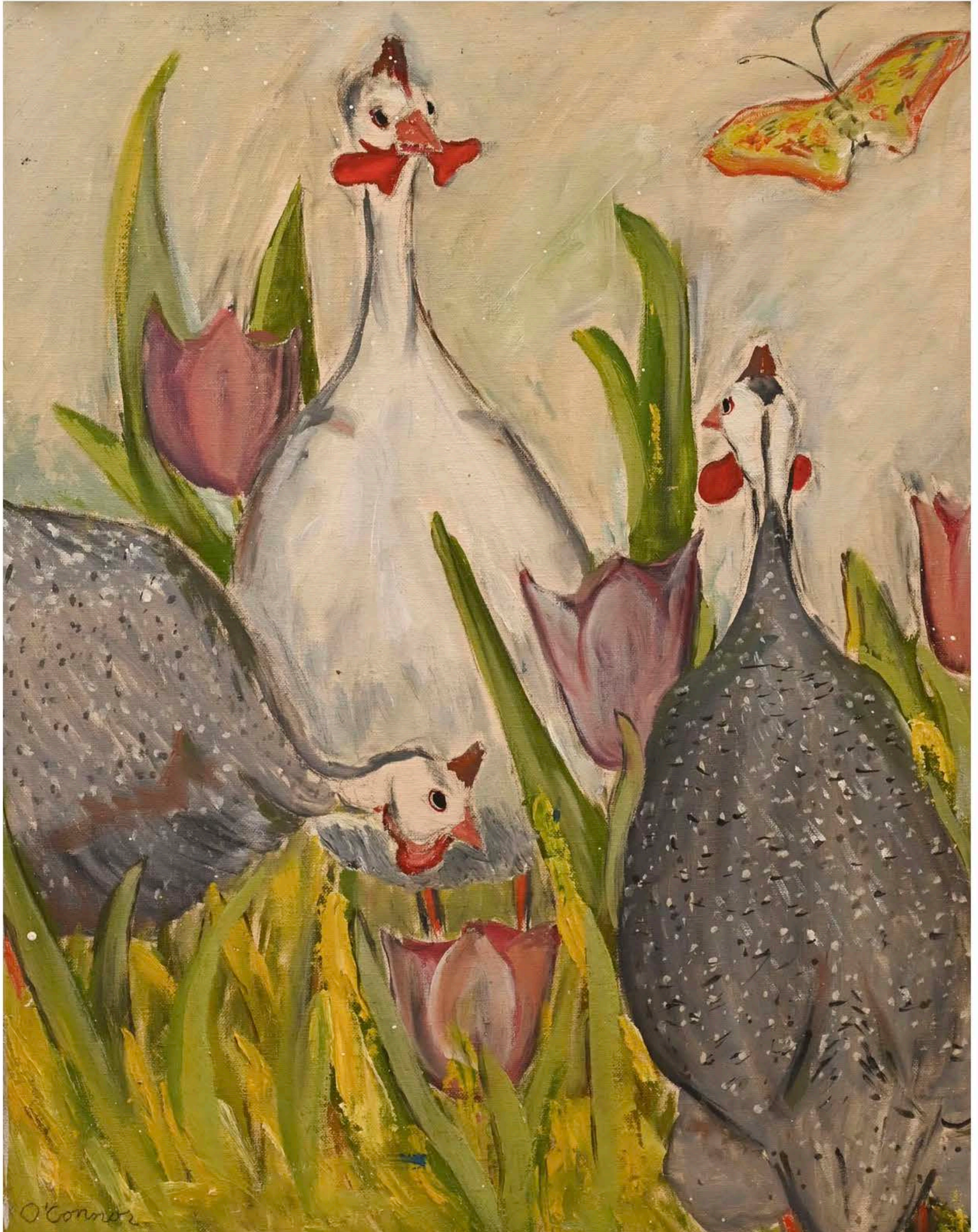


GCSU going all out for O'Connor centennial

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by Gil Pound



This untitled, undated painting was completed by author Flannery O'Connor circa 1950. Though known for her skill as a writer, it seems she also found time to paint as well. This and many of her other visual artworks will be on display during the author's centennial birthday celebration in late March.

Georgia College & State University is taking its job as steward of Flannery O'Connor history very seriously.

The famed southern gothic author who died of lupus in 1964 would have turned 100 years old in March. Her stories have inspired generations of writers, whether they be of the traditional written word or song.

The local liberal arts university, O'Connor's alma mater, has a ton of programming on tap to celebrate the writer's centennial. The slate of events to include scholarly lectures, workshops, a music festival, and a film screening was announced Thursday. The writer's birthday week in late March is jam-packed with different offerings highlighting O'Connor, her work, and its impact on the world.

“We have a full week of birthday celebrations as befits the centennial of a really influential and important writer,” said Dr. Katie Simon, interim executive director of GCSU’s The Flannery O’Connor Institute for the Humanities.

Like some birthdays, there are surprises in store as GCSU will showcase artifacts and even some of the author’s painted works never before seen in the public eye. O’Connor is most known for her work as a writer, but it seems she found time to work with a paintbrush and other art media as well.

“Georgia College is the epicenter of Flannery O’Connor,” GCSU President Cathy Cox said in a press release. “From our stewardship of Flannery’s home at Andalusia, to our library’s special collection of her work, the university attracts O’Connor experts from around the world to explore her roots and cultural impact, and we’re excited to share these new dimensions of her artistic legacy with the world.”

Born in Savannah March 25, 1925, O'Connor moved to Milledgeville with her family in 1938. She later attended the Georgia State College for Women, a former moniker for GCSU, where she served as editor of the school's literary magazine. Her work there also included being the "unofficial campus cartoonist," as the New Georgia Encyclopedia puts it. O'Connor's drawings were featured in the campus newspaper and college yearbook in addition to the literary magazine called the "Corinthian." She wrapped up her undergrad period with a degree in sociology in 1945.

O'Connor went on to study at the University of Iowa. Her first aim was to become a journalist, but she changed course and began studying creative writing instead. The rest, as they say, is history.

Having already lost her father to lupus years before, O'Connor was forced to return home to Milledgeville in 1951 after surviving her own life-threatening attack stemming from the autoimmune disease. She lived out her remaining days at Andalusia, her family's farm located on the north side of town just off 441. It's where she completed the bulk of her work, drawing upon her experience living as a practicing Catholic in the South. Today her reach extends far beyond little old Milledgeville.

“People are writing dissertations and books about her all over this world,” Dr. Simon said. “I grew up in California and went to UC Berkley for my undergraduate. I wrote my undergraduate thesis on Flannery O’Connor. I had never been to Georgia or thought of coming to Georgia, but I was reading O’Connor’s work because she was a great writer. She’s the master of the short story.”

O’Connor’s writing style is most often described as southern gothic.

“When we talk about southern gothic, there’s an interest in decaying structures and the feeling of being haunted, whether it’s literally ghosts or the uncanny,” said Simon. “Southern gothic also has what might be called grotesque characters or characters who are in some way despicable.”

Flannery showed great talent in fleshing out characters in her stories in a short amount of time, giving them startling or interesting characteristics and features. Some people in her stories were mentally ill, making it not difficult at all to make the link between the author and Central State Hospital. Formerly located on Milledgeville’s south side, the mental institution was around its peak at 12,000 patients during O’Connor’s time here.

“Absolutely I think there’s a lot of connections that we might draw between O’Connor’s work and Central State,” Simon said. “I think that’s an area that could really use more attention by scholars. She’s aware of this stuff. It’s in the air she breathed when she lived here.”

GCSU’s O’Connor Institute has a grant focused on gathering oral histories of people who worked at Central State to learn more about possible ties between O’Connor and the hospital.

“That population is getting scarcer and scarcer,” Simon said. “We’re trying to get a thicker understanding of her time period — what it was like here then, what institutions were here, what events, these kinds of things — because scholars are really interested in O’Connor’s work and that context matters.”

GCSU in 2017 took ownership of the O’Connor family farm, Andalusia. The designated National Historic Landmark is operated as a house museum, and the property also includes the Andalusia Interpretive Center. Visible from the highway and completed two years ago, the AIC provides a climate-controlled space to store artifacts related to O’Connor’s life and showcase them in exhibits for the public to view.

The Andalusia property will serve as the centerpiece for the author's 100th birthday celebration, though other campus facilities are being utilized to host some events as well. From 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on March 26, the Magnolia Ballroom will be home to newly-discovered artwork O'Connor completed at different stages of her life. The "Flannery the Visual Artist" exhibit collection totals 39 pieces that include oil paintings, a self-portrait, and more. The works are untitled and undated, but many feature one of Flannery's favorite subjects — birds. After its day in the Magnolia Ballroom, the visual art exhibit will move to the Andalusia Interpretive Center.

Andalusia on Thursday, March 27, will also play host to an outdoor Shawn Mullins concert. The American folk rock artist had a major hit with 1998's "Lullaby." Tickets to that concert are \$40, and attendees will be allowed to bring their own blanket, chairs, and picnic. Mullins will be supported by fellow folk singer Sally Jaye, who will also be at singer-songwriter workshops throughout the week and perform Saturday, March 29, as part of the official 100th birthday celebration at Andalusia. Colin Cutler and Hot Pepper Jam of GCSU's Music Department will perform as well during the free music festival and birthday celebration. Music is being incorporated because many musicians have said O'Connor's work has inspired them, including Bruce Springsteen, PJ Harvey and Tom Waits.

For more information on events scheduled for the Flannery O'Connor centennial celebration, visit gcsu.edu.