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# georgia O'KEEFFE

*visions of the sublime*

## CURRICULUM GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

*"The unexplainable thing in nature that makes me feel the world is big far beyond my understanding — to understand maybe by trying to put it in to form. To find the feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill."*

*"... that memory or dream thing I do for me comes nearer reality than my objective kind of work..."*

*- Georgia O'Keeffe*

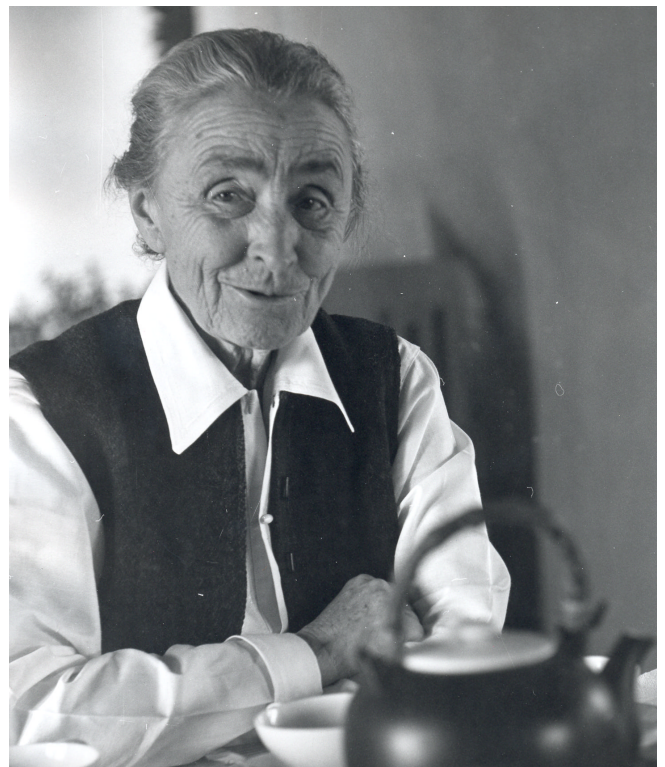
## EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

The exhibition at the FRESNO METROPOLITAN MUSEUM will feature thirty-three paintings and three works on paper spanning the entire career of Georgia O'Keeffe. In addition, a selection of photographs by Alfred Stieglitz and Todd Webb will enhance the exhibition.

## INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

Through the art of American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, (1877-1986), the curriculum guide presented here will afford an opportunity for students and teachers to employ the [Visual and Performing Arts Standards](#) in the areas of Creative Expression; Aesthetic Valuing; Historic and Cultural Context; Artistic Perception; and, Writing. Refer to the following Standards Overview Chart.

The guide focuses on classroom activities based on three important and well-known works: *Dark & Lavender Leaf*, 1931; *Canyon County*, 1965; and, *From the River, Light Blue*, 1964. The paintings, based on natural structure, demonstrate a simplification of forms reducing each shape to its most basic structure and express O'Keeffe's devotion to the western landscape. The images are a celebration of light, color and nature.



Todd Webb, *At Ghost Ranch*, 1962. Gelatin silver photograph. Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts. Gift of Mr and Mrs. Todd Webb; Todd Webb Study Collection 4717/23PH

## STANDARDS OVERVIEW

TOPICS	VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS STANDARDS
The Life of Georgia O'Keeffe	3.0 Historical and Cultural Context 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications
Georgia O'Keeffe Chronology	3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
The Landscape Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe	3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
Naming an Exhibition	3.0 Historical and Cultural Context 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications
Vocabulary	1.0 Artistic Perception 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
Activity 1: The Process of Abstraction; a Collage Activity (Grades K - 5)	1.0 Artistic Perception 2.0 Creative Expression 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
Activity 2: The Process of Abstraction; a Drawing Activity (Grades 6 - 12)	2.0 Creative Expression 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
Activity 3: Making Shadow Images	2.0 Creative Expression 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
Activity 4: Post-Visit Writing Activity	2.0 Creative Expression 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

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# THE LIFE OF GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

Georgia Totto O'Keeffe was born to a family of seven children in Wisconsin in November of 1887 where she lived on a large dairy farm until her family moved to Virginia in 1902.

Education was very important to the O'Keeffe family and from the age of 11, Georgia received an education in the arts. She attended the School of the Arts Institute in Chicago, Illinois, and the [Art Students League \(ASL\)](#) in New York. At ASL she was awarded a scholarship for her still-life painting and was able to attend the ASL outdoor school at Lake George, New York. Lake George later became the subject of many of her paintings.

In 1912, and at age 25, O'Keeffe was introduced to the ideas of an innovative artist and one of America's greatest art educators, Arthur Wesley Dow. Dow's influence extended to some of the leading painters, printmakers, photographers, ceramicists, and furniture-makers of the first half of the 20th century. O'Keeffe first drew and painted representationally but this work did not satisfy her and she began making charcoal drawings of land forms from memory. Dow inspired her, instructed her, and eventually convinced her to teach in Texas.

O'Keeffe began to correspond with photographer Alfred Stieglitz in New York, who then owned and operated the infamous '291' Gallery. Stieglitz's studio was a stronghold for young American Abstractionists. It was during this time that Stieglitz exhibited some of O'Keeffe's drawings without her permission; this was her first exhibition. By 1928 Stieglitz urged O'Keeffe to leave her job in Texas and move to New York City which she promptly did. Six years later they were married. Through Stieglitz, O'Keeffe was able to immerse herself in the contemporary environment of art, [abstraction](#), and modernism.

O'Keeffe developed a lifelong passion to travel to new places and each journey inspired ideas and [subject matter](#) for her [paintings](#). O'Keeffe frequently painted [architectural](#) forms and the natural surroundings of any area she visited. *Waterfall - No. III - 'Iao Valley*, 1939, a painting in the exhibition, is a product of O'Keeffe's travel to Hawaii.

In 1925 Stieglitz integrated O'Keeffe into his circle and further into the [American Modern](#) art world as he exhibited the *Portrait of a Day* series, *Eggplant*, and *The Chestnut Tree - Grey* in a group exhibition entitled the *Seven Americans*. The exhibition featured the works of O'Keeffe, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Charles Demuth, Paul Strand as well as Stieglitz's own photographs. The exhibition created a context for O'Keeffe's art and thrust her into the public eye. It also positioned her at the top of her profession when few women artists were taken seriously. O'Keeffe's highly individual and intuitive style, developed over a long and prolific career, placed her in the forefront of American Modernists. Such promotion and praise led to O'Keeffe's first [retrospective](#) at the Brooklyn Museum in 1927; she was then 40 years old and would live another 59 years.

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## GEORGIA O'KEEFFE CHRONOLOGY

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

1887	Born in Wisconsin
1912	Is introduced to the ideas of artist/educator, Arthur Wesley Dow
1916	Begins a teaching career at West Texas State Normal College. O'Keeffe's friend shows her drawings to Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz shows O'Keeffe's work at his '291' Gallery without the artist's permission
1917	Stieglitz opens O'Keeffe's first solo exhibition at '291' Gallery; most of the watercolors exhibited were painted during her time in Texas. O'Keeffe is 20 years of age.
1918	Moves to New York
1924	Marries Stieglitz and exhibits her flower paintings for the first time
1925	<i>Seven Americans</i> Exhibition
1927	Brooklyn Museum hosts O'Keeffe's first retrospective
1929	Visits Taos, New Mexico
1934	Spends first summer at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico
1939	Travels to Hawaii on money received from Dole Commission
1945	Purchases property in Abiquiu, New Mexico, builds a home and art studio
1946	Stieglitz dies
1949	Moves permanently to New Mexico, begins <i>Patio Series</i>
1959	Travels extensively internationally and paints scenes from airplanes
1962	Elected to the 50 member American Academy of Arts and Letters, the nation's highest honor society for people in the arts
1970	Given a retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art, O'Keeffe's work becomes <i>en vogue</i> once more
1971	Looses her sight, paints with an assistant
1976	Permits a documentary to be produced about her life
1986	Dies at age 98, ashes scattered over New Mexico

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# THE LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS OF GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Georgia O'Keeffe is most well known for her flower paintings but a larger portion of her work was actually devoted to landscape. The leaves and petals of the flowers themselves have been described as landscape. She regularly selected austere and remote sites as the subject of her work, often depicting only a small portion of the entire range of her view on canvas. Many of the landscapes O'Keeffe painted of New Mexico are evocative of the foothills of the San Joaquin Valley.

Many critics and scholars have talked about themes in O'Keeffe's work such as the cycles of birth, life, death and decay. Others observed that she incorporated photographic techniques such as cropping and close-ups well before the technology of color film or large photographic blow-ups had been invented.

Although O'Keeffe's work is usually described as abstract or modern, she did not confirm the critics' interpretations of her flower paintings. She said that she was painting the plants as she saw them--merely observing nature in her own way. She said, "A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower... still--in a way--nobody really sees a flower--really--it is so small.... So I said to myself--I'll paint what I see...but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it...even busy New Yorkers [will] take time to see what I see of flowers.... When you [referring to critics and others who wrote about these paintings] took time to really notice my flower you hung all your associations with flowers on my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower--and I don't."

Many consider O'Keeffe's work abstraction, but she is quoted as saying "My paintings look completely real to me. But the world calls them abstraction since no one else sees what I see." O'Keeffe's work is strong and bold and often compels the viewer to take notice.

O'Keeffe was interested in the more traditional European-based modern art, and learned well the methods taught by her instructors. She was taught the techniques of the Impressionists, the Fauvists, and the Expressionists but studied not in Europe, but in America. Under their tutelage, she felt restricted almost as if she were replicating their work and not creating her own.

In 1915, O'Keeffe read an important book that would profoundly influence her painting. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, by the Russian modern painter Wassily Kandinsky, presented theoretical concepts and a point of view that added another dimension to her art and strengthened her desire to create strongly personal work. In the publication, Kandinsky investigated the effect of colors as "vibrations of the soul" and developed a system for connecting form and color; each color was assigned a spiritual expressive quality. Kandinsky believed that painting should represent a mood not illustrate an object. His theory struck a chord with O'Keeffe and her style of painting became her own singular and very personal vision.

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## NAMING AN EXHIBITION

### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

### AESTHETIC VALUING

### CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

Museum exhibitions are often named for an underlying theme or concept. In the case of the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition at the Fresno Metropolitan Museum, is entitled *Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of the Sublime*.

The concept of the [sublime](#), popularized by Edmund Burke in the 18th century, was derived from Cassius Longinus, a Greek rhetorician and philosopher who lived from 213 to 273. According to Joseph S. Czestochowski, the organizer of the exhibition, "Edmund Burke's late eighteenth-century aesthetic concept of the "sublime" —a concept that acquired multiple meanings in nineteenth-century landscape painting but is not generally used to discuss landscape in the twentieth century when the focus shifts to more modern concerns. Burke's definition of the sublime associated feelings of fear, gloom, and awe with land forms of great scale and size such as mountains, oceans, and deserts. The vastness of these natural phenomena made them difficult to explain, provoking those feelings of infinity that O'Keeffe looks for in her contact with nature. However, unlike eighteenth-century spectators of nature, O'Keeffe finds these aesthetic responses in places others have overlooked—the plains of west Texas, the "badlands" of northern New Mexico with its eroded red, gray, and black hills."

O'Keeffe's vision of the sublime revolved around awe and emptiness. In a 1977 documentary movie about her life and art, Georgia O'Keeffe recounts a story which illuminates her own vision of the sublime. When O'Keeffe lived and worked in Texas she enjoyed the emptiness of that part of the United States. In the early 1900s, Texas was a vast empty land of cowboys, ranches and the seemingly endless plains. O'Keeffe recalled driving her car during the latter part of the day in any direction she chose. There were only dirt roads in the area and she would simply drive onto the plains. When the town disappeared behind her, O'Keeffe would stop and watch the twilight fade to darkness. O'Keeffe enjoyed the disappearance of the town behind her, and the lone feeling when faced with the dark plains. Only the distant lights of the town could guide her back to civilization. Georgia O'Keeffe characterized the sublime as the sense of vastness, of being alone, and of the emptiness and the sensation of simplicity.

Like many of her predecessors, O'Keeffe turned to nature for inspiration. Her frequent choice of desolate, inaccessible sites as subjects exemplified the sublime. She found peace in the solitude in the barren landscape. O'Keeffe simplified all that she viewed by the use of form and color. In this way she translated her powerful emotions about the wonder of nature to her canvases.

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## VOCABULARY

### ARTISTIC PERCEPTION HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Abstraction	An artistic technique that emphasizes conceptual representation and rejects the attempt to represent objects in a realistic or representational manner, a simplification of form that suggests a subject.
American Modern Art	An art movement in the early 20th century centered on experimenting with subject matter and materials. O'Keeffe was deeply involved in the movement due to her husband's interest in modern art and artists.
Architectural	Refers, in general, to any part of a building. O'Keeffe would often portray only a small portion of a building, such as a corner or a roof, without depicting the entire building.
Arthur Wesley Dow	Dow was inspired by the aesthetics of East Asian art as well as Impressionism. He taught his students to appreciate the elegance of design that was based on nature.
Art Students League (ASL)	The Art Students League was established in New York in 1875. Although it had no entrance requirements or set courses, it was considered one of the most important art schools in the country and in 1900 had nearly one thousand students. The Art Students League awarded O'Keeffe a scholarship that took her to Lake George, New York. Her first gallery show was of work created at Lake George.
Concerning the Spiritual in Art	Author and artist Wassily Kandinsky expresses his objectives and ideals about art and painting in the book entitled <i>Concerning the Spiritual in Art</i> . Written in 1911, it would greatly influence many artists including O'Keeffe.
Critic	One who specializes professionally in the evaluation and appreciation of literary or artistic works such as a film critic, a dance critic, or an art critic.
Cropping	Trimming a photograph or an image. Although this technique is most often used in photography, O'Keeffe often used cropping in painting to emphasize a part of the whole.
Expressionism	A term first popularized in Germany used to characterize all the modern art opposed to Impressionism; more commonly used to describe distortions of color and shape that reflect the artist's emotion. Artists who followed this style were called <a href="#">Expressionists</a> .
Fauvism	Generally regarded as the beginning of the modern art movement where artists used non-realistic color and bold draftsmanship. Artists who followed this style were called <a href="#">Fauvists</a> . Matisse is considered the leader of the Fauvist movement.
Impressionists	A group of painters in the 19th century who practiced a style of painting, called Impressionism, and applied small touches of color rather than broad strokes. Famous impressionists include Monet and Renoir.
Non-representational	A style of art that began in the early 20th century and moved away from recognizable images.
Painting	To form a figure or likeness in colors on a flat surface, as upon canvas; to represent by means of colors or hues; to portray with paints; as to paint a portrait or a landscape. Although O'Keeffe began work with charcoal drawings, she is most well known for her paintings.



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Photographic technique	The process in which a photograph is developed. O'Keeffe's husband pioneered much of the process, influencing a seemingly natural translation to O'Keeffe's artwork.
Retrospective	An exhibition of works produced by an artist over a considerable period. The O'Keeffe retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 1927 brought the artist to the front of the art world.
Subject matter	The object that is being represented through art.
The Sublime	An art term used in the 18th century derived from the Greek philosopher Longinus in the mid 200s AD. It was popularized with Edmund Burke's <i>Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful</i> (1757), which refers to the powerful emotions such as fear, awe, dread, and wonder. O'Keeffe's vision of the sublime revolved around awe and emptiness.
Theme	A recurring idea among the works of artists. In addition to the natural landscape itself, the crosses of the Southwest and the buildings of New York were themes in her work.
Wassily Kandinsky	Artist, and author of <i>Concerning the Spiritual in Art</i> (1911). Kandinsky was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth-century. He was driven to express his emotions through <a href="#">non-representational</a> art. His writings influenced the work of O'Keeffe.



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## ACTIVITY 1

### THE PROCESS OF ABSTRACTION -COLLAGE ACTIVITY

(RECOMMENDED FOR GRADES K - 5)

ARTISTIC PERCEPTION  
CREATIVE EXPRESSION  
AESTHETIC VALUING

## INTRODUCTION

By simplifying nature into blocks of color and abstract shapes, Georgia O'Keeffe takes us beyond what we can physically see to what our minds can imagine. Through the use of images, the *Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of the Sublime* exhibition asks the viewer to make meaning of O'Keeffe's painting and to respond to her abstract images of nature. It is possible that no two people may react in the same way.

Most students are familiar with realistic art, or art that looks just like the subject the artist is portraying. Realistic paintings can limit what we see to a particular time because they are finite. Abstract works allow us to expand our imagination and explore our sense of wonder; abstract works are infinite.

View the reproduction of two of O'Keeffe paintings, *Canyon County* and *From the River, Light Blue* on a large monitor or made into transparencies. Through her paintings, Georgia O'Keeffe gave form to emotional responses to the places where she lived.

## DISCUSSION

Ask the class to tell you what they think these paintings are about.

Do they see realistic details?

What kinds of shapes represent objects in nature?

What kinds of emotions are created beyond the recording of a view?

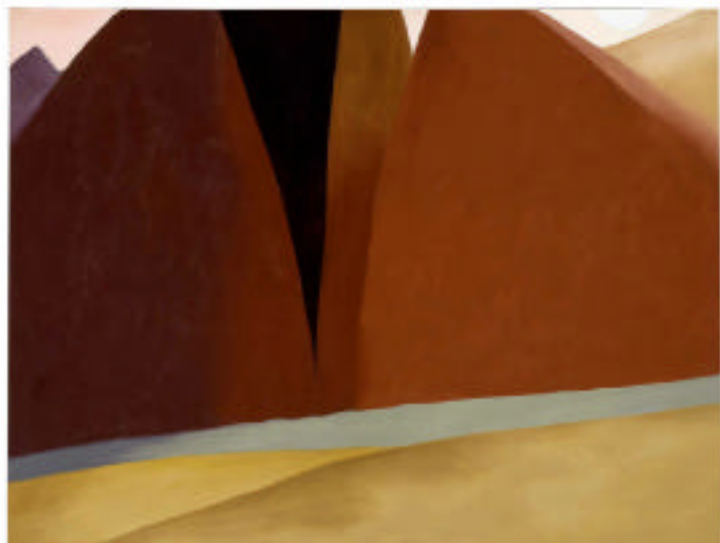
What can we see in our minds about the landscape?

How does the color add to the ambiance of the painting?

How do the paintings affect them?



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887 - 1986), *From the River, Light Blue*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40, Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Gift of the estate of Georgia O'Keeffe, 1987. © 2003 Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe. Photo: Blair Clark



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887 - 1986), *Canyon County*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40. Collection of Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona. Gift of the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation.

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## ACTIVITY 1 (continued)

### HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Georgia O'Keeffe went outdoors and viewed actual scenery, but the teacher can simulate a trip into nature by locating photographic images of American landscapes from postcards, calendars and magazines.

Give each student a photo to carefully study. After several minutes have passed, turn the image over so that it can no longer be seen.

Without using pencils to outline shapes, have the students cut out the basic shapes of the "remembered" photos from an array of colored construction paper. Lay the shapes on a 12" x 18" colored background paper. When they are satisfied with their composition, glue the pieces to the background.

### FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Display the students' art. Compare and contrast the newly created abstract landscapes. The teacher may create a game by randomly distributing the photographic images to the class and asking them to match the photo to the abstract compositions.

### MATERIALS

Photographic images of landscapes from postcards, calendars or magazines

12" x 18" assorted colors of construction paper

One sheet for background for each student

Scraps for smaller, cut out pieces

Glue

Scissors

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## ACTIVITY 2

### THE PROCESS OF ABSTRACTION - DRAWING ACTIVITY (RECOMMENDED FOR GRADES 6- 12)

#### CREATIVE EXPRESSION

#### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

#### CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of Georgia O'Keeffe's work is simplification of the subject. Many consider her work abstract. As we view O'Keeffe's work we notice large, flat areas of color and simplified shapes, yet we can determine the subject.

O'Keeffe's painting was not representational, that is, it was not painted exactly as it appeared in life. By following the instructions below, students can modify their drawing from representational to abstract in four steps.

## INSTRUCTIONS

The student will make a series of four drawings of the same object. Instruct the students to use the entire surface of their paper for their drawing.

- 1 The first drawing should include as many details as possible and should look as exact as possible. Use all of the colored pencils to create as much detail as possible with lines and shading.
- 2 In the second drawing, eliminate some of the unessential details. Draw the object again but without some of the more subtle details.
- 3 In the third, incorporate even fewer details. This drawing will consist mainly of areas of color, bolder lines and shapes.
- 4 The fourth drawing should give the viewer a sense of the object but not a realistic image of it. By the time the object is drawn for the fourth time, only the most essential details should be included.

## MATERIALS

The object to be drawn (leaves or other objects of nature)

4 pieces of paper for each student

Colored pencils, 3 or 4 per student

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## ACTIVITY 3

### MAKING SHADOW IMAGES

## CREATIVE EXPRESSION

### AESTHETIC VALUING

#### INTRODUCTION

Georgia O'Keeffe often painted small objects in nature such as flowers, shells and leaves but enlarged them to become their own landscape. She isolated and concentrated on single elements of nature with a special intensity. She wanted viewers to stop and take time to really see. These natural objects filled the space on large canvases in a beautiful, minimal way. In the painting *Dark & Lavender Leaf*, in this exhibition, she magnifies two leaves to fill a 20" x 17" space. O'Keeffe's intimate reaction to these simple shapes makes us into aesthetic observers as well. The image appeals to our senses and enhances our appreciation of nature.

#### HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

Take your students on a walk around the neighborhood searching for interesting leaves, seed pods, and pine cones. Students may also be asked to bring collections of shells, or other minute objects from nature to share with the class.

One way to create magnified images from nature, as inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe, is to draw the outline of a leaf (shell, etc.) from a shadow cast on a piece of paper by holding the leaf several inches above the paper. The best way to do this is to have the class take sheets of colored construction paper outside in the bright sunshine to intensify the cast shadows. The size of the shadow may be increased by raising the leaf higher above the paper.

Do this with two contrasting shapes, sizes, and colors of leaves (or other objects). With pastel chalk, add gradations of shading or veins and glue to the background paper. Remember the goal is not to copy *Dark & Lavender Leaf* but to create a unique picture that expresses your response to nature.

#### MATERIALS

Reproduction of *Dark & Lavender Leaf* on monitor or transparency

Small objects from nature - leaves, shells, fruits, veggies, flowers, etc.

Assorted colors of construction paper

Scissors

Colored pastel chalk

Glue

Sunshine



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887 - 1986), *Dark & Lavender Leaf*, 1931. Oil on canvas, 20 x 17. Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Gift of the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, 1993. (1993.51.3) © 2003 Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe. Photo: Blair Clark

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## ACTIVITY 4

### POST-VISIT WRITING ACTIVITY

#### CREATIVE EXPRESSION

#### HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

#### CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

During your Docent-led tour of the exhibition, your Docent will introduce the class to a painting entitled *From the River, Light Blue* that was painted by Georgia O'Keeffe in 1964. Take a few minutes to look at and to discuss the landscape painting. Notice the use of colors and shapes.

When the students return to the classroom, using the title of the painting as a clue to its content, have them describe in their own words the areas of color found in the painting and what they might represent. How do they think the artist decided on the shapes to use? Why do they think she selected certain colors? Since the students are being asked for their opinion, descriptions will vary; all answers are correct.

Another interesting idea to explore that relates to O'Keeffe's work is the emotional content. Ask your students:

What's going on in this picture?

How do they feel about the painting?

Does the painting evoke a response?

Does it feel warm or cool?

Share ideas with the class. The Post-Visit Writing Activity may be written or verbal and may be used to complement Activity 1, 2, or 3 in this guide.



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887 - 1986), *From the River, Light Blue*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40, Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Gift of the estate of Georgia O'Keeffe, 1987. © 2003 Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe. Photo: Blair Clark

## CREDIT AND ORGANIZATION

*Georgia O'Keeffe: Visions of the Sublime* is organized by Joseph S. Czestochowski, and is circulated by International Arts, Memphis, Tennessee. The exhibition was made possible by the assistance of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, Abiquiú, New Mexico; George Eastman House, Rochester (Alfred Stieglitz Collection); and the Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico (Georgia O'Keeffe Collection). All O'Keeffe images are provided courtesy of International Arts, Memphis, Tennessee. © 2004 courtesy of International Arts, Memphis, Tennessee.