

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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KOLLWITZ GRAPHICS FROM ROSENWALD COLLECTION

EXHIBITED BY NATIONAL GALLERY

WASHINGTON, D.C. December 8, 1970. An exhibition of forty prints and ten drawings by Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945), selected from the Rosenwald Collection of the National Gallery of Art, will be on view at the Gallery through January 31. The exhibition marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of the German graphic artist, one of the world's most expert draftsmen and printmakers.

The exhibition was organized by H. Diane Russell, Assistant Curator of Graphic Arts. The holdings of Kollwitz's graphic works in the Rosenwald Collection are among the most extensive in either a public or private collection.

"This exhibition has been grouped according to the subjects on which Kollwitz focused: the relationship of mother and child and the family; the grim realities of the workers' lives; the call of death; her own physiognomy as ravaged by fate and time," Miss Russell writes in text accompanying the exhibition. Quotations from the artists' diary are also displayed with the works of art.

Central to the exhibition is a working proof of Nie wieder Krieg ("No more war!"). The 1924 poster was part of Kollwitz's artistic response to World War I, in which her youngest son died. There are also six woodcuts from her War Cycle of 1922-23, images that express her pain over her own loss and the deaths of "the anonymous youths of all countries."

(MORE)

Kollwitz's husband, Karl, was a physician who practiced an early form of socialized medicine for the poor, and his patients' wives often sought consolation for their problems from his artist wife. Studies of working people, including portraits and representations of the miseries of hunger and unemployment, reflect interest in the workers' lives as well as her relationships with her husband's patients and their families.

"In the beginning my impulse to represent the proletarian life had little to do with pity or sympathy," wrote Käthe Kollwitz, "I simply felt that the life of the workers was beautiful."

The exhibition also includes seven lithographs from the Death Cycle, her last major opus, created between 1934 and 1936. Following the centuries-old European tradition of the "Memento Mori," the series personifies Death as it beckons people, terrifying some and comforting others.

Impressions of eight of the fifty self-portraits Kollwitz made at various stages of her life are also included in the exhibition. Miss Russell observes that Kollwitz's study of the changes in her own face over the years recalls Rembrandt's similar preoccupation in his work.

The humanitarian and pacifist nature of Käthe Kollwitz's images led the Nazis to expel her from the Berlin Academy and to forbid exhibition or sale of her works. She and her husband were threatened with arrest and internment in a concentration camp but would not leave Germany, fearing reprisals against their friends.

Much of Kollwitz's work was destroyed when her house in Berlin was bombed in 1943. She died in 1945 under the protection of Prince Ernst Heinrich of Saxony.

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For further information contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director, or Alison Luchs, Public Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, Area Code 202, 737-4215, ext. 224.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

KÄTHE KOLLWITZ
1867-1945

This exhibition of prints and drawings by Käthe Kollwitz has been assembled to commemorate the 25th anniversary of her death. It is selected from the extensive holdings of her works in the National Gallery's Rosenwald Collection.

Kollwitz dealt with themes of central importance to all individuals: love, poverty, war, death. While she was an expert technician as a draftsman and printmaker (these were almost uniquely her media of expression), she was always concerned with the subject-matter of her works. This exhibition, therefore, has been grouped according to the subjects on which she focused: the relationship of mother and child and the family; the grim realities of workers' lives; the call of death; her own physiognomy as ravaged by fate and time. She might have said of herself, as Immanuel Kant did nine days before his death: "Das Gefühl für Humanität hat mich noch nicht verlassen" (The sense of humanity has not left me).

Kollwitz's social conscience was deeply ingrained in her from childhood. She was born in East Prussia. Her father, Karl Schmidt, was a Social Democrat. Her mother was the daughter of a Lutheran pastor who, when expelled from the state church, founded a Free Congregation in Prussia. Käthe Schmidt married Karl Kollwitz, a young doctor who practiced an early form of socialized medicine for the working classes.

There are several perceptive studies of workers in the exhibition, as well as the highly expressive etching, Unemployment. The latter evokes the hopelessness of a family racked by illness and poverty. Workers are also seen mourning over the bier of the martyr, Karl Liebknecht. Liebknecht was a socialist deputy in the Reichstag, imprisoned for political reasons and shot to death while supposedly trying to escape. Kollwitz here experimented with the subject in the media of etching and lithography, but turned to the bolder medium of the woodcut for the final version of the print.

One of the greatest joys in Kollwitz's life was her sons, Hans and Peter. In 1914, she was deeply affected by Peter's death on a battlefield in Flanders. Her preoccupation with his death, and the deaths of his friends and anonymous youths of all countries, stayed with her for the remainder of her life. The War Cycle, composed in the stark, powerful medium of the woodcut, was an outgrowth of her concern. Another was the poster, Nie wieder Krieg! (No more war!), a lithograph shown here in a working proof touched up with charcoal. Kollwitz lived to see yet another devastating war, in which her grandson fell.

Although Kollwitz's prints and drawings are extraordinarily intense images which often batter the viewer's mind and emotions, there is an underlying dignity, toughness and objectivity in all of her works. Despite all of man's vicissitudes, she believed that he would endure. She brought these same qualities to her self-portraits.

Perhaps no other artist with the exception of Rembrandt (with whom she shares a number of characteristics) examined his own visage as frequently or as objectively as did Kollwitz.

One of her last print series was The Death Cycle. The works recall the long tradition of the memento mori in European art. In this cycle, Death is, by turns, frightening and curiously comforting, assailant and savior.

A number of studies have been devoted to Kollwitz's works; among them are books by Carl Zigrosser, Herbert Bittner and August Klipstein. A collection of her diary and letters was published in an English translation in 1955.

H. Diane Russell
Asst. Curator of Graphic Arts

Quotations from and about Käthe Kollwitz,
used in the exhibition at the
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
December 1970 - January 1971

Dear Peter,

You industrious little farmer! Is the elderberry already blooming? It's wonderful that you are working so hard in the fields, my boy. Too bad I cannot eat some of your rhubarb and your peas. Not even some of the strawberries, when they ripen. But send me a pressed forget-me-not or daisy when you write to me.

Letter to her son Peter,
written from Florence,
June 10, 1907

Last night I dreamed once more that I had a baby. There was much in the dream that was painful, but I recall one sensation distinctly. I was holding the tiny infant in my arms and I had a feeling of great bliss as I thought that I could go on always holding it in my arms. It would be one year old and then only two, and I would not have to give it away.

Diary, April 18, 1916

Age remains age, that is, it pains, torments and subdues. When others see my scant achievements, they speak of a happy old age. I doubt that there is such a thing as happy old age.

Diary, New Year's, 1932

Now I am forty-nine years old...What has the last year brought me? What have I brought to it? I feel that I have become older and feebler. When I see my body, my withered face, my old hands, I become discouraged. How can such a person accomplish as much as I still want to accomplish?

Diary, July 8, 1916

I should like to say something about my reputation for being a "socialist" artist...(M)y real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects gave me in a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful...Bourgeois life as a whole seemed to me pedantic. The proletariat, on the other hand, had...a breadth to their lives...(I)n the beginning my impulse to represent proletarian life had little to do with pity or sympathy. I simply felt that the life of the workers was beautiful.

"In Retrospect," 1941