

The Peters Principals

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The first of a three-part series that won an AP investigative reporting prize in 2000.

Canyon Suite, a group of watercolors once attributed to late artist Georgia O’Keeffe and now thought to include some fakes, is at the center of a story with themes and variations worthy of Rashomon, Akira Kurosawa’s movie in which each of several narrators tells a different version of the same set of events.

In the case of Canyon Suite, the principal and supporting players are names well known in Santa Fe. Since November, they’ve made national headlines as well.

O’Keeffe, the artist, painted lasting scenes of the American southwest. She died in 1986. Gerald Peters, the art dealer, has sold approximately 170 O’Keeffes during the past two decades in which he has represented her work. The Caballero family of Amarillo in 1988 sold Peters 29 watercolors purportedly made by O’Keeffe. Twenty-eight of them came to be known as Canyon Suite. Emilio and Mary Caballero first began selling artworks thought to be O’Keeffe to Santa Fe art dealers in the mid 1960s, *Pasatiempo* has learned.

Throw in O’Keeffe scholars who lined up to praise Canyon Suite; officials at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC and the Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation in Santa Fe, which co-sponsored the 1999 catalogue raisonne. Then add unidentified dealers stung by O’Keeffe fakes and you have a cast worthy of a Russian novel, most of whose characters have been playing in the same drama for years.

In interviews with more than 20 people for this story, Peters spoke to us many times. Emilio and Mary Caballero spoke by phone from Amarillo. We begin here to untangle the tale.

A pattern of art history is that the more famous an artist becomes, the more fakes follow. That's exactly what seems to have happened with O'Keeffe. A decade and a half after her death, it appears that of the 76 purported O'Keeffe watercolors that emerged from Amarillo and Canyon, Texas during her life after her death, only a few if any are genuine.

The highest profile among them are the 28 watercolors of Canyon Suite. The watercolors had been in an envelope left unopened in an Amarillo garage for 12 years. They emerged in 1987, the year after O'Keeffe's death at 98. People who knew her personally and scholars devoted to knowing her work inside and out were equally excited about the find.

Peters sold Canyon Suite to Kansas City businessman Crosby Kemper in 1993. The Santa Fe art dealer bought them back early this year after their omission from the O'Keeffe catalogue raisonne published in November cast doubt on their authenticity.

Omissions of work attributed to an artist from a catalogue raisonne mean that scholars do not believe the work in question to be authentic. The effect on the marketplace can be significant as the artworks plummet in value overnight.

Do collectors subside quietly into disappointment? Hardly. Authenticity duels prompt lawsuits often.irate collectors sometimes seek recompense from the organizations that supported the scholarship. That happened after publication of the Jackson Pollock catalogue raisonne in 1978, when a New Jersey collector with an excluded painting sued the Pollock-Krasner Foundation for \$25 million in damages.

Peters said he does not plan legal action.

"Getting to the bottom of it is more important to me than the money," he said. But in interviews he indicated he feels media reports have tarnished his reputation. He said that in retrospect he should have been much more skeptical about the watercolors. "but it's hard to be skeptical when everybody thinks they're incredible," he said.

Red flags

Some would say a dead artist and a quirky tale about art found in a garage should raise red flags.

But rose-colored glasses can help obscure the flags.

Peters originally bought 29 watercolors including the 28 of Canyon Suite for \$1.25 million from Amarillo therapist Terry Lee Caballero, the granddaughter of O’Keeffe’s friend Ted Reid of Texas. Reid had driven O’Keeffe nearly every day to nearby Palo Duro Canyon during her 1916-1918 stay in Canyon, where she taught at what is now Texas A&M.

In her spare time she walked the open country, wrote letters and painted. Enthralled with the Canyon landscape, O’Keeffe described the plains in a 1917 letter to Alfred Stieglitz, the New York art dealer whom she later married, as “the biggest thing I know.”

Supposedly O’Keeffe gave artworks to Reid, though no records documenting the gift have come to light. Adding to skepticism about such a gift is the fact that by 1916 O’Keeffe was already exhibiting and selling her work through Stieglitz’s Fifth Avenue Gallery, 291.

Nearly sixty years later, in 1975, Reid gave an envelope of 29 O’Keeffe artworks to his friend Emilio Caballero in Canyon, according to a description of the artworks’ ownership history—called provenance—which Caballero wrote in 1988.

“We demanded a written provenance,” Peters said. “We wouldn’t close without one.”

Speaking by phone from Amarillo, Caballero agreed to paraphrase his letter of provenance to Peters. He said he wrote the letter at his son and daughter-in-law Terry Lee Caballero’s request when they were negotiating the sale of the watercolors to Peters.

Caballero characterized notes he read as “a digest of my original letter.”

“During the fall of 1975, Ted Reid, a friend of long standing, visited with me in my office

in the fine arts building on the campus of the West Texas State University in Canyon, on an occasion which was at that time personal and troubling to me. Reid came by to counsel with me and find out what was going on in my argument with the administration.

“Ted was carrying a small package, which he placed on my desk, and eventually asked me if he might leave it with me until such time when it would be more convenient for him to pick it up.”

The fine arts dean assigned Caballero a new office in 1975, the year he stepped down as chairman of the art department at West Texas State.

“I took the package and put it in a cardboard box along with other personal items and moved it to another office. Eventually this packet was taken home and stored in our garage.

“Some years later, our son, Charles, daughter-in-law Terry, and granddaughter moved back to Amarillo into our vacant home, which we had moved from into our present residence. In the process of moving, I discovered the packet, which was never opened, and gave it to Terry.”

Emilio Caballero’s son, Charles, is married to Terry Lee Caballero. Her grandfather Ted Reid died in 1983. Emilio Caballero said he thought he was returning Reid’s property to his rightful heir by giving Terry the envelope.

By Emilio Caballero’s account, he first went to teach at West Texas State in 1946 as a visiting professor and was hired fulltime in 1949. O’Keeffe had taught at the same Canyon college from 1916-18. Caballero first appears in the WT course catalog in summer 1950 as an instructor of watercolor painting and art education, according to college records. He had earned a master of arts degree in 1949 from Teachers College at Columbia University and a Ph.D. in education from Columbia in 1955, according to the Columbia University registrar. Teachers College is O’Keeffe’s alma mater as well.

In 1955 Isabel Robinson stepped down as head of the WT art department and Caballero succeeded her, though Robinson continued teaching until 1963. She died in 1974, Caballero said.

Caballero remained head of the department until 1975 when he lost the chairmanship as a result of what he called a “philosophical disagreement” with the fine arts dean. Caballero retired in 1979.

Peters said he has never met or spoken with Emilio Caballero but did meet Terry Lee Caballero once. Art broker John Norton alerted Peters to the existence of the watercolors and negotiated on his behalf to buy them, Peters said.

Peters first purchased 25 watercolors from Terry Caballero, followed by four more over the next nine months. Of the total 29, 28 share common subjects and themes with one another and with other O’Keeffes made from 1916-1918. Peters sent the works which came to be called Canyon Suite to the National Gallery of Art for scholarly examination. The works remained there from November 1991 to December 1992, according to National Gallery spokeswoman Deborah Ziska. Since the controversy began, Ziska has been the spokeswoman for the gallery’s senior paper conservator, Judith Walsh, and for Barbara Buhler Lynes, the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum curator who authored the catalogue raisonne.

Peters said the idea was to find a patron to buy the works from him and donate them to the National Gallery. While the works were there, Walsh “saw the 28 watercolors known as Canyon Suite and unframed some of them,” Walsh wrote in a reply to questions. “Her research on O’Keeffe’s use of paper did not begin until 1994.”

In early 1993 Peters sold 24 of the Canyon Suite watercolors to Crosby Kemper of Kansas City, Mo. for \$5 million. Peters donated four others to Kemper Museum for Contemporary Art, the patron’s namesake in Kansas City, in time for its October 1994 inaugural, *Georgia O’Keeffe: Canyon Suite*. The exhibit also showed at the Kemper in 1995 and 1997 and traveled to seven other American museums between 1994 and 1998.

Peters kept one of the 29 watercolors.

Earl “Rusty” Powell III, director of the National Gallery, wrote a letter to Kemper in June 1993 making a pitch for Kemper to donate Canyon Suite to the National Gallery. Kemper had not yet founded the museum that carries his name.

“As it is our understanding from Mr. Peters that it is your intention eventually to donate the watercolors to an appropriate institution, I am writing to confirm our eagerness to add them to this national collection, where they would be an immensely important asset,” Powell wrote.

Powell named Lynes and Walsh in his letter, saying they both admired Canyon Suite. Powell’s enthusiasm echoed voices in the scholarly community about the watercolors.

A more recent communication from Powell to Kemper, however, was less happy.

The Wall Street Journal on Nov. 12 reported that Kemper had received a letter dated Oct. 13, 1999 announcing Canyon Suite’s omission from the catalogue raisonne. According to various sources, author Lynes excluded 250 artworks purported to be O’Keeffe’s. Additional owners of excluded works have not been publicly identified.

Various media reports revealed that the scholars’ investigation determined the paper on which the works are painted could not date from 1916-1918. That means O’Keeffe could not have painted the watercolors during her years in Canyon.

So what happened?

A Keystone Kops story

The seeds of what happened may lie in a discrepancy Peters noticed right after he got the watercolors. Of the 29 works, one looked “radically different” from the others, he said.

“We called the Caballeros and said, ‘What about this?’” Peters recalled. “They convinced us O’Keeffe had given it to Ted Reid later.”

Peters said he accepted the sellers’ convincing explanation that O’Keeffe gave the 29th watercolor to Reid sometime after 1918.

In hindsight, Peters stressed, he has “almost a Keystone kops story to tell.”

Emilio Caballero said he has not seen or read the O’Keeffe catalogue raisonne. He learned through media reports about the exclusion.

But he said he thinks his friend Ted Reid and his wife, Ruby Reid, visited O’Keeffe at Ghost Ranch.

“I think I have a photograph of them at Ghost Ranch,” Caballero said, suggesting O’Keeffe gave the Reids later watercolors when they visited her in New Mexico.

If such a visit occurred, it would have happened after the 1946 reacquaintance of O’Keeffe and Reid, since that meeting is documented as their first after O’Keeffe left Canyon in 1918.

The O’Keeffe catalogue raisonne, six years in production, is the authority on the artist’s career.

The chronology on her body of work runs from the piece numbered one, a 1901 watercolor *Hanging Up the Clothes*, painted when she was 13, to the work numbered 1720, an untitled clay pot dated only to sometime in the 1980s when she was in her 90s.

Catalog author Lynes sifted through primary sources of information about O’Keeffe’s life and work. She twice met Emilio Caballero.

“We took her to Palo Duro Canyon,” Emilio Caballero said. “She showed me photographs of paintings. I told her about paintings I sold to Smith.”

Santa Fe art dealer Andrew Smith paid Emilio Caballero \$1,250 for three works in 1978.

“Lynes asked me, ‘why did you sell them so cheap?’ I told her I needed a few dollars at the time,” Emilio Caballero said.

To arrive at the connoisseurship a catalogue raisonne requires can be controversial. Scholars typically combine interviews, such as the one Lynes held with Caballero, with research.

In O’Keeffe’s case, that research included a paper survey that documented the sorts of paper the artist preferred and used, and any inconsistencies that biographical or primary sources of

information about the artist could not explain.

Walsh of National Gallery worked with Lynes five years on the project Walsh examined more than 1000 works on paper for the paper survey portion of the catalogue raisonne that Walsh authored.

Walsh and Lynes have not publicly explained why the paper studies disqualified Canyon Suite, and they have canceled a scheduled College Art Association presentation on the project.

Walsh wrote in her catalogue raisonne essay that while she had expected to find that O’Keeffe used a wide range of paper, such was not the case. Walsh said O’Keeffe commonly chose papers that were “stunning for their simplicity.”

“O’Keeffe used newsprint only once for watercolor, for the 1917 series of three works, *Light Coming on the Plains*,” Walsh wrote. Walsh described the paper survey as “technical connoisseurship.”

A *Kansas City Star* story posted on Kemper Museum website reports that the National Gallery’s evidence shows that 10 of Canyon Suite watercolors are painted on beige groundwood paper, a low-grade sheet comparable to construction paper, and another three are on a rough heavyweight paper made in Italy and unavailable in the United States until 1965.

A *Washington Post* report says Walsh found three of the Canyon Suite watercolors are on paper not produced until the 1930s. Still another article, in *The New York Times*, offered that the paper of Canyon Suite wasn’t *imported* to the US until the 1930s. That report opened new rumors suggesting O’Keeffe may have received European paper from patrons or friends including Stieglitz.

But Walsh did examine papers Stieglitz was known to have given other artists. The Canyon Suite papers were not among them.

One primary source that might clear it up—the Stieglitz-O’Keeffe correspondence—is under seal

at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Books Library until 2006, 20 years after O'Keeffe's death. Lynes had access to those documents in her research.

Vintage and veracity

Deborah Fine, curator of prints and drawings at the National Gallery which oversaw publication of the catalogue raisonne, had been the watercolors' vigorous champion before, she told *The Washington Post* in December, a "combination of factors" led her to change her mind.

The person to whom the works' authenticity mattered most—Kemper, who owned the watercolors until Peters bought them back from him—hired his own paper expert, Mark Stevenson of Kansas City, to review Walsh's work. Stevenson reviewed it and concluded she had done an admirable job.

Even Peters concedes the Walsh studies have merit though he will not go so far as to say the works are fakes.

"There's enough evidence that a couple of pieces of paper in Canyon Suite appear to be wrong, are late," he said, referring to the post-1918 date of the paper. "What we can't easily determine is if O'Keeffe left some paper there and somebody added paint to them later."

Asked in a later interview what he thinks about the works' authenticity, Peters said, "It looks mixed. Even perfect provenance doesn't help deal with the problem we're dealing with now, of someone having added to the group."

"Even now, we can't disprove provenance. We can't prove it either. The only solution is technical analysis."

That could take months, he said. Peters said his gallery is retaining the services of another conservation organization.

Dirty laundry

Peters' 32,000-square-foot gallery is the largest in the southwest. He owns restaurants including

La Casa Sena and Blue Corn Café chain, and much expensive downtown Santa Fe real estate. He is majority stockholder in Century Bank, which he founded.

The controversy about Canyon Suite reveals much about the art business, which rarely airs clean much less dirty laundry. Shunning publicity is part of doing business in art, Peters said.

“Art collectors don’t normally make a purchase and then say, ‘Let’s call the newspapers.’ We have to be discreet in what we do.”

In the 1993 transaction between Kemper and Peters, Kemper paid Peters \$3.6 million in cash and \$1.4 million in Colorado real estate. Peters, who showed accounting documents to *Pasatiempo*, said he sold that real estate for \$750,000.

While windfall profits are often associated with Peters’ and other art dealers’ dealing, Peters noted that in this case he doesn’t consider the deal so sweet.

Peters said that when he sold Canyon Suite after five years of ownership, his net profit was 39 percent. Peters’ accounting documents show he paid \$1.25 million for the works and sold them for \$4.3 million.

Peters’ repayment to Kemper included part cash and part artworks totaling \$5 million in value. Peters declined to cite specific artworks that were part of the restitution.

After publication of the catalogue raisonne and Canyon Suite’s omission, Peters complained to the FBI the artworks might be fakes. The FBI dropped the matter in early March.

Peters has hired a private investigator, Fred Smith, to research the watercolors’ history. Sources in the Santa Fe legal community describe Smith as a topnotch professional who worked in the attorney general’s office investigating white-collar crime.

Smith was on the AG’s team in the 1980s that prosecuted a woman who illegally reproduced and sold O’Keeffe sculptures. Peters, who was already representing O’Keeffe, was a witness for the prosecution in the case.

According to Peters, Smith has uncovered as many as 76 purported O’Keeffes that emerged from Canyon and Amarillo. But only two early O’Keeffes, dating from 1914 to 1918, that appear in the catalogue raisonne have Canyon or Amarillo mentioned in their provenance: *Untitled (woman with Blue Hat)*, a gift to Jo Gilbert, 1917, and in the collection of Betty Buttolph of Gainesville, Texas since 1984; and *Untitled (Portrait of Dorothy True)*, cited with an Amarillo provenance before 1959.

Peters bought 32 artworks that passed through Emilio Caballero’s hands in total—three, including the Dorothy True portrait, that Santa Fe photography dealer Andrew Smith had bought from Caballero in 1978, and the 29 rediscovered in Amarillo in 1987.

Who owns the other 44 that emerged in Canyon or Amarillo is unknown.

The Caballero connection

Pasatiempo found records tracing connections between Caballero, O’Keeffe’s artworks and Santa Fe art dealers back to 1970. Caballero said they go back even further to the mid ‘1960s. How did he first get artworks that might be O’Keeffes?

By what at the time had seemed to his wife, Mary, to be a humdrum event: cleaning out the old schoolroom where O’Keeffe had worked before the art department at West Texas State moved buildings.

“When we moved to the new fine arts building in 1959-60 we were helping Isabel Robinson,” Caballero said. “You can imagine the accumulation after all those years. She was going to incinerate things, destroy them, and we asked, ‘May we take some things out?’”

The Caballeros took artworks out and hung them on their walls, not sure who had painted them but admiring them nonetheless, he said. Then, Caballero said, Amarillo newspaperwoman Vivian Robinson “came by one time, in 1964, and said, ‘Emilio, don’t you think these could be O’Keeffes?’”

Caballero's first Santa Fe contacts were two art dealers now deceased---Margaret Jamison of Jamison Gallery and William Ferrell of the Collector's Gallery. Caballero said word "got around" through Jamison that he had O'Keeffes.

"We never said they were O'Keeffes," Caballero said. "The people who purchased them, who were knowledgeable, said they were O'Keeffes. Why would they want to buy those paintings if they thought there was some doubt about them?"

Caballero said he sold work to Ferrell and Jamison as early as 1966.

When Smith bought his three O'Keeffes from Caballero in 1978, Caballero gave Smith copies of correspondence about other O'Keeffes he had sold in Santa Fe, Smith said. Smith still has the correspondence.

It includes a copy of a letter Ferrell wrote Caballero. In the letter Ferrell confirms having paid \$500 for a work on paper. Smith also got a letter written by Mary Caballero, dated Oct. 28, 1978. That letter explains how the Caballeros came to be in possession of works attributed to O'Keeffe.

According to the letter, "During the time Isabel Robinson was chairman of the art department at West Texas State University at Canyon (1925-55), she collected works and clipping from every possible source. The files were overloaded with prints and drawings throughout her teaching career.

"When she retired in 1955 she told me to take anything from the accumulation, since it was to be destroyed to make room for current work. I selected a small group of paintings that appealed to me and among these were the O'Keeffe works."

Mary Caballero recalled the cleanup.

"I picked them up off the floor when the file drawers were dumped out," she said. "I was there on a Sunday with my sister and the artworks were all over the floor.

“Isabel didn’t plan to do anything with them. I just supposed it was all student work.”

Now it appears that might be the case—that the found artworks were made by students with perhaps one or two O’Keeffes mixed in.

Neither Jamison nor Ferrell appear in the catalogue raisonne and we don’t know specifically which O’Keeffe artworks the dealers bought. The catalogue raisonne does not include an 1916-1918 O’Keeffes with a direct reference to Reid or the Caballeros.

Caballero apparently didn’t try to sell artworks in his own backyard—to the Amarillo Museum of Art, for example. When the Amarillo Museum wanted O’Keeffe works on paper from 1916-1918, it dealt directly with the artist, Amarillo Museum of Art director Patrick McCracken said. McCracken said the museum bought four O’Keeffe works on paper from the artist in Abiquiu in 1982.

The catalogue raisonne shows that other Santa Feans who have bought or sold 1916-1918 O’Keeffes include Grete Meilman, who does business as Grete Meilman Fine Art Ltd. of New York and lives in Santa Fe parttime.

According to the catalogue, Meilman has dealt in four 1916-1918 O’Keeffes. She did not return phone calls requesting comment.

The catalog lists Owings-Dewey Fine Art of Santa Fe, owned by Nat Owings and Ray Dewey, longtime Santa Fe art dealers, as having traded in nine 1916-1918 O’Keeffes. Owings-Dewey purchased three of those with Peters.

O’Keeffe in Canyon

The Canyon Suite story speaks with the clarity of hindsight to the art world’s hunger for the improbable but inspiring discovery—the stuff of good headlines, when the artwork proves right. Canyon Suite had hardly emerged into public viewing before many O’Keeffe specialists began crowing in delight. That changed last November.

The story reveals something intrinsic to the art world: that the word “discovery” can portend a gold mine or a landmine. The discovery of Canyon Suite was all the more exciting since it came after O’Keeffe’s death.

But that all changed when the researchers outed the artworks as probable fakes. The scholars, perhaps with other dealers who got stung for less than \$5 million, ran for the hills.

Part of the lure of Canyon Suite watercolors harks to the fact that 1916-1918 were breakthrough years for O’Keeffe. The young woman was a bohemian outsider in Canyon. She behaved unconventionally. She took off shoes and socks on the school steps. She didn’t go to church. She associated closely with Reid, a student, though she was a teacher.

Those reminiscences of the artist sing vividly in the 1995 documentary, *The Plains on Paper*, which revisits O’Keeffe’s two years in Canyon. The occasion for the documentary created by KAVC-TV in Amarillo was Canyon Suite’s emergence and national tour to museums around the country, according to the station’s Joyce Herring, the documentary producer.

The documentary shows the significance of O’Keeffe’s Canyon years. There she made work that remains outstanding more than eight decades later—luminous studies of star-specked skies, plunging gorges, triangular tent doors. The works evoke spaciousness beyond the borders of the paper.

Herring did not include the Caballero family in *The Plains on Paper*.

“The story didn’t depend on commentary from the family,” Herring said. “We had people who remembered going out with O’Keeffe to collect bones, and the whole bone thing is never attributed to her until she gets to New Mexico.”

Canyon Suite, exhibited at the McNay Museum in San Antonio in 1998 in a companion show to *O’Keeffe and Texas*, organized by visiting scholar and curator Sharyn Udall of Santa Fe.

Udall commented on Canyon Suite, “They were believable to me at the time as the kidn of very

spontaneous work O’Keeffe might do while teaching and working in a studio with lots of student materials lying around. It seemed to me they were on the kinds of paper that might be lying around a studio—every kind of paper you can imagine.”

A few people still think that aspect of the question—whether O’Keeffe used uncharacteristic paper in the ad hoc environment of a classroom—remain a mystery. Peters said he thinks it is possible but “considers the whole lot tainted now.”

He said he will never sell any of them again.

Peters solicited a scholarly opinion after buying the watercolors. The Art Institute of Chicago recommended that Peters contact California paper conservator Keiko Keyes, who had previously restored O’Keeffe’s art. Keyes is deceased.

Keyes’s communication with Peters spanned five months in 1989.

“The artist is known to have employed low-quality papers and fugitive colorants in her work,”

Keyes wrote. “These objects meet the criteria, with the possible exception of number 10.”

Which work was then numbered 10 is unclear.

Keyes looked at the watercolors in batches. She said about one batch that the watercolors seemed “unusually fresh with unfaded colors; rigorous and alive.”

She called still others “extensively damaged.”

Peters said Keyes also verified the 1916-1918 vintage of all but one of the watercolors.

Peters said he sent the works to University of Kansas at Lawrence, where O’Keeffe scholar Charles Eldredge worked with Juan Hamilton—O’Keeffe’s companion after 1973—to assign titles to the individual works and name the series Canyon Suite. Eldredge said he could “not recall” titling the works in a telephone interview. He declined to comment further, citing confidentiality agreements. He was an adviser to the catalogue raisonne project and therefore privy to the paper research that disqualified the works. According to a source who asked not to

be named, Eldredge cast a dissenting vote about Canyon Suite. The source said Eldredge believed as late as last year the catalogue should have included Canyon Suite.

Salesmanship

Emilio Caballero said when he gave the envelope to his daughter-in-law in 1987, he did not know the contents because he had never opened it. He said he felt Ted Reid had given him the package for safekeeping.

“Ted was my lifelong friend. Why would I look into it (the package)?”

Caballero said he first saw the envelope’s contents on TV, when *The Plains on Paper* aired in Amarillo.

Reid and O’Keeffe had lost touch in 1918, but renewed their acquaintance when O’Keeffe wrote to Reid after Stieglitz’s death in 1946. Reid even attended some O’Keeffe art exhibits including a 1966 show at Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth. And the pair exchanged letters.

Untitled (Portrait of Dorothy True), a 1915-1916 linoleum-block print that O’Keeffe authenticated for Peters in 1979, is the sole O’Keeffe traded by Caballero that made it into the catalogue raisonne. It is the only print O’Keeffe made in her lifetime, said Lynes at a recent *Arthur Wesley Dow* press preview at the O’Keeffe Museum.

Peters and his wife, Kathleen, still own that work and the two others Peters bought from Smith, as well as the 29 Canyon Suite watercolors.

A February 1979 letter signed by Juan Hamilton shows that Smith sent three works on paper to Abiquiu for O’Keeffe to see and consider buying. While skeptics suggest that the condition of her vision (she was blind at the time except for peripheral vision) call into question any authentication she would have made at that time, the letter Smith received in reply said only that O’Keeffe was not willing to sell or trade for the works.

“It’s a good principle in the art business that if it isn’t yours, you say,” Smith said.

In other words, during her lifetime the artist authenticated one work sold by Emilio Caballero. Peters said that gave reason to think other works Caballero offered might be authentic as well. Caballero said he did not know who had put his son and daughter-in-law in touch with Peters. He said they showed the work to other parties before Peters.

“Charles and Terry are innocent of the whole thing,” he said. “They saw a lot of money being offered by Peters and they needed the money. Why wouldn’t they jump at it?”

Terry Lee Caballero did not return calls seeking comment.

When Emilio Caballero saw Canyon Suite on TV, “I was almost disinterested,” he said. “I thought they could have been children’s work.”

“Charles and Terry asked me for a letter about the works’ provenance,” Caballero said. “I said, ‘gee whiz Charles and Terry, t his is not to be publicized. I’m a pretty well-known teacher. This is gonna get us sued.

“But I wrote the letter.”

Pressed about what he meant when he mentioned getting sued, Caballero said he had misspoken.

Elementary, my dear Watson

A clue to why the catalogue raisonne excludes Canyon Suite lies in the chronology of O’Keeffe’s life at the end of the giant volumes. Lynes uncovered a 1935 newspaper article that describes O’Keeffe returning to her Canyon classroom to get everything she had left behind there.

The entry dated November 1935 reads,

“O’Keeffe leaves New Mexico for New York, driving through Canyon, Texas, where she retrieves the art she left in the classroom in which she taught from 1916-18 [as reported by T.B. Reeves, in an article of 12 November 1935 in the *Amarillo Daily News*:] “One day Isabel Robinson, who was head of the art program, looked up and saw Georgia O’Keeffe standing in the doorway. She walked back to the files and picked out every drawing she ever did and walked out

with them. She never said a word.”

The Caballeros confirmed they knew of that visit.

“Isabel told us she never took anything,” Emilio Caballero said.

“I worked the same room. I washed brushes in the same sink. I used the materials she used. Why wouldn’t I be interested in a person of her fame?”

When told about the 1935 newspaper article cited in the catalogue, Caballero said, “That *raisonne* is all wrong.”

But the more one knows of O’Keeffe, the more that seems unlikely.

O’Keeffe biographer Roxana Robinson wrote that the artist kept meticulous track of artwork.

She writes, “O’Keeffe very seldom gave her work away, and the few times she did she seemed to regret it.”

Robinson describes one such occurrence in the biography:

“After Anita Pollitzer’s death, O’Keeffe wrote at once to Pollitzer’s relatives asking for the return of paintings she had given Anita some forty years earlier. Nor was this an isolated incident.”

Emilio Caballero insisted he never said works he sold are O’Keeffes. He said art dealers are to blame for any misunderstanding.

“Isn’t Peters the person who knows more about O’Keeffe’s work than most of the critics? Why would he jeopardize his own gallery?” Caballero asked.

Peters conceded the story of the Reid package now looks troubling. “We went on the art,” he said. “When the art looks right, you go on the art, not the story.”

Authenticity

Terry Lee Caballero interviewed only once, with *The Washington Post*, since the story broke in November.

In that interview she echoes her father-in-law: She never told Peters the works were by O’Keeffe. She said the sale was contingent on Peters’ getting authentication from O’Keeffe companion Hamilton.

Peters, whose lawyers wrote the sales contract, called the Caballero comment “ a very imprudent thing to say.”

Peters asserted the Caballeros presented and sold the works definitively as O’Keeffes. He acknowledged that he wrote a clause into the contract that Hamilton would authenticate the watercolors.

Peters said Hamilton did authenticate them but would not put it in writing. Hamilton in 1988 had been through lengthy and contentious litigation over O’Keeffe’s will and did not want to commit things to paper, Peters said.

Pasatiempo could not reach Hamilton for comment. He lives in Hawaii and Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation director Agapita Judy Lopez, who takes and delivers messages for him, said he was traveling. Hamilton did not respond to three messages seeking comment through Lopez.

Peters’ fellow dealers remain very quiet about where the other O’Keeffes that came out of Canyon, real or fake, are now.

1916-1918 works detailed in the catalogue raisonne and owned by Owings-Dewey inspired a call to Nat Owings about whether he ever bought anything from Emilio Caballero. Emilio Caballero’s niece, Joan Caballero, worked for Owings’ business partner, Ray Dewey, in an unrelated Indian art business throughout the 1980s.

Owings declined comment on O’Keeffe works with a Canyon provenance but added, “I didn’t know anything about the Canyon Suite.”

Owings, Smith and others in the art business agree the fake is an ancient phenomenon—albeit one that always attracts attention.

“Authenticity is the grim reaper of the art business,” Owings said. “It stands behind you all the time.”

“What separates the dealer from anybody else? Books. The hair on the back of my neck. My black light. Our own research. And then you go back in time to the things that occurred and where were the scholars? Everything becomes hindsight.”

O’Keeffe described Canyon to her friend Anita Pollitzer as a combination of “terrible winds and a wonderful emptiness.”

The artist would have been paraphrasing the effect of finding out Canyon Suite are fakes.

Peters said he wants simply to get to the bottom of it.

“It bothers me I got fooled,” he said. “That’s an ego blow.”

Owings asked rhetorically, “Do we get fooled?”

“Of course we do,” he said. “If you’re right, you’re a hero. If you’re wrong, you’re a goat.”