



81. *Study for the Porta Pia*, by Michelangelo Buonarroti. c.1561. Pen and ink, black chalk, ink wash and lead white, 44.2 by 28.2 cm. (Casa Buonarroti, Florence; exh. Musei Capitolini, Rome).

that occupied Michelangelo in his last years: the church of S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini and the Porta Pia. For the former, a set of five possible solutions was provided in the form of finished floor plans, where layers of dense overdrawing reveal the artist's working and reworking of the design (no.77; Fig.80). This layering of ink, black and red chalk, brown wash and lead white results in drawings that almost achieve the three-dimensional mass of built objects, an effect which is even more marked in the extraordinary drawings for Porta Pia (no.94; Fig.81). It is perhaps only with this project, displayed as the last section of the show, that the exhibition manages to convey the mastery of Michelangelo as an architectural designer and draughtsman whose ideas were in constant evolution. A sequence of drawings that starts with sketches and details that develop the gate's boldly innovative design follows through to the two fully worked up drawings (nos.94 and 95; Casa Buonarroti, nos.106A and 102A). Again the actual completion of the project dated from after Michelangelo's death, but here the drawings – and consequently the exhibition itself – convey the power and vigour of the artist in the final months of his life. Christof Thoenes's subtle essay, which opens the catalogue, does much to capture the remarkable qualities of these exceptional drawings.

This exhibition only really achieves the professed goal of its title, to focus on the role of Michelangelo as an architect, between the covers of its catalogue.² This is a volume of essays without a catalogue of exhibited works; it opens with four thematic essays followed by others which cover all the major and minor

projects associated with the architect in Rome, many of which do not feature in the exhibition at all (fortifications, bridge designs, minor residential palace projects, etc.). So this well-illustrated volume makes a valuable contribution to the vast literature on Michelangelo by bringing together the current research on the extensive architectural activity in Rome of an artist who claimed, as late as the 1540s, that '*non sono architectore*'.³

¹ A. Bedon: *Il Campidoglio. Storia di un monumento civile di Roma papale*, Milan 2008; reviewed by the present author in this Magazine, 151 (2009), pp.620–21.

² Catalogue: *Michelangelo architetto a Roma*. Edited by Mauro Mussolin, with Clara Altavista. 360 pp. incl. 124 col. + 200 b. & w. ills. (Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, Milan, 2009), €35. ISBN 978–88–3661501–8.

³ Quoted in C. Elam: 'Funzione, tipo e ricezione dei disegni di architettura di Michelangelo', in *idem*, ed.: exh. cat. *Michelangelo e il disegno di architettura*, Vicenza (Palazzo Barbaran da Porto) and Florence (Casa Buonarroti) 2006–07, p.43; reviewed in this Magazine, 149 (2007), pp.206–07.

Georgia O'Keeffe

New York, Washington and Santa Fe

by DAVID ANFAM

THE GROWING COMMERCIAL ATTENTION paid to certain modern American artists, such as Edward Hopper, Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol and Georgia O'Keeffe, threatens to mask, like a brand name, the intrinsic quality of their work. It is not just the proliferation of posters, postcards, calendars, coffee-table books, biographies, television programmes, films and numerous exhibitions, but also the degree to which public acclaim insinuates that their art is at root somehow populist. Of course, high modernist elitism – the presumption that 'serious' painting and sculpture must

be 'difficult' – lurks here. However, part of the fascination of Hopper, Pollock and Warhol stems precisely from the fact that they did not pander outright to mercantile hype (although the last succumbed to it). On the contrary, their achievement remains as elusive as it is distinctive, laden with ambiguities and tricky to reduce to any fixed message or core. By comparison, O'Keeffe's massive popularity is relatively explicable. The exhibition *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction*, currently at the **Whitney Museum of American Art, New York** (to 17th January), seeks to present a tougher facet of her *oeuvre*, the artist's abstract images, even as its aggregate necessarily courts the box office.¹

By laudably aiming to rescue O'Keeffe from mass consumption for a scholarly purview, the curatorial concept of this exhibition perforce walks an intellectual tightrope. Packing the Whitney's third floor, nearly 150 graphics, canvases, photographs, sculptures and documentary items confirm how, far from being an 'in-focus' selection, this is a hawkish blockbuster cloaked in learned garb. The crowds of visitors in New York included an exceptionally high percentage of children, enthralled by various teachers and gallery staff (not to mention the bright hues and eye-catching patterns before their eyes). This situation reflected an unusually large set of educational programmes 'for families and kids' in which they would, to quote the press package, find 'curves, squiggles and giggles'. Apparently, for parents, O'Keeffe is becoming the thinking person's Walt Disney.

If indeed O'Keeffe's compositions do sometimes evoke passages in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), then it nevertheless attests to her primacy and influence. Yet there is a deeper lesson to be learnt. As *Fantasia's* visual-musical mix popularised earlier avant-garde ideas about synaesthesia, so O'Keeffe's vision sprang from aesthetic tenets entrenched in the nineteenth century. The wonder is that



82. *Evening star no. IV*, by Georgia O'Keeffe. 1917. Watercolour on paper, 22.5 by 30.5 cm. (Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).



83. *Early abstraction*, by Georgia O'Keeffe. 1915. Charcoal on paper, 61 by 47.3 cm. (Milwaukee Art Museum; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

she managed to sustain these *fin-de-siècle* origins for seven decades, extending from before the First World War through to the era of cyberspace.

The catalogue's compact essays reiterate O'Keeffe's debt to the theories of her mentor, Arthur Wesley Dow. In turn, Dow's thinking voiced the Arts and Crafts movement's concern for individuality and the Pateresque ideal that the image should aspire to the condition of music. Consequently, there is a sense in which O'Keeffe – notwithstanding Alfred Stieglitz's marketing her in the early 1920s as a modern, sexually liberated woman – never quite threw off the mantle of the previous century.

Striking as O'Keeffe's first abstractions of 1915 may look, their grisaille, mystery and sinuous curves exude a Symbolist aura: Jan Toorop, as it were, finessed for the New World. O'Keeffe's genius was to purge this morbid European inheritance, invigorating it with large doses of oxygen drawn from the Great American Outdoors. Notwithstanding, her landscape-inspired creations from as late as the 1950s and after still occasionally retained a hint of Whistlerian moody mistiness. The difference is that O'Keeffe excised Aestheticism's haze with the precision of a ranch-hand's lasso. On a different note, a few of Stieglitz's celebrated photographs of his lover taken in 1918 portray the artist pouting and posing with the faintly ludicrous theatricality of a silent movie vamp.² Some of O'Keeffe's own paintings now seem similarly dated – congruent with the streamlining, flair and strong rhythmic pulse of Jazz Age *moderne*.

A broader problem running through the exhibition is the lax definition of 'abstraction'. For example, the first painting in the entranceway at the Whitney is *Sky above clouds*

III (1963; cat. no.142). This vista resembles what the title declares: a panorama, albeit mildly stylised, of sky and clouds seen from an airplane. This is a far cry from the non-objectivity of, say, Malevich's *Black square* or even the mature Mondrian, let alone of contemporary American art, such as that of Morris Louis or Agnes Martin. In fact, O'Keeffe's abstraction almost always required an anchor in reality, following a Yankee pragmatism that distilled what she called 'the unknown' from the commonplace.

Furthermore, the show's first entry, *Early abstraction* (no.1; Fig.83) speaks volumes, although none of the catalogue essayists identifies it. Plainly, this charcoal drawing depicts the scroll of a musical instrument, even to the tuning pegs in the box above the neck. In subsequent drawings and watercolours, the motif transforms into a volute a little reminiscent of Brancusi's *Princess X*, a plant- or wave-like presence and, in *Blue II* (1916; no.14), a foetus (shades of Brancusi's *The newborn?*). Thereafter, the sometime 'scroll' seems to have mutated, via the twin curves of the *Blue* series (nos.17–20), into the brightly tinted *Series I* canvases of 1918 (nos.45–47). Thence it was a short step for this form to turn hollow or concave as the orifices of the two superb *Music – pink and blue* paintings (1918; nos.48–49) – breakthroughs that announced the many erotic renditions of

clefts and apertures that segued into the 1920s, becoming perhaps O'Keeffe's best-known icon.

Crucially, if the musical instrument's scroll is acknowledged as seminal to this pictorial progression, then its ultimate transformation into an abstracted detail or metonym for the female anatomy echoes the well-worn analogy, familiar from Cubism and elsewhere, that has long associated the body of a guitar or violin with the female body. To support such a reading, we need only recall the work that especially caught O'Keeffe's attention when, in January 1915, she first ventured into Stieglitz's 291 gallery: Picasso's charcoal *Violin* (1912).

The size of *Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction* tends to expose the weaknesses alongside the strengths of its subject in ways that a smaller display can sidestep.³ Watercolours such as the *Evening star* suite (nos.38–42; Fig.82) and *Morning sky* (1916; no.43), are magnificent landmarks in the pageant of American abstraction. Furthermore, their daring fluency implies that Stieglitz's decision in 1918 to steer O'Keeffe towards oils – as a dealer he could only harbour one watercolourist, John Marin – was deleterious. Rarely has an artist who prized the tangible evinced less feeling for tactile painterliness. No matter whether O'Keeffe portrayed flowers, mountains, an adobe wall or a sunset, her dry handling



84. *Red canna*, by Georgia O'Keeffe. 1925/26. Canvas mounted on masonite, 91.4 by 76 cm. (University of Arizona, Tucson; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

managed to reduce them to the same trimmed contours and inert surfaces. Whenever she overcame this attrition by dint of sheer chromaticism, as in the resplendent *Red canna* (no.90; Fig.84) or the antithetically sombre *Black place* canvases of 1944 (nos.131–35), she triumphed.⁴ As Elizabeth Hutton Turner puts it in her catalogue essay, ‘colour becomes the verb of the painting’.

Yet too often O’Keeffe’s cropping, simplification and flatness render her less a painter in the fullest meaning of the word than, *au fond*, a graphic designer. Not for nothing did her career begin with fashion illustrations. This is one reason why her works function brilliantly as posters. It also explains the cinematic look of various paintings, as though they were monochrome *mise-en-scène* sketches for frame shots meticulously transcribed into Technicolor pigment.⁵ At times, the results pack a terrific punch – witness the mesmeric Jack-in-the-pulpit sequence (nos.118–22), the equally wonderful, enigmatic quietism of *New York – night’s* grey folds (no.93), and the two oils inspired by the hole of a pelvis (1944–45; nos.129–30), which appear as forerunners to James Turrell’s skyspaces. However, at other moments the impression is of a painter who might have been better suited to a different, more decorative discipline altogether.⁶ This is the interior designer’s fate that Demuth’s words to O’Keeffe in 1926 inadvertently yet tellingly invoked: ‘When we have our houses you must do my music room – just allow that red and yellow ‘cana’ [*sic*] one to spread until it fills the room’.

¹ Catalogue: *Georgia O’Keeffe: Abstraction*. Edited by Barbara Haskell, with contributions by Barbara Haskell, Barbara Buhler Lynes, Sasha Nicholas, Bruce Robertson and Elizabeth Hutton Turner. 246 pp. incl. 202 col. + 26 b. & w. ill. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2009), \$65 (HB). ISBN 978-0-300-14817-6. After showing at the **Phillips Collection, Washington** (6th February to 9th May), the exhibition travels to the **Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe** (28th May to 17th September).

² Although hitherto unremarked in the literature, it is possible that the absurdity of Stieglitz’s photographs of O’Keeffe stimulated Marcel Duchamp’s parodistic pose in Man Ray’s photographic portrait of him as *Rose Sélavy*.

³ For example, the excellent exhibition *Dove/O’Keeffe: Circles of Influence*, at the Stirling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown MA (7th June to 7th September 2009).

⁴ The funereal quality of these paintings and the grim vortices of the two *Piece of wood* compositions (1942) suggest that they belong to a wartime mood – in effect, *paysages moralisés*.

⁵ Routinely, O’Keeffe’s compositional strategies elicit comparison with the photographs of Paul Strand and others, but could the cinema have also been an influence? For instance, D.W. Griffith had exploited the emotional intensity of the close-up from as early as 1911 onwards, while O’Keeffe’s juxtaposition of the very nearby and the faraway, as well as her framing effects, find parallels in Eisenstein’s montage principles (*Battleship Potemkin* made a considerable impact at its December 1926 New York debut).

⁶ Significantly, in 1926 O’Keeffe was commissioned by the Cheney Bros. Silk Company.

French drawings

Washington

by PERRIN STEIN

AMONG THE MAJOR collections of French drawings in the United States, that of the **National Gallery of Art, Washington**, was for many years the least published and, aside from the famous sheets which have appeared in monographic loan exhibitions, the least well known. The welcome end to that era comes in the form of the handsome exhibition at the Gallery, *Renaissance to Revolution, French Drawings from the National Gallery of Art, 1500–1800* (to 31st January), and the thoroughly researched catalogue that accompanies it.¹ In line with recent trends in museum publishing, the Gallery chose to publish representative highlights rather than a complete catalogue of the permanent collection, a solution which – while not ideal for scholars – does serve a wide swathe of the Gallery’s audience quite well, as it allows the best works to be published in a fairly opulent manner with full scholarly apparatus. Moreover, the concurrent improvements in online databases – and the National Gallery of Art has long been a leader in this area – offer an effective means to complement printed exhibition catalogues. As a result, full measure can now be taken of this part of the national collection, at once venerable and surprisingly young, with many important drawings added in recent years and making their debut here.

Margaret Morgan Grasselli, the curator of the exhibition, not only wrote the catalogue, but is largely responsible, along with Andrew Robison, Andrew W. Mellon Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings, for building Washington’s collection through acquisitions and gifts; a stunning ninety of the 117 entries in the catalogue are for works which entered the Gallery during her nearly thirty-year tenure. It is a running joke in museums that every acquisition either fills a gap or builds on strength, but that proves true here, as Grasselli and Robison have filled some major art-historical lacunae while also adding works that augment the unique character of the permanent collection, which is

rich in drawings for book illustration and highly finished composition drawings.

In a series of stately galleries, with painted panels softening the stone interiors, the installation balances chronology, thematic groupings and aesthetics, sometimes separating works by an individual artist to make comparative points. Vitrines in the last two galleries allow the display of a number of the collection’s treasures which happen to be in bound form: eighteenth-century albums of sketches of Rome and studies for book illustration, often with the published book displayed alongside, *hors catalogue*. In the catalogue, the entries follow an approximate chronological order and are preceded by an essay tracing the history of the collection. The story is engaging rather than perfunctory in Grasselli’s telling, especially as gifts, promised gifts and bequests account for more than half of the exhibited works and her knowledge of the majority of the donors is first-hand.

The distinctive core of the collection, 350 drawings for eighteenth-century book illustrations, came to the Gallery as a gift of Joseph E. Widener in 1942, just one year after the Museum’s founding, and still accounts for over a third of the French drawings. The cadre of benefactors grew steadily over time, and Grasselli’s essay details the debts owed to, among others, Mrs Gertrude Laughlin Chandler, Julius S. Held, Dr Armand Hammer and Ian Woodner. Woodner’s daughters, Dian and Andrea, are among a group of collectors who continue to support the Museum with such notable gifts as François Quesnel’s *Portrait of a noblewoman* (cat. no.9; gift of Andrea Woodner; Fig.87), Hubert Robert’s *The oval fountain in the gardens of the Villa d’Este, Tivoli* (no.84; gift of Mr and Mrs Neil Phillips and Mr and Mrs Ivan Phillips), and François-André Vincent’s *The drawing lesson* (no.100; anonymous partial and promised gift).

As Grasselli is the first to admit, the collection still has some way to go to achieve art-historical balance. The sixteenth-century group, though small, is a stellar part of the collection, transformed by a number of rare and beautiful sheets from the Woodner collection. Acquisitions in this area continue to be made, including the purchase in 2006 of an exquisitely well-preserved watercolour by Jean



85. *A man reclining and a woman seated on the ground*, by Antoine Watteau. c.1716. Red, black and white chalk on brown paper, 24.1 by 34.9 cm. (National Gallery of Art, Washington).