

Rosin

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Period 4

### **Georgia O’Keeffe’s Art and Cultural Influence**

Georgia O’Keeffe, a radical modern abstract painter, revolutionized and shaped American women’s culture with disregard for the accepted “Freudian interpretations of her work” and “critical evaluations [of her artwork] that focused on her gender” (Merrill 34) and pioneered a new era of conceptual, modernist art. O’Keeffe’s unique work is a product of her American Romanticist and Transcendentalist mindset - her love of nature, her imagination with her subjects and colors, her emotional spontaneity and her overall self-reliance and independence as an artist within the American tradition.

Georgia O’Keeffe’s work is a reflection of the Modernist era with a Romantic approach in the American experience; at a time when America was particularly influenced by the artistic direction of Europe, it moved toward totally abstract visual expression. The beginnings of the Modernist era in American resulted from the

Events of World War I (1914-1918) [which] led to the appearance of reform-based European avant-garde art. These works criticized European culture and contributed to political and social reform movements after the war. But some artists in the early 1900's wanted to restore to art its primary creative function. For example, German artist Kurt Schwitters created collages from fragments of newsprint and discarded items, including stamps, wood, buttons, and cloth. He also wanted to weaken the authority of conventional art forms. Avant-garde ideals became especially important in art of the mid-1900's when artists tended to combine distinct art forms, such as architecture, motion pictures, music, painting, sculpture, and theater. (Foster)

Alfred Steiglitz, the founder of Studio 291, “began to hold exhibitions of modern photography and art as early as 1905.” Inspired by the European avant-garde, seen at the 1913 Amory Show in New York, “Studio 291 became a Mecca for American Modernists who had a proclivity for abstraction and also reflected in a meaningful measure American *zeitgeist*” (Daneshvari). As a friend and aficionado of O’Keeffe’s work, Steiglitz is credited for introducing her paintings and bringing over a new Modernist approach to art in America where it began to take on a new meaning:

This [Modernist] trend coincided with revolutionary advances in science and technology, such as Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalytic theory and explication of the role of the unconscious, and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. City life was changing too, with the pervasive presence of electric lights, automobiles, and skyscrapers. Sparked by these dramatic changes, American artists were among those who experimented with unconventional techniques. (Caroll)

Artists in America, among them O’Keeffe, abandoned the accepted techniques and views of how a work of art should look and initiated a new era of Modern Abstractionism.

O’Keeffe captures the essence of the previous century’s American transcendentalist movement in the subjects of her paintings which are mostly elements from nature.

O’Keeffe’s adoration for the outdoors in her paintings that convey individualism, simplicity, purity, and solitude. Her love for the solitude that the canyons of Texas and the plains of New Mexico provided drew her out from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the East, particularly the heavily industrial environment of New York City. The paintings she did in New Mexico such as *Red and Yellow Cliffs* and *Road Past the View* (Bloemink 10) particularly express a sense of solitude. *Red and Yellow Cliffs* (Bloemink 11) is done in warm shades of reds, oranges, and yellows, and is a painting of cliffs that appear to go on for eternity, with no other living things in the distance but shrubs. Similarly, *Road Past the View* (Bloemink 27) is a painting of three cliffs whose purples, maroons, and

blues blend together in the background, and fade to white in the foreground where there is a never-ending road, which looks more like an endless blue wavy line flowing over the horizon. These paintings both embody O'Keeffe's love for the solitude that she got from the simplicity and purity of the vast sublime plains. Similarly, a transcendentalist like Thoreau also found solitude inspiring; he believed that "in nature's eternal calm man finds himself" (American). Thoreau would comment he 'love[d] to be alone' (American) in the forests of Walden when he was writing just as O'Keeffe loved the solitude the plains of New Mexico when she painted.

Transcendentalist themes were not only present in her paintings of nature, but also in her depictions of buildings, such as the barns and churches in New Mexico and Canada, which were her most simply composed works. Bold lines and geometric shapes construct *White Canadian Barn No.2* (Bloemink 87); her effectiveness in plainness is astounding. The simple, abstract construction of the building conveys a sense of isolation. With its rectangular shape, a few square windows scattered across the face, sitting on bright green grass, the barn's simplicity in its lack of detail is surreal. Her love for objective, pure images that reveal somber purpose without excess detail makes O'Keeffe a modern abstractionist with a transcendental mindset. In *Jimsonweed* (Frazier 43), O'Keeffe paints the flowers objectively, and massive; the white flowers contrast with the dark green of the leaves in the background. Their beautiful simplicity, she seems to say, often goes overlooked. O'Keeffe's art seems to aim at revealing the natural beauty in things that we see everyday, without distorting them or giving them excess detail, but instead capturing what they really are, and that degree is based on the level of abstractionism. In *East River from the 30<sup>th</sup> Story of the Shelton Hotel*, which she painted

in New York, shows a bustling dock as a monochromatic gray industrial wasteland. Evident in *East River from the 30<sup>th</sup> Story of the Shelton Hotel*, and many other paintings she did of New York City, there was little inspiration coming in between the tight cracks between buildings of the dense city. Paintings done in New York don't have the variation of colors and value that O'Keeffe put into her nature paintings. Oddly enough *East River from the 30<sup>th</sup> Story of the Shelton Hotel* (Frazier 34) was the last one she did before returning to Lake George in the country and then to the West.

Another element that contributes to O'Keeffe's paintings' unique American style is her imagination, which distinguishes her from the other more prominent male artists at the time. O'Keeffe creates work that has been especially influential and characteristic of American culture by using familiar subjects such as flowers, shells, buildings, scenery, and bones and giving them imaginative colors, "bold, simple, and vivid images [that] seem to suspend time by capturing a fleeting moment and rendering [them] in solid, monumental form" (Merrill 28). In the paintings she produced in New Mexico, such as *Cliffs Beyond Abiquiu* (Frazier 23) and *Dead Tree with Pink Hill* (Frazier 63), the cliffs, instead of painting them with shades of brown and gray, O'Keeffe creatively uses bright pinks, yellows, reds, warm browns and warmer greens to make the desolate plain with a dead tree look alive and living, as the mountains almost look like flesh. O'Keeffe tends to use a monochromatic gray scale when she paints in New York and in the East, unlike her imaginative, vivid portrayals of the East. In *Skull with Calico Roses* (Merrill 87), O'Keeffe experimented by putting white roses through the holes of a cow skull. This painting is uniquely American because it shows that O'Keeffe is "considering the rational inferior to the intuitive," (Frazier 20) where she was not seeing the skull as a symbol for

death, but perhaps the stark white color and the obscure shape as something beautiful. This Romantic mindset, and freely experimenting with her own ideas was one of the distinguishing characteristics that made Georgia O’Keeffe an innovative American artist, and her works representative of the modernist movement. Transcendentalists alike practiced with an intuitive, experimental, passionate, not-necessarily-rational-perspective; they believed that humankind was given the gift of intuition, insight and inspiration for a reason (Lewis). In O’Keeffe’s case, it was using her intuition and imagination like the Transcendentalists used theirs to write which allowed her to create innovative art.

At a time where women didn’t have many rights, Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings of “erotic” flowers were considered particularly independent. The Freudian associations of O’Keeffe’s flower paintings with female genitalia were shocking to the public (Claxton), who were accustomed to European nudes, and labeled O’Keeffe’s work out of the norm and unrefined. The painting entitled *Black Iris III* (Frazier 76) is especially controversial. One critic said that “O’Keeffe has created an image that, for all of its apparent intelligibility, it fraught with local unfamiliarities; she [O’Keeffe] means the sheer strangeness of these painted phenomena to strike us and reorient our vision” (Claxton). This quotation best describes the painting’s impact on the critics; that something so common like a flower once enlarged to show detail was then considered foreign. O’Keeffe, who was partaking in this modernist era frenzy along with many artists freely expressing their ideas; was shocked by critics’ reactions, and reconciled by saying that people brought their own associations to her work:

Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—and I don’t. (Frazier 77)

Although her flowers are simple and pure, the critics didn't always consider that her ideas are as well. O'Keeffe's paintings are criticized for their sexual innuendo and fell in and out of favor of critics throughout her career (Frazier 4). Her works are iconoclastic, and O'Keeffe was without a doubt a nonconformist because she disregarded what others thought was appropriate for her to paint. Paintings like *Iris* and *Red Canna* also stirred controversy with their suggestive colorful symbolic folds (Merrill). Critics that attacked *Black Iris III* (Frazier 76) failed to associate the simplicity O'Keeffe saw with nature to that of her paintings and of her ideas. The critics are looking at her paintings as if they are looking directly into the sun; they searched so much for meaning that their judgment was essentially blind. O'Keeffe's paintings satisfy a want to paint simplistically using bright colors, and abstraction, not a clandestine approach to infer sexuality:

The critical point is that O'Keeffe stated that she herself did not know what the message was. For O'Keeffe the very act of painting was a way of clarifying an experience for herself: it was not a way of illustrating an idea or explicating a cause, but simply the means she used to express her visual, emotional, sensual, and tactile experience of the world. It was her way of coming to terms with, of knowing and understanding, an experience. (Carroll)

The flowers and nature she painted are simple and objective; perhaps there are no deeper meanings that required analysis. She produced paintings for the same reason transcendentalists wrote, to record an experience.

Another characteristic that made her paintings particularly American is their idea of independence and self-reliance. When she moved out to her ranch in Abiquiu, O'Keeffe tested her independence by living on the Southwest "fringe of civilization" (Frazier 19). In her depictions of the canyons of Texas, and the mountains and plains of New Mexico, along with her "mindscapes" (Frazier 48), her non-objective abstract

paintings, the bold, simple and colorful shapes that make up the paintings lend a sense of remoteness in their lack of detail, in contrast to the monochromatic objective paintings produced in the East. The Eastern paintings like *The Shelton with Sunspots* (Frazier 9), which is abstract, is simplified with few details on the buildings except small rectangles for windows. O'Keeffe uses abstraction consistently when she paints New York City. As previously stated, perhaps O'Keeffe uses abstraction to convey a simpler world, as she sees it, and with the city so complex and detailed, the only way she can convey independence and self-reliance is by giving her buildings and cityscapes ambiguity. "Furthermore, because of her position as an important female artist at a time when there are not many female artists, the differences between her work and the work of male artists was attributed to her gender" (Frazier 14). O'Keeffe dealt with the constant flow of criticism that came with every new painting. Her flower paintings, especially condemned for their sexual implications, are the best example of O'Keeffe's self-reliance and independence because she continued to paint them even though the public didn't always approve of them.

O'Keeffe's paintings embody imagination and individual feelings "where her own perception [is] greater than logic and planning" (American 181), which makes her paintings representative of the new Modernist era of American art. Her paintings represented themes of artists in America: her love of nature, her imagination with her subjects and colors, her emotional spontaneity and her overall self-reliance and independence as an artist all contribute to her distinctively American work. O'Keeffe shocked American by first coming in as a female contributor to a new era, but also through her subject matter. Whether she painted mountains, canyons, flowers, bones or

houses, her paintings were uncomplicated and objective. She painted what she saw, mostly nonliving objects, as opposed to the nude paintings that were popular at the time. “Through imagination, spontaneity, individual feelings, and a mindset where the simple portrayal of nature was of greater value than reason” (American 181), O’Keeffe’s paintings are idiosyncratically representative of the American Modern Abstractionist Movement.