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The diplomatic life of a sculptress

Olof Palsdottir, wife of the Icelandic Ambassador, combines diplomatic life with her work as a sculptress. She is pictured here in her workshop in the Residence off Grosvenor Square.

‘What a splendid way of saying good-bye,’ said the writer and broadcaster, Magnus Magnusson, as he greeted Olof Palsdottir, wife of the Icelandic Ambassador, at her sculpture exhibition — held during the last week of her husband’s posting to London.

Olof Palsdottir is a well known sculptress. Her works can be seen in public institutions and art galleries in Iceland, Denmark, Italy and Canada. The basement of the Icelandic Residence in Park Street was converted into a workshop when she arrived with her husband nearly seven years ago, but sadly she has not spent as much time there as she would have liked. The pressures of diplomatic life in London were such that she did little new work here.

‘My work as an ambassadress took up too much of my time,’ she explains. ‘There are many people whom one meets who think that diplomatic life is all about parties, and that the ambassador’s wife only has to make herself look nice. But this is not so — we are very busy ladies.’

For most of the time in London, she felt that she was running the Residence almost as a hotel, for they had so many people staying. Even during the last weeks of the posting, while she was making all the arrangements for moving out of the Residence, and preparing for her sculpture exhibition, there were five house guests to look after.

And then there was all the entertaining. Dinner and luncheon parties were part of the routine at



Left: the Cellist. Olof Palsdottir sits in her study beyond.

the Residence — sometimes there were several in one week, sometimes just one or two, but always Mrs. Bjarnason was meticulous in making sure the arrangements were absolutely right. 'It is in my nature to be perfectionist about these things,' she says, 'but I also find entertaining creative.'

Planning the menus with her Italian chef, preparing the guest lists, sending out invitations, setting the table and arranging the flowers — all this was time consuming, but enjoyable. For the bigger events she would arrange some cultural entertainment as well. At a ladies luncheon held in honour of Mrs. Francis Pym, with 18 guests, an actress gave a short reading of a translation of work by the Nobel prize winner Hildur Laxness. 'My husband was against the idea,' laughs Mrs. Bjarnason, 'he said you couldn't do that sort of thing at a luncheon in England, but the ladies loved it.' At their farewell reception for 300 people she successfully staged a short cultural interlude — an actress read a poem, which was then sung by an opera singer. Again her guests very much appreciated a glimpse of Icelandic culture.

Weekends, when she might have expected to have some time for sculpting, were almost as busy as the weeks. Every Sunday, an Icelandic school was held at the Residence, for children of Icelanders living in London — the aim, being to

enable the children to continue their studies in Icelandic language and literature. The parents came with the children, turning the event into quite a social occasion.

Her husband, Sigurdur Bjarnason, is not a career diplomat. He is an established politician in Iceland, and also served as Editor of one of the major Icelandic newspapers. It was perhaps partly because of this that the Bjarnasons' interests and contacts ranged far beyond the purely diplomatic. Olof Palsdottir maintained her friendships within the artistic community in Denmark — where her husband was previously posted — and developed new artistic connections in London. Between them, they had a very wide and varied circle of friends and acquaintances, and became involved in many things outside the realm of diplomatic duty.

After six years of constant activity, Olof Palsdottir is a little worried about how easily she will settle down to a quieter life in Iceland. Her sculpture is still fundamental to her life, even though she has not had a chance to do much while in London.

Her husband has been appointed Ambassador to India, Pakistan, Thailand and Bangladesh — but he is resident in Iceland, and so for the first time in over twelve years the Bjarnasons will be living at their home on the outskirts of Reykjavik,



Left: the Drawing Room, looking towards the Cellist in the hall.

near the sea. 'It will feel strange going back,' says Olof Palsdottir. And she doubts whether she could settle down and continue her sculpting in Iceland — 'because I have been abroad so much.'

Her husband's new appointment will however mean that she will have many trips abroad — and there will inevitably be stop overs in London. She would like to find a workshop in London — 'I like art life in London,' she says, 'and I never really had time for it.' Leaving a country is one of the heartbreaks of diplomatic life — 'you leave something of yourself behind when you leave a country that you have lived in for many years,' she says.

The success of her sculpture exhibition held in September left her feeling a little dazed. Friends and acquaintances through diplomatic circles came — many of whom had not realised that she was a sculptress. And art critics and eminent people from art galleries and institutions also came. Her only sorrow was that because she was leaving London she couldn't easily follow up on the interest shown, and deal with all the enquiries in the way that she would have liked.

It was unfortunate that the exhibition had had to be arranged at the end of their posting. She had in fact twice before tried to stage an exhibition — booking good central London galleries which were suitable for displaying sculpture. But on both occasions the exhibitions had had to be can-

celled — the first time because she had to accompany her husband on an unexpected journey to Nigeria, where he was also accredited as Ambassador, and the second time because of an official visit by the President of Iceland.

Nevertheless, as Magnus Magnusson said, the exhibition made a splendid way to say goodbye. The sculpture was professionally displayed on the ground floor and the basement of the Residence, and in the garden. Her best known figure, *Son*, a young man sitting with his hands outstretched, was there (the bronze is in the National Art Gallery in Iceland). And the *Cellist* playing with such intensity that one does not immediately notice that he has no bow, was also on display. Many other smaller sculptures were there — all with the unmistakable hallmark of Olof Palsdottir's work, a strength and simplicity of execution. 'My sculptures express me,' says Olof Palsdottir. 'When I am sculpting, I follow my own ideas and my own personality.'

Olof Palsdottir played the role of Ambassador's wife to perfection — but seven years of diplomatic life in London have still left the sculptress in her unscathed. Her next sculpture exhibition, she promises, will be in London — she will be working hard on new ideas and new sculptures over the next few years. Diplomatic life can now take second place.