

The Image of the Octopus: Six Political Cartoons (1882-1909)

The following series of political cartoons were produced as America transitioned from the self-absorptive Gilded Age to an era of grand reform championed by the Progressives. In the late nineteenth-century America, the octopus seemed, metaphorically, to be everywhere. It was not a sea monster, but every bit as menacing as a land creature, instilled with clear rationality, malicious purpose, and unbridled appetite. Why did this image resonate so deeply within the popular imagination of the era? It was due to the growing awareness of the extent to which massive, centralized, interlocking networks of distribution, organization, and administration were shaping American life. Trapped in such systems, the American public suffered a lessening of control in nearly every realm. While the specific local conditions to which each of these six cartoons refers are different, their message, regarding interpretation of control and powerlessness, is consistent.



- What specific entity does the octopus represent in each of the six cartoons? How can the six be described collectively?

- List similarities and differences among the six octopus images with regard to historical, political, economic, geographic, and social setting. Compare the artists' decisions about shape and size among the drawings.

- Why do you think the octopus image was so popular? How do the artists characterize the power of the octopus?

- Who are some of the specific victims? What label encompasses the entire group? How are they portrayed by the illustrators?

- Identify the following items from the various six cartoons:
 - Charles Croker, Mark Hopkins, & Leland Stanford
 - “Brother Jonathon”
 - Ashcan School
 - Tammany Hall
 - Richard “Boss” Croker

- Two of the preeminent targets of these cartoons (and others of the era) are the railroads and Standard Oil Company. What book is the most celebrated of the several muckraker attacks on the railroads—specifically the Southern Pacific Railroad? What is the most famous muckraker exposé about Standard Oil? (Include title, author, and date of publication for both responses.)