

Kathe Kollwitz

1867-1945

An excerpt from Kathe Kollwitz by Elizabeth Prelinger

Unlike Modersohn-Becker's robust and monumental depictions of motherhood, Kathe Kollwitz's imagery is marked by poverty stricken, sickly women who are barely able to care for or nourish their children. Kollwitz's art resounds with compassion as she makes appeals on behalf of the working poor, the suffering and the sick. Her work serves as an indictment of the social conditions in Germany during the late 19th and early 20th century.

The daughter of a well to do mason, Kathe Schmidt was born in East Prussia. Her father encouraged her to draw and when she was 14 years old she began art lessons. She attended The Berlin School of Art in 1884 and later went to study in Munich. After her marriage to Dr. Karl Kollwitz in 1891, the couple settled in Berlin living in one of the poorest sections of the city. It was here that Kollwitz developed her strong social conscious which is so fiercely reflected in her work. Her art features dark, oppressive subject matter depicting the revolts and uprisings of contemporary relevance. Images of death, war and injustice dominate her work. Kollwitz was influenced by Max Klinger and the realist writings of Zola and she worked with a variety of media including sculpture, and lithography. It may be argued that her work was an expression of her tumultuous life. She came into contact with some of the cities most needy people and was exposed to great suffering due to the nature of her husband's work. Her personal life was marred by hardship and heartache. She lost her son to World War I and her grandson to World War II and these losses contributed to her political sympathies.

Kathe Kollwitz became the first woman elected to the Prussian Academy but because of her beliefs, and her art, she was expelled from the academy in 1933. Harassed by the Nazi regime, Kollwitz's home was bombed in 1943. She was forbidden to exhibit, and her art was classified as "degenerate." Despite these events, Kollwitz remained in Berlin unlike artists such as Max Beckman and George Grosz who fled the country.



*Woman with
Dead Child*

*Outbreak from
'Peasants' War'*



The plates of *Peasants' War* exhibit a complicated array of techniques for creating the drawings and for producing the tone and texture that were so crucial to Kollwitz' compositions in these and other contemporaneous works.

First, instead of making her drawing directly on the prepared copper plate, she used soft ground to transfer a drawing made on laid paper. The procedure most often consisted of laying a sheet of paper over the copper plate, which had been covered with soft ground, and then drawing lines over it with a hard pencil. This action would remove the corresponding ground, allowing the plate to be bitten in those areas. When printed, the lines produced would be softer and grainier than the usual etched ones. Kollwitz extended the potential of this procedure even farther by creating entire backgrounds of texture, often transferring

by means of the sensitive soft ground grain of the laid paper on which she made the original drawing. This is visible in all the *Peasants' War* prints and in *Woman with Dead Child* as well.

The second technique Kollwitz used during this period to create large expanses of texture and tone was the addition of a so-called "mechanical grain," described as exhibiting "unmistakable rows of tiny, parallel dots. This grain, "only added in later states," has been observed on every sheet in *Peasants' War* except for *Outbreak*. Its striking regularity and fineness and

similarity to reproductive print, has activated a debate that turns on whether or not Kollwitz, used some kind of photomechanical process to transfer, the tone created in this way. Careful study corroborates the suggestion that she did. Most likely, Kollwitz laid a half-tone screen over a copper plate grounded with a light-sensitive emulsion, transferred the dot pattern from the screen by means of exposure to light, possibly the sun itself, and then etched, the pattern into the plate. The rest of the image was obtained from soft-ground procedures, stopping out, and direct etching.

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