

Peabody Essex Museum presents well-rounded exhibit of Georgia O’Keeffe’s art and style

By By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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In a sweeping exhibition that layers the artist’s work with details of her inimitable and influential persona, the Peabody Essex Museum opens “Georgia O’Keeffe: Art, Image, Style” this week. Seamlessly curated by Wanda M. Corn, and originating at the Brooklyn Museum, the exhibition draws frequent parallels between O’Keeffe’s paintings and her personal fashion ideas and creations.

If you go...

WHAT: Georgia O’Keeffe: Art, Image, Style

WHERE: Peabody Essex Museum, East India Square, Salem

WHEN: through April 1

TICKETS: Free with museum admission. Visit www.pem.org or call 978-745-9500.

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Seamlessly curated by Wanda M. Corn, and originating at the Brooklyn Museum, the exhibition draws frequent parallels between O’Keeffe’s paintings and her personal fashion ideas and creations.

Normally, an exhibition with this many dresses, hats, shoes and other outfits would tumble precipitously into the “fashion is art, and here’s why” category. Not this one.

O’Keeffe’s sense of style wove organically into her ideas about life, her ideas about art, her ideas about the world around her. She defined her life, and lived it. There is a perception that she never compromised over anything, and this exhibition feeds that notion.

O’Keeffe (1887–1986) worked with extraordinary rigor, and her abstract, nature-oriented paintings are immediately recognizable as her own. Happily, more than three dozen of her watercolors, gouaches and oils are on view here, including celebrated works like “Ram’s Head/White Hollyhock—Hills,” “East River No. 1” and “Brooklyn Bridge.”

But this exhibition doesn’t just hang greatness on the walls and wait for everyone to come worship. Corn’s thoughtful connections linking O’Keeffe’s persona, her fashion designs, her life as a photographic subject — as well as her inimitable artwork — make this an experience of her life.

Dozen of photographs buttress Corn’s ideas. Of course a generous selection of images by O’Keeffe’s husband, Alfred Stieglitz, form the basis of the photographic documentary that emerges.

But O’Keeffe loved any camera (even though she hardly ever smiled). Images by Ansel Adams, Todd Webb, Philippe Halsman, Bruce Weber, Yosuf Karsh and others capture the artist in her primary home settings — New York, and after 1950, New Mexico — and elsewhere.

From the very entryway of the exhibition, clothes play an important part in this chronological appreciation. O’Keeffe dressed purposefully, and designed and executed many of her own outfits. Wrap dresses, men’s-style suits, hats, kimonos, blue jeans and dozens of other items complement the paintings and photographs.

Paintings from the 1910s (“Portrait of Catherine O’Keeffe,” “Woman with Blue Hat”) show early influences like Toulouse-Lautrec and Beardsley. One painting, “Pool in the Woods, Lake George,” done at the summer home she shared with Stieglitz, reminds of Arthur Dove.

But O’Keeffe mimicked her influences only lightly. She was herself — and nobody else — seemingly from childhood on. Co-opting her greatness, making her into a feminist hero — she would have none of it, and said so. She was an artist.

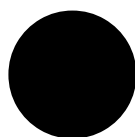
The greatness of the paintings lies at the intersection of abstraction, color harmony, geometry — and, strangely, a sense of the pastorate. Even her supposed modernist urban images — like the chiaroscuro oil on canvas “East River No. 1” — seem softened by their place in the world. City images don’t strive to overcome nature, but add to it.

Several very brief videos — including a touching, confident sequence of the artist near the end of her life — add context to the curatorial intentions.

Every great artist walks a path that starts with themselves, and leads to the unexpected. Don't miss a chance to follow O'Keeffe's journey in this compelling exhibition.

“Georgia O’Keeffe: Art, Image, Style” runs through April 1 at the Peabody Essex Museum. For information visit www.pem.org or call 978-745-9500.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com



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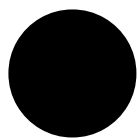
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