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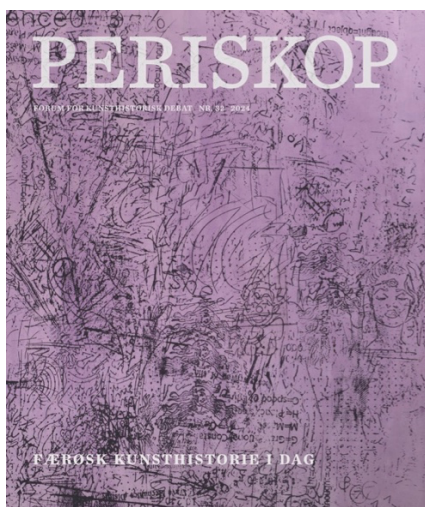
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Aquatic Art Histories of the North Atlantic

Frida Zachariassen and the Faroe Islands Fisheries



[1] Frida Zachariassen: *Kvinnur stakka fisk* (Women stack fish), c. 1950s. Private Collection, Faroe Islands. Image: Listasavn Føroya.

Fishy forms have been parsed out into triangular patterns on the surface of the dock in Frida Zachariassen's (1912-1992) *Fiskagentan* (*Girl dries fish*, 1954) **[2]**. They are scattered around the feet of the women splitting and stacking them. In a contemporaneous painting, *Kvinnur stakka fisk* (*Women stack fish*, c.1950s) **[1]**, the split and salted Atlantic cod are being piled one atop of the other, each fish coming together to form a whole, a mirage of white. Here, the woman in pink in the foreground holds the tailfin of a split cod in her hand, the hollowed-out space of its belly made visible through a deep blue line. Indicative of Faroese inshore fishing, that is, fishing carried out close to the shore and often from small boats, Zachariassen's work explores the contact between the fisheries and fishers, of the boats in the harbour and the people and fish on the shore. *Kvinnur stakka fisk* and *Fiskagentan* are both examples of women working post-harvest, when the fish are being prepared and packaged. They draw attention to the women involved in the processes of fisheries labour, but also pressure the restrictive gendered framings of the fishing industry in and around the North Atlantic.

In recognising the role of women in the local Faroese fishing industry, Zachariassen depicts alternatives to

the prevailing scenes in art history of oilskin-clad fishermen hauling their catch onto the decks of fishing boats or onto the shore. As Elspeth Probyn (2014, 594) writes, “If in myth women meld with the sea, historically they have tended to be tied to shore.” On North Atlantic shores, women washed, split, brushed down, and salted the fish before laying them out to dry. In the Faroe Islands, as in the neighbouring Lofoten Islands, Norway, for example, the cod were also hung on purposefully designed racks or beneath the rafters of buildings to dry in the sun until cured. Similar traditions of wind-dried cod or stockfish also characterised the inshore fishing of Shetland. Photographic archives of the Faroe Islands, Denmark, Iceland, neighbouring Scotland, and trans-Atlantic Newfoundland abound with images of women preparing cod and herring alike, the fish themselves piled high on the docks or on the factory floor.

Many places identify through and with fish, especially in the North Atlantic region. In Norway and Iceland, for example, artists including Gunnar Berg (1863-1893), Anna Boberg (1864-1935), Jón Stefánsson (1881-1962), and Gunnlaugur Scheving (1904-1972) all painted scenes characteristic of their local fisheries. Art historian Maura Coughlin (2020) encourages us to read art through fish when thinking about nineteenth-century French coastal fisheries and communities. With this essay, I propose that Zachariassen’s paintings not only document the social history of the Faroese fishing industry during the 1950s, but that they also speak to the wider historical involvement and importance of women in fisheries around the North Atlantic. Here, I pursue an art history of fisheries in the Faroe Islands through the works of Frida Zachariassen, as they manifest intimate relationships between people, land, and fish in a pictorial form that warrants closer scrutiny.

Fishing in the Faroe Islands

For centuries, codfish had driven “transatlantic commerce as a staple of both the European diet and the Atlantic slave trade” (Kurlansky 1997, 82). Off the French Atlantic



[2] Frida Zachariassen: *Fiskagentan* (Girl dries fish), 1954. Bank Nordik, Klaksvík. Image: Listasavn Føroya.

coast, cod had already been over-fished by the sixteenth century, with Iceland and Newfoundland continuing to provide far-reaching sources of this desirable white fish. For European fishermen, the Lofoten fishery was, and remains, one of the largest and most important deep-sea fisheries for Arctic cod. It remained especially strong until the early twentieth century, witnessing, like the Faroe Islands, a transformation from small-scale coastal fisheries to deep-sea, trawl fisheries. During the post-war period, the Faroese fisheries underwent waves of uncertainty, confrontation, and financial insecurity. Yet fishing remains the primary economic activity in the Faroe Islands. Focused on the small-scale fishery of Klaksvík, on the island of Borðoy, in the north of the Faroe Islands, Zachariassen’s paintings, such as *Kvinnur stakka fisk* and *Fiskagentan*, exist within and respond to a significant

[3] Frida Zachariassen:
Úti í Klaksvík (Out in
Klaksvík), 1952.
Bank Nordik, Klaksvík.
Image: Listasavn Føroya.



moment of transformation throughout the North Atlantic fishing industry and community.

Born in Klaksvík in 1912, Zachariassen's fishery paintings were likely shaped by a personal and geographical intimacy with the Faroese coastal fisheries. Zachariassen's father, Jógvan Rasmussen or Jógvan í Grótinum, was a boat-builder and central figure in Klaksvík, fostering relationships with neighbouring Icelandic fishers, particularly those based out of Seyðidjórður on the east coast. Zachariassen's husband, the fisherman Guttorm Zachariassen, died in a fishing-related accident in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1945, less than a year after they were married. To what extent these events impacted Zachariassen's artistic career requires a closer study of her biography.

Zachariassen was trained in drawing at a technical college in Denmark and was later accepted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, an opportunity she turned down to instead pursue a more financially lucrative career in business. Among her drawings and paintings are not only scenes of the Faroe Islands, but also Sweden, Iceland (1955 and 1976), Shetland (1956), and Norway (1958). These

travels signal Zachariassen's mobility as an artist, demonstrating North Atlantic connections within the artist's own oeuvre and between and among these geographies and coastal societies. From the late 1940s onwards, Zachariassen remained in Klaksvík, and it was during the following two decades that she created most of her work. Her paintings were the subject of a solo-exhibition at Listasavn Føroya in 2010 and more recently, *Kvinnur stakka fisk* and *Fiskagentan* were included in the exhibition *The Sea*, similarly staged at Listasavn between 2020-2021. Despite this prolific career, Zachariassen's work has been little discussed outside of the Faroe Islands and warrants greater consideration within a wider art historical discourse.

Art historian Malan Marnersdóttir (2010, 136) argues that the angular and geometric style that became so synonymous with Zachariassen's work from the 1950s onwards "echoes the mechanical nature of modern working life." Marnersdóttir (2010, 119) further stresses the importance between people and land, with many of Zachariassen's geometric landscapes making visible the human presence: "Figures are usually painted at work:

they process fish, they are about to leave on fishery in small boats, they off-load ships, shop, harvest grass and feed sheep.” Other paintings by Zachariassen depict these shoreline activities, with the masts of the vessels docked in the harbour rising like a desolate forest against the backdrop of a village. Figures in yellow oilskins and navy overalls move bales and buckets along the shore, their genders similarly obscured by the abstract rendering of their faces and forms. Beyond the human form, Zachariassen’s *Fiskagentan* and *Kvinnur stakka fisk* are also noteworthy for their depiction of the fish. They remind us that the fish is both a resource and commodity.

Beyond the fish itself, Zachariassen’s paintings also evince the ongoing interchangeability and extractive nature of fishing and its related shoreline activities. In her painting *Úti í Klaksvík (Out in Klaksvík, 1952)* [3], she depicts the steam trawlers and traditional wooden fishing boats moored in the harbour, their chimneys and masts obstructing the view of the town beyond. In the Faroe Islands, the traditional wooden-oar boats, or *útróður*, facilitated small-scale inshore fishing. The vessels typically used for cod fishing were fitted with eight rowers or *áttamannafar*. Archival photographs from the Shetland Museum & Archives show several Faroese fishing boats in Lerwick harbour. Many of these shots were taken during the 1960s and demonstrate the persistent connections between North Atlantic fisheries (Wonders 2015). While the use of *útróður* continued as a commercial and personal practice, large-scale commercial fishing vessels and trawlers eventually replaced smaller boats throughout the twentieth century.

Similar to Zachariassen, Swedish painter Anna Boberg’s paintings of the Lofoten fishing industry (Gapp 2021) recognises the shift between traditional modes of fishing and the increased industrialisation of the fisheries – the mechanisation of modern life, to borrow from Marnersdóttir. As in the Faroe Islands, trawling vessels had been introduced into the Lofoten fishery in the early twentieth century to replace the local Nordland boat, with Boberg (1934, 10, as cited in Gapp 2021) writing, “Who, at

the time of my earlier visits to Lofoten, could imagine [...] that the power of the motor would in a staggeringly short time end tradition. The slow, hammering of the oars was replaced by the engine’s rapid bangs, pure sailing was over forever.” By including both the *útróður* and steam trawlers in *Úti í Klaksvík*, Zachariassen appears to comment on the coexistence of the two modes of fishing, as the one slowly outpaced and replaced the other. This mourning for the loss of traditional fisheries plays to the indefensible but commonplace assumption that the ocean has existed outside of history (Bolster 2014, 6).

Changing from so-called “traditional fisheries” to the more mechanised modes of the fisheries, trade rapidly altered coastal communities. So substantial was the transformation of the Faroese fishery during the 1950s that the inshore fisheries which had characterised the local fishing communities were required to move offshore, increasingly depending upon resources beyond the islands’ geographical borders. It was also during this time that any hope of financial optimism in the Faroe Islands was brought to an abrupt halt. The nationwide investment in old-fashioned British steam trawlers proved catastrophic when coal prices suddenly soared. The Faroese bank *Sjóvinnubankin*, which had partly financed this endeavour, declared bankruptcy. Unemployment rates rose, and many were forced to move abroad to seek employment. Leveraging this time of national economic crisis, in 1954 two major Faroese fisheries strikes were organised by the national fisheries trade union *Føroya fiskimannafelag*, which also succeeded in rallying fishermen around the secessionist party *Tjóðveldisflokkurin*. The women’s fisheries association, *Havnar Arbeidskvinnufelag* (or *Tórshavn’s Working Women’s Association*), rallied behind the fishermen striking in 1954, despite their own strike funds having been depleted after countless conflicts with employers since their founding in 1936.

The Shore Crew: Women as Fishers

Fiskagentan was painted the same year as the two Faroese fisheries strikes took place. The women who

worked the roles that Zachariassen presents would have likely been involved in such industrial action. With arms outstretched and with her boots disappearing into piles of white fish that are strewn across the floor of the dock, the woman central to Zachariassen's composition in *Fiskagentan* directs her attention toward the viewer and might be read as taking both a literal and metaphorical stand.

Where much has been written about historic maritime masculinities, little has been framed around women in these watery, fishy, coastal domains (see Downing et al. 2021). In their introduction to fishy feminisms, Christine Knott and Madeleine Gustavsson (2022, 1670) argue that "At their most basic, fisheries involve human-fish interactions, and feminisms involve highlighting and challenging inequities." The argument that Knott and Gustavsson make locates gender within the larger system of fisheries. While part of this is recognising the number of women who participated in fisheries and later fish plants, it also extends to social and political engagement with concerns such as workers' rights, as Havnar Arbeiðskvinnufelag shows. With this in mind, Zachariassen's paintings, espe-

cially *Fiskagentan*, might be viewed through the lens of the intense union-led strike action that took place across the Faroese fishing industry during the early 1950s.

Recent curatorial work scrutinises the roles of women as launderesses, seamstresses, vendors, and shoemakers within nineteenth-century painting, but fishing is perhaps unsurprisingly absent.¹ In 1950 there were 4,846 women (adult and children) of a total population of 31,781 associated with the Faroese fishery and whale hunt (Danmarks Statistik 1959). Zachariassen's work, therefore, is particularly noteworthy, not only for recognising the significant role women had in the Faroese fishery industry, but also for being works made by a woman. The art historical emphasis on women as workers (artists) and women at work coalesces with Zachariassen. Importantly, these paintings question to what extent Zachariassen personally interacted with the women she painted and engaged with the women's association.

Women have long had a stabilising effect on the shoreline activities of fisheries, they perform roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and friends. These women were unlikely to



[4] Johannes Klein: *Fiskevaskning Vestmanhavn i Færoerne* (Washing fish in Vestmanhavn, Faroe Islands), 1898. The National Museum of Denmark. Public Domain.



[5] Sámal Joensen-Mikines: *Skipini fara ein várdag* (Ships Depart on a Spring Day), 1937. Listasavn Føroya. Image: Listasavn Føroya.

[6] Sámal Joensen-Mikines: *Skilnaður* (Departure), 1955. Listasavn Føroya. Image: Listasavn Føroya.

be on the boats, especially far out to sea, instead they were extensively involved in the fisheries on or near the shore. Women “formed an amazing migration along with the fish and formed an important part in the more-than-human assemblage of fish, institutional encouragement and technology,” writes Probyn (2014, 594). Johannes Klein’s photograph *Fiskevaskning Vestmanhavn i Færøerne* (*Washing Fish in Vestmanhavn, Faroe Islands*, 1898) [4] shows women scrubbing the fish clean, those same white forms splayed open as in Zachariassen’s *Kvinnur stakka fisk*. Women would prepare the salted fish before laying them out to dry in the sun until cured. They “tended the fish, taking it in each night, or during rainy weather” (Wright 2001, n.p.). Women’s labour “was integral to pre- and post-harvest tasks such as baiting long-lines, cleaning boats, washing clothes, gutting fish and sometimes the administration work related to the crew and the boat”, write Siri Gerrard and Danika Kleiber (2019, 259).

Framed by shades of blue, white, pink, and yellow, the women in Zachariassen’s *Fiskagentan* and *Kvinnur stakka fisk* are depicted within the spaces they inhabit and work. Inspired by Marilyn Porter’s (1985) writing on Newfoundland, Gerrard (1983) introduced the concept of women as the “shore crew.” Zachariassen’s women are shown as a part of the local fishing industry, rather than apart from it. Unlike the solitary woman standing on the precipice of a cliff looking out towards a departing vessel and the vast

expanse of the North Atlantic in Faroese painter Sámal Joensen-Mikines’ *Skipini fara ein várdag* (*Ships Depart on a Spring Day*, 1937) [5], Zachariassen firmly roots the female body within a fishy domain. Women are shown handling, packaging, and salting the fish. By contrast in Joensen-Mikines’ painting, as in another of his works *Skilnaður* (*Departure*, 1955) [6], women are reduced to onlookers, anticipating the departure and arrival of the men.

Writing about the roles of women and men along Sweden’s west coast, Anders Gustavsson (1986) also notes that during the early twentieth century, women were those who made the oilskin clothes that the men wore out into the fishing grounds near Iceland and the Shetland Islands. Originally made of old sailcloth covered with a thin layer of tar, or later cotton duck (a plain but strong woven canvas) soaked in linseed oil, by the 1950s this waterproof fishing gear was commonly made of PVC. Yet, in Zachariassen’s *Fiskagentan*, it is the women who are dressed in oilskins, as opposed to the more commonly seen oilskin clad men in paintings such as Joensen-Mikines’ *Postbáturin* and *Grind Killing* (1970, Ribe Kunstmuseum). Zachariassen’s own paintings of the whale hunt warrant closer attention but were beyond the scope of this essay, especially given that women were not historically allowed to participate in the grindadráp (grind killing).

We might also observe the transition of women’s fash-

ion from the more traditional silhouettes of the women in the background of *Fiskagentan* to the 1950s-style ensembles in *Kvinnur stakka fisk*. While in the latter, the women have been abstracted into simple forms, their distinguishing facial features removed, in *Fiskagentan* the central figure holds the viewers' attention, with the fish serving only to frame the composition. Writing in her self-published book *Brún og brá* (1979), Zachariassen acknowledged her own stylistic tendencies: "the idea that the line should be enhanced still prevails, though it is not always well chosen. Everybody did agree with this kind of abstraction, and in the 1950s and for a bit longer, I was no exception" (as cited in Marnersdóttir 2010, 42). Through the emphasis on line and form, both *Kvinnur stakka fisk* and *Fiskagentan* appear to emulate printmaking through their abstraction. In the blocks of colour and delineated shapes and lines, they evoke linocut and woodblock printmaking techniques. These parallels with methods of artistic process, abstraction with modernisation, and printmaking with technological advancement go further to consider the shifting spaces in which the women in Zachariassen's paintings worked, from the dock to the factory floor.

Women as shore crew changed dramatically following the Second World War. As Coughlin (2020, 149) notes, the "industrialization of fishing that added freezing to early conservation techniques such as drying, salting or canning [...] affected ocean ecosystems and the fishing populations that depended on the sea." Zachariassen's paintings are indicative of this change. As in *Kvinnur stakka fisk*, women began to be contained within the industrial structures of the processing plant.

Concluding Words

While women didn't cross geographical borders as part of the fishing industry, Zachariassen's artwork offers transnational modes for thinking through women's involvement in the North Atlantic fisheries and beyond. With women today comprising approximately half of fisheries workers globally (Harper et al. 2013), greater attention is warranted to the role women have historically played in

fisheries. As a woman painter depicting women at work, Zachariassen also offers unique insight into these often-separate and distinct perspectives through her paintings. Zachariassen's *Fiskagentan* and *Kvinnur stakka fisk* offer important alternatives to the art historical emphasis on nineteenth-century labour and fisheries on the French and New England coastlines and introduce avenues through which to explore the aquatic and maritime connections in North Atlantic art histories.

NOTES

- 1 Most recently, these exhibitions include the Cleveland Museum of Art exhibition *Degas and the Laundress: Women, Work, and Impressionism* (2023-24) and the Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibition *Mary Cassatt at Work* (2024).

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