

# Spheres of Influence

A new exhibit at the Woodmere Art Museum provides a retrospective look at the career of Violet Oakley

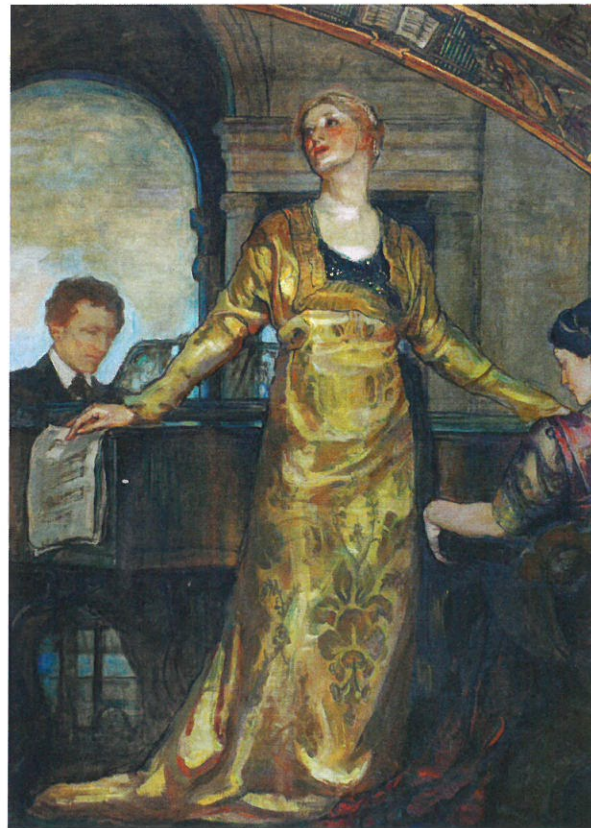
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Living in a time when a woman's "sphere of influence" was primarily domestic, Violet Oakley worked throughout her career to expand her influence. Beginning in magazine illustration, Oakley moved on to create murals for American cities, altarpieces for military chapels, and, eventually, she set her eyes on

international government, painting portraits of delegates attending the League of Nations conference in Geneva.

The Woodmere Art Museum provides a comprehensive, retrospective look at Oakley's career in *A Grand Vision: Violet Oakley and the American Renaissance*. The exhibition highlights

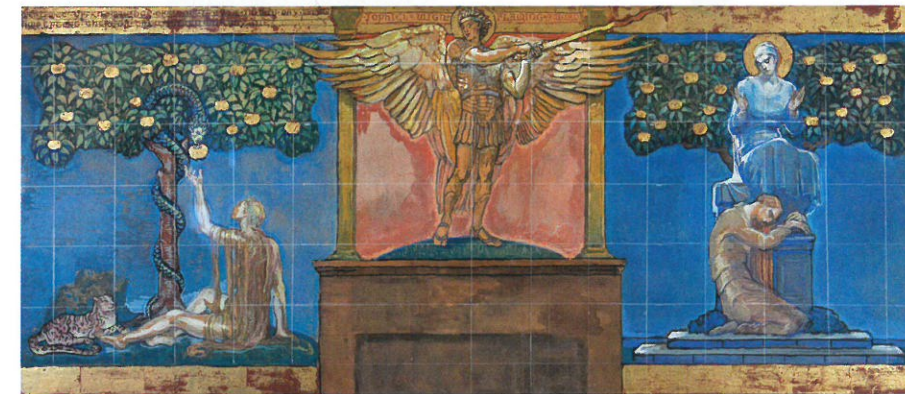


Violet Oakley (1874-1961), *Youth and the Arts* (detail), from the mural series *The Building of the House of Wisdom*, 1910-11. Oil on canvas, 84 x 165 in. Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross, 1963.

Violet Oakley (1874-1961), *Man and Science* (detail), from the mural series *The Building of the House of Wisdom*, 1910-11. Oil on canvas, 84 x 165 in. Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Red Cross, 1963.



Violet Oakley (1874-1961), *General Meade and Pennsylvania Troops in Camp before Gettysburg* (Pennsylvania Senate Chamber), 1914. Gouache, ink and gold leaf on canvas board, 17 7/8 x 24 in. Woodmere Art Museum: Museum purchase, with generous funding provided in part by The Barra Foundation Art Acquisition Fund, 2015.



Violet Oakley (1874-1961), *Study for "The Redemption,"* ca. 1945-49. Gouache and gold leaf on board, 21 1/2 x 50 1/4 in. Woodmere Art Museum: Gift of Russell Harris, MD, in honor of John Casavecchia, 2017.

Oakley's civic humanism, as expressed through her accomplishments as a muralist, portraitist, stained glass designer and illustrator, and was curated by Patricia Likos Ricci, an art historian and director of fine arts at Elizabethtown College.

To understand Oakley, Ricci explains, one must understand the Progressive Era in which she lived. It was a time of immense change,

when the Christian left vociferously supported causes like fair labor practices, ending prostitution, and civil rights for women and minorities.

"Oakley was a spokeswoman against the war, and she spoke about disarmament throughout her life," Ricci says. "Part of her mural work brought her into contact with political leaders, including governors and senators, and even president Woodrow Wilson.

She supported the Quaker political philosophy, which was progressive in believing in racial and gender equality, non-violence, the refusal to bear arms."

While many other muralists of her time used "safe" renaissance iconography in their public works, Oakley never shied away from making a statement. In the murals she created for the Pennsylvania State Capitol, she portrayed the plights of African slaves and Native Americans in stark terms alongside the traditional story of William Penn's holy experiment.

Ricci says, "Oakley believed that art influenced people, and if people were surrounded with the right kind of messages, they'd start to embody those values." ■