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Violet Oakley, mural painter : rethinking women artists and masculine genres

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VIOLET OAKLEY, MURAL PAINTER:
RETHINKING WOMEN ARTISTS AND MASCULINE GENRES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Art & Design

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Regina Megan Palm

August 2005

UMI Number: 1429444

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ABSTRACT

VIOLET OAKLEY, MURAL PAINTER: RETHINKING WOMEN ARTISTS AND MASCULINE GENRES

by Regina Megan Palm

This thesis addresses the life and work of Violet Oakley (1874-1961), a leading artist in the American Renaissance who achieved national recognition in the early years of the twentieth century. It examines how and why, in a society divided by gender with a woman's "proper place" clearly defined, Violet Oakley was able to overcome long-held prejudices and become a phenomenally successful muralist.

The position put forth proposes that Violet Oakley's accomplishments were not solely the consequence of talent and determination, but also the result of deeply held beliefs and lifestyle choices. Through these choices, Violet Oakley was able to maintain social acceptability and Victorian propriety, while thriving as an artist in an era when many aspiring professional women were hindered by established conventions restricting their options.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my family – my world: Mom, Dad, Tina, Steven, Riley, and Michael. I love you all more than words can express. I would like to thank my parents, Jack and Anita, for their never-ending love and faith in me. It is because of you both that I am who I am today and where I am today – you are my mentors, my heroes, and encapsulate everything I strive to be.

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PREFACE

To date, few women artists have been recognized either as major contributors to the history of art, or as equals to their male contemporaries. The exclusion of women from the canon presents a complex problem that cannot be easily remedied. For it not only involves flaws within the construct of the discipline of art history, but it also exposes long-held cultural beliefs regarding females.

Many feminist art historians have attempted to resolve the problem by “unearthing” and “reinserting” women artists into texts and exhibitions. In doing so, they have essentially found a “quick-fix,” but have not provided a permanent solution. Their scholarship, doubtlessly motivated by a sincere desire to right past wrongs, has unfortunately yielded dubious results. By reinserting women artists into the traditional, patriarchal system, feminist art historians have created their own biased canon of art, one that is modeled after the same system that ejected females in the first place.

What currently exists is a biased, women’s canon of art history, consisting of a few selected artists whose work parallels or complements the men’s canon.¹

¹ Though well intentioned, many of the founding mothers of feminist art history have aided in the establishment of a “women’s canon.” They, like most art historians from their generation, were taught that female artists did not exist and so in order to counter this deeply rooted convention, they sought to “unearth” women artists. However, they did not address the issue and politics of the canon in which they were inserting the women artists. While the simple

Although these canons may be analogous, the artists existing within them are not considered equal. Male artists still dominate the history of art and are often studied separately from their female contemporaries.² These aspects of art history must be changed if female artists are to achieve parity within the discipline.

In past studies regarding women and art, women are often treated as anomalies. Their contributions are often taken out of context and are exhibited, studied, and analyzed separately. Except when an attempt is made to establish an intimate connection to a male contemporary, female artists are often cut-off from male accomplishments in their time and genre. Their work may be presented as running parallel to the productions of their male colleagues, but it never intersects — a construct that suggests that male and female artists are not on the same playing field.

The majority of the artists in this restricted “women’s canon” fit a certain criteria. They are normally fine artists, have some intimate connection to a male artist, or they have endured some horrific tragedy that engendered within them

insertion of women was a victory in and of itself, it was not enough. Some of the studies that have been the most influential to feminist art history and the “women’s canon” are Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin’s exhibition and text *Women Artists 1550-1950*, Linda Nochlin’s essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, and Mary Garrard’s study of *Artemisia Gentileschi*.

² For example, many universities offer classes specifically on “Women and Art.” Why is it necessary to have a separate art history class on women artists when there are no classes titled “Men and Art”? Is it that without these special topics courses women are not covered to the extent that they should be, and if this is the case why aren’t they? If it is necessary to have a

the strength and power to create. Without this defining experience, the female artist would have been a “normal” woman and there would be no justifiable explanation as to why she, a domestic being, was able to create on a level similar to a male. These deeply embedded cultural explanations of female success ensure that women artists are regarded as anomalies and serve to sustain the male-dominated historical matrix. Without these justifications, the notion that “normal” women were unequal to the demands of high art and the idea that artistic “genius” is a masculine trait would have to be dismissed.

“women and art” course but not a “men and art” course then perhaps the current art historical curriculum, meaning texts and methods of teaching, should be reassessed.

INTRODUCTION

During the late nineteenth century the field of art, as a profession, was expanding and there was a significant increase in the number of American women who became career artists. One of the art forms in which women had become active was magazine and book illustration. The field welcomed and appreciated women artists for their “innate” maternal instincts, and their ability to depict “soft,” “feminine” subjects. At the time, the primary demographic for most periodicals and journals were women.¹ The visual culture of the nineteenth century supported defined gender roles. Women were seen as domestic entities and as a result, many of the illustrations of the Victorian era depicted women as wives and mothers.

In the late nineteenth century, the flourishing market for images that came to be called “The Golden Age of Illustration,” provided women of a certain social class with the opportunity to explore a career and life outside of the home.² Proficiency in the field enabled female illustrators to achieve some semblance of, if not complete, economic independence from males. Illustration also served as a

¹ Since women were the primary demographic for most periodicals and magazines, publishers needed to compete for their business. In order to do so, publishers tried to appeal to female consumers by creating images that pertained to Victorian women, images of mothers with children and wives tending to domestic duties. Publishers believed that women would be best suited to create illustrations for other women, that they would be more in tune with what women wanted to see and how they felt.

gateway into “higher” art forms because the training that females received as illustrators provided them with a substitute for the training previously denied to them by many professional fine arts schools and organizations. Hence, illustration acted as a stepping-stone for women artists, giving them the training and skills needed to enter “masculine” genres of art.

Prior to the rise of illustration, men were the primary creators and disseminators of culture. It was not until women began to participate in the Golden Age of Illustration that they too started to have a voice in popular visual culture. However, once admitted into the realm of commercial illustration, women artists continued to create what was considered the socially ideal woman. While Oakley began her career in illustration, she soon left the field in order to pursue genres and venues that better served her goal to propagate her personal beliefs.

As an American Renaissance muralist, Violet Oakley was part of a generation of artists whose values and general themes were closely connected. She was exceptional in that she accomplished many feats unprecedented for women during the early years of the twentieth century. Yet at the same time her mural work matched if not surpassed that of her fellow American Renaissance muralists, regardless of gender, an achievement that is well documented.

² The “Golden Age of Illustration” refers to the end of the nineteenth century during which magazine and book illustration production began to soar.

By succeeding in a genre that was customarily masculine, Violet Oakley accomplished something unique. However, in doing so, she sacrificed her sexuality as a woman, and became part of the third sex, a sex that included educated women. She was no longer seen as feminine nor was she fully masculine. Her sexuality lay in limbo. Thus Oakley was able or “allowed” to become a celebrity because she was not seen as posing a direct threat to the “American family.” She did not attempt to marry and have children during her lifetime. Had she done so, she would have violated the accepted convention of domesticity assigned to middle-class women, which demanded total devotion to home, husband, and children. Instead, Violet Oakley was perceived as an anomaly, a single, unobtrusive woman who through her socially acceptable work in illustration was able to receive the necessary training for higher art forms. She upheld society’s notions of propriety, while simultaneously achieving national success.

In this thesis, I have sought to determine how Violet Oakley, an American Victorian woman artist, became a prosperous, professional mural painter. I have attempted to analyze her position within the art world, as well as within the larger context of American society at the turn of the twentieth century, and also to evaluate her achievements and contributions to American art. I am attempting to reintroduce Violet Oakley into art history, as well as to rethink why women

artists like Oakley have had to be perceived as anomalies in order to fit into the generally accepted canon of art history.

As with many competent female artists, there are very few published texts on Violet Oakley and her career. I have used these texts to inform my thesis but have also drawn on personal papers, turn of the twentieth-century magazine articles and book excerpts, tape recordings, and other archival materials in an attempt to incorporate Violet Oakley's life and career into the history of American art.

CHAPTER 1

Violet Oakley

Violet Oakley was born in Bergen Heights, New Jersey on June 10, 1874, into a family of artists. The creative disposition of her relatives was a pivotal factor in Oakley's choice of a career. When asked to account for her later success, Oakley often explained her interest in art as both hereditary and chronic.¹ Like her two elder sisters, Cornelia and Hester, Violet Oakley received her first artistic instruction from her mother, Cornelia Swain Oakley, an accomplished painter who had forfeited her career for marriage and motherhood. As a young woman, Cornelia Swain had studied with William Morris Hunt in Boston and later moved to San Francisco where, family legend claimed, she opened the first painting studio in the city.² According to Oakley's friend Edith Emerson, Cornelia Swain made her living painting "little dainty portraits of people in their home environments" as well as competent genre paintings before turning her focus to family and children.³

Including her mother, more than a dozen of Violet Oakley's family members were either professional or vocational artists.⁴ Gender did not dictate

¹ Edith Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965. Cassette. Collection of Alice Carter.

² Alice Carter. The Red Rose Girls: An Uncommon Story of Art and Love. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000, 31.

³ Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

⁴ Ibid.

who would or would not become an artist in the family, and both men and women pursued their ambitions with equal success. Three of Oakley's aunts, Juliana, Isabel, and Georgiana Oakley studied art in Europe.⁵ During their European travels, Violet's aunts visited monuments and museums, making reproductions of paintings done by old masters and later sending the artwork home to their nieces.⁶ Purportedly, when young Violet saw a copy of a Gainsborough painting done by her Aunt Juliana, she decided immediately that she too would become an artist.⁷

Although Cornelia Swain Oakley was eager to pass her artistic knowledge on to her daughters and was supportive of Violet's ambitions, she raised her daughters to adhere to traditional Victorian sensibilities, which assigned prescribed roles to women that were centered on home and family. Violet was an obedient daughter who took her mother's lessons to heart, becoming proficient at her craft while maintaining the expected conventions concerning manners and moirés. Nevertheless, as Violet matured and grew in confidence and ability, she would come to challenge the professional boundaries that hindered women artists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – boundaries that dictated what was and was not appropriate subject

⁵ Helen Goodman. "Women Illustrators of the Golden Age of American Illustration." Woman's Art Journal 8 (Spring/Summer 1987): 19.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

matter for women artists and what mediums could be managed by the “softer sex.”

Violet Oakley’s formal education in art did not begin until 1894 when she was twenty years old. Violet was a sickly child who suffered from asthma, and having lost their eldest daughter, Cornelia to diphtheria, her parents were understandably protective of their youngest child. Although Hester Oakley attended Vassar College and Violet was eager to follow, the Oakleys were convinced that their youngest daughter was better off at home. Eventually, acquiescing to repeated entreaties, they permitted Violet to accompany her father on his daily commute to New York City where she attended the Art Students’ League.

Unlike many artists of the period, Violet received the majority of her formal art education in America. While on a family trip to visit her Aunt Juliana, Violet attended the Academie Montparnasse in Paris. According to author Alice Carter, the atelier was a typical all-female institution consisting of few serious students.⁸ While in Europe Violet also traveled to Rye, England where she took a class with the American-born painter Charles Lasar who taught popular technical classes. Unfortunately, the Oakleys’ trip was cut short when Arthur Oakley became sick. Although the exact nature of Mr. Oakley’s illness was never

⁸ Ibid.

diagnosed, Violet would later conclude that his ill health was caused by a nervous breakdown brought on by financial problems and overwork.⁹

With her father debilitated by an apparently incurable illness, Violet began to lose faith in conventional medicine. It was during this time that she became interested in the Christian Science religion, a newly formed faith that seemed to offer her father some hope of recovery. Mary Baker Eddy, who founded the denomination, believed that true healing could only come from God. She came to this conclusion in 1866 following her miraculous recovery from a severe injury.¹⁰ After years of reflection and study, she went on to found the Church of Christ, Scientist in Massachusetts in 1879.

Christian Scientists were taught to rely on God for healing. Ms. Eddy believed that because sickness, sin, and evil were not a part of God's world that they did not truly exist.¹¹ In her book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Mary Baker Eddy explained that matter was not real. She believed that humankind could not consist of matter because God was spiritual. If all people were made in God's image, she concluded, we too must be purely spiritual.¹² As a result, healing could only come from God through prayer.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ While reading a passage from the book of Matthew in the Bible about a healing performed by Jesus, Mary Baker Eddy claims to have experienced a similar miraculous healing that was both immediate and instantaneous. Jean Kinney Williams. The Christian Scientists. New York: Franklin Watts, 1997, 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

¹² Ibid., 12.

Although both her father's illness and her own poor health made the tenets of Christian Science particularly attractive to Violet Oakley, many other women were captivated by this new religion founded by a female and supported by a congregation comprised of more women than men.¹³ An article from the 1895 *Christian Science Journal* stated that the church provided women who were Christian Science practitioners, with more opportunities to work in the noblest of avocations, philanthropy and medicine.¹⁴ Christian Science appealed to many women because of the control that it allowed them over their own lives. They no longer had to rely on male doctors for cures. They could be self-sufficient. In this sense Christian Science empowered women. Healing did not require any sort of higher education or medical degree, neither of which was readily available to women. Instead, all that was needed was faith.

After their return to the United States, the Oakley family first settled in New York City, then moved to Atlantic City, and finally relocated to Philadelphia where Arthur Oakley would be able to see a specialist. Since her father was unable to work and support the family financially, Violet and Hester were left with the responsibility of providing for the family. Fortunately for Violet, advances in printing technology had opened many opportunities for artists skilled enough to produce illustrations for the books and periodicals that

¹³ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴ Ibid.

flooded American homes. Indeed, the late nineteenth century is often cited as the beginning of what would later be known as The Golden Age of Illustration.¹⁵

Late nineteenth-century etiquette dictated that if a woman of middle or upper-middle-class standing needed to support herself, illustration was a viable option. "Artwork, especially if done at home, was considered an extension of women's domestic role, thereby natural and safe, as it did not encroach on male-female labor divisions."¹⁶ The field of illustration was opened to women, because the images that they created correlated with their responsibilities within the home.¹⁷

However, while illustration did allow women to gain some financial independence from men, it did not give them the status of fine artists. Since illustration was viewed as commercial work, it maintained a stigma that placed it below the realm of "fine art." In this sense, illustration was perfectly suited for women, as it did not require "genius," a characteristic assumed to be found only in males. In fact, illustration was seen as being almost biologically suited for women. Regina Armstrong, an art critic from the turn of the twentieth century,

¹⁵ Goodman, "Women Illustrators of the Golden Age of American Illustration," 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷ Catherine Connell Stryker. The Studios at Cogslea. [Exhibition catalogue] Wilmington, DE: Delaware Art Museum, 1976, 4.

wrote of women that, "the genre [illustration] attracts her, the conventional is understood by her."¹⁸

Women were thought to have a "natural" disposition for illustration since they were believed to be patient and maternal in nature. Armstrong opened one of her many articles on women and illustration by saying:

The personal point of view is peculiarly feminine, the personal note as well; so it naturally follows that in the interpretation of character, the woman illustrator finds a field especially fitted to her temperamental equipment.¹⁹

In a later article Armstrong wrote:

Indeed, many publishers hold that certain qualities of pictorial interpretation are distinctly the faculty of a woman's delicacy and insight to portray and especially is this true of the studies and compositions depicting child life.²⁰

While illustration did provide opportunities for many women who wished to pursue careers in art, there was a catch. Women were only permitted to become illustrators because the skills required were thought to coincide with their traditional duties and natural instincts. As long as they focused their attention on domestic images and not on historical or allegorical subjects, which often featured violence, nudity or both, they did not cross any societal boundaries. Thus a nineteenth century career in illustration can be seen in two

¹⁸ Regina Armstrong. "Representative American Women Illustrators: The Character Workers." The Critic 37 (July-December 1900): 43.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Regina Armstrong. "Representative Women Illustrators: The Decorative Workers." The Critic 36 (June 1900): 418.

ways. Although the profession allowed women to gain some financial independence while maintaining a professional, artistic career, it also reaffirmed a woman's traditional role as maternal, docile, and subservient to men.

In 1896, Violet decided to enroll at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to study with Cecilia Beaux (1855-1942), the first female instructor ever hired at the Academy.²¹ It was Violet's hope that she could someday profit from her artwork, but in the interim she would have to develop her skills. Nevertheless, in the thriving market for illustration there was room for neophytes, and, by the end of the year, Violet had sold numerous works to Philadelphia publishers (figs. 1 and 2).²² It was during this period that Oakley first met Howard Pyle (1853-1911), a renowned illustrator, who along with Cecilia Beaux, became one of her most admired mentors.

Encouraged by her sister Hester, who preceded her in the endeavor, Oakley decided to submit her portfolio for admission to Pyle's illustration class at the Drexel Institute in Philadelphia. Prior to teaching at Drexel, Howard Pyle had offered his services to the venerable Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. However, the Academy was not interested in offering a class in illustration or any other "commercial" art form and rejected his proposal – a decision they soon regretted when Pyle's growing reputation would have made his presence at the

²¹ Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 34.

²² Ibid.

Academy a considerable asset. Eager to correct their error, the Academy directors offered a teaching position to the affronted Pyle, and he summarily rejected it.

One of the reasons that the Academy reconsidered their decision regarding the feasibility of adding illustration to their curriculum was that Howard Pyle's courses at Drexel were extremely popular. As a result, competition for admission was fierce and the students who did gain admission were highly skilled. Nevertheless, after reviewing Oakley's work, Pyle evidentially recognized her potential and said, "I think I can help you."²³

One of the great advantages of attending Howard Pyle's classes was the interaction with other accomplished students. Pyle believed that students should collaborate and form partnerships. Many of them benefited from this camaraderie and were able to meet colleagues with similar ambitions.²⁴

It was in Pyle's class that Violet Oakley met her future companions Jessie Willcox Smith, a former student of Thomas Eakins, who was Oakley's senior by eleven years, and Elizabeth Shippen Green, a published illustrator and Academy graduate (fig. 3). Oakley, Smith, and Green formed a friendship based on their dedication to art and their shared interests in establishing viable careers, while maintaining the traditional standards of decorum befitting proper young

²³ Ibid., 35.

²⁴ S. Michael Schnessel. Jessie Willcox Smith. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1981, 30.

women. Together they formed a supportive professional and personal structure that was virtually nonexistent for most women artists during the late Victorian period. Much of Violet Oakley's subsequent success can be directly attributed to her relationships with Smith and Green and to the lifestyle the women created. In time this bond would grow to include their friend Henrietta Cozens and to exceed the boundaries of a customary friendship as the four women formed romantic friendships.

CHAPTER 2

Boston Marriages and Romantic Friendships

Born into a culture that dictated women's primary roles as wife, mother, and moral exemplar, Violet Oakley and other women artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries faced many obstacles because of their gender. They lived and worked in a society that saw them as less than full citizens. Women were raised to be docile and obedient. Girls were taught that they were different from boys, they were both physically and mentally inferior—they were the "weaker" or the "softer" sex.

The conditioning of women to be subservient to men began at an early age.¹ Victorian girls were taught that their father was the undisputed head of the household and as such, he should be categorically obeyed.² This social conditioning instilled in young girls a belief system that would extend into their adult life and their marriages. Violet's desire to maintain proper decorum followed her throughout her entire life. Among her personal scrapbooks the following excerpt was found:

The really popular girl always knows a lot. She knows enough not to gossip about people who have done her favors and who are in a way of doing her favors. She knows enough to dress appropriately at all times

¹ Mabel Collins Donnelly. The American Victorian Woman: The Myth and the Reality. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, 11.

² Ibid., 21.

and never to be overdressed...She knows enough to keep silence and she knows how to talk well. She knows how to dance, swim, row, sail a boat, play the piano and banjo...she knows enough not to growl and whine and complain...³

Victorian women were pressured to live in and abide by the rules of a culture that thrived on a patriarchal, binary system of gender. While men were considered physically strong and mentally capable, women were thought to be weak and susceptible to the evils of society. In accordance with the acceptance of this paradigm, women were confined to lives of domesticity, while men were given the freedom to pursue an education, a career, and a family.

In Anna Lea Merritt's *A Letter to Artists: Especially Women Artists* she writes:

The chief obstacle to a woman's success is that she can never have a wife.
Just reflect what a wife does for an artist:
Darns the stockings;
Keeps his house;
Writes his letters;
Visits for his benefit;
Wards off intruders;
Is personally suggestive of beautiful pictures;
Always an encouraging and partial critic.
It is exceedingly difficult to be an artist without this time-saving help. A husband would be quite useless. He would never do any of these disagreeable things.⁴

³ "The Popular Girl." Violet Oakley Papers, 1841-1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [3719].

⁴ Anna Lea Merritt. "A Letter to Artists: Especially Women Artists." Lippincott's Monthly Magazine 65 (1900): 468.

Ms. Merritt's observation is not only entertaining, but also accurate. The primary impediment that a woman artist had to overcome in the nineteenth century was her gender role. Victorian standards of proper decorum dictated that women should submit to men's desires, and that it was improper for upper-middle class ladies to pursue professional careers outside of the home.⁵

The discrimination that Violet Oakley and other women faced during the Victorian era was not just implemented socially and upheld through social hierarchies and etiquette. At the time, women were thought to be biologically inferior to men. Consequently, the sexist binary system of gender in which the two sexes functioned was upheld by "scientific" evidence and "expert" opinions. In 1873 Dr. Edward Clarke the author of *Sex in Education*, stated that academic study would divert blood from the reproductive organs and nervous system of a woman compromising both her health and her ability to reproduce.⁶ Not only is this statement typical of many scientific conclusions of the period, but it also affirms what mattered most in a woman's life — motherhood. Gender roles were central to the domestic ideologies of the Victorian period in America. So when they began to be challenged, physicians and researchers stepped forward with scientific reasons to explain why it would be inadvisable for women to pursue higher education.

⁵ Donnelly, The American Victorian Woman, 47.

One of the most commonly held beliefs was that studiousness damaged the health of women, specifically academic study undertaken during a woman's menstrual period.⁷ In *Sex in Education*, Dr. Clarke warned that study would interfere with women's fertility causing countless illnesses such as uterine disease, amenorrhea, and dysmenorrhea.⁸ In 1882 Dr. William Goodell professor of Clinical and Didactic Gynecology at the University of Pennsylvania wrote that:

Too much brain-work and too little body-work is the crying evil in this land. The fact is that our girls are over-educated...energy is withdrawn from the trophic and reproductive centres, and physical development is arrested. Precocious cleverness is attainable only at the cost of physical and sexual development.⁹

So not only were women raised to believe that they were socially inferior to men, but they were presented with scientific evidence that they were biologically inferior as well. They were warned that if they did seek the luxury of an education, their health would be endangered. Additionally, since a higher education was equated with the sphere of men, it was viewed as masculine, thus if women were to pursue a higher education their femininity would be compromised and they would become "masculinized."¹⁰ Essentially American

⁶ S. J. Kleinberg. *Women in the United States, 1830-1945*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999, 157.

⁷ Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman*, 35.

⁸ Lillian Faderman. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1991, 13.

⁹ Donnelly, *The American Victorian Woman*, 36.

¹⁰ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 14.

society utilized scare tactics in order to maintain its gendered division of labor and social hierarchy.

As a result of societal pressures and “scientific fact,” many women during the late nineteenth century adhered to the biased gender role that society assigned them. Evidence of this can be seen in the paucity of women who held professional positions. In 1870, just four years prior to Violet Oakley’s birth, America had only five female lawyers, and out of 63,000 practicing physicians, only 525 were women.¹¹ Even when they were admitted to colleges and professional programs, women were still discouraged from attending, and if they persevered and did enroll, they often did not receive the same education as their male colleagues.

While Howard Pyle did not discriminate against his female students, he was a product of his era, and as a result had “no very strong faith in the permanent artistic ambitions of the feminine sex.”¹² “The pursuit of art interferes with a girl’s social life and destroys her chances of getting married,” he once said.¹³ Pyle was a realist in both art and life. He knew all the pressures on women to marry and have children, and no doubt had encountered many female

¹¹ Gail Collins. America’s Women. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 2003, 34.

¹² Jessie Trimble. “The Founder of an American School of Art.” Outlook (1907): 455.

¹³ Howard Pyle. “Why Art and Marriage Won’t Mix.” North American (19 June 1894).

students who gave up their professional ambitions and artistic talents to the confinement of marriage.¹⁴

However, Violet Oakley along with her companions Jessie Willcox Smith and Elizabeth Shippen Green, found a way to both appease social pressures and become successful professional artists. The three women decided to move in together believing that three could survive and thrive more easily than one. They formed a group in which they would work to support one another both financially and emotionally. They entered into a “Boston marriage” or what nineteenth century society generally called a “romantic friendship,” a same-sex household consisting of all women. Boston marriages, as they were known in the East, were typically founded on love, be it friendship or something more; whether women in Boston marriages were sexually involved with one another cannot be known for sure.¹⁵

The women first started out in a three-bedroom studio at 1523 Chestnut Street in downtown Philadelphia in a building that they affectionately called the Love Building, a name coined in honor of the owner, Clement C. Love.¹⁶ Oakley, Smith, and Green spent several years at the Love Building, and by 1900 had established themselves as successful illustrators. As a result, numerous art students called on them for advice. In addition, reporters who were curious

¹⁴ Goodman, “Women Illustrators of the Golden Age of American Illustration,” 15.

¹⁵ Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, 15.

about the extraordinary success of these three independent women frequented their door searching for an interview.¹⁷ The interruptions proved to be so daunting that Oakley and her companions grew tired of the city and decided to summer in the country at Bryn Mawr College where they rented apartments in the Low dormitory.¹⁸ That summer whetted their appetite for country living, and longing to find a haven from the city, the women discovered the Red Rose Inn in the suburb of Villanova and started renting the property in 1901 (figs. 4 and 5).¹⁹

While individually skilled and capable, much of the professional success of Violet Oakley and her companions can be attributed to their domestic arrangement. As Ms. Merritt explained in her *Letter to Artists*, the primary obstacle that a woman artist faced was that she could never have a wife. It was this obstacle that Oakley and her companions endeavored to overcome with the addition of another member to their group, Henrietta Cozens. Henrietta Cozens was a friend of Elizabeth Shippen Green, and although she was not an artist, she was an expert at domestic husbandry as well as an extraordinary gardener, eager to take on the responsibility of managing the property and household duties.²⁰

¹⁶ Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

¹⁷ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰ Henrietta did not like being referred to as the “housekeeper” by the public. So, Oakley, Smith, and Green told people that she was the “garden artist.” Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

In exchange, Oakley, Smith, and Green agreed to financially support the entire household and to subsidize Cozens' living expenses.

Same-sex households were not uncommon in the late nineteenth century.²¹ Many of the women who graduated from all-female colleges such as Vassar, Smith College, and Mount Holyoke formed Boston marriages after completing their studies. Their reasons for doing so were varied. Some arrangements were career related and formed for expediency while others were emotionally based – a continuation of romantic relationships started in college. In addition, some Boston marriages may have been the only independent living arrangement available for female college graduates. Between 1880 and 1900 only 10% of America's population of women remained single, but out of those who were college graduates approximately 50% remained single.²² Many men of the era were not eager to marry an educated woman.

While it was ideal for a woman to marry, it was also socially acceptable for two or more women to move in together while they waited for a suitable marriage proposal. Although none of the women at the Red Rose Inn had any intention of marrying, this custom enabled them to maintain social respectability without sacrificing their careers or independence.

Harriet Hosmer a nineteenth-century American female sculptor observed:

²¹ Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

Even if so inclined, an artist has no business to marry. For a man it may be well enough, but for a woman, on whom matrimonial duties and cares weigh more heavily, it is a moral wrong, I think, for she must either neglect her profession or her family, becoming neither a good wife and mother nor a good artist. My ambition is to become the latter, so I wage eternal feud with the consolidating knot.²³

According to Hosmer, women could not have the best of both worlds. They had to choose whether they were going to pursue a career or marry, because unlike men, women artists were not afforded the luxury of both a family and a career. Although they chose professional careers, Oakley and her colleagues at the Red Rose Inn were still able to establish and maintain close relationships with each other under the guise of a Boston marriage – an association in which a woman could have an intimate relationship and maintain a career and propriety as long as that relationship was with someone of the same sex.

To society at large, a romantic friendship was a means by which a woman could play out her natural penchant for affection while keeping her chastity. This type of relationship or household was not, however, open to women of all classes. The women who benefited from these living arrangements were usually women of middle-class standing.²⁴ For upper-class women, higher education and professional pursuits were not encouraged, as an “appropriate marriage” was the primary goal. Women from poor families were also unlikely to form

²³ Ibid., 17.

²⁴ Ibid., 12.

same-sex households, as they could not afford to live on the wages that they earned, and were thus forced to rely on support from a male counterpart, who could usually earn more money for similar work.²⁵

A Boston marriage not only afforded Violet Oakley with financial independence and the opportunity to pursue a professional career, but it also alleviated a commonly held apprehension among women during the Victorian era – the encumbrance of pregnancy. Viewed as “the glory of woman,” pregnancy was a major dynamic in a Victorian woman’s life, it was often regarded by women with fear, for good reason. Many pregnancies ended in dangerous abortions or death during or immediately following delivery.²⁶ Much of the risk involved in childbirth was the result of the lack of knowledge of the female reproductive system. So it is not altogether surprising that a woman might choose to enter into a Boston marriage, avoiding physical risk while gaining an independence and peace of mind that might not be possible in a heterosexual marriage.

Women’s motives for entering into romantic friendships varied from fears of pregnancy and sexuality, to a desire for companionship coupled with economic independence, to the freedom to express romantic feelings for another woman. While it was hard for nineteenth-century America to fathom the idea

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Donnelly, The American Victorian Women, 8.

that two women could be physically attracted to one another, it did of course, in fact, occur. However, if sex were to enter into the relationship, the women involved would probably not have regarded the physical expression of their affection with any more guilt than that associated with masturbation since intercourse was not involved.²⁷ This changed at the turn of the twentieth century when sexologists began to classify all romantic friendships and Boston marriages (sexually intimate or not) as perverse and began labeling the participants as lesbians.²⁸

The extent of intimacy that Oakley, Smith, Green, and Cozens shared is unknown, and it can only be speculated that Violet Oakley and Elizabeth Shippen Green shared a special bond as did Jessie Willcox Smith and Henrietta Cozens. However, one thing is certain. Their relationships went beyond the professional realm. During an interview, Violet Oakley made it clear that they were not an artist's colony nor did they start out with the intention to be one.²⁹ The ladies of the Red Rose Inn were a family. They often referred to one another as sisters and even created nicknames for each other.³⁰ Eventually the four women adopted a pseudonym, "Cogs," an acronym of the first letter of each of their last names, "C" for Cozens, "O" for Oakley, "G" for Green, and "S" for

²⁷ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 50.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Charlotte Herzog. "A Rose by Any Other Name: Violet Oakley, Jessie Willcox Smith, and Elizabeth Shippen Green." *Woman's Art Journal* 14 (Fall/Winter 1993-1994): 14.

³⁰ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 73.

Smith.³¹ Relatives of the women would refer to them as the Cogs family, and letters that Violet sent to her companions while abroad were addressed to “Mr. and Mrs. Cogs and family.”³²

The ladies of the Red Rose Inn were virtually inseparable. Oakley and her companions would pose for one another in costume, study together, exhibit together, and collaborate on projects and commissions. They belonged to the same clubs and organizations, and entertained and socialized as a group.³³

The relationships and partnerships that they had established in Howard Pyle’s illustration class continued to grow and strengthen with time. Local newspaper reporters called their working relationships a “school,” a “colony,” a “community,” though there was much more to their association than a professional relationship.³⁴ Violet Oakley and her companions established a support network available to few other women of their era. Although excluded from certain professional organizations, social clubs, and schools, their romantic friendship offered Violet Oakley and her companions the opportunity to receive professional and emotional support. All of this was possible without having to sacrifice their status as proper Victorian women, an image that they cherished. Although Oakley, Smith, and Green chose professional careers over marriage,

³¹ Herzog, “A Rose by Any Other Name,” 12.

³² Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 78.

³³ Herzog, “A Rose by Any Other Name,” 14.

³⁴ Ibid.

they were not radicals, nor did they consider themselves to be bohemians. Like their male counterparts, they wanted to fit into upper-middle class Philadelphia society while maintaining careers as professional artists. Although they never participated directly in any organized feminist movement, Oakley, Smith, and Green created an atmosphere that promoted equality and opportunity.

Violet Oakley's success as an artist should be attributed to her talent, hard work, and dedication. Nevertheless, the lifestyle choices that she made must also be taken into account. Oakley's choices enabled her to pursue an artistic career yet still abide by society's preconceived notions of femininity and respectability. She was able to receive the support that she needed in order to flourish as an artist through her romantic friendships with Jessie Willcox Smith, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and Henrietta Cozens.

CHAPTER 3

The American Renaissance and De-feminization

Violet Oakley began her artistic career in illustration and although she quickly gained commissions, she did not remain in the profession and soon turned her career towards fine art. The American Renaissance movement, a style of painting that incorporated allusions to ethics and religion, appealed to Oakley's growing sense of moral purpose and beckoned her to follow its tenets. The peak of the American Renaissance comprised the three decades that bridged the turn of the twentieth century and was a period in which the arts and daily life were interwoven.¹ It was an idealistic movement founded on "the desire to build a society that was as good as it was beautiful," and to disseminate American culture and values.²

The term "American Renaissance" was first used in a journal called *The Californian* in 1880.³ However, the movement is said to have begun in 1876, with a vital component of its conception being the birth of numerous organizations: the Society of American Artists (1877), the Arts Student League of New York (1875), The Tile Club (1877), the New York Etching Club (1878), and the Society

¹ Bailey Van Hook. Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, 111.

² Patricia Likos Ricci. "The State as a Work of Art: Design, Technology, and Social Reform, 1876-1917." The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 126 (April 2002): 182.

of Decorative Art (1877). Each of the clubs relied on the same members and believed that the Italian Renaissance was a valuable source of study for artists.⁴

Artists of the American Renaissance appropriated images and symbols from past civilizations and incorporated them into their own work, which allowed them to develop their own nationalistic style while simultaneously linking them to established “masters” and art historical conventions. By using American subject matter with stylistic references to the art of the Italian Renaissance, American artists were able to create a style that was uniquely American, while at the same time validating their contemporary works. It allowed them to maintain their identity as Americans, yet root them within the larger, established sphere of art, history, and culture.⁵

Prior to the American Renaissance, mural painting was not highly encouraged. In fact, it was not until the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition that mural painting began to take root in America.⁶ Prior to the exposition, John La Farge (1835-1910) and William Morris Hunt (1824-1879) were the two principal American muralists. La Farge’s mural series for the Trinity Church in Boston, Massachusetts (1876-1878), and Hunt’s mural paintings for the New York State Capitol (1878) serve as examples of mural work done in the prelude period, the

³ The Brooklyn Museum. The American Renaissance 1876-1917. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979, 63.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 187.

mid-1870s to the mid-1880s. During this time, artists were interested in increasing the scale of artwork and referencing the work of “Old Masters.” There was not yet a stylistic harmony as there would be at the height of the American Renaissance, though references to works of the Italian Renaissance alluded to an eventual unification of theme and style. During the prelude period, private commissions were the predominant source of income for professional muralists.⁷

Though public and private murals had been produced prior to the height of the American Renaissance, they were not highly regarded, and as a result, mural painting was not considered a notable facet of American art. Edwin Blashfield (1848-1936), a critic and muralist, said in 1913 that “Save by the initiated it [mural painting] is apt to be misapprehended, as a form of art at best demanding little but arrangement, fancy, lightness of hand, at worst as a commercial product calculable as to its worth by the hour and the square foot.”⁸ Mural paintings’ less than popular reputation was due, in part, to the fact that painters at that time were not being trained for the field, because patrons of the

⁶ Hirschl & Adler Galleries. The Arts of the American Renaissance. New York: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, Inc., 1985, 10.

⁷ The Brooklyn Museum, The American Renaissance 1876-1917, 63.

⁸ Edwin Howland Blashfield. Mural Painting in America. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913, foreword.

arts, both public and private, did not commission such works.⁹ However, as America's civic architecture began to grow so did the need for mural painting.

The construction of the Boston Public Library (1887-1895) and the Newport, Rhode Island "cottages" are two examples of the extraordinary influx of civic and private buildings that Americans constructed during the American Renaissance. During this period muralists began to achieve a status unlike any they had had before. As the decorators of these public and private buildings, muralists began to be seen as disseminators of American culture. Their work was meant to enlighten the public, teach them democratic values and government policy.¹⁰ Artists of the movement believed that public murals were the ultimate democratic art, because unlike other art forms like easel painting or sculpture, murals were meant for the public.¹¹ The construction of the Boston Public Library represents the height of the American Renaissance, and symbolized the beginning of a new age, one that is characterized by an "all-embracing public spirit."¹²

The American Renaissance was a period in which America saw a great deal of change in its architecture and art, which were reflective of the social change that was taking place. Monumental structures were being erected that

⁹ Van Hook, Angels of Art, 111.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 125.

¹² The Brooklyn Museum, The American Renaissance 1876-1917, 64.

glorified American civilization and cities were being remade.¹³ Artists began to search out new imagery reflecting these changes. Instead of representing images of beauty and gentility, they wanted strong, energetic images. The artists of the period echoed this transformation in the way that they depicted females. Women were no longer “poetic identities.” Instead, they stood for power and the values of the American government, subjects that had once seemed too strong and bold for females.

Females personified the ideals of the institution whose walls they upheld. They were not romanticized or casual. The female figures of American Renaissance murals are not passive decorations but robust, powerful women. Muralists made their female figures larger, stronger, monumental, and often more active than earlier representations. Women were used to symbolize justice and the law, rather than the seasons.¹⁴ The female figures that the artists painted coincided with the popular notion of woman as “moral exemplar.” Women within society were thought to be the guardians of culture and morality, and the female figures depicted within public murals functioned similarly, as monumental pillars of American ideals and values.

As noted by Edwin Blashfield in *Mural Painting in America*, mural painting became one of the most influential genres of the American Renaissance:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Van Hook, *Angels of Art*, 123.

The decoration of public buildings is the most important question in the consideration of...art of the future, just as it always has been in the past of any and every national art from the time of the pyramid-builders down. Indeed, it passes far beyond the question of art to the question of morals and patriotism and general morals.¹⁵

Mural painting became a pivotal component of the American Renaissance because of its monumental scale and its prominent placement in public buildings. Murals served as heroic representations of American ideals. They were a platform from which artists could convey the nation's history, hopes, and aspirations to the masses.¹⁶ The work that muralists produced was not art for art's sake; it had a higher purpose; it was meant to educate and inspire the American people, instilling in them a sense of national pride. As one renowned muralist said, "Public and municipal art is a public and municipal educator."¹⁷

In addition to representing nationalistic ideals, American Renaissance mural paintings were meant to complement the architecture of a building, not mask it. Prior to the movement, many of the murals that had been produced were painted as though they were large easel paintings, and were never intended to blend flawlessly with the architecture.¹⁸ American Renaissance muralists respected the medium's surface on which they were working. They believed that mural paintings should "animate" walls and never detract from them. As a

¹⁵ Hirschl & Adler Galleries, The Arts of the American Renaissance, 11.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Blashfield, Mural Painting in America, 24.

¹⁸ Bailey Van Hook. The Virgin & the Dynamo: Public Murals in American Architecture 1893-1917. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003, 5.

result, they blended the painted work with the architecture. Violet Oakley said of mural painting, "By its 'inward and spiritual grace' it shall increase, intensify, the significance and beauty of the architecture, add definition and impressiveness to the purpose, and dignity to the use of the room and order to the whole building."¹⁹

During the height of the American Renaissance there were two primary schools of mural painting. The first was considered the academic group and consisted of Kenyon Cox (1856-1919), Edwin Blashfield (1848-1936), Henry Siddons Mowbray (1858-1928), and Charles Sprague Pearce (1851-1914). The academic group painted allegorical figures and utilized symbolism from the ancient Greeks and Romans. They are characterized as having painted classical, beautiful women as personifications of virtues. The artists of the second school were classified as history painters and included Charles Yardley Turner (1850-1918), Howard Pyle (1853-1911), William Van Ingen (1858-1934), John White Alexander (1856-1915), and one woman, Violet Oakley.²⁰ As history painters, Turner, Pyle, Van Ingen, Alexander, and Oakley are said to have rejected "unrealities, allegories and symbolism borrowed from Greece and Rome, and Florence, and like the painters of old, are interpreting on the walls of many

¹⁹ Violet Oakley. "Art as a Stimulus to Civic Righteousness." The Philadelphia Forum Magazine (August 1922): 11.

²⁰ Van Hook, The Virgin & the Dynamo, 136.

public buildings in a large and imaginative way, the history and traditions of their own country and the civilization of their own time."²¹

To most of society, the idea of a woman entering the field of mural painting and succeeding was shocking. For as Blashfield noted, "Mural Painting may safely be called the most exacting, as it certainly is the most complicated, form of painting in the whole range of art; its scope includes figure, landscape, and portrait; its practice demands the widest education, the most varied forms of knowledge, the most assured experience."²²

Violet Oakley's first mural commission came after she completed an apprenticeship with Caryle Coleman of the Church Glass and Decorating Company in New York in 1899, where she designed a stained glass window and painted the heads and hands of figures directly onto glass.²³ Impressed by her abilities, Coleman recommended Oakley as a muralist for the All Angels Church commission in New York City. At the time, the project was one of the largest commissions ever completed by a single artist. It consisted of five windows, each 132 by 19 inches, a glass mosaic altarpiece, and two large murals; the church would later commission Oakley to create two additional windows in 1903.²⁴

²¹ Ibid.; G.B. Zug. "American painting VIII: Contemporary Mural Painting." Chautauquan. (April 1908): 245.

²² Blashfield, Mural Painting in America, foreward.

²³ Patricia Likos. "Violet Oakley." Bulletin of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1979, 10.

²⁴ Ibid.

While murals were the perfect vehicle for Oakley to disseminate humanist ideals, mural work was not considered gender appropriate for females. The large spaces to be decorated were believed to be too cumbersome for a woman, and there were the physical issues of having to climb scaffolding corseted in a long dress. In addition, as art historian Bailey Van Hook points out, the “big brush” can be viewed as a symbolic representation of the phallus, an instrument of power and status, that was not to be employed by a woman.²⁵ As such, the mural movement would be predominantly male, with Violet Oakley as one of the few exceptions.²⁶

Many of Oakley’s male colleagues may have shared the popular view of mural painting as a man’s work. Violet Oakley’s long-time companion Edith Emerson remembered painter Robert Reid denigrating Oakley’s abilities by commenting that while, “She [Violet Oakley] might be able to prepare nice sketches...she would never be able to do the big work because she lacked the masculine mind.”²⁷ Victorian society believed that mural work, like higher education, was beyond the capacity of a woman, because it required physical agility and strength, and knowledge of historical narratives. Women were encouraged to stick to more “delicate” art forms like china painting, needlework, and illustration. The consequence for a woman who did choose to pursue mural

²⁵ Van Hook, *The Virgin & the Dynamo*, 22.

²⁶ See page 11 of the introduction to Blashfield’s book, *Mural Painting in America*.

work was the same consequence that a highly educated woman faced: de-feminization.

Turn of the century America was obsessed with and frightened by the idea of a woman taking on a role or position that had been previously the domain of men.²⁸ It seemed unnatural that a woman would not only want to take on such a role, but that in doing so, she would be willing to risk her sexuality. Edith Emerson commented that women were not expected to be professional artists, that it was “not all together ladylike.”²⁹ There was no middle ground for Oakley. She could either be feminine or a muralist, not both.³⁰

While Violet Oakley was the first woman to become a professional muralist and to continuously paint murals on a scale equivalent to, if not surpassing that of her male contemporaries, she was not the first woman to paint public murals. Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), Mary Fairchild MacMonnies (1858-1946), Amanda Brewster Sewall, Lucia Fairchild Fuller (1872-1924), Rosina Emmet Sherwood (1854-1948), and Lydia Field Emmet (1866-1952) each painted murals for the Woman’s Building at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in

²⁷ Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

²⁸ Women began to achieve great professional success at the turn of the twentieth-century. So much so that women’s undertakings began to be seen as a threat to the American family. See Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 136.

²⁹ Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

³⁰ Patricia Likos Ricci. “Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (April 2002): 223.

Chicago. Mary Cassatt's mural *Modern Woman* stretched 64.5 feet by 15 feet, and Mary Fairchild MacMonnies' mural *Primitive Woman* measured the same. However, neither Cassatt nor MacMonnies would ever paint another mural.³¹

Regardless of the social restrictions imposed upon women artists at the turn of the twentieth century, Violet Oakley was able to establish herself as a professional muralist within the confines of the American Renaissance. It served as the perfect venue for the propagation of her humanist ideals, which would serve as the primary themes of all of her future projects. During the American Renaissance, America was in search of a national identity, one that would inspire a sense of national pride and growth. Violet Oakley found her niche in this period. As an American Renaissance muralist, Oakley would thrive and achieve national recognition.

³¹ For further information on the Woman's Building of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago see: Jeanne Madeleine Weimann. The Fair Women. Chicago: Chicago Academy, 1981.

CHAPTER 4

The Governor's Reception Room Murals

"At least one room should be decorated by a woman," declared Joseph Huston, the architect for the new Pennsylvania State Capitol, in 1902.¹ It was with this thought in mind that Huston sought out the talents of a woman artist to contribute to the rebirth of the capitol building, which had been destroyed in a devastating fire. Huston wanted to create a "Palace of Art" and thought that commissioning a woman artist would "add interest to the building and act as an encouragement of women of the State."²

As the result of a Plastic Club exhibition where her All Angels' Church designs were shown, Violet Oakley's reputation as a muralist was beginning to grow.³ After discovering her work, Huston decided to commission Oakley to paint thirteen murals for the 6 foot high and 134 foot long frieze in the

¹ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 12.

² The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. A Sacred Challenge: Violet Oakley and the Pennsylvania Capitol Murals. Harrisburg, PA: The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, 2002, 34; The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. The Pennsylvania Capitol: A Documentary History, vol. II. Harrisburg, PA: Heritage Studio for the Capitol Preservation Committee, 1988, 335.

³ The Plastic Club was the first successful women's art organization in the United States. It provided women artists from the Philadelphia area with a supportive atmosphere where they could work and exhibit. The name "Plastic Club" was coined by the organization's first president, Blanche Dillaye. It refers to the idea that any unfinished artwork is in a plastic state. Violet Oakley, Jessie Willcox Smith, and Elizabeth Shippen Green all became charter members of the organization in 1897, the same year that the club was founded.

Governor's Grand Executive Reception room.⁴ She was offered \$20,000 for the project, which would take her four years to complete.⁵ This was the first time in American history that a woman artist had been entrusted with such a large and esteemed public commission.

The public and press were stunned by the announcement that Huston had selected a woman for one of the Capitol commissions. As the architect, Huston could have selected whomever he liked for the job including some of the nation's leading artists. However, he chose Violet Oakley for the project, and in doing so he integrated his team of decorators, which included renowned artists George Gray Barnard and Edwin Austin Abbey.⁶

American society was skeptical about Oakley's ability to complete such an arduous job and alarmed that a female would decorate a "male" institution. Consequently news of Huston's innovative decision quickly spread across the nation. Newspaper headlines announced "Brilliant Young Woman Commissioned to Paint Mural Decoration," "Woman Pioneer as Decorator of Great Capitol."⁷ Countless newspaper articles emphasized the fact that Violet was the first woman to ever be entrusted with the decoration of a "great public building."

⁴ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 76.

⁵ During this first commission, both Edwin Austin Abbey and William Van Ingen were paid more for their mural work in the Capitol than Oakley. The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 34.

⁶ Ricci, "Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman," 220.

The commotion that arose from Violet's commission was not based on questions concerning her qualifications, but rather her sex. Victorian society was inundated with texts attesting to women's shortcomings outside of the domestic sphere. One such text is *Sesame and Lilies*, which reinforced the popular if misogynistic notions of British art critic and author, John Ruskin. Ruskin's philosophies were spread across America by his disciple Charles Eliot Norton, a professor of fine arts who later became the president of Harvard University.⁸

John Ruskin advocated that:

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 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.⁹

Violet Oakley was a woman who was quite literally attempting to enter a world of men. In becoming a muralist she not only challenged the boundaries of art, but the social construct of American society. She represented a different side to the Victorian stereotype of woman as "Angel of the Home." She was self-supporting, competent, and knowledgeable in both the arts and history.

Oakley's knowledge of historical narratives and her passion for representing stories as accurately as possible were ideal for what Huston had in mind for his Renaissance revival construct. It was Huston's hope that the new

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 223.

capitol building would not only serve as a place of business, but as a museum where the history and contributions of the people would be commemorated.¹⁰ This type of historic theme coincided perfectly with Oakley's perception of what art, specifically mural painting, should be. Oakley stated, "In the broadest and most noble significance of the term I believe that paintings upon walls should be great illustrations or illuminations of great and epic themes."¹¹ She believed that murals had the power to edify society. That their "influence may become a spiritual and inspirational force so potent and living as to flow forth constantly from the walls where it is enshrined, mixing with the whole daily life of the whole community, causing it to rise 'as leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal'."¹² Violet Oakley believed that artists had a moral responsibility to serve the public with their work. So, in 1902 at the age of twenty-eight Oakley agreed that the theme of the Governor's Reception Room murals would follow the capitol's overall decorative program, *The Romance of the Founding of the State*. She decided to devote her mural series to both the founding of the State and its progenitor, William Penn.¹³

The Capitol's decorative program coincided perfectly with Oakley's desire to spread the beliefs of William Penn. Violet was a woman who not only lived

⁹ John Ruskin. *Sesame and Lilies*. New York: 1866, 90.

¹⁰ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 76.

¹¹ Oakley, "Art as a Stimulus to Civic Righteousness," 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Patricia Likos. "Violet Oakley: Lady Mural Painter." *Pennsylvania Heritage* (Fall 1998): 14.

by her faith but she was driven by her faith. Oakley defied the stereotype of a traditional woman artist not only in genre, but in the subject matter that she chose to paint. Instead of painting the more “appropriate” subject matter of women and children, she decided to depict the subjects of history, law, and religion.¹⁴ She was a humanist who believed in a world united by international law, and she incorporated these themes into her work.

Oakley’s decision to dedicate her series of murals to the founding of the state of Pennsylvania and to William Penn, was not just about relaying a historical narrative or following Huston’s decorative program. Since her conversion in 1900, Oakley had become a fervent Christian Scientist and a strong supporter of Quaker values.¹⁵ To Oakley, William Penn was the embodiment of political responsibility and morality. She saw him as a prophet and the forefather of civil liberty.¹⁶

William Penn sailed from England to America in 1682, after receiving a grant of territory in North America by the Crown. He was a devout Quaker, a Christian based religion that emphasizes human goodness with the belief that there is something of God in everyone, and founded the colony of Pennsylvania with the hopes that he could form a community rooted in social harmony. Penn established the idea that “government was the only means to justice and justice

¹⁴ Patt Likos. “The Ladies of the Red Rose.” The Feminist Art Journal (Fall 1976): 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

the only assurance of peace."¹⁷ It was from Penn's teachings that Oakley drew her inspiration and passion for international justice and peace.

In 1903 Violet Oakley received a \$5,000 advance for the Governor's Room murals.¹⁸ She believed strongly in historical accuracy and wanted to utilize her mural series to depict the events that influenced Quaker ideology and Penn's life prior to his arrival in America. In order to prepare for the job, she used the advance to sail to Europe where she conducted exhaustive research on William Penn's life. However, it was in Italy that Violet would find a model for her murals.

Like many American Renaissance muralists, Oakley studied the mural paintings of Italian artists, and in the summer of 1903 she traveled to Italy where she copied the works of the Quattrocento masters. Upon discovering Vittore Carpaccio's (1465-1526) oil on canvas murals at the Church of San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice, Oakley found a model for her own work.¹⁹ Both his technique and style appealed to her. Oakley incorporated elements of Carpaccio's work into her own by adopting his color scheme and the medium in which he worked.²⁰ She painted her murals in oil on canvas instead of fresco. Oil on canvas was the preferred method for most American muralists of the

¹⁶ Likos, "Violet Oakley: Lady Mural Painter," 14.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 78.

¹⁹ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 12.

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

period. Carpaccio along with Giorgione da Castelfranco (1476/77-1510) is credited with having developed this method of painting in the early sixteenth century, which has come to characterize the Venetian school of painting.²¹

After returning from Europe, Violet began to work on the Governor's Reception Room murals, calling her series *The Founding of the State of Liberty Spiritual*. As a disciple of William Penn's teachings, Violet wanted to encapsulate Penn's dream of a harmonious and understanding world. She decided to paint a pictorial narrative that would begin with the events in Europe in 1525 that led to William Penn's dream of a peaceful, unarmed world, free of religious persecution, and end with his first sight of the Pennsylvania shores in 1682.²² Oakley designed her mural series to be "read" left to right as though it were a book. Each of her murals includes illuminated text; a caption within a scroll enhances the visual narrative. The scrolls are located at the top of the murals and are positioned in such a way, that it often seems as though the figures are conversing with the viewer.

In addition to Oakley's chronological pictorial narration of the founding of Pennsylvania, there is another aspect of her mural work that reflects her training in illustration. In the style of contemporary turn-of-the-century illustrators, Oakley outlined the figures within her murals, a characteristic that is not found

²¹ Patricia Fortini Brown. Art and Life in Renaissance Venice. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997, 31.

in Carpaccio's mural paintings and that is decidedly American. This can be easily seen in her first mural panel, *William Tyndale Printing his Translation of the Bible into English at Cologne, 1525* (6' x 10'4") (fig. 6), in which Oakley has outlined every component of the painting. It can also be seen in the fourth mural panel, *Culmination of Intolerance and Persecution in the Civil War: Development of the Puritan Idea* (6' x 10'4") (fig. 7). In this segment, Violet's portrayal of the horses is thought to be reminiscent of Carpaccio's painting of *Saint George Slaying the Dragon*.²³ However, her use of a strong, dark outline differentiates her figures from that of her Italian mentor, and enabled her to maintain her own national style while assuming certain Venetian characteristics.

Oakley's adaptation of Carpaccio's techniques can be seen all-inclusively in her sixth mural, *William Penn Student at Christ-Church, Oxford* (6' x 6'6") (fig. 8). In this mural panel, Violet created a simple composition in which William Penn is shown seated at a desk in a study, looking up towards a soft glowing light in the right hand corner of the mural. The room is sparse except for a world globe and multiple texts. The only light in the room comes from the window and the soft glow of what can be imagined to be a candle. The colors in this mural are mellow including warm browns, reds, and blues. The colors, natural lighting, and simple composition in *William Penn Student at Christ-Church, Oxford* (fig. 8),

²² Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 92.

²³ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 36.

have been directly attributed to Carpaccio's painting *Saint Jerome in His Study*.²⁴ Additionally, Oakley is believed to have adopted Carpaccio's use of a lighter and more neutral background in order to help the figure, done in warm, dark colors, to stand out in the composition.²⁵ The use of darker figures against a lighter background reduces the depth of the composition, focusing the viewer on the frontal image and emphasizing the flat plane of the wall. Oakley's use of an outline also aids in these attempts.

Violet Oakley brought the story of William Penn and the State of Pennsylvania to life by depicting an incredibly detailed account that included accurately portraying costumes and architecture. Everything that she painted was based on history; she is believed to have avoided taking artistic license with anything. Howard Pyle, who always insisted that his students strive for perfection of content when "illustrating" history, most likely influenced this choice.

Oakley implemented an illustrative style in all of her mural work as seen in the eleventh panel, *Penn's Vision* (6' x 13') (fig. 9), of the Governor's Room mural series. Pyle instructed his students to create illustrations that would draw the viewer into the picture, with the primary figure leading the way.²⁶ In *Penn's Vision*, Oakley has quite literally done just that. As the viewer begins to "read"

²⁴ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 13.

²⁵ Ibid.

the panel from the left, the group of figures, though taking-up at least one-third of the panel, are not the primary focus nor do they detract from the main character. These figures act as a subtle link between William Penn and the religious journey that lay ahead of him. A journey that is alluded to by Penn's gesture towards the sea, and who also leads the viewer onto the next panel. Oakley has clearly chosen to distinguish the figure of William Penn from the large group by incorporating a distinct gap between Penn and the crowd. However, the grasping of Penn's hand by the frontal female figure delineates a strong line, leading the viewer into the picture and onto the next, just as Howard Pyle instructed.

In addition to Pyle's teachings and Venetian painting techniques, Violet Oakley was also strongly influenced by the art of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.²⁷ The Pre-Raphaelites reacted against the tenets of academic art, particularly the teachings of the Royal Academy in London, and sought to paint what they believed were nobler, more serious paintings that would inspire and uplift the viewer.²⁸ The Pre-Raphaelites are viewed as having painted romantic, idealized pieces, often revolving around religious or literary themes, but to the members of

²⁶ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 22.

²⁷ The Pre-Raphaelite movement took place during the nineteenth century in England, and consisted of painters, poets, and critics who were against the neoclassical conventions of academic art and Victorian materialism. The members of the movement established the "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" in 1848, with the central artists being Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), John Everett Millais (1829-1896), William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-1898), and William Morris (1834-1896).

the Pre-Raphaelite movement their works were historical accounts of particular events. They strove to be as accurate in content as possible, inspired by the detailed art of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance painters up to the time of Raphael.²⁹

Oakley would have been exposed to and familiar with the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. Howard Pyle was a devoted admirer of the movement and like Oakley, followed the Pre-Raphaelite credo to always paint objects and people from nature, but Oakley, unlike Pyle, took her admiration of the Pre-Raphaelites one step further and followed their attempt to create moralistic works of art.

Oakley's devotion to detail and historical accuracy stems not only from her training as an illustrator and from Howard Pyle, but from the legacy of the Pre-Raphaelites carried forward during Oakley's lifetime by artist and designer William Morris (1834-1896) and painter Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898).³⁰ These men spread the Pre-Raphaelite credo by incorporating its qualities into almost every aspect of Victorian life: furniture, architecture, decorative arts, interior decoration, and book design and illustration. In addition, Oakley would have been familiar with the work of John William Waterhouse (1849-1917), a late

²⁸ Christopher Wood. The Pre-Raphaelites. New York: Crescent Books, 1981, 10.

²⁹ Raphael (1483-1520) was a renowned Italian Renaissance painter who, along with Michelangelo (1475-1564), was revered above all other artists for emulation by art academy students. This doctrine was proliferated by the Royal Academy of London where many of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood first studied. Tim Barringer. Reading the Pre-Raphaelites. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 7.

exponent of the Pre-Raphaelite movement who continued to exhibit at the Royal Academy until one year before his death, and was considered a highly admired and respected artist in both Europe and America.³¹

Oakley's third mural consisting of two panels in the Governor's Reception Room, *The Answer to Tyndale's Prayer* and *Anne Askew Before the Lord Chancellor* (6' x 11'10") (fig. 10), shows a strong connection to Pre-Raphaelite conventions. One such convention is the profile of the fourth man from the left of the second panel. Oakley painted his face in a style similar to the aristocratic profiles by Burne-Jones where prominent nose, short upper lip, and pale glowing skin, give each sitter a classical grace.³² The colors that Oakley used in this mural can also arguably be a result of Pre-Raphaelite influence, as she used bright colors including reds, vibrant browns, yellows, and blue-greens. However, the choice of colors can also be attributed to her work as an illustrator.

Another aspect of Oakley's work that may also be related to the Pre-Raphaelites is her use of a decorative border and script in her murals. Burne-Jones, who along with painting, produced illustrations in which he would

³⁰ Morris, Jones, and Rossetti formed a decorating firm in 1861. The work that these men produced directly inspired the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century.

³¹ Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 142.

³² For an example of such a profile see the far right figure in *Laus Veneris* (1873-1878), oil on canvas, by Edward Burne-Jones. Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 160.

incorporate ornate borders of flora that enclosed the illustration as well as the text.³³

While painting the Governor's Reception Room series, Violet became engrossed in her work. She saw herself as the one true disciple of William Penn and took the project seriously – so seriously that her companions, Jessie Willcox Smith, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and Henrietta Cozens, began to complain about her demeanor.³⁴ However, Oakley's tireless efforts and obsession with the Governor's Reception Room murals yielded positive results.

In 1905 Oakley exhibited six of the completed panels at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Her work was met with praise, and at the Academy's centennial anniversary celebration, she was awarded the Gold Medal of Honor. Oakley was only the third woman ever to receive this award. The other two artists before her were Cecilia Beaux and Mary Cassatt.³⁵ Coincidence or not, all three women, Oakley, Beaux, and Cassatt, were single, having chosen professional careers over marriage and children.

Violet Oakley became an overnight success. Newspapers commended her work stating that, "if ever a politician's soul can be elevated by his surroundings, we shall be in for the politician millennium when the Governors of Pennsylvania

³³ For an example see *A Dream of John Ball*. Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 52.

³⁴ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 36.

³⁵ Herzog, "A Rose by Any Other Name," 15.

have their being confronted by these splendid decorations.”³⁶ Oakley’s paintings were so well received that her work was described as being “masculine.” Arthur Hoeber, a writer for the *New York Globe*, said that he was impressed by her “broad masculine treatment of the theme and place.”³⁷ He went on to say that Oakley’s “genuine artistic feeling and intellectual fitness entirely justified the unusual selection of the committee.”³⁸ Having her work described in masculine terms was one of the highest compliments that the critics could have paid Oakley or any other woman artist for that matter.

The aesthetics of fine art at the turn of the twentieth century were gendered. As a woman, Oakley was expected to create art that reflected her sex. In successfully painting themes and subject matter that were presupposed as masculine, she became an anomaly, a woman who was somehow capable of painting on the same level as men, both in subject matter and scale. Oakley became part of a third sex, a group that included educated women. They were viewed as neither feminine nor masculine. They were anomalies because they were female, yet able to grasp concepts and accomplish tasks that were believed to be biologically impractical.

³⁶ Ricci, “Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman,” 232; “Some Contrasts and Miss Oakley.” *Philadelphia Press* (22 January 1905).

³⁷ Ricci, “Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman,” 232; Arthur Hoeber. “Pennsylvania Academy Exhibition.” *Art Bulletin* 4, no. 15 (4 February 1905).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The Governor's Reception Room murals were installed on November 23, 1906. The thirteen murals that comprised the series were made up of horizontal panels, each six feet in height, with the longest measuring nineteen feet.³⁹ Unlike many other muralists, Oakley worked on and completed her murals by herself; she did not have any assistants. She also insisted on supervising the workmen as they installed her paintings, a job that would not be completed until 6 A.M. the following morning.⁴⁰

On November 24, in honor of the unveiling, the Pennsylvania Railroad ran special discounted rate excursion trains for people to see the new State Capitol and Oakley's murals. The *Harrisburg Telegraph* said that Oakley's murals were "as much of an attraction for the sightseers as the Capitol itself..."⁴¹

Thousands attended the event and Oakley's series was deemed one of the greatest mural decorations of the era.⁴² Talcott Williams of the *Philadelphia Press* commended her by saying:

No American artist, and few artists anywhere have had a commission so precisely suited to their genius and their ability as Miss Oakley. The great wall picture is done so rarely and its difficulty is so great, that one can count on the fingers of one hand all who have been successful in this crucial task. Miss Oakley's work precisely resembles the better achievements of the Venetian School...This great achievement will grow

³⁹ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 92.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴¹ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 50.

⁴² Ricci, "Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman," 233; Talcott Williams. *Philadelphia Sunday Press*, 30 September 1906.

with every year it is seen and studied. In it there has been depicted what is unquestionably rare in modern art—a genuine spiritual conviction.⁴³

Sadly in later years, Violet Oakley's "achievement," would not be studied. Her work would go out of style, and as a woman artist she would be neglected by the discipline of art history. The American Renaissance would only last until 1917, and Oakley's fortunes, tied to the movement would fade along with it.

Nevertheless, for eleven years after the unveiling of the Harrisburg commission, mural painting and the stylistic and societal conventions that supported it continued to thrive. During these years, Oakley was a busy and productive artist.

⁴³ Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 128; Talcott Williams. *Philadelphia Press*, 25 October 1906.

CHAPTER 5

The Charlton Yarnall House Decorations

Following her success in Harrisburg, Violet Oakley received a new commission. Working with Philadelphia architect Frank Miles Day, she would create what would be deemed a gem of the American Renaissance, the Yarnall house at 235 South 17th Street in Philadelphia. The Yarnall house commission would be Violet Oakley's only opportunity to decorate an entire room in a private residence.¹ Charlton Yarnall, a prominent Philadelphian, selected Frank Miles Day to design his elaborate home. Having been familiar with her work, Day could have either recommended Oakley for a commission or could have very well had her in mind when designing the central hall of the home.² According to a handwritten autobiography by Violet Oakley, Day told her she was the only artist that he would ever consider asking to paint the murals for the Yarnall house.³

¹ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 14.

² Day was hired by George Woodward to restore Cogslea, the residence that Oakley, Smith, Green, and Cozens lived in after being evicted from the Red Rose Inn. Day and Oakley became friends in 1906 and shared a love of the art and architecture of northern Italy. It has been speculated that Day's and Oakley's relationship went beyond friendship and became intimate. However, this has never been proven and there is no evidence to support this accusation.

³ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 52; Violet Oakley, "The Romance of the Red Rose," handwritten autobiography, Violet Oakley Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Upon receiving the commission Oakley quickly absorbed herself in her work and began devising a theme for the room. The project included a Renaissance inspired dome-shaped stained glass window, three lunettes, four pendentives, and six octagonal murals for insets in the carved walnut paneling.⁴ Oakley decided to use the Yarnall house as a metaphor for human civilization and named her series of works *The Building of the House of Wisdom*.⁵

For the center of the domed entryway, Oakley designed a stained glass window tinted in blue and flesh tones with a woman's head personifying wisdom as the center of the piece (fig. 11). Wisdom is shrouded in a veil with only her eyes and nose revealed to the viewer. Though her face is covered, Wisdom's gaze is direct and unwavering. She is surrounded, in a circular fashion by the phrase, "Wisdom hath builded her house." It is believed that the imagery Oakley used for this was inspired by 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."⁶ Around the central figure are four additional female personifications representing the four winds, these figures have long, sinuous hair and are encircled within the dome by the inscription, "Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?" Completing the window is

⁴ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 130.

⁵ Ibid., 143.

⁶ Ricci, "Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman," 236.

a decorative border of water surrounded by small, repetitive representations of fish.

Beneath the glass dome were four pendentives that traced architectural progress beginning with the tent, and continuing on to the Egyptian pyramid, the Renaissance dome, and the American skyscraper, Oakley named the progression *Builders of the Earth*. In *The Dome of the Renaissance* pendentive, Oakley painted Michelangelo and incorporated quotations from the Prophets and Sibyls of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. These tributes, along with other components of the Yarnall house decorations are a testament to Violet's conscious attempt to pay homage to the masters of the Renaissance.⁷

The three lunettes, located on the walls below the pendentives, show the development of contemporary culture through the growth of a child who represents human progress.⁸ The first lunette, *The Child and Tradition*, depicts a young boy sitting with his mother and nurse while being introduced to past literary figures. The second lunette, *Youth and the Arts*, is represented as young adults performing in a concert. The trio ends with *Man and Science* (fig. 12), in which an amazed crowd is shown watching a biplane fly over the city of Florence.⁹

⁷ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 17.

⁸ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 143.

⁹ It had only been seven years since the Wright brothers took the first successful powered flight in history.

Oakley is known to have traveled to Italy in 1909 in order to study wall paintings. She, like English painters Sir Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) and George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) adopted a Venetian method of handling of paint. Oakley incorporated dark colors like primary reds and blues into the lunettes as a result of her admiration for Venetian painting techniques. In addition, art historian Patricia Likos Ricci argues that Oakley's compositions echo the informal grouping of the Gonzaga family portraits in the Doge's Palace in Mantua done by Mantegna. Ricci also believes that the ornamental borders surrounding the lunettes are similar to the decorative fruits and flowers painted across the tops of Mantegna's murals in the Church of the Eremitani in Padua.¹⁰ Violet Oakley is thought to have been influenced by British trends in painting, which would explain why she implemented the Venetian techniques that were adopted by Leighton and Watts. However, she was also motivated by her own studies of Renaissance techniques as shown in her imitation of Mantegna's work.¹¹

Accompanying the lunettes were six octagonal panels encased in the arched vault above the three compositions. The octagonal paintings were divided into two groups, three in each. The first set was above *The Child and Tradition* lunette and depicted scenes from the life of Hercules. One of the

¹⁰ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

paintings in this set, *The Infant Hercules Strangling the Serpents* (29" x 29"), is argued to be Oakley's most direct use of "Michelangelesque" composition.¹² The second set of octagonal paintings were located above the lunette *Man and Science*. They depict inventions that celebrate aspects of progress and technology: the wireless, the electric light, and aviation.¹³

The designs that Violet Oakley used in the Yarnall house central hall reflect America's devotion to progress and technological advances. She emulated a traditional Renaissance style with contemporary subjects in order to exalt and commemorate the present and future of American culture. By using a canonical style she raised science and technology, two contemporary themes, to a status equal to that of traditional historical narratives, something that was commonly done by American Renaissance artists.

Violet started the Yarnall house project in 1910 and completed it in 1911. As with her other mural commissions she worked alone. In 1963 the Yarnall house was acquired by the American Red Cross and all of Oakley's decorations were removed. The glass dome broke and the murals were donated to the Woodmere Art Museum in Pennsylvania.

As evidenced in her representations of strong female allegorical figures, Violet saw strength as a desirable female attribute. She was twenty-eight at this

¹² Likos, "Violet Oakley," 16.

¹³ Ricci, "Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman," 237.

time and would continue to do a “man’s job,” climbing scaffolding to paint massive canvases and painting with authority.

CHAPTER 6

The Senate Chamber and Supreme Court Room Murals

In 1911, when the Yarnall house commission was nearing completion, Edwin Austin Abbey, the chief muralist at the Pennsylvania State Capitol, died in England on August 1st at the age of 59. According to Oakley, Abbey died as a result of his work on the State Capitol murals, stating that, “it was perhaps the most colossal commission that had been given to one painter – and it was too heavy for him.”¹ In fact, Edwin Austin Abbey died of cancer.²

Prior to his death, Abbey had completed the murals for the State Capitol dome but had not yet had the chance to compose a series of murals for the Senate Chamber or the Supreme Court Room. In the autumn of 1911, Samuel B. Rambo, Deputy Superintendent of Public Grounds and Buildings, notified Oakley that she had been selected to design and execute the remaining mural series. Though nine years had passed since Violet Oakley received her first mural commission at the Harrisburg Capitol, the news that a woman had yet again been selected for such a large and important commission was met with shock and uncertainty. *The New York Herald* announced that she “was the only woman artist anywhere ever to receive a commission of such magnitude,” and that it was the “most

¹ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 168; Violet Oakley, taped speech at the Pennsylvania State Capitol, Harrisburg, 21 May 1955.

elaborate and costly scheme of decoration of any public building” in the United States.³

In a society that did not yet allow women to vote, the idea that a woman would be paid to paint political ideas in a government building was astounding. In addition, Violet was to be paid at the same rate as Abbey, a world-famous muralist: fifty dollars per square foot.⁴ Once completed, she would earn approximately \$100,000 for this commission.

The *New York Times* ran a full-page article on December 3, 1911 announcing, “Woman Chosen to Complete the Abbey Paintings.”⁵ In the article that followed, Oakley said she felt “satisfaction” in being the first successful woman 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.”⁶ Violet was attempting to direct attention away from her sex and focus the public on her murals. She believed that art and sex were two different issues and that the former could be gender free.

In an interview with the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* on June 12, 1913, Oakley was asked whether she thought that a woman’s work was characteristically

² Ibid.

³ Violet Oakley Papers, 1841-1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [1188].

⁴ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 59.

⁵ Ricci, “Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman,” 238.

⁶ Ibid.

feminine, the newspaper reported that Oakley believed that “in art the sex distinction is lost...that the artist puts in his work what is essentially human. She [Violet Oakley] 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.”⁷

Violet believed that art was human and that it did not have any direct connection to gender other than what may have been socially constructed.

While battling controversy over her gender, rumors abounded that Oakley’s mural panels were based on Edwin Austin Abbey’s designs rather than her own. The reports made Violet irate, as they were absolutely false. Later in life she affirmed that:

It was erroneously stated in the papers that I was to finish Abbey’s paintings, and never have I been able to see that falsehood corrected. They still say I finished Abbey’s paintings—some people. I didn’t have a single painting of Abbey’s to touch nor a single idea of his to embody.⁸

Violet Oakley worked on the Senate Chamber murals from 1911-1920. She wanted to use the room to further develop the Governor’s Room theme of an ideal state. She titled the Senate Chamber series *The Creation and Preservation of the Union*, which illustrates the events in American history that helped to further the growth of peace and unity.

⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁸ Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 169; Oakley, taped speech at the Pennsylvania State Capitol, Harrisburg, 21 May 1955.

Oakley's nine murals varied in size with the largest stretching out to 44 feet in width. She painted them all in her new artist's studio that was specially built in order to fit her colossal canvases along with scaffolding, on which she climbed and stood to work. Oakley would begin her mural projects by assembling entire compositions in scale drawings, and would later make detailed paintings in watercolor prior to beginning the actual canvases. She worked from models in costumes with props that she had either bought or had replicated from historical sources. After she completed the final paintings, the canvases were unstretched, rolled, and taken to Harrisburg where they would be affixed to the walls through a process called marouflage.⁹

Violet Oakley used her skills as an illustrator to create dramatic paintings for the Senate Chamber mural series. Howard Pyle had taught his students to visualize the most exciting moment of a historical or literary narrative, and then to depict that moment as a dramatic scene in the lives of the individuals that were being rendered.¹⁰ In the first mural, *The Little Sanctuary in the Wilderness -- Illustrating the Quaker Legend of the Latchstring* (7'10" x 12'6") (fig. 13), Oakley painted the Quaker legend of a husband and wife living in Pennsylvania in the early years of the State's colonization. According to Oakley's version of the legend, the couple survived an encounter with the native "Indians," who had

⁹ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

recently pillaged other nearby settlers' homes, because of their trust in the "Great Spirit."¹¹ The Great Spirit is shown hovering over the settler couple with her arms outstretched towards the door and entering Indians. The gesture of the Great Spirit is holding back the Indians; she acts both as a buffer and link between the settlers and the Indians. Directly below the Great Spirit's torso and placed between the first Indian and male settler are the words "Touch not mine anointed." In this mural the female personification of the "Great Spirit" attests to Oakley's belief that faith in God will bring peace, just as the common faith in a higher-being or "Great Spirit" between the Indians and settlers brought them peace.

The Little Sanctuary in the Wilderness (fig. 13) is an action-filled, highly dramatized mural. Oakley included authentic Indian artifacts that are spread throughout the settlers' home. Also, in addition to the floating being above the settlers, the Indians are poised for an assault and are frozen in mid-movement as they charge through the door. The actions of the figures within the murals tell the Quaker legend without the need for words. The settlers' faith in their God's protection is represented by their placid and undaunted expressions. The Indians are taken aback as they enter the home and seem, within only a moment, to have lost their motivation for pillaging the home. Oakley's ability to retell a story convincingly through the use of pictures dates back to her work as an

¹¹ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 76.

illustrator. Beneath the primary scene is a predella that is illustrated with small panels from the Passion of the Christ: *Christ in Gethsemane*, *The Crucifixion*, and *The Resurrection*.¹²

Another romanticized and highly theatrical mural painting – reminiscent of a swashbuckling tale of the high seas – is the second mural, *The Slave Ship Ransomed* (7'10" x 12'6") (fig. 14). In this piece, Oakley depicted the story of a wealthy Quaker who, upon hearing that a shipload of African slaves was about to dock in Philadelphia, bought the entire ship and its contents. He then ordered that the ship sail north to Nova Scotia where the slaves were to be set free.¹³ Oakley animated this mural by depicting the African slaves in authentic native dress, and by having the figures cover almost the entire vertical and most of the horizontal space; thus forcing the viewer to focus on the transaction that is taking place.

The scene is set on the deck of a pirate ship with the transaction between the wealthy Quaker and the lead pirate. The pirate fits the part. He is tan and barefoot, with a brightly colored cap, gold hoop earring, and knife looped around and hanging from his waist. There is one other pirate on the ship who fits a similar profile guarding the slaves. Oakley distinguishes between the “godly” Quakers and the deviant pirates through her use of color. The wealthy

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Quaker and his seated assistant are wearing “plain” monochromatic clothing, as mandated by the Quaker religion. Their skin, like their clothes, is disturbingly pale in comparison to the vibrant and romantic costumes of the pirates. Behind the head of the wealthy Quaker is a flat one-dimensional halo that creates a circular glow around the Quaker’s head as he conducts the liberating transaction. The halo is symbolic of the wealthy Quaker’s connection to God and to his God-like work. Oakley used dramatic and romanticized images in order to illustrate her fervent devotion to and propagation of Quaker values and beliefs.

Violet Oakley’s most impressive and massive undertaking in the Senate Chamber is her mural painting of *International Understanding and Unity* (figs. 15 and 16). It is 9 by 44 feet and extends along the ceiling of the north wall. The central figure of the frieze is “Our Blue Lady of the Water of Life,” a personification of the rivers that flow out of the throne of God and into the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:1).¹⁴ She is an awe-inspiring figure represented as a woman in a blue robe, whose arms stretch out to envelop members of the community while the water of life flows from her. The panels that surround the figure of Unity represent the triumph of unity over war and slavery.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ricci, “Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman,” 244.

¹⁵ Ibid.

It has been speculated that Oakley's Unity figure might be modeled after a European image known as the Madonna of Mercy.¹⁶ Having been familiar with Italian murals, it is quite possible that Violet appropriated the personification for her own work. The figure is most commonly found in Italian churches, and is depicted with outstretched arms, sheltering masses of people beneath, much like Oakley's Unity figure.¹⁷

One of the characteristics that differentiates Violet's allegorical female figures from those of her male contemporaries, is that her personifications are neither classical nor stereotypical representations of women as the "Angel of the Home." The Unity figure for example, is clothed in medieval dress and is not sexually exploited. She is not a passive woman, but "an active agent of unification."¹⁸

The mural panel to the left of Unity shows men beating swords into plowshares, and on the right, slaves reaching out to Unity as their manacles are removed. Oakley depicted specific people in this mural that she felt were champions of social issues. In the right panel, touching the hand of Unity, is Dante dressed in a green robe with a blue cape handing down fruits of culture to a child. Some believe that Oakley's use of Dante in this mural is representative

¹⁶ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, A Sacred Challenge, 65; Patricia Likos Ricci. Untitled Lecture, Senate Chamber, Pennsylvania State Capitol, Harrisburg, 10 June 2001.

¹⁷ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, A Sacred Challenge, 65.

¹⁸ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 7.

of social mobility.¹⁹ To the right of Dante, Violet painted Jane Addams, a feminist and Quaker who she knew well.²⁰ Addams and Oakley shared the belief that society had an obligation to help solve social problems, including aiding those that lacked what they believed were necessities like food, shelter, clothing, education, and the arts.²¹

Violet Oakley worked on the Harrisburg commission continuously and began working on the Supreme Court Room murals in 1917, three years prior to the completion of the Senate Chamber series. For the room she designed sixteen murals, which are said to encapsulate her idealistic social and political ideas.²² Oakley believed that ideals could build a better world, and she used her murals to advocate that through unity and international law, peace and religious freedom could be attained. It was while working on the Supreme Court Room cycle, *The Opening of the Book of the Law*, that Violet became a highly respected artist both in American and European art communities.²³

¹⁹ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, A Sacred Challenge, 65; Ricci, Untitled Lecture, 10 June 2001.

²⁰ Jane Addams (1860-1935), was a social reformer who founded Hull House in Chicago, a center for social work and one of the first settlement houses in America. Addams played an important role in the foundation of the Woman's Peace Party, and was president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She also won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. In 1955 Violet Oakley wrote a book on Addams titled, Cathedral of Compassion: Dramatic Outline of the Life of Jane Addams 1860-1935.

²¹ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, A Sacred Challenge, 72; Ricci, Untitled Lecture, 10 June 2001.

²² Likos, "Violet Oakley," 22.

²³ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, A Sacred Challenge, 78.

As with all of her projects, Oakley's experience as an illustrator served her well for this series. She had always admired illuminated manuscripts and this commission provided her with the opportunity to create her own on a massive scale. Once again, she designed each panel as though it were a page in a book. Edwin Blashfield made the case in 1912, that easel painting, mural painting, and illustration were all interconnected and that the artists from each genre needed one another. He advocated "the gradual infiltration of fundamental ideas from one class [genre] into another would be infinitely helpful to American art."²⁴ The foundation that Oakley established while training to be an illustrator merged with and strengthened her abilities as a muralist, substantiating Blashfield's claim that if the artists within the various genres of art incorporate their methods and styles, each genre and artist would benefit.

The Supreme Court Room mural series, *The Opening of the Book of the Law*, portrays the development of the law in seven phases: divine law, law of nature, revealed law, law of reason, common law, law of nations, and international law. Oakley illustrated this series by using allegorical, historical, and contemporary figures.²⁵ The murals or "pages" in this series form a frieze around the room and most measure 10 by 8 feet. Decorative borders highlighted by geometric and organic patterns surround the murals. Within each panel Oakley incorporated

²⁴ Blashfield, *Mural Painting in America*, 188.

²⁵ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 22.

ornate hand-lettered text. The images were painted in a linear style with vivid pastel colors like those an illustrator would use.²⁶

Oakley's conscious decision to create an illuminated text on the walls of the Supreme Court Room is evidenced in her third mural *The Golden Age: Law of Nature* (fig. 17). In this panel the text states: "The chief object of the following pages 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..." Oakley did not think of her mural panels as canvases, but as pages. In this series, Oakley took on not only the task of illustrating a narrative but also the task of becoming an author. Though incorporating text into murals was not new for Oakley, as seen in the Governor's Reception Room murals, this was Oakley's first attempt at writing a full discourse, consuming at least one-fourth of almost every "page." She was transformed from being strictly an illustrator or decorative worker to becoming an author—an author whose thoughts and philosophies would be enshrined in a public building.

Oakley's admiration of Italian Renaissance techniques and styles can be seen again in her mural panel *Supreme Court of the World...International Law* (fig. 18). In this piece, Oakley painted twelve men at a large rectangular table, who represent the members of the Supreme Court of the World. Her figures have been arranged in a similar manner to Leonardo da Vinci's figures from *The Last*

²⁶ Ibid., 23.

Supper.²⁷ The men in Oakley's composition are seated around the left, right, and back side of the table, which has been set – as in da Vinci's fresco – parallel to the picture plane. Violet also centered her group around one man who is easily discernible from the others, as he is seated directly in the center of the composition. Like Jesus in *The Last Supper*, Oakley's central figure has his arms stretched out in front of him with his left palm facing upward and his right hand placed in an operative position. The remaining eleven men in Oakley's mural bear a remarkable resemblance to Jesus's disciples as portrayed by da Vinci. She seems to have taken great care to replicate da Vinci's placement of figures. For example, she grouped the three men on the far left together, with the furthest left man's arm reaching back and around his two fellow members just as da Vinci did. Another example is the third man from the right of the central figure, who is shown partially standing and arching over the two men between himself and the central figure. Again, this arrangement has been borrowed from *The Last Supper*.

For her mural painting, *Divine Law...Love and Wisdom* (fig. 19), Violet borrowed imagery from yet another Renaissance master, Sandro Botticelli.²⁸ In this ornate vision, Oakley painted the face of a Botticelli-like woman as the background for the mural. The woman's expression has the characteristic

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

melancholy of an allegorical Botticelli female. Also, like Botticelli's iconic Venus from *Birth of Venus*, Oakley's female figure has long flowing wind-blown hair. According to Violet Oakley's own words, the female figure represents Truth hovering over earth yet looming in the background, half-concealed, half-revealed.²⁹ While Oakley integrated many of Botticelli's artistic conventions into this mural, she continued to maintain her own sense of style.

Divine Law...Love and Wisdom (fig. 19) is said to be one of her most original images. In this piece she attempted to connect images to words. She incorporated enormous intertwined letters that form the word "Law." The letters' ornate surfaces also reveal the words "Love and Wisdom." The interlacing design that Oakley created was adapted from Celtic manuscripts that she used as models to formulate the lettering for the entire mural cycle.³⁰

Oakley finished the Supreme Court Room murals in 1927, and twenty years later she would receive for them, an Honorary Doctorate in Law from Drexel University. The citation for her award read:

Her full talent, her technical mastery, and her insight have been devoted to the portrayal of that which is noblest in mankind, particularly 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 civilizations.³¹

²⁹ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 89.

³⁰ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 23.

³¹ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 127; Honorary Degree, Doctor of Laws, presented to Violet Oakley 14 June 1948. Drexel University Archives, Philadelphia.

After all of her murals had been unveiled, the *New York Telegraph* called Violet Oakley Pennsylvania's most famous artist. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* added that the Supreme Court Room mural series represented the best work done in the field of mural painting, and that it was the most ambitious and demanding work ever competed by an American woman artist.³²

Violet Oakley devoted sixteen years to the decoration of the Senate Chamber and the Supreme Court Room. Once finished, Oakley's efforts, combined with her early works in the Governor's Reception Room, generated forty-three murals for the Pennsylvania State Capitol, and are believed to be some of the largest murals in the world. In the Pennsylvania State Capitol building Violet Oakley had completed what was deemed "gigantic undertakings – gigantic both physically and intellectually," undertakings that were "a responsibility from which many men would shrink."³³

³² The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 105.

³³ Ricci, "Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman," 238; Joseph Jackson, "Violet Oakley, Master Genius of American Mural Art," *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 12 June 1913.

CHAPTER 7

For Her Sisters: A Summary of Achievements

Violet Oakley accomplished many unprecedented feats during her lifetime. She became only the second female ever to be offered a teaching position at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where she taught a course on mural painting.¹ According to one of Violet's students from the Academy, "the women got a great deal from her because it was inspiring to feel that a woman could do large and important work."² Edith Emerson felt that Oakley's work was, "a great breakthrough in a way for women - to enter a field which had been naturally supposed to be entirely suitable for men with their greater strength and every kind of physique."³ Oakley's success as a muralist proved that the sex of the artist was not a formative factor in the creation of works of art. She advocated that there was nothing inherently feminine in her work or in any other woman's work, because art is human in nature and as such the issue of gender should be left out.

¹ While teaching at the Academy, Oakley was able to convince a theater owner to allow her students to design potential mural decorations for his walls. Edith Emerson's designs were selected and she completed the murals in 1917.

² Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

³ Ibid.

In 1919 when the League of Nations was established, Oakley was thrilled.⁴ However, to her dismay, the United States Congress voted against America's participation in the League. Never a follower, Oakley became a self-appointed ambassador for America to the League of Nations from 1926-1929. She was convinced that an alliance like that of the League of Nations would be the answer to fulfilling William Penn's vision of a peaceful world. Still the devoted disciple, she set up residence in Geneva so that she could attend the Assemblies of the League where she drew portraits of the delegates. Oakley later published her drawings in her portfolio *Law Triumphant*.⁵

Along with an ardent belief in peace, Violet Oakley believed in equal opportunity for both men and women. Nothing confirms this more than her acceptance speech for the Medal of Honor from the Architectural League of New York. She stated, "This medal shall always be precious to me as a symbol by means of which I have magically opened the way into this garden of yours for myself and my sisters."⁶ Prior to this the Architectural League of New York had been an exclusively all-male organization. It had taken a resolution signed by

⁴ The League of Nations was an international alliance for the preservation of a peaceful world. It was established in 1919 and disbanded in 1946. Twenty-eight countries participated in the League, with an additional thirty-five countries joining and withdrawing throughout its existence. The League of Nations was the predecessor to the United Nations.

⁵ The *Law Triumphant* is a portfolio on the history of international law that Oakley published, and illustrated with her murals from the Supreme Court Room. She dedicated the text to William Penn, George Washington, and Woodrow Wilson.

⁶ Ricci, "Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman," 240; Patricia Likos, "For Myself, For My Sisters," *Arts Exchange* 2, no. 6 (November-December 1978): 57.

Edwin Howland Blashfield, Kenyon Cox, Daniel Chester French, and others to break years of tradition.

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.⁷

By the end of the American Renaissance in 1917, the modernist movement began to take hold of the American art world and beaux arts mural painters like Violet Oakley began to be seen as out of style. Oakley was criticized for being too academic, traditional, and idealistic, though to some, Oakley and her comrades were seen as “veritable beacons of light amidst the turbulent sea of modernism” which threatened “to engulf the true and the good.”⁸

Art critic Lloyd Goodrich used Oakley to disparage the entire generation of American Renaissance muralists:

She is one of those artists who, by dint of much formal decoration, divine and profane, has lifted herself to a position where her friends look upon her art as something too dignified and serious to be referred to critically. Essentially the seriousness of her art is due to the fact that its author has come to be known as one of America’s dignified mural painters. Like the others of her group, she has managed to impose upon the public an uncritical attitude. Her work is thought to be important because it occupies high sounding places. The truth is that most of the official decorators in America are decorators, not because they have any particular talent for such work but because their original impulse was too

⁷ Ricci, “Violet Oakley: American Renaissance Woman,” 240; Violet Oakley. The Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn, 1644-1944. Philadelphia: 1950, 156.

⁸ Violet Oakley Papers, 1841-1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [1188].

lifeless to bring them any success in the larger competitive field of the easel picture.⁹

As Edith Emerson pointedly remarked, "This business of being in fashion and out of fashion in art is really very silly. A thing is either good or it isn't good. If it's good of its own period, that's all that you can ask. You can't ask a person to be born out of his time."¹⁰ Violet Oakley's work reflects the period in which it was made. She was part of a generation of artists who believed that art could educate and enlighten the public. Violet was a woman driven by her faith and wanted nothing more than to aid in the betterment of the world, the vehicle for which were her murals. Though the world around her was rapidly changing, Violet Oakley did not. She held onto her Victorian convictions and religious beliefs. She never faltered or wavered when faced with criticism for either her artistic style or lifestyle choices.

Though the peak of Oakley's career was over by the 1920s she continued to work throughout the remainder of her life. During World War II Oakley was commissioned by the Citizens' Committee of New York to paint twenty-five portable altarpieces for the Army and Navy. The majority of these pieces were triptychs in the style of the old Italian painters. They dealt with religious subjects, and were placed in military chapels, on naval bases, and aboard ships.

⁹ Lloyd Goodrich became a respected curator and art historian. Van Hook, The Virgin & the Dynamo, 187; Lloyd Goodrich. "33 Moderns' and Violet Oakley." The Arts (February 1930): 423.

¹⁰ Emerson, tape recording, 11 July 1965.

Many of the altarpieces were unveiled in formal ceremonies with members of the armed forces and dignitaries in attendance.¹¹

Violet Oakley continued to work well into her seventies. She was busy with numerous commissions including portrait painting, book production, as well as public appearances. She was even asked by David Robinson, the president of the College Art Association and a professor at Johns Hopkins University, to give an illustrated talk on mural painting for the College Art Association, an honor that Edwin Blashfield had received the previous year.¹²

Oakley's last major mural commission came in 1945 from Mrs. W. Beatty Jennings, the wife of the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Mrs. Jennings wanted Oakley to paint a mural for the reception hall of the Pastoral Aid Society, the women's organization in the church.¹³ Oakley decided to paint an "army of women" that would include the "great women forerunners and followers of Christ."¹⁴ The reception hall was no small feat for a seventy-one-year-old woman; the room is approximately 24 by 50 feet, similar in size to the Governor's Reception Room – a space that proved physically challenging when Oakley was in her thirties. Violet Oakley completed the mural frieze on March 29, 1948, entitling it *Great Women of the*

¹¹ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, *A Sacred Challenge*, 124.

¹² Violet Oakley Papers, 1841-1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [1187].

¹³ The reception hall of the Pastoral Aid Society is now called the Jennings Room.

¹⁴ Likos, "Violet Oakley," 26.

Bible. Oakley was seventy-four at the time, and was awarded the Mary Smith prize from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for the panel, *Jesus and the Woman of Samaria at Jacob's Well*.

Violet Oakley received many awards and honors during her lifetime. Including, a silver medal for her mural decoration at the All Angels' Church in New York. In 1915, she accepted a Gold Medal of Honor for a stained glass window of Dante at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. She was also awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Delaware College in 1918. In 1940, Oakley was given yet another award from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Walter Lippincott Prize for a portrait of Quita Woodward. Finally, in 1950, Violet Oakley was given a gold medal as one of the Twelve Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania.¹⁵

¹⁵ The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee, A Sacred Challenge, 159.

CONCLUSION

Miss. Oakley may be properly considered 'the greatest' of living women painters...Sympathy with her political and social views is not necessary for a realization of those talents which at times seem to border genius. In her selection of artistic motives, in draughtsmanship, in composition, in the sustained power of line, tone and color, she is the dominating woman artist of the era. Indeed, when both the quality and quantity of her canvases is considered, she may properly be characterized as the great artist of the age, regardless of sex. In all the square yardage—one is almost tempted to say acreage—of her achievement, there is little which is not admirable...¹

During her lifetime, Violet Oakley achieved national recognition for her work, and respect for her participation in the movement for world peace. In addition, she accomplished many "firsts" for women during the Victorian era. Yet, with the rise of modernism, her reputation as one of America's most renowned artists dissipated. It is understandable that Oakley's status would decline once a new and more independently focused movement took over, but the question remains as to why she would essentially be erased from the history of art. Was Violet Oakley's work not "valued" during the period in which it was made? Was her subject matter or style inadequate, or did her work lack the "masculine quality" of "genius?"

Violet Oakley was one of the most successful, professional artists during the American Renaissance and was the first successful woman muralist in

¹ "A Great Living Woman." *Boston Herald* (6 June 1930). Violet Oakley Papers, 1841-1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [1187].

America. During the early twentieth century, her reputation rivaled that of Mary Cassatt, who has since been “reborn” and canonized because of the 1970s feminist movement. Yet Violet Oakley’s name and work (like that of many other female and American Renaissance artists) is largely unknown to the art historical community. This is because of the system within which art historical study is conducted, including much feminist research.

The reputations of women artists such as Mary Cassatt, Artemisia Gentileschi, Georgie O’Keeffe, and Frida Kahlo have been revitalized thanks to the feminist movement. However, many women artists who do not fit the criteria of being a “fine arts” artist, having been involved with a male artist, or having endured some horrific experience are negated from art history. Those who are included are often handled as though they are anomalies, or are constantly referred to in connection with some male artist, as if their connection validates the woman artist’s place within the canon without which she would not belong. Women artists have been and must be treated as anomalies in order for the current regime of art history to prosper. If they, the women artists are seen as ordinary women creating works of art equal to men, then the fundamental belief that only males were capable of “genius” or becoming “masters” would be refuted.

While Violet Oakley lived well into the twentieth century, she was a Victorian woman at heart. All of the qualities that made her an exceptional artist

during the turn of the century, are the same qualities that comprised her “downfall” at the end of the American Renaissance. She had the misfortune of not only being a woman artist but also one who took part in a movement, the American Renaissance, that has been underrepresented and overshadowed by the modernist movement. The artists of the American Renaissance have been trivialized in the scheme of art history, and yet the American Renaissance is a movement in which male and female artists can easily be studied as equals.

Had Oakley been part of the modernist movement, there is a stronger chance that she may have been recognized by the history of art, but because she maintained the principles of the American Renaissance, she was cast aside. The ideas that Oakley and other American Renaissance artists shared were not respected by the new generation of modernist artists and historians of American art, who felt that modernism was the key to the post-World War II art market.

Additionally, Violet Oakley and her work have been forgotten not because she lacked talent, celebrity, or “genius,” but because she did not fit the biased “criteria” set forth by conservative, traditional art historians. It is these “criteria” that have been transformed into a rigorous gauntlet, through which artists and their work must successfully pass before they may enter the esteemed and exclusive world of art history.

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APPENDIX A

Catalog of Relevant Work

"THE FOUNDING OF THE STATE OF LIBERTY SPIRITUAL" (1902-1906) THE GOVERNOR'S RECEPTION ROOM MURALS HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA STATE CAPITOL

Mural 1 Panels A, B

A. *William Tyndale Printing his Translation of the Bible into English at Cologne, 1525*

B. *Smuggling the First Volumes of the Testament into England*

South wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 10' 4"

Mural 2 Panels A, B

A. *The Burning of the Books at Oxford in the Attempt to Stop "The New Learning"*

B. *The Execution of William Tyndale*

South wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 11' 10"

Mural 3 Panels A, B

A. *The Answer to Tyndale's Prayer*

B. *Anne Askew Before the Lord Chancellor*

South wall, Oil on Canvas, 6' x 11' 10"

Mural 4

Culmination of Intolerance and Persecution in the Civil War: Development of the Puritan Idea

South wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 10' 4"

Mural 5

George Fox Upon his Mount of Vision

West wall, Oil on Canvas, 6' x 6' 6"

Mural 6

William Penn Student at Christ-Church, Oxford

West wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 6' 6"

Mural 7

Penn Meets the Quaker in the Field – Preaching at Oxford

North wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 13'

Mural 8

Admiral Sir William Penn Denouncing and Turning his Son from Home

North wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 9' 6"

Mural 9 Panels A, B, C

A. *Penn's Arrest While Preaching at Meeting*

B. *Penn Condemned to Prison in Newgate*

C. *Writing in Prison, "The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience"*

North wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 19'

Mural 10

Penn Liberated

North wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 9' 6"

Mural 11

Penn's Vision

North wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 13'

Mural 12

Achievement of his Purposes: The Charter of Pennsylvania Receives the King's Signature

East wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 6' 6"

Mural 13

Penn's First Sight of the Shores of Pennsylvania

East wall, Oil on canvas, 6' x 6' 6"

"THE BUILDING OF THE HOUSE OF WISDOM" (1910-1911)

THE CHARLTON YARNALL HOUSE, PHILADELPHIA

Stained Glass Dome

Wisdom

No longer exists -- shattered

Builders of the Earth: Pendentives A, B, C, D

A. *Dwellers in Tents*

B. *Egyptian Pyramids*

C. *The Dome of the Renaissance*

D. *The High Tower*

Lunette 1

Child and Tradition

Woodmere Art Gallery, Philadelphia, Oil on canvas, 6 ¾' x 16 ½"

Lunette 2

Youth and the Arts

Lunette 3

Man and Science

**"THE CREATION AND PRESERVATION OF THE UNION" (1911-1920)
THE SENATE CHAMBER MURALS
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA STATE CAPITOL**

Mural 1

The Little Sanctuary in the Wilderness – Illustrating the Quaker Legend of the Latchstring

South wall, Oil on canvas, 7' 10" x 12' 6"

Mural 2

The Slave Ship Ransomed

South wall, Oil on canvas, 7' 10" x 12' 6"

Mural 3

Troops of the Revolution: Washington Marching through Philadelphia

North wall, Oil on canvas, 10' 4" x 12' 4"

Mural 4

The Constitutional Convention

North wall, Oil on canvas, 16' 4" x 10'

Mural 5

Troops of the Civil War: General George Gordon Meade and Pennsylvania Soldiers in camp before Gettysburg

North wall, Oil on canvas, 10' 4" x 12' 4"

Mural 6

Lincoln at Gettysburg -- The Preservation of the Union

North wall, Oil on canvas, 16' 4" x 10'

Mural 7

The Armies of the Earth Striving Together to Take the Kingdom of Unity by Violence

North wall, Oil on canvas, 11' 4" x 13' 8"

Mural 8

The Slaves of the Earth -- Driven Forward and Upward by Their Slave-Drivers, Greed, Ignorance and Fear

North wall, Oil on canvas, 11' 4" x 13' 8"

Mural 9

International Understanding and Unity Supreme Manifestation of Enlightenment

North wall, Oil on canvas, 9' x 44'

"THE OPENING OF THE BOOK OF THE LAW" (1917-1927)

THE SUPREME COURT CHAMBER MURALS

HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA STATE CAPITOL

Mural 1

The Keynote, Divine Law...Love and Wisdom

Oil on canvas, 10' x 11'

Mural 2

The Octave

Oil on canvas, 10' x 4' 6"

Mural 3

The Golden Age: Law of Nature

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 4

Themis -- Greek Idea of Revealed Law

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 5

The Decalogue...Hebrew Idea of Revealed Law

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 6

The Beatitudes...Christian Idea of Revealed Law

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 7

Code of Justinian...Law of Reason

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 8

Commentaries

Oil on canvas, 10' 4' 6"

Mural 9

The Spirit of William Blackstone...Common Law

Oil on canvas, 10' x 11'

Mural 10

Commentaries

Oil on canvas, 10' 4' 6"

Mural 11

William Penn as Lawgiver...Law of Reason

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 12

Supreme Court of the State...Law of Nations

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 13

Supreme Court of the Nation...Law of Nations

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 14

Supreme Court of the World... International Law

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 15

Christ and Disarmament...International Law

Oil on canvas, 10' x 8'

Mural 16

The Spirit of Law – Purification and Enlightenment

Oil on canvas, 10' x 4' 6"

APPENDIX B

Violet Oakley's Memberships

Associate, National Academy of Design
Honorary Member, American Institute of Architects
Honorary Member, Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, Spain
Fellow, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
Member, National Society of Mural Painters
Member, American Federation of Artists
Member, Cosmopolitan Club, New York City
Member, Philadelphia Water Color Club
Member, New York Water Color Club
Member, League of Nations Association
Member, The Contemporary Club of Philadelphia
Member, The Cosmopolitan Club of Philadelphia
Member, Dante League of America
Member, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania
Member, The English-Speaking Union
Member, The Transatlantic Society of America
Member, The League of Nations Non-Partisan Association
Member, Philadelphia Art Alliance
Member, American Field of Honor Association

Fig. 1. Violet Oakley. *Lenten Cover*. From *Collier's Illustrated Weekly* (February 1899). Collection of Jane and Ben Eisenstat. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 49.

Fig. 2. Violet Oakley. *June*. Cover illustration from *Everybody's Magazine* (June 1902). The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Henry D. Gilpin Fund. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 48

Fig. 3. Photograph of Elizabeth Shippen Green and Jessie Willcox Smith. Archives of American Art. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 79.

Fig. 4. The Red Rose Inn. Archives of American Art. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 57.

Fig. 5. Violet Oakley at work in her studio at the Red Rose Inn, 1903. Archives of American Art. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 76.

Fig. 6. Violet Oakley, *William Tyndale Printing his Translation of the Bible into English at Cologne, 1525*, and *Smuggling the First Volumes of the Testament into England, 1526*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. A Sacred Challenge, 38.

Fig. 7. Violet Oakley, *Culmination of Intolerance and Persecution in the Civil War: Development of the Puritan Idea*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. A Sacred Challenge, 40.

Fig. 8. Violet Oakley, *William Penn Student at Christ-Church, Oxford, 1660s*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. *A Sacred Challenge*, 43.

Fig. 9. Violet Oakley, *Penn's Vision*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. *A Sacred Challenge*, 46.

Fig. 10. Violet Oakley, *The Answer to Tyndale's Prayer* and *Anne Askew Before the Lord Chancellor*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. *A Sacred Challenge*, 39.

Fig. 11. Violet Oakley's stained glass dome in the Yarnall House. Archives of American Art. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 150.

Fig. 12. *Man and Science* mural by Violet Oakley for the Yarnall House. Archives of American Art. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 151.

Fig. 13. Violet Oakley, *The Little Sanctuary in the Wilderness* – Illustrating the Quaker Legend of the Latchstring. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. A Sacred Challenge, 75.

Fig. 14. Violet Oakley, *The Slave Ship Ransomed*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. A Sacred Challenge, 77.

Fig. 15. Violet Oakley, *International Understanding and Unity Supreme Manifestation of Enlightenment*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls*, 199.

Fig. 16. Violet Oakley in front of the center *Unity* panel. Archives of American Art. Copied with permission by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Carter, The Red Rose Girls, 173.

Fig. 17. Violet Oakley, *The Golden Age: Law of Nature*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. A Sacred Challenge, 91.

Fig. 18. Violet Oakley, *Supreme Court of the World: International Law*.
 Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania
 Capitol Preservation Committee. *A Sacred Challenge*, 102.

Fig. 19. Violet Oakley, *Divine Law: Love and Wisdom*. Photographed by Brian Hunt. Copied with permission by The Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee. A Sacred Challenge, 88.

Date 20 April 2005

To Regina Palm

From Leslie Dutcher

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