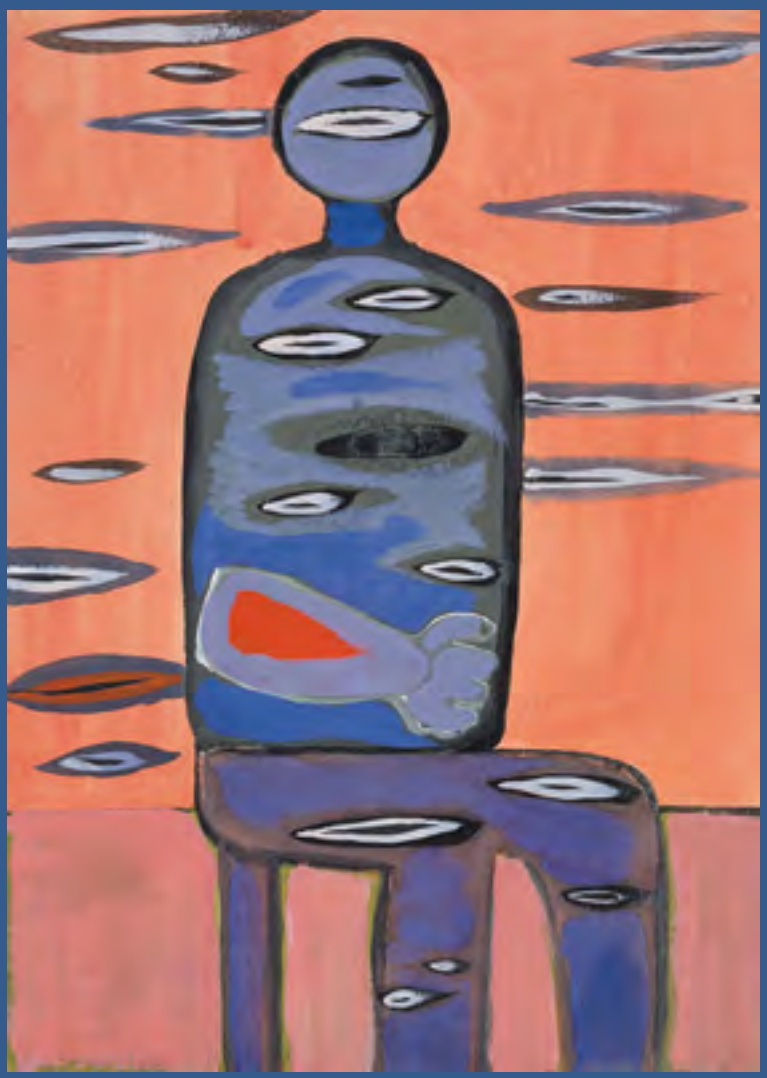
WAITING ROOM

Andrzej Wróblewski



(Torn Man II)
undated; gouache, paper; 42 × 29.6 cm; private collection

15.10.2020–10.01.2021
MODERNA GALERIJA
Cankarjeva 15, Ljubljana

However, the waiting room was not only an Eastern one. In fact, it is not only an Eastern one today. From this vantage point, the first exhibition of Andrzej Wróblewski's work in Slovenia, with the title *Waiting Room*, and closely connected to his travels across the former Yugoslavia, bodes well for Moderna galerija's history of "conceptualizing" both the East, and the West. The pinnacle of our efforts was most certainly establishing Moderna galerija's pioneering international collection of Eastern European art, Arteast 2000+. In other words, instead of waiting for something to happen in times of transition, we simply had to do it ourselves, artists included; likewise in terms of the history of Eastern European art. We had to say enough and break with the waiting room mentality, which is, as we can clearly see, more pertinent than ever in these end times, but with the very clear difference that is today's absence of a consoling announcement of the Messiah's arrival as Heiner Müller would perhaps have put it. However, "the systemic announcement in our capitalist, frenetic waiting room is apocalyptic, fed by the ideology of survival, ultimately the survival of the status quo."[1] We had and will have to construct what was and is worth fighting for ourselves, also in terms of the former and

1 Heiner Müller and Jan Hoet, "Insights into the Process of Production: A Conversation," Documenta IX, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz, 1992), pp. 96–97.

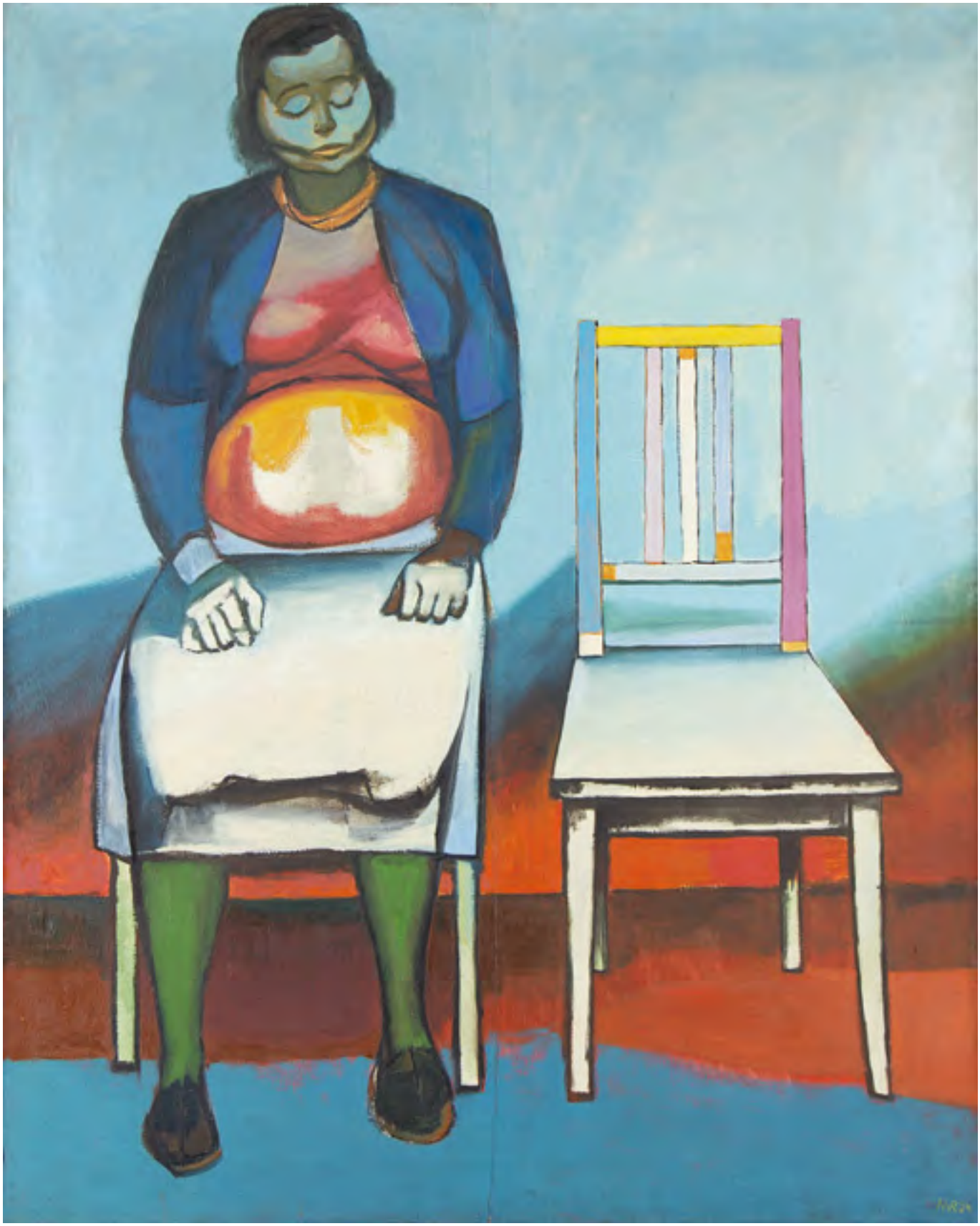
present East, with an international perspective and without any expectation of someone else's recognition. We were and are to be the subjects of our own (re)presentation.

Zdenka Badovinac

Andrzej Wróblewski. Waiting Room is the first international exhibition of Wróblewski's work that is dedicated solely to his and Barbara Majewska's travels across Yugoslavia during the autumn of 1956. It showcases 121 works (paintings, gouaches, inks, monotypes, drawings) from the period between 1954 and 1957, emphasizing the theme of the waiting room as a special characteristic of the East, evident as *pars pro toto* in the artist's work. At the time of their visit, Yugoslavia was already undergoing general modernization after the fateful year 1948. This was also the time of the Khrushchev Thaw, following Stalin's death in 1953, and just after the Polish October of 1956.

This "waiting-room mentality," as Heiner Müller described it, can be seen as typical of the onetime socialist Central and Eastern Europe experience. Even if everyday life in the former socialist Yugoslavia differed considerably from the social and artistic circumstances in Poland and other countries behind the Iron Curtain at the time, the waiting-room point of view enables us to establish a connection that touches upon ethical, moral and bodily existence, but also affective labor and the work of mourning. In this respect, the exhibition places the topos of waiting in Wróblewski's work (including the draft of a screenplay for a short film called *Waiting Room*) in dialogue with a selection of waiting rooms from a 1950s series by the Slovene painter Marjan Dovjak (1928–1971).

ROOM 1 – MOTHERS



WAITING ROOM II, (CHAIRING I)

1956; oil, canvas; 155 × 125 cm; National Museum, Kraków

The intimacy of Wróblewski's female figures and scenes from his Kraków apartment—the studio of this declared "anti-bourgeois" and non-conformist artist, sketched daintily in ink, provide a counterbalance to the monumental canvases *Mothers, Anti-Fascists* and *Mother and Daughter, Laundry*.

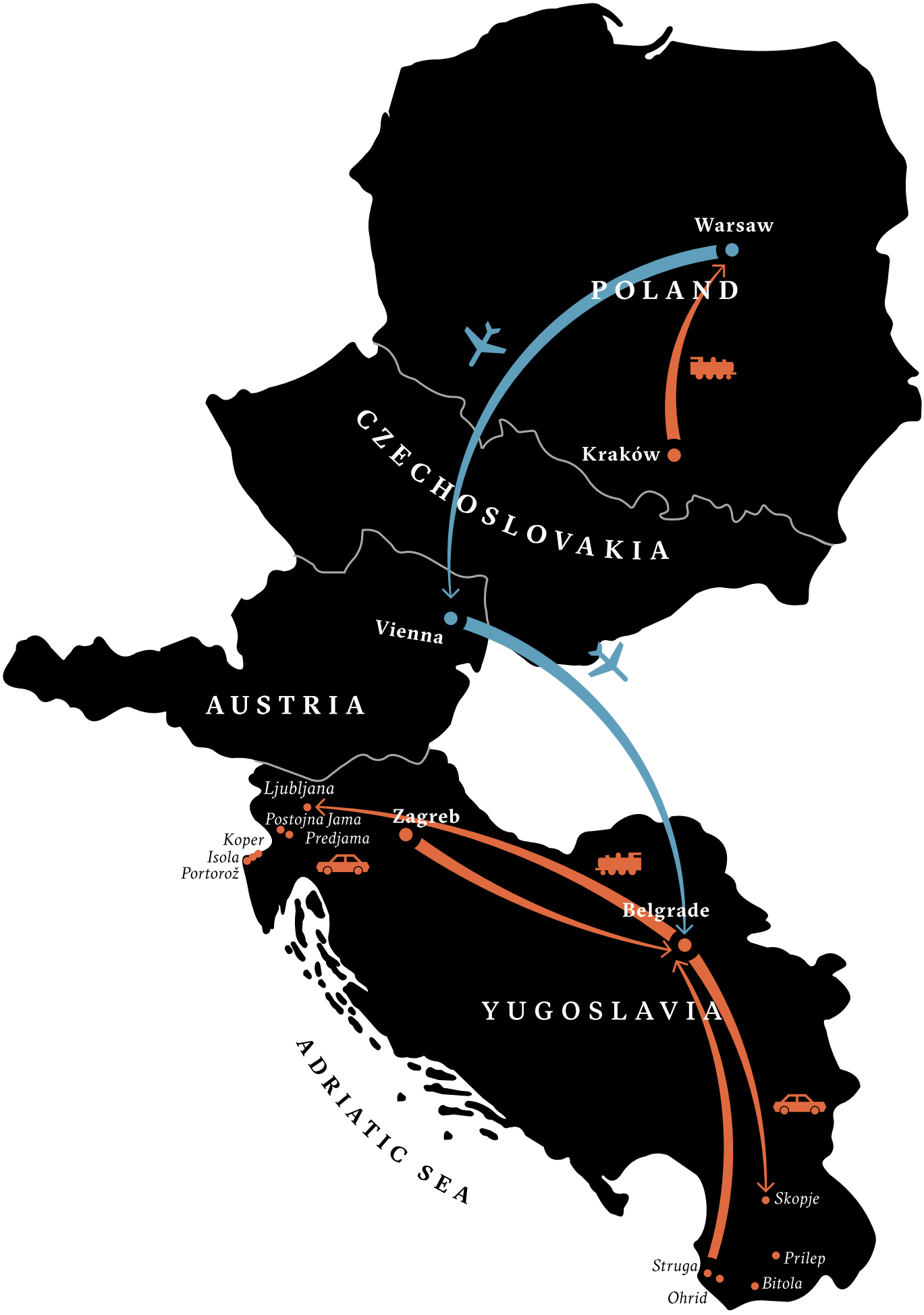
Mothers, Anti-Fascists, finished on June 3, 1955, was the first painting submitted to the *Polish Exhibition of Young Art,* "Against War, Against Fascism," at the Warsaw Arsenał in the summer of 1955, in which the artist abandons the language of Socialist Realism. The organizers wanted to show radical, socially engaged art, liberated from didactics, academic realism and post-imperialism's formal prescriptions. Wróblewski, who submitted "a poor painting" as one art critic wrote, was perhaps too restrained to be appreciated among the raging artistic sensibilities setting the tone of the Arsenał exhibition. However, Wróblewski's canvas, with its classical composition, iconographically reminiscent of St. Anna, together with domestic themes, definitely stood out alongside representations of the ghetto and other paintings whose titles and motifs evoked memories of war. His was an uncompromising representation of his own experiences and the particular role he had assigned to shapes and colors that conveyed man's socio-moral condition.

Waiting Room II, (Chairing I) and *Mother and Daughter, Laundry*, both presented in the Warsaw "Po Prostu" Salon in autumn 1956, introduce figures to whom Wróblewski will devote his future work: people waiting or pinned to chairs. Here, the waiting room is much more than a metaphor for the social conditions of the Thaw period. It exposes the inertia of the material surroundings and the sterility of a certain mental economy.

'The painting has a very apt title, evoking associations with a crucifixion. Although it does not impress with magnificent or unexpected artistic values and in some parts reveals formal defects, it still manages to affect the viewer. What is its impact based upon? Are factors other than visual art involved? No. *[Chairing]* forces one to reflect, expresses protest, and defends the ill-treated man—through artistic means alone. The artistic sense of the image is contained within its generalization. This tired pregnant woman, waiting among indifference, rudeness, and ignorance, is not some specific woman, recreated by the painter in a naturalistic way. Wróblewski painted her in such a generic manner so that she became a universal phenomenon, arousing compassion and anxiety.'

Ignacy Witz, "Ukrzesłowienie," *Żołnierz Polski*, no. 1 (1957), p. 16.

ROOM 2 – DELEGATES


Warsaw
POLAND
Kraków
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
Vienna
AUSTRIA
Ljubljana
Postojna Jama
Predjama
Koper
Isola
Portorož
Zagreb
Belgrade
YUGOSLAVIA
ADRIATIC SEA
Skopje
Prilep
Struga
Bitola
Ohrid

Between October 30 and November 21, 1956, Andrzej Wróblewski and the art critic Barbara Majewska visited Belgrade, Ljubljana, Skopje, Zagreb, and smaller towns such as Portorož, Piran, Koper, the Postojna Cave, Predjama Castle, and Ohrid. This gave them the opportunity to become acquainted with the art and museum scene in Yugoslavia as well as its achievements in architecture.

In Ljubljana they met the artists Stojan Batič, Boris Kalin, Riko Debenjak, Božidar Jakac, and the future director of Moderna galerija Zoran Kržišnik. In Belgrade, the artists Lazar Vujaklija, Aleksandar Luković Lukijan, Boris Atanasijević, Milo Milunović, Stojan Ćelić, and the literary figure Miodrag Bulatović. In Zagreb, there were meetings with Ivan Meštrović, Ivo Dulčić, and Oton Gliha.

Barbara Majewska and Riko Debenjak (1908–87) in front of the sixteenth-century castle in Predjama, Slovenia

Božena Plevnik (1933–99) later director of the City Gallery
in Ljubljana, Slovenia and Andrzej Wróblewski

Andrzej Wróblewski:

"We came to acquaint ourselves with artistic life in Yugoslavia. We have been hearing about your painting for several years, but this will be our first real contact with your art and artists. We have to admit that we came here also to learn something new. You've surpassed us, that's for sure, because you luckily discarded so-called Socialist Realism, imposed art, many years ago. Personally, I'm interested in the attitude of modern painters toward folklore. I've heard that many of them have achieved great results. What can we say about ourselves? The fight against Socialist Realism started a long time ago. The resistance was particularly noticeable around 1950. External pressures, I mean especially the worst of them, which came from the Soviet Union, in fact, could never find followers in our artistic practice. Last year was a milestone in the life of Polish visual arts. The exhibition in the Arsenał showed real paintings and gathered real painters ..."

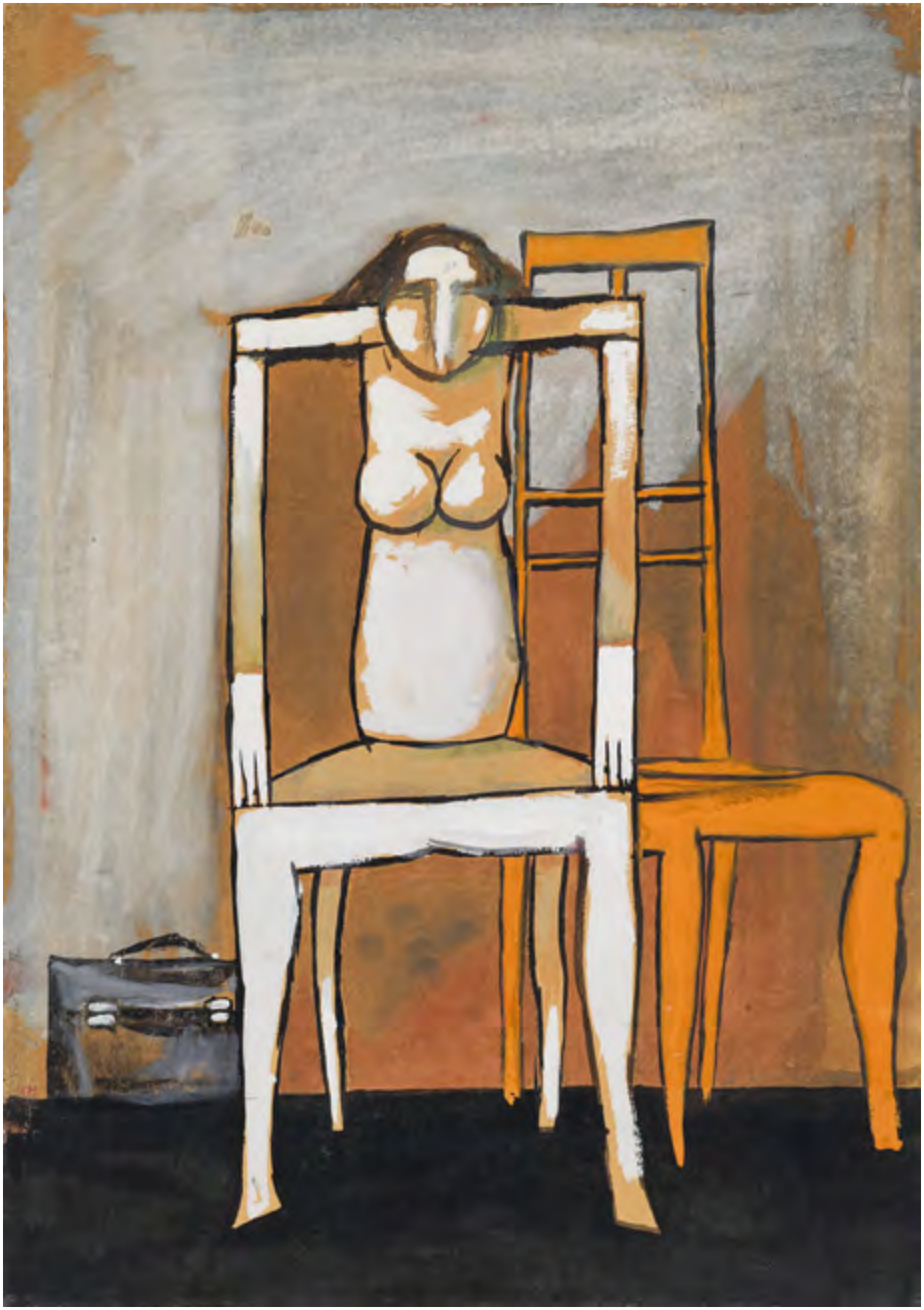
From: "A Moment with ... Andrzej Wróblewski and Barbara Majewska,"
Nedeljne informativne novine (NIN), no. 305 (November 4, 1956), p. 6.

Barbara Majewska:

"I want to say one word: 'freedom.' There has been enough anxiety and fear. Now, everything will proceed normally, almost by itself. In keeping with that, we have started a real war against conservatism, outdated forms, and all that was imposed on us from above. We are ready to defend our truth, the truth that is ours alone. There is no possibility of a return to the old order. It will be as we want it to be! Our goals are profoundly humanistic, evolving, progressive. We want to get closer to life, to the people. Enough of being locked up in an atelier! ... Anyway, our painters live quite impoverished lives, especially those who didn't want to accept the current situation, while the others, managed by the regime, have done very well. The rest were forced to take other actions that would enable them to survive. However, we believe that this will change soon. It has to."

From: "A Moment with ... Andrzej Wróblewski and Barbara Majewska," *Nedeljne informativne novine (NIN)*, no. 305 (November 4, 1956), p. 6.

ROOM 3 – CHAIRED MAN

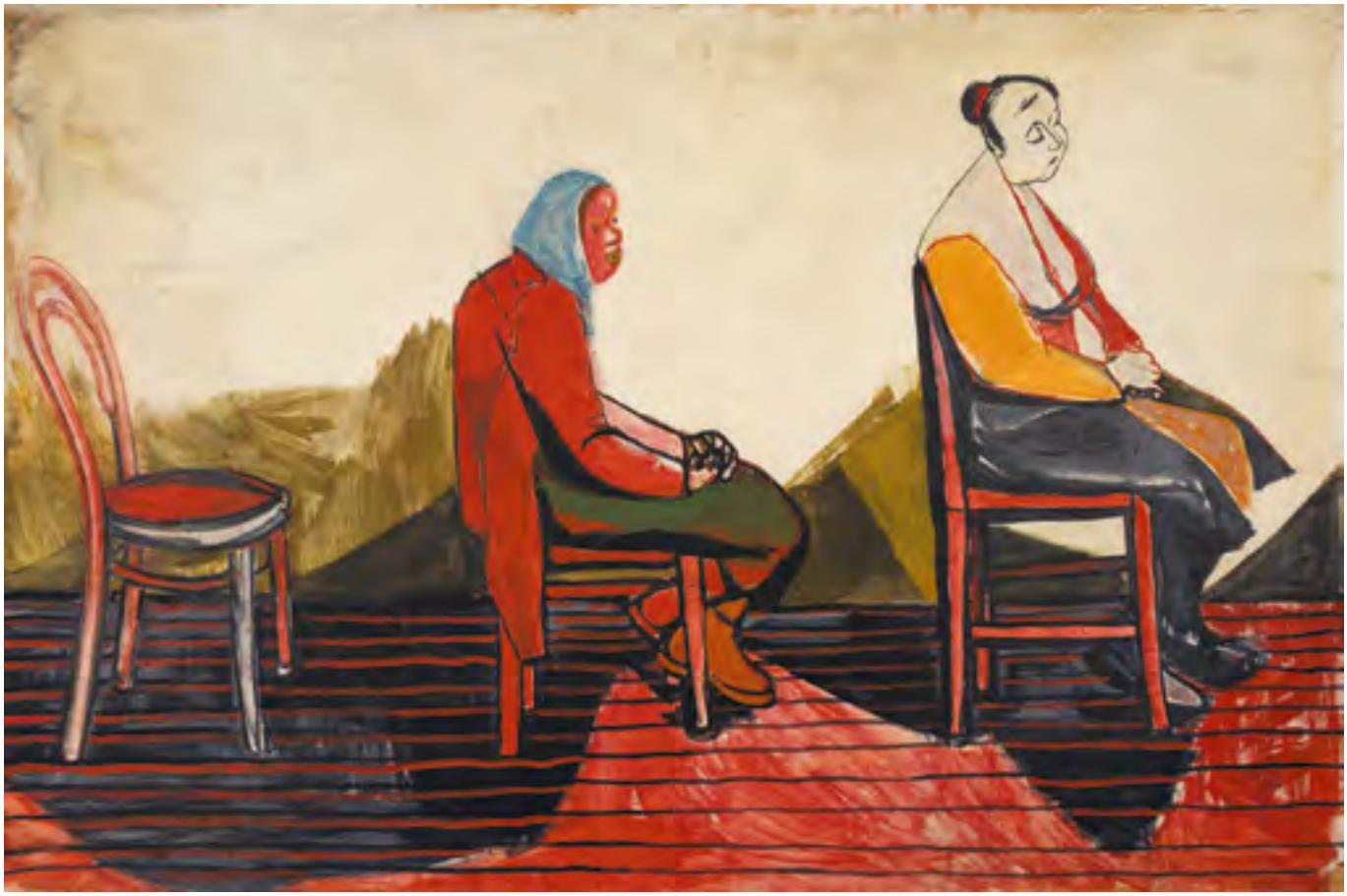


(CHAIRED WOMAN II)
undated; gouache, paper; 41.6 × 29.3 cm; private collection

We understand the waiting room as daybreak—the moment right before the dawn, the harbinger of upcoming changes or transformations. The figure leading us through the rooms of frozen silhouettes and frozen faces is the chaired man. He is more a specter than a protagonist, waiting hopelessly, pensive, in a state of timelessness, tormented by the constraints and pathologies of the social system. So are the heroes of this section—as if they froze for a moment, concentrating, waiting for something to happen, standing next to each other in a world suspended in time, on the brink of an undefined future. Degraded to the shape of a chair ... anonymous. They do not talk to each other; they don't look at each other. Even when Wróblewski portrays a young model—Aleksandra Peterschein—the canvas is permeated with an atmosphere of deaf timelessness, in which he achieves absolute mastery. The title *Waiting Room*—the stage of chairings and expectations—foreshadows that which is yet to come.

"A similar, mesmerizing inventory of human physiognomy—an inventory of nameless people, people without qualities—can often be found in Andrzej Wróblewski's work. Standing against a wall in anticipation of being shot, seated on benches in a train station's waiting room, residents of towns and village frozen still at the news of Stalin's death—their acts of waiting are connected by something that is essential to the experience of togetherness. At some points in history, such seemingly unproductive time—time spent everyday at a tram stop, in a queue at the shops, commonly known as "a line," or to receive certain rationed goods—is transformed into a spell of the dignity of waiting and acceptance of history unraveling "at its own pace." These moments become a meaningful, documenting time."

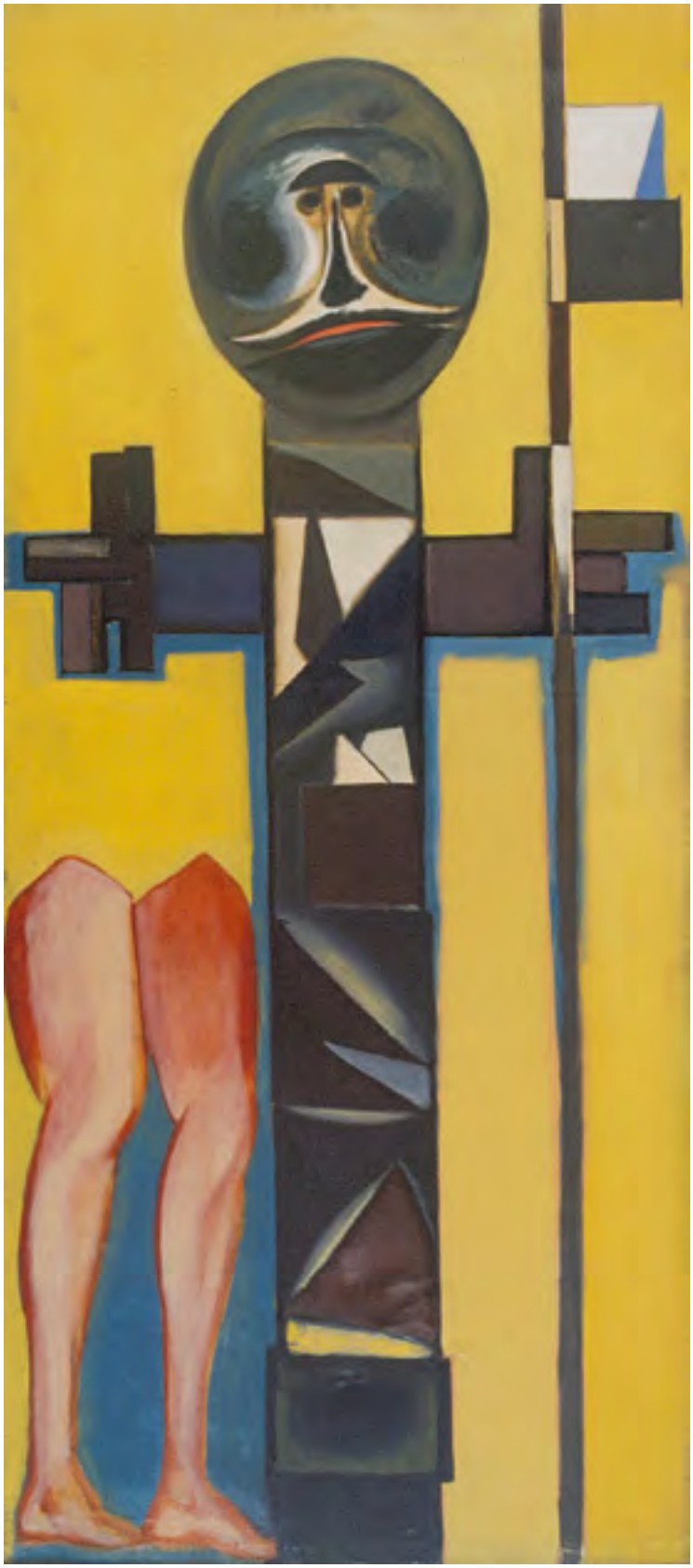
From: Magdalena Ziółkowska, "*Everything That Passed Will Play Out Anew.* The Historical and Artistic Circumstances of Andrzej Wróblewski's Trip to Yugoslavia in the Autumn of 1956" in *Andrzej Wróblewski. Waitign Room* ed. Magdalena Ziółkowska, Wojciech Grzybała (Warsaw–Ostfieldern: Andrzej Wroblewski Foundation, Hatje Cantz, 2020), p. 52.



THE QUEUE CONTINUES

1956; gouache, watercolor, paper; 99.8 × 150.6 cm; private collection

ROOM 4 – WOMANIZER

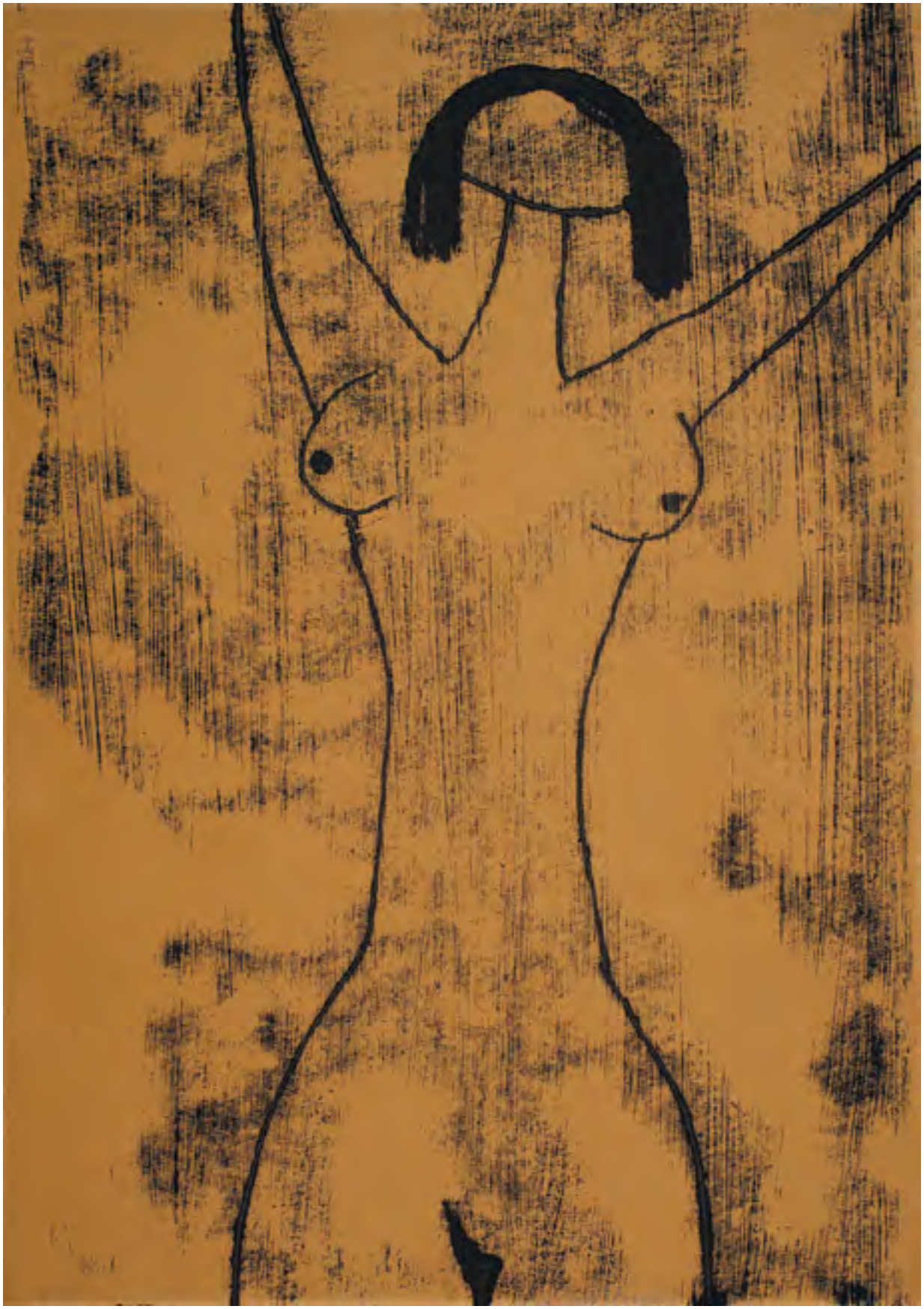


TOMBSTONE, (TOMBSTONE OF A WOMANIZER)
1956; oil, canvas; 176 × 77 cm; District Museum, Toruń

Works created by Andrzej Wróblewski following his return from Yugoslavia and in the last four months of his life are stamped with a striking atmosphere of anticipation—or perhaps, a terrifying sense of demise. Some of them focus on the petrification or objectification of the human body—skulls, dismembered, decapitated, and maimed bodies, others on themes of tombstones and funerals. Their complete form is the monumental canvas *Tombstone, (Tombstone of a Womanizer),* whose protagonist, the Womanizer, is full of contradictions. Dead, and yet he is smiling, constantly wearing a scornful expression. His tombstone is adorned with votive offerings: the slender legs of a woman. Their erotic shape adds piquancy to the typical silhouette of the Bogomil *stećak*, the marker of the Bosnian Christian heretical sect.

The figure of the Womanizer also constitutes a roadmap to the artist's iconographic will, i.e., a collection of eighty-five monotypes, probably created at the turn of 1956–57. It is in this technique that Wróblewski evokes themes present in his early work—fish, horses, violins, vehicles, and the chauffeur; but one subject firmly occupying the artist's attention is the female body, transformed in countless ways and depicted with numerous attributes. The woman—stretched out on a cross, transformed into a rose, objectified into a chair, covered with a veil, or wearing lingerie—is the bearer of sexual power.

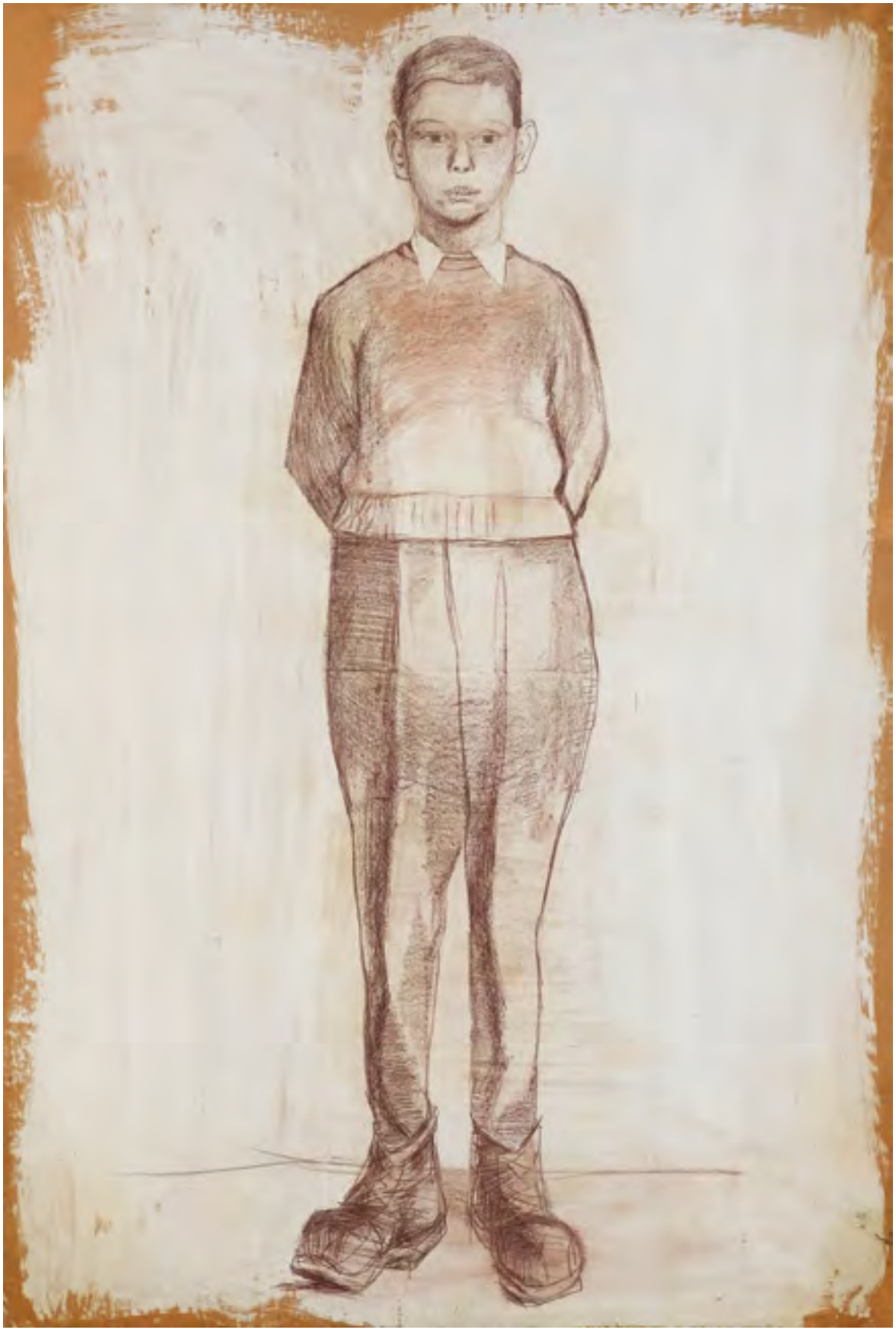
The selection of works by then Yugoslav artists, together with the replica of a *stećak*, reveal one of Wróblewski's main interests during his visit: the inclusion of folklore, folk or naïve art, or ancient history, in Yugoslav modernism, which wa progressively more abstract and a fpcus for highly interesting discussions between Yugoslav artists after 1948, when Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union parted ways. The question of the relationship between the national, native, and the international, can ultimately be summed up by the pressing issue of how to avoid nationalism, not only in art. One of the more obvious problems opened up by this issue is disclosed to us by Petar Lubarda exoticizing the title of his work, which is visually similar to his famous painting *Guslar*, namely, *Oriental Rhapsody (Symphony of the Orient)* from 1953.



(GIRL NUDE)

undated; monotype, paper; 41.9 × 29.3 cm; private collection

ROOM 5 – BOY

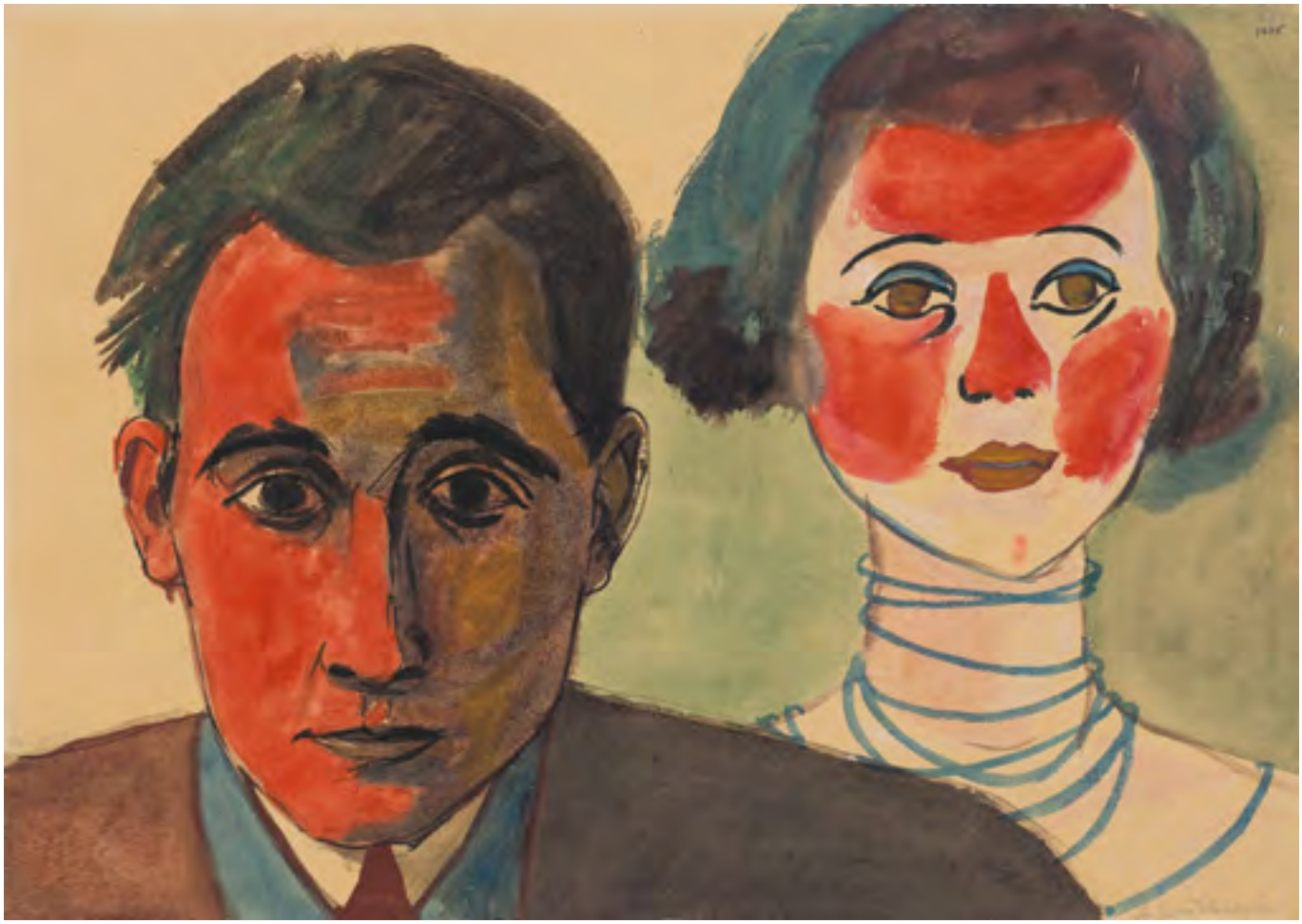


[BOY AGAINST A WHITE BACKGROUND]
undated [1955/56]; mixed technique, paper; 150.7 × 101.3 cm; private collection

The boy is one of the most mysterious characters of Andrzej Wróblewski's work. Although this motif appears in the famous *Executions* paintings from 1949, the boy depicted in the works from 1955–56, including pieces in oil on canvas and board, watercolor and gouache, and drawings, seems to be a different protagonist. A red-haired boy, a teenager, against the yellow wall of the artist's studio. He is now alone, although once he stood among a group of captives and families about to be executed; he appears at a bus stop, against a wall, next to a statue of Gudea—a priest and Sumerian ruler of the Lagash city-state. All alone.

At the same time, he was important enough that for the exhibition *Young Generation. Polish Visual Art, Painting – Sculpture – Visual Art* in Berlin (July 21–August 29, 1956), the artist didn't submit *Mothers, Anti-Fascists* shown at an earlier exhibition at the Arsenał in Warsaw, but a brand new painting—*Boy against a Yellow Background, Model, (A Boy*). Two of the works have not yet been exhibited—*[Boy against a White Background]* and *(Boy), [Boy no. 1062]*—and have their premiere at this exhibition.

ROOM 6 – PROTAGONIST



(HIM AND HER), [FIGURAL COMPOSITION NO. 869]
undated; gouache, paper; 29.5 × 41.8 cm; private collection

my gaze moves slowly
at the same time it rushes at one hundred kilometers per hour

Andrzej Wróblewski

Waiting, yet also traveling. A simultaneous absence and presence of moving. Take, for instance, ancient Greek theater, where the protagonist is the first actor in dialogue with the choir. His nature is twofold, heading for the unknown, beyond the horizon, somewhere straight ahead, in a timeless vehicle. Sometimes the chauffeur, at other times the passenger. The motionlessness of the driver is akin to the motionlessness of any observer in front of the screen. This double figure is also the literary protagonist of Tadeusz Różewicz, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Federico García Lorca's poetry—visually untranslatable, but filled with a suggestive mood.

Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–57)—a painter, art historian and critic, one of the leading representatives of postwar Central and Eastern European art. Born in Vilnius in 1927, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, where he became Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Painting, and graduated in art history from the Jagiellonian University. He took part in numerous exhibitions of Polish art, including the famous *Against War – Against Fascism* show at the Arsenal in 1955. His 1956 solo show at the Club of the Polish Writers' Union in Warsaw is also notable; he exhibited works on paper and organized the exhibition with the help of his friends, including the famous film director Andrzej Wajda (1926–2016). Between 30 October and 21 November that year he traveled across Yugoslavia with the art critic Barbara Majewska. Their three-week trip through Belgrade, Ljubljana, Skopje, Zagreb, and smaller towns such as Portorož, Piran, and Ohrid gave them an opportunity to become acquainted with the art and museum scene in Yugoslavia as well as its achievements in architecture. This can be seen reflected in the work Wróblewski produced in the final months of his life before his fatal heart attack in the Tatra Mountains in 1957.

(SELF-PORTRAIT IN RED)
undated; watercolor, gouache, paper; 29.5 × 41.7 cm; private collection

We are especially grateful to Marta Wróblewska and Barbara Majewska.

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Visual Identification: Łukasz Paluch / AnoMalia art studio
Framing and Technical Assistance: Marcin Sieradzki
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October 15, 2020 – January 10, 2021

The exhibition is co-organized with the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation and in cooperation with the Adam Mickiewicz Institute.

It is accompanied by a catalogue, co-published in English by Hatje Cantz, the Andrzej Wróblewski Foundation, and the Adam Mickiewicz Institute including the essays by Zdenka Badovinac, Ivana Bago, Branislav Dimitrijević, Wojciech Grzybała, Marko Jenko, Ljiljana Kolešnik, Barbara Majewska, Ewa Majewska, Andrzej Wróblewski, Magdalena Ziółkowska

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