

*Georgia O'Keeffe: Living Modern* is organized by the Brooklyn Museum, with guest curator Wanda M. Corn, Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor Emerita in Art History, Stanford University, and made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts.

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(NEA LOGO)

## INTRODUCTION

*Georgia O’Keeffe has never allowed her life to be one thing and her painting another.*

—Frances O’Brien, artist and friend (1927)

Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986), an American artist of enormous creativity, believed that everything a person makes or chooses to live with—art, clothing, home décor—should reflect a unified, pleasing, modern aesthetic. Even the smallest acts of daily life, she liked to say, should be done beautifully. This exhibition freshly explores the profound connections she carefully crafted between her art, her style of dress, and her public persona.

Organized chronologically, the exhibition begins with O’Keeffe’s early years and her blossoming career in New York in the 1920s and ’30s, then moves to her life in New Mexico. From her youth onward, she dressed in a plain, unornamented fashion. Whether sewn by her own hands, custom-made, or bought off-the-rack, O’Keeffe’s choice of dress emphasizes the compact shapes, flowing lines, and organic forms that define her paintings. Her striking style in both dress and art was deeply influenced by her lifelong study of Japanese and Chinese cultures, as seen in the galleries. The final section is dedicated to O’Keeffe’s celebrity; in her late career, she became an icon of popular culture, as famous for how she lived in her remote environment as for what she painted.

Throughout the exhibition, the importance of the camera in O’Keeffe’s aesthetic universe is underlined. Over the course of her lifetime, the artist dressed and modeled for some fifty photographers, helping to generate and promote her public identity as an independent, non-conforming woman who by the end of her life had become a feminist archetype and the face of modernity. O’Keeffe’s consistency encourages us to consider how challenging and inspiring it can be to create and sustain a personal style that inflects every aspect of a life.

## Beginnings

*Oh, she wore black. Black, black, black. And her clothing was all like men's clothing....[S]he didn't believe in lace, or jabots in blouses, laces or ruffles or things like that. Everything on straight lines.*

—A student of O'Keeffe's in Canyon, Texas

Born on a Wisconsin dairy farm in 1887, O'Keeffe spent her formative years in Virginia. She excelled in high school art classes and subsequently took two years of formal art training in Chicago and New York. When family finances worsened, she sought employment as an art teacher, one of the few professions open to women with her skills. By 1916, she was head of the art department at a new teacher's college in Canyon, Texas, located south of Amarillo, where she fell in love with the Western frontier and sweeping plains of the Panhandle. Her progressive teaching methods and her loose "reform" dress—notably white or black—worn with thick stockings and flat shoes, was radically out of character with traditional feminine attire, generating local curiosity and gossip.

During her teaching years O'Keeffe came into contact with the influential writings of Arthur Wesley Dow, a painter and printmaker who dismissed the idea of art as an imitative medium and advocated for modern abstraction. His teachings led O'Keeffe to focus on the beauty of pattern and design, not only in art but in every aspect of modern life. She liked to summarize Dow's philosophy as "filling space in a beautiful way." This could be as mundane as where one placed a stamp on an envelope or how one dressed in clearly defined black and white shapes. It became the driving principle of her aesthetic life.

## New York

In 1918, O'Keeffe left teaching in Texas to become a professional artist in New York. Alfred Stieglitz, a fine art photographer and modern art advocate, made her an irresistible offer: he would find her a place to live and support her if she would come to New York and paint full time. At the time, O'Keeffe, thirty and single, was developing her radically new abstract art. Stieglitz, fifty-three and unhappily married, recognized her exceptional talent and exhibited her early abstractions. She knew that he had considerable experience launching male artists' careers in his New York gallery, 291, and through his magazine *Camera Work*.

Not long after O'Keeffe arrived in New York, she and Stieglitz fell in love. He moved into her modest studio apartment, having already begun what he called a "continuous portrait" of her. For twenty years, he made formal photographic portraits of O'Keeffe, a unique and ambitious project that eventually numbered 330 images. Beginning in 1923, Stieglitz showcased her work on a nearly annual basis, building her artistic career while giving her facial recognition by exhibiting and publishing his photographs of her. His portraits and her abstract paintings launched O'Keeffe's public persona as an audacious, modern woman.

An accomplished seamstress, O'Keeffe made many of her garments by hand during these early years. She had a fine eye for quality silks, cottons, and wools, and remained true to her two-tone dress palette of white and black. Characteristically, her clothing veered toward strong silhouettes, plainness, and simplicity. She took pride in her handiwork and preserved some of her early garments for well over sixty years.

While O'Keeffe and Stieglitz lived in Manhattan apartments during the winter, they spent summer and fall in Lake George, New York, where his family had property. There she would paint and model for Stieglitz's camera wearing her summer wardrobe of ivory dresses and blouses, and black skirts and sweaters.

## **Lake George**

In the warmer months, Stieglitz and O'Keeffe would retreat to his family's compound on Lake George in upstate New York to relax and create new art. O'Keeffe painted the lake and its trees, and flowers and fruits from the woods and gardens. Stieglitz worked on his photographic projects, including his continuous portrait of O'Keeffe, who appears to have posed whenever asked. She dressed in cotton smocks, silk tunics, and her lovingly crafted white blouses that hang nearby.

## New Mexico

In 1929, fleeing the busy summer routines at Lake George, O’Keeffe traveled by train to rural New Mexico in search of the solitude and freedom she needed to do her best work. Living in an adobe outbuilding in Taos, New Mexico, she felt so exhilarated and productive that she nicknamed the region “my country,” writing to Stieglitz: “I would rather come here than any place I know.” For the next twenty years, when the weather turned warm, Stieglitz continued his pattern of summers with family members at Lake George while she routinely left New York to paint in northern New Mexico. He never ventured out West. When he died in 1946, O’Keeffe settled his estate and took up permanent residency in New Mexico where she lived until her own death forty years later.

The artist created two homes in a remote area fifty miles northwest of Santa Fe: a small summer cottage at a dude ranch called Ghost Ranch and a larger year-round house with trees and gardens in the nearby village of Abiquiu. Both were adobe structures that she modified by adding midcentury picture windows and designer furniture. She creatively used bleached animal bones, smooth river rocks, and Navajo rugs as regional decorations. Influenced by the astounding chromatic lands and the culture of cowhands and ranchers, she revved up her palette and relaxed her wardrobe. In her art, she drew upon the new motifs and bold colors of her adopted landscape—bright blue skies, white animal bones, brown adobe, and pink and red stony cliffs. In her daily dress, she adopted blue denim and added other new colors to her wardrobe. When members of a new generation of photographers came calling, she continued to dress in black and white for their cameras; now, however, she posed against adobe walls decorated with desert artifacts, reinventing herself as a Southwest modernist.

## Asia

O’Keeffe’s favorite teacher, Arthur Wesley Dow, introduced her to the arts and cultures of Japan and China, and she became a lifelong student of Eastern traditions. She visited American museums with major Asian collections and built an impressive private library that included books on Asian art, calligraphy, gardens, tea, and poetry. After her husband Alfred Stieglitz died, she traveled to many new places, including Japan, China, and India. She visited gardens, temples, and museums, finding reinforcement for the central idea by which she lived: everything in one’s environment should be beautiful and unified in a harmonious style of simplicity and understatement.

From her early years on, O’Keeffe had a soft spot for Japanese kimonos and put together a personal collection of them to wear around the house as bed and bath wear. In her later years, she adopted a kimono-like wrap dress as her signature outfit. Traveling to Hong Kong in her seventies, she bought off-the-rack garments and accessories, and ordered custom-made coats and dress suits in local silks, incorporating details like mandarin collars and frog button closures.

## Celebrity

From the 1920s on, O'Keeffe maintained a strong following among art lovers, securing her stature as one of the country's first and most significant modernist painters. Beginning in the 1960s, however, her audience expanded. She became a national celebrity, as famous for how she lived in her remote environment as for what she painted. She gained increased publicity for her national exhibitions as the media covered her homes and lifestyle in New Mexico. In 1968, *Life* magazine ran a cover story about her and a decade later a PBS documentary was widely televised. During the last twenty years of her life, feminists embraced her as a role model for women who wanted satisfying careers. Artists sought her out for inspiration and advice. A youthful counterculture admired her independent lifestyle. Professional photographers increasingly asked if she would sit for them.

To help cope with the parade of visitors, O'Keeffe came up with two uniforms to wear for the camera: a simple wrap dress and a tailored suit. She commissioned multiple versions of these basics, some in different materials and colors, but mostly in black. Modeling for portraits she embodied a toughness, austerity, and individualism befitting someone who lived life on her own terms. When O'Keeffe died in 1986 at the age of ninety-eight, she had earned her reputation as an American original tempered by age into a Zen-like state of grace.



## Wall Quotes

### INTRO at opening of exhibition

Georgia O’Keeffe has never allowed her life to be one thing and her painting another.  
Frances O’Brien, artist and friend

Nothing is less real than realism...It is only through selection, by elimination, by emphasis,  
that we can get at the real meaning of things.  
Georgia O’Keeffe

### NEW YORK

Today, the city is something bigger, grander, more complex than ever before in history. There  
is a meaning in its strong warm grip we are all trying to grasp.  
Georgia O’Keeffe

### LAKE GEORGE

In a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small...I said to myself—I’ll paint what I see—  
what the flower is to me, but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look  
at it.  
Georgia O’Keeffe

### NEW MEXICO

The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert,  
even tho’ it is vast and empty and untouchable—and knows no kindness with all its  
beauty.  
Georgia O’Keeffe

### CELEBITY

Mona Lisa got one portrait of herself worth talking about. O’Keeffe got a hundred. It put her  
at once on the map. Everybody knew the name. She became what is known as a newspaper  
personality.

Henry McBride, Art Critic

### EXIT

[Georgia O’Keeffe] belongs not only in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art, but in the history of  
women, costume, architecture, home décor, gardening, Southwest culture, and  
photography... O’Keeffe justly belongs in more than one kind of history; her breadth of  
interests and her excellence in all of them are what make her such an unusual artist.

Wanda Corn Art historian and exhibition curator