Teacher Resource

BECOMING KÄTHE KOLLWITZ

March 16 – July 28, 2019

Suggested grades: 7-12
Curriculum connections: Visual Art, World History, English
Key words: Social justice, activism, empathy, equality, inequality, identity, history, power.

This resource supports the AGO’s Becoming Käthe Kollwitz. Käthe Kollwitz (Kay-eh Koll-vitz) was a German artist who used her art as a tool for social justice and activism. At a time when opportunities for women were extremely limited, she fought for equal rights and used her art to push for better living conditions for Germany’s working classes. Using this guide, teachers can lead conversations around art, activism and social justice with their students, looking to works by Kollwitz as a starting point.

Becoming Käthe Kollwitz is located on Level I, toward the back of the AGO. The show is spread out over three galleries. Photography (without flash) is allowed in these galleries and most areas of the AGO. Encourage your students to take pictures with their phones or cameras so you can continue discussions and revisit lesson plans outside of the exhibition.

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Before you visit

WHO WAS KÄTHE KOLLWITZ?

“I accept that my art has a purpose. I want to have an impact in these times when people are so desperate and in need of help.”
—Käthe Kollwitz, diary entry, December 4, 1922

Kollwitz was born Käthe Schmidt in 1867, in Konigsberg, Prussia (part of Germany in her era; today, the city of Kaliningrad, Russia). Ideas around justice were important to her liberal-minded family. Both her father and grandfather were active socialists and Käthe's upbringing was significantly shaped by their beliefs. Käthe showed an early talent for drawing and her parents encouraged her to attend art school. The Prussian Academy of Art did not allow female students so she attended schools for women in Berlin and Munich.

In 1891, Käthe married Karl Kollwitz. Karl was a medical doctor, and he set up a clinic in eastern Berlin to help working-class families. Like Käthe's father and grandfather, Karl was a member of the Social Democratic Party. Käthe and Karl had two sons: Hans (1892-1971) and Peter (1896-1914). Peter's death in the early weeks of the First World War prompted a prolonged depression but also forced Käthe to reexamine her support of the war effort: In the years leading up to 1914 she felt Germany had a right to defend itself against other European powers, and that war or sacrifice were often necessary to achieve a 'greater good.' After Peter's death, she became a committed pacifist.

Following Germany's defeat in the First World War, the country descended into economic turmoil, food shortages and extreme poverty. The Deutschmark, Germany's currency, plummeted in value. During these years, Käthe designed posters and leaflets that drew attention to the social impacts of economic instability.

By 1928, the Prussian Academy of Art was finally open to women, and Käthe became director of its graphics studio. In 1933, Germans elected the Nazi Party and Käthe was forced out of the Academy. The Nazis considered her art degenerate and removed it from exhibitions (while still appropriating it for their own propaganda).

Käthe died in 1945, a few weeks before the end of the Second World War. Today, she is remembered for her achievements as a woman working in a male-dominated field, but also as a strong, empathetic voice at the intersection of art and activism.
Before you visit

BERLIN IN THE LATE 1800s

The Kollwitzes made their home in Berlin, during a time of massive change in the city. After 1870, Germany was flush with wartime reparations from France following that country’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871). Much of these funds went into massive construction projects in Berlin, the country’s capital.

In the mid-1860s, increasing numbers of factories were opening in Berlin, creating new jobs, which in turn attracted more workers to the city. As a result, by 1864, less than half of its residents were originally from Berlin; the others had moved there from regions outside the city. Between 1850 and 1880, Berlin’s population expanded from 412,000 to more than 1 million, an increase of more than 100 percent. By 1914, Berlin had almost 2 million inhabitants. Builders, keen to make as much profit as possible, squeezed together as many tenement buildings as possible. Most working-class Berliners lived in substandard housing, with little natural light or space. The city’s sanitary conditions were subpar as well: there were few toilets, and many tossed wastewater and sewage directly into the streets. The stench was terrible, and Berlin was also rife with disease. A modernized sewage system wouldn’t be completed until 1893.

Käthe and Karl lived in Prenzlauer Berg, one of the city’s eastern neighbourhoods. Their home doubled as Karl’s medical practice, so Käthe was intimately aware of the struggles of Berlin’s working-class populations. She routinely encountered mothers whose children were sick or dying as a result of disease or malnutrition. After seeing these patients at her husband’s clinic, Käthe was compelled to use her art to raise awareness around the harsh effects of poverty and the exploitation of the working classes.

WHY PRINTMAKING?

Kollwitz considered herself an artist of the people and wanted her work to have purpose and impact. She demonstrated skills in drawing and sculpture, but truly established her artistic reputation as a printmaker. In some ways, printmaking aligned with her socialist background: She could reach a wider audience by making and printing multiple copies from the same printing plates.

Kollwitz created four major print series to address war, loss, and revolution. By the early 1900s, she had begun accepting commissions to produce posters and placards that helped spread awareness of humanitarian causes, including poverty, hunger, alcoholism, and unemployment.
At the AGO

A CLOSER LOOK AT KOLLWITZ’S *Ende (End)*

Gallery I40


**Guided observation**

- What’s your first impression of this print?
- What captures your attention?
- What clues has the artist provided to tell you more about the subject?
- How does the work evoke feelings, emotions and ideas?
- Imagine yourself as one of the women standing by the loom. What emotions are you feeling?

**Context**

In 1893, Kollwitz began working on *A Weaver’s Revolt*, her first major print series. She was inspired by a play called *The Weavers* (1892). Both the play and her print series dramatized the 1844 worker uprisings against corrupt landlords in Silesia, Prussia. In response to the weavers’ demonstrations, the Prussian army opened fire into a crowd, killing 11 and wounding others. *End* is the final print series in *A Weaver’s Revolt*. In this raw image, two women stand next to a large weaving loom as they receive the dead bodies of strikers. As the title suggests, scenes like this marked the end of the workers’ revolt—though a true resolution remained out of reach.

**Extended Exploration**

- How does the medium selected by the artist evoke feelings and ideas? How would these feelings and ideas shift or change if the medium changed?
- In groups of 2 or 3, select a work of art and come up with a new title for it. How does the title of the work reflect the subject matter and overall mood of the image?
At the AGO

A CLOSER LOOK AT KOLLWITZ’S Municipal Station

Gallery 124

Guided observation

• What’s the overall mood in this print? How does the artist create the mood of the piece?
• Kollwitz wanted her work to have a purpose. What do you think the purpose of a work like this is?
• Kollwitz made this work in 1925—do you think it’s tied to that era?

Context

Kollwitz’s great joys in life were her sons, Hans (1892–1971) and Peter (1896–1914). When they were children, she often used the boys as models in her drawings. “From the bottom of my heart I am thankful to the fate which gave us our children and in them such inexpressible happiness,” the artist wrote in a letter to her husband, Karl. Her images of mothers and children are among her happiest and most tragic artworks, and portray a range of experiences, from bonding and protection to separation, loss, and overwhelming grief.

Extended exploration

• Ask the Artist: Working in pairs, create a list of five questions you would like to ask the artist if you were able to speak to her. Share the questions with the larger group.
• Does this work remind you of anything you’ve seen in the news recently?
At the AGO

CONNECTING KOLLWITZ TO...

William Kurelek, A Ukrainian Canadian Tragedy, Gallery 208

Guided observation

• What is your first impression of this painting? What captures your attention?
• What is happening in this work? What do you see that shapes your idea of the action?
• What do you think is the theme or subject of the work? Why?

Context

Canadian artist William Kurelek spent his childhood on farms in Alberta and Manitoba, where the environment had a profound effect on his both his perspective and his art. He considered the wide expanse of the prairies as similar to the enormity of the oceans—both awesome and terrifying in its size and endlessness. Kurelek was the son of Ukrainian immigrants. Life was hard: the family struggled to make a living during the Great Depression. Back in the Ukraine, the Kureleks had long made their living as wheat farmers, but the family had to abandon this practice for dairy farming in Alberta after a number of crop failures.

Extended exploration

• Has your point of view changed from your initial reaction to this work? How? Why?
• Imagine yourself as one of the figures standing in front of the smoking ruins. What thoughts are running through your head?
• Both Kollwitz and Kurelek explore tragedy and disaster in their artwork. How are they similar in their treatment of these subjects? How do they differ?
At the AGO

CONNECTING KOLLWITZ TO...

Yoruba Artist, *Mother and Child Bowl*, Gallery 249

Guided observation

- What stands out to you about this sculpture? What do you think is the purpose of this work?
- What does this work remind you of?
- Do you find any elements of it puzzling? What questions do you have?
- What can we tell about the work just from looking at it?

Context

“In Yoruba culture, children are considered the biggest blessing. You may not be rich, but children are your main asset.” —Moudu Ekhar, contemporary artist

In this sculpture, a woman carries a child on her back. Look closely: the sculpture is carved from a single piece of wood, binding mother and child together. Moyo Okediji, artist and Yoruba art historian, notes that images of mother and child are common. “Yoruba mothers go to great lengths to keep their children alive, even offering sacrifices to encourage the divinities to intervene and assure the health and wellbeing of their children,” writes Okediji. The Yoruba region is in western Africa, extending across parts of Nigeria and Benin.

Extended exploration

- How does the treatment of mother/child themes in this sculpture differ from Kollwitz’s approach to the subject matter?
- How is it similar?
Post-visit activities

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• To consider the relationship between art and politics.
• To think critically about what it means to be politically active today.

Group discussion

Split the class into small groups to facilitate the following discussions:
• Think about the artists you admire (they can be actors, writers, musicians, dancers, or visual artists). Would you consider their work political? If yes, how? If not, why?
• How do they integrate politics into their practice?
• What do you think they are trying to bring attention to?
• Do you think these artists are always successful or unsuccessful? What helps get their message across? What hinders it?
• Why would someone use art as a political tool?

Extended project suggestions

• Kollwitz’s themes reflect the unjust world around her. Research and inquire about activist groups in your own community or city. What visual media, forms or conventions do they use to raise awareness?
• Individually/in a group: reflect on a current issue you feel strongly about. Design and create your own piece that advocates for your issue and calls for the change you want to see in the world. This could take a few different forms:
  • Visual essays through collage, using newspaper/magazine clipping
  • Conducting interviews at your school
  • Writing a blog
  • Posters or leaflets
  • Social media action (hashtags, campaigns, photos, etc.)
• Take a closer look at the works you photographed during your visit. Select one and write a poem that explores its mood, emotion and action.