

Vojko Štuhec / Sculptor
UGM Kabinet, Strossmayerjeva 6
24 August—6 October 2024
curator: Andreja Borin

The exhibition was initiated with the donation of sculptures and drawings by academic sculptor Vojko Štuhec to the Maribor Art Gallery from the artist's heirs, Alenka and Mojca Štuhec, the artist's wife and daughter. The donation consists of 33 sculptures, two sculptural drafts, and 150 paper drawings, sketches, and drafts. As there have only been a few sculptures by Vojko Štuhec from the *Phytoliths* and *Figure* series in the UGM Collection up to this point, the contribution is a significant addition to both the artist's body of work and the UGM's collection of sculptures. There is a collection of about 30 pieces on display. The exhibition highlights Vojko Štuhec's distinct periods of work, emphasises the relationship between sculpture and drawing, and showcases his many sculptural approaches. In addition, the exhibition provides an opportunity to present previously unseen works by the artist (such as *Mobile*, 1974).

Nude sketches and the plaster study of a portrait from the sculptor's time as a student at the Academy of Fine Arts are among the early works on display. The young sculpture student adhered to a study plan while creating these and related pieces, hence the personal touch is not pronounced. Following his graduation, Vojko Štuhec focused mostly on creating organic forms throughout the first part of the 1970s, drawing inspiration from the reclining female body. However, this was not the sculptor's sole interest. Štuhec's 1974 *Mobile*, preserved and largely reconstructed, is on display for the first time. Concurrently, Vojko Štuhec produced two sculpto-paintings and ten preserved studies for unimplemented kinetic-light objects (1977–1980). This interest of the sculptor, which has been mostly overlooked up until now, is rooted in broader modernist impulses and follows the path of the mobile and light objects of Dušan Tršar and Slavko Tihec¹. Early in the 1970s, Tršar and Tihec worked along with the art group *Neo-constructivists*, which allowed Slovenian art become more rationally conceived and minimalist, free of the subjective expression of the artist. The objects frequently included movement, light, and colour and were constructed of then-novel technological materials including polyester, neon, and plexiglass.² Therefore, Vojko Štuhec also engaged in this area at the beginning of his artistic career.

¹ Slavko Tihec was Štuhec's professor at the Academy of Fine Arts.

² The *Neo-constructivists* were active in the years 1968–1972. Slavko Tihec joined them during a 1970 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana.



The sculpture of organically melodic, rounded lines, which was influenced by English artist Henry Moore, was another significant impulse in the early 1970s.³ At first, Štuhec was primarily interested in studying rounded sculptural mass that emanated from the female body. A qualitative peak with encouraging possibilities for larger realisations can be found in the semi-abstract sculptures in coloured or patinated siporex. Among the sculptures included in the donation are two pieces both named *Reclining Figure* (1975), for instance. In the two series that followed, *Phytoliths* (1975–1977) and *Figure* (1984–1985), which signify the artist's mature period, the sculptor carried on this subtly sensed organic tendency. He frequently applied the principles of variation, multiplication, folding, and composition throughout this phase. He realised the *Phytoliths* series in multiple forms: three-dimensional and relief sculptures, small-scale sculptures, and large-scale public sculptures. Owing to the constraints of his workspace, he has frequently used siporex, which is both easy to work with and paintable. One of the features of his sculptural oeuvre in siporex is the subtle tinting of his sculptures.

The artist's travels throughout Scandinavia served as inspiration for the creation of the *Odin Saga* series in the mid-1990s. Compared to his earlier series, he used different materials (wood, metal, aluminium). Iron plate silhouettes are sometimes employed as stand-alone pieces, and their poetic undertone comes from their minimalist abstraction. Štuhec has employed a puzzle approach to integrate the separate components into dialogue in earlier works from this series. Again, colour plays a major role, but this series abandons the figurativeness of the preceding ones in favour of abstraction. The series' fundamental expression is provided by the wooden elements, such as spears and arrowheads, which are meant to resemble ship ribs, building roofs, or deer antlers. However, these elements can also move technically, a feature that the artist was drawn to in his earlier works.

In his last completed series, Vojko Štuhec seems to have returned to his early interests. In the works after 2000, the most frequent title is *Composition* or *Folder*, and the sculptor revisits concepts, such as movement, application, multiplication, and variation. The artist does not use chiselling or modelling, the sculptures are created on the basis of a precise technical plan. Again, he uses an analytical approach, where the hand of the artist is in the background and the material itself takes over the message. Unlike the soft siporex of the previous period, here the sculptor has opted for marble and metal. Although the movable elements invite the viewer to move and co-create, the sharp and sleek surfaces seem rather inaccessible.

Vojko Štuhec was always receptive to a variety of sculptural techniques: chiselling, carving, modelling, casting, patination, welding, etc. He was a restless seeker who did not remain committed to the fields he had already conquered. He seemed to have been

³ Henry Moore rose to fame after winning the sculpture prize at the 1948 Venice Biennial. A book on Henry Moore, a present by Štuhec's wife Alenka from 1977, and a guide to the 1975 Henry Moore exhibition at the Tate Gallery are both preserved in Štuhec's personal library. In 1960, Kranj, Slovenj Gradec, and Maribor held a traveling exhibition of Henry Moore's sculptures. Moore's sculptures, drawings, and prints were on display in Slovenj Gradec in 1979. Moore also participated in the 1983 Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, where he displayed his graphic works.



seeking out the next challenge while working on a piece. Most likely for this reason, he repeatedly decided to take up new themes, materials, and approaches. The following is the artist's notation found in the margin of one of the 1980 sketches:

Search and keep searching,

You might find!

Find what? You'll know then,

Search, it might not be in vain!

It was certainly not in vain! Vojko Štuhec's contributions have made a noticeable impact on Maribor and the wider Slovenian region. His work is part of the broader trend of 1970s–1980s Slovenian contemporary sculpture, which promoted the use of new expressive possibilities and the liberation of sculptural form. He made his name mostly as a sculptor of soft, rounded sculptures, which constituted the majority of his body of work, both in the public and the art world. On the other hand, new pieces were continuously being produced at the periphery of these series, suggesting a shift in the artist's focus and a diversity of interests.

Vojko Štuhec (1946–2018) received his degree in 1972 from the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana, where he was taught by Boris Kalin, Drago Tršar, and Slavko Tihec. In 1974, he made Maribor his home. He worked as an art teacher at several secondary schools, and as a freelance artist since 1987. He participated actively in both the Maribor Fine Artists Society and the Slovenian Association of Fine Arts Societies. In addition to participating in multiple solo and group exhibitions, he has dedicated his time to public sculpture. Two of his public sculptures are to be found in Maribor: a fountain in the city park (1980)⁴ and a relief sculpture in the underpass beneath the railway bridge on Meljska cesta (1984). He also created individual public sculptures in the following locations: Štanjel in the Karst region (1968), student campus in Ljubljana (1970), Videm ob Ščavnici (1972), Ribnica na Pohorju (1980), Ruše (1980), and Radlje ob Dravi (1993). He worked on productions of *Faust*, *Nabucco*, *Hamlet*, *The Csardas Princess*, *Carmen*, and *The Marriage of Figaro* as a set designer with the Maribor Slovene National Theatre. The artist's works were the subject of a retrospective exhibition held in 1997 at the Maribor Art Gallery.

Exhibition setup: Andreja Borin, Simona Šuc

Translation: Ksenija Vidic

Layout: Matej Koren Studio

With gratitude to Alenka and Mojca Štuhec.

⁴ A copy of the fountain, often referred to as the *Mushrooms*, is being created after it was stolen during park renovations.

