Memorial Sheet for Karl Liebknecht

Kathe Kollwitz. 1919-21920 C.E. Woodcut

- Article at Khan Academy
- In the political turmoil after the First World War, many artists turned to making prints instead of paintings. The ability to produce multiple copies of the same image made printmaking an ideal medium for spreading political statements

- Context:
  - Artist rarely depicted known people – but on a rare occasion would to promote a cause
  - This work, *In Memoriam Karl Liebknecht* was created in 1920 in response to the assassination of Communist leader Karl Liebknecht during an uprising of 1919
  - a period of social and political upheaval
  - she was not particularly sympathetic to his cause – but admired his charisma and was asked by the family to memorialize him, she agreed
  - other artists also memorialized him (and the other ‘martyr’)

- Artistic choices (form):
  - *Memorial Sheet of Karl Liebknecht* is in the style of a lamentation, a traditional motif in Christian art depicting the followers of Christ mourning over his dead body, casting Liebknecht as the Christ figure
  - The iconography would have been easily recognizable by the masses who were the artist’s intended audience

  - The composition divides the sheet into three horizontal sections.
    - The top section is densely packed with figures. Their faces are well modeled and have interesting depth in themselves, but the sense of space is very compressed – the heads push to the foreground and are packed into every available corner of space. It gives the impression of multitudes coming to pay their respects, without compromising the individuality of the subjects.
    - The middle strata contains comparatively fewer details, further emphasizing the crowding at the top of the printing plate. This section draws attention to the specific action of the bending mourner. His hand on Liebknecht’s chest connects this section to the the bottommost level of the composition, the body of the martyred revolutionary.
    - Mourning woman holding a child (detail), Käthe Kollwitz, Memorial Sheet of Karl Liebknecht (Gedenkblatt für Karl Liebknecht), 1919-1920, Woodcut heightened with white and black ink, 37.1 × 51.9 cm (Art Institute of Chicago)Above the bending mourner, a woman holds her baby up to see over the heads of those in front of them. Women and children were a central concern of Kollwitz’s work, making her a unique voice in a creative environment dominated by young men (in fact, Kollwitz was the first woman to be admitted into the Prussian Academy).
Medium: Woodblock printing is a technique in which a design is carved into a slab of wood which is then covered with ink and printed onto paper. Ink coats the original surface of the wood block, which prints as black, while the cut away areas stay the color of the paper. This is different from printmaking methods such as engraving in which the ink is caught in the recesses carved into the metal plate by the stylus and therefore the lines print black and the untouched areas of the plate come out white in the print.

Kollwitz’s career overlapped with the German Expressionists but she was not an Expressionist herself and was about a generation older than most of them. Her use of such a trendy technique was uncharacteristic, and in fact, she only worked in woodblocks for a few years after the First World War. Kollwitz created some of her most powerful and affecting work in this style, including the War print cycle of 1924. She embraced the raw effect of woodblock printing to create pieces works that have cast off the subtlety and finesse of her earlier work in etching and lithography. Kollwitz’ felt that her protest against the horrors of war was best communicated in the rough edges and stark black and white that woodblock prints afforded.