

BACKGROUND READING FOR PRESENTERS

Georgia O'Keeffe – Cow's Skull with Calico Roses

Georgia Totto O'Keeffe was born November 15, 1887 in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Georgia knew from an early age that she was going to be an artist. She and her sister were taught early on to draw by a grammar school teacher and were taught to paint by a local watercolor artist. In 1905, Georgia graduated and continued her art studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where she was the recipient of top honors during her first year. In September of 1907, she resumed her studies at New York's Art Student League, earning a scholarship.

In 1912, Georgia took a teaching job at the Chatham Episcopal Institute. A year later, she applied for and was hired for a teaching position as a drawing supervisor in Texas. But after years of teaching and having almost no time for herself, she decided it was time to paint again. What resulted was a series of charcoal drawings she says were based on images she had in her head. She sent these drawings to her friend in New York, Anita Pollitzer. Against Georgia's wishes, she showed them to Alfred Stieglitz, famous photographer and owner of Gallery 291. His reaction to her drawings was overwhelming stating "At last, a woman on paper!" He decided to show her drawings without her permission. When she found out, she traveled to New York to confront him but he convinced her to keep them on display, gaining a fair amount of buzz.

In 1923, Stieglitz held a major exhibit of O'Keeffe's work at the Anderson Galleries, the first of many of her showings. The following year, Stieglitz and his wife of 31 years divorced and he quickly asked Georgia to marry him. That same year marked the first time O'Keeffe painted a large, magnified flower which she would become famous for. Stieglitz and O'Keeffe moved to the Shelton Hotel in New York and lived there for the next 12 years where Georgia would be inspired to paint the magnificent views from their 30th floor apartment. But three years later, she felt the need to travel and took a trip to New Mexico which would change her life for good.

Georgia returned to New Mexico every summer until 1946, when her husband died. Only then did she decide to move from New York and permanently reside in New Mexico, calling it "her land". Though her husband had passed away, she continued to exhibit her work. In 1951, O'Keeffe made her first trip to Mexico where she met the artists Diego Rivera, Frieda Kahlo, and Miguel Covarrubias. She spent the next decade traveling throughout the world and her fame continued through the 1950's and 60's.

Over the years, her eyesight began to deteriorate and painting became difficult. She could no longer paint without some assistance. She hired the help of Juan Hamilton who helped her as much as possible. She did her last unassisted oil painting in 1972. In between this time, she received numerous awards and honors. In 1984 O'Keeffe moved to Santa Fe to live with Juan Hamilton and his family. Her only regret at the continuing loss of her eyesight was "that I will not be able to see this beautiful country anymore... unless the Indians are right and my spirit will walk here after I'm gone." One year later, she died, March 6, 1986 at the age of 98. Her body was cremated and Hamilton scattered her ashes over her beloved 'faraway'.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Study this picture for a minute or two. What do you think of it?
What was the first thing that attracted your attention? How do you feel about the subject matter.
2. A viewer's eyes should move around a painting from one place to another.
What is it about this painting that makes you do this?
What leads your eyes around this painting?
3. Would you say that this painting is divided into sections or areas?
How are areas created in this painting?
4. What is the predominant color? How many shades of this color can you find?
What other colors do you notice?
Why do you suppose the artist chose so few colors?
5. How many and what kinds of lines do you see?
Can two contrasting colors placed side-by-side create a line? Where?
Do you see sharp, clean lines or fuzzy, indistinct lines?
6. What textures do you notice?
Does this painting give you a very sharp idea of what the texture of an object is?
7. Does this painting have any similarities to a photograph?
Are the objects life size? Larger? Smaller? More detailed? Simplified?
8. What do you suppose is the meaning of the calico roses?
Why would an artist combine a cow's skull and calico roses in one painting?
9. Her home was in the Southwest. What in the painting would remind you of this?
What things are in your life of which you could make a painting?

SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

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1. “Blow-up” chalk picture

Materials: Flowers (real or artificial) for models. Paper, colored pencils or chalks

Demonstrate the effects achieved by looking through various sizes of small frames at the flowers. Allow students time to cut paper frames of various sizes (or make ahead of time) – one to show the entire flower, one to show a large part, and one to show only a small part, perhaps only half an inch. Let students draw the flower looking through the various frames.

2. Black and white skull or bone picture

Materials: paper; pencil, black ink, or charcoal; bones

Ahead of time, let the students know that they will be making a skull or bone picture and solicit their help in bringing to school bones of skulls they might have. Students will make a black and white drawing of the bone or skull.

3. Newspaper collage

Materials: newspapers, black and white construction paper, manila paper, poster paint

Allow students freedom to create a collage but using only the materials listed and one dab of poster paint. For example, he might paste sections of black construction paper on the manila paper for a base, then add white paper and torn newsprint to add to the collage. On the picture or design, student may add one place to put one color of paint. This should be just a small section, one spot in which to use a bright dab of poster paint.