

[O'Keeffe, from Page E31] True bowed out of a Decoration Day outing to Coney Island with O'Keeffe, Stieglitz, and Strand, and the threesome went with Stieglitz's friend, Henry Gaisman, who had invented the Autograph Camera.

Stieglitz and Strand fell all over themselves showing off for their visiting artist. On the way home, Stieglitz wrapped O'Keeffe in his great loden cloak. She proclaimed it a "great party and a great day," rare words in her ever-cautious apportioning of enthusiasm.

O'Keeffe returned to Canyon convinced that her ten days in the city had been a success. She felt more a part of 291, and *Vanity Fair* had purchased her illustration of a reclining debutante, largely due to Stieglitz's friendship with editor Frank Crowninshield.

It looked to be a slow, hot summer of teaching. She completed two realistic watercolors of the Canyon landscape, one of the orange and green canyon with crows and another of the red mesa. As was her habit, she was warming up for another foray into abstraction. Then, in early June, a letter arrived from Strand. She wrote back breathlessly,

*I knew you would write, knew . . .
that I meant something to you — it
was just a look in your eyes that
made me turn away quickly — and
wonder in a wild way . . .*

*Then the work — Yes I loved It —
and I loved you — I wanted to put
my arms around you and kiss you
hard. . . . Its so funny the way I
didn't even touch you when I so
much wanted to. I don't know why
but it seemed that I mustn't — that it
wouldn't be fair to you — I don't
know why. And afterward I was
almost afraid to be alone with you.*

Strand, who was similarly smitten, had included one of his prints with his letter. She coyly remarked, "I think I'll love your print more than you do. . . . I felt that I ought not touch you — Still am telling you that I wanted to."

The sober-minded photographer had given O'Keeffe his copy of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* to read on the train trip west and she wished he had been there to read it to her. "I've been wanting to tell you again and again how much I like your work," she wrote. "I believe I've even been looking at things and seeing them as I thought you might photograph them — isn't that funny — making Strand photographs for myself in my head. . . . I think you people have made me see — or should I say feel new colors — I cannot say them to you but I think I'm going to make them."

In fact, such pictures were painted only days after she wrote those words. "The moon seems very near full tonight — and quite near it is a very little star. The straight line where the ground and sky meet tonight is very wonderful as I see it out my window."

O'Keeffe produced her boldest and most direct watercolors to date, a series called *Evening Star*. Intense rainbows are wrapped around a point of light like a vibrant, celestial target. Bold strokes of beryl and jade run along the bottom of the paper, pure ruby is rolled around in circles of mandarin and citrine. These watercolors bear witness to the startling force of modern painting, especially the unfussy compositions of modern photography as practiced by Strand. The stacked bowls, among Strand's own favorite prints from 1916, is likely what he sent to O'Keeffe. It was a print she would have known from her trip to 291 and from *Camera Work*. This photograph is the likely source for her seven *Evening Star* watercolors with their stacked circles, one inside the other, replicating the shapes in Strand's photographs. (The first in her series, simple tangerine sky and horizon, doesn't feature the circular forms.) This was the second instance of photography directly affecting the composition of O'Keeffe's painting, but it would not be the last.

She also painted Strand's portrait in three entirely abstract watercolors of a strong, dark tubular shape surrounded by washes of yellow, blue, and red. O'Keeffe wrote, "I sang you three songs — in paint. I'd like you to hear them. I don't know why — but I would — it's all the same song sung different ways. . . . I feel you took me with you — even though I'm not there at all."

O'Keeffe wanted to write to Strand but was hesitant. She told him, "Write me so I'll know where to send those letters to. I don't know why — but I have a notion not to send to 291."

O'Keeffe could hardly have been unaware that Stieglitz's interest in her was bordering on the obsessive; he had written to her nearly every day for the past year and a half. But she did not want to jeopardize her professional relationship with him by calling attention to Strand's interest in her. She made it apparent to Strand that she was granting secrecy to their correspondence, and that her feelings for him must be kept from Stieglitz, whom she considered more of a father figure. Unbeknown to O'Keeffe, Strand and Stieglitz were comparing notes.

Strand's next letter provided his home address, so they no longer corresponded care of 291. His letter put what she called "wheels in her head," and, that evening, she walked in preoccupied silence until her sister complained that walking with her was "just the same as being alone." Lying down upon the hard, desert soil, O'Keeffe watched heat lightning make "wonderful zigzags flashing all round of the edge of the sky."

On a Sunday morning, after breakfast, she collected the mail and received another packet of small prints from Strand.

*I picked them up again and again — and found
myself unconsciously looking off into space every
time before I put them down. . . . It's almost as
though you are sitting by me — silent — yet telling
me so many things I want — just to reach my hand
out to you and let you hold it. Can you understand
that — its different from telling you in words what
they say to me — in a way it is much more real.
Maybe that's why I want to touch people so often —
its only another way of talking. . . . The little prints
make me conscious of your physical strength — my
weakness relatively but that in spite of . . . my
weakness I give you something that makes it*