

## PREFACE TO THE EXPANDED EDITION



I ONCE MET GEORGIA O'KEEFFE. This was not easy to do, and I considered it an achievement.

It was in the early 1970s, when I was in my early twenties. I was working at Sotheby's, in New York, in the American Paintings Department. One of the things I did there was to catalogue the works we sold. I held each picture in my hands, felt its shape and weight. I measured and described it, recording the medium, condition, signature. The date. The provenance and exhibition history. I came to know the works very well.

Whenever we received a work by Georgia O'Keeffe I called Doris Bry, her dealer. Bry (pronounced "Bree") was a scholarly woman who had been the assistant to Alfred Stieglitz. After his death she'd helped O'Keeffe settle his estate. After that, Bry became O'Keeffe's private agent, selling her work to a select group of collectors. Bry kept extensive archival records, and she shared her information with us.

During this time I had begun to write about American art. I was particularly interested in the modernists, those early twentieth-century artists who were part of the rising surge of abstraction. I wrote about different members of this group—Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove. I wanted to write about O'Keeffe, but this was difficult. She held the copyright to many of her paintings, so it was necessary to ask permission from her in order to reproduce them. This was one reason that relatively little scholarship had appeared on her: How could you write a book about art without using images? Another reason was the coolness and confusion that permeated critical response to her work, until well into the late 1960s. All those flowers! Was she a great artist or a cheap sentimentalist? The work

was so easy to like—could it be important? She was scorned by the guys, and if you wanted to be taken seriously as a scholar, it seemed risky to write about her.

Another reason for the paucity of writing about O’Keeffe was her own inaccessibility: She lived in a small village in rural New Mexico and rarely gave interviews. She chose to keep herself from the world. Seclusion and withholding were a part of her persona: She herself was a rarity. She was not interested in publicity, and once refused a request for a one-person show at the Louvre.

Here was a paradox: the work, so intimate and engaging, so luscious, radiant, accessible, and the artist, so remote and self-controlled, distant, enigmatic, clothed in severe black and white. This mystery gave the artist a kind of charged glamour. A sighting was a significant event.

That season Sotheby’s had received an O’Keeffe painting of Canadian barns. It had been done in the early 1930s: two dark grey buildings in a wintry landscape. I catalogued it, and asked Bry for her information on it. Later she called me.

“Mrs. Alger,” she said (for that was my name then), “this is Doris Bry.” Of course I knew who it was. She had a dry, gravelly voice, very distinctive, with a WASPy drawl. “I’m calling about the Canadian Barns.”

“Yes, Miss Bry.” I used my formal, fluty, professional tone. “How may I help you?”

“I’d like to have the painting brought over to my apartment.”

Doris Bry lived in an apartment in the Pulitzer mansion. This was a grand Beaux-Arts building, only a few blocks away from our offices on Madison Avenue. It didn’t matter how close she was.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Bry,” I said snootily, “but our insurance policies don’t permit the works to leave the premises until they have legally changed hands. If you’d like to bring someone in to see the painting, I’ll be happy to have it brought out to the viewing room and put up on the easel. But I can’t allow the painting to leave our property.”

“Mrs. Alger,” said Miss Bry, “the artist is here. She would like to see the painting.”

“I’ll be there in 10 minutes,” I said, in my normal voice.

I called storage to have the painting brought out. I had it under my arm and was walking down the hall on my way to the front door when I ran into my boss.

“What are you carrying?” he asked.

“Canadian Barns,” I said, putting my other hand over the frame protectively.

“Where are you going?” he asked. “It can’t leave the premises.”

“The artist wants to see it,” I said.

My boss put out his hand. “I’ll take it.”

“I answered the phone,” I said. “I’m taking it.”

With the painting under my arm I walked down Madison Avenue to the Pulitzer mansion. Doris Bry ushered me into her apartment. She was a tall, stately, formal woman, rather ponderous. She had dark eyes, pale lightless skin, and a mass of short grey curls. She wore a grey silk dress, stockings, heels. She brought me into the living room, where there were three other people, two lawyers in dark suits, and an older woman. Bry introduced me.

“This is Mrs. Alger, from Sotheby’s.”

The woman nodded pleasantly but said nothing.

She was much smaller than I, which surprised me. She had a lined face, dark hooded eyes, and long silvery hair coiled into a low bun. She wore a grey cotton housedress with a white collar and a narrow self-belt. On her feet she wore flat black Chinese slippers, with straps across the insteps.

Everyone watched as I carried the painting across the room and set it on the easel. The small woman came with me, but Doris and the lawyers stood at the back of the room, talking. Georgia O’Keeffe and I stood in front of the painting. She looked quietly at the canvas as though it were part of her, as if she were alone with it.

I stood silently beside her.

After a moment I spoke. It wasn’t enough for me to stand beside her.

When people meet someone famous, often they want to inflect themselves upon the moment, to impose their own identities upon that of the famous person. They say, I grew up in your town, or I have that same scarf, or I met you once in a train station. It’s a hopeless venture.

“I hope you like the frame,” I said.

I had ordered the frame myself. It was a simple silver half clamshell, the kind that Arthur Dove had used. We used the Dove frame on all the Stieglitz paintings. I knew O’Keeffe had liked Dove and had admired his work. I knew she’d like the frame. She’d be grateful. This was my moment.

She answered without turning. “I like them best without frames.”

I said nothing more.

She stood looking at the painting, calm and utterly self-possessed. I think she was wearing a black sweater, a thin little cardigan, not buttoned up.

She'd have been in her early eighties then.

• • •

NEARLY 20 YEARS LATER, in the spring of 1986, I was living in northern Westchester County. We had moved there 10 years earlier. We were out in the country, in an old farmhouse with a big barn and some fields. Living with us were four or five horses, two or three dogs, and some large cats. My daughter was 14. I had left the art world.

One evening, my husband, Tony, came home from the city and found me in the kitchen. He was in his business suit, still carrying his briefcase.

"I have something to tell you," he said. On the train coming out he'd sat next to a friend of ours, Edward Burlingame, who was an editor at Harper & Row.

Edward had said, "Georgia O'Keeffe has just died, and there isn't a big biography of her. Who do you think we should ask to write it?"

Tony said me.

Edward said that he knew I wrote fiction, but that he needed someone who knew about American art.

Tony told him I did.

Edward said he'd keep it in mind.

When Tony finished the story I shook my head.

"Thanks for suggesting me, but he's being polite. This is Harper & Row, and it's a big deal. They'll want a museum curator, or anyway someone with a graduate degree. Not someone who's just published a few articles and catalogue essays. So he won't ask me.

"And if he did, I'd say no. I was writing about art because my fiction wasn't being published, but now it is. I have a novel coming out, and I'm done with art. I've thought about it: I can't be both a novelist and an art historian, and I'm going to be a novelist. So, thank you for suggesting me, but, first, he won't ask me, and, second, if he did I'd say no."

Tony said, "Well, I wanted to tell you."

"Thank you," I said again.

That was on Friday.

On Monday Edward called and asked if I'd be interested in writing the biography of Georgia O'Keeffe, and I said yes.

• • •

AFTER O'KEEFFE'S DEATH, several other writers also began writing books about her. We'd all started at the same time. "Your book must be the first out," Edward told me, "or within six months of the first, or it won't be reviewed."

And so I began the project. I did much of the archival research at the Beinecke Library at Yale, which holds the vast O'Keeffe-Stieglitz archive. There I worked in tranquil silence within the alabaster walls, leafing through papers and photographs, reading long, chatty, private, serious, funny, heartfelt, and thoughtful letters, learning that complicated network of kinship, friendships, and professional relationships. I enjoyed those times enormously. The other kind of research—interviews—was far more stressful, as it meant meeting with strangers. There were two lawsuits underway, and feelings in the O'Keeffe community ran high. Some people took sides, and when they learned that I had spoken to someone on the opposing side, they refused to speak to me themselves. Some friends and colleagues were loyal to O'Keeffe's long tradition of silence toward strangers and refused to speak to me.

But her family, after they had read other things I'd written, and had met me, agreed to talk to me. I met various members, and then I was given the great honor of three days of interviews with Georgia's one remaining sister, Catherine O'Keeffe Klenert. Catherine was then in her nineties, frail and white-haired, utterly cogent.

One afternoon, when I was asking her about those early days in Sun Prairie, she looked up at me, baffled. "I don't know why you're asking me. Anyone could tell you about this. Everyone knows it."

I smiled at her. "No one else could tell me. You're the only one left." She was the only one who could tell me about getting up in the dark, during the winter in nineteenth-century Wisconsin, what it was like walking to school, celebrating a birthday, going to church. What the evenings were like in that household. Catherine was an invaluable source, and a deeply sympathetic presence.

Of course I was sorry not to be able to interview my own subject, Georgia O'Keeffe. But after I came to know other family members, after I'd listened to their stories and heard their thoughts, I understood that I was absorbing the culture that had produced O'Keeffe herself. Courage, determination, and self-reliance were all

part of the family culture. O'Keeffe drew on these resources, which enabled her to lead the life she wanted.

Place was important to this book. I went to Sun Prairie, to see the long swell of the rich dark-earth fields. I went to Amarillo and Canyon, Santa Fe and Abiqui to see what it felt like to stand beneath the wheeling sky, to watch the sun rise on the roseate cliffs.

Edward had told me that the book had to be first, and I was determined that it would be. I had already completed some of the scholarly research when I wrote about other members of the Stieglitz circle, but there was a lot more to learn, and then there was the writing itself. Toward the end, the book took over my life. One day I was driving through our little village when I approached an old black car. The driver was an older man with a bristly white mustache and round rimless glasses. I knew I knew him, but I couldn't place him until we had passed each other. Then I realized who my mind had made him into: Alfred Stieglitz (who had actually died before I was born). The book had taken me over. I thought of nothing else.

My daughter was in boarding school by then, and we had sold the horses. I took over the guest room and laid my folders out on the bed. I put a tall file cabinet in the upstairs hall. I wrote the book on a desktop computer on a card table, set against the closet door. We couldn't get into that closet for three years.

My book came out in the fall of 1989. It was the first biography to appear after her death.

• • •

O'KEEFFE'S WORK has always evoked a mixture of praise and exasperation from scholars and critics—praise from people who understand what her work does, exasperation from people who think it should do something else. She has been accused of being too accessible (though so is Monet), too obvious about gender (though so is Picasso), too arcane (though so is Braque), and too obvious (though so is Hieronymus Bosch.)

But the response to her work and her story continues to grow. Art lovers, other artists, and people on the street feel a powerful reaction to the images, and to the sense of possibility they offer. The scholarship focused on her work has created a critical mass: O'Keeffe is now an established and important presence in the art historical canon.

A dealer from the Vose Gallery in Boston once told me that after an artist died, they would hold a retrospective exhibition. After

that then they put the work away for 40 years. During that time art currents would shift away from the period, and the artist's reputation would decline. Forty years later, Vose would bring out the work again, offering it to a new generation, a new critical lens, and a new perspective. The work would become popular again. Vose was founded in 1841 and could take the long view.

O'Keeffe didn't fit into this pattern. For one thing, she was over 20 years younger than her cohort—Stieglitz and the rest of his stable. Stieglitz died in 1946, and so did Arthur Dove. Marsden Hartley had died in 1943, Charles Demuth in 1935.

After O'Keeffe settled Stieglitz' estate, in 1949, she left New York and moved full time to New Mexico. Without a cohort and without a gallery, her reputation declined while she was still alive. In the late 1950s she appeared in a column run by *Life Magazine* called "Where Are They Now?" O'Keeffe was featured as a formerly famous artist, now a forgotten figure, living among the mesas of the Southwest. But just as her decline preceded her death, so did her resurgence. She outlived her own decline, partly because of her longevity and partly because she'd been professionally part of an older generation, and now her time had come round again.

In 1970 the scholar Lloyd Goodrich mounted a large and authoritative retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York. Like the posthumous shows at Vose, this reintroduced O'Keeffe's work to a new generation—but in this case the artist was still alive, and still painting. The result was a huge reflorescence of interest in her work. O'Keeffe's most accessible images—the magnified flowers, the dreaming antlers and skulls, as well as the vast, mysterious cloudscapes—became hugely popular among the public. Some critics still turned up their noses, calling the flowers obvious and sentimental, but a logjam had been broken. A new generation of scholars forged ahead, writing and thinking about her work, and claiming O'Keeffe's place as a modernist.

Because O'Keeffe was famous for flower paintings, she was accused of sentimentality and accessibility. In fact, those cropped and magnified flowers were radical works for their time. Also, of course, her subjects were not only botanical, and her body of work reveals the richness and complexity of her intentions. Forty years after the Goodrich retrospective, in 2009, Barbara Haskell, Chief Curator at the Whitney Museum, produced another groundbreaking O'Keeffe show, "Abstractions." Instead of the familiar images of flowers, bones, and mountains, Haskell presented over 100 powerful ab-

stract images. The show began with the radical charcoal drawings of 1915 that declared O’Keeffe’s fundamental commitment to purely nonobjective art, and it posed an effective challenge to the charges of sentimentality and accessibility. As Haskell pointed out, abstraction was always a source for O’Keeffe, and she never stopped drawing on it. She began and ended her long career with purely nonobjective works, and throughout it she moved easily back and forth between semiabstract and nonobjective compositions. The fact is that she saw abstraction in the natural world, in patterns of light and shade, of shape and design. Her compositions came both from interior ideas and the distillation of what she saw before her. She created a powerful visual lexicon with which to express her feelings: The combination of the two confounded some critics and delighted others. O’Keeffe refused to settle on one or the other.

The “Abstractions” show did what the 1970 retrospective had done— forty years later, it presented O’Keeffe through a new lens, and to a new audience. This show drew artists who saw her in a new light, not as a painter of voluptuous flowers, but as a creator of purely nonobjective compositions, absolute and penetrating in their intensity.

The scholarship on O’Keeffe continues to expand, focusing on every aspect of her work and life. Recently an exhibition presented the work of her sister Ida; another presented O’Keeffe’s personal style. The art historian Wanda Corn writes, “Today we have an expanded understanding of O’Keeffe’s creativity outside of the studio. She was a brilliant designer of her homes and gardens . . . and an early proponent of farm-to-table cooking. She created a personal style of dress and distinctive ways of modeling for the camera.”

Artists emerging into the public realm during the last 30 years have been aware of her presence.

The distinguished *New Yorker* writer Calvin Tomkins, one of the few journalists to have interviewed O’Keeffe, says today: “I have a sense that, after a period of being more or less dismissed, she has regained her seat in the historical pantheon, and is revered for a lot of new reasons.”

The figurative painter Katherine Bradford, who shares with O’Keeffe a radiant sense of color and a mastery of spatial manipulation, writes,

The day O’Keeffe died I was at an art opening when we all got the news. I didn’t exactly cry but my eyes welled up with

tears. The same thing happened when I was showing slides of her work in a big lecture hall full of students. I had to stop for a moment.

She lived a long time and we were used to having her among us as a fellow artist, one that we admired for her ability to pare down both her life and her work into bold essentials. That same year I made a painting called *Farewell O'Keeffe*. It was a dark painting with two crude black crosses one atop the other. The person who bought the painting was John Marin's daughter-in-law and wrote me a postcard saying "Of course I knew O'Keeffe." That was the closest real-life connection I had to Georgia O'Keeffe.

I still have that post card.

Corroborating Tomkins's view of the shift is this response from the artist (and my daughter) Roxana Alger Geffen, to whom this biography is dedicated:

When I was a young artist, Georgia O'Keeffe was not fashionable. Her work was unambiguously representational, bold but not messy, possibly feminist but not radically so and—most embarrassing of all—beautiful. O'Keeffe delighted in the beauty of the natural world. She used the landscape's rich and subtle palette, and its supple, fluid forms directly and earnestly. She applied paint thinly, with modest brushstrokes that direct our attention away from the maker and towards the subject. She wanted to convey the power of the natural world as clearly and truthfully as possible.

Twenty-five years ago, clarity and beauty—unmitigated by irony or critique—seemed dangerously clumsy and conservative. Now, after many years of my own practice, I believe that beauty may be the most important experience art can offer us.

• • •

O'KEEFFE CONTINUES to arouse interest and respect in the community of scholars and beyond. She is admired for her determination, her bravery, and her commitment, as well as for her extraordinary body of work. She is as much admired as a role model as she is as an artist.

It was an honor, a challenge, and a delight to write the story

of Georgia O'Keeffe's life, to delve so deeply into the narrative of someone who has, through her art and her example, influenced my own life and the lives of so many others.

I still think of her lined face and coiled silver hair, her faint, amused smile, those flat black Chinese slippers.

### *This Expanded Edition*

This expanded edition includes the complete set of letters from Georgia O'Keeffe to Arthur Macmahon. These appear in the appendix at the end of the book, with a description and explanation. The letters are copyrighted by the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, and are used in this edition with their kind permission.

I would also like to thank my editor, Sue Ramin, and her staff at Brandeis University Press for their support of this edition, and their expert care shepherding it through the publication process in the teeth of a pandemic.

*Roxana Robinson*

NEW YORK, 2020