

## **Georgia O’Keeffe (November 15, 1887-March 6, 1986)**

### Georgia’s Early Years

Georgia Totto O’Keeffe was born in a farmhouse on a large dairy farm outside of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin on November 15, 1887. She lived with her parents and her six other brothers and sisters.

From a young age, Georgia started to look at the world with an artistic eye, noticing shapes, colors and light. Georgia said that her “first memory is of the brightness of light . . . light all around. I was sitting among pillows on a quilt on the ground . . . very large white pillows.”

Georgia was born at a time when women were not allowed to vote. And women artists were basically unheard of. Her parents wanted her to be an art teacher. But Georgia had other ideas for her future and even from an early age pursued a career in art.

When Georgia was in the eighth grade, she asked a daughter of a farm employee what she was going to be when she grew up. The girl said she didn’t know. Georgia replied, “I am going to be an artist!”

In 1903, Georgia moved with her family to Williamsburg, Virginia. Georgia’s parents encouraged her interest in art, and by the time Georgia was 16, she had had five years of private art lessons at various schools in Wisconsin and Virginia.

After graduating from high school in 1905, Georgia moved to Chicago to live with an aunt and attend the Art Institute of Chicago. She attended school for one year and then dropped out because of illness. In 1907, she enrolled in the Art Students League in New York City, but, discouraged by her work, she did not return the following year. Instead, Georgia decided to move back to Chicago, where she found work as a commercial artist, making fashion illustrations for an advertising firm.

### Georgia’s Early Influences and her Abstract Charcoal Drawings

In 1909, Georgia became ill and moved back to Virginia to be with her family. After she recuperated, she enrolled in a drawing course for prospective art teachers, which was being taught at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Her instructor, Alon Bement, was a professor of art from Teachers College at Columbia University in New York. Bement introduced her to the revolutionary teaching of Arthur Wesley Dow, who’s approach to art making emphasized harmonious composition and abstract design principles rather than the age-old technique of copying images from the real world. According to Dow’s philosophy, the purpose of art was not to copy nature, but to create beautiful and proportional designs that expressed the individual’s understanding of the world. This new way to create art rekindled Georgia’s interest in being an artist and influenced her own work.

In 1912, a friend wrote Georgia that an art teaching position was open in a school in Amarillo, Texas. Georgia applied for the position and was hired for the fall semester. For two years, Georgia taught art to young people in Texas during the academic year and returned to the University of Virginia during the summer months to assist Bement in teaching art to adults training to become teachers.

In 1914, Georgia moved to New York City to attend Columbia Teachers College to work toward a teaching certificate. It was in New York that Georgia was exposed to new art by artists such as Pablo Picasso and John Marin, who were making paintings that moved away from representational art toward abstraction. Pablo Picasso, Violin, 1912 and John Marin, Woolworth Building No. 32, 1913 (Board 2).

Representational art depicts something that exists in the world and is recognized by most people. Abstract art uses color and line to create a composition that is independent from visual references in the world. Georgia was also exposed to new intellectual and political ideas, such as feminism, a political and cultural movement to establish more rights and legal protections for women.

At the end of the summer of 1915, Georgia decided to accept a position teaching art at Columbia College in South Carolina. It was in South Carolina, when Georgia was completely alone, that she began to develop her own style of painting. She was determined to make something that reflected her own ideas and emotions rather than what she had been taught.

“I have things in my head that are not like what anyone has taught me . . . shapes and ideas so near to me . . . so natural to my way of being and thinking that it hasn’t occurred to me to put them down,” she said.

Initially, Georgia decided to give up color and began to create images using charcoal. She made a series of abstract charcoal drawings in which she portrayed intangible emotions she could not express in words.

“Words seem to me such a poor medium of expression – for some things,” Georgia wrote. “I always have a hard time finding words for anything.”

Board 3      Early Abstraction, 1915  
                  No 20 – From Music – Special, 1915  
                  No. 14 Special, 1916

The charcoals Georgia created in the winter of 1915 were among the most radical art produced in the United States. In contrast to most abstract artists, whose work visually recorded their own experiences of objects or people, Georgia’s work depicted pure emotion. She did not draw what her eyes saw, she drew what she felt. Georgia’s use of fluid, undulating forms created rhythms that seemed alive and breathing, like nature.

Early in 1916, a friend took some of Georgia's charcoal drawings to a New York City art gallery called 291. The gallery was owned and run by Alfred Stieglitz. Alfred was a photographer and promoter of modern art. Through exhibits at his gallery, Alfred single-handedly introduced America to the works of some of the most renowned artists of the time, such as Picasso, Matisse and Cezanne. He also published *Camera Work*, a quarterly photographic art journal that helped established photography as an art form.

Alfred loved Georgia's drawings. And in April, he included 10 of her drawings in a group show at his gallery. Georgia had not been consulted before the exhibit, and only learned about it through an acquaintance. Georgia considered her drawings to be private statements about her own emotions that were not wholly appropriate for public viewing. Legend has it that Georgia flew to New York to confront Alfred about exhibiting her work without permission. But Georgia was so impressed and charmed by Alfred that she agreed to let the work hang at the gallery.

She once said that "I believe I would rather have [Alfred] Stieglitz like something . . . anything I had done . . . than anyone else I know of."

### Georgia's Texas Watercolors

In the Fall of 1916, Georgia moved to Canyon, Texas to become the head of the art department at West Texas State Normal College. She continued to write to Alfred and send him some of her work.

Georgia was awestruck at the size of the Texas landscape. For Georgia, the panhandle landscape was what oceans and mountains were to other artists—expansive and infinite. "The plains – the wonderful great big sky—makes me want to breathe so deep I'll break," she said. With this inspiration, Georgia began to paint in vivid color to express her wonder and awe of the landscape.

Georgia made at least 50 watercolors during her time in Texas. And in April, 1917, she had her first solo show, comprised mostly of these watercolors, at Alfred's gallery 291 in New York.

Board 4      Evening Star No. 4, 1917  
                  Pink and Green Mountains, 1917  
                  Tent Door at Night, 1916

### Georgia Moves to New York

Alfred encouraged Georgia to leave Texas and return to New York to paint. By this time, Alfred had fallen in love with Georgia and he wanted to pursue a relationship with her. Georgia agreed to come to New York and she and Alfred moved into his studio in New York City. At that time Alfred was 54, 23 years older than Georgia, who was 31.

Once she moved to New York, Georgia began working in oil paint, and with the change in medium she increasingly used rich and vivid color to express her emotions. Her use of color incited a physiological response in the viewer that mirrored an emotional experience. Georgia's smooth surfaces and gently pulsing organic forms suggested the soothing movement of the natural world. Instead of depicting the outward images of nature, she depicted the experience of being in nature, a feeling that often could not be expressed in words.

Board 5        Series 1 – No. 3, 1918  
                  Series 1 – No. 4, 1918  
                  Series 1 – No. 8, 1919

One day when Georgia was at Columbia, she heard music coming from an art teacher's classroom. The students were asked to paint what they heard. "This gave me the idea that I was very interested to follow later. The idea that music could be translated into something for the eye." This experience led to Georgia's painting Music, Pink and Blue, II, 1918 (Board 6), which Georgia painted while listening to music.

*Ask the children what kind of music they think Georgia was listening to when she painted this picture. Low or high? Sad or happy? Lively or slow?*

Board 6        Grey Lines with Black, Blue and Yellow, 1923-25  
                  Pink Moon and Blue Lines, 1923

*Ask the children what they think of when they look at these pictures. What do they think Georgia was thinking about? What emotions do these paintings convey?*

Georgia and Alfred got married in December 1924. Alfred was Georgia's most avid supporter, arranging shows and selling her paintings. Alfred took many photographs – over 300 – of Georgia throughout their relationship. He even exhibited his photographs of her.

Board 7        Alfred Stieglitz, Various Portraits of Georgia (1918-19)

These photographs made Georgia into a media sensation, and probably helped to market her paintings, but they also may be responsible for what she considered to be a misinterpretation of her work. Critics repeatedly associated her abstract images with her womanhood, rather than with a more universal and emotional experience.

Georgia used to help Alfred print his photographs in the darkroom. Working with him introduced her to the idea of cropping a picture—taking an image of something whole, enlarging it and using only a small portion of it to create a new and different image. This influenced her approach to composition in her own work.

## The 1920s: Georgia's Shift to Representational Work

In the 1920s, Georgia became frustrated with critical interpretations of her abstract paintings, so she shifted her attention to the depiction of recognizable forms. Although abstraction always remained the underpinning of her art, she is best known today for her works with recognizable subject matter.

In New York, Georgia painted pictures of the inside of her studio and the outside world she saw around her. She painted pictures of the strong and powerful skyscrapers that reflected the modern style of architecture that became popular in New York in the 1920s. The size and monumentality of these buildings made them symbols of modernism and popular subject matter for painters and photographers.

Board 8      59<sup>th</sup> Street Studio, 1919  
                  The Shelton with Sunspots, 1926  
                  Manhattan, 1932

*You could ask the children about where Georgia standing when she painted some of these paintings? What is the point of view? What is in the New York scenes? What time of day was it? How do you know? What colors did she use? Are there any people in the picture? Why not?*

Georgia and Alfred spent summers at his family's home at Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains. Georgia produced many paintings of the Lake George countryside during these years.

Board 9      Lake George with Crows, 1921  
                  View from the Lake, 1924  
                  Red, Yellow and Black Streak, 1924  
                  Wave Night, 1928

*You can ask the children what they see in these paintings? What time of day was it? What emotions do the paintings convey?*

In 1924, Georgia completed what would be her first of many enormous flower paintings. Although many artists had painted flowers before, no one had painted flowers the way that Georgia did. Instead of painting a flower in a vase or in a landscape, Georgia would fill up the entire canvas with one flower painted extremely close up, leaving out some of its characteristics like the leaves, the stem or many of the petals. She would paint the flower like it was under a magnifying glass so that only a portion of it would fill the canvas. It was a unique way of looking at the flower, and it transformed the image from something completely recognizable to something approaching abstraction. Georgia's flower paintings are some of her most popular work today.

Here's what Georgia had to say about painting flowers. "A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower. You put your hand out to touch it, or lean

forward to smell it, or maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking, or give it to someone to please them. But one rarely takes the time to really see a flower. I have painted what each flower is to me and I have painted it big enough so that others would see what I see.”

Board 9      Yellow Sweet Peas (1925)  
Red Canna (1925/28)  
Abstraction White Rose (1927)  
An Orchid (1941)

Board 10     Corn No. 2 (1924)  
Two Calla Lilies on Pink (1928)

*You can ask the children if they recognize any of the flowers? Ask them to describe the colors. How does this painting make you feel? What do you think Georgia is saying about these flowers by making you see it so close up? Perhaps she is saying that there is a lot to be seen, a lot of beauty, in small things if you just slow down and take the time.*

Board 10      Jack-in-the-Pulpit Paintings (1930).

These paintings are her most complete statement of the relationship between abstraction and representation. Georgia made several paintings of this flower. With each successive painting she rendered the flower more and more abstract until in the very last painting she suddenly honed in on the central, entirely abstract motif of the flower’s pistil. It is very difficult even to see the flower in the final painting. It becomes a picture of something altogether new.

Georgia’s emphasis on abstraction can best be understood by her 1922 statement, “Nothing is less real than realism. . . . It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.”

### Georgia and New Mexico

By 1928, Georgia began to feel the need to travel and find other sources for her painting. Friends returning from the West with stories stimulated Georgia’s desire to go there. So, in May of 1929, Georgia and a friend set out by train to Taos, New Mexico, a trip that would forever change her life.

Georgia found the thin, dry air enabled her to see further. At times she could see several approaching thunderstorms in the distance at once. She referred to the land of Northern New Mexico as “the faraway,” a place of stark beauty and infinite space.

While in Taos, she visited the historical mission church at Ranchos de Taos. Although other artists had painted this church, Georgia’s painting of only a fragment of the mission wall silhouetted against the dark blue sky portrayed it as no other artist had done before. Rancho Church, 1930 (Board 11).

Georgia explained, “I often painted fragments of things because it seemed to make my statement as well as or better than the whole could. . . I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at . . . not copy it.”

Georgia wanted to explore New Mexico on her own, so she bought a Model A Ford, learned how to drive, and traveled the back roads, painting what she saw.

The first summer Georgia spent in New Mexico, she was surprised that there were so few flowers. There was no rain, so flowers didn’t grow there. But the landscape was full of dry white, animal bones scattered over the desert. Georgia began to collect the bones, and she decided to take a barrel of them back to New York with her as mementos of New Mexico.

Georgia saw the bones not as something that was dead, but rather as symbols of longevity and survival. “The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even though it is vast and empty and untouchable . . . and knows no kindness with all of its beauty,” she said.

Georgia made many paintings of bones. She painted bones floating through the sky as though they were guarding or surveying the land. Later, in the 1940s, Georgia used the bones as devices to frame the vast, blue sky that she saw around her. These paintings were more like the abstractions she painted in her early years.

Board 11      Cow’s Skull with Calico Roses, 1931  
Ram’s Head, White Hollyhock, Hills, 1935  
Deer’s Skull with Pedernal, 1936  
Pelvis I, 1944  
Pelvis IV, 1944

Georgia returned to New Mexico each summer until Alfred’s death in 1946. After that she moved there permanently.

Georgia bought two pieces of property in New Mexico. The first was an adobe house called Rancho de los Burros located at Ghost Ranch, a resort for wealthy Easterners located on a dirt road 120 miles north of Albuquerque. The cliffs, the trees, and the Cerro Pedernal, a mountain directly across from the house’s patio, inspired Georgia’s creative efforts for the next 40 years. My Front Yard, Summer, 1941 (Board 11).

Later she bought an abandoned hacienda in the village of Abiquiu, 16 miles from Ghost Ranch, where she typically spent the spring and winter months. Many of her paintings were of her Abiquiu home and the land surrounding it. Cliffs Beyond Abiquiu, Dry Waterfall, 1943 (Board 11)

Georgia frequently claimed that her fascination with the wooden door on the South side of her Abiquiu home was one of the primary reasons she bought the property, and from

1945 to the mid-1970s, she made an extensive series of paintings of it. Back Door with Snow, 1956 (Board 12).

Some of her paintings can be read as abstractions, as in My Last Door, 1952/54 (Board 12). But each element is derived from what she saw: a thin area of sky, the wooden rectangular door, the adobe wall surrounding it, and the stone steps in front.

In 1951, Georgia began to travel internationally. Her travels inspired her to sketch and paint rivers, clouds and landscapes seen from the air. Sky Above Clouds III, 1963 (Board 12).

### The 1970s: A Return to Abstraction

In 1971, Georgia became aware that her eyesight was failing. At the age of 84, Georgia developed an irreversible disease of the eye called Macular Degeneration, which caused her to lose her central vision leaving her with only peripheral sight. She produced her last oil painting in 1972, but continued to paint with assistance into the late 1970s. During this period, Georgia returned to the abstractions she had created at the start of her artistic career, producing more than 40 watercolor paintings.

Board 12      Untitled (Abstraction Pink Curve and Circles), 1970s  
Like an Early Blue Abstraction (1976/77)

In 1976, Georgia explained her use of abstraction. “The abstraction is the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint.” She used abstraction to give visual form to (as she confided to Stieglitz in a 1916 letter) “things I feel and want to say – [but] haven’t [sic] words for.”

Georgia died on March 6, 1986, at the age of 98.

### Where to View Georgia’s Work

In 1997, the Georgia O’Keeffe museum opened in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The museum is the largest holder of Georgia’s work and owner of most of her personal property, including her Ghost Ranch and Abiquiu houses.

Her work also can be seen locally at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, and the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York. A wonderful exhibition, GEORGIA O’KEEFFE: ABSTRACTION, is on display at the Whitney through January 17, 2010.

### Sources

GEORGIA O’KEEFFE: ABSTRACTION, Yale University Press, 2009.

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE MUSEUM: CELEBRATING 10 YEARS 1997-2007, Barbara Buhler Lines, Abrams, New York, in association with Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, 2007.

O'KEEFFE'S OKEEFFES: THE ARTIST'S COLLECTION, Thames & Hudson, 2001.

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE/JOHN LEONGARD: PAINTINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS, Schirmer/Mosel, 2006.

[www.ellensplace.net](http://www.ellensplace.net)

### The Project: Making a Close-up Painting

For this project, you will need the following materials, all of which are located in the Art Appreciation locker\*:

Watercolor paper

Paint brushes

Cups for water

Drawing pencils

Erasers

Watercolor pencils

Crayons

Laminated photographs

Samples of completed paintings to show kids (should be kept in portfolio)

Pass out the photographs. The children can share them if there are not enough to go around. Most of them are of flowers or leaves. There are a few cityscapes that I thought some the boys may prefer. Ask the children to make a magnified picture of an item in the photo. You can explain that they only have to paint a portion of the photo, and that they have artistic license to use different colors if they want. You should encourage them to use vivid colors, as Georgia O'Keeffe did.

You should encourage the children, especially the older children, to begin by drawing a rough sketch with a drawing pencil, and then add color. The younger kids may not have time to do both. Use your discretion, and if you see that it is taking too long, encourage the children to move along and add color.

Watercolor pencils work like both regular colored pencils and watercolor. You can use them in a number of different ways. You can color an area with the pencil, then add some water over it and blend the area in as you would with watercolor paint. You can add the water first and then color over it, or you can even dip the pencil in the water before putting it on the paper. The latter method produces a darker color.

You can explain to the children that they may want to start out with a lighter color first and then move to a darker color, layering the colors once an area has dried. You should

discourage them from using black, as this usually produces a muddy picture. I would not even pass out any black watercolor pencils.

The wax crayons are impervious to the water, and therefore the crayons can be used with the pencils to add color and texture. The areas that are covered with the crayons will not blend with the watercolor. You should encourage the kids to experiment with both the pencils and the crayons.

\* Please wash out brushes well after use and put water color pencils and crayons back by color so that the materials will be available for the next class. You may have to sharpen the pencils before the project.

Dear Parents:

Today, art appreciation volunteers came into your child's classroom to teach the students about the American painter Georgia O'Keeffe.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) has long been considered a central figure in 20th century art. In 1915, O'Keeffe created a series of abstract charcoal drawings that were among the most radical works of art produced in the United States at that time. In these and subsequent abstract paintings, O'Keeffe sought not to copy an image from the natural world, but rather to transcribe the thoughts and emotions that she was unable to put into words.

While abstraction is the underpinning of all of her art, O'Keeffe is better known for her representational works, which include landscapes of the New York City skyline, Lake George, the Texas prairie and of course, the New Mexican desert, whose barren landscape and expansive skies captivated O'Keeffe and inspired much of her work. O'Keeffe is most often associated with her still lifes of magnified animal bones, shells, and flowers that continue to enchant viewers all over the world. O'Keeffe's use of crisply contoured forms, undulating lines and vivid colors transport the viewer into the artist's own emotional world. O'Keeffe's paintings often transformed her subject matter into powerful abstract images.

After the presentation, the students made their own abstractions from photographs of flowers, leaves and buildings, using watercolor pencils, crayons and graphite.

O'Keeffe's works are exhibited in many nearby museums, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, and the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, New York.

A wonderful exhibition called GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: ABSTRACTION is on display through January 17, 2010 at the Whitney Museum.

Sincerely,

The Art Appreciation Committee