Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986)

“Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words.” — GEORGIA O’KEEFFE, 1976

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 skyscapes, glowing landscapes, and images of bones against the stark desert sky are iconic and widely recognized. O’Keeffe’s work is known for its 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 realism 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 revolutionary ideas of his colleague Arthur Wesley Dow encouraged an intellectual and imaginative approach 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 marked some of these highly abstract drawings to a friend in New York City. His 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, she 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 direction of her artistic practice shifted dramatically four years later (1918) 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.

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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 well known as the work she had completed earlier in New York. During her first two summers in the Tacos house of her friend Mabel Dodge Luhan, O’Keeffe painted the surrounding landscape, its weatherworn 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 saw the land in a new way 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 their 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 renderings of northern New Mexico express a deep personal response to the high desert terrain. She created enchanting visual experiences for viewers in paintings like Rám’s Head, Blue Morning Glory (1928), and Untitled Red and Yellow Clouds (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 evolved a sense of the spectacular places she visited, including the mountain peaks of Peru and Japan’s Mount Fuji. Continuing to travel during the 1950s, she increasingly concentrated 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 Clouds II (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 (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. I live in New Mexico, and almost blind, she enlisted the help of several assistants to enable her to create art.” One such helper, Belalmino Lopez, recalls mixing her paints and following her careful instructions in preparing the canvas. Like Sky Above Clouds / Yellow Horizon and Clouds (1977), she returned to favorite visual motifs from her memory and the urban center of New York City. A technique refined by decades of practice, she continued to “fill a space in a beautiful way” in abstract watercolors that recreated the paper from edge to edge with simplified and intangible forms.