Tools transcend: their essential purpose crosses boundaries of all types; their essential forms and functions enduring across eras, geographies, and cultures. The universality and timelessness of tools have won them a special place in the human psyche as both icon and symbol, embedding them firmly in the foundation of human creativity.

In the United States — a nation forged in a crucible of individualism, immigration, ingenuity, and industry — tools have accrued a particular mythos, a set of connotations that are, arguably, fundamentally American. But, while tools may be beloved by a nation as part of its origin story, they remain the collective property of humanity. When tools become art, they are similarly egalitarian, becoming the muse of all and any.

The renowned art collection of the late hardware magnate John Hechinger exemplifies this practical and artistic universality. Over his long career, Hechinger devoted much of his energy, playfulness, and passion to this collection, seeking out works from numerous genres and artists of many backgrounds, all of them bound by a common theme: the democracy of the tool.

In Work and Play, curator Sarah Tanguy explores interlocking principles: tools as icons of labor; labor as a component of creativity; creativity as a form of play; and the art of tools as the most incisive expression of their interrelatedness. This exhibition celebrates the virtues inherent in the art of the tool and highlights the astounding breadth of the Hechinger Collection by illuminating this unique, but ubiquitous, idiom.