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Nurse's Suffragette Medal, rediscovered at auction, goes on public display

A Suffragette medal awarded to the chief nurse to Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) is to go on public display in the UK at a new exhibition after being bought at auction.



📷 The Silver Suffragette Medal awarded to Nurse Catherine Pine.

In Focus: Nurse Catherine Pine will open run from March 8-October 4 at the Florence Nightingale Museum in London.

Pine (1864-1941) treated the hunger-striking Pankhurst and helped sisters Christabel (1880-1958) and Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960) escape arrest. She also ran the Suffragettes' refuge and worked at a home for illegitimate 'war babies' that Pankhurst founded in 1915 in Kensington.

She was awarded her medal 'For Duty' by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). The circular medal, adorned with 11 silver bars and the purple, white and green ribbons, was bequeathed by Pine on her death to the British College of Nurses (BCN). However, the medal had actually fallen into private hands.

In 2016 writer and historian Elizabeth Crawford published a blog piece about the medal's disappearance from BCN which was read by Dr Hope Elizabeth May, a lawyer and philosophy professor at Central Michigan University.

Auction history

May researched the medal and discovered that while it was advertised as offered at auction at Sotheby's on June 28, 1990, it in fact, did not sell. It was then sold at auction in London in 2008 and subsequently owned by women's rights collector Ronnie Lapinsky Sax (1955-2019).

In 2024, the medal was again offered at auction, this time in the US at Heritage of Dallas, sold from the collection of Lapinsky Sax.

May and Crawford worked together and May purchased the medal for a hammer price of \$24,000 (or \$30,000 including buyer's premium) at the April 26, 2024 sale.

May now allows the medal to tour for educational purposes and has developed a website for Pine (hosted by her non-profit organisation The Cora di Brazzà Foundation).

Pine, who trained in nursing at St Bartholomew's Hospital, forged a close bond with Emmeline Pankhurst when she cared for her young son who contracted polio and later died. Pine then began working with the Suffragette movement.

The ascending dates inscribed into the medal's 11 silver bars attest to 11 Suffragette 'incidents'. The first bar, 'March 29th 1913', marks Sylvia Pankhurst's release from prison after hunger striking and being force fed. All other bars reference Emmeline Pankhurst's various arrests and release from prison. The final date, 'July 18th 1914', marks Pankhurst's final arrest, shortly after which she escaped to France rather than heading to prison in London.



📷 Silver Suffragette Medal with 11 bars.

Laura Sharpe, director of the Florence Nightingale Museum, said: “We are so excited to be displaying Nurse Pine’s medal publicly for the first time. Pine is an overlooked figure in the Suffragette movement yet her skill and passion for nursing is proven from her medal to have been incredibly significant.

“We are extremely grateful to the wonderful detective work of Elizabeth Crawford and Dr May who have dedicated themselves to giving Pine the credit she deserves.”

Dr May said: “I believe that Pine bequeathed her medal to the British College of Nurses with the intention that it form part of an educational project - one that situates her practice of the art of nursing within the broader histories of human rights and justice, and thus within the moral progress of our species. Nurse Pine took this bequest seriously, formally notifying the college of her intentions 11 years prior to her death. Visitors who encounter the special display devoted to Nurse Pine are likely to deepen their moral imagination and their appreciation for both Nightingale and Pine, just as Pine intended.”

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