

Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico

A Sense of Place

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Maria Chabot—Georgia O'Keeffe

Correspondence, 1941-1949

Edited by BARBARA BUHLER LYNES & ANN PADEN

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Georgia O'Keeffe continues to fascinate nearly 20 years after her death in 1986. She was one of the most well-known American artists of the mid-20th century and became a feminist icon, despite her own protestations, and her work became a decorating cliché, despite the inventiveness and risk of which she was capable. *Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico* explores how the desert Southwest landscape of O'Keeffe's adopted New Mexico shaped her work and in turn shaped how she manipulated the landscape in her art.

From an early career as an abstractionist, O'Keeffe became best known as a representational painter who employed a number of abstractionist strategies to achieve her lasting fame. From the flower paintings to the floating bones and skulls, she used color and space to create emotional and formal effects. Her work is so pervasive that it has been absorbed by the visual culture of the American Southwest in advertising and by countless imitators.

Barbara Buhler Lynes, curator at the O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and director of its research center, has carefully documented sites painted by O'Keeffe and demonstrates how the painting shows the effects of the artist's process. Lesley Poling-Kempes, an independent scholar, writes evocatively of the geology and forms of the land. Frederick W. Turner, who has previously written about the place of landscape in the creative imagination, describes O'Keeffe's fabled prickliness and how she made the landscape her own and continues to loom as a larger-than-life presence in the area around her home in Abiquiu, New Mexico. Maps, diagrams, and photographs complement small but elegant reproductions of O'Keeffe's paintings.

New Mexico has attracted artists and writers from Andrew Dasburg and D.H. Lawrence to Susan Rothenberg, Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman, and Eliot Porter, but none is so identified with the area as O'Keeffe. *Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico* does not offer a simplistic answer as to why this is, but provides several avenues of inquiry.

O'Keeffe may be as well-known for her doughty personality as for her paintings. *Maria Chabot—Georgia O'Keeffe: Correspondence, 1941-1949* provides ample insight into this and other aspects of the artist's life. Maria Chabot was a young, aspiring writer who ran O'Keeffe's summer home in New Mexico for much of the 1940s.

Compiled here is correspondence that covers personal

advice, gossip, and the logistics of constructing and running a home. This book was Chabot's lifelong dream, and it has been realized, perhaps more objectively than she envisioned, by Barbara Buhler Lynes and by Ann Paden, an editor originally brought to the project by Chabot. The letters range from chatty and affectionate to brusquely businesslike over the arc of the friendship. It is easy to infer that Chabot initially idolized O'Keeffe and that the artist thrived on her attention and capable help. As new friends came into O'Keeffe's life and as Chabot led the reconstruction of the ruined adobe house in Abiquiu that would become the painter's permanent home in 1949, tensions mounted and the friendship cooled. It is interesting to read subtle and not-so-subtle attempts at manipulation by both correspondents and to realize that these are the negotiations of any evolving relationship. If neither party seems completely noble by the last letters exchanged in 1949, they do seem entirely human: fallible and vulnerable but capable of great warmth. There is plenty of mundane conversation, but the editors have wisely chosen to let the text stand with minimal excisions: In the exchange of daily events we are allowed past the facades and personas and gain a richer sense of who these women were. Vital transitions and background are provided to give both historical and social context but also to maintain a narrative thread. The letters are carefully documented, and a selection of photographs helps develop the imagery that comes through the text.

As Lynes and Paden point out, this correspondence records how Chabot and O'Keeffe interacted from afar. As readers we are left guessing about the dynamics of their relationship when they were together working at Ghost Ranch and in Abiquiu. It is to the editors' credit that they do not engage in speculation about the relationship beyond the letters. Future scholarship (O'Keeffe's letters to Alfred Stieglitz become available to researchers in two years) may fill in the blanks. *Maria Chabot—Georgia O'Keeffe* is quite satisfying as it stands. It is much more about the relationship of two strong women than about art, but it is a valuable contribution to the literature for that very reason. ■

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