

Always on our minds

Georgia O'Keeffe's unforgettable works make their way to Fresno.

By Marty Berry
The Fresno Bee

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Think of Georgia O'Keeffe, and the images that come to mind likely are either large-scale, lush paintings of a flower or stark renderings of sun-bleached animal bones.

Lesser known to the public are the iconic American artist's abstract works and landscapes. "Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of the Sublime," which opens Friday at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum, seeks to adjust the popular view to allow for a more complete -- or at least broader -- perspective on her work.

The works in the exhibit span O'Keeffe's long career, with 33 paintings drawn from major museum collections throughout North America. A sculpture and three works on paper also are included, as well as photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, O'Keeffe's mentor and husband, and Todd Webb, a close O'Keeffe friend introduced to her by Stieglitz.

There are flower paintings in the exhibit, but most are landscapes.

"The exhibit is an overview of Georgia O'Keeffe, from her early watercolors and early charcoal drawings all the way to her late paintings, in the '60s and '70s," Met curator Susannah Bieber says. "There are amazing examples of large-scale flowers, but also a quite substantial number of Southwestern landscapes, which are a rather unknown side of O'Keeffe."

Some of the landscapes were painted in Lake George, N.Y., where O'Keeffe and Stieglitz spent summers during their marriage, but most were painted in O'Keeffe's beloved New Mexico, where she visited often, moving there permanently in 1949 after Stieglitz's death.

"The desert, the rivers, the mountains and hills, the light -- the landscape is what drew her there," Bieber says. " 'This is really my home,' she said. 'I feel like I am coming home.' It was her place. She loved the peacefulness and infinity of the New Mexico landscape, and the solitude."

For an artist known for being her own woman, both artistically and personally, O'Keeffe's paintings are generally immediately accessible, even though thoroughly original.

"Many of her paintings are slightly realistic, which the general public can relate to," says O'Keeffe biographer Hunter Drohojowska-Philp. "She made a conscious decision to paint her subjects in a beautiful way. She organizes space in a beautiful way."

"Not all modern art is so intrinsically seductive. People prefer to look at paintings that are beautiful."

Her landscapes tend to be more abstract, Bieber says.

"They're quite abstract," she says. "You can see how she depicts the same subject two different ways, side by side. One painting will be more realistic, and then the other abstract."

"The landscapes show a different side of her, the desire to explore the sublime, which might be more difficult for people to grasp. It's an aspect of her work that has been overlooked."

According to press information from the Met: "Paintings such as 'Untitled (Desert Abstraction -- Bear Lake)' (1931) and 'From the River -- Light Blue' (1964) translate earth, water and sky into geometric bands of color and light."

" 'Waterfall -- No. III -- 'Iao Valley' (1939) and 'Canyon Country' (1965) provoke profound feelings of reverence and sublime awe in the viewer."

O'Keeffe's own comments indicated that she felt her abstract works were closer to reality, as she experienced it, than her more objective work. She was seeking an emotional truth in her paintings, rather than anything approaching exact reproduction; she painted in her own language, communicating an inner awe through an evolving style and approach.

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Her later "Sky Above White Clouds I" (1962) also features layered bands of color, and yet is immediately recognizable as sky.

O'Keeffe flew for the first time late in her life, and her view from the airplane inspired a whole series of "Sky Above White Clouds" paintings. The feeling of flying above the clouds and looking out an airplane window should be recognizable to anyone who has flown and marveled at the view from above.

"Seeing is a really important thing for her," Bieber says. "Really seeing the details, spending time looking at an object. That's so difficult to convey to somebody else, but she manages to do that in her paintings.

"There's such a myth around her and the other aspects of her life. It's important to look at the paintings, to confirm why she is so popular. The exhibit should please both scholars and fans -- there's a lot for everybody in the exhibit."

New Mexico also was significant in O'Keeffe's personal life in that she went there ultimately to establish her own identity, separate from Stieglitz. She already had established her artistic identity long before, and in that sense her move to New Mexico and her work there represented more an evolution of her style than a radical departure. But her identity as a person changed profoundly, says Drohojowska-Philp, and of course ultimately, the woman can't be entirely separated from the artist.

The author offers a new look at O'Keeffe the woman, particularly in terms of her relationship with Stieglitz and its effect on her, in her recently published biography, "Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe."

Drohojowska-Philp will be on hand for a Met After Hours talk about O'Keeffe the woman and O'Keeffe the artist.

She writes about the profound effect Stieglitz's infidelities had on O'Keeffe, and particularly his long-term affair with artist Dorothy Norman, whom Drohojowska-Philp interviewed at length twice over the course of 12 years, adding a significant new element to O'Keeffe scholarship.

"It was much more than flirtatious," she says about the relationship between Stieglitz and Norman. "She never really goes away. She takes over the running of the gallery, and Georgia felt very wounded and betrayed by the emotional infidelity. The gallery was something they shared and where they hung out with friends. And there was Dorothy Norman in the same gallery, selling her paintings.

"I really think it brought on Georgia's nervous breakdown. She had this commission to do this huge mural at Radio City. The stress of such a big commission, combined with being fearful about this relationship, led to it. She stopped painting for three years.

"It forced her to think about the future, and she made the decision to go to New Mexico.

"She had a profound relationship with nature. The land was her church. Her landscapes convey the feeling of seeking the sublime in landscape painting, and they speak of her resurrection in the desert. She was self-created there."

Of course, the popular mythical image of O'Keeffe in the Southwest is of a strong, independent feminist.

Drohojowska-Philp offers a new, inner dimension to that image.

"The bio tells you how she became the person she did," the author says. "People see her as very tough and no-nonsense. She did become somewhat abrupt in later life, and almost cruel in the way she could be dismissive of others.

"I was interested in how she became this hardened shell. I realized she was wounded inside and had been wounded repeatedly in her life. After Stieglitz, she was trying to cope on her own in the art world, and she didn't have a role model for that. She is the role model. She had to learn to stay afloat emotionally and financially in a world that didn't encourage that in a woman."

The Met exhibit offers a look at O'Keeffe through Stieglitz's lens, as well as at Stieglitz's own work as influenced by O'Keeffe.

"The Stieglitz photos are from the 1920s and '30s," Bieber says. "Some are of O'Keeffe's hands. He was fascinated with her hands. She was his model, and some are erotic, too."

Stieglitz's "Equivalent" series, of abstract patterns of clouds, was directly influenced by O'Keeffe's work.

"The photos really work nicely with her paintings," Bieber says.

And the Todd Webb photos from the 1950s and '60s offer a candid look at her everyday life.

The show, which will remain on display through Jan. 2, was organized by Joseph S. Czestochowski, drawing from major museum collections across the country, and put on tour by International Arts in Memphis, Tenn., which also published the show's catalog, edited

by Czestochowski and featuring nine scholarly essays exploring O'Keeffe's work in the context of earlier concepts of the sublime.

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