

The E. L. Wiegand Collection: Representing the Work Ethic in American Art

The artworks in the Nevada Museum of Art, E. L. Wiegand Collection date from the early- to mid-twentieth century and represent various representations of the work ethic in American art. While many of the paintings depict people undertaking the physical act of labor, others focus on different types of work environments ranging from domestic interiors and rural landscapes to urban cityscapes and industrial scenes. By expanding the definition of the term “work ethic” to encompass a broad range of activities, the collection acknowledges all those who have devoted their lives to the tireless pursuit of work.

Over the last century, American artists have approached the subject of work from many points of view and in a variety of artistic styles. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, artists often chose to idealize scenes of labor. This idealization sometimes took the form of agricultural landscapes featuring farmers, who epitomized the spirit of American democracy at the time. During the 1920s and 1930s, attention was focused on industrialization and America’s advanced industrial technology. At the same time, many Realist painters sought to convincingly portray the urban working conditions of struggling workers—a trend that continued during the era of the Great Depression, when artists shifted their attention to documenting the hardships faced by migratory, agricultural workers.

Perhaps the most influential event to impact art production in the United States was the launch of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal Program that put millions of unemployed Americans back to work in the 1930s. The inauguration of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—a special fine arts component of the New Deal—aimed to employ thousands of artists across the country. While many of the paintings, sculptures, and public murals produced under the program featured people at work, the program itself helped to validate the important contributions American artists were making—and formally invited them to join the venerable ranks of the American workforce.

The Nevada Museum of Art thanks the E.L. Wiegand Foundation for its generous support of this unique permanent collection.

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