

Two Comrades

Asger Jorn and Sigurjón Ólafsson

Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum
Laugarnestangi 70 Reykjavík

October 21st 2017 – Fall 2018

Sigurjón Ólafsson and Asger Jorn first met in Copenhagen in 1937, when Jorn entered the School of Painting at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts after a brief but educational stay in Paris. While Sigurjón had graduated from the Academy, he was there every day, as he was making his works of art in the gardens. And the Royal Academy and the entire district around Kongens Nytorv was a hotbed of innovation and creativity in all fields of culture.

Jorn and Sigurjón both participated in the *Linien* exhibition in 1937 and *Skandinaverne* in 1939, and in 1941 they showed their work together at the *13 Kunstnere i Telt* (13 Artists in a Tent) exhibition at Bellevue. Works shown by Sigurjón included *Dragon* and *Man and Woman*, now in the collection of KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art Aalborg (previously Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum). The exhibition was held on Jorn's initiative, with the objective of giving the public an opportunity to see avant-garde art in Copenhagen's centuries-old park, Dyrehavsbakken by Klampenborg and Bellevue, which was a popular destination for city dwellers on fine days. The art was not exhibited in lofty, splendid galleries, but displayed on the grassy lawn in the shelter of a marquee. The exhibition also stood for opposition to the Germany occupation of Denmark, and was a response to the Nazis' reactionary attitudes to art.

Asger Jorn and Sigurjón Ólafsson were both participants in the Danish resistance movement, where they had many friends in common. They lost touch after the war, when Sigurjón returned to Iceland and Jorn headed south to France and Italy. Sigurjón heard of Jorn's success in the 1950s, when his art was selling for high prices,



Asger Jorn, Sigurjón Ólafsson and Sigurjón's son, Dagur, in Hveragerði 1967.

but they were not in touch at that time. So it was quite a surprise when Asger Jorn appeared on the doorstep of Sigurjón's home at Laugarnes in Reykjavík late one July evening in 1967. He said he was travelling *incognito*; he was in Iceland to meet Dr. Selma Jónsdóttir, Director of the National Gallery of Iceland, to ask her to write an essay for his planned *magnum opus* on ten thousand years of Nordic art. Selma and Jorn worked together on the project for the next two weeks. During his stay in Iceland, Jorn was invited to the home of Nobel-prizewinning author Halldór Laxness, and that meeting led to Jorn being commissioned to illustrate Laxness' book *Sagan af brauðinu dýra/Die Geschichte vom Teuren Brot* (1972). His illustrations were made at the renowned Erker-Press in St. Gallen, Switzerland.

The works in the exhibition

The National Gallery of Iceland collection includes seven works by Asger Jorn, six of which found their way to the gallery through the mediation of Sigurjón Ólafsson. When he returned to Iceland from Denmark in 1945, Sigurjón brought with him an oil painting by Asger Jorn, *Tron II* (1937, numbered 78 in Guy Atkins' complete catalogue). Jorn had presented the work to Sigurjón as a gift. He had made the work in Paris, and displayed it *inter alia* at *Kunstnernes Efterårsudstilling* in Copenhagen, along with two other paintings. All were clearly influenced by Fernand Léger. In due course Sigurjón entrusted the painting to his brother, pharmacist Guðni Ólafsson, feeling that Guðni's safe apartment in the western part of Reykjavík would be a better setting for it than Sigurjón's makeshift home at Laugarnes, in one of the military huts left after the Allied occupation of Iceland in World War II. After Guðni's death in 1976 Sigurjón decided to include it in Guðni's bequest of art to the National Gallery. The painting had been catalogued and photographed for Asger Jorn when he was in Iceland in 1967.

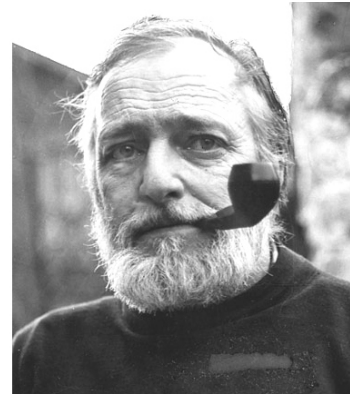
On his visit to Iceland Jorn brought with him a number of prints. Sigurjón drew his attention to the Association of Icelandic Artists (FÍM), who were fundraising to acquire their own exhibition space. As a result Jorn presented three lithographs and two copperplate engravings to FÍM, to be sold to contribute funds for the planned gallery. The works were purchased in December 1967 by the National Gallery of Iceland, and the money raised went into a fund which financed the building of the Kjarvalsstaðir gallery (Reykjavík Art Museum).

The exhibition *Two Comrades* instigates a dialogue between the works of these two friends and allies. Their subjects and imagery changed greatly over the years, as both were constantly experimenting with new methods and approaches. It is interesting to compare *Tron II* to a photograph of Sigurjón Ólafsson's lost work *Dragon* of 1939, which according to the artist expressed his opposition to the rise of Nazism in Germany. Both works are characterised by surrealist form, manifested in convex, organic shapes. The *Dragon* is a huge, terrifying creature that stretches over a log carved with a human figure that appears to be holding or protecting a flower. In *Tron II* growth is also a dominant theme – while the bright colours of the work interact with the blue-and-gold of Sigurjón's *Bird*, also from 1939. But commonalities between their works do not provide an answer to the question: Why did Asger Jorn choose to give Sigurjón Ólafsson *this* particular painting?

Asger Jorn's prints seen here demonstrate the freedom of his drawing and his confrontation with the stringency of lithography and etching. Thus they interact with selected works by Sigurjón which share that attribute, though in entirely different material form. The juxtaposition of Sigurjón's sculptures and Jorn's drawings throws light on the visual and ideological relationship between them. Both were influenced by French Surrealism in their formative years, although their backgrounds, artistic training and presentation were dissimilar. This exhibition thus sheds lights on a period of flourishing art, informed by relationships and friendships among artists at a traumatic time in Danish society – and shows what the fruit of such friendships could be.

Birgitta Spur

Shortly after qualifying as a teacher in 1935, **Asger Jorn** decided to devote himself to his art. In 1936 he went to Paris where he studied under Fernand Léger at *Académie de L'Art Contemporaine*. In 1937 he assisted Léger in enlarging murals for the Paris International Exposition, and also took part in erecting the huge exhibition tent famously placed outside the exposition site by architect Le Corbusier.



Asger Jorn 1914–1973

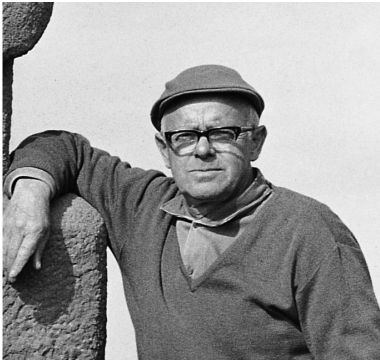
For the next few years Jorn divided his time between France and Denmark, until the outbreak of World War II in 1939. He spent the war years in Denmark, where he was very active on the art scene, along with his avant-garde colleagues in such groups as *Linien*, *Høstudstillingen* and *Helhesten*. From an early age Jorn was interested in children's art, and he developed methods of creating his own imagery. He embarked on collaboration, for instance, with his son's preschool in Copenhagen (*Børnehaven i Hjortøgade*), where he explored the children's creative work. In December 1944 he painted murals in the preschool building, along with fellow painters Carl-Henning Pedersen, Else Alfelt, Ejler Bille, Henry Heerup, Erik Thommesen and Egill Jacobsen. He was a member of the Danish resistance movement during the German occupation, and for a time he printed *Land og Folk*, the banned organ of the Danish Communist Party, on a printing press in his home.

Asger Jorn was the originator of many large-scale projects, artists' organisations and publication of books and periodicals, such as *Helhesten*, published in Denmark 1941–1944. He was one of the founders of the *Cobra* group of artists, and among its leading members 1948–1951. After

the war he spent a lot of time in Albisola in Italy, but lived mostly in Paris, where he was a participant in the *Internationale situationniste* movement, whose objective was to transform modern consumerist society and activate the creativity of the people. In 1961–1965 Jorn focussed his efforts on a huge research project which he called *Skandinavisk Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalisme* (Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism, SISV), whose objective was to collect and mediate knowledge of ancient Nordic art. The intention was that the SISV would publish a lavishly-illustrated 32-volume history: *10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art*. Sadly Jorn did not complete the project; but about 25,000 photographs taken for the project by leading photographers of the day are in the collection of the Jorn Museum in Silkeborg.

In 26 August 2017 an exhibition opened at the National Gallery of Iceland, Fríkirkjuvegur 7, which provides insight into Jorn's work on this project. On display are about 100 contact sheets of photographs from his visit to Gotland, Sweden, in 1964.

Asger Jorn left an extensive oeuvre. He was extraordinarily versatile and productive, leaving thousands of paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, ceramics and textile works. He was also a prolific author and poet. Jorn was a sociable and outstandingly generous man. The Jorn Museum in Silkeborg was founded with donations from him, including his own art and works he had purchased from friends and associates – Danes and others. He is now counted among the most influential Nordic artists of the 20th century, and his work is to be found in leading collections around the world.



Sigurjón Ólafsson

(1908 – 1982)

Sigurjón Ólafsson 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 *Veje 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