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## MAKSIMILIJAN VANKA'S *BEAUTIFUL JELA WOVE THREE WREATHS*

### Abstract

*During the World War I, Croatian artist Maksimilijan Vanka (1889–1963) made a triptych of paintings of figures in folk dress based on the lyrics of a folk song titled Lijepa Jela tri vijenca splela (Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths). They were not a state commission, but by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all three paintings landed in the collections of major Croatian state institutions – the Office of the President, the Croatian History Museum, and the Croatian Parliament building, respectively. In the decades since their creation, these works have often been misdated, the connection between the works unacknowledged, and the original context ignored. This paper situates the triptych in the midst of the war, in the last years of the Habsburg Monarchy, and explores the complex relationships of folkloric imagery to empire, nation, and foreign audiences at this historic juncture.*

**Keywords:** folklore,  
folk dress, nationalism,  
cosmopolitanism, Croatia,  
Austria-Hungary

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### INTRODUCTION

In midst of World War I, in the last years of the Habsburg Empire, Croatian artist Maksimilijan Vanka (1889–1963), then twenty-seven years old and at an early point in his career, started a triptych of paintings based on the lyrics of a folk song titled *Lijepa Jela tri vijenca splela* (Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths).<sup>1</sup> In his three paintings and in the song, the young woman “Jela” gives a woven wreath first to an icon of the Madonna, then to the host of a feast next to his bountiful table, and finally to her beloved, mounted on horseback. The song has many Central Croatian and Slavonian variants. In each, a young girl weaves three wreaths using three materials to take to three different places. In most of the variants, the goal of all this wreath weaving is thankfulness for agricultural abundance, but also expressing desire for health, happiness, and love. This appears to be the first time that Vanka employed a folk song in his paintings, but it would become something the artist did in a number of his works in the decades that followed. Both the inscription of folk song lyrics and attention to regional folk dress is a testament to ethnographic specificity in Vanka’s works. The works share similar compositions: full-length depictions of figures dressed in folk dress, participating in folk ritual, and shown in Croatian landscapes. Critics compared the stiffness and arrangement of the figures to

<sup>1</sup> This research is expanded from the author’s dissertation: Heidi Cook, “Picturing Peasants: Maksimilijan Vanka’s Folkloric Paintings and the ‘Croatian Question’ from Habsburg Empire to Croatian Nation-State” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2016). I would like to thank my committee, and especially my advisor Barbara McCloskey, for their feedback and encouragement. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted, and the original Croatian sometimes appears in footnotes.



**Fig. 1.** Maksimilijan Vanka, *Da bi nam bolje rodilo polje* (*So That Our Fields May Be Fertile*), ca. 1916–1917, oil on canvas, 180 cm x 202 cm, Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb.

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Byzantine art.<sup>2</sup> The scale of the paintings is large. All three are approximately 200 centimeters in width, and their heights vary from 160 to 200 centimeters. Vanka purposely employed the scale and composition of a history painting, but challenged the format by depicting common folk culture rather than literary or historic narratives, playing with the divide between high and low culture.

At the time Vanka painted this series of three folkloric paintings, they were not a state commission. Despite this, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all three, each via its own route, landed in the collections of major Croatian state institutions – three of the most powerful spaces of Croatian national imagining. The most well-known and most highly finished of the three paintings is inscribed *Da bi nam polje rodilo bolje* (*So That Our Fields May Be Fertile*, **fig. 1**).<sup>3</sup> The first president of the Republic of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, had the work purchased for the office of the President of Croatia in the early 1990s. According to a 2000 newspaper article, Tuđman encountered the work in the tennis club he frequented and, considering himself a fan of Vanka’s work, requested to purchase it.<sup>4</sup> It was hung (and continues to hang)

<sup>2</sup> Josip Bobek, “Ausstellung Maksimilijan Vanka” [Maksimilijan Vanka Exhibition], *Morgenblatt*, April 11, 1934, 4.

<sup>3</sup> The painting was referred to by its full folk lyric *Prvi vijenac Bogorodici dala, da bi nam bolje rodilo bolje* (The First Wreath She Gave to the Virgin Mary, So That Our Fields May Be Fertile) in Antun Jiroušek, “Naše slike: Maksimilijan Vanka” [Our Pictures: Maksimilijan Vanka], *Vijenac* I, no. 6 (February 6, 1923), 118. In 1930 it was reproduced under the title *Blagoslov žita* (Blessing of the Grain) in “Izložba Maksimilijana Vanke u Salonu Ullrich od 7.-20. o. mj.” [Maksimilijan Vanka’s Exhibition in Salon Ullrich from 7th to 20th of this Month], *Svijet* 5, no. 12 (March 15, 1930): 294–95.

<sup>4</sup> According to the article, the painting was purchased with money from the *Fond Reda predsjednikovih vitezova* (Fund of the Order of President’s Knights) in the early 1990s for the Presidential Palace from Franjo Tuđman’s



**Fig. 2.** Maksimilijan Vanka, *Lijepa Jela tri vijenca splela* (*Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths*), 1916, oil on canvas, 166 cm x 201 cm, Croatian History Museum, Zagreb.



in the conference room of the Office of the President in what is known as Villa Zagorje. The second work in the triptych, inscribed *Lijepa Jela tri vijenca splela* (*Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths*, **fig. 2**), entered the collection of the Croatian History Museum in Zagreb.<sup>5</sup> It is not on permanent display, but included in relevant exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> By 1923 this work was already reported to be in a private collection in Zagreb, and according to the museum's records the work was purchased from a previous owner in Zagreb in 1971.<sup>7</sup> *Treći vijenac svom dragom dala* (*The Third Wreath She Gave to Her Beloved*, **fig. 3**) is displayed in the Croatian Parliament building, the Hrvatski Sabor, in a salon off the raised viewer level.<sup>8</sup> The Sabor has no known documentation of when

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friend Vinko Hotko. Đurđica Klancir, "Nerasvijetljene tajne Tuđmanove umjetničke zbirke" [Unexplained Secrets of Tuđman's Art Collection], *Globus*, December 22, 2000, 74–76. The fact that this painting was frequently published in articles about Vanka in the 1920s and 1930s suggests that it stayed in Vanka's studio until the 1934 exhibition he held before his immigration to the United States.

5 In the catalog for the May 1920 Association of Yugoslavian Artists "Lada" exhibition in the Hrvatski umjetnički salon in Zagreb, Vanka listed it under its full title: *Lijepa Jela tri vijenca splela, drugi vijenac domaćinu dala* (*Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths, The Second Wreath She Gave to the Host*). *Lada 1920.: Izložba "Lade"* [Lada 1920: Lada Exhibition] (Zagreb: Tisak nadbiskupske tiskare Zagreb, 1920). This catalog and all others mentioned in this publication are available online through the Digital Collection of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Digitalna zbirka Hrvatske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti).

6 In recent decades, the work was shown in the exhibition *Stjepan Radić* held in 1991 and the exhibition *Slike Velikog Rata* [Images of the Great War] held June 12, 2014–January 11, 2015 and curated by Marina Bregovac Pisk. Both exhibitions took place in the Croatian History Museum (Hrvatski povijesni muzej).

7 Jiroušek, "Naše slike," 118–119; Marina Bregovac Pisk (Curator of the Collection of Paintings, Graphics, and Sculpture, Hrvatski povijesni muzej), email message to author, March 7, 2014.

8 This painting does not bear an inscription or a signature. This is the title used for the piece in the catalog of Vanka's departing exhibition *Maksimilijan Vanka: MCMXXXIV*, April 1–14, 1934, Zagreb Art Pavilion (Umjetnički paviljon, Zagreb).



Fig. 3. Postcard color reproduction of Maksimilijan Vanka's painting *Treći vijenac svojom dragom dala* (*The Third Wreath She Gave to Her Beloved*), ca. 1916–1934, oil on canvas, 200 cm x 205 cm, Croatian Parliament.

the work was acquired, but it happened after 1956, as archival documentation indicates this painting was offered to the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts from a private collector that year.<sup>9</sup>

That each of the paintings seems to have taken its own route, through various owners, to a distinct space of cultural state authority – the Office of the President, the Croatian History Museum, and the Croatian Parliament – reveals that Vanka's folkloric paintings, including the triptych that is the focus of this paper, have come to be seen over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as having national significance. In contrast to their contemporary reception, in this paper, I explore what can be known about the original aim and reception of this triptych made in the last years of the Habsburg Empire. The origins of these three paintings and some of the earliest interpretations of Vanka's folkloric works offer a stark contrast to their contemporary nationalist reception and reveal the changing and competing meanings of folkloric imagery.

<sup>9</sup> Maksimilijan Vanka file, Archive of Fine Arts in Zagreb (Arhiv za likovne umjetnosti), a division of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Art. In this document, the work had an alternative title, which is also on a plaque added to the frame probably in the postwar period: *Proslava žetve* (Celebration of the Harvest).



## THE ORIGINS OF *BEAUTIFUL JELA WOVE THREE WREATHS*

The dating of these three paintings has presented problems in the scant literature about Vanka's *oeuvre*.<sup>10</sup> The second painting in the triptych (but perhaps the first completed), *Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths*, clearly indicates the production year 1916 in Vanka's signature.<sup>11</sup> This should provide a basis for estimating the dates of the other two works, but the fact that these works originally comprised a triptych has not been acknowledged in any publication on Vanka's work since the 1930s. This has led to the misdating of the other two paintings. The first painting in the triptych, inscribed *So That Our Fields May Be Fertile*, bears no date and has been misdated to the early 1930s in a recent exhibition catalogue.<sup>12</sup> However, a photograph in the artist's possession depicts Vanka and a group of people, some of whom are in military uniform, gathered around the painting and is dated June 21, 1917, showing the work was in fact completed much earlier than the 1930s (fig. 4).<sup>13</sup> The third painting, *The Third Wreath She Gave to Her Beloved*, was probably begun at the same time as the other two, around 1916–1917, but does not seem to have been completed in the early 1920s. It was never published or exhibited until Vanka's 1934 farewell



**Fig. 4.** Photograph of Maksimilijan Vanka with *So That Our Fields May Be Fertile*, dated 21 June 1917, Vanka-Brasko Archive, Doylestown, PA.

<sup>10</sup> The two most complete exhibitions of Vanka's work up to this point include David Leopold, ed., *The Gift of Sympathy: The Art of Maxo Vanka* (Doylestown, PA: James A. Michener Art Museum, 2001), which mentions very few of Vanka's Croatian, pre-immigration works, and Nevenka Posavec Komarica, ed., *Maksimilijan Vanka, 1889–1963: Retrospektivna izložba [Maksimilijan Vanka, 1889–1963: Retrospective Exhibition]* (Zagreb: Galerija Klovičevi dvori, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> The signature painted in the lower left corner in red paint reads: VANKA 916.

<sup>12</sup> Komarica, ed., *Maksimilijan Vanka, 1889–1963*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> The photograph is located in the Vanka-Brasko Family Archive, Rushland, Pennsylvania and a copy is in the archive of Strossmayerova Galerija, Zagreb. In addition to the dated photograph, the painting appeared in publication as early as 1923: Jiroušek, "Naše slike," 117.

exhibition in Zagreb's Umjetnički paviljon, held before the artist immigrated to the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The best historic evidence that these three works comprise a triptych and that all three pieces were at least begun by the early 1920s, is a 1923 article on Vanka's folkloric paintings in the literary and cultural journal *Vijenac* in 1923. It is unsigned, but attributed to Antun Jiroušek (1873–1949), an art historian and critic at the time, and soon-to-be director of Zagreb's Museum of Arts and Crafts from 1925 to 1933. Jiroušek's account is one of the only to describe the works together: "The artist conceived the third large painting under the influence of known folk verses: *Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths*. It is a triptych, of which two paintings are already made."<sup>15</sup>

This question of dating may seem of minor importance, but the argument in this paper hinges on the original context of this triptych. What little interpretation exists of these three paintings situates them in the interwar context, where these images of folk culture would be read as engaging with the growth in popularity of the Croatian Peasant Party in the latter half of the 1920s, a nationalist movement that caused a corresponding surge in folk culture revival that took the form of an increased popularity of folk dress, folk singing and dancing performances, and images of folk culture.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, some of Vanka's later works did engage with this movement after the assassination attempt, wounding and subsequent death in 1928 of Croatian Peasant Party leader Stjepan Radić with images of strong, independent peasants, who often return the viewer's gaze.<sup>17</sup> However, this paper argues that Vanka's early triptych emerged out of a starkly different late Habsburg context, where images of folk culture often took on very different connotations, connected to Habsburg imperial multiculturalism rather than nationalisms.

To begin, Vanka's biography pegs him as product of Habsburg cosmopolitanism. He was an illegitimate child, probably of Habsburg nobility, and it is unlikely he was ethnically Croat through his parentage.<sup>18</sup> However, he was raised until the age of eight by a Croatian peasant wet nurse, which left a large impression on him and his artworks.<sup>19</sup> He completed his school and fine arts

14 This dating is based on Jiroušek's remark in 1923 that, "This painting remained unfinished in Brussels." Jiroušek, "Naše slike," 118. Although the author can find little evidence that the painting was in Brussels, the fact that an image of the painting was not published and it was first shown to the public in 1934 seems to support that it was not completed in the early 1920s. Perhaps it was never fully completed considering it bears no inscription with folk lyrics like the other two paintings.

15 Jiroušek, "Naše slike," 118–119. Additional evidence that these three works compose a triptych includes the fact that two of the works are described as belonging to a triptych in the catalogs for the *Izložba "Lada"* (Lada Exhibition), held May 1920 in the Hrvatski umjetnički salon, Zagreb and for Vanka's departing exhibition *Mak-similijan Vanka* held April 1–14, 1934 in the Zagreb Art Pavilion (Umjetnički Paviljon).

16 See for example the inclusion of *Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths* in the 1991 Stjepan Radić exhibition at the Hrvatski povijesni muzej in Zagreb, which attempts to place the work in the interwar context.

17 Of Vanka's interwar works, of particular note are his *Zagorska Nevjesta* (*Zagorje Bride*, 1925) which appeared on the cover of *Ženski list* and the 1928 poster for the X. Zagrebački zbor (Zagreb Trade fair) designed together with Zdenka Sertić.

18 Although he knew the identity of at least his mother, Vanka never revealed his parentage publicly.

19 The closest thing to an account of Vanka's young childhood can be read in Louis Adamic, *Cradle of Life: The Story of One Man's Beginnings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936). Adamic was good friends with Vanka and based parts of the book on discussions with Vanka about his life.

education before the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy. He enrolled in Zagreb's newly formed School for Art and Craft (Viša škola za umjetnost i umjetni obrt) from 1908 to 1910 to study with Croatian symbolist painter Bela Csikoš-Sessija. Contributing further to his cosmopolitan background, in 1911 he continued his studies at the Royal Academy of Arts in Brussels with symbolist painters Jean Delville and Constant Montald. Few Croatian art students chose to study in Brussels, but Vanka selected this location in part because he was a relation of the Belgian queen.<sup>20</sup>

## CHANGING RECEPTION OF VANKA'S FOLKLORIC MOTIFS

While Vanka painted portraits and landscapes, he would become most well-known before his immigration to the United States for painting scenes of Croatian folk culture. His first big success while studying in Brussels was the painting *Proštenjari* (The Supplicants) completed in 1913, which, according to critic Ivo Hergešić, “won him a gold medal and many international accolades.”<sup>21</sup> The painting depicted a group of men and women in the folk dress of the Gračani region just north of Zagreb gathered around an outdoor altar. It is notable that his first major folkloric work, produced only three years before beginning the *Beautiful Jela* triptych, was a hit not so much with Croatian audiences (although the work did circulate in Croatia as a postcard) but with audiences outside Croatia and even outside the Habsburg Empire. In other words, *The Supplicants* was likely not appealing to foreign audiences for its Croatian nationalist sentiment, as Vanka's works are often received today, but instead these viewers were more drawn to the perceived exoticism and distinctiveness of the small and distant South Slavic folk culture depicted therein. Given the way that the folk cultures of Austria-Hungary were often displayed in world's fairs and imperial museums of art and crafts, it is not surprising that foreign audiences and even audiences within the Empire would perceive Vanka's folkloric works as emblematic of Austria-Hungary's rich multiculturalism. These Habsburg displays encouraged citizens and foreigners alike to view the empire as culturally diverse but politically unified.<sup>22</sup> Imperial multiculturalism could be celebrated, but only in ways that did not threaten the integrity of the Empire with nationalism. Vanka's works created before the fall of the Empire conformed with their intricate depictions of folk ritual and the weavings and embroideries on folk dress.

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20 This is reported by Louis Adamic, *My America, 1928–1938* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 167.

21 Ivo Hergešić, “Maksimilijan Vanka – prigodom izložbe u Umjetničkom paviljonu” [Maksimilijan Vanka – On the Occasion of the Exhibition in the Art Pavilion], *Hrvatska revija* VII, no. 4 (1934): 215.

22 For more on this see Diana Reynolds Cordileone, “The Austrian Museum for Art and Industry: Historicism and National Identity in Vienna 1863–1900,” *Austrian Studies*, vol. 16 (2008): 123–141; Rebecca Houze, “At the Forefront of a Newly Emerging Profession? Ethnography, Education and the Exhibition of Women's Needlework in Austria-Hungary in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 1 (2008): 19–40.

Furthermore, the responses from Croatian critics at the time surprisingly indicate that they also did not perceive Vanka's *The Supplicants* as nationalist, particularly because of Vanka's painting style. Despite the fact that the painting depicted Croatian folk culture, early critics of Vanka's work, including Izidor Kršnjavi and Andrija Milčinović, critiqued this work for being too Spanish in its style.<sup>23</sup> Critics frequently repeated that Vanka's early works were especially similar to the works of contemporary Spanish painters Ramón and Valentin de Zubiaurre (two brothers) and Ignacio Zuloaga.<sup>24</sup> Kosta Strajnić summed up these critical viewpoints well, saying "his religious compositions function more with foreign artificiality than with direct honesty."<sup>25</sup> Vanka was seen as mixing national influences in his works, or not clearly belonging to one authentic national school of painting, and was accused of being derivative, a common fate of artists on the periphery.

Vanka completed his studies in Brussels in 1914, and with the outbreak of the war was eventually forced to return to Zagreb.<sup>26</sup> Despite the local critiques, Vanka's original intent with the *Beautiful Jela* triptych, which was begun only a few years after the completion of *The Supplicants*, seems to have been to build off the international success of *The Supplicants* by making a new set of works that would appeal to broader European audiences with its display of Croatian folk culture. Vanka's triptych engages with ethnographic specificity to draw attention to Croatian folk culture. All three paintings take their content and inscriptions from the lyrics of the same popular folk song, *Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths*. However, "Jela" is not the same young woman in the three paintings. In each painting "Jela" appears as a different young woman, wearing the folk dress of three distinct regions.<sup>27</sup> *So That Our Fields May Be Fertile* depicts the blessing of the wheat in the folk dress of the Moslavina region located south of Zagreb around the town of Sisak. *Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths* depicts

23 Izidor Kršnjavi, "Izložba Maksimilijana Vanke" [Maksimilijan Vanka Exhibition], *Narodne Novine*, no. 264 (November 13, 1915): 1; Andrija Milčinović, "Dešković i Vanka" [Dešković and Vanka], *Savremenik: mjesečnik Društva hrvatskih književnika*, VIII (1913): 750–751; Kosta Strajnić, "Mladja umjetnička generacija" [The Younger Artistic Generation], *Savremenik* X, no. 11 and 12 (December 1915), 426–429.

24 "We are not sure in which nationality we must classify Miss [sic] Vanka, who paints Croatian subjects obviously imitating the Zubiaurre brothers." [D. A.], "Le Salon triennial – Les artistes étrangers" [The Triennial Salon – Foreign Artists], *Le Soir*, May 25, 1914, 2.

25 Strajnić, "Mladja umjetnička generacija," 429.

26 When the war broke out, it was with the Belgian Queen's permission that Vanka, now a citizen of an enemy empire, was allowed to stay and work with the Belgian Red Cross during the German invasion for a time before he was forced to flee.

27 I owe a debt of gratitude to Vesna Zorić, Museum Advisor at the Etnografski muzej in Zagreb, for assistance with the identification of the geographical origin of folk dress in these paintings. Any mistakes of identification are my own. Jiroušek also helps identify the regions of folk dress in the paintings: "*The First Wreath* (in our reproduction) *She Gave to Mary*, so that *Our Fields May Be Fertile* shows the blessing of the wheat as is the custom in Moslavina. The painting is located in Brussels. *The Second Wreath, She Gave to the Host* (in our reproduction) shows the end of harvest as our nation celebrates it in Pokuplje. This is located in a private collection in Zagreb. *The Third Wreath She Gave to Her Beloved*, captures that moment when [moma] gives the wreath to the most beautiful young man in the circle, from which an engagement develops and a folk wedding, and is shown exactly as is customary in Đakovo region. This painting remained unfinished in Brussels." Jiroušek, "Naše slike," 118–119.



an end-of-the-harvest tradition in the folk dress of Kupinec or Bratina, villages just southwest of Zagreb in the Jaskansko polje region. *The Third Wreath She Gave to Her Beloved* depicts the folk dress of the village of Rečica just east of Karlovac. Through that maneuver, “Jela” seemingly stands in for all the young women maintaining Croatian tradition.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, it is telling that the language Croatian critics used to describe Vanka’s folkloric motifs takes a nationalist turn after World War I. Only after the fall of Austria-Hungary and the creation of a Yugoslav state could the ethnographic study of South Slav folk cultures be openly acknowledged as something that lent legitimacy to the nationalist movements.<sup>29</sup> Not coincidentally, it was right after World War I that the ethnographic collection in Zagreb received its own museum. It was at that moment that critics began to take notice of the nationalizing potential of Vanka’s folkloric works. Jiroušek’s 1923 article, which provided important evidence that these three works compose a triptych, was also one of the first to openly romanticize Vanka’s work in a nationalist way: “Vanka tells us in his paintings how the artist feels while observing the life of the Croatian peasant. From these paintings gushes out enormous devotion and honest love towards the Croatian village.”<sup>30</sup> Jiroušek’s post-World War I commentary is evidence that it was only with the fall of the empire that Vanka’s ethnographic specificity was openly received as Croatian nationalism, an interpretation which has continued up until today.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The present-day locations of Vanka’s *Beautiful Jela* triptych in three state collections suggest to contemporary viewers that the artist painted these images of folk culture in order to encourage Croatians to imagine themselves as an independent ethnic nation. However, this paper argues that when properly dated and contextualized to the last years of the Habsburg Monarchy, a different artistic intent emerges. Although this triptych was created at a historic juncture in the years leading up to and during World War I, when almost all Croatians wanted more self-governance, few Croatians imagined that the fall of a huge Empire or a fully independent Croatian state was a tangible possibility. More likely, Vanka’s triptych reveals his attention to ethnographic specificity, which Vanka did not intend as a statement on ethnic nationalism, but as a window

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28 It is noteworthy that Vanka only depicts folk dress from Central Croatia in these paintings and his other folkloric works. He does not choose to geographically delineate the three historic regions of Triune Kingdom (Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia) through folk dress, even though he had a house on Korčula and was familiar with Dalmatian culture, which might be understood as a more nationalist expression.

29 Although it must also be acknowledged that Croatian nationalism was also suppressed within the boundaries of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Strong expressions of individual nationalisms were perceived as a threat to the new Yugoslav state. A careful balancing act played out in the interwar years.

30 Jiroušek, “Naše slike,” 118–119.

31 Another strong example of this romanticization of Vanka’s work that follows includes Olga Baldić-Bivec, “Maksimilijan Vanka,” *Ženski list* 5, no. 12 (December 1929): 16–18.

for elite European audiences into the folk traditions of a remote corner of the Habsburg Monarchy.

Further complicating nationalist readings of this triptych is Vanka's cosmopolitan upbringing and approach. A rare quote from the artist reveals that he did not understand his work on the same nationalist terms as some interwar critics. Vanka chose the word "Slavic" rather than "Croatian" to describe the inspiration for his works: "I am happy and overjoyed when I am among those to whom I am closest according to maternal milk, because there that pure real Slavic generosity warms and inspires me; there I regularly feel ... that I cannot pull my folk from its milieu to my paintings, but that as an artist I must get closer to my folk in my paintings."<sup>32</sup>

Vanka, like many other Croatian and South Slav intellectuals, supported the efforts in the last years of Austria-Hungary for South Slavs to be united in a single Yugoslav state either within or outside the Empire.<sup>33</sup> Vanka was actively involved in the Zagreb chapter of the Yugoslav arts organization Lada. In fact, *Beautiful Jela Wove Three Wreaths* was first exhibited in a Lada exhibition in 1920, the earliest documented exhibition of one of these three paintings in Zagreb.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike our usual sense of a triptych, there is no evidence that the works were ever exhibited together. *The Third Wreath She Gave to Her Beloved* was not exhibited until Vanka's 1934 departing exhibition.<sup>35</sup> There is no evidence that the most fully executed of the three works, *So That Our Fields May Be Fertile*, was ever publicly exhibited, but the work had a lively print life, circulating in Croatian journals and as a postcard.<sup>36</sup> I would speculate that after the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy and the violence of World War I, Vanka was unsure about the reception of these works by the original European audiences for whom he had intended them, and thus did not exhibit them together.

Contrary to simplistic readings, close examination reveals that folk culture held a plurality of meanings in Vanka's work and that of his Croatian contemporaries. Before the interwar period, Vanka's work flaunted the

32 "Ja sam sretan i presretan kad sam među onima, kojima sam po materinjem mlijeku najbliži, jer me ondje zagrijava i oduhovljuje ona čista i prava slavenska širokogrudnost; tu redovno osjećam – ispovijeda obrazovani otmjeni i tankočutni Vanka – da ne smijem svoj narod iz njegovog milieu-a na svoje slike navlačiti, već da se ja kao umjetnik moram u svojim slikama približiti svome narodu." Jiroušek, "Naše slike," 118.

33 Scholar Andrew Wachtel has described how Ivan Meštrović (and I would add other intellectuals and artists around Vanka's generation) "matured in the waning years of Austro-Hungarian rule, the period when the synthetic model of Yugoslav culture was developed, and the period in which it captured the imagination of a good portion of young South Slav intellectuals." Andrew B. Wachtel, "The Synthetic Yugoslav Culture of the Interwar Period," in *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918–1992*, ed. Dejan Djokić (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 241.

34 The exhibition took place in May 1920 in the Hrvatski umjetnički salon, Zagreb. *Lada 1920.: Izložba "Lade"* (Zagreb: Tisak nadbiskupske tiskare Zagreb, 1920).

35 *Maksimilijan Vanka: MCMXXXIV*, April 1–14, 1934, Zagreb Art Pavilion (Umjetnički paviljon, Zagreb).

36 For example, *So That Our Fields May Be Fertile* is pictured in "Iz hrvatske umjetnosti" [From Croatian Art], *Svijet* 1, no. 7 (March 20, 1926): 119; and "Izložba Maksimilijana Vanke u Salonu Ullrich od 7.-20. o. mj" [Maksimilijan Vanka's Exhibition in Salon Ullrich from 7th to 20th of this Month], *Svijet* 5, no. 12 (March 15, 1930): 294–295.

uniqueness of Croatian folk culture on the periphery while claiming command of traditional academic style of painting in order to engage with Western European audiences in a way that yielded to Austria-Hungary's desire for political unity in cultural diversity. Vanka's triptych gains greater significance if we acknowledge the ways in which folkloric works intersect with the complex 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Croatia. Images of folk culture were understood differently in the context of multi-national Austria-Hungary than in the contexts of interwar and postwar Yugoslavia, and naturally took on new significance in the new Republic of Croatia. To acknowledge the changing nature and reception of Vanka's folkloric works and that of his contemporaries is to fully acknowledge the shifting identities and experiences of Croatians over the last century.



