

## ***Cotton-Mill Worker, North Carolina, Lewis Wickes Hine***

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Lewis Wickes Hine  
American, North  
Carolina, 1908  
Gelatin silver print  
4 5/8 x 6 9/16 in.  
84.XM.967.5

A young girl of no more than twelve or thirteen years of age stands poised between a window and a cotton loom that seems to extend infinitely into the distance behind her. Almost metaphorically, her hair appears to be cropped short on the side that faces the loom, while a long braided ponytail faces



the window as if its growth has been nourished by the sunlight. Her cotton dress is wrinkled and shabby, the soft, faded stripes of her garment contrasting with the tautly pulled threads running through the machine at which she labors. Thousands of young girls, like this unknown figure, commonly worked in industrial mills throughout America.

Lewis Hine's photographs of poor children in deplorable working conditions, made while on assignment from the National Child Labor Committee, were instrumental in the passage of child labor laws in the United States.

### **About the Artist**

Lewis Wickes Hine (American, 1874–1940)

Lewis Hine was trained to be an educator in Chicago and New York. A project photographing on Ellis Island with students from the Ethical Culture School in New York galvanized his recognition of the value of documentary photography in education. Soon after, he became a sociological photographer (a photographer interested in documenting the way that society works), establishing a studio in upstate New York in 1912.

For nearly ten years, Hine was the photographer for the National Child Labor Committee, contributing to exhibitions and the organization's publication, *The Survey*. Declaring that he "wanted to show things that had to be corrected," he was one of the earliest photographers to use the photograph as a documentary tool. Around 1920, however, Hine changed his studio publicity from "Social Photography by Lewis W. Hine" to "Lewis Wickes Hine, Interpretive

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Photography," to emphasize a more artistic approach to his image making. Having joined the American Red Cross briefly in 1918, he continued to freelance for them through the 1930s. In 1936 Hine was appointed head photographer for the National Research Project of the Works Projects Administration, but his work for them was never completed. His last years were marked by professional struggles due to diminishing government and corporate patronage, and he died in 1940 at age sixty-six.

### **Questions for Teaching**

Using as many details as possible, describe what you see in this image. (In this image a young girl stands inside a building between a window and a column of machines. One hand rests on the window sill to her left, and one hand rests on the machines to her right. The girl wears a rumpled dress with the sleeves rolled up and stares, unsmiling, directly into the camera lens. Her hair is braided on the left side of her head, forming a ponytail. The light from the window illuminates the left side of her body and face, leaving her right side in relative shadow. The space the girl stands in is very narrow and very deep. Although the image blurs, it is clear that this column of machines spans the depth of the building.)

Lewis Hine's image had a huge impact on its audience and contributed to the passage of the first child labor laws. What reactions do you think Hine wanted to evoke with this image? (Hine wanted to put a human face to child labor by capturing a very affecting portrait of a young girl in a textile mill. The exhausting working conditions are made clear by the girl's grubby dress, which is missing buttons, and blank facial expression, as well as by the shabby condition of the factory itself. Dirt along the frame of the window indicates that the windows were rarely open while the walls are chipped and peeling, indicating a lack of care both for the building and the workers inside. The textile industry relied on child labor to work in the factories at long hours for very little pay. Hine highlights this social ill through his photography and attempts to evoke sympathy for his subject.)

This image expresses many strong formal qualities. Which of the elements and principles of art are most strongly represented here? (The body of the young girl is arranged in the *shape* of a triangle, with her two arms creating *lines* that lead up to her face, creating *movement* through the image. The looms on the left side of the image create a *rhythm* and repeating *pattern* and also moves the eye into the image. There is an interesting contrast in *texture* between the soft, rumpled cotton of the girl's dress and the hard mechanized elements at the left. The symmetrical arrangement of *shapes* and *textures* also creates a sense of *balance* in the image. The looms also create *movement* into and through the picture, moving the viewer's eye from the foreground to the background.)

