

## CURRENT PORTRAIT

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# Majesty's lions

**The sculptor Claus Ørntoft achieves a temporary peak at the unveiling of the gift to the Queen in Marselisborg Palace park.**

Those who attended a sneak preview of sculptor Claus Ørntoft's sculpture "3 Lions and 9 Hearts" have called it a masterpiece. The installation is a gift, funded by a series of organisations, to the Queen to mark the occasion of her 70th birthday in 2010 and can be regarded as a temporary peak to a career that has brought its maker into the foremost ranks. Her Majesty will be attending the unveiling of the granite work in Marselisborg Palace park after a laborious and fruitful working process over several years. And it was the Queen who proposed and contacted the artist to ask whether he would create a sculpture for the royal setting.

Claus Ørntoft's sculpture is based on the Danish Royal coat of arms. His idea was to have the three lions leaping out of the shield and interpreted freely. Amongst the leaping lions are hearts and leaves, references to the heraldry of the national coat of arms. The aim reflects a desire to create a balance between gravity and humour, weight and weightlessness.

Claus Ørntoft was born in 1959. He didn't thrive at school, so it was a relief not to have to deal with books and homework after he graduated from 10th grade.

His subsequent meeting with the inspirational teacher Jonna Sejg in West Jutland, was defining for the 17 year old. She was an energetic catalyst and was Claus Ørntoft's mentor for several years while he attended Design School in Kolding.

He later became a student of Gestur Thorgrímsson in Iceland, Sys Hindsbo at the Art Academy in Funen and the sculptor Erik Varming.

His membership of the artists' association, Corner, Kunstnersamfundet and the Vraa exhibition association provides him with professional sparring.

At home, his wife, Norwegian colleague Marit Benthe Norheim, is an important sparring partner. The couple met in Qaqortog/Julianehåb in 1994 at the Nordic sculpture project "Sten og Menneske", organised by the Greenlandic artist Aka Høegh, where they fell in love. They later bought a house on a farm in Vendsyssel where they set up their respective studios

### Human characteristics

A youthful attempt at becoming Sven Havsteen-Mikkelsen's assistant when the sculptor was working on the Faroe islands, was not a success for Claus Ørntoft. The master replied to the young

hopeful that he lacked teaching abilities, but that he would be happy to have him come for a visit. Over the 15 years that followed, Claus Ørntoft sought out his older mentor, and remembers that his conversations with the Nordic-minded artist became the ballast that settled in his consciousness. Havsteen-Mikkelsen was not arrogant and made his young colleague feel like an equal.

Claus Ørntoft has created a series of commissions both at home and in Norway and is represented throughout the country. His sculptures are mostly of animals. Monumental, fabled animals, strange animals, funny animals, and animals in sculptural landscapes, but animals that often display human qualities. They often have a hypnotic attraction with compelling compositions that are mythical, mysterious, and possessed of a primordial power rooted in the Nordic. His messages hit home without the use of cultural viagra. They stand alone. Majestic and chiseled into the memory at first sight. His art can stand alone, but allows itself to be integrated into the architectonic whole if it is invited in.

He is able to fill every no man's land that he wanders into, undisturbed and self-consciously, striving and wandering, making it a genuine pleasure to witness, wrote a critic of his retrospective at the museum at Koldinghus.

### **Between tradition and new departures**

It has been said of Claus Ørntoft that he treads the ground between tradition and new departures, the international and the national, both challenging and appealing to sense and emotion. Claus Ørntoft used to carve directly into granite, but is no longer able to do that for health reasons. These days he creates his models in clay and carves and refines at the end. He is still able to do this. After the demanding task of the work for the art-loving head of state, Claus Ørntoft will now start on piece for a square in Hirtshals. He has just put the finishing touches to a commission for Hospice Djursland and will be unveiling a relief for a new building at Sct. Hans Hospital in Roskilde. The commission in the fishing town of Hirtshals is not far from where he lives and it challenges him professionally because there are several components that need to be unified for it to form a synthesis.

### **Amalienborg Museum**

In addition to the series of commissions and works on Claus Ørntoft's CV are also richly deserved honours such as the Sculptor Gerhard Henning's scholarship which he was awarded three times, Ole Haslund Artist Foundation Honorary Gift, a portion from the Danish Arts Foundation and Akademirådet's travel scholarship as well as the Silkeborg artist grant.

From 2 November Amalienborg opens an exhibition of Claus Ørntoft's scale models and sketches as well as a description of the sculpture project "3 Lions and 9 Hearts".