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William A. Gleason. *The Leisure Ethic : Work and Play in American Literature, 1840-1940*. Melissa Dabakis. *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture : Monuments, Manliness, and the Work Ethic, 1880-1935*.

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- 1 Both of these books investigate changing conceptions of work from the Gilded Age to the eve of World War II. Gleason approaches his goal through an examination of leisure, the counterpoint to work. By studying the growing emphasis on notions of leisure and the role of play in forming the self and in defining the larger national identity, he emphasizes the shifting terrain of authority and social control away from the factory, focal point of industrial capitalism, to the playground. His sources, chosen from writings on the benefits of play and bodybuilding, as well as from literary works, situate the cultural context of the debate over the values of work or play as instruments of assimilation and identity-formation.
- 2 Equally grounded in cultural studies is the book of Dabakis devoted to the role played by labor sculpture in shaping and defining conceptions of work and the worker. Exploring the historical, social and political context of labor monuments, the author insists on the centrality of patrons and viewers in imbuing labor sculpture with ideological meaning beyond its evident visual signification. She emphasizes the conflictual nature of art and the variety of interpretations and uses which labor statuary served in the years of industrial conflict and rising working-class consciousness from the 1880s through the 1930s.

- 3 Gleason explores how certain writers reacted to the shift from a work ethic to one of leisure and how they represented the effect of this shift on the formation of national values. He opposes literary authors to writers on play reform in a supposedly national debate on self-improvement in which the notion of leisure is a central element of character-building. Moving through the pages of American literature from Thoreau to Zora Neale Hurston, Gleason analyzes the contradictions in the thinking and arguments of the proponents of play and their literary critics who accused them of adhering to the values of the same work ethic they purported to reject. In their insistence on the notion of the superiority of the team over the individual and of organized play over spontaneous activities, play reformers reflected the tenets of corporate capitalism. Authors like Abraham Cahan and Ole Rølvaag refuted such a vision of American life by creating characters who fail to accommodate to it. Finally, Gleason examines how class, race, and gender intersected and interacted with the increasingly popular notion that play formed individual character and national identity. He concludes that leisure activities could be said to reinforce both class and racial divisions while deepening gender cleavages.
- 4 Gender concerns take less importance in the study of Dabakis for, as she points out herself, women were far less numerous in the world of industrial labor. The gendering of this sort of labor as a masculine occupation is established in the first chapter and supported by numerous examples from nineteenth-century American painting. Nevertheless, in representations of this world of work, the female figure is not entirely absent ; it tends to vehicule expressions of suffering, hope, and solidarity. Dabakis devotes particular attention to the sculptures of Abastemia St. Leger Eberle, whose works portrayed the hardships of working-class women.
- 5 Issues of race and especially of class are constantly raised throughout this book, as each work is carefully examined in its political, social and cultural context. Dabakis insists on the role of patronage in determining the aesthetics of labor sculpture. She analyzes the ambiguous relationship between monuments and sponsors in the context of industrial change and the triumph of industrial « progress » over the frontier with the rise of western cities.
- 6 She addresses the attempt of private cultural institutions to minimize the growing perception of labor as radical and militant through representations of submissive, diligent workers, as portrayed in the sculptures of the Belgian Constantin Meunier, popular in America in the early years of the twentieth century. As the private role of labor statuary began taking precedence over its public function with the growth of galleries and the commercialization of art, small-scale sculptures reinforced the numerous meanings attributed to work by labor and capital alike. The image of the skilled worker particularly served the interest of both : just as he was beginning to disappear from the scene, his sculptured likeness made him the visual hero of the values of the American work ethic. While this image dominated labor statuary in the years between the two world wars, alternative sculptures showing a proletarian vision of labor contested the « heroism » of work in the late twenties and early thirties.
- 7 While both of these books deal with the transition in the values of work as a basic credo of American national life, they are not equally convincing. Gleason's study, ambitious in its aims, fails to convince this reader that a « play » ethic replaced the work ethic as a major factor in forging personal and national identities, nor that it had the national importance he attributes to it. Gleason is at his best when he develops the tensions

within class, race, and gender on these issues. His ideas are well structured, but his proofs often seem farfetched or inadequate and are delivered in a heavy, sometimes awkward language. Moreover, he omits to include excerpts or citations from the authors he discusses, leaving the reader regrettably dependent upon Gleason's personal interpretations.

- 8 Dabakis, on the contrary, skilfully weaves together her analyses of labor sculpture with supporting illustrations. In this amply documented book, the reader can easily follow her interpretations of images while relating them to contemporary debates. Hers is a carefully researched, clearly written book thoroughly versed in the various aspects of labor history and the social and political problems of the époque, including excellent passages on « idleness, » unemployment, vagrancy, and Coxey's army. Providing both pleasurable and informative reading, her book is a « must » for students and teachers of American civilization.

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Thèmes : Recensions

AUTEUR

BARBARA KARSKY

Université Paris VII