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Final Report**

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**Representing the Peasants:
Interwar Depictions of Folk Culture and the “Croatian Question”**

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Research Abstract

With a nine-month American Councils Title VIII grant I undertook research for my dissertation project on the various frameworks for interpreting and depicting Croatian folk culture in interwar Yugoslavia. Using the folkloric paintings of modern Croatian-American artist Maksimilijan Vanka (1869-1963) to connect and compare, I examined contemporaneous images and displays of Croatian folk culture in museums, mass media, and visual arts between the two World Wars. Art historians have long understood rural handicrafts and vivid peasant imagery in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Central Europe as constructed images of ethnic and national identities, but static understandings of folkloric imagery mask the contested history from which these images emerged and into which they intervened. Vanka’s large-scale paintings that precisely capture folk dress and rituals defy simply interpretation as nationalist visual culture. I am working to show how the production, circulation, and reception of objects and images related to Croatian folk culture played an active role in attempting to rally viewers to not one but rather a variety of political allegiances – imperial, national, and socialist. Specifically, by situating images and exhibitions of folk culture in local political and artistic movements from the late nineteenth century to World War II, I am working to differentiate the politics and visual culture of movements that focused on peasant rights from more reactionary movements. Ultimately the

study works towards differentiating and identifying the romanticization and codification of folk culture that supported fascist regimes during World War II.

Research Goals

Although largely disregarded by art historians, during the 1990s several of Vanka's folkloric works were hung by the Republic of Croatia in spaces of symbolic importance for the new state: the office of the President, the seat of the parliament, the national history museum. Here they acted as legitimizing symbols of a distinct Croatian nation rooted in folk culture. However, their new ambassadorial role is at odds with their original context. Vanka began producing paintings of Croatian peasants right before World War I at a moment when the Croatian region faced a collapsing Austro-Hungarian Empire and the "Croatian question" about the region's national sovereignty remained without a fixed answer.

This "Croatian question" was a search for Croatian political autonomy that had begun in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and persisted despite the 1918 unification with Serbia into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The quest for autonomy over and against Hungarian and Serbian attempts to gain power sparked competing loyalties among Croatian nationalists, who aligned themselves with the Habsburg Monarchy, with multiple versions of Yugoslavism and pan-Slavism, and/or with the Croatian Peasant Party. In addition, Croatian folk culture was absorbed into the sweeping Germanic imperial imaginings advanced by the Habsburg Monarchy and the Third Reich. While these political conflicts were taking place, images of Croatian folk did not carry one standardized meaning. Instead, artists, museum institutions, and the public used objects and images related to Croatian folk culture to imagine themselves as part of these various ethnic, national, and imperial communities.

My research on images of Croatian folk culture deals with the construction of competing senses of regional, national, pan-national, and imperial identities and with attempts to negotiate those identities in a reforming and modernizing Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Though seemingly nationalist in content, Vanka's largely under-researched images focused on improving the social and economic status of the peasant and resisted appropriation by right-wing politics. After Vanka immigrated to United States he painted a set of murals in the Croatian Catholic Church St. Nicholas outside of Pittsburgh in 1937 and 1941 that incorporated folkloric works that he painted in Zagreb and were laden with anti-fascist and anti-capitalist imagery. His work can be viewed as an important alternative form of non-reactionary nationalism and provides an avenue by which to explore and compare other images of folk culture and nationalism. However it needs to be contextualized within the changing geo-politics of a modernizing Central Europe and the multifaceted depictions of Croatian folk culture in early twentieth-century museum displays and in popular visual culture.

I had several corresponding research aims during my nine months in Zagreb. First, I documented Vanka's early life and work before he immigrated to the United State in 1934 in order to determine the earlier political contexts and aims with which Vanka painted his images of folk culture. In order to compare his works with the related displays and images of Croatian folk culture in museums, mass media, and fine arts in the period from First World War to the Second I also researched a number of related questions. I traced the collection history of rural Croatian folk objects in Vienna and Zagreb from their initial role in building a cosmopolitan imperial identity in museums of applied arts to their role in increasingly nationalist and racist ethnographic museum projects after World War I. I researched the changing nature of mass media images of folk culture through popular interwar magazines *Svijet* and *Ženski List*. And I

studied how the artworks and writings of the most prominent Croatian academic and avant-garde artists, including Vanka, Ivan Meštrović, Ljubo Babić, and Krsto Hegedušić, reveal their conscious efforts to align themselves in various ways with the Croatian question. Using close visual analysis, contemporary interpretations and reactions to artworks, and changing ethnographic discourse, my research aimed to study exactly how folk culture was mediated.

Research Activities

My research period in Zagreb allowed me to purchase and scan primary and secondary sources, photograph images, as well as speak to a number of scholars at the University of Zagreb and various research institutions who provided invaluable advice on the existence and location of artworks and resources. This research took me to a broad range of archives, libraries, and museums.

One of my primary aims was to locate folkloric paintings that Vanka produced before his immigration to the United States and document how these were exhibited and perceived by critics in late Austria-Hungary and interwar Yugoslavia. I began with the clippings file on Vanka maintained by the Archive of Fine Arts (HAZU Arhiv za likovne umjetnosti). This file helped me locate and scan a large number of reviews written about Vanka's work by some of the leading art critics beginning with his first exhibited works in Brussels around 1913 and leading to his final exhibition in Zagreb in 1934. As I began reading through these articles, often together with assistance from my language tutor, these sources proved vital for my project as they pointed out a larger number of folkloric works than I had previously been aware. They confirmed my early suspicion that Vanka was largely known for painting images of folk culture.

In August I began research at the State Archive in Zagreb (Državni arhiv u Zagrebu) on the interwar Zagreb Trade Fair (Zagrebački Zbor) for which Vanka had designed a poster in

1928 advertising an exhibition of folk art. By comparing it with other posters in the archive as well as viewing newspaper articles and reports, I charted how the changing visual identity of the fair in the interwar period and in the Independent State of Croatia was used to express changing and sometimes ambiguous types of political identity. In October, I presented my findings at the conference “National Socialism and Regional Consciousness in Eastern Europe” at the Slovak Embassy in Berlin.



Maksimilijan Vanka and Zdenka Sertić, Poster for the X. Zagreb Trade Fair, 1928, ink on paper, 10 ½ x 8 9/16 in.

In order to gather examples of popular images of Croatian folk culture in interwar Zagreb media I examined two major periodicals in detail at the National and University Library (Nacionalna i sveučilišna knjižnica) and the Library of the City of Zagreb (Knjižnica grada Zagreba). Starting in November and continuing through the course of my research stay in Zagreb I went through the eleven-year span of the popular art-deco illustrated weekly journal *Svijet* (1926-1936) and through the first seventeen years of the monthly women’s magazine *Ženski List* (1925-1941). I photographed and scanned images and articles on folk and traditional culture,

ethnographic exhibitions, traditional folk-inspired clothing and crafts, and major art exhibitions and political events. As I had hoped these journals provided a chronological series of images and articles on folk culture that document the rise and fall in popularity of folkloric visual culture over the interwar period in relationship to political events and social trends.

For my research into the exhibition of Croatian folk culture in Vienna and Zagreb from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, I studied the history of museums of applied arts, chambers of commerce, and ethnographic museums. I gathered documentation of correspondence and photographs of historic exhibitions of Croatian folk culture in the Museum of Arts and Crafts (Muzej za umjetnost i obrt) in Zagreb and the Museum of Art and Industry (now Museum für Angewandte Kunst) in Vienna. In April, I meet with ethnographer Alexandra Muraj, who provided me with a number of her writings on the early history of ethnography in the Croatian regions. Through my conversation with her, I also gained a better understanding of Vanka's participation in the ethnographic scene of the 1920s as well as a sense of the degree of ethnographic specificity with which he painted. With the help of scholars at the Ethnographic Museum (Etnografski Muzej) in Zagreb, I was also able to identify the exact geographic origin of the folk dress in Vanka's paintings. In the National and University Library and the Library of the City of Zagreb I copied several historic books highlighting the transition of the Croatian Chamber of Commerce to the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb.

A number of Vanka's artist colleagues in Zagreb also took up themes of Croatian folk or were attempting to create distinctly Croatian modern art in other ways. As I went through the periodicals and resources I scanned reviews and descriptions of artists Krsto Hegedušić and his group Zemlja (Earth) as well as Ljubo Babić and his Grupa Trojica (Group of three). Vanka worked with both of these groups during his career in Zagreb and served as a liminal figure. I

was able to gather secondary sources and articles published about these artists, but not available in the United States. In addition, being in Zagreb meant that I was able to view exhibitions of modern art that took place at the Modern Gallery, the Art Pavilion, and Museum of Arts and Crafts to get a better sense of the artistic context in which Vanka was working.



Pictured next to Ivan Meštrović's *History of the Croats* in front of the University of Zagreb

My American councils funding made it possible for me to meet one-on-one with a language tutor twice a week for a total of about 100 instruction hours. My speaking and reading abilities have improved dramatically, and she provided me valuable assistance while I read and translated primary-source documents.

Important Research Findings and Conclusions

In the coming year as I write my dissertation I will fully analyze the implications of the images and data that I gathered during my nine-month grant period in Zagreb. Much information still remains in this rich material that needs to be fleshed out, but here I will summarize my initial observations and hypotheses.

I have uncovered a larger number of Vanka's artworks dealing with folk culture than previously discussed by scholars, including twelve large-scale oil paintings and three major projects: scenography for a ballet, a poster for a trade fair, and a set of murals in a popular city tavern. My research has uncovered that Vanka's work, by occupying a liminal space, reveals much about competing frameworks for interpreting folk culture in interwar Yugoslavia. He represents a middle ground between a bourgeois, economic approach to folk culture as handicraft and an ethnographic approach. He also moved between artists groups who took a socialist view of the peasant as subject of economic injustice and nationalist view of the peasant as carrier of national identity.

Vanka's folkloric works were produced at a moment of two competing approaches to the study and display of Croatian folk culture. The earliest bourgeois and economic interest in folk arts as local "cottage industry" was expressed primarily in Austro-Hungarian museums of applied arts and chambers of commerce. This economic approach lingered into the interwar period in Croatia, where a lack of economic development made folk arts one of a few viable sources of income. In contrast, also emerging at this time period was an effort to systematically record and classify peasant culture in ethnographic museums. Vanka, as I have uncovered this year, took part in both approaches. He participated in ethnographic expedition organized by the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb in 1923, and five years later helped organize an exhibition that encouraged the production and sale of folk arts. His faithful rendering of detailed textile weaving

and embroidery in his paintings is similarly ambiguous, stemming both from an applied-arts focus on technique and an ethnographic effort to record the regional specificity of folk dress.



Maksimilijan Vanka, *Da bi nam polje rodilo bolje* (*So That Our Fields May Be Fertile*), c. 1917, oil on canvas, 180 x 202 cm. Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb.

Vanka also worked with the two major artists dealing with folkloric themes in interwar Yugoslavia. Vanka briefly exhibited in 1928 with the *Grupa Četvorice* (Group of Four) together with Ljubo Babić. In 1933, Vanka also painted a set of murals in a popular Zagreb tavern, *Gradski Podrum*, with Krsto Hegedušić, one of the leading members of the socialist leaning artists group *Zemlja* (Earth). These two leading artists of the period, Babić and Hegedušić, were deeply concerned in their artwork and writings with finding a distinctive aesthetic form of Croatian national expression. Although both turned to folk culture in order to answer this problem, they did this through very different content and style. Babić produced a great numbers of writings in which he devoted much attention to the idea of “naš izraz” (“our expression”), a

visual language that would contain elements from Croatian regional landscapes and color ranges used in peasant art to express something inherent to Croatian culture. Krsto Hegedušić and other artists in *Zemlja* painted images of plain, everyday, and indistinct village life, usually in a naïve style, producing dreary images about the social concerns of the period.

I am discussing primarily frameworks for museum and aesthetic approaches to folk culture, but I will argue that Vanka's images painted in the 1910s and 1920s aligned themselves with the progressive politics of the Croatian Peasant Party, expressing the party's idea of "peasant right" (*seljačko pravo*), which aimed for improving the economic, political, and social standing of the peasant.¹ Vanka's images, in terms of both content and formal elements, depicted strong and engaged images of peasants as active protectors. However, he often used symbols ambiguous enough to be read as representative of Zagreb or Yugoslavia, and he only painted Central Croatian folk culture in the area around Zagreb where Vanka grew up (rather than attempting to map all the regions that make up the Croatian lands as popular imagery often did). In comparison to those images later used to support the fascist Croatian regime, the Ustaša, Vanka's paintings were not romanticized. Romanticization very rarely empowers those who it essentializes and at its core is antimodern. Thus Vanka's largely under-researched images can be viewed as an important alternative form of non-reactionary nationalism, they resisted appropriation by right-wing politics and provide an avenue by which to explore alternative experiences of modernity. Although we read these images of peasants as reaching back to something archaic, the political message and often the bold graphic visual styles used by the artists align these images with modern reforms. Vanka's work helps us to understand how

¹ Biondich, Mark, *Stjepan Radić, the Croat Peasant Party, and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904-1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 67.

images related to Croatian folk culture could be used to resist rather than facilitate right-wing politics and extreme nationalism.

Vanka's paintings and the ways in which they have been "culturally recycled" by various regimes over the course of the twentieth century reveal much about the politics at stake in depicting ethnic folk culture.² Being in Croatia this past year, I continue to see how the image of folk culture is continuously contested and constructed. The idea of the "peasant" seems distant and archaic to Americans, but in the Balkans the *seljak* represents a current and disputed, two-faced figure. On the one hand, the peasant is necessary, because traditional culture is seen as the legitimizing cultural foundation of recently-founded nation states. On the other hand, the peasant represents the type of backwardness and provincialism from which urban Croatians are trying to distance themselves and have been trying to distance themselves since the turn of the twentieth century. The *seljak* represents someone crude or old-fashioned.

Vanka's work and its liminal status raises important questions about approaches to folk culture. It questions whether artists, museums, or politicians are claiming to revive folk culture, only in fact to romanticize and petrify it for the purposes of nationalism. Or, on the other hand, if artists, exhibitions, and viewers can treat folk culture as living, breathing, changing culture that promotes social and economic solutions. I would argue that keeping these questions in mind can actually help us to discern types of emerging identity and nationalism in images and displays of folk culture in Central and Eastern Europe.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

This project focuses on early twentieth-century Yugoslavia, but the consequences of the ethnic tensions of that period and the violence of World War II have reverberated throughout the

² For more on the idea of "cultural recycling" see Eve Blau and Ivan Rupnik. *Project Zagreb: Transition as Condition, Strategy, Practice*. Barcelona: Actar, 2007.

twentieth century and into the present. Just a few months ago critics and commentators condemned Croatia as the “rotten heart” of the EU after its recent use of fascist slogans and its referendum on gay marriage. Under the circumstances, keeping a critical eye on Croatia's forms of national imagining, and those of the surrounding region, is as relevant as ever. Nation-building is still very much an ongoing process in Southeast Europe.

The way in which traditional cultural dress and art forms are treated by states, political parties, and citizens can help to differentiate benign forms of everyday ethnic identity from reactionary nationalism. We should work to foster programs abroad that promote an idea of folk culture as changing, developing, living, local practice. These include programs that seek to keep folk traditions alive for a new generation through performance and practice, and historical programs that explore the development of these folk cultures, their change over the course of history, and especially their intersections and interactions with surrounding cultures. Researching images and displays of folk culture in interwar Yugoslavia has shown that folk culture can provide a basis for healthy local identities, promote interest in the social and economic status of local rural populations, and be an important source of tourist income.

Contrived manipulations of traditional and folk culture are often warning signs for the rise of reactionary policies and politics. We should be wary of political and social initiatives that attempt to revive any form of “pure” or “authentic” folk culture, for this is almost always for the sake of differentiation from other ethnic groups. Idealized images of premodern “authentic” folk culture do not present realistic images of the past, rather they reveal much more about current political desires. Be wary of political parties that accessorize themselves with folk culture. This is almost always an attempt to claim sole representation of an ethnic group and does not promote a democratic party system based on political issues rather than ethnic identity.

Co-Curricular Activity

I received valuable advice from several of the professors from the Department of Art History at the University of Zagreb after discussing my project. I am primarily indebted to Lovorka Magaš Bilandžić, Ana Munk, and Jasenka Gudelj. Through their advice and contacts I was able to locate a number of primary documents, resources, and paintings. I also received generous access to documents and artworks from a number of institutions including the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the State Archive in Zagreb, the Museum of Arts and Crafts, the National and University Library, the Croatian History Museum, and the Croatian Sabor. I also consulted with scholars associated with the Institute for Art History and the Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Research.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations and Publications

Upon returning to the United States I will spend the next academic year analyzing the primary documents, images, scholarly works, and notes that I have collected this year and using this material to complete a draft of my dissertation with the assistance of an Andrew Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship from the University of Pittsburgh. I now have a much more developed understanding of Vanka's pre-immigration career and the discursive frameworks that surrounded images and displays of folk culture produced in interwar Yugoslavia. However, I hope to return to Central Europe in the summer of 2015 to conduct additional research in Zagreb, Belgrade, Vienna, and Berlin in order to add a comparative transnational element to my project. I am planning on submitting my dissertation at the end of 2015, and want to find a position in academia as a scholar of Central European art and design. The nine months that I was able to live and work in Zagreb with Title VIII funds provided cultural knowledge, improved language skills,

and invaluable research experience that I will draw from for the remainder of my career in academia or otherwise.