

VIOLET OAKLEY: PENNSYLVANIA'S PREMIERE MURALIST

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[SLIDE 1] Violet Oakley--a versatile portraitist, illustrator, stained glass artisan, and muralist--earned a reputation as the first American woman artist to succeed in the predominantly-male architectural field of mural decoration. Her strong commitment to her religion and world peace influenced her art as well as her life.

[SLIDE 2] Oakley was born in Bergen Heights, New Jersey, to the artistic family of Arthur Edmund Oakley and Cornelia Swain Oakley. Both of her grandfathers, George Oakley and William Swain, belonged to the National Academy of Design and two of her aunts studied painting in Munich with Frank Duveneck. She believed that her compulsion to draw was "hereditary and chronic." She once commented that she must have been "a monk in some earlier state of existence....The abbesses and sisters were too busy nursing the sick and doing fine needleworks. I never heard of them illuminating manuscripts. I am quite sure I was a monk."¹ The youngest of three children, Violet followed her sisters Cornelia and Hester in learning the acceptable feminine skills of poetry writing, piano playing,

and sketching. While Hester attended Vassar College, Violet's asthma prevented her from obtaining a college education which her parents thought too rigorous for her physical condition. She never let the asthma impede her artistic education or career.

In 1892, at the age of eighteen, Oakley commuted to New York City to study at the Art Students' League with Irving R. Wiles and Carroll Beckwith. Violet and Hester joined their parents on a European trip in 1895-96 and Violet took art lessons in Paris from the symbolist painter Edmond Aman-Jean and Raphaél Colin at the Académie Montparnasse and in England from Charles Lazar. When they returned to the United States, Violet enrolled in classes taught by Henry Thouron at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. At the Academy she studied portraiture under Cecelia Beaux, and took Joseph De Camp's life class. The family relocated from South Orange, New Jersey, to Philadelphia the same year. Their father's ill health and declining family income prompted Hester and Violet to focus their artistic pursuits on the lucrative magazine illustration field. Seeking the instruction of America's foremost illustrator, Howard Pyle, Violet Oakley enrolled in his classes at the Drexel Institute for one semester. She assimilated his belief that illustration was "teaching

under an aesthetic form” and applied his techniques first to book illustration, then to stained glass and mural decoration.

[**SLIDE 3**] From 1897 to 1899 Oakley’s work appeared as book [**SLIDE 4**] and magazine illustrations with spiritual or religious themes usually centered around a holiday such as Easter or Christmas. [**SLIDE 5**] Pyle recognized the similarities in the decorative styles of Oakley and Jessie Willcox Smith [**SLIDE 6**] and obtained a commission for the classmates to collaborate on the illustrations for Longfellow’s *Evangeline*. After four more books, Oakley concentrated on producing stained glass windows and murals, encouraged by Pyle. By 1899 Oakley produced the Epiphany Window for the Church Glass and Decorating Company in New York. [**SLIDE 7**] She received her first major mural commission in 1900 to decorate All Angels’ Church in New York City with two large murals, one glass mosaic altarpiece, and five stained glass lancet windows. Leading art critic Sadakichi Hartmann commented that Oakley’s work in All Angels’ Church, prior to completion, “promises to be well drawn, and interesting in its line, space, and colour composition with a delightful parallelism and repetition of figures. The religious feeling, which is generally missing in such works, is quite pronounced in Violet Oakley’s art.”² In all, she

produced eight stained glass windows between 1900 and 1911 for public and private buildings **[SLIDE 8]** such as St. Peter's Church in Germantown.

Oakley depended on narrative and/or a moral stance to convey her art. Using her experience as an illustrator, she imbued her murals with subjects from popular culture as well as from an idealistic, updated traditional background.

[SLIDE 9] In 1898 Oakley and Smith rented studio and living space together with another Pyle student, Jessie H. Dowd. When Dowd became ill and returned home to Ohio in 1899, another art school colleague, Elizabeth Shippen Green, replaced her in the household. When the three artists needed more working space, they first moved to the Red Rose Inn in Villanova, joined by Henrietta Cozens who became their gardener and household manager. Oakley enjoyed reciting poetry as she walked across the peaceful grounds. Although a cooperative venture for the women, Oakley declared "This is not going to be an artist's colony at all. We have grown tired of working in the midst of trolley cars, drays, and all the noise of heavy traffic, so we three are going out where green trees grow, where the cows roam and where the air is pure, and quietness prevails."³ When a new owner purchased the inn in 1905 the artists turned to the Woodward, their benefactors, to secure other living and studio space in the country. The

Woodwards rented the artists part of their Germantown property which the women named Cogslea (for Cozens, Oakley, Green, and Smith) where Oakley had a spacious area to work on her murals. **[SLIDE 10]** To the extended household, Oakley, the youngest, brought her aging mother. The three friends pooled their resources to afford a grander lifestyle than any of them could provide on her own, maintaining this living arrangement with a multitude of relatives for fourteen years until Green married. Smith built Cogshill nearby and Oakley and Edith Emerson, one of her student muralists who joined the household in 1913, continued to live at Cogslea. Emerson later turned Cogslea into the Violet Oakley Memorial Foundation to house Violet's artwork. After Emerson died in 1986 the foundation dispersed the contents and sold the house, then disbanded.

Religion played an important role in Oakley's life, both personal and professional. She converted to Christian Science from Episcopalian; her faith helped cure her of the debilitating asthma and allowed her to tackle the physically exhausting mural work. The slender woman with blue eyes and a delicate face had tremendous stamina. A relative of Cozens remarked that living with Oakley was "like living in a thundercloud." Oakley's strong personality vaulted her to the position of matriarchal head of the household.

On July 21, 1902, architect Joseph Miller Huston awarded Oakley the prestigious commission to paint eighteen murals in the **[SLIDE 11]** Governor's Reception Room in the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg which she entitled **[SLIDE 12]** "The Founding of the State of Liberty Spiritual" (completed in 1906). He thought this would "act as an encouragement of women of the State," and chose Oakley "purely because of the superior excellence of her work."⁴ Indeed, it was the largest public commission given to a woman artist in the United States at that time.

Oakley's method of working included extensive research. After receiving Huston's commission, she left for a six-month study trip to Europe in 1903 with her mother. **[SLIDE 13]** She began her trip in England researching seventeenth century costumes and interiors and studying the life of William Penn, his philosophy of universal brotherhood, and ancient law. Oakley was determined to understand his Quaker beliefs and "express the religious feeling behind the founding of Pennsylvania."⁵ Thus the paintings in the Governor's Room were so planned as to deal exclusively with the Foundation of the State and stopped just short of recording any event within the life of the State itself--bringing William Penn, **[SLIDE 14]** in the prow of the ship *Welcome*, only within sight of his Promised Land."⁶ **[SLIDE 15]** In Italy, they spent two months in Florence, and toured Perugia, Venice,

and Assisi. Oakley studied the Old Masters' fresco and wall-painting techniques and discovered the Florentine Trecento which she later incorporated into her own home and the [SLIDE 16] Vassar College Alumnae House Living Room commission, "The Great Wonder: A Vision of the Apocalypse," in 1924. Throughout her travels, Oakley drew bits and pieces of landscapes, architecture, and ethnic costumes--plants, flowers, a donkey, an Arab turban--into sketchbooks for later reference. As part of her research for the Penn mural, she copied the works of the Quattrocento masters, modelling Carpaccio's mural paintings for her work. Oakley returned to Italy in 1909 to study wall painting.

Not content to work on one project at a time, Oakley juggled several commissions such as the [SLIDE 17] Yarnall house (1910-11), books, portrait drawings and paintings, posters [SLIDE 18] like the one for the Red Cross during World War I, illuminated manuscripts, [SLIDE 19] medals such as "In Praise of the Universal Medium" for the Philadelphia Water Club, and awards while she created the Capitol murals. Oakley, unlike many of her colleagues, did not use assistants to paint her large-scale murals, preferring to complete the entire project herself. Between 1913 and 1917, Oakley also taught design and a special class in mural decoration for

advanced students at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the only female instructor besides Beaux until the 1950s.

Her work on the Governor's Reception Room garnered Oakley much publicity. She won the Gold Medal of Honor from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1905, and a Medal of Honor from the Architectural League of New York in 1916, both firsts for a woman artist, for this work. Although the mural commission paid well (\$20,000 for the Governor's Reception Room), Oakley had to spread the money over four years. Edwin Austin Abbey, commissioned to decorate the Rotunda, House and Senate chambers, and the Supreme and Superior Court Room in the Pennsylvania Capitol, died suddenly in 1911 before completing the last two rooms. **[SLIDE 20]** While working on a mural for the Cuyahoga County Courthouse **[SLIDE 21]** in Cleveland, Ohio, Violet Oakley received the commission to complete the contract for the Senate Chamber and Supreme and Superior Court Chamber for which she was paid \$100,000. "I was asked by the Board of Commissioners to undertake that part of his contract with the State which at the time of his death he had not even begun. I was not asked, as has been mistakenly reported, to finish any of the Paintings which he had begun or planned. That was done by his own Assistant in his Studio in England."⁷ She suggested that one mural, "The Camp of the

American Army at Valley Forge, February 1778,” which Abbey had finished for the Senate Chamber, be moved to the House of Representatives’s chamber to keep all of his work intact in one room.

Oakley then began a sixteen-year project to create nine murals for the] Senate Chamber entitled “The Creation and Preservation of the Union” (completed in 1920) and [SLIDE 22] sixteen murals in the Supreme and Superior Court Chamber entitled [SLIDE 23] “The Opening of the Book of Law” (finished in 1927). These last sixteen, the history of citizens’ legal rights designed to resemble an illuminated manuscript scroll unrolled like a book, are mounted on wooden stretchers and not adhered directed to the walls. In creating additional murals, Oakley recognized the opportunity to express her deep feelings about spiritual liberty upon which Pennsylvania was founded. She wrote in “The Vision of William Penn” that “I burned to build a great Monument, not only as its Memorial, but that it might *live again*.” [SLIDE 24] Oakley included her equal passion for world peace in the panel [SLIDE 25] “International Understanding and Unity” in the Senate Chamber, conceived in 1912 when the Paris peace conference discussed forming the League of Nations. The first paintings in the Senate Chamber, unveiled in 1917, and the final paintings in the Supreme Court Room, [SLIDE 26] ten years later, Oakley dedicated to the cause of peace.

In all, Oakley painted forty-three murals for the State Capitol in which she expressed her desire and hope for “world peace, equal rights, and faith in the work of unification of the Peoples of the Earth.”

[**SLIDE 27**] In 1922, Violet Oakley published the 300-copy limited edition [**SLIDE 28**] *The Holy Experiment*, reproducing the murals from the Governor’s Reception Room and Senate Chamber to illustrate “her interpretation of Pennsylvania’s history as an enlightened episode in international understanding and spiritual development.”⁸ [**SLIDE 29**] The favorable publicity Oakley received for the book gratified her. [**SLIDE 30**] In a March 1, 1924 letter to Stanley R. Yarnall, she thanked him for his “beautiful tribute to the spirit of The Holy Experiment. What you have said comes as the greatest encouragement and at a time when I needed it most--for many different reasons.”⁹ [**SLIDE 31**] Jessie Willcox Smith nicknamed her “Elaborate Violet” for her talent in illumination and calligraphy with which she decorated the book.

Oakley’s beliefs manifested themselves in her art and in her social activism for women’s suffrage, world peace, and international government. She went to Geneva, Switzerland, in June 1927, one month after completing the paintings in the Supreme Court Room, as a self-appointed ambassador when the United States refused to join the League of Nations; she “wished

to observe the development of International Law.” **[SLIDE 32]** Oakley stayed three years, drawing sixty portraits of the ambassadors and dignitaries. In September 1929 she attended the laying of the cornerstone for the library of the League of Nations and planned “to go to Geneva in time for the September [1936] session of the Assembly and make the presentation [of her original drawings] in person.”¹⁰ **[SLIDE 33]** An American Committee of Donors, headed by Oakley, presented the drawings to the Secretary General and Librarian in October 1936.

When the League of Nations adjourned, Oakley rented an Italian villa outside Florence to work on a commission to design an altarpiece for the Graphic Sketch Club’s sanctuary in a former church. **[SLIDE 34]** For “The Life of Moses,” Oakley studied Egyptian motifs and imagery, combining them with the medieval format and Christian religious symbolism. She spent 1927-1929 working with local craftsmen experienced in constructing artwork for churches.

[SLIDE 35] In order to publish the privately printed books *The Holy Experiment*, *Law Triumphant*, and *Samuel F. B. Morse*, Oakley solicited sponsorships from subscribers to the signed, limited editions. She had a keen sense of self-promotion and sent out typed and, later, calligraphic letters to potential supporters. For her October 1950 publication of *The*

Holy Experiment, Oakley also gave “a brief reading from the text to which all the advance subscribers will be invited--and [I] will present their special copies.”¹¹

The art world, taken with surrealism and abstraction, modernized and bypassed Violet Oakley’s religious symbolism in the 1930s. Forbes Watson, art critic and editor of *The Arts*, harshly evaluated an exhibit of her League of Nations sketches, drawings from Florence, and **[SLIDE 36]** reproductions from the State Capitol murals in juxtaposition to thirty-three moderns at the Grand Central Galleries in New York City. He thought she “represents completely the wearisome, prayerful academic art against which the brighter spirits of today stand” and her pictures reeked of “conventional lifelessness.”¹² Another critic for *The Art News* thought the “drawings display all the conventional virtues. Her line is crisp and incisive and although the gallery of celebrities is almost appallingly large, a certain degree of character is found in most of her work.”¹³ In London the previous summer, the same exhibit drew a different reaction from a British art critic for the *London Morning Post*. **[SLIDE 37]** He compared her work to Abbey and Pyle, and found “she conveys to her mural paintings much of the spirit and technical distinction which characterized the compositions of those brilliant men. She has thought out her designs with considerable care

and breadth, and they form a stirring and withal dignified commentary on Penn's conceptions of Liberty, Justice, and Union.”¹⁴ [SLIDE 38] In 1942 an exhibit at the Woodmere Gallery drew a good review: “Always astonishing in its virtuosity and variety, her art has the great common denominator of an idealism that can be read into an army altar triptych defined for the battlefield a message of peace....If at times, her idealism of character robs it of personal punch, it also goes behind personality to what Miss Oakley herself believes--that there is a noble idealism in human nature.”¹⁵

[SLIDE 39] Despite criticism from American art critics, Oakley continued to work and win awards. In 1940 she received the \$300 Walter Lippincott Prize for the best figure in oil from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and one year later the Emily Drayton Taylor gold medal “for distinguished service in art” from the Society of Miniature Painters. Oakley began winning awards in 1904 when she won two medals at the St. Louis Exposition--a gold for illustration and a silver for the mural decoration of All Angels' Church--and in 1915 the medal of honor at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts awarded Oakley several more awards: in 1922 the Philadelphia Prize for a portrait of Lieutenant Henry Howard Houston Woodward; in 1932 the

Joseph Pennell Memorial Medal, by the Philadelphia Water Color Club, for distinguished work in the graphic arts; and in 1948 the Mary Smith Prize for a panel from “Great Women of the Bible” in the First Presbyterian Church, Germantown, Philadelphia. Oakley also received the Woodmere Prize from the Woodmere Gallery, Philadelphia, in 1947, a gold medal from the Springside School, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, and a gold medal in 1950 as one of the twelve “distinguished daughters of Pennsylvania.” One of her most impressive awards was an honorary Doctor of Laws degree which she received from the Drexel Institute in 1948 for her “portrayal of that which is noblest in mankind...in her paintings where love of mankind prevails over hatred and prejudice, spiritual aspiration over material ambition, and respect for Law and Order over those base emotions which would degrade mankind and destroy civilization.”¹⁶

[SLIDE 40] Throughout her long career, Oakley exhibited her drawings, portraits, studies for her murals, and watercolors at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. For example, between 1924 and 1953 she hung eighty-eight pieces ranging from hard pastels, sanguine, red and white chalk, crayon, and charcoal, to watercolor in juried shows at the Academy. In 1973 the Academy mounted an exhibit of “The Pennsylvania Academy and Its Women,” including an early charcoal and pencil drawing,

June, purchased from Oakley in 1903 for the Academy's permanent collection. Later additions to the permanent collection include Oakley's oils on canvas *Tragic Muse*, 1912, and *Henry Howard Houston Woodward*, 1921.

Even though murals went out of fashion, and commissions dried up, Oakley continued her large-scale work. [SLIDE 41] She completed twenty-five portable triptychs during World War II for the Citizens' Committee for the Army and Navy chapels. Oakley organized the Cogslea Academy at Lake George in the 1940s for summer art courses. She also continued illustrating books. [SLIDE 42] Violet Oakley wrote and illustrated biographies of Samuel F. B. Morse in 1939 and Jane Addams in 1955. The latter arose from Oakley's active membership in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom founded by Addams in 1915. [SLIDE 43] She received one last major mural project for the Jennings Room in the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown. [SLIDE 44] Oakley completed this "Great Women of the Bible" series between 1945 and 1949 at the age of seventy-five. [SLIDE 45] The room resembles the Governor's Reception Room in proportion and design and Oakley used her usual style of dramatic presentation with scriptural text bordering the historically accurate paintings. [SLIDE 46] Oakley painted and worked at her Cogslea studio

until her death on 25 February 1961. **[SLIDE 47]**

¹ Baltimore Sun, 20 August 1922.

² Sadakichi Hartmann, *A History of American Art*. (Boston: L.C. Page & Company) I: 187.

³ *Philadelphia Press*, 24 October 1901.

⁴ *Philadelphia Free Press*, undated clipping in Violet Oakley's scrapbook, Archives of American Art.

⁵ Malcolm Vaughn, "Violet Oakley: Painter of Peace," *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 February 1930.

⁶ Violet Oakley, "The Vision of William Penn." *Pennsylvania History* 20 (October 1953): 328.

⁷ Violet Oakley, "The Vision of William Penn," p. 328.

⁸ Sally Mills, *Violet Oakley; the Decoration of the Alumnae House Living Room*. (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1984), p. 2.

⁹ Charles Roberts Autograph Collection, Haverford College Library.

¹⁰ Violet Oakley letter to Harrison Streeter Hires, 8 June 1936, Hires Collection, Haverford College Library.

¹¹ Violet Oakley letter to Amy Post, 31 July 1950, Charles Roberts Autograph Collection, Haverford College Library.

¹² "In the Galleries: '33 Moderns' and Violet Oakley," *The Arts*, February 1930, p. 424.

¹³ *The Art News*, 8 February 1930.

¹⁴ *American Magazine of Art*, October 1929, p. 595.

¹⁵ *The Art Digest*, 15 March 1942, p. 27.

¹⁶ Violet Oakley, *The Holy Experiment* (Philadelphia: Privately printed, 1922), p. 157.