

# How can we use a photograph to explore the identity of the composer and Suffragette Ethel Smyth?



Object in focus

## Photograph of Ethel Smyth, May 1913

### Who was Ethel Smyth?

Ethel Smyth was an accomplished classical composer of the early 20th century, who dedicated two years of her life to the Suffragette movement, which campaigned for women to be allowed to vote in parliamentary elections. One of her most significant contributions to the campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was the well-remembered marching song, 'The March of the Women', the original sheet music for which is in the Museum of London collection.

Despite her father's protests, Ethel studied composition and symphony from a young age and, in 1922, she became the first woman to receive a Damehood for her contribution to the field.



Portrait photograph of Ethel Smyth, 1913

### Why is it related to LGBT+ history?

Ethel Smyth had many confirmed relationships with women throughout her life and some references to them have been found in her writing, including a relationship with the ex-Empress of France. Smyth also had a relationship with a man named Henry Brewster, although she confided to him that it was 'easier for me to love my own sex passionately, rather than yours'.

It is important to recognise that the term 'lesbian', though referred to as early as 1893, did not popularly circulate until long after some women gained the vote in 1918, and so we shouldn't use this language to describe Smyth.



Cover of sheet music for 'The March of the Women', composed by Ethel Smyth with words by Cicely Hamilton, 1911

Today we might refer to London's LGBT+ community. It's important to remember this is modern terminology that that would not have been used at the beginning of the 20th century.

### Further information

Collections in Focus: **The Suffragettes**  
[collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/group/18146.html](https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/group/18146.html)

## Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Use your whiteboard to display the photograph of Ethel Smyth. It can be found with further information here: [collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/294232.html](https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/294232.html)

You might want to introduce her as a Suffragette, but not reveal anything else. Then, ask students to work in pairs to answer the following question. They'll only need a couple of minutes.

### What words would you associate with this image?

Students may consider Ethel's wealth, childhood, appearance, job or background. You could focus on the photograph as an object and think about artistic style, its potential purpose, size and Ethel's pose.

When everyone has given feedback, reveal that Ethel Smyth was also:

**A renowned composer**

**The first woman to receive a Damehood for her contribution to the field of symphony**

**Known for having passionate affairs, often with women**

**A Suffragette**

**Sentenced to two months in prison for window breaking for the votes for women cause in 1912**

**A good friend of Emmeline Pankhurst. Emmeline stayed in her Woking home whilst recuperating after a hunger strike in 1913.**

