The Role of International Exhibitions in the Aftermath of Empire: The 1948 British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

Claudia Di Tosto

Abstract

For the 1948 iteration of the Venice Biennale, the first after the Second World War, a painter and a sculptor were chosen to represent Britain: J. M. W. Turner (1775 – 1851), founding figure of the English Romantic landscape genre, and Henry Moore (1898 – 1986), the Yorkshire-born sculptor who had worked as a War Artist for the British Government during the conflict. While the role of early post-war British Pavilions within the context of Western Europe's politics has already been extensively discussed, this paper will aim instead to position the 1948 British Pavilion against the backdrop of the initial phases of the dismantling of the British Empire. In particular, I will examine the narrative built around Moore's participation and argue that the insistence on the inherent humanism of his works is linked to the humanitarian rhetoric of the post-war period. Taking as a cue Joel Robinson's statement that national pavilions at the Venice Biennale represent a "moral dilemma" founded on the alleged economic, cultural and political superiority of some countries over others, I will argue that the 1948 British Pavilion needs to be read within the context of the renewed cultural imperialism that Britain tried to promote at home and abroad as an indirect way of claiming superiority while the independence movements in the former colonised countries were succeeding in dissolving the British Empire.

Keywords

British Pavilion, Decolonisation, Henry Moore, Post-war humanism, Herbert Read, Britishness

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The Role of International Exhibitions in the Aftermath of Empire: The 1948 British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale[1]

Claudia Di Tosto

Introduction

Remembering the British display of 1948, a review published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1950 commented: "Visitors to the Biennale in 1948 will recall how austerity and muddled optimism combined to turn the British pavilion into one of the most splendid in the whole exhibition".[2] These two terms, austerity and muddled optimism, well described the atmosphere surrounding the organisation of the country's first participation in the Venice Biennale since 1938, the year after its Pavilion had been taken over by the British Council.[3]

A pairing that celebrated both the past and the present of British art awaited visitors inside the British Pavilion: the large canvases by J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), celebrating naval victories and national landmarks while also paying homage to Italian scenes, were grouped with sculptures and drawings by Henry Moore (1898-1986), a Yorkshire man who charmed the Italian critics and fellow artists with his friendly manners.[4] The choice of Moore to represent Britain would prove to be a success, with the artist earning the prestigious International Sculpture Prize and

1
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2
"Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions", *The Burlington Magazine* 92, no. 565 (1950): 120.

3
Originally called British Committee for Relations with Other Countries when it was founded in 1934, the British Council would be renamed as such in 1936.

4
See for instance Lee Miller's description of Moore in Venice: "He prowled around, stocky, un-Latin, serious, and simple. He talked with Italian-speaking artists and critics, inarticulate, but sculpting his intentions with his hands like an Italian and being interpreted by his fans". Lee Miller, "The Venice Biennial Art Exposition", *Vogue* (November 1, 1948), 193-195. The author thanks Dr Rhian Addison McCreanor for drawing her attention to Miller's review.

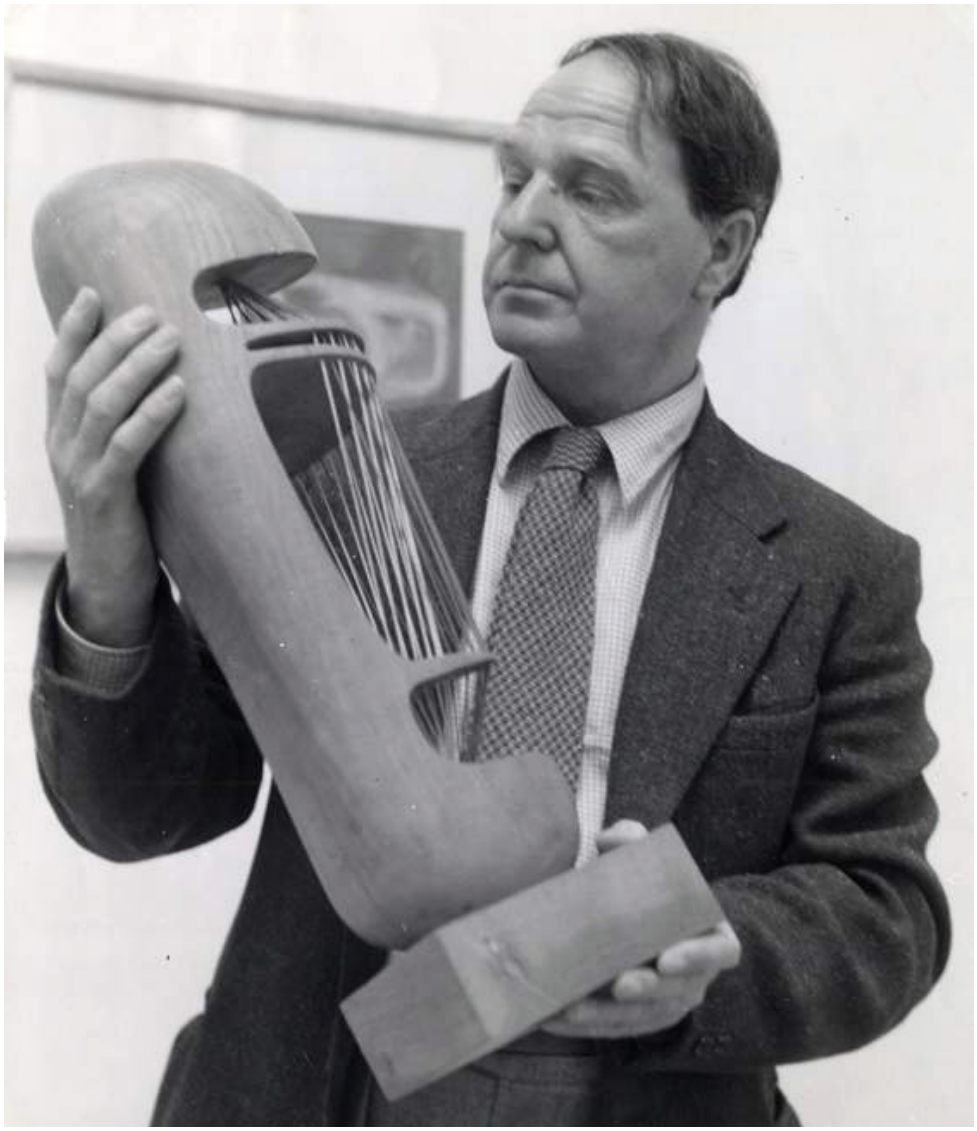

fig. 1
Henry Moore at the 1948 Venice Biennale. © British Council

embarking on a successful international career, aided by the British Council, which resulted in his work becoming emblematic of a quintessentially British art [Fig. 1].[5]

Investigating the national image, the idea of Britishness presented at the British Pavilion in 1948, is the main objective of this article. Focusing on this specific year in relation to the ever-changing and constantly fleeting ideas around what constitutes this "imagined community"[6] called nation, in Britain's case means addressing how the decolonisation process, propelled at the end of the Forties by the Independence of India (1947), forced Britain to rebuild its identity at home and abroad. The question of what it meant to be British after the Empire became increasingly salient. I will argue that the 1948 British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale offered a possible answer to this disputed matter: if a formal political, military and governmental control of the former colonies was no longer possible, culture could still play a pivotal role in reinstating Britain's predominant role on the world's stage. This

5
The close connection between the promotion of Moore's sculpture abroad in the post-war period and the circulation of specific conceptions of Britishness rooted in the legacy of imperial Britain was extensively illustrated by Paul Overy in an essay that has become a classic of the British art field: Paul Overy, "Lions and Unicorns: The Britishness of Postwar British Sculpture", *Art in America* 79, no. 9 (1991), 105-110, 153-155.

6
Anderson Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

analysis of the 1948 British Pavilion as an exemplary case study of a renewed cultural imperialism will focus on the narrative built around Henry Moore's participation at the Biennale, in particular on the text that the critic Herbert Read, co-founder in 1946 of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, wrote for the exhibition's pamphlet. The aim is to unveil and investigate the connection between the framing of the pavilion and the patronising Western humanist rhetoric promoted by the government.

Before delving into the core argument of this essay, I will outline a brief overview of the 24th Venice Biennale and discuss the 1948 British Pavilion in its specificities, such as the juxtaposition of 19th and 20th century art around which the display was organized. Then, the historical and political context of the time will be delineated to illustrate why 1948 was such a watershed year for Britain. Finally, in the last two sections, I will discuss the connection between the narrative around the British Pavilion and the rhetoric behind post-war Humanism and how it relates to the renewed cultural imperialism that Britain tried to promote at home and abroad after the dissolution of the Empire.

"The first pan-European exhibition of modern art since the War": the 24th Venice Biennale

The year 1948 marked the reopening of the Biennale after its activities had been interrupted in 1942 due to the worsening of the Second World War. The 24th iteration of the Venice Biennale opened with a rich programme of exhibitions and national participations. Alongside solo shows of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, and Oskar Kokoschka, a selection of American and European avant-garde works from the Peggy Guggenheim collection was displayed in the Greek Pavilion, while a landmark group exhibition on French Impressionism was held in the German Pavilion. Described as "the first pan-European exhibition of modern art since the War",[7] this eclectic exhibition programme demonstrated the organising committee's effort to contextualise contemporary artistic trends through exhibitions by developing a cohesive art historical narrative, a strategy more akin to museums than the world's fairs on which the Biennale was modelled, as Stefano Collicelli Cagol and Vittoria Martini have highlighted.[8] The promotion of these exhibitions in the already-temporary setting of the Biennale had a clear political motivation in post-war Italy since the adoption of a supposedly objective discipline like art history in the selection of artists and artworks "aimed to formalise the political neutrality regained by the institution after the fascist dictatorship, as well as to ensure the same neutrality within the new Cold War context".[9] Exploited as yet another ideological tool in the arsenal of the Italian Fascist Government after the party had seized the control of the Biennale in 1938, it was clear that there would not be any future for the Venetian exhibition if its cultural autonomy could not be restored. At the same time, however, its internationality, a characteristic that had been central since its very foundation in 1895,[10] meant that the Biennale could be an ideal platform to promote the image of a strong democratic Western Europe, one united by shared cultural values against the rising force of the Communist bloc.[11] That these aspects were at the forefront of the Biennale organi-

7
Henry Meyric Hughes, "The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948–1960: Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and the "Young British Sculptors"", British Art Studies, no. 3 (July 2016), unpaged, https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/hmhughes.

8
Vittoria Martini and Stefano Collicelli Cagol, "The Venice Biennale at Its Turning Points: 1948 and the Aftermath of 1968", in Noemi de Haro García, Patricia Mayayo, and Jesús Carrillo (eds.) *Making Art History in Europe After 1945* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020): 83–100.

9
Ibid., 84.

10
Clarissa Ricci, "From Obsolete to Contemporary: National Pavilions and the Venice Biennale", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 2020): 10, https://doi.org/10.1386/jcs_00009_1.

11
Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale 1948-64: Italy and the Idea of Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

sing committee's objectives is evident in the preface written by the President of the Exposition Giovanni Ponti for the 1948 exhibition catalogue: "Art invites all men, beyond national borders, beyond ideological barriers, to a language that should unite them in a humanistic understanding and a universal family against any Babelic disunity and disharmony".[12]

Thirteen nations were invited to answer this call: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, France, the Netherlands, Poland, the United States, Switzerland, Hungary and Great Britain. The group seemed to have been largely made up of countries that had been united in the Allied block against the Axis powers, the coalition between Nazi Germany, the Fascist Kingdom of Italy, and Imperial Japan. Their selection thus evidences how much politics affected the organisation of the Biennale as the newly-established Republic of Italy attempted to distance itself from its Fascist past and connection with the Nazi regime; simultaneously, it indicates how important the Biennale was considered to be in forging new diplomatic relationships in the aftermath of the war.

The juxtaposition of nineteenth and twentieth century art at the British Pavilion

"There is no doubt that this year's Biennale is a much more important event than usual", stated an internal report of the British Council.[13] This was indeed the case not only for political and historical reasons, but also owing to the fact that Britain had been missing from the Biennale for ten years. When it was confirmed that the Biennale would return in 1948 and that Britain would be among the attending countries, the Biennale Committee initially offered to host the British delegation in two rooms of the Italian Pavilion, most probably because of structural damage to the British Pavilion when it was commandeered by the Italian army during the war. Yet soon after the Biennale Committee took back the offer as the number of artists to be displayed in the Italian Pavilion had increased.[14]

As already mentioned at the beginning of this article, two artists were selected for the British Pavilion in 1948: J. M. W. Turner, an artist widely considered to be a founding figure of the English Romantic landscape genre, and Henry Moore, the Modernist sculptor of highly recognisable curved human figures who had been employed as an official War Artist during the conflict.[15] The juxtaposition of 19th and 20th century art and the decision to display only two artists instead of a large group, two novelties introduced for this biennial, were unanimously considered as determining factors for the sweeping success of the British Pavilion among critics and public alike. An internal report compiled by a British Council representative, dated June 1948, stated: "In my view our decision to exhibit one old master and one contemporary artist was exceptionally successful" as it also sidestepped the problem of a partial representation of artists which was usually the case in this kind of international exhibitions.[16] The minutes from a British Council Fine Arts Committee's meeting

12
XXIV Biennale di Venezia. Catalogo. Quarta edizione definitiva, exh. cat., 4th ed. (Venice: Edizioni Serenissima, 1948), X. Translated from Italian by the author.

13
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 78/2. These words are an extract from a report quoted in: British Council, Fine Arts General Committee, Minutes of the 39th Meeting held at 43 Portland Place, W.1. on Wednesday February 25th 1948, at 2:30 pm.

14
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, letter from Rodolfo Palluchini dated January 20,1948.

15
The War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) was established in 1939 and headed by Kenneth Clark (then director of the National Gallery in London) with the aim of enlisting artists to produce works documenting the conflict. The WAAC was a propaganda tool of the Ministry of Information but it also created an efficient system of financial support for artists during the war. See for instance: Matthew Withy, A *Fine Tomorrow: Sculpture and Socialism in Mid-Century Britain*, Henry Moore Institute Essays on Sculpture 39 (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2003), unpaginated.

16
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Extract from report on file IT/701/5 attached to letter reference of 3rd July, 1948, from Representative, Rome to Overseas Division "C".

held in September 1948 further reported that:

> the selection of two artists, Turner and Moore, as the British representation had been a most outstanding success; even the French, who had shows of quite a small number of artists, were criticised for showing the works of too many. It seemed probable that the resulting tendency would be to cut down the number of artists and amplify the representation of a few in future international exhibitions.[17]

This strategy was praised by art critics as well. Douglas Cooper, reviewer of the Biennale for the *Burlington*, wrote: "The foreign pavilions fell into two clear groups: those in which two or three artists were presented comprehensively and well, and those in which anything from fifteen to fifty were uselessly represented by one work each", with the British Pavilion included, of course, in the former.[18] This new "felicissima formula"[19] (translated in "most delightful formula" – in the words of the Biennale's General Secretary Rodolfo Pallucchini) would indeed be replicated in the 1950 Pavilion which saw the participation of Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and Matthew Smith (1879-1959), alongside John Constable (1776-1837).

Pallucchini had strongly encouraged the Pavilion's Selection Committee to choose these two artists as Britain's representatives because one, Turner, would have provided "an excellent foundation for the beginnings of French Impressionism, to which the Biennale is dedicating a great exhibition", while the other, Moore, was widely considered the most important living sculptor in Britain.[20] His

fig. 2
On the right John Rothenstein, Director of Tate Gallery and Commissioner of the 1948 British Pavilion, accompanying the President of the Italian Luigi Einaudi (centre) for a visit around the pavilion. © Archivio Storico della Presidenza della Repubblica / The Historical Archive of the Presidency of the Republic

17
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Minutes of the 41st Meeting held at 43, Portland place, W.1. on Wednesday, 22nd September, 1948, at 2:30 P.M.

18
Douglas Cooper, "24th Biennial Exhibition, Venice", *The Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 547 (1948): 290.

19
XXIV Biennale di Venezia, p. XV.

20
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, letter from Rodolfo Palluchini dated January 20, 1948.

request was granted despite some resistance from the British Council in displaying Turner's works in a building that was not in optimal condition.[21] While paintings by Turner were displayed in the three front rooms of the Pavilion (including the larger, central room), the long corridor at the back of the building and the two smallest rooms on each side were occupied by Moore's sculptures and drawings.[22] The layout of the building meant that visitors would first encounter the Turners in the main room, then those in one of the side rooms; from there they would move toward the back and see the Moore exhibition and then finish the visit with Turner again.[23] The Turner works on display belonged to the Tate Collection and also included some of the artist's Italian paintings such as *Bridge of Sighs*, *Ducal Palace and Custom-House*, *Venice: Canaletti Painting* (exhibited 1833, oil on mahogany) and *The Arch of Constantine*, *Rome* (c. 1835, oil on canvas). The Director of the Tate Gallery John Rothenstein [Fig. 2], who was also Commissioner of the Pavilion, travelled to Venice to supervise the final touches on the installation, also altering the hanging of some of the paintings.[24]

As for Moore's works, the artist himself arrived in Venice a few days before the opening to oversee the display arrangements. The layout, drawn by Moore and the British Council's Fine Art Department back in UK, had to be heavily modified when the works arrived in Venice. Moore's idea was to display the sculptures in the two smaller rooms on both sides of the long corridor, as these had overhead lightning only. However, a lack of available space meant that the corridor with the windows had to be used as well, since "the effect of it all concentrated in the two small rooms was that of a primaeval forest".[25] The windows were thus screened to avoid the reflection of the green vegetation of the Giardini on the opposite wall where most of the drawings were hung. Some of the designs for the sculptures were displayed in the two smaller rooms and even the pillars of the window-wall were equipped with canvas screens so that more drawings could be hung there. The direct involvement of Rothenstein and Moore during the installation phase proved to be crucial for the successful display of the British Pavilion, and resulted in giving the pavilion "the finish of a permanent collection, not often obtained at an exhibition of the nature of the Biennale".[26] These words reflect an art historical approach to the display that confirms the aforementioned museological turn of the Biennale in 1948 and the desire for a museum-quality display, rather than one that felt provisional.

The Pavilion's display arrangement did not facilitate a direct comparison between the two artists since their works were kept neatly separated. It is also important to remember that this grouping had more to do with meeting Pallucchini's request than with an unprompted decision by the British Council. Nonetheless, the pairing of Turner's atmospheric landscapes, with their reassuring celebration of traditional values (see for example *'Hurrah! for the Whaler Erebus! Another Fish!'* (exhibited 1846) [Fig. 3], celebrating the vessel that, along with the Terror, had participated in major Arctic explorations during the 19th century), and the barren backgrounds found in some of Moore's studies (see for example *Crowd Looking at a Tied-up Object*, 1942) [Fig. 4], sorrowful wastelands that seemed to echo the deso-

21
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, report dated March 3, 1948 and signed A. A. Longden.

22
Hughes, "The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948-1960". At the National Archives, the floor plan of the 1948 British Pavilion and the display layout of Turner's works are preserved in the folder BW 2/377.

23
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, Report on the Turner and Moore exhibition, British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, June-September 1948, 11.

24
Ibid., 12.

25
Richmond, The National Archive, BW 40/42, Report on the Turner and Moore exhibition, British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, June – September 1948, 13. The articulation of the display can be glimpsed in promotional photographs of Moore in the Pavilion and official shots taken during the visit of the President of the Italian Republic Luigi Einaudi, but no images of the installation itself could be retrieved.

26
Ibid., 15.

fig. 3
Turner, *'Hurrah! for the Whaler Erebus! Another Fish!'*, exhibited 1846, oil paint on canvas, Tate, London, 1228 × 1528 × 160 mm (framed dimensions). © Tate

fig. 4
Henry Moore, *Crowd Looking at a Tied-up Object*, 1942, pencil, wax crayon, charcoal (rubbed), watercolour, wash, pen and ink, The British Museum, London: from the Estate of Lord Clark, 432 x 559 mm. © The Henry Moore Foundation.

lation of the war, appeared to encapsulate Britain's post-war desire to promote the new through a direct association with the past.[27] The Biennale's correspondent for *The Sunday Times*, for instance, wrote: "The two artists could have not been better chosen. What other painter but Turner could have opened Italian eyes to the strangeness and scope of the English genius?"[28]

Moore's works on display offered an excursus of the sculptor's activity from the mid-1920s until the most recent sculptures made in 1946-47 and covered a range of his predominant subjects: Madonna and Child, reclining figures, and family groups.[29] Although it is not possible to determine the reasoning behind the selection of each piece, reading through the loan request letters makes it clear that the final display largely depended upon the availability of each work and the willingness of lenders.[30] The drawings gave the public a rare insight into the working method of Moore, who used to fill the same page with a variety of ideas, biomorphic figures methodically lined up next to each other on the page and projects for sculptures inserted in bare landscapes, "working new images on top of earlier pencil studies or reworking to a higher degree of finish in ink an underlying pencil sketch".[31] The success of the drawing display was so widespread that even a review of the following iteration of the Pavilion mentioned it: "Moore's drawings last year were an object of pilgrimage".[32]

Among the highlights were five bronze maquettes for the Madonna and Child commissioned by the Parish Church of St. Matthew in Northampton in 1943 which marked the return of Moore to public sculpture after the war.[33] One of the contemporary reviewers of the Pavilion notably declared that the maquettes for Northampton's Madonna and Child represented one of the very few occasions when Europeans might "think of Britain in connection with religious art".[34] Four out of five maquettes belonged to the Tate Gallery Collection; one came from the private collection of the artist's wife, Mrs. Irina Moore. The small bronzes showed the Madonna seated on a low bench holding the Child, with each maquette representing a slight variation on the same subject, including the piece that most closely resembles the final Northampton version. Here the Child is seated but his legs are propped up, hinting at a vivacity that has not been fully quieted, while the Madonna has her right hand on the Child's shoulder and her left cradles one of her son's. The severity and aloofness of the Northampton sculpture evoked not only that of the Renaissance (Donatello especially) but also recalled the reclining figures of the shelter drawings realised by Moore between 1940 and 1941 in his official role as War Artist. These sketches had earned him a sweeping popularity both at home and abroad and a small selection was on display in Venice.

27
According to Roger Berthoud, the tied-up object of the drawing was inspired by Moore's student years at the Royal College of Art, where in-progress sculptures would be covered by damp cloths tied with strings to keep the clay moist. See: Roger Berthoud, *The Life of Henry Moore* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 206-207.

28
Eric Newton, "The Venetian Biennale-II", *The Sunday Times* (20 June 1948), 7

29
For the full list of Turner and Moore's works on display in the 1948 Pavilion see: "Padiglione della Gran Bretagna" in XXIV *Biennale di Venezia*, 274-284.

30
The loan request letters and the lenders' replies are held in the folder BW 2/376 at the National Archives.

31
Richard A. Born, *From Blast to Pop: Aspects of Modern British Art, 1915-1965* (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1997), 55.

32
"THE VENICE BIENNALE: Wanted---a Patron", *The Manchester Guardian* (24 August 1950), 4.

33
Andrew Stephenson, "Fashioning a Post-War Reputation: Henry Moore as a Civic Sculptor c.1943–58", in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity* (Tate Research Publication, 2015), https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/andrew-stephenson-fashioning-a-post-war-reputation-henry-moore-as-a-civic-sculptor-c1943-r1151305, accessed July 2023.

34
Atticus, 'Men, Women and Memories', *The Sunday Times* (23 May 1948), 5.

Britishness at the end of the Second World War, the British Pavilion seemed to claim, coincided with a reverence for the past, the importance of nature and landscape (the reclining female figures of Moore were inspired by the sloping hills of his native Yorkshire) and a rhetoric of unanimity and stability in the present. As Catherine Jolivette has highlighted in her monograph on the relationship between the landscape genre in the 1950s and British national identity, this Janus-like stance, which aimed to look both at the past and the future of British art simultaneously, was also adopted in the Festival of Britain in 1951.[35] The insistence on a native cultural heritage that went unbroken from Romantic painters to contemporary artists also suggests an unwillingness to build the future on new premises as the present constantly needed to be validated through the past. The question remains: what does this all mean within the context of that pivotal year for decolonisation that was 1948?

The historical context of the 1948 British Pavilion

The British Pavilion [Fig. 5] was – and still is – housed in a building that had previously been a café-restaurant built in 1887 for the antecedent of the Biennale, the Esposizione Nazionale Artistica, and then altered by the architect Edwin Alfred Rickards.[36] Even though the raised position of the former café, up on a mound in the Giardini, offered the perfect privileged position for a national pavilion, there had been a unanimous consensus among the representatives of the British Council to construct a new building, though nothing came of it.[37] As Bowness pointed out: "The shift from private benefaction by rich patrons to governmental support for the arts in Britain which was dominant after the Second World War was mirrored in the history of the British Pavilion".[38] Indeed, the early post-war editions of the British Pavilion largely reflected the welfare policy of the Labour Party, which had won the election in June 1945, and the role of art within it. However, other major changes marked the post-war period for Britain, as a quick succession of events led to the be-

fig. 5
The British Pavilion © British Council

35
Catherine Jolivette, *Landscape, Art and Identity in 1950s Britain* (Farnham and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2009).

36
The word 'Biennale' itself was introduced only in 1930. See Sophie Bowness and Clive Phillpot (eds.), *Britain at the Venice Biennale, 1895-1995* (London: British Council, 1995), 51.

37
Ibid., 35, n. 45.

38
Ibid., 29.

ginning of the dismantling of the British Empire and to a large-scale migration from the former colonies. In 1947 India gained Independence and, following the Partition, Pakistan was created. In June 1948 the Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury Docks in Essex carrying the first wave of Caribbean migrants that came to be known as Windrush Generation, and in July of the same year the British Nationality Act created the status of Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies, establishing that migrants from the former colonies already had the status of British citizens. 1948 also saw both the start of the Malayan Emergency which led to the country's independence in 1957 and the Accra Riots which began the process towards Ghana's eventual independence in the same year. 1948 also marked the start of Apartheid in South Africa, which would last until the early 1990s, and the independence of Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). In 1949 the London Declaration formally established the Commonwealth of Nations on the principle that all member states were free and equal.

The decline of the British Empire was part of a broader shift from a political order based on empires to one centred around nation states but, unlike other former imperial nations and despite the enormous human cost and economic decline caused by the war, 20th-century Britain was still, as Sarah Stockwell argues, "at the centre of an empire larger than any other, and a co-architect of the post-war settlement".[39] Furthermore, as was to be expected, Britain's involvement in its old dominions' politics did not stop altogether with their newly-gained independence and the economic, political, and cultural bonds between both sides remained strong.

Outlining the historical setting in which the 1948 Pavilion was organised and inaugurated reveals the importance of recontextualising the early post-war British Pavilions within the decolonisation process after the Second World War. This framework not only represents an original approach to the study of the history of the British Pavilion, which, until now, has been mainly considered in relation to Britain's role within the context of Western Europe's politics;[40] it is also pivotal for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex intertwining between bureaucracy and art system enacted through the national pavilion system at the Biennale. Joel Robinson has argued that the Biennale's national pavilion system reflected a geopolitical structure that is fundamentally in contrast with participating countries' aspirations towards a more democratic and egalitarian Europe after the Second World War.[41] Thanks to its international scope, the Biennale could indeed foster diplomatic cooperation across countries when it was most needed. However, the predominant – and almost exclusive – presence of First World nations in the Giardini made clear how the Venice exhibition had inherited the unevenness of a colonial world order.[42] The national pavilions thus represent a "moral dilemma", embedded as they are in an inherent cultural imperialism founded on the alleged economic, cultural and political superiority of these nations.[43]

39
Sarah Elizabeth Stockwell, "Britain and Decolonization in an Era of Global Change", in Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 66, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.013.4. Although dated, David Goldsworthy's book offers an in-depth analysis of both the Labour and Conservative approaches to the decolonisation process in the post-war years: David Goldsworthy, *Colonial Issues in British Politics 1945-1961: From 'Colonial Development' to 'Wind of Change'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

40
Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale 1948-64.*

41
Joel Robinson, "Folkloric Modernism – Venice's Giardini Della Biennale and the Geopolitics of Architecture", *The Open Arts Journal*, no. 2 (February 2014), https://doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2013w04jr.

42
As is well known, the situation has not improved much as, even nowadays, so-called Global South countries are largely relegated to collateral locations around Venice.

43
Robinson, "Folkloric Modernism", 4.

Humanism and Decolonisation

The text on Henry Moore for the exhibition booklet written by Herbert Read, who was part of the British Council's Fine Art Committee, offered an introduction to the artist's life, achievements and influences.[44] A shorter version, published (in Italian) in the general catalogue of the 24th Biennale, had been edited by Lilian Somerville, Head of the Fine Art Section at the British Council, and endorsed by Moore himself before being sent to Read's wife for the art historian's final approval.[45] The importance that the exhibition booklets, one for Turner and one for Moore, had for the British Council appears evident from internal reports where the "only serious mishap in connection with the Biennale" was a delay in the delivery of the catalogues, which did not arrive in time for the press conference.[46] The exhibition booklets represented crucial promotional tools in the Biennale setting, so much so that their late arrival was considered to have badly affected sales.[47]

Read's 1948 text has been discussed previously within a European framework: for instance, Henry Meyric Hughes stated that Moore's catalogue entry highlighted the affiliation between British art and the European tradition,[48] differently from Nancy Jachec who had argued that these connections were made clear only in 1952 and that both Moore and Hepworth "were presented as the products of world, as opposed to specifically European, culture".[49] However, as explained above, any analysis of the 1948 British Pavilion that takes into consideration exclusively the context of Britain's relationship with the rest of Europe offers only a limited view; its early post-war iterations can be better understood in relation to a broader context involving the exhibition's history, curatorial choices and world politics. Therefore, what I propose is to look at Read's text from a postcolonial perspective through a discussion of how the narrative built around Moore's participation reiterated the specific kind of rhetoric that was being used to talk about decolonisation in the post-war period. The point here is not to retrospectively ascribe a contemporary meaning to Read's words, but to show how the use of certain terms had a specific significance in the post-war period, which was neither neutral nor only pertinent to art criticism, but participated in, and should therefore be read against, a broader social, political and historical context.[50]

After having identified Moore's influences, from Mexican sculpture and Viking carvings to Brancusi and Giacometti, Read wrote: "It must be emphasised that, in spite of his concentration on formal values, Moore remains a humanist".[51] Read further argued that Moore's commitment to a universal language led the sculptor to the truth of the materials, a facet of the work which made it coherent despite its broad range of themes and scope. In the conclusion, Read declared that Moore had succeeded, more than any other modern sculptor, in "combining formal

44
Sculpture and Drawings by Henry Moore (Text by Herbert Read) (London: British Council, 1948).
45
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, GB/641/25, letter dated 15th April 1958 from Lilian Somerville to Mrs. Read.
46
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Extract from report of "Tour by Representative and Mrs. Bottrall of Venice and Northern Ireland, June 1948". See also Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/42, Report on the "Turner and Moore Exhibition British Pavilion Biennale Venice June-September 1948", pp. 14-15. Moore's catalogues arrived in time for the public opening on June 6th while Turner's did not arrive until the 18th of the same month.
47
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 2/377, Extract from report, June 1948.
48
Hughes, "The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948-1960".
49
Nancy Jachec, "The "New British Sculpture" at the Venice Biennale: Europeanism and Its Limits", *The British Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (April 2006): 25-32.
50
As argued by Kevin Davey, in the inter-war years Read clearly replicated imperialist tropes in his surveys of art and civilization. See Kevin Davey, "Herbert Read and Englishness", in David Goodway (ed.), *Herbert Read Reassessed* (Liverpool: University Press, 1998), 270-286.
51
Sculpture and Drawings by Henry Moore (Text by Herbert Read), unpaged.

dynamism with inherent *animism*" meaning that, despite the formal experimentations, his sculptures had not lost that emotional quality that was necessary for an engagement with the wider audience.[52] Read's words were echoed in the documentary about Henry Moore written and produced by the art historian's son, John Read, and broadcast in 1951 by the BBC, becoming the first film on British television about a living artist.[53] Moore's works' main qualities were identified in "a tradition of expressiveness and truth to material",[54] which also clarified the emotional aspect praised in the Venice catalogue: the interest in the formal quality of shapes could easily have led to pure abstraction, but in Moore's case the human figure was still readable and thus the wider audience could easily find both personal and universal connections in the subjects depicted. The documentary also placed a great importance on explaining the artist's working process from start to finish, a perspective that recalled the choice to show drawings alongside sculptures at the Pavilion and thereby offer a glimpse into Moore's creative practice.

The traditional humanistic reading of Moore's works, initiated by Read, is clearly linked to the role of the artist in post-war Britain. Coming from a working-class socialist background, Moore was the prototype of the ideal artist for the welfare state, which considered public art as an important part of the country's infrastructure and a tool to educate the wider public in the principles of social idealism and civic optimism, values central to the reconstruction of the country.[55] Moore himself was extremely conscious of the social responsibility of the artist towards society, a subject that he discussed on the occasion of the UNESCO International Conference of Artists held, significantly, in Venice in 1952.[56] Nonetheless, when Moore declared that "We live in a transitional age, between one economic structure of society which is in dissolution and another economic order of society which has not yet taken definite shape", an awareness of the drastic changes that the decolonization process had started can also be perceived, especially if we consider the date of this speech.[57]

What is most relevant here, however, is that the reference to humanism in an international setting such as the Biennale evoked the kind of rhetoric that was being used by the British government in the same period to present decolonisation "as the fulfilment of a British mission rather than a body-blow to prestige and national interests", a narrative that suffused humanism with a patronising humanitarian tone towards the former colonies and their striving towards independence.[58] Still in 1956, the Colonial Office civil servant Charles Jefferies argued that: "I think there is too much tendency to consider whether these places are "ready" for Statehood. Of course they are not, any more than the Gold Coast is "ready" for independence, or than one's teenage daughter is "ready" for the proverbial latch-key".[59]

52 Ibid. In italics in the original text.

53 "Henry Moore and the Festival of Britain", *The Henry Moore Foundation website*: https://www.henry-moore.org/about-henry-moore/biography/a-symbol-of-post-war-optimism/adhoc/henry-moore-and-the-festival-of-britain, accessed July 2023.

54 John Read, dir. *Henry Moore*, BBC, 1951, 00:01:18 – 00:01:20, https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/henry-moore/znkkf4j, accessed July 2023.

55 Dawn Pereira, "Henry Moore and the Welfare State", in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity* (Tate Research Publication, 2015) https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/dawn-pereira-henry-moore-and-the-welfare-state-r1151315, accessed July 2023.

56 Henry Moore, "The Sculptor in Modern Society", in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity* (presented at the Unesco, International Conference of Artists, Venice, 1952) https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/henry-moore-the-sculptor-in-modern-society-r1175901, accessed July 2023.

57 Ibid.

58 Stockwell, "Britain and Decolonization in an Era of Global Change", 16.

59 Quoted in Nicholas Owen, "Decolonisation and Postwar Consensus", in Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (ed.), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History,* 1945-64, Contemporary History in Context Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 166, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24942-8_9. The double quotation marks are in the original text.

The rhetoric of post-war Humanism

Based on the Renaissance principles of placing human experience at the centre of the universe and on the self-determination and self-sufficiency of the individual, in post-war Europe humanism became closely intertwined with national identity and modernity.[60] However, postcolonial theorists have challenged humanism and its supposed universality and rationality as something "advanced by colonial apologists, who used 'civilizing mission' as a rhetorical humanist device to cultivate social hierarchies and the violence required to maintain them".[61] It is difficult to not see a similar way of thinking behind the rhetoric around the independence of the colonies as the humanitarian fulfilment of the imperial mission, a narrative also needed to legitimise the continuing presence of Britain in its old dominions, supposed to last until they could achieve the necessary "maturity" for self-government.[62] Furthermore, it has been argued that the humanist perception of cultural identity is not only Western-centric but essentially rooted in difference, providing the basis for colonial expansion.[63] A strong argument in favour of this thesis is the concept of the "civilization of the universal" promoted by the humanist European Society of Culture (Société Européenne de Culture, also known as SEC), a body created in 1950 in Venice by a group of European intellectuals.[64] This idea of "a universal civilization as a permanent solution to international political conflict" was based on the premise that culture had the ability to create universal values.[65] However, SEC's stance was that only Europe could have a leading role in this process.[66]

This analysis of post-war humanist rhetoric and its interconnections with the decolonisation process might appear only distantly relevant for an analysis of the 1948 Biennale or the British Pavilion. Nevertheless, there are three elements that can be brought forward in support of the opposite contention. First, Giovanni Ponti, President of the Exposition, would go on to become a member and one of the strongest advocates of the SEC, which was established in 1950, only two years after the 24th Venice Biennale.[67] Thus, an understanding of the discussion around the "civilization of the universal" and the Eurocentric stance behind the humanism of the SEC, becomes essential to correctly contextualise his words in the Preface for the 1948 catalogue, where, as noted above, the Italian translation of Read's text was published. In the Preface Ponti spoke about the role of art in creating a universal language that could unite all individuals "in a humanistic understanding", meaning a humanistic, *Eurocentric* understanding. The insistence on Moore's humanism in Read's text for the British Pavilion needs to be read within this context. Second, the affinities between Herbert Read's writing and thinking and SEC's own ethos appear to have been strong enough for the *Société*'s own members to repeatedly ask the English art critic to join their ranks, as revealed by a series of insightful letters from the

60
For a close reconstruction of how morality and politics came together in post-war France, a country that shared an imperial past with Britain, see: Michael Kelly, "Humanism and National Unity: The Ideological Reconstruction of France", in Nicholas Hewitt (ed.), T*he Culture of Reconstruction: European Literature, Thought and Film, 1945-50* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 103-19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19728-6_7.

61
Malreddy Pavan Kumar, "Review Essay: Humanism and Its Other: Difference and Disjuncture in Postcolonial Theory", *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 10, no. 1 (4 March 2011): 87. Single quotation mark in the original text.

62
Owen, "Decolonisation and Postwar Consensus", 157-81.

63
Lidan Lin, "The Irony of Colonial Humanism: 'A Passage to India' and the Politics of Posthumanism", *Ariel* 28, no. 4 (October 1997): 133.

64
Nancy Jachec, *Europe's Intellectuals and the Cold War: The European Society of Culture, Post-War Politics, and International Relations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

65
Ibid., 73.

66
This concept was however to be contested by those SEC's member that were closer to the former colonies. Ibid., 73.

67
Ibid., 40.

late 1960s held in the Herbert Read Archive at the University of Leeds. Despite flattering comments and high praise from both Umberto Campagnolo, General Secretary of the SEC, and George Buchanan, Chairman of the British chapter, Read nevertheless refused to join.[68] In his letter to Buchanan dated March 3, 1967, he explained that his reticence revolved around two crucial points: SEC's view on the universality of poetry and the idea that intellectuals were always on the side of the people. "It is simply not true", argued Read, "the man of culture is nearly always an individualist and essentially aristocratic".[69]

Third, Western humanistic rhetoric clearly fed into the narrative that Britain used to present itself through cultural events of the period such as the aforementioned Festival of Britain of 1951, whose scope was to celebrate the technological achievements of the country. In the film produced to promote the Festival, the narrator celebrates the diversity of this "big family" represented by the British Isles, "as different as the countryman and the scientist", but also declares that "We are too small to stand alone" and that a communion across the Atlantic is a necessity.[70] Yet despite its humanistic stance promoting international collaboration, the film does not fail to avow Britain's superiority towards its former colonies, mentioning "the idea of the Parliament itself that spread until the Ganges", an explicit attempt to reinstate Britain's influence on India post-Independence.[71]

Conclusion

In a series of reports relating to the Pavilion from the Sixties following concerns over the high cost involved in organising such a demanding exhibition, the Biennale was regarded as an unrivalled "sounding board and shop window"[72] whose impact "is very far from being confined to Italy or even Western Europe"[73] with the 1948 iteration brought into the discussion multiple times as evidence of the importance of Britain's participation in the Venetian art event.[74] This importance wasn't only cultural, but political as well. Events such as the Biennale or the Festival of Britain were an occasion for Britain to enact a new form of cultural imperialism which could not assume the same characteristic of blatant subjection as in the past and had

68
Leeds, University of Leeds, Herbert Read Collection, class mark: BC MS 20c Herbert Read/11/125. See in particular the letter from George Buchanan to Read dated 6 March 1967, and the one sent by Umberto Campagnolo on May 16, 1967.

69
Leeds, University of Leeds, Herbert Read Collection, class mark: BC MS 20c Herbert Read/11/125, letter from Herbert Read to George Buchanan, March 3, 1967. The English art critics concludes writing: "'Dialogue' is another thing, and I am all in favour of that. I am all in favour of developing mutual understanding in so far as the language barriers permit it. But is also in favour of preserving certain values which depend on the integrity of each language and of the traditions based on it. In such circumstances can I subscribe to the ideals of S.E.C.?". Buchanan replies to his concerns as follows (March 6, 1967): "In reply to your letter and your question: of course you are the ideal member of SEC. No one has done more for cross-fertilisation than you. To be an individualist, and aristocratic, is the right qualification. An aristocrat wants the best world." (underscored in the original, author's note).

70
The film was entitled *Family Portrait - A Film on the Theme of the Festival of Britain* and directed by Humphrey Jennings. It can be watched here: http://archive.org/details/family_portrait_festival_of_britain_1951_humphrey_jennings, accessed July 2023. For a thorough discussion on the persistence of imperial discourse in many aspects of the Festival see John M. MacKenzie, 'The Persistence of Empire in Metropolitan Culture', in Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 21-36.

71
Family Portrait, 00:12:51.

72
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/86, GB/641/1(a), Notes on Venice Biennale by Lilian Somerville to Philip Hendy, August 1964, 2. Philip Hendy was Director of the National Gallery at the time.

73
Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/86, ITA/641/1(a), Report signed E.N. Gummer, 11th August 1964.

74
Beside the two archival references above, see also Richmond, The National Archives, BW 40/86, Report signed Philip Hendy, August 7, 1964.

thus to find new, indirect ways of claiming superiority even when, and especially because, the independence movements and anti-colonial struggles were succeeding in dissolving, at least formally, the British Empire. In the international setting of these cultural events, building a narrative that used humanism as a tool to support the idea that what was happening in the former colonies was actually the fulfilment of colonialism's purpose formed a pivotal part of that process of the "forgetting and disavowal of empire" which Faulkner and Ramamurthy have identified as a characteristic of the discourse around decolonisation in the cultural sphere.[75]

Decades later, the ghost of the British Empire still hovers over the Giardini. In 1997 the artist Rachel Whiteread, the first woman to represent Britain with a solo show, significantly described the pavilion as "that imperial building, up on a hill at the end of the avenue".[76] More recent biennials have seen artists tackling head-on this burdensome legacy of violence and racism whose effects still reverberate in contemporary British society.[77] Reassessing the post-war history of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale within a postcolonial context is central to understanding the role of cultural events in shaping the narratives around national identity, an aspect more important than ever in a post-Brexit reality.

75
Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy, "Introduction", in Simon Faulkner and Anandi Ramamurthy (eds.), *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

76
Charlotte Higgins, ""So Beautiful I Cried": Rachel Whiteread, Jeremy Deller and More on the Thrill of the Venice Biennale", *The Guardian* (6 May 2019), https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/06/so-beautiful-i-cried-rachel-whiteread-jeremy-deller-thrill-venice-biennale-british-pavilion, accessed July 2023.

77
I am thinking here not only of Chris Ofili's British Pavilion saturated with the colour of the Pan-African flag (2003) or the re-centring of Black female subjectivity in Sonia Boyce's *Feeling Her Way* at the latest Venice Biennale (2022), but also of Richard Hamilton's pavilion (1993) focused on the Troubles, the bloody conflict between Unionists and Irish Nationalists that racked Northern Ireland between the Sixties and the Nineties. For a brilliant read on the multiple ways in which Imperialism still impacts on modern Britain see: Sanghera, Sathnam. *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

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