

Voice of Life: A Restudy of Kollxitz's Sacrifice

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Abstract: *Sacrifice* is the first of a series of woodcuts that German artist Kathe Kollxitz produced during the war. In 1931, it was published in China by Lu Xun on the first issue of *Beidou* and became the spiritual origin of emerging woodcuts. Delving into the creation background of *Sacrifice*, this paper focuses on Kollxitz's artistic spirit and Lu Xun's choice. The research concluded a profound implication that is, art is a direct expression of concern for life and a search for the true meaning of life.

Keywords: Kathe Kollxitz; Sacrifice; Lu Xun; Artistic Spirit.

1. Introduction

Sacrifice, a work preserved in the historical memory of Chinese printmaking, was published in 1931 on the founding issue of *Beidou* (the journal of the Left Association), which was the first time that the works of German artist Kollxitz appeared in front of the Chinese public. The work was purchased by Lu Xun specifically to commemorate the five revolutionary soldiers such as Roshi. With the publication of the journal, Kollxitz's printmaking art officially entered China, and her aesthetic thought was rekindled here. Under the guidance and influence of the artistic spirit and creative style represented by Kollxitz, the progressive youth rose up and launched a vigorous new woodcut movement with the carving knife creation as a weapon, which provided the image foundation for the propaganda of Chinese people's anti-Japanese and anti-oppression, and contributed to the modernity of Chinese printmaking. Kollxitz has become a veritable spiritual mentor for Chinese print-makers until today.

2. Background Information of *Sacrifice*

In 1923, Kollxitz completed a group of woodcuts, *War*, which had been started during the war, and the focus of the seven paintings was on the depiction of the victims of the war and the warning of the cruelty of war. *Sacrifice* is the first painting in the series, in which a mother, eyes closed and thin, presents her sleeping baby in a rigid posture, the dark mass behind her seeming to lead into a hopeless abyss. We show pity and fear for the life of the child. The mother and son were besieged by war and hunger.

Behind the picture are the memories and reflections of Kollxitz's past life, during which his creation has undergone a transformation. In 1914-18, during the Great War in Europe, she supported Peter to the front, but her son never returned, and the pain of losing her son greatly stimulated Kollxitz. Comparing the early works of Kollxitz, it is found that a series of woodcuts created in the 1920s have really changed greatly in style: in the early bronze and stone works, it is delicate to full of tactile sense of narrative style. The woodcuts at this time are rough, symbolic and expressionistic: the figures are pulled away from the concrete background, leaving only large, sharp black and white lines, and the sadness of life is merged with this thin and deformed body. The solid blade vividly depicts the grief and hopelessness of a mother who struggles but is unable to fight. According to Kollxitz's diary at that

time, the work not only accuses the war of depriving a family of everything, but also mixes a kind of pain and remorse. Obviously, her later work was driven by guilt and grief, and death became her lifelong inspiration, taking her work in a completely different direction: in the contradiction between life and death, light and darkness.

Lu Xun was provoked from this sadness and anger, that is, the student Roshi that does not know the child's death of the blind mother. On February 7, 1931, in Longhua, Shanghai, five members of the Left Alliance, including Roshi, were persecuted by Kuomintang reactionaries. The black fog that serves as the background in *Sacrifice* transforms from War into a symbol of Revolution. The legitimacy of the revolution comes from the thousands of insulted and damaged mothers represented by this woodcut.

3. Kollxitz's Creative Concept and Humanistic Spirit

Kollxitz, who belongs to the vein of Western modernism, is accepted as a realist artist in China. This is mainly due to the selection of the content of her works, which mostly depicts the unpleasant side of German history at the end of the 19th century. It contains hardship, hunger, displacement, disease and death of peasants who were transformed into worker by the process of industrialization. The depiction of this painful experience, projected on the Eastern landscape of the same war, became a typical representative of the progressive artworks. Kollxitz once said: "Many people have not seen my work, but assert that I am a depiction of suffering." In fact, sorrow is pervading the whole suffering society. It is no doubt shallow to be regarded merely as a progressive artist associated with the revolution.

"I want to explore the true meaning of life through my works." His early works were influenced by the literature of the time and related to his father and brother. She perceives the hardships of real life and draws from them. The hardship and misery in her life made her feel pain and anxiety, and the practical problems prompted the expression of the lower class people, and art was the gate through which her heart was released to the outside world. "To create completely real, without any rendering", rather than in the art of hard thinking, technical deliberately carved.

With the knife as the pen, Kollxitz reaches to the deepest depths of life with the power of the paper. In the war, the artist's real presence experience, with personal pain, and the pain of sympathy for others in the same situation, repeatedly

expressed in the work also thinking, expressing life and death. In the expression of Kollxitz's suffering, there is a struggle, but also a great love beyond the ego. Beginning with the woodcut group War, the theme of mother and son has repeatedly appeared in Kollxitz's drawings, prints, sculptures, and posters, and the experience of pregnancy, life, and feeding a child has been transformed into different forms. These works contain a kind of sentimental poetry and concise expression gesture, the depiction of maternal love and life moments, reflecting the artist's understanding of the relationship between people and society in the real world, and the relationship between people, containing virtues beyond times and permeating rich humanistic feelings. Romain Rolland once said that Kollxitz's work is the greatest poetry of modern Germany, which illumines the plight of the poor and common people.

Artistic measurement should be the first, not political concepts. She has superb artistic means. But it cannot be said that the social and political history and profound social significance directly Kollxitz's works more influential. What she shows in her works is beyond the strength of women and even beyond people, which is the speculation on the deep emotions and humanity of human beings, rather than a completely radical revolutionary reaction. The real intention of the artist is to care for life.

4. Lu Xun's Aesthetic Choice and Artistic Spirit

In the 1930s, in this land of war, famine and death, saving the nation's survival was the top national priority. How can art save a Nation? Lu Xun chose Kollxitz and devoted all his energy to the promotion of Kollxitz's works. Publish works, hold exhibitions, lectures, publish albums, and interpret Kollxitz's work through your own words. In this major change, the first to be directly influenced by its style is in the pavilion in Shanghai, as the vanguard of China's emerging woodcut movement print-makers, such as Chen Tiegeng, Hu Yichuan, Huang Xinbo, Li Qun, Jiang Feng, Chen Yanqiao, Wang Qi, Liu Xian, Yang Keyang, Zhu Xuanxian, Ma Da, Zheng Yefu, Li Hua, Huang yan, etc. They are undoubtedly in this era. It brings out the best efficiency in art.

Why did Lu Xun pay so much attention to Kollxitz? On the surface, Kollxitz's works have a strong power and penetration, and such works are needed to arouse the numb nerves of the people. The inherent communication characteristics of print are linked to real life and beneficial to society. Kollxitz's works can shock Lu Xun, and there are deeper reasons for Lu Xun's such admiration:

4.1. Similar Artistic Propositions

There is no doubt that Lu Xun not insisted on an empty art view, nor a vulgar utilitarianism, but an aesthetic view that integrated into real life and served the people and advanced history. Kollxitz's works are deeply concerned about society and people, the oppression and resistance of workers, the hunger and cold of refugees, and the infinite care of mothers as the main themes of creation, which obviously coincides with Lu Xun's aesthetic view of active entry into the world. Lu Xun said his writing had a utilitarian purpose, to use the power of fiction to improve society. The most important feature of Kollxitz's works is to express the true feelings of times, and the thoughts expressed are not personal catharsis, but contain profound social content and express the wishes of

the majority of people. Kollxitz expressed that, "My art has a purpose and I want to make a difference at a time when mankind is so helpless and asking for help." Using art to truly reflect the real society is their common spiritual pursuit and aesthetic choice in the same big background of society. The artistic images in their works also come from reality, which is stronger and more shocking than reality. Whether it is written language or visual language, the core of their narrative is the powerful real voice.

4.2. Similar Artistic Spirit

In *Kollxitz's Selected Works*, Lu Xun seldom mentions Kollxitz's political tendency, but lays emphasis on her artistic spirit and aesthetic characteristics, and tries to accurately outline her spiritual portrait. Lu Xun essentially started from Kollxitz's spiritual source, rather than just staying at the surface of the shell of political tendency.

Reading Lu Xun's words, its lonely, sad display is to the reality of the inquiry. After the slide event, his attitude of disparaging vulgarity, attacking tradition, and bravely entering the world undoubtedly cast his revolutionary view, and because of this, his experience of life became more profound. In his lyrical prose *Weeds*, Lu Xun described death many times, showing his living soul's perception of death consciousness. Between hope and despair, Lu Xun emphasized the importance of the will to respond to the call of life. In the fierce battle, Lu Xun still witnessed the loss of life and the coming of suffering from time to time, and used the stronger warrior feelings in Vietnam to commemorate and praise life and death. His psychological experience of experiencing life and death, bearing suffering and feeding the world is precisely the spiritual resonance in Kollxitz's works. War and sacrifice, hunger and death... It is such a heavy art material, Kollxitz and Lu Xun, the same initiative to shoulder the artist's responsibility to the world. The reality of suffering, desperate struggle and unremitting efforts are their life perception, and Kollxitz's paintings are more spiritual comfort for Lu Xun in distress. Lu Xun's creative spirit and Kollxitz's art are interrelated.

At Kollxitz's request, the inscription on her gravestone said, "Rest in her hands, not only with God, but with the heart of mankind." When the artist establishes a close connection with life, the form of art is rooted in time. Sigh from the heart, thinking about life. A meditation on life and death, a hoarse appeal for human dignity, a great thirst for truth, an interrogation of suffering, and a yearning for peace. The two great minds met, so Lu Xun chose Kollxitz.

5. Implication

Under the specific historical background, Lu Xun introduced the works of artists such as Kollxitz and advocated new printmaking, which is definitely different from the ancient Chinese engraving woodcut in the sense of art and reality. Artists who have independent spirit and dare to make statements start from individual life experience, combined with the advantages of mass media printmaking form to issue the inner call and life cry. At this time, the concept of print is no longer just a general copy, but as an art with spiritual direction. The revolutionary spear dagger with pioneering spirit, that is, printmaking has finally take shape as an art. People's thoughts on reality and artists' thoughts on life have become the spiritual origin created in the emerging woodcut period.

Today our world is surrounded by virtual images. The

exploration of historical retrospection helps us to respond to the crisis of the present, that is, to re-imagine our relationship with the world, to evoke our sense of the real world. As Heidegger said, "Life hides everything in the bottom of my heart, art expresses what I experience, truly places myself among the people, and truly depicts what I see." The mind of a man with death must throw itself into the darkness of a deep source in order to see the stars in the day. The simple art must root in reality. *Sacrifice* is the voice of life, the direct expression of the concern for life, and the exploration of the true meaning of life.

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