An American Tune
Immigration photography as reinforcement of a national identity

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Abstract

Though widely accepted as the visual record of early twentieth century immigration, the Ellis Island work of photographer Lewis Hine omits representation of those classified “undesirable” upon arrival due to health, religion, culture or ethnicity. This creates a visual mythology that elicits nostalgia of Ellis Island as the celebrated entry point for millions of white Europeans.

Contrary to this nostalgia, immigration in the United States is often a story of contradiction, austerity and exclusion. Throughout U.S. history, disjuncture arises between the country’s collective idealized values and beliefs harbored toward those who sought acceptance. Rooted in Anglo-Saxton heritage, nativist views that immigration dilutes national identity are reinforced by photography through visual representation of culture and ethnicity that underscore the sentiment ‘they don’t look like Americans.’

Examining photographs of amateur photographers Augustus F. Sherman and John A. Robinson, An American Tune: Immigration photography as reinforcement of a national identity investigates the effect of ethnicity on representation in historical immigration photography. Employed at immigration stations Sherman and Robinson were embedded at the front line of immigration during the decades preceding two of the most restrictive immigration reforms in U.S. history —the Asiatic Barred Zone Act (1917) and the Johnson-Reed Act (1924).

I will establish how the portraits of eastern Europeans made by Sherman, an Ellis Island processing clerk, were influenced by organizational culture imbued by controversial immigration administrator William Williams. This will be contrasted against images of Asian immigrants made by Robinson, an Angel Island immigration inspector, as he investigated fraud and corruption in San Francisco. Though serving very different roles in the immigration process, both Sherman and Robinson made images of “undesirable” immigrants. This study explores how national biases and U.S. policy manifested in their work, but also helps re-establish the presence of non-Anglo-Saxton’s into the visual historic narrative of immigration.

1 Though Hine’s work did include images made of immigrants in the Ellis Island infirmary and a few portraiture of culturally “undesirable” immigrants, the vast majority of his work, and certainly his most celebrated and remembered images, were of those deemed “desirable” thus granted admission.