

Special Exhibition Catalogue

Constantin Meunier

By

Christian Brinton



Museum of Art

Detroit

February Twentieth—March Fourteenth

1914

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First Impression
8000 Copies

Redfield Brothers, Incorporated
New York

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Sculpture should be the most exclusive of the arts. It should express only certain rare and irreproachably beautiful phases of life, form, and mortal joy or suffering. Every plastic manifestation that fails of this is a species of lasting and inexcusable crime. In our day Rodin and Meunier, the one in the realm of passion, the other in the field of labour, are the sole sculptors who have succeeded in seizing a few of these significant moments, these sublime movements.

Maeterlinck.

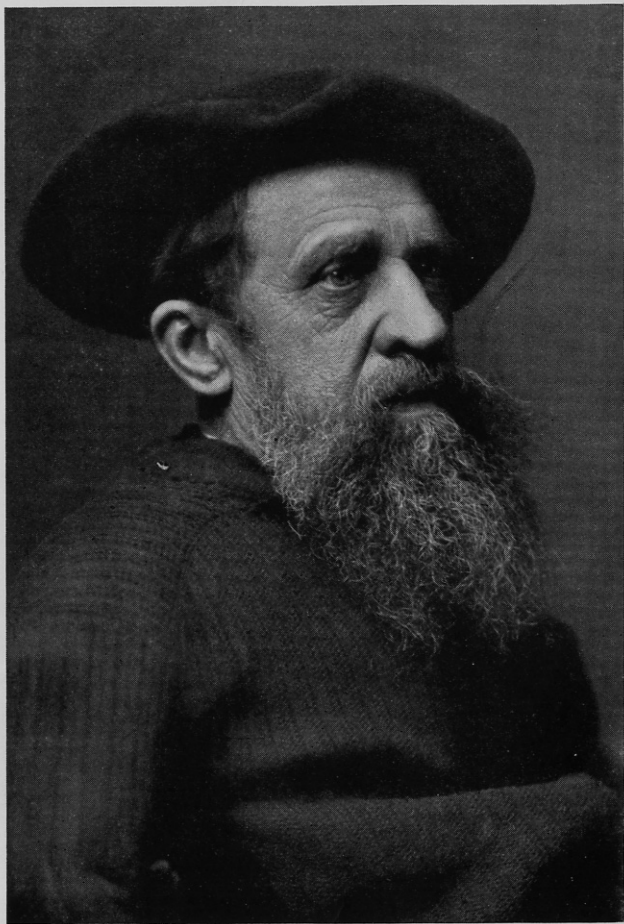


Photo. Alexandre, Brussels

CONSTANTIN MEUNIER

BIOGRAPHICAL

Ma vie est toute de travail et de rêve.

THE simple, earnest words you see above characterize as nothing else could the life of the man whose art you have come here to study and admire. His was in truth an existence fraught with work and dreams. The work was arduous, the dreams full of gentle, mystic fervour. Few artists have encountered so many obstacles. Ill health, poverty, prolonged obscurity, each fell to his lot in ample portion, and yet in due course he surmounted all. Though he lived to realize in goodly number his conceptions of form, colour, and movement, he exclaimed toward the end, with kindling eye and eager tone, "What I would do surpasses by far all I have done." He was never satisfied. He remodelled statue after statue, and group after group, striving to get closer and closer to the outward verity and the inner vision. He left behind him a valiant, sombre army in bronze and plaster, yet, like the true creative spirit he was, his brain still teemed with thoughts and themes never to find definite shape and semblance.

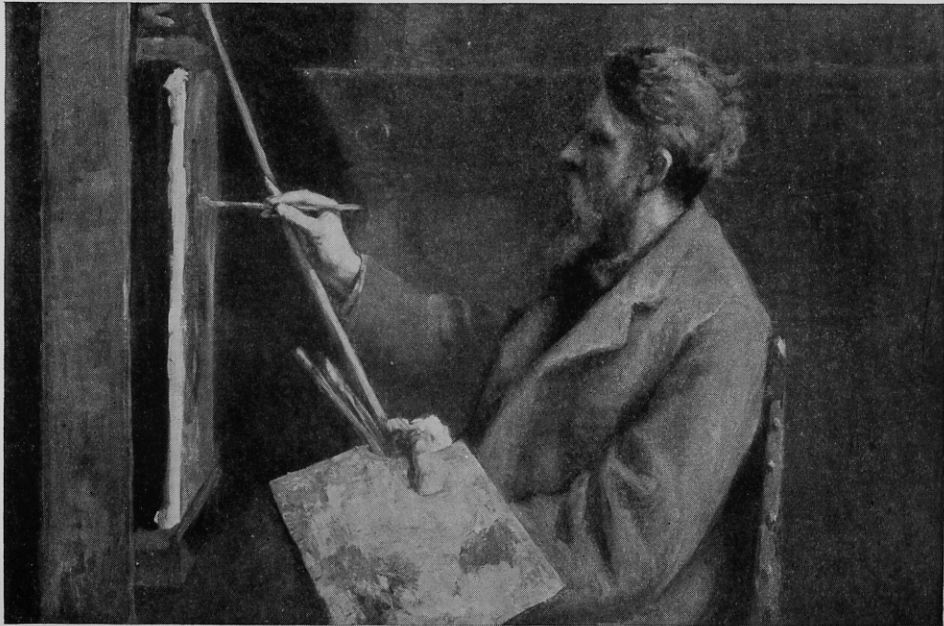
Constantin Meunier was born April 12, 1831, at Etterbeek, in the suburbs of Brussels, the son of an impecunious tax collector, who, despondent over

the loss of his position, abruptly left his wife and six small children to face the hazards of fortune as best they might. Delicate and sensitively organized, the boy never became wholly strong, and at frequent intervals had to be sent to the seaside or taken from school because of his frail physique. The family had meanwhile moved to a modest house in the place du petit Sablon, where the widow rented her few spare rooms and the daughters supported themselves as dressmakers. Situated in the centre of the city near the galleries and museums, the Meunier home naturally became a rendezvous for artists, and it was in this atmosphere that Constantin first received encouragement to devote himself to his future career. While the engraver, Calamatta, and the talented Belgian landscape painter, Théodore Fourmois, both evinced a kindly interest in him, it was his own elder brother, Jean-Baptiste, who may be called his earliest preceptor.

Trained as a journeyman typographer, and later an engraver of considerable merit, Jean-Baptiste Meunier exercised a salutary influence over the shy, shambling lad whom all regarded with undisguised misgiving. Thinking that manual labour might prove beneficial to his health there had been some talk of placing him with a local carpenter. So rapid however was his progress under his brother's guidance that within a brief period he was ready to join the classes at the Academy, and sub-

sequently entered the studio of the sculptor, Fraikin. Yet he was not fated to remain long in this atmosphere of correct officialism and vapid charm. The art of Fraikin was innately distasteful to him, and it is by no means to his discredit that he tended the stove with as much zest, and moistened the clay with as much zeal, as was brought to bear upon more ambitious problems. After two years of faithful though distasteful apprenticeship he left Fraikin, paying dutiful tribute to academic insipidity with *The Garland*, exhibited at the Brussels Salon of 1851.

It was natural that a young man possessing the reflective temperament which was the peculiar birthright of Constantin Meunier should soon seek a more convincing medium of expression than was to be found in the artificial abstraction so typical of French and Flemish sculpture of the mid-century. There seemed more scope for his talents in painting, so to painting he forthwith turned, beginning his studies with Navez, a former pupil of David and a reasonably virile exponent of the fast-vanishing classic tradition. The superior freedom of crayon and oils appealed strongly to the sensibilities of one whose creative enthusiasm had been chilled by the stilted conventions of Fraikin and his school. His first picture of importance, a *Ward in the Hospital of Saint-Roch*, revealed the influence of his friend, Charles De Groux, for



CONSTANTIN MEUNIER (1885)

Portrait by the late Isidore Verheyden

whom he evinced a marked personal and artistic sympathy. They both married young, and forced to provide for increasing families, found it necessary to devote themselves to work which would insure immediate pecuniary return. Side by side like two patient, anonymous medieval craftsmen, they designed stained glass windows for the ecclesiastical decorator, Capronnier, painted stations of the cross for various local churches, and even made drawings for cheap printed kerchiefs. At Louvain, Châtelineau, and elsewhere throughout the province of Liège may still be seen tasks fashioned by the sweat of their brows and the blood of their starved artist souls.

Insensibly and mayhap through some latent religious atavism Meunier's ardent, contemplative spirit had already been drawn toward the shadows of the cloister and the esthetic possibilities of sacred theme. Oppressed by the sorrow and penury about him and seeking perchance solace or self-immolation, he passed considerable time, as Verhaeren afterward did, among the Trappist monks at Westmalle, in the Antwerp Campine. The sequestration in each instance proved fruitful, the painter's *Burial of a Trappist*, in the Courtrai Museum, being eloquently paralleled by the zealous exaltation of the poet's *Friars*. In the *Stoning of Saint Stephen* the note becomes more forceful and dramatic, yet always Meunier must have felt that

such motives, however pleading and human, did not afford his talents definitive expression. It was inevitable that he should have sought to widen his sympathies, to enrich a somewhat austere, ascetic palette. Just as Maeterlinck later turned from Ruysbroeck the Admirable to the Treasure of the Humble, so Constantin Meunier gradually drifted from the passivity of monastic influence into a broader fellowship and brotherhood. Bowed figures in dim, grey chapel and those tortured images of Christ on wayside cross seemed after all less beseeching than the poor labourer who hurried by making the sign.

The climax of his religious, as of his historical naturalism, was attained in the canvas entitled *The Peasants' War*, first shown in 1875 and now hanging in the Modern Gallery, Brussels. He had all the while been confronting reality with increasing conviction, and when, a couple of years later, circumstances brought him into direct contact with life in the teeming industrial centres of Liège, he instinctively felt that the true pathway lay open before him. An opportune commission to furnish designs for a triumphal float depicting typical scenes in the Pays noir caused him to undertake a systematic tour of the region, and from thence onward there was no hint of doubt or indecision. Among the initial results of his sojourn with the glassblowers of Val Saint-Lambert was

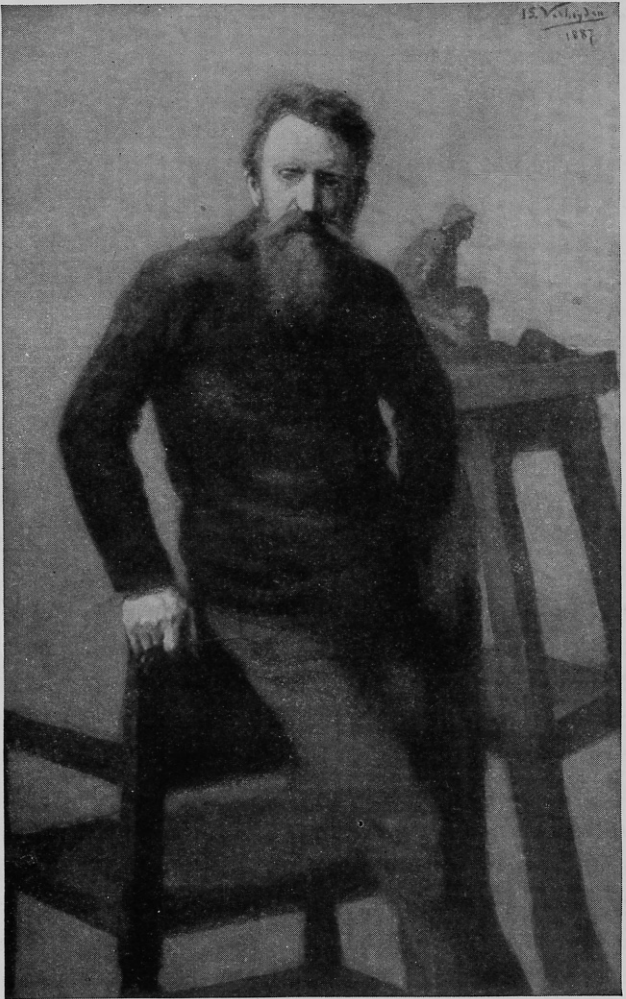
The Broken Crucible of 1880, an ambitious episode treated in pseudo-historical vein. Yet before long he was to cast off convention and move forward after his own sober, deliberate fashion.

From Val Saint-Lambert he proceeded to study the puddlers and foundrymen of the vast Cockerill establishment at Seraing. The earliest record of his stay in the Black Country proper was the Descent of the Miners. All along that stifling, leprous belt which stretches from Liège to Charleroi, and from Charleroi to Mons, he watched these accursed sons of Cain fulfilling their sinister destiny. At Frameries and Pâturages he found them stunted, deformed, and stamped with tragic depression, though for the most part they displayed a silent heroism and primal energy that turned pity into admiration. Still he did not spend the entire time indoors or underground among creatures more like antique troglodytes than human beings. He also went abroad in the sun with the mower and the happy harvester or strolled along the Antwerp water front watching the great ships load and unload. It was work which he chose for his theme, work and the workman in their every phase.

Interrupted by a trip to Spain during the winter of 1882-3, whither he had been sent by the Government to make a copy of Kempeneer's Descent from the Cross, in the Seville cathedral, Meunier, directly upon his return, resumed activity in the Borinage.

While he painted a number of pictures and filled countless note books with vigorous and veracious sketches, it was the plastic force and beauty of the labourer that most impressed him. It was indeed not long before painting became secondary to the claims of sculpture. All the man's passion for form which had thus far lain dormant surged forth with resistless impetus. He seemed actually to grow younger, to undergo a species of physical as well as esthetic rebirth. Although past fifty and beset with poverty and family cares, this courageous soul had the fortitude to begin his life work afresh. At the outset he modelled tiny figures in wax, which though crude were characteristic in pose and rich in vital intensity. Within a few brief years he had attained the accent of assured mastery.

The first work in three dimensions was the head of a puddler, executed in relief in the studio which he then occupied in the rue de la Consolation. Undertaken in a spirit of relaxation it proved so successful that he shortly essayed more ambitious subjects. The Hammerman and the Puddler Resting, completed respectively in 1884 and 1885, marked the real inception of his career. The fight for recognition was nevertheless long and bitter. Although their appearance synchronized with the rise of the Labour Party in Belgium and elsewhere, few grasped the significance, either social or esthetic, of these majestic giants of forge and fur-



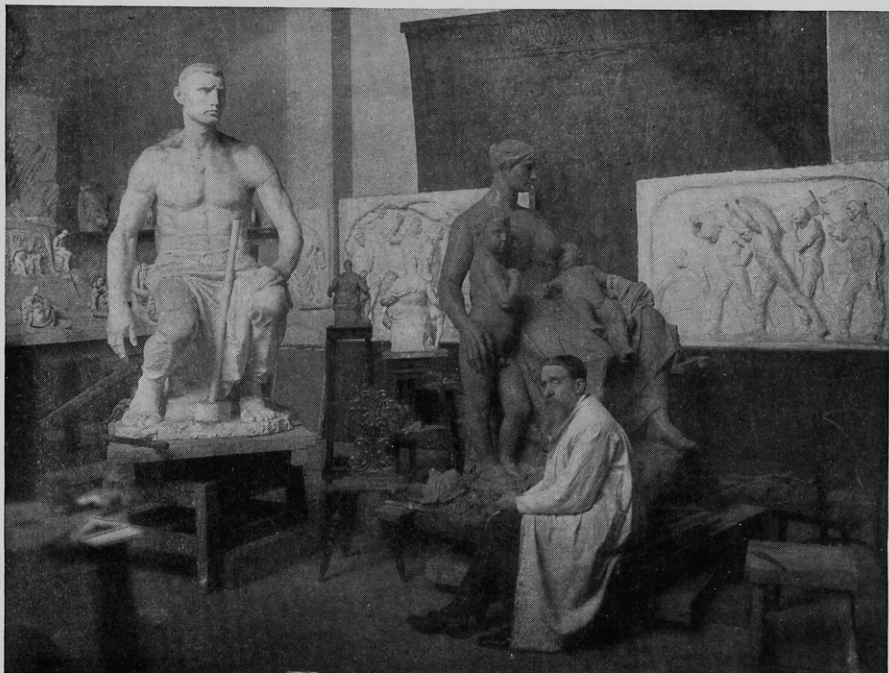
CONSTANTIN MEUNIER (1887)
Portrait by the late Isidore Verheyden

nance, or felt they possessed any special claim to consideration. It was naturally difficult for an artist who had suddenly changed his medium to secure commissions, and, dubious as to the future, Meunier felt constrained to accept the professorship of painting at the Louvain Academy, a post he had vainly solicited during ten weary, wasting years. For family considerations alone the sacrifice was made, so in 1886 he forsook his humble quarters in Brussels for the grey, quiescent town of Father Damien.

And yet this apparent renunciation did not prove fruitless, for it was here that the man revealed the true measure of his artistic power and displayed to the full his sympathy with the sad, ennobling beauty of toil. Instead of being a barren exile, the eight years passed at Louvain became the vigil of his glory. He worked unremittingly, pausing only to attend classes. Statue followed statue and group succeeded group until he had almost completed that valiant hymn to labour which marks the climax of his life effort. The majority of these passive, cyclopean creatures, as well as numerous busts and reliefs, were either planned or in part executed at Louvain. And it was but fitting that Louvain should have commissioned him to undertake the monument to her son who had given his life that he might succour the outcasts of a far-off Pacific isle.

The studio in which this earnest, patriarchal man laboured from dawn until nightfall was situated in the quiet rue des Récollets, and had formerly served as the dissecting room of the near-by medical faculty of the University. Erected in 1744 by the celebrated Docteur Rega, it was a grim, sepulchral structure, tower-shaped and pierced by narrow, arched windows, some of which were roughly boarded over. The interior was dim even at mid-day, for the walls were darkened by the moisture of ages. In the seclusion of this somnolent, scholastic town, the silence broken only by the sound of distant bells, or the footfall of some passing seminarist, Meunier worked out his salvation alone and unaided. He never had an assistant, preferring to build the fire and execute the most rudimentary tasks with his own hands. His movements, while apparently deliberate, were in reality swift and full of restless precision. He seemed made only of nerves and bone. Absorbed in his work, he would light and relight his pipe twenty times in succession, smiling at his forgetfulness, and, when things were going well, would softly whistle a strain from one of his favourite Wagner operas.

Pale, long-bearded and clad in dark blue béret and flowing grey blouse, Constantin Meunier wrought with the solemn preoccupation of one performing a sacred office. Guided by the inherent simplicity and grandeur of his own nature, he



CONSTANTIN MEUNIER IN HIS BRUSSELS STUDIO

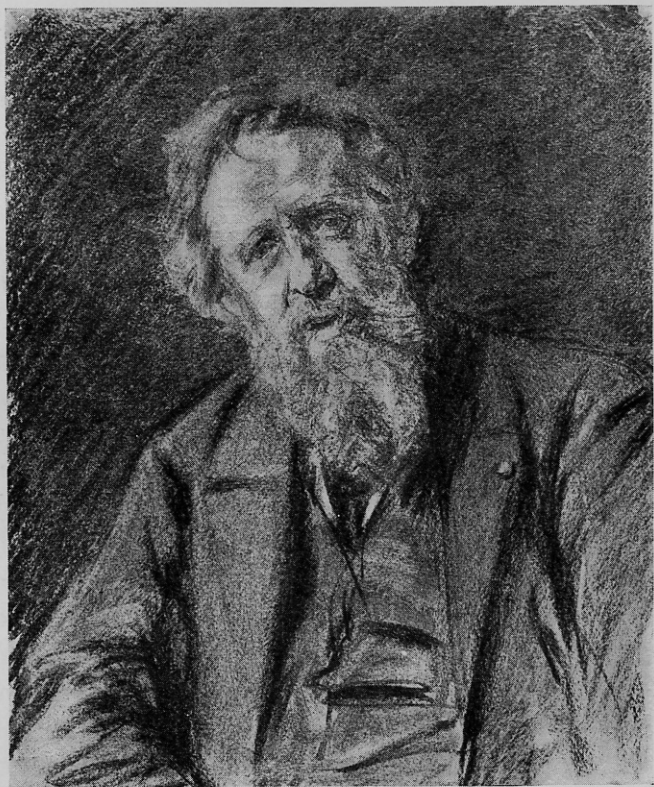
Photo by M. Duyk

looked at all things simply and grandly, his Classic singleness of purpose tinged with Christian sorrow and self-sacrifice. Mystic to the core, he was at times the prey of hallucinations more or less vivid. He appeared to be in constant communication with the great spirits of the past. The impress of things gone and the shadows of things to come were always upon him. "I am never alone here," he would often say, referring to the dust of countless departed souls who seemed still to haunt the place. His psychic susceptibility was moreover by no means purely fanciful, for the precise hour his younger son George, the beloved "marin," died at sea, he had an explicit presentment of the event. This blow, coupled with the loss a few weeks previously of his talented elder son Karl, turned Meunier's eyes once again toward the solace of sacred theme. A pitiful, tortured *Ecce Homo*, a *Prodigal Son* full of filial trust and paternal forgiveness, and a *Pietà* are the mute records of his suffering and resignation.

A wish to leave the scene of his bereavement, together with the necessity for better facilities in order to finish the monumental groups already under way caused Meunier to return to Brussels. In the old days of obscure, unrewarded struggle he had lived first in the rue des Secours and afterward in the rue de la Consolation. On this occasion he settled in the rue Albert De Latour, also in the sub-

urb of Schaerbeek, later moving with his friend Verheyden to 59 rue de l'Abbaye. Although his step was slower, and his shoulders drooped even more beneath the double weight of grief and increasing infirmity, he devoted himself valiantly to his art, completing in rapid succession several important commissions in addition to numerous portrait busts of well-known figures in the world of art, science, letters, and music.

It is unnecessary to describe in detail the production of this period. The various puddlers and miners in significant attitudes, the stately, reposeful Dockhand, The Sower for the Botanical Garden, and the noble equestrian entitled At the Watering Place for the square Ambiorix are already classic examples of his art. Never robust, and realizing that his days were numbered, Meunier dedicated his few remaining years to that Monument to Labour which constitutes his crowning achievement and the eloquent synthesis of his entire career. Conscious of the difficulties to be encountered, he sought Government aid, on failing to obtain which he undertook the work himself, piece by piece. Dominated by the epic form of The Sower, flanked by the four reliefs entitled respectively Industry, The Harvest, The Port, and The Mine, with figures about the base depicting Maternity and certain familiar industrial types, Constantin Meunier's canticle in praise of work



CONSTANTIN MEUNIER

From the drawing by Max Liebermann

ranks as one of the most impressive conceptions in the history of sculpture. It was his supreme legacy to the world, and while he never witnessed its actual installation, he had the satisfaction of knowing, before the end came, that it was purchased by the State and would eventually be placed in the Main Hall of the new Palais du Mont des-Arts.

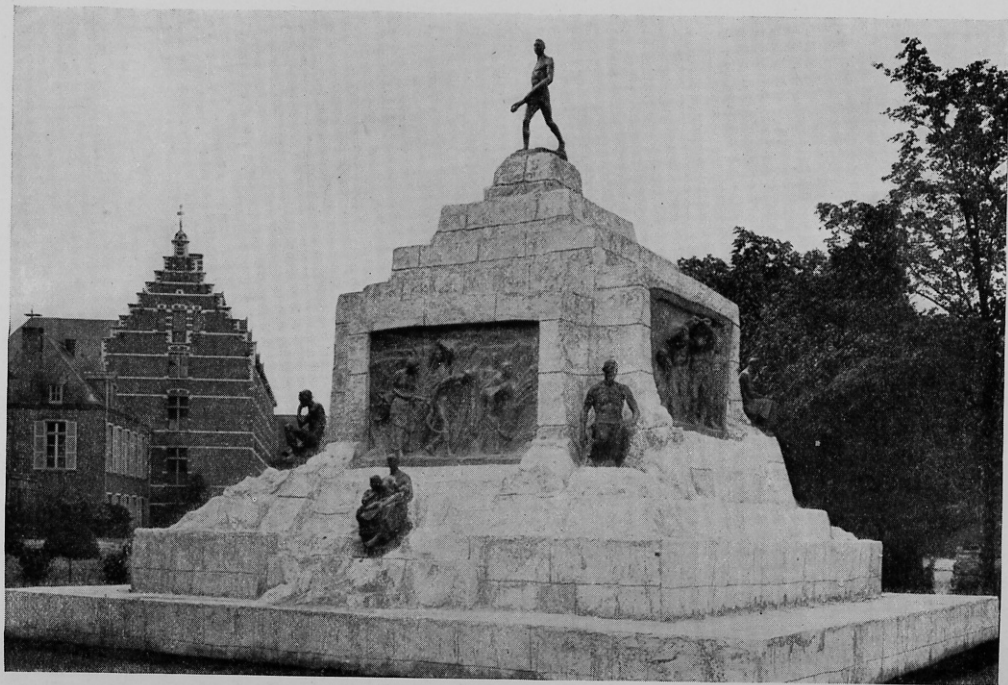
Though it was only within the last decade of his long, arduous existence that Meunier may be said to have come into his own, there gathered about him during the late 'eighties and early 'nineties a little band of enthusiasts who did their utmost to make his art known and understood. This handful of supporters to-day cherish unforgettable memories. They have watched a sustained and resolute symmetry issue from that which was rough and tentative. They have seen gropings and hesitations end in a grand, though troubled triumph. And yet no one dreamed that he would be able to accomplish what he did, for none could have measured that tenacity of spirit which kept this gaunt, loosely-knit frame together and stiffened this sensitive soul for each fresh task.

The first of that memorable series of exhibitions which were to sweep in silent succession over the face of Europe and finally cross the ocean to you was held within the restricted compass of the Salle Saint-Cyr, in the rue Royale, Brussels. An eloquent exposition of Meunier's art was made in the

presence of some hundred auditors by the eminent barrister, M. Edmond Picard. As the assembly moved about among these grave, toil-stained figures, so freighted with human sympathy and resolute esthetic integrity, there was none of the customary aimless chatter. The occasion was a solemn one, and much the same atmosphere prevailed throughout the duration of the vastly more important and comprehensive display at Bing's Salon de l'Art nouveau in the rue de Provence, Paris, in February and March 1896.

It was this latter exhibition which more than anything assured the reputation of Constantin Meunier. Having conquered the suffrage of Paris, it was comparatively easy to win the other European capitals. It is however in Germany that Meunier has met with the most enthusiastic and discriminating appreciation, Dresden, Berlin, Munich, and Vienna having repeatedly honoured themselves in honouring him and his art. He is to-day represented in nearly every Continental museum of importance, the most extensive collection of his work being in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, though Brussels falls not far behind in possessing almost intact the Monument to Labour besides numerous miscellaneous figures of importance.

Although for years his existence had been dark and stressful, the twilight of Meunier's life was



THE MONUMENT TO LABOUR, Louvain, 1909

suffused with peace and security. When at length he had a home which he might safely call his own he used to say, with touching relief, "I am not afraid now when the door-bell rings," knowing there was no further dread of creditor or bailiff. And yet the spectre of poverty and want was hard to banish from his mind. Worn and wellnigh decrepit, he would often, in Paris or elsewhere, tramp long distances, unmindful that he had ample funds to take a cab. Though a constant sufferer from heart trouble, there was on the whole a gentle serenity about those few, lingering weeks. The studio was situated in the verdant suburb of Ixelles. All around was the green of springtime, the brightness of the sun. Pigeons cooed under the eaves, birds carolled in the tree-tops, and from across the way floated snatches of song. With that singular fitness and consistency which had marked his entire career, Constantin Meunier died on the very month and in the city of his birth. All day Monday, April 3, 1905, he spent working on the figure of Fecundity for the base of the Zola Monument originally intended for the Tuileries Gardens. He retired early, rested well, and before seven the following morning had started for the studio when he was seized with a sudden spasm of suffocation and expired after a few moments and without actually regaining consciousness. It was the intention of the family to have had

the funeral services preserve an intimate, private character, but so widespread was public sympathy that the affair spontaneously assumed the aspect of a veritable civic and artistic apotheosis. The procession on the morning of the sixth was dignified and imposing, the church of Sainte-Croix was filled to overflowing, and the scene at the graveside in the cemetery of Ixelles was memorable in its sincere and reverent homage.

Since his death appreciation of Meunier's position in the world of art has increased beyond the hope and anticipation of his most confirmed admirers. At the retrospective exhibition of modern Belgian art held in Brussels in 1905 he was accorded an unprecedented amount of space, and has everywhere received similar consideration. All such demonstrations were however eclipsed by the magnificent collective display of his work at Louvain during the spring and summer of 1909. Organized in conjunction with the anniversary celebration of the Catholic University, and held under the highest civil, academic, and ecclesiastical patronage, the occasion was notable from every point of view. Over seven hundred examples of sculpture and graphic production were on exhibition, and it was the success of this undertaking which in large measure paved the way for the appearance of Meunier in our midst.

As he strolled through the bright squares of

Brussels or along the dim by-streets of Louvain there always seemed to be something evangelical about Constantin Meunier. His was a steadfast, forthright nature and his leading characteristic was that of benignity. He was tall, with massive, osseous head, pale northern eyes, and brow furrowed by ceaseless effort and anxiety. His form was bent as by some unseen weight, and a full, apostolic beard covered chin and chest. Pensive, and with an air of mystic absorption, he might have stepped out of one of those early Gothic reliefs or tapestries with which his work has such marked affinity. He was modest to a degree rare in these, or any days. When recognition finally came and he was hailed as the creator of a new epoch in art, as the founder of the "esthetics of work," he merely looked puzzled and exclaimed, "Why, what can they all see in my poor stuff?" He did not indeed fully realize the significance of his achievement, his best efforts having been produced under the stress of a powerful subconscious impulse.

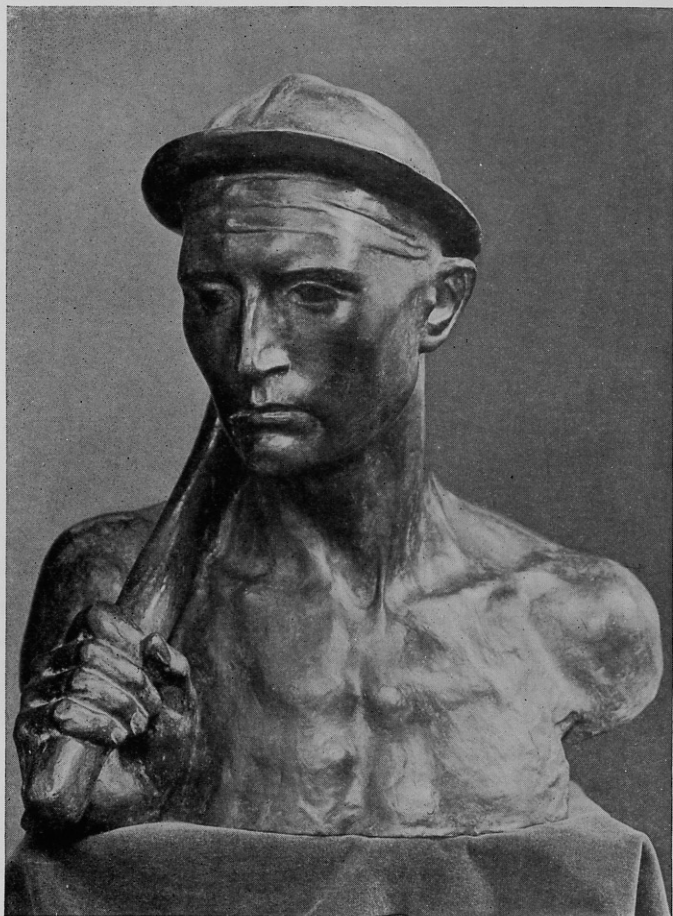
A wide reader, especially of the Scriptures, the Greek and Roman classics, and certain modern naturalistic authors, such as Flaubert, Zola, and the de Goncourts, he was also notably fond of music. Glück, Beethoven, and Wagner were his favourite composers, and when younger he used often to attend concerts in his native city, though latterly, especially after a fatiguing day's toil, pre-

ferred to sit quietly within the ever-narrowing family circle. Throughout his life and the work of his hands flowed a deep and tremulous sympathy. He always felt the sense of tears in human things. Like his art, the man himself was profoundly fraternal of character and aspect. He seemed transfigured by a divine pity—that pity which came into the world long since and made the world anew.



All the anguish which Agesander pictures in the Laocoön, all the abnegation that Michelangelo suggests in the fettered and submissive figure of the Slave, Constantin Meunier expresses in latter-day bronze or plaster. And for the stressful agony of the Laocoön and the Slave—for the terror of this serpent-entwined body and the poignancy of this bent and suppliant form—modern sculpture here substitutes a fortitude more heroic and profound, a resignation nobler and more tragic.

Verhaeren.



MINER WITH AX
Catalogue No. 24

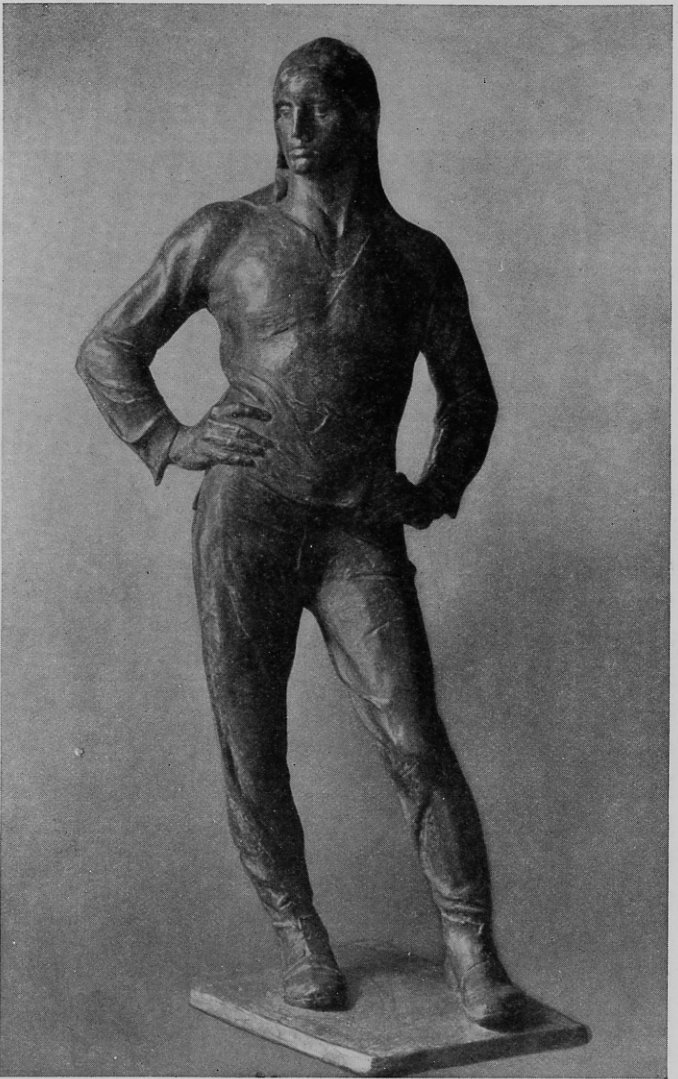
CRITICAL

Il faut faire beau, il faut faire grand.

TO HAVE led art from temple and palace to cottage door and into field and factory, to have delivered her from the hands of priest, king, or noble patron and presented her unfettered to the people, was the particular triumph of the nineteenth century. Once ritualistic and aristocratic, art is to-day also rationalistic and democratic. Although it took the peasants of France but a brief, mad moment to storm the Bastille and sack the Tuileries the event was long preparing. Though in similar fashion it has only been within the present generation that art has attained universal suffrage, it was as far back as the early 'twenties that the movement had its inception. Curiously enough, a flamboyant romanticist, Géricault, was among the first to recognize the esthetic possibilities of labour. It was not Millet, as many fancy, but such masters as Géricault, Cals, and Jeanron who were the true heralds of the proletariat in art, who were the original champions of the man in sabots and smock. For a good quarter century he moved clumsily, even timidly, in this new realm of form and colour, but with the redoubtable Courbet he entered aggressively into his own. While Gér-

cault's Limekiln and the humble rustics and vagabonds of Cals were mainly experimental, it was with something akin to savage assurance that the Stonebreakers of Gustave Courbet crushed beneath their swinging blows the foundations of an effete and exclusive temple of beauty.

By the 'fifties work had become a theme in itself. Across the Channel, Ford Madox Brown was inspired to paint its apotheosis, and some years later the perceptive Adolf von Menzel, to whom no phase of human activity was foreign, gave the world a third great picture of labour with his Rolling Mill. Thus far however work had been treated in a broad, symbolic vein. Despite their manifest sincerity, Courbet's stonebreakers, Millet's sober toilers on the plain of Fontainebleau, and Menzel's grimy ironmoulders of Konigshütte were not sharply individualized. There was something abstract and theoretical about them. The idea still loomed larger than the fact behind it. With the exception of Millet, work with these painters was an episode rather than an experience, a chance theme rather than a permanent text. It was not in France, England, or Germany, but in a smaller, more compact and densely populated community that labour and the labouring classes first assumed their rightful place in the domain of esthetics. It was not in short until the rise of latter-day industrialism, not until they had gained



THE DOCKHAND

Catalogue No. 73

unity and organization that these serfs of civilization captured the citadel of art.

There is singular propriety in the fact that Flanders and the Low Countries, which were the earliest to free themselves from the tyranny of Church and Court, should also have proved the scene of this new conquest for the extension of the artistic franchise. Certain timid spirits have been fond of contending that modern industrial conditions spell the death of esthetic expression. The steam engine, the factory and the forge, the coal-pit and the quarry, are popularly supposed to crush beauty, to obliterate art. In point of fact, the precise contrary is the case. No country is more industrial than Belgium. Within a few decades the meadows of Hainaut, the leafy copses of Liège, and the valleys of the Meuse and the Sambre have been seamed and blistered by myriads of collieries and iron foundries. The whole face of the land has been seared and the sky blackened by fumes from countless belching stacks and blast furnaces. Man, in place of remaining bucolic and pastoral, has become a dusky, subterranean creature. His back is bowed and the song upon his lips has turned to a bitter cry for easier hours and better pay.

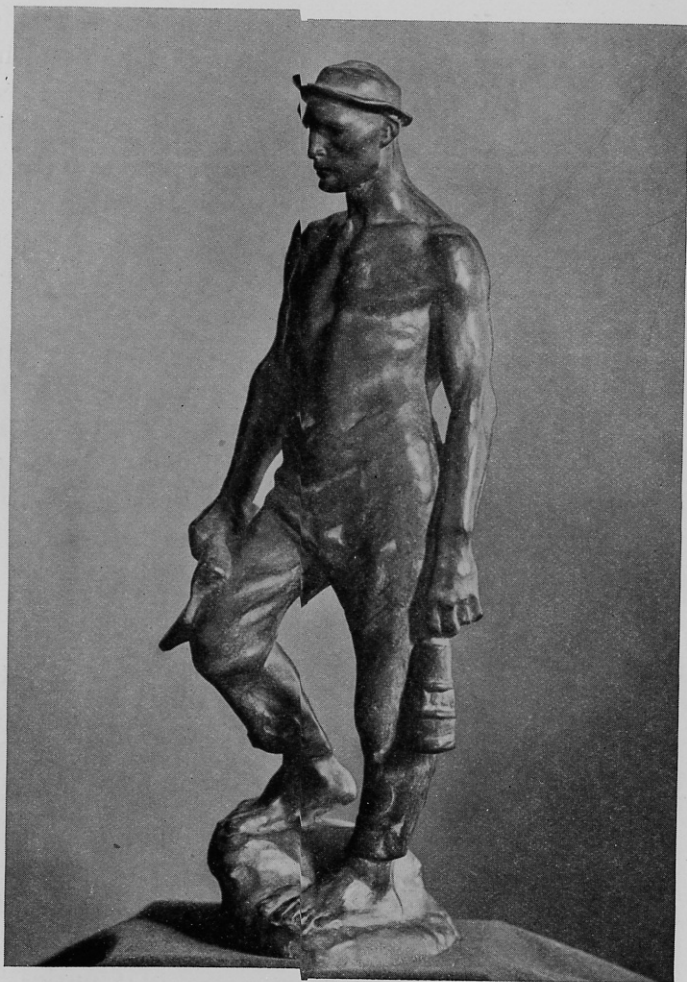
Everything it would seem has conspired to annihilate art and the sense of beauty, yet both have survived and have even taken on new significance. The novels of Camille Lemonnier, the verse



THE HAMMERMAN
Catalogue No. 61

of Émile Verhaeren, and the gentle mysticism of Maurice Maeterlinck have all flowered upon this sombre battlefield of industry. In painting, Frédéric and Laermans reveal a personal and suggestive mastery, while the plastic evocations of George Minne display a dolorous and penetrant appeal. It is not despite, but rather because of existent conditions that such results have been achieved. The art of Belgium is predominantly serious. It has never been a mere matter of petty diversion. Nowhere is the social function of art more clearly defined and nowhere is its vindication more convincing. That fusion of mysticism and materialism which is the leading characteristic of this sturdy, resolute folk early taught them to place the work of hand and brain frankly in the service of the soul.

Although sculpture failed signally to respond to the new spirit, it was a vital moment for Belgian painting when the pensive, ardent Constantin Meunier turned from clay to crayon and oils. The volcanic Courbet had just sounded the note of realism by sending certain of his pictures to the Brussels exhibition. The dawn of democracy so luridly foreshadowed by Wiertz in his huge, distraught concoctions had broken in sadder, soberer tints upon the poignant canvases of Charles De Groux. Everywhere was felt the thrill of new influences, the impact of fresh forces. Nor did it



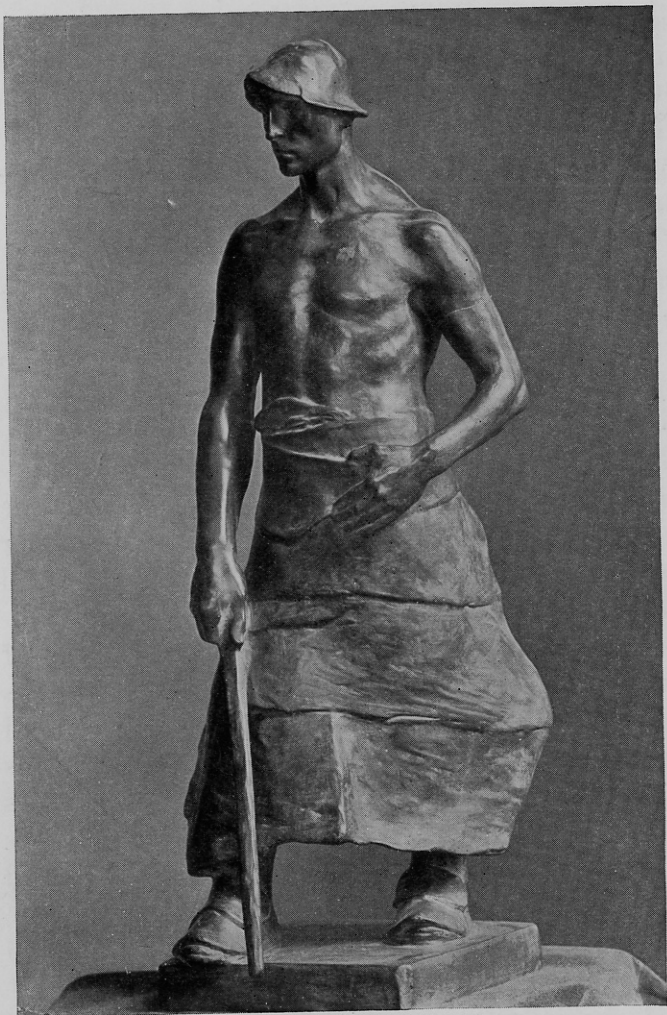
MINER WITH LANTERN

Catalogue No. 54

take long for something definite to issue from this fruitful unrest, there shortly gathering about the pathetic, sedentary De Groux a group of men whose creed was actuality, whose aim was a verity capable of enlisting the deepest human sympathies and aspirations.

The formation of the Ecole d'art libre, or Académie libre, currently known as the Atelier Saint-Luc, was the real starting point of modern Belgian art. In addition to Meunier himself the membership included De Groux, Félicien Rops, and Louis Dubois. Together with Alfred Stevens they comprised the gallant vanguard who finally rescued Flemish painting from the shackles of a frigid classicism and the smouldering fires of romanticism and brought her face to face with the troubled yet inspiring appeal of every-day existence. De Groux sought his subjects among the pallid and famished victims of civic misery and oppression. With the scrupulous fidelity of a true Low Country Little Master, and the delicate sensibility of later times, Stevens depicted the discreet intimacies of the upper class world. Rops followed the scarlet trail of the senses along devious pathways, while on the other hand the silent heroism of the workman and the simple majesty of labour found their fitting exponent in Constantin Meunier.

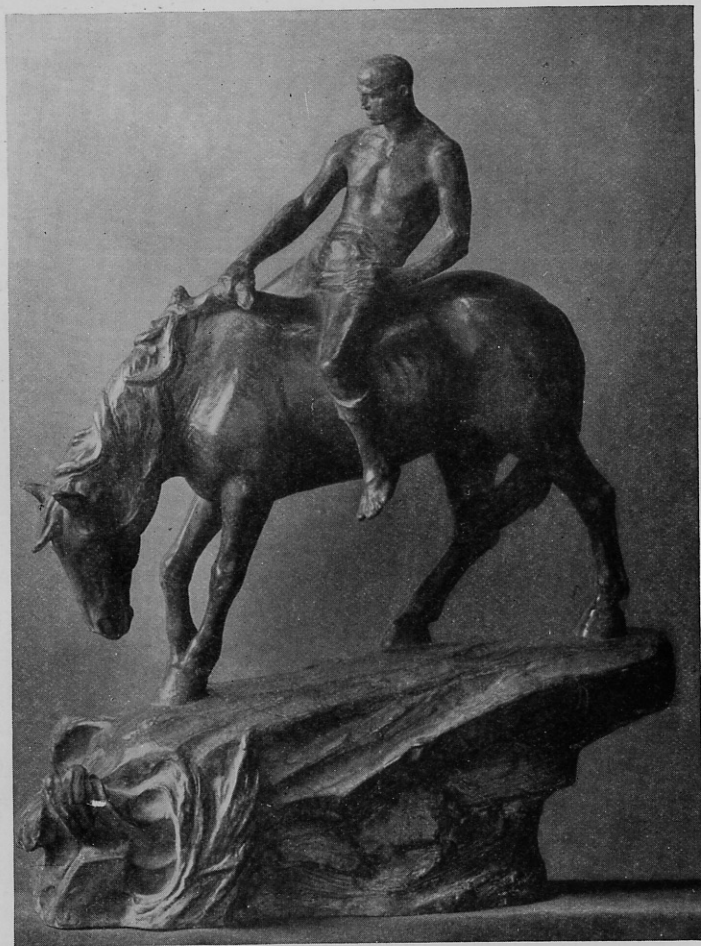
All pupils of the excellent Navez, the little band used to meet daily at a shabby studio situated over



THE FOUNDRYMAN
Catalogue No. 62

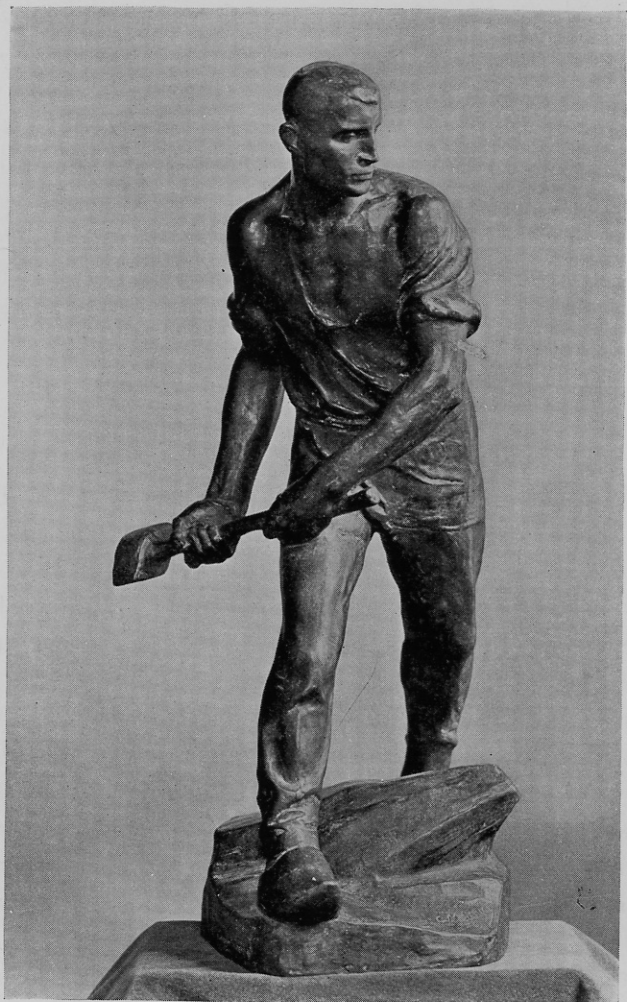
a beer cellar in the rue aux Laines, the ascent to which was made by a rude ladder placed between casks of faro. They worked manfully along for a time, but were soon fated to be scattered. Stevens and Rops drifted to Paris, rapidly winning fame and success. De Groux and Meunier remained at home to face poverty and neglect and await in patient humility a long-deferred recognition. And yet the force of their example and united efforts never quite vanished, such organizations as the Société libre des Beaux-Arts, "Le XX," and the Libre esthétique all clearly deriving from this epoch of struggle and ferment. It was however not in painting, or in letters, that the most potent expression of the period was attained. In a certain sense the least promising of all, constantly beset by doubt, and hampered by persistent lack of physical strength, it was nevertheless Constantin Meunier who lived longest and who achieved more than any of his colleagues. It was in his austere yet benign, his vigorous though resigned figures in bronze and plaster that was voiced the supreme accent of the movement.

It is scarcely necessary to consider in detail Meunier's work as a painter. In its essential characteristics it reflects the leading tendencies of his generation. It stands midway between the realism of yesterday and the impressionism of to-day. In its early phases by no means free from certain con-



AT THE WATERING PLACE

Catalogue No. 48



THE QUARRYMAN

Catalogue No. 67

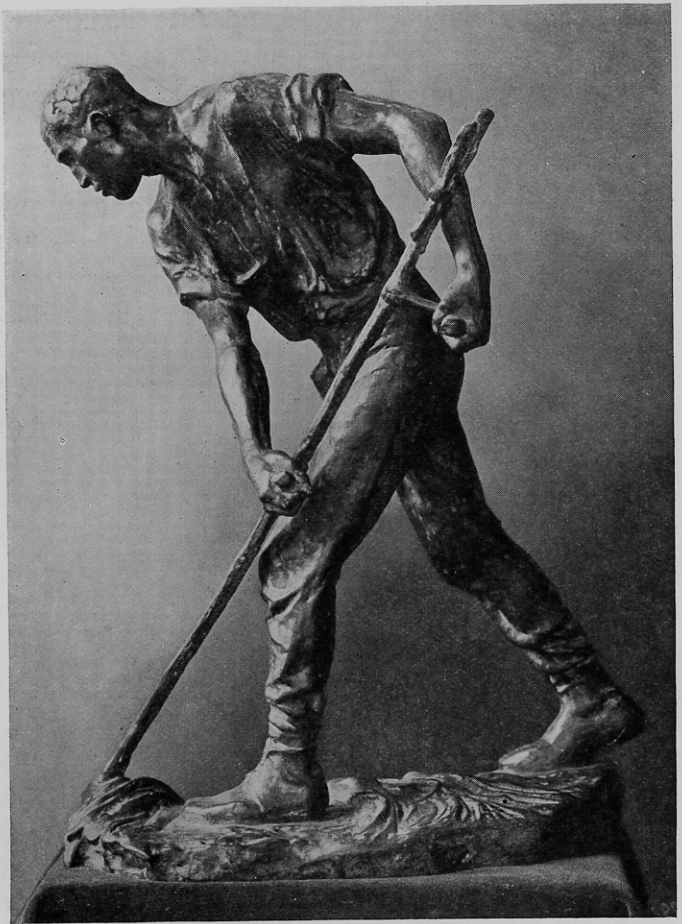
ventional academic influences, it rises in other instances to the plane of a genuinely personal expression. Looked at in proper perspective, it assumes its rightful position as a faithful and painstaking preparation for his work in the round. These fervid religious subjects, these countless documents jotted down in the Black Country, and these dark-sweeping landscapes with horizons cut by stark chimneys and gaunt scaffolding, form but the natural background against which he placed man—the workman—in all his eloquent plastic energy.

The artistic production of Constantin Meunier is marked throughout by a singular unity of thought and purpose. Glance over the three decades during which he devoted himself to painting and you will discover the same motives you subsequently observe in the statues and reliefs. His first picture of importance, a *Ward in the Hospital of Saint-Roch*, reveals his deep sense of social pity. *The Stoning of Saint Stephen* typifies the passive suffering of the ages, and *The Peasants' War* proves his ability to give a specific scene something more than ordinary significance. Each of these themes is conceived in a spirit of graphic naturalism. While sufficiently individual in treatment, they have much in common with the powerful, sombre vision of the great Spaniards, Ribera and Zurbarán, whose message descended to the Frenchman, Ribot.

The drawing is vigorous and decisive, the colouring dark and sumptuous, and you will note in the modelling of the figures and the folds of the draperies a marked feeling for form and rhythm.

When in after years Meunier relinquished painting for sculpture, he was in no sense a different man. He responded to the same influences as before. The subject-matter was new, yet his attitude toward it remained identical. He had simply forsaken the heroes and martyrs of faith for those humbler though not less touching victims of economic pressure and distress. He had merely exchanged cathedral and cloister for factory and furnace. His monks became miners, his sisters of charity, colliery girls. Out of modern industrialism he forged his own religion, and through unflinching faith and energy succeeded in bestowing upon labour the precious baptism of art. One symbol alone he guarded intact, and that was the figure of Christ, which he used many times, a version of which, fashioned by his own hands, watches beside his grave in the cemetery of Ixelles.

If the emotional quality of the early canvases survived in much of the production of after days, the actual details and composition of certain later subjects clearly served him in various statues and groups. Thus *The Broken Crucible* became with the customary process of transmutation the relief entitled *Industry for the Monument to Labour*.



THE MOWER
Catalogue No. 79

The canvas known as *The Emigrants* was in similar fashion made to do duty for *The Port*, and the noble form of *The Sower* crowning the monument was elaborated from a sketch from nature made some dozen years previously. You will indeed find the entire scheme for this great work foreshadowed in the large cartoon originally intended to decorate the mantelpiece of a certain Black Country railway station. Every particle of this precious material seemed in due course to fit into its appointed place, the numerous oils, the various crayons, pastels, and water-colours merely proving the preliminary suggestions for work of a more substantial and enduring character.

You will thus readily infer that no abrupt and fanciful transitions punctuated the artistic progress of Constantin Meunier. He developed naturally and normally, passing with a certain inner logic from one phase to another. His apprenticeship was long, and he matured but slowly, in which he resembles the master craftsmen of other, sturdier times. On surveying his life work you instinctively recall such old-world figures as Adam Krafft and Peter Vischer. There was to his career and achievement a singular intensity of effort and a sustained continuity of endeavour. In order to find for it an adequate parallel it is almost necessary to go back to the still earlier dawn of the Gothic age in the darkness of German forest or amid the rose-tinted mists of the *Île de France*.



GRIEF

Catalogue No. 13



ANTWERP

Catalogue No. 18

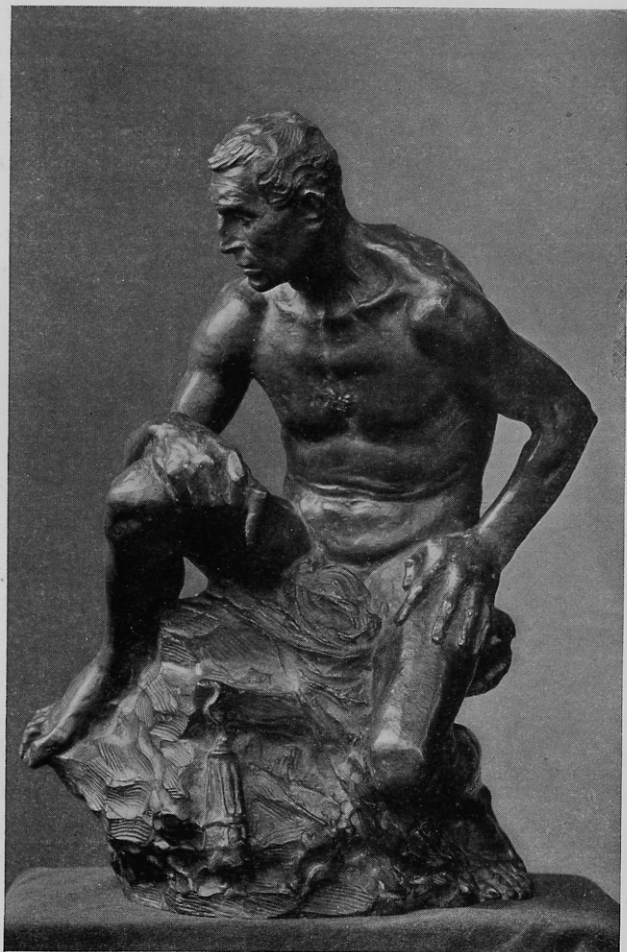
Sculpture, properly considered, is an absolute art, in direct contrast to painting, the effects of which are attained through a process of transposition. Ever since it first succeeded in detaching itself from the low relief of the potter's vase and the primitive tracery of wall surface, sculpture has striven to achieve an ampler measure of plastic freedom. Century after century it has fought its way toward reality, toward nature, toward life. With the Egyptians it remained to the end hieratic and immobile, indissolubly linked to those mysterious doubles of which it was but the outward and visible incarnation. With the Greeks it took on an elasticity hitherto undreamed, and from the Christians was destined to learn the lesson of suffering and humility. Essentially concrete in its aim and appeal, it early chose man as its principal theme, and it is into the mould of man, and of woman, that the sculptor of every age and epoch has poured his dream of eternal power and imperishable beauty.

In the sane and buoyant days of Attic supremacy the wrestler and the athlete were the typical exponents of plastic movement. Man was no longer a rigid prisoner of ritualistic form but a free being, rejoicing in his prowess and acclaimed in the stadium. The coming of Christianity taught him penitence and renunciation, taught him not to deify but to mortify the body. With Michelangelo

he became a stormy colossus, full of grandiose inquietude, and with Pajou and Clodion we find him a white and wanton boy. In later times sculpture has shown him lamenting his lost serenity and chafing against a modernity which he could not summon the courage to confront.

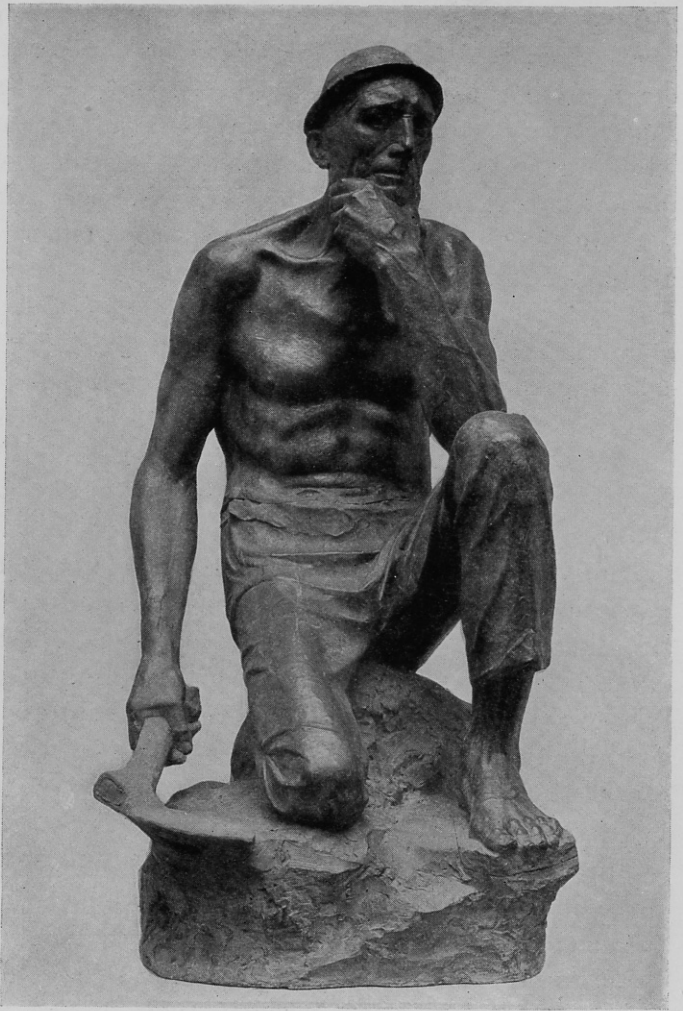
There are two artists of the current generation who have, with a conspicuous measure of success, adapted sculpture to present-day conditions, and, needless to add, their names are Auguste Rodin and Constantin Meunier. It is unnecessary here to discuss the supreme emotionalist in marble who has harked back to a vanished antiquity in order to voice the significance of physical passion, who has, as no one before or since, immortalized the desire of the ages. Rodin and Meunier were both living and working in Brussels at the same time, the one on his caryatides for the Bourse, the other in patient obscurity with few if any specific commissions. They did not meet during this period of probation, and little did either dream that, between them, they were destined to divide the honours of contemporary sculpture.

Like the art of the Greeks which he so fervently admired, the work of Constantin Meunier is soundly objective in character. Each of these figures has its appointed task to perform and each fulfills his function with resolute sincerity. An innate realist, Meunier fearlessly stripped his sub-



MINER

Catalogue No. 51



MINER CROUCHING

Catalogue No. 55

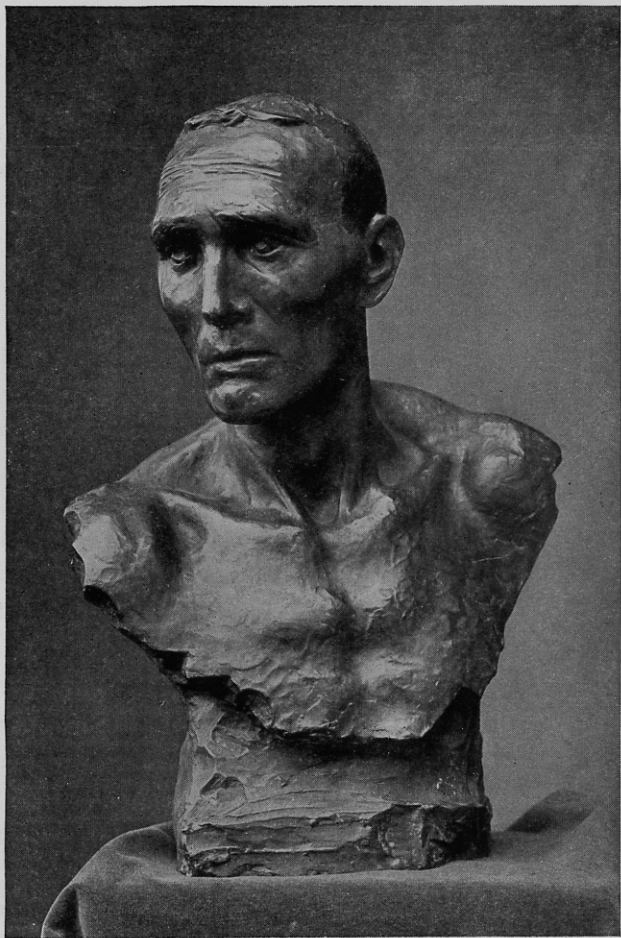
jects of every vestige of extraneous appeal. He knew them and knew and felt their condition too deeply to indulge in the slightest esthetic subterfuge. They were all taken directly from life, and while the majority were men, he now and then modelled a female form such as the buoyant Mine Girl, or the mother crushed beneath a weight of agonizing fatality in that tragic episode entitled Fire-damp. Animals, too, he made share their portion of nature's inflexible destiny. As with Zola in *Germinal* he felt drawn toward those sodden brutes condemned to plod dumbly in suffocating darkness, and with the Old Mine Horse gave but another version of "Bataille" in all his spent and shapeless decrepitude.

And yet, as already noted, his accurate and sympathetic observation was by no means confined to the Black Country. Little by little he widened his circle of activity by adding *The Ploughman*, and *The Sower* scattering his seed with impressive sweep of arm; *The Reaper*, and *The Mower* glancing at the noonday sun. *The Quarryman*, too, he transferred to this cycle of human effort, nor did he neglect *The Brickmaker* or *The Dockhand*. He thus spontaneously enlarged his panorama, omitting that which was incidental, and bringing into closer accord that which seemed possessed of lasting importance. And presently these varied elements began to reveal a certain community of feel-

ing as though obeying a single, unifying impulse. In its higher manifestations the art of Meunier gradually became a fusion of reality and creative imagination. Though specific in aspect and attitude these labourers and artisans display an affinity with that which is eternally sculpturesque. They tap at a vein or pause before a pot of molten metal, yet they embody kinetic and dynamic laws that are universal.

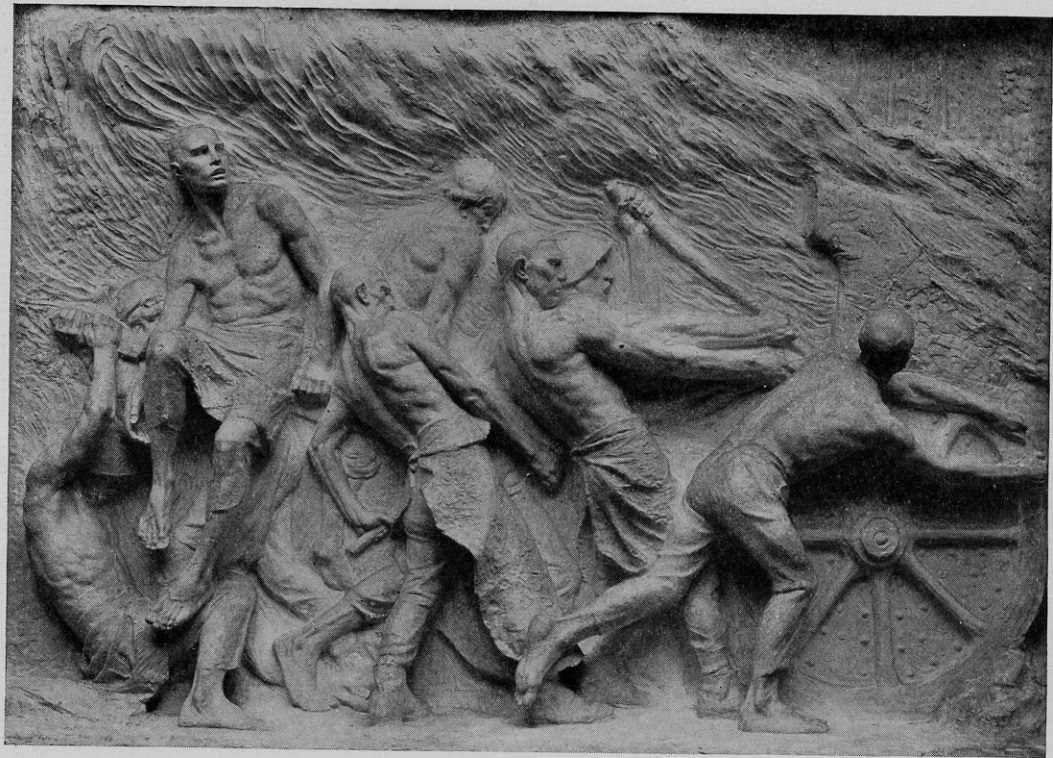
Not the least triumph of Meunier's art, like that of Rodin, consists in having bridged over the past, in having adapted sovereign, immutable truths to actual feelings and conditions. In this work which at first seems devoid of esthetic charm, he has not ignored but rather preserved the lasting canons of plastic beauty. Gods and gladiators have merely been put into harness. Infolding draperies, soft as sea-foam from the Aegean, have been exchanged for rough blouse and leather apron. Mercury has slipped his winged heels into sabots; the flexible Discobolus has learned to swing a sledge. It is in brief not Apollo or Venus, but Vulcan whom this new race worships. That which these modern Atlantes bear upon their shoulders is not a fabulous universe; it is the sober structure of latter-day social and industrial democracy.

Being in a broad sense but a continuation of that which has gone before, there are numerous more or less explicit parallelisms between this art



OLD MINER

Catalogue No. 23



INDUSTRY

Catalogue No. 2

and the production of the past. That primal drama of continuous action, the Pergamum frieze, is the distinct prototype of Meunier's reliefs. Each depicts struggle, the former simply epitomizing an earlier phase of strife. In similar fashion weeping Niobe finds her counterpart in the grief-stricken mother of Fire-damp, and the Old Mine Horse is but an abused and forlorn Pegasus. Coming down to the Renaissance, the rider in *At the Watering Place* is none other than a Colleoni of the people. Over all Meunier's groups, however tense and concentrated, lingers that static repose which is the priceless heritage of Hellas. And still this art is not Classic, or Christian, or Modern; it is all three. It illustrates the gradual and consistent evolution of the plastic principle.

There is of course an obvious affinity between Meunier's miners of the Borinage and Millet's peasants in the brown fields about Barbizon. Though representing different strata, they share a similar community of inspiration. Millet's types are nevertheless more pathetic and self-pitying; Meunier's more reticent and self-reliant. And yet while every statue, every bit of bronze or plaster that left his hand bears in some measure its portion of weariness and of pathos, this art is not in essence an appeal or a protest. It is a courageous acceptance of existing conditions. These miners are not suppliants, they are con-

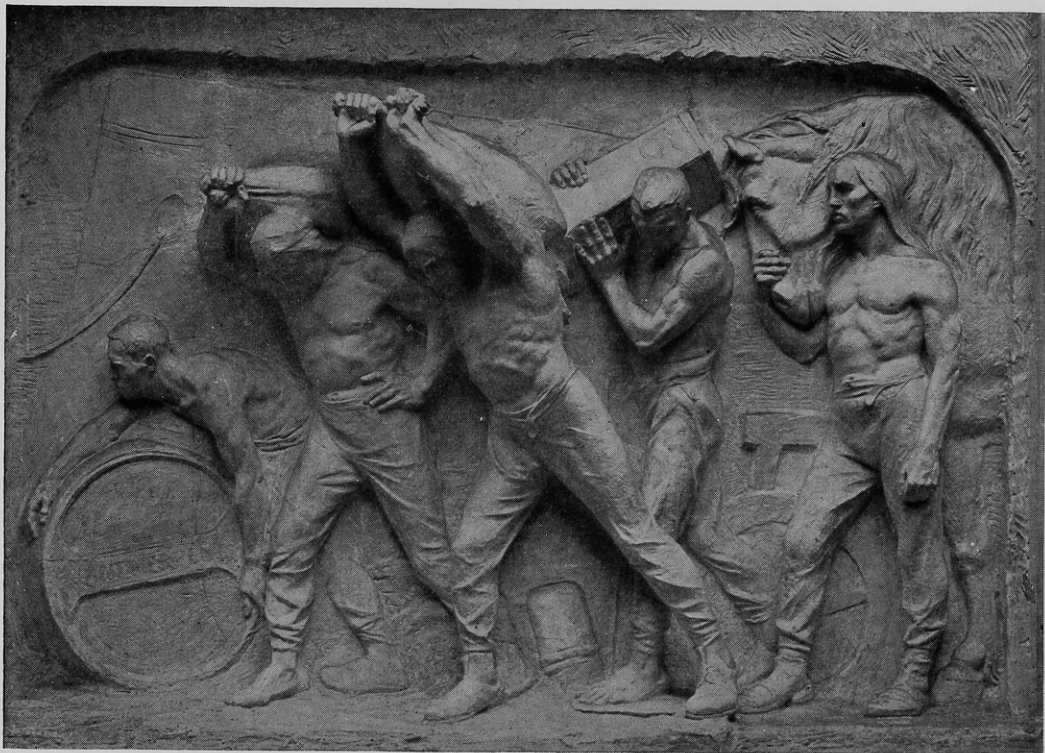


THE HARVEST

Catalogue No. 3

querors. A species of latent idealism animates their every movement. They rejoice in labour well performed. As they themselves say, "Work and the Walloon are friends," and it is this note that Meunier strove to sound. His art is in a sense the deification of work. Still, though he modified, he did not falsify life. He simply gave these stalwart man-gods a touch more of heroism, a shade more of that virile, expressive splendour with which they are clothed. An august majesty accompanies each gesture. Work with them has become a solemn, physical ritual. The Sower is Biblical, The Abatteur sacrificial, and that dark line of rhythmically swinging figures in *Returning from the Mine* suggests a great recessional of labour. It is not the bare performance of a given task which this art celebrates. It is the eternal continuity of corporate endeavour. These men are not building for to-day alone. With each stroke they are strengthening the solidarity of the human race.

Although the spirit of his work is inherently social and fraternal, Constantin Meunier never posed as a man with a mission. He was content to portray life in the concrete, leaving press and public draw whatever conclusions they saw fit. Shorn of trivial accident and exalted to a plane of vigorous simplicity, these figures are untrammelled by theory or thesis. Meunier never dealt directly in generalities. He approached the general only

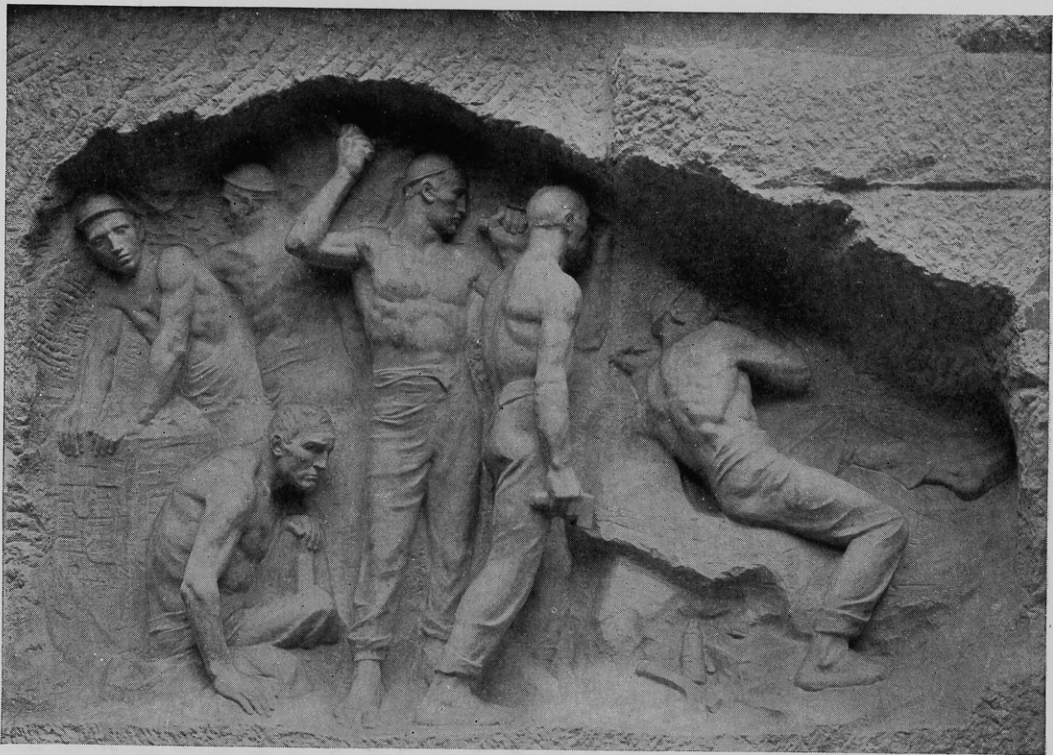


THE PORT

Catalogue No. 4

through the particular. You will not discover in this work the slightest tendency to identify man with those elements with which he is associated. That which the artist gives us is a synthesis, not a symbol. He frankly disavowed all predilection, all suspicion of *parti pris*. He claimed but one privilege, and that was the placing on record of those few forms and movements which inspired within him the eternal productive impulse.

The specific achievement of Constantin Meunier consists in having evolved a distinctive type, in having taken that which was local and made of it something that is universal. The entrance of these stately sons of toil into gallery and museum marks an epoch in the history of sculpture. The children of a new era—the era of Collectivism—they clearly show the continuation of Classic and Christian traditions. The joyousness of the Pagan world and that sorrow which was the legacy of the Church have been supplemented by a social sympathy and a synchronous effort of which these statues are the eloquent witness. You find in them all the humanitarianism, together with that fierce energy and material pride which inevitably belong to a period of industrial ascendancy. And yet this art is new only in its externals, for its spirit is as old as the world itself. It is essentially rhythmic in its utterance. It chants that cosmic hymn of human endeavour and human fatality which has resounded



THE MINE

Catalogue No. 5

through the ages, and to which each age merely adds its fitting character and cadence.

There can be no question concerning the relative status of Constantin Meunier. Taken in its entirety his production will readily stand comparison with that of the very foremost of his contemporaries. Though in a measure restricted in scope, it ranks in general significance beside the pellucid and spacious vision of Puvis de Chavannes, the penetrant humanity of Eugène Carrière, and the sensuous unrest of Auguste Rodin. The poet of death, Leonardo Bistolfi, too, he suggests, while in his single-hearted devotion to a definite locality he may well be likened to such masters as Segantini and Cottet. At once the product of past and of present, his artistic heritage may be traced through the sober majesty of Millet and the graphic vehemence of Honoré Daumier back to the fountain-heads of medieval and antique sculpture. Bearing with manful mien their burden of earthly toil and tribulation, these sombre figures take up their position in the plastic procession of all time. And just as assuredly does their earnest-souled creator find his resting place in the pantheon of modern art. He possesses, indeed, dual claim to his hard-won haven. His triumph was not alone esthetic, but spiritual. He wrought in beauty and nobility, and his was also a conquest of human hearts.



RETURNING FROM THE MINE

Catalogue No. 35

CATALOGUE

SCULPTURE

PLASTERS

1 Constantin Meunier (By Himself)

Monumental bust, 1903-04. Executed for the façade of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

2 Industry

Monumental relief, one-half original size. The first of four friezes designed for the Monument to Labour. The scene takes place in a glass factory, and was treated by the artist in crayon and in oil as early as 1879.

3 The Harvest

Monumental relief, one-half original size. The second of four friezes designed for the Monument to Labour. First version completed in 1898, and exhibited in Paris, 1900.

4 The Port

Monumental relief, one-half original size. The third of four friezes designed for the Monument to Labour. First version completed in 1901. Recalls the painting bearing the same title dated 1886, as well as a still earlier canvas known as *The Emigrants*.

5 The Mine

Monumental relief, one-half original size. The fourth and last of the friezes designed for the Monument to Labour. Completed in 1905, a few weeks before the artist's death.

6 The Hammerman

Also known as the Man with the Pincers. Monumental statue, 1884. The artist's first important work in sculpture. Exhibited in Paris, 1886, where it was awarded an Honourable Mention. Compare Nos. 61 and 87.

7 The Sower

Monumental statue, 1896. An earlier version (1893) is in the Botanical Garden, Brussels, and a later (1904-05), crowns the pinnacle of the Monument to Labour.

8 The Dockhand

Monumental statue, 1893. A typical lighterman of the Antwerp waterfront. There are several versions of this subject, one of the best-known being that in the Luxembourg, Paris.

9 June, Mower Resting

Monumental statue, 1890. The same figure may be seen in the relief of The Harvest (No. 3). Compare also No. 77.

10 Charles Cottet

Bust, 1903. Shows the characteristic physiognomy of the distinguished painter of Brittany coast scenes.

BRONZES

11 The Prodigal Son

Group, 1895. Executed at Louvain shortly following the death at sea of the artist's youngest son, George.

12 Maternity

Group, 1902. The same, barring a few modifications, as the Maternity of the Monument to Labour. Earlier versions, 1893 and 1895.

13 Grief

Executed at Louvain, 1888. Study for the woman in Fire-damp (No. 46).

14 Antwerp Dockhand

Reduction of No. 8.

15 Industry

Date, 1900. Fragment of central portion of No. 2.

16 Head of Christ

Bust, 1899.

17 The Crucified One

Bust, 1887. Not the Christ, but a conception partly secular, partly religious.

18 Antwerp

Bust, 1900, symbolizing the city of Antwerp. Compare Nos. 8 and 14.

19 June

Bust, 1900. Compare No. 9.

20 A Woman of the People

Bust, 1893.

21 A Daughter of the People

Bust, 1887. Suggests the woman in Maternity (No. 12).

22 Head of Mine Girl

Date, 1896. One of those *hiercheuses* who are so fast disappearing from the mines.

23 Old Miner

Bust, 1897. The model was an old mine worker of Couillet.

24 Miner with Ax

Date, 1900. Wears the traditional leather cap and carries his ax proudly over the shoulder.

25 Bust of Puddler

Date, 1895. Depicted in the full intensity of action before the furnace.

26 Youth

Life-sized bust, 1890. Model was the sculptor Craco.

27 Ecce Homo

Statuette, 1890.

28 Christ at the Tomb

Group in ivory and bronze, 1900. Inspired by Holbein's Christ at Basel.

29 The Prodigal Son

Statuette, 1895. Compare No. 11, of which this is first version.

30 Head of Child

The artist's granddaughter, aged seven months, 1898.

31 Germaine

Bust, 1900. The artist's granddaughter, aged three years.

32 Industry

Relief, 1890. One-quarter the size of No. 2, for which it was a preliminary study.

33 The Harvest

Relief, 1895. One-quarter the size of No. 3, for which it was a preliminary study.

34 The Port

Relief, 1895. One-quarter the size of No. 4, showing various differences.

35 Returning from the Mine

Relief, formerly intended for the Monument to Labour, but subsequently abandoned.

36 Toilers of the Sea

Low relief, 1898.

- 37 Leaving the Shaft
Relief, 1892.
- 38 Puddlers at the Furnace
Low relief, 1893.
- 39 The Brickmakers
Plaque in low relief, 1896.
- 40 Tillers of the Soil
Plaque in high relief, Louvain, 1892.
- 41 Sunset
Plaque in low relief, 1902. Compare No. 64.
- 42 Puddlers in Profile
Study in low relief. Compare Nos. 2 and 15.
- 43 Antwerp Draught Horse
Exhibited, 1885, at Antwerp Exposition.
- 44 Woman and Child
Group, 1897.
- 45 Woman Nursing Child
This group (1899), was the inspiration for the Fecundity of the Zola Monument.
- 46 Fire-Damp
Small group, executed at Louvain in 1893, differing from its predecessor of 1888-89. The artist's impressions after witnessing one of those appalling catastrophes in the mines at La Boule, Frameries lez-Mons.

- 47 Old Mine Horse
Statuette, 1890. The model was mercifully slain after having posed.
- 48 At the Watering Place
Equestrian group, 1890. First study for the monumental group of 1889, square Ambiorix, Brussels.
- Boat Beacher, Katwyk
Equestrian statuette, 1901.
- 50 Shrimp Fisher on Horseback
Statuette, 1903.
- 51 Miner
Statuette, 1900. Known as the *Grand Mineur*.
- 52 Miner Working at Vein
High relief, 1892. Compare No. 5.
- 53 Miner with Ax
Statuette, 1901.
- 54 Miner with Lantern
Statuette, 1901.
- 55 Miner Crouching
Statuette, 1896. Inspiration for similar subject, Monument to Labour.
- 56 Mine Girl Calling
Statuette, 1888. Formerly a popular type in the mines. Known as *houilleuses* or *hiercheuses*.

- 57 Mine Girl with Shovel
Statuette, 1888.
- 58 Puddler Resting
Statuette, 1889. Reduction of the statue of 1885-86,
which figured in the Louvain Monument to Labour.
- 59 Man Drinking
Statuette, 1890.
- 60 Blacksmith Seated
Statuette, 1901. Original version, 1895.
- 61 The Hammerman
Statuette, 1890. Compare Nos. 6 and 87.
- 62 The Foundryman
Statuette, 1901. Typical workman in the steel
foundry.
- 63 Wounded Man
Statuette, 1896.
- 64 The Ancestor
Statuette, 1895. Compare No. 41.
- 65 Glassblower
Statuette, 1889. Type from Val Saint-Lambert.
- 66 Glassworker
Statuette, 1899.

- 67 **The Quarryman**
Statuette, 1900. Type from the quarries of Quenast.
- 68 **The Stonecutter**
Statuette, 1898.
- 69 **The Woodcutter**
Statuette, 1898. Compare No. 51.
- 70 **Shipwrecked**
Statuette, 1890. Marine group, modelled at Newport on the North Sea.
- 71 **Ostend Fisherman**
Statuette, 1890.
- 72 **The Porter**
Statuette, 1889. Compare with figures in No. 4.
- 73 **The Dockhand**
Statuette, 1890. Study for No. 8.
- 74 **The Ploughman**
Statuette, 1896. Originally designed to crown the Monument to Labour, but subsequently abandoned in favour of The Sower.
- 75 **In the Harvest Field**
Date, 1902. Suggested by the types in No. 3.
- 76 **The Harvester**
Date, 1898.

- 77 **June, Mower Resting**
Statuette, 1898. Reduced version of No. 9.
- 78 **Sower**
Statuette, 1895. Sketch for No. 7.
- 79 **The Mower**
Statuette, 1892. Based upon a sketch from nature made in oil in 1858. Original version, 1890.
- 80 **The Abatteur**
Statuette, 1891. Companion figure to No. 65.
- 81 **The Philosopher**
Statuette, 1899. A species of modern Memnon.
- 82 **Workman Resting**
Statuette, 1895. Figure for the Monument to Labour.
- 83 **Man in Despair**
Study of back, 1904. Compare No. 63.
- 84 **Old Woodcutter's Wife**
Statuette, 1891. Compare No. 69.
- 85 **Head of Child**
Date, 1897. Ghislaine, the artist's grand-daughter, aged ten months.

86 Eugène Ysaye

Relief, 1902. The famous Belgian violinist and close friend of the artist.

87 The Hammerman

Compare Nos. 6 and 61.

PAINTINGS

88 Miner's Cottage, Women Chatting.

89 Return of the Miners

90 Miner of Liège

91 Miner from the Borinage

92 Mine Girl with Shovel

93 Dump Cars

94 Red Roofs

95 Borain Before His Cottage

96 Coal Mine in Snow

97 Boat at Wharf, Rupelmonde

98 Small Marine

99 Bark in the Channel, Nieuport

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- 100 Boat Beachers
- 101 Head of Mine Girl
- 102 Puddlers at the Furnace
- 103 Heads of Puddlers
- 104 Miner with Pick

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- 114 The Shaft Head

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- 116 Brickyards
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- 118 The Smoke Stack
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- 129 Workman
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- 131 Page from Sketchbook

- 132 Workman from Blast Furnace
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- 134 Dockhand
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- 145 *The Dead One ("La Tonia Lighting Up the
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- 146 *The Dead One ("And the Feet Were Always
Visible")
- 147 *The Dead One ("The Corpse Had Changed
Its Place")

**Nos. 145, 146 and 147 are drawings for the first illustrated edition Camille Lemonnier's book entitled Le Mort.*



PUDDLERS IN PROFILE

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