

City Night



By Pam Pevon
Artist: Georgia O'Keeffe
Date: 1926
Medium: Painting, Oil on Canvas
Size: 48 x 30 in.
Accession #: 80.28
G377

One can't paint New York as it is, but rather as it is felt.

-Georgia O'Keeffe

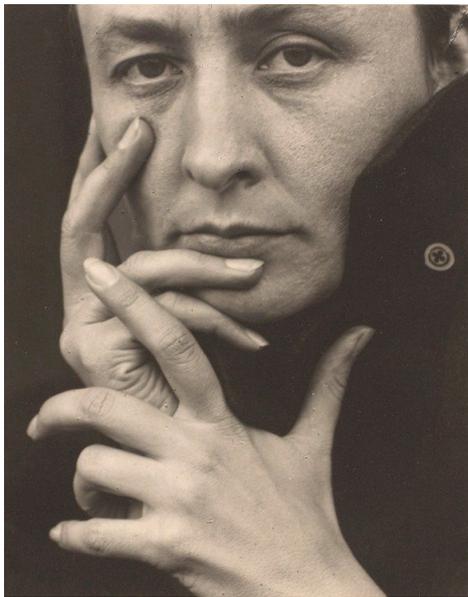
City night was painted in 1926 during a time of economic growth and expansion of New York City. O'Keeffe had moved into a New York apartment at the Shelton Hotel and was both fascinated and exhausted by the bustling city. Therefore, she eliminated the windows and other architectural details from the buildings to emphasize how ominous these structures were to the human on the sidewalk with the light of the low hanging full moon to guide them through canyons of glass and steel.

O'Keeffe used extreme angles for the composition of architectural forms. The industrial subject matter, harsh angles, and straight lines are typical of the Precisionist movement. Influenced strongly by Cubism and Futurism, its main themes included industrialization and the modernization of the American landscape, which were depicted in precise, sharply defined, geometrical forms. The themes originated from the streamlined architecture and machinery of the early 1900s. Precision artists considered themselves strictly American and tried to avoid European artistic influences. O'Keeffe chooses to keep a restricted palette-- in City Night there is little to no color; black and white like a photo.

The importance of the skyscraper at the time cannot be overlooked; it was considered a distinctly American "thing," signifying symbols of modern technology. How it was to be represented in an accurate and aesthetically pleasing way became a challenge to photographers and painters alike in the New York art world. For artists like Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler, for example, the mystique of the skyscraper was so great it ultimately, became their muse.

Europeans visiting New York were equally fascinated with the architectural feats. “The appeal America exercised as the ideological reflection of anything inadmissible in ancient regime Europe” was possible because “America was free, it was unlimited in space, it abounded in natural resources and in money. It knew no tradition, it had no history.”

During those early years in New York, O’Keeffe grew to know the many early American modernists who were part of Stieglitz’s circle of friends, including Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Paul Strand and Edward Steichen. Strand’s photography, as well as that of Stieglitz and his many photographer friends, was instrumental in inspiring O’Keeffe’s work.



About the artist:

Georgia O’Keeffe gained worldwide fame for her austere minimalist paintings of the US Southwest. Born in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, on 15 November 1887, O’Keeffe grew up in Virginia and first studied painting at the Art Institute of Chicago. Initially, she embraced a highly abstracted, urban style of art. She later moved to New York where she thrived within the growing community of abstract expressionists. Beginning in 1912, though, she began spending time in Texas and she became the head of the art department at the West Texas State Normal College in 1916. O’Keeffe’s time in Texas sparked her enduring fascination with the stark and powerful western landscape. She began to paint more representational

images that drew on the natural forms of the canyons and plains that surrounded her. O’Keeffe’s paintings of cow skulls and calla lilies gained particular attention and won her an enthusiastic audience. She rarely signed a painting, but instead would sometimes print an "OK" on the back of the canvas.

Her marriage to the New York art dealer and photographer Alfred Stieglitz brought O’Keeffe back to the northeast. For a decade, she divided her time between New York City and the couple’s home in Lake George, New York. In 1919, O’Keeffe made a brief visit to the small New Mexican village of Taos, and she returned for a longer stay in 1929. Attracted to the clear desert light and snow-capped mountains, she began returning to New Mexico every summer to paint. O’Keeffe found a vibrant and supportive community among the artists that had been flocking to Taos and Santa Fe since the 1890s.

After Stieglitz died in 1949, O'Keeffe permanently relocated to Abiquiu, New Mexico. There she continued to produce her hauntingly simple images of the southwestern land she loved. By the time she died in 1986, O'Keeffe was considered one of the preeminent artists of the American West.

I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life -- and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.

I found I could say things with colors that I couldn't say in any other way -- things that I had no words for.

-Georgia O'Keeffe