ART AND OCCUPATION

Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst
The Chainmaker 1907

A slender woman her auburn hair piled high on her head bends forward intent on her work. The long skirt, neat blouse (sleeves rolled up) and tidy apron contrast starkly with the bare bricks, rough floors and barred windows of her grim surroundings. To her left steam rises from a bucket of water (bosch) in which a pair of tongs is cooling. To her right a wooden crate crammed with rubble and covered with a layer of ash serves as her workbench, on top of which rest the tools of her trade—‘dolly’ (hammer), ‘hardy’ (gauge/cutter), ‘swedge’ (mould), ‘dog’ (hook) and ‘bickon’ (anvil—just visible at her waist). Her left hand grips a wooden lever, which operates the bellows for the small coke-fired hearth in front of her. (The mechanism for the next work station is visible on the right.) [1]

This simple but beautifully executed gouache painting (now lost) does little to suggest the dramatic impact that the subject and the painter would have on the lives of 20th century women. She is a Cradley Heath chainmaker and the artist is Sylvia Pankhurst, the political activist and Suffragette. The picture is one in a series Sylvia completed during a 1907 tour of worksites in Northern England and Scotland witnessing the lives of working women and recording their struggle. She visited pottery workers (Staffordshire), shoemakers (Leicestershire), pit brow women (Wigan), fisherwomen (Scarborough), agricultural workers (Berwickshire), mill women (Glasgow) and chain makers [2]. At Cradley Heath, she lodged at a confectioner’s shop and went out each day to paint [3] creating a precise record of a typical backyard chain shop, which although realistic cannot begin to convey the hardship, physical grind and appalling conditions that the ‘sweated’ women faced. In 1910, these ‘white slaves of England’ [4] won a famous but bitter 10-week strike, doubling their wages and helping to establish the principle of a national minimum wage [5]. None of Sylvia’s paintings was ever exhibited or sold although Chainmaker did appear on the front cover of The London Magazine (1908) [6] and others in the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) newspaper Vote for Women (1911) [7].

(Estelle) Sylvia Pankhurst was born at Old Trafford, Manchester in 1882, the second of five children of Dr Richard Pankhurst (a barrister) and his wife Emmeline. Sylvia grew up in a household immersed in radical politics and women’s rights campaigns [8]. She attended schools in Southport and Manchester before winning scholarships to Manchester Art School (1898), then Venice’s Accademia and finally London’s Royal College of Arts (1900) [9] when she became closely involved with Keir Hardie, founder of the Labour Party. In 1906, she gave up her studies to devote herself to the suffrage campaign and the WSPU, resulting in her many arrests. During World War I, she adopted an anti-war stance and following uprisings in Ireland and Russia briefly joined the British Communist Party, visiting Moscow and meeting Lenin. Back in London, she fell in love with Silvio Corio an exiled Italian socialist and bore him a son. Together they battled against fascism and fought for Ethiopia’s independence after Mussolini’s invasion (1935). After Silvio died in 1954, Sylvia went to live in Ethiopia at the invitation of Emperor Haile Selassie. She died in 1960 and following a state funeral was buried at Trinity Cathedral, Addis Ababa in a special plot reserved for Ethiopia’s heroes [8].

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Women chainmakers no longer struggle in the backyards of Cradley Heath but in the UK almost 4 million people, attracted by the prospect of flexible hours, family friendliness and improved work-life balance, work at home [10] in manufacturing (footwear, medical supplies, electronic goods and car components), computer-driven teleworking and as paid and unpaid carers [11]. Their employers enjoy reduced overheads, low absenteeism, enhanced performance and increased productivity [12]. However, homeworking is not without its risks [13], including isolation and other more insidious psychosocial pressures [14]. Standards of best practice [15] clearly need to be promulgated if exploitation, particularly of low-skilled workers is to be avoided. Only in Paradise is the work week ‘fixed at thirty hours’ [16].

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Anne Spurgeon who suggested this painting, to Curator Jo Moody for providing technical information and to Jackie Mulhallen for numerous e-mails, articles, images, slide presentations and general encouragement in preparing the article.

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