

WOODMERE

Teacher Resource

Violet Oakley and America Indivisible

NOTE to the Teacher / Parent / Homeschooler:

This teaching resource packet is our way of bringing the educational ideas of the many class tours and teacher workshops provided by the Woodmere Art Museum to your home or classroom.

Each resource highlights specific learning skills and focuses on key works from the Woodmere collection. These resources are also designed to be interdisciplinary and include links to other information sites, as well as suggestions for extensions to meet the unique interests of your students/children.

We hope to expand on these resources and welcome your feedback. If you use this resource please take a minute to tell us of your successes and struggles. E-mail your feedback to: education@woodmereartmuseum.org

The “Big Idea” of this teaching resource:



This teaching resource is designed to reinforce the connections between history and visual arts, and to show how these natural connections can be used to gain insights into both historical events and artistic details. The focus is on the works of the Philadelphia-based artist Violet Oakley, specifically on the mural installation she created for the Senate Chamber at the PA State Capitol in Harrisburg. These murals are a permanent installation and available to the public. (Please see Suggested Resources on page 11 for information.)

One goal is to have these connections reinforce both the study of history (with added concentration of visual details) and the study and appreciation of the visual arts as an avenue for furthering interdisciplinary instruction.

Additionally, this teaching resource highlights the use of critical thinking skills – promoting this most-important aspect of real-world education.

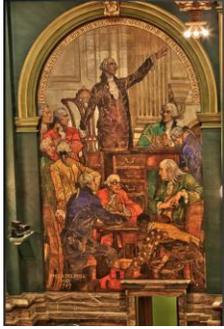
Process Part I: (Using the visual arts to examine political and social forces in history)

Necessary Background: [Click here](#) for a video preview of Violet Oakley’s murals in the Senate Chamber of the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg. After viewing this video, how could you summarize the general goal of Oakley’s murals? What central themes does she offer? (Be sure to explain your reasons for the answers you give to this and to all questions in this teaching resource.)

- 1- To open the image of *The Creation and Preservation of the Union*, by Violet Oakley, go to the link copied below:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/mcorqz7lya5n5l/Violet%20Oakley%20Murals%20PA%20State%20Capital%20May%202017%20%20%2871%29.jpg?dl=0>

Take a moment to look closely at these two mural panels. What is depicted here? Which historical figures can you recognize? What seems to be the stories these panels are telling?



a- [Click Here](#) to open a close-up view of *George Washington at the Constitutional Convention*, from the mural series, *The Creation of the Union*, by Violet Oakley, 1911-1920.

Or copy: <https://woodmereartmuseum.org/the-violet-oakley-experience/the-state/senate-chamber-pennsylvania-state-capitol-the-creation-and-preservation-of-the-union#555556>

Make a list of single words which describe this first mural. (NOTE: the use of single words rather than phrases will force your observations and your thinking to be more precise.) Discuss these.

b-Note the addition of the Black man at the feet of Ben Franklin. What is he doing? How does his presence fit with the action depicted in the mural? How would you describe the colors and patterns of his clothing? From this information, form a hypothesis of what Oakley might be trying to say with his inclusion.

Discuss your hypothesis. (NOTE: The use of the word “hypothesis” rather than “opinion” is deliberate. Critical thinking involves challenging and supporting or revising our hypotheses. Challenging an opinion is often seen as personal, while challenging a hypothesis is typically seen as

academic – and therefore more likely to be met with an open mind.)

c- How has Oakley added and/or positioned characters to present a mood or feeling in this mural? How does her presentation of mood match (or not match) with her inclusion of the Black man mentioned earlier?

Formative Assessment:

From the details and hypotheses you have noticed regarding this mural, what central message – or theme – can you see in Oakley’s presentation of this historic moment?



d-

[Click Here](https://woodmereartmuseum.org/the-violet-oakley-experience/the-state/senate-chamber-pennsylvania-state-capitol-the-creation-and-preservation-of-the-union#555557) to open a close-up view of *Lincoln at Gettysburg, 1863*, from the mural series *The Creation and Preservation of the Union*, by Violet Oakley, 1911-1920.

Or copy: <https://woodmereartmuseum.org/the-violet-oakley-experience/the-state/senate-chamber-pennsylvania-state-capitol-the-creation-and-preservation-of-the-union#555557>

As before, make a list of single words to describe this scene, and discuss. Do you see any faces you

recognize? What possible reasons could the artist have to choose not to include more “famous” faces in this scene?

1. Study the faces of the people in this mural. How would you describe Lincoln’s expression? What about his posture? Examine some of the other people depicted. What do their faces reveal about their experiences and feelings? How would you describe the overall mood here?
2. Do you see any facial expressions that seem to contradict others in the crowd? Form an hypothesis about these apparent contradictions in facial expression.

Formative Assessment:

Select 3 people depicted in this mural and write what they might say to each other. Now add thought bubbles indicating what the people might be thinking as they speak. (See page 12 for Thought Bubble worksheet.)

(NOTE: as you review some of these responses, discuss how this helps the viewer better understand individuals in the crowd as well as general purposes of Oakley in depicting these people.

You may also consider having students take roles of the people in the mural and speak their thoughts to each other. This can be an effective way to engage students in the artwork.

2-Now consider the two murals together. Is there a central theme which connects them? What details have guided your response to this question? Discuss these.

(NOTE: Be sure that student responses to these subjective questions are supported with visual details. If there is hesitation to do this, simply ask, “What do you see that makes you think that?” Such support is essential when building Critical Thinking skills.)

Formative Assessment:

Select one of the two murals and refer to your list of words from earlier. Use the words in your list to create a poem which describes what you see in the mural and includes either a central theme or the emotional reaction of one of the people in the mural. (NOTE: Older students might be required to add a simile or metaphor to their poem.)

Process Part II: (Discovering Context through the connections among panels in Violet Oakley’s murals)

To return to the full scene of the murals on the north wall of the PA Senate Chamber, go to the link copied below:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/mcorqz7lya5n5l/Violet%20Oakley%20Murals%20PA%20State%20Capital%20May%202017%20%20%2871%29.jpg?dl=0>

Clearly, the two murals we have been examining are not isolated, but are part of a larger story which continues in other murals on the walls. For example, look at the large,

majestic figure in the upper center, directly over the central alcove (the blue figure named *Unity*).



[Click here](#) to open a close-up view of the figure *Unity* that joins two halves directly over the central alcove. As before, make a list of single words to describe what you see, and discuss your choices. Note: questions below can be used if needed to foster close looking.

- a. What do you notice about the size of the central figure in comparison with the others?
What color dominates the image?
What could be a reason the artist chose blue for her robe?
How would you describe the expression on the face of Unity?
What details do you see in the background?
(Chiseled words on steps: "The Kings of the Earth Do; Bring their Glory; Honor into")
What/Who do you see on either side of *Unity*?
(figures of kings laying their crowns at her feet; Red Cross figure, who comes when disaster strikes, to provide shelter, food, and health and emotional health services
What mood do you see in this scene, and what details of the mural lead you to your responses?

- b. What questions do you have resulting from your observations, and how might you proceed to research your questions further?

Summative Assessment:

When an artist is asked to complete a project as encompassing and as grand as the murals for the PA Senate Chamber, that artist invariably brings their own beliefs and ideals to the project. Think carefully of the murals you have been examining here (and feel free to add any other murals from the chamber that you have examined on your own) and consider Oakley's view of, and her sense of the important themes of American history. From an hypothesis based on your perceptions, describe that hypothesis, and support it in either a paper or a presentation.

-consider the historical context in which these murals were being created: during the decade of national and international conflict (WWI), and a time of social change with the passage of the 19th amendment.

(See the *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 1911 front page story in Suggested Resources, pg. 11, Violet Oakley's murals in the Pennsylvania Senate Chamber (from paheritage.com))

Suggested Resources:

- [Biography of Violet Oakley](#), (from Hyperallergic.com)
- [Biography of Violet Oakley](#), Woodmere Art Museum: includes hyperlinks to artworks, influences, and important projects and commissions
- [Violet Oakley's murals in the Pennsylvania Senate Chamber](#) (from paheritage.com)
Or copy: <http://paheritage.wpengine.com/article/form-perfect-union-violet-oakley-murals-pennsylvania-senate-chamber/>
- Current events issues related to the division that exist within American society today.
 - [Divided America](#)
(from the Associated Press)
 - [America is Exceptional in its Political Divide](#)
(from PEW trusts)
- Related National History Standards (from UCLA Public History Initiative)
[Standard 2: Economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary United States](#)
- Critical Thinking Skills (from Rasmussen University)
[Six Critical Thinking Skills You Need to Master Now](#)
- Responding to Visual Arts in the Classroom (from Project Zero) [Project Zero's Thinking Routines](#)
- *A Sacred Challenge: Violet Oakley and the Pennsylvania Capitol Murals* (Capitol Preservation Committee, 2002), an excellent introduction to Oakley and a short history of her commissions from the state.
- [Click here](#) to view: *A New Woman: The Story of Violet Oakley*, produced by History Making Productions

Or copy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLREKCwjSYQ>

- [Click here](#) to plan a visit to the PA State Capitol
Or copy: <http://www.pacapitol.com/plan-a-visit/>
- [Click here](#) for WHY?Y's Guide to Violet Oakley State Capitol murals
Or copy: <https://why.org/articles/guide-to-violet-oakleys-state-capitol-murals/>
- [Click here](#) for Woodmere's Violet Oakley Experience
Or copy: <https://woodmereartmuseum.org/the-violet-oakley-experience/the-state/senate-chamber-pennsylvania-state-capitol-the-creation-and-preservation-of-the-union>

Name

What might a character be thinking or saying?

1. Choose a character from the painting.
2. Write down what the character might be thinking or saying?

