CHRISTIAN PETERSEN AND THE UNKNOWN POLITICAL PRISONER
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This research was commissioned by University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa in 2022 to further illuminate the rich story behind Christian Petersen’s sculpture *Unknown Political Prisoner*. Scholarship is funded in part by an Iowa Arts Council grant.

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Cover image: *Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1952 by Christian Petersen. Above image: Christian Petersen working in his studio, mid to late 1950s, Ames, IA. The *Unknown Political Prisoner* sculpture can be seen over his shoulder on a shelf by the window.
Christian Petersen and the Unknown Political Prisoner

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In the midst of the Cold War, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London proposed in 1952 an international sculpture competition, the first such event after World War II (1939–1945). The ICA was among the vanguard organizations of postwar avant-garde art, and its idea was to enlist the creative energies of the sculptors of the “free world” to comment on one of the saddest aftermaths of the war: the domination of the Soviet Union and its Communist ideology over satellite nations of eastern and central Europe known as the Eastern, Soviet, or Communist Bloc, as well as the suppression of dissenting citizens in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) itself. The theme for which the ICA solicited sculptural imagery was a challenging one: the “unknown political prisoner;” the title for the proposed work of art was to be Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner (abbreviated here as Unknown Political Prisoner).

The word went out around the world early in 1952 about this competition, which had the advantage of offering solid financial prizes to those chosen for final consideration. The eventual winner was the British artist, Reg Butler (1913–1981), in a contest that attracted several thousand responses from 57 nations. (Fig. 1) The ICA decided to jury only sculptors from the United Kingdom and to set up selection committees in various countries to deal with the entrants from their respective nations. In the United States, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City accepted all the proposals from Americans and chose eleven finalists who were then to be funneled forward to the final decision in London. Artists from every continent (with the exception of Antarctica) responded, and those in western Europe and the United States especially. In the United States alone, 399 respondents asked for entry materials and approximately 193 actually sent in proposals (including maquettes or models) for the “unknown political prisoner.” Most of the entries came from New York City and the East Coast, with a scattering of participants from other regions. The Midwest was only slightly represented, with most of the entrants coming from Chicago and Detroit. Among those, only one sculptor from Iowa responded to

1. These nations (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania) were also united with the Soviet Union in a defense treaty known as the Warsaw Pact.

2. From the undated list of Americans entering the competition, compiled by the Museum of Modern Art (the final number included a few names which were not on this list), 99 were from New York (city and state), 36 from the Northeast, 25 from California and the West, 20 from the Midwest, and 8 from the South. These calculations are by the author. “Total List of 193 Contestants Submitting Maquettes in American Section of ICA – International Sculpture Competition.” The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. International Council and International Programs Records, I.B.36.
the “unknown political prisoner” contest. Very few of the Americans who sought to have their art recognized were from rural areas; almost no one had the simple address that Christian Petersen (1885–1961), artist-in-residence at Iowa State College (now University), sent in: no house number or street address or urban zone number, simply “Gilbert, Iowa.” (Gilbert is a small community about four miles north of Ames.) He was the only Iowan who created a work of art on the ICA’s theme, and the only one who accepted the challenge, giving form to the idea of “the unknown political prisoner.”

The only Iowan

Petersen’s entrance into this international competition was odd indeed – he had refused to submit his work to juried exhibitions since the 1930s and rarely even tried to show his work beyond the campus of Iowa State College or, occasionally, Des Moines and nearby towns. His reputation was almost non-existent outside Iowa, and most of his work could be seen only at the college; also, he was recognized primarily for his scenes of campus life, rural themes, or portraiture. But in 1952, at the age of 66, he focused on this competition originating in London, one that put him up against some of the best-known artists of his time. In addition – and perhaps even more affecting – his oft-stated rejection of “Modernism” would have marked him as among the most provincial practitioners in an artistic backwater – at least in the minds of some. His decision to enter this competition placed him at the center of an art world that he largely disdained and which mostly ignored him and his style of art. Submitting his proposal to the Museum of Modern Art and its jury of Modernist sympathizers was risking rejection on a new scale. Subsequently, his work was rejected and returned to him, apparently without comment from the jurors. Why did he enter this fray to begin with? No direct evidence for his thinking is found, but judging from documents and works of art both before and after the international contest, it seems likely that he was much affected by the theme and believed he could contribute worthwhile ideas and interpretations about political oppression and injustice.

Aside from all the factors predicting his failure, one might have expected that Petersen had at least as good a chance as anyone considering the anonymity of the jurying process. A glance at his sculpture (Fig. 2), however, strongly suggests why his proposal was rejected: it was a fine-tuned rendering of human anatomy in the most excruciating detail, the ultimate naturalistic statement that was clearly based in the classical language of the body as an ideal perfection of form. One can only imagine how quickly the New York jury rejected and pushed his proposal aside, out of sight and purged from the competition. His maquette, along with its supporting drawings, were all shipped back to Iowa and, for decades, no one suspected that Christian Petersen, from Iowa State College in Ames, had dreamed of international recognition.
Like much of the work of this Midwestern artist, this sculpture remained in his studio, unsold and barely, if at all, noticed. It has no exhibition record, and no mention of it is found in the sparse literature on Petersen during his lifetime. Nearly the only record of its existence is found in the listing of artworks offered for sale by his widow, Charlotte Garvey Petersen (1899-1985) in 1964, most of which were purchased by sympathetic friends who recognized her financial need after her husband’s death in 1961. Listed as Unknown Prisoner, it was sold for $50 to Helen J. Sebek, a collector from nearby Fort Dodge, Iowa. Petersen was a poor record-keeper, and we would have few resources for learning about his career were it not for his wife, who was his archivist (and advocate), saving his personal papers, along with scores of drawings and sketches. Among those papers was no mention of the international sculpture competition for the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner. For many years, Petersen’s plaster sculpture was assumed to be from around the period of World War II. Starting from 1939 with the Nazi Blitzkrieg across Europe and England, through D-Day of 1944 and, in 1945, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan, Petersen gave considerable attention to expressing his horror at the war and the suffering it inflicted. (See Figs. 40-43)

When the University Museums began to compile a catalogue raisonné of Petersen’s oeuvre and conduct intensive research into the artist’s career, a thorough examination of his drawings and sketches ensued. In 1992, the artist’s daughter, Mary Charlotte Petersen, had sold her large collection of Petersen’s works on paper, and they opened a new chapter of information on his career. In that cataloguing process, it was noted that his wife Charlotte had penciled a brief inscription on the cover of a sketchbook that contained drawings related to war imagery in which she referred to an “unknown prisoner,” drawn for a sculpture competition. Several sheets contained sketches that seemed to relate to this subject, including one with a highly finished drawing that was obviously a study for the plaster sculpture purchased in the 1964 sale, a drawing that elucidated the artist’s plans for the scale and placement of his sculpture. In early versions of the catalogue raisonné, “Unknown Prisoner” was the title ascribed to the small sculpture and the drawing, along with the speculation that they might be related to several war memorials that Petersen proposed for the Iowa State campus or were unusual depictions of Christ’s crucifixion. With further research, it was learned that there had been a sculpture competition, but it was for an unknown political prisoner, and it was conducted by the Institute for Contemporary Art in London, well known as an advocate for Modernism, especially abstraction. Considering Petersen’s intransigence about entering juried competitions and his often-stated disregard for Modern art, it seemed a stretch to think he might have participated. It was only when the archives of the Museum of Modern Art in New York were searched that it was discovered that Christian Petersen of Iowa had indeed sent an entry to the international competition. Prior to this confirmation, there was little reason to think that Petersen had paid any attention at all to this contest or that he had aspired to compete on an international level.

3. At Mrs. Petersen’s sale, Sebek bought a total of five sculptures: Country Doctor, 1936 (painted plaster), Madonna of the Prairie, 1930s (painted plaster), Madonna, 1940 (plaster), and Colonel Godson, 1940 (painted plaster). Sebek donated all of them to the University Museums, Iowa State University, in 2000.

4. This drawing was removed from the sketchbook and placed into an archival matte. UM92.359
Petersen’s early influences and career

It is not entirely surprising that the subjects of oppression and suffering would have aroused Petersen to overcome his retiring nature and decide to join the contest. From his earliest days, political struggles and military actions had directed his life, at least in part. Born on the family farm in Denmark in 1885, his parents were acutely aware of the hegemony possessed by Germany over their region. The German state known at the time as Prussia, engaged in several conflicts with Denmark, particularly in the areas of Schleswig and Holstein, exactly where the Petersen’s had lived for generations. These disputes became acute in the 19th century during what the Danes refer to as the First and Second Schleswig Wars. The earliest encounter was relatively mild, ending in 1852 with the Danes losing part of their territory. The Second one, in 1864, was far more significant in that it ended with a decisive and humiliating defeat for the Danish forces, causing further loss of territory, population, and influence. The major battle was, in fact, fought quite near the Petersen farm (Fig. 3), and the resulting destruction and death must have been closely observed and felt by the family, who identified firmly as Danish.  

The Petersen’s lived under Prussian domination for at least a generation, but in 1894, Peter and Helene, nine-year-old Christian’s parents, decided to do what many other Danes had done during this period: they left and emigrated to America. Their particular concern was that their two sons would eventually be conscripted into the Prussian Army and forced to fight against their fellow Danes. The risk of living adjacent to a state they regarded as oppressive and warlike, and the worry that Prussian military aggression might be imposed upon their young men, proved compelling.


The Bridge is the journal of the Danish American Heritage Society. Additional commentary on the Petersen family is found in an undated typescript by August Bang (1887–1959) in the Christian Petersen Papers in the Special Collections of the Iowa State University Library. Bang emigrated from Denmark in 1913 and settled in Cedar Falls, Iowa where he published a Danish-American newspaper and Julegranen, a Danish-language holiday magazine of articles, stories, poems and illustrations that celebrated Danish heritage. Bang’s friendship with the Petersen family began with Christian’s father, Peter, and continued with the artist. Christian Petersen contributed numerous illustrations to Bang’s publications, especially Julegranen.
They landed at Ellis Island in May of that year and proceeded to a Danish settlement near Paxton, Illinois, but about three years later, they moved to New Jersey, a decision made, according to family legend, because Helene wished to live closer to the sea, as they had in Denmark. The familial memory of living in occupied territory, under political stress, with a constant dread of war was surely assimilated by the eldest son, who carried into adulthood and into his artistic identity a sensitivity to the effect of such conditions and of warfare on the lives of ordinary people.

The young Petersen attended the public schools of Newark and then began his training as a metal craftsman at the Newark Technical School (now the New Jersey Institute of Technology), followed by night classes in die cutting at the Fawcett School of Design, also in Newark. Around 1900, he began his career, working mostly for the Robbins Company of Attleboro, Massachusetts, designing and engraving small objects such as medals, plaques, and commemorative coins. (Fig. 4) He made a comfortable living and developed a substantial reputation, but he was restless because his deepest goal in life was to become a fine artist, a sculptor. Hoping to expand his abilities and his erudition, he attended classes at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence (a short train ride from Attleboro), and at the Art Students League, and the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, both in New York. He also worked for a brief time in the early 1920’s in the Boston studio of Henry Hudson Kitson (1863–1947) as he struggled to create a new pathway for his life. He took every opportunity he could find to establish himself as a true artist and not simply a worker with high technical skills. Some of Petersen’s earliest known “fine art” sculptures dealt with the subject of warfare and its attendant oppressions. He began to be critically noticed during the years around World War I when he savaged the Germans as brutes (Fig. 5), celebrated the valiant American doughboys, and memorialized individuals in small-scale studio sculptures which garnered him attention.

Fig. 4 Doughboy of World War I, 1917-1920 designed by Christian Petersen (Danish-American, 1885 - 1961); Manufactured by The Balfour Company (American, Attleboro, MA). Bronze. Gift of Charlotte Petersen to Special Collections, Iowa State University Library. Transferred to University Museums. In the Christian Petersen Art Collection, Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. UM99.57

6. Much of the information about the Petersen family history, including the reason for their emigration from Denmark, appears in Christian Petersen Remembered by the sculptor’s first biographer, Patricia Lounsbury Bliss (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1986; especially 3-4.) See also the research by James D. Iversen, Professor Emeritus at Iowa State University, especially for specifics about the Petersen’s in Denmark and their immigration into the United States. Curatorial files of the Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University.

7. In several of his lectures, Petersen made reference to having worked among other sculptors in a studio in Boston, but it is only in some of his personnel information sheets for Iowa State College that he cited his connection to Kitson, which he dated to the 1920’s. A search of the papers of Henry Hudson Kitson and his wife, Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson (1871–1932) has discovered no mention of Petersen. For more details on Petersen’s education and early career, see DeLong, Lea Rosson, Christian Petersen: Urban Artist, 1900–1934 (Ames: University Museums, Iowa State University, 2007). Although much of the information from this period of his life has been expanded since the publication of this book, along with a few corrections, it is a useful preliminary survey.
The most notable result of these beginnings as a sculptor rather than as an industrial craftsman was a 1923 commission from the veterans of Newport, Rhode Island for their Spanish-American War Memorial, still standing in the city’s Equality Park. (Figs. 6-7) An over-lifesized monument, it presents a female figure draped in classical robes, holding aloft the torch of liberty (sometimes called Victory in its early days, the statue is known locally as Liberty). Petersen’s design thoroughly employs the traditional vocabulary for war memorials, celebrating victory with noble figures derived from ancient Greek and Roman imagery. Judging this sculpture against his other work, both earlier and later, it seems possible that the classicizing style was requested, or even dictated, by the veteran commissioners or other participants. At his next major opportunity the following year of 1924, Petersen left behind all classical references when he was selected to create a World War I memorial to the men of Battery D, an artillery company from New Bedford, Massachusetts, where the monument remains today. Here, his narrative was not victory expressed via a form adapted from Antiquity, but an ordinary, enlisted soldier displaying a workmanlike automatism in manning the machinery of modern warfare. (Fig. 8) The Battery D Memorial was a grim statement about the anonymity and grinding endurance of trench bombardments on the battlefields of France. The memorial consists simply of a single figure, bending to the task of loading and re-loading a shell into the French 75 canons with which the Americans covered the advance of infantry troops in several battles in 1918. Petersen gives no indication of the setting and doesn’t even include the big gun; he sculpted only the figure and a small pile of artillery shells at the soldier’s feet. The artistic decision to have only a single figure carry the weight of the sculpture’s narrative and its meaning was a forerunner to his later “unknown political prisoner.” Important also for his later art about war, the artist doesn’t give any hint of victory; we have no idea from the sculpture itself how the fight came out. All we can see is the bent and intense body of the doughboy, head down, hardly recognizable, a nearly anonymous figure whose being is concentrated in the role given him in this massive war. It isn’t clear if we should regard him as a hero or not, if he is part of a glorious endeavor or just a cog in a pointless, brutal exercise. Tucking the soldier’s face away from us, so that we cannot easily, if it all, read his facial expression (and therefore get some idea of his emotional state) is a device the artist would resurrect in his Cold War sculpture of 1952, along with the lack of resolution in the outcome:

8. The Spanish-American War Memorial was cast by the commercial foundry of the Tilden-Thurber Company in Providence. The exact relationship of Petersen with the company has never been firmly established; it isn’t known whether Petersen obtained the commission on his own and then solicited Tilden-Thurber for the casting or whether the commissioners enlisted the company to find an appropriate artist.
Fig. 6-7 Spanish-American War Memorial, 1923 by Christian Petersen. Equality Park, City of Newport, Rhode Island. Fig. 6 is of the dedication for the sculpture in 1923. Fig. 7 is from 2015. The sword was lost at some point.
Fig. 8  Battery D Memorial, 1924 by Christian Petersen. City of New Bedford, Massachusetts.
we cannot discern whether victory will come for the doughboy or if it will evade him. In Petersen’s *Unknown Political Prisoner*, we do not know if he is dead or alive.

These two important commissions helped Petersen move toward his goals as an artist but did not cement his reputation, or bring him the recognition and the opportunities, he so desired. In the late 1920s, he decided it was time to push harder and risk everything to satisfy his ambition. Following a divorce, he left behind his first wife and three teenaged children in Attleboro, quit all of his jobs for the Robbins Company and other jewelry and metal design companies on the east coast, and headed west, ending up in Chicago. He was certain that whole new avenues for artistic expression and sculptural achievement were awaiting him in the Midwest. What greeted him instead was the Great Depression, which began in 1929 just as Petersen was embarking on the new phase of his life. When the market for art dried up as surely as it did for almost every livelihood in that economy, Petersen found himself back at a die-cutting firm, asking for work. Accepting employment from Dodge and Ascher in Chicago, nevertheless he tried to keep his sculpture studio going. From about the mid-1920’s, Petersen had been carrying out small projects for the state of Iowa, namely commemorative and historical plaques, and that connection would afford him a lifeline for his career in the early and most stressful years of the 1930s. His relationship with the Historical, Memorial and Art Department of Iowa was strong enough that its curator, Edgar R. Harlan (1869–1941), continued to patronize Petersen as he struggled to establish a new career in the Midwest.

The national economic catastrophe deepened, but when Franklin D. Roosevelt won the presidential election of 1932 his New Deal soon began to address the peoples’ troubles, including that portion of the population known as artists. The first of several art agencies, the Public Works of Art Project, was established late in 1933, with offices in every state. The director for Iowa was its most famous artist son, Grant Wood (1891–1942), who immediately began to recruit the talent of the state to join the New Deal endeavor. Harlan and other admirers of Petersen’s wrote to Wood to suggest that the well-regarded but very poor sculptor ought to move to Iowa so he could join Wood’s group. With a paucity of sculptors who could qualify for the PWAP, Wood did as they asked and invited Petersen to Iowa City. While Wood and his painters worked on a series of murals for the library at Iowa State College (*When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*), Petersen began designing a sculpture for the college that consisted of six low-relief panels and a fountain, *The History of Dairying*. (Fig. 9) Before Petersen could finish this complex installation, however, the PWAP lost its Congressional funding. Instead of giving up on his special project, the president of the college, Raymond M. Hughes (1873–1958), took an unprecedented step: he hired Petersen as an artist-in-residence, creating the first such post in American higher education. Though he was shockingly poorly paid, Petersen came to Ames where he created major monuments for the campus until the 1950s.

![Fig. 9 History Of Dairying preliminary drawing by Christian Petersen in the workshop of the PWAP, Iowa City, Iowa. Christian Petersen Archives.](image)
War, innocence and memorials

Most of Petersen’s time for the rest of the Depression decade was taken up with sculptures requested by various departments at the college, but when World War II began in September of 1939, Petersen shifted some of his energies to reflect his distress and his worries. For him, with his European background, the early days of the Blitzkrieg, especially when the Nazi forces rolled across parts of Scandinavia, became subjects for his art. Over the next half-decade, he did create several notable sculptures about the fighting men and about combat, but they are matched by others (including works on paper) that focus on civilians or the aftermath of war. After World War II finally ended in 1945, Petersen’s sketchbooks were filled for years with dozens of proposals for war memorials, none of which were ever realized. (Figs. 10-11) The ICA competition gave him a different, but related subject. Warriors and innocents had all been the artist’s subjects for decades, but never before had he produced any sculpture with the calculated suffering of a political prisoner.

We do not know how he learned about the international competition; perhaps it came in a routine announcement mailed out to American colleges, or he saw a notice in a national art magazine such as Art News. However it came about, Petersen was the sole artist from Iowa and one of the few Midwesterners who decided to enter the competition.

![Fig. 10 All the evils which have kept Him prisoner, c. 1950 by Christian Petersen. Pencil on paper. Gift of Charlotte Petersen to Special Collections, Iowa State University Library. Transferred to University Museums. In the Christian Petersen Art Collection, Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. UM99.223](image)
Fig. 11  *Sketch of a Statue*, n.d. by Christian Petersen. Black graphite or conte on paper. Purchased by University Museums from Mary Petersen with the Christian Petersen Memorial Fund. In the Christian Petersen Art Collection, Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. UM92.274a
Fig. 12 Detail of head and wrists, *Unknown Political Prisoner* by Christian Petersen.

Fig. 13 Detail of feet, *Unknown Political Prisoner* by Christian Petersen.
His idea for the “unknown political prisoner” was different from nearly everything in his past. He seldom dealt with the nude or with figures that articulated human anatomy in detail or, at this point in his career, with intimations of religion; he certainly had few hints of politics in his work. And this sculpture, until its exact and accurate title was attached to it, would not appear to have any political component. (See Cover image) The lack of an overt political comment was surely intentional on Petersen’s part. Yet, once that title is recognized, the political aspect becomes unmistakable. Having the title activates the sculpture on several levels.

The artist modeled a nearly nude male figure hanging by his wrists, his face against a broad slab. (Fig. 12) The figure is utterly still and suggests no movement or capacity for movement. Though he is well muscled, his body is inert and suspended from his wrists; with both feet trailing behind him, he no longer supports his own weight. (Fig. 13) This figure is different from Petersen’s other war sculptures in that he is not an active combatant or a victim of bombing or a person caught in unintended consequences. This man has been placed here deliberately, and his situation is not incidental to warfare nor is it collateral damage or accidental. In addition, once we understand that this is a Cold War era sculpture and not one from the fighting and bombings of World War II, it changes the morality issues. The body holds no obvious injuries such as wounds or abrasions, yet we know at once that he has been, and perhaps still is, in distress. Even without direct evidence of battering, shocks, or blows, we feel certain that we are witnessing the aftermath of torture. The character of the body’s suspension alone is extreme and frightening.

Applying the title of “unknown political prisoner,” we know that this man is not a captured combatant, but a person taken prisoner primarily because of his beliefs. Whatever actions he may have taken, a political prisoner is taken into custody first because of what he thinks, and only second for what he does. Within human society, war is allowable, legally, and with international sanction. But there are rules for war. The Geneva Conventions proscribe certain behaviors and actions in the conduct of warfare and the treatment of prisoners of war, and combatants are held accountable to follow those prohibitions. Torture is not permissible, not ever, for any reason. Some may argue that torture is “justified,” and they may have their adherents, but even so, it is not lawful. Torture is never legal, and it is always a crime. Because it is never supposed to happen, there exist no rules about it. And yet, how popular it has been. States are also allowed to detain, incarcerate, and punish those whom, it has been proven, are a danger. It is not illegal to imprison anyone whose actions, as demonstrated in court, constitute a threat to the peace and safety of the citizens in society, nor is it illegal (in democracies) to voice strong and substantive criticism of a government. Part of the genesis behind this sculpture competition is the assertion that democracies do not imprison people just because of their beliefs. In such societies, even those whose actions have resulted in imprisonment are entitled to be treated humanely and never subjected to deliberate torture. The man depicted by Petersen has not been granted these rights. Aside from any notions of humane treatment, in Petersen’s presentation, we feel convinced that illegality, the subversion and flaunting of human rights, is a factor in what we are seeing. We have no idea what this man’s beliefs were, nor do we know exactly what was done to him. All we have is his body to tell the story.
We do not know why he has been hurt or killed. Actually, we don’t know whether he is dead or alive. Petersen’s reticence in that regard strengthens his sculpture when we puzzle over whether this person is unconscious or lifeless. Hanging by his wrists, shoulder blades protruding, the bones of the lower rib cage extended, and feet dragging at the base of the slab, the body is inert. (Fig. 14) The body is left intact, and we can see how well muscled and physically powerful it is, or was, but we cannot tell whether to mourn or to hope. This man is turned away from us; his face, where we might gauge his suffering, is hidden, and his identity is obscured. Turning the front of the body and the face away bestows anonymity, a lack of personhood. It is difficult to defend, remember, or commemorate those whose faces we cannot see, those who have been deprived of their prominent physical identity. By using this position in his sculpture, Petersen fulfilled one of the definitions of the competition theme. Truly, the prisoner is unknown, and this is part of the tragedy and unspeakable cruelty of oppression and torture. We have few ways to assess this person or to know his value in the world’s eyes; all we have is his body, his fundamental humanness.

Among the horrible aspects of this scene is the fact that the man has been affixed to the slab by straps – straps that seem intended to be used more than once. There was likely a person held in them before, and another person will hang from them when this man is removed. They are re-usable, a permanent piece of equipment designed for sequential use. Just as we do not know who this person is, we will not know the next one – and we feel sickeningly sure that there will be another, and another after that. The terrifying implication of those straps in the context of the postwar world is that World War II did not resolve injustice, aggression or state-sponsored
criminality, and the subsequent Cold War only pushed those behaviors off the battlefield. Unlike some of the sculptures entered into the competition, Petersen’s offers no escape from the reality of torture.

Two elements of Petersen’s design refer to Christian imagery, but in ways that are odd or even contrary to tradition. The first and most obvious is the position of the body with its splayed arms, and the second is the rudimentary cross against which the figure hangs suspended (the base is also cruciform). (Figs. 15-16) In early studies for his monument, Petersen did place the figure against a plain, rectangular slab, but in the end, he chose to include short, abbreviated extensions, taking the sculpture out of a neutral, geometric context and positing it into the more complex ambiance of a cross with all of its religious associations. (Figs. 17-18) This decision was deliberate on Petersen’s part as illustrated in the evolutions of his design, and he surely understood the implications. He ran the risk of having his sculpture regarded as a “Christian” statement and thereby not acceptable – or too old-fashioned and derivative to many of the postwar world. By using historical associations, he may have seen it as an opportunity to alter those readings, to make the use of cruciforms or men hanging by their arms more applicable to the present day.

These elements, then, do evoke the crucifixion of Christ, but with significant differences. The artist might have knowingly employed these well-recognized devices enough to set up familiar associations, but then different enough to highlight his distinctive new statement. In bypassing
Fig. 17  Crucifixion (now attributed to Unknown Political Prisoner), 1951-52 by Christian Petersen. Black graphite or conté on paper. Purchased by University Museums from Mary Petersen by the Christian Petersen Memorial Fund. In the Christian Petersen Art Collection, Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. UM92.97
Fig. 18 *Unknown Political Prisoner: Concept Sketch*, 1952 by Christian Petersen. Black graphite or conté on paper. Purchased by the Christian Petersen Memorial Fund. In the Christian Petersen Art Collection, Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University. UM92.96
exclusively Christian components, Petersen opens up the interpretation of his sculpture to a multitude of possibilities, an asset in art. There are no signs identifying the figure (such as “This is the King of the Jews,” the sign placed above Christ’s head at his crucifixion) to give some reason for his punishment or to hold him up to public ridicule. There is little art historical iconography to give us the story behind what we see in Unknown Political Prisoner or to place it in a time-honored religious context. What examples of such postures can we point to in the art of the past? There are a few martyrdoms which have the victim strung up in this way, but not many, and they are not usually without a specific identity. Because of these dis-associations, we must see this figure in a largely ahistorical way.

As noted already, the man’s face is turned away from us, tucked into his angled shoulder joint so that we cannot see any emotional expression, nor can we identify him as an individual. In our common understanding of Christ’s life, he was nailed to a wooden cross, and Petersen seems determined to counter that story; this unknown prisoner has not been crucified. The straps alone, as permanent installations, push this narrative in a different direction as does the slab against which the figure hangs. The artist makes it clear that this “support” is not wooden but is some sort of stone and one of substantial thickness. Unlike the crucifixion of Christ, this man has not been nailed to a cross; that method does not involve permanent fixtures in that when the victim is dead, both the nails and the wooden cross are likely “throw-aways” and won’t be used again. In Petersen’s sculpture, however, we feel fairly certain that, as observed, another prisoner has and will hang where this man now does.

Petersen had used a stone slab earlier in his career for the 1923 Spanish-American War Memorial, but there its function was decorative, providing a simple backdrop for the presentation of the statue of “Victory;” it had nothing to do with the female classical figure or the ideas embodied in it. (Fig. 19, See also Figs. 6-7) But here the thick stone evokes an architectural interior. The concept of a “monument to the unknown political prisoner” generally implies a thing set out and separate from a building, and Petersen’s drawings make it clear that he understood that; he is creating a work of art that will be placed, as an object, in an exhibition hall or a public spot, but part of its function as a work of art is to evoke

Fig. 19  Side view of the Spanish-American War Memorial, Newport, RI. Note the cruciform shaped base also employed in the maquette for Petersen’s Unknown Political Prisoner.
spaces beyond its own physical boundaries. Petersen had demonstrated in numerous campus sculptures of the 1930s and '40s that part of his artistic statement was to activate the imagination to see his sculptures in an entirely different and expanded environment. The broad, thick slab, therefore, suggests that it is only a portion of a larger wall and, further, that the wall is a portion of a room in a building. By this imaginary transformation, the artist makes us suspect that this torture has been carried out in secret, with only the victim and his torturers present.

The slab alone can carry that interpretation, but it is the positioning of the body that furthers the suspicion, if not the conviction, that what we are seeing is something out of public view. Even though we can’t tell if the man is alive or dead, we do sense clearly that this is not specifically an execution. The end may be death, but the route is a different one. The first goal was to inflict pain, and whether any public witnessed it, or was instructed by it, was irrelevant. The implied secretiveness of this scene separates it from the crucifixion of Christ. As already noted, when Petersen turned the man’s face away from view, he robbed him of an identity. If we cannot tell who the person is, there is no point in having a public execution, which is one of the primary reasons, according to the New Testament of the Bible, for Christ’s crucifixion. Public humiliation was a crucial aspect of Christ’s punishment – and of almost all executions carried out by the state – and his face and his body were lifted above the crowd and displayed frontally for all to see. As ignoble as this situation is, it does at least recognize the individual, and thus his fate becomes a public act in which there is the notion of spectators becoming acquainted with the offender and engaging in a shared experience. In Petersen’s sculpture, however, the hanging man is denied the dignity of being recognized as an individual; by obscuring his face, spectators cannot register him as a person, even if all they do is to regard him as an unfortunate among them. If something is carried out in secret, it brings the act into a darker realm.

Petersen’s implication of things hidden would have been, in 1952, a distinctive reference to the Cold War and to the USSR and countries under its domination. When Winston Churchill coined the term “the Iron Curtain” in 1946, he was referring to the walling off of entire societies after World War II. With reduced access to one another, the Soviet East and the Anglo/American West lived in a heightened and anxious atmosphere that was a definer of the Cold War. The Soviet Bloc (and soon, China) seemed and, to a great extent, actually was impenetrable; those in the “free” world – like Petersen – had little idea what was going on although the repression and restrictions for ordinary citizens was assumed. Most Western citizens who viewed Petersen’s sculpture would likely feel confident that his scene was not taking place in their own country, but they would have no hesitation in believing that it happened frequently in the Communist world.

**Narrative rejection**
What we might perceive today as strengths and the imaginative, associative powers of Petersen’s entry into the international competition for the *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner,*

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9. “Monument” can suggest architectural elements and, for a number of entries into the competition, architecture was clearly involved in the artists’ concepts. Max Bill (1908-1984), a Swiss artist, proposed a notable and well-regarded entry that was highly architectural; it was a finalist in the London judging. Many artists designed entries in which the walls of prisons (or the abstract implication of walls) were a major element.
were ultimately insufficient to gain him much consideration by the jury. He was not among the eleven American finalists chosen by the Museum of Modern Art committee, and he did not go on to the final selection process in London. Each juror issued a statement, but they were general comments, with no observations about any individual artist. Therefore, we don’t know what they thought about Petersen’s proposal or why it was rejected. But we can reasonably guess.

Though his references to Christian iconography were contrary and slight, they were probably enough to arouse the shared cultural memory of age-old imagery of the crucifixion and thus, to some, render his sculpture dull, derivative, and out of step with current realities. Petersen’s artistic and narrative choices make it clear that he declined to associate his sculpture fully with Christianity, and yet we must see that religion informed his background. One can hardly doubt that a source of the artist’s feelings was his newly defined connection to Christianity. After World War II, in 1949 at the age of 64, Petersen converted to Roman Catholicism following a lifetime of disdaining religion. His wife, Charlotte, was an ardent Catholic who made sure that their family life was soaked in religious practice and, after years of gentle pressure (or perhaps not so gentle), her goal of having her husband join her in her faith was accomplished. Or maybe Petersen did it on his own; he rarely articulated his emotions in writing – though he did not hesitate to express his judgments about art.

Whatever his conversion process was, we know from his papers that it was genuine and that it shaped his thinking. The war and the post-atomic world engendered in him sorrow and circumspection, and like many European and American citizens and leaders, he must have pondered how humanity could alleviate the conditions that led to such horrible conflicts. His position seems to have been that war was inconsistent with Christianity or, perhaps more accurately, it is un-Christian behavior that leads to and sustains warfare. How much of this belief did Petersen infuse into his sculpture? We have no documentary evidence of his intention. The resulting sculpture, however, side-steps the most parochial of these associations, and it is possible that he chose to use a visual language that was commonly recognized in Western culture as an entrée into more divergent and universal commentary.

Modernism and propaganda
The competition that Petersen entered was truly international and inspired a wide range of commentary. In announcing its subject as a “Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner,” London’s Institute for Contemporary Arts offered no guidelines as to style or interpretation. In defense of the winning entry by Reg Butler (and of his purchase of it for the Museum of Modern Art), Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Director of Collections, asserted that parts of Butler’s sculpture suggested the mourning women beneath the cross and that Christ had himself been “another ‘political prisoner’ of 2000 years ago.” Quoted in Joan Marter, “The Ascendancy of Abstraction for Public Art: The Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner Competition,” Art Journal, 53, no.4 (Winter 1994): 28-36, 36. Marter commented on Barr’s motivations in associating religion with Butler’s work: “Evoking Christ as a political prisoner and begging for a figurative reading of a work that was elsewhere compared to television aerials was Barr’s attempt to educate his public to abstraction and to give some universal significance to this project.”
same time, however, there seems to have been the underlying assumption that political prisoners were not to be found in its own society and those with which it was aligned; they were a feature and a failure only of places ruled or overly influenced by Communism, in particular the Soviet Union. The whole idea of the competition, then, might be seen as a reproach to the Communist world.

The Russian Revolution and the rise of the USSR after World War I had, from the beginning, caused dismay, fear, and antagonism in many quarters of Western society. During World War II, however, it was expedient to work with the Soviets to fight the Nazis, and some may have hoped that these alliances would defuse certain tensions. But even before victory was declared in 1945 and peace treaties were signed, it was clear that Russia and the West had been only temporary friends, and so the old suspicions and conflicts revived and substantially expanded into what became known as the Cold War. In this atmosphere, even art organizations took stands against Communist countries – in which they were often encouraged and aided by their democratic governments. While the United Kingdom was still staggering economically and otherwise after the war years, there was nevertheless a conviction among many that the world, including the art world, had changed and that a burst of freedom and untrammeled expression was about to spread.11

Less than a year after the end of the war in Europe, a group of men began a campaign in London to establish an organization to promote progressive art that explored new avenues of expression – in short, Modernism – and to provide institutional support for artists who were pushing advanced ideas. The Institute for Contemporary Arts was founded in May 1946 and by 1948 had opened its first exhibition. Discussions about a sculpture competition began early in 1950, encouraged by an American hired as the Director of Public Relations, Anthony J.T. Kloman, who had connections to wealthy patrons in the United States. Typical of the complexities of this Cold War period, the funding and the backers of this enterprise were sometimes obscure and, as it turned out, misleading. The participation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in cultural affairs is now well documented, and certain private individuals were also active in supporting propaganda designed to enhance the US and its allies and to use art and culture to best the Communists.12 Whatever subterfuge or covert political goals were being carried out in certain quarters, the art competition was seen as a welcome opportunity for sculptors to express their ideas on a compelling subject – and in an international context. Not to be ignored, of course, was the fact that the competition

11. The ending of the novel The Young Lions by Irwin Shaw, published in 1948, contains an example of that hope, at least momentarily. One of the main characters, Noah Ackerman, an American Jewish soldier, is among the American forces liberating a death camp. Despite his shock, he still sees some hope for the future in the actions of the rescuers, particularly his Captain. In an interaction with another American soldier, Ackerman begins to shout that when the war ends, things will be different. “The human beings are going to be running the world!... The human beings!” As if to predict how wrong this young soldier is, he is shot in the next moment by a straggler from the Nazi forces. Shaw, Irwin; The Young Lions (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1948), 680.

12. Investigation into the competition has concluded that the CIA and its allies were involved in the idea and the funding of the competition. See Axel Lapp, “Memories of a Monument: The Competition for a Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner, London 1953 – a Discussion of the Powers of Sculpture That Never Existed,” Memory and Oblivion (Amsterdam: Springer, 1999), 1051-57.
was offering substantial prize money. The ultimate winner would receive approximately £4000 (over $40,000 in today’s dollars) and smaller amounts were to be distributed among other levels of recognition. Having lived on the economic edge for much of his life, Petersen would have been happy to win any money, aside from the prestige of participating in an international competition.

The ICA announced their “Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner” sculpture competition in January 1952, and the news began to spread around the world. Response was rapid and numerous, and it became clear that the ICA alone could not manage all of the artists who had registered to participate. The group in charge of the competition, which included the renowned sculptor Henry Moore, decided to set up subsidiary committees in countries where the number of applicants was significant; in the United States, the administration of the competition was given to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Led by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., MoMA invited six museum and academic officials to be jurors.13 The recorded number of Americans who followed through on their registration and actually sent in materials including, most importantly, a maquette, vary, but the approximate figure is just under 200.

Of this number, eleven proposals were declared the finalists and, prior to being shipped to London for the last phase of judging, they were exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art early in 1953.14 The selected American eleven were Calvin Albert (1918-2007) of New York, Alexander Calder (1898-1976) of Connecticut, Rhys Caparn (1909-1997) of New York, Wharton Esherick (1887-1970) of Pennsylvania, Herbert Ferber (1906-1991) of New York, Naum Gabo (1890-1977) of Connecticut, J. Wallace Kelly (1894-1976) of Pennsylvania, Gabriel Kohn (1910-1975) of Michigan, Richard Lippold (1915-2002) of New York, Keith Monroe (1917-1973) of California, and Theodore Roszak (1907-1981) of New York, most of whom were already known in American sculptural circles. (Fig. 20) All of their proposed monuments employed abstraction at some level, with some being entirely non-objective (although containing elements that could set up a narrative or interpretation). Of those which referred to the human body, none did so in a way that described the anatomy very closely. Had Petersen’s “prisoner” been exhibited among them, it would have been a striking anomaly.

The prospectus for the competition had emphasized that no particular style was favored, and it specifically assured artists that abstraction was acceptable and would arouse no prejudice on the part of the jury. In the end, the consensus was that the judges had – in fact, judging from their choices – preferred abstraction in some form. Considering the originator of the contest and the administrator of it in America (both the ICA and the Museum of Modern Art in New York were founded to promote and appreciate progressive, Modern art), it can be no surprise that the jury tended toward that taste. In the early 1950s, it would have been difficult not to recognize the dominance of abstraction in much of the nation’s art.

13. The American jury consisted of: Andrew C. Ritchie, curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA; Daniel Catton Rich, curator of painting at the Art Institute of Chicago; Hanns Swarzenski, fellow at the Boston Museum of Fine Art; Charles Seymour, curator of Renaissance Art at the Yale University Art Gallery; and Henri Marceau, curator of painting and sculpture at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (See Figs. 33-35)

Although each juror issued a statement at the end of their process, all were relatively unspecific comments, and we do not know the exact nature of their deliberations. Who was eliminated in the first round of examination? Who was set aside at once as definitely in the running? What was the criteria for sorting through and evaluating the work of almost 200 artists? We do not know these answers with any certainty; what we can discern comes largely via their final eleven choices.

Today, it appears to be impossible to re-construct the American aspect of the competition. In order to truly assess how Petersen’s sculpture might have been viewed and, in the end, rejected, it would be necessary to have a much fuller picture of the rest of the competition. The Museum
of Modern Art does not have a photographic archive for all the contestants, so it is a matter of working through the Museum’s list of entrants, which consists simply of names and addresses. The registration materials do not appear to have been achieved nor, as stated, are there any photographs of maquettes, supporting drawings, or resumes to consult, beyond those of the finalists. The laborious task of tracing each contestant in the hope of finding imagery of the sculpture they submitted, reveals remarkably few artists mentioned their participation in the international competition and even fewer appear to have preserved their maquettes. At this point, only a dozen or so of these sculptures seem to have passed into the permanent collections of American museums.

Nevertheless, it is possible to get a general idea of the character of the American sculptures which vied to win the *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner* competition. The sculptors ranged from very old, established figures, to the very young just getting started in their careers, from practitioners of a highly traditional Beaux-Arts style (such as Leo Lentelli [1879-1961]), to embracers of Constructivism and Abstract Expressionism (such as Naum Gabo or Herbert Ferber). The contest also attracted quite a number of amateurs whose artistic credentials were minor or non-existent. Most of the entrants, however, were persons who had successful careers as sculptors, whose works were well-recognized in exhibitions and reviews, and who enjoyed significant patronage. Luise Kaish (1925-2013) is an example of the caliber of artists who participated, as is Nathaniel Kaz (1917-2010) and Nat Werner (1907-1991), none of whom are quickly recognized names today, but all of whom had distinguished careers. Unfortunately, all three of these are typical in that their “Unknown Political Prisoner” entries cannot be found; even an image of what they submitted has not been discovered. In the established chronologies of nearly every artist, the mention of the Unknown Political Prisoner competition is absent. The ICA’s contest was perhaps the most important sculptural competition of the Cold War period, so it is puzzling why so few of the participants saved their maquettes, placed them into subsequent solo or group exhibitions, or included related documents in their resumes or personal papers. It is possible that the sting of rejection and the ultimate failure of the ICA’s plan to install the winning sculpture caused the artists to de-value their work on this theme.

**Evaluating the entries**

Although, as will be discussed, one can formulate several ideas as to why Petersen’s sculpture was rejected, it is still useful to attempt a survey of those entries which can be found in order to get a clearer picture of what his work was compared to and what he competed against. In an international contest of well over a thousand entries, it is difficult to compare his work to that of artists from countries other than the US. At the same time, there is little benefit to attempting that comparison since Petersen was never in a position to compete with these others. He competed only against the Americans who sent maquettes to the Museum of Modern Art New York. Therefore, it seems most appropriate to give context to his sculpture by looking at the proposals from the United States. As noted, it is likely impossible now to locate every entry or even an image of each one. But of the objects that we can evaluate, it is possible perhaps to see enough to suggest the range of expression, to discern the taste of the decision-makers in the museum and academic world, and to surmise just how far afield and out of the mainstream Petersen’s sculpture was.
The best place to start is with the eleven finalists chosen by the jury and then sent on to London for the next level of judgment. Even the most abbreviated glance at the winners confirms the strong, near unanimous preference for abstraction, and several that went beyond abstraction to non-objectivity. In only one of the eleven can we see an immediately recognizable human form, the standing male figure by Rhys Caparn. (Fig. 21) With the battered elongation of the body, Caparn’s figure, like many of the proposals in the US and elsewhere, reflects the overshadowing influence of Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966). The Swiss artist’s concept of a singular human being, modeled nearly out of existence, had since the 1930s been a symbol of mankind in the modern machine age, full of anxiety and haunted by isolation. Now many of the competition’s sculptors perpetuated that treatment and often honed their figures down to thin apparitions which emphasize their smallness, brittleness, and minor presence in a vast (or implied vast) space. Such a device is used in Richard Lippold’s entry in which a tiny, shallowly modeled stick-like figure is placed inside a double cone of wires that come together at the top to create a sort of space-age tepee. (Fig. 22) The closest maquette to Caparn’s in terms of possessing human-like forms is Calvin Albert’s construction made up of three main totemic elements, one of which falls across the composition to enclose or block off the two standing shapes. (Fig. 23) All of Albert’s forms are modeled with complex biomorphic surfaces which have a wave-like motion, different from the jagged finishes of much of the contest’s sculptures, such as those of Theodore Roszak and Herbert Ferber. A member of the American Abstract Artists (AAA, an organization founded
Fig. 23 Calvin Albert, maquette from "International Sculpture Competition: The Unknown Political Prisoner" (American Preliminary Exhibition), exhibition brochure (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1953).

Fig. 24 Gabriel Kohn, maquette for The Unknown Political Prisoner, 1953. (London: Tate Gallery, 1953).

Fig. 25 J. Wallace Kelly, maquette for The Unknown Political Prisoner, 1953. (London: Tate Gallery, 1953).

Fig. 26 Alexander Calder, maquette for The Unknown Political Prisoner, 1952. (Calder Foundation, New York)
in 1937 to champion abstraction in any form and provide exhibition opportunities), Albert’s work often had a fluid, organic quality that occasionally included references to the human body.

The remaining sculpture proposals cannot be said to contain any more than a hint, if that, of the human form; all are highly abstracted and some even completely geometric. Except for the maquettes of Gabriel Kohn and J. Wallace Kelly, the others are at least as architectural as they are sculptural. Kohn’s solid and massive sculpture has two elements that separate themselves out to suggest perhaps a head and a leg, but they are both so geometric that they are more appendages than truly evocative of human anatomy. (Fig. 24) While Kohn’s maquette suggests resolute resistance and a steeling of oneself in the face of imprisonment, Kelly’s imparts more of a sense of struggle and physical grappling as the contending, geometric shapes reach outward from a blockish base and a thick center. (Fig. 25) The outermost shapes are connected by four or five thin rods that may suggest binding ropes or fencing, or may be intended to be read as the form stretched to its breaking point and struggling to maintain itself. Alexander Calder fashioned a stabile of the sort he had been producing since the 1930s, now using three main pointed, aggressive shapes that splayed out with a single spear-like form piercing the tallest element. (Fig. 26)

Wharton Esherick, Naum Gabo, and Keith Monroe all showed extremely reduced, completely non-objective sculpture that interpreted the political prisoner’s plight in a wholly metaphorical manner. Esherick’s and Monroe’s in particular seemed destined to be taken to a monumental, architectural scale. (Figs. 27-28) Monroe’s maquette was two tall geometric piers that soared way above the tiny splinter suggesting a singular figure minimized, yet not crushed, by the two sky-scraping geometric totems surrounding it. Esherick’s two tapered solid shapes, with smooth, featureless surfaces, tilt toward each other and were intended to represent two personages. As with many of the artists in the competition, Esherick counted on his audience being familiar enough with contemporary art to “read” content into his composition. With his typical use of clear plastic and thin wires or strings, Gabo’s entry had a transparency that was perhaps intended to symbolize the capacity of the prisoner’s mind to break free of his physical boundaries. (Fig. 29)

Finally, both Ferber and Roszak offered ideas that were firmly connected to Abstract Expressionism in their exaggerated, dynamic shapes as well as that style’s characteristic of finding human symbolism in highly abstracted compositions. Ferber presents us with a circular composition that is a maelstrom of contending thrusts of metal, every element thin and ragged. Several elements in Ferber’s composition appear to be remnants of fences or cages, and everything seems to have gone through a process that split any notion of wholeness. (Fig. 29) The cage-like armature is a common characteristic of his and other Abstract Expressionist sculptors, including a number in the ICA competition. Similarly, Roszak’s is also full of dynamic, out-flung shapes that suggest an almost frenzied action. In contrast to the stasis of many entries, Roszak’s personage is vividly alive,

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15. For the majority of the entries, we have little specific information, particularly comments by the artist. For Esherick’s proposal, however, he titled it Aspiring Pair and suggested that the two forms could represent parents or a man and a woman. He intended the two to be fifty and sixty feet high, taking them truly into the range of architecture. His model was black-painted pine, but he hoped that the finished sculpture would be black granite or polished stainless steel. “Esherick on a Monumental Scale,” Wharton Esherick Museum, Malvern, Pa., 2022. https://whartonesherickmuseum.org/esherick-on-a-monumental-scale/ Accessed August 20, 2022. The maquette is the collection of the Wharton Esherick Museum.
Fig. 27  Model for *Aspiring Pair*, Wharton Esherick, 1952. Wharton Esherick Museum, Malvern, PA.

Fig. 28  Keith Monroe, maquette for *The Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1953. (London: Tate Gallery, 1953).

Fig. 29  Model for a *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1952 by Naum Gabo. (London: Tate Gallery, 1953).

Fig. 30  Model for a *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1952 by Herbert Ferber. (London: Tate Gallery, 1953).
Fig. 31  *Monument to Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1952 by Theodore Roszak. Steel. Collection: Tate Museum, London, UK. Purchased (1953).

Fig. 32  Study for the *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner*, 1951-52 by Theodore Roszak. Pen, ink and sepia wash on paper. Collection: Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey Collection.
with a raging form that is aggressive and even frightening. His sculpture was acquired by the Tate Gallery in London and has probably enjoyed the most attention from scholars. (Fig. 31) In addition, his preparatory drawings survive and are found in several museums, so that we can glean some idea of his design process. (Fig. 32) We also know that he gave a subsidiary title to his proposal which makes his intent much clearer: Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner: Defiant and Triumphant. His sculpture is full of forms that fling themselves outward, with no hint of quiescence or resignation. The composition doesn’t categorically suggest an imprisoned environment; it is solely a “body,” but a body that has been transformed into abstract shapes and movements. It is the opposite of Petersen’s approach not only in form but in content – and Roszak assumes, as did many of his generation, that such abstractions can be interpreted and understood as symbols of complex situations and emotions. The content in Roszak's design is a reversal of the despair and inertness with which Petersen invests his figure. Roszak confirmed that he took an entirely different goal in expressing the political prisoner. In a 1956 interview he stated, “I thought that the monumental aspect of a project of this kind would have to be affirmative…. To me, this is a kind of hero’s deed, and therefore I wanted that to become a heroic thing...... To me, it is necessary to give it this thrust of defiance, and then the wings and flourish of triumph.”16 This reading is in contrast to Petersen’s sculpture where we do not see any sign of either defiance or triumph; we do not know whether to regard the figure as a hero or not. Possibly he is, and possibly his situation (or his death) has meaning, but it may also be just an anonymous, unobserved, ugly fact, like the death-strewn room in Honoré Daumier’s (French, 1808–1879) 1834 lithograph Rue Transnonain.

A survey of other maquettes in the American aspect of the competition results, at this point, in a fairly thin report; a majority of those listed by the Museum of Modern Art cannot presently be located. But of those that can, nothing like Petersen’s entry has been found. Every submittal takes some measure of abstraction and many veer into non-objectivity and architectural construction. Though the whereabouts of a select number of entries has been established, the story they tell affirms the oddity of Petersen’s entry. It is likely that researchers will never be able to fully reconstruct the American part of the contest, partly because so many of the sculptures themselves, including any documentation, seem to have disappeared. (Figs.33-37)


In the face of "realist" rejection
Christian Petersen did save his proposal, but it is possible that he did so not out of intent, but just inattention or neglect. It was shoved into a corner of his studio and forgotten as just another ill-considered attempt to join the tempestuous arena of juried competitions and exhibitions. (Fig. 38) The checklists of his later exhibitions affirm that he did not ever show it publicly. The only firm documentary evidence of its existence is when his wife sold the contents of his studio in 1964 – and even then, the title was incomplete, the painted plaster object was undated, and nothing in his personal papers recorded anything about it. Had his wife not scribbled a quick inscription on a sketchbook cover, we would have had few substantial clues.

In an art world atmosphere that championed abstraction, and amidst an art market that was buzzing with the acquisitions of Abstract Expressionism and similar styles by major collectors, it is a little surprising that Petersen would even try to compete. But he did, and we must conclude that the theme of the contest tuned up some of his most deeply held convictions. The sculpture that he sent in is unlike anything else he produced, although he realized a number of war-themed sculptures, and he drew dozens of proposals for everything from singular statues to entire landscape-scaled installations. When MoMA sent his maquette back to Iowa, Petersen must have been severely disappointed (though probably not surprised), and he surely wondered what the reaction to his work must have been at the jury sessions in New York. He might have mused about the competition he faced and where he figured into it. And when he saw the eleven finalists that were chosen to move forward in the contest, he likely got an idea of what the judges hadn’t liked and had deemed as successful comments on the topic.
Even with an incomplete survey of all the other sculptures in the American contest, we can still, as suggested, develop some reasons why Petersen was rejected. As noted, the naturalistic treatment of the human anatomy would have been off-putting to many postwar observers, not just the jurors. It would have seemed old-fashioned, *retardataire*, and inadequate for expressing the dreadful topic of political prisoners. For many survivors of World War II, no matter what their experience of it, the realism of art in the past was deemed unable to truly express the horrors. First of all, nearly every atrocity had been documented by photography and had been recorded in a way that made no attempt to evade any gruesome detail. There could be no serious questioning of what the cameras had revealed, and it wasn’t possible to apply any of the old standards or aesthetics to these images, the many thousands of them. That reality could not be bested by any “realist” rendering in artwork. For many, it seemed that for recording humanity’s response to what it had done to itself, realism was limited, and the necessity was to move artistic expression of these appalling issues into the realm of the spirit and of a new sort of consciousness.

Petersen’s use of a naturalistic, classically-based anatomy might not have been inherently objectionable to the jurors, especially those whose specialties involved art created before the 20th century. The main problem was the postwar associations of that classicizing style. It had been Adolf Hitler’s favorite, and in the USSR, it was the only one officially allowed. Usually termed Socialist Realism, it was associated with the most oppressive and the least free of societies, and it had been so absorbed into those societies’ art establishment, and so tied to inhumane practices, that it would be discredited as an acceptable approach for several generations. It was not just artists, but much of the general public who took that kind of realism to be unsavory at the least, and at the worst, as simply unacceptable as a valid style. Had the jurors placed Petersen’s “Unknown Political Prisoner” among the finalists, the uproar would have been considerable. Even artists who had or were in the process of leaving realism behind might have been affronted that such an object fashioned in the damned style would be accorded respect. Hardly anyone would have failed to recognize its similarity to the products of Hitler’s art program or the current sculptures being supported by the Soviet state. Many in the art world would have remembered H.W. Janson’s attacks that put Midwestern Regionalists squarely in the fascist camp, especially Petersen’s fellow Iowan, Grant Wood (1891–1942). Petersen would have been horrified that anything in his work could be associated with Hitler’s preferred form

17. H.W. Janson published two articles which linked Regionalism, and Wood especially, to the art of Nazi Germany (although he recognized that the pre-war style of Neue Sachlichkeit also had similarities). His animosity toward Wood had begun when they were both on the faculty of the University of Iowa (Janson from 1938 to 1941 and Wood from 1934 until his death in 1942), and Janson was among the faction who saw Wood as anti-modern. Janson’s main publications on the subject were “The International Aspects of Regionalism,” *College Art Journal*, II (1943), 110-15 and “Benton and Wood; Champions of Regionalism,” *Magazine of Art* XXXIX (1946), 184-86, 198-99. By the 1950s, esteem for Regionalism was at a low point and was regarded as a hopelessly out-of-date and provincial style, practiced by artists out of touch with the new trends. If the jurors had known that Petersen had been an Iowa colleague of Wood’s in the Public Works of Art Project during the New Deal and that he had been among the few to produce sculpture in the Regionalist style, they might have held prejudice against him. However, since the judging process kept all the contestants anonymous, that suspicion cannot be maintained. They might have known the work of artists, such as Alexander Calder, well enough to recognize certain entries, but it is unlikely that they would have ever seen anything by Petersen.
of art. In retrospect, it may seem odd that he would not realize how close his art resembled the official style of the Nazi and Communist worlds. He surely was aware that the art school of the University of Iowa (Iowa City, IA) was among the most progressive, diverse, and welcoming in the nation; he must also have noted that his own Iowa State College (Ames, IA) was liberalizing as rapidly as the rest of the country. At the same time, a realist approach was the one he had used all his career, and he was emphatic that he didn’t want to change. In that regard, he was no different from thousands of other American painters and sculptors who persisted in their realist styles. Yet, his employment of the classical form may have been just too evocative of what the ICA, MoMA and other art institutions felt they were fighting against. Petersen’s figure had the anatomical structure and proportions of a classical cultural ideal while possessing little of the expressionistic extremes through which many would have described a tortured political prisoner. The remnant of drapery that winds around the waist of the prisoner and drops gracefully to the floor might have been seen as a pointless, outdated device that only weakened the impact of Petersen’s statement. (Fig. 39, see also Fig. 14)

A single glance at Petersen’s sculpture gives important clues for its rejection: a style of realism at a moment when abstraction had gained dominance; a too-obvious reference to Christianity and the crucifixion of Christ; and a stylistic link to the favored style of Nazi and Soviet governments. The vehemence with which the art of these totalitarian governments was rejected was understandable, and the discrediting of artists who cooperated by working in this style of realism has echoed for a long time – rightly so in many regards. But it is possible to excuse Petersen in his employment of such a classicizing realism when we look at his career, which began in the years prior to World War I, and when we see how thoroughly he accepted and practiced a Beaux-Arts style throughout his career. In addition, his biography makes it clear that he subscribed to none of the tenets of these repressive regimes. His many sculptures and drawings on themes of war and, especially, its cruel aftermath affirm his life-long repulsion towards aggression and injustice. (Figs. 40-43) These factors strengthen the idea of seeing his 1952 sculpture in a more generous vein.

As already noted, his use of the human body to make an outcry against the treatment of those imprisoned for their political ideals was unusual in the context of the ICA’s international competition. Admittedly, not every submission to the jury can presently be found, but enough can be traced to shape a picture of how other sculptors responded. Further, even if a particular maquette for the ICA competition cannot be located, we can find enough of the artists’ body of work to reasonably speculate on their stylistic approach to the theme; few examples of a realistic depiction of the human anatomy are to be found. Today, it is possible to look at
**Fig. 40** *Carry On*, c. 1933 by Christian Petersen. Plaster proposal for World War I memorial. Proposal presented in August of 1932 at the Iowa American Legion Convention in Ft. Dodge, IA. Currently presumed destroyed.

**Fig. 41** *Men of Two Wars*, 1942 by Christian Petersen. Painted plaster. Gift of Charlotte Petersen. In the Christian Petersen Art Collection, Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. UM2007.10

**Fig. 42** *Price of Victory (Fallen Soldier)*, 1944 by Christian Petersen. Painted plaster. Gift of Mary Petersen. Conservation funded by Stockman Foundation and Ellen and Bernard Skold. In the Christian Petersen Art Collection, Christian Petersen Art Museum, University Museums, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. UM99.297

**Fig. 43** *War (After the Blitz War)*, 1940 by Christian Petersen. Bedford limestone. Gift from Martha Ellen Fisher Tye to the Central Iowa Art Association. Dedicated in 1961 at the Fisher Community Center, Marshalltown, Iowa. Fisher Governor Foundation, Marshalltown, IA.
Petersen’s rendering of the human body, especially in the context of torture, differently than in the past. First of all, the denial of the physical body, its character and its needs and its damages, isn’t as dominant as it once was, particularly during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. Artists and observers are now more likely to acknowledge the body as the first place where we exist in the world; its reactions, from the beginning, are the primary route through which we understand the fact of our existence. Pain – a significant aspect of the subject of political prisoners and torture – comes in many forms, but the first place it is registered is often within the body.

Petersen does not deny the body, nor does he attempt to make its sensations less acute. We can see the strain on the prisoner’s body although one fails to discern marks, such as lashes or cuts, no blood, no bruises, and no obvious broken bones. Aside from the hanging of the prisoner by his wrists against the slab, we can’t tell what has been done to this person. But one can certainly see the effect on his inert body. As already discussed, viewers of the maquette likely feel that the torture has been carried out away from observation, probably in secret, as the nature of certain sorts of torture requires. As also noted, we cannot know whether the prisoner is dead or alive, and Petersen offers us few reasons for hope. This body is utterly still, with no action shown, or implied. Perhaps worst of all, the artist denies us a look at the face of the tortured man; even if we could find no other evidence of the aggressions against the body, if we could see a person’s face, it would surely tell a story. What one could conclude is that Petersen sets himself the task of using just the human body alone to comment on torture. He does not even permit himself the articulation of a face or an agonized gesture to carry his narrative.

The last competition
In contrast to a great many of the sculptures entered into the competition, including all of the finalists, Petersen’s work makes no attempt to “transcend” the body. The idea of the mind lifting the prisoner above and beyond his imprisonment and pain, is a constant in the proposals for the “Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner.” That ability to bypass the actual anatomy and to turn it into a symbolic form is one of the strengths of abstraction. It can be useful for expressing an enormous range of human responses and sensations, including ones such as psychological distress, internalized hopelessness, fear and horror, and on and on in the catalogue of crimes against the body and spirit. But for Petersen in this particular sculpture, he refuses to take his theme outside of the closely detailed rendition of the human anatomy. In many of the submitted maquettes, the artists implied the use of imagination or transference to “escape” the torments of torture and imprisonment. Whether Petersen’s victim tried to use these devices as he underwent his torture can’t be known; the fact is that he has likely been killed or else his consciousness is barely functioning. Whatever spiritual resources he attempted to employ to withstand torment have slipped below his cognizance or his ability to direct his mind. In the end, he has “transcended” nothing, and death, or nearly so, is a fact, one from which he cannot escape. In many situations, bodily pain captures our being, and the body is no longer a place where our mind dominates our existence, but is a prison from which we cannot escape. Sedation or death are the only ways out, and we can be sure that no relief was offered to this prisoner. In Petersen’s sculpture, the locus of the torture is truly in the body, an approach that was avoided by most of the other artists.
Petersen’s figure shows torture as a criminal act against a human body. The abstract sculptures
make that reality less vivid and deal more with the psychological effects. Petersen’s interpretation
would have almost certainly been regarded as a hopelessly old-fashioned, even a flat-footed,
unimaginative treatment of a theme that was most properly expressed in a metaphorical
fashion. Petersen, however, did not deal in metaphor, at least in the sense that these jurors
admired. While in 1952, this characteristic of his might have been regarded as an artistic
weakness, today we can judge it with less prejudice. If we share little else, all human beings
have bodies, and thus we are more likely to identify with and grieve over what has happened
to this figure. We can acutely reckon with torture in part because we can witness its effect on
the body, a thing we all possess.

Christian Petersen produced many sculptures and sketches on the theme of war during his
lifetime. His entry into the ICA’s international competition was one of only two postwar
sculptures he created and the only one that, we now recognize, dealt with the Cold War. From
all these war related works of art, we can see how clearly he understood where war was most
truly located. Whether in active combat, collateral damage, or secretive torture, the worst
human impulses find their locus eventually and primarily in one place. Even today, with remote
operations, unmanned drone strikes and dark renditions, we must still recognize, as Petersen
showed us, that war and conflict always find their way to the human body.

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