

INTRODUCTION

Work, as central to the American experience, has enjoyed a critical position in social, political, and economic thought, but its role within cultural practice has received little attention.¹ This book takes as its focus a study of the representations of work and industry in American sculpture from the decade in which the American Federation of Labor was formed to the inauguration of the federal works projects that subsidized American artists during the Great Depression. Among the many concerns this book will address is the contentiousness surrounding images of labor, a remarkable fact given the centrality of the work ethic to American cultural experience.

“In the United States, at least,” writes Nicholas Bromell in his study of antebellum literature, “work takes place everywhere yet appears to find cultural representation almost nowhere.”² Within the realm of visual culture, locomotives and steam engines – symbols of technological progress – rather than the workers who constructed them, piqued the American imagination of the nineteenth century. Currier and Ives, for example, a lithography firm established by Nathaniel Currier in 1835, produced dozens of prints of industrial behemoths, like the steamboat and locomotive, but not one print of the newly emergent factory and its attendant industrial labor force.³ Lamenting that the life of the worker held little interest to contemporary readers of Gilded Age literature, William Dean Howells asserted later in the century:

The American public does not like to read about the life of toil. What we like to read about is the life of noblemen or millionaires; . . . if our writers were to begin telling us on any extended scale how mill hands, or miners, or farmers, or iron-puddlers really live, we should soon let them know that we do not care to meet with such vulgar and commonplace people.⁴

In terms of sculptural expression, which had traditionally conveyed themes associated with the transcendent realm of the spirit or the perfected world of the material, middle-class and elite patronage demanded, as we shall see, a sanitized and, at times, allegorical account of work. When represented with any degree of realism, images of labor inferred the conflicted aspirations of the culture of capitalism. In general, private and civic patronage sought representations of work and the worker that either valorized (depicted in the

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Excerpt

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language of the ideal) or romanticized (invoked a nostalgic agrarian idyll) contemporary notions of labor.

In denouncing the effects of industrial capitalism and its ravaging of the work experience, John Quincy Adams, a progressive social critic, exploded the contradictions associated with the sculptural monument to labor and its commemorative function. In 1903, he postulated an ironic homage to the contemporary worker by foregrounding the de-skilling of labor in industrial processes.

Could we get St. Gaudens or Meunier to represent in bronze or marble the operatives in any great factory where division of labor is carried to the extreme, and then represent just those parts of the operatives which are actually engaged in their work, we could fill a museum with mutilated statues as ludicrous as any to be found in foreign lands.

Indeed, the representation of the industrial worker, the subject of this book, occupied a complicated position within the fine arts due, in part, as Adams sardonically asserted, to the ideological contradictions and political tensions inherent in mechanized and routinized labor. Nonetheless, despite his previous lampooning of the commemorative process, he concluded his 1903 article with a plea for more monuments to labor.

Up to the present time, the subject matter of nearly all art has been such as to appeal only to the rich. . . . Statues of generals and of statesman [*sic*] are all very well, but we want placed in prominent points in our cities and about our factories statues of noble working people, so that a workingman as he passes one of these shall feel his backbone stiffen and throwing his head up will exclaim, "Thank God, I am a workman."

The purpose of art, it would seem, should be to idealize work. In our factories, all about them, we should place works of art, which should make men proud of being workers, for the chief evil in our industrial conditions today is that men look upon work merely as a commutation of life's obligation.⁵

Although at first asserting the absurdity of commemorating alienated labor, Adams later argued in the same article that public monuments have a responsibility to reinvigorate the work ethic by depicting workers in a proud and dignified manner – so that their backbones may stiffen. Indeed, this essay made explicit the range of meanings that may be assigned to contemporary images of the worker. The public monument to labor and small-scale sculpture of laboring themes, I shall argue, participated in a conflicted discourse that helped shape and define assumptions about the nature of work and the role of the worker in society.

The monument to labor represented, for the most part, a public recognition of the changed conditions of labor in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Plans for the erection of labor monuments appeared for the first time in the 1880s, a period characterized by the expansion of industrial capitalism and a growing class consciousness that led to the birth of the

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modern American labor movement. Whether serving the ends of progressive labor causes – as did the *Haymarket Monument*, installed in Waldheim (now Forest Home) Cemetery in 1893 (Fig. 9) in commemoration of eight anarchist activists, or paying tribute to the forces of social order underlying the work ethic ideology – as did the 1911 sculptural commission for the Pennsylvania State Capitol (Figs. 7 and 8), these sculptures provided a public record of contemporary attitudes toward labor. Indeed, the meanings associated with these public monuments were continuously mediated by dominant political debates.

The role of sculpture to commemorate – to call to remembrance or to serve as a memorial to – proved central to its aesthetic, social, and political functions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In writing about Civil War memorials, Kirk Savage has explained:

The increasing tendency in the nineteenth century to construct memory in physical monuments – to inscribe it on the landscape itself – seems symptomatic of an increasing anxiety about memory left to its own unseen devices. Monuments served to anchor collective remembering, a process dispersed, ever-changing, and ultimately intangible, in highly condensed, fixed and tangible sites. Monuments embodied and legitimated the very notion of a common memory, and by extension the notion of the people who possessed and rallied around such a memory.⁶

Monuments to labor attempted to construct a common meaning with regard to a practice that held a long and contested social and political history in this country. As the monument sought to solidify meaning through the permanence of site and material, its content – in this case, the commemoration of work and the worker – refused such stability. “Work is a concept, and a word,” Nicholas Bromell asserts, “that functions in American culture primarily as a blank, as an open space into which various meanings can be inserted. . . .” He continues:

Work is deliberately left open . . . its meaning unfixed, because it is a crucial site of conflict and change. . . . At the same time, this very fluidity means that work’s meaning will always be contested as one class, or group, or profession, tries to establish a privileged claim to work’s fountain of values.⁷

To be sure, the social significance of labor inhabits a highly disputed field. In its most general application, labor refers to all productive work – and as such evokes the powerful legacy of the work ethic. Understood within modern historical conditions, work comes to signify, in Raymond Williams’s words, “that element of production which in combination with capital and materials produced commodities.” By extension, labor represents the services performed by workers for wages as distinguished from those rendered by entrepreneurs for profit. Moreover, the term implies a broad conceptual framework within which, Williams continues, the “economic abstraction of the activity and the social abstraction of the activity and the social abstraction of

that class of people who perform it” serve various interests.⁸ Thus, an underlying assumption of this book maintains that political tensions and ideological conflicts inform the meaning, representation, and commemoration of labor in this country.

In acknowledging the competing interests and various ideological claims associated with the sculptural commemoration of labor, this study addresses both the concerns of patronage – those served by the financial commission of the monument – and the audience – those who view and give personal significance to the sculpture. Indeed, a number of questions complicate the project of commemorating labor: What particular events or persons are chosen for commemoration, in effect, what constitutes the social definition of labor? Whose labor is being remembered? Who is responsible for this choice, that is, for the commissioning and the financial support of the monument? Who contributes to this process of recollection?

All monuments participate in the production and management of public memory – a highly mediated system of meaning with special language, beliefs, symbols, and stories that privilege some historical interpretations over others. When installed in municipal settings under civic patronage, labor monuments speak primarily about the structures of power in society and tend to commemorate activities that underscore the desire to maintain order and avoid dramatic change. In effect, they form a part of a struggle to consolidate middle-class identity and interests. Although memorials are open to resistant (or oppositional) readings, dominant political forces construct powerful and pervasive historical representations.⁹ George Grey Barnard’s *Apotheosis to Labor*, the sculptural commission installed on the facade of the Pennsylvania State Capitol in 1911, represented an allegorical interpretation of labor that invoked the spiritual authority of the Bible and commemorated the moral legacy of the work ethic (Figs. 7 and 8). Didactic in nature, this sculptural program rehearsed the beliefs of the chiefly Protestant middle class of Harrisburg while providing a model of decorum for the population of immigrant workers newly arrived from eastern Europe. In celebrating an ideal central to American identity, this monument encoded the work ethic ideology within a nationalist spirit.

In contrast, monuments commissioned by the interests of labor – radical political organizations or labor unions – often, but not always, commemorated resistance as a form of public memory. In so doing, these monuments have served as markers of histories often erased by official repression and have provided spaces (both ideological and physical) in which labor communities have produced their own collective memories and commemorated their own historical struggles.¹⁰ In the example of the *Haymarket Monument* in Waldheim (now Forest Home) Cemetery, the setting of the memorial – despite its funereal function – has served as an historical site claimed by disparate and at times opposing elements of the political left (Fig. 9). A wide array of groups, from traditional labor organizations to fringe anarchist factions, lay

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claim to the Haymarket legacy by utilizing the site of the monument for public assembly and invoking the image of the monument as a symbol of labor's heritage.¹¹

Ultimately, it is the viewer, standing before the monument, who completes the memorial process – a process constituted by shifting and fluid historical meanings. The significance of the monument remains forever embedded within its context – from the physical setting of the memorial to the historical circumstances of its apprehension by a particular viewer. As James Young reminds us, “We cannot separate the monument from its public life, that the social function of such art is its aesthetic performance.”¹² In fact, it is the dialogic quality of each memorial site – the interaction between viewer and monument – that produces historical understanding. Rather than embodied (and reified) within the public monument, social meaning accrues through the accumulation of discrete experiences brought to bear upon the memorial by its many viewers.¹³ Young explains,

Memorials provide the sites where groups of people gather to create a common past for themselves, places where they tell the constitutive narratives, their “shared” stories of the past. . . . At some point, it may even be the activity of remembering together that becomes the sacred memory; once ritualized, remembering together becomes an event in itself that is to be shared and remembered.¹⁴

In the example of *The Mechanics Fountain* of San Francisco, the intended meaning of the monument by its patrons – an homage to industrialism and progress – has undergone a dramatic shift in recent years (Fig. 27). Although rarely recognized by most middle-class inhabitants of the city, the monument now stands as a symbol of labor pride. With its focus upon the heroic male industrial worker, the sculpture has been adopted by San Francisco's laboring community as a marker of its productive capacity. Rather than embedded in the physical forms of the monument, its commemorative power remains a product of both social interaction and historical circumstance.¹⁵

Each one of the monuments under study in this book functions as a commemorative site in a distinctive way. This selection of monuments – from diverse geographical locations in the United States and varied historical moments – exposes the wide array of meanings attached to work and the worker. Indeed, monuments to labor represent broad constituencies – each with unique political positions and social goals. The aim of this book is to articulate the complicated elements that constitute the social formation, “labor,” and to explore how sculptural expression participates in the process of producing public memory and eliciting private remembrance.

In complementing this study of the public monument to labor, this book further seeks to outline the shifting role of sculpture from purveyor of public values to object of private consumption within a market economy. By the end of the nineteenth century, artistic modernism had eroded the successful expression of civic meaning and national morality in public monuments.

Thus, a personal and, at times, idiosyncratic content infused modern sculpture of laboring themes produced for a private art market. With the reinvigoration of public art through the New Deal cultural programs of 1935, we bring this narrative to a close. These social programs, which for the first time in American history lent federal monies to support fine art production, have received significant scholarly and popular attention in the past two decades. Although a close analysis of New Deal sculptural expression – much informed by the tradition of labor imagery outlined in this book – should be undertaken, that project remains for a future generation of scholars.



This book details several public monuments to labor commissioned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, analyzes the institutional support afforded to labor sculpture in this country, and studies the increasing popularity of small-scale sculpture of laboring themes throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. Providing a series of case studies and thematic essays rather than a survey format, it integrates the theoretical perspectives of new historicism with the interdisciplinary concerns of labor studies, gender studies, and visual representation. The sculptures of laboring themes under study here engage a variety of political and social discourses, encompassing issues important not just to the history of labor, but the changing ideals of work and masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Central to the arguments in this book will be the examination of the dominance of the American work ethic and the gendering of labor as a masculine practice. In Chapter 1, “From Craftsman to Operative: The Work Ethic Ideology and American Art,” I propose that representations of labor articulated American middle-class notions of the work ethic at a time when industrialism had radically altered the traditional nature of labor. Moreover, I show that few images of women in industry have existed in American visual culture and that definitions of labor and masculinity have functioned as mutually reinforcing concepts. This chapter outlines the historical sources of significant themes relevant for the study of the varied monuments and small-scale sculpture introduced in the following pages of the book. In so doing, it presents a selective overview of American labor imagery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seeking to demonstrate the effect of the shifting significance of the work ethic ideology and changing historical conditions of labor upon representational strategies deployed in imagery of the industrial worker.

In Chapters 2 to 4, I study the nature of the public monument to labor. Through the close scrutiny of four sculptural projects, I explore the social, political, and aesthetic dimensions comprising the monument’s public life; I analyze the uneasy relationship between representations of labor and the patronage system (both private and civic); and I investigate the role of the

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viewer in producing historical meaning through the public memorial. Chapter 2, “Martyrs and Monuments: The Haymarket Affair,” and Chapter 3, “The Spectacle of Labor: The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893,” attend to the labor monument in Chicago, an important historical locus for American labor history. In its commemoration of the 1886 bloody confrontation between workers and police near Haymarket Square, Albert Weinert’s *Haymarket Monument* served as a sign of class warfare to more radical elements of the labor community. Representing a strong and powerful woman defending the body of a dead worker, the *Haymarket Monument* figured the feminine as a disruptive force that resisted and opposed the symbolic authority of the state. The *Police Monument* of 1889 by Johannes Gelert recalled a radically different interpretation of the same event. This sculpture commemorated the police involvement in the labor dispute, and in so doing gave visual form to an official public memory of the tragic incident. In the same year that the *Haymarket Monument* was unveiled, Gelert exhibited his *Struggle for Work* at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. Timely in its message, his sculpture expressed the misfortunes of those affected by the Great Panic of 1892–3 by representing three men contending for a work ticket thrown from a factory window. This imagery served the interests of the bourgeois fair visitors by depicting workers in competition for the scarce resource of jobs and thus rendering them as passive victims of contemporary economic conditions. Defining labor and its political claims in a variety of ways, these monuments demonstrated the multivalent meanings attached to labor relations in Chicago in the 1890s.

Representations of work varied significantly throughout the the United States as labor assumed different dimensions within various cultural and geographical contexts. In Chapter 4, “The Erotics of the Laboring Body, Douglas Tilden’s *Mechanics Fountain*,” I analyze this monument to labor, a privately commissioned and realistically styled sculpture installed in 1901 on Market Street in San Francisco. Functioning as much as a paean to industry as it did to the worker, the monument promoted the civilizing effects of industry on the wild frontier. Moreover, in its focus upon workers’ bodies, Tilden’s monument constructed a hierarchical ordering of the masculine along the intersecting axes of race and class.

The role of cultural institutions and private patronage in supporting sculptural production is discussed in the following two chapters. In analyzing the patronage of labor imagery, I explore a major exhibition by the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier in Chapter 5, “A Museological Tribute to the Work Ethic: The Constantin Meunier Exhibition.” This chapter argues that Meunier’s visual imagery confirmed American middle-class notions of the work ethic at a time when industrialism had radically altered the traditional nature of labor. Meunier produced images of modern industrial workers, stoically resigned to the hardships of their fate. While appealing to reformist sympathies in recording the arduous toil of the worker, his sculptures helped

assuage the fear of industrial unrest by providing a popular model for the perfect industrial worker: productive, efficient, and, above all, submissive. In analyzing the appeal of Meunier's labor imagery to American audiences, I examine the ways in which the perceived meaning of his sculpture articulated complex and often conflicting attitudes toward labor and the laboring classes to a middle-class audience. Informed by the specific historical conditions of labor, the critical reception of Meunier's oeuvre in this country differed significantly from that in Europe. When exhibited in the United States between 1913 and 1914, Meunier's sculpture provided images of diligent industrial workers – images that contrasted with the representations of radicalized and militant strikers dominating current political debates.

The relationship between small-scale statuary of laboring themes and the private market is investigated in Chapter 6, "The Stoker, the Ragpicker, and the Striker: American Genre Sculpture in the Progressive Era." I argue that at the turn of the century the production of small-scale sculpture proliferated, and with it, the sculptural themes associated with working-class life. A young generation of sculptors, most notably, Mahonri Young, Chester Beach, Abastenia St. Leger Eberle, Charles Oscar Haag, and Adolf Wolff, gained professional support from such institutions as the newly formed National Sculpture Society, the National Academy of Design, and the Macbeth Gallery, institutions that openly promoted the exhibition and sale of small-scale sculpture. Among these sculptors, no unified movement existed – although Young, Beach, and Eberle showed together on several occasions. In fact, a plurality of working-class subjects appeared in these sculptural works, conveying a wide range of social concerns, political commitments, and ideological underpinnings. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section concerns the issues of patronage and institutional support for small-scale sculpture, concentrating on the work of Mahonri Young and Chester Beach. While dignifying and honoring daily toil in their images of men engaged in manual labor, these sculptures also invoked the popular belief in an American work ethic as defined in terms of contemporary masculinity. Abastenia St. Leger Eberle forms the focus of the second section. While participating in a variety of reform movements from suffrage to settlement houses, she paid special attention to the world of working-class women – poor immigrants at work at their humble tasks and young Lower East Side girls at work and play in the city streets. Finally, I discuss the development of a radical labor politics in the small-scale sculptural production of Charles Oscar Haag, who represented striking workers and union members, and Adolph Wolff, who produced images philosophically aligned with the political theories of anarchism.

In Chapter 7, I argue that the meaning of labor stood at the center of ideological debates of the 1920s and 1930s in the United States and that the image of the skilled industrial worker – a class of workers ever diminishing due to technological progress – served the interests of both labor and capital. A discursive network of images – the sculpture of Max Kalish, the paintings of

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Gerrit Beneker, the photographs of Lewis Hine and Margaret Bourke-White, as well as mass-media imagery – represented these skilled workers as partners in the industrial process. Reproduced widely in popular journals as well as labor and management publications, these images enjoyed a broad audience consisting of skilled and unskilled workers, organized labor, and industrial management. Although images of the skilled heroic worker appeared frequently in visual culture of the 1920s, few representations challenged this near hegemonic construction, except in the small-scale statuary of Saul Baizerman, Adolf Wolff, and Aaron Goodelman. Though less known and far less popular, these sculptures suggested an alternative understanding of the role of the worker in capitalist society, an alternative that formed the basis of a proletarian visual expression espoused by the John Reed Clubs, centers of radical cultural production between the years 1929 and 1935 with which these artists were variously engaged.

“Organized Labor and the Politics of Representation: *The Samuel Gompers Memorial*” forms the conclusion to this book. Commissioned by the American Federation of Labor and dedicated in 1933, the *Gompers Memorial*, executed by Robert I. Aitken, serves as a visual record of organized labor’s historical legacy. The monument is a testament to the tenets of craft unionism – the organizing of skilled workers by specific crafts or trades. Marking the end of an era, it stands apart from the heady atmosphere of change and reform inaugurated by the nascent industrial unionism movement, which intended to protect all workers – skilled and unskilled – within large labor organizations. Dedicated on national ground in Washington, D.C., the monument commemorated the historical achievements of labor – an organizational feat, initiated by Samuel Gompers, that should not be underestimated in the history of this nation.

In studying the history of labor through public monuments and small-scale statuary, we understand that the history of middle-class and elite attitudes toward labor has been constituted by many ideological rifts. Similarly, we learn that the American labor movement itself – with solidarity and differing forms of collectivity at its core – has been anything but a monolithic force. The varied sculptural expressions discussed in this book help articulate these historical complexities and in so doing contribute an added dimension to a visual culture of labor.

CHAPTER ONE

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