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book review of

Robert Koehler's The Strike by James M. Dennis

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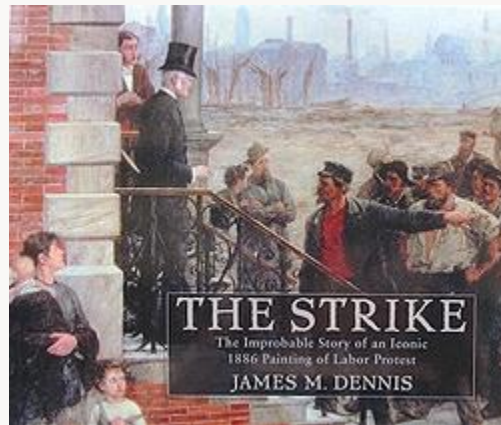
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James M. Dennis, *Robert Koehler's The Strike: The Improbable Story of an Iconic 1886 Painting of Labor Protest*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. 235 pp., 67 b/w figures; 8 color plates \$24.95 ISBN: 978-0-299-25134-5 (paperback)

With James Dennis's comprehensive study of Robert Koehler's seminal painting, *The Strike*, a work long out of the public view and often neglected in the history of nineteenth-century culture and art, has returned to prominence. It is now on view in the permanent collection of the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. Dennis's text astutely situates the canvas within the context of nineteenth-century debates, painstakingly revealing how the painting was often a touchstone for controversy or neglect from the moment of its creation. First recognized as an object of critical importance, because it visualized a generic strike during a period of social unrest, the painting later lost its relevance when the following generations regarded the scene as yesterday's news once the world battle for worker's rights abated. Dennis makes intelligent use of the documentation in his possession, demonstrating how *The Strike* reemerged from obscurity and rose to a significant position in the Berlin museum, where it is on display.

Dennis's text, considerably reinforced by the original research of Lee Baxandall—who is given the deserved credit for having rescued the painting from benign neglect in the basement of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts—examines the painting from a series of interlocking vantage points.^[1] In the first section of the book, he reconstructs the career of the painter, Robert Koehler, from his earliest art training in Milwaukee and Manhattan and then on to Munich from 1865–79. The second chapter chronicles Koehler's interest in painting scenes of fashionable women in order to find patrons and receive commissions, a period of time in Munich from 1869–92 when *The Strike* was completed. In the third chapter, he focuses on Koehler's earliest images of workers, including the completion of the small painting of *The Socialist*, which set the scene for his compassion and sympathy for the plight of workers at the hands of unruly capitalists.

The second part of the book, divided into four chapters, carefully examines the "Origin and Initial Reception of The Strike." Examining the importance of the railroad strike in the United States in 1877 gives Dennis the opportunity to tie the genesis of the composition to

contemporary events, however, without pinpointing the exact activity that influenced Koehler's composition. In examining the possible influences that helped shape the painting, Dennis also mentions other significant protest paintings that could have played a role in the creation of *The Strike*, but again without providing evidence that there existed a composition of a worker's strike that moved Koehler to create his own composition. However, the author convincingly argues that protest paintings in Europe were becoming fashionable subjects for painters. In the third chapter of the section, the importance of the historical context from 1877–86 reinforces the timeliness of Koehler's image by focusing on workers's strife, and the importance of improving the life of workers with better hours and increased pay. After establishing the historical background for the painting, Dennis turns to its reception at exhibitions, first in Munich (1888) where it received a silver medal (104), then in Paris at the Exposition Universelle in 1889. Koehler expected that his painting would be better received, but the work raised troubling issues that disturbed many viewers because it visualized unsettling labor problems. However, Dennis notes, this was only the beginning of the difficulties that the painting faced during its exhibition history.

Focusing on the United States after the 1889 showing in Paris, Dennis emphasizes Koehler's Milwaukee roots. Believing that he had the opportunity to sell the painting to a collector did not prepare Koehler for the ambivalent reactions that the painting elicited in newspaper reviews. Some sided with the workers's position; others saw the painting as too propagandistic. Linkage with political events of the time made *The Strike* even more difficult for members of an audience to understand and assess dispassionately (116–117). The fame of the work led to its being shown at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, but surprisingly for Koehler, the painting was completely bypassed, failing to generate either attention or critical commentary. Dennis raises issues as to why this occurred. Was the Chicago World's Fair whitewashing anything political by refusing to discuss it in the press? Had aesthetic interests changed substantially, focusing on bucolic landscapes at the expense of paintings with a strong naturalistic narrative that examined issues directly, although perhaps not pleasantly for powerful industrialists? Despite these possible issues, as Dennis notes, *The Strike* did appear in a book illustrating the *World's Masterpieces of Modern Painting* at the Chicago Fair (1893). But time was running out for a favorable reception of *The Strike*; even the political left failed to maintain their championship of the painting after 1894 (122). By the end of this section of the book, Dennis has admirably demonstrated how complex the reception history of *The Strike* had become. But there is much more to learn about the fate of the painting and the beginning chapters in no way prepare the reader for what will happen later in this publication.

Struggling as an artist, and eager for acceptance and commissions, Koehler received an offer to teach and manage the art school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1893. Far from the political agitation of Europe, and free from the constant necessity of having to succeed amidst tough competition, Minneapolis was a pleasant tonic. Although the art scene was not as progressive as elsewhere, there were individuals, such as T. B. Walker, who were building painting collections that stressed ties with European art. But Walker, an avowed capitalist, was not going to add a painting such as *The Strike* to his own personal collection. Running the Minneapolis Art School allowed Koehler the opportunity to make a living. Unfortunately, the art works that he created from then on were usually pleasant commissions designed to appeal to an upper class clientele; the works are devoid of the intense social implications of *The Strike*. Without

saying as much in his text, Dennis implies that Koehler's work was no longer at the cutting edge of creativity. Having established this context, he returns to the situation of *The Strike*.

Koehler brought *The Strike* with him to Minneapolis where the painting was housed on the fourth floor of the newly built Minneapolis Public Library (123). Had he been aware that a number of European paintings that were being produced around the theme of the strike (e.g. Hendrik Luyten (1859–1945), *The Strike*, 1888, or Hubert Herkomer (1849–1914), *On Strike*, 1891, Jules Adler (1865–1952), *The Strike*, 1899), Koehler might have been reassured about the significance and value of what he had produced in his earlier canvas; and perhaps the Minneapolis art cognoscenti might have been more aware of its importance. But this was not to be the case since the painting was entering a period of neglect and eventual obscurity, first in Minneapolis and then elsewhere in the United States. All of these aspects are revealed in the third part of the book “Decades of Neglect” culminating in a chapter on *The Strike's* “Ambiguous Purchase and Gradual Obscurity, 1900–1917” when the painting was officially purchased by the Minneapolis Public Library in 1901 only to hang in an upper hallway of the building (156). A sad repository for what was probably the best painting by the artist and one that could favorably take its place among the best paintings on similar subjects in Europe.

The fourth section of the book “Rediscovery and Belated Acclaim” begins with the neglect of the painting in Minneapolis, but then examines the rescue of the work when again it became relevant to the plight of the workers and their struggle for better treatment. During the 1930s and 40s, union organization was again at the forefront; protest paintings were produced and Dennis introduces Philip Evergood's *American Tragedy* (1937) and Harry Gottlieb's *Home Sweet Home (Their Only Roof)*, 1935–36, as examples of workers's discontent. In the midst of all of these changes in the American scene, Lee Baxandall became the rescuer of *The Strike*. His discovery of the painting, and the recognition that the work had to be restored (it had been badly damaged over the years) eventually led to his securing the work for himself, leading to another round of changes, during which the painting was saved from further humiliation and returned to public view. Between 1972–83, the painting reemerged in a series of exhibitions and publications, which helped it partially reclaim its national fame. Some art historians began to write about the canvas. And in 1983, as noted in Dennis's final chapter, Germany reclaimed what they considered a national treasure, exhibiting *The Strike* publicly in Berlin (191). The exhibition in Berlin attracted many reviews, and the painting was widely reproduced in various publications. The painting was back in the public eye, leading eventually to its being purchased.

While the history that Dennis presents in his book is complex and convoluted, no reader will ever be bored by what is presented. Seldom has a book so carefully plotted the vicissitudes of meaning and reception by focusing on one object over such a long period of time. What is so fruitful about this methodology is that it provides a clear model of what can be done to bring a painting to life by reexamining the historical eras through which a work has passed. The changes in interpretation are both meaningful and enlightening to the reader. Through this amazingly clear and evocative text, one sees the methodology of a committed art and cultural historian working to develop a case for interpretation that sheds light on Koehler's masterpiece, now unfortunately lost to the view of the public in the United States. Dennis's book also becomes a model for younger art historians, as they are often distracted from

looking at an actual work of art, and have had little chance to reconstruct how a painting's meanings have changed over time.

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Notes

[1] The history of the painting languishing in Minneapolis, in painting storage, is well documented in the text.