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La Salle University Art Museum

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**Graphic Expressions:
The Prints of Käthe Kollwitz**

La Salle University Art Museum

January 23, 2006 – March 31, 2006

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Born in 1867 in Königsberg, East Prussia, Käthe Kollwitz grew up in an atmosphere of religion and radical thought. Her grandfather, Julius Rupp, was the founder of the first Free Religious Congregation, a ministry that rejected the authority of the church and promoted a doctrine that combined Christianity with democratic principles. As a child, Kollwitz was encouraged to pursue her interests in art, and in 1884 she entered a special art academy for women. She soon realized that painting was not her calling and that her real talent lay in graphic art; during her lifetime, Kollwitz executed over 270 etchings, woodcuts and lithographs.

In 1891, she married Dr. Karl Kollwitz, a doctor for a workers' health insurance fund in a working class suburb of North Berlin. As a doctor's wife in a poor area, Kollwitz daily witnessed the suffering and degradation of the poor, which became the dominant theme of her art. Unlike other contemporary Modernists, such as Wassily Kandisky and Paul Klee, who endeavored to create works that transcended subject matter, Kollwitz's art engaged current issues. Following in the footsteps of other graphic artists, like Goya and Daumier, Kollwitz embraced the social and

political function of the print. "I am content," she writes, "that my art should have purpose outside itself."

During her lifetime, Kollwitz experienced the tyranny of the Prussian Empire, and then the horrors of World War I (when her son was killed), the Weimar Republic, Hitler's Nazi Regime and finally World War II (when her grandson was killed.). Her art, which frequently depicts poverty, suffering, exploitation and death, offers a vivid picture of the tumultuous and tragic nature of these years. Kollwitz died in 1945, at the end of World War II.

The prints in this exhibition are *re-strikes*, impressions printed after the original edition was no longer available. The re-strike is pulled from the original plate, but someone other than the artist or original printer was responsible for making the impression.

Self-Portraits

Like the old masters, Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt van Rijn, who frequently treated their own likenesses, Kollwitz made at least fifty self-portraits in prints, drawings and sculpture. Unlike many of her predecessors, however, who explored the portrait's possibilities for self-fashioning – occasionally dressing themselves up as dandified gentleman and other well-known figures – in her images of herself Kollwitz focuses on the genre's potential for capturing a range of psychological and emotional conditions.

1. *Self-portrait at Table*

[Selbstbildnis am Tisch]

Etching and aquatint, 1893?

K14

This is one of Kollwitz' earliest self-portraits. Depicted at about twenty-five years of age, she shows herself seated at a table with her papers – probably drawings or prints – spread out in front of her. A gaslight suspended above casts dramatic shadows, imbuing the image both with a sense of intimacy and introspection.

2. *Self-Portrait*

[Selbstbildnis]

Etching, 1912

Gift of Ruth Armon

K122

At least since Albrecht Dürer's famous sixteenth-century print of *Melancholia*, the gesture of resting one's head in one's hand connoted the kind of creative genius, which was inspired by melancholy. A number of Kollwitz's self-portraits show her in exactly this pose. In some cases, the gesture implies deep sadness or despair; here it seems to point to a less despondent state, a kind of brooding pensiveness.

3. *Self-Portrait in Profile looking to the Right*

[Selbstbildnis im Profil nach Rechts]

Lithograph, 1938

Signed in pencil by the artist's son and inscribed:

"Aus dem Nachlass Käthe Kollwitz.

Hans Kollwitz"

K265

4. *Self-Portrait*

[Selbstbildnis]

Etching, 1921

K155

5. *The Call of Death*

[Ruf des Todes]

Lithograph, 1934-35

Signed in pencil by the artist's son and inscribed:

“Aus dem Nachlass Käthe Kollwitz.

Hans Kollwitz”

K263

The theme of death is prevalent throughout Kollwitz's oeuvre. One of her last works, this lithograph depicts a woman with the artist's own features. A disembodied hand reaches out to touch her, and she slowly looks up. One senses that she is ready to follow.

The Peasant's War [Bauernkrieg]

From 1903 - 1908, Kollwitz worked on a series of seven prints that was based on an historical event, the German peasant's revolt of 1522-25. Exploited by their feudal masters, the peasants rose up to protest their situation. The

noblemen united to squelch the uprising, yet not before the peasants killed a number of their oppressors. The work of the theologian and historian Wilhelm Zimmermann, who wrote the *General History of the Great Peasant's War* [Allgemeine Geschichte des grossen Bauernkrieges], probably inspired the series. As in the *Weaver's Rebellion*, Kollwitz lays the blame for the event on the workers's miserable working and living conditions. Yet, she takes this one step further focusing on the process by which the individual develops a consciousness of his suffering a desire to change his fate. The series was made out of order and later arranged to compose a rough narrative sequence. Four prints of the seven prints in the series are shown here.

6. *The Ploughmen*

[Die Pflüger]

Plate 1 from the *Peasant's War*

Etching, aquatint and soft ground etching, 1906

K94

This image shows the worker yoked to the plough like an animal. The figure's extreme exertion is suggested by his hunched and virtually deformed shape.

7. *Sharpening the Scythe*

Beim Dengeln]

Plate 3 from the *Peasant's War*

Etching and soft-ground, 1905

K90

Here the artist concentrates solely on the head and upper body, capturing the moment when the worker realizes that he can use his scythe as a tool against his oppressors and as a means of liberation.

8. *Outbreak* [Losbruch]

Plate 5 from the *Peasant's War*

Mixed technique, 1903

K66

The uprising was started by a woman (known as "Black Anna"), who is pictured from the rear. Dressed in a somber black dress, she raises her large, calloused hands to the sky, in a gesture that simultaneously suggests a signal for battle and a gesture of grief and mourning.

9. *After the Battle* [Schlachtfeld]

Plate 6 from the *Peasant's War*

Etching on soft-ground, 1907

K96

Black Anna is seen from the front, bending over a dead figure. Again, the artist focuses not on the face, but on the woman's large hands, which gently caress one of the slain workers.

Workers

Kollwitz supported the Socialist party, but was not a political activist or a vocal protestor. Like Karl Liebnknecht and Rosa Luxembourg, whom she admired, she had a deep sympathy with the worker, and was deeply troubled by the conditions of labor. The worker is a common subject in her art.

10. *Four Men in a Pub*

[Vier Männer in der Kneipe]

Etching, 1892 or 1893

K12

This genre work is one of Kollwitz's earliest prints. Though the work lacks the obvious social dimension of her later works, her choice to treat the worker at leisure heralds her budding interest in depictions of the laborer.

11. Mourning Man Part of the print

Memorial for Karl Liebknecht

K137

Etching, 1919

Originally part of a larger composition for the *Memorial for Karl Liebknecht*, which depicted a group of mourners, this print was created when the plate was later cut in half. Karl Liebknecht was one the founders of the Berlin *Spartakusbund* (Spartacus League) that evolved into the Communist Party of Germany. On January 15, 1919, Liebknecht was shot to death during the Spartacus Revolt on the pretext that he was attempting escape.

Revolt of the Weavers [Weberaufstand]

Gerhart Hauptmann's play, *The Weavers*, inspired the series of prints. First performed in Berlin in 1893, the play dealt with the desperate conditions and revolt of Silesian weavers in the winter of 1840. The disturbances were part of the industrial revolution that swept Europe in the Nineteenth Century. Kollwitz worked on the series form 1894-1898. The episodes follow a dramatic pattern of provocation, angry reaction and tragic end.

12. *March of the Weavers* [Weberzug]

Etching, plate 4, 1897

K32

This image and the following one both depict the uprising itself. Women and children are featured in both works, and serve to dramatize the role women have historically played in social conflict.

13. *Storming the Gate* [Sturm]

Etching, Plate 5, 1897

K33

The series comes to a climax in this print, which shows the outbreak of violence in front of the factory owner's wrought-iron gate.

14. *The End* [Ende]

Etching and aquatint, Plate 6, 1897

K37

This image marks the end of the rebellion, with the bodies of the dead being returned to the weavers' dwelling. A figure appears crouched in the left hand corner next to two bodies, which are laid on the ground. Two further figures are carrying in yet another body while a female figure looks on.

The gigantic loom, which appears at the left, bears testimony to the outcome of the workers' suppression.

Women and Mothers

Kollwitz was particularly sensitive to the experience of women, whom she frequently depicts in her art. As mothers and workers, Kollwitz's women are defined either by their close and loving relationships with children and family or else by their familiarity with struggle, both psychological and physical.

15. *Bowed Head of a Woman*

[Gensenkter Frauenkopf]

Etching, 1905

K77

Kollwitz creates an intimate, yet mysterious study of the female worker. The woman's averted gaze denies the viewer access to the image. Her thoughts remain private.

16. *Mother with Child on Arm*

[Mutter mit Kind auf dem Arm]

Etching, 1910

K110

In a moment of creative self-doubt with regard to images such as this one, depicting a loving mother and child, the

artist posed the question of whether or not they were “kitschig” or kitschy. “I do not feel secure about them,” Kollwitz claimed. Unlike other female artist like Berte Morisot or Mary Casatt, Kollwitz’s images of loving mothers are relatively few, and are based on biblical representations of the Virgin and child.

17. *Standing Mother, Feeding her Little Son*

[Stehende Mutter, Ihr Büblein Fütternd]

Etching, 1931

K247

18. *Death, Woman and Child* [Tod, Frau und Kind]

Etching, 1910

K113

Kollwitz created this image soon after her youngest son died in battle. She expressed her grief in a cycle of prints that treat the subject of a mother protecting her children or a mother with a dead child. The artist articulates her grief and sense of loss by distorting and merging the figures’ faces.

Madeleine Viljoen

Director and Chief Curator