

# Pictorial Representations of Occupational Accidents in the Nineteenth Century: An Analysis from the Perspective of Risk Prevention

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## Abstract

*Workplace accidents were a pervasive reality during the 19th century, particularly in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, when labor conditions were harsh, and safety measures were virtually nonexistent. Amid this context, painting emerged as a powerful medium for documenting the struggles of the working class, offering both a visual testimony of occupational hazards and a reflection of evolving social awareness. This study examines a selection of Spanish 19th-century paintings through the lens of occupational risk prevention. Using an iconographic and contextual analysis, key works from costumbrismo and social realism are explored. These artworks not only depict workplace accidents but also expose the precarious conditions in which workers operated, highlighting the absence of protective measures and the profound human cost of industrial labor. The analysis is structured around four key themes: the visual representation of workplace accidents, the physical environment and safety conditions, societal responses to labor-related tragedies, and the evolution of working-class iconography in 19th-century painting. Through this approach, the study establishes a dialogue between past labor struggles and modern occupational health and safety principles, providing insight into how these historical representations resonate with contemporary concerns. Beyond their artistic and documentary significance, these paintings reveal how workplace accidents were perceived in a society undergoing profound transformation. As labor movements gained momentum and industrialization reshaped the economic landscape, art played a crucial role in shaping the collective memory of labor and raising awareness about occupational risks. This study underscores the enduring relevance of these visual narratives and their capacity to inform current debates on workplace safety and workers' rights.*

**Keywords:** Occupational Accidents, 19th-Century Painting, Social Realism, Occupational Risk Prevention, Labor History).

## Introduction

Nineteenth-century painting, in general, and Spanish painting, in particular, encompasses an extremely dense, complex and heterogeneous production (Barón, 2024). Within it, evolution is a constant: in less than a hundred years it goes from the neoclassical sunset to the emerging avant-garde, finding on this secular path movements as disparate as romanticism, realism, naturalism, impressionism or costumbrismo (Díez et al., 2015).

It is precisely realism and costumbrismo that are the focus of this research (Reina Palazón, 1996). At the end of the nineteenth century, in the midst of social upheavals linked to the Industrial Revolution and the consequent workers' movement, many artists decided to orient their aesthetics and production to the faithful representation of the scenes and customs of the society of the time, in very specific areas (Eitner, 2021).

The workers begin to take center stage because the artists grant it to them; The work begins to be represented as it is seen and perceived by the sensibility of the painters (Howden-Chapman & Mackenbach, 2002), who are not alien to the formation of groups of workers, unionized with the aim of achieving an improvement in their working conditions and, therefore, in their quality of life.

At that time, precariousness was the fundamental characteristic of jobs: labour legislation and workers' rights were non-existent. The (bourgeois) bosses imposed environments of extreme harshness and demands

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on the wage-earners, with working days of sixteen hours or more, low wages and conditions that today would be considered exploitative.

If today an accident at work is often and unfortunately accepted as something inherent to productive activity, in the nineteenth century the outlook was even more pessimistic. The work accident was much more internalized and assumed as an inevitable part of the production process. Thus, it could be said that they were considered as mere misfortunes that had to occur necessarily.

However, even then an accident, just like today, was the visible face of a real human, personal, family and economic tragedy. Workplace accidents left workers in an extremely difficult position, becoming dependent on their own family, employers, or charity and beneficence (Sarasua, 2005). It wasn't just the physical damage suffered; what came next was much worse.

For this reason, the artists of the nineteenth century echoed this harsh reality and the consequences that, in the form of workplace accidents, they had for nineteenth-century families and society (Barón, 2024; Díez et al., 2015).

Francisco de Goya could be considered the forerunner in this thematic current. His painting *The wounded bricklayer* (Figure 1), composed at the end of the eighteenth century, is the first recorded in Spanish painting on this subject.

The scene immortalized on the canvas shows two masons carrying a third, who is a colleague injured in an accident. This worker seems to have suffered a fall from the scaffolding that can be seen in the background of the painting. The expressive faces of the two porters, very serious and frowning, enhance the drama of the situation, as the accident suffered by the companion seems to have been extremely serious. Porters express effort and gravity; For his part, the wounded man, with his head bowed and slightly tilted to his left and his body practically inert, represents human fragility in the face of adverse working conditions.

There is another version of this same painting, but in it the faces reflect a less dramatic (Museo del Prado, n.d.-c; Poza Yagüe, 1999).

This canvas is part of a series of works that Goya made for the Royal Tapestry Factory, characterised by costumbrist themes and scenes of everyday life. The initial destination of this work was the Prince's dining room in the Palace of El Pardo (Albarrán, 2014; Museo del Prado, n.d.-d).

The vertical composition and the low point of view confer greater dignity on the workers represented. In this way, their status is raised, becoming more than just popular figures. The use of a sober colour palette and the depiction of an autumn landscape, with seemingly abandoned scaffolding, bring a melancholic and reflective atmosphere to the scene (Narbonne, 2016). Indeed, Goya used colors with great skill to capture his sensitivity to the conditions of the working class of his time, anticipating the social criticism that would characterize much of his later artistic production (Mena Marqués, 2005). The greyish background and the simple costumes of the protagonists accentuate the somber and melancholic tone of the work.



**Figure 1.** *The wounded bricklayer.* Francisco de Goya. AC. 1786 – 1787. Oil on canvas. 268 cm x 110 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain (Museo del Prado, n.d.-d).

Behind this work, there is an obvious social background: Goya also echoed "*the frequent misfortunes, and deaths suffered by the Laborers, and Journeymen of Masons who work in the public Works of this Court, arose in large part from the lack of security, and care in the formation of Scaffolding, due to the carelessness, and economy with which the Masters of*

*Works proceed in this part, resulting from this the Republic being deprived of useful Individuals, who die quickly, or are crippled, so that they cannot continue their work in succession, falling they, their wives, and children into misery, and begging [sic]"* (Royal Council of Castile, 1784), as stated in a 1784 edict of King Charles III of Spain, which sought to regulate the use of scaffolding in construction activities, promoting safety measures on construction sites and establishing compensation for master builders so that, in cases in which, due to a deficiency in the scaffolding, some occupational accident will end up occurring.

In Spain at that time, at the end of the eighteenth century, there were no coherent regulations on the prevention of occupational risks. There were still more than two hundred years to go before the approval of Directive 1989/391/EEC, of 12 June, on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work in the countries of the euro area. However, during the reign of Charles III, various enlightened reforms were promoted aimed at implementing measures aimed at improving the lives of the working classes. Among them is the aforementioned royal edict of 1784 (that is, just two years before Goya painted this painting), which demanded safety measures in public works, as well as financial compensation for injured workers. This historical context suggests that Goya not only depicted an everyday scene, but may have made an implicit comment about the need to protect workers (Mckiernan, 2013; Vinaza & Rubio Jiménez, 2011).

The work reflects with great realism the consequences of the absence of prevention and protection measures in the workplaces of the time, and particularly in construction sites. In fact, some key observations can be inferred from the contemplation from the contemporary perspective of occupational risk prevention:

- Presence of unsafe auxiliary means, particularly scaffolding. The background of the scene suggests the presence of a rudimentary and probably unstable structure. This is a constant risk in traditional construction, before the development of technical standards.
- Absence of personal protective equipment. The three immortalized workers show their poverty in their clothing and footwear; especially the injured worker, who is transported in a shirt and without pants. The operators do not wear any type of element or garment that could protect them from one or more risks that could threaten their safety or health. A lanyard, for example, could have prevented falling from scaffolding. This shows an absolute lack of preventive culture, an aspect unfortunately very common at the time.
- Poor management of emergency situations. The way in which the colleagues transport the injured worker shows the absence of stretchers or specialized health personnel, which denotes the absence of protocols to attend to possible accidents, in situations like this, so frequent at the time according to the content of the royal edict. This is because it does not analyse the issues related to the ergonomic load and the possible musculoskeletal injuries that could be contracted by the operators who hold the injured colleague.

Having stated all of the above, it can be concluded that *The wounded bricklayer* it is a work that transcends the merely decorative purpose (Glendinning, 2008) that characterized a good part of the production of the time, to become a social and historical testimony of the working conditions of the time (Albarrán, 2014; Poza Yagüe, 1999). So much so that, and hence it is the starting point of this research, this table is a timeless reminder of the importance of occupational risk prevention. Goya, through this work, showed the viewer the vulnerability of the human being in an extremely adverse work environment, raising issues that, during the following years and even today, were and continue to be relevant in the field of occupational safety and health and also in the field of social rights.

## Objectives

The objectives of this article are:

- To analyse the representation of occupational accidents in Spanish painting at the end of the nineteenth century, exploring how various artists captured the working conditions and occupational accidents of the time in their works.
- To establish a relationship between art and social history, highlighting how the selected paintings served, not only as artistic expressions but also as visual documents that reflect job insecurity and the lack of protection and prevention measures in different productive sectors of the nineteenth century.
- To examine the evolution of the perception of occupational accidents, comparing the approach of costumbrist and realist painting with the subsequent evolution of preventive policies.
- Carry out an analysis from the perspective of contemporary occupational risk prevention, identifying in the pictorial works elements that show the absence of protection measures, emergency protocols and labor rights in the context of the Industrial Revolution.
- To contribute to the historiography of art and occupational safety, providing a new perspective on the role of painting as a visual testimony of socio-occupational problems and their relevance in the current debate on safety at work.

#### *Methodological Development*

A century after Goya painted *The wounded bricklayer*, Europe underwent a great transformation as a result of the Industrial Revolution; and Spain, although to a lesser extent, was also a participant in this industrialization (Domains, 2007). By the end of the nineteenth century, the economy had been modernised, producing a very large and localised development of the textile and steel industries, very closely linked to the boom in mining exploitation. Productive models changed and with them changed jobs, traditionally linked to rural sectors (Barquín et al., 2016; Boone, 2007). However, the working conditions in the new centres were painful: the hustle and bustle and the rhythm of the machines coexisted with very long working days, in which the extreme cold and heat, especially suffocating in summer, reduced the scarce existing well-being at work. The almost total absence of protective measures against dust, against the inhalation of fumes, vapors and other toxic substances present, coexisted with the disciplinary excesses imposed by the bosses in the form of fines and physical aggression or even dismissal (Sarasua, 2005). All this amalgam of painful and inhumane conditions constituted the breeding ground for frequent occupational accidents, which on many occasions were very serious if not fatal.

This led other artists to follow in Goya's footsteps a hundred years later: the sensitivity of painters was directed towards those great misfortunes that arose as a result of working conditions. The victims of workplace accidents were treated differently socially and artistically, to the point of becoming the true protagonists of works that did not intend to extol beauty or beauty, but to reflect the harsh reality of a complicated and changing moment (Sánchez Camargo, 1954).

Thus, a series of representative works of the last decade of the nineteenth century have been chosen below (Díez et al., 2015; Reina Palazón, 1996), which, from the point of view of the end of the nineteenth century, will be studied in chronological order to go through and analyse different representations of the occupational accident as a preventive failure, and thus draw a series of conclusions from the current preventive perspective.

#### *The Wounded Mason or The Last Sacraments*

Rafael Romero de Torres (Córdoba, Spain, 1865-1898) composed the work *The wounded bricklayer* (of the same name, therefore, to the painting previously analyzed by Goya), also known by the name of *The Last Sacraments* (Figure 2), in 1890. This oil painting is considered one of the most representative works of the brief, but very significant, artistic career of its creator (Museo del Prado, n.d.-f; Valverde & Zueras, 1984).

This oil on canvas, of imposing dimensions, is currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts of Córdoba (García de la Torre, 2002).

This work stands out for its deep social content and aesthetic relevance, reflecting the artist's commitment to the representation of social issues.

The painting immortalizes an extremely moving scene: a seriously wounded worker lies on a needy bed placed directly on the ground, while a priest administers the last rites. Around him, the injured man's co-workers, an altar boy and a female figure (possibly the wife or perhaps the mother of the injured man), surround the unfortunate man with expressions of pain and resignation (García de la Torre, 2024). The architectural background, blurred and wrapped in dark tones, places the action in the environment of a construction (reaffirmed by the palette deposited on the ground, next to the clothes, in the foreground), emphasizing the work context of the tragedy. In this dark background, two children are discovered embraced by an adult, perhaps the children of the unfortunate worker.

The composition focuses on the inert body of the worker, surrounded by figures that express sadness, pain and solemnity. Next to the wounded, the figure of the priest stands out, in an attitude of anointing the sick. The background shows architectural elements that suggest the work environment of the injured person.

In this work, Romero de Torres addresses a theme of social criticism, reflecting the precarious working conditions of the time and the lack of safety measures at work. The choice of a bricklayer as the protagonist symbolizes the vulnerability of the working class to occupational risks, emphasizing the need for reforms in terms of safety and protection for workers.





**Figure 2.** *The wounded bricklayer* or *The Last Sacraments*. Rafael Romero de Torres. AC. 1890. Oil on canvas. 318 cm x 210 cm. n Museum of Fine Arts of Cordoba, Cordoba, Spain (Wikipedia, n.d.-b).

The chromatic palette used by Romero de Torres is composed of dark and earthy tones, which create a somber atmosphere that emphasizes the drama of the scene. The treatment of light and shadows provides depth and realism, highlighting the facial expressions and emotional tension of the characters: the lighting, focused on the mason and the priest and in contrast to the semi-darkness of the background, creates an atmosphere charged with gravity and melancholy.

The realism with which details have been treated, such as the worn clothes of the worker in the foreground, his tools or the architectural elements of the ceiling and background, brings authenticity to the representation. This realist approach, together with social themes, connects the work with the costumbrista movement of the late nineteenth century, but with a marked critical intention that brings it closer to social realism.

Once again, this is a work that invites reflection on human fragility and social injustices, maintaining its relevance in contemporary debates on job security and the dignity of the worker.

The representation of a wounded bricklayer in a large-format work aimed at a wide audience has a clear component of social denunciation. By choosing a worker as the protagonist of his work, Romero de Torres

elevates the figure of the worker, giving him a dignity and visibility that contrasts with the social and economic marginalization that this social class faced in reality.

### *A Misfortune*

*A misfortune* is a painting that was painted in 1890 by the artist José Jiménez Aranda (Seville, Spain, 1837– 1903), constituting another emblematic work of nineteenth-century Spanish social realism (Figure 3) (Museo del Prado, n.d.-e; Reina Palazón, 1996).

Once again, we are dealing with a representation of the consequences of a workplace accident on a construction site. On this occasion, unlike the two works previously analyzed, the figure of the injured worker is not visible. However, the composition suggests that it is the fall of a mason from a precarious scaffolding, as evidenced by the unstable structure of the auxiliary medium that can be seen in the background.

The focus of the composition is on the reactions of the witnesses present: a crowd of people from different social classes, including co-workers of the injured person, congregate around the scene of the accident, expressing expressions of surprise, concern and shock. A woman dressed in black and covering her face, in the foreground, gives an idea of the seriousness of the accident and its fatal consequences.



**Figure 3.** *A misfortune*. José Jiménez Aranda. AC. 1890. Oil on canvas. 108 cm x 150 cm. Private Collection (Wikipedia, n.d.-c).

Jiménez Aranda employed a sober color palette and lighting that highlights the gravity of the situation: a palette of gray and dark tones was used to emphasize the somber tone of the scene. The austere chromatic palette used, in which dark and earthy tones predominate, not only reinforce the somber atmosphere, but also visually connect the viewer with the harshness of the work and the precariousness of the work environment.



The composition is structured to direct attention to the epicenter of the tragedy, highlighted by the diagonals that make up the scaffolding and the inclined postures of the characters. The diffused light highlights the expressions of the faces and, even more if possible, the position of the hidden body of the injured person. This gives an air of solemnity and tragedy. The detailed treatment of the characters' clothing and facial expressions brings a realism and emotional depth to the scene, underscoring the universality of the impact of these workplace tragedies.

The meticulous detail of the architectural elements and the clothing of the characters adds an almost documentary authenticity to the print, placing it in the context of the urban constructions of Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. The worn clothing of the workers and the improvised scaffolding suggest the risky conditions that workers in this sector faced daily.

Analysed from a preventive point of view, *A Misfortune* once again highlights the absence of protection and prevention measures in the construction works of the time. The representation of an unstable scaffold lacking protective elements and the absence of protective elements among the workers who descend it show the dangerous conditions in which they worked at the time.

This work, which was awarded the First Medal at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts in 1890, served to consolidate Jiménez Aranda as a benchmark in painting of social denunciation: his focus on the difficulties of the working class and the implicit critique of the lack of labor protection resonate with contemporary concerns about safety at work.

#### *Out of Combat*

Vicente Cutanda Toraya (Cella, Teruel, Spain, 1850 – Toledo, Spain, 1925) was a painter with a very representative production within the social realism of the end of the nineteenth century (Barón, 2024; Museo del Prado, n.d.-a). Many of his works are set in the Biscayan blast furnaces, where the activity linked to the iron and steel industry had marked the future of the region. Within this theme, there is the work *Out of combat*, composed in 1891 and currently preserved in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Historical Sciences of Toledo (Figure 4).

In it you can see two blast furnace workers and a third personage, of whom only a tense arm can be seen, who are carrying a colleague who has suffered an accident at work. They transport him because he cannot stand up, as he seems faint or even falling during transport under his own weight, and is blindfolded. All this suggests a serious accident with a cast iron or metal.

Behind the injured worker, covering his face with his work apron, a girl cries inconsolably, while following the porters. It can be a girl who worked in the oven or the daughter of the injured person; or it can even be both at the same time, since child labor was allowed at that time (Sarasua, 2005). Be that as it may, this figure constitutes a moving element, with which the artist intends to incite the viewer to reflect on the harsh and unfair working conditions of the time and on the family drama that lies ahead when a misfortune like this arrives.



**Figure 4.** *Out of combat*. Vicente Cutanda. AC. 1891. Oil on canvas. 75 cm x 146 cm. Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Historical Sciences of Toledo, Toledo, Spain (Royal Academy of Fine Arts and Historical Sciences of Toledo, n.d.).

In the background, two workers continue with their work, completely oblivious to the drama that has occurred.

The environment shows characteristic elements of a nineteenth-century industrial facility, such as metal structures, cast iron metal or riveted steel plates, which place the action in a manufacturing context.

Once again, the colours and lighting have been used to increase the drama of the performance. The whole is a new denunciation of precarious working conditions, while recalling the importance of adopting measures that guarantee protection.

The title of the painting, *Out of Combat*, seems to indicate that the worker has become disabled as a result of the accident or due to some serious health problem related to exertion or heat.

This work, like the previous ones, invites us to reflect on the need to implement effective safety measures to protect workers and avoid tragedies that affect both workers and their families.

#### *Accident on the Hard or On the Battlefield*

Also the work of the brush of Vicente Cutanda Toraya (Cella, Teruel, Spain, 1850 – Toledo, Spain, 1925) is the painting *Accident in the Duro* or also called *On the battlefield*, an oil on canvas smaller than the previous one (Figure 5) (Museo del Prado, n.d.-a).



**Figure 5.** *Accident in the Duro or on the battlefield.* Vicente Cutanda. AC. 1893. Oil on canvas. 51 cm x 104 cm. Location Unknown (Wikipedia, n.d.-a).

The painting shows a worker seriously injured after an accident, who does not fall to the ground because his co-workers, who try to help him, support him as best they can. A gentleman in more elegant attire, perhaps the patron, seems to be trying to perform some kind of cure on him.

The whole is a dramatic scene, full of emotional tension: in the foreground and in the centre of the painting, the injured worker, with obvious signs of pain and suffering, while the other characters, with faces of concern and despair, try to assist him. Hands try to lift the wounded man, but the anguish is evident: there is no hope, only the attempt to alleviate the immediate suffering.

The backdrop of the painting is once again a dark and chaotic industrial workshop, marked by the presence of characteristic elements of a blast furnace and heavy machinery, which is possibly the cause of the serious accident.

The light in the painting is directed and dramatic: there is a spotlight that illuminates the injured worker and the characters around him. That dim light that bathes these figures highlights their humanity and their efforts, creating a contrast with the coldness of the machines and the working conditions, as the background is left in semi-darkness. This contrast of light reinforces the drama and allows the expressions and gestures of the characters to stand out, as well as the gravity of the scene. The light, in fact, seems to come from an artificial source typical of the industrial space, such as lamps or the fire of the oven, which contributes to the oppressive atmosphere and the feeling of confinement typical of these places.

Cutanda employs a palette of somber colors, with gray, black, and brown tones, typical of industrial environments, evoking soot, dust, and metal. These colours, which reinforce the feeling of dirt and wear typical of the work environment, further accentuate the feeling of hardness and danger typical of the workplace.

However, the drama of the scene not only emphasizes the human cost of industrial progress, but also denounces the lack of attention to the safety and health of workers, typical of the historical context.

*They Still Say Fish is Expensive!*

The work *They still say fish is expensive!* was painted by Joaquín Sorolla (Valencia, Spain, 1863 – Cercedilla, Madrid, Spain, 1923) in 1894 (Figure 6). Although it is not one of his most famous paintings, this painting is one of Sorolla's most representative works, which synthesizes his ability to capture moments of great human intensity in the context of working life. On this occasion, the artist presents a dramatic and realistic scene, which shows an injured fisherman inside a boat, surrounded by his co-workers who try to help him (Museo del Prado, 2019).

The scene takes place inside a fishing boat. An operator lies on the floor inside the boat, visibly injured, with his face hidden, but with a noticeable expression of pain, a reflection of the seriousness of the accident suffered. The fisherman is being attended to by two companions who, with gestures of concern, try to help him: one of them holds the injured man by the head, while the other seems to be treating him with his hands, at the height of the abdomen.

As already mentioned, the most remarkable thing about the work is the emotional intensity it transmits. As in several works analysed above, far from the serenity or idealised beauty of seafaring work, Sorolla presents a very crude and direct scene, which demonstrates the risk inherent in fishing activity. The characters, who in this play do not present an exaggerated drama as in any of the previous ones, are perceived realistically in the midst of the tension and speed that the situation requires. The gesture and posture of the wounded fisherman capture the moment of vulnerability in the face of the extreme harshness of the work.



**Figure 6.** *They still say fish is expensive!* Joaquín Sorolla. AC. 1894. Oil on canvas. 152 cm x 204 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain (Museo del Prado, 2019).

Natural light penetrates through the openings of the boat, partially illuminating the scene, to highlight the recumbent figure of the wounded fisherman. This lighting allows the texture of the unfortunate worker's



skin and the clothes of his colleagues to be enhanced; In addition, the light creates dramatic contrasts between the highlighted areas and the shadows, which enhances the drama and sense of urgency.

The predominant tones are warm, with the light reflecting off the bodies of the characters and the surfaces of the boat, creating an atmosphere that highlights the reality of the moment. Sorolla, through his technique, manages to capture not only the physical scene, but also the emotional tension inherent in that hard moment that is being experienced.

The title of the work, *They still say fish is expensive!*, introduces a very relevant irony and social critique (Soler Carnicer, 1997). In the historical context of pictorial production, fish was considered an essential good (Barón, 2024), but the harsh working conditions of fishermen were not recognized in the market; On the contrary, the population often complained that the price of fish was too high (Barquín et al., 2016), despite the sacrifices and risks involved in their capture. There is, therefore, a social criticism on the part of Sorolla towards the devaluation of the work of fishermen, who not only faced long hours of work, but also the constant risk of suffering serious accidents and exposure to the inclemency of the sea. Thus, the painting reflects the gap between the tremendous physical effort of the slaughterers and the recognition given to that effort, whether at an economic or social level.

Beyond the social criticism and the realistic representation of a work accident, the work also has a deeply human dimension. In addition to becoming a symbol of the precarious conditions to which workers were subjected at that time, the figure of the injured fisherman, together with his colleagues, reflects solidarity and compassion in the midst of tragedy. This human detail is an important aspect that Sorolla manages to capture, showing not only the harshness of the work, but also the sense of community and mutual support among the workers.

#### *After a Strike*

José Uría y Uría (Oviedo, Spain, 1861 – Vigo, Pontevedra, Spain 1937) composed the work *After a strike* (

Figure 7), in 1895. This oil on canvas, of considerable dimensions, is currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts of Asturias, in Oviedo (Baron Thaidigsman, 2007), and, within the production of its creator, it is considered to be its greatest exponent among the paintings dedicated to social issues (Barón, 2024).

The painting *After a strike* depicts a dramatic scene following a workers' strike in the Talleres de la Compañía del Norte in Valladolid in the spring of 1892 (Barón, 2024; Barón Thaidigsman, 2007; Museo del Prado, n.d.-b). The canvas shows a deceased worker, lying in the center of the composition, next to his wife and daughter, in an empty and gloomy space, which enhances the pain of tragedy. The light and composition were carefully studied, so that dark and grey tones dominate the scene: the light comes from the ends of the diagonals and the windows, creating a lively rhythm and highlighting the central drama. For their part, the gray tones and perspective expand the space and emphasize the isolation of the three central figures.



**Figure 7.** *After a strike*. José Uría y Uría. AC. 1895. Oil on canvas. 252 cm x 374 cm. Museum of Fine Arts of Asturias, Oviedo, Spain (Museo del Prado, n.d.-b).

The composition is structured around two large imaginary diagonals, which converge on the injured worker's body, creating a dramatic focal point. The precision in the depiction of industrial machinery and the police presence on the right, guarding the enclosure from the outside, add realism and historical context to the scene.

The fabric shows a highly cluttered industrial environment, an aspect that can contribute to the production of workplace accidents: maintaining a clean and tidy workspace is crucial to prevent risks. This aspect, together with the perceptible lighting in the workplace, scarcely uniform and clearly insufficient, may have been related to the accident that has occurred and whose consequences the artist immortalized.

José Uría depicted a scene in which a working class family faced the aftermath of a workplace accident, which goes beyond the damage that the unfortunate event entails for the injured worker; they fully affect the most direct family nucleus. The expressions of the girl and especially of the woman next to him are of pain, helplessness and suffering: despair not only caused by the damage suffered by the loved one, but also by the uncertainty that this entails for the family's livelihood.

#### *Victim of Work*

Jenaro Carrero Fernández (Noya, A Coruña, Spain, 1874 – Santiago de Compostela, A Coruña, Spain, 1902) painted the painting *Victim of work* (Figure 8) in 1899. This large oil on canvas is currently on display at the Museum of Pontevedra, after an eventful existence: after many years of disappearance, it was located in 2001, being deposited by the Prado Museum and restored before being exhibited in its current location (Tilve Jar, 2014). Carrero composed this work of social content, which also represents the drama of a work accident, to present it at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts of 1899, in which he obtained, in the section of History and Genre Painting, the Second Medal.

The immortalized scene is located in the Plaza del Obradoiro in Santiago de Compostela. There, at dusk on a rainy day, the body of an injured worker arrives, which is transported to the gates of the Royal Hospital on a cart pulled by cows (Barón, 2024; Tilve Jar, 2014).

The expectation generated by the event brings together a large group of villagers (men, women and children), some sheltered under their umbrellas, who observe with great interest the inert body of the victim. At the entrance to the Hospital, a nun belonging to the congregation of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, recognizable by her characteristic winged headdress, awaits the arrival of the wounded man to provide him with first assistance, in line with the work that these nuns carried out in the institution.

Thus, in *Victim of Work* Carrero captures with narrative precision the drama of a work accident, thus addressing the welfare dimensions of charity, medicine and relief, all of which were of great relevance at the time.

The work is structured in such a way that the wounded worker, whose feet are only visible, is the focal point, with the figures of the villagers and the nun creating a frame around him. The arrangement of the elements guides the viewer's gaze towards the centre of the drama.



**Figure 8.** *Victim of work*. Jenaro Carrero Fernández. AC. 1899. Oil on canvas. 300 cm x 402 cm. Provincial Museum of Pontevedra, Spain (Museo del Prado, n.d.-g).

From the compositional point of view, the work reveals the technical maturity reached by the young Carrero, whose pictorial evolution, influenced by Joaquín Sorolla, (Díez et al., 2015), is manifested in a loose and expressive brushstroke, and in a very rich and balanced chromatic palette between cold and warm tones, as well as in an outstanding interest in light effects (Tilve Jar, 2014). Carrero uses a sober palette and dim lighting to emphasize the melancholy tone of the scene. The diffused light of sunset and the persistent rain add an air of sadness and solemnity.

Despite the tragic nature of the theme, emphasized from the title of the canvas, the artist avoids a crude or explicitly dramatic representation of suffering. Instead, it adopts an aesthetic of expressive containment that, without resorting to disturbing visual devices, conveys the gravity of the event. The decision to depict only the feet of the injured worker, without exposing the harshness of the physical damage, responds to a sweetened vision of social realism, closer to costumbrismo than to an explicit denunciation of working conditions. This approach, free of critical or subversive connotations, is fully in line with the aesthetic and moral tastes of the dominant bourgeoisie and with the preferences of the juries in the official competitions, which positively valued a more benevolent representation of social reality. It is logical, therefore, that the painting was awarded.

### *Comparative Analysis*

At the end of the nineteenth century, Europe was experiencing a process of industrialization that brought with it a growth of the working class, but also an increase in social inequalities and an alarming job insecurity (Domains, 2007). In Spain, although industrialization was much slower than in other countries, occupational accidents were very common due to the absence of regulations on occupational safety and the exploitation of workers (Barquín et al., 2016; Boone, 2007). Particularly hazardous workplaces such as construction sites (represented in *The wounded bricklayer* or in *A misfortune*), steel plants or blast furnaces (represented in *Out of combat*, *Accident in the Duro* or *After a strike*) or fishing vessels (such as the one depicted in *They still say fish is expensive!*) were particularly dangerous in the past, as they lacked the basic protection measures that are fortunately mandatory today.

The works analysed here not only document tragic events, but also launch a critique, more or less implicit, of the working conditions of their time, highlighting the dehumanisation of workers and social indifference towards their problems. In the same way, the oil paintings also reflect the growing interest in social issues that characterized many artists of realism, an artistic movement that sought to portray everyday life with a critical perspective.

If these paintings are analysed from a contemporary preventive perspective, the oil paintings chosen are profoundly eloquent, as they reveal multiple shortcomings in terms of safety at work and, even more, the consequences of these shortcomings. In this sense, a series of common notes are observed when the analysis of the works is carried out from this perspective:

- Existence of unsafe conditions in the work environment and absence of protection and prevention measures. The precariousness of the places where the accidents have occurred is evident in the representation of the elements and details observed in the paintings.

All the paintings include accidents suffered by an operator. In all cases, the print suggests that the accident occurred due to a lack of protective measures in the workplace. In *The Wounded Mason* or *A Misfortune*, the scenes show a precarious construction environment, with scaffolding visible in the background, but there is not the slightest trace of elements such as railings, protective nets or mooring elements, basic components that, fortunately, are mandatory today. The scaffolding seems to be built with rudimentary materials and without any type of support or barrier that could prevent falls, one of the main causes of serious damage and deaths in the construction sector even today.

The industrial environment that Cutanda presents in *Out of Combat* or in *Accident in the Duro* or that Uría shows as a background in *After a Strike* is far from being a safe place to work. The factories of the late nineteenth century, as shown in the tables, were spaces full of dangerous machinery, without adequate maintenance and without safety protocols to protect workers. Thus, the accidents reflected are only a visual manifestation of the innumerable occupational tragedies that all too often occurred in this type of environment.

To this could be added the personal protective equipment, which is completely absent in all the paintings: in none of the fabrics is there the slightest indication of protections such as helmets, harnesses, gloves,



suitable footwear or special clothing. Sorolla, in *They still say that fish is expensive!*, immortalized the interior of a very disorderly vessel, in which there are no rescue devices, currently mandatory in the fishing industry, the fishermen's clothing being inadequate for protection against the natural elements and the risk of accidents.

All of the above highlights the total lack of protection in which the workers who carried out a multitude of dangerous activities operated, leaving their lives to chance. The tables show that workers did not have the right to effective protection in terms of occupational safety and health that the legislation currently establishes and, therefore, that companies did not guarantee the protection of workers against occupational risks.

- Inadequate management of emergencies. In all the scenes, chaos and commotion are perceived in those around the injured workers. Their condition and the state in which the victim is observed in all cases show the lack of preparation to respond to accidents.

The scenes collected in some of the paintings (such as *Out of Combat*, *Accident in the Duro* or *They Still Say Fish Is Expensive!*) reflect the inability of workers to manage the accident efficiently. Moreover, the presence of the priest in the work of Romero de Torres (*The Wounded Mason* or *The Last Sacraments*) reflects that the priority was to provide spiritual comfort to the wounded; but there is not the slightest evidence of medical care or of an infrastructure prepared to respond to the more than possible labor emergencies.

The absence of medical personnel, clear protocols known to all operators or tools to provide first aid shows negligence that further aggravated the consequences of the accident. Employers did not analyse possible emergency situations or adopt the necessary measures in terms of first aid and evacuation of workers that the legislation currently imposes on them. Fortunately, nowadays, the vast majority of labour regulations oblige employers to organise the necessary relations with services outside the company, in particular in the areas of first aid, emergency medical assistance, rescue and firefighting, so that the speed and effectiveness of emergency management measures is guaranteed. In this sense, the cadres have collected workers who have been improperly transported to receive assistance (in *Out of Combat* the injured person was transported in a saddle or in *Victim of work* he was transported in a cart pulled by cows) or who have been assisted as well as it has been possible and known by the comrades, with the scarce means that the workers had at their disposal in the workplace. In *They Still Say Fish Is Expensive!* and especially in *Accident in the Duro*, an improvised reaction of colleagues is observed who, although they try to help the injured worker, do not seem to have a clear knowledge of how to proceed in a situation of this type. This lack of preparation and organization was common in the workplaces of the time.

- Extreme environmental conditions, work fatigue and overexposure. All the charts suggest extreme working conditions. In this sense, the paintings set in steel or blast furnace workplaces (*Out of Combat*, *Accident in the Duro* or *After a Strike*) depict environments where working conditions were exhausting, and in which employees suffered long hours in extreme conditions. This emphasizes the need to respect rest times, limit hours of exposure to risk factors, and ensure access to hydration and safe rest areas.

In addition, a blast furnace creates a hostile environment that is characterised not only by extremely high temperatures, but also by the presence of ambient smoke and dust in high concentrations. These factors involve risks such as burns, dehydration, heat stroke, and poisoning from inhalation of toxic substances.

- High emotional and social impact of workplace accidents. Most of the accidents immortalized in these canvases underscore not only the physical harm suffered by the injured worker, but also the emotional and social repercussions for those around them. This reflects the importance of considering psychosocial well-being in modern work environments, in addition to the physical aspects that seem to be limited exclusively to safety and avoiding occupational accidents. The signs of pain that are observed in the pictures in those who accompany or contemplate the injured are the best proof of this.

## Conclusions

From a contemporary point of view, the paintings can be analyzed as a powerful denunciation of the lack of job security in the industrial context of the nineteenth century. The representation of occupational accidents highlights the inherent danger of working conditions at that time, marked by the absence of safety measures and the lack of training of operators on the occupational risks to which they were exposed. Workers were often exposed to extremely dangerous conditions, and the pictures analyzed here reflect their vulnerability to them.

Today, the image of the injured worker invites us to reflect on the advances in the prevention of occupational risks. Uría's painting (*After a Strike*), for example, can be understood as a wake-up call to the urgent need to implement workplace safety regulations and the protection of workers' rights. Compared to current policies, which have evolved towards more rigorous standards of safety and hygiene in workplaces, Uría's scene underscores the importance of labor law to prevent similar tragedies today.

However, and in line with the objectives identified at the beginning, the following conclusions can be drawn from the research carried out:

- Spanish painting of the nineteenth century documents the occupational accidents and precarious conditions of the workers of the time. The tables analysed reflect with great realism the unsafe working conditions of operators in particularly dangerous sectors such as construction, steel and fishing. These paintings are, without a doubt, a document of the time and fulfil the mission of being a visual testimony of the lack of safety measures, the absence of labour rights and the normalisation of accidents in the industrial context of the late nineteenth century.
- Art, and particularly painting, was not only an instrument of representation, but also served to denounce the deplorable working conditions that existed at the end of the nineteenth century. Although it was not always done explicitly, nineteenth-century painters used their work to capture the injustices and precariousness of the world of work at that time. Thus, social realism in painting not only captured the aesthetics of work, but also served as a critique of the precarious working conditions of the working class.
- There is an evolution in the perception of occupational accidents and their social impact. While in the first performances, such as Goya's *The Wounded Mason*, the accident is shown as a tragic but isolated event, in later works, such as *After a Strike* by Uría, the social and family impact of accidents is highlighted. Thus, greater sensitivity towards the victims is achieved, showing not only the moment of the accident, but also the immediate and subsequent human and emotional consequences.
- From the point of view of current occupational risk prevention, these paintings show the total absence of protection and prevention measures. The tables clearly show the lack of preventive regulations, as well as the lack of protective equipment and the poor management of the more than frequent emergencies. If a comparison is made with current regulations, the progress in labour rights is more than evident and remarkable, as well as the importance that occupational risk prevention policies have been gaining in the present.
- Art, in general, and painting, in particular, is a tool for raising awareness. The works analysed not only have artistic and historical value, but were also intended to raise awareness of the importance of safety at work. The representation of human suffering in the paintings analysed is still relevant today to reflect on the protection of workers and the evolution of their rights.

All in all, this research confirms that nineteenth-century painting not only portrayed work, but also left a visual legacy on occupational accidents, anticipating concerns that today are part of occupational safety and health.

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