GEORGIA O’KEEFFE:
NATURE AND ABSTRACTION

TEACHER’S STUDY GUIDE
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GEORGIA O’KEEFFE: Nature and Abstraction

Georgia O’Keeffe is known for her brilliant close-ups of flowers and abstracted desert landscapes. She has been called an American icon and a modernist trailblazer, and is acknowledged as one of the most important female painters of the twentieth century. This exhibition, a joint venture of the Irish Museum of Modern Art and Vancouver Art Gallery, provides a rare opportunity to view major works by the internationally acclaimed artist and examine her approaches to nature and abstraction.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition Georgia O’Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the vocabulary section.

The tour of Georgia O’Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction has three main goals:

• to introduce Georgia O’Keeffe as an important twentieth-century American artist,
• to examine O’Keeffe’s approach to abstraction,
• to consider individual artworks within historical and geographical contexts.
Georgia O’Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction presents a remarkable survey of the work of Georgia O’Keeffe, one of the legendary figures of twentieth-century art. The exhibition consists of a stunning selection of paintings that span the entirety of O’Keeffe’s career from 1918 to 1977. This presentation is the first solo exhibition of O’Keeffe’s work in Canada in more than fifty years. Through her landscape paintings and studies of flowers, bones, clouds and other natural phenomena, the exhibition focuses on the central theme of O’Keeffe’s art—transforming nature into abstraction. The dominant influence on O’Keeffe’s work in the 1930s and 1940s was the landscape of New Mexico, which she first visited in 1929 and where she spent almost every summer for the following twenty years, eventually settling there in 1949.

During her long and prolific career, O’Keeffe established herself as a major figure in American art, first as a member of the “Alfred Stieglitz Circle” of modern artists in New York, which included Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley and John Marin. Although O’Keeffe’s work is aligned with that of some of the major figures of twentieth-century modernism—both European and American—such as Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso and Ellsworth Kelly, she is renowned for steadfastly remaining true to her own unique vision amid the many shifting artistic trends of the time. Since her death in 1986, her importance, eminence and influence have continued to grow, establishing O’Keeffe as an artist of great significance.

The exhibition also includes an important selection of photographs of O’Keeffe taken early in her life by her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, and images of her taken by Todd Webb later in her life. This extraordinary presentation of paintings and photographs offers a rare opportunity to view the life and work of one of America’s foremost artists. The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated book co-published by Skira, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Vancouver Art Gallery, with essays by Yvonne Scott, Achille Bonito Oliva and Richard D. Marshall.
ARTIST BACKGROUND: Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia O'Keeffe was born in 1887 on a farm in Wisconsin. She took art lessons as a child, and early on showed both artistic competence and an interest in pursuing a career in art, declaring at age twelve: “I am going to be an artist.” She studied art in New York and Chicago, preparing herself for a career as a graphic designer or art teacher. She worked briefly as a graphic designer, and then taught art in primary schools, while working on her own art, from 1910 to 1918. It was during this time that she began experimenting with abstraction, and considering a career as a full-time artist.

In 1916, O'Keeffe, then living in South Carolina, sent some charcoal drawings to a friend in New York, who forwarded them to Alfred Stieglitz—an influential figure in the art world, as well as an important photographer and the owner of the prestigious Gallery 291. Stieglitz was deeply impressed with these drawings and included them in an exhibition in his gallery—without O'Keeffe’s consent. She stormed into the gallery and demanded that the drawings be taken down. The drawings remained in place, but O'Keeffe and Stieglitz began an intense life-long relationship. Initially he served as her advisor, guide and mentor in the art world; later he became her lover and then, in 1924, her husband.

O'Keeffe had her first solo exhibition in 1917, and soon after that she moved to New York. Her early work consisted mostly of watercolours, but she soon switched to working in oils, which she felt better suited her large, colourful abstract compositions. She began taking yearly summer trips to the Stieglitz family estate in Lake George, New York, where she found inspiration in the natural forms surrounding her. She started to paint landscapes that included mountains, lakes, leaves and plants. In 1924 she created the first of the large close-up flower paintings for which she became so well known. Influenced by many of her modernist contemporaries and predecessors, she started simplifying shapes and forms, using swirling shapes and lines, and juxtaposing striking colours. Her forms from nature seemed to open up to include layer upon layer of yet more forms revealed within the natural structure.

Over the next years her work became increasingly abstract and began to include the straight lines and forms of architectural elements. She began to make trips to Taos, New Mexico, where she fell in love with the desert landscape. She subsequently spent every summer in New Mexico and bought a ranch in Abiquiu. After Stieglitz died in 1946, she settled there permanently.

Shortly after she began making her trips into the desert, O'Keeffe started collecting sun-bleached animal skulls and bones, images of which soon found their way into her paintings. She said “the bones do not symbolize death to me.” She loved their forms and shapes, and initially was more interested in the negative spaces they created, and the ways the bones became frames or windows through which the landscape could be viewed. She said: “When I started painting the pelvis bones I was most interested in the holes in the bones—what I saw through them...” The bone forms evolved into strong elements that she then included as part of the natural landscape.

Her later paintings became increasingly abstract, bearing less and less resemblance to the actual landscape, while still originating in it and being deeply connected to it. She painted until the age of ninety, when her eyesight began to fail, but she continued to draw until 1984. Georgia O'Keeffe died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1986—an American icon, aged ninety-eight.
PRE-VIST ACTIVITY: Flowers—from Realism to Abstraction
(all levels)

Objective:
Students look at both real flowers and Georgia O’Keeffe’s abstractions, and create their own artworks.

Discussion:
O’Keeffe talked of her observations about flowers in the following ways:
“Nobody sees a flower—really, it is so small—we haven’t time... So I said to myself—I’ll paint what I see—what a flower is to me but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it.”
“I know I cannot paint a flower... I can convey to you my experience of the flower or the experience that makes the flower of significance to me at that particular time.”

Materials:
- Large sheets of paper for sketching, and thicker sheets for painting
- Pencils or colour pencils for drawing
- Paint (tempera or watercolour) and brushes
- A bunch of real flowers—one flower for each pair of students would be ideal
- A copy of a Georgia O’Keeffe flower abstraction (it would be preferable to match up the real flowers with the chosen print, e.g. white roses, or red poppies, or pink lilies)
- Alternatively, students can bring in objects from nature; e.g., shells, stones, branches, blossoms

Process:
PART 1
1. Have students work in pairs to examine the real flower (or other object from nature). Have them describe what they see. Discuss as a class.
2. Have each student fold a large sheet of paper into four quarters, then flatten it out.
3. Have each student make four quick sketches of the flower, from four different angles or perspectives, in pencil or colour pencil. The sketches should be fairly realistic close-ups of the flower. Encourage them to fill each quarter, adding as much detail as possible.
4. As a class, discuss what the students noticed.

PART 2
1. Show students the copy of an O’Keeffe flower painting. Read them the above quotes. Ask them how O’Keeffe has changed or simplified the flower: look at the shapes and colours, and notice how she has filled the entire picture frame with the close-up of the flower. Make sure students understand the term abstraction (see Vocabulary).
2. Give each student a large sheet of paper, paints and brushes, and ask them to fill their sheet with a simplified, changed, abstracted version of their flower. It should still represent or resemble the flower, but not look realistic.
3. Display each student’s sketches alongside his or her painting.

Conclusion:
- Discuss the differences and similarities of the two ways of working, as well as the differences and similarities of the finished works.
- Ask students to think of other ways they could abstract the flower.
- What if they filled the paper with blocks of colour, or perfect circles, or only painted a close-up of one petal? Would they still be showing the flower? When does an abstract image stop representing the “thing” and become “pure” abstraction?
PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: O’Keeffe in Context
(Intermediate and secondary students)

Objective:
Students look at the ways Georgia O’Keeffe has influenced and been influenced by her environment and her peers, and the role she played as an artist in the twentieth century.

Discussion:
O’Keeffe has been identified in many different ways by different interest groups. She has been claimed by modernists and feminists, New Yorkers and New Mexicans, Freudians and sensualists.

Materials:
- Writing materials
- Internet
- Books on Georgia O’Keeffe, Alfred Steiglitz, twentieth-century American artists

Process:
1. Divide the class into four groups and give each group one of the following topics:
   - O’Keeffe was a very important woman artist of the twentieth century. Why?
   - O’Keeffe was a very significant American modernist painter. How?
   - Stieglitz and his circle of artists had a powerful influence on O’Keeffe’s life and career. How?
   - O’Keeffe’s encounter with the desert profoundly changed her and her work. How?
2. Ask students to research their topic in order to present their perspective on O’Keeffe to the class. They can use the Internet and books for research, and find images of her work that support their ideas.
3. Ask each group to find a creative way (or ways) of presenting their perspective on O’Keeffe to the class. They could choose to write a poem or a song, present a scene from her life theatrically—or, if all else fails, just deliver a lecture to the class.

Conclusion:
Ask students to consider the following in a class discussion or written form:
- Is O’Keeffe’s significance best reflected by considering a combination of perspectives?
- How would it limit our understanding of her life and work to see her only from a single perspective?
- Why is it helpful to view O’Keeffe from multiple perspectives?
Objective:
Students look at the ways O'Keeffe used **line**, **colour**, **shape** and **form** in her **abstractions** by examining her images and creating their own layered collages.

Discussion:
O'Keeffe abstracted forms, layering and exposing the internal structure of objects and the landscape. She said: “A hill or a tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is line and colour put together so that they say something. For me it is the very basis of painting.”

Students might need to be reminded of the definitions of the underscored terms mentioned above (see Vocabulary).

Materials:
- Large sheets of white paper
- Construction paper or other coloured paper
- Translucent or transparent paper, such as tissue paper and/or coloured acetate or cellophane
- Scissors and glue sticks
- Nature/outdoors magazines
- Some O’Keeffe images, such as *Series 1, No. 8* (1919) and *Rust Red Hills* (1930)

Process:
1. Show students some O’Keeffe images (suggested images above easily available on the Internet) and discuss the details. Look at the **lines**, **colours**, **shapes** and **forms**. Have students think about the idea that O’Keeffe is not just painting the outside of the subjects, but that she is exposing the layers hidden inside at the same time.
2. Have the students work in pairs to look through magazines and cut out a nature picture they like.
3. Cut the picture in quarters and have each student choose one quarter to work from (using a quarter of the image rather than the whole should help students think less literally and see the shapes in a more abstract way).
4. Examine the image closely, noting details—**lines**, **colours**, **shapes** and **forms**.
5. Ask students to imagine what the “substructure” would look like if they looked into the forms and could see the formations within the mountains, trees, rocks, etc. What shapes or lines would they find? Mention the rings of growth in a tree trunk, or the layers that can be seen inside different types of rocks.
6. Have the students create their image by trying to expose the lines and layers beneath the formations shown in their image.
7. Have them cut out shapes from coloured and transparent paper, then layer and glue down different coloured translucent and transparent shapes over opaque and translucent shapes on their large sheet of white paper.
8. Display the collages, placing each alongside the original magazine image that inspired it.

Conclusion:
- Show students the O’Keeffe images again and discuss what they notice about her images and theirs.
- How do colours change when they are laid alongside or on top of other colours?
- How has the process of collage changed the look of their images?
- How have their images become more abstract?
abstract: a style of art that can be practised in two ways:
   a. the artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it,
   b. the artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality.

colour (another word for hue): the words we use to name our experience of specific wavelengths of light: red, yellow, orange and so forth. Colour may be descriptive, decorative and symbolic. Colour has both tone (degree of light or dark) and intensity (degree of brightness). Some words to use to describe colour are bright, pastel, warm, cool, in harmony and discordant.
   • Primary colours cannot be mixed from other colours. They are blue, red and yellow.
   • Secondary colours are mixed from two primaries. They are green, purple and orange.
   • Tertiary colours are mixed from two colours adjacent to each other on the colour wheel (one primary and one secondary); e.g., yellow-green, green-blue.
   • Complementary colours are opposite each other on the colour wheel. They share no common colours. For example, red (a primary) and its complementary green (made up of the primaries blue and yellow) provide maximum contrast and intensify each other.
   • Analogous colours are three colours next to each other on the colour wheel. All contain a common primary (e.g., yellow, yellow-green and green). Analogous colours are used to create harmonious compositions with subtle contrasts.
   • Shades are created by mixing colours with varying amounts of black.
   • Tints are created by mixing colours with varying amounts of white.
   • Warm colours are reds, oranges and yellows; they tend to pop to the foreground of the picture plane.
   • Cool colours are blues, greens and purples; they tend to recede to the back of the picture plane.

contemporary: created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists.

form: a shape that has been given a three-dimensional quality. Form may be implied by the use of tone and/or shadow, or may actually be three-dimensional. Some words to use to describe form are rounded, squared, angular, textural, volume and mass.

landscape: artwork in which the subject is a view of the exterior physical world.

line: the path of a moving dot, where a dot is extended in some manner. Line is used to symbolize direction, imply movement, outline forms, suggest mood and determine boundaries of shapes. The quality of line can vary according to the tool and method used, the amount of pressure used and the way a line relates to other elements. Some words to use to describe line are jagged/smooth, thick/thin, weak/strong, curved, straight, implied, wavy and diagonal.

modern: an approach to art that embraced new ideas ranging from science to political thought. The modernists rejected the restrictions of past art traditions and stressed innovation over all other criteria.

shape: a two-dimensional area that is defined in some way. Shapes may be open or closed, positive or negative, free-form or geometric. Some words to use to describe shape are solid, organic, repeated, symbolic and proportional.
RESOURCES

Print:


Online:
www.artcyclopedia.com
Online art encyclopedia, listing international artists and museums and galleries with collections of their work. Includes information on art historical trends and a large selection of reproductions of artworks.

www.wikipedia.org
Online dictionary and encyclopedia with good background and biographical information on artists.