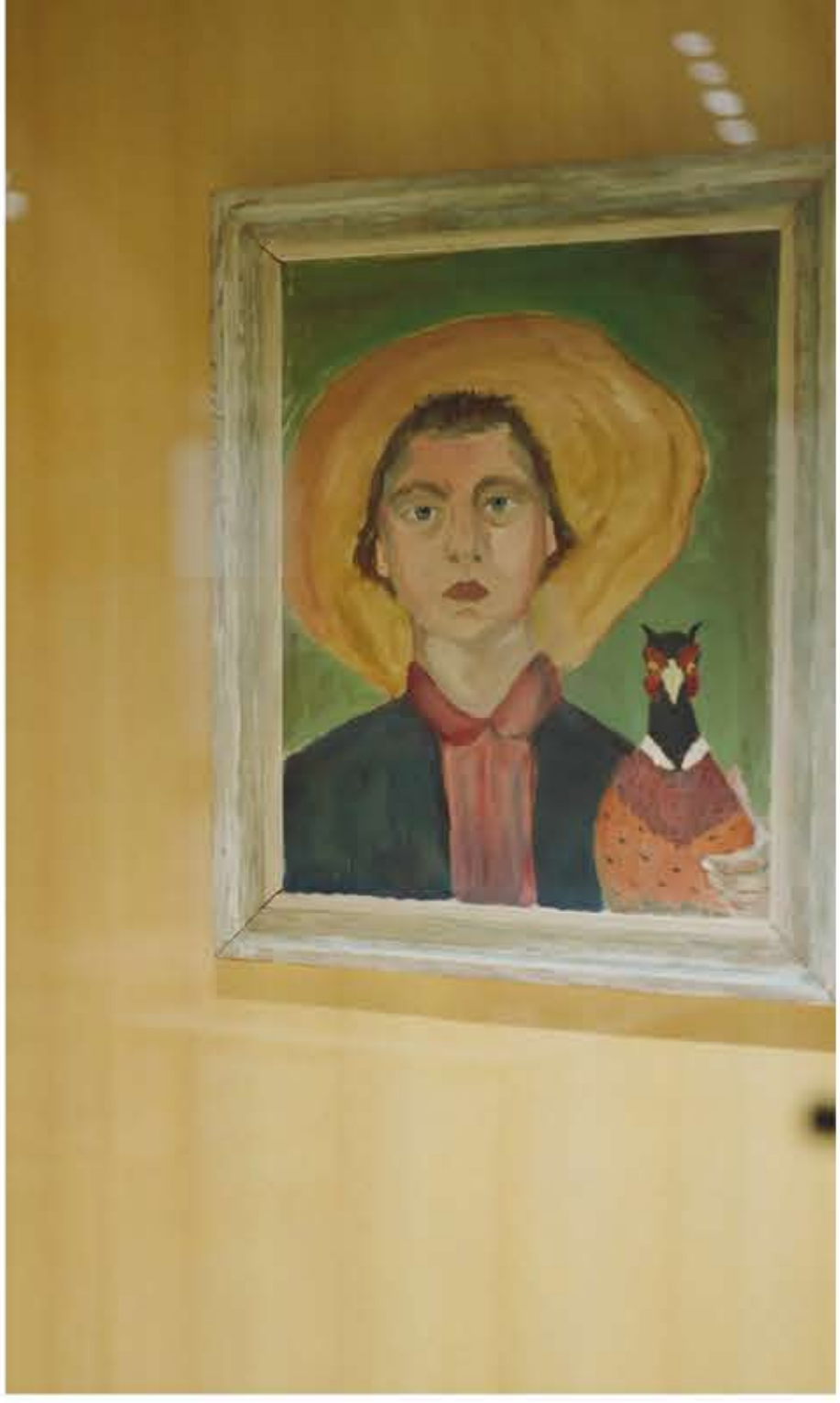
Sprung From the Attic, Flannery O'Connor's Artworks See the Light

The darkly comic Southern novelist kept a quiet practice in the visual arts. For the centenary of her birth, her paintings are finally getting an audience — and updating her legacy.



Flannery O'Connor's 1952 self-portrait is the star of an exhibition in Milledgeville, Ga. She "stares at us with the deadpan of a Byzantine saint, a golden sun hat engulfing her head like a halo," our critic writes. Mary Flannery O'Connor Charitable Trust

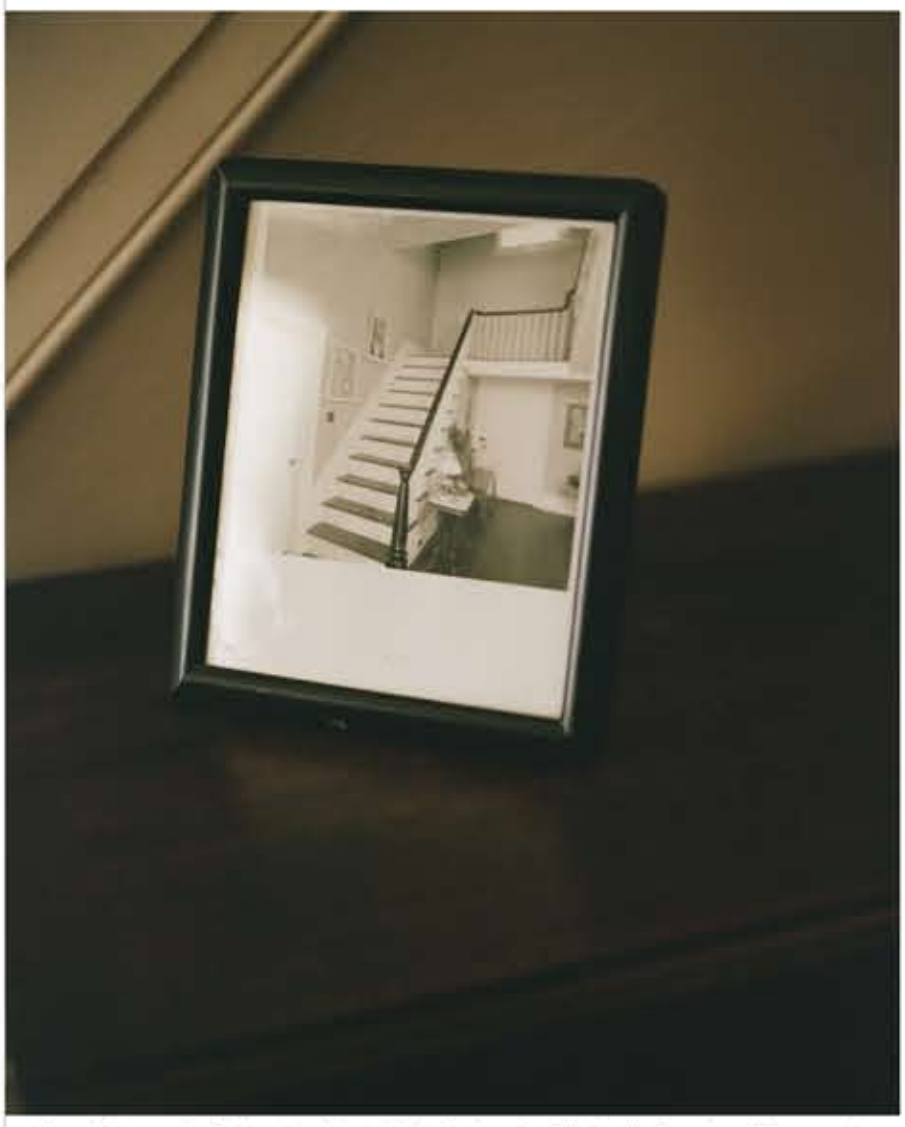
By Walker Mimms Photographs by Rita Harper
Reporting from Milledgeville, Ga.

March 20, 2025

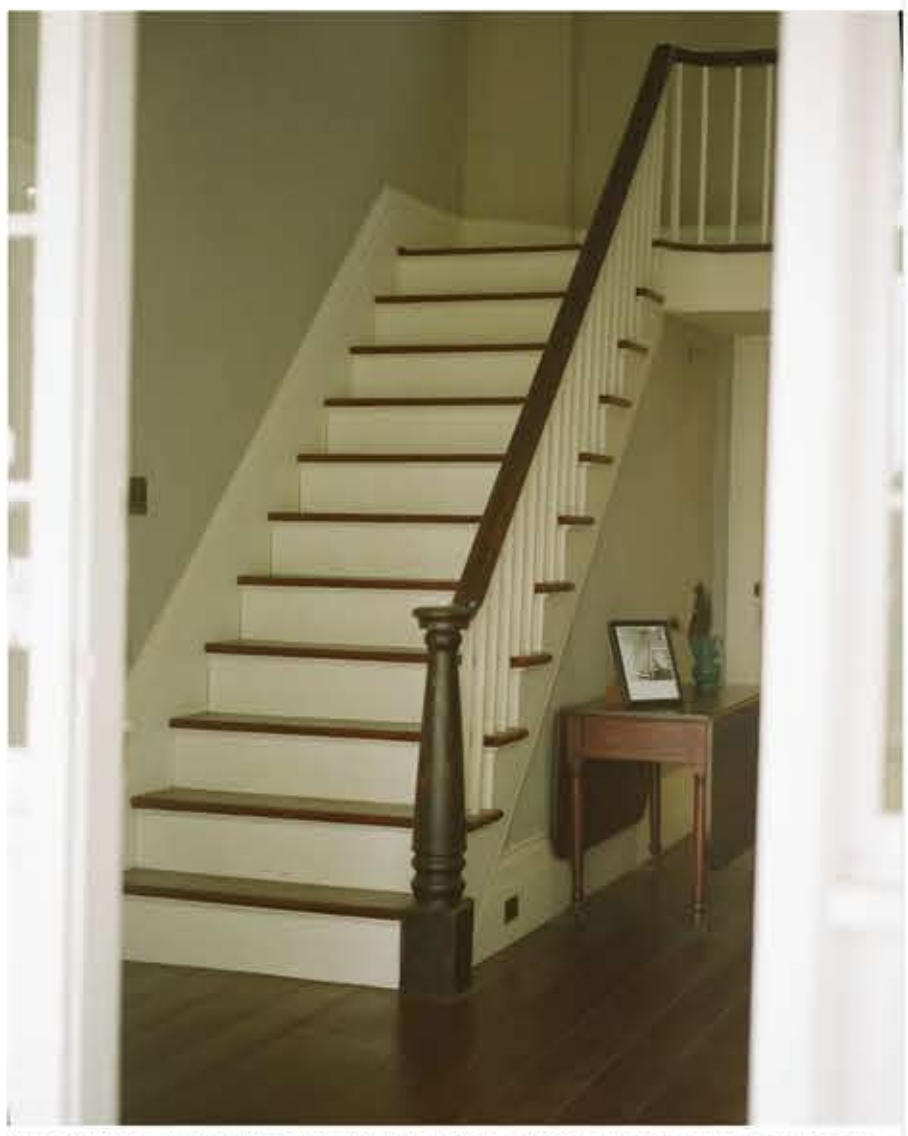
"I don't know how to write," Mary Flannery O'Connor once said. "But I can draw."

She had just become a cartoonist for her high school newspaper, at Peabody High School in Milledgeville, Ga. There, and later at Georgia State College for Women, she hoped to place her linoleum-block-print satires of campus life in The New Yorker.

Instead, she left for the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a Yaddo residency in New York State, shed "Mary" from her name and published two finely tuned novels about religious belief, the perversely funny "Wise Blood" (1952) and her grave "The Violent Bear it Away" (1960), then a collection of short stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (1955), whose staring contest with belief and tradition in the modernizing South placed her at the front of new regional literature until her death from lupus in 1964, at age 39.



A framed photograph of the interior of the Andalusia farmhouse in Milledgeville, Ga., where O'Connor made paintings that decorated the walls during her lifetime.



The Andalusia farmhouse today is a museum devoted to O'Connor's life. The exhibition of her paintings is at an interpretive center on the premises.

Since the republication of those newspaper cartoons, in 2012 — and a deeply researched biography in 2009 — an academic scavenger hunt for the true Flannery O'Connor has taken off. Her prayer journal and unfinished third novel were recently published, a documentary and biopic released. On March 25, for the centenary of her birth, her alma mater, now the Georgia College & State University, will exhibit 70 newly acquired artworks of a different sort, which some O'Connor scholars have heard about but far fewer have seen. Then on March 27, the exhibition moves to the Andalusia Interpretive Center, an exhibition space nearby run by the college.

Comprising painted woodcut caricatures from her childhood along with regional oil paintings from the peak of her writing career, the artworks might shed new light on a literary vision cut far too short, a Roman Catholic theology that scholars have debated for 70 years and infamously protective gatekeepers — her mother and cousin — who may have resisted access to O'Connor's artwork.

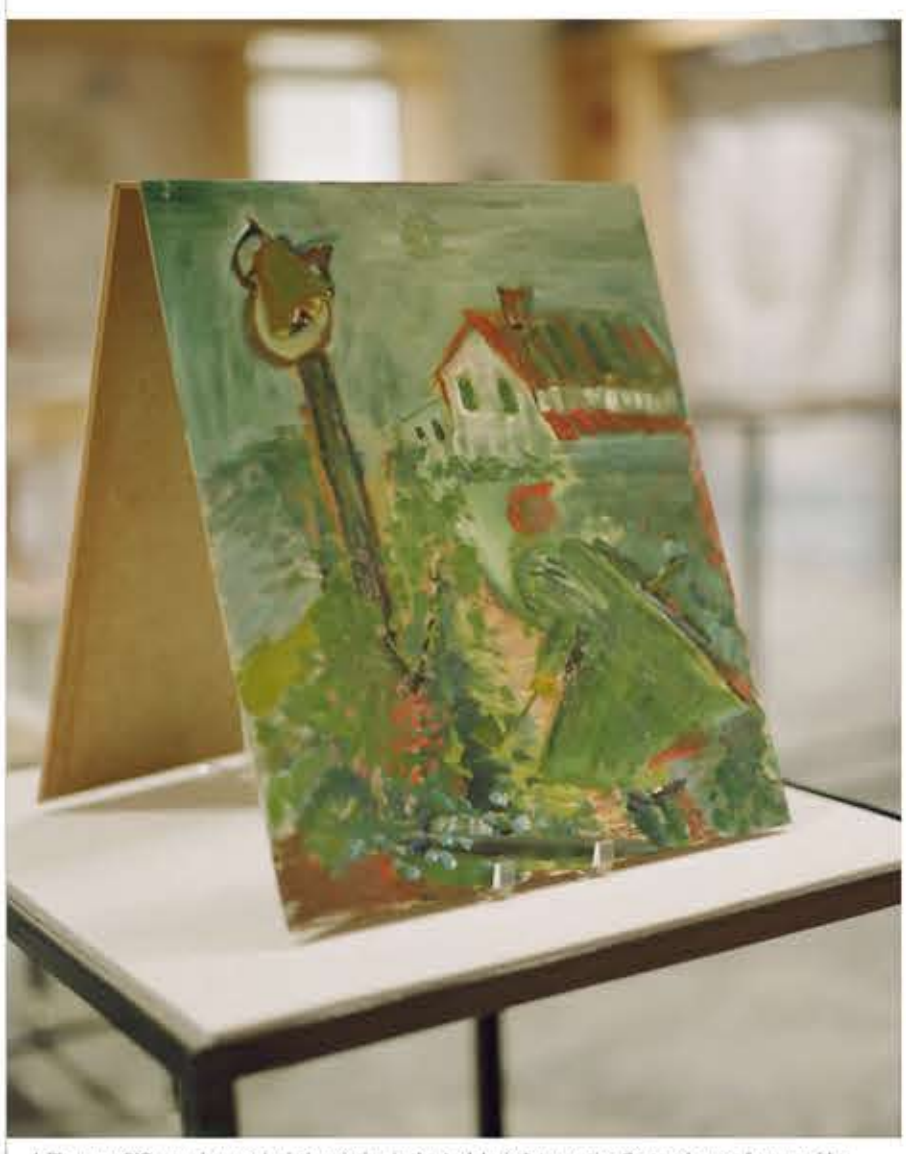
On a balmy afternoon during Lent, Seth Walker, the college's vice president of advancement, led me up two flights of stairs of a peeling Federal-style foursquare house in downtown Milledgeville, where O'Connor, age 13 and a self-described "pigeon-toed" only child "with a receding chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I'll-bite-you complex," moved from Savannah with her parents, and where she would reside until age 20.

Sun burst in when he creaked open the door to the attic, which is lit by a large skylight. "This is where she escaped to do her art," Walker said. When his team accepted the house from the family in 2023, they discovered among "*tons* of stuff" two barrels full of paintings on wood tile.

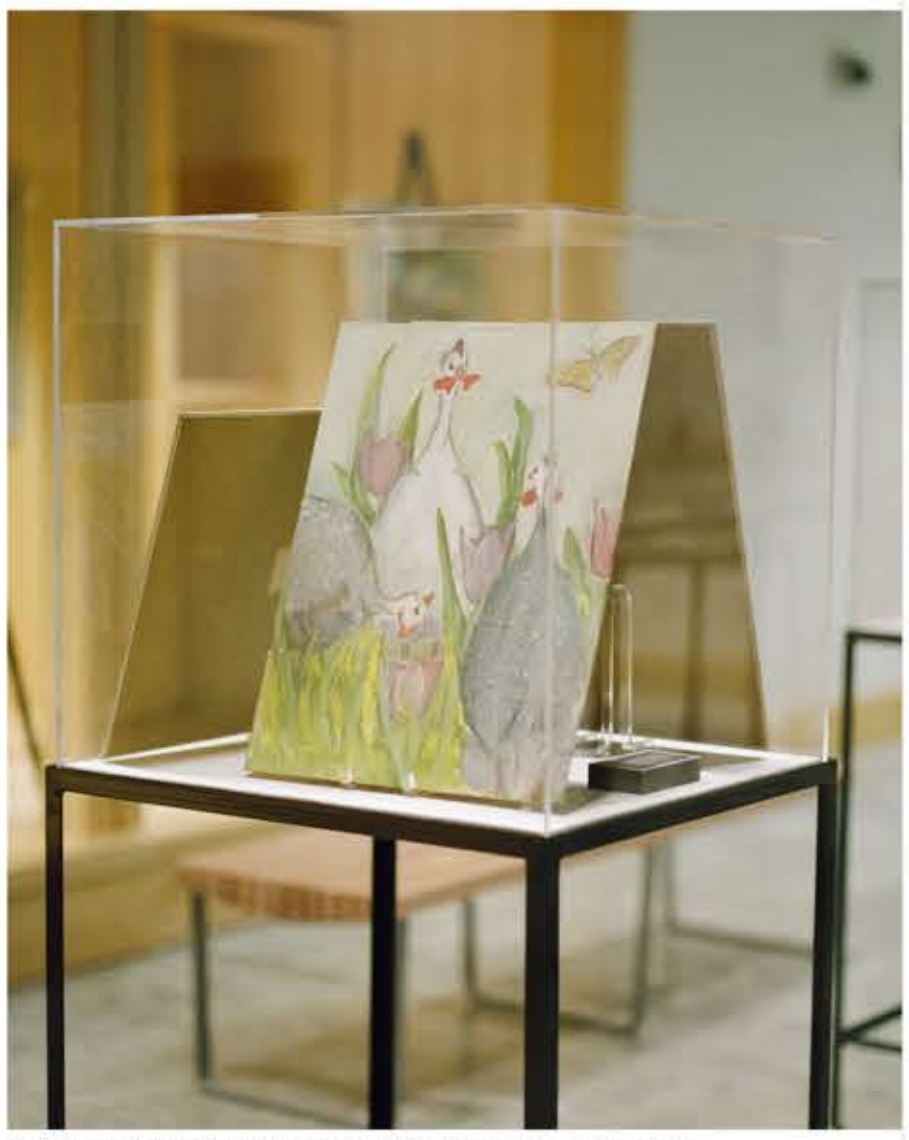
The Cline House attic, where two barrels full of paintings on wood tile by O'Connor were discovered around 2023. Her gatekeepers may have worried that the paintings might distract from her achievements as a writer, a trustee said.

In the exhibition, these works on wood panel are cartoony like O'Connor's school newspaper prints, but much more individualized. She drew her figures in pencil, and grooved over them with deep trenches of a wood-burner and, in some cases, a hacksaw.

Here are pipe-smoking crones, socialites in feather headgear, potato noses, clown mouths: O'Connor cut, then illuminated them in lime, red and orange paints still bright today. One tile depicts an oval-faced man with a top hat, head cocked. Beside him an ice cream cone-faced woman scowls through a monocle.



A Flannery O'Connor impressionistic painting in the Andalusia Interpretive Center shows a farmer with a hoe; his coat blends in color and movement with the surrounding earth.

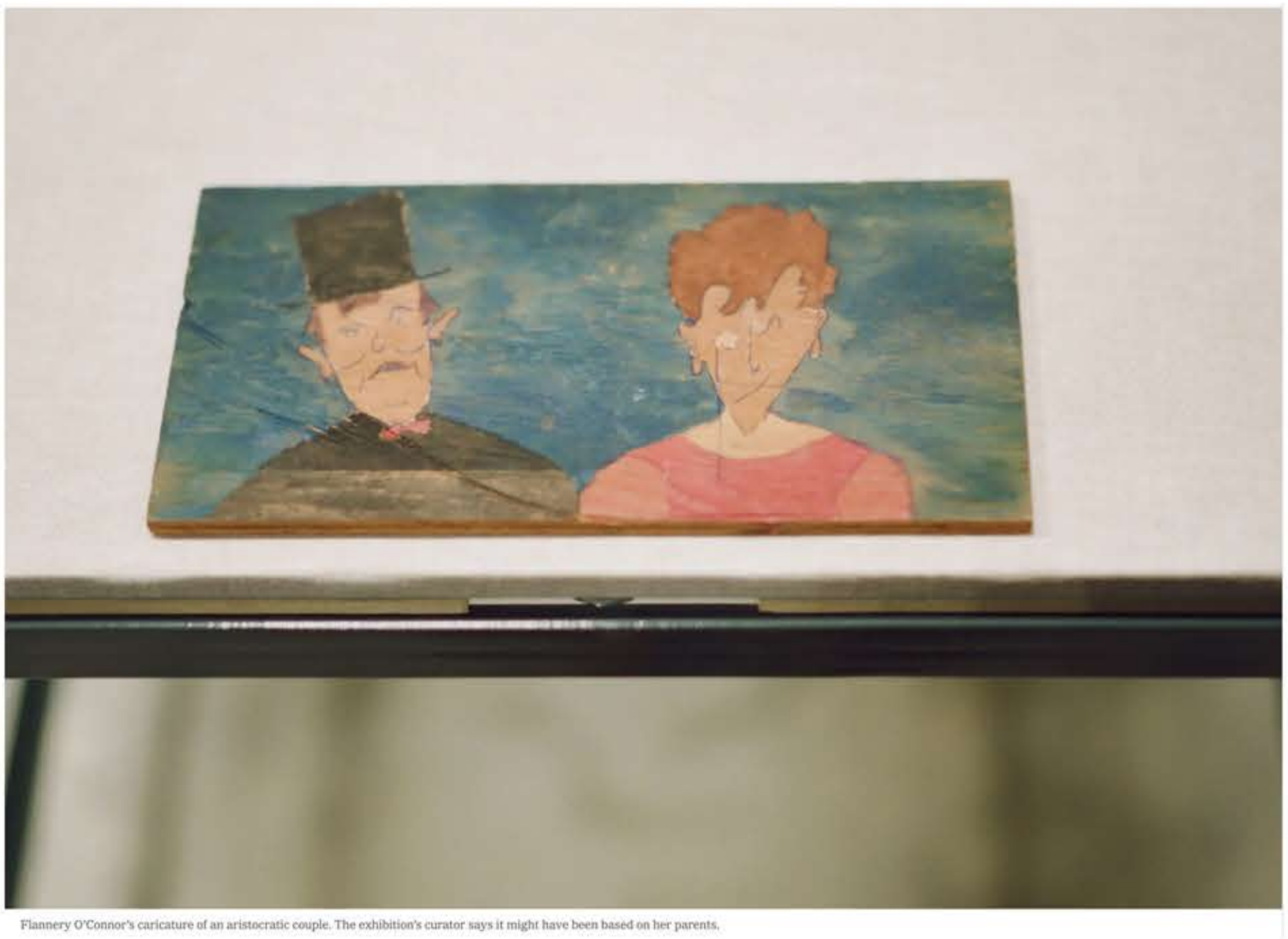


In a vitrine in the Interpretive Center, a painting of three fowl in a naturalistic landscape.

In these cartoon aristocrats, Cassie Munnell, the curator at Andalusia, sees Flannery's parents. Her father, Munnell said, did have a "toothbrush sort of straight mustache."

Robert Donahoo, an O'Connor specialist who is writing on the newly discovered artwork, suggests that the young painter may have been influenced by the revolving cast of very Catholic, mainly female relatives, on her maternal Cline side, who inhabited the large house with O'Connor's family.

"Growing up calling her parents by their first names, in that big house full of rules, there was no shortage of material," Donahoo explained. "But in the end it's a guessing game" he said of attempts to identify the sources.



Flannery O'Connor's caricature of an aristocratic couple. The exhibition's curator says it might have been based on her parents.

What seems clearer is how these drawings presage her sense of slapstick in the fiction. In "Wise Blood," a doomed allegory of personal religion, she gives her country preacher "a nose like a shrike's bill," and makes his first victim "a fat woman with pink collars and cuffs and pear-shaped legs."

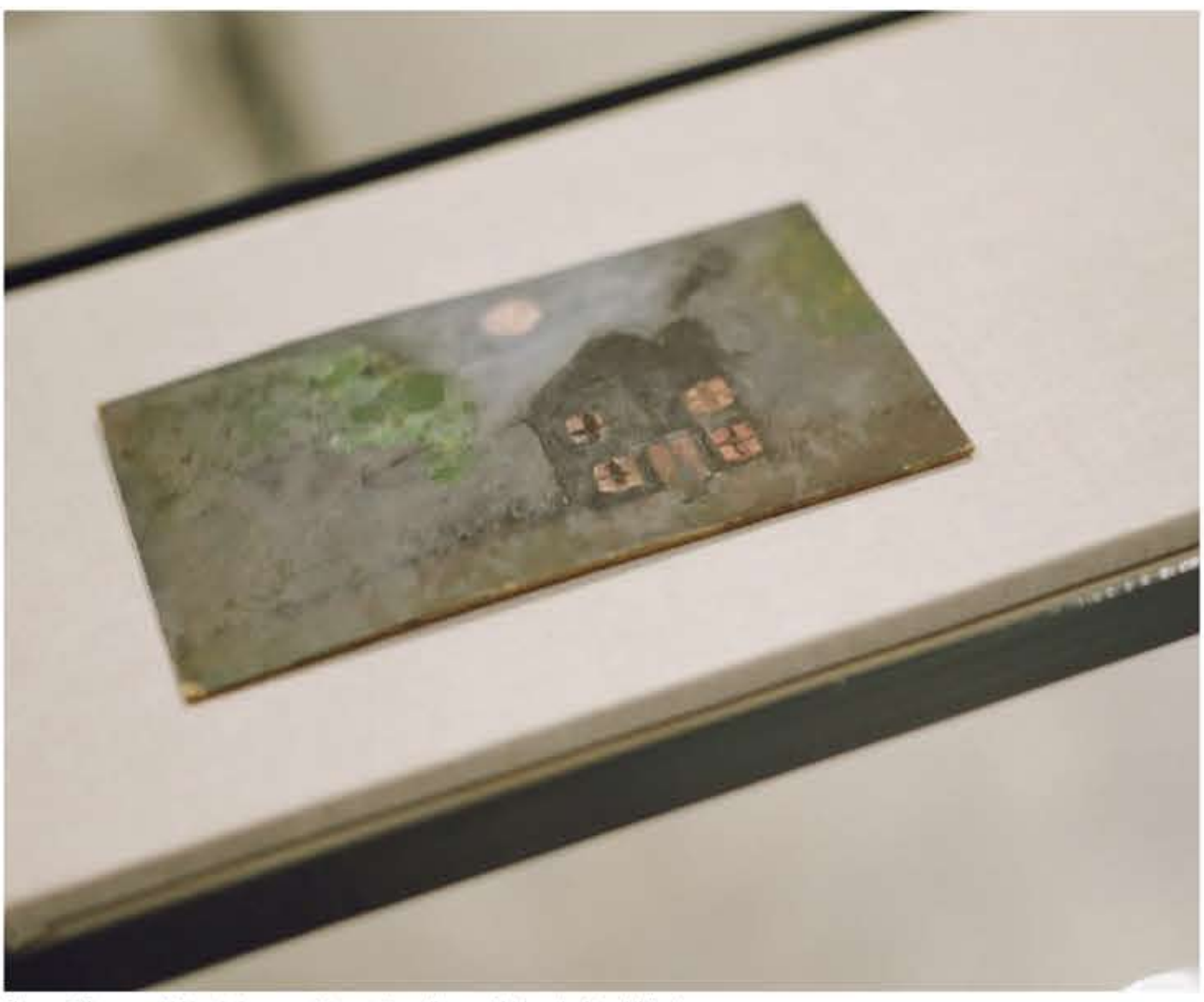
O'Connor, a high formalist writer, justified exaggeration in her essay "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction." For a market full of "tired" and desensitized readers, she writes, today's novelist must "know how far he can distort without destroying." Cartoon writing for a cartoon world.

O'Connor was 20 when she left Milledgeville for graduate school in Iowa and a literary career up north. By 25, she was forced back home, having been diagnosed with the autoimmune disease that also killed her father at age 45. She moved with her mother to Andalusia, a family farmhouse north of town, because it had fewer stairs. Daily until her death, she rose for 7 a.m. mass, wrote for four hours in the bedroom she kept darkened like a cell, corresponded with multiplying admirers and journalists and tended her dozens of peafowl as her body stiffened.

Flannery O'Connor's bedroom in the Andalusia farmhouse where she lived with her mother from age 25 to the end of her life, showing the very short distance from bed to typewriter.

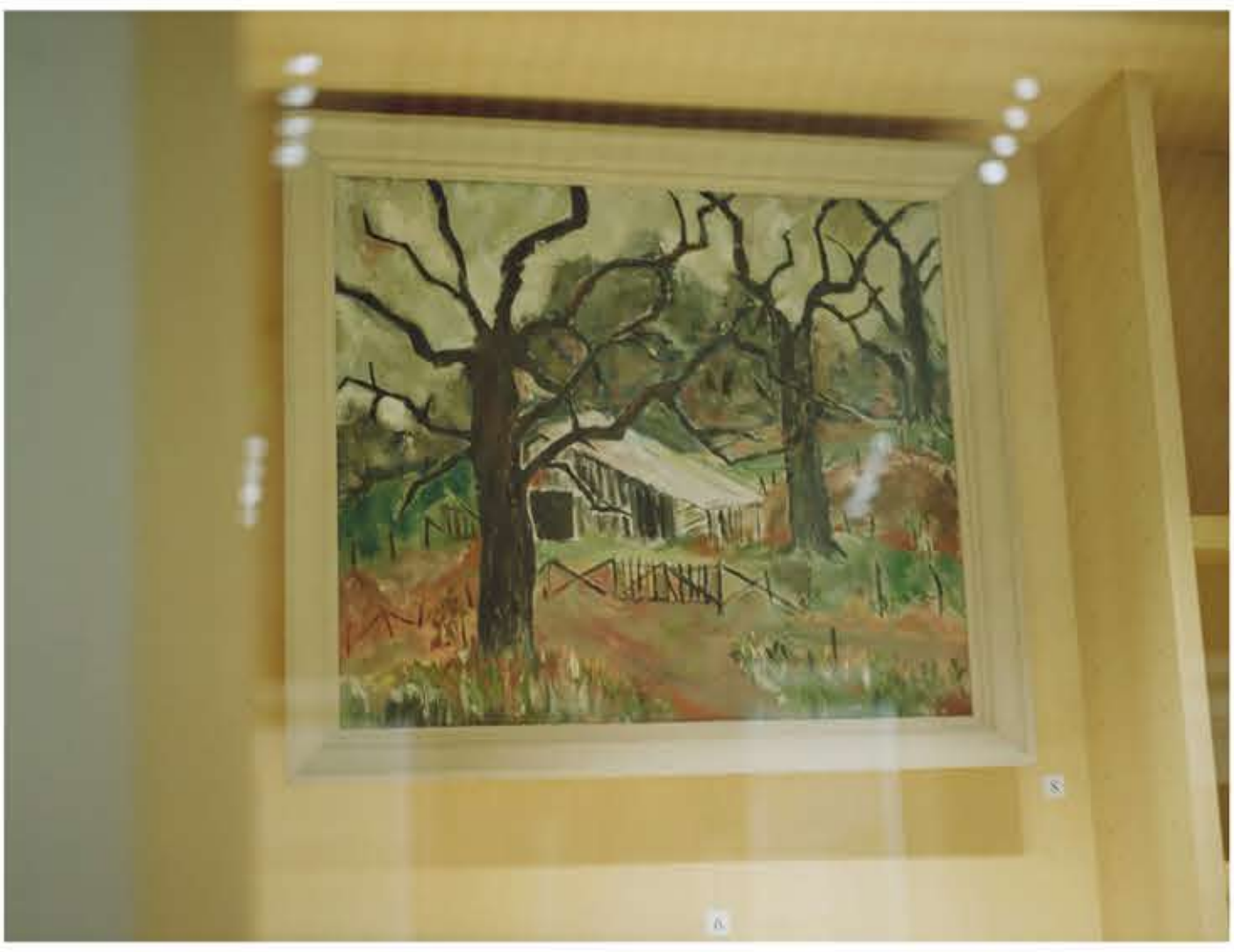
And she returned to painting. Twenty-five oils on canvas board are also in the exhibition.

After O'Connor's death her executors, her mother, Regina Cline O'Connor, and later O'Connor's cousin Louise Florencourt, moved back to the Milledgeville townhouse. Before Florencourt's death in 2023, at 99, she willed the townhouse, a time capsule of 150 years of Clines (including Flannery), for use by the college's Flannery O'Connor Institute for the Humanities. Its use remains to be determined. The painted caricatures were found in the attic around this time; the oil paintings had been crammed into a storage unit behind the drive-through of Cook Out, a fast-food restaurant.



Flannery O'Connor made this painting as an adolescent. It was discovered in the attic of her childhood home, the Cline House.

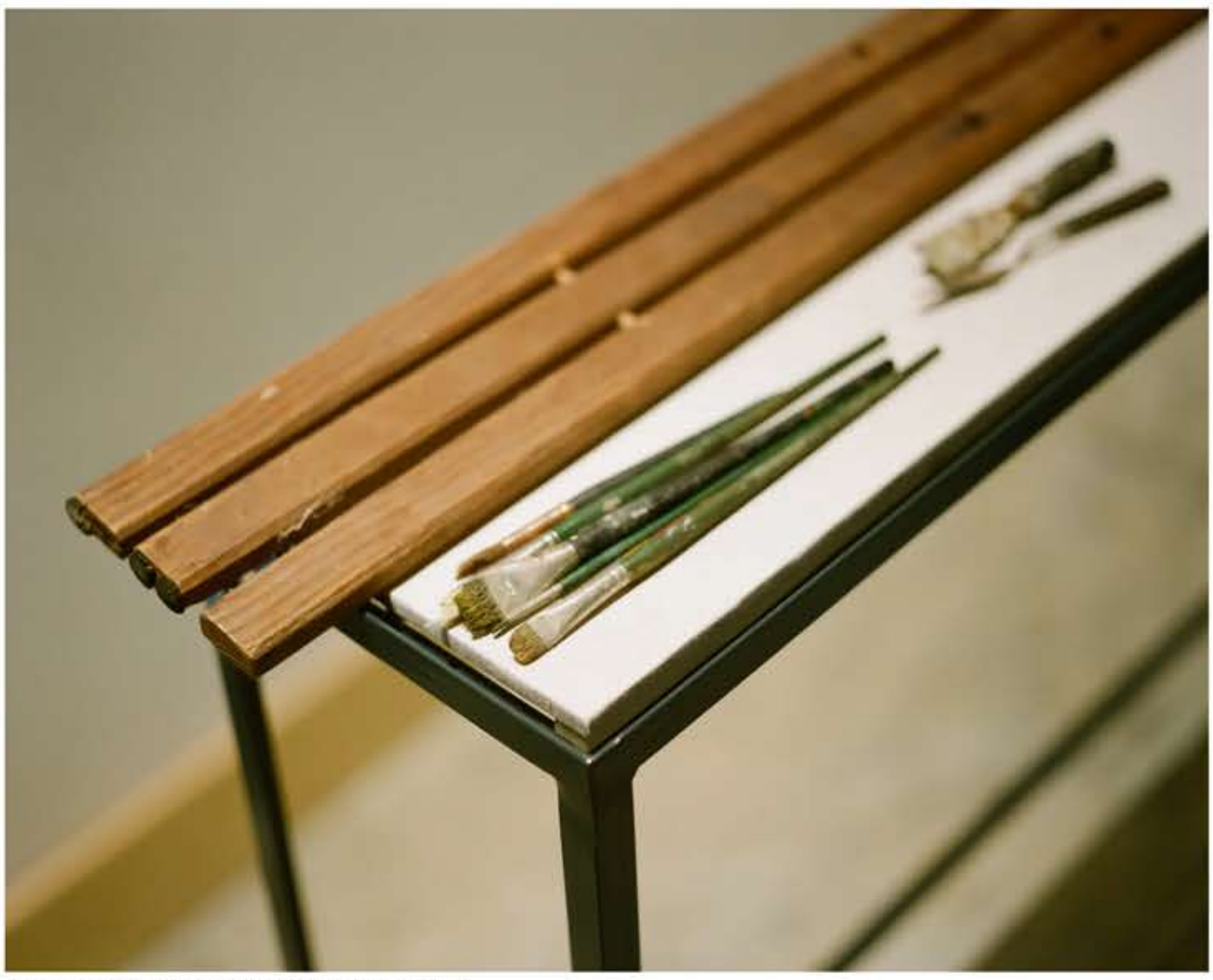
Must an artist be known in full? Farrell O'Gorman, one of the O'Connor estate's new trustees, explained by phone that her "mother and early trustees, in the 1960s, '70s, '80s, weren't sure if she would be rightly recognized as what she is: one of the greatest short story writers. I think they were worried that the paintings might somehow distract from her achievements as a writer."



Painting of trees by O'Connor shows a house resembling the barn near her home. It is on view for her centenary celebration in the Andalusia Interpretive Center near Milledgeville.

At first, these later paintings seem diversions: barns, fruit bowls, birds. But they are also visibly aware of the legacy of impressionism. In her picture of the painting class where she studied with the watercolorist Frank Stanley Herring, her dabs of bright impasto call to mind the domestic mysticism of Raoul Dufy.

"She's not a rube in the middle of nowhere, even though she sometimes cultivated that image of herself," Donahoo said. In her letters, O'Connor praises Matisse, Rouault, Chagall and Rousseau. Though a poster child for Southern literature on television and radio, she read her Joyce and Erich Auerbach. Her forays into impressionism reflect the same worldly metabolism.

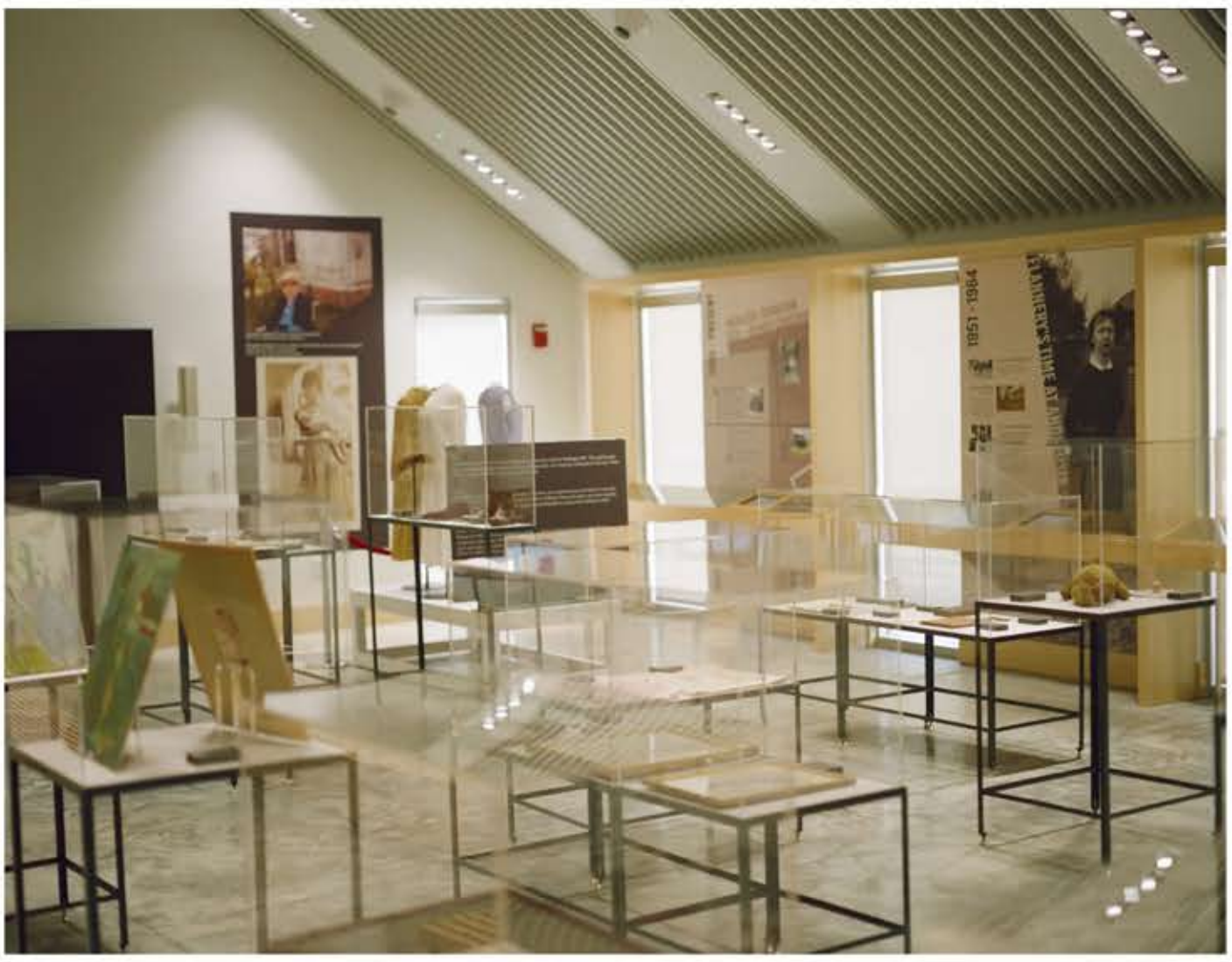


Paint brushes mounted on easel at the Andalusia Interpretive Center.

In recent years, O'Connor has come under question for using racial slurs in her work and her letters, and for not enthusiastically embracing the civil rights movement. (She turned down an invitation to meet James Baldwin in Georgia, writing in 1959 that this "would cause the greatest trouble and disturbance and disunion. In New York it would be nice to meet him; here it would not. I observe the traditions of the society I feed on – it's only fair.")

Two devotedly detailed portraits of Black sitters complicate the pigeonholing of her politics. Munnell suspects the sitters were her neighbors. One is a girl seated in a blue dress, with copper smears glinting in her kneecaps and knuckles. Her lips are parted, half smiling.

The other is an elderly woman bent over quiltwork. Up close, O'Connor has defined the fabric squares with steeply peaked ridges of yellow, as if embroidering. The chair sits on a coiled scrap rug in similarly sculpted pigment; the woman surely sewed that, too. We can almost feel the texture of this quilter's craft.

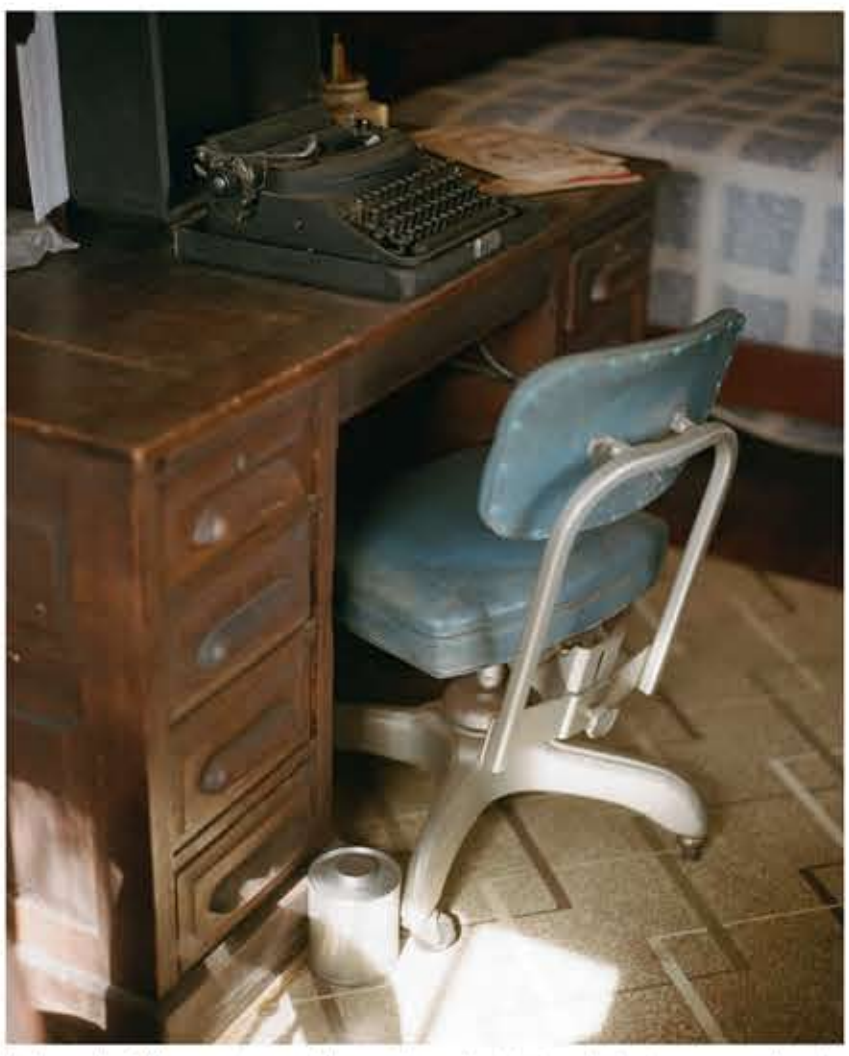


Installation view of "Flannery at 100: Hidden Treasures," at the Andalusia Interpretive Center, on Flannery O'Connor's 100th birthday. The exhibition showcases artifacts related to O'Connor's life.

Tactile vividness also makes her stories of this period taut and memorable. "You have got to learn to paint with words," O'Connor urged an aspiring writer in 1955. In her bleak parable of grace, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a murder victim wears "a yellow sport shirt with bright blue parrots designed on it and his face was as yellow as the shirt." It's enough to convey his foppery and cowardice.

Though O'Connor claimed to be a "thirteenth-century" Catholic and resented attempts to modernize the Latin mass, she was also unpredictably progressive, even appearing to accept homosexuality in a much-discussed 1956 letter.

That letter, and "Wise Blood," brought one current senior at the college, Charlotte Aexel, to a Catholic conversion of her own. "O'Connor thought Catholicism was the way to live," Aexel told me at a coffee shop downtown. "But her story is more about being spiritual. She understands that piety can be beautiful, but that sometimes piety steps on life, and Jesus is life."

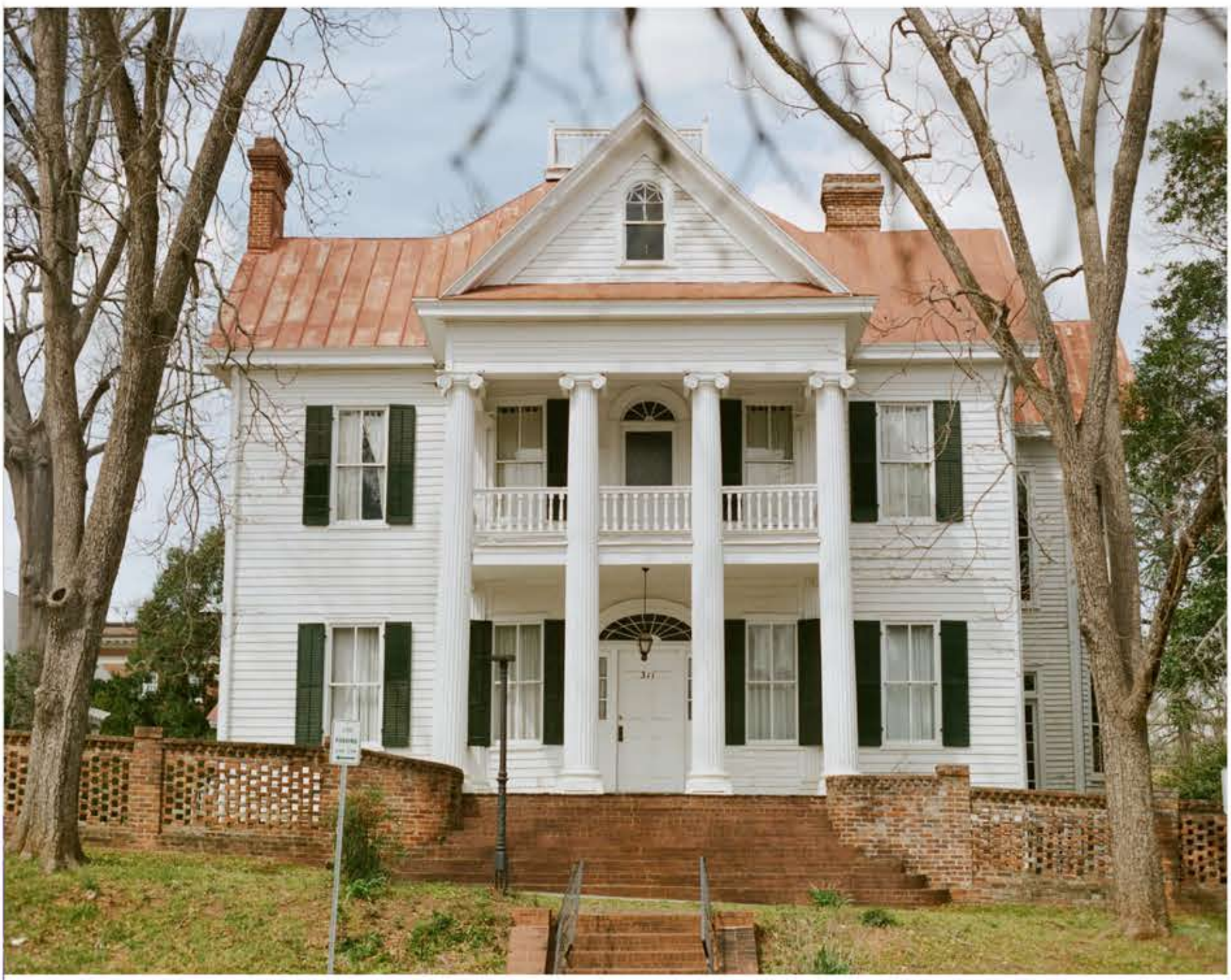


Bedroom where O'Connor wrote some of her most famous short stories and voluminous correspondence, in the Andalusia farmhouse near Milledgeville.

The star of the exhibition is a painting from around 1952 that may reflect O'Connor's offbeat orthodoxy. In a magnificent self-portrait created during a lupus attack, O'Connor stares at us with the deadpan of a Byzantine saint, a golden sun hat engulfing her head like a halo. The brushstrokes are flat, more illustration than expression. Evoking St. John with his eagle, she cradles a pheasant, which glares through angry red eyes and feathered horns. (The painting is still owned by her estate.)

O'Connor wrote of the pheasant in that picture as "the Devil," but also as her "Muse," as if at home with the forces of evil. (The show also contains a companionable red Satan puppet she made in youth.) O'Connor mailed photos of this portrait to friends and to her publisher for a dust jacket (never used) with the proviso: "Nobody admires my painting much but me."

All regional artists might be iconographers of a sort, making images that stand in both for themselves and for some outside truth. Rocking in the screened porch of Andalusia, where she drank her final coffee-Cokes, I gazed down the gravel driveway. In O'Connor's time, the yard surrounding the house would have been cleared. Today it's thick with pecan trees and Bradford pears. She made universal this pocket of Georgia to which she was forced to return. "The longer you look at one object," she wrote in an essay discussing Cézanne's apples, "the more of the world you see in it."



Federal-style Cline House on West Green Street in Milledgeville, Ga., where O'Connor lived from age 13 to 20, before she was diagnosed with lupus – and where she honed her love of art and literature.

In Milledgeville, with pilgrims visiting daily to her house, now a museum, O'Connor is all but beatified. But there is a lesser-known relic at the college that fewer get to see: the novelist's church kneeler, which was recently gifted to the society of Campus Catholics.

Aexel took me inside its small carpeted chapel, where she dotted holy water onto her forehead from a reservoir in the door jamb. She genuflected toward the crucifix that had been hung above Flannery's kneeler, a thumb-browned copy of the complete O'Connor under her arm.

Flannery at 100: Hidden Treasures

The exhibition opens March 25 at Georgia College & State University, Milledgeville, Ga., for the community. It moves on March 27, through Dec. 22, to the Andalusia Interpretive Center, 2628 North Columbia Street, Milledgeville; (478) 445-8722, gcsu.edu/andalusia.

***A correction was made on March 20, 2025**: An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of a scholar and critic read by Flannery O'Connor. He is Erich Auerbach, not Eric.*

See more on: Flannery O'Connor