

Pre- & Post-visit Materials for Teachers

Images & Additional Information

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



Jack-in-Pulpit—No. 2, 1930. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe 1987.58.1

Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

WHITNEY

The Black Place

I must have seen the Black Place first driving past on a trip into the Navajo country and, having seen it, I had to go back to paint—even in the heat of mid-summer. It became one of my favorite places to work.

I had a Model A Ford. It was the easiest car I ever had to work in. The windows were high so there was plenty of light. . .It was very good until about four in the afternoon when the bees were going home and thought it a good place to settle. Then the windows had to be closed and it was really hot.

The Black Place is about one hundred and fifty miles from Ghost Ranch and as you come to it over a hill, it looks like a mile of elephants—grey hills all about the same size with almost white sand at their feet. When you get into the hills you find that all the surfaces are evenly cracked so walking and climbing are easy. . .

Such a beautiful, untouched, lonely-feeling place—part of what I call the Far Away. It was a fine morning, sunny and clear, but soon the wind began to blow and it blew hard all day. I went on working. When I was ready to stop, there were clouds everywhere. . .In the night I was waked by a mad wind flapping at the tent and shaking my bed. Down went one corner of the tent so we got up and tied it to the car. . .

It was a pale dawn, as dismal anything I've ever seen—everything grey; grey sage, grey wet sand underfoot, grey hills, big gloomy looking clouds, a very pale moon....and still the wind.

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



Above Clouds III/Above the Clouds III, 1963

Oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in. (121.9 x 213.4 cm)

Private collection

© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

All information in this packet is excerpted from the *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction* audio guide.

1. *Above Clouds III/Above the Clouds III*, 1963

Oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in. (121.9 x 213.4 cm)

Private collection

© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

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 don't contain recognizable imagery. They focus on her experience of people and places, rather than on realistic appearances. Some abstract works—like the large 1963 painting in this introductory area—take the natural world and distill it to its most basic elements. As the artist explains in this 1970s interview, 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.”



Music, Pink and Blue No. 2, 1918

Oil on canvas, 35 x 29 1/8 in. (88.9 x 74 cm)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of Emily Fisher Landau in honor of Tom Armstrong

91.90

© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Photograph by Sheldon C. Collins

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In 1918, O'Keeffe went back to using oil paint – a vivid, luminous medium that allowed her to develop a vibrant palette that was unlike anyone else's. She began using titles that called attention to that color – like this one, *Music, Pink and Blue*.

Pink and blue are far from the only colors that O'Keeffe uses here, but overall the painting *is* a play between warm and cool tones. Two soft lobes emerge from the painting's upper corners— shallow but tactile volumes of blue, green, and lavender. They move towards each other, but don't meet. Instead they touch up against tender sprouts of pinks and orange that seem to grow from the volume in the lower right. Overall the canvas is rhythmic, varied, and harmonious – qualities O'Keeffe associated with the music she refers to in the title. Modernist artists admired music because it was expressive even when it didn't have words or evoke specific images. O'Keeffe found this quality especially compelling.

O'Keeffe stated, "I can see shapes. It's as if my mind creates shapes that I don't know about. I can't say it any other way. But I get this shape in my head. And sometimes I know what it comes from and sometimes I don't. And I think with myself that there are a few shapes that I have repeated a number of times during my life and I hadn't known I was repeating them until after I'd done it."



Jack-in-Pulpit—No. 2, 1930

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe

1987.58.1

Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

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310. *Jack-in-Pulpit—No. 2*, 1930

Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Bequest of Georgia O’Keeffe

1987.58.1

Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington

NARRATOR: In 1930, O’Keeffe made five paintings of a wild flower called a jack-in-the-pulpit that was growing near her Lake George home.

O’KEEFFE CH 13: I have a series of paintings of Jack-in-the Pulpits. At Lake George we had a good many Jack-in-the-Pulpits. My first one was almost photographic. It was about 10x12. And the next one got up to be 30x36. And the next one was 30x40. And in that one the jack got black. Well, then I made an abstract thing of all the different parts of the jack and then it got to be 48 inches high. And then I thought I ought to be able to simplify it more than that, and then I thought well the thing that makes you interested in that flower, and that you wouldn’t look at the flower without, is the jack in the middle of it. So I painted just the jack.

NARRATOR: It is typical of O’Keeffe to suggest that the most abstract image might be most meaningful. She once pointed out that in some ways *realism* isn’t very *real* at all. She did not want to capture the surface appearance of things. Instead, she worked to eliminate some things and emphasize others in order, as she put it, to quote “get at the real meaning of things.”¹

This series signals a subtle change in O’Keeffe’s approach. Her step-by-step move towards abstraction here is analytical – as if the flower were a problem she were trying to solve. In the earlier abstractions, she often seemed to be exploring an interior, imaginary space. Here she uses abstraction instead to reduce the observable world into its most essential, meaningful forms.

¹ Haskell, Barbara (ed.). *Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction*. (exh. cat.) New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. p. 126.



Black Door with Red, 1954

Oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in. (121.9 x 213.4 cm)

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia

Bequest of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

89.63

© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

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314. *Black Door with Red*, 1954

Oil on canvas, 48 x 84 in. (121.9 x 213.4 cm)

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia

Bequest of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

89.63

© Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

NARRATOR: O'Keeffe painted two canvases of the façade of her adobe home in Abiquiu, New Mexico. This façade was just her starting point. Wide expanses of nearly flat paint dominate both paintings, punctuated by schematic forms that depict O'Keeffe's front door and patio. The compositions are more or less the same, but one is an intense sunset-red while the other is pure white –bleached by blinding heat or snowy cold.

Though O'Keeffe was remote from the art world when she made these paintings, they were very much of their moment.

BARBARA HASKELL: In the '50s, after she had moved to New Mexico for good she created paintings that in some ways announced a vocabulary that became the precedent for a younger generation. Instead of flowing, undulating forms that she'd used earlier in her career, she chose these large expanses of geometric color.

NARRATOR: This bold, planar vocabulary put her in dialogue with a much younger generations of artists – abstract expressionists like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, as well as young geometric abstractionists such as Ellsworth Kelly.