

## Representations of Class in the Artists' Suffrage League, 1907-1914

A young working-class woman, identifiable by her clogs and shawl, glares at a poster promoting legislation which would have reduced the working hours of women employed in factories in this 1908 poster by Emily Ford of the Artists' Suffrage League.<sup>1</sup> The caption of the image stresses, as an argument for women's suffrage, that working women had "never been asked" about factory legislation since they lacked the franchise. But had Ford herself, and artists like her, asked working women how they should be represented in suffrage art? At which points of the artistic process—ideation of suffrage posters



Figure 1

and banners, production of these goods in print shops or by hand, and consumption of artworks through purchase or use in political activities like protests and parades—were working-class women present? What can their presence or exclusion from the creation of suffrage art reveal about the class politics of the British suffrage movement? I plan to answer these questions in my thesis by studying the art and operations of the Artists' Suffrage League, one of the two major suffrage art organizations active in Britain between 1907 and 1914.

### **Background: Suffrage Art Organizations**

The Artists' Suffrage League was founded in 1907 by stained glass artist Mary Lowndes to assist with preparations for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies' (NUWSS)

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Card, "Seeing the Point: Using Visual Sources to Understand the Arguments for Women's Suffrage," 18; Ford, Emily. "They Have A Cheek I've Never Been Asked." Poster collection of Alice Park, 1903-1926, Gr-1, 4.. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/c/sch00846c00006/catalog>.

upcoming “Mud March,” which would be the first large-scale public demonstration held by suffragists.<sup>2</sup> The League remained affiliated with the NUWSS from its founding, and comprised only professional artists and no amateur artists or factory workers like the woman in Ford’s design.<sup>3</sup> It expected these professional artists to contribute their work on a volunteer basis, though it did hold regular design competitions with prizes ranging from one to five pounds.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the League differed from its main counterpart, the Suffrage Atelier, which welcomed amateur artists, paid its artists, and explicitly aimed to raise working women’s access to income by teaching them marketable craft skills.<sup>5</sup> The Atelier informally allied itself with the Women’s Social and the Political Union (WSPU) and the Women’s Federation League (WFL), organizations that represented the “militant” side of the suffrage campaign, while the NUWSS, with which the League affiliated, remained committed to non-violent agitation and thus represented the “constitutionalist” wing of the campaign.<sup>6</sup>

### **Historiography: Suffrage and Class**

Historians have consistently highlighted the class-based exclusivity of leading British suffrage groups, both constitutionalist and militant. In 1988, Jihang Park published a quantitative analysis of the makeup of major suffrage groups, which established that at least among the NUWSS, WSPU, and other large suffrage organizations, middle- and upper-class women dominated the ranks of suffragists.<sup>7</sup> Since then, scholars like Laura Schwartz and Jane Martin

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide, 1866-1928*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Schwartz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem*, 80-81.

<sup>4</sup> Tara Morton, “An arts and crafts society, working for the enfranchisement of women’: Unpicking the political threads of the Suffrage Atelier, 1909-1914,” in *Suffrage and the Arts*, 67; Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Morton, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Zoe Thomas, “Institutional Conservatism in Early Twentieth Century Women’s Art Organizations,” in *Suffrage and the Arts*, 32; Morton, 72; Dean Cooper-Cunningham, “Seeing (in)security, Gender, and Silencing: Posters in and about the Women’s Suffrage Movement,” 394.

<sup>7</sup> Jihang Park, “The British Suffrage Activists of 1913: An Analysis,” 148.

have applied this line of inquiry to specific social groups with ties to British suffrage.<sup>8</sup> In her 2019 *Feminism and the Servant Problem*, Schwartz studied the role of domestic servants in the suffrage campaign, noting their exclusion from the major organizations Park studied but stressing their political activity in the Domestic Workers' Union.<sup>9</sup> The class politics of suffrage are especially significant in light of the separate attainment of propertied women's franchise (1918) and full adult women's suffrage (1928).<sup>10</sup>

Tara Morton considered how these class politics played out in the realm of suffrage art in her 2018 article on the Suffrage Atelier. Considering the Atelier's more inclusive member base, public art classes, and payment scheme, Morton argued that the Atelier's work extended beyond artistic support for women's suffrage to offer "an arts and crafts alternative to women's industrial exploitation."<sup>11</sup> In her argument, the Atelier transcended the types of class-based exclusivity Park, Schwartz, and others have identified, instead using art as a tool to include working women in the suffrage campaign and offer them an additional source of income.

### **Research Proposal**

While Morton's work is important for revealing a suffrage organization which countered the movement's classist tendencies, without additional research on the representations of class in the League, suffrage art as a whole may be considered to have challenged the movement's classism. The stark differences between the operations of the League and the Atelier (admitting professional vs. amateur artists, conducting work on volunteer vs. paid basis, and creating art to support the constitutionalist vs. militant wings of the suffrage movement) lead me to hypothesize that suffrage art was not produced upon such egalitarian ideals within the League, but may have

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Martin, "Beyond Suffrage: Feminism, Education and the Politics of Class in the Inter-War Years," 411.

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz, 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Miranda Garret and Zoë Thomas, "Introduction," in *Suffrage and the Arts*, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Morton, 66.

instead *contributed* to the classism of the movement. My thesis' analysis of the class politics of the League and its artworks will therefore add to active scholarship on the class politics of the suffrage movement and contextualize recent scholarship on the Suffrage Atelier.

To investigate these questions, I plan to consult the Records of the Artists' Suffrage League, held at the Women's Library at the London School of Economics, to uncover discussions within the League about membership, content of artworks, competitions, production, and distribution.<sup>12</sup> Though the League is mentioned in a number of works about the suffrage movement and suffrage art, I have not identified any scholarship dedicated solely to the League, nor any scholarship which uses the Records of the Artists Suffrage League. This thesis would therefore not only contribute to an active area of research, but also introduce new archival materials to the conversation. I would supplement the records of the League with related collections. First, I would study posters by the League held at the Museum of London to analyze the League's artistic representations of class.<sup>13</sup> Back at the Women's Library, I would examine the Records of the Fawcett Society and its Predecessors, which includes materials from the NUWSS.<sup>14</sup> This collection would allow me to identify correlations between representations of class in the League's art and class-related policies or attitudes of the NUWSS. Finally, the Autograph Letter Collection: Women's Suffrage<sup>15</sup> and the Josephine Butler Letters Collection,<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Records of the Artists' Suffrage League, Ref. No. 2ASL, The Women's Library, London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom. <https://archives.lse.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=2ASL>

<sup>13</sup> Records of the Artists Suffrage League, *ArchivesHub*, <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/61379fc5-81ad-30d4-90e0-3c7ea100cccb?terms=artists%20suffrage%20league>.

<sup>14</sup> Records of the Fawcett Society and its Predecessors, Ref. No. 2LSW, The Women's Library, London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom. <https://archives.lse.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=2LSW&pos=2>.

<sup>15</sup> Autograph Letter Collection: Women's Suffrage, Ref. No. 9/01, The Women's Library, London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom. <https://archives.lse.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=9%2f01&pos=4>

<sup>16</sup> Josephine Butler Letters Collection, Ref. No. 3JBL, The Women's Library, London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom. <https://archives.lse.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=3JBL&pos=5>.

both held at the Women's Library, each contains correspondence between League artists like Mary Lowndes, Emily Ford, and Bertha Newcombe and suffrage leaders like Josephine Butler, Philippa Strachey, and Millicent Garret Fawcett. These letters would allow me to further explore the relationship between the League and the broader suffrage movement.

As Park and Schwartz stress, just because working-class women were rarely included in dominant organizations like the NUWSS and WSPU does not mean they were not active in the movement behind the scenes of these organizations or in organizations of their own. In light of this and considering Schwartz's success using the records of the Domestic Workers' Union, I plan to also consult the archive of the National Amalgamated Society of Printers' Warehousemen and Cutters, held at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.<sup>17</sup> This archive, with contents from 1902-1915, contains documents from a number of printers' unions which merged within the period to create the Society, including a women's section. The Society operated on Fleet Street in London, where two of the three printers the League paid to print their designs were located.<sup>18</sup> Based on the notable proximity of League-paid printers and this printer's union, I believe it is likely that some documents in this archive will be representative of the opinions and experiences of printers who aided in the production of League materials. This would not only shed light on the production practices behind League art, but could reveal working-class printers' attitudes about the League, its exclusivity, and its production practices.

I plan to begin my research with two weeks in London (June 20-July 1) to consult the Women's Library and Museum of London. I would spend the first week closely studying the records and posters of the League and the second week contextualizing my findings with the

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<sup>17</sup> National Amalgamated Society of Printers' Warehousemen and Cutters, 1902-1915, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom. <https://mrc-catalogue.warwick.ac.uk/records/PWC>

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Marsh and John B. Smethurst, *Historical Directory of Trade Unions*, 50; Tickner, 18.

Women's Library collections discussed above. Then, I would travel to Coventry to consult the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick for one week (July 4-8), before heading to Paris for the July 11-13 workshop. Afterwards, I would return to London for one final week (July 14-20) to re-enter the Women's Library (and potentially other London archives) with new questions and approaches based on the feedback I receive from peers and faculty members in Paris.

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