



Selections from the
Kresge Art Museum
Collection XII

The Workers' Landscape: American Images, 1900-1950

The half century covered by *The Worker's Landscape: American Images, 1900-1950*, was a period of momentous change. The twentieth century worker was not like that of the nineteenth. The gradual diminution of one family farming, one person artisanship or shopkeeping on one's own property was coupled with wars, famines, and upheavals in Europe and America that put people on the move, off the farms and into the cities, out of their countries and into others, usually on this continent. Piecework made women a large part of the developing workforce and led to assembly-line mass production in which women might also participate. Masses of people led to mass production of everything from food to the automobile.

Yet when you look at the work created by artists during this time, with the exception of the documentary photographers, little of this is pictured. Instead the artists seem largely to have succumbed to a powerful dose of nostalgia for all that is being lost. Thomas Hart Benton, John deMartelly, John Steuart Curry and other Regionalists picturing farm life drew swelling forms vibrant with life as if with welling hearts. Work in the forests and on the sea seems equally joyous and fulfilling. Only with the Depression-Era Farm Security Administration's photographic surveys of what life was actually like for the tenant farmer, the fruit picker, or the homeless mother do you come closer to reality. The conservative trend in American art during this period ignored Modernist European developments in abstraction in favor of art anyone could appreciate.

The overall trend was cityward. Company towns formed around factories or production facilities like mines or oil wells and regional towns turned into cities as more and more companies and manufacturing units came into existence. City life was a different phenomenon than that of the countryside. Workers might be sandhogs digging under the Hudson River for a tunnel to New Jersey, or jazz musicians at a gig, a newspaper columnist, a salesgirl, a milk inspector, or a whole new phenomenon, a crack news photographer on the scene of a crime or accident in seconds, like Weegee. Urban leisure time activities and entertainment weren't self generated, the way they were at a barn dance or a county fair. In the cities people usually had to pay for sports events, movies, the opera, and Isadora Duncan's dance performances. As hard as things were during these sometimes terrible years, there were always bright spots.

In over 65 American paintings, prints, photographs and drawings from the Kresge Art Museum collection, this exhibition explores the themes of farming, company towns, work in the landscape, working the waters, the city, time off, and documenting the 1930s. The show is part of a year-long project of the Greater Lansing Museum Collaborative to feature exhibitions and programs about work and workers' culture.



April Kingsley
Curator