



# **Robert Koehler's *The Strike*: The Improbable Story of an Iconic 1886 Painting of Labor Protest (Studies in American Thought and Culture)**

*James M. Dennis*

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Every work of art has a story behind it. In 1886 the German American artist Robert Koehler painted a dramatic wide-angle depiction of an imagined confrontation between factory workers and their employer. He called this oil painting *The Strike*. It has had a long and tumultuous international history as a symbol of class struggle and the cause of workers' rights. First exhibited just days before the tragic Chicago Haymarket riot, *The Strike* became an inspiration for the labor movement. In the midst of the campaign for an eight-hour workday, it gained international attention at expositions in Paris, Munich, and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Though the painting fell into obscurity for decades in the early twentieth century, *The Strike* lived on in wood-engraved reproductions in labor publications. Its purchase, restoration, and exhibition by New Left activist Lee Baxandall in the early 1970s launched it to international fame once more, and collectors and galleries around the world scrambled to acquire it. It is now housed in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, Germany.

Art historian James M. Dennis has crafted a compelling "biography" of Koehler's painting: its exhibitions, acclaim, neglect, and rediscovery. He introduces its German-born creator and politically diverse audiences and traces the painting's acceptance and rejection through the years, exploring how class and sociopolitical movements affected its reception. Dennis considers the significance of key figures in the painting, such as the woman asserting her presence in the center of action. He compellingly explains why *The Strike* has earned its identity as *the* iconic painting of the industrial labor movement.

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