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**Georgia O'Keeffe's *Horse's Skull on Blue*:
A Dedicatory Essay**

While reaching for a conclusive interpretation of a work of art, it is imperative to consider any influences which may have played a part in the creation of the work and to heed the artist's own interpretation and intent. The artist often connects the emotional and spiritual elements in a subconscious manner. The question at hand concerns the skull paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe. In the following quote she relates her first encounter with the subject:

Actually I really didn't know where to begin on the skulls, I only knew I was more interested in painting them than sketching them. I remember one of the servant girls at the hotel, where our apartment was located was making a sort of pajama type thing, with little blue feet in it for her small child. She was making it out of a beautiful blue flannel. She had some of the material left over and she knew I liked the color very much; so she gave it to me. I felt this would be a good background for the horse's skull I had brought back from New Mexico. Strangely enough I didn't hang the skull and the fabric on the wall as one would suppose, I laid it on the floor in the kitchen, set up my easel and started to paint. Also, among other things I had brought back from New Mexico were some beautiful large tissue paper flowers made by the Spanish-American people, (they used to make such beautiful flowers years ago); and that first day I was working on the horse's skull, I was holding one of these flowers in my mouth. The door bell rang. I laid down my brushes and started for the door, wondering what I was going to do with the flower. I couldn't answer the door with the flower in my mouth; so I poked it in the eye of the horse's skull. Of course that inspired another painting a year later: *Horses's Skull with Pink Rose*, 1931.¹

Figure 1. Georgia O'Keeffe,
Horse's Skull on Blue, 1930,
oil on canvas. Arizona State
University Art Museum. Gift
of Oliver B. James.

Horse's Skull on Blue, (Figure 1) 1930,² marked the beginning of a series of twenty works by Georgia O'Keeffe which were probably the most startlingly original images she produced during the 1930s and the

early 1940s. This painting reflects the profound and lasting effect the deserts of New Mexico had on her work. Set against a cerulean blue background, the bleached umber and grey skull nearly fills the medium-sized canvas. The compositional arrangement is starkly simple, with the skull placed in a strictly frontal position. The simplified style and overall smooth texture may be due to the fact that O’Keeffe painted “from” the subject rather than what she saw, thus capturing the essence of the subject and not simply recording an object. L.M. Messinger has observed that, “The subject’s essential form is derived from her radical simplification of shape and detail. Although her paintings of landscape, flowers and bones are the result of intense direct observation and familiarity with a particular locale or subject, they do not produce a sense of specificity.”³

O’Keeffe first experienced the desert during the years 1912-14 and again in 1916-18 when she had a variety of teaching jobs in Texas. She wrote in her studio book:

Texas had always been a sort of far-away dream. When we were children my mother read to us every evening and on Sunday afternoon. It was particularly for my older brother, whose eyes were not good. I had listened for many hours to boy’s stories – Stanley’s adventures in Africa, Hannibal crossing the Alps, Julius Caesar, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, all the Leatherstocking tales, stories of the Wild West, of Texas, Kit Carson and Billy the Kid. It had always seemed to me that the West must be wonderful – there was no place I knew that I would rather go – so when I had a chance to teach there – off I went to Texas – not knowing much teaching.⁴

O’Keeffe recalled the large herds of cattle being driven slowly across the vast plains into town, where the “lowing of cattle was so loud and sad – particularly haunting at night.” This sound continued to haunt her, like “Penitente songs, repeating the same rhythms over and over all through the day and night. It was loud and raw under the stars in that wide empty country.” She often took trips into the nearby canyons where the quiet solitude and perilous climbs up the steep and narrow paths gave her a new perspective.

It was wonderful to me and not like anything I had known before. The fright of the day was still with me in the night and I would often dream that the foot of my bed rose straight up into the air – then just as it was about to fall I would wake up. Many drawings came from days like that and later some oil paintings.”⁵

In the softly curving indentations and cavities of the skull and drapery in *Horse's Skull on Blue*, one can sense the rolling, undulating landscape of the Southwest. The brilliant blue of the background suggests the clear sky and the isolated skull reflects the haunting loneliness O'Keeffe felt in her first experience in the West.

During this time, O'Keeffe took a year off from teaching and studied at Columbia University's Teachers' College where she encountered the design concepts of Arthur Wesley Dow. Here she found the incentive for truly creative painting. Dow's design formulas were in large part developed from his knowledge of oriental art, particularly eighteenth and nineteenth century Japanese woodcuts. Harmony and balance were the key words in his theories. In his teaching philosophy, Dow stressed the principals of abstract design using line arrangement, spacing, dark and light pattern and color relationships. Only after these were totally absorbed could the artist experiment in pictorial expression.⁶ O'Keeffe's sensitive arrangements of nature resulted in primarily serene images which evoked an emotive power.⁷ She applied these concepts and personal motifs to an abstract idiom, unifying, as Messinger and Watson suggest, the "canons of traditional European painting and her conversion to the flat compositional mode of oriental painting and philosophy."⁸

In 1916, her work came to the attention of the famous photographer, Alfred Stieglitz. O'Keeffe had sent some of her drawings to Anita Pollitzer, a friend whom she had studied with at Columbia, and had made Pollitzer promise not to show the work to anyone. Pollitzer had become so excited about the work, she immediately took them to the most avant-garde gallery in New York City, "291," which belonged to Stieglitz. He hung them, and when O'Keeffe heard about this she became very angry and insisted Stieglitz take her work down. He finally convinced her to leave her work on the walls and eight years later convinced her to marry him.

Dividing time between New York and the Stieglitz family estate at Lake George, O'Keeffe worked prolifically and almost exclusively in oil. She associated with artists and photographers who gathered around Stieglitz, such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Charles Demuth and photographer Paul Strand. These artists shared her commitment to abstraction based on nature. Paul Strand's images were done in such extreme magnification of detail that the objects lost all sense of pictorial reference and became abstractions of pattern, shape and line. His work had great influence on O'Keeffe and the very simplicity with which he handled

the subject was a reinforcement to the lessons she had learned from Dow.

Around 1928, O’Keeffe found her sources of inspiration drying up. The din of the city oppressed her. Requiring long periods of privacy to work, she had never enjoyed having many people around her and the continual crowds of family and friends surrounding Stieglitz were abrasive to her spirit.⁹ In April, 1929, at the age of forty-one, O’Keeffe made her first visit to New Mexico, where she spent the summer with friends in Taos. Messinger writes:

O’Keeffe was taken by the majestic terrain [of New Mexico], with its varied geological formations, wide range of exotic colors, intense clarity of light and unusual vegetation. Mountains and bones – new and powerful themes that were readily adapted to her style of combined representation and abstraction – were added to her repertoire. The sculptural qualities inherent in these subjects led her in a new direction, toward more three-dimensional space and form, which she had begun to explore in some of her earliest abstractions.¹⁰

O’Keeffe returned to New Mexico in 1930, and every summer after with the exception of two years, 1932-33, when she was torn between her work and the needs of Stieglitz, who was recuperating from an illness. Before leaving in September of 1930, she sent a barrel of bones and fabric flowers east, so that she could continue painting New Mexico themes while in New York and Lake George. O’Keeffe recalled:

That first summer I spent in New Mexico I was a little surprised that there were so few flowers. There was no rain so the flowers didn’t come. Bones were easy to find so I began collecting bones. When I was returning East I was bothered about my work – the country had been so wonderful that by comparison what I had done with it looked very poor to me – although I knew it had been one of my best painting years. I had to go home – what could I take with me of the country to keep working on it? I had collected many bones and finally decided that the best thing I could do was to take a barrel of bones – so I took a barrel of bones. When I arrived at Lake George I painted a horse’s skull – then another horse’s skull and then another horse’s skull. After that came a cow’s skull on blue.¹¹

Thus *Horse’s Skull on Blue*, which evokes not only the accumulated experiences of her studies with Dow, and her association with Strand, but also her spiritual experiences with the Southwestern deserts.

O'Keeffe often states that people try to find hidden meaning in her paintings and to instill some kind of symbolism in the paintings of the skulls. In spite of O'Keeffe's denial of symbolism in her paintings and her insistence that people accept them simply as examples of the way she wanted to paint, she does confess: "I find that I have painted my life – things happening in my life – without knowing,"¹² and "I found that I could say things with shape and color that I couldn't say in any other way . . . things that I had no words for."¹³

In using the phrase, "without knowing," O'Keeffe admits that she is not always aware of the intent of a painting. She is following an inner voice which declares the deep and sensual perceptions of her own experiences through color and shape. The simplified forms of *Horse's Skull on Blue* became abstract symbols which connect the eternity of nature with the continuous cycle of life and death.¹⁵ Ernest W. Watson quoted O'Keeffe in an article for *American Artist* in 1943:

I have wanted to paint the desert and I haven't known how. I always think that I cannot stay with it long enough. So I brought home the bleached bones as my symbols of the desert. To me they are as beautiful as anything I know. To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around – hair, eyes, and all with their tails switching. The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert, even though it is vast and empty and untouchable – and knows no kindness with all its beauty.¹⁶

Whatever the experience of the viewer, O'Keeffe's longing for solitude and communion with nature is evident in this composition which captures the essence of her life and her love for the Southwest.