

chestnut hill local

Stunning murals in Mount Airy church by local pioneer



Mt. Airy resident, Eric Sternfels, an architect, interior and garden designer and amateur historian, is producing the program titled "Great Women, Great Murals" this Friday and Saturday at the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown.

by Brenda Lange

For more than 100 years, visitors to Pennsylvania's capitol building in Harrisburg have been treated to the rich renderings of Violet Oakley, a renowned American painter, muralist and illustrator.

Just after the end of World War II, she also painted 10 murals for the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown depicting women from the Bible — a display that will be discussed in a program titled "Great Women, Great Murals" given by Mt. Airy resident Eric Sternfels on Feb. 22 and 23.

Sternfels is an architect, interior and garden designer and amateur historian who is producing the program through the Mt. Airy Learning Tree, with whom he's worked since 2011 on garden-related programming, including the annual hidden gardens tour.

While he was aware of Oakley and her work for the capitol, a friend first introduced him to the church paintings several years ago. "Since then, I've been compelled to share them," he said. "Our community is richer when we discover who has been here and what they have accomplished."

What Oakley accomplished was groundbreaking. Born in 1874 in New Jersey, she trained at the Art Students League of New York, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and with Howard Pyle at Drexel University. At the latter institution, she met lifelong friends, fellow artists and, for a time, roommates in Mt. Airy, Jessie Willcox and Elizabeth Shippen Green.

Oakley wrote that her interest in art reflected her interest in history, literature, science and religion, which shows when examining her paintings, as does her belief in pacifism and feminism. In 1902, architect Joseph Huston chose her to paint 13 murals for the Governor's Reception Room, earning her publicity and a Gold Medal of Honor from PAFA in 1905 — the first woman to receive the award. She also was the first woman to receive a public mural commission, a field previously dominated by men.

To prepare for the work, Oakley spent months in London studying William Penn, his life and goals, and her paintings feature Penn's vision for an international community and a peaceful world. She also visited European art galleries to study the coloring and style of the great masters.

She named her resulting mural series "The Founding of the State of Liberty Spiritual." Later, she was commissioned to paint more murals for Harrisburg's Senate and Supreme Court Chambers; 43 Oakley murals grace the capitol building.

Sternfels hopes to provide a complete look at Oakley and her colleagues through his lecture, in which he will address the reasons that "America's Golden Era of Illustration" blossomed in northwest Philadelphia.

"The late 1800s was a boom time for magazines, and there was a hunger for content, including illustrations, until about World War I, when other means of entertainment came into vogue. These women (Oakley, Willcox and Green) drew characters from their lives, and other familiar elements showed up in the magazines, like a scene in Villanova in Harper's Weekly, for example."

Willcox and Green also contributed to magazines such as The Ladies' Home Journal, Saturday Evening Post and Harper's Magazine as well as books for children and adults.

"I want to present these beautiful murals in the church not only from an academic, art perspective, but as a way to showcase this extraordinary work produced by a local, and explain how America's Golden Era of Illustration blossomed right here in Mt. Airy," Sternfels said.

Oakley was first asked to create a painting to hang over the massive fireplace in the church's reception room, but she convinced church members that she should produce 10 murals to fill open spaces around the entire room, and that she would use the work to illustrate the great women of the Bible. She began in 1945 when she was 70 years old and completed them four years later.

In addition to her paintings and illustrations for Collier's Illustrated Weekly, Woman's Home Companion, Century Magazine and others, Violet Oakley published a book, "The Holy Experiment: Our Heritage from William Penn 1644-1944," in which she describes the mural series in the capitol building.

Sternfels will deliver his lecture on Friday, Feb. 22, 7–9 p.m., and Saturday, Feb. 23, 10 a.m.–noon, at the [First Presbyterian Church of Germantown](#), 35 W. Chelton Ave. Register at mtairylearningtree.org, or call 215-843-6333.