

Eloquent Objects: Georgia O’Keeffe and Still-Life Art in New Mexico

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“No ideas but in things.”¹ A favorite aphorism of the modern American poet William Carlos Williams suggests a key to his art: the route to the universal begins with the particular and concrete. The expressive power of objects was recognized by other writers of his modernist cohort, as well as by their ancestors, for example, Henry James. In James’s novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, Madame Merle, the worldly American expatriate, explained to the young and skeptical Isabel Archer that possessions define a person. “I’ve a great respect for *things!*” Madame exclaimed. They are the “expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive.”²

Visual artists knew that, too. Max Weber, the one-time protégé of Alfred Stieglitz and a pioneer among American modernists, prized the eloquence of “things in the three dimensions, made and shaped by hand and taste . . . objects of use, houses, clothing, food, implements, utensils and their functions.” He regretted the neglect of such and looked forward to a day “when every man will know how to address himself to the inanimate simple things of life. A pot, a cup, a piece of calico, a chair, a mantel, a frame, the binding of a book, the trimming of a dress . . . these we live with [*sic*].” For Weber, “it is only through things that one discerns himself.”³

Marsden Hartley, another member of the Stieglitz circle, thought similarly. He identified a “great artist” as “that one who is most sensitive to the spirit of existence in the things around him.”⁴ Furniture and frames, garments and food, dishes and books—such things of daily life might tell a tale, might express Hartley’s “spirit of existence,” but they do so only when they are quickened by imagination, by the creative individual’s sensitivity. Without that, the object remains mute; materials remain inanimate, dead.

The sun-bleached bones that Georgia O’Keeffe gathered in the New Mexico desert were decidedly dead

stuff. Yet she found them beautiful and “strangely more living than the animals walking around.”⁵ Like her similar gatherings from the land—shells, rocks, pieces of wood—the bones were mementos of experience. They could convey ideas, could speak to and for O’Keeffe. Painting them was, she explained, “my way of saying something about this country which I feel I can say better that way than in trying to reproduce a piece of it. It’s a country that’s very exciting. . . . How can you put down an equivalent of that kind of a world?”⁶

That world was summoned by O’Keeffe’s paintings of skulls and bones, probably the most famous of America’s diverse regional icons. Beyond the ossuary, however, other subjects from the Southwest might similarly carry new but different ideas. Consider, for example, flowers, which, as psychologist Havelock Ellis noted, possess an “emotional force . . . largely independent of association and quite abstracted from direct vital use.” Although they “subserve neither of the great primary ends of life . . . yet we are irresistibly impelled to ‘consider the lilies.’” It is as “manifoldly complex symbols that flowers appeal to us so deeply,” Ellis concluded. “There is nothing so vitally intimate to himself that man has not seen it, and rightly seen it, symbolically embodied in flowers.”⁷

For painters, a flower could, for example, suggest native growths and rootedness in place; or it might illustrate the gardener’s passion and the cultivation of exotic species. It might evoke memories of a special occasion or person, recall a cultural tradition or seasonal rite—or it might simply be a pleasing and colorful addition to an artfully composed bouquet.

Fruits and vegetables might likewise be products of labor in the garden or harvest from nature’s bounty; or they could be produce brought from afar and purchased at the local grocer. The edible subject, like the tropical bananas painted by Raymond Jonson in 1928 (University of New Mexico Museum of Art), might be an exotic and imported addition to the New Mexican menu, both culi-

nary and artistic; or the subject might be a staple of the regional diet, like the peppers painted in Taos by Maurice Sterne (plate 18) during his brief residence there.

Objects crafted by hand provided frequent inspiration for still-life painters in New Mexico. Each thing—*santo* or *katsina tithu* (kachina), for instance, or textile, pottery or furniture—might carry with it the idea of its maker and the cultural tradition represented by its type: regional or imported, religious or secular, Native American, Hispanic or Anglo.

A variety of objects might be gathered together in a still-life painting, sometimes isolated in an indeterminate space, sometimes settled on a surface. On other occasions these objects were depicted in architectural settings of various types, suggestive of a domestic space or the creative arena of the artist's studio. While these interior spaces were often personal in character, religious or even mercantile settings might also be portrayed. E. Boyd and Polia Pillin, for instance, documented Southwestern parish churches in watercolors for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and Ward Lockwood painted *Sisneros Store* in Taos (plate 38), with its pictorial inventory of commercially available products. Like Madame Merle's things that bespoke an individual's identity and personality, these ensembles of objects in architectural spaces conveyed personality, the artist's or the occupant's, or both; and they did so even—or especially—when not populated by human presence.

Finally, the intense focus on an object or still-life arrangement might yield a distillation of the motif that verges upon, or even achieves, abstraction. In such cases patterns may provide a residue of the original source, offering a hint of the design's inspiration; organic forms, for example, might suggest a source in flowers or plant life, or geometric patterns in Native American pottery or weaving. In other cases, however, mimesis yields to abstract invention completely; the inspirational object can only be inferred from the artist's title, statements or personal history. The vital thing has inspired a new non-objectivity.

BONES

In selecting her familiar skeletal subjects, Georgia O'Keeffe was drawing upon an iconography with a long and rich tradition, and one not limited to desert depictions. The mystical import of skulls was recognized by many cultures, including the native tribes of the American West. Among Karl Bodmer's watercolors documenting that part of the country in the 1830s, for instance, is one recording a *Magic Pile Erected by the Assiniboine Indians* (Joslyn Museum), a talisman of stones and bones that

captivated the explorer-artist, symbolizing for him both race and place.

As emblem of a specific landscape and locale, the bones of dead animals were often used by nineteenth-century painters to evoke desert desolation, from the American interior to the Sahara. Skeletal remains—horse, cow and especially buffalo—appeared in various works by artists depicting the American West, from Albert Bierstadt to Frederic Remington to William Robinson Leigh. Charles Marion Russell even incorporated the buffalo skull into his signature logo. Though their depictions might vary, the general allusion of their pictures was to loss, both of cultures and traditions: the last of the buffalo, a vanishing race. The motif also figured prominently in the work of several of O'Keeffe's contemporaries, such as the Texas painters Alexandre Hogue, Jerry Bywaters and Otis Dozier, each of whom employed skeletal imagery in scenes of the tragic Dust Bowl during the 1930s.

O'Keeffe, by contrast, found in the skulls and bones an affirmative symbol, one referring to life and to place. To viewers who might be puzzled by the subject, she explained the remains were "as beautiful as anything I know. To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around—hair, eyes and all, with their tails switching. The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even though it is vast and empty and untouchable—and knows no kindness with all its beauty."⁸ Unlike her predecessors and even most of her contemporaries, O'Keeffe initially treated her bony still-life subjects in isolation from their natural surroundings. By severing the skull from its setting, the artist at once simplified her image, yet complicated its symbolic resonance. With *Cow's Skull—Red, White and Blue* of 1931 (O'Keeffe 773), the summa of the series, she expanded the regional symbol to a larger role as national icon, a pictorial riposte (as she famously explained) to the period's obsessive quest for "the Great American Thing."⁹

In her rambles through the landscape O'Keeffe had developed the habits of gathering objects from the land, souvenirs of place and experience: stones, like that which she abstracted in *After a Walk Back of Mabel's*, 1929 (O'Keeffe 680; plate 47), or decades later, river rocks carried home from her rafting descent of the Colorado River; feathers that appeared in some of her paintings, for instance, *Turkey Feathers in Indian Pot*, 1935 (O'Keeffe 855; plate 55), and more often were enclosed in letters to her husband; bits of wood whose gnarled knots provided inspiration for three circular designs in the 1942 series *A Piece of Wood* (O'Keeffe

1030–1032); and shells, some from Atlantic beaches, others fossilized examples from the New Mexico desert. In a similar fashion she gathered bones from the desert, barrels of them. Considered individually or in combination with other desert souvenirs, the bones were reminders of the region that provided inspiration to O’Keeffe from her first visit onward. “I have used these things,” she once wrote, “to say what is to me the wide-ness and wonder of the world as I live in it.”¹⁰

In 1930 and again in following summers, she shipped some of her trophies to the Stieglitz family summer home at Lake George, where her unusual souvenirs drew mixed reactions from her husband and in-laws. “I have been working on the trash I brought along,” she reported from the lake in 1931, “— my bones cause much comment.”¹¹ In New York the bones served as mementos of a special place and inspiration for art. As curator Elizabeth Turner explained, “No longer tied to time and place, the bones operated in the world of forms opened by the Hegelian logic” that O’Keeffe’s mentor, Arthur Wesley Dow, had espoused. As Dow related Hegel’s philosophy, all materials were dead without art. “Wood, stone, metal, canvas, even words, are in themselves dead stuff. What art creates upon this dead stuff belongs to the domain of the spirit and is living as the spirit is living.”¹²

The bones that littered the desert floor were bleached by the sun, and their paleness complemented the fragile white of weathered calico flowers that decorated graves in the Hispanic *camposantos*. These, too, O’Keeffe collected. She related a story, often repeated and perhaps true, of being interrupted one day as she was studying such a blossom. To answer the caller, she absent-mindedly stuck a calico flower she had been holding into the eye socket of a horse’s skull. Upon returning to the easel she was struck by the combination. “The rose in the eye looked pretty fine,” she explained, “so I thought I would just go on with that.”¹³ Whether a happy accident or, as some critics discerned, a playful juxtaposition with surrealist intent, the resulting painting, perhaps *Horse’s Skull with Pink Rose*, 1931 (O’Keeffe 775; plate 50), was one of her first and most captivating essays on bones.

O’Keeffe’s skull paintings were initially exhibited late in December 1931 at An American Place, the gallery operated by her husband, the photographer and modern art impresario Alfred Stieglitz. The novel works excited feverish speculation among critics and gallerygoers alike. Despite its apparently accidental origins, the flowers-and-skull composition is evocative of the Hispanic Southwest; however, to most Eastern viewers, unfamiliar

with New Mexican *camposantos* and funerary traditions, the flower appeared incongruous, even surreal, and provided the occasion for much comment and interpretation. Some read the paintings as symbols of death, as a Southwestern *vanitas*. Henry McBride, for example, worried that the artist was ruminating on the skull “with the perversity of a Hamlet,” while Ralph Flint was alarmed by her “grim research into the mysteries of death in the desert.”¹⁴ Few appreciated the artist’s response to the bones as symbols of place, the source of inspiration and vitality, not something funereal or surreal.

At the paintings’ debut, few viewers could have anticipated the long hold that the bones would have on the artist’s imagination as, over the next two decades, O’Keeffe added ribs, jawbones and teeth, horns and later pelvises to her skeletal repertoire. The pairing of bones and beauty that early appeared in, for instance, *Horse’s Skull with Pink Rose*, led a few years later to yet more imaginative compositions. By the end of the 1930s, the skeletal still lifes were regularly winning the critics’ favor. In reviewing the artist’s 1939 exhibition at An American Place, Martha Davidson found “the things that are, to Georgia O’Keeffe, symbols of the desert, [are] to us, the macro-cosmos of a very accomplished technician.”¹⁵ Her observation may have been inspired by *Deer Horns*, 1938 (O’Keeffe 941; plate 76), which was first shown in that exhibition. That painting might similarly have moved the eminent critic Edward Alden Jewell to his rapturous applause for O’Keeffe’s “prodigious skill” and her “most sensitive feeling for color, form and subtly searched textures. The modulations are frequently exquisite.”¹⁶ After nearly a decade of working with such symbolically freighted motifs, O’Keeffe’s antlered subject had grown extravagant. Against a background of blue and brown, reminiscent of sky and ground that dominate in O’Keeffe’s Southwestern world, the elaborate horns undulate upward like the carved tracteries of flamboyant Gothic. Their arcing branches are animated by the artist’s characteristically suave brushwork, which Jewell praised for being “polished to a smooth velvety texture.”¹⁷

Sometimes O’Keeffe posed her subjects with the landscape where she discovered them. In *Ram’s Head, White Hollyhock—Hills*, 1935 (O’Keeffe 852), for example, she wed the dual symbols of New Mexico’s high desert country, bone and blossom, with the eroded landscape in a virtual inventory of the subjects that had earlier garnered acclaim. In several compositions from the late 1930s, O’Keeffe seemingly quickened her bony subjects by releasing them from gravity’s strictures, floating her motif above the ancient land in a skeletal apotheosis.

The land that provided such trophies had arrested her attention from her first encounter. During her initial Southwest sojourn in 1929, O’Keeffe traveled with friends to the Painted Desert country near Cameron, Arizona. From there she wrote with excitement to Stieglitz: “I never saw anything so dark and naked and simple—and beautiful—it would be a good place to die and let your bones bleach—.”¹⁸ Following another trip to the region she recreated her initial impression in a painting first exhibited in 1937 as *From the Faraway Nearby* (O’Keeffe 914; plate 58), but elsewhere it was catalogued as *Deer’s Horns near Cameron*. Bleached remains hover above the distant horizon; a horn arcs downward to kiss the hill, linking near and far, relic and region.

In other canvases, such as *Ram’s Head, Blue Morning Glory*, 1938 (O’Keeffe 940; plate 59), the bones materialize like an apparition against the indeterminate blank background. And in yet other compositions, remains repose on an ambiguous plane. Such is the case with the curious painting *It Was a Man and a Pot*, 1942 (O’Keeffe 1087; plate 61), the first of two compositions centered on a human skull. Viewed from behind, the cranium with its jagged seams echoes the edges of the broken vessel that, inverted, shelters the relic. The paired objects rest on a colorful abstract field of red and blue. The red suggests the rust-colored hills of New Mexico, by then made familiar through O’Keeffe’s landscapes. However, the irregular red shapes seem to graph land forms abutting a blue oceanic plane, a setting far from the Southwestern desert, perhaps a wartime map of western Europe soaked in blood. The date of the painting’s creation, near the nadir of Allied fortunes in World War II, together with the fractured pot and exceptional human subject, both titled in the past tense, combine to add a poignant note to this still-life lament.

Elsewhere bones repose *in* the landscape from which the artist gathered them. The most effective of these, *Red Hills and Bones* (O’Keeffe 1025; plate 60), appeared in 1941. The large canvas is among her most ambitious evocations of the arid country of which she was by then an owner, having purchased an adobe house at Ghost Ranch the preceding year. O’Keeffe had written of the bones as “more living” than the live animals, and in the 1941 painting her response is given visual form. The bleached vertebrae in the foreground arch naturally, establishing a rhythm that is repeated in the red humps of hills stretching upward to the margin of the canvas. The scalar relationship between the foreground bones and the background hills is ambiguous; the closely viewed skeletal parts dominate the foreground, but nothing mediates

between the bony “here” and the distant “there.” In short, the middle ground seems to have dropped out of O’Keeffe’s composition, just as it had in her paintings of animal heads hovering above desert horizons a few years earlier.

However composed, the bone paintings captured an essential symbol for O’Keeffe, one that for nearly two decades held her interest and inspired her work. Though the animal skulls were largely exhausted as subject matter by 1940, skeletal imagery remained important to O’Keeffe, with fascination drawn, beginning in 1943, to the curving planes and cavities of pelvis bones. As with the airborne skulls and antlers of the 1930s, her early pelvis bones similarly hovered above low horizons. The mysterious impression of *Pelvis with the Distance*, 1943 (O’Keeffe 1049; plate 78), or *Pelvis with the Moon—New Mexico*, 1943 (O’Keeffe 1050; plate 62), results from the unfamiliarity of the bony subject that is not as readily recognizable as a frontally posed skull. As with the deer horns that only brushed the pink hills beneath, so, too, do these early pelvises barely touch the landscape. Their shapes unfurl across the silvery sky, linking the cosmos to the silhouetted mountains below.

For the skulls and horns of her earlier skeletal subjects, critics and viewers had at least a tradition of *vanitas* compositions and funerary symbolism on which to rely as they sought, however mistakenly, to come to terms with the subject. With the empty pelvises, however, there was less by way of iconographic tradition, and reviewers were left to struggle with the ambiguous white forms in the desert landscape. Some faulted the paintings for their loss of precise design—the pelvic bones were not viewed frontally and centered—and for their “fuzziness of idea (or its communication).”¹⁹ Others found morbid preoccupations clearly communicated by the bleached bones, but in so doing they neglected the artist’s own advice that “there is no such thing as death—only change—.”²⁰ Curator Daniel Catton Rich, organizer of a major O’Keeffe retrospective in 1943, was most eloquent in appraising the new pictures. In them he discovered a “fresh emotion . . . no longer concerned with death or after-death.” The new paintings concentrated upon the sculptural forms closely viewed against sky and land, effecting a merger of macro and micro whose novel inventiveness stirred Rich. “Bone and sky and mountain are welded,” he concluded, “into a luminous affirmation. . . . Once again transformation has triumphed over observation.”²¹ And once again the painter’s things, and the multivalent ideas they conveyed, had arrested attention and won acclaim from critics and curators, collectors and fellow artists.