

Kollwitz was likely thirty-three years old when she made this self-portrait. She had recently garnered both acclaim and controversy for her first print portfolio, and that experience propelled her to the forefront of the Berlin art world. Working at the cusp of a new century, which held the promise of unprecedented advancements in women's rights, she depicts herself emerging from a dark background and gazing straight ahead with confidence and candor, unfettered by the gendered expectations of her time. Her spotlighted hand—symbolizing her abilities as an artist—is as prominent as her unadorned face.

Exhibition Title

2024 Käthe

Kollwitz

Label Format

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b65eacea

War, Kollwitz's third print portfolio, memorializes the anguish of those who lost sons, husbands, and fathers in World War I. Its sequence mirrors Kollwitz's evolution from war supporter to pacifist as she coped with the death of her own son in the conflict. "[This series] is my confrontation with that part of my life, from 1914 to 1918, and these four years were difficult to reckon with," she wrote. The first two sheets portray a mother holding her infant as if offering a sacrifice, and a band of volunteers marching ecstatically to battle. Subsequent sheets shift to parents and widows grieving their losses. One of the final sheets depicts mothers protecting children—an image of resistance against Germany's culture of military sacrifice.

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b65ead56

Love Scene I is one in a series of erotically charged drawings that Kollwitz created in the aftermath of her extramarital relationship, likely romantic, with Hugo Heller, a Viennese book dealer and gallerist. The “Sekreta” drawings, as she called them, were never sold or exhibited in her lifetime; it would have been highly unusual for a woman to show such work to the public. “I don’t know what will happen to them after my death,” she reflected. Kollwitz heightened the intensity of this scene by using bold, expressive strokes of charcoal, which she smudged with her fingers.

Exhibition Title
2024 Käthe
Kollwitz
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b65ead32

A Weavers’ Revolt, Kollwitz’s first print series, dramatizes the story of a textile workers’ uprising in Silesia in 1844—a watershed event in the history of class struggle for many socialists in Germany. Her six prints move from scenes of poverty-induced hunger and death, to those of workers plotting their rebellion and storming the gates of their employer’s home, to the final image in which dead workers are laid out beside a giant loom, their revolt having been quashed. In 1898 the series was nominated for a gold medal at a state-sponsored exhibition, but Kaiser Wilhelm II denied the award, citing the work’s socialist subject matter and Kollwitz’s gender: “Medals belong on the breasts of deserving men,” he claimed.

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This preparatory drawing shows how Kollwitz thought through ideas for *End*, the sixth sheet of *A Weavers' Revolt*, shown nearby. In the scene at center, and in a sketch in the left margin, a woman meekly clasps her hands as she watches two men carry a dead revolutionary into their modest quarters. However, another sketch in the lower margin shows how the artist would adjust the woman's stance in the final print to be more defiant, knotting her hands into fists. With this change, Kollwitz shifts the woman's attitude from resignation to rage, and suggests that the workers might rise up again.

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b65eace4

With its unusually large format and fine details, Kollwitz meant for *The Downtrodden* to showcase her virtuosity as a printmaker. At the same time, she devised a richly symbolic narrative that underscores her commitment to the struggles of the working class. She divided the composition into three segments. By referencing depictions of Christ's entombment in the center image, Kollwitz elevated the hardships of the present-day proletariat, represented on the left by a family coping with the death of a child, and on the right by two naked women who likely embody the poverty that forced some women into sex work to survive.

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Kollwitz
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b65eacf0

In this image, Kollwitz depicts a crowd cavorting wildly around a guillotine as a stream of blood flows down a cobblestone street. She based it on Charles Dickens's novel, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which is set during the French Revolution (1789–99) and includes a scene in which hundreds of people sing and dance “The Carmagnole”—a revolutionary song that ridiculed the monarchy, and the frenetic dance that often accompanied it. Kollwitz transposed the scene, which glorifies the passion and power of the proletariat, to the streets of a German town.

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b65eacf6

Kollwitz was deeply moved by Michelangelo's marble sculpture *Pietà* (1498–99), which depicts the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Christ. She translated that symbol of sorrow and compassion into a new version addressing the hardships faced by mothers in her time, when industrialization and poverty contributed to a childhood mortality rate above thirty percent. Shifting away from the panoramic scenes that had established her career, Kollwitz zoomed in on her figures to distill and monumentalize their emotion. But even for all its power, the artist was dissatisfied with this lithograph. She started over to create a more visceral version, at right.

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b65eacfc

These six works document Kollwitz's progress in developing *Woman with Dead Child* into the final state shown at left. To create the first state, she transferred one of her drawings to a copper printing plate using soft-ground etching, so the image registered in pale, ghost-like tones. Also using soft-ground etching, she pressed textured papers to shade the figures' bodies. In subsequent states, she employed etching and drypoint to forge dense lines, and she pressed sandpaper into her printing plate to add tonal depth. She hand-colored some of her trial proofs, and printed the background of one in gold through lithography. But she ultimately decided a stark black was most appropriate for the final state.

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2024 Käthe
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b65ead02

Kollwitz spent six years working on *Peasants' War*, her second print portfolio. It was inspired by a history of the Great Peasants' War (1524–25), an uprising of farm laborers against the feudal landowners who controlled them. Kollwitz's seven plates chart a narrative that moves from images of the farmers' oppression and abuse, to the workers' vengeful awakening and revolt, to their ultimate defeat. Exceptionally, Kollwitz hinged her narrative on the actions and circumstances of women: a rape is the brutal event that catalyzes the revolt, and a woman is the leader of the charge. Kollwitz deployed great technical skill in developing these unusually large and experimental etchings.

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b65ead14

Kollwitz visited Paris in 1901 and again in 1904, and the art of the French avant-garde affected her deeply. In this print, she seems to be measuring herself against renowned French artists, from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres to Edgar Degas, who made a tradition of depicting women's nude torsos from behind. French advancements in lithography may also have inspired the luminous color she achieved here. After 1905, however, Kollwitz would banish color from her work, believing its decorative effects to be incompatible with her socially critical subject matter.

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b65ead0e

Woman with Dead Child is a shockingly visceral portrait of maternal love and grief. After creating a comparatively placid first version, *Pietà* (1903), at left, Kollwitz entwined her figures more tightly here, and they seem in their positioning to thrust forward, toward us. The artist served as her own model, sketching herself naked in front of a mirror, while cradling her seven-year-old son Peter. In an era when many children did not live past the age of five, Kollwitz gave public expression to the primal pain that mothers suffered in private.

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b65ead08

Kollwitz made this drawing and the one next to it in preparation for the climactic fifth sheet, *Charge*, in her *Peasants' War* series, at right. Here she focuses on the figure of "Black Anna," a legendary female leader from the sixteenth century with whom Kollwitz strongly identified. Kollwitz paid special attention to the thrust and rotation of Anna's hands—the instruments of her power as she signals her followers to revolt.

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b65ead1a

In this climactic scene, Kollwitz depicts “Black Anna,” the heroine of the sixteenth-century uprising, raising her arms and propelling her body to direct her followers into battle. Its visual representation of the strength and power of women is virtually unprecedented in art history. Kollwitz devised a triangular composition to reinforce the sense of urgent action, with the crowd lurching, on Anna’s command, to a point at the far left. Kollwitz experimented with pressing fabric and stippled papers into a soft-grounded etching plate to animate the scene through a variety of tones and textures.

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b65ead20

Kollwitz was pregnant with her first child, Hans, when she made this double self-portrait, one of her first prints. In the upper image, she rests her hand on her heart, just above her swollen belly. In the lower one, she holds her hand to her head in a pose that artists often used to signal a brooding intellect. In pairing these images, Kollwitz presents herself as both mother and artist, possessing the power to create both life and art.

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b65eacd8

Between 1908 and 1911, Kollwitz published fourteen drawings exposing the struggles of working-class women in *Simplicissimus*, a socially critical magazine. Publishing them allowed her to speak “to a large audience about the . . . many silent and noisy tragedies of big city life,” as she explained. *Home Worker*, shown here, lays bare the hardships of those who were paid to process raw materials like cotton at home. Labor regulations did not extend to home workers, and women exhausted themselves by working long hours while simultaneously caring for young children.

Exhibition Title
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A gaunt woman lying in bed cradles two children while her despondent husband, hunched in a chair, stares into the distance. The title suggests he is unemployed, and the pressures of unemployment loom over this family. Kollwitz likely based the scene on the stories of women who visited her husband, a doctor. “[Only] when I became acquainted with the women, who came to [him] seeking aid and incidentally also came to me, did I truly grasp in all its power, the fate of the proletariat,” she wrote.

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b65ead2c

After her teenage son Hans recovered from a life-threatening case of diphtheria, Kollwitz created many works depicting a mother clinging to a child. In this etching, a woman—whose features are the artist’s own—clasps a boy’s neck with her right hand. Her left hand makes a fist around his tiny fingers, further entwining his body with her own. A skeletal arm around the boy’s waist is that of a Death figure attempting to separate them. Two related studies, at left, reveal how Kollwitz immersed herself in this image and explored different positions for the mother’s hands.

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b65ead38

Family planning and women’s rights were important issues to Kollwitz, and she participated in campaigns on their behalf. She created this poster for the fight to repeal paragraph 218 of the German criminal code, which made abortion illegal. Kollwitz’s image conveys the hopeless exhaustion of mothers trapped in poverty with ever more children to feed and care for.

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b65ead42

The Lovers is one of Kollwitz's first sculptures, and one of the only plaster models she made that survived World War II. It was likely influenced by Auguste Rodin's erotic *The Kiss* (c. 1882), which Kollwitz may have seen in Paris a decade earlier. But from certain perspectives her sculpture also resembles a pietà—an image of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ. Here the small woman with limp arms looks almost like a lifeless child in the man's lap. His thin arms encircling her waist recall those of the Death figure Kollwitz included in several slightly earlier drawings and prints also on view.

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b65ead3e

The shrouded body of Communist leader Karl Liebknecht lies horizontally along the bottom of this print—Kollwitz's first woodcut. Surrounding him are his grieving working-class followers. In January 1919 Liebknecht helped lead an armed revolt in Berlin, which was brutally suppressed by right-wing paramilitary units; he was captured and murdered. Although not a Communist, Kollwitz was appalled: "As an artist, I have the right to . . . represent the workers' farewell to Liebknecht . . . without following Liebknecht politically. Or not?!" Nearby drawings show how she worked to respectfully capture his face and his mourners' sorrowful expressions.

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In this study, Kollwitz used passages of dark ink to approximate the fields of black she would develop as a woodcut in her *War* portfolio (on view nearby). It took her four years after World War I, from 1918 to 1922, to develop the final images for that series because she struggled to find a visual language appropriate for the gravity of her subject. She tried etching and then lithography for her images, as demonstrated in the two earlier versions of this subject at left. Ultimately, it was the heavier, starker black afforded by woodcut that suited her purposes. “Sorrow,” she wrote, “is all darkness.”

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b65ead50

In a gesture of defiance and optimism, a young protester raises their right arm toward the sky and places their left hand on their heart, as if to take an oath: “Never Again War!” Kollwitz made this poster as a commission for the pacifist organization Nie Wieder Krieg (Never Again War), in remembrance of the tenth anniversary of the start of World War I. Her bold, underlined words and quick strokes underscore the passion and urgency with which she embraced this pacifist message.

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Kollwitz created this work in memory of her friend, artist Ernst Barlach, who died in 1938 after prolonged persecution by the Nazis. The face depicted here is the artist’s own. With her hands covering her mouth and one eye, she seems to be framing and cradling her own emotion. “When I was making [it] . . . I was affected by Barlach’s death and the terrible injustice that he had suffered,” she wrote. This is one of very few plaster castings by Kollwitz that survived World War II.

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Kollwitz's final print portfolio, *Death*, is a summation of a lifelong preoccupation, stoked both by her personal experiences of loss and war and by her compassion for the precarities of working-class life. Completed in the year the artist turned seventy, as the Nazi party cemented its grip on Germany, it was also a warning and, perhaps, a premonition. Alongside images of a spectral figure visiting society's most vulnerable—especially women and children—the last print in the series shows the hand of Death coming for Kollwitz herself.

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