

LEGACY OF AMERICAN ICON RE-EXAMINED IN *GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: ABSTRACTION*

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is widely celebrated for her iconic paintings of flowers, animal bones, and stark New Mexican cliffs. While she has long been regarded as a central figure in 20th-century art, the radical abstract work she made throughout her career has remained less known. This February, The Phillips Collection examines her artistic achievement from a fresh perspective in a landmark exhibition—*Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction*. By delving into this work, the exhibition demonstrates O'Keeffe's important contribution to the history of American abstraction. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction* is on view at the Phillips from February 6 to May 9, 2010.

Showcasing more than 100 paintings, drawings, and watercolors dating from 1915 to the late 1970s, the exhibition also includes 12 photographic portraits of O'Keeffe by Alfred Stieglitz. By assembling works from her entire career, this exhibition reveals O'Keeffe as a painter who adopted abstraction as early as 1915, worked extensively with it throughout the 1920s, and used it thereafter as the foundation for her art. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction* is organized by The Phillips Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986). *Series I—No. 3*, 1918. Oil on board; 20 x 16 in. Milwaukee Art Museum. Gift of Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. Photography by Larry Sanders © Milwaukee Art Museum

In 1915, O'Keeffe moved into the forefront of abstraction with a group of charcoal drawings that were among the most radical creations produced in the United States at that time. A year later, she added color to her repertoire and by 1918 she was expressing the union of abstract form and color in paint. First exhibited in 1923, O'Keeffe's psychologically charged, brilliantly colored abstract paintings garnered immediate acclaim. By the mid-1920s, however, O'Keeffe had shifted the emphasis in her work away from abstraction to redefine herself as a painter of representational forms. Yet she never abandoned abstraction, which remained the guiding principle of her art, even at its most representational.

“It is fitting that The Phillips Collection, with its long history of exhibiting, championing, and publishing new scholarship on O'Keeffe's art and life, presents this groundbreaking exhibition with our

partners the Whitney and the O’Keeffe Museum,” says Dorothy Kosinski, director of the Phillips. “It is a long overdue acknowledgement of her place as one of America’s first abstract artists and furthers our shared commitment to advancing a more complete understanding of the history of American abstraction.”

The national presentation of the exhibition and the catalogue are proudly sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation. The exhibition in Washington is made possible by Lockheed Martin Corporation.

“Lockheed Martin is proud to support *Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction*,” says Larry Duncan, vice president of Federal and State Government Relations & PAC Affairs, Lockheed Martin Corporation. “At Lockheed Martin, we believe that contributing to the educational and cultural quality of our community is an important responsibility of good corporate citizenship. When we invest in our community, we invest in the creativity, curiosity, diversity, and intellectual vigor of our country.”

For much of her career, O’Keeffe struggled with how others perceived her work. Early on, interpretations were shaped almost exclusively by Alfred Stieglitz—photographer, gallery owner, and O’Keeffe’s husband in 1924—who presented her work from 1916 to 1946. His statements about O’Keeffe’s early abstractions coupled with the photographs he took and exhibited of her in 1921, many of which presented her as partially clothed or nude, led critics to interpret her work—to her great dismay—as Freudian-tinged, psychological expressions of her sexuality.



Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986). *Grey Blue & Black—Pink Circle*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. Dallas Museum of Art. Gift of The Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Cognizant of the public’s lack of sympathy for abstraction and seeking to direct the critics away from sexualized readings of her work, O’Keeffe began to introduce more recognizable images into her repertoire in the mid-1920s. As she wrote to the author Sherwood Anderson in 1924, “I suppose the reason I got down to an effort to be objective is that I didn’t like the interpretations of my other things [abstractions].” Stieglitz’s penchant for favoring new, previously unseen paintings meant that O’Keeffe’s abstractions rarely figured in the 22 solo exhibitions he mounted of her work from 1924 to 1946, causing her first forays into abstraction to virtually disappear from public view.

Nevertheless, throughout her career O’Keeffe moved freely between abstraction and representation. Although she increasingly focused on representational objects, after 1923 she continued to distill them into abstract forms and patterns. In the 1930s and 40s, O’Keeffe continued to interpret the architectural, landscape, and natural forms of New Mexico that she had made the subject of her work since 1929. But their representational components allowed her to explore once again the abstract shapes that she had adopted as her personal language in the 1910s. Beginning in the mid-1940s, she renewed her connection to abstraction by introducing flat, geometric planes of color that extend from one edge of the canvas to another. These elements reinvigorated her art while providing a precedent for a younger generation of abstract painters.

For O’Keeffe, abstraction offered a way to communicate ineffable thoughts and intangible experiences. As she defined it in 1923, her goal as a painter was to “make the unknown—known. By unknown I mean the thing that means so much to the person that he wants to put it down—clarify something he feels but does not clearly understand.”

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Georgia O’Keeffe was born in Sun Prairie, Wisc., in 1887. The second of seven children, O’Keeffe longed to be an artist from an early age. In 1905 she attended the Art Institute of Chicago, and from 1907 to 1908 she studied with William Merritt Chase and others at the Art Students League of New York. She went on to attend classes with Arthur Wesley Dow at Teacher’s College, Columbia University before accepting a teaching position at Columbia College, S.C., in fall 1915. While in South Carolina, O’Keeffe created her breakthrough charcoal abstractions known as *Specials*. In 1916, Alfred Stieglitz featured them in a three-person exhibition at his 291 gallery. Within two years, Stieglitz convinced O’Keeffe to give up teaching and move to New York to pursue painting full time. Six years later the two were married, beginning one of the most fruitful and well-known collaborations of the modernist era.

In 1929 O’Keeffe traveled to northern New Mexico in search of new inspiration for her work. The trip would forever alter the course of her life. Invigorated by the area’s open skies and sun-drenched landscape, O’Keeffe returned to New Mexico every summer to paint. In 1949, three years after Stieglitz’s death, O’Keeffe took up permanent residence there. She died in March 1986 at the age of 98.

SPONSORS

The Henry Luce Foundation seeks to bring important ideas to the center of American life, strengthen international understanding, and foster innovation and leadership in academic, policy, religious and art communities.

Headquartered in Bethesda, Md., Lockheed Martin is a global security company that employs about 140,000 people worldwide and is principally engaged in the research, design, development, manufacture, integration, and sustainment of advanced technology systems, products, and services.

ORGANIZATION AND TOUR

Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction is organized by The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y.; and the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, N.M. Its co-curators are Barbara Buhler Lynes, curator of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum and the Emily Fisher Landau Director of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum Research Center; Barbara Haskell, curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art; Bruce Robertson, professor of the history of art and architecture at the University of California; and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, professor and vice provost for the arts at the University of Virginia and guest curator at The Phillips Collection. Coordinating curator at the Phillips is Elsa Smithgall.

After its presentation at the Phillips, the exhibition will be on view at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum from May 28 to Sept. 12, 2010.

CATALOGUE

A 256-page catalogue with 202 color illustrations accompanies the exhibition. *Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction*, published by Yale University Press, features essays by Barbara Buhler Lynes, Barbara Haskell, Bruce Robertson, and Elizabeth Hutton Turner. It is available in the Phillips Museum Shop for \$65.00.

In addition to rethinking O’Keeffe’s place in American modernism, the catalogue reappraises the origin and singular character of the artist’s abstract vocabulary and the shifts in style her art underwent over her long career. It includes excerpts of correspondence from O’Keeffe to Stieglitz, sealed by O’Keeffe until 2006, 20 years after her death. By drawing on the letters exchanged between O’Keeffe and Stieglitz, the catalogue provides new insights into the experiences and ideas that informed the artist’s exploration of abstraction.

ABOUT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

The Phillips Collection offers an intimate encounter with one of the finest collections of impressionist and modern American and European art, with works by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Vincent van Gogh, Edgar Degas, Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Claude Monet, Honoré Daumier, Georgia O’Keeffe, Arthur Dove, Mark Rothko, Milton Avery, Jacob Lawrence, and Richard Diebenkorn, among others. The Phillips Collection, America’s first museum of modern art, has an active collecting program and regularly organizes acclaimed special exhibitions, many of which travel nationally and internationally. The museum also produces award-winning and in-depth education programs for K–12 teachers and students, as well as for adults. Its Center for the Study of Modern Art explores new way of thinking about art and the nature of creativity, through artist visits, seminars, and classes. Since 1941, the museum has hosted concerts in its wood-paneled Music Room. The Phillips Collection is a private, non-government museum supported primarily by donations.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Phillips Collection is located in the heart of Washington's historic Dupont Circle neighborhood, at 1600 21st Street, NW, near the Dupont Circle Metro (Q Street exit). Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursdays until 8:30 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Mondays and New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day.

Provenance of the Georgia O'Keeffe work on the Web site's "Featured Event" Home Page:

Georgia O'Keeffe
Music, Pink and Blue No.2, 1918
Oil on canvas; 35 x 28 1/8 in.
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York. Gift of Emily Fisher Landan
In honor of Tom Armstrong 91.90
© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photography by Sheldon C. Collins