The Broad Imagery Of Expression Used By Kollwitz Thesis

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Factors Shaping Kollwitz’s Expressionist Imagery

Thesis statement: There are many factors that contributed to the broad imagery of expression used by Kollwitz and other expressionist women in the period before 1945.

I. The onset of Nationalism, Nazism, and the accession of Hitler into power forced Kollwitz to resign from the academy and inspired her last lithograph.

A. The death of Kollwitz’s oldest son alongside her grandson in the earliest days of World War and the Russian War11, respectively, was enough to strengthen Kollwitz’s pacifist convictions.

1. A passionate outcry against war and its waste of the young

B. Intensified bombings in Berlin by the Allied Forces.

II. Kollwitz was a socialist and a communist.

A. She expressed her convictions through many art forms.

1. Lithographs

2. Prints

3. Woodcuts

4. Sculptures

B. Kollwitz was compassionate and sympathetic at the same time.

1. She offers unique and kind features to proletarian women with whom she identifies.

2. Kollwitz intends to end the suffering of humanity that never ends by using the portrait of a woman watching but doesn’t feel anything.

III. Most of her work had very distinctive images of hands holding a beloved.

A. Kollwitz's experience as a widow was reflected in her work developing around the theme by portraying scared children and babies with dead children in their arms, which goes to show the effects of the war.

B. Most of her work had very distinctive images of hands holding a beloved.

C. These personify strength and support, all illustrating a broad sense of protection amidst prevailing insecurity.

IV. In 1891, Kollwitz was married, and they had to move to the working-class sector of Berlin.

A. The poor living conditions here motivated her to do Weaver Revolt 1894-1898, which was her first significant work. This served to reflect the outcome of the war.

B. During the period of war, her artistic work was based on creating awareness of issues concerning suffering, poverty, and unemployment, among other political issues.

1. Posters and pamphlets of her work were passed around in the period.

Women Expressionism

Expressionism in modern times can be analyzed as a bold act of rebellion against the prevailing institutions that directly influence one's life. Expressionism in the time of accomplished women such as Kathe Kollwitz was viewed as the notion of modernism by women who were said to reject tradition. These labels made expressionist women in Germany targets of political aggression and right at the center of social struggle (Barron et al.). These were hard times, especially with the world wars starting in Europe. The weight of war was felt through the depression of the society engaged in it. As such, life in Germany was marked by recession, struggle, and suffering spreading through the social classes. Amidst such severe conditions, women like Kathe Kollwitz defied the odds, becoming accomplished in very dynamic fields of painting, printmaking, wood carving, and sculpture (McCausland). This made her a proclaimed socialist and agitator of political pacifism. An important question arises: what are the factors that led her and many others like her to such accomplishments?

Although Kollwitz had exclusively studied arts and printing since she was a child, she completely embraced her talent in the 1890s following the influence of a German artist called Max Klinger, as well as Nationalism and Nazism, which were spreading throughout the nation. In the earlier days of her work, Kollwitz found a cheaper means to reproduce her prints and distribute multiple copies to many people throughout the country. As many people got their hands on Kollwitz's works, she became a popular figure throughout Germany and the entire world as a whole. This brought about a controversy with the Nazi regime, which forced her to resign from her position at the Prussian Academy. The government would later refuse her the right to exhibit her art (McCausland). In her final years, Kollwitz created bronze and stone sculptures that emphasized the same kind of message and

aesthetic as her work in two dimensions. Many of these art forms were destroyed in Berlin following bomb attacks by the Allied forces, and she was forced to flee to Moritzburg for safety. As both the World War and the Russian War II intensified, Kollwitz's son and grandson were killed in the respective wars, and this inspired her last work, a passionate outcry against war and its waste of the young (McCausland). Indeed, it is clear that the state of the nation and the suffering it later brought to the people were factors that led to Kollwitz's expressionist ideas.

Kollwitz was raised in a middle-class family where she enjoyed family and artistic support that somewhat contributed to her socialist and communist nature that later influenced some of her artworks. Her father sent her to Munich to study arts over marriage. After her graduation, she returned to Munich and married her fiancé in 1891. In the 50 years that followed, Kollwitz expressed her feelings through woodcuts, lithographs, prints, and sculptures, which were generally black or white (McCausland). The inspiration for her images was taken from her husband's working-class patients, who proved worthy subjects and models before she had seen the suffering that included the loss of lives by her son, grandson, and many other innocent civilians. The miserable conditions of the people touched her compassionate self, and she sympathized with them to the extent of expressing her emotions in the best way she knew how.

Raw human experience can be attributed to the success of German expressionists. Kathe Kollwitz had several life-changing events in her lifetime. Firstly, she was married in 1891, and she had to move to the working-class sector of Belgium. The poor conditions here due to the national weight on the working led her to do the Weaver Revolt 1894-1898, which was recorded as her first significant work (McCausland). During the actual years of war here, her work now took a humanitarian appeal, reflecting on the strained human condition in Germany, where people were dying, starving, sickly, and constantly tormented. Kollwitz had a very elaborate way of creating mass awareness using the expressions in her artistic work. Pamphlets and posters of her work were passed in an organized chain expressing the effects of war, such as the rampant impoverishment of society, unprecedented unemployment levels, and mortality rates, among many other political reasons.

The most unique aspect is how Kollwitz utilized imagery to express her message clearly. Most of her work had imagery in the form of very distinctive images of hands holding a beloved. This was in the example of dead children in the hands of very distraught mothers. This was, of course, the depiction of losing her eldest son in war. These images personify strength and support, illustrating a broad sense of protection amidst prevailing insecurity. This also presents a moral judgment to the audience, which works in the social movement against certain oppressions prevalent in any given society. Expressionism, from the account of Kathe Kollwitz, is seen to be involved in a great variation of prevalent factors in her immediate environment, leading to the metamorphosis of great ways to present reality in a way that provokes change. Being a painter, an accomplished sculptor, and a printmaker, she successfully explored the fields of warfare, human tragedy, and the outcome of poor organizational units in society that are based on self-interest instead of the common good (McCausland). The main source of inspiration was her own personal experience through the erratic conditions during the war period. This outcome made Kollwitz a bold pacifist and also an avid

socialist, using her unique work to resonate with her message. She used a range of resources such as woodcuts, drawings, lithographs, and even etching, starting with the depiction of a common laborer. An example of this is the German peasant war, her initial series that was in the spirit of the rising workers' movement. In a clever way, she used black-and-white elements depicting the human body, which opened up a social debate almost immediately. In the field of sculpture, Kathe had a very expressive way of presenting her intended message. This was majorly based on sublime human emotions of despair, frustration, depression, suffering, and a disoriented mood. A fluctuation through different ideas during the time, which was predominantly the roughest in her life, greatly appealed to the social movements of the time.

From the precedent, Expressionism is expressed using intense coloration, distorted or disjointed forms of spaces and agitated brushstrokes. This style of expression, with time, took many forms, and it influenced other forms of art, such as dance, poetry, literature, cinema, theatre, and fine arts (Barron et al.). This method of communication continues to appeal to emotional effects and, as such, is used by many artists to express deeper meanings through their works. The way by which the rest of the world reacts to these art forms is what stimulates the artists to continue or stop. That said, Kollwitz effectively uses color in the paintings to communicate a lot of emotional feelings to the audience.

Works Cited

Barron, Stephanie, et al. *German expressionism: art and society*. Thames and Hudson, 1997.

McCausland, Elizabeth. "Käthe Kollwitz." *Parnassus* 9.2 (1937): 20-25.

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