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Norman Geske
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

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GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
An Exhibition of Oils, Watercolors and Drawings

Presented by the Nebraska Art Association at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

September 9 – October 19, 1980
GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
FOREWORD

Georgia O'Keeffe has been honored with five retrospective exhibitions in her lifetime: in Chicago in 1943, New York in 1946, Worcester in 1960, Fort Worth in 1966 and New York in 1970. The present exhibition cannot claim the comprehensive representation of her work embodied in those shows, nor can it even claim the inclusion of more than a few of her best known paintings. It is, in effect, an exhibition of a somewhat different kind. With a considerably smaller compass it shows what can be considered only a random sampling of her thematic concerns. It shows her most fully in works of the twenties and thirties; it only suggests the innovations that marked the beginning of her career and it does not even suggest the character of her work since 1960.

Given this situation, which is the result of a number of factors beyond our control, we can, and must, approach these paintings from a special point of view. Consider, if you will, that we are approaching this body of work as the only surviving remnant of a famous career. One can recall a parallel situation in the art of Simone Martini, a great and famous master, whose achievement is reduced to the evidence of a handful of works. What can we make of this experience? Here is an artist of rare individuality, not quite like any other artist of the same period. Her subjects seem to derive from widely differing physical situations: a rural lakeside, urban fantasy, a desert world and solitary objects of natural origin seen close up. Within each theme the variations are sometimes only enough to avoid the charge of repetition. Some examples have about them an intensity of color and form that rivets our attention, others appear perfunctory.

As we consider these paintings and drawings, the work of a famous artist, we are surely reminded that the vision which is recorded on these canvases is human, capable of an entire range of insights from the ordinary to the sublime. It is perhaps a salutary thing that we can come as close as this to the transmutation of our own perceptions into the reality of art.

Thanks and acknowledgments are due to all the lenders to the exhibition, to the trustees of the Nebraska Art Association, who insisted on perseverance in the face of difficulties and to the staff of the Sheldon Gallery for their patience in moments of stress. Special acknowledgment goes to Cheryl Wall for the compilation of the chronology of the artist's life and to Jon Nelson whose idea it was to provide a text drawn from the critical, pro and con opinions of the artist.

Finally, our very special thanks to the Community Arts Fund of Lincoln for the contribution which has made this exhibition possible.

Norman A. Geske
Director

CHRONOLOGY

1887
November 15, Georgia Totto O'Keeffe born to Ida (Totto) and Francis O'Keeffe in their farmhouse near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, second child of seven.

1891-1903
Attends one room grammar school near home. Boards at Sacred Heart Academy, Madison, Wisconsin, for one year. Attends Madison High School for one year. Has art lessons with sisters in Sun Prairie and at boarding school and high school. Decides to become artist at twelve.

1903
Spring, O'Keeffe family moves to Williamsburg, Virginia.

1903-1905
Boards at Chatham Episcopal Institute, Chatham, Virginia. Receives diploma with special art award and prize for watercolor.

1905-1906
Attends Art Institute of Chicago to study with John Vanderpoel.

1906
Summer, Returns to Virginia. Has typhoid fever followed by long period of recuperation.

1907-1908

1908-1910
Abandon idea of becoming fine artist. Works as free lance commercial artist in Chicago. Family moves to Charlottesville, Virginia. O'Keeffe returns to family after measles strains her eyesight.

1911
Spring, Substitutes for former Chatham art teacher, Mrs. Elizabeth May Wills.

1912
Summer, Attends University of Virginia, Charlottesville, summer school for women to study with Alan Bement, who introduces her to works by Arthur Wesley Dow.

Autumn, Teaches as supervisor of drawing for Amarillo, Texas, school system.

1913
Joins National Woman's Party. Remains member for thirty years.
INTRODUCTION

In a vitriolic review of the Georgia O’Keeffe retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946, Clement Greenberg, the champion of the emerging Abstract Expressionists, chastised Miss O’Keeffe for not being more French, for not learning her lessons properly from Picasso and Matisse and for not being an abstractionist.

“The importance of Georgia O’Keeffe’s pseudo-modern art is almost entirely historical and symptomatic. The errors it exhibits are significant because of the time and place and context in which they were made. Otherwise her art has very little inherent value. The deftness with which she places a picture inside its frame exerts a certain inevitable charm which may explain her popularity: ... but the greatest part of her work adds up to little more than tinted photography. The lapidarian patience she has expended in trimming, breathing upon and polishing these bits of opaque cellophane betrays a concern that has less to do with art than with private worship and the embellishment of private fetishes with secret and arbitrary meanings.”

Fifteen years earlier Lewis Mumford had a different idea of Georgia O’Keeffe. He saw her as the heiress of Albert Pinkham Ryder and the whole of nineteenth century lyricism in painting. He defined this lyricism as the melding of personal feelings with worldly reality and thereby establishing an iconography that imparts allegorical meaning to the mundane. That the resulting iconography is highly personal and introspective and mysterious does not trouble him. In fact, for him, these qualities are the ones that define the best that American art has created. Due to their highly personal nature they are based on concrete American experiences not on false European adventures.

Mumford admits that such an attitude has something of a provincial nature, because it often refuses to be impressed or to be instructed by more worldly or sophisticated influences. The fact that Ryder said the museums of Europe meant nothing to him makes sense to Mumford, because in Mumford’s view American artists who could not assimilate European styles became little more than minor copyists.

So, what Greenberg saw as the error of creating a private symbology based on a non-European style, Mumford understood as American correctness. To be sure Miss O’Keeffe’s paintings have the look of the 1920’s and 1930’s, which can partially be described as elegant exactitude or machine like precision, but those are only superficial appearances that are governed by the accident of O’Keeffe’s time and place. Or, to put it another way, as all nineteenth century works have the look of their time, Miss O’Keeffe’s works have the look of her time. But, more importantly, her paintings illustrate characteristics which go beyond the contour of time and place to the domain of the universal. Mumford explains the universal American characteristics as, “... something wistful in the American character that shrinks from the harsh forms of reality ...” and “... a touch of that sentimental adolescence one finds ... in
Thoreau, the impulse to seek the ideal, not through the fuller richer use of what the body brings and signifies, but by its persistent disembodiment and “... the New England desire for purity, for an ideal world: a body purged of bone, sinew, intestines.” If one adds contemplation to puritanism one can achieve a kind of mysticism that reveals itself in the absorption and distillation of the tangible world, which results in a transcendental interpretation of the world.

We can readily see in the flower paintings that O'Keeffe is absorbed in her subject. The extreme close up view that almost seems to say “If I can get to the center I will discover the secret of its beauty,” indicates a degree of concentration and an attempt to drink in all that the flower has to offer. The painting based on that absolute absorption becomes a distillation of visual experience. The same applies to her landscapes, because they, too, seek the essence of the subject. The compositions that Greenberg calls “neat” and that Mumford sees as purity of form as in a perfectly crafted New England farmhouse are cages in which O'Keeffe captures the content of her subject.

Mumford observed that O'Keeffe harmoniously fused inner thoughts with outer reality to create an image of womanhood: “Georgia O'Keeffe has carried the symbol both close to actuality and close to pure abstraction. She is the poet of womanhood in all its phases: the search for the lover, the reception of the lover, the longing for the child, the shrinkage and blackness of the emotions when the erotic thread has been lost, the sudden effulgence of feeling, as if the stars had begun to flower, which comes through sexual fulfillment in love: all these elements are the subjects of her painting. However remote the abstraction, it is always but a step from the symbol to actuality: fruit and flowers, realistic fruit and stupendous magnified flowers, clam shells and seaweed, the lake and the mountain and tall buildings, shafts of light and spots of black - all these reminders of the external world are means wherewith she contrives to bring forth objectively the content of feeling, experiences that would be bare and fragmentary - an ache, a lust, a void - if hoarded within. Miss O'Keeffe has done more than paint; she has invented a language, and she has conveyed directly and chastely in paint experiences for which language conveys only obscenities. Without painting a single nude, without showing a part of the human body, she has magnificently embodied passion, sexual life, womanhood, as physical elements and as states of soul.”

Greenberg and Mumford represent the points of opposition in critical writing about Georgia O'Keeffe. Eleanor Munro in her “Originals: American Women Artists” takes Mumford’s side. She points out that O'Keeffe has scoffed at interpretations of her work insisting always that she only paints what she sees. Which, as Munro says, may be true, but nevertheless, O'Keeffe’s work still conveys a spirituality.

“. . . she seems to have provided both a personal image and works that touch upon two fundamental human intuitions about the nature of reality. These are that there exists motion (in the case of her
person: a life of action, self determination, will; in the case of the world: changing lights, shadows, wind, forms in mutation, music and the breath of life) and there exists a permanent ground (in the case of her person: ritualistic, timeless costume, silence, the austerity of her isolation and manner of life; in the case of the world: stars, earth and bones). And in this way, Georgia O’Keeffe has provided for a world in need of such things both an active model and a reassurance of the permanence of some values and ideas.”

The other side, which always champions the avant garde and seeks the trade currents, criticises the artists of the twenties and thirties for children, tied to adolescent fantasies. The soul.

them of being provincial. And prminciality, the eighth sin, is equated with arrested development. Those artists, including C)'Keeffe, remained Assistant to the Director

FOOTNOTES
3. Ibid., p. 198.
4. Ibid., p. 199.
5. Ibid., p. 244.

1932
Summer. Travels to Gaspé, French Canada, to paint crosses and barns with Stieglitz’s niece Georgia Engelhard.

1933
February. Suffers physical collapse due to tensions of professional and personal life. Recuperates in Bermuda and at Lake George.

1934
First sale to Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, “Black Flower and Blue Larkspur.”

Spring. Returns to Bermuda.

Summer. Stays at Ghost Ranch north of Abiquiu, New Mexico. Returns to Ghost Ranch following summers. Buys Ghost Ranch in 1946.

1936
O’Keeffe and Stieglitz move to penthouse apartment at 405 East Fifty-fourth Street.

1938
Life magazine photographic essay on O’Keeffe extends her fame far beyond art world.

May. Awarded honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts by William and Mary College, Williamsburg, Virginia.

1942
Spring. Awarded honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by University of Wisconsin, Madison.

October. O’Keeffe and Stieglitz move to apartment at 59 East Fifty-fourth Street one block from An American Place in consideration of Stieglitz’s failing health.

1943
First major retrospective exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, curator Daniel Catton Rich.

1944
Exhibits first pelvic bone paintings.

1945
Buys and begins to renovate abandoned hacienda in Abiquiu village.

1946

1947
Works on settlement of Alfred Stieglitz estate, art collection divided among major benefactors. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, letters and papers to Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, through 1949. Returns to New Mexico during the summers.

1948
Prepares retrospective exhibition of Stieglitz's collection for Art Institute of Chicago.

1949
Elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

1950
Exhibition of new paintings, closing exhibition at An American Place.

1951
Travels through Mexico for first time.

1952

1953
Travels to Europe to visit Spain and France for the first time.

1954
Returns to Spain.

1956
Travels to Peru.

1958
Metropolitan Museum of Art devotes one room to O'Keeffe's paintings in exhibition of fourteen American masters from colonial times.

1959
Takes trip around the world for three months. Begins paintings from above clouds.

1960

1961
Takes trip down Colorado River. Makes several trips down the river during following years.

1962
Elected To American Academy of Arts and Letters.

1963
Begins road and river paintings. Receives Brandeis University Creative Arts Award. Travels to Greece, Egypt and the Near East.

1965
Paints monumental canvas 8' x 24', "Sky Above Clouds IV."

1966
Retrospective exhibition at Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas, then at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and University of
New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque. Elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Travels to England and Austria.

1970
Retrospective exhibition at Whitney Museum of American Art, then Art Institute of Chicago and San Francisco Museum of Art. Awarded National Institute of Arts and Letters' Gold Medal for Painting.

1972
Juan Hamilton becomes studio assistant. O'Keeffe encourages him in pottery career.

1975
Solo Exhibition at Governor's Gallery, Santa Fe.

1976

1977
Receives Medal of Freedom Award. Honored at showing of award winning film about her world by National Education Television on her ninetieth birthday in Washington, DC and at reception at the National Gallery of Art, then exhibiting some of her paintings and some of Stieglitz's photographs of her.

1978
“Georgia O'Keeffe—A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz,” exhibition of photographs of her at Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1979
Honored as only living woman included in “The Dinner Party,” by Judy Chicago. One of five women over 75 awarded first annual Women's Caucus for Art Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Visual Arts.

Note: The chronology above is based on “Portrait of An Artist - A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe” by Laurie Lisle, New York, Seaview Books, 1980.

Cheryl Wall
CATALOGUE

1. TENT DOOR AT NIGHT, c. 1913, watercolor
18 15/16" x 24¾" (48.2cm x 62.9cm.)
Lent by the Art Museum of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

2. BLACK LINES, 1916, watercolor
24½" x 18½" (62.3cm. x 47cm.)
Lent by Andrew Crispo Gallery

3. PINK AND GREEN MOUNTAINS, NO. 1, 1917, watercolor
8½" x 11¾" (22.6cm. x 30.2cm.)
Lent by the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Lawrence, The Letha Churchill Walker Memorial Fund

4. PORTRAIT W-NO. 1, 1917, watercolor
12" x 9" (30.5cm. x 22.9cm.)
Lent by Andrew Crispo Gallery

5. LIGHT COMING ON THE PLAINS, 1917, watercolor
17¼" x 13¼" (45.1cm. x 35cm.)
Lent by Andrew Crispo Gallery

6. LANDSCAPE AND LAYERED MOUNTAIN, 1917, watercolor
8½" x 12" (22.6cm. x 30.5cm.)
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Warren Adelson

7. BLACK DIAGONAL, 1919, charcoal
24¼" x 19¾" (62.3cm. x 50.2cm.)
Lent by Andrew Crispo Gallery

8. RED BARN, LAKE GEORGE, NEW YORK, 1921, oil
14" x 16" (35.6cm. x 40.7cm.)
Lent by the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, Eva Underhill Holbrook Memorial Collection of American Art, Gift of Alfred H. Holbrook

9. LAKE GEORGE WITH WHITE BIRCH, 1921, oil
26" x 21" (66cm. x 53.3cm.)
Private Collection
10. GREY LINE WITH BLACK, BLUE AND YELLOW, c. 1923, oil
48" x 30" (121.9cm. x 76.2cm.)
Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Agnes Cullen Arnold Endowment Fund

11. LAKE GEORGE, NEW YORK, 1924, oil
9" x 16" (22.9cm. x 40.7cm.)
Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe

12. DARK ABSTRACTION, 1924, oil
23¾" x 20¾" (62.9cm. x 52.7cm.)
Lent by the St. Louis Art Museum, Gift of Charles E. and Mary Merrill

13. PURPLE PETUNIA, 1925, oil
15¾" x 13" (40.4cm. x 33cm.)
Lent by the Newark Museum

14. THE OLD MAPLE, LAKE GEORGE, 1926, oil
32" x 33¼" (81.3cm. x 84.5cm.)
Lent by the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson

15. ABSTRACTION, 1926, oil
30" x 18" (76.2cm. x 45.7cm.)
Lent by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

16. LAKE GEORGE BARNs, 1926, oil
21" x 32" (53.3cm. x 81.3cm.)
Lent by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

17. PANSY, 1926, oil
2615/16" x 121/16" (68.5cm. x 30.7cm.)
Lent by the Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Alfred S. Rossin

18. LAKE GEORGE BLUE, 1926, oil
18" x 30" (45.7cm. x 76.2cm.)
Lent by Andrew Crispo Gallery

19. COS COB, 1926, oil
16¼" x 12 1/16" (40.9cm. x 30.7cm.)
Lent by the University of Oklahoma, Museum of Art, Norman
20. **EAST RIVER NO. 1**, 1926, oil
   12\(\frac{1}{8}\)" x 32\(\frac{1}{8}\)" (30.8cm. x 81.6cm.)
   Lent by the Wichita Art Museum

21. **POPPY**, 1926/1927, oil
   30" x 36" (76.2cm. x 91.4cm.)
   Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg

22. **MADISON AVENUE (White Abstraction)**, 1926, oil
   32\(\frac{1}{2}\)" x 12" (82.5cm. x 30.6cm.)
   Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Henderson, in Memory of Hunt Henderson

23. **EAST RIVER, NO. 3**, 1926, oil
   12" x 32\(\frac{1}{4}\)" (30.5cm. x 81.9cm.)
   Lent by Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, Bequest of Mrs. Arthur Schwab

24. **CALLA LILLY**, 1927, oil
   20" x 9" (50.8cm. x 22.9cm.)
   Lent by Andrew Crispo Gallery

25. **RED HILLS AND THE SUN, LAKE GEORGE**, 1927, oil
   27" x 32" (68.6cm. x 81.3cm.)
   Lent by the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

26. **EAST RIVER FROM SHELTON**, 1927/1928, oil
   25" x 22" (63.5cm. x 55.9cm.)
   Lent by New Jersey State Museum, Trenton

27. **ORIENTAL POPPIES**, 1928, oil
   40\(\frac{1}{8}\)" x 30" (101.9cm. x 76.2cm.)
   Lent by the University of Minnesota, University Gallery, Minneapolis

28. **OAK LEAVES, PINK AND GRAY**, 1929, oil
   33\(\frac{1}{8}\)" x 18" (84.2cm. x 45.7cm.)
   Lent by the University of Minnesota, University Gallery, Minneapolis
29. **NEW YORK, NIGHT**, 1928/1929, oil
   40½" x 19½" (101.9cm. x 49.6cm.)
   Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Memorial Collection

30. **YELLOW CACTUS FLOWERS**, 1929, oil
   29¾" x 41½" (75.6cm. x 104.9cm.)
   Lent by the Fort Worth Art Museum, Gift of the William E. Scott Foundation

31. **IRIS**, 1929, oil
   32" x 12" (81.3cm. x 30.5cm.)
   Lent by Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center

32. **HORSES SKULL ON BLUE**, 1930, oil
   30" x 16" (76.3cm. x 40.7cm.)
   Lent by Arizona State University, University Art Collections, Tempe

33. **RUST RED HILLS**, 1930, oil
   16" x 30" (40.7cm. x 76.2cm.)
   Lent by Valparaiso University, University Art Galleries, Valparaiso

34. **BANANA FLOWER NO. 1**, 1934, charcoal
   21½" x 14½" (54.7cm. x 37.2cm.)
   Lent by the Arkansas Arts Center Foundation, Little Rock

35. **PURPLE HILLS NEAR ABQUIU**, 1935, oil
   16" x 30" (40.7cm. x 76.2cm.)
   Lent by San Diego Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norton S. Walbridge

36. **RAM'S SKULL & BROWN LEAVES**, 1936, oil
   30" x 36" (76.2cm. x 91.4cm.)
   Lent by the Roswell Museum & Art Center

37. **DATURA AND PEDERNAL**, 1940, oil
   11" x 16½" (28cm. x 41cm.)
   Lent by Loch Haven Art Center, Orlando
38. **PINK HILLS**, 1940, oil
   7" x 18" (17.8cm. x 45.8cm.)
   Lent by Andrew Crispo Gallery

39. **THE GRAY HILLS**, 1942, oil
   20" x 30" (50.8cm. x 76.2cm.)
   Lent by Indianapolis Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James W. Fesler

40. **DEAD COTTONWOOD TREE**, 1943, oil
   36" x 30" (91.5cm. x 76.2cm.)
   Lent by Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Gary Cooper

41. **CEBOLLA CHURCH**, 1945, oil
   20" x 36½" (50.8cm. x 91.8cm.)
   Lent by the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh

42. **CLIFFS - GHOST RANCH**, c. 1950, oil
   18" x 12" (45.7cm. x 30.5cm.)
   Private Collection

43. **GREEN PATIO DOOR**, 1955, oil
   30" x 20" (76.2cm. x 50.8cm.)
   Lent by Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, Gift of Seymour H. Knox

44. **BLACK DOOR WITH SNOW II**, 1955, oil
   30" x 18" (76.2cm. x 45.7cm.)
   Lent by Milwaukee Art Center Collection, Gift of Mrs. Harry Lynde Bradley

45. **DRAWING IV**, 1959, charcoal
   18½" x 24½" (47cm. x 62.3cm.)
   Lent by the Whitney Museum of American Art, Gift of Chauncey L. Waddell in honor of John I. H. Baur

**Addendum**

46. **SMALL HILL NEAR ALCALDE**, 1930, oil
   24½" x 10" (62.3cm. x 25.4cm.)
   Lent by Auburn University
Catalogue No. 28
Catalogue No. 46
Catalogue No. 43
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