

ASSERTING HERSELF

In 1891, when Kollwitz was twenty-four years old, she married, settled in Berlin, and began her career as an artist. Within a few years, she had given birth to her two children, Hans and Peter. To be a wife and mother as well as a professional artist was virtually unheard of in her time. She was able to balance these roles thanks to her fierce sense of purpose and the support of her progressive husband, Karl, a medical doctor and socialist who believed in gender equality.

Kollwitz gained initial renown for her meticulous prints focusing on the struggles of the working class, including her first print portfolio, *A Weavers' Revolt* (between 1893 and 1897). With these works, she established a lasting practice of distilling vast social problems into images of the painful experiences and smoldering potential of women. She would continue, throughout her life, to plumb the technical possibilities of drawing and printmaking in order to amplify that emotional content.

“My work at this time . . . was in the direction of socialism. . . . [I chose] my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers.”

FORGING AN ART OF SOCIAL PURPOSE

In nineteenth-century Germany, the Industrial Revolution effected a massive shift from a rural, agrarian economy to one based on industrial production in urban centers. These rapid transformations exacted a heavy toll on workers, who often suffered horrible living and labor conditions, and inflamed tensions around social inequities. In response, socialism emerged as a movement for workers' rights and economic parity, and a push for women's rights also gained ground. Kollwitz was committed to both of these radical causes. She focused her early work on narratives of class struggle, and, crucially, constructed many images around the actions and circumstances of women.

In *Peasants' War*, her second print portfolio, Kollwitz turned to history to explore the injustices of her own time. The project was inspired by a sixteenth-century uprising of farm laborers against the feudal landowners who exploited them. At the center of the series is “Black Anna,” a legendary leader in the conflict. Kollwitz envisions her as a powerful revolutionary whose upraised hands unleash the fury sown by centuries of oppression.

HER CREATIVE PROCESS

To develop the images in her etchings, Kollwitz often created numerous studies and draft versions that she refined or rejected along the way. She typically printed many trial proofs, testing the progress of her prints. Occasionally she overworked these proofs with charcoal, ink, or pencil marks intended to guide the subsequent changes she would make on her metal etching plate. Together these sequential iterations map a process of refining and reconceiving in order to make her images more potent.

Exhibited here is a selection of drawings and etchings that evolved into *Sharpening the Scythe* (1905), a pivotal print in Kollwitz's *Peasants' War* series (on view in the adjacent gallery). The artist's first version, at far left, shows a man guiding a downcast peasant woman in how to use a scythe. Over the course of her revisions, which proceed clockwise around the room, Kollwitz gradually reimagined the composition to give the woman a powerful agency. In its final form, the woman stands alone, in full command of the scythe and ready to wield it in a revolt.

“I have never done any work cold. I have always worked with my blood, so to speak. Those who see these things must feel that.”

LOVE AND GRIEF

Between 1908 and 1913 Kollwitz focused much attention on the women in the working-class neighborhood where she lived. She knew many of them as patients of her husband’s medical practice, where they sought treatment for maladies related to pollution and malnutrition, domestic violence, and unwanted pregnancy—all of which were rampant in crowded, newly industrialized cities like Berlin. “I was powerfully moved by [their] fate,” the artist wrote.

During these years, Kollwitz was also preoccupied with two emotional situations in her own life. In 1908 her sixteen-year-old son Hans contracted diphtheria, and his grave illness, coupled with the high rate of childhood mortality in her environment, affected her deeply. She made many works that depict a mother clinging to her wan son. These images of fervent embrace echo the intertwining figures in Kollwitz’s works from this period of lovers—which the artist created in the aftermath of an extramarital relationship she had. Such disparate but related visions underscore the connection between grief and love at the core of Kollwitz’s art.

“I have been through a revolution, and . . . I am no revolutionist. . . . I should hardly mount a barricade now that I know what they are like in reality.”

WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

World War I (1914–18) marked a devastating turning point in Kollwitz’s life and art. In 1914, only two months after the conflict began, her eighteen-year-old son Peter was killed on the Flemish front. His death, and her role in allowing him to enlist as a minor, haunted her for the rest of her life. Her third print portfolio, *War* (1921–22), is a memorial to those “unspeakably difficult” years of war and her resulting turn toward pacifism. Its images of mothers safeguarding children supplanted her earlier depictions of revolutionary uprising.

In the years after the war, as a new democratic government brought more rights for women in Germany, Kollwitz rose to great prominence. In 1919 she became the first woman to be a professor at the Prussian Academy of Arts, Berlin’s leading art school. Her public presence was further elevated by the posters she produced in support of humanitarian crises wrought by the war and its turbulent aftermath. Addressing issues including famine relief, pacifism, and women’s health, they were plastered throughout the streets of Berlin and other cities.

“The most important task for someone who is aging is to spread love and warmth whenever possible.”

MATERNAL PROTECTION

When the Nazi party began its rise to power in the early 1930s, Kollwitz was outspoken about the danger it posed to German democracy. As a result, after Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1933, she was forced to resign from her professorship at the Prussian Academy, she was prohibited from exhibiting her art, and the Gestapo threatened to send her to a concentration camp. In the midst of these intimidations, and with German fascism igniting another excruciating war in 1939, Kollwitz created many works depicting mothers with their arms encircling children. They stand as visions of maternal protection, resistance, and compassion in response to repression and terror.

In her final self-portraits, Kollwitz is frank about the toll this dark time took: she appears in them tired, with aging features. But she is unmistakably the same woman who gazed out with determination in her earliest self-images, courageously asserting herself for the cause of social justice.