

## Three Expressionists



**Edvard Munch** (1863 – 1944)

*"No longer shall I paint interiors with men reading and women knitting.  
I will paint living people who breathe and feel and suffer and love."*

**Edvard Munch** was born in a farmhouse in the village of Ådalsbruk in Løten, Norway, to Laura Catherine Bjølstad and Christian Munch, the son of a priest. Christian was a doctor and medical officer who married Laura, a woman half his age, in 1861. Edvard had an elder sister, Johanne Sophie, and three younger siblings: Peter Andreas, Laura Catherine, and Inger Marie. Laura was artistically talented and may have encouraged Edvard and Sophie.

His childhood was overshadowed by illness and bereavement; his mother, died young, when Munch was 5 year old; and he dreaded inheriting a mental condition that ran in the family (his younger sister, Laura, was diagnosed with mental illness at an early age.) Of the five siblings, only his brother Andreas married, but he died a few months after the wedding. Munch would later write, "I inherited two of mankind's most frightful enemies—the heritage of consumption and insanity."

The self-portrait, painted when he was nineteen, betrays an academic training and technique, but also we can see it as a powerful psychological study. The signs of his emotional inner life are already present.

The oppressive religious milieu from his father, Edvard's poor health, and vivid ghost stories helped inspire his macabre visions and nightmares; from an early age he felt that death was constantly advancing on him.

He studied at the Royal School of Art and Design in Kristiania (today Oslo). He began to live a bohemian life under the influence of the nihilist Hans Jæger, who urged him to paint his own emotional and psychological state ('soul painting').

The subject of *The Sick Child* (1885-86) is the death of his sister Sophie, which he re-worked in many future variations. He wrote that this was his first "soul painting", his first break from Impressionism. The painting received a negative response from critics and from his family, and caused another "violent outburst of moral indignation" from the community.



In 1889 he went to Paris, arriving during the festivities of the Universal Exhibition. There he encountered the work of Gauguin, van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, and was influenced by their example to paint with more colour.

In December 1889 his father died, leaving Munch's family destitute. The death of his father depressed him and he was plagued by suicidal thoughts: "I live with the dead—my mother, my sister, my grandfather, my father...Kill yourself and then it's over. Why live?"

He painted the first version of *Evening. Melancholy* in 1891, representing the beach at Aasgårdstrand, a small resort south of Oslo where Munch spent his summers from 1889. It is considered as the first Symbolist painting by a Norwegian artist, in which he formulated his characteristic, and original, Synthetist aesthetic, in which colour becomes the symbolic element.

It was exhibited 1891, at the Autumn Exhibition in Oslo. In 1892, [Adelsteen Normann](#), on behalf of the Union of Berlin Artists, invited Munch to exhibit at its November exhibition, the society's first one-man exhibition. However, his paintings evoked bitter controversy (dubbed "The Munch Affair"), and after one week the exhibition closed. Munch was pleased with the "great commotion", and wrote in a letter: "Never have I had such an amusing time—it's incredible that something as innocent as painting should have created such a stir."



This version of *Evening. Melancholy*, from 1894 is identical in composition but less sketchy and more filled out with colour.

The inspiration for the painting was an unhappy romantic affair that Munch's friend, Jappe Nilssen, was involved in. In Munch's painting the figure of the melancholy man is at the right, and his mood is represented by the undulating shoreline and skylines that extend toward the left. Critics suggest that there are also erotic allusions, perhaps in the presence of the Moon reflected on the water.

In 1892 he went to [Berlin](#), where he became involved in an international circle of writers, artists and critics, including the Swedish dramatist and leading intellectual August Strindberg whom he painted in 1892. He also met Danish writer and painter Holger Drachmann, who was 17 years Munch's senior and a drinking companion. In 1894 Drachmann wrote of Munch: "He struggles hard. Good luck with your struggles, lonely Norwegian."

During his four years in Berlin, Munch sketched out most of the ideas that would comprise his major work, *The Frieze of Life*, first designed for book illustration but later expressed in paintings depicting a series of deeply-felt themes such as [love](#), [anxiety](#), jealousy and [betrayal](#), steeped in atmosphere. He sold little, but made some income from charging entrance fees to view his controversial paintings. Already, Munch was showing a reluctance to part with his paintings, which he termed his "children".

In *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (1892) the 'cropping' techniques which he saw in the paintings of Degas, in Japanese prints, and familiar in photography, provide Munch with a method of intimating threat and unease, as the vacant, pitiless gazes of the bourgeois strollers bear down on the viewer. The mood of nocturnal catalepsy comes from Munch's experience as he waited for a mistress to meet him. As he wrote in his diary in the third person: "She greeted him with a soft smile and walked on ... Everything became so empty and he felt so alone ... People who passed by looked so strange and awkward and he felt as if they looked at him, stared at him, all these faces pale in the evening light."



Compared with *The Scream*, however, this work is still more symbolist than expressionist. The raw power of the later work is here hidden under the great beauty of the blue night sky and the glowing lamps, a velvet surface disguising the terror. The single figure moving against the flow and walking in the middle of the street, evokes Munch's own situation as a 'bohemian' and radical artist, hounded by the middle-class authorities in the stifling parochialism of Christiania, in contrast with the larger world of Berlin, Paris and beyond for which he was yearning. Munch's mastery of symbolism, however, ensures that these personal interpretations do not intrude on the vision of universal anguish and every individual's fear of the mindless crowd.



This night landscape, *Starry Night* (1893), represents the coastline at Åsgård-strand. In this painting Munch shows the view from the hotel window, where he fell in love for the first time.

Painted as an almost abstract arrangement of a few shapes. The deep grey blues and the undulating line of the shore, melding into the strange hummock, which may be a hill or the foliage of a tree, evokes a sense of profound sadness. A few stars are reflected in the flat calm of the sea. The horizontal line of the horizon is countered by a silvery, vertical line, with a dot above, running through the humped mass on the right. This line is difficult to interpret: is it a star with its light casting down through the branches; or a vertical gap in the tree cover; perhaps a lamp on the distant hillside illuminating a path? Whatever: its striking impression is of an essential construct in the composition. The motif of a humped and ominous shape recurs often in Munch's work, in the presence of a hill or a clump of trees.

Munch came under the malevolent, anti-establishment spell of Hans Jaeger, the local nihilist who lived by the code "a passion to destroy is also a creative passion" and who advocated suicide as the ultimate way to freedom.

He said "My ideas developed under the influence of the bohemians or rather under Hans Jæger. Many people have mistakenly claimed that my ideas were formed under the influence of Strindberg and the Germans... but that is wrong. They had already been formed by then."



His *Portrait of Hans Jaeger* (1889) shows his friend slouched on a settee staring directly out at us with piercing blue eyes from under the low brim of his hat, his collar turned up. It is brightly lit from the left throwing his face half into shadow. The blue of his suit blends into the blue fabric of the settee, giving him the appearance of a predatory beast hiding his presence, but watchful, awaiting his opportunity to lunge on his prey. The sharp perspective line of the table thrusts him back into the picture space, while at the same time, points like an arrow to the half hidden face.



*The Scream* (1893) was conceived in Kristiania. In his diary in an entry headed "Nice 22 January 1892", Munch wrote:

"One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord – the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The colour shrieked. This became *The Scream*."

He later described his inspiration for the image:

"I was walking along the road with two friends – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red – I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence – there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature."

The painting's agonized face is widely identified with the *angst* of the modern person. Between 1893 and 1910, he made two painted versions and two in pastels, as well as a number of prints.

In 1978, the Munch scholar Robert Rosenblum suggested that the strange, skeletal creature in the foreground of the painting was inspired by a Peruvian *Mummie di cuzco*, which Munch could have seen at the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris.

This mummy, which was buried in a foetal position with its hands alongside its face, also stood as a model for figures in more than twenty of Gauguin's paintings; notably the old woman at the left in his painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*.

Norwegian angst, like its German counterpart, had become the key term not only for Munch's central pictorial content but for the entire tradition that is traced to Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's philosophies, Strindberg's and Ibsen's plays, and the North European modern aesthetic contribution in general.

Christian, his father, had reprimanded his children by telling them that their mother was looking down from heaven and grieving over their misbehaviour. Munch wrote, "My father was temperamentally nervous and obsessively religious—to the point of psychoneurosis. From him I inherited the seeds of madness. The angels of fear, sorrow, and death stood by my side since the day I was born."



*Anxiety* (1894) repeats the vision of an anxious humanity moving relentlessly forward as if driven by ominous elemental forces, as expressed in *Evening on Karl Johan Street* and the view of Oslo Fjord, represented in *The Scream*. Both images recur in other works of the same period. The same jetty that accommodated a single alienated personage in *The Scream* appears again, as do the lake in the distance, the two boats, the church, and other structures that line the shore just a little less dimly than before. These are all quoted from the earlier work, as are the gloomy hues and the intense swirls of concentrically enlarging lines that define and ultimately embrace land, sea, and sky.

If, however, *The Scream* deals with the horror experienced in total isolation by a single being, *Anxiety* plays upon collective despair: the sentiment of angst being even more sustained, as its desperation is here borne by a whole group rather than by an isolated individual.

From this time he began to group his paintings together into a cycle which he called the *Frieze of Life*

—A *Poem about Life*, including motifs such as *The Storm* and *Moonlight*, later enlarged to include *Anxiety*, *Ashes*, *Madonna* and *Women in Three Stages* (from innocence to old age). Set again on the beach at Aasgårdstrand, with the swirling line of the shore unifying the different elements *Three Stages of Woman* or *Sphinx* (1894) is the point of origin for *The Dance of Life*, amongst the many works depicting the confrontation of Man and Woman, as in *The Three Ages of Woman* by Gustave Klimt it depicts, in symbolic form, the stages of life of womanhood.

On the left, gazing out to sea and out of the picture, is a young woman dressed in virginal white. The flow of her hair carries over to the more mature nude figure with red hair, occupying the central space and voluptuously displaying her body with raised arms. Beside and slightly behind her a slim woman dressed demurely in deep blue-black, hovers enigmatically gazing out at the viewer. Does she represent the third stage of life; or, scarcely older than the figure on the left, her repressed or judgemental other self? To the far right is a black robed figure in profile; screened off from the rest of the scene by the imprisoning line of a tree, and almost engulfed by the dark area of greensward, apart from the bowed head with an enigmatic, sad expression. Is this a male or female figure? Is it a representation of Man, as has been suggested, or Death awaiting the woman to cross the barrier? In front of this figure is a plant with red flowers, a symbol of jealousy.



*Madonna* (1894) is a highly unusual representation of the Virgin Mary. One of several versions of a composition showing a bare-breasted half-length female figure created between 1892 and 1895. Whether the painting is specifically intended as a representation of Mary is disputed. Munch is not famous for religious artwork and was not known as a Christian. The affinity to Mary might as well be intended nevertheless, as an emphasis on the beauty and perfection of his friend Dagny Juel-Przybyszewska, the model for the work, and an expression of his worship of her as an ideal of womanhood.

Munch used more than one title, including both *Loving Woman* and *Madonna*. Interpretations vary from Austrian Critic Werner Hofmann's suggestion that the painting is a "strange devotional picture glorifying decadent love. The cult of the strong woman who reduces man to subjection gives the figure of woman monumental proportions, but it also makes a demon of her," to Robert Melville who states that the image portrays "ecstasy and pain in the act of love" and feminist critic Carol Duncan who is inclined to interpret the figure as a *femme fatale*.

The usual golden halo of Mary has been replaced with a red halo symbolizing the love and pain duality. The viewer's viewpoint is said to be that of the man who is making love with her. Even in this unusual pose, she embodies some of the key elements of canonical representations of the Virgin: she has a quietness and a calm confidence about her. Her eyes are closed, expressing modesty, but she is simultaneously lit from above; her body is seen, in fact, twisting away from the light so as to catch less of it, even while she faces it with her eyes.

The lithographic print of the composition (1895-1902) is distinguished by a decorative border depicting wriggling sperm, with a fetus-like figure in its bottom left corner. The 1893 version of the painting had a frame with similar decoration, but it was later removed and lost. The print also exists in a number of different versions.

Other critics have also seen the portrayal of the woman as implicitly paradoxical. According to author Peter Day, it is a potentially vampiric figure. Day identifies a "dichotomy" between the haunting image of a monstrous mother and of female subjectivity and self-sufficiency:

"This inverted portrayal of the virgin mother is a study of sensuality shot through with imagery of death and corruption. Male desire is literally transfigured into the undulating sperm framing the canvas, and the euphoric, ecstatic sexuality of the naked woman is described in serpentine brushstrokes. Her closed eyes, like those of Beata Beatrix, distance and separate the subject of the painting from the spectator; this woman is inviolate, revelling in her closed-off auto-erotic sensuality. The homunculus, or foetus in the left-hand corner shrinks into itself in the face of such supreme female self-containment and plenitude."



**Puberty**, (1894–95) depicts a young, teenage girl, anxiously seated precariously on the side of a bed. The light enters from the left, casting a dark, menacing shadow on the wall behind the girl. The motif is often regarded as a symbol of anxiety and fear, a young girl's awakening sexuality and the changes a young person experiences, physically and psychologically, on the path towards adulthood.

Munch often uses shadows and rings of colour around his figures to emphasize an aura of fear, menace, anxiety, or sexual intensity. These paintings have been interpreted as reflections of the artist's sexual anxieties, though it could also be argued that they represent his turbulent relationship with love itself and his general pessimism regarding human existence.

**Moonlight**, of 1893, is divided vertically and horizontally into a cruciform structure with all elements flat on to the picture plane.

Depicted is a woman entirely swathed in a black or dark brown dress, so that only the ghostly image of her white face, is present.

The soft outlines put her 'out of focus' face hangs like a pallid moon, isolated in the gloom of a starless sky. The stark white paling fence and window frame repeating the colourless visage. In dramatic contrast her shadow is a clearly delineated silhouette thrown up on the boarded wall of the house. It's outline doesn't follow the outline of the woman so that we are forced in our interpretation of the painting to disconnect it from the woman, turning it into a looming phantasmal presence, threatening her, and by association, us.



To relieve the unrelenting gloom and stark contrasts two white and one red spindly roses rise from the black earth beneath the window; and what may be a floral form appears to the left of the fence.



**Love and Pain (Vampire)** (1895) depicts a man and a woman with long flame-red hair embracing, with the woman appearing to be either kissing or biting the man on his neck. Munch painted six different versions of the same subject between 1893 and 1895.

Called *Love and Pain* by Munch, others have seen in it "a man locked in a vampire's tortured embrace – her molten-red hair running along his soft bare skin," Munch himself always claimed it showed nothing more than "just a woman kissing a man on the neck". It was called vampire by his friend the Polish poet and critic, the anarchist Stanislaw Przybyszewski, a central figure in Berlin's artist circles.



The colours red and white bore psychological significance for Munch. As can be seen in the painting **Red and White** (1899-1900): one woman dressed in virginal white gazes out to sea, while the other in sensuous red, the colour of sensual passion and temptation—of the erotic, immodesty, of heat and provocation, of blood and the flames of hell.



**Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm** is one of the first lithographs that Munch (1863-1944) made in Berlin in 1895, when he was just thirty-one years old, but represent himself as a spectral figure, with bones at the bottom of the picture serving as a *memento mori*, or reminder of death. They are balanced by the artist's name and the date at the top of the image; together these details turn it into a kind of tombstone, or sepulchral tablet. 'I was born dying', Munch claimed as an old man. 'Sickness, insanity and death were the dark angels standing guard at my cradle and they have followed me throughout my life'. The darkness of the background allows the bones to appear to be those of the subject's arm, leaning on the picture's frame. The severed, floating head was a familiar motif in art around the turn of the twentieth century, signifying a split between the physical and spiritual worlds.

The basic design is drawn in lithographic chalk, over which a thick ink wash has been brushed to create a solid black. In this it gives an immediate impression of a woodcut more than a lithograph.

Some years later, probably after 1900, when reprinting this lithograph, Munch blacked out the arm and his name. **Separation**, (1896) depicts the same virginal pale, young woman gazing out to sea as in *Sphinx*, her hair flowing into the distance, in a flowing line reminiscent of the sky in *The Scream*, as if appealing in a great cry to the hills. Her dress and feet blend with the strand. The black clad male figure is turned away in sorrow, while the leafy clumps hang like black clouds above his head.



Munch hated to part with his paintings because he thought of his work as a single body of expression. So to capitalize on his production and make some income, he turned to graphic arts to reproduce many of his paintings, including those in this series. Many of his sketches and paintings, such as *Madonna*, *Hands* and *Puberty*, were done in several versions, and also transcribed as wood-block prints and lithographs.



He admitted to the personal goals of his work but he also offered his art to a wider purpose, "My art is really a voluntary confession and an attempt to explain to myself my relationship with life—it is, therefore, actually a sort of egoism, but I am constantly hoping that through this I can help others achieve clarity."

**The Kiss** (1897) is part of Munch's *Frieze of Life*, which depicts the stages of a relationship between men and women; and which Munch called "the battle between men and women that is called love". It is a realization of a motif with which he had experimented since 1888/89: a couple kissing, their faces fusing as one in a symbolic representation of their unity. It depicts a couple surrounded by darkness, with only a sliver of daylight showing through a window which is mostly covered by a curtain. They hold an embrace as they seemingly merge into one, their faces a single, featureless shape.

In the numerous realizations of this motif there is a contrast between the world inside and outside of the room in which the couple is situated. The outside world appears vibrant and lively, whereas the interior of the room is timeless, with the couple frozen in their embrace. In this motif, the couple's abstract form, in which the faces of the two appear to be merged as one, indicates their sense of belongingness and togetherness. Later versions of the motif not only merged their faces, but also their bodies.

Art historian Reinhold Heller considers the depiction of the lovers to represent their unity while at the same time representing a threatening "loss of individuality, a loss of one's own existence and identity" which hints at death.

In this version, **Kiss IV** (1902), executed as a woodcut, note that he has exploited the heavy grain of the wood-block to print an atmospheric background, as though the lovers are engulfed by a waterfall. The brown background would be printed from a separate, uncut block. These techniques would later be exploited by the German Expressionist artists of Die Brücke.



In 1899, Munch began an intimate relationship with Tulla Larsen, a "liberated" upper-class woman. They went together to Italy. On their return, Munch began a fruitful period of painting. Tulla Larsen wished to marry but Munch was hesitant, fearful that his poor health and his drinking made it unwise; as he wrote in the third person in his diary: "Ever since he was a child he had hated marriage. His sick and nervous home had given him the feeling that he had no right to get married." Fleeing from her (and her considerable fortune) in 1900 he moved to Berlin.

The woman in **The Dance of Life** (1899–1900) is said to be Tulla at different stages of the progression of life through love. It was the final painting in "The Frieze of Life" series.

The depth of the picture space suggests a time scale: a journey from the distant past in the far background up to the present in the foreground, where the participants are pressed up close to the picture plane. Life's dance is initiated by the sun (or moon?) hovering over a column of light reflecting in the sea, suggesting a phallic looking primitive idol: a symbol of fertility and the mystical spirit of life.

A solitary girl stands on the shoreline waiting for her partner. Then, to the right, a group of men on the greensward are in contention for her favour, giving rise to the possibility and the birth of jealousy. A little closer she dances with a chosen partner: the stage of courtship. Closer to decorous courtship has transformed into lust; she recoils as her leering partner thrusts himself forward as if to ravish her. His face is a grossly expressed caricature of Munch's friend, the playwright Gunnar Heiberg, who had introduced him to Tulla, and who he believed had previously had a relationship with her, giving rise to feelings of jealousy. The girl still in white now has darkened and reddened hair.

In the foreground the final stage of the Dance is represented, where it turns from a dance of life into a dance of death. The red dress engulfs like a wave the man's leg; continuing as a line around his legs and back, encasing him in a predatory contour and blending them together into a single unit. They dance facing one another but without seeing, each in their own spiritually remote region, silent and unsmiling, gliding somnambulistically through the motions of the dance trapped in a fateful union. Isolated, by their profile positioning, also from the other protagonists, and as if their creative lives are over. Framing the scene, to left and right, are the two aspects of Tulla; the one in her virginal, innocent white floral patterned dress looking hopefully forward to marriage, her gaze passing by the saddening chimera in the centre. On the right, in black the scales have fallen from her eyes as she looks disconsolately, and with a much aged face and haggard expression, at the truth: that the consequences of love are fatal.

The colours symbolically express different feelings: red for love, passion and pain; white for youth, innocence and joy; and black for loneliness, sorrow and death.

In 1902, he displayed his works thematically at the hall of the Berlin Secession, producing "a symphonic effect—it made a great stir—a lot of antagonism—and a lot of approval." The Berlin critics were beginning to appreciate Munch's work even though the public still found his work alien and strange.

The positive press coverage gained Munch the attention of some influential patrons and he described the turn of events in his diary, "After 20 years of struggle and misery forces of good finally come to my aid in Germany—and a bright door opens up for me."

Possibly following the greater appreciation of his work *Woman in a Red Dress* (1902-03) shows a lightening in his mood, in the subject matter, if not in his expression. The landscape is evoked with his customary agitated, twisting forms; the rushing curve of the roadway is the colour of flesh and the houses seem about to slide down the sloping land.



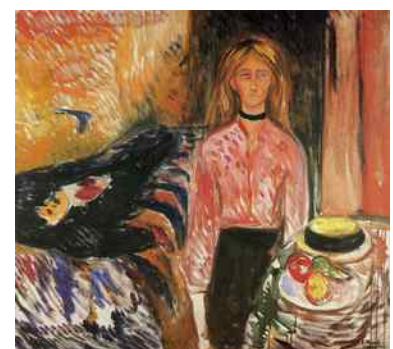
Munch painted as many as eighteen versions of *The Bridge*. Some with three or four young girls, others with older women. He portrayed women either as frail, innocent sufferers or as the cause of great longing, jealousy and despair.

In spite of the summer season, the colourful dresses and the bright yellow straw hat, there is a sense of fraught alienation pervading *Four Girls on the Bridge* (1905). The figures appear vulnerable and with featureless or hidden faces, over which loom the threatening shapes of heavy trees and brooding houses. Pink and raw, like a flayed arm, the jetty slants up to the road and relentlessly into the distance. The clump of dark green trees rear ominously over the houses, like a menacing spectre and undisclosed malevolent threat to the virginal young girls, who seem about to be drawn into the inky black, inspissated reflection in the water.

Despite its poetic strain, *Four Girls on the Bridge* is a literal translation of a scene at Aasgårdstrand. Now, a century after its original conception, the actual scene is essentially unchanged: the elongated pier continued by an

upward sloping road, the curvature of the sandy shore-line interspersed with patches of green, and the old house itself surrounded in summer by foliage and overshadowed by the often portrayed three linden trees, that have grown together as if to share a common crown. Framed by a white wooden fence, all these features are a literal description of the place, not poetic fancy.

However, despite this positive change, Munch's self-destructive and erratic behaviour led him first to a violent quarrel with Tulla Larsen (who had returned for a brief reconciliation) and another artist at his summer house at Aasgårdstrand in 1902. A revolver had gone off, accidentally shooting him in the right hand, injuring two of his fingers. Munch later sawed a self-portrait depicting himself and Larsen in half as a consequence of the shooting and subsequent events. She finally left him and married a younger colleague of Munch. Munch took this as a betrayal, and he dwelled on the humiliation for some time to come, channeling some of the bitterness into new paintings. His paintings *Still Life (The Murderess)* (1906) and *The Death of Marat I* clearly reference the shooting incident and the emotional after-effects.



In 1903–04, he exhibited in Paris. Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck – who would come to be known as *les Fauves* (the Wild Beasts), famous for their boldly false colours – probably saw his works and might have found inspiration in them. He was invited to contribute to their first exhibition as a group in 1906.



**The Death of Marat I** (1907) repeats the format of *The Murderess*, but now both of the figures are nude. Again he made a number of versions of this painting. The title refers to Charlotte Corday's murder of the revolutionary Jean Paul Marat in 1793 when he was lying in the bath, and may be suggested by the famous painting of the same name by Jacques-Louis David, and a motif treated by many artists. Marat was often presented as a hero, whilst Corday was regarded as a traitor. Munch depicts himself naked on the bed with a bloody hand. The naked woman has Tulla Larsen's facial features as she stands upright in front of the bed.

However, Munch is not concerned with the historic background or the details of the crime. The crucial aspect appears to have been that of a woman murdering a man – an analogy to Munch's perception of woman's power over man. He laid the blame on Tulla for the shooting incident, which culminated in the final break in their relations. The episode developed into a trauma which was to haunt Munch for many years.

In the series *The Death of Marat* (1906-07) Munch continued to visually process the nervous tensions that eventually led to his breakdown. He was still obsessed with his relationship to Tulla Larsen and the gunshot incident that ended it, when he shot himself in the finger. But the event itself is greatly exaggerated in his rendering of a murder drama where he and Tulla Larsen are cast as the main characters.

In *Jealousy* (1907), another frequent theme in Munch's oeuvre, an angst ridden face looms towards the viewer. In the background, through a doorway the object of the man's wretchedness, a man and woman embrace. At the bottom, in front, is an enigmatic form; possibly the curved edge of a table intervening between the haunted face and viewer. A sofa is pushed against the wall and the frenzied diagonals of the green striped wallpaper, contributes to the oppressive claustrophobic atmosphere and effect of anxiety.



In the autumn of 1908, Munch's anxiety, compounded by excessive drinking and brawling, had become acute. As he later wrote, "My condition was verging on madness—it was touch and go." Subject to hallucinations and feelings of persecution, he entered a clinic for treatment for eight months. Therapy included diet and "electrification"—a treatment at the time fashionable for nervous conditions.



Munch's stay in hospital stabilized his personality, and after returning to Norway in 1909, his work became more colourful and less pessimistic. Further brightening his mood, the general public of Kristiania finally warmed to his work, and museums began to purchase his paintings. He was made a Knight of the Royal Order of St. Olav "for services in art". His first American exhibit was in 1912 in New York.

In another version of *The Murderess* (1907), and a number of other paintings, such as *Taken by Surprise*, *Desire*, a second version of *Jealousy*, and a brothel scene titled *To the Sweet Maiden*, he uses the same setting, which may have been a dining room in his house. Here, in this domestic setting, a corpse of a man lies on the *chaise longue*, with a streak of blood running from his limp, roughly sketched in hand, suggesting that the life is drained out of it. The dining table is set with a meal, and the slim woman, faceless apart from her staring eyes, bears a resemblance to the somnambulist Tulla figure in

*The Dance of Life*. The purple door and, again, the roughly brushed green diagonals, representing the patterned wallpaper, contribute to the feeling of oppression and imminent menace.

**Weeping Nude** (1913–14) is painted in thin washes of colour. It has the appearance of a watercolour, rather than an oil painting.

The young woman is hunched over, with long strands of her hair covering her face. Her hunched body echoes the dark rounded solidified form of trees or hills which recurs, and looms like a menacing threat, in many of his paintings. The black crest of her head is repeated by the 'peak' of the lurid green pillow. The strong contrast of red and green contributes to the sense of anxiety.



At over two metres square, **Workers on their Way Home**, (1913–14) is one of the largest of Munch's paintings. This conveys strongly Munch's belief in the working class as the dominant force in the society of the future. The tramp of the weary workers along the road home, from the distant vanishing point up to and beyond the picture plane.

The figures in the background are painted from a low eye level viewpoint, while as they move forward the viewpoint rises so that the foreground figures seem to be passing underneath us into the future. In contrast to the forward movement the deep perspective recedes into the past. On the left a few small figures of bourgeois appearance; walk along the pavement into the past.

The use of multiple contours, especially evident in the leading figure, further increases the impression of movement. In fact the whole picture seems dominated by a tangle of wiry lines, more like a drawing than a painting; the lower legs of the man on the left are actually transparent, allowing us to look through them at the cobblestones. Given his poor health history, during 1918 Munch felt himself lucky to have survived a bout of the Spanish flu, the worldwide pandemic of that year.

**Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu** (1919) is a meditation on this life threatening episode of his life. His body, draped in a dark dressing gown forms a dominant L shape filling the centre of the painting, poised (or trapped?) between the yellow wickerwork chair and the green oval mass of the tangled bed clothes.

*“From my own rotting body flowers shall grow and I am in them, and that is eternity .”*



**Self-Portrait. Between the Clock and the Bed**

(c.1940–43) is one of his last major works. He depicts himself as an unhappy, ageing older man. Behind him is a bright room full of light and past paintings, but he has placed his current self between a clock and a bed, symbolising the inevitable passing of time and where he will eventually lie down for the final time.

To the end of his life, Munch continued to paint unsparing self-portraits, adding to his self-searching cycle of his life and his unflinching series of takes on his emotional and physical states.

In the 1930s the Nazis labeled Munch's work "degenerate art" (along with that of Picasso, Klee, Matisse, Gauguin and many other modern artists) and removed his 82 works from German museums. Adolf Hitler announced in 1937, "For all we care, those pre-historic Stone Age culture barbarians and art-stutterers can return to the caves of their ancestors and there can apply their primitive international scratching."

In 1940, Norway was invaded and the Nazi party took over the government. Munch was 76-years old. With nearly an entire lifetime's work in his house he lived in fear of a Nazi confiscation.

Munch died in his house at Ekely near Oslo on 23 January 1944, about a month after his 80th birthday. His funeral, ironically orchestrated by the Nazis, suggested to Norwegians that he was a Nazi sympathizer, an independent artist appropriated by the regime.

## James Ensor (1860-1949)

*“The mask means to me: freshness of colour, sumptuous decoration, wild unexpected gestures, very shrill expressions, exquisite turbulence.”*

**James Ensor** was a Belgian painter and printmaker, and an important influence on expressionism and surrealism. He lived in Ostend for most of his life. But he was no provincial. From 1877 he received a classical training at the Academy in Brussels (where he managed to come bottom of almost every class)

His **Portrait with Flowered Hat** was painted first in 1883. He added the hat later in a humorous gesture. It may reference Rembrandt's Self-Portraits, where he is often shown wearing a hat, some times with a long feather. It also has the dark background of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch portraits. There is also an indication of an oval, painted frame, which may be intended to represent a mirror, or is another coded reference to Rembrandt's portraits in oval frames, or his **Self-Portrait with Two Circles**.



**Still Life with Ray** (1892), a reprise on a version of c.1880, pays homage to Chardin's *The Ray* (c.1726). Whereas the earlier version was more sombre and traditional, this one has more colour, is more visceral and unsettling. Seafood is tipped from a wicker basket, which itself hints of a dark brown menacing, faceless head with black slit eyes. There is an outlandish feel to the mask-like 'face' of the ray, like an albino frog with blank, still alive, staring eyes; and the abalone with its raw exposed interior like bloody lips, a flesh wound or a labia. The whole reeks with alien strangeness, tainted with a ghastly corporality.



Ensor was a founder member of the artistic group Les XX a group of twenty artists established in 1883 by entrepreneur Octave Maus.

Initially he painted conventional seascapes and varnish-brown interiors, but that changed when he set up a studio in the attic of his mother's souvenir shop and furnished it with props from her stock – masks, curios, shells, carnival costumes



and chinoiseries. These gewgaws and the sea-sky helped him, he said, to become “a painter in love with colour, delighted by the blinding glow of light”.

As a mark of his love for his father who was British, and who had always supported his artistic career, he kept his half British nationality until 1929, when he was awarded a Baronetcy by the King and requested naturalisation.

His mother had a souvenir shop, and he set up a studio in the attic and furnished it with props from her stock – masks, curios, shells, carnival costumes and chinoiseries. These and the sea and sky helped him, he said, to become “a painter in love with colour, delighted by the blinding glow of light.”

Attracted by the forms and bright colours of masks on sale in his mother's gift shop for Ostend's annual Carnival, and their potential for psychological impact, he created a format in which he could paint figures and faces using forms and colours with great freedom. Hence, carnivals, grotesque, masks, puppetry, skeletons, and fantastic allegories figure in many of his paintings.

In **Scandalized Mask** (1883) Ensor creates a fantastic tableaux in which a masked female figure enters a room making a threatening gesture with a long carving knife towards a man seated at a narrow dining table, who likewise has his face hidden by a mask. The room looks almost bare, even squalid, lit garishly by a single oil lamp hanging on the sickly yellow wall, and casting gloomy shadows around the scene. What is the meaning of this astonishing scene? We are not told, the artist invites us to invent our own stories.



**Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889** (1888), considered Ensor's most famous composition and a precursor to Expressionism, is a parody of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, celebrated on Palm Sunday.



The painting measures over 2.5 metres high × 4.31 metres wide (8ft 4in × 14ft 2in). It was so large that Ensor was unable to work

on the whole painting at the same time, instead nailing part to the walls and allowing the rest to drape on the ground. He used brushes, palette knives and spatulas, laying on paint thickly, mostly as pure pigments.

It depicts a crowded scene with a colourful carnival procession, ostensibly held to celebrate the arrival of the Saviour, but none of the surrounding figures pay any attention to the small figure of Christ – almost hidden at the centre, with yellow halo and red coat, riding on a donkey, with one hand raised in greeting or blessing – amid the grotesque clowns, a marching band, and other figures, many apparently wearing masks. Above is a red banner, with the words “Vive la sociale”. To the right, another banner reads “Vive Jesus Roi de Bruxelles” beside the painter's signature “J. Ensor” and the date, 1888. Identifiable within the crowd of masked characters, skulls and clowns, are portraits of Belgian politicians, historical figures, and members of Ensor's own family, and one figure identified as the Marquis de Sade. All forming an aimless but threatening and dehumanised mob, they function as an Everyman in a menacing swirl around the isolated figure of Christ – a caricatured self-portrait.

During the late 19th century, much of Ensor's work was rejected as scandalous, particularly his painting *Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889*. The Belgium art critic Octave Maus famously summed up the response from contemporaneous art critics to Ensor's innovative (and often scathingly political) work: “Ensor is the leader of a clan. Ensor is the limelight. Ensor sums up and concentrates certain principles which are considered to be anarchistic. In short, Ensor is a dangerous person who has [made] great changes. ... He is consequently marked for blows. It is at him that all the arquebuses are aimed. It is on his head that are dumped the most aromatic containers of the so-called serious critics.” Some of Ensor's contemporaneous work reveals his defiant response to this criticism. For example, the 1887 etching **Le Pisseur** depicts the artist urinating on a graffitied wall declaring (in the voice of an art critic) “*Ensor est un fou*” (“Ensor is a Madman.”)



**“Reason and nature are the enemy of the artist”**



Ensor was a master printmaker. The etching **Cathedral** (1886) exhibits an astonishing amount of finely drawn detail. The tiny, repetitive marks, made with an etching burin, evoke a new, expressive style in contrast to that of most of his contemporaries. The Gothic architecture, worn facade, and overwhelming scale of the cathedral seen here in exacting detail show that it has withstood the test of time. Ensor juxtaposed the building with a dense crowd of grotesque figures that push forward seemingly irrationally, presenting a symbolic contrast between their whims and the permanence of both the church and the past.



Ensor's bizarre visions were fuelled, from early child-hood, by the attic above his family's souvenir shop. He described it as "dark and frightening...full of horrible spiders, curios, seashells, plants and animals from distant seas, beautiful chinaware, rust and blood-coloured effects, red and white coral, monkeys, turtles, dried mermaids."



In this curious etching, **My Portrait in the Year 1960** (1888), showing his macabre sense of humour, he depicts the state of his rotting corpse seventy two years into the future. Although reduced to a sad skeleton with a grimacing smile at the ravages of fate, his eyes shine out beneath a ragged growth of wiry hair. The image references the recumbent skeletons often depicted beneath shrines in churches as a *memento mori*.

His prediction, ironically, wasn't so far from reality. In 1919 the artist Léon Spilliaert wrote of Ensor living "in an old dilapidated house above a shop selling shells. Here he lives a sad and lonely life... among his marvellous paintings... He is vegetating in this ruined and

ransacked town... And always the same: sweet and good, sensitive and worried; childlike."

He hadn't, though, been forgotten by his fellow painters: Max Beckmann, Fernand Khnopff and Wassily Kandinsky were among those who visited, recognising in him a trailblazer and sharing his creed that art should be anything but banal and his belief that religion and science are "cruel goddesses, drenched in tears and blood".

In **Peculiar Insects**, of 1888, under a windy sky and flat landscape dotted with wildly growing trees he attaches human heads, recognisable portraits, to the bodies of a beetle and dragon fly.



In plate after plate, such as in **King Pest** (1895), he arraigned the madness of crowds. He poked fun at the ineptitude of doctors, the absurdities of lust or sloth, or the abuse of the people by royalty, aristocracy, politicians and the clergy.



In his etchings he uses satirical caricature in the vein of artist such as James Gillray. As Gillray threw barbed arrows at the social ills of Georgian England, then Ensor did the same for the late nineteenth century Belgium, as here in **'Taking Physick; or The News of Shooting the King of Sweden!'** of 1792.



He dressed skeletons up in his studio and arranged them in colourful, enigmatic tableaux on the canvas, and used masks as a theatrical aspect in his still-lives.

His **Skeletons Warming Themselves** (1889) are dressed as the bourgeoisie just returned from an evenings entertainment, not to a comfortable middle class home, but to a cold and cheerless studio. They stand around the stove, which gives off only a pathetic amount of warmth. There is no fuel in the fuel-box. A violin leans against the

stove: perhaps they are the entertainers. Perhaps, as in the starving artists of Puccini's *La Bohème*, the violin is destined for the stove. Prostrate on the floor, wrapped in a coat but perhaps already dead or dying is a small, child-like figure with an artist's palette at its feet. Does this represent Ensor himself?

**The Intrigue** (1890) consists of eleven masked figures. In the centre of the painting, a woman is taking a man's hand with a smile of triumph. The masks, rather than hiding the figures' characters, are revealing them. In the right corner of the painting, a woman is holding a doll or maybe a dead baby.



The story behind the painting is autobiographical and inspired by an actual event during Ensor's life. It depicts his sister's marriage with a Chinese art dealer from Berlin, which was disapproved of by his family and caused a scandal in Ensor's hometown.

Belgium and the Netherlands have a continuing tradition of carnival that has its roots in the Middle Ages. Think of the phantasmagoria of Bosch, the kirmesses of Bruegel and the Dance of Death imagined most terrifyingly by Holbein.



Jheronimus Bosch,  
*Allegory of Gluttony and Lust*  
(c.1500-10)



Peter Bruegel the Younger,  
*The Kermess of St. George*  
(1628)



Hans Holbein,  
*Death and the Abbot*  
from *Dance of Death* (1523-25)

He called his fascination with Bruegel and the primitive as "love for the extraordinary and the abnormal." Masks conferred the anonymity that allowed the inversion of normality to happen. By Ensor's time the more unnerving aspects of carnival had been superseded by a benign Mardi Gras, where men and women in disguise would roam the cafés, goading and challenging the unmasked drinkers to guess their identities and drinking at their expense until they did.

**Skeletons Fighting over a Hanged Man** (1891) depicts an on-stage drama in which two skeletons dressed in masks and women's clothing are fighting with traditional female weapons such as brooms and umbrellas. Behind them hangs a dead body described as "civet", the French description for a hare stew. In both wings extras wearing masks and carrying knives are watching the fight. A loose web connects the body to the combatants.



One misogynistic interpretation of the work is that the two quarrelling women represent Ensor's wife and mistress and he the helpless body over which they fight. An alternative more androgynous interpretation is that the quarrelsome pair represent Ensor's embittered view of his critics where he again is the powerless prize; the people in the wings would in this case represent the public, some for and some against his art.



**The Dangerous Cooks** (1896) was created a couple of years after the Les XX group was disbanded. As one of the founder members Ensor had disagreed with decisions about some of the invited artists. For example he opposed the invitation to Seurat, an artist he hated, but he was overruled.

*The Dangerous Cooks* is a response to these fractious disagreements that Ensor had with Maus and other members of the group. The man depicted as serving Ensor's head up on a plate is Octave Maus, and other severed heads around the painting are representative of other members of Les XX; Anna Boch, who was a keen advocate of Seurat's inclusion in their salon, is depicted here with her head atop the body of a plucked chicken on the wall to the left. (Anna Boch bought the only painting which van Gogh sold.)

However dark some of Ensor's themes, his pictures are full of pearlescent colour and light. This nougat palette gives the paintings a visionary intensity: they would be less otherworldly, less surprising, if he had restricted himself to more shadowy tones. But then Ensor seems to have seen everything in heightened terms.

He wrote: "What a wonderful, phosphorescent dream: to end in beauty, tenderly embraced by a passionate octopus! Lying between the cultivated mussels of Ostend and loquacious mermaids, I will offer myself up to the avid kisses of the lovely beasts of the waters of the sky, the earth and the sea." It is hardly a monochrome dream.

In 1898 Ensor and a group of friends visited **Le Rat Mort** ("The Dead Rat") a popular cafe/restaurant and cabaret in Paris in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Located in the Place Pigalle in the Montmartre District, it was frequented by artists, writers, actors, artist models, and prostitutes, and was a gathering place for lesbians in the evenings. Paintings and sketches inspired by the cafe and its customers included work by Toulouse Lautrec, Maurice de Vlaminck.



It started out as Le Café Pigalle. There are various ideas concerning the origins of the name, but one story is that after renovations, before the plaster had properly dried, one customer said "It smells like a dead rat in here", and from then on the place was known as **Le Rat Mort**. It closed in 1934, shortly after a shoot out by two members of the Corsican mafia in which the five year old child of one of them was killed.



On their return to Belgium, Ensor and his friends decided to host a ball named in its honour. **Bal du Rat mort** ("Ball of the Dead Rat") which became an annual masquerade ball held in Ostend. The photograph is from the 1966 event.

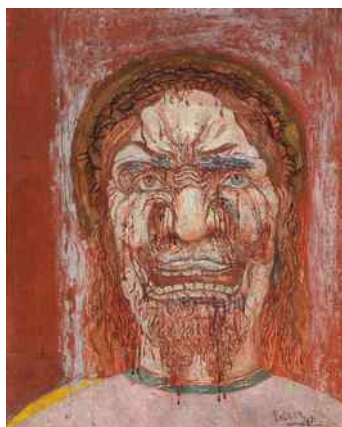
In **Self Portrait with Masks** (1899) the artist places himself, as "the sole beacon of sanity" at the centre of a grotesque display of callous and demonic faces. The mask in Ensor's world can be used to hide the identity of the wearer, but it can also expose the inner character, whether malicious or foolish. He saw himself as something of a martyr; his pictures being greeted with scorn and sometimes vitriolic criticism, and treated with a "viciousness beyond all known limits." He felt himself "surrounded by hostility" and subjected to "mean vile attacks."



For Ensor, while the mask hides the identity of individuals it nevertheless exposes the wearer's true personality – malicious, giddy, foolish. It is not, in this sense, a mask at all. Ensor was always touchy about criticism and saw himself as something of a martyr as a result of the opprobrium that greeted many of his pictures.

He would depict himself not only as Christ entering a Belgian Jerusalem but also nailed to a cross, dissected, as a decapitated head served on a platter to his enemies, and in 1891 as a herring being torn to bits by two skeleton critics in **Skeletons Fighting over a Pickled Herring**. He may have portrayed the *comédie humaine* but to him human life was not all that comedic.

*"Disparagement beats down on me like hail. My umbrella is always to hand; I'm abused, I'm insulted, I exist, I'm mad, I'm simpleminded, I'm nasty, wicked, incapable, ignorant, a creampuff gone rotten."*



**The Man of Sorrows** (1891) is based on a fifteenth-century painting by Albrecht Bouts. In his version Christ's bleeding face is amalgamated with a devil's mask from the Japanese Noh Theatre to form a horrifying image.

The portrait – which also recalls Grünewald's Christ from the **Isenheim Altarpiece** (c.1512-16) – is the manifestation of Ensor's identification with Christ who was also a marginal and mis-understood person. The tortured expression on the face of Christ also reflects the existential crisis that the artist went through in the 1890s. During this



period of his life, he was deeply depressed. As a result he tried to sell his studio and its entire contents of pictures. Here he represents himself deformed and in pain with a bleeding face, reflecting his suffering and frustration with the conformist society of his time.

Wrapped in his personal world, he sat out the First World War in Ostend, although he managed to get himself arrested for drawing the Kaiser as a vulture. It was the intercession of young German artists who had come to admire his work that ensured his release.

Even in the first decade of the 20th century Ensor's production of new works was diminishing, and he increasingly

concentrated on music—although he had no musical training, he was a gifted improviser on the harmonium, and spent much time performing for visitors. Against the advice of friends, he remained in Ostend during World War II despite the risk of bombardment. In his old age, he was an honoured figure among Belgians, and his daily walk made him a familiar sight in Ostend. He died there following a short illness, on 19 November 1949 at the age of 89.

In 1929, Ensor's friend, the art historian August Vermeylen, described the reaction to the major retrospective of the painter's work in Brussels: "anyone with even the slightest feeling for art was left with their head spinning as rapidly as mine. Bewildered and bamboozled, they could articulate their admiration only with a quiet stutter or a hearty curse – a curse that in those circumstances had the quality of a prayer."

## Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945)

*"It is my duty to voice the suffering of men,  
the never-ending sufferings heaped mountain-high."*

**Käthe Kollwitz** was a German artist, born in Königsberg, who worked with painting, print-making and sculpture. Despite the realism of her early works, her art is now more closely associated with Expressionism

Her most famous art cycles, including *The Weavers* and *The Peasant War*, depict the effects of poverty, hunger and war on the working class. Kollwitz was the first woman not only to be elected to the Prussian Academy of Arts but also to receive honorary professor status.

This candid charcoal **Self portrait** of 1924 shows a perceptive insight into her own character. She depicts herself as an astute, tenacious and implacable observer of the common life.



Born Käthe Schmidt to a father who was a radical Social Democrat and the daughter of a Lutheran pastor who, expelled from the official Evangelical State Church, founded an independent congregation. From her parents she inherited her streak of rebellion and concern for social justice.

In 1888/89, she studied painting in Munich where she realized her strength was not as a painter, but a draughtsman. When she was seventeen, her brother Konrad introduced her to Karl Kollwitz, a medical student, to whom she became engaged; marrying in 1891.



In 1890, she returned to Königsberg, rented her first studio, and continued to depict the labours of the working class, which became one of her major themes.

Printmaking, which for her always had a social motivation, became her main means of artistic expression. In the etching **Need**, from the period 1893-97, a mother, worn and aged before her time, clutches her head in anguish at how to feed the child lying contentedly in its cot, innocent of the life to which it is destined. In the dark, rundown hovel, in the background the careworn faces of her husband and older child may be discerned. Hanging on the wall above his head is a pair of scissors; skeins of wool, a spinning wheel and primitive loom denote this miserable life as that of a weaving family.

Karl was by this time a doctor tending to the poor in Berlin. The couple moved into the large apartment that would be the Kollwitzs' home until it was destroyed in World War II. The proximity of her husband's practice proved invaluable:

"The motifs I was able to select from this milieu (the workers' lives) offered me, in a simple and forthright way, what I discovered to be beautiful.... People from the bourgeois sphere were altogether without appeal or interest. All middle-class life seemed pedantic to me. On the other hand, I felt the proletariat had guts. It was not until much later...when I got to know the women who would come to my husband for help, and incidentally also to me, that I was powerfully moved by the fate of the proletariat and everything connected with its way of life.... But what I would like to emphasize once more is that compassion and commiseration were at first of very little importance in attracting me to the representation of proletarian life; what mattered was simply that I found it beautiful."

**The March of the Weavers in Berlin** (1897) is from one of her most famous art cycles. *The Weavers* and *The Peasant War*, depict the effects of poverty, hunger and war on the working class.

Between the births of her sons – Hans in 1892 and Peter in 1896 – Kollwitz saw a performance of Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, which dramatized the oppression of the Silesian weavers and their failed revolt in 1844. Kollwitz was inspired by the performance and produced a cycle of six works on the weavers theme.

The cycle is neither a literal illustration of the drama, nor an idealization of the workers. The prints expressed the workers' misery, hope, courage, and eventually their doomed protest.





The cycle was exhibited publicly in 1898 to wide acclaim. But when the painter Adolph Menzel nominated her work for the gold medal of the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1898 in Berlin, Kaiser Wilhelm II withheld his approval, saying "I beg you gentlemen, a medal for a woman, that would really be going too far . . . orders and medals of honour belong on the breasts of worthy men." Nevertheless, *The Weavers* became Kollwitz' most widely acclaimed work.

Kollwitz's second major cycle of works was the *Peasant War*. The production of this series lasted from 1902 to 1908. Inspired by the German Peasants' War of 1524–1525, when oppressed peasants in southern Germany took arms against the nobility and the Church. In *Prisoners* (1908) from the series the figures, with hands bound are encircled by an imprisoning rope which binds them into tight knit group.

The pain and despair shown on their faces elicits a powerful sympathy in the viewer for their plight.

**"We [women] are endowed with the strength to make sacrifices which are more painful than giving our own blood. Consequently, we are able to see our own [men] fight and die when it is for the sake of freedom."**



**Woman With Dead Child** 1903 is an etching. The complex image is concentrated into a single, powerful, numbing depiction of despair.

In the lithographic print, **Whetting the Scythe** (1908), from the *Peasant War* series, the farm labourer in this powerful depiction is entirely engrossed in his work. He looks almost demonic in his action.

While working on the series she visited Paris and took classes at the Académie Julian to learn to sculpt.



When the writer Richard Dehmel called for more soldiers to fight in World War I in 1918, Kollwitz wrote an impassioned letter to the newspaper he published his call in, stating that there should be no more war, and that "seed corn must not be ground" in reference to young soldiers who were dying in the war.



**The Sacrifice** (1923) is a wood-block print, from the print cycle *War*. The technique lends itself to this stark image of a naked woman holding up her child. The title adds a trope to the depiction that is not immediately evident. Is she offering the child to some off picture idol? The deeper cutting of the edge of the nimbus surrounding the woman, and the fragment of 'light' entering at the top left, suggests that she might be offering it to the sun.



**The Survivors** (1923) is an ink drawing. This circle of adults and children, with haunted faces stare disconsolately out at the viewer with a plea for help which challenges our response and our conduct towards those less fortunate. As an image of the tormented and dispossessed it is as relevant today as when first made in 1923. The skull-like central figure, clasping her children to her breast, although sightless, nevertheless seems to be staring with a look of accusation at the viewer. The other adults have their eyes bandaged. However, is the title meant to indicate defiance in the face of their fate, or is it ironic?

**"There has been enough of dying! Let not another man fall!"**



Kollwitz was a socialist, with strong leanings towards Communism, so not inclined towards religious iconography; however, the bronze sculpture, **Pietà (Mother with Dead Son)** (1937-39), references the religious subject of the dead Christ in his mother's arms. This may be a reaction to the death of her youngest son, Peter, in the First World War, which threw her into a long depression, and affected much of her subsequent work.

It is a highly concentrated form with the male figure embraced by the shrouded legs of the mother.

An enlarged version of *Mother with Dead Son* was placed in 1993 at the centre of **Neue Wache** in Berlin, serving as a monument to "the Victims of War and Tyranny".

Her reaction to the savagery of the First World War led to a continuous output of works in protest to the inhumanity of conflict. In 1922–23

she produced the cycle *War* in woodcut form, including the works *The Sacrifice*, *The Volunteers*, *The Parents*, *The Widow I*, *The Widow II*, *The Mothers*, and *The People*. Much of this art was inspired by pro-war propaganda which both she and **Otto Dix lampooned** to create anti-war propaganda. Kollwitz wanted to show the horrors of living through a war to combat the pro-war sentiment that had begun to grow in Germany again. In 1924 she finished her three most famous posters: *Germany's Children Starving*, *Bread*, and *Never Again War*.



Kollwitz lost her younger son, Peter, on the battlefield in the First World War in October 1914. The loss of her child began a stage of prolonged depression in her life. By the end of 1914 she had made drawings for a monument to Peter and his fallen comrades. She destroyed the monument in 1919 and began again in 1925.

The memorial, titled *The Grieving Parents* (1925-32), was finally completed and placed in the Belgian cemetery of Roggevelde in 1932. Later, when Peter's grave was moved to the nearby Vladslo German war cemetery, the statues were also moved.

***"Her silent lines penetrate the marrow like a cry of pain; such a cry was never heard among the Greeks and Romans."***

(Gerhart Hauptmann, quoted by Zigrosser)

In 1933 she was forced to resign her place on the faculty of the Akademie der Künste by the Nazis and her work was removed from museums. Although she was banned from exhibiting, one of her "mother and child" pieces was cynically used by the Nazis for propaganda:

"They give themselves with jubilation; they give themselves like a bright, pure flame ascending straight to heaven."



In July 1936, she and her husband were visited by the Gestapo and threatened with arrest and deportation to a [concentration camp](#); they resolved to commit suicide if such a prospect became inevitable. However, Kollwitz was by now a figure of international note, and no further action was taken.

On her 70th birthday, she "received over 150 telegrams from leading personalities of the art world," as well as offers to house her in the United States, which she declined for fear of provoking reprisals against her family. She outlived her husband (who died in 1940) and her grandson Peter, who died in action in World War II two years later.

In 1943 she was evacuated from Berlin. Later that year her house was bombed and many drawings, prints, and documents were lost. She lived her final months near Dresden as a guest of Prince Ernst Heinrich of Saxony. Kollwitz died just 16 days before the end of the war.

Kollwitz made a total of 275 prints, in etching, woodcut and lithography. Virtually the only portraits she made during her life were images of herself, of which there are at least fifty. These self-portraits constitute a lifelong honest self-appraisal; "they are psychological milestones". (Carl Zigrosser: *Prints and Drawings of Käthe Kollwitz*). More than 40 schools in Germany are named after Kollwitz.

