GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
Cross By The Sea, Canada. 1932. Oil, 36 x 24 inches.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to acknowledge my debt first to Miss O'Keeffe and Mr. Alfred Stieglitz. In the preparation of the text Miss Dorothy Odenheimer and Mr. Patrick Thomas Malone helped with locating and summarizing much of the considerably extensive literature on the artist. Miss Petronel Lukens and Mr. G. E. Kaltenbach prepared the manuscript for the printer and aided in the proof-reading. Miss Etheldred Abbot secured books and periodicals bearing on the subject.

Daniel Catton Rich
TRUSTEES AND OFFICERS
OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Charles H. Worcester, Honorary President; Potter Palmer, President; Robert Allerton, Vice-President; Percy B. Eckhart, Vice-President; Chauncey McCormick, Vice-President; Russell Tyson, Vice-President; Walter B. Smith, Treasurer; David Adler, Lester Armour, Frederic Clay Bartlett, Walter S. Brewster, Thomas E. Donnelley, Max Epstein, Charles F. Gore, Charles B. Goodspeed, Alfred E. Hamill, Abram Poole, Joseph T. Ryerson.

Daniel Catton Rich, Director of Fine Arts; Charles H. Burkholder, Director of Finance and Operation; Charles Fabens Kelley, Assistant Director.

COMMITTEE ON PAINTING AND SCULPTURE
OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO


STAFF OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Daniel Catton Rich, Director of Fine Arts; Charles H. Burkholder, Director of Finance and Operation; Charles Fabens Kelley, Assistant Director; Charles H. Burkholder, Secretary; Daniel Catton Rich, Curator of Painting; Frederick A. Sweet, Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture; Ulrich A. Middeldorf, Honorary Curator of Sculpture; Charles Fabens Kelley, Curator of Oriental Art; Helen C. Gunauslus, Assistant Curator of Oriental Art and Keeper of The Buckingham Collection of Japanese Prints; Meyrie R. Rogers, Curator of Decorative Arts and Curator of Industrial Arts; Helen F. Mackenzie, Curator of the Gallery of Art Interpretation; Carl O. Schniewind, Curator of Prints and Drawings; William F. E. Gurley, Honorary Permanent Curator of the Gurley Collection of Drawings; Etheldred Abbot, Librarian, the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries; Dudley Crafts Watson, Membership Lecturer and Extension Lecturer for the Public Schools; George Buehr, Associate Lecturer; Helen Parker, Head of the Department of Education; Norman L. Rice, Dean of the School; Maurice Gnesin, Head of the School of Drama; Mary Agnes Doyle, Assistant Head of the School of Drama; G. E. Kaltenbach, Museum Registrar and Keeper of the Archives; Frederick A. Sweet, Editor of the Bulletin; Walter J. Sherwood, Manager of Printing and Publications; Mrs. Katharine Kuh, Public Relations Counsel; F. M. Gardner, Manager of Membership Department; David Rosen, Technical Adviser; Anna I. Brownlee, Accountant; J. Francis McCabe, Superintendent of Buildings; Martin J. Thon, Assistant Superintendent of Buildings.
"I found that I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way—things that I had no words for."

Georgia O'Keeffe, 1923
Georgia O'Keeffe. From a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.
GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

The art of Georgia O'Keeffe is a record of intense emotional states resolved into crystalline form. Her ability to charge abstract elements of line, color, and mass with passionate meanings is as notable as her fastidious and immaculate craftsmanship.

O'Keeffe's deepest experiences occur with nature. Not nature as most of us see it, through the windshield of an automobile or on a casual walk in the woods. She is sharply and deeply aware of the forces which lie behind nature. In conversation, it is only in describing the green hills of Canada or the lush flowers of Hawaii or more often, the barren and luminous New Mexican landscape that O'Keeffe grows excited. Her eyes shine, she sits forward on her chair, the words pour forth and that full, creative electricity which for twenty-five years has animated her art becomes suddenly apparent.

The farm country round Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, where she was born in 1887, gave her a love of landscape. Her ancestry was Irish on her father's side, Hungarian and Dutch on the maternal. At ten years of age, Georgia copied pansies and roses and calmly told a friend that she was going to be an artist. There followed a convent school. For her first drawing lesson a Sister set her at copying the plaster cast of a child's hand. She made a tiny, careful sketch and was scolded for drawing it so small. Then and there she made up her mind never to make anything small again. The memory of that resolve came back to her years later when she began her series of prodigious flowers. Later the family moved to Virginia. "As a youngster," she once wrote, "I lived in an old-fashioned house in the south—open fires and a lot of brothers and sisters—and horses and trees."

At The Art Institute of Chicago, where she enrolled as a student, it was John Vanderpoel, a famous teacher of drawing, who impressed her. Vanderpoel taught anatomy and structure and though she soon went on to the Art Students League in New York to paint under William Merritt Chase and F. Luis Mora, the Chicagoan's
clear emphasis on line remained beneath the clever brushwork and summary form of these later teachers. O’Keeffe was a gifted student. In Chase’s class she dutifully won a first prize for still life. Chase, she recalls, was forever stressing the beauty of oil paint. Pigment he adored and this love of the medium, infinitely refined and subtilized, still characterizes every painting she makes.

Several years later O’Keeffe was to return to Chicago, not as a painter but as a free-lance commercial artist. Advertising art, however, which in the nineteen twenties was cheerfully to plagiarize her discoveries until she could hardly pass a florist’s window without seeing a poster caricaturing her roses or calla lilies, could not absorb her. Or rather she felt herself too much absorbed by its routine. There seemed no time to think of anything else and she didn’t want to think about advertising all the time. After her winter with Chase she stopped painting. She had realized that she couldn’t paint a better Hals than Hals painted or a better Sargent than Sargent or even a better Meissonier. More clear-eyed than many of her fellow students she saw
Blue And Green Music. 1919. Oil, 23 x 19 inches.
no reason to go on turning out picture after picture. Rather than spend her life on
imitations she would do nothing. No one had suggested that she try to make a
painting of her own. She returned to the South and gave up her art career. In none
of her student work, able as it was in technique, did she recognize herself. All she
destroyed. She would never paint again.

But a few years later she was attracted by a class in design at the University of
Virginia. Alon Bement was teaching the methods of his teacher, Arthur Dow.
O'Keeffe found herself persuaded of another approach to art. Here was no imitation
of natural appearances but a fresh statement of design in terms of line, dark-and-
light pattern, and color. She began to think of these elements as the language of
painting, a language for her as articulate or more articulate than the word for litera-
ture or sound for music. Superficial brushwork and realistic form were decried in
favor of flat composition in the Oriental mode. This was an art eminently useful.
Knowing its laws you could apply them to everyday living. The same discrimination
which composed a picture could be employed to choose a rug or a dress. So enthu-
siastically did O'Keeffe work at the new system that she was soon back in New York,
studying with Dow, himself, at Teachers College in Columbia.

Arthur Dow, whose method of teaching art molded the taste of a generation, is
today somewhat forgotten. But the years at Pratt Institute, his summer classes at
Ipswich, and above all his long tenure as Head of the Department of Fine Arts at
Teachers College gave him enormous sway over the minds of those who were to
teach art in the public schools.

In the eighties, Dow had studied in Paris and won awards in the Salon. In 1887
he was among the group of young experimental painters at Pont Aven in Brittany
where he knew Gauguin. The contact is suggestive. Gauguin was already seeking a
flat, ornamental art, a return to the simplified drawing of the primitives and the
shadowless space and unrealistic color of the Japanese and Chinese. In Boston in
1889, Dow worked with Ernest F. Fenellosa, the great student of Oriental art. From
the new movement in Europe and from confirmations which he discovered in the art
of the East, Dow developed his own abstract principles which were to appeal so
Corn, Dark. 1922. Oil, 32 x 12 inches.
Black Abstraction. 1927. Oil, 30 x 40 inches.
strongly to Georgia O’Keeffe, dissatisfied with the out-worn traditions of the art school.

Dow, with all the zeal of a reformer, insisted that “Art is decadent when designers and painters lack inventive power and merely imitate nature or the creation of others. Then comes realism, conventionality, and the death of art....”

“The Japanese,” he went on to state, “know of no such divisions as representative or decorative; they conceive of painting as the art of two dimensions; an art in which roundness and nature-imitation are subordinate to the flat relations.”

To O’Keeffe and others he clearly demonstrated through a series of visual exercises that “abstract design” was “the primer of painting.” “The first step is the drawing of lines as the boundaries of shapes; in the making of these lines there is opportunity for great beauty of proportion and a powerful, vital touch.” She practiced at massing darks and lights, regardless of their realistic content. Experiments with hues taken from Persian textiles and Chinese ceramics detached color from illusionism. Under Dow she learned that in Oriental art “the same theme appears again and again with a new beauty, with different quality and complex accompaniments.” (This last was to become a working precept in the long series where the same form or flower was painted many times, each with fresh insight.) She was encouraged to use rectangles of varying proportions, some “nearly square, others tall, others long and narrow horizontally.” (Here appears the advice so well remembered in the elongated parallelograms which frame the mountains of New Mexico or the rising stalk of a flower.) Above all she was urged to experiment, for “the artistic mind is always trying to find new ways of expressing a beautiful idea.”

Though she had given up painting she had found art. It was with the thought of teaching this to others that she now went far away from New York to Texas. As supervisor of art in Amarillo and later as a teacher in a State Normal school in the Panhandle, she banished antediluvian methods and established the Dow system. She became a vital teacher. Had she chosen, she might have gone far in the profession but an inner urge to create something out of herself and for herself gave her no peace. The country, too, was working its magic. “I lived on the plains of North
East River From The 30th Story Of The Shelton Hotel. 1928. Oil, 30 x 48 inches
Texas for four years," she wrote in 1919. "It is the only place I have ever felt that I really belonged—that I felt really at home." Tentatively she began to paint again.

One day she set up some of her work round the room. Critically she surveyed it. A surprising thought came to her. She did not have to paint as other people had painted or taught her to paint. Suddenly looking at this picture which reminded her of Chase or that one which recalled someone else, she saw that she had "a whole string of things" in her mind that she had wanted to put down, but until now they had seemed so different from all her earlier experiences in art, that it never occurred to her to realize them. It was a moment of vivid self-revelation and from that time on she went her own way.

In Texas the water colors of Mexican children had interested her. She even copied some of them in her own style. She felt so strongly a sunrise over sweeping Texas distance that she made a whole series of water colors on this theme. Simplified to a few burning forms, they still have peculiar force. The emotions of this difficult period in her life finally found expression in a group of extraordinary drawings which were to make history.

O’Keeffe and two friends who had worked with her at Columbia had been in the habit of sending drawings to one another for criticism. To Anita Pollitzer in New York she sent in 1916 a roll of sketches with the "express condition that they were not to be shown to anyone." The instruction is interesting. O’Keeffe regarded these charcoal and water color drawings as personal revelations to be shared only by an intimate friend. Highly abstract in form, made up of "lines, masses, and spaces" in the approved Dow method, they were nevertheless intended by her as communication.

In them for the first time she created works which fall entirely outside the realm charted by her recent teacher. True, they have what he recommended, "beauty entirely independent of meaning" but the meaning is equally challenging. Where Dow’s other disciples went on placidly filling rectangles with pale Japanese flowers and fretwork, here are drawings whose content seizes the imagination. What fever heat and what tensions lie behind them? What powerful moods and sensitive perceptions brought them to life?
Anita Pollitzer who got them in the mail, on the way to the theatre, was excited by what she saw. Should such things remain hidden? Certainly not, and disobeying O'Keeffe's request she promptly tucked the roll under her arm and took them to one of the few men in America capable of appreciating them—Alfred Stieglitz.

In 1916 Stieglitz, acclaimed for many years a master photographer, was the center of artistic ferment. His gallery, "291" Fifth Avenue, had been established ten years before. This one little room had not only shown the best in contemporary photography but here was held the first showing in America of Cézanne water colors, the first exhibitions of Matisse and Picasso, the first collection of Negro sculpture. Max Weber, himself an exhibitor, had arranged the first memorial of Henri Rousseau. Young Americans back from Paris or touched off by the Armory Show were welcome. "291" in its founder's intention was more than a gallery; it was a laboratory of the human spirit, open to all that was vital, new, and uninhibited in all the arts. Its core was Stieglitz, himself, an energetic and clairvoyant prophet. He was instantly impressed by O'Keeffe's drawings. "Finally a woman on paper," he remarked. For several months he studied them; then in May put ten of the drawings on view along with works by Charles Duncan and René Lafferty.

Even at the end of the season there was stir and soon the news reached Columbia where O'Keeffe was taking still another summer course under Dow. Indignantly she descended on "291" and ordered them off the walls. But Stieglitz, masterly as always in persuasion, convinced her that they should remain. One of them, a drawing in charcoal founded on Texas landscape, is made up of a few abstracted shapes playing against one another in tightly locked upward rhythm. Another, even more striking in elimination, consists of only two thin, aspiring blue lines made with the Japanese brush. As they soar up the paper the artist has subtly related them by thinning and widening the line and by exquisite adjustment of white space. The effect is of a quivering sensibility, of mercury in glass tubes. Here is an emotional chart, daring and original in its purification. This is O'Keeffe's rejection of all that Chase and his tradition stood for. It is the beginning of her own new language. In fact the whole series contains much of the vocabulary of form which she was later to develop.
Black Iris. 1926. Oil, 36 x 30 inches.
Black Hollyhocks And Blue Larkspur. 1929. Oil, 30 x 40 inches.
In the first review of the exhibit in Stieglitz' own magazine, *Camera Work*, there occurs the suggestion that these drawings may be of psychoanalytic interest. Exciting as this observation was to a period fascinated by Freud, it has probably been, in the long run, harmful to O'Keeffe's case as an artist. It set off a whole train of mystic and sexual explanations of her art which have sometimes stood in the way of understanding. Her later flowers and landscapes have all too often been judged solely as symbols of the unconscious—a fact that the artist, herself, somewhat ruefully admits. Their analogy to music was as quickly recognized and for years critics tried to equate her abstractions with auditory forms. Few at this time were willing or able to see her as she wanted to be seen—a pure painter.

Alfred Stieglitz at once became her valiant champion. The atmosphere of "291" in which she now found herself was stimulating to the point of dizziness. New artists and new arts were being constantly shown. In addition to those experimenters who dropped by the way it is only necessary to mention such now accepted leaders in painting as Demuth, Dove, Hartley, and Marin and photographers like Paul Strand and Stieglitz, himself, to realize that "291" in these years was the most exciting art center in America. O'Keeffe who married Stieglitz a few years later unquestionably was affected by his clean, new vision in photography. In a series of abstractions done before 1921 we can sense her responses to the clear focus and luminosity of the camera. Where an early picture like Church Bell, Ward, Colorado (1917) is relatively dull in tone, her new work is full of controlled light. The pastel colors, accented with black, the scale of transparent greys as well as the smooth all-over surface with brushwork suppressed, make this apparent. But unlike certain other painters of this period, O'Keeffe avoided the *imitation* of photographic form in paint. Various qualities she simply translated into her own medium. In his work Stieglitz had divorced photography from painting. O'Keeffe made scrupulous use of the camera's suggestions but wholly in terms of pictorial design. The creed of "291" purified her style of the lingering traces of the art school.

Based ultimately on forms of flower and tree and wave, the abstractions of this time show an intense lyricism. On canvas they often develop the passionate themes
of the early drawings. In some a tremulous, swirling movement is sharply arrested by geometric shapes. The result, as in Blue and Green Music (1919), is dynamic, balanced, subjective. Several are linked in series, the painter returning to a central theme to play new variations or creating a new theme out of the old. This discipline of this period of abstraction, where sensitive adjustments of color, space, and shape are made to take on a whole cycle of meanings, is apparent in all her subsequent work. When she seeks objective form again as in Mask with Golden Apple (1921), she is free to present the object with an abstract force and still heighten its realism of effect.

This ability is particularly clear in the tall panel of Corn, Dark painted in 1922. The crisp, crackling leaves of corn are freely designed and impeccably painted in a gamut of green, deepened by neutral violets. A sparkling electric streak plays over the leaves, suggesting the vitality of growing things. So strong is the suggestion of corn that one looks twice before noting that O’Keeffe has used only a few elements of the plant to suggest the whole and they have been completely reorganized in terms of her perception.

Though New York had become acquainted with her work at “291” before the gallery closed in 1917, it was not until six years later that anything like a full-length view was available. In January, 1923, at the Anderson Galleries, Stieglitz presented a hundred of her oils, water colors, pastels, and drawings. For the catalogue O’Keeffe wrote a statement. It not only shows independence of spirit but indicates that by now she is wholly aware of her own point of view:

“I grew up pretty much as everybody else grows up and one day seven years ago found myself saying to myself—I can’t live where I want to—I can’t go where I want to—I can’t do what I want to—I can’t even say what I want to—Schools and things that painters have taught me even keep me from painting as I want to. I decided I was a very stupid fool not to at least paint as I wanted to and say what I wanted to when I painted as that seemed to be the only thing I could do that didn’t concern anybody but myself—that was nobody’s business but my own. So these paintings and drawings happened and many others that are not here. I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say in any other way—things that I had no words for. Some of the wise men say it is not painting, some of them say it is. Art or not Art—they disagree. Some of them do not care.”
The success of this exhibition was widespread. At once it established Georgia O’Keeffe as an artist of high originality. Though some of the “wise men” wrote imposingly of “The Feminine Principle” and stressed biology and psychoanalysis, the public reacted more genuinely to her art by enjoying it.

Many of the works shown were small in format and in many her color had not developed its full daring and control. Summers at Lake George had provided themes from shore and water and trees and clouds but now her painting grew bigger, broader, more full-scale in effect. Red, Yellow and Black Streak (1924) shows the emancipation. Its design is an enlargement of earlier organic rhythms but the intense and unpredictable color in which these forms are clothed is new. Here O’Keeffe presents a pictorial “equivalent” of an experience with nature, anticipating in approach the remarkable series of photographs by Stieglitz which he named Equivalents.

Characteristically, now and later, she moves back and forth from pure abstraction to objectified abstraction. At base there is no difference in approach between Red, Yellow and Black Streak and the canvas of The American Radiator Building done the next year. She here conveys the mysterious night of the city by the same method as the less recognizable forms of hills and sky and water in the earlier painting. Only now and in the East River from the 30th Story of the Shelton Hotel (1928) it is the rectangular, monolithic unit of the city, rather than the flowing forms of nature, with which she builds her design. In the New York series the geometry is so varied and the light and atmosphere so rarefied that we seem to be seeing the city for the first time. Nevertheless O’Keeffe’s reactions to New York, compared to the best of her other work, seem to lack a final quality of transformation. Perhaps she recognizes this by remarking that she wants to go back to these subjects again.

Her power of invention is far more present in the magnified flowers through which she has become famous. Several years earlier in a little still life of zinnias in a vase she intimated that the hackneyed flower piece was capable of new interpretation. A set of immaculate calla lilies was quickly followed by other experiments in enlarging a flower until it assumed gigantic form, often filling a whole large canvas. Paintings like Black Iris (1926) or Black Hollyhocks and Blue Larkspur (1929) do more than
Jack-In-The-Pulpit. No. 2, 1930. Oil, 40 x 30 inches.
Jack-In-The-Pulpit. No. 6. Oil, 36 x 18 inches.
present—as the photographs of Blossfeldt did—the amazing architecture of nature, so magnified that we seem to enter into the secrets of its structure. They reveal O’Keeffe abstracting and heightening the qualities of these blossoms to convey her own distinguished emotions. About them she wrote, “I am attempting to express what I saw in a flower which apparently others failed to see.”

As in Corn, Dark, she chooses only those parts of the structure which she needs, redesigning them into new forms. In Black Iris we are made to feel the balance between drooping, velvety petals in the lower part of the flower and the airy crown of petals which rises over them. In Black Hollyhocks and Blue Larkspur the fragile drift of the larkspur is opposed to the heavy, dark mass of hollyhock with its brilliant starry center. O’Keeffe has penetrated into the very essence of nature and brought back reports of its mysterious existence. Textures, shapes, and colors are all enlarged and each blossom endowed with a peculiar rhythm. In canvases of this sort she reaches the height of her creative skill. The brush catches the delicacy of living tissue, yet the whole work is far from representational. She has never surpassed them in condensation of feeling and in decorative clarity.

The Jack-in-the-Pulpit theme—complete in six paintings—shows how she returned to a single motif. Though the first canvas is the most objective and the last the most abstract, it would be a mistake to think that she progressed from realistic statement to abstraction, picture by picture. Each one is a new intuition, different in design and mood. Above all such a cycle shows the wealth of inventive feeling which the artist possesses. In her letters she often remarks of some painting with which she is dissatisfied that she is “going to try it again.” A perfectionist in everything, she has never relinquished a theme until she has exhausted its possibilities.

Are such works merely decorative? They have often been so dismissed but in the finest of the group there is a fantasy and emotional force seldom encountered in any but the greatest of Oriental paintings on these themes. People who say, “I like Georgia O’Keeffe’s work but I don’t like her flowers” really mean, “I like the subject matter of other O’Keeffe paintings but I don’t understand her at all.”

From flowers and from a series of enlarged leaves which are made to give off the
Farmhouse Window And Door, Lake George. 1927. Oil, 40 x 30 inches.
Black Cross, New Mexico. 1929. Oil, 36 x 30 inches.
sensation of brilliant yellow autumn or, tattered and with color washed away, can suggest the starkness of November, O’Keeffe could turn to another essay in starkness, Farmhouse Window and Door, Lake George (1927). While Stieglitz photographed the worn textures of an old clapboard dwelling, she painted this closed and withdrawn “portrait.” If you ask O’Keeffe why she has never tried the human figure or face, she smiles. “I have sat to so many artists that I would never ask anyone to do the same for me,” she confides. “Besides (and you realize that this is the real reason) I’ve always believed that I can get all that into a picture by suggestion. I mean the life that has been lived in a place.” Here she has rendered the lonely overtones of a period not only through the blankness of geometry but in her austere color scheme of greyed blues and greens, black and white. Every detail that might distract from the singleness of vision has been eliminated.

Increasingly in certain pictures of this time O’Keeffe seems to be cultivating a distinguished aloofness. As she grew older the lyrical stress of her earlier work was replaced by a calm mastery. By 1929 she had practically exhausted the region round Lake George. With this partly in mind she set off for New Mexico.

Though she had spent many years in cities, it was in the country that she had always felt her deepest intuitions. Even in New York she had needed living things
round her and had painted flowers. Now she turned West, remembering perhaps the space and color of Texas, the one place she had felt she really belonged.

The highlands round Taos immediately excited her. New Mexico, at once stark in form and sensuous in color, stereoscopic in its lonely clarity, yet still bearing the mark of Spain and the Penitenti, has never been out of her mind since she first saw it. This land, so often painted and so sadly, became for her a land of promise. Under its first impact she did some of her finest work like the Black Cross, New Mexico (1929). A primitive wooden cross of Catholic Spain, seen in dramatic close-up like her flowers, spreads massive arms across an arid landscape, threatening to burst the confines of the frame. Below are humped and folded greyish hills and a thin streak of blood-red sunset. Above is painted a lucid sky with an evening star. Like Farmhouse Window and Door, Lake George, this canvas symbolizes a whole manner of life. The famous church at Ranchos de Taos—which became a recurrent theme—she first painted with the objectified distinction and cool palette of an early Umbrian. Though O'Keeffe never went to Europe, such a painting reminds us of her confession that if she had gone it would have been to see the land rather than the paintings. The final picture of the church that year is but a detail of curving adobe walls set against an intense blue sky and a white cloud. The artist has consciously striven in all her work to condense and eliminate. She has always believed that a long poem could be said in a few intense words and that painting could likewise be stripped down to its essential form and meaning. When she came to paint the landscape as in Dark Mesa and Pink Sky (1930) or Near Abiquiu, New Mexico, No. 2, (1930)—both narrow horizontal canvases—the austerity of this belief is combined with richly invented color. These mountain forms give off a stillness reminiscent of great Chinese landscape, save that these are weighty and solid, rather than floating and remote.

Some bleached skulls of cattle picked up on the desert suggested another means of symbolizing this uncanny land. In Cow's Skull and Calico Roses (1931) the whiteness of death is intimated by subtlest modulations of grey and white playing against a ribbon of black. Here and in other canvases on the same theme there is no morbidity. Rather the beauty of flesh has given way to the beauty of bone, polished clean
Ranchos Church, No. 3. 1929. Oil, 14 1/2 x 11 inches.
by the sun and snows of the desert. The painting of the skull becomes an elegant abstraction and the cloth roses with which it is decked add an irrational, decorative note which could have occurred to no one else. A second in the series, Cow's Skull, Red, White and Blue, takes on the quality of a banner of death. The blanched skull has grown larger to dominate a field of white and deep blue edged with irregular bands of striking crimson. Unobtrusively the form is made to suggest a crucifixion and the same primitive, religious overtones as in the earlier Black Cross result.

Was it to escape from the compulsion of New Mexico with its harsh vistas and overlay of death that O'Keeffe sought out the Gaspé country in 1932? Perhaps she was trying to recapture the living greens which she had long known in the Lake George region. If so, a canvas like Green Mountains, Canada (1932), with its sharply modeled emeralds in luminous design, held her but briefly. She found starkness and silence even in white Canadian barns where the utter reduction of the object to a few cleanly cut but sensitized forms is as remarkable as the brilliantly controlled craftsmanship with which they are painted. When she came upon a mariner's cross, it was not to be resisted and Cross by the Sea, Canada (1932), as typical of the Gaspé as her earlier ones had been of the Southwest, came into being. The picture is designed with almost no foreground so that nothing intrudes between the spectator and the mastlike form silhouetted against the waves. Instead of the massive weight of the Penitenti cross this one is spare, wind-racked, and cleansed by

*White Canadian Barn, No. 2. 1932. Oil, 12 x 30 inches.*

32
ocean spray. Nowhere has O’Keeffe rendered finality and isolation with more striking economy. The delicate, lucid technique is perfectly suited to the theme.

But, stimulating as Canada proved, it was to New Mexico that she returned after a long and serious illness. There, near Abiquiu, she bought a summer home (From the Patio [1940] is a picture done in her adobe courtyard) and for the last seven years had dedicated herself more and more to the landscape and material of the South West. Purple Hills near Abiquiu (1935) and Grey Hill Forms (1936) indicate an increasing tendency to express all of the country, rather than to seize and abstract certain fragments. She seems to be seeking hard, resistant and eternal materials and forms. Even in still life done in the winter in New York she turns to shells, rocks, and stones rather than to tenuous flowers. Things worn smooth by time yet keeping a timeless integrity are combined into enigmatic patterns as in Red and Pink Rocks and Teeth (1938) where her technique, growing more masterly year by year, takes on an almost trompe l’oeil quality.

No longer do skulls and bones develop the sentiment of death. In an extraordinary canvas called Summer Days and in another, Deer’s Horns near Cameron (1938), they are given a fanciful resurrection and float in stiffened convolutions over desert and mesa. Reviewers have been quick to call such canvases surrealist, but there is nothing here to suggest the paranoiac distortions of that school. Instead, they carry on O’Keeffe’s freedom to render an emotion by whatever means she chooses and to
Cow’s Skull With Calico Roses. 1931. Oil, 36 x 24 inches.
fused objects and colors which would never have lived together in nature into a dominant symbol.

Seldom has she interrupted her rapt contemplation of New Mexico to paint elsewhere. In 1938, however, she visited Hawaii on a commission to do a series of paintings. But the canvases and pastels which she brought back are not her most perfect work. The fantastic blooms and far valleys of the Islands were perhaps too exotic in themselves for O'Keeffe who is best when imbuing simple things with her own brand of strangeness. No doubt she recognized this when she wrote of the experience with her usual candor: "Maybe the new world enlarges one's world a little. Maybe one takes one's world along and cannot see anything else."

Red Hills and Bones, the high point of her production of 1941, displays most clearly her increasing absorption with a motif which she sees daily from her New Mexican studio. These hills have come to mean to O'Keeffe what Mont Ste. Victoire meant to Cézanne. In this canvas the bones lie significantly discarded in the foreground. The eye of the artist (and the eye of the beholder) travel over them to the massive forms of the mountains, sculptured in hieratic silence.

"At five I walked," wrote O'Keeffe in one of her letters. "I climbed way up on a pale green hill and in the evening light—the sun under the clouds—the color effect was very strange—standing high on a pale green hill where I could look all around at the red, yellow, purple formations—miles all around—the colors all intensified by the pale grey green I was standing on. It was wonderful—"

The more she loves this land and the more fully she renders its likeness the more evident it becomes that O'Keeffe has set herself a tremendous new problem. On her first contact with New Mexico she did some of her strongest work—canvases that synthesize rather than portray. Is she now committed to a more realistic statement with all the complexities that such a shift in point of view implies? Are these actual hills and mesas, already half-abstract in shape and unearthly in changing light, beginning to satisfy her by themselves? A hint that such may be the case occurs in another letter: "I am through with my tree," she wrote in 1937. "It is the first thing I have done that when I stand it by the window and look at it—then look out
the window—it looks like what I see out of the window, though it was painted a mile away. I think it really looks like here.” And then the significant reflection: “Even at that I don’t think it very good. I’ll try it again.”

Or is O’Keeffe rather in transition and are these canvases, many of which strike one as literal (for her) or decorative (for her) the prelude to a still broader expression where, as in certain masterpieces of the past what at first seems representation turns out in the end to be of deepest symbolic force? In the fifth decade of her life she is still at work with intense energy and what the next years will bring forth no one (not even herself) can foresee.
Red And Pink Rocks And Teeth. 1938. Oil, 21 x 15 inches.
Grey Hill Forms. 1936. Oil, 20 x 30 inches.
Red Hills And Bones. 1941. Oil, 30 x 40 inches.
Whatever results, the place of Georgia O’Keeffe is secure. Seen in the whole her art betrays a perfect consistency. It has undergone no marked changes of style but has moved outward from its center. In over a quarter of a century of painting O’Keeffe has only grown more herself. In her art that feeling before nature which she once eloquently described as “sort of sparkling and alive and quiet all at the same time” has been conveyed through superbly original design and consummate technique. American painting of our day is infinitely richer for her triumphant vision.

DANIEL CATTON RICH
CATALOGUE
PAINTINGS

INCLUDED IN THE EXHIBITION

All the paintings are lent by an American place, New York City

All are oil paintings unless otherwise indicated

2. Charcoal Drawing. 1915. 25 x 19 inches.
3. Church Bell, Ward, Colorado. 1917. 17 x 14 inches.
4. Black Spot, No. 3. 1919. 24 x 16 inches.
5. Blue And Green Music. 1919. 23 x 19 inches.
7. Mask With Golden Apple. 1921. 9 x 15 inches.
8. Corn, Dark. 1922. 32 x 12 inches.
9. Leaves Under Water. 1922. 9 x 6 inches.
10. The Red Maple At Lake George. 1923–24. 36 x 30 inches.
11. From The Lake, No. 3. 1924. 36 x 30 inches.
12. Red, Yellow And Black Streak. 1924. 40 x 32 inches.
15. Black Iris. 1926. 36 x 30 inches.
16. Grey Tree, Lake George. 1926. 36 x 30 inches.
17. Ballet Skirt or Electric Light. (from the White Rose Motif) 1927. 40 x 30 inches.
18. Black Abstraction. 1927. 30 x 40 inches.
19. Clams And Mussels. 1927. 9 x 7 inches.
20. Closed Clam Shell. 1927. 20 x 9 inches.
21. Farmhouse Window And Door, Lake George. 1927. 40 x 30 inches.
22. Seaweed. 1927. 9 x 7 inches.
23. Tan Clam with Seaweed. 1927. 9 x 7 inches.
25. East River From the 30th Story of the Shelton Hotel. 1928.
   30 x 48 inches.
26. Red Poppy. 1928. 7 x 9 inches.
27. Yellow Hickory Leaves with Daisy. 1928. 30 x 40 inches.
28. Black Cross, New Mexico. 1929. 36 x 30 inches.
29. Black Hollyhocks and Blue Larkspur. 1929. 30 x 40 inches.
31. The Lawrence Tree, Night. 1929. 30 x 40 inches.
32. Ranchos Church, Front. 1929. 20 x 36 inches.
33. Ranchos Church No. 3. 1929. 14½ x 11 inches.
34. Black and White. 1930. 36 x 24 inches.
35. Dark Mesa and Pink Sky. 1930. 16 x 30 inches.
36. Jack-In-The-Pulpit, No. 1. 1930. 12 x 9 inches.
37. Jack-In-The-Pulpit, No. 2. 1930. 40 x 30 inches.
38. Jack-In-The-Pulpit, No. 3. 1930. 40 x 30 inches.
39. Jack-In-The-Pulpit, No. 4. 1930. 40 x 30 inches.
40. Jack-In-The-Pulpit, No. 5. 1930. 48 x 30 inches.
41. Jack-In-The-Pulpit, No. 6. 1930. 36 x 18 inches.
42. Near Abiquiu, New Mexico. No. 2. 1930. 16 x 36 inches.
43. Ranchos Church. 1930. 24 x 36 inches.
44. Cow’s Skull, Red, White and Blue. 1931. 40 x 36 inches.
45. Cow’s Skull with Calico Roses. 1931. 36 x 24 inches.
46. Nature Forms, Gaspé. 1931. 10 x 24 inches.
47. Cross by the Sea, Canada. 1932. 36 x 24 inches.
48. Green Mountains, Canada. 1932. 12 x 30 inches.
49. The White Flower. 1932. 30 x 40 inches.
50. White Canadian Barn, No. 2. 1932. 12 x 30 inches.
51. Purple Hills Near Abiquiu. 1935. 16 x 30 inches.
52. Grey Hill Forms. 1936. 20 x 30 inches.
53. Mule’s Skull With Turkey Feathers. 1936. 30 x 16 inches.
54. Deer’s Horns, Near Cameron. 1938. 35 x 40 inches.
55. Red And Pink Rocks And Teeth. 1938. 21 x 15 inches.
56. The Broken Shell—Pink. 1939. 12 x 10 inches.
57. Three Shells. 1939. 36 x 24 inches.
58. From The Patio. 1940. 24 x 19 inches.
59. Shell, Red Hills. 1940. 30 x 40 inches.
60. Red Hills And Bones. 1941. 30 x 40 inches.
61. Turkey Feathers And Indian Pot. 1941. 20 x 16 inches.