

## Georgia O'Keeffe's *Flower and Vase*

Menconi +  
Schoelkopf



Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986)

*Flower and Vase*, 1921

Oil on canvas, 10 × 8½ inches

Inscribed on verso: 1919 Georgia O'Keeffe

Flower & Vase 1921

In the early 1920s, as O'Keeffe's relationship with Alfred Stieglitz was developing, they made regular visits to the Stieglitz summer home at Lake George. While she reveled in the quiet beauty of the landscape, the steady stream of family members, Stieglitz acolytes, and other visitors to the compound made her feel that she and her work were under constant scrutiny. There were times when she felt unable to paint.

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**FIG 1**  
Charles Demuth, *Zinnias*, 1921  
watercolor on paper, Philadelphia  
Museum of Art

**FIG 2**  
Georgia O'Keeffe, *Three Zinnias*,  
1921, oil on canvas, Georgia O'Keeffe  
Museum, Santa Fe

This situation improved when she discovered an abandoned building on the property and appropriated it for her studio. By August 1920, renovations completed, it had become her refuge (she called it “my shanty” and commemorated it in a small canvas, now in the Phillips Collection). The next summer she was able to produce scores of pictures at Lake George. A bumper crop of apples inspired her to feature them in a series of elegantly austere still lifes. She made several paintings of her favorite red maple tree and produced some brilliantly colored views of the lake and surrounding hills. She also continued her exploration of flowers. Among those were three small oils of zinnias that are surprisingly different from one another in style and spirit. *Flower and Vase* was the last of the group.<sup>1</sup>

Zinnias were grown at Lake George and O'Keeffe probably tended them as she did other flowers on the property, both because she enjoyed them and because they provided material for her art. (She told a sympathetic critic, Blanche Matthias, that she had planted a bed of blue petunias one year just so that she could study their color.<sup>2</sup>) Cheerful, sturdy, and bright, zinnias are an easy and unpretentious motif for a still-life painter. They were also a favorite subject of Charles Demuth's, O'Keeffe's closest friend among the artists of the Stieglitz circle. His zinnias, like hers, came from a family garden; his images of them (see, for example, *Zinnias*; fig. 1), find a counterpart in O'Keeffe's *Three Zinnias* (fig. 2), include a freely painted, exuberant, descriptive composition that nonetheless hovers on the edge of abstraction. O'Keeffe's second painting of zinnias (fig. 3) exhibits a more measured form of modernism





and has been compared with Charles Sheeler's *Zinnias and Nasturtium Leaves* (fig. 4). The exchange of ideas among artists working in different media was common in the Stieglitz circle, and Sheeler's elegant photograph may have inspired O'Keeffe's compositional arrangement and its almost classical austerity.<sup>3</sup>

O'Keeffe pared things down even further in *Flower and Vase*, which is the most abstract, the most modern, and—despite its many distinguished antecedents—the most original of the three. In it, she depicted a single zinnia resting on the lip of a simple vase, facing the viewer directly, and dominating the picture space. This intense focus on a single blossom, which would become a hallmark of her work, has connections to other contemporary photographs, notably the sensuous closeups of calla lilies and lotus and magnolia blossoms that Stieglitz's long-time associate Edward Steichen had been creating since the mid-teens (e.g., *Magnolia Blossom*, *Voulanges*, gelatin silver print, c. 1921). Like Steichen's floral studies, O'Keeffe's are tightly cropped, intense, and almost portrait-like. *Flower and Vase* is one of the most formal of these, presenting carefully balanced geometric shapes in a straightforward, frontal arrangement. Its intellectual



**FIG 3**  
Georgia O'Keeffe,  
*Zinnia [White Zinnias]*,  
1921, oil on canvas,  
private collection

**FIG 4**  
Charles Sheeler, *Zinnia  
and Nasturtium Leaves*,  
1916–17, gelatin silver  
print

roots can be traced to the greatest modern master of still life, Paul Cézanne, who famously counseled painters to “treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone.”<sup>4</sup> O'Keeffe's paint handling is restrained: smoothing away the cheerful dots of color that describe the flowers' tiny, feathery petals in *Three Zinnias* and the opalescent passages that give the flowers in *Zinnia* an almost sculptural presence, she redefined the flower as a luminous orb emerging from a wide, unadorned cylinder.

Some months later, Stieglitz would describe her recent work as “primarily small things. Very rich in color.”<sup>5</sup> But in *Flower and Vase*, color has also been smoothed away. Rather than painting a bright red, or yellow, or orange zinnia, O'Keeffe chose to paint a white one, faintly tinged with lavender. It emerges from a white vase, and casts a grayish-white shadow onto a bluish-white wall behind. In her final exploration of zinnias, O'Keeffe has turned an unprepossessing floral still life into a sophisticated essay about painting white on white.

All three zinnia paintings were included in *One Hundred Pictures: Oils, Water-colors, Pastels, Drawings*, by Georgia O'Keeffe, *American*, organized

by Stieglitz and shown at the Anderson Galleries, New York, from January 29 through February 10, 1923. This was only O’Keeffe’s second solo exhibition and her first major, public, large-scale show. The works ranged in date from about 1916 to 1921 and included many different subjects, some treated in a representational manner and others entirely abstract. Most had never been seen before. The exhibition was a tremendous success: there were 500 visitors a day throughout the two-week run; by the end, \$3000 worth of pictures (more than \$45,000 today) had been sold.

While widely, and overwhelmingly positively, reviewed, the exhibition prompted a number of Freudian explanations of O’Keeffe’s work, interpretations that caused her a great deal of distress at the time, and that persist to this day. Critics saw her art as an expression of her sexuality: “[the] essence of very womanhood permeates her pictures,” one wrote. Her pictures “seem to have been painted with her very body;” they were called “living and shameless private documents.” Another writer saw them as “suppressed desires in paint.”<sup>6</sup> These views should not have been surprising, since Stieglitz’s photographic portraits of O’Keeffe (many of them nudes) had been shown at the Anderson gallery the year before; their private physical relationship had already been made public. She nonetheless found such comments invasive, limited, and condescending: her still life subjects were regarded simply as personifications (zinnias were said to “stare quaintly”) and at least one writer made explicit connections between works like *Flower and Vase* and her physical being, pointing out “breastlike contours” in the pictures, for example.<sup>7</sup>

However, the most far-sighted critic of the era, Henry McBride, recognized the true achievement of *Flower and Vase* and other paintings in the show: the union of the unabashedly personal expression of an independent spirit with the intellectual austerity of abstraction. He called the show “one of the first great triumphs for abstract art,” and celebrated O’Keeffe for providing a contribution to modernism that was specifically American: “In unbosoming her soul she not only finds her own release but advances the cause of art in her country.”<sup>8</sup>



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Ph.D. from Yale. Her 2007–2008 exhibition of the works of Edward Hopper was seen in Boston, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. She has lectured at museums across the country and in 2011, she served as Interim Chief Curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. She is now an independent scholar.

#### NOTES

1. Inscribed on the backing board is a comment attributed to O’Keeffe: “Final one of Zinnia.” Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols., New Haven, 1999, vol. 1, no. 354.

2. Blanche C. Matthias, “Georgia O’Keeffe and the Intimate Gallery. Stieglitz showing Seven Americans,” *Chicago Evening Post Magazine of the Art World*, March 2, 1926, reprinted in Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O’Keeffe, Stieglitz, and the Critics, 1916-1929*, Chicago and London, 1989, p. 249.

3. See Sarah Whitaker Peters, *Becoming O’Keeffe*, New York, 1991, pp. 206–209. O’Keeffe admired Sheeler’s work, although they were not especially close. His photograph was reproduced in the March 1920 issue of *Vanity Fair* (“A Painter’s Solution with a Camera of a Problem Usually Deemed Solvable with Paint Alone,” p. 80); O’Keeffe undoubtedly would have known it.

4. Cézanne to Emile Bernard, April 15, 1904, quoted in Richard Friedenthal, ed., *Letters of the Great Artists*, London, 1963, p. 180.

5. Stieglitz to Herbert J. Seligmann, October 8, 1922, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, quoted in Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Georgia O’Keeffe: The Poetry of Things*, Washington, D. C., 1999, p. 105.

6. Paul Rosenfeld, “The Paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe: The Work of the Young Artist Whose Canvases Are to Be Exhibited in Bulk for the First Time This Winter,” *Vanity Fair* 19, October 1922, reprinted in Lynes, p. 178; Alexander Brook, “February Exhibitions: Georgia O’Keefe [sic],” *The Arts* 3, February 1923, in Lynes, *O’Keeffe . . . and the Critics* p. 194; Marsden Hartley, “Georgia O’Keeffe,” *Adventures in the Arts*, 1921, reprinted in *One Hundred Pictures . . . by Georgia O’Keeffe, American*, in *Ibid.*, p. 170; Helen Appleton Read, “Georgia O’Keeffe’s Show an Emotional Escape,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 11, 1923, in *Ibid.*, p. 192.

7. Herbert J. Seligmann, “Georgia O’Keeffe, American,” *MSS.*, no. 5, March 1923, reprinted in *Ibid.*, p. 195.

8. Henry McBride, “Art News and Reviews—Woman as Exponent of the Abstract,” *New York Herald*, February 4, 1923, reprinted in *Ibid.*, pp. 187–189.