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British Sculpture Abroad, 1945 – 2000

**Edited by Penelope Curtis and Martina
Droth**

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Cover image: Installation View, Simon Starling, Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima), 2010–11, 16 mm film transferred to digital (25 minutes, 45 seconds), wooden masks, cast bronze masks, bowler hat, metals stands, suspended mirror, suspended screen, HD projector, media player, and speakers. Dimensions variable. Digital image courtesy of the artist

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Želimir Košćević, "Henry Moore's Exhibition in Yugoslavia, 1955", *British Art Studies*, Issue 3, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/zkoscev>

When Henry Moore's exhibition arrived in Yugoslavia in 1955, it seemed like the icing on the cake. The groundwork had already been laid by a visit to the artist's studio in Hertfordshire, some one hundred kilometres from London, in the first half of 1954, by Najdan Pašić (1922–1997), the then press attaché at the Yugoslav Embassy, and Stevan Majstorovic, a journalist from *Nedeljne informativne novine (NIN)* in Belgrade.¹ An informal proposal they had floated at the time soon turned into a formal invitation for an exhibition.²

However, the Yugoslav officials' visit to Henry Moore did not come out of the blue. It had been preceded by some correspondence between the Embassy of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and the British Council, in which the Embassy had suggested three possibilities for cultural co-operation to their British counterparts: first, an exhibition of historic British art from Hogarth to Turner; second, an exhibition of British painting; and third, an exhibition of British sculpture—"particularly, that of Henry Moore".³

The British Council had opted for the last of these three alternatives as the most expedient, as it could be based on a combination of the artist's works returning from the São Paulo II Bienal (1953)—where Moore had just been awarded the Sculpture Prize—and from a solo exhibition that was due back from Germany in July 1954.⁴ In 1955, the turbulent period in Yugoslavia that began in 1948 with the dramatic breaking off of relations with the Soviet Union and other nations from the Eastern Bloc, had already lasted for seven years, and Henry Moore's exhibition was merely the last in a series of important events resulting from the newly established cultural and political ties with Western nations. The tensions were moving to an end when a Soviet delegation, including the First Secretary of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, paid an official visit to Yugoslavia on 26 May 1955, which would be followed in July by the signing of the so-called Belgrade Declaration, according to which the relations between the two countries were to be developed on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, independence, and equality.

Henry Moore (1898–1986) was the son of a miner. At the time the Yugoslav exhibition was proposed, he had already held a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1946, won the Grand Prix at the Venice Biennale in 1948, and participated in the Festival of Britain in 1951. His work in wartime Britain had been marked by the celebrated cycle of "Shelter Drawings" made in the London Underground. Finally, there was also his marriage to the Russian-born dancer, Irina Radetsky. On top of all this, since Josip Broz Tito's visit to the UK in March 1953, relations between the two countries had been steadily improving. Furthermore, the British Embassy in Belgrade was headed by Frank Roberts, a man of great culture and diplomatic experience, while the ambassador of the SFR Yugoslavia to London was an equally experienced and knowledgeable diplomat, Vladimir Velebit. Two other people who played a very important part in the organization of Moore's exhibition in Yugoslavia were Marko Ristić, the then

chairman of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, and Ivo Frol,⁵ the then Secretary of the Federal Committee for Cultural Relations, who was about to take over a senior role in government protocol at the time of the Belgrade exhibition. These might seem to be matters of secondary importance, but they nevertheless played a definite part in the process leading up to the final decision taken by both sides, to hold the exhibition.

Announcements of the Henry Moore exhibition started to appear in the Yugoslav press in the summer of 1954 and continued into the first months of 1955. In the end, the exhibition comprised twenty-one sculptures, four bronze maquettes, forty drawings, two linocuts, and ten large-scale photographs. It was accompanied by a single catalogue, in two different—Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian—versions. This contained a text by Herbert Read, an extensive biography of Henry Moore, a selection of texts by the artist, and a list of works (nine of which were reproduced in black-and-white). Included among the drawings was a group that depicted Londoners sheltering in the Underground during the Blitz, which had been added at the request of the artist, who considered that “they would be of special interest to the Yugoslavs.”⁶

Henry Moore and his wife, Irena, arrived at Zagreb on Saturday, 19 March 1955. Moore’s exhibition came to Yugoslavia at a time when the ideological taboos associated with an aesthetics based on Socialist Realism had already been broken. Over and above the official welcome dictated by protocol in Zagreb, Belgrade, Skopje, and Ljubljana, the exhibition once more presented critics with an opportunity for publicly voicing their opinions. By the mid-1950s, these opinions had already been clearly formulated, and the critical parameters had been traced out within the central field of debate. In Belgrade, a polemical discussion took place in the pages of the magazine *Savremenik* and the newspaper *Delo*;⁷ in Zagreb, opinions were divided between the magazines *Krugovi* and *Čovjek i prostor* on the one hand, and the magazine *Republica* and the daily paper *Vjesnik* on the other; in Ljubljana, the polemics extended throughout the pages of the magazine *Naši razgledi*, in the daily papers, and at a number of public panel discussions. Although by then it was politically and ideologically clear that the old-style socialist model had already been more or less abandoned, the essential question in all the discussions kept returning to the issue of “the human dimension in art”. Henry Moore’s exhibition offered an answer to this question (fig. 1).



Figure 1.

Installation View, Henry Moore, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 1955 Digital image courtesy of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana / Henry Moore Foundation

Miodrag B. Protić rightly stated that Moore’s exhibition was “not the beginning of an end to dogmatism, but a continuation of its demise”.⁸ More time had to pass before an end was finally put to ideological dogmatism in art, and in the meantime the focus of debate shifted to the relationship between figuration and abstraction. Protić went on to assert that the exhibition had “encouraged artistic renewal and strengthened the freedoms won in the period from 1950 to 1954”, and he was able to adduce many arguments in support of this claim. Since the early 1950s, the shift towards more democratic forms of socialism and culture had become visible in Yugoslavia.⁹ In Zagreb, this process had started with the appearance of the group EXAT 51 and their first manifesto in December 1951,¹⁰ and with the exhibition of fantastic paintings by Antun Motika a short time afterwards,¹¹ as well as with a joint exhibition by Josip Vaništa and Miljenko Stančić at the Museum of Arts and Crafts.¹² In Belgrade, an exhibition of works by Petar Lubarda in 1951 represented a significant shift towards creative freedom and expressionism,¹³ also displayed in the touring exhibition of contemporary French art that had been presented in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Skopje in 1952.¹⁴ In Ljubljana, the confrontation between “modernists” and “conservatives” was not as pronounced, but some artists there also found an outlet in a tendency towards magical realism and fantasy—particularly in the field of graphics.

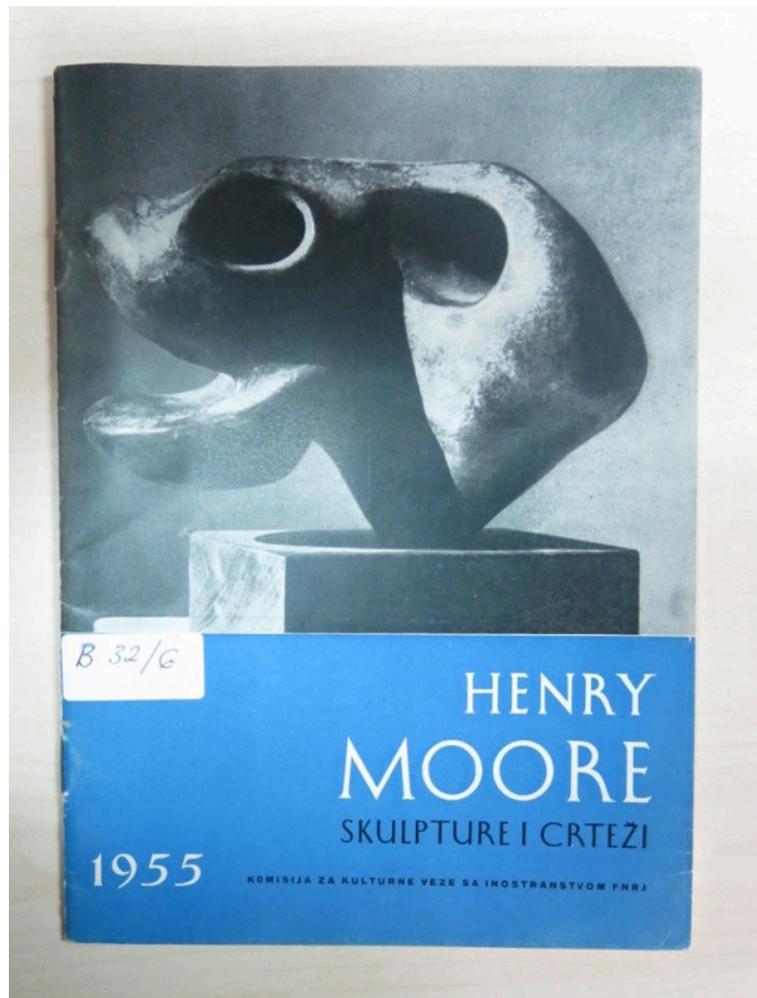


Figure 2.

Cover, Henry Moore: izložba skulpture i crteža (Henry Moore: exhibition of sculpture and drawings), (London: British Council, 1955)

In the mid-1950s, the “humanist” position in art, which had no place in the theory and practice of Socialist Realism, now came up against “the spectre of abstraction”. As early as 1951, the Zagreb critic Radoslav Putar had written that the path of art was determined by the tendency towards “a real abstraction of the physical aspect of things”,¹⁵ —a view that was reflected in certain comments by Henry Moore, in the catalogue of the exhibition in Yugoslavia, to the effect that “from a certain point of view, all art is abstraction”, and “abstract qualities of construction are essentially important for the value of the work.”¹⁶ Although the degree of abstraction was mitigated by reference to the search for a human dimension, Moore’s exhibition clearly showed that a synthesis was possible. Protić realized this, when writing about Moore’s exhibition in Belgrade: “While concrete in expression, he [Moore] also imbues his work with an irrational component. The functions of the concrete and the abstract are fully understood. The

concrete accelerates the psychological process and helps the abstract to gain the fascinating strength of reality.”¹⁷ As for the “human dimension”, Putar stated that: “Indeed, Moore’s works belong to the order of abstraction that is charged with human substance.”¹⁸ Dimitrije Bašičević (the artist, Mangelos) also joined in with his own reflections on Moore’s exhibition: “Moore has a tendency to penetrate reality, instead of adopting a popular form of realism. This was also what served to distinguish the art of the early 20th century from what went before.”¹⁹ In Ljubljana, some 4,200 visitors came to see the exhibition, according to a letter that the director of the Moderna Galerija, Karel Dobida,²⁰ sent to the British Council in Zagreb and Henry Moore in England. The exhibition was less favourably received in magazine reviews, although it “aroused great interest among visual artists and art lovers and gave them an opportunity for discussing questions of principle. Younger artists also felt a strong incentive to talk about the medium of sculpture and took the opportunity to do so.”²¹ However, in 1955 there still lingered a strong suspicion, which was publicly aired at the time of the contemporary French art exhibition in Ljubljana in 1952, that “a delight in such art is absurd and pathetic. There is nothing either joyful or beautiful in it, and anything about it that is new merely exudes despair, sickness and disgust.”²² Most of the debates were about the relationships between realism, figuration, abstraction, and humanism versus dehumanization, and so forth, but it was also clear that the orthodox ideology was gradually running out of arguments. In Ljubljana as elsewhere, the questions about the relationship between the socially advanced and the socially regressive, and between socialism and capitalism, seemed to be losing traction. More than once it was asserted that the visitors simply “succumbed to the idea of fashion” and that the works in Moore’s exhibition were “things that could hardly be called sculpture”.²³

Nevertheless, all contemporary reports of the events in Zagreb, Belgrade, Skopje, and Ljubljana distinctly stated that the exhibition aroused great interest.²⁴ In Zagreb it was inaugurated on 1 March 1955 by Ivan Leko, the then Secretary of the Council of Culture of the People’s Republic of Croatia, while the sculptor Vojin Bakić spoke about the importance of the exhibition. There were around one hundred visitors to the exhibition in the Zagreb Art Pavilion when Henry Moore went to have a look at it with his wife, and the artist was highly impressed. The final number of visitors in Zagreb was in the region of ten thousand. Moore’s stay there was not without its inconveniences, however: the Academicians refused to receive him, though he did pay a courtesy visit to the “master’s workshop” of Krsto Hegedušić, quite possibly because his hosts had sent him a copy of a publication about the latter’s work in advance of his visit.

The opening at the Cvijeta Zuzorić pavilion in Belgrade on 29 March 1955, where the work had been installed by the artist Djordje Papović, was a particularly ceremonious occasion. The exhibition was inaugurated by Marko Ristić in the presence of Henry Moore and his wife.²⁵ A rich programme was laid on for Moore's visit to the city, which lasted several days. He visited the atelier of the sculptor Toma Rosandić, in the company of Ivo Frol, and there the sculptor met the latter's wife, Olga Jančić.²⁶ He also visited Rosandić at his home. In Rosandić's workshop he met a number of the sculptor's young assistants, inspected their works, and held meaningful conversations with everybody present. He also visited the painters Petar Lubarda,²⁷ Milo Milunović, and Peđa Milosavljević, and the sculptor, Rista Stijović. Moore attended numerous receptions in the company of the painter Marko Čelebonović,²⁸ and charmed the guests with his courtesy and simple replies. Prior to the exhibition, Moore's work had already been known to artists in both Zagreb and Belgrade—especially to sculptors—but for many of them this occasion represented a real turning-point in establishing the new paradigm of “organic” or “vitalist” abstraction (terms favoured by the critic Herbert Read). Olga Jančić disagreed, however, with the subsequent suggestion that the exhibition of Moore's work represented a turning-point in Yugoslav sculpture, and she probably had a point; because Yugoslav sculptors in the first half of the 1950s had already acquired, if not fully articulated, the belief that their future creative path lay in the direction of an organic, vitalist sculpture. “In Belgrade, however, something ‘stupid’ happened”, wrote Miodrag Protić: “The National Museum [in Belgrade] had second thoughts and decided it would not be appropriate to accept a proposed gift [from Henry Moore] of one of his ‘decadent’ works.”²⁹

The third showing of the exhibition, in an old Turkish building, the Daud Pasha Hamam, in Skopje, was inaugurated by the President of the Council for Science and Culture of Macedonia, and apparently attracted an unusually large attendance of around four hundred guests at the opening and a total of around five thousand visitors in just under three weeks. (This showing made an especially strong impression on the artist Omer Kaleši, who was later active in Istanbul.) Then, for its final showing, the exhibition moved to the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, where the official opening on 17 May 1955 was likewise reported to have been a great success, though no attendance figures were made available.

Overall, Henry Moore's exhibition in Yugoslavia in 1955 acted as a powerful incentive to sculptors, in particular, and to those of the younger generation who wanted to continue along the path on which they had already embarked. Sculptors such as Vojin Bakić, Kosta Angeli Radovani, and Dušan Džamonja in Zagreb; Olga Jančić and Ana Bešlić in Belgrade; and Jakob Savinšek in Ljubljana, found in this exhibition a strong confirmation of the need to

experiment, as well as the idea of organic sculpture that they had already intuited. By around 1954, the voices raised against that “nothingness called the abstract art” already sounded rather anachronistic.³⁰ They had not yet been silenced, but they gradually faded away and eventually fell silent. However, there were relapses, too: the Yugoslav president, Josip Broz Tito, sharply attacked abstract art in early 1963:

I am not against the creative exploration and search for the new in, say, painting, sculpture and other arts, because it is necessary and good. But I am against investing public funds in so-called modernist works that have nothing to do with artistic creation, let alone with our reality.

Although this criticism came from the top, it was already outdated, and out of tune with current artistic practice.

Above all, Moore’s touring exhibition to the main cultural centres in Yugoslavia in 1955 strengthened the artistic drive for innovation and freedom of expression in painting, graphics, and sculpture. In culture and the arts, the decade between 1950 and 1960 was full of events, arguments, discussions, and polemics; but it was clear from the outset that Yugoslav art was gradually rejecting the dogmatic model of Socialist Realism, while searching for its own forms of expression. The avalanche had already been set in motion in 1952 by the exhibition of French contemporary art (also held in Ljubljana, Zagreb, and Belgrade), and Moore’s exhibition three years later merely served, in a magnificent way, to reinforce the development, already in train, of a completely different kind of Yugoslav art which faced towards the outside world and became steadily integrated into the different mainstream currents. This was borne out not only by the continuous presence of Yugoslav artists at all the great art festivals (Venice, São Paulo, Tokyo, Alexandria, Kassel, Paris, and so on), but also through the recognition awarded to them in highly competitive situations by successive international juries.

Towards the end of his stay in Yugoslavia, at a press conference in Belgrade, Henry Moore stated:

Prior to the São Paulo Biennial I was convinced that the art, and especially visual art, in Yugoslavia was created to order and that Yugoslav artists were under the influence of Soviet socialist realism. But, looking at Lubarda’s works at the Biennial and what I have seen in the course of my stay here, it has become clear to

me that the visual artists in Yugoslavia enjoy complete creative freedom, with an enormous variety of individual styles, and this is, for me, the true proof of each individual's freedom of artistic expression.³¹

This was a great, and important, realization for artists and critics in all the main centres in Yugoslavia, and a confirmation for all the parties involved in organizing this touring exhibition of Henry Moore's work in 1955, that they had made the right decision, to the benefit of all concerned. The British Council's Representative in Yugoslavia, in his Annual Report on activities for the year April 1955 to March 1956, summed up his impression that Henry Moore had "won the hearts of the Yugoslav artistic worlds". The artist himself reported on his return that he had been treated "as something between a film star and royalty".³²

Translated by Daria Torre

Footnotes

- ¹ "So, we were looking at it all while drinking tea and then we proposed to organise his exhibition in Yugoslavia. He accepted it wholeheartedly." From the interview with Stevan Majstorović, *NIN*, no. 2473, 21 May 1998.
- ² Najdan Pašić, press attaché to the Yugoslav Embassy of the SFRY in London, in a letter addressed to the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in Belgrade on 25 May 1954, wrote: "Henry Moore's art causes considerable controversy with British art critics, but its high reputation is indisputable." For this quotation, I am indebted to Lora Mitić, from Belgrade.
- ³ Internal Memo from the Deputy-Director of the British Council to the Controller of Arts Division (YUG/641/85) of 28 April 1954 (TGA 9712/2/120). *British Painting from Hogarth to Turner* was the title of the first major exhibition of British art sent by the British Council to Hamburg, in the British Zone of Occupied Germany, in 1949. See C. N. P. Powell, memorandum on The British Contribution to the Arts in Germany, 14 March 1958 (GER/640/1, in TGA 9712/1/6).
- ⁴ Minutes of the 58th meeting of the British Council's Fine Arts Committee on Tuesday, 4 May 1954 (YUG/641/85, TGA 9712/2/120).
- ⁵ Ivo Frol (1908–1986), was Secretary of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and husband of the sculptor, Olga Jančić.
- ⁶ Letter of 10 Nov. 1954 (YUG/641/85), from the British Council's exhibition organizer, Margaret McLeod, to the collector and eventual lender, Peter Gregory (YUG/641/85, TGA 9712/2/120).
- ⁷ The magazine *Suvremenik* advocated realism and its socialist aspects. *Delo* was a "modernist" magazine.
- ⁸ Miodrag B. Protić (1922–2014) was director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade from 1959 to 1980.
- ⁹ Miodrag B. Protić, *Nojeva Barka/Noah's Ark* (Belgrade, 2000), 446.
- ¹⁰ This demonstratively advocated abstract art. The members of the group were Ivan Picelj, Aleksandar Srnc, and Vladimir Kristić; and the architects Vjenceslav Richter, Boško Rašica, Zvonimir Bregovac, Vladimir Zarahović, and Zvonimir Radić.
- ¹¹ In parallel to this, Antun Motika (1902–1992) exhibited his Archaic Surrealism at the Salon of the ULUH (Association of Visual Artists of Croatia), in Zagreb.
- ¹² In this exhibition, Miljenko Stančić exhibited his fantastic realism and Josip Vaništa presented one of the paintings from his series of abstracts, *Lanterna Magica*.
- ¹³ Petar Lubarda (1907–1974). Henry Moore saw Lubarda at the São Paulo Bienal in 1953.
- ¹⁴ Along with the classics of French contemporary art, works by Picasso, Miró, Hartung, Vasarely, and others, were also shown in this exhibition.
- ¹⁵ Radoslav Putar (1929–1994). From the review of the 6th Exhibit of ULUH, published in *Izbor*, Zagreb, no. 3, March 1951, 180–84.

- 16 Henry Moore, catalogue of the Yugoslav exhibition, Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, (1955), n.p.
- 17 Miodrag B. Protić, "Henri Mur/Henry Moore", *NIN*, Belgrade, 3 April 1955.
- 18 Radoslav Putar, "Henry Moore: crtež i skulptura velikog umjetnika na izložbi u Umjetničkom Paviljonu u Zagrebu/Henry Moore: Drawings and Sculptures by the Great Artist at the Exhibition in the Art Pavilion in Zagreb", *Narodni List*, Zagreb, no. 3013, 6 March 1955, 4.
- 19 Dimitrija Bašičević (1921–1987), "Skulptor gole prirode: Henry Moore/The Sculptor of True Nature: Henry Moore", *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, no. 3112, 6 March 1955, 7.
- 20 Karel Dobida (1896–1965). From 1952 to 1957, Dobida was director of the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana.
- 21 From the Archive of the Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana.
- 22 Stane Mikuž (1913–1985), "Razstava del sodobne francuske umetnosti/Exhibition of Works of Contemporary French Art", *Ljudska pravica*, Ljubljana, 31 May 1952.
- 23 Prof. Dr Ramiro Bujas (1879–1959), "Gledalac i sugestija mode/The Viewer and the Suggestivity of Fashion", *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 26 May 1955. Prof. Dr Bujas was director of the Institute for Psychology in Zagreb.
- 24 A draft of the letter that Karel Dobida addressed to Henry Moore, asserted: "Younger artists, sculptors in particular, felt strongly incentivised by this exhibition, as well as welcoming the opportunity to discuss the principles of sculpture."
- 25 Marko Ristić (1902–1984), Surrealist poet and author; chairman of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries at the time of Henry Moore's exhibition.
- 26 Herbert Read included Olga Jančić (1929–2012), along with the Zagreb sculptors Vojin Bakić and Dušan Džamonja, in his book, *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1964).
- 27 According to the journalist, "I.B.", Henry Moore commented that: "For me it was the strong individuality of Petar Lubarda's work, which best gave the lie to the prevalent view in the West at the time, that art in Yugoslavia was being produced to order", and went on to say: "In the best possible way, he contradicted various rumours about the dictated art in Yugoslavia that circulated in the West at that time." See I.B., "Puna sloboda umjetničkog izraza: britanski vajar Henri Mur napustio je sinoć našu zemlju/Full Freedom of Artistic Expression: British Sculptor Henry Moore Left Our Country Last Night", *Politika*, Belgrade, 13 April 1955.
- 28 Marko Čelebonović (1902–1986), was an eminent Serbian painter, Oxford graduate, and professor at the Art Academy in Belgrade.
- 29 Protić, *Nojeva Barka/Noah's Ark*, 447.
- 30 Ljubo Babić (1890–1974), Croatian painter, was for many years the director of the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters in Zagreb. Quoted from the text, "O progresu i tradiciji na likovnom području/On Progress and Tradition in the Visual Arts", *Republika*, Zagreb, no. 5, May 1954, 369–73.
- 31 B. Stojadinović, "Utisci Henryja Moorea o Jugoslaviji/Henry Moore's Impressions of Yugoslavia", *Večernje Novosti*, Belgrade, 4 April 1955.
- 32 Letter of 11 Aug. 1955 to Lilian Somerville, Director of the British Council's Fine Arts Department in London, quoted in the minutes of the 61st meeting of the Fine Arts Committee, 18 Oct., 3–4 (TGA/9712/120). Somerville wrote to Helen Kapp, Director of the City Art Gallery and Museum in Wakefield, and to other lenders to the exhibition: "The importance of the exhibition in Yugoslavia was not unnaturally far greater than in Switzerland [Basel], where Moore's work is already known, but nobody was quite prepared for its phenomenal success in Belgrade, Zagreb, Skopje and Ljubljana, where an estimated 45,000 people, in all, visited the exhibition."

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