Violet Oakley / The Great Wonder: A Vision of the Apocalypse, 1924
Alumnae House, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York

Violet Oakley (1877–1961) was an accomplished figure within the American mural movement in the early twentieth century. She initially trained as an illustrator in Philadelphia and New York, and became the first woman in the United States to create high-profile murals for government buildings. The large-scale triptych The Great Wonder: A Vision of the Apocalypse, among Oakley’s most mystical and inventive compositions, was created at the height of her creative powers. The triptych serves as a memorial to Oakley’s sister, Hester Caldwell Oakley Ward (1871–1905), who was a member of Vassar’s class of 1899. Hester’s roommate Louise Lawrence Meigs commissioned the work, which she subsequently offered as a gift from the class of 1899.

The triptych format echoes Italo-Byzantine altarpieces, with a central devotional image flanked by smaller related narrative scenes. The imagery comes from St. John’s Book of Revelation and the flanking panels depict passages from this text. At center a monumental semi-clothed woman hovers against a star-filled sky, described in Revelation 12:1 as “a great wonder in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.” She raises above her the man-child she has birthed, “who was to rule all nations,” saving him from the red dragon below who threatens to devour him, lifting him up “unto God and his throne.” Oakley’s dramatic focus on the female figure emphasizes redemption rather than Revelation’s apocalyptic destruction, and suggests a spiritual allegory of divine feminine power. In an explanatory pamphlet, the artist expressed her lofty sentiments about the impact the work might have on the Vassar audience: “The Great Wonder...unveils the high idea of Woman and the offspring of her own labours...May it serve to lift up Every-Woman who contemplates it...never to bring to light—without fear—the child of her innermost yearning.”

While the plan was initially to create a mural, Oakley shifted to the more unusual altarpiece format. She further extended her work to encompass the entire room where it was to be situated. (Numerous preparatory works on paper related to this project now belong to Vassar’s Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center.) Her design for the room reflected the Italian trecento (fourteenth-century) style of the altarpiece. Taking inspiration from her visits to Palazzo Davanzati in Florence, an early Renaissance palace that was restored and opened as a museum in 1911, Oakley designed patterned beams and shutters (painted by her former students Edith Emerson and Carolyn Haywood), and purchased antique furnishings in Europe, including an Italian refectory table, Savonarola chairs, English choir stalls, and candelabras. She also created a decorative screen with music motifs, a modified version of which can be seen above the fireplace in the dining room. Only some of the original furnishings now remain, as the layout of the room was adapted over the years. Oakley also conceived an elaborate pageant for the dedication. Torchbearers wearing specially designed costumes led a procession with a Shakespearean blessing sung before the ceremonial opening of the triptych, creating an immersive experience through her art.


This pamphlet was produced for Art 218: The Museum in History, Theory, and Practice with Christopher Platt (Art Department) and the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center. Text by Allison Unruh. This project is supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.