

The Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka: Background & Analysis

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Maxo Vanka's murals for Millvale's Croatian Church of St. Nicholas are a unique contribution to the American mural movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, government agencies began in 1933 to sponsor the production of murals as part of the largest federal art program in the nation's history. Grouped together under the WPA (Works Progress Administration), these agencies put thousands of artists back to work with commissions to provide art for government buildings, post offices and schools around the country. In a nation struggling to lift itself out of the Great Depression and confronting the perils of world war, these federally sponsored murals were viewed as an important aspect of economic recovery.

More controversially, they were also considered key to the construction of a national culture and the safeguarding of the American way of life. The history of the WPA is fraught with conflicts between artists and officials over the role these murals were to assume in defining the America that was then taking shape.

Vanka's Millvale works engage themes readily found in WPA murals—such as labor, the family, and community values. Commissioned by a private religious institution, however, they fall outside the purview of the voluminous literature devoted to this important period of government arts patronage. They also contain a moral intensity and socially critical perspective unacceptable to the idealized image of America that emerged within much of WPA art. From their unusual vantage point, Vanka's murals restore to us the debative circumstances under which this important period of our nation's cultural and artistic heritage unfolded. By addressing specifically the experiences of Pittsburgh's Croatian and African-American populations in his murals, Vanka's works also provide vivid insight into the problems as well as the potentials of Pittsburgh's crucial role in defining the America that emerged from the historic transformations of World War II.

Vanka was born in Zagreb, Croatia in 1889. A prize-winning student in the Royal Academies of Art in Zagreb and Brussels, he augmented his studies with travel throughout Europe in order to view the latest developments in art. During World War I, he served in the Belgian Red Cross. Vanka eventually returned to Croatia where he became a professor at the Fine Arts Academy in Zagreb. He exhibited his work internationally throughout the 1920s and several of his paintings

were purchased by prominent museums and galleries. He immigrated to New York City in 1934 as part of the great migration of artists and intellectuals who sought safe harbor in the United States from the threat of dictatorship and war in Europe.

Vanka began his St. Nicholas commission in 1937. By then, Pittsburgh had long secured its reputation as the steel capital of the world built by the entrepreneurial know-how of Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick and the labor of the many Croatian, Polish, Italian, German and other immigrant groups that flooded into the city's mills. By the time he completed his St. Nicholas commission in 1941, Vanka had also witnessed Pittsburgh's incipient transformation into the industrial backbone of the American war effort.

Stylistically, Vanka's Millvale murals demonstrate his profound knowledge of Byzantine church decoration and Croatian folk art. Integrating such traditional elements into an otherwise thoroughly modern artistic vocabulary derived from Mexican muralism, turn-of-the-century European symbolism, and the most recent developments in surrealism, Vanka's Millvale works represent an important and as yet understudied example of eastern European modernism. His combination of traditional and modern aesthetic elements also set the tone for the central thematic concern of his murals, namely the relationship between the old and the new, and between enduring values and the human cost of accelerated change.

During his years in Zagreb, Vanka developed an ethnological interest in Croatia's folk traditions and devoted his art to preserving those traditions in the face of industrial modernization and its leveling effects. The chance to paint murals for St. Nicholas's small, ethnically proud Croatian community in one of the most industrialized cities in the world provided Vanka with an ideal setting in which to address his long-held concerns. Throughout the suite of murals, mothers, sisters, and daughters attired in traditional Croatian folk costumes echo Vanka's iconic portrayal of the Virgin Mary over the altar, where she appears in the guise of Mother Croatia. Women represent in Vanka's murals a nurturing harbor for the values of family, spiritualism, and ethnic tradition. Counterpoised to them are sons, brothers, and fathers whose lives are cut short by work in Pittsburgh's industrial mills and in the region's coal mines. Other scenes depict men as depersonalized cogs in a war machine whose nondescript gray uniforms, rifles, and bayonets stand in stark contrast to the colorful intricacy of the women's embroidered costumes, their spiritual humility, and their reverence for the hearth and home.

In their moral outrage over war, Vanka's murals follow in the tradition of Francisco Goya, whose etchings chronicled the atrocities of Napoleonic conquest in the early 19th century, and Pablo Picasso, whose anti-war mural *Guernica* of 1937 drew international attention to the

beginning phases of fascist war in Europe. Vanka's startling images of divine figures wearing gas masks and of Christ on the cross being stabbed by a soldier with a bayonet also align his art with the anti-war imagery of George Grosz, one of Germany's most prominent artists of the 1920s. Grosz's incendiary depiction of Christ on the cross wearing combat boots and a gas mask protested the rise of militarism and fascism on the eve of Hitler's accession to power. Grosz's provocative image of Christ also became the focus of a highly publicized, three-year long blasphemy trial in Germany of which Vanka was certainly aware.

The narrative core of Vanka's Millvale commission appears in two murals in the series: *The Croatian Mother Raises Her Son for War* and *The Immigrant Mother Raises Her Son for Industry*. Likening labor exploitation to the human exploitation of war, Vanka calls into question unreflective notions of social progress by railing against the manner in which ethnic minorities, the poor, and the disenfranchised frequently bear the burden of—and pay the ultimate price for—such progress. In this regard, the sentiment of his murals contrasts pointedly with two other Pittsburgh monuments: the *Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall* in Oakland, which foregrounds the valor of war, and John White Alexander's celebratory mural of the Pittsburgh steel industry (*The Crowning of Labor, 1906-07*) that graces the central stairwell of the Carnegie Museum of Art. Historians laud Vanka for his keen observation of and sensitivity to the dispossessed. It is also clear, however, that Vanka was equally observant of his artistic milieu. Though contained within the four walls of a humble Croatian church located in a working class enclave on Pittsburgh's north side, Vanka's murals take their point of departure from and enter into critical dialogue with Pittsburgh's central cultural institutions.

Vanka's sympathy for the exploited, the downtrodden, and the disenfranchised spoke to the experiences of Pittsburgh's Croatian immigrant community. They also upheld the Christian ethos of St. Nicholas church while extending its charitable vision beyond the Croatian congregation to which Vanka's murals was most directly addressed. In his rendering of the crucified Christ, for example, Vanka used an African-American steel worker as a model. And, in the scene entitled *The Capitalist*, an African-American servant waits on a well-fed industrialist with a deference that tacitly registers the racial as well as class differences between them. In this regard, Vanka's murals find their closest resonance in the plays of August Wilson and in the collages of Romare Bearden. Like Vanka, Wilson and Bearden drew attention in their art to the realities of racial inequality and the hope for a better, more just life that drew African-Americans in large numbers from the south into northern industrial centers like Pittsburgh in the 1920s and 1930s.

Throughout the early 20th century, Pittsburgh symbolized the industrial heart of America and its future promise. Dwelling on themes of labor exploitation and war, Vanka's Millvale murals introduced a skeptical counterpoint into visions of that promise. But in their profound empathy for the plight of whites as well as blacks, Croatian-Americans as well as African-Americans, Vanka's murals expose another, though less appreciated, aspect of Pittsburgh's historic legacy. Reminding us of the rich and diverse cultural heritage that constituted this city in its industrial heyday, Vanka's Millvale murals preserve an awareness of the conflicts and possibilities that defined Pittsburgh, its social fabric, and its role in what America was and the promise of what it could be in the modern era.