

Swann Galleries, New York City

# Photo Sale Offers Iconic Americana, Including Lewis W. Hine's Child Laborers, Immigrants, and *Men at Work*

by Jeanne Schinto  
Photos courtesy Swann Galleries

A collection of photographs by Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940), each with the hand stamp for his studio in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, was the undisputed highlight of Swann Galleries' "Icons & Images" sale on February 15 in Manhattan. The auction house offered two dozen prints that spanned most of Hine's career. In the mix were some of his best-known pictures of child laborers: a girl tending a cotton-spinning machine that easily dwarfs her, and a group of boys getting ready to hawk newspapers in the dark. There were also portraits of immigrant families newly arrived on Ellis Island—suddenly timely again, given the nightly news. Rounding out the selection were several from Hine's famous series of men nonchalantly working at dizzying heights while constructing the Empire State Building.

"The terms 'documentary' and 'photojournalism' didn't exist when Hine was working," said Daile Kaplan, director of Swann's photographs and photo books department and one of its vice presidents and auctioneers and the author of two books about Hine. "He is famous for saying, 'If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug around a camera.'" The Hine material was produced for the most part during a period before *Life* and *Look* magazines, Kaplan pointed out. "It also predates the notion of photography as a kind of language. Today there is a real appreciation for the fact that someone back then was there to record so many important moments."

A native of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Hine began his career as a teacher in New York City. Assigned by his mentor, Frank A. Manny, to take pictures for use as a teaching tool, Hine did not approach image-making as an artist. Calling what he did "interpretive photography"—indeed, that is what he named his eventual business—he deliberately used photography as an instrument of social change. "There were two things I wanted to do," he once said. "I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated." That he produced art along the way is now universally acknowledged.

Scores of bidders competed for these lots. A circa 1921 silver print of *Mechanic at Steam Pump in Electric Power House*—also known as *Powerhouse Mechanic*—was the top Hine lot and the sale's cover lot, going to a dealer at \$81,250 (including buyer's premium) on an estimate of \$70,000/100,000. It is Hine's celebrated and beautifully composed image of a bare-armed, muscled young man in profile, bending at the waist and tightening a nut with a giant wrench. At its photo sale on April 20, 2017, Swann sold a posthumous print of the same image for \$13,750.

What made the \$67,500 difference? "The privileged iteration is the one printed during Hine's lifetime and close to the making of the negative," said Kaplan. Also, the one that sold in April didn't have Hine's "Interpretive Photography / Hastings-on-Hudson" hand stamp; this one does. "We're looking at two different iterations of the image," said Kaplan.

The images Swann sold were originally collected by Isador Sy Seidman (1892-1977), a photojournalist in his own right and the owner of the Seidman Photo Agency of New York. According to Seidman's obituary in the *New York Times*, "At age 16, he bought his first camera, and his career of taking and collecting pictures began." When he died at age 85, he had

**The Hine material was produced for the most part during a period before *Life* and *Look* magazines.**

accumulated a vast archive. During Seidman's lifetime, his collection of photos, as well as memorabilia and other types of Americana—e.g., presidential campaign sheet music—had become a rich resource for movie makers, magazines, and newspapers.

That Seidman knew Hine personally is likely. It's certainly true that they were like-minded. As Kaplan recounted, "In the 1920s he was awarded a prize for a photo he made at the Statue of Liberty—an image that addressed immigration when quotas were being instituted." Both he and Hine were progressives in New York. Both were members of the Photo League. "We believe that the Photo League was their point of contact," she said. "That was the go-to destination for all things photographic in New York in the period."

There were many other remarkable offerings of all kinds at this sale, but Americana is my focus here, because that's *M.A.D.*'s focus. The fact is, though, that 11 of the auction's dozen bestsellers were either American scenes or by American photographers.

Multiple bidders competed for another of the special consignments of the sale: an album of photographs depicting the surveying and removal of the Great Raft on Louisiana's Red River by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1873. One of only three copies known, *Photographic Views of Red River Raft* consists of 113 hand-tinted albumen prints by British-born Robert B. Talfor, who had a studio in Brooklyn, New York. A 1971 article by Hubert Humphreys in *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* described the raft as "an ever shifting series of logjams that clogged the main channels of Red River for more than a hundred miles." Those logjams created permanent islands, bars, and ridges made of silt and sand from which stands of trees and other vegetation grew. Dynamite couldn't break up the raft; nitroglycerin did. One of Talfor's photos shows a canvas tent on the river shore affixed with a sign saying, "NITROGLYCERIN! DANGER! Keep Away!" The words were flanked by skull-and-crossbones symbols. Like the other two, the album is now the property of an institution. Unnamed, it paid \$93,750 (est. \$18,000/22,000).

The consignor of the album was someone Kaplan met while appraising items for *Antiques Roadshow* approximately half a decade ago. "We had a wonderful conversation, memorable enough for him to contact me many years later," she said. Both the consignor and Kaplan did some research into the hand-tinting of the photos. "This is an aspect of nineteenth-century photography in the United States that is really uncommon," she said. "Obviously we see a lot of documentary photos of places like Yosemite and Yellowstone by figures like [William Henry] Jackson and [Eadweard] Muybridge, who were majestic image-makers. But with Talfor we see an artist who marries the documentary with an aesthetic that is very much heightened by the hand-tinting."

Neither she nor the consignor discovered who was responsible for the coloring, but Kaplan believes it wasn't the photographer himself. "It doesn't seem to have been within his skill set." Instead, she speculates that



Lewis W. Hine, *Mechanic at Steam Pump in Electric Power House*, also known as *Powerhouse Mechanic*, 6⅝" x 4⅝", circa 1921, silver print, with Hine's "Interpretive Photography / Hastings-on-Hudson" hand stamp and numeric notations on reverse in pencil, \$81,250 (est. \$70,000/100,000). I am not the first to note the contrast between the gravitas of this image and the opposite gestalt of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). While Hine's intent was to heroize the factory worker, portraying him as the glorified, all-important human "piece" of the machine, Chaplin's Little Tramp is the machine age's hapless victim, exhausted, dazed, and ultimately undone by the repetitive motions he is forced to perform faster and faster. It's interesting to imagine what the photographer's take on the film may have been.



*Photographic Views of Red River Raft* by Robert B. Talfor sold to an institution for \$93,750 (est. \$18,000/22,000). The exceedingly rare 1873 folio comprises 113 hand-tinted 7" x 9¼" albumen prints (one shown) depicting the surveying and removal of the Great Raft on the Red River of Louisiana by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



Lewis W. Hine, *Laborer on Connector, Empire State Building*, 4 1/4" x 3 3/8", silver contact print, 1930-31, with Hine's "Interpretive Photography" hand stamp and numeric notations in pencil on reverse, \$13,750 (est. \$10,000/15,000). This image was on the cover of Hine's picture book for adolescents, *Men at Work: Photographic Studies of Men and Machines*, published in 1932. It is now extremely rare; I found two copies on the website of rare book dealer Peter L. Stern & Company of Boston ([www.sternrarebooks.com](http://www.sternrarebooks.com)). One, priced at \$10,000, is described as "very nearly a fine copy in a worn, chipped and mended dust jacket" and inscribed by Hine to his nephew. The other, priced at \$5000, is described as "a good copy" with no mention of a dust jacket. It is inscribed by Hine: "Harold Rugg / New York City / From L.W.H. Oct. 18, 1932." As Stern comments: "A fine association; Rugg was then teaching at Columbia, and was eventually hounded from public life for harboring leftist opinions and sympathies."



With this sale Swann continued its longstanding successful run of images by Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952). Lately the auction house has been offering bunches of them from the Louis K. Meisel Gallery. This time, an unnamed consignor's lot—an edition of Curtis's seminal study, *The North American Indian, Portfolio V*, featuring 36 photogravures on vellum, including *Bear's Belly, Arikara* (pictured)—was the most coveted one, going to a collector for a record price for the work, \$43,200 (est. \$18,000/22,000). Each image is approximately 15 1/4" x 11 1/4"; each sheet is 22" x 18" and has Curtis's credit, title, date, plate number, and the printer's credit. With contents loose as issued, the portfolio is from an unfulfilled edition of 500, published in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by the Suffolk Engraving Company in 1907. Bidders spent a total of \$73,125 on six other lots of Curtis images.



Lewis W. Hine, *Italian family in the baggage room, Ellis Island*, 6 3/4" x 4 3/4", silver contact print, 1905, printed circa 1931, with Hine's "Interpretive Photography" hand stamp along with the title, date, and numeric notations on the reverse, \$7560 (est. \$5000/7500). A picture is worth a thousand words? In this case, try a whole novel. "I think Hine is a figure who continues to have currency," said Kaplan. "Obviously the topics he was addressing eighty or a hundred years ago—immigration, child labor—are issues that are very much in people's minds today."

it was someone in his wife's family or social circle. Among them were a number of daguerreotype artists.

Other top sellers by American photographers were a late 1960s silver print of the 1937 image *Georgia O'Keeffe and Orville Cox* by Ansel Adams (\$48,600); a 1981 silver print of Roy DeCarava's 1956 portrait *Dizzy Gillespie and Roy Eldridge* (\$27,500); a 2008-09 printing of Bert Stern's 1962 compilation *The Marilyn Portfolio* (\$29,700); and a 2001 print of Cindy Sherman's 1975 *Self-Portrait as Lucille Ball* (\$25,000). The prices for the DeCarava and the Sherman were records.

Fifty lots of vernacular photography, always a category full of fascination at these Swann sales, provided more opportunities for buyers of American imagery. This time, there were photos of colonial Hawaii, 1890-1910 (\$3000); an album documenting the construction of a powerhouse at Niagara Falls (\$3500); a small archive of work by unidentified Farm Security Administration photographers from the 1930s (\$4500); New York City aerial views from 1924 (\$4500); and an archive relating to Frank Lloyd Wright (\$2970).

A true rarity went up during this section of the sale. It is what is believed to be a hand-painted photography studio's backdrop. "We think it is photographic, but since there is no credit or date, and no indication of the maker or user, we can't be sure," said Kaplan. The department dated it to the 1870s. "We dated it later [in the period of early photographic history], because, to our eye and because of its large size, it seemed more to relate to the tintype era when family groups would go to a studio and have their picture taken."

This was only the second example of a backdrop that Kaplan, who has been in the photography field for decades, has ever seen. It was the first that Swann has offered, she said. "This material has disappeared, because of its fragility. It's painted on very thin muslin, and the size makes it difficult to handle, too. That it exists at all and that we were able to offer it was really a lot of fun." During previews, Kaplan and other members of Swann's staff mugged for a contemporary digital camera in front of it, as did previewers themselves; at the auction, it sold to an absentee bidder for \$7500.

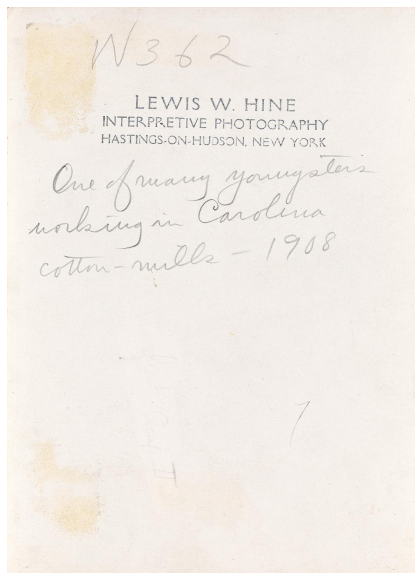
For more information, contact Swann at (212) 254-4710 or via its website ([www.swanngalleries.com](http://www.swanngalleries.com)).

Lewis W. Hine's *Newsies, New York*, a 4 3/4" x 6 3/4" silver contact print, with Hine's "Interpretive Photography" hand stamp and numeric notations in pencil on the back, brought \$5250 (est. \$5000/7500). A typewritten caption on a detached label says: "The gang starts off with the Sunday papers—1:00 A.M. under Brooklyn Bridge. December 1906." The 1906 image was printed circa 1931.



This late 1960s silver print of a 1937 image of Georgia O'Keeffe and Orville Cox by Ansel Adams (1902-1984) sold to a collector for \$48,600 (est. \$18,000/22,000). The image is 7 3/4" x 9 3/4" with a credit in blue pencil on its back. Cox was the head wrangler at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, where O'Keeffe spent 50 years of her life. They are pictured at Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona.





*One of many youngsters working in Carolina cotton mills* by Lewis W. Hine sold to a collector for \$30,000 (est. \$10,000/15,000). Hine made the image in 1908; this 4 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " silver contact print, circa 1931, has Hine's "Interpretive Photography" hand stamp, plus the title, date, and numeric notations in pencil on the back. When these and other damning images of children working were first made available to the public, the culpable parties pleaded that the photos were, in essence, "fake news." In a letter Hine wrote, circa 1910, he said: "My child labor photos have already set the authorities to work to see 'if such things can be possible.' They try to get around them by crying 'fake,' but therein lies the value of data & a witness." The correspondence is included in Daile Kaplan's *Photo Story: Selected Letters and Photographs of Lewis W. Hine*, published by Smithsonian Institution Press in 1992.



Lewis W. Hine, *Russian Family at Ellis Island*, 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 5 $\frac{7}{8}$ ", silver contact print, 1905, with Hine's "Interpretive Photography" hand stamp, plus his title, date, and numeric notations in pencil on the back, \$6000 (est. \$6000/9000). A Swann press release said: "The lasting relevance of these [Hine] images is exemplified by the buyer [of this one], who happily relayed that the children in the photograph are his great-grandmother and her sister."



A group of 18 photographs of colonial (1890-1910) Hawaii fetched \$3000 (est. \$2500/3500). The 13 albumen prints and five silver prints, each 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", show early hotels, landscapes, seascapes, surfers, cliff divers, poi-cooking and -eating, women in grass skirts and leis (as seen here), and more. Included in the lot was a circa 1895 carte de visite of Queen Lili'uokalani (1838-1917), last sovereign of the Kamehameha dynasty.



Lewis W. Hine, *Hull House Beneficiary, Italian Grandmother*, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", silver contact print, with three hand stamps—Hine's "Interpretive Photography," "Hine Photo Company," and "Set No. 566"—along with his signature, title, date (1910), and numeric notations in pencil and ink on reverse, \$15,000 (est. \$5000/7000).



An album of 35 photographs (cyanotypes, silver prints, and platinum prints) of New York City subway and elevated railway construction projects undertaken 1902-15 sold to an absentee bidder for \$4250 (est. \$3000/4500). Each measures 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". All are dated and captioned.



Collectors, curators, and dealers are starting to consider the merits of press photos, but not all are equal. Subject matter is important. At this sale a collection of approximately 113 press and wire photographs relating to the American civil rights movement sold for \$6500 (est. \$3000/4000). "Press photos have been the focus of private and institutional collectors for several years now, in particular Pulitzer Prize-winning images and topical images," Kaplan commented. "The civil rights material definitely sold very competitively." Dating from the 1960s through the 1980s, each image measures approximately 8" x 10", nearly all with a caption in the negative.



Christine von der Linn and Rick Stattler of Swann took a moment to pose in front of this 106" x 116" winter scene hand painted on muslin. Dating from the 1870s, it is presumed to be a photographer's studio backdrop from the tintype era. The item sold to an absentee bidder for \$7500 (est. \$3000/4500).



A vernacular album of more than 130 albumen prints, most measuring 7¼" x 4¾", sold on the phone for \$5000 (est. \$4000/6000). They were taken in 1889-90 by an accomplished amateur photographer who remains anonymous. He shot scenes from his travels coast to coast, of his family back in Boston, and ones that appear to be self-portraits—selfies, as it were. Of the two shown here, Kaplan said, "It's my instinct that he's the one on the left, although the photographer did not identify himself by name or otherwise anywhere in the album." Of vernacular photography in general, she said: "The poignant aspect of so much of it is that it becomes disconnected from the original family. But that this material enters the photographic marketplace is a commentary on how photographic images are, on the one hand, treasured when family members are alive and aware of them and, on the other, how, in instances when families come to an end, it continues to be appreciated by others."



Swann's photo department, posing in front of the hand-painted backdrop, from left to right: Oliver Lott, Deborah Rogal, Keavy Handley-Byrne, and Daile Kaplan.

