

Basic Detail Report



Title: East River from the 30th Story of Shelton Hotel

Date: 1928

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3ec86

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: For more than seventy years O'Keeffe painted prolifically, and almost exclusively, the flowers, animal bones, and landscapes around her studios at Lake George, New York, and in New Mexico. These subjects, taken from nature and distilled to their essential colors, shapes, and designs, became her trademarks. Since O'Keeffe's work always reflected her immediate environment, it is not surprising that she, like so many artists of the early twentieth century, attempted to capture the enormous size, scale, and dynamism of New York in her work. It was, after all, the city in which she resided for all or part of thirty-one years (1918-49) and in which she established her artistic reputation. Between 1925 and 1929 O'Keeffe produced some twenty-five paintings and drawings that feature two different aspects of the city. One group of works presents specific buildings seen close-up, usually from street level looking upward (for example, the facades of the Shelton Hotel, the Radiator Building, and the Ritz Tower). The other group, to which "East River from the 30th Story of the Shelton Hotel" belongs, show a panoramic aerial view over the rooftops looking toward the East River, Queens, and the sky beyond. O'Keeffe and Stieglitz had moved in November 1925 to a two-room apartment on the thirtieth floor of the Shelton Hotel, then one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city. The Shelton was situated on the southeast corner of Lexington Avenue between Forty-eighth and

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Forty-ninth Streets and offered its tenants a wide range of amenities, including housekeeping services, a cafeteria, a gym, a pool, lounges, an observation terrace, and a rooftop solarium. Although this was not their first apartment in midtown Manhattan, it was the first time that either of them had ever lived so high above the city. Their views, through windows left deliberately uncurtained, looked far into the distance in three directions (north, south, and east), unobstructed by any other tall buildings. The exhilaration they both felt at this location was immediately reflected in their work and in their words. Just a few weeks after moving into the Shelton, Stieglitz wrote to novelist Sherwood Anderson: "We live high up in the Shelton Hotel. . . . The wind howls & shakes the huge steel frame--We feel as if we were out at midocean--All is so quiet except the wind--& the trembling shaking hulk of steel in which we live--." (1) The elevated perspective allowed O'Keeffe to contemplate the city from a distance and at her leisure. For the first time since moving there seven years earlier, she felt confident that she could "paint New York" even though she was "told that it was an impossible idea--even the men hadn't done too well with it." (2) "I know it's unusual for an artist to want to work way up near the roof of a big hotel, in the heart of a roaring city, but I think that's just what the artist of today needs for stimulus. He has to have a place where he can behold the city as a unit before his eyes but at the same time have enough space left to work. . . . Today the city is something bigger, grander, more complex than ever before in history. There is a meaning in its strong warm grip we are all trying to grasp. And nothing can be gained by running away. I wouldn't if I could."(3) In a sequence of some eleven known oils and pastels of the East River executed between 1926 and 1928, O'Keeffe repeatedly studied the same section of the New York City waterfront. Through subtle changes in color scheme, hard-and-soft focus styling, and the spacing and alignment of images, O'Keeffe was able to alter the mood of each picture and our perceptions of the scene. Such elusive effects as the time of day, weather and lighting conditions, and the seasons are all accurately conveyed. "East River from the 30th Story of the Shelton Hotel" is by far the largest and most realistic picture of the series. It is also probably O'Keeffe's final statement on the subject. Executed in a Precisionist style, in the manner of Charles Sheeler, the details of the scene are brought into sharp focus by the clarity of light and the straightforward reporting. Noticeably absent in this austere urban setting are the bright colors and the sense of organic growth that enlivens her nature-inspired works. Like the other pictures in the East River series, this composition is divided into three horizontal registers. In the bottom third are the darkened water towers and irregular rooflines of the buildings along the east side of Manhattan. In the middle section, the calm waters of the East River separate Manhattan from the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn. In the upper portion are the jagged piers and smoggy cloud-covered spires and factory smokestacks of Long Island City, an industrial section of Queens. O'Keeffe's vista is breathtakingly panoramic, yet the result is somehow airless and emotionally distant, as if the artist had finally come to terms with being in New York

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and had decided that she did not like it. A year later, in 1929, O'Keeffe made the last of her New York pictures a skyscraper painting entitled "New York, Night" [Nebraska Art Association, Lincoln] and departed for New Mexico on the first of her many extended trips away from New York and Stieglitz. LMM Bibliography: Georgia O'Keeffe, "Georgia O'Keeffe" (New York: Viking Press, 1976); Laurie Lisle, "Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe" (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1986); Jack Cowart, Juan Hamilton, and Sarah Greenough, "Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters", exhib. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1987); Lisa Mintz Messinger, "Georgia O'Keeffe" (New York: Thames and Hudson and Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988); Roxana Robinson, "Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life" (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Charles C. Eldredge, "Georgia O'Keeffe" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991). NOTES: 1 . Alfred Stieglitz to Sherwood Anderson, letter, December 9, 1925, quoted in Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, "Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings" (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983), p. 214. 2. O'Keeffe quoted in Georgia O'Keeffe, "Georgia O'Keeffe" (New York: Viking Press, 1976), opp. pl. 17. 3. O'Keeffe quoted in B. Vladimir Berman, "She Painted the Lily and Got \$25,000 and Fame for Doing It," "New York Evening Graphic Magazine Section", May 12, 1928, p. 3M. Dimensions: 30 x 48 1/8 in. (33 3/4 x 51 7/8 x 2 in. framed)