*Der unbekannte politische Gefangene: Ein internationaler Skulpturenwettbewerb zu Zeiten des Kalten Krieges* (*The Unknown Political Prisoner: An International Sculpture Competition in the Cold War Era*), Kunsthaus Dahlem, Berlin, 30 October 2020 – 21 February (extended to 18 July) 2021, and exhibition catalogue edited by Petra Gördüren and Dorothea Schöne, Wasmuth and Zohlen Verlag, Berlin, 2020 (304pp., 87 ills.) ISBN 978 3 8030 3406 9

As an historian of the controversial international sculpture competition of 1951-53 for a *Monument to* *The Unknown Political Prisoner*,[[1]](#endnote-1) I was keen to see the first exhibition and accompanying catalogue dedicated to the event since it was conceived seventy years ago. The exhibition publicity and catalogue had whetted the appetite with their distinctive graphic reworkings of the original catalogue cover. And there was no more appropriate location to hold the exhibition than Berlin, the favoured site for the competition’s projected monument. Sadly, however, the pandemic forced the exhibition’s closure for much of its scheduled run, leaving me and no doubt many others disappointed and reliant on photographic documentation to gain a better understanding of the event.

The *Kunsthaus Dahlem*’s director Dorothea Schöne and Petra Gördüren curated the exhibition and edited the catalogue, to which both contributed essays. It was an ambitious undertaking for a relatively small institution and although the original competition was not as large or unique as its original organisers often claimed it remains almost certainly the largest event of its kind, having probably attracted at least 2,000 entries (500 more than the *Kunsthaus* catalogue suggests).[[2]](#endnote-2) The curators narrowed the scope of their exhibition by focusing on the entries of thirty of the competition’s finalists, the twelve West Germans and eighteen others, who between them won a total of twenty-four prizes, including the Grand Prize. As many of the maquettes have remained with the sculptors themselves or their estates, a high proportion of the loans came from private collections, and several had rarely if ever been exhibited since 1953. Where the exhibitors’ maquettes had been lost or destroyed – Max Bill (Switzerland), Jorge Oteiza (Spain) and Fritz Koenig, Richard Raach, Louise Stomps and Hans Wimmer (all West Germany) – their entries were represented by photographs and/or drawings (fortuitously, Stomps’ maquette was added to the exhibition after it emerged at auction). Regrettably, the multi-part maquettes of Egon Altdorf (West Germany) and Barbara Hepworth (Britain) were incomplete, as the former has not survived intact and the latter is shared by two owners, while those of F.E. McWilliam and the Grand-Prize winner Reg Butler (both Britain) were substituted by similar or preparatory works.[[3]](#endnote-3) The inclusion of some of these artists seemed puzzling as the maquettes of many other international finalists survive (several in public collections), and if Butler’s maquette was unavailable[[4]](#endnote-4) a more telling exhibit would have been his larger ‘Working Model’ of 1956-57 (Tate Gallery), given that it was fabricated when efforts to erect his monument in West Berlin were at their height.

The lengthy, complex and still partly unknown history of the *Unknown Political Prisoner* competition began in London, in 1951, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, with the appointment of a former US cultural attaché, Anthony J. Kloman, as its Director of Public Relations. After a visit to the US, Kloman proposed the idea of holding an international sculpture competition on this theme, with the promise of generous funding from an unidentified source for prizes and the Institute. As the headquarters of the British avant-garde, the ICA’s managers were initially reluctant to accept the proposal but won over by the financial incentives. Artists living in western social and liberal democracies, above all, West Germany, Great Britain, the United States, France and Italy submitted the highest number of applications for entry, in that order (actual entry figures are not known for all countries), although those in several dictatorships also competed. The Soviet bloc and individual members of western Communist parties boycotted the competition, suspecting it of an anti-Communist intention. Their suspicion was confirmed by a late announcement that the monument would be erected in West Berlin, close to the border with the Soviet sector, demonstrating a clear intention, despite the universalising theme, to protest Communist repression of political dissidents. Countries with high numbers of entry applications shortlisted entries in twenty national preliminary contests and from these and others sent directly to London an international jury then selected 146 finalists for an exhibition at the Tate Gallery in March and April of 1953. Given the avant-gardist sympathies of most of the national and international jurors, it was unsurprising that prizes were awarded almost exclusively to modernist designs. However, following widespread public controversy over the award of the Grand Prize to Reg Butler’s ‘ultra-modern’ design, the anonymous American backers pulled out of the competition, although others continued with efforts to erect the monument until the whole project was finally dropped in 1964.

Of the thirty maquettes in the *Kunsthaus* exhibition, 23 had originally been shortlisted in seven of the competition’s national preliminary contests, and seven selected by the international jury from those sent directly to London. Only about a quarter of the countries that participated in the competition (14 of 57) were represented here. The most conspicuous omission was France, which had had the fourth highest number of entry applications and won two major prizes, while only two entrants were included from outside the European continent: Theodore Roszak (US) and Jewad Selim (Iraq). Despite or perhaps because of the narrow range of countries included, the *Kunsthaus* was able to represent many of modernist idioms in evidence among finalists’ maquettes – biomorphic, concrete, expressionist, primitivist, realist, surrealist and so on – with the notable absence of any constructivist designs despite Naum Gabo (US), Antoine Pevsner (France) and Margel Hinder (Australia) being major prize-winners. The maquettes did represent, however, many of the diverse materials employed by finalists – including brass, bronze, composite metal, iron, marble, stone and wood – and many of the common iconographical solutions to the competition theme, ranging from depictions of imprisonment and suffering – with solitary prisoners, often accompanied by gaolers or fighting oppressors, trapped in cage-like structures or threatened by implements of torture – to more positive images suggesting escape, freedom or transcendence – featuring birds, spires, crucifixes or more abstract forms evoking openness, upwardness or weightlessness. The prize-winning maquettes often combined elements of both tendencies, evident at the *Kunsthaus* in Butler’s, Lynn Chadwick’s and Hans Uhlmann’s entries.

The high ceilings and large windows of the *Kunsthaus* galleries created light and airy spaces for displaying the small sculptural models (limited to 50 cm. in all dimensions by the competition’s rules). They were displayed on black, white and grey, geometric plinths, inspired by the design of the competition’s US national exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, but the low height of some would have made it difficult to envisage the designs at full scale. The layout of the exhibition grouped entries from the same nations together and accentuated the curatorial focus on the West Germans by setting them apart in a separate room. While this arrangement facilitated national comparisons, it might have been more enlightening to accentuate formal, material and iconographical connections between countries.

The exhibition’s weighty, bilingual (German/English) catalogue includes contextualising essays on the competition and on each of the exhibiting sculptors, except, oddly, for Raach, Stomps and Wimmer (although information on them is available elsewhere). These biographically oriented texts compiled by Liza Strumila and five other specialist scholars combine valuable information on the sculptors’ lives with insightful interpretations of their maquettes but tend to repeat information about the competition.

The introductory essay by Dorothea Schöne draws extensively on the secondary literature to provide an admirably concise account of the competition’s origins, selections, exhibitions and reception, and of the several attempts to realise Butler’s winning entry, but disappointingly evades discussion of the identity and intentions of the competition’s anonymous backers.

Angela Lammert’s essay provides a more detailed account of the failed efforts to erect Butler’s monument in West Berlin, an aspect of the competition that is less well known. She argues that the support of Berlin’s newly founded Academy of Art was compromised by the motives of its leading proponents: the Director of Literature, poet and critic Hans Egon Holthusen, described its proposed construction as a service to ‘the entire free world’ while suppressing his ten-year membership of the SS, while the President, architect Hans Scharoun, affirmed Holthusen’s views as the Academy’s ‘expert opinion’ without acknowledging other members’ opposition to the project. Lammert concludes that their enthusiasm to build a modernist monument on this theme in West Berlin reflected a generational attempt to erase its ‘problematic past’ (p.80).

In an essay on ‘The Failure of a Genre in Post-war Aesthetic Conflicts’,Petra Gördüren traces a ‘crisis’ in the history of the traditional sculptural monument in early twentieth-century Germany and the growth in post-war West Germany of competitions and commissions for new types of monuments. Her illuminating comparison of the *Unknown Political Prisoner* competition with the competition for the *Berlin Airlift* memorial of 1949 leads her to suggest that the former had failed because it was judged only by art experts, favoured rarefied forms of abstraction, and hid rather than proclaimed its ideological intentions. Yet her argument is partly undermined by the popularity of the semi-abstract design realised for the *Airlift* memorial – which, as she herself notes, 70-100,000 Berliners cheered at its inauguration (p.113) – leaving this reader still convinced that the ICA’s competition ‘failed’ primarily for political reasons rather than because the monument ‘genre’ had failed in general.

The fourth essay by Tanja Pirsig-Marshall summarizes the influential roles of the British Council, the US State Department and the CIA in the dissemination of British and American modernist art, especially sculpture, to Europe and particularly West Germany. Her summaries of the relevant literature are, however, occasionally misleading: she asserts that ‘scholars generally accept that the foreign secret service of the USA began its covert support for the American avant-garde around 1950’ and cites several publications for support, including one of my own (p.141). But my article argues that the higher international reputation of *western European* modernist art in the early 1950s made it a more attractive anti-Communist propaganda instrument for the CIA than the American avant-garde (hence this pro-modernist sculpture competition based in Europe). Elsewhere, she suggests that British entrants did unusually well in the competition due to ‘the hegemony of British sculpture’ and the nationality of the ‘head of the international jury, Herbert Read’ (p.145). Yet part of the backers’ motivation for holding the competition was their hope that it would enable Britain *to acquire* international cultural leadership, which they feared might otherwise fall to Italy (a Communist-leaning nation),[[5]](#endnote-5) while it was the American, Kloman, not Read, who chaired the international jury (and, anyway, Read’s private correspondence reveals that he championed Gabo, not Butler, to win the Grand Prize).[[6]](#endnote-6) Even the claim that Britain won more prizes than any other country (p.145) is not quite correct: certainly the Grand Prize winner was British but the US and Britain both won three major prizes and British sculptors won no more Runner-Up prizes than France, Italy or the US. More interesting, is that West German sculptors won no major prizes, despite submitting almost as many entries as Britain and, as the author ably describes, being highly cognisant of developments in British and American modernist sculpture.

The *Kunsthaus* catalogue is generously illustrated with photographs of the competition maquettes, including many that are not in the exhibition and several that are little known, although their selection and arrangement in four untitled sections seems somewhat arbitrary. But this is not an exhibition catalogue in the conventional sense: the exhibited sculptures and drawings are not fully catalogued, and it is not made clear which of the illustrated works were exhibited. It would have been helpful, however, to have had a list of the prize-winning entries, a list of the illustrations, a list of the contributing authors, a fuller table of contents, more informative illustration captions (indicating each maquette’s status as a finalist, prize-winner, Runner-Up or reject) and photographs and information about the exhibits that were not competition maquettes. And a few small errors escaped correction: for example, Britain, not West Germany, submitted the highest number of entries (p.10), Emil Gehrer (Austria) received a Runner-Up prize not an Honourable Mention (p.239), Danish sculptors made 37 ‘entry applications’ not entries (p.262), and Henry Moore was a teacher not a student at the Slade when he met McWilliam (p.268).

Overall, despite some odd curatorial choices and minor shortcomings of scholarship, the exhibition and catalogue represent a considerable achievement and provide valuable new information about the competition, principally about its impact in Germany. The exhibition presented the largest number of the competition’s maquettes to be reassembled since the original event. The catalogue expanded German, especially Berlin-based, perspectives on the competition and the Monument, showed that the competition contributed to many entrants’ successful careers as public sculptors and memorialists, and began a process that should help recover the reputations of several little-known sculptors. Yet in focusing on the competition’s finalists and prize-winners, the exhibition seemed to reflect the political and aesthetic values of the original organisers and jurors and perpetuate a misleadingly homogeneous view of the competition’s diverse entries. A more adventurous exhibition might have featured more of the non-prize-winning or even rejected maquettes, including more by non-European and female sculptors, and might thereby have brought a more critical perspective to the innate biases of the competition and offered a more global and pluralist understanding of approaches to commemorative sculpture in the early 1950s.

**Robert Burstow**

1. See Burstow, ‘Butler’s Competition Project for a Monument to “The Unknown Political Prisoner”: Abstraction and Cold War Politics’, *Art History*, vol. 12, no. 4, December 1989, pp. 472-96, and Burstow, ‘The Limits of Modernist Art as a “Weapon of the Cold War”: reassessing the unknown patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner’, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 20, no. 1, Spring 1997, pp. 68-80. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. My figure is given in an official report by the international juror Alfred H. Barr (see Burstow, 1997, p. 78, n. 55), while a Dutch newspaper claimed there were ‘over 2,000’ entries (see Burstow, 1989, p. 491, n.8). By contrast, the Kunsthaus curators follow Axel Lapp’s estimate of about 1,500 entries (e.g., Schöne, p. 45; Gördüren, p. 114). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See McWilliam’s *Cain and Abel* (in Denise Ferran, *F.E. McWilliam at Banbridge*, Banbridge, F.E. McWilliam Gallery, 2008, p. 56) and Butler’s *First Maquette for the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner* (in Margaret Garlake, *The Sculpture of Reg Butler*, Much Hadham and Aldershot, The Henry Moore Foundation in association with Lund Humphries, 2006, p. 134, cat. 112). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The catalogue preface (p.11) indicates that it was included but it is not visible in the photographic documentation. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kloman, letter to Sir John Rothenstein, 18 November 1952, ‘The Unknown Political Prisoner’, Tate Gallery Archive, London. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Letter to Gabo, 19 March 1953, Herbert Read Archive, University of Victoria, British Columbia. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)