

## SCULPTURE PARK

The Ásmundur Sveinsson Sculpture Museum, originally the artist's home/studio, forms an organic whole together with the sculpture park in which it stands. When visiting the Museum, a visit to the Sculpture Park adds an extra dimension. Among the works outside are enlargements of several of the pieces in this exhibition: *Helreiðin/Hell Ride*, *Tröllkonan/Gigantess*, *Móðir mín í kví, kví/Mother Mine in the Pen, Pen*, *Stríð og flótti/War and Flight*, and *Andvarp/Sigh*.



The personal circumstances and experiences of artists inevitably have an influence upon their creative lives; and the same is true of the society and *zeitgeist* of their time. Sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson is no exception to that rule: he casts his net wide in the quest for inspiration in his art, especially in literature, history and nature. The mother and the working man are also important recurrent themes in his work.

But if we look beneath the surface of Ásmundur's sculptures, we often come across smouldering fire – a personal expression of profound feelings and strong emotions, along with an endless curiosity about the mechanisms of life and the universe. This exhibition focuses on the fire within, which is revealed when Ásmundur's oeuvre is considered in the context of his life and his time.

The exhibition *Inn í kvíku/The Fire Within* comprises three parts, addressing different aspects of the artist in terms of content, form and period. We seek to use the art museum building at Sigtún, originally Ásmundur's home and studio, as a part of the exhibition and a setting for it, along with the sculpture park around the building where many of the artist's best-known pieces are on display.

*Kristín G Guðnadóttir and Steinunn G Helgadóttir, curators*

### Re-enactment of Ásmundur Sveinsson's “performance art”

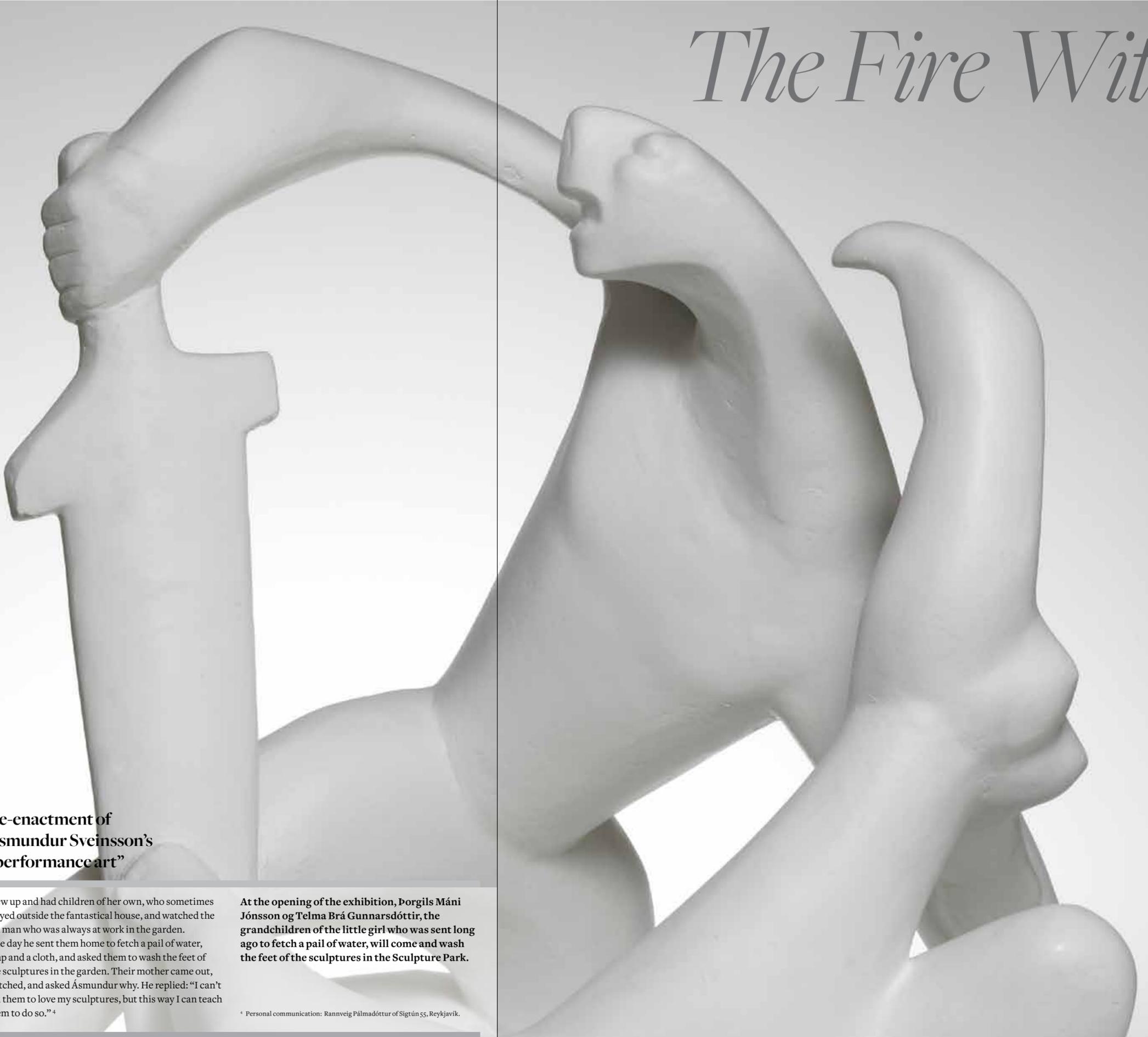
Many years ago a little girl, Rannveig Pálmadóttir, played all summer, hanging around the taciturn artist who lived in the strange domed house on the other side of the road. One day he asked her to go home and fetch a pail of water, soap and a cloth, and then he had the girl wash the feet of the sculptures in his garden. As the girl washed the cold stone, she perceived the substance and the forms through her cleaning cloth, and she never forgot it. The little girl continued to live in the house; she

grew up and had children of her own, who sometimes played outside the fantastical house, and watched the old man who was always at work in the garden. One day he sent them home to fetch a pail of water, soap and a cloth, and asked them to wash the feet of the sculptures in the garden. Their mother came out, watched, and asked Ásmundur why. He replied: “I can't tell them to love my sculptures, but this way I can teach them to do so.”<sup>4</sup>

**At the opening of the exhibition, Þorgils Máni Jónsson og Telma Brá Gunnarsdóttir, the grandchildren of the little girl who was sent long ago to fetch a pail of water, will come and wash the feet of the sculptures in the Sculpture Park.**

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication: Rannveig Pálmadóttir of Sigtún 55, Reykjavík.

# The Fire Within



# Garden

The female figure provided Ásmundur with endless inspiration, and in his work we see many aspects of Woman. We recognise the big, strong working woman, who with dignity and grace scrubs floors, carries pails of water or churns butter; and the fertile mother/Madonna figure, giver of life, who enfolds her child in a warm embrace.

But Ásmundur was cosmopolitan, too, and in the Garden we see sensuous representations of the female form. “I have nothing against love or sexuality. They are beautiful and also necessary. I’m in favour of Freud.



**Manstu er sátum við saman /The Memory of Us, 1932**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 415  
The work expresses a melancholic regret and emotional intensity. The man has placed his arm around the woman’s waist and holds her hand in his. He gazes into her face, while her eyes are cast down. Ásmundur commented on the piece: “*The Memory of Us* is in an old style. The work is more innocent and sweeter (than *Melancholy*), like the time from which it springs. In those days they used to sing: *Poverty is happiness, Dísa my darling.*”



**Jónsmessunótt/Midsummer Night, 1940**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 310  
Here a male and female figure are intertwined in a sensuous yet affectionate manner, into an indissoluble whole. Two forms fuse into one.



**Draumsýn/Reverie, 1935**  
Clay. ÁS-H 022



**Kossinn/The Kiss, 1936**  
Copper. ÁS-H 125

<sup>1</sup> All verbatim quotations from the artist are from Matthías Johannessen’s book *Bókin um Ásmund*. Helgafell 1971. English translation published as *Sculptor Ásmundur Sveinsson: An Edda in Shapes and Symbols*, Helgafell/Iceland Review

A natural sex life is a necessity for everyone, especially if he wants to have sweet dreams... We have a tendency to turn it all into prudishness and puritanism, or else wild and unbridled passion. But that’s all wrong. Nothing can be healthier than love, to maintain life.”<sup>1</sup>

The works in the Garden date from the period from the 1930s and 40s. The earlier works reflect something of the cosmopolitan artist, while in the latter part of that period Ásmundur was passing through a period of upheaval and renewal. By 1935 his marriage to sculptor Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir was essentially over, and at that



**Söknudur/Melancholy, undated**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 184  
“*Söknudur/Melancholy* is made in a different style. It has more tension, more drama... I’m making the shapes converse. The couple are parting. His hand and arm are a continuation of the girl’s thigh, in order to maintain the correct form in the composition of the image. There’s no other significance. Art has its own language. I want it to be free, without literature. Without influence from other art forms.” “You emphasise the woman’s breasts.” “Oh, yes, they are symbols of fertility, of course.”



**Systur (Útþrá)/Sisters (Wanderlust), 1934**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 014  
Ásmundur took photographs of his first wife, Gunnfríður, and her sister, naked by an Icelandic waterfall; this work bears a clear resemblance to the photographs.



**Krjúpandi kona/Kneeling Woman, 1935**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 021



**Maður og kona/Man and Woman, 1941**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 224

time he began a new relationship with his second wife Ingrid Sveinsson. His long-cherished dream of fatherhood became a reality in 1941.

In the works of that time, Ásmundur memorably sculpts dreams and memories of love and sensuality. Human forms interact, telling stories which express the artist’s profound understanding of the relationship between a man and a woman, and also display his remarkable skill in expressing himself through form.



**Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, undated**  
Concrete. ÁS-H 313  
Ásmundur and his first wife, sculptor/seamstress Gunnfríður Jónsdóttir, lived for many years in Stockholm and Paris, and also travelled around Europe and saw the sculptures of Italy and Greece.



**Maður og kona/Man and Woman, 1943**  
Clay. ÁS-H 039  
The clay of which the work is made underlines the raw eroticism and tenderness of the piece.



**Himinn og jörð/Heaven and Earth, 1935**  
Fired clay. ÁS-H 020



**Sköpun/Creation, 1949**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 051

# Battlefield

The Garden is a symbol of Paradise: a green and fertile Eden of love, affection and pleasure. But mankind was expelled from the Garden. Many of Ásmundur’s works of the 1940s are especially emotionally-charged and complex: depicting his own inner struggles as well as the bloody strife of World War II. These works are unique in Icelandic sculpture:



**Móðurást/Mother Love, 1948**  
Oak. ÁS-H 046  
“Ásmundur had travelled to France and seen the rubble of burned cities, bereft and traumatised people who had lost everything but the native instinct to survive and to save their children. When such a woman makes her way through bodies and blood after an air raid, carrying her life and all her possessions tied to her breast, she is only half-human. She is the incarnation of human instinct, strong and awe-inspiring.” Ásmundur says of the work: “One of the woman’s breasts has been shot off, leaving a hole. Our conscience sometimes has holes in it. The void, which is compositionally necessary, also tells a tale. The woman strives with her remaining breast to protect her child and save it. I have said to mothers: I urge you to campaign against war. Deliver your children from evil, as the Lord’s Prayer says. War is the worst of all evils.”



**David og Goliát/David and Goliath, 1952**  
Oak. ÁS-H 068  
“Here in *David and Goliath* the space is also framed in. Here the figurative is used with abstract ideas. Some people are under the mistaken impression that different trends cannot go together. But it is often absolutely vital for different styles and trends to interact in the same piece.”



**Stríð og flótti/War and Flight, 1943**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 396  
“This is intended to be the war-monster. A symbol of our time. We try to flee war. I did a number of pieces inspired by the war.”

<sup>2</sup> Björn Th. Björnsson. Helgafell 1953. Issue of periodical devoted to Ásmundur Sveinsson.

Ásmundur was almost alone among Icelandic artists in the 1940s in addressing the horrors of war and the bestial urges of humanity unleashed by warfare. The formal approach and content of the works *Stríð og flótti/War and Flight*, *Helreiðin/Hell Ride* and *Móðurást/Mother Love* have much in common with the painting *Guernica* (1937) by Spanish artist Picasso,



**Svörtu skyín/Black Clouds, 1947**  
Concrete and obsidian. ÁS-H 044  
True and honest expression is deeply rooted in the artist’s psyche. In the autumn of 1947 Ásmundur’s world was convulsed with tragedy when his five-year-old daughter was struck by a car and died. In that year the artist made *Svörtu skyín/Black Clouds*, the most powerful expression of grief and loss in all of Icelandic visual art. The title is ambiguous, referring to literal storm-clouds in the sky and at the same time to the dark night of the soul. Weighty and dark, the concrete and glittering black obsidian of which the work is made underline its emotional intensity. A troll-like mother gazes despairingly at the sky, arms spread as if to hold her child – but her embrace is empty. The void – the antithesis of form – is the crux and meaning of the sculpture. The one who should be there, is lost for ever.



**Sonatorrek/Lament for Lost Sons, 1948**  
Concrete. ÁS-H 047  
This context lends a new dimension to the work *Sonatorrek/Lament for Lost Sons* (1948). Tenth-century poet/warrior Egill Skallagrímsson, protagonist of the *Saga of Egill*, composed his great poem *Sonatorrek/Lament for Lost Sons* to express his agonising grief for his two dead sons. It is surely no coincidence that in 1948 Ásmundur sought inspiration in Egill’s verse. In the sculpture Ásmundur depicts the moment in the saga when Egill’s daughter Þorgerður, fearing that her father will starve himself to death in sorrow, urges him to address his grief through poetry. We may deduce that, in the same way, Ásmundur’s younger daughter and his art combined to enable him to work through his grief. Ásmundur’s *Sonatorrek* is thus a deeply personal work, in addition to referring to a classic theme of Icelandic literature.

which was one of the most influential and best-known works of its time. Picasso’s work was inspired by an air raid on civilians in a small Spanish town, *Guernica*, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-9). Picasso powerfully captures the terrors of civil strife; fear, pain and chaos when defenceless people are victims of brutal aggression.



**Helreiðin/Hell Ride, 1944**  
Copper. ÁS-H 367  
*Helreiðin/Hell Ride*, depicting the goddess Hel, who rampages blindly across the world, displaying no mercy; and *Stríð og flótti/War and Flight* (1943), embodying war as a monster from which there is no escape.



**Í tröllahöndum /Captured by Giants, 1949**  
Oak. ÁS-H 054



**Tröllkonan/Gigantess, 1948**  
Concrete. ÁS-H 049



**Höfuðlausn/Head Ransom, 1948**  
Oak. ÁS-H 050



**Móðir mín í kví, kví /My mother in the Pen, Pen, 1943**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 220



**Andvarp/Sigh, 1948.**  
Plaster of Paris. ÁS-H 410

# Yearning for Space

Ásmundur’s works were constantly evolving, and during the 1950s they became increasingly abstract, while his use of materials also changed; from 1955 he preferred to work in iron. He describes this process of development himself: “New wide-open spaces are constantly opening up. Modern art gives one precisely this opportunity to look into those open spaces – and to regenerate one’s creative powers. In the past artists felt they were bound to certain models, but now art has become more international in nature. That is not surprising, if we consider modern science and the modern way of thinking. Everything has become expanded. Everything has been unleashed. And then there’s technology. That will always exist. And if it is to become an ever-present factor in our cosmology, it must be united with art.”

The final years of Ásmundur’s life were eventful times in space science. Laika the astrodog was launched into orbit, and in due course a man took his first steps on the moon. And it made perfect sense that this eternally-young artist, who as a child had listened to fantastical tales in a dark farmhouse, should be enchanted by the infinite dimensions and potential of the universe. Ásmundur’s iron sculptures reflect the dreams of that time about the infinite potential of the human mind; in *Kúlan/Sphere* their shadows cast a distorted astronomical chart on the walls, interacting with an acoustic space which does not appear to comply with the laws of nature as we know them. Works of this nature include *Samhljómur hnattanna/Harmony of the Spheres* (1959), *Andlit sólar/The Face of the Sun* (1961) and *Geimþrá/Yearning for Space*, (1967).

## PÝRAMÍDINN/PYRAMID



**Geimdreki/Space Dragon, 1957**  
Iron, copper, whalebone. ÁS-H 080  
Ásmundur’s *Geimdreki/Space Dragon* and other works with similar themes such as *Geimþrá/Yearning for Space* refer explicitly to the “Space Race” which reached its zenith in the 1950s and 60s. The Soviet satellite *Sputnik I* was launched into space in the autumn of 1957, and several months later the bitch Laika was sent into orbit aboard the *Sputnik II*. These events caused an international sensation, and are reflected in Ásmundur’s art.

“*Geimdrekin Space Dragon* is made of iron, with a gaping maw and white fangs, and at the top is a little spherical moon. “When the US astronauts came here this spring<sup>3</sup> before they went to the moon,” Ásmundur commented, “I showed them this sculpture and pointed out the gaping jaws: *That is the danger on the way to the moon*, I said. Yes, they said, *you go that way to the moon, but we have to go there another way*. Fortunately they didn’t get caught in the jaws.””



**Fljúgandi diskar/Flying Saucers, 1965**  
Iron and copper. ÁS-H 128  
On 25 July 1965 daily *Alþýðublaðið* published a report with the headline: *Flying Saucers Return*: “The question of whether we will be visited by living beings from other planets has been revived after a large number of reports of ‘flying saucers,’ most of them from South America.” Ásmundur was well attuned to the issues of the time, and his *Fljúgandi diskar/Flying Saucers* may be his interpretation of that report. Ásmundur’s ambiguous saucers have an organic look of living creatures.



**Síðasti farfuglinn /The Last Migratory Bird, 1959.**  
Iron and copper. ÁS-H 084

## KÚLAN/SPHERE



**Andlit sólar/The Face of the Sun, 1961**  
Copper, wooden pedestal. ÁS-H 090  
“When my *The Face of the Sun* was erected in front of Reykjavík High School, they said that the sun stopped shining in the sky immediately afterwards. But that doesn’t matter. My sun takes no offence. It enjoys shining there, on the lawn in front of the High School. It won’t give anyone sunburn, admittedly, but it does its best to stay in vogue. And it’s never tried to compete with the one true Sun, which has no reason to be jealous. Some people see my sun as being at odds with the High School and its traditions and history. But I don’t see how present and past can be at odds with each other. Great rivers don’t stop flowing just because small tributaries flow into them. On the contrary, they grow stronger, the volume of water in them increases, their white foaming mane is enhanced; they are prouder, and flow more confidently to the sea. And the same is true of time. Without new works, without the present, the past ceases to be interesting. It becomes a land-locked reservoir, that evaporates in the stagnant air.”



**Samhljómur hnattanna /Harmony of the Spheres, 1959**  
Iron, copper, painted iron. ÁS-H 086  
Although space was the focus of scientific enterprise during the Cold War and the Space Race, *Samhljómur hnattanna/Harmony of the Spheres* expresses the artist’s yearning for beauty and harmony in an age of technology.



**Geimþrá/Yearning for Space, 1967**  
Iron and Plexiglas. ÁS-H 104

<sup>3</sup> In 1967 astronauts from NASA visited Iceland for training in the “lunar” landscape of the interior. Among them was Neil Armstrong, who in 1969 became the first man to set foot on the moon.