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Robert Koehler's The Strike: The Improbable Story of an Iconic 1886 Painting of Labor Protest

James M. Dennis
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Every painting of cultural worth should have a chronicler as thorough and comprehensive as James M. Dennis. A professor emeritus of art history at the University of Wisconsin, Dennis has two missions here, the first being to explain the artistic and social conditions that gestated Robert Koehler's 1886 oil painting of factory workers on the point of rebellion, and the second to trace how the painting has been used to advance the cause of organized labor.

Koehler was born in Germany in 1850 but moved with his family to Milwaukee when he was four years old. While still a young man, he returned to Germany to study art. Koehler came from a working-class background, but was never a fierce partisan for the laborers. He was, however, sensitive to class struggle and to the forces intensifying that conflict. The upshot was The Strike, a canvas measuring just over nine-by-six feet that depicted two dozen or so workers streaming out of a factory and facing the top-hatted, grim-faced owner. On the margins of the crowd, one man picks up stones and another argues with a woman (possibly his wife), while a second woman wearing ragged clothes holds a baby in her arms and stares expectantly at the scene unfolding. It is a starkly dramatic tableau. Koehler would later say that the painting was chiefly inspired by the 1877 railroad strike in America and was not the representation of any particular place.

"Even as Koehler chose to depict this traditional scene," Dennis writes, "labor unrest and ideological ferment were roiling the urban-industrial world in Europe and America. With machines rendering handicraft rapidly obsolete, factory owners, intent on cutting labor costs, demanded long hours at the lowest possible wages from a modestly skilled workforce." Painted in Germany, The Strike was soon thereafter brought to America for an exhibition in New York City, where it was generally well received by the popular press. From there, it made the rounds of galleries in Munich, Paris, Milwaukee, Chicago (at the 1893 World's Fair), and elsewhere before ultimately sinking into oblivion at the Minneapolis Public Library. Koehler, who died in 1917, spent his final years painting portraits, often of the well-to-do.

In 1971, the American "New Left" activist, Lee Baxandall, purchased The Strike from the library and set about using it as an icon for organized labor, both through exhibitions in America and abroad and by allowing its reproduction in articles and on posters and magazines. He also sold prints of the painting. After more than fifteen years of exploiting its value as propaganda, Baxandall sold The Strike to another collector who, in 1990, sold it to the Deutsches Historiches Museum in Berlin, where it now resides.

Through such detailed historical footnoting, Dennis demonstrates the intricacies by which a piece of art can simultaneously reflect society while entwining itself into it.

EDWARD MORRIS (March / April 2011)

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