

Permanent Collection work:

Lewis Hine

Interior of Cotton Mill, South Carolina, 1908

gelatin silver print

Helen Johnston Bequest, Focus Gallery Collection

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History of Photography

Museum Assignment

Today, social activists are protesting against manufacturers who exploit cheap labor forces under the guise of globalization. Recent estimates by the International Labor Office show 250 million children between the age of five and fourteen working in developing countries; of the 250 million, there are some 120 million working full-time under dangerous conditions and living in harsh quarters. Tremendous social and political changes in the past hundreds of years have succeeded in transforming America into one of the world's most prosperous countries. People in the United States tend to view child labor as something out of the historical past; some are even ignorant of this history.

After the Civil War, the reconstruction in the South was largely driven by the ambitious Northern industrialists. Cheap labor encouraged cotton mills to move south; new textile plants were built by investors in Alabama, Mississippi, and the Carolinas; there were abundant coalfields in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia.¹ Children were often employed to work long hours, as the adults did, in essentially every industry. Typically every member of the family worked as part of the labor force. Men did the heavy physical labor while the women and children did the "lighter" work, working in

cotton mills, picking shrimps, or oyster shucking for canneries. While both parents were working, children were “left to shift for themselves at a very early age.”² Although sometimes older siblings helped to share the burden of looking after the youngest, babies were often left alone at the shacks (temporary quarters), as no one in the family could take care of them. Children, as young as three, would hang around with the older members of the family at work. To amuse themselves, they learned by imitating the work of the grown ups. They would begin working as soon as they had sharpened their skills. Most children did not go to school at all.

As early as the 1830s, laws restricting or prohibiting the employment of young children in industrial settings were established in several states. However, little attention was given to the issue of child labor of the farms, the mills, and factories in the rural areas. Employers saw children as valuable economic resource and families needed every bit of income to survive. The 1900 census estimated 1,750,178 children between the ages of 10 and 15 were employed. But according to the observations of factory inspectors and social photographers like Lewis Hine who traveled in the American South, many children as young as 6 and 7 were working full time, this figure therefore clearly underestimated the level of child labor.³ The harsh truth of these children’s lives was hidden away from the public.

Lewis Hine used photography to “bring one immediately into close touch with reality.”⁴ *Interior of Cotton Mill, South Carolina, 1908*, is such an example. Taken

¹ John R. Kemp, *Lewis Hine, Photographs of Child Labor in the New South*, University Press of Mississippi, 1986, p 8.

² *The Child’s Burden in Oyster and Shrimp Canneries*. Lewis W. Hine. From *The Child Labor Bulletin, 1912, 1913*. Arno Press: New York, 1974, p 107.

³ *Child Labor, A World History Companion*, 1999, p239.

⁴ *Lewis W Hine, Social Photography*. From *Classic Essays on Photography*, Edited by Alan Trachtenberg. Leete’s Island Books: New Haven, 1980, p111.

inside the mill, we encounter a group of young girls and women who have put aside their work in order to be photographed. They seemed prepared and well dressed for the occasion. Notice that the clean attire, hair tied back neatly, and the polished shoes worn by all the girls in the front row are identical. Compared to some of Hine's most well-known photographs of child labor, we do not see these girls and women at work. Instead they are conveniently placed aside, dressed for the occasion, ready to be photographed. There is a lack of scholarly information on this particular photograph, but one can be sure that the children and women were prepared to pose for Hine only with the permission of the factory owner. They are arranged according to height; the youngest girls in the front row are probably around 8 or 9 years old. Placed by the side of a spinner, the group is confined to the space between the machine and the wall on the other side. This distance between the group and the camera can serve many purposes. First, typical documentary photographs place the subject further away from the lens to create a larger picture. Here, the use of distance also conveniently includes the large machine next to the group. The young girl next to it, barely the same height as the spinner, testifies to the employment of children in mills. Second, the space between the subject and the viewer also suggests the difference between these young workers and the viewer. Hine took thousands of photographs when he traveled in the South between 1908 and 1916 as the staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC). His photographs were used widely in NCLC's campaigns against child labor during the early Progressive era. During the campaigns, lantern slide shows were accompanied by lectures to educate the public. Third, Hine also compared light to photography: without visual documentation to campaign against child labor "the great social peril is [in] darkness and ignorance."⁵

⁵ Trachtenberg, P112.

Hines suggests that the light reflected on the faces of these workers is as real as the photograph in front of us, so how can we not have compassion for them?

Last, the inclusion of parts of the factory indicates that we are clearly looking at the interior of the mill. Details of the factory are helpful in understanding the working conditions. Notice the spinner on the left hand side is *still* spinning and a young girl leans next to it. If we look carefully, we can see the bottom of a light bulb cut off near the top of the photograph. The height of which the light bulb is hung implies a need to facilitate working late at night: it is only a little taller than the height of an adult. Notice the tall ceilings and large factory space behind the two large entrances behind the group. How can such small light bulbs afford to light up the entire space sufficiently? We can only imagine the same view of the factory at night when all is dark except the dim lighting from these little light bulbs and the little workers who work late into the night. Even during the day, on a day without sunshine, large windows used to take advantage of natural light during the day can barely be sufficient to illuminate the entire factory. How was one to focus and work hard amongst rows and rows of loud moving machines when the light was barely sufficient? Health damages and safety concerns were ignored since there were plenty of immigrant workers ready to replace the injured and the sick. Hine was faced with tremendous difficulties in making images such as *Interior of Cotton Mill*. Southern factory owners were the leading opposition against child labor amendment. They were unwelcoming to visitors such as Hine because they were seen as representatives of Northern reformers interfering with Southern economic development. It was perhaps with this precaution that the owner of this particular factory ordered his workers to dress in their best clothes for this special occasion.

Federal regulation was only achieved in 1938 when Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standard Act. Prior to 1938, child labor legislation was passed and implemented at the state level. Let us not forget that America has struggled and witnessed the same misfortune young children are still enduring in numerous developing countries today. Without social awareness and public effort, little can be changed. The fight for social justice continues today.