

# "Living on Paper:" Georgia O'Keeffe and the Culture of Drawing and Watercolor in the Stieglitz Circle



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## **Abstract**

Drawing and watercolor were important in shaping the modernism of artist Georgia O'Keeffe and photographer Alfred Stieglitz. In his gallery 291 and journal *Camera Work*, Stieglitz introduced European avant-garde art to early twentieth-century America and promoted American modernists including O'Keeffe. Stieglitz as a child collected drawings and watercolors and learned traditional drawing connoisseurship that valued revelation of the artist's character through the marks he made on paper. Stieglitz's journals *Camera Notes* and *Camera Work* asserted connections between photography and other graphic media. Stieglitz and Edward Steichen founded 291 as a pictorial photography gallery but later exhibited modern paintings and many drawings and watercolors. O'Keeffe studied academic art at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Art Students League in New York, but she wanted more creative freedom. Art educator Arthur Wesley Dow introduced O'Keeffe to abstract design principles and prepared her to appreciate modern art. While O'Keeffe was training as an art teacher at Columbia University Teachers College in New York in 1914 and 1915, she visited 291 and became interested in modern art. The modern art O'Keeffe had seen was mainly in form of drawings and watercolor at 291 and reproductions in modernist journals, so her original conception of modernism was graphic. Her first modern art works, made in South Carolina in 1915, were abstract charcoal drawings that combined academic drawing techniques with modernist approaches from charcoal drawings by Pablo Picasso and Marius de Zayas. Stieglitz interpreted O'Keeffe's drawings as naïve expressions of female sexuality and showed them at 291 in 1916. O'Keeffe taught art in Texas and made modernist watercolors of the Texas sky and landscape. Stieglitz showed her new works at 291 in 1917. In 1918 O'Keeffe returned to New York and moved in with Stieglitz. She concentrated on painting in oils for the rest of her career. Stieglitz photographed O'Keeffe with her drawings and watercolors, connecting the marks on paper with the artist's body, hands, and sexuality. While exhibiting O'Keeffe's oil paintings, Stieglitz continued for decades to show O'Keeffe's early drawings to critics and to stress her origins as a simple graphic artist.

## **URI**

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291. "Exhibition of Drawings by Georgia O'Keeffe, of Virginia, Water-Colors and Drawings by C. Duncan of New York, and Oils by René Lafferty, of Philadelphia," May 23–July 5, 1916, no catalogue. Anderson Galleries, New York. "Alfred Stieglitz Presents One-Hundred Pictures, Oils, Watercolors, Pastels, Drawings by Georgia O'Keeffe, American," January 29–February 10, 1923, no catalogue. New York. An American Place. "American Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors from the Museum's Collections," October 1–December 7, 1969, no catalogue. New York. Whitney Museum of American Art. Peter–Cornell Richter. *Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz*. New York, 2001, p. 43, ill. Barbara Buhler Lynes with Russell Bowman. *O'Keeffe's O'Keeffes: The Artist's Collection*. Georgia O'Keeffe's enchanting floral still life paintings are now a deeply ingrained part of American culture—so much so that they often eclipse her

other colorful accomplishments. 10. Georgia O'Keeffe served as a muse to other artists. Thanks in part to Stieglitz, O'Keeffe was one of the most photographed women of the 20th century. Stieglitz made O'Keeffe the subject of a long-term series of portraits meant to capture individuals as they aged, and she made for a striking model. If the person in the photographs were living in this world today, she would be quite a different person—but it doesn't matter—Stieglitz photographed her then." 11. Georgia O'Keeffe quit painting—three times.