Thornton Oakley Encyclopedia Article

Thornton Oakley

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Thornton Oakley

While Norman Rockwell painted people, Thornton Oakley (1881–1953) was known for his paintings of industrial America. Oakley graduated with a degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania and then studied art under renowned artist Howard Pyle (1853–1911), founder of the Brandywine School, in Wilmington, Delaware.

Thornton Oakley married Amy Ewing in 1910, and together they published numerous travel books, which she wrote and he illustrated. During World War II (1939–45), the National Geographic Society commissioned forty-eight paintings of war plants and related topics from Oakley. To fulfill his assignment, the artist traveled from coast to coast and visited steel mills, grain elevators, shipyards, chemical plants, assembly lines, oil refineries, and more. His paintings, as well as his written reflections, appeared in the December 1942 issue of *The National Geographic Magazine* titled "American Industries Geared for War." Oakley used his canvases to vividly portray the highlights of America's vast war production effort.

Oakley's next assignment with National Geographic was to do a series on transportation titled "America Transportation Vital to Victory." He was to capture the spirit of America's might in moving men, materials, and supplies. Once again he was on the road for months to cover everything from railroads to cargo planes, from highways to tankers. His impressive paintings appeared in the December 1943 issue of *The National Geographic Magazine* and were accompanied once again by his patriotic and descriptive writings.