

*The Life of Moses*  
1927-1929  
Violet Oakley

Commissioned by Samuel S. Fleisher in 1927, *The Life of Moses* demonstrates Violet Oakley's curious combinations of form and content and her continuing interest in religious art. While attending the Sesqui-Centennial celebration in Philadelphia in 1926, Fleisher had admired the special exhibition of Violet Oakley's murals for the Supreme Court Room at Harrisburg and was particularly impressed with her painting of Moses Carving the Ten Commandments. Fleisher had recently established the Graphic Sketch Club in a former church building at 711 Catharine Street. He wanted to preserve certain features of the Romanesque-style architecture, and he commissioned Oakley to design an altarpiece with the theme of Moses for the Sanctuary.

Oakley decided to make a reredos, or screen to stand behind the altar, seventeen feet high and eight feet wide. Since it was also to be a memorial to Fleisher's mother, Cecelia Hofheimer Fleisher, Oakley chose Pharaoh's daughter holding the infant Moses as the primary subject matter. In the central panel, the enigmatic Egyptian princess clasps the wriggling Moses in her brown arms. The image is inscribed from Exodus 2: "And the child grew and he became her son..." Fleisher at first protested the visual shift of emphasis from the Hebrew to the Egyptian, and he was alarmed by the absence of Moses's natural mother, Jocebed. Moreover, he was uncomfortable with the fact that Oakley's mother and child image was so obviously based on Christian prototypes. At his request, Oakley introduced the figure of Jocebed teaching the law to the child Moses on the arch above the central panel. On each side of the central image, she illustrated four episodes from the life of Moses. As one of the predella panels, she included a miniature version of the Moses panel that had first attracted Fleisher.

During the time she worked on the altarpiece, Violet Oakley lived abroad. She spent most of the year in Geneva, attending the sessions of the League of Nations, but when the League adjourned, she rented a villa in Italy outside Florence. The altarpiece was entirely executed at the villa, where Oakley was able to work with craftsmen experienced in making constructions for churches.

Oakley's method of working was elaborate and meticulous. She began by studying Egyptian imagery and motifs in the museums and libraries of Florence. She made numerous sketches and studies, enlisting an energetic four-month-old baby, the son of an Italian neighbor, to pose for the infant Moses. Oakley then designed a one-third scale model, which she worked up in full detail and gold-leafed. When Fleisher had approved the model from sketches and photographs, Oakley ordered the construction of the full-scale altarpiece, in which she played deep blues and pinks against the golden frame.

This project is an example of Oakley's eclectic use of art-historical sources: the medieval altarpiece format is inset with images derived from Egyptian wall painting; an Egyptian princess with a Hebrew baby becomes a reference to the Renaissance Madonna and Child; and an archaeological approach is used to imbue religious subject matter. In spite

of Oakley's artistic idiosyncrasies, Fleisher was perfectly satisfied with her work, which was enthusiastically reviewed when it arrived in the United States in 1929. Although the painting of altarpieces, as well as Oakley's style, was obsolete, the popular success of her unconventional work points out the gap that existed between the taste of the art world and of the public earlier in this century.

## Bibliography

Likos, Patricia. "Violet Oakley." Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin 75, Number 325 (1979).