A Mother's Grief: Kathe Kollwitz Descends into the Marginalized

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A Mother’s Grief: Käthe Kollwitz Descends Into the Marginalized

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Death and Woman, 1910
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Abstract

Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) was a progressive artist who used art as a cathartic means to live through the death of her son in WWI and grandson in WWII. Trapped in the sexist generation of early 20th century Germany, Käthe defied the society in which she lived to create art that served as an empathetic mouthpiece for society’s marginalized. She created thousands of lithographs and hundreds of sculptures depicting war, death, and poverty. Käthe found beauty in the struggle of the working class and constantly used her physician husband’s patients as subjects of her work. As she continued into the socialist realm, she made enemies with German leaders, including Adolph Hitler. Her work fiercely rejected Germany’s involvement in World War I and condemned Hitler’s Third Reich near the onset of World War II. Käthe’s use of bleak colors and disturbing subject matter penetrates the viewer’s comfort zone. The viewer is unable to turn away from her work without feeling guilt, and is forever haunted by her prudent recognition of truth.
Chapter I

“Women are either goddesses or doormats.”

When one thinks of artists of the 20th century, who initially comes to mind? Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh, perhaps Cezanne? Ironically, female artists of the same period are not so readily acknowledged. In particular, women artists who emerged in Germany posed a potentially difficult problem. Women are frequently viewed through the male dominated art of the early 20th century which provides an image tailored to the attitude of society. Germany, in the early years of the Nazi Party, harshly criticizes women who want to go beyond traditional domestic roles. Edvard Munch offers one example of an artist’s projection of women as either thieves of creativity or sexual predators. Once again, women seem to be locked into the medieval paradox of woman as Madonna or whore. At the turn of the 20th century, the femme fatal became the predominant definition of a woman; male artists secured fame as the women who equaled them in talent were subverted. During this time, female artists constantly demanded gender equality yet only received the response of an exacerbated backlash of misogyny. Artists such as Munch and Matisse depicted women as an obstacle, deliberately standing in the way of the creativity of man. A common quote of the time states: “Women are either goddesses or doormats.”

Due to the sociopolitical situation of the era, there lay a double standard where women were forced to retain their wholesomeness and provide the emotional nourishment of the family, while at the same time provide the outlet for man’s sexual desires. Hitler’s Nazi Germany offers this paradigm of the marginalization and degradation of women. At a time when all mankind was suffering at the hands of one

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power hungry, crazed man, it was a strong, defiant, and extremely talented woman who made her anti-Nazi sentiment publicized throughout Germany.

Käthe Kollwitz defied the marginalized role created for female artists in the mid-nineteen-hundreds by challenging society and its leaders with her emotional laden depiction of the workers’ struggle and graphic images of the First World War. In the years leading to World War I, artists separated into two methods of reacting to the war: some felt that the abstract realm gave them a channel to reveal their raw emotions through color and form; while others needed to invoke emotions of the viewers through realistic depictions of their own torments or recounted stories of the horrors of the war. Käthe Kollwitz belongs to this second domain. She recreated her personal terrors of the war on canvas, allowing us all to witness and feel her losses. Through many drafts and extreme skill in print, Kollwitz was able to perfect the combination of form with subject. Her accessible style and humanitarian themes were discovered in an exhibit in 1893, revisited during World War II, and continue to astound audiences today.

The complexity of Kollwitz’s art can be analyzed beyond its social issues and mysterious allegories in order to provide a glimpse into what defined her as a woman, a mother, and an artist. She held a boundless compassion for humanity in her work as she revealed the suffering of members of the lower classes and the cruel effects of poverty. Throughout her life, haunted by bleakness and condemned by her beliefs, she painted the poverty of Germany in an anti-societal manner through dark colors and graphic images; if she had painted an idealized beauty, she would have been untrue to herself and to the callous world around her. She found beauty in her physician husband’s suffering patients and constantly used them as models for her work. Thus, she was not only condemned as
a woman in a male dominated field, but she was outcast from society due to her
exploitation of society’s ills and failures; she displayed the naked truths of the dismal
treatment of the working class, the ravages of illness and death, and the unbearable
brutality of the War. Her parents often wondered why she did not paint ‘beautiful’
subjects (Klein 11) while her sister, equally talented to Käthe artistically, replied that
pretty faces did not show the longing toward an unattainable goal that attracted Käthe.
Those who fell short of society’s definition of beauty fascinated Käthe who found beauty
in human intensity, in the unforgiving suffering of life:

“She practiced neither art for art’s sake nor escapism. With growing
directness and concentration she made dramatic and revealing portrayals of
the humble, the miserable, the helpless ” (Klein 28).

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Chapter II

I cannot turn my eyes away,
I must linger near and stare
As your hurried hands pass all you own
To the sailors standing there, (Nagel, 15)

Käthe Kollwitz was certainly formed by the century in which she lived. As a woman seeking expression in a man’s world of art and politics, she rejected tradition and broke through all barriers to become a socialist artist. She strategically adapted her positions as the wife of a doctor who took in the unemployed and impoverished, the mother of two draftees, and a leader at the Academy of artists, to make poignant statements and harsh condemnations regarding war and the structure of German society. Thousands of Germans saw her work as a way of telling their stories of misery and wretchedness; her courage seeped from the canvas to their hearts. Käthe Kollwitz was an artist for the people, an artist never satisfied with anything but presenting the most meaningful and authentic works she could create.

Born in 1867 to Katharina and Karl Schmidt, Käthe grew up in a wealthy home in Königsberg, Prussia. As a girl, she made weekly visits to her grandfather, Julius Rupp and his Free Religious Congregational Church, which divulged to her a history of religious and social repression under Kaiser Friedrich Wilhem IV. Growing up under the influence of her grandfather’s strong ideals engrained sharp memories of past persecution in Käthe which later developed into a deep empathy for, and constant awareness of, the needs and misfortunes of others. She was welled learned in the Gospel of Matthew and the embodiment of religion in other parts of the world. Through her religious teachings, Käthe readily developed as a woman with strong adherence to her morals and unbiased understanding of issues around her. These lessons from her childhood later transferred
into her artwork, of which the most influential story was an account of the “March Dead” as told to her by grandpa Rupp. The “March Dead” is the name given to those martyred in Berlin in March of 1848 after an attempted revolutionary uprising. This story so touched Käthe, that she later created a series of three lithographs entitled *March Cemetery*, which shows German workers sixty five years later, looking reverently at the graves of their martyred ancestors. Each man embodies such profound compassion that Käthe poured into her work, that the audience gains the sense that these mourners actually participated in the lithograph’s creation.

Käthe’s poor health inevitably fashioned her art. Through her early twenties, Käthe was plagued with vivid nightmares and constant depression which caused seizure-type crying spouts and melancholy for days at a time. Perhaps the austere fortresses and architectural grimness of the East Prussian environment in which Käthe grew up also gives more comprehensibility to her dark sensibilities and intense need to love (Prelinger 91). Her family moved into a better neighborhood when Käthe was nine and she partook in solo wanderings around the Gothic castles and commercial excitement that existed at the waterfront. This early romantic experience would later shape her work as she found beauty in the longshoremen and the work of ordinary folk.

Käthe’s early paintings maintained a dark overtone due to her nightmares and the guilt she experienced after the death of her youngest brother, Benjamin. The memory of Benjamin’s illness and death overwhelmed Käthe, and she could only find escape through her art. Her guilt stemmed from the situation she was in at the time of his death: she was a young girl of about ten pretending to worship the goddess, Venus, in her homemade play temple. She therefore thought Benjamin’s death was punishment for the
sacrilege she performed by worshipping a pagan deity. In addition to her own internal feelings, Käthe took in the feelings of her mother as she grieved desperately for her son. Many of her later paintings involve a mother clinging to her child as he dies, or a child holding onto a sickly mother. Most of her paintings portray death as an external force, tearing apart loved ones who are not yet ready to take separate paths.

Despite the underlying seriousness and pain of her early childhood, Käthe did love to laugh and grew strong through the love and support of her family. Her father, Karl, was less rigid than grandfather Rupp, but highly concerned with the political situation of Prussia. He held the primary occupation of mason, but was also a great artist who often reproduced the paintings of old masters in his spare time. By means of his influences, Käthe formed the basis of her ethics and morals; Karl could have been a successful lawyer, yet chose not to contribute to the legal machinery of Kaiser’s Prussia. Käthe’s mother, Katharina, provided the quiet emotional foundation for the family, and despite a more distant relationship with Käthe, held an equally dramatic impact on her development, teaching Käthe the value of understanding others before judging, or forming, an opinion.

The events and people in Käthe’s early life were responsible for the formation of her strong ideals, uncanny empathy for the victim, and love of art and literature. Her house was filled with the works of Goethe, Rembrandt, Hogarth, and more. Her determination emerged early as she already held strong opinions differing from great writers; for example she disagreed with the principles set in Goethe’s work: instead of Goethe’s belief that it is better to tolerate injustice than create disorder, Käthe saw social
injustice as the greatest disorder.\textsuperscript{3} The call for an end to social injustice was the proclamation she later made in many of her etchings involving an anti-war sentiment. Despite the difference in perspective, however, Käthe held a profound respect for and interest in Goethe’s use of language. Her father, Karl Schmidt, also read to her such works as Ferdinand Freiligrath’s \textit{From the Dead to the Living}, a summons to continue the revolt of the “March Dead.” This work brought to life the tale her grandfather had told her and enhanced its effect on Käthe, deepening her empathy for the working class and their causes to eventually become a dominant theme in her art and label her as a socialist.

Chapter III

“A pity Käthe is not a boy.”

Käthe created her first painting at age sixteen, a talented depiction of working class people. With her bright mind and promising talent in art, Käthe’s father constantly stated: “a pity Katuschen (his pet name for her) is not a boy” (Klein 10). Although her father’s statement coincided with the general view of women in the early 20th century, he granted Käthe drawing lessons from Rudolf Mauer in 1881. Käthe chose to draw members of the working class and other ‘real’ and ‘ordinary’ people (Klein 10). When her parents and sister, Lise, asked why she did not draw beautiful subjects, Käthe replied that beauty was found in human intensity and the cares and losses of real people, a sentiment captured by an excerpt from her diary: “Beauty is that which is ugly” (Klein 39). She has stated that her initial appeal to proletariat people had little to do with sympathy, but that the lives of the workers, the marginalized, and the rejected were beautiful.4 Perhaps the most direct impact on her art is a later verse from Thomas Hood’s The Song of the Shirt of which she was so fond:

But why do I talk of Death?
That Phantom of grisly bone,
I hardly fear his terrible shape,
It seems so like my own,
Because of the fasts I keep
Oh! God! that bread should be so dear,
And flesh and blood so cheap! (Klein 11)

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Once again death is an external force, coming to take the lives of innocent victims. She further developed this theme in many of her later works, as death turned into a metaphor for the outcome of war in German society and the result of Hitler’s leadership.

In 1884, at the age of seventeen, Käthe traveled to Berlin to pursue her artistic interests. She attended Zeichnen-Ind Malschule des Verins der Künstlerinnen, an academy established specifically for women. At this time, women were not allowed in government sponsored art programs, and were therefore forced into programs that were less progressive, and with fewer resources. Her teacher in Berlin was Karl Stauffer-Bern, a man who adhered to tradition but convinced Käthe to develop her skills at drawing rather than painting. Although at the time she resisted, later Käthe proclaimed her gratitude to him for this, and for introducing her to the works of Max Klinger, a graphic artist whose interests were also founded in realistic depictions of ordinary people. Käthe went to Klinger’s etched cycle of Life, where she almost immediately abandoned painting and became hypnotized for his dual concern for social issues and fantastic allegory (Prelinger 14). Käthe read some of Klinger’s works, including a theoretical treatise entitled Malerei und Zeichnung, a work which outlines Klinger’s views of the superiority of drawing as an expressive medium and its unique social agenda in Germany. In another piece, appropriately titled March Days, Klinger envisioned a riveting future of urban revolutions. Käthe consistently attempted to recapture the agitated mood of the revolutionaries, and from this began to develop her own manner of creating emotion. Käthe would later refer to Klinger’s work as a means of justification for her use of the graphic arts in her fight against social injustice.
After her study in Berlin, Käthe studied under Emil Neide in Königsberg. Käthe and another young woman had to take private lessons from Neide since women were not allowed into the official art Academy in Königsberg. Here and into the next year in Munich’s School for Women Artists, Käthe continued to depict outcasts and poor people at work and at rest (Klein 18), defying her lessons on adherence to the norms and traditional use of color. Though she remained quiet during school, she would silently criticize the use of color by concentrating on the graphic arts and the use of black and white to evoke a stronger effect and excite emotion. Through the graphic arts she could better express the darker aspects of life and spread her message to a greater audience. The relative ease of reproduction of graphic art made Käthe’s work more accessible to the rich, the poor, the sick, the hungry, the marginalized, and the persecuted.
Chapter IV

“You have made your choice now. You will scarcely be able to do both things. So be wholly what you have chosen to be.”

Käthe’s sister, Lise, was an artist equal in talent to Käthe. In fact, Käthe often found herself jealous of her sister’s exquisite paintings (painting was something Käthe loved, but could never satisfactorily undertake). Yet in adherence to the social standard of the century, Lise gave up art when she was married. Käthe, however, would not allow marriage to be a distraction from her art. She often said that she was entirely committed to art while Lise lacked the motivation to continue it seriously (Kollwitz 40).

Käthe Schmidt and Karl Kollwitz were married on June 13, 1891. Shortly before their marriage, her father declared to her the infeasibility of being both a wife and artist, and to “be wholly what you have chosen to be” (Kollwitz 41). Although he saw her talent and determination, he nonetheless advised Käthe to abandon her art to become exclusively a wife and mother. In spite of great odds, Käthe’s inextinguishable goal to function as an outspoken artist and a devoted wife was successfully met. Her husband, Dr. Karl Kollwitz, was a physician for a workers’ health insurance fund, serving the lower class in the northeast section of Berlin. He and Käthe moved into their modest home in 1891, the domicile which would be theirs for the next half century. Because of his role as a social democrat in the Berlin health insurance group, Karl was required to live in the same neighborhood as his lower-class patients. Not only did Käthe- who grew up in a splendid home in Königsberg- never complain about her less-than-luxurious living conditions, but she used her husband’s occupation as fuel for her own endeavors. It is appropriate for Käthe to have married a man who looked at his patients as people,
rather than as numbers and who maintained an office constantly overflowing, thanks to his reputation for being sensitive and dedicated to his patients. Kollwitz and his practice offered his wife daily contact with his patients. While she listened to their tales, a mutually satisfying relationship evolved as Käthe served as an understanding ear to them while they became the subjects of her artwork. Her son Hans later said that although the people she spoke with left feeling lighter, Käthe always had more burdens to bear (Kollwitz vi). She was like a sponge that soaked other’s problems into herself and could only squeeze her pain out into her art. Käthe and Karl had two biological sons, Hans and Peter. After returning from her 1922 trip to Paris, the couple added Georg, the son of a friend whom Käthe had found living in poverty in Berlin. Acting on her motherly instinct and empathy for the impoverished, Käthe instantly accepted twelve year old Georg as a part of her family for years.

The Kollwitz home enjoyed enthusiastic games and excursions in nature, activities which replenished Käthe- who relaxed in nature, because it did not inspire her artistic creativity- that was a quality saved solely for human contact. Yet when she moved into her work, she seemed almost bipolar, vacillating between long periods of depression that slowed the process, and shorter periods of progress and mastery of the task at hand. The hundreds of lithographs, woodcuts, and sculptures she created are evidence of her relentless labor, which did not stop until her health began to fail. The fiercest bout of grief and utter despair was felt by Käthe when she learned of her son Peter’s death in 1914, only a day after he had taken to the line of German forces. The seed she had birthed and nurtured was savagely uprooted by the bitter evil of war. This monstrous presence of war was also responsible for the end of her grandson, Peter, who
died in the front line of WWII in 1942. Only two years earlier, Käthe had experienced her second greatest loss, as Karl slowly slipped away from her and the earthly world. With his death, Käthe realized how much she had relied on the support he had given her and her strength noticeably diminished; 1942 left her struggling with her own grief while trying to maintain her maternal role to comfort the rest of her family. After 1943 Käthe was continuously forced to change her place of living because of bombings and threats. In 1945 Käthe breathed her last with these words: “My greetings to all.” She was cremated and buried with her husband, brothers, and sisters under a gravestone she created: “in peace within His hands” (Kollwitz 11).
Chapter V

Her art was good considering she was a woman.

The intensity and vision of Käthe Kollwitz’s life can best be defined through her art. She rejected the prejudices present against females in the art world by intensifying the emotions laden in her work. H.W. Singer, author of a work on modern graphics published in 1920, suggested that she purposely made her prints more intense than she might have had she not also been fighting antifeminist prejudice (Klein). Käthe was on a two-fold mission to challenge those who claimed her art to be good considering she was a woman, and to create awareness for the poor and working class citizens of Germany. Throughout her life, Käthe held many roles as a mother, a grandmother, a mourner, a widow, and a political outcast. Her art displayed all of these aspects and never lost touch with the specific statements she wanted each to narrate to society.

The art of Käthe Kollwitz reveals her experience as a woman in a male-dominated art world, a mother whose son was sent to war, and a societal outcast fighting for human rights. The social and literary implications of her work have often overshadowed her technical skill and creative artistic technique. The forceful rhetoric apparent in her work is the result of her sustained dedication to perfecting the form through which she wanted her ideas expressed. Käthe would constantly practice drawing by isolating herself for long periods of time to laboriously and repetitiously draft piece after piece. Analogous to her development as an artist was the progression of her self portraits; the struggle to present a subject that properly displays the idea, parallels her struggle as a woman drawing the brutal reality of a society in which she has no real place. Käthe found the self-confidence she needed to grow as an artist after creating a charcoal drawing.
representing *Germinal*, a novel written by Zola in 1885. This work was praised by the group of artists she associated herself with and provided the basis for her continuation of Klinger’s preferred manner of expression, graphic art (Prelinger 18-19). She also wanted her work to be available to the general public, which was made easier by the less expensive recreation of graphic artwork. Although Käthe’s series of the fight scene from *Germinal* was still unfinished, she was interrupted by Hauptmann’s play entitled *The Weavers* (1893), a humanist drama of a rebellion against the mechanisms of the Industrial Revolution. The play was based upon the historical uprising of Silesion workers in 1844 who were relentlessly massacred by the military after descending upon the mansion of their disparate employer. Käthe never finished her *Germinal* series, but began to develop a sincere sympathy for the workers and took on a four year project based on *The Weavers* (Prelinger 21). Her exhibition of the completed *The Weavers’ Rebellion* also included experimental etchings she had created in an effort to find the most convincing mode of illustrating her motifs. Although Käthe did not intend for these preliminary etchings to be included in the exhibition, they are now documented as valuable insight into her aesthetic preoccupations and alternative expressive configurations; her need for the perfect saturation of emotion. The *Weavers* cycle includes five drawings which depict her interest in combining naturalism with symbolism, although she continued to adhere to traditional academic practice.

After her *Weavers* series, Käthe joined the Secession art group and remained a member until it dissolved. This sequence of events gave Käthe the reputation as a socialist artist, a label that at this period in her career Käthe did not agree with. Although her work did reflect the attitude and literature of a period engrossed in socialism, her
motive for choosing proletariat subjects was not socialist, but because the beauty in their simplicity and struggle appealed to her. She became gripped by their fate, their fight, and their ugliness; a simple and unqualified way of life was beautiful to Käthe: “Unsolved problems such as prostitution and unemployment grieved and tormented me, and contribute to my feelings that I must keep on with my studies of the lower classes. And portraying them again and again opened a safety-valve for me; it made life bearable” (Kollwitz 43). She initially created works based on the life of the worker not for pity or sympathy, but because she was allured by their beauty. Her life at this time was positive, even happy; she was living with her new husband and sons in North Berlin, and having much success as an artist at a girls’ art school. Yet as she delved deeper into the lives of the workers and was plunged into World War I, Käthe lost the ability to create merely for beauty’s sake and began a long journey filled with empathy and potent artwork.
Chapter VI

"It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex. Yet, it is the masculine values that prevail."  

Käthe Kollwitz created nontraditional art to defy the society in which she lived, as she broke free from the socially unacceptable and limited vision for women of her time. She rejected the role that her sister passively accepted and refused to give up and focus on solely being a wife and mother. Her determination and creative need to pursue her art had many societal and personal ramifications. Defying tradition, she did not stay at home with her children as they grew up, choosing to leave them with her husband and housekeeper as she explored new settings. Her extroverted style of protest eventually forced her to leave her home of fifty years; Hitler soon erased her from all art publications as though she had never existed. Yet Käthe never adhered to restrictions placed on her art or gender because it was her art for the people. As pressures of society and the implicit restrictions on art and, in particular female artists increased, Käthe’s work began to include such struggle.

Käthe’s earlier works display her rejection of gender boundaries as a developing artist and independent woman. She experimented with homosexuality, a topic entirely taboo in her day, presenting her sexuality as something she felt herself as an artist while ignoring the societal context:

“...although my leaning toward the male sex was dominant, I also felt frequently drawn toward my own sex- an inclination which I could not correctly interpret until much later on. As a matter of fact I believe that bisexuality is almost a

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necessary factor in artistic production; at any rate, the tinge of masculinity within me helped me in my work”

Käthe’s feelings for other women are described as ‘masculine’ in her diary, perhaps a reference to the ‘masculine’ characteristics she saw in herself, namely strong self confidence, ambition, and intellectual creativity (Kearns 59). Although it sounds somewhat sexist to attribute these qualities to males now in the 21st century, they were presumed masculine in the early 20th century and the stereotype still exists. By loving women, Käthe was able to retain the self confidence she needed in a challenging art world because she found precisely the qualities she craved to support and sustain her own beliefs. As her fifth decade approached, her own female body overwhelmed her, as the disconcerting changes of menopause threatened her creativity. She destroyed works that had taken her weeks to create because of what she described as “pathological pressure during menstruation” (Kearns 123). Additionally, there lay the possibility that Käthe needed to undergo a hysterectomy, an operation that Käthe felt would take away her sexuality which had so fruitfully influenced her artistic endeavors. She feared that with the loss of her identity as a sexual being and artist, she would again be restrained: “What will remain of myself other than the mother and Karl’s wife” (Kearns 124)? During this brief but troublesome period, Käthe’s self-portraits reflected her fatigue and the lack of bold self-assurance she so often portrayed. Death and Woman, 1910 (title page) was created around the weary time of her middle age and reiterates the need for her sexuality, manifested in her ability to produce children which she

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saw as the one true positive influence on her artistic creativity. Käthe did not need to undergo a hysterectomy and managed to get through this period unbroken.

All of Käthe’s work is free of egoism and sexism, but includes an examination of herself as a human being. *Self Portrait*, 1880 can be analyzed to distinguish precisely how Käthe included her struggle as a female in the male dominated art world. Her gender was placed as an obstacle to her, at times limiting her ability to develop successfully as an artist. Many of her early self portraits show a tension between her femininity and the masculinity she saw necessary to be an artist. *Self Portrait*, 1889, one of Käthe’s earliest self portraits, is a black and white torso with no context, a stark image of Kollwitz with cropped hair and her hand grasping a scarf around her neck. She is wearing what appears to be a suit and tie with the semblance of androgyny aside her naturally feminine face, which holds a look as if to challenge us to critique her work. Her eyes seem to look beyond us and criticize the society in which we rest so contentedly; she annihilates our comfort and makes us twinge in our own skin. As she looks beyond us with force and sadness, we sense her provocative challenge to view discomfort and reevaluate our own beliefs.

The drawing is filled with exposed canvas and visible ink strokes, Käthe prolongs our unease since it is the feeling that she, an artist and a woman, feels eternally. The background has a thick brushstroke with an inconsistent pattern of movement, a
metaphor for the chaos of society which makes the audience look to Käthe for an answer. Perhaps the glimpse of white canvas and background in flux represents the imperfection of German society or the unrest and struggle of the lower class against the dominant subject of military leadership. The strokes on Kollwitz, the subject, are smaller and not as clear. On the sleeve we can see how her hand carried the pen, but the rest of her suit is too dark to distinguish the detail of the strokes. Her flesh has small pencil lines cutting across the surface to give the illusion of depth and shadow. These crevices display the toll of time on someone such as Kollwitz who strove for a cause in a society they had been excluded from. Each experience deepens the holes and folds over the wrinkles; yet these imperfections correspond to Käthe’s belief that an unacceptable appearance makes a stronger condemnation of society.

As a woman and an artist, Käthe fought hard to realize the artistic position she deserved in society, and eventually found her niche as a socialist artist. This struggle is displayed with her deliberate ambivalence of gender as we are confronted with something resembling a distinguished gentleman. Her hair is parted in the middle and stops above her ears to give the effect that she groomed herself to look like a man. Had she been a man, her early struggles to get into a credible art school and her father’s disappointment that she had chosen to continue art would not have been obstacles. Perhaps the self portrait is a lament for all women forced to lose or compromise their dreams. The distant look on her face is one that shows connection and recognition of her audience- is this a true self portrait or a man? The majority of female figures displayed at this time were those created by men, usually in a pose of sexual allure or a transformation to the base
manner of the female nature. Käthe defies this stereotype and gives herself the prowess of an illustrious man who challenges us to doubt or defy him.

Another self portrait in which she repeats the empathetic yet confrontational glance to the left is her Self Portrait with Student Colleague, 1889 (Prelinger 16.) In this work she also uses black and white but pays more attention to lighting. There is a single lamp in the center of the table she is sitting at which illuminates her drawing, the wall and the student. We are again dared by Käthe to look at the work without confronting its societal implications. We are allowed to view the student and the background, but we cannot look at Käthe without shifting in our seats. Her ability to haunt us with her eyes without even needing a gruesome image draws us in to listen and to look again. By confronting the negative aspects of society she healed herself; it was through art that she continued to live a semi pain-free life.

With the light coming from the lamp, but angled downward as if from the wall, the background becomes foreboding. The wall seems to be in flux with unsystematic and visible brushstrokes as if she is releasing herself from the rigid role society has created for her. We see canvas peering through the paint, giving the viewer the impression we are staring into the room and must also deal with the reflections of the light (Hyde 52). The result of such intense art forces the world to deal with Käthe Kollwitz, it cannot

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ignore her. She refuses to be silenced by any predetermined niche in her own society; as she teases her student this emancipated mentality, she shows the viewer the same. She taught her students to be free when approaching their material and to approach it in full, not as separate pieces coming together. This represents Käthe’s portrayal of the need for Germany’s unification and the repeating theme of a group of impoverished workers she uses throughout her works. Self Portrait with Student Colleague was created a few years before she moved in with her husband, Karl, but we can already see her sympathy with those who are helpless. The unsuspecting teacher and student are to be swallowed by their surroundings, regardless of their occupation or gender signifying that Germany is a country without justice. Although now Käthe is dressed in feminine clothing, the sex of her student is not apparent. He or she seems to have a bun in his or her hair, but the outfit is one for a man. She found intensity in ordinary and persecuted people, and chose to focus on their sorrows after finding her method of graphic design through much experimentation with self portraits.

Art was used as a tool to keep Käthe alive; the viewer, however, remains haunted by her recognition and blatant outcry of society’s ills. She became second secretary of the Secession- the group of artists she had been a part of for years- a position of demeaning social status since her artistic merit clearly showed she was worthy of a higher position; but her sex became the main issue for her lower election. “And I really have not escaped my destiny; they’ve saddled me with a horrible job, that of second secretary…To give you an idea of how much this job has disturbed me: the following night I dreamed that the Secession had given me the task of pasting a quantity of red stickers on the advertising columns. With a pail of paste hanging at my belt and a large brush, I ran
breathlessly from column to column, pasting on my red stickers and trembling for fear I was doing it wrong…” (Kearns 131). As she watched a society in which she was seemingly absent from drift closer to war, Käthe still did all she could to show her personal stance against it and reveal the evils behind it.

Beyond her challenging glances, Käthe used other subjects and objects to slice into our conscious to recognize the truth. Whetting the Scythe, 1905 is a dark, monochromatic work of a female worker drudgingly laboring over a sharp scythe. The scythe is an ancient representation of Saturn, the destructive and cannibalistic icon of death, of the end of time.\textsuperscript{8} The woman is given masculine arms and hands, providing a sense of androgyny and allowing a comparison to Saturn. Or perhaps Käthe keeps the sex of this figure ambiguous to project its universality; whether it be a father or a daughter, the inherent importance suggests a German proletariat fighting for survival in a society that dismisses its existence. One cannot help but relate Whetting the Scythe to the ideas behind Virginia Woolf’s Orlando. Woolf played with the ideas of the difference between the genders from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. In the 1600’s Englishmen wanted to have a feminine appearance, and did so by applying makeup and wearing large curly wigs. As time continued, their outfits grew more ridiculous, eventually including skirts and tights as well as high heeled shoes. Women were forced to wear corsets and large impractical

skirts- adding to the idea that they are objects to be admired and used by men. In Kollwitz’s work, we get the sense of a masculine female figure, who despite her place in society as an object, is forced to labor just as a man is. Her face shows the same pain a man would show, and the same calloused hands. In a study done by art scholar Sarah Hyde, the majority of people who first saw Whetting the Scythe actually thought its artist was a man. The image of a physically powerful woman in a dramatic context led many to assume the protagonist was actually a man. The broadness of the arms, the threatening atmosphere, and the powerful woman give the sense that the world has been turned upside down. It is time for the peasants, male and female, to attain their proper place in society. Kollwitz has deliberately taken the negative associations of female assertions of power and made them into positive and frightening visual signifiers (Hyde 62). Käthe rejected what she saw as frivolous types of abstraction in art, and made the emotions stand out from human subjects and dark contrasts.

In 1916, Käthe was placed on the jury of the Secession, a position above second secretary, which entailed voting on what pictures would be included in the group’s exhibitions. Käthe struggled with this job because it often meant that a mediocre picture with elements fitting the face of the Secession had to be chosen over an artistically superior one to maintain the facade. Often, Käthe found herself forced to defend the cause of a woman regardless of the quality of artwork, and was therefore involved in many equivocations among the jury members. She had taken it upon herself to thrust women next to men in the forefront of the art world; despite disliking her place on the jury, she continued to use it as a means to encourage female artists, as well as secure a means to display her own works in their exhibitions without complication.
Käthe’s works continue to pry into the relationship gender has within society and the role which women are assumed to hold. Dark paints, chaotic backgrounds, and haunting imagery are all the aspects that Käthe mastered to challenge and attract the acceptance of German society and expose the true and ignominious interior.
Chapter VII

A life ensnared in struggle

Käthe’s work provides a glimpse into her struggle to find her own identity by portraying the undeniable emotions she held about being a woman and a mother, exploring her sexuality, witnessing the hardships of war, and using her art to convey a political message. Käthe’s entire life revolved around struggle and confrontation. She was tormented by war, death, and extreme emotion. The following works exemplify Käthe’s defiant attitude toward society and have served as a light for the poor in Germany and a caveat to the leaders of their horrific destruction.

One painting that holds a meaning beyond its literal intentions is Memorial for Karl Liebknecht, 1919-1920. This is one of Käthe’s most impressionistic works since she used it as a means to pay homage to a comrade and fellow peace fighter, as well as to plead with the world for solidarity and togetherness to fight for basic human rights. She used Liebknecht to relive the principle of Christ’s martyrdom; His preoccupation with the common people and Käthe’s desire to focus on the mourners displays the larger protest she wished to convey. The impressionism of this work was not intended to portray beauty, but rather to create a haunting contrast through stark reality as she had throughout her life. The grief that permeates the canvas is such that it envelops the audience and forces us into her conscious; we cannot escape the naked emotion Käthe projects from her own grief and
criticism of society. The piece rejects militarism and war in an anticlassical and revolutionary manner. The mourners represent not only those who followed and cared for Liebknecht, but also the millions of Germans who fell victim to WWI and later to Hitler’s regime, and those suffering from malnutrition and hunger (Klein 73). Initially Käthe had only four mourners next to Liebknecht, and then added more than fifteen figures whose stricken faces look at the abstracted dead figure who had once represented hope for a better future. These men standing around fixated on their fallen hero correspond to the idea of the Last Supper. The Christ motif is found in several of Käthe’s works and serves to emphasize the universality of her cause as well as glorify those who sacrificed to end the suffering, as did Karl Liebknecht. She includes a white halo around his face as is customary with the depiction of key biblical figures (Panofsky 83). The figure bending toward Liebknecht with his hand on his chest seems to be trying to revive him; all they can do now is pray; despite his symbolic connection to Jesus, the harsh reality is that Karl is gone forever. With this, she commands the people to persevere, and to remind them that she will never stop working for justice. Perhaps the mother and child present symbolize the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus, as Käthe allows for the continuation of hope despite the death of the working class’s first leader. She will be their new leader. In her role as mother, wife, and artist, Käthe will break all barriers and display the injustice seeping through a cruel society.

Expressionism began to engage art contemporaries in Munich between 1905 and 1911. Two groups of artists formed: Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky created the Blue Rider group (Der Blaue Reiter) and the Bridge (Die Brücke) was organized by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. The Blue Riders had no
dominant style, but maintained the principle that art should discard external realities for internal emotions and truths. The Bridge group, on the other hand, was inspired by contemporary literature and politics, and the Germanic tradition of woodcut. By 1916, both groups had dissolved, but the principles of expressionism—essentially the dominance of the artist’s inner self over technical form and aestheticism—were already grounded in artists such as Käthe. As the war continued, expressionism was a term used for any artist who expressed nonconformist political views using nontraditional artistic style, and therefore became mistakenly attached to Käthe. Käthe used self-expression to grapple with the sociopolitical climate of Germany; the expressionist movement forced her to question her identity as an artist and realize she was the only one who could continue her artistic clause. “I am overcome by a terrible depression. Gradually I am realizing the extent to which I already belong among the old fogies, and my future lies behind me…I shall return, without illusions, to what there is in me and go on working very quietly. Go on with my work to its end” (Kearns 140). Käthe cannot be categorized into any artistic movement; she includes aspects from expressionism, realism, impressionism, and more to transform each artistic and societal aspect into her style. Despite the complexity behind her art, Käthe fought to sustain its function as a mouthpiece for the marginalized.

Käthe continued her expressionistic vision after Memorial to Karl Liebknecht. In her War series, several sheets were used to show the heightened drama of battle and destruction the war was causing Germany. One sheet entitled Die Carmagnole, 1901 includes Death itself beating upon the drum that the young volunteers are cajoled into following. They all reach up, misled into thinking their leader will bring them to victory, in much the same way as Hitler had tricked his nation into believing he would rebuild an
improved Germany. Unlike her other works where she heightened the individualization and, by extension, the personal appeal of soldiers at war, here Käthe has created solidarity. Below the torso of each person, as they stand on unified legs looking for hope in a single clause, is dark, bleak canvas. They exist on this solid foundation while looking for hope in a single cause. With *The Volunteers*, 1922, Käthe captures the peak of war’s hysteria as she displays the men who, as she ironically states, ‘volunteered’ to fight (Kearns 169). They are shown with hands on each others’ shoulders and heads thrown back unnaturally as if decapitated, while they all blindly enter into their dismal death. Death is seen at the far left, as a skull with arms ripping the young men away from their families and into its infinite domain. The universality of such a group following Death shows the increased participation in the World War and the need to abandon it. In her diary, Käthe compares the blind leap to war to the Roman youth who jumped into the abyss and closed it. In this case, however, the abyss remained opened and swallowed up millions of Germany’s young men. Did the young victims die believing, or had they come to their senses though forced to leap nonetheless?

Käthe made this a statement to fight against the war; the rounded rainbow-like lines at the top of *Volunteers* serves as a unifying symbol of hope for the people to stand against the war together (Prelinger 63). The jagged appearance of the white lines entrapping the men is a beastly reminder of the manipulation of Hitler and the inescapable violence of war. Over all there is a touch of irony: the rainbow shape and the
innocence of young
men who look so
ready to follow their
leader- do they really
want to die in war?
Two years before the
completion of the
woodcut, Käthe
entered the following statement:

“We have had four years of daily bloodletting- all that is needed is for
one more group to offer itself up, and Germany will be bled to death...In my
opinion such a loss would be worse and more irreplaceable for Germany than
the loss of whole provinces” (Kollwitz 89).

*The Volunteers* is her true expression of these words. Käthe’s decision to make the final
draft of *The Volunteers* a woodcut was due to her need to move away from lithograph.
She was not seeing the profound results she wanted and needed a change, perhaps to
create the illusion of a newfound hope (Kollwitz 86). Woodcut was also a medium that
emphasized struggle. Society was like a shattered glass from which Käthe used the
broken ends to cut the wood and create a fierce image of a raw Germany. Many artists of
the late 20th century, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Max Pechstein, used woodcut
to show their own struggle as artists. Woodcut meant that the artist had to carve the lines
they wished to be seen, a time-consuming and rigorous activity. They then had to apply
ink and enable it to grab onto the parts they wanted colored, and leave the rest. Käthe
sliced into the wood to create the black figures by conscientiously cutting the surrounding
wood to produce the white lining. As with her smudging the charcoal in *Die Carmagnole*
to bring the illusion of a common base, the solidarity of the figures is displayed here by carving them from and into a single block of woodcut form.

In 1918, Käthe replied to a manifesto written by Richard Dehmel entitled *Sole Salvation* which appealed to all young fit men to volunteer to save the honor of Germany. She awakened the idea that it was easier for a man of his age and flowered life to sacrifice himself for a cause since he has lived the better part of his life. Youth, however, was not submitting to a superior force, but allowing his blood to be drained before he was able to give any real worth to his life. She compared Germany’s state to that of Russia in the era of Brest-Litovsk; Russia did not lose her honor by agreeing to the harsh peace agreement, but instead felt obligated to accept unjust peace over sacrificing blood for province. Germany also did not need to feel dishonored by defeat: “Germany must make it a point of honor to profit by her hard destiny, to derive inner strength from her defeat, and to face resolutely the tremendous labors that lie before her” (Kollwitz 89).

The response to Dehmel manifested in Käthe’s art work. Käthe’s use of the woodcut differed from the avant garde artists of the time as she used it as a call for society to react, while other artists, namely Pechstein, used it as a call to other artists and a way to show his own suffering. Käthe’s resistance to contemporary styles took a back seat to the woodcut’s ability to gain the attention of the people. Its reductionism and intense quality allowed Käthe to better represent certain ideas than had the lithograph. The lithograph had, however, enabled her to exhort action due to its simplicity and quick means of creation (Prelinger 65). She used lithograph for purely political posters and works; her *Never Again War*, 1924 is probably one of her most powerful and well-known pieces, displayed over and over again during World War I, without ever giving credit to
her as the artist. It includes one large androgynous figure whose arm shoots up into the air as a fierce yet pleading signal to end the violence. Ironically, the figure in this work strongly represents the stance of a figure in a cover of a pamphlet for the radical artists’ organization, the November Group, created by Pechstein and entitled *To All Artists!, 1919*. This artistic movement was a pledge to the unification and recognition of the avant garde artists, a cause that Käthe would not participate in. Although she was such an artist, she was also a woman, and would therefore have been marginalized and seen as a spectator supporter rather than as one of the group’s most brilliant artists. Additionally, her loyalty was to the people of Germany. The dozens of patients seen by her husband had filled her heart with tales of sorrow and anguish. She could not create work from any other source than from that which truly moved her. A diary entry of 1909 shows how even in the unfettered privacy of her diary, her response to a patient is immersed in empathy: “Frau Pankopf was here. She had a completely black eye. Her husband had gone into a fit of rage…The more I see of this, the more I understand that this is the *typical* misfortune of workers’ families…for a woman the misery is always the same. She keeps the children whom she must feed, scolds and complains about her husband. She sees only what has become of him and not how he became that way” (Kollwitz 52). Despite being exposed to the same living conditions as the workers- Hans and Peter suffered lung infections and Peter had tuberculosis- Käthe was able to remove herself from her own problems and universalize Germany’s suffering. Pechstein’s work,
however similar in style, was created for a different and narrower cause. Käthe positioned her figure against only a background of words, to emphasize the potency of the stance present in Pechstein’s work, but reworked it to fit her own aesthetic (Prelinger 67). Pechstein’s work included a figure that was curvilinear, invoking a type of sympathy with the artist. This figure emerged from burning buildings and held his burning heart to his chest, a juxtaposition that created a statement against a society who marginalized their artists; Käthe universalized this to fight for all who were condemned by their civilization.

*To All Artists! 1919*
“She practiced neither art for art’s sake nor escapism. With growing directness and concentration she made dramatic and revealing portrayals of the humble, the miserable, the helpless" (Klein 28).

Käthe’s art reflects her dilemma as a female artist with a strong social conscience and a keen sense of empathy. Women were not supposed to express their grief, for they represented the rock of the home and were supposed to remain strong and protect the hearth. Käthe fought against this norm as a means of healing. Her lithograph, Outbreak, 1903 represents her defiant personality that withstood her enormous grief to triumph eventually over an unjust society.

As shown earlier, Käthe projected her defiance against the stereotypically weak, woman-at-home figure. By positioning women in ‘manly’ jobs and giving them masculine features, Käthe broke away from the tradition. While making a societal statement against sexism, Käthe’s works also delved into her own attitudes about sexuality. Some of her first loves were women, and became the means to find her own strength to drive her artwork. Outbreak is a work that forces a woman, the Black Anna,
to the forefront as the leader of a revolution. She initially included her own profile in the
Black Anna figure, however she completed it with only her back in a gesture to create a
sense of furious excitement. The role with which Käthe often identified was that of Black
Anna, the allegorical figure featured in several of Käthe’s works to represent the ultimate
female leader who brought her people out of the turmoil of war and into the safe-haven of
a protective mother. She stood as a mother encouraging the principle behind the fight,
yet yearning to comfort her children. Käthe carried out this ideal to educate her sons
about the horror of war, while simultaneously grieving that it would take them from her.
She gave the peasants skeletal features to dispel their inevitable death; the desperate
position of Black Anna may be Käthe or any mother being overcome by heart-wrenching
screams on learning of the death of her child.

Black Anna catalyzed the peasant’s passion for their revolt as well as symbolized
the need to end violence against and rape of woman. “[Black Anna] has dignity as
woman and human in her courageous leadership of revolt; and the mother, while
sorrowful, is stalwart in the loss of her son” (Kearns 105). Such a personal conflict was
one Käthe continued to feel throughout her life. The peasant’s fight was one in which
she believed since her grandfather Rupp had first read her the “March Dead”. As the
subjects that fueled her work, struggle and oppression pushed Käthe to utilize the power
of art as a remedy, as an outlet, a means of transforming her grief into a medium meant
for all to see. Women and men could see Outbreak and take from it a cathartic cry of
their torments and the desire to win their cause.

Pregnancy was the ultimate symbol of femininity to Käthe. Her diary entries are
filled with her desire to have a child and the descriptions of what it felt to be pregnant.
Since only the woman can carry a child, Käthe viewed childbirth as the ultimate power of women’s lives, and the artwork she created around the time of her pregnancies with Hans and Peter exemplified a mother’s strength and a dedication to her children that burned persistently in her soul. Sadly, war disrupted the physical connection she had with her children. In late 1914, when World War I was in full bloom, Käthe lost Peter to the front line. She was trapped in a society in which women, such as Gabriele Reuter, spoke of the joys of sacrificing one’s family for society. In her article, Tag, she glorified a mother’s sacrifice to war; Käthe responded: “Where do all the women who have watched so carefully over the lives of their beloved ones get the heroism to send them to face the cannon” (Kollwitz 62)? Her precious connection with the March Dead reminded Käthe of the young men who had wanted to live and were now dead; and how the ‘joy of sacrificing’ would soon be turned into bleakness and despair over the death of loved ones. Again Käthe was sent further outside of the society that is accepting the war- the cut between Käthe and society was grooved more deeply as she realized the impact the war would have on those already unfortunate and those who would be cut from their families forever. Furthermore, the inability of those leaders to foresee the inevitable destruction only drove Käthe even further to turn her cathartic work into a statement that punctured the madness that fueled Germany to allow their children to go to war.
In a diary entry in September of 1911, Käthe described her desire to create a piece displaying a pregnant woman: “The immobility, restraint, introspection. The arms and hands dangling heavily, the head lowered, all attention directed inward” (Kollwitz 59). Around 1916, Käthe’s entries changed and described her feelings of abandonment at the loss of her two sons, one at war and the other dead. Her position as a mother was slipping away and she longed for the days when she had tenderly held them in her lap. With these feelings of claustrophobic loneliness and unconditional helplessness, Käthe created *The Mothers*, 1922-1923. This piece allowed her to not only express her personal dark feelings, but to unify and universalize the unreserved grief felt by all mothers across Germany. This work was created shortly after Hans and his wife had their son, Peter, named for the boy killed in 1914. *The Mothers* combined the faces of the peasants in *Outbreak* with that of the mother in a work entitled *The Widow*, 1922. While they seemed women desperate to hold onto their children and their own lives to support their children, they were also depicted as fighters. The women together created a dome to protect their young ones as a single arm cut horizontally across the canvas to give the impression of stability and security. At the far left of the circle of women appeared two hands held out as if to stop someone or something; they may be the hands of the pregnant woman on the end, but we cannot be fully certain. The intertwining of limbs and faces leads to an ambiguity that generalizes the group to represent all German mothers. Käthe incorporated her own
feelings of fear and her dedication to speak out for all people. The mothers, all facing out, are seen looking for the next attack which can penetrate through their circle of protection and slash away their lives, an apt representation of that inability to protect their children from war. Perhaps Käthe was criticizing women’s lack of power in such matters, and the resulting loss of millions of young men’s lives for an ambiguous cause.

In Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, there is a discussion of what it is to be the perfect man. Orlando asks Shelmerdine if, since it is unmanly to avoid war, is it then manly to die for an uncertain cause? “If I a man chose not to sacrifice my life for an uncertain cause, am I then not a real man. But if a woman decides not to sacrifice my life for my children and go abroad- am I then a real woman?”⁹ While the womanly man was desired in the seventeenth century, a manly woman was certain to be ostracized from society. Here, Käthe shows women’s innate need to protect their children. The only child seen, however, is a small head and hand peering out from the mass of mothers. This single child illuminates the innocence and helplessness of a young person in the midst of war and poverty. This child is only a few years away from leaving his family and dying on the front, like Peter. He peers out cautiously and curiously, tempted by what is out there. As his eyes peer up and to the left, a bluish, skeletal hand moves toward him from the right. Perhaps this is the hand of Death that has shown up in so many of Käthe’s works; if so, than the mothers have no way to stop such a force. They are doing all they can, but their irreplaceable souls, the human beings they gave life to, cannot be protected from nor escape the evils of war.

Käthe was commissioned to make a sculpture based on *The Mothers*, and in 1937-1938 she created *Tower of the Mothers*. This portrayal of defiant women also has a unified wall that creates a roadblock against Death, but this time in a triangular formation. There is a single woman facing front with her arms wrapped around her fellow mothers, her bosom protruding out of the sculpture, and her head raised challengingly. This version is more confrontational; the woman facing the viewer (and Death) in a triangle form is a more rigid and less welcoming one than the womanly circle.

Käthe stepped away from her ideals of motherhood and more deeply into the stance against the war. We still see the small child peering from the inside, but it is more of a reminder of Germany’s future. The women are protecting the future whose innocence can be easily destroyed by Hitler’s Nazi regime. This inner conflict of protecting her children, illuminating hope for the parents of Germany, and defying her preconceived role as a woman, are all interwoven in a single work which allowed Käthe to express and release herself.

Käthe wanted to do a drawing of the one man who could truly see the suffering in the world, Jesus Christ. She universalized her personal suffering and forced the viewer to reflect on the dismal time and the possibility of surviving through perseverance. In her
diary entry on February 26, 1920, Käthe expressed her ideas that led to *Oh Nation, You Bleed from Many Wounds*, 1896 in which she envisioned having children and women in the background sharing Jesus’ dark visions. Käthe incorporated what she had learned from her own rich religious background into her work: the universality of the history of religion and its comprehensive ethics that are employed across the world parallel the universality of suffering and the impact that war has on all people, not just German Jews. This painting is the hymn that provokes all those who view it to join in singing; the doctrines of the church shall lead the way to overcome the bitter political environment that is being taken over by totalitarian monsters. Although we see the death of Jesus and the suffering of the women, His crucifixion, and as depicted here his mortal wound, do not prohibit him from providing hope to His people and the presence of a new life after the plight. This work was one that closed the gap between Käthe and her other artistic achievements. She became very aware of the politics, the emotions, and her gender when creating such a strong piece: “An artist who moreover is also a woman cannot be expected to unravel these crazily complicated relationships. As an artist I have the right to extract the emotional content out of everything, to let things work upon me and then to give them outward form” (Kollwitz 98). Today, the Taliban still marginalize women to
the extent that they cannot walk in public without a man by their side; and a woman who
gives birth to an illegitimate child may receive the punishment of being put to death.
Most people in the United States of America are entirely unaware that such inhumane
practices still take place, and the only way we could know is through the courage of those
who work to make it known. Käthe became the voice of the people by means of her own
cathartic work: she instilled into her audience the emotional grief that went along with the
painful recognition of what was truly occurring in her society. She took her pencil and
her knife and taunted her viewer to remain silent, dared them to allow the adulterous
woman to be killed. Even if one could pry their eyes from Käthe’s art, he or she still
could not maintain an ignorant mind about the horrific evils that were taking place in
Nazi Germany.
Chapter IX

“Blessed are the dead which lie in the Lord from henceforth. Yea, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them.”

Käthe came from a generation that not only lived through WWI, but also experienced the inevitable dawn of the Second World War. Her life was defined by pain and empathy, yet she was able to survive by releasing those emotions onto canvas. The impact of her compelling art also defined her last years despite her inability to generate any more lithographs because of old age. Käthe was not just an artist, but a person who lived through art; as she fought against her depression and her own insecurities, those she touched benefited and learned.

By 1933, Hitler had established a dictatorship and had taken Berlin under Nazi rule. Due to Käthe’s left wing stance, she and colleague Heinrich Mann were forced to resign from the Academy of Art or succumb to Hitler’s threat to dissolve the foundation. Käthe described the situation to her long time friend, Emma Jeep, in her diary entry of 1933: “For fourteen years (the same fourteen that Hitler has branded the “evil years”) I have worked together peacefully with these people. Now the Academy directors have had to ask me to resign. Otherwise the Nazis had threatened to break up the Academy… I want and must be among those who have been slapped down. The financial loss you mention follows as a matter of course. Thousands are going through the same experience. It is nothing to complain about” (Kollwitz 170). For a time, Käthe’s works continued to be displayed; then in 1933, shortly before the
opening of an exhibition, two of her pieces were removed without explanation. Although she had experienced government derogation with earlier exhibits, this was her first confrontation with censorship. In the summer of 1934, while contemplating a new art work, Käthe returned to her diary: “I thought that now that I am really old I might be able to handle this theme in a way that would plumb depths…But that is not the case…At the very point when death becomes visible behind everything, it disrupts the imaginative process…” (Kearns 210).

She continued working and created a lithograph cycle entitled Death, a series of eight different conversations about death she had carried on with her sister, Lise throughout their lives. At this time, a collection of Käthe’s pieces were still being displayed at the Crown Prince Palace- but in 1936, Hitler ordered it closed to the public. Käthe would never again see her work on public display. She suffered harsh, immediate censorship due to the candor of her art; her themes were pungent and irrefutably directed to the core of German society and failure of German leadership. Käthe would not succumb to Nazi leadership nor would she pretend she welcomed the censorship of her work: “Participation is good and vital, and it is sad to be excluded. For one is after all a leaf on the twig and the twig belongs to the whole tree. When the tree sways back and forth, the leaf is content to sway with it” (Kearns 209).

In July of 1936, two Gestapo officers pounded on the Kollwitz home and demanded to see Frau Kollwitz. A few months earlier, Käthe and fellow artist, Otto Nagel, had agreed to speak with the foreign press regarding artists and antifascists of the time. The article was published, and despite Kollwitz and
Nagel’s attempt to be careful with what they divulged, they had evidently not been careful enough to avoid the Nazi wrath. Only Käthe’s name appeared in the article, and the Gestapo demanded that she retract her statements and reveal the name of the second author. Käthe refused on both accounts. The officers continued to interrogate her and threatened to throw her into a concentration camp- but Käthe remained silent. The next day a single Gestapo officer entered Käthe’s home and rummaged through her studio. She was reminded of the drastic consequences she would face if she did not cooperate, and finally agreed to write a statement retracting her part in the article. She did not, however, divulge Nagel’s identity. As she was gradually stripped of everything that gave her meaning- her art, her courageous words, her honor- Käthe would not be destroyed.

Neither Käthe nor Karl thought the interrogation would end there, and continued to live in constant fear. They came to a mutual decision to carry around a small vile of poison, leaving death as the final escape should they be taken prisoners by the Nazis. Soon after this decision, in 1938, the Nazis banned Karl’s medical practice, leaving the two with only a small commission Käthe received from a private collector. A year later, World War II began.

Karl died on July 19, 1940. The man who had always stood by Käthe’s side- the man who showed her such consistent affection that she at times could not handle it- was gone. Käthe had once said she wished to outlive Karl because she thought she could handle living alone better than he could; yet without Karl, her desire to live diminished. From that day forward, Käthe
walked with a cane, perhaps a subconscious substitution for the man who had helped her walk through every stage of life since she was twenty-three.

In 1942, Käthe’s grandson, Peter, was killed in Russia. Käthe fought on. Her last self portrait was created in 1943, a depiction of an old androgynous figure who stares out as if accepting the forces of time, the same portrait as her, *Self Portrait in profile facing right, 1938*, but facing to the left. Perhaps as she left the world, she wanted to keep a watch on the suffering from all angles. As she aged, her empathy only increased; as we can see by her stance she is slowly allowing the world to pull her down. When she lost the ability to paint, she lost the courage to fight. Käthe was wise in her final years, able to reflect upon her life and instill her values in her living heirs.

By 1943, the bombing in Berlin became too severe for Käthe to continue living there. She was offered refuge by a young sculptor in Nordhausen, which she initially refused. Finally, Käthe was convinced to leave the home she had occupied for fifty-two years and seek asylum in Nordhausen. The years of marriage, childbirth, art, and struggle had all been captured by the walls of the small Berlin home she was now being forced to abandon. In November of 1943, Käthe learned that her home had been bombed: “Yes, it was a hard blow to me at first. After all, it was my home for my than fifty years. Five persons
whom I have loved so dearly have gone away from those rooms forever. Memories filled all the rooms...the fate of one is merged in the fate of thousands...Only an idea remains, and that is fixed in the heart” (Kollwitz 181). As the war grew worse, Käthe stuck firm in her convictions against it and against war in general. For a woman who felt such personal responsibility to battle against this violence, her life could not have been closer to it. In 1944, Käthe was again unsafe; she was offered a suite in the Moritzburg estate of Prince Ernst Heinrich of Saxony. Here was where Käthe breathed her last, only four months before the end of WWII. Her granddaughter, Jutta Kollwitz, who had taken care of Käthe in the Moritzburg estate, recorded Käthe’s favorite phrase of the time from the Revelation of St. John: “Blessed are the dead which lie in the Lord from henceforth. Yea, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them” (Kollwitz 198).
Chapter X

“Then people will have been enriched by me.”

Social defiance, feminine declaration, and personal definition are the aspects that define Käthe Kollwitz. She exemplified the many roles as a mother, an artist, a wife, a widow, and a woman. She dedicated herself to ordinary people, those whose lives she saw as beautiful. As a girl, Käthe knew her life’s calling was to give hope and an outlet to those brutally thrown aside by society. She refused to let society’s role for women interrupt her goal and married accordingly. As a couple, Käthe and Karl Kollwitz welcomed strangers into their home and raised their children to fight for what they believed. The only way in which Käthe survived was by externalizing the piercing pain that gnawed at her by harnessing it to carve into wood or apply ink to canvas. While it was not acceptable for women to explore or display their grief, Käthe would not let hers be ignored by society. She opened the door for the mothers and parents across Germany to weep for their sons with an animalistic cry of emotional devastation welcomed by all those marginalized and in pain. Käthe’s sculptures, however, were rejected by the public during the period they were displayed. These works that embodied so dramatically and symbolically the suffering under the hands of Hitler, or the malnourished under the pillars of society, had gone beyond the public’s understanding. Her work was not simple enough to be popular: “Genius can probably run ahead and seek out new ways. But the good artists who follow after genius- and I count myself among these- have to restore the lost connection once more. A pure studio art is unfruitful
and frail, for anything that does not form living roots—why should it exist at all” (Kollwitz, 68)? It is now, years later, that we can understand Käthe’s art and feel the grief dispersed throughout her sculpture even more profoundly, for we know the war’s outcome and her personal tribulations. Her art emphatically reminds us of the war, social injustice, centuries of pain, the lives of the victims, and the chance at salvation.

Käthe was never radical in her refusal to adhere to a single style, nor was she able to fully penetrate through the male-dominated art world of the early 20th century. This lack of ability to classify her as a member of any particular movement, and the absence of any radical style to set her apart from her male counterparts has led many art historians to dismiss her achievements. There has been long discussion of whether the integrity of Käthe’s art is enhanced by its social implications, or conversely, has been compromised by its social content (Prelinger 131). Her broad-based appeal has undoubtedly touched the hearts of millions of suffering Germans, though perhaps jeopardized by its rejection of the social norms and by her gender. This oppositional stance, as held by more antagonistic Kollwitz observers such as artist Georg Grosz in the 1960’s, came to believe that Käthe’s work was “more concerned with its themes than with style as an end in itself...[She] was not a great artist, but her vision was authentic and her own” (Prelinger 131). Although they questioned her artistic technique, these critics could not overlook the agony of the subjects nor the profound compassion her work extracted. New York Times reviewer, Nigel Gosling, called Käthe’s work “positively distasteful”, yet confessed that “a

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sensitive viewer will feel a guilty twinge at reacting unfavorably to such agonizingly sincere and passionate appeals” (Prelinger 131). At the other end of the Kollwitz spectrum are those who champion her work for its social appeal as well as its artistic utilization. Other proponents of Käthe saw her work as art that climbed beyond that which was preoccupied with the prerequisite of aesthetic charm. Perhaps the most passionate support for Käthe’s work was written by Robert Breuer in 1917: “…Kollwitz is ensured her place in eternity because…every stroke from her hand is saturated with the rhythm of her time, with the suffering and dying of the people, and with the great hope for a future kingdom. All great art is prophetic, is a scream from the deep and a flight to heaven…True art results from a melding of content with form” (Prelinger 131). Käthe’s message was universalized by artists of her time; dada artist Hanna Höche (1889-1978) included an image of Käthe in one of her pieces of reigning compassion used to ridicule the prominent postwar greed. Höche’s work was displayed in 1920 while Käthe’s diary entry that day was instead concerned with the death of her neighbor’s son due to complications of a lung infection he had suffered during the war: “with this the last family in our house that had sons in the field has paid its tribute” (Prelinger 89).

Today the world is far from genderless, whether it is in the Taliban religious practices, the Catholic Church, or the current debate over same-sex marriages. In the Church, for example, we see the forced silence of women as a continuous means to define society and the roles of each gender11. Less men are entering the priesthood, more women are showing the desire, yet the
Church’s policy are being made only by men as they have for the last two thousand years. Today, a voice as forceful as Käthe’s would provide an unignorable summons for change; images as haunting as hers would create awareness across the world of how the power-hungry and crazed leaders continue to persecute the marginalized. She remained dedicated to exposing society’s ills despite receiving no financial compensation and being gravely threatened by the Nazis- her character alone is recognized in Germany for its persistent dedication to a noble cause. The political art of today has hardly been popularized; the aesthetically pleasing realm has taken center stage while socially critical art appears as cartoons and comics. Perhaps there will be a revival of political or social art; perhaps those marginalized today would benefit from Käthe were she alive. Although Käthe is not with us today, the impact of her art continues to live in the hearts of Germans who lived through the wars, and will never be forgotten by those who had the chance to know her-whether in life or through her art: “She has…been claimed by many different political causes, yet her images have survived because of a universality that transcends such transitory associations” (Prelinger 132).

Bibliography


