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Portraits

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Käthe Kollwitz

German artist, Käthe Schmidt Kollwitz, was born in Königsberg, East Prussia on July 8, 1867. Both her father and grandfather were religious leaders in their community and activists for social reform. She grew up with a strong sense of social and moral commitment and her sympathy for the working class reverberates throughout her life and artwork.

At the age of thirteen she began taking lessons under Rudolph Mauer, later spending a year at art school in Berlin and another year in Munich. She started her career as a painter, later encountering the prints of Max Klinger, inspiring her to commit to printmaking and graphic arts. The graphic arts, as Klinger himself had put it, “could better express the darker aspects of life.” (Klein, 20) And for Kollwitz, naturalistic art that focuses realistically on the human condition was beautiful and preferable to the idealistic aesthetic of 18th century Romanticism.

On June 15, 1891 Käthe married Karl Kollwitz, a physician for a worker’s health insurance fund. The apartment, clinic, and Kollwitz’s studio were located in the impoverished Northeast section of Berlin. A convenience for Kollwitz, as the worker’s clinic beside the studio provided her with sitters. As a portraitist however, some of her most evocative and emotional works are pieces where she sketches herself as the model, making them self-portraits.

Techniques

Kollwitz’s work demonstrates a mastery of medium in a variety of graphic techniques: primarily etching, lithography, and woodcuts, though in 1904 she attended the academié Julian for the purpose of learning sculpture. To understand her artwork, it is important to understand the nature of printmaking. As already mentioned, graphic arts,

especially black and white, express the darker aspects of life in a way that cannot be accomplished with painting and color. More importantly, printmaking can be readily reproduced and distributed, making it a democratic medium, accessible, informal, and produced at a transportable and intimate size. (Hults, 7)

The master image is established on a metal plate, stone, or wood. The process of transferring the ink from plate to paper differs depending upon the technique. Many of her self-portraits were experiments in etching and lithography. A survey of her work, especially in self-portraiture, is thus beneficial in understanding the techniques Kollwitz employs throughout her work.

Etching involves a metal plate in which lines are chemically established using acid solution or mordant (a corrosive.) The image is drawn through the acid-resistant ground, exposing the metal underneath. The plate is then immersed in acid bath, 'biting' the lines and tones. Depending on how long the plate is immersed, the depth and width of lines will vary. (Hults, 853)



Figure 1 – *Self Portrait at Table*. 1883. Etching and Aquatint.

Different tonal effects are made depending on the ground a plate is coated with. In the case of *Self Portrait at Table* [fig 1], Kollwitz uses aquatint, an acid-resistant resin that produces a grainy surface. When etched, aquatint will print non-linear areas of tone (Hults, 851). A sense of this effect can be observed especially in the facial tones, clothing, and table in this portrait. Kollwitz also uses soft-ground in her etchings, a technique that uses a waxy ground to impress texture into the print (Hults, 858).



Figure 3 – *The Mothers*. 1919. Lithograph.



Figure 2 – *The Mothers*. 1922-23. Woodcut.

Later in her career Kollwitz gave a more predominant focus to lithography and woodcuts. Lithography is a technique that uses greasy medium on a flat, usually limestone surface. “The stone is treated with nitric acid and gum Arabic to set the image, dampened, inked, and printed, traditionally using a press with a bar that scrapes across the back of the paper laid face down on the stone.” (Hults, 855) While woodcuts are images engraved directly into a piece of wood, generally carving with the grain (Hults, 859).

Motherhood, a theme throughout Kollwitz’s work and especially the sheltering mother after the death of her son Peter in World War I, was addressed in *The Mothers*, 1919 [fig 2] in lithograph and *The Mothers*, 1922-23 [fig 3] as a woodcut. Both works convey a sense of community among proletarian women, but the differences in medium approach motherhood in vastly different ways. In the lithograph there is a stronger sense of individuality between the mothers and a distance between them as each mother shelters their own child. The piece has a distinguished foreground, mid-ground and background. The mother embracing the two children in the foreground, her arms exaggerated and enlarged to encircle and protect both children is identifiable as Kollwitz, the children being her two sons, Hans and Peter (Buettner, 19). The woodcut on the other hand, unites the mothers, providing a tower of protection for the children sheltered in the center. The mothers are individualized only by the white highlights that make up their faces and hands. It is worth noting the exaggeration of the hands in this piece, emphasizing the powerful protection the mothers provide.



Figure 4- Mother with Child in Arms, 1910



Figure 5- Mother with Dead Child, 1903

Early Work

Käthe Kollwitz's well-known early successes are mostly based on historical worker's revolts, featuring women as the protagonists. Most of these pieces consist of peasants being provoked into protest, an outbreak of violence, and a defeat of these workers, sometimes resulting in death. Though most of these prints aren't actually portraits, she does incorporate a few in her historical print cycles. *Whetting the Scythe*, a part of the *Peasant's War* cycle, is a portrait that uses a combination of etching and pen and ink technique ("press-through process") creating strong, suggestive lines. The woman is pictured crouched over scythe, sharpening the tool and brooding. Both the lines and position of the figure are psychologically suggestive (Zigrosser, 10).

Even at the beginning of her career, however, she uses portraiture to address the theme of motherhood. *Mother with Dead Child* [fig 5] is an evocative piece portraying a mother clutching her dead son. What is not immediately apparent is the likeness of Kollwitz, posed as the mother. She modeled before a mirror in this rather painful position for this self-portrait with her son, Peter, the same son who was to later die in World War I. Later she would refer to this etching as prophetic (Klein, 46). In contrast, *Mother with Child in Arms* [fig 4] is a cheerful celebration of motherhood.

"The woman who posed for the mother in this popular print was one of Kollwitz's favorite models. While self-portraits often served as the basis for her politically conscious, psychologically compelling mothers, Kollwitz preferred to use models for her joyful, traditional versions of the mother-child theme." (Buettner, 19)

Aside from representing herself as a mother and a politically conscious woman, as an aging artist her self-portraits became defined by an uncompromisingly ugly representation of herself. Around the 1920's her portraits begin to exhibit ape-like features as Kollwitz portrays herself in a rather harsh light (West, 142).



Figure 6- (right) *The People*



Figure 7- *The Sacrifice*

War Cycle

From 1922 through 23 Kollwitz produces a series of woodcuts on the effects of war on women, specifically war effecting mothers. This unique perspective on war is largely a reaction to the death of her son, and a reflection on a mother's mentality toward war. *The Sacrifice* [fig 7] especially demonstrates her counter-reaction to the Nationalistic mentality of sacrifice for the greater good. Pictured in this woodcut is a mother unwilling to sacrifice her child to the cause of war. Kollwitz herself had believed her son's decision to volunteer was courageous and exemplary (Moorjani, 1114).

However, in her post-war artwork we see a condemnation of this attitude. She wrote:

"I have repeatedly attempted to give form to the war. I could never grasp it. Now finally I have finished a series of woodcuts, which is some measure say what I wanted to say... These sheets should travel through the entire world and should tell all human beings comprehensively: that is how it was- we all endured that throughout these unspeakably difficult years." (Springer, 45)

War goes back to the theme of motherhood. The mourning mother is depicted, but more importantly Kollwitz makes a bold statement with the sheltering mother. *The People* [fig 6], perhaps one of her most famous works, depicts a pregnant woman with large protective hands. Similar to *The Mothers* [fig 2], the black massive form of the mother is pictured as a fortress against the death of the children.

Notably, one of her last prints returns to this theme of protecting the young against the tragedies of war. *Seed Corn must not be Ground* borrows its title from a saying of literary author, Johann Wolfgang Goethe. The large arms of the woman are sheltering the three boys. More than a statement against war, this piece is a protest, a command against recruiting young boys into the army (Zigrosser, 18).



Figure 8- *Seed Corn Must Not Be Ground*, 1942. Lithograph.

Death Cycle

The final cycle produced by Kollwitz is a series of lithographs between 1934 and 1935 entitled *Death*. Her haunting characterization of death throughout this series depicts death as an act of violence, such as her print *Death Swoops* which shows the figure of descending upon a group of small children, taking one of them. It also shows death as a friend, or an acceptance of death in old age. In *the Call of Death*, Kollwitz depicts herself being comforted by the hand of death as it quietly taps her on the shoulder.



Figure 9- *Call of Death*

Annotated Bibliography

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The portrayal of motherhood by Kollwitz is discussed. Insights on the changing view of motherhood.

3. Hults, Linda C. *The Print in the Western World*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.

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4. Klein, Mina C. and Klein, H. Arthur. *Käthe Kollwitz: Life in Art*. 1972. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

This book provides a detailed biography of Kollwitz's life and its interaction with her art.

5. Moorjani, Angela. "Käthe Kollwitz on Sacrifice, Mourning, and Reparation: An Essay in Psychoaesthetics" *MLN*, Vol. 101, No. 5, Comparative Literature, (Dec. 1986), pp. 1110-1134. The John Hopkins University Press.

This article is a psychological study on sacrifice, mourning, reparation and its role in the creative process. Using the life and works of Kollwitz as a case study, Moorjani analyzes themes of social reform in Kollwitz's art.

6. Springer, Julie. "Instructional Resources: Women, Power, and Empowering Imagery." *Art Education*, Vol. 47, No. 5, Interpretation, (Sep., 1994), pp. 27-46. National Art Education Association.

This is an article on art history education as pertains to the portrayal of women. Springer looks at several women artists and how they approach gender issues. Providing exercises and questions for understanding these artists, she chooses 'Das Volk' as a sample of Kollwitz's work.

7. West, Shearer. *Portraiture*. 2004. Oxford University Press.

This book presents a survey of portraiture, analyzing various aspects of this genre including the self-portrait.

8. Zigrosser, Carl. *Prints and Drawings of Käthe Kollwitz*. 1969. Dover Publications, inc., New York.

This monograph contains an expansive collection of Käthe Kollwitz's artwork from some of her very first paintings to her last series of lithographs dealing with themes on death. The introduction by Carl Zigrosser provides some context for the selected works by examining the life of the artist.