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Knud Rasmussen's Bust

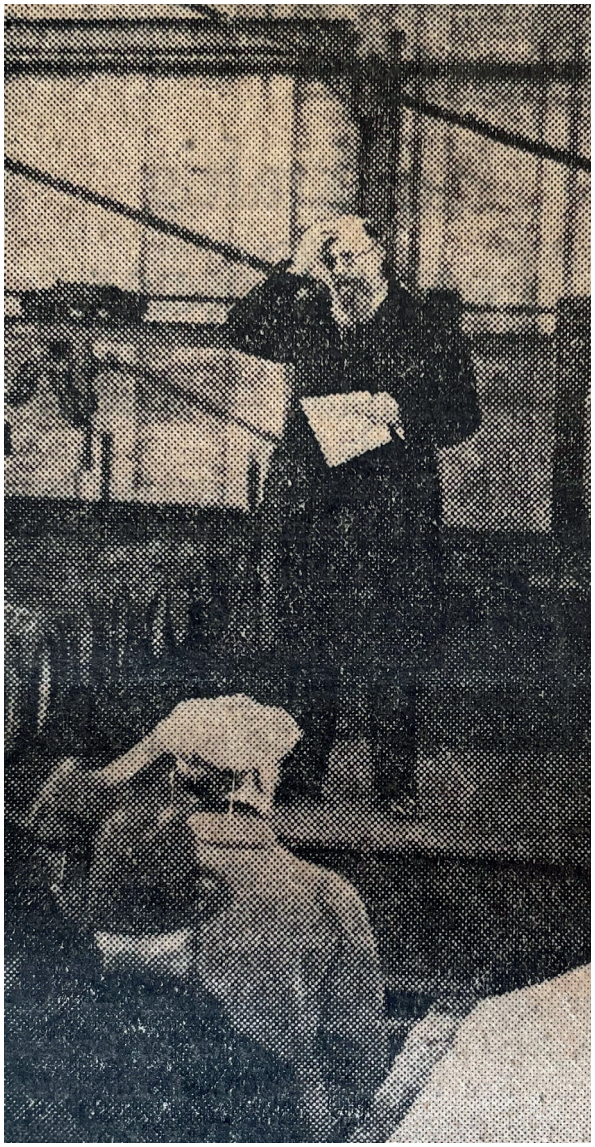


[1] Plaster model (left) and Greenland marble (right) busts by Niels Hansen. *Buster af Knud Rasmussen,* 1935. Photographic Print. Det Kgl. Biblioteks billedsamling.

Among the amendments proposed to the Finance Law of 1936-1937 was a request by Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning (1873-1942) to fund a life-size bust of the famous polar explorer, Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933). Carved from Greenland marble, the bust was executed by sculptor

and violinmaker Niels Hansen (1869-1938) and offered to the Ministry of Greenland **[1]**. Upon the recommendation of the director of the National Gallery of Denmark (SMK), Leo Swane, the value was set at 2,500 kroner, making this a rather modest amendment to a national budget of nearly 400 million. Having served many years as Minister of Greenland, Stauning's personal interest in the bust not only reflected his deep ties to Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat), but it also stemmed from his special relationship with Rasmussen as a de-facto spokesperson for Greenland and Greenlanders (Michelsen 2016, 288). In his request for payment, Stauning offered two arguments: the bust was not only a commemoration of "Greenland's great Son" ("Grønlands store søn"), who had recently died, it was also to support the nascent marble industry in Greenland (Beretninger og Kundgørelser 1938, 739). Although Rasmussen's legacy to Greenland could hardly be disputed, Stauning's justification for the purchase of the bust based on its material – Greenland marble – is intriguing. The specific use of marble from Greenland was not only related to Rasmussen's memory, it was also a political choice representing cultural attitudes and economic choices for the future of Denmark-Greenland relations. Rasmussen's bust, currently displayed along a corridor of the Prime Minister's Office (Statsministeriet), opens up an enigmatic micro-history carved in marble.

Greenland marble, extracted by Danish interests from Uummannaq Fjord between 1934 and 1939, was a critical link between Stauning's industrial policy and the cultural project of deepening ties between Denmark and Greenland. Not only would the marble adorn several landmark buildings in Denmark's burgeoning welfare architecture, such as Overfomynderiet (1935-37) and Radiohuset (1938-40), it would also support the continued economic and cultural modernisation of Greenland under the protection of the Danish trade monopoly (Foote 2023, 179-192). Rasmussen, who had nothing to do with the marble extraction effort, was nevertheless cited as a supporter by Stauning and others in the deeply moral arguments for keeping Greenland closed to the outside (Michelsen 2016, 312-313; Bistrup 1936, 5-6). Having met an untimely death in December 1933, Rasmussen's legacy was actively shaped in the subsequent years by Stauning. A significant example is Rasmussen's ethnographic film about a



[2] Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning presenting at Grønlandske Handels Plads, February 2, 1935. *Social-Demokraten*. 1935, "Det grønlandske marmor tager sig glimrende ud". 03.02.1935, 8.

love-triangle in East Greenland, *Paolos Brudefærd* (1934), which features a lofty introductory tribute by Stauning to the polar hero (Volquardsen 2015, 216). Stauning situates Rasmussen within a centuries-old connection between the Danish and Greenlandic people, helping to solidify his legacy in support of the deepening colonial project sought by the Prime Minister.

The bust's sculptor, Niels Hansen, is often confused with more prominent contemporaries. In the photographic collection of the Royal Library, Rasmussen's bust is incorrectly attributed to the painter Niels Hansen (1880-1946), while the plaster model held in Knud Rasmussens Arkiv **[left side, 1]** was up until recently attributed to Niels Hansen Jacobsen (1861-1941). In spite of his relative obscurity, Hansen seems to have moved in some important circles, as his death was reported in a short obituary and photo in *Politiken* on December 27, 1938. He was invited to work on decorative architectural details on significant buildings such as the Copenhagen Town Hall and the rebuilding of Christiansborg under Thorvald Jørgensen. The sculptor Kai Nielsen was one of his students (*Politiken* 1938, 8).

Niels Hansen first appears in relation to Greenland marble as a participant in Stauning's unveiling of the material to the public on February 2, 1935. On that day, perched upon a makeshift stage at Grønlandske Handels Plads in Copenhagen, Stauning made a case for industrial extraction to politicians, industrial leaders and workers **[2]**. Surrounded by around two hundred tons of sample blocks carefully arranged on the dockside, he presented the merits of a possible Danish marble industry in Greenland. Stauning lauded the cultural-artistic potential as well by including and highlighting some busts carved by Hansen in the marble. Offered as a replacement for Italian marble, the white variety from Greenland fit conveniently into familiar applications already present in Danish society (*Horsens Social-Demokrat* 1935, 1). Reporting on the event, a friendly press referred to a "beautiful, domestic marble" ("smukke, indenlandske Marmor") while also describing its more mysterious associations, such as its appearance in the Nordic Sagas and its geological categorization as "urmarmor" – a kind of proto-marble whose uncertain geology dates before the appearance of life on earth *(Social-Demokraten* 1935, 8; *Frederiksborg Amts Avis* 1935, 4).[1] The bust motif was certainly chosen not only to showcase the quality of the material, but also to demonstrate, in spite of its distant and exotic origin, its potential within conventional categories of commemoration and fine arts.[2] That sculptural works were included at the presentation signified that the economic-industrial arguments for the extraction effort went hand-in-hand with the cultural project maintained and expanded by Stauning during his leadership.

Unlike producing a bust in bronze or conventional Italian marble, a bust of Knud Rasmussen in Greenland marble was an intentionally provocative proposition. Although Rasmussen's solidarity among social democrats was well-known, particularly later in life (Nørgaard 2024, 240), it is not obvious that Rasmussen would have agreed with such a choice. In 1934, Svend Rathsack (1885-1941) cast a bronze bust of Knud Rasmussen for the National Museum of Denmark which, just like Hansen's bust, was intended to commemorate Rasmussen's death. Rathsack had earlier carved a small bust of a woman in Greenland marble, becoming one of the first artists to work in the material (*Portræt af Rese*, 1934, Ribe Kunstmuseum). As encouraged by unnamed "authorities" ("Myndigheder"), the base of his Rasmussen bust was also intended to be in Greenland marble, although this never occurred due to a lack of suitable material (Nationalmuseets Etnografiske Samling 1936, 60).[3] Given the need to promote the extraction effort, one can certainly suspect the encouragement of Stauning's government to use Greenland marble in Rathsack's bust as well. Beyond any official motivations, an ideological impetus is also clearly evident. Within the context of Stauning's project of deepening personal and political ties between Greenland and Denmark (Rud 2019, 61), the choice of Greenland marble for Rasmussen's busts effectively appropriated the popularity of the polar explorer



[3] Bust of Thorvald Stauning in Greenland marble by sculptor Niels Hansen from 1938. *Politiken* 1938, "Dødsfald – Billedhugger og Violinbygger Niels Hansen". 27.12.38, 8.

as a subtle tool in the 1930's debate over the social and economic modernisation of Greenland.

These unexpected intersections between a skilled but mostly unknown sculptor, a popular prime minister and a cultural hero write a curious micro-history that demonstrates how stone, or marble in this case, can act as a compelling actor when placed at the centre of a network of people and places. Marble certainly has this capacity, as it exudes all kinds of historical associations and coded relations (Gamboni et al. 2021). Greenland marble, sculpted into a bust of Knud Rasmussen, thus had an exceptional ability to embody a clear cultural and political position. It should come as no surprise that Hansen's final work, left uncompleted at his death, was yet another bust in Greenland marble, a parting manifesto among protagonists. In Hansen's obituary, pictured inside of his atelier in Lyngby, he carves a marble bust of none other than Stauning himself **[3]**.

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NOTES

1 The reference in the Nordic Sagas to what might have been Greenland marble is dubious. As far as the geology is concerned, however, Stauning was right – the marble dates from the Paleoproterozoic Era, approx. 2 billion years ago, and is among the oldest marble on the planet (Garde 1978, 5-7).

2 Alternatively, the stonemasons' guild was not impressed by the expense needed nor the craft-worthiness of the material, publishing a rebuttal that the blocks were better off "lowered to the bottom of the Greenland fjord" to take their rightful place among the mountains ("Nyttematerialе ... burde være sænket til bunds i den grønlandske Fjord, ved hvilken Fjældet ligger"), (Mohr 1935, 4).

3 Following an initial sample of 25 tons in the summer of 1933, larger blocks of Greenland marble suitable for such a base did not arrive to Copenhagen until the autumn of 1934, probably beyond the bust's completion date.