

“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.

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About Georgia O'Keeffe. Alfred Stieglitz. Georgia O'Keeffe at "291", 1917. Platinum print, 9 9/16 x 7 5/8 inches. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. O'Keeffe mailed some of these highly abstract drawings to a friend in New York City. Her friend showed them to Alfred Stieglitz, the art dealer and renowned photographer, who would eventually become O'Keeffe's husband. He became the first to exhibit her work, in 1916. By the mid-1920s, O'Keeffe was recognized as one of America's most important and successful artists, known for her paintings of New York skyscrapers—an essentially American symbol of modernity—as well as her equally radical depictions of flowers. In the summer of 1929, O'Keeffe made the first of many trips to northern New Mexico. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Red Canna*, 1924 (Georgia O'Keeffe Museum). "I found that I could say things with colour and shapes that I couldn't say in any other way things that I had no words for,"

Georgia O'Keeffe (November 15, 1887–March 6, 1986) wrote in the foreword to a catalog for an exhibition of her work two decades before she became the first female artist honored with a retrospective at. In a passage originally published in the exhibition catalog *An American Place* — which also gave us O'Keeffe's serenade to blue — and later cited in *Georgia O'Keeffe: The Poetry of Things* (public library), she writes: A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower — the idea of flowers.