

Title: Georgia O'Keefe - Analyzing her art using VTS

Subject Area: Studio Art

Grade Level: 9th - 12th Grade

Materials:

lined paper  
pencils

The following 5 poster size images of Georgia O'Keefe's work:



Summer Days, 1936  
Oil on canvas  
Whitney Museum of American Art, NY



Music - Pink and Blue II, 1919  
Oil on Canvas  
Whitney Museum of American Art, NY



Light Iris, 1924  
Oil on Canvas  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond



Black Iris III, 1926  
Oil on canvas  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY



The Radiator Building at Night - New York, 1927  
Oil on canvas  
Carl van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, Fisk University

### NYS Standards::

1. Students will create a written analysis of a Georgia O'Keefe painting.
2. N/A
3. Students will be able to analyze artwork using visual thinking strategies (VTS).
4. Students will gain a further knowledge of visual thinking strategies (VTS), as well as a better understanding of Georgia O'Keefe's art.

### Vocabulary:

Visual Thinking Strategies - A learner-centered method used to examine and find meaning in visual art

### Motivation:

Begin by briefing the students about Georgia O'Keefe's life using the following as reference: Georgia Totto O'Keefe was born in a farmhouse on a large dairy farm outside of Sun Prairie,

Wisconsin on November 15, 1887. Education for women was a family tradition. Georgia's own mother, Ida had been educated in the East. All the daughters but one became professional women, attesting to her influence on them. When Georgia was in the eighth grade she asked a daughter of a farm employee what she was going to do when she grew up. The girl said she didn't know. Georgia replied very definitely...*"I am going to be an artist!"*

In 1902 her parents moved to Virginia and were joined by the children in 1903. By the age of 16 Georgia had 5 years of private art lessons at various schools in Wisconsin and Virginia. One particular teacher, Elizabeth Willis encouraged her to work at her own pace and afforded her opportunities that the other students felt unfair. At times she would work intensely, and at other times she would not work for days. When it was brought to the attention of the principal, she would reply... *"When the spirit moves Georgia, she can do more in a day than you can do in a week."*

After receiving her diploma in 1905 she for left Chicago to live with an aunt and attend the Art Institute of Chicago. She did not return to the Institute the following year after a bout with Typhoid Fever. Instead, in 1907 she enrolled at the Art Student League in New York City. While at the Art Student League, Eugene Speicher, a student at the League asked Georgia to pose for him. Seeing her annoyance at the offer he commented, *"It doesn't matter what you do, I'm going to be a great painter and you will probably end up teaching painting in some girls' school."* She latter agreed to pose for him. Discouraged with her work, she did not return to the League in the fall of 1908, but moved to Chicago and found work as a commercial artist. During this period Georgia did not pick up a brush, and said that the smell of turpentine made her sick.

She moved back to her family in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1909 and later enrolled at a nearby college. In 1912 a friend in Texas wrote that a teaching position was open in Amarillo, Texas for a "drawing supervisor". Georgia applied for the position and was hired for the fall semester. She would remain here till 1914, making trips to Virginia in the summer months to teach at the University of Virginia. After resigning her job in Amarillo, Georgia moved to New York City to attend Columbia Teachers College until accepting a teaching position at Columbia College in South Carolina. Having a light schedule, she felt it would be an ideal position that would give her time to paint. Here she was to strip away what she had been taught to paint and began to paint as she felt.

Early in 1916, Anita Pollitzer took some of Georgia's drawings to Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery. He was to exclaim, *"At last, a woman on paper!"*. He told Anita the drawings were the *"purest, finest, sincerest things that had entered 291 in a long while."*, and that he would like to show them. Georgia had first visited 291 in 1908, and later on several occasions, but had never talked with Stieglitz...although she had high regard for his opinions as a critic. In April Stieglitz exhibited 10 of her drawings. She had not been consulted before the exhibit and only learned about it through an acquaintance. She confronted Stieglitz for the first time over the drawings...later agreeing to let them hang.

Needing a job, and missing the wide, flat spaces of northern Texas, Georgia accepted a teaching job at West Texas State Normal College in the fall of 1916. She would often make trips to the nearby Palo Duro Canyon, hiking down the steep slopes to observe the sandstone

formations with white gypsum, and orange mudstone above the rich green canyon floor. At least 50 watercolors were painted during the time spent in Canyon, Texas.

Georgia's first solo show opened at 291 in April 1917. Most of the exhibit were the watercolors from Texas. After the show Stieglitz decided to close 291 due to financial difficulties but said, *"Well I'm through...but I have given the world a woman."* During the winter Georgia became ill with the flu that was sweeping the country. She took a leave of absence from the teaching job and later resigned. It's possible that there was pressure from the community to encourage her resignation, as she had what was considered radical views about the United States entry into the war in Europe...along with other non-mainstream opinions shocking this small Texas town. She was encouraged by Stieglitz to return to New York. By this time he had fallen in love with Georgia and wanted to pursue a relationship. He being in an unhappy marriage, had moved out from the family home and into his studio. She boarded a train in June of 1918 to return to New York and Stieglitz...and to a new life that would make her into one of the most important artist of the century.

Alfred Stieglitz was 54 when Georgia arrived in New York...23 years her senior. Educated in Berlin, he had studied engineering and photography before returning to the States at the turn of the century and opening the 291 gallery. He pioneered the art of photography, and single-handedly introduced America to the works of Picasso, Matisse, and Cezanne at the gallery...along with publishing his well respected "Camera Works" magazine. Shortly after her arrival, Alfred took Georgia up to the Stieglitz family home at Lake George in the Adirondack Mountains. They would return to the lake home each summer for years to come. Georgia produced many paintings of the Lake George countryside during these years.

Stieglitz had become obsessed with photographing Georgia since the beginning of their relationship. He would take over 300 portraits of her between 1918 and 1937. Stieglitz was Georgia's most avid supporter...arranging shows, and selling her paintings. Buying an "O'Keeffe" was not only expensive, but a collector needed to meet Stieglitz's somewhat hazy standards for owning one. Alfred's wife divorced him in September 1924 and he began to press Georgia into marriage. She was reluctant to do so since they had lived together since 1918 and had survived the scandal, seeing no reason to marry now. She finally relented and married late in December.

During the long winter months in New York she began to paint her very large flowers, some of her most popular work today. She completed her first enormous flower painting in 1924. *"Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not."* The giant flower paintings were first exhibited in 1925. A Calla Lily painting would sell for \$25,000. in 1928 and draw media attention to "O'Keeffe" like never before. Georgia's financial success would finally prove to her that an artist could make a living with a paintbrush. In 1925 she and Stieglitz moved to the Shelton Hotel in New York, taking an apartment on the 30th floor of the new building. They would live here for 12 years. With a spectacular view, Georgia began to paint the city. By 1928 Georgia began to feel the need to travel and find other sources for painting. The demands of an annual show needed new material. Friends returning from the West with stories stimulated Georgia's desire to see and explore new places. Alfred had no desire to leave New York and Lake George...he hated change of any type. In May of 1929, Georgia would set out by train with her friend Beck Strand to Taos, New Mexico...a trip that would forever change her life.

Georgia found the thin, dry air enabled her to see farther...and at times could see several approaching thunderstorms in the distance at once. She affectionately referred to the land of northern New Mexico as "the faraway"...a place of stark beauty and infinite space.

Soon after their arrival, Georgia and Beck were invited to stay at Mable Dodge Luhan's ranch outside of Taos for the summer. She would go on many pack trips exploring the rugged mountains and deserts of the region. On one trip she visited the D.H. Lawrence ranch and spent several weeks there. While in Taos she visited the historical mission church at Rancho de Taos. Although she painted the church as many artists had done before, her painting of only a fragment of the mission wall silhouetted against the dark blue sky would portray it as no artist had before. Being a loner, Georgia wanted to explore this wonderful place on her own. She bought a Model A Ford and asked others to teach her how to drive. After one particularly exasperating moment, one of her teachers declared that she was unable to learn the art of driving. Only her determination was to lead to mastering her machine. In her yearly visits to New Mexico she would travel the back roads in the Model A...having removed the backseat, would unbolt the front seat, turning it around so that she could prop her canvas against the back wall of the car. Georgia would return to "her land" each summer until Stieglitz's death in 1946, when she would move permanently to her home in New Mexico. During Georgia's second summer in New Mexico she began collecting the dry, white animal bones scattered over the desert. She would crate up many of them and ship them to Lake George so that she could study and paint the bones later.

In June of 1934 Georgia would visit Ghost Ranch for the first time, and knew immediately that she would live here. The ranch is located in a remote area approximately 120 miles north of Albuquerque. Among other guests to visit the ranch were, D.H. Lawrence, Charles and Anna Lindbergh, and Ansel Adams. Georgia purchased the house where she had been staying at Ghost Ranch in 1940, along with the view of the flat-topped mesa in the Jemez range, called the Pedernal. In December 1945 she bought an abandoned hacienda in the village of Abiquiu, 16 miles from Ghost Ranch.

While Georgia was spending the summer of 1946 in New Mexico, Stieglitz suffered a cerebral thrombosis. She quickly flew to New York to be by his side where he died on July 13, 1946. She took his ashes to Lake George and buried them at the foot of a tall pine tree beside the lake.

As both the inheritor and executor of his estate, Georgia found herself busy the next three winters in New York cataloging his works and finding suitable institutions for his photographs and writings. Although separated for long periods of time through the years, Stieglitz had taken care of many business details for Georgia. She would now have to take on these responsibilities. Although having a major retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1943 and later an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, she would only have 3 solo shows in the fifties. It was a time of change in the art world where her work was not considered in fashion. She would withdraw from the limelight...tending her garden at the Abiquiu home and travelling to Mexico, South America, Europe, and Asia...often in the spring when the dust storms were so prevalent in New Mexico. When asked why she travelled so much, she would say that she wanted to see if she lived in the right place.

In 1962 Georgia was elected to the 50 member American Academy of Arts and Letters, the nation's highest honor society for people in the arts. By the 70's people began to take

renewed interest in her work. She was invited to show at the Whitney and her retrospective exhibit travelled to the Art Institute of Chicago and San Francisco Museum of Art...setting new attendance records. Her popularity was skyrocketing.

In 1971 Georgia became aware that her eyesight was failing. At the age of 84, she was losing her central vision and only had peripheral sight...an irreversible eye degeneration disease. She would stop painting in 1972. Juan Hamilton, a young potter, appeared at Georgia's ranch house one autumn day in 1973 looking for work. She hired him for a few odd jobs and would employ him full time shortly thereafter. He became her closest confident, companion, and business manager until her death. She later dabbled in pottery herself, and had a large kiln installed at the ranch for firing pots. Even with her dimming eyesight she was inspired by Hamilton and others to paint again. She hired a studio assistant to execute some of her ideas. During this time she agreed to accept interviews and other opportunities. In 1976 she would write a book, with Juan's help, about her art...and allowed a film crew to do a documentary at Ghost Ranch.

Georgia became increasingly frail in her late 90's and moved to Santa Fe where she would die on March 6, 1986, at the age of 98. Per her instructions, she was cremated the next day. Juan Hamilton walked to the top of the Pederal Mountain and scattered her ashes to the wind...over her beloved "faraway".

### Procedure:

1. Have students direct their attention to the front of the classroom.
2. Begin stating motivation for this project.
3. Explain to students that they will be analyzing Georgia O'Keefe's artwork using the visual thinking strategies (VTS).
4. Explain and demonstrate to the students how to implement the visual teaching strategies (VTS) by analyzing "Music - Pink and Blue II" by O'Keefe painting together as a class.
5. Ask the students if they have any questions thus far or do not fully understand the assignment.
6. Break the class into 4 groups of 5 students.
7. Distribute paper and pencils to each group.
8. Assign each group a different painting of Georgia O'Keefe's and distribute the O'Keefe posters.

9. Have students work on the assignment as a group and record their questions and answers.
10. Allow students to then research their assigned O'Keefe painting online and record their researched information.
11. Have students then compare and contrast their interpretation of their assigned painting using VTS to the information researched on the assigned painting.
12. When assignment is complete, have each group share with the class their recorded results and their comparisons and contrasts.
13. Reinforce to the students the importance of visual thinking strategies (VTS) when analyzing artwork, as well as the importance of researching information.
14. Before completing the lesson, review visual thinking strategies (VTS), as well as key points in Georgia O'Keefe's life and artwork.

#### Evaluation:

Evaluation will be based on participation with all steps of the assignment, the effort put into all aspects of the assignment, completion of the assignment, and the ability to analyze O'Keefe's artwork using the visual thinking strategies (VTS).

#### References:

On life and history of Georgia O'Keefe

Websites: <http://ellensplace.net/okeeffe2.html>  
<http://www.okeeffemuseum.org/background/>