

# SIGURJÓN ÓLAFSSON'S WOODEN ASSEMBLAGES

Exhibition in Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum  
September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016 – May 28<sup>th</sup> 2017

**Sigurjón Ólafsson** must surely be considered one of Iceland's most versatile sculptors. He is the author of numerous sculptures in stone, a range of portraits modelled in clay and plaster, open-form iron constructions and hundreds of carved or assembled sculptures out of wood.

In recent years Ólafsson's wooden sculptures have been increasingly studied by art historians. It now seems clear that they owe something to *Primitivism* – mostly African art – both with regard to their content and carving technique. They can also be seen in the context of the modern assemblage, which looms large in 20th century sculpture. Hence the present exhibition.

Art historically, assemblages are an offshoot of the collage technique pioneered by Picasso and Braque prior to World War I. Works made from pasted paper evolved into three-dimensional assemblies of the everyday objects that were lying around the studios. These objects were integrated into painted surfaces, as reminders of the real world, extending these works into three dimensions and adding to their conceptual complexities.

Around the middle of the 20th century, many influential artists had begun to put together large commonplace objects and/or figuration and painted abstract planes, creating a friction between objective and non-objective elements. A few, such as American artist Louise Nevelson, worked exclusively with abstract elements, building up enormous walls or structures out of (mostly) found wooden parts, which she proceeded to paint with monochrome colours.

Nevelson and Sigurjón Ólafsson share a predilection for abstract assemblage, but apart from that Ólafsson does not have much in common with other modern assemblage artists. Yet, at the time necessity propelled him towards wooden constructions, he seems to have been very aware of the possibilities inherent in the technique.

Ólafsson's first assembled rather than exclusively carved wooden pieces date from the second half of the Fifties. They include *Swans* (LSÓ 1139), *Mythical Creature* (LSÓ 1140), *The Prodigal Son* (LSÓ 194) and *Jacob's Ladder* (LSÓ 159). These assembled works are multicomponent, unlike the figurative or totemic wood sculptures that he produced before World War II, and have a spatial dimension – or a spatial reach – which

the older works don't possess. One of the main characteristics of modern assemblages is precisely their often aggressive incursion into 'real' space.

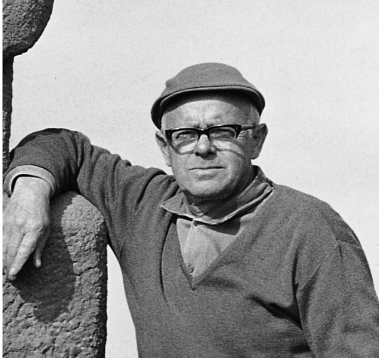
Ólafsson's wooden assemblages probably reach their apogee during the last five or six years of his life. These late assemblages are mostly vertical, and thus replicate the column motif or the upright figures so common in Ólafsson's art as a whole - see f.i. *Blossom* (LSÓ 097), *Atomic Bomb* (LSÓ 099), *Who are you?* (LSÓ 114) and *Footfall* (LSÓ 127).

Around a central upright motif Ólafsson often posits horizontal or vertical wooden or metal parts which create a kind of corkscrew rhythm around it, all the while describing the space within. But whether the component parts of these sculptures are used 'raw' – as found – or have been treated in some way during the assembly process, they never camouflage their origins; thus they are essentially 'realistic'.

In a few of these works Ólafsson thinks in terms of architectonic constructs, which are made to envelop, contain or protect enigmatic or mysterious spaces at their centres; one thinks of pieces like *New Life* (LSÓ 103), *The Secret Weapon* (LSÓ 104) and *Genes* (LSÓ 150). It is tempting to see in these works references to some of the mysterious enclosure of the Surrealists, which appealed to Ólafsson during his early years.

Sigurjón Ólafsson's assemblages are ambiguous, fantastically spirited and engaging in every sense, whether we look to their technical or imaginative aspect.

Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson



**Sigurjón Ólafsson** (1908 – 1982) was born in Eyrarbakki, a village at the south coast of Iceland. Trained as a house painter, he moved to Copenhagen in 1928 and entered the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts, from which he graduated in 1935, having supplemented his studies with a year in Rome. In 1930, he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Academy for his sculpture *Labourer* (LSÓ 1017).

Ólafsson is known as one of the pioneers of the spontaneous abstract sculpture in Denmark, but he also developed the realistic style that characterized his portrait busts and statues. In 1938 he was awarded the honourable Danish Eckersberg Prize for the portrait *My Mother* (LSÓ 007), cast of which were immediately bought by leading museums in Scandinavia.

In 1939, Ólafsson made his first completely abstract sculpture *Man and Woman* (LSÓ 1054), which caused great controversy, but is now considered a sculptural landmark in Denmark. Ólafsson's most challenging commission in Denmark was the *Vejde Sculptures* (LSÓ 1062 and 1063). The commission called for two large sculptures to be placed at the main square of the town of Vejle, flanking a staircase in front of the city hall. The sculptures would feature 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, leaving eighteen public monuments in Reykjavík alone, *Emblem of Iceland* (LSÓ 1278) at Hagatorg and *Throne Pillars* (LSÓ 1269) by the Höfði House perhaps being the best known. He has also been named one of his century's most important portrait sculptors creating around 200 portraits.

A catalogue raisonné of Ólafsson's work is accessible at [www.LSO.is](http://www.LSO.is)