

REVIEW

ICONS

An American Original Goes To Spain

A new exhibition in Madrid celebrates Georgia O’Keeffe, a painter who ‘needed to move to create.’

By Tobias Grey

When the 20-year-old Georgia O’Keeffe burst onto the New York gallery scene in 1917, the American art world was under the sway of French Cubism. But O’Keeffe’s abstract charcoal drawings presented a version of modernism that was radically individual; she later described herself as “working into my own unknown—no one to satisfy but myself.” She didn’t make her first trip to Europe until 1953, when she was 66 years old, a mature artist.

This belated visit to France and Spain, followed by another trip to Spain the following year, sparked the imagination of the curator Marta Ruiz del Árbol, who has spent nearly 20 years trying to mount a Spanish retrospective of O’Keeffe’s work. It is finally set to open at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid on April 26, before traveling to the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Fondation Beyeler in Basel. About 90 paintings and drawings encompassing the whole of O’Keeffe’s 60-year career will be on display.

“From the Plains II” (1954), one of five paintings from the museum’s own collection, is the second version of a painting O’Keeffe executed 35 years earlier in Amarillo, Texas. It shows the vastness of the Panhandle spread out beneath the flaming colors of a jagged sunset. “What she does here is not really copying nature,” Ms. Ruiz del Árbol says. “In a way she is abstracting nature, keeping the most fundamental part of what she has seen by bringing it onto the canvas.”

O’Keeffe grew up on the Wisconsin prairie and was forever after enchanted by wide open spaces with limitless horizons. Later she found a similar sense of ease in the Badlands of New Mexico, where she lived after her husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, died in 1946. O’Keeffe lived another 40 years, dying at the age of 98.

Ms. Ruiz del Árbol believes that the first step in the artist’s creative process was discovering new landscapes, whether by foot, car, horse or airplane. “Before going into the studio, before starting a canvas, she walked and traveled,” Ms. Ruiz del Árbol says. “My thesis for this exhibition was that she needed to move



GEORGIA O’KEEFFE MUSEUM, VEGAS, MADRID, 2021 (2)



to create.”

As O’Keeffe walked, often for hours beneath a blistering sun, she gathered a bounty of flowers, shells, stones, bones and other natural ephemera, which she took back to her studio and used as the subjects of her paintings. In the Madrid show there are two monochrome oils, part of a series of seven “shell and shingle” paintings that O’Keeffe did in 1926 at a time when she felt creatively blocked. “The white shape of the shell and the gray shape of the weathered shingle were beautiful against the pale gray leaf on the pink-lined pattern of the wallpaper,” O’Keeffe wrote. “Adding the shingle got me painting again.”

Other paintings in the exhibition juxtapose flowers and a ram’s head with a white hollyhock. Ms. Ruiz del Árbol says that “in many cases the forms have a dialogue that is independent of what they were in the beginning when O’Keeffe first

saw them.”

O’Keeffe began making her famous large-scale flower paintings in the 1920s; the Madrid show includes “Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1” (1932), which sold for over \$44 million at auction in 2014, more than tripling the previous auction record for a female artist. At first critics rushed to give them a sexual interpretation, but Ms. Ruiz del Árbol hopes that the flower paintings can now be seen with fresh eyes, especially in Spain where O’Keeffe’s work is still little known.

“O’Keeffe pushed back against Freudian readings of her work,” Ms. Ruiz del Árbol says. “I think it’s time to see her work more like she wanted it to be seen in the first place.”

The Madrid exhibition also looks to reassess O’Keeffe’s technical ability, which was denounced by the critic Clement Greenberg for its lack of visible brushwork. In the months leading up to the exhibition the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum has been using photography and X-rays to study O’Keeffe’s technique in the works in its collection.

Above: Georgia O’Keeffe, ‘Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1’ (1932). Below left: O’Keeffe’s ‘From the Plains II’ (1954).

“The way that O’Keeffe applies her pigments is a technique called ‘wet into dry’ which is almost like a fresco technique.” Ms. Ruiz del Árbol says. “She makes one stroke, let’s it dry and then puts the next color. The change is so little that your eye cannot see it. She never mixes colors, so you have for example blue and then green. When you look at the underlying drawing, you can see that the colors never touch.”

Didier Ottinger, who is curating the Pompidou Center’s version of the retrospective, agrees that O’Keeffe is still underestimated in this regard. “The technique she employs involves a very light touch,” he says. “The idea of modern art, which has been widely promoted, is that it is a virile business in terms of gesture and putting on paint. That has nothing to do with Georgia O’Keeffe.”

MASTERPIECE | ‘THE CATHEDRALS OF ART’ (1942), BY FLORINE STETTHEIMER

Celebrating and Satirizing New York’s Aesthetes

By Helen A. Cooper

SHE WAS THE SOCIETY INSIDER and the artistic outlier. Florine Stettheimer (1871-1944) gathered about her the most fervent modernists of the 1920s and ’30s—the likes of Marcel Duchamp, Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keeffe, Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein—whose intellectual and aesthetic energies shaped their era. As a painter she discarded all the prevailing definitions of modernism and painted just as she pleased. She invented her own visual language—purposefully naïve, sly, theatrical and allusive. It both celebrated and mocked her own rarefied milieu—upper-class bohemian life in Manhattan between the world wars.

Her sensibility is on full display in the four satirical allegories created between 1929 and 1942 of Manhattan’s secular “shrines” of cosmopolitan life—Broadway, Fifth Avenue, Wall Street and Art. In the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they are considered her master works. These symbol-packed fantasies are populated with fond and sardonic likenesses of individuals instantly recognizable to a contemporary audience. Worldly and witty, they are comedies of manners. She called them “Cathedrals.”

“The Cathedrals of Art,” the last in the series, was the world within

New York she knew best—the Met, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. She stages them as a theatrical triptych of the art establishment against which the newly formed American avant-garde struggles to gain a foothold.

Stettheimer gloried in artifice, mingling reality and fantasy. Her style is gossamer, alive with joyful reds, pinks and yellows accented with black and dark blue and thick strokes of gold on a radiant white ground. The scene has the noise and color and light of a comic opera in which many incidents occur simultaneously. But beneath the disarming froth there is rigor and structure. Peopled with sinuous miniature portraits of New York art world luminaries, each smugly ensconced in his or her own orbit, it parodies both the art establishment’s insularity and the self-consciousness of American modernism desperate for establishment acceptance.

She loathed pretention and no one escaped her elegant ridicule, including herself. She appears at the lower right labeled as *commère*, the gossip, under a gold-trimmed canopy, self-mockingly dressed as a bride in white, at last grown young (she was then in her 70s and never married). Opposite is her *compère*, the master of ceremonies. He is the

interior decorator Robert Locher, in the pose of Apollo but dressed like a waiter. In the foreground, at the foot of the Met’s grand red-carpeted staircase, new American Art in the guise of a naked infant drawing a picture is being ushered into this High Temple of Art.

Virtually every figure in the painting is based on a real-life character. The photographer George Platt Lynes illuminates the child in a halo of flashbulbs; A. Everett “Chick” Austin Jr., the ballet-mad director of Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum—arms folded, wearing red dance tights—stares at the nativity-like scene; the art critic Henry McBride, stationed near the entrance, waves Stop and Go signs to guide public opinion.

Two stately columns, ironically inscribed “Art in America” and “American Art,” announce the entrance to an institution unsympathetic to American modernism. On either side of the staircase, rival art dealers, artists and publicists com-



It sends up the city’s storied museums and the elites in their orbit.

pete for attention. We can almost hear them shouting “look at me!” Alfred Stieglitz, in his trademark black cape, looks longingly up to the exhibition halls, a dealer clutches a marble bust by Elie Nadelman, a publicist frantically waves balloons, the Surrealist Pavel Tchelitchew poses to show his celebrated profile. At the head of the stairs the Met’s director, Francis Henry Taylor, who viewed modern art as morally questionable, leads Baby Art to some of the museum’s “real” art—an Egyptian sculpture, a Frans Hals portrait and a horse in armor. The nubile blonde with her foot atop a platform labeled “Cocktail Dress” mocks a

Met exhibition on contemporary fashion.

At the right, an enormous orange-red American eagle announces the Whitney. The only art visible in the empty gallery is a sculpture by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the museum’s founder. The institution’s director Juliana Force looks straight at us, arms crossed, grimly resolute, uncertain of her future or the museum’s.

At the left, the Modern’s director, Alfred Barr Jr., lounges on a Le Corbusier chair amid paintings by Picasso, Matisse and Henri Rousseau, while Baby Art plays hopscotch on a Mondrian. Picasso’s name floats in the golden dome above, on its way to immortality.

Look carefully. Stettheimer has slyly inscribed “Florine S” next to it.

Florine Stettheimer’s art existed apart from her generation’s modernism, her airy fluid style the antithesis of the commitment to formal abstraction. Its narrative freedom and sly take on our cultural icons seem ever fresh and uniquely American. Writer and patron of the Harlem Renaissance Carl Van Vechten—the subject of one of Stettheimer’s greatest portraits—likened its boundary-breaking quality to jazz. Andy Warhol called her his favorite artist.

Ms. Cooper is curator emeritus of American paintings and sculpture at the Yale University Art Gallery..

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART