

# De Profundis

Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum  
24 April – 1 September 2013

Selected sculptures by Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908–1982)  
and paintings by his colleagues and friends  
Þorvaldur Skúlason, Svavar Guðnason, Nína Tryggvadóttir,  
Kristján Davíðsson and Guðmunda Andrésdóttir.  
From the collection of the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum  
and the National Gallery of Iceland

## Foreword

We stand at a remarkable turning point, when two art museums in the Reykjavík area – one of them the leading museum of Icelandic art, the other one of Iceland's most influential specialist museums – open a joint exhibition on the premises of the latter. The exhibition *De Profundis* juxtaposes the works of sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson with those of several of his close friends and colleagues. The title invokes the sea monsters he conjured up, after long-term ill-health forced him to abandon the chisel for good. As is so often the case, an unavoidable retreat was transformed into a new advance, making use of different objects and materials. Instead of giving up in the face of adversity, people will search out fresh fields and pastures new; and in that way the Icelandic nation was enriched when Sigurjón conclusively demonstrated that he was capable of turning over a new leaf and tackling new ideas, developing them in complex ways – although in a sense he returned to his origins, using wood, with the addition of copper and other metals.

His painter friends also faced a new challenge. The strict formalism of the 1950s gave way to a more lyrical approach. Every experiment with liberating imagery from the fetters of regular spatial divisions, and freeing colour from the clutches of geometrical linear forms, reflected the way that artists were seeking out new and unexplored territory. Hence there is some truth in the assertion that the period ushered in by these changes marked the high point of Modernist art in Iceland, and opened the eyes of the people of Iceland to what these artists had to offer.

It is in light of this progression that it is worthwhile to take a look at the period which followed on from the confrontation between incomprehension and enlightenment, which led to people opening their eyes to the modern age, and what it had brought them. Thus we have reason to rejoice at the way that the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum conserves the chapter of Icelandic art history concerned with Modernist art – which rose to its zenith with the works that emerged *de profundis*, from the depths of the psyche of the artists seen here, testifying to their highly-developed understanding of their work and their calling.

Halldór Björn Runólfsson director  
The National Gallery of Iceland

## De Profundis

Art, architecture and environment coalesce in a unique manner in the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum, by the sea on the Laugarnes headland. Sigurjón's work remains perennially fresh, although it may admittedly be hard to grasp the revolutionary ideas behind the philosophy of twentieth-century art, and to fathom the context, both local and international, of Icelandic art in the years following World War II.

The title of the exhibition *Úr djúpunum – De Profundis* is a reference to the fantastical creatures that Sigurjón began to work with following a grave illness around 1960. Due to the decline in his health, he abandoned almost entirely sculpting in stone, to experiment with new – yet old – materials, and work with them in innovative ways, to create images which have either human or animal character. Sigurjón almost returned to first principles: by the simple action of handling such diverse substances as copper, iron and wood, he entered upon a new period in his art. He permitted himself to make experiments, while never forgetting the essential foundations of sculpture, i.e. the confrontation with space. *Friendship* (Vináttá 1969, LSÓ 046) is an excellent example of his new approach; the piece also demonstrates that Sigurjón's composite carved wooden works are founded on his long experience as a sculptor, and his absolute command of the material. The work is a pillar in human form, forward-facing – looking the observer right in the face. The imagery, cuts, scratches and nail-marks are aspects of the innovative method adopted by Sigurjón at that time, which offered unlimited potential in the search for the primeval. Perhaps chance sometimes played a part; but in spite of his experimentalism Sigurjón's composite works are always well-thought-out and finished pieces of work. Every cut,

every cleft, seems to be in precisely the right place, in such a way that light and shadow fall exactly as they should. The piece quickens into life, becomes human, with all its bizarre holes and spikes and nails. That physical presence is undeniably reminiscent of African idols: the power springs directly out of the material, and the rest is left to poetic inspiration.

Painter and critic Hjörleifur Sigurðsson described Sigurjón's works in a review of a show in *Birtingur* (1958): "Pure objects, all of a piece, that we perceive all at once with our entire body, as if by chance ... These rounded stones, the carved trunks of wood, the bronze heads – how have they become an integral part of our lives? Was it a hard road to their creation? Are multifarious talents the genesis of simple form?" Sigurjón's improvisational pieces could even be called mythological creatures, in the sense used by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*. The beings rise up from the depths of the psyche: whole, autonomous creatures, reflecting Man's primal need to collect things and to handle them. Their existence might perhaps be explained in terms of Sigurjón trying to push time away, magically to halt its onward march.

Works by Sigurjón from the period 1960 until his death in 1982 are shown here in colloquy with paintings by his colleagues Guðmunda Andrésdóttir, Nína Tryggvadóttir, Þorvaldur Skúlason, Svavar Guðnason and Kristján Davíðsson. All were connected, whether personally or as artists, and the interface between their paintings and Sigurjón's works yields unexpected perspectives. Viewed in this context, Sigurjón's two-dimensional works, even wooden pieces such as *Battle for the Magic Egg* (Baráttan um fjöreggið 1978, LSÓ 098), are seen in a new light. His handling of the plane, the bas-relief, and of the plane in free-standing pieces, gained growing importance as the 20th century progressed, and by around 1970 it is striking – when he was commissioned to tackle the huge wall of the new Búrfell hydro-electric plant (1966–69). At that period, it is interesting to observe how Sigurjón sought to establish symmetry between plane and space, between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. Many of his free-standing pieces of that time recall larger-scale two-dimensional

works; and a comparison reveals that many of the smaller pieces were originally conceived on a large scale. They were “exercises” for bigger pieces; and in larger pieces forms from smaller ones could be reworked. Behind this lay the artist’s long experience and knowledge of the qualities of sculpture, scale and proportion, and the effect of proportion in the space, both indoors and out.

Sigurjón had gained this experience, inter alia because during his long career he had worked his way through the history of art in practice, learning all the methods of sculpture; and he was a master of all materials, whether he chiselled in stone, moulded in clay, cast, added or subtracted. He familiarised himself with the sculpture of the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Assyrians; he learned lessons from Brancusi; turned back to the Italian Renaissance, armed with perspective drawing, until he reached found fragments of wood and rocks from the sea shore; then weighty concrete; and finally the primal simplicity of carving wood. Thus primitive arts are manifested in diverse ways in Sigurjón’s art – whether the material is rock or wood – from the time when he carved his first pillar in human form, *The Stem* (Stofninn 1936, LSÓ 1041). And an overtone of primitive art may still be seen in the stylised face of *The Horseshoe and the Shield* (Skeifan og skjöldurinn 1970, LSÓ 052), which has the same calm, rounded character as *Atomic Bomb* (Atómsprengjan 1979, LSÓ 099). The colloquy with the artist’s colleagues is seen where the shadowplay of *Battle for the Magic Egg* (LSÓ 098) interacts with the eddies in Þorvaldur Skúlason’s works from 1981. And Sigurjón’s sculptures and the paintings of Guðmunda Andrésdóttir also share the characteristics of rhythmical composition, repetition and symmetry, as seen in Sigurjón’s *Roundelay* (Snúningar 1970, LSÓ 050). *Composition* (Samstæða 1978, LSÓ 059) is another example of how Sigurjón establishes a strong dialogue between form and plane; and these two pieces could both have been conceived as ideas for much larger spatial pieces. On the other hand, the freedom which Sigurjón permits himself, in compositions which take flight like poetry written in the space, is echoed in the free-flowing brushwork of Svavar Guðnason and Kristján Davíðsson in the picture plane.

How do we react when a period becomes a part of history? The works of the artists shown here never make overt reference to disputes or differences of opinion about art in Icelandic society, although they are grounded in strongly-held views on what art should be, and its role in society. Guðmunda Andrésdóttir described her art as a matter of life and death; and Sigurjón himself laid his life on the line for his art, and paid the price, with permanent damage to his health. The works conjure up a time when artists saw it as their role to grapple with man's existential crisis – manifested in a quest for that which is primeval, common to all, in humanity. As novelist Guðbergur Bergsson has pointed out, works of art outlive their makers. Sculpture is a permanent part of the environment, in a different way from a painting, which must make do with wall space. Sigurjón's works do not make their mark only on the museum and its surroundings on the Laugarnes headland – for they can be seen in many other places around Reykjavík: on walls along Sæbraut, on apartment buildings at Espigerði, in the piazza by Hotel Saga, to mention but a few. This is art which springs into life at close quarters, in the here and now.

Paris, April 2013  
Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir  
Art Historian

### **Þorvaldur Skúlason (1906–1984)**

was born in Borðeyri in northwest Iceland, then moved with his parents to Blönduós, in the same region, where he grew up. At the age of 15 he sailed to Leith and Copenhagen as ship's mess boy, and thus had the opportunity to visit art galleries there and in Edinburgh. On his return to Iceland he started to draw and paint in earnest, and received lessons from artist Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876–1958). In 1928–30 he studied with Professor Axel Revold in Oslo, and he spent the next ten years studying in Paris and Copenhagen, where he encountered other Icelanders, including Sigurjón Ólafsson. They both showed their work at the exhibition *Skandinaverne* in 1939, along with young abstract artists who went on to found the *Cobra* group. In 1940 Þorvaldur returned to Iceland, and he participated in exhibitions of the *September Group* in Reykjavík 1947–52. He showed his work extensively abroad, and, along with Svavar Guðnason, represented Iceland at the *Venice Biennale* in 1972. In 1980 about 100 paintings and drawings by Þorvaldur were presented to the University of Iceland by Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir and her husband Sverrir Sigurðsson; that gift formed the basis of the present University Art Collection.

### **Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908–1982)**

was born and brought up in Eyrarbakki on the south coast of Iceland. In 1923 he moved to Reykjavík, where he took art lessons, and qualified as a journeyman housepainter. He left for Copenhagen in the autumn of 1928, to study with sculptor Professor Einar Utzon-Frank at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. In 1930 Sigurjón was awarded the Academy's Gold Medal, and before long he had the reputation of being one of the most promising sculptors of the younger generation in Denmark. In the 1930s he came to be influenced by Cubism and Surrealism; he experimented boldly with form, and took part in exhibitions with other avant-garde artists. Sigurjón's largest project in Denmark was a commission to make two granite sculptures for the town-hall square in Vejle in 1941–44. In 1945 Sigurjón returned to Iceland, where he became one of the pioneers of modernism in Iceland. During his long career Sigurjón was commissioned to make many



works of public art including portrait statues, monuments, and bas-reliefs, for instance on the powerhouse of the Búrfell hydro-electric plant. A large collection of his work belongs to the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum and the National Gallery of Iceland, and examples of his work can also be seen in collections in Scandinavia and the USA.

### **Svavar Guðnason (1909–1988)**

was born in Höfn in Hornafjörður, southeast Iceland, and later worked and studied in Reykjavík, before leaving for Copenhagen in 1935 to study art. He did not remain for long at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, and was largely self-taught. In 1938 he went to Paris, where he stayed for six months, familiarising himself with the latest developments in art, and energetically painting. He had close ties with artists in the Danish *Høstudstillingen* group (1942–48) and *Cobra* (1949–51), which was founded by Asger Jorn along with artists from Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium. Like Sigurjón Ólafsson, Svavar spent the war years 1940–45 in Denmark. In the autumn of 1945 he held a large one-man show of abstract works in Reykjavík; this marked a turning point in Icelandic art. Svavar's works have been shown extensively outside Iceland, often in company with other *Cobra* artists. Paintings by Svavar may be seen in many foreign collections, and at the Hornafjörður Art Gallery, where the Svavar Guðnason Gallery was founded in 2011 with an inaugural gift from the artist's widow, Ásta Eiríksdóttir. Svavar represented Iceland, along with Þorvaldur Skúlason, at the *Venice Biennale* 1972.

### **Nína Tryggvadóttir (1913–1968)**

was born in Seyðisfjörður, east Iceland, and moved to Reykjavík with her family at the age of six. While a student at Reykjavík High School, she received art lessons from painters Ásgrímur Jónsson, Finnur Jónsson and Jóhann Briem. She studied 1935–39 with Professor Kræsten Iversen at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, and showed her work inter alia at *Charlottenborg* and *Den Frie*. Nína lived abroad for most of her life – in Paris, London and New

York – so she was well placed to show her work internationally. But she generally spent her summers in Iceland, and Iceland and the Icelanders remained dear to her heart. Her art exhibits influence from Icelandic nature and the unique quality of Icelandic light, in powerful yet lyrical works. She received a number of commissions in Iceland, including the mosaic altarpiece of Skálholt Cathedral, and a mural for Landsbanki Íslands (National Bank) in Reykjavík. Works by Nína Tryggvadóttir are in MOMA in New York, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and Le Musée d'Art et d'Industrie in Saint-Etienne, as well as collections in Germany, Israel and Iceland.

### **Kristján Davíðsson** (b. 1917)

was born in Reykjavík, and grew up in Patreksfjörður in the West Fjords. At the age of only five he watched Guðmundur Þorsteinsson – known as Muggur – painting down by the harbour. Ten years later he saw photographs of the work of Expressionists Oskar Kokoschka from Austria and the German Karl Hofer, which proved a powerful inspiration, and he sought the guidance of painter Finnur Jónsson, who had studied art in Germany. In 1935–45 Kristján lived in Reykjavík, supporting himself as a fisherman and labourer, while painting energetically and also playing the violin. He befriended avant-garde artists – both writers and painters – and in 1945 he received a grant which enabled him to study at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. In the USA he familiarised himself with the work of leading Modernists, and also the art of “primitive” peoples. On his return to Iceland in 1947 he took part in the exhibitions of the *September Group* in Reykjavík. His fertile, individual style of painting has been channelling new influences into Icelandic art ever since. Kristján Davíðsson represented Iceland at the *Venice Biennale* in 1984 and the *São Paulo Biennale* in 1985.

### **Guðmunda Andrésdóttir** (1922–2002)

was born in Reykjavík. She graduated in 1941 from the Commercial College of Iceland, after which she did clerical work. In the autumn of 1945 she saw an exhibition of abstract art by Svavar

Guðnason, which was such a powerful inspiration that she started to paint. In 1946–48 she studied art in Sweden, and 1951–53 in Paris; she also made study tours to Italy, the Netherlands and England. Guðmunda first exhibited her work with the September Group in 1952, and in 1956 she held her first one-woman show. Guðmunda always had a “day job” alongside her work as an artist: initially as an art teacher, and subsequently as a draughtsman at the Iceland National Energy Authority. Works by Guðmunda are found in the leading Icelandic collections; and in the USA in the Colby Art Museum í Maine, the Gertrud A. Mellon Foundation at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Guðmunda bequeathed her collection to the National Gallery of Iceland, the Reykjavík Art Museum and the University of Iceland Art Collection. Another bequest went to establish a fund in her name to provide financial support to promising young artists in their studies.