

Svend Rathsack's Monument to Mariners (1924-28) Restored and Reinaugurated 2011

The Danish sculptor Svend Rathsack (1885-1941) was originally trained as a painter at the Danish Royal Academy, but soon turned to sculpture which defined the bulk of his artistic output. His *Monument to Marriners* near the Langelinie Marina was the result of a competition launched in 1924 by the Danish Steamship Owner's Association to commemorate sailors who lost their lives at sea serving in the Danish merchant fleet during World War I 1914-18. Two rounds of the competition were necessary in order to choose a suitable project, and Rathsack participated in both. His solution in the first round simply showed a man throwing a life ring in the attempt to save a fellow marriner (1). His next proposal was a lot more ambitious. He joined forces with the architect Ivar Bentsen (1876-1943), and this time they came up with a proposal for a huge monument. (2) A rhombus-shaped construction shoots forward from a slope like a ship's prow ploughing the waves. It serves as the plinth for the enormous statue of *Remembrance*, an angel-like figure with an oak wreath in her hands. She is standing on a tall base where all names – not only of the ships that were destroyed but also of the crew who died – are inscribed (3). Two of the sides of the plinth serve as surfaces for relief friezes which narrate two incidents: a ship shattered by a mine (4) and the ensuing rescue operation (5). On the shorter sides we see representations of Mercury (6) and Mars (7), gods of commerce and warfare. One is sided by a fatherless family (8), the other by a helmsman (9). There is space for further allegorical representations: a little boy playing with his toy ship (10), and an eagle chasing a dove (11), symbolizing the dangers at sea and superior military force, respectively.

A series of sketches and bozettos were made before the final version. Diminished plaster models of two of the friezes decorates a gateway in a private tenement in Copenhagen (12-13). It is interesting to note how the artist shifts from a naturalistic style in the early production stages to a more stylized and simplified language in the final work. In a photo from Svend Rathsack's studio (14) we see him sitting on a reduced scale model of the entire construction with the reliefs in clay and *Remembrance* in

plaster. The photo of the final plaster model with Rathsack's wife next to it demonstrates its huge dimensions (15).

Finally in 1925 work on the fullscale monument could be initiated. Rathsack probably chose a Danish limestone from the Faxe quarries for two reasons: 1) it is a beautiful material and 2) it is quite soft and therefore easy to carve. The rhomboid building was constructed on the site, and, following drawings and models, carving directly on the stone was begun. Rathsack would trace the outlines on the stone surface, as you can see in this photo of Rathsack next to the at that point only roughly hewn Mars (16), and several assisting stonemasons, some of them Rathsack's own pupils, set to work on the task (17). It took three summer seasons to finish it. This way of operating permitted great artistic freedom during the process, as can be seen by comparing the 'rescue' frieze while in progress with the final result. Rathsack had originally intended to have two fleeing figures to the extreme right, namely a boy and a man (18). In the final version the boy has been eliminated, so that we now more clearly perceive that the escaping man is about to throw himself into the sea (19). Likewise the artist altered the midship smoke caused by a mine explosion and replaced it with a simplified pattern of splinters (20).

Alas, only a few decades after the inauguration of the monument in 1928 signs of decay could be noticed. For centuries the Faxe limestone had been used as building material, but it soon appeared to be quite unsuitable for sculptural work in urban space. The changeable Danish climate with damp and frosty winters eroded the surface, and over the years large chips of material fell off the friezes (21). Repairs with cement flawed the overall aesthetic impression, and by the beginning of the new millennium it was decided to recarve the whole monument in a more weather-resistant stone. More than 6.5 million Danish kroner was raised through donations from Danish shipping companies, and an Italian travertine limestone was selected. The new carvings were made from silicone casts of the partly reconstructed reliefs, ashlar by ashlar. These casts had been encased in plaster and set in wooden frames which proved to be a very bad solution. During the period of fundraising and preparatory works the casts had been stored for years in a container without any climate control, resulting in the

wood and plaster reacting to the constant weather changes. When the carving from the casts was completed minor inaccuracies in each ashlar ended up forming a frightening chaos of forms and lines that converged from block to block in quite incongruous ways so that the overall impression of each frieze was heavily flawed. Luckily, an artistically gifted Spanish stonemason saved the monument from total disgrace. In fact he simply repeated the original method of working directly on the monument *in situ* after old models and photographs. The monument was reinaugurated in 2011.

Now, how did Rathsack and Bentsen get the idea for this monument? The inspiration for *Remembrance* is quite obvious. *Nike of Samothrace* representing the Greek goddess of Victory is seen with spread wings standing on a base in the shape of a ship's bow (22). It is a masterpiece of Greek sculpture from the Hellenistic era (2nd century BC), and it stands in the Louvre Museum, Paris. As to the friezes one has to look in a different direction. In 1921 Rathsack had made a journey to Java where he visited the largest Buddhist temple in the world, the famous *stupa* of Borobodur raised 778-842 (23). Its friezes carved in volcanic stone depict the history of Buddha, and like in Rathsack's monument the individual relief fields are spread over a pattern of ashlars (24). In the figures and overall composition there is another, perhaps less conspicuous influence, namely from ancient Egyptian art. You may have noticed Rathsack's predilection to depict the human body from the side with faces in profile. He borrowed the effect of having his figures set one foot in front of the other from the Egyptians, and he transformed the gesticulating arms of persons with sacrificial vessels for his own narrative purpose (25-28). You'll find a more exhaustive treatment of the subject in my article from 2011 (29).

So what has Rathsack's monument got to do with the Sigurjón Ólafsson's *Saltfiskstövlun*? (30) Ólafsson belonged to a younger generation than Rathsack who was almost of the same age as Einar Utzon-Frank (1888-1955), Ólafsson's teacher at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen 1928-33. The professor had been a member of the artistic consultative committee for the *Monument to Mariners*'s competition, and in the second round he himself participated and was even awarded ~~the amount of~~ 1.000 kr.

Ólafsson couldn't have followed the creation of Rathsack's monument at close quarters as he didn't arrive until the year it was inaugurated (9 May 1928), but it must have caused great interest among the young artists, not least Utzon-Frank's pupils. It may interest you to hear what Utzon-Frank's proposal was like. It represented the figure of a nereid – one of the daughter's of the sea god Nereus – with dolphins and seashells at her feet. She is placed on a tall pillar with decorative reliefs, a wreath and a branch in her hands. It was meant to be a landmark of colossal dimensions.

To me it is quite obvious that Ólafsson must somehow have been inspired by Rathsack's idiom in his *Saltfiskstövlun* created 1934-35. In it we recognize the vivid gestures from Rathsack's work that give life to the narrative, and both works exhibit a firm and well-considered compositional pattern. The limited space in breadth has been compensated for by setting the frieze in two layers which also lay latent in Rathsack's work, especially in the rescue scene with the interaction of figures in various positions – in layers one might even say. The roughly modelled, angular figures – some would call them cubistic – is a common feature in both works.

Other Danish sculptors were undoubtedly influenced by Rathsack's and Ólafsson's works. Charles Svejstrup Madsen's burly *Fishwife* (31) at Gammel Strand from 1939 has definitely borrowed features from both of them. Ólafsson carved two figure groups by hand during the war, from 1943 to 1945. These broadly carved and simplified forms, much in the same vein as *Saltfiskstövlun*, now stand in front of Vejle Town Hall, representing Commerce and Trade on one granite block, Agriculture and Industry on the other (32). Here we see them in their original position. They have recently been reorganized and placed closer to the building on each side of the main stairs (33-35). As late as 1964 inspiration from Rathsack's and Ólafsson's works is discernible in August Keil's *Monument to prime minister Thorvald Stauning*. Like the *Monument to Mariners* it draws on ancient Egyptian art. On one side we see a concourse of people (36), on the other a group of construction workers (37). Other examples from before and after the war could be pointed out, but I think that the few-mentioned here will suffice to demonstrate the impact and

importance these two early works were to have on Danish sculpture for decades to come.

Finally, let me express my sincerest hopes that a way will be found to save the *Saltfiskstövlun* from decay, either by reconstructing it in its original material – or maybe recreated as a carved work of art in stone. It certainly deserves it.

Jens Peter Munk, November 2022

