

VISUALIZING LABOR IN AMERICAN SCULPTURE

MONUMENTS, MANLINESS, AND THE
WORK ETHIC, 1880–1935

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FROM CRAFTSMAN TO OPERATIVE

The Work Ethic Ideology and American Art

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the image of the artisan or skilled mechanic embodied the traditional values of dignity, morality, and diligence – those traits commonly associated with the work ethic ideology. Typically, these skilled craftsmen were pictured with the symbols of their trade, marking their status and industry while affirming the republican values that comprised their working lives.¹ John Neagle’s *Pat Lyon at the Forge* of 1826–7 serves as an important example of such imagery. (Fig. 1). Painted in Philadelphia, this portrait presents Patrick Lyon, a blacksmith earlier in his life, who at the time of this commission had retired from his trade with an ample fortune.² In this large painting (it measures 93 × 68 inches), Lyon is pictured at the forge in his blacksmith shop. He is dressed in a slightly frayed leather apron, a traditional symbol of the mechanic, and worker’s blouse with sleeves rolled up to reveal his muscled arms. He stands before the smoking fire of the forge, one hand resting upon his hip, the other, blackened by work, holding an anvil. Strewn on the floor around him are the accouterments of his craft – long- and short-armed mallets and large and small pliers; on the workbench lay awls of differing dimensions as well as two large open books. As the master craftsman, Lyon dominates the space of his shop and engages the viewer with authority. In the shadows behind Lyon stands a young boy who tends the fire with bellows. He is the young apprentice to whom Lyon will impart the “art and mystery” of his trade.

While Lyon was working at his successful blacksmith and locksmith business, authorities wrongfully accused him of stealing money from a bank in which he had installed two vault doors. He was arrested and imprisoned for six months in the Walnut Street Jail – the cupola of which appears in the background of the painting. Eventually, the real culprits were found to be the bank watchmen. Lyon, after his release from prison, lived in poverty and disgrace for seven years. To avenge this wrong, he brought a malicious prosecution suit against the bankers and constable, winning a favorable judgment and compensatory damages. With his newfound wealth, Lyon proceeded to build his entrepreneurial fortune.³

This slight digression into the autobiographical facts of Lyon’s life provides a context for one possible interpretation of the painting. In commissioning this full-length, life-sized portrait of himself, Lyon explained to Neagle, “I



Figure 1. John Neagle, *Pat Lyon at the Forge*, 1826–7, oil on canvas, 93" × 68". Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund. (Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)

wish you, sir, to paint me at full length, the size of life, representing me at the smithery, with my bellows-blower, hammers, and all the et-ceteras of the shop around me." He continued, "I wish you to understand clearly, Mr. Neagle, that I do not desire to be represented in the picture as a gentleman – to which character I have no pretension. I want you to paint me at work at my anvil, with my sleeves rolled up and a leather apron on."⁴ Lyon had instructed Neagle to paint him as a master craftsman rather than as a "gentleman," the

social position to which he currently ascribed himself. To Lyon, the word “gentleman” connoted both dishonesty and immorality as it was the gentlemen of Philadelphia who had unjustly accused him of criminal activity. For the most part, it was from this elite social class that he chose to distinguish himself despite the shining buckles and fancy leather shoes apparent in the portrait – sartorial accouterments that belied his artisanal status and confirmed his present success in the “gentlemanly” world. Nonetheless, within the cultural codes dictated by the work ethic ideology, the mechanic – the skilled craftsman of a preindustrial economy – stood as a paragon of virtue and it was in this manner that Lyon chose to commemorate his life and accomplishments.

The history of the work ethic in this country, or more specifically, the history of shifting attitudes toward work, reveals the gradual transition from a “free labor” or republican economy committed to the well-being of the independent farmer and skilled artisan – like Pat Lyon – to the development of industrial capitalism, a system in which wage labor prevailed and the product of one’s toil no longer served as one’s own. Unlike Neagle’s portrait of Pat Lyon, which celebrated the dignity and autonomy of skilled craftsmanship, images of the industrial worker – produced in the years following the Civil War and the subject of this book – exposed, and at times, attempted to reconcile the friction between pride in work and estrangement from the satisfaction of productive toil. Such representations, even while celebrating, masking, or decrying the conditions of contemporary labor, highlighted (wittingly or unwittingly) the economic conflict between labor and capital, that is, between those who sold their labor and those who owned the means of production, including the labor of others.

These profound changes in the nature and meaning of work affected both the production and reception of images of laboring themes. This chapter begins with a study of the antebellum figure of the republican mechanic, whose image within visual culture takes on a nostalgic resonance when later associated with representations of the industrial worker. It ends with a critical appraisal of the work ethic ideology as represented in a sculptural program for the Pennsylvania State House completed by George Grey Barnard in 1911 (Figs. 7 and 8). By the turn of the century, as we shall see, the work ethic ideology had devolved from a seemingly meaningful social philosophy around which people had organized their lives to an abstract principle deployed, for the most part, by an elite social class to contain and manage the lives of working people.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the work ethic ideology has historically operated in tandem with the social discourses on masculinity, and together they form the scaffolding that sustains the basic arguments of this book. To be sure, the changing historical conditions of labor produced new and often conflicting identities for the American worker in the years of growing industrial production following the Civil War. From noble titan to

downtrodden clod, this identity has stood as a conspicuously gendered one. Few images of women in industry have existed in American visual culture.⁵ Moreover, modern industrial labor has been consistently coded as a masculine practice. To that end, definitions of labor and masculinity have functioned as mutually reinforcing social categories. As we shall see in this and the following chapters, the male working-class body, in both painting and sculpture, has served as a stabilizing sign for conflicted masculine identities despite the inherent class frictions encoded in these often contentious representations.

This chapter also highlights the particular tensions accompanying the transition from a republican economy to industrial capitalism. In so doing, it presents a range of subjects that are thematized within the visual lexicon of labor imagery: a nostalgia for images of agrarian labor; the appearance of a newly established category of worker – the “unemployed” – a category that attempted to rationalize the economic fluctuations in the boom-and-bust cycles; and, finally, organized labor’s renegotiation of the meaning of work under the conditions of industrial capitalism.



Devotion to work and commitment to the ideals of a work ethic have served as national traits unique to the American experience.⁶ Throughout antebellum culture, the notion of work as personal fulfillment dominated American life. As Daniel Rodgers explained, “The work ethic had rested on a set of premises about the common, everyday work of men that made sense, by and large, in the North” in antebellum America. “Work was an outlet for self-expression, a way to impress something of oneself on the material world. Work was a means to independence and self-advancement.”⁷ This understanding of the nature of work had its roots in the Protestant ethic’s notion of “the calling,” a life task that embodied the fulfillment of worldly duties as the highest form of moral activity. Through the teachings of Calvin and the Protestant Reformation, labor as a prudent and thrifty activity served as an end in itself. When adopted in this country, American Calvinism associated work with a state of grace and human labor with salvation. Thus the Emersonian dictum – toil and ye shall be rewarded – recalled the spiritual roots of the work ethic while asserting the significance of individual achievement, a cornerstone of American ideology.⁸

In antebellum America, a belief in the work ethic held as its basis the notion that the worker owned his own toil, reaping the successes of his effort. The Jeffersonian model of self-reliant yeoman farmers and independent artisans populating an ideal republican nation buttressed such fundamental beliefs. This philosophy – that political and economic independence undergirded liberty and democracy – exerted considerable force throughout the century despite the expansion of industrial capitalism, an economic order in which the worker labored at the will and for the profit of another. To many, the development of wage labor came uncomfortably close to a system of slave

labor – a system, argued some labor reformers, that cheated, demoralized, and “enslaved” the workingman.⁹

As the circumstances of labor shifted in the industrializing United States during the nineteenth century, Karl Marx, writing in England, produced influential manuscripts that outlined the effects of industrial capitalism upon the worker. In his early writings, he emphasized labor as the determining factor in the evolution of culture and attached an unprecedented importance to the role of the worker. In according the laborer such dignity in his writings, he stressed that man’s essential identity was that of *worker* and that his essential activity was that of *work*. In his labor theory of value, the foundation of his economic doctrine, Marx argued that the value of the commodity must depend ultimately upon the amount of socially necessary labor time that was expended in producing it. In an industrial economy, however, the capitalist strove to increase the surplus value of labor, that part of the labor process in excess of the worker’s wages – the portion that belonged to the capitalist as profit. In “Alienated Labour,” Marx wrote in 1844:

the worker is related to the *product of his labor* as to an *alien* object. . . . The worker puts his life into the object; and now it no longer belongs to him, it belongs to the object. . . . The *externalization* of the worker into his product does not only mean that his work becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him* independently, as something alien to him, as confronting him as an autonomous power. . . . The alienation of the worker in his object is expressed within the laws of political economy thus: the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more values he creates, the less value, the less dignity, he has. . . .¹⁰

In theorizing the condition of labor as alienated from the worker and the product of labor as accumulated capital, Marx argued that wage labor would lead to a proletarian revolution.¹¹ Despite his revolutionary predictions that held more credence for Europe’s rigidly stratified societies of disenfranchised workers, the Marxist model provided a complex and convincing explanation of a newly emergent political economy in the United States. In fact, Marxist theories of labor stripped of their revolutionary potential and the Calvinist model of work as spiritual redemption informed attitudes toward and representations of American labor in the second half of the nineteenth century.

On a practical level, the most notable embodiment of both Marxist and Calvinist principles among the middle class appeared in the Arts and Crafts Movement in the United States. With its origins in England, John Ruskin and William Morris condemned industrial capitalism for degrading work, despoiling nature, and inhibiting creativity. Influenced directly by Marx’s writings, the Arts and Crafts philosophy understood modern culture as alienating people from themselves, their labor, and the natural world. In fact, Ruskin defined art as “man’s expression of his joy in labour.”¹² Eileen Boris has explained:

The craftsman ideal offered an alternative, perhaps even an oppositional, culture: that is, a set of symbol systems, social understandings, and behavior patterns in contrast to the dominant norm. A new productive order [would ensue], a new sort of community with the craftsman as the characteristic citizen and craftsmanship as the core value. . . .¹³

In essence, the Arts and Crafts Movement associated handicraft and productive labor with moral satisfaction – a functional expression of the work ethic.¹⁴

The craftsman style – which stressed natural materials and simplified geometric design – became a sign of reform among members of the middle class. In an 1884 series of essays, “A Factory as It Might Be,” Morris envisioned factories where people worked “in harmonious co-operation towards a useful end.” In this utopian scheme, the conditions of workers would be improved through newly redesigned quarters – attractive buildings in garden settings and finely decorated rooms for dining, study, and recreation. Gustav Stickley, in his influential magazine *The Craftsman*, argued not for a return to craft in the sense of manual labor, but for the worker to master the machine as a useful tool for creative productivity. Small-scale industry, therefore, served as the key to reforming the ills of industrialism. In this way, the Craftsman ideal attempted to recuperate a work ethic ideology as manifested by antebellum artisans, like Patrick Lyon. In fact, many Arts and Crafts leaders in the United States, Stickley among them, espoused the ideology of individualism and thus opposed the union movement, asserting that as a collective endeavor, organized labor hampered the ability of the individual to reap success through superior craftsmanship. From their middle-class perspective, they advocated cooperation between labor and capital – an experiment in what would become paternalistic profit sharing.¹⁵

It is in antebellum America where we find the roots of a preindustrial model of labor, closely associated with the work ethic, that later became a nostalgic ideal within industrial capitalism. The traditional hierarchy of the skilled trades – master craftsman, journeyman, and apprentice – served as the organizing principle of both social and economic life in a preindustrial economy. The image with which we began this chapter, Neagle’s *Pat Lyon at the Forge*, while representing the personal wishes of a specific patron, also demonstrated the social prestige of the tradesman at that time (Fig. 1). The master – Pat Lyon in this case – was the proprietor who ran the shop and worked with the journeymen – the skilled workers whom he paid by the day or the piece depending on the trade. Preindustrial artisans like Lyon were highly respected citizens – literate men skilled with the hand and mind, as the open tomes in the painting suggest. Apprentices – such as the young lad pictured by Neagle in the background of the painting – began their training as teenagers and usually spent three to seven years learning the trade. Between the ages of 18 and 21, they were promoted to journeyman and given a suit of clothes and a set of tools as a sign of entering their profession.¹⁶

Thus, skilled artisans, pictured with their tools, were generally identified with Republicanism – a somewhat utopian vision of a nation comprised of responsible and egalitarian citizens drawn from the producing classes of mechanics, farmers, and manufacturers. Asserting that the capitalist market stimulated greed and compromised morality, this republican ideal posed a tension between self-interest and the good of the whole. The yeoman and mechanic claimed their independence by keeping the market at arm's length and abjured the idle rich and dependent poor as parasites living off the state or the labor of others.¹⁷ Despite Lyon's later foray into entrepreneurial capitalism – from which he made his fortunes, he took much pride in his origins as a craftsman, as his portrait attests (Fig. 1). Indeed, the mythic aura surrounding notions of Republicanism – even as capitalism flourished – was given visual form in the golden halo of light that enveloped the sturdy persona of Lyon, the blacksmith at his forge.

Neagle's depiction of Pat Lyon formed part of a nascent artistic tradition that, in alluding to classical mythology, depicted the noble craftsman as Vulcan at his forge. Throughout the nineteenth century, this image of Vulcan celebrated the skilled trades. Ironworkers, for example, chose to call their union, "The Sons of Vulcan."¹⁸ Similarly, in a mural commission for the Pennsylvania State Capitol, Edward Austin Abbey depicted an heroically scaled Vulcan floating above toiling Pennsylvania ironworkers in *The Spirit of Vulcan, The Genius of the Workers in Iron and Steel* (Fig. 2). Moreover, Walt Whitman, in arguably his most famous poem, "Song of Myself," drew attention to the lives and livelihoods of many common people, among them the blacksmith. In describing the smithy, he wrote, "Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests environ the anvil, / Each has his main-sledge, they are all out, there is a great heat in the fire."¹⁹ Indeed, in all three images, the skilled worker, whether at the forge or in the foundry, assumed heroic proportions. In asserting an association (either explicitly or implicitly) with the Olympian God Vulcan – often depicted with powerful physique and enormous strength (despite his lameness), the image of the blacksmith reinforced a notion of masculinity as constituted by strenuous manual labor.

Championing an artisanal republic in an age of growing industrialism served as one of the callings of the American poet, Walt Whitman. Raised in a semiliterate family of the laboring class, Whitman enjoyed little education, leaving school at the age of 11 to toil at a variety of apprentice-level jobs in New York. As a young man, he worked as a carpenter, gained the skills of a journeyman printer in Brooklyn, and later served as a newspaper writer and editor. He was a radical Democrat, supporter of workingmen's politics, and journalist-advocate of the Free Soil movement, which opposed the admission to the Union of new states permitting slavery. In his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, Whitman included an engraved frontispiece, based on a daguerreotype of himself as a day laborer, dressed in workingman's trousers, shirt unbuttoned to reveal his undershirt, and hat cocked on his



Figure 2. Edwin Austin Abbey, *The Spirit of Vulcan, The Genius of the Workers in Iron and Steel*, 1907, mural. Rotunda of the Pennsylvania State Capitol, Harrisburg. (Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee and Hunt Commercial Photography.)

head. This image suggested the poet's revolt against an elite literary profession. In establishing the role of author as a democratic presence, he identified himself within this engraving as a common man who spoke for the people.²⁰

In his poetry, Whitman is one of the few nineteenth-century writers to address himself to the workingman and woman. He lavished praise upon the common person – the worker who made this country bountiful. In “I Hear America Singing,” he exalted the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the boatman, the shoemaker, the wood-cutter, and, significantly, the mother, the young wife at work, and the girl sewing or washing, “Each singing what belongs to him or her to none else.”²¹ With such words, he furthered the republican values of free labor and self-sufficiency and commemorated the moral values of the work ethic. Even when skilled labor and traditional handicrafts were succumbing to the pressures of technology, Whitman stressed the creative hand of the worker. In his poem, “Song of the Exposition,” begun in 1871 and rewritten in 1881 after his visit to the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Whitman praised the role of the worker in both traditional crafts and new industrial processes: “Not only all the world of works, trade, products,/ But all the workmen of the world here to be represented.”²² Moreover, in highlighting the discrepancy in class positions between those who attended the fair and those who labored to produce the commodities on display, he wrote, “The male and female many laboring not,/ Shall ever here confront the laboring many.”²³

To a small but select contemporary audience, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* provided a vital model for communicating a celebration of artisanal toil. His role, as he described it, was not “to pick out evils from their formidable masses (even to expose them,)/ But add, fuse, complete, extend – and cele-

brate the immortal and the good.”²⁴ Despite the changed conditions of labor – the disempowering and de-skilling of the worker that took place during his lifetime – Whitman produced an iconography of the worker that continued to convey a trenchant optimism for the future while armed with republican legends of the past.²⁵



This Jeffersonian model of republicanism inspired much of the imagery of rural labor that dominated nineteenth-century visual culture. By the second half of the century, this republican ideal, however, showed signs of strain as social tensions inherent in the shift from an agrarian to an industrializing economy colored the bucolic nature of this pastoral myth. In their American reception, the paintings of Winslow Homer (1836–1910) and Jean François Millet (1814–75), for example, conveyed the anxieties of a culture in economic and social flux. Unusual in its depiction of women industrial workers, Homer’s *The Morning Bell* of ca. 1872 centers upon a young woman on her way to work at a rural mill²⁶ (Fig. 3). As Bryan J. Wolf points out, she is dressed in a fashionable jacket and sun bonnet, both signifiers of the middle class – the same bonnet that appears in Homer’s tourism paintings, such as *The Bridge Path, White Mountains*, of 1868.²⁷ Behind the central figure whose erect and proper posture signal her breeding, stand three other women – presented in frontal, profile, and back views, like three (working-class) graces – who huddle together in a group. With their hunched postures and more robust bodies, these women signify working-class womanhood. Dressed more plainly as appropriate for their daily labor, they serve as a foil to the well-dressed central figure.

As the focus of the painting, the finely dressed woman stands at the crossroads between an agrarian existence behind her, signified by the small isolated cabin in the background, and the industrial life of the future, marked by the large clapboard mill with ringing bell before her. In the New England mill districts, the ubiquitous bell towers rang the workers out of bed, called them to work, and returned them home again. In organizing the workers’ day, they represented the mechanization of time and work and served as the symbol of the new industrial workforce. Middle-class women eagerly participated in such industrial labor. In the early nineteenth century, they left their homes on the farms to earn money while living securely in clean and well-chaperoned boarding houses provided by the mill owners. By the 1840s, the conditions at the mills deteriorated due to increased competition from other parts of the country. As conditions worsened, wage labor for middle-class women grew unacceptable – considered coarse, uncouth, and unladylike. As a consequence, these women fled mill life. By mid-century, mill owners recruited immigrant and poor rural women to fill the need for such labor.²⁸

In the dilapidated condition of the mill, marked by its broken windows, this painting gives visual form to the social tensions surrounding mill labor.



Figure 3. Winslow Homer, *The Morning Bell*, c. 1872, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery. Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A., 1903.

The grouping of women to the far right represents the new industrial work force – immigrants and the rural poor – who had no choice but to endure difficult working conditions and accept the increasingly low pay of the textile industry. Despite its bucolic setting, this painting registers with a poignant realism the stark class divisions associated with an industrializing economy.

Similarly, the rural labor in Jean-François Millet's paintings expressed to an American public a complicated, and at times contradictory, message about industrialism. Purchased by many American collectors, these images gained a widespread popularity in the years following the Civil War. Millet's *The Sower*, for example, evoked a nostalgia for republican values in a period of increased industrialism (Fig. 45). For the most part, these wistful scenes of preindustrial labor represented for American middle-class and elite audiences an affirmation of this country's agrarian origins, assuaging the social tensions inherent in new rural capitalism and a nascent consumerism. Moreover, his paintings communicated the moral and political strength of the common man, the biblical promise of the Puritan work ethic, and the grace of rustic life – essentially rehearsing yet again the union of agrarian life with republican virtues.²⁹

However, as early as 1864, Millet's peasants evoked an alternative reading as signifiers of danger and subversion. Anticipating the great labor upheavals of the following decades, one writer perceived violence and class warfare smoldering beneath the placid exterior of these diligent rural laborers.

[Millet's peasants] look heavy with gross cares, hardened with increasing labor, and vindictive and brooding. You would say they are souls whose only sense is a sense of oppression, and you stand in awe of the smothered violence that waits under that stolid pace and heavy body. I do not know what to liken these peasants to. They remind me of 'field hands' on Southern plantations, their skulls are as animals, but they have none of the inoffensiveness of expression of the poor slaves. . . . They may waken any moment to assert their power and avenge their wrongs.³⁰

Conveying a rather volatile attitude toward the contemporary “labor problem,” this passage demonstrated the ability of Millet’s images to evoke a range of interpretative responses from joyful praise of republican values to hostile disdain for a “vindicative and brooding” laboring class.

In its comparison of black slaves to poor peasants, this passage asserted the language of racial difference. It emphasized the body rather than the mind and invoked an animal rather than a human nature. In so doing, it reinforced the belief that both worker and slave were considered separate, distinct, and “inferior” races. Such open contempt for the working classes prefigured the language of Social Darwinism that infiltrated the ideology of Progressive reform and informed the critical reception of another popular European artist, Constantin Meunier, whose sculptures of laboring themes are discussed in full in Chapter 5. The admiration and aversion that Millet’s painting elicited in the last half of the nineteenth century extended to the sculpture of laboring themes by Constantin Meunier popular in this country in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The work of both artists, it seemed, conveyed a nostalgic yearning for productive and satisfying labor – whether agrarian or industrial, while also serving to communicate the potential for labor unrest to an increasingly fearful middle-class audience.

In 1899, Edwin Markham brought attention to Millet’s painting, *Man with a Hoe* of 1860–2 – a graphic representation of the effects of a lifetime of ceaseless labor, by publishing a controversial poem of the same name in the *San Francisco Examiner* (Fig. 4). In this poem, Markham had originally equated the French peasant with the American farm laborer in a plea for agrarian reform. Although Markham intended his poem solely as a commentary upon the hardships of farm life, it had an explosive affect upon its public. To many, the phrase “man with a hoe” assumed a much broader meaning, serving as a code for rural degradation and industrial unrest.³¹ Much discussion regarding the poem ensued in the popular press; the *Oakland Tribune* even sponsored a “Hoe-Man Symposium” that same year. Using the poem as a call for social reform, socialists, clerics, and teachers who participated in the symposium argued that the factory system, inequities in distribution and production, competition, and technology – the whole gamut of industrial woes – had created a climate in which the “hoe-man” flourished.³²

In focusing upon Millet’s *Man with a Hoe*, Markham challenged the efficacy of republican agrarian myths – often embodied in the image of the sturdy, independent, and proud yeoman farmer. In contrast, this painting presented a bent and broken peasant, wizened beyond his years, who toiled at the seemingly impossible task of cultivating a rocky wasteland stretching to the picture’s horizon. Markham wrote the opening stanza of the poem upon seeing Millet’s world-famous painting.

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon the hoe and gazes on the ground.



Figure 4. Jean-François Millet, *Man with a Hoe*, 1860–2, oil on canvas, 31½" × 39". Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

The emptiness of ages in his face,
 And on his back the burden of the world.
 Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
 A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
 Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
 Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
 Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
 Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?³³

Such powerful language angered those Americans who still believed in the nobility of rural work and the sacredness of the land. In response to those who resisted the call to agrarian reform, Markham adopted the view of social reformers, arguing that his poem not only embraced agrarian labor, but also indicted the evils of the industrial system. He wrote in 1900:

I soon realized that Millet puts before us no chance toiler, no mere man of the fields. No, this stunned and stolid peasant is the type of industrial oppression in all lands and in all labors. He might be a man with a needle in a New York sweat shop, a man with a pick in a West Virginia coal mine. . . .

The hoeman is the symbol of betrayed humanity, the toiler ground down through ages of oppression, through ages of social injustice. He is the man pushed away from the land by those who fail to use the land, till at last he has become a serf, with no mind in his muscle, and no heart in his handiwork. . . .

In the hoeman we see the slow, sure, awful degradation of man through endless, hopeless and joyless labor. Did I say labor? No – drudgery.³⁴

Indeed, this poem represented a form of literary dissent – a protest against the changing conditions of labor in rural and urban America. As demonstrated by the powerful public response to both Markham’s poem and Millet’s painting, the representation of the worker, both literary and visual, served as a lightning rod in the struggle over social change. By the 1880s, the worker had assumed a variety of social guises: serving the ends of reform as the hapless victim of industrial oppression *and* bolstering the forces of the status quo as the demonized agent of anarchy and violent change.



As industrial workers experienced the deleterious effects of wage labor and the growing mechanization of the work process, the fears of social unrest grew among industrialists and the middle class in general. In 1880, the gap between skilled and unskilled workers’ wages grew much wider than in 1850, producing an unbridgeable chasm between workers – a division that would come to characterize the American workforce until the present day.³⁵ The unemployment rate – the percentage of the work force idle at any one time – expanded with the boom and bust cycles of the new economy. The frequency of unemployment – the percentage of employees out of work at some point during the year – also skyrocketed. During the depression years of the 1870s and the 1890s, the unemployment frequency was 30 percent. Even during prosperous times, one in five workers was unemployed at some point in the year, at times for a period of three to four months.³⁶

In order to understand better the social significance of labor, we must also consider its opposite condition – idleness – and its social meaning in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the wake of the 1873 depression and the 1877 railroad strikes, the term “tramp” came into existence to designate migratory and unemployed workers. As an ideological construction, it named the new phenomenon of unemployment in an industrial economy. Social scientific, charity, and relief discourses along with biological findings judged tramping (as well as pauperism and crime) as inherited traits. Moreover, a growing middle-class constituency deemed vagabondage as a sign of a declining public morality in its rejection of the civilizing qualities of work. Bolstered by the moral authority of the work ethic, legislators in New Jersey first passed antitramp measures in 1876. By the 1890s, the man who could not or who would not work became a symbol of maladjustment to industrial America and stood as a threat to the stable social structure of the country.³⁷

Workingmen from all over the country rejected this encoding of idleness as moral depravity. In fact, many unemployed laborers demanded work following the financial panic of 1893 when three million Americans were left jobless. Under the leadership of Jacob Sechler Coxey, an eccentric business-

man from Ohio, an army of workingmen marched from Ohio to Washington to demand government-funded public works. Arriving in the nation's capital on May 1, 1894, "Coxey's Army", consisting of only 500 tattered and desperate men, paraded through the town. After defying a law prohibiting demonstrations on the Capitol grounds, Coxey and many of his cohorts were jailed for twenty days and fined \$5.00 each for walking on the grass. With the arrest of its leader, the army soon fell apart.³⁸

Coxeyism raised the spectre of social revolution in the minds of many. Although the actual numbers of the army were small, several prominent commentators described the group in the thousands and feared that this wild mob of vagabonds would disrupt the very existence of the Union. So intriguing to the American public was this act of protest that one month after Coxey's arrest in Washington, the dime novel, *On to Washington: Or Old Cap Collier with the Coxey Army*, appeared in print in the Old Cap Collier Library on May 30, 1894.³⁹ Posing little actual threat to the social order, Coxey's Army brought attention to mass unemployment, framing the social problem in terms of economic conditions rather than moral laxity. In uncovering the material grounds for the existence of the tramp, Coxey's Army foregrounded the potential political threat of labor activism when linked to traditional boom-and-bust economic cycles.

In the midst of the unemployment crisis of the 1890s and the attendant fear of vagabondage that had gripped the country, Johannes Gelert exhibited his life-size plaster sculpture, *The Struggle for Work*, in the Fine Arts Palace of the World's Columbian Exposition (Fig. 21). As discussed more fully in Chapter 3, this sculpture depicted three men of differing generations contending for a factory work ticket. Although the sculpture depicted a common practice in British industry, the struggle for work was all too familiar to the legions of unemployed men who roamed the streets of the Windy City in 1893 and protested their joblessness at the Chicago lakeside. In Gelert's sculpture, the strong and virile middle-aged worker, with children and wife at his feet, wrested the work ticket from the hands of a youth and an aged man, both types of workers expendable in an economy that had forsaken the hierarchy of master craftsman and apprentice. Gelert's sculpture pictured a Darwinian struggle for work and naturalized an economic system that, in effect, denied workers access to labor. Indeed, unemployment (or vagabondage) served the needs of capital; as the demand for jobs far outstripped the supply, it allowed wages to remain depressed and forced workers to compete for a scarce resource.

It was in response to the conditions of industrial capitalism that the union movement took hold. Labor organizations of skilled craftsmen had their beginnings in the 1820s in Philadelphia. However, under the auspices of the Knights of Labor and later the American Federation of Labor, the meaning of work and the status of the worker claimed a new resonance in an industrializing America. Thus, images of the industrial worker must be acknowledged

within the context of these new organizational structures that greatly empowered labor's ranks.

The Order of the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869 in Pennsylvania, developed into a national organization with vast working-class loyalty. After assuming control of the organization in 1878, Terence Powderly transformed the Knights from a secret order with elaborate initiation rites to an organization with a much larger membership base. Among those encouraged to join were blacks, segregated into their own orders, and women who comprised about ten percent of the Order's constituency. Welcoming both skilled and unskilled workers into its fold, the Knights of Labor advocated the motto "An injury to one is a concern of all."⁴⁰ In its inclusiveness, it foreshadowed the tenets of industrial unionism, first put forward in this country in 1905 by the Industrial Workers of the World. Regarded as a radical practice until the 1930s with the formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization, the Knights advocated the protection of all workers – regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or skill level.

The Knights repudiated the notion of an irreconcilable conflict between labor and capital. Through cooperative production and land reform, the Order aimed to abolish "wage slavery." Rather than overthrow capitalism, they intended to substitute arbitration for strikes. In the aftermath of the Haymarket Tragedy of 1886 (discussed at length in Chapter 2), which highlighted class tensions in this country, the Knights began to lose favor among its constituency. Powderly, who had once exclaimed, "I curse the word class," hardened his positions into dogma. He refuted all strikes, condemned craft unionism, and denied amnesty for the Haymarket anarchists unjustly accused and convicted of conspiracy. Once faithful Knights defected to the ranks of the newly formed American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886 by Samuel Gompers.⁴¹

The American Federation of Labor offered many contrasts to the Knights of Labor. As craft unionists, they favored trade autonomy rather than a centralized organization and accepted class conflict as inevitable in industrial life. In direct opposition to the inclusive policies of the Knights, the AFL excluded blacks, women, and the unskilled from their ranks. Founded out of a loose organization of national trade unions, the AFL held to three core concepts: pure and simple unionism, voluntarism, and prudential unionism. Through these principles, Gompers argued for the autonomy of labor – with the union as the core of workingmen's lives. Repudiating slow and bureaucratic governmental reform, pure and simple unionism advocated rapid improvements in the lives of workers and immediate betterment of workplace conditions. Similarly, voluntarism taught workingmen to look to the union for all their needs, not to reformers or to the government. Prudential unionism, Bruce Laurie explained,

was calculated to preserve trade unionism in an unfriendly environment. It argued strongly for turning away from unskilled and semiskilled factory workers inclined to

engage in mass strikers or general work stoppages that activated the repressive machinery of government. It also encouraged unionized labor to restrict its struggles on the shop floor in the hope of reducing the possibility of government intervention.⁴²

In essence, prudential unionism aimed to protect the rights of skilled workmen in the face of hostile reactions from industrial capitalists and the federal government. Gompers wanted to halt the violence that had come to dominate labor relations since the massive railroad strikes of 1877. For this reason, he denounced mass strikes and general work stoppages and disinherited the unskilled masses whom he believed lacked “civilization,” patience, self-discipline, and a realistic sense of the possible.⁴³

In keeping with its core principles, the AFL took an active stance in the battle for the eight-hour day. The repressive aftermath of the Haymarket bombing squelched the powerful impetus of this movement, originally centered in Chicago. Taking a courageous stance, the AFL resumed the struggle for this popular crusade in 1888. The eight-hour day strategy intended to tackle the growing problem of unemployment, ironing out the boom-and-bust cycles by shortening the work day and employing a larger number of workers. Fought by industrialists and manufacturers, it challenged the notion of the “surplus value of labor,” working against capitalist interests of accumulated profits.⁴⁴

The eight-hour movement resonated with the contemporary moral debate on vagabondage. With its slogan, “Eight Hours for Work. Eight Hours for Rest. Eight Hours for What We Will,” it advocated relief for workers from the difficult and increasingly unsatisfying nature of modern toil. Moreover, the AFL defended the importance of relaxation and recreation in workers’ lives while also endorsing the moral satisfaction of labor. What seemed to be a weakening of the work ethic among the “dangerous classes” fueled middle-class opposition to this campaign. In fact, many opponents of the eight-hour day asserted that the sanitizing effects of constant labor offered workers an escape from the supposed dangers of temptation that beset them during leisure. Unlike tramps who were tempted into moral laxity and labor agitation, legitimate workers toiled exhaustively, too drained to participate in violence and revolt.⁴⁵

Although industrialism had come to dominate the work experience of many, few paintings recorded the conditions of contemporary labor. Among them, John Ferguson Weir’s *Forging the Shaft: A Welding Heat* of 1878 and Thomas Anshutz’s *Ironworker’s Noontime* of ca. 1881, although not addressing the union movement in any direct way, celebrated the contributions of skilled industrial workers in modern factory settings (Figs. 5 and 6). In highlighting the strenuous labor of forging steam-engine shafts for peacetime use, *Forging the Shaft* served as a companion to *The Gun Foundry* of 1864–6 in which workmen cast Parrott guns for government commission during the Civil War.

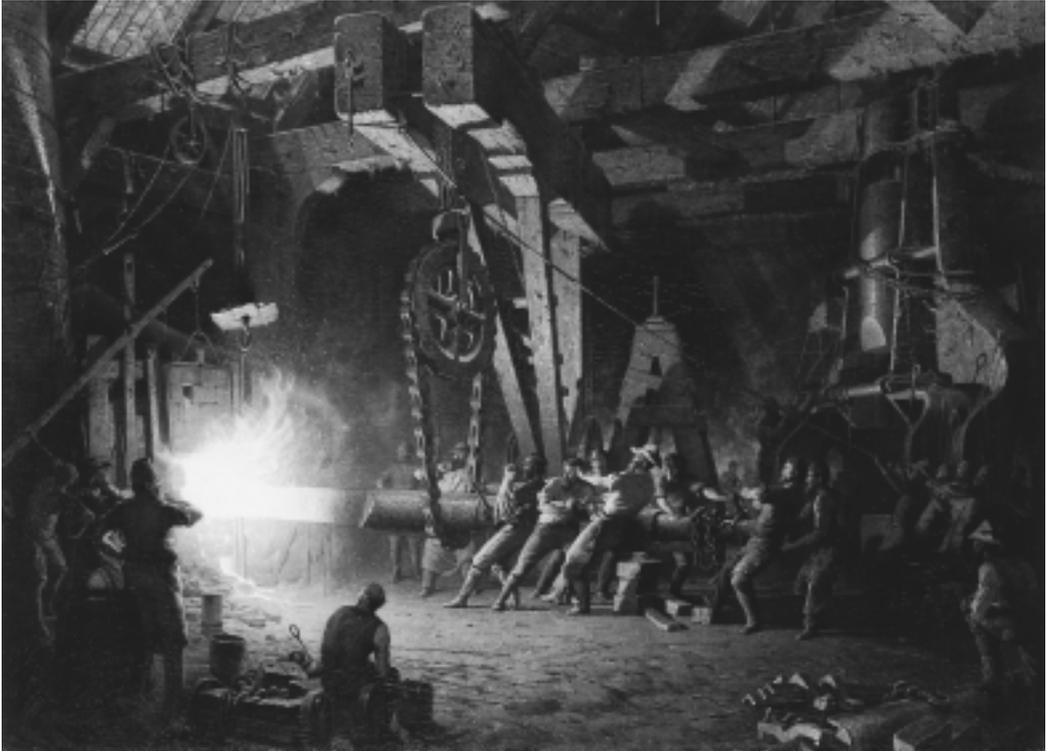


Figure 5. John Ferguson Weir, *Forging the Shaft: A Welding Heat*, 1878, oil on canvas, 52" × 73¼". The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Lyman G. Bloomingdale Gift, 1901 (01.7.1).

Shown at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, *The Gun Foundry* represented the only industrial scene in the entire exhibition, a surprising fact given the attention to industrial display apparent at the Fair.⁴⁶

In Weir's *Forging the Shaft*, fourteen men manipulate the shaft of an ocean liner propeller as it is heated to welding temperature in the West Point Iron and Cannon Foundry in Cold Spring, New York.⁴⁷ Weir (1841–1926) depicted the machinery and tools – the pulleys, harnesses, and various ropes and chains used in foundry work – with detailed accuracy. Although diminutive in scale, the workers appeared as unique individuals, each dressed in their protective leather aprons and workshirts with rolled-up sleeves. As the straining men recoiled from the raging heat of the open furnace, Weir made evident the strength of their brawny bodies. In fact, this painting highlighted the contribution of labor to the manufacturing process as these industrial workers – with their powerful physiques – provided the energy and skill to activate this spectacular scene.

Although the cavernous space of the foundry, bathed in raking light from the blast furnace, dwarfed the hard-working men, the heroic quality of their strenuous labor participated in this spectacle of modern wonderment. The