

#10 November 2013 Cameraderie

Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940)

This is the story of a man who dedicated his entire life to effecting social change through photography, and while his photos helped change child labor laws and created an important pictorial record of the lives of immigrants and laborers in the early 20th Century, he died in poverty following abdominal surgery at age 66. As I have read through the source material on Lewis Hine, my reaction has been “We must not forget this man.”

Hine’s work includes many projects, but his most memorable are the following:

- Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island in New York City
- Child laborers before the age of child labor laws
- The celebration of American workers
- The construction of the Empire State Building in New York City

Hine worked over the years for a number of publicly-spirited institutions—the Ethical Culture School of New York City, the Russell Sage Foundation, the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), the American Red Cross, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Through most of these employments, he used his photography to bring about social change, particularly through his poignant images of child laborers.

As a teacher at the Ethical Culture School of New York City, Hine took his photography students to Ellis Island to photograph newly arriving immigrants. Among his students who took inspiration from these trips was Paul Strand, who later had a distinguished career in photography (I will eventually do an article on Strand in this series).

Fortunately, immense numbers of Hine’s images are preserved. According to the Wikipedia article on him (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_Hine), “The Library of Congress holds more than five thousand Hine photographs, including examples of his child labor and Red Cross photographs, his work portraits, and his WPA and TVA images. Other large institutional collections include nearly 10,000 of Hine’s photographs and negatives held at the George Eastman House and almost 5,000 NCLC photographs at the Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.”

Here is link to the National Archives exhibit, “Picturing the Century,” direct to the Lewis Hine page (http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/picturing_the_century/portfolios/port_hine.html). (You can also browse to Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams, among others.) Have a look at the six samples of Hine’s work. The first four document child labor, followed by two that celebrate adult workers, including the famous “Power House Mechanic Working on Steam Pump.” (These images are all in the public domain, so you are free to download and print any of them that you like.) What is the difference between documentation and art in Hine’s images? Certainly the four child labor images from the National Archives site are well-composed, and artistic in that sense. But their purpose is documentary honesty leading to social change. On the other hand, “Power House Mechanic” is a tour de force of compositional perfection, almost entirely art, even as it documents a worker. All of Hine’s work has this dual nature in varying degrees.

Here is a link to an extensive gallery of Hine's child labor photographs: <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/childlabor/>. These images speak for themselves. Please go through them slowly, click on each one to see a full-size image and read Hine's detailed captions, which were part of his method of documentation. Notice the fine compositions as well as the social purpose of these images.

For a view of Hine's Ellis Island images, go to this link of George Eastman House, http://www.geh.org/fm/lwhprints/htmlsrc/ellis-island_sld00001.html, and browse through some of this collection.

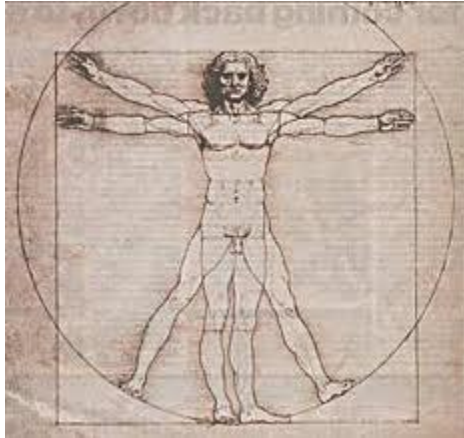
Here is a link for a wonderful collection of Hine's images of the building of the Empire State Building: <http://twistedifter.com/2012/06/vintage-photos-of-the-empire-state-building-under-construction/>. Several of these images appear in the US Postal Service stamp collection that I will discuss below.

Here is a copy of "Power House Mechanic."



This image is one of the most iconic of all industrial photographs ever taken. But it seems to me the mechanic's angle of attack on the nut he grips with his wrench is all wrong. I therefore think this is an obviously posed, formal composition. For a mechanical situation, surprisingly, everything is curves, circles, and more curves, especially the gigantic pipe across the top of the composition, which echoes the mechanic's arched back. The mechanic's muscular arms are

curved and his body is arched in an “S” curve from knee to neck. His shirt has curved opening around his shoulders and neck. Even the six-sided nuts are more or less little circles. Add in good indirect light—possibly from a large expanse of perhaps north-facing industrial windows—and you have a wonderful formal composition of the harmony of human and machine. I may be reaching here, but I sense an updated reference to Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing of a man inside a circle and square, linked by positioning our mechanic in front of a giant industrial circle.



On August 8, 2013, the U.S. Postal Service, our national chronicler of American history and culture, issued a set of 12 commemorative stamps celebrating “Made in America,” each one celebrating an American laborer “building America” in the early 20th Century. Eleven of the 12 images are Hine’s, verifying his importance as a documenter of all aspects of labor. Of course, “Power House Mechanic” is included in the set. So find a reason to send some snail mail and stamp them with these wonderful photographs.