

Sylvia Pankhurst
Tate Britain: Display
16 September 2013 – 6 April 2014

Curated by the Emily Davidson Lodge (Olivia Plender and Hester Reeve)

The display of art works by Sylvia Pankhurst originated with a letter written by the Emily Davison Lodge to Tate Britain in 2010, demanding that they take note of the artists who has been part of the early 20th century campaign for womens suffrage in the UK. It was intended as a feminist intervention in the canon of art history, challenging the conservative notion of art as separate from politics.

The letter was itself an art work, part of a commission for the Women's Library in London where the Emily Davison Lodge were asked to develop new works in relation to the feminist archive.

Ann Gallagher
Head of Collections (British Art)
Tate Britain
Millbank
London SW1P 4RG

Olivia Plender & Hester Reeve
The Emily Davison Lodge
c/o The Women's Library
London Metropolitan University
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May 13th 2010

Dear Ann Gallagher,

This letter is a request for an appointment to discuss the importance of Tate Britain collecting the work of the British artist Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960) and promoting her significance to the nation. We both have established art careers and also lecture in the practice and theory of Fine Art (Chelsea School of Art and Sheffield Hallam University) and this letter, along with the reinstatement of the Emily Davidson Lodge, arises out of research for a commission-exhibition hosted by the Women's Library (*Out of the Archives* curated by Anna Colin May-October 2010).

We feel it only right to present the grounds for such a request:

Sylvia Pankhurst's name is well documented within social and political history on account of her celebrated mother and family's campaign for female suffrage via the establishment of the WSPU (Women's Social & Political Union) in 1903. But less celebrated is how, aside from being a leading figure of the campaign to win women the vote in this country, Sylvia Pankhurst was also a highly skilled, versatile and pioneering artist in her own right. In our recent research into her work, we are saddened by the lack of recognition accorded her as an artist and the ongoing pervasive attitudes within society and the arts that such an omission might stand for. Tate Britain currently has no works by Sylvia Pankhurst in the collection and seems to have omitted specific recognition of any feminist impact upon art history in its thematic arrangements of British art 1700-present date despite counter culture and rebel voices having always played a serious role in the formation of British culture.

Sylvia Pankhurst's practice ranged from drawing to painting, from fine art to craft, suffragette propaganda, banner and movement identity design to public speaking, writing and political activism. In our time, when any singular narrative of the traditional argument of art versus life has expanded beyond any neat categorisation of either, the practice of Sylvia Pankhurst forms the basis for renewed discussion into arts relationship to 'change' – do we in the art world know how to value 'deeds not words' in 2010? The suffragette insistence of *Deeds not Words*, carried through seventy years later to the women's lib claim that *The Personal is the Political*, seems ready for a third stage of reappraisal in the ongoing fight to realise equality for women and the representation of female artists within the canon of art history.

Some further historical facts to back up our proposal to accord Sylvia Pankhurst her due place in British art history:

She studied at Manchester Municipal School of Art and then went on to win a scholarship at the Royal College of Art (she was later to challenge them on their prejudice against women artists). Her practice expanded upon becoming a WSPU leader; she designed badges, banners and logos (most notably the 'angel of freedom' which featured on badges, tea pots and the front page of "Votes For Women" the suffragette newspaper). It is claimed that this is the first instance of a campaigning organisation deliberately using design and colour to present an 'identity.' Of further note is her 'Holloway Broach' (1909), a silver design incorporating the portcullis and arrowhead of freedom which was awarded to WSPU suffragettes who had been imprisoned for their actions and the huge 20 ft banners she designed for the famous fundraising Suffragette Exhibition at the Princes Skating Rink in 1909.

An active militant, Sylvia Pankhurst was involved in some of the key moments of the WSPU campaign. Before the avant-gardes had ripped up their first canvas, she was one of the first to attack an artwork, recognising its status as a symbol of patriarchal power and 'the secret idol of capitalism'. Other artists of the time acknowledged the power of these actions, for example Wyndam Lewis (founder of the British Vorticist movement) gave the movement his blessing in the publication *Blast*, with the words: "We admire your energy. You and artists are the only things... left in England with a little life left in them."

Sylvia Pankhurst was imprisoned many times for her actions. Whilst in Holloway she went on hunger strike alongside other suffragettes, suffered force-feeding and yet also made sketches of prison life so she could publicise the adverse conditions to the outside world. The Penal Reform Union was in fact formed at one of the breakfast-welcomes held upon her release from jail. She also produced one of the first historical overviews of the campaign, *The Suffragette: The History of the Women's Militant Suffragette Movement 1905-10*, published in 1911 and then later in 1931 one of the most notable accounts in existence, *The Suffragette Movement*.

Aside from the art and activism, Sylvia Pankhurst's particular contribution to the historical force of the suffragette movement was to encourage working women and the poor to take power (depicting a mill woman and a washer woman, for example, on the suffragette members card that she designed in 1905). Indeed, her own criticism of the WSPU was that it was too bourgeois and in 1913, she officially broke ties and founded the East London Federation of Suffragettes (which later became the Workers' Socialist Federation). Here she worked with all strata of society and allowed men to join in the cause:

"I was looking to the future; I wanted to rouse these women of the submerged mass to be, not merely an argument of more fortunate people, but to be fighters on their own account, despising mere platitudes and catch-cries, revolting against the hideous conditions about them, demanding for themselves and their families a full share in the benefits of civilisation and progress." (*The Suffragette Movement*, pp. 416-7)

Sylvia Pankhurst always displayed a heightened consciousness about the complexities of practicing as an artist and yet simultaneously wishing to be of service to society. She wanted to put her art at the service of the poor and yet to fund herself as an artist meant dependence on bourgeois patrons:

“...whether it was worthwhile to fight one’s individual struggle...to make one’s way as an artist, to bring out of oneself the best possible, and to induce the world to accept one’s creations, and give one in return ones’ daily bread, when all the time the real struggles to better the world for humanity demand another service.”

These conflicts provide a radical backdrop to her ‘representational’ works created when she toured the country making drawings of working class women in their various places of labour. Some commentators have claimed that a crucial turning point in the Liberal PM Lord Asquith’s antipathy for the women’s vote was when he realised, through Sylvia Pankhurst work and campaigning, just how many British women constituted the nation’s workforce. For all the passion dedicated to political and social reform, Sylvia Pankhurst never faltered to declare that art was her “chosen mission”...“which gave me satisfaction and pleasure found in nothing else.” (*The Suffragette Movement*, p. 428)

Pankhurst continued throughout her life to engage with art and politics. She later joined the pan-African movement and fought for the independence of Ethiopia, against Mussolini. She subsequently settled there and is still recognised today by the Ethiopian art world as a serious cultural figure.

We bring these biographical facts to your attention, not just to impress upon you Sylvia Pankhurst’s importance but to again link such a significant life work to the advent of British modern art. She stands as a radical forerunner to the later aims of the European avant-garde, indeed this fact can be backed up by the Italian Futurist Marinetti’s claim that: “In this campaign for liberation, our best allies are the suffragettes” (from *Le Futurisme*, 1911).

For all of the above, we have none-the-less found no instances of Sylvia Pankhurst being included in books on the relation between art and radical politics and rarely does one find books dedicated to her art practice upon art book shelves, the Women’s Library in London excepting. Ultimately, the great radical nature of her achievement lies in the combination of art and activism. Like her fellow militant suffragettes, Sylvia Pankhurst did not just fight for the vote; she fought for the creation of new forms of political life. Having said, “I would like to be remembered as a citizen of the world” she fought for freedom not only for women in Britain but also for women around the globe. Ironically she remains an uncelebrated figure within British Art despite contemporary expanded definitions of art and interest in its social agency.

In view of the above, we would very much appreciate an occasion to discuss Tate Britain’s making specific display of Sylvia Pankhurst’s work and the promotion of her remarkable practice to the British public.

Thank you for your consideration, we look forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely,

G. Plender *HESTERREEVE*

Olivia Plender & Hester Reeve



Inside a Boot Factory: Fitters at Work (1907) gouache on paper, by Sylvia Pankhurst



Tate Britain exhibition information:

Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960) made a profound impact on the fight for women's rights as both an artist and a campaigner. Trained at the Manchester Municipal School of Art and the Royal College of Art, she was a key figure in the work of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) set up with her mother Emmeline and sister Christabel in 1903, using her artistic skills to further the cause.

Pankhurst's lifelong interest was in the rights of working women. In 1907 she spent several months touring industrial communities documenting the working and living conditions of women workers. Her combination of artworks with written accounts provided a vivid picture of the lives of women workers and made a powerful argument for improvement in working conditions and pay equality with men.

Pankhurst designed badges, banners and flyers for the WSPU. Her symbolic 'angel of freedom' was essential to the visual image of the campaign, alongside the WSPU colours of white, green and purple. As the suffrage campaign intensified she struggled to balance her artistic and political work, and in 1912 she gave up art to devote herself to the East London Federation of Suffragettes, the organisation she founded to ensure that working-class women were represented in the suffrage campaign.

Pankhurst was one of many women artists involved in creating designs for the suffrage campaign and active in militant protest.

The display was devised by The Emily Davison Lodge (Olivia Plender and Hester Reeve) with Emma Chambers.



Women Workers of England, series of gouache on paper paintings (1907) by Sylvia Pankhurst

Tate Britain exhibition information:

Women Workers of England

In 1907 Sylvia Pankhurst toured northern England and Scotland to document the lives of women workers. Living in the communities she studied, she painted and wrote about industrial processes and the women who performed them. Working in gouache, which she found ideal for working quickly under factory conditions, her studies of women at work were unusual for the time in their unsentimental observation and their focus on individual workers.

Pankhurst's detailed account of working conditions and wages was published as an illustrated article 'Women Workers of England' in the London Magazine in November 1908, and as a series of articles on individual trades in the WSPU journal Votes for Women between 1908 and 1911. These highlighted difficult working conditions and the differential between men's and women's wages. Writing about the 'pit-brow lassies' of Wigan Pankhurst said:

In spite of their great strength and the arduous labours they perform, they are, like most other women workers, very poorly paid... A bankswoman earns from 1s 10d to 2s 4d; whilst a banksmen, doing exactly the same work gets from 4s 9d to 5s a day. It is this question of underpayment that is at the root of most of the hardship and suffering.



Untitled: Full Length Portrait of an Old Woman, gouache on paper (1907)

Pankhurst's first visit was to Cradley Heath in Staffordshire. Here she studied the working conditions of women making nails and chains. This portrait may be of her landlady. She recalled: 'Lodging with a little old dame who kept a confectioner's shop, I went out each day to paint pictures of the women toiling at the forges in the dilapidated domestic workshops and wrote articles about the work in the evenings.'



Inside a Boot Factory: Fitters at Work, gouache on paper (1907)

In Leicester, Pankhurst was introduced to a small producer's co-operative factory by Mrs Hawkins, the local WSPU secretary, who was also active in the Bootmakers' Union. Pankhurst noted the contrast between the bootmakers working from home, who made the boot from start to finish, and factory work where the different processes of cutting, fitting, skiving and machining were divided up. This work shows fitters in the foreground, with machinists behind. Pankhurst later reflected on the connections between her work and that of the women she studied: 'As the women working there rose from their monotonous task, repeating year in year out the same operation, perhaps machining toe-caps – always toe-caps, they would crowd around my easel full of interest. I was astonished by their oft-repeated comment: "I should never have the patience to do it!"'



On a Pot Bank, Staffordshire: Apprentice 'Thrower' and his 'Baller' at Work, gouache on paper (1907)

Pankhurst's visit to the Staffordshire potteries resulted in a large group of studies where she contrasted the working conditions in different factories. She observed how women workers were often restricted to the lower-paid unskilled jobs, working as assistants to the men who performed more skilled and highly paid operations. In this work the young female 'baller' prepares the clay for the male 'thrower' to turn on the wheel to make pots. Pankhurst later wrote: 'In the potteries I also saw the subordination of women workers. A woman was turning the wheel for the thrower, a woman was treading the lathe for the turner: each was employed by the man she toiled for – the slave of a slave, I thought!'



On a Pot Bank: Scouring and Stamping the Maker's Name on the Biscuit China, charcoal on paper (1907)

Scouring was a process where powdered flint dust was removed from the fired unglazed pottery, known as 'the biscuit'. The women told Pankhurst how the dust injured the lungs of the workers, who had no protection from inhaling it. The adjacent work also shows the process of scouring and dusting, this time performed by a young girl, a reminder of the prevalence of child labour in factories at this date.



Untitled: A Red-headed Girl Working in a Pottery, gouache on paper (1907)



Dipping and Drying on the Mangle, charcoal and gouache on paper (1907)

These two works show the dipping shed where the pottery was glazed. Many factories at this date used lead glaze which severely affected the health of the workers resulting in lead poisoning, and many of the female workers giving birth to stillborn babies. Pankhurst fainted twice on her first morning there, but when she asked if it was necessary to use lead glaze she was horrified to hear that the reasons for its continued use were commercial and considered more important than the health of the workers.



On a Pot Bank: Finishing Off the Edges of the Unbaked Plates on a Whirler, gouache on paper (1907)



Old-fashioned Pottery: Transferring the Pattern onto the Jasper
gouache on paper (1907)

Pankhurst also visited Wedgwood's factory where, in contrast to most other firms, lead was not used in the production of their jasper ware. Her two depictions of old-fashioned pottery processes emphasise skilled craftsmanship. Although the female worker is still subordinate to the male worker, turning the wheel for him as he shapes the pottery, in the adjacent work the skill of the female workers is emphasised by the beautifully-decorated soup tureen in the foreground.



Old Fashioned Pottery: Turning Jasper Ware, gouache on paper (1907)



Scotch Fisher Lassie Cutting Herrings, gouache on paper (1907)

In Scarborough, Pankhurst observed women working in the traditional fishing trade. Although the work was in many ways as repetitive as factory work, she appreciated their freedom from hazardous factory conditions. She later wrote: 'I sped north to Scarborough, to study the conditions of the Scotch fisher lassies working the east coast in the trail of the herring, beautified by their outdoor life, singing and chattering like a shoal of sea birds over the fish they were cleaning and packing. I lodged with a fisherman's wife in the old town: a jolly woman with quaint stories, grave and merry.'



In a Glasgow Cotton Mill: Minding a Pair of Fine Frames, gouache on paper (1907)

Pankhurst's final factory visits were to a Glasgow cotton mill in the winter of 1907. These processes were fully industrialised and this is a rare depiction of a female worker not actively engaged in work as she supervises the complex machines that have taken over from hand processes. Pankhurst described the women's skilled work tending the machines: 'The work in all the different processes of cotton-spinning consists in keeping the machines clean, supplying them with fresh cotton, taking away the cotton that has been spun, and in rejoining together the threads which are constantly getting broken as they become longer and finer. This work is not really arduous, but it requires a light, quick touch, and a great deal of practice is needed before the operative can become expert.'



In a Glasgow Cotton Spinning Mill: Changing the Bobbin, gouache on paper (1907)

Although the work in the cotton mill was not as arduous as in some of the factories Pankhurst visited, the working conditions were difficult. She later recalled: 'The mule-spinning room where I started my work was so hot that I fainted in the first hour, and the manager who had not so much as asked my name, but liked the notion of an artist painting pictures of the mill, gave permission for a little window to be kept open near me. The girls told me they were all made sick by the heat and bad air when they first began work in the mills.



'What It Feels Like to Be in Prison', The Pall Mall Magazine May (1907), facsimile

Pankhurst wrote and illustrated an article describing her first hand experience of the brutal regime in Holloway Prison after she was jailed for suffragette activities in 1906. It was published in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in May 1907.



'Women Workers of England', The London Magazine May (1908), facsimile

Pankhurst's detailed account of working conditions and wages, illustrated with reproductions of the gouache studies she had made in the workplaces she visited, was published as an illustrated article 'Women Workers of England' in the *London Magazine* in November 1908.

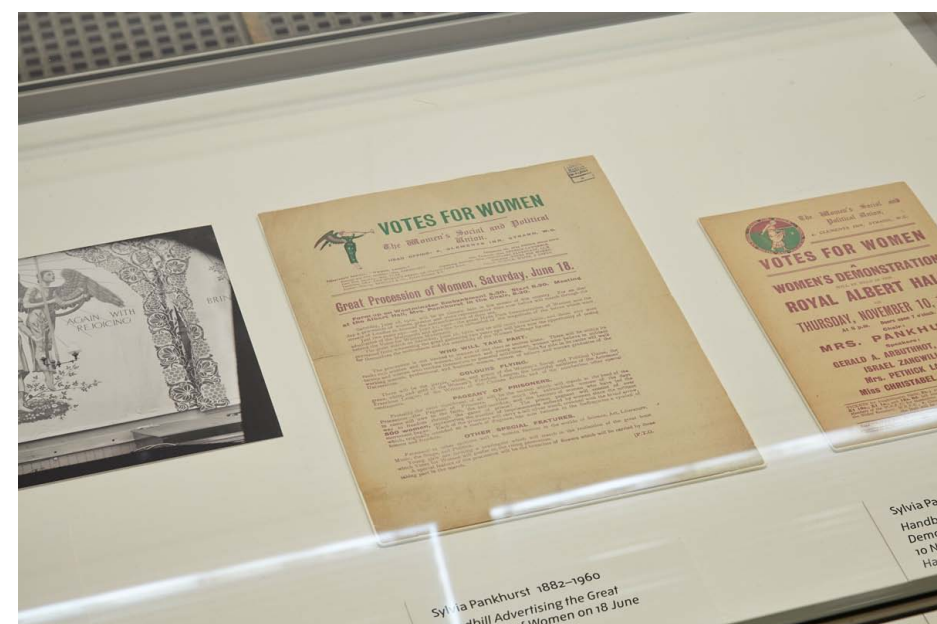


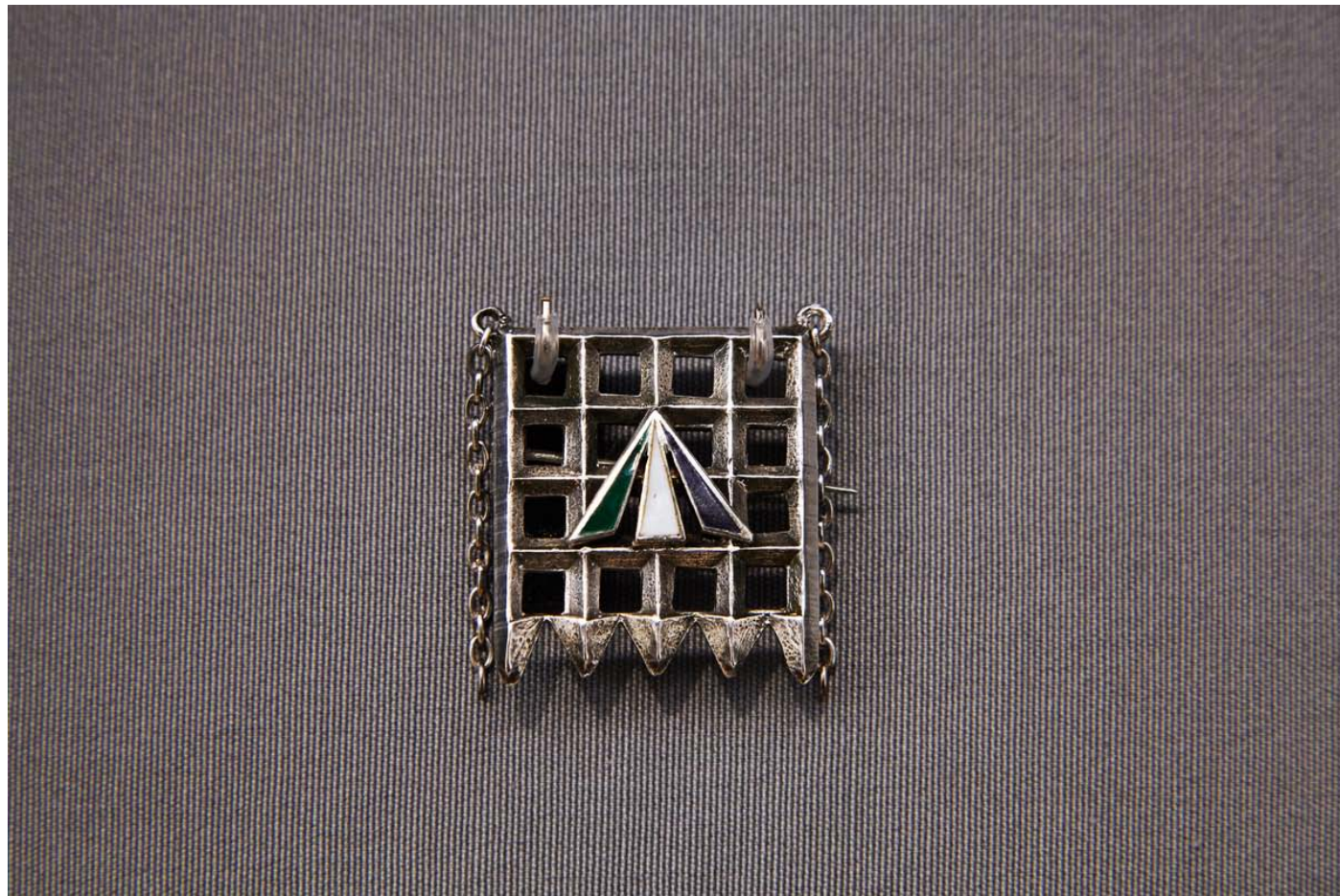
Untitled: Three Portraits of Young Women, c.1910, chalk on paper



Designs for the WSPU

Pankhurst's designs for the WSPU quickly evolved from depicting women workers in a social-ist realist style, as seen on an early membership card which reflects the origins of the WSPU in the Manchester labour movement. She began to develop more symbolic representations of the organisation's ideals and values, designing several key images which were extensively used on printed materials, banners, badges and crockery. All of these were executed in the WSPU colours of purple, white and green, introduced by Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in 1908 and symbolising dignity, purity and hope. The most widely used of Pankhurst's designs was the 'angel of freedom' blowing a trumpet. Others included a woman breaking free from prison gates, stepping over broken chains and carrying a 'votes for women' streamer, and a woman sowing the seeds of emancipation.





Holloway Brooch c.1909 Enamel silver

The Holloway Brooch, designed by Sylvia Pankhurst, was first mentioned in Votes for Women on 16 April 1909. It was presented to WSPU members on their release from prison in addition to the illuminated addresses. The design of the brooch combines a silver portcullis, symbol of the House of Commons, with an enamel convict's arrow in the suffragette colours of purple, white and green.



A Suffragette Procession in Hyde Park c.1910

Photograph by Christina Broom 1862 - 1939

This photograph shows the WSPU's procession to Hyde Park on 23 July 1910. Sylvia Pankhurst holds a placard in the shape of the portcullis, accompanied by Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence on the left and Emily Davison on the right. The placard references the Holloway Brooch designed by Pankhurst and awarded by the WSPU to members who served a period of imprisonment for their militant suffragette activity.



Illuminated Scroll Presented to Elsa Gye by the WSPU c.1909
Print on paper

Illuminated addresses designed by Sylvia Pankhurst and signed by Emmeline Pankhurst were awarded to WSPU members on their release from Holloway Prison, where they had been imprisoned for militant suffragette activities. This address was presented to Elsa Gye who had been arrested for a disturbance at the House of Commons on the 24 February 1909.



Suffrage Tea Set 1909, Porcelain

This tea set, designed by Sylvia Pankhurst and incorporating her 'angel of freedom' symbol, was commissioned by the WSPU from the pottery firm HM Williamson & Sons of Longton, Staffordshire. It was used in the refreshment room at The Women's Exhibition and was then sold to WSPU members to raise funds for the suffrage campaign.



Sylvia Pankhurst in her Studio, c.1904-5



On right hand wall:
West Ham WSPU Banner 1909-1910, facsimile

In right hand corner:
Working table of the Emily Davison Lodge 2010-3
by the Emily Davison Lodge (Olivia Plender and Hester Reeve)
Letter, drawings, audio

The Emily Davison Lodge was originally established by her friends, the militant suffragettes Mary Leigh and Edith New, after Emily Davison's death at the Epsom Derby in 1913. Very little evidence remains of its activities although regular meetings were held in High Holborn until its disappearance in the early 1940s. Olivia Plender and Hester Reeve instigated 'The Re-inauguration of The Emily Davison Lodge' in 2010 as part of a series of commissions for the Women's Library and in order to uphold the Lodge's original mission: 'to perpetuate the memory of a gallant women by gathering together women of progressive thought and inspiration with the purpose of working for the progress of women according to the needs of the hour.'

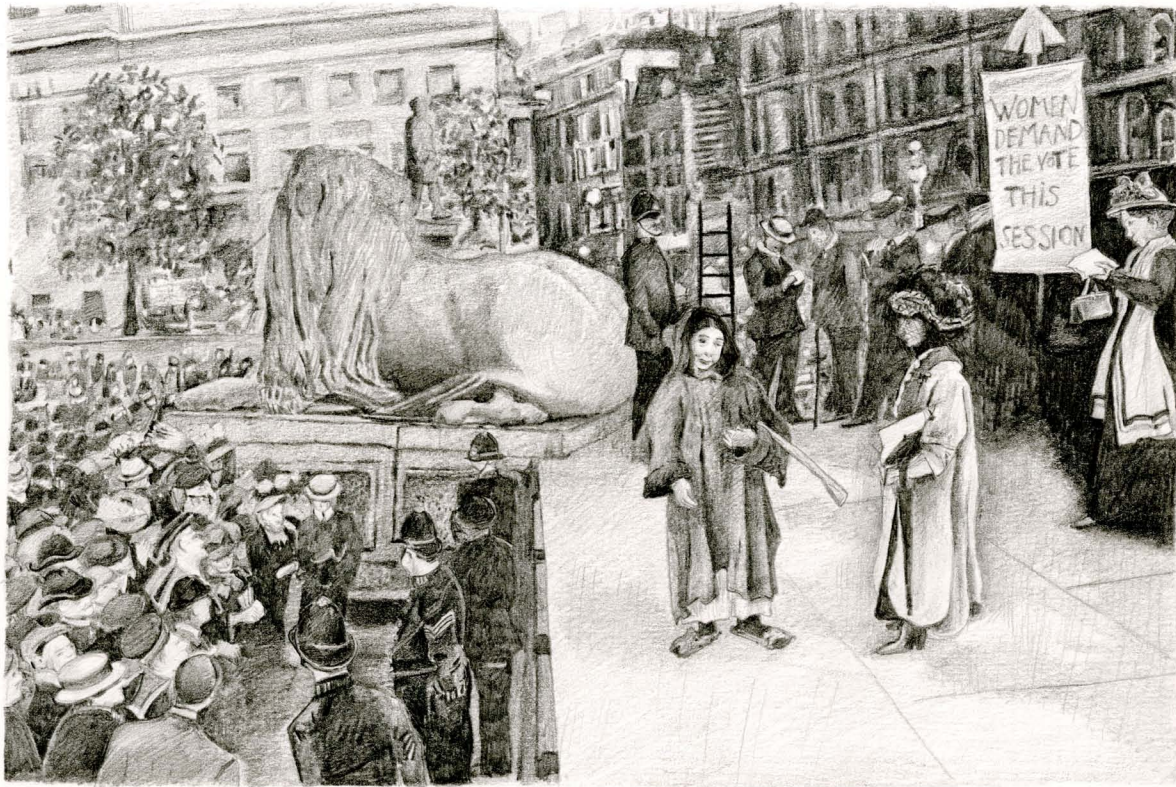
Drawings (from the series *The Suffragette as Militant Artist*)

- 1 14 January 1913. Sylvia Pankhurst throws a lump of concrete at a painting (Andrew Carrick Gow *Speaker Finch being held in the Chair* 1912) in St Stephen's Hall, The Houses of Parliament. She had just received news that the government had refused to allow a women's suffrage amendment bill to be introduced despite an earlier promise to do so.
- 2 27 July 1913. Sylvia Pankhurst, her licence expired under the Cat and Mouse Act (the temporary release of suffragette prisoners about to die from hunger striking) manages to fool the police by disguising herself as a shepherd so she can address a Suffragette rally at Trafalgar Square. Her speech issued the adoption of a resolution to carry a 'Women's Declaration of Independence' to Downing Street. One journalist compared the event to the Battle of Valmy at the French Revolution, quoting Goethe: 'Today marks a turning-point in history, and we can say we were present.'
- 3 5 November 1913. Sylvia Pankhurst with Sir Francis Vane and one of his army officers at Bow Baths for the inaugural drill of the People's Army (members of her East End Federation of Suffragettes). She had arrived in disguise and managed to escape undetected despite the presence of 300 mounted police men sent to arrest her.
- 4 18 June 1914. Released from prison where she had been on hunger strike, Sylvia Pankhurst drags her weakened body to the base of the statue of Oliver Cromwell outside the Houses of Parliament in order to force Prime Minister Asquith to finally receive a deputation of working women. Asquith's acceptance marks a turning point in the fight for women's suffrage. The historian George Dangerfield wrote that it was 'one of the most important moments in English history' and a 'scene that deserves to be recorded on canvas.'
- 5 July 1920. Refused a passport by the British government, Sylvia Pankhurst is a stowaway on a Norwegian ship bound for the Soviet Union where Lenin has invited her to attend the 2nd Congress of the 3rd International.

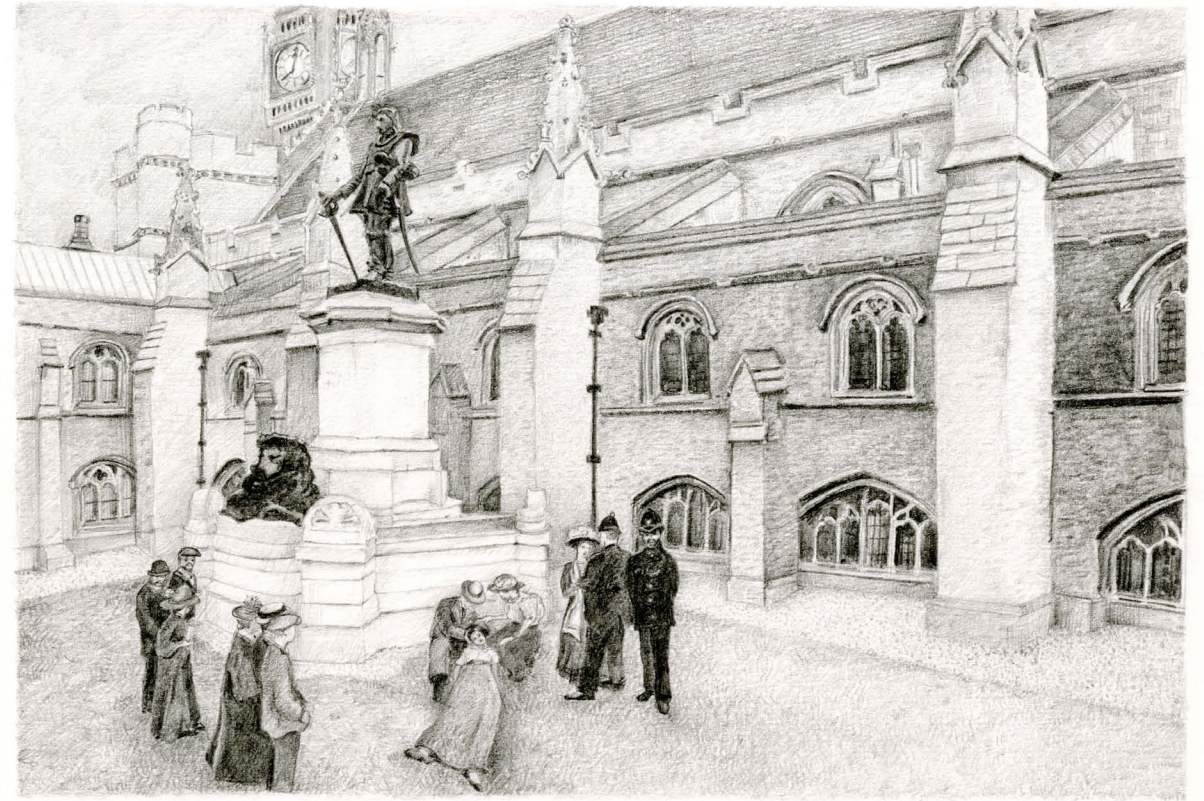


The Suffragette as Militant Artist 1, Pencil on paper drawing, by the Emily Davison Lodge. Exhibited at Tate Britain as part of *The Working Table of the Emily Davison Lodge* 2013/14.

For further details of drawings see key on left



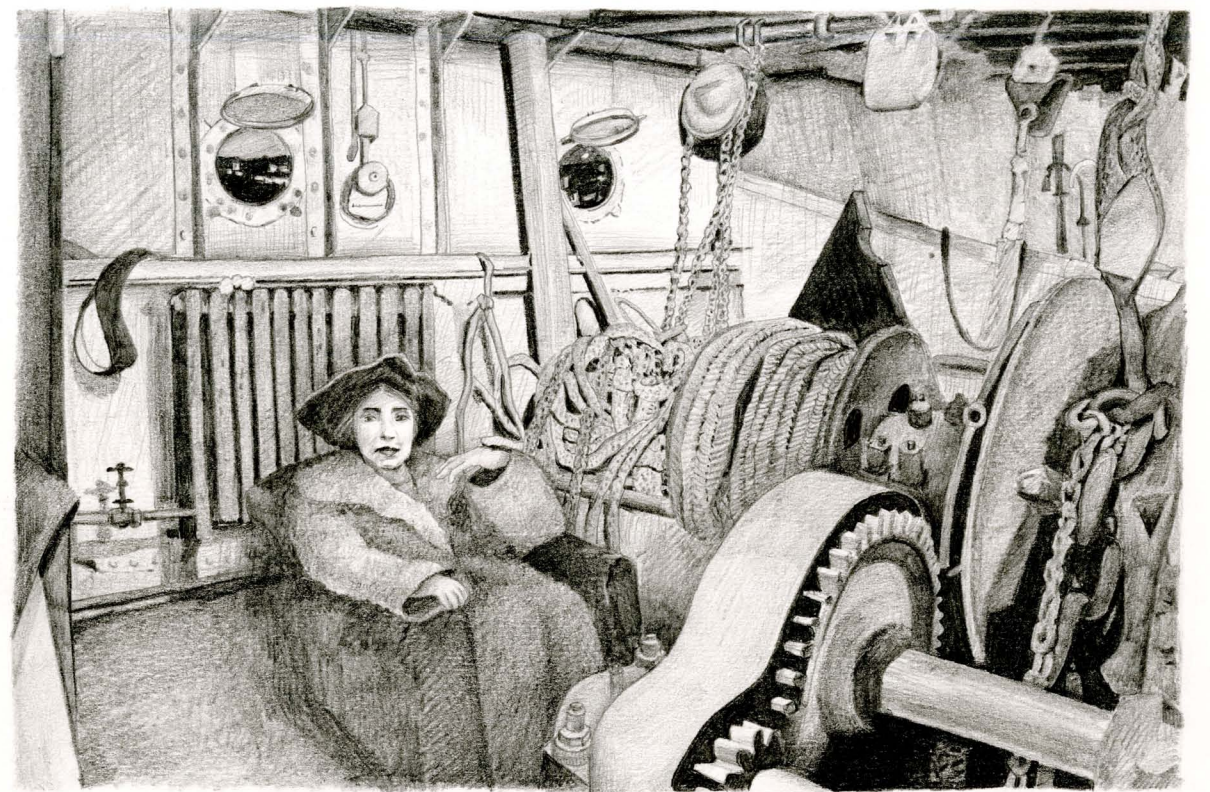
The Suffragette as Militant Artist 2, Pencil on paper drawing, by the Emily Davison Lodge Exhibited at Tate Britain as part of *The Working Table of the Emily Davison Lodge* 2013/14



The Suffragette as Militant Artist 4, Pencil on paper drawing, by the Emily Davison Lodge Exhibited at Tate Britain as part of *The Working Table of the Emily Davison Lodge* 2013/14



The Suffragette as Militant Artist 3, Pencil on paper drawing, by the Emily Davison Lodge Exhibited at Tate Britain as part of *The Working Table of the Emily Davison Lodge* 2013/14



The Suffragette as Militant Artist 5, Pencil on paper drawing, by the Emily Davison Lodge Exhibited at Tate Britain as part of *The Working Table of the Emily Davison Lodge* 2013/14