

Artwork of St. Sava Serbian Orthodox Church McKeesport, PA

The contemporary beige brick exterior of the St. Sava Serbian Orthodox Church in McKeesport, PA gives no clue as to the richness of the artwork within the sanctuary walls.

To enter the church is to pass from the outside world into a sanctuary that immediately fills the senses with brilliant colors originating from the expansive murals on the walls to the iconostasis (icon screen) across the front of the nave.

As one's eyes adjust to the light streaming from the soaring chandeliers, or to the subdued illumination during certain liturgical cycles, one's mind undergoes a change of mood. This change, transformed by the play of color and light, helps to prepare the soul to receive the Holy Word.

Although the church building was dedicated in 1950, it was not until 1957 that the church board commissioned artist Alexander Dzigurski to create six expansive paintings to fill the east and west walls of the nave. He completed the paintings in the McKeesport church in 1959.

*Dzigurski's reputation as an established ecclesiastical artist preceded his selection for the commission. He had already completed commissions in Europe and for St. Eliah Serbian Orthodox Church in Aliquippa and St. Sava Orthodox Church in Steubenville, Ohio. About the same time that he was engaged to sketch the murals for the McKeesport church, he accepted a similar project for the Cathedral of St. Sava in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Parishioner Stoyanka Vranesevich said that her father, the Very Reverend Milan G. Popovich, gave the artist the ideas or themes for the respective murals. She said that her father wanted the paintings to represent both the life of Christ and Serbian history.

As a result, three of the works depict the passion and resurrection of Christ and three reflect key turning points in Serbian history.

Mrs. Vranesevich recalls that Dzigurski, his wife and a helper installed the paintings and applied gold leaf to the ornamentation of the iconostasis in one week. The artist painted and framed the pictures at his studio rather than painting directly on the church walls to prevent damage from moisture, heat and cold.

Dzigurski's talent goes beyond the application of paint to canvas. His use of color, light and texture exudes the emotion with which he captures his subjects.

Gazing at the mural of Christ's crucifixion one is drawn into the panorama of the familiar scene of Christ on the cross, arms extended toward the good thief to the right and the bad thief to the left. The spectacle is preserved in the faces of the women at the foot of the cross, the beloved apostle standing nearby, the centurion with downcast eyes, and the people who gathered to watch

The painting of Christ praying at Gethsemane shows Our Lord asking His Heavenly Father for strength to face His destiny. An angel appears to comfort Christ.

The mural of Christ's emerging from the tomb portrays the Resurrection. Two angels greet Christ as the Roman guards flee in terror.

On the opposite wall three paintings illustrate important Serbian historical points in time. The first shows St. Sava and his father St. Simeon on a hilltop overlooking the Hilandar monastery. The prominence of the monastery in the scene is representative of

the importance of this sacred place in the spiritual life of the Serbian people. Simeon, previously known as King Stefan Nemanya before he became a monk, established the independent state of Serbia in 1159. His son's name was Rastko prior to his taking the monastic name Sava. Together they rebuilt the ruins of Hilandar on Holy Mt. Athos.

The expansive mural of Prince Lazar (Hrebecjanovic) and his armies receiving communion from Bishop Spiridon before the battle of Kosovo in 1389 recalls their bravery in the face of overwhelming odds by the Turkish hordes. All of them went to heroic deaths and Prince Lazar was beheaded in this fierce battle of Christianity against Mohammedanism. The supreme sacrifice of Lazar and his men is regarded as the preservation of the Orthodox Christian Faith and serves as the foundation for succeeding generations of Serbian Orthodox Christians to build lives on these same ideals.

Perhaps one of the most stirring paintings in this series is the burning of St. Sava's relics by the Turks at Vracar in 1595. The orange, yellow and red flames can almost be felt as this incident brings Serbian passions to their height. Although St. Sava died in 1235 at Trnovo, Bulgaria, his remains were taken for burial to Monastery Mileshvo. Both Christians and Muslims were healed at the tomb of St. Sava. In 1595 the new Sultan Mohamed III ordered Sinan Pasha to quell Serb uprisings and ordered the body taken to Belgrade and burned at Vracar. St. Sava's memory lives on in the hearts of the Serbian people from generation to generation.

More about Alexander Dzigurski

Born in 1911 in Stari Becej in the province of Vojvodina, Alexander Dzigurski enrolled in the School of Art in Belgrade at age 14 against his father's wishes. Upon graduating in 1929 at age 18, he intended to pursue further studies at the Academy of Art in Munich. However, he lacked a passport to do so. In 1930 he enlisted in the King's Navy for two years during which time he acquired a passport that allowed him to study abroad upon completion of his military service.

Dzigurski's biography recounts his determination and struggles to persist in his artistic career from the time of his first studio, his first commissions to restore icons in the Serbian church at Gospodjinci, his survival with his wife and daughter during the German occupation of Serbia and their subsequent flight to Trieste in 1945, their time in Genoa and Rome where his paintings received acclaim, and their journey to American in 1949. By that time his star in the European art world began to rise and the prospect of a career in a new land held promise.

Known for his spectacular seascapes, Dzigurski and his wife traveled extensively throughout the United States. He completed paintings of crashing waves at various coastal points as well as almost every major mountain range from east to west. He loved his adopted country and never ran out of natural subjects to capture on canvas.

*Information about Alexander Dzigurski was obtained from *The Art of Alexander Dzigurski* by Phyllis Barton; McGraw Color Graphics, Publishers, Kansas City, Missouri; 1979.