

Subversive suffrage stitches

Sarah Sexton explores how, 100 years ago, sewing skills helped win Votes for Women

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago, the Representation of the People Act became law on 6 February 1918, allowing some 40% of women in Britain to vote in national elections for the first time. Those women must be over 30, and be householders, or the wives of householders, or British university graduates, or occupiers of property with an annual rent of at least £5. The legislation resulted from over 50 years of campaigning on a wide variety of social and political matters that had evolved from lobbying Members of Parliament to holding meetings, demonstrations and rallies in order to gain public attention.

Although it was considered unseemly for a woman to demonstrate in the streets, when Herbert Asquith, the new Prime Minister in 1908, said he needed proof that women really wanted the vote, the National Union of Women Suffrage Societies (the largest network throughout the country of women campaigning for enfranchisement) organised a procession through the capital to show him – and everyone else – that they did. On 13 June 1908, thousands of women from all walks of life and all parts of the country walked side by side through central London from the Embankment to the Albert Hall. Many women would doubtless have been apprehensive at risking their reputation and suffering ridicule, but as crowds watched and a party atmosphere developed, they said afterwards it didn't feel so dreadful after all.

The poster for local groups to organise and publicise this 1908 march depicted a bugler girl holding a banner, and as suffrage historian Elizabeth Crawford writes, 'It was banners that were recognised at the time – and are remembered today – as the most significant visual element of that procession'. The *Daily Express* wrote that 'never have such banners been seen in the London streets. They were works of art'; while another journalist reported that the women had 'recreated the beauty of blown silk and tossing embroidery'. At the Albert Hall, the banners were 'piled in terraced ranks of raw and flaming colour' framing the speakers' platform where they 'glowed like a beautiful piece of vivid coloured tapestry'.

Banner design

Many of these banners were designed by clergyman's daughter Mary Lowndes (1856–1929), who described herself in the 1891 census as an 'Artist Designer for Stained Glass'. Contemporary stained-glass quilter Gail Lawther points out, 'The bold lines of stained glass which are visible from a distance lend themselves well to large banners.' Mary Lowndes had set up the stained-glass firm of Lowndes & Drury (with glazier Alfred Drury) to provide studio space and the services of skilled craftspeople for artists to carry out their own independent commissions. Despite the fact that Mary was a professional artist, business partner and employer, she couldn't get a



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Top: The Bugler Girl, 1908: the poster for local groups to organise and publicise the march on 13 June 1908.

Above: Photographic postcard of women with the Edinburgh banner from Mary Lowndes Album.

Below: Writers' banner, appliquéd in black and cream velvet.



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mortgage because she was a single woman – an injustice that rankled. In her 50s, she had set up the Artists' Suffrage League ('suffrage' meaning the legal right to vote in public elections) whose aim was to further 'the cause of Women's Enfranchisement by the work and professional help of artists'. It produced posters, postcards, cartoons, Christmas cards, calendars, designs, illustrations and banners, enlisting the talents of men as well as women – Mary Lowndes thought it unprofitable 'to talk about any art with relation to the sex of the person who pursues it'.

For the June 1908 procession, members of the Artists' Suffrage League and others stitched, embroidered and appliquéd some 70 to 80 banners from January onwards, following Mary Lowndes' simple, uncluttered designs. The Women's Library holds an album of her watercolour sketches indicating design, size – 4' 6" by 6' 6" was large enough in case

of wind – and rich colours in striking combinations, some with swatches of fabric or pencil scrawls suggesting velvet or silk.

Designs for local suffrage societies displayed recognisable emblems associated with the town or region they were from – Mary Lowndes recommended using 'the old symbols always when they will serve' but with a new twist for the 'new thing we are doing'.

There were banners for women's diverse occupations – doctors, teachers, business and office workers, artists, actors, musicians, nurses, physical trainers, gardeners, farmers, foragers and homemakers. For the Writers' Suffrage League, Mary Lowndes designed a scrivener banner, a scrivener being someone who copies out letters and documents, particularly legal, business and historical records. But the Scriveners Guild complained that the banner didn't have its approval, so it was changed to 'Writers' and appliquéd in black

Above:
Suffragette banner carried by the Hammersmith branch of the Women's Social and Political Union

Below:
Pencil and watercolour design for scriveners banner from Mary Lowndes Album.



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and cream velvet.

Many banners depicted well-known women of the past, including Marie Curie, Caroline Herschel, Queen Elizabeth I, Boadicea, Elizabeth Fry, Queen Victoria, Joan of Arc, Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Jenny Lind and Florence Nightingale, the last being the only one of the 'heroines' still alive in 1908. Drawing attention to historical great and good women – 'the Valhalla of womanhood' wrote *The Sunday Times* – sent a powerful visual message that what suffrage campaigners were demanding – full citizenship as evidenced by the vote – was not really radical, threatening or novel after all. Altogether the banners summarised visually the range and relevance of the suffrage movement, being 'celebratory, commemorative, inspirational, educational and political all at once'.

Design and sewing skills

The *Daily Chronicle* observed that ‘the beauty of the needlework ... should convince the most sceptical that it is possible for a woman to use a needle even when she is also wanting a vote’. By the Edwardian period, needlework and embroidery were identified as amateur (not professional) crafts (not arts) in which middle- and upper-class women (only) were expected to become proficient, chastely sewing church hangings, altar cloths, drawing-room draperies and smoking caps in their separate sphere of the home. In turning to women’s traditional sewing skills for practical and economic reasons but deploying them in a political context, the women’s suffrage movement challenged and subverted conventional notions of what it meant to be a woman: needlework and embroidery represented femininity as a source of strength rather than evidence of weakness.

However, perhaps recognising the time and effort that the ‘subversive stitches’ had taken, Mary Lowndes jotted down her design methods in a ‘Banners & Banner-Making’ article so that anyone could make ‘a banner ... to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to flirt its colours for your pleasure’. To determine good colour combinations, she suggested fetching ‘in from the garden the most gorgeous flowers you can gather. Lay these together, trying contrast and harmony, and when you have got those colours you really like, decide upon them for your banner.’ Red and blue may be required, but ‘the whole question is what red, and what blue’. Her advice is to get hold of ‘the deepest blue spike of delphinium you can lay hands on, and beside it place, not a scarlet geranium, but a crimson lobelia. What is wrong now with red and blue?’ She goes on: ‘Now from these lovely flowers learn a further lesson in design. Fetch several crimson lobelias, and make the mass of them equal to the great mass of colour of the blue spike.’



IMAGE © MUSEUM OF LONDON

And then: ‘Why, the thing is spoilt! You begin to think red and blue will not look nice after all. It is not the colours that are wrong, however, it is the proportion in which they are brought together that causes discomfort, as the different proportion before gave delight. ... A little must now be said on the subject of material,’ she adds. ‘Never use anything ugly because it is expensive or because it is cheap. Do not use the wrong colour or the wrong tone because you have a piece of something “over” which would “just do”. If it is not exactly right it won’t do at all.’

The suffragette movement

Also furthering ‘the cause’ of the women’s vote were the deeds of a more militant group, the Women’s Social and Political Union, set up by Emmeline Pankhurst and others. A *Daily Mail* journalist was very derogatory about these

Above:
Suffragette banner carried by the Hammersmith branch of the Women’s Social and Political Union

‘little suffragists’; remembering his schoolboy French of adding the suffix ‘ette’ to a word to indicate a small version – cigar and cigarette, for instance – he called them not suffragists but ‘suffragettes’. Far from being offended, the Pankhurst group members embraced his term of derision, and suffragettes is how we now call not only them but, mistakenly, all women campaigning for the vote.

The suffragettes organised several of their own processions before 1913 for which they also made banners. They chose white, purple and green as their colours: white for purity, purple for loyalty and courage, and green for youth or regeneration. A suffragette banner for Hammersmith was decorated with an iris because the flower has all three colours; irises were very popular at the time anyway. In 1907, *Needlework Monthly* observed: ‘The pretty iris design is the favourite work of the season ... to be worked in



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silks ... for table covers, duchesse sets'. Beverley Cook, curator at the Museum of London, is struck by the contrast between the Lowndes banners and those made by local branches of the Women's Social and Political Union. 'The latter are often more "amateur" in the quality of the needlework and embroidery and appear composed of recycled fabric, such as curtaining, that was probably lying around the homes of the women.' She prefers these banners as 'they represent the spirit of comradeship and commitment of the "ordinary" lesser known suffragettes who worked together in a branch member's sitting room to create these visually powerful political statements'.

One huge purple, green and white banner in the Museum of London was first carried in a suffragette procession in June 1908, which commemorated 'From Prison to Citizenship' – many suffragettes imprisoned for their activities went on hunger strike, and many were forcibly fed. But this banner started its life as a signature quilt, designed and made by Ann Macbeth, who was head of the embroidery department at the

Glasgow School of Art, hence its Scottish art nouveau style lettering. The centre is made up of 80 pieces of linen that 80 suffragette hunger-strikers signed and which Ann Macbeth embroidered in purple cotton. She donated the quilt to a suffragette fundraising bazaar held in Glasgow in April 1910 – its asking price was £10 (at least £1,000 today) – where it was bought by a union leader from London and turned into a banner.

When (some) women finally won the vote in February 1918, that should have been the trigger for 'the suffrage demonstration to surpass them all',² but celebrations were muted because Britain was still at war. The National Union simply held a meeting at which the Artists' Suffrage League banners were displayed once again. When the House of Commons finally passed legislation just over a decade later, in 1928, giving women the vote on the same terms as men (that is, to those over 21 years old), Mary Lowndes was still putting her 'great artistry' into converting 'dingy London halls into palaces of delight and beauty' in pursuit of women's equality. Her

Left: Caroline Herschel banner, designed by Mary Lowndes. Caroline Herschel was an 18th/19th-century astronomer who discovered several comets. In 1828 she was the first female recipient of the Royal Astronomical Society's gold medal.

detailed arrangements for a United Franchise Demonstration state that 'it would be very nice if this banner-procession was mainly of the young: the people to be newly enfranchised'.

Stained-glass historian Peter Cormack describes Mary Lowndes as 'amongst the most significant Arts & Crafts pioneers in stained glass' because 'having first created a successful professional career for herself in the craft, she then found a way to open the same career path to other women'.³ In her thorough analysis of suffrage imagery, art historian Lisa Tickner concluded that she was 'probably (and despite her asthma) the most energetic and influential of all the artists working for the suffrage campaign'.⁴

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Sarah Sexton's current research project is the life and work of Mary Lowndes.

Sources

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References

¹ Tickner, p.69, ² Tickner, p.236, ³ Cormack, p.85, ⁴ Tickner, p.246

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Suffrage events

'At Last! Votes for Women

23 April – 31 August

LSE Library Gallery, 10 Portugal Street, London WC2A 2HD

An exhibition at the Women's Library focusing on the three main suffrage groups, including suffrage banners.

For more details, visit: www.lse.ac.uk/library/suffrage18

'Votes for Women'

Until 6 January 2019

Museum of London, 150 London Wall, London EC2Y 5HN

A display forming part of the national commemorations marking the centenary of the 1918 Act giving some women the right to vote for the first time.

For more details, visit: www.museumoflondon.org.uk