

EXPLORING AMERICA THROUGH ART

“Labor”

"I, too, have a dream-to show people in the out of the way places, some of whom are not only in small villages but in corners of New York City-something they cannot get from between the covers of books-some real paintings and prints and etchings and some real music."

Franklin Roosevelt, January 6, 1938

Essential Questions:

- How did the Great Depression affect businesses such as iron and steel production?
- How did President Roosevelt's New Deal attempt to help Americans who lost their jobs?
- How did New Deal artists portray industrial workers and why?

Objectives:

- I can explain how steel and other industries were portrayed by New Deal artists.
- I can explain how visual art exposed dangerous working conditions as well as glamorized conditions during this time period.
- I can compare and contrast images.
- I can describe and interpret images from this era.
- I can present my group's research regarding various labor images.

Materials and Resources:

- Images of artwork from "Labor" unit
- Labor images from <https://www.historyplace.com/>

Vocabulary:

- Labor - to work, toil; especially for economic gain.
- The Great Depression - economic downturn that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world.
- Economy - the wealth and resources of a country or region, especially in terms of the production and consumption of goods and services.
- Industry - systematic labor especially for some useful purpose or the creation of something of value.

- The New Deal - the legislative and administrative program of President Franklin D. Roosevelt designed to promote economic recovery and social reform during the 1930s.
- Modernization - the process of adapting something to modern needs or habits.

Engage:

- Review the Great Depression and its challenges for Americans.
- Review FDR's New Deal Program along with the WPA.
 - (FDR's New Deal provided federally-funded jobs for millions of unemployed Americans during the Great Depression. These included jobs for tens of thousands of artists, including musicians, actors, dancers, writers, photographers, painters, and sculptors.)
- Compare/contrast steel worker image with Superman - "Men of steel."

*Extension: Research the origins of Superman, a character that was created during the Great Depression.

- Discuss similarities and differences.
- What was each artist's purpose/intention?
- Which features are exaggerated and why?
- What descriptive words come to mind when you look at these images?



Herschel Levit, *Take It Away!*, 1945



*Desperate Enterprises Superman
Man of Steel Tin Sign*

Explore:

Divide students into 5 groups.

Each group will receive an image (which can be laminated) including some background information.

Groups will be tasked with the following:

- Describe what's going on in this picture, including any activities and objects.
- What might the artist's intention have been?
- What title would YOU have given to the piece?
- Your interpretation of the image.
- Summarize the background information.
- Present your information to the class.

IMAGE 1

The photograph depicts eleven men eating lunch and chatting, sitting on a steel beam 840 feet (260 meters) above on the sixty-ninth floor of the near-completed [RCA Building](#)

in [Manhattan, New York City](#), on September 20, 1932. These men were immigrant ironworkers employed in the construction of the RCA Building in the [Rockefeller Center](#). They were accustomed to walking along the [girders](#). The photograph was taken as part of a campaign promoting the skyscraper. [Central Park](#) is visible in the background.^{[2][3][4]}

The photograph was first published in the Sunday supplement of the [New York Herald Tribune](#) on October 2, 1932, with the caption: "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper".^{[4][5]}

([Wikipedia](#))



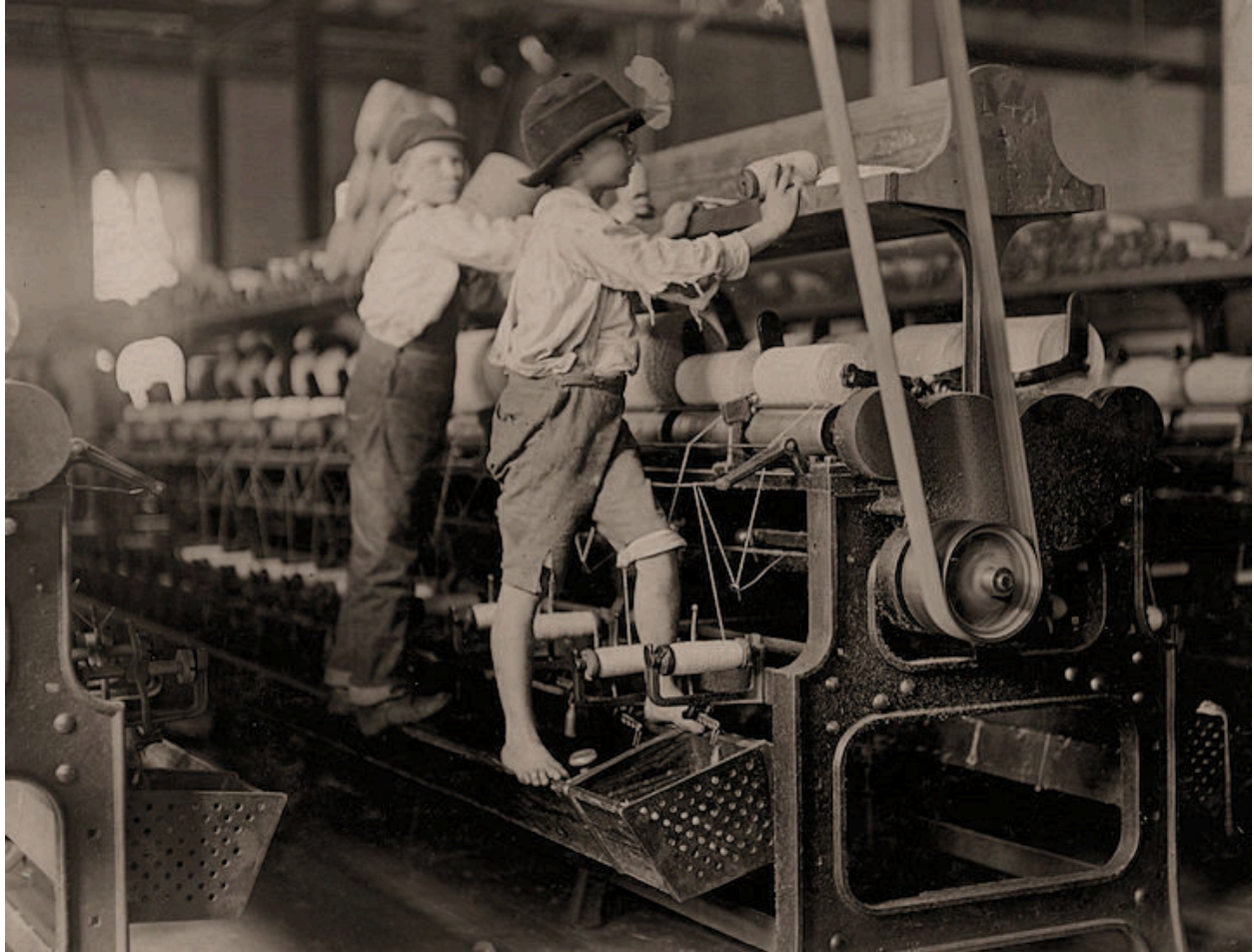
IMAGE 2



Jolan Gross Bettelheim, *Employment Office*, 1935-36

The unemployment rate rose from 3.2% in 1929 to 24.9% in 1933 during the Great Depression's more severe first downturn. While almost 1.6 million persons were unemployed in 1929, more than 12.8 million individuals lacked jobs in 1933. The unemployment rate declined during the brief recovery and measured 14.3% in 1937, when the second downturn began. Although the Great Depression came to an end in June 1938, the unemployment rate averaged 19.0% for the year. The number of unemployed persons jumped by almost 3 million (from 7.7 million to 10.4 million) between 1937 and 1938.[18](#)

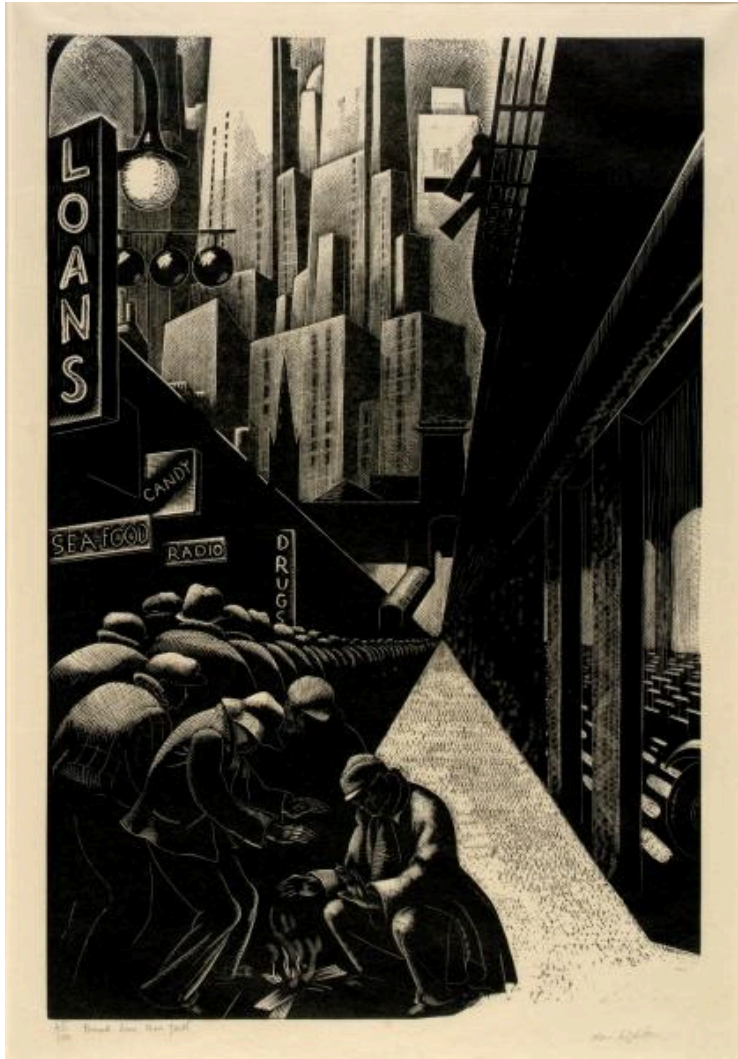
IMAGE 3



The Mill: Some boys and girls were so small they had to climb up onto the spinning frame to mend broken threads and to put back the empty bobbins. Bibb Mill No. 1. Macon, Georgia. (Lewis Hine, photographer and child labor advocate).

A doffer is someone who removes ("doffs") bobbins, or spindles holding spun fiber such as cotton or wool from a spinning frame and replaces them with empty ones to start the spinning process again. The job of doffer may have offered time to play, but was not void of danger. Some of these boys were so short they had to climb up onto the machinery to do their job. ([Hindman, 161](#)). One could easily slip and get caught in the open bobbins and spindles, causing serious injury and perhaps death. Many of these children were little protection when entering the mills (factories for making cloth); they often wore as little as possible because of the heat and most of the boys did not even own a pair of shoes.

IMAGE 4



Clare Leighton, *Bread Line, New York*, 1932, wood engraving on paper, Smithsonian.

The breadlines during the Great Depression are some of the most symbolic characteristics of the Great Depression. The breadlines were unusually long and crowded, despite the fact that the agencies were providing little bread to each individual. Although most of the people on the breadline were capable laborers, the lack of employment opportunities made them unable to make any production and forced them to wait on a crowded line for most of the day-time. It was quite tragic, since many capable workers were forced to accept the little ration provided by the government. Certain city folks found it unbearable and relocated themselves to rural areas to farm, in hope of using their labor to produce actual food. (<https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/>)



James E. Allen, *Teeming Ingots*, 1935

Allen's [realist style](#) frequently celebrated the heroism of industrial laborers. In this etching, two steel workers pour molten metal into forms to make ingots or blocks. The process brightly illuminates their bodies, revealing not only strong physiques, but also their uniforms—overalls over a cuffed shirt. Note, too, that the only protection they wear are goggles and heat-resistant gloves! The two men appear in charge despite the dangerous situation, something that suggests their skill and fortitude. (Chelsea C. Gibson)

ELABORATE:

- Write a paragraph/dialog from the perspective of a laborer during the Great Depression.

- Use <https://makebeliefscomix.com/> to create a cartoon explaining your knowledge/opinions of the Great Depression, New Deal, Industrial Laborers.
- Interpret political cartoons.



Source: Clifford Berryman, *Washington Star*, January 5, 1934, Library of Congress (adapted)

Background Information:

In this political cartoon, there are three important figures: President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Congress, and Uncle Sam. Each of them assumes a role in the cartoon, with FDR as the doctor, Congress as the caretaker, and Uncle Sam as the patient. Uncle Sam represents a sickly America. FDR is the doctor, who has the responsibility to cure or relieve the symptoms of the depression that struck America and its people. FDR gives Uncle Sam many different kinds of “medicine,” including programs like the

National Industry Recovery Act, the Civil Works Administration, and the Agricultural Adjustment Act. In addition, FDR is carrying a bag of New Deal “remedies,” which can provide even more relief for America. FDR reassures Congress that the “remedies” do not necessarily guarantee success and changes can be made.

[political cartoon | Modern American History](#)

***In this particular political cartoon, NRA (labeled on the large bottle) stands for National Recovery Administration - New Deal**

[National Recovery Administration \(NRA\) and the New Deal: A Resource Guide](#)

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