German artist Käthe Kollwitz at the Art Gallery of Ontario

David Adelaide
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An anonymous gallery visitor left these words on a comment card after visiting the recent Käthe Kollwitz exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). An entire wall of the exhibit's antechamber was filled with comment cards that explicitly connected the exhibit's deep emotional impact with opposition to the US and British invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Kollwitz (1867-1945) was an artist of considerable technical means who used her skills to speak to her own experiences—motherhood, war, poverty and death. The results are devastating. Viewing Kollwitz's work, it would impossible not to be struck by the sense of a sheer emotional force projecting off the walls. (A number of images are at http://www.mystudios.com/women/klmno/kollwitz.html, http://www.dhm.de/museen/kollwitz/english/works.htm, and http://www.humanitiesweb.org/cgi-bin/human.cgi?s=g&p=c&a=s&ID=324.)

In an exemplary 1926 lithograph, a woman is huddled over two children, with her hand to her head and her eyes closed. Everything in the composition is concentrated on the woman's facial expression, which is perfectly rendered, lyrical and expressive of suffering. We instinctively know that this is someone who has lost everything, save for the two small children who draw near to her for warmth. Nothing in the picture suggests a particular place or time, other than the print's title—"Municipal Shelter."

Still, one finds oneself asking—after the tears have successfully been held back—is there nothing that can be done about these tragedies? Is an embrace, a brief moment of consolation provided by the warmth of another human being, the best and the most that can be hoped for? Is there no possibility of transforming the tragic world depicted to such devastating effect by the artist? Are the downtrodden not capable of acting collectively to advance their interests?

In her early work, displayed in the first of the exhibit's two rooms, Kollwitz answered this last question in the affirmative.

In the 1880s, under the political influence of the SPD (Social-Democratic Party of Germany) and the artistic influence of (French) naturalism, the young artist gravitated towards working class subjects. At the end of the 19th century, the SPD was the foremost socialist workers movement in the world, virtually equated in many workers' minds with the struggle for freedom and democracy. So great was the appeal of the revolutionary SPD that the various measures employed by ruling class to resist its rise, ranging from social reform to outright repression, were futile.

Kollwitz's early depictions of workers waging one form or another of struggle against their circumstances were based on this optimism, supported by long hours of her own observation. In her hometown of Königsberg, she would spend days wandering, watching the workers at work. Later, she would reflect: *"Bourgeois life as a whole seemed to me pedantic. The proletariat, on the other hand, had a grandness of manner, a breadth to their lives. Much later on, when I became acquainted with the difficulties and tragedies underlying proletarian life, when I met the women who came to my husband for help and so, incidentally, came to me, I was gripped by the full force of the proletarian's fate."*[1]

In 1891, she married a doctor, Karl Kollwitz, and moved to the crowded tenements of Berlin, where she would live until her death. At this early stage in her career, she opted for printmaking and drawing over painting. On the one hand, prints could be easily reproduced, and thus offered the possibility of reaching the wide audience denied to painting. On the other hand, she felt she lacked the sense of colour necessary for painting.[2] Throughout the 1890s, she honed her printmaking technique.

The exhibition of Kollwitz's print series *A Weaver's Rebellion* at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition in 1898 marked her emergence as an artist of great significance. The Kaiser intervened to veto her gold medal nomination, upset by her gender, by the debt to naturalism and by the uncomfortable political overtones of her subject matter—an 1844 revolt of Silesian workers against their landlords.[3]

Plate 4 from *A Weaver's Rebellion*, entitled "The Weaver's March," shows a crowd of weavers, along with women and children, marching weapons-in-hand. There are a great variety of facial types and expressions. Angry, clenched fists are prominent. A subtle use of perspective gives a sense of headlong rush to the composition, a general impression that the weavers constitute a conscious, dynamic political force.

This sense of dynamism is heightened in her second big print series, *Peasant's War* (1908), depicting a 16th century peasant uprising and presented as a complete set at the AGO exhibit.

The first print in the series, entitled "The Plowers," depicts a labourer under the burden of the plough, almost flattened to the vertical plane of the ground, as if oppressed by the very sky, by nature itself. The exhibit also contained an early model for this print, a charcoal drawing entitled "Pulling the Plough," in which an ominous "master" figure pushes down on the plower's neck. The final print dispenses with this heavy-handedness, and is much stronger for it.

Writing in a diary entry of December 30, 1909, Kollwitz underlined the importance of eliminating the inessential: *"In my own work I find that I must try to keep everything to a more and more abbreviated form. The execution seems to be too complete. I should like to do... etching so that all the essentials are strongly stressed and the inessentials almost omitted."*[4] Around this time, the economy of means that characterises her late style starts to become noticeable, an economy characterised by a deft manipulation of body language—a vocabulary in which eyes, hands and mouths take on a dominant role.

In the third print from *Peasant's War*, "Sharpening the Scythe," a woman, obscured by a gritty darkness, sharpens a weapon to be used in the uprising. The picture focuses on her eyes and hands. Her eyes are narrow, full of intent, of conviction. Her hands, which are large and tough, are at work in proximity to the blade, hiding her mouth, as if to suggest that words will not do justice to her grievances.

The death of Kollwitz's son Peter, during the early days of the First

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World War, was a major turning point. But the impact of her son's death cannot be understood apart from a consideration of the SPD's role in the war.

On August 4, 1914, the parliamentary deputies of the SPD cast their vote in favour of war credits. Only weeks before, the social democrats had been singing hymns to the international unity of the working class. Now they were signalling their approval of the imperialist slaughter, resorting to the most grotesque pretexts to justify setting the workers of diverse nations against each other. The SPD's support for the war was a consequence of a pronounced turn to the right by the party in the decade leading up to the war, of an adaptation to the national milieu of trade union struggles and parliamentary debate.[5]

The SPD's support for the war threw Kollwitz, like many others, into a deep political confusion, described here by her son Hans: "When the First World War broke out she was overwhelmed by a frightful melancholy. But at the beginning she was swept out of this melancholy by the attitude of the young men, and especially the enthusiasm of my brother Peter and his friends."[6]

In "The Sacrifice" (sheet 1), from Kollwitz's 1922 print series *War*, a nude woman offers up her baby to the powers that be. The woman's eyes are closed, as if willfully blind to what is going on, as if complicit in the baby's murder. Her facial expression is grim. The blackness that surrounds woman and child is like a swooping, enveloping, malevolent force, and it is through this compositional device that the artist expresses her protest against what is being depicted. There is a sense that something entirely backwards, entirely barbaric is taking place.

In a 1920 charcoal study for a print from the *War* series entitled "The Volunteers," four youth appear. One of them bears a field drum. Their arms are around each other, as if dancing. Their eyes are closed, underlining their ignorance of the bloody and useless fate that awaits them on the battlefield. In the study (albeit not in the final print), the right-most dancer is barely present, as if already dead. The feeling of the artist towards what is depicted seems ambivalent.

A few words must be said against the way that the AGO exhibit depicted the political context of Kollwitz's reaction to the war. The catalog offers the following description of her development after the war: "*The content of Kollwitz's two early print series and, indeed, all her work reflect her conviction that revolution, war, and sacrificing one's life may be necessary to achieve a greater good. Such idealistic views were challenged by the death of her son Peter in 1914... After a long, agonising struggle, which is documented in her diaries and letters, she confronts her betrayal of Peter and his patriotism...*"[7]

Socialism and revolution are somehow falsely identified with support for the imperialist slaughter. In fact, by accepting a commission to memorialise Karl Liebknecht, the leader along with Rosa Luxemburg of the revolutionary Spartacus League, both of whom were murdered at the behest of the social democrats in 1919, Kollwitz would indicate that, despite her political confusion, she was not at all in agreement with the SDP traitors. In the memorial print itself, completed in 1920, sincere, deeply concerned workers surround the body of the murdered revolutionary. The body glows, as if haloed, while a mother and baby watch. Kollwitz makes it clear that Liebknecht is not merely a conspirator, as the slander of the day would have it, but rather a leader who both enjoys and deserves the respect of the workers.

Nevertheless, in the chaotic and confused atmosphere after the war, Kollwitz would indeed come to harbour doubts about the revolutionary politics of her formative years. In her diary entry for June 28, 1921, she wrote: "*I thought I was a revolutionary and was only an evolutionary. Yes, sometimes I do not know whether I am a socialist at all, whether I am not rather a democrat instead.*"[8] And there is evidence to suggest that, at least to some extent, Kollwitz blamed the masses for the disaster unfolding around her, writing in early 1920 that "*the masses have been brought so low that little can be hoped from them.*"[9]

Something of this sentiment is captured by the print "Das Volk" from the *War* series. Leering faces surround a withdrawn, suspicious hooded woman who is protecting a visibly frightened child. The leering faces present various aspects, one a feral snarl, another a calculated, reprimanding look, while another has a desperate look as if about to commit a criminal act. It is hard to escape the general idea that the masses represent a hostile, animalistic, force, a source of terror for the innocent woman and child. Indeed, the image of life as a field of hostile forces directed against a defenceless woman is a recurring image in her later work.

Yet despite her political misgivings, Kollwitz did continue, for two full decades, to produce powerful works of art that were watched closely by progressive forces all around the world, and that continued to be admired after her death. Her artistic "unconscious" was formed during a period when the revolutionary workers' movement was on the ascent, and she carried this feeling, this sense of protest, into the subsequent period of multiple crushing defeats for the working class—the betrayal of the German revolution, the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union and the rise of fascism.

Throughout the 1920s, she produced numerous posters identified with various progressive social causes, such as the 1921 poster "Help Russia." In 1924, she staged an exhibition of German art in the Soviet Union, and in 1927, she was invited to the Soviet Union for the 10th anniversary celebration of the October revolution. Unfortunately, very little of this part of her life and work showed up at the AGO exhibit—one exception being a charcoal sketch for the well-known poster "Never Again War!" in which a youth stands, one hand held high, the other over his heart, as he abjures war.

The Nazi takeover in 1933 inaugurated Kollwitz's darkest days. She was forced to resign from the Berlin Academy of Art, where she had been the first female professor, and was later threatened by the Gestapo. Public exhibition of her work in Germany all but ceased. The AGO exhibit includes a 1935 lithograph, "Call of Death," from the series entitled *Death*, in which a likeness of the artist appears, eyes closed, as the spectral hand of death reaches to touch her from the upper right. The hand has a consoling or comforting, rather than threatening, aspect.

When death finally overtook her in 1945, it had already claimed both her grandson Peter, who died in combat in 1942, and her husband Karl, who died in 1940. A bronze sculpture from 1941, "Farewell," memorialises her husband's death, again through effective inflection of body language. The woman in the sculpture attaches herself so forcefully to the departing man that his head is pushed up, in a slightly awkward manner, by the desperation of her endeavour.

A teacher from Kingston, Ontario, left the following comment at the exhibit: *"I hope there is a Kollwitz in Iraq 2003."* The AGO exhibition, by acquainting a new generation of artists and the general public with Kollwitz's art, has certainly contributed to the fulfillment of that wish.

Notes:

1. *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*. Ed. Hans Kollwitz. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955. pg. 43.

2. *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz.* pg. 40.

3. Brenda Rix. "Käthe Kollwitz: The Woman Who Feels Everything," in *Käthe Kollwitz: The Art of Compassion.* Exhibit catalog. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2003. pg. 24.

4. *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*. pg. 52.

5. Interestingly, one of Kollwitz's brothers was Konrad Schmidt, a prominent revisionist figure whose theories about the progressive role of the trade unions were explicitly critiqued by Rosa Luxemburg in *Reform and Revolution* (1900).

6. *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*. pp. 7-8.

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7. Brenda Rix. “Käthe Kollwitz: The Woman Who Feels Everything,” in *Käthe Kollwitz: The Art of Compassion.* Exhibit catalog. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2003. pg. 28.

8. *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz*. pg. 100.

9. *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz.* pg. 95.

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