

George O'Keeffe: Chapter One

By Michael Berry

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It was 1916, and 28-year-old Georgia O'Keeffe was furious with photographer and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz. His prestigious gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York City, usually referred to simply as "291," regularly displayed some of Europe and America's most exciting modern art. O'Keeffe, a painter and art teacher, admired Stieglitz greatly but decided that he still had no right to do what he had done to her. She was determined to have it out with him.

While eating in the cafeteria at Columbia University Teachers College earlier that day, she had been approached by a woman who asked whether she was "Virginia O'Keeffe." When O'Keeffe said that she was not, the woman explained that drawings by someone of that name were on display at Stieglitz's 291.

O'Keeffe realized that the drawings were her own. Without her permission -- without even using her correct name -- Stieglitz had put her deeply personal drawings on display for strangers to see. As O'Keeffe later wrote in her autobiography, "For me the drawings were private and the idea of their being on the wall for the public to look at was just too much."

She immediately set off for Stieglitz's gallery, which was housed in an unpretentious brownstone located at Fifth Avenue and Thirty-first Street. When she arrived at 291, O'Keeffe discovered that Stieglitz was away on jury duty. The tongue-lashing would have to be postponed, but she decided to have a look around anyway. Despite her anger, O'Keeffe noticed that her drawings occupied the gallery's largest room. The work of two male artists was relegated to smaller areas. Stieglitz had clearly taken great care in mounting her drawings, which were displayed in the best possible light: natural sunlight that flooded through a skylight. A burnished brass vase filled with colorful dried flowers had been placed on a platform at the center of the room.

O'Keeffe had first encountered Stieglitz in 1907, while studying at the Art Students League in New York. A native of Hoboken, New Jersey, Stieglitz was one of the earliest champions of photography as a serious art form. Among his many other technical and artistic accomplishments, Stieglitz was the first photographer to take successful pictures at night and during storms.

At that first meeting, O'Keeffe had been intimidated by the outspoken photographer and had said almost nothing to him. Now, 11 years later, she still kept her distance from the flamboyant art patron, although she often visited his gallery to view the works on display. The artists shown by Stieglitz infused their work with an intensity and

a sense of bold experimentation that O'Keeffe greatly admired. It was in this crowded gallery, consisting of little more than a small front room, a hallway, and a larger room at the back, that Americans first saw the paintings of such modern European masters as Pablo Picasso and Paul Cezanne. One day O'Keeffe hoped to join the ranks of innovative artists that Stieglitz had discovered. In a letter to a friend and fellow artist, Anita Pollitzer, she confided, "I believe I would rather have Stieglitz like something -- anything I have done -- than anyone else I know of."

Early that year, O'Keeffe had been teaching in South Carolina when she sent several new drawings to Pollitzer in New York. She wanted Pollitzer's opinion on the abstract charcoal sketches. They represented a departure from O'Keeffe's earlier work, in which she painstakingly reproduced objects and landscapes on canvas and paper. Her friend was immediately impressed. "I was struck by their aliveness," Pollitzer later remarked. "They were different. Here were charcoals -- on the same kind of paper that all art students were using, and through no trick, no superiority of tools, these drawings were saying something that had not yet been said."

Soon after she received them, Pollitzer stood outside 291 with O'Keeffe's drawings in hand. She knew that O'Keeffe was reluctant to show her drawings to people she did not know well, but she also knew how much her friend admired Stieglitz. She went in and found him alone in his attic, weary from a long day. The middle-aged photographer, always eager to look at new work, inspected O'Keeffe's drawings in silence. Then he looked up, smiled, and, according to later reports, declared, "At last, a woman on paper!" He went on to call the drawings the "purest, finest, sincerest things that have entered 291 in a long while," and he casually mentioned that he might want to display them sometime.

Pollitzer quickly wrote to O'Keeffe, confessing what she had done. O'Keeffe was not angry. Pollitzer had correctly guessed that O'Keeffe had wanted her to take the drawings to Stieglitz all along but did not dare face him -- and any possible criticisms -- herself.

Although O'Keeffe valued Stieglitz's opinion of her art, she was still indignant when she moved back to New York and discovered that he had hung her drawings without asking her permission. A week after she first went to upbraid him, O'Keeffe once again rode the rickety, hand-pulled elevator to the attic of 291. This time, Stieglitz was in the gallery. O'Keeffe's anger made her fearless; she walked right up to him and insisted that he take down her drawings at once. A bushy-haired man with a bristling white mustache, Stieglitz stared at the slender, dark-haired young woman addressing him. She was dramatically dressed all in black, except for the simple white collar around her throat. Stieglitz refused to take down her drawings. "He said he wanted them on the wall to look at," O'Keeffe later reported in her autobiography.

Stieglitz kept talking, praising O'Keeffe's drawings, and finally she softened. He may have exhibited her works without her knowledge, and his attitude might have been patronizing, but he certainly understood and respected her art. When Stieglitz finally ran

out of steam, O'Keeffe gave in and asked what he planned to do with the drawings once the show was over. He promised to take exceptional care of them and return them at once. He also asked to see more of her work. A strong woman used to getting her own way, O'Keeffe must have left 291 wondering how he had changed her mind so easily.

At the beginning of the 20th century, most members of the art establishment did not take women seriously as artists. Stieglitz, however, was a rare exception. He believed that the female experience of life was fundamentally different from that of the male. He felt that these differences left women freer of crippling societal inhibitions and enabled female artists to express vividly personal visions. In his eyes, the bold lines and shapes of O'Keeffe's abstract drawings were unmistakably the work of such an intensely expressive woman. At the time she was creating them, O'Keeffe had written to Pollitzer, "The thing seems to express in a way what I wanted it to but -- it also seems rather effeminate -- it is essentially a woman's feeling -- [it] satisfies me in a way."

As Stieglitz had foreseen, the drawings caused a stir. Critics, artists, and other spectators filled the gallery, anxious to see these drawings by an unknown female art teacher. Many were shocked by what they found.

What scandalized some was the erotic energy of the drawings. Although they were abstract, the drawings managed to convey a powerful sensuality. Disturbed by their frankness, art critic Willard H. Wright complained to Stieglitz, "All these pictures say is 'I want to have a baby.'" Stieglitz was unruffled. "That's fine," he replied, "a woman has painted a picture telling you that she wants to have a baby." Stieglitz saw nothing wrong with art that expressed sexual feeling. He believed that America needed to free itself of its repressive attitude and allow artists full creative freedom.

Reveling in the controversy he helped cause, Stieglitz extended the show into July. By then, O'Keeffe was in New York to teach summer school at the University of Virginia. But she left with a sense of triumph. After years of study, her unorthodox and highly original drawings had at last been displayed in public, and they had certainly created a sensation.

O'Keeffe's debut at 291 was a turning point in her life. It marked the beginning of her association with Alfred Stieglitz, the genius who would become her mentor and eventually her husband. Relying on his and her own confidence in her artistic gifts, she would go on to build a reputation as one of America's greatest painters.

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