



Red Hills and Bones, 1941, by Georgia O'Keeffe



Red Hills and Bones
1941
Oil on canvas
29 3/4 x 40 inches (75.6 x 101.6 cm)
Georgia O'Keeffe
American, 1887–1986

Let's Look

- Look carefully at the foreground, middle ground, and background of the picture. What is in each part?
- What do you notice about the setting of this painting? What kind of place is this?
- Describe the colors that you see. What do they remind you of?

Let's Look Again

- Compare the shapes, colors, and textures of the hills and bones. What similarities and differences do you notice?
- Georgia O'Keeffe loved to go for hikes in these hills. What would you explore in this place, and why? What do you think you'd discover?

About the Painting

This painting shows the hills and cliffs that were right outside Ghost Ranch, Georgia O'Keeffe's home in New Mexico. She found endless inspiration in this desert landscape and painted it many times. She said, "A red hill doesn't touch everyone's heart as it touches mine. . . . Badlands [desert] roll away outside my door, hill after hill—red hills of apparently the same sort of earth that you mix with oil to make paint." Even her house, made from the same reddish-brown earth, shared this color that O'Keeffe loved.



Ghost House Patio with Skull and Chili's at Ghost Ranch, October 9, 2011, by Angi English

A large hill stands majestically in the center of the picture. Dark, jagged cracks start at the base and stretch their way up the hillside like deep wrinkles. The hill is completely bare, reminding us that few plants can survive in the hot, dry desert. The small greenish-gray bushes are the only vegetation we see in the painting. In front of these low plants is a brown hill with two animal bones—a cow's leg and spinal column—resting on top. Just like the hills, they have been smoothed by wind, water, and sand.

O'Keeffe collected bones that she found on her walks through the desert. She cleaned them, displayed them in her home, and included them in paintings. She appreciated their bleached white color, interesting shapes, and quiet strength. O'Keeffe said, "They are as beautiful as anything I know. . . . 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 untouchable." The bones are a reminder of how powerful yet fragile life can be.

Steep colorful cliffs rise up in the background. O'Keeffe called these her "ice cream cliffs" because of their soft cream, yellow, pink, purple, and orange colors. Made of sandstone, these ancient rocks were formed 220 million years ago. Although they have gradually eroded ever since, they still loom over the hills below.

In this landscape, there is no evidence of people. No houses, roads, or signs. Instead, O'Keeffe focuses on the natural features of this unique, American desert that she loved—a vast, wild place that offers us, as it offered her, an invitation for quiet reflection.

About the Artist

Georgia O'Keeffe felt a lifelong connection to nature. Recalling her childhood on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, she said, "Where I come from, the earth means everything." She spent her career exploring the natural world and capturing its wondrous beauty in her art. Her close-up views of flowers, expansive landscapes, and abstract paintings invite people to see the world through her eyes.

**"All the earth colors of the painter's palette are out there in the many miles of badlands [desert]. The light... yellow through the ochres—orange and red and purple earth—even soft earth greens."
—Georgia O'Keeffe**



Georgia O'Keeffe, After Return from New Mexico, 1929, by Alfred Stieglitz

O'Keeffe was one of the first American women to achieve fame as an artist in her lifetime. She became well-known when the photographer Alfred Stieglitz showed her work at his prominent gallery 291 in New York City. The artists fell in love and married in 1924. O'Keeffe began spending her summers in New Mexico in 1929. Its landscape and distance from busy city life inspired her and gave her the peaceful time alone that she needed to work. She moved there permanently twenty years later.

O'Keeffe made sketches wherever she went. Using her drawings and the objects she found on her adventures, she made her final pictures back in the studio. Her works of art celebrate the beauty of the places and things she so carefully observed, as well as her deeply personal experiences of them.

Experiencing Nature

Georgia O'Keeffe enjoyed being outside, taking in nature's sights and sounds and collecting objects such as rocks, shells, and bones. Outdoors, she found the time to sketch and the space to consider her inner thoughts and feelings. An explorer at heart, she took long hikes and camped with friends—even in the remote desert. She liked being outside so much that she often slept under the stars on the roof of her house.

O'Keeffe responded to the environment wherever she traveled. As a young artist, she briefly lived in Texas, where she admired the vast open spaces and dramatic sky. When she returned to New York, she painted *Red and Orange Streak* (right) based on her memories of Texas. The bold orange curves, horizontal red line, and dark background recall distant sounds travelling over open plains and sudden storms that light up the sky.

O'Keeffe said, "Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things." What do you think she meant? What details do you think she left out in *Red Hills and Bones* and *Red and Orange Streak*, and why?

What similarities and differences do you notice between these two paintings? Imagine you could visit each place. What do you think you would see, hear, and feel?



Red and Orange Streak, 1919, by Georgia O'Keeffe

Learn More

These picture books offer more information about Georgia O'Keeffe:

- Georgia's Bones* by Jen Bryant
- My Name is Georgia: A Portrait* by Jeanette Winter
- Kid Artists: True Tales of Childhood from Creative Legends* by David Stabler

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