

# THE GIFT OF CHILDREN

Sigurjón Ólafsson's portraits of  
fisheries magnate Einar Sigurðsson  
and his family



Exhibition in Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum  
February 3<sup>rd</sup> – August 27<sup>th</sup> 2023

**As Iceland's pre-eminent portrait artist** for most of the 20th century, Sigurjón Ólafsson took on a vast number of commissions for private individuals as well as official institutions and public organizations, not to mention the many portraits that he undertook on his own initiative, because of personal connections to certain sitters or a sincere interest in the features or traits of certain individuals. These commissions are remarkably varied, ranging from traditional busts, portrait profiles and reliefs to full-length figurines or figures to half size sitting figures. His sitters, young and old, were not exclusively men, a high proportion of the portraits feature women and children. Ólafsson did not cater solely to the privileged, for most professions are represented in his gallery of portraits, everyone from labourers to the presidents of the Republic. All things considered, this gallery probably contains more representatives of the working classes than other segments of society.

However, the commission that Ólafsson undertook for Einar Sigurðsson, a fisheries magnate from the Westman Islands in 1963, was unlike any other that he had been entrusted with. It is a portrait commission without parallel, not only locally but also in an international context. To be sure, we have notable examples of large-scale family portraits in earlier art, especially that of the 18th century. There we find Dutch grandees depicted in style, along with their wives and scores of children and servants. But these are mostly single canvases, (large-scale to be sure), not a series of sculptures, each one subject to a long and arduous modelling routine, a process that begins with the kneading of raw clay and ends up, much later, in the form of bronze casts. Whether or not this was Sigurðsson's and Ólafsson's original intention, the sculptor ended up producing portraits of the former's extended family; busts, portrait profiles, reliefs, a seated portrait and full-length figurines, seventeen pieces in all. In addition Sigurðsson requested – and paid for – two additional portraits, of one of his most successful fishing captains, Auðunn Auðunsson (1964, LSÓ 1195) and the other featuring a long-term friend and colleague in the fishing industry, Ólafur Þórðarson (1964, LSÓ 1199).

In the family portrait gallery that ensued we find portrait busts of Sigurðsson himself (1963, LSÓ 1193) and his second wife, Svava Ágústsdóttir (1964, LSÓ 033) and portrait profiles of their children. The order of the profiles was as follows: Ágúst (1964, LSÓ 1201), Sigurður (1964, LSÓ 1207), Auður (1964, LSÓ 175), followed by a second portrait of Auður (1964, LSÓ 1200), Elísabet (1964, LSÓ 1203), Guðríður (1964, LSÓ 1204), Helga (1964, LSÓ 1205), Ólöf (1964, LSÓ 1206), Sólveig (1964, LSÓ 1208), Svava (1964, LSÓ 1209) and finally Elín (1968, LSÓ 1370). Elín rounds up

the childrens' portraits, since she was not born when the sculptor started on the series and four when she sat for the sculptor. The portrait profiles are largely the same size, varying from 17 x 24 cm to 25 x 21 cm. While Ólafsson worked on these profiles he sculpted *The Patriarch*, showing Einar sitting with his daughter, Auður, curled up in his lap (1964, LSÓ 1202, h. 50 cm). In addition Ólafsson sculpted a rough draft of a full-length figurine of Sigurðsson (1965, LSÓ 035, h. 38 cm), later finishing a larger and more finished version of the same piece (1972, LSÓ 1277, h. 107 cm). This larger standing figure was the last portrait piece he did for Sigurðsson.

There was a coda to the project, as Sigurðsson asked the sculptor for a bust of his late father, Sigurður Sigurfinnsson, district administrative officer for the Westman Islands, and a notable pioneer of motorized fishing in the region. Ólafsson created a striking full-bearded head of the man from photographs. It remains one of the many impressive portrait busts that he modelled of significant turn of the century Icelanders. This bust (1964–65, LSÓ 1210) has never been cast in bronze. But there may be more to this particular commission, for we have a note by Birgitta Spur in the LSÓ archives where she mentions a sketch she saw in her husband's studio of Sigurðsson's father in a boat, whereabouts unknown. In total Sigurðsson seems to have commissioned some twenty works from Ólafsson, making him by far the most ambitious of his clients.

It's worth while speculating as to Sigurðsson's intentions in commissioning this portrait series from the sculptor. Two of his children, Ágúst and Auður, are adamant that their family home had little in the way of what today would be called 'visual culture'. In an interview with Sigurðsson, Morgunblaðið editor Matthías Johannessen described the family's home as "tasteful" and "modest", mentioning in particular the bookshelves lining every wall. Ágúst and Auður say that there were some works of art in the home, for instance paintings by Jóhannes Kjarval, Kristján Davíðsson and Sverrir Haraldsson. The only time Ágúst recalls accompanying his father to an opening of an art exhibition in Reykjavík, Einar insisted on paying for an entrance ticket, although he had an invitation from the artist in his pocket. When queried about this by his son, Sigurðsson had said that the artist most likely needed the money more than the invited guests. According to Ágúst and Auður, this incident may be seen indicative of their father's attitude to artists in general, in essence that it was the civic duty of prosperous citizens to support their endeavours, and they were to do so without drawing attention to themselves.

As it happens Ólafsson was not the only beneficiary of Sigurðsson's largesse. In the late 1950s, a young sculptor, Gerður Helgadóttir, had finished her preliminary studies in the Icelandic College of Crafts and Arts, and wanted to go abroad or further study. But like many other budding artists at that time she was short of money, official stipends being in short supply. Her father, Helgi Pálsson, did what he could, but to no avail. In end, he contacted his employers at the Icelandic Organization of Fish Exporters. One of them, Ólafur Þórðason, CEO of Jöklar Inc, offered Helgadóttir free berth on a company ship transporting salted cod to Italy. It was most likely Þórðarson who brought in a friend, Einar Sigurðsson, who ended up commissioning a portrait bust from the young artist. As it turned out Helgadóttir executed two portrait busts of Sigurðsson, one in 1936, the other a year later. And as happened in the wake of the Ólafsson portrait commissions, Sigurðsson also paid for a bust of his friend Þórðarson. For these portraits Helgadóttir earned enough money to pay for her schooling in Florence, as well as a trip through Italy. In Helgadóttir's biography, written by Elín Pálmadóttir, Þórðarson and Sigurðsson are said to have been so solicitous of their protégé, that they frequently phoned her from the Westman Islands to check on her progress.

In both these cases, Helgadóttir's and Ólafsson's, Einar Sigurðsson could be said to be providing support to sculptors of a progressive cast, not representatives of the older generation of conservative artists such as Guðmundur Einarsson of Miðdal, Magnús Á. Árnason or Marteinn Guðmundsson, all of whom would no doubt have welcomed some financial support from successful entrepreneurs of Sigurðsson's ilk. But one does not have to read too much into this. For instance, it seems fairly certain the above-mentioned Ólafur Þórðarson was really the one to draw Sigurðsson's attention to Helgadóttir's plight. When it comes to Sigurðsson and sculptor Ólafsson, bringing them together was most likely one of publisher Ragnar Jónsson's brilliant ideas. In the early 1960s Jónsson was in close contact with both men; for instance he was said to be impressed with Sigurðsson's gifts as a storyteller and had persuaded writer Þórbergur Þórðarson, another gifted fabulist, to write his biography. Around the same time Ragnar Jónsson had also taken upon himself to build a family home for Ólafsson and his growing family at Laugarnestangi, where they had been living in straitened circumstances. The house was ready for occupation at Christmas 1961.

Ragnar Jónsson would have realized that in spite of his intervention the Ólafsson family was not quite out of the woods, since the sculptor's

finances were still in a perilous state. Without further assistance from an idealistic benefactor such as Sigurðsson, his affairs would likely to go from bad to worse. While Ólafsson worked on the portraits of Sigurðsson, his wife, Svava Ágústsdóttir, and most of his brood, Jónsson was in fact very much present, both personally and as an image, since the sculptor was simultaneously working on his bust in the very same studio. And as often happened when Ólafsson worked on portraits of people that he liked, Sigurðsson's prolonged sittings in the studio at Laugarnestangi, either on his own or with one of the children in tow, was the beginning of a close – and life-long – friendship between the two. They would have had a lot to talk about, since both were the sons of fishermen, and both with a bevy of young children. A good personal connection between Ólafsson and his sitters was always a guarantee of a successful outcome. This is certainly true of the heads of Sigurðsson and his wife, which are counted among the sculptor's finest character studies. The bust of Ágústsdóttir has regularly been featured in Ólafsson's many retrospective exhibitions. In his two-volume *History of Icelandic Art*, art historian Björn Th. Björnsson praises the bust of Ágústsdóttir highly, saying that "It marries dignity with moderation; the smooth surface is alive with the rhythms of its tiniest features, as a whole the bust reminds us of the famous depictions of the ancient Egyptian queens."

There has not been much discussion of the individual portrait studies in the group, apart from the head of Svava Ágústsdóttir. Thus it is worth looking at them in the context of Ólafsson's art as a whole. During his stay in Denmark he was frequently commissioned to do busts of youths, even very young children. However he never did individual profile studies of single children, only the odd mother-child profile. A typical portrait profile of that kind is the one Ólafsson modelled of his daughter Steingerður alongside her grandmother Halla Lovísa Loftsdóttir (1952–53, LSÓ 201). The Sigurðsson children form a series of ten single profiles. They are all of similar size and all of them turn their left side toward the viewer. The only exception is a three-quarter study of Auður's face (1964, LSÓ 175), in addition to the standard profile of her. This extra study might have suggested by Ólafsson, since he probably saw more of her than of her other siblings; as mentioned before she is the child sitting in her father's lap in *The Patriarch*. But all these children's profiles are executed with great sensitivity. They are such an accurate record of their faces that some of their acquaintances claim to be able to recognize their grown-up selves from these profiles. Basically Ólafsson's approach never varies, the smooth, soft skin of the children is delicately empha-

sized by a fine grainy texture, whereas their tousled or unruly hair and ruffled collars are used as a contrasting elements in each work.

The two slender and elongated full-length figurines of Sigurðsson are a unique feature of Ólafsson's art. Giacometti's long and faceless figures come to mind; Ólafsson would have known about his works from books and art magazines. In all likelihood he is portraying Sigurðsson as a captain of industry, in his overcoat and fancy hat, rather than Sigurðsson the person. Still, those that knew the tall and wiry Sigurðsson would have recognized their man. Interestingly, there are seven years between the original sketch (1965, LSÓ 035) and the larger plaster figure (1972, LSÓ 1277), which seems to suggest they had a different purpose. Ólafsson most likely did the smaller one for his own pleasure, since it has always been in the collection of his family. According to Birgitta Spur the larger version was originally to be placed close to the Sigurðsson family summer house by Varmá river in Mosfellsbær; for some reason it was never cast in bronze.

But the one sculpture in this whole portrait series that most resonates with Ólafsson's oeuvre as a whole is undoubtedly *The Patriarch*. Which strongly suggests that it was done at his instigation rather than Sigurðsson's. In fact there is a note in Sigurðsson's papers that says as much: "Sigurjón was mentioning this morning that it would be fun to do a sculpture of me sitting down with Auður on my lap, as I do every morning. He's talked about this before. Perhaps he'll do a small study" (1964). The central motif is one that was dear to the sculptor, namely parental love. It is a motif that appears at regular intervals in Ólafsson's work throughout his career and may be regarded as one of the most significant themes in his art. At its plainest it appears as a single 'protective hand', a outsize and stylized palm wrapped around an infant's fingers or cupping the fragile back of his head (*Hands*, 1938, LSÓ 1047, *Óli*, 1955, LSÓ 1136) or one that presses a child to a mother's body (*Mother and Child*, 1941, LSÓ 1065). Ólafsson makes a similar point in some of his full-length figures of mothers or fathers clutching at their offspring. His full-size concrete *Mother and Child* (1931–32, LSÓ 1020) shows a standing mother lifting an infant up to her face, in another sculpture from the thirties, a mother is shown pulling a child so close that it virtually merges with her body (*Mother and Child*, 1936, LSÓ 1039). In *The Family* (1939, LSÓ 1052), a sculpture of a primitivistic pedigree (now in the collection of FAO, Rome) we see a trinity of parents and their child emerging as one out of the same stem.

The statue of the *Rev. Friðrik Friðriksson* in Reykjavik's centre (1952, LSÓ 1120) is a later version of this theme, and the same can be said of *The Patriarch*, portrait of Sigurðsson not as a captain of industry, but as devoted pater familias. Both of these speak of the close ties that exist between fathers and their children. The sitting Reverend is seen almost as a version of the enthroned God the Father, one 'protective hand' resting on the shoulder of the youth beside him, the other covering his left hand. *The Patriarch*, however, is a very earthy father, easily identifiable as Einar Sigurðsson, note the distinctive bald pate. The relaxed posture of little girl sitting on his lap is an indication of the growing mutual trust that characterized the relations between the two at that stage. The figure's torso is slightly awry, not unlike what we find in two earlier sitting figures by Ólafsson, the *Labourer* (1942, LSÓ 1068) and the portrait of Danish writer *Otto Gelsted* (ca. 1941, LSÓ 1061). In all three Ólafsson uses the slight twist of the sitting figures, especially the hint of a discrepancy between shoulders and hips, to indicate a movement about to happen, and thus to suggest the inner lives of the persons being depicted.

Above all, the collaboration between these two formidable individuals, Ólafsson and Sigurðsson, counts as a memorial to the cultural responsibility demonstrated by a number of affluent individuals in Iceland during the early years of the modern Icelandic art, when many of the country's most significant artists were sorely in need of assistance.

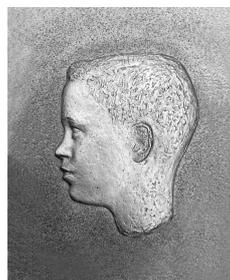
Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson



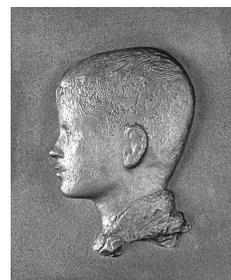
Guðríður



Elísabet



Sigurður



Ágúst



Svava



Ólöf



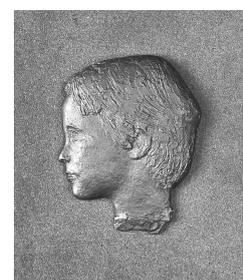
Helga



Sólveig



Auður



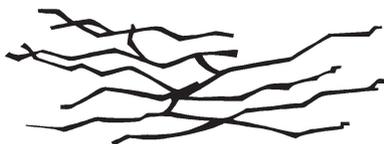
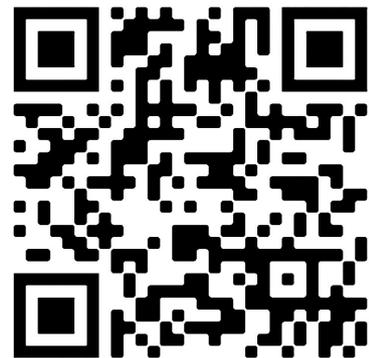
Elín



Einar Sigurðsson with his daughter, Auður. Sigurjón Ólafsson modelling *The Patriarch* in his studio at Laugarnes 1964.

LSÓ numbers refer to Sigurjón Ólafsson's  
Catalogue Raisonné which can be found at

[www.LSO.is](http://www.LSO.is)  
or  
with QR code:



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