

# National Gallery of Art

## NEWS RELEASE

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### VIRTUOSO WORKS ON PAPER BY GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

#### ON VIEW AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, APRIL 9 - JULY 9, 2000

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Drawing on new scholarship and including many rarely seen works from private collections, O'Keeffe on Paper presents more than fifty stunning watercolors, pastels, and charcoals by Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986). The exhibition offers fresh insights into this distinctive and little-known aspect of the artist's oeuvre. It is on view in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, April 9 through July 9, 2000, and at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico, July 29 through October 29, 2000.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe. It is made possible by the Henry Luce Foundation, The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, and the National Advisory Council of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

The exhibition celebrates the publication of the two-volume O'Keeffe catalogue raisonné, a major scholarly project of the National Gallery of Art in partnership with The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. "Documentation of Georgia O'Keeffe's prolific output in the catalogue raisonné project has provided fascinating new information about the oeuvre of this great American artist," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "This display of her jewel-like watercolors and pastels and her accomplished charcoals is bound to increase appreciation for O'Keeffe's originality and her special place in the annals of American art."

O'Keeffe, who created works on paper throughout her long career, did some of her most innovative work in watercolor, pastel, and charcoal. By including sheets produced over a half-century period, starting in 1915, the exhibition illuminates the artist's technical virtuosity, while tracing the development of her personal artistic language. In a broader sense, O'Keeffe's work reflects the dialogue in twentieth-century American art between representation and abstraction.

In the 1910s, O'Keeffe created some of the most innovative images of early American modernism, starting with charcoal drawings such as No. 2—Special (1915). The following year, her work was introduced to photographer and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz, whom she married in 1924.

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O'Keeffe's watercolors from the teens range from the spare and highly abstract, such as Black Lines (1916), to broad fields of clear, bold color, as in Blue No. II (1916) and Evening Star No. V (1917), to more representational images, such as Roof with Snow (1916) and Train at Night in the Desert (1916). Of particular interest are three fluid watercolors—all known as Untitled (Abstraction/Portrait of Paul Strand)—from private collections. Created in 1917, they refer to the photographer and friend of the artist and reflect O'Keeffe's experimentation with different forms of imagery.

O'Keeffe settled in New York City in 1918, where she became part of the circle of modernists gathered around Stieglitz, many of whom, like Stieglitz himself, embraced the city as one of their subjects over several decades. O'Keeffe used pastel to record buildings silhouetted against the East River and charcoal to depict the skyline of Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge. Blue Flower (1918), a delicate early pastel, presages the large-format oil paintings of flowers close-up for which O'Keeffe is famous, while A White Camellia (1938) is a late pastel on a similar theme. After her permanent move to New Mexico in 1949 she again chose to work in charcoal. Among those late works is the highly abstract From a River Trip (1965), the latest drawing in the exhibition.

Coordinating curator of the exhibition in Washington is Ruth E. Fine, the National Gallery's curator of modern prints and drawings and co-director of the catalogue raisonné project. Selections were made by Fine with Barbara Buhler Lynes, co-curator of the exhibition, author of the catalogue raisonné, curator of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, and Emily Fisher Landau Director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center; Judith Walsh, the Gallery's senior paper conservator, who participated in the catalogue raisonné project; and Elizabeth Glassman, president emerita of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation and co-director of the catalogue raisonné project.

The fully illustrated exhibition catalogue demonstrates the depth of work conducted by the catalogue raisonné project and how the research has facilitated greater understanding of O'Keeffe's art. Essays by Fine and Glassman, Lynes, and Walsh place O'Keeffe's works on paper in the context of her American contemporaries and in relation to her oil paintings, and examine the importance of the artist's choice of materials in the development of her aesthetic. The catalogue is available for \$25 (softcover) and \$35 (hardcover, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers) in the Gallery Shops and on the Gallery Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). To order by telephone, call (301) 322-5900 or 1-800 697-9350.

Also available in Gallery Shops, on the Gallery Web site, or by telephone is Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné by Barbara Buhler Lynes, published by Yale Press, the National Gallery of Art, and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation. A two-volume set in a slipcase, it presents more than 2,000 paintings, drawings, watercolors, and sculptures by O'Keeffe, many of which have not previously been reproduced, along with factual entries for each. There is a full bibliography, exhibitions listing, and chronology of the artist's life. With 2,050 illustrations in color and 100 in black-and-white, it is available for \$195.

### **General Information**

The National Gallery of Art and Sculpture Garden, located on the National Mall between Third and Ninth Streets at Constitution Avenue, NW, is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is free of charge. For general information, call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at (202) 842-6176 or visit the National Gallery of Art's Web site at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). To receive the Gallery's free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.

*Washington, D.C.*

## Backgrounder

### GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

Born on a farm near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, from childhood Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1996), maintained a direct, observant relationship with her immediate environment. Her experiences of the cycles of nature would serve as an important source for her work as an artist.

O'Keeffe's family moved to Virginia in 1902, and she joined them the following year, attending boarding school in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. O'Keeffe began her art training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1905-06). She went to New York City for the first time in 1907 as a student at the Art Students League, where she studied with William Merritt Chase. Before the revolutionary Armory Show in 1913, when work by European avant garde artists such as Henri Matisse, Paul Cezanne, and Pablo Picasso was encountered by the American public, Alfred Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (called "291" for its address on 5th Avenue), was the primary place where such innovative art could be seen. O'Keeffe visited "291" as a student and was fascinated by Stieglitz's enthusiasm for the role of new arts for the new century.

After another year in Chicago, working as a commercial artist, O'Keeffe returned to her family's home in Virginia. In the summer of 1912 at her sister's urging she visited a drawing class at the University of Virginia taught by Alon Bement. His instruction, based on theories of design inspired by Columbia Teachers' College professor Arthur Dow, greatly influenced O'Keeffe's thinking. Thus Dow's notions of filling a space in a beautiful way would become an element in her work. The following four summers O'Keeffe worked with Bement as a teaching assistant in Virginia.

From the fall of 1912 through the spring of 1914 O'Keeffe supported herself teaching art in Amarillo, Texas. Despite the differences between the great empty spaces of Texas and the familiar green rolling hills of Virginia where she continued to spend her summers, she felt at home on the prairie, and the flat, barren landscape became a frequent inspiration for drawings and paintings.

O'Keeffe returned to New York from the fall of 1914 through the spring of 1915 and again in the spring of 1916 to study at Columbia Teachers' College, and began making critical decisions about her future as an artist. The art world, affected by the Armory show, was more sophisticated in 1915 than it had been in 1907, the year of her first visit. European and American artists, as well as collectors and critics, continued to meet in Stieglitz's "291" Gallery.

While in South Carolina teaching at a small college in 1915 and 1916, O'Keeffe decided to reject what she had been taught, apart from "the use of [her] materials as a language – charcoal, pencil, pen and ink, watercolor, pastel, and oil," and to paint and draw to please only herself. This resulted in a series of highly original black and white charcoal abstractions. She sent the drawings to Anita Pollitzer (a friend and fellow student from New York) who showed them to Alfred Stieglitz. Organic, natural forms define these abstract drawings which visually incorporate O'Keeffe's understanding of the only instruction which she didn't reject: filling a space in a beautiful way.

O'Keeffe took up a teaching position in Canyon, Texas, in the fall of 1916. Her return to the western landscape where she felt so at home provided inspiration for highly expressive watercolors. She re-introduced brilliant color into her work, using it freely as a tool of expression, just as she had before used only line and tone. She began to follow a course that would continue throughout her life: exploring an idea through a series of images dealing with the same subject until she had exhausted her interest in the subject.

Stieglitz and O'Keeffe corresponded regularly from 1916 to 1918. Drawings she sent to him from Canyon formed the nucleus of her first one-woman show at "291" during the spring of 1917. At the close of the school year, O'Keeffe traveled to New York to see the exhibition, which had been taken down and had to be re-hung. When the paintings and drawings were re-installed Stieglitz took his first photographs of O'Keeffe, beginning a multi-image portrait study that would continue for two decades. At Stieglitz's urging O'Keeffe returned to New York in 1918 at which time she added pastels to her repertoire of important materials. She and Stieglitz were married in 1924.

During her career, which spanned nearly 70 years, O'Keeffe's art continually fluctuated between the representational and abstract. Stieglitz supported her work with yearly solo exhibitions, first at "291", then the Intimate Gallery, and last at An American Place. In 1929, in addition to annual sojourns at Lake George with the large Stieglitz family and the routine of her New York City life, O'Keeffe began spending summers in New Mexico. There she continued to use her surroundings as her subject, focusing on the magnificent beauty and mystery of the desert landscape, continuing to examine specific places and themes such as rocks and bones in series.

Stieglitz died in 1946. After dealing with his estate, O'Keeffe returned to New Mexico to live permanently in 1949. She also traveled frequently and gained inspiration from new sites and experiences.

Throughout her life Georgia O'Keeffe maintained an unusually imaginative and searching relationship to the world around her. By capturing the essence of her subjects, O'Keeffe became, and remains, one of the central figures of American modernism.