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The Afterlife of an Image of Striking American Workers

James M. Dennis's *The Strike: The Improbably Story of an Iconic 1886 Painting of Labor Protest*, is a fascinating history of an artwork by the nineteenth-century German American artist Robert Koehler (1850-1917). Koehler's painting (*The Strike*), which depicts a confrontation between a taciturn factory owner and his gesticulating workers in late nineteenth-century America, has had a singular historical life–but not a notable art historical one. As art historian Dennis correctly maintains, *The Strike* has functioned more as a "documentary ... [and] dramatic record of organized labor's early travails" than as an influential aesthetic object (p. 191).

In this regard, the author's book-length focus on this painting may seem quite surprising. Erica Doss, another art historian engaged with visual culture and labor, who supports Dennis's statement, notes, "the history of American art reveals a paucity of both public memorials and private objects focused on labor and laborers.... [D]uring periods when issues of 'labor and capital, work and wages' were central to the nation's political and social life, such as in the late nineteenth century, art which focused on work and workers was relatively sparse."[1] Even the numerous images of ordinary workers created by artists after World War I, are as Bill Brown reminds us, not well known by contemporary audiences.[2] The popularity of the taciturn farmers in *American Gothic* (Grant Wood, 1930), Brown maintains, is a result of its appropriation and transformation by almost anyone selling a product (such as corn flakes) or parodying some aspect of American culture.*The Strike,* which is somewhat unique in its depiction of a public confrontation between a factory owner and his workers, did command attention for its depiction of labor unrest during the artist's lifetime and after its rediscovery by Lee Baxandall in the early 1970s. For this reason, Dennis's "biography" of this artwork should interest not only cultural historians of the nineteenth century but also those interested in representations of organized labor today.

Dennis opens his transatlantic history of the painting with the biography of the artist, who, as a four-year-old in 1854, emigrated from Hamburg Germany to Wisconsin with his working-class parents. As a young man, Koehler traveled to Munich to complete his fine arts education (thanks to the sponsorship of a German-born brewer). While there, he produced several canvasses of Bavarian peasants and laboring German workers. He created only one other noteworthy image of a worker: *The Socialist* (which "anticipates John Steuart Curry's fanatic John Brown some fifty years later" (p. 45). The contemporary art historian Agnete von Specht's conclusion that Koehler's fiery socialist may represent the artist's "fear" of the "rapid growth of radical socialism" in Germany (p. 46) is, rightly notes Dennis, open to debate. By the time the painting was last reproduced for public view in an article about the artist in Chicago's 1901 *Brush and Pencil,* the fiery orator was no longer a subject of particular interest. Instead, the critic commented on the image's "quality of crude vigor" rather than its subject matter (p. 52). *The Socialist* would not reappear until 1975 in a Montana journal (*Montana: The Magazine of Western History)* about the 1876 centennial.

The Strike suffered a similar fate, though Dennis regards *The Strike* as sympathetic to the demands of workers. With this image, "Koehler gave a human face to industrial protest" (p. 72). The artist initially showed the painting in 1886 at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts as part of his diploma exhibit. Later that year–and only nine years after explosive railway strike in Chicago–he exhibited it at New York's National Academy of Design. It was, so to speak, a singular event. As Dennis notes, "depictions of unrest within the industrial working class before *The Strike* are rare" (p. 59). While some European artists

did depict worker unrest in the mid- to late nineteenth century, American artists generally did not. Dennis correctly points to Winslow Homer's female workers in *The Morning Bell* (1873), who desultorily walk to the dreary factory in which they labor, as a well-known example of labor resignation.

Much like *The Socialist,* Koehler's provocative painting elicited a variety of interpretations in the American and European venues in which it was shown. The social frictions and labor unrest in each city framed T*he Strike's* critical reception. For instance, it was used as a "jumping-off point for an extended commentary" on voting rights in Belgium (p. 102). The Milwaukee Industrial Exposition Association invited Koehler to submit the work because "'the subject is a popular one in this city ... [and] might be interpreted as a way of commemorating the mass walkout and deadly confrontation of workers with police"' (p. 105). By contrast, the *New York Times* offered a somewhat more ambivalent review: "'In trying to rouse our sympathies with a beggar woman [Koehler's] moral gets heavy. American workmen are not beggars, nor do their women become so through the fault of capitalists"' (p. 98). In twenty-first-century America, these are indeed interesting comments.

Despite its generally favorable reception, the painting disappeared from public view around the time of the artist's death due to the "pervasive anti-radical, anti-labor hysteria" of the early twentieth century (p. 162). Lee Baxandall, author of *Radical Perspectives in the Arts* (1972) and son of a Wisconsin Republican businessman, bought it in 1971 for $750 from the Minneapolis Public Library, where it had been placed in storage. In 1990 the German government purchased the painting. It now hangs–along with *The Socialist*–in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin.

In the introduction to the text, Dennis states that one of his "aims in writing this book has been to provide a historic context to this discourse" regarding *The Strike's* critical and popular reception (p. 6). And in this, he has truly succeeded. The author situates the creation and early reception of the painting with a fascinating narrative of the struggles of labor, including a history of well-known labor leaders who may have inspired Koehler. Dennis's account of Lucy Parsons, a labor activist who led a protest in 1885 to Chicago's Board of Trade and whose husband was hanged on Nov 11, 1887, as one of the so-called instigators of the Haymarket Riot, is particularly engaging. Along with Parsons, Dennis includes brief biographies of other important labor leaders, such as Mathilde Fraziska Giesler Anneke (1817-84), who with her husband founded the working-class *Neue Koelnische Zeitung,* and immigrated to Milwaukee after the failed 1848 revolution (p. 78). Dennis cogently argues that such women may have provided models for the female characters in *The Strike.* He speculates that the woman in the center of the canvas may be a possible "feminist activist" who supports workers' rights (p. 78). Given her middle-class "professional" dress, which clearly contrasts with that of the worker she addresses, the author may certainly be correct in his interpretation (p. 78).

Dennis is, however, at his most compelling when he discusses the ways in which the image has been caught up in the social movements of the twentieth century–especially with those of the 1960s and 1970s. We learn, for example, that Lee Baxandall loaned it to union organizer "Moe" Morris Foner (an executive secretary of a local of the Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees in New York City), who proudly displayed the painting in an art gallery at the Union's New York Headquarters as part of his "Bread and Roses" program–a program meant to enrich the cultural lives of union members (p. 176). The *New York Times* published an account of the painting's history and afterlife that ultimately led to the Whitney Museum of American Art's inclusion of *The Strike* in a major traveling exhibit. As in the nineteenth century, the critical responses to its rediscovery were often speculative and factually incorrect. In effect, the painting served as a "generic, all-purpose representation of labor on the march" (p. 180).

Because Dennis focuses on the image's reception, the reader occupies an historical ringside seat to the ways in which critical interpretation is shaped by cultural politics. The author provides clear textual evidence that what passes for historical fact is often based on either supposition or wishful thinking. For instance, the well-known art historian Patricia Hill repeats the "unverified claims that Koehler grew up in a socialist family" and that he had been a member of the Socialist Party during his student years in Germany (p. 193). In an exhibition in Germany, a German-born Marxist playwright fancifully states that "'armed police [were] assembling behind the mansion,"' implying that the artist was recording an actual historical event (p. 194). Even in the English-language version of this catalogue, "The Other America," critic Reinhard Schultz repeats Hill's assertion that Koehler "'grew up in a socialist family"' (p. 194). Similarly, Schultz's statement that "'[t]he painting, which today is generally considered to be the labor masterpiece of American painting, never received much attention from U.S. art critics until its rediscovery in the 1970s"' would also seem to be something of an exaggeration (p. 195).

Schultz's designation of *The Strike* as a "masterpiece" is a sentiment with which Dennis agrees. The latter has written his well-illustrated book so that viewers and critics may recognize this image as a "masterpiece" which "deserves to be remembered" (p. 7). Given what its critical reception tells us about labor activism in the United States and Europe, he is most certainly correct in his assessment about the importance of this long-forgotten nineteenth-century painting.

Notes

[1]. Erika Doss, "Toward an Iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers and the Work Ethic in American Art, 1930-1945," *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 53.

[2]. Bill Brown, "The Public Life of Painting," review of Stephen Biel's *American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting*, *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (June 2006): 485-494.

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