

ART REVIEW

‘Our Strength Is Our People: The Humanist Photographs of Lewis Hine’ Review: Faces of America

At the Asheville Art Museum, working class and immigrant subjects abound in an exhibition dedicated to the celebrated documentarian’s work.



Lewis Hine’s ‘Sadie, a Cotton Mill Spinner, Lancaster, South Carolina’ (1908)

PHOTO: ART2ART CIRCULATING EXHIBITIONS

By William Meyers

June 28, 2021 5:33 pm ET

Asheville, N.C.

When I saw “Italian Family Looking for Lost Baggage, Ellis Island” (1905) at the Asheville Art Museum exhibition “Our Strength Is Our People: The Humanist Photographs of Lewis Hine,” the family seemed like old neighbors. Although I didn’t know their names, the mother and her three children, with their anxious faces, had been around often enough to have become familiar. “Italian Family” is American art in the same way that Ansel Adams’s “Monolith, the Face of Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California” (1927) is—not just a picture of America, but now a part of America.

Our Strength Is Our People: The Humanist Photographs of Lewis Hine

*Asheville Art Museum
Through Aug. 2*

“Italian Family” is one of 65 vintage prints in Asheville from the private collection of Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg. Hine’s work was mostly known through publications; he seldom made more than two or three prints from any given negative, so those here, a few as large as 20-by-16 inches, are a rare chance to see his interpretations of the images. Whitney Richardson, the museum’s associate curator, hung the work in four sections; the first, appropriately, is “Ellis Island Immigration,” that being where Hine’s photographic career began. Lewis Hine (1874-1940) came from the Midwest to teach at the progressive Ethical Culture School in Manhattan and was asked by its headmaster to take pictures of arriving immigrants for classroom use. Hine crossed the Hudson River to Ellis Island with a large-format view camera, tripod and magnesium flash powder, and found his life’s work.

“The Madonna of Ellis Island (Russian Family)” (c. 1905), “Climbing Into the Land of Promise, Ellis Island” (1905) and the other pictures in the section show that, although he had no formal training in photography, Hine had a natural ability to take pictures that were not only technically correct but poignant. There must have been a language barrier, but he could somehow persuade the young woman in “Italian Immigrant From Albania, Ellis Island” (c. 1905) to look intently at the camera. The resulting portrait is documentary but also beautiful, if “beauty,” as British philosopher Roger Scruton wrote, is what “demands to be noticed.” Throughout his career, Hine made stunning pictures of human faces.

Twelve-year-old Rob Kidd, the subject of “Carrying-in Boy, Glassworks, Alexandria, Virginia” (1911), presents one of the haunting faces in the “Children at Work” section. These pictures were taken for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), and they brought the photographer wide recognition. Hine, who had a graduate degree in sociology, made careful notes about his subjects, so we know that “Sadie, a Cotton Mill Spinner, Lancaster, South Carolina” (1908) is 9-year-old Sarah “Sadie” Phifer, and that when the picture was taken she had been working 11-hour shifts at the mill for a year and a half and was paid 48 cents a day. She was 4 feet tall; Hine measured the children against the height of his jacket’s buttons. The NCLC later used Hine’s work when it successfully lobbied Congress to pass the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938.

The subjects in “The American Worker” section are identified by sex, occupation and, occasionally, ethnicity. Hine had toiled several years at various menial jobs before going to college and so had sympathy for people who labored. The woman in “Scrublady, New

York” (1920) is on her knees cleaning the tile floor with a rag; her face is turned away but we sense her weariness in the arch of her back. “Irish Steel Worker, Pittsburgh” (1908), “Young Trackwalker, Pennsylvania Railroad” (1920) and “German Steel Worker, Pittsburgh” (c. 1908) are part of a group of six portraits in which the subjects paused from their work to present themselves to the camera. The museum uses the well-known “Powerhouse Mechanic” (c. 1920-21) to advertise its exhibition; the young man’s tensed arm muscles are parallel with one of the inert spokes on the machine he services.



Lewis Hine's 'Powerhouse Mechanic' (c. 1920-21)

PHOTO: ART2ART CIRCULATING EXHIBITIONS



Lewis Hine's 'Two Connectors on a Girder, Empire State Building' (1930)

PHOTO: ART2ART CIRCULATING EXHIBITIONS

Hine devoted his career to documenting the dignity of labor and the contribution of immigrants, themes that explain his photographs' continuing pertinence. "Empire State Building Construction," the fourth section, has only three pictures from what was to be his final project. The building, a classic of American architecture and engineering, was the tallest in the world by the time of its completion; Hine photographed the men erecting it as it went up floor by floor, shooting the 100th from a bucket. "Two Connectors on a Girder, Empire State Building" (1930) was taken at such an elevation that it makes me queasy looking at it.

The Depression found Hine scrambling, like so many others, for work. In 1938, he applied for a Guggenheim grant to finance a project he titled "Our Strength Is Our People," the phrase used as the title of the present exhibition; he was turned down. Medical expenses for his wife and his son drained his resources and he had to go on relief. When he died two years later, his work was largely forgotten, but, like Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," it is too intrinsically a part of America to remain in oblivion. The Asheville show prompts us to remember.

—Mr. Meyers writes on photography for *The Wall Street Journal*. See his photographs on Instagram @williammeyersphotography.

Appeared in the June 29, 2021, print edition as 'Faces of America.'