

WATERFALL—NO. III—‘IAO VALLEY

1939, Oil on canvas, 24.25" × 20"

Honolulu Museum of Art • 900 South Beretania Street • Honolulu, Hawaii 96814 • (808) 532-8700 • honolulumuseum.org

It's hard to think of Hawai'i without thinking of pineapples. But for American painter Georgia O'Keeffe, the fruit Hawai'ians call *hala kabiki* seemed to be the last thing on her mind when she visited the islands and discovered the wonders of their stunning natural beauty.

In 1938, New York City advertising agency N. W. Ayer—working on behalf of one of their clients, the Hawaiian Pineapple Company—capitalized on the trend of hiring fine artists to make ad campaigns look classier. They commissioned O'Keeffe, once dubbed by *Time* magazine as the “least commercial artist in the U.S.,” to go to the Territory of Hawai'i and paint two canvases of pineapples

to be used for a promotional campaign.

The Wisconsin-born O'Keeffe—an American modernist known for her vibrant paintings of flowers, New York skyscrapers, and bones with a backdrop of desert sky—was already an acclaimed artist. She was inspired by nature and frequently used it as her subject matter. As a young artist, she eschewed strict realist tradition and found her own style. The O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe notes that she developed her craft into “a refined and dramatic brush technique of laying down colors that meet at a hard edge, creating spectacular color shifts along a precise line.”

In January 1939, O'Keeffe took a voyage to Hawai'i on the *SS Lurline* ocean liner.



For almost three months she explored the Hawai'ian islands, visiting Oahu, Kaua'i, Maui, and the Big Island, painting twenty canvases in all during and after her trip. On Maui, known as the Valley Isle, she traveled along the coast and into the mountains. In the western part of the island, she was drawn to the 'Iao Valley, a verdant mountain landscape dotted with streams—an area so beautiful that she made the journey up the winding road several times to visit it. These trips inspired a few canvases, including *Waterfall—No. III*, which was painted near the mouth of the valley. Though the waterfalls in the valley aren't permanent fixtures—they appear from time to time during the year, after a heavy rainfall—O'Keeffe happened to luck out with the timing of her visit.

But pineapples were clearly not on her agenda; instead, she created a variety of landscapes. To satisfy the ad agency—or perhaps to annoy them—she sent them paintings of a heliconia plant, a pink banana, and a papaya tree. But the Ayer agency needed their pineapple. To nudge O'Keeffe, they eventually shipped a pineapple plant to her penthouse in Manhattan. She finally delivered two canvases several months later, only one of which actually portrayed the prickly fruit.

The 'Iao Valley, though devoid of pineapples, is full of scenic vistas and tropical flora. In 1972, it was designated as a World Heritage site and a National Natural Landmark; as the location where Kamehameha I defeated the Maui army in the 1790 Battle of Kepaniwai, it's also a historical site. The valley was once *kapu* (sacred or forbidden) to anyone except Hawai'ian royalty, and for centuries the 'Iao cliffs were a burial site for the *ali'i* (members of a Hawai'ian noble family).



Waterfall—No. III appears courtesy the Honolulu Museum of Art.

'Iao Valley

'Iao Valley State Park • 54 High Street • Wailuku, Hawaii 96793 • dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/parks/maui

Today, this ten-mile-long, four-thousand-acre valley is a popular paradise containing 'Iao Valley State Park. It's very accessible by car, and easy to navigate once you're there,



with hiking trails, a ridgetop lookout point, and signage with historical information. Walk the 'Iao Needle Lookout Trail and Ethnobotanical Loop, a paved 0.6-mile trail offering a view of the soaring, twelve-hundred-foot Kuka'emoku ('Iao Needle), a mountain peak created by the erosion of the rock around it. On 'Iao Valley Road, just before 'Iao Valley State Park, the Kepaniwai Park Heritage Gardens is a showcase of the multicultural history of the island. The park's gardens and buildings reflect a wide variety of cultures, including Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and Portuguese. For travelers who want to stay in the area, the nearby town of Wailuku, once home to New England missionaries and a thriving sugar company, has a handful of lodging options. Rain is frequent; the valley summit is one of the wettest places in Hawaii, averaging out to an inch of rainfall per day, much of which drains into the 'Iao stream.

Those who are looking for O'Keeffe's *Waterfall—No. III* will find it as part of the collection at the Honolulu Museum of Art. When you're in O'ahu, give it a look-see, then head to Maui to check out the 'Iao Valley.



THE PINEAPPLE EXPRESS: Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) never said much about the paintings she produced from her time in Hawaii, although she did say a lot about art. She once told an interviewer that her ultimate wish lay in "Filling a space in a beautiful way. That is what art means to me."

If you're lucky, you might spot a waterfall. Either way, you won't be thinking of pineapples.

—MELISSA BRANDZEL



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