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GEORGIA O'KEEFFE'S
GHOST RANCH

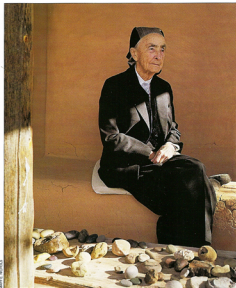


HISTORIC HOUSES

Georgia O'Keeffe's Ghost Ranch

THE ARTIST'S FIRST NEW MEXICO HOME IS FAITHFULLY RESTORED

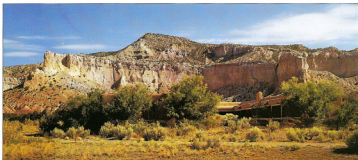
Text by Dana Micucci/Photography by Robert Reck



"To me it is the best place in the world," O'Keeffe (left, at 94) said of Ghost Ranch. "It has always been secluded and solitary. When I first went there, it was only one house with one room—which had a ghost living in it." **BELOW:** Bluffs rise to the north of the house, which is partly obscured by piñon trees.

As soon as I saw it, I knew I must have it," said Georgia O'Keeffe of the simple adobe house at Ghost Ranch, her first residence in her beloved New Mexico. O'Keeffe first stayed at the 21,000-acre dude ranch in 1934, having already spent several summers in northern New Mexico, captivated by the piercing sunlight, expansive skies and stark beauty of the high-desert landscape that have long attracted artists to the region.

Here in this unpretentious, U-shaped structure, situated in a remote area of the ranch, O'Keeffe spent each summer and fall of most of the last 40 years of her long and prolific life. (She died in 1986 at



the age of 98.) Its adobe walls seemingly an extension of the earth itself, the Ghost Ranch house (first shown in *Architectural Digest* in June 1981) nurtured her love of nature. Its picture windows frame views of majestic cliffs and mesas. O'Keeffe expressed her enthusiasm for her surroundings in a 1942 letter to the painter Arthur Dove:

"I wish you could see what I see out the window—the earth pink and yellow cliffs to the north—the full pale moon about to go down in

an early morning lavender sky...pink and purple hills in front and the scrubby fine dull green cedars—and a feeling of much space—It is a very beautiful world."

She immortalized the landscape around her home, in all its shifting moods and colors, in paintings such as *The Cliff Chimneys*, 1938, *Untitled (Red and Yellow Cliffs)*, 1940, and *My Front Yard, Summer*, 1941, which depicts a vista of her "private mountain," the Cerro Pedernal. "Out here, half your work

is done for you," O'Keeffe said. She particularly delighted in climbing the hand-hewn wooden ladder to the roof, where she often entertained visitors and slept under the stars.

A component of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center, which is affiliated with Santa Fe's Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the artist's house at Ghost Ranch recently was restored to its original 1940s appearance, based on photographs from the period. The ranch

For more than 40 years Georgia O'Keeffe spent her summers at Ghost Ranch, some 60 miles northwest of Santa Fe. "I loved it immediately," she said of her first visit to New Mexico. "From then on I was always on my way back." **OPPOSITE:** O'Keeffe would climb the ladder to the roof, where she often slept.



The stark desert landscape corresponds to O'Keeffe's austere, self-sufficient image.



itself, located some 60 miles northwest of Santa Fe, now functions as an educational-conference center run by the Presbyterian Church.

At Ghost Ranch, Georgia O'Keeffe composed a life of Zen-like simplicity. The stark desert landscape corresponds to the austerity of the house and its interior as well as to her austere, self-sufficient image. O'Keeffe's minimalist aesthetic, rooted in her appreciation of Asian art and the design-driven

teachings of artist Arthur Wesley Dow, with whom she studied at Columbia University in 1914–15, is evident throughout. The rooms are decorated with a careful assemblage of found objects and functional furniture and open onto a central patio, overgrown with gray-green chamiso and sagebrush. Adobe fireplaces and walls, and the *viga*-and-*latilla* ceilings typical of New Mexican adobe-style architecture, endow the house with a

TOP: O'Keeffe at her dining table in 1967. ABOVE: The kitchen and breakfast room feature *viga*-and-*latilla* ceilings and windows that open onto the high-desert landscape. The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Research Center has restored the house to its 1940s appearance.

LEFT: As elsewhere in the house, rocks, shells and bones collected by the artist on her walks line shelves in the dining room. Chinese chairs surround the plain plywood table. The simple, U-shaped adobe structure was built in the 1930s; it now sits on approximately 12 acres.



welcoming, earthy intimacy.

Though modest in appearance, it exudes a certain harmony, as if every element were in its proper place, reflecting O'Keeffe's attention to detail.

Her studio is a tranquil, whitewashed space with a hardwood floor and an adobe fireplace, above which hangs a bleached animal skull. Displayed on the mantel and windowsills, as well as on the naturally grained cedar ledge encircling the room, are gnarled branches and animal bones, reminiscent of the objects that she scavenged from the desert. The originals were donated, along with O'Keeffe's art materials and personal possessions, to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum

Research Center in Santa Fe by artist Juan Hamilton, O'Keeffe's friend and associate, and his wife, Anna Marie.

All of the artist's furnishings remain in the house, arranged as she once lived among them. In the studio, where O'Keeffe installed a picture window to maximize the desert view, are a scattering of rush-seated chairs, a modest wooden table and a red-canvas-and-chrome Le Corbusier-style lounge chair. White cotton curtains shade the windows. The artist's easel, which supports a large, primed blank canvas, stands in a corner. A small wooden bench and a metal cart bearing tin cans of paintbrushes, paint tubes and other supplies are nearby.



TOP: From the breakfast room, O'Keeffe could look north to the pump house. ABOVE: Her *Untitled (Red and Yellow Cliffs)* dates from 1940, the year she bought the property. In 1949 she settled permanently in New Mexico, dividing her time between Ghost Ranch and Abiqui.

OPPOSITE: A ledge displays bones and other objects found by the artist. "The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even though it is vast and empty and un-touchable—and knows no kindness with all its beauty," she once said.





The studio at Ghost Ranch remained an austere space with few furnishings. O'Keeffe also painted outdoors, and her Model A Ford functioned as a kind of mobile studio. "I thought the ranch would be good for me because nothing can grow here and I wouldn't be able to use up my time gardening," she said.

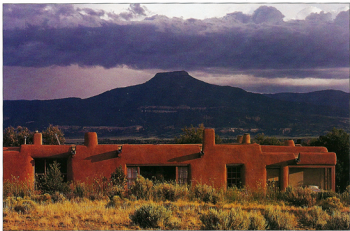
The room adjacent to the studio served variously as a bedroom and a sitting room where O'Keeffe often listened to classical music. It is furnished with several rudimentary tables, a simple black chair, an old stereo and the plain desk on which O'Keeffe penned her numerous

letters to her husband, photographer and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz, who never set foot in New Mexico.

Even sparer in appearance is the artist's corner bedroom, in which two perpendicular walls of glass offer an unobstructed view of the red-and-yellow cliffs in what

she called her backyard. A flagstone floor and a modest twin bed dressed in white cotton sheets add to the monastic aura of the space. Cedar wall ledges display seashells and rocks, another reminder of O'Keeffe's love of simple natural forms.

"O'Keeffe had a profound



BELOW: The Le Corbusier-style lounge chair in the studio is original to the house. Small items were given to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe by her friend and associate, Juan Hamilton. The house is now used for research activities.

ABOVE: The house, with Cerro Pederal in the distance. "I suppose I could live in a jail as long as I had a little patch of blue sky to look at," O'Keeffe said. "The kinds of things one sees in cities... it's better to look out the window at the sage."



connection to nature, its forms, shapes and contours. Her main objective was to distill her experience of the world around her to its essence," says Barbara Buhler Lynes, curator of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum and the Emily Fisher Landau director of its research center.

"The solitude and raw, elemental beauty she found at Ghost Ranch brought her closer to that essence."

The dining room is minimally furnished, with a long plywood table, tall-backed Chinese chairs and an Art Déco-style floor lamp. Polished black stones, carefully

arranged on the windowsill, glisten in the sunlight. Adjacent to the dining room are the kitchen and pantry, precisely ordered with the artist's spices, canning jars, baskets and myriad cooking utensils. O'Keeffe enjoyed eating in the vestibule off the kitchen, where she would sit

on the *banco* (adobe ledge) and look out into the New Mexican desert, studded with wildflowers and stunted piñon and juniper trees.

The Ghost Ranch residence represented for O'Keeffe "a kind of freedom," she said, despite the hardships of living in isolation with generator-supplied electricity and without a telephone or fresh fruits and vegetables, for which she had to drive to Santa Fe on a dirt road.

Her daily routine here was marked by her reverence for simple rituals and an inner clarity that allowed her to be fully present in each moment. She would rise early and take a long walk before breakfast, accompanied by her dogs. After breakfast, she would venture back into the desert for a day of painting, often using her Model A Ford as a portable studio. Upon returning home, she would take an evening walk before dinner. The lasting impression of O'Keeffe's legendary life and art, and the Ghost Ranch home that stood at its center, is that of a woman completely at ease with the natural world and with herself. □

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