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Abstract The British female suffrage movement reached its militant height in the spring of 1914. At this time, despite decades of prior campaigning, women were still denied the right to a democratic vote, and supporters of an equal franchise found themselves resorting to increasingly extreme measures. Suffragettes were engaged in a range of violent activities devised to draw public and political attention to their cause. Window-smashing and arson were common tactics. On March 10, 1914, the situation intensified with the emergence of a new form of militancy: iconoclastic attacks in museums and galleries. The suffragette Mary Richardson instigated the campaign with an audacious hatchet assault on The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus) by Diego Velázquez. Her act scandalized the nation, and stimulated a wave of attacks on artworks that would continue for five months. This article investigates suffragette iconoclasm during 1914, an under-explored chapter in the history of British museums and galleries. The article begins by examining the background to the phenomenon, before discussing the actions and intentions of the perpetrators. It analyzes the communicative successes and failures of the tactic as an activist weapon, determining that the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the women’s motives prevented the campaign from substantively changing the fortunes of the female suffrage movement prior to the First World War.

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On May 23, 1914 the London newspaper the Times published an article entitled ‘Suffragists and the King.’ This report described the chaotic aftermath of an attempt by militant suffragists to lead a deputation to Buckingham Palace on May 21. The forcible prevention of the suffragists from presenting their grievances before the King, and the subsequent arrest of sixty-six protesters, had provoked an eruption of disorder and violence across London, from disruptions of performances at His Majesty’s Theatre to window-smashing in Whitehall. Yet the Times was principally concerned with one particular series of incidents – a spate of
assaults on artworks that followed the deputation. Five Venetian paintings in the National Gallery had been attacked by a suffragette on May 22, while, in a simultaneous but separate incident, another suffragette had damaged George Clausen’s Primavera at the Royal Academy. Since March 1914 suffragette iconoclasm had already claimed three artworks, and a further five would be targeted in the coming weeks. The Times condemned this latest episode as a continuation of the suffrage movement’s “campaign of wanton attacks on works of art.”

The struggle for an equal franchise in Britain had been lengthy. Campaigning throughout the 19th century had gradually earned women improved legal rights to custody of their children, retention of their own property and earnings, and established grounds for divorce. However, women’s right to vote proved widely unpalatable. Agitation for female suffrage began in the 1860s, but the movement gained little headway until the adoption of militant tactics by the Women’s Social and Political Union in 1905. This maneuver injected the cause with greater publicity and renewed determination. In 1918 the government finally passed the Representation of the People Act, conditionally opening the franchise to 8.5 million women.

The role of militant tactics in securing this concessionary measure would go on to become a subject of debate. Nevertheless, in spring 1914 many suffragists believed militancy to be the most effective means of obtaining the vote. As the suffragette Ivy Bon asserted: “It is the only way we shall get it.”

At this stage in the campaign, amidst growing impatience and escalating violence, some women turned to acts of iconoclasm: the deliberate damage or destruction of works of art. These acts took place inside public museums and galleries, with perpetrators using concealed weapons to inflict physical harm on exhibited paintings and drawings. In modern-day terminology, such behavior might be described as ‘art vandalism,’ yet this phrase suggests a meaningless act carried out by an ignorant or thoughtless assailant. In fact, the attacks were purposeful and resolute, undertaken with a common agenda in mind. It is far more appropriate, therefore, to use the term ‘iconoclasm.’

The iconoclastic offensive began on March 10, 1914 with an audacious assault on The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus), a 17th century masterpiece by Diego Velázquez. A young woman named Mary Richardson entered the National Gallery armed with a hatchet and struck the painting at least seven times, breaking its protective glass and slashing the canvas. Her action scandalized the nation, and inspired a wave of further assaults on artworks that would continue for five months, until the outbreak of the First World War necessitated a cessation in suffragist activities.

This series of attacks became a significant milestone in the history of modern iconoclasm; the first ever sustained campaign to focus exclusively on artworks housed in museums and galleries. But how did this situation arise? How did museums and galleries become a key battleground in the struggle for an equal franchise, what did activists hope to achieve by damaging works of art, and how successful did this tactic ultimately prove?

Iconoclasm was just one form of protest in a “long list of outrages” perpetrated by the suffragettes. The phenomenon can only really be understood when set against the wider
backdrop of developing militancy, a trend which had started years before with the emergence of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU).

A group of women, led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel, founded the WSPU in 1903. The Pankhursts dismissed the peaceful constitutional strategies of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), rallying followers with the motto “Deeds not words.” This principle was put into action on October 13, 1905, when, upon being expelled from a Liberal meeting in Manchester, Christabel Pankhurst committed a technical offence by spitting at a policeman. She and her accomplice, Annie Kenney, refused to atone for their actions with a fine, and were sentenced to imprisonments of one week and three days respectively. The story gained much publicity. As Antonia Raeburn comments: “Not only was Manchester roused but the whole country read about the episode in the morning papers.”

Thereafter, the WSPU drew attention to the suffrage cause through conspicuous and sensational protests, including deputations, rallies and heckling Members of Parliament. The term ‘suffragette’ was coined by the Daily Mail in January 1906 to distinguish WSPU supporters, with their radical brand of activism, from ‘suffragists’ who favored constitutional methods. The name caught the public imagination, and today it is still used to differentiate between militant and non-militant arms of the female suffrage movement in Britain.

Somewhat ironically, suffragettes found justification in the words of William Gladstone, who had remarked in 1884 that “if no instructions had ever been addressed in political crises to the people of this country, except to remember to hate violence and love order and exercise patience, the liberties of this country would never have been attained.” Their campaign was not without support; in 1906 George Bernard Shaw told the Tribune that “Women should have a revolution. They should shoot, kill, maim, destroy until they are given the vote.”

However, this momentum did not translate into the political arena. Despite sympathy in principle from many Liberal politicians, a succession of women’s suffrage bills and amendments to male suffrage bills were talked out of Parliament. The precedent had been set by the defeat of John Stuart Mill’s amendment to the 1867 Reform Act. The repeated failures of the Conciliation Bill in July 1910 and November 1911, and the women’s suffrage amendment to the Electoral Reform Bill in January 1913, demonstrated negligible progress. In each instance, proposals were either ruled against or delayed beyond redemption. Suffrage societies called periodic truces in their militant behavior to indicate support of each new Bill and maximize its chances of success. Every defeat heralded renewed and amplified campaigns of violence.

WSPU members were increasingly led to believe that the only way to break the political stalemate was to embrace militancy. Emmeline Pankhurst later recollected that “We had exhausted argument. Therefore either we had to give up our agitation altogether, as the suffragists of the eighties virtually had done, or else we must act, and go on acting, until the selfishness and the obstinacy of the Government was broken down, or the Government themselves destroyed.” A similar opinion was voiced by Teresa Billington Greig, a prominent member of the Women’s Freedom League: “Forty years of gentle persuasion has borne no fruit for women.”
There was opposition to intensified militancy, not only from the growing Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League, but also from sympathizers. In a letter to the editor of the *Times* dated August 31, 1912, Annie Besant warned that “men have ever used violence to gain their ends, and there is a danger that women may follow their bad example, and become second-rate men in their political methods, instead of heroic women.” The notion that militancy contradicted the feminist ideal was commonly held.

By 1913 the remaining militant core of the WSPU appeared to have reached a point of no return. Aware that a retreat from violence would signify a weakness of will and diminish valuable press coverage, the WSPU leadership also found it ever more difficult to exercise restraint over its members. As Brian Harrison identifies, an atmosphere of pressurised one-upmanship had become entrenched among followers. Novel modes of protest had always been encouraged by the Pankhurs, and initiative-taking gradually became an unruly guiding principle, with women embarking upon unauthorized acts of window-smashing, hunger-striking and arson. As early as November 1909, the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, told Sir Edward Grey: “I am in a state of constant anxiety touching the safety of the P.M.” Extremist WSPU members were in the minority, but such fears were not unfounded. Two months previously, Prime Minister Asquith had been subjected to a barrage of slate tiles, hurled by two suffragettes from a factory roof, as he left a meeting in Birmingham.

The WSPU’s escalation in criminality coincided with a change in targets. Rather than direct their efforts exclusively against political figures and institutions, militants began to adopt protest methods that would affect the general public – cutting telegraph wires, destroying letters, defacing golf courses and burning down railway stations. The State Assurance Company estimated the total damages attributed to suffragette militancy to be £250,000 in 1913 alone. As well as causing costly disruption to everyday public life, this new policy was engineered to injure symbols of established male dominance.

Cultural institutions were a particular target. When Mrs. Cohen smashed a jewel case at the Tower of London in February 1913, it was not only the financial value of the case and exhibits at stake, but the emblematic value of the Tower itself. The incident prompted the pre-emptive closures of the Palaces of Kensington, Hampton Court and Holyrood, and a special guard was put on Nottingham Castle. Such measures were not an over-reaction. Mrs Cohen stated that, prior to selecting the Tower of London for her protest, she “pondered the matter very carefully,” studying a local guide to places of interest, including museums and galleries. Already, the British Museum and the central London art galleries had undergone a temporary closure after a severe spate of window-smashing on March 1, 1912. The readiness of the authorities to take these precautions confirmed cultural landmarks as potentially vulnerable establishments.

Following the attack at the Tower of London, episodes of this kind became more prevalent. A significant watershed was passed when the glazing was smashed on thirteen Victorian paintings in Manchester City Art Gallery on the April 3, 1913. This time the art collection was the subject of the assault, rather than the furnishings or structure of the building. Yet the incident cannot be clearly defined as suffragette iconoclasm. In contrast with later attacks, there are indications that the perpetrators intended only to break the glass covering each...
artwork, rather than to injure the actual paintings. As Rowena Fowler suggests, “the incident has more in common with the window smashing campaign than with the later attacks on works of art.” Even so, the case provided a clear precedent for the adoption of more resolute iconoclasm.

Between March and July of 1914, fourteen artworks were damaged as a result of nine separate attacks by suffragettes. The first and most infamous of these was the attack by Mary Richardson on the *Rokeby Venus* on March 10. Richardson was a particularly zealous militant with previous convictions for assault, wilful damage, obstruction and arson. Having struck the canvas several times with a hatchet, she was restrained, arrested and duly prosecuted.

It was initially assumed that the mutilation of the *Rokeby Venus* was a severe but isolated incident. However, the problem resurfaced a few weeks later. On May 4, the suffragette Mary Wood slashed John Singer Sargent’s portrait of *Henry James* on the opening day of the Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition. This portrait was a presentation piece commissioned by friends of Henry James, and it had been “greatly admired by the King,” which increased its cachet as a militant target. Eight days later security at the Royal Academy was breached again, when Gertrude (Mary) Ansell used a small axe to cause an estimated £15 worth of damage to a portrait of the *Duke of Wellington* by Hubert von Herkomer. A third and final attack at the Royal Academy was undertaken by Mary Spencer, who slashed George Clausen’s *Primavera* with a cleaver on May 22. On the same day Freda Graham entered the Venetian Room in the National Gallery and defaced five artworks with a hammer: *Portrait of a Mathematician* by Gentile Bellini, *The Death of St Peter, Martyr, The Agony in the Garden*, and *The Madonna of the Pomegranate* by Giovanni Bellini, and a votive picture from the School of Gentile Bellini. The National Gallery was closed to the public indefinitely following this episode.

Thereafter, iconoclastic attacks were launched across a broader range of galleries around the country, heightening the unpredictability of the phenomenon. A *Portrait Study of the King for The Royal Family at Buckingham Palace, 1913* by John Lavery, on display at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh, was subject to a hatchet assault by Maude Edwards on May 23. On June 3, a drawing by Francesco Bartolozzi entitled *Love Wounded* and a watercolor by John Shapland depicting *The Grand Canal* were destroyed at the Doré Gallery in London. Ivy Bon inflicted irreparable damage on both artworks before she could be restrained by the gallery manager. Fortunately, George Romney’s portrait of *Master John Bensley Thornhill* came to less harm when it was struck with a hatchet by Bertha Ryland on June 9. This artwork, on loan to Birmingham City Art Gallery, had been exhibited at such a height that Ryland could only reach the lower portion of the canvas, and those cuts she made were clean.

The final incident in this wave of attacks occurred at the National Portrait Gallery on July 17. Despite significant numbers of bystanders, Margaret Gibb succeeded in delivering three blows to the head area of John Everett Millais’s portrait of *Thomas Carlyle*. Throughout this period suffragettes repeatedly overcame gallery security. Further artworks might well have been damaged had the outbreak of the First World War not brought the situation to an abrupt conclusion.
Suffragette iconoclasm emerged as a result of escalating militancy, as extremist members strove to expand the policy of property destruction into new symbolic and financial areas. But what message were these women trying to communicate through their actions, and how successful were they?

Evaluation of the suffragettes’ message cannot be undertaken without considerable reliance on the example of Mary Richardson. She was both the initiator of the tactic, and its most articulate perpetrator. Invariably, it was her comments that were preserved for posterity. The accounts of the other women involved went mainly unrecorded. At best, they were limited to brief statements reproduced in the WSPU newspaper, the Suffragette. This imbalance of surviving documentation makes it impossible to assess the motives of each attacker individually. The bias towards Richardson’s perspective does, however, indicate the initial priorities and direction of the campaign.

For Richardson, the adoption of iconoclasm was a predominantly political calculation. By attacking a famous artwork in a renowned public art gallery, she endeavored to inflict a two-fold injury on the government.

On one hand, the Rokeby Venus attack was symbolic; proof that the government was unable to protect even the nation’s most valued cultural treasures from the determination of the suffrage movement. Richardson sought to illustrate the powerlessness of the authorities and destabilize public faith in their capabilities.

On the other hand, the assault had a strong financial aspect. Years later, Richardson explained her reasoning in terms of the dissatisfaction she felt towards the law and its application in 1914: “Values were stressed from the financial point of view and not the human. I felt I must make my protest from the financial point of view.”34 Slashing the Rokeby Venus was Richardson’s way of confronting the authorities on what she saw as their own monetary terms. The mutilation of any valuable artwork is a financial misfortune, but the fact that this painting had been acquired in 1905 for £45,000 made its subsequent destruction particularly calamitous. In court, the Keeper of the National Gallery estimated that the damage sustained had reduced its value by £10,000-£15,000.35 Although the loss did not affect the government directly, Richardson believed that politicians held financial worth in the highest esteem, and that the financial consequences of her act would force them to consider the suffrage cause more seriously.

In fact, a more immediately damaging financial implication for the government was the impact on British tourism. Repeated closures of major cultural institutions rendered Britain increasingly unattractive to overseas visitors, and diminished profits in this economic sector. Suffragette militancy in its wider sense was to blame for this situation, but incidents of iconoclasm exacerbated the problem. Two days after the Rokeby Venus episode, the Standard published an article devoted to the threat posed to tourism.36 Indeed, by August 1914 the National Gallery had received a letter from the Association of Managers of Hotels drawing attention to the “injurious effect of closing the Galleries on the Hotel trade.”37

Suffragette iconoclasm even put the international reputation of the government at stake. Following the assault on the Rokeby Venus, The New York Times was reported to have
remarked that “The British Government is getting precisely the sort of treatment it deserves at the hands of the harridans who are called militants for its foolish tolerance of their criminal behaviour.”

As a protest concerned with attaining political attention by injury to the government, Richardson’s act was evidently successful. The government was sufficiently alarmed by the symbolic and financial implications of the attack that questions on the subject were put before the Home Secretary, Reginald McKenna, in the House of Commons that very day.

Whether Richardson foresaw the full consequences of her actions is a matter of speculation, but she was certainly aware of the potential of iconoclasm as a political weapon. On January 16, 1911, the Dutch government had been similarly attacked via their national art collections, when a man assaulted Rembrandt’s famous painting the Nightwatch. The culprit believed that the authorities had deliberately prevented him from gaining employment, and reacted by stabbing the artwork with a cobbler’s knife. When asked by a journalist from De Echo about the reasoning behind his choice of target, the man replied that “it seemed to me to be the most expensive possession of the State.” Mary Richardson was well educated and travelled, and had received an artistic training. It is not unreasonable to suggest that she may have been familiar with this case.

Moreover, she may well have recognized comparable events in London. The murder of an American woman by her husband, and his subsequent suicide in the National Portrait Gallery on February 24, 1909, was documented prominently in the press. The damage inflicted on four paintings by a man with a metal rule in the National Gallery on January 23, 1913 created another media sensation. Although neither of these incidents was political in character, both demonstrated that public attention could easily be drawn by displays of violence in the perceived sanctum of an art gallery.

Regardless of whether Richardson drew from such examples, the Rokeby Venus attack showed her to be a shrewd tactician. To ensure that her political message was conveyed with optimum clarity she planned the assault at length. Her memoirs suggest that she sought and received Christabel Pankhurst’s authorization before embarking on any action. Even the timing of the attack, a response to the re-arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst in Glasgow on March 9, was not as spontaneous as it first appears. Richardson was furious to learn that the already infirm Mrs Pankhurst had been returned to Holloway Prison and obliged to resume a hunger and thirst strike. Many of Pankhurst’s supporters regarded this ‘Cat and Mouse’ treatment as torture, genuinely fearing for her life. The re-arrest was the catalyst that prompted Richardson to execute her plan. Yet she did not act rashly. Before setting out for the National Gallery she sent an official statement to the WSPU headquarters, which was forwarded to the press for publication. She was also sufficiently prepared to present her own legal defense in court on March 12.

The consistency of Richardson’s message is equally worthy of comment. Although the slashing of the Rokeby Venus had been conceived originally as a general attempt to injure the government, Richardson was able to communicate her protest more succinctly by associating her act with a specific injustice. Both her official press statement and legal defense speech focused on the plight of Emmeline Pankhurst. “Mrs Pankhurst seeks to
procure justice for womanhood,” the statement proclaimed, “and for this she is being slowly murdered by a Government of Iscariot politicians.”45 Similarly, upon being asked in court whether she appreciated that the Rokeby Venus was irreplaceable, Richardson replied that “no money under the sun could replace Mrs. Pankhurst. She was being killed slowly.”46 This reiterated argument sought to expose the hypocrisy of the situation, where a painting was valued above a life.

The suffragettes who followed in Mary Richardson’s wake presumably understood that by carrying out an act of iconoclasm they could send a strong message to the government. In practice, however, their communicative success rate was erratic. Today, few people are aware of the attacks that followed Richardson’s inaugural act. More importantly, many contemporaries judged them simply to be evidence of ‘wanton’ or ‘wild’ behavior rather than legitimate political agitation. The suffragette iconoclasts found increasingly that delivery of their message was frustrated by external factors. Press interest waned as the tactic lost its novelty, and the authorities’ adamant refusal to grant concessions stifled the nuances of their arguments.

In some respects, this communicative failure was also self-induced. Most of the iconoclasts who followed Richardson’s example aspired to emulate her by allying their actions to specific injustices. The injury to Lavery’s Portrait Study of the King, for example, was a response to the authorities’ interception of the Buckingham Palace deputation on May 21. Like Richardson, these women were also determined to be arrested, thereby creating the opportunity to publicize their cause in court and enter prison as martyrs. Bertha Ryland guaranteed her apprehension at Birmingham City Art Gallery by leaving a piece of paper with her name, address, and a statement near the damaged painting.47 Yet deviations from the model of the Rokeby Venus attack also occurred. The statements issued by perpetrators sometimes made convoluted demands. Mary Ansell’s statement called for both the recognition of suffragettes as equals of the Ulster terrorists, and for an end to the sexual abuse of women and girls;48 it was hardly a clear declaration of intent.

This apparent lack of direction was reinforced by the inability of some iconoclasts to articulate their arguments in court. The Times reported that Ivy Bon “shrieked furiously throughout the proceedings” on June 9, exclaiming: “I wish I’d smashed the whole lot.”49 Far from constituting a rational defense, Bon’s outburst was seen as proof that she had acted out of instinctive vengeance. Such behavior undermined the political headway made by Richardson, and prevented the campaign as a whole from being taken seriously.

Widespread misunderstanding and confusion regarding the women’s motives compounded their communicative failings. One particular issue that dogged the campaign was the belief that the perpetrators had acted not for purely political reasons, but according to additional feminist, or even anti-male, ideologies.

On February 22, 1952, nearly forty years after the mutilation of the Rokeby Venus, the Star interviewed Mary Richardson about the incident. Although Richardson reiterated her familiar rationale, linking her actions with the authorities’ treatment of Emmeline Pankhurst, she added with regard to the painting: “I didn’t like the way men visitors gaped at it all day long.”50 This suggestion that the artwork’s nude subject-matter had somehow prompted the
assault added a completely new dimension to her former justifications. It implied that she had objected to the portrayal of the female form as a sexual commodity. Slashing the *Rokeby Venus* was not only a political protest, therefore, but a social one.

The historian Lynda Nead advocates this notion, insisting that the case has “come to symbolize a particular perception of feminist attitudes towards the female nude.” Yet it seems unlikely that Richardson would have omitted this additional motivation from her statements and speeches in 1914 had it been of overt significance. It is not even mentioned in her 1953 memoirs. That she had “disliked the painting” is all she writes on her interpretation of it. It is possible that Richardson’s own recollections of the attack, and her reasons for it, altered gradually over time. However, a more satisfactory explanation is put forward by Dario Gamboni, who suggests that her comments in the *Star* were a conscious attempt to render her act more palatable to the values of a 1952 readership.

While this type of feminism was not a primary motive for Richardson, its influence cannot be dismissed entirely. Agitation for a female vote was part of a wider movement to redefine gender relations in Britain. Throughout the 19th century, society had characterized women by their biology, establishing a stereotypical polarization between the idealized wife and mother on one hand, and the degenerate prostitute on the other. Both roles confined women to the private sphere, barring them from engagement in public and political affairs. In this regard, Richardson’s destruction of the image of Venus, the ultimate masculine portrayal of femininity, could be read as a protest against the perpetuation of this ideology.

As militancy intensified, instigation of a ‘sex war’ became a prevalent propaganda initiative within the WSPU, culminating in Christabel Pankhurst’s 1913 publication *The Great Scourge and How to End It*. This text, advocating “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men,” simultaneously championed the liberation of women and urged the mistrust of men and male authority. Its ideology was contentious even at leadership level; Christabel Pankhurst’s sister Sylvia opposed the portrayal of all men as enemies. Nevertheless, some grassroots members followed WSPU policy fervently. The anti-male doctrine may have been a factor in the decision to start targeting art galleries, a traditionally male-orientated domain. It might even account for certain patterns regarding the types of artworks attacked during the iconoclasm campaign.

Of the nine iconoclastic assaults carried out by suffragettes in 1914, seven involved damage to individual paintings, all of which depicted either female nudes or male portraits. In these cases, the emphasis was not on wreaking as much havoc as possible, but mutilating particular artworks. As such, anti-male impulses may have been significant. Just as the slashing of a female nude could symbolize the rejection of enforced female stereotypes, so the defacement of a male portrait could represent the rejection of male authority. Even if such an undercurrent was entirely non-existent, this apparent pattern and its implications were discernable to society. The ensuing belief that the iconoclasts were pursuing an anti-male agenda partly explains why the campaign incited so much public hostility.

Closer examination of the targeted artworks provides another clue to understanding public responses. Of the seven individually targeted paintings, four were portraits of eminent men: Thomas Carlyle, Henry James, the 4th Duke of Wellington, and King George V. Portraiture
often attracts iconoclasts, and the art historian David Freedberg provides a convincing rationalization for this trend. He proposes that such attacks constitute “a second order of harm” in the mind of the perpetrator, an opportunity for them to abuse someone who cannot be reached in person. So were these portraits defaced in lieu of violence against the actual figures depicted?

Most suffragettes wanted to avoid endangering lives through their actions. Richardson summed up their policy as follows: “... our warfare was to be without bloodshed. Money could be spilled, yes! Property could suffer; but human beings would be immune, except for the sufferings inflicted upon us militants in the course of the campaign.” However, the idea that the suffragettes employed iconoclasm as a substitute for bloodshed, to symbolically harm or shame the men portrayed, is problematic. Most of the men whose portraits were damaged were not obvious enemies of the WSPU. Emmeline Pankhurst admired the writings of Thomas Carlyle, who, moreover, had died over thirty years previously, in 1881. Although Henry James was a contemporary figure, his general sympathies towards the women’s movement made him an unlikely victim too. Similarly, the 4th Duke of Wellington was not a prominent personality in the franchise debate. The somewhat arbitrary selection of these targets suggests that neither the political inclinations nor the identities of the men depicted were major considerations. Mary Wood, who slashed the image of Henry James, had apparently never even heard of him.

The assault by Maude Edwards on Lavery’s Portrait Study of the King remains the most credible example of an attack undertaken to cause symbolic personal harm. Since early 1913 militants had been trying to bring the suffrage question to the attention of King George V. In June 1913 Emily Wilding Davison had died after being run down at the Epsom Derby as she tried to grasp the bridle of the King’s racehorse. In October that year petitioners disrupted the royal wedding of Princess Alexandra, and in December a gala performance of Jeanne d’Arc was commandeered by protesters. Yet these episodes seemingly failed to stir the King’s conscience; he would not hear their arguments. By the time of the aborted Buckingham Palace deputation in May 1914, George V had become deeply unpopular. At one WSPU meeting the very mention of his name was “greeted with groans and hisses.” Yet no matter how much the King was hated, inflicting physical injury on him was unthinkable. Any violent reaction to his perceived indifference had to be symbolic. Maude Edwards’ assault on the King’s portrait was among the most vehement protests that she could have committed without overstepping the line into actual blood-letting. The fact that her hatchet-blow was aimed at the chest area of the image is perhaps indicative of her intentions.

Whether deliberate or not, the symbolism of such attacks would have been obvious to the public. Indeed, the British press actively encouraged a metaphorical reading of events. As a ploy to sensationalize their reports, and so increase newspaper sales, journalists compared the suffragette iconoclasts to murderers. Some dubbed Richardson ‘Slasher Mary,’ making allusions to serial killers like ‘Jack the Ripper.’ Others referred to the damage using terminology normally reserved for human injuries. The Times, for example, described the Rokeby Venus as having suffered “a cruel wound in the neck.” Readers were left with the distinct impression that something more serious than property damage had occurred.
Beyond the wreckage of canvas and pigment, these crimes represented latent homicidal intentions and the implicit threat of even greater violence.

Given this complex scenario of multiple, interconnected motives, rationales and intentions – both real and perceived – it is unsurprising that the iconoclasts’ core political message became lost as the campaign progressed. Yet it was a more calculated effort by the British authorities to misrepresent the nature of these attacks that perhaps ultimately undermined their effectiveness.

Throughout the militant suffrage campaign, the authorities struggled to contain the proliferation of new tactics. Iconoclasm was no exception. The unpredictability of the crime made it impossible for the police to take pre-emptive measures beyond strengthening security around museums and galleries, and shadowing WSPU members. After each incident they responded swiftly with arrests, but their efforts were impaired by the relative impotence of the law.

The Prisoners Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health Act of April 1913, known as the ‘Cat and Mouse Act,’ hindered the pursuit of civil order. In a bid to prevent incarcerated suffragists from martyring themselves through hunger strikes, this act allowed prisoners to be released temporarily during periods of infirmity, and rearrested upon recovery to resume their sentences. However, the system was vulnerable to exploitation, and suffragettes soon began dictating the terms of their own imprisonments. Mary Richardson attacked the Rokeby Venus while on leave from serving a previous sentence. Further liberties were taken by Mary Wood, who began a hunger strike immediately after she was arrested for disfiguring the portrait of Henry James. Her deteriorating health meant that she had to be released before her trial, and subsequently she went into hiding to avoid returning to prison. Not only did these conditions enable perpetrators to re-offend, they gave the impression that suffragettes were beyond the reach of the law.

The situation was worsened by the lenient sentences meted out for iconoclastic offences. The maximum sentence for damage inflicted on an artwork was six months imprisonment, while those convicted of window-smashing could expect up to eighteen months imprisonment. Although the presiding magistrate at Richardson’s trial deemed six months to be “quite inadequate,” the courts could not exceed this limit. Sensing their advantage, the iconoclasts made a mockery of their hearings. During proceedings on March 10, Richardson declared that the Home Secretary could not impose sentence on her, explaining that his only options involved repeating “the farce of releasing her or else killing her; either way, hers was the victory.”

In some cases the authorities tried to re-establish control by forcibly feeding prisoners, but this strengthened the resolve of the WSPU and reflected poorly on the government. To curb iconoclasm they found another solution, which was more subtle, but just as ruthless: allegations of mental illness.

In 19th century Britain, women who deviated from their prescribed role of wife and mother had risked being denounced as unnatural and ‘unsexed.’ Elements of this mentality endured into the early 20th century, particularly in relation to the franchise debate. The view that
female suffragists were embittered, fanatical and unbalanced was relatively common. Indeed, it spread with the onset of militancy. On March 11, 1912, the *Times* reported on the sentencing of thirty-two suffragettes charged with breaking windows in London. In several of these cases there were appeals for leniency on the basis that the perpetrators had been “carried away by the example of hysterical women.”

Some people did genuinely believe that women who practiced militant tactics like window-smashing and iconoclasm were mentally unstable. Yet these allegations also gave the authorities a convenient opportunity to undermine the legitimacy of the suffragettes’ arguments.

Asserting that the destruction of art was driven by mental illness enabled the government to present the perpetrators as irrational, and their motives as irrelevant. Although this did little to prevent attacks in the first place, it altered the public’s interpretation of them. Rather than symbolizing the suffragettes’ determination to damage government credibility as part of a sustained campaign to bring about political change, instances of iconoclasm were seen as demonstrating little more than the erratic behavior of deranged individuals. The women were represented as acting without thought or reason, and thereby denied the clear political justification that Mary Richardson had endeavored to promote.

When suffragettes were arrested, the government did not recognize them as being entitled to First Division detention, a classification reserved for political prisoners. This designation would have allowed certain privileges in jail, such as access to books and newspapers, as well as confirming their political legitimacy. Instead, and by stark contrast, incarcerated suffragettes faced the possibility of being confined indefinitely on mental health grounds.

Mary Richardson had already been assessed by three psychiatrists during a previous spell of imprisonment prior to the *Rokeby Venus* attack. Her memoirs recall, with relief, that two of the three doctors certified her as sane, after which time an insurance company executive volunteered to become her legal guardian, and so prevent “any further official attempt to have me certified.” Maude Edwards also had a narrow escape from being sectioned while in jail. Dr. Ferguson Watson, a medical officer at Perth Prison, recorded that she “seemed incoherent at times, did not seem to realise the gravity of the situation.” Ultimately, none of the suffragette iconoclasts were officially diagnosed as mentally ill, although the passing of the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act made their situation precarious.

Even without medical evidence, such allegations became highly effective propaganda against the suffrage cause. The press followed the authorities’ lead by pouring scorn on the iconoclasm campaign, repeating evocative phrases like “wanton” and “senseless” to indicate the perpetrators’ lack of self-control. Some journalists also made more overt references to mental illness. While reporting on Richardson’s trial, the *Times* made sure to reproduce the words of the prosecutor, who remarked that “One regretted that any person outside a lunatic asylum could conceive that such an act could advance any cause, political or otherwise.”

This blend of misrepresentation and insinuation had a corrosive effect on the campaign. By the time of the final attack by Margaret Gibb at the National Portrait Gallery on July 17, the
public had grown to view these cases with contempt rather than outrage. In court, Gibb interrupted proceedings repeatedly, refusing to acknowledge her conviction and attempting to rush from the dock. Her increasingly desperate verbal and physical protestations played into the hands of the authorities. The momentum fuelling the iconoclasts’ ambitions was all but spent.

When Mary Richardson slashed the Rokeby Venus in March 1914 she horrified the British public and forced politicians to react. Her actions generated vital publicity, reinvigorating press interest in the women’s cause at a point when coverage was starting to flag. Yet iconoclasm proved to be an unwieldy political weapon. While Richardson undoubtedly recognised that mutilating a famous artwork in a major public art gallery was an inherently powerful gesture, she may not have appreciated the full extent of this power. She may not have foreseen that her behavior would elicit such a range of different, often misleading and even false, interpretations. She almost certainly could not have predicted that the women who followed her example would have inadvertently undermined their political rationale by allowing their vehemence to get the better of them. Public attention was naturally drawn to the sensational and the shocking – the image of a seemingly ordinary and respectable woman brandishing a hatchet in an art gallery. Yet the fundamental political point that these women were trying to make was eclipsed in the ensuing chaos.

Ultimately, in spite of Richardson’s best efforts, the adoption of iconoclasm did not substantively change the fortunes of the female suffrage movement. Indeed, had suffragette militancy not come to a premature halt with the advent of the First World War, it is likely that the iconoclasm campaign would have soon reached its own natural conclusion, with the tactic surpassed by ever-more extreme forms of protest.

Notes

1 ‘Suffragists and the King’, The Times, May 23, 1914.
2 The political decrees that secured these changes were the 1839 Custody Act, the 1886 Guardianship of Infants Act, the 1870 and 1882 Married Women’s Property Acts, and the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act. See: Susan Kingsley Kent, Sex & Suffrage in Britain, 1860-1914 (London, 1990), 27-29.
3 This act opened the franchise to women over the age of 30 who were householders, wives of householders, occupiers of rented property with an annual rent of at least five pounds or university graduates. See: June Purvis, ‘Deeds, Not Words’ Daily Life in the Women’s Social and Political Union in Edwardian Britain’, in Votes for Women eds. June Purvis and Sandra Stanley Holton (London and New York, 2000), 150.
5 For further discussion on terminology in this field see: Helen E. Scott, ‘Confronting Nightmares: Responding to Iconoclasm in Western Museums and Art Galleries’ (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2009), 8-10.


10 For further reading on the Parliamentary proposals for women’s suffrage reform see: 


15 The first instances of window-smashing in June 1908 were embarked upon without the leadership’s permission, as was the first suffragette hunger strike, undertaken by Marion Wallace-Dunlop in July 1909. Both tactics received retrospective approval from Emmeline Pankhurst, effectively setting the standard for the unauthorised adoption of arson in December 1911. See: 


17 ‘Suffragist Fires’, *The Times*, April 21, 1914.

18 Metcalfe, *Woman’s Effort*, 245.


21 In court, both Lilian Forrester and Evelyn Manesta expressed their regret at the damage done to the canvases of four of the thirteen paintings. The works targeted in this attack were: *The Last Watch of Hero and Captive Andromache* by Frederic Leighton; 
   *Prayer, Paolo and Francesca* and *The Hon. John Lothrop Motley* by George Frederick Watts; 
   *Astarte Syriaca* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti; 
   *Sibylla Delphica* by Edward Burne-Jones; 
   *A Flood and Birnam Woods* by John Everett Millais; 
   *The Last of the Garrison* by Briton Rivière; 
   *When Apples Were Golden* by John Strudwick; 
   *Syrinx* by Arthur Hacker; 
   and *The Shadow of the Cross* by William Holman Hunt.

For further details see:


‘City Art Gallery’, *The Manchester Evening News*, April 5, 1913.


24 For details of this attack see:
   ‘Minutes of Special Meeting of the National Gallery Board’, March 10, 1914,
   National Gallery Archive NG1/8, 173.
   For further details of this incident see:
   George C. Rollin, ‘Letter from George C. Rollin, Restorer, to J.D. Milner, Director of the
   National Portrait Gallery’, December 6, 1924, National Portrait Gallery Archive NPG
26 This attack took place on May 12, 1914. See:
   Metcalfe, *Woman’s Effort*, 311.
   ‘Another Academy Outrage’, *The Times*, May 13, 1914.
27 For more information see:
   Fowler, ‘Why Did Suffragettes Attack Works of Art?’, 120.
   Metcalfe, *Woman’s Effort*, 312.
   ‘Suffragists and the King’, *The Times*, May 23, 1914.
28 These paintings remain in the National Gallery’s collections, although *Portrait of a
   Mathematician* is now entitled *A Man with a Pair of Dividers (?)*, *The Death of St
   Peter, Martyr* is now entitled *The Assassination of St Peter Martyr*, and *The Madonna
   of the Pomegranate* is now entitled *The Virgin and Child*, and is thought to be from
   the workshop of Giovanni Bellini. The votive picture from the school of Gentile Bellini
   is *The Virgin and Child with Saints Christopher and John the Baptist, and Doge
   Giovanni Mocenigo*.
   For details of this attack see:
   David King, ‘Memorandum concerning Suffragette Attack at the National Gallery on
   22nd May 1914’, May 22, 1914, National Gallery Archive NG7/447/2.
   ‘Minutes of Special Meeting of the National Gallery Board’, May 22, 1914, *National
   Gallery Archive* NG1/8, 188-189.
   *The Parliamentary Debates (Official Report)*, Fifth Series – Volume LXIII, House of
   Commons, Sixth Volume of Session 1914, May 25, 1914, 38.
   (London, 1924), 73.
   The National Gallery only reopened on August 20, 1914, after suffrage societies had
   renounced militancy following the outbreak of war in Europe.
30 For details see:
   Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause: The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Scotland*
31 See:


32 See:


33 See:

‘Picture Outrages Renewed’, *The Times*, July 18, 1914.

34 Richardson, *Laugh a Defiance*, 165.


37 ‘Minutes of Meeting of the National Gallery Board’, August 5, 1914, *National Gallery Archive NG1/8*, 201.


40 For details of this incident see:


42 ‘Murder and Suicide in the National Portrait Gallery’, *The Times*, February 25, 1909.

43 The affected artworks in this attack were *The Gleaners* and *The Misses Constable* by John Constable, *A Castle by a Lake* and *Hadrian’s Villa* by Richard Wilson. For details see:

‘Outrage at the National Gallery*, *The Times*, January 24, 1913.

44 Richardson, *Laugh a Defiance*, 165.


52 Richardson, *Laugh a Defiance*, 165.

54 For further discussion on the position of women in 19th century British society see: Rosamund Billington, ‘Ideology and Feminism: Why the Suffragettes were “Wild Women”’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Volume 5, Number 6 (1982), 664-666.


57 The National Galleries were viewed as particularly male-orientated institutions. In 1891 the National Portrait Gallery had refused to accept Susan Isabel Dacre’s portrait of the suffrage pioneer Lydia Becker, so denying women as “agents of history”. See: Deborah Cherry, *Beyond the Frame: Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850-1900* (London and New York, 2000), 195.


59 Richardson, *Laugh a Defiance*, 39.


63 ‘Militants and the King’, *The Times*, May 26, 1914.

64 Nead, *The Female Nude*, 38-42.


66 Plain-clothed policemen had been shadowing WSPU leaders since March 1907. See: Harrison, ‘The Act of Militancy’, 62.

   The failings of the ‘Cat and Mouse Act’ are discussed further in:


70 ‘The Suffragist Window Breakers’, *The Times*, March 11, 1912.

71 After the *Rokeby Venus* attack, Sir Philip Magnus asked the Home Secretary to explain the measures that would be taken to protect artworks from “the wanton attacks of feeble-minded and other mentally deranged persons”. See:

72 van Wingerden, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement*, 89.


74 Quoted in: