
Georgia O'Keeffe, Her Life in Paintings

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Works to Know from the Mother of American Modernism

She needs no introduction. To many of us, Georgia O'Keeffe is a beloved artistic icon and inspiration.

Tracing her life through her works is fitting tribute that yields several surprises and brings an already enraptured audience even more to appreciate.

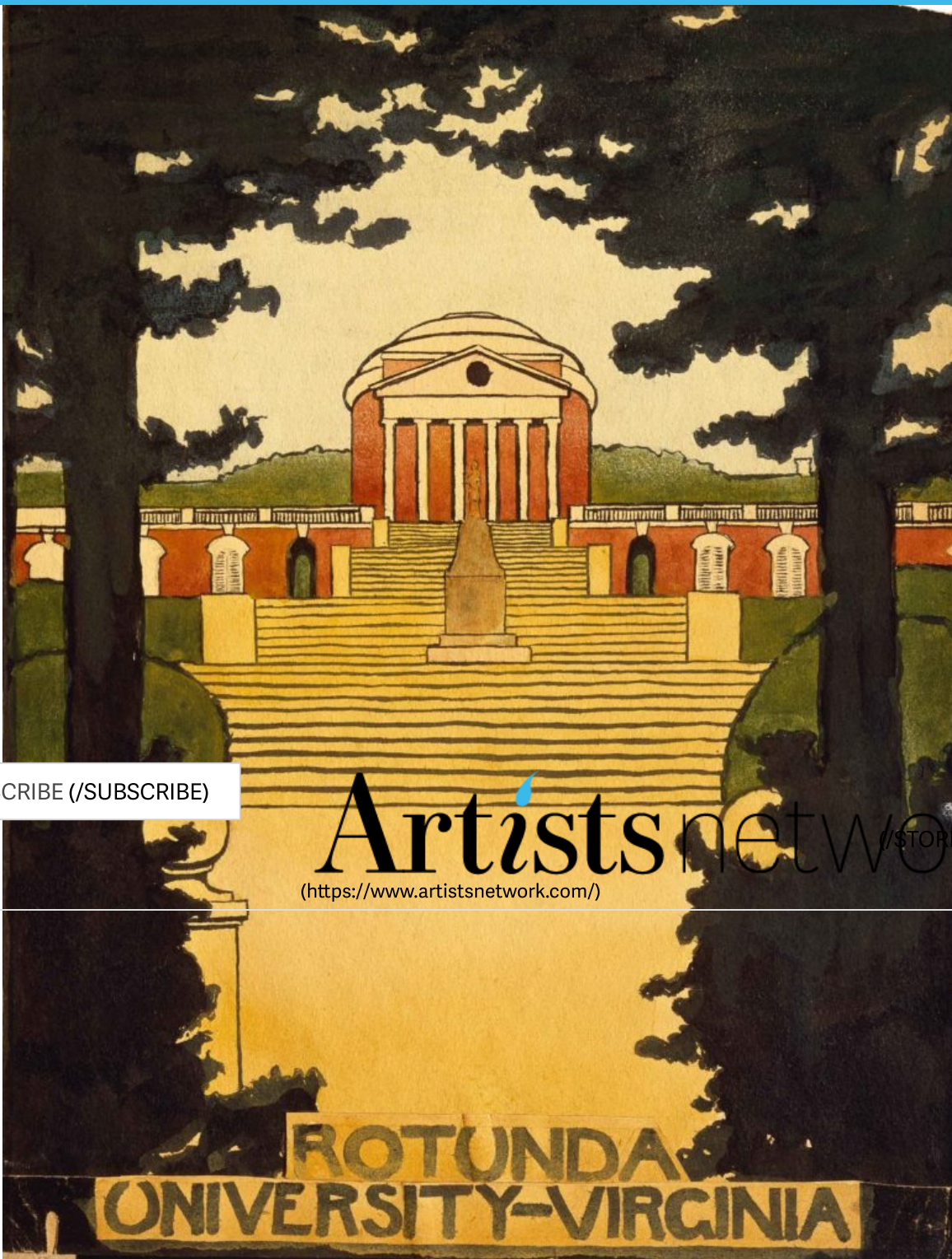
Dead Rabbit and Copper Pot (1908)



In 1907, O'Keeffe studied at the Art Students League in New York City. She won a competition at the school for her still life, *Dead Rabbit and Copper Pot*.

The artist explored New York City galleries while studying at the League. That includes visiting the avant-garde gallery, 291, owned by her future husband, Alfred Stieglitz.

[Rotunda at University of Virginia \(c. 1914\)](#)



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For roughly four years, Georgia O’Keeffe went without painting. It began when she had to give up pursuing her art education to take a job as a commercial illustrator in Chicago in 1908.

In 1910 she headed east to her family's home in Virginia, where she recovered from a bout of measles. She began teaching art in 1911 and took art classes during 1912-1914.

But it wasn't until she was exposed to the ideas of Arthur Wesley Dow, who stressed art as an expression of personal style and design, that she experienced a significant breakthrough with her work.

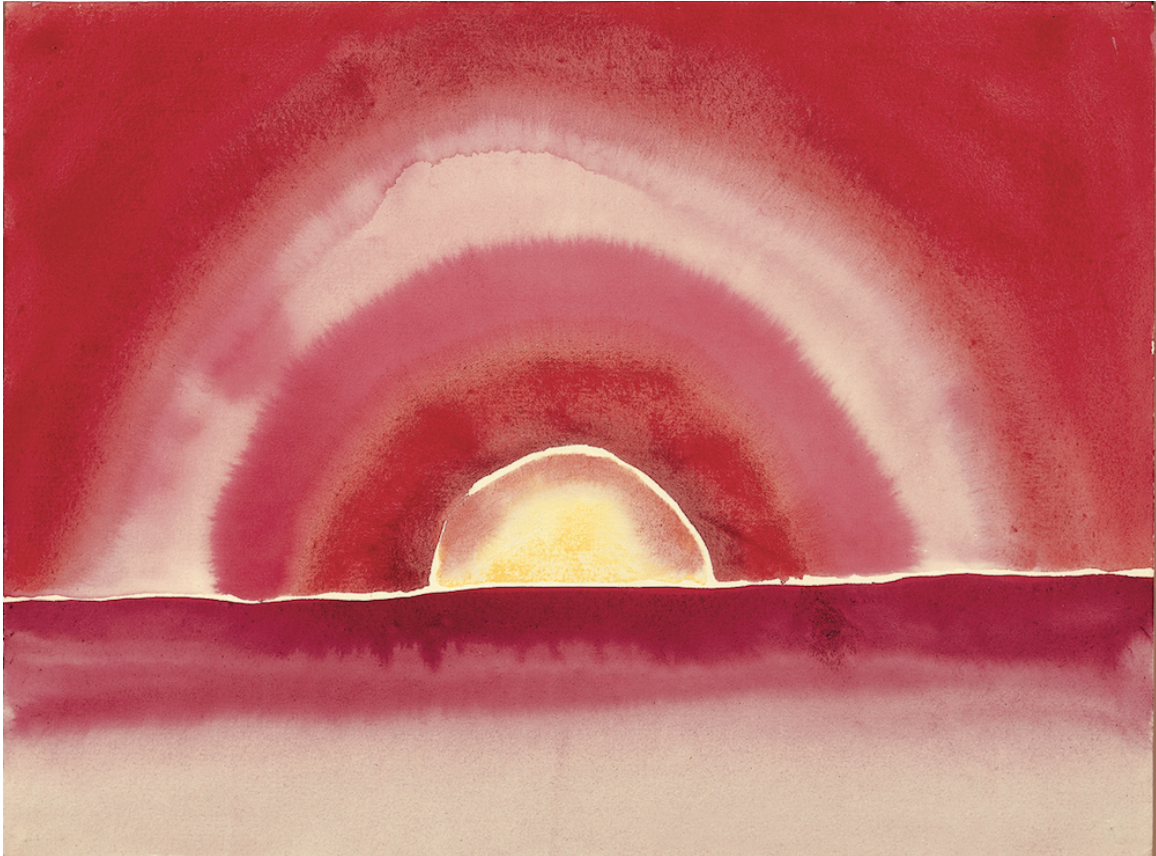
No. 12 Special (1916)



Dow's influence on O'Keeffe cannot be understated. Exposure to his teachings were a turning point for O'Keeffe. After a class with him in 1914, she created a series of charcoal drawings that mark the beginning of her modernist career and her pursuit of unabashed abstraction.

Through a friend, O'Keeffe's drawings made their way to the desk of Alfred Stieglitz. He called the works the "purest, finest, sincerest things..." and showed them at 291 in April 1916.

Sunrise (1916)



For a span of two years while living in Texas, O'Keeffe taught during the day and painted at night. She painted the plains and endless skies, colorful sunrises and sunsets.

She made a series of vibrant paintings of the Palo Duro Canyon and a watercolor series titled *Light Coming On the Plains*. The works' commonalities include intense colors and a continued push toward abstraction.

The Flag (1918)



During the latter years of World War I, O'Keeffe taught at a state college in west Texas, heading the school's art department. Her brother, Alexis, was at a military camp nearby. O'Keeffe, one of seven siblings, went to see him in the autumn of 1917 as he prepared to ship out to the fighting in Europe.

The Flag was painted in the early part of 1918 when the artist took a leave of absence from teaching to recover from the influenza pandemic that killed 20 million people worldwide. Alexis died fighting in France. The work was not displayed until 1968.

Red Canna (1924)



By 1918, Stieglitz had taken O’Keeffe securely under his wing, bringing her to New York and introducing her to the heavy hitters of early modernism including Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and Charles Demuth among others.

O’Keeffe’s work had fully evolved into intersections between abstraction, personal sensation and vision, and the natural world. She and Stieglitz would marry after his divorce is finalized in 1924.

In the early 1920s O’Keeffe created many of the magnified large-scale floral paintings she would become famous for, including her Red Canna paintings. Florals number around 200 of the artist’s 2,000 or so total works.

Radiator Building — Night, New York (1925)



The city skyline became O'Keeffe's muse for a time. She created a series of skyscraper paintings based on the view from her 30th floor apartment among other vantage points throughout the city starting in 1925.

Over the years, the works go from glitz and city lights to smog-filled pieces with little glamour. It is probably no wonder that soon after O'Keeffe would find her way out of the city to New Mexico.

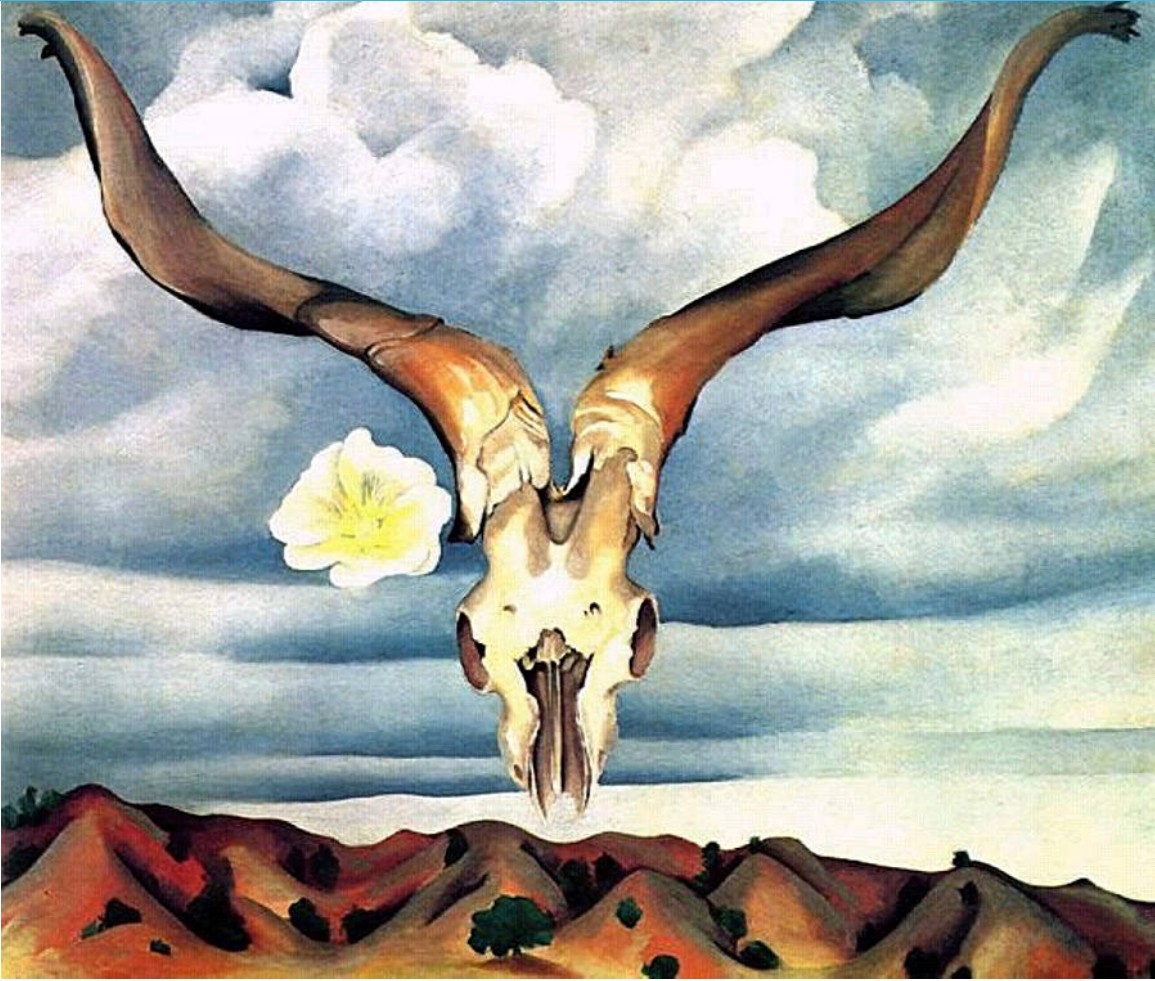
But in terms of career growth, the latter 1920s were filled with blockbusters for the artist. Her work commanded extremely high prices and was on view in major exhibitions and solo retrospectives.

[Jimson Weed \(1932\)](#)



An iconic close-up floral painting from O'Keeffe that made first-page headlines worldwide is *Jimson Weed*. It sold for \$44,405,000 at Sotheby's in November 2014. It is the most expensive artwork by a female ever sold at auction.

[Ram's Head with Hollyhock \(1935\)](#)



O'Keeffe's life and work were never the same after she filled her vision with the Southwestern horizon. After 1929 she spent part of every year in New Mexico, driving solo in her Ford Model A across the bad lands, painting from the seat of her car and collecting specimen from the desert floor to bring back to her studio.

O'Keeffe did stop painting for close to a year after being hospitalized for a mental breakdown, but she returned to her work reinvigorated after her first visit to Ghost Ranch, north of Abiquiu in New Mexico, in 1934. It would be a place she would visit on and off until Stieglitz's death in 1946. She would eventually leave New York City for good and settle permanently in Abiquiu.

[Sky Above Clouds IV \(1965\)](#)



After transplanting her life and work completely to the desert, O'Keeffe spent the intervening years traveling the globe for months at a time followed by bouts of working and painting in New Mexico. She made her large-scale cloud works in her garage in Abiquiu in 1965. These were inspired by the view of clouds from an airplane window.

O'Keeffe, suffering from blindness due to macular degeneration, would make her last unassisted oil painting in 1972. By 1984 she had to give up drawing as well because of her lack of eyesight. O'Keeffe would move to Santa Fe in 1984 and passed away on March 6, 1986.

Paint Yourself Calm

After writing through O'Keeffe's life in art, I feel strangely moved to create. Finding a place to put all the swirling emotions (sadness at her demise, admiration for her grit, and thankfulness that she lived so fearlessly through her art) so that I can feel calm and less dizzied is what Jean Haines' Watercolor Mindfulness Streaming Video (https://www.artistsnetwork.com/store/watercolor-mindfulness?utm_source=artistsnetwork.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=arn-cja-at-180227) gives us—an outlet so we can paint ourselves calm, find peace through making and re-energized by letting our feelings out and letting them go. Jean's video is a perfect companion to all that flow. Enjoy!

Author



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Bonnie C

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i got to see the documentary on her a few years ago on PBS. it was wonderful and i learned so much about her whole life. she was a pretty strong lady.

February 28, 2018 at 12:38 am



Gayle M

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I appreciate her art more and more every time I see something she has created. Some of my work in oils has taken on an influence from her. People often comment, that I must be the next Georgia, I laugh because how can you match such natural flow? I love her work.

March 6, 2018 at 8:13 pm



Courtney Jordan

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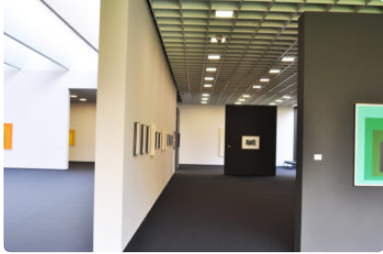
I feel the same way. If I can get to feel as natural in my work as she was with hers, then I'll know I'm at my best. That's an awesome compliment though, Gayle! Congrats!!

March 7, 2018 at 5:03 am

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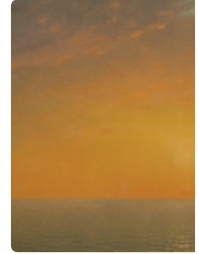
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