

V&A Archive Research Guide

Suffragettes and the V&A

V&A

The Suffragette movement had a profound effect on London's museums and galleries. Mary Richardson's attack on Velazquez's *The Toilet of Venus* (the 'Rokeby Venus') at the National Gallery in 1914 was a dramatic signal that the Women's Social and Political Union intended to target cultural institutions in their bid to secure women the vote, and according to one source of intelligence, it was decided at a meeting of militants 'to continue outrages on galleries and museums until not a picture remained unharmed in London' (archive ref. [ED 84/438](#)). While attacks also took place outside London – 13 pictures were damaged in the Manchester Art Gallery in 1913 – the concentration of art treasures in the capital and their susceptibility to attack by fire, acid or other destructive means spread alarm among the directors of London's national museums.

The V&A itself escaped largely unscathed: intelligence of plots in 1913–14 to deface valuable books and manuscripts in the National Art Library, attack the Raphael cartoons, and smash china in the Ceramics department proved to be unfounded (or not pursued), but someone did use a hat-pin to scratch the phrase 'Votes for Women' on the handrail in Room 100.



The suffragettes' militancy, however, forced the V&A to make radical (if in some cases temporary) changes to its admission procedures: sticks, umbrellas, bags and parcels were left at the entrance (ladies' muffs were subject to 'discreet' examination); several galleries, including the Jones galleries, the Ceramics and Salting collections, and the Loan Court were closed to the public; the number of warders was increased, bolstered further by cleaners and attendants, and plain clothes detectives mingled with visitors. Proposals to admit women by ticket or ban them from entry altogether were rejected.

Significantly, the suffragettes' actions contributed to the Museum's decision to abolish admission charges in 1914. This was made in part because it was felt that the charges were deterring visitors from taking guided tours, but also because the Board of Education considered that 'the increase in the number of visitors which is likely to result from the abolition of the fees may be expected to provide some additional security for the Collections' against possible suffragette 'outrages'.

An internal memorandum advised that when detaining a woman, she should be seized by the wrists, and that precautions should be taken against pepper being thrown into the warder's eyes, allowing the suffragette to effect her escape. The intervention of World War 1, however, put end to the suffragettes' attacks on museums and galleries.

The following files in the V&A Archive contain papers and press cuttings relating to measures taken against the threat of suffragette action in the Museum and are available for study in the Blythe House Reading Room:

- Notices to the Press, 1880–1913
[ED 84/181](#)

- Police and Warding, 1912
[ED 84/201](#)
- Police and Warding, 1912–14
[ED 84/202](#)
- Police and Warding, 1914–17
[ED 84/203](#)
- Hours of opening and admission of the public and students to the Museum, 1911–14
[ED 84/218](#)
- Hours of opening and admission of the public and students to the Museum, 1914 –18
[ED 84/219](#)
- Possibility of damage by suffragettes, 1913–14
[ED 84/438](#)
- Press cuttings albums
[MA/49/2/81, 91-93](#)

Further reading

- Cockroft, V. Irene. *New Dawn women: women in the Arts & Crafts and suffrage movements at the dawn of the twentieth century*. Compton, Surrey: Watts Gallery, 2005. NAL pressmark: 608.AG.0371
- Crawford, E. *The women's suffrage movement: a reference guide, 1866–1928*. London: UCL Press, 1999
- Holton, S. S. *Feminism and democracy: women's suffrage and reform politics in Britain, 1900–1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986
- Holton, S. S. *Suffrage days: stories from the women's suffrage movement*. London: Routledge, 1996
- Tickner, Lisa. *The spectacle of women: imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907–14*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1987. NAL pressmark: 511.E.14
- *A Second viewing: an exhibition of Suffragette banners, posters and photographs, from the Fawcett Library, compiled by the Women Artists Slides [sic] Library: an International Women's Day celebration from March 7th-28th '86*. [London]: W.A.S.L., 1986. NAL pressmark: 209.T.149

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Access

The V&A Archive is located at Blythe House, near Olympia in West London and can be consulted by appointment only.

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Image:

Commemorative Suffragette silk scarf with purple, green and white vertical stripes. Museum no. T.20-1946. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London