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Foote, Jonathan

Published in:

Il Quaderno: The ISI Florence journal of architecture

Publication date:

2020

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Foote, J. (2020). Depicting Labor. *Il Quaderno: The ISI Florence journal of architecture*, 4, 42-48.

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Depicting labor

Jonathan Foote

In 1825 Karl Friedrich Schinkel painted a now lost painting entitled, *Blick in Griechenlands Blüte* (View of Greece in its Prime). A copy by August Ahlborn from 1836 grants access to the scene and immerses us into a magnificent construction site, where athletic builders are erecting an exquisite work of Hellenic architecture (fig. 02). The painting epitomizes the nineteenth century project of recovering the moral and aesthetic clarity of ancient Greece for the modern age.¹ By foregrounding anonymous builder-craftsmen rather than architects or patrons, the sense of intrinsic, cultural heroism is brazenly announced. The common builder sets the stage for the not-so-subtle narrative unfolding in front of us: inscriptions sing of virtuous deeds, the frieze recalls that of the Parthenon, and the double Ionic loggia has a certain resemblance to Schinkel's Altes Museum, at that very moment under construction. The monumental narrative imbued in the half nude workers is bolstered by the marvelous size of the painting, which measures almost two and half meters wide.

Being an accomplished painter well before his success as an architect, Schinkel was probably aware of paintings from earlier periods that featured skilled craftworkers. Typically in such paintings, workers inhabit the margins or orchestrate the background action of some kind of significant building event. Witness Piero di Cosimo's panoramic *Costruzione di un Palazzo* of 1518, for example, where the main protagonists—an in-progress quattrocento palazzo and a gallant but unidentified horseback rider — are set amidst a pleth-

ora of unspecified builders and laborers who, upon close inspection, offer a number of lively and curious scenes (fig. 03).² In one detail, a pair of sawyers carefully saws a wood beam while a small child appears to collect the saw dust. And further back, along the facade of the palazzo a pair of workers scramble up to the second floor terrace using a taut rope, pulled into place by two other companions. Like Schinkel's *Blick*, the panoramic treatment set amidst otherwise common building activities reinforces the feeling of epic grandeur of the emergent architecture.

Most commonly, depictions of construction sites narrate scenes where the patron and his entourage have just arrived to inspect the building works, a motif observed quite often in illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. In sixteenth century versions, these patrons are typically met by the architect, who presents the construction progress through a model or drawing. Among the multitude of examples from the period, the portrayal of Paul III inspecting the rebuilding of Saint Peter's in Rome stands out, painted in 1546 by Giorgio Vasari and his workshop in the Palazzo della Cancelleria, (fig. 04).³ Here, the pope emerges prominently from the left edge of the frame to encounter Lady Architecture, supported by her confidants, Painting, Sculpture and Geometry, who unroll a magnificent drawing. Equally dominating is the entangled body of old and new Saint Peter's, under re-construction, pictorially rendered in the background but in conspicuous dialogue with the gesturing Paul III. Off in the distance, as if to remind the



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viewer that construction indeed continues, a small team of men and beasts are squaring, moving, and fitting stones. Just as the building ornaments are being carved by the workers, so have the workers themselves become ornaments in the witnessing of Paul III's encounter with the building site.

In Vasari's fresco the workers are present, but they have become the supporting cast of a much grander storyline. In terms of pictorial space, these roles can be quite effectively reversed, leading to a more nuanced view of patronage. For example, in one of the several tapestries narrating the life of Lorenzo de' Medici, woven in 1570-71 by the workshop of Bene-

detto Squilli, the stone carvers for the Medici Villa of Poggio a Caiano are given a quite prominent position in the scene (fig. 2). The building patron, Lorenzo, has arrived with his entourage to the building site, who even has the good manners to bring along a chair for their prince to sit in. Greeting Lorenzo are most likely the architect, Giuliano da Sangallo, and his assistants, who present a wooden model of the project.⁴ Unlike the fresco in the Palazzo della Cancelleria, the three stone carvers are notably thrust into the foreground. Since the workers remain diligent and anonymous in spite of Lorenzo's presence, their prominence does not threaten the overall narrative. But the spatial reversal has a more subtle effect, whereby



Lorenzo emerges as the model of an esteemed prince; one who, quoting Niccolò Machiavelli, «... should also demonstrate that he loves talent by supporting men of ability and by honoring those who excel in each craft».⁵ The stone carvers are thus cleverly employed to demonstrate Lorenzo's magnificence. We see them without seeing them.

Such representations of on-site activity generally rely on the observer entering into the middle of a peaceful, quotidian scene, with emphasis on the patron or architect. The effectiveness of this technique relies on our typical perception of craft-workers, where their subjectivity is tied to the monotony of everyday work

and not to monumental life events. If one continues such an analysis into the age of photography, many of these myths endure. One needs only to recall the iconic *New York Construction Workers Lunching atop a Cross-Beam* from 1932, where a diverse group of immigrant workmen casually take a brake on a cross-beam dangled high over the New York skyline. The photo's enduring fame relies on the contrast between everyday life events (lunch) set casually amidst a decidedly heroic scene of nameless workers, cheerfully escaping imminent death. Two curious aspects reinforce the age-old tropes of the craft-worker: on the one hand, the workers themselves are totally anonymous, and in fact efforts by archivists to identify



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these heroes of the sky have proven controversial or altogether unsuccessful; on the other, and perhaps even more revealing, it is commonly accepted now that the photograph was staged as a publicity stunt to promote the construction of Rockefeller Center, or, to state it another way, to demonstrate the owner's magnificence.⁶

Thus, one may claim that the appropriation of workers by capital (or some other power structure) for its own aggrandizement may be repeatedly detected in how the craft-worker is represented. With this in mind, it is all the more shocking to discover a sketch by George Scharf, who in a rare moment captures the craft-worker's point of view. On August 13, 1844,

Scharf encountered a frightening accident during the construction at the British Museum (fig. 01), and he felt compelled to open his sketchbook and meticulously record the event.⁷ While hoisting a five ton iron girder into place for the Lycian room - a feat that took four hours - the lifting rope unexpectedly snapped. This caused the girder to crash to the ground, break into four pieces, and pin one of the workers to the ground. Scharf writes on the drawing that the cascading girder, "nearly brock (sic) a man's leg." And even though the man luckily avoided grave injury, Scharf captures the shock and panic of the moment through his own hastily drawn figures. In contrast to the depictions so far examined, Scharf focuses his pencil on a precise moment from the worker's perspective; one



forgotten to history, perhaps, but certainly burned into the memory of the un-named workers who happened to be there. His focus on the worker makes one realize that the common triumphs and toils which are central to the life of the craftworker are generally invisible to us architects.

A close examination of representations of construction workers is so revealing since, when placed in front of the critical mirror, they reveal to us a multitude of prejudices: that workers are compliant, nameless, skilled but not creative, and an embodiment of docile, bodily vitality. Just as construction firms have grown in size and risen in importance in relation to complex building projects, the likelihood that a

builder could achieve some kind of creative status on par with the architect is lower than ever. Rather, architects expect builders to be obedient to the design and abundantly skilled, albeit not in any specifically personal way. Although we place great value culturally and professionally on a unique design solution, very few building designs today rely on the know-how of a specific builder or group of craftsmen to implement them. Those working on-site, in contrast to the professionals off-site, remain a transparent bunch - more or less replaceable with another person having the same 'skill-set'. Generally speaking, in public works at least, the construction contract is awarded to the lowest bid, creating a race to the bottom for the increasingly alienated construction worker.

As the profession of architecture confronts its own threats today, workers and laborers are once again put on display. A few years ago an academic discourse emerged about the role of the labor in architectural production, and it seemed that finally the discipline was looking critically at its relationship with those employed on the construction site.⁸ To my surprise, however, the abundance of writing has focused precisely on the architect's labor and not at all on those who actually put their hands on the materials of the buildings. By identifying architects with laborers, we call attention to the increasingly oppressive status of architects within the neo-liberal production of buildings. However, in appropriating the term 'labor' to describe the activity of architects, a class of relative privilege in spite of our poverty, we actually conceal a deep distrust toward those who make our buildings. Those who work in the lowest-skilled jobs on building sites are called laborers - they are wage workers who have no intellectual or physical ownership over the durable outcomes they produce. If all of us are laborers, do we find more or less solidarity with those on the buildings site? I suspect that, in moments of such distinction, architects would re-claim their traditional role as above the crafts. In the rare depictions of workers' plight, such as those by George Scharf, I have hope that we can focus more attention on understanding the everyday lives of those who dwell on the building site.

1_ See Paul Ortwin Rave. *Karl Friedrich Schinkels Blick in Griechenlands Blüte*, Berlin: Verlag Gebrüder Mann, 1946.

2_ For a summary of recent interpretations and a current bibliography on this painting, see Virginia Brilliant. "The Building of a Palace," catalogue entry in: Dennis Geronimus. *Piero di Cosimo. The poetry of painting in Renaissance Florence*, London: Lund Humphries, 2015, no. 36, pp. 212-215.

3_ For a recent analysis of this fresco, see Federica Goffi, "Architecture's Twinned Body," in: *From Models to Drawings: Imagination and Representation in Architecture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 94f.

4_ Giuliano da Sangallo and Piero di Cosimo, both associates of the Medici family, were close friends, which has led to speculations by art historians that the palace depicted in

Costruzione di un Palazzo is a reference to the Medici Villa of Poggio a Caiano or Lorenzo's unrealized palazzo on via Laura (also by Giuliano da Sangallo). Dennis Geronimus. *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 143.

5_ Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince and Selected Discourses*, trans. by Daniel Donno, New York: Bantam Books, p.79.

6_ For a recent critical assessment of this photo, see "Reviewed Work: Men at Lunch by Éamonn Ó Cualáin, Seán Ó Cualáin and Niall Murphy," reviewed by Darragh O'Donoghue, *Cinéaste*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Summer 2014), pp. 67-69.

7_ For an introduction to this sketch, see catalogue for the exhibition, *George Scharf: From the Regency Street to the Modern Metropolis*, exhibition at the Sir John Soane's Museum, London, 20 March to 6 June 2009, no. 31, p. 78. George Scharf immigrated from Bavaria and became an accomplished illustrator and printmaker in London. This sketch reflects Scharf's lifelong concern with common workers, now preserved in scores of sketches and watercolors in the British Museum.

8_ Key starting texts here are: Peggy Deamer and Phillip Bernstein. *Building (in) the Future: Recasting Labor in Architecture*. United States: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012; Pier Vittorio Aureli, "Labor and Architecture: Revisiting Cedric Price's Potteries Thinkbelt," *Log*, no. 23 (Fall 2011), pp. 97-118; and Peggy Deamer. *The Architect As Worker: Immaterial Labor, the Creative Class, and the Politics of Design*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.



[04] Giorgio Vasari, Paul III Supervising the Work on Saint Peter's, Palazzo della Cancelleria © Scala.

on the previous pages:

[02] Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Blick in Griechenlands Blüten, 1825. Schinkel's original was lost in World War II. This is a copy by Wilhem Ahlborn held in the Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

[03] Piero di Cosimo, Costruzione di un palazzo, 1520, John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida (USA), inv. 22.