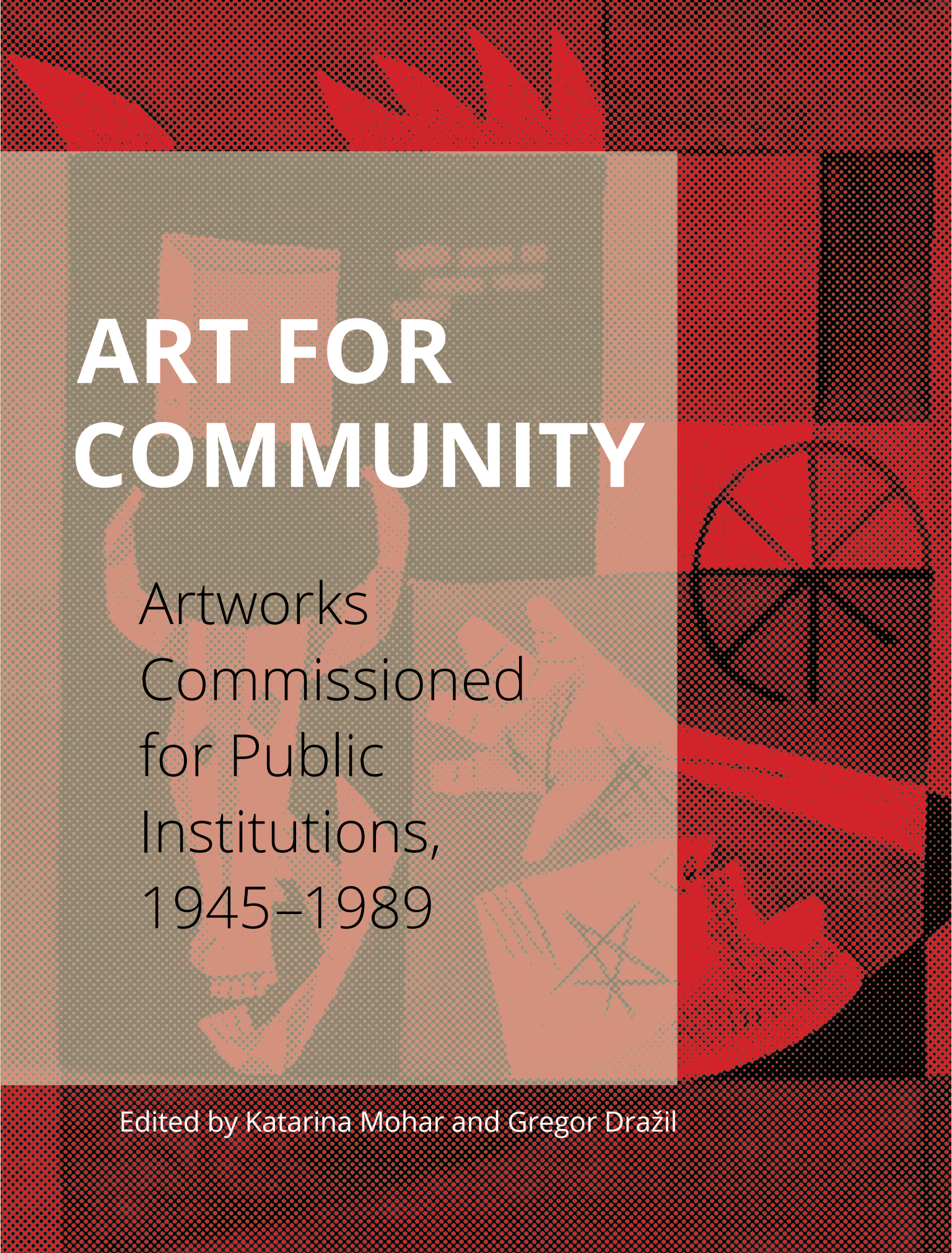




ART FOR COMMUNITY

Artworks
Commissioned
for Public
Institutions,
1945–1989

Edited by Katarina Mohar and Gregor Dražil



Založba ZRC



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Ljubljana, 2026

Opera Instituti Artis Historiae

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Edited by Katarina Mohar and Gregor Dražil

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Issued by ZRC SAZU, France Stele Institute of Art History

Represented by Mija Oter Gorenčič

Publisher: Založba ZRC

Represented by Oto Luthar

Založba ZRC general manager and editor-in-chief: Aleš Pogačnik

Print: Present, d. o. o., Ljubljana

350 copies

First edition, first print run / First e-edition

Ljubljana 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/9789610511748>



The book is a result of the research programme Art in Slovenia at a Cultural Crossroads (P6-0061) and research project Art for Community: Registration and Assessment of Artworks Commissioned for Public Institutions in Slovenia, 1945–1991 (J6-50206), both funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.



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Cover image: Ivo Šubic, unrealised sketch for the mosaic in the building of the People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia.
Photo: Andreja Rakovec, ZRC SAZU.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 009
013 Katarina Mohar, Gregor Dražil
INTRODUCTION
Uvod
- 018
039 Oscar Svanelid, Marta Edling
THE GOVERNMENT OF ART: DEMOCRACY
AND STATE PUBLIC ART IN SWEDEN 1937–2027
Vladanje z umetnostjo: demokracija in javna umetnost
v državnih naročilih na Švedskem v letih 1937–2027
- 042
067 Barbara Vodopivec
“PERCENT FOR ART” SCHEMES: ARTISTIC AGENCY,
CULTURAL POLICY, AND PUBLIC ART IN EUROPE AND
POSTWAR SLOVENIA/YUGOSLAVIA
Shema »odstotek za umetnost«: vloga umetnikov, kulturna politika
in javna umetnost v Evropi ter v povojni Sloveniji/Jugoslaviji
- 070
097 Annette Tietenberg
ED AND NANCY KIENHOLZ’S PROPOSAL FOR *THE BERLIN
FOUNTAIN* (1981/83): AN IRONIC COMMENTARY ON THE
FUNCTION OF ART IN PUBLIC SPACES IN EAST AND WEST
BERLIN DURING THE COLD WAR
Predlog Eda in Nancy Kienholz za *Berlinsko fontano* (*The Berlin Fountain*;
1981/83): ironični komentar o funkciji umetnosti v javnem prostoru
Vzhodnega in Zahodnega Berlina v času hladne vojne
- 100
129 Burcu Selcen Coşkun
THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ART AND ARCHITECTURE DURING
THE POSTWAR PERIOD IN TURKEY: CASES FROM ISTANBUL
Dialog med umetnostjo in arhitekturo v povojnem obdobju v Turčiji:
primeri iz Istanbula

132

Gregor Dražil

**THE MURALS OF IVAN SELJAK ČOPIČ IN THE 1950S AND
EARLY 1960S: BETWEEN REALISM AND ABSTRACTION**

154

Stenske poslikave Ivana Seljaka Čopiča iz petdesetih in zgodnjih
šestdesetih let 20. stoletja: med realizmom in abstrakcijo

156

Irina Cărăbaș

**JULES PERAHIM'S MURALS AND THE POLITICS
OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN ROMANIA
IN THE POST-STALINIST PERIOD**

179

Stenske poslikave Julesa Perahima in politika grajenega okolja v
Romuniji v poststalinističnem obdobju

182

Andreja Rakovec

**NEW INSIGHTS INTO IVE ŠUBIC'S MOSAIC
IN THE SLOVENIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

209

Nova odkritja o mozaiku Iveta Šubica
v Državnem zboru Republike Slovenije

212

Nadja Zgonik

**TAPESTRIES AS PUBLIC ART IN ELITE SPACES OF SOCIALIST
YUGOSLAVIA: THE CASE OF MARIJ PREGELJ'S TAPESTRIES
FOR THE KOTEKS TOBUS BOUTIQUE**

239

Tapiserija kot javna umetnost za elitni prostor v socialistični
Jugoslaviji: primer tapiserij Marija Preglja za butik Koteks Tobus

242

Nataša Ivanović

**ARTISTIC DECORATION OF SHIPS IN POSTWAR ITALY:
ZORAN MUŠIČ'S EMBROIDERY *STORIA DI MARCO POLO***

260

Likovna oprema ladij po drugi svetovni vojni v Italiji:
vezenina Zorana Mušiča *Zgodba o Marku Polu*

262

Patricia Počanić

**ART FOR LEISURE ARCHITECTURE: ARTWORKS
COMMISSIONED FOR HOTELS IN ISTRIA AND
THE KVARNER GULF IN THE 1960S**

297

Umetnost za turistično arhitekturo: umetniška dela, naročena za
hotele v Istri in Kvarnerju v šestdesetih letih 20. stoletja

300

Blaž Šeme

**CONDITION AND RISK ASSESSMENT
OF SOCIALIST-ERA MOSAICS IN SLOVENIA**

324

Ocena stanja in ogroženosti mozaikov
iz obdobja socialistične Slovenije

326

Begoña Farré Torras

**PROMETHEUS'S TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS:
A CASE STUDY OF HERITAGE CHALLENGES POSED
BY MURALS FROM THE TIME OF PORTUGAL'S *ESTADO NOVO*
DICTATORSHIP (1933–1974)**

345

Prometejeve preizkušnje in tegobe: študija primera izzivov
dediščinskega varstva, ki jih odpirajo stenske poslikave iz obdobja
portugalske diktature *Estado Novo* (1933–1974)



THE MURALS OF IVAN SELJAK ČOPIČ IN THE 1950S AND EARLY 1960S: BETWEEN REALISM AND ABSTRACTION

Gregor Dražil

ZRC SAZU

Only a handful of artists in Slovenia produced a substantial body of murals in the period following the Second World War. Among them was Ivan Seljak Čopič (1927–1990), a prolific book illustrator, painter, and print-maker, but also a highly productive muralist. Given the breadth of his oeuvre, this discussion does not provide a comprehensive overview of his monumental painting projects, but instead interprets a specific phase of his career – the 1950s and early 1960s – which was the first major peak of his artistic development. At the same time, it contextualises this period within the broader framework of contemporary artistic trends in Slovenia. The chapter first outlines Seljak Čopič's early life, up to the end of the Second World War and his enrolment in the Ljubljana Academy of Fine Arts in 1945, before more closely examining his postwar years.

I have examined Seljak Čopič's murals from the 1950s and early 1960s, listed later in the introduction. This research involved investigating the state of preservation of individual works through site visits and correspondence with individuals knowledgeable about the history of the buildings housing the murals. Most preparatory sketches for the murals are held by members of the artist's family, with whom I have also been in contact. In addition, I studied Seljak Čopič's works held by the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia. I also surveyed all available literature and previous research on the artist.

The literature on Seljak Čopič's work – and even more so on his murals – is remarkably sparse. His first solo exhibition took place relatively late, in 1972, when he was already forty-five years old. Most of the catalogues accompanying his solo exhibitions are modest, largely commemorative publications containing brief texts that scarcely mention his murals. Although some press coverage of his exhibitions appeared from the 1970s onwards, his 1950s and 1960s murals were, as far as current research shows, almost entirely overlooked by contemporary critics and journalists. Consequently, little to no documentation exists regarding their critical or public reception at the time of their completion.

One early exception to the general lack of commentary is an article published in *Mladina* in 1954, which discussed the decoration of the Vuzenica

power plant.¹ A second and more significant contemporary source is a two-part article from 1963–1964 by the Slovenian cultural figure, philosopher, essayist, and critic Taras Kermauner. In this text, Kermauner reflects on the state of art criticism in Slovenia, proposing new interpretative approaches grounded in his own analysis of Seljak Čopič's art up to the early 1960s.²

The most valuable resource for the study of Seljak's oeuvre – and in particular his murals – is the catalogue of his solo exhibition published by the Idrija Municipal Museum (*Mestni muzej Idrija*) in 1988.³ In addition to photographs and reproductions of his murals and preparatory sketches, the catalogue also includes examples of his prints, drawings, and paintings. It features a partial list of works compiled by the museum's curator, Janez Kavčič, which spans his Partisan-period works, book illustrations, monumental paintings, and other creations. The publication further provides a list of Seljak Čopič's exhibitions and a selected bibliography. A particularly valuable contribution is the accompanying essay by Marijan Tršar (1922–2010) – an artist, art historian, and friend of Seljak Čopič – which offers a detailed account of the artist's life and career. Tršar pays special attention to Seljak Čopič's education, his stay in Paris, and his artistic influences, while carefully tracing the development of his style across a wide and diverse body of work, including his murals.⁴

Among the more recent valuable contributions to the study of Seljak Čopič's murals is a doctoral dissertation by Katarina Mohar. Mohar's research situates the artist within the context of artworks commissioned for the building of the People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia in Ljubljana, which includes a mosaic by Seljak Čopič discussed later in this chapter.⁵ A more recent contribution is an article by Simona Kostanjšek Brglez focusing specifically on Seljak Čopič's murals in his hometown of Idrija.⁶

Chronologically, Seljak Čopič's murals created between approximately 1950 and 1965 include the following projects: a sgraffito at the Police Centre (*Dom milice*) in Ljubljana, dating from the late 1940s or early 1950s; sgraffiti for the Leatherworking High School (*Usnjarski tehnikum*) in Domžale, the predecessor of today's Domžale High School, completed in 1953;⁷ an indoor fresco and an outdoor sgraffito for the former Kočevje Regional Museum building, also from 1953; wall decoration of the hydro-electric power plant in Vuzenica, created around 1954 in collaboration with Zoran Didek and Ive Šubic; a painted ceiling in the building of the Main Cooperative Union (*Glavna zadružna zveza*) in Ljubljana from 1956; two sgraffiti for the Čipka lace shop in Idrija, completed in 1957; sgraffiti for the Institute for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (*Zavod za rehabilitacijo*

invalidov), today the University Rehabilitation Institute, Republic of Slovenia – Soča (*Univerzitetni rehabilitacijski inštitut Republike Slovenije Soča*) in Ljubljana, also from 1957; a mosaic for the building of the People's Assembly (today the National Assembly) in Ljubljana, dated 1958; a mosaic for the Journalists' Centre (*Dom novinarjev*) in Ljubljana and two murals in the building's passages from 1959; a two-part mosaic in the Workers' Hall (*Delavski dom*) in Zagorje ob Savi, completed in 1961; two mosaics in Lipica from 1962; and three mosaics at Brdo Castle near Kranj from 1965.

The sgraffiti depicting portraits of Slovenian musicians on the façade of the building at Vega Street (*Vegova ulica*) 5, formerly home to the Ljubljana Music High School and now the Conservatory of Music and Ballet Ljubljana (*Konservatorij za glasbo in balet Ljubljana*), remain undated.⁸

Most of the artist's works listed above survive, although some are in poor condition. The sgraffiti at the Domžale Leatherworking High School and on the exterior of the former Kočevje Regional Museum building are lost, while the location and condition of the Lipica mosaics remain unknown; these are known only from designs preserved in the Seljak family archive.⁹

Early life and education

Ivan Seljak Čopič¹⁰ was born in 1927 in Idrija, an old mining town in the northwestern part of present-day Slovenia, which at the time was part of the Kingdom of Italy. He attended Italian schools during the late 1930s and early 1940s, but in 1943, at the age of sixteen, he joined the resistance movement.¹¹ It was during his years as a Partisan that he discovered his talent for drawing and came into contact with older, well-established artists who were also Partisans, including Dore Klemenčič, Božidar Jakac, France Mihelič, Nikolaj Pirnat, and the Vidmar brothers, Nande and Drago. Seljak Čopič soon became part of a group of artists who illustrated the Partisan newsletter of the Šercer Brigade, *Udarnik*, while simultaneously learning from his senior colleagues. Among these mentors, Nikolaj Pirnat – a renowned artist trained before the war – was especially influential. Pirnat's style, characterised by its raw and unromantic depiction of events, rough construction, and formal simplification, left a significant mark on Seljak Čopič's artistic development.

Among Seljak Čopič's Partisan-period works, his prints – particularly his linocuts such as *Morilci* (Murderers) [Figure 1] – are the best known, despite being relatively few in number. These prints have been exhibited and reproduced in exhibitions and catalogues dedicated to artistic production from the Second World War.¹² Stylistically, they are characterised

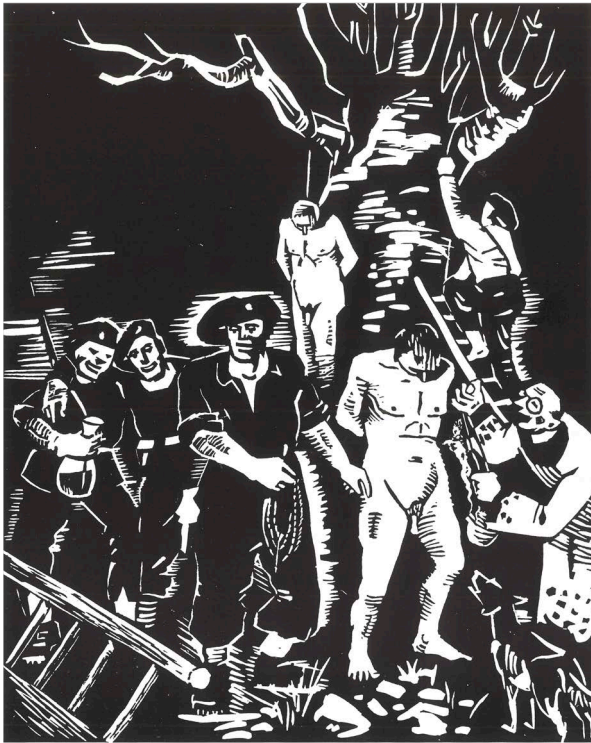


Figure 1.
Ivan Seljak Čopič,
Morilci (Murderers),
linocut, 1944.
Source: Bassin,
Revolucija in umetnost.

by simplicity – partly a consequence of the linocut technique – with minimal detail and a focus on using only the essential expressive means to convey powerful emotions. Through this pared-down style, Seljak Čopič vividly depicts the terror and tragedy of war-time violence.

It is important to emphasise that the Partisan movement was a defining experience for the young artist, both personally and artistically. He returned to this formative period repeatedly in his later work, expressing it across a wide range of formats, from small prints to monumental murals.

In 1945, still wearing his wartime uniform, Seljak enrolled at the newly established Ljubljana Academy of Fine Arts as a member of its very first class. The period of his education, during the late 1940s, coincided with the height of socialist realism in Slovenia

and Yugoslavia – a movement perhaps best exemplified by the murals of Slavko Pengov.¹³

The phenomenon of socialist realism, with a few exceptions,¹⁴ still has not been researched sufficiently and has largely been left aside by researchers. According to the Slovenian art historian Igor Zabel, this is partly because “[s]ocialist realism was not regarded in general consciousness as an integral part of the artistic tradition, but rather as a kind of anomaly. It sharply broke with the modernist (although fairly moderate) tradition of pre-war (and partly also wartime) art – not so much in formal terms, but primarily in that it openly assumed an ideological function. As such, it was connected with the most orthodox and crude form of the communist system.”¹⁵

According to Zabel, both stylistically and iconographically, socialist realism in Slovenian art was not uniform. The artistic traditions of interwar moderate modernism – such as colour realism – and the socially critical art of the same period, alongside works created during the Second World War, were reshaped and adapted to the demands of the postwar era, resulting in a broad spectrum of realist styles. The ideological framework was similarly diverse: at one “extreme” were works that could be classified as official, party-endorsed, and engaged, often characterised by a “romantic

pathetic" style. Conversely, there were works that moved away from the customary themes of triumphant fighting and postwar reconstruction to embrace more "traditional human and artistic values," including themes of suffering, empathy, and meditation.¹⁶ Zabel's interpretation, which emphasises the heterogeneity of Slovenian socialist realism, is accurate, but one should exercise caution when assessing the stylistic and iconographic range within the production of murals. Although individual artistic styles make different hands clearly distinguishable within the non-negotiable framework of realism, it would be difficult to argue that there was significant room for ideological diversity – or for the depiction of the traditional humanistic and artistic values Zabel identifies – in early postwar murals.

One notable aspect of the art system in the early postwar years was a concerted emphasis on murals – large-scale narrative compositions intended for public consumption – which was actively promoted by the curriculum of the newly established Academy of Fine Arts. Specifically, two postgraduate specialist classes, known as *specialke*, were introduced: a monumental painting class led by Gojmir Anton Kos and a mural painting class led by Slavko Pengov. This curriculum reveals the academy's deliberate encouragement of young artists to pursue careers in mural painting, emphasising its role as a form of public art.

Although it is true that during the late 1940s and early 1950s there were numerous voices – from art critics, politicians, and artists themselves – supporting what might be called socialist realism, the newly appointed professors at the academy were by no means unanimous in their endorsement. As Marijan Tršar recalls, it was common knowledge that professors such as Maksim Sedej, Gojmir Anton Kos, and Gabrijel Stupica were familiar with and even admired the works of artists such as Cézanne, Matisse, Braque, and perhaps, although quietly, Picasso.¹⁷

Although established artists occasionally created works reflecting the new socialist reality – depicting the struggle of the working class, rebuilding efforts, factories, or portraits of political figures – such themes were not predominant in their art. Instead, they largely continued to focus on traditional genres such as still lifes, portraits, and landscapes.

As Nikola Dedić writes, there was a significant "gap" between the demands of the few art critics who called for art adhering strictly to socialist realist criteria and the actual artistic production of the time.¹⁸ This was especially true for art created in the "shelter" of artists' studios and intended for exhibitions, whereas public art – such as sculptural monuments and murals – more closely adhered to socialist realist principles. These principles

sometimes persisted in public art long after 1952 and the Third Congress of the Association of Writers of Yugoslavia, which “officially deleted socialist realism from the cultural-political vocabulary.”¹⁹ A good example of the persistence of socialist realism is the fresco *Zgodovina Slovencev* (History of the Slovenians) by Slavko Pengov, commissioned for one of the most prominent architectural-artistic projects – the new parliament building in Ljubljana – and executed as late as 1958.²⁰

This often contradictory environment shaped Seljak Čopič during his formative years as an art student. At the time, abstract art was still somewhat taboo, yet it was by no means absent from the artistic scene. These dynamics, of course, had a profound influence on the young artist.

Seljak Čopič enrolled in Gojmir Anton Kos’s monumental painting master class in 1950/1951. Kos’s best-known monumental painting project was a cycle of seven large canvas paintings for the Palace of the Drava Province (today’s Presidential Palace) in Ljubljana, completed in 1940. It was one of the rare examples of secular monumental painting in prewar Slovenia.²¹ As Tršar notes, one of the key things Seljak gained from Kos was a mastery of composition – an element crucial to monumental painting.²²

It was probably during his studies and shortly thereafter, in the early to mid-1950s, that Seljak Čopič began to travel: to Italy, where he admired historic painting, and to France, where, encouraged by the Slovenian painter Venio Pilon – who was living in Paris – he approached André Lhote in 1956.²³ This well-known French painter, writer, and teacher had run a private academy in Paris since 1925, through which hundreds of later-famous artists passed.²⁴ One of them was Seljak Čopič, and it is certain that this experience must have left a significant impression on the young artist. Because Seljak’s period of study in Paris is an important part of his biography, I sought to gather further information regarding it. Unfortunately, neither the André Lhote Archive,²⁵ nor the archive of the Venio Pilon Gallery in Ajdovščina,²⁶ nor the Seljak family archive has so far yielded any correspondence, photographs, or other documentation related to Seljak Čopič’s time in Paris.²⁷

Seljak Čopič’s early murals

There was a strong demand for mural painters in Slovenia and Yugoslavia when Seljak Čopič was completing his studies at the academy and starting his career in the early to mid-1950s. Works that could be seen by large audiences and conveyed a political narrative were actively encouraged. Commissions for public art were frequent and provided a means for

artists to support themselves financially. Established artists such as Slavko Pengov, Maksim Sedej, Riko Debenjak, and Marij Pregelj were recruited, but recent graduates from the Ljubljana academy – including Janez Vidic, Ivo Šubic, and Seljak Čopič – were soon involved as well.²⁸

Mural production was also supported by the extensive postwar building programme. Existing buildings were nationalised and repurposed for the new government's needs, thus requiring new, appropriate visual decoration. As Stane Mikuž, an art historian and one of the strongest opponents of socialist realism among Slovenian art critics, wrote in two articles published in 1949 and 1950, "monumental fresco painting can only be developed where there are certain conditions of social development. Where the collective builds big works [buildings] for the community, conditions for the development of art of monumental proportions are created."²⁹

Seljak Čopič produced monumental painting projects for a wide range of institutional settings, including restaurants, hospitals, schools, museums, factories, and government buildings. Most of his murals are located in semi-public interiors, whether in newly constructed or older buildings, while a few were placed outdoors and were fully visible to the public. In terms of technique, his early projects were mostly realised in sgraffito, whereas from 1958 onwards Seljak increasingly opted for mosaic.

The earliest known of Seljak's murals was probably the sgraffito in the building at Kotnik Street (*Kotnikova ulica*) 8 in Ljubljana [Figure 2]. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the building had been used by the Catholic Church, specifically by the Daughters of Charity (*Sestre usmiljenke*), sisters known for their charitable work as nurses. The sisters were evicted from the building, which had until then been known as the Marian Centre (*Marijin dom*). It was nationalised in 1948 and subsequently renovated and repurposed for use by the national police force, and the Police Centre was established. Both older and younger artists were called upon to decorate the building with wall paintings. At least three large murals were executed. The first two were created by Marij Pregelj³⁰ and Maksim Sedej,³¹ while the third was a sgraffito by Ivan Seljak Čopič.³² Pregelj's work featured a scene from the Second World War, whereas Sedej's focused on postwar life, depicting a group of

Figure 2. Ivan Seljak Čopič, sgraffito at the Police Centre (Dom milice), after April 1948, most likely early 1950s. Location: Kotnikova ulica 8, Ljubljana. Photo: Gregor Dražil.

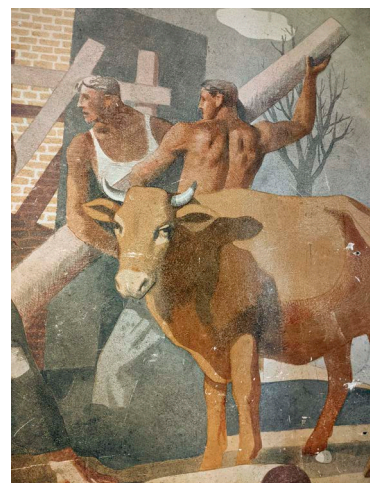
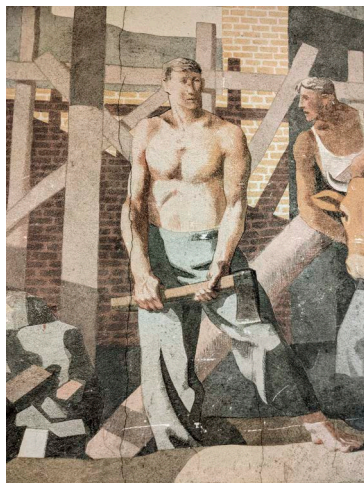
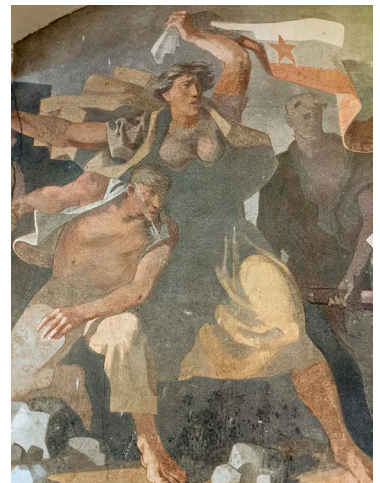
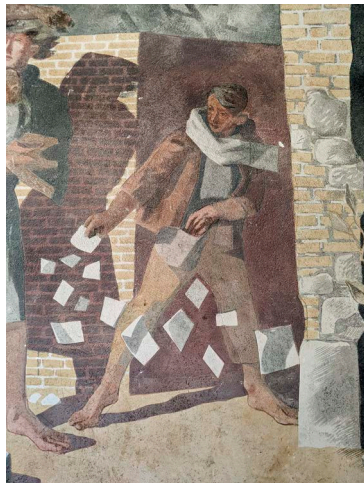
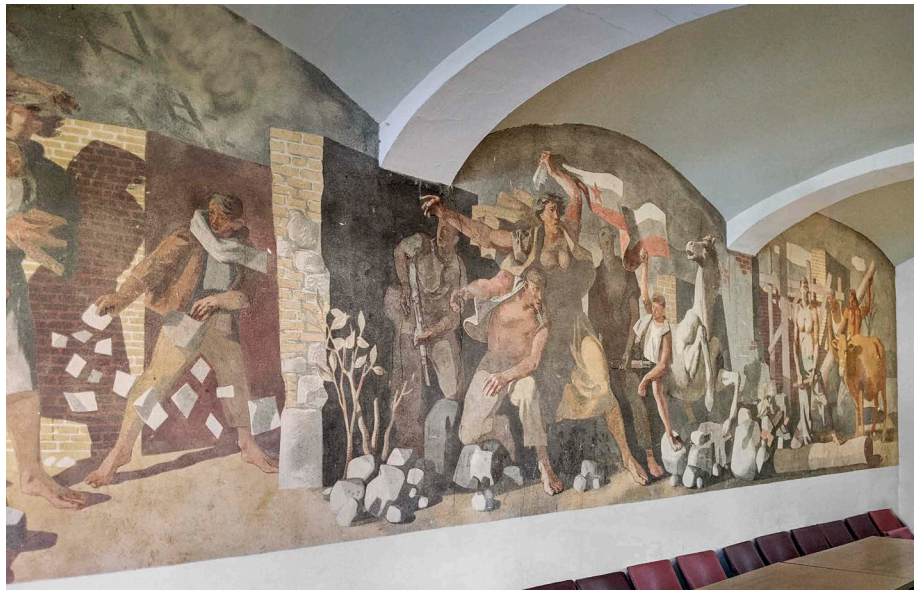


peasants and workers marching towards a larger central figure who functions as a kind of goddess of labour, emphasising the role of work in the new Yugoslav society.

Seljak Čopič's sgraffito,³³ located on the intermediate landing of a staircase in the Police Centre, depicts an armed Partisan looking over his shoulder and raising his arm, encouraging his fellow soldiers to join him in the attack against the enemy. Behind him is a female figure carrying a large flag on a pole. This is most likely one of Seljak Čopič's earliest works, created in the late 1940s or early 1950s, while he was still a student or had only recently completed his studies. The image remains fairly realist, although already somewhat stylised, with sharp, abruptly cut lines.

One of the first larger commissions Seljak Čopič received comprised a fresco and a sgraffito, executed respectively inside and in front of the building then used by the predecessor of today's Kočevje Regional Museum in the southern Slovenian town of Kočevje. As in the previous case, this was a prewar private building called the Skubec Mansion (*Skubizova vila*), which appears to have been nationalised after the Second World War. The building, which was in very poor condition, was designated for use by the newly founded Kočevje Museum Society (*Muzejsko društvo Kočevje*) – the future Kočevje Regional Museum – in 1953. It was renovated that same year, and the first exhibition in the former mansion opened on 2 October 1953, on the tenth anniversary of the Assembly of the Delegates of the Slovenian Nation (*Zbor odposlancev slovenskega naroda*) held in Kočevje in 1943.³⁴

In the same year, Seljak executed a large fresco, more than ten metres long and over two metres high, for one of the halls in the building [Figure 3]. A brick wall both separates and visually links the three sections of the mural. The left section depicts the early stages of the war, with burning buildings, a mother saving or protecting her child from the flames, and a young boy distributing propaganda leaflets [Figure 4]. Following the chronology of events, the central section illustrates the Partisan uprising or National Liberation Struggle, with soldiers armed with rifles and grenades charging forward. They are accompanied on the left by a galloping horse, while a large female figure carrying a flag – as in the Police Centre sgraffito – stands among them [Figure 5]. The right section depicts peacetime after liberation and the effort to rebuild a country devastated by the war. In the foreground stands a man carrying an axe [Figure 6], accompanied by an ox, a draught animal used for ploughing and other farm work. Behind him, two further workers erect a wooden building [Figure 7].



Figures 3–7: Ivan Seljak
Čopič, fresco in the
former Kočevje Regional
Museum building, 1953.
Location: Trg zbora
odposlancev 8, Kočevje.
Photo: Gregor Dražil.

Stylistically, the fresco is more markedly realist than the earlier sgraffito at the Police Centre, probably partly because of the different technique.³⁵ There is little stylisation, and the only noticeable “deformation” lies in Seljak Čopič’s characteristic treatment of the human body: overly muscular torsos, elongated necks, and small heads.

Although currently inaccessible to the public, the fresco is in good condition. Unfortunately, the sgraffito, which was placed on an exterior wall of the building, has not survived. The collection of the Kočevje Regional Museum, however, contains an archival photograph depicting the artist at work.³⁶ As far as can be discerned from the photograph, the sgraffito depicted a large male figure carrying a torch in one hand and the emblem of the Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation – later adapted as the coat of arms of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia – in the other.³⁷ The rest of the mural was covered with fluttering flags bearing symbols such as the Yugoslav five-pointed star and the hammer and sickle.

It can be assumed that both the fresco and sgraffito formed part of the renovation and repurposing of the building as a museum, which coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Kočevje Assembly – an important political event of the Second World War that gave the town national significance. The importance of the anniversary is further indicated by the erection and inauguration, on 3 October 1953, of *Spomenik svobode* (Monument of Freedom)³⁸ in the main square of Kočevje, only about one hundred metres away.

Towards abstraction: Seljak Čopič’s murals from 1957 onwards

Around the time of the Kočevje project, from 1953 onwards, attitudes towards Western modernism in the visual arts began to change noticeably in Slovenia and Yugoslavia more broadly. The Yugoslav authorities recognised modernism and the arts, among other things, as a means of “shaping a more acceptable image of [Yugoslavia’s] ruling social and political order in the West”.³⁹

From book illustration and printmaking to sculpture, painting, and photography, Slovenian artists began to experiment with and embrace (semi-) abstraction as a major artistic language.⁴⁰ Exhibitions of Western art – such as *Sodobna francoska umetnost* (Contemporary French Art, 1952),⁴¹ featuring works by Picasso, Miró, Matisse, and other modernists – were mounted in galleries, especially at the particularly ambitious Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana (established in 1948). In this context, the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts – a large, international, but predominantly

West-oriented exhibition established in 1955 – is particularly worth emphasising.⁴² These exhibitions strongly influenced artists eager to learn more about the prewar modernist legacy and contemporary trends. As in Seljak Čopič's case, artists began to travel – mostly to Paris at this early stage – where they could observe the latest international developments at first hand. Slowly but steadily, in the 1950s and especially the 1960s, Slovenian artists also began exhibiting abroad, again focusing on Western countries, with an especially large number of exhibitions held in Italy and West Germany.⁴³

These developments were also reflected in mural painting. Numerous projects display tendencies towards stylisation and cubism, sometimes even approaching (semi-)abstraction. A particularly important example is the group of murals created for the new parliament building in Ljubljana, where – alongside the aforementioned socialist realist fresco by Slavko Pengov – abstract or semi-abstract mosaics by Marij Pregelj,⁴⁴ Ive Šubic,⁴⁵ Jože Ciuha,⁴⁶ and Seljak Čopič were installed.

This is reflected in Seljak Čopič's murals of the 1950s, a period in which he devoted much of his time and effort to this type of artistic production. He became one of the first artists to introduce abstraction into Slovenian mural painting. Although it is not possible to cover all the projects conceived by Seljak during this period and listed in the introduction, I focus here on a few key works.

In 1957, Seljak Čopič created two sgraffiti for the former Čipka lace shop in Idrija, the artist's hometown. Both sgraffiti, originally facing each other on opposite walls, are dedicated to two local Idrija traditions: mercury mining and Idrija lace.

The first sgraffito [Figure 8], still preserved in its original location, depicts a mercury miner carrying a torch used in the mines alongside a female lace-maker, recognisable by the lace she holds in her arms and the tools needed to create it. In the background, one of the Idrija mercury mine plants is visible. The second sgraffito [Figures 9, 10], moved from its original location and now housed in the Idrija

Figure 8. Ivan Seljak Čopič, sgraffito for the Čipka lace shop in Idrija, 1957. Location: Mestni trg 17, Idrija. Photo: Ferdinand Rupnik.





Figure 9. Ivan Seljak Čopič, sgraffito for the Čipka lace shop in Idrija, 1957. Transferred to the Idrija Municipal Museum in 2020. Location: Prelovčeva ulica 9, Idrija. Photo: Bojan Tavčar. Source: Idrija Municipal Museum Photo Archive.

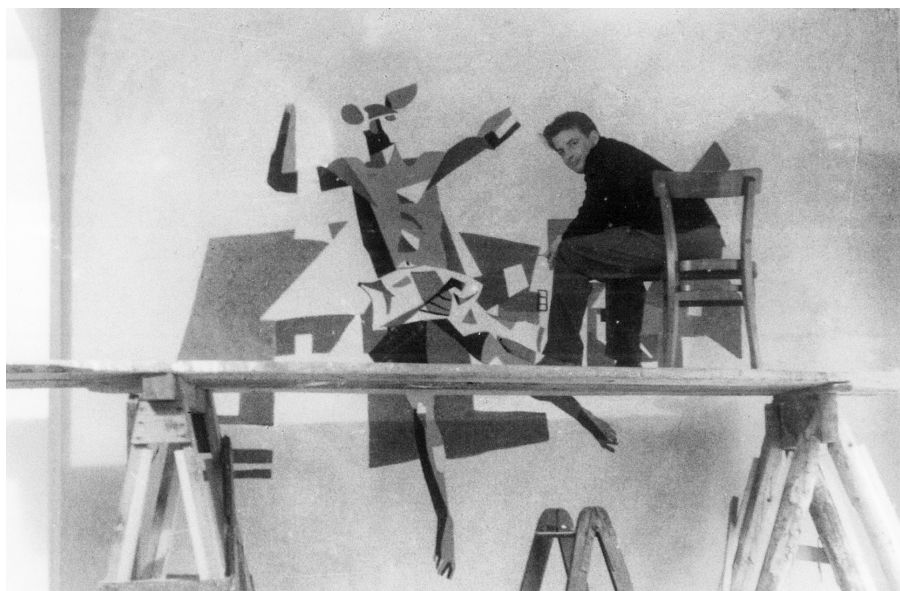


Figure 10. Ivan Seljak Čopič working on the sgraffito for the Čipka lace shop in Idrija, 1957. Source: Seljak family archive.

Figure 11.
Ivan Seljak Čopič,
mosaic in the building
of the People's Assembly
of the People's
Republic of Slovenia,
1958. Mosaicist: Alfio
Tambosso. Location:
Šubičeva ulica 4,
Ljubljana.
Photo: Andrej Furlan,
ZRC SAZU.



Municipal Museum, shows the god Mercury, the deity from whom the metal mercury (or quicksilver) gets its name and who is also depicted in the town of Idrija's coat of arms. Mercury carries a *bula* (lacemaking pillow) in one hand and Idrija lace in the other. The urban landscape of Idrija forms the background.⁴⁷

Compared with the earlier projects, the Idrija sgraffiti show a marked stylistic change. The image is no longer a coherent, uniform mass but a sum of flattened surfaces that reveal different viewpoints of the same element or figure. This shift can be partly attributed to the sgraffito technique itself. However, even when compared with the Police Centre mural [Figure 2] – also a sgraffito – there is a clear evolution in the artist's use of the technique. In the span of just a few years separating the two works, he moved away from an approach that still exhibited tendencies towards realism – note, for example, the realist modelling of the face and the volume of the torso of the charging Partisan fighter – and embraced a style characterised by stylisation and the deformation of traditional modes of representation.

A similar tendency is reflected and amplified in another project: the mosaic in the National Assembly building, mentioned a few paragraphs earlier and dated 1958.⁴⁸ Given the national importance of the building, this commission could arguably be described as the first major high point of Seljak Čopič's career.

The mosaic [Figure 11] depicts the Battle of Dražgoše, one of the most famous battles between Partisan and German forces on Slovenian territory during the Second World War, which took place from 9 to 11 January 1942

in the small village of Dražgoše in Upper Carniola. Outnumbered Partisan fighters, defending the liberated village of Dražgoše, faced a large formation of German troops and successfully held their position for three days before deciding to retreat. After the Germans entered Dražgoše, they executed forty-one villagers in reprisal for their support of the Partisans and burned the village, ultimately demolishing it. Dražgoše was rebuilt after the war, and several memorials were erected to honour the memory of these wartime events. In 1976, a large monument commemorating the Battle of Dražgoše was inaugurated.⁴⁹

Seljak Čopič's depiction of the events in Dražgoše focuses on a group of Partisan fighters at the Biček Cliff (*Bičkova skala*), a fighting position named after the platoon led by the Partisan Henrik Biček, which courageously defended the site. The Partisans, positioned amid rocky terrain, are shown fiercely holding their ground: the two soldiers in the foreground appear already to be losing the battle, while the two groups to the left and right continue firing their guns and waving flags. In the background, the village of Dražgoše is depicted in the aftermath of the battle, with Seljak Čopič emphasising the brutal reprisals by the German army: the village, from barns to people's homes, is engulfed in flames, completely devastated and devoid of any trace of life.

Stylistically, the work displays the distortion of depicted forms and the flattening of the surface discussed earlier. The distortion and fragmentation are even more pronounced here, requiring greater effort from the viewer to decipher the elements, figures, and events. This effect is further reinforced by the characteristics of the selected technique – mosaic – which inherently possesses a fragmentary structure.

Although mosaic had been used in Slovenian murals since the early post-war years, this was the first time Seljak Čopič selected the technique. Unlike sgraffito and fresco, which he had practised in previous years, the mosaic was not – at least in most cases – executed by the artist himself. The production of mosaics in postwar Slovenia was facilitated by the presence of the Italian mosaicist Alfio Tambosso and his team of assistants.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In addition to presenting the early murals of Ivan Seljak Čopič, this chapter has illuminated the complex context of the Slovenian and wider Yugoslav art scene of the late 1940s and 1950s, when Seljak received his education and embarked on his artistic career. As shown, this was a period marked by tension between the demands of socialist realism, which

retained vocal supporters throughout the period in question, and modernist artistic expression. The latter continued the tradition of moderate prewar modernism but also reflected increasingly strong contact with postwar artistic developments in the West.

Seljak Čopič's career as a muralist did not end in the 1950s. He continued to undertake projects in the first half of the 1960s and again from the late 1970s onwards, becoming one of Slovenia's most productive and sought-after mural painters. He continued to develop his style, although it rarely progressed from the geometric stylisation of motifs to complete abstraction. He emerges as an artist who rejected the uncritical adoption of Western modernism and instead carefully explored its possibilities, determining what suited him and what did not. In his own words, in a statement from the period addressed in this chapter (1961–1962):

The subordination of our art to socialist realism in the past, and to abstraction today, is misguided. These two extremes only allow us to recognise the place where we truly stand. It is neither anywhere in the East nor anywhere in the West, but right here. Our place – our standpoint – and the awareness of its value give us the true conditions for work in art, as well as for any other genuine work. Only then does our Slovenian, Yugoslav art gain the conditions to become truly universal, truly human.⁵¹

Funding

This chapter was written as part of the basic research project Art for Community. Registration and Assessment of Artworks Commissioned for Public Institutions in Slovenia, 1945–1991 (J6-50206), funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency from the state budget of the Republic of Slovenia.

Endnotes

- 1 The reportage documents the art critic Janez Dokler's visit to the Vuzenica power plant and his conversation with Zoran Didek, who, together with Seljak Čopič and Ive Šubic, was one of the creators of the artistic decoration inside the power plant. See [Janez Dokler] R. J., "Pomlad, konjske sile in pogovor o slikarstvu," *Mladina*, 28 December 1954, 7.
- 2 Taras Kermauner, "Red v enotnosti (1): ob slikarstvu Ivana Čopiča-Seljaka," *Perspektive: mesečnik za kulturo in družbena vprašanja* 4, no. 31 (1963–1964): 73–82; Taras Kermauner, "Red v enotnosti (2): ob slikarstvu Ivana Čopiča-Seljaka," *Perspektive: mesečnik za kulturo in družbena vprašanja* 4, no. 32 (1963–1964): 246–271.
- 3 *Ivan Seljak – Čopič: Pregledna razstava ob umetnikovi 60-letnici* (Idrija: Mestni muzej Idrija, 1988).
- 4 Marijan Tršar, "Pregledna razstava akademskega slikarja Ivana Seljaka-Čopiča," in *Ivan Seljak – Čopič: Pregledna razstava ob umetnikovi 60-letnici* (Idrija: Mestni muzej Idrija, 1988), 3–23.
- 5 Katarina Mohar, *Likovna oprema Ljudske skupščine Ljudske republike Slovenije: umetnostno naročilo in njegov kontekst* (PhD diss., Ljubljana: Podiplomska šola ZRC SAZU, 2015), 149–156. Mohar presents the artist and the state of research on him and then discusses Seljak Čopič's mosaic.
- 6 Simona Kostanjšek Brglez, "Slikar Ivan Seljak – Čopič in njegova dela v Idriji," *Idrijski razgledi* 66, no. 2 (2021): 45–53.
- 7 I would like to thank Tanja Stergar, a professor at Domžale High School, for her extensive help with the research on the sgraffito, which is unfortunately most likely lost. Fortunately, the drafts for it are preserved in the Seljak family's personal archive.
- 8 Also listed in the catalogue of Seljak Čopič's works are undated sgraffiti on the Academy of Music in Ljubljana, the exact location and existence of which remain to be researched.
- 9 One of the designs for the Lipica mosaic is also published and attributed to Seljak Čopič in the aforementioned source: *Perspektive: mesečnik za kulturo in družbena vprašanja* 4, no. 32 (1963–1964), n.p.
- 10 Basic biographical information on the artist can be found in Asta Znidarčič, "Seljak, Ivan (1927–1990)," in *Slovenska biografija* (Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, Znanstvenoraziskovalni center SAZU, 2013), accessed July 15, 2026, <https://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi560021/>.
- 11 Seljak Čopič's Partisan years and his artistic activities during that time are described, based on archival sources, in Vera Visočnik, "Kipar Janez Weiss-Belač in slikar Ivan Seljak-Čopič," *Borec* 20, no. 4 (1969): 376–378.
- 12 See, for example, Aleksander Bassin et al., eds., *Revolucija in umetnost. Izbor slovenske partizanske grafike in risbe*, Knjižnica NOV in POS. Likovna zbirka, 2nd ed. (Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1982).
- 13 See, for example, Katarina Mohar, "Stensko slikarstvo Slavka Pengova pred in po letu 1945," *Studia Historica Slovenica* 16, no. 3 (2016): 759–766.
- 14 On socialist realism in Slovenian art see, for example, Marjeta Mikuž, *Socialistični realizem v slovenskem slikarstvu* (Ljubljana: Muzej ljudske revolucije Slovenije, 1986); Donovan Pavlinec, "Slikarstvo socialističnega realizma na Slovenskem: kritični pogled na problem njegove časovne zamejitve," *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino*, n. s., 39 (2003): 198–225. On socialist realism in Yugoslavia in general, see Dragoslav Đorđević, "Socijalistički realizam 1945–1950," in *Jugoslovenska umetnost XX veka: 1929–1950. Nadrealizam, socijalna umetnost*, ed. Miodrag B. Protić and Marija Pušić (Belgrade: Muzej savremene umetnosti, 1969), 68–81.
- 15 Igor Zabel, "Od socrealizma do analitične abstrakcije," in *Eseji o moderni in sodobni umetnosti I* (Ljubljana: Založba /*cf., 2006), 9.
- 16 Zabel, "Od socrealizma," 12–13.
- 17 Tršar, "Pregledna razstava," 7.

- 18 Nikola Dedić, "Socijalistički realizam: Optimalne projekcije novog društva," in *Istorija umetnosti u Srbiji XX vek. Drugi tom. Realizmi i modernizmi oko hladnog rata*, ed. Miško Šuvaković (Belgrade: Orion Art, 2012), 235.
- 19 Aleš Gabrič, "Slovenska agitpropovska kulturna politika 1945–1952," *Borec* 43, nos. 7–9 (1991): 648.
- 20 Mohar, *Likovna oprema*, 93–94.
- 21 For information on the 1938 painting competition for the Palace of the Drava Province, the selection of Gojmir Anton Kos's proposal, and the subsequent execution of the commission, see Mohar, "Likovna oprema," 48–56; Asta Vrečko, "A Multiplied Mirror of Society: Slovenian Art in the 1930s," in *On the Brink: The Visual Arts in The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929–1941)*, eds. Marko Jenko and Beti Žerovc (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2019), 192.
- 22 Tršar, "Pregledna razstava," 6–7.
- 23 Marijan Tršar writes about Seljak Čopič's time at Lhote's school and its significance for the artist's development, based on Seljak Čopič's first-hand account, in Tršar, "Pregledna razstava," 8–11.
- 24 For more on the international importance and influence of the Académie Lhote, see the recently published volume by Zeynep Kuban and Simone Wille, eds., *André Lhote and His International Students* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2020).
- 25 Email correspondence with Dominique Bermann Martin, rights holder and custodian of the painter's works, 2024.
- 26 Email correspondence with Tanja Rijavec, curator of documentation at the Veno Pilon Gallery, Ajdovščina, 2024.
- 27 Andreja Seljak, the artist's daughter, personal communication with the author, 2024. She clearly recalled that her father stayed in Paris for extended periods on two separate occasions.
- 28 These works are mostly mentioned in volumes written by individual artists, whereas texts that assess a larger corpus of monumental paintings and summarise and integrate findings are rare. See, for example, Donovan Pavlinec, "Slovenski inženirji človeških duš: monumentalne stenske poslikave socialističnega realizma," *Zbornik za umetnostno zgodovino*, n. s., 44 (2008): 114–138.
- 29 According to Mikuž, in capitalist bourgeois societies, art of small proportions – such as landscapes, portraits, and miniatures executed in oil – flourished because these works were suited to individual bourgeois apartments. It was only when the bourgeoisie began to think beyond the "everyday worry of raising money" and turned their attention toward common values (such as pride in one's nation's history) that monuments and large-format paintings emerged. However, it was not until liberation and the establishment of socialism that truly monumental art – created in collaboration between architects, sculptors, and painters and intended to serve the common good – became possible. See Stane Mikuž, "Freska Rika Debenjaka," *Ljudska pravica*, 14 August 1949, 4; Stane Mikuž, "Freske Slavka Pengova v poslopju Centralnega komiteja KP Jugoslavije," *Delavska enotnost*, 1 January 1950, 12.
- 30 The unpreserved fresco is discussed, for example, in Katarina Mohar, "Big Themes, Big Paintings: Marij Pregelj's Mural Painting," in *Marij Pregelj: Retrospektiva*, ed. Martina Vovk (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2017), 420–421.
- 31 For media response to the fairly recent discovery of the fresco by Maksim Sedej at Kotnik Street 8, see, for example, Vojko Urbančič, "Socrealistična podoba med sestrami usmiljenkami in tovariši miličniki," *Delo*, 2 April 2019, <https://www.delo.si/kultura/vizualna-umetnost/socrealisticka-podoba-med-sestrami-usmiljenkami-in-tovarisimi-milicniki>.
- 32 A brief presentation of all three murals was among the subjects of the small panel exhibition *Kulturna dediščina Kotnikove 8* (The Cultural Heritage of Kotnik Street 8), which opened at the site in 2019. Produced in collaboration between the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC), the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia (ZVKDS), and the Police Museum of Slovenia, the exhibition showcased the history of the building before and after 1948, as well as its socialist-realist decoration. See "Prvi obisko-

valci razstav Muzeja slovenske policije na Kotnikovi 8," *Policija*, 14 December 2019, accessed July 15, 2026, <https://www.policija.si/medijsko-sredisce/porocila-za-javnost/porocila-za-javnost-gpue/102087-prvi-obiskovalci-razstav-muzeja-slovenske-policije-na-kotnikovi-8>.

- 33 The sgraffito is not signed but can be attributed to Seljak Čopič based on the list of works published in the aforementioned 1988 catalogue.
- 34 Natalija Mihelčič, *Kultura Kočevske v času socializma* (PhD diss., Nova Gorica: Univerza v Novi Gorici, Fakulteta za podiplomski študij, 2013), 282.
- 35 Sgraffito is produced by scratching through one or more layers of differently coloured plaster to reveal the layer beneath. Its graphic character often favours simplified and sharply delineated forms.
- 36 I would like to thank Vesna Jerbič Perko, Director of the Kočevje Regional Museum, for generously sharing the photograph.
- 37 The coat of arms of the future Socialist Republic of Slovenia was gradually formed on the basis of the emblem of the Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation, which developed artistically during the Second World War from 1941 onwards. See Janez Kos, "Grb Socialistične republike Slovenije," *Arhivi: glasilo Arhivskega društva in arhivov Slovenije* 6, nos. 1–2 (1983): 7–14.
- 38 The project was conceptualized by the artist Zoran Didek; the central sculpture is the work of Božidar Pengov, and the side figures were created by Lojze Lavrič, Marjan Keršič, and Stane Keržič.
- 39 Ješa Denegri, "Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene, 1950–1970," in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, ed. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2003), 175. See also Ljiljana Kolečnik, "Konfliktne vizije moderniteta i poslijeratna moderna umjetnost," in *Socijalizam i modernost: Umjetnost, kultura, politika 1950.–1974.*, ed. Ljiljana Kolečnik (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti and Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2012), 130; Miško Šuvaković, "Kulturalna politika od socijalističkog realizma do socijalističkog modernizma," in *Istorija umetnosti u Srbiji – XX vek: II: Realizmi i modernizmi oko hladnog rata*, ed. Miško Šuvaković (Belgrade: Orion Art, 2012), 369.
- 40 The Slovenian art historian Špelca Čopič provides insight into the artistic, institutional, exhibition, educational, and art-critical characteristics of the postwar decade (1945–1955): Jelisava-Špelca Čopič, "Povojno desetletje," *Mars, časopis Moderne galerije Ljubljana* 3, nos. 2–3 (Autumn 1991): 48–52.
- 41 "Sodobna francoska umetnost," Raz_Ume Database, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, accessed July 15, 2026, <https://razume.mg-lj.si/razstava.php?lang=en&id=101952>.
- 42 Seljak Čopič was one of the artists who exhibited at the second Ljubljana Biennale in 1957. For more on the history of the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts, see, for example, the recently published reader by Nevenka Šivavec and Gregor Dražil, eds., *70 Years of the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts: A Reader* (Ljubljana: MGLC, 2025).
- 43 See Gregor Dražil, "The Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts and Exhibiting Slovenian Artists in the West: The Cases of West Germany and Italy," in *Desires and Contradictions: Exhibiting Art and Architecture in Slovenia 1947–1979*, ed. Beti Žerovc, Miha Valant, and Vladimir Vidmar (Ljubljana: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory and Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts, 2026), 203–214.
- 44 "Marij Pregelj: mozaik v Državnem zboru, Ljubljana," Umetnost za skupnost: Evidenca umetnin 1945–1991, ZRC SAZU, accessed July 15, 2026, <https://umetnostzaskupnost.si/umetnisko-delo/mozaik-v-drzavnem-zboru-ljubljana-2/>.
- 45 "Ive Šubic: mozaik v Državnem zboru, Ljubljana," Umetnost za skupnost: Evidenca umetnin 1945–1991, ZRC SAZU, accessed July 15, 2026, <https://umetnostzaskupnost.si/umetnisko-delo/mozaik-v-drzavnem-zboru-ljubljana-4/>.
- 46 "Jože Ciuha: mozaik v Državnem zboru, Ljubljana," Umetnost za skupnost: Evidenca umetnin 1945–1991,

ZRC SAZU, accessed July 15, 2026, <https://umetnostzaskupnost.si/umetnisko-delo/mozaik-v-drzavnem-zboru-ljubljana/>.

- 47 For information on the sgraffiti and the relocation of one of them to the Idrija Municipal Museum, see Simona Kostanjšek Brglez, "Uspešno snet sgraffito Ivana Seljaka – Čopiča v Idriji," *Umetnostna kronika*, no. 68 (2020): 54–58.
- 48 The course of the mosaic commission, its iconographic and formalist interpretation, and its placement within the artist's opus are provided in detail in Mohar, *Likovna oprema*, 149–156.
- 49 Architect: Boris Kobe; sculptor: Stojan Batič; mosaic artist: Ive Šubic.
- 50 Tambosso, born in 1914 in Spilimbergo, came to Yugoslavia in 1949, according to his own account, and established a workshop with Slovenian assistants. An illustrated report on a visit to Tambosso's workshop was published in 1958 in the Slovenian magazine *Tovariš*: Asta Znidarčič, "Kamenček pri kamenčku," *Tovariš*, 26 October 1958, 1138–1139. Owing to the limited space available here, it is not possible to present Tambosso's life in detail or the role he played in shaping Slovenian postwar public art. His life and artistic contributions will be the subject of a forthcoming text.
- 51 Ivan Seljak Čopič, "Ivan Seljak – Čopič o svojem delu," *Mlada pota* 10 (1961–1962): 34.

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Stenske poslikave Ivana Seljaka Čopiča iz petdesetih in zgodnjih šestdesetih let 20. stoletja: med realizmom in abstrakcijo

Povzetek

Ivan Seljak Čopič (1927–1990) je bil eden redkih slovenskih umetnikov, ki so se v obdobju po drugi svetovni vojni intenzivno posvečali stenskem slikarstvu. V besedilu so obravnavana njegova stenska dela iz petdesetih in zgodnjih šestdesetih let, pri čemer je posebna pozornost namenjena prehodu od realizma, značilnega za njegova zgodnja dela, k vse izrazitejši stilizaciji in abstrahiranju v drugi polovici petdesetih let. Ob predstavitvi dela Seljaka Čopiča skušamo v poglavju omenjene slogovne premene umestiti v širši kontekst razgibanega umetnostnega dogajanja obravnavanega časa v Sloveniji.

Seljak Čopič se je leta 1945 vpisal v prvo generacijo študentov novoustanovljene Akademije upodablajočih umetnosti v Ljubljani in se pozneje izpopolnjeval v specialki za monumentalno slikarstvo pri profesorju Gojmirju Antonu Kosu. Njegova formativna leta so tako sovpadala s kratkim obdobjem socialističnega realizma v slovenski umetnosti, ki mu v besedilu posledično posvetimo več pozornosti.

Socialistični realizem, do dandanes razmeroma slabo umetnostnozgodovinsko raziskan pojav v slovenski umetnosti, ni bil slogovno enoten: umetniške tradicije medvojnega zmernega modernizma, med drugim barvnega realizma, družbenokritična umetnost istega obdobja ter umetnost, nastala med drugo svetovno vojno, so bile po letu 1945 preoblikovane in prilagojene zahtevam novega časa. V praksi je to pomenilo, da se je socialistični realizem v slovenski umetnosti pokazal v širokem razponu realističnih izrazov.

Druga značilnost socialističnega realizma v Sloveniji je, da kljub podpori, ki je bil deležen med kritiki, politiki in umetniki konec štiridesetih in v začetku petdesetih let, ne moremo trditi, da je bila ta usmeritev na slovenski likovni sceni enotno sprejeta. Dvoumna je bila na primer že situacija na osrednji izobraževalni ustanovi na področju likovne umetnosti, Akademiji upodablajočih umetnosti. Vemo namreč, da so nekateri profesorji dobro poznali in cenili zahodni modernizem. Tudi v ikonografskem smislu obdobje prvih povojnih let v slovenski likovni umetnosti ni bilo zaznamovano z vsesplošno in ortodoksno pripadnostjo načelom socialističnega realizma. Uveljavljeni slovenski umetniki so se sicer občasno lotevali motivov nove

socialistične stvarnosti, vendar so se – zlasti v ateljejski umetnosti – večinoma še naprej posvečali tradicionalnim žanrom, kot so krajina, portret in tihožitje.

V tem mestoma protislovnem in neenotnem umetniškem ozračju se je oblikovala umetniška osebnost Ivana Seljaka Čopiča, ki je kmalu po zaključku študija v začetku petdesetih let začel dobivati prva naročila za stenske poslikave. Stensko slikarstvo je bilo zaradi javne dostopnosti in možnosti posredovanja političnih vsebin širšim množicam v prvih povojnih letih posebej spodbujano, naročila za javne umetnine pa so bila razmeroma pogosta in za umetnike tudi pomemben vir zaslužka.

Med zgodnja dela Ivana Seljaka Čopiča sodijo sgraffito v nekdanjem Domu milice na Kotnikovi ulici 8 v Ljubljani ter poslikavi v nekdanji stavbi Pokrajinskega muzeja v Kočevju in pred njo. Ti dve poslikavi sta nastali leta 1953, ko je Seljak Čopič za na novo muzejski dejavnosti namenjeno vilo v Kočevju izdelal danes neohranjeni zunanji sgraffito in monumentalno fresko. Ta v treh vsebinsko povezanih delih pripoveduje zgodbo od vojnega trpljenja prek partizanskega boja do osvoboditve in povojne obnove. Kočevski projekt dobro ponazarja umetnikovo zgodnjo fazo, v kateri sta realistični izraz in politična ikonografija tesno povezana z novo funkcijo javnih stavb in širšimi potrebami povojne socialistične družbe po njihovi ustrezni likovni opreми.

Od sredine petdesetih let se je jugoslovanski kulturni prostor vse bolj odpiral zahodnemu modernizmu. Razstave zahodne umetnosti in potovanja umetnikov v tujino ter njihovo vse intenzivnejše mednarodno razstavljanje so prispevali k uveljavljanju stilizacije in abstrahiranja v slovenski umetnosti. Kot številne druge umetnike in kulturne delavce tega časa, ki so vse pogostejše potovali na Zahod, je tudi Seljaka Čopiča močno zaznamovala izkušnja Pariza, kjer se je leta 1956 dodatno izobraževal pri francoskem kubistu Andréju Lhotu.

V zadnjem delu poglavja obravnavamo dva projekta, ki odražata prodiranje modernističnih tendenc v stensko slikarstvo Ivana Seljaka Čopiča v drugi polovici petdesetih let. Sgraffita za trgovino Čipka v Idriji iz leta 1957 tako že kažeta opuščanje nekaj let poprej še prisotnega realizma ter uporabo postopkov stilizacije in deformacije dotlej prevladujočega realističnega načina upodabljanja. Iste težnje je zaznati v mozaiku, posvečenem dražgoški bitki, ki je mesto leta 1958 dobil v stavbi Ljudske skupščine v Ljubljani. Vojni motiv umetnik upodablja izrazito stilizirano, fragmentirano in ploskovito, pri čemer k razgradnji podobe dodatno prispeva sama tehnika mozaika, h kateri se je umetnik tudi v nadaljnjih desetletjih večkrat vračal.

A substantial body of postwar art created for institutional environments remains hidden in plain sight: in schools, hospitals, municipal offices, factories, hotels, shops, and other spaces of everyday life. Some works remain intact, others survive in altered interiors or as partial material remains, and still others are known only through scattered archival records, photographs, and uncertain

memories. Many have been covered, relocated, destroyed or forgotten, even though they formed an important part of postwar public space and visual culture.

This volume contributes to the transnational study of art

commissioned for public institutions, a field that remains unevenly researched across national contexts. The chapters show how institutions used art to shape their environments and how later changes in use or ownership affected the works' meanings and prospects for preservation.

