

Georgia o'keeffe | artist biography



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Georgia O’Keeffe

Georgia O’Keeffe is one of many famous American painters. Her paintings of flowers, skulls, horns, and pelvises against a colorful New Mexico background are what made her known to the art world (Zophy 448). There are so many interesting facts about Georgia O’Keeffe, which include her education and teaching, her major works and where they are, the honors she has received, and her charcoal drawings.

Georgia and her siblings attended the Number Five District school house. This school was called the Town Hall School. Georgia once stated, “ My memories of childhood are quite pleasant, although I hated school. I left the local school when I was twelve, and was sent to a convent school in Madison, Wisconsin. It was the one year I ever really learned anything,” (Robinson 24).

While Georgia attended the Sacred Heart School, she was in the advanced section of her class. “ At the convent in Madison, I don’t even remember wanting to do anything I shouldn’t,” she said (31). In 1902, she was sent to the big public high school in Milwaukee. She didn’t pay much attention to the academics and did not like the art teacher either. In the art room of the high school, she realized that the world through which she walked was a never ending source for her work. Since the age of ten, she knew that painting would be her life long profession (Zophy 448).

Georgia first taught at the Chatham Episcopal Institute in Williamsburg, Virginia. The six weeks at Chatham showed Georgia how to continue her art, live in the country and be able to live off her artworks. It showed her a life she might make for herself after all (Robinson, 79).

Georgia was offered a teaching position at the University of Virginia. When she wrote to a friend in Texas to get a reference, her friend told her about an opening in Amarillo. She immediately took the position in Amarillo. “ I was very excited about going to Texas, where Billy the Kid had been,” (Robinson, 86).

“ Later she went to West Texas State Normal College in the Texas panhandle. Her teaching methods were unofficial. Georgia was head of her own department. She taught the students the methods of design, drawing, costume design, interior decoration, and the teaching of drawing” (Robinson, 159).

“ One of Georgia’s many famous paintings is the Jack-In-The-Pulpit series. This series is a powerful celebration of the strong thrust of spring and of the dark secret tower enfolded in green. Due to the natural design of the Jack, the paintings have been viewed as sexual. Georgia did not like her paintings to be put into that category” (Robinson, 354).

Another series of Georgia’s paintings is the “ Corn” series. “ She got the inspiration to paint this series while living with Albert, her husband, in the country. She loved working in her garden which is where the vision came to her. The design of the young plants while she was looking down onto them made an exciting and stirring statement to her” (Robinson, 269).

The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum opened on July 17, 1997 in Santa Fe, New Mexico and was built for the purpose of preserving and presenting the life work of one of America’s famous artists, this museum now houses a permanent collection of O’Keeffe’s art (“ Georgia”). O’Keeffe Museum’s

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Director, Peter H. Hassrick, added, “ O’Keeffe’s life and work are central to the Santa Fe mix. When people visit Santa Fe, they think of Georgia O’Keeffe, and an institution devoted to her artistic accomplishments, located in the region that inspired much of her work, is long overdue.” (“ Georgia”).

“ There are more than eighty paintings, watercolors, drawings, pastels, and sculptures in the collection. One of the centerpieces of the collection is “ Jimson Weed”, a large-scale flower painting, one of her favorite flowers, created in 1982. She liked to make more than one version of her paintings” (“ Georgia”). “ The museum’s long-range plans include the building of a study center on the museum grounds providing scholars, students, and the general public with reference materials on the life and art of Georgia O’Keeffe and her fellow artists” (Robinson, 423)

“ Another place that Georgia’s paintings can be seen is at the National Gallery of Art. “ Secretary of Treasury, Andrew W. Mellon, first wrote of his interest in creating a national art museum in Washington, D. C. in the year of 1928. Later in 1937, Congress passed legislation to build the National Gallery of Art as an independent agency within the Smithsonian Institution. Four years later, the National Gallery of Art was dedicated by President Roosevelt in the evening of the seventeenth of March which was attended by over 8, 000 guests” (“ National”).

“ The mission of the National Gallery of Art is to serve the United States of America in a national role by preserving, collecting, exhibiting, and fostering the understanding of works of art, at the highest possible museum and scholarly standard,” (“ Mission”).

“ The 291st Gallery in New York was the first gallery to recognize her talent. There were few galleries in New York that showed American art because each artist had their own special style” (“ Younger”). It soon closed shortly after its opening in 1917 (“ Younger”).

Georgia had received many great honors throughout her life. Here are some of them: in 1935 she was recognized for excellence in her field by the New York League of Business and Professional Women. “ Later, in May of 1938, she received her first honorary degree, a doctorate of fine arts, from the college of William and Mary, in Williamsburg” (Robinson 423). In 1939, she was chosen as one of the twelve most outstanding women of the past fifty years. “ Her painting, Sunset-Long Island, was picked to represent New York at the World’s Fair” (Ahsby, 432). “ In 1942, she was given a second honorary degree, this one from the University of Wisconsin. In 1946, Georgia received an honor from the Women’s National Press Club, as one of ten women who had reached distinction in their fields” (Ashby, 451).

Thirty-one years later, on January 10, 1977, Georgia was given the Medal of Freedom, which is America’s highest civilian award and was awarded to her by president Gerald Ford (“ The Award”). Georgia recieved another award from a President in April of 1985. This one was the National Medal of Arts, given to her by President Ronald Reagan. This is the highest award given to artists and art supporters by the United States Government. “ With this medal, the President recognizes the extent of creative expression of America’s artists. This is a lifetime achievement award.” (“ The Award”) Georgia was given this medal one year before her death (“ National”).

“ In 1962, the American Academy of Arts and Letters elected her into membership. That same year she was honored with the Bandeis University Creative Arts Award. In 1966, she became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences” (Robinson 507).

“ Georgia O’Keeffe also did many charcoal drawings. Her very first charcoal drawing was titled the “ Special No. 15,” a very early drawing of the Palo Duro Canyon in Texas. It sends a remarkable and significant sense of place. Then eighteen years later in 1934, she drew “ Special No. 40.” She wrote, “ This is from the sea – a shell – and paintings followed. Maybe not as good as this drawing.” Also in this group of Georgia’s drawings is a rare charcoal drawing of her friend, the African American painter Beauford Delaney from the 1940’s. In 1959, she made a charcoal drawing of a riverbed in a desert, which was inspired by sketches she made during one of her first airplane rides” (“ Philidelphia”).

“ Another one, “ Banana Flower No. 1,” was chosen by Albert to be shown in his gallery. Because of her high standards when drawing flowers, some people thought there was some hidden meaning in them” (“ American”). “ She also drew “ Maybe a Kiss...” in 1916, another of a series, because of a boyfriend who left “(Robinson 133). In 1934, she drew the “ Eagle Claw and Bean Necklace (Robinson, 406).

“ All of Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings and drawings had a reason to be drawn. The first reason is because she loved nature.” Many times, she said, “ You know how you walk along a country road and notice a little tuft of grass, and

the next time you pass that way you stop to see how it is getting along and how much it has grown?” (Robinson 233).

Many of Georgia’s visions came from nature, she would tell people this by saying, “ When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it’s your world for a moment,” (Robinson, 33). She would walk through the pines and hear “ singing woods,” (Robinson, 118). “ On the prairie she noticed how dried bones and skulls had a beauty of their own. She liked the color, strength, and shapes of these.” (Robinson, 119)

“ Another reason for her charcoal drawings is because of her emotions. In the nineteenth century, and in earlier decades of the twentieth century, art critics enjoyed the sentimental and long discussions of the emotional qualities in the paintings they saw: sadness, tenderness, passion, rage – all four were great feelings to be kept in print” (Robinson, 178). “ It seemed she did most of her charcoal drawings when she was sad or lonely” (Ashby, 133). She once told a friend that art was a force that passed through the soul (Robinson, 28).

Summing up her life, Georgia moved to Abiquiu, New Mexico permanently after her husband died in 1946. She had visited there many times before and fell in love with the place. She rented a ranch and stayed there six months out of the year (Ashby 204). “ Her style was known as modernism. Some of her most innovative works were in watercolors, pastel, and charcoal” (“ O’Keeffe”). By the year of 1984, she was blind (Robinson 249). “ She spent the rest of her life with a nurse. She died on March 6, 1986 at a hospital in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She was ninety-nine years old. She was cremated and

her ashes were scattered into the “windy landscape” near her house at Ghost Ranch” (Robinson, 550). This paper has some of the many interesting facts about Georgia O’Keeffe, including: her education and teaching, her major works and where they are, all of the honors she has received, and her charcoal drawings. Georgia O’Keeffe had a very interesting life, this term paper only touched on part of it.

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