

Art History Seminar

NATURE: IN THE LIVES OF GEORGIA O'KEEFE AND ARTHUR DOVE

Submitted by

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INTRODUCTION

Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove were part of the Alfred Stieglitz group of artists which also included Alfred Maurer, Marsden Hartley and John Marin. Stieglitz, a photographer and artist in his own right, was the force that encouraged and made it possible for the two artists to pursue their interests. He was very interested in artists who displayed attributes that were, in his mind, purely American, during a time when Europe dominated the art world.

Dove had been to Paris and was conscious of the current art movements taking place. While in France he continued to paint in a impressionistic manner as he had done before arriving there. The only difference was that he changed to a brighter palette. He also exhibited works in the 1908 and 1909 Salon d'Automne.

O'Keeffe on the other hand did not travel to Europe until 1953. She was however, aware of the art movements taking place in Europe because of the shows that Stieglitz brought to New York through his gallery, 291.

Both O'Keeffe and Dove were interested in nature at early ages. O'Keeffe was reared on a farm while Dove lived in the city as well as on a farm. Nature was the inspiration for the majority of their paintings. Each one's view of how they interpreted nature is different but, in many ways it is the same.

To begin with, both artists were a part of the same modern arts movement in America. They had a chance to talk with each other about related art issues and could encourage each other's ideas. They wanted to be able to interpret the spirit of sound into paint. Examples of this interpretation are Dove's *Fog Horn*, *Ferry Boat Wreck* and *Sentimental Music*. Some of O'Keeffe's interpretation of music into paint would be *Music - Pink and Blue II* and *Blue and Green Music*. Both artists were influenced by Wassily Kandinsky's book On The Spiritual in Art. Kandinsky advocated the artist as creator of his own means of expression, that every artist felt the need to express the spirit of his time and that every artist was a servant of art and should therefore help the cause of art. He also wrote: *Color is the keyboard, the eyes are hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings... Music sound acts directly on the soul and finds an echo there since music is innate in man.*<sup>1</sup>

Neither O'Keeffe nor Dove painted the human figure in their nature scenes, but a number of paintings had a human presence.

Paintings like *Light Coming on the Plains II* or *Train in the Desert* by O'Keeffe and *Sails* and *Barn Interior No. 2* by Dove indicate a human presence. Both artists tended to paint the essence of nature rather than the details of nature.

### 1910-1920

O'Keeffe stated, "From experience of one kind or another shapes and colors come to me very clearly. Sometimes I start in a very realistic fashion and as I go on from one painting to another of the same thing, it becomes simplified till it can be nothing but abstract, but for me, it is my reason for painting I suppose."<sup>2</sup> From this statement one would think that for O'Keeffe to understand nature she had to paint it over and over until the essence of the subject revealed itself to her. One example of this would be the *Jack-in-the-Pulpit* series. O'Keeffe started by painting the Jack-in-the-pulpit realistically. As she painted the image over and over, she started eliminating details of the flower that didn't seem to be important to her as the true essence of the plant. The image of the plant was brought closer and closer to the viewer's eye with each successive painting until the final work shows the pistil of the flower bursting out of the dark. This did not seem to be the case with her paintings prior to the 1920's. Before that time O'Keeffe painted and repainted the same subject, not to understand it but, rather to push the limitations of color and mood. An example of this would

be her *Evening Star* series. The forms and compositions tended to remain the same. Also during this time O'Keeffe's paintings tended to abstract nature without being painted realistically first. This is not to say she wasn't also painting in a more realistic manner because in fact she was.

In contrast to O'Keeffe, Dove said, "... I have always felt it is much better to ... paint things that exist in themselves and do not carry the mind back to some object upon which they depend for their existence. We lean too heavily on nature. I would rather look at nature than to try to imitate it. ... If we find at any time that we are depending too much on any one thing, we will also find that it is just that much that we have missed finding our own inner selves. I would like to make something that is real in itself, that does not remind anyone of any other thing, and that does not have to be explained..."<sup>3</sup>

In *Abstractions 1-6*, Dove was abstracting nature or, as he called it "extracting" from nature what he saw as the essence of nature. Dove felt that the only way one could reach the essence of nature was to paint it intuitively. By analyzing nature too closely one would see nature as it existed with other objects and miss the essence of it.

## 1920-1940

The 1920's seemed to be a transition period for Dove. He was divorced from his first wife and as a result lost everything he owned except Stieglitz's letters and back issues of *Camera Work*. He even lost his paints and easel. Shortly after his divorce, he met a woman painter by the name of Helen Torr Weed also known as "Reds." They lived together for awhile on a houseboat Dove bought called the "Mona," on the Harlem River. Reds later became his second wife. During this time Dove experimented with Assemblages or "Things" as he called them and didn't do many paintings. One reason for this was that there wasn't room to do paintings while he lived on the houseboat.

Concerning Dove's working with collages, O'Keeffe has been quoted as saying, "...he worked with collage because it was cheaper than painting and also it amused him - once he was started on it, one thing after another came to him very easily with any material he found at hand."<sup>4</sup> While experimenting with collage Dove also experimented with different textures, painting surfaces and materials. It's during this time that he started experimenting with pastel and wax emulsions. Wax emulsion was to become the medium of the majority of his paintings in the 1930's and 1940's.



Although Dove had jobs as a free-lance illustrator he still lived in poverty. The Stock Market Crash in 1929 didn't help his financial situation at all. His paintings were of interest to only a hand full of followers. Dove said his paintings appealed to "those with sensitive instruments."<sup>5</sup>

For O'Keeffe the 1920's were not as hard as they were for Dove, and she never had to experience the poverty he did during the Great Depression. It was during this time that she started painting urban New York City. She also began experimenting with nature in the form of flowers and the landscape around Lake George. Her flower paintings took on a monumental size. She felt that by painting small flowers much larger than life, it would force the viewer to see them as she did. O'Keeffe wrote in the catalog of her 1926 show at Stieglitz's gallery: *Everyone has many associations with flowers. You put your hand to touch it, or lean forward to smell it, or maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking, or give it to someone to please them. But one really takes time to really see a flower. I have painted what each flower is to me and I have painted it big enough so that others would see what I see.*<sup>6</sup> The large size as well as the fact that the total image area of the canvas was filled with the image of the flower helped give some of her paintings an abstract quality.

O'Keeffe was also painting nature in the form of found objects such as sea shells and rocks. These paintings tended to be abstract in nature by the mere fact of painting their images from broader to boarder of the canvas. For the most part these works were much smaller in size. While flowers and shells may be considered a part of nature, these paintings tended to be superficial or more stylized. She is able to get to the essence of the object by magnification and simplification, a technique she seems to have borrowed from photography. She would very much be aware of the photographic technique of bringing the lens up close to the subject matter because Stieglitz, her photographer husband pioneered many photographic techniques. O'Keeffe denied any such influence to her flower paintings. Technique and analyzation rather than an intuitive interpretation seems to make up the content in the flower paintings as well as the still lives.

In the landscapes O'Keeffe painted of the Lake George area during this time, she seems more at one with nature. The work doesn't seem over analyzed. In paintings like *From the Lake #1* and *Lake George and Woods* she was inspired by an image of the nature she was viewing and painted it. These paintings seem more immediate and not analyzed for an abstract form. *From the Lake #1* seems to capture the essence and movements of water as well as the clouds during a storm. O'Keeffe is not concerned with any details of the lake, clouds or hills behind the lake.

The title helps the viewer put the work into some sort of context and we feel as she did about the elements of weather and the foreboding mood of the impending storm. The same sort of concerns seem to be happening in *Lake George and Woods*. This painting is more contemplative in mood. It's almost as if O'Keeffe were dropping pebbles in the lake and painting the rippling effect. There is still a sense of oneness with nature and an immediate reaction to the forms of nature.

Both O'Keeffe and Dove seemed to start another phase of experimentation in their painting careers from about 1929 until 1939. Dove stopped working with collage and started painting again. All through the 1930's O'Keeffe was traveling back and forth from New York to New Mexico and had become entranced with the New Mexico landscapes. During this time she started painting the vastness of the southwest.

By 1933 Dove had moved off his houseboat and back onto the family farm. The years on the houseboat seemed to afford him the time to formulate his ideas concerning the representation of nature. His paintings became more abstract in his search for the essence of whatever subject he was looking at. Dove saw his art in the same way he viewed and understood the principles of nature. A letter he wrote in 1914 to Arthur Jerome Eddy states: *One of the principles which seemed most evident was the choice of the simple motif. This law held in nature, a few forms and*

*a few colors sufficed for the creation of an object.*<sup>7</sup> This was a principle Dove believed in throughout his career as an artist. Just before his death, Dove wrote to Duncan Phillips, "*The essence of what I had found in nature was in the motif choice - two or three colors, two or three forms.*"<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Dove, O'Keeffe's paintings started selling. By the end of the 1930's, she was the best known successful female artist in American. One reason for O'Keeffe's popularity may have been the images she used in her paintings. People could identify with nature as they saw it. They may or may not have agreed with her interpretation of the subject but they could tell a mountain was still a mountain or a flower was still a flower.

Dove's paintings were much more complicated to understand. The people of his day didn't take the time to understand what his work was about. Another factor concerning his lack of popularity may have been his hermit-like existence and his allusiveness from the critics in their attempts to ask questions about his art.

During the 1930's and until Dove's death, Duncan Phillips was a loyal collector of Dove's work. Phillips not only bought Dove's paintings, he also sent Dove fifty dollars a month to help with expenses. Duncan Phillips was a wealthy collector

and art critic that championed the "American Moderns." In 1926 Phillips wrote: "*So in 1918 I incorporated the Phillips Memorial Gallery ... a chance to create a beneficent force in the community where I live - a joy-giving, life-enhancing influence, assisting people to see beautifully as true artists see.*"<sup>9</sup> He felt the Memorial should cater to those artists that were neither conservative nor radical in their artistic expression: *The Phillips Memorial Gallery must guard its doors against the intrusion of wild, unbalanced radicals and of dogmatic close-minded, conservatives, both standing for violent partisanship... [it must] stimulate contemporary artists by establishing personal contact and friendly relations, to win their confidence and to help them to understand themselves and to succeed with their own best methods and intentions, resisting the temptations to fall back on commercialism of one kind or another - such a policy I consider of the utmost importance.*<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between Dove and Phillips was strained at times because Dove refused Phillips' invitations to come to his gallery in Washington D.C. and talk about his art. Phillips also felt that Dove's living conditions could greatly improve if he were to try and get a job with the Federal Arts Project in the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.). Dove felt that the acceptance committee for the W.P.A. would not like his new works of art. He thought he could take old art out of storage and send them, but that he would soon run out of old work to substitute for new work. He wanted to send all his new work to Stieglitz because if they could be sold through Stieglitz, he would be paid substantially more than

the \$34 per week that he could earn through the W.P.A. Dove met Phillips only once in Stieglitz gallery, An American Place. The two men remained friends through the mail and Phillips continued to support Dove as well as buy his paintings.

Dove was very concerned with nature's underlying laws and wanted his paintings to be paintings of "living things" even though he chose not to paint nature as it appeared. His later works may not always show the connection with nature, but nature's laws as he understood them are evident throughout his work.

It seems Dove sometimes contradicts himself when he says, "to many thoughts spoil an idea."<sup>11</sup> His approach to his art seems much more cognitive and formulated than to that of O'Keeffe. Dove is able to distinguish between the intellectual and the intuitiveness of his paintings. While he is formulating his ideas about painting, he is not actually painting. And even though he has formulated ideas about what he is doing, his formulas don't dictate the outcome of his work because of his belief in the intuitiveness in painting.

#### The Cone, the Spiral and the Circle:

It appears that Dove had a working knowledge about math and mathematical formulas. He was able to translate the "idea"

these formulas suggested into his own form of creating nature. Dove could distinguish between "mathematical forms" and "life forms" and felt the spirit of the forms to be more important than the laws of the forms. In his way of thinking, laws tended to kill the spirit of the forms in art. Dove writes about a "*mathematical dream*" where, ... *one would multiply, subtract and divide whole conditions of existence, the sum of two or three motives, curves so to speak, representing instincts from all of life.*<sup>12</sup> Dove saw this "mathematical dream" in forms of ovoids, ellipses and spirals. These forms seem to dominate his paintings in such works as *Nature Symbolized No. 2, Fog Horns, Alfie's Delight* and *Sunrise I*.

In a letter written to Stieglitz in 1930, Dove included some of his theories about form and color: *Pencil Notes Made On A Boat* *I have come to the conclusion that there is one form and one color - that simplifies to the point of elimination, theory, which might be called the conscience. The form is the cone. From it we get the conic section, the spiral, the circle and the straight line. Whirl the circle and we have the sphere. The cylinder is just a circle moved in one direction. The cube of course comes from the straight line section of the cone.*<sup>13</sup>

During the 1930's Dove's working habits changed. He no longer painted out of doors. Watercolor, crayon or pencil studies were made outside and brought into his studio and enlarged with a pantograph. The pantograph is a device Dove used to

trace his studies mechanically. They could be enlarged or reduced to whatever size he wished. He felt that by working small studies first he could get inside himself or "self-portrait" and to him, that was what painting was all about.

Sexual Symbols:

As with O'Keeffe, Dove had been accused of using sexual content in his paintings. O'Keeffe denied any sexual implications in her paintings by stating, "The critics are just talking about themselves, not about what I am thinking."<sup>14</sup> She also wrote: *Still - in a way - nobody sees a flower - really - it is so small - we haven't time - and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time. 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. So I said to myself - 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. Well - I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower, you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower - and I don't.*<sup>15</sup>

Dove on the other hand didn't deny or agree with his critics concerning sexual symbols in his art. In a 1930 letter to Stieglitz, Dove wrote, *The bursting of a phallic symbol into white light*



may be the thing we all need.<sup>16</sup> In her book, Arthur Dove: Nature as Symbol, Sherrye Cohn feels that Dove's response had to do with O'Keeffe's *Jack-in-the-Pulpit* series of that same year.

Another of Dove's concerns in his work throughout the 1930's and until his death was what he called a "condition of light." In a letter to Samuel Kootz, Dove wrote: *There was a long period of searching for something in color which I have called "a condition of light." It applied to all objects in nature, flowers, trees, people, apples, cows. These all have their condition of light, which establishes them to the eye, to each other, and to the understanding.*<sup>17</sup> Dove never abandoned the idea that color makes things.

In 1939 Dove suffered a severe heart attack. His condition worsened with the discovery of a serious kidney condition called Brights disease. Even though his health continued to improve, he would remain a semi-invalid for the rest of his life. Doctors kept his spirits high, as well as his family's, by acknowledging the improvement of his heart and keeping the deteriorating kidney a secret.

#### 1940-1960

By the 1940's O'Keeffe's language had become synonymous with that of the Southwest landscape. She purchased her first house in New Mexico in 1940. Her style would bounce from

realism to semi-abstract to abstract. O'Keeffe tended to paint what she saw and how she felt emotionally about the object to be painted. During this time her work tends to be less abstract and more semi-abstract or realistic. She felt that her abstractions left too much room for misinterpretation.

#### Concerns with Representing Space

By the end of 1939 Dove had started painting again. Painting was to become his only activity. During this time Dove's paintings tended to be less organic in nature and more hard-edged and geometrical. These new works are just as much a result of his illness and old age as they are with a new understanding of space in relationship to form and depth as it exists in the real world. Dove wrote to Stieglitz: *Am working more from space outward instead of the eye back which is a relic. Comes more from space than from drawing.*<sup>18</sup>

During the 1940's Dove started working with projective geometry. He knew this could be done mathematically because he knew: *From the cone we get the conic section, the spiral, the circle and the straight line.*<sup>19</sup> It seems Dove's later works are no longer about nature. They seem more a statement about space and how that space is perceived. Dove achieves this notion through the reference of landscape in such paintings as *Flight, Yellow*

*Bush and Rose and Locust Stump.* Dove still maintained the idea that intuitiveness was more important than the formula and never used projective geometry as the solution to the problem of pictorial space. His use of geometry was as a point of departure.

Dove spent the last months of his life painting with the help of his wife, Reds. She would hold his paintbrush-held hand and move it along the canvas to wherever he directed her.

### Surrealism

O'Keeffe's paintings from the 1930 through the 1960's concentrated more on the object rather than an abstract interpretation of that object. In paintings such as *Pelvis with Moon* or *Summer Days*, she has taken the objects and rearranged their reality. In *Pelvis with Moon*, the canvas is filled with the image of the pelvic bone from a cow. There is a landscape form at the bottom of the canvas with the moon behind the pelvic bone. It's as if the pelvic bone was floating above the landscape giving the painting a surrealistic interpretation. The same is true with *Summer Days*. A deer's skull with antlers floats in the sky with daisies floating beneath the skull. Beneath all of this there is a landscape form of orange hills. Again O'Keeffe has rearranged the normal perception of reality.

O'Keeffe once again denied any symbolism concerning surrealism in her paintings. Her bones did not represent death but desert life. She said, "I was in the Surrealist show when I'd never heard of Surrealism - I'm not a joiner and I'm not a Precisionist or anything else."<sup>20</sup> This statement is hard to believe because of her associations with Stieglitz and his knowledge of European art movements during the time. It could be as Laurie Lisle writes in her book, Portrait of an Artist, that O'Keeffe always remained outside the circle of intellectual talk.<sup>21</sup> O'Keeffe was referring to the Saturday night talks at the Far East Tea Garden with other members of the Stieglitz group. Lisle goes on to say that O'Keeffe was present, she just never understood what they were talking about. Her art was different from surrealism in that there was no attempt to use the subconscious and there was no similarities to psychoanalysis.

Critics of O'Keeffe's work have called her depictions of nature "universal forms." Marsden Hartley describes her as a sort of "mystic of her own sort."<sup>22</sup> The one classification she didn't seem to mind was when her critics compared her work to that of other nature painters such as Arthur Dove.

#### The Use of the Vortex:

After the death of Stieglitz in 1946 (Dove also died a few months later that same year), O'Keeffe made New Mexico her

permanent home. She started painting the landscape without much reference to the sky. Mountains and hills filled the whole canvas. Paintings like *Red and Yellow Cliffs* or her *Black Place* series are examples of how she took the forms of the landscape and flattened the color to achieve a semi-abstract interpretation of nature. She painted seven versions of the *Black Place*. Each one from a different view. Unlike her earlier series of the *Evening Star*, she was able to transfer what she saw into a variety of abstract forms. At the core of these paintings O'Keeffe used the vortex to dominate her compositions. The same composition can be found as early as 1919 in a painting called *Blue and Green Music*. During the 1940's though the 1960's the vortex shows up in her more referential works as well as her abstracts. To O'Keeffe the vortex image represented movement, symmetry and balance.

Throughout the remainder of the 1940's and 1950's O'Keeffe did not tend to paint much. She used these years to settle Stieglitz's estate and to travel over the world. By the mid 1950's and into the 1960's, it appears that O'Keeffe had returned to some of the images and issues she was working on in the early 1910's. Images like *First Drawing of Blue Lines* done in 1916 resembles that of *Drawing I* done in 1959. Each of these drawings also have their painted counterparts: *Blue Lines* painted in 1916, and *Blue, Black and Grey* painted in 1960.

## Conclusion

O'Keeffe didn't seem to have the deep-rooted convictions that Dove had concerning the representation of nature. Where Dove intellectualized a way of seeing nature, he always painted it intuitively. O'Keeffe's understanding of nature seemed to be an emotional one. The denial of intellectual stimulus such as O'Keeffe's use of photographic "close-up" techniques or surrealism would indicate that she wanted only the emotional response from her subject matter. Dove felt to be one with nature was to understand nature intellectually and emotionally, but to be able to paint the essence of nature one had to deny the intellectual and paint intuitively.

Dove's art seemed to always be growing whereas O'Keeffe's seemed to be more consistent throughout her life. Sherrye Cohn suggests that because Dove had been to Europe and was familiar with historical painting and the nature of exploration throughout paintings history and that Dove readily accepted experimentation as a way of life. O'Keeffe having never gone to Europe during her formative years, had no such examples to relate to.

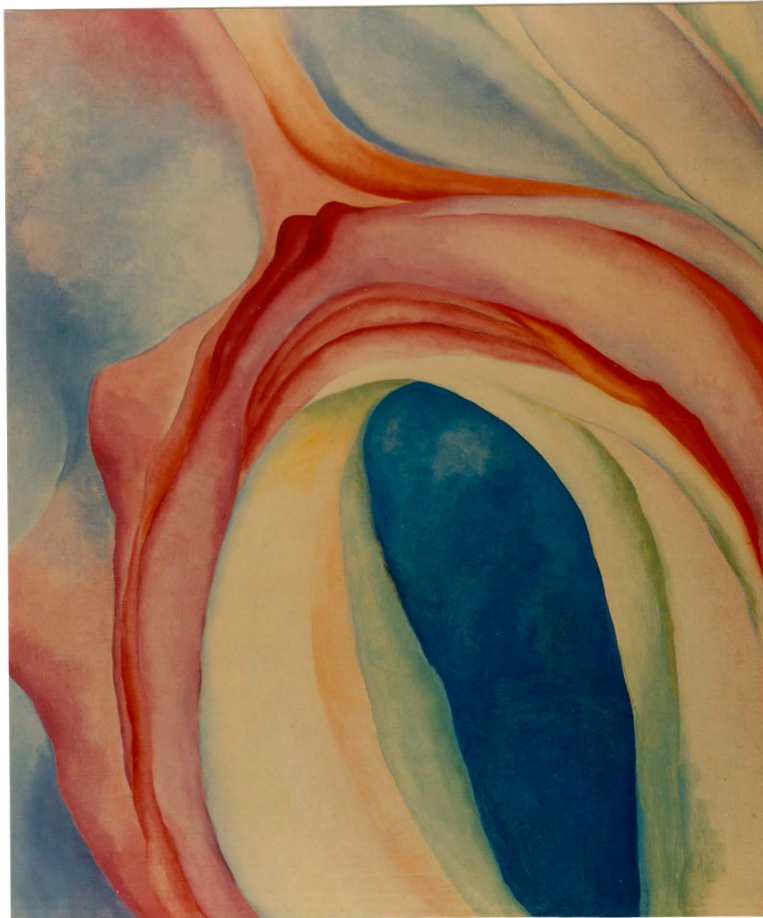
Both artists seem to find peace within themselves and their interpretation of nature. After Stieglitz's death, O'Keeffe was no longer in the daily distractions of New York City. New

Mexico was the peaceful source of inspiration she'd longed for since her days as a school teacher in Canyon, Texas.

Dove felt that by knowing his own inner most spirit and being in harmony with it that he would be able to recognize the true essence of nature. He wanted to go beyond the object by painting the external of the object as an internal thought or feeling.

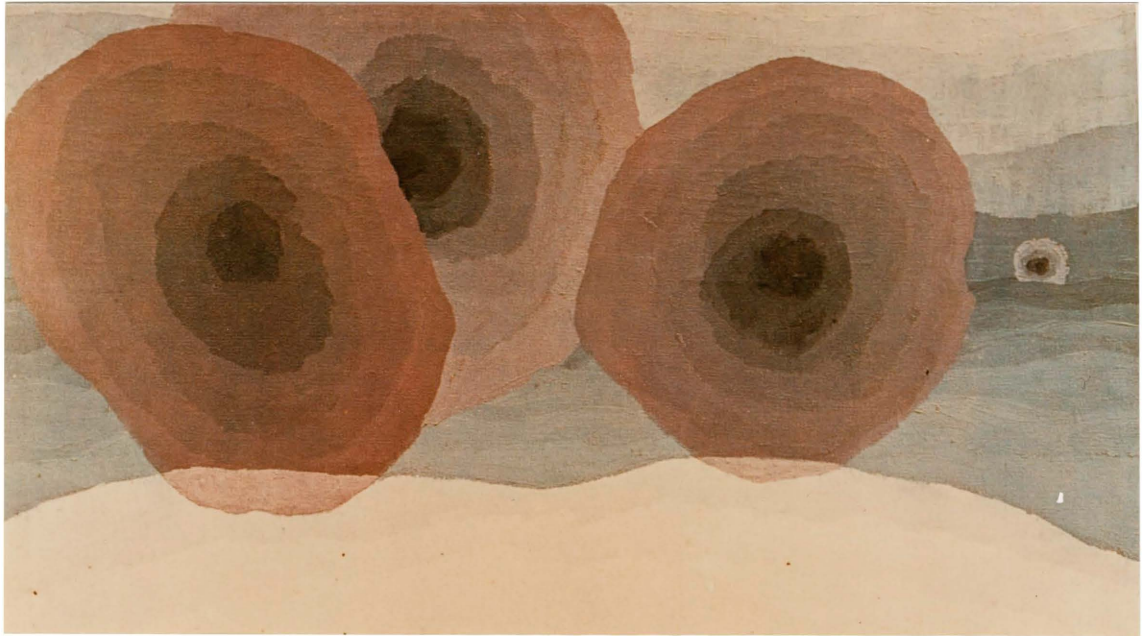


1. Arthur Dove, *Nature Symbolized no. 2*, 1914



2. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Music - Pink and Blue II*, 1919





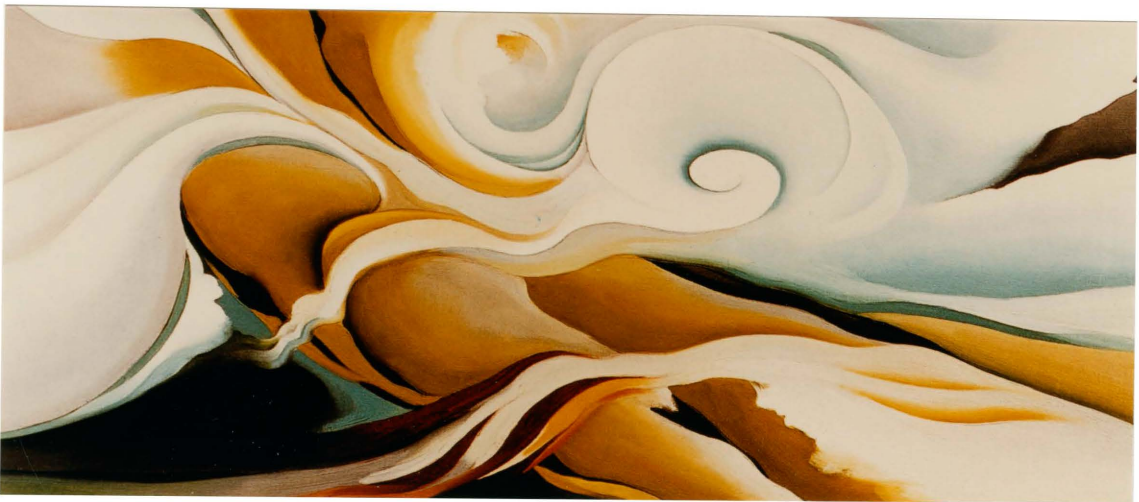
3. Arthur Dove, *Fog Horns*, 1929



4. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Hollyhock, Blue Larkspur*, 1929



5. Arthur Dove, *Fields Of Grain As Seen From Train*, 1931



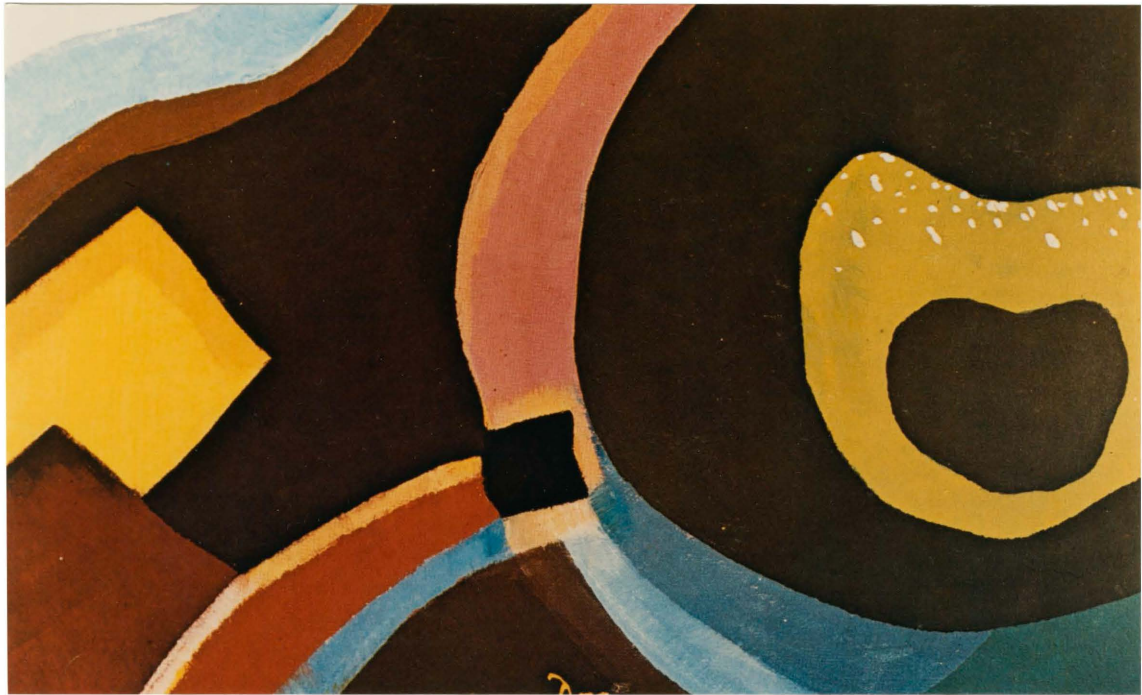
6. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Nature Forms, Gaspé*, 1932



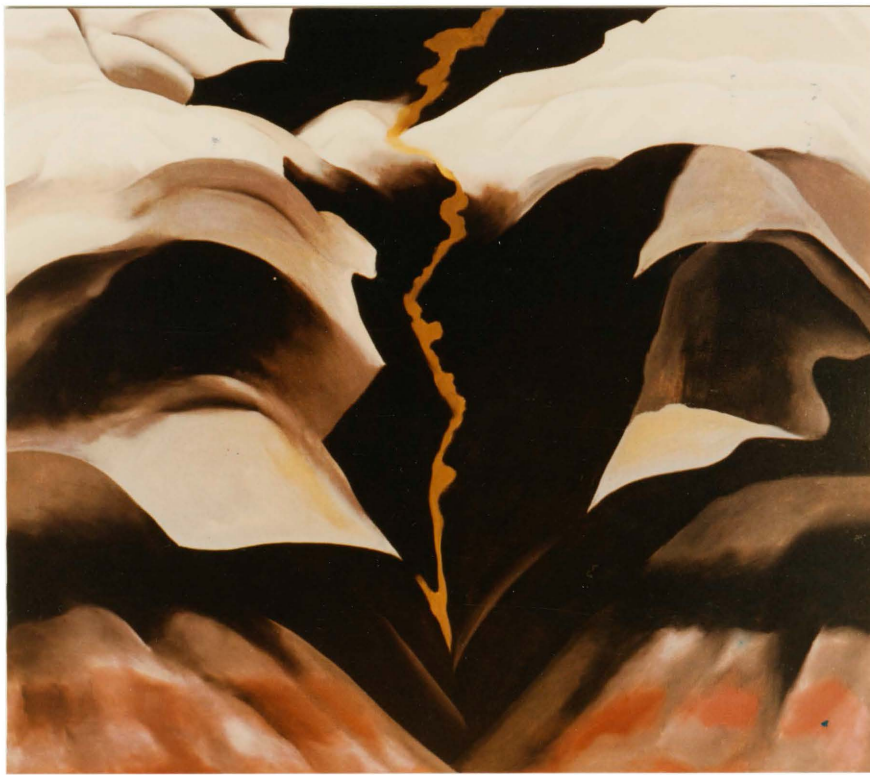
7. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jack-In-Pullit no. V*, 1930



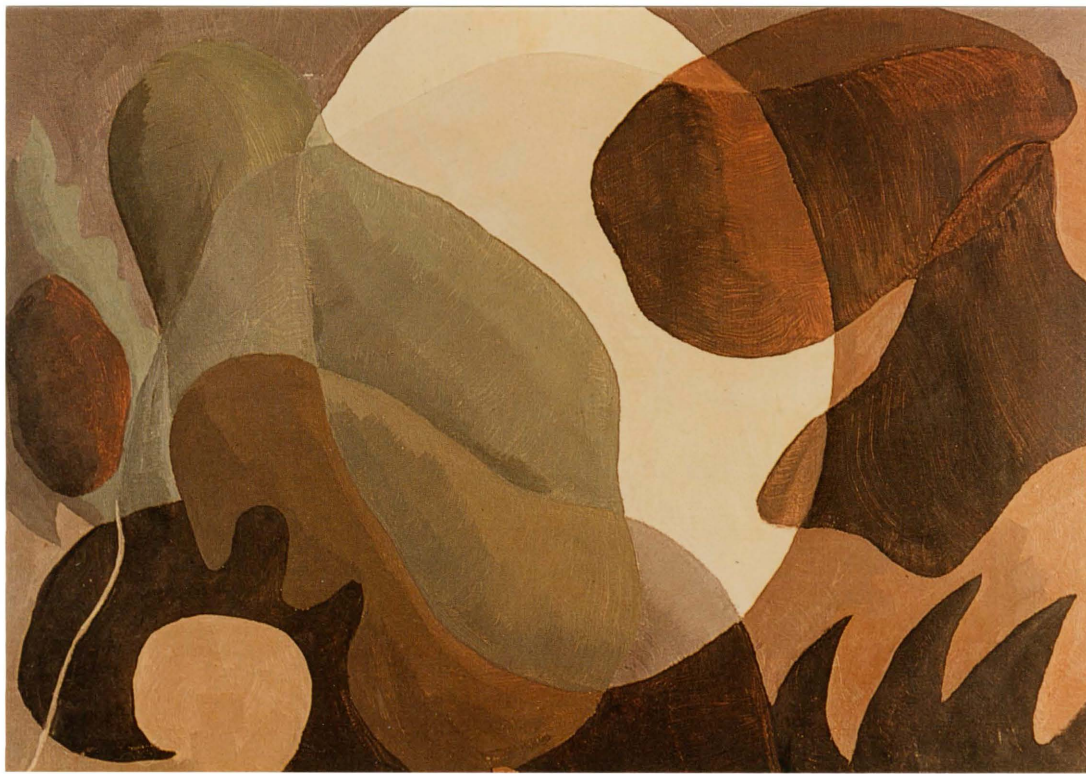
8. Arthur Dove, *Willow*, 1939



9. Arthur Dove, *Flight*, 1943



10. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Black Place II*, 1944



11. Arthur Dove, *Through A Frosty Moon*, 1946

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Katherine Hoffman, An Enduring Spirit: The Art of Georgia O'Keeffe, (The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Metuchen, NJ and London 1984), P.13

<sup>2</sup>Katherine Hoffman, P. 86

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Haskell, Arthur Dove, (New York Graphic Society, Ltd. Boston, Mass. 1974), P. 16

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Haskell, P. 49

<sup>5</sup>Sherrye Cohn, Arthur Dove: Nature As Symbol, (UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1982), P. 8

<sup>6</sup>Anita Pollitzer, A Woman On Paper: Georgia O'Keeffe, (Touchstone New York, NY 1988), P. 189

<sup>7</sup>Frederick S. Wight, Arthur G. Dove, (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1958), P.36

<sup>8</sup>Sherrye Cohn, P. 12

<sup>9</sup>Sasha M. Newman, Arthur Dove and Duncan Phillips: Artist and Patron, (The Phillips Collection Washington, D.C. with George Braziller, Inc. New York, NY 1981), P. 24

<sup>10</sup>Sasha M. Newman, P.24

<sup>11</sup>Barbara Haskell, P. 35

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<sup>14</sup>Katherine Hoffman, P.69

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<sup>16</sup>Sherrye Cohn, P. 78

<sup>17</sup>Frederick S. Wight, P. 38

<sup>18</sup>Sherrye Cohn, P. 83

<sup>19</sup>Sherrye Cohn, P. 85

<sup>20</sup>Katherine Hoffman, P. 78

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<sup>41</sup>Laurie Lisle, Portrait of An Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe, (Washington Square Press, Pocket Books, New York, NY 1980) P. 158

<sup>42</sup>Katherine Hoffman, P. 87

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