

It's Personal: Exploring the Work of Georgia O'Keeffe

Inspiration: Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887–1986). *Banana Blossom* (detail below), 1934. Charcoal on paper. Bequest of Carl E. Hiller, 1992 ([92.1.1](#)). © 2018 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY.

Ages: 5+ (through adult)

Duration: Open-ended

Materials: Paper and pencil; charcoal for drawing, if available.

Introduction: Why does an artist create their work? The answer is often complex for those with a visual art practice. Artwork can be commissioned by a gallery or museum, collector or corporation; it can be a commercial enterprise; it can be made in response to particular events, a particular location, or to make a statement; and it can be created for compelling, deeply personal or even private reasons. Ultimately, an artist creates work because that's who they are and what they do; it is how they generally process and respond to the world around them. Often, a work is created in response to a combination of these factors. Georgia O'Keeffe's charcoal drawing from 1934, *Banana Blossom*, demonstrates the importance of understanding the context for the creation of a particular work.



Look

Take a close look at *Banana Blossom*.

- What's going on in this work?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Think

- Why do you think O'Keeffe used charcoal as a medium for this work?
- How did she make use of value, texture, and emphasis in her monochromatic version of a colorful blossom and leaves? What is your eye attracted to when you look at the work?
- Why do you think she chose to draw a single blossom versus an entire banana plant?

Connect

O'Keeffe is well known for her botanical abstractions—large-scale, close-up depictions of blossoms and leaves in vibrant colors—as well as for her modernist landscapes and New York cityscapes. She was a critically acclaimed and financially successful artist for the majority of her career. Like many artists, she occasionally engaged in commercial work. In 1932, she won a competition to create a mural at New York's Radio City Music Hall, but the overall failure of this commission and simultaneous crisis in her marriage to photographer and gallerist Alfred Stieglitz led her to an emotional breakdown and deep depression; she stopped painting for almost an entire year.

Her mental health deteriorated to the point where she admitted herself to a hospital in 1933. After her release, she traveled to Bermuda to rest and recuperate, and she created this work there, along with other place-specific botanical works in graphite and charcoal. It was after this difficult transitional period that O'Keeffe created many of her iconic, colorful depictions of the American Southwest.

Do

1. Consider a personal issue, problem, or recurring mood you may be having in response to changes in your life because of COVID-19, your family, work, or school situation, or your relationship with another person or group of people. How do you feel when you think about a difficult topic, event, or personal problem?
2. Consider a subject, in nature or otherwise, that is immediately available for you to observe. What happens to your mood, perception, or thought processes when you sit and look at this one object or subject for a period of time?
3. Using only a paper and pencil, or charcoal if available to you, extend this act of focus and close observation by making your own detailed, monochromatic work on paper.

Reflect

In your own life, how do you deal with difficult times? What activities do you do to lift your mood, distract yourself, and get back on track? Have these transitional periods of sadness or difficulty led to something new in your life?

Share

Take a photo of your work and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #GeorgiaOKeefe and #MuseumFromHome, and tag @HudsonRiverMuseum.

