

**Georgia O'Keeffe** famous now for her large, beautiful oil and watercolor paintings of flowers, skulls and landscapes.

### **1887-1986**

As a child, Georgia Totto O'Keeffe, the second of seven children, was born in 1887 on a farm in Sun Prairie Wisconsin. She was named after her mother's father, George Totto.

She was very observant, and very independent. She was aware of every detail surrounding her and her memory for recalling special events was very remarkable. Her sensitive awareness of her surroundings helped her become a very fine artist who is

When she was ten years old, she and her sisters took painting lessons. By the time she was thirteen, she knew in her heart that she wanted to be an artist.

O'Keeffe had many art lessons throughout high school but she had several critical teachers who discouraged her. They wanted her to paint what they saw rather than what she saw. She was disappointed with this instruction but she worked hard and stuck to what she believed was right for her. She did not like to draw what others had drawn. Her vision of art was original and imaginative.

At eighteen, O'Keeffe studied at The Art Institute of Chicago and then later at the Art Students League at New York. She wanted to paint what was important to her, but she still had teachers who thought she should study painting by imitating the works of others. She wanted to continue her studies in New York City, but because of financial difficulties, she had to return to Chicago to live with her relatives. While O'Keeffe was there, she got the measles, (which weakened her eyesight temporarily.) Then she left to join her family who were now living in Virginia.

At the University of Virginia, O'Keeffe studied painting under Alon Bemont and for the first time, she felt secure under someone else's teaching. Bemont greatly influenced O'Keeffe. He felt it was a painter's most important duty to fill space in a beautiful way. O'Keeffe agreed with his thinking.

O'Keeffe very much wanted to study under Arthur Wesley Dow, Alon Bemont's former teacher, in New York City. But in order to study with him and take his classes, O'Keeffe had to save her money. So she worked for two years in Amarillo, Texas as a supervisor of art for the public schools. She enjoyed the landscapes of Texas very much, and the plains, ocean, and sunsets there would later play an important part in her painting. She returned to Texas several years later to teach in Canyon, and while also working at her art, she tried to simplify her creations and get to the essence of what she wanted the painting to say.

In 1914, O'Keeffe returned to New York City to study with Dow, and she gained new insight and inspiration for her work. In 1915, she went to South Carolina to teach, and while there, she sent several of her drawings to her old school friend for comments. O'Keeffe's friend sent her drawings, without her knowledge, to a very important and well-known photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, who owned an art gallery called '291'. Alfred Stieglitz was a powerful figure in the New York City art world and he liked O'Keeffe's drawings right away, soon displaying them in his gallery.

Thus began a very close relationship between Stieglitz and O'Keeffe. As artists, they supported each other's work and drew from each other much inspiration. In 1924, Stieglitz and O'Keeffe were married. Stieglitz took many beautiful and unusual photographs of O'Keeffe during their long relationship. Some photographs show us only O'Keeffe's hands or neck or back. The photographs are very simple, stark, and sensual, much like O'Keeffe's paintings.

Almost from her very first exhibition, O'Keeffe had success as a painter. During the period from 1916-1919, her work was very abstract. As her own personal vision of art became more defined, her paintings turned more toward reality, and she produced many still lifes, landscapes, and flower paintings in the Cubist-Realist style. She portrayed the world simply as she saw it and her vision had many unusual perspectives.

Flowers were her favorite subjects and she would only show us a part of her subject on the canvas. She gave us this new perspective because she wanted to make us look at the beauty of the flowers in new light. O'Keeffe painted very popular and monumental paintings of Oriental poppies, calla lilies, larkspurs, hollyhocks, petunias, and morning glories. In over nine hundred paintings, watercolors, and drawings, she created art that was innovative and influential in a style that was clearly powerful and sensual.

IN 1929, O'Keeffe first visited New Mexico and loved the new landscapes that greeted her. She traveled to New Mexico almost every summer to work and was inspired by the natural imagery of the Southwest, painting stories of feathers,

bones, and the desert. After Stieglitz died in 1946, O'Keeffe settled in Taos, New Mexico, permanently, living in the desert and painting there until she was almost blind. Georgia O'Keeffe was still working at her art until her death at age 98.

### **Thinking about Georgia O'Keeffe**

The perspective that O'Keeffe chose to paint her subjects from often made her paintings seem abstract, even though they were not. Ask the students if their paintings remind them of another object other than the flower they painted. Ask them to explain. Georgia O'Keeffe loved to paint in the desert of New Mexico. Ask the students where they might like to go and paint and why? Is it the weather, or the subject matter, etc. O'Keeffe also liked to paint skulls of animals, ask the students if they think that this makes a good subject matter. Have them explain.