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Lewis Hine

When Innovation Was King

The WPA National Research Project Photographs, 1936-37

Main description

In 1936, science-teacher turned photographer Lewis Hine was commissioned by the National Research Project, a division of the Works Progress Administration, to produce a visual document of the industries that the US government hoped would provide the jobs that would lift the country out of the Great Depression. Hine, already well-established as a chronicler of social conditions of his day, produced more than 700 photographs for this project, the last major work of his career.

By emphasizing the inherent tension between machinery and workers, Hine imbued these compelling images with his characteristic rigor and aesthetic appeal. These photographs, and their implied message, are particularly relevant today given high unemployment rates and radical shifts in the role of the worker in the rapidly changing world economy. Included in this book is an essay by the eminent photographic historian, Judith Mara Gutman, in which she discusses the project and the photographs in the context of the economic conditions of the time and the artistic and technological innovations of the era.

Co-published with the Howard Greenberg Library, New York

Biography

Lewis Hine (1874–1940) was trained as a sociologist and educator in Chicago and New York. In 1904 he photographed newly arrived immigrants on Ellis Island with his students from the Ethical Culture School in New York. He felt so strongly about the abuse of children as workers that he quit his teaching job in 1908 to become an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee. Declaring that he “wanted to show things that had to be corrected,” he was one of the earliest photographers to use the photograph as a tool for social change. During and after World War I, Hine photographed the relief work of the American Red Cross in France and the Balkans, and in 1930 was commissioned to document the construction of the Empire State Building. Hine was the head photographer for the National Research Project of the Works Progress Administration.

Bibliography

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