

## PPCC ART 110 ESSAY – GEORGIA O'KEEFE

Georgia Totto O'Keefe and the world around her

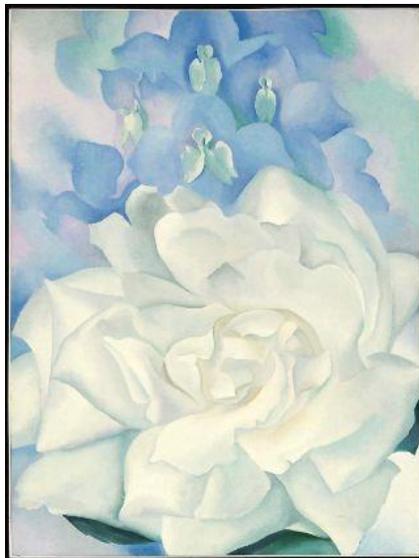
Art Appreciation – Art110

O'Keefe is a female, American artist, who was born November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1887 in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Her family consisted of her mother, Ida Totta, who came from a Dutch and Hungarian heritage, her father, Francis Calixtus O'Keefe, who came from an Irish background, and six siblings. As an aspiring doctor, Ida Totta encouraged her children to be educated and creative. Because Georgia O'Keefe was interested in nature and the world around her, she was set up with a local artist. Art became as family activity as two grandmothers and two of her sisters were also interested in art. In Georgia O'Keefe's earlier years, she went to study at a highly strict school, Sacred Heart Academy, to continue her study in art as well as some. The Sacred Heart Academy is in Madison, Wisconsin, so O'Keefe stayed with her Aunt while O'Keefe's relocated to Williamsburg, Virginia in 1902. Later, O'Keefe attended Madison High School. Later, in 1903, O'Keefe rejoined her family and started to take her up artistic talent independently. O'Keefe then attended a boarding school, Chatham Episcopal, where she became well known as a talented artist, well educated, and the art editor for her school's yearbook. Once graduated from high school, O'Keefe studied at an art school, Art Institute of Chicago, in 1905 to 1906. In Chicago, she studied mostly with John Vanderpool. As top of her class, O'Keefe excelled in every piece of art she put her hands to, but sadly, in 1906, she contracted typhoid fever, so she had to take some time to recover. Once healed, O'Keefe took no time getting to the Art Students League in New York, where she studies art a little more. At this school, O'Keefe learned realist painting techniques from William Merritt Chase, F. Luis Mora and Kenyon Cox. One painting of hers that was creative at this time is called *Dead Rabbit with*

*Copper Pot, 1908.* We'll talk more about this piece later. As O'Keefe's knowledge in art expanded, she decided to experience some art galleries. One specifically called *291*, founded by photographers Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen. *291*, located at 5th Avenue, Steichen's former studio, has promoted photography as art and introduced the work of modern European and American artists. Sadly, after a year of studying, O'Keefe had to return to Virginia as her mother got very sick with tuberculosis and her father's business had gone broke. Without a steady income, O'Keefe couldn't continue her studies, but her love for art pulled her to Chicago in 1908 to work as a commercial artist. Eventually, O'Keefe moved with her family to Virginia, Charlottesville in 1910. Come 1912, O'Keefe was able to afford a summer class at the University of Virginia where she studied with Alon Bement. Bement, a member of Teachers College at Columbia University, introduced O'Keefe to the revolutionary ideas of his Columbia colleague, Arthur Wesley Dow. Dow's art and design really showed the principles of Japanese art, and that greatly influenced O'Keefe. As she experimented with her art, O'Keefe moved from realism to her own form of abstract compositions. From 1912 to 1914, O'Keefe went on to teach art at schools in Amarillo, Texas. During the summers, O'Keefe took a class from Dow at the Teacher's college and she also became Bement's teaching assistant (TA). Later on, in 1915, in South Carolina, while teaching at Columbia College, O'Keefe became one of the first American artists to practice pure abstraction when she began a series of abstract charcoal drawings. Anita Pollitzer, a friend and former classmate of O'Keefe, got a hold of some of O'Keefe's works via mail. Pollitzer showed some of O'Keefe's art to a very influential art dealer, Alfred Stieglitz. In 1916, Stieglitz showed ten of O'Keefe's works in *291*. O'Keefe was unaware that Stieglitz was showing her work, but they two came to an agreement, and O'Keefe allowed Stieglitz to continue showing her work. This was O'Keefe's first art exhibit. By the time 1917 came around,

Stieglitz gave O'Keefe her first solo show. In 1918, she moved to New York where Steiglitz not only found a place for O'Keefe to live and work, but he provided financial support so she can focus more on her art work. Stieglitz then divorced his wife to marry O'Keefe in 1924. The two lovers lived in New York City together happily (Georgia O'Keeffe Biography).

In this essay, we will be going over four different works done by O'Keefe. We'll explore O'Keefe's style of unique flowers, southeastern landscapes, New York skyscrapers, and animal skull paintings, one painting from each category. O'Keefe started with impressionism but later experimented with abstraction. In her piece, *White Rose with Larkspur*, you can see the obvious flower, but the background is mostly blue, white, and teal, less detailed flowers.



*White Rose with Larkspur (1927)*

In front is a main, white rose the painting is about. This painting explores subtle colors, from green to grey, from yellow to blue. The flowers are abstract and recognizable, making a very interesting and intriguing painting. Another kind of nature art O'Keefe created is called *Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico / Out Back of Marie's II*.



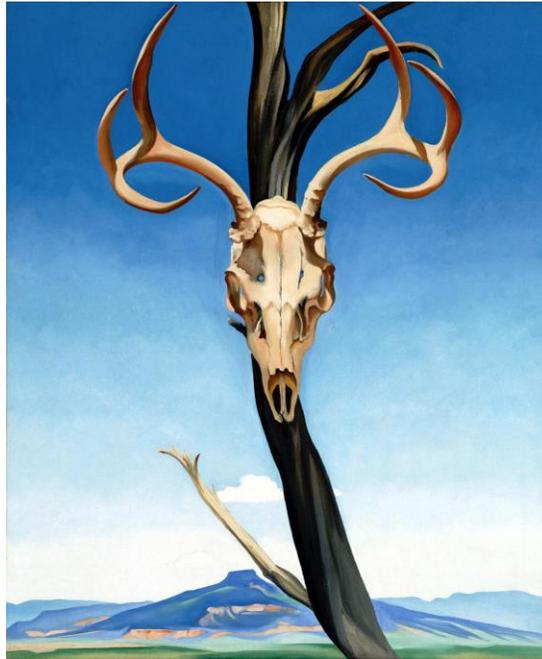
*Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico (1930)*

This piece is quite similar to *White Rose with Larkspur*, only the main “flower” is a bright orange mountain. This painting studies more shadowing, darker and lighter colors. With careful manipulation of color and line, the mountains look 3D. With a few curvy lines, here and there, the mountain’s edges and dips become extremely detailed. Another type of land we see often is the city. O’Keefe painted a few skyscrapers in her time. Her painting *Shelton with Sunspots* was inspired by an illusion of sun from behind a building.



*Shelton with Sunspots (1926)*

Even though this piece is more representational, it doesn't make this piece any less intriguing than the other paintings O'Keefe has created. This skyscraper studies more of man-made forms instead of nature-like objects. Finally, we will look at *Deer's Skull with Pedernal*.



*Deer's Skull with Pedernal* (1936)

With a faraway mountain in the background and a very detailed tree and skull closer to the viewer, this painting deals with scale and details. Let us take this small overview and explore a more creative and imaginative side of things (Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, 2017).

O'Keefe is a modernist. Her paintings are inspired by things she's seen or admired on her lifetime. Her appreciation for nature pulled her a long way when it came to her landscaping and flower art pieces. O'Keefe once said about her flower paintings, "Well – I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flowers you hung all your own 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" (O'Keefe, 1943). O'Keefe isn't an artist who puts

a meaning into her art. Instead, she puts her vision on an object as well as her feelings into a piece of art. How successful can a modernist be successful without any meaningful or overly creative and abstract piece of art?

Though O'Keefe might have tried to keep meaning out of her art, she defiantly had strong opinions of life, death, art, and setting priorities. Passionate love letters sent between her and her husband were O'Keefe's true inspiration for what she has seen then later painted. O'Keefe's art started off at a feeling, then moved to words in the forms of letters, and finally, ended up between paint, a vision, and a canvas. I believe the extreme details in her art create a very strong piece. Being able to see the world through O'Keefe's eye via art is truly a gift.

### **Image Labels**

*White Rose with Larkspur*, 1927, Oil on canvas,  
40 x 30 in, 101.6 x 76.2 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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*Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico / Out Back of Marie's II*, 1930, Oil on canvas mounted on  
board,  
24 ¼ x 35 ¼ in, 61.6 x 89.5 cm, Tate Modern, London.

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*Deer's Skull with Pedernal*, 1936, Oil on canvas,  
36 x 30 1/8 in, 91.44 x 76.52 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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*Shelton with Sunspots*, 1926, Oil on canvas,  
48 ½ x 30 ¼ in, 123.2 x 76.8 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, New York.

## Reference

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