

# Kaethe Kollwitz's expressions of grief

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Kaethe Kollwitz (1867-1945), an artist born in Prussia, lived and worked in Germany during a particularly tumultuous time. She lived through World War I and died exiled in Morizburg at the end of World War II; as a result, she experienced a great amount of loss during both wars. Her losses included the death of her youngest son Peter in Belgium which occurred towards the beginning of the first war and her grandson Peter in battle on the eastern front during the second war. Death and suffering were a consistent experience for Kollwitz; besides personal losses she lost many friends throughout her lifetime. Additionally, she was intimately involved with the sick, poor, and dying within her husband's medical practice that was attached to their house. He was a doctor for a factory in the poor section of Berlin, and Kollwitz often used the mothers and children in the waiting area as models. Kollwitz and her husband were socialists, and in that vein she used her art for an additional purpose, to advocate for those who were in need. She wrote, "I agree that my art has purpose. I want to be effective in this time when people are so helpless and in need of aid" (1).

The single-most influential event that affected Kollwitz and her work was the death of her youngest son Peter on October 22, 1914, as aforementioned. Prior to his death she had struggled with periods of stagnation after periods of productivity and recognition in her work. However, after Peter's death, she had a particularly difficult time both emotionally and artistically. The theme of grief and suffering had appeared in her compositions, but after Peter's death it became a driving force and greater presence in her work. She conceived of a memorial for Peter's grave portraying the grief of her and her husband (*The Parents*) which took 18 years to complete: she did

not finish until 1932. Another portrayal of the grieving parents was expressed in her woodcut *The Parents* (1923) (*Figure 1*), which is more emotive and raw. In the image, the father, kneeling, his hand covering his face, supports his wife as she leans into his chest and arms. The lines are jagged; expressive of the raw suffering the parents are experiencing. The most detailed parts of this woodcut and most significant to Kollwitz in emotion expression are the heads and the hands, which are out of proportion in the figures. Although the artist often struggled to find her style and manner in dressing or nude figures, the hands and face became the center of expression and often drawn out of proportion for that reason. In *The Parents*, the father covers his face with a larger-than-life hand that is enlarged with details of the knuckles and veins. This was the artist's way of representing the emotional gravity of suffering and grief, and was a personalized description of her feelings and experiences.

Death as a theme was a consistent motif in Kollwitz's art throughout her career. As she struggled with her own grief and bereavement, envisioning ways to portray death, Kollwitz believed she was an advocate for others who were also struggling with their own grief. When describing how she was going to portray death, she wrote, "I want to show Death.....I really felt the burden I am bearing. I felt that I have no right to withdraw from the responsibility of being an advocate. It is my duty to voice the sufferings of men, the never-ending sufferings heap mountain-high. This is my task, but it is not an easy one to fulfill" (2). She completed a series of lithographs from 1934 that focused solely on the theme of Death. Some of the images show death taking unknown women and children, but there is also a personal image (*Call of Death*) where Death's hand reaches down



**Figure 1** Kaethe Kollwitz, The Parents, 1923, Woodcut Print

for the artist's shoulder. Kollwitz was deeply affected by the death of her own child and her art provided a vehicle for her to explore her own grief. More importantly she felt as though her compositions would help others who were experiencing their own grief and suffering.

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### References

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