

# exhibition

## Art, love and flowers: the blooming passions of Georgia O'Keeffe

**She commands record prices for a female artist but the extraordinary life of Georgia O'Keeffe is little known. As her work comes to London, Hunter Drohojowska-Philp tells the story**

**G**eorgia O'Keeffe, known for her suggestive portrayals of flowers, is considered an icon of 20th-century American art. She was also the first American woman to achieve a level of professional recognition equal to male artists. However, unlike Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol, her work has been not been exhibited widely outside the United States. Her last show in London, at the Hayward Gallery, was 23 years ago. For this reason alone, the retrospective of 100 works opening at Tate Modern next month marks a significant opportunity. If O'Keeffe's paintings are unfamiliar in Britain, however, her life is even less known.

O'Keeffe is revered today for her independent spirit, but she could not have had such a career, unprecedented for a woman of her time, without the guidance and manipulations of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. He was the first dealer to exhibit Matisse, Picasso and Rodin in America, among the first to extol photography as fine art, and the publisher of the journal *Camera Work*, which showcased the most advanced photography, art, criticism and poetry. Yet even the zealous Stieglitz could not have promoted O'Keeffe to fame and fortune without her exceptional talent and ability to resist as well as accept his ideas. While he succeeded in bringing her to the attention of the New York art world after the First World War, she resurrected his interest in photography — even in life.

Stieglitz was born to wealthy German-Jewish parents in 1864 in Hoboken, New Jersey. However, he was educated in Germany and determined to pursue a creative life rather than the business interests of his father. He was driven, volatile and verbose.

O'Keeffe, born in 1887 in the small mid-western town of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, was the daughter of a dairy farmer of failing fortunes. The eldest of seven, she knew from adolescence that she would have to earn her own living. O'Keeffe was taciturn but observant, intelligent and determined. As a couple, they embodied the adage that opposites attract.

After studying art in Chicago and New York, O'Keeffe was employed in Chicago as a commercial artist but found the work depressing. She returned to Charlottesville, Virginia, where her family had moved. Studying to become an art teacher at the University of Virginia, she discovered the influential composition theories of Arthur Wesley Dow (in a nutshell: that art should be created from elements of the composition, such as mass, line and colour, instead of copying nature) and went to New York to study with him at Columbia University's Teachers College. His principles freed her from notions of faithful representation — she recalled that he taught her to "organise space in a beautiful way".

In 1915 she produced a group of charcoal and watercolour abstractions, called *Specials*, which were shown by a friend to Stieglitz. Noting that he was finally seeing "a woman on paper", he displayed them informally on the walls of 291, his highly regarded gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. After receiving her letter of thanks, he began



writing her regular missives of encouragement and mounted a show of her work in 1917, just before closing the gallery as America entered the war.

O'Keeffe was thrilled by his attention but had accepted a teaching position in Canyon, Texas. For the next two years, the pair got to know one another through letters. In the remote panhandle territory, O'Keeffe evolved her earliest abstract watercolours inspired by Dow's teaching, Stieglitz's letters and another, often overlooked factor —

Paul Strand. The handsome young photographer, a protégé of Stieglitz, had come across O'Keeffe in New York and a mutual infatuation arose quickly. Strand was radical in the way he enlarged and cropped images. Stieglitz published him in *Camera Work*, which he sent to O'Keeffe, but Strand also sent her packets of his photos of stacked bowls that appeared as abstract circular forms of black and white. She wrote back to tell him that she loved the work and loved him. She made watercolours in response to his photographs, circles of desert colour

nested inside one another, such as the *Evening Star* series of 1917. That year, O'Keeffe contracted Spanish influenza during the epidemic that killed millions in Europe and the United States. Stieglitz — married for 25 years to Emmeline, an heiress who financially supported his various artistic pursuits — had been corresponding endlessly with O'Keeffe and became so concerned about her health that he told Strand to take the train to Texas to rescue her. Strand found her recovering but still weak. They spent several days together, him photographing her, and Strand came to recognise the seriousness of O'Keeffe's feelings for him. Yet, he was unable to commit. Instead, he wrote to Stieglitz saying that he was bringing her to New York. Stieglitz installed her in an apartment, brought her soup and soon after became her first lover. He was 54 with a 20-year-old daughter. O'Keeffe was 31. It was a huge scandal. Stieglitz's high-bourgeois family was appalled. His wife issued an ultimatum; Stieglitz promptly moved in with O'Keeffe, promising to

support her while she painted. She, in turn, produced some of the best paintings of her life. He, who had not picked up his camera in years, began to make some of his most memorable work — photographs of O'Keeffe, many in the nude.

Those photographs titillated the social circles of Manhattan. O'Keeffe was embarrassed but the canny Stieglitz seized the moment to promote her career. When he staged an exhibition of O'Keeffe's paintings at the Anderson Galleries in 1923, critics fluttered and society figures purchased. Resigned to the hard facts of the art market, O'Keeffe eventually became a shrewd businesswoman. This was fortunate — because without his rich wife, Stieglitz and O'Keeffe needed money.

She did not betray his confidence in her talent. Her paintings from 1919 to 1929 are among her finest, even as she moved from abstractions inspired by music and sexual awakening to her enlarged close-ups of flowers. Watching Stieglitz make photographs, learning about cropping and enlarging and unblemished surfaces, led to paintings that were graphic and powerful, in unapologetically bright colours. They sold briskly for large sums.

In 1924 Emmeline granted the divorce that allowed them to marry. Though Stieglitz could be infuriating to even his closest friends and relatives, O'Keeffe was grateful for the opportunities that he had provided, even as she was earning the bulk of their income and paying rent on their large apartment in the Shelton Hotel. She painted views from their windows and the exterior tower in a series of stunning, highly original cityscapes. They spent summers in the country with his family at their spacious home on Lake George in upstate New York, a bucolic landscape that she painted while he photographed.

After a decade together, O'Keeffe was no longer an awestruck devotee but an independent woman. She summarised her approach: "I have had to go to men as sources in my painting because the past has left us so small an inheritance of woman's painting that has widened life. And I would hear men saying, 'She is pretty good for a woman; she paints like a man.' That upset me. Before I put brush to canvas, I question,

**The nude photos of O'Keeffe titillated the social circles of Manhattan**

"Is this mine? Is it all intrinsically of myself? Is it influenced by some idea or some photograph of an idea which I have acquired from some man?" ... I am trying with all my skill to do painting that is all of a woman, as well as all of me."

By 1928, with O'Keeffe enjoying great success, critically and financially, Stieglitz needed another young woman to impress. He began an affair with a 21-year-old socialite named Dorothy Norman. Married to the heir of a wealthy investor, she had heard about Stieglitz and visited his Intimate Gallery, which he opened in 1925. Norman began buying work but also spent hours at the gallery, taking notes on all



**IN BLOOM** Jimson Weed/White Flower No 1 (1932), the most costly painting by a woman artist sold at auction; top left, O'Keeffe photographed by Stieglitz (1918); the couple in 1936

that Stieglitz said. She became obsessed with him and soon they were lovers. It was this devastating fact that drove O'Keeffe to flee to New Mexico in 1929. With Rebecca Strand, Paul's wife, she headed west to Taos, where they spent part of the summer with the art collector Mabel Dodge Luhan. O'Keeffe loved the freedom and

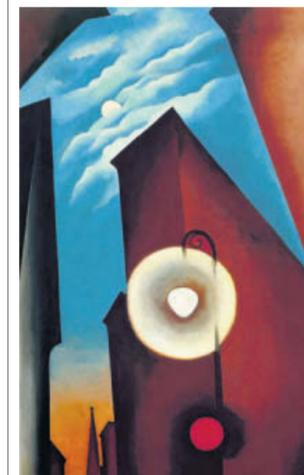
the landscape, recalling her early years in the remote beauty of Canyon, Texas.

Stieglitz was distraught, writing to plead for her return regularly but not admitting any wrongs. In fact, his relationship with Norman gained strength in his wife's absence. He began photographing her as he had O'Keeffe and named her director of

**Georgia O'Keeffe is at Tate Modern, London SE1 (020 7887 8888), July 6 to October 30**



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**FLORID** Oriental Poppies (1927), top; New York Street with Moon (1925), above

his new gallery, An American Place. Norman's husband either did not know or did not care but O'Keeffe could not accept Stieglitz's betrayal. By 1933, in the midst of a mural commissioned for the newly built Radio City Music Hall, she suffered a nervous breakdown. After hospital confinement, she spent months resting in Bermuda, uninterested in making art.

More than a year passed before she recovered enough to return to New Mexico, eventually spending summers at a resort for the adventurous rich, Ghost Ranch, outside Abiquiu. She bought her own home there in 1940, but returned to New York in the winters and continued to live with the ageing Stieglitz. Their marriage was a cordial business arrangement

but together they attended the opening of her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1946, the first there for a woman artist. When she got back to Abiquiu, she found his letter, "Oh Georgia — we are a team."

Three months later, she learnt that he was dying. She flew to New York and was with him when he died on July 13, 1946. After a few years settling his estate, leaving much of his material to the National Gallery in Washington, DC, she moved permanently to New Mexico, building a second, larger home and studio in Abiquiu, establishing a garden to serve her health-conscious diet. There she concentrated on painting cliffs in coral and cream, mountains in lavender and sage. Simple compositions of her patio door evolved with the minimalist era.

She was not a recluse. She had endless visitors and travelled often to New York, Europe, Latin America and Asia. However, in 1971 she began losing her vision to macular degeneration. As her condition deteriorated, the remote location grew frightening for her. Then Juan Hamilton knocked on the back door asking for work. He was a ceramicist, an educated artist who could pack shipping containers and type letters. He was attractive and young and not too much in awe of her celebrity.

Over the next 14 years, he took over her career, selling paintings, arranging exhibitions and, most important, getting published her oversized, picture-laden memoir *O'Keeffe*. He was not, as rumoured, her young lover. In fact, he married and had a family while in her employ. However, he was ambitious and helped to attract fresh attention to her work and encouraged her to keep painting. As she became more frail, Hamilton moved her to Santa Fe, the capital of New Mexico, to be closer to doctors.

O'Keeffe hoped to live to 100 but on March 6 1984 she died, aged 98. She worked right to the end. Though nearly blind, with the help of assistants, she returned to making simple, abstract watercolours, similar to the *Specials* made in 1915. It was as though she was returning, in her imagination, to that moment that had indeed made her life special.

**Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is author of *Full Bloom: The Life and Art of Georgia O'Keeffe* (WW Norton)**