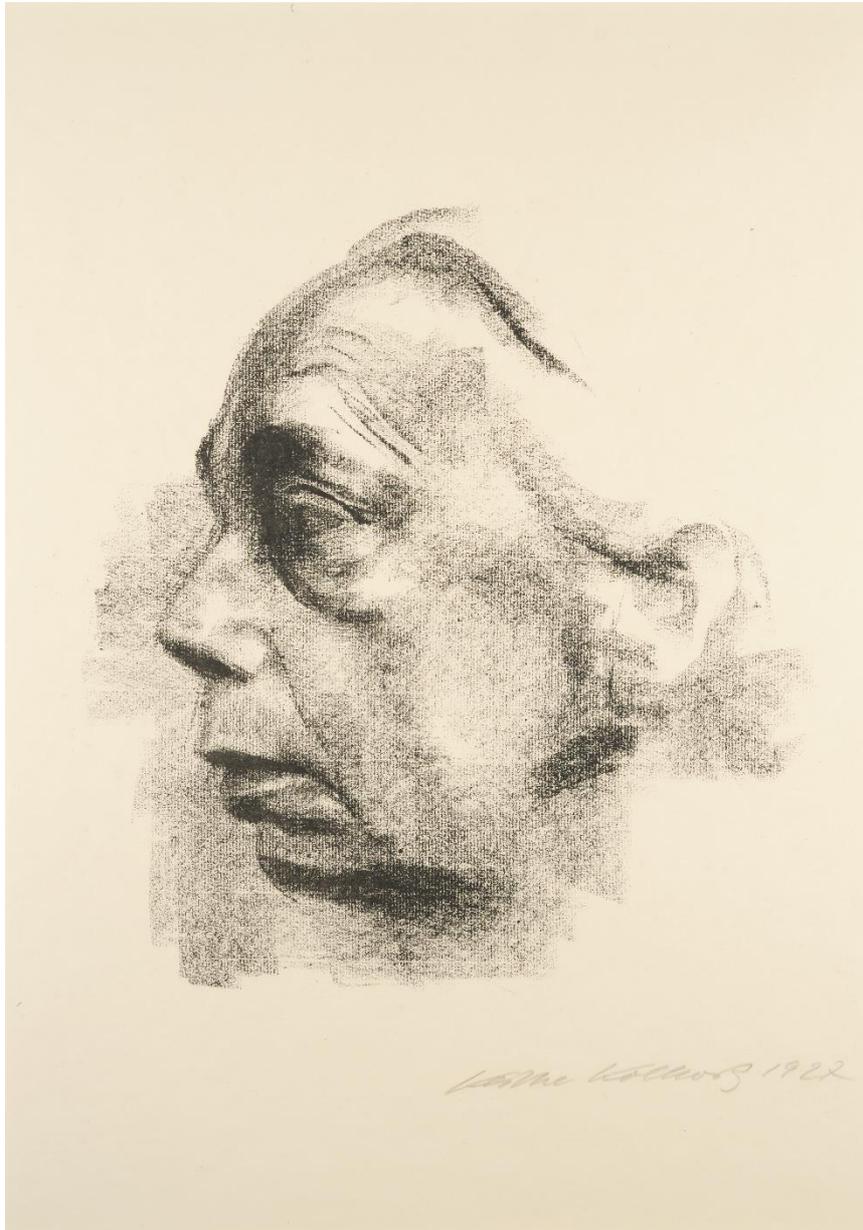


Self-Portrait in Profile: The Artist's Process



Self-Portrait in Profile, Käthe Kollwitz, 1927, lithograph on Japanese paper,
585 x 450 mm.

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to our series of online Tuesday Talks presented by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, a Grade I listed gallery at the University of Birmingham.

My name is Flora Kay, Learning & Engagement Manager here at the Barber and my usual role includes programming events and workshops so that our different audiences can access and enjoy our collection.

Having been away from the galleries for six months we are delighted to open our doors safely to the public once again. Many of us are taking time to reflect on some of our favourite artworks and what we have missed about being in our gallery space.

I've long had a passion for printmaking and I am drawn to exploring the Barber's Works on Paper Collection that we are so fortunate to house in our Prints and Drawings Study Room. You can enjoy curated displays of this collection in our two print bays, situated in the main galleries while also accessing images of them online, through our [website](#). It consists of prints, drawings, watercolours, books and miniatures, comprising more than eight hundred works that cover six centuries.

I'm going to be considering the life and work of one artist, Käthe Kollwitz, and exploring one work on paper, *Self-Portrait in Profile*, 1927. Kollwitz may be familiar to you but, if not, she offers a wealth of artwork for you to discover. This print was added to the Barber's collection in 2001 and I'll be focussing on this image and the artist's process.

Kollwitz was a German artist who worked with a wide range of media including painting, printmaking (etching, lithography and woodcuts) and sculpture. Born Käthe Schmidt in 1867, Kollwitz grew up in the largest city in the province of East Prussia, Königsberg. Annexed by the Soviet Union in 1945 and renamed Kaliningrad it is now in a Russian enclave sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania.

Kollwitz created more than one hundred self-portraits, spanning her whole career as an artist. Her identity and humanistic values are shown throughout her graphic art, weaving in her experience as a woman, the wife of a doctor and as a mother.

She first studied at the Munich School for Women Artists, in 1888 where she realised her strengths as an artist. She became engaged to Karl Kollwitz, a medical student, at just the age of seventeen, postponing her eventual marriage until after her studies in 1891. This paralleled with being able to rent her first studio in Königsberg where she depicted the harsh labours of the working class in a city that was undergoing rapid industrialisation after much bombing and hardship.

Her husband's profession allowed her access to the realities of the human condition and up close observations of the human form. I feel this is shown within the figures of her compositions. She skilfully draws hands, feet and faces which effortlessly portray the narratives of the scene. Not quite the life drawing class that students would experience today.

Loss and grief would not be unknown to Kollwitz and her own community and she would have witnessed many hardships, being the wife of a doctor, living and working amongst the working classes. The grieving mother was a reoccurring figure in her work and she heartbreakingly lost her own son, Peter, who fell on the battlefield at the beginning of the First World War in 1914.

Social and personal observations such as these are continually explored through her work. Her most famous print cycles are *The Weavers (1892-96)*, *The Peasant War (1902 – 1908)*, *War (1922-23)* and *Death Cycle (1930s)*. I feel just even the subject matter of these show the weight of her own life experience and how she would have lived through an unthinkably troubling period coving Germany's history.

Despite the turbulence of the war years and the unstable Weimar Republic that followed in Germany, she eventually became the first female member, and then, in 1919, the first female professor of the Preussische Akademie der Kunst (Prussian Academy of Arts), in Berlin at the age of 52.

Kollwitz died aged 77 just 16 days before the end of the Second World War. She carved out her identity as an artist through hard, wearing experiences and left an artistic legacy of over 275 prints for us to reflect on today.

I first viewed *Self-Portrait in Profile*, 1927, in 2017. At the time the Barber was exhibiting the temporary print bay display, *German Graphic Art 1910-1923*. This was organised to complement *Portrait of the Artist: Käthe Kollwitz* an exhibition held at Birmingham's Ikon Gallery where I was working at the time.

This print measures 585 x 450mm, slightly larger than an A3 piece of paper. If you have access to our website, why not take a look yourself? What are your first impressions on being introduced to Kollwitz? What do you notice about how this image was made? We see Kollwitz, in profile, with her eyes looking straight ahead, beyond the left edge of the paper. Her mark-making is sensitive and soft, allowing the artist to portray her own signs of aging. In this image Kollwitz would have been 60 years old. She presents her face honestly to the viewer by bringing it to the forefront of the picture plane. She achieves this by using a shaded background that creates tonal layers, lifting her face from the page. This allows us, the viewer to inspect her lined forehead and the darkest tones under her eyes, into the hollow of her eye socket.

On first glance this may look like just quick, crayon drawing but it is in fact a crayon lithograph. There are four major types of print techniques, in historical order being Relief, Intaglio, Lithography and Serigraphy. They vary in the equipment, time and skill needed.

Kollwitz is known to have practiced and experimented with Relief, Intaglio and Lithography.

Lithography is long and labour intensive, needing many stages of treatment. [Leicester Print Workshop](#), a Midlands-based print room, has some fantastic resources on its website including a step-by-step video of the whole process. You can find a link in this talk's transcript. You need a flat surface, usually a large stone, upon which to draw your image. The drawing material, described as 'the ink', needs to contain grease to absorb

into the stone's surface. These materials are usually lithographic crayons and it's a process that takes advantage of physical qualities of grease and water repelling each other. It is incredibly time-consuming and because of this, personally I think really rewarding for an artist to go through. If we think of creating a self-portrait through lithography, this long process of self-appraisal would allow an artist to spend time doing the 'drawing' and enjoying the tactility and hands on experience that printmaking allows. I think there is a real intimacy in preparing all of these elements for a print to be produced.

Let's think of why an artist would choose to make a print rather a drawing. Printmaking allows an image to be produced multiple times, thereby, in theory, allowing the artist to reach a much wider audience. If they sell these editions, there is the added opportunity for financial success. The image can be reviewed and experimented with, allowing the artist to have a continual relationship with the same work. For example, Kollwitz returned to the print *Frau mit totem Kind (Woman with Dead Child)*, 1903, of which there are ten variations.

The differences in them show her interest in colour, texture and the wish to experiment with the making process.

So why did Kollwitz choose this method of printmaking? Perhaps it's that lithography allows free movement of mark making contradicting the laborious process. Once the lithographic stone is prepared an artist can 'draw' at their leisure and create their image in their own style. By using materials such as crayons and inks, there is a chance to experiment with small details and subtle tones which lends itself to more figurative representation due to the fine detail it allows. Many drawing techniques that you may do in preparatory sketches can be translated easily onto the stone allowing images to have a nice relationships from sketch to print. The ease of creating tone, depth and line are as easily achieved as you would be able to with a pad of paper. From this, many see lithography as the print-making technique which most closely connects the artist's hand with final printed art work.

If we think back to Kollwitz's experiences of drawing from life, her subjects of the working class, she would have been able to quickly make likenesses of those around her. She wouldn't have needed more than paper and pencils to do this before going back to her studio to complete the work and move on to create the lithographs.

A good example of this in *Self-Portrait in Profile* is the hair line. Unfinished, it is created by a few quick, sweeping lines of her hand and therefore Kollwitz's face is suspended in the centre of the page. The face fades into the right edge with only a suggestion of an ear. Some shading looks as though it was done with the side of a crayon from the way we can see horizontal planes. This print is described as a crayon lithograph transferred from a drawing, so perhaps the original was quickly done as just a preparatory study on a whim, and only later chosen to be immortalised into a more formal print run. As the lithographic process is so laborious, Kollwitz would have spent a lot of time contemplating her own face. Here, as a 60-year-old, she has already drawn her changing state over and over. I wonder if everyone would feel comfortable with drawing themselves over such a long period?

If you were to approach making a self-portrait how would you do it? Would you brave the mirror and really explore your self-image?

For myself, experiencing her work brings a sense of inspiration, not just for the grit of real life she portrays, but for her commitment to the printmaking process. I feel there are multiple points of interest and given that she illustrated historic societal events, I do wonder how she may have portrayed our current universal experiences affecting us politically, environmentally and personally.

Thank you very much for listening to this Tuesday Talk. I hope you have a chance to explore others in the series alongside visiting our collection in person if you are able.