

## **Beauty Bound – Georgia O’Keeffe**

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Toward sunset, a clear autumnal light glows the Sangre de Christos in rich earthy tones of crimson, copper and plum... alighting Her as if from within, hues radiant with amber and honey. Aromas mingle of apples, smoky cedarwood and cinnamon scented poplar leaves.

For generations, painters have come to experience this fabled landscape, celebrating the sheer beauty of its setting. The Indians called this area “dancing ground of the Sun”. Santa Fe, nestled among the foothills of these mountains, atop a high plateau (7,500'), was founded as a distant Spanish outpost in the Americas, becoming a trading centre during pioneer days, the end of the Santa Fe Trail.

On the way back from a hiking vacation in Colorado during 1917, travelling by train, Georgia and her sister Claudia, stopped for a few days in Santa Fe. “I loved it immediately”, Georgia recalled later... “from then on, I was always on my way back”.<sup>1</sup> After 12 springs had passed, with the next one she returned to Taos. Travelling with Rebecca Strand (wife of photographer Paul Strand), they were invited to stay at the heiress Mabel Dodge Luhan’s Taos hacienda. They stayed in the ‘Pink House’ as Frieda and D. H. Lawrence had done previously. She was also offered an adobe studio near a stream, beneath huge cottonwood trees, with large north windows overlooking a meadow where black and white Indian ponies grazed. Beyond were silvery sagebrush and the looming Taos mountains in the distance. Exhilarated, Georgia set up her easel, exclaiming... “this is wonderful...I feel like myself and I like it.”<sup>2</sup>

Staying on for several months, Tony Luhan (Taos Indian husband of Mabel) took them to the Pueblo, camping at sacred Bear Lake in the Taos mountains, motored to cliff ruins of Mesa Verde in southern Colorado, to Canyon de Chelly in Navajo country and as far as the Grand Canyon.

She returned for most summers over the next 20 years, driving her black roadster across America either with a friend or on her own. “Georgia established a pattern, rarely broken until the death of Stieglitz<sup>3</sup> (in July 1946), of setting out every spring from the East with tubes of paint and rolls of canvas and returning in autumn with her back seat (of her mobile studio), full of painting for Stieglitz to show the world”.<sup>4</sup>

Georgia was born on November 15, 1887, the second of seven children and grew up on a farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Her mother Ida, then 23, named her child after her Hungarian grandfather, George Totto, a count from Budapest. Her O’Keeffe grandparents came to the American frontier when their family’s wool business in Ireland faltered. Ten years later in 1848, George Totto and his wife bought land next to the O’Keeffe farm.

In her book, *Georgia O’Keeffe*, she recalls her first memory: “... while sitting outside on a patchwork quilt, I remember the brightness of the light...the light all around...I was probably 8 or 9 months old. The first thing I remember drawing was a picture of a man lying on his back with his feet in the air...wetting the pencil in my mouth...the line became very dark...pressing hard on a tan paper bag”.<sup>5</sup>

Ida O’Keeffe arranged for private art lessons for the three oldest girls. Georgia was close to twelve when she declared to the O’Keeffe’s washerwoman’s daughter, “I’m going to be an artist!”.<sup>6</sup> These private lessons continued for five more years. Thirty years later, a classmate Christine McRae recalled: “Her easel always stood in the centre of the floor and was the high spot of interest. Here she would stand for hours, perfectly silent, working on something that seemed to us already finished, adding colour that our ordinary eyes could never see and serenely undisturbed by our incessant chatter as to how she got that purple or red or green. Presently though, she would drop to earth, look around to see that the teacher was gone, spin on her heels, run up to someone and give her a hug and get the whole studio in an uproar. Then she would quiet down and by the time the teacher returned, would be working away intently”.<sup>7</sup>

“Later, when she moved to New York and her rural roots appeared remarkable to the urbanites, she never lost her belief in their normalcy and her feelings of blessedness at having been born a farmer’s daughter in the American Midwest”.<sup>8</sup>

By the time Georgia graduated from high school she was still intent on making her way as an artist. She pursued studies at the Art Institute of Chicago (1905–06) and the Art Students League in New York (1907–08), quickly mastering techniques which formed the core of the curriculum, imitative realism. After winning the still life prize, adroitly rendered in this style, she gave up making art, saying later that she had known then she could never achieve distinction working within this tradition.

Her interest in art was rekindled when she took an art teachers’ summer course at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, taught by Alon Bement of Teachers College at Columbia University. He introduced her to the revolutionary ideas of his colleague, the head of Fine Arts department at Teachers College, Arthur Wesley Dow. She immersed herself with the aesthetics underlying painting, the principles of abstraction. For the next two years she experimented with Dow’s ideas, either while teaching or as Bement’s assistant in the summer. He introduced her to Kandinsky’s book, *On The Spiritual in Art* and encouraged her to study with Dow. During this time, she visited the avant garde gallery 291 of Alfred Stieglitz, the international photographer and art impresario. Georgia knew he was the only person in New York interested in the art of Americans working in a modern idiom.

Toward the end of her 27th year, she decided to start over, in the simplest way, with charcoal and “... decided not to use any colour until it was impossible to do what I wanted to do in black and white”.<sup>9</sup> On the first day of 1916, Anita Pollitzer, a former Columbian classmate, received a roll of charcoal drawings in the mail. The same day, through rainy streets, she made her way to 291. Stieglitz is said to have exclaimed: “At last, a woman on paper!”<sup>10</sup>

On May 2nd, Georgia’s mother died of tuberculosis complications.

Before he closed the doors of 291 a year later, Stieglitz held Georgia’s first solo exhibition. During this period, working primarily as an abstractionist, Georgia said, “Abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself, that I can only clarify in paint”.<sup>11</sup> In the spring of 1918, Stieglitz offered Georgia financial support to paint for a year in New York. Shortly after her arrival in June, they fell in love and would continue to live and work together in New York during winter and spring and at his family’s estate at Lake George during summer and fall through 1929. At the lake they would hike, swim and pick wild strawberries, while marvelling at the blazing autumn maple leaves, often a time of prodigious painting for Georgia. She wrote of Stieglitz, “He seems to be the only man I know who has a real spiritual faith in human beings”.<sup>12</sup> They married in 1924.

Alfred admired Georgia’s extreme candour and absolute genuineness. By the time he had put down his camera in 1937 at the age of 73, he had taken 500 photographs of her. Over his lifetime, they had exchanged 3400 letters and telegrams. Crediting his photographs of her as helpful, she recalls, “I know now that most people are so closely concerned with themselves, that they are not aware of their own individuality”.<sup>13</sup>

As if the stars had begun to flower, she painted her joy with Alfred. Enlarged, as if from sheer enthusiasm, she painted the first of her ‘butterfly’ views of flowers. The aura of sacred nature burst onto the canvas in vivid colour, exotic and dramatic. Rhythm permeated the sensuous fluidity of her lines and shapes. Painting with transparent glazes of oil, her evocative colour palette often revealed a Japanese sensibility in mood, atmosphere and use of midtone intervals.

Since girlhood, she explored her intense emotions about a subject through drawing and painting in a series, distilling and transforming feelings to essential, satisfying aesthetics. Referring to a series of seven in the *Shell and Old Shingle* (1926), she recalls, “they fascinated me, so that I forgot what they were, except that they were shapes together... singing shapes”.<sup>14</sup>

Often assisting Alfred, she was exposed to several photographic techniques and devices, the influence of which can be seen in the unusual perspectives of the skyscraper paintings – many executed while they lived on the 28th floor of the Shelton in Manhattan (1925 – 29). Even in her most representational work, she displays a penchant for abstraction. Alfred worked assiduously and with great success promoting Georgia's work. A pioneering modernist, by 1940 she was the pre-eminent woman artist in America.

Her first visit to Ghost Ranch was in 1934. Heading across a long wooden bridge over the milk chocolate Rio Grande at Espanola, she continued for many miles on a narrow dirt road aside the Chama River toward Abiquiu. Eventually opening to a wide pastureland, bordered on the right with textured, eroded and sculpted hills of mauve cocoa, rising into a carmine and buff butte. On the left, a sombre mesa with its hills below in brick red, ruddy coral and flesh tones. Slowly driving down a steep slope across another grass and sage plain dotted with character-rich pinons, cedars and junipers, she arrived to cross a log bridge which led to a majestic valley with low ranch buildings below a glowing burnt sienna mesa with turrets of umber and coffee.

She spent most of her time by herself, painting. More light than ever saturated her canvases and there was a new sense of spaciousness. Her paintings expressed this rhythmic expanse of space with shaped planes of enchanted, resonant colours. "The unexplainable thing in nature that makes me feel the world is big 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".<sup>15</sup>

In 1940 she purchased a small U-shaped adobe on seven acres, three miles from Ghost Ranch. Whitewashed rooms were built around a patio and in the bedroom was a huge window overlooking the startling bare-boned interior of earth, hills and cliffs awash in terracotta, ochre and gamboges. The front faced toward a 'perfect blue mountain', the flat mesa called the Pedernal. Continuing to explore movement in space and metamorphic development of forms, Georgia held up against the clear blue sky, a found pelvic bone and then painted it aflight, above her 'blue Pedernal mesa', dynamic and graceful, a symbol of continuing life.

In 1945, in the village of Abiquiu, she purchased another house on four acres with good well water and a garden area overlooking a sweeping expanse of the Chama River valley with strands of cottonwoods, tamarisks, and Russian olives winding along its banks. Two centuries before, the town had been an Indian farming pueblo. She would live here in winter and spring and move to Ghost Ranch for the summer and autumn. By 1949, she had made this area her permanent home.

"In almost all the paintings of O'Keeffe's New Mexico period, her reliance on contour as a descriptive device permits her to present specific, recognizable configurations as sharply focused, fixed entities... giving them the quality of verisimilitude". Magically, the opposite may be the reality, in that O'Keeffe's experimenting over many years, "explored various formal devices often using colour to create abstract geometric shapes and patterns within the boundaries of the contours".<sup>16</sup> This melding of abstract with reality lent strength and mobility to her work.

Generously, she provided Abiquiu with a system that pumped water from the mountains, outfitted the village Little League (the junior baseball team) and had a community centre built.

Through the years, Georgia's spirit of adventure had taken her to paint in Maine, French Canada, Bermuda, California, Hawaii and Mexico. In 1953 she visited Europe for the first time and six years later embarked on an around the world trip over three and a half months.

At the age of 77, she painted a 34' x 8' canvas for the largest retrospect of her career at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. In 1970 the Whitney Museum in New York exhibited 121 paintings and when this exhibit travelled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Art, it broke attendance records. Soon after, failing eyesight forced her to abandon oil painting, although she continued with drawing and watercolour and creating objects in clay. Her exceptionally keen vision had been a source of pride to her since early childhood.

In the autumn of 1973, Juan Hamilton, a potter working at Ghost Ranch, knocked at her door.

“He came at just the moment I needed him”.<sup>17</sup> Soon he became Georgia’s assistant. She took an interest in his artistic development and he taught her to make pots. Lending support to her aging gracefully, their friendship was inspired by a sincere respect and genuine affection. “Living out here has just meant happiness”.<sup>18</sup> She died in 1986 at the age of 98.

“My centre does not come from my mind... it feels in me like a plot of warm, moist Earth with the Sun shining hot on it. It seems I would rather feel starkly empty then let anything be planted that cannot be tended to the fullest possibility of growth”.<sup>19</sup>

In 1997, the contemporary and elegant Georgia O’Keeffe Museum opened in Santa Fe, as the first museum in America dedicated to the work of a woman artist of international stature. The museum’s innovative programs include *O’Keeffe’s O’Keeffe’s*, a first attempt to illuminate her life and work by exhibiting her own collection, featuring 75 drawings and paintings.

Collaborating with other institutions and collections, the museum showcases exhibitions featuring many works rarely seen before now by the public. Also, many young people, assisted by arts education professionals, participate in the O’Keeffe’s Art and Leadership programs.

One thing is for sure, Georgia O’Keeffe was the genuine article, whose verve and wisdom was woven in beauty. Her empathic bond with Nature and her pleasure in living as expressed in her life and oeuvre, endures through what it evokes in our feelings and how we respond.

*What thou lovest well remains,  
The rest is dross  
What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee  
What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage.*

Ezra Pound

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## Endnotes

1. *Portrait of an Artist*, Laurie Lisle, Sea View Books, New York, 1980, p. 89.
2. *ibid*, p. 176
3. Alfred Stieglitz, international photographer and art impresario.
4. *ibid* p. 219
5. *Georgia O’Keeffe*, Penguin, New York, 1977, pp. 1-2.
6. *Portrait of an Artist*, p. 16
7. *ibid*, p. 29.
8. *ibid*, p. 24.
9. *Georgia O’Keeffe*, p. 12.
10. *Portrait of an Artist*, p. 69.
11. *Georgia O’Keeffe*, p. 158.
12. *ibid*, p. 123.
13. *Portrait of an Artist*, p. 108.
14. *Georgia O’Keeffe*, p. 91.
15. *ibid*, p. 179.
16. *Catalogue for a Sense of Place*, June – Sept. 2004. O’Keeffe Museum Curator, Barbara Buhler Lynes.
17. *Portrait of an Artist*, p. 319.
18. *ibid*, p. 343.
19. *ibid*, p. 211.