

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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In Washington, Portraits of the Forgotten

In a Smithsonian exhibition, artists focus on factory workers, miners and a slave; 'hope and determination'



Dorothea Lange's 'Stoop Labor in Cotton Field, San Joaquin Valley, California' (1938). PHOTO: THE J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES

By Alexandra Wolfe
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Portraiture tends to be an elite art form, usually depicting “presidents, the good and the great” rather than everyday people, says historian David Ward. To commission a portrait from a top-notch artist rarely comes at a discount: “It’s expensive, so it’s exclusionary,” he adds.

In curating a new exhibition at Washington’s Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Mr. Ward and co-curator Dorothy Moss decided to seek out those rare times that everyday people, many of them laborers, became portrait subjects. The works, from the late 18th century to the present, are by renowned American artists such as Winslow Homer and 20th-century photographers Dorothea Lange and Lewis Hine.

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“The Sweat of Their Face” runs from Nov. 3 to Sept. 3, 2018, with a title that derives from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis. God tells them, as the King James Bible has it, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.”

The show’s own genesis began five years ago, when Dr. Moss was researching her dissertation. She came across an article about an 1897 incident in which a plumber walked into the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on his lunch break, and was promptly asked to leave for wearing dirty overalls.

“I started reflecting on [the 1897 article] and wondering how far we’ve come in terms of making museums accessible,” Dr. Moss says. She wanted to explore what part of society art museums were intended to serve, and she hopes that the exhibit of nearly 100 works will help show people of all economic classes artwork they can relate to.

“I’m trying to...enable our visitors to leave feeling like they’ve seen themselves in history and also feeling less alone when they walk out of our doors,” Dr. Moss adds.

Organized chronologically, the exhibit also showcases changing labor practices and conditions over the decades. The curators wanted the collection “to be portraits, not genre paintings or cartoons,” says Mr. Ward. “We wanted it to be high art.” The earliest works were the hardest to come by. For example, portraits of slaves “are really difficult to find because they were nonpeople, legally,” says Mr. Ward. The curators managed to locate a rare watercolor of a slave woman in a blue dress.

Dr. Moss notes that the few portraits of early workers look different from those of the upper classes. In Lilly Martin Spencer’s “The Jolly Washerwoman” (1851), the woman, who is likely Spencer’s own maid, smiles broadly and looks directly at the viewer. That sets the picture apart from the usual portraits where the elite dressed formally and posed with emotionless, serious expressions.

Pictures of workers took another turn by midcentury, as the advent of photography exposed grim conditions. By the late 19th and early 20th century, photographers such as Hine created moving images of young textile workers in poor conditions. He photographed children working in factories and laboring in the fields, and his images coincided with the labor reforms of the Progressive Era, says Mr. Ward.

Later, during World War II, portraits of workers became bolder and more idealized. “During wartime, when we need workers, we sort of remember them,” says Mr. Ward, not without some irony. In “Mine America’s Coal,” Norman Rockwell depicted a miner’s determined face in an oil painting for the War Manpower Commission, which focused on labor needs and productivity.

Another miner is the focus of Janet Biggs’s 2011 video piece “Brightness All Around.” The installation portrays a female coal worker whose daily job is to descend deep into a mine under frozen Arctic ground. Ms. Biggs and the coal miner’s colleagues took the footage, and then Ms. Biggs spliced the imagery together with music. “It is a powerful portrayal of the dangers of work and also has this sense of hope and determination,” says Dr. Moss.

She sees this theme throughout the show. “In the face of difficult circumstances, there’s still a sense of resilience that comes through,” she says. Sometimes the individuality of these workers is threatened by “their conspicuous corporate uniforms,” but, through portraiture, the artists are “desperately trying to focus on their [subjects’] humanity.”