

Seeds are for Sowing and not Grinding

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Käthe Kollwitz
Self Portrait 1934



Käthe Kollwitz
Lamentation 1938-41



Paul Klee
Red and White Domes 1914, 45

In the week of the Put it to the People's march in my hometown of London, I have been in another corner of Europe. As the very idea of Europe flails in its death throes in my own country, it felt melancholy but also positive to spend time in Cologne and Düsseldorf, two cities devastated by war, but resurgent in peace, healthy competition with each other, and fervent reconciliation.

The artist I came to look at in the astonishing Kreissparkasse Köln Bank's collection in Cologne - the Berliner Käthe Kollwitz - dedicated her life and work to the ideals of social progressiveness and pacifism. She would be amused and perhaps even piqued to know that the biggest and best collection of her work is not in the lovely museum dedicated to her in her home city, but here on the top floor of a shopping centre and bank in Cologne. It doesn't chime with her politics at all as Kollwitz was a socialist all her life and in her own quiet way an unrepentant rebel. Dismissed from the Prussian Academy of Art in Berlin when Hitler ascended to power in 1933, she was both a progressive and a renegade, and she was banned from exhibiting her work. Her life was a crusade for equal rights for women and against oppression. "As far as Germany is concerned, I am dead", she wrote in the 1930's.

I am happy to say that this is not the case any longer.

The artist I came to look at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen collection in Düsseldorf was another dissident in his way - the painter and teacher Paul Klee. After his time at the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau, Klee was dismissed as a professor from the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf by the Nazis, and he, like Kollwitz before him, was branded a degenerate. These are two brave and truthful artists. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Beacons of hope in these troubled times.

I feel a personal connection to both artists in different ways.

A lacerating self-portrait by Käthe Kollwitz – torn shamelessly from a copy of the illustrated London News in my school library when I was 14 – has lived on my studio walls for well over 50 years. Many years after this unrepentant act of wanton theft I proposed to write my art school thesis on her work, but it was deemed and damned by my (male) professors to be “far too female and morbid”. I am ashamed that I did not argue my case more forcefully. That is another story for another time in another place. The right place. Perhaps a book....

Käthe Kollwitz lived a quiet, socially activist life in Berlin and died in 1945, just 3 weeks before the end of the war. As a young woman she was opposed to the conservatism of the Kaiserreich, and later she suffered bitterly through the First World War, losing her beloved younger son Peter. This was a tragedy that turned her into a lifelong committed pacifist. She spent her working life in small rooms next to her husband’s medical surgery in Prenzlauer Berg, then a poor district of Berlin. She drew herself constantly, unforgivingly and rigorously. Her documentation of ageing and grief makes her a worthy heir to Rembrandt. She drew and etched and made lithographs and sculpture. She drew the families she saw in the waiting room, but her main subject was herself. This obsession with self has no narcissism or self-pity, unlike Tracy Emin and her kin. Motherhood, female identity, and the death of a child were her subject matter. Little did I know when I cut out the drawing in my school library that I too would live through all three experiences.

Paul Klee’s work is almost as deeply wired in me. A reproduction of the 1945 watercolour *Red and White Domes* lived above my cot as a baby and I’m convinced it worked its sinuous way into my infant consciousness - and it still does. Sometimes I think that it’s the earliest images that an artist lives with that make the most profound impact. As the old song goes: the first cut is the deepest. I have just finished three works on folding Japanese paper (*Table Miniature Washibyōbu* screens) that owe a great deal to the medieval painting that surrounds me here in Flanders as I write, but I am also thinking a lot about Klee’s delicate brushwork, and graceful mark-making, taking his “line for a walk”. Looking at his work yesterday in Düsseldorf I can see a connection to my own and funnily enough there are actually only two degrees of separation between us. During the last war my painter mother was taught painting at university by a student of Klee’s, a German refugee trained at the Bauhaus. I was brought up on Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook* and it was my first art book gifted to me by my parents. I still love it dearly.

I say goodbye to this quiet corner of what is still Europe at the end of this week and make my way back to my life in my own beleaguered country. I am thinking of what Käthe Kollwitz wrote in 1918, quoting wise old Goethe:

“Seeds for sowing should not be ground.”