

Acquisitions, Donations and some of Sigurjón Ólafsson's key works

Exhibition at the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum
3 February - 31 August 2005

The Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum has been fortunate in that many admirers of Ólafsson's art have given pieces by the artist to the museum; some of these play a key role in Ólafsson's artistic career. These gifts have included previously unknown and uncatalogued works. The museum's board thanks all the donors for their generosity and goodwill toward the museum.

This exhibition includes nearly twenty works which the museum has acquired over the past ten years, and also two which are on loan from other collections. In this exhibition guide, the works are divided into several categories on the basis of the form, period and nature of the works. Their origins and provenance are also explained.

Works made in Denmark 1936 – 1940

At this time Ólafsson became known as one of the pioneers of modern sculpture in Denmark. His art was characterised by originality and inventiveness, at a time when the artistic world was teeming with creative ideas springing from Cubism, Primitivism, Surrealism and Dadaism; for young artists of the time, the most important thing was to find new ways of expressing the reality they were experiencing. This was a time of radical change for the younger generation, who were seeking new values to replace the ideology of the established bourgeoisie. Young avant-garde artists were generally highly aware of developments elsewhere in Europe - both in the arts and in politics - and many adhered to radical political movements. In Denmark, debate focussed on the trade union movement, social reform, housing and architecture for the people, and opposition to Nazism and Fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain. The theories of Sigmund Freud had a crucial influence upon the Surrealists, who found here a way to address the subject of sexuality, which had hitherto been taboo.

The museum has been given several key pieces by Ólafsson from his formative years in Denmark; these may be defined as experiments with form in clay and plaster of Paris.

1 Football Players

1936, LSÓ 247

In 1936–37 Ólafsson made four works on a sports theme, which capture the motion and speed of the human body in stylised, splendid, almost weightless forms. Ólafsson contributed *Football Players* to an exhibition held by artists in Denmark in support of volunteers fighting in the Spanish Civil War. The piece was purchased by a Danish architect, who owned it until 1991.

In 1997 it was purchased by Ólafur Ó. Johnson and his wife Guðrún, who presented it to the museum. By this generous gift, the museum acquired one of the artist's key works of the 1930s.

2 Children at Play

1938, LSÓ 206

This relief is part of a prize-winning entry made by Ólafsson for the *House of Children*, which was to be built in the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen in memory

of Hans Christian Andersen. The house was never built, and this version of the work remained in the home of architect Finn Juhl and his wife Inge Skaarup, who offered it to the museum at a low price in 1989. The Eimskip shipping company paid the costs of acquiring the piece, and of major restoration carried out with great expertise by sculptor Pontus Kjerrman, a lecturer at the Royal Danish Academy of Arts. The work was exhibited in a peripatetic show in Denmark in 1991, and it came to Iceland the following year.

3 Sculpture

1939, LSÓ 259

Grete Borg, widow of architect Ejnar Borg, gave this piece to the museum in 2003. The couple were neighbours of Ólafsson at Nyhavn 65 in Copenhagen, and among his closest friends.

This is an example of formal ideas which interested Ólafsson at that time, which are seen strikingly in large surrealist works such as *The Bird* (LSÓ 1043, 1939), in the collection of the National Gallery of Iceland, and *The Dragon* (LSÓ 1051, 1939–40), which is believed to be lost.

4 Seated Woman

c. 1938, LSÓ 1044

This small piece was also given to Ejnar and Grete Borg by Ólafsson. The museum acquired the mould and a cast of the original in 2004.

5 Desire

c. 1940, LSÓ 234

In this powerful work, Ólafsson provides an unambiguous interpretation of sexual appeal and sexual attraction. The piece is moulded directly in plaster of Paris, demonstrating Ólafsson's skill with this rather intractable material, making conscious use of its qualities as it solidified.

Closely related to *Desire* are the wooden sculptures *Man and Woman* (LSÓ 1054, 1939), in the Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum in Ålborg, Denmark, and *Woman* (LSÓ 1066, 1942), in a private collection in Reykjavík.

Dentist Aage Gall in Dragør, Denmark, acquired the piece in the 1940s as payment for dental work. When the work was offered for sale to the museum, the museum's support fund raised funding from friends of the museum, and the museum acquired *Desire* in 1994.

Portraits

Sigurjón Ólafsson is renowned for his mastery of portraiture, and about 200 portraits by him exist. The best known is undoubtedly the portrait of his mother, Guðrún Gísladóttir, made in 1938 - according to the artist in one day. He was living in Denmark at the time, and he had not been home for four years. Other portraits in the exhibition are of male subjects; the surface treatment of the clay reflects the different personalities of the subjects.

6 My Mother

1938, LSÓ 007

This sculpture, among the best and most inspired of Ólafsson's works, is in the museum's permanent exhibition. For this work, Ólafsson won the prestigious Danish Eckersberg Prize in 1939, after which bronze casts of the piece were purchased by three Nordic State Art Museums. It has been shown in many countries, most recently in the spring of 2004 in London as the Master Portrait of *FACE 2004*, an exhibition held by the British Society of Portrait Sculptors.

7 Chief Surgeon Guðmundur Thoroddsen 1947, LSÓ 248
Ólafsson often spoke of how much he had enjoyed talking to Thoroddsen as he posed, and of being permitted to see him at work in the operating theatre of the National Hospital.

The original plaster of Paris sculpture was given to the museum by Thoroddsen's heirs, and it was subsequently cast in bronze at Kristiania Kunst & Metalstøberi in Oslo, Norway.

8 Kristín Einarsdóttir 1949, LSÓ 1103
Ólafsson made this relief of his sister-in-law for her fiftieth birthday. The plaster of Paris original was presented to the Museum in 1998. This is a typical portrait of a friend, made on the artist's own initiative, as a token of his respect and gratitude.

9 Actor Haraldur Björnsson 1961, LSÓ 245
This portrait was made in 1961, on the initiative of Haraldur's sons. The National Theatre acquired a bronze cast of the portrait, and in 1997 the plaster of Paris original was presented to the museum by Björnsson's daughter-in-law Áslaug Stephensen.

10 Jakob Gíslason 1972, LSÓ 230
Ólafsson made the portrait at the request of Gíslason's friends, for his 70th birthday. Jakob and Sigurjón, who were both from Eyrarbakki, were friends. Gíslason's heirs gave the plaster of Paris original to the museum in 1994.

11 Þorsteinn Þ. Víglundsson 1972, LSÓ 1280
Þorsteinn Víglundsson was a headmaster and savings-bank manager in the Westman Islands. Ólafsson's portrait was made when Víglundsson was just over 70. Bronze casts of the piece are located in the Westman Islands secondary school and in the local folk museum. The plaster of Paris original was presented to the Ólafsson Museum in 2004 by Víglundsson's son, Víglundur Þ. Þorsteinson.

Abstract works from various periods

This contains works of various kinds and of many different materials: clay, wood, rock and metal. The oldest is *Queen of the Mountains* (LSÓ 010, 1947), a totem-pole image which is on permanent exhibition at the museum and indicates the interest the artists of the time had in primitive art. *Queen of the Mountains* has two 'sisters' made in the same year, called *Masks*, one made in bronze, the other in gabbro.

12 On the Way to my Beloved 1954–55, LSÓ 212
This work has an unusual history. It was conceived in a cramped attic apartment where Ólafsson lived with his family at Nørrebro in Copenhagen. In order to overcome his sense of claustrophobia beneath the skylight, the artist imagined a piece of environmental art, built across a main road so that the cars would drive underneath it. The work is open to broad interpretation, from the concrete to abstract surrealism.

13 Infant

1955, LSÓ 1137

This sculpture, which Ólafsson made in Denmark from a granite boulder, has had many titles over the years: in addition to *Infant* it has been called *Útburður*, and *Móðir mín í kví, kví*, both references to the exposure of “unwanted” babies. The piece is on loan from the ASÍ Labour Federation Art Gallery.

14 A Magic Sign: To Win all Causes

1960, LSÓ 1173

In 1960–1962 Ólafsson made drawings of old Icelandic magic signs which appeared in Jón Árnason's folklore collection. It was not surprising that these magical signs with their powerful forms appealed to him, as they had much in common with primitivism, to which he and his contemporaries had been drawn in the 1930s in Denmark. It is interesting that the focus of the piece is the *Mask* motif, which was first seen in his work in 1947. The work was purchased by the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum in 2003.

15 Creation

1976/1988, LSÓ 072

Ólafsson first made this piece in expanded polystyrene in 1976, with the idea of having a marble version made by a stonemason; by this time the artist was no longer able to work in stone himself, due to failing health. In 1988 the company Ó. Johnson & Kaaber hf. met the costs of having the piece carved in Carrara marble, and presented it to the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum to mark the company's 80th anniversary. The gift was also accompanied by a donation to the museum, which opened to the public that year. The marble sculpture was made by sculptor Erlingur Jónsson. *Creation* is on permanent exhibition in the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum.

16 Storm Petrel

1975, LSÓ 1300

In 1974 Ólafsson was commissioned to make a large mural in mahogany for *Lögberg*, the new building of the Faculty of Law at the University of Iceland. From the off-cuts of the work he made a number of free sculptures, including *Storm Petrel*. The piece depicts speed, tension and conflict. The artist used the same motif in a memorial coin for Finland in a Nordic coin series in 1978.

Friends of the artist, carpenter Kristján Guðmundsson and Valborg Hallgrímsdóttir, who bought the work originally, gave *Storm Petrel* to the museum in 1998.

17 House God

1979, LSÓ 106

In this piece Ólafsson returns to a motif related to his totem poles of the 1930s and 1940s. The piece is made of driftwood, and in places a silvery patina is visible, due to the weathering of the timber by the sea. The piece was bought by the museum in 1994.

Proposals for environmental art works

In recent years the museum has acquired remarkable proposals for environmental art works; some were privately owned, while others are from the museum's collection and have recently been cast in durable materials.

18 Knud Rasmussen: Sketch for a Memorial 1957, LSÓ 025
In 1957 Ólafsson participated in a competition held in Denmark for a memorial to Knud Rasmussen, explorer of Greenland. He made a larger-than-life portrait of Rasmussen, and also this proposal, depicting the explorer with his dog-team on a spit of ice. It is interesting to see how the proportions of the piece reflect those of the dog-sled, so that the sled is also present, though invisible. The proposal did not meet with the judges' approval; the reason given was that it did not meet the requirement of being one-sixth of full size - it was one-twelfth.

19 Yearning for Life 1960, LSÓ 226
The work springs from the magical signs mentioned above, but it is primarily a celebration of the simplicity and joy of children's drawings, where the human body is compressed into a sphere and a line, and a hand becomes a trident. The position and size of the spheres also carries the same dignity and balance as Arab architecture. The piece was enlarged by sculptor Erlingur Jónsson in stainless steel, and erected at the Reykjalundur sanatorium in 1993, in memory of chief physician Oddur Ólafsson.

20 Four-Sided Form 1966, LSÓ 224
In 1964 Ólafsson started to work in copper sheets which were welded together for him; this was in order to avoid the costly process of casting in bronze, which was done in Denmark. While the piece is not large, it is monumental in nature and could be greatly enlarged.

21 The Racket Troll 1967, LSÓ 197
Ólafsson made a small metal maquette for the large sculpture *Racket Troll* (LSÓ 1243, 1967–68) which was erected at the Búrfell hydro plant in south Iceland. This is a silver cast of the maquette, made by the Pangolin Edition sculpture foundry in Britain. It was part of an exhibition of about 50 silver sculptures, *Sterling Stuff*, shown at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in London, and in Iceland in 2003.

22 Greetings 1973–74, LSÓ 073
In the 1970s Ólafsson started concentrating on working in expanded polystyrene. His experience with bas-reliefs made for the Búrfell hydro plant led to further experiments with this modern but base industrial material. He made the work in expanded polystyrene, and bronze casts are owned by the Central Bank of Iceland, the Leifur Eiríksson Air Terminal and the Icelandic Embassy in Denmark. In 2004 the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum had a fourth cast made for its collection.

23 Ferrum 1973–74, LSÓ 1284
Draft for an outdoor sculpture five to six metres high, which received an award from the town of Kópavogur on the 1100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland. The work was to be made in corten steel and stand directly on the ground, so that one could walk inside it.

This piece shows Ólafsson's innovative approach to sculpture in seeking to remove the plinth and the forward-looking vision which was always a striking part of his work, to take over the observer's spatial sense to make him/her a participant in the work. The piece is on loan from the Kópavogur Art Museum, Gerðarsafn.

Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908– 1982) was born in Eyrarbakki, a village at the south coast of Iceland. Trained as a house painter, he entered the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1928, from which he graduated in 1935, having supplemented his studies with a year in Rome.

From early on Ólafsson worked in abstract forms, but he also developed the realistic style that characterizes his portrait busts and statues. He has been named one of his century's most important portrait sculptors. In 1938 he was awarded the honorable Danish Eckersberg Prize for the portrait *My Mother*, cast of which were immediately bought by leading museums in Scandinavia. In 1939, he made his first completely abstract sculpture *Man and Woman* which caused great controversy, but is now considered a sculptural landmark in Denmark where Ólafsson is known as a pioneer of spontaneous abstract sculpture. Ólafsson's most challenging commission in Denmark were the monuments on Vejle square (1941–1944) featuring symbolic figures for the town's main occupations, agriculture, handicraft, trade and industry.

Ólafsson returned to Iceland in 1945. As one of the leading artists of the country, he was commissioned to create numerous challenging projects, among them a 90 m long relief at the Búrfell - hydropower station. He leaves eighteen public monuments in Reykjavík alone, Emblem of Iceland at Hagatorg and Throne Pillars - by the Höfði House perhaps being the best known.

Ólafsson was an experimental artist who brought both classical schooling and artistic insight to a variety of materials from clay and plaster to wood, metal, stone and concrete. This versatility has inspired younger generations of Icelandic visual artists. His works are found at museums and private collections in Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Italy and the United States.

