During the mid-1920s, Georgia O'Keeffe and her husband, Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946), lived on the 30th floor of the Shelton Hotel on Lexington Avenue at 49th Street in New York City. Designed by the architect Arthur Loomis Harmon and opened in 1924, the 35-story residential skyscraper was considered the epitome of contemporary metropolitan living, and the New York Times proclaimed it a “stately, breath-taking building.” [1] Her new home inspired O'Keeffe to paint a number of New York views ranging from the East River as seen from her window to specific skyscrapers in her midtown Manhattan neighborhood. While some of these urban paintings are more clearly representational, such as The Shelton with Sunspots [fig. 1], others more closely approach pure abstraction, for example City Night [fig. 2].

Executed in 1927, Line and Curve consists of a simple juxtaposition of a vertical line than runs down the center of the canvas intersected by a sweeping curve that extends through the upper right quadrant of the composition. The painting combines architectonic elements with hints of more natural, curving, organic forms. The mottled, gently undulating, white paint surface with evanescent violet hues and the shading of the vertical line suggest the shallow spatial recessions of New York’s crowded spaces. The gray-white palette evokes a cloudy sky.
Line and Curve is the last in a group of four highly abstract, predominantly white, narrow vertical compositions by O’Keeffe. The two initial works from 1926—Abstraction [fig. 3] and White Abstraction (Madison Avenue) [fig. 4]—are more fragmented and complex. The 1927 pair—Abstraction White Rose [fig. 5] and Line and Curve—are concisely rendered and feature just a few, minimal elements. O’Keeffe returned to this line of inquiry in 1930, when she produced Black and White (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Lynes no. 700) and the Gallery’s Black White and Blue, two works that can also be linked to skyscraper motifs. [2]

All four of O’Keeffe’s white paintings should be understood in the context of the ongoing, complex dialogue in her work between hard-edged urban and softer, curvilinear natural forms, and more broadly between objective representation and subjective abstraction. New York-Night, for instance, has been interpreted as an abstract rendering of the convergence of Madison Avenue and two side streets seen from an elevated vantage point in the Shelton Hotel or, alternately, as a view across the sky comparable to a series of cloud photographs by Stieglitz known as Equivalents. [3] An additional source for the imagery of Line and Curve and its related works has recently been suggested by Bruce Robertson: “The space of these pictures is shallow: folded, crumpled, or pleated are useful adjectives, all terms one might use to describe paper or fabric.” [4] Shortly after completing Line and Curve, O’Keeffe painted Black Abstraction (1927, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Lynes no. 574), a work inspired by her recollection of a vision she had prior to succumbing to anesthesia before an operation. The various associations conjured by O’Keeffe’s paintings from the 1920s—skyscrapers, clouds, crumpled paper, and anesthetic dreams—are reminders of how indebted the Stieglitz group was to the allusive, protosurrealist imagery favored by late 19th-century symbolist poets and painters, such as Stéphane Mallarmé (French, 1842 - 1898) and Odilon Redon (French, 1840 - 1916).

In 1976 at nearly 80 years old, O’Keeffe, echoing Stieglitz’s strategy with his Equivalents series, offered one of her most articulate statements on the relationship between objective realism and nonobjective abstraction: “I long ago came to the conclusion that even if I could put down accurately certain things that I saw and enjoyed it would not give the observer the kind of feeling the object gave me. I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at—not copy it.” She continued:
It is surprising to me how many people separate the objects from the abstract. Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or tree. It is lines and colors put together so that they say something. For me that is the very basis of painting. The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint. [5]

Robert Torchia
September 29, 2016

fig. 2 Georgia O’Keeffe, *City Night*, 1926, oil on canvas, Minneapolis Insitute of Arts, Gift of Funds from the Regis Corporation, Mr. and Mrs. W. John Driscoll, the Beim Foundation, the Larsen Fund, and by Public Subscription. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
fig. 3 Georgia O’Keeffe, *Abstraction*, 1926, oil on canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with Funds from Georgia O’Keeffe and by Exchange 58.43

fig. 4 Georgia O’Keeffe, *White Abstraction (Madison Avenue)*, 1926, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, Gift of Charles and Margaret Stevenson Henderson in Memory of Hunt Henderson

NOTES


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined plain weave fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher. All the tacking margins are intact. The artist applied paint directly and thickly over a bright white paint layer that was placed on top of the commercially prepared gray-white ground. There is evidence of a rudimentary pencil underdrawing. The painting is in excellent condition. The surface has not been varnished.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1887-1986]; her estate; bequest 1987 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1933 Georgia O'Keeffe: Paintings--New and Some Old, An American Place, New York, 1933, no. 23, as Abstraction, White, Grey and Violet.


1947 Alfred Stieglitz Exhibition: His Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1947, no. 79 (circulated to Art Institute of Chicago in 1948; see next citation).

1948 Alfred Stieglitz: His Photographs and His Collection, Art Institute of Chicago, 1948.


2016 Georgia O’Keeffe, Tate Modern, London; Bank Austria Kunstforum, Vienna; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2016-2017, unnumbered catalogue, fig. 37 (shown only in London).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

