



c. 1917

Graphite, ink, bole and gold leaf, opaque watercolor and oil paint on illustration board

Sheet: 20 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches (52.1 x 52.1 cm)

**VIOLET OAKLEY**  
American

Purchased with the Director's Discretionary Fund, 1976, 1976-211-1

### FIRST LOOKS

How many letters can you find? Which is the biggest? What words do they make?

What do you see in the background?

How many angels are there? What color are their wings?

### SECOND LOOKS

What tools and materials do you think the artist used?

This picture is a study for a large mural in a special room in a public building. What do you think happens there?

What adjectives would you use to describe the woman's face? Why? What idea could she symbolize or represent?

## STUDY FOR "DIVINE LAW"

If you look carefully at this picture, you can see many interlocking, decorated letters of all sizes and shapes. A large female face peers out from behind them. Below her, there is the green globe of the earth, a frothy blue-and-white sea, and stars and planets. Inside the right angle made by the large *L*, look for a smaller *A* and *W*. Together they spell the word "law." How many more letters and words can you find? Look for "love," "and," and "wisdom" in and around the big letters, and for "divine" across the top border. The lower border reads, "Thou hast Magnified Thy Word above all Thy Name," a phrase from Psalm 138 in the Bible that indicates God's power and truth.

The title, *Study for "Divine Law,"* tells us that this picture was created by Violet Oakley in preparation for a much larger work of art. In 1911 Oakley was commissioned to paint sixteen large murals, most of them about ten feet by eight feet, for the Supreme Court Room in the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg. She was the first woman in the United States to receive an important public mural commission. Oakley's series of murals, titled *The Opening of the Book of Law*, tell the story of law in the format of an illuminated manuscript with interlacing patterns of Celtic designs. The wall-size pages of her "book" feature borders, text, and paintings of famous men who tried to create just laws for the world, including Moses, Byzantine Emperor Justinian, and United States President Woodrow Wilson. This study shows the design for the opening mural of the series, titled *Divine Law*.

Oakley used some medieval materials in this study, such as gold leaf and bole. Instead of parchment, however, she drew and painted on cardboard, using black ink and opaque watercolors. Have you noticed all sixteen angels perched in and around the letters? Angels

like these are a traditional motif in Christian art. Those with elaborate headdresses and red wings are *seraphim*, and those with blue wings are *cherubim*. How would you describe the expression of the beautiful, brown-eyed woman? The sweeping, diagonal curves of her hair and the bright white waves create a feeling of movement and energy in contrast to the straight, geometric forms of the letters and her still, staring face. Who could she be? She is an allegory, or imaginary figure, who symbolizes truth. The purpose of courts of law is to discover the truth. Maybe she is partly hidden because the truth can be so hard to see!

## ABOUT THIS ARTIST

Violet Oakley was born in Bergen Heights, New Jersey, into a family of professional and amateur painters, in 1874. Encouraged by her mother as a child, she spent hours sketching, illustrating poems and stories, and painting. She started her serious art training at home by copying works of art by the old masters, as if she were attending an art academy. Later Oakley attended classes in New York City, England, and France. In early 1896 she enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to study with Cecilia Beaux, the Academy's first female instructor. When her father became ill and unable to work, Oakley needed to earn money with her art. She transferred to Drexel University to study with the famous illustrator Howard Pyle—probably in hopes of entering the well-paying field of illustration.

At Drexel, Oakley met the two women who became her closest friends and colleagues—Jessie Wilcox Smith and Elizabeth Shippen Green. For many years, these three artists shared studio and living space—first as students in Philadelphia and later as respected artists in Villanova and Chestnut Hill. They belonged to the Plastic Club, the first successful women's art organization in the United States, and supported each other personally and professionally. Oakley, Smith, and Green were devoted to their art, which was rare for women at the turn of the twentieth century, and they embraced Pyle's view that it was impossible for a woman to combine marriage and a career. Oakley's professional career began after her father died, when Pyle helped her find work creating magazine illustrations and designs for stained glass.

In 1902, when she was only twenty-eight years old, Oakley was asked to create eighteen murals for the Governor's Reception Room in the Pennsylvania State Capitol building. She based them on the life of William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, whose visions of world peace and religious freedom inspired her. She received the Pennsylvania Academy's gold medal for this major accomplishment, and was hired to finish all the murals for the State Capitol, including those in the Senate

Chamber and the Supreme Court Room. She worked on these paintings, including *Divine Law*, from 1917 to 1927.

Oakley created murals, illustrations, and stained-glass window designs for many years, and always remained true to her academic training—beautifully drawn allegorical and historical figures—in spite of new trends in art like abstraction and expressionism. A successful artist with many public commissions and awards, she also taught a popular class in mural decoration at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and energetically promoted world peace through her support of the League of Nations, which became the United Nations in 1946.

## THE ROAD TO EQUALITY IN LIFE AND ART

The road to equal rights for women in the United States has been long and difficult. During colonial times, only men who owned property could vote. The property requirement was struck down by 1830, but voting rights still applied to white men only. In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first convention for women’s rights at Seneca Falls, New York. A constitutional amendment that would give women the right to vote was introduced in 1878, but not passed until 1920.

Women who wanted to be artists in the 1800s had limited educational opportunities unless members of their family were artists. In 1844 the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts became the first art school in the United States to allow women to draw from plaster casts, and in 1868 a separate life-drawing class for women was established there. Despite these advances, women artists had to find the courage to deal with social pressure to be “feminine,” family demands, difficulty in finding patrons, and a lack of female role models.

## CONNECT AND COMPARE

Investigate the architecture and art in the Supreme Court in your state and the United States Supreme Court.

Compare the life and work of Violet Oakley to Maya Lin (born 1959), whose design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., was chosen when she was a college student.

## RELATED ART PROJECT

Imagine that you have received a commission to paint a series of murals for the Supreme Court in your state capital. Brainstorm with your classmates to develop a list of ideas related to law and justice. Choose one and make a study for the first mural in the series by combining a descriptive word and an allegorical face that symbolizes the idea.

*This picture is included in Five Women Artists, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by generous grants from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.*