

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Huddled Masses, Studiously Eyed

Lewis Hine's Photographs, in Two Shows at I.C.P.

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Published: October 3, 2013

With so much contemporary art photography devoted to the slippery nature of photography itself, it's a good corrective to regularly visit the International Center of Photography, an institution founded on faith in the medium as a window on empirical reality. Among the non-navel-gazing shows on view there are a pair devoted to the pioneering documentarian Lewis Hine (1874-1940), whose subjects included immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, children working in factories and coal mines, families living in Lower East Side tenements, black Americans and men building skyscrapers.



Lewis Hine" presents about 175 mostly postcard-size prints from all phases of Hine's career drawn from the collections of the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film by that institution's photography curator at large, Alison Nordström. "The Future of America: Lewis Hine's New Deal Photographs" is a smaller set of pictures of agricultural, manufacturing and mining activities in the Northeast made in 1936 and '37. Selected from the I.C.P.'s collection, it was organized by Judith Mara Gutman, a Hine scholar.

Hine followed an indirect path to photography. Born in Oshkosh, Wis., he studied sociology at the University of Chicago and the Columbia School of Social Work in New York. In 1903, he was teaching at the New York Ethical Culture School when its director suggested he take up photography to document school events and add it to the curriculum. Having taught himself the basics, Hine began photographing newcomers at Ellis Island a few months later.

What he went on to pursue was more a kind of illustrated sociology than photojournalism. In his hands, the camera would serve to reveal with quasi-scientific objectivity the circumstances of various understudied populations. His pictures often are aesthetically compelling, and his portraits of individuals are especially vivid both visually and emotionally. But art was a means, not an end, for Hine.

One thing you learn from Ms. Nordström's revealing catalog essay, however, is that he was not as scrupulous about the facts as photojournalists are expected to be today. For example, a portrait of a lovable young boy from about 1918 is called "Paris Gamin"; yet the same image appeared

on the cover of a magazine, *The American Child*, in 1924 to illustrate that publication's theme. In most of his images, it is evident that the subjects are posing.

Sometimes he even had his subjects dress in different costumes. For Hine, the literal truth was less important than the symbolic impact of the image, and he was happy to recycle certain images for different purposes. This approach, observes Ms. Nordström, "may have stemmed in part from a wish to gain maximum financial benefit from a successful image."

The idea that photojournalism should be strictly truthful was not established as a professional standard until long after Hine began his career. That shift had a political dimension, Ms. Nordström explains. Roy Stryker, who ran the documentary photography program for the New Deal's Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, insisted on the facts "to defend against right-wing charges that Farm Security Administration pictures were staged for propaganda purposes," she writes. That may be one reason that Hine could not get a job with the farm agency when he fell on hard times in his later years.

Hine was, in fact, a successful propagandist in a nonpartisan sense of the word. Published in periodicals devoted to child welfare, his images of child laborers, illustrating articles describing deplorable working conditions, did much to arouse awareness of and action to improve conditions for underage workers. A display of these publications in the exhibition is heartbreaking.

Framed and hanging on museum walls, however, his images are not so hard-hitting. Compared with the gut-wrenching pictures we see today of people around the world suffering all kinds of calamities, they seem pretty benign. The children he photographed may be dirty and dressed in rags, but for the most part they don't appear terribly mistreated. An exception are the images made on assignment in Europe for the American Red Cross in 1918-19 to document the plight of those affected by war. In some of these photographs of refugees in Serbia, Greece and other countries, you sense a degree of psychic devastation that you don't in his American pictures.

In his portraits of families living in substandard conditions in New York, you feel degradation less than a loving togetherness. Unlike Jacob Riis, to whom Hine is often compared, he depicts no drunks or criminals, and squalor is not sensationalized. The women are beautiful, the men ruggedly handsome, the children adorable. "Powerhouse Mechanic Working on a Steam Pump" (1920), one of his most famous pictures, shows a man applying a large wrench to a nut on a massive machine whose circular front rings him like a halo. It has a mythic quality that calls to mind divergent associations like William Blake and Socialist Realist propaganda.

A severe critic could say that Hine put too pretty a face on society. Certainly a generous spirit animated his work. He wanted to humanize those most at risk of losing their humanity. He had a romantic belief in the possibilities of America, epitomized by his heroic images of construction workers near the top of the nearly completed Empire State Building. The soulful optimism he sustained and projected from first to last may not convert the coolly cynical viewer, but it's something to admire.

"Lewis Hine" and "The Future of America" continue through Jan. 19 at the International Center of Photography, (212) 857-0000, icp.org.