

Maxo Vanka's Magnificent Millvale Murals

Maxo Vanka's amazing murals in industrial Millvale derive from a providential conjunction of three factors: an immigrant Croatian community willing to provide a venue, an artist with a most extraordinary experience of both poverty and privilege, and a dramatic time of conflict and social upheaval.

Saint Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church in Millvale, with a distinctive concave silver dome is framed high on a rocky hillside for all to see from the busy highway connecting the Allegheny Valley to downtown Pittsburgh. Renovated after a fire in 1921, for almost two decades the church's white walls remained devoid of decoration. Father Zagar, a Franciscan priest of artistic taste and progressive politics put out the word to the immigrant Croatian community for someone to decorate his church.

Maxo Vanka led three lives. The illegitimate child of high Austrian nobility, Vanka was farmed out for the first eight years of his life to a peasant family. There, he was provided shelter from a generous peasant mother, whom his heart adopted in place of the noble mother who couldn't claim him, she likely served as inspiration for the unconventional *Mary, Queen of Croatia* that graces the main altar – her dark hair and eyes, large hands, strong shoulders, splayed knees providing a maternal support to her noble son.

After eight years, Maxo's biological maternal grandfather discovered his existence and elevated him from poverty to a life of privilege including educational and artistic opportunity. During his aristocratic interlude, Maxo displayed a "gift of sympathy," to servants and workers. Forest birds settled on his shoulders when he fed them and, on his beloved Korcula Island, lizards crawled in his pockets looking for treats.

From art academy in Zagreb, he went to Brussels where, he studied at the Academie Royale des Beaux Arts in Brussels. Famous artists who trained there included Rene Magritte, James Ensor and briefly, Vincent Van Gogh. His nickname among the students was INRI because of his resemblance to representations of Jesus.

At 24, he witnessed the brutal German invasion of Belgium including gas warfare. After the war and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he became an art teacher in Zagreb, exhibiting widely in Europe. As a modestly paid professor, he remained loyal politically and socially to the peasantry of his upbringing.

His life changed again: first, the admiring daughter of a New York physician, Margaret Stetten, determined successfully to marry him; second, the Slovenian writer Louis Adamic, who toured Yugoslavia in 1932-3 on a Guggenheim fellowship, was so taken by Vanka that he became a kind of press agent for him. Margaret and Louis together convinced Vanka to leave a Croatia threatened by Fascism and come to New York City.

In *New York's* tenements, bars and under bridges, Vanka painted the Depression poor and hungry of his adopted land. He left New York and traveled with Adamic to industrial centers around the country. Vanka painted Pittsburgh and held a one-man show during a visit in 1935. Through Adamic, Father Zagar invited Vanka to Millvale where he painted two sets of murals: the first in 1937 and the second in 1941.

1937 marked the great rising of American labor following the overwhelming electoral victory of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Union campaigns surged through the industrial valleys of the Pittsburgh region. As Vanka painted his first set of murals, US Steel signed a contract with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, the US Supreme Court in *J&L vs. NLRB* upheld workers right to organize, and Catholic priests joined strikers on local picket lines for the first time. Vanka's sympathy for workers and the poor finds eloquent expression in the mural of a mother mourning a coal miner's lifeless corpse - *The Immigrant Mother Raises her Sons for American Industry*.

When Vanka returned to Millvale in 1941 to paint the second set of murals, the terrible suffering caused by Hitler's invasion of Yugoslavia in April and Russia in June weighed upon him. A month after his 1941 labors, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Horror of spreading war and bitter condemnation of the greed that fosters violence are major themes of these murals. *Injustice* is depicted by a scale where gold outweighs bread. The dark lower realm of earthly suffering is contrasted with a triumphant ceiling of resurrection and hope. The greedy capitalist, indifferent to servant and beggar, stands

in stark counterpoint to the loving Croatian family gathered for a simple meal of soup and bread.

While Pittsburgh's capitalists and financiers created industrial empires of coal, steel and oil, Maxo Vanka joined the ranks of regionally recognized artists in answering that power with a celebration of humanity. The murals of St. Nicholas constitute a tribute to the endurance of women, the centrality of motherhood for survival, and the transcendence of a hope rooted in resistance to evil.