

**College Guild**  
PO Box 6448 Brunswick, Maine 04011

# Art of the Masters

## Unit 3 of 6

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### Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986)

Georgia O'Keeffe, an abstract expressionist, was born on a farm in Wisconsin in 1887. Her mother was of Hungarian ancestry and her father, Irish. She wasn't born with a special creativity, but a life of suffering sickness and setbacks, along with some good fortune, worked to her advantage. She became one of the most successful artists of the 20th century, making an enormous contribution to modern art. She loved painting flowers, desert landscapes, and white cow skulls, and her work was influenced by Surrealism - a style of art that stressed what was in the subconscious and putting the unexpected side by side. After she left the University of Virginia at the age of twenty-nine, she taught art in Texas, Virginia, and South Carolina. Her early paintings were shown in New York at the gallery of Arthur Stieglitz, who was a well-known art photographer. Picasso, Matisse, and Rodin, the French sculptor, were first presented there when they came to the United States. O'Keeffe, being a woman, was a rarity in the field of painting in the early 20th century - and to be accepted was unprecedented.

#### 1. Can you think of other areas of society that have been reluctant to accept women?

Eventually, O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, twenty-three years her senior, became romantically involved. Not long afterwards, she blossomed into the most famous and highly paid woman artist in America. In 1927, O'Keeffe and Stieglitz were married. She was at the peak of her career. Only a few years later, her husband became interested in another woman, who was even younger than Georgia. Heartbroken, she had a nervous breakdown and ended up in a hospital. After that, she went to Lake George, New York, in the Adirondacks, to rest and paint. Following her stay at Lake George, she went to New Mexico. It was there that her disappointments drove her to self-discovery. Her independence emerged as well as her independent vision.

#### 2. Do you believe that suffering can sometimes bring about something good? Why or why not?

In New Mexico, she lived in Abiquiu in an adobe house close to Ghost Ranch, a retreat for wealthy Easterners. She loved this area and was extremely prolific with her paintings. In 1949, she became the subject of numerous feature stories in popular magazines. She was portrayed as having changed from the slender young lady married to the elderly photographer to a woman who was noble, reserved, and sun-wrinkled from hard work. Her spiritual ties to nature and the landscape had deepened.

In the 1920s and 1930s, O'Keeffe was known as the "Lady of the Calla Lilies" because of the many variations of this flower she had painted. It was a very popular flower at that time. She continued painting calla lilies into her old age.

#### 3. Do you have a favorite flower, tree, bush, etc.? Sketch it!

#### 4. How do you think being immersed in nature, as Georgia O'Keeffe was, can influence our mindset? Does being in nature ever help shift your perspective?

In 1932, O'Keeffe painted *Cow Skull with Calico Roses* (Appendix 1). Animal skulls were the most well known of her subjects. This one is definitely surrealistic!

**5. Do you find the skull to be morbid or beautiful? Why?**

In 1936, O'Keeffe painted the *Jimson Weed* (Appendix 2), called the miracle plant. She loved this heavily scented, night-blooming plant and had it growing wild around her Ghost Ranch patio despite the fact that its seeds are poisonous.

**6. Notice O'Keeffe's fluid, almost swirling brush strokes. Do you like her portrayal of this flower better than a photograph of the flower? Why or why not?**

Another rather surrealistic painting was done in 1958 - *Ladder to the Moon* (Appendix 3). It's a painting of the Pedernal Mountains of New Mexico in the distance; the sky is a gorgeous turquoise. The Pueblo Indians felt the ladder represented a link to cosmic forces.

**7. Some say this is a religious work. What do you think?**

Towards the end of her life, there were several exhibitions of her work and the production of a documentary film. In 2001, Christie's auction house in New York sold *Calla Lilies* for 6.2 million, a record price for a woman artist. Interest in O'Keeffe is still escalating. Georgia had envisioned a museum dedicated to showing her art. The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum opened in 1997 in Santa Fe with 137 of her works in its permanent collection. In all, she completed more than 2,000 paintings. At her death, her estate was worth over 70 million - after donating many of her works to museums. Among other honors, she received the National Medal of Arts from President Reagan. Georgia O'Keeffe once said: "I have seen with my own eye."

**8. After looking at O'Keeffe's work, what aspect of her work do you think contributed the most to her fame?**

**José Clemente Orozco**  
(1883-1949)

José Clemente Orozco was born in Mexico, spending his early youth in Guadalajara and Mexico City. On his way to school, he passed a shop where an engraver worked in the window, doing illustrations for the newspaper. This set his imagination in motion, and he began creating his own little figures on paper. But his father wanted him to go to agricultural school, and so he did. At the age of twenty-one, Orozco lost his left hand in an accident while mixing chemicals to make fireworks to celebrate Mexico's Independence Day.

**9. With his Dad wanting him to go to agricultural school and losing his left hand, there seemed to be a lot going against Orozco becoming an artist. What do you think inspired him to continue his dream of becoming an artist?**

After the accident, he decided to enroll in night school, studying drawings at the Academy of Fine Arts. He studied Greek and Roman sculpture and was inspired by Michelangelo's muscular, human forms in the Sistine Chapel.

**10. You may remember some of Michelangelo's muscular human paintings and sculptures from Unit 1 (look in Appendix 4 for an example). Looking at Orozco's work in the Appendix, do you think his work was similar to Michelangelo's, or very different? Explain.**

In the early 1900s, he worked in watercolor, his style much like Picasso's, expressing his art through the human form. Orozco was a modest, unpretentious man. He wore overalls and mounted scaffoldings to complete his murals. He was a

social realist and muralist, specializing in the hardship of everyday life. He didn't paint for pleasure; he had something to say. At that time, he and other artists were passionate critics of Mexico's social system. There was pessimism in his work - see *La Cantina* (Appendix 5) and *Return to Labor* (Appendix 6).

**11. In *La Cantina*, what do you imagine a person sitting next to the dancers is thinking about the situation?**

**12. As you can see, *La Cantina* is painted in color, while *Return to Labor* is in black and white. Considering this, which is more effective in conveying the artist's message/emotion and why?**

His fresco, *Man Released from the Mechanistic* (Appendix 7), painted at Dartmouth College, shows man emerging from a heap of machinery, symbolizing slavery and the conversion of man into robot. Man is shown at last able to go forth with a new creative freedom.

**13. What are your thoughts about 'man as a robot' vs. 'man free to express himself creatively'?**

In 1917, Orozco felt that the atmosphere in Mexico was not receptive to his type of art, so he headed to Texas. Eventually, in 1927, he moved to New York. In 1930, he was invited to paint some murals in the dining hall at Pomona College in California. Soon after this, he traveled through Spain, France, and Italy. When he returned to the States in 1932, he went to New Hampshire to paint the murals in the library at Dartmouth. Until this time, muralists in America painted decorative works. Orozco's were called "The Epic of American Civilization" (Appendix 8). He did hundreds of preliminary drawings. The murals were bold and startling, some mirroring Orozco's vision of immigrants rising and attaining a triumph of the spirit. These murals show Orozco's faith in a noble human destiny.

**14. What do you think of Orozco's vision regarding immigrants?**

**15. What's your favorite detail in this painting and why?**

In 1938, Orozco returned to Mexico. The president of Mexico awarded him the Federal Quinquennial Prize. He became a national hero.

Orozco was one of the three greatest Mexican muralists and the first Mexican muralist in North America. He was one of a handful of people who made the twentieth century the most creative in modern history.

**16. Orozco's paintings are quite different from those we have seen up until this point. How would you describe them? Do you like them?**

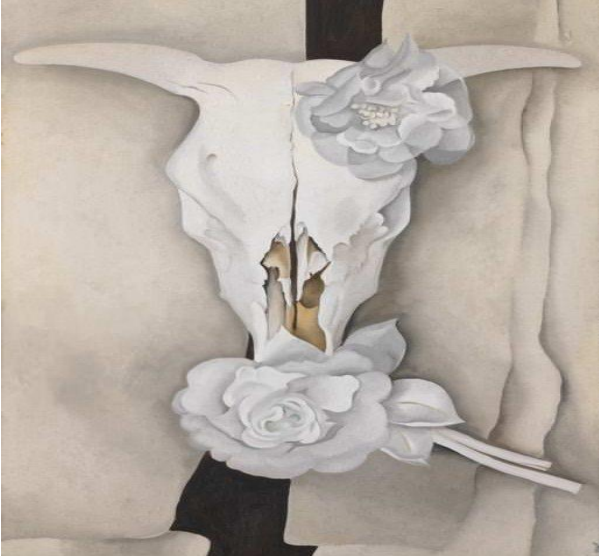
**17. After looking at the paintings in the appendix - do you find works of art about nature or about people more interesting? What do you think you would most like to paint?**

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Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

**Appendices**  
**Art of the Masters: Unit 3 of 6**

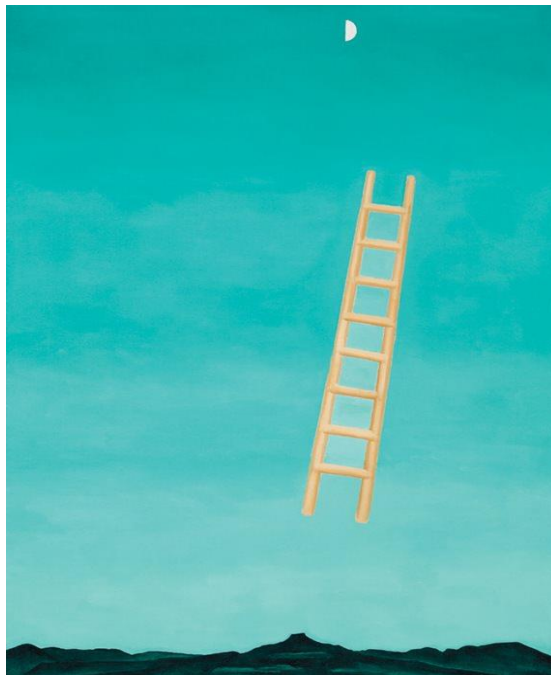
(Appendix 1) *Cow Skull with Calico Roses*  
c.1931



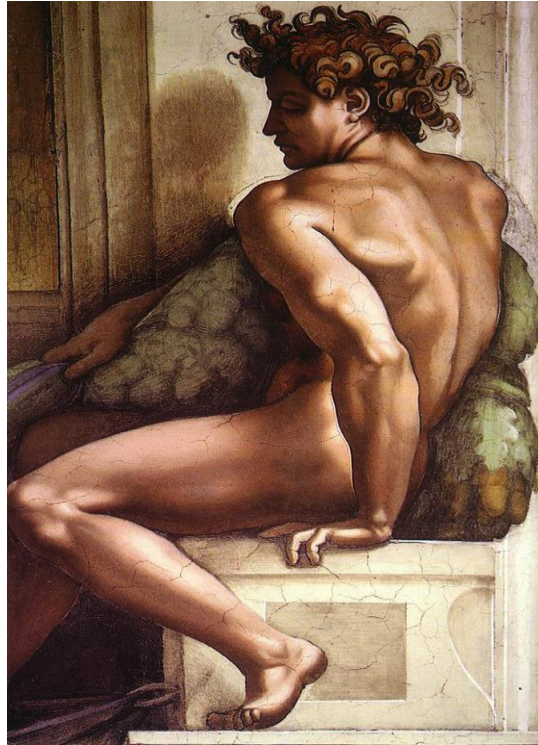
(Appendix 2) *Jimson Weed* c.1936



(Appendix 3) *Ladder to the Moon* c.1958



(Appendix 4) *Ignudo* c.1509



(Appendix 5) *La Cantina* c.1941

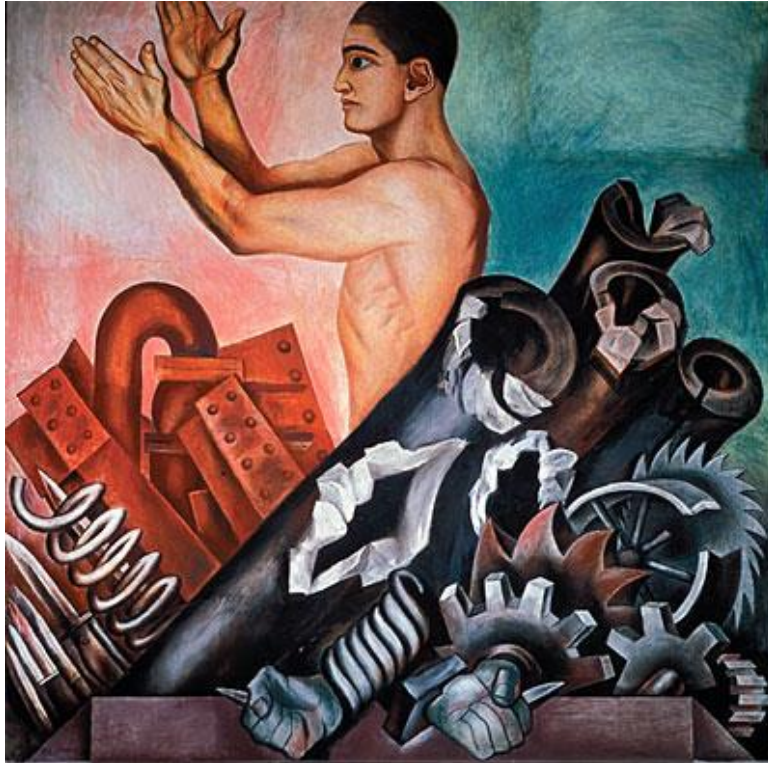


(Appendix 6) *Return to Labor* c.1926





(Appendix 7) *Man Released from the Mechanistic* c.1932



(Appendix 8) *The Hispano-America panel (#16) in The Epic of American Civilization* c.1932-34

