



NOT TO BE MISSED

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# MODERN NATURE

*Georgia O'Keeffe and Lake George*

A new show at San Francisco's de Young Museum examines the work of the trailblazing modernist before she moved to the Southwest, during a time when her visits to upstate New York formed her as an artist and informed the way she came to look at the natural world.

*-by Marlana Donohue*

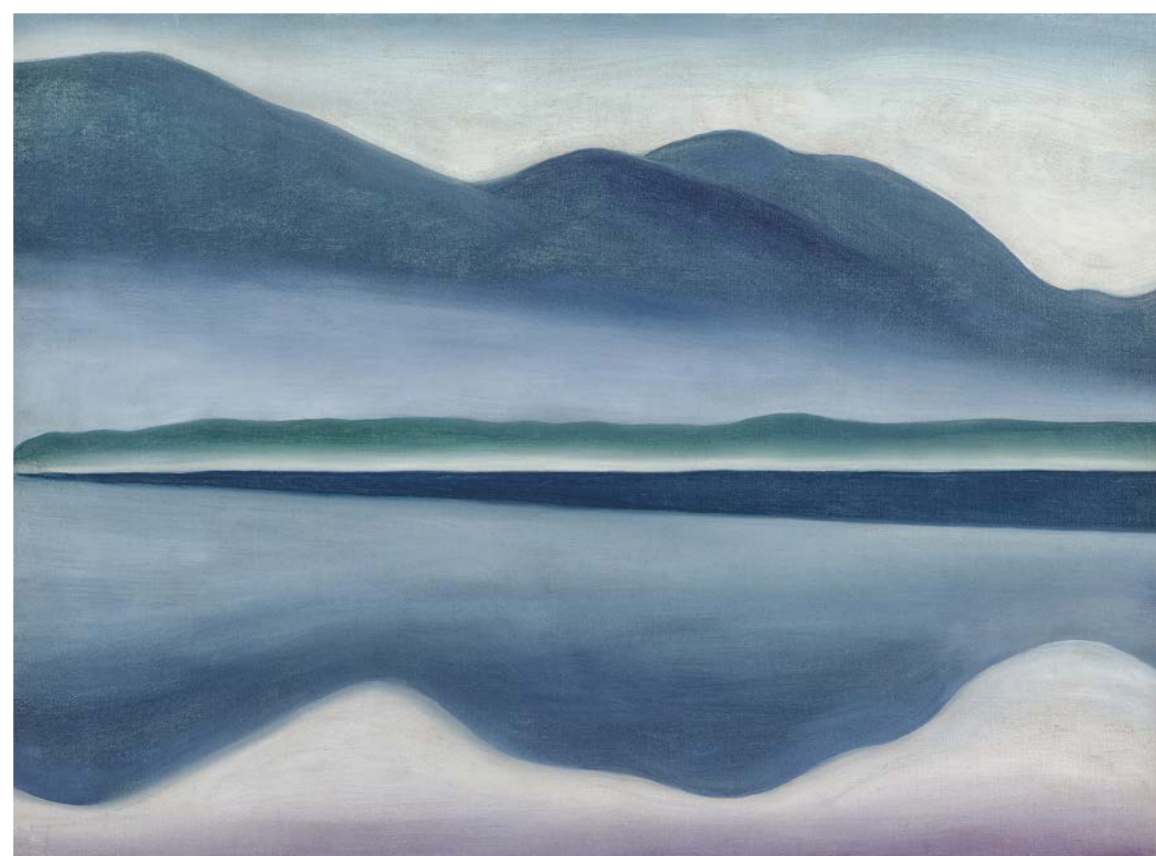
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**F**ew women artists enjoy the widespread academic and popular fame of say, Salvadore Dalí or Andy Warhol. An exception is the painter Georgia O’Keeffe (1887 -1986), whose globally recognized images of animal skulls or lushly abstracted flowers are central to both serious studies of the birth of American modern art — O’Keeffe was a pioneer — as well as populist visual culture. Rare is the office or dorm room whose walls have not held an O’Keeffe poster.

O’Keeffe’s most famous images are associated with her proto-feminist relocation in the 1940s to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she built a compound conspicuously apart from her famous husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Presumably it was here that she could live as she saw fit, closer to nature.

An iconic portrait of Georgia O’Keeffe taken in 1918 by Paul Strand © Aperture Foundation, Inc., Paul Strand Archive. Previous page: *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. 2*, 1930, is on loan from The National Gallery of Art, Washington © National Gallery of Art, Washington





Above: *Lake George*, 1922. Right: *Apple Family 2*, 1920, both images © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**M**odern Nature: Georgia O'Keeffe and Lake George," on view through May 11 at the de Young Museum, in San Francisco, reminds us that O'Keeffe's ties to the land began long before she moved to Santa Fe. A joint venture with the Hyde Collection, in Glens Falls, New York, and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the exhibition features 55 paintings on canvas and paper, plus drawings and pastels made over a 16-year period from 1918 to 1934, when O'Keeffe spent summers and autumns on the 36-acre Stieglitz family estate on the lush shores of Lake George in upstate New York. Co-curated by the Hyde Collection's Erin Coe; Barbara Buhler Lynes, a former curator of the O'Keeffe Museum; and the de Young's Timothy Anglin Burgard, the show brings together iconic and beloved O'Keeffes, borrowed from such excellent collections as the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, and New York's Museum of Modern Art.

The show is rich with landscapes, florals and depictions of rural architecture recorded around Lake George both as fully abstract arrangements of sensuous color and in the artist's characteristically rich, spare realism. During these recharging, self-crystallizing lake-side retreats, O'Keeffe came into her own personally and creatively, and she began to be noticed as an artist in her own right, refining her use of minimal means to absolutely capture a sense of place. In a recent conversation, curator Coe shared with 1stdibs how the show came to be and what it reveals about an artist many of us think we already know so well.

**CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE SHOW'S CONCEPTION?  
HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO FOCUS ON THIS  
PARTICULAR MOTIF OF THE LANDSCAPE?**

The Hyde Collection has a long history of researching, exhibiting and interpreting the artistic legacy of Lake George. Nine years ago, I curated an exhibition of 19th-century landscape paintings of Lake George, focused mainly on the artists associated with the Hudson River School. As a follow up to that, I wanted to investigate the tradition of modernism on Lake George during the first half of the 20th century. I soon realized there was a story to be told about O'Keeffe's Lake George years that had largely been ignored. "Modern Nature" is the first exhibition to focus on this body of work.

*The Chestnut Grey*, 1924, from the Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





*Petunias*,  
1925, from  
collection of  
the Fine Arts  
Museums of  
San Francisco  
© Georgia  
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ciety (ARS),  
New York

**O'KEEFFE SEEMS TO ALWAYS HAVE HAD STRONG TIES TO THE LAND.**

O'Keeffe was a naturalist at heart and connected to a place, whether Lake George or New Mexico, in a very profound way. It was this deep attachment to place that ultimately, in my view, inspired and informed her greatest work. The Stieglitz family's property at Lake George was a farm, and O'Keeffe was able to reconnect to her agrarian roots there. (She did, after all, grow up on a farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.) At Lake George she developed a deep and abiding interest in gardening and horticulture that I believe was central to her artistic practice. For example, her growing of corn on the property in 1924 was the catalyst for a series of corn paintings. With the affection of a devoted gardener, O'Keeffe once described her excitement at watching her corn plants grow. The resulting works are her attempt to capture and share this excitement with the viewer.

*Lake George Barns*, 1926, on loan from the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

*“O'Keeffe grew up on a farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. On the Stieglitz family's farm on Lake George, she was able to reconnect to her agrarian roots.”*

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HOW DID YOU SELECT THE IMAGES FOR THE SHOW? SHE DID SO MUCH WORK THAT'S RELATED TO THE LAND AND NATURE, IT MUST HAVE BEEN DAUNTING.

The selection of works came from a comprehensive assessment and study of all the known works that O'Keeffe created at Lake George, based on the catalogue raisonné by the O'Keeffe scholar [and co-curator] Barbara Buhler Lynes. Based on this analysis, I was able to determine that around 220 works relate to Lake George in subject and conception, and, from this, the themes of the exhibition were formed. These include: abstraction, landscape, barns and buildings, tree portraits, Lake George souvenirs (leaves) and from the garden (fruit, flowers and vegetables). I wanted the final selection of works to represent a balance of these themes, which mark O'Keeffe's Lake George years.

*Autumn Leaves*, 1924, from the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**COULD YOU COMMENT A BIT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE WORKS IN THE SHOW AND O'KEEFFE'S GENERAL BODY OF WORK?**

If this exhibition proves anything, it is that Lake George is the place where the essential Georgia O'Keeffe was formed. For example, she created her first enlarged flower paintings at Lake George. Not only are the flower paintings considered her signature works, but also many consider them to be her greatest contribution to 20th-century art. Lake George was crucial to how she developed an abstract vocabulary rooted in the natural world that informed the work she produced years later in New Mexico. It also provided the basis for subjects that O'Keeffe would continue to explore throughout her career.

*Lake George with White Birch*, 1921, from a private collection © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





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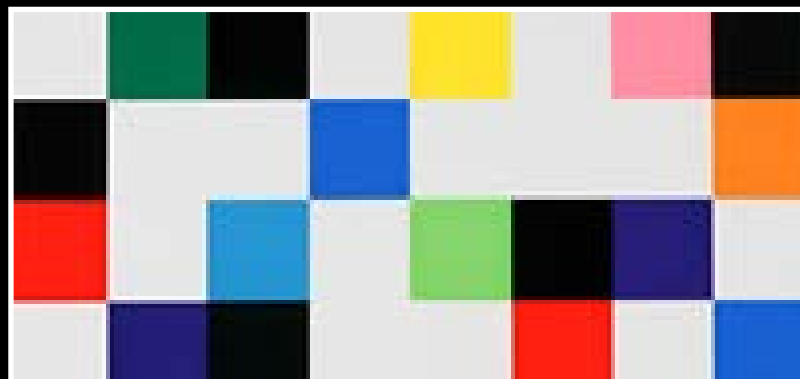


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