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Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), *Georgia O'Keeffe,* 1923. Gelatin silver print, 11.7 × 9.1 cm. George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y. Part purchase and part gift of An American Place. Ex-collection Georgia O'Keeffe. 1974:0052:0047.

# Preface

Georgia O'Keeffe is a creative presence in American artistic and cultural history. Her name is one among a handful immediately recognized by the general public, her paintings are well known as originals in museums or as countless posters, and she has been the subject of numerous publications and exhibitions both in the United States and, increasingly, abroad. As an integral part of the American art scene since the 1910s, she has been viewed almost exclusively in the context of twentieth-century modernism, notwithstanding her own attempts to distance herself from both scene and context. Her popularity was engendered by the refined sophistication and simplicity of her imagery, the endless debate about her life, accomplishments, and continuing legacies for new generations. In her earliest works, O'Keeffe was already a visionary who intuitively created new definitions of the sublime, enhanced our perceptions of its visual symbols, and inevitably provided us with new ways to view our surroundings and explore our inner selves.

From the beginning of her explorations she struggled between so-called but loosely defined abstractions and more representational work. She enjoyed tremendous success and recognition by 1916, while still in her twenties, but this also made her a target of pointed criticism, misguided interpretation, and, inevitably, distraction. She disliked being categorized and found the critics infuriating. By the early 1930s, she wrote from New York to Dorothy Brett, the painter and friend of D. H. Lawrence, about "that memory or dream thing I do for me comes nearer reality than my objective kind of work. . . ." In this she was most herself; the unconscious visualizations or dreamscapes from nature hinting at a greater meaning that eludes the physical dimension. This comment and numerous others in the same vein are readily associated with the late-eighteenth-century aesthetic concepts of the sublime that were held by Edmund Burke and others, and then with the various visual definitions of the sublime that arose throughout the nineteenth century. Over the past two centuries, the concept of the sublime—with its immediate sensation of awe-inspiring infinite space and evocative color and light directly internalized to moments experienced in our own lives—has been substantially redefined by a small number of artists, writers, and critics, for whom it has become a vital source of spiritual values at times of increased secularism. For many, other than those few, if they are aware of it at all, the concept of the sublime is of little consequence.

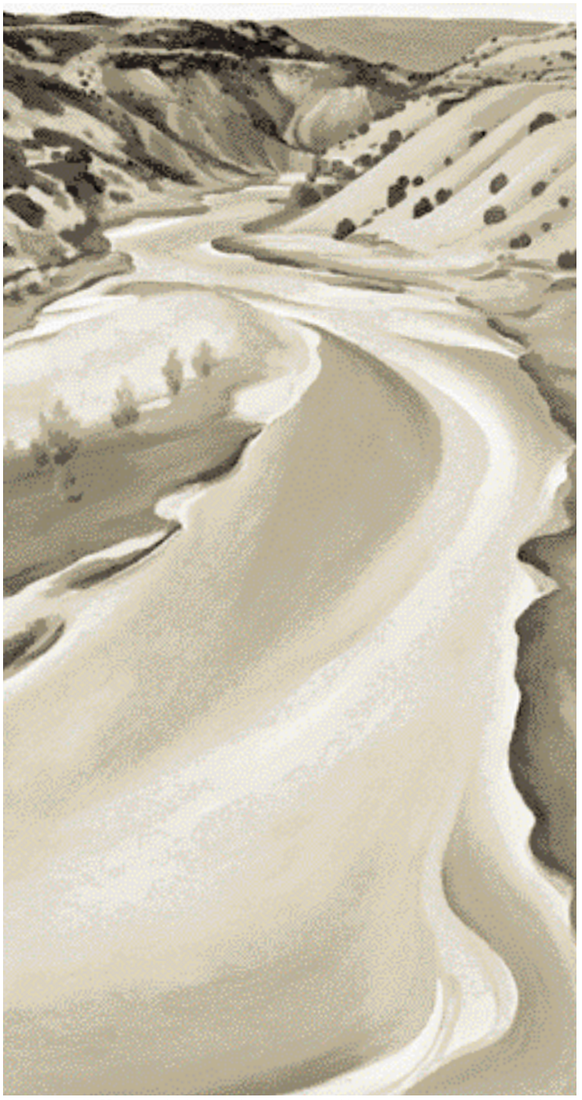
For O'Keeffe, already imbued with the spiritual and transcendental, the sublime was not a theoretical concept; it was manifest in her everyday worldly experiences, the unmediated response of a temperament acutely attuned to nature—simple realities inspired her veneration. Although most of O'Keeffe's works are landscapes, the sublime, for her, was not necessarily associated with a physical location, be it New Mexico, Lake George, or elsewhere. Nor, at the time, was the southwestern landscape associated with notions of the sublime. It was clearly a physical place she loved, finding in it an ever-changing beauty and intimations of infinity. She treasured the quiet nobility of the region and the sense of timelessness it evoked. She also found those same qualities in Texas, Canada, New York, Hawaii, and elsewhere and, in each place, they would precipitate for her, not explorations of the spirit of place or of the landscape as cultural icon, but of her own vision. Although keenly aware of nature's physical and transcendent dimensions, the prevailing American nineteenth-century metaphor of an untouched pristine wilderness, the mythical view of an unpeopled natural world, and the environmentalists' lament for a changed landscape, she was creating poignant self-portraits and expressing her own sensations, emotions, dreams, and visions.

O'Keeffe's was a state of mind in which nature and the sublime transcended specific times and places. Her observed reality was the transitional passage interacting with her already pervasive visionary sentiments and immediately embracing the intuitive response unencumbered by her experiences. The physical landscape was not the source of inspiration, but her paintings expressed her inexplicable spiritual response to life and all its manifestations. Every aspect of her surroundings spoke to her. Each day was a new revelation, a new spiritual experience, a new exploration of herself and the unknown. From the earliest, she sought to convey some measure of the forces she felt and so embraced in nature. As only few others, O'Keeffe demonstrated an intuitive association with all that can be considered sublime, and in her remarkable journey with color, line, light, and form

from the abstract to the representational and hovering between the two, she pursued a spiritual quest that has, for us, dramatically refined the visual qualities of the sublime, taking an aesthetic concept far beyond the notion defined by traditional visual symbols. For her, as for Fitz Hugh Lane, Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, or James Turrell, space, color, and light are vehicles for the sublime either as a direct traditional representation or image, or in engendering the experience for the viewer. In the early 1960s in his essay "The Abstract Sublime," the distinguished art historian Robert Rosenblum perceptively placed Georgia O'Keeffe as a critical transitional figure who redefined the traditional nineteenth-century perceptions and visual imagery of the sublime while anticipating and greatly influencing new definitions by other twentieth-century artists, writers, and critics.

O'Keeffe's meteoric success by the 1910s and her earlier experiences at the Art Institute of Chicago not surprisingly established another critical legacy that deserves attention. Numerous artists trained from the 1920s onwards at that highly influential art school embraced a lifelong fascination with O'Keeffe and her artistic achievements. Many artists, whose names today are by no means readily known, went from the Chicago Art Institute off to numerous places in Texas, California, the Midwest, and the Southwest and made important artistic contributions. These artists who were so vital a part of their communities from the 1920s through 1960s were not only greatly influenced by Georgia O'Keeffe but also created the rich diversity of regional artistic expression that distinguished those decades. Her influence on them and its effect on their work is one of her most significant legacies as an artist and a person.

For O'Keeffe, her paintings were powerful poems distilled from her imagination and her vision of our surroundings, seductively simple and appealing, yet highly complex explorations of ever-relevant universal sentiments. If her perceptions were formed by her experiences, they must share the commonplace characterizing most of us. Her art spoke directly to twentieth-century modern art with an originality and vitality that today retains a relevance not easily equaled.



**Georgia O'Keeffe** (1887–1986), *Blue River* (*Chama River, Ghost Ranch*), 1935. Oil on canvas, 30⅛ × 16⅛ in. Museum of New Mexico, Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Gift of the estate of Georgia O'Keeffe, 1987. (O'Keeffe 933) Plate 54