

Georgia O'Keefe
Nov 15, 1887 – March 6, 1986

“When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else.”

Georgia painted over two hundred flower paintings.

Georgia O'Keeffe was born on November 15, 1887, the second of seven children, and grew up on a farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. As a child she received art lessons at home, and her abilities were quickly recognized and encouraged by teachers.

In 1902 her parents moved to Virginia and were joined by the children in 1903. By the age of 16 Georgia had 5 years of private art lessons at various schools in Wisconsin and Virginia.

One particular teacher, Elizabeth Willis encouraged her to work at her own pace and afforded her opportunities that the other students felt unfair. At times she would work intensely, and at other times she would not work for days. When it was brought to the attention of the principal, she would reply; *“When the spirit moves Georgia, she can do more in a day than you can do in a week”*

By the time she graduated from high school in 1905, O'Keefe was determined to make her way as an artist.

After graduating from high school she started studying at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1905 and thereafter at the Art Students League in New York. She drew considerable praise from her instructors but was discouraged and uninspired by their emphasis on realism and "perfection" in painting. She longed for a style of her own, to capture in her paintings the feelings and gracefulness she saw in the world. Shortly thereafter O'Keeffe quit making art, saying later that she had known then that she could never achieve distinction working within this tradition.

In 1915, studying for a teachers degree in South Carolina, O'Keefe met and took classes with Arthur Dow, an art enthusiast who worshipped oriental art rather than European art. Dow helped expose Georgia's mind to the possibility for different styles of art. It was then that she began work on her series of small charcoal abstract paintings which she was pleased with and sent to a friend in New York. The drawings by chance found their way into the hands of Alfred Steiglitz, an obsessive photographer and gallery owner in New York. The energy and confidence of these drawings from this "mystery woman" so excited Steiglitz that in 1916 he exhibited them at his Manhattan art gallery without her even knowing. She finally met Steiglitz and fell in love and married him.

She started living in New York. Some of her most famous works are of flowers and she once said *“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 the time to look at it-I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.”*

By the 1920s O'Keeffe was a major figure in the American art world. Beginning in 1923, Stieglitz organized exhibitions of O'Keeffe's work annually. She is chiefly known for paintings of flowers, rocks, shells, animal bones and landscapes. Her paintings have crisply contoured forms and she often transformed her subject matter into powerful abstract images. Her work commanded high prices; in 1928 six of her calla lily paintings sold for \$25,000 US dollars, which was at the time the largest sum ever paid for a group of paintings by a living American artist.

By 1928, Georgia began to feel the need to travel and find other sources for painting. The demands of an annual show needed new material. Friends returning from the West with stories stimulated Georgia's desire to see and explore new places. In May of 1929, Georgia would set out by train with her friend Beck Strand to Taos, New Mexico...a trip that would forever change her life. She fell in love with the location -- the bright sunshine and open skies. Georgia found the thin, dry air enabled her to see farther...and at times could see several approaching thunderstorms in the distance at once. She affectionately referred to the land of northern New Mexico as "the faraway" ...a place of stark beauty and infinite space.

She would journey there annually from then on, and later make it her home. The New Mexico landscapes and still lifes, especially the paintings of brilliant white parched animal bones set against deep blue sky, are as highly regarded as her earlier flowers.

Georgia O'Keeffe had an incredible sense of color yet she only wore black or white clothes. Once she said that if she began to choose colors to wear, she would not have time to pick any to paint. Another time she said that she was so sensitive to color that if she wore a red dress, then she would feel obliged to live up to its flamboyance.

By the nineteen forties, Georgia O'Keeffe's stature in the art world had grown tremendously. In 1946 she was given a one-woman exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the first ever from that museum for a female artist. When Steiglitz died in 1946, O'Keeffe moved to New Mexico permanently to work on her paintings in peace and solitude. She captured in these later paintings the long cloudscapes of the southwestern desert, the adobe walls of her home in Taos, and the shadows and natural curves of the bleached animal bones.

Three years after Stieglitz's death, O'Keeffe moved from New York to her beloved New Mexico, whose stunning vistas and stark landscape configurations had inspired her work since 1929. She lived at her Ghost Ranch house, which she purchased in 1940, and at the house she purchased in Abiquiu in 1945. O'Keeffe continued to work in oil until the mid-1970s, when failing eyesight forced her to abandon painting. Although she continued working in pencil and watercolor until 1982, she also produced objects in clay until her health failed in 1984. She died two years later, at the age of 98.

"I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way-- things I had no words for."