NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

Georgia O'Keeffe
American, 1887 - 1986

Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. VI

1930

oil on canvas
overall: 91.4 x 45.7 cm (36 x 18 in.)
framed: 96.8 x 51.4 x 3.8 cm (38 1/8 x 20 1/4 x 1 1/2 in.)
Inscription: across top reverse: Jack in Pulpit-30 / signed within five-pointed star: OK
Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe 1987.58.5

ENTRY

This work is part of a series of six paintings depicting the jack-in-the-pulpit flower, five of which reside at the National Gallery of Art: *Jack-in-Pulpit - No. 2*, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. 3*, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. IV*, *Jack-in-Pulpit Abstraction - No. 5*, and this painting. Georgia O'Keeffe painted the series in 1930, while staying at her husband Alfred Stieglitz's family estate in Lake George, New York.

The jack-in-the-pulpit is a common, North American, herbaceous flowering plant of the Arum family, *Arisaema triphyllum* (also called *A. atrorubens*), whose upright spadix, or jack, is enclosed within an elongated, striped spathe. It is closely related to the calla lily, another of O'Keeffe's early floral subjects. A favorite among wildflower enthusiasts, the plant's colloquial name is derived from the resemblance between its spathe arching over its spadix and early, hooded, church pulpits. It is also known as "Indian turnip" because Native Americans cooked and ate its bulbous roots, which they considered a delicacy. Joseph Harned, a botanist, noted that the "jack-in-the-pulpit has been a delight to American boys and girls ever since Columbus discovered America."[1]

O'Keeffe has related how her high school art teacher in Madison, Wisconsin, first introduced her to the subject:

> Holding a jack-in-the-pulpit high, she pointed out the strange shapes and variations in color—from the deep, almost black earthy violet through all the greens, from the pale whitish green in the flower through the heavy green of the leaves. She held up the purplish hood and showed us the jack inside. I had seen jacks before, but this was the first time I remember examining a flower. I was a little annoyed at being interested because I didn't like the teacher.[2]

The artist has also described the circumstances that led her to execute the six-painting series at Lake George:

> In the woods near two large spring houses, wild jack-in-the-pulpits grew—both the large dark ones and the small green ones. The year I painted them I had gone to the lake early in March. Remembering the art lessons of my high school days, I looked at the jacks with great interest. I did a set of six paintings of them. The first painting was very realistic. The last one had only the jack from the flower.[3]

Although the sequential numbering of the works' titles implies a serial progression of exploration and refinement that culminated in the sixth version, the actual order of execution is not clear. O'Keeffe and Doris Bry renumbered the series in 1970; the present third painting was originally the second, and the fourth was originally the sixth. Further complicating matters, there is no consistent use of Roman and Arabic numbers in the paintings' titles and the works vary in size.

The first three paintings in O'Keeffe and Bry's final arrangement are all relatively naturalistic views of a single flower's exterior. The forms are simplified, and the artist made no attempt to render minute botanical details. The bold colors are derived from the jack-in-the-pulpit's distinctive, purple-striped spathe (a feature that botanists have identified as characteristic of the fertile plants), and emphasis is placed on the tip of the spadix that protrudes from the protective spathe. *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. 1* [fig. 1] was the smallest painting in the series, measuring only twelve by nine inches. In the much larger *Jack-in-Pulpit - No. 2*, the plant is set against a pale mauve background, and all four corners of the composition are occupied by green foliage. *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. 3* is viewed from a slightly more distant vantage point, so there is more emphasis on the elongated, upright form of the

striped spathe. The green foliage is arranged in a less symmetrical manner, and the mauve background has been replaced by a cloudy sky.

The last three paintings in the series are close-up, lateral views of the spathe's interior. In these works, the imagery borders on abstraction. *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. IV* is a magnified view of the spadix set against the spathe's cavernous, dark purple interior. The composition is bifurcated by a narrow strip of white that emerges from the tip of the spadix. Green foliage and a hint of the cloudy sky are now confined to the upper right and left corners. *Jack-in-Pulpit Abstraction - No. 5* is the largest painting in the series; its dimensions may have prompted an early critic to remark that some of the series "are on an almost gargantuan scale."[4] Individual plant forms have reached such a degree of abstraction that they are difficult to identify. The predominant purple color indicates the interior of the spathe, and the rounded tips of what are presumably three spadices appear on the left. A white stripe similar to that in the previous painting appears in the left center of the composition. The culminating painting in the series, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. VI* is a highly simplified view of the spadix, which is now reduced to an elegant, dark, linear configuration, whose form is echoed by an eerie white light. Echoing the author of a popular book on botany who had metaphorically described how the plant's "pulpit is erected beneath leafy cathedral arches,"[5] an art critic similarly described this image as "grand and luminous as a cathedral window."[6] The tall, narrow dimensions of the composition enhance the architectural analogy, and the arch-like configuration is reminiscent of the French cubist Robert Delaunay's series of paintings depicting the interior of the Parisian Gothic church Saint-Séverin, for example *Saint-Séverin No. 3* [fig. 2].

The large, magnified representations of flowers that O'Keeffe began to paint in 1923 are her most famous subjects, and the ones with which she is most often associated; as early as 1929 Miguel Covarrubias caricatured her in the *New Yorker* as "Our Lady of the Lily" [fig. 3].[7] Although her close-up, monumentalized views of flowers had antecedents in the photographs of Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883 - 1976), Paul Strand (American, 1890 - 1976), and Edward Steichen (American, 1879 - 1973), and were to some extent paralleled in the paintings of Charles Demuth (American, 1883 - 1935) and Marsden Hartley (American, 1877 - 1943), O'Keeffe rendered her subjects at an unprecedented scale and became more closely associated with flower imager than her male peers.[8] From the mid-1920s to the present, numerous art critics and historians have offered eroticized interpretations of these floral still lifes by maintaining that they are visual

metaphors for the female reproductive organs and thus have a sexual connotation. Lewis Mumford, for example, opined in an important essay that O'Keeffe "has beautified the sense of what it means to be a woman; she has revealed the intimacies of love's juncture with the purity and absence of shame that lovers feel in their meeting; she has brought what was inarticulate and troubled and confused into the realm of conscious beauty."[9]

Some early critics, whose outlook was conditioned by the misogynistic symbolist equation between flowers and predatory female sensuality, found O'Keeffe's paintings enticing, sensual, and lewd.[10] Such notions, reinforced by the sinister associations of the plant's reproductive system, had become firmly embedded in popular culture by the 1920s. The author of a popular, turn-of-the-century book on wildflowers called the jack-in-the-pulpit "a gay deceiver, a wolf in sheep's clothing, literally a 'brother to dragons,' an arrogant upstart, an ingrate, a murderer of innocent benefactors!"[11] The author proceeded to describe at length how insects attracted to the plant are often trapped and drowned after they fly into its spathe. These insects fertilize the small flowers at the base of the spadix (individual plants are generally staminate or pistillate, and thus incapable of self-fertilization), but at the expense of their lives. "Open a dozen of Jack's pulpits, and in several, at least, dead victims will be found—pathetic little corpses sacrificed to the imperfection of his executive system."[12] Unaccustomed to the new phenomenon of a modernist woman artist of extraordinary talent and stature, some critics ascribed O'Keeffe's imagery to uniquely feminine sensibilities and her supposed obsession with the female body. The issue is complicated by the fact that Stieglitz actively promulgated these theories in order to promote his wife's paintings on the commercial art market.[13]

For some early viewers, the jack-in-the-pulpit series was distinguished by its phallic imagery. As early as December 1930, Arthur Dove wrote to Stieglitz about *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. VI*, commenting that "the bursting of a phallic symbol into white light may be the thing we all need. Otherwise it would not bother them so."[14] Stieglitz's grandniece described the series as "the most frankly explicit" of all O'Keeffe's work, and opined that they were "a perfect subject for a love-note painting for Alfred."[15] *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. IV* is similar to Stieglitz's bluntly erotic photograph *Interpretation*, in which he juxtaposes a phallus-shaped plaster sculpture by O'Keeffe against the background of her painting *Music—Pink and Blue, I* (1919, The Barney Ebsworth Collection). More recently, Anne Middleton Wagner has speculated that this phallic imagery was a deliberately vulgar gesture on O'Keeffe's

part that demonstrated “the will to exempt herself from the cultural implications of that gender status, [feminine] perhaps even to achieve a kind of androgyny,” an “ironic effort to adopt and employ the key male signifier [that] still stands as the most extreme of her efforts to adjust to the terms of her reception.”[16] Some early critics had quite the opposite reaction and discerned a religious serenity in the series. Following the same line of thought as the critic who likened *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. VI*, considered by some to be the most phallic image in the series, to a cathedral, Henry McBride wrote, “Almost any one of them, if shown alone in a chapel . . . might be found to have mystic properties.”[17]

O’Keeffe repeatedly denied that she had intended her flowers to have any overt or covert sexual content. She offered an alternative—and more practical—explanation of how she came to paint her “blown-up flowers”:

> In the twenties, huge buildings seemed to be going up overnight in New York. At that time I saw a painting by Fantin-Latour, a still life of flowers I found very beautiful, but I realized were I to paint the flowers so small, no one would look at them because I was unknown. So I thought I’ll make them look big like the huge buildings going up. People will be startled; they’ll have to look at them—and they did.[18]

On another occasion she offered a similar account of what led her to paint flowers, and directly refuted the critics: “Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—and I don’t.”[19]

The imagery in O’Keeffe’s floral subjects is indeed suggestive, and in the 1920s and 1930s—the era of Sigmund Freud, D. H. Lawrence, and Sherwood Anderson, and the height of the women’s suffrage movement—they were likely to be interpreted as such. From the perspective of plant symbolism, the jack-in-the-pulpit, and other of O’Keeffe’s floral subjects, had strong sexual connotations; one early 20th-century writer even commented: “Female botanizing classes pounce upon it as they would upon a pious young clergyman.”[20] On the other hand, the artist’s persistent denials that her flower paintings were intended as sexual metaphors cannot be ignored, and her repeated accounts of how she came to paint them are entirely plausible. As Charles Eldredge has aptly concluded, those

who persist in a sexual interpretation of O'Keeffe's flowers "reduce them to one-dimensional Rorschach tests."[21] Her magnified views of flowers were an original and logical development in the history of still-life painting and need not be exclusively interpreted as sexual metaphors. The disparity of opinions voiced about *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. VI*, running the improbable gamut from phallus to cathedral, indicates that O'Keeffe's flowers are complex, multilayered images that will continue to stimulate a debate that is impossible to resolve.

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. 1*, 1930, oil on canvas, private collection, Los Angeles. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

fig. 2 Robert Delaunay, *Saint-Severin No. 3*, 1909–1910, oil on canvas, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Founding Collection. Image: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation / Art Resource, NY

fig. 3 Miguel Covarrubias, "Our Lady of the Lily," illustration from *New Yorker* (July 6, 1929): 21. © Condé Nast

NOTES

[1] Joseph E. Harned, *Wild Flowers of the Alleghenies* (Oakland, MD, 1931), 94.

[2] Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York, 1976), n. p.

[3] Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York, 1976), unpaginated text accompanying pl. 41.

[4] Margaret Breuning, "Georgia O'Keeffe," *New York Evening Post*, Jan. 24, 1931.

[5] Neltje Blanchan, *Nature's Garden: An Aid to Knowledge of Our Wild Flowers and Their Insect Friends* (New York, 1904), 367.

[6] Edward Alden Jewell, "Georgia O'Keeffe in an Art Review," *New York Times* (Feb. 2, 1934). For the record, William Schack, "On Abstract Painting," *Magazine of Art* 27 (Sept. 1934): 470–475, reproduced and titled the painting "Number 8."

[7] *New Yorker*, July 6, 1929.

[8] For a discussion of some of some of these artists and their images of calla lilies, see Charles C. Eldredge, "Calla Moderna: 'Such a Strange Flower,'" in Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Calla Lily in American Art, 1860-1940* (Santa Fe, NM, 2002), 18–29.

[9] Lewis Mumford, "O'Keefe [*sic*] and Matisse," *New Republic* 50 (March 2, 1927), reprinted in *O'Keeffe Exhibition* (New York, 1928), and Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916–1929* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1989), 265.

[10] For a summary of these cultural influences, see Bram Dijkstra, "America and Georgia O'Keeffe," in *Georgia O'Keeffe: The New York Years*, ed. Doris Bry and Nicholas Callaway (New York, 1991), 125–126.

[11] Neltje Blanchan, *Nature's Garden: An Aid to Knowledge of Our Wild Flowers and Their Insect Friends* (New York, 1904), 368.

[12] Neltje Blanchan, *Nature's Garden: An Aid to Knowledge of Our Wild Flowers and Their Insect Friends* (New York, 1904), 368.

[13] Various early critical responses to O'Keeffe's floral imagery are discussed in Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916–1929* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1989). Feminist, gender-based art historical literature has added another perspective to these issues. See, for example, Anna C. Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America* 78 (Jan. 1990): 114-125, 177, 179.

[14] Quoted in Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), 70.

[15] Sue Davidson Lowe, *Stieglitz: A Memoir/Biography* (New York, 1983), 310.

[16] Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), 71.

[17] Henry McBride, "The Georgia O'Keeffe Exhibition," *New York Sun*, Jan. 24,

1931.

[18] Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York, 1962), 190–191; quoted in Henry Geldzahler, *American Painting in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1965), 131–132.

[19] Georgia O'Keeffe, "About Myself," in *Georgia O'Keeffe: Exhibition of Oils and Pastels* (New York, 1939), n. p. The text is reproduced in Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York, 1976), n. p.

[20] Neltje Blanchan, *Nature's Garden: An Aid to Knowledge of Our Wild Flowers and Their Insect Friends* (New York, 1904), 367. For a discussion of flower symbolism in O'Keeffe's paintings, see Charles C. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York, 1991), 82–90.

[21] Charles C. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York, 1991), 90.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The fine, plain-weave fabric support is unlined and remains mounted on its original stretcher. The artist applied paint with great precision over a commercially prepared white ground. The colors are mostly laid down next to one another rather than overlapped, and the edges of the forms are defined by low impasto. The painting is in good condition. The surface is coated with two layers of synthetic resin varnish.

PROVENANCE

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

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1931 Georgia O'Keeffe, An American Place, New York, 1931, one of nos. 7-11.

1932 Possibly Exhibition of The American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1932, no. 105, as Jack-in-the-Pulpit.

1934 Possibly Georgia O'Keeffe, An American Place, New York, 1934, as Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. 7.

1943 Georgia O'Keeffe, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1943, no. 41.

1946 Georgia O'Keeffe: Retrospective Exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1946, no. 39.

1953 Possibly An Exhibition of Paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; The Mayo Hill Galleries, Delray Beach, Florida, 1953, no. 13, as Jack in the Pulpit.

1970 Georgia O'Keeffe Retrospective Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Art, 1970-1971, no. 70, repro.

1984 Reflections of Nature: Flowers in American Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1984, unnumbered catalogue, fig. 60.

1987 Georgia O'Keeffe: 1887-1986, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; The Art Institute of Chicago; Dallas Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1987-1989, not in cat. (shown only in Los Angeles).

1997 Birth of the Cool. American Painting - from Georgia O'Keeffe to Christopher Wool, Deichtorhallen Hamburg; Kunsthaus Zürich, 1997, unnumbered catalogue.

1998 O'Keeffe and Texas, Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, 1998, no. 20, repro.

1999 Georgia O'Keeffe: The Poetry of Things, Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Dallas Museum of Art; Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1999-2000, unnumbered catalogue, fig. 22.

2001 O'Keeffe's O'Keeffes: The Artist's Collection, Milwaukee Art Museum; Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark, 2001-2002, no. 45, repro.

2009 Dove/O'Keeffe: Circles of Influence, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, 2009, pl. 57.

2009 Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, 2009-2010, unnumbered catalogue, pl. 122.

2013 Modern Nature: Georgia O'Keeffe and Lake George, The Hyde Collection Art Museum, Glens Falls; Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, de Young Museum, 2013-2014, no. 55, repro.

2014 Loan to display with permanent collection, The Phillips Collection, Washington, 2014-2015, no catalogue.

2015 Collection Conversations: The Chrysler and the National Gallery, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, 2015-2016, no catalogue.

2016 O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, Zorach: Women Modernists in New York, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach; Portland (Maine) Museum of Art, 2016, no. 63, fig. 12.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1976 O'Keeffe, Georgia. *Georgia O'Keeffe*. New York, 1976: color pl. 42.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 252, repro.

1995 Benke, Britta. *Georgia O'Keeffe 1887-1986: Flowers in the Desert*. Cologne, 1995: 45, color repro.

1996 Wagner, Anne Middleton. *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe*. Berkeley, 1996: 70-72, color pl. 13.

1999 Lynes, Barbara Buhler. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*. 2 vols. New Haven and London, 1999: 1:437, no. 720, color repro.

2016 Roberts, Ellen E. *O'Keeffe, Stettheimer, Torr, Zorach: Women Modernists in New York*. Exh. cat. Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach; Portland (Maine) Museum of Art. West Palm Beach, 2016: 127 fig. 12, 127-128, 150 no. 63.9

To cite: Robert Torchia, "Georgia O'Keeffe/*Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. VI*/1930," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, http://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/70181/2016-09-29 (accessed September 29, 2016).