



Chazen Museum of Art

Fall 2020 Faculty Curriculum: Activism through Art

Käthe Kollwitz, *Hunger*, sheet 2 from the series *Proletariat*, 1925



Woodcut, 23 1/16 x 16 15/16 in.

Bequest of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2017.14.22

I intend to have an effect on these times in which human beings are so distraught and helpless.

—Käthe Kollwitz's diary¹

¹ Quoted in "War and Compassion: The Art of Käthe Kollwitz," Illustration Chronicles [website](#)

Artist Biography

Käthe Kollwitz (German, 1867—1945) was a printmaker, sculptor, teacher, and social activist whose long career spanned three German governments: the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, and the Third Reich, all of which were fraught with political discord. Throughout these periods, however, Kollwitz was relentless in her advocacy for the working class, and she concerned herself especially with the depiction of social injustices resulting from war, the abuse of laborers, rapid urbanization, and poverty, with both poignancy and artistry. Among her most powerful images are graphic works portraying fear, death, motherhood, and grief—themes she frequently returned to as she reworked compositions and honed the essence of their emotional content. In addition, she made many self-portraits.

Kollwitz's lifelong promotion of Socialist ideals stemmed from her upbringing in a progressive family. Her maternal grandfather, theologian Julius Rupp, left established Protestantism and founded the Free Religious Congregation. Rupp was harassed and imprisoned for his liberal beliefs, which valued duty, freedom, justice, and love as moral and ethical imperatives in the struggle against class oppression and social inequality. Kollwitz's father, a lay preacher, was a close reader of Karl Marx and an adherent of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Despite her left leaning interests, Kollwitz disliked partisan bickering, and formed her own, thoughtful opinions based on a solid understanding Marxist theory and related political discourse.

Kollwitz was born in Königsberg, Germany (present-day Kaliningrad, Russia, the administrative center of a Russian exclave located between Poland and Lithuania). She began studying art at thirteen, learning engraving (a type of printmaking) in particular. At seventeen, she moved to Berlin to study, and in 1888 continued her art education in Munich. Kollwitz moved to Berlin in 1891 upon her marriage to a physician who practiced in small clinics for working class subscribers. She taught at the Berlin School of Woman Artists and joined a group of avant-garde artist group there. Over her career, she created suites of prints that raised awareness of the suffering and struggles experienced by the German people, particularly: *A Weavers' Revolt* (1895-98), *Peasants' War* (1903-08), *War* (1922-23), and *Death* (1934-35). In these series, and her work more generally, she rarely if ever focused on the oppressors, making the common man and the oppressed the subject of her work.

During World War I, Kollwitz lost her son Peter only a month into the conflict; a personal event that historians have often linked to the artist's focus on death and experiences of suffering, especially those depicting mothers grieving the loss of children. Around the same time, the graphic work of expressionist artists—especially that of Ernst Barlach—prompted Kollwitz to adopt the woodcut printing method and to simplify her compositions. Hands and faces became vehicles of heightened emotional expression. During the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), her fine art and numerous poster designs addressing social causes earned her widespread recognition. Her posters addressed a number of causes, including poverty, malnutrition, the exploitation of laborers, abortion, and domestic abuse. In 1919 she was the first female member elected to the Berlin Akademie der Künste (Academy of Fine Arts), and in 1928 became the organization's first woman professor.



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Due to her political activity during the rise of Nazism, Kollwitz was asked to leave the Akademie in 1933, and she lost her printmaking studio. Her art was named “degenerate” under Hitler’s rule, she was not allowed to exhibit, and her artworks were removed from view at museums throughout the country. This was not a new occurrence for Kollwitz, as her work had been censored throughout her career: in 1906, for example, a poster she made for the Home Industries Exposition showing an exhausted woman was suppressed by the Kaiser’s wife and in 1912, another poster promoting playgrounds for children was banned by the police. Kollwitz’s husband died in 1940, followed by her grandson, named Peter after his deceased uncle, in 1942 fighting on the Eastern front. In 1943, due to frequent air raids, she evacuated Berlin for first Nordhausen, then Moritzburg, near Dresden; her house was destroyed along with many of her artwork the same year. She herself passed away a few days before Armistice.

Location

Hunger is currently installed at the Chazen Museum in the passageway between the Mezzanine and the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 13. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

Hunger, number 2 from the series *Proletariat* is a black and white woodcut print created by Käthe Kollwitz. The vertically oriented print measures about twenty-three by seventeen inches. The print depicts a group of figures who appear to be cowering from danger as a mysterious figure lurks and hovers in the upper left corner. The lower half of the print shows a group of people hunched over and huddled together with fright on their faces. Due to Kollwitz's heavy use of black ground and minimal whites, it's hard to decipher how many people are in the group, but visual evidence suggests there are at least six people. A central figure appears in profile, their long hair flying back as if windblown. Their back is slightly arched and leans forward to the left, while their arms are outstretched near their face. They are grasping onto the back of another figure in the foreground, their hands clenched tightly. This figure is large and wears a dark floor length robe as evidenced by two bare feet peeking out at the bottom. Short white hatch marks run across the robe to indicate folds of fabric. Their body is significantly hunched over and their head hangs low. They hold a bundle against their face that resembles a baby with their right hand, and their left hand and arm reaches back towards the central figure. Huddled between these figures, the head of a small person appears and seems frightened as evidenced by their wide eyes looking upward and gaping mouth. To the right of this trio stands two more figures though only the face of one is visible, while just the head and one bare foot of another can be seen. These figures also have wide eyes and gaping mouths, a look of fear on their face. In the upper left corner, the head and hands of a skeleton lurk holding what appears to be thin cords. There is a smudged white shape hanging nearby that resembles a scythe. The skeleton appears as a black mass except for its' face and hands which have been rendered in minimal white detail. A large field of black separates the skeleton from the crowd below, though he looms above.

Content and Context

While I was drawing and was moved to tears by the children's anguish, I felt the burden I was carrying. Yet I also felt that I could not flinch from the task of speaking for the people afflicted. I have the task of spelling out the suffering of the people which is interminable and has reached gigantic proportions. I have this task, and it is not an easy one at all.

—Käthe Kollwitz's diary (January 5, 1920)

Hunger one of three woodcuts Käthe Kollwitz created for *Proletariat*, her fourth and most concise suite of prints addressing sociopolitical issues. Prior to this publication, she had made three other series of prints on similar topics: *A Weavers' Revolt*, *Peasants' War*, and *War*. The prints in *A Weavers' Revolt* featured a narrative based on Gerhart Hauptmann's drama "The Weavers," itself based on food riots that occurred in 1844, in which weavers, faced with poverty and starvation and working under deplorable industrial conditions, rise up against their employers; in one image, two men killed by soldiers called upon to quash the demonstration can be seen. *The Peasants' War* series referenced an uprising that occurred in Germany from 1524-26, when peasants and poor townspeople revolted against their feudal landlords. The uprising began in a town on the Swiss border but spread throughout most of the country. The peasants fought for a number of rights, including religious freedom, reduced taxes, the right to hunt and fish on feudal lands, abolition of inheritance taxes, and impartial courts. Lastly, *War* (created in the years after World War I) depicted the story of a child going off to war and the suffering of his parents in the aftermath of his death.

The series *Proletariat* is named for the working class as a distinct social group. This word gained its modern meaning about a decade prior to Marx's use of the term, which brought it attention, and to whom it is still linked. Created in 1924-25, *Proletariat* responds to the dire German economy that followed World War I and its tragic effects on working class citizens, who had already suffered during the war from malnutrition and starvation due to Allied blockades. In the aftermath of war, military revolts led the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, to abdicate and a new government was formed the following year, called the Weimar Republic. The expense of the war, followed by steep reparations issued by the Allies as part of the Versailles Treaty at the end of the war, depressed Germany's economy. In response to debt, the government printed new money, a solution that resulted in hyperinflation. As the value of the German currency declined exponentially, many working-class Germans became impoverished.

Hunger is the second image in *Proletariat*, situated between *Unemployed*, depicting a family facing the economic implications of job loss, and *Child Mortality*, in which a woman holds a tiny casket. Together, the three woodcuts narrate a concise story in focused, graphic form. Each composition depends on Kollwitz's sparing use of white lines and shapes within an otherwise flat field of black ink.

Kollwitz regularly revisited compositions and reworked images—including those carved into her woodblocks for printing—until she felt they effectively conveyed her message. She brought to her artistry the same degree of attention and persistence as she did in her ongoing activism for social



causes. To create *Hunger*, Kollwitz returned to the composition of a lithograph, *Vienna is Dying! Save Its Children!*, that she had made in 1920, and translated it into woodcut.² Kollwitz's primary period of poster production occurred immediately after World War I, between the years 1919 and 1926, and *Vienna is Dying! Save Its Children!* was one of a number of examples, including another made in 1923 entitled *Germany's Children are Starving*, created for the Workers International Relief organization (WIR). The following year, she contributed a lithograph to a portfolio for WIR entitled *Fight Against Hunger! Buy Food Coupons*. Thus her 1925 woodcut *Hunger* demonstrates a prevalent concern in Kollwitz's production at the time and a social issue about which she cared deeply.

Notably, in translating the composition from lithograph to woodcut, she altered the position of the figure of death, placing the specter's face and hands directly above the cowering women and children. Using various woodworking and engraving tools, Kollwitz worked and reworked the block no less than fifteen times, printing proofs (test impressions) along the way, until she arrived at the final image. At one point, Kollwitz cut away the bottom of the image—from about the waists of the figures down—and replaced it with a new section of wood so she could model the shapes of the legs differently. The impression of *Hunger* in the collection of the Chazen Museum of Art is an example from late in the process.

² Käthe Kollwitz, [Vienna is Dying! Save Its Children!](#), 1920. Lithograph. Collection of the Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Köln

Discussion Questions

1. Though this print contains minimal visual information, it speaks volumes. What does it say to you? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. What emotions does this image evoke, and how does Kollwitz communicate them?
3. Kollwitz created many political posters throughout her lifetime. How might printmaking be an advantageous medium for an “activist” artist?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Max Beckmann (German, 1884 - 1950). [Malepartus](#), sheet 8 from the series *Hell (Die Hölle)*, 1919. Lithograph, 26 x 16 1/8 in. Carolyn T. Anderson Endowment Fund and Barbara Mackey Kaerwer and Howard E. Kaerwer Endowment Fund purchase, 2018.36.

Max Beckmann was another artist working in Germany during and following World War I. This work, however, does not focus on the proletariat, but rather, a more affluent class. The print’s title refers to a nightclub or dance hall and it is part of a series portraying the social disintegration and civil violence that occurred shortly after World War I.

Michael Glancy (American, b. 1950), [Pax-MAD Bashar](#), 2012. Blown glass, cloisonné cut copper, silver, 8 x 6 x 6 in. Chazen Museum of Art General Endowment Fund and Stanley J. Lerner Endowment Fund purchase, 2013.62.

In this piece, glass artist Glancy refers to the Syrian war and the destruction and suffering caused to the Syrian people at the hands of President Bashar Al-Assad.

Käthe Kollwitz (German, 1867 - 1945). [Revolt \(Losbruch\)](#), sheet 5 from the series *Peasant's War (Bauernkrieg)*, 1902. Etching and soft-ground aquatint, 19 3/16 x 22 5/8 in. Bequest of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2017.14.16.

This print is one from Kollwitz’s series *Peasant’s War* in which the oppressed are shown rising up.

Käthe Kollwitz (German, 1867 - 1945). [The People \(Das Volk\)](#) sheet 7 from the series *War (Krieg)*, 1922-1923. Woodcut, 14 1/4 x 11 7/8 in. Transfer from the Art Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1985.8.

This woodcut is the final image in Kollwitz’s series *War*, which focuses on those left behind during combat: mothers, widows, and children.

Additional Resources

Jay A. Clark and Brenda Rix, "Art in the Spotlight: Käthe Kollwitz," *Art Gallery of Ontario* webinar (July 15, 2020), 31 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bapw0oD0oU0>

Joseph Henry, "How Käthe Kollwitz Invented a New Art of Protest," *Frieze* (January 2020), <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-kathe-kollwitz-invented-new-art-protest> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Philip Kennedy, "War and Compassion: The Art of Käthe Kollwitz," *Illustration Chronicles* (November 2017), <https://illustrationchronicles.com/War-and-Compassion-The-Art-of-Kathe-Kollwitz>

Hans Kollwitz, ed., *The diary and letters of Kaethe Kollwitz*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988) [Kohler Art Library N6888 K62 A3 1988]

Louis Marchesano, "Introduction," and Louis Marchesano and Natascha Kirchner, "Artistic Quality and Politics in the Early Reception of Kollwitz's Prints" in *Käthe Kollwitz: Prints, Process, Politics*, Louis Marchesano, et. al. (Los Angeles: Getty Trust Publications, 2020) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Elizabeth McCausland, "Käthe Kollwitz," *Parnassus* vol. 9, no. 2 (February 1937), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/771494> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Naoko Takahatake, Christina Aube, Lauren Graber, and Alina Samsonija, "Käthe Kollwitz: Prints, Process, Politics," Getty Museum website, https://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/kollwitz/explore.html