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Contact: Warren Epstein, Media Relations
and Community Outreach Manager
719.477.4316; wepstein@csfineartscenter.org

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE BIOGRAPHY (1887-1986)

Georgia O'Keeffe blossomed in the desert.

In the final chapters of her life, the high plains of New Mexico were her home, her muse, her calling. Perhaps more than any other artist, she defined the region, making it iconic. And, in doing so, became an icon herself.

The Smithsonian magazine recently named O'Keeffe one of the 100 most significant Americans of all time (the only female artist on the list). Her painting *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1* (1932) recently sold for \$44.4 million, more than three times the previous world auction record for any female artist.

Her paintings are spread throughout the globe. Even the rare souls who don't recognize her name, would probably find her emblematic paintings of explosive flowers and sun-bleached bones pleasantly familiar.

"O'Keeffe is among the rare American artists, such as Ansel Adams and John James Audubon, whose work was truly transformative, and has also seen continuous mass dissemination through coffee table books, calendars, cards, etc. – all enhancing its recognition and appeal," says FAC museum director and chief curator Blake Milteer.

The bottom line: "We think of neither the development of American Modernism or Southwestern art without thinking of Georgia O'Keeffe."

O'Keeffe was born in a farmhouse near Sun Prairie, Wis. She was the second child of seven. Her parents, Francis Calyxtus O'Keeffe and Ida (Totto) O'Keeffe, were dairy farmers. Her father was Irish. Her mother's father, George Victor Totto, for whom O'Keeffe was named, was a Hungarian count.

O'Keeffe received art training early, going on to enroll in the Arts Students League in New York in 1907. By 1912, she'd moved to Amarillo, Texas, to take a job as a supervisor of art in the public schools.

Four years later, a friend introduced her to Alfred Stieglitz, a famous photographer and owner of the pivotal 291 gallery, who was captivated by O'Keeffe's groundbreaking charcoal drawings. Although he was married and 24 years her senior, they fell in love, and eventually married in 1924.

The art giant would call O'Keeffe one of the geniuses of the modern age and her work, "heartrendingly beautiful." He started photographing O'Keeffe in 1917, when she visited him in ??? and saw his exhibition of her work. By 1937, he had taken more than 350 shots of her, many of them showing her in the nude.

Stieglitz proved just as excited about promoting O'Keeffe's paintings. Beginning in 1923, Stieglitz organized annual exhibitions of her work.

O’Keeffe visited New Mexico many times, beginning with a train stopover there in 1917 (“I loved it immediately. From then on I was always on my way back.”). She didn’t move there permanently, though, until after Stieglitz’s death in 1946. She lived simply in her homes in Ghost Ranch and Abiquiu, and painted artifacts of the desert. After years of poor health, including losing all but her peripheral eyesight, O’Keeffe died in Santa Fe in 1986. She was 98.

“The sun-bleached bones that Georgia O’Keeffe gathered in the New Mexico desert were decidedly dead stuff,” writes curator Charles C. Eldredge in the *Eloquent Objects* catalogue. “Yet she found them beautiful and ‘strangely more living than the animals walking around.’ Like her similar gatherings from the land – shells, rocks, pieces of wood – the bones were mementos of experience. They could convey ideas, could speak to and for O’Keeffe.”

She might have agreed.

“I seem to be hunting for something of myself out there,” she wrote to Stieglitz in 1929, “something in myself that will give me a symbol for all this – a symbol for the sense of life I get out here.”