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Lewis Hine in Hastings-on-Hudson

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Lewis Hine in Hastings-on-Hudson

Frédéric Perrier

Kindly, trustful, wistful, amazingly innocent, his front is a mask for his power. He looks like an unworldly schoolteacher, needing protection from the rigors of the everyday world. But behind this disarming apparent naïveté is an artistry and directness and determination that has etched the history of an era into the consciousness of the country.¹

- ¹ He must have been about five feet four or five inches tall, slight in stature, always wore a tie, shirt and jacket. Lewis Wickes Hine [1874-1940] remains one of the most outstanding figures in the history of American documentary photography. Like many famous painters or musicians, his talent was unrecognized by the public during his lifetime. For almost thirty years many of his photographs have been and still are on exhibition. His best known are the series he did on Ellis Island, National Child Labor Committee, Work Portraits, Men At Work, Empire State Building, Shelton Looms, Works Progress Administration, National Research Project, Pittsburgh Survey and his European photos.
- ² When I wrote my D.E.A dissertation about Hine I came across a set of photographs that he made where he lived: in the village of Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. (USA). Some of them were available on the Eastman House website, but Muriel Olsson and Fatima Mahdi from the Hastings Historical Society offered me a “gem”: photos which had never been publicly exhibited. Friends, students, firemen, local politicians, classrooms, buildings, teachers: here, at last, I could see those with whom Hine had lived, not professionally, but during his private life in Hastings [1917-1940]. It was a real community. One of his neighbors, Richmond Shreve, was a principal in the architecture

firm Shreve, Lamb & Harmon that designed the Empire State Building and recommended Hine for the job of photographer.

Lewis W. Hine, *Demonstration of proper bed making in a Hastings High School home economics class*. Photograph shows Marion Braginetz (second from left), Marie Sydlowski (later Lucko) (third from left), and Jenny Filipovitch (fourth from left), 1935 (ca), gelatin silver print, 7 x 5 inches, Courtesy of the Hastings Historical Society, Hastings on Hudson, New York, U.S.A

- 3 The photographs in this exhibition were taken between 1929 and 1940. Some will remind you of his Work Portraits, many others are reminiscent of the photographs he took at the beginning of his career at the Ethical Culture School in New York—an educational institution that was comprised largely of middle-class German-American Jews, first and second generation sons and daughters of immigrants—where Hine taught nature study, geography and photography. Parallel to photographing immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, he documented school life: dancing clubs, science classes making around 1,000 plates from 1905 to 1908. Hine’s Hastings photographs show how the Hastings students were trained at the lathe or how to repair an engine in the Hastings High School machine shop, how girls were instructed in how to make a bed in the Hastings High School home economics class and students working in the Farragut Middle School library. Besides the official school photographs that Hine was hired to take as a commercial photographer, he also created a large photographic mural for the Hastings school building. It was called “Men at Work” (like his only book published in 1932) and consisted of three photographs of construction workers on the Empire State Building.

Lewis W. Hine, *Teacher Clayton Blakeslee and students in an industrial arts class in the Hastings High School, 1930s* (ca), gelatin silver print, 5 x 7 inches, Courtesy of the Hastings Historical Society, Hastings on Hudson, New York, U.S.A.

- 4 Hine’s interest in celebrating the American laborer was the focus of his photographs in the 1920s-30s. The Work Portrait methodology, a form of “positive” documentation, is also evident in Hine’s Hastings photographs.
- 5 Lewis Hine was familiar with Education. He had studied at the University of Chicago under Colonel Francis Parker, John Dewey and Ella Flagg Young, and in 1905 he received a degree of Master of Pedagogy from New York University. Actually, some other photographs shown here are illustrations from “*A Program for the Development of More Adequate Secondary Education in a Suburban Area*” a PhD thesis submitted in 1936 to the School of Education at New York University by John L. Hopkins who was the Superintendent of Schools for Hastings from 1923 to 1951. One of the main concerns of the dissertation was meeting the educational and recreational needs of the children of immigrant parents from the poorer, overcrowded industrial area near the Hudson waterfront.

Lewis W. Hine, “Village” Boys at the Recreation Room (School Buildings), n.d., gelatin silver print, 5 x 7¼ inches, Courtesy of the Hastings Historical Society, Hastings on Hudson, New York, U.S.A

- 6 Hastings Police Commissioner Frederick H. Charles Sr., firefighters, politicians such as village President and Mayor Thomas F. Reynolds, and village trustees are also displayed. Whether for his country or his village, the notion of citizenship was central to Lewis Hine. When researching my M.A thesis (“Immigration and Social Reform: Lewis Hine, His Patterns of Personal Growth and Creative Expression—1874-1918”) I uncovered that Lewis Hine attended Columbia University in the Fall of 1907 as a non-matriculant in the Division of Political Science. A few years later, he was hired by the

National Child Labor Committee [1906 to 1918]: child-labor movements were not an isolated phenomenon but rather a constituent part of the Progressive Movement. Social workers had to gather facts to have a bill passed. Hine wanted to build a better world with his photographs. Certain evils had to be eradicated and it was this only which mattered to him. His assistance was central to the NCLC because he was much more than a photographer and reformer: he was also a “documentarian”. He would sometimes travel 50,000 miles a year with his 5x7 Graflex. Like a police inspector, he went where the children worked (mills, canneries, factories, mines, fields, city streets) to capture details that would give people another view of child-labor and above all, to show the opponents to child-labor regulation how very mistaken they were: “My child-labor photos have already set the authorities to work to see ‘if such things can be possible.’ They try to get around them by crying ‘fake,’ but therein lies the value of data & [sic] a witness. My ‘sociological horizon’ broadens hourly.”²

- 7 Hine in Hastings-on-Hudson was not an isolated person. On the contrary. During my research, I read many letters from neighbors and children of neighbors telling how much Hine was involved in the life of Hastings-on-Hudson. In 1923, Lewis Hine and his wife, Sara, even offered the use of their home at 170 Edgars Lane until larger permanent quarters could be secured for another school.
- 8 Recently I was sent two more Hine photographs of the family of the dentist Dr. Finkelstein that Hine made in exchange for dental services. Lewis Hine, who was a close friend of the Finkelsteins, took family portraits to pay for his dental work. Muriel Olsson and Fatima Mahdi, of the Hastings-Historical Society, told me that “In the 1920s and 1930s Hastings was an industrial town with many immigrant families, and during the Depression no one had much money. People would often barter for Dr. Finkelstein’s services. This barter included groceries and home-grown vegetables, hand-made doilies, and two lovely French chairs. A French woman gave him beautiful gowns for Mrs. Finkelstein; Mr. Rohrbach, a local tailor, gave the doctor two custom-made suits. And even local doctors traded their services for dental work.” One photo shows Louis Finkelstein and his wife Rose and his children Jerry and Rita, ca. 1936-7. It was taken in the backyard of their home at 141 Farragut Avenue in Hastings. The other is Jerry and Rita, taken ca. 1931.
Lewis W. Hine, Dr. Louis Finkelstein and his family, Wife Rose and his children Jerry and Rita, It was taken in the backyard of their home at 141 Farragut Avenue in Hastings, 1936-1937 (ca), gelatin silver print , 8 x 10 inches, Courtesy of the Hastings Historical Society, Hastings on Hudson, New York, U.S.A
- 9 Because no work could be found by Lewis Hine, in 1939 the Hine family lost their home to the Federal Home Loan Bank Board—yet continued to live there on a monthly basis.
- 10 At this point, the best way of showing how much Lewis Hine mastered photography, cared for his fellow citizens, and how much he loved his village is to let the images “speak”...

NOTES

1. Robert W. Marks, 'Portrait of Lewis Hine', *Coronet*, (February 1st 1939) Vol 5, No 4, Whole No 28:147-157.
 2. Daile Kaplan, *Photo Story: Selected Letters and Photographs of Lewis W. Hine* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 7.
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