

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Georgia O'Keeffe" exhibition

This podcast invites you to discover the life and work of Georgia O'Keeffe, following the eight sections of the exhibition (8 September - 6 December, 2021), and through the comments of Anna Hiddleston-Galloni and various quotes of the artist.

Colour code:

In black, the voices of Célia Crétien (introduction and section titles) and Anna Hiddleston-Galloni (sections)

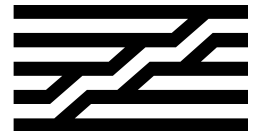
In blue, quotes from Georgia O'Keeffe, read by Claire Olivier

In green, quotes from Alfred Stieglitz and other men, read by Darrell Di Fiore

In purple, the musical excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

Section 1 - 291 Gallery

[Jingle of the show]

Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears.

You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

[Jingle of the show]

This Centre Pompidou podcast accompanies the "Georgia O'Keeffe" exhibition, presented from 8 September to 6 December 2021.

Painter Georgia O'Keeffe, a major figure in American art, was born in 1887 and died in 1986. Her work traverses the 20th century: she drew on the tradition of American landscape painting, contributed to asserting the first modern art in the United States and heralded the arrival of minimal art.

From the effervescence of the New York avant-garde to the desert of New Mexico, the artist gave expression to her intense feelings for nature through her paintings. O'Keeffe was also the first woman to establish herself with critics, collectors and modern art museums, which contributed to her legend.

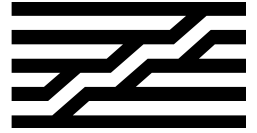
Anna Hiddleston-Galloni, associate curator at the Musée national d'art moderne, introduces us to the life and work of this fascinating artist.

291 Gallery

In 1915, Georgia O'Keeffe, then aged 28, was teaching art at Columbia College in South Carolina, drawing and painting over two hours daily.

In December she sent a roll of her radical charcoal drawings to her friend Anita Pollitzer, met the previous year at Teacher's College in New York.

[sounds of pencil on paper]



On New Year's Day 1916, Anita strode into the renowned 291 gallery and handed the drawings to the gallery owner and renowned avant-garde photographer Alfred Stieglitz. [footsteps]

His famous words “Finally, a woman on paper” marked the beginning of the recognition of O’Keeffe’s work by the New York avant-garde.

She later wrote in a euphoric letter to Stieglitz. “I make them just to express myself – things I feel and want to say.”

His support triggered a burst of energy in her: “I worked till my head all felt tight in the top I really doubted the soundness of the mentality of a person who can work so hard and laugh like I did.”

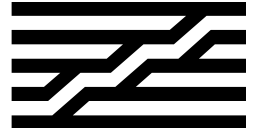
Without informing O’Keeffe, Stieglitz decided to display some of the drawings as part of a group show in May.

Georgia, who was in New York at the time, heard of a show by Virginia O’Keeffe at 291, thought that must be me, and hurried over in a fury to demand they be taken down. [sounds of a gallery opening]

“For me the drawings were private and the idea of their being hung on the wall for the public to look at was just too much.”

Stieglitz not only refused to take the drawings down, he extended the show, saying to O’Keeffe “You have no more right to withhold those pictures than to withdraw a child from the world.”

From then on, Stieglitz showed O’Keeffe’s work every year at 291 gallery until his death in 1946. [Musical excerpt: George Gershwin, *Rhapsody in blue*]
[transitional sound drums]



Section 2 - Early Works

O'Keeffe moved to Canyon, Texas to teach in late August 1916.

She was exhilarated and inspired by the wild, wide spaces and dramatic canyons nearby: [sounds of nature: wind, birds...] "Those perilous climbs were frightening but wonderful to me and not like anything I had known before. [...] Many drawings came from days like that, and later some oil paintings."

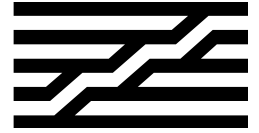
Her letters to Alfred Stieglitz were full of the intense sensations nature provoked in her: "The plains – the wonderful great big sky – makes me want to breathe so deep I'll break."

She began a bold series in watercolor of the *Evening Star* where she attempted to convey her deeply felt impressions of the atmospheric phenomena of light in the Texas Panhandle.

As she walked into the crepuscular sky, her response was immediate and all-encompassing: "Tonight, I walked into the sunset [...] The whole sky – and there is so much of it out here – was just blazing – and grey-blue clouds were rioting all through the hotness of it."

Another series of *Nudes* reveals one of O'Keeffe's rare attempts to portray the human figure. These translucent washes defining a fluid female form are reminiscent of Auguste Rodin drawings O'Keeffe saw at 291 gallery in 1908.

In August 1917, she vacationed in Colorado, then detoured through New Mexico. This was her first glimpse of the desert and the Sangre de Christo Mountains. "I loved it immediately. From then on I was always on my way back."
[transitional sound drums]



Section 3 - Towards Abstraction

In late February 1918, O'Keeffe fell ill with influenza and was granted leave of absence from teaching. Concerned for her health, Stieglitz sent the photographer Paul Strand to Texas to ask if she would consider moving to New York.

"I want her to live. [...] She is the spirit of 291 – Not I."

Strand finally convinced her to come and Stieglitz met O'Keeffe at the train station in New York in June. Their relationship intensified and they became lovers. In July, Stieglitz left his wife and his daughter to live with Georgia.

He began photographing her regularly, producing intimate, erotic portraits.

[trigger tones of a camera] "When I make a photograph, I make love."

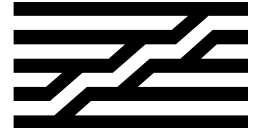
"I was photographed with a kind of heat and excitement."

O'Keeffe resigned from teaching and remained in New York to pursue painting full time, relying on Stieglitz's offer of financial support.

Over the following year O'Keeffe began experimenting with oil and painted a series of colorful organic abstractions, some inspired by music. Her interest in the medium was first aroused whilst studying with Arthur Wesley Dow in 1916 at Columbia University Art Department, New York.

She remembered vividly: "The instructor was playing a low-toned record, asking the class to make a charcoal drawing from it. So, I sat down and made a drawing too. This gave me an idea that I was very interested to follow – the idea of lines like sounds."

The pure colors and fluid contours of these paintings are evocative of both an inner and outer harmony and bring what O'Keeffe described as "just her tune" to a crescendo. [Musical excerpt: Rachmaninov, *Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 44*]
[transitional sound drums]



Section 4 - From New York to Lake George

From 1918 until 1934, Georgia O'Keeffe would stay every summer at Alfred Stieglitz's family home in Lake George, located 200 miles north of New York. [sounds of nature: wind, birds, cows...] The bucolic, rural setting not only provided respite from New York but also abundant material for her art.

The works she did there ranged from detailed paintings of leaves, fruits and flowers to views of the lake at different seasons or the weathered barns on the Stieglitz property, which she imbued with a with a sense of timeless harmony and enduring stability.

"I wish you could see the place here – there is something so perfect about the mountains and the lake and the trees – Sometimes I want to tear it all to pieces – it seems so perfect – but it is really lovely."

In contrast, O'Keeffe's images of Manhattan's skyscrapers painted at the same period rise vertically in sleek celebration of urban modernity. [Sounds of the city]

In 1925, the couple moved first to the 28th and then to the lofty 30th floor apartment of the Shelton Hotel.

The view of the industrial districts stretching out below the East River to the smoky horizon and pattern of New York's skyscrapers inspired twenty works by O'Keeffe.

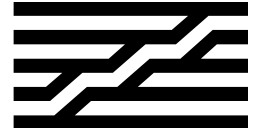
"I had never lived up so high before and was so excited that I began talking about trying to paint New York. Of course, I was told that it was an impossible idea."

[Musical excerpt: Duke Ellington and His Cotton Club Orchestra, *Jubilee Stomp*]

[transitional sound drums]

Section 5 - Plant World

O'Keeffe drew flowers as a child, attended still-life classes at the Arts Students League and painted her first enlarged flower in 1924. [Soft music and sounds of birds]



In 1915, she wrote of her love of them to Anita Pollitzer “Do you feel like flowers sometimes? Tonight, I have an enormous bunch of dark red and pink cosmos – mostly dark red – over against the wall. [...] They give me a curious feeling of satisfaction.”

Her urge to expand the flowers across the canvas is linked to what she had seen in photography but also a more primal urge to fuse with her subject.

She transformed the blossoms into icons, revealing their structures with complete clarity. “One rarely takes the time to see a flower. I have painted what each flower is to me and I have painted it big enough so that others would see what I see.”

Although wary of the sexual interpretations of her works, the layered petals of the flowers are the expression of a pantheistic sensuality, of her identification of the body with nature.

Yet she raged against the critic’s interpretations: “when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower – and I don’t.”

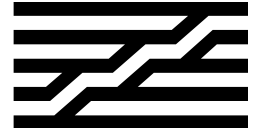
[transitional sound drums]

Section 6 - Bones and Shells

In April 1929, O’Keeffe and Rebecca Strand left for Santa Fe and then Taos in New Mexico as guests of Mabel Dodge Luhan, who provided them with a studio within the community of artists settled there.

O’Keeffe was enraptured by the desert landscape: “Taos is a high, wide, sage-covered plain. In the evening, with the sun at your back, it looks like an ocean, like water.”

[sounds of waves]



She returned the following summer and then every year, without Stieglitz who could not bear the heat, until she finally settled there permanently when Stieglitz died in 1946.

Throughout her life, O’Keeffe collected objects from the natural world for her art. Shells, stones, feathers, leaves and bones all provided her with equivalents for the experience of a place. “When I leave the landscape it seems I am going to work with these funny things that I now think feel so much like it.” [soft music] In 1926 she picked off shells from the beaches in Maine to paint their brittle, pristine forms and moist hollows.

Similarly, she gathered skulls and antlers from the desert, piling them up in Ghost Ranch, her low, adobe house stood within the rocky cliffs and eroded hills of the Chama Valley. For her, the bleached bones were “my symbols of the desert. They seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho’ it is vast and empty and untouchable.” [sounds of winds] [transitional sound drums]

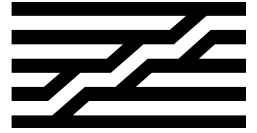
Section 7 - New Mexico

“You know I never felt at home in the East like I do out here – and finally feeling in the right place again – I feel like myself – and I like it.”

The radiant New Mexican sunlight invigorated O’Keeffe, provoking in her an almost spiritual awakening, as it had with D.H. Lawrence who had lodged at Taos in 1922: “one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly and the old world gave way to the new.”

During the summers she spent there, O’Keeffe went to numerous Pueblo Indian dances, thrilled by the “great aliveness” of the agile dancers; “such a beautiful body - all every fiber seemed to go off like fire.”

[Musical excerpt: Pueblo Indians, *Deer Dance*]



She drove almost daily in her Model A Ford around the desert, “painting and painting. I think I never had a better time painting – and never worked more steadily and never loved the country more.”

She depicted the black penitent crosses, likening them to “a thin dark veil of the Catholic Church spread over the New Mexican landscape.” [sound of bells]

Her organic depiction of the Ranchos Church in soft ochres that merge with the earth, embodies the blending of Catholicism with O’Keeffe’s own beliefs, inspired by Native American culture, that the divine is immanent within all things.

As her friend the artist Russell Vernon Hunter remarked, “her regard for nature seems virtually pantheistic. She ... loves the sky, the wind, the solitary places and what grows therein, as she might love a person.”

[transitional sound drums]

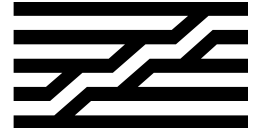
Section 8 - Cosmos

In 1945, O’Keeffe purchased an abandoned hacienda in the village of Abiquiu.

Over the years, she renovated the building, transforming the original corral into her studio “a long white room, with wide windows overlooking the Rio Chama valley”. She also planted a flourishing vegetable garden.

Once Stieglitz had died in 1946, she left New York permanently to live in New Mexico.

Her world became quieter as she carved out an independent life for herself; [Musical excerpt: John Cage, *Dream*] “I’ve been sleeping on the roof this week. [...] I like to see the sky when I wake and I like the air – and I like seeing all over my world with the rising sun.”



The spaces she lived in blended nature with art and had an essential bareness that suited her, for as she once said “If you have an empty wall you can think on it better.”

Light-filled and spare, the paintings from the 1950s and 1960s foresee the minimal style of American art.

These years were filled with trips around the world, to Asia, Europe, the Far East and India.

Her experience of flight led to a new series of paintings based on aerial views of river patterns. Her “Sky above the clouds” paintings express a yearning “to find the feeling of infinity on the horizon line.”

Early in 1971 O’Keeffe began to lose her central vision. As her vision diminished so did her work. In 1972 she made her last assisted oil painting from memory “I can see what I want to paint. The thing that makes you want to create is still there.”

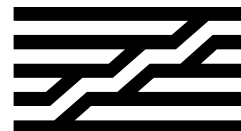
O’Keeffe died on March 6, 1986 at Santa Fe. When asked how she would like to be remembered, she replied simply: “As a painter – just as a painter.”

[Musical excerpt: Ellis Paul, *Georgia O’Keeffe* issu de *The Hero In You* (Ellis Paul Publishing 2012, Sharon Teeler Publishing)]

[Jingle of the show]

It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou web site, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!

[Jingle of the show]



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