

## **Kaethe Kollwitz** **(1867-1945)**

Kaethe Schmidt was born in Koenigsberg, East Prussia, to parents who nurtured both her artistic talent and her concern for her fellow human beings. Her father was a radical Social Democrat who first studied law, then became a master stone mason and later a successful house builder. Her mother was a highly cultured woman whose father had been a minister in the Free Religious Congregation and a member of the House of Deputies. Her parents' Christian values and strong social consciousness were significant influences on Kaethe's life and art.

Supported by her father, Kaethe began taking art lessons as a child; she entered the School for Women Artists in Berlin when she was 17. (Women were not permitted to enter the German Academies.) In Berlin, she discovered the work of Max Klinger, whose technique and subject matter were an artistic and spiritual awakening for her. She began to feel that drawing was a more appropriate medium than painting to portray the images from life's darker side that she favored. The stark contrast of black and white and simplified human figures in tight compositions were typical of her style. Kollwitz worked primarily in the graphic arts throughout her career, but she did produce some sculpture.

In 1891 Kaethe married Dr. Karl Kollwitz, and the couple settled in a poor, industrial section of Berlin where Karl established a clinic and dispensary. In 1893, Kollwitz attended a performance of Gerhart Hauptmann's play, *The Weavers*, which inspired her to produce over the next five years her first print cycle, *Revolt of the Weavers*. Next came the *Peasants' War*, in which Kollwitz perfected her technique with etching. The positive response to these two series established her as the most important female artist in Germany.

Kollwitz' younger son Peter was killed in 1914 during the first days of World War I. The loss of her son profoundly influenced her artistic vision. No longer did she idealize sacrifice for a transforming revolution as she had in her earlier work; now she focused on the suffering of the survivors. Her woodcut series *War* (1922-23), as well as such posters as *Never Again War* reflected her commitment to pacifism.

Although she was the first woman elected to the Prussian Academy of Arts in 1919, her work drew increasing criticism from the Weimar Republic. When Hitler came to power in 1933, she was forced to resign from the Academy, but she retained her salary and her studio for several months. She was then expelled from the Academy, art galleries were forbidden to show her work and her plates were sold or smuggled out of the country. She continued to work, however, and completed her last lithographic cycle, *Death*, between 1934 and 1936.

In 1940, Karl Kollwitz died, and in 1941 Kaethe's oldest grandson Peter was killed in Russia. She became increasingly frail. She moved to Nordhausen in the Harz mountains to escape the Allied bombing, and later to Moritzburg. Her home in Berlin was destroyed by an air attack in 1943 along with many proof prints, drawings, letters and documents.

“Her career ended...with an inspirational lithograph, *Seeds for Sowing Shall Not be Milled*. Its message, based on a line from Goethe, was that human potential (the symbolic ‘seed’) must not be squandered by human folly, but allowed to grow to fruition. In April 1945, three years after completing this, her final print, Kollwitz died in the Dresden suburb of Moritzburg. . . . Having lived through two world wars, she just missed, by four months, the declaration of world peace.” (Galerie St. Etienne, 1987)