

# art & man

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## GEORGIA O'KEEFFE ABSTRACTING FROM NATURE

# THE TWO WORLDS OF



Can you remember a morning two years ago when you turned on the radio or TV, or you happened to glance at the front page of the newspaper? And do you recall seeing pictures of an elderly

woman and perhaps some of her paintings of bones and skulls and desert scenes?

On Thursday, March 6, 1986, American artist Georgia O'Keeffe died at the age of 98. She had lived for nearly a century and during that time, her life, art, and character had become a part of American culture. Her career, which began in 1916, included the whole history of modern art. But most of all, Georgia O'Keeffe was one of the first artists to prove that a woman painter could be the equal of any man.

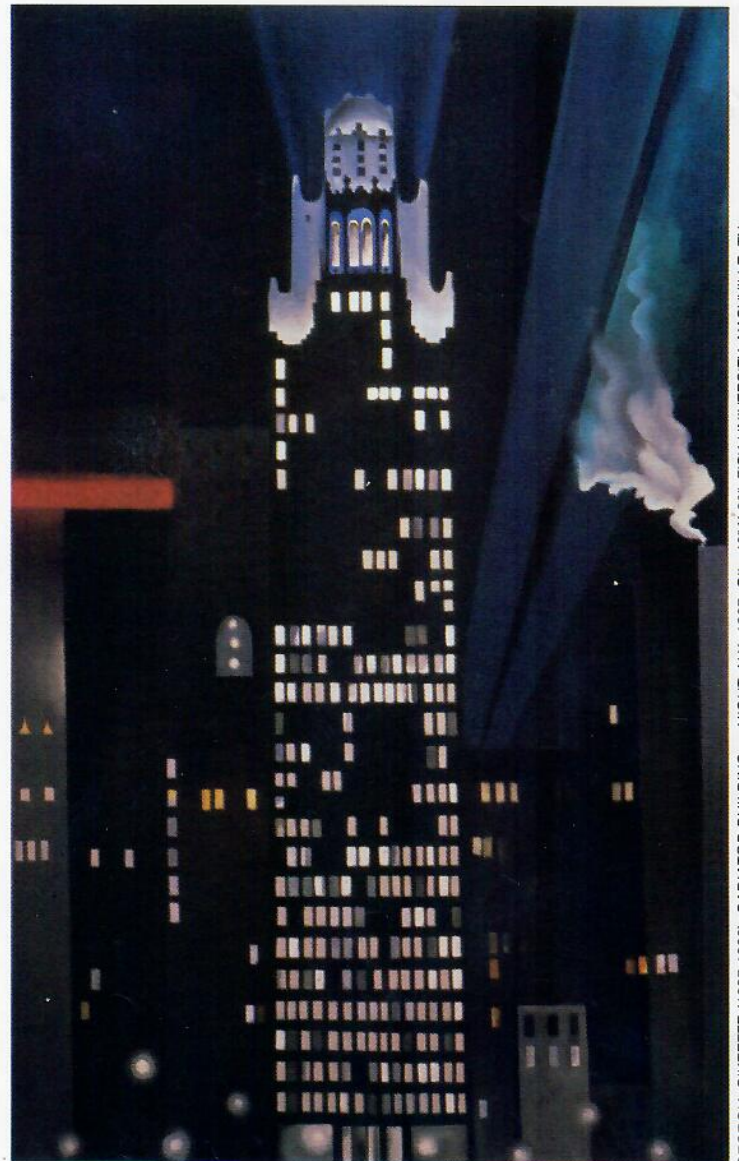
Born in 1887, Georgia O'Keeffe was the second of seven children whose parents owned a dairy farm in Wisconsin. In 1902, the family moved to Williamsburg, Virginia, and young Georgia went to boarding school. Even as a teenager, O'Keeffe dressed and acted differently from the other students, but she was admired because of her talent and independence. In 1905, she studied at the school of the Art Institute in Chicago and later won a scholarship to the Art Students League in New York. Bored with the kind of classes she had to take, she stopped painting for a while and worked as a commercial artist. In 1912, she went to Texas, where she became supervisor of art for the Amarillo public schools. Her classes were somewhat unusual; one project involved getting a pony up on a desk so her students could draw it!

Two years later, while O'Keeffe was studying at a teachers' college in New York City, she had an experience which changed her life. "One day, walking down the hall, I heard music coming from a classroom. A record was playing and the students were drawing what they heard. This gave me a new idea — that music could be translated into something for the eye." From that point on, O'Keeffe resolved to draw *only her own ideas*, instinctively and abstractly, no matter what anyone else said. In 1915, while teaching in South Carolina, O'Keeffe sent some of her drawings to a friend in New York. Her friend showed the drawings to famous photographer Alfred Stieglitz [STEEG-litz] who, upon seeing the work, is supposed to have said, "At last, a woman on paper!" He immediately exhibited them in his art gallery.

In the 1920s, Stieglitz' gallery, at 291 Fifth Avenue, was one of the most important places in American art. Painters like Arthur Dove, John Marin, and Stuart Davis, and photographers Stieglitz and Paul

"I want to find the feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill."

— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE



*"When I saw the view, I was so excited I began talking about trying to paint New York. Of course, the men told me it was an impossible idea. Well, from my teens on I had been told I had crazy notions so I went on with my idea of painting New York."*

# GEORGIA O'KEEFFE



RED HILLS AND SKY, 1945. OIL, 30" X 40". PRIVATE COLLECTION.

*"So I went west, which was something I'd wanted to do all my life. And I was beside myself. The openness . . . the beauty of that wild world."*

Strand were creating a new form of American art and making New York City the new art capital of the world. The star of Stieglitz' circle was Georgia O'Keeffe. Not only did he recognize her talent by showing her work, but he captured her features in the nearly 500 portraits (see photo, above left) he took of her. "He photographed me until I was crazy," she would later say. In 1924, the quiet, solitude-loving O'Keeffe and the outgoing, dramatic Stieglitz were married. They lived in New York, where O'Keeffe did a series of skyscraper paintings like the one on the left, which symbolized the new power and technology of the 1920s. Around that time O'Keeffe also began doing the paintings for which she is most famous — a series of enormous, abstract flowers.

By 1929, O'Keeffe realized she needed more space and privacy, and when a friend invited her to spend the summer in New Mexico, she jumped at the chance. From then on, she spent nearly every summer

there and her work changed dramatically. She painted the bones and skulls, hills and deserts of New Mexico and her paintings became **lighter, simpler**, and more **abstract**. Compare the **geometric, dark, complex**, and **vertical** building (left) with the **simplified, light, organic (rounded)** shapes of the landscape shown above. O'Keeffe has taken the real forms and **abstracted**, or simplified them. Can you find the **three triangles** within a **square** in *Red Hills and Sky*?

After Stieglitz died in 1946, O'Keeffe moved to New Mexico and did painting after painting of the desert landscape that surrounded her. For the first time, she traveled around the world and had exhibitions in every major U.S. museum. Living alone in her house on the desert, she became a symbol of the independent American artist. In this issue, you'll see more works by this legendary painter, you'll meet other artists who have **abstracted from nature**, and you'll create your own abstract natural design. ■

# NATURE UP CLOSE

COW'S SKULL WITH CALICO ROSES, 1931.



Look at the paintings on these pages, and at the one on the cover. They are all of skulls and bones. In fact, many of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings are of bones of all sizes and shapes. In the past, when you've seen other pictures of skulls, what feelings have you had? Do the ones shown here look at all frightening? Do they look like symbols of death and

decay? Why did the artist paint them? What do they mean? Where did she get this idea?

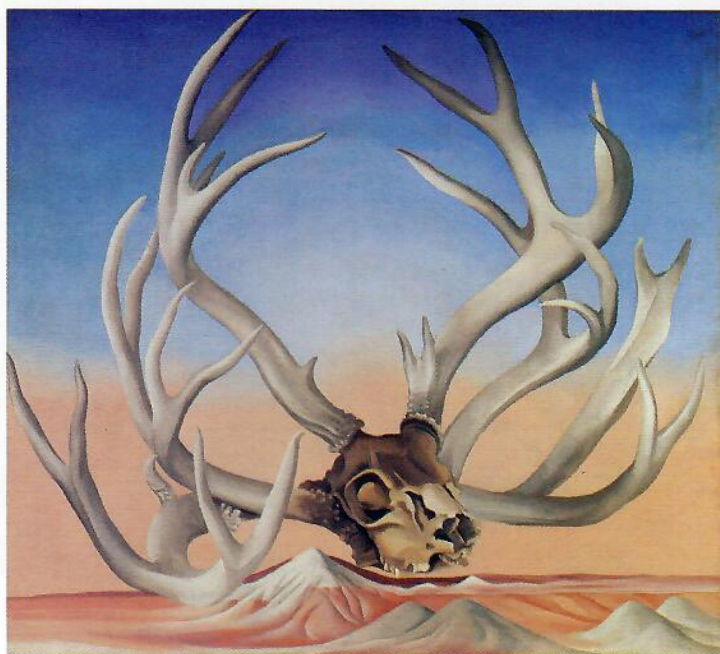
O'Keeffe herself wasn't very helpful. When describing how and why she created the painting on the cover, she said, "That little head had been hanging on the wall all summer. Then one day I saw it and said, 'Well, I'll paint it.' I hung it on a tree beside some flowers. My paintings grow from what is around. I make them up inch by inch." Georgia O'Keeffe hated the way other people interpreted her paintings. She insisted that her art was not related to her life. But one of the signs of a great work of art is the fact that it is able to communicate to all kinds of people in a number of different ways. The paintings on these pages all have an immediate visual impact. But their creation must have involved more than the fact that the artist just happened to see them and happened to paint them in this way.

In 1929, Georgia O'Keeffe was becoming one of the best-known artists in America. Her works were selling, and major museums were including her paintings in their exhibitions. She was married to a famous photographer who was not only promoting her art, but producing photos of O'Keeffe that gave her the glamour of a photographer's model. Why, then, did she leave all this and go west? Perhaps, to continue to create her art, she needed at this time to get back to her earliest memories — the wind and plains of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin; the distant hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia.

From 1934 to 1946, O'Keeffe lived part of the year in New Mexico and part in New York with Stieglitz. She loved the hills, deserts, and skies of the Southwest, but during this period, her favorite subjects were animal skulls and bones. In Stieglitz' gallery, O'Keeffe may have seen the work of a group of European painters, called *Surrealists*, who based their images on "unconscious" feelings. They painted objects very realistically, but the objects are unrelated and often seem to be floating in deep space. O'Keeffe's "bone" paintings — in which objects

"The abstraction is often the form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only make clear in paint."

— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE



*"When I found the beautiful white bones in the desert I took them home. . . . I use them to say what is to me the wideness and wonder of the world."*

also appear to float — were done during a time of conflict with Stieglitz. He wanted her to stay with him in New York, but she had to live in the Southwest to paint. Art critics have suggested that her choice of skulls, sometimes combined with flowers, may have reflected her conflicting feelings. The contrast between the hard, white skulls and the delicate, colorful flowers might have been symbols for Stieglitz and herself.

The artist may also have shared the reverence for nature of the Native Americans who had always lived in the Southwest. The two paintings called *From the Faraway Nearby* (above) and *Pelvis with Moon* (above right) have a kind of mystical feeling, possibly reflecting the Indian tradition of honoring natural objects such as bones or sacred mountain peaks.



have known what object this painting was based on if you hadn't read the title or seen the other paintings?) She **flattens** and **simplifies** her forms — the pelvis bone on the left has become a mysterious, unknown shape and the forms in the painting below are completely unrecognizable. She has completely abstracted this painting by **changing the colors**. The work has now become an **abstraction** based on two simple shapes: a yellow oval within a red rectangle. ■

*"I do not remember picking up the first pelvis bone but I remember when I first noticed them, always knowing I would one day be painting them."*

*"I was the sort of child that ate around the hole in the doughnut, saving the hole for the last and best. So, not having changed much, when I painted the bones, I was most interested in the holes."*

**Abstract** art is based on, but not completely related to the real or natural world. Very representational paintings can only show one kind of person or object in one specific situation. The more **abstract** a work is, the more general its appeal can be. Georgia O'Keeffe based her work on recognizable, natural forms, and she **abstracted** them. The forms in each of the three large paintings on these two pages become more and more **abstract** as you read from left to right. First of all, O'Keeffe **isolates**, then **enlarges** her form until it is almost unrecognizable, as in the work shown on the right *Pelvis, Red with Yellow*. (Would you



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# A WORLD OF



"I believe to create one's own world in any of the arts takes great courage."

— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE



## MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH



RED POPPY, 1927.

When the public first saw some of the paintings shown above, many people were puzzled and others were very upset. What do each of these works remind you of — a sunrise; an explosion; a spaceship; a tunnel; or just a pure design? There is only one painting in which the subject is immediately recognizable: *Red Poppy* (see inset above). Would it surprise you that *all* the paintings on these two pages are of flowers?

Georgia O'Keeffe first started doing her most famous paintings — enlarged details of ordinary flowers — in 1924. When she showed Alfred Stieglitz one of them, he said, "Well Georgia, I don't know how you're going to get away with anything like that. You aren't planning to show it, are you?" Later, Stieglitz

himself exhibited O'Keeffe's flowers, and both the public and the art critics had a lot to say about them. They were too abstract, they were too large, and they were unrecognizable. Surprisingly enough, the artist was a woman. Women, if they painted at all, should certainly paint flowers, but the flowers should be small, delicate, and recognizable.

The work of Stieglitz and other photographers of the time — Paul Strand, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams — may have inspired O'Keeffe's flower paintings. Their photos were large, sharp-focus close-ups of natural objects. In her "flower" paintings, O'Keeffe **enlarged** an ordinary plant, then **tightly cropped**, **flattened**, and **simplified** its shape. She achieved her **luminous colors** by using very clean brushes, bright, fresh paint, and she always worked on a bright white base. The colors in her paintings seem almost to glow because of the white sizing behind the thin layer of paint. *Red Poppy* is one of O'Keeffe's smallest flower paintings —

# SHAPES



only 7" x 9" (the actual work is smaller than the reproduction on the next page), but it has the power of a huge painting. The gray-white background at the edges and the curves of the **triangular** petals lead your eye in to the **focal point** of the painting, the dark **oval** in the center. The bright red color is so vibrant, the work seems illuminated from within.

O'Keeffe **abstracted** each of her flowers in a different way. In the one on the far right, she uses the whole image, but suspends it in blue sky. The flower is painted realistically, but the painting has a fantastic look. It is painted in **monochrome** (basically one color) with yellow accents. The **single large, dark shape** at the bottom **contrasts** with the **small, light blue shapes** on top. Its **vertical format** gives the work an **active** feeling.

The rest of the paintings on these pages are more **abstract**. In the painting in the middle of page 6, O'Keeffe has **focused on a tiny detail** and the flower (*Jack-in-the-Pulpit*) has become nearly unrecogniz-

able. The whole painting is **dark** and the colors are from the same **color family**: blues, greens, purples. A white, arrowlike shape "points" to the **focal point** at the bottom, which is further emphasized by the white, halolike effect that surrounds it.

Can you tell which of the other paintings is a *White Rose* and which is a *Tulip*? Both have been reduced to **pure line, shape, and color**. One (*White Rose* above left) is very **painterly** — the artist builds up a **texture** by **repeating** brushstrokes. What other images does this painting bring to mind? The other **pure abstraction** on these pages (*Pink Tulip*, far left) is made up of **geometric (straight)** and **organic (round)** shapes. Can you find the shapes that might stand for leaves, flower, stem? O'Keeffe uses **pastel colors** and an **asymmetrical design** (the shapes on the left **balance** the space on the right) to create a dynamic composition. Over the years, Georgia O'Keeffe did more than 200 flower paintings, and each one seems to reveal nature as seen from within. ■

# RED POPPY



GEORGIA O'KEEFE (1887-1986). RED POPPY, 1927. 7" X 9". PRIVATE COLLECTION. PHOTO BY MALCOLM VARON.



by Georgia O'Keeffe



MASTERPIECE  
OF THE  
MONTH #5

“Sometimes I have resisted painting something that seemed to me so ordinary, hardly worth doing. But when I do it and it’s done, it’s different from what other people see. It is ordinary to me, but not to you.”

— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

**art&  
man.**

# NATURE ABSTRACTED

These artists express three very different feelings about nature.

## Exotic Animals

The African artist who carved this wooden antelope “mask” shown on the right did not create it as an art object. *Chi Wara* was a mythical creature who was believed to have taught the Bambara tribe how to farm. A dancer performing in the annual harvest ceremony would wear this two-foot-high sculpture on his head. The animal — who is carrying her baby on her back — has been **abstracted** into a series of **gently curving, yet pointed, shapes**. The **curved shape** of the animal itself **contrasts** with the **straight, geometric designs** cut into the wood. The horns are made up of one continuous line that gets smaller and smaller as it rises, symbolizing the abstract force in all living things.

## Colorful Landscapes

Like Georgia O’Keeffe, 20th-century artist Milton Avery painted simplified landscapes set in one particular area of the United States. While O’Keeffe’s works are associated with the Southwest, Avery did sunlit summer scenes set in the Northeast — the woods of Vermont, the beaches and dunes of Maine and Cape Cod. By using **simplified shapes; curved, rhythmic contours; and flat, bright color patterns**, Avery reduced his landscapes to **meaningful essentials**. In *Tree Fantasy* (below right), he changed the “real” colors and used other colors to express the way he felt about his subject. The large area of bright orange grass **balances** the red, yellow, green, and pale blue accents of the trees. If you half close your eyes and look at the painting, can you see how it breaks into **three large, basic shapes**? Avery has **abstracted** this landscape so the pine tree and mountain form one dark shape; the yellow tree on the left is made up of a circle and a line; while the sky, grass, and light blue tree on the right blend together into a third abstract shape.





BAMBARA ANTELOPE HEADPIECE, WOOD. HEIGHT 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". PRIVATE COLLECTION. PHOTO © BY LEE BOLTIN.  
IMOGEN CUNNINGHAM (1883-1976). MAGNOLIA BLOSSOM, 1925. PRIVATE COLLECTION.



## Plant Patterns

When you first look at the black and white **abstract** photograph above, can you tell what the subject is? Or does it just seem to be a pleasing pattern of ovals surrounding a dark form in the center? Compare this image, created by American photographer Imogen Cunningham, with Georgia O'Keeffe's *Red Poppy* on pages 8-9. Do you see any similarities? Both artists were working around the same time, the 1920s. In fact, Cunningham took this photo — a close-up of a flower — two years before O'Keeffe painted *Red Poppy*. Both artists have **abstracted** a real object by **isolating a small detail, enlarging it, then tightly cropping the image** so it no longer looks like a flower. It has become an **abstraction** — a series of large and small forms, dark and light areas, and positive and negative shapes. The large, smooth, white shapes surround and lead your eye to the **focal point** of the photo — the dark, textured form in the center.

# CHRISTIE LEWIS:

## ABSTRACTING EVERYDAY OBJECTS



PHOTO BY WILLIAM H. LEWIS.

What gives the abstract drawing on the right, by 16-year-old Christie Lewis, its power? Is it the shimmering blues and greens, the rosy-colored background filling the space with light, or the soft, round shapes and gently flowing lines? In this interview, Christie will tell you how she created an abstract world by using simple, everyday objects.

Christie created this Scholastic Art Award-winning piece as a sophomore at Boylan Central Catholic High School in Rockford, Illinois. A junior now, she plans to major in art in college. Also a sports lover, Christie plays soccer, basketball, and runs cross-country.

### When did you get interested in art?

Since I was a kid. My father is very good at art — he's had some pieces in local art fairs. That helped to get me interested. I'd draw anything I could get my hands on.

Now I like to draw people or things related to nature, and my drawings are usually very detailed. I tried something different with this piece.

### How did you happen to do it?

It was a class assignment. We were doing a whole bunch of still lifes. I chose this one, which was made up of paper and eggs. We could do the whole composition or focus on just part of it. First, we did a black and white pencil drawing on white paper to get a feel for the piece. Then, we did a second version using colored pencil on black paper.

### How was the still life set up? How did you choose this angle?

Each table had a different still life set up on it. The egg shells, the pieces of cut paper, and the ribbon were all white, and they

were sitting on a small piece of paper. Each person found a position they felt comfortable with. I just happened to like the way the shapes looked from where I was sitting, and I went from there.

### What attracted you to this still life?

The most interesting thing about it was how it was arranged and how the lights played on all the whites. It became just a pattern of light and shades of gray, with no colors at all.

### Did you change it very much from the way you saw it?

I think I changed the light so that it seemed to be coming just from one side. I also put in more darks. The challenge for me was putting in dark areas where there really were none.

The more I looked at it, the more it began to take on a character of its own. It didn't look like paper and eggs any more. It became more about abstract shapes. I think I emphasized the curves to give more movement throughout the whole piece.

### How did it change in the second version when you added color?

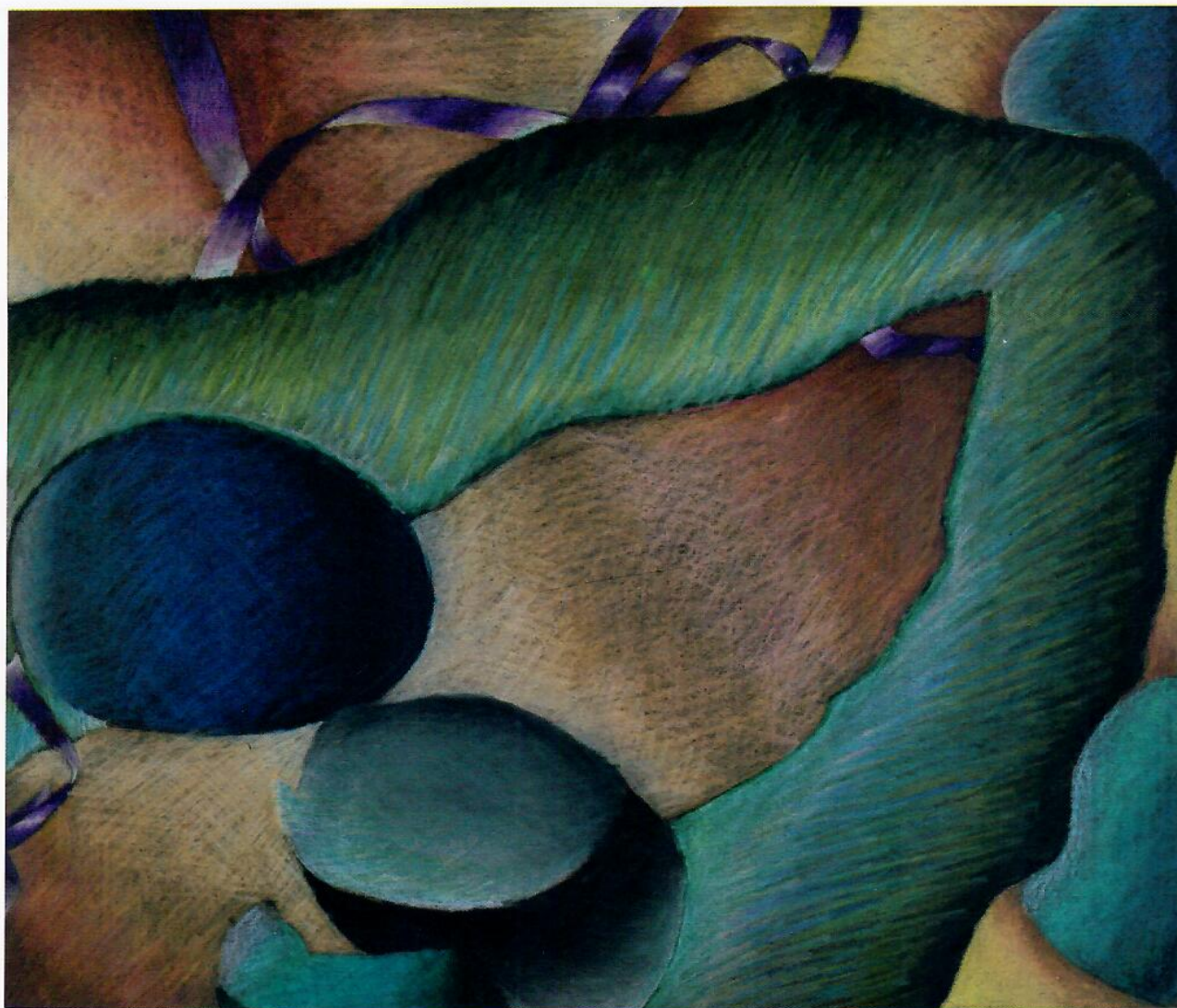
I think the colors gave it more life. They brought in more dimension. We had to decide whether to use warm or cool colors in the background or foreground. I chose warm background colors and built it from there.

### How did this choice affect the feeling of the piece?

Well, when you use cool colors in the *foreground*, it can be kind of risky because they usually work better in back. But it made the piece less foreboding. If I had used cooler colors in the background, it would have made it seem darker and smaller — farther away. With warm background colors, the whole thing became lighter and closer. The foreground and background don't seem so far apart.

### Then you have the ribbon weaving in between them.

The purple ribbon is a transition between the foreground and background. It can be warm or cool. It's one of my favorite parts. It let me show my love of detail — I



was able to give the ribbon a shiny look by using purple and white.

**How does the drawing look to you now? Does it remind you at all of the actual still life — of paper and eggs?**

Not really. I didn't ever see it that realistically. It was more about curves and shapes and shadows overlapping other shapes. It seems to have almost a machine-made look. It doesn't seem that natural.

**Were you happy with the piece when you finished it?**

I was satisfied. I saw it as an experimental piece, especially the way I used the marks of the pencil to give it texture. I used a lot of different techniques — cross-hatching in the background; long, flowing strokes in the blue-green part to make the shapes look

round. I was using all the approaches I could think of to see how they would work together.

After doing this drawing, I think I appreciate better what you can do with lines. I feel like I can be freer with the pencil and show the strokes. I think abstraction lets people be themselves. It lets you see the world however you want to see it.

**Is there any advice you would give about doing art?**

You have to really love it and then you have to pursue it with zeal. One hundred percent has to be given to produce anything of quality. Everything in the world has art in it. I like to take the beauty of the world and capture it on paper or canvas in whatever way I can.

*After doing this drawing, I think I appreciate better what you can do with lines. I feel like I can be freer with the pencil and show the strokes. I think abstraction lets people be themselves. It lets you see the world however you want to see it.*

We select our Artist of the Month from students who have won medals in the current Scholastic Art Awards Program. To enter, ask your teacher to write to the Scholastic Art Awards, 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003 for entry deadline and rules book.

# CLOSING IN ON NATURE

Create an abstract design based on an object you can hardly see.



“I started to paint big flowers in the 20s, when everything was going so fast. Around then, I saw a painting with a flower in it — it was so beautiful, but so small you really could not appreciate it. Then and there, I decided to stop time and paint that flower on a huge scale — then you could not ignore its beauty.”

— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

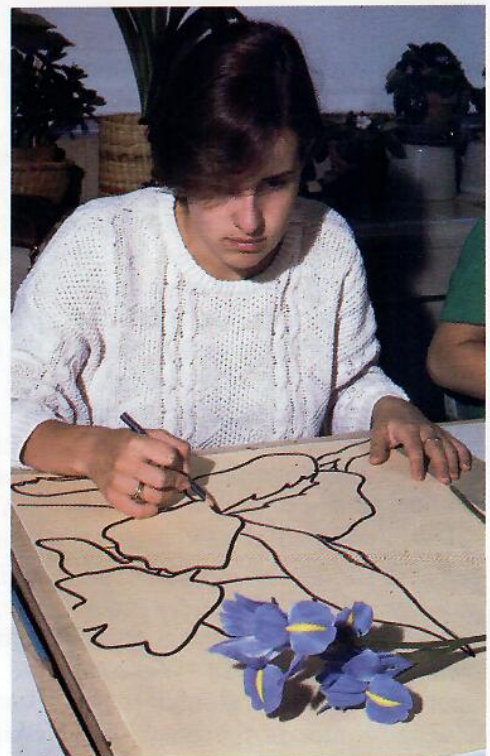
## Materials

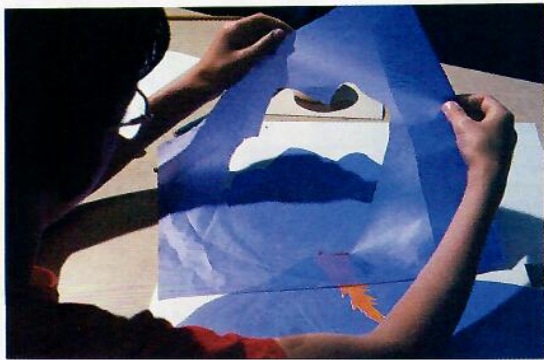
In this issue, you've seen how artist Georgia O'Keeffe used everyday scenes and natural objects as the basis of her abstract paintings. She simplified the shapes and flattened the colors in her landscapes. She did close-up, enlarged images of ordinary flowers. And she abstracted some of her works by changing her point of view — looking up at skyscrapers and down from a plane on the clouds below. You'll use some of these devices and an ordinary flower to produce inventive, abstract color-tissue collages like those you see on the opposite page.

- 18" x 24" oak tag paper
- Ebony pencil
- Vinyl eraser
- Colored tissue
- Transparent paint base
- X-Acto knives
- 3/4" flat brushes
- Fine-line black marker
- Turpentine (for solvent ink)
- Scotch tape

## Starting Out

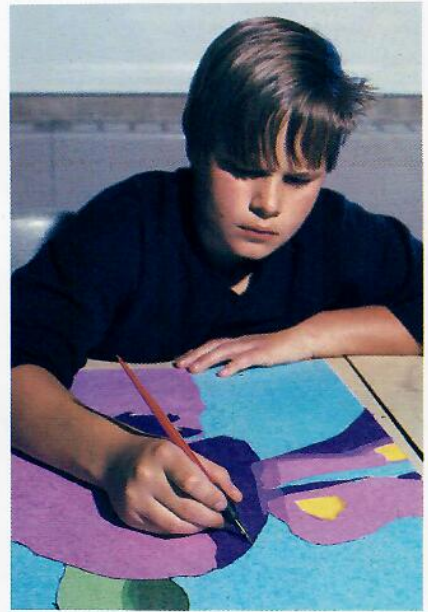
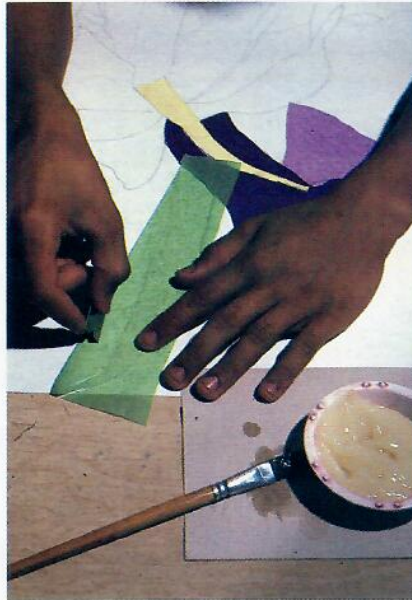
**1** Choose a plant or flower (it can be real, dried, or silk) and do a quick, loose **contour drawing** by imagining your pencil is actually touching an edge of the flower. Move your eyes slowly along the edge, and move your pencil at the same speed. **Simplify shapes; eliminate details.** Will you look **down on, up at,** or see your subject from **eye level?**





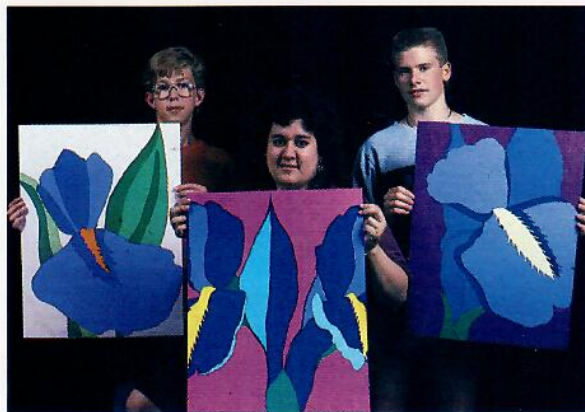
Apply transparent paint base over the area to be covered and place a sheet of tissue over it. **Cutting** the tissue gives one effect; **tearing** it gives another.

**2** **Abstract** the image by changing its **scale**. Change the way you ordinarily see the flower by **choosing** the most interesting part of your drawing. Then **enlarge** and **crop** it so it fills the paper. Experiment with tissue color combinations. Will your designs be **bright, light, dark**, or a combination? Do you want to show **shadows and highlights** or keep your shapes **flat**? **Overlapping** (different or the same color) **shapes** gives a distinctive effect.



**3** When your drawing is finished, you may wish to emphasize forms or certain **focal points** by outlining them with black ink. Or, you may prefer the way the shapes seem to **blend** naturally.

## Some Solutions



In which of the collages on the left are the flowers recognizable? In which has the **scale** been changed so much, the subject can't be recognized? Which artists used only color and which used the white of the paper as a color? Red/green; blue/orange; purple/yellow are **color opposites**. Purple/blue/green; red/orange/yellow are in the same **color families**. Which artists used **opposite colors** and which used **related colors**? Which used three **related colors** and a fourth **opposite** to emphasize the **focal point** of the composition? Can you find **organic** (rounded) shapes; jagged, pointed shapes? Did any of the artists use **symmetrical** (both sides are the same) compositions? Which artists **balanced** the "**positive**" forms in their **asymmetrical** compositions with areas of "**negative**" space?

Like Georgia O'Keeffe, these two contemporary artists also abstract natural forms.

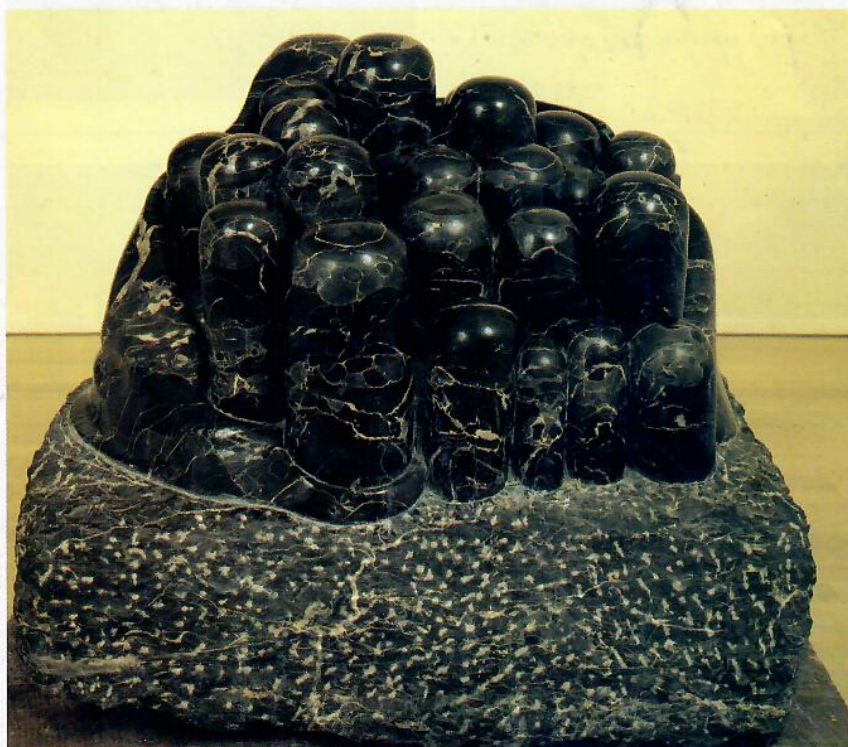


## Zany Puzzles

What do the bright, curved forms in the painting on the left suggest? Can you see some kind of animal — perhaps an enormous, comical duck — dancing on gigantic feet? In fact, this painting by American artist Elizabeth Murray is called *Duck Foot*. Compare this work with the paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe on pages 6-7. Which ones is it *most* like; *least* like? Like O'Keeffe, Murray **abstracts organic (rounded) forms**. She reduces the image to pure **color, shape, and line** that suggest the *idea* of a duck's foot. Murray combines the techniques of painting and sculpture by joining together several canvases. *Duck Foot* is made up of four overlapping canvases containing **curved, eccentric (off-center) shapes**. The bright red and yellow **positive shapes** of the canvases contrast with the **negative space** of the wall. Murray carefully selects and plans the shapes she uses, often choosing “goofy” cartoonlike images.

## Mysterious Creatures

When you look at the sculpture on the right, what might the group of black, abstract shapes on top represent? Perhaps they are dark, faceless authority figures ready to decide the fate of someone small and helpless. Might they be armless, legless people huddled together for comfort and safety? They could even be mysterious plants with large, black sprouts. Whatever the black shapes are, they make us slightly uncomfortable. We sense something ominous and scary about them. The artist, American sculptor Louise Bourgeois [Boor-ZHWAH], was born in France shortly before World War I. She bases many of her abstract forms on childhood experiences of war, difficult family relationships, and unfair treatment of women. Bourgeois, like



Georgia O'Keeffe, uses **simplified organic forms** in her work. The artist has made these few simple shapes “work” as a sculpture by **simplifying, repeating, and vary-**

**ing the size of the group of small shapes. She contrasts the smooth, slender, elongated shapes on top with the wide, rough-textured base below.**— S. B.