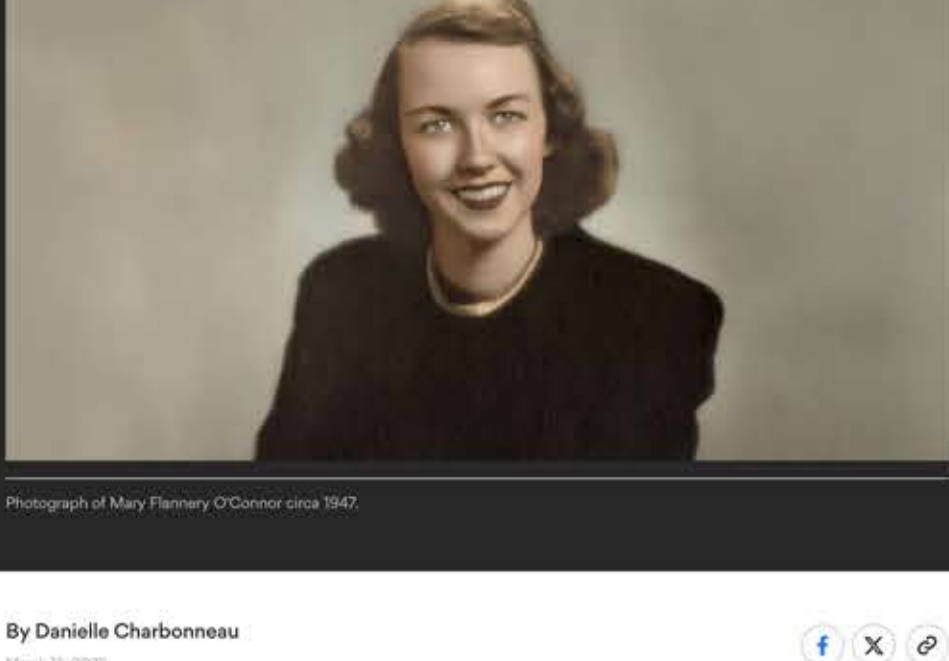


ARTS AND CULTURE

New Flannery O'Connor treasures found in time for centennial celebration

Weeklong centennial celebration of Flannery O'Connor expected to attract scholars and fans to Milledgeville.



Photograph of Mary Flannery O'Connor circa 1947.

By Danielle Charbonneau

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MILLEDGEVILLE, Ga. — On Greene Street in historic Milledgeville, across the lawn from the old Governor's Mansion, is a charming Southern house with plantation shutters framing the windows and four white Corinthian columns ascending toward a small attic window. If one could peer through its frame and into the past, they would likely find Georgia author Flannery O'Connor as a teenage girl.

She would probably be sitting behind a tall clerk's desk crafting linocut cartoons or drafting stories for her high school paper the Peabody Palladian. She might be escaping the frenzy of visitors at the house where her mother Regina and three unmarried aunts entertained guests for Sunday lunches or afternoon tea. Outside, O'Connor's pet geese might be roaming the lawn.

Up until last summer, the Cline home was kept by O'Connor's cousin Louise Florencourt, the petite, but feisty, trustee of the Mary Flannery O'Connor Charitable Trust. As the gatekeeper of O'Connor's legacy, Florencourt was described in her 2023 obituary in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution as a "diminutive, elegant, steel magnolia" often standing in the way of access to O'Connor relics.

When she died in 2023, the Cline mansion was bequeathed to Georgia College and State University (GCSU), adding to the school's list of O'Connor assets. The home is not yet open to the public.



Credit: Courtesy of Georgia College and State University

The Cline Mansion, pictured here, was the home of Flannery O'Connor in Milledgeville when she was in high school. She lived there with her mother and three aunts. The home was bequeathed to Georgia College & State University last summer. Inside, 39 original artworks by Flannery that have never been seen...

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The school, which O'Connor attended when it was the Georgia State College for Women, also operates Andalusia Farm, where O'Connor later lived and wrote for 13 years; the Andalusia Interpretive Center, an exhibit and event space at the entrance of the farm; the Flannery O'Connor Collection of manuscripts, letters, personal belongings and archival materials at GCSU; the Flannery O'Connor room, a space on campus for showcasing her life and work; and the Flannery O'Connor Review, an academic journal focused on publishing scholarly work about her literature.

When the school inherited the Cline mansion, a new treasure trove of O'Connor ephemera opened.

Katie Simon, the interim director of the Flannery O'Connor Institute of Humanities at GCSU, couldn't wait to see what was inside the previously off-limits bedroom of the author whom she'd studied for decades. When she finally did, her "Flannery fan girl" was floored, she said. The room was frozen in time.

"It was like a time capsule," she said, kept exactly as it was when O'Connor was alive. A pair of the author's gloves still sat on the vanity next to her crucifix. There were her 1950s dresses, dry cleaning bags, talcum powder, radio and a juvenile book called "Nathalie's Chum." A suitcase sat on the floor with O'Connor's name handwritten in youthful scrawl.



Credit: Courtesy of Georgia College and State University

A suitcase with Flannery O'Connor's handwriting was found inside the Cline House where O'Connor lived while she was in high school. The suitcase and other personal belongings will be shown during an exhibition, "Flannery at 100 -- Hidden Treasures," at the Andalusia Interpretive Center on March 25.

"I was geeking out," Simon said. "I was like 'Oh my God, are you kidding?' ... It's her bed, it's her sheets, it was really wild ... To me, that's so Southern gothic."

"She would probably really appreciate the grotesqueness of it," added Amanda Respass, director of public affairs for GCSU, pointing to O'Connor's eye for the dark, twisted and absurd.

Inside the home, a collection of 39 original paintings, cartoons, wood-burned illustrations, linoleum-block prints, lithographs and a self-portrait by O'Connor were also found. The artworks had never been seen before publicly.

"These paintings reveal that she never stopped creating visual art until her death," Simon said in a press release. "She's taught as an example of literature — but scholars are starting to look at her as a visual artist as well."

The new acquisitions from the Cline house came at a serendipitous time. This month, GCSU is celebrating O'Connor's 100-year birthday. "Flannery at 100: The Centennial of the Birth of Flannery O'Connor" is a series of events celebrating O'Connor's impact on literature, music, film, religion and the South. The cornerstone of the event is the week of O'Connor's birthday, March 24-29.

The unveiling of O'Connor's never-seen-before artworks is one of the most anticipated events. Beyond the opening, the school expects it will attract an additional 3,000-5,000 visitors to Milledgeville in its first year, with an increase to 6,000-8,000 visitors within five years, generating \$60,000-\$120,000 in direct annual revenue. "Flannery the Visual Artist" will open March 26 in GCSU's Magnolia Ballroom before being moved to the Andalusia Interpretive Center to be displayed at least until the end of the year.



Credit: Georgia College and State University

Painting of Andalusia by Flannery O'Connor. Courtesy of Georgia College & State University

O'Connor ephemera found in the Cline mansion, along with many other items from the school's collection of personal belongings, will be shown in a separate exhibition, "Flannery at 100 -- Hidden Treasures," at the Andalusia Interpretive Center.

Other centennial events include a singer-songwriter workshop with American folk musician Sally Jaye, a Shawn Mullins concert and book readings. A screening of Ethan Hawke's feature film "Wildcat," starring his daughter Maya as O'Connor, will follow a discussion with the film's producers Mary Rogers and Joe Goodman.

Festivities culminate with a birthday party at Andalusia Farm with food trucks, cake, free tours and a performance by Colin Cutler and Hot Pepper Jam, a band based their album "Tarwater" on O'Connor's short stories.

"I think what has come together for the centennial is a full picture of the different disciplines that she has influenced," said Respass. "There's so many avenues to celebrate Flannery ... there's something for everyone."



Credit: Courtesy of Georgia College and State University

Visitors gather on the front lawn of Andalusia, the home in Milledgeville where Flannery O'Connor wrote many of her short stories and novels.

Simon agrees. When asked why she thinks O'Connor has made such a long-lasting impact, she points to the fact that O'Connor's work can be read on many levels. On the first read, her work is striking for its engaging storytelling, well-formed plots, witty, once peeled back, it reveals more. Veiled behind her stories are deeper elements of religion, philosophy and ethical dilemmas. One reader might be fascinated by O'Connor's female angst (as Simon said she first was), while another might be taken by her allegories for the grace of God.

O'Connor's popularity has only gained momentum with time, despite having a relatively slim corpus. (She published two novels, 31 short stories and some posthumous letters, essays and journals before dying from lupus at 39 in 1964.) While her first novel "Wise Blood" in 1952 sold roughly 15,000 copies, her posthumous collection of short stories won a National Book Award eight years after her death.

Cassie Munnell, curator of Andalusia, said O'Connor's postmortem reach could likely be attributed to the many artists who credit her as inspiration. Bruce Springsteen and Martin Scorsese bonded over their shared love for O'Connor in a conversation at a private Netflix event in 2019. Filmmaker David Lynch expressed intrigue with O'Connor's ability to blend the bizarre with the spiritual in an appearance on "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno in 2001. Ethan and Joel Coen, Toni Morrison, Bono and Lucinda Williams are a few more who have publicly praised O'Connor.

"It's been kind of like a rolling snowball effect as more and more people reference her," Munnell said.

Academics and globe-trotting scholars have likewise carried a torch for O'Connor. Scholars from around the world visit GCSU's collections every year to study her writing, revisions and marginalia. Studying O'Connor's edits can be enlightening, Simon said. For example, one visiting scholar discovered O'Connor omitted direct reference to Stone Mountain and other Confederate landmarks in her works to make their references present but disguised.

"What she chose to cut out is often really interesting," said Simon.

Another scholar found that O'Connor had read a book written by a nun who converted to Catholicism after studying with a prominent German philosopher. That scholar is now analyzing O'Connor's writings for veiled lessons in that philosopher's teachings. Studying her work can be like peeling an onion, with new discoveries on each layer.

"There's so many approaches to O'Connor," Simon said. "I think a really good work of art does that. It allows you to approach it from different angles."

The town of Milledgeville has benefited from its status as O'Connor's hometown. The visitor's bureau promotes visits to Sacred Heart Catholic Church where O'Connor would worship every morning before returning to Andalusia Farm to write. Memory Hill Cemetery on Franklin Street is where O'Connor is buried with her parents.

"This is the epicenter for O'Connor studies," Simon said.

Flannery at 100 events

March 24-27 | Singer-songwriter workshops with folk musician Sally Jaye, 6-8 p.m., March 24-25: \$50. Porter Hall, room 304 at GCSU. Advance registration required. Participant performance showcase 6-7:30 March 27 at Blackbird Coffee in downtown Milledgeville.

March 25 | Opening of "Flannery at 100 -- Hidden Treasures," a showcase of artifacts related to O'Connor's life that have never been shown publicly before. Andalusia Interpretive Center. Free.

March 25-29 | Free tours at Andalusia with birthday cake and a song at noon daily.

March 26 | "Flannery the Visual Artist" exhibit of newly discovered O'Connor artworks. 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Magnolia Ballroom at GCSU. After opening, artwork will move to Andalusia Interpretive Center for the rest of the year. Free.

March 27 | Shawn Mullins concert with Sally Jaye at Andalusia Farm. \$40. Attendees advised to bring blanket or chairs.

March 28 | "Wildcat" film screening and panel discussion with producers Mary Rogers and John Goodman. Discussion 8 p.m., film 8:30 p.m. Free, Russell Auditorium at GCSU.

March 29 | 100th Birthday Celebration. 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Andalusia Farm. Free. Festivities include tours of Andalusia, food trucks, birthday cake and musical performances by Colin Cutler and Hot Pepper Jam, Sally Jaye and Rob Sumowski.

Andalusia Farm / Andalusia Interpretive Center, 2628 N. Columbia St. 478-445-8722, gcsu.edu/andalusia. Georgia College and State University, 231 W. Hancock St. 478-455-5254, www.gcsu.edu. Blackbird Coffee, 431 W. Hancock, 478-454-2473, www.blackbirdcoffee.com. For more information on Flannery at 100, visit gcsu.edu/oconnor/flannery-at-100.

About the Author



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