



O'Keeffe, Georgia

American, 1887 - 1986

Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe*,
1918, platinum print, National
Gallery of Art, Washington, Alfred
Stieglitz Collection

BIOGRAPHY

Georgia O'Keeffe was born on November 15, 1887, on a farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. She demonstrated an early aptitude for art and resolved to become an artist. After graduating from high school in 1905, O'Keeffe attended the Art Institute of Chicago from 1905 to 1906, and the Art Students League in New York from 1907 to 1908. Although O'Keeffe won the League's William Merritt Chase still-life prize in 1908, she became disillusioned with academic realism. In 1912 she took a summer course for art teachers at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, with an instructor who introduced her to the progressive ideas of Arthur Wesley Dow (American, 1857 - 1922). O'Keeffe experimented with these concepts while teaching art in the public school system in Amarillo, Texas, from 1912 to 1914. She returned to New York and took courses at Columbia Teachers College for the academic year 1914–1915, and later began teaching art at Columbia College in South Carolina. She produced a series of innovative abstract charcoal drawings that attracted the attention of the photographer and gallery director Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946) who exhibited them at his 291 gallery in 1916. He gave O'Keeffe a solo exhibition the following year, and in 1918 provided financial support that enabled her to leave her position at West Texas State Normal College in Canyon, Texas, and move to New York. She and Stieglitz began living together shortly thereafter.

The relationship between Stieglitz and O'Keeffe profoundly affected the course of their professional and personal lives. In March 1924 Stieglitz arranged for major exhibitions of his photographs and O'Keeffe's paintings and works on paper to be

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shown simultaneously at the Anderson Galleries. Later that year Stieglitz divorced his wife Emmeline and soon after married O’Keeffe. They lived in New York City and summered at his family’s house in Lake George, New York. Until his death in 1946, Stieglitz ardently promoted O’Keeffe and held annual exhibitions of her work at his galleries. By the late 1920s her representations of New York skyscrapers and large, close-up views of flowers earned her recognition as one of the most significant American artists of the time. Although O’Keeffe was not associated with any particular art movement other than her affiliation with Stieglitz’s circle, her work can be related to surrealism, regionalism, and precisionism.

O’Keeffe first visited New Mexico during the summer of 1929 and was deeply inspired by its people, landscape, architecture, and the animal bones and other natural souvenirs she found in the desert, which figured prominently in her paintings. She moved there permanently in 1949, dividing her time between Ghost Ranch, which she had purchased in 1940, and an adobe house she bought in Abiquiú in 1945. O’Keeffe’s fame continued to grow. A major retrospective of her work was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970, and her illustrated autobiography *Georgia O’Keeffe* (1976) was a best seller. In 1977 she received the Medal of Freedom from President Gerald Ford, and in 1985 the Medal of the Arts from President Ronald Reagan. In 1984 failing eyesight forced her into retirement. O’Keeffe died in Santa Fe on March 6, 1986, at the age of 98. The National Gallery organized an exhibition in 1987 to celebrate the centennial of her birth.

Robert Torchia

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