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## Expressionist Art

Käthe Kollwitz (German, Königsberg, now Kaliningrad, Russia 1867 - 1945 Moritzburg, near Dresden)  
*Self-Portrait with Hand of Death*, 1924  
 Signed and dated lower right: Käthe Kollwitz/1924  
 Charcoal on paper  
 23 7/8 x 18 7/8 in. (60.6 x 47.9 cm)  
 R. T. Miller, Jr. Fund, 1944  
 AMAM 1944.169



This important finished drawing served as a point of departure for three prints--two lithographs and one woodcut--by Käthe Kollwitz. Her repeated use of the pose suggests that she considered it an accurate embodiment of herself and her state of mind, which had turned from introspective to severely depressed during the ten years after the death of her son in World War I.<sup>1</sup>

The drawing originated during a phase of illness and depression in 1923-24, when Kollwitz noted in her diary her deep discouragement and sense of all-encompassing failure: she felt unable to love, to work, to think, or even to enjoy the spring.<sup>2</sup>

The drawing exemplifies Kollwitz's lifelong conversation with death,<sup>3</sup> which is represented here in the barely visible, shadowy hand touching the artist's shoulder. Among her numerous self-portraits, this drawing contains one of her most explicit personifications of the presence of death. In a lithograph and woodcut of the same year, which are based on this drawing, the hand of death is missing.<sup>4</sup> In the *Call of Death*, a self-portrait lithograph of 1934, the hand of death again touches the artist's shoulder. Although oriented in a different direction from the drawing, the lithograph seems to represent the moment just after that depicted in the drawing, as the figure responds to the call of death by a slight turn of her upper body.<sup>5</sup>

Executed in litho pencil,<sup>6</sup> the Oberlin drawing has a subtlety of line and shading that is largely lost in the stronger outlines of the lithographs and the sharp contrasts of black and white in the woodcut. In the drawing, the gesture is gentle, almost caressing; the faint hand of death is not skeletal and not at all demanding. Omitted entirely in the prints of 1924, the gesture becomes a more forceful tap on the shoulder in the *Call of Death* of 1934/35.

In the drawing, Kollwitz depicted herself resigned, with closed eyes, almost too exhausted to turn and see who is touching her shoulder, an attitude solidified and cast in more monumental form in the woodcut and lithograph of 1924. Her hands, disproportionately large with coarsely defined fingernails, are exaggerated even more in the lithograph, as if these instruments of artistic creation had become ugly and useless. The 1934 *Call of Death* is more sculptural in character, with solid outlines summing up the head and shoulders and reducing the face to an almost animalistic mask of fatigue and depression.

D. Hamburger

Work (C) 1998 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kust, Bonn

### Biography

Käthe Kollwitz was born on 8 July 1867, the daughter of Karl Schmidt, a master mason and preacher of the free-religious community in Königsberg.<sup>7</sup> In 1881-82, Kollwitz received her first art lessons from the engraver Rudolf Maurer in Königsberg and attended the School for Women Artists in Berlin, where she studied with the Swiss artist Karl Stauffer-Bern from 1885 until 1886. Influenced by Max Klinger's prints, she abandoned painting and turned to graphic art. She married Karl Kollwitz, a medical student, in 1891, and lived with him in Berlin, where she had direct contact with the industrial working class, who were her husband's patients and the subject matter of much of her work.

Kollwitz was also concerned with the interrelated themes of death, war, and maternal loss. Major works include the *Weavers' Revolt* (1895-98), a cycle of prints based on Gerhart Hauptmann's 1893 drama *The Weavers*; *The Peasants' War* (1908), a large-format cycle of prints that established her reputation as one of Germany's most important printmakers; a steady series of drawings published in the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*; and posters such as her well-known *War--Never Again!* (1924). Kollwitz's professional success--marked by exhibitions in honor of her fiftieth birthday in 1917, and her appointment as professor at the Preussische Akademie der Künste in 1919--did not undermine her sense of social calling, reflected in works entitled *War*, *Departure and Death*, and *Proletariat*.

This affinity with socialist causes and communist politics led to the loss of her position and studio at the Akademie when the National Socialists assumed power in 1933. She was prohibited from exhibiting her work, and both her husband Karl and her son Hans were prevented from practicing medicine. Some of Kollwitz's work was included in Hitler's *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich in 1937. During the same year she finished her monumental sculpture *Mother with Twins*. Kollwitz died on 22 April 1945, after the loss of her husband, her grandson, her home, and studio, and the destruction of most of her printing plates.

### General References

Prelinger, Elizabeth. *Käthe Kollwitz*. Exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1992.

### Provenance

Collection of the artist

With Galerie St. Etienne, New York (ca. 1940), from whom purchased in 1944 **8**

### Exhibitions

Iowa City, Art Department, State University of Iowa, 1951. *Six Centuries of Master Drawings*. Summer. Cat. no. 189.

New York, M. Knoedler & Company, Inc., 1954. *Paintings and Drawings from Five Centuries: Collection Allen Memorial Art Museum*. 3 - 21 February. Cat. no. 74.

Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1956. *Drawings and Watercolors from the Oberlin Collection*. 11 March - 1 April. No cat.

The Arts Club of Chicago, 1966. *Drawings 1916/1966*. 28 February - 11 April. Cat. no. 52.

### Literature

Tietze, Hans. *European Master Drawings in the United States*. New York, 1947, cat. no. 160, ill. p. 320.

Klipstein, August. *Käthe Kollwitz. Verzeichnis des graphischen Werks*. Bern, 1955, p. 352, under cat. no. 192.

Hamilton, Chloe. "Catalogue of R. T. Miller, Jr. Fund Acquisitions." *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1959), cat. no. 60; no. 3 (Spring 1959), ill. p. 279.

Nagel, Otto. *Die Selbstbildnisse der Käthe Kollwitz*. Berlin, 1965, pl. 64.

Nagel, Otto. *Käthe Kollwitz: Die Handzeichnungen*. Berlin, 1972, cat. no. 1024.

Stechow, Wolfgang. *Catalogue of Drawings and Watercolors in the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College*. Oberlin, 1976, p. 45, fig. 81.

Bittner, Herbert. *Käthe Kollwitz. Drawings*. New York, 1967, cat. no. 102.

Thorson, Victoria. *Great Drawings of All Time: The Twentieth Century*. Vol. 1. Redding, Conn., 1979, cat. no. 82.

### Technical Data

Drawn with a litho pencil on ivory-colored wove paper, which was cut on all four edges (unevenly on the right side), this work is in good and stable condition. The paper is somewhat bleached by exposure to light in the image area and yellowed in the margins, where it was covered by the mat. The image is executed in quick, broad strokes; the facial features are delineated with heavier dark strokes with an almost paintlike build-up of the medium in the shadows of the outline. On the right margin there are scribbles indicating the artist's efforts to obtain the desired quality of line. The verso is marked up with black litho pencil smudges and slightly damaged by old gummed paper tape, abrasion, and adhesive residue.

### Footnotes

1. The death of her son plunged Kollwitz into a long period of intense depression. She wrestled for seventeen years with plans for a memorial for him, completing the monumental sculpture, *Mourning Parents* (Military Cemetery at Diksmuide, Belgium) in 1932.

2. Otto Nagel, *Die Selbstbildnisse der Käthe Kollwitz* (Berlin, 1965), pp. 36-37.

3. From verbal communication with her sister Lise, quoted by Uwe Schneede, *Käthe Kollwitz: Das zeichnerische Werk* (Munich, 1981), p. 5.

4. *Seated Woman with Propped Up Hand*, lithograph, 1924, 48 x 41 cm; *Self-Portrait*, woodcut, 1924, 40 x 30 cm; August Klipstein, *Käthe Kollwitz. Verzeichnis des graphischen Werks* (Bern, 1955), cat. nos. 192 and 202, respectively.

5. *The Call of Death* (pl. 8 from the *Death* series), lithograph, 1934-35, 38 x 38.3 cm; August Klipstein, *Käthe Kollwitz. Verzeichnis des graphischen Werks* (Bern, 1955), cat. no. 263.

6. See conservation survey report by Moyna Stanton, Intermuseum Conservation Association, completed 3 November 1995.

7. Her maternal grandfather, Julius Rupp, had founded the first Protestant Free Religious Congregation in Germany, and with his sermons--especially the maxim "eine Gabe ist eine Aufgabe" (a talent is a challenge)--exerted a lasting influence on the artist.

8. Letter from Otto Kallir, Galerie St. Etienne, to Ellen Johnson, 18 December 1944: "Concerning the Kollwitz drawing: It comes directly from the artist and was sent to America shortly before the war began. It has never been in any other collection."

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Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College  
87 North Main Street | Oberlin OH 44074  
440.775.8665