

*Work: Ford Madox Brown's Painting and Victorian Life* by John A. Walker. London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2006. ISBN 1-903427-29-0. 138 pp. + 19 colour plates, 33 b/w illus. £22.00 (paper).

Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (1852-65; Manchester City Art Gallery) is the first major painting in Western art to glorify working-class man. Unlike J.F. Millet's dark and burdened sower of 1850 or Gustave Courbet's neutral stone-breakers of 1849, who are more like victims than conquerors, Brown's ditch-diggers in *Work* dominate their world. Brown's confident and self-directed "navvies," who rip up a Hampstead street to lay water pipes in the centre of this bustling picture, smile, drink, shovel, sweat, and cast everyone else into shadow. The labourers in Brown's picture make the aristocrats, Christian do-gooders, rich ladies, policemen, electioneers, postman, soldiers, unemployed itinerants, troublesome children, and philosophers who crowd the painting look silly, bad, or insignificant. His ditch-diggers prefigure the muscular proletarian masters who will stride through the art of the Soviet Union. However, John A. Walker in this extremely slender volume devoted to *Work* barely mentions such broad art-historical significance.

Nevertheless, he accomplishes his stated goal: to summarize the scholarly studies of *Work* for the general reader in order to illustrate the relation of this painting to Victorian society. Much of what Walker presents can be found in the first chapter of Tim Barringer's *Men at Work* (2005). But Walker's book is not a cut-and-paste job; he analyzes *Work* and its literature with care, acuity, and sensible language, citing his sources thoroughly (most of the time), and including an extensive bibliography (which Barringer did not). Walker is a known writer, but not a familiar figure in Pre-Raphaelite studies. He is a painter, and retired Reader in Art and Design History at Middlesex University, whose publications include *Art since Pop* (1975), *Art in the Age of Mass Media* (1983), *Visual Culture* (1997), *America's Impact on British Art since 1945* (1998), *Art and Outrage* (1999), *Art and Celebrity* (2003), and *Firefighters in Art* (2005).

One would expect this little picture book to be nothing but fluff. But it is not. Originality of ideas may be lacking, but Walker's book admirably sets out major themes to be considered, adds some factual details, approaches interpretations with both fairness and circumspection, and presents the reader with a judicious look at what art historians have had to say and how art reflects, or works with, or challenges the society in which it was produced. Even some of the many illustrations that at first sight seem mere padding, subtly enhance the points in the text. For example, Walker reproduces a rare daguerreotype of a Chartist demonstration. The image relates directly to no specific part of Brown's *Work*. It brings to mind, however, the truculence of workers in mid-century Britain, and the fear of workers among middle-class people at the time.