

The 2009 Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture

Given by Jacqueline Mulhallen

A shortened version of Jackie's lecture

Sylvia Pankhurst is mainly known for her political activity, first as a member of the Women's Social and Political Union, or 'suffragettes' and later as a dedicated socialist and anti-Fascist. It is not so well known that before this she was an artist. Brought up in a political family, she was inspired by Walter Crane's *The Triumph of Labour* and wanted from childhood to be a political artist and to decorate meeting places for working people.

When Sylvia's father died, she was 16. The family were left with debts and had to move and Charles Rowley, the artist, came to value the paintings. He was so impressed with Sylvia's work that he suggested she went to Manchester School of Art. She got a scholarship, and, while there, she won several more, including one to study in Venice where she stayed a year, studying at the Accademia delle Belle Arti. Her landlady offered her the opportunity to stay longer without paying rent, but her mother and sister wanted her to return to Manchester and she did so. On her return she found her mother had agreed for her to decorate an ILP hall in honour of her father – just the kind of work she wanted to do. But, while she was working on the project, Sylvia found that that particular ILP branch did not allow women to join. The Pankhursts were so angry that they founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) to fight on women's issues. Although Sylvia went on to study at the Royal College of Art (another scholarship) she was still very much involved with the WSPU, and this is typical of the way that at this stage her family life, her politics and her art were intertwined.

Indeed at the RCA she found a huge bias in favour of men, and questions were asked in Parliament at her instigation by her friend, the Labour leader Keir Hardie. When she left, it was a struggle to find work, but in addition she was in constant conflict about whether her art or her politics were more important; she felt that art was an indulgence whereas her political activity was needed. She suffered imprisonment, hunger strikes and forcible feeding, which adversely affected not only her health but also her artistic career. On the other hand, she got commissions through Keir Hardie, and designed a membership card and the Holloway brooch for the WSPU as well as the decorations for a Suffrage exhibition at the Princes Ice Rink in May 1909. A

speaking tour of America brought in some money. In 1908 she toured the north of England and Scotland, writing about and painting the conditions of women workers for *Votes for Women*, the WSPU magazine. A number of these paintings are extant.

In 1987, I wrote and performed for Lynx Theatre and Poetry, *Sylvia*, illustrated with 250 historical slides, including suffragette demonstrations and Sylvia's activities in World War I in Bow. For the play, William Alderson photographed nearly all of Sylvia's paintings which belonged either to Richard Pankhurst or were part of the collection made by Ernest O'Brien, the landlord of the Women's Hall Sylvia rented in the Old Ford Road. I continued my research because the play was so popular that it toured for five years and then was revived in 1997. In 1991, I bought from the catalogue *Woman and her Sphere* a copy of *The London Magazine* (1908) with an article on the northern tour by Sylvia Pankhurst. It was illustrated by seven reproductions of her paintings, only one of which belonged to the known collections. What is more, they include paintings of the chain and nail makers at Cradley Heath and the pit brow women at Wigan of which there are no known originals.

It was Cradley Heath which Sylvia visited first and she described it as 'a blighted landscape'. The women chainmakers were paid much less than the men and single mothers were left with so little that they had to go to the workhouse. The nail makers earned on an average 5 shillings a week when they worked as long as permitted, besides looking after the house and children too.

Sylvia went on to paint a women's co-operative boot factory in Leicester. She then went to Wigan to paint 'the pit brow lassies', the women who worked at the head of the pits. Despite doing heavy work, dragging tubs of coal around and picking out shale from coal, working a 12 hour day starting at 5am they earned half of the man's wage. She found in the potteries, Stoke on Trent that the lead glaze, used by all manufacturers except Wedgwood, caused paralysis, jaundice, miscarriage, and colic, and in a Glasgow cotton mill, where the cotton caused respiratory diseases, she found the atmosphere so stuffy that she nearly fainted. She thought that the women who worked outside were healthier, like the women she painted at Scarborough, who gutted and cleaned the herrings, and the agricultural workers around Berwick on Tweed.

I believe that it was in this series of paintings that Sylvia Pankhurst showed herself a true political artist since they make a political statement. They depict women at work, unaffected and unselfconscious, concentrating on what they

are doing. The job is equal to those men do, and the women also look after the children and the house, but they don't get equal wages or the right to vote. Sylvia's paintings are accurate in detail: her pottery paintings can be compared to photographs of the potteries taken around the same time and Denis Pye, who had worked in one, confirms the accuracy of her paintings in the cotton mill. The artist, Tony Coombs, found a resemblance to Van Gogh's paintings of workers and her style seems to be similar also to such work as Carl Moll's 'The Coffee Factory' or Askipov's 'The Laundresses'.

By 1912, the WSPU, weakened by splits, had turned to the breaking windows and the arson attacks of the late part of its campaign. Sylvia did not want it to fail and was still attached to her mother and sister. She realised that the campaign needed a strong working class base, one it had had in its early days in the North West of England. She gave up her art and decided to devote herself to building a mass organisation in East London of both men and women. Two years later the Prime Minister, Asquith, agreed to receive a deputation of women from her East London Federation of Suffragettes; their arguments may well have been instrumental in his later changing his mind about votes for women. The war followed; Sylvia was involved in relieving the terrible conditions of women in East London, anti-war work and support for the Russian Revolution. Later, she was consistent in her opposition to Fascism, the cause of Ethiopia and many others.

Sylvia never went back to her art. She had become a prominent leftwing leader, and there was no room for it in her eventful life. She herself regretted that she gave up her profession at such a young age, when she considered she 'was just becoming efficient from the technical point of view'. Yet her commitment to a high professional standard of art was the very reason she could not return to it, since she would have been dissatisfied with a lower quality than she had attained before. Her achievement as an artist is impressive, even though there are so few of her works extant and she never really reached her potential. Yet to regret that she gave it up for her political career would be to miss the point. Divorced from the political movement, Sylvia may have become technically more proficient, but she would never have painted her series of portraits of working women. Without her politics she would not have been the artist she was.