



GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

20 April to 8 August 2021

Curator: Marta Ruiz del Árbol

The Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza is presenting the first **retrospective in Spain** of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), one of **the most important representatives of 20th-century American art**. Featuring a selection of around 90 works, the exhibition offers a complete survey of O'Keeffe's career; a unique opportunity to discover and admire the work of this fascinating artist who is little represented outside the United States. With the five paintings in its collection, the Museo Thyssen is in fact the institution with most works by the artist outside her native country.

This ambitious exhibition project has been made possible thanks to the collaboration of **more than 35 international museums and collections**, principally in the United States and most notably the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, which has been outstandingly generous with its loans and unconditional support. After being seen in Madrid the exhibition will travel to the Centre Pompidou in Paris and then to the Fondation Beyeler in Basel. It is also benefiting from the sponsorship of the Terra Foundation for American Art and JTI.

A great modern American artist

Georgia O'Keeffe is **one of the few women artists associated with the avant-garde trends** of the first half of the 20th century in the United States. After first arousing enormous admiration in artistic circles at the early date of 1916 for her daring abstract works and establishing a reputation as a pioneer of non-figuration, O'Keeffe became one of the principal figures in modern American art. The exhibition opens with some of those works which provoked such surprise in New York towards the end of the second decade of the 20th century, then moves on to a **complete survey of the artist's entire career**. The paintings are arranged both chronologically and thematically, allowing visitors to follow a series of masterpieces within her career and to simultaneously appreciate her principal artistic concerns.

Images, from left to right:

Georgia O'Keeffe: *White Iris No. 7*, 1957. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; *Series I—No. 3*, 1918. Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee. Gift of Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation and the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, and *Black Mesa Landscape, New Mexico / Out Back of Marie's II*, 1930. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Gift of The Burnett Foundation.

THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA
MUSEO NACIONAL



More information and images:

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The different sections of the exhibition thus reveal an artist whose language always moved between figuration and abstraction. The **early landscapes of Texas and Lake George** show O’Keeffe’s latent interest in capturing nature and its vibrant colours as well as her desire to create a composition in which the formal elements - colour and shape - are the true protagonists. Also on display is an important selection of the artist’s celebrated **large-format flower paintings** which are exhibited alongside her canvases of leaves, shells and bones. A special section is devoted to **views of New York** which leads on to the change of direction that came about in her life and work when she turned her attention to the American West in the late 1920s. Fascinated by the landscapes and cultural mix of **New Mexico**, O’Keeffe made this remote state the principal subject of her paintings and her lifelong home from the late 1940s. In the early 1950s two visits to Spain **marked the start of extensive international travel and inspired new works**. Finally, the last gallery in the exhibition shows some of the objects that the artist kept in her studio; specially loaned for this occasion, they allow her creative method to be reconstructed.

A travelling artist / a walking artist



Maria Chabot. *Georgia O’Keeffe, Breakfast, The Black Place, 1944.* Maria Chabot Archive. Georgia O’Keeffe Museum. Gift of Maria Chabot

“The unexplainable thing in nature that makes me feel the world is big far beyond my understanding – to understand maybe by trying to put it into form. To find the feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill.”

The exhibition in Madrid, curated by Marta Ruiz del Árbol, curator of the Department of Modern Painting at the Museo Thyssen, aims to present Georgia O’Keeffe as a **travelling artist**: a painter for whom travel was not just a source of new themes but also a fundamental part of her creative process.

O’Keeffe’s boundless curiosity and her interest in the unknown lie at the origins of all her creative activity. Over the course of her long life (she lived to be 98) she travelled ceaselessly, firstly across the United States then in every continent in the last third of her life. The exhibition reminds visitors of the appeal that these numerous destinations held for the artist. O’Keeffe first discovered the beauty and immensity of the American landscape, from the plains and canyons of Texas to the urban scenes in which she captured Manhattan’s rapid transformation into the city of skyscrapers. Other subjects include the famous storms on Lake George in New York State and the spectacular rock formations of the country’s Southwest. Finally, visitors to the exhibition can appreciate O’Keeffe’s fascination with flying in paintings that employ a bird’s eye view to depict river courses. All these works deploy a truly individual language which in some cases precisely refers to visible reality but in others seems to move away from the motif that is the source of inspiration to offer a harmonious, abstract combination of forms and colours.

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Georgia O’Keeffe. *(It Was Yellow and Pink II)*. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Georgia O’Keeffe

“I have never had a more beautiful walk [...] I seem to be hunting for something of myself out here.”



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Clam and Mussel*, 1926. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Gift of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation

The exhibition also reveals **Georgia O'Keeffe the walker**, who covered the ground of the places she visited. Throughout her life these walks were part of her daily routine and are emphasised in the exhibition as the first step in her creative process. Like Nietzsche, who said that he needed his feet in order to write, in a reference to his need to walk in order to make his thoughts flow, O'Keeffe walked first then painted afterwards. While doing so she also collected a wide range of objects - flowers, leaves, shells, pieces of wood and bones - which then became the subjects of her paintings. The depiction of these organic records in close-up, foreground presentations also points to the influence on the artist of her numerous photographer friends, including her partner Alfred Stieglitz. Above all, however, it points to her interest in making the busy inhabitant of the modern city stop to look at these objects: “But one rarely takes the time to really see a flower”, she said in

1926, “I have painted what each flower is to me and I have painted it big enough so that others would see what I see”: a slow, aware gaze which the exhibition aims to encourage in the viewer.

1. Early work

The exhibition starts with a room devoted to the works with which Georgia O'Keeffe surprised New York's cultural and artistic circles in 1916 when they were exhibited for the first time at the 291 gallery. “Finally, a woman on paper”, exclaimed its proprietor, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz when he saw these creations, in which O'Keeffe evoked the growth and movement of nature through abstract forms. Executed while she was teaching in South Carolina and Texas, they mark her decision to move away from the artists who had previously inspired her and to embark on her own path, a dazzling one from the outset due to its modernity and originality.

During this early period O'Keeffe was notable for her mastery of the technique of watercolour. The mountains of South Carolina and the Texan plains are depicted in works of intense colour which already reveal the artist's interest in nature and the appeal of the horizon line. Shown alongside them are various nudes in colours which seem to establish a dialogue with the landscapes.



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Early Abstraction*, 1915. Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee. Gift of Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation

2. Abstractions



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Series I - From the Plains*, 1919. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Gift of The Burnett Foundation

“I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn't say any other way, things I had no words for.”

The second room in the exhibition presents the paintings that O'Keeffe produced from 1918 after giving up her teaching job in Texas and moving to New York to devote herself entirely to painting. These are organic abstractions in which the artist investigated relationships between form and colour and which elevated her to the status of a pioneer of pictorial abstraction.

Some of these canvases reveal O'Keeffe's interest in creating a visual equivalent to music. Others refer to her intense experience of

the Texan landscape or are examples of her earliest floral abstractions. When they were exhibited in Manhattan in the early 1920s they became the subject of psychoanalytical interpretations by certain critics and provoked debates on the importance of O’Keeffe’s gender for her work.

3. New York / Lake George

“I am divided between my man and a life with him, and some thing of the outdoors [...] that is in my blood.”



Georgia O'Keeffe. *New York Street with Moon*, 1925.
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza
Collection on loan at the Museo
Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid

From the end of the second decade of the century O’Keeffe divided her time between the city and the countryside. This contrast, between winter and spring in New York and summer and autumn at Lake George, is reflected in her painting.

Living in a modern skyscraper, O’Keeffe began to look at the metropolis, which became the quintessential theme of modern art in the 1920s. Her views of Manhattan are exceptional within her oeuvre and are essentially characterised by her interest in depicting nature. At the same time she continued to focus on that other, rural America which she encountered during her periods of retreat in the countryside. Among her favourite motifs were the grain silos that reminded her of her childhood on a Wisconsin farm.

4. Flowers and natural world

“Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not.”

The exhibition’s central gallery is devoted to Georgia O’Keeffe’s celebrated paintings of flowers, one of the principal themes on which she consistently focused from the mid-1920s onwards. Irises, poppies, Jimson weed and arum lilies are shown alongside depictions of other natural objects such as leaves and shells which the artist collected during her walks in order to then represent them on canvas.

In some of these works O’Keeffe’s focus lies in progressively moving away from the natural form while on other occasions the sharp focus and close-up viewpoint seem to suggest a photographic blow-up. Through the use of these daring compositions, through which she aimed to oblige the hurried city dweller to pause and look at small details, O’Keeffe became one of America’s most acclaimed female artists by both critics and the public. In 2014 her painting *Jimson Weed. White Flower no. 1* (1932), which is present in the exhibition, made a world record price at Sotheby’s for a work by a woman artist.



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1*, 1932. Crystal Bridges
Museum of American Art, Bentonville,
Arkansas

5. First trips to New Mexico

“When I got to New Mexico, that was mine. As soon as I saw it, that was my country. I’d never seen anything like it before, but it fitted to me exactly.”



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Ram's Head, White Hollyhock-Hills (Ram's Head and White Hollyhock, New Mexico)*, 1935. Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Edith y Milton Lowenthal

In the summer of 1929 Georgia O'Keeffe travelled to northern New Mexico, an experience that would change her life forever. The landscape, the powerful presence of Native American culture and the region's Spanish colonial past inspired a new direction in her art.

The spectacular terrain, vernacular architecture, wayside crosses in the remote countryside and the bones of dead animals that she found on her walks filled O'Keeffe's paintings over the following years. These works mark a return to a landscape that recalls her early experience in Texas and coincide with a growing interest in rural America on the part of the artistic avant-garde which was seeking for its own vision unaffiliated with the European canons.

6. Exploring New Mexico

Over the next two decades the artist spent most of her summers in New Mexico. The landscape that surrounded her adobe house in Ghost Ranch, a desert area that she had discovered in 1934, became the subject of many of her works. Others focused on two places which she also frequently painted: the one she called “White Place” and another, more remote one within the Navajo nation that she called “Black Place” and which inspired particularly abstract works.

During those years O'Keeffe also embarked on a series of paintings of pelvis bones, returning to a theme which had fascinated her since her first summer in New Mexico. Despite the metaphysical nature of many of these works the artist always denied that they had any relation with Surrealism.



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Black Place I*, 1944. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Charlotte Mack

7. Travels around the world



Georgia O'Keeffe. *Black Door with Red*, 1954. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA. Bequest of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

The penultimate gallery shows a selection of O'Keeffe's late work. Firstly, the series on the courtyard of the hacienda that she purchased in the small village of Abiquiú in 1945, a few years before New Mexico became her permanent home in 1949.

Secondly and in the manner of a contrast, this room features various canvases inspired by the numerous international trips that O'Keeffe made in the last third of her life. Having never previously left the American continent, after her visit to Spain from 1953 to 1954 O'Keeffe

started to travel to every part of the globe. The long hours that she spent on aeroplanes

inspired a series of views from their windows. Alongside horizons painted in a multitude of different tones, she also produced abstract compositions that recall aerial images of winding rivers.

8. The studio



Laura Gilpin. Georgia O'Keeffe, 1953.
Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

On her return from her travels and walks O'Keeffe would go into her studio, a place where she liked to work alone. Hidden from the gaze of others, it was here she pursued her painstaking, meticulous creative process which has been revealed through a study of the technique of the five canvases by the artist in the Thyssen-Bornemisza collections. The results produced by the multi-disciplinary team of restorers, curators and chemists from both the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum are on display in the last gallery of the exhibition, accompanied by some of the objects still housed in the artist's studio which have been specially loaned for this event. This final room reveals a methodical, rigorous, reserved artist who was fascinated by colour and textures, concerned for the conservation of her paintings and for ensuring that the original intention of her works be maintained intact for the future.

Associated activities:

From 26 May to 30 June there will be a **lecture series** on Wednesdays at 5.30 pm, with talks by Cody Hartley (director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe), Roxana Robinson (a writer and biographer of Georgia O'Keeffe), Wanda Corn (emeritus professor, Stanford University, and curator of the exhibition *Georgia O'Keeffe. Living Modern*), Susana Pérez and Marta Palao (Restoration Department, Museo Thyssen), Clara Marcellán (technical curator of the exhibition), and Marta Ruiz del Árbol (curator of the exhibition in Madrid).

Taking place between February and June is a new edition of the ***Narraciones gráficas*** project, an educational laboratory which aims to introduce art to people from different social contexts and backgrounds. On this occasion the project will be focused on associations of women in Spain's rural areas thanks to the collaboration of Fademur (the Federation of Associations of Rural Women). Taking walking as the first step in the creative process, this activity will establish connections between the work of O'Keeffe and that of other artists in the collection who also went on walks and collected objects for depiction in their paintings. It will also encourage spaces for listening, understanding and creativity among participants through their own everyday objects. These encounters, which are open to the general public, will be both on-site and virtual and the results will be compiled in a publication by the graphic designer and illustrator Susana Blasco. **With the support of JTI.**

Exhibition sponsored by Terra Foundation for American Art

The Terra Foundation for American Art is dedicated to fostering exploration, understanding, and enjoyment of the visual arts of the United States for national and international audiences. Recognizing the importance of experiencing original works of art, the foundation provides opportunities for interaction and study, beginning with the presentation and growth of its own art collection in Chicago.

To further cross-cultural dialogue on American art, the foundation supports and collaborates on innovative exhibitions, research, and educational programs. Implicit in such activities is the belief that art has the potential both to distinguish cultures and to unite them.

EXHIBITION DETAILS

Title: *Georgia O'Keeffe*

Organisers: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza (Madrid), Centre Pompidou (Paris), and Fondation Beyeler (Riehen/Basel), in collaboration with the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe.

Sponsored by: the Terra Foundation for American Art

With the support of: JTI

Venues and dates: Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 20 April to 8 August 2021. The exhibition then travels to the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and to the Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel.

Curator: **Marta Ruiz del Árbol**, Department of Modern Painting, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Technical curator: Clara Marcellán, Department of Modern Painting, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

Number of works: 90

Publications: Catalogue with essays by Marta Ruiz del Árbol, Didier Ottinger, Ariel Plotek and Catherine Millet; technical studies by Dale Kronkright and Susana Pérez, Andrés Sánchez Ledesma and Marta Palao, and chronology and entries by Anna Hiddleston-Galloni. Educational guide by the Education Department of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, and Comic by María Herreros, co-published with Astiberri.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Address: Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014, Madrid. Temporary exhibition galleries, ground floor.

Opening times: Tuesdays to Fridays and Sundays, 10 am to 7pm; Saturdays, 10 am to 9 pm.

Summer opening times: 29 May to 8 August: Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 9pm. Sunday, 10am to 7pm.

Ticket prices: Combined ticket: Permanent collection and temporary exhibitions.

- Standard: 13 euros
- Reduced price: 9 euros for visitors aged over 65, pensioners and students with proof of status; groups (7 or more): 11 euros
- Free entry: visitors aged under 18, officially unemployed Spanish citizens, disabled visitors, Large Families, currently working teachers and holders of the Youth Card and European Youth Card.

Advance ticket purchase at the ticket desks, on the museum's website and on tel: + (34) 91 791 13 70

Audio guide: available in various languages.

More information: www.museothyssen.org

PRESS INFORMATION:

<https://www.museothyssen.org/area-privada/prensa/dosieres/georgia-okeeffe>