

## GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

### SELECTION OF THE CATALOGUE ESSAYS

#### Georgia O'Keeffe: Wanderlust and Creativity

Marta Ruiz del Árbol

“(…) Her two visits to Spain are the point of departure for this text. What led her to choose this Mediterranean country as one of her first overseas destinations and to return soon afterwards? What did she find there that inspired her to pack her bags and carry on exploring the world? Could she have been seeking new sources of inspiration? Did she somehow reflect this in her final works? Focusing on her late-in-life travel urge, this essay attempts to unravel the reasons that drove O’Keeffe to become a globetrotter at a time when she had seemingly achieved all her goals in life. It also sets out to analyze whether her *wanderlust*, her insatiable appetite for discovering new places, emerged suddenly or, on the contrary, whether it had in fact appeared earlier and was a stimulus, even a need, that preceded and influenced her creative activity.

#### The land of her dreams

O’Keeffe’s first European trip began when she disembarked at Le Havre in May 1953 and, crossing Brittany, arrived in Paris. Her traveling companion, sculptor Mary Callery, who had lived in the French capital between the wars and was a friend and patron of artists like Picasso, Matisse and Léger, was her host there. The painter’s biographies tell of how she visited the city’s main monuments and museums before heading south. They stopped in Aix-en-Provence, where she could not resist the temptation to view the Mont Sainte- Victoire, which had been one of Paul Cézanne’s favorite motifs for so many years and had sparked so many discussions among the American artistic elite of the start of the century. “All those words piled on top of that poor little mountain seemed too much,” she recalled years later. Her refusal to go and see Picasso was equally demythifying: “He doesn’t speak English, I don’t speak French, what would we have to say to each other?” she concluded.

With these statements O’Keeffe, one of the few female painters of her generation not to have traveled abroad during her formative years, seemed to perpetuate the story built around her since the start of her career. At a time – the early 1900s – when, as she put it, “they would ... [all] have stepped across the ocean and stayed in Paris if they could have”, she had been presented by critics of the period, and by herself too, as the American woman artist par excellence owing to her supposed unfamiliarity with European art trends. Although far from true, the idea that her art sprang solely from “general American life” instead of from analyses of Cézanne and Picasso greatly influenced how her work was interpreted. It is therefore only logical that once in Europe she should have felt compelled to prove that the reasons which had at last spurred her to visit the Old Continent were not related to an interest in gaining firsthand knowledge of its art scene.

O’Keeffe and her companion then traveled on to Spain, a place which, according to Anita Pollitzer, a friend since their student days, had been “the country of her dreams” since her childhood, when her mother used to read her Washington Irving’s *Tales of the Alhambra*. They entered via the Basque Country and viewed the caves of Altamira before making their way to

Madrid, where she was fascinated by the Museo del Prado. Her visit to the Madrid art museum is the aspect of this first European trip that has most been stressed in chronologies and she too considered it particularly significant. O’Keeffe, who usually rejected other painters’ influence, was awestruck by the Old Masters whose works graced the walls of the Villanueva building. She dwelled on the episode when surveying her career in a 1974 interview in *The New Yorker*: “I’m very critical. I don’t seem to have the kind of pleasure I know a lot of other people have in pictures. That’s why I was so surprised when I went to the Prado in 1953 – because everything there was so exciting to me.” (....)

### **The other side of the hill**

Georgia O’Keeffe’s life was marked by moves of house from very early on. Born in 1887 in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, she spent her first years on a farm in the Midwest. The first move came in 1903, when the family went to live more than 1,600 kilometers away in Williamsburg, Virginia. The future painter embarked on her training only two years later, spending periods in Chicago, New York and Williamsburg, and this roving lifestyle would continue when she got her first jobs as an art teacher. Although she did not make these changes out of choice, they left a lasting impression on her and turned her into a traveling artist from the very start. (...) And it is noteworthy that from a very early age the young O’Keeffe developed the habit of going for walks, which she continued to practice until her last years. Wherever she went, she would explore it on foot, seeking a connection with her surroundings, the sense of place you only get by strolling around. The first reference to this habit is a memory that goes back to the time when she was a pupil at the Chatham Episcopal Institute after the family moved to Virginia. Reminiscing about that period of her teenage years, O’Keeffe recalled above all her rambles. “I’d go for long walks in the woods, which wasn’t allowed.”<sup>38</sup> A free and independent spirit, the young student was capable of breaking all the rules of her new school to satisfy her innate need to explore the natural surroundings on foot. Years later, in 1915, when she began teaching at Columbia College in South Carolina, she confessed several times to her friend Anita Pollitzer what she herself considered an obsession. (...) In her letters she described how her daily routine consisted of teaching, painting and, naturally, going for a walk. This inner need, present from a very early age, became one of her main habits. The traveling artist was above all, and more than anything else, a walking artist.

(...) “Each time she reached home, she thought she would stay, but she is always interested in what lies on the other side of the hill,” Pollitzer recounted in her memoirs. This statement, referring to O’Keeffe’s travels around the world beginning in the 1950s, essentially expresses the *wanderlust* that led her to explore faraway lands but also places closer to home, literally on the other side of the next hill. Reading Pollitzer one understands how these two passions are related and fully tie in with both senses of the word of German origin: firstly, her irrepressible urge to visit remote countries and discover places, in keeping with the more contemporary English definition of the concept; and secondly, her innate passion for exploring at the leisurely pace of walking, as in the original meaning of the term in German (*wandern*: to walk and *lust*: desire). Hers was doubly a case of *wanderlust*.

(...) On New Year’s Day 1916, Pollitzer went to 291 to show Stieglitz the abstract charcoal drawings Georgia O’Keeffe had sent to her in New York from her teaching post in South Carolina. “Finally, a woman on paper,” she reported the photographer as exclaiming when he set eyes on them. The intense correspondence that ensued between the painter and the man who eventually became her lover, artistic companion, patron and representative frequently attests to the powerful emotions aroused in O’Keeffe by the landscapes she saw during her excursions, and, also, how these experiences triggered a desire to capture on paper what she had perceived and felt. During the summer of 1916, for example, she described her solitary climbs to the top

of a mountain in the moonlight to watch the day dawn from there. She referred to that moment of communion with nature again a few days later: "The walk that I told you of started many things." Georgia O'Keeffe thus acknowledged the role played by these outings as the driving force behind her artistic activity. Like Nietzsche, who claimed that to write one's feet needed to be involved – a reference to the need to walk in order for thoughts to flow – O'Keeffe walked to be able to draw and subsequently paint. Before picking up the charcoal, long before grasping the brush and bringing it to the canvas, the painter went for walks, and this act should be considered the first essential step in her meticulous creative process."

### **Georgia O'Keeffe: A Deviant Modernity**

Didier Ottinger

"(...) Established in 1905, Alfred Stieglitz's gallery (The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, later to be known as "291") had become the first – and for a long time was the only – place to show European (chiefly French) avant-garde art. After exhibiting Rodin and Matisse (in 1908), 291 was hailed as the epicenter of modern art in America, the place where people first learned about it through exhibitions and publications (*Camera Work* from 1903 to 1917, then *291* from 1915 onwards). It is therefore only logical that after displaying Cézanne's watercolors 291 should have devoted an exhibition to Picasso's recent watercolors and drawings. In New York as in Paris, the story, the catechism of a modern art was thus starting to be written in which the teleology, Cézanne's connection with cubism and beyond, foreshadowed the diagrams Alfred H. Barr Jr. later used to trace the development of the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

The history of modern art, which Stieglitz had been one of the first to outline – and would later be formalized and reified by the MoMA of New York – fairly soon struck the photographer and gallery owner as being too French. Stieglitz would counter the positivism and formalism of this viewpoint with the spiritualism and naturalism drawn from a tradition which had grown from German Romanticism to the writings of Wassily Kandinsky. Two events would prove decisive in shaping Stieglitz's conception of the development of modern art. The first was his discovery of Kandinsky's writings. Six months after *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* came out in Munich at the end of 1911, the 39th issue of *Camera Work* published excerpts from it, translated into English by Stieglitz himself. These extracts attest to the distinction Kandinsky established between the "two great highways" opened up by the art of the future: Matisse's color and Picasso's form.

(...) Maintaining that her series of charcoal drawings of 1915–16 reflected her innermost feelings and was the best expression of her artistic convictions, O'Keeffe was conscious of identifying with a style and an aesthetic which had historically discredited cubism and the European avant-garde movements stemming from futurist mechanization. Her self-confidence was bolstered by her acknowledged kinship with the poetic universe of Arthur Dove, whom she had discovered in Eddy's book [Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism*, 1914]. Alongside Eddy's reproductions of European avant-garde painters were several pictures by Dove, whom Eddy described as the "only man in this country who persistently painted in modern fashion." The discovery of Dove's work came at a decisive moment in O'Keeffe's confirmation of her vocation. Anxious to find out more about his work, she set about searching for his paintings and discovered them physically in the exhibition of *Younger American Painters* organized by Stieglitz in 1910. Among them was *The Lobster* (1908), whose colors and decorative focus are an explicit tribute to Matisse. Dove, like O'Keeffe, was unquestionably more attracted to the Matissian way analyzed by Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Like O'Keeffe, Dove had grown up far away from the East Coast metropolises. Indeed, she was to say that "Dove is the

only American painter who is of the earth. You don't know what the earth is, I guess. Where I come from the earth means everything. Life depends on it. You pick it up and feel it in your hands." Dove had spent his childhood in the mountains and forests north of New York State. From 1910 to 1918, his sole source of income came from his farming activities. His closeness to nature prompted him to produce paintings Barbara Haskell found to be based on "plants, flowers, leaves, trees and other natural forms and [to] explore natural phenomena of growth, movement and transformation". O'Keeffe's attraction to Dove's work was mutual. According to Stieglitz, "Dove, about 6 years ago, when he saw O'Keeffe's watercolors at 291 said to me: 'this girl [...] is doing what we fellows are trying to do. I'd rather have one of her watercolors than anything I know'." O'Keeffe expressed this admiration, as exclusive as it was mutual, in a very particular way: "My house in Abiquiú is pretty empty; only what I need is in it. I like walls empty. I've only left up two Arthur Doves."

### **Saying it with flowers**

Flowers – explicitly recognizable – first appeared in the artist's work in 1919 in a series of watercolors based on calla lily motifs. O'Keeffe's interest in flowers as subject matter was stimulated by her visit to Charles Demuth, an artist belonging to the Stieglitz circle who had been painting them since 1905. During the 1920s, they became his main subjects. Demuth's pictures convinced O'Keeffe of the artistic validity of flowers as motifs and encouraged her to explore the best style for turning them into a highly personal subject matter.

From 1925, O'Keeffe depicted flowers from a closer viewpoint, so that they filled the whole picture space. This progression to close-up was brought about by the combined influence of photography and her attention to the phenomenology of the modern city. As a firsthand witness to the artistic revolution led by a new generation of photographers (Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams...) under the banner of "Straight Photography," she had plenty of time to meditate on what could be learned from their approach, in which the use of blow-up acted as both a formal and an emotional intensifier. O'Keeffe aspired to this intensification to adapt her art to the phenomena of the modern city: "In the twenties, huge buildings sometimes seemed to be going up overnight in New York. At that time, I saw a painting by Fantin-Latour, a still life with flowers I found very beautiful, but I realized that were I to paint the same flowers so small, no one would look at them because I was unknown. So, I thought I'll make them big like the huge buildings going up."

The repeated presence of flowers in the paintings of Odilon Redon and Henri Fantin-Latour was not interpreted by critics as psychologically revealing; yet analysts of O'Keeffe's oeuvre seized on her flowers and used them to construct a facile monumental gender stereotype, pigeonholing her work in the category of female art – which she nonetheless never ceased to challenge.

(...) O'Keeffe found in D.H. Lawrence's literature an accomplished form of this femininity repressed by the technological changes taking place in modern societies. For Lawrence, flowers are symbols of the fragile ties that bind man to the cosmos: "[Men are] gods frail as flowers, which have also the godliness of things that have won perfection out of the terrific dragon-clutch of the cosmos. Men are frail as flowers. Man is as a flower, rain can kill him or succour him, heat can flick him with a bright tail, and destroy him: or, on the other hand, it can softly call him into existence, out of the egg of chaos."

For O'Keeffe, abstraction, like femininity, is a means, never an end. Abstractizing more than abstract, her artistic practice is faithful to the Latin etymology of the term, the action of extracting, separating, distancing herself from – that is, a process rather than a state, a tension

rather than a fixed form. Her use of abstraction relates to the method of Arthur Wesley Dow, the teacher she acknowledged to have played a determining role in shaping her art. After following the teachings of two advocates of realism – John Vanderpoel in Chicago in 1905–6 and William Merritt Chase at the Art Students League in New York in 1907–8 – in the summer of 1912, O’Keeffe attended the lessons given by Alon Bement, an assistant and pupil of Dow, in Charlottesville (Virginia). The learning of a scrupulous realism gave way to a teaching that advocated reflection, stylization and abstraction from the motifs used by the painter.

(...) In 1914–15, O’Keeffe attended his course at Teachers College in New York. She remained faithful to his principles, attaching greater importance to analyzing the structures of her motifs than to depicting them realistically. Paraphrasing Dow, she stated: “It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasizing, that we get at the real meaning of things.” In keeping with his teachings, O’Keeffe sought forms found in nature to reflect her ideas and translate her emotions, and flowers became a favorite source of inspiration.”

### **The Painter’s Lens**

Ariel Plotek

“(...) Among the photographers she pointed to as proof was her contemporary, Paul Strand, and the *éminence grise* of American avant-garde photography, Alfred Stieglitz himself. It was at Stieglitz’s behest that O’Keeffe had moved to New York in 1918 (the two would be married in 1924) and it was he who had introduced her to art photography through the pages of his earlier journal *Camera Work*. O’Keeffe, in turn, had energized Stieglitz, in the first place with her drawings. Upon encountering these in 1916, he exhibited them at once in his gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, praising the authentically “American” character of O’Keeffe’s drawings: innovative without any discernible European influence. At the same time, the two had begun an intimate correspondence. Now, in her defense of photography as an art in the pages of *MSS.*, it was O’Keeffe’s turn to champion Stieglitz. It was to the publisher of *Camera Work* and *MSS.* that O’Keeffe referred as well when she remarked that she had been “much photographed”: something of an understatement. In fact, Georgia O’Keeffe had first been photographed by Alfred Stieglitz in 1917, when she had posed at 291 (as the gallery was known) in front of her own drawings. “I like your photographs of my drawings much better than I do the drawings,” she wrote in a subsequent letter to Stieglitz. In the years that followed, Stieglitz would photograph O’Keeffe more than three hundred times. He first showed a selection of these photographs in 1921, in an exhibition at the Anderson Galleries. Among the portraits of O’Keeffe were strikingly intimate images that laid bare the artist’s body. These would be recalled by the critics, who casually conflated O’Keeffe’s art with the eroticized image advanced by Stieglitz. But this experience in front of the camera would also be a source of authority for O’Keeffe when it came to her estimation of photography as an art.

(...) For two years, the couple lived in a studio apartment belonging to Stieglitz’s niece. They moved next to an apartment belonging to Stieglitz’s brother. Newly married, the two settled in 1925 at a more permanent address: the 34-storey Shelton Hotel on Lexington Avenue at 49th Street. Boasting numerous “club” amenities, the Shelton claimed at its opening in 1924 to be the tallest residential hotel in New York City. O’Keeffe and Stieglitz took a two room apartment on the 28th story, and later moved to the 30th. From their perch high atop the tower, the two could see out their windows to the East River and beyond. As O’Keeffe would remark in 1928 about this choice of address: “I know it’s unusual for an artist to want to work way up near the roof of a big hotel, in the heart of a roaring city, but I think that’s just what the artist of today needs for stimulus [...]. Today the city is something bigger, grander, more complex than ever before in history.”

In fact, O’Keeffe and Stieglitz’s fascination with the building (and the views it afforded) was altogether in keeping with a modernism that celebrated all manner of innovation and viewed the skyscraper as a quintessentially American achievement. Already, the city’s soaring skyline had been captured by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler in their 1921 short film *Manhatta*. Even earlier, Strand had begun photographing the life of the city from a friend’s second story window. O’Keeffe, however, did not turn her attention immediately to this novel view. Rather, she continued at first to paint the sorts of subjects that had inspired her at Lake George: landscapes and more-or-less abstract nature forms. Already in 1923, an exhibition of these mostly floral subjects organized by Stieglitz at the Anderson Galleries had further established the artist’s growing reputation as a painter of “exquisite subtleties.” At the same time, O’Keeffe’s depictions of petals, stamens and other reproductive organs of the flower also inspired less subtle interpretations, particularly in light of Stieglitz’s nude portraits of the artist.

(...) What the other artists in Stieglitz’s stable (“the men,” as O’Keeffe would refer to them) saw first and foremost was a woman artist. As such, they found fault less with her choice of subject than with her technique: too bright and pretty. Nor were these exclusively feminine qualities; they were associated in the New York of the 1920s with the schools of Europe. Such was this chorus of criticism from “the men” that O’Keeffe deliberately set to painting a more muted subject, the graying barns at Lake George, simply to prove them wrong. With tongue-in-cheek, she demonstrated that she too could forego bright color – as had been the case with the first works on paper she had exhibited in New York. To paint a barn was one thing, but what about the city itself: the modern city portrayed, for instance, in Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*? As O’Keeffe recalled of her rooms at the Shelton: “I had never lived up so high before and was so excited that I began talking about trying to paint New York. Of course,” she remembered, “I was told that it was an impossible idea – even the men hadn’t done too well with it.” This was all that O’Keeffe needed to hear. In 1925, the year in which she and Stieglitz moved into the Shelton, she executed her first painting of the city skyline: *New York Street with Moon*. While the painting is among those now in the collection of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, a related drawing (surely a preparatory study for the Thyssen painting) is preserved at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe. As O’Keeffe described it: “My first painting [of the city] was a night scene of 47th Street, New York with moon. There was a street light in the upper foreground at about the Chatham hotel.” These elements of the painting are present in the preparatory sketch as well. A functional drawing, it not only silhouettes the principal forms of the composition, but includes notational color instructions: purple, pink, dark.”

### **Georgia O’Keeffe: A Heroine for D.H. Lawrence**

Catherine Millet

“(...) At least twice in her life, Georgia O’Keeffe, overcoming obstacles, bravely decided to leave, and both times these departures turned her life upside down. The first was in 1917: the previous year, her friend Anita Pollitzer had taken some of her charcoal drawings to Stieglitz, who was deeply impressed and promptly filled the walls of his gallery, 291, with an entire Georgia O’Keeffe exhibition, before they had even met. O’Keeffe was then a young provincial art teacher in Canyon, a small town in Texas. The exhibition, her first ever, was the last to be held at the gallery, which closed shortly afterwards. She had to see it. The train journey from Canyon to New York cost two hundred dollars, all she had. “This was on a Sunday. That afternoon Georgia appeared at the Canyon bank manager’s house and persuaded him to open the bank for her. She took out her savings and left the next morning on the early train.” She arrived at 291 unannounced. Stieglitz sensed her presence.

The second time was twelve years later. O’Keeffe and Stieglitz had been lovers for eleven years and husband and wife for five. Georgia had been exhibiting and selling her work, but life in New York and the summers spent in the Stieglitz family home at Lake George in New York State were taking their toll on her; she had recently undergone two surgeries and on top of that Dorothy Norman was starting to be involved in the small Intimate Gallery, the successor to 291. The eccentric Mabel Dodge Luhan, who had previously persuaded D.H. Lawrence to visit Taos in 1922 with the intention of interesting him in the cause of the Pueblo Indians, had invited Georgia to Taos and she, long sensitive to the appeal of the South, had accepted. But first she needed to overcome Stieglitz’s opposition to this trip. It was a tough battle under the particular conditions of their relationship at the time. She finally set off on April 27, 1929 and wrote to Stieglitz: “I came into the train wondering why on earth I ever had any such idea as to leave anything as beautiful as you are – once I have found it – But even through my tears I knew I had to go.” She later admitted: “The difficulty in getting out here was enormous, but I came.”<sup>18</sup> From 1934 until Stieglitz’s death in 1946, she spent her winters with him in New York and her summers in New Mexico, where *she could be her old individual self*. A seminar titled “Women Who Rode Away” – a reference to Lawrence’s novella with the same name – was organized at Santa Fe in 1992. The poster advertising the event reproduced a famous photograph of 1944 showing O’Keeffe in trainers and rolled-up jeans on the back seat of a motorbike. She turns her head to face the camera and it is one of the rare pictures in which she is actually laughing instead of wearing her usual half-smile.

(...) In New Mexico she shunned the voluptuous, intriguing flowers that filled the whole field of vision and painted instead arid landscapes with mountains in the distance. It is as if Lawrence had described them a few months before she painted them in a piece written for *Survey Graphic*: “All those mornings when I went with a hoe along the ditch to the Cañon, at the ranch, and stood, in the fierce, proud silence of the Rockies, on their foothills, to look far over the desert to the blue mountains away in Arizona, blue as chalcedony, with the sage-brush desert sweeping grey-blue in between, dotted with tiny cube-crystals of houses.” When she returned to flowers, she produced the increasingly somber *Jackin-the-Pulpit* (1930) series whose very Newmanian line of light that crosses and opens some of them was stressed by Grad. The shape and name of these flowers are so explicitly sexual that it is difficult not to see and understand the humor in them – that is, the distance.”