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| O’Keefe, Georgia (1888-1887) |
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| Georgia O’Keeffe was one of the most important American and women artists of the twentieth century and a leading early abstract painter. She is most famous for her synaesthetic, sensuously coloured and painterly abstractions and enlarged-close-ups of flowers done in the late-1910s and 1920s, and her paintings of animal bones done in 1930s and 1940s. |
| Georgia O’Keeffe was one of the most important American and women artists of the twentieth century and a leading early abstract painter. She is most famous for her synaesthetic, sensuously coloured and painterly abstractions and enlarged-close-ups of flowers done in the late-1910s and 1920s, and her paintings of animal bones done in 1930s and 1940s.  O’Keeffe was born on a farm near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin in 1887 and raised there and on a farm in Williamsburg, Virginia. Her interest in art developed as a child, when she received her first lessons from a few local women artists. In school, she was supposedly told by one of her teachers to make her still life works bigger, an admonition that had a lasting impact, and encouraged to carefully study the structure of flowers and plants. As a young woman, she studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, at the Chase Art School with William Merritt Chase and Kenyon Cox, and Teachers’ College of Columbia University with Arthur Wesley Dow. She then taught art in colleges in South Carolina and Texas for several years in the 1910s.  While in Texas, she created abstract watercolours on paper of views of the Panhandle such as *Evening Star III* (1916), in which she conveys the effects of light at sunset in a highly reductive way, using only three colours and a handful of brushstrokes. She also did some purely abstract works in watercolour and charcoal that vaguely suggest natural forms and processes, such as her two versions of *Blue II* (both 1916) and a group of abstract charcoal drawings called *Special*. Her early works on paper came to the attention of Alfred Stieglitz in 1916. He was very impressed with them and quickly got to know her and exhibited her work in his New York City art gallery ‘291.’ The two soon met, became lovers by 1918 and got married in 1924. Since Stieglitz came from a wealthy family, O’Keeffe settled in New York City and no longer needed to teach to earn a living.  By 1919, O’Keeffe was working in oil on canvas and on a larger scale. At this time, she did a number of pure abstractions, which are striking for their rich harmonic colours, sensuous brushwork, and energetic painterly effects. These include *Blue and Green Music* (1919) and *Music: Pink and Blue I* and *II* (1920), which evoke synaesthetic emotive responses, the transformation of solid and diaphanous forms moving through space, and possible references to the female sexual anatomy. In the 1920s, O’Keefe did hundreds of paintings of all species of flowers and plants, usually as enlarged close-ups that emphasize details or the abstract rhythms of growth and energy in natural forms. Among the best known are *Flower Abstraction* and *Red Canna* (both 1924), *Black Iris III* (1926), *Purple Petunia* (1927) and *Jack-in-the-Pulpit IV* (1930). The critics responded rather harshly and often dwelled on the sexual anatomy that many of them seemed to imply. Although O’Keeffe denied these works had sexual overtones, some of them unmistakably do, and these interpretations were helpful for establishing her reputations and selling her works.  In the late-1920s and 1930s, O’Keeffe’s paintings became more representational as she responded to the broader trend in America between the World Wars to discard modernism and paint subjects that celebrated American technology, industry, morality, and heritage. *Radiator Building* (1927) reflects her response to the modern American urban environment and Precisionism. In 1929, O’Keeffe made her first extended visit to New Mexico, having briefly toured the West when she lived in Texas years earlier. She loved the Southwest and returned often over the next twenty years. Her paintings from these trips include numerous depictions of Mexican penitent crosses on the desert landscape and, more famously, animal bones painted in careful detail or as large, close-up abstractions. *Rancho de Taos Church* and *Cow’s Skull: Red, White and Blue* (both 1930) and *Pelvis–Red and Yellow* (1945) are among her most famous paintings of the 1930s and 1940s.  O’Keeffe relocated permanently to New Mexico in 1949, three years after Stieglitz died. In her later years, she did abstracted views of the mountains and desert of the Southwest, her adobe house, and animal bones. In the 1950s, she did large abstractions of clouds and the linear patterns of rivers, all of which were inspired by aerial views made possible by flying in airplanes. She ceased painting around 1971 due to health problems, including deteriorating vision. She died in Abiquiu in 1987, having become internationally famous and receiving numerous awards and honours in the last years of her long life. |
| Further reading:  (Cowart)  (Eldredge)  (Fine)  (Lisle)  (Peters)  (Robinson)  Online Resources  (Georgia O’Keefe Museum) |