

Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia O'Keeffe was a famous and influential American artist, best known for her paintings of flowers, skyscrapers and the landscape of New Mexico.

Early Life

For an artist whose style would go on to be internationally recognisable, Georgia came from humble beginnings; she was born on 15th November 1887 on a wheat farm in Wisconsin, USA and as the second of seven children she was rarely lonely growing up. Although there were many chores to do on the farm, she was never without a sketchbook in her hand because the natural world of the farm fascinated her (she was deeply affected by the landscape of Wisconsin, which became evident in her later work). By the age of ten, she had decided that she wanted to be an artist in order to express the beauty she saw around her and her mother, Ida, encouraged Georgia's love of art by arranging for her to have art lessons.



Georgia left her modest home to go to art school in Chicago, followed by New York, where she studied painting. Finally, she moved to Texas to teach art but she continued drawing. It wasn't easy being a woman artist at this time; most famous artists were men and it was difficult to convince people to take female artists seriously. She sent some of her charcoal line drawings to a friend, who showed them to a famous photographer, Alfred Stieglitz. Alfred recognised Georgia's potential and saw that her drawings were very different to any other art being made in America at the time. So, he took a risk and **exhibited** them in his gallery in 1916; Alfred and Georgia later married.

A New Way of Seeing

Georgia noticed that in New York people were always in such a rush that they rarely stopped to appreciate the beauty of small things, like a flower. She said to herself, "If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it, no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small." Instead she decided, "I'll paint what I see – what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it – I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers."



This is just what Georgia did – she painted tiny, delicate flowers on a huge, magnified scale. Her use of bold, vivid oil paints and gigantic canvases shocked people into paying attention and seeing the world as Georgia saw it. Although viewers often couldn't work out what they were looking at, this only added to the appeal of her paintings. She was one of the first American artists to paint in this intriguing, **abstract** style – a style of art that uses shape, lines and colour in a way that does not show things as they are. Her paintings became very popular and she became successful.

It wasn't only the wonders of the natural world that interested Georgia. She was also inspired by the tall skyscrapers of New York City; these buildings filled her with awe and made her feel small and insignificant, in the same way that nature did. She painted the towering skyscrapers from below – as a child would see them. Again, people were impressed to see such ordinary things presented in such an innovative way.



In 1929, Georgia visited New Mexico and the wide, open landscape transported her straight back to her childhood. She was overwhelmed by the incredible rock formations, the unusual light, the bones of animals dried out by the sun and the Navajo culture, which is the art, music and clothing of the Native American people of the Southwestern United States. The paintings she produced in New Mexico added to her success.

Artistic Legacy

In her astonishing lifetime, Georgia painted thousands of paintings that have now been exhibited in galleries worldwide. Her legacy is that she is remembered as one of the greatest American artists of the twentieth century and has been called the 'Mother of American Modernism' (art that departs from more traditional styles).

In 2014, one of Georgia's artworks set a new auction record for a painting by a female artist, when it sold for 44.4 million dollars, or 28.8 million pounds! The painting can now be seen, alongside many of her others, at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe.

Questions

1. Which words describe Georgia's beginnings? Tick **two**.

- unhappy
- humble
- lonely
- modest

2. Draw lines to match up these sentences about Georgia's subjects.

Flowers

New Mexico

New York

Made people look at the city in a new way.

Painted landscapes and natural objects.

Painted up close to make people pay attention.

3. Find and copy two words that describe how the buildings of New York City made Georgia feel.

4. Fill in the missing words.

Georgia painted flowers with _____ on huge _____.

5. What record did Georgia's artwork set in 2014?

6. Why do you think the second section of the text is called ***A New Way of Seeing?***

7. What are the main similarities and differences between Georgia's three main painting subjects?

8. Explain why you think Georgia has been called ***The Mother of American Modernism***.

9. ***So, he took a risk and exhibited them in his gallery in 1916...***

Explain why you think exhibiting Georgia's drawings meant Alfred was taking a risk. Give two reasons.

10. Imagine you are an art critic at the time that Georgia's paintings first appeared. Write a short review of the paintings, explaining how they make you feel.
