

Georgia O'Keeffe's New Mexico

Exploring the desert landscape that inspired this American artist

by Peggy Wolff

In April of 1929, Georgia O'Keeffe left New York for New Mexico on a "working" vacation, with enough paints and brushes and canvas to last for a few months. Little did she realize that this break from her hectic New York lifestyle would spark a passion for the Southwest that would last the rest of her life.

Taos revitalized the artist and her obvious, immense enjoyment of the landscape was on her lips for weeks: "Well, well, well," she murmured repeatedly to friends, "isn't the country wonderful? No one told me it was like this!"

That first summer she couldn't take in enough of her new surroundings. "There doesn't seem to have been a crack of the waking day or night that wasn't full," she wrote in a letter. "I have frozen in the mountains in rain and hail—and slept out under the stars—I got a new Ford and learned to drive it—and I laughed a great deal—I went every place that I had time to go."

A Woman on Paper

O'Keeffe's decision to make the trip west was prompted by both personal and professional motives. She had spent the previous 11 summers at a family retreat in Lake George with her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, the famous photographer and gallery owner. The two had met years before when a mutual friend showed some of O'Keeffe's abstract charcoal drawings to Stieglitz. His reac-



The artist in 1948 at her adobe home in Abiquiu, where she spent her winters.

Philippe Halsman 1948/© Yvonne Halsman 1989

tion to her work is now legendary: "At last, a woman on paper." The drawings were exhibited in a one-woman show in 1916 at Stieglitz's 291 Gallery, thus propelling her into the spotlight of the early-20th-century art world. Eight years later they were married.

During the summers they spent at Lake George, Stieglitz's extended circle of family and friends interrupted the couple's time together and took them away from their work. Overwhelmed by his "volatile madhouse of a family" and bored with the greenery at the lake, O'Keeffe headed west. Although Stieglitz felt that she was deserting him—he had suffered a heart attack the previous September—she believed strongly that her life and her work needed new attention. The early 1920s had brought her high critical acclaim and public popularity, particularly because of her oversized images of flowers, but by 1929 the praise was less enthusiastic. Going

west was the hardest decision O'Keeffe ever made, but she resolved to devote the spring and summer months to the desert and the rest of the year to Stieglitz in New York.

The two New Mexico homes in which O'Keeffe lived are not open to the public; it is possible, however, to retrace her steps to see the landmarks that became her truest, most consistent visual sources. These include the flat-topped Cerro Pedernal mountain, the highway that ran beneath her hilltop home in Abiquiu, the old

ponderosa pine on D. H. Lawrence's ranch, the red and yellow hills nestled behind her summer home at Ghost Ranch, and the desert where she wandered collecting animal skulls and pelvis bones.

Finding the Faraway

To explore the "Faraway," as O'Keeffe called New Mexico, the best place to be based is Taos, which O'Keeffe referred to as "Mabeltown" for the art patron and socialite, Mabel Dodge Luhan, who dominated the local happenings. Mabel had a flair for attracting people with important names and interesting talents, most notably D. H. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas.

Mabel's estate is now a charming bed-and-breakfast inn called *Las Palomas de Taos*. Traveling east from the Taos Plaza on Kit Carson Road, turn north just past Carl's Trading Post onto

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Morada Lane, and continue about half a mile to the big rambling adobe house.

One day while walking around Mabel's estate, O'Keeffe found two flowers, as she later recalled in her book *Georgia O'Keeffe* (Viking Press, 1976). "I picked a large blackish red hollyhock and some bright dark blue larkspur that immediately went into a painting" (*Black Hollyhock, Blue Larkspur*). O'Keeffe had been painting flowers ever since her childhood art lessons in Wisconsin, and they had become one of her themes.

"Nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven't time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time," she wrote. "So I said to myself—I'll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers."

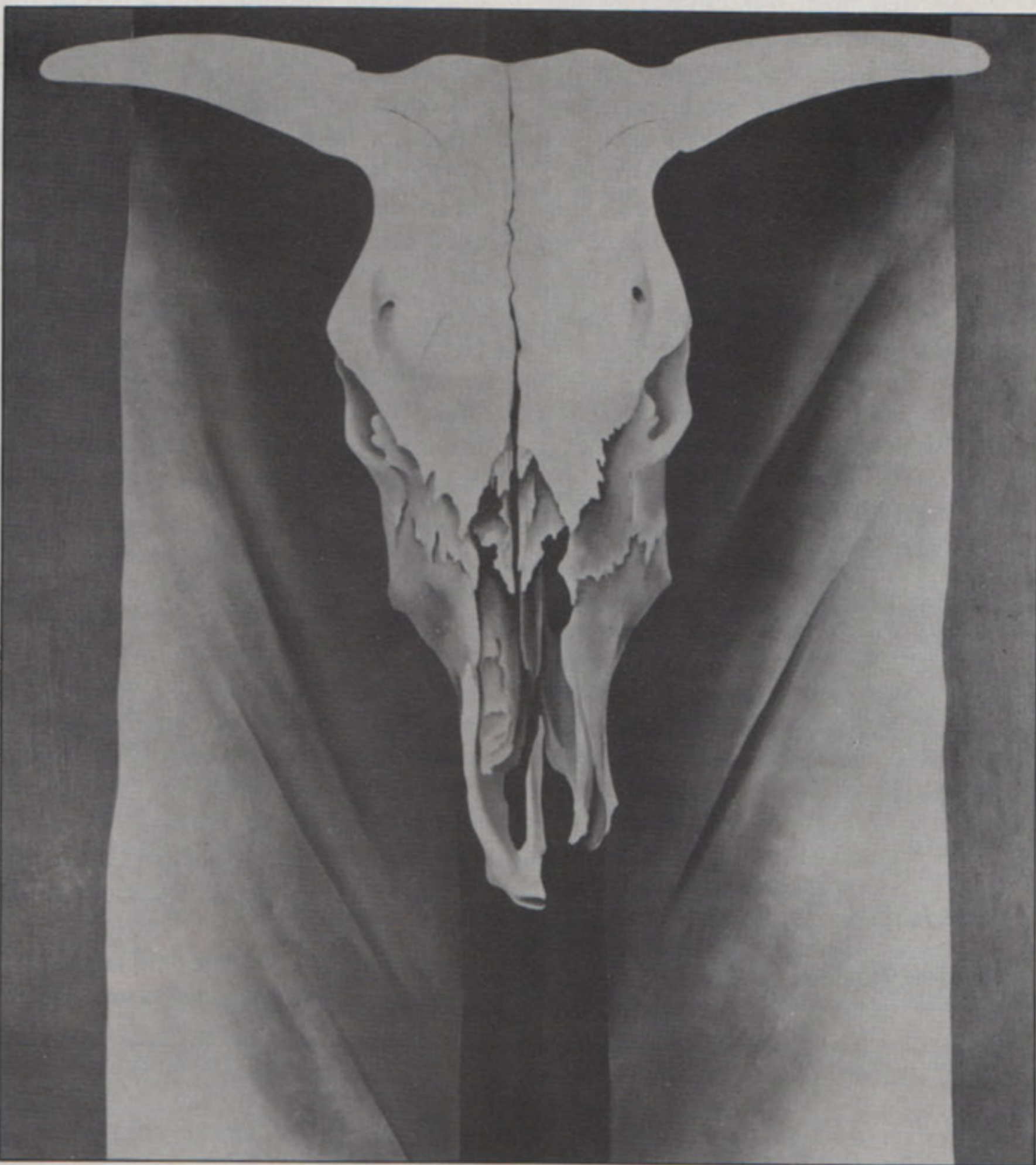
Equivalents

That first summer O'Keeffe also discovered the primitive black wooden crosses that dotted the Taos hills. *Black Cross, New Mexico; Black Cross with Red Sky; and Black Cross with Stars and Blue* were not an attempt to glorify religion, as the critics thought, but a way to express what was for her an integral part of the land. Declared O'Keeffe: "I saw the crosses so often—and often in unexpected places—like a thin dark veil of the Catholic Church spread over the New Mexico landscape. . . . For me, painting the crosses was a way of painting the country."

In her paintings, the shape of the cross, the way it loomed over the dark hills, and the way she edited out scale and distance were meant to convey the "equivalent" of the feeling she got from the landscape. Stieglitz had introduced the concept of equivalents to her: Since she couldn't duplicate nature she needed to search for equivalents to convey the *feeling* she got from experiencing the flower or the cross at a particular time.

One of the places O'Keeffe stayed near Taos was the Kiowa Ranch, now called the D. H. Lawrence Ranch because it was a gift from Mabel Dodge Luhan to Frieda and D. H. Lawrence in exchange for the manuscript of *Sons and Lovers*. (This is the ranch that appears at the end of Lawrence's novella "St. Mawr" and in his essay "A Little Moonshine with Lemon.") There,

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949



For O'Keeffe, painting the bleached animal bones she collected was a way to express the desert, as in this famous 1931 painting, *Cow's Skull: Red, White and Blue*.

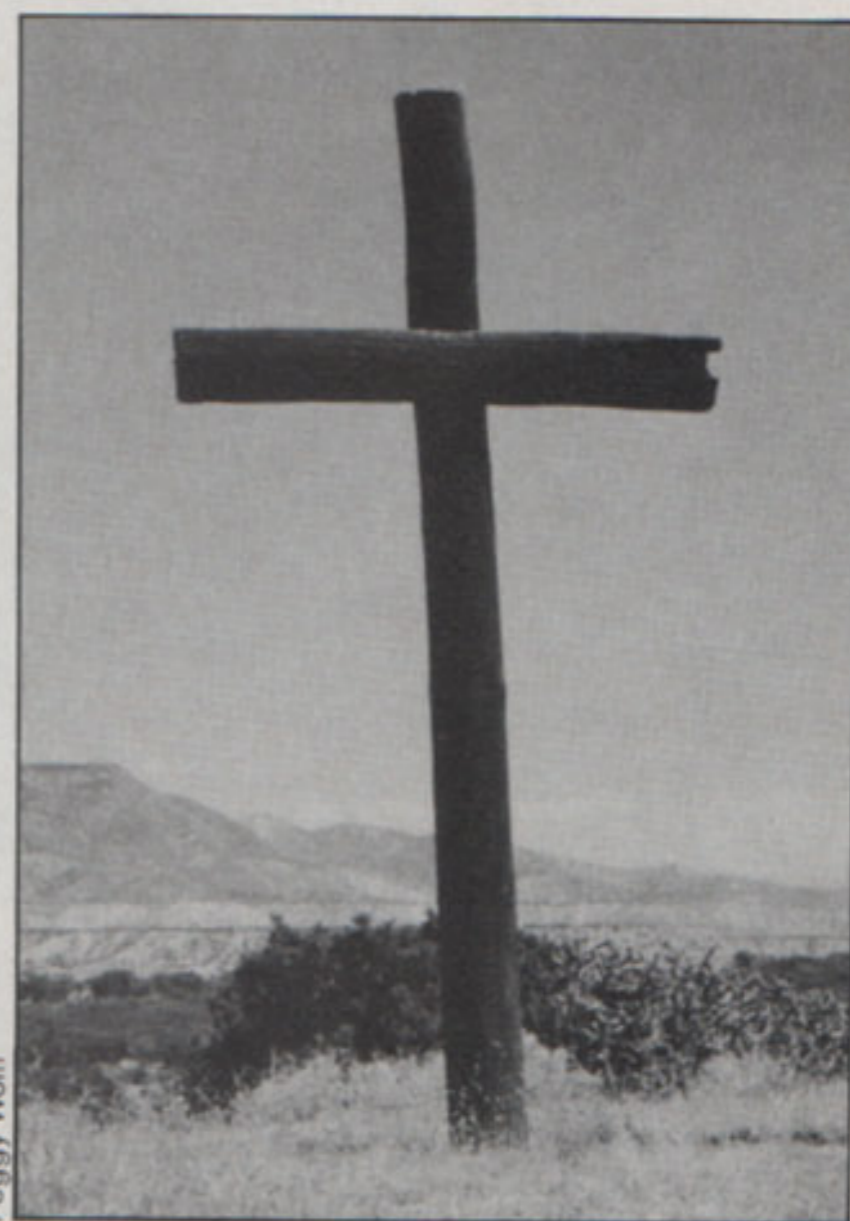
O'Keeffe made a painting of an old ponderosa pine, *The Lawrence Tree*, which became one of her favorites.

To visit the ranch, follow State Route 522 (previously numbered 3) 14 miles north of Taos. The turnoff from the highway is marked by a state historical marker on the right. Follow the dirt road for about six miles to the ranch, which is open to the public during daylight hours.

Fragments and Fortresses

The desert where O'Keeffe lived out her 98 years is southwest of Taos. Follow Highway 68 south from Taos, then take Highway 74 west toward Ojo Caliente and Abiquiu. Turn left at junction 285 onto Highway 84 and head north into Abiquiu.

On the way is a landmark that O'Keeffe painted—the Church of San Francisco de Assisi. Also called the Ranchos Church, it is four miles south of Taos on Highway 68. In her book,

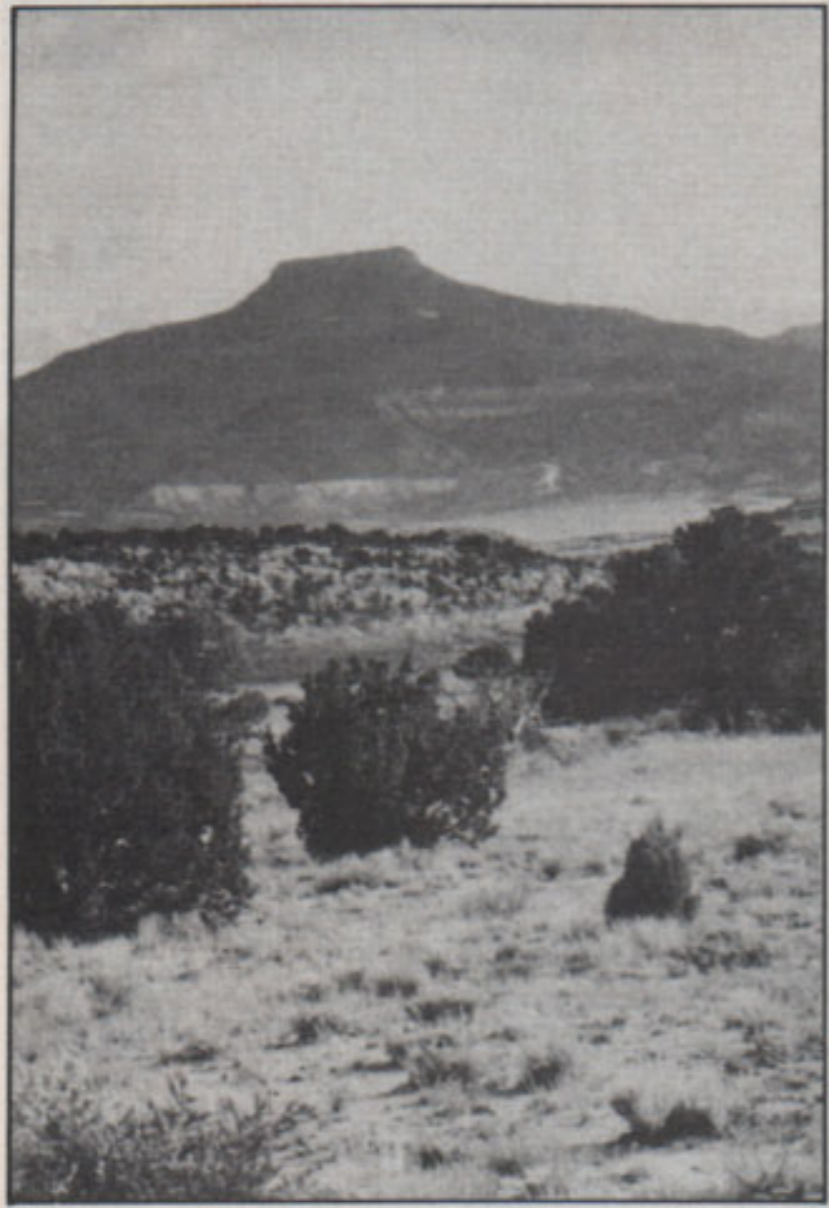


Peggy Wolff

O'Keeffe viewed the primitive black wooden crosses that dot the Taos hills as "a thin dark veil of the Catholic Church spread over the New Mexico landscape."

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O'Keeffe described this church as one of the most beautiful buildings left in the United States by the early Spaniards. "Most artists who spend any time in Taos have to paint it, I suppose, just as they have to paint a self-portrait." She was particularly pleased with her painted fragment called *Ranchos*



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Church. By painting only a part of the back of the church she felt that she said all she needed to say about it.

Continuing on Highway 84 toward Abiquiu, there is a point at which one of O'Keeffe's homes—a fortress atop a mesa surrounded by a terra-cotta-colored wall—can be seen from the road. After the sign that reads MILEMARKER 282, look up to the left. This was where she spent part of the year because her summer home at Ghost Ranch was too remote for winter living. *The Winter Road* and *Road Past the View I* are abstractions of the view she had of Highway 84.

"Two walls of my room in the Abiquiu house are glass and from one window I see the road toward Española, Santa Fe, and the world," she wrote in her book. "The road fascinates me with its ups and downs and finally its wide sweep as it speeds toward the wall of my hilltop to go past me. I had made two or three snaps of it with a camera. For one of them I turned the camera at a sharp angle to get all the road. It was

accidental that I made the road seem to stand up in the air (*Road Past the View I*), but it amused me and I began drawing and painting it as a new shape. The trees and mesa beside it were unimportant for that painting—it was just the road."

Cliffs of Every Color

To explore the Ghost Ranch Living Museum, a 14-acre environment of canyons, forests, prairies, and marshes, continue about 14 miles farther on Highway 84 and leave your car in the museum's parking lot. From a hiking trail in back of the museum building, you will get the same views of the red and yellow hills and the Cerro Pedernal that O'Keeffe had from her home.

O'Keeffe first saw the area when she was learning how to drive her Model A Ford. She was so exhilarated by the sight that she knew immediately it was where she would live. The artist rented and then bought one of the low ranch buildings, called Rancho de los Burros, on the dude ranch owned by Arthur

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The view of Cerro Pedernal (left) inspired O'Keeffe's 1936 painting, *Red Hills with the Pedernal*. "It's my mountain," she used to say. "God told me if I painted it enough, I could have it."



Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico

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Pack, the conservationist and publisher of *Nature* magazine. From the museum's fire lookout tower, Rancho de los Burros is barely visible at the base of the red and yellow cliffs.

The house was far out into the badlands, three miles away from ranch

headquarters. It was U-shaped with a flat roof where, in the cool desert night, she often spread a mattress and slept under the stars. From her patio, as far as she could see, were mountains, mesas, gullies, precipices, and cliffs of every color—lavender, red, yellow,

black, and purple. Even when clouds blocked the sun, she was delighted because the colors would change in a hundred different ways.

To see the view that O'Keeffe had from her home, take the 90-minute round-trip hike on the nature trail in back of the museum. The trailhead is at an upright log with #28 painted in yellow, and the numbers descend along the way. At markers #16, #15, and #14 there are views of the Cerro Pedernal, easily recognizable because of its flat top. "It's my mountain," O'Keeffe used to say. "God told me if I painted it enough I could have it."

Relics of the Desert

Juan Hamilton, a potter who worked for O'Keeffe, described how simply she lived at Ghost Ranch. In the courtyard were neatly arranged relics of the desert: "A few skulls and pelvis bones on a cedar shelf, a small bell ringing in the breeze, some flagstone tables with her favorite rocks. Red rocks and black obsidian, river rocks, and a stone once used for grinding corn." Inside her home it was white—white-stained floors, white ceilings, white cotton curtains, white walls. She tried to eliminate everything in her home that was unnecessary, claiming, "If you have an empty wall, you can think on it better."

O'Keeffe took long walks through the red and yellow hills with her chow dogs, Inca and Jingo, climbing up and down old cattle trails, and painting the landscape again and again—*Summer Days*, *Red Hills and Bones*, and *Red Hills and White Flower*. She mainly spent her days outdoors, looking for places to paint or ways to get her car across gullies, picking flowers, and collecting the bleached dry white animal bones scattered throughout the desert. She picked them up and saved them because she thought their forms were beautiful. But, eventually, she began to see them in a different way—as equivalents of the desert. "I have wanted to paint the desert and haven't known how," she said in an exhibition catalogue. "The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable—and knows no kindness with all its beauty." ■

Peggy Wolff is a Chicago-based freelance writer who has long admired O'Keeffe's work.



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The former estate of art patron and socialite Mabel Dodge Luhan is now a charming bed-and-breakfast inn.

ON THE O'KEEFFE TRAIL

Rates at *Las Palomas de Taos* are \$60 to \$95 per night. (For information write to Box 3400; Taos, NM 87571; 758-9456; all telephone numbers are in area code 505.) At the *La Fonda de Taos* hotel (758-2211) on the south plaza, it's possible to see the owner's ten paintings by D. H. Lawrence. Though the scenes of fleshy bathers are hardly erotic by today's standards, they were banished as obscene from Britain.

In Abiquiu, the *Abiquiu Inn* (685-4378) on Highway 84 is a good place to stop for lunch and to buy O'Keeffe books, posters, and postcards. On Highway 84 about two miles east of Abiquiu, the *Los Trujillos* store sells gasoline, dairy cows' skulls, strands of red chiles, and Indian fried bread. Also on Highway 84 is the *Red Crow Camp*, a roadside attraction with a large collection of bleached bones for sale—deer, elk, fox, coyote, cow, sheep, and goat.

To learn more about O'Keeffe, two books are especially recommended: *Portrait of an Artist*, by Laurie Lisle (Washington Square Press, New York City, 1987), and *Georgia O'Keeffe, Art and Letters* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1987). This latter book is the exhibition catalogue for the O'Keeffe show touring the country (now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through June 18).

Surprisingly, museums in New Mexico do not have particularly strong examples of O'Keeffe's work. Museums with the most impressive collections include the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Art and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas.