

CHAPTER  
**21**

## AMERICAN LIVES

# Georgia O'Keeffe

## *Abstract Painter*

## Section 3

*"I have used [my art] to say what is to me the wideness and wonder of the world as I live in it."*—Georgia O'Keeffe, quoted in *World Artists (1984)*

In 1915, Georgia O'Keeffe became dissatisfied with everything she had painted until then. So she destroyed almost all of it. She then started over, developing a style that made her one of the most important of all American artists.

O'Keeffe showed artistic talent when young and studied in both Chicago and New York. She even won an award for a still-life painting. However, the work dissatisfied her. It seemed merely to imitate a style that was accepted. "I began to realize that a lot of people had done this same kind of thing," she later recalled. "I didn't think I could do it any better." She stopped painting and took work as a commercial artist.

Illness forced her to abandon that work five years later. After taking an art class, she became interested in the simplified style of Oriental art. The interest quickened her desire to begin art again. First, though, she destroyed almost all the art she had created until then. She began to draw some charcoals in which she reduced real objects to their most abstract form. She sent them to a friend in New York, with the instruction to reveal them to nobody else. The friend, disobeying, showed the work to Alfred Stieglitz, an art dealer and photographer. Stieglitz was so impressed he began to exhibit the drawings in his gallery. When O'Keeffe found out, she protested. However, Stieglitz calmed her down, and they began a professional and personal relationship that lasted the rest of his life. They were married in 1924, but most important, Stieglitz encouraged O'Keeffe to paint whatever she liked.

She did so—for more than 60 years. O'Keeffe became famous for her spare, clean work. She drew, painted in watercolors, and painted in oil. She created small studies only 7-by-9 inches and huge canvasses that were 8-by-24 feet. She painted flowers, doors, barns, and the sky—whatever interested her. Many of her paintings are so realistic that they have been called photographic. Yet underlying them all is an abstract feeling for the

form of the object. Often she painted the same object repeatedly. In each canvas, the object became less and less recognizable. The last work in the series shows the forms and colors of the object, which can no longer be recognized as an object.

O'Keeffe painted what was around her. When she first settled with Stieglitz in New York, she painted the moon and sun over city buildings. They had a summer home on a lake, and she painted the flowers she saw there. Later she visited New Mexico and became enchanted by its landscape. Many of the works painted there show the bleached bones of cattle or horses. Critics said this work showed a preoccupation with death. O'Keeffe denied it. "There was no rain, so the flowers didn't come," she said. "Bones were easy to find, so I began collecting bones." Among her most well-known works are a series looking at the sky through the holes in an animal skull.

She returned to New Mexico each summer after that. When Stieglitz died in 1946, O'Keeffe moved there permanently. Later, she began to travel extensively to Europe and the Orient. Flying gave her new subjects. She "noticed a surprising number of deserts and wonderful rivers. . . . You see such marvelous things, such incredible colors." She painted a new series that portrayed winding rivers framed in a landscape seen from the air.

O'Keeffe's approach was unique in American art. She refused to be categorized with one school of art or another. "I'm not a joiner," she said. She painted until her death at age 99.

### Questions

1. Why did O'Keeffe not like her early work?
2. Would you say that O'Keeffe was more interested in natural or human objects? Explain your answer.
3. How is O'Keeffe's art both realistic and abstract?