

BOOK REVIEW

On the Artistic Representation of Industrial Disputes in the Shadow of Repression in European Art, from 1870 to 1914 and Beyond. Ed. by Filip Dorssemont. [Law and Visual Jurisprudence, Vol. 15.] Springer, Cham, 2024. ix, 210 pp. Ill. € 174.39. (E-book: € 119.83.)

Anyone interested in the history of industrial disputes is likely to be familiar with the renowned painting “Der Streik” (1886) by Robert Koehler (1850–1917). However, if asked to provide additional examples, I would need to take a moment and reflect. As a legal historian specializing in the history of social law, art history lies somewhat outside my primary focus. Yet, after reading the book under review here, I now recognize that I had underestimated the significance of art history for an understanding of the broader history of social conflicts.

This edited volume explores the representation of workers and conflict in artistic production, a topic that bridges the fields of social history and art history. It builds on the 1992 landmark exhibition “Streik: Realität und Mythos” at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, which addressed similar themes, though with a focus on the history of Germany. While the exhibition was interdisciplinary in nature, this book takes an even more specific approach by examining these themes through the lens of academic labour law – a field where practitioners typically have limited engagement with art, history, or art history. The initiative for this exploration comes from Filip Dorssemont, a professor of labour law at the Université catholique de Louvain in Belgium and an art history enthusiast who recently completed his master’s degree in art history. Dorssemont’s dual expertise underscores his profound interest in the intersection of labour law and artistic expression.

The introductory chapter, titled “Some Perspectives on the Representation of Industrial Disputes Under the Shadow of Repression in European Art (1870–1914)” and authored by Dorssemont himself, serves as an invitation to his labour law colleagues to expand their perspectives and contribute new dimensions to this interdisciplinary dialogue. His chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the topic. It establishes a clear temporal framework, focusing on the *belle époque* – the period between 1870 and 1914, marked by rapid industrialization, the rise of the modern labour movement, and the artistic innovations of Impressionism. Dorssemont also clearly defines the spatial scope of his analysis, centring on European art. Throughout the chapter, several key iconological themes are examined: the causes of strikes, the nature of social dialogue, discussions surrounding the act of striking, depictions of individuals on strike, and the aftermath of strikes, including repression and the challenges faced by those willing but unable to work. The chapter concludes with a series of observations, addressing topics such as the identification of the industries represented

in the artworks, the motivations and potential involvement of the artists, and the rarity of strike-related themes in art – what the author refers to as “white elephants”. Gender dynamics within these representations are briefly touched upon as well. Ultimately, this introduction charts largely uncharted territory, laying the groundwork for future research in this interdisciplinary field. It underscores the potential for a multidisciplinary approach, arguing that examining artworks through the lens of labour law and industrial relations can significantly enrich our iconographical and iconological understanding of this artistic heritage. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, of course. Following his statement, the book presents four chapters authored by different labour lawyers.

Edoardo Ales opens with a chapter on the early phases of collective action and their visual representations, focusing on the struggle for better labour conditions. He presents a collection of images connected to events that took place between 1875 and 1914 across Europe and the Americas. Various types of images evoke the emotions stirred by these events. He groups them into three pairs: “pain and despair”, “rage and anger”, and “strength and hope”. The images and the narrative structure of his chapter are organized around these three emotional pairs. Despite their differences in time and space, these events, images, and emotions all stem from the disregard shown by employers and public authorities toward workers’ needs and rights. A recurring theme throughout is the unwarranted violence that employers did not hesitate to direct toward workers. The visual representation of early collective action and the emotions that fuelled it not only helps in understanding and commemorating these events more effectively but also amplifies those emotions. Consequently, these emotions influenced decision-makers, leading to a shift in their legal reasoning that prioritizes improved working conditions. By organizing visual representations in this way, we can better comprehend the social context in which collective actions unfolded, the motivations of its participants, and the regulatory frameworks in which they operated.

Claude Didry shifts the focus to the Parisian *midinettes*’ strike of August–September 1910. *Midinettes* were young female workers, primarily employed in the fashion and garment industry. They went on strike to enforce their demands for wage increases to compensate for rising living costs. Despite some initial success, in the end they lost because the movement lost momentum. The *midinettes*’ strike led to a series of caricatures published in the avant-garde magazine *L’Assiette au beurre*. At first glance, these drawings by the cartoonist Maurice Radiguet seem to mock the amateurism of the striking women. However, Didry argues that this interpretation is misleading. Radiguet, who was part of an avant-garde social movement, subverted the traditional strike iconography: instead of depicting men and tragic scenes, he portrayed women and framed the strike in a festive light.

The next chapter, by Csilla Kollonay-Lehoczky, turns to Hungary and its neighbouring region of Moldova. She begins by noting that the period between 1867 and 1918 is often referred to as the period of dualism in Hungarian history. However, she identifies additional dualisms, such as the contrast between the nation’s semi-feudal agricultural society and its remarkable artistic progress, as well as the division between Eastern and Western Europe. Moreover, she argues that turning points in art are closely linked to historical turning points. The chapter offers a sweeping journey through

Hungary's history, from the peasant-serf society of the nineteenth century, through industrialization, the communist era, and into the post-communist period.

Joanna Unterschütz follows a similar historical trajectory, focusing on Poland, where industrialization began in the mid-eighteenth century and developed over two centuries. She begins with Käthe Kollwitz's "The Weaver's Revolt", a series of lithographs depicting themes such as "Need", "Death", "Conspiracy", and "March of the Weavers". She then examines the artistic reflections of the "forgotten" 1905 Revolution, notably "The Strike" by Stanisław Lentz (1910). Unterschütz extends her analysis beyond the 1870–1914 period to include "The Manifesto" by Wojciech Weiss (1950), offering a broader perspective on the representation of strikes and protests.

The contributions in this volume explore a broad range of diverse perspectives. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde: "Reflections on art are apparently the most individual expression of the most individual emotion". Each chapter offers a different viewpoint on the artistic representation of workers' struggles and conflicts, mostly anchored in national experiences. This diversity enriches rather than detracts from the discussion. Dorsemont's structural introduction provides a solid foundation, guiding the reader toward the following engaging and illustrative case studies that underscore the depth and variety of the topic. The cross-disciplinary approach is a significant strength, with academic labour lawyers passionately delving into the intersections of art history, labour law, and industrial relations. This is exemplified by the personal note by Csilla Kollonay-Lehoczy at the beginning of her chapter:

[...] I have to express that the initial timid hesitation with which, as a lawyer, I set to this work, turned into a feeling of gratification. It helped me (and probably all authors) to discover new contexts, connections between industry, art, law and politics – links, that obviously exist like the air around us, but we do not perceive them, or at least not with the attention or intensity that they would deserve, so that they could support and contribute to each other. The topic has significance for the history of culture and painting, but also enriches the history and directions of the regulation of labour, its application, labour law and labour politics.

By combining different fields, the book facilitates a deeper understanding of how industrial disputes were artistically represented in European art during a period of significant historical transformation. Although the book's specificity could pose challenges in terms of finding a dedicated audience, its innovative approach and wide-ranging insights will potentially appeal across disciplines, bridging the divide between specialized academic research and broader intellectual curiosity. I hope this initiative will not stand alone, but instead serve as the starting point for a series of similar efforts. It would be valuable, for instance, to explore the representation of workplace accidents in art, as just one possibility.

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