

## *Winter Afternoon, n.d.*

**Maximillian Vanka (Croatian), (1889–1963)**  
oil on academy board  
H. 20 x W. 24 inches  
Courtesy of Bucks County Intermediate Unit  
#22, Pennsylvania



### **Biography**

Maximillian Vanka was born in Croatia in 1889. Croatia is a Central European and Mediterranean country bordering the Adriatic Sea. He may have been the son of Austro-Hungarian nobility, but no one knows for sure. Maxo (his nickname) Vanka was raised by peasants until the age of eight. Maxo felt very connected to the history, mythology and customs of his homeland.

Maximilian Vanka studied at the Zagreb Academy of Art in the capitol of Croatia, and the Royal Academy of Beaux Arts in Brussels in Northern Europe. He soon became one of the country's best portrait artists and leading painters, as well as a highly respected teacher at the Academy of Beaux Arts in Zagreb. He was celebrated as the finest Yugoslavian portraitist in the 1920's and 1930's. He exhibited throughout Europe, receiving such honors as the 'Palme Academique' of the French Legion of Honor, before moving to the United States in 1934.

When Vanka came to America, he first settled in New York City. This was during a very difficult time in American history known as the Depression. He wore old clothes and traveled through the city painting homeless people and laborers. His paintings show the sad lives of these people, yet his style makes them look important in the paintings. In doing this he wanted to show that all people have something to contribute to the world.

Although his first New York shows were not well received, Vanka gained American recognition in 1937, when he was commissioned to paint two sets of eleven murals for the Croatian St. Nicholas Church of Millvale, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Noted as some of the finest examples of church murals in the United States, the strongly anti-war images depict not only traditional Catholic scenes and symbols, but also scenes showing the lives and spirituality of the Croatian immigrant community in the small mining town.

Vanka was asked to paint a second set of murals in 1941. These images include beautiful landscape scenes inspired by his new life in rural America. He became a naturalized citizen and six months later, he made White Bridge Farm in Rushland, Pennsylvania, his home. He turned his attention away from war, religion and cities toward the natural beauty he saw right outside his windows at home. He viewed the woods, and their flora and fauna, with constant wonder and reverence. A deeply spiritual man, whose sanctuary was in nature among the trees, birds, and plants, Vanka empathized with his fellow man as well as



animals, which were mysteriously attracted to him.

While living in Bucks County, he continued to work, exhibiting only rarely, and teaching Art Appreciation at the National Agricultural College outside of Doylestown. He established the art department at Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture in New Britain, Pennsylvania.

Maxo Vanka drowned in 1963 while swimming off the coast of Mexico. He was 74 years old. After his death, a bird sanctuary was established in his honor at the Washington Crossing Nature Education Center.

### **Where did the artist get his ideas?**

Maxmillian Vanka got ideas from his childhood in Croatia. Memories of Byzantine churches, Croatian crafts, the history of war and the importance of religion stayed with him.

Maxmillian Vanko grew up in a country where the walls of Byzantine churches were covered with beautiful frescoes. The colors, patterns and images in these paintings had an impact on his artwork throughout his life.

Croatia is a country with a long history of war. Vanko was an officer in the Belgian Red Cross during World War I, and many of his paintings show the hardships of war.

His religion meant a lot to him, and he was a man who always wanted to help others. Images of Christianity appear in his work as symbols of both suffering and goodness.

Some of the colors and patterns you see in his work come from Croatian textiles, beautifully embroidered cloth that continues to be a major part of the Croatian economy to this day.

Vanka admired many famous artists of his time. He was influenced by Mexican mural painters Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco. He was also inspired by the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya and the French artist Honore Daumier. He knew about his European contemporaries Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso.

His later work was inspired by his move to rural Bucks County, and all the natural beauty he found there. He loved people, plants and animals.

### **Is this a still life?**

Still life painting shows one or more inanimate objects. That means the objects depicted in the painting can't get up and walk away by themselves. Do you see things in this painting that can move by itself? What about outside, through the window? So...is this a still life?



There were always still life objects in paintings, used as props to make a scene more believable, but it wasn't until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that artists started to paint scenes of still life objects all by themselves. The first artists to do this were Dutch, which means they lived in the Netherlands (Holland).

### **Why do artists paint still lifes?**

Artists paint still lifes for many different reasons. Have you ever made a still life? Why did you do it?

Some still life paintings are made as a way for artists to show off how skilled they are. For example, American artist William Harnett painted still lifes so realistically that people who viewed them thought they could lift the objects right off the wall where the painting was hanging. This is called trompe l'oeil, or "fool the eye" realism. Others have symbolic meaning; that is, they are filled with symbols of life and ideas about the time in which they were painted. For example, bugs crawling on a piece of fruit in a Dutch still life symbolizes the fact that eventually everything dies. Some still lifes are used by artists to express their states of mind. Renee Magritte combined eggs and birds and nests and apples and windows in ways you would never see in real life to make dream-like, imaginary still lifes. In modern art, still life is a way to show experiments with techniques and styles. For example, Picasso broke objects apart and reassembled them in his cubist still lifes of newspapers, apples, knives and tables.

What reasons do you think Maxmillian Vanka had for creating his still lifes the way he did?

### **Did you know that Maxo Vanka also painted murals?**

Vanka was invited by Father Albert Zagar to paint murals in the Croatian Catholic Church of St. Nicholas in Millvale, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. The invitation came at a perfect time in Maxo's life. He was at a low point in his career, selling very few paintings and living off the abundant wealth of his wife and her family.

Although the exterior of the church was rather plain, the inside walls were an inspiration to him. He left specific instruction for the wall's preparation and then returned to New York to sketch his ideas for the murals. He returned to Millvale in April of 1937 and in eight weeks he created eleven murals.

His images would combine religious subjects, scenes from life in Croatia and themes surrounding the labor movement and the World Wars. At the time Vanka painted these murals, the American government was supporting mural artists around the country in their efforts to artistically communicate American ideals. Many artists were creating murals at the same time as Vanka. They all blended their creative skills with the need to address the social and political concerns of the day. They all worked to create a national art that would describe the life, history, values and achievements of the United States. The government murals



had something in common with Vanka’s work: the simple goal “to make their viewers feel more comfortable about America.”

In 1981, the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation created a special category in order to recognize and protect Vanka’s murals. In 1982, the church and the murals were placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1990, a non-profit organization, The Society for the Preservation of the Murals of St. Nicholas, Millvale, was formed to continue to protect and restore the murals.

### **Is there a Museum where I can see more of Vanka’s art?**

The collection of Maxmillian Vanka, along with his house and studio in Korcula, Croatia, were donated to the Zagreb Academy in 1964 by his widow, Margaret Stettin Vanka. Vanka’s villa was adapted for the presentation of the Memorial Collection, and it was opened to the public in 1969. The collection of Maksimilijan Vanka in Korcula presents a cross-section of his work from the 1920’s until his death. It consists of dozens of paintings, watercolors, pastels and drawings, showing Vanka’s art from the monumentalism of New Reality through the influence of Van Gogh and expressionism, to later constructivist tendencies. The newly adapted building which houses the collection was opened in 1998.

### **Learn More**

Write a story or poem about the person who has these things in his or her home. Who is it? What is he or she like?

The activity sheets “Looking at Still life” and “What Do You See” will help you look at still life works more carefully and will help you create still lifes of your own. See both of these activities below.

The RijksMuseum in the Netherlands features an array of Dutch still life paintings at [www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has several Northern European still life paintings in their collection at [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

American still life paintings from three centuries are on view at the National Gallery of Art at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov).

Paint a mural! Use the activity sheet below as a guide.

Create a 20<sup>th</sup> century still life! Set up objects on a table to draw or paint. Make sure the objects you use are all objects that have only existed since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (that means, no cups, no pitchers, no tablecloths!) Even more challenging – try to set up a still life using objects that have only existed since the 21<sup>st</sup> century!



## **Related Images**

To see Maxmillian Vanka's Murals of St. Nicholas, go to The Society for the Preservation of the Murals of St. Nicholas in Millvale Pennsylvania at [www.stnicholascroatian.com](http://www.stnicholascroatian.com).

To learn more about Dutch still lifes, visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York at [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

To see some examples of trompe l'oeil painting by William Harnett, visit the website of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC at <http://www.nga.gov>.

## **Related Links**

Learn more about The Gallery of Maksimilijan Vanka on the island of Korcula, Croatia, visit [www.hazu.hr](http://www.hazu.hr).

The National Gallery of Art features interesting information about the still life genre at [www.nga.gov/education/american/still.shtm](http://www.nga.gov/education/american/still.shtm).

The Philadelphia Mural Arts program is an ongoing effort to beautify the city at [www.muralarts.org](http://www.muralarts.org).

