

## Käthe Kollwitz: *Denouncing War and Inhumanity*

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Since 24 February, Europe is experiencing a terrible war with daily live coverage, reporters on the ground in Ukraine and images of the suffering of people affected. The destruction of homes, hospitals, infrastructure, the killing of people is unspeakable. Millions, mainly women and children, are fleeing to the West. Ukrainian and Russian people in my circle of friends are equally horrified by the escalation of violence and increasing brutality in this war amongst brother nations, which seems so senseless. Many families and soldiers in the war zone have relatives on both sides of the border.

With these images in my head, I could only imagine writing about Käthe Kollwitz, who depicted the suffering and hardship of people, families, mothers and children, in times of war with her striking works, sometimes frighteningly realistic drawings, lithographs, etchings, woodcuts. She referred to historical events, but also experienced death, suffering and destruction in her own life.

Käthe was born on 8 July 1867 in Königsberg in East Prussia as the fifth child of Carl and Katharina Schmidt. The former German Königsberg is today Kaliningrad and Russian. Her father discovered his daughter's talent



*Misery (Sheet 1 of the cycle Weavers Rebellion(1893-1897)*

for drawing and it was from him that she received her artistic education. As a girl, she was excluded from a classical academy education. She received her first instruction in Königsberg from the painter Gustav Naujok and the engraver Rudolf Mauer. In the following years she studied and worked in Berlin and Munich.



*March of the Weavers (1897)*

In 1891 Käthe married her long-time fiancé Karl Kollwitz, to whom she owes her surname. With him she moved to Berlin, to the working-class district of Prenzlauer Berg. There she gave birth to her son Hans in 1892 and her son Peter in 1896. It was during this period (1993) that she saw the premiere of Gerhart Hauptmann's drama "The Weavers", which inspired her to





*Woman with dead Child*

create her first graphic cycle "Weavers' Rebellion" (1893-1898).

She produced the first three sheets for this series as lithographs shortly after the performance. Max Liebermann, one of the most prominent painters of German Impressionism, was so convinced by these that he proposed the young artist for the award of the small gold medal in the same year. But Kaiser Wilhelm II indignantly refused. Her realistic-expressionist style stood in contrast to the then favoured historicism and style of the bourgeois salons.

However, Kollwitz attracted a great deal of attention a few years later, when she took part in the Great Berlin Art Exhibition in 1898 and showed the complete cycle "Weavers' Rebellion".

In the following years, she accepted a teaching position for graphic art and worked on her second print cycle "Peasants' War", which was inspired by a book on the history of the Great Peasants' War (1841-1843). From 1909 she also devoted herself to sculpture.

The First World War (1914-1918) shocked her with the worst possible news: her 18-year-old son Peter was killed in the first weeks of the war. The sculpture "Mourning Parents", created between 1914 and 1932, is dedicated to the fallen son. She subsequently moved

closer to pacifist and socialist groups, seeing in art the task of depicting people's social conditions. Around 1927 she reached the zenith of her fame, was 60 years old and received numerous honours. She never belonged to a political party, but took a stand against the fascism of the Nazis, even after they came to power in 1933, and therefore had to experience hostility and discrimination.

In her studio community, she was able to continue working on her late work until 1940, during the beginning of the Second World War. Before she withdrew for health related reasons, she completed a large number of drawings and graphics and sculptural works, including the lithograph cycle "Death" (1937) and several sculptures.

Her husband Karl died in 1940. She herself had to flee the city in 1943 because of the bombing. Her flat was hit.



*Käthe Kollwitz 1927*

Many of her works were destroyed. At the invitation of a patron, she moved to the Rüdendorf in Moritzburg in 1944, where she died in 1945, only a few days before the end of the war and the Nazi regime. The building of her last home is now a memorial site and museum, the Käthe Kollwitz House in Moritzburg near Dresden, which honours the artist's memory. Museums in Cologne and Berlin own and show larger collections of her art, and many international galleries hold works of her.



*Mourning parents, 1914-1932*