

Violet Oakley, 1874-1961
Life of Moses, 1927-29
The Fleisher Art Memorial Altarpiece

Violet Oakley was born in Bergen Heights, New Jersey in 1874 into a family laden with talents in the arts. At the center of her home life was a sincere reverence for the arts. Her family frequently attended concerts and plays which had a significant impact in her later works. In many of her murals she would use the concept of the stage as a compositional design device. Although she studied briefly at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and at various institutions abroad on summer trips, the bulk of her training came from copying works of the old masters on her own. In 1896, her family moved to Philadelphia, which enabled Violet to study under the famous illustrator, Howard Pyle, at Drexel Institute. Pyle was an important influence on Oakley's approach to her art. He maintained, "...illustration was a mode of communication based on principles equally valid for painting and mural decoration." Oakley's early work in illustration revealed many similarities to that of Pyle in the definition of characters with bold outlines in shallow space. In addition, Oakley revealed a strong preference for religious subjects and moralizing themes, which she later developed in her mural paintings.

In 1902, Pennsylvania Capitol architect, Joseph Huston, asked Oakley to paint thirteen murals for the Governor's Reception Room in Harrisburg. Huston believed that choosing Oakley would "act as an encouragement of women in the State." It was to be the largest public commission given to a woman in the country at that time. The commission allowed Oakley to transcend the traditional roles of women painters as either portrait or genre painters and to pursue a successful career in the prestigious, but overwhelmingly masculine field of mural decoration. The immense challenge of Oakley took 27 years to complete.

Oakley believed that art should not only evoke a moral response, but also make a social comment. She adamantly believed that her art could revolutionize the world in some way. She felt that “the elevating influence of beautiful images could have a positive affect on the community.” This sentiment was embodied in American culture in the years following the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. A new aesthetic purpose existed in which decoration and moral education were intertwined.

Oakley was strongly influenced by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a pre-Raphaelite whose paintings were based on religious themes and elements of mystical symbolism. She wanted the viewer to experience the heavenly gifts of G-d’s glory as transmitted through religious interpretation. She developed the idea of spiritual interpretation further in her desire to portray women as mystical images. And even though her murals leaned heavily toward themes of spirituality and mysticism, she was able to create biblical and historical figures that the popular culture could identify with.

In 1927, when Oakley was 53, she was commissioned by Samuel Fleisher to create an altarpiece for a church he recently acquired, which was adjacent to the Graphic Sketch Club (later to be named the Samuel S. Fleisher Memorial). The church interior is Italianate of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which Fleisher referred to as “a playground for the soul.” The altarpiece was to be a memorial to his mother, Cecelia Hofheimer Fleisher. Fleisher had admired Violet Oakley’s work while at an exhibition and was particularly impressed with her painting of Moses carving the Ten Commandments. As was her method, she meticulously researched her subject matter by studying Egyptian metaphors and motifs. Her penchant for historically accurate depictions of the stories she interpreted on canvas is evident throughout the work she created. Although the creation of altarpieces was archaic in the 20th century, the memorial she created for

Samuel Fleisher's mother was enthusiastically received when it arrived in the United States in 1929.

The altarpiece aptly called, *The Life of Moses*, is reminiscent of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Byzantine art in Italy. It is in the form of a reredos, or screen to stand behind an altar. It displays a highly formal and refined decoration with standardized calligraphy and admirable use of rich color and gold. As with most 12th to 14th century Italian Renaissance religious works, the altarpiece stood as a narrative of a biblical story or depiction of a saint with scenes from his or her life. Similar narrative works can be found in Bonaventura Berlinhieri, *St. Francis with Scenes from His Life* and Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*. Such paintings may have served as historical reference for the construct of Oakley's altarpiece. The altarpieces were used as devotional aids and reflected the architecture of the church in structural design. Usually a wealthy family, who could dictate the iconography that was to be painted, donated the altarpiece to the church. The more elaborate altarpieces have frames that were carved by a professional carpenter or woodcarver outside of the artist's studio.

Oakley's altarpiece is quite large and stands eighteen feet high by seven feet wide. It is composed of central oil on canvas panel (approximately 8 feet high) flanked by several smaller canvas paintings (approximately 1 foot square) inset in a gold-leafed carved wood frame. The altarpiece pedestal (predella) has three unique narrative scenes on canvases approximately 18" square. At the time she was given the altarpiece commission Oakley was living in a villa outside of Florence, Italy. She had been attending the League of Nations meetings in Geneva and decided to stay abroad to work and travel. According to Patricia Likos in the Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin, "The altarpiece was entirely executed at the villa, where Oakley was able to work with skilled craftsmen experienced in making constructions for churches."

Oakley frequently used female subjects in her work. On the central panel of the altarpiece a regally seated Egyptian princess, the daughter of Pharaoh, holds a wriggling baby Moses. The large scale of this central panel is impressive. The princess, dressed in emerald green traditional Egyptian garments, is set against a deep blue celestial background with Egyptian iconography such as, hieroglyphs, birds and guards on either side of her legs. She is adorned in a wide gold necklace and headpiece. Violet Oakley was forever concerned with archeology and historic accuracy in her depictions of imagery. She made numerous sketches and studies using historical reference and even enlisted the 4-month-old son of a neighbor for the baby Moses. The image, comparable to the Madonna and child paintings of early religious works, is natural and humanistic.

The inspiration and choice of subject matter for the *Life of Moses* was perhaps a continuation of Oakley's work on the murals of the Capitol building at Harrisburg. Her comprehensive study in the life of William Penn and his theory of the science of government and law possibly fueled her interest in portraying the biblical story of Moses. Moses, as one of the first lawgivers, was given the primary narrative of the altarpiece, which depicts the development of law. As an underlying theme and tribute to Samuel Fleisher's mother, she utilizes motherhood. The Egyptian princess holding Moses, which is the focal point of the narrative, indicates an alternative definition of motherhood—the creative mother who gives life to ideas. Other signs of creativity abound in the symbolism of the story. Moses' mother demonstrated creativity as she solved the problem of saving Moses from being murdered by the Egyptians. She carefully placed him in a basket coated in tar and pitch in the river. She had Miriam, Moses' sister, hide in the bushes knowing that the Egyptian princess visited that location on the river. When the princess found Moses, she asked Miriam to fetch a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby.

And whom would Miriam choose other than her own mother? Moses' life was saved due to the creativity and love of the female concerns in his life. What a strong paradigm of the fortitude and instinct of women.

Beneath the Egyptian princess's feet, in expertly rendered calligraphy, is an inscribed passage from Exodus ii, "And the child grew and he became her son and she called his name Moses..." The name Exodus in Hebrew means "departure" and refers to the most important event in Israel's history, the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt, where they had been slaves. Above the arch of the central panel, Oakley introduced the figure of Jochebed, the mother of Moses, teaching the law to the child Moses. She included Jochebed at the request of Samuel Fleisher, as he was alarmed at the absence of Moses' natural mother. On either side of the image of Jochebed are designs of Egyptian iconography, Wings of Cherubim derived from Egyptian mythology, held in the symbolic gesture of protection and safety.

Flanking each side of the main panel are four smaller canvases that illustrate the story of the life of Moses. The beginning of the story starts in the upper right canvas and follows down the right side to the upper left canvas down the left side of the altarpiece. Below each painting Oakley incorporated an excerpt from Exodus in hand rendered lettering. It is interesting to note that the canvases read as the Hebrew language is read, from the right side to the left. The bottom three predella panels illustrate various highlights in the account of the life of Moses and can be read as individual stories. The left panel, Moses carving the Ten Commandments, is a miniature version of the original painting that attracted Samuel Fleisher to Oakley's work. Oakley consistently uses Egyptian design elements and stylized imagery to create a historically accurate representation of the biblical story. Her placement of color and gold accents within the individual paintings present a rich experience for the viewer.

In conclusion, the altarpiece *Life of Moses* is exemplary of Oakley's style and skill as an artist, historian and storyteller. She expertly conveys a meaningful and sacred portion of the Old Testament into a beautifully rendered storyboard in the form of an architecturally accurate altarpiece. And, as a testament to her beliefs of morality, peace and humanity, the altarpiece is a justly triumphant work.

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Amy Iversen
Research paper

Art In Society
August 7, 2003

Dear Patricia:

I wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed taking your class this summer. It was a great experience for me and has enriched my studies as a graduate student.

The research paper proved a challenge to write. I decided to eliminate many of the assumptions I was trying to make, as I couldn't find sufficient materials to support my hypotheses. The Fleisher memorial (Alyse) has asked for a copy of the paper upon completion. I was wondering if you might help me refine it further before handing it over to them (after grading it, of course). If I decide to pursue my research further, I would appreciate your help with future writings. Would you mind if I contacted you via email (hopefully it will be working)? Do you have email at U of Arts, as well?

Thanks again,

Amy