

MATERNITY AND THE SELF: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT IN THE IMAGES OF KÄTHE KOLLWITZ

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The 20th Century German Expressionist movement brought with it a proliferation of artists: E.L. Kirchner, Oskar Kokoshka, and Wassily Kandinsky. Their primary focus was on internal life and emotion.¹ During this period of artistic expression there was an abundance of portraiture; the self-portrait became a means for the artist to explore the psyche, and the newly introduced theories of psychoanalysis became popular tools of the German artist.²

Käthe Kollwitz's (1867-1945) was an artist who challenged these trends during the early part of the twentieth century, most notably, the German Republic's cultural paradigms of femininity. Kollwitz's series self-portraits and images of women with their children speak militantly against traditional forms of feminine representation and demonstrate Kollwitz's personal need to work through her identity as a woman. Kollwitz replaces the archetypal imagery of the female body and exchanges it for bodies of women that reflect poverty and emotional hardship. These maternal images reflect her need to process the emotional imperatives and challenges of the current socio-economic conditions within German culture during the early part of the twentieth century.

In employing this new psychoanalytic model, Käthe Kollwitz engaged a mode of introspection and self-reflection to create a new and honest vision of the modern female.

Visual representations of her political ideologies are evident throughout her large body of work. Through her creation of over 100 lithographs, drawings, and sculptures of herself, Kollwitz created a series of self-portraits that were ferociously honest and personal (Fig. 1-3).³ This series of self-portraits reflects a desire for an internal understanding of the artist herself. Kollwitz's

¹ Danielle Knafo. "The Dead Mother in Käthe Kollwitz", *Art Criticism* 13, pt. 2, (1988): 4-15.

² Ibid., 6.

³ Luba Gurdus, "Käthe Kollwitz, her art seen through her self-portraits; summary of thesis," *Marsyas* 6 (1950/1953): 85-6.

vision of herself not only reflects an internal dialogue but also introduces a cultural notion of femininity. Kollwitz believed that, “For work, one must be hard and thrust outside oneself what one has lived through.”⁴ Kollwitz’s art functioned as a way to reveal not only her own self-analysis but also a psychological examination of her culture.



Fig. 1. *Self-Portrait*, 1889. Käthe Kollwitz Museum Köln



Fig. 2. *Self-Portrait*, 1904. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Fredrick Brown Fund

⁴ Hans Kollwitz, ed., *The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz* (Berlin: Henry Regnery Company, 1955).



Fig. 3. *Self-Portrait in Profile Facing Right*, 1938. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

Kollwitz's vision precedes those of her contemporaries in its utilization of the self and the maternal as a vehicle for cultural reflection. This notion is separate from previous notions of Kollwitz as a political activist, which should not be rejected. However, it is not just her feminine subject matter that is proactive in articulating Kollwitz's desire to promote socialist policies. This desire is also expressed in the subtleties of the maternal structure within her compositions and the related contextual meanings of motherhood within German culture at this time.⁵

Kollwitz's expression of maternity has only been accepted as visionary when it is expressed through overtly political statements as it is seen in images and posters with titles such as: *Brot!*, *Seed for the Planting Must Not Be Sown*, and *Vienna is Dying! Save Its Children, Germany's Children are Hungry!* (Fig. 4,a-c). These mighty lithographs counter the injustice of war and government and address Kollwitz's lifelong concern for social issues.⁶ Kollwitz's mother and

⁵ Rosemary Betterton, "Mother Figures: the maternal nude in the work of Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker," *Generation & Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 159-179. This is investigated in Betterton's article, as she articulates its presence in Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker's female nude bodies. I will look at the current maternal discourses in relation to the maternal images within Kollwitz's *oeuvre*.

⁶ Alessandra Comini, "For Whom the Bell Tolls: private versus universal grief in the work of Edvard Munch and Käthe Kollwitz," *Arts Magazine* 51 Mar (1977): 142.

child images have been largely dismissed as uncharacteristic and sentimental compared to those generally more political images represented within her oeuvre. It is in these works that Kollwitz examines her personal life, and it is these compositions that many scholars claimed have interfered with her vision. Elizabeth Prelinger discusses these compositions as, “too sentimental...her deep feelings could sometimes overtake her” and cites Kollwitz’s positive reaction to a contemporary critic’s similar comments towards these compositions (Fig. 5, 6).⁷ Prelinger surmises that Kollwitz appreciated this “check” of her composition and her seeming lack of critical distance from her work, which allowed her to, as Prelinger states, “hover precariously on the edge of sentimentality.”



Fig. 4. *Brot*, 1924. Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Köln

⁷ Elizabeth Prelinger, “Kollwitz Reconsidered,” in *Käthe Kollwitz*, ed. Elizabeth Prelinger (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 67.



Fig. 4a. Seed for the Planting Must Not Be Ground, 1942



Fig. 4b. Vienna is Dying! Save Its Children, 1920, Private Collection



Fig. 4c. Germany's Children are Hungry!, ca. 1920



Fig. 5. Mother with Boy, 1931. Private Collection



Fig. 6. Mother with Infant (Mutter mit Säugling), ca. 1911

The rhetoric of motherhood was used as a political tool and appeared frequently in political campaigns and activism to achieve an altruistic vision of German culture and politics.⁸ This connection between the maternal rhetoric which was pervasive in early twentieth-century Germany and Käthe Kollwitz' maternal imagery, and especially the discourse surrounding the Mütterschutz league, has been previously addressed in Rosemary Betterton's article, "Maternal figures: the maternal nude in the work of Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker."⁹ Betterton has established that this maternal discourse shaped Kollwitz's work, as presented within her nude maternal figures. This imagery reflects an artist who was saturated and enmeshed within these feminist discourses during this period. In contrast to Betterton, however, Kollwitz's subjects and her own self-awareness, as a maternal being, are congruent; thus, she is both the subject and object of her vision. This relationship projects Kollwitz not only as an artistic personality but also as a cultural voice. The consistent presentation of Kollwitz as a maternal artist in German culture, as well as the maternal subject matter within her compositions, was Kollwitz's attempt to define German culture in feminine terms. These feminine terms were ultimately expressed in a cultural vision of maternity as responsible for the cultural opposition that shook German culture during the early part of the twentieth century. This dynamic

⁸ Ibid., 67, 150-151.

⁹ Betterton, "Mother Figures: the maternal nude in the work of Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker," 159-179.

opposition structures the maternal images of Käthe Kollwitz. Her work emanates a sense of authority through the dominant feminine presence throughout her artistic *oeuvre*.

Kollwitz was the mother of two sons and married to physician Carl Kollwitz, who established a “free clinic“ for the working class.¹⁰ Kollwitz lost her son Peter in World War I and her grandson in World War II.¹¹ Her entire personal and artistic identity would be shaped by these losses, and projected in terms of the various rhetoric’s of socialism, pacifism and feminism.¹² Her activism led her to found in 1913 the Women’s Art Union (*Frauen Kunstverband*) in Berlin. For this, she was the first woman elected to the Berlin Academy of the Arts in 1919, and the foremost graphic artist of the first half of the twentieth century.¹³

Kollwitz was encouraged to draw as a child by her father.¹⁴ Kollwitz’s studies of art in Berlin and Munich were followed by a period of training in her birth city, Königsberg, under the engraver Rudolph Maurer. Stylistically, Kollwitz’s early work remained “conservative” and did not follow the abstract expressive style of her contemporaries, as Kollwitz continued to adhere to a figurative style of representation.¹⁵ Kollwitz was criticized for her realistic treatment of social themes.¹⁶ This reflects a general ideology of modernist scholars during the early twentieth century who maintained that an artistic engagement with social issues posed an inferior formal product than more “radical” experimental expressionists. It was Hitler who ultimately confirmed Kollwitz’s modernism by placing her art within the Degenerate Art (*Entartete*) exhibition in 1937. Whether due to her modernist tendencies or her connections to the Communist party, Kollwitz was thus placed alongside many great German modernist artists such as Ernst Barlach, Max Beckman, Paul Klee, and Wassily Kandinsky, to name a few.¹⁷

Her stylistic evolution may be more a product of her early artistic training, than from contemporary influences, such as her grounding in academic practices at the *Zeichnen- und-*

¹⁰ Stiftung Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin- Käthe Kollwitz Archiv (hereafter BKKA) Theodor Heuss, *Käthe Kollwitz- Die Frau* (August 1927), sec. 34, Nr. 11: 662-665.

¹¹ (BKKA) “Ausstellung Käthe Kollwitz, Berlin” *Westfälischer Kurier* 30 (Februar, 1929).

¹² (BKKA) “Menschenliebe,” *Berliner Stimme* (16. December 1967), sec. S.

¹³ (BKKA) “Professor Käthe Kollwitz,” *Zeitung am Mittag* (9 September 1919). Also consult, “Die bedrohte Akademie Heinrich Mann und Käthe Kollwitz zum Austritt gezwungen,” *Vossische Zeitung* (16 Februar 1933): z. This position was eventually taken from Kollwitz during World War II.

¹⁴ Tom Fecht, *Käthe Kollwitz: Works in Color* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 4-6. For a detailed biography, consult Fecht and the numerous books and articles listed within the bibliography of this essay.

¹⁵ Prelinger, 13.

¹⁶ Alexander Comini, “Gender or Genius? The Women Artists of German Expressionism,” *Käthe Kollwitz*. (London: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ “A Teachers Guide to the Holocaust,” <http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/arts/ARTDELST.HTM>. Consulted May, 2002. For a complete list of artists included in this exhibition consult the website listed.

Malschule des Vereins der Künstlerinnen in Berlin, where she studied in 1884, and her studies with various artists such as Karl Stauffer- Bern (1857-1891) and Max Klinger (1857-1920).

Kollwitz's short period of training in Munich from 1888-1889 allowed her to experiment with color and to study under Ludwig Herterich (1856-1932). This experience with painting frustrated her, and the course of her artistic career changed after witnessing Max Klinger's exhibition, an etched cycle, titled *A Life*. Klinger's concern for social issues and fantastical allegories excited Kollwitz (Fig.7). It was during this period that Kollwitz realized where her talents lay, in etching, and she never picked up the brush again.¹⁸



Fig. 7. Max Klinger, *Into the Gutter*, 1884, etching and aquatint.

Los Angeles Count Museum of Art

¹⁸ For a more detailed account of Kollwitz's early artistic training consult Prelinger's, "Kollwitz Reconsidered," *Käthe Kollwitz* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 13-19.

During her lifetime, Kollwitz remained one of the few modern artists to work consistently within the domain of the graphic arts. She was influenced by many of her contemporaries, including Edward Munch and Ernst Barlach, although she stated in a letter to her son Hans that she was unsure of the work of Matisse.¹⁹ Kollwitz voiced a critique of German art in a letter to her son Hans, in which she admires an exhibition of French art that she had earlier disliked:

I went up to the French artists, and in the very first room- which holds the famous Rodin bust- I began to regret my having signed Vinnen's protest. For here I saw French art once more represented in really good works and I said to myself that come what may, German art needs the fructifying Romance element. It is simply that the sensuous nature of the French that makes them that much more gifted at painting; the Germans lack any color-sense and left to herself Germany would produce the type of painting represented by the Dresden school, which I despise.²⁰

Kollwitz was attracted to the plight of the working class as liberal politics were often discussed in her household as a child.²¹ Both her father and her brother belonged to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and her husband's medical practice was focused on helping those who could not afford quality medical care.²² It was through her relationship with Karl that Käthe Kollwitz became exposed to the realities of the working classes: the poverty, unemployment, and prostitution.²³ The spectacle of suffering that emerged from his medical practice affected her even more deeply and immediately than the political discussions in her childhood home.²⁴ Becoming involved with the workers, as they also lived in a working-class neighborhood, Kollwitz was deeply moved and saddened by the realities she translated from that environment to her compositions.²⁵ Through her married life, she said, "I became acquainted with women patients of my husband who would also pay me visits at the same time...unsolved problems like prostitution and unemployment disturbed, tortured me and it was one of the reasons why, as an artist, I felt drawn to treating the working class..."²⁶

¹⁹ Hans Kollwitz, 136. Kollwitz was both attracted to French romantic painting and felt that German art should incorporate this style into their painting. Matisse's painting and her dislike of it is not specifically addressed, other than her overall dislike of his style. This could be due to Matisse's abstraction within his figurative paintings.

²⁰ Ibid., 136-38. Letter from Kollwitz to son Hans dated May 20, 1911.

²¹ Frank Whitford, "Käthe Kollwitz." *Studio* (Dec. 1967): 262-3.

²² Arthur Bonus. *Das Käthe Kollwitz Werk* (Dresden: Carl Reissner Verlag, 1925), 8-9.

²³ James Barr. "The Iconography of Human Suffering," *Apollo* 86 (Nov 1967): 396.

²⁴ Ibid., 263.

²⁵ (BKKA), H. Lewy. "Ihr Milieu- Die Stimme der Menschlichkeit/ Zum. 15 Todestag von Käthe Kollwitz." *Allgemeine Zeitung der Juden in Deutschland*, Nr. S.

²⁶ Noun, 58.

During her lifetime Kollwitz could not escape her role as a socialist artist, nor could she escape headlines describing herself or her art as “*mütterliche*.” As seen in archival material on Kollwitz’s artistic career in Berlin, she was consistently referred to in headlines as, “*Käthe Kollwitz- Die mütterliche Künstlerin*,” the motherly artist.²⁷ Her art was referred to as human and compassionate, and one article states, “she served the poorest of the poor in the city of Berlin, which influenced her art rather than her political engagement.”²⁸ This article also addressed her as the “mother of all the hurt and exploited ones” Kollwitz did not make art solely for her own pleasure; rather she focused on art that could serve a purpose.

My work is not pure art. Nevertheless it is art. Every artist works in his own vein. I want my art to serve a purpose; I want it to have an impact in this day and age, when people are so desperate and in need of help.²⁹

Kollwitz’s concern for the working class evolved into an art that focused both on contributing a message and reflecting a distinct feminine perspective. This feminine identity evolved throughout her artistic career and is most reflected in her mother-child imagery.

Whether reflecting the reality of the lower classes or the affections between mother and child, Kollwitz emphasized the authority of women. Even her early works asserted that femininity should be at the forefront of social consciousness, and this emphasis was articulated through the positioning of female figures in her compositions (Fig. 8, 9). Kollwitz’s women were positioned centrally in her pictorial spaces and actively engaged as part of the subject matter. Such a positioning demonstrates that German women were the foundation of German society. This notion of presenting women in an iconic manner is not to be misinterpreted as an idealistic celebration of femininity. Such a visual strategy might mislead the viewer to think that Kollwitz is playing out her sense of obligation towards femininity, she addressed these expectations in her diary on January 31, 1916, “I always find myself forced to defend the cause of a woman.”³⁰

²⁷ For example: (BKKA), Hellmut Kotschenreuther “Wiechste Mütterlichkeit und düstere Härte- Käthe Kollwitz Retrospektive der Westberliner Akademie der Kunste und der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz,” Manheimer Morgen (17. December 1967), (BKKA), Rene Orth, “Käthe Kollwitz/ Die mütterliche Künstlerin,” Siegener Zeitung (27. April 1955), (BKKA), Alfred Maderno, “Mutter der Enterbten Die Meisterschaft der Käthe Kollwitz,” Der Morgen (21. Oktober 1945).

²⁸ (BKKA), René Orth, “Käthe Kollwitz,” Siegener Zeitung (April. 1955), v. 27.

²⁹ See Kollwitz’s diary entry for December 4th 1922; quoted in Hans Kollwitz, 105.

³⁰ Ibid., 67.



Fig. 8. *Storming the Gate*, 1897. Private Collection, courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York



Fig. 9. *Outbreak*, 1903. Private Collection

Throughout her artistic career Kollwitz's compositions consistently depicted the German *proletariat* in a manner that was honest, raw, and aggressive (Fig. 10-12). She was successful in recognizing those generally marginalized within German society, and she exploited the suffering

of German women who were neglected by the current government social policy.³¹ This social policy, as discussed in the previous chapter, was a primary focus of concern for the feminist movement. Many scholars, such as Dora Apel, believe that Kollwitz was a pacifist and that she cast femininity into a role of passivity within her images.³² Apel addresses Kollwitz's antiwar imagery during the Weimar era, and her points are important to consider when looking at Kollwitz's much more sentimental images of maternal affection from earlier in the twentieth century. The passive aggressive attitude presented in such works as *Survivors* (Fig. 13) is a direct reflection of the ideology of maternal feminism, whose basic premise established that it was through the mother that cultural authority should be constructed. This contemporary ideology of maternal empowerment, which is central to Kollwitz's maternal images, as will be demonstrated, is in direct contrast to the notion that her more "sentimental" images are ineffective and obsolete.



Fig. 10. Poster: "Warning! Be Careful on the Job!", ca. 1924

³¹ Dora Apel, "The Politics of Gender in Weimar Antiwar Imagery." *Art Bulletin* (3 Sept. 1997): 362-385.

³² *Ibid.*, 384.



Fig. 11. *Unter dem Bruckenbogen* (Under the Bridge), 1928



Fig. 12. *Soup Kitchen* (for Simplicissmus, 1 March 1909), ca. 1909



Fig. 13. The Survivors (Die Überlebenden), 1922-23

Kollwitz's female figures are usually identified as "*mütterlich*," and these motherly figures are central to Kollwitz's compositions. There are two distinct types of maternity present within Kollwitz' compositions: those which reflect Kollwitz' personal experience and those which can be defined as activist in nature. These two types, as observed in Kollwitz's compositions, have been established previously as contradictory.³³ They are typically thought to reflect two separate identities of motherhood. There is, however, a distinct non-contradictory pluralism present within the images, a pluralism that is produced through their contextual meanings.

The first *mütterlich* type, as the more personal one, is evident in Kollwitz's composition, *Mother with Boy (Mutter mit Jungen)*, 1931 (Fig.5). Here the artist demonstrates the complete adoration of a mother toward her child. The mother looks tenderly down at her young child and smiles while embracing him completely. Her body seems to engulf the child in a protective, albeit egocentric grasp. She appears to be trying to make the child a part of her again. The mother is represented as the central figure and the child as the central focus. Here the child appears nearly overwhelmed by the demonstrative gestures and turns slightly away from her, glancing not toward her but in the other direction. As he turns away, the child is presented as both assertive and dependent upon her bodily mass.

This notion of the mother as all consuming and protective is also present in *Mutter Gebt von eurem Überfluss*, 1926 (Mother Gives from Her Abundance) (Fig.14). This representation focuses on the maternal exchange between two women. The main figure of the composition is a

³³ Prelinger, 65-67.

woman who sits holding an infant in her lap. Asleep and unaware, the infant is cradled in the swaddling legs of the mother. The woman appears nearly oblivious to the sleeping infant and turns to accept another infant to nurse.



Fig. 14. Mütter gebt von euerem Überfluss, ca. 1920

Kollwitz's personal practice of maternal affection is evident in her son Han's commentary, which describes her affections as "felt but not seen."³⁴ A very different affective scenario is evident in her compositions, where her mothers are assertively and openly affectionate. In *Mutterglück*, 1934, (Fig.15) a family embraces in a moment of intimacy. Kollwitz has captured not only the joys of motherhood, but also the ecstatic emotions of mother and child in an exchange of affection. Here the focus is solely on the mother as she faces the child and reaches out to embrace the infant. The mother's face is exposed to the viewer and participates exclusively within the composition. The father is present only through his firm, strong hands; his identity has been removed through the body of the infant. The infant reaches out toward the mother, revealing only its back to the viewer.

³⁴ Hans Kollwitz, 2.



Fig. 15. *Mutterglück*, 1931. Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Köln

This portrait is also identified as a self-portrait of Kollwitz with her son Hans and husband Carl; however, Kollwitz emphasizes only the motherly aspects. Kollwitz has been quoted as having reservations about many of these “*mütterlich*” (motherly) compositions (Fig.16,17) and posed the question as to whether or not these were too “*kitschy*” (*kitschig*).³⁵ It is possible to see her comments as reflections of her own personal reservations toward maternal affection. But also her desire in such images can be construed as an attempt to capture significant moments not of maternal affection but of maternal responsibility as a larger cultural signifier.

³⁵ Prelinger, 67.



Fig. 16. *Mutter mit Kind*, ca. 1918



Fig. 17. *Arbeiterfrau mit schlafendem Jungen*, 1927

This gentle mother and child interaction is repeated often in Kollwitz's compositions. These studies of maternity define Kollwitz's personal experiences with motherhood, but also her observations of maternal interactions of other women and their children. Kollwitz appears to have defined herself through others, and this dynamic is evident in these intimate interactions she so readily selected and transcribed. This projection of herself is also evident in Kollwitz's own belief in maternal responsibility and the sense that the mother is the "cultivator" of her offspring:

I am the bearer and cultivator of a grain of seed-corn. What Hans will become, the future will show. But since I am to be the cultivator, I want to serve faithfully. Since recognizing that, I am almost serene and much firmer in spirit. It is not only that I permitted to finish my work- I am obligated to finish it. This seems to me to be the meaning of all the Gabble about culture. Culture arises only when the individual fulfils his life cycle of obligations. If everyone recognizes and fulfils his cycle of obligations, genuineness emerges. The culture of a whole nation can in the final analysis be built upon nothing else but this.³⁶

This quotation is key to defining Kollwitz's impression of her own cultural obligations as a mother. Her sense of being the "cultivator of youth" comes directly from the maternal feminist's doctrine. If Kollwitz was not overly demonstrative in her maternal expressions with her own children, she nevertheless appears to have projected such emotions into her paintings of other women, which can be understood as generalized self-portraits. Kollwitz described her art as one of service and her mothers as women who were "quiet observers" of society. Her program thus reflects not only a personal desire, but also articulates a desire for German culture as a whole.

Kollwitz was shaped by an emerging feminist ideology, which embraced this notion of mother as a signifier of a new German culture. Her focus on the bond between the all seeing, all-feeling mother and her child is important when considering its context within German society.

In her insistence on a singularly feminine subjectivity, Kollwitz recapitulates the basis of the *Frauenkultur*, which emerged in Germany in 1920-1930.³⁷ The maternal structuring of Kollwitz's work emulated the aspirations of German women at this time who saw themselves as the makers of men and culture.³⁸ Maternal feminism in Germany was part of a broader discourse

³⁶ Hans Kollwitz, 64.

³⁷ Carol Duncan discusses the idea of women as "other" and the affects that orientalism and primitivism have had on the emergence of this ideology. Matisse's *Odalisque*'s exemplify the notion of colonialism and orientalism and the European mentality as being superior over non-European women. This makes the idea of femininity, as a whole, even more repressed and celebrates even further the "primordial stereotypes" which have destroyed womanhood in representation.

³⁸ Hans Kollwitz., 115.

on motherhood, child rearing, the family, and the state. In the late nineteenth century, maternal and child-rearing practices were for the first time defined as public concerns, central to the welfare of the state. At the turn of the century, the increasing awareness of the “emotional commitment, unity of feeling, and natural bonding as the basis for citizenship” encouraged a new emphasis on the emotional and psychological, as well as, biological significance of the mother-child bond.³⁹ When women began to enter the public sphere as speakers and advocates, they derived much of their theory from eminent social theorists such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Carl Froebel. Froebel’s concept of “spiritual motherhood” becomes essential to the goals of maternal feminism. Focused on the concern childcare as a profession a concern, many feminists embraced Froebel’s emphasis on the concept of duty and honor, and an intermingling of the maternal and the community, in conjunction with female employment, to provide rights for the female worker. Froebel’s notion of “spiritual motherhood” did not separate the individual from the maternal, rather, it regarded this communitarian idea as a “fulfillment of women’s search for autonomy.”⁴⁰ Kollwitz too incorporated the current notions of maternal feminism and Froebel’s notion of spiritual motherhood into her work.⁴¹ Froebel’s theories are present in Kollwitz’s representations of maternity as an essential aspect of German society; the mothers in her compositions represent their community through their maternal strength and concern for child welfare.

Many of her compositions also demonstrate the use of maternal themes for political purposes. Kollwitz actively reflected some of the ideas of the *Bund für Mütterschutz und Sexual Reform* (League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform).⁴² The League brought together numerous political parties, radical, socialist and a few conservative party members who all united for the cause of German feminism.⁴³ The League was founded on the ideas of Helen Stöcker who, through the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, was devoted to urging the middle class women to, “follow Nietzsche’s philosophy and live life to the full by marrying, having children

³⁹ Allen, 24-31, provides a detailed look into the feminist movement and the role of the maternal feminists within Germany at this time.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴¹ Many feminists at this time were shifting their philosophy on childrearing away from purely scientific perspectives to those that focused on the relationship between biology and culture. This shift was impelled by hereditarianism and evolutionary theories. Feminist intellectuals realized a need to incorporate Darwinian explanations in revising the role of maternity in child rearing. Much of the discourse on eugenics reflected negatively on the role of women and their biological contribution to their children. However, these discourses provided feminist intellectuals a foundation for the emergence of a “a female-centered counter-discourse,” one that embraced both the iconization of the mother and continued to utilize the Darwinian doctrine. Such a discourse was obviously at the center of the work of Käthe Kollwitz.

⁴² Evans, 120.

⁴³ Betterton, 171.

and entering higher education and the professions.”⁴⁴ Evans states that Nietzsche’s ideas on teaching the conquest of the self and the development of the creative powers of the individual were also believed to “propagate a romantic form of liberal individualism.” These philosophies influenced Stöcker’s early publications and she utilized these theories to argue for married women and their rights as individuals. Ruth Bré, the founder of the argued for the “end of the capitalist rule of man” and the restoration of the matriarchy.⁴⁵ In 1907, the League submitted a petition that called for the improvement and inclusion of maternity insurance for working women.⁴⁶ The League, influenced by the writings of Swedish feminist Ellen Key, concerned themselves with the needs of both women, particularly unmarried women, and League on November 12, 1904, children; focusing primarily on health issues and a search for a greater sexual freedom for women. In her essay “The Misuse of Women’s Energies” (1898) Key writes out about the importance of the relationship between the mother and the child and the significance of the function of women within the community.⁴⁷ Key argued for many changes in women’s status, and she felt that women’s energies where best used for motherhood. As Allen states, “Key felt the encouragement of careers, higher education, and work outside the home for women would lead them to imitate men, thus depriving the younger generation and society as a whole of their salutary influence.”⁴⁸ Key traced the origins of the family to mothers and argued that it was the mother who taught men to love and protect their children, and she felt that women possessed innate abilities to mother and nurture their children. According to Key, women could best serve their communities this way, and this was the way they would be the most successful. Key also believed that women could not combine the rewards of the public and private spheres, so she emphasized the values of maternity and stressed that this was the “highest cultural task.” According to Allen, Key believed in the improvement of women’s status, the reform of marriage and divorce laws, and payment for housework. Kollwitz was deeply concerned with these same issues, such as, health issues of working women, as well as the entire platform of the socialist women’s movement (SPD), even though she never became a member of the party.⁴⁹ However, Kollwitz did have direct links to the *Bund für Müttershutz*: in 1909 she donated two of her drawings to the Bund, including one of her mother and child compositions.⁵⁰

During the later part of the nineteenth century, the argument for regarding motherhood as purely biological function that ensured survival of progeny through ethical and altruistic behaviors was

⁴⁴ Evans, 117.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁷ Allen, 157.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁹ Betterton, 171.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 171.

developed in the field of philosophy, namely by the theorists Johann Jakob Bachofen in his book *Das Mütterrecht* (Mother-Right), which was published in 1861 and again later in the century. Bachofen felt that the mother and child bond was “the origin of all altruism, and women thus as the originators of all social ethics.”⁵¹ Such theories provided powerful incentive to feminists to remedy the state of women and push toward their legal equality.⁵² German feminists at the turn of the century valued similar Pestalozzian theories of the mother-child bond. Following Bachofen’s precepts, Pestalozzi believed that the mother-child bond was the source of all social morality.⁵³ Therefore, woman was the architect of society; Pestalozzi believed that it was from the role of the mother that the origins of traditions and beliefs emerged. These debates prove a heated differencing of gender ideologies in turn-of-the-century Germany.

Kollwitz’s activist agenda for painting is evident in her composition *Mütter II, 1919* (Fig. 18). In this lithograph, a group of mothers form a protective barrier around their children. This image is one of protection and defense; the children peek out from under and behind their mother’s arms and clothing. With her eyes closed, the maternal figure in the center of the composition is the most prominent and appears to be almost meditative in her protective stance. These women are proud and strong; yet they glance almost pensively out at the viewer. This representation of the protective mother is present throughout Kollwitz’s oeuvre and became a typical mode of the portrayal of maternity within her images (Fig. 19).⁵⁴ Her images connected a soft motherliness with the dark hardships of the *proletariat* and expressed this message through an intense power of suffering and stoicism.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Allen, 160.

⁵² Ibid., 169. Friedrich Engels and August Bebel, who later worked on socialist theories of the family, republished Bachofen’s book at the turn of the century. Engels and Bebel believed that the role of the mother was a primitive and undeveloped form of society. However, this theory was rejected by many socialist feminist theorists at this time. Bebel’s book *Women Under Socialism* (1879) was concerned primarily with questions regarding marriage, population, and eugenics. These theories were discussed by Kollwitz, her brother and friends in the early 1880s.

⁵³ C. Richter, *Bilder aus dem Kinderleben des Pestalozzi-Froebel Houses*. (Berlin, 1904).

⁵⁴ (BKKA) Werner Schumann, “Käthe Kollwitz, die Mutter und die Kinder,” Neue Evangelische Frauenzeitung (1958), Nr. 1.

⁵⁵ (BKKA) Helmut Kotschenreuther, “Wiechste Müttlerlichkeit und düstere Härte- Käthe Kollwitz Retrospektive der Westberliner Akademie der Kunste und der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz,” Mannheimer Morgen (17. December 1967).



Fig. 18. *Die Mütter II*, 1919. Käthe Kollwitz Museum, Köln



Fig. 19. *Tower of Mothers*, 1937-1938. The Baltimore Museum of Art

Such works and others related to them are not only political, they are also loosely based on the Christian motif of the *Schutzmantel Madonna*, Virgin of Mercy (Fig. 20), which Kollwitz appropriated to express the concept of protection.⁵⁶ The image of the Virgin Mary with her cloak outspread to protect and shelter those who have entrusted their lives to her is an old one. The

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Prelinger, "Sacrifice and Protection. The Double Sided Coin in Kollwitz's Life and Art," in *Käthe Kollwitz- Schmerz and Schuld, Eine Motivgeschichtliche Betrachtung* (Käthe Kollwitz Museum: Berlin, 1995), 67.

image of the Virgin in this guise projects her as the all-giving and all-consuming mother and, much like Kollwitz's mothers, she is merciful and emanates an eternal sweetness representative of all womanhood.⁵⁷ This notion of sacrifice, as present in Kollwitz's images, is discussed in Elizabeth Prelinger's article, "Sacrifice and Protection: The Double-Sided Coin in Kollwitz's Life and Art." Prelinger contends that Kollwitz's idealistic vision towards social and political idealism led her to believe that sacrifice was heroic, an idea she later recognizes as naïve. The subject of maternal sacrifice and protection evolves throughout her artistic career and is played out in her maternal images in varying degrees.⁵⁸



Fig. 20. Michel Erhart, *Schutzmantel Madonna*, 1480. Staatliche Museen, Berlin

Of Kollwitz's images produced during World War I, *Die Überlebenden*, 1923 (The Survivors), (Fig. 13), a preparatory study for a poster, was made for the anti-war day of 21 September, 1924.⁵⁹ Again, Kollwitz employed the image of the protective mother in the same frontal

⁵⁷ George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 94.

⁵⁸ (BKKA) E. Vogt, "Käthe Kollwitz/ Zu ihrem 80. Geburtstag," *Neues Deutschland* (8. Juli 1947).

⁵⁹ "Image of Everywoman," *Time* (May 1956): 80.

position with arms encircling her children as *Mütter II*, but now her eyes are open. This mother appears nearly defeated and almost dead; the men surrounding her are blindfolded as she stands in the foreground of the composition. She still projects a gesture of protection; however, social forces have attempted to subvert her capacity to nurture her children. This mother is less resigned and less passive than are the women in *Mütter II*; with her eyes open, she literally attempts to fight back against social forces. She is more assertive and her arms form a secure, tight barrier between the viewer and the children. The children remain dependent on her abilities to nurture them; it appears as if she remains willing to do so. The women in both *Mütter II* and *Survivors* can be viewed as reciprocating the assertive attitude of German women at this time and the German ideology of women Kollwitz embraced.

As we have seen, Kollwitz's etchings and lithographs are engaged with German feminist thought, which embraced the mother as a representative and creator of society. This maternal thematic is evident in the predominantly feminine subject matter in her body of work and the emphasis on the relationship between the mother and child. The most prominent social theorists identified women as the earliest community builders, thus the founders of human culture, and the feminists with whom Kollwitz was allied claimed this argument. Thus, Kollwitz's feminine subjects reject the bourgeois construction of women and the domestic as arenas supervised by male surveillance. Rather, Kollwitz creates a maternal subject built on the dual aspects of the body and the mind. The idea of spiritual motherhood, as established by Froebel, was widespread in Germany at this time and women were trying to find unity in the notion that supported women's roles within the community and their importance within a "national family." Social service was considered one of the most productive non-violent forms of service to the nation. Kollwitz's work also emerges from this argument that social service was comparable to military service for men; such a line of reasoning connected the increasing dignity of motherhood in the private sphere with an expanded role in the "great social household."⁶⁰

It is primarily in the maternal body, as a personal and cultural reflection of maternity, that Kollwitz identified her women as *mütterlich*. Kollwitz established in both her private and activist images of maternity that women are essential founders of German culture. It is in her maternal bodies that women are seen socially, as complete "women." German women played on the stereotype of the mother as a self-sacrificing icon "who inevitably, if tragically, dedicated herself to motherhood."⁶¹ Kollwitz's invocation of this self-sacrificing type is most evident in her composition *Mütter II*.

⁶⁰ Allen, 100-102.

⁶¹ Ibid., 101.

Kollwitz's solid, smooth female forms evade the traditional erotic connotations, to put in place the figure of a female body that reflects an appearance that suggests control, and a different purpose. This form is one that resonates softness through the rather jagged and blended lines of her etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts. The German State defined the mother as "mother of the human race," and Kollwitz's female figures echo this sense of responsibility to humanity and German culture. Kollwitz rejected the patriarchal control over women. In response, she presented a figure that is firmly in control and projects the theme of matriarchal responsibility. Kollwitz made transparent the matriarchal struggle which German women were waging against a culturally defined patriarchy. As a resolution to the struggle, she offered a symbolic representation of the matriarch as founder and cultivator of German society. This matriarchal responsibility is demonstrated in the heavy and protective stance of Kollwitz's women. They are strong, protective, and at times Madonna-like; they dominate the space rather than being possessed by it. Kollwitz's (*mütterlich*) maternal forms demonstrate a theorized matriarchy that emerged from the political and feminist debates in turn-of-the-century Germany.

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