Illumination
The Paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce

Pre-Visit Activities for Elementary School Students
This pre-visit activity will help prepare your students for their museum visit to see *Illumination: The Paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce*. This is the first exhibition to bring together the work of these four important American women modernists. O’Keeffe (1887-1986) and Pelton (1881-1961) were born six years apart in the 1880s, while Martin (1912-2004) and Pierce (1918-2007) were born six years apart in the 1910s. All four women influenced the development of modern art in the 20th century—O’Keeffe and Pelton created images using curving organic shapes, while Martin and Pierce produced minimal geometric works. All four drew on nature as their primary focus, inspired by the desert: O’Keeffe, Pierce and Martin, lived much of their lives in New Mexico, while Pelton resided in Cathedral City near Palm Springs, California. Each artist developed their own style, but they all share an interest in illumination and abstraction.

Your museum visit and pre-visit activities support interdisciplinary learning by connecting Visual Arts and Language Arts, and address the California State Content Standards in the Visual Arts.

1.0 Artistic Perception
2.0 Creative Expression
3.0 Historical and Cultural Content
4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

Please adapt these activities according to your classroom needs.
Learning Objectives:

Students will make discoveries about works of art from the exhibition *Illumination: The Paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce*. Students will focus on works by Georgia O’Keeffe and Agnes Pelton and use their observations and discoveries to derive meaning. Students will employ the language of the elements of art to describe each artwork and make connection between the works. They will learn what to expect when they visit the museum.

Featured Artists:

**Agnes Pelton**

*San Gorgonio in Spring*, 1932  
oil on canvas, 24” x 30”

**Georgia O’Keeffe**

*Part of the Cliffs*, 1937  
oil on canvas, 20” x 32”

Materials:

- Transparency of *Part of the Cliffs* and *San Gorgonio in Spring*
- Overhead projector
- Paper
- Pencils
- Scissors
- Ruler
- Paper Clips (optional)
- Landscape images or photographs (Ask students to bring from home)
- Crayons, markers, pastels, or colored pencils
Ask your students if they have ever borrowed anything from a friend or relative. What have you borrowed? Why did you borrow it? How do you care for an object that you are borrowing? How do you want people to treat objects that they borrow from you? Why do you think a museum would borrow certain objects? Ask your students why it is important not to touch anything at the museum.

Explain that a museum exhibits beautiful, valuable, fragile, historical, and thought-provoking objects, such as artworks like painting and sculpture. Museums also borrow things from other art collectors, museums, and artists all over the world, so that they can share these objects with their own local communities.

Tell students they will visit the Orange County Museum of Art to view an exhibition called Illumination or the act of spreading light or brightening. The exhibition features work by Georgia O’Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce. The curator of the museum borrowed over 100 paintings, works on paper, and sculptures from all over the United States to bring together the work of these 4 female artists for the first time. The artists in this exhibition, or display of objects that have something in common, all drew inspiration from nature and desert environments and explore light through abstraction, or art that uses line, color, and form to alter or simplify reality. We’re going to look closely at work by two of the artists in the exhibition, and explore their connection to their environment and the similarities and differences in their artistic practices, or approach to art making.

Look:

Project the transparency of San Gorgonio in Spring. Tell your students this is a landscape painting, or a view of the outdoors by Agnes Pelton. What do you see? Agnes Pelton painted this work right after she moved to California at age 51. As soon as Pelton moved to California, she felt at home, she described her relationship to California “as though the spirit of this place has taken me in, accepted me.”

Ask students to guess what region of California Agnes Pelton chose to depict in this painting. Ask them to defend their answer using visual evidence from the painting.

Tell students the title of this work is San Gorgonio in Spring. What signs of spring do you see? Pelton took her inspiration from the Mojave Desert and Coachella Valley near her home in Cathedral City. Pelton’s composition, or arrangement of elements like shapes, colors, and space, offers an expansive and detailed view of the outdoors. Pelton divided her painting into two areas. The foreground is the part of the painting that looks closest while the background looks farthest away.
Ask students what they see in the foreground and in the background. How does the size of the rocks in the foreground compare to mountains in the background?

Tell students that artists can create a sense of depth, or the distance from front to back or near to far in an artwork, by making objects in the foreground larger. Artists also create depth by overlapping objects in the foreground and background or using scale, the comparative size of one thing in relation to another like thing.

Tell students that many of Pelton’s works are abstractions, but this work is more realistic, or resembling real life or nature. When Pelton first moved to California, she painted landscapes like San Gorgonio in Spring for tourists to take home with them after a visit to the desert. Why do you think tourists wanted realistic images of the places they visited? What looks realistic about this work? What looks abstracted?

Project the transparency of Part of the Cliffs. Tell students this is a painting by Georgia O’Keeffe of the New Mexico desert near her home, Ghost Ranch. New Mexico was a special place to Georgia O’Keeffe. She began visiting in 1929 and returned every summer until eventually moving there in 1949. She said of New Mexico: “I never feel at home in the East like I do out here…It is just unbelievable—one perfect day after another.”

Ask students to describe what they see. How is O’Keeffe’s painting similar to Pelton’s painting? How do they differ? What is O’Keeffe’s point of view, or the position an observer is in relation to the objects in a picture? The point of view is determined by where a viewer is stationed in relation to everything else he or she sees. Ask students if this painting looks like the real world. Why or why not?

Tell students that O’Keeffe uses a cropped, or close-up, composition of cliffs in New Mexico to show her vision of the desert. How does the cropped composition affect the foreground and background?

Tell students that O’Keeffe believed in abstracting her subjects. She said: “A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is line and color put together so they say something.” What colors does O’Keeffe use? How does O’Keeffe use color to create shadows and depth? What types of lines does O’Keeffe use? Are they curvy or straight? What types of shapes does O’Keeffe use? Are the lines geometric, shapes using math and straight lines or curvilinear lines? Are the lines organic, a shape that is irregular or might be found in nature?
How do the lines and shapes O'Keeffe uses help to abstract the image? Why do you think O'Keeffe chose to create an abstracted view of the desert instead of a more realistic view? How does O'Keeffe express her feelings about New Mexico in this painting? What do the warm colors and organic shapes tell us about her connection to New Mexico?

**Create:**

**Tell** students to bring in a photograph or a magazine clipping of their favorite landscape environment or one that they would like to visit. Ask students to share why they chose that image. What feelings or memories do they associate with that place? **Tell** students that they are going to create a landscape drawing using some of the techniques employed by Agnes Pelton and Georgia O'Keeffe.

**Tell** students they are going to create a viewfinder. Students will use their viewfinder to make choices about composition. Give every student an 8.5 x11 piece of paper.

- **Step 1:** Have the students use rulers to draw L shapes that are at least 1.5 inches deep and the length of the paper.
- **Step 2:** Students should cut out each L shape.
- **Step 3:** Students should overlap L shapes to create their viewfinder. They can attach the L shapes with paper clips. Your viewfinder can act like a frame around your subject.

**Have** students lay their viewfinders on the landscape image they chose. They can adjust the viewfinder’s size to discover the best composition by moving the L shapes closer together or further apart. They may choose an expansive view of their landscape like Agnes Pelton or closely crop their subject like Georgia O'Keeffe and focus on just one part of the environment. Remind students to look for relationships between objects and their background, paying attention to what is pictured in the foreground and background. They can also think about the interplay of size, shape, line, and color and how these elements can be used to create a realistic or abstracted image.
Distribute crayons, markers, pastels, or colored pencils, so students can begin to sketch their chosen view.

Prompt students to think about how they can communicate their feelings or memories about the place. What effects or elements of art can you use to draw attention to a feature of the landscape? How will you incorporate your feelings or memories about the place in their drawing? How can you use color to express your feelings? What feelings are communicated through warm colors? What about cool colors?

Write:

Pretend you must convince people to visit the landscape you chose to draw. Write a travel diary describing what they could see and do during a day trip to your chosen place. Who would they meet? What surprises might they encounter? What adventures will they have? Narrate a logical sequence of events and provide enough concrete sensory details to enable your reader to imagine the environment you have created. (Please note: if students do not complete the “create” section of the lesson, they can write about environment of Pelton or O’Keeffe’s paintings)


O’Keeffe on the Portal at Ghost Ranch, 1964 Photograph by Todd Webb 13 x 11 in. (33 x 27.9 cm) Oglethorpe University Museum of Art, Atlanta Georgia
**Illumination:** The act of spreading light or brightening.

**Exhibition:** Display of objects that have something in common.

**Abstraction:** Art that uses line, color, and form to alter or simplify reality. Abstract work contains few recognizable or realistic forms.

**Artistic practice:** An artist’s approach to making their artwork.

**Landscape:** A view of the outdoors.

**Composition:** The arrangement of elements, such as shapes, colors, and space.

**Foreground:** The area in a two-dimensional work of art that appears to be closest to the viewer.

**Background:** The area in a two-dimensional work of art that appears to be farthest away from the viewer.

**Depth:** The distance from front to back or near to far in an artwork.

**Scale:** The comparative size of a thing in relation to another thing.

**Realistic:** An image representing the appearance of an object or figure in the real world.

**Point of view:** The position an observer is in relation to the objects in a picture. The point of view is determined by where a viewer is stationed in relation to everything else he or she sees.

**Cropped:** A close-up view of a subject.

**Geometric:** Shapes using math and straight lines such as triangles and squares or curvilinear lines such as circles and ovals.

**Organic:** A line, shape, or form that is irregular or might be found in nature.
Agnes Pelton was born in 1881 in Stuttgart, Germany to American parents. She spent her childhood in France and Switzerland until her father’s untimely death in 1890 prompted a return to America, where she and her mother settled in Brooklyn, New York. Saddened by her father’s death, Pelton described her earliest years as a time of sorrow. She found refuge from her pain in music and art. In Brooklyn, her mother opened a music school where Agnes worked and took piano lessons. At age 14, Pelton began art classes at the Pratt Institute. In 1913, she was invited to participate in the landmark Armory Show with important artists such as Picasso and Matisse.

Pelton traveled through America and the Middle East during the 1920s. When she wasn’t traveling she lived in a windmill that had been converted into her home and studio on Long Island, New York. After visiting Pasadena in 1929, she decided to move permanently to California in 1931, to the desert community of Cathedral City outside of Palm Springs, where she was inspired by the natural landscape. She loved to read Romantic poetry by authors such as John Keats and William Wordsworth, and also wrote poetry herself. Pelton enjoyed learning about different kinds of religions and studied a spiritual philosophy called Theosophy, which incorporated the teachings of a variety of faiths. Pelton died in 1961 just before she turned eighty. Throughout her painting career, she strove to look beyond the world she knew and express the inner spiritual power of nature through her art. Pelton used her abstractions as the visual representation of her own spiritual quest and hoped that through them others would find a new way of seeing.
Georgia O’Keeffe was born in 1887 in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. She was one of seven children and grew up on a farm where she helped her family by cooking, sewing, and growing vegetables. O’Keeffe attended school in a one-room schoolhouse and took private art lessons after school. By the eighth grade, she knew she wanted to be an artist. When O’Keeffe was 15 years old, her family moved to Williamsburg, Virginia, but O’Keeffe and her brother stayed behind and lived with an aunt. They transferred to a big public high school in the city. O’Keeffe’s high school art teacher brought a jack-in-the-pulpit flower to class and for the first time, O’Keeffe thought about drawing or painting plants. After high school, O’Keeffe studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, the New York Art Student’s League, and Teachers College at Columbia University.

When O’Keeffe finished school, she taught art lessons. She developed her own style of drawing and painting and began to experiment with abstract art. In 1916, a photographer named Alfred Stieglitz exhibited O’Keeffe’s abstractions at his gallery. Stieglitz and O’Keeffe began writing letters to each other and eventually fell in love and married. They spent a lot of time at their house in Lake George, New York. Here O’Keeffe began creating the paintings she is most known for, close-ups of flowers in bright, bold colors. In the 1930s, O’Keeffe took some trips to New Mexico. She loved it so much that she eventually moved there. Her art was influenced by her surroundings and she created paintings of the mountains, the desert, and the adobe houses. In 1985, O’Keeffe was granted the Medal of Arts by President Ronald Reagan. She continued to paint until she lost her eyesight. She died at age 98.
Agnes Pelton, *San Gorgonio in Spring*, 1932, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches, The Buck Collection, Laguna Beach, California
Georgia O'Keeffe, *Part of the Cliffs*, 1937, Oil on canvas, 20 x 32 inches, Private collection; courtesy of Irene Drori, Inc., Los Angeles