MONUMENTS TO LABOR

By PETER P. FECHNER

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Since man pushed the first plow, the theme of work has appeared in art. Numerous prehistoric rock drawings prove to us early man's interest in depicting human labor. The ace in this field of art is represented by the creations of the ancient Egyptians of the Old Kingdom. The motif of work occurs in astonishing variety in fresco, relief, and sculpture in the round. Sometimes they depict an entire process of work, covering the walls of burial chambers; sometimes they amaze us by the artistic perfection of the individual figures, for instance, the famous statue of the "Seated Scribe" dating from 2700 B.C.

The art of ancient Greece and Rome does not show us much in the way of secular labor; it was interested chiefly in heroic and mythological subjects. The sculptures most familiar to us are idealized human beings and deities corresponding to the artistic ideal of their time, which sought for perfection in the beauty of mind and body.

In Christian art, no painter or sculptor passed by the labor of the craftsman with which he was familiar. It occurs in most portrayals of the life of Christ. Conrad Witz, Hieronymus Bosch, Darer, and Grünewald, chose their models from the craftsmen among whom they lived and had their roots. The great German wood sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider portrayed craftsmen when he carved his Apostles, and the same spirit is manifest in the self-portrait of Master Pilgrim (Fig. 1). That the stonemason Pilgrim was an artist is proved by the bold composition of this high relief in which, in spite of the one-sided emphasis, nothing disturbs the harmony of the whole. The opening window conveys an impression of space and plasticity. The fresh realism expressed in the hand with the compasses, in the treatment of the garment, all the way up to the emblem of his trade, combined with the slight exaggeration in the execution of the spiritualized face, make this sculpture a typical artistic creation of its time.

In the period extending from the close of the Middle Ages over the Renaissance, the pathos-imbued baroque and frivolous rococo styles, the motif of work was practically forgotten in art.

The nineteenth century formed a new ideal of work and the worker. The Impressionists were the first to discover the overpowering beauty of a blast furnace or a rolling mill; but they saw them merely in the light of color, where the worker himself was only part of the setting. With the progress of mechanical work, new social problems appeared which, strangely enough, had little effect upon painting but found new, strong expression in literature and sculpture. The worker was raised from his anonymity and made the subject of new artistic forms of expression. The Belgian Constantin Meunier is probably the strongest representative of this new trend in art, and he may well be regarded as the precursor of modern portrayals of workers in plastic art. With the same powerful realism used by his contemporary Zola in his novels, Meunier portrayed the Belgian coal miner, yet still expressing that which was typical, without embellishing accessories. It is not a coincidence that it was Belgium where the first expressive statues of workers were created, as this was the first country on the Continent in which the social question made its appearance in political life, more than in France or Germany.

From the Belgian Meunier it is a straight path to the German Fritz Koelle. His "Miner," which he created in 1927, is a well-known statue standing in front of the National Gallery in Berlin. One of his most recent works, the "Isar Raftman" (Fig. 3), is on the same high artistic plane. It reveals the development of Koelle's personality which is expressed in spiritual monumentality combined with outward austerity of form.

The experience of war and revolution brought an entirely different attitude of the artist toward the theme of work and the worker. In the trenches he saw the worker as a soldier and comrade, in the following period of economic distress he saw him as a starving proletarian. It was these two main impressions which made themselves felt in the portrayal of workers in art.

With the coming into power of the new regime in Germany in 1933, the artist was set great new tasks in the representation of work. Many sculptural works have since stated through the medium of art that the worker is
Fig. 1. Anton Pilgram: Self portrait, relief sculpture on the pulpit of St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna (1515)

Fig. 2. Josef Ensﳉ: "Mourning Miner," statue on the war memorial of a miners' union in Bochum

Fig. 3. Fritz Koele: "Tsar Rattusman"

Fig. 4. Paul Oesten: "Brothers in Work"
WORK IN

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Fig. 5. Otto Winkler: "Blast Furnace Worker"

Fig. 6. Carl Stock: Figure on the new administration building of the Wood Chemical Company, Frankfurt am Main.

Fig. 7. Ernst Kuhle: "File Sharpener"

Fig. 8. Arthur Holmman: "Cradle Steel Casting"
a representative of the nation on an equal footing with other groups of the population. This is how we must understand the war memorial of Josef Ensельing (Fig. 2), who chose a worker as the subject for his monument to the fallen. In him he gives expression to the mourning over the fallen brother worker, and the artist’s deep feeling make his monument convincing in what it wishes to say.

One of the sculptor’s most difficult problems is that of composing a sculptural group, as it is essential in sculpture to create bodies as close plastic units. In the portrayal of groups the danger is inherent that several individual bodies do not achieve the necessary merging of shape and line and hence fail to grow into an artistic unit. In his “Brothers in Work” (Fig. 4), Paul Oesten succeeded in achieving an exceptionally good solution to this difficult problem. The composition of this group alone is enough to show Oesten’s great mastery. The three torsos merge into one great, harmonious expression of form; while the flowing lines of the legs, by means of skillfully balanced overlapping of the empty spaces, binds these latter in turn into a unity. Although for reasons of composition the injured man’s head only lightly touches the cap of his comrade, the spectator still has an impression of the function of support; nor does the consciously close contact between the hanging leg and the knee of the second comrade interfere with the function of careful stepping. The wonderful intrinsic truthfulness radiated by this group of workers makes all explanatory accessories superfluous: only the unpretentious working cap of the man on the right characterizes the whole group as workers. Suffering, sympathy, and readiness to help, form the spiritual content of this sculpture.

Laborers at work are a subject rarely found in sculpture in the round, owing to the sculptor’s distaste for illustrative work. For this reason sculptors usually portray the worker at rest, his work characterized by his tool. The task of portraying the worker with his tool, which to the layman seems fraught with no particular problem, often represents a severe test of the artist’s ability. Thus, for instance, in the case of Otto Winkler’s “Blast Furnace Worker” (Fig. 5), a fine, mature work almost bordering on expressionism in its style, the problem has not been solved as successfully by the utterly naturalistic treatment of the tool as in the case of the “File Sharpener” by Ernst Kunst (Fig. 7). Here the tool has been sculptured in such a way as to form an organic part in the treatment of the rest of the figure.

Another great field was opened up to the sculptural portrayal of labor by the vast building program in Germany before the present war. Architect and sculptor co-operated in the creation of huge architectural sculptures rarely to be found elsewhere in the modern history of art. The monumental architecture dedicated to work required monumental sculpture on appropriate themes. Sculptural works appeared on the outer walls of the new Labor Bureaus, in the halls and entrances of large factories, and in the recreation grounds of industrial plants. They were created in bronze, stone, and ceramics. As verticals, they effectively relieve large wall surfaces, or as corner sculptures they join up these surfaces. A fine example of the latter is Carl Stock’s massive worker’s figure placed on the corner vertical of a new factory building (Fig. 6).

Reliefs, both high and low, are subject to entirely different laws of plastic art. That which the sculpture in the round tries to avoid can be fulfilled by the relief, namely, to narrate a process and to give it decorative expression. Two beautiful examples of this are Artur Hoffmann’s “Crucible Steel Casting” (Fig. 8) and Karl Albiker’s relief for the District Command Office of the Air Force in Dresden (Fig. 9). It is among the best works of modern relief sculpture and ideally fulfills all the demands we are entitled to make upon a relief. The surface has been divided up in a masterly manner by the severe, clear composition. All massing of overlapping figures has been avoided, resulting in a fine flowing ornamentation. In dynamic majesty the seven figures pass across the frieze, symbolizing the air arm and the forges of arms.

It is no longer possible to imagine sculpture, painting, and literature without the motifs of work and the worker: as a new theme, they have enriched our cultural era and will continue to do so. No artist, least of all the sculptor, can pass by these gloriously tempered bodies and these faces with the proud expression of men who have become conscious of their value and their place within their people, without feeling the desire to portray these men of labor.

Fig. 9 The Air Arm, by Karl Albiker