

*Atlantica* &  
**Iceland  
Review**



# Accent on Simplicity in Style

By Gísli Sigurdsson

Ólöf Pálsdóttir is one of those Icelandic artists who has achieved fame outside her own country. Though she has largely adhered to traditional styles, foreign art critics have frequently emphasized that her work bears a strong, individual and personal stamp. Some have compared her with two of the leading female artists of Scandinavia, Astrid Noach and Olivia Holm Möller. But how did it all begin? How did Ólöf's interest in sculpture arise? She herself has said that her mother's hands gave her the first feeling for form. But her art studies really commenced in the years 1947 to 1949 at the Fredriksberg Technical School in Copenhagen. Later she attended the Royal Academy of Art in that city, where her principal teacher was Professor Utzon Frank.

Ólöf Pálsdóttir's first work to be displayed at a public art show in Copenhagen was adjudged to be the most mature exhibit there. The crowning achievement of her study years was the award of a gold medal for the sculpture entitled "Son", which she dedicated to her mother. Participants in the competition had six months in which to prepare, but Ólöf only decided to take part six weeks before expiry of the period. Working in a cold greenhouse, she succeeded in completing the sculpture by the specified date.

In 1954 Ólöf went on a study trip to Egypt and Greece, and various mementoes of her stay there may now be seen in her home: tiny statues and ancient Egyptian ornaments showing the Egyptians' innate sense of form. Her acquaintance in Egypt with Professor Ramses Wissa Waseff had a strong influence on her. He had directed there a special school for children, whose work had gone to all parts of the world. It seemed to Ólöf that great things were being achieved in the field of art there, and she has closely followed the Professor's work ever since.

After completion of her studies, Ólöf returned home to Iceland, where she married, became a housewife and started to look after a busy home. Her husband is Sigurdur Bjarnason, who last winter was appointed Icelandic Ambassador



Ólöf Pálsdóttir in her studio. In the background is the prize winning sculpture, "Son".

to Denmark and Turkey with his residence in Copenhagen. So Denmark is an ever-recurring theme in Ólöf Pálsdóttir's life.

## SIMPLICITY AND INNER VOLUME

Since Ólöf left the Royal Academy and began to run a household in Iceland, while continuing her sculpture, many things have happened. In 1957 she obtained a grant from Italy, went to Rome and lived for eight months at the Danish Science and Art Institute there. During this period she studied under the Italian sculptor, Fazzini. And it was in Rome that her best work was stolen from her atelier — the sculpture of a woman, which she has never recovered. Subsequently Ólöf spent two months on a Finnish cultural grant in Helsinki. She has had close contact with two of the best known Finnish female artists, Eila Hiltunen and Leila Pullinen. The latter invited Ólöf to work with her on the production of an important theatre play by Peter Weiss. Last year Ólöf received another grant enabling her to live and have the use of an atelier for five weeks in the home of the painter, Edvard Munch, in Norway. She had previously travelled through the Soviet Union, as far as Yalta and Armenia, where she met and had discussions with Soviet sculptors. It is obvious from Ólöf's atelier that she is very fond of working on portraits. And one can in fact say that figures of one sort or another always appear in her work. On the other hand, she has done little abstract sculpting. She has chiselled some of her works straight

from stone, which is an extremely difficult task, especially for a woman. In recent years she has worked more in plaster of Paris, though she shapes her subjects to some extent in wire. But, like many other modern sculptors, Ólöf has also done sculptures in iron, and reliefs in plaster of Paris or clay. What is of supreme importance for Ólöf Pálsdóttir is the sculptural form manifested in its simplicity and based on inner volume. She finds much abstract sculpture too decorative and in some ways more akin to painting. She has no wish, however, to condemn this; all artists should be equally entitled to do the work to which they are inclined. Yet she says: Finding a rock out in the country and putting it on a pedestal is too easy, and it can hardly be regarded as anything else or more than a kind of sport.

## THREE PORTRAITS

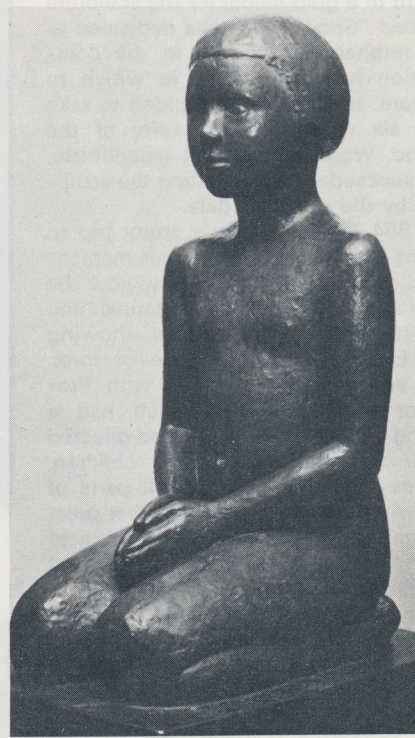
Ólöf's work has with the passage of time become coarser and severer, such as for instance "Grazing Horses", which she did directly in plaster of Paris out-of-doors in midwinter. One of these has recently been bought by the Grund Old People's Home in Reykjavik for presentation to and display in the Nordic House in the Icelandic capital. Some of Ólöf's best sculptures are the portraits of her father, of Halldór Laxness and of her husband. The last two have been shown at an exhibition in Copenhagen, while that of Laxness is really a study for a larger sculpture of the author, which the Helgafell publishing firm has ordered from Ólöf. The art critic of the newspaper "Roskilde Tidende" has, for instance, written about

Ólöf's portraits: "Here she displays a strength that commands respect and admiration. Especially in the portrait of Halldór Laxness".

But when Ólöf is asked to name the works of which she herself is most fond, she mentions the prize-winning sculpture "Son", which was long ago awarded a gold medal and is now the property of the National Art Gallery of Iceland. Asked about sculpture in Scandinavia, Ólöf thinks that the Scandinavian countries have in recent years been more to the fore than, for example, the French or the Italians.

## FULL OF CONTRASTS

It is obvious that present conditions for Ólöf to practise her art are not easy. Various duties have to take precedence: the duties of a mother, a wife and, not least, those time-consuming duties connected with the ambassadorial office. Nevertheless, Ólöf tries to make the best use of her time, and she has many things on hand. One of these is a figure of Christ, on which she has been working for some years for the cathedral at Skálholt. A copy of this may be seen in her atelier in Reykjavik, but Ólöf has not had the advantage of a good, permanent place of work enjoyed by many other Icelandic artists. For a time she had a studio in Gothenburg, Sweden, where another and bigger copy of the Christ figure is to be found. How does she conceive Christ? "More human than any other man who has existed. Complete, magnificent, pure, modest, full of contrasts. On the one hand, with the terrific power of the warrior, on the other this wonderful



gentleness and perfect peace — his personality is incredibly varied”.

Ólöf does not mould Christ on the cross. Hers is not the Christ of suffering, much rather the Christ of the Resurrection. But other tasks await Ólöf. Two reliefs for Skálholt, another for a bank, and a free composition for a school.

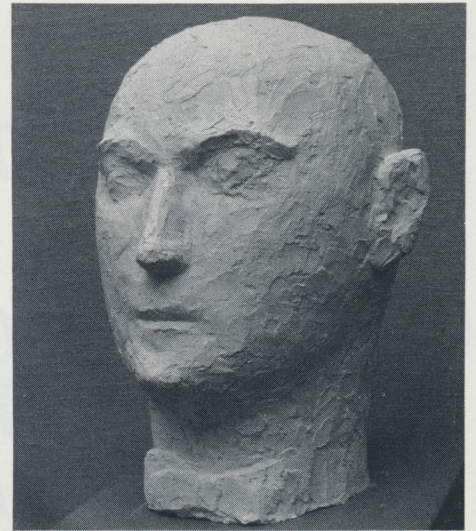
## JOINING THE “LILLE GRUPPE”

The National Art Gallery of Iceland has, as mentioned above, bought Ólöf's prize-winning sculpture. In addition, the City of Reykjavik and the Town Council of Århus in Denmark have both acquired works by her that have been erected in these two places. Ólöf's sculptures adorn several buildings, such as the Agricultural Bank and the Commercial College of Iceland, and the Canadian Embassy in Oslo. Another of her works is in Genoa, Italy.

Ólöf was one of the Icelandic artists to exhibit Icelandic pictorial art in the Luisiana Collection in Denmark in 1962. She has participated in very many Icelandic and inter-Scandinavian exhibitions. She has also exhibited in East and West Germany, as well as in the Faroe Islands, where she was a guest of the Faroese Art Association. She lived in fact in the Faroes throughout the war years, as her father was Icelandic Consul there. Ólöf is a reserve member of the council of the National Art Gallery of Iceland.

Last year Ólöf Pálsdóttir was invited to join a well-known, Danish art society known as the “Lille gruppe”. In the beginning of 1969 she took part for the first time with this society in an art show that represented her greatest success so far. Ólöf's works received much publicity in all the major Copenhagen newspapers and in the Danish provincial press. The notices were everywhere very favourable. For instance, the “Berlingske Tidende” wrote: “Ólöf Pálsdóttir's sculpture illustrates her development through the years, ever since she was a student at the Royal Academy and received a gold medal for her interpretation of a young man with outstretched hand. This work was last shown at the Icelandic exhibition at Luisiana, and it is always regarded as a major achievement. Yet, strangely enough, every time you stand in front of it, you see new sculptural merit in it. The form is imbued with unusual strength and lightness”.

The “Politiken” art critic said: “It seems to me that Ólöf Pálsdóttir's works are especially interesting, not only because she is new to the Society, but much rather because every time she has exhibited in Denmark she has attracted notice with her art. She is talented, personal, has built on her own experience and does not succumb to the demands of the normal”.



Opposite page: Of supreme importance: The sculptural form, based on inner volume. The wild horse (left), Girl (right).

Politician. A recent sculpture, typical of Ólöf's portrait style (right). Ballerina (below).

