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## **Post-Colonial Art History for Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned States? Oto Bihalji-Merin and the Concept of “Naïve” Art**

The Yugoslav writer, artist and art critic Oto Bihalji-Merin (1905–1997) lived in Berlin during the 1920s. Born into a Jewish family, he moved to Paris after the rise of the Nazi regime before he joined the defenders of the Second Spanish Republic in the Civil War. After the Second World War, he became the most important cultural theorist and administrator in Tito’s Yugoslavia. The left-wing intellectual who had first joined the Yugoslav and then the German communist party had established close contacts with intellectuals from all over Europe – Germany, France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union. In Belgrade, where he lived after 1945, he edited the lavishly illustrated magazine *Yugoslavia*, promoting culture and art in the various regions of the socialist Republic. He also published several books on medieval as well as modern Yugoslav, European and World art, while organizing, at home and abroad, exhibitions of Yugoslav *naïve* painters. After Tito’s break with Stalin in 1948, the concept of *naïve*, autodidactic folk art he advocated replaced socialist realism as an official doctrine. *Naïve* art was sustained as an authentic, primordial expression of proletarian and peasant creativity. Inspired by Tito’s movement of Non-Aligned states Bihalji-Merin tried to propose an early concept of art history overcoming the hegemonic views of colonialism – long before Edward Said published his famous book *Orientalism*.

Can his ideas of an international folk or *naïve* artistic production be considered as anticipating post-colonial theories of post-colonial artistic culture? In order to answer this question, I will analyse Bihalji-Merin’s attempt at overcoming the gap between high and low, old and modern, abstract and figurative, Eastern and Western art, and its impact on various levels: from regional art to the multinational cultures of communist Yugoslavia, finally in the global perspective of the non-aligned movement.

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