January

Drawing Hands : How Artists Depict Hands

Grade 6

Kathe Kollwitz "Sharpening the Scythe"
Charles White "Harvest Talk"

Artwork Overview:
(See the following pages)

Artist Information:
(See the following pages)

Topics for Discussion:

1. What do you think of these two art works? Why?
2. Do the hands of these people reveal anything about them, and what they are doing?
3. Why do you think the artist chose to depict the figures in such a strong and straight forward manner?
4. Both of the artists used black and white to depict the subject. Kollwitz used printmaking and White used charcoal. Can you tell which is medium is which?

Hands-on Art Activity: **Draw Your Own Hands**

Materials: White drawing paper
Drawing pencils
Erasers

Directions:

1. Discuss the concept of self-portrait except drawing their hands instead of their faces.
2. Quietly look and study the shape of the hand in different positions, and choose a position that is interesting. You can place an object in the hand if desired.
3. Carefully draw the outline of the figures and the hand. Draw life size or larger to fill - up the dimensions of the paper.
4. When outline drawing is complete the shading can be used to emphasize light dark areas.
5. Be sure that students sign the front of their drawings.

Käthe Kollwitz, *Sharpening the Scythe*

Käthe Kollwitz (*kay*-teh *kahl*-wits), German, 1867-1945
Sharpening the Scythe, 1905, etching, 11 3/16 x 11 5/8-in.
Courtesy of The Busch-Reisinger Museum
Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

The Artist

The accomplishments of German artist Käthe Kollwitz were widely acclaimed during her life, at a time and in a place where the odds against independence and achievement by a woman were immense. Today, she is regarded as one of the finest graphic artists of this century, and her simultaneous roles of wife, mother, citizen, and social commentator were also highly respected.

Borne Käthe Schmidt in East Prussia in 1867, the artist remembered a warm, loving, respectful childhood with parents who nurtured and promoted her artistic talents. Because the art academy in her native city of Königsberg was closed to women, she was privately tutored. In 1884, at 17, she moved to Berlin to continue her studies at an art school for women. At this time, Kollwitz gave up painting to dedicate herself to important themes through the thorough exploration of printmaking and drawing.

In 1891, Käthe married Dr. Karl Kollwitz, a medical doctor whose practice in the poorest working district of Berlin exposed her to all aspects of poverty and suffering. She became an outspoken champion for the working class and especially its women, expressing through her etchings, woodcuts, lithographs, drawings, and sculptures her sadness and outrage at social injustice and indifference to suffering.

Kollwitz received numerous awards and honors acknowledging her lifelong achievements, including Germany's prestigious gold medal. She was also the first woman to be appointed to the Prussian Academy of Art.

The rise to power by the Nazi regime caused Kollwitz's dismissal from the Academy in 1933 because her art was considered decadent, degenerate, and inflammatory. She and many other artists were subsequently prohibited from exhibiting, and her prints, along with works by such artists as Cezanne, van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso, were removed from German museums. Then her husband was prevented from practicing medicine, and both he and Käthe were constantly threatened by the Gestapo with deportation to a concentration camp.

Kollwitz had lost her oldest son in World War I, and then her grandson and husband were claimed by World War II. When her home of 50 years was bombed during a raid, she fled to Dresden where she died only days before the close of the war. The last words of this compassionate and committed artist were, "My greetings to all."

The Art

Sharpening the Scythe is a soft-ground etching that is only 11 3/16 x 11 5/8-in. in size. Kollwitz's dramatic lighting focuses on the powerful, plain hands and face of a peasant woman who sharpens the giant blade with intense determination. She appears to know the farm tool well, not only for its common use but as a weapon for the rebellion. What stories could this simple, well-worn cutting tool tell about its time with the peasant woman?

The woman is shown from the waist up against a stark background. This focuses our attention on the vital elements: the two hands and the eyes. There is a type of *invisible* triangle formed by these three features. The blade between the two hands acts as the base of the triangle. Trace your finger around the complete triangle.

In what other artistic context have you seen a scythe? *As carried by the horseman in Albert Pinkham Ryder's* The Race Track. Kollwitz's peasant acquires the same ominous attitude and makes a forceful statement by replacing the traditional tool of protest, the mouth, with the hard, curved blade of the scythe.

Guided Analysis

Subject:

Sharpening the Scythe is the third of seven etchings in a series of prints called *Peasants' War*

which was a passionate, monumental, but ultimately unsuccessful uprising against serfdom and feudalism in Germany during the time of the Reformation. The woman depicted here is purposeful and determined. Intent on sharpening her harvesting tool for the impending combat, she is prepared to give her own life to the cause of social and economic equality.

What is a hero? What might the term *hero of the people* refer to? Name a person you consider a *hero of the people* and explain why.

Women have played important roles in American history, including the wars. Can you name any of these women and tell about their contributions?

Elements and Principles of Design:

The composition of *Sharpening the Scythe* was thoughtfully planned. The deep shadows cast an almost cross-like image across the background. What kind of message might this send the viewer?

The woman's torso is like the sturdy trunk of a tree. Women, to Kollwitz, were not frail creatures with nothing to contribute to society other than the ability to have children. They were the roots of the family and therefore of society itself.

Kollwitz's use of light is also designed for emotional impact. She was known for stressing clear and emphatic contrasts. "Separate the light from the darkness," she would tell her students. She chose to reduce gray tones to get a sharp, bold division of black and white which also eliminated small, unnecessary details. Is it important to know exactly where the woman is standing, what she wears, or more about her facial features?

Media and Technique:

Soft-ground etching is a process Käthe Kollwitz used in combination with other techniques such as aquatint, which produced soft lines and textural backgrounds in her prints. The original soft-ground method was invented in France in the 18th century. The technique used a copper plate covered with a ground containing beeswax and grease. (Today, a type of resin powder is used.) A piece of paper is laid on top of it and a design is drawn. When the paper is pulled away, the ground sticks to the areas where the pencil pressed, exposing the metal of the copper plate. The paper's texture itself leaves an impression on the ground, which appears on the final print. The plate is then exposed to acid. Where the ground was removed, the metal is eaten away. The plate is inked, paper is applied, and the print is pulled.

Comparison:

Find other artistic representations of women's struggles as political, social, or religious activists. There are certainly a number of works depicting Joan of Arc, and Goya's subjects in *Disasters of War* show women in nontraditional roles. Pieter Bruegel's *The Dulle Griet* from around 1562 shows the legendary "Mad Meg" at the head of a brigade of wildly determined women where she brandishes a kitchen knife against the devil itself.

In what ways are Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* and Käthe Kollwitz's *Sharpening the Scythe* similar?

Expressive Properties:

How does this print make you feel? How did Kollwitz accomplish creating the mood of *Sharpening the Scythe*? *Dramatic lighting with sharp contrasts; simple, bold shapes; strong, direct composition; looming shadows; the expression of the face; limited color.* How would the effect of this piece be different if it had many colors?

Judgment:

Kollwitz's last decade of life was her most difficult. One contributing factor was the tyrannical suppression of her art and art production by Hitler and his secret police. Hitler imagined himself an artist, and at one time in his life, he had plans to make art his career. He considered all modern art degenerate and senseless. He also did not hold women in high regard. As dictator of his country, he had the power to torment the artists who did not meet his standards for good art, and in many cases, he simply forbade the artists to create, and his secret police rigidly and brutally enforced this.

Many artists did actually produce art secretly during Hitler's reign of terror, but hid it away.Which do you think would be the greater torture for an artist: to be forbidden to create ever again or to create art, then hide it away so that it could be neither seen nor destroyed. Consider also which might be worse for the art world.

Does art exist if no one can see it? Is art that exists only in the mind of an artist of any value? Can it contribute in any way if it cannot be seen except in the mind of its creator?

The strengths of Kollwitz

An artist of power in more than one medium

Many European artists at the end of the last century established their fame equally through painting and printmaking. A great exception was German artist Käthe Kollwitz.

Her early ambition was to become a painter, but she soon devoted herself to the making of prints, which meant giving

critical eye

Alan G. Artner

primacy to a pursuit that was only secondary for others.

A Kollwitz print exhibition, such as the one at the Worthington Gallery, is therefore an event of some importance, for the artist's engravings and lithographs are the very works in which she achieved fullest expression.

Part of this was owing to the closeness Kollwitz felt to the working classes, which might never come in contact with an object as aestheticized as a painting. Prints, on the other hand, had great accessibility, a fact important to Kollwitz's social vision.

As Kollwitz drew more and more from incidents in her life, she gradually abandoned more complicated printmaking techniques for lithography and its direct translation of her drawing. This gave her work an immediacy that helped turn personal experiences into universal archetypes, making her not only known and admired but also loved.

Primarily a printmaker, Kollwitz was also a sculptor who frequently appropriated themes from her prints and gave them back a sculptural massing of forms. From 1910, when she began to sculpt, until 1942, when she made her final lithograph, there was a lot of cross-fertilization that augmented the strength Kollwitz would have achieved had she done only one or the other.

The exhibition has a representative selection both of media and favorite themes,

Kollwitz's closeness to the working classes is evident in her etching "Weaver's Uprising" (1897).

allowing viewers to trace Kollwitz's progression through printmaking techniques as well as her eventual settling on the subjects of self-portrait and mother and child.

Worthington has devoted, in fact, an entire room to the mother-and-child theme that has endeared her to millions of viewers. She never surpassed the rawness of her first treatment, the 1903 etching "Woman with Dead Child." But after Kollwitz's model for the work, her son Peter, was killed in World War I, her range of responses widened, giving even her joyous moth ers and children a special undercurrent of poignance.

Like Ludwig Meidner and Otto Dix, Kollwitz became a artist obsessed by the toll of war, and it's impossible to think of her work apart fror it. However, she confined th suffering of an entire genera tion to a world populated almost exclusively by mothe and children. So the explicit horror of Meidner and Dix became more muted in Kollwitz, who showed the intern effects of war through griev faces and unarmed hands.

Some find this contractior gloomy or sentimental. And sometimes it is. Yet Kollwitz best prints have a formal economy that doubtless com from her sculptures, giving counterbalance that withhol the images from bathos.

In other words, there's a strong aesthetic vein runnir through Kollwitz's graphics that's often overlooked in th interest of social content. Hc this vein rises to the surface what ultimately has made tl output so enduring, and the strength of the Worthington show lies in the many piece that illustrate the two curre working powerfully, inextr bly, together. (At 645 N. Mic gan Ave., through Feb. 28.)

This self-portrait lithograph from 1927, with it's massing of forms, shows how Kollwitz's sculptural work influenced her printmaking.

CHARLES WHITE

Charles White, one of America's best-known African American artists, worked primarily in graphic media. White believed that working primarily in black and white or sepia and white, which required raordinary skill in draftsmanship, would sharpen the impact of his work; through economical reproduction, he made his pictures available to millions. His drawings and paintings, affirming the humanity and beauty of black people, moved many who had never before recognized the aesthetic qualities of black figures and faces. In portraying black Americans, often in bitter circumstances, White sought to make a universal statement about the heroic efforts of humankind to be free of oppression. This ennobling vision distinguished White as an artist.

White, grandson of a slave, was born in Chicago in 1918. When he was seven years old, he observed some Art Institute students painting in a neighborhood park, and they taught him basic painting techniques. He went on to attend a Saturday "honors" class at the Art Institute. His interest in African American literature gave him further insights into what would become the subject of his art. As a teenager, White earned money by lettering signs. Later, he became an art teacher. His circle broadened to include many black writers, intellectuals, actors, and musicians, from whom he gained "my cultural orientation, my black orientation." He encountered racial discrimination in entering scholarship competitions, but his determination to become an artist led him to complete his high school education and win a scholarship to the Art Institute. This training enabled him to become a WPA artist.

On the WPA, White learned that the art he was most interested in -- mural painting aimed at overcoming racial prejudice and ignorance--was considered political and could be destroyed by political interests. He was also excited by the controversial ideas of the Mexican muralists, who used historical subjects to educate their illiterate and impoverished people on social issues. He wanted, above all, to reach black Americans with paintings that would give them confidence and pride in themselves. One of his WPA murals dramatized the efforts of five African American leaders -- Sojourner Truth, derick Douglass, George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington, and Marian Anderson. Another mural, for the Chicago Public Library, was also completed but has disappeared.

White married sculptor Elizabeth Catlett in 1941. She was head of the art department at Dillard University in New Orleans, then a new black college built with WPA funds; he received a fellowship. They both experienced black life in the segregated South. A year later, they moved to New York, where White studied with Harry Sternberg, who inspired the elaborate rendering that characterizes White's work. White taught at the Hampton Institute in Norfolk, Virginia, where he painted a mural on black contributions to American history. This mural included such figures as Crispus Attucks, the first American to die in the Boston Massacre; Peter Salem, the Bunker Hill hero; Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, who led slave revolts; and such leaders as Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Max Yergan, and Paul Robeson. It brought unusual recognition to White, then only twenty-five years old.

In 1943, White was drafted and assigned to do camouflage painting in an engineers' regiment. While in the service, he developed tuberculosis; he spent the next three years in a Veterans Administration hospital in Beacon, NY. Too weak to paint, he decided "not to do anything except reread everything I had read during my adolescence. I reread all of Jack London, Mark Twain...." It was a way of reevaluating what had been important in his youth in light of his experiences and artistic goals. Such reintegration enabled White to become very prolific after his discharge. He had a one-man show in the American Contemporary Artists (ACA) Gallery in September 1947, and his work was called that of "a mature, powerful, articulate talent. He paints Negroes, modeling their figures in blocky masses that might have been cut from granite. He works with tremendous intensity. His subjects are militant, y, strong. They are symbols rather than people -- symbols of his race's unending battle for equality." oon after, he went to Mexico to paint and study and was warmly received. During this otherwise successful period, his marriage ended and his health deteriorated. After lung surgery in New York, he was hospitalized for a year.

In New York, White became acquainted with a wide range of Harlem's cultural leaders, including W.E.B. DuBois, Ralph J. Bunche, Thurgood Marshall, Charles Alston, Langston Hughes, and Jacob Lawrence. He renewed a childhood friendship with Lorraine Hansberry, and Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier drew attention to his work. In fact, some of Belafonte's album covers carry White's drawings. During these years, White's interest gradually shifted from leaders of the past to ordinary black men and women. Yet the past is somehow, almost magically, present so that these figures take on a deep emotional and symbolic significance. His work became more fluid and rhythmic and less massive. It also became more realistic and humanistic, its social significance appearing almost as an afterglow. In 1951, White's second ACA exhibition was devoted to portraits of black women that struck a haunting, responsive chord among thousands of people. These unsentimental portraits had a warm sensitivity, strength, and dignity. His subjects seemed immediately recognizable, as though one knew and liked them. With his virtuoso demonstration of draftsmanship and recognition of women as towering figures in African American life, White gained widespread respect and admiration among his own people.

In 1950, White married social worker Frances Barrett. Honeymooning belatedly in Europe, they were delighted to find White's work had achieved wide recognition in France, Italy, East and West Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Soviet Union. White discovered that attention in Europe created attention at home, where his works were increasingly shown and honored. In the United States, however, McCarthyism was on the rise and any black artists who had been on the WPA art projects were presumed to be subversive revolutionaries. Although McCarthyism began to ebb after 1954, fear and blacklisting lingered. White was constantly called upon to help blacklisted friends, to speak on their behalf, and to give work to benefit exhibitions for groups fighting for constitutional rights, jobs, education, and against prejudice. Overtaxed, White again developed tuberculosis. He regained his health in California, where he enjoyed living near mountains and streams.

A new focus for White's strong, sometimes searing portraits of African Americans came from the mounting civil rights campaign by black students and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His work addressed the issue of civil rights directly -- not in depictions of brutal abuse, but in positive, humanistic, and moving portrayals of courageous black people surmounting difficulties with inner moral strength and calm dignity. His work continued to gain recognition and awards. In 1967, a book of White's work, *Images of Dignity*, was published. He also taught at the Otis Institute of Art in Los Angeles, where "the stimulation I get from young people is important to my own growth." Late in the 1960s, White created a series of portraits of contemporary black Americans painted on pre-Civil War posters advertising slave auctions and WANTED runaway slaves. With this series, he reached a creative peak that was difficult to surpass. He continued to gain recognition and honors through the early 1970s. Increasingly disabled by respiratory insufficiency, White worked with the aid of an oxygen tank until his death. In 1980 he was posthumously honored by his inclusion in a group of ten older African American artists recognized for their achievements by President Jimmy Carter at a White House reception in conjunction with the twenty-second annual meeting of the National Conference of Artists.

Harvest Talk

White's masterly drawing from 1953 reflects the artist's time spent in both the southern United States and Mexico. Here he depicts the dignity of rural labor with powerful figures reminiscent of those in revolutionary Mexican murals. With the contours of scythe, hat brims, and forearms echoing the curves of horizon and clouds, the artist portrayed his subjects in harmony with the landscape. The strength and dynamism of his drawing and his dramatic use of perspective give *Harvest Talk* a mythic quality. In the tradition of Social Realism, the work conveys a poetic political ideal as well as a concrete physical reality.

--excerpted from *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present*, Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, New York, c. 1993, and the brochure for the exhibition *Since the Harlem Renaissance/ Sixty Years of African American Art*, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1996.