



There's Still Life in Those Bones

By Joseph S. Pete

You've seen a million still lifes before: There's usually a random assortment of fruit, vases, books, pewter wine goblets and splayed-out pheasants.

Maybe there's a lobster or a human skull. Sometimes a globe or a violin.

Any old array of food or flowers on a table could really be painted anywhere. The genre has been one of the most common in painting over the centuries, but there's little that ties a bowl of pears to a time or a place.

Most still life paintings had no real sense of place until Georgia O'Keeffe and other Southwestern painters turned to the desert landscape and Southwestern culture for inspiration, according to Harriet Warkel, the Indianapolis Museum of Art's guest curator for American Art. A total of 66 of their paintings, including 24 by the Modernist master, are featured in *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Southwestern Still Life*, a touring exhibit that makes its only stop east of the Mississippi River at the IMA on Nov. 2. The work will be on display through Feb. 15, 2015.

[click to enlarge](#)

The exhibit focuses on how O'Keeffe and other area artists made objects symbolic of the Southwest and its Native American and Hispanic cultures, Warkel says. O'Keeffe wasn't just painting an adobe home's door or sun-bleached animal bones. She was trying to capture the spirit of a desolate sagebrush-blanketed region known for its striking natural beauty and dramatic vistas.

"Bones had no connotations of death in her work; she always felt the bones were symbols of the Southwest," Warkel explains. "She appreciated the form. There was no negativity. She said the bones were more alive than the animals that walked the area. Bones suggest the

transience of life, but also eternity. We still find the bones of Neanderthal men. Instead of being dead, she thought of them as existing longer than everything.”

O’Keeffe gathered horse heads, mule skulls and the deer horns that littered New Mexico’s arid landscape, but she was particularly drawn to the form of animals’ pelvic bones, and painted them from a perspective that framed the vast Southwestern sky through the circular hole. Over time, she tightened the frame on the hole of sky more and more. She painted such inanimate objects the way previous artists rendered oranges or wine glasses, but her work was pioneering in the still life genre, because it instantly evokes a specific geographical place that is immediately recognizable.

“The still lifes actually show a sense of place, that this was painted somewhere, that it was from the Southwest,” Warkel says. “The objects artists in this exhibit show offer a look into how the people there lived. They use different types of modernist imagery to show scenes and describe the culture.”

[click to enlarge](#)



Image Courtesy International Arts®



Image Courtesy International Arts®
Deer Horns, 1938. Oil on canvas, Copyright
2014 Georgia O’Keeffe Museum.

Memphis-based museum service firm International Arts organized the exhibition around the idea that still lifes largely did not say anything about place until O’Keeffe and other artists started settling in New Mexico in the early 20th century. This exhibit will also travel to museums in Colorado, Texas and Washington state.

“This exhibition brings much needed attention

Mule's Skull with Pink Poinsettia, 1936. Oil on canvas, from the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico. © Copyright 2014 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

to the painted interpretations of the American Southwest by O'Keeffe and her contemporaries," says former Smithsonian American Art Museum Director Dr. Charles Eldredge, who wrote a 160-page book to accompany the exhibit. "It explores the ways these artists took simple, seemingly mute objects and with them conveyed

natural and human dramas that described a distinctive locale and its rich cultural history."

People might be surprised to see some of the cultural imagery O'Keeffe painted, such as an Indian pot and a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, Warkel points out. Her work is rich with cultural signifiers, including that the flowers she was famous for painting were often modeled on the intricate fabric calico flowers that Hispanic craftsmen weaved for mourners, because real flowers wilted too fast when left at cemeteries in the dry heat.

"It's a really interesting, really different look at the still life that hadn't been done before," Warkel says.

The IMA hopes to transport visitors to the desert of northern New Mexico O'Keeffe depicted in much of her art. Literally. Right before the end of the exhibit, museumgoers walk into a room with wall-size photos of the views O'Keeffe could see from her windows, complete with all the mountains and the trees. Visitors are meant to feel as though they're standing at her easel, soaking it all in.



Courtesy International Arts®

Yellow Cactus, 1929. Oil on canvas from Dallas Museum of Art, Texas. Copyright 2014 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

Warkel also hopes visitors will leave inspired enough to travel to the Southwest and see firsthand the landscapes O'Keeffe painted. She was an exterior painter who wasn't confined to a studio, so it's possible to still view many of the sights she represented in her work, including the black door of her Abiquiu winter house that she painted from several different angles.

"Today, you can still look at what Georgia O'Keeffe saw," Warkel says.

And thanks to this exhibit, you can also see how she interpreted such views.

If you want to be among the first art lovers to see the exhibit, the museum is hosting a special opening event Saturday, Nov. 1 from 7 to 11 p.m. Visitors can see the art, listen to music courtesy of deejay Kyle Long, and enjoy hands-on art activities inspired by Dia de Los Muertos traditions. Tickets and more details are available online (\$12 for non-members, \$5 for students, free for members).

Tags: 2D, Still life, Georgia O'Keeffe, Harriet Warkel, Indianapolis Museum of Art, International Arts, Charles Eldredge, Symbolism, Painting, Exhibit, American Southwest, Kyle Long, Dia de Los Muertos



Share

76 people like this. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

12

Tweet

0

Pin it

3

Share

« Figuratively Speaking about Abstract Art

The Photo Sleuth »

[More 2D »](#)

Speaking of...

Coming Attraction: Cinema du Cellulaire

Sky Blue Window and the Indianapolis Museum of Art to team up for a smartphone video festival and contest in 2015.
by Sky Blue Editors

Gift Local: Glass Appeal

For Indianapolis Museum of Arts' Tariq Robinson, a local jewelry artist helps make his holiday gift giving a cinch.
by Sky Blue Editors

A Tasty Trip to the IMA

Exclusive event for IndyHub's Passport to the Arts ticket holders provides special glimpse at innovate art programs at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.
by Emily Hinkel

[MORE »](#)

Comments

Subscribe to this thread: By Email With RSS

☐ Subscribe to this thread

POST COMMENT

Readers also liked...

It's a Wrap!

From Indy's own Pattern Magazine comes this gorgeous spread that explores the artistic beauty of headpieces.

by Sky Blue Editors

Your Favorite Lucky Tee

Vardagen, an indie biz in Fishers fuses fashion with social media in comfortable cotton tees.

by Ashley Davis / Butler

About The Author



Joseph S. Pete

 [Contact Us](#)

Bio:

Joseph S. Pete is a Peter Lisagor and Hoosier State Press Association award-winning journalist who has been known to hang around museums and

make the rounds on First Fridays. His literary work has appeared in Flying Island, Punchnel's and elsewhere. He has no known aliases.

More by Joseph S. Pete

Creativity & Camaraderie for Vets

Veterans Art Day workshops at the Indianapolis Art Center take military personnel to a better place.

by Joseph S. Pete

An Inventor's Thirst for a Better World

Heartland's *SlingShot* highlights technology that aspires to change the world.

by Joseph S. Pete

[MORE »](#)

Latest in 2D

Artistic Twists & Turns

Internationally known local artist Chris Pyle weaves his way through a successful life creating fine art, illustrations and music.

by Chi Sherman

Creative BOOM! and POW! and ZAP!

Watch dialogue, storyboards and illustrations come together Saturday during the Comic Book in a Day competition at Noblesville's Nickel Plate Arts Campus.

by Jami Stall

Amber is The New Black

The Harrison Center for the Arts opts for a brighter color palette for its upcoming show.

by Chi Sherman

MORE »