

Confronting the O'Keeffe myths

What was Georgia O'Keeffe really like and what was she trying to express in her artwork? It's been 20 years since her death at age 98, and questions still linger.

If you read books about her you'll get many conflicting answers, and it's difficult to sort through the facts and myths. What often emerges are descriptions of her as varied as one of a liberated, 20th-century creative, yet reckless, free spirit to portrayals recluse, revered on a stature with Mother Theresa. The truth lies somewhere in between.

Many clues about the real O'Keeffe will emerge as O'Keeffe's private collection is transferred from the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in March. In addition to the art collection, the museum will also take over O'Keeffe's Abiquiú house and studio. The museum already owns and maintains the artist's Ghost Ranch property, 20 minutes north of Abiquiú. Several hundred sketches, almost 30 works of clay and about 200 oils on canvas will become part of the museum's collection. Personal letters, notes, photographs and oral histories will offer greater insight. More important, this enormous legacy will give a clearer picture of O'Keeffe's art and her place in art history.

O'Keeffe was prolific. When she was 29, her work was first exhibited by Alfred Stieglitz, whom she later married, in 1916 in New York City. Since then more than 500 examples of her works were acquired for more than 100 public collections in Asia, Europe and North and Central America. Yet O'Keeffe kept an enormous collection of her work private, and most of this has rarely been seen.

In 1929, she began spending summers painting in New Mexico. Three years after Stieglitz's death in 1946, she moved permanently to New Mexico, living in either her Ghost Ranch house, purchased in 1940, or in the house she bought in 1945 in Abiquiú.

George King, executive director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, is thrilled about the transfer. "I'm really excited about the 800 drawings that show another side of O'Keeffe. Drawing is such an elemental act, and these works on paper show us another side of the artist both in New York and New Mexico." While many associate O'Keeffe with her oil paintings, the museum often exhibits her magnificent works on paper. "The museum has many of her outstanding pastels and watercolors," King says.

Barbara Buhler Lynes is the leading expert on the art and life of O'Keeffe. Lynes, curator of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and

Facing page—

Alfred Stieglitz's *Georgia O'Keeffe*, gelatin silver print. Gift of the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

Below—Barbara Buhler Lynes



STEVE LAROSE



the Emily Fisher Landau director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center, has written many authoritative books and articles. Her scholarly publications include, among others, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*. What sets her books apart from the others? "Everything I say about O'Keeffe is based on primary documentation," she says.

Lynes, too, is ecstatic about the transfer. "We will not only exhibit this new collection, but we will make it and the archival materials available to the scholarly community. The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center and the O'Keeffe houses form a wonderful and important complex that greatly enhances our ability to acquaint visitors with O'Keeffe's place and significance in the history of American art. This (the transfer of materials) is a major, major resource for the museum. We're really very lucky to have it," Lynes says.

Both she and King have worked diligently with the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation to ensure a smooth transition.

Lynes knows these acquisitions will shed more light on O'Keeffe's work and life. She often lectures about O'Keeffe and passionately confronts many prevalent myths. In a recent interview she addressed some of them. Here are highlights of that revealing conversation.

Myth:

Her work is about her sexuality.

"Perhaps the biggest myth about O'Keeffe is that her art is about her sexuality," Lynes says, "which suggests that it is a manifestation of her womanhood. In the 1920s, when Freudian ideas were quite new, such an interpretation of her art was quite seductive. What's interesting is that her work is filled with both masculine and feminine forms.

"And to say her work is about her sexuality is to ignore its universal meaning. Yet, people still look at her flowers and they say that's about her sexuality or female anatomy or whatever, when in fact most flowers are androgynous and thus are both male and female. I've written and lectured about her flowers. One of the reasons she began doing close-up paintings of them is to call attention to the masculine and feminine sensual components of the natural world. And if people could just realize that when they're viewing work by O'Keeffe, perhaps they could get beyond limiting its meaning."

Myth:

Because O'Keeffe did not influence other painters her work is not as valued as painters whose work was influential.

Lynes says some people feel O'Keeffe is less important than artists such as Pablo Picasso or Jackson Pollock because her work did not influence other painters the way theirs did.

"But my question is: Who would have imitated the art of a woman in the '30s, '40s or '50s? Certainly, not the men. I feel that the issue of influence is only one of many ways to assess an artist's importance. One of the key components of understanding her work is that its modernism comes from the way in which she used photography as a conceptual source for her imagery."

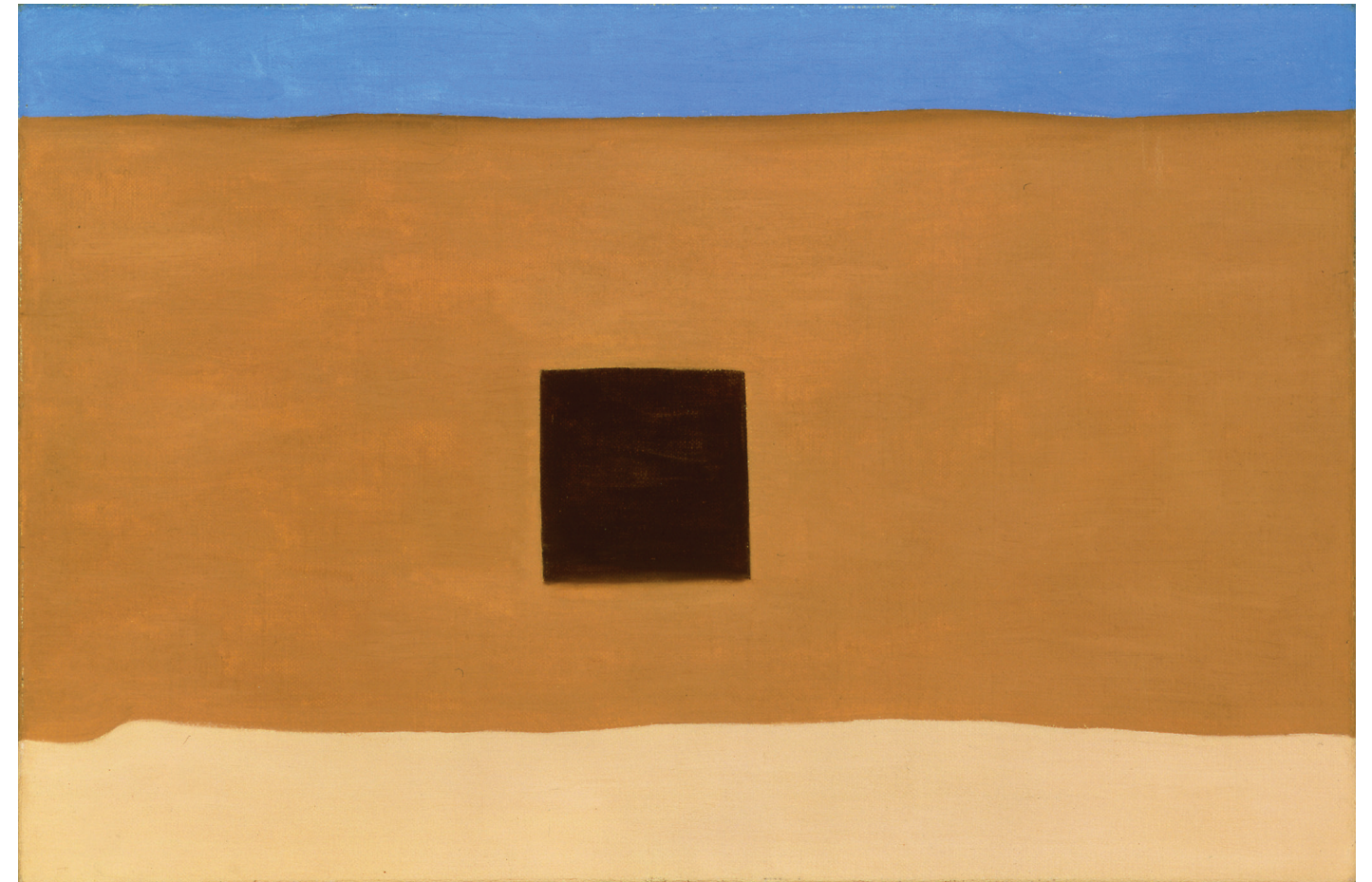
Lynes points to a black-and-white photograph in her office of a landscape. "If you were actually in this landscape, you wouldn't see the abstract relationships between its forms that are so obvious in this photograph of it," she says, pointing to triangles, inverted triangles and other forms that reveal abstract patterns in nature. "We don't see these forms with the naked eye, but O'Keeffe was fascinated by the way photography revealed them.

"People also don't appreciate the precision with which she worked, preferring that she work more gesturally, as did someone like Pollock, and thus they impose expectations on her work that she never had in mind. She preferred a smooth, finished surface, like the surface of a photograph, and such surfaces distinguish her work."

Myth:

O'Keeffe was an intuitive, untrained artist.

Lynes says Stieglitz promoted this myth because it fulfilled his ideas about the nature of women—that they are fundamentally intuitive, emotional and irrational creatures. "But O'Keeffe had gone to school and was quite sophisticated in her knowledge of art, and especially of European modernism and increasingly in the modernist work of her contemporaries. And on one hand, it was hard for her to



STEVE LARESE

Above—Georgia O'Keeffe *In the Patio III*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 18-by-30 inches. The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. This piece is one of nearly 200 oils on canvases that have recently become part of the permanent collection of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe.

Left—This O'Keeffe painting on the right (*A Street*, 1926. Oil on canvas. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, gift of The Burnett Foundation), would seem to dispel the myth that O'Keeffe wasn't fond of New York.

contradict him publicly, as he was the leading authority on modern art in America. She realized she couldn't change his thinking and, besides, he was selling her work, which made it possible for her to continue making art. It was only later in life that she was able to challenge Stieglitz's ideas—and particularly after she moved to New Mexico—to define herself as she saw herself—as a hard-working individualist, who followed her own path and, in the process, realized herself as an artist and person.”

Myth: O'Keeffe was a loner.

While it's true that she needed time to be alone, it's not true that she was a loner. “People think she spent all of her time alone, but she almost always had people around her, whether it was a friend or someone who was cooking or cleaning for her. There almost always was somebody with her. She was never totally isolated (at Ghost Ranch or Abiquiú). She liked the quiet of solitude, and enjoyed being by herself, but she was seldom alone.

“Stieglitz created a myth about her being a sexually liberated woman and artist. To contradict this, she promoted the idea of her being a reclusive isolationist and, O'Keeffe the person, who had a wonderful sense of humor and enjoyed life to the fullest, disappears between these opposing myths.

“She loved her work and was determined to succeed as an artist and, in order to do so, she was keenly dedicated to and serious about her work. And she preferred to be in a place where she could be left alone. The more human side of her remains fairly elusive, except to her family and close friends.”

Myth: O'Keeffe hated New York.

Lynes says O'Keeffe enjoyed New York. But after working there for more than a decade (1918-29), O'Keeffe felt she needed a new source of inspiration for her work. “In New Mexico, she discovered an environment that was particularly appealing to her and where she could continue to develop her work. I doubt that she could have done so effectively if she had she stayed in New York.

“Coming here allowed her to define herself in terms of an environment she considered her

own—the American Southwest. Here she established an autonomy and identity in terms of a world that suited her ideas and personality that distinguishes her from anyone else who worked here—and there were plenty. For instance, the photographs Todd Webb made of her with her head wrapped up—in a scarf—you know, she projected a uniqueness that was entirely hers. She was born an individualist. She never fit into the norm of anybody else's reality. And she needed a place she could call her own and found it in New Mexico.”


Myth: O'Keeffe's marriage to Stieglitz was one of convenience rather than devotion.

“She adored Stieglitz. To think that she didn't is ridiculous. And that she was not loyal to him is a myth. Some biographies portray her very differently—saying that she had affairs with numerous people—but that's not who she was. She and Stieglitz shared an aesthetic as well as many interests in common. Both were extremely dedicated to their art. She had strong friendships with both women and men, but she was always loyal to Stieglitz. She really adored him. And he adored her.”

Many wonder why he did not travel to New Mexico when she came out to spend summers here. Lynes says it was because he was a hypochondriac who didn't like to travel. “New York was his world. He didn't have any desire to go to the West. By the time she started coming out here he was in this mid-50s. He could have come, but he didn't want to, and he was busy running his gallery. He hardly took vacations.”

O'Keeffe suffered from macular degeneration beginning in '73. “At that point she had the ideas, but she couldn't see well, and needed assistance with her work, yet wanted to remain independent,” Lynes says. “Juan Hamilton, her friend and assistant, helped her continue being creative by teaching her how to work in clay.”



The exhibition, *A Celebration of New Works: Recent Gifts, Promised Gifts and Extended Loans* (Feb. 10 through June 6) will showcase many of the museum's new acquisitions. To learn more logon to www.okeeffemuseum.org or call (505) 946-1065. 



Left—Alfred Stieglitz's *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1932, gelatin silver print, 9 1/8-by-7 1/2 inches. Gift of the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

Below—Georgia O'Keeffe, *Sky Above Clouds/Yellow Horizon and Clouds*, 1977, oil on canvas, 48-by-84 inches. The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. This piece is another of the newly acquired collection by the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

