

*Lake George Reflection* (1921-1922) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - Georgia was born and raised in Wisconsin in the late 1880s. Her parents were dairy farmers with seven children. Living in the country nurtured a love of nature in her. Georgia fell in love with art at a young age and took watercolor lessons. Two grandmothers and two sisters also enjoyed painting.

Her family moved to Virginia in the early 1900s. After she graduated from high school, Georgia attended art school in Chicago. Her talent was recognized early on. She studied art in New York and attended a prestigious art school in Lake George, New York, the inspiration for this painting. Georgia's career in art kept getting sidetracked by illness. She took a year off to recover from typhoid fever and, just when things were taking off, she returned to Virginia to care for her mother who was dying of tuberculosis. When she did go back to Chicago, she had to support her family as a commercial artist. Georgia came down with measles and went home to recover. She could not paint for four years because the smell of turpentine made her sick.

This oil on canvas appears to a landscape as a reflection of Lake George where she studied art with the masters. The blue sky flows with the rolling blue water and the green rolling hills match with their reflection. Long, parallel lines of blue, white, and black fade into a purple haze, creating perspective. The round trees causes us to question whether or not it is a reflection which causes us to wonder if it really is a landscape. Georgia displayed it as a portrait so that the the abstract curves and lines pushed up vertically. Perhaps, the colors can be seen as the inside of the stem of a flower which became her signature theme.

*Red Canna* (1924) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - What does an artist do when she cannot paint with her favorite medium (oils) ? When Georgia recovered from the measles, she could not stand the smell of turpentine which is used to clean paint brushes. She took more watercolor classes and studied Japanese printmaking which inspired her to simplify her art and create smooth lines and curves that flowed.

Georgia also became an art teacher. She taught at her high school alma mater. A couple of years later she turned her back on the New York City art scene to be closer to nature and isolated from the distractions of urban life. She accepted a teaching job at Columbia College in Columbia, South Carolina! In her free time, she turned her back on realistic paintings of flowers. She began to explore the abstract shapes of flowers drawn in flowing charcoal lines. Out of that experiment bloomed, her vividly drawn flowers.

This oil on canvas is an example of her abstract depiction of flowers—intense colors, fluid lines, and extreme close-up views of the inside. \Imagine shrinking yourself to the size of an ant and walking inside a red canna flower. Her brushstrokes are smooth and silky like a soft petal. Waves and frills of color flow one into another, almost like watercolors do. The dark, bold colors at the bottom—oranges, crimson, and magenta—and, as the lines thrust up, the colors become lighter and lighter—apricots, pinks, and pearly whites. The vivid colors point to life and energy. Georgia depicted a flower as its own world—a place to enter and explore. Shading hints at some depth but the painting is abstract enough not to be realistic.

*Black Cross with Stars and Blue* (1929) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - Georgia O'Keeffe had grown up in Wisconsin and finished high school in Virginia. She studied art in Chicago and New York City. While teaching at Columbia College in South Carolina, she made some charcoal sketches and her abstract style caught the attention of a photographer in New York. Before long, her work was being exhibited there. Never content to stay put, she traveled to New Mexico where she eventually settled down for good. Just as the flowers of South Carolina flowed into her art, so did the vistas of New Mexico.

This oil on canvas painting is one of many that positions a black cross over the landscape of this southwestern territory. While the Spanish explored the southwestern United States, they left many missions and Catholic churches in their trail. The stark black crosses with open skies and purple hills as a backdrop left an impression on Georgia. She wrote, "I saw the crosses so often—and often in unexpected places—like a thin dark veil of the Catholic Church spread over the New Mexico landscape," and "One evening when I saw living in Taos we walked back of the morada toward a cross in the hills... The cross was large enough to crucify a man... It was in the late light and the cross stood out—dark against the evening sky."

Georgia memorialized the beginning of her walk by painting the first with a purple evening sky and the ending by painting a blue sky with stars. The viewer of the cross is standing below it so that its head and arms are surrounded by sky. The smoothness of the paint and colors do not make the painting appear flat because the cross in the foreground is so large, the dark horizon line between grass and hills and the white outline of the hills.

*Back of Marie's No. 4* (1931) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - When Georgia O'Keeffe visited New Mexico in the late 1930s, she was so inspired. She said in an interview, "I saw the country from the hill up there... The road went high over the hill and I looked out over the valley, and the red hills and these cliffs go quite a distance—and nobody was there." She was drawn to nature and isolated places and New Mexico offered plenty of both. Georgia visited for several summers and eventually bought a ranch in a small town about an hour's drive north of Santa Fe.

Georgia befriended a rancher in New Mexico and, in the early 1930s, she made several oil paintings of the view from the ranch. Just as Monet became known for his water lilies and van Gogh for his sunflowers, O'Keeffe became known for her flowers and New Mexico. She paired large abstract paintings of flowers with a background of red hills. Her simple, refined paintings of the southwest are her deep personal response to the wide and high desert.

This painting depicts layers of color to show areas in the landscape. Some artists let sky and land share space on their canvas but Georgia loved the land more. On top lies only a thin layer of cerulean blue dots with white clouds. Contrasted with that thick layer of mountains, crinkled with deep crevices and hints of red clay. While the shadows give an appearance of perspective, the darkness of the mountains, which should be lighter, tower over the other features. The middle layer, also thick, are red hills that Georgia especially loved and a thin layer of white sand hills. The lowest layer features spring green trees and sliver of land.

*Blue Morning Glories* (1935) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - On her first visit to New York, Georgia met an important photographer named Alfred Stieglitz. He helped her find a place to live and work as an artist and introduced her to the art world. He setup exhibitions of her work and she began to sell her works for a high price. They become close friends and, even though he was much older, they married.

The first five years of their marriage were busy and then they struggled. Georgia felt so flat that she did not have the heart to travel or paint for about five years. Finally, she spent the summer in New Mexico and the dramatic landscape of the high desert caused her art to bloom anew. When people think of Georgia O'Keeffe, flowers come to mind. Of her 2,000 plus paintings, only 200 were flowers. The rest show landscapes, leaves, rocks, shells, and bones.

Georgia painted *Blue Morning Glories* that summer. While the flowers are mainly cool colors (blue and purple), the yellow warms it up. She leaves the viewer wondering because the flower in the foreground is lighter and normally the background is lighter to give a picture perspective. There seem to be shadows on the flower in the background but what is blocking the light is not known. These unusual choices plus the smooth shift in shading and the lack of brushstrokes give the flowers an abstract feeling. Since morning glories bloom for only one day, could the flower in the foreground be the bloom, bright and lovely in the morning? Could the darker bloom be tracking the sun's movement overhead and the dark colors hinting at the bloom's death at the end of the day?

*Deer's Skull with Pedernal* (1936) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - Georgia O'Keeffe traveled to New Mexico for the first time in 1929. She hired a guide and pack mules to help her explore the land. Longing to be alone, she purchased a Ford Model A car, taught herself to drive, and wandered through the wonders of the dry land. She collected objects she found in the desert which she featured in her paintings. She explained her fondness in this way, "Such a beautiful, untouched lonely feeling place, such a fine part of what I call the 'Faraway'. It is a place I have painted before ... even now I must do it again."

After that trip, she spent a part of every year there, drawing inspiration in the high desert. She eventually settled on a place called Ghost Ranch in northern New Mexico. She loved the property so much that she bought a seven-acre sliver of Ghost Ranch in 1940. Her little house in the desert was perfect for summer vacations but too rustic to weather winter. Because she longed for a garden to tend and a warm home, she also bought a house in the nearby village. She moved there for good after her husband died in 1946.

O'Keeffe painted this oil on canvas of the distinctive flat-topped mountain named Pedernal. She could sit in her patio and gaze at that view from her home in Ghost Ranch. She joked, "It's my private mountain. It belongs to me. God told me if I painted it enough, I could have it." In this painting, the mountain is far, far away in the lower part of the background. A deer skull with elegantly curving antlers hung on a weathered pinyon pine tree dominates the foreground. A limb reaches out like a hand welcoming viewers to the desert. The blue sky fills the rest of the background and peeks through the eye sockets of the skull.

*My Backyard* (1937) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - Today we are used to abstract art that focuses on color and shape rather than painting things exactly as they are seen. When Georgia O'Keeffe began her art career, abstract art didn't really exist. She was one of the pioneers of this modern style which was a brave thing for her to do. There were not many women in the field and sticking to a traditional path might have seemed sensible. Her daring move paid off in the long run—she pioneered a new art form and became one of the highest paid female artists in America. She didn't pursue abstract art for the money because, in her words, “I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way—things I had no words for.”

This oil painting of the desert scenery in her backyard gives a soft, dreamy view of the red hills that dominate much of her work. Like Monet with his lilies and van Gogh with his various series, O'Keeffe was drawn to painted repeatedly to one subject:—the unique culture and scenery of New Mexico. Moreover, she could paint such views from her home as did Monet with his garden. She captured the changes in the cottonwood trees during the different seasons of the year. Instead of starkly carved crevices into the mountains, hers were loose and flowing with creamy colors.

Because O'Keeffe chose the Southwest as her main subject, her paintings are distinctly American. She explained, “One cannot be an American by going about saying that one is an American. It is necessary to feel America, like America, love America and then work.”

*Two Pink Shells* (1937) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - The natural world fascinated young Georgia O'Keeffe. Her interest in shells began in Wisconsin, far from the call of the ocean. She recalled, “When I was small and went to visit my O'Keeffe grandmother, I sometimes got into the parlor by myself and would take a shell from the ‘whatnot,’ a set of fancy shelves between two windows. The shelves held many things I was not to touch but when I got in there alone I would take a shell from the whatnot and hold it close to my ear. I had been told that the sound I heard was the sound of the sea—I had not heard the sea at that time but it was wonderful to me to listen to it in the shell. So when I grew up and went where there were shells I was always looking for them.”

Whenever she went on nature walks, she collected flowers, bones, shells, and leaves. Like flowers and leaves, shells showed up in her earliest paintings. Sometimes she realistically magnified them to enormous proportion and at other times she made an abstract mash-up of her favorite things. Later in life, O'Keeffe reflected on shells as subject matter, “I have picked up shells along the coast of Maine—farther south, in the Bermudas and Bahamas I found conch shells along the pure sandy beaches... Each shell was a beautiful world in itself... Even now, living in the desert, the sea comes back to me when I hold one to my ear.”

When some people claim that abstract artists do not know how to paint, show them the shells. She captured the subtle changes in shade of pink and pearly pastel colors. Her careful brushstrokes capture the ridges and wavy edges of the shells, which looks three-dimensional. They look so realistic that you want to reach out and touch the shiny inner shell.

*Red Hill and White Shell* (1938) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - Georgia O'Keeffe was attracted to intense light, strong colors, and a vast landscape. When she developed her technique, only black and white photography was available which not only stripped the colors she loved but also left heavy shading and shadows. Shading and shadows diminished the color which is why she limited them in her work. The great tragedy of her life were the last fifteen years when macular degeneration robbed her of the ability to see color. A dark spot in the center of her vision began to grow and grow until she only had peripheral vision left. She could still imagine paintings and had an assistant paint them for her. She died at the age of 98!

This painting is another example of O'Keeffe bringing her nature collection into her art. Two basic geometric forms dominate this painting: a large circle pinned to a series of triangles. Some abstract artists focused more on shape instead of color so she is giving them a nod. The oversized "white" shell with its delicate, subtle pinks, grays, yellows, and ochres fills the center of the painting. In the background is layers of landscape. The bright red hills lighten to pink heading into the foreground, the reverse of what the eye expects. Distinct bands of sky are painted as red with fiery red clouds, golden sunlight, and flowery pink with thin strips of white or gray. The bold colors in the background are too bright and more alive than one would see in reality. It evokes sunset but there is something more to this sunset.

*Pineapple Bud* (1939) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - Georgia O'Keeffe traveled extensively during her life. Her family took her from Wisconsin and Virginia and her art brought her to Texas, South Carolina, New York City, and Chicago. After her husband died, she made a permanent move to New Mexico which inspired her art. Not only could she support herself, she traveled abroad. She toured Europe, Peru, the Middle East, and Japan. She rafted down the Colorado River several times. She traveled to Mexico to meet fellow artists.

This painting is one of twenty paintings Georgia O'Keeffe made on a nine-week journey in Hawaii. The Dole Pineapple Company commissioned her to design some graphics. At first she was inclined to turn down the all-expenses-paid trip. In exchange she would paint two canvases for them to use in their advertising. The only sticking point was that she retained the artistic freedom to choose the subject of the paintings. What would it be— sharp and silvery pineapple fields, tropical flowers, lush greenery, lava-studded beaches, and towering waterfalls? She gushed about Hawaii, "I was astonished—it was so beautiful."

O'Keeffe arrived in Oahu, the most populated island where the headquarters of Dole was located. She visited pineapple fields, banana plantations, and sugar cane farmers. She traveled the twisty turn road to Hana on the island of Maui. Steaming volcanoes on the Big Island unnerved her. She tried new things like straw sandals and raw fish.

When she returned home, Georgia painted a papaya and a tropical. Dole was less than pleased for their aim was to sell pineapples. They shipped her a pineapple plant in under 36 hours and they got their pineapple painting.

*Leaves of a Plant* (1941) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - Georgia O'Keeffe was not pleased with people studying her life. We have learned that she was born in Wisconsin in 1887 and she died almost a century later in New Mexico. She once said, "Where I was born and where and how I lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest." When Georgia finally sat down to make an autobiography called *Georgia O'Keeffe*, she wrote nothing about her life. The book featured glorious illustrations of her art and she sold three hundred thousand copies of it.

Even though she lived a quiet, private life, people did not let her fade into the background. Many famous people found her life and work inspiring and they visited her in New Mexico. Famous aviators, singers, songwriters, poets, and photographers roughed it and went on camping trips with her. She was so quiet that some people found her to be prickly in personality.

What do you see in the painting? The bright red center makes one think of flowers but the title is "Leaves of a Plant." Have you ever seen red leaves? The center of the plant is in the lower foreground of the painting, giving the appearance of the viewer peeking down in its heart. The bold colors are complementary (red is the complement of green which is made of yellow and blue). The leaves below the red center appear to be shaded because they are darker. Those waving above shimmer and reflect the light. The leaves appear to be silky in texture.

*My Front Yard* (1941) by Georgia O'Keeffe (20th century American artist) - By the 1950s, Georgia O'Keeffe began to enjoy the rewards of her hard work. She could live quietly in New Mexico and she could travel. She was recognized with awards and interviews about her work. She published a book about her art. People visited her at the ranch.

Disaster slowly crept up on her in the form of an eye disease. Her central vision slowly disappeared until she could only see around the edges of her field of vision. Her failing eyesight was frustrating and she painted her last canvas without help about fifteen years before she died. While she could not make art, she created in her mind. She explained, "I can see what I want to paint. The thing that makes you want to create is still there." She hired assistants to create what she could see in her mind's eye. She realized that while she found color hard to use because she could only rely on her peripheral vision, she could draw with graphite and charcoal almost up to the time of her death.

We have seen her backyard and this painting is her front yard dominated by a mountain named Pedernal. Painting this view came easy to her and she said, "Out here, half your work is done for you." Georgia uses bold colors for the mountain, an object in the background. It makes the view more abstract and less realistic. The painting is layered—a sliver of the sky is covered with fluffy clouds and the green rolling hills are broken up by red banks. The ground comes in strips of sand, grass, flowers, trees, and bushes.