

A spiral of passion

At 29, Georgia O'Keeffe left Texas for New York, where she confronted a rich mix of artistic visions, experimentation and infatuation. In time, an evolving muse came into her own.

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, a frequent contributor to The Times, spent more than a decade researching Georgia O'Keeffe. The most famous female artist of the 20th century is renowned for her passionate relationship with photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz and for her paintings of enlarged flowers. While reading the artist's correspondence, Drohojowska-Philp was struck by the intensity of O'Keeffe's relationships with the men she had known before Stieglitz, when her painting was largely abstract.

In spring 1917, O'Keeffe, 29, was teaching art classes at West Texas State Normal College in Canyon, Texas. She was entertaining the attentions of Arthur Macmahon, a Columbia University political science professor, as well as those of Ted Reid, one of her students. When she finished the semester, she took the train to New York City to see the first solo exhibition of her work at Stieglitz's 291 Gallery on Fifth Avenue. She arrived unannounced and her work had been taken down, but Stieglitz was so pleased to see her, he rehung the show and photographed her in front of some of the paintings. It was the last show at the historic gallery, which closed after America entered World War I.

What follows is excerpted from chapters X and XI of "Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe," to be published in September.

INFLUENCES

DURING her whirlwind trip to New York, Stieglitz introduced O'Keeffe to a few of the artists who had recently entered his circle, including Stanton MacDonald-Wright and Morgan Russell, inventors of what they termed the synchromist style of abstract painting.

No one, however, was as influential as Paul Strand, who had a terrific impact on her art and no little impact on her life. The attraction between the younger artists was palpable and immediate. At twenty-seven, Strand was Stieglitz's most recent acolyte. Eager to impress, he showed O'Keeffe his photographs of bowls, chairs, and fruit—subjects that he enlarged and cropped to enhance the abstract shapes. O'Keeffe was felled by their luminous rigor, and intrigued that Strand also admired the raw beauty of the Texas Panhandle.

Born in 1890 to middle-class Jewish parents in New York, Strand attended public schools until the age of fourteen, when he enrolled in the Ethical Culture School. Classes in math, science, and language were buttressed by courses in crafts and photography. Strand's teacher was the socially conscious Lewis Hine, who photographed the immigrants arriving at Ellis Island and the exploitation of children as laborers.

In 1907, when Hine brought his photography class to visit 291, he introduced Strand to Stieglitz. Strand was thrilled to meet the man who had done so much to



ALFRED STIEGLITZ
Collection: The J. Paul Getty Museum © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe

THE ARTIST: "Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait — 1918" by Alfred Stieglitz, who photographed her many times.

establish pictorialist photography and the Photo-Secession. Strand began reading [the magazine] *Camera Work* and the following year joined the Camera Club of New York, where Stieglitz's support for pictorialist photography still held sway.

For the next five years, pictorialist soft-focus technique and nostalgic subject matter dominated Strand's own work. On a trip to Europe in 1911, he took pictures of Venice canal scenes that were indebted to Stieglitz's photos of the 1890s. By the time he was introduced to O'Keeffe, he had made his break from pictorialism.

Although he was a generation younger than most of the 291 artists, Strand thought that they "all talked the same language" in their desire to validate American modernism, but Strand's understanding of Cubism — that it embraced formal analysis over symbolism — was well advanced. After the Armory Show, [the first major U.S. exhibition of modern art] Stieglitz claimed that it was meaningless "to go on doing merely what the camera does better," and determined that the mission of photography must be the same as that of modern art: to invent, not imitate, in order to reveal emotional, psychological, or spiritual conditions.

During the summer of 1916, Strand was staying at his parents' vacation home in Twin Lakes, Connecticut. In an attempt to clarify for himself the abstract methods of the Cubists, he photographed still lifes of ladder-backed chairs and stacks of bowls. By taking the pictures up close and at dizzying angles, bowl rims, porch shadows, and chair rungs were reduced to pure ovals and angles: his own brand of

"anti-photography."

Strand was a pioneer in applying his understanding of Cubism to what he called "photographing in the real world." By that fall, he had completed works like *The White Fence*. Bracing white pickets march across the frontal plane of a traditional picture of barns and houses to meld a modernist sensibility with the symbolism of a quintessentially American domestic architecture.

Stieglitz called Strand's photographs "the direct expression of today." He exhibited them at 291 in 1916 and featured them in the last two issues of *Camera Work*, the same issues that contained reviews of O'Keeffe's shows.

Although it is certain that O'Keeffe had seen them reproduced, Strand's prints felt like a Great Plains wind to O'Keeffe. Intuitively she identified the influence of Japanese art in his use of an uptilted picture plane, and admired his use of fractured abstraction. With uncharacteristic candor, she admitted, "He showed me lots and lots of prints — photographs. And I almost lost my mind over them — Photographs that are as queer in shapes as Picasso drawings. . . . He is great."

But it was not just the work that excited her. As O'Keeffe revealed to [her friend Anita] Pollitzer, "Dorothy (True) and I both fell for him." O'Keeffe's feelings for Stieglitz at this point were friendly, perhaps idolizing, but not romantic. After all, Stieglitz was married.

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