

# Female Idols

Portraits and figures of women  
by Sigurjón Ólafsson

Exhibition to mark the centenary  
of women's suffrage in Iceland

Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum  
17 October 2015 – 28 August 2016

1 **Sigrún Magnúsdóttir, 1930, LSÓ 1015**

A gift to the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum in 1998 from Sigrún's sister Arnþrúður. Sigrún Magnúsdóttir was a drama student at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen when Sigurjón, who was studying at the sculpture department of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, made this portrait of her. Danish art historian Lise Funder writes: *There is a hint of strict classical expression in this portrait – of what Utzon-Frank called a "cultural tool," which he inculcated into the young students of the Academy. ... The simplified lines in the hair with their sharply-defined outlines, are reminiscent of Utzon-Frank's bust Aphrodite. But where Aphrodite exudes a distance, a certain aloofness, the bust of the Icelandic singer Sigrún Magnúsdóttir represents a modern young woman with a sensitive mouth and a lively glint in her eye.*<sup>1)</sup> The sculpture was first exhibited in Kunsternes Efterårsudstilling 1930.

2 **Margarethe Krabbe, 1931, LSÓ 204**

A gift to the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum in 1990 from Margarethe Krabbe's daughter, Helga. In the summer of 1931 Sigurjón travelled to Iceland and held an exhibition of several works, including *Labourer*, for which he had recently been awarded the Academy's gold medal. This led to a commission to make portraits of Director Thorvald Krabbe and his wife Margarethe. In a photograph, the artist is seen working on Margarethe's portrait in the Krabbes' home on Tjarnargata in Reykjavík. The work was first exhibited at the Charlottenborgs Efterårsudstilling 1937.

3 **Elsemarie Christensen, 1936, LSÓ 200**

A gift to Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum in 1989 from Elsemarie Christensen. In 1936 Sigurjón made portraits of Elsemarie Christensen and her husband Haakon, but Elsemarie did not want to have both their portraits in her living room, and the artist then proposed making a bas-relief of her. Haakon insisted on Sigurjón sculpting both profiles of his wife. Sigurjón is not thought to have made any other work of this nature. The relief was first exhibited at Charlottenborgs Forårsudstilling 1937.

4 **My Mother, 1938, LSÓ 007**

This work is beyond doubt one of the artist's finest portraits. It was made one memorable afternoon in the kitchen of his mother, Guðrún Gísladóttir, in the summer of 1938 when he was in Iceland on holiday. First shown at the Grønningen exhibition in Copenhagen in 1939, it won Sigurjón the Eckersberg Medal. Danish art historian Pierre Lübecker writes: *This is a character portrait of Sigurjón's mother, which is so intimate that one sees a whole nation in the face.*<sup>2)</sup> Casts of the work are in the collections of the national galleries of Denmark, Sweden and Iceland.

5 **Kristín Einarsdóttir, 1949, LSÓ 1103**

A gift to the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum from Kristín's descendants. Kristín Einarsdóttir was Sigurjón's sister-in-law, the wife of his brother Gísli, a master baker. Sigurjón had lived with the couple as a youngster in Reykjavík. He was deeply fond of his sister-in-law, and made this bas-relief on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday. She did not pose for the portrait; Sigurjón worked from sketches he made as she worked in her kitchen.

6 **Birgitta Spur, 1950, LSÓ 017**

Danish art historian Charlotte Christensen writes that this portrait of Birgitta Spur is: ... *the boldest and most daring of all his portraits. The subject's face is built up of sheer planes, ostensibly as a reminiscence of the art of cubist sculpture. The eyes have been indicated as small rhombuses. In spite of its stylisation, the portrait is brimming with life and character.* <sup>3)</sup>

7 **Halla Lovísa Loftsdóttir and Steingerður Sigurjónsdóttir  
1952–1953, LSÓ 201**

A gift from Steingerður Sigurjónsdóttir Gonzales 1987. This bas-relief of Sigurjón's daughter with her maternal grandmother is unlike Sigurjón's other portraits. The contrasts in the work are striking: on the one hand the grave, dignified woman in traditional Icelandic dress, who rises up vertically in the picture plane; on the other the little girl behind her with the rounded forms of a child's face, leaning into the picture plane. It is as if one sees the little girl hurrying to keep up with her grandmother as she strides ahead with her skirts swinging.

8 **Jakobína Jakobsdóttir, 1957–1958, LSÓ 1158**

Jakobína Jakobsdóttir taught at the primary school in Eyrarbakki when Sigurjón was a schoolboy there. In 1957 he was commissioned to make a portrait of this formidable woman, who was eighty years old at the time. She sat for the portrait in Sigurjón's studio in the old military hut at Laugarnes, and the two got on well. The work was first shown in plaster of Paris in Sigurjón's 50th-birthday-show at Listamannaskálinn in 1958. The Eyrarbakki Primary School's bronze cast of the work was shown at Frederiksborg Palace in Hillerød, Denmark, on the artist's centenary in 2008.

9 **Astrid Cappelen, 1963, LSÓ 190**

Astrid Cappelen was the daughter of the Norwegian ambassador in Iceland in the 1960s. This work is regarded as one of Sigurjón's finest portraits of a young girl.

10 **Svava Ágústsdóttir, 1964, LSÓ 033**

There is no doubt that Sigurjón found it a refreshing change from portraits of males to model women's faces. The portrait of Svava Ágústsdóttir appears to attain a higher plane; Danish art historian Charlotte Christensen describes the work as: *brilliant ... every bit as exquisite as the head of Nefertiti.*<sup>3)</sup>

11 **Selma Jónsdóttir, 1965, LSÓ 1212**

The portrait of Selma Jónsdóttir, director of the National Gallery of Iceland, is a 'friend's portrait', i.e. Sigurjón made the work on his own initiative. The work is an outstanding portrayal of character, fresh and humorous – despite the fact that Sigurjón was unable to complete the piece as he intended, as the clay dried out. As is well-known, early sketches and maquettes of a work may provide as much insight into the personality as a finished piece.

12 **Bjarnveig Bjarnadóttir, 1977, LSÓ 1311**

Every feature of Bjarnveig's face is clear and fully formed – and this was an 'official portrait', commissioned for display in a public space. At a young age Bjarnveig started to collect art, for money "that others spent on cigarettes and alcohol", as she put it, and in 1963 she presented to the LÁ Art Museum in Árnes-sýsla, south Iceland, 42 paintings by leading artists of the time. These works were the founding gift of the museum. Bjarnveig was related to artist Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876–1958), and was director of the museum of his work for twenty years. The LÁ Art Museum commissioned the portrait from Sigurjón in 1977.

13–18

photographs

Photographs of six portraits made by Sigurjón in Denmark 1933–1945, which exemplify the diversity of his methods. The oldest of the works is a naturalistic portrait of his then fiancée (later wife) *Tove Thomasen* (LSÓ 1025, 1933). The portraits of *Inga Kærn* (LSÓ 1070, 1943), *Ina Rohde* (LSÓ 1057, 1940–1945) and *Else Park* (LSÓ 1075, 1944–1945) are unfinished clay works which have the freshness of maquettes. Particularly interesting is the free handling of the hair in the portrait of Inga Kærn. It is interesting to compare these works with the portraits of *Benedikte Bülow* (LSÓ 1038, 1936) and *Hanne Schultz* (LSÓ 1074, 1944), which are characterised by large, massy forms. In the case of Benedikte, however, the solid forms are enlivened by delicate details around the eyes and the hair. On close scrutiny, this piece seems to pave the way for the portrait *My Mother*, made two years later by Sigurjón.

19 **Venus 1935**, 1934–1935, LSÓ 1033

Part of the academic training in sculpture at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts during Sigurjón's time was the life class, where students learned to depict the human form from life. But as early as in his graduation project, *Venus 1935*, Sigurjón stepped beyond the aesthetic boundaries of the time. The young woman resembles the walking figures seen in profile in ancient Egyptian art, which reflected the rules or canon of their time. The large, simplified forms manifest the influence of statues of the Archaic period in Greek art (around 500 BC), which Sigurjón had studied and copied. The work was moulded in clay, and cast in concrete.

20 **Stacking Saltfish**, 1934–1935, LSÓ 1034 photograph

Sigurjón's massive bas-relief *Stacking Saltfish* was also made during his last year at the Academy. The subject – women at work stacking saltfish – is of a well-established genre, but Sigurjón's approach is modernist, and at the same time classical, in that he disrupts the stillness of the work by permitting the shapes to extend beyond the frame. He made the work full-size (four metres tall), initially in clay, after which he made a plaster of Paris cast with his own hands. Sigurjón had envisioned a place for the work on the façade of the new premises of the Fisheries Association in Reykjavík, designed by State Architect Guðjón Samúelsson; the building is now a hotel. That plan came to nothing, but in 1945 the Icelandic government purchased the work, and the following year it was cast in concrete. In 1953 it was erected on a hilltop site on Rauðarárholt in Reykjavík, adjacent to the College of Navigation (now Technical College).

21 **Mother and Child**, 1936, LSÓ 1039

One of Sigurjón's first works sculpted in stone – in this case French limestone. The compression of forms has similarities with the women in the bas-relief *Stacking Saltfish*. The sculpture has stood in the open air, and has weathered badly.

22 **Woman**, 1941, LSÓ 1066

Sigurjón worked in many different materials, such as clay, stone and wood, employing a range of methods. Clay sculpture is an additive method, whereby material can be added or removed, while sculpture in wood or stone is subtractive, i.e. material is removed by chiselling, carving or cutting, and cannot be replaced. *Woman*, made using subtractive technique, is a fine example of how Sigurjón showcased the qualities of the material in the finished work. Year-rings and branches in the wood are an integral part of the work, and contribute to the finished piece.

23 **Commerce and Industry**, maquette, 1941, LSÓ 164

In 1941 Sigurjón was commissioned to make two stone sculptures for the Town Hall Square in Vejle in Jutland, Denmark. He made clay maquettes at three scales: this is a cast in plaster of Paris of the middle-sized version of one of the sculptures. The first maquette for the other sculpture is in existence, but it is probable that Sigurjón rid himself of the full-size clay pieces due to lack of space. The piece on exhibition here was discovered by chance in 1987, standing in a courtyard in Christianshavn, Copenhagen, in very poor condition after standing in the open air for 35 years. It was restored in 1987 by Pontus Kjerrman, a lecturer at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. The cost of restoration and transport of the piece to Iceland was paid by the Eimskip shipping company.

24 **Girl**, 1945, LSÓ 1081

Art historian Æsa Sigurjónsdóttir writes: *Girl was Sigurjón's first work after his return to Iceland in 1945. It is made in gabbro from southeast Iceland, but the morphology, especially the shape of the face, indicate that he was still working through ideas that he had accumulated during the Vejle project. The image gives the impression that it is breaking out of the rock. The chiselling is rather shallow, allowing the rough texture of the stone to evoke rugged facial features, while delicately-drawn lines and rounded forms shaped in the hard rock elicit a powerful emotional response to the gigantic head that rises like a mask straight out of the earth. In his stone sculpture Sigurjón skilfully applied the expertise he had acquired in academic morphology, and he knew precisely where to use light and shadow to create forms and bring the stone to life. He needs do no more than hint at the idea by gentle tapping at the stone, in order to perfect the effect and underline the uncertainty of whose hand is stroking the girl's giant cheek.* <sup>4)</sup>

25 **Woman Bathing**, 1948, LSÓ 013 photograph

When Sigurjón returned to Iceland in 1945 after living for many years in Denmark, he started to make large sculptures in dolerite, among them this piece and *Woman with a Cat*. Typically, Sigurjón chose indefinite titles for his work, as he did not wish to force explicit ideas onto the observer, although his symbolism might be clear. The cat is well-known to be a symbol of the Norse goddess of love, Freyja; and many people also know that the Greek goddess of love Aphrodite rose fully-formed from the sea-foam. If we choose to see *Woman Bathing* as some kind of Icelandic mermaid, or simply a girl bathing on the beach at Nauthólsvík, that is fine too. The observer is free to make his/her own interpretation.

26 **Queen of the Mountains**, 1947, LSÓ 010

Masks became a common motif in Sigurjón's art after he returned to Iceland in 1945 at the end of World War II; but the idea had probably been present in his subconscious since the 1930s and 40s, when avant-garde artists in Denmark became interested in 'primitive' art. In 1947 Sigurjón made three mask sculptures, of which *Queen of the Mountains* is the second. Masks are also a feature of Sigurjón's later works, and *Pallas Athena* is indubitably the most spectacular.

27 **Pallas Athena**, 1973, LSÓ 055

The work is a Janus-like figure with two heads facing in opposite directions. In Roman mythology Janus was the god of new beginnings and change. But this double head is indisputably female: her hair ends in braids, and the facial details are delicate. Art historian Björn Th. Björnsson thus chose wisely in naming the piece *Pallas Athena*, as the Greek goddess had a double role as the goddess of war and of wisdom. Art historians have often expressed their surprise at the way that Sigurjón moved from realism to the abstract and back again – but the artist himself saw no conflict in his methods. For those who examine *Pallas Athena*, the obvious conclusion is that it was precisely that combination of methods that honed the artist's creativity; thus the delicate lines in Athena's face may be seen as the fruit of decades of work making portraits, where a fraction of a millimetre is crucial.

28 **Teacher**, 1977, LSÓ 089

29 **The President**, 1980, LSÓ 118

30 **Woman**, 1980, LSÓ 117

31 **Two Sisters**, 1981, LSÓ 133

32 **Woman**, 1981, LSÓ 131

33 **Elf Maid**, 1982, LSÓ 148

These six pieces are assemblages, and hence differ from works which are shaped as an integral whole, all of the same material. Sigurjón's assemblages are made up of fragments of different woods, sometimes with the addition of metals – either to join the wooden elements together, or as a feature of the work in their own right. Danish artist Henry Heerup assembled sculptures from objets trouvés, which were displayed at the famous 'Tent Show' *13 kunstnere i Telt* in Denmark in 1941. At that show Sigurjón exhibited his *Dragon*, his first assemblage work – of concrete, wood and iron. But it was not until 1956 that he made his first objet trouvé work: *Arctic Tern* consists mainly of a piece of driftwood. Art historian Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson discusses the wooden works in detail in a biography of the artist, published in 1998–1999. He writes: *In Sigurjón's wooden sculptures, exotic*

and unconventional as they sometimes seem, there are diverse links – both formal and conceptual – with his older works, from the figurative pieces of the 1930s to the copper works he made in the 1960s. These wooden works are predominantly anthropomorphic variations on the human and animal figures which were always among the artist's recurrent subjects. The evocation of the human figure is not always obvious, as there will always be overtones of the totem pole and nature, as well as other symbolic interpretations of vertical works. As Auður Ólafsdóttir wrote in an article about the bas-reliefs on the powerhouse of the Búrfell hydro plant: "Abstract figures or figurative abstractions. Indeed, it is the very nature of Sigurjón's work to suggest more than one interpretation."<sup>5)</sup>

#### Citations

- 1 *Sigurjón Ólafsson – Ævi og list I*, Reykjavík, 1998, pp. 80–81.
- 2 Catalogue: *Sigurjón Ólafsson; Danmark – Island 1991*, Silkeborg Kunstmuseums Forlag, 1991, pp. 59/64.
- 3 Catalogue: *Billedhuggeren Sigurjón Ólafsson og hans portrætter*, Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum, Reykjavík, 2008, p. 49. Sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson and his Portraits. (English translation by Dan A. Marmorstein)
- 4 Catalogue: *Spor í sandi/Tracks in Sand*, Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum and National Gallery of Iceland, 2014, p. 36.
- 5 *Sigurjón Ólafsson – Ævi og list II*, Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum, 1999, p. 159. The author cites Auður Ólafsdóttir in the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum Year-book 1991–1992, Reykjavík, 1993, p. 46.

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For further information on exhibitions and opening hours, see the Museum website: [www.LSO.is](http://www.LSO.is)

All Sigurjón Ólafsson's known works are catalogued, most of them with photographs, in a *catalogue raisonné* which can be viewed online on the Museum website.

The Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum is a separate museum under the aegis of the National Gallery of Iceland.