well received and positively reviewed in Copenhagen (Jákupsson 2007, 36). He probably had the intention of travelling to the Faroes in the summertime to paint the landscape, his favourite subject matter. However, World War II came in the way. The Faroe Islands were occupied by British troops and Denmark was occupied by German troops, and all communication between the two countries was severed. Mikines' stay in Copenhagen turned into a long exile (*ibid.*).

It was then Mikines started to paint pilot whale hunts. According to Faroese artist Bárður Jákupsson this was to become his most important motif (*ibid.*). Throughout the years he painted a lengthy series of whale hunts and slaughter. To a large extent, the practice is a theme of death. Mikines was not fond of the blood bath, but he said the drama, battle, colours, compositions, contradictions and the movement fascinated him (*ibid.*).

3.2 Inspiration

These paintings of struggle are an important part of the search for a personal and a cultural identity. Mikines started painting these dramatic motifs during a world war. The Faroe Islands have never experienced war in the same way as mainland Europe has. The British occupation was met by a wish for friendly relations by the Faroese government. Even though it was a situation of war, Faroese people mainly heard and read about the drama happening around the world. Mikines was living in Copenhagen at this time, experiencing war in a different way. He was closer to the drama in mainland Europe and he was isolated from his family and home country. The situation was put into perspective when he thought about what kind of dramatic events played out on the Faroe Islands. The country does not have any grand, historical masterpieces like the ones that can be found in museums all around Europe. To create a link to art history, and to compare the world situation to a Faroese context, Mikines painted Faroese versions of grand battle scenes. Instead of war, he portrayed pilot whale hunting. The hunt can be said to be one of the most dramatic events on the islands, and these paintings can be seen as Faroese versions of older, grand war and battle paintings. Mikines viewed whale killing as a Faroese struggle to stay alive.

Mikines was the first Faroese artist who painted whaling. Therefore he had to figure out how to approach the motif. He found parts of his inspiration in Early Renaissance. Whilst studying Mikines saw a reproduction

of one of the paintings of *The Battle of San Romano* by the Italian master Paolo Uccello, painted around the 1450s. Uccello's series of three paintings celebrates Florence's victory over Sienese forces in 1432 showing a group of soldiers in armour with lances riding horses. In Uccello's painting the lances play a special role in creating static, linear lines in the composition. Mikines uses the whalers' spear-like weapons to create the same effect. Instead of armour the men are wearing woollen knitted jumpers and Faroese hats. And instead of horses, Mikines paints whales. Just like the painting by Uccello, this is a battle between life and death. The whales are large and strong, the boats can capsize, and the tension is fierce: this is a hazardous situation.

Mikines painted pilot whale hunting throughout his career, developing the subject in different ways. The inspiration from Uccello was forming and crucial for creating a foundation for a subject no Faroese artist had painted before. The inspiration is evident in the paintings up until the middle of the 1940s. Mikines developed as an artist, World War II ended, and the hunt became modernized. These factors changed the motif. In the earlier paintings Mikines emphasizes the drama and battle of the hunt. There is a respect for the hunt and prey where one can see an organized group of whalers standing face front in battle with the catch. The later paintings focus more on the slaughter itself. Blood red sea where it can be hard to distinguish between the hunter and prey (Ingólfsson 2006, 156). The earlier paintings have a stronger visual drama, one being the painting from 1944 at the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands (fig. 1, p. 140).

Classic, grand paintings depicting war or battle scenes can be found in excess throughout the world. It can be argued that museum guests are to some extent used to seeing these motifs and they do not cause a reaction of outrage or the alike. Most of these artworks are older paintings depicting historical battles. Even though Mikines' goal was to mediate the same kind of drama, the situation is different. The painting is only around 75 years old, the pilot whale hunt is a living practice, and this is not a part of the general consciousness.

4. The dilemma

4.1 The museum and the guests

As is evident, Mikines is an important artist in a Faroese context, and the paintings of pilot whale hunts play a special role in Mikines' oeuvre. Therefore

it is imperative that the artist and his art are properly represented in the permanent collection at the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands.

Pilot whale hunting is a difficult subject matter, and the museum experiences this in different ways. Around half of the museum's guests are foreigners. The painting of pilot whale slaughter is one of the first artworks they see in the collection. Most often the guests do not react openly when seeing this painting, but occasionally it happens that a guest vocalizes his or her discontentedness with being confronted with this dramatic and bloody painting.

The museum has made various initiatives to greet discontentedness in the best manner. Firstly the custodians are trained to deal with this kind of feedback by engaging in a constructive dialogue. On one hand there are the subjective truths of the individual guest that the museum needs to take into consideration. Here the museum employees need to project a more objective truth. If necessary the guests are offered to talk to the management. Secondly there is a pamphlet next to the painting with a short text about the art historical importance and the pilot whale hunt in Faroese, Danish and English.

4.2 Risk of damage

For the past five years these initiatives have not been considered to be sufficient for the safety of the painting. In co-operation with the employees, the director of the museum has chosen to put the artwork into storage in the main tourist season. For security reasons and due to the risk of damage the painting has been taken down from late May to early October.

Criticism is something the museum manages on a day-to-day basis. But vandalism is another situation. There are several examples of sabotage of cultural heritage sites to protest whaling on the Faroe Islands, and this plays an important role for the paintings whereabouts. Two examples are Skansin, an old fortress in Tórshavn, and the statue of the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen.

The Little Mermaid is an iconic bronze statue from 1913 by Edvard Eriksen, displayed at Langelinie in Copenhagen, Denmark. It is based on the fairy tale by Danish author Hans Christian Andersen. In recent decades it has become a popular target for defacement by vandals and political activists. On 30 May 2017 the statue was found drenched in red paint with the message "Denmark defend the whales of the Faroe Islands" written on the ground in front of the statue (Jenkins 2017).

Skansin is a historic fortress from the 1580s built to protect against pirate raids. It was expanded in 1780, and during World War II the fort served as a military base for the British soldiers. Skansin is a popular attraction for both locals and tourists. In August 2016 parts of the area were vandalised with graffiti using bad language about whaling and the Faroe Islands. Some of this could be washed away and painted over, but there was also made irreparable damage to one of the old houses (Bertholdsen 2016).

4.3 Ethical issues

A painting at the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands can easily become a target for a political statement protesting the pilot whale hunt. Because of this the museum needs to take precautions. The museum faces several dilemmas in doing this. A museum is a democratic place where subjects can be discussed through art. Stefan Bohman from ICOM Sweden had an introduction to the conference theme *Difficult Issues* for the ICOM International Conference in Helsingborg, Sweden in September 2017. In his introduction he discussed four pitfalls for museums when dealing with difficult issues: full account, omitting, double bookkeeping and minimizing (see p. 24). These four dilemmas can be used to illuminate the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands' situation from different angles.

Firstly Bohman spoke about the challenge to give the full account of something. In this present situation it is impossible to tell the whole story. The museum needs to choose what to write and exhibit. In this context the focus is on Mikines and his art. As explained there are pamphlets where the guests can read more about the matter, but the space is limited and it is impossible to discuss the advantages and disadvantages, criticism, historical aspect, artistic aspect etc. as well as raise ethical questions on such a limited format. The story about pilot whale hunting in the Faroe Islands belongs somewhere else – perhaps in the National History Museum, a special exhibition or in a debate.

There is also a risk in presenting the subject in two different ways. One for the guests visiting the museum, without addressing the difficult issue, and one for people who have a special interest where the difficult issue is addressed, e.g. in books, articles or on the website. This means that the difficult issue is only offered to people who seek further information about the



Fig. 1: Mikines, Sámal Joensen (1944) Pilot Whale Hunt.
[Oil on canvas] 157x190 cm. ©National Gallery of the Faroe Islands, Tórshavn.

subject. This is not the case with Mikines' painting of whale killing. Everyone has equal access to the material about the painting.

The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands can be blamed for omitting the difficult issue when storing the painting in the main season. It can be argued that the museum chooses to ignore a certain subject matter even if it can contribute with an artistic viewpoint. It would be easier to store the painting and not have it on display at all. But if doing so, the museum omits an important part of Mikines' artistic oeuvre because the artwork is too demanding to exhibit. Here the museum must weigh very clearly between the advantages and disadvantages of displaying the painting in the permanent exhibition. Only when the artwork is in higher risk of vandalism compared to the importance of having it on display, is it advisable to take it down.

The difficult issue can also be presented in the museum in a minimized way, e.g. in a remote corner or as cold facts without discussing the underlying



Fig. 2: Mikines, Sámal Joensen (1942) Pilot Whale Hunt.
[Oil on canvas] 79 x 110 cm. ©National Gallery of the Faroe Islands, Tórshavn.

issues or presenting another, less difficult version. The dramatic artwork by Mikines is taken down, but the other, smaller, less dramatic one is kept on display. This is a form of minimizing the issue at hand. Instead of showing the final painting as well as the preparation, the museum chooses to take the more dramatic down. This can be interpreted as a form of censorship. But again here one needs to take into account the risk of vandalism compared to the benefits of displaying the painting.

4.4 Security measures

Even though the museum can be accused of omitting and minimizing the issue, two of the four pitfalls, one has to ask oneself why the museum chooses to put the painting in storage. The answer to this is solely due to security

reasons. The museum management considers the painting being high risk of vandalism compared to other artworks, and therefore it is taken down.

The earlier painting of pilot whale hunt from 1942 is part of the permanent collection all year round (fig. 2, p. 141). Thereby the motif is represented, guests can experience the motif and employees can use this in their work and presentations. Still, this is a compromise because this painting is a preparation, it is not as dramatic as the one from 1944 and it is much smaller. It can be described as a milder version of the motif.

The museum could choose to put the painting from 1944 behind glass, mark the area around it or have a museum guard present when necessary. But the museum does not wish to put extra focus on the artwork by increasing the security around the artwork and thereby singling it out and emphasizing the subject matter. Most of the guests do not seem to mind it or keep it to themselves. People have very different opinions, and the challenge is to figure out if these opinions could be a threat or not.

The museum aims to show a wide, representative and good selection of Faroese art. This goal is compromised when one of the artworks is taken down for security measures. Museums have the power and responsibility of making difficult stories easier to understand and to give an insight to a foreign culture through the language of art. The National Gallery of the Faroe Islands is very much aware of this and hosts special exhibitions, events, dialogues, concerts etc. which explain, interact with, contribute or discuss the art. The difficult dilemma is to balance between when the security issue overweighs the aim to be a democratic museum. This is a grave decision, which the management in the museum needs to take in an earnest degree.

5. Conclusion

There is a kind of pride attached to the old practice of hunting pilot whales for the Faroese people. It is an old practice open to all, organized on a community level and regulated by national laws. The slaughter itself is bloody and can be dramatic to witness. The hunt gives rise to various forms of criticism – some of which hit harder than others. Cultural heritage has been vandalized, e.g. with the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen and Skansin in Tórshavn. This has caused the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands to take measures and store the dramatic painting of pilot whale hunt from 1944 by Mikines. In doing this, the museum compromises on some of its tasks.

Museums have the power of making difficult stories easier to understand, to give an insight to a foreign culture, and this is compromised when the painting is taken down. So should the fear of vandalism control what is exhibited and not? The ideal answer is of course no, but reality is more complex. The museum is also responsible for protecting its art for both present and future. It seems that up until today the best way of doing this – finding the balance between risk and responsibility – is to store the painting of the pilot whale hunt in the summer season.

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