IN DIALOGUE:
Henry Mosler, *Forging the Cross*

SNITE MUSEUM OF ART

JANUARY 10 – MARCH 13, 2016
IN DIALOGUE:

This single-work exhibition is the second in a series focusing on a painting from the Snite Museum’s permanent collection that is normally not on view. Designed to highlight the many interpretive possibilities an object offers, the presentation brings together diverse voices from across campus to create an open and ongoing understanding of Mosler’s turn-of-the-century synthesis of art, history, religion, and gender roles.

Forging the Cross, ca. 1904
Henry Mosler (Silesia, Poland, 1841 – 1920, New York)  
oil on canvas, 46.5 x 67.25 inches (118.11 x 170.82 cm)  
Signed lower right in black paint: Henry Mosler  
Gift of Mrs. J. Fuller Feder, New York, 1950.003

PROVENANCE
Mrs. J. Fuller Feder (née Edith Mosler, d. 1960), presumably inherited from her father in 1920.

EXHIBITED
Worcester (Mass.) Art Museum, Eighth Annual Exhibition of Oil Paintings, June 2–September 24, 1905, no. 41.
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, February 7–March 9, 1907, no. 328.
Cincinnati Art Museum, 1912.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
“Figure Pictures and Portraits at the Academy.” New York Times (January 22, 1905): Second Magazine Section, 1.
“The Eightieth Exhibition of the National Academy of Design.” Brush & Pencil 15, no. 2 (February 1905): 80 (ill.).
“Eightieth Annual Exhibition of the National Academy of Design.” Book News 23, no. 270 (February 1905): 490 (ill.).
Appreciating *Forging the Cross* through the lens of Catholic Social Tradition focuses our attention on the social doctrine of communal salvation and the call to participation. Henry Mosler created the painting during the Progressive Era when Theodore Roosevelt implemented government reforms, Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, and the Wright Brothers brought flight to humanity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a period of hope blossomed through these innovations and the willingness of the American people to participate in democracy.

Viewed in this way, Mosler’s painting emblematizes these efforts and ideals. Gathered as community to form the cross in the blacksmith shop, a pastor oversees the workers while the women and children witness the act and lend their support. As they forge a holy image, the scene suggests how humankind is made in God’s image existing as both sacred and social beings. Similarly, Catholic Social Tradition states, “In community we realize the fulfillment of our dignity and rights in relationship with and to others.”

Pope Benedict further emphasized this point of communal salvation in his encyclical, *Spe Salvi* (*Saved in Hope*), when he wrote, “No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine.”

The community of salvation, as depicted in this painting, invites all to participate. This participation thus becomes a moral obligation in order to encounter the cross. As the Pontifical Council highlights, “Participation in community life is not only one of the greatest aspirations of the citizen, called to exercise freely and responsibly his civic role with and for others, but is also one of the pillars of all democratic orders.” The forging of the cross becomes a formation of community, which leads us to Christ.

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**WHAT’S IN A NAME?**

*Forging the Cross* is one of Henry Mosler’s historical genre scenes. Signed but undated, the painting has previously been ascribed to the mid-1880s, when Mosler was in France and making frequent visits to Brittany.¹ But three dated drawings in the Cincinnati Art Museum (Figs. 1–3) and the artist’s 1903 copyright application to the Library of Congress allow us to assign the painting to 1904. In the application, Mosler described the painting, titled *The Light of the Cross*, as “[i]nterior of a blacksmith shop, (Puritan costumes).”² When he exhibited it a year later, he renamed it *Forging the Cross*.

In the painting, four men labor over a red-hot iron cross, whose glow illuminates the center of the room. Mosler was aware of the symbolic use of light in European paintings from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century. Netherlandish artist Michael Sittow used the trope of the Christ child as the divine source of light in his *Nativity*, for example (Fig. 4). The device was still common in the nineteenth century when Eduard Steinbrück painted his *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 5).

Enlightenment artists proffering industry, science, and technology as humankind’s salvation appropriated this use of light. In Joseph Wright of Derby’s painting and subsequent mezzotint *Blacksmith’s Shop* of 1771 (Fig. 6), the anvil and hot iron illuminating the scene stand in for Jesus in a manger.³ The smiths resemble classical heroes, and attendant angels are now consigned to a stone decoration over the arched doorway. A contemplative old man at right replaces the familiar kneeling magus or shepherd in a nativity.

In Mosler’s painting, the light of the cross is manufactured by men and sanctified by the presence of a minister. Changing the title shifted the emphasis from the phenomenon of light to physical activity, suggesting man’s agency in religious life.

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Curator of European Art

**NOTES**

Figure 1. Henry Mosler, Study for *Forging the Cross*, 1902, pen and black ink with graphite on paper, 11 x 8.8 inches (sheet). Cincinnati Art Museum: Gift of Henry M. Marx in memory of Agnes Mosler Marx, 1976.1005.

Figure 2. Henry Mosler, Study for *Forging the Cross*, 1902, graphite on paper, 10.9 x 9 inches (sheet). Cincinnati Art Museum: Gift of Henry M. Marx in memory of Agnes Mosler Marx, 1976.1006.


Figure 4. Michael Sittow (Netherlandish, ca. 1468–1525/26), *Nativity*, ca. 1510–20, oil on oak panel, 44.5 x 33 inches. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, GG.5878.

Figure 5. Eduard Steinbrück (German, 1803–1882), *Adoration of the Magi*, (detail) 1838, oil on canvas, 59.75 x 111.5 inches. Snite Museum of Art: Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Hamilton Sr. Purchase Fund, 1978.017.

Figure 6. Richard Earlom (British, 1743–1822), *A Blacksmith’s Shop*, after Joseph Wright of Derby, 1771, mezzotint on wove paper, 24.1 x 17.3 inches (sheet). Snite Museum of Art: Acquired with funds provided by Rebecca Nanovic Lin, 2015.023.
WORKING FOR FAITH AND FAMILY

Henry Mosler’s *Forging the Cross* foregrounds artisans hard at work in the construction of the essential icon of Christianity. An idealized image of the traditional craft shop, the men sport leather aprons, wield hand tools, and collaborate closely as they deploy mind and muscle to fashion metal into a customized product. At the time Mosler composed his painting, such workplaces were rapidly disappearing as innovations in technology and production methods transformed the division of labor and the distribution of wealth. In the face of urgent public questions about the status of work and the role of religion in industrializing America, Mosler’s painting sanctified the traditional craft economy by linking it to religion, suggesting that the future of both faith and family lay in the hands of workers.

*Forging the Cross* was unveiled just a few months before the 1905 founding of the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical union decrying the dehumanization of capitalism and advocating that workers seize the means of production. Not long after that, John A. Ryan, a Catholic priest and labor economist, published *A Living Wage*, which declared that workers had the natural right to an income adequate to support themselves and their families. Through this painting, Mosler forged his own argument regarding the inherent dignity of labor and its relationship to Christianity.

If the painting represents human agency as central to the construction of religion, it specifies further that workers—not clerics or their congregations—are the church’s indispensable builders. Standing outside the workshop but peering in expectantly, the women and children passively occupy a sphere completely separate from, yet entirely dependent on, the men and their work, a gendered ordering of the world consistent with the breadwinner ideology of Ryan’s Catholic social thought and the labor movement more generally.

The priest also plays a passive role in the production, but unlike the women, he is placed at the center of both the painting and the activity. His presence there seems problematic: narratively, he seems too close to the heat and in danger of being hit by a stray spark; figuratively, he suggests the meddling manager or overweening employer that was a staple of craftsmen’s complaints. Intensely proud of their skills and status, craftsmen were notorious for refusing to work when watched by bosses or customers. The priest’s passivity and awkward placement stand in sharp contrast to the forceful and organically collaborative action of the craftsmen, suggesting that Mosler had suspicions about the role of the clergy in the workplace, and, for that matter, in the church itself.

Painted during a period of violent workplace conflicts and heated debates over the proper relationships between industrialization, democracy, and religion, Henry Mosler’s *Forging the Cross* suggests the centrality and indispensability of dignified labor to the project of Christianity. A century later, we confront our own questions about the relationships between faith, family, and the future of our economic system. Although our answers may differ from Mosler’s, his painting points to the enduring importance of work and the material world to the search for salvation.

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FORGING MASCULINITY

Space in Henry Mosler’s *Forging the Cross* is highly gendered, a distinction emphasized by the artist’s use of light. The central figures of the tableau are all men: men at movement, men who take up large swathes of space at the forge. In contrast, the women and children are tightly clustered together at the right margin of the canvas, just outside the workshop and peering through the doorway. Such positioning calls to mind ideologies of the private and public spheres, with their division of both occupational tasks and the space in which they are performed. But the painting does not merely silently reinforce the traditional public-private split: The women and children are outside, only framed by the doorway, not confined to the home. Most of them are standing idly, only watching the forging. This is perhaps a rare moment of leisure for them. One woman alone also works; she stands at the left of the group, knitting. Moreover, the women, positioned as they are in the external world, share their space with the Church, represented by the spire in the distance.

Viewers of the painting are invited to identify with the men, even though we are positioned, like the women, as passive observers. As art historians Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain, in the classic Western tradition “men were depicted in action and women as objects to be looked at.” Here, in *Forging the Cross*, this traditional division repeats, emphasizing the masculinity of the workers.

In his analysis of masculinity, sociologist Michael Kimmel connects its evolving forms to economic and historical developments, especially industrialization. The Heroic Artisan, he suggests, lived in symbiotic accord with the Genteel Patriarch in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, only to be supplanted by the Market-place Man by the 1830s. Masculinity as embodied by the artisanate was characterized by physical strength, republican virtue, paternal devotion, economic autonomy. This is the man who takes pride in his work and cherishes his democratic community. The Heroic Artisan, by embodying such democratic ideals, represented a secure masculinity that directly contrasts with the masculinity shaped by industrialization and capitalism, a form of masculinity that required proof of success through the acquisition of tangible goods. By the early 1900s, new technologies exerted pressure on daily life: the earliest two-way wireless communication between Europe and the United States arrived; the Wright brothers achieved the first sustained, manned flight; and the United States held half the world’s manufacturing capacity. In harkening back to a form of masculinity last dominant a hundred years earlier, Mosler’s scene thus encapsulates a gendered nostalgia for a former, supposedly simpler time.

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