

Georgia O'Keeffe

(Ge-or-jah Oh Kee-fh)

Painter, American Modernism style (see vocab)
Modern Period of Art

BORN: November 15, 1887, Wisconsin

DIED: March 6, 1986, Santa Fe, New Mexico

ACTIVE: 1916 - ca.1982

Georgia O'Keeffe was raised on a small farm in Wisconsin, where she liked to explore her world in any way she could...she even remembered eating dirt as a child, because she was curious how it tasted! Named for her absent Hungarian Count Grandfather (George Victor Totto,) Georgia spent her childhood learning everything she could, including the elements of art from her mother.



Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia wanted to be an artist from the time she was 10 years old, and her mother supported her (as well as her sisters Ida and Anita) by finding watercolor lessons, and later encouraging them to go to art school.

After college, Georgia taught art, but was faced with the difficulty that there were no real female painters-most female artists painted for family art and recreation or taught art, but did not make their living with it. She decided to try anyway, and her first big break came when a friend showed some charcoal abstract art sketches to gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz and he promptly put them on display (O'Keeffe scolded him for not asking her permission first!)

Stieglitz helped O'Keeffe display and sell her art. He encouraged her to switch from watercolors (considered fit only for amateurs) to oils (the media of "real artists") and advertised her works. Soon, Georgia was making money, and falling in love with Stieglitz, who proposed. They married in 1924. In 1946, Georgia became the first female artist to have her own retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

While she is most famous for her oversized, close-up paintings of flowers, these comprise only 10% of her work. She created over 2,000 canvases during her career, only around 200 are flowers. She also painted landscapes, cityscapes, bone studies, and abstract works.

After Stieglitz's death, O'Keeffe moved permanently to New Mexico, where she converted her car into a mobile studio, allowing her to paint anywhere in the desert. She also camped out in order to catch early morning or late evening light. She painted in driving rain, in freezing cold (wearing gloves) and under the blazing sun.

O'Keeffe started to go blind in 1972, and painted her last unassisted painting that year. She hired an assistant to help stretch canvases, and mix oil paints, which helped her keep painting. Later she returned to watercolors and finally sculpture, until she had to quit altogether when she was 95 years old.¹⁻

¹ This makes her similar to Edgar Degas, who switched from oil paints to pastels when his eyes began to lose the ability to see detail, then from pastels to sculpture when his vision failed. Losing a tool of one's trade doesn't mean you lose your ability to create, you just create a new avenue of creativity. (Grandma Moses also changed her medium: she switched from embroidery to painting when her arthritis made sewing too difficult!)

O'Keefe's work is often categorized as **American Modernism:**

But even here, she's hard to define. Most Modernist artists created purely abstract works, trying to remove all definable imagery. Others focused on how war and industrialization was altering, or destroying, culture. While the bulk of O'Keefe's works are abstracts, she also created very recognizable works, such as the flowers, bones, and landscapes.

However, her abstracts never caught on the way her flowers and landscapes did. Her colors, techniques, and combinations of forms were so unusual, they were marks of her style. Since she worked during the 20th century modern movement, this is where her works land on an art timeline.

Still, many consider her work so unique to her, it can only be categorized as "O'Keefe."

Etymology:

Modernism (n.)

The word "Modernism" originated in 1737, and means "a deviation from the ancient and classical manner." Samuel Johnson, creator of the first modern English dictionary, credited (or perhaps, blamed!) satirist writer Johnathan Swift for inventing the word. From 1830 forward it meant, "in modern ways and styles", and has made its way into art, philosophy and even theological movements.

Modern (adj.) comes from the 1500s Middle-French word *moderne*, meaning "pertaining to present or recent times". This word came from the Late Latin term *modern* (which meant the same thing), it comes from the classical Latin term *modo* (Ablative form: *modus*) meaning "Just now [done] in a certain manner." Shakespeare used the word "modern" as a slang term to mean every-day, ordinary, or common.

The term "Modern Art" was first coined in 1807.

Definition compiled from the Online Etymology Dictionary, www.etymonline.com

Quotes from O'Keefe

"I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do." -Georgia O'Keefe

"Nobody sees a flower - really - it is so small it takes time - we haven't time - and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time." -Georgia O'Keefe



Figure 1: Jimson Weed No. 1 (1932). This painting sold in 2014 to Alice Walton (heiress of Walmart) for \$44.4 million, making this the highest priced painting by a female artist ever sold at auction. Earlier, this painting hung in the White House during the George W. Bush administration at the request of Laura Bush. Walton subsequently donated the painting to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, which Walton helped found. In 2016, this painting was displayed in the Tate Gallery, London, as part of a Georgia O'Keefe show in the United Kingdom.

In many parts of the world, this is an invasive weed...Georgia turned it to a beautiful masterpiece.

Pelvis IV (1944)



Red Canna (1924)



Poppy IV (1927)



Heliconia (1939)



Black Hollyhock and Blue Larkspur (1930)



Black Pansy and Forget-Me-Nots (1926)



“Leaves of a Plant” (a Bromeliad) (1942)



Pelvis II; 1944



Horns and Feathers, 1937



Clam and Mussel 1924



Ram's Head with Hollyhock 1935



The Red Hills Beyond Abiquiu; 1930



Above, *Red Hills beyond Abiquiu*, 1930. Oil on Canvas. Eiteljorg Museum of Native Americans and Western Art, Indianapolis Indiana. Below, on the left, detail of the tree ridge in "*Red Hills*" upper right corner. Below on the right, detail of the tree in the lower left corner. Note the loose brush strokes and swirls O'Keefe used to create her "trees" and "ridges". Photo: R.J. Hughes, 2018

The Eiteljorg posted the following quote from O'Keefe with this beautiful landscape: "A red hill doesn't touch everyone's heart as it touches mine and I suppose there is no reason why it should. The red hill is a piece of the badlands where even the grass is gone. Badlands roll away outside my door-hill after hill..."



The Flower and Bone Series Paintings

Georgia O'Keeffe loved to look deeply at things which were overlooked by most people.

Most people see flowers, and flower paintings are ancient: Lotus blossoms adorn Ancient Egyptians paintings, Medieval artists used Flowers as codes for various ideals², and the Dutch had an entire Renaissance school of Still Life Floral Arrangements, many with hidden meanings. (see painting at right.)



But O'Keeffe saw something many people did not: for all their beauty and all the paintings of flowers over the centuries, many people still passed them by quickly. They saw the flowers, the beauty of them, but never stopped to gaze at the colors and structure of a single blossom for long at all. In her own words:

... nobody sees a flower — really — it is so small — we haven't time — and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time... So I said to myself — I'll paint what I see — what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it — I will make even busy New-Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.



So, she painted flowers on large canvases (many canvasses are larger than 3 feet tall) with single blossoms flowing right off the page. It worked; people stared. She drew common flowers, flowers bought in the market, flowers growing as weeds in her gardens, it didn't matter; these massive blooms were breathtaking in their beauty and shape. Even leaves, up close, yielded a spectacular splendor.



Later, after she moved to New Mexico, she saw the same thing with the dusty, dried-out bones that littered the remote landscapes she loved. While most saw the ugly remains of a long-dead animal, she saw exquisiteness of form and color. She painted bones and shells and feathers and horns, sometimes set against the sky or the distant landscape, sometimes near her beloved flowers, sometimes so close you only see the white curl of baked bone as it swirls around the moon.

She made people stop and see these discarded bits of derelict debris in a whole new light.

UPPER RIGHT: "Still Life with Bouquet of Flowers and Plumbs" by Rachel Ruysch 1664 – 1750; an example of the Floral art in the Dutch Golden Age. **UPPER LEFT:** O'Keeffe's "Corn No. 2" (1924)—yes, that's a stalk of corn. **LOWER RIGHT:** Poppy VI (1928); **LOWER LEFT:** Horse Skull with White Rose (1931)

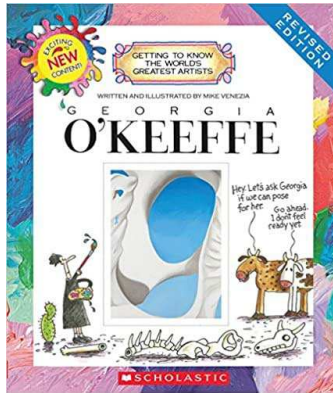
² Lilies, for example are a symbol of purity, which is why they are often painted near the Virgin Mary or being held by her.

Take Home

Georgia O'Keefe's work was both detailed and loose. It was detailed because a single bloom could fill the entire canvas, forcing the viewer to see each petal, stamen, or pistil in detail. It was loose because she blended colors and omitted some of the miniscule details like veins and blemishes, choosing to focus on the shape, colors, and form of her work. She often used vivid, bold colors to paint what she was seeing.

So, use photos of flowers or plants (or houseplants, or bouquet flowers, or the photos in this tutorial) and try to fill a page with the details and colors of a single bloom or section of plant! Or, look out your window to paint a landscape. You can even look at photographs of natural wonders which inspire you, and fill the page with them.

Books:



Getting to Know the World Great Artists: Georgia O'Keefe by Mike Venezia

(Once again, I Love, LOVE LOVE Venezia's books. He offers a child-friendly biography with LOTS of photos of the work each artist did...these books are a fantastic way to introduce a child to the world of art and music!)

Through Georgia's Eyes, by Rachel Victoria Rodriguez, Julie Paschkis (Illustrations) *(younger children may prefer this one, though there are fewer direct images of O'Keefe's work)*

Online Gallery:

Wikiart.org has a gallery of some of O'Keefe's works:

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/georgia-o-keeffe>

Field Trips:

O'Keefe was an artist who was popular before she died, and as a result, many museums have pieces by her. In addition to the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, these museums also have multiple O'Keefe works in their holdings:

- The Georgia O'Keefe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico
- National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C
- Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio
- Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York
- San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, California
- Art Institute of Chicago

As always, call before you visit to make sure any piece you want to see is on display. Museums routinely rotate exhibits, loan pieces out for traveling exhibitions, or remove pieces for conservation or storage.

