

Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibits work of left-wing German artist: *Käthe Kollwitz*

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Käthe Kollwitz, Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 31-July 20, 2024

“If my works continue to make such an impression—even after decades—then I will have achieved a great deal.”

The prints of Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945)—intaglio etchings, lithographs and woodblocks—have been widely displayed in a variety of contexts over the century since their creation. However, the Museum of Modern Art’s recent exhibition, *Käthe Kollwitz*, which ended July 20, was the first museum retrospective in New York exclusively dedicated to her entire body of work.

It included her three main suites of prints—*A Weavers’ Revolt* (created between 1893 and 1897), *Peasants War* (1902-1908), and *War* (1921-22); *Woman with Dead Child* (1903) together with several proofs; her monumental woodblock *In Memoriam Karl Liebknecht* (1919) of the murdered leader of the failed German Revolution; and many riveting self-portraits she made over the course of her life. The show also included preparatory drawings and revised proofs offering insight into her creative process, as well as sculptures, posters and more.

If at the outset of the 20th century, Kollwitz’s prints were exceptional, they are even more meaningful today when the threats of world war, fascism and genocide, far from being things of the past, are again very much on the agenda. One can’t help but think of Kollwitz’s images of dead women and children when reading reports of the Israeli genocide carried out in Gaza.

However, Kollwitz’s ability to create such powerful images derived not solely or even primarily from her being a woman and a mother herself. After all, the remarkable painters Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) and Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) also painted women and children but without the same social power. While the MoMA show’s curation includes the fact that Kollwitz was *also* a socialist, it underplays the essential role that this played in Kollwitz’s depiction of the exploitation and poverty of the working class and the impact of war, on the one hand, and the drive of the masses to revolutionary struggle, on the other.

As we wrote of an exhibition that included Kollwitz’s *Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Shawl* at the Worcester Museum in Massachusetts in 2005, which we repost here and on which this review is based:

Kollwitz’s life and career, as much as that of any artist, were bound up with the growing self-consciousness of the German working class, its socialistic aspirations and its political organization, with all the latter’s strengths and weaknesses.

Käthe Kollwitz was born in Königsberg, East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia). She grew up in a cultured atmosphere where critical thinking, directed toward social and moral idealism, was nurtured. The spirit of democracy and socialism encouraged by the Revolution of 1848 was venerated in the family, and her father, Karl Schmidt, joined the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), the party formed under the influence of Marx and Engels. Her elder brother Konrad Schmidt also became a leading member of the SPD and a friend of Engels, although he later turned sharply to the right. From early childhood, her father felt she was destined for a career in art, despite the “unfortunate” fact that she was a girl.

In 1891, she married Dr. Karl Kollwitz, her brother’s boyhood friend, who practiced medicine in a working class district of Berlin. World War I took the life of her son Peter, heightening the urgent emotional and anti-war character of her art. Kollwitz subsequently drew great inspiration from the Russian Revolution, without ever seeing eye to eye with Bolshevism. When Hitler assumed power in 1933, she was expelled from the Berlin Academy of Art, and her works were removed from German museums and destroyed. Linked with socialists and communists, she faced hostility and increased restrictions but was never imprisoned. Kollwitz died in the last days of World War II in 1945.

Lithography

Early on, Kollwitz was attracted to graphic art, as opposed to painting, as a medium. She felt it was of paramount importance her work be moderately priced and widely accessible.

She became an established artist when her print series *A Weavers’ Rebellion* created a major sensation at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition in 1898. Comprising six prints, the *Weavers*—a depiction of the 1844 revolt by Silesian workers—traces a dramatic pattern of poverty, death, conspiracy, a procession of angry weavers, the storming of the owner’s house and death by soldiers’ rifles.

“It was a landmark of class-conscious art: for almost the first time the plight of the worker and his age-long struggle to better his position received sympathetic treatment in pictures. ... What Millet did with the peasant, she did with the worker—projected a way of life, envisioned a noble world.” (*Prints and Drawings of Käthe Kollwitz*, selected and introduced by Carl Zigrosser) The series earned her the ire of Kaiser Wilhelm who, admonishing her work as “gutter” art, intervened to veto her gold medal award.

Kollwitz’s second print cycle was the *Peasants’ War*. A rendering of the

16th-century peasant uprising, the series emphasized the intolerable conditions of the poor (in this case, the rural poor). What is unusual in the series is that in four of the seven plates the protagonist is a woman. Increasingly, the urge to give voice to woman as the universal mother, protector and combatant was to find expression in her work. The second print in the series, *Raped*, is one of the earliest pictures in Western art to portray the female victim of sexual violence sympathetically.

World War I

The impact of titanic events—World War I, the betrayal of Social Democracy (however Kollwitz may have perceived it), the sacrifice of her son to that war, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the aborted German revolution of 1918-1919—forced Kollwitz to reevaluate the purpose of art and the relationship of technique to meaning in a work of art. She decided that many of the devices she had avidly used in previous works, such as intaglio, seemed irrelevant to the new requirements placed on art in times of war and social revolution.

Kollwitz wrote in her diary in 1919: “Lithography now seems to me the only technique I can manage. It’s hardly a technique at all, it’s so simple. In it only the essentials count.”

In 1919, Kollwitz executed a commission to memorialize the funeral of Karl Liebknecht, the leader, along with Rosa Luxemburg, of the revolutionary Spartacus League. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were both assassinated in January 1919 by reactionary soldiers, with the connivance of the right-wing SPD leadership, having opposed the imperialist war and defended socialist internationalism.

The *Karl Liebknecht Memorial* is a jarring piece in which Kollwitz captures the psychic devastation caused by Liebknecht’s murder in the working class. The woodcut presents workers somberly crowding around the corpse of the fallen leader, stoically paying their respects. Kollwitz renders the event with a combination of naturalism and symbolism, distilling the emotional mood of the population in the style of a Christian Lamentation.

In writing about the memorial to Liebknecht, Kollwitz reveals something of her internal artistic process:

As an artist I have the right to extract the emotional content out of everything, to let things work upon me and then give them outward form. And so I have the right to portray the working class’s farewell to Liebknecht, and even dedicate it to the workers, without following Liebknecht politically. Or isn’t that so?

Part of her reflection on the grim consequences of war took the form in 1923 of a set of seven woodcuts, entitled *War*, illustrating the reaction of women to the global slaughter of 1914-1918. *The Volunteers*, the most famous in the series, shows a group of four youth following a leader, who is none other than Death. In 1916, Kollwitz wrote:

When I think I am convinced of the insanity of the war, I ask myself again by what law man ought to live. ... I shall never fully understand it all. But it is clear that our boys, our Peter [her son], went into the war two years ago with pure hearts, and that they were ready to die for Germany. They died—almost all of them. Died in Germany and among Germany’s enemies—by the millions. ... Is it a breach of faith with you, Peter, if I can only see madness

in the war?

Kollwitz and the USSR

Kollwitz’s views on the vicissitudes of German and international socialism in the 20th century are not precisely known. She was first and foremost an artist of great honesty and seriousness, not a politician. However, her general sympathies can be gleaned from her public actions.

In 1924, Kollwitz participated in an exhibition of German art in the Soviet Union, and in 1927, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution, she was invited to visit the USSR, now deep in the process of Stalinization. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the remarkable “commissar of enlightenment,” discussed her work in his essay, *An Exhibition of the Revolutionary Art of the West*:

This truly admirable “apostle with the crayon” has, in spite of her advanced years, altered her style again. It began as what might be described in artistic terms as *outré?* realism, but now towards the end of her development, it is dominated more and more by pure poster technique. She aims at an immediate effect, so that at the very first glance one’s heart is wrung, tears choke the voice...

As distinct from realism, her art is one where she never lets herself get lost in unnecessary details, and she says no more than her purpose demands to make an immediate impact; on the other hand, whatever the purpose demands, she says with the most graphic vividness.

Prompted by a group of Russian artists, Kollwitz made a poster called *Solidarity: The Propeller Song* in 1932. “In order to make my position clear regarding an imperialist war against Russia, I drew this lithograph with the inscription: ‘We Protect the Soviet Union (Propeller Song),’” explained the artist.

During the second half of her career, Kollwitz created her famous anti-war posters, such as *Never Again War!* She also completed the memorial to her son Peter—a process that took 17 years—and focused on the theme of death in a final series of lithographs.

Toward the end of her life in 1941, Kollwitz summarized in her memoirs the source of her artistic and aesthetic commitment to the working class:

My actual motive, however, in choosing from now on the representation of the life of the worker was that selected motifs from that sphere simply and unconditionally were what I perceived as beautiful. ... People from the bourgeoisie were entirely without charm for me. The bourgeois life seemed entirely pedantic to me. On the other hand the proletariat had great style.

Only much later, when I became acquainted, especially through my husband, with the difficulty and tragedy of the depths of proletarian life, when I became acquainted with the women, who came to my husband seeking aid and incidentally also came to me, did I truly grasp in all its power, the fate of the proletariat...

Kollwitz demonstrated that despite the experience of fascism and Stalinism, she, unlike many artists at the time, never lost her bearings and succumbed to despair. One year before her death, in a 1944 entry in her

memoirs, she writes: “Every war is answered by a new war, until everything is smashed. ... That is why I am wholeheartedly for a radical end to this madness, and why my only hope is in world socialism.”

In her most tendentious art, in which she sought, through pointed emotionalism, to exhort to action, Kollwitz struggled with technique, always intent on subordinating means to end. For this reason, she returned to lithography almost exclusively from around 1920 until her death. This choice was not without difficulties because at times she seemed “to lose a certain critical distance from her subject, allowing them to hover precariously on the edge of sentimentality” (*Kollwitz Reconsidered*, Elizabeth Prelinger).

The best of Kollwitz’s last works are those in which her fluidity of style yields to visual economy, to images that are unsentimental but sympathetic.

In an era now dominated by abstraction, Kollwitz staunchly adhered to representational forms in her drive to depict the great questions facing humanity. “While I drew, and wept along with the terrified children I was drawing, I really felt the burden I am bearing. I felt that I have no right to withdraw from the responsibility of being an advocate. It is my duty to voice the sufferings of people, the never-ending sufferings heaped mountain-high,” penned the artist in 1920.

Driven to chronicle the depths of humankind’s anguish, Kollwitz declared in 1916: “A pure studio art is unfruitful and frail, for anything that does not form living roots—why should it exist at all?” And again in 1922: “One can say it a thousand times, that pure art does not include within itself a purpose. As long as I can work, I want to have an effect with my art.”

The betrayal of August 1914

The collapse of German Social Democracy and the Second International in August 1914 were blows to the socialist workers’ cause. These experiences did not leave Kollwitz untouched. In an April 1917 letter to her son Hans, she addresses the implications and lessons of these upheavals:

My dear Hans! ... You know how at the beginning of the war you all said: Social Democracy has failed. We said that the idea of internationalism must be put aside right now, but back of everything national the international spirit remains. Later on this concept of mine was almost entirely buried; now it has sprung to life again. The development of the national spirit in its present form leads into blind alleys. Some condition *must* be found which preserves the life of the nation, but rules out the fatal rivalry among nations. The Social Democrats in Russia are speaking the language of truth. That is internationalism. Even though, God knows, they love their homeland.

It seems to me that behind all the convulsions the world is undergoing, a new creation is already in the making. And the beloved millions who have died have shed their blood to raise humanity higher than humanity has been.

Kollwitz recognized that her life’s artistic mission was to alert and sensitize others to the human condition. Endowed with a tremendous capacity for empathy and employing a consciously chosen epigrammatic form, she made clear her socialist sympathies in a variety of forms: historical settings, the immediate conditions of workers, in fierce anti-war

agitation. In her memoirs in 1915, Kollwitz writes: “I do not want to go until I have faithfully made the most of my talent and cultivated the seed that was placed in me until the last small twig has grown.”

It can hardly be accidental that the life and work of one of the greatest female artists of the 20th century were inextricably linked to the democratic, egalitarian cause of international socialism.



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