

STOIC IN THE FACE OF DEPRESSION

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Near the start of the Great Depression, Iowa painter Grant Wood created what would become one of the most iconic images of that era. “American Gothic,” depicting a farmer and his adult daughter in front of their home, first went on display at the Art Institute of Chicago on Oct. 30, 1930 — 95 years ago.

GRANT WOOD: BORN NEAR ANAMOSA, IOWA

Grant Wood was born on Feb. 13, 1891, in rural Iowa. His family moved to the small city of Cedar Rapids when he was 10 years old. He worked as an apprentice in a local metal shop and later attended an art school in Minneapolis and then the Art Institute of Chicago.

During World War I, Wood designed camouflage patterns for the army. He then worked as a high school art teacher and spent four summers studying art in Europe.

In August 1930, Wood was traveling through the small town of Eldon, Iowa, in search of Inspiration for his paintings when he spotted a white wooden house with a large gothic-style upstairs window. It stood out from the more traditional farmhouses in the area.

Wood pulled over and made a number of sketches of the farmhouse. But he knew he'd need more than just a house to put into his painting.



FIGGE ART MUSEUM
Grant Wood self-portrait from 1932.



“American Gothic” was an instant sensation when it went on display in 1930 at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Institute says. “Its ambiguity prompted viewers to speculate about the figures and their story. Many understood the work to be a satirical comment on Midwesterners out of step with a modernizing world. Yet Wood intended it to convey a positive image of rural American values, offering a vision of reassurance at the beginning of the Great Depression.”

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Wood’s inspiration in Eldon, Iowa.

THE SUCCESS OF ‘AMERICAN GOTHIC’

“I saw a trim white cottage, with a trim white porch — a cottage built on severe Gothic lines,” Wood later told a reporter. “This gave me an idea. That idea was to find two people who, by their severely strait-laced characters, would fit into such a home.”

The models he chose were very close to him: Wood’s dentist, Dr. Byron McKibbe, who was 63 years old, reluctantly agreed. And for the farmer’s adult daughter, Wood asked his 31-year-old sister, Nan Wood Graham.

Wood had his models sit for him at different times. And he worked in his studio — not in front of the house. He added a slight exaggeration, elongating the faces and the house itself. This stretching is more apparent in the face of his sister than in the face of his dentist.

Wood then entered what he called “American Gothic” in a painting competition at the Art Institute of Chicago. It went on display on Oct. 30, 1930 and later won a bronze medal and a \$300 prize — about \$5,700 in 2025 money.



CEDAR RAPIDS MUSEUM OF ART

The Des Moines Register referred to the painting as “An Iowa Farmer and His Wife,” but Grant always maintained his sister was playing the farmer’s unmarried daughter, who ran the fictional household shown in the background after the death of her mother.

But not everyone appreciated the painting. A museum official called it “a comic Valentine.” On Nov. 6, the Des Moines Sunday Register ran a large photo of the painting. One reader wrote in: “On gazing at Grant Wood’s creation ... I thought I might have discovered the ‘missing link.’”

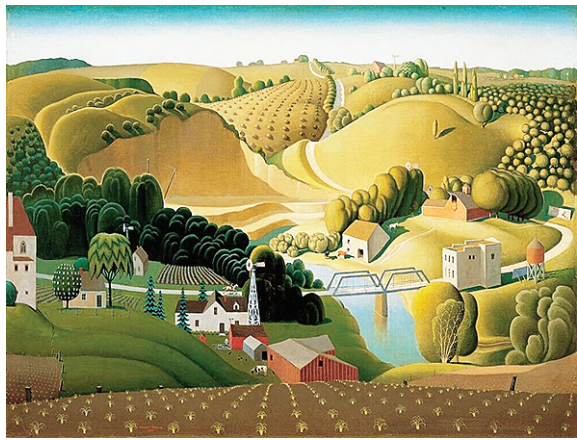
One Iowa farm wife threatened to bite off Wood’s ear and another told him that he should have his “head bashed in.” Wood defended his work saying he was a “loyal Iowan” and that the painting was not meant to be a derogatory representation of Iowa’s farmers, but just a depiction of generic small-town Americans.

In 1941, Wood would write: “In general, I have found, the people who resent the painting are those who feel that they themselves resemble the portrayal.”

“American Gothic” became one of the most famous examples of a new style of art, “Regionalism,” that grew during the 1930s.

The Art Institute bought the painting from Wood and has displayed it ever since.

THREE OF WOOD’S OTHER WORKS



JOSLYN ART MUSEUM

Stone City, Iowa: 1931

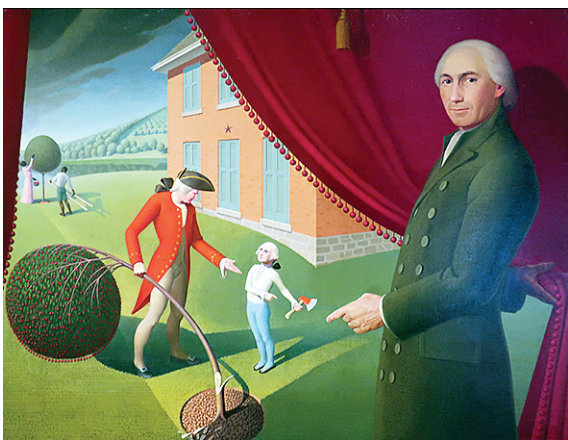
Wood’s first landscape painting is a stylized depiction of a former limestone quarry boomtown. It had fallen on hard times, But Wood still loved the place.



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere: 1931

Wood used a child’s hobby horse as model for Revere’s horse. The painting is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.



AMON CARTER MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Parson Weems’ Fable: 1939

Wood ridicules this mythological tale of young George Washington, who, with an comically adult head and holding an axe, gazes blankly up at his father.