



UNIVERSITY
OF ICELAND

Final conference for the
Grant of Excellence:
My Favourite Things:
Material Culture
Archives, Cultural
Heritage and Meaning

The Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís)
Reykjavík, Iceland

10–11 August 2023
At the Green Room
at the National Museum of Iceland



10 August 2023

11:00 am – 12:15pm

- A visit to the Exhibit at the National Museum of Iceland based on the work of My Favourite Things project – Reception: light lunch – invitation by the director of the National Museum of Iceland, Harpa Þórsdóttir.

12:15–1:00 pm

- Opening remarks – Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon – What Have We Accomplished? Short status report and overview of the past five years of the Grant-of-Excellence project My Favourite Things. What have we really accomplished with around 20 scholars from all over the world?
- Arndís Bergsdóttir, *My favourite thing is absence*. Absences are mostly regarded as nothings – as nothings or voids, thus including neither materiality nor meaning. Yet, in heritage, absences can stand for forgotten things and stories that have been disregarded in the face of social systems that underpin heritage practices. This short presentation discusses how absences are part of the world's materialities that critically play a part in the world's becomings.
- Guðný Hallgrímsdóttir, *Women's Saddles in the Estates of Working Women*. What conclusion can be drawn from the fact that valuable women's saddles are found in the estates of unmarried working women? Can it be assumed that some of them went a long way to sell specialized services or even products that they produced themselves?

1:00–1:45 pm

- Karen Harvey, *Reliquary power and textual embodiment: the materiality of eighteenth-century letters*. Scholarship on the materiality of historical documents, an attention to the meaning of objects and the 'material turn' more broadly make evident the material nature of the letter. This paper explores how letters offer a particular form of 'thingness'. I will discuss the particular power of the letter and how its reliquary power transmit embodied connectedness. Letters offer a distinctive form of 'textual embodiment', both in the way the body was registered in the letters and in the powerful affective and physical reactions generated by the letters themselves.

1:45–2:15 pm – Coffee break

2:15–3:00 pm

- Mikhail Boytsov, *Just a Piece of Paper. But Dated Back to 1515...* In this paper I will present an unpublished letter found in the Vienna archives. It was written in school Latin in November 1515 by an envoy of the Moscow Grand Duke Vasily III. Instead of being solemnly received by Emperor Maximilian I, the Muscovite envoy suddenly found himself left alone in a small Tyrolean town. This letter was a call for help ...

3:00–3:45 pm

- Elizabeth S. Cohen, *The Unremarked Ubiquity of the (Under) Shirt in Early Modern Italy*. Shirts, or shifts in the female version, both called *camiscie* in Italian, were everywhere in early modern life – on men and on women, on the high and the low, and even on those about to be executed. Shirts appeared peeking out here and there at the collar or along the sleeves in portraits and history paintings. And even after death, along with other households linens, they figured in post-mortem inventories. An essential in-between layer that covered the body in most situations, shirts, though generally not remarked, were both useful and the bearers of intimate meanings. They deserve a moment of history.

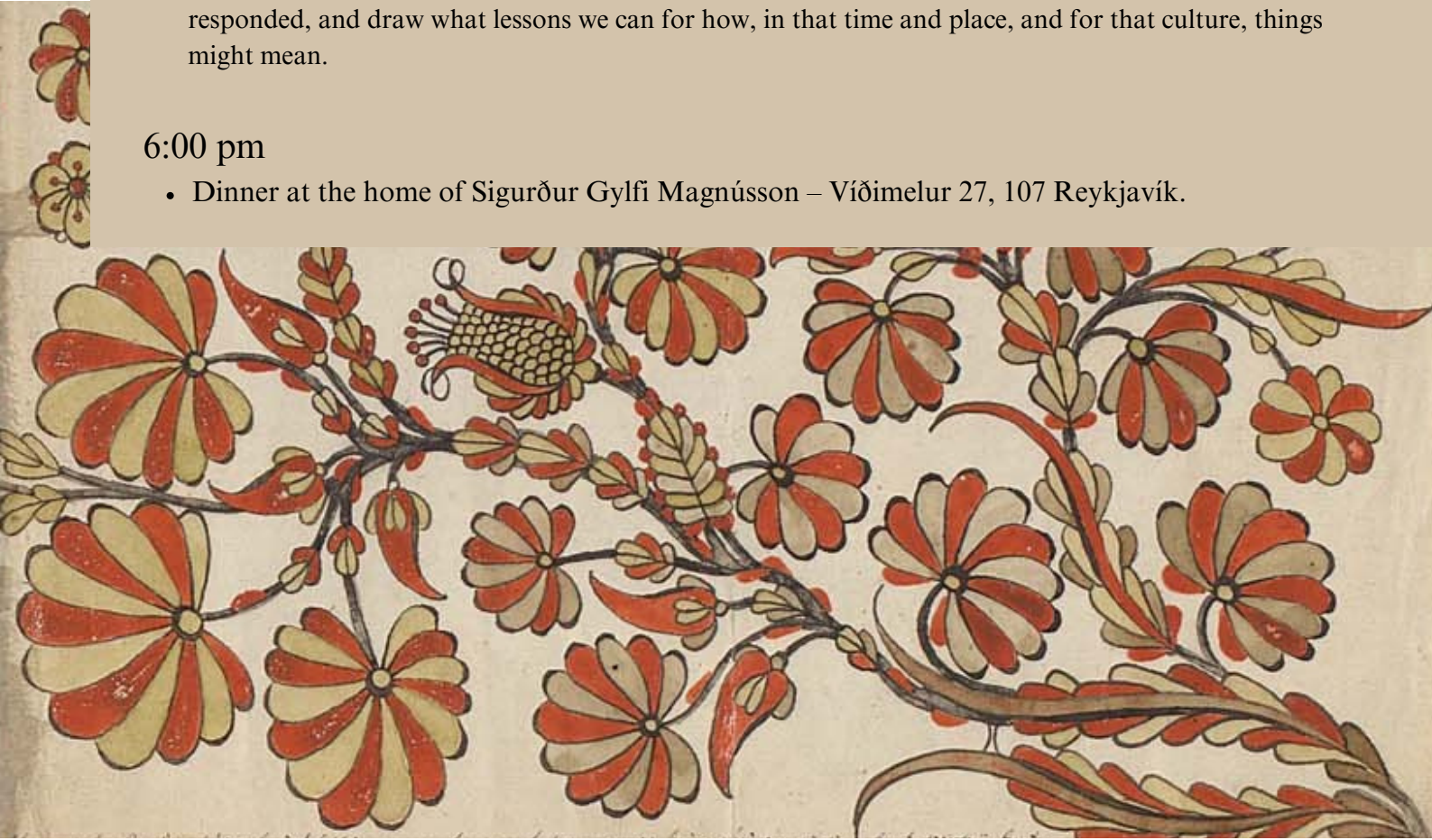
3:45–4:00 pm – Coffee break

4:00–4:45 pm

- Thomas V. Cohen, *The Material World of a Deaf and Mute Roman Woman (1590)*. In 1590, Maddalena, through a scribe, petitioned the pope to let her draw up her will, although, born deaf, she could neither hear nor speak. Ancient Roman law forbade such action, but the pope sent her a judge. How to test her, how to prove the competence of her mind, and her capacity for legal action? The answer: the language of things! So we watch carefully what the judge devised and how the woman responded, and draw what lessons we can for how, in that time and place, and for that culture, things might mean.

6:00 pm

- Dinner at the home of Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon – Víðimelur 27, 107 Reykjavík.





11 August 2023

9:00–9:45 am

- Laurie Bertram, *Curse of the Viking? Nordic Americans, White Nationalism, and Viking-Age Historical Imagery*. Proceeding from images of Viking-Age symbols at the 2021 US Capitol Attack, this lecture explores some of the more hidden, migrant origins and recent incarnations of white nationalists' appropriation of Viking-Age imagery in North America. Contemporary discussions of the use of “the Viking” in racially motivated political campaigns often point first to European and particularly Hitler's manipulation of the Nordic past. This popular tendency often overlooks the North American forces that also helped give birth to this phenomenon. These include the popularity of Viking imagery during Icelandic and broader Nordic mass migration to the Americas, anti-Black, Indigenous, and Catholic campaigns in Anglo- American culture, 19th-century colonial expansion, and, most recently, the rise of modern social media platforms. Amid the rebirth of white nationalist “Viking”-themed populism in Nordic American diasporas, this lecture addresses these roots and how they apply to a pressing new context. Scholars now face a challenging new incarnation of the use of the Viking-Age past in extremist and racially-motivated online campaigns, as privately-owned social media corporations, including Meta (Facebook) and YouTube, continue to promote historical disinformation for use in modern day conflicts. Building on the work of Ruha Benjamin, Ryan Eyford, and Azeem Azhar, this lecture identifies new opportunities for challenging both the “curse of the Viking” and a widening gap between rigorous scholarship and popular public discourse more broadly.

9:45–10:20 am – Roundtable 1 (7 minutes presentations)

- Inventories and Material Culture
 - Anna Heiða Baldursdóttir, *People's Possessions and Museum Collection from 19th Century*. This paper will focus on what material culture in two archives can reveal about the sources and what it can mean for historiography. Few things will be drawn from a comparison between peoples's possession in probate inventories and museum collection from 19th century at the National Museum of Iceland.
 - Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Art on a Page: Textural Embodiment*. The process of drawing up an art piece gives us an opportunity to reflect on the act of creation; how the art is sitting on the page, where the artist was when he or she created the art, how they make excuses for primitive motives, etc. The art piece provides an important evidence of the impacts that such an “object” made on people.
 - Ágústa Edwald Maxwell and Gavin Lucas, *The Archaeology of Z*. This presentation explores the idea of consumption as work; how the emergence of a consumer society impacted household routines and altered our entanglement with things.



10:20–10:30 am Coffee break

10:30–12:00 am – Roundtable 2 (7 minutes presentations)

- Archives

- Kristján Mímisson, *The Essence of (Material?) Culture*. In the midst of debates on intangible heritage there is an urgency to consider the materiality of culture. How is “material culture” different from simply “culture”? Does the difference between the two rest upon its tangibility? Is culture then – opposite to material culture – intangible in its essence. Allow me to ponder over the tangibility of culture, and so allow me to approach the essence of (material?) culture.
- Anna Lísá Rúnarsdóttir, *The Importance and Significance of Selective Collecting: The National Museum of Iceland*. Museums need to be selective in their collecting practices and assemble material culture in line with a clearly defined collecting policy. Is aiming for objectivity in “collecting the nation” a mirage? The characteristics of a collection of artefacts can unveil narratives, meanings, and perspectives of the past. This paper discusses the methodological challenges of using a museum collection for analysis and the opportunities that material culture archives present, through the case study of the National Museum of Iceland.
- Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, *Museums as Research Institutions*. Unlike collecting, preserving, educating and displaying, research is rarely considered a core activity in museums. Yet, it is one of the formal requirements museums must fulfil according to international standards of what constitutes a museum. It is also the most ambiguous and a challenging one to accomplish. Most museums report being unable to conduct research due to lack of manpower, time and funding, while others see research as inherent in everything they do. These two extremes create a climate of confusion around research activity, which, in turn, leads to ambivalence or uncertainty on what counts as research in the museum workplace. This talk speaks to this ambivalence with the aim to bring clarity to the discourse.

12:00–13:15 pm – Lunch at Háma at University of Iceland, on campus.



13:15–14:30 pm – Roundtable 3 (7 minutes presentations)

- Books, Manuscripts, and Icelandic Culture
 - Davíð Ólafsson, *“I could not get any books from Andrés’s estate”*. Auctions as redistribution of goods. In my presentation I will take examples of how books in probate inventories were redistributed through auctions in 19th century Iceland and consider if the process lead to concentration or distribution in ownership of this particular type of goods.
 - Andri M. Kristjánsson, *Material Agency in Literature*. The talk will be a contemplation on material agency in literature; how the performance of the vitality of objects, things, nature and other non-human phenomenons are represented on the pages of works of fiction. Moreover, I will discuss the crucial part material actants play in unfolding narratives and plotlines by being active participants and utilizing their efficacy. This happens on the pages of literary works in the same way it happens off the pages, out in the “real world”. The vitality of the material world around us is becoming ever more apparent and consequently more important. Looking at matter in literature and identifying the vital and agential forces it exhibits in the text, can help us better understand and grasp the agency of the material outside of it. As a result, we open our perception to the important role the material it plays in our existence and our future.
 - Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, *Deferred Truths: On Icelandic Architecture*. In this talk I will reflect upon architectural fragments of turf houses preserved at the National Museum of Iceland and the importance of including them in critical heritage discourse.

14:30–15:00 pm

- Þóra Pétursdóttir – Final Remarks

