



KÄTHE KOLLWITZ

Prints
Process
Politics

The art of German printmaker, sculptor, and teacher Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) bears witness to experiences of poverty, injustice, and loss in a society troubled by turbulent political change and devastated by two world wars. Spanning all five decades of her career, Kollwitz’s prodigious graphic work—notable for its affecting imagery and technical virtuosity—asserts her commitment to social advocacy and her pursuit of artistic excellence.

Kollwitz’s reputation flourished during a printmaking renaissance in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. The artist embraced the print’s capacity to disseminate her designs to a wide audience. As she explored the formal and expressive possibilities of different processes, Kollwitz generated numerous preparatory sheets, including drawings, trial prints, and working proofs. These rich sequences of images vividly document the evolution of her ideas, both artistic and political.

All works in the exhibition are from the Dr. Richard A. Simms Collection of Prints and Drawings by Käthe Kollwitz and Other Artists at the Getty Research Institute. Partial gift of Dr. Richard A. Simms

KÄTHE KOLLWITZ

Born Käthe Schmidt in a conservative region of the German Empire, Kollwitz grew up in a politically active Socialist household. She studied painting at schools for women artists in Berlin and Munich in the 1880s, but she did not receive formal instruction in printmaking. Learning from artists, printers, manuals, and her own restless experimentation, she produced a remarkable 275 etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts. In 1919, Kollwitz became the first woman elected as a full member to the Academy of Arts in Berlin but was forced to resign in 1933, following the Nazi Party's seizure of power. She died at the age of seventy-seven in Moritzburg, near Dresden.

Kollwitz's graphic output responded to the economic and political turmoil that disrupted German society from 1870 until 1945. In her search for a visual language that would appeal to discerning collectors and engage an ever-broadening public, she remained largely independent of avant-garde movements such as expressionism. Kollwitz evolved her early realist style toward a greater simplification of form. While she moved from a descriptive to a more suggestive aesthetic, she never abandoned the human figure.

DR. RICHARD A. SIMMS COLLECTION

The Dr. Richard A. Simms Collection of Prints and Drawings by Käthe Kollwitz and Other Artists, which comprises more than 650 nineteenth- and twentieth-century works on paper, was a partial gift to the Getty Research Institute in 2016. After acquiring 121 prints that came from Kollwitz's estate in 1978, Dr. Simms continued to seek works to chronicle her printmaking career, bringing together exceptional sequences of preparatory sheets. His collection, which expanded to 286 works by Kollwitz, also represents artists in her orbit, including George Grosz, Max Klinger, and Ludwig Meidner.

Four decades ago when I began collecting, I was moved by Kollwitz's images of the downtrodden, victims of war, and the underclass. But, I quickly understood that she was as dedicated to the artistic process as she was to humanism and social justice. I saw Kollwitz's genius in the chalk, pencil, and wash emendations that cover the numerous working proofs I collected. . . . I wanted to build a masterpiece study collection that would encourage us to explore the depth of her thought, technique, and creativity.

—Dr. Richard A. Simms, 2016

PEASANTS' WAR

For its narrative power, scale, and technical complexity, *Peasants' War* is Kollwitz's most ambitious print cycle. Inspired by historian Wilhelm Zimmermann's book *The History of the Great Peasant War* (1841–1843), the cycle is a modern interpretation of the German Peasants' War (ca. 1522–1525), a popular uprising of laborers against aristocratic landowners. The seven prints in *Peasants' War*, like those in Kollwitz's earlier series *A Weavers' Revolt*, evoke the loathsome conditions of modern industrial labor. Both series follow a similar dramatic arc: from provocation to reaction, outbreak of violence, and ultimately, death and defeat.

The Association for Historic Art—an organization that supported painting and printmaking of German historical subjects—commissioned the series, distributing the prints in 1908. Drawings, trials in lithography and etching, and working proofs produced over the course of six years testify to Kollwitz's meticulous planning and execution. Whereas print series were traditionally uniform in size, Kollwitz varied the dimensions and format of the individual sheets of *Peasants' War*, strategically framing each scene to amplify its message. The result is a tour de force that affirmed her standing as the foremost woman artist in the German Empire.

THE PLOUGHMEN

Kollwitz devoted five years to *The Ploughmen*, the first of seven prints in *Peasants' War*. The preparatory drawings, working proofs, and rejected versions record the artist's evolving thoughts as she sought to articulate the inhumane conditions that compelled the laborers to revolt. Through numerous trials in different printmaking processes, the artist recast the figures to revise the composition's narrative implications.

In an early rejected lithograph, a hunched peasant woman guides a plough pulled by two human beasts of burden. Unhappy with this composition, Kollwitz repositioned the ploughers and introduced a standing female figure in the foreground in a study drawing and etching. The artist rejected this image, too, ultimately eliminating the female figure to focus on the laborers' physical torment. The definitive version of *The Ploughmen*, executed in etching, captures the men in their Sisyphean misery, perpetually mired in their desperate place in society.

RAPED

Together with the exploitation of laborers in *The Ploughmen*, the sexual abuse in *Raped* signals the brutal conditions that precipitated the peasants' revolt. A woman lies violated and dead in a patch of flowers and cabbage leaves. The extreme foreshortening of her body, with legs splayed and arms pulled back, conceals her face from the viewer. The lush vegetation—a unique depiction of flora in Kollwitz's oeuvre—serves as a foil to the lifeless body. In deep shadow at the upper left, a small child looks over the garden fence at the victim. An ominous triangular shadow extending to the woman's left foot suggests a menacing presence just beyond the picture plane. Although Kollwitz does not explicitly illustrate violent action in this print, its meaning is clear.

SHARPENING THE SCYTHE

Following the scenes of exploitation and abuse in *The Ploughmen* and *Raped*, the cycle's third sheet illustrates the decisive rise to rebellion. Kollwitz took as her subject a woman with her scythe—a farming tool with a curved blade designed to reap crops—but struggled to give visual form to the incitement of her revolutionary consciousness. Several states of *Inspiration* show an imposing male figure guiding the peasant woman's hand to seize the scythe. Kollwitz rejected this print for the cycle and eventually developed the definitive *Sharpening the Scythe*, in which the woman is alone, empowered by her own militant resolve. The scythe, now in her firm grasp, transforms into a weapon of war.

Comparison between *Inspiration* and *Sharpening the Scythe* reveals the artist's creative scope and technical investment in developing a subject. It also shows how she used plates of different shapes and sizes as she reformulated her ideas.

ARMING IN A VAULT

The awakening insurgent spirit in *Sharpening the Scythe* leads to the rise of mass revolutionary action in *Arming in a Vault*. A crush of peasants bearing torches and weapons ascends from the depths of an underground vault up a steep spiral staircase, clamoring to breach the surface and release their outrage. Inspired by French modernist printmakers after a stay in Paris in 1901, Kollwitz experimented with color lithography. However, she ultimately determined that this scene—like the rest of the *Peasants' War* cycle—was best treated in etching, here printed in somber black and gray-brown inks. The rejected lithograph and definitive etching are similar in their overall compositions. However, with its decorative use of color and narrow range of values (lightness or darkness of a hue), the lithograph lacks the pictorial depth and resolution of the etching. The latter's theatrical lighting and spatial recession, together with the added figures and sharpened incline of the stairs, convey a greater urgency and drama.

CHARGE

Kollwitz displayed an early proof of *Charge* in 1902 at the sixth exhibition of the Berlin Secession artists' group, where the print received positive reviews for its depiction of Black Anna, the sixteenth-century figure from the Black Forest region who ignited the German Peasants' War. In 1904, she submitted *Charge* to the Association for Historic Art, which awarded her the commission to execute the other six plates of the *Peasants' War* series over the next four years.

Kollwitz tirelessly honed both composition and graphic vocabulary to convey meaning. She used vigorous drypoint linework to assert the furious energy of the storming mob, and she printed the pattern of wove fabric in Anna's skirt and the peasants' clothing. The artist wrote about *Charge* to art historian Max Lehrs, an early admirer of her technical virtuosity and expressive power: "I consider this . . . print to be my best work and I am rather happy about it."

BATTLEFIELD

In the aftermath of belligerent conflict comes the heartrending task of burying the fallen. Steeped in quiet darkness, a woman looks for her dead son in a field of corpses. The high horizon line suggests the vast expanse of the battlefield and the enormity of her search.

A single light—the woman’s lantern—cuts through the nocturnal veil, illuminating her weathered hand at the chin of a young man. Kollwitz initially intended to close the *Peasants’ War* cycle with this image, but she ultimately executed a seventh plate, *The Prisoners*, to represent the conclusion of the failed revolution.

THE PRISONERS

Restrained by a barrier of thin wooden poles and rope, the horde of prisoners is distanced from the viewer, pressed into the composition's middle ground. The men are crowded together into a monolithic mass, yet their faces bear individual expressions of anguish and resignation. In its format and scale, *The Prisoners*, the final print in the cycle, matches the opening plate, *The Ploughmen*. This formal connection echoes the tragic full-circle turn of the narrative, from the peasants' oppression to their ultimate suppression.

PROLETARIAT

The three sheets in Kollwitz's fourth and smallest graphic cycle offer bleak portrayals of the plight of the working class. The artist, who became more politically active in the 1920s, pointedly titled the series *Proletariat*—a Socialist and Communist term—rather than *workers*. The series was issued in 1926 by Emil Richter, a Dresden-based art dealer who published Kollwitz's prints from around 1910 to 1930. Richter, who also financed the publication of two catalogs of her print oeuvre in 1913 and 1927, was a crucial figure in the dissemination and appreciation of her work.

Following World War I and throughout the 1920s, woodcut became Kollwitz's preferred print medium. She was drawn in particular to the woodcut's unique capacity to render fields of unmodulated, saturated black. Working from dark to light, the artist used areas of unprinted, bare paper to produce a white design within a dense black plane. In the *Proletariat* series, she developed a compelling, reduced syntax, in which white line designs are sparingly hewn out of a dominant black ground.

WAR

For the third of her five print series, Kollwitz turned to woodcut to depict the misery of a society forever changed by World War I. The artist had direct experience of its devastation: her youngest son, Peter, had been killed in the early months of the conflict. She conceived *War* in 1914, the year of his death, and executed its seven prints between 1918 and 1923. The prints address the losses and trauma suffered by those left at home, including mothers, fathers, wives, and widows. One of several German artists in the early 1920s to publish a print series on the subject of war, Kollwitz exhibited these woodcuts in 1924 at the newly established International Antiwar Museum in Berlin.

The political turbulence of these years coincided with Kollwitz's own artistic struggle. In 1919 and 1920, the artist grew increasingly dissatisfied with etching and lithography, media she would abandon for a period of time in favor of woodcut, engendering a style shift toward a greater simplification of form. The woodcut's bold abstraction provided the artist a new graphic vocabulary through which to express extreme emotional states.

KARL LIEBKNECHT

Following the dissolution of the German Empire and the signing of the armistice agreement to end World War I in November 1918, left and right factions struggled for political power. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, founders of the Communist Party of Germany, participated in the Spartacist Uprising in Berlin in January 1919. After the provisional government led by the Social Democratic Party brutally suppressed the uprising, Liebknecht and Luxemburg were arrested and murdered by right-wing paramilitary forces. With the Communists in crisis, a coalition of parties established Germany's first democratically elected parliamentary government, known as the Weimar Republic, which lasted until Adolf Hitler ascended to power in 1933.

Although she was not a member of the Communist Party, Kollwitz was moved to create a memorial print for Liebknecht. The artist labored to find the technique that would best express her sentiment, writing: "The immense impression made by the hundred thousand mourners at his grave inspired me to a work. It was begun and discarded as an etching, I made an attempt to do it anew, and rejected it, as a lithograph. And now finally as a woodcut it has found its end."

KOLLWITZ'S FINAL YEARS

After 1929, Kollwitz abandoned woodcut and returned to lithography. While the artist made lithographs throughout her career, her approach to the technique evolved as she simplified intricate applications of crayon, brush, pen, scraper, and spatter—at times paired with etching—to more economical crayon and brush works. Her lithographs from 1930 to the early 1940s (when she ceased making prints) were almost exclusively in crayon. In these late works, she often used a transfer method, which entailed drawing on specially prepared paper and relaying the image from sheet to lithographic stone. This turn to a more expedient technique coincided with a rising dedication to sculpture in her last decade.

In 1933, under the Nazi regime, Kollwitz was expelled from the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin and forbidden to exhibit. During World War II, in the late fall of 1943, her Berlin home was bombed and completely destroyed, and numerous works, studio materials, and documents were lost.

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