

## A Tribute to Workers and the Artists Who Portrayed Them

A couple of summers ago, during a road trip across the United States, we had the good fortune of spending a couple of hours at the Grohmann Museum in downtown Milwaukee. The art museum, situated on the campus of the Milwaukee School of Engineering, is dedicated to the evolution of human creativity. Sculptures, paintings, and drawings depict workers engaged in their crafts, including field laborers, doctors, cobblers, steelworkers, taxidermists, and various factory workers. If you are in Milwaukee, the museum is definitely worth a visit. In the meantime, in honor of Labor Day, here's a selection of works of art, mainly from other museums, featuring workers engaged in a wide range of endeavors.

The painting below is from the Grohmann Museum. The painting goes by various titles, including *The Peasant Lawyer*, *The Tax Collector*, and *The Payment of the Tithes*. **Pieter Brueghel the Younger's** painting was so popular that no fewer than 20 variants were created in the artist's workshop. The version held by the Grohmann Museum has been dated to approximately 1620. The scene depicts villagers who appear to be lined up to enlist the services of the local attorney, bearing various products to be offered in trade for the lawyer's assistance.

The Flemish artist (1564-1636) was the son of the more famous Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Some of the Younger's work is actually copies or imitations of his father's work.



The British artist, **J.M.W. Turner** (1775-1851), captured the hard life of fishermen in rough seas near the Isle of Wight in his moonlit *Fishermen at Sea* (1796). An artist of the Romantic School, Turner is renowned for his marine paintings, which often feature turbulent seascapes. This painting is in the collection of the Tate Gallery in London and is known as the first oil painting exhibited by Turner at the Royal Academy.



*The Stone Breakers* (1849) by the French artist **Gustave Courbet** (1819-1877) was inspired by Courbet's observation of two laborers breaking stones along the road. In a letter to a friend, describing what gave rise to the painting, Courbet stated that one rarely sees such a pure expression of poverty. The painting was apparently destroyed in the bombing of Dresden in 1945. A smaller mirror image of the work is in the Oskar Reinhart Collection at Winterthur. Courbet was a leader of the Realist movement, committed to painting only what he could see. He said, for example, that he could not paint an angel because he had never seen one.



**Jean-François Millet's** 1857 painting, *The Gleaners*, depicts three peasant women gleaning: picking up stray pieces of wheat from a field, with the juxtaposition of the abundant harvest in the distance. Millet (1814-1875) was part of the Realist movement and one of the founders of the Barbizon School in rural France. He is noted for his paintings of peasant life, which he researched carefully for a decade. *The Gleaners* was initially criticized for its subject matter; the middle and upper classes viewed it as glorifying the lower-class workers. Not until after the artist's death did the work gain popularity. Part of the Musée d'Orsay collection, it is now the most recognizable of Millet's paintings.



**Gustave Caillebotte** (1848-1894) was a French Impressionist painter, although his works tend to be somewhat more realistic than his colleagues. He had the good fortune of coming from a wealthy family, which enabled him to be both an art patron and an artist. Caillebotte made his exhibition debut at the second Impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1876, where he exhibited eight paintings, including the one featured below, *"The Floor Scrapers"* (1875), considered his earliest masterpiece. It was somewhat unusual at the time, inasmuch as it featured the urban working class. The apartment whose floor is being scraped belonged to Caillebotte himself.

Caillebotte was an art collector; after his early death at age 45, he bequeathed his art collection to the French government (which accepted it reluctantly). It was to become the basis for the Impressionist collection at the Musée d'Orsay. Caillebotte's reputation as an artist did not blossom until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as most of his work had been in the hands of family and rarely exhibited. His first posthumous retrospective exhibition did not take place until 1994. Currently, the Art Institute of Chicago is holding a major exhibition of his work (until October 5, 2025). *The Floor Scrapers* is included in this exhibition.



French modernist artist, **Édouard Manet** (1832-1883) is considered a pivotal figure in the transition from Realism to Impressionism. His last major work is a scene depicting a barmaid. In the painting, entitled *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, or *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882-1883), the barmaid is conversing with a gentleman who can be seen in the mirror behind her. Critics long debated whether the perspective shown in the mirror was even possible. However, a reconstruction in 2000 demonstrated that, in fact, the scene could be reproduced as Manet had painted it.



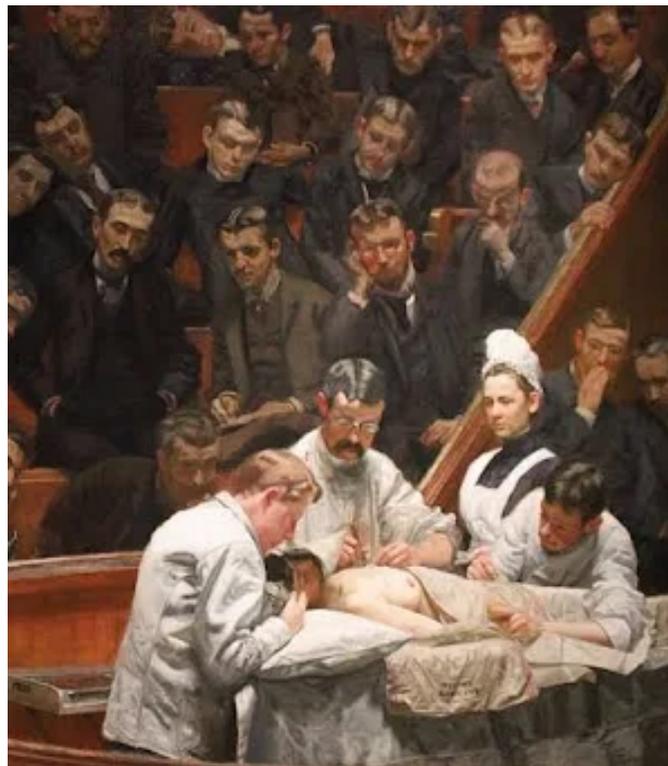
While we often associate **Edgar Degas** (1834-1917) with paintings and sculptures of ballet dancers (more than half his works include dancers), the French Impressionist artist also created approximately 30 works of laundresses. The industry, which was one of the most challenging and poorly paid in Paris, employed thousands of women and fascinated Degas. He created his first sketches of laundresses in his early 20s and continued to portray them throughout his career. In 2023, the Cleveland Museum of Art presented this body of work in an exhibition titled *Degas and the Laundress: Women, Work, and Impressionism*. The painting below, *A Woman Ironing* (1873), is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Realist Winslow Homer** (1836-1910) is regarded by many as one of the greatest 19<sup>th</sup>-century American painters. Of his artistic talent, Homer said, "There is no such thing as talent. What they call talent is nothing but the capacity for doing continuous work in the right way." In his later years, Homer lived in relative isolation in Prout's Neck, Maine, where he continued to paint, focusing on the force of the sea. In "*The Herring Net*" (1885), Homer depicts the heroic efforts of two fishermen struggling in a turbulent sea to land an abundance of herring in their small dory.



**Thomas Eakins** (1844-1916) was one of the most important American Realist painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly renowned for his uncompromising depictions of medical care during his time. His 1875 *Gross Clinic*, created for Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition, was rejected by the jury as too bloody and brutal for display. It is now recognized as one of the greatest American paintings of all time. The painting below, *The Agnew Clinic* (1889), was commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania Medical Class of 1889 to honor the surgeon and professor, David Hayes Agnew, who was retiring that year. Both paintings are in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Eakins' hometown.



**Frederic Remington** (1861-1909), according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was “a chronicler par excellence of the old American West”. Theodore Roosevelt said of Remington, “He is, of course, one of the most typical American artists we have ever had, and he has portrayed a most characteristic and yet vanishing type of American life. The soldier, the cowboy and rancher, the Indian, the horses and the cattle of the plains, will live in his pictures and bronzes, I verily believe, for all time.”

*The Bronco Buster* (1895) was Frederic Remington’s first sculpture. It was also the first sculpture of an American cowboy cast in bronze. The sculpture was copyrighted, and foundries in New York produced more than 275 authorized bronze casts. It became the most popular small bronze sculpture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the authorized casts is displayed in the Oval Office of the White House. There is also one in the Grohmann Museum.



**George Bellows** (1882-1925) was a leading young member of the Ashcan School of American Realism, known for his realistic depictions of urban life in New York City. Robert Henri introduced him to the works of Goya and Honoré Daumier, whose influence is evident in Bellows' art. When he died at the age of 42 from a ruptured appendix, Bellows was known as one of America's greatest artists (according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art). His gritty, realistic boxing scenes are among the most recognized American works of art. Bellows also frequently painted workers at the docks, of which *Men of the Docks* (1912) is pictured below. Purchased by the National Gallery in London in 2014, *Men of the Docks* was the first major American painting acquired by the museum.



**Edvard Munch** (1863-1944) was a Norwegian painter whose work is associated with the Expressionist and Symbolist movements. Munch, despite his mental health struggles, was highly productive as an artist. His body of work comprises approximately 2,000 paintings, hundreds of graphic motifs, and thousands of drawings. His work, *The Scream*, first rendered in pastels in 1893, has become one of Western art's most iconic images. Munch's work was banned in Nazi Germany as degenerative. Fortunately, most of his work survived World War II. His distinctive style has been dubbed "soul painting". The painting below, entitled *Workers Returning Home* (1920), is part of the collection of the National Museum of Norway.



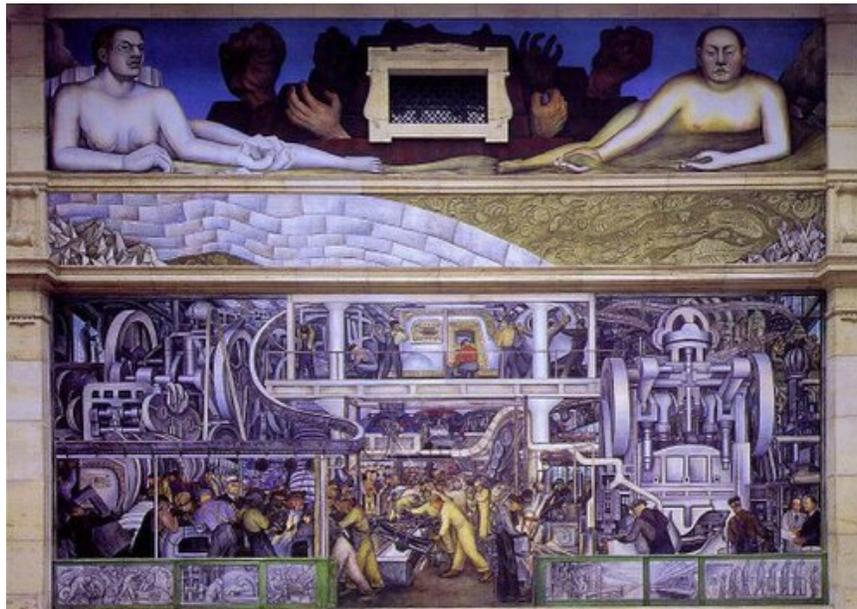
A tribute to workers would not be complete without the iconic *American Gothic* (1930) by **Grant Wood**, one of the best-known American artists (1891-1942). Wood, a native Iowan, was one of three artists most closely associated with the American art movement known as Regionalism, the other two being Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry.

*American Gothic*, pictured below, was first exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, where it remains today. Although some (including the author, Gertrude Stein) have concluded that the painting is intended to be a parody or a satire of small-town life, Wood insisted that it was supposed to convey a positive image of rural American values, offering a vision of reassurance at the beginning of the Great Depression. Some Iowans were outraged at the depiction of them as "pinched, grim-faced, puritanical Bible-thumpers". *American Gothic* is among the world's most lampooned works of art.



Between 1932 and 1933, the Mexican muralist (and then husband of Frida Kahlo), **Diego Rivera** (1886-1957), completed a series of twenty-seven fresco panels entitled Detroit Industry on the walls of an inner court at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The murals were commissioned by the art museum, with Edsel Ford making a significant contribution to make the endeavor possible. The panels serve as a tribute to the city's industries and labor force. The two main panels on the North and South walls depict laborers working at Ford Motor Company's River Rouge Plant in Dearborn. The panels were completed by Rivera and his assistants in just eight months, sometimes working fifteen-hour days. Rivera reportedly lost 100 pounds during this stretch due to the rigor of the work. The photograph below is of the south wall of the court at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Franklin Roosevelt was, it has been said, inspired in part by Diego Rivera's 1932-1933 Detroit Industry murals to create the Federal Art Project in 1935. The project, part of the New Deal, was a relief measure designed to employ artists to create art in various media, including murals. The project, which lasted until 1943, employed approximately 10,000 artists and resulted in over 500,000 pieces of art, including more than 2,500 murals, primarily for the embellishment of public buildings.



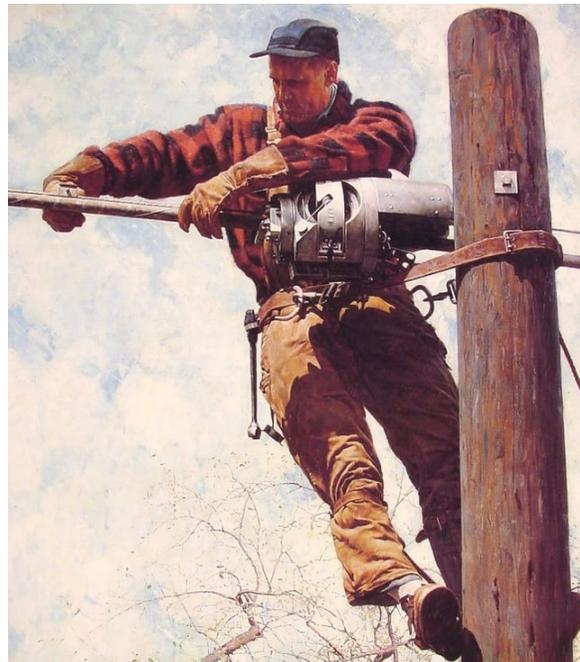
**Edward Hopper** (1882-1967) has been called the most important American realist painter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The painting below, *Office at Night* (1940), features his wife and fellow artist, Josephine Nivison Hopper. Apparently, Josephine Nivison Hopper was Edward Hopper's only model. In her diary, referencing the work of art in progress, Josephine said, "It's a business office with an older man at his desk & a secretary, female fishing in a filing cabinet. I'm to pose for the same tonight in a tight skirt—short to show legs. Nice that I have good legs & up & coming stockings."



Over the years, the Regionalist artist **Norman Rockwell** (1894-1978) produced numerous images of American workers, many of which graced the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. His 1943 portrayal of *Rosie the Riveter* is one of the more iconic. A local Arlington, VT (where Rockwell was part of a vibrant artist community) telephone operator, Mary Doyle Keefe, posed for the painting at the age of 19. While Keefe herself was quite petite, Rockwell painted her with large arms, hands, and shoulders to highlight her strength. Twenty-four years after she posed, Rockwell sent her a letter calling her the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and apologizing for the hefty body in the painting. "I did have to make you into a sort of a giant," he said. The painting is part of the Crystal Bridges Museum's collection in Bentonville, AR. Another Rockwell painting features an American worker was his 1949 *The Lineman*, commissioned by AT&T to honor the work of linemen.



NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM



**Jacob Lawrence** (1917-2000) was one of the most widely acclaimed African American artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and one of only a few whose works are included in standard survey books on American art. Lawrence's paintings portray the lives and struggles of African Americans and have found a broad audience due to their abstract, colorful style and universality of subject matter. By the time he was thirty years old, Lawrence had been labeled as the "foremost Negro artist," and since that time, his career was a series of accomplishments.

Lawrence's painting below, *The Builders* (1947) was purchased in 2007 by the White House Historical Association (a non-profit started by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961) through the White House Acquisition Trust. It was then donated to the permanent White House Collection. The acquisition of Lawrence's work was a part of First Lady Laura Bush's major 2007 refurbishment of the Green Room.



**Elizabeth Catlett** (1915-2012) was an African American Mexican sculptor, painter, and activist. The grandchild of freed slaves, Catlett was the first African American woman to earn an MFA from the University of Iowa (1940). In 1941, she moved to Mexico with her then-husband and became involved with the printmaking collective, Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP). In the 1950s, the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated the TGP and Catlett specifically for her bold artwork, political activism, and communist affiliations. The United States government declared her an “undesirable alien.” In 1962, she became a Mexican citizen. Although her US citizenship was restored in 2002, Catlett remained in Mexico until her death in 2012.

Catlett liked to recall how Grant Wood, with whom she studied at the University of Iowa, told his students, “Do something that you know a lot about, the most about.” Catlett said she knew most about women, black people, and working people. These themes are reflected in her work.

The artwork below, titled “*Sharecropper*,” is a linocut. Originally created in 1952, this version was printed in 1970. While the original printings were in black and white, to this one at the Art Institute of Chicago, Catlett added color.



I couldn't resist adding a bit of whimsy to this piece. If you find yourself in Bratislava, Slovakia, look for *Cumil, the Sewer Worker* (1997) at Panská 251/1. Slovak artist **Viktor Hulík** created the peeping sewer worker as part of a project aimed at revitalizing the Old Town area of Bratislava following the city's liberation from communist rule. Cumil is one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city.

