

Georgia O’Keeffe

(1887–1986)

“I found I could say things with colour and shapes that I couldn’t say any other way – things I had no words for.”



Georgia O’Keeffe, *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1*, 1932. Oil paint on canvas 121.9 x 101.6 cm. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Arkansas, USA Photography by Edward C. Robison III © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum/SODRAC 2017

Big Idea & Exhibition Synopsis

This exhibition reveals Georgia O’Keeffe’s distinctive vision over the full course of her career, offering visitors a fresh perspective on the artist and her work. The exhibition features more than 80 works by O’Keeffe and approximately 40 photographs by other artists she knew well and often travelled and collaborated with. The works are hung loosely according to chronology. The first sections begin with O’Keeffe’s early abstractions and works she made before spending time in New Mexico. The galleries that follow highlight the various series she worked on in New Mexico, and the show concludes with a contemplative room of late abstractions from the end of her career. The exhibition also explores O’Keeffe’s relationship with important photographers of the time with the inclusion of photographic portraits and nudes by Alfred Stieglitz, portraits by Arnold Newman and New Mexican landscapes by Ansel Adams.

Key themes in the show include:

The fierceness and tenacity O’Keeffe demonstrated throughout a long artistic career.

- How O’Keeffe’s art embodied a new modern American culture and identity.
- The importance of O’Keeffe’s response to place in her art from New York to New Mexico.
- The construction of O’Keeffe’s persona and her reaction to the myths about her art.
- The relationship between O’Keeffe’s art and photography.
- Abstraction and representation in O’Keeffe’s art.

Vocabulary

Abstraction, Pictorialism, feminism, musicality, essentialism, identity, synesthesia, line, shape, form, colour, psychological space, dust bowl, manifest destiny.

Artist & Society

Wassily Kandinsky: O’Keeffe was aware of Kandinsky’s publication, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Both artists had synesthesia (the ability to hear colour) and were similarly interested in the theosophical concept of thought-form and drawing inspiration from music and landscape.

Paul Cézanne: O’Keeffe saw his work exhibited in New York City. Inspired by his Mont Sainte-Victoire series, she also began returning to the same subject in nature again and again. (e.g. the maple tree at Lake George that she painted several summers in a row).

Chinese painting: O’Keeffe adored Chinese painting and considered it “the best that’s been done.”

Frida Kahlo: The two were avid letter-writers. Kahlo wrote O’Keeffe a particularly poignant letter in 1933 during one of O’Keeffe’s hospitalizations. O’Keeffe would have seen some of Kahlo’s surrealist work and this may have impacted the dream-like aspects of some of O’Keeffe’s works. O’Keeffe visited Kahlo in Mexico in the early 1950s.

Francisco Goya: O’Keeffe reported that she enjoyed Goya’s prints, especially as he managed to show some pretty terrible things but also make them palatable.

Photography: From **Stieglitz**, and other artists he promoted in his gallery space (like **Paul Strand**, **Edward Steichen**), O’Keeffe learned photographic techniques (for example, cropping and filling the frame of a camera with a subject) which she then applied to her canvasses. O’Keeffe was also interested in Pictorialism (how photographers could manipulate what they saw in front of them in order to communicate a clear personal vision, i.e. not just documentary photography).

Connections & Responses

Personal responses

The following questions attempt to foster a more intimate connection between students and O’Keeffe’s art. These inquiry questions can be used to solicit initial reactions before visiting the exhibition, or for reflection following a more extended study of O’Keeffe’s work. You can invite students to discuss or write their responses.

- Find an artwork that puzzles or intrigues you. What question might you ask the artist if you could?
- Find an artwork that you would like to walk into. What would you see that we cannot? What might you smell, hear or touch?
- Find an artwork that appears to be telling a story. What might happen next?
- O’Keeffe aspired to make ‘musical’ paintings (in fact, as noted, she could ‘hear’ colour). Choose a work of art that seems particularly musical to you. What do you think it would sound like? Why?

Critical thinking

- Georgia O’Keeffe lived for nearly 100 years. How do you think certain events (WWI, WWII, the Great Depression, the Cold War, women winning the right to vote in the U.S. in 1920) may have impacted what and how she painted?

- Compare an early work by O’Keeffe with one she made later in her career. What differences do you notice in terms of style, subject matter, colour, composition, movement, etc.?
- When Georgia O’Keeffe broke onto the art scene in the late 1910s and early 1920s, many critics declared that she had a distinctly “female” vision of the world. Why do you think they might have said that? How do you think such comments would make O’Keeffe feel or impact future artistic choices she made?
- Georgia O’Keeffe had a lot of control over how and where her work would be displayed. She worked closely with frame-makers and art dealers, and, as her career progressed, she would get to have the final say on which works to include in her shows. In 1976, she published a book about her art—essentially curating her own retrospective. She inscribed the book with the words “for myself”. Why do you think she may have felt the need to have so much control over her works and her own story? (You may want to show the work *In the Patio, No. IV* (1948) to illustrate how O’Keeffe would be involved in the designing of her own frames—in this case, the painting even extends on to the frame itself).
- Georgia O’Keeffe would often give her works somewhat vague titles (e.g. the *Black Place* series, named after a favourite painting spot). Why do you think she would do this? If you were to give one of these paintings a new title, what would you call it? Why?
- Movement in painting imitates the feeling of actual motion or physical change that we experience in life, and creates a sense of action or dynamism in an artwork. Find a work of art that has a strong sense of movement about it. What movement does this inspire in your body?
- Scale involves comparing sizes of images or objects to so-called ‘normal’ human expectations. What might we say about the scale of Georgia O’Keeffe’s flower paintings (*Oriental Poppies*, 1927 or *Jimson Weed*, 1932, for example)? Why do you think she might have painted these flowers so much larger than how

we'd see them in reality? What might she be trying to communicate about her or our relationship with the natural world?

Creative responses

- O'Keeffe was one of the first artists to adapt photographic techniques (like cropping) to painting. In doing so, she would render close-ups of very American objects (skyscrapers, flowers, animal bones). Though highly detailed, her paintings also appear abstract. Challenge students to take close up photos at school or at home of a well-known object, but to zoom in or crop it in such a way that it abstracts the original subject. Students can present their photos and their classmates can guess what the original object was.
- Georgia O'Keeffe knew a lot about the plants and flowers she painted. Many of them came from her own gardens or grew in landscapes that were special to her. Invite students to reflect on outdoor spaces that mean something to them, and have them draw and then research a particular plant or flower that grows in the place they have selected
- Share with the class an O'Keeffe painting that is particularly moody (one of the *Black Place* series, perhaps) and invite each student to write a short story using this painting as the setting.
- In order to better illustrate the concept of synesthesia, play a piece of instrumental music in class and using pencil crayon, pastels or paint, invite students to draw/paint the colours they seem to hear. This activity could be done several times in a row using different genres of instrumental music.
- O'Keeffe would often incorporate into her paintings objects she found in nature while walking in New Mexico (i.e., pelvis bones, animal skulls etc.) Invite students to take a walk outdoors and to bring to class some sort of natural object they found on their journey (a piece of driftwood perhaps? A rock, leaf or pinecone). Then challenge students to

incorporate it somehow into a landscape painting. Maybe they will use a hole in the leaf as a viewfinder, as O'Keeffe did with the pelvis bones she found (*Pelvis Series*, 1945, 1947). Or maybe the found object will take up the entire centre of the canvas, as is the case in O'Keeffe's *Pedernal*, 1945).

Biography/Timeline

1887: Born in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. She is the second of seven children. She receives weekly drawing lessons at home with her sisters.

1901–1905: O'Keeffe continues her studies at boarding school (first in Wisconsin and later in Virginia), and she is encouraged by her teachers to continue formal art education.

1905: Starts art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago

1907–1908: Begins studying at Art Students League of New York. O'Keeffe visits 291 (Stieglitz's gallery in New York City) and sees works by pioneering avant-garde European artists. O'Keeffe wins a Chase Still Life Scholarship and participates in a summer school at Lake George.

1911–14: She holds various teaching positions in Virginia and Texas and continues with her own studies, which are now heavily influenced by another of Kandinsky's books, titled *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, and Arthur Dow's (a teacher at Teacher's College, Columbia University) ideas about freedom of expression and compositional harmony—instead of an “imitation of nature”.

1915: She begins a one-year art teacher position at Columbia College in South Carolina

1916: A few abstract charcoal drawings that O'Keeffe had sent to a friend (Anita Pollitzer) were forwarded to Stieglitz and he put them on display in a group exhibition in his gallery in New York.

1917: Stieglitz gives O'Keeffe a solo exhibition at his gallery, which includes charcoals and watercolours made in Texas – it was the last show to be held at 291

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before its closure due to financial difficulties caused by WW I. Critics were favourable, but tended to emphasize her identity as a woman and the feminine qualities of her work.

1918: O’Keeffe leaves her teaching position in Texas to join Stieglitz in New York. There is a building boom in the city at the time. Stieglitz leaves his wife and moves in with O’Keeffe. They often visit the Stieglitz family home at Lake George and O’Keeffe paints there.

1921: A retrospective of Stieglitz’s photographs is shown, including 45 portraits of O’Keeffe (some nudes). Stieglitz had always wanted to photograph one person throughout their life. O’Keeffe became that person.

1924: O’Keeffe and Stieglitz marry. Stieglitz insists he won’t have children with O’Keeffe because they would create a distraction from her work.

1925: O’Keeffe has a first show where her large-scale flower paintings are exhibited—many critics still sexualize the imagery. O’Keeffe and Stieglitz move into the ultra-modern Shelton Hotel. O’Keeffe starts to paint pictures of the city itself (Stieglitz had been photographing the city since the 1890s.)

1929: Wall Street crashes and the Great Depression begins. O’Keeffe is no longer inspired to paint in New York. She spends four summer months in New Mexico and her project of uniting abstraction with American landscape continues in a more rural setting. She contributes to the idea that “modern America could be found far west of the Hudson, not just on Wall Street, at Lake George, or on the New England Coast”. O’Keeffe meets photographer Ansel Adams—they become good friends. O’Keeffe learns to drive and visits Navajo sites in Arizona, Colorado and Utah, and she attends many native American dances.

1930–31: She begins to paint horse skulls that she gathered following an exceptional drought in 1930. They were a way to address the Great Depression and Dust Bowl (a period of drought and severe dust storms in the 1930s). She also collects stones, shells and other souvenirs from her “tramping” through the landscape.

1932: O’Keeffe visits Canada. It’s her first time leaving the U.S.

1943: She oversees the installation of her first retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago.

1944: She makes various excursions to Black Place (part of the Bisti Badlands in Navajo country, 240 km. west of Ghost Ranch).

1945: O’Keeffe purchases an adobe hacienda she had been coveting for half a decade. She plants a garden that feeds the household.

1946: O’Keeffe has a second retrospective, this one at The Museum of Modern Art (it’s MOMA’s first solo exhibition devoted to a female artist). Stieglitz suffers a stroke and dies on July 13 at age 82. O’Keeffe is the principal heir and sole executor of his will.

1949: O’Keeffe moves to New Mexico permanently, spending summers and autumns at Ghost Ranch and winters and springs in her home in Abiquiu Village.

1951: She begins travelling internationally on a regular basis (she would continue to do this for 30 more years). Visits Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Mexico.

1953–56: She visits Europe for the first time and also spends three months in Peru. Because of Cold War fears, she installs a fallout shelter in Abiquiu.

1959–63: She travels to India and Pakistan, East and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. She creates many works from the perspective of being in an airplane. She also visits Greece and Egypt and takes a rafting trip down the Colorado River at age 73.

1970: O’Keeffe is heralded as a figurehead by a new generation of feminist artists and receives fresh admiration from the general public.

1984: She makes her final drawing.

1986: She dies in Santa Fe at age 98. Her ashes are scattered from the Cerro Pedernal, the mountain near her Ghost Ranch home). “It’s my private mountain. It belongs to me. God told me if I painted it enough, I could have it.”

References

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