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The Aesthetics of Loss

*German Women's Art of
the First World War*

CLAUDIA SIEBRECHT

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List of Abbreviations

BDF	Bund deutscher Frauenvereine
DA	Dehmel-Archiv, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei
DTA	Deutsches Tagebucharchiv
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei
Eph	Ephesians
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GSPK	Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz
HLA	Helene Lange Archiv
IWM	Imperial War Museum
LAB	Landesarchiv Berlin
NFD	Nationaler Frauendienst
NL	Nachlass (personal papers)
SAdK	Stiftung Akademie der Künste, Berlin
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
Stellv. Genkdo	Stellvertretendes Generalkommando
VdBK	Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen
VF	Vaterländischer Frauenverein

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Introduction

War Experience, Visual Narrative, and Identity

In August 1932, Käthe Kollwitz unveiled her sculpture *Die trauernden Eltern* (*The Grieving Parents*) at the German military cemetery at Eesen Roggeveld in Flanders, where her son Peter, who was killed at the front in October 1914, was buried (Fig. 0.1).¹ The occasion was a moment of public commemoration, but it also had a deep personal significance for the renowned artist, who had conceived of the idea of creating a memorial to her son just weeks after she learnt of his death.² As her diaries and letters from the time reveal, Kollwitz was grief-stricken by her loss, and the process of creating the memorial was a painful one that was frequently interrupted by periods during which she felt overwhelmed by emotional distress and daunted by the magnitude of her self-appointed task. She often doubted that her art could adequately reflect the nature of her son's sacrifice, was tormented by the artistic challenge, and feared that she might not be able to complete her work. This distress resulted largely from the struggle to find meaning in her son's death, a theme that features heavily in her correspondence with her elder son Hans.³ As she writes in her diary and letters in December 1914, Kollwitz initially sought to design a memorial to honour the sacrifice of her son and his generation and to express gratitude to the German war dead for what they had given.⁴ Yet ultimately *The Grieving Parents* focused on the bereaved and their emotional anguish and it embodies her personal experience of loss. The sculpture now stands facing over twenty-five thousand German war dead and, situated in close proximity to buried British and Belgian soldiers of the First World War, the humility of her design captures an enduring sense of sorrow over death in war.

For Kollwitz, the installation of the memorial was a highly symbolic event, reuniting a bereaved mother with the remains of her fallen son. During the war years, the artist had not been able to visit her son's grave in Belgium and her request for the repatriation of his body, like almost all such appeals, was rejected. The desire to be in charge of, and near to, the material remains of the dead has been a consistent

¹ Today both Peter's remains and the statues are at the German military cemetery of Vladslo in Flanders where they were moved according to the German Belgian War Graves Agreement of 1954.

² Diary Käthe Kollwitz, 1 December 1914, Käthe Kollwitz, 'Die Tagebücher, 1908–1943', ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz (Berlin: Siedler, 1999), p. 177.

³ Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz, ed., *Käthe Kollwitz: Briefe an den Sohn, 1904–1945* (Berlin: Siedler, 1992).

⁴ Käthe Kollwitz–Hans Kollwitz, 18 December 1914, in Bohnke-Kollwitz, ed., *Käthe Kollwitz*, p. 92; Diary Käthe Kollwitz, 3 December 1914, Kollwitz, 'Die Tagebücher, 1908–1943', p. 177.



Fig. 0.1. Käthe Kollwitz, *Die trauernden Eltern* (*The Grieving Parents*), 1932. Vladslo, Belgium, author's photograph, 2012.

feature of human responses to death throughout history.⁵ Scholars highlight the anthropological function of burial rites in aiding the living in their attempts to come to terms with bereavement and accept permanent separation.⁶ Yet the upheaval of war means that the exact location, time, and circumstances of a soldier's death are often difficult or impossible to reconstruct. Death often came as a very sudden shock in the First World War, as in other conflicts, for families received the news in a telegram, post factum, and without being able to perform any rites or rituals to ease the transition. The precise details regarding a man's death at the front were generally not conveyed in the official death notification but often communicated by his comrades, and the violent nature of wartime death frequently hindered and prevented the recovery or burial of soldiers' remains, thus obstructing closure.⁷ This wartime separation of the mourner from the dead had a fundamental impact on private civilian mourning.

⁵ Gail Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion: Grief and its Political Uses* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 15.

⁶ Luc Capdevila and Danièle Voldman, *War Dead: Western Societies and the Casualties of War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 114; Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites* (London and Washington, DC: Cassel, 1997); Douglas J. Davies, 'Burial Rites', in *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*, ed. Glennys Howarth and Oliver Leaman (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 67–9.

⁷ Holst-Warhaft, *The Cue for Passion*, pp. 78–123.

Some women stoically adapted rituals of bereavement to the circumstances of the war, or invented new customs that met their emotional needs. While Kollwitz tried to find comfort in the thought that her son was buried along with his comrades in Belgium, the geographical distance to his grave clearly added to her burden and prolonged her grief. The unique circumstances of wartime loss prompted the artist to develop her own rituals of bereavement, which included turning her son's former bedroom into a shrine that she routinely visited and decorated.⁸ His bed, she wrote in February 1915, had become something of a substitute grave.⁹ On birthdays and religious holidays, she would regularly bring seasonal flowers to his room, and take time to grieve and reminisce. Women in other belligerent countries were also greatly distressed by the distances that separated them from the remains of their male relations.¹⁰ In France, the official regulations regarding the burial of the war dead caused much civic discontent, and some women clandestinely exhumed and reinterred the remains of fallen relations.¹¹ For Kollwitz, installing a permanent representation of herself in the cemetery where her son was buried allowed her symbolically to transcend the wartime separation of the mourner from the remains of the fallen soldier.

Yet overcoming dislocation was not the same as overcoming bereavement. The overall spirit of the memorial and body language of the mother and father figures, as Kollwitz referred to them, testify to the continuing presence of grief in Kollwitz's life, eighteen years after her son's death in Flanders. The mounted female figure is a grieving mother on her knees, hunching forward with her arms folded over her chest. Her gaze is fixed on the ground, near to the spot where her son now shares his final resting place with nineteen of his comrades. Although the mounted male figure, representing the father of the soldier, kneels by her side, the two are neither touching nor comforting each other. They are not represented as a unit, but as two individuals, emotionally isolated and wounded by their loss. The sculptures show the private agony of mourners lost in their own pain, exposing the all-encompassing nature of grief and individual trauma that was not, and could not, be shared, even with a spouse. Kollwitz and her husband Karl had travelled to Belgium for the unveiling of the memorial in 1932 and, in her diary, she described the moment when she very consciously recognized herself in the female figure, on her last visit

⁸ Regina Schulte, 'Käthe Kollwitz. Das Opfer', in *Die verkehrte Welt des Krieges. Studien zu Geschlecht, Religion und Tod* (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 1998), pp. 121–3.

⁹ Käthe Kollwitz–Hans Kollwitz, 10 February 1915, in Bohnke-Kollwitz, ed., *Käthe Kollwitz*, p. 102.

¹⁰ On Italy, France, the US, and Australia see Oliver Janz, 'Zwischen privater Trauer und öffentlichem Gedenken. Der bürgerliche Gefallenenkult in Italien während des Ersten Weltkriegs', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002), p. 560; Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, 'Corps perdus, corps retrouvés. Trois exemples de deuils de guerre', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 55, 1 (2000), pp. 47–71; John W. Graham, *The Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s: Overseas Grave Visitations by Mothers and Widows of Fallen U.S. World War I Soldiers* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 2005); Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 10.

¹¹ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 239–40; Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 22–8.

to the cemetery before her return to Germany, as the most memorable and meaningful one of the entire trip: 'I stood in front of the woman, saw her—my own—face, cried, and stroked her cheeks.'¹² Kollwitz had thus succeeded in capturing her disconsolate grief in art. By casting her innermost emotions into Belgian granite, the most well-known female artist of her generation both commemorated and eternalized her bereavement. The sculpture is a monument not only to Kollwitz's fallen son, but also to her own grief.

In choosing the figure of a disconsolately bereaved woman to represent herself, Kollwitz was drawing on an aesthetic tradition that had been developed by female German artists throughout the First World War. While the unveiling of the memorial in 1932 demonstrates both the lasting repercussions of the conflict and the abiding intensity of maternal grief, the memorial in its completed form is an evolved artistic response that represents a transition within Kollwitz's own long journey of mourning. Yet the story of her bereavement, and the conception of her artistic response to it, begin in 1914 and belong to the broader history of women's loss and women's art during the First World War. This book examines the work produced by a group of over thirty female artists, including Wismar-based Sella Hasse, Dresden-based Martha Schrag, Katharina Heise from Schönebeck near Magdeburg, Käthe Lassen, Otilie Roederstein, Lina von Schauroth, and the later Dadaist Hannah Höch. The chapters that follow trace the artistic output and personal experiences of these artists during the war years and examine the thematic evolution of their art from visual expressions of outspoken support for the war to more nuanced, ambivalent, and distraught testimonies of loss and grief. Female artists did not act merely as detached observers of the conflict; they saw themselves as very engaged witnesses of, and participants in, war. A number of them experienced personal trauma when they lost close relations, sons, fiancés, or husbands on the fighting fronts. Others participated directly in the war effort as nurses or auxiliary military personnel. Although a variety of experiences and ideas are expressed in women's wartime art, coming to terms with violent mass death and the ordeal of bereavement stand out as the central motifs.

The Aesthetics of Loss is a cultural history of women's artistic responses to the First World War in Germany that locates their rich visual testimony in the context of the civilian experience of war and wartime loss. Historical codes of wartime behaviour and traditional public rites of mourning led women to redefine cultural practices of bereavement and question existing notions of heroic death and proud bereavement through art. This book argues that female German artists developed a unique aesthetic response to the war that both expressed emotional distress and served to re-imagine the place of mourning women in wartime society. Wartime sacrifice often engendered acute personal conflict as women faced the challenge of reconciling their emotional pain with their loyalty to the soldier and their own commitment to the national cause. The personal moral economy of the war, just like its public conventions, caused tensions, stress, and ambivalent feelings that

¹² Diary Käthe Kollwitz, 14 August 1932, Kollwitz, 'Die Tagebücher, 1908–1943', p. 669.