

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Fisk's Stieglitz Collection Controversy: *Radiator Building* in Retrospect

In 1927, when avant-garde artist Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) painted New York City's American Radiator Building, the 23-story skyscraper designed by architect Raymond M. Hood was but three years old. From the beginning of the tower's construction, however, this "precursor of Art Deco" was the center of publicity and controversy. The sleek skyscraper was constructed entirely in manganese-clad black bricks, with gold highlights added by a coating of bronze powder on the cast-stone creating the pinnacles, finials, and parapets. The dramatic effect of the black and gold was, in a word, stunning --especially at night, when floodlights illuminated the façade.

The racial symbolism of an all-black building was obvious in 1925, according to an article in the *New York Times Magazine*. The Harlem Renaissance was "in full flower and race consciousness-and animosity-were generally running high. [Architect] Hood has broken through the color line," wrote Orrick Johns. Four years later, in 1929, architectural illustrator Hugh Ferriss observed that the American Radiator Building "has one undeniable virtue: it has undoubtedly provoked more arguments among laymen on the subject of architectural values than any other structure in the country."

O'Keeffe's oil painting, *Radiator Building-Night, New York*, revealed the artist's "personal vision of unique, peak moments of revelation" in uncluttered, American modern abstract style and marked a "key moment" assuring her successful career. She had been a watercolorist through 1916, when she met photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) at his 291 gallery in New York, and her watercolors were exhibited at 291 the following year. Stieglitz became her mentor, then her husband in 1924, and encouraged her use of oil paints as she explored new modes of creative expression. As O'Keeffe began to develop her individual style, Stieglitz

began making photographs of her. His obsession with O'Keeffe photographs became public knowledge in early 1921, when 45 of his photographs were exhibited at the Anderson Galleries. Many of the images were of O'Keeffe, some of which were in the nude. The O'Keeffe photographs created a public sensation-which would continue to surround O'Keeffe's life and to which the taciturn artist never responded.

From the 1920s through the 1940s, both Stieglitz's and O'Keeffe's artistic reputations and popularity grew. Honors and commissions accrued to the pair in rapid succession. O'Keeffe discovered the brilliant colors of New Mexico and the American Southwest in the late 1930s and abandoned the cityscapes for large-scale paintings of brilliant flowers, canyon walls, and myriad desert subjects. She was in New Mexico painting when Stieglitz suffered a cerebral thrombosis in New York; she flew to the city to be with him when he died on July 13, 1946.

O'Keeffe was executrix of her late husband's estate, including a 1,000+ collection of his own photographs and paintings, prints, and African sculpture/tribal art. He had left to her discretion the distribution of his collection. She designated six institutions as recipients of portions of the Stieglitz collection, one being Fisk University. The latter recipient was suggested by their close friend, Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964), who shared with O'Keeffe his plan to donate a portion of his own private collection to Fisk, a small private school founded in Nashville in 1866 for the education of newly emancipated slaves.

Arrangements were made in 1948 for the establishment of the Alfred Stieglitz Collection at Fisk University. During the November 4, 1949, dedication of the Stieglitz Collection housed at Fisk, only a few explanatory words were offered by Stieglitz's taciturn

widow O'Keeffe: "These paintings and sculptures are a gift from Stieglitz. . . . I hope you will go back and look at them more than once."

Carl Van Vechten also spoke briefly, downplaying his pivotal role as benefactor in connecting his three friends-Fisk President Charles Johnson (who joined the school's faculty in 1928 and became the first black president in 1946), New York photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and artist Georgia O'Keeffe-for the benefit of the visual arts program at Fisk. After the ceremony, those assembled walked across campus to the Stieglitz Collection's new home in the Carl Van Vechten Art Gallery, facilitated by interior renovation of the 1888-89 gymnasium building. This eclectic, austere setting for the 97 pieces of contemporary art provided an unadorned contrast to the university's crown jewel across the campus: the massive Victorian Gothic structure, Jubilee Hall, which houses the floor-to-ceiling c.1880 oil portrait of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. After the Singers' 1873 performance for England's Queen Victoria, she had commissioned court painter Edward Havell to paint the singers' portrait, completed c.1880 and later presented to the university.

The addition of selections from Alfred Stieglitz's art collection further enhanced Fisk's established reputation as a cradle of creative expression. Items donated included nineteen of Stieglitz's stunning photographs on chloride-illustrative of his technique that "defined photography as a fine art form"-and five pieces of African sculpture/tribal art (in the early 1900s, Stieglitz mounted the "first exhibition of African sculpture in the United States" at his 291 gallery in New York). Also included were paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin (1872-1953), Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), Arthur G. Dove (1880-1948), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Charles Demuth (1883-1935), and Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and prints by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919).

Carl Van Vechten, a prolific novelist, essayist, and photographer, was a patron of the Harlem Renaissance that began in New York City in the early 1920s and lasted until the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s. He was fascinated by African-American culture and made photographic portraits of many of the creative black figures of the period, including writer James Weldon Johnson, poet Langston Hughes, actor Paul Robeson, singer Bessie Smith, writer Zora Neale Hurston, and writer-historian Arna Bontemps. Van Vechten created more than 15,000 photographic images and was an "avid collector of ephemera and books pertaining to black arts and letters." During his lifetime, Van Vechten donated various parts of his extensive collection to several universities, including Fisk University.

Thus, Carl Van Vechten's role as benefactor of the university continued to illustrate why Van Vechten Art Gallery was named in his honor. Georgia O'Keeffe also continued as a Fisk benefactress, initially loaning a number of paintings from her personal collection to the school in the early 1950s, then making the paintings permanent gifts. In 1954, O'Keeffe donated her *Radiator Building-Night, New York*; in 1956, O'Keeffe donated her smaller painting, *Flying Backbone*, to Fisk's growing art collection.

Although O'Keeffe died in 1986, controversy has continued to surround her paintings. In late 2005, local controversy erupted when Fisk sought court permission to sell two of its paintings, O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building-Night, New York* and Marsden Hartley's *Painting No. 3*, to raise funds for the financially challenged university. Litigation and negotiation have transpired from Tennessee to New Mexico to Arkansas, with media publicity and "advice" from every interested quarter to the present time. The completion of the *Radiator Building* in retrospect has yet to be decided.

-- Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.
