LABOR IN AMERICAN ART**


The California Historical Society, the California Labor Federation (AFL-CIO), and San Francisco State University collaborated on this book and its accompanying exhibitions in 2003. The book serves as a historical survey of both California art and California labor. Five themed essays are interspersed with discussions of important, some now-iconic works, accompanied by numerous images—many in color—of paintings, sculpture, prints, photographs, murals, and posters, from the early twentieth century to today. Nineteenth-century European works by Honoré Daumier, Gustave Courbet, and Jean-François Millet, New York photographers Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis, the Ashcan School painters, and literary works by Californians influenced California labor art works, as did, notably, the Mexican muralists José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The volume seeks to highlight many lesser-known examples, and discusses them in terms of labor struggles and the unique circumstances of different regions of California. Contemporary art related to labor themes is given considerable attention.


Ennis Carter’s compilation of the Works Progress (then, Work Projects) Administration posters follows Christopher DeNoon’s 1987 publication Posters of the WPA (Los Angeles: Wheatley Press, in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1987. 175 p. ISBN-10: 295965436; ISBN-13: 978-0295965437.). Both books have brought to light a small sample of the huge output of posters created in offices of the Federal Art Project’s Poster Division across the nation from 1935 to 1943. Because posters are ephemeral in nature, many were discarded or dispersed and never officially archived by the federal government. In his forward to Carter’s book, DeNoon credits Carter with discovering 114 additional posters he had not seen. These and more are included in the online WPA Living Archive (http://postersforthethepeople.com). The main portion of this over-sized book is a catalog devoted to the posters organized by theme. The posters specifically related to labor themes are included in the “Prosperity & Opportunity” section (pp. 6-25) and illustrate the subjects of jobs (advertising and promotion of), specific trades and industries, education related to a trade, and health and safety issues in the workplace.

Costanzo, Dennis. “Industrial Scenes.” In Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online. http://www.oxfordartonline.com (by subscription; accessed November 2, 2010). This entry in the online art encyclopedia published by Oxford University Press,


Despite their importance, American labor posters have not been given adequate scholarly attention. This may be due in part to the difficulty in locating posters, a problem Cushing and Drescher, as well as the authors of the books in the previous annotation, experienced. Lincoln Cushing, a labor librarian and archivist, contributed many posters from his own archive, and the authors gathered examples from about a dozen institutional archives. They note that there are many more posters in public and private collections than are included in this publication. The book’s introduction states that “these images of men and women of all races and ethnicities working in a wide variety of jobs serve as a valuable lens through which one can look at the history of millions of people as they struggled to improve their lives and their work experiences.”(p.1) The posters selected concern various aspects of the workplace, as well as of the broader community. There are posters that celebrate specific unions, while others refer to particular strikes and other labor events. The book is heavily illustrated, with most examples in color, grouped into such categories as “Health and Safety,” “Women,” “Race and Civil Rights,” “Solidarity and Organizing,” and “Culture.”


This is an in-depth, scholarly overview, with an extensive bibliography included. As the author states in the introduction, her work is “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.” (p.1) Sculpture offered allegorical or romanticized views of the usually male worker, but also served to commemorate events. The examples analyzed here reflect the long and changing history of labor conditions in America and the history and political debates at the time of the sculpture’s creation, all of which inform a labor monument’s meaning for the viewer. Dabakis also discusses smaller-scale sculpture produced for the private art market on the theme of labor. The author acknowledges the abundance of New Deal publications related to the art work produced during this time, and thus does not attempt to consider New Deal sculpture, specifically.

From John Singleton Copley’s Paul Revere to Robert Kohler’s The Strike, from Copley’s Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin to Edward Hopper’s East Side Interior, Lois Dinnerstein provides a progression of images on a theme in her two articles. The author examines Colonial American art, primarily, and specifically, the figure of the iron worker in her first article, and the housewife accompanied by sewing implements, in the latter, as frequently depicted images of labor in American art, which was influenced by European examples. The craft worker, whether iron worker, silversmith, or blacksmith, became an icon of the American work ethic, and recalled simpler times and ways of working with one’s hands before rapid industrialization. Examples of large canvases in which the factory or large machines dominate the scene are described, and ultimately, the workers themselves become the focus of the works depicted. The “industrious” housewife motif is used to characterize the woman of means, usually, who is depicted alone or with her husband or suitors, and engaged in needlework or seated at the loom. These “working” women are contrasted with illustrations and photographs of women at work in New York City, typically the immigrant women of the garment industry or those working in factories. Many of the examples discussed in both articles lack accompanying images.


Erika Doss offers a scholarly, but accessible read that includes many works of art from Florida Atlantic University’s Wolfsonian Collection in her analysis. Doss explains why and how labor was depicted during the Great Depression. Work has been an important element of American identity and values from colonial times on, but Doss argues that the worker and the working class have been more problematic to portray artistically for a number of reasons. It was the Depression era that brought to the fore long-standing issues involving class, masculinity, and identity; images of work and working people of the 1930s speak to the changes going on in the working world and with the working class, at a time when so many were unemployed. She includes publicly displayed (e.g. in post offices and government buildings), government-sponsored examples, which served as propaganda to relay a unified, male ideal of labor that ignored class differences and contemporary labor struggles. She discusses many major artists and examples of painting, printmaking, illustration and murals, up to and including the 1930s.


This publication is the abridged English translation of Das Andere Amerika: Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der amerikanischen Arbeiterbewegung (West Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst and Elefanten Press, 1983. 543 p. ISBN-10: 3885201011; ISBN-13: 978-3885201014). Both editions are the result of a project established in 1980 that led to a series of exhibitions in Europe, starting with the show in West Berlin at the Staatliche Kunsthalle from March to April, 1983. More than a thousand visual examples—paintings, posters, drawings, and photographs—on the American labor movement were collected from numerous sources. The title derived from a 1962 book by Michael Harrington on poverty in the United States. The “Other America” eventually referred to working people, especially the young and minorities dealing with labor problems such as layoffs and unemployment. Although not as extensive as its German counterpart, this catalog includes several substantive essays accompanied by numerous visual examples: “Art and Labor in

This title is a scholarly account of the unique era when the cultural arm of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration, the Federal Arts Project, employed numerous artists to create works of public art, many of them depicting work and/or workers. The author provides information on the numbers and salaries of the artists, analyzes specific works of art, discusses the different divisions of the FAP and critics’ views of WPA labor art, and examines current scholarship. Gender and race, both on the part of the artist(s) and the workers depicted, and how they relate to and impact labor organization, are also considered. Since more WPA art was produced than could be collected in a definitive catalog of all works of art, the author has carefully selected those works she chooses to analyze, excluding murals and abstract works for the most part. She calls her study a work of cultural criticism.

A virtual collection of images and artifacts relating to working people. Ephemera such as stickers, songbooks, neckties, buttons, photographs, anything and everything of relevance has been accumulated and made available online. The collection may be browsed by type of art, theme and period, or searched a number of different ways (item type, occupation, ethnicity, etc.). There are many online exhibits, as well as information about a related discussion list, H-Labor-Arts (see http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~laborart/), along with numerous links to related websites, collections, institutions, exhibits and general labor history resources.

Artistic portrayals of laborers from 1929-1943, spanning the Great Depression and FDR’s New Deal, are more complex than their seemingly straightforward, realistic depictions might seem. There appear more “high” art portrayals of people at work, e.g. in murals and prints, than was previously the case, e.g. compared with nineteenth century illustrations in the pages of Harper’s Weekly and elsewhere. The author situates printmaking within American art history, and compares differing treatments of laboring individuals in paintings of the Ashcan School, for example, with murals and leftist journal illustrations of the time. Specific artists of the 1930s are profiled, and their works are discussed in terms of whether or not they reflect their political, economic and social contexts and in terms of the labor concerns of the time. While most workers depicted in paintings and prints were male, Langa includes examples of the few women portrayed in such works and how these depictions differ from their male counterparts.