

Equali-tee:

Suffragist Tea Cozies in Redwork

A suffrage centennial exhibition by Tisha Dolton

Why suffragists?

As a historian, I began studying the Women's Suffrage Movement, and the songs of that movement over twenty years ago. Over the last few years, my research led me to the many local women who were active in this cause of "Votes for Women"! 2020 marks the centennial anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote. What better year to celebrate these (mostly) unsung heroines?

As an artist, I was inspired to put faces to the names I uncovered in meeting notices and articles in local newspapers by creating embroidered portraits of 40 suffragists from New York State. At the last minute, I was given reference images of two Glens Falls women and added them to the exhibit, bringing the total to 42 suffragists.

Why tea cozies?

Because the Suffrage and Abolition Movements were confronting long held societal views, like which people are citizens, and have the right to vote in our government, there was backlash and opposition. One of the many arguments against women voting was the ideal that women's place was in the domestic or private sphere, while the public sphere belonged to men. Just look at a popular suffrage song of the day...

Keep Woman in Her Sphere (1882)

Lyrics: Experience Estabrook, Tune: *Auld Lang Syne*

I have a neighbor, one of those
Not very hard to find,
Who know it all without debate,
And never change their mind.
I asked him "What of women's rights,"
He said in tones severe-
"My mind on that is all made up,
Keep woman in her sphere."

Works of art such as “The Dinner Party” (1979) by Judy Chicago, and “Famous Women Dinner Set” (1932-34) by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant have used this ideal of the domestic sphere to create provocative art to re-write women back into history. By using the domestic art of hand embroidery to feature unknown, and a few well-known, suffragists on a cover used to keep tea inside tea pots warm, I am following in the footsteps of those artists before me.

The Suffrage Movement also had strong ties to tea. The planning of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention began over tea. The women used the Boston Tea Party as a model, using “no taxation without representation” as a rallying cry. The Woman’s Suffrage Party of California even sold Equality Tea as a fundraiser, charging 75 cents for one pound of tea.

Why redwork?

According to Deborah Harding in her book, *Red and White: American Redwork Quilts*, “[d]uring the last quarter of the nineteenth century, decorative surface embroidery on practical household linens came into vogue in America. Influenced by exhibitions at the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia, this form of needlework replaced... stitchery on canvas. The term *art needlework* was used to describe this trend and to distinguish it from plain sewing.”

Redwork was one of the most popular forms of art needlework because it only required three beginner stitches (stem stitch, lazy daisy, and French knot) and one color of thread (red). Redwork patterns were readily available from all the fashionable ladies’ magazines via subscription, and came in a wide variety including farm animals, plants and flowers, buildings, letters, and portraits of famous people.

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