

Will New Mexico ever be the same without Georgia O'Keeffe?

By Hunter Drohojowska

Of painting in New Mexico, Georgia O'Keeffe once said, "Half your work is done for you." She was being modest.

When the doyenne of American painting died March 6, at age 98, in Santa Fe, she had done as much to affect the public's perception of New Mexico as Gauguin had done for Tahiti.

New Mexico, renowned for its incomparable natural beauty, has attracted artists since the late 1800s, from Robert Henri to Larry Bell. Yet O'Keeffe's pictures remain the authority.

When you are walking around Ghost Ranch a few miles above Abiquiu in northern New Mexico, you can appreciate O'Keeffe's skill in choosing from any of the magnificent views. From her hundreds of paintings, you are sure to recognize the flat-topped blue mountain called the Federal rising above the violet Jemez range; the crimson cliffs known as the Mesa Montosa; the sage-covered plains stretching like a rumpled blanket; the surging Chama River as it snakes between the dramatic black and white hills.

O'Keeffe also focused on the interior of her home, later purchased because of the patio door that is now so familiar from her paintings. She made us see even the bleached bones in the desert as rare and precious objects.

When O'Keeffe spotted the red hills of Abiquiu for the first time in 1934, she experienced an epiphany. "As soon as I saw it," she later said, "I knew that was my country. I'd never seen anything like it before, but it fitted me exactly."

When her first New Mexico paintings were shown in New York, critic Henry McBride wrote that they were "something less and something more than painting." The desert had offered a new vocabulary compatible with O'Keeffe's strong affinity for abstraction as influenced by the theories of Arthur Wesley Dow and by her mentor and husband, photographer Alfred Stieglitz.

She wrote in her autobiography, "It is surprising to me how many people separate the objective from the abstract. ... A hill or tree cannot make a good painting be-

cause it is a hill or tree. It is lines or colors put together so that they say something. For me, that is the very basis of painting."

O'Keeffe's reputation as a major talent was established long before her first trip to Taos in 1929 as the guest of arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan. She had painted her landmark enormous flowers, her somber Lake George landscapes and crowded city scenes ever since moving to New York at Stieglitz's invitation in 1918.

When Stieglitz first saw O'Keeffe's work in 1916, he purportedly cried, "At last, a woman on paper." The next year he began showing her work at his 291 Gallery, home of the first American modernists in the early decades of this century: Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove and John Marin, photographers such as Paul Strand and, later, Eliot Porter. Stieglitz also showed the advanced European art of Cezanne, Picasso and Matisse.

O'Keeffe, the independent girl from Sun Prairie, Wis., had grabbed not only the eye but the heart of the impresario of the avant-garde. In 1918, Stieglitz, 54, left his wife of 25 years to live with his young innamorata. They married in 1924. During their lives together, Stieglitz took more than 500 photographs of O'Keeffe that stand as a remarkable monument to their affection.

She had grown to be an exotic beauty, with angular, sculptural good looks enhanced by her severe clothing hair worn straight back. Stieglitz called his composite photographic portrait "clean-cut, heart-felt bits of universality in the shape of a woman."

For the next decade, Stieglitz threw himself behind O'Keeffe's career with fervor, leaning on all his critic and writer friends, the intelligentsia of New York — Henry McBride, Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford — to publish articles about her work. During this time, she evolved the mammoth pictures of flowers — "Red Canna," "Black Iris," "Morning Glory With Black" — but was infuriated by the written analysis of their sexual innuendo.

The strongest competition for O'Keeffe's love came not from a suitor, but from New Mexico. From 1929 until Stieglitz's death in 1946, O'Keeffe painted nearly every summer in the rocky geography she called her spiritual home. Stieglitz

grudgingly forgave his wife's absence, saying he'd rather spend six months with O'Keeffe than 12 months with somebody else.

As a young girl, O'Keeffe demonstrated enough talent to be sent to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1904, then on to the Art Students League in New York, but her family's falling fortunes prevented her from continuing her education. After working as a commercial artist, she ceased making art altogether. Then she read Arthur Wesley Dow's theories of post-impressionist and Oriental art, based on his studies with Gauguin. Flushed with renewed excitement over making paintings, as she put it, "from inside my own head," she accepted a teaching position in Amarillo, Texas, in 1912.

"It was something I'd wanted to do all my life. The Wild West, you see. I was beside myself. The openness. The dry landscape. The beauty of that wild world." Five years later, O'Keeffe made her first visit to New Mexico on a vacation with her sister.

Vacationers continue to boost New Mexico's population of 1 million. In the popular village of Santa Fe, posters of O'Keeffe's paintings are sold in the art galleries, and older women in the shops even seem to resemble the aging O'Keeffe, with their graying hair swept back in a bun, wearing black with silver Indian jewelry as the only adornment.

O'Keeffe became a legend in a state that cultivates independence and eccentricity. She was notorious for saying and doing exactly what she wished, an idiosyncratic notion even among artists. Yet, anyone who wished to remain O'Keeffe's friend acquiesced to her whims.

When traveling in Mexico in 1951 with photographer Eliot Porter, his artist wife, Aline, and the poet Spud Johnson, O'Keeffe insisted that everyone dine with her at 5 p.m. Aline remembered those invitations: "We were all tired and dusty from traveling and we wanted a drink, but what could you do?"

Eliot added, "I liked that about her, no pretense. You couldn't get her to do something she didn't want to do. She wanted to have her way — always." The Porters, who have lived in New Mexico since 1945, remained her friends for life, often spending holidays with her.

O'Keeffe attracted friends with a sense of freedom and independence as distinctive as her own. Richard Pritzlaff raises Arabian horses and keeps chow dogs and peacocks in northeastern New Mexico. He knew her for 49 years and gave her Siamese cats and chows. "She likes chows because they are independent, strong-willed creatures, like her," Pritzlaff said.

He remembered taking O'Keeffe for a day's horseback ride around Hermit's Peak. Both avid garden-



The legendary New Mexico artist Georgia O'Keeffe always looked like, well, Georgia O'Keeffe, as can be seen in this 1962 photograph, which is reprinted from the book "Georgia O'Keeffe: An Artist's Landscape," published by Twestrees Press.

ers, they sent packets of seeds to each other. O'Keeffe was always particular about food. Pritzlaff recalled that when they traveled to Vienna to watch the Lipizzaners perform, she wanted to return daily to the same luncheon establishment for a Salzburg-style fluffy omelet.

Architect and design partners Alexander and Susan Girard befriended O'Keeffe after moving to Santa Fe in the '60s. Susan Girard noted that the artist never varied from her own sense of fashion. "It didn't matter where she went, even to a black-tie dinner," said Girard, "she came as Georgia O'Keeffe, not as someone else, and I find that the height of elegance."

The Girards also loved traveling with O'Keeffe to Morocco and to Mexico because she never complained. On one trip to Oaxaca, the Girards wanted to journey by jeep to a remote village in pursuit of its folk art collection. Accompanying them was O'Keeffe's younger sister, Claudia, who was constantly complaining. The Girards were con-

cerned that Claudia could not make the rugged trip, but equally afraid of offending O'Keeffe. The artist, by then in her 80s, laughed and said disdainfully, "Leave her alone. Let her sit on this bench in the town square and she can tell me her complaints when I come back."

O'Keeffe ultimately became as much a tourist attraction in New Mexico as the Indian pueblos and ski resorts. People regularly drove to Abiquiu to spy upon the large adobe house she bought in 1945, violating her intense need for privacy. When a reporter once appeared at the house asking to see "Georgia O'Keeffe, the artist," she snarled, "You have," and slammed the door shut.

O'Keeffe stopped painting regularly when her eyesight began to fail in the early '70s. Juan Hamilton, a sculptor and ceramist of 23, came to work as her assistant and companion and interested her in making pottery. But she still felt more competent in painting. "I can't make the clay speak," she said.

Hamilton became such a trusted friend over the last 14 years that O'Keeffe named him executor of her estate. She left paintings to him as well as to the museums that were her loyal supporters over the years: the Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Brooklyn Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art.

O'Keeffe realized at an early age that the American public rewards mystery and scandal among its artists. With Stieglitz's help, she promoted her own mystique. At the age of 92, she still questioned a friend about what people in Santa Fe were saying about her. She was well-aware of the constant rumors and did everything to keep them flying, as if living up to Marcel Duchamp's quip that all great artists are created by a few great anecdotes.

Hunter Drohojowska writes frequently about art for the Herald.