

Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman

THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE mural movement of the late nineteenth-century produced three generations of talented men and one woman: Violet Oakley (1874–1961) (fig.1). Although she is best known for her murals at the Pennsylvania State Capitol, these were only a part of her prodigious output. Over a period of fifty years, Oakley adorned the interiors of churches, schools, civic buildings, and private residences with murals and stained glass. She also illustrated books, magazines, and newspapers, and painted hundreds of portraits. Imbued with the Renaissance spirit of civic responsibility, Oakley helped shape the culture of Philadelphia. She taught mural painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, designed floats for the Founder's Day Pageant of 1908 (fig. 2), sculpted medallions for the Philadelphia Water Club and the Philadelphia Award, and was a founding member of both the Plastic Club and the Philadelphia Art Alliance. A late bloom of the nineteenth-century feminist movement, Oakley's career was a series of landmarks for women. Recognizing her importance as a role model, the ladies magazines interviewed her while Bryn Mawr, Vassar, and Sarah Lawrence Colleges sought her services as an artist.

Oakley's concerns were global as well as national. Inspired by William Penn's vision of an ideal commonwealth and traumatized by two world wars, she lent her art to the quest for peace. She became a tireless advocate of international government, first for the League of Nations and later for the United Nations, and an activist for disarmament during the Cold War. Pouring her creative energies into a great variety of forms and media, in art and statecraft, she was America's Renaissance woman.

With a well-documented career of this scope, Violet Oakley's place in American history would seem secure. Yet she fell into posthumous obscurity after a lifetime of fame. After World War II, when modernism supplanted art tainted with the academic tradition in most critical discourse,



Fig. 1. Violet Oakley in front of her mural of *Unity* in the Senate Chamber of the Pennsylvania State Capitol, 1917. Author's collection.

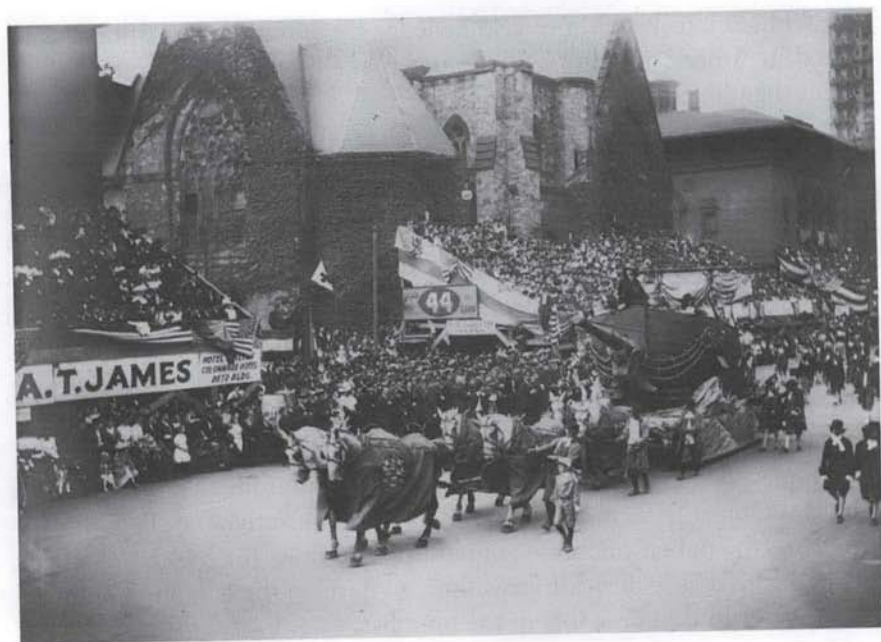


Fig. 2. Float of William Penn on the ship *Welcome*. It was designed by Violet Oakley after her mural in the Governor's Reception Room, Pennsylvania State Capitol, for the Founder's Day Parade, 1908. Author's collection.

she was virtually forgotten. Spurred by the feminist movement of the nineteen-seventies, scholars reconstructed her career through a series of exhibitions devoted to local women artists.¹ The first retrospective of the work of Violet Oakley was organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1979.² Despite the fact that she had received the largest mural commission ever awarded to an American artist, she was not represented in the *American Renaissance: 1876–1917* exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum later that

¹ The illustrator-author Henry C. Pitz, who knew Oakley personally, gave a brief summary of her work in his history of American illustration, *The Brandywine Tradition* (New York, 1968). Oakley was represented in the following exhibitions: *The Pennsylvania Academy and Its Women: 1850–1920* (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1973); *Women Artists in the Howard Pyle Tradition* (Brandywine River Museum, 1975); *The Studios at Cogslea* (Delaware Art Museum, 1976); *Philadelphia: Three Centuries of American Art* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976); *Drexel's Great School of American Illustration: Violet Oakley and her Contemporaries* (Drexel University, 1985); *Portraits of Cogslea* (Chestnut Hill Historical Society, 1995).

² Patricia Likos, *Violet Oakley* (Philadelphia, 1979).

year.³ Historians have yet to acknowledge the prominent position she attained in American culture. If she is remembered at all, it is for her sex rather than her art.⁴

In truth, no aspect of Violet Oakley's career impressed her contemporaries more than the fact that she was a woman who could do a man's job. Although women had proven themselves adept at easel painting and illustration, at the beginning of the twentieth century mural painting remained the exclusive domain of male artists. The herculean scale and lofty themes of murals made exceptional demands on the body and mind of the artist. Painting walls on scaffolding required physical agility and stamina that seemed beyond the capacity of the tightly corseted contemporary woman with her cumbersome ankle-length skirts. Equally daunting was the intellectual dimension of the mural program. Trained in art schools to master techniques, few artists of either sex had the type of liberal arts education that would enable them to compose historical narratives or allegories appropriate for public murals. Limited opportunities for higher education made it particularly difficult for women to develop the combination of artistry and erudition desirable in the muralist.

Consequently, the announcement that Violet Oakley was among the artists commissioned to decorate the new Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg came as a shock to the public. For the decoration of his Renaissance-revival building, architect Joseph Huston could pick and choose among the nation's leading artists. His selection of sculptor George Gray Barnard and muralist Edwin Austin Abbey, both renowned in their fields, was not surprising, but the addition of an unfamiliar twenty-eight-year-old woman to his all-male team created a sensation. News of the unprecedented event spread across the country. Headlines proclaimed "Woman Pioneer as Decorator of Great Capitol,"⁵ "Brilliant Young Woman Commissioned to Paint Mural Decoration,"⁶ noting that "for the first time in

³ The exhibition catalogue, *The American Renaissance: 1876-1917* (New York, 1979), lists Oakley among women stained glass designers on p. 131.

⁴ Oakley was discussed in the context of women's history by Patricia Likos, "The Ladies of the Red Rose," *Feminist Art Journal* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1976), 11-16; Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson, *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal From the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1976); Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortune of Women Painters and Their Works* (New York, 1979); Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Artists* (Boston, 1982); Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914*; Alice A. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls* (New York, 2000).

⁵ "Woman Pioneer," *Philadelphia Record*, Nov. 1, 1903.

⁶ "Brilliant Young Woman to Paint Murals at Pennsylvania's New Capitol," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*,

the history of American art a woman is to be entrusted with the mural decorations for a great public building."⁷

Although she was the first woman to receive a mural commission for a public building, Violet Oakley was not the first woman to paint murals in the United States. Only a decade had passed since seven women, including the famous Mary Cassatt, had painted murals in the Woman's Building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.⁸ To ensure their participation in what Augustus Saint-Gaudens proclaimed "the greatest gathering of artists since the 15th century,"⁹ feminists had insisted on the construction of a separate building for women. As Mrs. Potter Palmer, president of the Board of Lady Managers, informed the audience at the inaugural ceremony, "Even more important than the discovery of Columbus, which we are gathered here to celebrate, is the fact that the general government has just discovered woman." Of the four hundred edifices constructed for the World's Fair, the Woman's Building was the only one designed and decorated entirely by women. This was a measure of the progress made since the Centennial Exhibition in 1876 when, in the absence of a qualified woman, the chief architect of the exposition, H. J. Schwartzmann, had designed the Women's Pavilion. By 1893, there were enough female architects to hold a competition, won by Sophia G. Hayden, the first female graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The reviews of Hayden's Renaissance revival building were mixed. She was awarded a medal commending her design for its feminine qualities and "delicacy of style," and mocked by a critic who described her roof garden as a "hen-coop for petticoated hens, old and young." "It seems a question not yet answered," the reviewer concluded, "how successfully a woman with her physical limitations can enter and engage in a profession which is a wearing one."¹⁰

The murals at the Woman's Building were also controversial. The progress made by woman through the ages was illustrated in two large lunettes:

Nov. 29, 1903.

⁷ "Capitol Commission Names Artists," *Philadelphia Press*, July 23, 1902.

⁸ In addition to Cassatt, Lydia Field Emmet, Lucia Fairchild Fuller, Dora Wheeler Keith, Mary F. MacMonnies Low, Amanda Brewster Sewall, and Rosina Emmet Sherwood painted murals at the Woman's Building. See Jean M. Weimann, *The Fair Woman: The Story of the Woman's Building*. (Chicago, 1981).

⁹ *American Renaissance, 1876-1917*, 12.

¹⁰ David F. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington, Ky., 1976), 106.

Primitive Woman by Mary Fairchild MacMonnies and *Modern Woman* by Mary Cassatt. Neither employed the allegorical mode preferred by the male muralists at the fair. MacMonnies painted noble female savages performing their domestic duties in a forest while Cassatt depicted idle bourgeois women and children amusing themselves in an orchard. As represented by these murals, woman's progress over the millennia seemed to consist primarily in an improvement in fashions.

Because Cassatt was a model of the successful modern woman, her mural was especially disappointing. Although she claimed that the scene depicted "young women plucking the fruits of science and knowledge,"¹¹ this interpretation was not encoded in recognizable visual symbols. The beholder might infer that the image alluded to Eve's notorious fruit picking or was simply an idyllic moment in the lives of women of the leisure class. When the artist explained that the girls chasing a kite symbolized the quest for fame, a skeptical female viewer remarked that "Modern Woman's useless pursuit of fame" would be a better title for the mural.¹²

The conflict about *Modern Woman* was caused by two different interpretations of modernity: one artistic, the other political. In the circle of French impressionists in which Cassatt painted, modern was synonymous with contemporary, hence her remark, "I have tried to express the modern woman in the fashion of our day."¹³ Stylistically, Cassatt's mural with its impressionist palette and brushwork was the most modern painting at the Columbian Exposition. She did not, however, represent the political condition of contemporary women. Devoid of any reference to the suffrage movement or modern woman's struggle for equality, Cassatt's mural did not fulfill the requirements of feminist propaganda.

Responses to the Woman's Building were colored by contemporary gender stereotypes that circumscribed the separate spheres of the sexes. The British art critic John Ruskin promoted the notion that the creative faculty was lacking in women in *Sesame and Lilies*, his book prescribing the duties proper to men and women:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and

¹¹ Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson, *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal* (New York, 1976), 89.

¹² Judy Sund, "Columbus and Columbia in Chicago, 1893: Man of Genius Meets Generic Woman," *Art Bulletin* 75 (1993), 463, n. 139.

¹³ Letter from Mary Cassatt to Mrs. Potter Palmer, Oct. 11, 1892, as quoted in *ibid.*, 462.

invention. . . . The woman's power is for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. . . . Her greatest function is Praise.¹⁴

Ruskin's theories of art were disseminated in the United States by his disciple, Charles Eliot Norton, professor of fine arts, and later president, at Harvard University. In his commencement speech to Bryn Mawr's class of 1896, Norton advised the graduates to renounce their artistic ambitions since "in man, imagination was mainly a creative or poetic faculty, in woman mainly sympathetic."¹⁵ Toward the end of the century, assertions of the creative deficiency of the female seemed to increase in proportion to women's demands for greater participation in the fine arts.

Nineteenth-century critics reinforced gender distinctions by using the terms "masculine" and "feminine" as aesthetic qualities that reflected the sex of the artist. Women's work was typically described as feminine, womanly, delicate, sweet, and sympathetic while men produced works of art that were masculine, virile, strong, bold, and intellectual. With her limited capacities, woman was suited to the scale of easel painting, needlework, china, and textile design while architecture and mural painting were forever beyond her reach. Opponents of the expansion of woman's sphere argued that such incursions into the male domain would inevitably "de-sex" the female.¹⁶ When Charles Dana Gibson wanted to ridicule "The Female Artist Who Has Ceased To Be Feminine" in an 1890 cartoon, he had only to show the frail sex at work on a large easel painting.¹⁷ The aesthetics of gender asserted that a woman could be feminine or she could be a muralist; she could not be both.

Not surprisingly, the muralists working on the Woman's Building became embroiled in the tautologies of gender-driven art criticism. To deflect the weakness associated with the feminine, Maude Howe Elliott, author of the official handbook for the Woman's Building, declared, "The more womanly a woman's work is the stronger it is."¹⁸ The argument was also

¹⁴ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (New York, 1866), 90.

¹⁵ Quoted by Lillian B. Miller, "Celebrating Botticelli: The Taste for the Italian Renaissance in the United States, 1870–1920," in *The Italian Presence in American Art, 1860–1920*, ed. Irma B. Jaffe (New York, 1992), 22, n. 43.

¹⁶ See Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven, 1996), chap. 5, "Outselling the Feminine," 159–86.

¹⁷ Cartoon from *Life*, Aug. 7, 1890. Reproduced in Burns, *Modern Artist*, fig. 75, p. 182.

¹⁸ Maude Howe Elliott, *Art and Handicraft in the Woman's Building of the World's Columbian Expo-*

deployed by Mary Cassatt who defended her traditional portrayal of *Modern Woman* by stating, "If I have not been absolutely feminine, then I have failed."¹⁹ On the other hand, when Mary MacMonnies was criticized by the Board of Lady Managers for the indecorous use of nudity in *Primitive Woman* she replied, "I think that one of the objects of the Woman's Building is surely to show what I may call our *virility* which has always been conspicuous by its absence."²⁰

Although the World's Columbian Exposition generated a national mural movement, none of the painters who decorated the Woman's Building became professional muralists. Lucia Fairchild Fuller, who had studied with the muralist H. Siddons Mowbray at the Art Students League, went on to have a successful career as a miniaturist.²¹ Lydia Field Emmett and Rosina Emmet Sherwood worked in the related field of stained glass design, while Candace Wheeler and her daughter, Dora Keith Wheeler, continued to collaborate on interior decorations.²² Although the famous French muralist Puvis de Chavannes had praised MacMonnies's *Primitive Woman*, she turned her attention to easel painting after her marriage to the muralist Will Low.²³ Cassatt received a small commission from the Pennsylvania State Capitol to produce two murals for the Ladies Parlor. However, after completing the paintings she decided to sell them instead.²⁴

In her 1902 book *American Mural Painting*, Pauline King gave a wholly favorable account of the female muralists but she also predicted that the Woman's Building would "probably appear as quaint and curious to our descendants as the Courts of Love and the Tournaments of Wit held in the Middle Ages."²⁵ Her prophecy came true nine years later when the eminent muralist, Edwin H. Blashfield, mentioned only one woman in his book on

sition (Chicago, 1894), 38.

¹⁹ Quoted by Karen Petersen and J. J. Wilson, *Women Artists* (New York, 1976), 90.

²⁰ Rubinstein, *American Women Artists*, 155.

²¹ Lucia Fairchild Fuller was a founding member of the American Society of Miniature Painters. See her biography in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950* (1971; paper ed., 3 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 1:677-78.

²² Dianne H. Pilgrim, "Decorative Art: The Domestic Environment," in *American Renaissance: 1876-1917*, 128.

²³ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁴ Charles H. Caffin, *Handbook of the New Capitol of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, 1906; reprint, Harrisburg, 1999), appen., 19.

²⁵ Pauline King, *American Mural Painting: A Study of The Important Decorations by Distinguished Artists in the United States* (Boston, 1902), 87.



Fig. 3. Violet Oakley, *Penn's Vision*. Governor's Reception Room, Pennsylvania State Capitol. Oil on canvas, 1902–06. Capitol Preservation Committee.

Mural Painting in America: Violet Oakley. He included her in the same category as Kenyon Cox, Elihu Vedder, and Maxfield Parrish, artists with “a highly developed decorative sense” and included a reproduction of her mural *Penn's Vision* (fig. 3) from the Pennsylvania State Capitol.²⁶

To receive Blashfield's approval was a great honor, since he had decorated the Library of Congress, the Wisconsin State Capitol, and the Appellate Court House in New York. The leading spokesman for the American Renaissance, he zealously promoted municipal art for its nationalistic value. Blashfield argued that the decoration of civic architecture was a matter of critical importance that went “beyond the question of art to the question of morals and patriotism and general culture.”²⁷ “For we shall have a national school,” he wrote, “when, and not until, art, like a new Petrarch, goes up to be crowned at the capitol.”²⁸ Blashfield's unequivocal endorsement of Oakley indicated that by 1912 her sex had become less salient than her art. How did Oakley transcend the gender barrier to become one of the acclaimed mural painters of the American Renaissance?

²⁶ Edwin Howland Blashfield, *Mural Painting in America* (New York, 1913), xi. *Penn's Vision* is on p. 200.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 312.

Born in Bergen Heights, New Jersey, in 1874 to a family of painters, Violet Oakley was trained from childhood to be a professional artist. Her grandfathers, William Swain and George Oakley, were both associates of the National Academy of Design before the Civil War. These men were unusual in encouraging their daughters to pursue careers in the arts. Georgina, Frances, and Julianna Oakley exhibited at the National Academy of Design with their father. Their niece, Violet, who later became an associate of the Academy in 1919 and a national academician in 1929, also exhibited there early in her career.²⁹ Violet's mother, Cornelia Swain, studied with William Morris Hunt in Boston and had a portrait studio in San Francisco for several years before her marriage. Hunt was one of the pioneers in the American Renaissance mural movement. In 1878, he painted two frescoes on the walls of the Assembly Chamber of the New York State Capitol.³⁰ His former student, now retired from painting, nurtured the talents of all of three of her daughters, but only Violet, the youngest, would survive to become an artist. Nellie died of diphtheria at the age of six and Hester, a Vassar graduate and a novelist,³¹ died from typhoid at the age of thirty-four, shortly after losing her child in a smallpox epidemic. Afflicted with asthma, Violet was considered too frail for a college education. Instead, she commuted to New York with her father, who worked in the financial district, to attend the Art Students' League. Studying with Carroll Beckwith, one of the muralists at the World's Columbian Exposition, may have piqued her interest in mural painting. Although there is no evidence that Violet visited the World's Fair, she would have seen the photographs and articles discussing the sudden flowering of American art that saturated the popular press. In any event, her life changed abruptly with the Panic of 1893.

Her father, Arthur Oakley, was the conspicuous exception in this family of artists; he was more interested in making money than art.³² After acquiring capital in the Gold Rush, he established himself as an investment banker in New York and maintained his family in affluence in the suburbs.

²⁹ Eliot Clark, *History of the National Academy of Design, 1825-1953* (New York, 1954), 265.

³⁰ King, *American Mural Painting*, 39-54.

³¹ For a discussion of the biographical sources of Hester Oakley's novel *As Having Nothing* (New York, 1898), see Patricia Likos Ricci, "Violet Oakley, Lady Mural Painter," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1988), 16.

³² Edith Emerson, director of the Violet Oakley Memorial Foundation, provided biographical information about Arthur Oakley for my Master's thesis on Violet Oakley (Goddard College, 1977).

Faced with the economic collapse of 1893 and the social unrest that followed, Oakley took his family abroad. From 1895 to 1896, Violet and Hester enjoyed a brief respite studying painting with Edmond Aman-Jean and Raphael Collin at the Académie Montparnasse in Paris and drawing with Charles Lazar in Rye, England. However, they returned to find that the failure of hundreds of banks had left the family financially ruined. The shock caused Arthur Oakley to suffer a complete nervous breakdown. In desperation, the Oakleys sold their house and moved to Philadelphia to put Arthur in the care of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, who had developed the "rest-cure" to treat the epidemic of Americans suffering from "neurasthenic" ailments.

When her father did not respond to Weir Mitchell's treatment, Violet sought the advice of a Christian Science practitioner. A spiritual discipline founded by Mary Baker Eddy in 1879, Christian Science was a form of "mind-cure" based on belief in faith healing. Using biblical accounts of Jesus' miracles as evidence, Christian Scientists believed that mental and physical illnesses could be healed by faith in the "Divine Mind." In 1900, while Violet was studying with a Christian Science practitioner, her father died. Convinced of the inadequacy of the existing medical and religious institutions, she left the Anglican Church in which she had been raised and devoted herself to Christian Science.³³ From that time on, she exhibited remarkable physical stamina. She ultimately lived to the age of eighty-seven without experiencing a serious illness.

Oakley's first mural commission coincided with her religious conversion in 1900. It came to her by a circuitous path. When she first arrived in Philadelphia, she enrolled in the portraiture class of Cecilia Beaux at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. As it became increasingly apparent that her father was not going to recover, she withdrew from the Academy. Although she admired Beaux, whom she called her "first Master,"³⁴ she had little hope of following in her footsteps. For successful society portraitists like Beaux and John Singer Sargent, patronage was an extension of social life. Oakley, who now lived in a boarding house with her mother and rented a studio with friends, could not entertain the thought of having wealthy sitters. As the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton attest,

³³ Oakley played an active role in building the first two Christian Science churches in Philadelphia: one in West Philadelphia at 40th and Walnut Streets and the other in Germantown at 5443 Greene Street.

³⁴ Likos, *Violet Oakley*, 4.

the fall into poverty was a sin that polite society did not forgive. Her father's stigma of failure and mental illness also effectively eliminated Oakley from the marriage market.

To improve her chances of earning a living, she sought instruction in illustration from Howard Pyle at the Drexel Institute in 1897. The foremost exponent of the Pre-Raphaelite style of illustration in the United States, and an artist whose work was admired by William Morris, Pyle was a nurturing mentor and compassionate father-figure who gave Oakley her first job. He arranged for Oakley and another student, Jessie Willcox Smith, to collaborate on the illustrations for a new edition of Longfellow's *Evangeline*. With Pyle's support, Oakley worked for several years as a freelance illustrator. The religious and medieval themes of her illustrations caught the eye of Caryl Coleman of the Church Glass and Decorating Company in New York and he took her on as an apprentice in stained glass in 1899. Impressed with Oakley's execution of a window representing the Epiphany, Coleman hired her as the principal designer of the decorations for the chancel of All Angels Episcopal Church on 251 West 80th Street. With the money she earned from this commission, Oakley was able to improve her social position.

Influenced by the socialistic theories of William Morris, who advised artists to form small, self-sufficient arts and crafts communities, Oakley formed a communal household with Smith, the illustrator Elizabeth Shippen Green, and Green's friend, Henrietta Cozens, an avid gardener. With Oakley's mother and Green's parents, the extended family of seven were able to raise their standard of living and restore their social prestige by renting the Red Rose, an eighteenth-century estate in Villanova in 1902.³⁵ When the property was sold in 1906, they made arrangements with George Woodward of Chestnut Hill to restore an abandoned farm along Cresheim Creek in West Mount Airy. Woodward hired the Philadelphia architect Frank Miles Day (1861–1918) to renovate the colonial house and convert the barn into studio space.³⁶ Originally called the "Cresheim Rose," it was later known as "Cogslea," an acronym formed of Cozens, Oakley, Green, and Smith that alluded to the dehumanized condition of industrial workers

³⁵ See Likos, "The Ladies of the Red Rose," 11–15, 43; Patricia Likos, "The Red Rose Inn: *La Vita Nuova*," *Tiller* 1, no. 3 (Jan.–Feb. 1983), 23; Alice A. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls* (New York, 2000); and review of *The Red Rose Girls in 19th Century* 20 (2000), 36–37.

³⁶ See Frank Miles Day, "Cogslea: The Home of Four Artists," *Country Life in America* (July 1910), 329–32.

treated like cogs in the wheels of industrial capitalism.

The All Angels Church commission was also responsible for bringing Oakley to the attention of Joseph Huston. In 1902, when Huston informed the Capitol Building Commission that he was going to hire a woman "purely because of the superior excellence of her work,"³⁷ he was referring to All Angels, which was then one of the largest commissions executed by a single artist.³⁸ Representing *The Heavenly Host*, the murals in the apse lit up the white marble interior in a blaze of color. The designs were composed entirely of a multitude of monumental figures of angels painted in a fiery palette more typical of hell than heaven. The bold and original decorative ensemble was pronounced an "artistic triumph" by the *New York Herald Tribune*³⁹ and commended not only for its "grace, sweetness, and serenity" but also for its "force."⁴⁰ (Unfortunately, Oakley's work was damaged and dispersed when the Episcopal Church sold the decorations in 1979). After the success of All Angels, Oakley was in demand for the Pre-Raphaelite style of her stained glass windows in which the faces and details of the figures were painted directly on the glass. She designed a window of the *Three Marys at the Sepulcher* (lost) for the Convent of the Holy Child in Sharon Hill and a Shakespeare window with scenes from *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* for the home of Mary Gibson in Wynnewood in 1903. The exquisite *Wise Virgins* (fig. 4), a double window made in 1908 for St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Germantown, evoked Edward Burne-Jones's painting *The Golden Stairs* (1880, Tate Gallery).⁴¹ One of her most interesting designs was a stained glass dome (destroyed) with an allegorical figure of *Wisdom*, for the residence of Charlton Yarnall in Philadelphia (about which more will be said below). Only the cartoon now survives (fig. 5). Oakley's masterpiece in the medium was *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (1912), commissioned by the publisher Robert Collier for the library of his New York residence (now in the House of the Apostolic Delegate, Washington, D.C.). Displaying "the influence of Botticelli's famous drawings" for *The Divine Comedy*,⁴² Oakley's three-paneled window with scenes from

³⁷ *Philadelphia Press*, July 21, 1902.

³⁸ *The Churchman*, Jan. 11, 1902.

³⁹ "Memorial to Dr. Hoffman Artistic Triumph," *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 30, 1901.

⁴⁰ *Philadelphia Press*, Dec. 8, 1901.

⁴¹ *The Wise Virgins* was restored in 2001 by the Beyer Studios in Philadelphia and is one of the few Oakley windows in its original location.

⁴² Royal Cortissoz, *New York Herald Tribune*, Feb. 7, 1914.

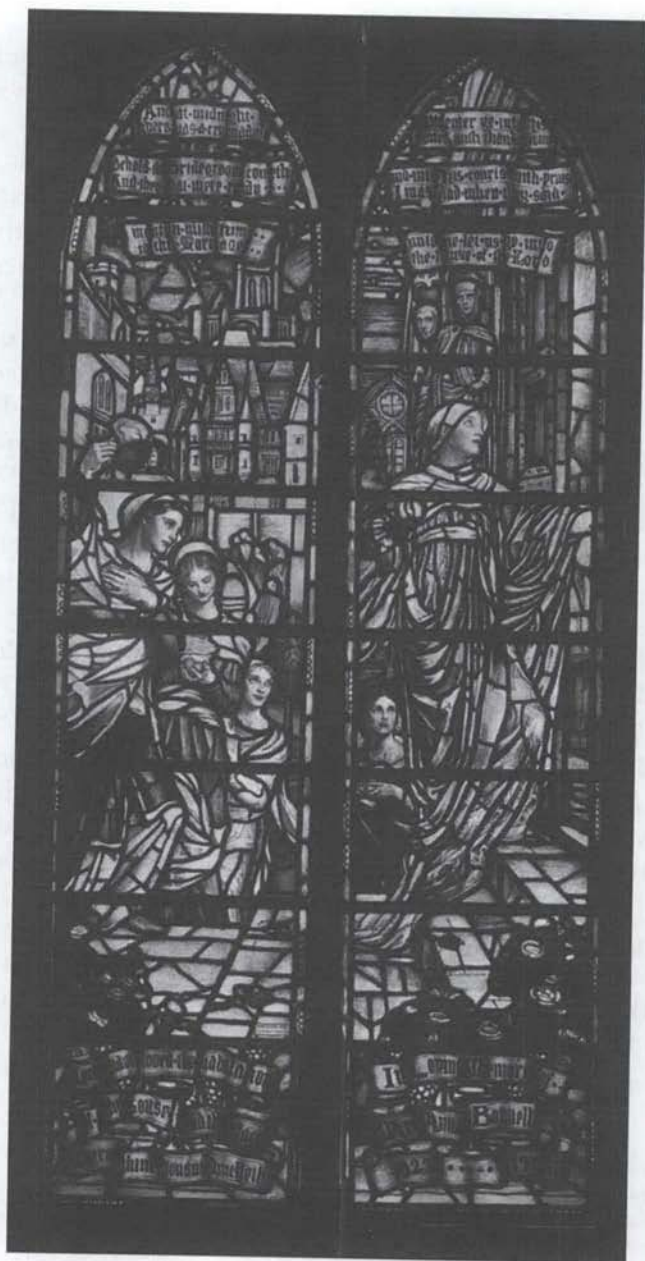


Fig. 4. Violet Oakley, *The Parable of the Wise Virgins*. St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Philadelphia. Stained glass, 1908. Author's collection.



Fig. 5. Violet Oakley, Sketch for *Wisdom*, Charlton Yarnall House. Oil on canvas, 1910–11. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Violet Oakley Memorial Foundation.

the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* was awarded a gold medal in 1915 at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.

Compared to the variety of media she had used at All Angels, Oakley's commission at the Pennsylvania State Capitol was simple and straightforward.

ward. She was charged with painting a frieze 6 feet high and 134 feet long in the Governor's Reception Room that represented the "Romance of the Founding of the State," the theme of the capitol's decorative program.⁴³ After spending a year abroad studying Italian Renaissance frescos and researching the life of William Penn at Oxford, she composed the program. *The Founding of the State of Liberty Spiritual* would depict the pre-history of Pennsylvania, chronicling the key events in history of religious intolerance in England that culminated in the Penn's departure for the New World. The subject was a variation on the theme of "Good and Bad Government," first painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti on the walls of Siena's Palazzo Pubblico in the fourteenth-century and revived by Elihu Vedder as *Good Administration* and *Corrupt Legislation* in the Reading-room of the Library of Congress.⁴⁴

As the opening of the Pennsylvania State Capitol grew near, the public anticipated the results of Huston's folly in hiring a woman. They were treated to a preview of Oakley's murals when she exhibited six of the finished panels at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1905. Within the ranks of the Academy where she had studied for a semester and regularly exhibited, her male colleagues were as thrilled as if they had discovered an exotic species of flower growing in their own backyard. At the Academy's one-hundredth anniversary celebration, President Edward Coates awarded Oakley the coveted gold medal as the audience showered her with roses and carnations.⁴⁵

The critics were also unstinting in their praise. The *Philadelphia Press* judged the paintings "worthy of the great state for which the work is done," adding that "if ever a politician's soul can be elevated by his surroundings, we shall be in for the political millennium when the Governors of Pennsylvania have their being confronted by these splendid decorations."⁴⁶ To express their admiration, some of the critics resorted to terms reserved for men. Arthur Hoeber of the *New York Globe* was impressed with her "broad masculine treatment of the theme and place" adding that Oakley's "genuine artistic feeling and intellectual fitness entirely justified the unusual selection of the committee."⁴⁷ James B. Townsend of *American Art News* thought the

⁴³ See Ingrid Steffensen's article in this issue.

⁴⁴ King, *American Mural Painting*, 191-95.

⁴⁵ *Philadelphia North American*, Feb. 24, 1905.

⁴⁶ "Some Contrasts and Miss Oakley," *Philadelphia Press*, Jan. 22, 1905.

⁴⁷ Arthur Hoeber, "Pennsylvania Academy Exhibition," *Art Bulletin* 4, no. 15 (Feb. 4, 1905).



Fig. 6. Violet Oakley, *The Burning of the Books at Oxford, 1526, and the Execution of Tyndale, 1536*. Governor's Reception Room, Pennsylvania State Capitol. Oil on canvas, 1902–06. Capitol Preservation Committee.

murals were “really superior, strongly conceived and beautifully executed.”⁴⁸

When they were installed in the Governor's Reception Room, the unveiling of Oakley's murals by Governor Samuel W. Pennypacker was attended by a crowd of thousands. “Oakley Paintings Charm Governor” the *Harrisburg Telegraph* reported.⁴⁹ After viewing the “highly spiritual painting with which Miss Oakley has limned the rise of religious liberty,” Talcott Williams, editor of the *Philadelphia Press*, pronounced them “one of the greater mural decorations of our day.”⁵⁰

In the general euphoria, a note of discord was sounded by a large group of Catholics who detected a Protestant bias in the murals. When they saw *The Burning of the Books at Oxford* and *William Tyndale Burnt at the Stake* (fig. 6), events that depicted oppression by the Church that had no direct connection to Pennsylvania, they interpreted the murals as anti-Catholic propaganda and organized a protest. The president of the American Catholic Historical Society, William McGrath, Jr., lodged a formal complaint with Governor Pennypacker accusing Oakley of “private propa-

⁴⁸ James P. Townsend, “Pennsylvania Academy Exhibition,” *American Art News* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 1905).

⁴⁹ *Harrisburg Telegraph*, Nov. 24, 1906.

⁵⁰ *Philadelphia Sunday Press*, Sept. 30, 1906.

ganda." He demanded the removal of the murals on three grounds: first, that by "failing to represent adequately the background of the events," the paintings were "false and misleading"; second, that they were "irrelevant and inappropriate" as mural decorations of the Capitol of the commonwealth; and third, that they "were wholly inadvisable in as much as they offered a gratuitous affront to a very large body of citizens as is sufficiently attested by the protests already made against their use."⁵¹

The conflict may have arisen from friction between the Irish and the English rather than from Catholicism per se. As Digby Baltzell noted, "the famous anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia during the 1840s were really anti-Irish."⁵² No doubt, Oakley's celebration of English history exacerbated political tensions between Irish Catholics and Anglo-Saxon Protestants at a critical moment at home and abroad. For decades, the American press had waged a propaganda war against Irish Catholics, arguing that their loyalties to the Pope rendered them unfit for democracy. Caricatures by artists such as Thomas Nast portrayed the Irish as an inferior race.⁵³ In recent years, the Anglo-Saxon movement had organized the Immigration Restriction League to limit the number of Catholic and Jewish immigrants entering the country.⁵⁴ The fact that Oakley, an Anglo-Saxon, was known to have worked on the mural program in England at a time when Home Rule for Ireland was being contested in the British Parliament, contributed to her anti-Catholic image.

Ironically, her visual tribute to religious tolerance had generated accusations of religious prejudice. Yet her motivation may have been more personal than theological. When Oakley was in Florence working on the murals in 1903, she was healed of a life-long affliction with asthma by reading Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with a Key to the Scripture*.⁵⁵ However, Christian Science was considered a dangerous cult and Oakley's family and friends continued to warn her against it. The subtext of her depiction of burning books and the heresy trial of Anne Askew, who refused to recant, was the defense of her right to believe in Christian Science.

⁵¹ *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Nov. 26, 1906.

⁵² E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment* (New York, 1966), 73.

⁵³ E.g., Thomas Nast's 1876 cartoon "The Ignorant Vote" from *Harper's Weekly*, reproduced in Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, 1998).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, chap. 2, "Anglo-Saxons and Others, 1840-1924," 39-90.

⁵⁵ "Testimony of Christian Science Healing," Aug. 6, 1959, from Violet Oakley to the Christian Science Publishing Co., Boston, Mass., carbon copy in author's possession.

To guard against the misrepresentation of her beliefs, Oakley placed a manuscript in the Governor's Reception Room in which she pointed out that several of the scenes, such as the imprisonment of the Quakers, represented abuses by the Church of England. Ultimately, Governor Samuel Pennypacker, a Quaker and a historian, resolved the conflict by ruling that insofar as the events represented were historic facts, they were beyond dispute. Nevertheless, in retrospect Oakley does indeed appear to be a religious propagandist with an evangelical approach to public art.⁵⁶ "Realizing that painting has always been one of the clearest expositions of the religious spirit and realizing that religion has been the inspiration of most of the significant painting in the world," she recollected, "I felt that I had received a sacred challenge. I told myself throughout the years, daily, hourly, that unless I could express the religious feeling behind the founding of Pennsylvania, I would stop work and retire."⁵⁷ Virtually all of her subsequent commissions contain references to faith, good works, and the teachings of the Bible that establish her mural programs within the Protestant tradition.

Undaunted by the protest, Oakley chose a religious subject for a commission the following year. In 1907, she painted three small murals in the Henry Memorial Library of Chestnut Hill Academy, a private school for boys in Philadelphia, with Old and New Testament models of virtuous youths: *David and Goliath* (heroism), *the Young Solomon* (service), and *Christ Among the Doctors* (sacrifice). These murals did not arouse enthusiasm in the press and one critic mocked her "unpleasant interpretation" of Jesus: "Miss Oakley portrays a hysteric kneeling boy, evidently delivering an impassioned harangue to the men, who are listening with a grave attention that is highly suggestive of physicians at a nervous clinic."⁵⁸ In her next commission, religion would play a less conspicuous role.

The collaboration of Oakley and Frank Miles Day on the Charlton Yarnall house (1910–11) at 17th and Locusts Streets in Philadelphia produced one of the gems of the American Renaissance.⁵⁹ Colleagues, friends, and

⁵⁶ The term "propaganda" originated in a religious context. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV established the *Congregatio de propaganda fide* to propagate the Roman Catholicism in the foreign missions.

⁵⁷ *New York Herald Tribune*, Feb. 16, 1930.

⁵⁸ *Philadelphia Press*, Nov. 22, 1907.

⁵⁹ When the house was acquired by the American Red Cross in 1963, the decorations were removed. The glass dome shattered and the murals were given to the Woodmere Art Museum, where they remain today.

perhaps lovers as well,⁶⁰ Oakley and Day were both enamored with the art and architecture of northern Italy. After designing a Venetian palazzo to house the Art Club (demolished) on Broad and Chancellor Streets in 1888, Day became one of the leading architects in the Renaissance and Colonial revival styles in Philadelphia.⁶¹ Admired for his collegiate architecture, Day designed Houston Hall, Weightman Hall, and Franklin Field for the University of Pennsylvania, his alma mater, and buildings for Penn State, Princeton, Wellesley, Cornell, and other educational institutions. He contributed to the development of the American Renaissance by helping to found the American Academy in Rome (1894) and *House and Garden* magazine (1901), and he served as president of the American Institute of Architects (1906–07). In 1906, when he was in charge of the restoration of Congress Hall on Independence Square, he met Oakley when he undertook the renovation of the colonial house and barn that became her home and studio.

Involving only a single room, the Yarnall House commission was small in scale but grand in concept. Paneled in Circassian walnut with an intricately carved and coffered barrel vault, the central hall was planned by Day to utilize Oakley's expertise in stained glass and mural painting. She, in turn, composed a decorative program that was a tribute to the architect. Oakley found the theme for *The Building of the House of Wisdom* in Proverbs 9:1: "Wisdom hath buildeth her house." Her imagery for the stained glass dome (fig. 5) derives from Proverbs 8:27–29 where Wisdom says of the Lord, "When he drew a circle on the face of the deep . . . when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him." Beneath the hovering visage of Wisdom, the pendentives trace the progress of the builder's art in four stages: the primitive tent, the Egyptian pyramid, the Renaissance dome, and the American skyscraper. On the walls below them, three lunettes simultaneously depict the Ages of Man and the Progress of Knowledge. Beginning with *The Child and Tradition* (fig. 7), a boy sits with his mother and his nurse at the foot of a staircase listening to stories told by the literary figures on the steps, while in the vault overhead he sees Hercules grow to adulthood in three stages. On the upper floor, a concert performed

⁶⁰ Day was married at the time. According to his daughter (interview March 12, 1995, at the "Portraits of Cogslea" exhibition organized by the Chestnut Hill Historical Society), Day and Oakley's relationship, presumed to be intimate, greatly distressed her mother.

⁶¹ See Patricia L. H. Keebler, "The Life and Work of Frank Miles Day" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1980).



Fig. 7. Violet Oakley, *The Child and Tradition*. Lunette for the Charlton Yarnall House. Oil on canvas, 1910–11. Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross, 1963.

by young adults represents the development of *Youth and the Arts* (fig. 8). *Man and Science* (fig. 9), the culminating stage of individual and cultural maturity, takes place on the rooftop where the adults and children have gathered to gaze at the flight of a biplane over the city of Florence. Arching over them in the vault are inventions that celebrate the genius of American technology: the wireless, the electric light, and aviation. The conquest of space, attempted by Leonardo da Vinci in the High Renaissance, is finally achieved by the Wright Brothers during the American Renaissance. The allegorical program of *The Building of the House of Wisdom* transformed an entrance hall into a microcosm of the Renaissance concept of civilization. Although this was their only joint venture, with Oakley's recommendation, Day was awarded several commissions for Christian Science churches.⁶²

While Oakley was completing the Yarnall House, Edwin Austin Abbey, the chief muralist at the Pennsylvania State Capitol, suddenly died and she was awarded his commission for the Senate Chamber and the Supreme Court. Nine years and several commissions after receiving her first com-

⁶² Day designed the Second Church of Christ Scientist on Greene St. in Germantown in 1916. See Charles Draper Faulkner, *Christian Science Church Edifices* (Boston, 1946), 132, 134, 136.



Fig. 8. Violet Oakley, *Youth and the Arts*. Lunette for the Charlton Yarnall House. Oil on canvas, 1910–11. Woodmere Art Gallery: Gift of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross, 1963.

mission at Harrisburg, the press response was virtually unchanged. In 1911, when women did not yet vote, the news that a woman would be paid \$100,000 for her interpretation of political ideas on the walls of a state capitol still caused a sensation. "Woman Chosen to Complete the Abbey Paintings" proclaimed the headline of a full-page article in the *New York Times*.⁶³ In the interview that followed, Oakley attempted to deflect the preoccupation with her sex. While she expressed "satisfaction" at being the first successful female muralist, "yet she is glad to find people not regarding her work as extraordinary simply because she is a woman. . . . there is no discrimination in art and it is good to know that your work is judged solely as work."⁶⁴ Joseph Jackson in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* voiced a similar opinion. In selecting Oakley to complete Abbey's work, the state had not intended to pay "a graceful compliment to a woman painter"; according to Jackson, rather it was because "in all her work, the thinker is dominant, as it should be in the mural painter." Moreover, "such gigantic undertakings—gigantic both physically and intellectually" were "a responsibility from which many men would shrink."⁶⁵

⁶³ *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1911, 11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Joseph Jackson, "Violet Oakley, Master Genius of American Mural Art," *Philadelphia Public Led-*



Fig. 9. Violet Oakley, *Man and Science*. Lunette for the Charlton Yarnall House. Oil on canvas, 1910–11. Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross, 1963.

Asked whether she thought a woman's work had feminine qualities, Oakley said that "in art the sex distinction is lost . . . that the artist puts in his work what is essentially human. She believes in the equality of the sexes and does not think her work would have been materially different had she not been the woman she is. . . ." ⁶⁶ Oakley's remarks reflect a critical juncture in feminism: the theory that artistic qualities were socially not biologically constructed. In 1911, Charlotte Perkins Gillman dismantled the aesthetics of gender in *The Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture*. "When we wish to praise the work of a woman, we say she has a masculine mind," Gilman observed, "but what is being called masculine is actually human and applies to both sexes."⁶⁷ Exposing the purely semantic construction of gender in art criticism, she argued that "neither the masculine nor the feminine has any place in art. Art is human."⁶⁸

ger, June 12, 1913.

⁶⁶ *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, June 12, 1913.

⁶⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World, or Our Androcentric Culture* (New York, 1911), 21–22.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

Not least among Oakley's achievements was her role in exposing the fallacies of the aesthetics of gender. Because mural painting was identified with men, Oakley, perhaps more than any other female artist at the time, was living proof that the sex of the painter was not a determining factor in the production of art. This must have been the conclusion reached by the exclusively male Architectural League of New York when they decided to break with tradition and for the first time award their medal of honor to a woman. The resolution, signed by Edwin Howland Blashfield, Kenyon Cox, Daniel Chester French, and other luminaries was conspicuously free of gender terminology:

Resolved, That the Medal of Honor in Painting of the Architectural League of New York, be unanimously awarded to Violet Oakley for her work at the Capitol at Harrisburg, for its thoughtfulness, thoroughness of workmanship, and success in the decorative treatment of historical subjects.⁶⁹

Oakley, however, acknowledged the historical implications of the event in her acceptance speech. "This medal shall always be precious to me," she stated, "as a symbol by means of which I have magically opened the way into this garden of yours for myself and for my sisters."⁷⁰ Oakley's feminism consisted of advocating equality of opportunity for women in all facets of society, including the vote, but she did not use her murals as a platform to advance women's rights. Rather, like the Quaker abolitionists who had defied the ban against women speaking in public to protest slavery, Oakley took it upon herself to address the critical political and philosophical issues of the day.

Violet Oakley's forty-three murals at the Pennsylvania State Capitol comprise a systematic philosophy of the ideal "state" (in the generalized sense of an organized political and geographical entity) developed over a period of twenty-five years (1902-27). In her first commission for the Governor's Reception Room, it was already apparent that the theme was not the history of Pennsylvania, but the emergence of a new concept of the state founded on the principle of religious liberty. When she received the second commission in 1911 after a hiatus of five years, she had "to take up again the threads and weave on the tapestry of the History of a State":

⁶⁹ Violet Oakley, *The Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644-1944* (Philadelphia, 1950), 156.

⁷⁰ Patricia Likos, "For Myself, For My Sisters," *Arts Exchange* 2, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1978), 57.

What might not the destiny be of this "State" (or condition or consciousness) builded upon such foundations of pure and complete Spiritual Liberty? Based upon the broad, deep, and firm foundation I saw the Building of it rise—in strength and piercing Beauty—to the Stars, up and up to the City of God!⁷¹

The "destiny" of the state was the primary concern of the neo-Hegelians who dominated British and American philosophy from 1880 until World War I. T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, Josiah Royce, and John Fiske adopted Hegel's precept that "the State is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth," and explained the vicissitudes of world history as the progressive realization of universal harmony.⁷² The concept of the state as a moral agent in civilization appears in Green's *Principles of Political Obligation* (1885–88), Royce's *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885), Bosanquet's *Philosophy of the State* (1899), and John Fiske's *American Political Ideas Viewed from the Standpoint of Universal History* (1911).⁷³ The influence of Hegelian metaphysics is also evident in Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with a Key to the Scripture*, which interprets the Bible as the Divine Mind's revelation of the laws of universal harmony.

Neo-Hegelian philosophers of history agreed that progress toward an ideal state began with the Reformation, but their national loyalties determined which Protestant country they considered most significant in the process. For Hegel, Germany was the source of liberty since it was there that Martin Luther struck the first blow for individual rights. He believed that America, the product of this political and philosophical reformation, was "the land of the future where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of World's History shall reveal itself."⁷⁴ British historian John Addington Symonds argued that the United States had inherited the legacy of freedom from the mother country. He maintained that the Puritan church "introduced in America the general principles of the equality of men."⁷⁵ In *The Founding of the State of Liberty Spiritual*, Oakley also acknowledged the Puritan revolution, but only as a transition to the Quakers, whom she

⁷¹ Oakley, *Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644–1944*, 61.

⁷² Georg F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (trans. J. Sibree, 1881; reprint, New York, 1991), 39.

⁷³ Oakley, *Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644–1944*, 147, cites this edition of Fiske (orig. pub., New York, 1885), as well as his *The Critical Period in American History, 1783–1789* (Boston, 1888) and *The Dutch and Quaker Colonies in America* (Boston and Cambridge, Mass., 1903).

⁷⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 86.

⁷⁵ John Addington Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 1, *The Age of The Despots* (New York, 1888), 26–27.

thought played the pivotal role in history by establishing in Pennsylvania the principles of religious, racial, and gender equality that would ultimately unify the world.

The progress of the state toward international unity was Oakley's theme for the Senate Chamber. In *The Creation and Preservation of the Union* (1911–20), equality and social justice ensure the peace necessary for unification. The early Quakers' belief in racial equality, represented by their refusal to bear arms against the Indians (*The Little Sanctuary in the Wilderness*) and their condemnation of slavery (*The Slave Ship Ransomed*), prevented warfare in colonial Pennsylvania. The denial of political liberties in the British colonies led to the War of Independence, represented by *General Washington Marching through Philadelphia*, and consequently a new union was formed at *The Constitutional Convention*. A slave whose presence was overlooked by the delegates at the convention presages the Civil War, represented by *General Meade Marching to Gettysburg*. *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* exhorts the living to dedicate themselves to "the unfinished work" of unification.

The final mural in the series represents *International Understanding and Unity* (fig. 10), the destiny of the state. Studying Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, Oakley was struck by his statement that the "Kingdom of God and the Socially Moral World" were the same and that "the course of Time has witnessed a process ever tending to the realization of this Unity."⁷⁶ Religious neo-Hegelians stressed the idea of an ultimate resolution of all conflicts. For Royce, the revelation that "the time process consists in the progressive realization of the Universal Community" was the essential message of Christianity.⁷⁷ By working on such ideal objects as "Beauty, Knowledge and the State" that transcend self-interest, he believed that "the absolute Unity of Life" could be achieved.⁷⁸ Eddy, who defined her ethical monism as the "unity of good," also used the term.⁷⁹

According to Oakley, the idea for the mural on international unity came to her when she was working in London on the eve of the Great War. When diplomacy failed to avert the Balkan crisis, the thought of Penn's 1693 plan for a parliament of nations compelled her to paint "the Holiest

⁷⁶ Oakley, *Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644–1944*, 87.

⁷⁷ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (2 vols., New York, 1913), 1:386.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 213–14.

⁷⁹ Mary Baker Eddy, *Unity of Good* (Boston, 1887).



Fig. 10. Violet Oakley, *International Understanding and Unity*. Senate Chamber, Pennsylvania State Capitol. Oil on canvas, 1911-17. Capitol Preservation Committee.

Experiment of all, the Union of the World."⁸⁰ During the "war to end all wars," she found appropriate imagery in the vision of the heavenly city in the Apocalypse. In the center of an enormous frieze (9' x 44'), Oakley painted "Our Blue Lady of the Water of Life," a monumental blue-robed woman who personifies the rivers that flow out of the throne of God into the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:1). Based on the Renaissance iconography of the *Madonna Misericordia* created in Italy after the Black Death, she is a hieratically-scaled deity whose arms reach out to protect representative members of the community.

Surrounding her are figures demonstrating the triumph of unity over war and slavery. In a mural on the far left, the combatants of World War I attack the kingdom of Unity. They are defeated by *The End of Warfare*, a beating of "swords into ploughshares" (Isaiah 2:4) in which soldiers lay down their weapons, and a doctor and nurse place their instruments into the waters of life. On the far right, slaves disembarking from ships are beaten by Greed, Ignorance, and Fear. Adjacent to them, *The End of Slavery* is represented by a group of Africans, Asians, and Middle-Easterners reaching out to the Quaker social worker Jane Addams, who holds open a volume of Penn's *Fruits of Solitude*. (Addams, who Oakley knew and admired, had organized the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1915.) A man removing a ball and chain from a prostitute dressed in scarlet symbolizes the abolition of "White Slavery." The kneeling kings who remove their crowns are an allusion to Mary Baker Eddy's gloss on the Apocalypse: "mighty potentates and dynasties will lay down their honors within the heavenly city."⁸¹ Also present is Dante who, having survived the spiritual journey to Paradise, now offers the fruits of culture to a child.

Oakley thought that the realization of international unification required the vision to see the state as a work of art:

There are so many parts to this vast world of ours, that to see all the parts fitly framed together requires the formulation of a great composition, the work of the hand of the master. Subordination of parts to the whole is the process constantly required in the production of any work of art. May we not then consider the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁸¹ Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health, with Key to Scriptures* (Boston, 1934), p. 577, lines 22-23.

harmonizing of the world as a vast work of art, rather than a gigantic and unwieldy problem in politics and economics?⁸²

In 1919, two years after the mural *International Understanding and Unity* was installed, the Treaty of Versailles established the League of Nations. For Oakley, this was sufficient reward for daring to paint the subject "at a time when the idea of a federation of the world was considered—by the vast majority of mankind—a most wild and forlorn dream of visionaries."⁸³ Appalled when Congress voted against American participation in the League, Oakley produced an illuminated portfolio of her notes on international government illustrated with reproductions of her murals in the Governor's Reception Room and the Senate Chamber. After exhibiting the original manuscript at the Library of Congress in 1922, she published a leather-bound facsimile edition titled *The Holy Experiment—A Message to the World From Pennsylvania*, which she personally presented to former President Woodrow Wilson whose support for the League had cost him the election in 1920.⁸⁴ Oakley became a self-appointed American ambassador to the League of Nations from 1926 to 1929. She set up residence in Geneva, attending the 8th, 9th and 10th Assemblies of the League and drawing portraits of the delegates which she later published in *Law Triumphant*, a portfolio on the history of international law illustrated with her murals in the Supreme Court Room.⁸⁵

Conceived at the time when Oakley was working on *The Holy Experiment*, the murals in the Supreme Court Room depict the pages of a book.

⁸² Violet Oakley, *Law Triumphant* (Philadelphia, 1933), 37.

⁸³ Oakley, *The Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644–1944*, 79.

⁸⁴ Violet Oakley, *The Holy Experiment—A Message to the World from Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1922). Sold by subscription. At the suggestion of James Brown Scott, director of the Carnegie Foundation of International Peace in Washington, D.C., an *International Supplement* of translations in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Japanese was added. Oakley stated that she visited Woodrow Wilson twice in his library in Washington, D.C.: in 1922, she showed him the original manuscript of *The Holy Experiment* and "he seemed deeply moved by its prophecy of the League of Nations"; and in 1923, when she presented him with the published edition, he told her "This will always be one of my most cherished possessions." Oakley met with Mrs. Woodrow Wilson at the League of Nations on Sept. 19, 1928 (*Law Triumphant*, 70).

⁸⁵ Oakley dedicated *Law Triumphant* to William Penn, George Washington, and Woodrow Wilson. The original portraits were given to the Library of the League of Nations in Geneva. She published an additional volume on her murals at the Pennsylvania State Capitol. *The Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644–1944* included an abridged version of the texts in *The Holy Experiment—A Message to the World from Pennsylvania* and *Law Triumphant*, illustrated with black line drawings of the Capitol murals.

The Opening of the Book of the Law (1921–27) is a Hegelian interpretation of jurisprudence. “The chief object of the following pages,” Oakley inscribed on the panel representing the Law of Nature, “is to indicate some of the earliest ideas of mankind as they are reflected in ancient law and to point out their relation to modern thought, showing an essential Unity of Substance beneath a startling difference of form.” The progression is organized in triads: three murals illustrate revealed law among the Greeks (*Themistes*), the Hebrews (*Decalogue*), and the Christians (*Beatitudes*); three law-givers, Justinian, Penn, and Blackstone, codify the laws of government; three courts set the precedents for international law: the Pennsylvania Supreme Court under Chief Justice Thomas McKean; the United States Supreme Court under John Marshall, and the newly established International Court of Justice at the Hague. A final panel depicted *Disarmament*, the result of international cooperation. “Now we have the culmination of the series, developing the theme *The Opening of the Book of the Law*,” Chief Justice Robert von Moschzisker explained at the dedication of the murals, “which marks the evolution of law, beginning with the panel on Divine Law, over the entrance door, and ending with the Spirit of the Law, so beautifully symbolized by Christ walking upon a troubled sea filled with sinking ships of strife.”⁸⁶

The issue of separation of Church and State was never raised with regard to the religious imagery in the Supreme Court Room. Certainly Oakley did not perceive any contradiction in her statement at the opening ceremony that “a local or tribal sense of law seems as unlawful and intolerable and intolerant as to have a tribal (or sectarian) sense of God.”⁸⁷ Ironically, the League of Nations Headquarters declined her mural representing Christ at Geneva because its Christian subject would undermine the pluralistic values of internationalism.

Oakley left not only her mark but also her image at the Pennsylvania State Capitol. The mural titled *Penn, The Law-Giver* (fig. 11) in the Supreme Court Room is particularly revealing of Oakley’s identification with the founder. The Quaker visionary is shown writing at his desk beneath a lantern, an external symbol of the Inner Light. In a manner reminiscent of *The Child and Tradition* in the Yarnall House, the thinkers who have in-

⁸⁶ Oakley, *The Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644–1944*, 107. Oakley cited Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Law* in her bibliography on p. 111.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

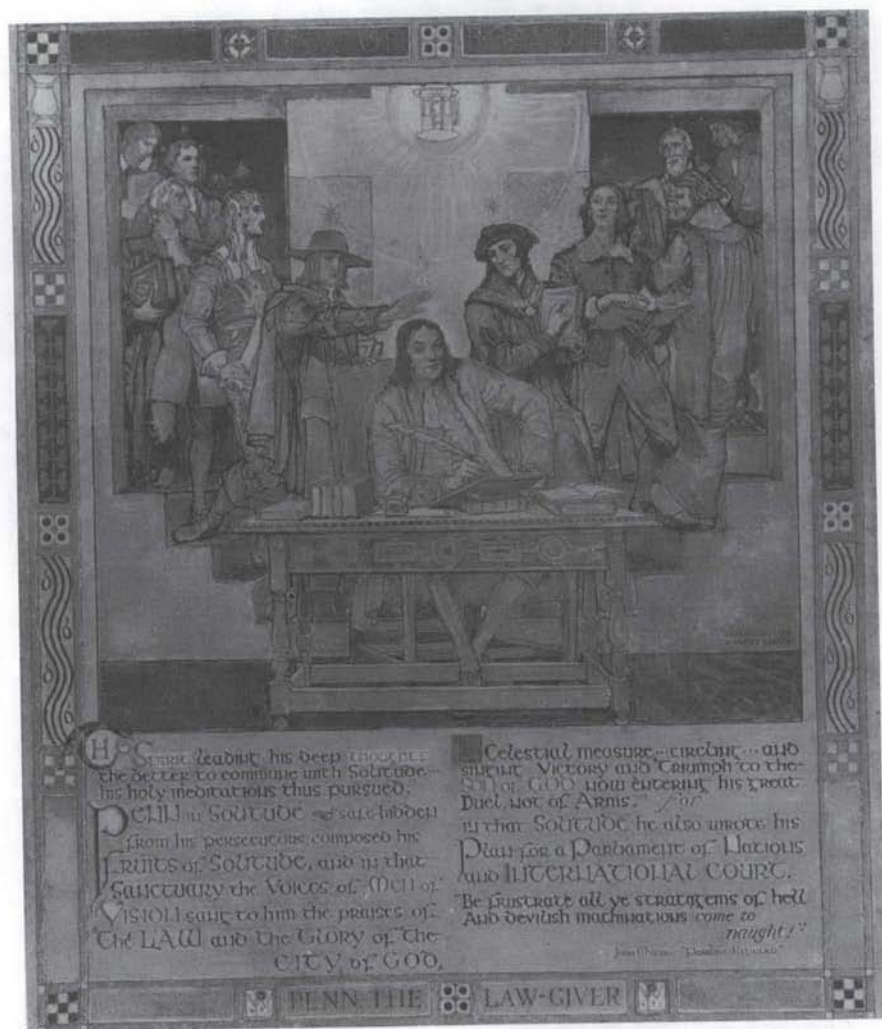


Fig. 11. Violet Oakley, *Penn, Law-Giver*. Supreme Court Room, Pennsylvania State Capitol. Oil on canvas, 1917–27. Capitol Preservation Committee.

spired him and whom he has inspired, appear on the staircases behind him: George Fox, founder of the Society of Friends; Sir Thomas More, author of *Utopia*; John Milton, with *Paradise Regained*; Grotius, the father of international law; Henry IV of France; John Locke, the English philosopher; Sir Algernon Sydney; Woodrow Wilson; and Dante. At the top of the staircase on the left, behind President Wilson, Oakley painted herself holding a volume representing her *Book of the Law* mural series.

"When her task was done," wrote Malcolm Vaughn in the *New York Herald Tribune*, "Violet Oakley had raised in the Capitol of Pennsylvania an International Altar to the Victory of LAW over force."⁸⁸ Twenty years later, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Law from Drexel University for her murals in the Supreme Court Room. In 1950, the seventy-six year old artist who had come to the state more than half a century earlier was declared a "Distinguished Daughter of Pennsylvania."

Although Oakley's celebrity was initially fueled by her sex, in the final analysis her fame came to rest securely on her accomplishments. By designing complex mural programs that addressed the critical issues of the age with the gravity and decorum of Renaissance painting, she transcended the arbitrary restrictions placed on women artists. At the Columbian Exposition of 1893, there was no woman who could design a mural on the level of Oakley's *Unity*; in 1920, one would have been hard pressed to find a man equal to it. By the 1930s, however, a new mural movement, supported by the federal government, replaced the American Renaissance and women's participation in it was a matter of course. Oakley's pioneering role was rapidly forgotten. With the hegemony of modernism after World War II, her murals looked sentimental and her radical political ideas, deprived of their cultural context, seemed naïve. Nevertheless, Oakley's paintings are no more obsolete than the Renaissance art that inspired them. They belong to an age when what an artist had to say was as important as how she said it.

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⁸⁸ Ibid., 158.