

Striking Scenes: Robert Koehler, The Strike (1886), and competing visions of labor-capital conflict in the Gilded Age



These days it's rare to find a United States history textbook that does not include a reproduction of Robert Koehler's 1886 painting, *The Strike*. Indeed, a quick survey of leading college-level textbooks finds that it is the most popular image used to open a chapter on the industrial revolution. What is it about the painting that accounts for this appeal? Making sense of this question requires both a detailed analysis of the painting as well as a discussion of the Gilded Age context in which it was created.



The Strike captures a moment of confrontation as workers pour out of a factory to gather outside the office of their employer. Their many conversations and quizzical looks, not to mention their hurried movements, indicate that the strike has been called only moments before. This stop-action, photographic quality (note the boy running on the right) lends the scene an air of palpable tension, suggesting to the viewer that something dramatic is about to happen. Unlike most scenes of labor unrest painted or drawn in the late nineteenth century, Koehler presented these workers as sympathetic characters, painting each as an individual rather than as nondescript members of a mob. Many also appear to be of foreign birth, but again Koehler shuns the popular trope of depicting the immigrant worker as a wild-eyed, violent anarchist. The ubiquity of the latter is evidenced in figures 2 and 3 that illustrate two prominent labor clashes in the spring of 1886, the same time Koehler first displayed his painting. Notice the violent postures of the workers in both images as they destroy property and brandish stones and guns. Such scenes suggest workers who are incapable of rational discourse and who reflexibly turn to violence to get their way. In contrast, Koehler presents even the striker speaking to the factory owner—presumably a leader and one especially fired up about the perceived injustice that triggered the walkout—as earnest but calm. Looking upward at the boss (a clever depiction of their upper- and lower-class status), he gestures toward the gathering crowd as if to say, These men will not accept the wage cut, or the speed up, or the dangerous conditions.

This theme of moderation is also conveyed by Koehler's liberal use of square hats on the strikers. Made of paper, they were originally developed by skilled woodworkers, most likely to keep sawdust out of their hair. But nineteenth-century artists placed square hats on any worker they wished to distinguish as skilled, regardless of trade. In so doing, they suggested to viewers their subjects were respectable, hardworking men of American birth who might belong to unions but were less prone to strike than their recently arrived, unskilled, foreign-born counterparts. By including so many of these workers in the crowd, Koehler reveals his pro-labor sympathies. The painting suggests a work environment so deplorable that even the skilled, sober-minded, American-born workers have walked out.



Fig. 2. "The Street Railroad Strike in New York," Puck Magazine (April 1886). Courtesy of the Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

Yet at the same time, *The Strike* is fraught with tension, indicating that at any moment the workers' composure might dissolve into violence. Clearly, the strike has been called only minutes earlier, as we see workers pouring out of the factory (the only one in the scene with no smoke emanating from its chimney), several of them pulling on their coats and many speaking in clusters, seeking additional information. Behind them dark, foreboding storm clouds loom on the horizon. Most notable is the worker in the foreground stooping to pick up a rock. Maybe he is only a moment away from hurling it at the boss, an act that will surely trigger more violence and lead to clashes with the police or militia. Maybe he will opt for an act of symbolic violence and throw it through a window. Maybe he will simply toss it up and down in his hand as a dramatic but ultimately harmless show of anger. Similarly, we see in the center foreground a woman trying to calm down another angry worker, presumably her husband. As with the worker picking up the rock, the viewer is left hanging, wondering whether peace or violence will prevail. Will she succeed in deterring him from a rash act? Koehler provides no answer.



Fig. 3. "The anarchist riot in Chicago—A dynamite bomb exploding among the police," illustration by Thure de Thulstrup, Harper's Weekly (May 15, 1886). Courtesy of the American Social History Project, New York, NY.

This theme of pervasive tension and anxiety over what will happen next is also furthered by the mother with two children at the far left. Apprehension verging on terror is evident on the faces of the mother and of child standing next to her. Here Koehler is presenting a familiar element in Gilded Age labor-capital conflict imagery—the powerless and vulnerable wife and children standing on the edge of a scene dominated by male workers, police, and employers. The message in this set piece is that the fate of innocent women and children hang on the decisions of men. As indicated in the accompanying examples (see figures 4 and 5) from *Puck*, the vast majority of labor-capital conflict scenes took the side of the employer and thus criticized the deluded American worker for shirking his primary responsibility of providing for his family in favor of pursuing a misguided strike or boycott. Note how the woman in figure 4 pleads with her husband to resist the power of the power-hungry labor agitator. Figure 5 presents an even starker scene of half-starved women and children victimized by their husbands' succumbing to the wily deceptions of the union leader. Again, as with his positive depiction of the gathering workers, we see how Koehler departs from a dominant trope. While he presents the mother and children as powerless and vulnerable people who will likely suffer the consequences of the action unfolding, he leaves open the question of culpability. If the workers persist in their strike, their families will suffer for lack of income for food and rent. But they will also suffer if the strikers relent before the capitalist and accept his wage cut.

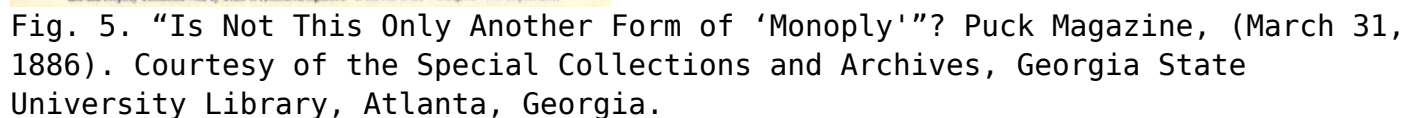
This theme of ambiguity extends to Koehler's depiction of the factory owner. On the one hand, he appears like Ebenezer Scrooge (replete with a nervous Bob Cratchit figure behind him), standing stiff and emotionless as the worker below him makes his appeal. Note also how Koehler's creation of two distinct worlds—the hardscrabble, grimy landscape of the workers' world and the elegant, ordered space of the factory owner—serves to heighten the sense of widening class distinctions and intensifying class conflict. From this perspective, the viewer is inclined to see him as the quintessential cold-hearted capitalist. There seems little chance that he will accede to the workers' demands. And yet, there he is, willing to come before his workers and listen. Perhaps his grim countenance reflects not hostility toward his workers, but the great dilemma he faces: he might want to agree to the workers' demands that he restore a wage cut, or reduce the hours of labor, but doing so would raise his costs and imperil his business in an age of intense competition. Again, Koehler leaves his audience wondering.



Fig. 4. "The New Slavery and the New Slave Driver," Puck Magazine. Courtesy of the Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

This uncertainty in the painting over both what is about to happen and which side is in the right –workers or employer–illuminates the dilemmas posed by rapid industrialization in the late nineteenth century. Many people agreed that social turmoil threatened the future of the republic, but they disagreed over its causes and, especially, its solutions. Koehler presents us with workers who appear hardworking and worthy of sympathy. Yet, his inclusion of the man picking up the rock suggests that he is acknowledging a troubling tendency among some workers to embrace radicalism and violence. Similarly, Koehler presents a factory owner willing to talk to his disgruntled workers, suggesting that not all capitalists were greedy and heartless. Yet the man's stern gaze and the rough landscape of the workers' world (and the fact that they have just called a strike) serves as an admission that some capitalists bear responsibility for the current labor-capital strife. Koehler is content only to highlight this dilemma and he declines to offer a solution. We can deepen our understanding of Koehler's intentions in crafting so complicated yet uncertain a scene by taking a close look at the period in which he lived and worked. The Gilded Age, defined roughly as the period from 1865-1900, was an era of dualities. As the name suggests, many considered it a golden age, one marked by spectacular advances in industrial output and technological innovation that transformed the United States from a predominantly agricultural nation that ranked well behind England, Germany, and France to the world's most formidable industrial power by 1900. Americans celebrated one astonishing achievement after another, from the completion of the transcontinental railroad (1869) to the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge (1883), from the laying of the Atlantic Cable connecting London and New York by telegraph (1866) to the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty (1886). On these occasions and seemingly at any opportunity, Americans invoked the optimistic themes of progress, expansion, growth, and success. "[E]very American citizen must contemplate with the utmost pride and enthusiasm the growth and expansion of our country," offered President Grover Cleveland in a typical address in 1893, "... the wonderful thrift and enterprise of our people, and the demonstrated superiority of our free government." Nowhere was this ebullient spirit more evident than at the world's fairs held in Philadelphia (1876) and Chicago (1893), events that

And yet, in both instances, the year following these world's fairs witnessed massive railroad strikes (the Great Uprising in 1877 and Pullman in 1894) that offered vivid evidence that there was more to this upbeat vision of national development than initially met the eye. Put another way, the name Gilded Age also suggests a disturbing superficiality to all this evidence of progress. As with a gilded piece of jewelry, one needed only to scratch the surface of the thin gold layer to find the cold, hard, black iron that lay beneath. What many Americans found were the darker consequences of industrialization, especially the immense power accrued by big businesses and capitalists, the growing number of workers living in squalid slums, and the frequent episodes of labor-capital violence (the period 1880-1900 witnessed nearly 37,000 strikes). If these were the trends of the future, warned an aging Walt Whitman in 1879, then "our republican experiment, notwithstanding all its surface-successes, is at heart an unhealthy failure."



Whitman was hardly a lone voice of concern, for the Gilded Age produced a profusion of books and articles focused on what many at the time referred to as “the labor question” or “the social question.” No less than three special congressional committees (1879, 1883, and 1898) convened to investigate and take voluminous testimony “on the relations between labor and capital.” One of the most pointed and widely read analyses of the Gilded Age’s social turmoil was the book *Progress and Poverty*, written in 1879 by the social reformer Henry George. The title itself captured perfectly the vexing duality emerging in late-nineteenth century America: industrialization brought both greater

progress for a few and increased poverty for many. "It is as though an immense wedge were being forced, not underneath society, but through society," wrote George. "Those who are above the point of separation are elevated, but those who are below are crushed down." George warned that the very fate of the republic was at stake. "This association of *poverty with progress*," he asserted, "is the great enigma of our times... It is the riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilization, and which not to answer is to be destroyed."

Workers and farmers echoed these concerns about economic inequality. In 1878, for example, the Knights of Labor adopted a Constitution, the preamble to which denounced the "recent alarming development and aggression of aggregated wealth" that if left unchecked "will inevitably lead to the pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses." In 1892, Populist leader Ignatius Donnelly sounded a similar alarm. "[W]e meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and [the Courts] ... The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty." Most farmers and workers demanded the government take a greater role in regulating the economy in the name of preserving the republic.

Conservatives, however, offered a very different interpretation of both increased social turmoil and poverty. In the 1870s, middle- and upper-class Americans celebrated and embraced as never before laissez-faire individualism, the most extreme form of which was social Darwinism. According to this view, the greatest danger to the American republic was not the widening gap between the rich and the poor, but rather the possibility that the poor would mobilize *collectively* against their betters, either via the ballot or the bullet, and take what did not belong to them. "To rising Americans," writes historian Heather Cox Richardson, "it seemed as if the system worked for everyone and faced threats only from those who had no intention of working and planned to use the government to redistribute wealth to them."

As a consequence, members of the middle- and upper-classes in the 1870s demonized the poor as unfit, grasping losers and took steps to sharply curtail charity, which they deemed dangerous to the morals and manners of the needy. This spirit of social Darwinist hostility toward the poor was most famously captured in a widely reprinted sermon by Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, the nation's most renowned preacher. Dismissing the claims of workers that they could not live in dignity on wages of a dollar a day, he asserted that too many workingmen "insist on smoking and drinking beer." A frugal workingman could support his family on a diet of bread and water, argued Beecher, and "the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live." This hostility also manifested itself in the widespread agreement among elites that working-class protesters be met with state-sponsored violence. The declaration of the *Independent*, a religious weekly, was typical. If "the policeman, knocking out the brains of the rioter" failed to put down the mob, "then bullets and

bayonets, canister and grape—with no shame or pretense, in order to frighten men, but with fearful and destructive reality—constitute the one remedy and one duty of the hour. ... Napoleon was right when he said the way to deal with a mob is to exterminate it.” To speed the military response and provide a haven for themselves should the “dangerous classes” arise, wealthy urbanites sponsored the construction of large armories in major cities.

Central to wealthy and powerful Americans’ dismissal of the protests of workers and the pleas by reformers like Henry George was the idea that these agitators had become infected with one or more of the varieties of European radicalisms like socialism, communism, and anarchism, a notion vividly illustrated in figure 3, the image from *Harper’s* showing the labor leaders involved in the Haymarket bombing looking like crazed European radicals. The United States, they insisted, was a classless society. “[W]e have among us a pernicious communistic spirit,” wrote Allan Pinkerton, head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency (whose real business was, of course, violent strikebreaking) in the wake of the great 1877 railroad strike, “which is demoralizing workmen, continually creating a deeper and more intense antagonism between labor and capital ... it must be crushed out completely, or we shall be compelled to submit to greater excesses and more overwhelming disasters in the near future.”

It was in this context that Robert Koehler commenced painting what became his best-known work, *The Strike*. Born in Hamburg in 1850, he came to the United States at the age of four with his family. They settled in Milwaukee where his father, a skilled printer, enjoyed a successful career. Young Robert grew up studying art and working as a lithographer. At age twenty-three he traveled to Munich to study with some of Germany’s leading painters. Returning to New York in 1875, he continued his studies at the New York Academy of Design and Art Students League. He returned to Munich in 1879, maintaining his primary residence there until 1892, but also returning to the United States nearly once a year.

It is not entirely clear when Koehler commenced work on *The Strike*, but according to the artist’s own account, its initial inspiration was the great railroad strike of 1877, a nationwide event known as the Great Uprising that saw more than a hundred workers killed by police, militia, and federal troops. He did not witness the violence personally, but the events received extraordinary coverage in the press, including the illustrated weeklies like *Harper’s Weekly* and *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly*, for weeks afterward. Although inspired by events in the United States, he began the project in Germany. As Koehler later recalled,

The Strike was in my thoughts for years... Its actual inception was in Munich and there the first sketches were made. I had always known the working man and with some I had been intimate. My father was a machinist and I was very much at home in the works where he was employed. Well, when the time was good and ready, I went from Munich

over to England and in London and Birmingham, I made studies and sketches of the working man—his gestures, his clothes. The atmosphere and setting of the picture were done in England, as I wanted the smoke. The figures were studied from life, but were painted in Germany.

Reflecting these diverse sources of inspiration, as well as the universality of labor-capital conflict in the industrialized world, Koehler set his painting in an unidentified, nowhere-but-everywhere archetype of an industrial town.

Koehler first exhibited the painting in the United States in 1886, one of the most tumultuous years of labor-capital strife in the nation's history. Despite this tense context and the painting's subject matter, it received very positive reviews. The reviewer for the *New York Times*, for example, while criticizing Koehler for being overly dramatic in places (notably, the inclusion of the mother and children on the left) nonetheless hailed it as "the most significant work" of the Academy of Design's spring exhibition. One month later *Harper's Weekly*, the nation's leading illustrated journal of news, politics, and culture, brought the scene before an enormous audience by publishing a reproduction. The painting later was exhibited in Germany and France, where in 1889 it won Honorable Mention at the Paris Exhibition.

But this achievement marked the apex of Robert Koehler's international fame. In 1892, he left Germany for good and moved to New York. After spending more than a year there as a portrait artist, he accepted an invitation to join the faculty of the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts. He spent the rest of his life in Minneapolis, teaching, writing, and painting portraits and landscapes. In 1900 he organized what became an annual exhibition of artwork in Minneapolis, the continued success of which led eventually to the erection of a large building for the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts in 1915. Koehler died two years later on April 23, 1917, at the age of 66.

Koehler's most famous work, *The Strike*, faded into obscurity. In 1901, Koehler had sold it to the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts, which subsequently gave it to the Minneapolis Public Library. The library eventually placed the painting in storage, where it languished all but forgotten until 1971. A leftist literary critic named Lee Baxendall saw a reproduction of *The Strike* in a book and was so taken he set out to find it. To his astonishment, the Minneapolis Public Library sold it to him for a mere \$750. Baxendall arranged for the painting to be restored and then hung it in the headquarters of a New York labor union. In 1974 he lent the painting to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York for inclusion in its *The Painters' America: Rural and Urban Life, 1810-1910* exhibition. The painting's great size and powerful tableau drew significant attention, especially when compared to the rest of the works on display. "A harsh, brutal painting bullied its way into the Whitney Museum's 19th Century 'Painter's America' exhibition recently," observed a reviewer from the *Village Voice*. "Amid the genteel genre works depicting 'Afternoon Tea' and

'Country Wedding,' it shoves for attention and gets it."

Indeed, from this point forward, *The Strike* has never lacked for attention. Three factors explain its popularity. First, apart from its artistic merit, the work reflects better than perhaps any other image produced in the Gilded Age the conflicting visions and resulting debate over the proper role of government in regulating the economy, the rights of workers to form unions and strike for better wages and working conditions, and the impact of growing disparities of wealth on America's republican traditions. Koehler himself seems to have recognized the unique power of the painting. "Yes, I consider *The Strike* the best," offered Koehler in a 1901 interview, "that is the strongest and most individual work I have yet done."

Second, the recent popularity of *The Strike* is also explained by the emergence of social history in the 1960s. Historians committed to writing "history from the bottom up" uncovered/illuminated a vibrant new labor history that took workers seriously as historical agents who struggled to protect their families and communities against large and impersonal forces of industrial capitalism. Although painted in the 1880s, Koehler's work reflects a similar disposition.

Finally, the popularity of *The Strike* reflects a more recent trend in history: the treatment of images as historical documents that make complex cultural statements, rather than as mere illustrations. Or as I often put it to audiences of students or teachers, historical images are primary sources that are every bit as valid as traditional primary sources such as letters, diaries, speeches, and editorials. Analyzing and unpacking historical images can reveal important information about an era's politics, social relations, and cultural values. But because the creation and preservation of historical images necessarily privileged those who possessed greater resources and power, we find that while labor-capital conflict in the Gilded Age generated a vast number of images, the great majority, as noted earlier, depicted workers in a negative light. As one worker observed in 1877, "[I]f a workingman speaks his mind, the public have theirs so full of pictures of him and his doings in the illustrated papers, that he is listened to as if he was a convicted rough." On the rare occasions that an artist depicted workers in a neutral or positive light, it was most often as an *individual* laborer doing his or her job. On the rare occasions when *groups* of workers were shown in a neutral or positive manner, artists most often chose quiet scenes, such as Winslow Homer's 1873 *Harper's* illustration "[Morning Bell](#)" of workers walking to the factories in Lowell, Massachusetts. Or they showed workers engaged in harmless activities that contain no suggestion of oppression, discontent, or collective resistance, such as Thomas Anshutz's 1880 painting "[The Ironworkers' Noontime](#)," which shows a group of men washing up and resting on their lunch break. In other words, because Koehler's largely positive depiction of workers in *The Strike* is quite rare for the Gilded Age, it appeals to historians, museum curators, documentary filmmakers, and textbook writers seeking to present a social history perspective.

Further reading

Notable works that discuss the life and work of Robert Koehler include: Rena Neumann Coen, *Painting and Sculpture in Minnesota, 1820-1914* (Minneapolis, 1976), Patricia Hills, *The Painters' America: Rural and Urban Life, 1810-1910* (New York, 1974); Peter C. Merrill, "Robert Koehler: Artist in Milwaukee," *Hennepin County History* (Minneapolis, 1988); Thomas O'Sullivan, "Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915," in Michael Conforti, ed., *Minnesota 1900: Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi, 1890-1915* (Newark, Del., 1994).

The *New York Times* commentary on *The Strike* in the 1886 exhibition at the Academy of Design is found in "The Academy of Design: Spring Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures," *New York Times*, April 4, 1886, p. 4. The 1901 interview with Robert Koehler in which he explains the origins of *The Strike* is found in *Milwaukee Journal*, March 23, 1901 (cited and quoted in Hills, *The Painters' America*, p. 123)

The best overviews of the Gilded Age include Jack Beatty, *Age of Betrayal: The Triumph of Money in America, 1865-1900* (New York, 2007), Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905* (New York, 2006), Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York, 2009), Nell Irwin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: United States, 1877-1919* (New York, 1988), Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982).

Works detailing the thought and action of American workers in this period include: David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1993), Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), and Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, Penn., 1996).

Books on labor-capital conflict in the late nineteenth century include James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America* (New York, 2006), David O. Stowell, *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877* (Chicago, 1999), Philip Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York, 1977), Paul Krause, *The Battle For Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh, 1992), and Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, and Nick Salvatore, eds., *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics* (Urbana, Ill., 1999).

For works on the intellectual and philosophical response to labor-capital conflict in the Gilded Age, see Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001), Maureen A. Flanagan, *America*

Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms, 1890s-1920s (New York, 2006), Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), Edward T. O'Donnell, *Talisman of a Lost Hope: Henry George and Gilded Age America* (forthcoming, Columbia University Press), Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

For works on the rising hostility of middle- and upper-class Americans toward workers and the labor movement, see Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (New York, 2001) and Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn., 2008).

Examples of books and articles that treat images as historical documents include Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, N.C., 2004), Gregory M. Pfitzer, *Picturing the Past: Illustrated Histories and the American Imagination, 1840-1900* (Washington, D.C., 2002), Melissa Dabakis, *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture: Monuments, Manliness, and the Work Ethic, 1880-1935* (New York, 1999), and David Jaffee, "Thinking Visually as Historians: Incorporating Visual Methods," *Journal of American History* (2006).

This article originally appeared in issue 11.1 (October, 2010).

Edward T. O'Donnell teaches history at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass. He is co-author (with Jennifer Keene and Saul Cornell) of *Visions of America: A History of the United States*, a new textbook that makes visual analysis of historical images a central part of the narrative.