**Gallery Wall Texts**

***Eloquent Objects: Georgia O’Keeffe and Still-Life Art in New Mexico***

Drawn by starkly beautiful landscapes, unique architecture, intense light, and diverse cultural influences, artists of all types—from painters and photographers to musicians and writers—began traveling to the American Southwest in the early 20th century.   
The advent of the railroad into New Mexico in the 1880s as well as an extensive tourism advertising campaign also added to the lure and accessibility of the region. Many   
artists left urban, industrialized settings in favor of a land that promised vastness and isolation—the perfect environment for their artistic pursuits. A number of important art colonies were established, particularly in the New Mexico cities of Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Taos, and Roswell.

Among the painters that traveled to the Southwest were several representatives of the modernist movement, including Georgia O’Keeffe, Stuart Davis, and Marsden Hartley. Modernists broke from the tradition of realistic representation, experimenting with color and form to reshape what they saw into their own personal vision.

Many artists who traveled to the Southwest in the early 20th century were moved to capture the land in their art. However, they also created striking still-life paintings depicting flowers, bones, and other organic and architectural elements. These interesting compositions often incorporate artifacts that reveal the rich mixture of

Native American and Hispanic cultural influences intrinsic to the region.

*Eloquent Objects: Georgia O’Keeffe and Still-Life Art in New Mexico* explores the variety of ways in which O’Keeffe and her contemporaries in New Mexico used still life to record their impressions of this unique region, as well as how their experiences transformed their own ideas and approaches to their work.

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**Bones**

Bones have been traditional subjects in still lifes for centuries, often as a symbol of mortality and the transience of life. It is not surprising that artists in the Southwest, where sun-bleached bones are commonly found in the desert, were drawn to include skeletal remains in their compositions. While some artists used this type of imagery to evoke a barren landscape or the passage of time, Georgia O’Keeffe viewed the skulls and bones as beautiful and “strangely more living than the animals walk­ing around.” With bones, O’Keeffe expressed her wonder at the power and vastness of the land she came to call home.

Bones were not the only remains that became still-life subjects for O’Keeffe. Like her friend, the artist Rebecca Salsbury James, O’Keeffe some­times incorporated fossilized shells she found in the desert canyon walls, signs of the ancient seas long ago disappeared.

**Blossoms**

Still-life painters have used flowers as their subject for centuries. Southwestern still lifes frequently depicted flowers, including both indigenous species and those that had been imported to the region through waves of migration over the centuries. Georgia O’Keeffe and a number of her artistic contemporaries also planted their own gardens and used these flowers in their compositions. The profusion of different blooms in the images in this section reflect this mixture of native and imported, domestic and wild species.

For modernist artists, flowers offered a chance to reinterpret a traditional subject. O’Keeffe painted them larger than life to convey her experience of intensely looking at flowers. Others, like Pedro Lopez Cervantez and Barbara Latham, painted them in ways that suggest mood or atmosphere. In contrast, the traditional bouquets by their contemporaries such as Catharine Critcher focused on realistically capturing the beauty and lush colors of the flowers.

**Fruits, Vegetables, and Domestic Objects**

Like flowers, food─particularly fruits─have a long history as subjects in still lifes. The works on display here, though, reflect a particular sense of experimentation with the theme, in which artists embraced a modernist approach that emphasized form and color rather than realism. Taking their cue from the 19th-century French artist Paul Cézanne, who profoundly influenced the early 20th-century American modernists, artists transformed fruits, vegetables, and personal objects into colorful, simplified, geometric shapes. The table surface was often tilted or distorted, putting the focus on individual forms instead of the realism of the entire scene.

Many New Mexico artists followed the longstanding tradition of creating symbolic   
still lifes. The objects, the way in which they were arranged, and their setting, were deliberately chosen to convey a particular story or theme. The works by Jozef Bakos and James Stovall Morris in this section are particularly detailed examples of this   
type of still life. The objects they depict suggest both the Southwest and distant   
sources of news.

**Cultural Artifacts**

Many artists were attracted to the Southwest because of its diverse cultural environment. Artifacts reflecting Hispanic and Native American traditions found their way into numerous still-life paintings. Some artists chose them for their cultural meanings, but often they were used simply because they were interesting to look at  
or popular as collectibles, divorced from their religious or social contexts.

Although Georgia O’Keeffe rarely incorporated Native American artifacts in her still-life compositions—and Hispanic religious carvings only once—other artists were irresistibly drawn to these objects. Santos—statues of saints from Hispanic culture—and Hopi kachinas—carved figures representing spiritual forces—were popular subjects, as seen here in the works of several artists including Marsden Hartley and Gustave Baumann. Native American textiles often appear on tabletops or as backdrops in the work of Frank Sauerwein and others. Motifs and designs from these objects also were used to create abstract patterns.

**Architecture**

Still lifes are normally associated with smaller inanimate objects, but it is not uncommon for artists to include architectural elements in such works. Adobe mud-brick and stucco walls, windows, doors, and regional furnishings could be used to capture the essence of both the Southwestern setting and the lives the artists created for themselves while working there. Many Southwestern artists, like Alexandre Hogue and Howard B. Schleeter (whose works are nearby), depicted their studio interiors in their still lifes, in some cases allowing for intensely personal glimpses of their working spaces.

In contrast, Georgia O’Keeffe was particularly drawn to exteriors. The patio door of her Abiquiu house was her favorite architectural subject. In several of her canvases she also painted an old Hispanic adobe church from a variety of angles.

**Abstractions**

In the years around the middle of the 20th century, abstraction rose to new prominence for artists across the United States. Emil Bisttram and Raymond Jonson were two of the leading artists in New Mexico working with abstraction. Like their other contemporaries in this exhibition, they started with a specific subject—such as a plant, a landscape, or   
a design—and then magnified, distorted, or disassembled it to create their images.

Georgia O’Keeffe is the best known New Mexico practitioner of this type of abstraction. She used flowers, architectural elements, and other objects of interest that she saw   
or picked up on her walks through the desert. The resulting paintings are close contemplations of her subjects, souvenirs of her experiences.

**Georgia O’Keeffe and the Southwest**

Georgia O’Keeffe was a promising young artist and teacher when she first visited New Mexico in 1917. She returned in 1929 as a successful artist known for urban subjects painted in a modernist style. She began spending part of every summer there then moved permanently to the Southwest in 1949 after her husband, New York-based photographer Alfred Stieglitz, died.

O’Keeffe’s years in the Southwest had a profound impact on her art. During this time she developed some of her most iconic still-life compositions, the subjects of which included bones and flowers as well as architecture and cultural artifacts. Unlike the artists that settled in colonies in Taos and Santa Fe, O’Keeffe preferred privacy and isolation. Her enjoyment came from painting in a land that provided her with endless inspiration. She also became fascinated by the adobe architecture of the Southwest with its mix of influences from Native American and Hispanic cultures. She eventually purchased and renovated an adobe house in Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, located 18 miles north of the village of Abiquiu, where she kept a second adobe home. She painted many images of the houses’ doorways, patios, and sunbaked walls.