

# An O’Keeffe Odyssey

Thirty-three years after its purchase, a painting as peripatetic as its creator comes home—for good—to the New Mexico Museum of Art.

BY KATE NELSON



I don't think the Museum of Art could have asked for or received a better birthday present," director Mary Kershaw said after black curtains parted to reveal a Georgia O'Keeffe painting on the stage of Saint Francis Auditorium. The 400 people packed into the pews applauded enthusiastically, but given that they were all at least Museum of Art members and, at best, some of its most trusted advisers and donors, the unveiling of *Desert Abstraction (Bear Lake)* hardly came as a surprise. The Museum of New Mexico Foundation purchased it in 1983 and placed it on long-term loan to the museum, where it has been displayed periodically ever since. Most recently, it graced a wall in the foyer of the Governor's Residence, easily visible to anyone who entered. But in granting full ownership to the museum in honor of its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, the foundation earned its applause, if only for capping a story that contains elements of intrigue, desire, the Santa Fe Art Colony, a Park Avenue apartment, an international fashion designer, an up-and-coming art dealer, and a brief controversy.

"We're not in the business of collecting art; this is the only

piece we ever owned," says Jamie Clements, executive director of the foundation. "When we began having internal discussions about how to celebrate the museum's centennial, we reminded ourselves that we have this painting on long-term loan to the art museum. Everyone agreed that giving it to the museum is the most meaningful gesture we can make."

Why it took so long to turn it over is a question that baffles even those involved in the original purchase. To find the threads of a story most people have forgotten, you need to go back to 1932, when New York attorney Frank E. Karelson II walked into An American Place, Alfred Stieglitz's Madison Avenue showcase for modern American artists, including his wife, Georgia O'Keeffe. Karelson's twelve-year-old daughter, June, fell into the thrall of one work of art: *Desert Abstraction (Bear Lake)*. It featured a layered landscape in slabs of burnt orange and brown with two silvery-turquoise embellishments that could represent snow, water, or even a necklace on the skin of a weathered neck. Karelson was no art collector, and when Stieglitz quoted him a \$4,000 price, he quailed. He

**Opposite:** Georgia O'Keeffe, *Desert Abstraction (Bear Lake)*, 1931. Oil on canvas. The painting was permanently gifted to the museum by the Foundation on December 4, 2017. Photo by Blair Clark. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

only had \$1,000, he told Stieglitz, who was already known for refusing to sell works to people he didn't like. But the pigtailed girl's adoration touched Stieglitz. He took the \$1,000, and on February 24, 1932, wrote a note to Karelsen in a bold and flowery hand: *Orders have been given to deliver the O'Keeffe painting to you to-day. And understandably you will have received it before this. I know it will give you and yours ever increasing pleasure.*

It did, hanging above the Karelsens' fireplace for the next thirty-two years, acquiring an almost foolproof provenance. (Years later, June Karelsen Goodman said her father even decorated the apartment around the painting.) That the actual Bear Lake nestles south of Wheeler Peak on Taos Pueblo land that's now inaccessible to visitors makes the vista even more meaningful. O'Keeffe's visits to it would have been among her earliest explorations of a New Mexico landscape that lured her every summer from 1929 until she established a permanent residence in 1949. Of her three known paintings of the lake, one now resides in the White House collection. *Desert Abstraction* may not rise to a signature work, but Cody Hartley, senior director of collections at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, says it holds significance as a bridge between her earliest paintings and her New Mexico achievements. "She's really discovering and exploring the landscape and her interpretation of it," he says. "What's fascinating about the [Karelsen] painting is that it's similar in color palette and composition to paintings she did of Lake George, in New York. You see her adapting the language she developed in New York to New Mexico."

It wasn't until 1968 that a New Mexico museum would acquire an O'Keeffe of its own, and it was one of those early Lake George paintings. The Museum of Fine Art, as the Museum of Art was then called, received the circa 1924 *Landscape on Lake George* as a bequest from O'Keeffe's friend and fellow artist Rebecca Salsbury (Strand) James. Rendered in dark tones with more realism than abstraction, it could be seen, by someone with a particularly lively imagination, as a New Mexico-ish setting, with high hills, a few trees, and a remarkably small sky. But it isn't New Mexico. As the artist's fame in the state grew into a tourism attraction unto itself, the museum's collection stayed right there, at a grand one painting.

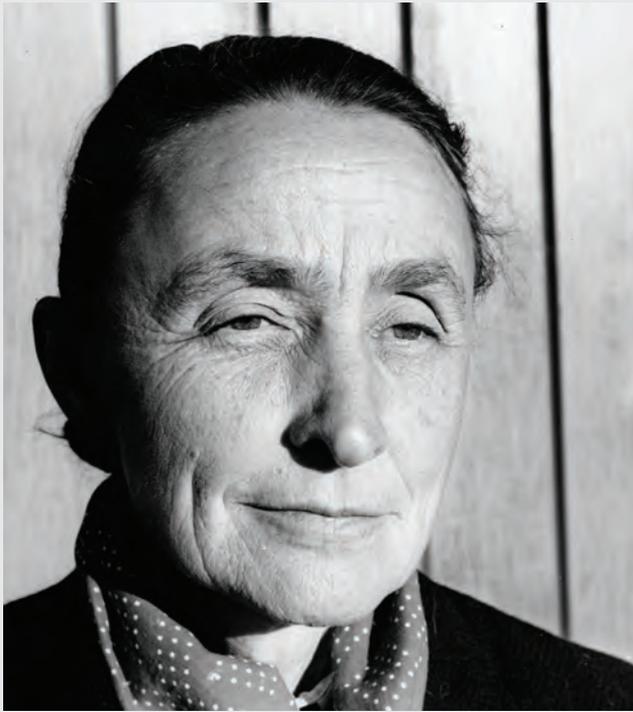
By the 1980s, the foundation and the museum realized that they had a problem. O'Keeffe was becoming the most popular artist in the state, and they had little to show for it. Tourists snapped up her Santa Fe Opera posters, greeting cards, and tote bags. Many came to New Mexico primarily to soak up some of her essence. In 1982, the museum managed to exhibit her painting *Summer Days*—a grand slam of Southwestern O'Keeffe tropes: a skull floating in a New Mexico sky, above flowers and desert foothills. That gave Thomas B. Catron, the foundation's founder, an idea. He floated the idea of purchasing it and was soon negotiating a \$400,000 price with O'Keeffe's assistant, Juan Hamilton. Both parties signed the contract, but when Catron asked how the artist would like the money delivered, the response flattened him. "Juan called me and said, 'Miss O'Keeffe doesn't get attached to her paintings too much, but she's attached to this and doesn't want to sell it.'"

Herein enters one of the first points of intrigue. Jerry Richardson, a foundation trustee, had worked for O'Keeffe in the 1970s, helping with her landscaping. She often invited him inside for lunch; sometimes, she asked him over for holiday meals. "She used to change out all the paintings in her house once a month," Richardson says. "*Ladder to the Moon* was the one painting that never changed. It was always on her living room wall. All the others? They'd go into storage. She had a new favorite every month."

Maybe O'Keeffe's attachment to *Summer Days* had a more fiscal quality. According to news reports, fashion designer Calvin Klein bought it from her in 1983 for \$1 million—a sum well beyond the means of the foundation.

Into that milieu, that same year, stepped David Turner. He had accepted a position as the museum's assistant director at a particularly opportune time. The museum had just reopened after a lengthy renovation that added the new wing, restructured interior walls, and resurfaced the courtyard. To Turner, it marked a change from old to new, a sort of chrysalis emergence similar to the one the museum is now making as it raises money to convert the Halpin Building into a contemporary art wing. New as the renovated museum was, it seemed a tad backward to many visitors.

"Everyone who came in asked, 'Where are the O'Keeffes?'" Turner says. "And we'd have to say, 'Uh, we don't have any.'" Well, they didn't have any of the Southwest. No bleached cow skulls or macro flowers—the proto-O'Keeffe images that visitors craved. "We realized it was long overdue that we do



**Left:** *Georgia O'Keeffe in New Mexico, 1939.*

Photograph by John Candelario.

Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives

(NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 165641.

something about Georgia O'Keeffe, both in our exhibitions and in our collections," Turner says.

During Catron's failed courtship with *Summer Days*, he had managed to persuade O'Keeffe to donate \$100,000 toward a future purchase. Turner learned of it and formed a plan. He built relationships with people who owned O'Keeffes, and put out a quiet word among dealers that the museum held an interest in purchasing a New Mexico-specific painting. Soon, Nat Owings called. The son of Nathaniel A. Owings, one of the nation's most significant architects, Nat grew up on the family's Jacona ranch near San Ildefonso Pueblo, rubbing elbows with locals whose ties to the Santa Fe Art Colony showed up in their DNA—people like Alice Henderson Rossin, a member of the foundation board and daughter of artist William Penhallow Henderson and poet Alice Corbin Henderson. Owings was a professor at Montana State University, but longed to be an art dealer (his Owings Gallery on Marcy Street in Santa Fe is now in its third decade of representing some of New Mexico's finest artists). His family connections soon built a path to O'Keeffe through a Jacona neighbor, and to Catron through his father, who had just hired him on as the architectural firm's attorney. Owings heard a tempting tidbit about a bequest by a New York attorney whose only major art purchase had come about in Stieglitz's gallery. Frank E. Karelsen II had died, and his will included a bequest of the family's O'Keeffe painting to New

York University Hospital. The gift had only one condition: The painting must be sold to benefit research into immunology. Owings talked to the hospital and obtained a color transparency of the painting and a photo of it in the apartment, which he sped to Turner.

He and Owings looked at how the family hung the painting, but then something odd happened. "We started turning the transparency one way, then the other," Turner says. "If you turn it the way it shows up in that photograph, the mountains are at the bottom, and the sky is filled with great, edge-to-edge clouds. But if you turn it the other way, it looks like rolling hills toward the lake valley, then mountains and sky. Complicating it is that on the back of the painting, in big, two- to three-inch-tall letters, it says, 'Georgia O'Keeffe 1931,' painted with a paintbrush. That's unlike anything we could find, and it oriented the painting to how it was hung in the apartment."

Questions and doubts arose. Is this a real piece? How do you explain the orientation? Why is her name that way on the back, but on no other pieces? "Then we found two other paintings that were a lot like it," Turner says. "One was the 1922 *Lake George*, then a 1930 *Bear Lake* in blue and purple with a fine line of blue in the middle. You can tell she had gotten herself in a position to see the lake in the distance. That helped us understand how it fit into the oeuvre of O'Keeffe in New Mexico and her developing abstraction."

June Goodman insisted, though, that the painting could only have been properly hung the way it had in the family's apartment, because that's how Stieglitz had it in the gallery. Turner and Owings sent the images to Hamilton and asked for advice from O'Keeffe. "She replied back through Juan, and I think she said, 'Yeah, this was my painting.' It wasn't clear if she said it goes this way or that way—which isn't surprising for her." Turner finally concluded that Stieglitz himself caused the confusion by playing with how he hung the painting, just to demonstrate the widening boundaries of abstraction.

With O'Keeffe's endowment and another \$250,000 from other museum supporters, the foundation obtained the painting in July 1984. And kept it, as decades crept past.

**Right:** At left, June (Karelsen) Goodman, who was once the little girl who fell in love with *Desert Abstraction (Bear Lake)* at Alfred Stieglitz's New York gallery, stands next to the painting in this photograph. It ran in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* on Sunday, October 14, 1984. The painting is oriented differently than on page 46, the museum's 1984 assessment of the correct orientation.



*Desert Abstraction (Bear Lake)* premiered in 1984 at a gala commemorating the Museum of New Mexico's 75th anniversary. It accomplished what Turner and foundation officials had hoped by breaking a logjam of O'Keeffe donations. Helen Miller Jones soon donated *Pederal with Red Hills* (1936), *Chama River*, *Ghost Ranch, New Mexico* (1937), and *In the Patio, II* (1948). "All of a sudden there were four paintings with a nice range of New Mexico influences, and *Desert Abstraction* really held its own," Turner says. Other donations followed, including *Spring Tree No. 1* (1945) and the eternally popular *Dark and Lavender Leaves* (1931). Some of the donations came directly from the O'Keeffe estate after her death in 1986. In all, the Museum of Art now counts twelve of O'Keeffe's paintings and two photographs that she took, all of which enjoy occasional display.

The tally would be one higher but for the still unsolved theft of *Special #21: Palo Duro Canyon*, on December 16, 2003. Painted in Texas in 1916, O'Keeffe's estate gave the 14 × 16-inch oil to the museum in 1995. Its disappearance baffled investigators; it has never resurfaced.

As for why the foundation retained ownership of *Desert Abstraction*, Jerry Richardson speculates that its finance officials were reluctant to show such a large loss on the books, so held on to it as an asset. Catron expresses skepticism, saying it was

always the intent to let the museum own it outright. That the hand-off didn't occur led to a skirmish in 2000 that could have settled the matter in a way that both Richardson and Catron opposed. Some foundation board members proposed selling it for \$1 million and dividing the proceeds among the four Santa Fe-based DCA museums. When it came before the full board, Richardson says, "People like me were upset. We knew it was always intended to go to the museum at some point. There was community push-back, too." The proposal fell to its doom, although attached to the decision was an intent to "revisit it at a less inflammatory time," as Richardson recalls.

That time arrived in 2017, when the foundation and its board began discussing a way it could deliver a splash of a donation, one that might inspire other collectors to show similar generosity. "This seemed like a good opportunity for us to emphasize what the foundation does for the museums in Santa Fe," Richardson says, "and to do so at an appropriate time, since we're asking for community support for the museum."

Catron applauds the ownership change. "That's where it should have been all along," he says. ■

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