

PRESS RELEASE

KOLLWITZ

20 MARCH TO 9 JUNE 2024

Exhibition annex

Frankfurt am Main, 19 March 2024. She was the most famous German woman artist of the twentieth century and nevertheless an exceptional phenomenon: Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945). This spring the Städel Museum is devoting a major exhibition to her with a focus on the versatility, modernity and explosive power of her oeuvre. As an artist, Kollwitz followed paths of her own: She devoted herself not to painting, but above all printmaking and drawing—a decision as bold as it was determined—and there found her way to an independent pictorial language distinguished by incisive immediacy. In the hope of influencing society with her art, she explored existential human questions from a new perspective, also addressing troublesome topics. Not least of all for that reason, the artist and her work were politically instrumentalized in Germany after 1945—a reception still impacting our collective conception of her to this day.

This complex history of Käthe Kollwitz's public reception as well as the Städel Museum's own extensive holdings, enhanced by works from leading museums and private collections, form the point of departure for the exhibition. More than 110 striking works on paper, sculptures, and early paintings by the artist will be on view, including outstanding loans from the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett, the Käthe Kollwitz Museum in Cologne, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Sprengel Museum Hannover, the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and elsewhere. These works will bear trenchant witness to Kollwitz's decision in favour of graphic art as well as her nonconformity and love for experimentation. They will reveal the special nature of her themes, her formal vocabulary and her compositional dramaturgy. The show will moreover explore the charged relationship between aesthetics and politics in her oeuvre. Finally, an overview of how the artist was assessed on both sides of the inner-German border after 1945 will serve as a reflection on the power of cultural-political narratives.

The exhibition is being sponsored by the DZ BANK, the Gemeinnützige Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain GmbH and the Städel'scher Museums-Verein e. V. with the Städel'sche Freunde 1815. Additional support comes from the Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung, the Wolfgang Ratjen Stiftung and the Aventis Foundation.

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Städel Museum director Philipp Demandt on the exhibition: “Apart from Käthe Kollwitz there is presumably no artist in Germany who attained as early and enduring a career with as much autonomy and determination. Her work made an impact as far afield as the U.S. and China—and was instrumentalized by many isms, both social and political, especially in post-war Germany. It accordingly appears all the more urgent to shed light on the German ‘Kollwitz myth’ and take an in-depth look at the lifework of this prominent woman artist of Classical Modernism. Especially our institution is called upon to undertake such a project: After all, the Städel Museum was already acquiring the art of Käthe Kollwitz during her lifetime, and since the purchase of the Goedeckemeyer Collection by the City of Frankfurt in 1964 has had a well-founded collection, above all of her works in the printmaking medium, to call its own. Awaiting our visitors this spring is an encounter with an artist whose oeuvre has lost nothing of its topicality to this day.”

“The history of our partnership with the Städel Museum began more than fifteen years ago with our donation of 220 photographs from the DZ BANK’s renowned photo holdings to the Städel’s contemporary art collection. Today we are extremely pleased to underscore our longstanding bond to the museum once again by supporting the Kollwitz exhibition. With their insistently close-up views and forceful handling of light, Kollwitz’s prints and drawings are often reminiscent of photography, a medium that bore a lasting influence on the development of the arts in the nineteenth century. Kollwitz, who lived and worked in an age of radical upheavals, moreover created works testifying to social change—as photographs frequently do as well. We wish all the exhibition visitors a new and stimulating look at Käthe Kollwitz”, comment **the co-chairmen of the executive board of the DZ BANK AG, Uwe Fröhlich and Dr Cornelius Riese.**

Sylvia von Metzler, chair of the board of directors, Städtelscher Museums-Verein e. V., on the show: “As an outstanding example of civic commitment in Frankfurt, the Städtelscher Museums-Verein has been supporting the work of the Städel Museum, both financially and non-materially, for 125 years. The Kollwitz exhibition has also come about thanks to this exceptional private dedication—and especially that of the collector Helmut Goedeckemeyer who, with his wife Hedwig, was a member of the association from 1959 onwards, and whose sizeable Kollwitz holdings are now part of the Städel collection. It is his close personal ties to the Städel Museum and the Städtelscher Museums-Verein that make it so important to us to provide substantial support to this exhibition.”

Regina Freyberger, head of the Städel Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings from 1800 and curator of the exhibition: "It is a huge challenge to remain completely unbiased because, consciously or unconsciously, we always carry our own conceptions and experiences with us. This is especially true with regard to an artist like Kollwitz who—thanks to school and street names, postage stamps and reproductions of her works—has been part of our everyday life for decades. That circumstance can easily obscure the fact that she was one of the most exceptional phenomena of Classical Modernist art. The work of Kollwitz is distinguished by unconventionality, a love for experimentation, and extraordinary persistence. Her refusal to produce art merely for her own sake led to her radical decision to work primarily in the graphic medium. She chose anti-bourgeois and ultimately also political issues and explored them artistically from new angles in an emphatic pictorial language that is today as gripping as ever. Like all great art, her art is timeless and timelessly relevant."

The Goedeckemeyer Collection in the Städel Museum

The Städel Museum has the art connoisseur and prints and drawings collector Helmut Goedeckemeyer (1898–1983) of Frankfurt to thank for its extensive Käthe Kollwitz holdings. A contemporary of the artist's, he began collecting her works after World War I. Over the following decades he would amass one of the largest private collections of her art in Germany. It encompasses nearly all her print editions as well as individual revised print states, drawings and bronze sculptures—more than 200 works in all. Goedeckemeyer actively made his holdings available to scholarship and numerous Kollwitz exhibitions, thus helping in the post-war years to facilitate many a critical re-assessment of an artist proscribed under National Socialism. The Städel, with which he had maintained close ties since the 1920s, presented his collection in exhibitions in 1958 and 1965. It was purchased by the City of Frankfurt for the Städtische Galerie in the Städel'sches Kunstinstitut in 1964 and enhances the Kollwitz holdings that had entered the Städel'sches Kunstinstitut under Georg Swarzenski. The Kollwitz collection today constitutes one of the Städel's most extensive Classical Modernist work complexes.

Kollwitz – An Introduction to the Exhibition

At the beginning of the exhibition, a number of exceptional self-portraits bear witness to Kollwitz's artistic versatility. In the approximately 55 years of her career, the artist produced over 100 self-portraits in the drawing, printmaking and sculpture mediums. In these works, she critically examined herself and her role as an artist, woman and mother while at the same time trying out various techniques and studying poses and

facial expressions for later compositions (see *Self-Portrait with Outstretched Hand*, ca. 1900).

In the sections that follow, the show focuses on the bold and modern qualities of Kollwitz's oeuvre, starting with a look at her decision in favour of printmaking. Although she had trained as a painter, she turned resolutely to this medium in the winter of 1890/91. It was a risky step because, despite the growing appreciation for printmaking as a form of artistic expression in its own right, painting still held as prominent a status as ever. In addition to early paintings, the exhibition presents early works of etching as well as sheets of studies from this phase—impressively showing the interplay between drawing and etching.

Kollwitz was already exploring topical, existentially human themes in her early years. Some of her prints inspired by writers like Gerhart Hauptmann and Émile Zola revolve around the relationship between the sexes. In drawings such as *A Woman's Fate (Woman's Martyrdom)* (ca. 1889), she moreover explored the plight of unmarried pregnant women, taking the figure of Gretchen from Goethe's *Faust* by way of example. Kollwitz also reflected on women's experience in her later years—in those days an unusual and emancipated perspective for the work of a female artist.

Kollwitz developed her striking—indeed, gripping—pictorial language over the course of a work process sometimes quite protracted in length. Her strongest compositions are characterized by close-up views, dynamic culminations and a concentration on the human figure. The exhibition sheds light on these dramaturgical devices by juxtaposing individual works from the *Weavers' Revolt* series (1893–1897) with works by Max Klinger, an artist Kollwitz greatly admired. It also retraces the artistic process and the intensification of a pictorial idea in the etching *Sharpening the Scythe* (1905), the third print of the *Peasant War* series (1902/03–1908). Finally, this seven-part etching series, which formed the foundation of the artist's success in the printmaking medium, reveals her unconventional handling of the print cycle as a narrative form, but also her tangibly political attitude. Kollwitz staged the human body—her true motif—as a timeless, gestural-emotional form of expression: All concentration is on the body, everything takes place on it and through it. In this way, the artist arrived at unconventional new pictorial formulations, even for the classical mother-and-child theme, as seen in the physical-corporal 'entanglement' of the *Woman with Dead Child* (1903) and the dance-like movement in *Death and Woman* (1910).

Kollwitz's use of the technical possibilities offered by printmaking and drawing was highly experimental. This is particularly apparent in the works she produced after the

turn of the century when, under the influence of French modernism and two sojourns in Paris, colour took on renewed importance in her work. Within a brief period, she produced drawings and etchings of a strongly painterly quality, some of which—for example *Woman with Orange* (1901), *Female Nude Seen from the Back, with Green Shawl* (1903) and *Parisian Cellar Tavern* (1904)—are extremely innovative in terms of technique.

Again and again, Kollwitz's oeuvre manifests as a single, continuous process in which she reflects on and reformulates individual motifs and pictorial solutions in ever new ways over decades and in all mediums. The exhibition explores this aspect in the woodcut cycle *War* (1921/23) created by the artist as she grieved her son Peter, who was killed in action in World War I. Not only the self-contained, monumental forms but also the development of the compositional ideas reveal an interplay with sculpture. The third sheet, *The Parents* (1921/22), is a variation on the *Grieving Parents* monument Kollwitz created in memory of her son (completed in 1932, now at the German military cemetery in Vladslo).

However widespread the conception of "l'art pour l'art" in her day, Kollwitz self-confidently espoused the view that art can and must serve a purpose. As an established artist, she considered herself responsible for contributing to social change. In the crisis-ridden era of the Weimar Republic she took on specifically political commissions. In this context it was not the client who was crucial, but the concern for which she adapted and sharpened her visual vocabulary according to the medium. For the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*, she moreover produced drawings denouncing the social hardships suffered by the industrial proletariat (see *Warm Shelter*, 1908/09).

Kollwitz's early decision to address herself to motifs and themes from the working-class milieu was also aesthetically motivated. She was drawn to the seemingly direct, unaffected nature of these people. What she later experienced in the context of her husband's medical practice also inspired her dedication to social causes and such sensitive works as *Half-Length Portrait of a Working-Class Woman with a Blue Shawl* (1903) and *Two studies of a working-class woman* (1910). Her choice of motifs—that is, her artistic interest in the working class—was anti-bourgeois to the core and contradicted classical aesthetics. That stance as well as her later socio-critical, practical-political approach are what led to the unrivalled explosive force of her oeuvre that would prove pioneering for modernism and later artistic currents.

In present-day Germany, few artists' names are as strongly associated with preconceptions and emotions—in the positive and negative sense alike—as that of Käthe Kollwitz. Already during her lifetime, all manner of skewed stereotypes grew around her: “pessimistic portrayer of hardship”, “religious artist”, “social-democratic agitator”. Owing to her political instrumentalization in Germany after World War II, they still resonate in Germany today. An artist proscribed under National Socialism, in the post-war years she served as a beacon for a cultural and intellectual new beginning. Public commemoration of Kollwitz set in throughout the country and played a role in the German search for identity. Starting in 1946, this led to the naming (or renaming) of schools and streets after her. During the Cold War, she was functionalized to such an extent on both sides of the inner-German border that interpretations of her work were reduced to either of two categories: “realistic/revolutionary” in the East and “ethical/humanist” in the West. Although scholarship has long corrected these assessments, their impact persists to this day. The most well-known Kollwitz monument is the fourfold enlargement of the artist's bronze *Pietà (Mother with Dead Son)* (1937–1939) in which she once again—twenty years after his death—addressed herself to the loss of her own son, killed in action in World War I. Since 1993 it has served at the Neue Wache in Berlin as a central monument “to the victims of war and tyranny”. The exhibition ends with an overview of Käthe Kollwitz's complex reception in Germany—and the hope that this reflection can clear the way for a new, undistorted understanding of the artist and her art.

KOLLWITZ

Curator: Dr Regina Freyberger (Head of the Department of Prints and Drawings from 1800, Städel Museum)

Exhibition dates: 20 March to 9 June 2024

Press preview: Tuesday, 19 March 2024, 11.00 am

Information: staedelmuseum.de/en

Visitor services and guided tours: +49(0)69-605098-200, info@staedelmuseum.de

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Tickets: Tue–Fri €16, reduced €14, Sat, Sun + holidays €18, reduced €16; every Tuesday from 3.00 pm 9 euros. Admission free for children under 12. Groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: €16 per person. Groups are required to book in advance by contacting +49(0)69-605098-200 or info@staedelmuseum.de

Digitorial®: The free Digitorial combines interactive modules with short, informative texts to provide an introduction to the exhibition themes. The intuitive way to discover the modernity, versatility and explosive power of Kollwitz's art—and ideal preparation for a visit to the exhibition. Available from 8 March in German and English at kollwitz.staedelmuseum.de. Designed for use at home or on the go, the Digitorial is a SCHIRN, Städel and Liebieghaus brand developed by the three Frankfurt museums as a multiply tried-and-tested digital museum education offer. The Digitorial on “KOLLWITZ” was realized with support from the Aventis Foundation.

Catalogue: A catalogue edited by Regina Freyberger and published by the Verlag Hatje Cantz will accompany the exhibition. With a foreword by Philipp Demandt and texts by Linda Baumgartner, Regina Freyberger, Gudrun Fritsch, Alexandra von dem Knesebeck, Katharina Koselleck, Andreas Schalhorn and Iris Schmeisser. In German, 283 pages, 207 ill., €44,90 (museum edition).



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