

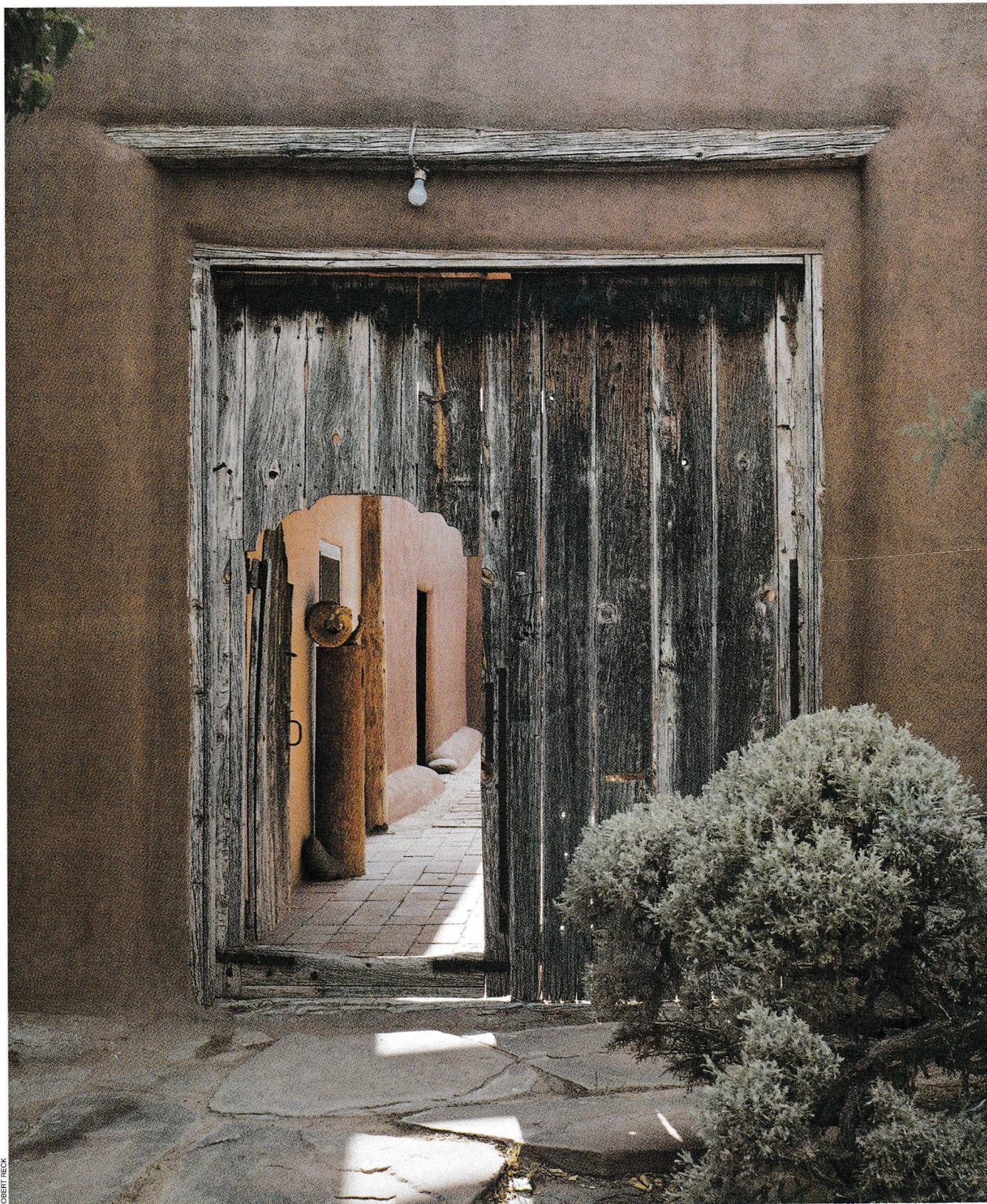
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST REVISITS:
GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
RETURN TO THE ARTIST'S ABIQUIU ADOBE

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True to her expectations, Georgia O'Keeffe enjoyed
a second life on her own in Abiquiu.

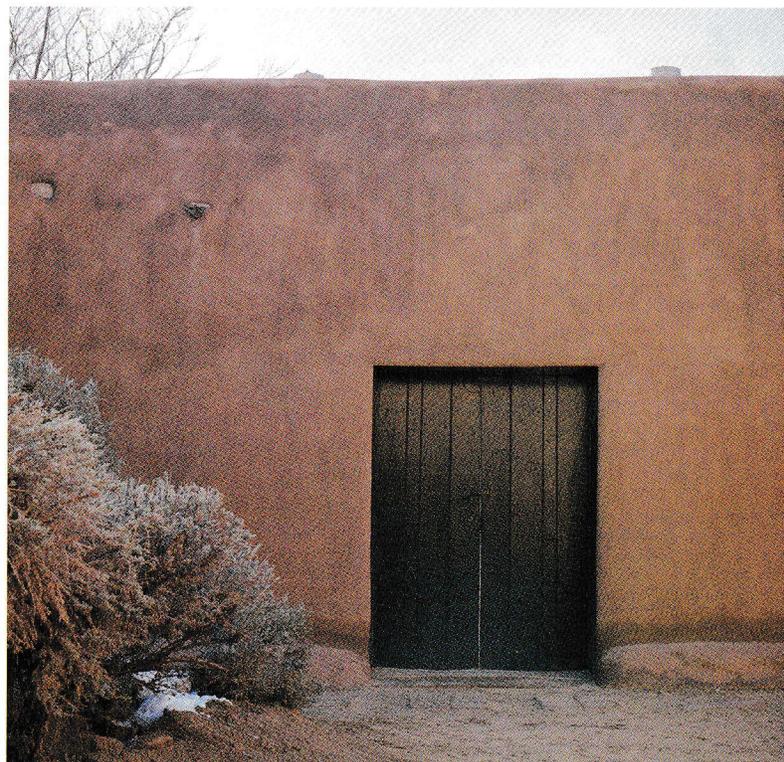




In her autobiography, Georgia O'Keeffe described her initial impression of her residence in northern New Mexico: "When I first saw the Abiquiu house it was a ruin with an adobe wall around the garden broken in a couple of places by falling trees. As I climbed and walked about in the ruin I found a patio with a very pretty well house and bucket to draw up water. It was a good-sized patio with a long wall with a door on one side."

O'Keeffe, the first woman in America to achieve celebrity and acclaim as a modern artist, was rarely put off by anything that she really wanted. She'd been going to New Mexico since 1929 and already owned a place at Ghost Ranch, some seventeen miles to the north. But it was Abiquiu she wanted to call home. After ten years of cajoling the priests of the Catholic

"If you ever go to New Mexico, it will itch you for the rest of your life," said Georgia O'Keeffe, who spent much of her time there from 1930 until her death in 1986. In 1981 *Architectural Digest* first visited the artist at her house in Abiquiu; most of the photographs on these pages appeared in that article. ABOVE: O'Keeffe in her sitting room. LEFT: Adobe walls flank the entrance to the property, which the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation is donating to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. BELOW: The door in the courtyard was a frequent subject for the artist.





O'Keeffe first visited New Mexico in 1929. She purchased the Abiquiu house in 1945 and subsequently embarked upon a total renovation, which involved rearranging the rooms and installing picture windows. OPPOSITE: The original door to the house dates from 1780.

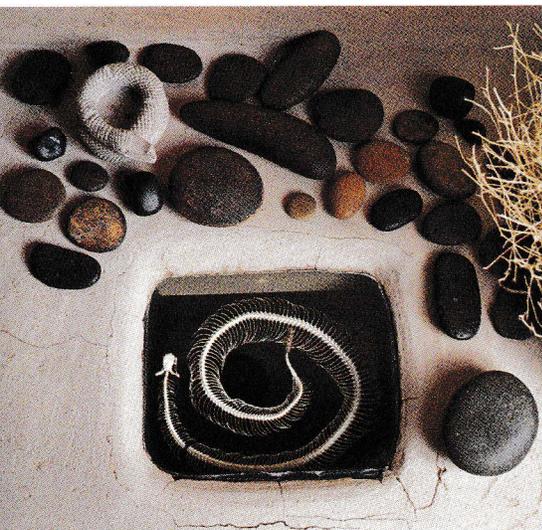
ABOVE: O'Keeffe's *Abstraction*, 1945/1980, occupies what she called the roofless room, a central space adjoining the dining room. O'Keeffe lived simply in Abiquiu, preferring her surroundings spare.

church that owned the property, O'Keeffe bought the place in 1945. Six months later her husband, photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz, died. While she spent the next three years settling the vast Stieglitz estate in New York, her friend and assistant Maria Chabot oversaw the renovation of the Abiquiu house. It was to be a new beginning for the artist, who was then fifty-eight years old.

True to her expectations, Georgia O'Keeffe enjoyed a second life on her own in Abiquiu. She lived there until 1984, when she moved to Santa Fe to be nearer medical attention (she died

two years later, at the age of ninety-eight). One of the most respected of American artists, she was honored in her lifetime by five museum retrospectives. She received multiple honorary doctorates, memberships in the prestigious National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as the National Medal of Arts and the Medal of Freedom, the last being the highest American civilian award. Her current status as a role model for countless women is the result of her clear-eyed dedication to her own aesthetic and to her unconventional lifestyle.

It is hard to remember what New Mexico looked like before O'Keeffe painted it.



ABOVE: A bench in the sitting room holds reminders of the desert, including a rattlesnake skeleton set under glass. BELOW: From the daybed in her studio, O'Keeffe looked out to the Chama River Valley. "I wish you could see what I see," she wrote of the valley, the "yellow cliffs to the north—the full pale moon about to go down in an early morning lavender sky . . . and a feeling of much space."



OPPOSITE: A Pueblo pot is displayed in the Indian room. One of the house's original spaces, it was named for the ledges used by Indians for sleeping. O'Keeffe had the ceiling beams restored along with the walls. Floors are red adobe.

All of this for a farm girl born in 1887 in the village of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, who remained true to her rural instincts. Educated for the most part in a one-room schoolhouse and in private girls' schools, O'Keeffe went on to attend the most challenging art colleges of the early twentieth century: the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, New York's Art Students League, the University of Virginia and Teachers College at Columbia University.

In 1912 she abandoned her academic painting lessons and seized upon the notion of "filling space in a beautiful way." She came to admire the po-

tency of the Japanese aesthetic, the uncluttered balance between form and space. This extended to the idea of a metaphor for a harmonic integration of life and art. O'Keeffe believed that both must be approached with the same devotional rigor.

Curiously, it was in the remote reaches of the Texas panhandle that these ideas coalesced for her. In 1916 she was hired as head of the art department at West Texas State Normal College in Canyon, just eighteen miles from Amarillo. It was seedy and dusty, but the dead quiet and the miles of unbroken horizon won her heart. "That was my country—terrible winds and a wonderful emptiness," she observed.

It was there, free of the distractions of city life, that O'Keeffe honed her unique combination of abstraction and landscape painting. Using a Japanese watercolor brush, she completed glowing paintings of the open space, brilliant sky and the deep red-and-gold cleft of Palo Duro Canyon, from which the town took its name. During a summer vacation the artist made her first visit to Santa Fe and saw the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico. "I loved it immediately," she said. "From then on I was always on my way back."

But her way back was to take a remarkable ten-year detour.

O'Keeffe might have remained a talented but unknown Texas schoolteacher had she not been discovered by Stieglitz. He was the first to introduce modern art to America through his 291 gallery in Manhattan with shows of Matisse, Picasso, Cézanne and others. He was also one of the first to exhibit work by female artists, and when he first saw O'Keeffe's drawings in 1916 he purportedly sighed, "Finally, a woman on paper."

O’Keeffe and Stieglitz pursued a Canyon–New York correspondence of such intensity that they fell in love, despite their age difference—he was fifty-four and she was thirty—and the fact that he was already married, albeit unhappily. In 1918 O’Keeffe contracted influenza, and Stieglitz paid for her return to New

Their relationship initially outweighed O’Keeffe’s distaste for the clutter and bustle of the city. Her paintings of the New York skyscrapers at night indicate how she created her own world of glory and serenity. She explained her giant and sensuous paintings of calla lilies, irises and poppies as a response to oppressive



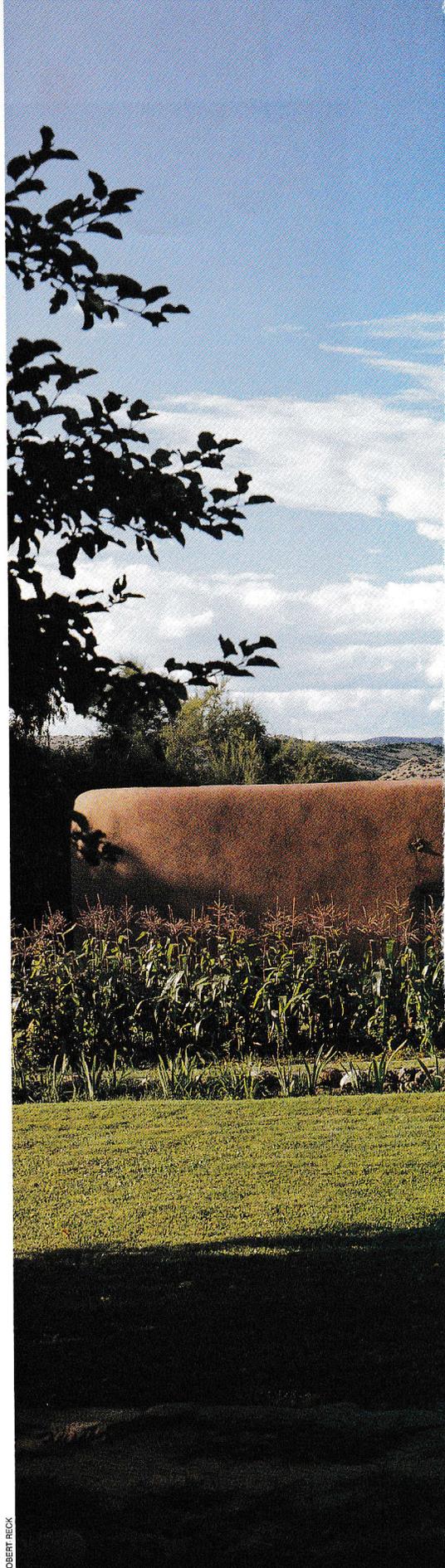
ABOVE: A Buddha’s hand adorns the artist’s bedroom. The fireplace, inspired by a Mayan example, provided heat in winter. RIGHT: O’Keeffe’s property was linked to Abiquiu’s irrigation system, and she planted fruits, vegetables and flowers on her one-acre plot. In a letter to a friend she wrote, “I have a garden this year. . . . There are lots of startling poppies along beside the lettuce—all different every morning—so delicate—and gay. . . . I don’t know how I ever got anything so good.”

York. After her recovery she agreed to stay and paint for at least a year. Within a month Stieglitz had left his wife and moved into a small studio with O’Keeffe. The result is a series of paintings by O’Keeffe and photographs by Stieglitz, including portraits of his new lover, that form an unparalleled visual document of physical and spiritual passion.

urban life. But by 1929 she realized how much she missed the West and jumped at the opportunity to spend the summer in Taos, New Mexico, at the home of arts patron Mabel Dodge Luhan.

Luhan had invited painters such as John Marin and Marsden Hartley to record the stunning landscape, but

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they often felt New Mexico was simply too grand, too imposing, too emotionally excessive to be confined to two dimensions. It was O'Keeffe who managed to capture that landscape with intimacy and wonder. Her familiarity with photography already contributed to the cropped and enlarged style of her compositions. She filled entire canvases with layers of the pink, gray and cream mountains. She made droll still lifes out of the cow skulls she found lying around on the range. In fact, it is hard to remember what New Mexico looked like before O'Keeffe painted it.

After that summer in New Mexico, O'Keeffe returned with the seasonal regularity of a swallow. Stieglitz continued to spend summers at his family's house in the Adirondacks. During the summer of 1934 the artist discovered Ghost Ranch, a remote area some seventy miles west of Taos with spectacular rock formations. It was frankly reminiscent of the landscape of Canyon, Texas, which had proved so inspirational to her eighteen years before. She bought a house in 1940 and spent four summers there until she acquired her house in Abiquiu.

The road from Ghost Ranch winds through desolate passes where there are no houses and few trees. It is a relief to descend to the cottonwood-lined banks of the Chama River and the cluster of warm adobe buildings known as Abiquiu. It's easy to understand why Georgia O'Keeffe wanted to move to "town."

She was at an age when she welcomed the easy access to Bode's General Merchandise and to the local families who cooked, gardened, ran errands and made life more comfortable for her. Ghost Ranch is remarkable for its blue-misted mesa and the surrounding mountains. But Abiquiu was more of a home. It was also O'Keeffe's first permanent residence without Stieglitz or other family, and it bears her imprint in every way.

Today the Abiquiu house is owned by the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation,

which is in the process of donating the building and its five acres of land to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Foundation president Elizabeth Glassman, who often gives tours of the property, explains its enduring lessons: "It's exciting when I take people around the house. They leave with a deeper understanding of Georgia O'Keeffe as an artist and of the artistic process. They learn how focused she was, how important her surroundings were, how she pared down the nonessentials."

The long red wall shaded by an olive hedge is distinctly well tended compared with other buildings in the tiny town. The trees announce one of the most attractive features of the house. As part of an original Spanish land grant, it came with essential water rights. The thin dry soil at Ghost Ranch couldn't support a garden. The arable land at Abiquiu allowed O'Keeffe to return to the habits of her childhood on the farm.

There is still evidence of O'Keeffe's neat rows of organically grown veg-

As she said, "I prefer
to live in a room
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etables—corn, squash, chiles and beets—as well as tomatoes, apples, peaches, pears, grapes and gooseberries. The meals prepared from this produce were legendary for their simplicity and creativity. Flowers were grown as accents and for cuttings. The large garden is irrigated by an aged system of ditches cut into the soil and shaded by giant mulberry, spruce and oak trees. O'Keeffe used to complain that at least she could get her work done at Ghost Ranch, since she didn't spend so much time in the garden.

The house itself reflects O'Keeffe's

insistent integration of her philosophy toward art and life. It required a complete renovation, which was overseen by Maria Chabot, and the artist felt free to rearrange the rooms to suit her particular needs. The living room, for instance, was moved to the back of the house, where a large plate-glass window looks onto a muscular tamarisk, heavy with violet plumes in the summer, and a little more than an acre of garden.

The idea of opening up the traditionally dark adobe with such large picture windows was new at the time and may have been influenced by O'Keeffe's visit with Frank Lloyd Wright in 1942. O'Keeffe used to sit next to the window, listening to classical music on her old record player. Even now a collection of her polished black stones is arranged on the sill.

Certain parts of the house date to 1780, and native materials and labor were used throughout the renovation. The adobe bricks were made on her property. The adobe floors were finished with a flour paste called *poleadas* to give them a taupe color. The mud was applied, in the traditional manner, by women. Watching their firm, smooth strokes, O'Keeffe observed, "The mud surface made with the hand makes one want to touch with the hand."

Supporting beams called *vigas* and wooden cross poles called *latillas* make up the ceilings. Benches along the walls of the living room provide elemental seating. In one bench, the artist embedded a glass box bearing the skeleton of a rattlesnake—one of her characteristic practical jokes. Although her paintings and an Alexander Calder mobile enlivened the room when she lived here, for security reasons there is very little of her art in the house today. One wall bears an early-1960s painting of a brightly colored sky from her series *Above the Clouds*.

The dining room is exceedingly spare, with a table made of sheets of plywood and a few inexpensive

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Windsor chairs all painted in a translucent whitewash. The Isamu Noguchi paper lantern over the table is one of the few light fixtures. Around the house, bare bulbs hang from the ceiling as they did in O'Keeffe's day.

The rooms reveal the artist's desire for simplicity and control. If Matisse wanted his painting to be like an easy chair, O'Keeffe undoubtedly would have preferred comparison to a hard wooden stool. Her design decisions were intentional and precise, not based on frugality, for she was by then a wealthy woman. As she said, "I prefer to live in a room as bare as possible."

In the kitchen, O'Keeffe had inexpensive metal cabinets set into the adobe and painted white to make them seem less intrusive. A breakfast table, also of plywood, faces a windowed wall looking out to the luxuriant garden. In 1948 electricity came to Abiquiu, and O'Keeffe bought a big freezer and a double refrigerator. "I didn't want to drive forty-five miles round-trip for wilted produce," she said. A mangle for ironing, a Chambers stove from the 1940s and a brown plastic Philco radio are reminders of the past. Yet other elements give one the feeling that the artist is still in residence. A jar in the pantry is marked "Good Tea" in her crabbed handwriting. Yogurt incubators, spices and simple copper-bottom cookware are eerie reminders of her ordered life. At Abiquiu, out of necessity, she turned to canning, baking bread and making preserves, which she remembered from her youth.

Across the open pebbled drive blooming with jimsonweed, the artist's studio and bedroom were built on the site of the old corral. Large windows dominate the pristine work space and take in the view of farmland in the valley. The White Place, as she called the chalky cliffs that she regularly painted, can be seen in the distance. On a ledge, her assistant and heir, Juan Hamilton, has left one of his ovoid black ceramic sculptures next to one of her geometric

paintings she called *A Day with Juan*.

Her low-ceilinged bedroom is not much bigger than a train compartment. The taupe adobe walls are unadorned but for a single hand from a Buddhist sculpture held in the *abhaya mudra* position, which is said to be a gesture of reassurance. Her narrow bed was set opposite the windows in the corner so she could wake with the dawn. O'Keeffe proudly described this view: "I see the road toward Espanola, Santa Fe and the world."

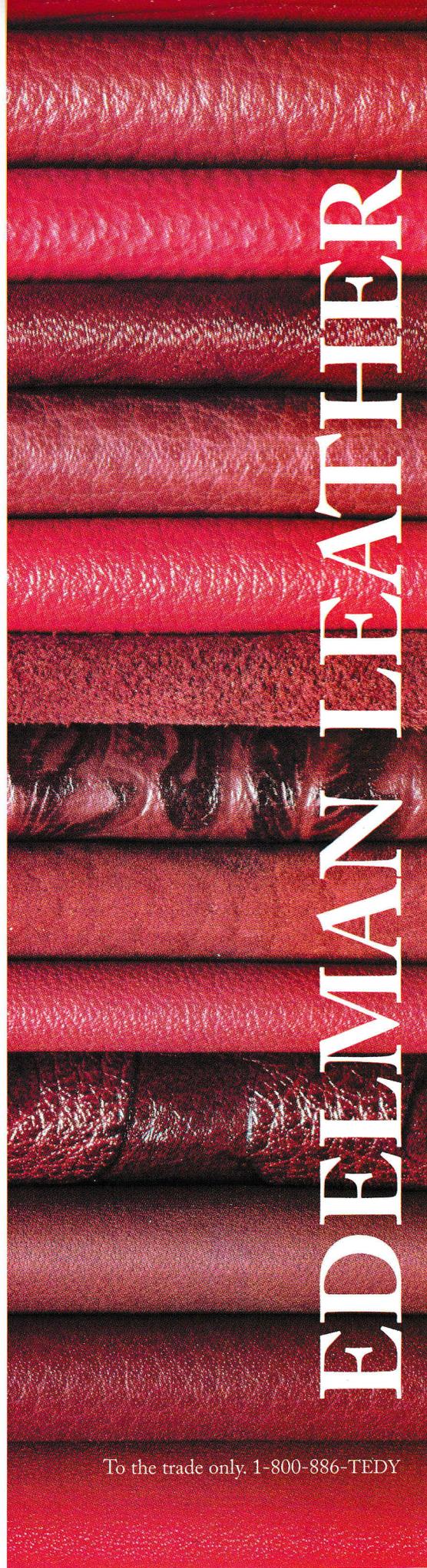
Most of the rooms of the house are arranged around a courtyard patio with rugged double doors at the center of one wall. Elizabeth Glassman notes, "When visitors stand in the patio and look at the patio door, then get shown a picture of her painting of the patio door, they get a sense of how the artist took her surroundings and transformed them into something else."

Although there were abundant practical reasons to buy the house in Abiquiu, Georgia O'Keeffe frequently talked about a more symbolic gesture involving the courtyard door. "That wall with a door in it was something I had to have. It took me ten years to get it—three more years to fix the house so I could live in it—and after that the wall with a door was painted many times."

Between 1946 and the late 1960s the artist did a series of paintings of that rectangular portal against a flat background. The reductive qualities of these pictures were singled out for special praise from art critics during the Minimalist era of the 1970s.

What most critics didn't know was that she was painting the door to the *salita*, which had served as the salon and the place where the artist stored her paintings in racks. Georgia O'Keeffe, who reveled in hidden meanings, was, in her way, rendering the entrance to her own paintings. □

The house is open to the public by reservation. For information, contact the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, P.O. Box 40, Abiquiu, NM 87510; 505/685-4539.



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