

# Georgia writer Flannery O'Connor was also an artist. Here's where her paintings were discovered

*Devon Zwald*

LISTEN: GPB's Devon Zwald talks to Georgia College and State University professor Katie Simon about legendary author and Savannah native Flannery O'Connor's paintings.

Writer Flannery O'Connor's fiction is legendary.

Informed by her Catholic faith, the native of Savannah trained her eye on the South and its complexities, both holy and unholy.

Andalusia, the farm outside Milledgeville where she spent her last years, is hosting an exhibit of 70 of O'Connor's artworks which had been hidden away for decades.

Professor Katie Simon has been reading and teaching O'Connor at Georgia College and State University for years, but this is one of the first times she's seen O'Connor — known for her Southern Gothic prose — as a painter rather than a boldface name in literature.

"It's really stunning to see them all in a gallery space," Simon said. "Yeah, it's pretty special. I'm kind of geeking out right now."

Simon directs GCSU's Flannery O'Connor Institute for the Humanities.

The 70 pieces are mostly paintings, with a few pencil drawings. They portray things such as birds, an art class, cows in a field and the landscape of O'Connor's home.

"[O'Connor was] painting things she saw every day," Simon said. "And it helps fill out the context of her last 14 years or so of her life, where she was living here at Andalusia Farm."

O'Connor, who died in 1964 at the age of 39, moved to the farm near Milledgeville in 1951 after she was diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disease. Her condition meant she spent most of her time on the first floor of the farmhouse.

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"Welcome into Flannery's bedroom," said Suzy Parker, collections assistant for the Georgia College Department of Historic Museums, as she entered the space. "This is the magic room. This is where she did all of her writing."

Parker leads visitors to the place where many of O'Connor's novels and short stories took shape.

"She was actually able to set her crutches down here at the side," Parker said. "She could lean on the bookcase. She could lean on the chair ... she's got this linoleum underneath her desk to make it easier to roll between the bed, desk, chair, such things like that."

One can imagine O'Connor looking out her bedroom window to see things she would ultimately paint, such as an old barn that still stands down the hill.

Simon said for her one of the most striking paintings in the exhibit is O'Connor's self-portrait. It was painted not long after O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus, the disease that also killed her father.

A self-portrait with a straw hat may appear to some as a halo, Simon said. In the painting, O'Connor holds a pheasant, not the peacock many associate her with. The bird and O'Connor in the artwork stare viewers in the eye.

"You know, I think it's hilarious," Simon said. "And she's like, 'Look at me, American Gothic. I'm sick. I was forced to come back to Milledgeville. But I'm a saint.' I mean, I'm having a religious experience. She's a devout Catholic. I think you can read this on so many levels. And she's staring you straight in the eye and daring you. You know, she's, 'This is me'. This is what I think about her fiction. She's calling it like it is. This is how it is."

Cassie Munnell curated the exhibit in the Andalusia visitors center. She says the paintings were largely unknown.

"People knew of them, that there were these paintings, but no one knew what they were, what they were of, or really where they were."

No one knew?

"Well, the public didn't know where they were," Munnell said. "Her family knew exactly where they were, which was a storage unit in town, storage unit behind the Cook Out."

Munnell moved the paintings from the storage unit two years ago.

Katie Simon said the exhibit comes at a time when new readers are finding and talking about O'Connor's work.

"Those conversations can change over time because we're connecting our through our lens," she said. "We're seeing her anew."



Flannery O'Connor's visual art is on display at Andalusia Farm in Milledgeville through December.