



# Georgia O'Keeffe

(1887-1986)

"Colors and shapes make  
a more definite statement than words."

— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, 1976

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Calla Lily Turned Away*, 1923. Pastel on paper, 14 x 10 7/8 in. Gift of The Burnett Foundation. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

On the cover: Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe - After Return from New Mexico*, 1929. Gelatin silver print. Gift of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

## An American Icon

Georgia O'Keeffe is one of the most significant and intriguing artists of the twentieth century, known internationally for her boldly innovative art. Her distinct flowers, dramatic cityscapes, glowing landscapes, and images of bones against the stark desert sky are iconic and original contributions to American Modernism—a style of art that departed significantly from the traditions of the past. In a career spanning more than sixty years, she produced more than a thousand artworks.

O'Keeffe's artworks were first exhibited in New York in 1916 by Alfred Stieglitz, an art dealer and internationally known photographer. He was America's leading advocate for modern art and eventually became O'Keeffe's husband. After the famous Armory Show of 1913, an art exhibit that introduced radically different art to American audiences, Stieglitz's primary interest became exhibiting the work of innovative American painters such as Arthur

Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Edward Steichen, and Max Weber. O'Keeffe moved to New York in 1918 and joined the efforts of these artists to create a distinctly American style of modern art, a search for what O'Keeffe called "the Great American Thing." O'Keeffe became famous for her large-scale flower paintings, as well as her images of the towering skyscrapers of New York City and the landscape of New Mexico. Above all, she was a pioneer of abstraction, creating images that were inspired by close observation of her surroundings but were products of her insight and imagination rather than imitative representations of the visual world.

## Early Life and Education

Born on November 15, 1887, the second of seven children, Georgia Totto O'Keeffe grew up on a farm near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. As a child she received art lessons at home. Her abilities were recognized and encouraged by teachers throughout her school years. By the time she graduated from high school in 1905, O'Keeffe had determined to make her way as an artist.

O'Keeffe studied at the Art Institute of Chicago (1905–1906) and the Art Students League in New York (1907–1908), where she learned the techniques of traditional realist painting. In 1908, she won the League's William Merritt Chase still-life prize for her oil painting *Untitled (Dead Rabbit with Copper Pot)*. The



Unidentified photographer, *Georgia O'Keeffe and Friends in Texas*, c. 1916–1918. Photographic print. Gift of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

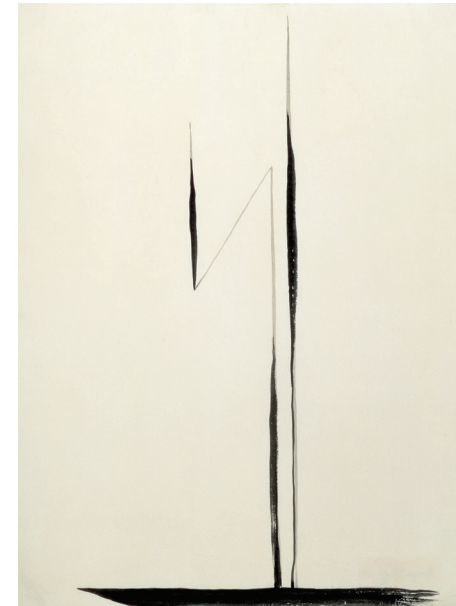
direction of her artistic practice shifted dramatically four years later (1912) when she took a summer course at the University of Virginia, taught by Alon Bement of Teachers College, Columbia University. Bement introduced her to the revolutionary ideas of his colleague Arthur Wesley Dow.

Dow encouraged an intellectual and imaginative process of making art that was grounded in personal expression and harmonious design. "This man had one dominating idea," according to O'Keeffe, "to fill a space in a beautiful way—and that interested me." Dow's approach offered O'Keeffe an alternative to realism, and she experimented with it for two years, while she taught art in the Amarillo, Texas public schools (1912–14) and worked summers in Virginia as Bement's assistant.

O'Keeffe studied in New York from 1914 to 1915, at Teachers College, Columbia University and by the fall of 1915 she was teaching art at Columbia College, in South Carolina. She began a series of abstract charcoal drawings, to develop a personal language through which she could express her feelings and ideas. Late in life she recalled, "I realized that I had things in my head not like what I had been taught – not like what I had seen – shapes and ideas so familiar to me that it hadn't occurred to me to put them down. I decided to stop painting, to put away everything I had done, and to start to say the things that were my own." She mailed some of these highly abstract drawings to a friend in New York City. Her friend showed them to Stieglitz, who kept the drawings.

## New York City and Alfred Stieglitz

In 1916, O'Keeffe began corresponding with Stieglitz. That same year, he exhibited ten of her abstract drawings in a group exhibition at his avant-garde gallery "291." A year later, he presented O'Keeffe's artwork in a one-person exhibition. In the spring of 1918 he offered



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Lines*, 1916. Watercolor on paper, 24 1/2 x 18 1/2 in. Gift of The Burnett Foundation. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

Georgia O'Keeffe, *A Street*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 48 1/8 x 29 7/8 in. Gift of The Burnett Foundation. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

O’Keeffe financial support to paint for a year in New York. She accepted his invitation and moved from Texas, where she had been teaching at the West Texas State Normal College since the fall of 1916. In 1923, Stieglitz began organizing annual exhibitions of O’Keeffe’s work.

Stieglitz and O’Keeffe were married in 1924. In 1925 they moved to a two-room suite at the Shelton Hotel with a view of the New York City skyline. O’Keeffe adapted her life and art in New York to Stieglitz’s habits and his pattern of spending winter and spring in the city and retreating to his family compound at Lake George in the summer and fall. By the mid-1920s, O’Keeffe was recognized as one of America’s most important and successful artists, known for her paintings of New York skyscrapers—an essentially American image of modernity—as well as flowers. Stieglitz played a significant role in promoting O’Keeffe and her artwork, organizing annual exhibitions at

The Anderson Galleries from 1923 until 1925; and later at The Intimate Gallery from 1925 to 1929; and finally at An American Place from 1929 until his death in 1946.

## American Modernism in New Mexico

In the summer of 1929, O’Keeffe made the first of many trips to northern New Mexico. For the next two decades she spent part of most years living and working in New Mexico, a pattern she rarely altered until she made it her permanent home in 1949, three years after Stieglitz’s death.

The stark landscape, distinct indigenous art, and unique regional style of adobe architecture inspired a new direction in O’Keeffe’s artwork. Over time, her New Mexico paintings became as well known as the work she had completed earlier in New York. During her first two summers



Georgia O’Keeffe, *Untitled (Red and Yellow Cliffs)*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in. Gift of The Burnett Foundation. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum.

O’Keeffe stayed in the Taos home of her friend Mabel Dodge Luhan. O’Keeffe painted the surrounding landscape, its weather-worn crosses and Hispanic adobe churches, as well as the lands sacred to the people of the Taos Pueblo. Mabel and her husband Tony, a member of the Taos Pueblo, introduced O’Keeffe to new experiences, and she found a new sense of independence as she learned to drive and explored the landscape and cultures of the Southwest.

O’Keeffe’s new paintings coincided with a growing interest in regional scenes by American Modernists, who were seeking a distinctive view of America, beyond the urban center of New York City. O’Keeffe was not alone in finding inspiration in New Mexico. Many artists looked to the area’s diverse cultures and geography to lend their work a unique character independent of European influences.

Other artists supported by Stieglitz, including John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Ansel Adams, spent time in New Mexico and shared her fascination with representing a specific sense of place. O’Keeffe alone returned repeatedly and made New Mexico her home. In so doing, she transformed her life and her art. Her simplified and refined representations of northern New Mexico express a deep personal response to the high desert terrain. She created enchanting visual experiences for viewers in paintings like *Ram’s Head*, *Blue Morning Glory* (1938), and *Untitled (Red and Yellow Cliffs)* (1940). Such New Mexico scenes have become her most iconic contributions to a uniquely American Modernism.

## Creativity in her Late Years

After Stieglitz’s death in 1946 and her move to New Mexico in 1949, O’Keeffe began to travel internationally. She created paintings that evoked a sense of the spectacular places she visited, including the mountain peaks of Peru and Japan’s Mount Fuji. Continuing to travel during the 1960s, she increasingly concentrated



Georgia O’Keeffe, *Blue Black and Grey*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. Gift of The Burnett Foundation. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum.

Georgia O’Keeffe, *Sky Above Clouds / Yellow Horizon and Clouds*, 1976/1977. Oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in. Gift of The Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum.

on the views from the airplanes that carried her around the world. At the age of seventy-three she embarked on a new series focused on the clouds in the sky and the rivers below. In 1961, she showed the river series, including *Blue Black and Grey* (1960), at Edith Halpert’s Downtown Gallery in New York City. Five years later, she created *Sky Above the Clouds IV* (1965); at 8 x 24 feet it is her largest painting.

Suffering from macular degeneration and discouraged by her failing eye sight, O’Keeffe

Painted her last unassisted oil painting, *The Beyond*, in 1972. But O’Keeffe’s will to create did not diminish with her eyesight. In 1977, at age ninety, she observed, “I can see what I want to paint. The thing that makes you want to create is still there.” Late in life, and almost blind, she enlisted the help of several assistants to enable her to again create art. One such helper, Belarmino Lopez, recalls mixing her paints and following her careful instructions in preparing the canvas. In these works, like *Sky Above Clouds / Yellow Horizon and Clouds*, (1977), she returned to favorite visual motifs from her memory and vivid imagination. With a technique refined by decades of practice, she continued to “fill a space in a beautiful way” in abstract watercolors that activated the paper from edge to edge with simplified and intangible forms.

She worked in watercolor and pencil until 1982 and produced objects in clay, encouraged by her friend and assistant, Juan Hamilton, from the mid-1970s until two years before her death, in Santa Fe, on March 6, 1986, at the age of 98.



Unidentified photographer, *Georgia O’Keeffe*, c. 1976–1981. Photographic print. Gift of The Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum.

## About the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum

The museum preserves and presents Georgia O’Keeffe’s legacy through an ever-changing series of exhibitions about her artwork, the work of her Modernist contemporaries, and works by artists reflecting her enduring legacy. The Museum offers an unparalleled opportunity to explore O’Keeffe’s long and prolific career and to understand her creative process. The Museum maintains the artist’s two homes located north of Santa Fe in the village of Abiquiu and at Ghost Ranch; tours of the Abiquiu home and studio are available March–November. Though her house at Ghost Ranch is not open, tours of the surrounding landscape are available and visitors can enjoy the sights that inspired O’Keeffe’s most colorful landscapes.

Sixty years of O’Keeffe’s accumulated art materials are in the Museum’s collection. They include watercolors, pastels, oil paints, and hundreds of her paint brushes, as well

as more than 700 sketches in charcoal and graphite that date from 1902 until the end of her career. The drawings express her thought process for developing compositions, while her hand-trimmed brushes reveal the precision of her preparations for achieving specific effects on the surface of her canvases.

In addition, the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum Research Center has an archive of photographs, letters, and documents, as well as a library and archival collections related to O’Keeffe and her contemporaries, American Modernism, and regional history.

