

FONDATION **BEYELER** | 25 YEARS

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**Georgia
O'Keeffe**

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
23 January – 22 May 2022

Cover:

Georgia O'Keeffe

Patio with Cloud, 1956

Oil on canvas, 91.4 × 76.2 cm

Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Edward R. Wehr, M1957.10

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Photo: John R. Glembin

INTRODUCTION

With this major retrospective on Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986), the Fondation Beyeler presents one of the most significant painters of the 20th century and an outstanding figure in modern American art. Bringing together around 80 paintings and a few works on paper, ranging from O'Keeffe's earliest abstractions to her iconic depictions of flowers and landscapes of New Mexico, the exhibition offers a comprehensive overview of her more than six-decade career. It highlights O'Keeffe's particular way of looking at her surroundings and translating them into new and hitherto unseen images of reality – at times almost abstract, at times close to their model in nature.

The exhibition is organised by the Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, and the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in partnership with the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe. It is curated by Theodora Vischer, Chief Curator at the Fondation Beyeler.

ROOM 1

1 Early Abstraction, 1915

Charcoal on paper

Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation

In this drawing, sweeping lines soar upward from the lower edge of the picture, curling and condensing into spirals. The interplay of various shades, from deepest black to light greys, gives the composition further momentum. This drawing is among Georgia O'Keeffe's earliest works; starting in 1915, she produced a whole series of abstract charcoal drawings, with which she left behind her academic training. Foregoing the use of colour, she began to develop a distinctive visual language in order to give expression to feelings and sensations by means of lines and shapes alone. These drawings made O'Keeffe a pioneer of abstract modernism in the United States. They promptly attracted the interest of gallery owner and photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who selected several for exhibition at his avant-garde gallery 291 in New York in 1916.

ROOM 1

2 Untitled (Tent Door at Night), 1916

Watercolour on paper

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM

Gift of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation

This watercolour shows an open tent entrance at night. The folded back tarpaulin flaps form a triangle, cut across by the thin line of a tent pole. The soft contours and flowing lines of the watercolour, applied in broad brushstrokes of dark reds, browns and blues, convey a sense of the dim darkness inside the tent. Through the narrow opening, the gaze is directed outward toward the sky. During her time at the University of Virginia and later in Canyon, Texas, where she taught art, Georgia O'Keeffe explored her surroundings and immersed herself in nature on regular walks and excursions. Between 1916 and 1918, she processed her impressions in saturated, vibrant watercolours. They bear testimony to her artistic quest, defined by an interplay between a relation to nature on the one hand, and abstraction on the other.

ROOM 3

3 Series I – No. 3, 1918

Oil on board

Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation and The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation

In 1918, Georgia O'Keeffe moved from Texas to New York. With the financial support of photographer Alfred Stieglitz she was able for the first time to focus fully on her artistic practice and began painting predominantly in oil. She devoted herself to questions of composition, the configuration of surface and depth in pictorial space, and the impact of shapes and colours. The spiral is a recurrent motif in her paintings. It alludes to possible organic origins of the image even though, as is the case here, the painting is fully abstract and its prosaic title is not suggestive of any figurative interpretation. Contemporary critics gave a psychoanalytical reading of O'Keeffe's paintings as an expression of her sexuality – this was due in no small part to the nude photographs taken of the artist by Alfred Stieglitz. O'Keeffe herself rejected this interpretation.

ROOM 3

4 Blue and Green Music, 1919/1921

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection

Gift of Georgia O'Keeffe

This oil painting seems to provide a partial view of a larger assembly of shapes, which appears to extend beyond the confines of the canvas. Various wedge-shaped, diagonally positioned elements create a dynamic movement toward the lower right edge of the picture. A staggered arrangement of rhythmically undulating bands and plummeting beams opens out onto a billowing organic formation of swells and hollows, reminiscent of tree bark, roots or feathers. Here, all the image's hues and light and dark contrasts are condensed in shimmering juxtaposition. In paintings such as these, Georgia O'Keeffe formulated painterly equivalents to noises and sounds, as stated in the work's title.

ROOM 4

5 White Iris, 1930

Oil on canvas

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bruce C. Gottwald

The delicate blossom of the white iris is depicted so close up and tightly cropped that it barely stands out against the background. More conventional flower painting mostly shows line-ups or clusters of blossoms in bouquets, in flowerbeds or in the wild. Georgia O'Keeffe's monumental approach focuses on a single blossom for a pictorial exploration of its formal qualities, texture and colouring. She began producing such flower paintings in growing numbers from the mid-1920s onward and they became emblematic in the reception of her work.

ROOM 4

6 Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. IV, 1930

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe

At first glance, it is not necessarily apparent that this painting represents a flower. The work is part of a series of more or less abstract depictions of a plant that is widespread in North America. This plant displays a strikingly sculptural spathe, which wraps around and over the spadix. Spatiality plays an important role in this painting. The high magnification, the unusual perspective and the extreme light and dark contrasts combine to blur the relation between surface and space, foreground and background, hollows and swells.

ROOM 5

7 The Shelton with Sunspots, N.Y., 1926

Oil on canvas

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Leigh B. Block

The gleaming light of the sun appearing next to the façade washes over the slender, dark tower of the Shelton Hotel. Shown from a low angle, the building – literally a skyscraper – projects upward, the harsh light and dark contrasts and steep vanishing lines underscoring its height. Diagonal, rippling bands of clouds wrap around and overlap the narrow rectangles of the architectural elements. Yellow dots rhythmically ripple across the picture surface, reminiscent of the effects of backlight photography. The Shelton Hotel is the New York City building that Georgia O’Keeffe painted the most, having been one of the first to move there in 1925 following her marriage to Alfred Stieglitz. At the time the tallest building in the world, it was built in 1924 during the skyscraper boom that changed the face of New York and turned the modern metropolis into a key artistic theme. Her new surroundings provided O’Keeffe with unfamiliar sensations, experiences of extreme height and depth as well as wholly new perspectives, which she transposed into her painting.

ROOM 5

8 Black Abstraction, 1927

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1969

Black Abstraction belongs to a series of non-figurative paintings created at the same time as the depictions of skyscrapers. Using only few shades between deep black and pure white, the colour palette is reduced to a minimum. Akin to a photographic double exposure, two picture planes seem to be overlapping. The white dot at the centre of the wide concentric circles operates like a far-off, strong source of light, in whose glow a seemingly corporeal silhouette takes shape. Yet this spatiality, generated purely by the impression of light and shadow, remains hazy and offers little optical support in face of the powerful sense of weightlessness and emptiness triggered by the painting. The artist herself spoke of this work as relating to her experience of the onset of anaesthesia – literally the “absence of sensation” – ahead of a surgical procedure.

ROOM 6

9 From the Lake No. 1, 1924

Oil on canvas

Des Moines Art Center, Nathan Emory Coffin Collection

Purchased with funds from the Coffin Fine Arts trust

Sweeping swaths of colour stream from top left to bottom right in this dynamic tall-format composition. In places, pointed and hard-edged spiky shapes cut across the organic swells.

In the 1920s, Georgia O'Keeffe alternated winters and springs in Manhattan with summers and autumns on Lake George in New York State. In Lake George's rural surroundings and local plant life, she found new subjects for her painting and experienced a highly productive period. In this abstracting depiction of the lake, a storm seems to be nearing.

ROOM 6

10 Leaf Motiv, No. 1, 1924

Oil on canvas

Private collection, Switzerland

This close-up view of an oak leaf shows Georgia O'Keeffe's interest in the methods of photography. However, her attention is focused less on achieving the most realistic depiction than on an experimental play with proportions. In nature, the leaf is no larger than the palm of a hand, but here it bursts the confines of the high and narrow format, giving us the impression of looking through a magnifying glass. This impression is further reinforced by comparison with the second, smaller leaf at the bottom left. Disconcerting spatial effects are produced by more abstract shapes in warm autumnal hues of red and orange. In the upper section of the picture, seemingly bulging elements generate a pictorial plane in front of the leaf's light and flat shape. In the central section, the dark red background optically presses forward in front of the leaf's lobed silhouette.

ROOM 7

11 Gray Cross with Blue, 1929

Oil on canvas

Albuquerque Museum

Museum purchase, 1983 & 1985 General Obligation Bonds
Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, Owenwest Corporation
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Framed by a deep blue sky, the imposing cross rises above a hilly landscape undulating softly along the lower edge of the picture. Although the colour of the sky is suggestive of twilight, the otherwise dark cross is strongly lit from the top left. This unreal mood is further underscored by the treatment of the cross itself: at the bottom, the vertical beam appears dark and flat, yet as our eyes move upward it becomes ever more bright and sculptural. This painting is linked to Georgia O'Keeffe's first journey to Taos in northern New Mexico, where she found new themes for her work. She was immediately fascinated by the unique natural environment, the indigenous culture and the Hispanic traditions of the region, and found inspiration in the penitents' crosses erected across the landscape.

ROOM 7

12 Mule's Skull with Pink Poinsettias, 1936

Oil on canvas

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM

Gift of The Burnett Foundation

A mule's skull stares at us out of empty eye sockets. Like a monumental sculpture, it lies in front of a hilly miniature landscape rendered in friendly pastel hues. Against the cloudy sky, two pink poinsettia blossoms float in isolation

This unusual composition is an expression of Georgia O'Keeffe's intense confrontation with the unique landscape of northern New Mexico. During her yearly months-long stays, she explored its vast and barren desert territory. She had her car converted into a mobile studio for the purpose of these expeditions. The sun-bleached animal skulls she collected became a characteristic feature of her landscape compositions.

ROOM 8

13 My Front Yard, Summer, 1941

Oil on canvas

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM

Gift of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation

This painting shows the view Georgia O'Keeffe looked out on in summer from her house on Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. Passing over shrubs and low-growing trees in various warm and cool shades of green, our gaze is directed toward the central mesa that rises skyward in the far back. The "Cerro Pedernal" (Spanish for "flint hill") with its high plateau, which runs closely along the top edge of the picture, is a regional landmark and was one of the artist's favourite motifs. O'Keeffe was fascinated by the unique natural environment and geological peculiarities of northern New Mexico. In the 1930s and 1940s, she spent part of the year there before finally leaving New York in 1949 to settle in her new adopted homeland.

ROOM 8

14 Black Place III, 1944

Oil on canvas

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM

Gift of The Burnett Foundation

On extended and far-ranging painting excursions, Georgia O'Keeffe liked to camp in the “Bisti Badlands” on Navajo territory, at times in harsh weather conditions. The inhospitable area with its stark and strange rock formations, which she called “The Black Place”, inspired her to create compelling series of paintings. In these eponymous works, executed during the years of the Second World War, O'Keeffe represented the greyish black hillscape in an unusually dark palette and increasingly abstracted form. She painted the Black Place from a bird's-eye perspective, the horizon line disappearing completely from view. The valley running between the jagged hill ranges seems to divide the picture in two halves.

ROOM 8

15 Pelvis IV, 1944

Oil on masonite

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM

Gift of The Burnett Foundation

The picture foreground shows an extremely close-up and enlarged partial view of an animal's pelvic bone. The large oval socket directs the gaze straight to the sky behind. In the far distance we can make out the pale disc of the moon. Between 1943 and 1947, Georgia O'Keeffe produced a series of images featuring pelvic bones and displaying unusual effects of scale and proportion. Her interest focussed in particular on the bones' natural cavities, forming a negative space, and the conjunction of a monumental motif in the foreground with a view into the distance.

ROOM 9

16 My Last Door, 1952–1954

Oil on canvas

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM

Gift of The Burnett Foundation

My Last Door is one of Georgia O'Keeffe's formally and chromatically most pared down works. Next to a nearly square black shape at the centre of the image, it features only two dark grey strips at the upper and lower edge of the canvas and a series of smaller light grey rectangles, seemingly marching along below the square.

This large composition is rooted in O'Keeffe's fascination for a dark doorway that inspired a series of paintings between 1946 and 1960. The door led to the square patio of the adobe house she purchased in 1945 in Abiquiú, a small village in New Mexico. The black square may therefore be read as a door and the rectangles below as flagstones just outside, while the strips running along the upper and lower edge of the canvas suggest shadows and thus the building's three-dimensionality.

ROOM 9

17 It Was Yellow and Pink II, 1959

Oil on canvas

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia O'Keeffe travelled abroad only late in life, journeying to Europe, South America and Asia. The view from the airplane window down onto earth introduced her to wholly new perspectives. During the flights, O'Keeffe made small sketches of road and river courses. Upon her return, she transposed them into richly coloured, seemingly abstract paintings.

In *It Was Yellow and Pink II*, we look down on the serpentine line of a river snaking its way across a barren landscape. The colours follow a subtle gradation from warm yellow to pink. They are reminiscent of the desert hues of New Mexico, the landscape the artist had elected as her new homeland ten years earlier, which proved an endless source of inspiration.

ROOM 9

18 Alexander Calder

Black Mobile with Hole, 1954

Sheet metal, wire and paint

Calder Foundation, New York

By inventing the mobile, Alexander Calder (1898–1976) created a sculptural form in which the fragile equilibrium between gravity and weightlessness becomes apparent in wonderful and manifold ways. Georgia O’Keeffe and the younger American sculptor knew each other and in later life developed a friendly relationship. The artist owned a mobile created in 1944, which was one of the few artworks she chose to surround herself with at home, first on Ghost Ranch and later in Abiquiú.

O’Keeffe’s attachment to the endless horizons and wide expanses of rural America here finds its echo in the spatially expansive effect of the mobile’s soft movement.

INFORMATION

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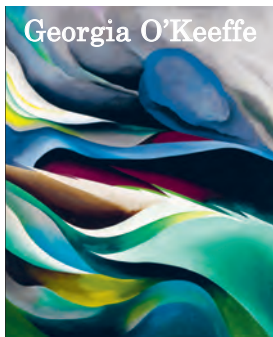
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CATALOGUE



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Further publications on Georgia O'Keeffe are available from the museum's Art Shop: shop.fondationbeyeler.ch

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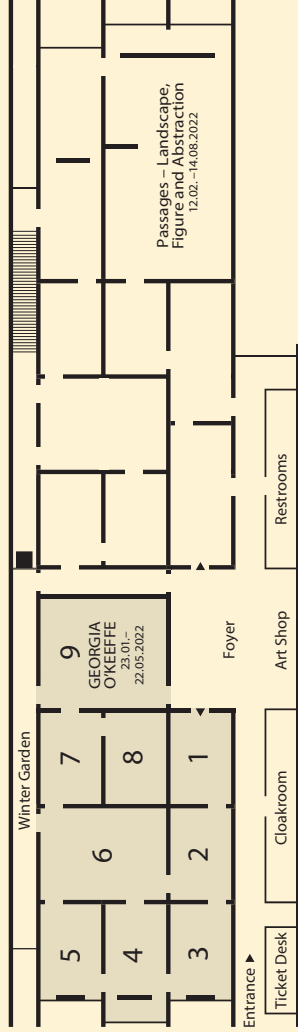
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Caution: please do not touch the artworks!