

Georgia O'Keeffe: From the Faraway, Nearby

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Abstract. The artist, Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) made her break-through while observing the wide-open night sky of Texas. She was already a keen weather-watcher having grown up on a Midwestern dairy farm. O'Keeffe would paint many images, often abstract, exploring celestial bodies and cosmic forces. Even her 1920s New York *skyscrapers* address the celestial topic, albeit rather ironically, as manmade structures that dare to *poke* at the heavens. Her later works presented the bigger picture, focusing on the intensely blue zenith seen from the Earth telescoped through pelvic bone cavities or seen from an airplane flying above the clouds. O'Keeffe has little to do with self-expression. Hers is a directly experienced sense of wonder, a spiritual vision, of the universe—inspired by Vedic, Buddhist, Taoist, and Native American mythology—that elevates even her sometimes overtly sexual symbolism to that of Mother Earth or planetary copulation. Her abstract and landscape scenes offer an aesthetic experience in touch with the Beyond—inspiring awe.

My first memory is of the brightness of light – light all around.¹

Introduction

'I am one of the few who give our country any voice of its own', declared Georgia O'Keeffe in 1945 to James Sweeney, curator of MoMA who was preparing her retrospective for 1946, three years after the one at the Art Institute of Chicago.² O'Keeffe had been the only woman included in MoMA's first show of American Art, *Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans*, in 1929. And, just before the end of the twentieth century, she would be honoured with a single-artist museum in New Mexico. O'Keeffe's importance should not be underestimated. She created a truly American art inspired by a sense of place that brings all which is faraway—sunrises, the wild blue yonder, and the starry heavens—nearby, so close that we, the

¹ Judith Zilcher, 'Light Coming on the Plains—Georgia O'Keeffe's Sunrise Series', *Artibus et Historiae*, no.40 (XX), p.191.

² O'Keeffe declared to James Johnson Sweeney, June 11, 1945, printed in Jack Cowert, Juan Hamilton, and Sarah Greenough, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters*, (New York: Bulfinch Press / National Gallery of Art, 1989), p.241.

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viewers, can experience them intimately without scientific instruments. Her images achieve, what William Blake had only envisioned, a way 'to see a World in a Grain of Sand and a Heaven in a Wild Flower'.³ O'Keeffe's art is, indeed, mystical—defined by Maurice Tuchman as, 'a search for the state of oneness with ultimate reality'—through her images of a single, unfolding blossom to her panoramic and telescopic views of the sky.⁴

Her original style portrays a dynamic universe, favouring process over form to unveil patterns of energy and growth in action. She encouraged her watercolours to search their own course along the dampened areas of the paper so that they left gaps of dry white paper in between enveloping each hue—like a glowing aura (see Figs. 1 and 2). Her dazzling palette explored a rainbow of nuances in, as for example, *Music: Pink and Blue II* (1919) unfolding a triad of full pink, orange and violet off-set by another of chartreuse, turquoise and peacock blue.⁵ For her 1920s flower close-ups, each colour glows, passing through all imaginable gradations until it flips becoming its own complimentary hue, even along a single petal. O'Keeffe handles her paints in such a way that her modest creation is actually acting out, on a micro scale, the whole universe's inception just as Blake had envisioned: 'Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand'.

The sub-title of this paper, *From the Faraway, Nearby*, underlines O'Keeffe's way of intimately linking such extreme scales thereby demonstrating the interconnectedness of the humblest of Earthly phenomenon with the Infinite. I will interject quotes from Georgia's personal correspondence that let us understand just what she was thinking when she painted such images. I will concentrate on those that show her passion for the sky, that infinite blue which, in her Hindu and Buddhist sources, symbolizes *sunyata* or the emptiness opening the way for *Akasha* or aether, that permeates all space.⁶ I will not go into her biography more

³ William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence', n.p. *Notebooks* (published in 1863 long after his death in 1827).

⁴ Maurice Tuchman, 'Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art', *The Spiritual in art: abstract Painting 1890-1985* exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986), p.19.

⁵ See image online: https://www.georgiaokeeffe.net/music-pink-and-blue-ii.jsp#google_vignette [accessed 8 Sept. 2025].

⁶ In Vedic texts, space (*Ākāsha*) has a double nature: luminosity and energy. See, for example, Deborah Jenner and Malou l'Héritier, eds, Colette Poggi, 'Ākāsha - Espace irradiant, espace cosmique, espace du corps, espace de la conscience', *Espace Mondialation* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2013), pp.17–31. See

than necessary for O'Keeffe herself said, 'Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest'.⁷

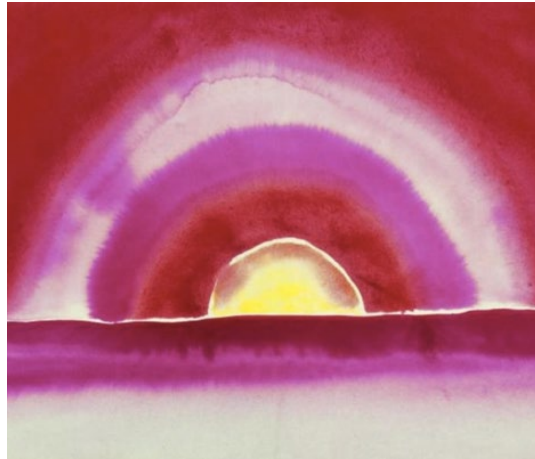


Fig. 1. Georgia O'Keeffe *Sunrise* 1916, watercolour 22.5 x 30.5 cm. Private Collection, Mr. & Mrs. Barney Ebsworth, St. Louis, MI © Public domain US.

O'Keeffe's Originality

O'Keeffe clarified her intentions, 'I'm not trying to do Art. I'm digging stars'.⁸ She offers a different approach to astronomy that, albeit unscientific, has the advantage of being accessible to all for she offers an aesthetic intuitive approach which, in 1946, F.S.C. Northrop, Sterling Professor of Philosophy at Yale, coined the 'aesthetic component'. He explained how this lets you truly appreciate, 'the blueness of the sky and

also: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aether> [accessed 3 Sept. 2024].

For more details on O'Keeffe's spiritual sources, see: Deborah Jenner, *The Spiritual in the Art of Georgia O'Keeffe* (PhD diss., Sorbonne University, Paris IV, 2003).

⁷ Dennis Abrams, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Artist (Woman of Achievement)* (New York: Chelsea House Publisher, 2009), p.13.

⁸ Ann Daily, 'Digging for Stars: Georgia O'Keeffe in the Texas Panhandle' (10 Aug. 2020), <https://sightlinesmag.org/digging-for-stars-georgia-okeeffe-in-the-texas-panhandl> [accessed 29 Aug. 2024].

the color of the rose and the moving beauty of the sunset'.⁹ He explains that it is precisely this that constitutes the spiritual with Mexicans, Tantric Hindus, Taoists, and the Americans, Emerson and Thoreau, thereby identifying the common denominator in O'Keeffe's wide range mystical sources from both Asia and nearer to home. He goes on to explain just why her art is so important to the United States:

There will be no religion nor culture which adequately meets the spiritual as well as the intellectual needs of men until the traditional Western theism ... is also supplemented with the primitive traditional Oriental religion of intuition and contemplation with its cultivation of the aesthetic component. And before this is possible there must be an art in the West, like that of the Orient, but our own, in which the female aesthetic intuitive principle in things speaks in its purity, conveying itself for its own sake. Such is the importance of the painting of Georgia O'Keeffe.

O'Keeffe's painterly technique concretizes Northrop's 'aesthetic intuitive principle' with shifts of scales, a vivid—even jarring—palette, and a razor-sharp focus to transmit star-gazing directly to her viewers.

Texas

O'Keeffe moved to Canyon, Texas in 1916 to teach art at a local college. The uniformly flat, arid tableland did not offer much choice in vistas for a landscape artist. However, she immediately loved Texas precisely because there was so much sky without hills or vegetation to block the dawn. For her lodgings, she insisted on renting an attic room in the home of the local Physics professor, Douglas Shirley, though he was not looking for boarders. Georgia explained that she simply had to live there because his top floor room's dormer made a great observation post for sunrise (see Fig. 1).¹⁰

Her letters to friends on the East Coast were filled with her excitement of having such open horizons before her eyes. In one of some ninety she wrote to the gallery director and photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia

⁹ F.S.C. Northrop, *The Meeting of East & West – An inquiry concerning world understanding* (New York: Collier Books, 1946), pp.462–64

¹⁰ Jan Garden Castro, *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1986), p.36. Castro's personal interview with Mrs. Shirley, Canyon, Texas on June 19, 1980, who recounted what O'Keeffe had told her. (Willena Shirley was the wife of Douglas Shirley, Professor of Physics, West Texas State).

exclaimed, 'The country is almost all sky—and such wonderful sky—and the wind blows hard'.¹¹ She started experimenting with just charcoal on paper to depict gales stirring up the emptiness of the Texan plains. Her abstract sketch, *N°16 Special* (1918),¹² almost filling the paper presents a twisting, broad, dark cluster of dusty, hollow, light-filled columns rising somewhat diagonally out of empty space, with no shadow cast.

O'Keeffe injects an inner glow in her watercolours, too. For *The House and the Tree—Red* (1918), a pale, mint-green, full moon is shining down, half-hidden behind a tree branch, as the sole light source for the scene.¹³ It beams right through her subject-matter, even the pigment itself, thanks to her loose brushwork that forms checkered apertures revealing the bare white paper left untouched by her swirling, broad paintbrush. Each silhouette of the house and two trees is distinguished by a separate colour: rust, green and navy. The sky-blue background is filled in with similar latticework patterns to expose the 'moonlight' as well. Her letter to her fellow painter and friend, Anita Pollitzer, sets the scene, 'The whole sky was blowing, the gray-blue clouds were riding all through the hotness of it and the ugly little buildings and windmills looked great against it'.¹⁴

The whole image suggests *Indra's Net*, a Vedic concept that Georgia had learned from Stieglitz's niece and closest relative, Elisabeth Davidson, a Hindu convert.¹⁵ Indra, an avatar of Vishnu, is said to have spun a jewelled net, whose intersecting, holographic fibres light up, giving structure to primordial emptiness, inviting the Cosmos to appear. The myth teaches that there is but one thread, infinitely reflecting itself at each mirrored intersection, so any individual entity is but illusory.

Thus, O'Keeffe's moonlight scene also suggests that the newly-founded settlement along the Texan frontier is perhaps only a mirage. Georgia had selected this very term 'mirage' in a letter to Anita, "Something wonderful about the bigness and the loneliness and the windiness of it—mirages—

¹¹ Georgia O'Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz, Canyon, Texas, September 8, 1916 reproduced in Sarah Greenough, ed., *Selected Letters of Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz*, Vol. 1 (New York: Yale University Press, 2011), p.28.

¹² See image online: <https://www.nga.gov/artworks/75113-no-16-special> [accessed 8 Sept. 2025].

¹³ See image online <https://data.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8363/> [accessed 9 Sept. 2025].

¹⁴ Anita Pollitzer, *Woman on Paper—Georgia O'Keeffe the Letters & Memoir of a Legendary Friendship* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1988), p.145.

¹⁵ Sue Davidson Lowe, *Stieglitz—A Memoire/Biography* (Boston, MA: MFA Publications, 1983, 2002), p.220.

Music that makes holes in the sky'.¹⁶ She equates music with that which opens up and structures space. In Hinduism, *Akasha*, or space, the fifth element, is often paired with the sense of audition as sound carries through space. O'Keeffe's watercolour, *Starlight Night* (1917), links the sky directly with music.¹⁷ It evokes the national anthem, *The Star-Spangled Banner* by Francis Scott Key:

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming, ...

O'Keeffe, a pacifist, celebrated America's neutrality in World War I. However, her flag reference is but a mirage forewarning of the country's immanent entry into war that very April. The picture keeps the checkered *Indra's Net* effect with a network of twinkling stars but creates an unnatural line-up in perfect rows as do the stars on the US flag.

The watercolour also involves a new technique that may well symbolize O'Keeffe's concept of the Universe. Instead of painting individual stars, she carefully sprinkled over-sized pieces of confetti in neat rows on a dampened sheet of white paper and then applied a dark-blue wash over the whole surface. When the paint dried, the bits of confetti shook right off the paper thereby revealing bare white paper "stars" forming a grid. Along the bottom edge, a solid band of blue-wash translates as the low-lying, Texan plains.¹⁸ O'Keeffe had enthusiastically described it in a letter to Stieglitz, 'The miles and miles of the thin strip of dark that is land... It was wonderfully big—and dark and starlight and night moving'.¹⁹ The image is both a nocturne landscape and a symbolic equivalent of the anthem belted out from twilight to dawn in the open night-sky. With flat grazing land, the sound carries quite far indeed. Even her act of shaking the confetti

¹⁶ O'Keeffe's letter to Anita mid-January 1916 reproduced in <https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/10/22/georgia-okeeffe-southwest/> [accessed 28 Aug. 2024].

¹⁷ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/1092/> [accessed 8 Sept. 2025].

¹⁸ O'Keeffe's letter to Stieglitz on October 16, 1916: '... the miles and miles of the thin strip of dark that is land—it was wonderfully big—and dark and starlight—', reproduced in Amy Von Lintel, *Georgia O'Keeffe's Wartime Texas Letters* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2020) p.56.

¹⁹ O'Keeffe's letter to Stieglitz on October 31, 1916 (postmarked 16 Oct. 1916) reproduced in Lintel, *Georgia O'Keeffe's Wartime Texas Letters* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2020), p.65.

made use of vibrations to spread her motif across the page—an exercise in synaesthesia by rendering music visible. It is also a metaphor for how the Universe began: its stars symbolically spewed across space with the Big Bang.

O'Keeffe's reversed-stencil technique reminds us that it is only when the night wipes the daylight away that stars become visible. Her stars, made of blank paper instead of paint, tease us with reversals of form/emptiness. Her process echoes the Taoist dance of yin and yang whose perpetual transformation gets the *Qi* (chi) flowing, solidifying into matter, and thinning itself back down again over and over. Already in the 1910s, 'O'Keeffe spoke of Kuo Hsi's *Essay on Landscape* as, "one of the greatest essays of the world".²⁰ She had been introduced to Taoist painting at Columbia, by Arthur Dow,²¹ who taught its essence through *notan*.²² She explained her handling of charcoal like yin and yang, 'I had probably looked very carefully at Chinese and Japanese paintings and calligraphy'.²³

O'Keeffe logged a different sort of ebb and flow with her three watercolours, *Light Coming on the Plains I-III* (1917).²⁴ Instead of charting the creation of a universe, she recorded a single sunrise by concentrating on different effects in each work. O'Keeffe had meticulously observed each

²⁰ O'Keeffe quoted in Sharyn Udall, *Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo—Places of their Own*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p.132. See also the essay that O'Keeffe praised: Kuo Hsi, 'An Essay On Landscape', p.7, Foreword: 'Sung Culture and Ideals ...whose outlook on Life was based on the Law of rhythm and the duality of Nature through the Yin and Yang'. https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.279513/2015.279513.An-Essay_djvu.txt [accessed 8 Sept. 2025]

²¹ O'Keeffe's professor at Columbia, Arthur Dow, used Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* and Gomes's *l'Art japonais* as course books to show Sung landscapes and Asian aesthetics. See: Arthur Warren Johnson, *Arthur Wesley Dow: Historian, Artist Teacher*, (Ipswich, MA: Ipswich Historical Society, 1934), p.61.

²² Fenollosa had coined the term 'no tan' from 2 Japanese words for dark and light when the need for such a designation arose while Kakuro was enlightening him in the Tao. See: Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, re-edited (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p.21.

²³ Georgia O'Keeffe and Doris Bry, *Some Memories of Drawings* (University of New Mexico Press, 1988), n.p.

²⁴ See all three images online:

<https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8351> (Plus, 8352 and 8353) / [accessed 8 Sept. 2025]

phase before she began painting, noting, 'The light would begin to appear, and then it would disappear and then there would be a kind of halo effect, and then it would appear again. The light would come and go for a while before it came'.²⁵ Her choice of grammar—a present participle—in the series' title '*Light Coming...*', purposely insists on a slow-motion portrayal of the event. Just a year after Einstein's principle of relativity, she is observing a sunrise and playing with the optics of differences in the speed it appears to be unfolding before her own eyes. O'Keeffe filled each sheet of paper with variations of pulsing, halo-like arches. They seem to glow for quite a while, building up the suspense for the dawn to break. Their individual patterns suggest different tempos although each watercolour covers the total sequence as if filmed with three cameras. She insisted the paintings were always hung together to offer a hologram' of the dawn.

O'Keeffe's approach to time contrasts greatly with, as for example, Monet's series, *Rouen Cathedral* (1892–93), that trace, hour-by-hour, the passage of sunlight over the facade with shifting shadows like a sundial. In contrast, O'Keeffe emphasized an energized, radiating space with three *simultaneous* views of the dawn over an extended present suggesting a sort of 'timeless space'. O'Keeffe would later use this phrase in a letter; 'They seemed to mark off the edge of the earth and the beginning of time and space—or should I say timeless space'.²⁶ However, her approach must not be confused with Cubism that juxtaposes different views—each with foreshortening—from different angles, She avoids linear perspective. In fact, she collapses all pictorial space. All the elements appear to be flush against the pictorial surface. What is more, in *Sunrise* (1916), her cropped image zooms in on simply the sun, personifying as if it were the subject of a portrait (see Fig. 1). For O'Keeffe, the burning sphere had a *will* of its own, as seen in her remark about another painting, 'The sunset was a long, warm glow—it seems to hate to leave this country'.²⁷

On one of her frequent country walks in the freshness of a Texan evening, O'Keeffe observed a solitary star changing hues as it rose in the western sky. This inspired her series of watercolours, *Evening Star I-VIII* (1917) (see Fig. 1). She left gaps of white paper around each concentric

²⁵ Georgia O'Keeffe cited in Calvin Tomkins, 'The Rose in the Eye Looked Pretty Fine', *The New Yorker* 4 March 1974, p. 42.

²⁶ Georgia O'Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz, September 23, 1923. Quoted in: Jennifer Sinor, *Letters Like the Day On Reading Georgia O'Keeffe* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), p.50.

²⁷ O'Keeffe's letter to Stieglitz on 22 Oct. 1916 reproduced in Lintel, *Wartime Texas Letters*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2020), p.52.

ring of pure colour: red, orange, peach and yellow making up her star to show that, ‘the Evening Star was high in the sunset sky when it was still broad daylight’,²⁸ For this effect, O’Keeffe first dampened select zones of white paper with a wide brush dipped in water. These would channel the flow of each pure hue so that each annulus only filled in its designated zone. Then, she marked the horizonline with a strip of bottle blue and another in teal for the land below. O’Keeffe declared that the *Evening Star* fascinated her; she painted eight versions. Some let puddles of paint bleed into each other; others, expand the star till it fills the page. Hung all together, they symbolically trace a life’s journey or even uncoiling universes. A Native American shaman had found a similar connotation from, this time, the Morning Star’s multicolour appearance:

I saw the Morning Star, and I noticed that at first it was all red and then it changed to blue, and then into yellow, and finally I saw that it was white, and in these four colors I saw the four ages. Although this star did not really speak to me, it taught me very much.²⁹



Fig. 2. Georgia O’Keeffe *Evening Star III & IV* 1917. Watercolours 22.5cm x 30.2cm ©Public domain US

O’Keeffe’s more abstract watercolours,³⁰ identified as images in her head, evoke the hues and shape of a stellar jet a clearly seen with the Hubble telescope decades later. For landscapes, O’Keeffe explored the Texan

²⁸ ‘Music for the Eyes: a New Georgia O’Keeffe Experience’, *Georgia O’Keeffe Museum*, <https://www.okeeffemuseum.org/blog-publications/music-for-the-eyes> [accessed 1 Sept. 2024].

²⁹ Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, eds, *Teachings From the American Earth – Indian Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Liveright, 1975), pp.37–38.

³⁰ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8278/> [accessed 8 Sept. 2025].

plains by car, heading off in any direction without need of a paved road.³¹ In *Morning Sky* (1916), she painted straight bands of multi-hued watercolours to depict the flat prairieland under heavy cloud at sunrise. With atmospheric perspective, she discretely hinted at the curvature of the earth which she well noted, 'The ground here seems level because it is so empty... seeming perfectly straight all round till you look a long time'.³²

O'Keeffe also keenly observed how extreme weather altered the sky. One night in Texas, the wildest wind and pouring rain distracted her from reading *Divine Comedy*. Georgia wrote, 'a great storm and a great book they seem to be the same thing almost'.³³ She was well-read in a whole range of disciplines.³⁴ For O'Keeffe, cosmic energy manifest in such extreme weather as thunderbolts, evoking the Hindu and Buddhist symbol, *Vajra*.³⁵ Her nocturne, *From the Plains* (1919) depicts such bolts of

³¹ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8310/> [accessed 8 Sept. 2025].

³² O'Keeffe's letter to Stieglitz on 12 Dec. 1916 reproduced in Lintel, *Wartime Texas Letters* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2020), p.54.

³³ O'Keeffe to Stieglitz, September 24, 1916 reproduced in Amy M. Von Lintel, *Wartime Texas Letters* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2020), p.50

³⁴ O'Keeffe's private library containing some 3000 volumes was the subject of its own exhibition, *The Book Room: Georgia O'Keeffe's Library in Abiquiu*, whose catalog by Ruth Fine, was published with the same title (New York: Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation & The Grolier Club, 1997). Back in January 1917, O'Keeffe, having prepared for 3 months, gave a lecture to the Faculty Circle on modern art aesthetics. She expounded upon the theories of Eddy, De Zayas, Kandinsky, Clive Bell, Charles Caffin, Nietzsche, etc. She wrote to Anita about it on 17 January 1917, 'They kept me going all through the time allotted to the man who was to come after me and an hour after it was time to go home. Really—I had a circus'. Quoted in Christopher Merrill & Ellen Bradbury, eds, *From the Faraway Nearby Georgia O'Keeffe as Icon* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1992), p.93

³⁵ See: <https://worldhistoryedu.com/the-vajra-symbolism-origins-and-cultural-significance/> [accessed 10 Sept. 2025]. 'The *vajra* is one of the most powerful and significant symbols in Hinduism, embodying both physical might and spiritual strength. Translated as "thunderbolt" or "diamond", the *vajra* symbolizes indestructibility, invincible power, and the ability to cut through ignorance. Throughout Hindu mythology, the *vajra* is most closely associated with the god Indra, king of the devas (gods), and is represented as his chief weapon for maintaining cosmic order'.

lightning nicking the sky like the blade of a giant circular saw.³⁶ She had witnessed the scene that same night, ‘The whole thing lit up first in one place then in another with flashes of lightning. Sometimes just sheet lightning and sometimes with a sharp bright zigzag’.³⁷

New York City

The art critic, Paul Rosenfeld, identified Stieglitz's *raison d'être*, ‘If ever (an) American man brought American people into relation with people and trees, rocks and skies, brought the finite into tune with the infinite, it was this man’.³⁸ Bringing ‘the finite into tune with the infinite’ foretells of O’Keeffe’s ‘Faraway, Nearby’. Already in 1912, Marsden Hartley, had the inspiration to coin the Stieglitz circle’s painting style ‘Cosmic Cubism’ in reference to *Cosmic Consciousness* by Dr Richard Maurice Bucke—a psychiatrist’s study on Walt Whitman’s enlightenment. Harley’s art together with Arthur Dove’s explores sacred imagery of the sky through both figuration and abstract forms. Stieglitz’s Gallery 291’s logo was a, ‘sun-whirl, there is one planet, which has a moon, which is turning the other way. And if it be strong enough, sooner or later the whole mighty Wheel of Light will return and follow that one little moon’.³⁹ That little moon materialized. in the form of O’Keeffe whose artwork Anita brought to the gallery on 1 January 1916. Walkowitz recalls that historic moment, ‘Stieglitz was depressed that the world was thinking war.... You appeared with O’Keeffe’s drawings. They were a revelation to him. In O’Keeffe’s work he saw a new expression of things felt, a new beauty’.⁴⁰

In 1918, Stieglitz invited O’Keeffe to come live in New York City. His niece, Elisabeth, who was engaged to Donald Davidson (both Ramakrishna practitioners) offered Georgia her photography studio to live and work in. Soon after moving in, Georgia and Stieglitz became lovers. She inspired him to photograph some 350 studies of the sky claiming he had even

³⁶ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/154/> [accessed 9 Sept. 2025]

³⁷ Letter from Georgia to Anita, September 11, 1916 reproduced in Julia Kristeva, *Georgia O’Keeffe* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1989), p.161

³⁸ ‘What ‘291’ Means to me’, *Camera Work*, no. 47 (January 1915).

³⁹ Richard Whelan, *Alfred Stieglitz—Photography, Georgia O’Keeffe, and the Rise of the Avant-Garde in America* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), p.212.

⁴⁰ Anita Pollitzer, *Georgia O’Keeffe: An Unauthorized Biography*, non-published, p.98. See: Jan Garden Castro, *The Art & Life of Georgia O’Keeffe* (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1986), p.31.

photographed God with his lens pointed directly upward into the dark sky by focusing on cloud formations that dramatically frame the Sun.⁴¹ The curator, Ananda Coomaraswamy, was so impressed with the artistic quality of Stieglitz's photographs he created the first ever, permanent exhibition of photography as art along the corridors of the Asian collection at Boston Museum.⁴² In the same period, O'Keeffe's giant flower oil paintings—by evoking photosynthesis—have much in common with Stieglitz's photos of the sun. And, in Hindu *Pooja* offerings, flowers symbolize the fifth element, *Akasha*—the sky or space itself—in Sanskrit.⁴³ This is what O'Keeffe called 'the blue that will always be there...', which brings us back to William Blake's, 'Heaven in a Wild Flower'. Moreover, one particular variety that she painted, *Morning Glory*, is so-named as its blossom never outlasts the dawn.

In 1925, O'Keeffe started depicting New York City's skyscrapers—appropriately named so for they pierce the aether—as challenging the celestial vault above. Her *New York Street with Moon* (1925) portrays tall buildings that box in the sky and dwarf the church steeple barely visible in the background.⁴⁴ Even the painting's urban streetlighting, a big, bright globe lamp emitting a thick halo challenges the poor little Moon barely peeking through the clouds. Another work with an extremely narrow canvas, *The Ritz Tower* (1928), must still crop its dark, slender, stacked skyscraper loaming up against the inky black night sky obscuring all but some cirrus clouds crossing the first-quarter Moon.⁴⁵ The tower's numerous windows, electrically lit up, become manmade stars. Scott Fitzgerald, author of *A Diamond as big as the Ritz*, described New York as 'a city that had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world'.⁴⁶ O'Keeffe's picture offers such modern cosmic symbolism.

⁴¹ See images online: <https://ar.inspiredpencil.com/pictures-2023/alfred-stieglitz-equivalent-series> [accessed 13 Sept. 2025].

⁴² Sue Davidson Lowe, *Stieglitz A Memoir* (Boston, MA: Museum of Fine Art Publications, 1983), p.xx.

⁴³ Guru Jisubi, *The Five Elements and the Five Senses* <https://easyhinduism.com/2018/06/13/the-five-elements-and-the-five-senses/>, 13 June 2018 [accessed 28 Aug. 2024].

⁴⁴ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8568/> [accessed 13 Sept. 2025].

⁴⁵ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/9335/> [accessed 13 Sept. 2025].

⁴⁶ Seymour Chwast and Steven Heller, *The Art of New York* (New York: Harry N Abrams, 1966), p.19.

When Stieglitz and O’Keeffe married in 1924, they moved into the Shelton Residence Hotel. Their new neighbour, Charles Bragdon, had translated Ouspensky whose study, *Tertium Organum*, declared the funeral of old Physics, ‘We know that radiant energy possesses gravitational mass’.⁴⁷ This inspired O’Keeffe’s *The Shelton with Sunspots* (1926) depicting the Sun, like a wrecking ball, smashing the corner of the tower precisely where her apartment was, while projecting sundogs all round.⁴⁸

The symbolism shifts in *East River From the Shelton* (1927/28)⁴⁹ to confirm Rosenfeld’s declaration, ‘the Sun, which once shone brightly on Europe alone, ... has moved across the Atlantic’.⁵⁰ For this, O’Keeffe patriotically paints the Sun as a blue-and-white star and the river in red-and-white stripes. However, her diagonal rays surrounding the Sun, descend in a monumental pyramidal shape, recalling the Great Seal on a one-dollar bill, thereby, suggesting greed. Sharyn Udall explained this was, ‘in a manner replete with the iconographic irony O’Keeffe relished in those years. Disguised with considerable subtlety, but signalled by the symbolic play of colors, O’Keeffe’s skyline becomes an iconic, perhaps slightly cynical, portrait of America’.⁵¹ Moreover, ‘the painting contains an enormous sun, centered overhead like a great eye (or “I”)', a double-meaning that Sarah Peters pointed out added the criticism of a big ‘ego’.⁵²

In a similar vein of hidden symbolism, O’Keeffe’s *Radiator Building* (1927), Fig. 3, featuring rows of glowing windows, warns what Ezra Pound’s poem, ‘Electricque fantasmagorie’ (1913), had prophesized:

⁴⁷ Petr D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum - The Third Canon of Thought A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (in Russian, 1909, and in English, Manas Press, 1920) New edition (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1981), pp.104–6.

⁴⁸ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8602/> [accessed 13 Sept. 2025].

⁴⁹ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8678/> [accessed 13 Sept. 2025].

⁵⁰ Celeste Connor, *Democratic Visions—Art and Theory of the Stieglitz Circle, 1924-34* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p.142, note citing Paul Rosenfeld, *Port of New York, Essays on 14 American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1924), p.293.

⁵¹ Sharyn Udall, *Carr, O’Keeffe, Kahlo – Places of their Own* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p.132.

⁵² Sarah Whitaker Peters, *The Early Years—Becoming O’Keeffe* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), p.47. (The first-person singular pronoun, I, is *ego* in Greek.)

250 Georgia O'Keeffe: From the Faraway, Nearby

Squares after squares of flame,
set and cut into the Aether.

Here is our poetry,
for we have pulled down
the stars to our will.⁵³

The searchlights in her painting are a nod to the Stieglitz's friend and journalist, Waldo Frank, whose pseudonym in *The New Yorker* was 'Search-Light'. When Frank entertained Albert Einstein, visiting New York City in the 1920s, Einstein exclaimed that it seemed to be a land of only two dimensions.⁵⁴ Indeed, the innate fragility of office-block towers was to be tragically exposed when the World Trade Center collapsed in 2001 with only bits of the steel grid erect, eerily echoing the fenestration in O'Keeffe's *Radiator* painting.

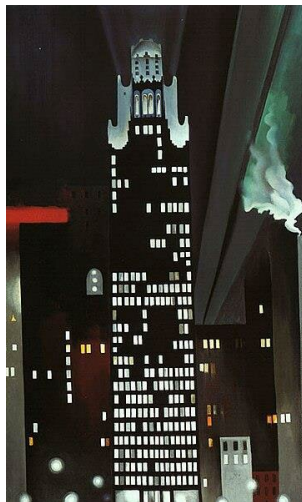


Fig. 3. Georgia O'Keeffe *Radiator Building - Night, New York 1927*. Oil-on-canvas 121.9 cm x 76.2 cm Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art © Public domain US.

⁵³ For the full poem see: Daniel Pearlman, *The Barb of Time: On the Unity of Pound's Cantos* (Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.21–22.

⁵⁴ Waldo Frank, *The Re-Discovery of America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p.88, note 1, states he (W. Frank) is in conversation with Albert Einstein.

New Mexico

In 1929, her marriage was in trouble so O'Keeffe began taking extended trips to New Mexico without Stieglitz. He is not very happy about her absence and writes to her, 'My Sweetest heart in her element—Faraway still right here', perhaps the inspiration for her 'Faraway, Nearby'.⁵⁵ There, O'Keeffe paints her first object seen suspended against the sky, the giant pine tree outside D. H. Lawrence's log cabin in Taos viewed from a unique angle by lying down on a bench underneath so she could gaze through its tangled branches, straight up into the starry night sky. She places the zenith at the very centre of the painting and has fun sometimes hanging it upside-down or sideways. It works equally in all directions. Her painting's web of branches looks like roots. Uncannily, the next year, Lawrence, would write, 'like a great uprooted tree, with its roots in the air. We must plant ourselves again in the Universe'.⁵⁶ He died the same year. His ashes were buried under this very tree. Also uncannily, not only does the Hindu god of creation Brahma, symbolized as an inverted tree, mean 'ever-branching' in Sanskrit⁵⁷ but also in physics., Hugh Everett and John Wheeler proposed that whole universes are created by, 'constantly splitting into a stupendous number of branches'.⁵⁸

The Lawrence Tree's trunk is well-lit and also backlit by the night sky. O'Keeffe's painting style itself expresses her spiritual beliefs that clear light, *Prabhâsvaratâ*, is at the core of all—already within and all about us—and not shining down from Heaven. She insisted that New Mexico must 'not (be) a country of light **on** things, but a country of things **in** light'.⁵⁹ This luminosity without any shadows is quite the opposite of the fleeting, surface reflections that Impressionists captured.

⁵⁵ Alfred Stieglitz to Georgia O'Keeffe, New York, May 9, 1929. Quoted in Jennifer Sinor, *Letters Like the Day—On Reading Georgia O'Keeffe* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), p.65.

⁵⁶ D. H. Lawrence, *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover* (London: Mandrake Press, 1930).

⁵⁷ For details about the upside-down tree as a symbol of Brahma see O'Keeffe and Stieglitz's close friend, Ananda Coomaraswamy's article, 'The Inverted Tree. The tree of Brahma. The Bodhi Tree', <https://www.scribd.com/document/135803995/The-Inverted-Tree-the-Tree-of-Brahma-the-Bodhi-Tree-by-a-K-Coomaraswamy> [accessed 11 Sept. 2025].

⁵⁸ Michael Talbot, *Mysticism and the New Physics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p.39 Cited in B.S. Dewitt, 'Quantum Mechanics and Reality', *Physics Today* 23, no. 9 (1970): 30r.

⁵⁹ Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), unpaginated text accompanying entry 64.



Fig. 4. Georgia O'Keeffe *The Lawrence Tree* 1929, Oil-on-canvas 78.7 x 99.4 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1981.23 CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 © Fair Use.

In the 1930s, O'Keeffe's 'things in light' became the bones she collected herself from desert walks. They are not at all surreal or *Memento Mori*—a reminder of our own mortality. O'Keeffe explained, 'These bones seemed to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive in the desert'.⁶⁰ In 1937, Georgia coined the *From the Faraway, Nearby* for her close-up image of a mule deer's skull hovering over a crystal-clear, distant, orangey landscape with a pale-blue sky.⁶¹ At altitudes of over 2000 meters, the thin New Mexican air telescopes distances and the faraway appears nearby. She painted the skull with multiple-antlers that recall Shiva's multiple-arms. Other symbols of Shiva—all astronomical—will come up in her art: Crescent Moon, Milky Way, Cosmic Ocean and blue itself. Shiva, *Neelakantha*, was said to have saved the Universe by swallowing poisonous gases which made his throat turn blue.⁶²

⁶⁰ Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own, The Spiritual in Modern Art 2-3* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1988), p.378.

⁶¹ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/8883/>. [Accessed 11 Sept. 2025].

⁶² 'Shiva ... during the churning of the Milky Ocean. Taking the tincture of death in a cup, he swallowed it at a gulp, and by his yoga-power held it in his throat. The throat turned blue. Hence Shiva is addressed as "Blue Neck", *Nilakantha*'. Quotation from: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edn



Fig. 5. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Pelvis IV*, 1944, oil-on-canvas, 91.4 x 101.6 cm, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM, Gift of The Burnett Foundation 1987, Private Collection ©Fair Use

O'Keeffe was fascinated by what she saw when holding bones up against the sky. In her painting, *Cow's Pelvis and the Moon* (1944), the blue hue intensifies to azure becoming the centre feature. Her composition crops an enormous, chalk-white, bovine pelvic bone so that its cavity frames the sky and, like a telescope, focuses on its intense blueness. The sky, in turn, features a full moon—a small circle within a larger one—itsself so blue that it seems transparent. O'Keeffe plays with the dichotomies of surrounding/enclosing and faraway/nearby. She explained her painting holes because she had been the sort of child who ate around the hole in a

(Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), p.154. O'Keeffe had many opportunities to learn about this key Hindu myth from Coomaraswamy who was a friend and colleague of Campbell. (See: <https://ou.groovdigit.com/the-vedic-roots-of-joseph-campbells-dance-of-eternity-and-time/>). Plus, Swami Nikhilanda was Stieglitz's houseguest at Lake George the entire summer of 1937. (See: <https://www.nga.gov/artworks/35914-swami-nikhilananda>). And, both of Elisabeth Stieglitz Donaldson's daughters studied Mythology under Campbell at Sarah Lawrence University, NY. Moreover, in 1940, Elisabeth introduced Swami Nikhilanda to Campbell. The three will visit India together during six months. (See: Joseph Campbell, *Baksheesh & Brahman: Asian Journals - India, August 1954-March 1955* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1995), p.xiv).

doughnut saving the hole for the last.⁶³ Curiously, in March 2024, Harvard's Center for Astrophysics compared the round and hollow Sagittarius A* black hole at the centre of our galaxy, to a doughnut.⁶⁴ O'Keeffe's image, in associating the Moon with a pelvis, also, evokes female fertility and rebirth. What is more, she started her *Pelvis* series shortly after her friend, Coomaraswamy, published his essay, 'Symbolism of the Dome', that describes how the womb of the Universal Mother has an opening, the sundoor, through which souls pass back from time to eternity by turning themselves inside out and realizing that the heavens have been within them all along. This could explain O'Keeffe's concept of 'Faraway, Nearby'.⁶⁵

Her images with white pelvic bones against blue skies were painted during World War II. As a life-long pacifist, O'Keeffe insisted that what counted in these works was 'that blue that will always be there as it is now after all man's destruction is finished', hinting that space itself is the Absolute as in Buddhism, sunyata—the transcendental void.⁶⁶ Living at Ghost Ranch, just up the road from the US government's Manhattan Project, O'Keeffe would dine there with Oppenheimer.⁶⁷ In her winter home in Abiquiù, I wonder if he noticed her two throw pillows with Japan's flag, a red sun motif, woven into the white fabric. The FBI did and kept tabs on her.⁶⁸ When the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, she

⁶³ Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970), p.18

⁶⁴ Bill Chappell, *Milky Way black hole has 'strong, twisted' magnetic field in mesmerizing new image*. <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/28/1241403435/milky-way-black-hole-spiral-new-image-magnetic-field> [accessed 28 Aug. 2024].

⁶⁵ Roger Lipsey, ed., *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers vol. I: Traditional Art and Symbolism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977) analysed by Gabriel Hartley, 'The Vedic Roots of Joseph Campbell's Dance of Eternity and Time, *OU-Groov*, March 20, 2019, <https://ou.groovdigit.com/the-vedic-roots-of-joseph-campbells-dance-of-eternity-and-time/> [accessed 12 Sept. 2025].

⁶⁶ Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist—A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1986), p.322.

⁶⁷ 'Oppenheimer would check in under a fake name at Ghost Ranch, where he and O'Keeffe dined and drank together'. Alexandra Marvar, 'In search of Oppenheimer's New Mexico', BBC, 8 March 2024. See: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20240308-the-new-mexico-landscapes-that-inspired-oppenheimer> [accessed 5 Sept. 2024].

⁶⁸ Ruth E. Fine, ed., *The Book Room Georgia O'Keeffe's Library in Abiquiù*, Exhibition Catalog, Grolier Club, New York 1997 (Santa Fe, NM: The O'Keeffe

did a new version of her *Pelvis Series*, by colouring the sky a bitter, acidic yellow and the bone, a noxious Cadmium orange, *Red with Yellow* (1945). The palette captures the strangeness of a new, radioactive world; it shocks. The local Pueblo had forewarned of a weapon that could destroy galaxies filling the universe with toxic gas, 'Our tools and utensils and everything we have made will rise against us, the stars will fall and we will all be boiled by a hot rain'.⁶⁹

O'Keeffe's respect for Japanese culture never wavered. She relished Zen's tea ceremony, *Chado*.⁷⁰ Tea and sky-gazing go together as O'Keeffe explained, 'and as I stood looking at the long dark mesa line—the Moon above it ... I thought to myself—Well—It would be good to sit on the wall and drink my tea'.⁷¹ Basically, *Chado* awakens all five senses while drawing parallels with the five elements to reconnect with the Universe, inviting a moment of bliss.⁷² One delights in watching iridescent bubbles form atop the green tea creating silvery networks, like sparkling cobwebs, Indra's Net. O'Keeffe liked to rise early and make some tea to drink while sitting on the roof of her adobe home to watch the Sun come up, 'I get out of bed, see the Moon shining, go out and climb the ladder to the roof.

Foundation, 1997), pp.45-46 (O'Keeffe sent off to Washington DC for documentation about the risks as soon as they were released from top secret classification. After reading *Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, The Effects of Atomic Weapons* (1950), she built a fallout shelter in her backyard which she kept well-stocked). See: William P. Barrett, 'FBI Foolishness: Security Matter C', *Crosswinds Newspaper* (July 1997): p.7.

⁶⁹ Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, eds, *Teachings From the American Earth – Indian Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Liveright, 1975), p.270.

⁷⁰ O'Keeffe was introduced to Okakura Kakuzo's *The Book of Tea* by Arthur Dow at Columbia University. See Fine, ed., *The Book Room Georgia O'Keeffe's Library in Abiquiu*, Exhibition Catalog, Grolier Club, New York 1997 (Santa Fe, NM: The O'Keeffe Foundation, 1997), p.49.

⁷¹ O'Keeffe's letter to William Schubert, Abiquiu, April-July 1950, reproduced in Julia Kristeva, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (Paris: Edition Adam Biro, 1989), p.261.

⁷² This micro-macro experience starts by hearing (sound-Space) boiling water poured into and whisked with Matcha tea presented in a delightful, hand-thrown ceramic cup that is felt (touch-Air) and admired (sight-Fire) before the tea itself is sniffed (smell-Earth) and sipped (taste-Water). *Chado* offers a poetic, if humble, model simulating cosmic origins: See: Martin P. Mack, 'Antiques: Japanese Pottery—The Tea Ceremony's Subtle Fusion of Matter and Spirit', *Architectural Digest* July (1981): p.58

Looking at the wilderness and stillness of my world in the moonlight and wondering'.⁷³

The lower edge of *Ladder to the Moon* (1958) shows the Pedernal, O'Keeffe's sacred mountain, where she requested her cremation ashes be strewed.⁷⁴ A wooden, kiva ladder suspended in the sky points to the Moon above. She painted a lighter hue between the rungs so the ladder would not stand out against the early-morning turquoise sky but offer a path through it to reach the first-quarter Moon. Her whole composition emphasizes transitions between night and day, earth and sky, life and death. O'Keeffe seems to evoke Tewa and Navajo symbolism, in which the ladder links subterranean kivas or Mother Earth and cosmic forces.⁷⁵

⁷³ O'Keeffe's letter to Ettie Stettheimer, Abiquiu, June 10, 1944, reproduced in Kristeva, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, (Paris: Adam Biro, 1989), p.261

⁷⁴ See image online: <https://data.okeeffemuseum.org/object/9445/> [accessed 8 Sept. 2025]

⁷⁵ O'Keeffe had authentic ladders from kivas at her home proven by a photograph taken the same year she painted this painting. *Kiva Ladders against Wall*, 1957 or 1958. See image online: Item — Box: 19 Identifier: 2006.6.1418, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation Photographs (MS-57). O'Keeffe explained her intentions, 'The sky was a pale greenish blue, the high moon looking white in the evening sky. Painting the ladder had been in my mind for a long time and there it was—with the dark Pedernal and the high white moon—all ready to be put down the next day'. See: Barbara Buhler Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe: catalogue raisonné* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), no. 1335. Quoting from Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (1976) n.p. text accompanying entry 102. O'Keeffe had attended her first sacred ceremony, invited by the Tewa drummer, Juan Luhan, on 1 May 1929. Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life* (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1989), p.325. O'Keeffe never ceased to be enthusiastic about such sacred ceremonies. In 1950, her letter—Georgia to Howard Schubert, Abiquiu, 25 December 1950, recounts, 'I've gone to 2 all night dances. Up a very rough mountain road—a Navajo ceremony that has to do with curing the sick', Reproduced in Julia Kristeva, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, (Paris: Edition Adam Biro, 1989). O'Keeffe was aware of the Navajo myth about climbing from world to world of increasing light. She had received a copy of *Emergence Myth According to the Hanelthnayhe or upward-Reaching Rite* (1949), from her a friend, Laura Gilpin, photographer of that very ceremony, who included several snapshots of it with the book: *Navajo Religion Series*, Vol 3 (Boston, MA: New Mexican Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1949). See: Ruth E. Fine, *The Book Room: Georgia O'Keeffe's Library in Abiquiu* (New York: The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, 1997), p.64. For a detailed description of the Hanelthnayhe rite, see: <https://sacred-texts.com/nam/nav/ncm/ncm3.htm> / [accessed 9 Sept. 2024] including this

Asia and Beyond

In 1959, with the advent of commercial air travel, O'Keeffe flew to India and Japan. Her canvas, *Sky Above the Clouds IV* (1965), depicts the view looking down from the plane's window flying at a high altitude with no land in sight.⁷⁶ The scene shows rows and rows of flattened clouds reaching back to a rather hazy horizon. A thin, pinkish demarcation strip, filling the painting's whole impressive 24-foot width, evokes the glow of the imminently setting sun. She shapes each of the clouds so that they are rather smaller along the front and larger behind, thereby reversing linear perspective. This subtle detail aligns a new, hypothetical vanishing point outside the canvas so that it falls directly onto the viewer. It has the opposite effect of linear perspective that projects an illusion of depth neatly contained inside a picture-frame which simply lets us peek inside. On the contrary, with O'Keeffe's images, we are invited to metaphorically project our whole bodies into the picture so we can walk along her painted clouds, looking like stepping-stones in Japanese gardens, right into the Infinite. The effect is quite liberating. O'Keeffe set it up so that we could experience her own desire to float freely in space, as she dreamt, 'how wonderful it would be to simply stand out in space and have nothing'.⁷⁷

O'Keeffe painted her last canvas—before she became too blind—a landscape so simplified it could be an abstract, called *The Beyond* (1972).⁷⁸ The close-up black earth extends far back to a low horizon (or shoreline) of muted-blue with looming grey cloud overhead. A clear line of pure white light with a neon-like glow illuminates the sky. Above that lurk heavy, cobalt-blue storm-clouds. While rains are imminent, all is calm. The artist is untroubled, ready to enter the Beyond. O'Keeffe passed on 6 March 1986 under a waning crescent moon.

quote, 'Begoohiddy, the Great God, ... and a form of human being first created were living in an underworld of darkness. They climb up from world to world of increasing light, creating more forms of life until finally emerging on this world and creating Man of the substance of the whole universe'.

⁷⁶ See image online: <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/100858/sky-above-clouds-iv> [accessed 8 Sept. 2025]

⁷⁷ Quoted in: Charles C. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe: American and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p.209

⁷⁸ See image online: <https://collections.okeeffemuseum.org/object/1057/> [accessed 11 Sept. 2025]

Conclusion

Georgia O'Keeffe's portrayal of the sky elevated twentieth-century, American landscape painting from provincial to sublime. Her painting celebrates star-gazing and weather-watching as an aesthetic experience with spiritual overtones. Her very composition, handling of light, and many other painterly techniques share with us her first-hand experience of the Infinite empirically. Art lets us understand the Universe in a different way than science, just as revealing, if not more so. As art historian Katherine Hoffmann concluded, 'Her aesthetic has provided new formulations of space, color, light, form and movement that push us toward infinity'.⁷⁹ O'Keeffe understood how aesthetic sensitivity can even set off enlightenment.⁸⁰ As an avid letter-writer and bibliophile, she left many traces for us to study her mindset. Astronomy was certainly one inspiration as were her many mystical sources. Her painting spans the dates of Einstein's Relativity and the Apollo Moon landing.

As for Science Fiction, while she was in New Mexico, a UFO was sighted in Roswell in 1947. On the fiftieth anniversary of this event, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum opened in Santa Fe. *Time Magazine* came up with the headline, 'Truly Enchanted: Spaceships, Powwow, O'Keeffe, Oh! My!'⁸¹ Though not exactly Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, Georgia was a farm girl who had dared to follow her own path. She rightly chose to settle in New Mexico, whose state nickname is 'Land of Enchantment' where she succeeded in finding her way not just for art but also spiritually: O'Keeffe's vibrant close-ups of the morning sky and stargazing bring the infinitely 'Faraway' so 'Nearby' that they make the viewers stop and notice.⁸² Her art can even trigger wonder.

⁷⁹ Katherine Hoffmann, *Georgia O'Keeffe—A Celebration of Music and Dance* (New York: George Braziller, 1997), p.57.

⁸⁰ 'It can cure you!' O'Keeffe's letter to Blanche Matthias, New York, 1924. reproduced in Sara Whitaker Peters, *The Early Years—Becoming O'Keeffe* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), pp.78–79.

⁸¹ 'Cool Summer State: Truly Enchanted: Spaceships, Powwow, O'Keeffe, Oh! My!', *Time Magazine*, 26 May 1997. <https://time.com/archive/6730856/cool-summer-state-truly-enchanted-spaceships-powwows-okeeffe-oh-my/> [accessed 1 Sept. 2024] thereby recalling Dorothy's chant in *The Wizard of Oz*: 'Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh! My!'.

⁸² 'I will make even busy New Yorkers take the time to see what I see of flowers', O'Keeffe explained. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), n.p., opposite plate 23.