

Pre- & Post-visit Materials for Teachers

Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction
September 17, 2009–January 17, 2010



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About these Materials

How can these materials be used?

These materials provide a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offer suggestions for follow up classroom reflection and lessons. The discussions and activities introduce some of the exhibition's key themes and concepts.

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Which grade levels are these pre- and post-visit materials intended for?

These lessons and activities have been written for Elementary, Middle, or High School students. We encourage you to adapt and build upon them in order to meet your teaching objectives and students' needs.

Learning standards

The projects and activities in these curriculum materials address national and state learning standards for the arts, English language arts, social studies, and technology.

Links to National Learning Standards.

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Comprehensive guide to National Learning Standards by content area.

<http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml>

New York State Learning Standards.

<http://www.nysatl.nysed.gov/standards.html>

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.html>

New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, grades K-12.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/teachlearn/arts/blueprint.html>

Feedback

Please let us know what you think of these materials. How did you use them? What worked or didn't work? Email us at schoolprograms@whitney.org.

For more information about our programs and resources for schools, educators, teens, and families, please visit whitney.org/Education.

Cover image: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Music, Pink and Blue No. 2*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 35 × 29 1/8 in. (88.9 × 74 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Emily Fisher Landau in honor of Tom Armstrong 91.90. © 2009 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

At the Museum

Guided visits

We invite you and your students to visit the Whitney to see the Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction exhibition. In an hour-long thematic gallery tour that builds upon classroom learning, we introduce students to three to five works of art through careful looking, discussions, and activities that incorporate the O’Keeffe’s voice and process. Museum educators lead inquiry based conversations as well as sketching or writing activities in the galleries.

If you are scheduled for a guided visit, your museum educator will contact you in advance. Let them know what preparatory work you have done, how this connects to the rest of your curricula, and what you would like your visit to focus on. If you are visiting during public hours, you and your students (in chaperoned groups) are welcome to stay after your guided tour.

All educators and students who have a guided tour will receive a pass which offers free admission to the Whitney through June 30, 2010.

Self-guided visits

High School students are welcome to visit the museum during public hours in a self-guided capacity. A maximum of 60 students may arrive at the museum together and must then divide into small groups (no more than 4 students) to visit the galleries. One chaperone must accompany 15 students.

Discuss museum rules with students before your visit. We have found that works of art are more accessible if students are provided with some structure or direction, and we recommend giving students a task to complete while in the galleries. You may want to create a worksheet, free-writing or poetry activity, or sketching assignments. Self-guided visits must be scheduled in advance.

For more information and to schedule a guided or self-guided visit, please visit whitney.org/SchoolPrograms.

We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Whitney!

About the Artist: Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986)

Early Years

Georgia O’Keeffe was born near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. The second of seven children, she grew up on her family’s farm. As a child, O’Keeffe was enrolled in private art lessons, and by the time she graduated from high school, she was determined to become an artist. After attending the Art Institute of Chicago (1905-6) and the Art Students League in New York (1907-8), O’Keeffe worked as a commercial illustrator in Chicago.

In 1912 O’Keeffe moved to Charlottesville, Virginia to live with her ailing mother, brothers, and sisters. That summer, she took a course for prospective art teachers at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville and was introduced to the ideas of Arthur Wesley Dow, a pioneer in art education at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York. Drawing upon practices and philosophies of East Asian art and the British Arts and Crafts movement, Dow believed that art should not copy nature but should instead express the artist’s personality. He proposed that beautiful arrangements of form could teach lessons about harmony and interdependence, which could be applied to everyday life. These ideas inspired O’Keeffe to pursue a career as an art teacher. In the fall of 1914, she enrolled at Teachers College to work toward a teaching certificate.

New York and Alfred Stieglitz

While studying at Teachers College, O’Keeffe was introduced to vanguard European and American art, particularly the works shown at the photographer Alfred Stieglitz’s “291” gallery. Stieglitz was the first to show and support modern art in the United States. Back at her family’s home in Charlottesville in the summer of 1915, O’Keeffe synthesized Dow’s ideas with the art she encountered in New York. By the fall of 1915 when she began teaching at a women’s college in Columbia, South Carolina, O’Keeffe was primed to experiment with non-representational art.

Isolated from family and friends in what she called “the tail end of the world,” O’Keeffe began creating abstract drawings that embodied the intangible thoughts and feelings she could not express in words. Early in 1916, a friend took a group of the drawings to Stieglitz who showed them in a three-person exhibition at his gallery in May of that year. The drawings were among the most radical works produced in the United States at the time. In the spring of 1916, O’Keeffe had returned to New York to complete her certificate at Teachers College. Encouraged by Stieglitz’s interest in her work, she continued to make charcoal drawings and

began to use watercolor, combining saturated primary hues with the spatial elements of the charcoals. In the process, she created a unique formal vocabulary that remained central to her work throughout her career. O’Keeffe was one of the first American artists to create abstract works of art, but instead of the fragmented forms that were characteristic of much American and European modernism, her objective was to communicate a sensation or feeling of the rhythms found in the natural world. She often worked in series, treating each variation of a given motif as a unique statement. In 1916, O’Keeffe had begun to introduce color into her work, first experimenting with blue, and later using a limited palette.

Over the next two years, O’Keeffe and Stieglitz corresponded while she continued to teach art at a public high school in Canyon, Texas. In 1918, O’Keeffe moved to New York to devote her full energy to art-making. She took up oil painting as her primary medium, using it to create abstract motifs that echoed those in her charcoals and watercolors. O’Keeffe lived and worked in a brownstone studio apartment on East 59th Street that belonged to Stieglitz’s niece. He and O’Keeffe began to have a personal relationship and the two moved in together. They were married in 1924.

Through her connection to Stieglitz and the photographers in his circle, O’Keeffe became familiar with modernist photographic techniques which transformed her approach to composition. O’Keeffe modeled for Stieglitz and she helped to print the photographs in the darkroom. In the process, she observed how cropping a representational image or an enlargement of a detail can create an abstraction. At that time, many people refused to consider photography as fine art. Part of O’Keeffe’s modernity was to adapt the techniques of contemporary photography and the traditional medium of oil painting to forge a unique personal vision.

Photography not only changed how O’Keeffe saw art, it also changed the critical reception of her work and the way that the public saw her. Stieglitz included forty-five images of O’Keeffe in a 1921 retrospective exhibition of his photographs. The erotically charged nude portraits of O’Keeffe and the public revelation of their relationship transformed O’Keeffe into a media sensation. By the time O’Keeffe’s first solo exhibition opened two years later, critics were discussing her paintings as emblems of female sexuality. Discouraged by what she felt was a narrow interpretation of her work, O’Keeffe reduced her output of abstractions. Yet abstraction always held a prominent place in her art through the 1920s and in her yearly solo exhibitions (1929-50) at the galleries Stieglitz opened after “291.”

New Mexico

“When I got to New Mexico, that was mine. That was my country. I’d never seen anything like it before, but it fitted me exactly.”¹

In 1929, O’Keeffe traveled to New Mexico for the first time. Although she continued to spend time with Stieglitz on the East Coast, O’Keeffe went to New Mexico with increasing frequency through the 1930s and bought a house there in 1940. After Stieglitz died in 1946, O’Keeffe moved permanently to New Mexico, spending summers at Ghost Ranch and winters at a compound in Abiquiu, sixty-five miles northwest of Santa Fe. By the 1960s, numerous magazine features about her life in New Mexico began to appear, but by then, O’Keeffe had carefully crafted her public image as a solitary, independent artist.

O’Keeffe also began to travel extensively to Europe, Asia, and South and Central America. In her large-scale abstractions of the 1950s, O’Keeffe expanded her compositional language by introducing flat, geometric planes of color that extend from one edge of the canvas to another. With this new scale and planar approach, she reenergized her work while offering a precedent for a younger generation of painters whose use of geometric color abstraction would play a primary role in the art of the 1960s.

In early 1971, O’Keeffe began to suffer from macular degeneration, a condition that eventually left her with only peripheral vision. Working with assistants, she continued to make drawings and watercolors for twelve more years; she also began working again with clay. In her nineties, she made a series of watercolor abstractions, using the same simple organic forms of her earliest work. O’Keeffe died in Santa Fe in 1986 at the age of 98.

¹ **From an interview with Georgia O’Keeffe in *The Originals – Portrait of an Artist – Georgia O’Keeffe*, 1977. Perry Miller Adato, producer and director. This material is licensed courtesy WNET.ORG.**

About the Exhibition

The artistic achievement of Georgia O’Keeffe is examined from a fresh perspective in this landmark exhibition, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction*. While O’Keeffe (1887–1986) has long been recognized as one of the central figures in twentieth-century art, the radical abstract work she created throughout her long career has remained less well-known than her representational art. By surveying her abstractions, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction* repositions O’Keeffe as one of America’s first and most daring abstract artists. This exhibition is the first to examine O’Keeffe’s achievement as an abstract artist and one of the largest of O’Keeffe’s work ever assembled. It includes more than 125 paintings, drawings, watercolors, and sculptures by O’Keeffe as well as selected examples of Alfred Stieglitz’s famous photographic portrait series of O’Keeffe.

The curatorial team, led by Whitney curator Barbara Haskell, includes Barbara Buhler Lynes, the curator of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum and the Emily Fisher Landau Director of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum Research Center; Bruce Robertson, professor of the history of art and architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Elizabeth Hutton Turner, professor and vice provost for the arts at the University of Virginia and guest curator at The Phillips Collection; and Sasha Nicholas, Whitney senior curatorial assistant. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays by the organizers, selections from the recently unsealed Stieglitz-O’Keeffe correspondence, and a contextual chronology of O’Keeffe’s life and work. Following its Whitney debut, the show travels to The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C., February 6–May 9, 2010, and to the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, May 28–September 12, 2010.

For information about specific works of art in the exhibition, please refer to the attached image packet.

Pre- & Post-visit Activities

Pre-visit Activities

Before visiting the Museum, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and concepts in Georgia O’Keeffe’s work.

Objectives:

- Introduce students to the concept of abstraction and to O’Keeffe’s art.
- Ask students to explore how O’Keeffe used abstract imagery to communicate her thoughts and experiences.
- Introduce students to a few of O’Keeffe’s sources of inspiration.
- Ask students to reflect upon what inspires them when they create works of art.
- Have students create their own abstract work of art.

1. What is abstraction?

Ask students what the word abstract might mean. After discussing their ideas, let them know that *abstraction* refers to a work of art that is not recognizable as a picture of a person, place, or thing. Abstract art may reflect an emotion, a sensation, or an aspect of the real world that has been simplified, generalized, distorted, or rearranged. Tell students that you’ll return to this definition as you explore O’Keeffe’s work together.

2. A Close-Up Look

Use the image packet that accompanies these materials. Show students image 1. Ask them what they notice? What does this remind them of? Why? What is abstract about this work? Read the title.

Abstraction played a fundamental role in O’Keeffe’s art. It gave her a way to express feelings that she could not express in words. Many of O’Keeffe’s abstractions focus on her experience of people and places, rather than on realistic appearances. Some abstract works—like this painting—take the natural world and distill it to its most basic elements. As the artist explained, she painted this work after looking out over the sky from an airplane window. The boldly planar form of the sky and dense rhythm of the receding clouds allow us to share her sense that we might just walk off into the horizon. O’Keeffe stated, “I was flying out from the big city, and the sky looked like you could just go out the door of the plane and walk right out to the horizon, the clouds looked so solid. Well, I couldn’t wait to get back to paint it.”²

Ask students what inspires them to create art. Share some information about O’Keeffe’s sources of inspiration. In addition to painting the view out of the

² Georgia O’Keeffe Abstraction Audio Guide, 2009

airplane, she has talked about being inspired by the sounds of cows, by music, by landscapes as varied as the New Mexican desert and by New York City's skyscrapers.

3. Create an Abstraction

Georgia O'Keeffe was inspired by the world around her and tried to capture how she felt about her surroundings in her abstract paintings. Using the photographic techniques of framing, cropping, and enlarging in her paintings helped O'Keeffe to arrive at her own approach to abstraction. With your students, view and discuss images of close-ups by Paul Strand that O'Keeffe saw in 1917.

<http://www.photogravure.com/collection/searchResults.php?page=1&artist=0&portfolio=106>

Discuss how your students use cameras or their mobile phones to take photographs. What do they think about before when they take a photograph? Ask your students to use digital cameras to take close-up photographs of the environment in and around your school. Have students explore their surroundings with the camera's zoom feature. Encourage them to observe line, shape, color, and texture. How do things appear differently when they zoom in close-up?

Alternately, you can turn this into a drawing activity, with viewfinders, pencils, and paper. To make a viewfinder, draw a 2" x 2" square in the center of a 5" x 7" index card and cut it out. Ask students to hold the viewfinder at arm's length and close one eye when they look through the hole. Have them draw what they see.

4. Tag it

Use the image packet that accompanies these materials to view and discuss one of the following paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe:

Music Pink and Blue No.2, 1918
Black Place III, 1944

Flower Abstraction, 1924
Sky Over Clouds III, 1963

Ask your students what they notice about the painting. Have them imagine that they could enter this painting. What sensory details might they notice (see, hear, touch, smell)? Have each student write down one word on an index card—a noun or an adjective—that most vividly describes what it might be like to be in the painting. Make a word wall that includes the image and students' selected words. View and discuss the word wall with your students.

For older students: Georgia O'Keeffe said: "The meaning of a word—to me—is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make a more definite statement than words."³ After students have completed a word wall, ask them to discuss what O'Keeffe might have meant by this statement. Do students agree or disagree with O'Keeffe? Why?

³ Georgia O'Keeffe. *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), n.p.

Post-visit Activities

Objectives

- Enable students to reflect upon and discuss some of the ideas from the exhibition.
- Ask students to further explore O’Keeffe’s approaches to abstraction through art-making and writing activities.

1. Museum Visit Reflection

After your museum visit, ask students to take a few minutes to write about their experience. What do they remember most? What did they learn about Georgia O’Keeffe? What new ideas did the exhibition give them? What other questions do they have? Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.

2. Frame, Crop, Enlarge

Ask students to find a photographic image in a magazine. Make a viewfinder (see pre-visit activity 1). Place the image on a flat surface and move the viewfinder over it to select one area of the image. Make an outline with marker or pencil. Have students make a larger drawing or painting from their selected fragment. Compare students’ drawings and their original photographic images. How are they similar or different?

3. A Letter from Near or Far

Ask your students to view and discuss Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Black Place III*, 1944. What do they notice? What comes to mind when they look at the image?

Distribute O’Keeffe’s description of the Black Place from the image packet. The image and the writing were both inspired by an area of New Mexico that O’Keeffe called “The Black Place.” She visited this place repeatedly to explore, camp, and paint. Have students compare the writing and the painting. Are there any parts of the image that remind them of passages from the text? Does reading the text give them any new ideas about the painting?

Ask your students to write a letter to a friend or someone in their family about a place they have visited. Ask them to think about why this place is important to them, what it looks like, how they are inspired or moved by this place, and what colors, shapes, smells, or moods they associate with this place. Ask students to use metaphors and similes to describe the surroundings in detail and their experience in that place. Have students read and discuss their letters. If possible, have students bring in or take photographs of their chosen places to share with the class.

4. Concrete Poetry or Haiku

Students may create a concrete poem or a haiku. A concrete poem is written in the shape of the subject. Each line in the poem is about the chosen topic and the poem is written so that the words create the shape of the subject.

Alternately, students can write a haiku, a three-line, seventeen-syllable poem. The first line contains five syllables, the second contains seven syllables, and the third contains five syllables. Originally from Japan, a haiku is often about nature and does not rhyme.

Select either the concrete poetry or haiku format and ask your students to create a poem about something from nature such as a cloud, flower, leaf, twig, rock, or shell. Display and discuss students' work.

5. Expressing the Inexpressible

O'Keeffe said, in 1976, "The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint." She created work to express emotions that she couldn't say in words. Ask students to identify a powerful emotion they have been feeling. They do not have to share it with the class. Give them watercolors, charcoal, or oil pastels and ask them to experiment with the material, trying to show their feeling or mood. What colors, shapes, or forms might they use? Why?

6. Go Digital

If computers and the Internet are available to you and your students, use online services for student projects and assignments. Make a blog (<http://www.blogger.com/home>) or Flickr set (<http://www.flickr.com/>) for student work. Include the assignment instructions and use the text and image features for student work. For student work, you may want to use Blurb, (<http://www.blurb.com/>), a site for creating and producing online books.

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PBS American Masters series featuring Georgia O'Keeffe.

http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/okeeffe_georgia.html

Artcyclopedia link for Georgia O'Keeffe.

<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/psearch?Request=S&imageset=1&Person=103030/>

Georgia O'Keeffe images from the National Gallery of Art.

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec97/okeeffe.html>

Portrait of an Artist, an online news transcript from PBS on the life and work of Georgia O'Keeffe.

<http://whitney.org/TeacherResources>

The Whitney's web resources for teachers.

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Credits

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