

# MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE



Georgia O'Keeffe, American (1887–1986), *Poppy*, 1927, Oil on canvas, Gift of Charles C. and Margaret Stevenson Henderson in memory of Jeanne Crawford Henderson

## **Wild Creations Digital Access – Workshop 5: Georgia O'Keeffe with Katherine Pill, MFA Curator of Contemporary Art**

“Men put me down as the best woman painter. I think I’m one of the best painters.” – Georgia O'Keeffe

With her singular style, Georgia O’Keeffe (American, 1887–1986) was a founding member of American modernism. Raised on a farm in Wisconsin, O’Keeffe studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and later the Art Students League in New York. She was one of the first American artists to practice pure abstraction, using charcoal drawings to experiment with line and shape as early as 1915. These works led to her first solo exhibition in New York at photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery, 291, which was at the forefront of the artistic avant-garde (Pablo Picasso’s work made its American debut there in 1911). O’Keeffe would also become the first woman artist to have a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1946.

O’Keeffe and Stieglitz married in 1924, and they influenced each other’s work. They moved into the 33-story Shelton Hotel, and O’Keeffe began a series focused on skyscrapers at night, one of which is in the MFA collection. She had been discouraged to take on the industrial, “male” subject of cityscapes. She stated, “When I wanted to paint New York, the men thought I’d lost my mind. But I did it anyway.” It was also in the mid-1920s that O’Keeffe began to work with close-up and enlarged views of flowers (the views are almost cropped, like a photograph), inspired often by her trips to Lake George, New York. Although critics were quick to draw conclusions about these paintings being linked to female sexuality, O’Keeffe was much more interested in their formal qualities and potential for abstract interpretations: “The subject matter of a painting should never obscure its form and color, which are its real thematic contents.”

O’Keeffe painted flowers before 1924, but she later enlarged their scale, so “even busy New Yorkers” would take time to look at them. Often associated with women, flowers were also emblems of nature. In O’Keeffe’s era, women were often viewed in terms of their biology. A contemporary critic remarked that her flowers had “the air of self-portraits.”

Seven paintings of poppies are known, and the one entitled, *Poppy*, is in the MFA Collection (see above). The two other large ones, *Red Poppy* and *Oriental Poppies*, are less menacing. Is this then her response to traditional flower painting and to critics who interpreted her work narrowly in terms of her sexuality? Her husband and dealer, Alfred Stieglitz, referred to this painting as “that wild red picture.”



Georgia O'Keeffe, American (1887-1986), *New York – Night (Madison Avenue)*, 1926, Oil on Canvas, Gift of Charles and Margaret Stevenson Henderson in memory of Hunt Henderson

Aside from its grey and white palette that suggests a winter sky, *New York Night*, has little association with the observable world. Yet, it has been seen as inspired by her paintings of New York City made between 1925 and 1929. O'Keeffe's move with her husband Stieglitz to the Shelton Hotel precipitated her first such paintings. She claimed her paintings were never non-objective, and this painting may reflect a view looking out of the skyscraper. It strongly evokes Stieglitz's photographs of the heavens made from the early 1920s on, which he called "Equivalentents." *New York Night* was purchased from Stieglitz, along with *Poppy*.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Grey Hills Painted Red*, New Mexico, 1930, Oil on Canvas

In 1929 she took her first trip to New Mexico, and returned often until she moved there permanently in 1949, three years after Stieglitz's death. In New Mexico, O'Keeffe was deeply inspired by the landscape: "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." O'Keeffe lived between two properties in and around Abiqui, New Mexico, until her death at 98 years old in 1986.

## QUIZ

1. The three paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe held in the MFA's collection explore different subjects. Museum visitors spend, on average, just 27 seconds looking at a painting. Choose at least two of O'Keeffe's paintings for this first exercise in close looking. Set a timer so that you spend at least 60 seconds looking carefully at each painting, taking care to note such things as color, light, line, and subject. While differences may be easy to spot, do you notice any similarities? Please write them down. If you'd like to also note ways in which they differ from each other, please feel free to do so.

2. O'Keeffe was met with skepticism when she began painting skyscrapers. What are some hallmarks of her style that she was able to bring to these paintings?

3. In talking about her work, O'Keeffe has said that form and color were her most precise languages for expressing her intimate feelings. Why do you think she was drawn to the subjects she chose, and how do you think those subjects allowed her to express herself through her paintings?

[Submit your quiz](#) answers to be eligible for prizes.

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[Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe](#) by Laura Lisle

[Conversation with Tanya Barson, curator of the Tate Modern's 2016 exhibition, Georgia O'Keeffe.](#)

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