

**THE GIFT: The Alfred Stieglitz Collection at Fisk University**

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CCB Carol Creswell Betsch

GO Georgia O'Keeffe voice

RM Reavis Mitchell - Professor and Chairman of Dept of History at Fisk University

VGF Vivien Green Fryd - Professor & Chairman of History of Art at Vanderbilt University

VS Victor Simmons - Director and Curator of Fisk University Galleries

VGF Fisk University, believe it or not is another one of these pockets in Nashville that has these small but very, very important collections of American art.

VS The Alfred Stieglitz collection of modern art here at Fisk University consists of 101 works of art mostly European and American works with a few African artifacts that the collection explores all media of the early modern movement paintings sculpture drawings prints photography.

VGF it's really wonderful that Fisk as a historically black institution has this renown collection for its students but also for the Nashville community. Not enough people go to Fisk University in order to look at the collection. It's the unknown treasure here.

NARRATION The collection was a gift from the estate of Alfred Stieglitz, at the behest of his wife Georgia O'Keeffe. Stieglitz and O'Keeffe were a powerhouse artist couple who had a major impact on modernism in America. The story of this collection begins with their creative and often tempestuous relationship-one of the great love stories of 20<sup>th</sup> century art. But neither of them had ever been to Fisk. So how did this collection arrive at Fisk University?

CCB it coming to Fisk was really unusual in that we had not had a profound art department. Aaron Douglas had come to Nashville, but this was an established group of art works, the finest in the south, certainly unusual for Nashville. We didn't have Cheekwood. We didn't have the Frist.

RM There becomes a discussion about what is this place Fisk because the names of the artists are well-known: Hartley, Picasso, Renoir, Cezanne, and why were they suddenly available at a small Negro College in Nashville, Tennessee?

VS Stieglitz was a pioneering figure in American photography, and he was America's first art photographer.

VGF He believed that photography was not just for documentation sake, but that it could be an art form in its own right, and that was very innovative thinking at the turn of the century.

VS Stieglitz as a collector is almost as phenomenal as he was as an artist. Those works that he collected, from people like Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, so many others. He's bringing painters, sculptures, to really reinvigorate American art as well and try to elevate it to being on par with what he'd seen in Europe in the 1880s and 1890s. He is like the great ringmaster, he is an impresario in many ways, and that he is organizing his circle to bring Americans into this great modern tent. People think he's crazy.

NARRATION His New York galleries would launch the careers of many American modernists including John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe. The works that Stieglitz exhibited and collected by these artists would eventually form the core of his collection of over 850 objects. Through his galleries, Stieglitz also promoted an appreciation of African art as art objects, rather than ethnographic artifacts. These objects also served as important source material for early modernists including Picasso and others.

- VGF Stieglitz's gallery was really one of the first places in the United States and in New York City where you could see these European Modernist works.
- VS At those galleries, Stieglitz introduces Americans to the most progressive art that is being produced here in this country, as well as abroad.
- NARRATION It was through his 291 gallery, named simply for its address on New York's Fifth Avenue, that Stieglitz first became familiar with the work of a young artist named Georgia O'Keeffe.
- VS Stieglitz and O'Keeffe, one of the great stories of American art. He loved her drawings. He thought that she was one of the most brilliant artists that he had ever seen. They finally met around 1917 or so, developed a strong friendship as well which eventually led to a marriage in 1924 that lasted for the remainder of his life his death in 1946 and they were quite a couple.
- VGF It was a romantic, supportive relationship in which they shared ideas about creating art and influenced one another. They had a companionship marriage in which they were in love and they did a lot of things together and yet Stieglitz was a very controlling person, and O'Keeffe was wanting to be a very independent person. So that led to conflicts. She said about Stieglitz,
- GO *"His power to destroy was as destructive as his power to build. The extremes went together. I have experienced both and survived. For me Stieglitz was much more wonderful in his work than as a human being. I put up with what seemed to me a good deal of contradictory nonsense, because what of what seemed clear, bright, and beautiful."*
- VGF I don't know about you, but I wouldn't want to say that about my husband.
- VS Nonetheless he is maintaining that she was really one of the great artists of that period and someone that he truly believed in. She returns that compliment in monumental works like the Radiator Building a Night in New York which is in our collection here at Fisk. In that painting you see a beautiful Art Deco skyscraper. You see it in this beautiful sort of elevation rising from the bottom of the painting up towards its crest with this highly decorated and ornamented top to it as well and wonderful sort of Art Deco aesthetic interplay of light and darks in this painting, strobe light to the right corner of the painting, all the smaller buildings surrounding it but then the piece de resistance in the painting is this beautiful lighted sign sort of glowing neon red sign that illuminates with the name Alfred Stieglitz in it, Alfred Stieglitz. And right above that sign is the only star in the painting. Right above his name, if you look up into the heavens, you see this lone star and it tells you exactly what this painting is about. It's about him. He is as glorious, he's as grand, he is as majestic as that skyscraper. And she wants the world to know it. She thinks this guy is really something special, something special.
- NARRATION Through exhibitions at Steiglitz's 291 Gallery, O'Keeffe quickly became a known figure in the elite, avant-garde inner circle of Modern artists around Stieglitz. Among these artists was a man by the name of Carl Van Vechten.
- VS Carl Van Vechten was one of the interesting figures in American cultural life between the two world wars. He was one of those figures who knew everyone. He became known as one of the great philanthropist of his day. He supported young, emerging African American artists and particularly writers like Langston Hughes. But he supported institutions also, and Fisk became one of the great beneficiaries of his support. Shortly after Johnson was installed as president here at Fisk in 1946, Van Vechten sought to really galvanize support for Johnson and his administration down here in Nashville. He donated things like what was considered to be the premier music archives in the American south at the time. And it was a collection that Van Vechten put here for strategic purposes. He wanted white researchers to have to come to Fisk to see these works and by inverse he did the same thing at Yale University. He established the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Music and Literature to force African American researchers to have to go to Yale to see those things. And so they're really trying to accomplish something much larger and that is they are trying to break down a lot of the barriers that have

separated the races.

He came to know Stieglitz and the artists of the Stieglitz circle through their mutual interest in modernism. But Stieglitz along with O'Keeffe trusted Van Vechten's judgment implicitly. They also shared the same sort of politics and outlook on the need to reform certain aspects of American life, particularly as it related to things like race and particularly in terms of their mutual interest in Modernism and the new art that had emerged in Europe.

VS By the late 30s Stieglitz's health is failing rapidly. He has heart troubles by the late 30s. By the time we enter the 1940s, he is really not a very active anymore as a photographer.

NARRATION In July 1946, at the age of 82, Stieglitz suffered a fatal stroke. Over his career, Stieglitz had amassed a monumental collection including 850 paintings and thousands of photographs, many of which were his own.

VGF He had this massive collection of work of not only European modernism and American modernism, photography but he also collected and exhibited African art and upon his death, O'Keeffe decided to disperse his collection to different regions in the United States.

VS She strategically thinks of ways to keep his legacy alive and she wants subsequent generations to know how important he had been for securing a place for modern art in this hemisphere.

NARRATION O'Keeffe distributed the works to six different institutions—most of which were logical choices: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Art Institute of Chicago, The National Gallery of Art in Washington, The Philadelphia Museum of Art and The Library of Congress. The sixth institution was a surprise to many.

VS As fate would have it, Fisk was the only college and university to receive works from Mrs. O'Keeffe.

NARRATION In the New York Times Magazine, Dec. 1949, O'Keeffe said that she chose Fisk

GO *"Because I think it is a good thing to do at this time and that it would please Stieglitz."*

NARRATION It was important to O'Keeffe that the collection be placed strategically in different regions of the country – especially the South—and it was of great importance to her that everyone regardless of race be able to have access to the art.

RM it was known that at Fisk all were welcome. There was a diverse faculty and a small number of white students who attended. This is near the end of segregation but it was known that that fabulous collection would be available to any who wished to view it and to all who wished to study art.

VGF O'Keeffe was friends with Carl Van Vechten who was a writer, a promoter of the Harlem Renaissance and who also was friends of the president of Fisk University, Charles Johnson, and he recommended to O'Keeffe that she give a portion of the collection to Fisk University which O'Keeffe then did.

RM It was a long and rich connection that sort of flowered into the collection, the Stieglitz collection, becoming a part of the legacy of Fisk University.

NARRATION Fisk University was the recipient of a transformational gift that would shape education and legacy of students throughout the years. The next step was for the university to find a suitable location to house and exhibit the collection.

VS When Georgia O'Keeffe gave the gift to the University, the 101 works from her husband's collection, she also selected a small building on campus which has served as the University's gymnasium since around 1903. She funded its transformation into an art gallery. It looked nothing like it did in its current incarnation.

NARRATION In honor of her friend who had been instrumental in securing this gift, O'Keeffe suggested that the

university call this new space The Carl Van Vechten Gallery.

VS The decision to name the gallery after Carl Van Vechten really had to do with the role he played in getting the gift to Fisk University. It was an idea that in his conversation with Charles Johnson that he birthed. And it carries his name to today. The Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Art at Fisk University.

NARRATION O'Keeffe took a lead role in ensuring that the collection was presented in a manner that befit Stieglitz's artistic and curatorial legacy.

CCB My mother was the first working person for the Van Vechten gallery. She served as curator and in other titles of the same job for 40 years. During that period of time I was 13 years old. I would go to the gallery with her. In meeting O'Keeffe, her presence was awesome. She always wore black. And I seem to remember the collection being in place but not to her approval, so she came and redirected the hangings, the way the light was structured, just different things. I can remember following them around and she would point to things and it was like saying, this had to come down and this had to go here.

And those were just vague recollections of it but I was somewhat intimidated, almost frightened of her because she was not a very big woman, but there was a presence and a power about her. She wanted it done a certain way.

NARRATION On November 4, 1949, The Carl Van Vechten Gallery at Fisk University opened and over 900 people attended a ceremony in the University's Memorial Chapel.

VS The Alfred Stieglitz collection gives you a wonderful survey of early modern art beginning in the late 19th century, 1890s when people like Paul Cézanne and Toulouse-Lautrec and Renoir and brings you all the way up through the mid-20th century culminating with one of the beautiful little paintings in the collection painted by Georgia O'Keeffe. It's from her southwestern period. It's called the flying backbone.

VGF When she was living in New Mexico she began to collect bones, and to her they were more alive than anything else in nature. And she began to do these fascinating, whole series of paintings of skulls in landscape that are abstractions and they float in the sky.

VS The collection goes from 1890s up to 1944 when her painting was completed. The works in the collection really reflect a very careful editing and scrutinizing of Stieglitz's legacy by Georgia O'Keeffe. She's very careful in the works that she selects for Fisk, things that represent the iconic phases of their circle but also represent some of the little-known sort of phases of their careers. So one might come to the collection and see a work by Arthur Dove and go like, "Wow! That's a beautiful Dove." But you'll turn the corner and see a work by Dove painted on aluminum on metal and go, "Gee, I've never seen anything like that before."

VGF There's a great painting by Charles Demuth of calla lilies in a seashell clearly influenced by O'Keeffe who is known for creating her flowers so they are large and fill in the surface of the painting, rendering them in an abstract fashion, playing between the two dimensional and three dimensional. But we also know it's an emblematic portrait of someone named Bert Savoy, and what's interesting about that is that Bert Savoy was a well known performer and cross dresser in New York City. So Demuth, whom himself was homosexual, is dealing with issues having to do with his own sexual identity at a time period when homosexuals in the United States were still in the closet. So that if you look at it you might just think it's a beautiful painting of these calla lilies in a seashell but when you know it's also subtitled Bert Savoy and you've learned who Bert Savoy is, you realize that he's playing around with issues having to do with sexuality. The flower for example and female anatomy, but then the calla lilies can also be seen as phallic and then you've got the seashell which can be a metaphor of the female anatomy and he really seems to be playing around with that and it's a beautiful painting.

VS The collection range is one of the things that surprises I think almost everyone who visits Fisk, from European masters to American masters, but then also the depth to which you can explore the work of some of the individual artists in the collection, for instance Marsden Hartley, one of the great early American modernists. You get to see Hartley in so many incarnations throughout his career that it really is a revelation when you see him from his

earliest works in the early 20th century. And you get to see him as a landscape painter, you get to see him as an abstractionist, you get to see him explore aspects of folk art, German Swiss folk art as well, things that again are quite a revelation. And so the depth as well as the breadth of this collection is one of the things that makes it one of the great cultural gems, not only in Nashville, but in the southeastern United States.

- VGF Even works of art by an artist who was part of the so called Synchronist Movement. His name is MacDonald and he had done a painting in which he was trying to capture the sound of music by way of color and it was very experimental.  
There are some really nice Marin watercolors. Some of his seascapes are included in that collection. Marin had done watercolors in a very experimental way in which he allowed the white of the paper to show through and play a big part of the composition.  
There's a fascinating work by Florine Stettheimer who had her own Salon and whom was a quirky kind of person. And she did paintings that were not exhibited a whole lot but were really fascinating works and she painted an emblematic portrait of Stieglitz that refers to all the American artist in his circle that he promoted in abstract fashion.
- VS There are some wonderful pieces of African art in the collection. Stieglitz had no idea in many regards what these things actually represented or what they meant, how they were used, what was their cultural importance. But they were immensely fascinated with the aesthetic of these objects. Yes, one could go to a natural history museum and see these objects and discuss them in their anthropological context, but in terms of their aesthetic value that was extremely new.  
Critical audiences looking at what he was doing thought, how could you do that? How could he make the claim that these objects by quote unquote primitive people should be revered and thought of on par with the works of people so-called civilized cultures? But it was Stieglitz who tried to open the mind of the American public as well as more conservative artists to the possibility that they were valid aesthetics outside of the European canon.
- VGF African art was a sort of fascinating abstraction of reality that so many people in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Stieglitz and Picasso were fascinated with and so they began to collect it and began to incorporate it into their works.
- VS Those are the kinds of things that make this collection magic.
- NARRATION Generations of students at Fisk have benefited from this collection of modern art. Through O'Keeffe and Van Vechten's progressive vision, all citizens of the region were granted the opportunity to experience first -hand, masterpieces of European and American modernism at a time when segregation was the norm.
- CCB It was really a stupendous thing for Fisk to have. He had gathered these works and we felt very special because this collection was given to Fisk to teach the students about art and to let them understand more about the larger world. These were pieces that had not traveled to the South. Most of us would not have gotten to The New York Metropolitan Museum.
- RM I can't imagine the display of the Stieglitz collection without a Fisk University. It's not separated. You can't separate it out. That's been the intent of the benefactors. That's been the intent of those who have been in charge of Fisk University for the last 50 years since the collection has been here, and that remains a vocal and viable point of Fisk and its art collections.
- GO *"This part of the Stieglitz collection goes to Fisk University with the hope that it may show that there are many ways of seeing and thinking. And possibly, through showing that there many ways, give someone confidence in its own way, which may be different whatever its direction."* Georgia O'Keeffe