



Georgia O'Keeffe *Canyons and Crows*

Note to parents: All lessons include suggested art materials; a book to read to student artists to further their understanding of the artist and their work; information about the artist; discussion questions; and step-by-step instructions for completing the artwork. Whenever possible, ideas for changing the lessons to make them age appropriate for student artists are suggested. These lessons should be educational, fun, and offer a chance to spend some time using their brains in a different way. We suggest turning on some classical music while they (and you!) create.

Lesson: Artists will create an abstracted landscape using the Georgia O'Keeffe's piece *Canyons and Crows* as inspiration. All adults should create a sample first with the art materials on hand. Be creative with available materials. Use timelines, maps, internet images and cross curricular connections to the famous artist studied.

Art Supplies

- Watercolor paints (recommended: Prang 16 color, OVAL, Semi-moist, NOT washable. Amazon: approx. \$10 with shipping)
- Paintbrush (watercolors come with a brush that is not the best (too small) but workable)
- White paper about 9" x 12" but may be larger if available (lightweight watercolor paper, cover stock, paper that will hold up to water)
- Water container
- Paper towel or clean cloth
- Crayons

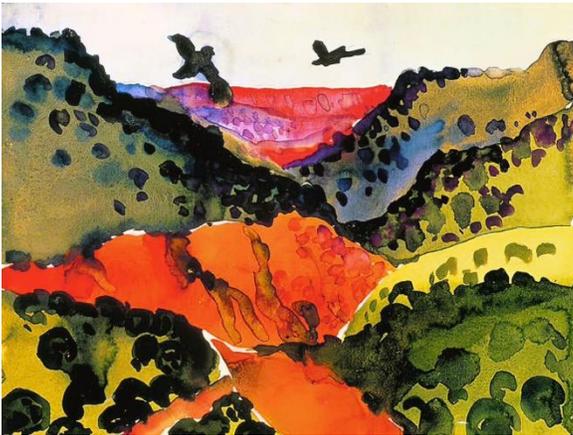
Book: There are numerous picture books about Georgia O'Keeffe. Some of my favorites are:

My Name is Georgia by Jeanette Winter (for young artists)

Georgia O'Keeffe by Mike Venezia (for older artists)

Below is a read-aloud text specific to O'Keeffe's early life and *Canyons and Crows* painting. I suggest you print out or look at the painting online for this lesson.

Famous Art and Artist Discussion



Canyons and Crows
Georgia O'Keeffe
1917
Watercolor, 9" x 12"
Georgia O'Keeffe Museum
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Georgia O'Keeffe was born on a farm in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin in 1887. When she was growing up, most people in the United States lived on farms or in small towns.

Girls were expected to get married, be mothers, and take care of all the household chores. The washing was done by hand without washing machines. Wood heated the kitchen stove. Water often had to be carried into the house. There were no vacuums or electric appliances.

Most schools treated boys and girls differently if they were even in school together. Women would not be allowed to vote until 1920. Georgia had never known a female artist other than the teachers who taught her art lessons.

Yet, Georgia knew the answer to what she wanted to be when she grew up. "I said very definitely- as if I had thought it all out and my mind was made up, I am going to be an artist."¹

When the O'Keeffe farm could no longer support the family, they moved to Virginia. Georgia went to an all-girl boarding school. "The Principal was the art teacher and the studio was my home about the place...I loved the country and always on the horizon far away was the line of the Blue Ridge mountains- calling- as the distance has always been calling me."

Unfortunately, Georgia became sick with typhoid. She spent a year recovering.

Once she was well, Georgia knew what she wanted to do next.

She started art school. Georgia practiced making the things she was told to make in school. Art students were supposed to make art that looked realistic and she did what was expected. Her

¹ Georgia O'Keeffe, by Georgia O'Keeffe, Viking Press, New York 1976 All quotes in this read-aloud are from O'Keeffe's own words.

painting of a rabbit won an award. About the art she was shown in art school, Georgia said, “I didn’t think much of the compositions and I wasn’t interested in what was said about them, but it started me thinking that I would try to make a painting I would really like.”

The O’Keeffe family struggled, and Georgia needed to work. She got a job as a commercial artist. A commercial artist draws realistically to help sell things. Unfortunately, Georgia became terribly ill again. This time with measles. She had trouble with her eyes, which had to be very scary, especially for an artist. She would not paint for several years, until she took a class that inspired her to continue her artist’s life once again.

She was offered a teaching job in Texas. “It always seemed to me that the West must be wonderful – there was no place I knew of that I would rather go – so when I had a chance to teach there, off I went to Texas – not knowing much about teaching.” Would Texas be wild and wonderful like the stories her Mom had read to her as a child? The wide-open spaces enchanted her. Even the sky looked bigger.

Georgia knew what she wanted to do next.

She took summer classes and studied with several other art teachers who taught her new ideas about art and teaching.

When she went back to teaching art in Texas, she walked across the plains when the first star of the night was in the sky. She painted this first star ten times. She experimented with her watercolors to express the wilderness and wonder as she saw it.

Canyons and Crows is one of these paintings. It is a landscape with a high horizon line. The horizon line separates the earth and sky. At the very top of the painting, she painted two crows. This is not like the landscape paintings she saw in art school. This painting is not big. It is just about the size of a painting you might make in school - 9 inches tall and 12 inches wide. She used watercolors. Her landscape is not completely realistic.

Many people thought abstract art was strange, odd, and bizarre. Georgia did not learn about abstract art in school but from a gallery in New York.

“Some of the first drawings done to please myself I sent to a girlfriend requesting her not to show them to anyone. She took them to ‘291’ and showed them to Alfred Stieglitz and he

insisted on showing them to others.” This gallery was the first to exhibit Georgia’s art. She was 29 years old.

Georgia O’Keeffe continued to paint and create for the rest of her life. She lived for 98 years. She is one of the most important artists in the twentieth century.

Discussion Questions

Look at artwork- Ask and answer questions- Cite your reasons- Explain and elaborate

- What is a landscape? What words would you use to describe a canyon?
- Is ***Canyons and Crows*** realistic or abstract? Or somewhere in between?
- What is a horizon line? Where might the viewer be standing? (at bottom of canyon? Birds’ eye view?)
- How do you know the birds are crows? Are the crows close or far away?
- How does the artist use perspective in this painting? (Pink hills look farther away, one crow bigger...)
- What colors does the artist use? How does the artist show trees and bushes? Realistic?
- What color is the sky? What does this tell you about the weather?
- How does the artist show us the hills? More than one? Smooth line or rugged?
- Do you think Georgia O’Keeffe made up this landscape or did she see something like it in nature?
- All quotes in the “read aloud” are O’Keeffe’s own words. What kind of source is this?

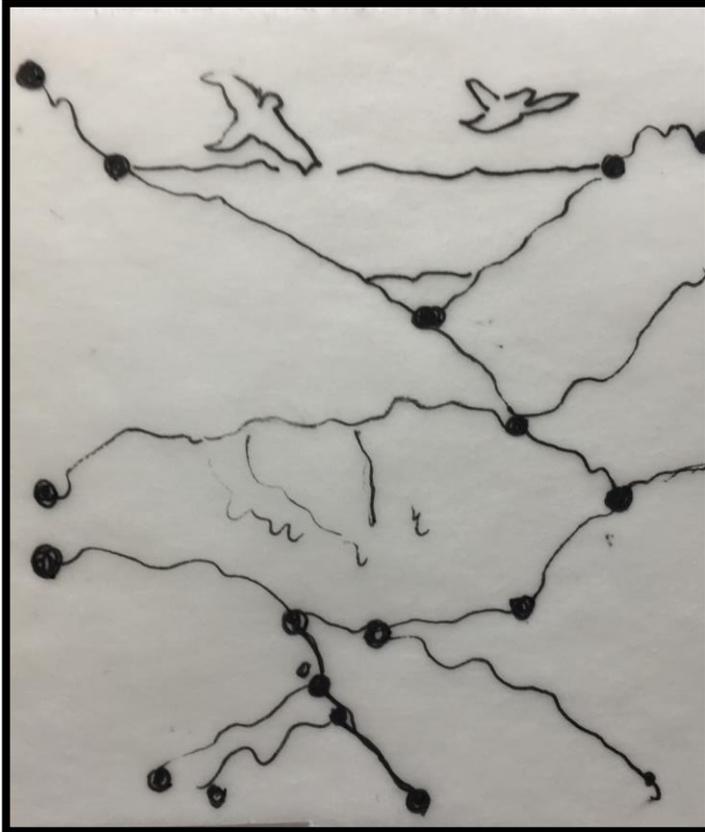
Process:

Georgia O’Keeffe probably used a pencil to lightly sketch the topography and position of the canyon hills before painting with watercolor. We are going to use crayons to create a line drawing of the composition. Watercolor on top of crayon will resist.

Extra credit: At end of lesson, any artist who wants to give it a try will use just watercolor. Just watercolor without the guiding lines of the crayon is more difficult.

Artists do not have to copy O’Keeffe’s work. However, there is a lot to be learned by using her landscape as reference. I tried several versions but even though I looked at her work, the outcome is always mine. I also oriented the paper both landscape and portrait. Artists may go either direction.

YOUNG ARTISTS process- Simplify the numbers of hills drawn in crayon. Use helper dots to connect shapes. Help “wake-up” watercolors with clean water at beginning of lesson. Remind about mixing complements that will create mud. Use a “V” shape for the crows. Show how to fill hills with circles, shapes, design in crayon.



Begin with a black crayon and press hard enough so the crayon will still be visible when watercolor is layered on top. With young artists, you may edit the composition with just a few hills. Do keep the high horizon line and do use helper dots to help connect the hills.

The crows can be created with a finer black pen or crayon and filled in completely. Artists may want to draw with pencil first and then fill in with black sharpie.

It is also OK to draw a large



and build upon that to create the crows or just leave as is.

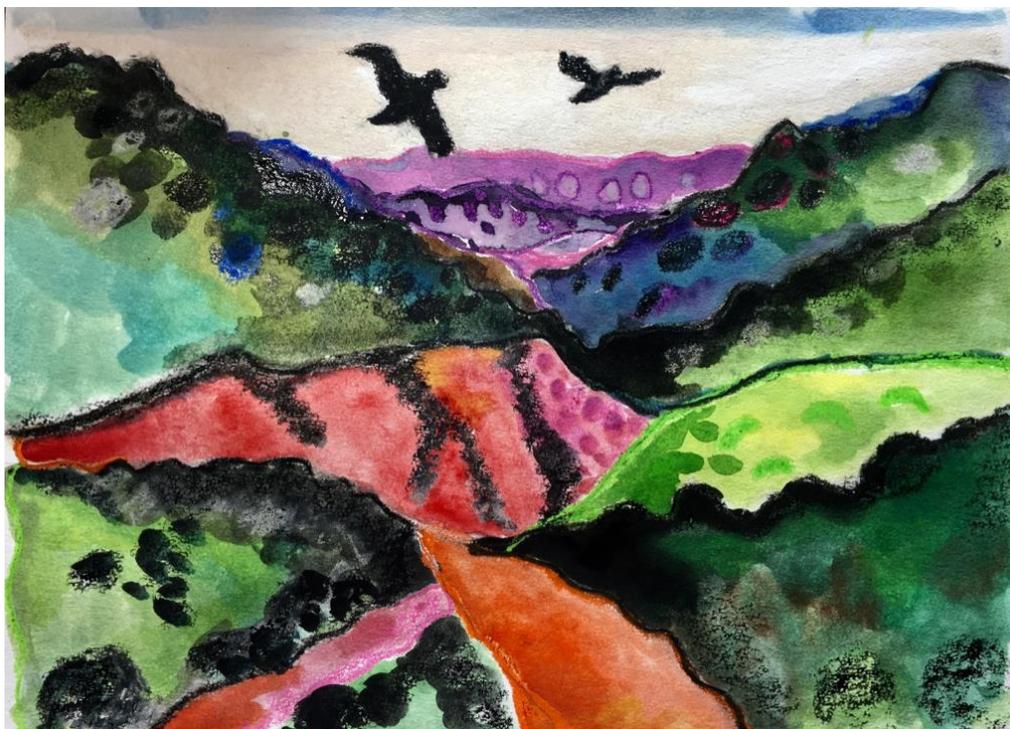
Add more crayon lines as desired without coloring in shapes. May use other colors.

May color bushes or outline shapes to remember colors of sections.





Crayon line example before watercolors are added.



Fill in with watercolor

EXTRA CREDIT Watercolor only:



In the six steps pictured above, I began the process with a light watercolor sketch. Note the difference between using crayon. With crayon I start with the darks and end with the lights. With this watercolor sketch, I began with the lights and then layered the dark values. I can draw the crows with paint, marker or crayon.

A pencil could be used if sketch lines are noticeably light. Pencil lines tend to be heavy for young artists and the pencil comes with an implied "DO OVER". Some artists cannot move ahead with the project if obsessed about perfection. They draw/erase, draw/erase, draw/erase, and then give up.

I encourage artists to finish each piece and then try again. The idea of throwing out work that does not go as expected or abandoning a project, does not move the creative process forward. Think what it takes to invent ANYTHING.... a lot of trial and error. Art is not any different. There is no formula and each of us has a unique perspective and skill set.