



DELAWARE ART MUSEUM

Violet Oakley Papers

A Finding Aid to the Collection in the
Helen Farr Sloan Library & Archives, Delaware Art Museum

Acquisition Information

Some materials collected by the Library; some materials gift of Richard Layton, 2004 and Karen J. Stumpf, 2009

Extent

2 linear feet

Processed

Sarena Deglin, 2003

Contents

Correspondence, materials regarding *The Holy Experiment* and *Law Triumphant*, exhibition catalogs, and tear sheets

Access Restrictions

Unrestricted

Contact Information

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Preferred Citation

Violet Oakley Papers, Helen Farr Sloan Library & Archives, Delaware Art Museum

Table of Contents

Biography of Violet Oakley
Organization of the Papers
Description of the Papers

Biography of Violet Oakley

Violet Oakley was born June 10, 1874, in Bergen Heights, New Jersey, the daughter of Arthur Edmund Oakley and Cornelia Swain Oakley. With two grandfathers who were members of the National Academy of Design and a multitude of relatives involved in the arts, she found her early efforts at drawing heartily encouraged. She once described her desire to paint as hereditary and chronic.

Violet Oakley studied at the Art Students League in New York and after almost a year left for Paris to study with a noted portraitist of the day, Edmund Aman-Jean. She also spent a summer studying in England. In 1896 she returned to Philadelphia and enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She did not remain there long, for in 1897 she began her study with Howard Pyle at Drexel Institute. Pyle's recognition of her sense of color and ability in composition caused him to push her toward stained glass design and work in a larger scale than illustration allowed. The artist herself always felt that Pyle had been one of the two main influences on her work, the other being the Pre-Raphaelites. By 1899 she had received her first commission for a stained glass window. From this early point on, she never returned full time to illustration but continued to work in large scale.

The first and most important commission of Violet Oakley's career was to design and execute murals for the Governor's Reception Room in the new Capitol Building in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. She was awarded the commission in 1902, and after six months of study in Europe she began work. Her theme was the founding of the colony of Pennsylvania. Through the study of the founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn, she found beliefs which formed the cornerstone of her life.

Violet Oakley was affiliated with the Christian Science Church, however, and always felt that faith to its tenets had helped her cure herself of severe and chronic asthma. She also felt that this belief aided her physically and spiritually in the completion of the large murals she continued to paint throughout her life.

After nearly four years' work, the Capitol murals were unveiled in 1906. They were immediately praised by leading art critics of the day, and Violet Oakley received several prestigious awards for them.

Violet Oakley had done some illustration during the Harrisburg commission but, after she became known for these murals, she was moved further into mural and stained glass commissions and away from illustration. In 1911, Edwin Austin Abbey, the artist responsible for

the major portion of the Harrisburg murals, died. She was given the balance of the commission, which included the Senate Chamber and the Supreme Court Room. For the next nineteen years she struggled with the nine murals for the Senate Chamber and the sixteen murals for the Supreme Court Room. At the same time she completed six illuminated manuscripts, and a book summarizing her research on the murals, and she undertook the decoration of the Alumnae House at Vassar.

Just when Violet Oakley might have relaxed, she packed her bags and took off for Geneva, Switzerland, to record the beginning of the League of Nations in 1927. She exhibited the work from this trip in prominent locations along the mid-Atlantic coast, including the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts.

Violet Oakley continued to work until the day of her death, February 25, 1961. She received many awards throughout the 1930s and '40s for her work. In 1948 Drexel Institute awarded her an honorary Doctorate of Laws Degree.

By Catherine C. Stryker

Source: Elzea, Rowland and Elizabeth H. Hawkes, eds. *A Small School of Art: The Students of Howard Pyle*. Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1980.

Organization of the Papers

Series I. Biographical Information

Series II. Correspondence

Series III. Exhibitions

Series IV. Illustrations

Series V. Miscellaneous

Series VI. Photographs

Series VII. Portfolios – *The Holy Experiment* and *Law Triumphant*

Series VIII. Oversize Materials

Description of the Papers

Box 1

Series I. Biographical Information

Folder

- 1 Biographical information
- 2 School
- 3 Record of work
- 4 Violet Oakley Memorial Foundation
- 5 Bibliography
- 6 Newspaper clippings

Series II. Correspondence

Folder

- 7 Correspondence
 - Oakley to Frederick C. New____, Jr. (lawyer), dated November 24, 1917
 - Between Edith Emerson (assistant to Oakley) and Gertrude Brincklé (Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts) regarding information on Pyle students, 1920 (2 letters)
 - Oakley to Bertha Bates Cole, April 29, 1931
 - Oakley to Jessie Rockwell (Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts) regarding return of slides borrowed for lecture, May 9, 1942
- 8 Christmas cards
 - "Christ at Geneva," by Violet Oakley (2 copies)
 - Christmas greetings to Bertha and David [Bates] from Violet, 1937
 - "Credo," 1938
 - 1946-1947
 - 1960 (2 copies)
 - Christmas greetings to Bertha and Daniel Bates from Violet Oakley and Edith Emerson, no date

Series III. Exhibitions

Folder

4 Exhibitions, 1918-1928

Exhibition of Original Drawings and Studies for Mural Decorations in the State Capitol of Pennsylvania and Elsewhere by Violet Oakley, A.N.A., Litt. D., The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., October 3 – October 23, 1918

Catalogue of an Exhibition of Oil Paintings by George Bellows, N.A. and Mural Paintings and Drawings by Violet Oakley, The memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York, December 1919 (photocopy)

Exhibition of Work by Violet Oakley, Galerie Moos, Geneva, September 15th-October 2nd, 1928

5 Exhibitions, 1930

Exhibition of Work by Violet Oakley, N.A. Including "The Holy Experiment," "The Opening of the Book of the Law," & "The Geneva Drawings," Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, February 4 – 15, 1930

Exhibition of Work by Violet Oakley, N.A. Including "The Holy Experiment," "The Opening of the Book of the Law," & "The Geneva Drawings," The Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, October 18 – 28, 1930 (4 copies)

6 Exhibitions, 1976-1985

The Studios at Cogslea, Delaware Art Museum, February 20 – March 28, 1976

Violet Oakley, Bulletin: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Volume 75, Number 325, June 1979 (2 copies)

Drexel's Great School of American Illustration: Violet Oakley and Her Contemporaries, Drexel University Museum, November 15, 1984 – May 31, 1985 (2 copies)

7 Exhibitions, 2007-2014

The Holy Experiment: Violet Oakley Mural Studies, Michener Art Muse, December 8, 2007 – March 30, 2008

Violet Oakley: The Founding of the State of Liberty Spiritual -- Studies for the Governor's Reception Room Murals, Allentown Art Museum, November 22, 2009 – May 23, 2010

Violet Oakley and the Women Artists of Paris, Woodmere Art Museum, August 28, 2012 – January 27, 2013

From Violet Oakley to David Lynch: "The Unbroken Line" Celebrates One Hundred Years of Art Education, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, September 19 – November 30, 2012

The Promise of Peace: Violet Oakley's United Nations Portraits, Woodmere Art Museum, March 30 – June 30, 2013

"Blessed are the Peacemakers:" Violet Oakley's The Angel of Victory, Delaware Art Museum, February 8 – May 25, 2014

Box 2

Series IV. Illustrations

Folder

- 1 *American Magazine of Art*, 1922
- 2 *Architectural League Yearbook*, 1914, 1916
- 3 Book illustrations
- 4 *The Book of the Pageant*
- 5 *Century*, 1902-1908
- 6 *Christian Science Monitor*, 1934
- 7 *Collier's*, 1898-1908
- 8 *Everybody's*, 1901-1902
- 9 *Harper's*, 1898
- 10 *The International Studio*, 1926
- 11 *The Ladies' Home Journal*, 1897-1898
- 12 *McClure's*, 1898
- 13 *The Mentor*, 1926
- 14 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1909
- 15 *Public Ledger*, 1913-1914
- 16 *Scribner's*, 1907
- 17 Sixteenth Friendship Fete, 1953

- 18 *St. Nicholas*, 1902
- 19 *Survey Graphic*, 1935
- 20 Three Arts Club Journal, 1916
- 21 Unidentified
- 22 Window for Robert Collier

Box 3

Series V. Miscellaneous

Folder

- 1 *Odes* by Harrison S. Morris, 1938
- 2 Publications from the Senate of Pennsylvania regarding chamber paintings (3)

Series IV. Photographs

Folder

- 3 Oakley at easel (from Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin, June 1979)
June, cover for *Everybody's Magazine*, June 1902
Violet Oakley, Louise Meigs, and Edith Emerson (on verso: "At Gerry Clifford's wedding (a candid)")
Sketch of Violet Oakley

Series V. Portfolios – *The Holy Experiment* (1922) and *Law Triumphant* (1933)

Folder

- 4 *The Holy Experiment* – production
Correspondence between Edith Emerson and Frederick Smith (bookbinder) regarding production of portfolio, February – December 1922 (11 letters)
Notes, leather, and paper samples
- 5 *The Holy Experiment* – subscriptions
Drafts of subscription correspondence and announcement
Letter from Charles Moore (Library of Congress) to Edith Emerson, November 16, 1921

Correspondence from Oakley to Joseph Bancroft, May 1922 – January 1923

Announcement and order form

- 6 *Law Triumphant*
Correspondence from Oakley to Joseph Bancroft
Announcement

Box 4

Series VIII. Oversize Material

Folder

- 1 *Collier's*, 1899, 1903
- 2 *Herald Tribune*, February 16, 1930
- 3 *The Ladies' Home Journal*, 1897
- 4 *New York Times*, December 6, 1914
- 5 Print: "For the Preservation of Italy, Guardian of the World's most precious heritage of Beauty"
- 6 *Public Ledger*, 1913, 1914