



# THE FIRST FJALLKONA

Fibre terrains of ethnicity and gender, 1924

Text by Laurie K. Bertram

This dress is a souvenir of both Icelandic immigrant dreams of home and the 'bald women epidemic' of 1924. It was created to dress Sigrún Línal, the very first Fjallkona, or the female embodiment of the Icelandic nation, at Winnipeg Íslendingadagurinn (Icelandic Day) on August 2, 1924. Like the playful performances upon frozen landscapes in the Icelandic Love Corporation's *Dynasty* [2007] and *The Discriminating Gentlemen's Club's Fox Hunt* [2006] by The Discriminating Gentlemen's Club ~ Le Club des Gentilshommes Avertis, this dress offers a fibrous terrain that reveals the role of clothing and hair in the construction of gender and identity in early twentieth century Icelandic Canada.

The Fjallkona (Mountain Woman) was a significant figure in the Icelandic independence movement. Nineteenth-century Icelandic authors and artists used the image of a long-haired woman whose body, clothing and accessories represented their dreams of a spiritually, politically, and culturally independent nation. Her clothing is based on a blend of nineteenth century Icelandic costume and the colours, shapes, and textures in Iceland's geography. Most Icelandic migrants to Canada left their homes during the height of the independence movement and



brought the symbols of the movement with them. The Fjallkona has since thrived in North America due to her ability to create a portable landscape and maternal point of origin that could stand in for the one those migrants had left behind.

Prior to 1924, the Fjallkona was solely a literary figure. Influenced by North American-style parades and pageants, Winnipeg Íslendingadagurinn organizers decided to boost attendance by holding a competition to select the first woman to portray the Fjallkona. The newspapers *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla* published the photographs of eight contestants, all Winnipeg women, known in the community for their physical beauty and/or contributions as schoolteachers, mothers, and musicians. (Fig. 1)

Much to the dismay of the older generation, however, most of the candidates had short, bobbed hair. The bob cut was first introduced in 1914 and by 1924 most Winnipeg women had embraced it, including those living in the Icelandic neighbourhood in the West End. Although already surrounded by women with short hair on the streets, in the movies and even in advertisements for bug spray, readers were angered by the prospect of a shorthaired Fjallkona. In June *Heimskringla* printed a protest *ríma*, (four stanza poem) written in 'Winnipeg Icelandic' (a mix of Icelandic and English).

The brides are bobbing their hair,  
Robbing themselves of their beauty,  
Greedy ones are boasting about it,  
Making themselves terribly fancy.

Hárið bobba" brúðurnar,  
Beauty "robba" sína,  
Af því grobba girugar  
Gera sig "obboð" fina.<sup>1</sup>

The *ríma* was the first of many jokes and assaults against what Editor Jón Bildfell referred to as a "nationwide epidemic" of "bald women." "Combs are for the hair as ploughs are for the earth," he argued; hair was a symbol of cultural cultivation and its loss represented the destruction of ancient cultural values by modern fashion and women's desire to work outside of the home.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, joked the newspapers, these gender-bending haircuts were causing mass-confusion in the Icelandic community. Grandfathers in particular struggled to understand the emergence of so many "pretty girls sitting with their sweaty, hairless, baldheads working in their futuristic offices" and *Heimskringla* also warned women that the haircut caused beard growth.<sup>3</sup>

When a short-haired, university-educated schoolteacher named Sigrún Lindal won the Fjallkona competition, she faced hostility from critics of the hairstyle. Sigrún bowed to pressure from the organizers and agreed to wear a long wig to cover her hair; however, her own unique vision of the Fjallkona is still visible in the history of this dress. (Fig. 2) While portraits of Sigrún with a wig were published in *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla*, she had another separate portrait taken for herself as Fjallkona with her own hair. She also decided to omit the white veil that came to characterize later Fjallkona dresses,



FIGURE 1

opting instead for the more politically charged image of a strong, autonomous, unveiled figure originally made popular during the nineteenth-century independence movement.

The dress itself also reveals much about the innovation of the maker and the role of the first Fjallkona. Time constraints prevented the maker from actually embroidering the hem, yoke and cuffs, so she created a similar effect by tacking beaded copper piping into a floral pattern. While the cloak was meant to create the image of a queen, it was not made with velvet but with a more affordable velour-style fabric. The fur trim of the coat is made not from ermine, but from more readily available Canadian black and white rabbit fur. The colour, form and contrast of this dress reveal its purpose as a costume to be viewed by hundreds of people, but mostly at a distance.

In spite of the bald women scandal that erupted during her election, community leaders and members praised Sigrún's performance at the Winnipeg festival. Anxieties surrounding a short haired Fjallkona also decreased significantly afterwards. The following year Stefania Prescott, Fjallkona 1925, appeared with short hair. Though Sigrún's dress was only worn once, it became a prototype for future costumes. Her crown is still in use and continues to adorn each,



FIGURE 2

(mainly short-haired) Fjallkona at the Gimli Íslendingadagurinn. In 1930 a large group of Icelandic North Americans visited Iceland to celebrate the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Alþingi, or Icelandic parliament. They imported the North American practice of appointing a woman to represent the Fjallkona to Iceland that year, a tradition which continues during national holidays there.

Fibre terrains, such as hair and clothing, reveal the more complex history of the Fjallkona in North America and the creation of hybrid ethnic identities in Canada. They have also contributed to her popularity by constructing a vital visual language that has since filled the gap created by language transformation and loss, already evident in 'Winnipeg Icelandic' by 1924. Yet these terrains also represent the central role of gender in negotiating the pressures and possibilities of both Icelandic and Canadian culture. More than a simple costume or a symbol of the Icelandic nation, this dress is a record of both the creation and contestation of Icelandic identity in North America.

[ Laurie K. Bertram ]

1. Jdodd, "Frá Winnipeg og nærsveitunum," *Heimskringla* June 04, 1924.  
 8. (Trans. Nelson Gerrard) 2. Jón Bildfell, "Sköllóttar konur," *Lögberg*, July 10, 1924. 4. 3. "Fróðleikur og forvitni," *Heimskringla*, October 22, 1924. 1.

**The Icelandic Love Corporation** [Jóni Jónsdóttir, Eirún Sigurdardóttir, and Sigrún Hrólfsdóttir; aka: The ILC] are a dynamic Icelandic performance art trio, who have received considerable attention in recent years in their ambitious pursuit to spread their message of 'Love conquers all. The future is beautiful.' Performing in diverse locations—spaces ranging from live television broadcasts to barren locations in the interior of Iceland, the ILC are committed to reaching a wide audience. Demonstrating intimacy and surprise they demand reaction in their uninhibited display of extravagance and beauty. Their work is bittersweet, flirting with amateurism and developing affection with their audience. Existing outside the parameters of critical discourse and art history, their work finds more in common with tragic fairytales and everyday pop songs.

**The Discriminating Gentlemen's Club ~ Le Club des Gentilshommes Avertis** [DGC~CGA] is a private order in the form of an artist collective. The club's presence is manifest in two distinct ways. The first is a public façade constituted of varied social events, the planting of public gardens, kite flying, film making, sculptural ephemera and the like. The second is a closed aesthetic inversion of the club's public customs performed to a select audience and regulated by legally binding non-disclosure agreements. The DGC~CGA holds three honorary chapters in Melbourne (Australia), Birmingham (UK) and The Hague (the Netherlands).

**Laurie K. Bertram** is an intermittent Winnipegger and a history PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation explores the development of Icelandic Canadian culture in the twentieth century via alternate terrains of ethnic expression, including material culture, food, ghost stories, and knitting patterns.

#### EXHIBITION

24 April–30 May 2009

#### RECEPTION

7–10 PM, Friday, 24 April

#### ARTIST TALK WITH DGC~CGA

3 PM, Saturday, 25 April

#### SCREENING + LECTURE

*Iceland on the Prairies* (NFB, 1941)  
Lady of the Lake Theatre/Waterfront Centre, Gimli Manitoba, 2 PM, Saturday, 16 May  
Núna (now) and PLATFORM co-present a screening of this iconic propaganda film, followed by a lecture with Laurie K. Bertram + Ryan Eyford | Admission is free

#### WORKS EXHIBITED

##### Icelandic Love Corporation

*Dynasty* [2007], HD Video / colour / 13:00  
9 C-prints, 27.6"x39.4" each

##### The Discriminating Gentlemen's Club ~ Le Club des Gentilshommes Avertis

*The Discriminating Gentlemen's Club's Fox Hunt* [2006],  
Single channel video / colour / NTSC / Stereo / 6:57

##### Unidentified Artist

*Maid of the Mountain outfit*, Green cloak with ermine trim,  
Record: 237577, catalogue number H17-3-1,  
PERM LOC UNIT XII A 6  
*White satin gown*, Record: 237578, catalogue number  
H17-3-3, PERM LOC UNIT XII A 6  
*Belt*, Record: 237579, catalogue number  
H17-3-3, CURR. LOC UNIT G-5500  
*Collection of The Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg, Manitoba*

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