The bas-reliefs Day and Night, made by Thorvaldsen in Rome in 1815, are undoubtedly the artist’s most popular bas-reliefs, widely seen on gravestones in Icelandic churchyards. At the Thorvaldsen Museum the two pieces hang as a pair, as if to symbolise the two phases of the day, and also life and death. Night is depicted as a winged female figure or angel with her head bent and eyes closed, holding two sleeping infants (sleep and death) in her embrace. In the background an owl, the bird of the night, flies towards the observer. The ambiance is peaceful. Day is also a winged female figure, but now embodying strength and movement: Aurora, goddess of the dawn, strews roses on the earth as she glances over her shoulder at the guardian of the light who accompanies her, holding up a flaming torch to symbolise the sun and light. In the Hólavellir cemetery, other reliefs by Thorvaldsen may also be seen on grave stones, such as images from the baptismal font of Reykjavík Cathedral.

In the National Museum of Iceland is a plaster mask of konfrensáld Jón Eiríksson (1728–1787), head librarian of the Royal Library in Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen. The mask is part of a bust made by Thorvaldsen in his youth, before he left for Rome. Its date is uncertain. The bust was long owned by Grímur Thorkelín of Copenhagen.
The collection of the National Gallery of Iceland includes one sculpture by Bertel Thorvaldsen, Ganymede. The original was made in Rome in 1804, only a year after he completed his Jason with the Golden Fleece, which heralded his period of fame as a sculptor in Rome. The National Gallery also has a pencil drawing of three heads by Thorvaldsen, and 66 prints of works by the artist.

In his sculpture of Ganymede, seen here, Thorvaldsen presents a figure from Greek mythology, the goblet and ever signifying the character and the story behind the sculpture, while the headgear is an allusion to the fact that Ganymede was originally a Trojan from Phrygia, as stated in Homer’s Iliad. Zeus, the king of the gods, had many human attributes, among which was an admiration for beautiful young men – and when he saw (or heard of) Ganymede, his desire to have the boy with him was so overwhelming that he sent an eagle (or perhaps went himself in the form of an eagle, as Ovid says in his Metamorphoses) to snatch him and bring him to Mt. Olympus. Zeus granted Ganymede the gift of eternal youth and appointed him cup-bearer to the gods. Thorvaldsen depicts Ganymede holding out a goblet to the gods on Mt. Olympus. The work is not only an example of the sculptor’s neoclassical themes, but also embodies his fidelity and that of neoclassicists to the Ancients’ ideals of beauty, described by Johann Joachim Winckelmann as “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” in his Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst (Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture, 1755).

The origin of the work was that in the winter of 1803-04 Ilina Vorontsova, a Russian countess, commissioned five sculptures from Thorvaldsen on themes drawn from Greek mythology, including the stories of Bacchus and Ganymede, as specified in their contract of February 1804.

Thorvaldsen's Ganymede exists in two versions in addition to the one in the National Gallery of Iceland: in one Ganymede lifts up the ewer to pour wine into the goblet, while in the other he kneels to give Zeus’ eagle a drink. In addition a number of reliefs and drawings of Ganymede by Thorvaldsen are extant. This Ganymede was in the collection of the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, having been left uncompleted in his studio at his death, and later completed for the Museum. It was sold when the Museum acquired another exemplar in 1922. It was presented to the National Gallery of Iceland in 1927 by Johan Hanss, Icelandic consul in Copenhagen.

Other works by Bertel Thorvaldsen in Reykjavik

Near the entrance to Fossvogur Church stands a bronze cast of one of Thorvaldsen’s most popular sculptures, depicting the risen Christ with his arms spread wide, showing the nail-marks in his hands and feet. The work was completed in 1921, and in 1839 an over-sized marble version was installed above the altar of Vor Frue Kirke in Copenhagen. Replicas of the work are found in churches all over the world, varying in size and material. This cast, which stands in the Fossvogur cemetery in the area allocated for interment of ashes, was presented to Reykjavík Cemeteries in 1962 by the Cremation Society.

The baptismal font of Reykjavík Cathedral is probably Thorvaldsen’s best-known work in Iceland. The artist presented it to his ancestral land, Iceland, in 1827, as stated in an inscription on the reverse. The font was installed in the Cathedral in 1839, and it may be deemed the Cathedral’s greatest treasure. The font is a square pedestal of white marble with reliefs on all sides and a floral wreath around the baptismal basin. On the front is a depiction of John the Baptist baptising Jesus in the Jordan river; on the north side the same two characters are seen in boyhood with the Virgin Mary; and on the south side Jesus Blessing the Little Children. On the reverse are three angels and an inscription. Similar, earlier fonts are found in Brahe-Trolleborg castle church in Tyn, Denmark, and Helligåndskirken in central Copenhagen.

In 1889 the marble sculpture Mercury about to Kill Argus was placed in the keeping of the Commercial College. The work was a gift to the Icelandic nation from businessman Svend Kragh Petersen. The original was made by Thorvaldsen in Rome in 1818, and this marble replica was made by the Thorvaldsen Museum in 1860. It remained in the museum until 1944, and was sold when the museum acquired another marble exemplar from 1822. Mercury was the messenger of the gods, and the Roman god of commerce and business. Mercury is said to have been sent by his father, Jupiter, to free his mistress who was being held by the monstrous giant Argus, who had eyes all over his body. Mercury plays his pipes to Argus until he grows sleepy and closes his many eyes. At that point Mercury grasps his sword to slay the giant.

In 1931 the Thorvaldsen sculpture was removed from Austurvöllur to make way for a statue of Jón Sigurðsson, hero of the Icelandic campaign for self-determination, by sculptor Einar Jónsson (1874-1954). Thorvaldsen was moved to Hljómskálagarður park, where he looks out over the Lake from a tall pedestal. Another copy of the statue may be seen in Central Park, New York. In the apartment of sculptor Einar Jónsson, on the top floor of the Einar Jónsson Húsi, a plaster work about 30 cm in height was placed in the keeping of...