

Explanations of Beauty

Popularity

“The spirit of the Blue shades now in style is a cool, restful serenity.” As early as 1926, the American Cheney company used elements of O’Keeffe’s formal vocabulary in a series of posters advertising its collection of silk fabrics. The language of advertising combined this descriptive gesture of the sensual qualities of the product with the visual character of the images. The large, smoothed forms, the ornamental simplicity, the brightly colored monumentality—Georgia O’Keeffe’s flower images are a standard item in nearly every poster shop. They are popular. The artist’s characteristic block lettering appears beneath the pictures. Expensive reproductions of her paintings grace numerous coffee-table books. Her best-known motifs are presented in countless folio-sized volumes—the large blossoms, the amorphous landscapes in rich colors, stylized in iconic frontal presentations.¹

More than nine different photographs of the artist, including portraits by Maria Chabot, Christopher Springmann, and Ansel Adams are also available as posters. While her art is popularized in decorative posters, her life is celebrated as a heroic legend.² The many biographies that tell her life story in thick volumes have made her a symbol of the artist’s quest for identity and self-definition. Laurie Lisle’s *Portrait of An Artist* became a best-seller even during O’Keeffe’s lifetime.³ Her life has been marketed as a legend that fulfills a wide range of expectations, from the romantic to the heroic.

“And here is the story of a great romance—between the extraordinary painter and her much older mentor, lover, and husband, Alfred Stieglitz. Renowned for her fierce independence, iron determination, and her radical vision, Georgia O’Keeffe is a twentieth-century legend.”⁴

In 1989, author Roxana Robinson presented a 639-page volume entitled simply *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Life*.⁵ Each chapter of the book begins with a quotation from the artist. Robinson’s work was followed in 1992 by columnist Jeffrey Hogrefe’s equally successful biography, *O’Keeffe: The Life of an American Legend*.⁶ The boundary line between historical fact and literary fiction was crossed in 1990 by Alan Cheuse’s novel entitled *The Light Possessed*.⁷

The artist’s popular reception is symptomatic of the difficulties that long stood in the way of a scholarly approach to the oeuvre of this representative of early American modernism. O’Keeffe occupies a unique position in the history of modern art. She has been removed from her historical context, and critical reception has often focused on stylized leitmotifs of her own creation. Only the critical catalogue raisonné published in 1999 provided a basis for a more discerning critical approach to her various work groups.⁸

¹ Cf. Nicholas Callaway, *Georgia O’Keeffe—Blumen* (Munich, 1993).

² Cf. the anthology by Christopher Merrill and Ellen Bradbury, eds., *From the Faraway Nearby: Georgia O’Keeffe As Icon* (Reading, Mass., 1992).

³ Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O’Keeffe* (New York, 1980, 1981, revised edition University of New Mexico, 1987, paperback edition New York 1987, London 1987).

⁴ Quoted from the cover of Laurie Lisle 1987 (see note 3); cf. Benita Eisler, *O’Keeffe and Stieglitz: An American Romance* (New York, 1991).

⁵ Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Life* (New York, 1989, 1990, 1999).

⁶ Jeffrey Hogrefe, *O’Keeffe: The Life of an American Legend* (New York et al., 1992, 1994).

⁷ Alan Cheuse, *The Light Possessed* (Salt Lake City, 1990; New York, 1991; Dallas, 1998).

⁸ Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London, 1999).