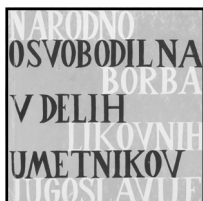


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Revolution Within Frames: Artistic Creation and Exhibiting in the Yugoslav People's Army



Historical and Conceptual Starting Points

One of the many areas influenced by the creation and exhibition of visual arts in Yugoslavia was the military. Given the fact that art and the military are only remotely connected today, this connection seems unusual at first glance, but it was an important segment of the activities of the Yugoslav People's Army, which saw it as an organic continuation of the Partisan movement during the Second World War. Culture played an important role in the Partisan struggle – often, both were regarded as equally important. For the Partisans, the struggle not only meant an armed confrontation with the occupiers with the aim of liberation but also characterised their efforts to bring about a change in man as such. Man, who in monarchical, feudal and capitalist systems is limited by his instincts and the social position into which he is born, was to rise intellectually and socially through a revolutionary rebirth brought about by the Partisan movement and its culture, and thus reach a higher, nobler level of humanity.¹ The Partisan movement was to help the individual to realise that he is a free creator who shapes himself and thus his human world and ultimately history.²

After the war, the ideas of the Partisan movement lived on in the ranks of the Yugoslav Army, since 1951 the Yugoslav People's Army (YPA), but had to be rethought in order to fit peacetime conditions and the ideological context of socialist self-management. To ensure that culture and art were no longer an elitist good of the upper, wealthier classes, the Yugoslav authorities focused on the so-called socialisation of culture. They encouraged the unleashing of the creative potential of the broad masses, especially the working people,³ and thus promoted participation in amateur art, which was seen as a collective expression of the revolutionary thoughts and beliefs of all citizens.⁴ Amateur art became an important concept within Yugoslav art. Anyone could participate in art, including a member of the military.

Amateur creativity was given an important role within the cultural activities – and thus artistic creation – of the YPA. However, it was not the only form of creativity in the military. It intertwined with the work of students or graduates of art academies who had been conscripted, as well as with exhibitions of established (civilian) artists

1 Đorđe Radišić, "Narodnooslobodilačka borba i socijalistička revolucija kao vid ostvarivanja čovekovog prava na kulturu", in: Mihailo Apostolski (ed.), *Kultura i nauka u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu i revoluciji: Radovi sa naučnog skupa*, Savet akademija nauka i umetnosti SFRJ, Skopje, 1984, pp. 454–457.

2 Ibid., pp. 465–466.

3 The system of socialist self-management defined creativity very broadly and even included the process of mass production, arguing that workers also create new objects in the production process. This view was often regarded as an axiom in theoretical discussions and was not specifically addressed by the authors. Compare e.g. Beno Zupančič, *Delavci in kultura*, Komunist, Ljubljana, 1975.

4 Vojislav Vukičević, *Priručnik za kulturne delatnosti u JNA*, Vojnoizdavački zavod, Belgrade, 1982, p. 65.

organised by the army. As in the days of the National Liberation Struggle, there was a great diversity of artistic registers in the army, but this heterogeneity was hardly recognised or reflected. Established art criticism, based on the value system of high art, often viewed art-work produced in the military as monolithic and judged it by standards that most works did not reach or aspire to.

The conceptual underpinning of culture in the YPA was defined by the cultural policy of the state. The intention of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) was to strengthen revolutionary and class consciousness in the military as well as transnational patriotism by emphasising the unity of Yugoslav nations and nationalities through their diversity and the idea of their interpenetration.⁵ As in the Partisan movement, culture was considered an inseparable part of the army's activities and was intended to raise the cultural sophistication of soldiers, strengthen the bonds between Yugoslavs, promote the values of brotherhood, solidarity and work in a community, and encourage good working habits.⁶ Military service was not only intended as a military drill, but as a process that moulded young men into upright, well-behaved and educated citizens. The declared goal of the self-management society was a "well-rounded, humane and free human personality";⁷ because only a cultivated person is capable of building socialism. The importance of cultural education was also emphasised by Josip Broz - Tito:

Cultural-political work is of enormous importance in the true people's army, whose responsibility is to protect not only the borders of our country, but also the achievements of the National Liberation Struggle and to safeguard the rights won through this struggle. [...] Every soldier and senior officer should have the opportunity to fully develop their talents and participate in a variety of cultural activities. The barracks should become a kind of school that not only imparts military knowledge, but also educates the young sons from the villages and towns to become productive members of society in their private lives as well.⁸

5 Anonymous, "Neka pitanja društvene uloge kulturnog života u JNA (pristupni materijal)", in: Voja Vukićević (ed.), *Kulturni život u JNA: Zbirka odabranih radova sa simpozijuma održanog 1970. godine*, Politička uprava and Državni sekretarijat za narodnu odbranu, Belgrade, 1971, pp. 23–24.

6 Dušan Pejanović et al., *Organizacija SKJ u JNA*, Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, Belgrade, 1986, p. 241; Slavko Samardžija, "Kulturna politika i umetničko stvaralaštvo u JNA" (master's thesis), Fakultet političkih nauka, Univerzitet u Beogradu, Belgrade, 1987, pp. 17–24, 85–87.

7 Gregor Kocijan, *Delavci in kultura*, Republiški svet Zveze sindikatov Slovenije and Center za raziskovanje javnega mnenja, Ljubljana, 1970, p. 9.

8 Anonymous, "Uvodna beseda maršala Tita ob prvi številki 'Ljudske armade'", *Ljudska pravica*, vol. 6, no. 141, 5.10.1945, p. 2.

In the early post-war years, culture was not yet able to flourish in the military as most of the attention was focused on the pressing problem of illiteracy. In the early 1950s, the range of activities was expanded to include those in which soldiers were passive recipients of cultural content, such as theatre, but soon afterwards soldiers were given the opportunity to become active creators of culture, initially in the form of orchestras and choirs.⁹ At the same time, it was not desirable for artistic creativity to be understood as light entertainment, because culture is not a handmaiden of the army, as the leading Yugoslav theorist of cultural activities in the Army Vojislav Vukićević claimed: "Cultural activities are not easier, more beautiful and more pleasant than training or any other field of activity in the Army, because they also require effort, knowledge and skill."¹⁰ In the early 1960s, the practice of creating art in the military became more widely accepted, to the general surprise of the Yugoslav daily press:

Can monumental works of art also emerge from circumstances in which two seemingly completely contradictory principles collide – subordination as the basis of the military chain of command and artistic freedom as the foundation of artistic creation? Every day in the barracks throughout Yugoslavia, new works of art are created by the hands of YPA members, which proves that such a dilemma never arises in the YPA, although the military environment does tend to impose certain limits on the artist.¹¹

The soldiers were declaratively free in their cultural creativity. The cultural theorists of the time assure us in their writings that the creative principles of artists were respected in the army. Moreover, even "if the artists' works were to reveal imperfections in some of our bodies, we would not oppose them."¹² However, the promised freedom was somewhat limited, at least regarding the theorising behind the practice. CPY members and senior officers did not interfere in the creative methods and artistic styles of the soldiers for various reasons, whether out of inexperience or to maintain the appearance of openness (even Tito noted that the League of Communists of Yugoslavia did not have the role of an unequivocal arbiter of aesthetic

9 Pejanović et al., 1986 (see no. 6), pp. 269–270.

10 Vukićević, 1982 (see no. 4), p. 17.

11 Franci Božič, "Da bi heroji živeli ...", *Delo*, vol. 16, no. 294, 19.12.1974, p. 10.

12 Dragiša Madžgalj, "Armijski život kao podsticaj za umetničko stvaralaštvo", in: Voja Vukićević (ed.), *Kulturni život u JNA: Zbirka odabranih radova sa simpozijuma održanog 1970. godine*, Politička uprava and Državni sekretarijat za narodnu odbranu, Belgrade, 1971, p. 129.

and theoretical criteria and forms of creativity).¹³ But they did – according to their own statements – watch over the socio-political function of art. Dissenting views, especially if they were associated with the overt or covert promotion of nationalism, religion and chauvinism or the negation of the achievements of the revolution,¹⁴ were characterised as undesirable and harmful “relapses into the past”,¹⁵ which is why the military was to actively combat “any attempt to introduce anti-self-managing or other hostile content and interpretations into the army under the guise of cultural-artistic creativity”.¹⁶ Consequently, the CPY representatives reserved the right to criticise the works created in the military: “It is certainly important to make a distinction between those who advocate non-interference because they want to have the freedom to create and those who advocate this for the simple reason of having complete freedom to continue their destructive activities.”¹⁷

At least, such were the assurances given in discussions and official documents. On the other hand, the soldiers had relative freedom in their creative endeavours, at least as long as they did not stumble upon sensitive and forbidden topics and openly satirise, provoke or attack the state regime and its values. If a superior officer recognised a critical aspect in a work (though it was possible for subtle, intellectual or cleverly disguised criticism to slip through the censorship net), the offender would face reprisals, usually in the form of threats, as no example of a soldier-artist being formally punished has yet been documented. One example in this vein is a film by director Karpo Godina, who was sent to Belgrade during his military service in Ajdovščina to make a film for the army, under the wing of the

13 Vukićević, 1982 (see no. 4), p. 15. However, in 1962 and 1963 – perhaps due to improved relations with the Soviet Union – Tito spoke harshly about abstract painting, saying that he was against providing common funds “for some so-called modernist works that have no relation whatsoever to artistic creation and even less to our reality”, and claimed that socialist reality offered artists enough material so that they did not have to take refuge in abstraction. Contrary to its assurances, the state leadership thus partially reserved the right of deciding on the quality of (fine) art. See Radina Vučetić, “Između avangarde i cenzure: Tito i umetnost šezdesetih”, in: Olga Manojlović Pintar, Mile Bjelajac and Radmila Radić (eds.), *Tito – viđenja i tumačenja: Zbornik radova*, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije and Arhiv Jugoslavije, Belgrade, 2011, pp. 695–697.

14 Anonymous, “Neka pitanja ...”, 1971 (see no. 5), p. 24.

15 Mihailo Golubović, “Odnos Saveza komunista prema kulturnom životu u Armiji”, in: Voja Vukićević (ed.), *Kulturni život u JNA: Zbirka odabranih radova sa simpozijuma održanog 1970. godine*, Politička uprava and Državni sekretarijat za narodnu odbranu, Belgrade, 1971, p. 132.

16 Ernest Mezga, *Politički rad u JNA*, Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, Belgrade, 1988, p. 274.

17 Golubović, 1971 (see no. 15), p. 131.

production house Zastava Film. The result was a 10-minute *About the Art of Love or a Film with 14441 Frames*, which was shot in Štip, Macedonia, and was above all a mockery of the lack of contact between soldiers and women. Godina received permission to film based on an ideologically sound script that had previously been submitted to the military and was inspired by an article in the army magazine *Front*. Despite the outrage in the leadership, Godina was not punished.¹⁸ It seems somewhat paradoxical that the considerable degree of creative freedom was (among other things) a consequence of the uncertainty of the state and its cultural ideologues about what art and creativity should be. While on the one hand it was clear what a soldier was not allowed to endorse openly, there was no agreement on what kind of cultural production fulfilled its social role. The lack of clarity in this area proved to be quite fertile ground for creativity.

From the 1970s onwards, military and civilian experts tried to remedy this lack of consensus by organising large or small conferences on the role of culture in the YPA, where views, experiences and recommendations for future work were exchanged. However, theory was not enough. Even in the years before the disintegration of Yugoslavia, there were cases of commentators who openly admitted that “there are great attempts in this field, but also great swathes of aimlessness”.¹⁹ Criticism of the paternalistic control of the cultural activities of workers and the military “from above” and of the inadequate criteria that led to inferior production and the spread of “folklorism” was also present at the conferences. The lament that soldiers did not spend their free time in a quality way and mainly passed the time with banal products of mass culture, such as comics and cheap films, was constantly heard at the conferences. The dichotomy between the popular interests of the average Yugoslav worker or soldier and the refined artistic taste promoted by the state was never fully resolved. Workers and soldiers became consumers – sometimes even creators – of culture, but of mass culture, which was considered inferior in the eyes of ideologues and theorists, so that the lofty, almost utopian, standards of official policy – the sophistication of people through culture – were not achieved.²⁰ Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the project of disseminating cultural content to the masses was a success,

18 Godina claimed that he was threatened with a prison sentence for this film but was spared after the intervention of a well-known poet and artistic leader of Zastava Film, who tried to explain the importance of artistic freedom to the seven generals who were to interrogate him. Karpo Godina, *On the cinema of Karpo Godina or a book in 71383 words*, Filmkollektiv Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main, 2013, pp. 46, 48.

19 Samardžija, 1987 (see no. 6), p. 35.

20 Vlatko Čakširan, *Kolonija likovnih umjetnika Željezare Sisak 1971–1990: Povijesni pregled: Izložba Gradskog muzeja Sisak* (exhibition catalogue), Gradski muzej, Sisak, 2012, p. 53.

even if it was more due to the efforts of individual art enthusiasts and organisers²¹ than to a well-thought-out state project.

Artistic Creativity in a Uniform

Artistic activities in the military were organised within the art sections, active both in the barracks and the cultural centres of the YPA. These were associations of soldiers who were grouped according to their interests, which resulted in the creation of a number of art sections, usually headed by a soldier with professional skills.²² The military usually took care of purchasing the working tools and materials, but this also meant that the artworks created became the property of the military.²³ The premises for the sections' activities – either purpose-built buildings or improvised rooms within the barracks – were usually provided by military clubs, which had been run by the army since 1945. These clubs were intended for the soldiers' leisure activities and often had a cinema, a library, a reading room and rooms for section activities.²⁴

The published figures show that between 1959 and 1978 (except for the missing years 1961 and 1970) over 100,000 different sections were active in the YPA, comprising 1.4 million soldiers, with each section having an average of 11 members. Visual arts sections were small; an average section for visual arts had eight active members and thus lagged behind the average music, chess, education, folklore and choir sections.²⁵

Art in the military was one of the areas that was not dictated by the directives of the General Staff in Belgrade, apart from providing theoretical and organisational guidelines. Whether visual arts activities took place in the barracks depended primarily on two factors. The first was the presence of talented or artistically trained soldiers who were interested in engaging in artistic activities during their military service; the other had to do with the favour or disfavour of the commanding officers of the barracks and the leaders of the military clubs, who, depending on their convictions, education and personality, could either (materially) support the soldiers' initiatives or refuse them, or at least tacitly reject them, usually due to lack of resources.²⁶ Vukićević even spoke of the possibility of transferring talented soldiers to another,

21 Vukićević, 1982 (see no. 4), pp. 26–29, 40–43.

22 Advan Hozic, "Kulturno-umetnički amaterizam u jedinicama JNA", in: Voja Vukićević (ed.), *Kulturni život u JNA: Zbirka odabranih radova sa simpozijuma održanog 1970. godine*, Politička uprava and Državni sekretarijat za narodnu odbranu, Belgrade, 1971, p. 298; Vukićević, 1982 (see no. 4), pp. 75–76, 115.

23 Vukićević, 1982 (see no. 4), p. 115.

24 Mezga, 1988 (see no. 16), p. 298.

25 Ibid., pp. 289, 291.

26 Ibid., p. 304.

better-equipped barracks or YPA cultural centre if the home barracks could not provide the resources for their creative endeavours.²⁷

In the barracks whose leadership supported cultural activities, soldiers were encouraged to participate in this or that section. In Slovenia, the barracks in Postojna, Ribnica, Novo Mesto and Vrhnika were known for their support of visual arts. The soldier-artists in the barracks in Novo Mesto, for example, “enjoyed the full understanding of the leadership”, so that the barracks were considered “a pleasant art corner where young artists took their first steps”.²⁸ The commander of the barracks in Vrhnika even declared: “Every single soldier – and they come to us from all over Yugoslavia – leaves a trace in us and in himself. We firmly believe that any kind of creativity of the soldier, which is not necessarily closely related to our main purpose – training – has a double benefit. Since we fulfil this purpose, we can be justifiably satisfied.”²⁹

Even if there was support from the leadership, the soldiers’ own initiative was the decisive prerequisite for starting a cultural project of any kind. It was not unusual for the artistic initiative to come from the soldiers, as many who served in the army had previously studied at Yugoslav art academies, but amateurs also showed interest. Even the construction and furnishing of the premises for cultural activities, including the studios, were often undertaken by the soldiers themselves.

As far as the choice of motifs was concerned, the soldiers were encouraged to produce primarily military and military-historical images and landscapes (fig. 93). The leadership believed that the military past of the Yugoslav nations, especially the Partisan struggle, was an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the soldiers’ creativity. While theorists advised caution and urged soldier-artists to create work according to their abilities, many of them, eager for recognition, ambitiously set about creating complex compositions. Others simply did not follow the recommendations because they wanted to create their works in their own way, undeterred by theoretical guidelines. An example is the illustrator Marjan Manček, who painted his first oil painting depicting the Scottish landscape, based on a postcard, during his military service.³⁰

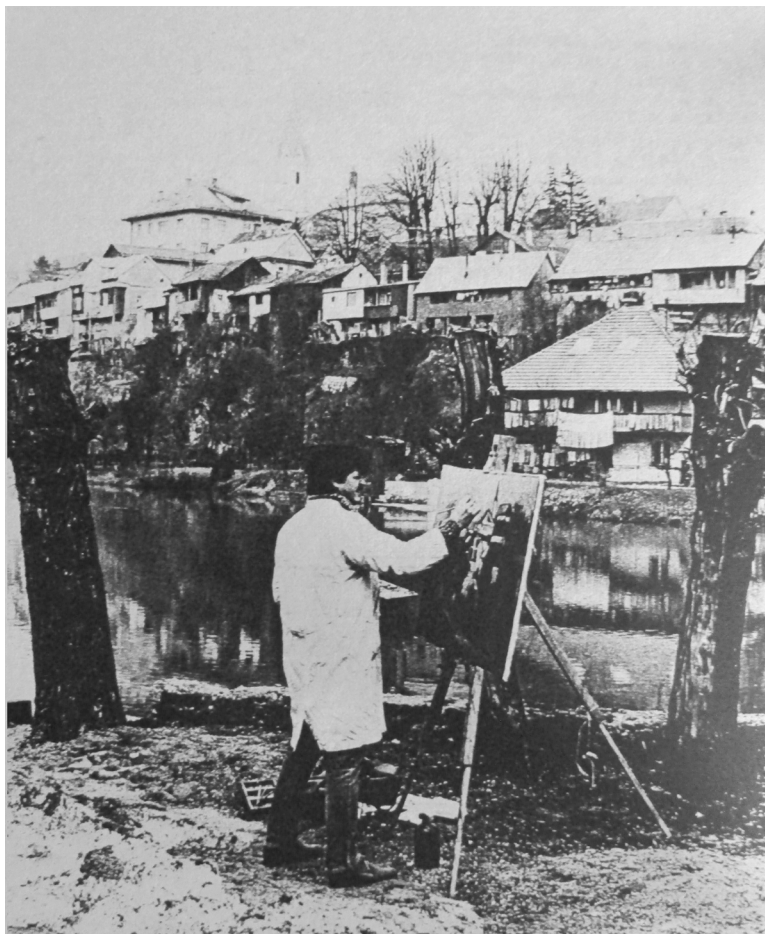
The limitation in the choice of motifs and the less-than-ideal working conditions were generally not an issue for the soldiers – if their assurances are to be believed. The painter Čedomir Vasić, from the barracks in Celje, saw the restrictions as an opportunity to face

27 Vukičević, 1982 (see no. 4), p. 118.

28 Slavko Dokl, “Veliko dejanje”, *Delo*, vol. 14, no. 221, 15.8.1972, p. 7.

29 N. L., “Vojak v kamnu”, *Delo*, vol. 16, no. 178, 2.8.1974, p. 5.

30 *Marjan Manček*, interview, conducted by Ivan Smiljanić, 18.2.2023.



Captain Milorad Ljubisavljević painting in Novo Mesto.

new challenges and find innovative solutions:

From the point of view of artistic creation, it does not seem to matter at all whether I am given a particular theme or whether it is entirely my personal choice. Much more important for me is the fact that artistic creation in the military represents a qualitatively new way of seeing. In other words, it offers the opportunity to come across content that you would not otherwise come across, but which is definitely of value.³¹

Branko Petan from Krško, for example, had words of praise for the

31 Božič, 1974 (see no. 11), p. 10.

working conditions at the Military Academy in Belgrade: “It’s a bit unusual, but we have really excellent conditions here, so anyone who wants to can study on the side. I am a member of a group of young artists who work under the careful supervision of a renowned art professional.”³² Vladimir Savić from Valjevo, a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Sarajevo and a soldier in the garrison in Jelendol, appreciated the understanding and support of his superiors, even though he painted in his attic room; nevertheless, he was provided with tools and materials.³³ The academically trained Serbian sculptor Miroljub Kostić, who created a sculpture of Franc Rozman – Stane for the barracks in Maribor, was more critical: “I would be even happier if I could work with suitable tools and better materials, for example in stone.”³⁴

The furnishing of the barracks with artworks was at least partly a consequence of the recommendations of the conferences on the dissemination of culture among the working people and in the military. According to these, a workroom or a space in the barracks had to be neatly and harmoniously arranged and decorated with paintings or sculptures.³⁵ It was expected that an environment characterised by a “synthesis of science, technology, architecture and fine art”³⁶ would contribute to the improved well-being of employees and soldiers, to an increase in their general cultural refinement and thus to a practical benefit – better results in production or training. The criticism that theory was not being put into practice was of course also voiced in this area. An important part of the programme to furnish the barracks with artworks were initiatives to put up monuments of Partisan national heroes created by soldiers. To the surprise of the leadership, some were created on the soldiers’ own initiative, others were commissioned. Procuring the materials, setting up the studio and obtaining financial support was a team effort involving everyone: artists, soldiers and senior officers. Sculpting itself was often an unusually sociable affair, with large numbers of soldiers observing the process as it unfolded. The unveiling ceremonies often coincided with the end of military service for the artists, who were often awarded leave or granted early discharge.³⁷

Artistic creation in the military thus had all the characteristics of a mutual exchange. Trained or talented soldier-artists put their talents at the service of the army (and of the state) in order to be

32 S.[lavko] Dokl, “Kadet s čopičem”, *Delo*, vol. 13, no. 100, 13.4.1971, p. 6.

33 L.[ea] M.[encinger], “Vojakova razstava”, *Gorenjski glas*, vol. 41, no. 72, 20.9.1988, p. 5.

34 Drago Vresnik, “Vojak sklesal Stanetov kip”, *Delo*, vol. 16, no. 167, 19.7.1974, p. 7.

35 Kocijan, 1970 (see no. 7), p. 42.

36 Zupančič, 1975 (see no. 3), p. 43.

37 Ivan Smiljanić, “Spomeniki kiparjev vojakov v slovenskih vojašnicah JLA”, *Kronika*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2022, pp. 204–211.

able to practice their art despite their service, to partially avoid training and to preserve a memory of their life in the barracks. The barracks, in turn, became the owner of artworks with military themes or scenes from military history, which – placed in the barracks buildings and in the surrounding area – spread the messages of brotherhood and unity of the Yugoslav self-management society and, as symbols, strengthened the identity of the barracks and the army.

Army on Display: YPA Cultural Centres in Slovenia

Studios, exhibitions and artworks set up in ad hoc adapted spaces in the barracks were accessible only to the soldiers and officers stationed there. The places where the achievements of the army were presented to the civilian population were the cultural centres of the YPA. These centres, which began operating in August 1945, were initially intended primarily for events and educational courses for members of the YPA, but eventually developed into cultural and entertainment venues that were open to everyone and thus became a symbol of friendship between the army and the citizens.³⁸

The cultural centres of the YPA were not only exhibition spaces but also ran visual arts sections for soldiers, similar to barracks. Around 1965, the State Secretariat for National Defence allowed soldiers with an art education to acquire the status of soldier-artist, which enabled them to work in larger YPA cultural centres and military clubs, with almost no further obligations and with a supply of working materials. “Their constraints are of a moral nature – it is expected that the subject matter of their work at this time would primarily include military themes,” explained art critic Janez Mesesnel, adding:

But more often than not, it turns out that this constraint is not a constraint at all, but rather a spur, because the impressions of the military are at their freshest and most intense at that moment and can therefore – apart from being a refreshing change – be a relatively difficult task, but one that is appealing to any true artist, simply because of the effort involved in exploring new themes and developing a different sensibility for the subject matter.³⁹

Among the artists who created in this way was Marjan Manček, who said that he became a part of the YPA Cultural Centre in Postojna mainly thanks to the efforts of the head of the cultural centre, Captain Pauković, who had a deep appreciation for visual arts and

38 Anonymous, “Neka pitanja ...”, 1971 (see no. 5), p. 33; Mezga, 1988 (see no. 16), pp. 301–302, 364–366; Samardžija, 1987 (see no. 6), pp. 55–56.

39 Janez Mesesnel, “Sveže in široko”, *Delo*, vol. 15, no. 94, 6.4.1973, p. 6.



Marjan Manček at the exhibition of his caricatures at the Yugoslav People's Army Cultural Centre in Postojna in 1973.

satire. Manček was given permission to create caricatures about military life and satirical images about the militarisation of the world. In October 1973, an exhibition of his caricatures was opened at the centre, which was very well attended (fig. 94).⁴⁰ The academically trained painter Franc Golob remembers how he and his comrades set up an improvised studio in the YPA Cultural Centre in Rijeka. The army provided them with oil paints, brushes, zinc white, glue and jute, while the soldiers made frames from wooden planks.⁴¹

The academically trained painter Rudi Španzel, who was stationed in the barracks in Šentvid, worked at the YPA Cultural Centre in Ljubljana in 1977. He remembers that he was able to work in relative freedom and even gave painting lessons to the officers. One of his projects, on the grounds of the barracks in Šentvid, included large paintings with motifs from the Second World War. His reputation in the barracks grew through these works, which brought him numerous benefits.⁴² The soldiers were also able to participate in the activities of the YPA cultural centres as curators, designers and organisers of exhibitions. As a soldier, the art critic Aleksander Bassin, for example,

40 Marjan Manček, interview (see no. 30).

41 Franc Golob, interview, conducted by Ivan Smiljanić, 9.3.2023.

42 Rudi Španzel, interview, conducted by Ivan Smiljanić, 15.3.2023.

organised an exhibition at the YPA Cultural Centre in Pula in 1964 to celebrate the Day of the Republic. He managed to borrow from the Museum of the People's Revolution of Slovenia (today the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia) the draft for *Battle on the Sutjeska River* by Marij Pregelj and a canvas, *In Memory of a Dead Comrade*, by Marko Šuštaršič,⁴³ which had to be transported to the cultural centre by train due to its size.⁴⁴

A productive way of looking at the organisational structure of the YPA cultural centres' exhibition policy is to distinguish between three hierarchical levels. At the base were the local centres, i.e. the centres in smaller towns, whose exhibitions were the least ambitious and relied mainly on artworks created by soldiers from the neighbouring barracks and local artists. One level higher were the YPA centres in the capitals of the Yugoslav republics and provinces, where, in addition to soldiers, renowned (civilian) artists from the home republic and other parts of Yugoslavia exhibited their works, which were not necessarily thematically related to military life. Perched on top was the Gallery of the YPA Cultural Centre in Belgrade. With its exhibitions of selected artists and its rich collection, the gallery became the most prestigious and influential institution in the artistic life of the YPA and thus occupied a visible place in the cultural life of Belgrade and Yugoslavia as a whole.

Even though the majority of the exhibition activities of the 20 or so cultural centres of the YPA in Slovenia were not related to fine art (they mainly organised exhibitions of handicrafts, food, etc.), YPA cultural centres were nevertheless the central exhibition spaces for art dealing with the themes of the Yugoslav military and the Partisan struggle. They also exhibited the works of amateur artists, both soldiers and local artists, as many YPA cultural centres welcomed and supported the efforts of local amateurs.

In the 1970s, the criteria for the themes and motifs that soldiers dealt with in their works became looser. Accordingly, there were exhibitions with somewhat lighter subjects such as caricatures or themes that moved away from scenes from military life and landscape painting. For example, the soldier Tibor Gergely exhibited female nudes at the YPA Cultural Centre in Ribnica in 1981.⁴⁵ In a few cases, the YPA cultural centres also exhibited works by canonised artists. In October 1954, the YPA Cultural Centre in Brežice held an exhibition of works by Rihard Jakopič, Ivan Grohar, Matej Sternen, Ivan Vavpotič, Maksim Gaspari and Hinko Smrekar, which had been lent by their owners from

43 Aleksander Bassin, *Obris mojega časa*, Slovenska matica, Ljubljana, 2022, p. 60.

44 Aleksander Bassin, interview, conducted by Ivan Smiljanić, 3.3.2023.

45 Anonymous, "Vojak razstavljal", *Dolenjski list*, vol. 32, no. 45, 5.11.1981, p. 20.

neighbouring towns.⁴⁶ Two decades later, a similar project was organised under the auspices of the professional community. In December 1975, an exhibition of works by Matej Sternen, which had been borrowed from the collection of the National Gallery, was opened at the YPA Cultural Centre in Vrhnika. In February of the following year, the centre in Vrhnika also hosted a travelling exhibition of the leading Impressionist painters.⁴⁷

There are currently around 50 documented exhibitions of soldier-artists that took place in Slovenian YPA cultural centres between 1954 and 1990, more frequently from the mid-1960s onwards. In most of the smaller YPA cultural centres, exhibitions of soldier-artists were a rarity. By far the most exhibitions took place in the centres in Ribnica and Novo Mesto, whose leadership strongly supported the soldiers' creative efforts. Moreover, the exhibitions of the soldier-artists did not take place exclusively in the YPA cultural centres.⁴⁸

The situation was different in the main YPA cultural centres of the individual Yugoslav republics. The main Slovenian centre was located in Ljubljana, in the building of the former Hotel Metropol on National Liberation Front Square. It was opened in 1952 and organised its first two exhibitions two years later, which immediately showed that Ljubljana had greater ambitions than the other Slovenian YPA centres. The first exhibition was dedicated to well-known graphic artists such as Ive Šubic, Dore Klemenčič, France Mihelič, Nikolaj Pirnat, Božidar Jakac, France Slana, Tone Kralj and Miha Maleš, while the second exhibition showed the works of five amateur painters from the ranks of the YPA.⁴⁹ In April 1955, the YPA Cultural Centre in Ljubljana founded the officers' art section, which provided its members with material support, offered them expert courses in fine art techniques, and organised an exhibition of their works just one month after its foundation.⁵⁰

After this encouraging start, the gallery activities of the YPA Cultural Centre in Ljubljana ceased for several years. The centre returned to the limelight in 1961, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the uprising, when its representatives announced plans for a proactive exhibition policy:

46 Anonymous, "Vsestranski uspeh Posavskega tedna", *Posavski tednik*, vol. 7, no. 43, 30.10.1954, p. 1.

47 Anonymous, "Razstava impresionistov na Vrhniki", *Delo*, vol. 19, no. 30, 6.2.1976, p. 8.

48 Exhibitions of soldier-artists were also organised at the Pilon Gallery in Ajdovščina, the Meblo Salon in Maribor, the ALP Hotel in Bovec, the library in Tolmin, the Art Salon in Kočevje, the Šivec House in Radovljica, the Textile and Shoe School Centre in Kranj and the Peko Shoe Factory in Tržič, among others.

49 Anonymous, "Paleta ob puški: Dve razstavi v Domu JLA", *Slovenski poročevalec*, vol. 15, no. 298, 22.12.1954, p. 4.

50 Anonymous, "Likovna razstava v Domu JLA v Ljubljani", *Slovenski poročevalec*, vol. 16, no. 111, 15.5.1955, p. 6.

In the YPA cultural centre, where a special room has been transformed into a new gallery where many artists can present their works to the public and especially to YPA members, Major Leopold Mendaš unveiled a rather extensive plan for a new action to popularise visual arts. He said that they seek to bring visual arts closer to all members of the army, in addition to efforts to raise general cultural awareness. At the same time, they will give many young artists and amateurs, who may otherwise find it difficult to access exhibition spaces, the opportunity to present their works. Their aim is to convey art to the public in cycles by focusing on specific themes, and as it is the year of the revolution, most of the exhibitions are finetuned to this particular theme.⁵¹

The 1961 programme included exhibitions of prominent Slovenian artists: Ive Šubic, France Godec, Božidar Jakac, Dora Plestenjak, Slavko Pengov, Nikolaj Omersa, Anton Sigulin and Evgen Sajovic. The artists mainly presented works with non-military motifs. Janez Mesesnel, who reviewed the exhibitions for the daily newspaper *Delo* (Aleksander Bassin wrote reviews of the same exhibitions for *Ljubljanski dnevnik*), wrote quite positively about the efforts of the YPA cultural centre. In mid-1961, he noted that the centre had “already acquired a certain renown as perhaps not the best-equipped, but still quite suitable space for smaller exhibitions”.⁵² By the end of the year, the exhibition space’s reputation had risen even more when it offered “its otherwise modest hall that is not the most suitable for exhibitions” as a replacement space for the demolished Jakopič Pavilion: “This way, our artists can exhibit and maintain at least some thread of continuity in terms of the pavilion’s exhibition activities until a new pavilion is built.”⁵³

The first exhibitions of artists from other Yugoslav republics began to appear alongside exhibitions of Slovenian painters in 1962, and, in 1963, the focus of the exhibitions shifted to them, as the YPA cultural centre followed the army’s policy of promoting brotherhood and unity. Group exhibitions were organised by the 8 March Art Group from Belgrade, as well as by artists from Vojvodina, Kosovo and Metohija, Skopje (the artist Dimitar Kondovski even exhibited paintings based on Orthodox icons), Banjaluka and Montenegro. The last active seasons were in 1964 and 1965, when members of the Army Art Studio of the Czechoslovak Army presented their works alongside artists from the Yugoslav republics. Mesesnel wrote at the time that “a small but relatively well-equipped space once again hosted artworks by artists

51 B. p., “Dve obliki za popularizacijo umetnosti”, *Delo*, vol. 3, no. 16, 18.1.1961, p. 5.

52 J.[anez] Mesesnel, “Dobra, moderna tradicionalnost”, *Delo*, vol. 3, no. 178, 1.7.1961, p. 6.

53 J.[anez] Mesesnel, “Osebni razvoj v naročju tradicije”, *Delo*, vol. 3, no. 340, 13.12.1961, p. 4.

who are not normally found in other exhibition pavilions in Ljubljana, [...] especially guests from other cities and republics, amateurs and professionals with different qualities of their work. In this seemingly unorganised way, the leadership of the YPA cultural centre nevertheless offers us a fairly comprehensive overview of the activities in visual arts in our wider homeland, which we would not have had otherwise.”⁵⁴ In the autumn of 1965, the momentum of the centre in Ljubljana slowed down. In 1968, the visual arts section of the Ljubljana YPA cultural centre was revived,⁵⁵ but exhibition activities almost completely ceased.

The First Among Equals: The Gallery of the Yugoslav People's Army Cultural Centre in Belgrade

The cultural centres of the YPA in larger cities were closely connected to the country's main centre – the YPA Cultural Centre in Belgrade. It was opened on 25 October 1944 and moved, in 1946, to the building of the former Army Centre in the city centre,⁵⁶ where it is still housed today (as the Home of the Army of Serbia). A gallery was established in the YPA Cultural Centre as early as in 1945. Its main initiators were the Bosnian-Serbian painter and graphic artist Branko Šotra (1906–1960) and Ivan Cvetko (1924–1996), a painter born in Novo Mesto and working in Belgrade. After Šotra's death, Cvetko took over the administration of the gallery for many years, although he had no formal training. As a communicative leader who was familiar with many Yugoslav artists, he became the most influential person in the field of art exhibitions in the YPA. In 1953, the army set up a gallery space on the ground floor of the Belgrade YPA Cultural Centre, which became the army's central exhibition space.

Cvetko said in 1971 that the gallery's primary task was “to bring together, encourage and engage artists to create work on the theme of the revolution”,⁵⁷ which is why it tried to attract as many artists as possible and kept a list of all members of the Yugoslav Association of Fine Artists. The gallery's representatives visited many studios throughout the country to find out about the state of affairs in contemporary Yugoslav art. Based on these findings, they prepared exhibition programmes and encouraged artists to create work on the theme of the National Liberation Struggle.⁵⁸ Every year, the YPA Cultural Centre

54 J.[anez] Mesesnel, “Amaterska eksotika”, *Delo*, vol. 6, no. 315, 19.11.1965, p. 5.

55 Janez Zadnikar, “Umetniki v sivih haljah”, *Sobotna priloga (Delo)*, vol. 10, no. 231, 24.8.1968, p. 17.

56 Mezga, 1988 (see no. 16), p. 360; Nikola Kusovac et al., *Umetnička zbirka Doma Vojске Srbije* (exhibition catalogue), Medijski centar Odbrana, Belgrade, 2017, pp. 8, 15.

57 Ivan Cvetko, “Likovno razstavna politika galerije Doma JLA v Beogradu”, *Borec*, vol. 23, no. 6–7, 1971, p. 489.

58 Ibid.

organised dozens of short-term exhibitions lasting no longer than two weeks, both by established artists and collectives and by emerging artists. The gallery purchased prize-winning works, creating an anthology collection of Yugoslav art – the only one in the country dedicated primarily to the war and revolution – which, by the mid-1980s, comprised more than 1,500 artworks.⁵⁹ Despite the ubiquitous military motifs, the gallery's administrators claimed that the artists were not interested in depicting the drama of battle but the common man bravely opposing the war and the occupiers, suggesting that the exhibitions embodied an anti-militarist, freedom-loving spirit.⁶⁰

In accordance with its policy of exhibiting the works of artists from all Yugoslav republics, the Belgrade gallery offered numerous Slovenian artists the opportunity to exhibit their works. The first was the exhibition of works by Nikolaj Pirnat, which opened in the summer of 1957.⁶¹ In the 1960s, 20 Slovenian artists presented their works in solo or group exhibitions,⁶² in addition to the group exhibition of artists from the Slovenian coastal region and Istria. In the 1970s, the number of solo exhibitions of Slovenian artists dropped to nine,⁶³ in addition to the nine members of the Slovenian Fine Artists Association from Zasavje. In the 1980s, the situation was very similar: eight artists were presented⁶⁴ as well as members of the Barva Group and the Maribor Fine Artists Society.

Although the Belgrade gallery was more reserved than most YPA cultural centres when it came to exhibitions with lighter content, it nevertheless opened an exhibition in the spring of 1973 with caricatures from military life by Leo Korelc, a captain and editor of military newspapers, who had dealt with the absurdity of the arms race.⁶⁵ At the end of the 1970s, it became customary for exhibitions by Slovenian artists to open on 8 February, the (Slovenian) Day of Culture, and for Slovenian politicians to attend the opening ceremonies. Even if the

59 Ibid., pp. 489–490; Mezga, 1988 (see no. 16), pp. 275, 362–363; Tanjug, “Plodna dejavnost”, *Delo*, vol. 17, no. 25, 31.1.1975, p. 9.

60 *Galerija Doma Jugoslovenske narodne armije Beograd: 1953–1968* (exhibition catalogue), Ivan Cvetko (ed.), Galerija Doma JNA, Belgrade, 1968.

61 Anonymous, “V galeriji doma JLA”, *Tovariš*, vol. 13, no. 29, 28.7.1957, p. 686.

62 Stojan Batič, Janez Bernik, Janez Boljka, Peter Černe, Marjan Dovjak, Božidar Jakac, Boris Kalin, Gojmir Anton Kos, Ludvik Pandur, France Peršin, Dora Plestenjak, Bine Rogelj, Maksim Sedej Jr, France Slana, Gabrijel Stupica, Janez Šibila, Ive Šubic, Marko Šuštaršič, Izidor Urbančič and Janez Vidic.

63 Janez Bernik, Jože Horvat – Jaki, Miha Maleš, Adriana Maraž, Kiar Meško, France Mihelič, Janez Pirnat, France Slana and Tone Svetina.

64 Negovan Nemec, Ludvik Pandur, Andrej Pavlič, Vladimir Potočnik, Vladimir Štoviček, Jože Šubic and father and son Tone and Vojko Svetina.

65 A. Arko, “Korelčev vojaški smeh”, *Delo*, vol. 15, no. 105, 17.4.1973, p. 8. In 1986, a comics exhibition was opened on the theme of the Partisan struggle. In addition to Korelc, Miki Muster and Jelko Peternelj were also among the exhibiting artists.



95–96

Installation views of the first and the second exhibitions of the *National Liberation Struggle in the Works of Yugoslav Artists* at the Gallery of the Yugoslav People's Army Cultural Centre in Belgrade in 1961 and 1966.

openings of the Slovenian exhibitions had an almost “national” undertone, the exhibitors could count on the attention and sympathy of the Belgrade press.

Slovenian artists also exhibited in the Belgrade gallery in numerous group exhibitions together with artists from other republics with whom they shared similar thematic interest. One of the most unusual is the group exhibition from 1976, which presented five artists, including France Slana, who had travelled the Mediterranean a year earlier as guests of the army on the training ship *Galeb* and had visited Egypt, Algeria, Libya and Italy together with the students of the Naval Academy. Although they were not obliged to create any work, the cruise inspired them to produce dozens of paintings, watercolours and drawings.⁶⁶

The flagship of the gallery in Belgrade was a series of exhibitions entitled *National Liberation Struggle in the Works of Yugoslav Artists* (*NOB u delima likovnih umetnika Jugoslavije*), held every five years from 1961 to 1985 on the anniversary of the founding of the army (figs. 95–96). Ivan Cvetko said this about the exhibitions: “With these works we want to find a new vision of the revolution: our aim is by no means to rehash socialist realism, but to give every artist the opportunity to approach the subject of the revolution based on his own artistic and stylistic starting points.”⁶⁷ The exhibitions were organised – at least from the beginning of the 1970s – in the following way: the organising committee, which consisted of representatives from the gallery, the Belgrade YPA Cultural Centre and the army, invited members of the Yugoslav Association of Fine Artists to submit a maximum of two recent works on the theme of the Partisan struggle. The recommended or, more precisely, the authorised themes for the works were defined in the gallery’s policy and embody a concise summary of the Yugoslav revolutionary imaginarium:

Pre-revolutionary period and preparation for the armed uprising. Armed resistance of the People’s Liberation Army and the Yugoslav army of all nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia from the uprising to the end of the war. Uprisings, epic events (Kadinjača, Sutjeska, Kozara, Pohorje, the February march of the Macedonian brigades, Neretva, Igman, etc.) and other themes inspired by the armed resistance of all Yugoslav nations and nationalities. Youth in resistance, diversions, cultural and educational work, movements, hospitals, etc. Portraits of revolutionaries, national

66 Anonymous, “Likovni spomini na križarjenje z Galebom”, *Delo*, vol. 20, no. 12, 17.1.1976, p. 7.

67 Anonymous, “Razstava likovnih del na temo revolucije”, *Dnevnik*, vol. 21, no. 54, 26.2.1971, p. 5.

heroes, commanders, illegals, couriers, fighters. Landscapes of historical sites from the time of the revolution. Still lifes of weapons and equipment of the fighters.⁶⁸

The committee then appointed a jury to decide on the prizes in the categories of painting, sculpture and printmaking. The exhibitors had to send in the works at their own expense and well packaged. The exhibitors from Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia sent the works to the YPA cultural centres in the capitals of their respective republics, from where they were transported to Belgrade by lorries. As these were sales exhibitions, the exhibitors had to declare the price of their works, and if a work was purchased, the gallery handed it over to the buyer after the exhibition.⁶⁹

The gallery staff spent a year preparing the first exhibition, which presented 177 artists (including 27 Slovenians)⁷⁰ who had accepted the gallery's invitation.⁷¹ The YPA, which financed the exhibition, had two representatives on the 13-member jury that awarded the prizes. The other members were representatives of the fine artists' associations of the individual republics (Slovenia was represented by Riko Debenjak and Zoran Didek) and gallery principals (including Zoran Kržišnik). Slovenian artists received a fair share of the prize fund.⁷² Although the critic Bogdan Pogačnik criticised some of the works in the exhibition in his review, his final verdict was that the organisers showed a "rich understanding for the development of our art on this topic" and predominantly high-quality artistic solutions.⁷³

Encouraged by the success of the first exhibition, the second exhibition in 1966 included almost twice as many artists as the first, but again with the participation of 27 Slovenians. The reviews were still positive, including Pogačnik's: "It is a valuable realisation that this

68 *III izložba Narodnooslobodilačka borba u delima likovnih umetnika Jugoslavije* (exhibition catalogue), Ivan Cvetko, Rajka Popović and Boris Stanojčić (eds.), Galerija Doma JNA, Belgrade, 1971.

69 Ibid.

70 According to the available data, the most frequently represented Slovenian artist in the exhibitions *National Liberation Struggle in the Works of Yugoslav Artists* was Stojan Batič. The following artists exhibited in at least two exhibitions: Janez Bernik, Janez Boljka, Bogdan Borčič, Božidar Jakac, Janez Knez, France Peršin, Dora Ples-tenjak, Marij Pregelj, Marijan de Reggi, France Slana, Ive Šubic, Marko Šuštaršič, Drago Tršar and Aladar Zahariaš.

71 Cvetko, 1971 (see no. 57), p. 489.

72 According to the available data, prizes for painting were awarded to Marko Šuštaršič for *Document on the Pohorje Battalion*, 1961, and *Nurses*, 1976, France Mihelič for *War and Chronicler*, 1971, and Jože Šubic (1985); for sculpture to Drago Tršar for *Squad*, 1961, *Partisan Theatre*, 1971, and *In Honour of the XIV Division*, 1985; and for printmaking to Ive Šubic for *Weary*, 1961, Bogdan Borčič for *Internment Dachau*, 1971, and *Dachau Camp, Gas Cell*, 1976, Boge Dimovski (1985) and Hamid Tahir (1985).

73 Bogdan Pogačnik, "Ljudje v skupini", *Delo*, vol. 3, no. 335, 8.12.1961, p. 4.

artistic initiative came from army circles and that it maintained the quality of execution without programmatic impositions. Between the first and second exhibition on the Partisan struggle at the YPA cultural centre, the YPA cultural centre itself [...] was transformed from an occasional, semi-amateur exhibition space into a new, regular and professional gallery.”⁷⁴ The third exhibition in 1971 attracted 387 artists, including 31 Slovenians.⁷⁵ This time the reviews were not quite as favourable. While Vera Visočnik stated that the diversity of the exhibited works was still a sign of quality,⁷⁶ Mesesnel, on the other hand, declared that only a handful of the exhibited works were really successful and quoted an unnamed critic from Belgrade: “Appalling, appalling, this exhibition! It’s just very kitsch!”⁷⁷ The fourth exhibition in 1976 also received critical reviews. Despite higher financial awards, the number of exhibiting artists decreased and with it the number of Slovenian artists, which totalled 17.⁷⁸ Among the reactions of critics who were weary of the hypertrophied exhibitions was the critic of the magazine *Borba*, Zoran Markuš, who described the exhibition as anachronistic and outdated because it lacked the participation of younger artists, adding that the artistic level had also fallen because untrained artists were also exhibited. “Being ‘naive’ and ‘primitive’, even if such an attitude is very sincere, cannot bring meaningful results.”⁷⁹ Markuš and many other critics felt that the visual expressions of Yugoslav ideological and political narratives had become emptied out and irrelevant by the 1970s. Moreover, art experts and critics, who by that time had established themselves as the supreme arbiters of art, insisted on judging the artworks according to the criteria of high art, even if the works judged did not claim to be recognised as such. Attempts to revitalise the lacklustre exhibitions by including younger exhibitors were unsuccessful in both the 1981 and 1985 exhibitions, in which only four Slovenian participants (Stojan Batič, Janez Knez, Marjan de Reggi and Jože Šubic) and Slovenian residents Boge Dimovski and Hamid Tahir took part. Aleksander Bassin was the only member of the now only six-member jury who came from Slovenia.⁸⁰

74 B.[ogdan] Pogačnik, “NOB v likovni umetnosti”, *Delo*, vol. 7, no. 334, 10.12.1966, p. 7.

75 Anonymous, “Beograd: Razstava ‘Narodnoosvobodilni boj v delih likovnih umetnikov Jugoslavije’”, *Delo*, vol. 12, no. 46, 17.2.1970, p. 5; Anonymous, “Beograd: Razstava na temo NOB”, *Delo*, vol. 13, no. 18, 21.1.1971, p. 5.

76 Vera Visočnik, “Udeležba slovenskih likovnih umetnikov na razstavah galerije Doma JNA v Beogradu”, *Borec*, vol. 23, no. 6–7, 1971, p. 491.

77 Janez Mesesnel, “Malo velikih upodobitev”, *Delo*, vol. 13, no. 208, 3.8.1971, p. 5.

78 Anonymous, “NOB v delih likovnikov”, *Delo*, vol. 19, no. 42, 20.2.1976, p. 9.

79 Zoran Markuš, “Rat i revolucija bez pravog izraza”, *Borba*, vol. 55, no. 181, 3.7.1976, p. 11.

80 6. izložba Narodnooslobodilačka borba u delima likovnih umetnika Jugoslavije: *Pobeda i sloboda* (exhibition catalogue), Boris Stanojčić and Gordana Kaljalović (eds.), Galerija Doma Jugoslovenske narodne armije, Belgrade, 1986; Anonymous, “Nagrade na šesti razstavi NOB v delih likovnih umetnikov Jugoslavije”, *Delo*, vol. 27, no. 116, 21.5.1985, p. 6.

NARODNO OSVOBODILNA BORBA V DELIH LIKOVNIH UMETNIKOV JUGOSLAVIJE





101



102



97–102

Catalogue cover, opening and installation views of the exhibition *National Liberation Struggle in the Works of Yugoslav Artists* at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana in 1971.

At the end of the exhibitions, the gallery compiled a selection of the exhibited works (mainly prize-winning and purchased works) and sent them to YPA cultural centres and other exhibition venues. The situation in Slovenia was unique, as none of the guest exhibitions took place in a YPA cultural centre. The first guest exhibition was organised in 1967, following the second exhibition in Belgrade. The selection of 81 works by 70 artists⁸¹ was ceremonially opened at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana (figs. 97–102). The works of most of the Slovenian artists who had exhibited in Belgrade were shown alongside the prize-winning works of well-known Yugoslav artists.⁸² Mirko Juteršek wrote that the exhibition was “one of the most interesting themed events in recent times”, but “unfortunately it took place in a rather tight space” so many works were not properly presented; the exhibition was missing, in his opinion, well-known artists and modernist solutions, even if it offered “a fairly unpretentious overview of the lively artistic developments in Yugoslavia in the last decade”.⁸³ At the end of 1971, the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana showed a selection of prize-winning and purchased works by 29 artists from the third exhibition in Belgrade. Critics described the exhibition as a slimmed-down version of the original exhibition, but this should not necessarily be taken as a criticism. Niko Goršič accused the Belgrade jury of being overly generous in awarding the prizes: “The fact that we saw a scaled-down exhibition in Ljubljana is only to the advantage of the exhibition itself [...]. Only half [of the works] reach a kind of average level, while only a handful of them can be labelled as – works of art.”⁸⁴ The 1975 exhibition, which included 45 works, was held at the City Art Gallery.⁸⁵ The last exhibition with a selection of 60 works was organised in Ljubljana in 1981, this time in the hall of the Cankarjev dom Cultural and Congress Centre.⁸⁶

Although most of the *National Liberation Struggle in the Works of Yugoslav Artists* guest exhibitions took place in Ljubljana, the gallery leadership in the capital did not forget the other Slovenian towns. In 1971, 40 painters and 17 sculptors exhibited their works at the Maribor Art Gallery,⁸⁷ and a year later the Museum of the Revolution

81 *Narodnoosvobodilna borba v delih likovnih umetnikov Jugoslavije* (exhibition catalogue), Rajka Popović (ed.), Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1967.

82 Anonymous, “Ljubljana: Razstava ‘NOB v delih jugoslovanskih umetnikov’”, *Delo*, vol. 8, no. 52, 24.2.1967, p. 5; b. p., “NOB v delih likovnih umetnikov”, *Delo*, vol. 8, no. 53, 25.2.1967, p. 16.

83 Mirko Juteršek, “NOB v delih likovnih umetnikov Jugoslavije”, *Borec*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1967, pp. 281–282.

84 Niko Goršič, “NOB v delih likovnih umetnikov”, *Revija M*, no. 10, 14.3.1972, p. 10.

85 Janez Mesesnel, “Nenehno aktualni”, *Delo*, vol. 18, no. 170, 24.7.1975, p. 5.

86 Dejan Vodovnik, “Razstava likovnih del NOB”, *Delo*, vol. 23, no. 245, 22.10.1981, p. 9.

87 Anonymous, “Maribor: Gostovanje galerije JLA iz Beograda”, *Delo*, vol. 13, no. 52, 24.2.1971, p. 5.

in Celje showed 75 works by 65 artists. Ivan Stopar wrote favourably in his review that the exhibition was the most significant artistic manifestation in Celje in modern times.⁸⁸ A special selection from the Belgrade collection was prepared for the same Celje museum for its exhibition of Yugoslav graphic art with motifs of the National Liberation Struggle in 1973.⁸⁹

The *National Liberation Struggle in the Works of Yugoslav Artists* exhibitions were also an important cultural export of Yugoslav cultural diplomacy, especially to the Eastern Bloc countries and members of the Non-Aligned Movement. In the 1970s, the Belgrade gallery prepared numerous guest exhibitions with works from the collection, in which the Federal Administration for International Scientific, Educational, Cultural and Technical Cooperation played an important organisational role. In 1972, around 100 works travelled to Moscow, where they were exhibited for a month at the Pushkin Museum⁹⁰ before being brought to Minsk.⁹¹ At the end of the following year, an exhibition of 50 works was organised at the Imperial War Museum in London.⁹² Exhibitions were also opened in Romania, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Cuba, China, Mongolia, Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, Senegal and Angola.⁹³

The second series of annual exhibitions organised by the Belgrade gallery since 1966 was entitled *Soldiers – Fine Artists (Vojaki – likovni umetniki; figs. 103–104)*. The exhibitions usually opened on 22 December, the Day of the YPA. They showed the works that the soldiers had created during their service and awarded prizes determined by the gallery committee. Amateurs made up only a small number of the exhibitors, most of them were graduates of art academies. Ivan Cvetko commented:

Young soldiers like to take the initiative and express their impressions of military life through artistic means. In doing so, they are following in the tradition of the artists who were active in the Partisan units since the beginning of the people's liberation army. They were fighters and yet remained artists. They fought with arms and – painting. Soldier-artists shed light on life in the army from the inside and their works can help us to develop a better and more humane understanding of a young person in uniform.⁹⁴

88 Ivan Stopar, "Veličina izpovedi", *Novi tednik*, vol. 26, no. 17, 26.4.1972, p. 7.

89 Anonymous, "Grafika NOV v Celju", *Delo*, vol. 15, no. 320, 24.11.1973, p. 2.

90 Anonymous, "Moskva: Jugoslovanska razstava", *Delo*, vol. 14, no. 31, 3.2.1972, p. 6.

91 Anonymous, "Razstava NOB – Minsk", *Delo*, vol. 14, no. 82, 25.3.1972, p. 14.

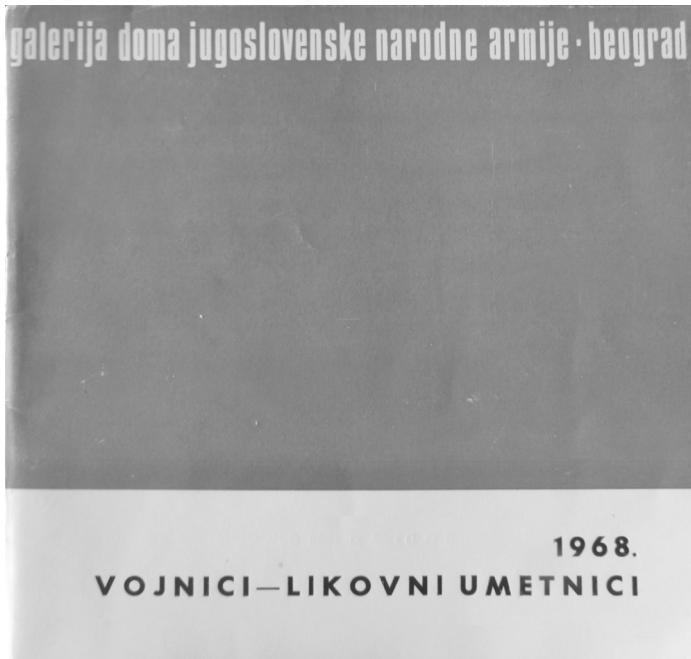
92 Anonymous, "Likovna dela o NOV v Londonu", *Delo*, vol. 15, no. 173, 27.6.1973, p. 7.

93 Mezga, 1988 (see no. 16), p. 363.

94 Cvetko, 1971 (see no. 57), pp. 489–490.



Installation view of the exhibition *Soldiers – Fine Artists* at the Gallery of the Yugoslav People's Army Cultural Centre in Belgrade in 1966.



Catalogue cover for the exhibition *Soldiers – Fine Artists* in Belgrade in 1968.

As far as can be gathered from the scarcely accessible material, Slovenian soldiers were not strongly represented at these exhibitions. At the first exhibition in 1966, the only exhibiting artist from Slovenia was France Votlak, at the second a graduate of the Ljubljana academy, Danilo Prosenc, and at the third Franc Golob, who presented three paintings of which *Post Festum*, renamed *War* in the catalogue, received the strongest response. It shows the feet of a hanged man, hanging above the ground, in front of a dilapidated wall. According to the artist himself, other works from his oeuvre, such as the self-portrait in the style of the musical *Hair*, were unsuitable for exhibitions.⁹⁵

In 1976, Rudi Španzel had visible success when he won the first prize for his painting *My Window* at the exhibition in the Belgrade gallery.⁹⁶ Španzel explains that he had sent several paintings to this exhibition on Cvetko's initiative, who greatly appreciated the artist's work. Later, in a telephone call from Belgrade, Španzel learnt that he had become "the first brush of the army" and was ceremoniously awarded a medal by national hero Franc Tavčar - Rok. The prize also included a meeting with Josip Broz - Tito, who would sit for a portrait. Španzel had two planned receptions in 1977, but both were cancelled under the pretext that Tito felt unwell.⁹⁷

In their choice of motifs, the soldiers continued to orientate themselves mainly towards realistic depictions of military life. They depicted scenes that they knew from their everyday lives: field training, weapons, target practice, guard duty, flying, the navy, radio telegraphy, helping civilians in need, meals, celebrations ... Many created intimist depictions of their immediate surroundings, with a bed, a locker, a uniform, a view from the window and other elements that give the impression of a still life. There is also no shortage of portraits of fellow soldiers and landscapes with a panorama of the barracks. Others focused on the more pleasant parts of a soldier's life: resting during a break, leisure activities, going into town, travelling home or visiting a girlfriend. However, some also tackled more ambitious compositions, such as motifs from the Second World War or Tito's portraits, while others created works that commented on current political and military circumstances, from the Cold War to the Vietnam War and the founding of Biafra. From the mid-1970s, metaphysical depictions of fear emerged, linked to the theme of the military only by the anticipation of nuclear devastation.

The Belgrade gallery also sent prize-winning works by soldier-artists to other cities in Yugoslavia. The first exhibition in Slovenia opened in 1973 at the City Gallery in Ljubljana and showed almost 50 paintings,

95 Franc Golob, interview (see no. 41).

96 Anonymous, "Nagrada slovenskemu slikarju", *Delo*, vol. 18, no. 303, 29.12.1976, p. 8.

97 Rudi Španzel, interview (see no. 42).

sculptures and prints. Janez Mesesnel described the works as “documents of a unique, well-conceived attempt that throws a new, thoroughly positive light on the YPA”, adding that they surprise “above all by the breadth of content and intensity of feeling, and impress with a thoroughly contemporary artistic language”.⁹⁸ In 1974, a selection from the Belgrade gallery was shown at the Rotovž Exhibition Salon in Maribor and at the Museum of the Revolution in Celje, where it was seen by over 2,000 people.⁹⁹ Was this high number the result of the organised school visits or does it indicate great interest on the part of the public, which, unlike the specialist public, had not yet grown tired of the exhibitions?

The title of the last exhibition cycle at the Belgrade gallery was *Armed Forces of the SFRY and General People's Defence in the Works of Yugoslav Artists (Oružane snage SFRJ i opštenarodna odbrana u delima likovnih umetnika Jugoslavije)*. Only three exhibitions were organised, in 1975, 1976 and 1978, all in cooperation with the Federal Secretariat for National Defence. They were based on an initiative that brought civilian artists into the barracks for several days to gain insights into the everyday lives of soldiers, to work closely with and advise the art sections and to create their own works.¹⁰⁰ The motifs used in the exhibitions were an interweaving of scenes from the National Liberation Struggle and military life and were intended to confirm “that a true artist can also find inspiration leading to a genuine artistic result in a SFRY border stone, an aircraft squadron, soldiers in training or on a break, units on the march, tank drivers, marines or members of the general people's resistance.”¹⁰¹ The selection of 30 works was exhibited in Slovenia in the summer of 1977 in the City Gallery in Ljubljana and in the YPA cultural centres in Maribor and Brežice.¹⁰² This type of work was subsequently exhibited in Belgrade as part of the exhibitions entitled *YPA in the Works of Fine Artists (JNA u delima likovnih umetnika)*. The fourth exhibition in 1983 presented 20 older painters and 10 soldier-artists, including Andrej Pavlič,¹⁰³ who won the first prize for the painting *The Time When Hasan Was in Charge of the Glass* (fig. 105). In this painting, which has a surrealist dimension and has little to do with the usual palette of military motifs, Pavlič expressed a rather subversive message. Hasan, from the

98 Mesesnel, 1973 (see no. 39), p. 6.

99 S. Mrvič, “Naša armada v delih vojakov”, *Novi tednik*, vol. 28, no. 45, 14.11.1974, p. 8.

100 Vukičević, 1982 (see no. 4), p. 118.

101 Anonymous, “Oborožene sile v delu umetnikov”, *Delo*, vol. 18, no. 272, 21.11.1975, p. 9.

102 *Jugoslovanska ljudska armada in splošna ljudska obramba v delih likovnih umetnikov Jugoslavije: Mestna galerija Ljubljana, Dom JLA Maribor, Dom JLA Brežice* (exhibition catalogue), Božena Plevnik (ed.), Mestna galerija, Ljubljana, 1977.

103 *Četvrta izložba Jugoslovenska narodna armija u delima likovnih umetnika* (exhibition catalogue), Gordana Kaljalović (ed.), Dom JNA, Belgrade, 1983.

**NA IV IZLOŽBI
JUGOSLOVENSKA NARODNA ARMIIJA
U DELIMA LIKOVNIH UMETNIKA**

**DODELJUJE SE I NAGRADA
JUGOSLOVENSKE NARODNE ARMIIJE**

Pavlič Andreju

ZA UMETNIČKO DELO
"Vreme kad je Hasan bio zadužen za stakla"

**U BEOGRADU
15. NOVEMBRA 1983. GODINE**

PREDSEDNIK ŽIRIJA



Diploma awarded to painter Andrej Pavlič for first prize at the fourth exhibition of the YPA in the Works of Fine Artists at the Gallery of the Yugoslav People's Army Cultural Centre in Belgrade in 1983.

painting's title, otherwise a military comrade of the artist, is in fact a clumsy man who lets everything slip out of his hands, which, in retrospect, foreshadows the disintegration of the army and the state it was supposed to protect. The other exhibited painting by Pavlič, *Remembrance*, shows a five-pointed star on a famous side cap (the so-called titovka) in a still life, which the author interpreted as a reference to the transience of all things and thus also to the decline of the Yugoslav regime.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

In the 1990s, the once-common army became a hated aggressor in the eyes of many former Yugoslavs. As a result, many were no longer able to see military art as anything other than cheap propaganda. Although the disintegration of the country played an important role in the emergence of this view, it is evident that the creation and exhibition of art within the YPA was a complex phenomenon decades before the Yugoslav wars. The field was extremely heterogeneous and veered between high and amateur art, intertwining works of art by absolute amateurs, recently graduated artists and established artists who had not been in contact with the army for years. Since theorists, art critics and ideologues insisted on considering art in the YPA as a unified body of work, they judged it according to the established criteria of high art, which could not be applied to most artworks in this sphere of Yugoslav art. Yugoslavia encouraged the development of amateurism as an expression of the creative potential of the masses and was quite successful with this project of cultural dissemination. However, the more ambitious plans for the spiritual enrichment of citizens through the creation and consumption of high art proved to be unrealistic. The majority of amateur artists both inside and outside the military pursued their own artistic interests, which neither reached nor aspired to the level of high art. Another, as it turned out, unsolvable puzzle was the degree of freedom granted to soldier-artists in their creative expression. While it was clear which subjects were forbidden, it was never specified exactly which artistic solutions were desired, which unintentionally opened up many opportunities for the soldiers to create freely. Culture in the YPA as a whole suffered from the gap between the well-developed theory and the lagging practice, which fell far behind the recommendations and guidelines presented at the conferences. As a result of all these factors, artistic creation in the YPA in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s became unclear in terms of its goals and purpose, empty of content, inherently paradoxical and therefore less and less popular. The collapse of the

104 Andrej Pavlič, interview, conducted by Ivan Smiljanić, 28.3.2023.

country was just the final nail in the coffin of the already shaky artistic corpus, which ultimately lost everything with this rupture: its creators, organisers, critics and consumers – or, in short, its context.