

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Paying Homage to the Building of America at the National Museum of Industrial History

After overcoming numerous hurdles, the National Museum of Industrial History has finally opened in Bethlehem, Pa.



Linde-Wolf ammonia compressor (foreground) and a Corliss steam engine in Machinery Hall. PHOTO: GLENN KOEHLER/NMIH

By **JULIA M. KLEIN**

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Bethlehem, Pa.

Almost two decades in the making, the National Museum of Industrial History finally opened its doors earlier this month in the restored 1913 electrical repair shop of the defunct Bethlehem Steel Corp.'s Lehigh Valley plant. Plagued by sluggish fundraising, county and state investigations, and allegations of mismanagement, the museum responded by scaling down its vision. Now, with an 18,000-square-foot space, about 200 artifacts and a regional focus, this Smithsonian Institution affiliate no longer merits its ambitious name.

The museum's impressive homage to the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia is its closest approach to national themes. But that may change as the museum expands to fill its second floor, an adjacent plaza and possibly other buildings on the 1,800-acre Bethlehem Steel campus. For now, it has made a promising, if deliberately modest, start by focusing on the Lehigh Valley's industrial heritage.

A rectangular red-brick structure with a new steel entrance canopy, the museum salutes its origins through both preservation and design. On its plaza, evoking a Claes Oldenburg sculpture, sit two 20-ton gears that helped transmit power to the steel mill. In the lobby is an overhead electric traveling crane that once moved equipment through the repair facility, dangling a winch that has become the museum's symbol. A steel beam is juxtaposed with a blown-up 1932 photograph, "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper," in which workers building Rockefeller Center take a midair break on a similar beam. The exhibition hall's retro design features hanging light fixtures and gleaming exposed pipes.

The first of four galleries, Machinery Hall, is the strongest, with a panoply of machines, many on loan from the Smithsonian, representing the Centennial Exposition. One wall is festooned with a salon-style display of wooden patterns used to cast metal machinery

parts. A framed set of files from the Nicholson File Company and a metal shaper are actual relics of the 1876 world's fair.

Overall, the gallery captures the exuberance with which the U.S. trumpeted its industrial progress, a message that apparently influenced even Oscar Wilde. "In America," he would write in 1883, "... the exercise of ingenuity, the application of science to the work of man, is ... the shortest road to wealth."

The fate of the once-behemoth steel company and the broader decline of American manufacturing give these exhibits an elegiac heft. Massive machines such as the Corliss pumping engine and the Linde-Wolf ammonia compressor inspire awe, like fossils of gigantic extinct species. Other, smaller machines—some adorned with painted and sculptural decoration—can be appreciated as masterpieces of design. (Wilde also wrote: "There is no country in the world where machinery is so lovely as in America.")

The museum's genesis, as the project of former steel-company executives, naturally inclines it to celebration, especially of Bethlehem Steel's undeniable contributions to city skylines, transportation and the American defense industry. Museum president and CEO Amy Hollander, hired in the spring of last year to replace Stephen G. Donches, says she sought oral histories to complement the museum's artifacts. Both audio clips and exhibit labels highlight Dickensian aspects of America's industrial past: dangerous working conditions, low pay, child labor, unionization struggles, and discrimination against women and minorities. In an oral history (heard here in an audio recording by an actor), William Major, an African-American hired by Bethlehem Steel Coke Works in 1973, says that to get ahead "I had to work three times as hard."

Following the Iron and Steel Gallery, whose artifacts include factory whistles that signaled emergencies and a protective blast-furnace suit, the narrative turns to the area's once-abundant silk mills. These factories employed mostly low-paid women, sometimes forbidden even to sit down. On display is a Jacquard loom that produced luxury fabrics for the White House, from the Hoover to Clinton administrations. While steel fell victim to changing technologies and foreign competition, silk's hegemony was challenged by synthetics.

A final, industry-supported gallery, distinctly boosterish in tone, discusses the production and uses of propane, a fuel that powers hot-air balloons, school buses and many rural homes. Industry founder Walter O. Snelling based his company in Pittsburgh, but later lived and worked in the Lehigh Valley. There the museum narrative abruptly ends—at least for now.

The National Museum of Industrial History is enriched by its setting, in the SteelStacks revitalization district, anchored by the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem and the ArtsQuest performing-arts and community center. More interesting from a historical perspective are the remnants of other factory buildings, the high-rise company headquarters, and especially the abandoned steel plant's blast furnaces, looming over the landscape like an Abstract Expressionist sculpture.

The Hoover-Mason Trestle, an elevated park similar to New York's High Line, runs alongside the plant and offers views of Bethlehem. Plaques commemorate the plant's operation, the human toll of steelmaking, and the symbiotic relationship between "the Steel" and the neighboring community. It's a concise and powerful complement to the museum.

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