

Käthe Schmidt Kollwitz was a German artist whose work has influenced many. Kollwitz's work has been influenced strongly by her life, the time that she lived and her drive to change the world. Throughout her life she saw much turmoil and hardship which she has used as the base for many of her works.

Käthe Kollwitz was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July, 1867 in Königsberg in Prussia which is now known as Kaliningrad, Russia. She was the daughter of a well off Mason who was very supportive of her passion for art. When she was 14 she began taking art lessons and in 1884 she enrolled at The Berlin School of Art. For a time she studied in Munich and then in 1891 she married Dr. Karl Kollwitz, from this marriage two sons were born. They moved to one of the poorest areas of Berlin where her husband practiced medicine, it was here that much of the inspiration for her works came. In 1898 Kollwitz started teaching at The School for Women Artists. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1914 her son was killed at Flanders Field, her husband died of an illness in 1940 and in World War II her grandson was killed in 1942. These events led her to suffer from depression for much of her remaining life. When the Nazis came into power she was forbidden to exhibit her art and her home was bombed in 1943. She never saw the end of World War Two and died on the 22 of April 1945.

Käthe's art was influenced by people, her life and the time and place that she lived. Max Klinger, Wilhelm Leibl and the realist writer Zola all influenced Kollwitz. Throughout her life Kollwitz saw many tragedies and drew much inspiration from her husband's patients who were living in extreme poverty. After becoming a mother her art began to follow a mother theme and she portrays many mother child relationships in her works. The death of her son, husband and grandson also played a big role in her choice of subject matter. However, the biggest influence was the time and place. Living through the transformation from monarchy to capitalism to fascism and through World War I, World War II and the Holocaust, there has been no other time in German history like it. In Germany propaganda was constantly being thrown at the people and many thought everything was fine. Kollwitz, knowing otherwise

and seeing the horror, tried to use her art to educate people of this. She once stated that: "I should like to exert influences in these times when human beings are so perplexed and in need of help." (Buchholz, 1991). During World War one there were severe food shortages in Germany as Britain blockaded them. In 1918 the government was in the transition stages and no one was properly running the country. This caused the food shortages to become worse; there was 50% less milk than there was before the war ([www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wei1.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wei1.htm)). This deprivation of food prevented the citizen's from being able to fight off disease as they normally would, causing approximately 750 000 people to die of a combination of the flu and starvation between 1916 and 1917 ([www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wei1.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wei1.htm)). After losing the war the government had an even harder time trying to control the country as the soldiers blamed them for the defeat. Losing 2 million men in the war ([www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wei1.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/wei1.htm)) the work force suffered and the economy was poor. From 8.5% in 1929 to 29.9% in 1932, unemployment rose and poverty spread ([www.moreorless.au.com/killers/hitler.html](http://www.moreorless.au.com/killers/hitler.html)). Many of Kollwitz's work show the poverty that was going on at this time. After Hitler took over in 1933 life only became harsher, he even stated: "I shall shoot everyone who utters one word of criticism." ([www.moreorless.au.com/killers/hitler.html](http://www.moreorless.au.com/killers/hitler.html)) and he forced her to stop exhibiting her work. Under his rule anyone he believed should not live was killed, he wanted to exterminate Jewish people (who he blamed for their defeat in the war), Gypsies, Slavs, Homosexuals and Communists. He killed approximately six million Jews while in power ([www.moreorless.au.com/killers/hitler.html](http://www.moreorless.au.com/killers/hitler.html)). During these unfortunate political events Kollwitz tried to use her art to change people's views and change the outcomes, she believed that: "everything could be so beautiful if it were not for the insanity of war." ([www.womeninworldhistory.com/lesson14.html](http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/lesson14.html)). Her art pulled at the heart strings of the viewers so that they might see war, poverty and death as awful and try to stop them.

The work 'Germany's Children Are Hungry' (1924) is a prominent example of Kollwitz's anti propaganda. First published as a poster, it is now a part of the National Gallery of Art collection. The work is a lithograph which means that it

was created by Kollwitz drawing a mirror image of the work onto a smooth stone tablet with greasy pencils. She then placed oil based ink onto the tablet which attached to the pencil and covered the un-painted areas with water. Paper was then placed over the tablet and it was put into a press and light pressure applied. This allowed her to make multiple copies of her work for use as posters. 'Germany's Children Are Hungry' depicts a gathering of tiny, malnourished children looking and holding up their empty bowls desperately. Kollwitz has used the element of tone to create a realistic looking image. The black and white make the image appear dull and unhappy and she purposefully left out colour. Unity, proportion and repetition are the principles she used. All the children are looking up showing they are all in the same situation which demonstrates unity. The repetition also shows this and proportion makes them appear real.

Kollwitz's message is strongly conveyed both in the work and title, the children in Germany are starving and in great need of food. It expresses the sadness of poverty at the time and appeals to people to change the situation by encouraging empathy. Her message is common in her works and they mostly have a similar theme of poverty.

The work is extremely effective and easily conveys Käthe's intended meaning. It strongly creates emotion in people and convinces them to make a difference and educates them as to the situation some people are in. Although sad there is still something beautiful about the work, it is believable and makes viewers want to jump into the picture and help the children of Germany.

'Woman with Dead Child' (1903) is another emotionally charged piece of art by Käthe Kollwitz. The work currently hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC and is an etching made from copper plate. She first made her drawing on laid paper and secondly transferred it to the copper plate using a hard pencil. This has caused the grainy texture of the print. 'Woman with Dead Child' shows a seated woman clutching a dead child close to her. As in 'Germany's Children are Hungry' she used the element of tone to create a

realistic image; however, she also used visual texture in this piece. The principle used is proportion.

Kollwitz is showing the aggravations of poverty and death in this work. It invites viewers to be saddened by what they see and feel empathy for the woman, almost feeling as if they are there, or are in her situation. The woman is perhaps the child's mother or grandmother and these connections are common themes in Käthe's works.

The style Kollwitz uses is very realistic and quite raw. Lines not often strongly defined and they give the look of a sketch. This suits the work and gives a more human effect. Her work is fantastic with its powerful expression of emotion and truthful display of life in 1903.

Käthe Kollwitz used her life and surroundings as the emotional content for her art works. She took inspiration from her life, time and place so that she could fight propaganda and make the world a better place. Her works succeeded in presenting the truth and horror of Germany from 1867 to 1945.



Germany's Children Are Hungry



Woman with Dead Child