

Georgia O'Keeffe: A Sense of Place
Teacher In-Service 10/11/06
Classroom Materials



***Jawbone and Fungus*, 1931**

Georgia O'Keeffe, American (1887-1986)

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould fund, 51.11a

The Art:

"When I found the beautiful white bones in the desert I picked them up and took them home too...I have used these things to say what is to me the wideness and wonder of the world as I live in it."

As with Georgia O'Keeffe's more familiar landscapes and still-lives of flowers, shells and bones, *Jawbone and Fungus* is a painting rich in meaning that can be viewed on many levels; realistic, abstract and metaphoric. The canvas is divided almost in half with brown stripes seeming to suggest the horizon line of a landscape. Two objects appear to be placed on this horizon line, or is it a tabletop? A white shape, filling the foreground and bottom half of the canvas, is carefully balanced by an equally large, but dark shape filling the top and background. Georgia O'Keeffe squeezes the two shapes together into the small canvas, their obvious contrasts creating tension. While the objects are recognizable as jawbone and fungus, the artist is more interested in the abstract shapes floating in space and the metaphorical qualities of these objects. Visually Georgia O'Keeffe has presented two very different objects, a jawbone and a fungus, whose connection is ambiguous. They seem to be both in opposition and in collaboration as each object needs the other to fully reveal itself. The large white shape is an animal jawbone, bleached by the desert sun and polished by the wind-blown sand. A brown edge suggests a shadow or the inside of the bone, as it also accentuates the one jagged end of the softly rounded shape. The white color and strong lines of the bone are contrasted with the dark shadow that seems to be both behind and on top of the jawbone.

While the bone is smooth, angular, dry and hard, the fungus is textured, round, fleshy and soft, suggesting the bone is dead and fungus alive. Yet O'Keeffe, familiar with the shamanistic beliefs of the Anasazi-Pueblo peoples of Santa Fe area, saw bones as alive and sacred; and fungi, though living plants, are often metaphors for death and decay.

In 1931 O'Keeffe was dividing her time between New York and Taos, New Mexico. Perhaps the fungus represents her experience in the Adirondack Mountains of New York, the bones her love of the southwest desert. At that time her relationship with her husband was strained; could the fungus represent the black cape Stieglitz often wore and thus, the overbearing character of the man who had such an influence on her career and life? Compared to many of her paintings, O'Keeffe's color choices here are limited to browns and grays, a somber palate perhaps suggestive of the depression she suffered at the time.

As autobiography or a study in abstractions, *Jawbone and Fungus* is both typical and unique in Georgia O'Keeffe's art.

The Artist:

Georgia O'Keeffe was born in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin in 1887, in a family that valued education and actively encouraged their daughter's interest and talent in art. Art training for O'Keeffe meant drawing lessons, from the Sprang Drawing Books to formal lessons at the Art Institute of Chicago. While she excelled in the classroom, O'Keeffe rebelled against the academic style of teaching with its emphasis on imitative realism. In 1908 Georgia O'Keeffe actually stopped making art and concentrated on teaching. As an art teacher in Virginia and Texas, she encouraged her students to draw objects they liked, objects that revealed their own feelings and expressions, a teaching strategy unusual for its time. However her interest in painting was renewed when she met Alon Bement, an artist experimenting with non-representational shapes and patterns, and Arthur Wesley Dow, who "taught her the importance of filling space in a beautiful way."

In 1912 a friend showed Georgia O'Keeffe's drawings of Texas landscapes to photographer and gallery owner, Alfred Stieglitz. Impressed by their expression of light and powerful beauty, he exhibited them in 291, his gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue. O'Keeffe moved to New York and quickly achieved success with abstract New York City skyscrapers, Lake George rural landscapes and the large flower paintings. The Stieglitz galleries, The Intimate Gallery (1925-1929) and An American Place (1929-1946), became the center of American modernism, gathering together such artists as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Charles Demuth and Georgia O'Keeffe who, in 1924, married Alfred Stieglitz.



Charles DeMuth
Zinnias, 1915



Arthur Dove
Cars in Sleet Storm, 1938



Marsden Hartley
Waterfall, Morse Pond, 1940



John Marin
Marin Island, Small Point, Maine, 1931

It was the southwest light and landscapes that especially inspired O'Keeffe. "That was my country, terrible winds and wonderful emptiness." Between 1929 and 1945, she traveled back and forth, from New York City and Lake George to Texas and, later New Mexico. She painted the desert landscape and its flowers and animal bones. In 1949 O'Keeffe moved to Abiquiu, New Mexico, where she continued to work until failing eyesight forced her to abandon painting. She died at the age of 98.

The 1926 words of her friend and art critic, Blanche Matthias, capture Georgia O'Keeffe's spirit and significance: "This woman who lives fearlessly, reasons logically, who is modest, unassertive and spiritually beautiful and who, because she dares to paint as she feels, has become not only one of the most magical artists of our time but one of the most stimulatingly powerful."

Ideas for Discussion and Activities:

“Color is one of the great things in this world that makes life worth living to me and as I have come to think of painting, it is my effort to create an equivalent with paint color for the world.”

Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico

- Look at Georgia O’Keeffe’s art from the perspective of color only. What colors has she used? Name the various colors as descriptively as possible.
- How does O’Keeffe use color to create mood, space, temperature and value?

NYS Standards: Art

In *Jawbone and Fungus*, Georgia O’Keeffe has juxtaposed a wide range of contrasts: colors, textures, lines, shapes, natural objects and emotions.

- Describe as specifically as possible all the contrasts you can see and/or infer.
- Describe how the artist unifies the image.

NYS Standards: Art

Compare *Jawbone and Fungus* with other works by Georgia O’Keeffe – other bone and fossil images, as well as flowers and landscapes.

- Identify and compare O’Keeffe’s choice of objects in these works, as well as her use of objects as abstract and /or metaphoric images.
- How does the artist compose her paintings, organize the objects in space, create points of emphasis, communicate context and move the viewer’s eye around the painting?
- Describe the impact of the paintings on your senses. What senses are most affected? How does O’Keeffe convey such sensual information?

NYS Standards: Art

Georgia O’Keeffe writes, “Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.”

Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico

- Consider how different artists see as “the real meaning of things?”
- Compare Georgia O’Keeffe’s concept of real meaning with that of other artists.



Albert Bierstadt
Sierras New Lake Tahoe, 1865



John Haberle
Torn in Transit, 1889-89



Stuart Davis
Landscape with Garage Lights, 1931-32

These and 70 other works of American art can be found in *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery*.

- Choose a traditional landscape or still life. Reduce it to 1-2 objects. Discuss your choices as you select, emphasize or eliminate specific details. What do the final objects now represent?

Once removed from context, in what ways do the objects remain representational or become abstractions or metaphors?

Title your work. Are words necessary to convey the meaning or are the objects sufficient metaphors in themselves?

NYS Standards: Art

One interpretation of *Jawbone and Fungus* is that the two objects represent Alfred Stieglitz's beloved Lake George area in the Adirondack Mountains of New York and Georgia O'Keeffe's "psychic homeland" in the Taos-Santa Fe region of New Mexico.

- Discuss the effectiveness of these two objects in representing geographic regions. What other objects might she have chosen and why?
- The O'Keeffe image closely resembles the "artist's conk" fungus which is flat, woody, gray to brownish with a white pore surface that bruises easily. Pictures of fungi can be found at www.bcbiodiversity.homestead.com/polypores.html. How do these compare with the artist's version? Why do you think she chose to depict the fungus as she did?
- Research Anasazi-Pueblo culture of New Mexico and the belief in bones as sacred objects.
- Compare *Jawbone and Fungus* with the many bone and horse skull images O'Keeffe completed throughout her career

NYS Standards: Art, Science, Social Studies

"From experiences of one kind or another shapes and colors come to me very clearly."

Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Art historian Sarah Whitaker Peters has suggested that *Jawbone and Fungus* can be seen as abstract portraits of the artist and her husband, Alfred Stieglitz. Her essay appears in *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery*.

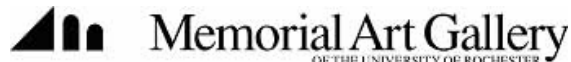
- What personality traits or attributes are suggested by a mule's jawbone and a fungus?
- How has the artist portrayed the two objects to describe the relationship between these two people?
- Think about an object or abstract form that is a metaphor for your personality. Create a visual image that portrays your personality. What can you portray visually that you cannot express in words? Write a symbolic word portrait of you and another person. Imagine these objects in a sequential story board of at least four scenes. Write the dialogue- thoughts and conversations – as the story evolves.

NYS Standards: Art, ELA

Consider Georgia O'Keeffe's statement "I found I could say things with colors that I couldn't say in any other way – things that I had no words for."

- Compare the similarities and the differences in these two forms of expression, the use of words and the use of images.
- How do you prefer to express yourself - visually or in words? Why?

NYS Standards: Art, ELA



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