Georgia O'Keeffe was remarkable among early-twentieth-century American women artists in that she achieved global celebrity both for her art and for her persona. Well known in the United States since the early 1920s, O'Keeffe's broader international fame in later life was greatly enhanced by numerous high-profile exhibitions and several magazine articles in the popular illustrated press that were accompanied by sumptuous portrait photographs that portrayed her as the grand old lady of American Art (she died at age 98 in 1986). She typically posed for these in what had become, by then, her signature style - sitting or standing in solitude, with regal dignity, a strong unsmiling face, her intense gaze focused on the distance, her hair pulled back from her face severely and her clothing simple, monochromatic and slightly mannish. Her quietude was most often set against the dramatic simplicity of her stark home and the desert landscape of New Mexico, where she had worked off and on, and then lived after 1929. This carefully self-crafted public persona is both underscored and analysed for the first time in the exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum (March-July 2017) and Wanda M. Corn's new book, Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern. Corn undertakes the first really exhaustive study of the extensive collection of O'Keeffe's extant clothing at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

It was not unusual for artists to 'brand' themselves in the Modern period to capture the public's attention, and not inconsequently, to market their art. But it was unusual for a woman artist of O'Keeffe's generation to do so and the myth of O'Keeffe has proven so pervasive that while some scholars have noted the consistency of O'Keeffe's image in photography, few scholars until Wanda Corn have actually trained their focus on O'Keeffe as an artist who created a public persona with intent. In her monograph, Corn examines the many ways in which O'Keeffe's single-minded sense of 'beauty' and 'style' permeated her life, her art, and how she insisted that she be photographed. Each chapter of her book is divided into three sections that examine, in turn, O'Keeffe's clothing, art and portrait photographs of the artist. The approach is laudable: it is the first time that O'Keeffe's wardrobe has been juxtaposed against both her art and photographs of her actually wearing some of the garments under scrutiny. The approach pivots the discourse on O'Keeffe away from the same old hackneyed questions about her sexuality and her supposedly innate feminine intimacy with nature towards a possible new scholarly discourse on the artist as a much more intellectually complex, deliberate and compelling artist.

O'Keeffe burst upon the New York scene in 1916, when Alfred Stieglitz gave her her first New York show at his 291 Gallery. In 1918, she moved to New York, Stieglitz installed her in an apartment and she became...
“Georgia O’Keeffe: Living Modern” takes a new look at how the renowned modernist artist proclaimed her progressive, independent lifestyle through a self-crafted public persona—including her clothing and the way she posed for the camera. The exhibition expands our understanding of O’Keeffe by focusing on her wardrobe, shown for the first time alongside key paintings and photographs. It confirms and explores her determination to be in charge of how the world understood her identity and artistic values. In addition to selected paintings and items of clothing, the exhibition presents photographs of O’Keeffe: Living Modern takes a close look at the fiercely independent artist who defied the conventions of her time. Through her art and wardrobe, and through photographic portraits in which she is the subject, a striking image emerges of a thoroughly modern artist — one who crafted her own public persona and, in doing so, became a household name. What does Living Modern refer to? Living Modern nicely encapsulates the overriding theme of the show, revealing that O’Keeffe was modern not just in her art but also in her life. The exhibition makes fascinating connections between her art, lifestyle, clothing, and home décor, and by the way she presented herself in portraits taken by a wide range of photographers.