

JUNE, 1939

*VOICE OF
PITY*

*A NOTE ON A SIGNIFICANT
ARTIST OF THIS CENTURY:
GREAT-HEARTED
KAETHE KOLLWITZ*



WHEN Kaethe Schmidt was born in Koenigsberg in 1867, the twin fairies Pity and Indignation claimed her for their own. Kaethe Schmidt grew up and by marriage became Kaethe Kollwitz, the wife of a physician and the mother of sons, one of whom was taken from her in battle. Study and training gave her mediums through which she was enabled to express her sense of pity and her sense of indignation through the forms of art. And the tragedies of Germany, in which was involved her personal loss, gave her both subject matter and challenges to declare herself.

Her declarations have never been equivocal. No one has ever mistaken her meaning, not even the Kaiser and not even the Kaiserin, both of whom refused to sanction honors accorded to her. She has been the artist of the common people, in that she has made art out of their weal and their woe and she has been content to receive understanding and approbation from them alone. She has worked in etching, lithography,



CALL OF DEATH

and wood-block, all of them mediums in which it is easy to reproduce the message either of art or of propaganda.

Her art may be summed up as a cry from a sympathetic heart. That is why there are exclamation marks in her titles, as in *Bread!* Her art is an advocacy for the rights of the underdog; it is a demand for women's rights, workers' rights, children's rights, for peace and for compassion. The years of war and the years of hunger and the inflation gave her many motives—all of them derived from the streets of the Berlin slum which she has made her home out of choice for the past thirty years. Her art is a speaking to the people of the things which concern them, and not the esthetes. If the esthetes also are pleased, so much the better.

The propaganda in her art is not a blemish, but the very rock on which it is founded. Storm and sunny day have found her equally unflinching. In the Kaiser's time she was not without recognition grudgingly granted; in the days of the Republic she became the first woman to be elected to the Prussian Academy, of whose department of graphic art she was made



SELF PORTRAIT:
KAETHE KOLLWITZ

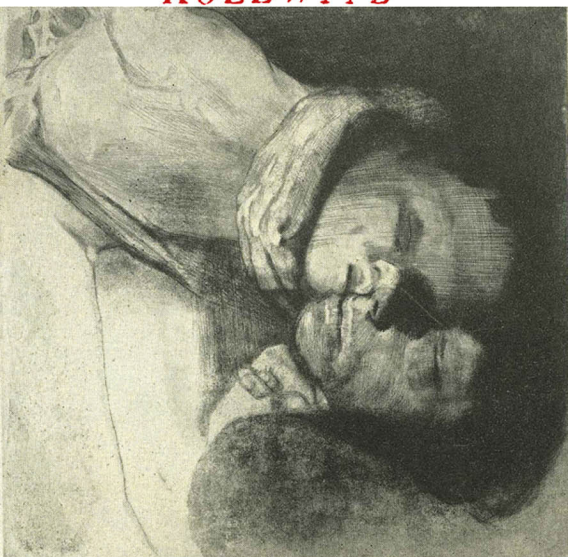
the head, as well as of the Kaethe Kollwitz School founded in her honor. Since Hitler, official encouragement has been withdrawn, and she has been barely permitted to work in silence and obscurity and in increasing poverty. She has refused to leave Germany on the ground that someone must stay against the better days to come.

A little woman with thinning, grey hair, a calm, meditative disposition and large sad eyes which are constantly getting worse, she has of late years shown continuing preoccupation with Death, whom, in a series of lithographs, she objectifies as a faceless terror that wrenches children from mothers and mothers from children. She seems to find it difficult to banish the theme. The *Call of Death*, for example, is almost a self-portrait. Perhaps by objectifying her own dread, this little 72-year-old woman can rob it of some of its terror.

The religion that bids you do good to your fellow man was the deepest and earliest influence of the artist's girlhood. To this day she cannot say whether the power which made her labors possible is something that is related to religion or is religion itself. Her maternal grandfather was a pastor

**WOMAN WITH SLEEPING CHILD**

who went to prison for subversive activities in the reign of Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia. Her father was a clergyman whose emotion upon reading a translation of Thomas Hood's *Song of the Shirt* she remembered for years afterwards. With her brother, Karl, who became an editor of the *Berlin Vorwaertz*, she explored Zola, Ibsen, Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, Hauptmann and other writers of the new age. Her first important work was a series of etchings based on Hauptmann's play, *The Weavers*, for which she was awarded a silver medal. This was the prize the Kaiser refused to let her have, but she got it the following year. Her second important series of etchings was one based on the Peasants' War of the sixteenth century, for which she received a fellowship which gave her a year of leisure in Italy. In 1891 she had married Dr. Karl Kollwitz and had gone with him to live among the poor of Berlin, for he was one of those physicians who had a mission instead of a bedside manner. By 1893 she had had her first exhibition and by 1898 her *Weavers* cycle had established her in the consciousness of German artists.



DEATH, WOMAN AND CHILD

Frau Kollwitz stands today as one of the greatest woman artists of this century, whose reputation has long since transcended the narrow spiritual boundaries of her native land. That one can read her sex in her art may be a limitation, but it is a limitation in which she must glory. Romain Rolland, in his tribute to her, proclaims the glory of this limitation: "This woman, with her great heart, has taken the people into her mothering arms with sombre and tender pity. She is the voice of the silence of the sacrificed."

—HARRY SALPETER

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