

Teacher's Manual

Georgia O'Keeffe's
My Back Yard, 1937



New Orleans Museum of Art

Introduction to the Teacher's Manual

This learning resource is intended for teachers of students in Grades 1-12 and may be adapted for specific grade levels. We hope that you will use the manual and accompanying images to help your students gain an in-depth knowledge of the New Orleans Museum of Art's *My Back Yard* (1937) by Georgia O'Keeffe

Cover: *My Back Yard* (1937)
Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887-1986)
oil on canvas, 20 x 36 in. (50.8 x 91.4 cm.)
New Orleans Museum of Art

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Written by

Jessica Piedascalzo, Intern
Kathy Alcaine, Curator of Education
Tracy Kennan, Curator of Public Programs

Edited by

Courtney Barrier, Associate Curator for Education Outreach
Allison Reid, Assistant Director for Education

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The Life of Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia Totto O'Keeffe was born November 15, 1887 at her family's farmhouse outside Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. She began her education in a one-room school house on her family's property. At the age of twelve, she began her first private drawing lessons with her grammar teacher. O'Keeffe informed a fellow classmate, "I am going to be an artist." O'Keeffe has become one of America's most famous 20th century artists.



After graduating from high school in Virginia in 1905, O'Keeffe enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago. She attended the Institute until 1906 when she began to suffer from typhoid fever. After a year-long break, O'Keeffe traveled to New York City to study at the Art Students League under the tutelage of William Merit Chase. There she studied oil, pastel, and watercolor. After a year of studying at the League, O'Keeffe was disappointed by her own artistic efforts. She wanted to explore more non-traditional fields of painting. O'Keeffe felt discouraged by her perceived limitations and as a result, she stopped painting for quite a while. She even destroyed all of her art work completed at the Arts Students League.

In the following years, O'Keeffe pursued other interests. She worked as a freelance commercial artist in Chicago, and taught art for the Chatham Episcopal Institute in Virginia. In 1912 she enrolled in University of Virginia's advanced drawing course for elementary school teachers taught by Alon Bement. Bement influenced O'Keeffe rekindled her interest in art. This new found interest in art led to several teaching positions in the United States and she solidified her own artistic style. During her teaching positions, O'Keeffe went to Amarillo, Texas to teach at a

high school for two years. The time spent in the panhandle of Texas sparked her love for the American southwest, where she would return many times.

After a short time in New York City, O’Keeffe accepted a position as head of the art department at West Texas State Normal College in 1916. While living in Texas, O’Keeffe was inspired by the open space and freedom that embodied the landscape of rural Texas. The astonishing colors found in the region engaged her. Her new surroundings led to a series of work expressing great emotional outbursts. She began bold experiments in watercolor by playing with color and painting in a semi-abstract style. The paintings were vividly hued, spatially disoriented, and pulsing with a sense of exultant liberation. In glowing radiant colors, O’Keeffe portrayed the Texas sky and its dramatic atmosphere. The works from the time spent in Texas can be read as both three-dimensional landscapes and as flat patterned abstraction due to O’Keeffe’s sophisticated manipulation of space.

When O’Keeffe traveled to New York City in 1917, she developed a series of drawings based on her Texas series. She sent the series to a friend who then showed them to Alfred Stieglitz, an well-known American photographer who owned the avant-garde Gallery 291. It is said that upon seeing O’Keeffe’s work, Stieglitz proclaimed “At last, a woman on paper!” Impressed with her work, Stieglitz hung her work in a show at Gallery 291. O’Keeffe was the only female member of Stieglitz’s art circle, and in the coming years Stieglitz would host twenty solo exhibits of her work.

A personal relationship developed between O’Keeffe and Stieglitz and in 1918, O’Keeffe moved to Stieglitz’s family home in Lake George, New York to paint full time. Although he was 23 years older than O’Keeffe, Stieglitz was enamored by the young artist. In 1924, after divorcing his first wife, Stieglitz and O’Keeffe were married and spent the last twenty-eight years of Stieglitz’s life together.

Collaborating in a close partnership, the two artists brought new elements to their work. O’Keeffe inspired Stieglitz as he produced some of his most memorable photographs, many of which were of O’Keeffe. After posing for many of Stieglitz’s photographs, O’Keeffe became interested in the aesthetics of photography. She would isolate elements from photographs, resulting in her unique style of exaggerated focus and magnified objects.

A constant factor that played a role in O’Keeffe’s art was her love of nature. O’Keeffe believed that nature was the equal of technology, a powerful new force in New York City. Physical objects in nature, such as bones, flowers, and mountains had power and were as forceful and strong as a New York skyscraper. O’Keeffe would take a flower and focus on it at close range, often until it assumed gigantic form. Her paintings suggested forms of nature, but without specific places or things. It was the nature of the flower that interested her, not the space in which the flower existed. Much of O’Keeffe’s work captured the imagination and isolated objects from their surroundings. O’Keeffe centered, enlarged, simplified, and sometimes cropped an object to display a different perspective of it. Her interpretation of the world of nature varied with great freedom from precise realism to abstraction. Her abstractions were some of the most original manifestations of modern art in America.

By 1929 O’Keeffe felt her sources of artistic motivation in Lake George were diminishing, so she turned to the American southwest. She had always felt a sense of belonging in the West, probably since her days as a teacher in Texas. By 1934 she regularly spent her summers in New Mexico and the rest of the year in New York City and Lake George with her husband, Stieglitz. After Stieglitz’s death in 1946, O’Keeffe moved permanently to New Mexico.

In New Mexico O’Keeffe was once again surrounded by nature. She began to record the dry magical landscape and the astonishing colors of the sky of Abiquiu, a small area outside Taos. She used glowing, radiant colors to portray the dramatic starlight, sunsets, and sunrises of the New Mexico sky. O’Keeffe spent many of her final years reviving her art with the colors, forms, and themes of the Southwest.

O’Keeffe is one of the most accomplished artists of the 20th century. She was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She received the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and the National Medal of Arts. In March 1986, Georgia O’Keeffe died at the age of 98. In July 1997, The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum opened in Santa Fe. Today, her home and studio in Abiquiu are now designated National Historic Landmarks.

My Back Yard, 1937



Georgia O’Keeffe once remarked to her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, that the city was not the place for her to live. In 1929, O’Keeffe traveled to New Mexico to the rural southwest to visit. She loved the area so much that she later “adopted” it as her home state. Every year, O’Keeffe would pack up her car with canvases and tubes of paint in the spring, spend her summer painting in New Mexico, and return to Lake George, New York in the fall to her husband with a car load of canvases filled with the landscapes and environments of New Mexico. Stieglitz the art dealer would then show her work his gallery.

O’Keeffe had a true love of the southwestern landscape. In the summers when she was in New Mexico, she would venture everyday to discover the landscape, collecting bones and noticing the colors of the sand and rock at different times of the day and under different weather conditions. Color to O’Keeffe was one of the great things that made life worth living. The colors she found in the New Mexico landscape were browns, oranges, yellows, violets and soft greens as can be seen in the intense colors of “My Back Yard” from 1937. She once remarked that all of the earth colors of the painter’s palette are out there. O’Keeffe was so interested in the colors of the New Mexico landscape that she once tried to combine the fine soil into her oil paints to make true, New Mexican colors. Of course her efforts for the colors were not what she had expected because her paints were too sandy.

By 1934, O’Keeffe regularly spent her summers in New Mexico at the Ghost Ranch near Abiquiu. In 1937 she painted a series of oils of the house and its environs. The works were titled *The House I Live In*, *My Front Yard*, and *My Back Yard*. She would later purchase the house at Ghost Ranch. The look of the hills surrounding the property were elusive and constantly changing. The colors changed when the sun was in different positions in the sky, or when a thundercloud loomed above the hills. The shape of the hills also changed constantly from the

violent desert storms. When O'Keeffe walked on the landscape and hills, it was always like a virgin landscape, untouched by anyone's footsteps. All human contact was erased the minute the wind blew or a raindrop fell.

In *My Back Yard* the different strata can be seen denoted by the color changes of the sands. The bottom most layer is composed of reddish rock that is at least 200 million years old, once a dense forest inhabited by dinosaurs. The next layer, golden-colored, is a solidified mass of ancient sand dunes, and the top layer of hard grayish white is a fossil filled layer of gypsum and limestone that was once the bottom of an inland sea.

In her paintings O'Keeffe captured the spirit of her adopted landscape. She painted in a style that was semi-abstract. However, she was influenced and entranced by the colors she saw and painted them as close to nature as she could. O'Keeffe spent the rest of her life in her beloved New Mexico painting the many-faceted landscape and environment.

Image List

1. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait*, 1918, silver gelatin developed out-print.



Georgia O'Keeffe moved to New York from Texas in 1918 after suffering an attack of the flu. From 1918 through 1929 O'Keeffe and Stieglitz spent summers at his family's compound at Lake George, New York and winters in Manhattan. The two artists married in 1924 after Stieglitz's divorce from his first wife was final. This photograph was taken of O'Keeffe by Stieglitz during their first summer at Lake George. O'Keeffe is seated on a mat beside the garden of the Lake George farmhouse holding a Japanese brush over a block of watercolor paper. Shortly after this period O'Keeffe took up oil painting.

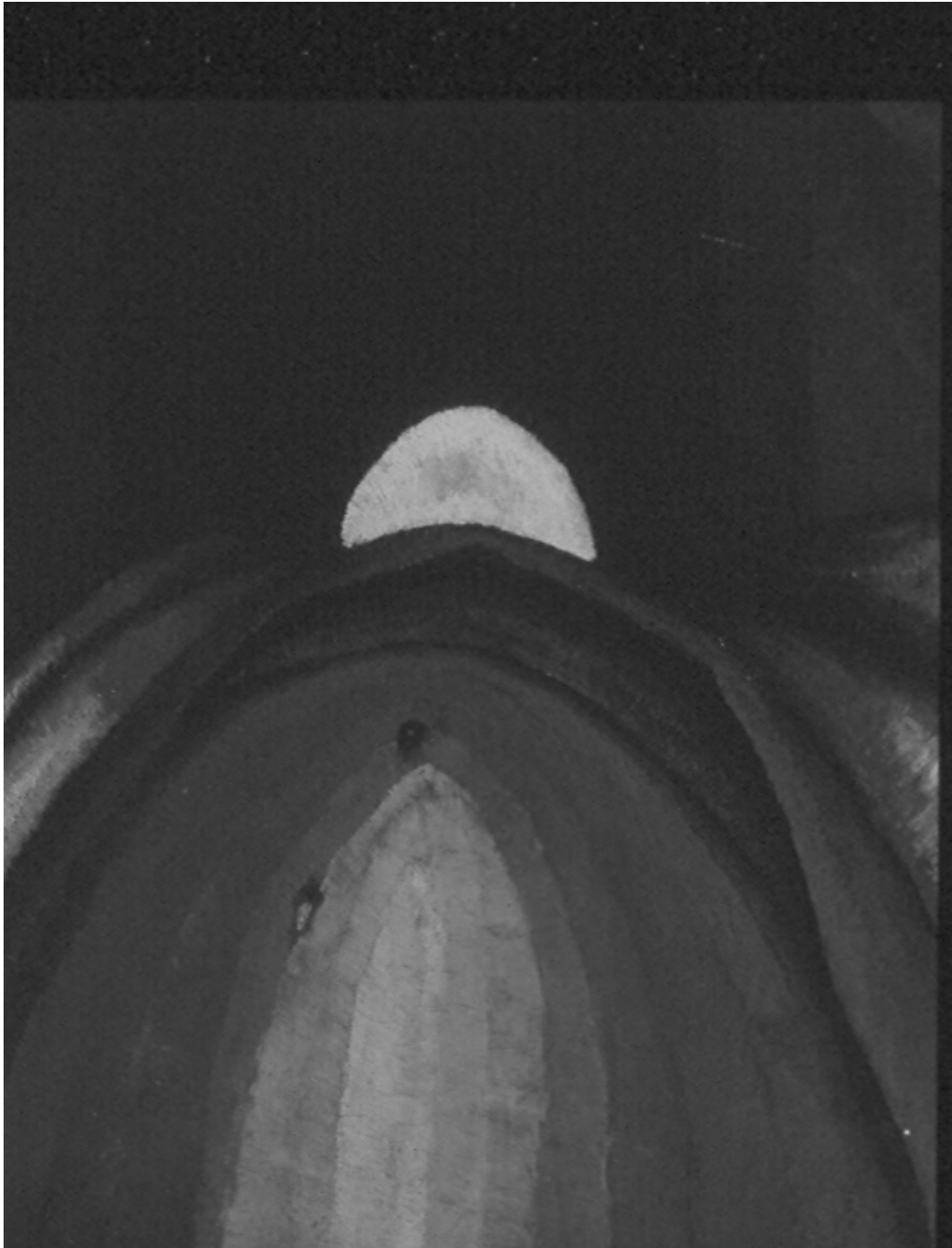
2. Georgia O'Keeffe, *My Back Yard*, 1937, oil on canvas.

Beginning in 1934 Georgia O'Keeffe spent her summers in New Mexico and winters in New York. In 1937 O'Keeffe painted several views from Ghost Ranch near Abiquiu, NM. O'Keeffe first visited Taos, New Mexico in the summer of 1929. During the same year she learned to drive and she purchased a Ford which she would take on drives through the New Mexican landscape. In this manner she discovered Ghost Ranch where she returned many times throughout the 1930's and purchased in 1940. *My Back Yard* is part of a series of works depicting Ghost Ranch. Other works include *The House I Live In* and *My Front Yard*.



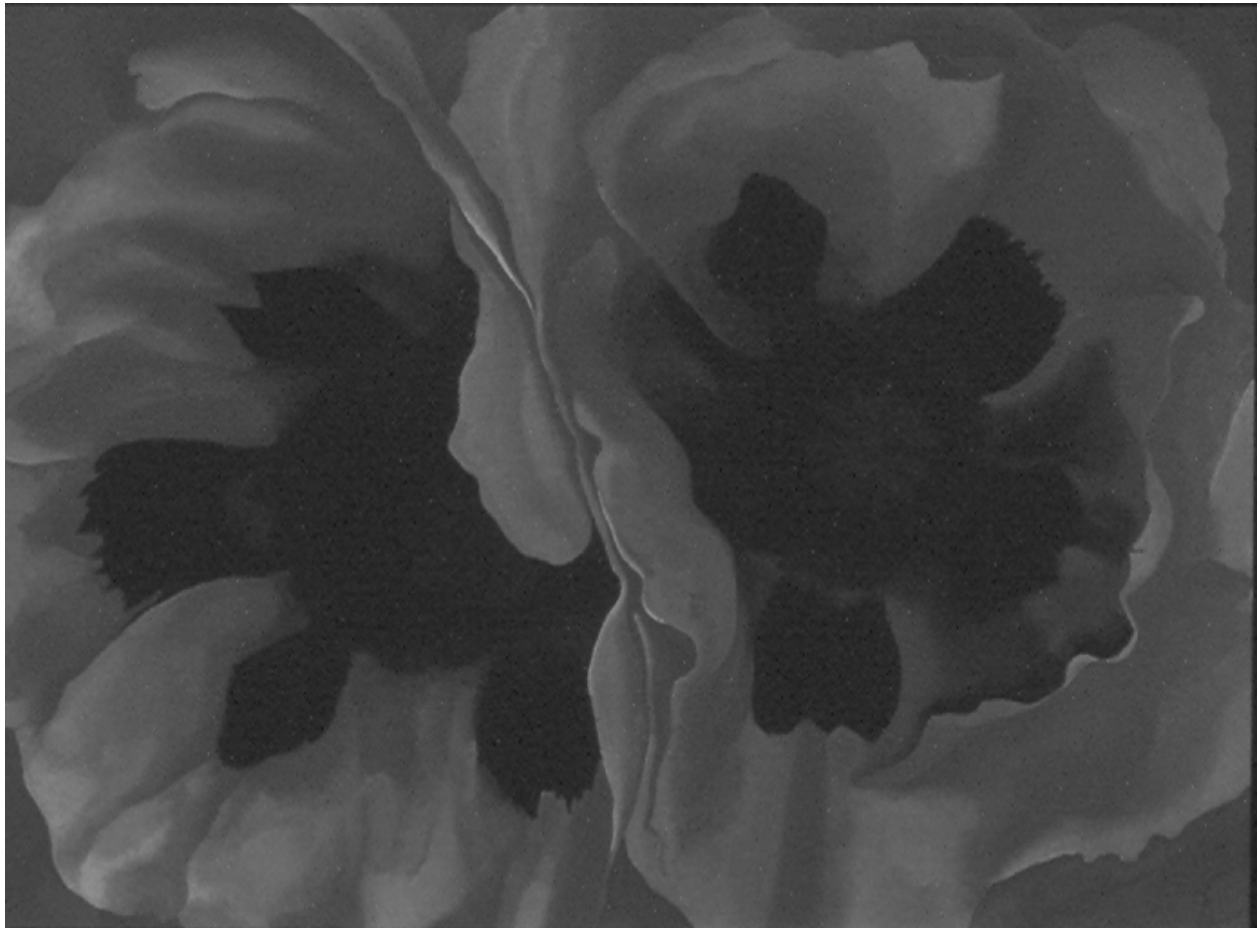
3. Arthur Dove, *Penetration*, 1924, oil on board.

Within the Stieglitz circle, Arthur Dove was certainly the artist most akin to Georgia O'Keeffe. During the 1920's the two artists' works were compared frequently. Critics often spoke of O'Keeffe as evoking feminine imagery whereas Dove represented the masculine. Like O'Keeffe, Dove looked to nature for his subject matter, often reducing natural forms to their essential compositional forms. According to Dove, *Penetration* was drawn while he stood "knee-deep in flowing water, looking downstream into the woods."



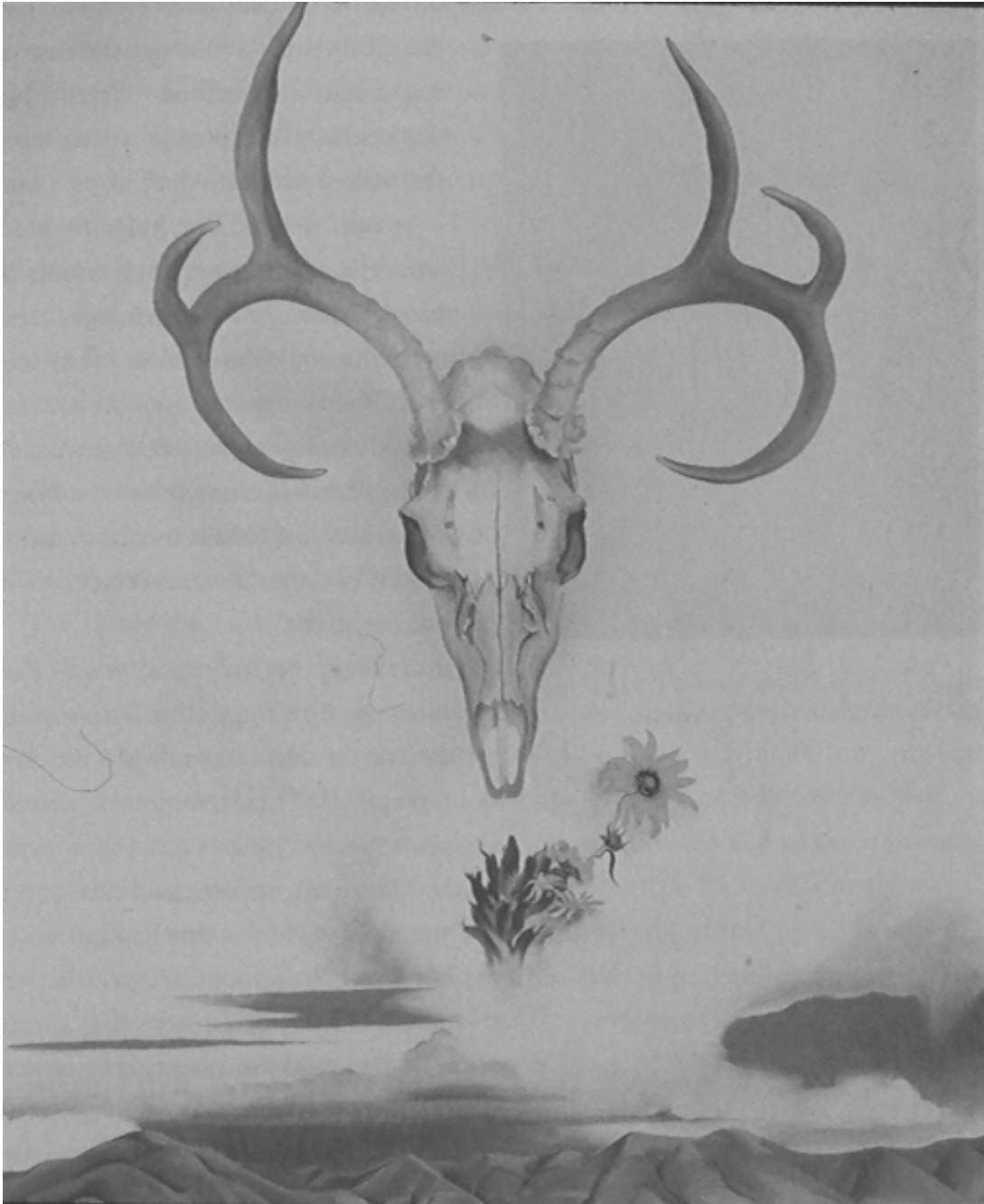
4. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Oriental Poppies*, 1928, oil on canvas.

O'Keeffe's flower paintings of the late 1920's are surprising in their monumentality as well as their intense color. Her flowers have a powerful presence that overrides any sense of fragility that one may associate with flowers. In *Oriental Poppies* of 1928, which measures thirty by forty and one-eighth inches, O'Keeffe depicts a close-up view of the two poppies so that the viewer looks down into the flower. This method of intense closeness is often associated with the cropping of photography. O'Keeffe employs startling reds in this work which are not only based in nature, but which also add an emotional impact akin to what the artist may have felt while examining the natural plant.



5. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Summer Days*, 1936, oil on canvas.

During her summers in New Mexico, Georgia O'Keeffe began to collect the bones that lay scattered across the southwestern landscape. The artist was first drawn to the bones because of their shapes, but later she associated the skulls and bones with the history of the Southwest. They served as a romantic reminder of the great days of cattle raising and the buffalo herds that had been effectively destroyed by the 1890's. Many of O'Keeffe's bone paintings associate the bones with the land on which she found them. In *Summer Days* O'Keeffe juxtaposes the deer skull, rolling barren hills and wildflowers in a tribute to the New Mexican landscape.



6. John Loengard, Georgia O’Keeffe at Ghost Ranch, 1967.

The Southwestern landscape surrounded O’Keeffe at her home at Ghost Ranch. Here she is shown descending a ladder on her adobe home. O’Keeffe exclaimed, “If you have an empty wall, you can think on it better. I like a space to think in.”



7. William Clift, View from Georgia O’Keeffe home, Abiquiu, NM, 1980.

This photograph was taken from O’Keeffe’s home in Abiquiu. The artist’s love of nature and the great expanse of the western landscape prompted her to claim that, “Out here, half your work is done for you.”



8. Fritz Kaeser, *Georgia O’Keeffe #8*, 1968, silver gelatin print.

Fritz Kaeser photographed O’Keeffe outside her Ghost Ranch home in 1968. The same year she was featured in the illustrated *Life* magazine article, “Georgia O’Keeffe in New Mexico: Stark Visions of a Pioneer Painter.” O’Keeffe lived a long and prolific life and died at the age of 98 in 1986.



Timeline

1880's	1887: On November 15 Georgia O'Keeffe was born in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.	1888: George Eastman patents first roll-film camera and registers the name "Kodak." Van Gogh cuts off his left ear. 1898: First automobile sold.
1900's	1902: The O'Keeffe family relocates to Williamsburg, Virginia. 1903: O'Keeffe begins course work at Chatham Episcopal Institute in Virginia. 1907: O'Keeffe moves to New York City where she enrolls in the Art Students League; she visits Alfred Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, informally known as 291. 1908-1910: O'Keeffe works in Chicago as a commercial artist.	1903: Joe Pulitzer establishes Pulitzer prizes. Wright Brothers make first flight at Kittyhawk. 1907: Finland becomes first European country to give women the right to vote.
1910's	1911-1916: O'Keeffe teaches art the Chatham Institute in Amarillo, Texas, at Columbia College in South Carolina, and summer programs at the University of Virginia. 1916: O'Keeffe corresponds with Stieglitz after he sees her drawings. In May, her work is publicly exhibited for the first time in a group show at 291. 1917: At 291, O'Keeffe has her first solo exhibition where she sells her first work. In the summer of 1917, Stieglitz photographs her for the first time. 1918: O'Keeffe quits teaching in Texas and moves to New York where she begins a relationship, both personal and professional, with Stieglitz.	1911: South Pole first reached by Norwegian Roald Amundsen. 1912: Titanic sinks off the coast of Newfoundland. 1916: Margaret Sanger opens first birth control clinic. 1917: US declares war on Germany in W.W.I. 1919: First US air passenger service begins.
1920's		1920: League of Nations holds its

	<p>1921-1924: Stieglitz exhibits photographs of O’Keeffe at Anderson Galleries where O’Keeffe also shows numerous works.</p> <p>1925: Stieglitz opens Intimate Gallery; O’Keeffe supervises and exhibits at the gallery.</p> <p>1929: O’Keeffe spends the summer painting in New Mexico; Stieglitz opens An American Place.</p>	<p>first meeting in Geneva.</p> <p>1925: Hitler publishes <i>Mein Kampf</i>.</p> <p>1927: Charles A. Lindberg completes the first solo non-stop flight across the Atlantic.</p> <p>1928: Amelia Earhart becomes first woman to fly across the Atlantic.</p> <p>1929: Stock Market crashes.</p>
<p>1930’s</p>	<p>1933: O’Keeffe is hospitalized in New York for psychoneurosis.</p> <p>1934: Stieglitz holds a 44 painting O’Keeffe retrospective. The Metropolitan Museum of Art purchases an O’Keeffe painting.</p> <p>1934-1940: O’Keeffe spends summers painting in Ghost Ranch, New Mexico.</p>	<p>1933: F.D.R. inaugurated as 32nd President. Prohibition ends.</p> <p>1936: Hitler breaks Treaty of Versailles sending troops to Rhineland.</p> <p>1938: Kristallnacht -- Nazis destroy Jewish synagogues throughout Germany and Austria.</p>
<p>1940’s</p>	<p>1940: O’Keeffe purchases a house at Ghost Ranch.</p> <p>1943: The Art Institute of Chicago hosts a full-scale retrospective of O’Keeffe’s works.</p> <p>1946: In New York, the Museum of Modern Art gives O’Keeffe a retrospective, the museum’s first solo female exhibition. Stieglitz dies at age 82.</p> <p>1949: Having completed the settlement of Stieglitz’s estate, O’Keeffe permanently</p>	<p>1941: Japan bombs Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. US declares war on Germany and Italy in W.W.II.</p> <p>1945: US defeats Japanese forces on Okinawa during W.W.II. Atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan by the “Enola Gay.”</p>

	moves to New Mexico.	
1950's	1951-1961: O'Keeffe travels internationally, visiting Mexico, Europe, South America and Asia.	1953: Scientists identify DNA.
1960's	1962: O'Keeffe is elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.	1955: Rosa Parks arrested for refusing to move to the back of the bus. 1957: School desegregation law established by Brown v Board of Education. 1961: 1,400 Cuban exiles land in Bay of Pigs in an attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro. Construction of the Berlin Wall begins in East Germany. 1963: Pres. J. F. Kennedy assassinated in Dallas. 1966: National Organization of Women (NOW) founded.
1970's	1970: In New York the Whitney Museum of American Art holds a major O'Keeffe retrospective. 1971: O'Keeffe's vision weakens, leaving her only with peripheral sight. 1972: O'Keeffe completes final unassisted painting. 1973: O'Keeffe hires her first assistant, Juan Hamilton. 1976: O'Keeffe publishes Georgia O'Keeffe.	1969: Neil Armstrong makes first step on the moon. 1973: Supreme Court rules in Roe vs. Wade, to allow abortion in the first six months. 1979: Susan B. Anthony dollar

1980's

1984: O'Keeffe moves to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to be near medical assistance.

1986: O'Keeffe dies in Santa Fe on March 6.

1987: The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. opens major retrospective of O'Keeffe's work.

1989: The Georgia O'Keeffe foundation established.

1990's

1997: The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum opens in Santa Fe.

issued, first US coin to honor a woman. Mother Teresa awarded Nobel Peace Prize

1984: AIDS virus is identified.

1986: Space Shuttle Challenger 10 explodes 73 seconds after lift-off killing all on board.

1990: The Berlin Wall comes down.

1991: Gulf War ends; Kuwait is liberated.

1994: Vatican acknowledges the Holocaust for first time.

1997: Scientists in Scotland successfully clone a sheep producing a lamb named "Dolly." UK returns Hong Kong to China after more than 150 years of rule

Curriculum Objectives and Suggested Activities

Geography/Science

- Discuss the natural processes, like erosion, which formed the striking desert landscape depicted in O’Keefe’s work.
- Compare and contrast the flora and fauna of New Mexico and New York. Compare and contrast the flora and fauna of New Mexico and the Texas Panhandle.
- Identify the various types of flowers depicted in O’Keefe’s flower paintings.
- Research and compare the climates of the Southwest and Northeast. How do the climates vary?
- Compare the US population in 1887 when O’Keefe was born to 1986 when she died. How are the numbers different? What do your findings imply?
- O’Keefe traveled by car to New Mexico from New York every summer in the 1930s and 1940s. On every trip she would take a different route trying to see as much of America as she could. Using a highway map, find new and interesting routes for a trip from New York to New Mexico. Choose major landmarks that you would want to visit.

Social Studies

- Discuss the role of women at the turn of the 20th century. Was O’Keefe’s life typical? What events occurred at this time that gave more rights to women? Explain.
- Why was O’Keefe the only female member of Stieglitz’s art circle? Discuss how women artists were treated during the 20th century. Has their experience changed over time?
- O’Keefe taught herself how to drive a car. Why was this so unusual at that time? What have you taught yourself to do that may seem out of the ordinary?
- What was the American involvement in World War I and II? Research your family history to find relatives who were involved in either of the two wars. How did the wars affect the civilians living in the U.S.? What other wars occurred during O’Keefe’s lifetime?
- Discuss and research the Great Depression. How did it affect not only artists but the general population in America?

Language Arts

- Research other 20th century women artists. Compare their works to Georgia O'Keeffe. Can you find any similarities? Differences? How do the themes compare?
- Using one of O'Keeffe's works as inspiration, write an essay or poem about the feelings it evokes.
- Write a short story describing a place where you would be artistically inspired. Describe your feelings in detail.

Math

- Measure the distance between New York and New Mexico in miles and kilometers.
- Discuss how shapes in a painting affect its overall composition.

Visual Arts

- Create an artwork depicting your own backyard. What are your favorite aspects of the yard?
- Discuss the influence of photography on O'Keeffe's work. Choose a photograph and create a larger size painting from it.
- Examine the realistic and abstract aspects of O'Keeffe's work. What is abstracted and what is naturalistic?

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