German widows of the First World War: images of rage and repression

Abstract:

This essay examines the portrayal of widows from the First World War in Germany from 1914-1921. By examining both popular and high art sources, the piece surveys a broad swath of cultural production. War widows were central figures in the cult of the fallen soldier and widowhood in general was part of the bourgeois cult of the dead. Yet mass death in war disrupted prior bereavement practices. On both practical and symbolic levels the war made widowhood a difficult status for the state and society, as widows could no longer be merely dependents and they were reminders of mass death. Artwork, then, did not portray widows during the war; it was only after the war that widows appeared as chastizers and critics of the war effort. Generally, such images were executed by non-commercial artists rather than those whose style was realistic and found in popular magazines. Yet even portrayals of widows postwar contained their power by presenting them as victims in isolation and in domestic settings.

Keywords: *War widows, bereavement, repression, images, Kirchner, Kollwitz.*