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## Georgia On Our Minds

**Long after her death, O'Keeffe's still a definitively American artist. But take the myth with a grain of salt**

Still grand: O'Keeffe's Waterfall No. III 'Iao Valley

**By Peter Plagens**  
Newsweek

Aug. 23 issue - For most Americans with an interest in art, the monumentalized flowers and delicately breathtaking landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) are modernist enough to be exciting and traditional enough to be credible. Her persona is equally compelling: the fiercely independent, no-man-needed woman in a long black dress, walking the canyons of New Mexico in search of the perfect bleached skull to paint. A few curmudgeons consider her work "The Bridges of Madison County" on canvas: high-toned at first glance, sentimental at bottom. But from the beginning, O'Keeffe was determined to find a style that was honest, pure and personal, and never to compromise it.

Her early success was startling. By 1927 she was supporting herself entirely

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by painting; in the 1930s her pictures commanded the price equivalent of five automobiles. And she's still a star. "A Sense of Place," the current exhibit at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe,

N.M., shows a selection of her landscapes, along with 20 color photographs of the sites that stirred her to paint them; attendance has spiked 21 percent. (The show runs through Sept. 12, then travels to Columbus, Ohio, and Wilmington, Dela.) And at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, "Georgia O'Keeffe and the Sublime Landscape" will welcome an estimated 60,000 spectators by late September before moving on to Fresno, Calif.; Indianapolis; Chattanooga, Tenn., and Boise, Idaho. That would be second only to the turnout for the museum's Monet show a few years ago.

O'Keeffe claimed that her visual memory reached so far back that she could accurately recall her baby quilt. At the age of 12, she'd decided she was going to be an artist. But as a massive new biography—"Full Bloom" by Los Angeles art writer Hunter Drohojowska-Philp—makes clear, O'Keeffe's real life wasn't quite like the defiant legend her admirers crave. She met the love of her life, the much older modernist photographer Alfred Stieglitz, in 1916, when she stormed into his avant-garde New York gallery demanding to know why some of her drawings had been hung there without her permission. They became lovers and Stieglitz left his wife and child to marry her. He pushed O'Keeffe to be a great painter—and she pushed herself even harder. Their collaboration was both artistic (she posed nude for his lens) and domestic: she settled into being a surprisingly dutiful wife, packing china service for 12 every summer when the couple decamped from their Manhattan penthouse for upstate Lake George.

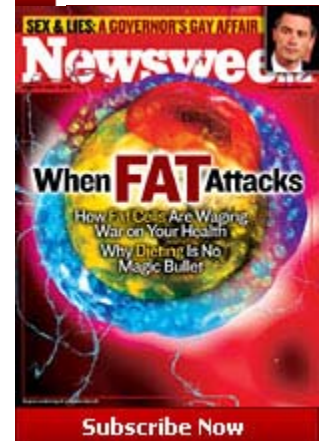
But as O'Keeffe became more confident and celebrated, Stieglitz found himself needing another shot of adoration from another impressionable, esthetically minded young woman. This time it was Dorothy Norman, seven years younger than Stieglitz's own daughter—and also married. O'Keeffe tried to win him back by modeling nude again for him, but his affair eventually led her to a nervous breakdown. Stieglitz was apparently the only sexual relationship she ever had, but a romantic friendship with the Harlem renaissance writer Jean Toomer helped her recover

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enough to pick up her brush again. In 1941 she moved permanently to New Mexico's picturesque high desert and left Stieglitz behind for good.

Out west, O'Keeffe found a way to "mellifluously move between representation and abstraction," as University of Michigan curator Carole McNamara puts it. "And people who are intimidated by abstraction find a way to it with her." An overwhelming number of these fans seem to be female. Drohojowska-Philp notes that other women artists of O'Keeffe's generation and before, such as Mary Cassatt, painted in a style indistinguishable from their male counterparts. But O'Keeffe, she says, "saw her femininity as a positive quality and self-consciously painted in colors traditionally considered to be feminine, like pale pink, yellow or lilac." And long before Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party," she pioneered the use of overtly vaginal imagery.

But before O'Keeffe was a feminist, she was simply—and, in the European-oriented world of modern art, defiantly—American: blunt, pragmatic and spare. "I have not been in Europe," she wrote in 1921. "I prefer to live in a room as bare as possible." (She didn't see Europe until she was in her 60s; except for a couple of paintings in the Prado, she wasn't all that impressed.) In her New Mexico years, she artfully constructed her persona and wrote an autobiography severely downplaying the role of Stieglitz in her life. But more importantly, she managed to create a modern-ist American landscape. Through painstaking composition, a smooth way of putting on paint and a unique female sensibility, she retained the 19th-century grandeur other modernists had neglected. These days, we could use a little American grandeur that emanates from something as benign as a painting.

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