
By Joel West

Before the birth of the Progressive Era in the wake of World War I, photographer Lewis Hine was one reformer who single-handedly influenced the national consciousness about child labor. The disquieting images of his early period (1905-1913) have retained their impact over half a century later. In 1904, at age 30, the recently wed Hine began a five-year photographic study of immigrants on New York’s Ellis Island. Considering that he took up photography in 1903 or 1904, the sensitivity and craftsmanship evident in this early series is amazing. One such example is *The End of a Heavy Day at Ellis Island, 1905*. Hine’s title is almost superfluous—a picture of a woman resting her head on her companion’s shoulder conveys all the time and place.

Hine’s second major effort began in 1906 with his work for the National Child Labor Commission (NCLC). The work took him into the tenement ghettos of New York, where he documented the conditions under which the children were economically forced to live and work. The extreme case of this is *Making Artificial Flowers in a slum workshop* (New York, 1912), in which Hine shows the youngest skilled laborer the NCLC investigations had uncovered: a three-year-old girl, hard at work with the rest of her family.

In 1907-1908, Hine worked for the Pittsburgh Survey, a study financed by New York charities that produced in 1911 a six-volume report on the workers of Pittsburgh. Though in this period Hine continues portray the individual, he also begins his series of industrial work portraits, which culminate in his 1930-31 commission to record for posterity the construction of the Empire State Building.

Hine continued his expose of child labor conditions in coal mines, textile mills and farms of the south and midwest. One such picture shows Sadie Feifer, an undernourished teenager who stands but 46” tall and works in a cotton mill. A similar setting is used in *Spinning Girl* (North Carolina, 1908 or 1909, shown above), where the girl’s face reflects a maturity obtained at the expense of childhood’s joys. *Frances* (St. Louis, 1910) shows a five-year-old who regularly peddles a bunch of newspapers.

Hine went overseas in 1918 to photograph post-war Europe for *Spinning Girl*. These are the last images that have the same level of emotional content as his early work. Perhaps it was his falling out with the NCLC; perhaps it was the climax of post-war America, a period whose lack of social conscience is matched only by the present. Perhaps Hine just “burned out,” his senses dulled by too much empathy for too many tears. If so, the current exhibition (the first since his death) is comprehensive and representative of his work, even his studies of the dispossessed during the depression seem sterile by comparison.

Hine died a pauper in 1940. Thus, the supreme irony was Tuesday’s opening celebration. Gentlemen in three-piece suits sampling imported cheeses and ladies in below-the-shoulder evening gowns sipping wine do not strike one as a likely gathering of social reformers. Indeed, the patrons seemed to treat it as just another opening. The exhibition catalog, *America & Lewis Hine*, shows a similar approach: none of the previously mentioned photographs are among the 110 reproductions contained within. With regards to child labor, his field where Hine had his greatest political impact, the images seem to be of cute children rather than of exploited workers.

One can approach the photographs of Lewis Hine in terms of their visual excellence, abstractly weighing texture, lighting and composition. But to do so is to miss the whole point of his early work — his efforts to portray what was good and what was not in the lives of the immigrants, workers, and child laborers that were his subjects and his concerns during the early part of this century.

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