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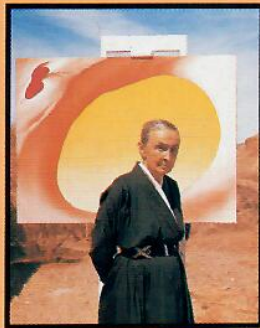


GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

**Working with
Abstraction**

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 SCHOLASTIC



COVER: GEORGIA O'KEEFFE (1887-1986). PHOTO BY TONY VACCARO

Text by Suzanne Bilyeu

SCHOLASTIC
ART

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An American Legend

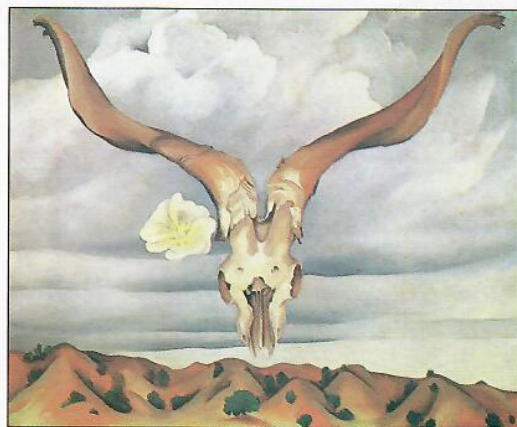
"Filling a space in a beautiful way. That is what art means to me."

— GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

Georgia O'Keeffe once said, "Sometimes I have resisted painting something that seemed so ordinary. But when I do, it's different from what other people see. It is ordinary to me, but not to you." And it was the extraordinary paintings she created, her lifestyle, and the fact that for a long time, she was a woman in a man's world that has made O'Keeffe a key figure in 20th-century American art.

Georgia O'Keeffe was born in 1887 on a farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. By 17, she was an accomplished artist. When she finished high school, she went to study at the Art Institute in Chicago. In 1912, O'Keeffe headed for Texas to teach art. Her teaching methods were often unconventional. O'Keeffe once coaxed a pony onto a table so her class could draw him.

While she was living in Texas, O'Keeffe began developing her artistic style. She eventually traveled to New York to attend Columbia Teachers College. Without her knowledge, a friend showed some of O'Keeffe's drawings to Alfred Stieglitz [STEE - glitz]. Stieglitz, a well-known photographer, had an art gallery which was an important showcase for unconventional artists. Stieglitz was so impressed by O'Keeffe's work that he



Ram's Head with Hollyhock incorporates all O'Keeffe loved about the American Southwest.

Ram's Head with Hollyhock, 1935. 30" x 36"
© Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe

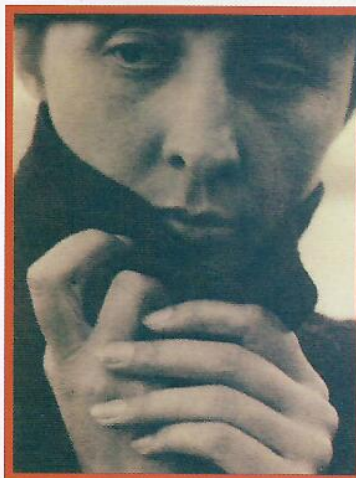
included some in an exhibit. "At last!" he exclaimed. "A woman on paper."

O'Keeffe was furious that Stieglitz had displayed her drawings without her permission. She went to his gallery and demanded that her drawings be removed from his show. But Stieglitz was supportive

and the two became close friends. O'Keeffe became part of Stieglitz's circle of artists during a time when few women artists were taken

Alfred Stieglitz photographed his wife hundreds of times.

Georgia O'Keeffe, 1918. Alfred Stieglitz. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.





***Red Poppy* fills nearly the entire canvas, forcing the viewer to appreciate its bright colors, its bold shapes, and intricate structure.**

Red Poppy No. VI, 1928.
36" x 30" © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe

seriously. O'Keeffe was 37 and Stieglitz was 60 when the two married in 1924.

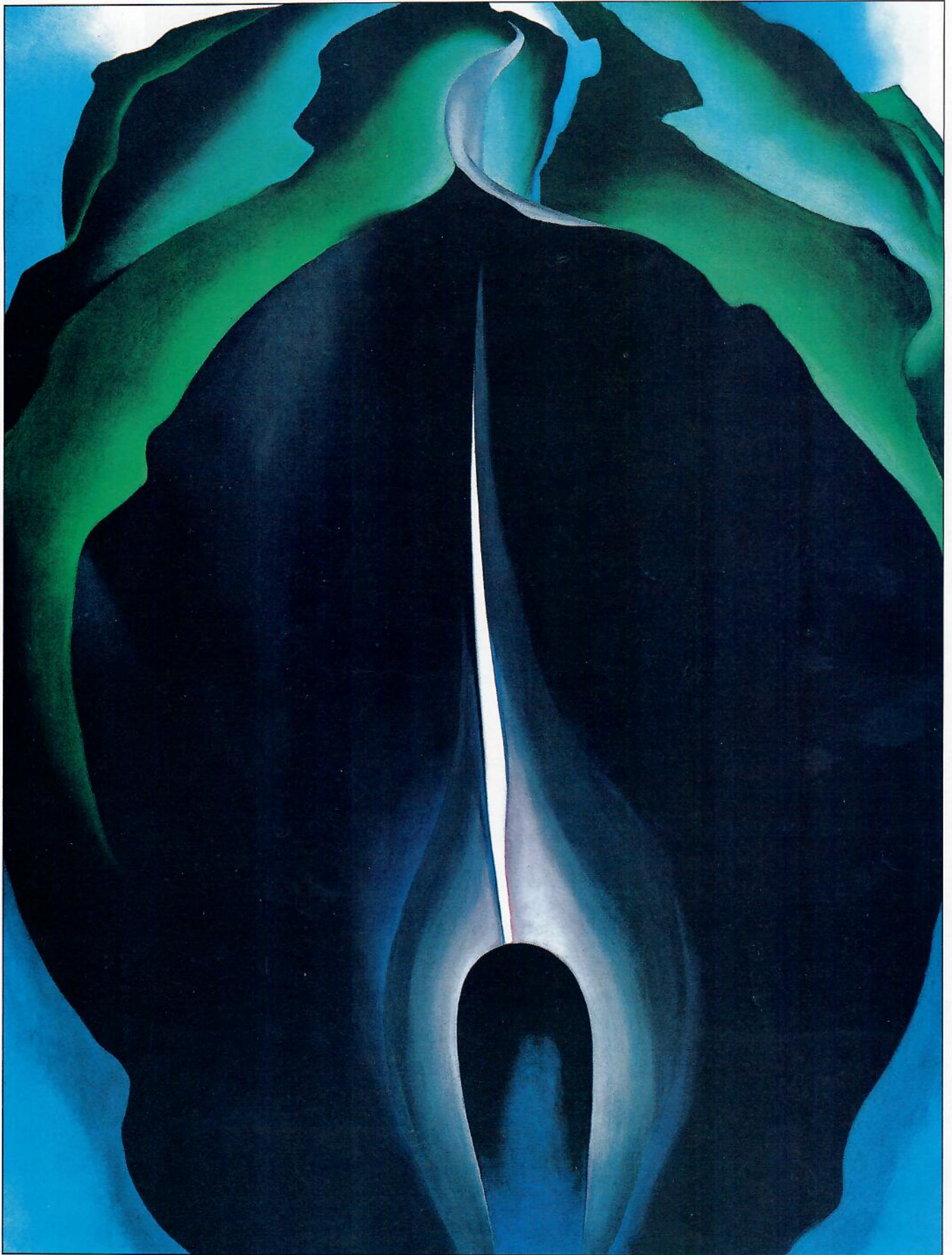
In 1929, O'Keeffe visited a friend in New Mexico. This experience changed the artist's life and work. She began spending winters in New York and summers in New Mexico. Objects symbolizing her new world became O'Keeffe's primary subjects. *Ram's Head with Hollyhock* (above, left) combines several of these: a sun-

bleached animal skull, a flower, hills, and the desert sky. O'Keeffe also used colors associated with the desert: tans, grays, reddish-browns, whites. The skull and flower seem to float, giving the painting a mysterious quality.

When Stieglitz died in 1946, Georgia O'Keeffe made New Mexico her permanent home. During the 1970s "back-to-nature" philosophies and the growing women's movement made

O'Keeffe's work enormously popular. And, in her severe black dresses and wide-brimmed hats, the artist herself took on a certain mystique.

When she reached her 80s, O'Keeffe had to give up painting. The artist had dreamed of living to be 100, but she died in March 1986 at age 98. O'Keeffe's work, with its celebration of light, color, and nature has become a beloved part of American culture.



Visions of the Familiar

“I’ll paint what the flower means to me — but I’ll paint it big and people will be surprised into taking time to look at it.” —Georgia O’Keeffe

One of Georgia O’Keeffe’s favorite techniques was to **monumentalize** small, natural, **organic (curved)** objects such as shells, trees, animal bones, and flowers. She did this by changing their **scale** as well as **enlarging** and **cropping** their shapes so they would fill a large canvas. Some of these paintings, such as *Sunflower for Maggie* (below), are somewhat *realistic*. The sunflower is painted in **bright, lifelike colors**. The **yellow-orange** petals stand out sharply against the **complementary (opposite) blue** of the sky. The sunflower is so strong and bold that it compels the viewer to study and appreciate its form and colors.

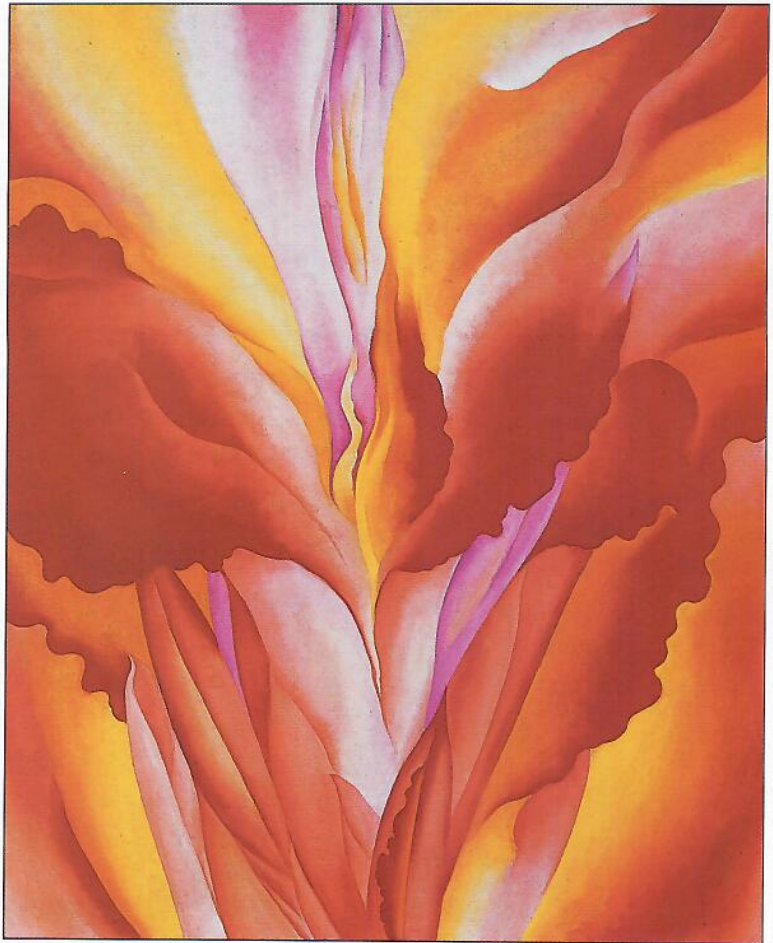
By contrast, O’Keeffe has so completely *abstracted* *Red Canna* (above, right), it is not immediately recognizable as a flower. The unfolding petals and leaves that cover the canvas are so **stylized** that they have completely lost their identity. O’Keeffe has **modeled** the edges of these shapes, creating an **abstract pattern** rather than a three-dimensional feeling. The bright rays of light that seem to radiate from the center of the composition add to *Red Canna*’s magical quality.

The form of the jack-in-the-pulpit (left) is highly stylized, but remains recognizable.

Jack-in-the-Pulpit IV, 1930. 40" x 30"
The National Gallery of Art. © Estate of Georgia O’Keeffe

The image of this sunflower (right) is simplified, but lifelike.

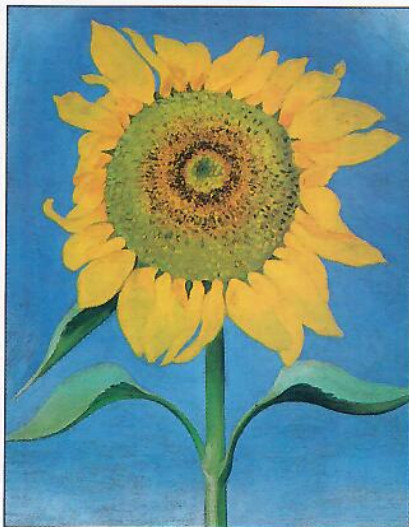
Sunflower for Maggie, 1935. 20" x 16".
Estate of Georgia O’Keeffe



In *Red Canna* (above), O’Keeffe abstracts the essence of the flower, transforming it into pure color and shape. *Red Canna*, 1923. University of Arizona Museum of Art. © Estate of Georgia O’Keeffe

Certain kinds of flowers held special significance for the artist. One spring, O’Keeffe was visiting Lake George in New York State. Many flowers were not yet in bloom as she walked through the woods. But she soon came on some wildflowers called “jack-in-the-pulpits.” (This deep-purple flower has a shape in the center that resembles a minister standing in a pulpit.) O’Keeffe was fascinated by these flowers, so she based a series of paintings on them. The composition of each painting she did was more *abstracted* than the one before. O’Keeffe zoomed in closer on the jack-in-the-pulpit each time, further reducing the flower to its essence.

In *Jack-in-the-Pulpit IV* (far left), the artist uses **closely related** blues and greens that are **dark in value** to capture the flower’s mysterious quality. The bright white area in the center highlights the painting’s **focal point**, the “jack” at the bottom. The nearly **symmetrical composition** and the glow around the jack resembles an eternal flame. The *Jack-in-the-Pulpit* series became O’Keeffe’s celebration of spring and the renewal of life.





"When I started painting the pelvis bones," said O'Keeffe, "I was most interested in the holes — what I saw through them."

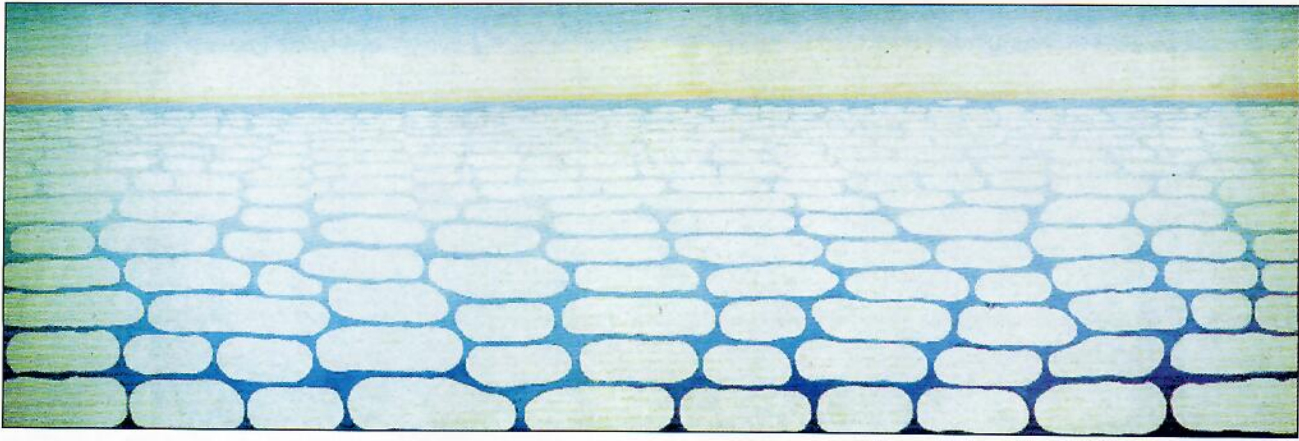
*Pelvis Series, Red with Yellow, 1945.
36" x 48" © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe*

Nature Abstracted

Throughout Georgia O'Keeffe's long career, she was inspired by the shapes and colors of her natural surroundings. The artist was also interested in the **negative spaces** between these shapes. O'Keeffe once described herself as "the kind of child who ate around the raisin in the cookie or the hole in the doughnut, saving either the raisin or the hole for the last and best." She found it pleasing to look through the holes in the smooth, white animal bones she found near her home in New Mexico. In *Pelvis Series, Red with Yellow* (above), the hole dominates the composition. The reddish pink areas of

bone **frame** the yellow oval shape. The bone itself seems less important than the hole. The artist has also changed its **scale, flattened** and **simplified** its shape, and altered its **color** until the subject has become unrecognizable. The work is completely *abstract*.

In *Sky Above Clouds* (above right), the spaces of blue between the clouds play an important role in the composition. The painting was inspired by a trip O'Keeffe took on a plane. "The sky below was completely full of little oval white clouds, all more or less alike," she recalled. To capture the full effect of the sky to the horizon, O'Keeffe used an enormous canvas



O'Keeffe looked out of an airplane window and saw beauty, calm, and order in the clouds.

Sky Above Clouds IV, 1965. 96" x 288" © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe

that stretched from one end of a garage wall to the other. When she began painting, the large canvas had to be placed flat on the floor. "Every time I sat down," said O'Keeffe, "I was afraid that the rattlesnakes would come in behind me as I worked." The artist's final abstraction is **stylized**, but still *recognizable*. She has **simplified, flattened, and repeated** her shapes, but changed their **sizes** to give the feeling of depth.

Dark Abstraction (below, left), with its **rich colors**, its **heavy shapes**, and **curving lines** suggests a landscape but can be seen in many other ways. The work might be a *visual interpretation* of what O'Keeffe referred to as "the intangible thing" within herself. The rich colors surround a mysterious black canyon or abyss. Perhaps the artist was seeking to express an emotion or dream that cannot be expressed in words or given a name.

Summer Days (pages 8-9) is an almost *surreal* depiction of O'Keeffe's love for the Western landscape. Again, the spaces around the objects are important. The graceful, curving antlers on the skull define visually interesting areas of "white space." Although the bones are from an animal long dead, its spirit seems ageless and immortal as it floats above clouds and hills. The dreamlike quality is enhanced by a single flower emerging from the mist. *Summer Days* is a tribute to the place that Georgia O'Keeffe found most precious.

"The abstraction is the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint."

—GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

What "intangibles" was O'Keeffe expressing when she painted *Dark Abstraction*?

Dark Abstraction, 1924. 25" x 21" © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe.





Georgia O'Keeffe (1897-1985), *Summer Days*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 36" x 30".
Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe. Photo © 1988 by Steven Sisman.

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH # 4

Summer Days

BY GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

"I have picked flowers where I found them — 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." —Georgia O'Keeffe

Personal Landscapes

Can you find a landscape in each one of these abstractions?



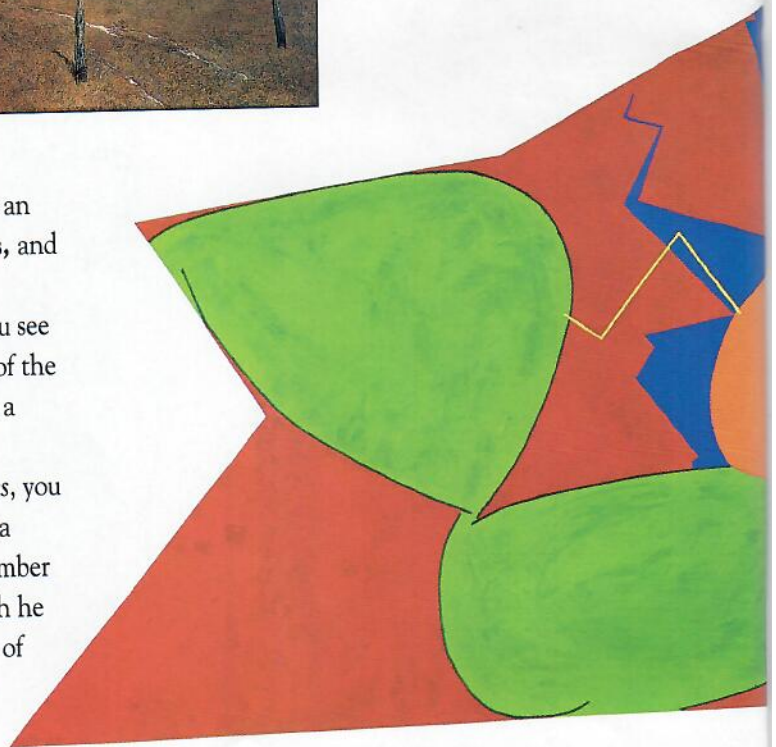
**“Sometimes I see an image out of the corner of my eye—a rim of light or the curve of a hill. Then I can’t rest till I get it down on paper.
—Andrew Wyeth**

Andrew Wyeth, b. 1917. *Snow Flurries*, 1953. 37 1/4" x 48". National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Reality Simplified ▲

Sometimes a “real” scene has been so simplified, it becomes an abstraction. The formal elements—the shapes, space, lines, and colors—are what you see first. Look closely at the painting (above) by contemporary American Andrew Wyeth. Do you see a realistic scene or do you see a light, gray shape at the top of the frame and a dark, textured shape that fills the bottom, with a faint, curved line running through it?

Even before you read the title of this work, *Snow Flurries*, you probably recognized the image represented in the picture—a bare, brown field on a raw winter day. Wyeth has used a number of compositional devices to abstract this scene. Even though he seems to have included every blade of grass and each patch of snow, at first glance the field is read as a single shape made up of **one overall texture**. The artist has chosen to look down on the scene from an **unusual angle of vision**, as though he is floating above it. This tends to **flatten** the three-dimensional illusion. The field is **tightly cropped** and the only sign that people have ever been there are the two vertical fence posts in the lower right-hand corner.



“Sometimes the images I create seem to take on a life of their own.”

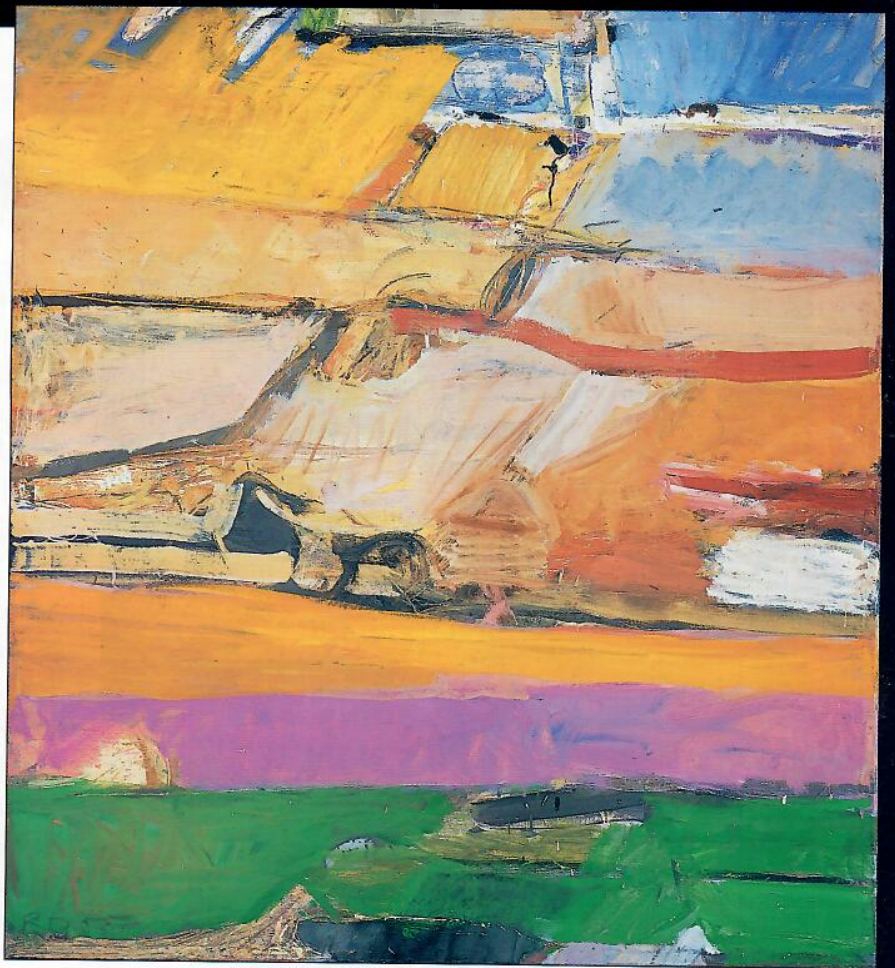
—Elizabeth Murray

Elizabeth Murray, b. 1940. *Tempest*, 1979. 120" x 170". Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN.

▼ Stormy Shapes

In her shaped painting seen below, contemporary American artist Elizabeth Murray uses **pure shapes, lines, and colors** to convey her feelings about the natural world. None of the elements in this work are at all realistic. But do the **curved, organic shapes** combined with the **jagged, hard-edged pointed shapes** and **lines** remind you of any familiar natural event? The angular network of lines that runs through the rounded forms should give you a hint.

The abstract shapes in *Tempest* don't literally depict a thunderstorm. Painted during an unsettled time in the artist's life, the work expresses her conflicting emotions. The two pairs of clashing **color opposites**—red/green and blue/orange—help to intensify the contrast between the **organic, slightly more painterly shapes** of the clouds and the **flat, geometric forms** that suggest lightning.



“I want to combine the intensity of Abstract Expressionist painting with the feeling of real life.”—Richard Diebenkorn

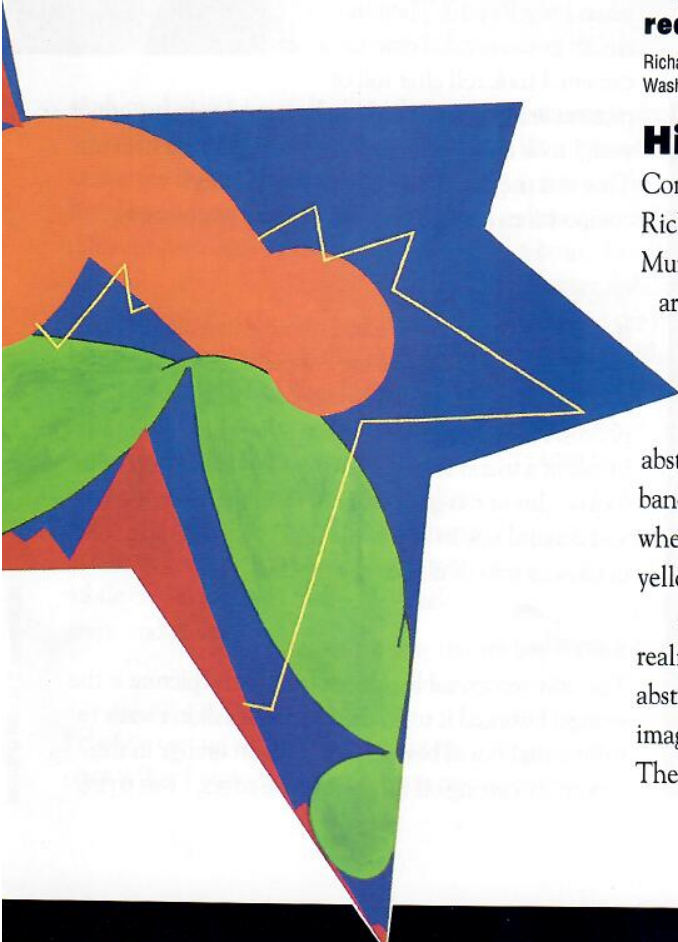
Richard Diebenkorn (1922-1993) *Berkeley No. 52*, 1955. 58 5/8" x 53 7/8". National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

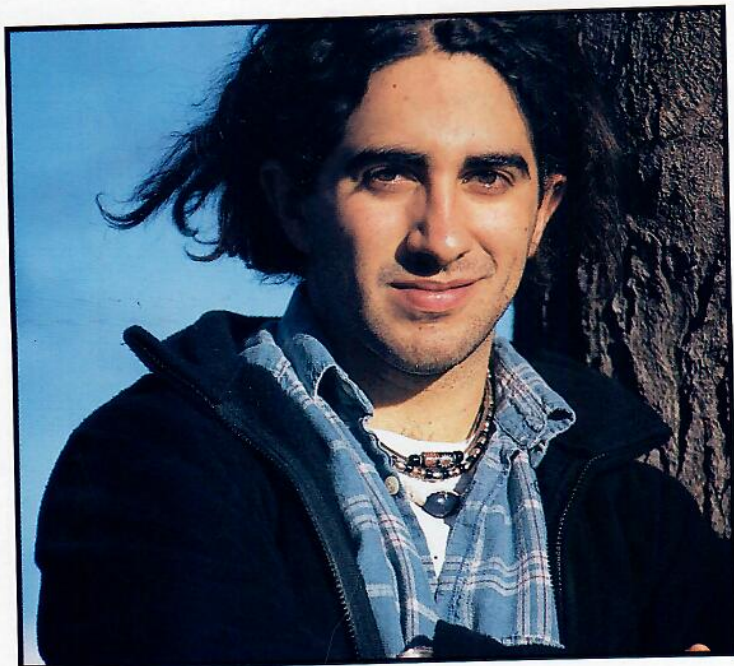
Hills of Color ▲

Compare the image (above) painted by modern American painter Richard Diebenkorn (DEE-ben-corn) with the one done by Elizabeth Murray. Both are abstractions and both are based on landscapes, but are they similar in any other way?

Berkeley No. 52 is made up of **horizontal brushstrokes of bright color** painted on a **flat, rectangular surface**. If it weren't for the title, this painting could be seen as entirely abstract. Named for the city where he painted it, the series of color bands in the work suggest the fields, mountains and hills of California, where the artist lived all his life. The broad strokes of green, blue, yellow, and purple resemble landscape patterns seen from a plane.

Soon after he did this work, Diebenkorn began to paint realistically. He worked realistically for 12 years, then returned to abstraction. He later said, “I needed to build a new vocabulary of images. A realistic or an abstract approach makes no difference. The result is what counts.”

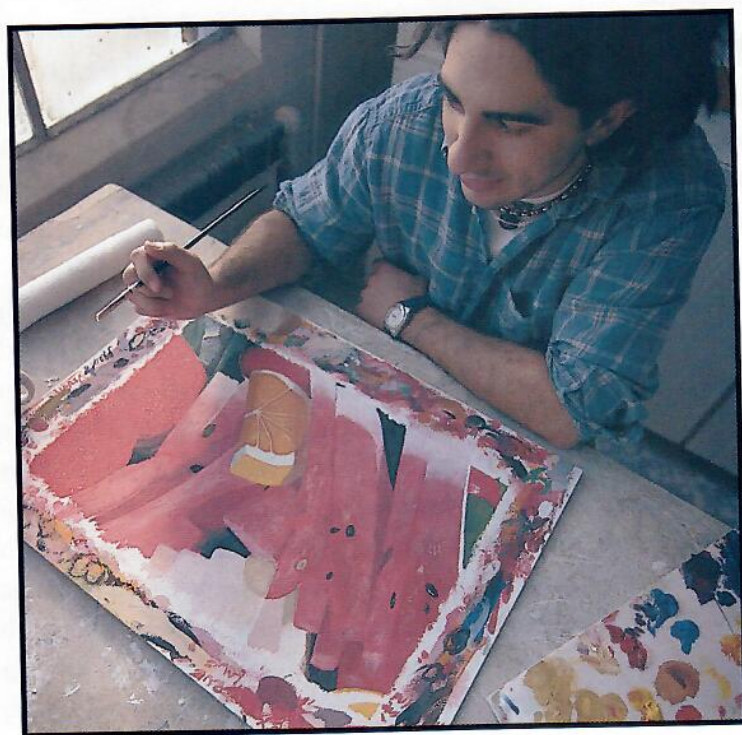




ARTIST OF THE MONTH

Mike Costello

ABSTRACTING FROM NATURE



The colors, shapes, and textures are so dominant in this striking abstraction done by 19-year-old Mike Costello, it's hard to tell if the piece was based on a "real" subject or not. Currently attending the University of Colorado at Boulder, Mike did this Scholastic Art Award-winning painting in his junior year at Lake Forest (Illinois) High School. Mike is not sure what he wants to major in at this point. But he's very interested in photography, especially nature photography. He says, "Most people will just walk by a flower. I want to take a picture of it a hundred different ways."

When did you first start creating art?

I guess my interest in art began when I was 9 or 10. Then in eighth grade, my dad gave me a camera. I took roll after roll of pictures and got interested in photography. In my junior year, I took an art class that made art really click for me. That was the first time I began constructing compositions and building art from my photography.

Where did you get the idea for this work?

It was an assignment. We had to bring in a picture and base a painting on it, making our painting as realistic as possible. I knew I wanted to use some of my own photos. I found some I had taken at a Fourth of July picnic at a friend's house. There was a table of food that looked almost too good to eat. I liked the vibrant colors and details I saw in one of the fruit trays, so I did a series of photographs of it from all angles.

How did you abstract your composition?

The only recognizable piece of fruit in the picture is the orange. I wanted it to be the focus, but I didn't want to paint a traditional bowl of fruit with an orange in the center. By cutting off the fruit at the edges, I was trying





“I wanted people to feel like they were actually in front of this fruit; that they could reach in and grab the watermelon and take a bite of it.”

to show there's a lot more there than what's in the picture frame. I wanted to create the feeling that the fruit was limitless and just kept on going. It's a different perspective on fruit.

What made you choose the color you did?

I was after a brilliance in this painting. I wanted people to feel like they were actually in front of this fruit; that they could reach in and grab the watermelon and take a bite of it. I think what makes the bright reds and oranges seem to jump out is the contrast with the neutral, more subtle colors in the picture—the blacks, grays, and greens.

How did you create your work?

I chose a certain section from one of my photos that I wanted to use to create my

painting. I also cut and snipped a little bit in places. After I worked out the composition, changing the positions and shapes around, I transferred the image to a board. Finally, I started to paint. I used tempera. I did all the red areas first. Then I painted the oranges and whites—just blocked the shapes in. I blended the colors to add more depth. Because it's the most realistic object in the painting, the orange took longest to do.

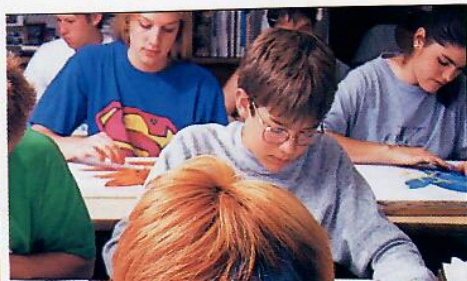
Do you have a favorite artist?

I like the work of Georgia O'Keeffe. She really brought her subjects to life. She had a gift for capturing natural things in the most basic terms. She could express the most complicated structures in nature and life using a few shapes and colors. In art today, people seem to think

that the more complicated the work is, the better it is. I think the more elements there are, the more cluttered and confusing the image becomes. I believe in creating simple art from within.

Do you have any advice for aspiring artists like yourself?

People say to just listen to yourself and work from within. But I think it also helps to listen to other people. Other people's ideas and perspectives help you learn. Do what you want, but be open to people's comments. Also, be patient. You can't just snap your fingers and hope a masterpiece will pop out. The harder you work, the better your piece will be. The more it will represent what you were trying to achieve in the first place. The more you put in, the more you'll get out.



Creating an Abstraction

Sometimes a very small object can become a monumental work of art.

Georgia O'Keeffe liked flowers. She felt that people can't properly appreciate them because they are so small. So she decided to make her flowers so large that anyone who saw them could not ignore their beauty. And while she was making her flower paintings big, the artist was also transforming the *shapes, lines, colors, and textures* of these familiar objects into unfamiliar and dramatic *abstractions*.

When you do this project, you'll be using some of O'Keeffe's techniques to create your own *monumental* flower composition.

Starting out

Find an encyclopedia that has a simple diagram of a flower and study the various parts—stem, receptacle, stamen, pistil, etc. This will help you to understand the functions of the shapes as you begin to abstract them. Select a flower that appeals to you and make it the subject of several contour drawings. Draw the

flower from **several angles**—from the top looking down, from the bottom looking up, or from a very sharp side angle. **Flatten and simplify** shapes, eliminating tiny details. Draw large, using very light lines; make sure your composition fills the paper.

Materials

- Plastic and silk flowers (old, worn flowers work best)
- School pencil
- Vinyl eraser
- 12" x 18" 60-lb white sulfite drawing paper
- 12 Cray-Pas (oil pastels) set
- Paper toweling

Prepared by Ned J. Nesti, Jr.,
Art Instructor, Morrison (IL) High
School. Photos by Larry Gregory





Step 2.

Georgia O'Keeffe **monumentalized** her flowers so they appeared to be larger than life. She did this by **isolating a detail**, **enlarging it**, then **cropping it tightly** so the form appears to be bursting out of the frame. Select your most visually interesting and dramatic *abstract* composition. Consider a **color scheme** that would contribute to the mood you wish your drawing to create.

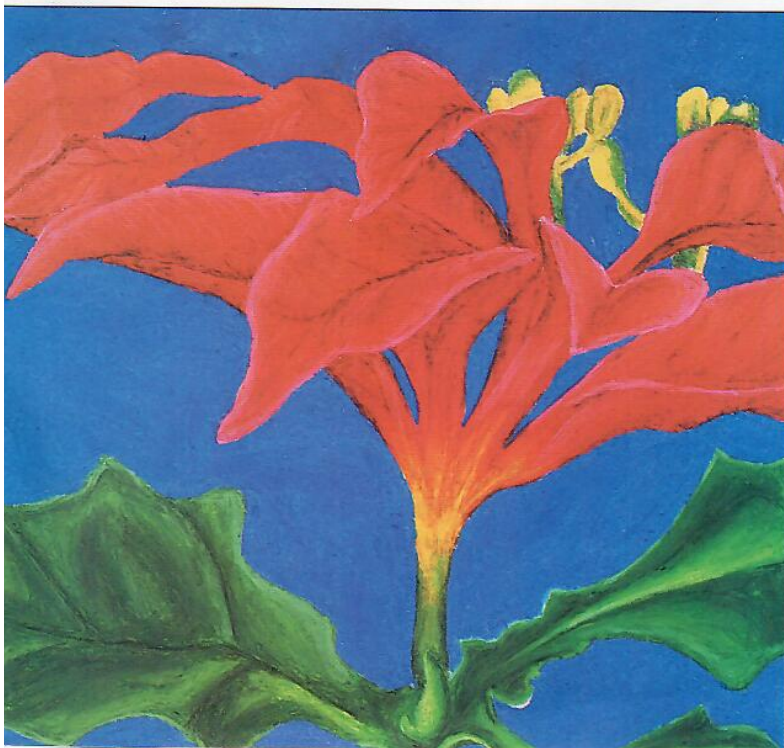
Drawings by (clockwise from top of page 14): Justin D. Boyles; A. Louise Hermes; Andrea D. Beveroth; Josh C. Gunderlock; Benjamin J. Boyles; Chris Paul Reed.

credit for pg. 16: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Flower Abstraction*, 1924. Oil on canvas. 48" x 30" Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY © Estate of Georgia O'Keeffe



Step 3.

Choose a few bold, bright Cray-Pas colors. **Color opposites** (red/green; purple/yellow; blue/orange) tend to vibrate and clash. **Warm colors** (red, orange, yellow) suggest action and excitement. **Cool colors** (blue, green, purple) tend usually to be calm and reflective. Establish a light source if you wish to use **highlights and shadows**. Practice blending and shading with Cray-Pas. Turn drawing, use paper toweling, and keep surface clean to avoid smearing.



Some Solutions

Which of these drawings would you recognize as a flower; which compositions seem completely abstract? Like some of the examples shown here, you can **pull back** and include much of the flower image, or you can **crop in** on an extreme detail. You can draw the flower from a number of **unusual points of view**. Your composition can be **symmetrical** (both sides are the same) **asymmetrical** (visually equal with different elements on each side), or **radial** (based on a circle with the center as a focal point). It can be **horizontal** or **vertical**. Your shapes can be completely **flat**, or they can be **modeled**, so there are slight **highlights** and **shadows**. Each of the bright colors you choose can be changed in **value**; blending in white produces a **tint**, blending in black makes a **shade**.

Seeing Nature From Within

"My paintings grow from what is around."

—Georgia O'Keeffe

1. The composition of this work is very similar to another O'Keeffe painting that appears in this issue. The work is called _____ and can be found on page ____.

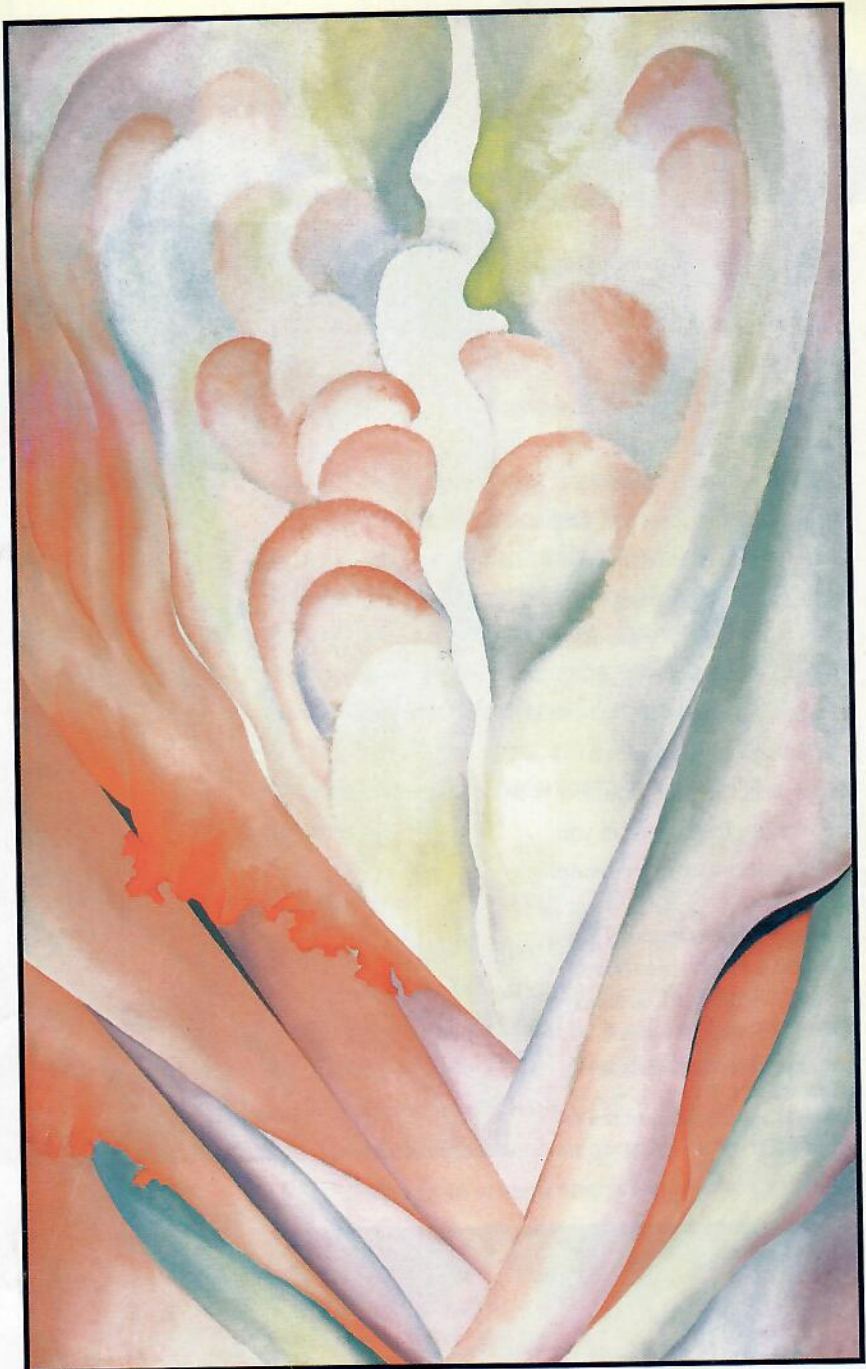
2. Based on what you've learned about Georgia O'Keeffe's work, the most likely title for this painting would be: (check the correct answer)

- A.** *Black Iris*
- B.** *Dark Abstraction*
- C.** *Pink and Blue*
- D.** *Flower Abstraction*
- E.** *Summer Days*

3. What natural object might be the basis for this abstraction?

- A.** A portrait
- B.** A battle scene
- C.** A flower
- D.** A rock concert
- E.** A figure

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4. This work is a good example of Georgia O'Keeffe's painting style. In it the artist (check the correct answer):

- a.** Uses lines (**A**)____; shapes (**B**)____.
- b.** Simplifies (**C**)____; includes details (**D**)____.
- c.** Uses shades (**E**)____; tints (**F**)____.
- d.** Uses organic (**G**)____; geometric (**H**)____ shapes.
- e.** Crops in (**I**)____; pulls back (**J**) ____ on subject.
- f.** Uses symmetrical (**K**)____; asymmetrical (**L**)____ composition.
- g.** Flattens (**M**)____; models (**N**)____ the edges.
- h.** Uses warm (**O**)____; cool (**P**) colors.