

## A Sculptor in Paris



The atelier 64 rue Saint-Charles

IN 1957 GUDMAR Olovson stayed in Paris briefly on his way back from Rome, returning to the French capital two years later, funded by a scholarship. He is twenty-three years old. He had visited the great cities of Italy, then those of Greece, deepening his knowledge of antique sculpture. The Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm had provided him with a profession, he now had to acquire a vision.

From September 1959 Gudmar Olovson occupied a studio on the top floor of the Swedish Pavilion in the Cité Internationale Universitaire\*, surrounded by beautiful parkland, in the south of Paris. For a sculptor perhaps even more than for a painter, having a studio means possessing the resources essential to his art: space, light and tranquillity. Without a studio no sculpture is possible, above all no large figures. Gudmar Olovson used the time not devoted to his work to discover the masterpieces of French sculpture, first of all those of the 19th century, by François Rude, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux and Auguste Rodin, which constitute a decisive milestone on the way towards a modernity intimately associated with life.

The brilliant design of the great female busts by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, the contours where shade adds a colour in Auguste Rodin's freedom of movement, would give his eager eyes moments of intense delight, the kind of moments that form an ardent soul and are never forgotten. It was by returning regularly to the Musée Rodin that Gudmar Olovson found confirmation of his deep vocation alongside other examples, methodically studying such masterpieces as *The Walking Man*, *The Kiss*, or *Iris*, messenger of the gods, a work in which the fire of art and the ardour of love are united. The choice of Paris, through his love of its works, would determine Olovson's destiny.

The artistic ties between Sweden and France which go back to the Middle Ages have always been very strong. In the 18th century Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, Sweden's ambassador to France, had assembled an outstanding collection of paintings, ranging from Desportes to Chardin and from Boucher to Fragonard, but also of drawings, now held in Stockholm National Museum, which was to contribute greatly to the influence of French art. At the same period, Swedish painters had travelled to France, artists like the portrait painters Alexander Roslin (1718 – 1793) and Adolf Wertmüller (1751 – 1811), or the great master of Swedish sculpture, Johan Tobias Sergel (1740 – 1814), the very epitome of an epic vision of forms, who stayed in Paris on two occasions, mixing with his main fellow artists, Bouchardon, Pajou and Houdon.

These ties were never to slacken. In the interwar period a woman sculptor, Lena Börjesson, set up the famous Académie Scandinave, known as the "Maison Watteau", in Montparnasse where the sculptors Charles Despiau (1874 – 1946) and Paul Cornet (1892 – 1977)

taught. Ranking alongside the Académie de La Grande Chaumière with Antoine Bourdelle, or the Académie Ranson with Aristide Maillol, at the time of the Ecole de Paris the Académie Scandinave constituted one of the most highly regarded studios in the capital. With its freelance teachers, it was a major centre of living art, respectful of professional skills and orientated towards the human body. So the ground in which the young Swedish sculptor would gradually root his art was very long established.

It was in his studio at the Cité Universitaire that Gudmar Olovson produced his first distinctive work, *Petit Torse*, a small female torso, already remarkably mature, with its sculptural feeling for masses and supple balancing of volumes. Even today this first torso surprises us with its youthful power, and the frankness of its light and shade effects. This work foreshadows a lot of Olovson's personality as it would develop in his finest compositions: a freedom of movement in the fleshy fullness of the volumes, derived from antique sculpture, and an intimate, almost physical strength, associated with his Scandinavian temperament. He entrusted the casting to a caster called Bisceglia, his very first casting endowed with a beautiful dark patina, and it may be imagined that he contemplated with a very special emotion.

At this time Gudmar Olovson had a decisive meeting which would to a large extent determine his direction as a sculptor: he met his fellow countryman Gunnar Nilsson (1904 - 1995). In his youth Nilsson had been a pupil of Charles Despiau and Paul Niclausse (1879 – 1958); he was a member of the Royal Academy of Sweden, and was then the most famous of the Swedish sculptors working in Paris. Through him, Olovson was able to meet Gunnar W. Lundberg, the Director of the Tessin Institute, of whom Gunnar Nilsson had made a bust. In line with general practice, Lundberg recommended Olovson in writing to the sculptor Jean Osouf, who



Pen drawing



*Petit Torse – Small Torso*  
This was Gudmar's first attempt at modelling, inspired by a ballet student living in the Cité Universitaire (Student Hostel), after settling in Paris

for his part had many connections with Sweden. His wife, Solveig, came from there, and Osouf had exhibited in Stockholm at various times. Gudmar Olovson's destiny was in the process of changing.

#### First meetings

The sculptor Jean Osouf (1898 – 1996), originally from Champagne, was discovered through his modelling by the Catalan Aristide Maillol (1861 – 1944), whose female figures embellish the gardens of the Louvre; he was one of the major figures in the independent tradition of French sculpture. Influenced by the Gothic art of Rheims, as well as by Etruscan and Roman art, Jean Osouf created male busts of a very positive nature, in which the unexpected expressive strength is derived from a strict architectural approach. While some female figures such as Coralie show the influence of mediaeval image carvers, his beautiful figures of Venus rising towards the sky seem to draw their inspiration from antique forms; or perhaps rather Gallo-Roman ones. Like a decisive milestone in the continuity of French art, his large stone statue L'Eveil [The Awakening] was installed in Paris in front of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1937.

Everything about Jean Osouf was irresistibly fascinating: his house, near Saint-Pierre de Montrouge, in a quiet Paris street,

where people dined by candlelight sitting on benches at a monastery refectory table, the memory of the artists he had known, from the painter Albert Marquet to the sculptor Charles Despiau, his collections of works of art, primarily of mediaeval sculptures. It may be recalled that one of the masterpieces of Gothic art, the bust of the Queen of Sheba, now held at the Musée de Cluny, used to be enthroned, if I may use that expression, on the small lavatory window, an unexpected sight likely to arouse the visitor's curiosity. For an artist with an academic training, Jean Osouf was the antithesis of a master who stood on ceremony. His misleadingly benign judgements, expressed in simple terms, born from his experience and from a long-term confrontation with great mediaeval works, were thought-provoking. His art, in its most vigorous modernity, was reconnecting with life, and through its very density with its precedents from the distant past, from Chartres or Rheims.

On leaving the Cité Internationale Universitaire in 1961, Gudmar Olovson found a studio on rue François Guibert, behind Montparnasse station, beside those of Gunnar Nilsson, Paul Cornet and Jean Carton. With its little gritstone houses, tradesmen's workshops, open courtyards, seedy pubs and market stalls, this district in the 15th arrondissement was then a relic of the Paris of earlier days in the heart of Montparnasse, being eyed by property speculators. It was there, around the boulevard Montparnasse, that the famous Ecole de Paris had been formed in the interwar period, involving French artists, often originating from the provinces, and artists from all over the world. In this little neighbourhood, now vanished, consisting of six sculptors' studios and six painters' studios, next door to another similar cluster, Gudmar Olovson would spend crucial years, essential for his experimentation and extremely fruitful in terms of his work.

Two further meetings separated by a year in this rue François Guibert locality would contribute towards placing Gudmar Olovson at the heart of French sculpture: the first was with Paul Cornet (1892 – 1977), the second with Jean Carton (1912 – 1988). Paul Cornet, married to a Danish wife and living in a large house built by his father who had been a decorator, was one of the first Cubist sculptors; then in about 1923, under the influence of Charles Despiau, he rediscovered art based on the human body. His bronze statue, Campagne [Countryside], on the forecourt of the Palais de Chaillot, is quintessential of his art, in the gentle casting of its volumes, redolent of the France of apple trees and vines. In Paul Cornet's work, the forms seem to have been decanted, the lines are continuous and always refined, without the solidity of the volumes ever suffering. As if born from the earth, at the rhythm of the seasons, his sculptures have the unaffected amplex of living works, with the light of the Ile de France as their only attire. He was a highly reputed master, first and foremost in Sweden.

Aware of the younger artist's interest in his sculpture, Paul Cornet made him welcome in his studio. He listened to him, argued with him, gave his impressions expressed in vivid, but extremely subtle terms, showed him his own work, and looked at his. His friendship with Gudmar Olovson was so close that he made a bust of him, based on twelve or so sittings (1963), a work which Gudmar's father, the surgeon Thore Olovson, subsequently bought. Through his simple, pithy way of putting things, far removed from

academic teaching conventions, Paul Cornet revealed to Gudmar Olovson a crucial aspect of French art, one that repudiates all spectacular effects and concentrates on the truth of feelings, a sense of moderation and the solidity of the craft.

The figure of Aphrodite (c. 1962 – 63), made with his wife Birgitta posing as a model, dates from these early years. She is supported on her right leg, with the head bent slightly to one side. The work is surprising because something about its proportions seems to make it appear even bigger. The lines have a real purity, and a sensation of balance and harmony emanates from the figure considered as a whole. A year later Gudmar Olovson completed the bust of his father, started a few years earlier in Sweden. The volume, modelled soberly, with controlled strength and a great concern for truthfulness, holds our attention because of its accuracy of feeling (1964). In these two works Gudmar Olovson shows that he has chosen to adopt as his own the tradition of his French elders, to get as close as possible to the form, while respecting his emotions, and refraining from any oratorical effect.

The third of these meetings was the most crucial. Jean Carton, the creator of radiant figures of energetic, untamed realism, would have a profound impact on Gudmar Olovson's work, in his search for a form of dramatic expression capable of effectively giving modern sculpture new impetus. Carton's powerful image of a boxer, Le Grand Riquet (1949), and his Athlète Vaincu [Beaten athlete] at the stadium in Villeneuve-sur-Lot (1958) illustrate an indomitable determination to retain a form of artistic heritage that was against the stream of the officially approved modes. Keen to anchor his art in the human drama, while relentlessly abjuring the anecdotal or superficial realism, through the power of his concepts Jean Carton renewed the tradition handed down by Charles Despiau, Robert Wlérick (1882 – 1944) and Charles Malfray (1887 – 1944). His highly developed awareness of the greatness of his art in the face of the rise of iconoclasm, his lapidary way of putting things, and his whole character, forged in adversity, impressed all sculptors, first and foremost the youngest among them.

These three meetings would be all the more decisive for Gudmar Olovson because they happened at a time of crisis. The independent tradition of French sculpture which took man as its measure had entered a period of adversity. The year of the young Swede's arrival in Paris actually coincided with the year when the French Republic, for the first time in its history, under the leadership of General De Gaulle, set up a Ministry of Cultural Affairs, with the mission of becoming involved in contemporary creativity. At the instance of André Malraux, a novelist and essayist for whom the Ministry had been created, cultural power previously unheard of in a modern democracy would gradually establish an interventionist policy. From purchases to retrospectives, from commissions to official exhibitions, on the pretext of modernity André Malraux's Ministry embarked on a move away from any form of humanist art, so breaking with the great constants of French art.

Yet at that time in the early Sixties the independent tradition in art still had solid foundations. With Paul Cornet and Jean Osouf, Jean Carton formed a vital link in the continuity of great French sculpture, going back beyond Rodin, Carpeaux and Houdon to the art of Versailles, or of the cathedrals. For each of them sculpture had the simplicity of the works of nature. It was associated with a



*Aphrodite*  
Created when Gudmar met Birgitta, his wife, who was his model for this work.

culture, a history and a light that guaranteed its free renewal, on the basis of sound craftsmanship, while refusing to lose its identity to any literary or ideological conception, however brilliant. No-one can make art from a theory, no-one can make another person's art. Alone, facing one's model, with the roughing chisel in one's hand: the truth is to be discovered within oneself. Between these three men, the heirs of a great tradition, and Gudmar Olovson, a young Swedish sculptor, a very strong bond would then be formed.

Therefore it was because of his love of French art, of which he is undeniably a connoisseur, and because of a genuine passion for its sculpture that Gudmar Olovson, while preserving close links with his native country, chose to work in France. The line of descent is clear, and freely accepted. All of his work has been carried



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out first in Paris, then at Ville d'Avray, Corot's favourite part of France, within a living tradition of which he has assimilated the accumulated experience. While the very special, often intense energy that emanates from his sculpted forms undoubtedly has deep Nordic roots, the plastic structure of his work, in its light and contours, is very much derived from French traditions. It is in this innovative synthesis between a long traditional line of sculpture, Latin and French, and an ardent temperament inclined to think large, as a man from the northern shores, that the uniqueness of Gudmar Olovson's art lies.

#### First figures

*Femme-oiseau blessée* [Wounded bird-woman] (1969) stands out from among the main sculptures Gudmar Olovson created at rue François Guibert. The figure, with its precarious balance, seems to be finishing a dance step, in the manner of a dove on a downward trajectory. The multiplicity of the points in space which underlies the form in movement that is about to erupt seems at first sight to be an impossible task. In attempting to resolve the challenge he had set himself by means of invisible geometry, Gudmar Olovson ran a great risk of science ending up by stifling his emotional response. But life won through. The feeling of drama that arises from this picture of suffering has constantly dominated our

view of it. And the harmoniously balanced movement has the clarity of a miracle.

That same year Gudmar Olovson welcomed the sculptor René Babin (1919 – 1997) into his studio. Babin was a disciple of Robert Wlérick, a powerful draughtsman and an inspired modeller. Working opposite one another after the same model, each man gave his own interpretation of this extended pose; René Babin called his *L'Etoile* [The Star], and Gudmar Olovson chose the title *Concorde*. The figure is in balance, firmly implanted on the left leg, with the right leg stretched back. Where René Babin, without sacrificing the overall structure, stresses the sinewy nature of the contours, Gudmar Olovson is more responsive to the momentum of the line. The right leg is raised high, the thigh almost stretched. The foot, calf and then the leg stripe space with their rhythm, like a big flourish, before pivoting around the knee and rising back towards the torso. It is this candour in the curved lines, with their swell and their rhythm, drawing a virtual arabesque in space, that prompts a sensation of taking flight, through a kind of plastic metonymy.

The woman in *Femme-oiseau blessée* finished her aerial movement in pain; the one in *Concorde* is in control of her trajectory, and seems to be on the point of overcoming gravity. Though inspired by the French supersonic plane, the name *Concorde*, chosen for its grammatical meaning, does not evoke only the spatial momentum of the figure. It also expresses the concordance of all parts of the form with one another to culminate in the unity of the movement. Without this the sculpture, a simple accumulation of fragments, would disintegrate before our eyes. Success in art relies on a total effect. That effect, which entails sacrifices, is extremely difficult to achieve. It implies the primacy of the dynamic concept by which true artists can be identified.

This sensation of welling up occurs again in many of Gudmar Olovson's works in the course of these years. With *Torse dans l'Espace* [Torso in space] (1971) a whole set of rhythms, as calculated as they are vigorous, is expressed. The left leg which acts as a support is turned twice on its axis, at knee level, then at ankle level. The right foot, vigorously shaped, leads in a single movement through the ascending rhythms of the leg to the main surface of the torso. Gudmar Olovson was putting the lessons of Rodin and DeGas to good use, combining power and energy. His contours, always broad and sensitive, come from the interior of the form. The plastic life, like a Scandinavian saga, is tied to the space it occupies; for all sculpture, beyond what it looks like, expresses a relationship with the world.

Through the dynamism of their lines *Femme-Oiseau blessée*, then *Concorde*, introduce the dream of Icarus into sculpture. With his pregnant woman, *Le Fruit* (1970), Gudmar Olovson allowed himself to be fascinated by its opposite: the powerful germination of volume. It seems that the bust, dragged down by the round stomach, like an almost monstrous egg, must tip forwards. But the body, conceived of in its totality, recovers its balance by the rooted

#### *Le Hongrois – The Hungarian*

*Etruscan bronzes provide the inspiration, but the features are those of a Hungarian actor who was Gudmar's neighbour at the Swedish Student Hostel in Paris. This work was awarded the "Prix de Grèce" in 1963.*





*La Chute – The Fall*

steadiness of its legs. The sculptor has transmuted statics into a network of vibrations. The volume, almost at bursting point, silently fills the space, and extends into a series of flows. Gudmar Olovson makes palpable the contradictory aspect of a mass when the mystery of something living is proliferating within it: a mixture of gravity and energy, concentration and radiation.

Later, with *Flora*, the sitting pregnant woman, Gudmar Olovson again took up the idea of fruit, in a small-scale figure with sensitive, delicate contours. The pose is very simple, with the hands on the stomach. The head is crowned with a garland of flowers, in homage to Rembrandt's *Flora*. The stomach sticks out, the back is straight, hardly tired by the growing weight of life. The figure is firmly settled in its space. Its forms curve out freely, in a tactile style, subtly capturing the light. With her strong seated posture reminiscent of a little antique goddess, Gudmar Olovson's *Flora* expresses in her own fashion, composed of silence and light, the picture of inner happiness. The very finely judged solidity of the form fixes an ephemeral state in enduring time. For what could be more temporary than this period of gestation? *Flora* is waiting, with no needless gesture, in confidence and serenity.

Two other sculptures deserve a mention: the first is *L'Élan* [Momentum] (1969), in which certain patterns in modern sculpture, like Degas's step, or the torso enconced frontally in the tradition of Rodin or Wlérick, are rethought by Gudmar Olovson through an energy that is all his own. A Scandinavian's energy, but a fighter's too. Immersed in her time, indissociable from her space, the woman moves forward, motivated by her momentum alone, with an impetuous step, just before making a leap. The profiles unite with the outlines of the planes, in a series of rhythms that accentuate the power of the movement. It is a kind of vigorous hymn, chanted like a plastic paean.

The second of these sculptures is the complete opposite: *L'Homme qui a perdu son chemin* [The Man who has lost his way] (1978) – and we might say his momentum. He is vacillating, as if caught up in the whirlwind of his own shadow, or of a destiny that is beyond him. The clearness of his gaze is clouded with shadows. His features have become blurred, his legs still seem sturdy, but his step is faltering. He moves forward haggard, devoured by doubt, having lost his bearings, in a space that is disrupted. His torso seems to pirouette on itself, and in the texture of its contours there are dark areas pitted by etching. This highly symbolic sculpture, in the image of modern man, helpless and bruised, is one of the most powerful made by Gudmar Olovson, and one of the most poignant. It conveys the crisis of a culture, and beyond that of a civilisation.

#### *Moving on to couples*

The child is the fruit of love. The theme of the couple is one of those that recurs most frequently in Gudmar Olovson's work, whether in the form of reliefs, sculptures, drawings or engravings. We can leave it to astrologers to look at the artist's sky chart to find the reasons for this obsession: not forgetting that the unknown in the field of the stars is the other side of the Infinite.

From the point of view of art the motif is simple: a great idea is seldom exhausted in one work. Sometimes it needs nothing but prologues, variations and repeats to be implemented. All musicians know this, as do all poets. In my opinion, even *Faune et Nymphe* [Faun and Nymph] (1971) slots into this theme of the couple, the powerful embrace having the thrill of a sacred lovers' tryst, in the undergrowth of ancient Greece, or the fjords of Scandinavia; as does the relief *Le Chant d'Amour* [Love song] (1975), where the sketch-like contours preserve the work's note of modesty.

In the first version of the couple (1966 / 70) the man and the woman stand facing one another, in their original truth. Gudmar gave this couple the name *Les Deux Arbres* [The Two Trees], taking up Maupassant's magnificent metaphor in *Notre Cœur*. The vigour of the forms blends harmoniously with the suppleness of the lines with their vertical emphasis. It is this very idea of plastic momentum that perhaps best characterises Gudmar Olovson's vision of the couple, compared with that developed by Jean Carton from 1955 on in a series of engravings, then by Raymond Martin in a bronze group entitled *La Rencontre* (1993), placed in front of the post office in Cachan. Since 2001 the monumental version of *Les Deux Arbres* has been installed in the Bois de Boulogne, on the main island on the lower lake.

In 1975 Gudmar Olovson produced a first variation on the



*La Chute – The Fall*