

Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945)



Käthe Kollwitz (originally Schmidt) was a German graphic artist and sculptor who spoke out for victims of social injustice, war, and inhumanity. She was one of the last artists to draw upon German Expressionism, and is often considered to be the leading artist of social protest in the 20th century.

Kollwitz was born in 1867 in East Prussia (now part of Russia). She grew up in a liberal middle-class family. She studied painting in Berlin (1884–85) and Munich (1888–89), and was taught by several artists. Impressed by the prints of fellow-artist Max Klinger, she devoted herself primarily to graphic art after 1890, producing etchings, lithographs, woodcuts, and drawings. In 1891 she married Karl Kollwitz, a doctor who opened a clinic in a working-class section of Berlin. There she gained first-hand insight into the miserable conditions of the urban poor.



In the early 1890s she turned exclusively to making prints. Influenced by fellow German artist Max Klinger, she saw the potential of the print for social commentary. Prints could be reproduced cheaply and in multiples, allowing her to reach more people. For the next 50 years she produced dramatic, emotion-filled etchings, woodcuts, and lithographs—generally in black and white but sometimes including touches of colour.

Kollwitz's first important works were two separate series of prints, respectively entitled *Weavers' Revolt* (c. 1894–98 – see *Sturm* top left) and *Peasants' War* (1902–08). In those works, she portrayed the plight of the poor and oppressed with the powerfully simplified, boldly accentuated forms that became her trademark. The death of her youngest son in battle in 1914 affected her deeply. She expressed her grief in another cycle of prints that treat the themes of a mother protecting her children and of a mother with a dead child. From 1924 to 1932 Kollwitz also worked on a granite monument for her son, which depicted her husband and herself as grieving parents. In 1932 it was erected as a memorial in a cemetery near Ypres, Belgium.



Kollwitz greeted the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the German revolution of 1918 with hope, yet she eventually became disillusioned with Soviet communism. In 1924, she created one of her most famous posters, entitled "Never Again War" (top right), for the Central German Youth Conference of the Socialist Workers Movement. She became the first woman to be elected a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts, where from 1928 to 1933 she was head of the Master Studio for Graphic Arts. Kollwitz continued to devote herself to socially effective, easily-understood art. The Nazis' rise to power in Germany in 1933 forced her resignation from the academy. During her final years, Kollwitz produced bronze and stone sculptures embodying the same types of subjects and aesthetic values as her work in two dimensions.

Kollwitz's last great series of lithographs, *Death* (1934–36) [see *Death and the Mother*, left], have an Expressionist sense of drama – expressed often in simple, monumental forms, and stark contrasts between black and white. In 1940 her husband died, and in 1942 her grandson was killed in action during World War II. The bombing of Kollwitz's home and studio in 1943 destroyed much of her life's work. She died a few weeks before the end of the war in Europe.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, Käthe Kollwitz, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kathe-Kollwitz>

National Museum of Women in the Arts, Käthe Kollwitz, <http://www.nmwa.org/explore/artist-profiles/k%C3%A4-kollwitz>

Käthe Kollwitz Museum Cologne, <http://www.kollwitz.de/en/technik.aspx>