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# Meunier, Constantin

(b Etterbeek, Brussels, April 12, 1831; d Ixelles, Brussels, April 4, 1905).

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Belgian sculptor, painter and draughtsman. He was directed towards an artistic career by his elder brother, the engraver Jean-Baptiste Meunier (1821–1900). He entered the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, in September 1845 and studied under the sculptor Louis Jehotte (1804–84) from 1848. In addition, in 1852 he attended the private studio of the sculptor Charles-Auguste Fraikin. Gradually he came to feel that sculpture, at least in the traditional form taught in Brussels, was incapable of providing an adequate vehicle for either exposition or expression. Still at the Academy, he transferred to painting, therefore, in 1853, and followed the courses given by François-Joseph Navez, studying in the evenings at the Saint-Luc studio, with Charles De Groux. He became friends with Louis Dubois, Félicien Rops and other rebellious young artists who were to found the Société Libre des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1868. With these, Meunier was part of the realist avant-garde, while seeking out a path of his own in painting. It has been said that De Groux had a decisive influence on Meunier. The latter partly denied this and insisted that he had felt the need very early to practise an art that was more devoted to the masses, to the people. His interest in everyday life, in the experience and condition of man, can already be discerned in the sketches and studies he made during his stays in the Trappist monastery of Westmalle, near Antwerp, between 1857 and 1875. He exhibited some of these works, for example the *Burial of a Trappist* (1860; Kortrijk, Mus. S. Kst.), at the Brussels Salon in the early 1860s. At this time he also carried out a number of commissions for churches, which he accepted in order to support his family.

Between 1875 and 1878 Meunier embarked on history painting, also marked by evident social concern. He chose as his subject episodes from the Peasants' War, drawn from the recent history of Flanders at the end of 1798. In 1878, however, a turning-point in his work occurred when chance led him to the industrial area of Wallonia, in particular to the Régissa rolling-mills. He subsequently visited the Val St-Lambert glassworks and the Seraing Cockerill factories. In 1880, at the triennial exhibition in Ghent, then at the Paris Salon, he showed his first paintings devoted to the world of factories and work, notably *The Brazier (Cockerill Factory)*; and in Brussels he showed *Molten Steel* (Liège, Mus. A. Wallon). It was then that the writer Camille Lemonnier (1845–1913) requested Meunier's collaboration in illustrating his text *La Belgique*. Together with the artist Xavier Mellery, they travelled, in 1881, through the industrial areas of the Borinage, Hainault and Liège. In the same year, in the Brussels Salon, Meunier showed the canvas *Lassitude*, which prefigured his later sculpted work. Meunier was then sent to Spain by the Belgian government to copy a *Descent from the Cross* by a Flemish master. He stayed in Spain from mid-October 1882 to the beginning of April 1883, and this brought a further increase in his self-awareness, in particular his ability to relate to the life around him and to capture it in a quick sketch. He also achieved greater mastery of colour, as can be seen in the *Tobacco Factory in Seville* (1883; Brussels, Mus. Meunier).



Constantin Meunier: *Industry*, from the *Monument to Labour*, bronze relief, 680×910×360 mm, 1896 (Paris, Musée d'Orsay); photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

Shortly after his return to Brussels, Meunier made his first sculptures, and showed five of them in the 1885 exhibition of the group Les XX in Brussels. Among these was *A Puddler*, a wax version of the work that was to become one of his most famous (bronze version 1886; Brussels, Mus. Meunier). In 1886 Meunier sent *The Hammerer* to the Paris Salon where it achieved great success (bronze version 1890; Brussels, Mus. Meunier). Another work of this period was the *Return of the Miners*. In March 1887, Meunier was nominated Professor of Painting at the Academy of Leuven where he went to live. There he produced several sculptures in the process of establishing an idea for a *Monument to Labour*. Among these were the *Grisou* group (1889), the *Old Pit Pony* (1890), the *Drinking Man* (1890) and the *Woman of the People* (1893; all Brussels, Mus. Meunier) and *Industry* (1896; Paris, Mus. Orsay). Although he went on teaching in Leuven until 1896, Meunier returned to Brussels at the end of 1894.

In February 1896, through the mediation of Henry van de Velde, Meunier held a retrospective exhibition of his work in Paris, in the new gallery of Samuel Bing, the Galerie Art Nouveau. This confirmed his international reputation. In 1897 he received a warm welcome in Germany (Dresden and Berlin) and in the spring of 1898 he showed a group of his works at the Vienna Secession exhibition. In 1899 he was elected a Member of the Académie Royale de Belgique and in 1900 he moved into the studio house he had had built at Ixelles, a suburb of Brussels, which now houses the Meunier museum. Gradually his *Monument to Labour* took shape, and its various component parts were purchased by the

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State, while the artist sought, notably with Victor Horta, to design the best architectural setting for it. In 1903, while completely immersed in his great project, he acceded to pressure from the Zola Committee and accepted a commission for a monument dedicated to the writer, a figure group *Fecundity*, alluding to Zola's impressive literary output. Meunier died, however, before being able to complete this work (figure of *Zola*, bronze, 1904; Brussels, Mus. Meunier).

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P. Baudson: *Les Trois Vies de Constantin Meunier* (Brussels, 1979)

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## See also

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Leuven

### More on this topic

Meunier, Constantin Émile <<http://oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00121702>> in Oxford Art Online <<http://oxfordartonline.com>>

### External resources

Meunier, Constantin: Bust of Christ, 1900, J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles, CA) <<http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/objects/o132284.html>>

Meunier, Constantin: Le puddleur au repos, 1884-8, Muses Royaux des Beaux-Arts (Brussels) <[http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/site/asp/Oeuvre\\_details.asp?ID=92](http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/site/asp/Oeuvre_details.asp?ID=92)>

Meunier, Constantin: Le marteleur, 1886, Muses Royaux des Beaux-Arts (Brussels) <[http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/site/asp/Oeuvre\\_details.asp?ID=24](http://www.fine-arts-museum.be/site/asp/Oeuvre_details.asp?ID=24)>

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