

# Pennsylvania steel works mural restored: rescuing history from the dustbin

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A remarkable mural of the US Steel Duquesne Works (circa 1920) by Harry M. Pettit, newly restored, is now on display at a gallery in Washington, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. The Duquesne Works, once one of the largest and most advanced steelmaking operations in the world, closed in 1984, during the general collapse of the steel industry in western Pennsylvania's Mon Valley. The vast majority of the facility's buildings have been demolished.

Pettit's work, 4 feet by 15 feet, painted on paper and backed with linen canvas, is a detailed rendering of a massive industrial complex built along the shore of a river. The eye follows the river entering from the right side, curving under and around the plant, filling up the bottom part of the painting, until it disappears in the upper left-hand corner under a distant bridge. The painter has used a method resembling a camera's wide-angle lens. The plant looms toward the spectator in the lower left of the picture. It recedes up and away toward the right.

To obtain a view of the entire complex, the artist has positioned himself in mid-air, so to speak. (Has the artist painted the work from an airplane? Undoubtedly not. But he suggests the possibility, placing two biplanes in the sky.) With this aerial view he takes in the many plant buildings, as well as the town in the background, appropriately, with its streets, houses, churches, schools.

We see more than a hundred smokestacks, many with plumes of smoke. Flames can be seen through plant windows; dozens of buildings, red and brown, and hundreds of train cars—also, electrical towers, coal barges, automobiles and telephone poles.

The striking painting conveys the power and confidence of American industry of another era. Would an artist in any other country have celebrated a modern manufacturing plant in this fashion? This is not hackwork. While it is clearly not art at its highest imaginative level, the painting is cleverly, carefully and skillfully done. It is aesthetically pleasing; there is something of the artist's heart and soul in the work. Pettit was clearly impressed and moved by the sight of the giant steel works, and he conveys something of his own emotional response.

As a work that hung in the corporate offices, the painting naturally also conceals a great deal: the brutality, the repression, the rapacious and relentless pursuit of profit. The mural suggests a harmonious existence—the river and sky are blue and clean, the hills green and blue, the town neat and orderly; the plant sits comfortably, almost snugly, on the curving riverbank. The artist has created an idyllic picture, perhaps—and Pettit was not a stranger to this—a utopian, futuristic vision.

The circumstances of this one's survival are extraordinary. The giant mural, rolled up in a tube, was about to be tossed in a dumpster in 1998 when it was rescued by former steelworker Steve Gluz. Convinced immediately of its significance, Gluz set about determining the name of its creator (the signature had come off) and the story behind the work. Over the course of several years, with collaborator and gallery owner Peter West, who led the restoration work, he helped uncover facts about the life and career of Harry McEwen Pettit (1867-1941), rescuing the painter-

illustrator, too, from undeserved historical obscurity.

On December 4, in the presence of invited guests, including a number of Pettit's relatives, and the press, the restored painting was unveiled. It will be on display at West's World West Galleries in Washington until April 4.

The unveiling of Pettit's mural has a certain objective significance, which may or may not be apparent to all those involved in its restoration or those who now view it. A great deal of complex and even explosive history, full of struggle and tragedy, pours out, as it were, through this picture. Nor are these historical matters settled, dead or academic. They are bound up with great social questions of our own day.

First, there is the matter of the Duquesne Works itself and its fate.

A steel mill was first built in Duquesne, 10 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, in 1886. Two companies failed to make a go of it. Robber baron Andrew Carnegie, who introduced large-scale steelmaking into the region a decade earlier at the Edgar Thomson Works in nearby Braddock, took over the facility in 1891.

According to James D. Rose, in his thorough *Duquesne and the Rise of Steel Unionism* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), "Between 1893 and 1901 he [Carnegie] transformed the Duquesne Works into a fully integrated basic steel plant. The work of expanding the plant proceeded at various levels, beginning with the purchase of two hundred acres of riverfront property that included a bankrupt tube mill and a glassworks. By 1901 the plant covered more than 240 acres, or just slightly more than a quarter of the town's acreage, and stretched two miles along the river bank. In one of the first changes to the mill, Carnegie built a four-furnace blast-furnace department, which quickly broke, then held for four years, the world record for monthly iron production."

Later, Rose comments: "In only nine years Carnegie had built one of the world's greatest steelworks at Duquesne. Simply to connect the plant's various mills and departments took twenty-five miles of railroad track. The editor of the local newspaper, who proudly called Duquesne a 'Carnegie Town,' likened the town and its mill to a meteor that 'darted out of space and cut a brilliant path across the horizon.' Not satisfied with this heavenly comparison, he added, 'An infant in years, it is the acknowledged young giant and the mastodon of the unconquered and unconquerable Monongahela valley.'"

Fearing a brutal conflict with Carnegie, financier J.P. Morgan, owner of National Tube Works, a finishing-steel company, offered to buy him out, along with other steelmakers. Carnegie agreed, for \$492 million (\$11 billion in 2003 dollars) in 1901, and United States Steel was born, the world's first billion-dollar corporation.

Between 1902 and 1918, the Duquesne Works underwent continual transformation. Rose explains, "By World War I the Duquesne Works stood as an imposing feature of the western Pennsylvania industrial landscape. The mill represented the early stage of steelmaking in the United States, when steelmakers lavished money on their mills, increased steelmaking capacity, and pioneered technological innovations."

The workforce grew commensurately. From 500 in the earliest days, to 2,400 by 1901, 3,000 in 1905, 4,000 in 1910 and approximately 6,000 by 1920. The first workers were native-born, British and Germans. "By 1919 immigrant workers from more than thirty different ethnic groups accounted for 60 percent of the workforce at the Duquesne Works. Slovaks and Magyars, the two largest groups, accounted for 15 percent and 12 percent, respectively. Russians, Lithuanians, Croats, Serbs, and Poles each accounted for 3 percent to 4 percent of the workforce. The foreign-born Irish, Germans, Scots, Welsh, and English, who once held a majority of jobs at the mill, now accounted for just 5 percent of the workforce" (Rose, Duquesne and the Rise of Steel Unionism).

Management ran the operation with an iron fist. Workers at the Duquesne operation came into conflict with Carnegie only one year after he bought the mill, during the infamous Homestead strike of 1892. A sympathy strike at Duquesne lasted two weeks. When Carnegie tried to open the mill with scabs, "the workers staged a street battle that kept the mill closed.... Federal troops arrived shortly after the violent clash; their orders were to reopen the mill. The strikers attempted one more battle to keep the plant shut down, but they were routed. The day ended with federal troops scouring the hills around Duquesne for the fleeing strike leaders."

US Steel, which refused to negotiate with unions after 1909 (a strike had been defeated in 1901), maintained "labor peace" through various means, including the introduction of paternalistic, "welfare capitalist" measures (stock option plans, pension benefits, health and safety programs, etc.), aimed at tying the workers to the fortunes of the company. Where these measures failed—and inadequate as they were, they had to—force and repression filled the gap. The company ruthlessly persecuted organizing efforts, firing and blacklisting all known or suspected union men. A network of company spies operated throughout its mills.

The atmosphere in Duquesne, it appears, was among the most repressive in the Mon Valley. This owed something apparently to the political domination of the Crawford family, a long-established landowning family, which considered the town and its environs to be their personal fiefdom. After initial clashes with the mill owners, the Crawfords united with US Steel interests in 1909. James Crawford became the city of Duquesne's first mayor in 1918 and remained in office until 1937, making it his personal business to repress any attempts by workers to build their own independent organization.

The grievances of steel workers erupted in the national strike of September 1919. Workers still toiled in the steel mills 12 hours a day, seven days a week. When they changed shift, at least once a month, they worked 24 hours straight. Despite the long hours, the typical unskilled worker in the steel industry earned less than the minimum subsistence level for a family of five. Frequent layoffs wiped out whatever savings could be built up.

The National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers (of the American Federation of Labor), led by William Z. Foster, found Duquesne the most difficult town in the region in which to hold a meeting. In fact, the National Committee was never legally able to. When an AFL organizer sought permission from the mayor, Crawford replied, "There will be no meeting held in Duquesne. I'll tell you that Jesus Christ can't hold a meeting in Duquesne."

Rose writes: "Foster and the other union leaders were especially incensed at Crawford's near-dictatorial control of the community. Crawford wrote the law forbidding meetings, introduced it at a city council meeting, and then voted for it. As mayor he decided that the National Committee could not hold a meeting. Serving as director of public safety, he ordered the arrests of the organizers, and, sitting as city magistrate, he presided over the court that convicted and sentenced them. Crawford also was not one to keep his feelings about unions and labor organizers to himself. When he sentenced one organizer, he told the

defendant, 'If I had my way you would be sent to the penitentiary for 99 years and when you got out you'd be sent back for 99 years more.'"

Participation in the national walkout was weak in Duquesne, as "Mill managers and civic leaders used a combination of persuasion, threats, harassment, and physical intimidation to dissuade people from supporting the strike." The steel strike was defeated, and union organization of the industry would not take place until the CIO movement in the late 1930s.

As for the Duquesne works itself, Rose writes: "The 1920s marked a turning point for the Duquesne Works. Rebuilding and expansion had been the watchwords at Duquesne since 1893, but expansion ceased after World War I. Growth in the steel industry shifted geographically to the Chicago region and to the South because of new markets, such as automobile production. Except for minor improvements, the Duquesne's size and scope remained constant; the years of growth and vitality ended and the mill entered its long aging process. Not until World War II did any change in its steelmaking capacity occur, and then the open hearth department added only one furnace. Instead, the improvements the company made in the 1920s were aimed at reducing costs, speeding up production, and modernizing steam and electrical power sources."

Internal indications suggest that the portrait of the Duquesne Works presently on display at the World West Galleries was painted around 1920. Pettit's relatives have in their possession a photograph (taken at an unspecified time) of an earlier version, or a different version, of the Duquesne painting, without the biplanes, electrical towers and other features of the World War I era. Whether Pettit painted a new work or retouched his original version, or even whether another artist brought the picture "up to date" is unknown.

At any rate, Pettit had vast experience in the field of industrial painting, and the painting of modern American life in general.

Born in Rock Island, Illinois, two years after the end of the Civil War, Pettit had a fascinating and varied artistic career. At an early age, according to a biographical sketch compiled by his great nephew, Harry E. Hoit, he held a position as an artist for his hometown newspaper. He married at 23 and around the same time moved to New York City, apparently working in interior decoration. He eventually divorced and married a second time, to a woman born in Baden-Baden, Germany.

Pettit hit his stride as a painter of large industrial sites, steel mills, railroad yards, packing plants and the like. A partial list, assembled by Hoit, of the companies and institutions that utilized Pettit's skills is remarkable and lengthy.

It includes the Illinois Steel Co. in Gary, Indiana; Standard Oil in Bayonne, New Jersey; Gulf Refining Co. in Port Arthur, Texas; Deere & Co. in Moline, Illinois; Westinghouse in Pittsburgh; International Harvester in Chicago and Hamilton, Ontario; Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. in Kansas City, Missouri; Cudahy Packing Co.; Chicago Gas Light & Coke Co.; Union Stockyards, Chicago; Pennsylvania and Grand Central stations in New York City; West Point Military Academy; and Northwestern, Loyola, Columbia and New York universities, as well as the City College of New York, to name only a few.

Pettit also worked for the city of New York, painting bridges and City Hall Park. He painted a picture of "New York City from Grant's Tomb" and a "Birds-eye view of Long Island, New York." According to his great nephew, he "became known as 'The Dream Artist' and 'The Bird's Eye View Artist.'" One of his more famous pieces, a futuristic vision of New York City, complete with a sky full of flying machines, "King's Dream of New York" (1908), can be viewed online: [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/20th/kingdrm2.jpg](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/20th/kingdrm2.jpg) Pettit also did book illustrations and architectural sketches and paintings.

Hoit notes that in an interview given to the Rock Island Daily Union on a visit to his hometown in 1910, Pettit "predicted that some day, without leaving home, people would be able to view the finest theatrical performances right in their parlor. He also said that the home would be

arranged so that by the simple pushing of a button, meals would be cooked and served.... From that interview it appears that he foresaw the coming of television and the microwave oven in 1910!"

Pettit and his wife apparently moved to Chicago prior to 1915. That year, he received a Medal of Honor for his painting "The Gary Works and City of Gary Indiana" from the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. He was the official painter of both the Chicago (1933-1934) and New York (1939-1940) world's fairs. His painting of the Chicago World's Fair is preserved in a Chicago museum. He died in 1941 without completing his painting of the New York World's Fair.

Pettit's fate, one supposes, was largely linked to the fate of the industries and institutions he depicted. There is little available today on his life and work. Photographs of some of the paintings mentioned above exist, but whether the works themselves survive is unknown. Pettit's works deserve to be collected, catalogued and exhibited, both for the flair and visual audacity he demonstrated, as well as the historic and social significance of the subjects he painted.

American capitalism is perhaps the most wasteful and anarchic advanced industrial society on earth. Giant corporations invade or construct communities, devour the natural resources at a feverish pace and exploit the population. When profits decrease or more lucrative opportunities beckon elsewhere, the older community—factories, infrastructure, people and all—is left to rot and die. If it, in fact, survives, that happens more or less by accident.

Author John Hoerr, in his 1988 *And the Wolf Finally Came*, wrote of the decline of steelmaking in Pennsylvania's Mon Valley, "Such industrial carnage may be unparalleled in US industrial history, especially within such a short period of time. An industrial civilization lies in ruins here." During the 1980s, nearly 50 percent of steel workers in the area lost their jobs. The Pittsburgh area lost 30,000 steel manufacturing jobs due to layoffs and plant closures. The consequences: long-term unemployment, dislocation, mortgage foreclosures, evictions and utility shutoffs, as well as a myriad of socio-psychological ills (drugs, mental illness, depression).

Steve Gluz lost his job at Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel in Monessen in the 1980s. That mill no longer exists. He participated in struggles against the closures and the collaboration of the unions with company management and the Democratic Party. In an interview, he explained that this history had something to do with his rescuing the Pettit mural from being tossed into the dumpster.

Gluz told me that he was "flabbergasted" when he first removed the giant painting from its sealed tube and rolled it out on the ground. "My instinct was that this was beautiful. It reminded me of my own history, my own past. You had to be nuts to throw it away."

He detailed his time-consuming efforts to trace the mural's painter, aided by tips from callers who saw newspaper articles about the "mystery" work. "It was like looking for a needle in the haystack." Once the painter's name was discovered, finding material on his life and career proved another onerous task. Inquiries to art institutions, museums, illustrators' societies and other bodies proved fruitless. Finally, a family member read another article about the Duquesne mural and a correspondence began. Meanwhile, the painstaking restoration work, led by Peter West, lasted two years.

Why had he pursued the work on the mural so fiercely? "These plants were shutting down, being demolished, destroyed. This was the biggest deindustrialization in the country. But it wasn't just the mills, there was an effort to erase the economic history, the political history. I felt obligated to uphold this history, my own history. I marched in a protest to stop the closure of the Duquesne Works.

"Everything that took place is torn down. There's something symbolic in the painting. I felt like I was defending something. I had to do it. It's difficult to hold on to this without idealizing it. Pettit's picture is idyllic. The sky would have been black. And there was the terrorizing of the

workers. In any case, these plants, those workers aren't coming back. That's impossible to recapture.

"You don't want to be nostalgic. But what's the way forward? How do we expand the productive forces? It's impossible under American capitalism. You need a social transformation to do that."



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