ART AND OCCUPATION

Constantin Meunier

*Industrie* (Industry) 1896

Against a background of fire and smoke, two semi-naked, muscular men, heads erect, noble faces like Roman gods, are captured in full toil. They strain together; heaving with all their might, the one in the hard hat raises his hammer in readiness to strike. Theirs is hot, dangerous work, requiring great concentration and determination. They are foundry workers from Wallonia, frequent subjects for the Belgian sculptor and painter Constantin Meunier. This bronze high relief (*Industrie*) is one of four: *Mine, Harvest, Port and Industry* (representing the classical elements earth, air, water and fire) which he created as components of a great monument to work and which the Belgian State acquired 2 years before his death. It took a further 20 years for *Monument to Labour* to be erected. Completed as part of Belgium’s independence centennial celebrations (1930–31), the work now stands in the Port of Brussels (Laeken) and includes in addition to the high reliefs, four large-scale stone reliefs also depicting the four elements as well as four life-sized freestanding bronze statues: *Sower, Ancestor, Crouching Miner* and *Resting Blacksmith* together with a bronze group *Maternity* [1].

Constantin Meunier was born at Etterbeek, Brussels, in 1831 and entered the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, Brussels in September 1845 initially to study sculpture but frustrated with his inability to express himself he turned to painting, which became his major focus for the next 20 years. However, a visit to the deprived industrial areas of Wallonia in the 1880s drew him back to sculpture and the theme of working people, achieving great success with *The Hammerer* at the Paris Salon in 1886. A year later, he became Professor of Painting at the Academy of Leuven (Louvain) [2] and in 1899 he was elected a Member of the *Académie royale de Belgique*. That year he built a studio house at Ixelles, a suburb of Brussels, where he lived till his death (1905). The Belgian State acquired the building (now the Meunier Museum) [3], which houses examples of his work from 1875 to 1905.

Wallonia has long been associated with iron manufacture [4] and several local artists (Henri met de Bles and Lucas van Valckenborch in the 16th century and Leonard Defrance in the 18th century) [5] have tried to capture the spirit of Walloon ‘metal bashing’ but Meunier’s ‘hymn to
the working classes of Belgium’ [6] brings a level of social realism, nobility and strength that the others can’t match. His preoccupation with the region’s declining work conditions was to feature greatly in his output during the latter years of his life.

Historically, metal industry workers have been exposed to many hazards including high concentrations of dusts and fumes [7] as well as volatile organic compounds [8] and radiation [9]. Hutchison [10] found British blast furnace and sinter operators had higher death rates than other steel workers whilst in France, Bourgkard [11] found no relationship between exposure to iron oxides and lung cancer but an excess of mortality from bladder cancer among workers exposed to oil mist. Today steel making is a worldwide industry dominated by China and the other Asian manufacturing powerhouses (Japan, South Korea and India). Worryingly, a retrospective Chinese iron–steel cohort study showed increased risks for all neoplasms [12]; and cancer mortality was elevated in stainless steel production at two Korean iron and steel manufacturing complexes [13]. This may imply that preventive health programmes to protect workers lag behind the transfer of technology from old to new economies [14] posing the question “why”? Cultural differences, economic pressures, uninformed management and inadequate infrastructure may all need to be addressed. Roy has suggested how this might be achieved [15].

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References