

Karólína Lárusdóttir

Karólína was a printmaker from Iceland whose work was inspired by her youth. She happily lived the majority of her life in the UK however, she looked back to her Icelandic roots for inspiration. She used both mythical creatures and folklore like angels or monsters to influence her pieces. By blending elements of her early life in a hotel owned by her grandfather and these angelic presences, she created a sense of wonder and mystery.

Her grandfather was an ex Olympian. After he left this competitive lifestyle, he decided to join the Barnum and Bailey's circus (the inspiration for the greatest showman) as a strongman. He was very successful in this industry and earned his own fortune. With this money, he returned to Iceland to build the first flamboyantly luxurious hotel, The Hotel Borg. It opened in 1980 and still stands today in Parliament Square. His granddaughters would often spend a lot of time here, including Karólína. This is where she would sit for hours, observing each strange individual that walked through those wonderous doors. She would watch every formal dance and see every maid scurry from one room to the next.

You can see the influence this had on her in her work as each print surrounding the hotel is filled with a number of peculiar people, ranging from kitchen staff to wealthy nobles. These people are unsmiling, often unhappy as if something bad or mysterious has happened: something the viewer does not know about. This creates an array of emotions as it invokes both fear and curiosity. The contrast of their pale, grey skin and the bright eye-catching colours of their clothes (usually in the women) gives a sense that something is off. As if they're trying to cover something up.



This piece is called Leyja Comes to Hotel Borg. Leyja was Karólína's nanny and a key figure in her life. The two people floating in the back are Karólína and this woman. They are watching a significant event take place in the hotel. This is suggested by the man sitting at the table. the woman standing up is likely wanting to talk to him but the fact that there is no seat for her to take suggests that this is a quick affair and the man doesn't want her to be there. He does not stand up to address her and continues eating. This is considerably rude so he obviously believes he is higher in status and more privileged. The only people standing up (other than the woman in question) are the hotel staff which could be a representation on how he views her in the same way as the people who work for him, despite the fact that she is in brightly coloured clothes like all the more important ladies (including Karólína herself).

Another major aspect of her work is the faces of the people she creates. In this piece, they all have mostly the same one, despite the obvious divide between gender and class. This certain face takes the form of almost every person she etches. She was fascinated by the old photographs of Icelandic families where they would be staring, unblinking into the camera. She wanted them to be “both general and specific. Plain and unaffected by their circumstances”.

I myself was first introduced to Karólína while learning how to frame pictures. I used one of her prints “the Leader” and was instantly captivated by her intricate detail and distinctive style. Inspired by her haunting faces and entrancing colours, I sought to find out more about her life and what influenced her work. This brought me on a fascinating journey through her childhood in The Hotel Borg. Learning about her grandfather, all the people she met and how she saw the world as a young girl. I believe each of her pieces has a story to tell and it is entertaining to try and decode each chapter, to really comprehend her message and what she is trying to say through her wonderful etchings.