

Four Centuries of Work in Art by Patty MacLeish

Man at Work: 400 Years in Paintings and Bronzes, Labor and the Evolution of Industry in Art by Klaus Türk. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Milwaukee School of Engineering, 2003. Color plates, 432 pp. \$49.95.

When Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, the Almighty admonished them, "By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat." And since those days, one way or the other, either by hunting and gathering or planting and harvesting or crafting and forming or bargaining and brokering, humankind has had to sweat to obtain their bread. *Man at Work*, the 432-page catalog of the Eckhart G. Grohmann Collection at the Milwaukee School of Engineering, depicts how men and women have done just that over the past four centuries.

I had previously been introduced to the Grohmann collection through the MSOE Web site and was impressed by the breadth of the collection. I was anxious to hold the book in my hands and look closely at the more than 450 works in the collection. Computer screens are fine, but I don't believe they encourage lingering over each work in the same way that a printed art catalog does. Now, having reviewed the book, I look forward to an opportunity of see the collection at its home in Milwaukee.

Another advantage of the book over the Web site is Klaus Türk's illustrated essay, "A Brief History of Labor Imagery," which introduces the collection. How men and women have felt about work, Türk notes, has changed over the centuries from the Middle Ages to modern times, and, in turn, how we have depicted ourselves has also evolved. I confess that when I opened the book, I turned first to the illustrations of the artworks. It was too tempting not to leaf through the hundreds of plates. But when I returned to the text, I found the author's insight provided a context for the art work and served as my guide in subsequent forays through the plates. Türk understands that art exists within a culture and one way, and I think the best way, to experience art is to understand the culture from which it emanated. In addition, along the bottom of the pages of the introductory essay, there is time line that outlines significant events as well as various developments in the history of work and technology that complement

the points raised in the essay.

The art collection Türk describes is a wonder. Eckhart G. Grohmann was born in Silesia where his family had a marble business. Following the Second World War, Grohmann and his family were made to leave their home when Poland annexed Silesia; all the Germans living there were expelled. Grohmann was educated in Germany and later moved to Milwaukee where he began working with the Aluminum Casting and Engineering Company. In 1960, shortly into his career, he began collecting art. The public is now the beneficiary of his interest in the subject.

Mr. Grohmann gave his collection to the MSOE because of his belief that engineering students need to understand how things come to be. Simply put, materials are transformed by men into things; it's a connection Mr. Grohmann feels is missing in education today. Consequently, the reader finds not only depictions of factory floors from early in the industrial age to the present day, but also commentaries that describe in detail the action in the painting. To assure that the school's students have access to the collection, many of the artworks may be found on the school's Web site <www.msoe.edu>.

The artworks themselves are arranged not chronologically, but by content. There are three broadly defined major divisions: metalworking, changing raw materials into useful objects, and construction and building. Within these divisions, the largest section (200 plus pages) is devoted to artworks depicting mining and metal (including a short introductory essay by Türk on iron production). The other chapters are "Quarries," "Glass and Ceramics," "Construction," "Timber," "Leather and Textiles," "Farming," and—my favorite—"Miscellaneous." This arrangement, which is somewhat chronological within each major division, allows readers to view on consecutive pages depictions of various crafts over time. There are, for example, seventeen different sculptures of single foundry workers with ladles, and in describing the foundry men, Türk compares not only the practical aspects of the artistic renderings such as the clothing and the body language of the subjects, but also how the artist viewed the worker. One particular bronze sculpture, although well executed, is obviously rendered with more interest in portraying a figure artistically than rendering an accurate record. Türk notes that the ironworker with his sleeves rolled up, wearing no gloves, and holding the ladle close to his hand, would surely have come

away from the task at least singed, if not badly burned. One thirty-page section is devoted to “Blacksmiths at Their Forges” from the seventeenth century to the twentieth.

At first, I was not as interested in the many paintings of factory interiors as I was in those depicting individuals at work. I prefer those artworks that show man and woman at work, not just the place of work. After reading Türk’s essay, however, I approached these examples with an enlightened eye. First of all, the paintings serve as documentation of these places, some now outdated and no longer operating. Most of the factories date from the mid- to late-twentieth century. (There are some of Grohmann’s own factory painted in the twenty-first.) Some of the hyper-realistic paintings provide much detail and give an excellent idea of what the plants or foundries looked like. The more impressionistic paintings, on the other hand, provide less detail of the factory itself, but leave the viewer with a sense of what it must have felt like to work in these places.

Unlike many historical photographs of workers in which we usually find men and women standing with their tools at rest staring at the camera, in these paintings, sculptures, and stained glass panels, people are in action. And it’s people who catch my eye and heart. What do we learn of the piano maker in Oskar Beckert’s painting by his clothes, the way he looks upon his work, and the pipe in his mouth as he saws piano keys? What did the women talk about as they spliced feathers in Otto Piltz’s painting? What kind of man was that whose grim face is overseeing a roomful of women making corks for wine bottles? How tired is the sock-less workman as he pushes a wheelbarrow up a ramp in Fred Harti’s canvas?

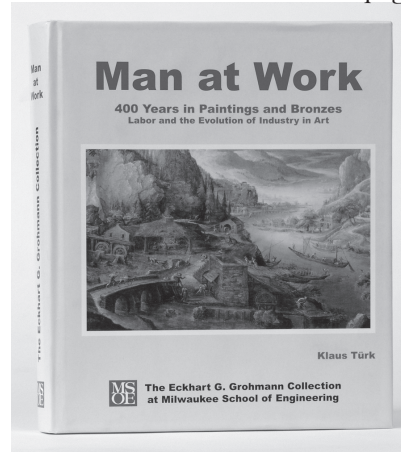
Finally, there are the artworks that when we place them in historic context become more poignant. Frenes Rud’s painting, “Five People at House Construction,” painted in 1900, shows a group of men and women about their normal work of bricklaying; perhaps, the commentary suggests, they are building something new with old bricks. A few pages later is Johvi Schulze-Görlitz’s painting, “Trümmerfrauen (Rubble Women) Reclaiming Bricks after World War II.” Here we see women and bricks again, but the beholder understands

all that has happened in the half century between the paintings.

It is unfortunate that the book’s design does not match the quality of the artwork found within its pages. The book has text book binding, serviceable, but not what is usually found in a fine artbook. Sometimes the commentary jumped from one column to another or from one page to another in such a way as to lose the

reader. And although the concepts Türk describes in his essay and in the commentary add tremendously to the artworks and the book overall, it doesn’t have the flow and ease of a native writer and scholar. I doubt that a scholar of Türk’s reputation would be such an unimaginative writer, so I can only look to the translation as the problem. Fortunately, the essence of what he is explaining comes through, and the artworks speak for themselves.

They are replete with detail and more than once, Türk’s words drew my attention to something I had missed in a corner of a painting or the stance of a worker. There is much to see, and the book will call you back again and again.



Patty MacLeish is the editor of The Chronicle. Man at Work is available from the Milwaukee School of Engineering Web page <www.msoe.edu>.