

“Kolosalno! There is something here...Power, energy, the future!”: Haunting, Steel, Progress,
and the Urban Religious Landscape

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Abstract

In 1937 and again in 1941, Croatian artist Maxo Vanka traveled to Pittsburgh Pennsylvania for eight-week work sessions to paint the walls of tiny Saint Nicholas Croatian Church. Upon this blank canvas Vanka communicated his early travels around industrial America by tapping into traditional steel and coal Works Progress Administration mural themes of labor, family, and community. During his sixteen-hour workdays, Vanka began to feel haunted, and in his own admission dealt with the specter of a former church priest. In making sense of this occurrence, Vanka mapped the city of Pittsburgh with all the physical primacy of industrial grit and smoke while simultaneously tapping into the memory of the church community. Indeed, Vanka’s work speaks not only to issues of the interwar years of America, but also ties in processes of religion and class exploration. Here I will attend to the ways in which the community was entangled within transnational flows of memory. The murals along with other folk traditions, such as songs, oral histories, stories underscore a central feature of the history of the Pittsburgh region: the intimate tie between the growth of industry and the onset of mass immigration. These narratives are structured allegorically, illustrating how industrial religion functions as an entangled engagement between tropes of secularization and religion. They shared a belief in steel and a faith in both present and future modernities born of their labor and inseparable from their religion. The aim of this thesis, then, is to focus to the various ways in which Vanka’s murals speak to the role of the church in industrial Pittsburgh in accounting for the rapid succession of change, and resulting displacement of what can be referred to as working and middle class citizens. Memory and imagination here captures the dynamics of a new social class defining itself through the resources at its disposal in critiquing, engaging and determining a place of meaning for labor and power within a new, urban environment.