

Cover Story

A groundbreaking female artist

When Violet Oakley got a commission to paint a series of murals, it was unprecedented.

By Erica S. Brath
FOR THE INQUIRER

Visitors to Pennsylvania's Capitol building are treated to a vast array of artistic works, including a series of murals by Pennsylvania painter Violet Oakley that represents a groundbreaking achievement for female artists.

"When she got the commission, it was unprecedented. A commission like this had never been given to a woman artist," said Erika Jaeger-Smith, associate curator of exhibitions at the Michener Museum.

The series of 13 murals is in the Governor's Reception Room at the Capitol in Harrisburg. The commission was awarded to Oakley, then 28, in 1901, "and it earned her everything that followed, including the gold medal from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts," Jaeger-Smith said. "And that's the first time a woman won that, as well. She broke several glass ceilings."

The paintings that served as studies for the murals are on display at the Michener Museum in Doylestown. The images depict the Reformation in England and William Penn's transformation to Quaker beliefs and his eventual journey to the United States.

"We just had to bring them here. It just seemed like it was a perfect story to tell," Jaeger-Smith said. "This whole idea of peace is so very tied to Bucks County. She's one of the major artists in American art, everything about her; we just felt we had to have it here."

A pacifist and feminist deeply devoted to peace,

ON THE COVER

Erika Jaeger-Smith, curator of the Violet Oakley exhibit at the Michener Museum. Inquirer photo by April Saul.



One of Violet Oakley's paintings depicts William Penn being banished from his house by his father, Sir William, because of his sympathy for the Quakers. It is one in a series of paintings she did about Penn.

Oakley also has drawn the attention of the National Women's History Project, which named her one of its 2008 National Women's History Month nominees.

"She knew she should paint something about Pennsylvania, the whole beauty of it, the beauty of the land and colonization," Jaeger-Smith added. "But she herself already had this important leaning toward the peace initiative and organizations that promote peace."



Violet Oakley.
"She broke several glass ceilings."

"She had a story in mind. She's going to tell a story of what happened in England that led to his founding Pennsylvania as a haven for peace."

The result is a classically styled series incorporating

images of Penn in reference to the struggle for religious freedom in England.

Images range from the early pioneers of the Reformation and Quaker beliefs to Penn's imprisonment, his being banned from his family home, the granting of the charter of Pennsylvania, and his eventual journey to his new home.

"She really had such a profound feeling and presence of the energy that was surrounding the life of William Penn and the Quaker spirit, the Christ spirit that he had," said Ruthann Hubbert-Kemper, executive director of the Pennsylvania Capitol Preservation Committee in Harrisburg.

"It really was the only colony in the United States where the person who owned control of it didn't come over here with guns blazing. She really wanted to tell that story."

Hubbert-Kemper said that Capitol architect Joseph Huston awarded the job to Oakley "because he wanted to have women represented in the arts in the state Capitol building. So

If You Go

"The Holy Experiment: The Murals of Violet Oakley" is on display through March 30 at the Michener Museum, 138 S. Pine St., Doylestown. For more information, call 215-340-9800 or visit www.michenermuseum.org.

he took a leap of faith."

Since Huston's leap of faith, interest in Oakley's work has boomed.

"Since our commission has been doing our preservation work," Hubbert-Kemper said, "Violet Oakley, bar none, has always been the one the tour guides get the most questions about. Her art is just sort of timeless. It draws people, and they remember it."

Oakley went on to paint 43 murals in the Capitol, many of which cover the walls of the Senate and Supreme Court chambers.

A native of Jersey City, N.J., Oakley spent most of her adult life in Philadelphia's Mount Airy

neighborhood. Cogslea, the home she shared with three other female artists, sits on St. Georges Road, and several of her works hang throughout the area, including in Germantown's First Presbyterian Church and among the permanent collection of the Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill.

The Capitol Preservation Committee owns a large collection of Oakley's works, studies, papers and other belongings. Oakley's papers are the second-largest collection at the National Archives in Washington, Hubbert-Kemper said.

Oakley and the studies that were the basis for the Capitol murals traveled to Switzerland, where she painted portraits of delegates of the League of Nations and United Nations. She returned to the States, but the studies remained behind until 2004.

"How would you ever know what happened to all [her] artwork?" Hubbert-Kemper asked. "When I traveled around and went to see all her work, these things didn't appear, but she could have sold them."

It was an e-mail to the Capitol Preservation Committee from the Initiatives of Change, a human-rights and social-justice organization in Switzerland, that brought Oakley's studies back to the United States. Oakley had donated the paintings to the organization, known then as the Oxford Group, while she was abroad.

"They felt it would be the right thing to ask us first before they would put [the paintings] on an open market because they got their beginning here," Hubbert-Kemper said. "I'm thankful they had the foresight."

The Capitol Preservation Committee exhibited the paintings at the Capitol after their purchase. From there, they traveled to the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg and then to the Michener.