

# Selected issues of the representation of Labour in Western Art

This course examines representations of labour in Western Art (between 16<sup>th</sup> Century till the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century) from an iconological point of view. A number of selected issues will be analysed. Whereas the period related to the *Ancien Régime* will be mainly analysed from the perspective of the so-called Flemish School of Painters, the subsequent period of the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century will be analysed from a broader European perspective.

## Introduction and the era of the Ancien Régime

Monday 28 October (3 hours)

1. Introduction
2. **Work Ethics** : From the representations of the Original Sin to the representation of the Land of Cockagne

The introduction seeks to give a methodological orientation. It seeks to offer tools to identify the relevant pieces of art representing labour (the corpus) and to explain the origins and the limits of an iconological analysis.

The selected issue of the work ethics will be analysed through two narratives. The first dates back to the book *Genesis*, whereas the second one relates to the first “utopia” of the medieval times, the land Cockagne, which was immortalized by Pieter Brueghel the elder. Both narratives tend to corroborate work ethics or to question it.



Jan Bruegel the Younger, *Adam Delving*, ca 1600, oil on wood, Private collection.

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Pieter Bruegel, Land of Cockaigne, 1567, Oil on oak, 52cm x 78cm, Inv. Nr. 8940, München, Alte Pinakothek © Alte Pinakothek

**Wednesday 30 October (3 hours)**

### **The representation of work within the corporations of the *Ancien Régime***

This chapter focuses on a very particular case : After the iconoclastic uprisal of 1561 and following the restauration of the Catholic denomination, corporations uniting masters and journeymen had to restore the altarpieces decorating the chapels in the Cathedral of Antwerp. They had to cope with a political pressure from the clergy to represent Christological scenes, whereas they also wanted to pay a tribute to their patron saints, which were chosen due to the relation they had to their craft. The format of the triptych allowed to do justice to both demands. The transformation of triptychs to the portico altarpieces complicated the need to do justice to these two dimensions. The question than arose whether Christ had to be chosen above the patron saint. Furthermore, the challenge was to identify those parts of the Gospel which could be related to the craft.



Ambrosius Franken, *Central Panel of the Martyrdom of Saints Crispinus and Crispianus* 1589, Oil on oak, 269 x 217 cm , Antwerp, KMSKA, Inv. Nr 145.

**Thursday 31 October (3 hours)**

***The representation of the training of painters*, between the workshop and the emerging Academy : the case of Michael Sweerts**

The training of pupils to the craft of painting initially was a prerogative of the corporations and took place in the workshop of the master. Due to a need to improve the status of painters, academies gradually centralized aspects of these training, sometimes in co operation , sometimes in opposition to the Corporation. Michael Sweerts (1618-1664) was one of the first painters to represent the training of these pupils in Western Art, in paintings produced in Rome as well as in Brussels. This body of paintings will be analysed in the light of the evolving conceptions of training.



Michael Sweerts, *Leçon de dessin*, Huile sur toile, 76,5 x 109,5 cm, Haarlem, Musée Frans Hals, n° Inv. 270.

## Second week : the XIX the Century and beyond

Monday 11 November

***A gender approach*** : the representation of the most contested female working hero of the XIX the Century : the hiercheuse in the work of Constantin Meunier (2 hours)

One of the most contested industrial workers were the so-called Hiercheuses, women who performed subterranean work in the coalmines next to their male comparators. Starting from the UK , the access of these female workers to this kind of subterranean work was progressively abolished. Belgium was one of the last European countries to ban these female workers. The most emblematic representations of these hiercheuses were created by the Belgian painter and sculptor Constantin Meunier (1831-1905) His works were criticized by feminist art historians as representing these women as objects of lusts, whereas it could be argued that he just wanted to do justice to their dignity . The ILO has universalized the expulsion of these female workers. The European legislation implementing the ILO Conventions, were retracted due to the case law of the CJEU.



Constantin Meunier, *Une hiercheuse*, 1887, Huile sur toile, Dimension : 137 x 77, Ixelles, Musée Constantin Meunier, inv. 10000 / 722, © *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Bruxelles* / photo : photo : Guy Cussac, Bruxelles)

**Tuesday 12 November**

***Labour and the human body* : Representing stress and work accidents (2 hours)**

Labour cannot be dissociated from the human body which it performs. Hence, it is impossible to represent labour in an abstract way, without representing workers. Artists have tried to render dignity to workers by refusing to show moments of stress and distress which are the result of their exploitation. Others artists adopted a more veristic approach by representing the traces exploitation has left on the human body. In the case of work accidents, especially lethal ones, the corporal dimension of labour is paramount, as much as a need of sublimation of these casualties. Hence, representation of work accidents is a challenge for artists. The emergence of work accidents with a high level of casualties is a feature of industrialization. Hence, these events necessitate the inauguration of public monuments allowing people to commemorate their loved ones. These monuments need to find a language, which is distinct from other moments seeking to glorify *uomini illustri*, due to the fact that victims are anonymous and due to the fact that these accidents are hardly glorious moments.



Anto-Carte, 1918, *Piëta*, Olie op doek, 94 x 112,5 cm., Mons, Collection du musée des Beaux-Arts (BAM), conservée à l'Artothèque, (photo : Atelier de l'Imagier), © Sabam Belgium 2023.

**Wednesday 13 November**

**Representing industrial disputes : Between 1870 and 1914 and beyond (2 hours)**

This class deals with the way in which industrial disputes have been represented in European art between 1870 and 1914 and beyond. Hence, there is a focus on strikes opposing workers and their employer. The works of art are essentially produced by artists who were born and trained in Europe. The period between 1870 and 1914 has been chosen for the purpose of temporal demarcation. It is a kind of *Gründungszeit* (foundational period) that is characterised by accelerated industrialization, the emergence of the modern labour movement outside an official role yet being attributed to the trade unions. On the political level, this period begins with the highly revolutionary workers' protest of the Paris Commune (1871), which would scare the bourgeoisie and which was smothered in considerably more blood by the French army. It ends with the outbreak of World war I.



Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, « Il Quarto Stato », 1901, oil on canvas , 200,85 x 500,43 cm, Milano, Galleria di Arte moderna ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Quarto\\_Stato.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Quarto_Stato.jpg)).

**Thursday 14 November**

**The issue of slavery and forced labour : Belgian colonial monuments (2 hours)**

Colonial monuments have come under attack in recent times. The case of the Belgian colonial monuments is particularly interesting. The creation of the free independent State of Congo had been accepted due to the vow of King Leopold II to eradicate slavery, although in practice he had replaced by forced labour. The colonisation of the Independent State by Belgium has been the result of the growing critique on Leopold II, although in practice the Belgian State never fully reduced forced labour. During the colonial period, a lot of monuments have been inaugurated which relate to the previous era. Hence, the narrative on slavery is at the heart of the iconology of these monuments.



Jean-Marie Hérain, *Monument to Father De Deken*, 1904, Wilrijk, De Bist.

Friday 15 November

**The Glorification of Labour : Monuments to Labour (Meunier, Rodin and Dalou) (2 hours)**

In this last class, the Monuments glorifying labour which were conceptualized prior to WWI are being studied to understand their message. Three monuments stand out which have been “invented” by Meunier, Rodin and Dalou. The Monument to Labour of Meunier is the only one which actually has been put in place, albeit solely 25 years after the death of Meunier. These Monuments are atypical, rather than commemorating historic figures or events, they seek to strengthen the national identity by attributing a place to the working class within the Nation State.



C. Meunier , *Monument to Labour*, 1930, Laeken, Rue Claessens. (CC BY 4.0 KIK-IRPA, Brussels)

