

Grant Wood's Queer Parody

American Humor during the Great Depression

Erika Doss

Many of American artist Grant Wood's best known paintings are humorous, even irreverent. Honed in theater, interior decoration, and commercial art, Wood's camp sensibility of artifice, exaggeration, and comic subversion intentionally disturbed normative assumptions about taste, value, nature, and, in particular, gender and sexuality—what Moe Meyer called “queer parody.” Wood's humor-inflected paintings aimed at enlightening viewers about the fundamentally invented terms of American character and history. Contrary to his Regionalist reputation, Wood's humor segued with that of New York Dada and with the theoretical insights on humor and American culture offered by Constance Rourke, Gertrude Stein, and John Dewey.

AMONG THE MOST POPULAR American artists of the twentieth century, Grant Wood (1891–1942) is especially recognized for paintings of idealized Iowa landscapes and sturdy midwestern types. His iconic *American Gothic* (1930, fig. 1), a portrait of a farm couple posing in front of a Carpenter Gothic-style cottage in Eldon, Iowa, is one of America's most familiar, and broadly appropriated, works of art. Since the 1930s, Wood has been identified with Regionalism, a representational style of modern art focused on scenes of rural life, local traditions, and grassroots values in America's heartland. During the years of the Great Depression, Wood enthusiastically embraced this Regionalist artist persona, wearing bib overalls in publicity photographs and joshing with reporters “that all the really good ideas I've ever had came to me while I was milking a cow” (fig. 2).¹

The depth of Wood's commitment to such corn pone is undercut by the humorous, even irreverent,

tone of many of his best known paintings, including *American Gothic*, *Daughters of Revolution* (1931), and *Parson Weems' Fable* (1939). Although born and raised in Anamosa, Iowa, a small farming community near Cedar Rapids, Wood never milked many cows. He studied abroad, worked as an interior decorator, taught art in a junior high school, painted backdrops for Little Theater productions, lived above a funeral parlor, frequented costume parties, and organized an art colony in Stone City, Iowa, that he jokingly described as the “Greenwich Village of the Corn Belt.”² In his 1930s paintings, Wood adopted a camp sensibility of artifice, exaggeration, and comic subversion that intentionally disturbed normative assumptions about taste, value, nature, and, in particular, gender and sexual identity—what Moe Meyer called “queer parody.”³

Recent profiles chart the “open secret” of Wood's homosexuality, which, Tripp Evans notes, “was widely—if still opaquely—acknowledged by many of those who knew him.”⁴ Yet Wood's queer

Erika Doss teaches in the Department of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Thanks to Amy Earls, Korey Garibaldi, Perin Gurel, and Jason Ruiz, for their helpful feedback on various aspects of this essay, and to the anonymous reviewers for *Winterthur Portfolio*, whose constructive criticism strengthened it in considerable ways. This article stems from the keynote address delivered at the 5th Grant Wood Symposium in Iowa City, organized by the Grant Wood Art Colony and the University of Iowa.

¹ “Wood, Hard Bitten,” *Art Digest* (February 1, 1936): 18.

© 2018 by The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc. All rights reserved. 0084-0416/2018/5201-0001\$10.00

² Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York: Norton, 1944), 88.

³ Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 9–11.

⁴ R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 59. For other discussions of Wood's homosexuality, see Joni L. Kinsey, “Cultivating Iowa,” in *Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic*, ed. Jane C. Milosch (New York: Prestel, 2005), 29–32; Sue Taylor, “Wood's American Logic,” *Art in America* 94, no. 1 (2006): 92–93; James H. Maroney Jr., *Hiding in Plain Sight: Decoding the Homoerotic and Misogynistic Imagery of Grant Wood* (Leicester, VT: self-pub., 2006), <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view>

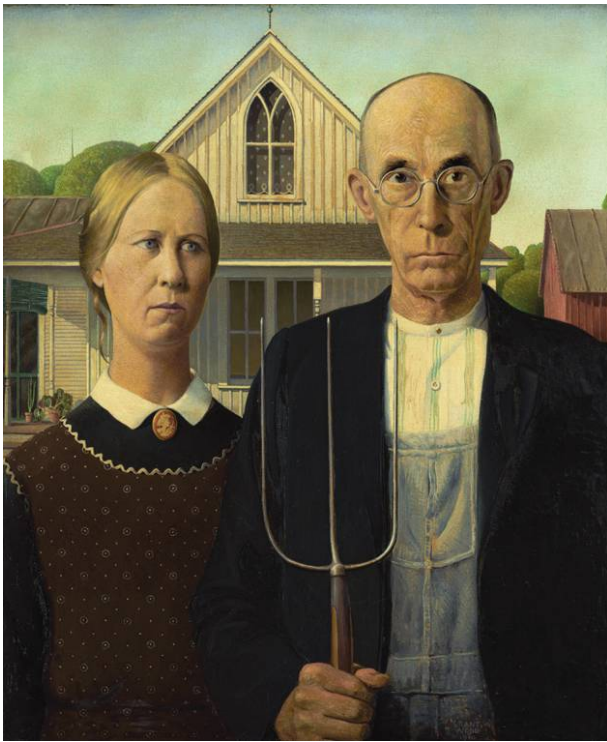


Fig. 1. Grant Wood, *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on beaver board; H. 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", W. 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". (Art Institute of Chicago.)

artistic sensibilities, and their crossover into mainstream popularity, remain underconsidered. My use of the term queer is intentionally broad, referring both to a self-affirming nonnormative sexual orientation and to attitudes, styles, and performances that upset and unsettle the norm. Queer, Meyer explained, is not restricted to "the biological sex or gender of the subject" but represents "an ontological challenge to dominant labeling philosophies," especially essentialist or normalizing models of identity. Queer, in other words, is an oppositional perspective, a subversive operation aimed at destabilizing controlling ideas and attitudes and imagining different ways of thinking and acting. As David Getsy argues, "It is a tactical modification—this name 'queer'—that invokes relations of power and propriety in its inversion of them."⁵

Much of Wood's playful, parodic body of art—from stage design and arts and crafts to paintings such as *American Gothic*—was grounded in a queer

sensibility of resistance to mainstream, or heteronormative, understandings of historical tales, cultural subjects, and social standards. Much of it was aligned with camp, an aesthetic, an attitude, and a way of seeing, Susan Sontag explained, informed by "the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not."⁶ Using camp tropes to highlight the artificial, or constructed, terms of self and national identity in America, Wood's humor-inflected paintings aimed at educating Americans about the fundamentally invented terms of their character and history. Refuting notions of a fixed, unified, complete, or normative American identity, Wood's campy humor encouraged viewers to consider the complexities, and possibilities, of difference. Contrary to his overalls-wearing Regionalist reputation, the more efficacious context for Wood's art is the comic sensibilities of New York Dada and the theoretical insights on humor, laughter, affect, and American culture offered by Constance Rourke, Gertrude Stein, and John Dewey.

Following his death in 1942, Wood's sister Nan Wood Graham took charge of his legacy, compiling a series of scrapbooks from the copious newspaper clippings, magazine articles, exhibition announcements, photographs, letters, and other ephemera she collected about his art and life.⁷ Their contents, especially articles and reviews from the 1930s, reveal frequent use of words like "fun," "laughs," "satire," "lampoon," and "humor" in discussions of Wood's popular paintings. What did humor mean in 1930s North America, and what did Grant Wood find funny? Exploring how Wood honed his humor in theater, interior decoration, and commercial art in the 1920s, and at the Stone City Art Colony in the early 1930s, this essay considers the popularity of his campy queer parody in tandem with other forms of humor in movies, literature, advertising, and public education. Camp overlapped with mass culture and mainstream taste in surprising ways during the Great Depression, and Grant Wood's paintings played an important role in broadening the scope of its queer critique.

American Humor and American Character

Among friends and acquaintances, Wood was known for his "prodigious" sense of humor, for

/11639117/hiding-in-plain-sight-james-maroney-inc; Travis E. Nygard, "Reinterpreting the Life and Art of Grant Wood: A Review Essay," *Annals of Iowa* 70 (2011): 358–67; Christopher Hommerding, "As Gay as Any Gypsy Caravan: Grant Wood and the Queer Pastoral at the Stone City Art Colony," *Annals of Iowa* 74 (2015): 378–412.

⁵ Meyer, *Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 2–3; David J. Getsy, "Introduction/Queer Intolerability and Its Attachments," in *Queer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 13.

⁶ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" (1964), in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 279.

⁷ The eighteen scrapbooks she compiled are available at the Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/grantwood/about.php>.

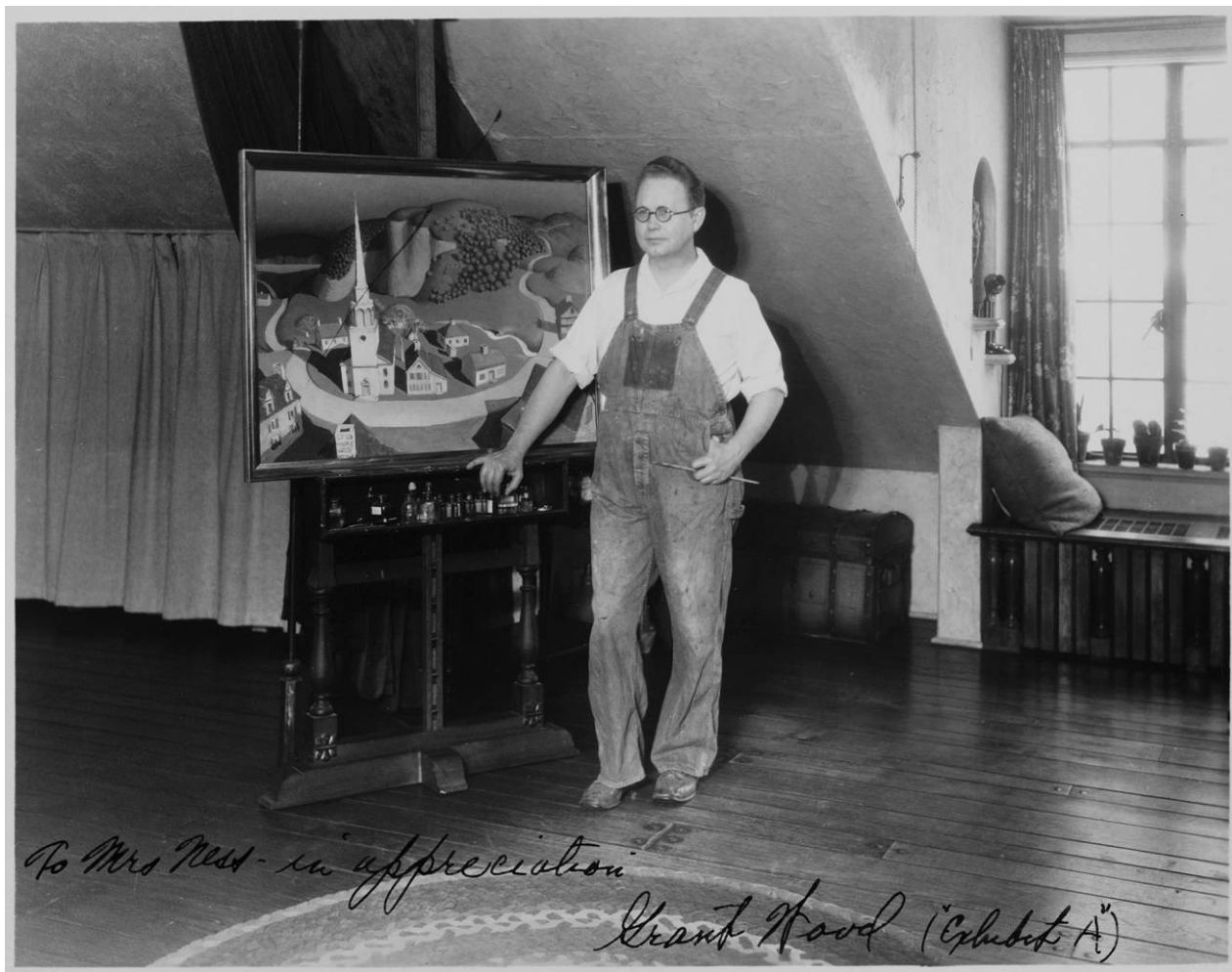


Fig. 2. Grant Wood in his studio with unfinished painting *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1931. (Grant Wood Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; photo, John W. Barry.)

wryly poking fun at cultural conventions, historical myths, and himself.⁸ In 1934, for instance, he organized the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers (SPCS), a private club where lecturers invited to the University of Iowa might be suitably entertained. He decorated its Iowa City clubhouse (a room above Smith's Café, a popular eatery near campus) in what he called "the worst style of the

late Victorian period," including cabbage rose wallpaper, floral carpeting, upholstered furniture with arms fashioned from animal horns, a parlor organ, a stuffed canary under a glass bell jar, Currier and Ives prints, and cross-stitch samplers spouting sappy homilies like "Home Sweet Home."⁹ Visiting writers, critics, educators, and artists such as Stephen Vincent Benét, Carl Sandburg, Gilbert Seldes, Thomas Craven, Adolph Dehn, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Thomas Hart Benton were encouraged to don false beards and period costumes and pose for pictures lampooning the flamboyant excess of Victorian sentimentality (fig. 3).

⁸ Writer MacKinlay Kantor's comment on Wood's humor is noted in Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 19. Wood's humor is also discussed in Karal Ann Marling, "Don't Knock Wood," *ARTNews* 82, no. 7 (September 1983): 94–99; Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 102–3; the website designed by Janet Haven, "Going Back to Iowa: The World of Grant Wood," for *Cultural Objects: The Electronic Journal for American Studies at Virginia* (1998), in particular the section titled "Grant Wood's Ironic Lens," <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~mag8/haven/wood/home.html>.

⁹ Grant Wood quoted in James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking, 1975), 241 n. 10; see also the description of the SPCS club in Hazel E. Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone: Artists of an Era* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1972), 89.

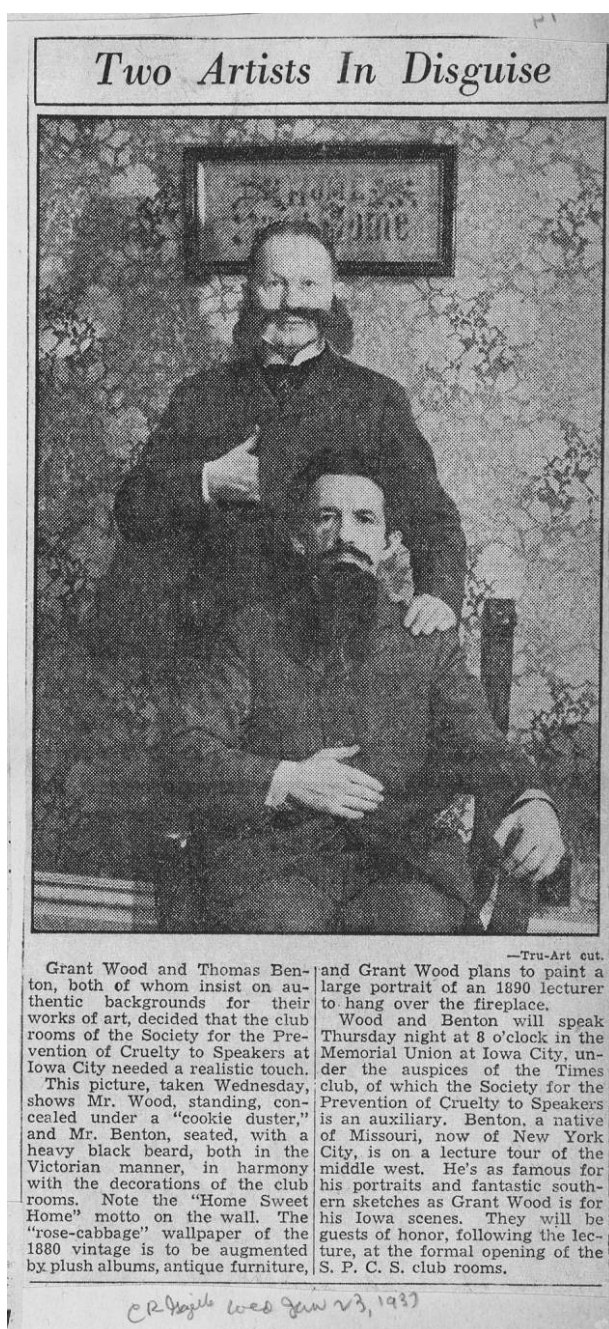


Fig. 3. Clipping, "Two Artists in Disguise," 1935. From *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, January 23, 1935. (Museum purchase with funds provided by Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, Grant Wood Archive, City of Davenport Art Collection, Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.)

Although the SPCS did not last long—the university, recognizing the club's off-campus threat to their cultural authority, quickly demanded its closure—the witty space that Wood designed was consistent with the campy body of paintings that he developed during the 1930s. While some viewers

perceived *American Gothic* as an unmediated portrait of a midwestern farm couple, Wood saw it as caricature and identified humor as a central feature in the American national character that he repeatedly critiqued. Byron McKeeby, the Iowa dentist who posed as the pitchfork-grasping farmer in Wood's picture, remarked: "He told me that he wanted a face showing integrity from a man with a sense of humor who would not rebel at the distortion that might be necessary to carry out his theme. The painting was in no manner intended to be a portrait."¹⁰

Wood himself explained that *Daughters of Revolution* (fig. 4), a portrait of three myopic matrons posed in front of a fusty engraving of Emanuel Leutze's *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), was similarly intended as a humorous picture, done "in fun rather than in anger."¹¹ And audiences laughed. Art critic C. J. Bulliet observed that Wood's picture drew "giggles" and "chuckles" at Chicago's Century of Progress exhibition: "Judging by the sale of postcard reproductions, considered by the Art Institute an excellent check, 'Daughters of Revolution,' by Grant Wood, is the most popular painting in the 1934 world's fair show." Bulliet was an entertaining writer who opened his 1927 book *Apples and Madonnas: Emotional Expressions in Modern Art* with the impudent sentence, "An apple by Cézanne is of more consequence artistically than the head of a Madonna by Raphael." He commended Wood's canvas, with which the artist targeted the smug hypocrisy of the *Daughters of the American Revolution*, a lineage-based and exclusionary women's club, as a "great piece of subtle lampoon."¹²

Wood's humorous paintings, especially his history paintings, intentionally queered conventional understandings of American character, community, pedagogy, and patriotism during the Great Depression. And the depth of public response during the

¹⁰ Clipping, "Model in Wood's Famous Painting Breaks Silence," *Des Moines Register*, March 24, 1935, Grant Wood scrapbook 02: Grant Wood, 1935–39, image 35, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/ref/collection/grantwood/id/130>.

¹¹ Grant Wood quoted in Christopher Morley, "The Bowling Green," *Saturday Review of Literature* (February 25, 1933): 450.

¹² Clipping, C. J. (Clarence Joseph) Bulliet, "Art in the 1934 Fair," *Chicago Daily News*, June 18, 1934, Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 114, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/com.poundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/991/rec/5>. *Daughters of Revolution* was shown in *A Century of Progress: Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, 1934*, held at the Art Institute of Chicago, June 1–November 1, 1934. On Bulliet's art criticism, see Sue Ann Kendall, "C. J. Bulliet: Chicago's Lonely Champion of Modernism," *Archives of American Art Journal* 26, nos. 2/3 (1986): 21–32.



Fig. 4. Grant Wood, *Daughters of Revolution*, 1932. Oil on fiberboard; H. 20", W. 40". (Edwin and Virginia Irwin Memorial, Cincinnati Art Museum/Bridgeman Images.)

1930s suggests that his queer visual readings struck a chord. National mythmaking was similarly queried at this time by Constance Rourke, a "model of the modern American intellectual," whose *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* was a widely reviewed best seller, picked by the American Library Association as a must-read book of 1931.¹³ Rourke argued that America was a nation of highly self-conscious humorists whose comic folklore was central to the diversity of its character and history. "Humor has been a fashioning instrument in America," she observed, "cleaving its way through the national life, holding tenaciously to the spread elements of that life."¹⁴

Drawing on French philosopher Henri Bergson's formulation of humor as "social gesture," Rourke understood humor as both a practice of "self-criticism fostered by democratic principles"

and national evaluation focused on sustaining those democratic principles.¹⁵ Humor, in other words, was a social corrective, a strategy that Americans used to expose and interrogate their cultural, social, and political attitudes and to thereby assess, and reassess, their imagined selves. Locating a popular middle ground of American humor in the comic figures of the Yankee, the frontiersman, and the minstrel, Rourke detailed how shared interests in myth and fantasy—words she used "interchangeably," notes Joan Shelley Rubin—evolved "against a backdrop of a still-forming nation."¹⁶ None of these comic types, Rourke emphasized in *American Humor*, were real: they were characters, actors on a national stage, wearing masks and performing how to be American. This included performing the complexities of American identity in terms of race, class, gender, religious belief, and sexual orientation.

Rourke's ideas about humor, mythmaking, and the performativity of American character mesh with

¹³ Joan Shelley Rubin, *Constance Rourke and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 194; Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931). On the book's award, see *Booklist Books 1931: A Selection* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1932), 22–23. *American Humor* was reviewed in the *New Republic*, *New York Times*, *Nation*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Survey Graphic*, and elsewhere; for a full list of reviews, see Jennifer Schlueter, "Our Lively Arts: American Culture as Theatrical Culture, 1922–1931" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2007), 301–2.

¹⁴ Rourke, *American Humor*, 297.

¹⁵ Nancy A. Walker, "Introduction," in *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, ed. Nancy A. Walker (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1998), 26. On Henri Bergson's theories on humor, see his book *Laughter: The Meaning of the Comic*, first published in 1900.

¹⁶ John Shelley Rubin, "Constance Rourke in Context: The Uses of Myth," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 5 (Winter 1976): 575; Schlueter, "Our Lively Arts," 104.

Grant Wood's visual attentiveness to how Americans staged themselves and imagined their history. In *Parson Weems' Fable* (fig. 5), for instance, Wood showed scheming Episcopal minister Mason Locke Weems pulling back a red velvet curtain fringed with cherries, a parodic take on the pom-pom trim used in window draping and a hint at the artificial, or fabricated, story he is about to share. Making direct eye contact with his audience, the parson points toward the scene and subjects of the cherry tree myth that he wholly invented to help sell a fifth edition (in 1806) of his popular biography *The Life of George Washington*.¹⁷

In his scene, Wood fabricated the bewigged head of the six-year-old future president from Gilbert Stuart's *The Athenaeum* (1795), an image of Washington that has appeared on the US one-dollar bill since the nineteenth century. The humor of *Parson Weems' Fable* lies in Wood's overt use of visual puns and his exposé of the American myths of truth and honesty. Like Rourke, Wood recognized that Americans shared a particular fondness for "the patently bogus historical pageant," for fantasy, wishful thinking, and taking liberties with the facts.¹⁸ Using unconcealed bits of humor, Wood made that fondness the central theme of his painting. In 1940, responding to "literal-minded patriots" who accused him of "debunking Washington" and deriding American history, Wood ribbed: "I have taken a tip from the good Parson and have used my imagination freely."¹⁹

Wood's inclination toward a liberatory imagination was strongly influenced by the books he read and the writers he knew. Wanda Corn observes that many of Wood's "best friends" in the 1930s, including Jay Sigmund, Sinclair Lewis, Paul Engle, and Christopher Morley, "were writers, not artists."²⁰ Wood recalled that when he was a boy, he "read and re-read" *Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* "until the pages were dingy and dog-eared." In his essay "My Debt to Mark Twain" (1937), he explained how a particular passage in *Huckleberry Finn*

upended his youthful perceptions of social and cultural conventions and his sense of self.²¹ The passage concerns Huck's description of the antebellum home of a well-to-do Southern family called the Grangerfords and the hilariously maudlin self-portraits rendered by their teenage daughter, Emmeline:

They had pictures hung on the walls—mainly Washingtons and Lafayettes, and battles, and Highland Marys, and one called 'Signing the Declaration.' There was some that they called crayons, which one of the daughters which was dead made her own self when she was only fifteen years old. They was different from any pictures I ever see before—blacker, mostly, than is common . . . one was a young lady with her hair all combed up straight to the top of her head, and knotted there in front of a comb like a chair-back, and she was crying into a handkerchief and had a dead bird laying on its back in her other hand with its heels up, and underneath the picture it said "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas."²²

As Wood related in his 1937 essay, published in the quarterly journal of the International Mark Twain Society and probably requested by one of its editorial board members, Huck's account of Emmeline's self-imaging was an inspirational wake-up call: "As I look back on it now, I realize that my response to this passage was a revelation. Having been born into a world of Victorian standards, I had accepted and admired the ornate, the lugubrious and the excessively sentimental naturally and without question. And this was my first intimation that there was something ridiculous about sentimentality."²³ Twain's description of "ridiculous" pictures guided Wood's earliest ideas about what art could look like, what artistic character might constitute, and how deadpan humor might be an effective artistic tool. As Rourke remarked about Twain's style of American humor, "Emotion he seldom revealed except in travesty; one of his favorite forms of comedy was to create the semblance of an emotional scene, beguiling the reader or hearer into a belief that this might be true, then puncturing it." Twain's scope, she added, "was nation-wide, because of the quality

¹⁷ Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 104; Steven Biel, "Parson Weems Fights Fascists: G. W. and the Cherry Tree in 1939," *Common-Place* 6, no. 4 (July 2006), <http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-06/no-04/biel/>.

¹⁸ Marling, "Don't Knock Wood," 97; see also Kurt Anderson, *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire, A 500-Year History* (New York: Random House, 2017).

¹⁹ Grant Wood quoted in "Parson Weems' Fable," *Life*, February 19, 1940, 33.

²⁰ Corn, *Grant Wood*, 44. Matthew Baigell similarly argued that Wood's art suggested "stronger literary than artistic antecedents"; see his article "Grant Wood Revisited," *Art Journal* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1966-67): 117.

²¹ Grant Wood, "My Debt to Mark Twain," *Mark Twain Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1937): 6.

²² Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885; repr., New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), 101. Wood's 1937 essay was reprinted as the introduction to Cyril Clemens, *Young Sam Clemens* (Portland, ME: Tebbetts, 1942), 11-17.

²³ Wood, "My Debt to Mark Twain," 14. *Mark Twain Quarterly* was founded in 1936 and edited by Twain's (distant) cousin Cyril Clemens. Editorial board members (called "Vice-Presidents" on the journal's masthead) whom Wood knew included Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, and G. K. Chesterton.



Fig. 5. Grant Wood, *Parson Weems' Fable*, 1939. Oil on canvas; H. 38 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", W. 50 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". (1970.43, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.)

of his imagination."²⁴ Her analysis could apply to many of Wood's 1930s paintings, including *American Gothic* and *Parson Weems' Fable*: at once earnestly captivating, startlingly farcical, and cleverly directed toward a cheeky exposé of American character.

"I Was Fascinated by the Stage"

Whetted in literature, Wood's interests in the imaginative and performative fashioning of identity were further kindled in theater, in queer spaces of diversion and masquerade where social norms and expectations are often critiqued and destabilized. Queer space, Christopher Reed explains, is a "space of difference," a fluid and contingent "imminent domain" where dissenting ideas and acts can be staged

and restaged.²⁵ Theater was such a space for Wood. "I was fascinated by the stage," he recalled about a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* he saw as a boy, adding, "Once I'd set eyes on it I could not look elsewhere."²⁶ Wood was not alone in his emotional attraction to this play: Henry James, whose queerness of style is theorized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Kevin Ohi, was similarly captivated by a theatrical production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that he watched as a child and later described as "a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness."²⁷ First published in

²⁴ Rourke, *American Humor*, 218–19. Her analysis followed Twain's 1895 essay, "How to Tell a Story," in which he wrote: "The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it." See Mark Twain, *How to Tell a Story and Other Essays* (1897; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

²⁵ Christopher Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," *Art Journal* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 64–70. On theories about queer space, see Kevin D. Murphy, "'Secure from All Intrusion': Heterotopia, Queer Space, and the Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century American Resort," *Winterthur Portfolio* 43, nos. 2/3 (Summer 2009): 189–93; Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997). On theories about theater's queerness, see Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla, eds., *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

²⁶ Grant Wood quoted in his unfinished biography, *Return from Bohemia*, cowritten with Park Rinard in 1935, as noted in Evans, *Grant Wood*, 270.

²⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic," in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 182–212; Kevin

1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's hugely popular book was performed—and parodied—in multiple incarnations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reinvented in plays, movies, cartoons, and songs, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* maintained continuous public appeal through affect (melodramatic fervor and sensational staging), humor, and “cultural immediacy,” as its characters and scenes were frequently refashioned to fit changed social tastes and mores.²⁸ Imaginative, emotional, comic, and indeterminate, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the sort of popular and fluid cultural product that Wood aimed to match in his 1930s paintings. *American Gothic's* sustained reception indicates his success.

As a teenager, Wood posed as characters from plays and paintings in *tableaux vivants* organized by his high school art teacher.²⁹ In addition to designing sets and costumes for these “living pictures,” he painted backdrops for local theater productions with his friend and classmate, Marvin Cone, later a recognized Iowa painter. In the 1920s, for example, Wood was “scenic artist, property man and set designer” for the Cedar Rapids Community Players. Modeled on the Little Theater Movement, which began in Chicago in the 1910s and centered on experimental community art productions, the Cedar Rapids group started out performing one-act plays in Wood's studio apartment—above the garage of a funeral parlor owned by David Turner, his primary patron at the time—and grew into a popular home-grown theater company.³⁰ Wood's mastery of stagecraft (props, makeup, lighting) and the theatrical arts of display, entertainment, and imitation would prove useful in the humorous queer spaces he concocted in his 1930s paintings.

Intermittently teaching art classes at McKinley Junior High in Cedar Rapids from 1919 to 1925,

Wood also supervised theater productions and design projects that engaged themes of fantasy, masquerade, and comic transgression. These included a 155-foot-long frieze (18" tall) titled *Imagination Isles* that decorated the school cafeteria and occasionally served as a moving panorama in school plays. Wood and his “class of 9th grade boys” also designed an elaborate “waterfall effect” made of hand-cranked cascades of painted cloth for a performance by the Girl's Glee Club.³¹ In 1922, Wood made a papier-mâché mask of “Percy Heavythinker”: a fey character who wore glasses and was often “dressed up” and “highly perfumed,” who was beloved by teachers as their “star pupil” and was regarded by other students as an obsequious apple-polisher. Each year, a top McKinley student wore the comic mask in class photos, an act of impersonation that poked fun at public school norms and identities.³² In 1924, Wood supervised a school skit featuring the “shrouded ghostly figures” of George Washington, Rip Van Winkle, and Paul Revere, automatons from the past who were revived on stage by three male students “amusingly costumed as girls.” Armed with “a feather duster, an oil can, and a crank to wind the figures” and reanimate them in modern times, the three young men were named “Fairly, Lilly, and Tilly.”³³ Wood's direction of these inescapably campy productions reveals his attraction to gender-bending performances of difference and transformation; as George Chauncey observes, vernacular terms like “fairly,” “pansy” (and other flowers), and “gay” had widespread homosexual connotations in interwar America.³⁴ Enthusiastically reviewed in local newspapers, Wood's theater productions were popular with general audiences, suggesting the broad diffusion of flippant camp humor in the 1920s.

Wood's reputation for stage design led to a commission to paint the sets for “the first dramatic version of the life and loves of Brigham Young, the

Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (New York: Scribner's, 1913), 159.

²⁸ Jim O'Loughlin, “Articulating ‘Uncle Tom's Cabin,’” *New Literary History* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 579.

²⁹ Evans, *Grant Wood*, 24.

³⁰ Clipping, Charles Victor Knox, “Art Gossip and a Variety of Random Notes,” *Chicago Evening Post Magazine of the Art World*, April 29, 1930, Grant Wood Scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 19, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/888/rec/3>. Wood's interests in the theater also included play writing and acting; see Lea Rosson DeLong, *Grant Wood's Main Street: Art, Literature, and the American Midwest* (Ames: University Museums, Iowa State University, 2004), 36 nn. 27 and 28. In 1932 the Cedar Rapids Community Players expressed their “gratitude” to Wood for saving the group “more than \$200 during the last season alone by painting scenery”; see “Community Players Report Successful Year,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, July 14, 1932, 10.

³¹ Corn, *Grant Wood*, 8–9; Kinsey, “Cultivating Iowa,” 12–14; clipping, “McKinley Ninth Grade Boys Make Waterfall for Coming Cantata,” *Cedar Rapids Republican*, January 13, 1925, Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 5, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/collection/grantwood/id/1030/rec/2>.

³² Wood's “Percy Heavythinker” mask is in the collection of the Cedar Rapids Community School District; for comments on the character, see the *The Mirror Yearbook* (Cedar Rapids, IA: McKinley Junior High, Class of 1927), 33.

³³ “McKinley Students' Skit Wins Applause,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, October 11, 1924, 8.

³⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1994), 14–17.

famous Mormon.”³⁵ Directed by Bernard Szold, a charismatic artist, former football player, and future Hollywood producer, *Brigham Young* premiered at the Omaha Community Playhouse in April 1933 and immediately provoked hullabaloo about “the scene wherein two elders swap wives with one throwing in a pinto pony for good measure.” *Time* magazine reported that the controversial play “wavered between the religious and the farcical,” and audiences “liked little about it beyond artist Grant Wood’s settings, done out of friendship for the Play’s Author-Director Bernard Szold.”³⁶ Wood often visited Szold’s home in Omaha in the early 1930s, and the two were close friends. Perhaps too close for Wood’s sister, who later denied Wood’s involvement in this—and other—unconventional interwar art and theater projects and his relationships with other men. Like Henry James’s heirs, Wood’s sister tried to bury any insinuations about his sexual orientation as she policed his posthumous reputation.³⁷

Wood’s Queer Parody

The Omaha job suggests Wood’s appetite for coded—and corny—kinds of humor. Wood’s humor was camp humor, a subversive sensibility marked by excess, artifice, and exaggeration that works to undermine normative assumptions and behaviors. Writing in the early 1960s, Sontag argued that camp was primarily formal, an “ineffable” sensibility that was “disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical”; she also downplayed its links to homosexual cultures.³⁸ More recently, critics have asserted that camp is a practice and a strategy that originates and operates as a “specifically queer cultural critique” aimed

at resisting heteronormative models of identity and producing “queer social visibility.” Writing in the early 1990s, and reflecting on activist groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, Meyer defined camp as queer parody, using Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody as an intertextual practice of borrowing and recycling that harnesses dominant codes and conventions in order to denigrate and dismantle them.³⁹

While Wood’s queer parody was never politically radical, it did constitute a strategic critique of heteronormative ideals and assumptions. In paintings, decorative arts projects, and commercial commissions throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Wood borrowed various historical styles, stories, and characters and then deconstructed them, often to comic effect. Employing elements such as aphorism, amplification, and allusion, Wood painted campy pictures that deliberately parodied established norms, including those of gender, sexuality, family, and nature.⁴⁰

Wood intimated that the midwestern farmers in *American Gothic*, for example, were based on the “tin-types from my old family album.” They were actually modeled on his 62-year-old dentist and his younger sister Nan. Wood’s sister, a stylish modern who usually wore fashionable dresses and Marcelled her hair, was in on the spoof and thoroughly enjoyed the deceit of masquerading as a prim farmerette. As she told a newspaper reporter, “I am supposed to be one of those terribly nice and proper girls who get their chief joy in life out of going to Christian Endeavor and frowning horribly at the young couples in back seats if they giggle or whisper.”⁴¹ Derailing expectations that *American Gothic* is a straightforward tribute to steadfast midwestern types and upright midwestern values, Wood’s painting subverts the conventions of portraiture. Exaggerating the stiff postures and dour faces of the couple in the painting,

³⁵ Clipping, “Grant Wood Paints Scenes for Brigham Young Play in Omaha,” ca. 1933, Grant Wood Scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 6, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/rec/2>.

³⁶ “Brigham Young’ Goes on amid Mormon Debate,” *Variety*, April 4, 1933, 37; “People,” *Time*, April 17, 1933, 44. For more on the play and Szold, see Warren Francke, *The Omaha Community Playhouse Story: A Theatre’s Historic Triumph* (Omaha, NE: Omaha Community Playhouse, 2014), 94–95, 100–104.

³⁷ A note in Nan Wood Graham’s handwriting under the newspaper article about Wood’s set designs for the Omaha play (see n. 35 for the scrapbook reference) reads “Didn’t paint it.” On the policing of James’s posthumous reputation, see Colm Tóibín, “How Henry James’s Family Tried to Keep Him in the Closet,” *Guardian*, February 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/20/colm-toibin-how-henry-james-family-tried-to-keep-him-in-the-closet>.

³⁸ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 276, 287.

³⁹ Meyer, *Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 1, 5, 7–11; Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985). For a helpful overview of these and other assessments of camp, see Sara Doris, *Pop Art and the Contest over American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 56–58 and esp. 245 n. 195.

⁴⁰ George Piggford uses these stylistic devices in his discussion of Lytton Strachey’s writing; see George Piggford, “Camp Sites: Forster and the Biographies of Queer Bloomsbury,” in *Queer Forster*, ed. Robert K. Martin and George Piggford (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 97–99.

⁴¹ Wood’s comment about his family scrapbook is noted in “Grant Wood Denies Reputation as Glamour Boy of Painters,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1940, 1; Nan Wood Graham quoted in “What the Woman Who Posed Says,” *Des Moines Sunday Register*, December 21, 1930, 39. Founded in 1881 in Portland, Maine, Christian Endeavor is an evangelical society focused on Christian youth fellowship and ministry.

and overstating their dominance in the scene—pushed close to the foreground, the two figures occupy more than two-thirds of the canvas—Wood called into question romantic nineteenth-century images of idyllic American farms and of farming itself as an inherently virtuous, honest, or “true” way of life. Resisting audience assumptions that the figures are man and wife, or father and daughter, Wood left their identities open.

The fact that *American Gothic* became one of the most popular works of art in the twentieth century—its purchase (for \$300) by the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930 was covered in hundreds of US newspapers—indicates that Wood’s queering of American conventions and norms was quite successful. Gertrude Stein certainly thought so. Describing Wood as “the first artist of America,” Stein remarked that he was “not only a satirical artist but one who has a wonderful detachment from life in general which is necessary to create the best of art.”⁴²

Stein’s observations stemmed from a creative lifetime of expatriate detachment spent queering normative literary and gender conventions. Living in Paris with her partner Alice B. Toklas, Stein surrounded herself with a coterie of gay male artists whose “eccentric modernisms,” Tirza Latimer observes, “challenged sex/gender codes” and “negotiated a range of cultural and social spaces.”⁴³ Like Wood, Stein had a flip and sometimes scandalous sense of humor, writing “identity is funny being yourself is funny as you are never yourself to yourself except as you remember yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself” in her memoirs and outlandishly remarking in 1934 that “Hitler should have received the Nobel Peace Prize . . . because he is removing all elements of contest and struggle from Germany.”⁴⁴

Also like Wood, Stein was a cultural celebrity in the 1930s. In 1934–35, she crisscrossed America on a six-month lecture tour, giving seventy-four talks

in thirty-seven cities in twenty-three states.⁴⁵ When she was invited to speak at the University of Iowa, students and faculty organized a “Gertrude Stein Club,” which the campus newspaper called “the first organization of its kind in the United States.” Grant Wood was specifically asked to join the club, whose activities focused on “adequately preparing for the arrival of the woman whose literary work has been the subject of international controversy.”⁴⁶ Wood’s own club, the SPCS, was also eager to entertain this legendary modern figure of cultural difference. The group temporarily renamed itself the “Rose Is a Rose Club,” sent Stein a photo of SPCS members wearing roses, and invited her to spend some time at their parodic clubhouse during her visit. Unfortunately, Stein’s plane was grounded by bad weather and she and “her favorite American satirist” never met.⁴⁷ Even so, the widespread visibility that Stein, her “eccentric modernism,” and paintings like *American Gothic* had during the 1930s shows the broad reach of camp humor and queer parody.

Stone City

During the summers of 1932 and 1933, Wood fostered his queer sensibilities at the Stone City Art Colony, a school that he, Marvin Cone, Ed Rowan, and other artists organized around an abandoned 1880s limestone quarry and associated company town in Stone City, Iowa.⁴⁸ Leasing a ten-acre tract of the former boomtown (displaced by the manufacture of Portland cement in the early 1900s), the artists offered six-week classes to dozens of students, aiming to cultivate a distinctively American school of art in a unique regional setting, like art colonies

⁴² Gertrude Stein’s comments were relayed by Rousseau Voorhies, a writer, lecturer, and “friend of Miss Stein” in “Wood ‘Best, Best,’ Gertrude Stein Picks Iowa Professor as ‘First’ Artist in United States,” *Daily Iowan*, July 8, 1934, 1.

⁴³ Tirza True Latimer, *Eccentric Modernisms: Making Differences in the History of American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 1, 5.

⁴⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937), 68; Stein quoted in Lansing Warren, “Gertrude Stein Views Life and Politics,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 6, 1934, 9. Charges that Stein actually endorsed Hitler for a Nobel prize completely fail to grasp her profound sense of irony; see Charles Bernstein, “Gertrude Stein’s War Years: Setting the Record Straight,” *Jacket2* (May 9, 2012), <https://jacket2.org/article/gertrude-stein-taunts-hitler-1934-and-1945>.

⁴⁵ For an overview of Stein’s celebrity in the United States and her US lecture tour, see Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Wanda M. Corn and Tirza True Latimer, *Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 223–40; see also Megan Gambino, “When Gertrude Stein Toured America,” *Smithsonian.com* (October 13, 2011), <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/when-gertrude-stein-toured-america-105320781/>. Stein’s popularity in mid-1930s America also stemmed from her collaboration with American composer Virgil Thompson in the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which premiered in Hartford in February 1934 and then ran on Broadway.

⁴⁶ “Gertrude Stein to Lecture Here,” and “A Club for a Rose,” *Daily Iowan*, September 13, 1934, 1.

⁴⁷ Steven Biel, *American Gothic: A Life of America’s Most Famous Painting* (New York: Norton, 2005), 59; see also Corn, *Grant Wood*, 46.

⁴⁸ “Teaching talent” at the Stone City Art Colony included Wood, Cone, Rowan, Adrian Dornbusch, Arnold Pyle, Florence Sprague, and Leon Zeman, as noted in Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 145–46; see also Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone*, 75–78.

in Woodstock, Ogunquit, Taos, and Carmel. In particular, Stone City was intended as a liberatory environment where artists eschewed conventions in favor of alternative styles, subjects, and ways of thinking.

Female students lived in a deserted mansion on the estate, while men were encouraged to repurpose a cache of abandoned ice wagons donated to the colony. One of the colony's more flamboyant characters, Leslie Young ("Reggie") Correthers, an art teacher from Rockford, Illinois, who dressed in billowy bright blue tunics, painted a faux clothesline draped with Victorian underwear on the side of his mobile home. Wood painted theater curtains on his wagon, decorating them with the same playful ball-fringe he used in *Parson Weems' Fable* a few years later and spoofing what one local reporter described as an "elaborate mid-Victorian scenic view" of the American West (fig. 6).⁴⁹ Wood's faux landscape featured a seminude Indian brave in a war bonnet, a huge buck sporting an impressive rack of antlers, a wagon train, waterfalls, and snowcapped Rocky Mountains.

In addition to classes in drawing, lithography, sculpture, and plein air painting in the Iowa countryside, Stone City's summer school hosted weekly musical and theatrical performances that drew thousands from nearby towns and farms. Sunday afternoon fund-raisers included poetry reading by Wood's friend Regionalist writer Jay Sigmund.⁵⁰ Reggie Correthers brought his considerable performance skills to Stone City both summers the school operated. After designing costumes and sets for opera diva Nellie Melba in the 1910s and staging the "Peacock Ballet" in Honolulu in 1916, Correthers taught art at Rockford College (along with poet Don Blanding) and throughout the 1930s wrote poetry, song lyrics, and plays while also staging amateur musicals.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Adeline Taylor, "We Go Calling in Exclusive Ice Wagon Row at Stone City and Hear Tales from Reggie," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, July 17, 1932, 5; "Art for Ice Wagon's Sake," *Decatur (Illinois) Herald*, July 21, 1932, 12.

⁵⁰ Zachary Michael Jack, ed., *The Plowman Sings: The Essential Fiction, Poetry, and Drama of America's Forgotten Regionalist Jay G. Sigmund* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), 7.

⁵¹ On Correthers, see "The Peacock Ballet," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, March 8, 1916, 5; "L. Young Correthers Soon to Don Khaki," *Hawaiian Gazette*, May 14, 1918, 8. Reggie Correthers published more than a dozen books of poetry during the 1930s and 1940s, including *These Blooming Friends: A Little Book of Garden Scandal* (Rockford, IL: Wilson-Hall, 1934), and *These Shady Friends: A Little Book of Gossip about the Trees* (Rockford, IL: Wilson-Hall, 1936); he also wrote children's books. His plays included "Moon Madness: A Fantastic Play in 3 Scenes," performed at Keith Country Day

In July 1932, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* reported that some of the Stone City colonists, most likely Correthers and Wood, were "hoping to work up some plays of the 'East Lynn' [*sic*] vintage during their spare moments." Published in 1861, Ellen Wood's best selling novel *East Lynne* featured a convoluted plot of infidelity, disgrace, downfall, and double identity among the Victorian middle class. Adapted as a popular melodrama in the late nineteenth century and noted for cornball lines like "Dead, dead, and never called me mother," *East Lynne* was re-staged and parodied by many Little Theater companies during the interwar years.⁵² The Provincetown Players, for example, burlesqued the play in 1926, with the entire cast wearing masks. In 1919, Charles Demuth, who acted in several Provincetown Players productions, painted *Backdrop of East Lynne* (fig. 7), a modernist rendering of nineteenth-century buildings in Gloucester, Massachusetts, including the First Baptist Church. Alluding to the popular melodrama in the title of his painting, Demuth proposed his pseudo-Cubist style as an alternative to antiquated Victorian staging.⁵³ Like Wood, Demuth's oppositional perspective was directed toward articulating a queer sensibility in modern American art.

Stone City's campy activities—newspapers described it as a "Bohemian carnival" with "ice carts as gay as any gypsy caravan"—included lining up the painted wagons on a hilltop dubbed "Ice Wagon Row." Underscoring the colony's queer sensibilities, Wood informed *Des Moines Register* newspaper columnist Harlan Miller that a "Banana Oil Art Research Society" had been organized at Stone City "to razz and befuddle fancy art critics."⁵⁴ During the school's second summer, colonists opened a bar called the Sickie and Sheaf, named in jest after the tavern in the 1854 temperance novel *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, the second most popular book of the

School (Rockford) in 1930, and "Motherland Sings: A Masque," an eight-number musical also performed in Rockford in 1935.

⁵² Adeline Taylor, "Columbia Hall, Hotel and Theater Building at Stone City, May Be Revived by Art Colony," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, July 3, 1932, 4; on interwar parodies of *East Lynne* melodramas, see E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 94–95.

⁵³ Erin Pauwels develops these ideas in "Backdrop of East Lynne—Charles Demuth's Dramatic Abstraction," *American Art* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2018), forthcoming.

⁵⁴ Taylor, "We Go Calling," 5; "Iowa Artists Live in Ice Carts as Gay as Any Gypsy Caravan," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 25, 1932, 5; Harlan Miller, "Art, the Business of the Soul, Thrives at Stone City," *Des Moines Sunday Register*, July 31, 1932, L1, L5. First recorded in the 1920s, "banana oil" was slang for insincere talk, or bunk.

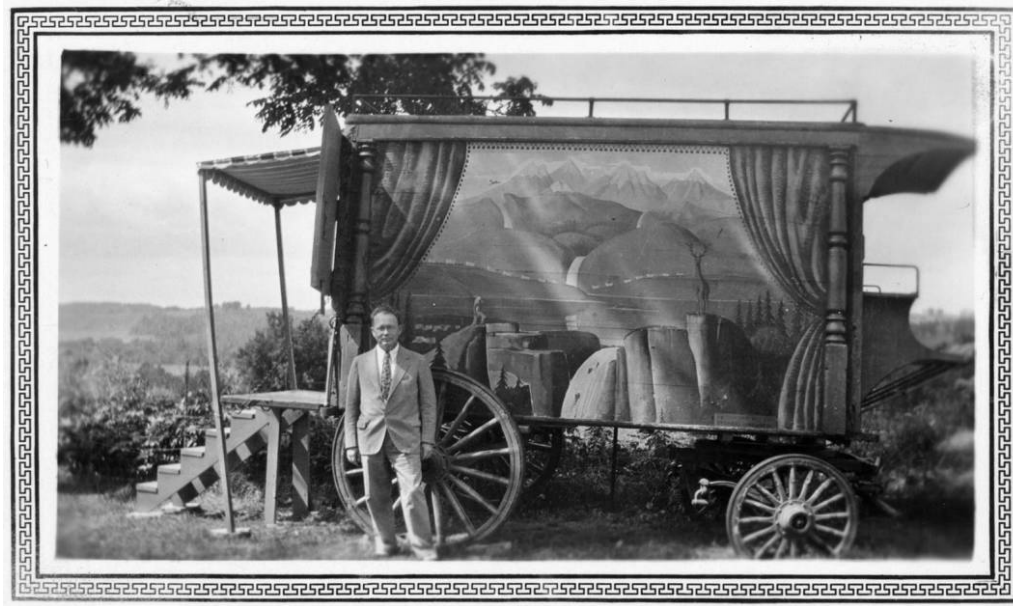


Fig. 6. Grant Wood standing in front of his Stone City ice wagon, ca. August 1932. (State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines.)

nineteenth century (after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Patrons were encouraged to "carve their initials" in the bar's benches and tables.⁵⁵ During both summers, colonists sold their art at public auctions. Wood publicized them with newspaper ads imitating "old fashioned farm bills" featuring woodcuts of a man and a mule, which drolly alluded to the real-life drama of farm foreclosures all over Depression-era America (fig. 8).⁵⁶ Some 3,000 people attended the August 7, 1932, Stone City Art Colony auction: all eager to experience a public art spectacle that commenced "at 3:00 sharp" and offered "10 Red Barns some with silos, windmills, and out buildings rendered in oil and watercolors" and "27 head sheep, hogs, horses, cattle and squirrels cast in plaster."

Decorating ice wagons, putting on snarky plays, drinking in a bar with a tongue-in-cheek name, and holding facetious art auctions, Wood's colony was spiked with camp humor, indicating that interwar



Fig. 7. Charles Demuth, *Backdrop of East Lynne*, 1919. Tempera on board; H. 19⁷/₈", W. 16". (Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; photo © Sheldon Museum of Art.)

⁵⁵ Adeline Taylor, "Sickle and Sheaf, Recreation Center for Art Colony, Is Christened at Stone City," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, July 2, 1933, 4. On *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, written by Timothy Shay Arthur, see *Bestsellers in Nineteenth-Century America: An Anthology*, ed. Paul C. Gutjahr (New York: Anthem, 2016), 437–535.

⁵⁶ "Stone City Art Colony Will Close Sunday with Auction; Project Declared Big Success," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 4, 1932, 5. Lauren Kroiz discusses Wood's auction ads in *Cultivating Citizens: The Regional Work of Art in the New Deal Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 47–48.



Fig. 8. Poster, Grant Wood, Stone City Art Colony, "Public Auction, August 7, 1932." (Courtesy Dr. Randall W. Lengeling and Dubuque Museum of Art.)

America's gay subculture was not unique to Greenwich Village.⁵⁷ Audiences and reporters alike duly recognized and responded to Stone City's queerness. Miller, for example, whose "Over the Coffee" column entertained Iowa newspaper readers for

nearly forty years, waxed enthusiastically about Stone City as "a most conspicuous episode in American art in 1932," calling the entrepreneurial efforts of its bohemian colonists "heroic" and art itself "eternal." He added, "No ignorant layman like me could write about an art colony without indulging in a little flight of lavender lingo."⁵⁸ Miller's reference to gay slang—"lavender" being a euphemism for homosexual—suggests that he saw Stone City as a demonstrably different queer space. His take may have been further informed by Wood's 1930 landscape painting *Stone City*. A depiction of the region's rolling hills and winding roads, Wood's picture includes a billboard advertising Chesterfield cigarettes with the slogan "They Satisfy" and the image of a man wearing a red necktie, a "subtle signal" of homosexual availability.⁵⁹

Camp Humor and Decorative Arts

Stone City was about three miles from Anamosa, where Wood grew up. After his father died in 1901, the family moved to Cedar Rapids, where Wood attended public school and apprenticed as a metal-smith. His art education was modest: after graduating from high school, he took a few classes at the Handicraft Guild in Minneapolis (1910) and a life drawing class with academic painter Charles Cumming at the University of Iowa (1911–12), and Wood enrolled for short stints at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago (1913–14). During World War I he enlisted as a private and soldiered stateside as a camouflage artist. Returning to Cedar Rapids after the war, he taught school, toured Europe, and honed his sense of humor in various art projects.

Cast (by his own design) as a provincial Regionalist in the 1930s, Wood was actually well traveled and culturally sophisticated; fluent in modern art styles, subjects, and sensibilities; and adept at parodying them for his own creative purposes, literary and material. In a tongue-in-cheek newspaper review, for example, of Australian art critic Mary Cecil Allen's 1929 book *Painters of the Modern Mind*, Wood imitated Bulliet's sarcasm about "apples and madonnas" and riffed on the "embarrassing" subject of the "modernistic pear." Confessing that still lifes of "downright salacious" pears gave him an "erotic

⁵⁸ Miller, "Art, the Business of the Soul," L1, L5; Hommerding, "As Gay as Any Gypsy Caravan," 387.

⁵⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 52; Evans makes this connection in *Grant Wood*, 135–36.

⁵⁷ On New York's thriving gay subculture during the early decades of the twentieth century, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*.

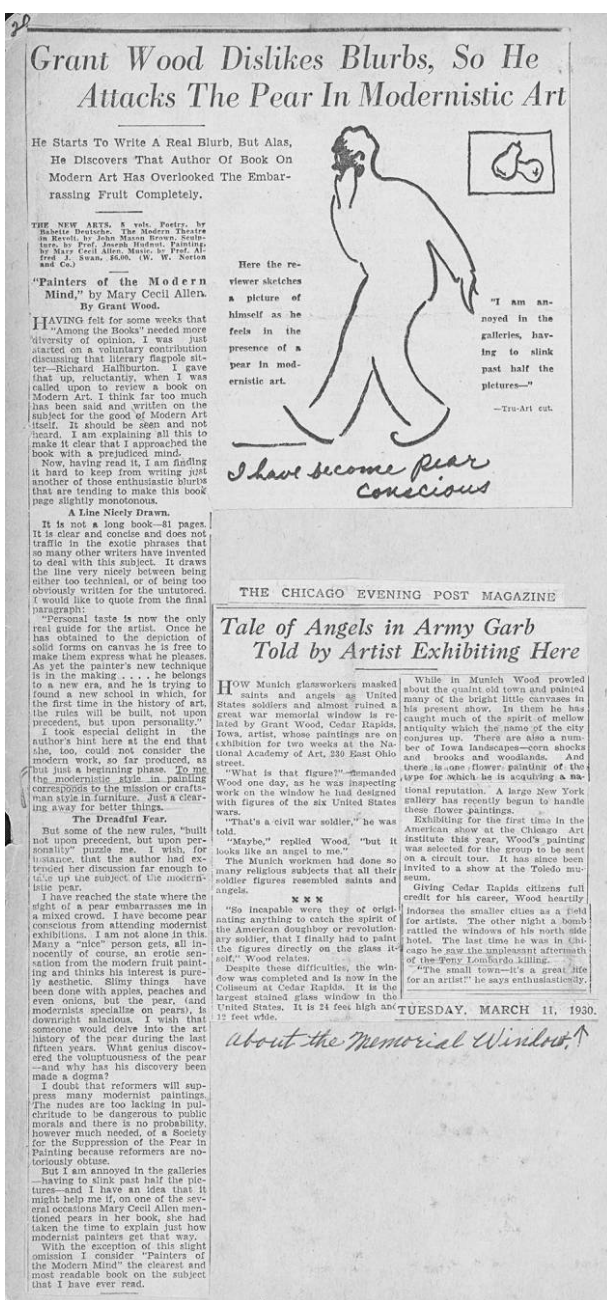


Fig. 9. Clipping, Grant Wood, "I have become pear conscious," accompanying book review by Wood, ca. 1929–30. (Museum purchase with funds provided by Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, Grant Wood Archive, City of Davenport Art Collection, Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.)

sensation" and that he was "annoyed" with "having to slink past" them in art galleries, Wood rendered a self-portrait that showed him blushing and shielding his eyes in mock mortification (fig. 9). A "much needed" reform, he wryly proposed at the end of his

campy review, was the formation of a "Society for the Suppression of the Pear in Painting."⁶⁰

Playful ridicule was the key register in Wood's *Mourners' Bench* (1921–22, fig. 10), designed for naughty kids called to the principal's office. Carving the crying faces of students on its posts and inscribing "The Way of the Transgressor Is Hard" on its backrest, Wood's wooden seat further lampooned the "moaning and mourning" benches stationed at the front of some Christian churches and in tents at religious revivals, specifically designated for repentant, and emotionally overwrought, sinners.⁶¹ He also made light of religion in *Lilies of the Alley* (1925, fig. 11), one of several sculptures that he crafted out of bottle caps, gear parts, clothespins, and other found objects and then "planted" in clay pots. A pun on the verse "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys" in the Bible's Song of Solomon, Wood's assemblage sculpture further poked fun at established hierarchies of art media and art making in which heroic statues made of bronze and marble held sway. Although raised in a strict Quaker household until his father died, Wood demonstrated no particular religious affiliation as an adult and was probably agnostic. Like the Dada artist and poet Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, "the Baroness," who in 1917 took a cast iron drain pipe, turned it upside down, mounted it on a wooden miter box, and titled it *God*, Wood was not afraid to ridicule social and religious mores and aesthetic conventions.⁶²

Nor was he afraid to spoof himself and share his campy sense of humor with others. In *Self-Portrait*, a tiny bronze relief (ca. 1925, fig. 12), Wood depicted himself as an imp with a dimple and unruly hair. Satirizing the visionary "all-seeing" persona of the modern artist (as promoted by Kandinsky, e.g., in his 1911 treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*), Wood showed himself wearing glasses that hid (rather than revealed) his eyes. His purposefully blind self-imaging referenced stereotypes of blind men wearing dark glasses, which popular American illustrator August Hutas caricatured in postcards of bachelors disguised as "deaf, dumb, and blind" on Leap Day,

⁶⁰ "Grant Wood Dislikes Blurbs, So He Attacks the Pear in Modernistic Art," *Cedar Rapids Sunday Gazette and Republican*, January 19, 1930, 6. Wood penned a number of art exhibit and book reviews for Cedar Rapids newspapers in the 1920s and early 1930s; see also DeLong, *Grant Wood's Main Street*, 36 n. 28.

⁶¹ Jay Mazzocchi, "Mourner's Bench," in *Encyclopedia of North Carolina*, ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); see NCPedia, <http://ncpedia.org/mourners-bench>.

⁶² Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's 1917 sculpture *God*, which may have been made in tandem with Morton Livingston Schamberg, is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Fig. 10. Grant Wood, *Mourners' Bench*, 1921–22. Oak; H. 37", W. 49", D. 16". (Cedar Rapids Community School District.)

also known as Ladies Day and Bachelor Day (fig. 13). Anglo-Saxon folklore held that single women could not be refused if they proposed marriage on this day during a Leap Year. Hutf's comic sketch offered a "tip to bachelors" on how to avoid being lured into matrimony, a humorous form of queer resistance that Wood, who was typically described as a "bachelor" in the press, no doubt identified with.⁶³

In June 1929, Wood's bachelor status was the subject of a *Des Moines Sunday Register* article on brides and weddings, which opened with: "This has been a hard season on eligible young men in Iowa for thousands of them have been bowled over by sweet young things and have bestowed their names

and worldly goods on them. But we want to introduce you to several indomitable and oh so eligible young men of Cedar Rapids who will not turn Benedict even for Miss America. They have survived many an open season and still can play poker with the boys without feeling guilty about deserting 'the little wife.'" The piece continued with descriptions of several suitable "young men": an amateur golfer, a basketball coach, a doctor, and Wood, who was 38 years old: "A topic of conversation at many tea tables and boudoir babbles is Grant Wood, Cedar Rapids artist. But he paints on and on and maintains a discreet silence about marriage."⁶⁴

Opening with an admission that Wood and his fellow Iowans were actually out of bounds as marriage material—being "indomitable" bachelors who would not turn traitor, even for Miss America—the

⁶³ August William Hutf (1874–1942), who is best known for a large body of commercial artwork including postcards, theater programs, and book illustrations, did a series of Leap Year postcards in 1908 for PCK (Paul C. Kroeber and Illustrated Postcard Company). Wood may have met him through their shared friendship with writer Christopher Morley. On newspaper descriptions of Wood as a bachelor, see, e.g., MacKinlay Kantor, "K's Column: At Year's End," *Des Moines Tribune*, December 29, 1930, 6, which describes Wood as "a bachelor" who "lives with a quiet, sweet faced woman who is his mother."

⁶⁴ Clipping, "There Have Been Brides and Brides but Bachelors Still Elude the Fair Sex," *Des Moines Sunday Register*, June 23, 1929, Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood 1900–1969, image 6, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/909/rec/1>.



Fig. 11. Grant Wood, *Lilies of the Alley*, 1925. Earthenware flower pot, paint, wire, and found objects; H. 12", W. 12", D. 6½". (72.12.38, gift of Harriet Y. and John B. Turner II, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.)

entire article was a gossipy parody of heterosexual desire. In interwar America, calling a man a bachelor, especially a confirmed, avowed, or middle-aged bachelor, was akin to calling him a homosexual. Likewise, the article's queer-coded phrases—"tea tables and boudoir babbles," "discreet silence about marriage"—and camp tone indicate that its anonymous author was not in the least motivated by pairing male and female Iowans in heteronormative marital bliss. In the gay lexicon of the day, Chauncey notes, a "tearoom" was a place for quick sex, and "tea" was slang for urine. Wood did eventually marry, in 1935. But the marriage was brief and unhappy, and he spent the last few years of his life in the company of male companions including Park Rinard, who became his secretary, and Arnold Pyle, a former student.⁶⁵ In the scrapbooks she organized, Wood's sister pasted the Des Moines news-

⁶⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 197. Wood and singer/actress Sara Sherman Maxon married in 1935, when he was 44 years old; they separated in 1938 and divorced in 1939; for details, see Sue Taylor, "Grant Wood's Family Album," *American Art* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 58–59. On Wood's relationships with Rinard and Pyle in the later 1930s, see Evans, *Grant Wood*, 235–38, 287–88.



Fig. 12. Grant Wood, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1925. Brass; H. 3", W. 2", D. 1". (72.12.59, gift of Harriet Y. and John B. Turner II, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.)

paper article affirming his bachelorhood next to a photograph of her brother in the guise of Cupid at a Cedar Rapids costume ball (fig. 14). Dressed in toga and sandals, wearing a mask decorated with thick, full lips, and posing with a symbolic bow and arrow at his side, Wood again fashioned himself as a playful imp, a fairy.⁶⁶ However hard his sister tried to conceal his campy humor from the art historical record, Wood's queer self-identity survived.

The queer parody of Wood's tiny bronze seeing/nonseeing *Self-Portrait* further corresponds to *The Blindman*, the short-lived Dada art magazine. Its first cover in April 1917 (fig. 15) featured Alfred Frueh's cartoon of an oblivious gentleman walking past a portrait of a nude derisively thumbing her nose: a snarky take, Dawn Ades writes, on "the myo-

⁶⁶ "Gods and Goddesses at Beaux Arts Ball," *Cedar Rapids Sunday Gazette and Republican*, February 16, 1930, 2; see also "Beaux Arts Ball Brilliant Affair Marked by Clever, Beautiful and Gay Costumes," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette and Republican*, February 15, 1930, 3. For the scrapbook page (image 6 of 152) featuring this article and the one on Wood's bachelor status, see n. 64. This page also features the newspaper article on Wood's sets for the Omaha Community Playhouse, which his sister denied he painted.

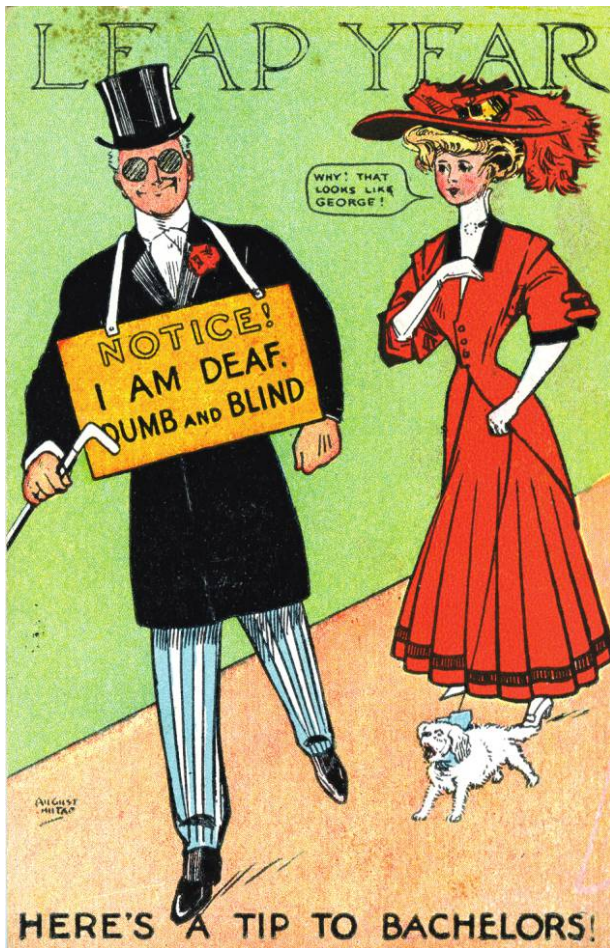


Fig. 13. Postcard, August Hutaft, *Leap Year*, publisher Paul C. Koeber and Illustrated Postcard Company, New York, 1908. H. 5½", W. 3½". (Erika Doss.)

pia of the American public vis-à-vis advanced art."⁶⁷ Such myopia extended beyond modern art. In its second issue *The Blindman* featured "The Richard Mutt Case," the story of the ready-made urinal called *Fountain* that was submitted to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917. Marcel Duchamp bought the urinal at a plumbing supply store and signed it "R. Mutt 1917" to test his ideas about "changing the norms used for defining an artist"; the Baroness may have actually submitted it to the supposedly neutral, nonjuried exhibition.⁶⁸ After heated de-

⁶⁷ Dawn Ades, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 27.

⁶⁸ Louise Norton, "The Richard Mutt Case," *Blindman* 1, no. 2 (May 1917): 4–6; Duchamp quoted in Francis Roberts, "Interview with Marcel Duchamp, 'I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics,'" *ARTNews* 67, no. 8 (December 1968): 62. On the Baroness's involvement with *Fountain*, see John Higgs, *Stranger than We Can Imagine: An Alternative History of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: Soft Skull, 2015), 37–40.

bate, the society's board of directors rejected it, issuing this disclaimer: "The Fountain may be a very useful object in its place, but its place is not in an art exhibition and it is by no definition, a work of art."⁶⁹ The fact that a urinal aroused such acrimony suggests that it was not just Duchamp's questioning of artistic categories that incensed the society's board but that the object he specifically chose represented the public toilets that "were specific to gay men" and homosexual hookups.⁷⁰

Wood's *Self Portrait* was similarly specific: the rendering of an inherently queer self-image. In the mid-1920s, Wood made 100 or so copies of his teensy self-portrait and gave them away as Christmas presents, telling his sister that he imagined his friends carrying him around "in the palm of their hand or in a pocket."⁷¹ Like Duchamp, the Baroness, and the New York Dadaists, Wood was completely comfortable with the gender-bending humor, and intimacy, of camp.

Commercial Commissions

Wood's queer sensibilities were sharpened during the interwar era in multiple commercial commissions. He used his flair for stage design and interior decoration to convert Turner Mortuary, for example, from a nineteenth-century Georgian Revival mansion into a "state-of-the-art" funeral parlor featuring a wrought-iron entrance gate, a chapel, and biers (stands) to hold caskets.⁷² Like theater, interior decoration offered Wood opportunities to craft a visual and material culture of queer spaces, borrowing historic and stylistic tropes and refashioning them in new and different ways. Male "decorators," Kevin Murphy writes, were "commonly suspected of effeminacy" in the twentieth century and subject to social deprecation. But Wood's playfully transgressive style of interior decoration, which in his liberal use of pastiche and illusion was akin to the "Amusing Style" of the Bloomsbury rooms designed by British

⁶⁹ William A. Camfield, "Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917," in *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, ed. Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 68.

⁷⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 196; on *Fountain*'s "queer resonance" see Paul B. Franklin, "Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and the Art of Queer Art History," *Oxford Art Journal* 23 (2000): 23–50.

⁷¹ Jane Milosch, "Grant Wood's Studio: A Decorative Adventure," in Milosch, *Grant Wood's Studio*, 95.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 83.

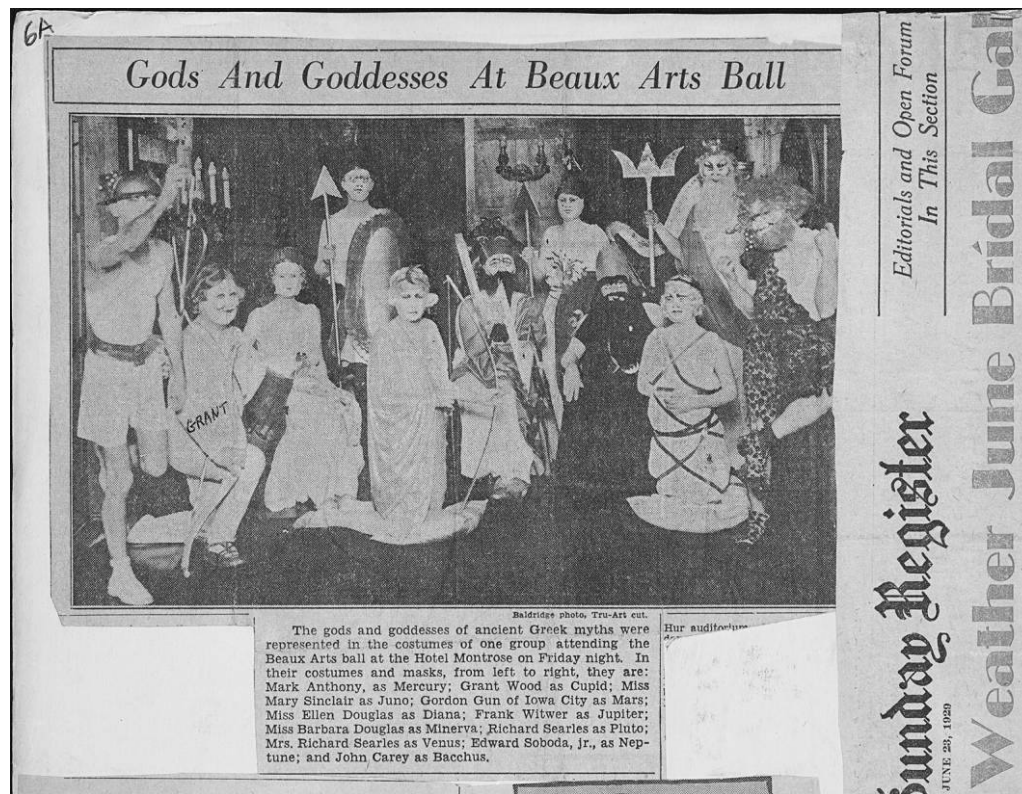


Fig. 14. Clipping, "Gods and Goddesses at Beaux Arts Ball," showing Wood (marked "Grant," second from left), 1930. From *Cedar Rapids Sunday Gazette and Republican*, February 16, 1930, 2. (Museum purchase with funds provided by Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, Grant Wood Archive, City of Davenport Art Collection, Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.)

moderns in the 1920s, was in high demand among interwar Iowa home owners and shopkeepers.⁷³

Wood's commissions included a "marine room" with light fixtures modeled on scallop shells for the Submarine Sweetshop in Waterloo, Iowa, and a sleeping porch with ornamental plasterwork depicting a dreamscape of trailing vines and exotic birds for a Cedar Rapids home. In his own living space above Turner Mortuary's hearses, Wood recycled a coffin lid for a front door and, Jane Milosch observes, showcased his skill with "decorative faux finishes."⁷⁴ And for the colonial-style home of

Herbert and Isabel Stamats—he ran a Cedar Rapids publishing company, and she headed the city's Community Players—Wood designed a humorous and highly stylized overmantel painting that appropriated and exaggerated the tropes of a nineteenth-century Currier and Ives print. Dressing the Stamats family in period costumes, he edged the scene with Technicolored and comically enlarged hothouse flowers (fig. 16). However clichéd, historicist design schemes and passionate interests in collecting, preserving, and adapting historic spaces, things, and images are theorized by some scholars as distinctively gay.⁷⁵ Wood's hypertheatrical aptitude for decor, his fondness for disguise and deception, and his apparent ease with whimsically upending historical and art historical conventions was aligned more with queer attitudes of amusement and plea-

⁷³ Murphy, "Secure from All Intrusion," 222; Peter McNeil, "Crafting Queer Spaces: Privacy and Posturing," *Queer Space: Centres and Peripheries*, UTS, 2007, 1–7; on the "Amusing Style," see Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁷⁴ Milosch, "Grant Wood's Studio," 91, 134 n. 54. Milosch's discussion of Wood's interior decoration is the most comprehensive to date; see also local newspaper announcements of Wood's designs for various commercial commissions, such as "Armstrong Opens Millinery Department," *Cedar Rapids Tribune*, March 22, 1929, 5; "New Lewis Tea Room Crowded to Capacity," *Cedar Rapids Tribune*, June 20, 1930, 5. For a list of homes and buildings he decorated in Cedar Rapids, see the "National Register of Historic

Places Registration Form" (1989), National Park Service, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/a5db25c7-cffa-4759-ad63-1fa563b46ea9>.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Will Fellows, *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); Reed, "Imminent Domain."

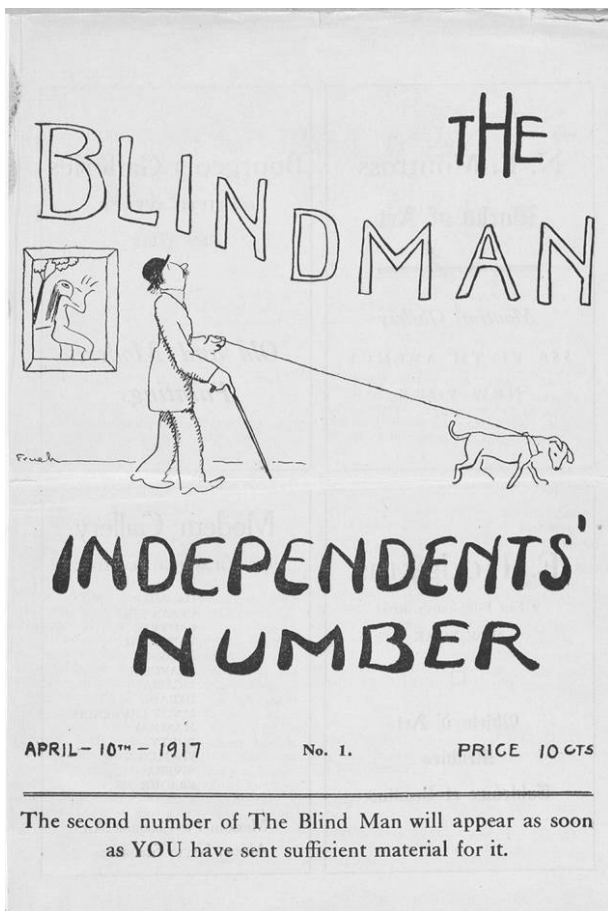


Fig. 15. Cover cartoon, Alfred J. Frueh, 1917. From *The Blindman* 1 no. 1, April 10, 1917. (General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.)

sure and their “transient delight over claims to timeless or essential verities.”⁷⁶

Like many American artists, Wood relied on commercial commissions to make a living while simultaneously pursuing other, personal art interests; as Michele Bogart relates, borders between fine art and advertising were relatively fluid in the interwar era.⁷⁷ Correspondingly, Wood adapted different art styles to fit the nature of his commissions, rendering line drawings for certain assignments and working with a loose, Impressionistic brush in others. He also appropriated subjects, forms, and de-

⁷⁶ Christopher Reed, “Design for (Queer) Living: Sexual Identity, Performance, and Décor in British Vogue, 1922–1926,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 383.

⁷⁷ Michele H. Bogart, *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); see also Erika Doss, “Hopper’s Cool: Modernism and Emotional Restraint,” *American Art* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 12–19.

signs that he researched in books and magazines in the local library. His “most prized possession,” he told Art Institute of Chicago curator (and future director) Daniel Catton Rich in 1934, was “a shabby edition” of a 1903 Sears Roebuck mail order catalog, from which he got “his details of wagons, harness, pitchforks, and even designs for fabrics.”⁷⁸

Wood played it straight with some of his commercial art projects. Sketches for a Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce crest, for instance, copied traditional seals and emblems that he found in nineteenth-century pattern books (figs. 17 and 18), and his final design featured an ear of corn, a cow, a pig, smokestacks, and a fireplace as symbolic references to the city’s economic spectrum of agriculture, meat packing, heavy industry, and home construction (fig. 19).⁷⁹ In 1925 the J. G. Cherry Company, a leading manufacturer of dairy equipment, commissioned Wood to depict its Cedar Rapids plant and workers (who included his younger brother, John) in a series of matter-of-fact oil paintings that were reproduced in “promotional brochures” and exhibited for many years at the factory itself.⁸⁰ Likewise, Wood’s drawing of the Merchants National Building, reproduced in a July 1932 newspaper ad that the Merchants National Bank took out as a statement of financial solvency, was a forthright representation of bustling downtown Cedar Rapids (fig. 20).

Other commercial commissions were more amusing. In the mid-1920s Wood was hired by realtor Henry Sturges Ely to promote Vernon Heights, a Cedar Rapids subdivision that was branded “the suburb beautiful” and a “high class suburban colony” and was located about ten minutes by streetcar from downtown.⁸¹ Wood designed several streetcar posters promoting Vernon Heights (and Ely’s real estate company)—each featuring images of tastefully designed homes, mature trees, spacious and well-groomed yards, paved sidewalks, and im-

⁷⁸ Unidentified Chicago newspaper clipping, ca. summer 1934, Grant Wood Scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 114, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/collection/object/collection/grantwood/id/1030/rec/2>.

⁷⁹ See the description of the crest Wood designed in “Around the Town,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 1, 1954, 2. Wood sketched numerous emblems and crests in preparation for the memorial window he designed for the Veterans Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids (dedicated 1929) and noted various sources he consulted, including J. F. Loubat, *Medallic History of the United States of America, 1776–1876* (New Milford, CT: Flayderman, 1878).

⁸⁰ Evans, *Grant Wood*, 61. The paintings are now in the collection of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.

⁸¹ Janet Stevenson Murray and Frederick Gray Murray, *The Story of Cedar Rapids* (New York: Stratford House, 1950), 48.



Fig. 16. Grant Wood, *Overmantel Decoration*, 1930. Oil on upson board; H. 48", W. 71". (73.3, gift of Isabel R. Stamats in memory of Herbert S. Stamats, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.)

pressively wide streets (fig. 21)—to Cedar Rapids professionals. In composition and tone, they resemble the flat, bright designs of the British railway posters that Wood collected while visiting London in 1924 and organized in an exhibition at the Cedar Rapids Board of Education Headquarters.⁸² Each of his streetcar posters also featured six lines of exceptionally awful doggerel encouraging prospective buyers to "Join the Colony":

The Doc-tor's Fan-cy of-ten takes
Him far from Pa-tients' Pains and Aches.
He'd cut his Friends and all a-lone
Take Pains with A-cres of his own.
At last, says he, lest Pa-tience flee,
I'll have to Join the Colony.⁸³

With their exaggerated images and loony rhymes, Wood's posters envisioned Vernon Heights as an escapist fantasyland, a "suburb beautiful" that was a little bit "off."

Wood's campy sense of queer space informed another commission with Ely and Company: the

11-foot-wide billboard *Adoration of the Home* (1921–22, fig. 22), which was used to advertise the firm's particular focus on home ownership.⁸⁴ Appropriating a slick, genteel style of academic art typical of the early twentieth-century mural movement and of Golden Age illustrators including Maxfield Parrish, Jesse Willcox Smith, and J. C. Leyendecker, Wood depicted "the spirit of Cedar Rapids" as a modern young mother dressed in a bright yellow gown. Flanked by a cast of metaphorically midwestern workers (farmers, bakers, construction workers), she is backed, as Wood waxed lyrical in the text panels describing his huge painting, by "the golden mists of futurity" from which "new civic buildings rise." Perched on a white throne labeled "The Adoration of the Home," her left hand resting on a naked child grasping a large book, the spirit of Cedar Rapids holds aloft "the focus of adoring eyes": a miniature version of the single-family houses that Ely and Company was selling in suburban Vernon Heights.⁸⁵

⁸² "English Posters on Exhibit Here," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, October 11, 1924, 8.

⁸³ A well-known local wordsmith, Ely probably wrote this and other verses for the Vernon Heights posters that Wood designed; his similarly hackneyed poems and letters frequently appeared in Cedar Rapids newspapers. Henry Sturges Ely collected his ad copy and other writing in *Sayings of Sturges: A Collection of Morals, Maxims, and Meditations Gleaned from a Busy Life* (Cedar Rapids, IA: privately printed, 1918).

⁸⁴ Flanked by 2-foot-wide text panels, now lost, the mural was originally about 11 feet wide.

⁸⁵ "Local Artist Produces a Great Mural Depicting Cedar Rapids City of Homes," *Cedar Rapids Republican and Times*, July 28, 1922, 9; "Mural Painting Is Shown on Streets," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, July 27, 1922, 2; see also Dennis, *Grant Wood*, 63, 237; Milosch, "Grant Wood's Studio," 82–83.



Fig. 17. Sketch, Grant Wood, Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce seal, ca. 1927. Pencil on paper. (Museum purchase with funds provided by Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, Grant Wood Archive, City of Davenport Art Collection, Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.)

Adoration of the Home was installed in Ely's offices in downtown Cedar Rapids, adjacent to a fully furnished "demonstration cottage" that the firm erected in the center of the city's business district. Outfitted with a white picket fence, a patch of lawn, and a large sign broadcasting "OWN YOUR OWN HOME," Ely's model home, meant to stimulate post-World War I home building, was a popular draw. Industry organs like the *National Real Estate Journal*, which declared "the whole world is for sale, and everyone in it is a potential buyer of real estate," breathlessly applauded Ely's publicity stunt with headlines like "25,000 Persons Inoculated with 'Own Your Home' Idea," an interesting choice of words given the recent deadly influenza pandemic.⁸⁶ At night, Wood's allegorical billboard was lit up with strings of light-bulbs; during the day it served as the visual lure for thousands of potential home buyers.

The composition and subject of this mural-sized painting suggest that Wood treated it as more than a real estate gimmick or a visual display of civic boosterism. Inverting the allegorical conventions of Flemish and early Renaissance altar paintings in which donors make votive offerings to the Virgin

⁸⁶ "Publicity and Its Relation to the Real Estate Business," *National Real Estate Journal*, November 20, 1922, 35; "25,000 Persons Inoculated with 'Own Your Home' Idea," *National Real Estate Journal*, June 6, 1921, 22–23.



Fig. 18. Sketch, Grant Wood, Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce crest, ca. 1927. Pencil on paper. (Museum purchase with funds provided by Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, Grant Wood Archive, City of Davenport Art Collection, Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.)

Mary, Wood twisted a seemingly straight advertisement for suburban home ownership into a campy joke about gender identity, veneration, and consumerism.⁸⁷ The addition on the far right of the seminude figure of Mercury, the Roman god of commerce and symbolic protector of merchants, gamblers, liars, thieves, and gladiators, unabashedly reveals Wood's quirky queer humor. Clutching a bag of money in his left hand, Mercury gestures toward "the spirit of Cedar Rapids" with his caduceus—a winged staff featuring two intertwined, or copulating, snakes—while his diaphanous, rose-colored loincloth is whipped up by an offstage breeze, exposing his rear end.

Wood's campy humor was further deployed in a series of "Corn Room" murals he painted for Omaha businessman Eugene Eppley, a hotel magnate who owned properties all over the country. From 1925 to 1927, Wood designed dining rooms

⁸⁷ On Wood's attention to medieval and Renaissance art, see Luciano Cheles, "The Italian Renaissance in *American Gothic*: Grant Wood and Piero della Francesca," *American Art* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 106–24.



Fig. 19. Grant Wood, Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce crest, 1927. From *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, August 1, 1954, 2. (Museum purchase with funds provided by Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, Grant Wood Archive, City of Davenport Art Collection, Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.)

for Eppley's hotels in Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, and Sioux City. Each was outfitted with golden-hued and loosely sketched wall paintings that depicted Iowa corn fields, chandeliers that sported ears of sweet corn (fig. 23), and friezes that featured the words to the "Iowa Corn Song," in bold capital letters (fig. 24).⁸⁸ As Travis Nygard explains, the "Iowa Corn Song" was a "cultural phenomenon" in 1920s Iowa, a jaunty ditty whose lyrics extolled the state's deep dependence on, and identification with, agribusiness:

⁸⁸ Wood, assisted by his former student Edgar Britton, painted Corn Room murals for the Hotel Montrose (Cedar Rapids), the Chieftain (Council Bluffs), and the Martin (Sioux City); references to a fourth mural in Waterloo, Iowa, are mistaken. For discussion of these murals, see Corn, *Grant Wood*, 26; Milosch, "Grant Wood's Studio," 99–101; clipping, "Artist Is Creating Chieftain Corn Room," *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, February 1, 1927, 7, in Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 13, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/890/rec/1>.

We're from I-o-way, I-o-way,
State of all the land,
Joy on every hand
We're from I-o-way, I-o-way
That's where the tall corn grows.⁸⁹

Wood's entertaining designs waggishly saluted corn's commanding, legendary, and comic status in Iowa. Popular use of the word "corny," after all, began in the early twentieth century when mail-order seed catalogs sent to American farmers were spiced up with ridiculous cartoons (fig. 25), bad puns, and dumb riddles ("Why is it unwise to tell secrets in a cornfield?" "There are too many ears!") that came to be known as "corn jokes," and then simply "corny."⁹⁰

Hazel Brown, a friend of Wood's who ran the Hobby House, a Cedar Rapids gift shop that he re-decorated for her in the mid-1920s, described dining in the Corn Room at the Hotel Montrose as a distinctively "different" experience. "As you sat at a table eating," she later recalled, "you were sure you were in the middle of a cornfield; you almost felt the crunchy cornstalks under your feet. The men who used the room for meetings loved to tip their chairs back against the wall and make big business of picking off an ear of corn." Wood's visual focus on swollen ears and upright stalks of corn was, Tripp Evans asserts, implicitly homoerotic.⁹¹ It was also an obvious example of queer parody. Situating diners "in the middle" of an Iowa cornfield and inviting them to sing along to the "Iowa Corn Song" while they gummed and chewed on phallic cobs, Wood blatantly spoofed dominant, normative assumptions about "the men" who came to the Corn Room "for meetings."

America's Sense of Humor

Constance Rourke opened her book on American character and comedy with another send-up of corn: "Corn Cobs Twist Your Hair," a popular nineteenth-century song sung to the tune of "Yankee Doodle." Like other interwar intellectuals, Rourke heeded

⁸⁹ Travis Earl Nygard, "Seeds of Agribusiness: Grant Wood and the Visual Culture of Grain Farming, 1862–1957" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009), 222. Nygard discusses the varieties of corn that Wood depicted in the Corn Room murals, including the new hybrids that drove Iowa's modern agribusiness economy; see esp. 210–24.

⁹⁰ Alex Horne, *Wordwatching* (London: Virgin, 2010), 305.

⁹¹ Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone*, 58; Evans, *Grant Wood*, 254–56.

CEDAR RAPIDS GAZETTE, SATURDAY, JULY 2, 1932.

THE MERCHANTS NATIONAL BANK

CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA


Statement of Condition JUNE 30, 1932

RESOURCES:

Loans and Discounts	\$ 7,632,009.57
Bonds	2,381,945.00
Overdrafts	129.94
Equity Bank Premises	884,872.63
Cash—	
On Hand and Due	
from Banks	\$5,843,212.82
U. S. Government	
Securities	2,314,265.48
State, County and	
Municipal Bonds	1,071,826.60
	9,229,304.90
	\$20,128,262.04

LIABILITIES:

Capital Stock	\$ 500,000.00
Surplus and Undivided Profits	1,059,371.02
Circulation	499,040.00
Deposits	18,069,851.02
	\$20,128,262.04



The above drawing of the Merchants National Building is by Mr. Grant Wood, famous artist.

E. B. ZBANEK,
Building Manager.

Officers

James E. Hamilton President	Marvin R. Selden Vice President
H. N. Boyson Vice President	Fred W. Smith Assistant Cashier
S. E. Coquillette Vice President	R. W. Manatt Assistant Cashier
Van Vechten Shaffer Vice President	L. W. Broulik Assistant Cashier
Edwin H. Furrow Vice President	Peter Bailey Assistant Cashier
Roy C. Folsom Vice President	R. D. Brown Assistant Cashier
Mark J. Myers Vice President and Cashier	O. A. Kearney Assistant Cashier

George F. Miller
Vice President and Trust Officer

Directors

Robert C. Armstrong	James E. Hamilton
Glenn M. Averill	Horace G. Hedges
F. A. Beals	D. E. Howell
H. N. Boyson	A. W. H. Lenders
E. B. Cameron	E. D. McCartney
E. J. Carey	Vernon Marshall
Howard H. Cherry	E. E. Pinney
Robert S. Cook	E. M. Pinney
S. E. Coquillette	C. B. Robbins
Sutherland C. Dows	Elmer A. Runkle
Edwin H. Furrow	John B. Terry
Howard Hall	

RECIPROCITY

The value of a bank to an individual is determined largely by the personal use he makes of its facilities. The value of a bank to a city is determined by its strength, breadth of vision, and civic enterprise.

The MERCHANTS NATIONAL long ago realized that the basis of successful banking is reciprocity, and it has ever tried to render a service to this community commensurate with its position of financial leadership.

UNITED STATES DEPOSITORY

Fig. 20. Advertisement, Grant Wood, Merchants National Bank, Cedar Rapids, ca. 1920s. From *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, July 2, 1932.

Van Wyck Brooks's call to discover America's "usable past." But she refused to categorize, or judge, her comic discoveries as high brow or low brow in deference to a cultural hybridity that she called "American vagaries" and that Gilbert Seldes called America's "lively arts": a blend of vaudeville, comic books, movies, and jazz that constituted popular

culture.⁹² The objective of American humor, said Rourke, was to create new perspectives and "fresh bonds" from multiple sources. American humor,

⁹² Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *Dial* 64 (April 11, 1918): 337-41; Rourke, "Foreword," *American Humor*, x; Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Harper, 1924).

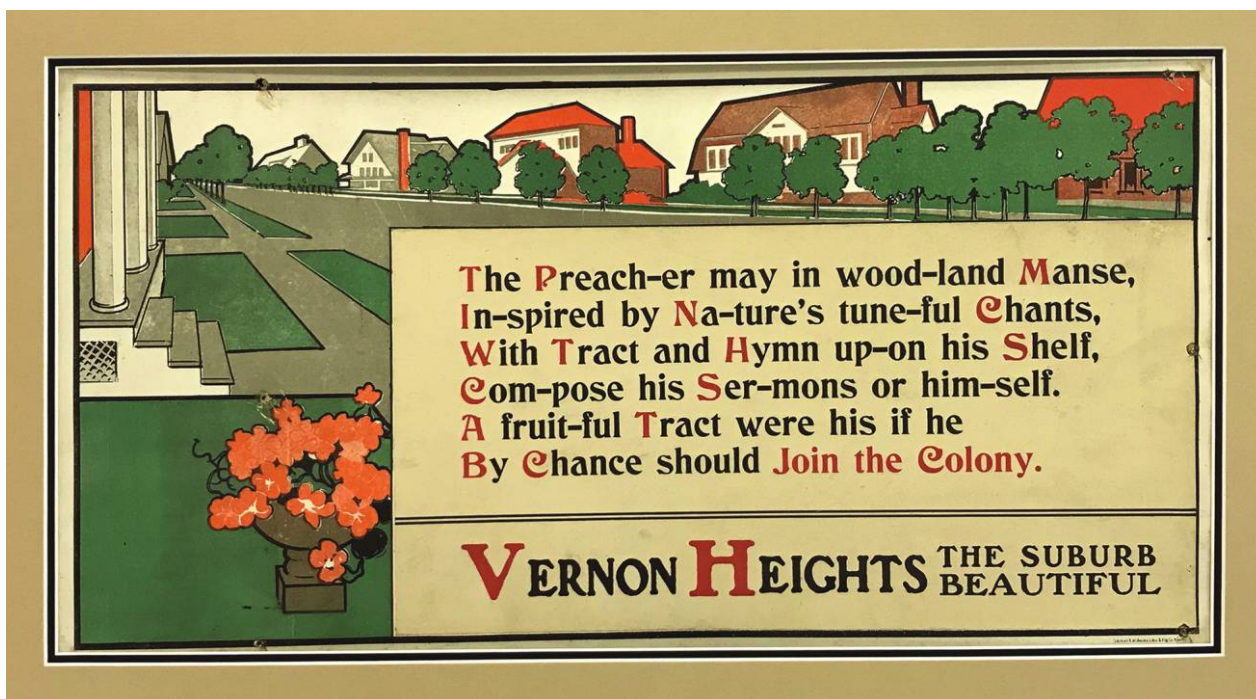


Fig. 21. Streetcar poster, Grant Wood, Vernon Heights subdivision, Cedar Rapids, ca. 1921–24. H. 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ ", W. 25 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". (S2007.002, museum purchase with funds from the Questers chapters of Cedar Rapids, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.)

she added, was “nomadic” and unfinished, like the nation itself. It was, Greil Marcus echoed in a 2004 reissue of Rourke’s book, America “declaring over and over, to closed ears, even its own, that it did exist: a shout, a whisper, a con game, a practical joke, nothing more and nothing less.”⁹³

Wood shared Rourke’s concept of American humor as the key expression of a diverse democratic culture, a repeated shout of defiance and difference in an enduring project of national, not just regional, reformation. After all, he titled his best known painting “American” Gothic, not midwestern or Iowa Gothic. “The people in ‘American Gothic’ are not farmers but are small-town,” Wood wrote in 1930, adding, “They are American, however, and it is unfair to localize them to Iowa.”⁹⁴

⁹³ Rourke, *American Humor*, 297; Greil Marcus, “Introduction,” in Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931; repr., New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2004), xxiii.

⁹⁴ Grant Wood quoted in clipping, “He Himself Explains ‘American Gothic,’” *Des Moines Sunday Register Open Forum*, December 1, 1930, Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 34, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/911/rec/2>; see also John E. Seery’s

Like Rourke, Wood understood humor as a continuous national project of recognition and reform: humor exposed and deflated America’s follies in order to advance a more sagacious state.⁹⁵ Using humor to reveal the mythic dimensions of American history and the susceptibility of Americans to make-believe, Wood’s historical trilogy—*Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, *Daughters of Revolution*, and *Parson Weems’ Fable*—aimed at reclaiming the nation’s history on more critically self-aware terms. Each highly staged painting jabbed at assumptions of history as fact, truth, and homage: George Washington at age six, for example, looks like George Washington at age fifty-seven. Drawing attention to how history is invented, or fabricated, Wood urged audiences to recognize the artificiality of perceived norms and to recognize the democratizing possibilities of difference. Gertrude Stein, again, recognized the revisionist intent of Wood’s queer parody, remarking in 1934: “We should fear Grant Wood. Every artist and

discussion of Wood as an ironist in “Grant Wood’s Political Gothic,” in *America Goes to College: Political Theory for the Liberal Arts* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 121.

⁹⁵ See, e.g., Robert Sklar, “Humor in America,” in *A Celebration of Laughter*, ed. Werner M. Mendel (Los Angeles: Mara, 1970), 9–30.



Fig. 22. Grant Wood, *Adoration of the Home*, 1921–22. Oil on canvas attached to wood panel; H. 31 1/4", W. 82". (80.1, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Peter F. Bezanson, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.)

every school of artists should be afraid of him, for his devastating satire," which, she explained, was more "creative and constructive" than "destructive."⁹⁶

Wood tended to avoid the word "satire," worried that some audiences might interpret it as derisive ridicule. But he certainly used humor for critically constructive purposes. "I did not intend this painting as a satire," he noted about *American Gothic*. "I endeavored to paint these people as they existed for me in the life I knew. It seems to me that they are basically solid and good people. But I don't feel that one gets at this fact better by denying their faults and fanaticism."⁹⁷ In *Daughters of Revolution* and *Parson Weems' Fable*, he poked fun at the "faults and fanaticism" of reflexive patriotism, at the dangers to American democracy of unchecked allegiances and unthinking assumptions. Interwar wit H. L. Mencken tackled the same subjects, hurling contemptuous satirical barbs at what he called the American "booboisie" and leaving his targeted audience feeling angry and marginalized from a larger American body politic.⁹⁸

Wood was no Mencken. His humor was intended to interrogate and inspire, not incense and alienate. As such, it corresponded with popular understandings of humor as a desirable American char-

acter trait. A "sense of humor," Daniel Wickberg explains, first appeared as a descriptive term in the 1840s and became widely valued as an American "personality attribute" in the 1870s.⁹⁹ Humor was considered an intellectual and social skill, the trait of a well-adjusted citizen who understood, and aimed to accommodate, to balance and tolerate, the multiple facets of modern life, including those of difference. In 1914, a writer in *Scribner's* observed that having a sense of humor was "the best lubricator for the machinery of civilized society" because it eased "the friction of many-sided human contacts."¹⁰⁰ Originating in and embodying camp characteristics, the humor resonant in many of Wood's 1930s paintings was aimed at lubricating a queer sensibility in popular American art.

As the twentieth century progressed, humor was viewed as both social corrective and social relief, a physical and emotional release from tensions and restraints.¹⁰¹ In his 1895 article "The Theory of Emotion," John Dewey described laughter as a "sudden relaxation of strain" and "the sigh of relief." In his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud similarly discussed laughter as comic relief, as the release of repressed psychic energy. In 1935, Walter Benjamin echoed Freud

⁹⁶ Stein's comments are paraphrased in a clipping, "Rousseau Voorhies, Traveler, Lecturer, Visits at Montrose," *Montrose Mirror*, July 1934, Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 133, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/1010/rec/1>.

⁹⁷ Grant Wood to Mrs. Nellie B. Sudduth, King Hill, Idaho, March 21, 1941, as noted in Wanda M. Corn, "Grant Wood: Uneasy Modern," in Milosch, *Grant Wood's Studio*, 125.

⁹⁸ For a comprehensive selection of his writing, see Henry Louis Mencken, *Prejudices: The Complete Series* (New York: Library of America, 2010).

⁹⁹ Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8.

¹⁰⁰ Henry S. Pritchett, "Politicians and the Sense of Humor," *Scribner's* 55 (January 1914): 79, as noted in Wickberg, *Senses of Humor*, 117.

¹⁰¹ Humor theory has tended toward three often overlapping categories: superiority (laughing at the misfortune of others), incongruity (laughing at the unexpected or inverted), and relief (laughter as a form of tension release); see Joshua Shaw, "Philosophy of Humor," *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 2 (February 2010): 112–26.



Fig. 23. Grant Wood, corncob chandelier, Iowa Corn Room, Hotel Montrose, Cedar Rapids, 1925–26. Forging, George Keeler (attributed), formed brass sheeting, cast and machined iron, copper wiring, paint; H. 94", W. 32", D. 34". (81.17.3, gift of John B. Turner II, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.)

when he observed that "American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies."¹⁰²

Humor and laughter are not necessarily linked: humor involves cognition, and laughter can be simply physical, a corporeal reaction to being tickled, for example. But in 1930s America, humor and laughter were considered mutually necessary, socially acceptable responses to modern conditions of stress and anxiety, conditions that might be met more dangerously if citizens resorted to undesirable emotions such as anger and fear. "It may seem that in an hour of nation-wide depression, laughter is the last thing to ponder on," Mary Bensley Bruère and Mary Ritter Beard observed in their

1934 book *Laughing Their Way: Women's Humor in America*. But, they added, "Under stress especially it is important to remember laughter, for it is more than a defense mechanism, a means of adjusting to circumstances, a safety-valve against tyranny—it is an agency in creative enterprise."¹⁰³

American Humor in the 1930s

During the stressful years of the Great Depression, humor's creative agency came in multiple forms—literature, advertising, movies, paintings—and aimed at multiple targets. In 1930, for instance, writers Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee edited *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse*, a hilarious compilation of "Good bad poetry" written by "the nature-loving contributor to the county newspaper, the retired station-master, the spinster lady coyly attuned to Life and Spring, the hearty but ill-equipped patriot, the pudibond but urgent Sapphos."¹⁰⁴ Parodying the sort of bloated badness evident in Henry Sturges Ely's real-estate couplets for Vernon Heights, Iowa, *The Stuffed Owl* (named after a gauche poem by William Wordsworth) assailed uncritical sentimentality in the interest of different and more discerning cultural forms fit for the twentieth century. So did Grant Wood.

Consider the lack of sentimentality in Wood's *Victorian Survival* (1931, fig. 26), a flip portrait of an elderly woman stiffly dressed in black and rigidly posed in front of the more animated form, on the far left, of a shiny black telephone perched atop a Jacquard weave tablecloth. The telephone, the punch-card mechanism of the Jacquard loom, and the tintype that Wood appropriated in "near-monochromatic simulation" in this painting were significant nineteenth-century technological innovations.¹⁰⁵ Their import is overshadowed, however, by Wood's focus on a tight-lipped lady whose fish-eyed stare and grim demeanor evoke an attitude—and an era—of stern reproach and sober denial. In a 1932 review, Iowa-born journalist Marquis Childs

¹⁰² John Dewey, "The Theory of Emotion" (1895), in *The Early Works, 1882–1898* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 4:158; Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* [*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*], trans. James Strachey (1905; repr., New York: Penguin, 1974); Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Howard Eiland, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008), 38.

¹⁰³ Mary Bensley Bruère and Mary Ritter Beard, *Laughing Their Way: Women's Humor in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), v. Challenging a mostly male comedy canon, *Laughing Their Way* discussed the humor in hooked rugs, cut paper designs, cartoons, poems, and prose made by American women from the 1830s to 1930s.

¹⁰⁴ D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee, eds., *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse* (London: Dent, 1930), ix.

¹⁰⁵ Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 98. The Jacquard loom was first demonstrated in 1801, the tintype in 1853, and the telephone in 1876.

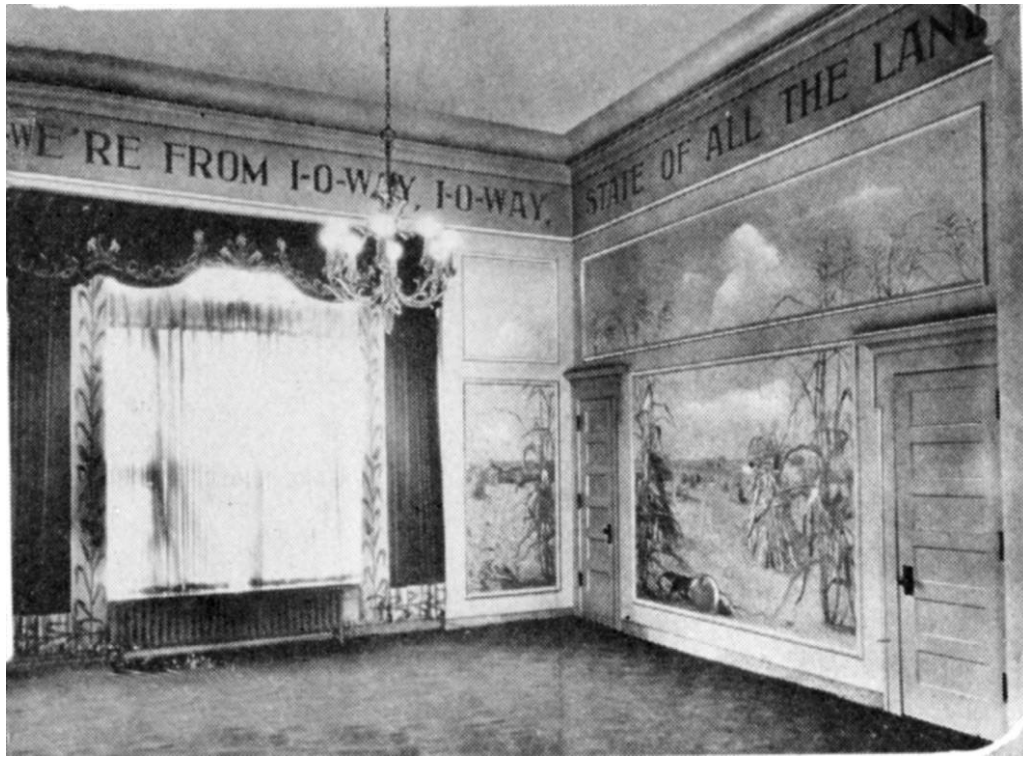


Fig. 24. Grant Wood, interior decoration, Iowa Corn Room, Hotel Montrose, Cedar Rapids, 1925–26. (Archives, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.)

commented that Wood's portrait revealed "much bitter truth about the late and seldom lamented Victorian era."¹⁰⁶ Her outfit is odd: respectable older women did not wear low-cut gowns and black satin chokers. Indeed, in the tintype of his great-aunt Matilda on which Wood based this painting, every inch of her neck and chest are fully covered by a high-collared dress and lace ruff (fig. 27).

"Baring" her in his 1931 painting, Wood both exposed the self-righteous and repressive strictures of Victorian morality and declared his personal liberation and "survival" from such constraints. Doing so, he followed the lead of other contemporary authors and critics, including writer Lytton Strachey, who condemned Victorian defects—fixed notions of truth and beauty; rigidly separated hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexual identity; and excessive displays of materialism—to affirm a new modern culture of authenticity, openness, diversity, and nonnormative sexuality.¹⁰⁷ Employing camp tropes

of exaggeration, amplification, and allusion to undermine Victorian norms, Wood privileged a queer sensibility of resistance in *Victorian Survival*.

Victoriana was repeatedly parodied in the 1930s, treated as a comic foil to the modern present and rebuked, as Wood himself gleaned from reading *Huckleberry Finn*, for its "excessively sentimental" emotional regime. Speaking at a regional conference of the American Federation of the Arts in 1931, Wood chided Victorian styles for being "flamboyant and meaningless."¹⁰⁸ Making fun of Victoriana's showy surfeit in his campy decoration of the SPCS clubhouse, and posing for photos with clubhouse visitors in a bulky black frock coat and a faux "cookie duster" mustache, Wood presented himself as a queer American modern with an artistic agenda of transparency via humor (see fig. 3). He was not alone: much as Puritanism was parodied during the Gilded Age by artists and writers in-

¹⁰⁶ Marquis W. Childs, "The Artist in Iowa," *Creative Art* 10 (June 1932): 462.

¹⁰⁷ British critic and Bloomsbury Circle member Lytton Strachey was among early moderns who denounced repressive standards of Victorian morality; see his book *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Putnam's, 1918). On modern American rejection of

Victorian mores, see Daniel Joseph Singal, "Toward a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 7–26.

¹⁰⁸ Wood quoted in clipping, "Artists Look Us Over," *Kansas City Star*, March 20, 1931, Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood 1900–1969, image 42, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/923/rec/1>.



Fig. 25. Cartoon, "Salzer's Northern Peep O'Day Sweet Corn," 1910. From *John A. Salzer Seed Co.'s Catalogue of Plants, Seeds, and Tools* (La Crosse, WI, 1910), 44. (National Agricultural Library.)

cluding Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Howard Pyle, and Mark Twain, the 1930s saw a salvo of humor targeting Victoriana and, in particular, the "Gay Nineties," a term popularized during the Great Depression.¹⁰⁹ Parallels of economic catastrophe—the Panic of 1893, the stock market crash of 1929—

¹⁰⁹ On "Puritan parody" during the Gilded Age, see Julia B. Rosenbaum, *Visions of Belonging: New England Art and the Making of American Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 71; Erika Doss, "Augustus Saint-Gaudens's *The Puritan*: Founders' Statues, Indian Wars, Contested Public Spaces, and Anger's Memory in Springfield, Massachusetts," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46, no. 4

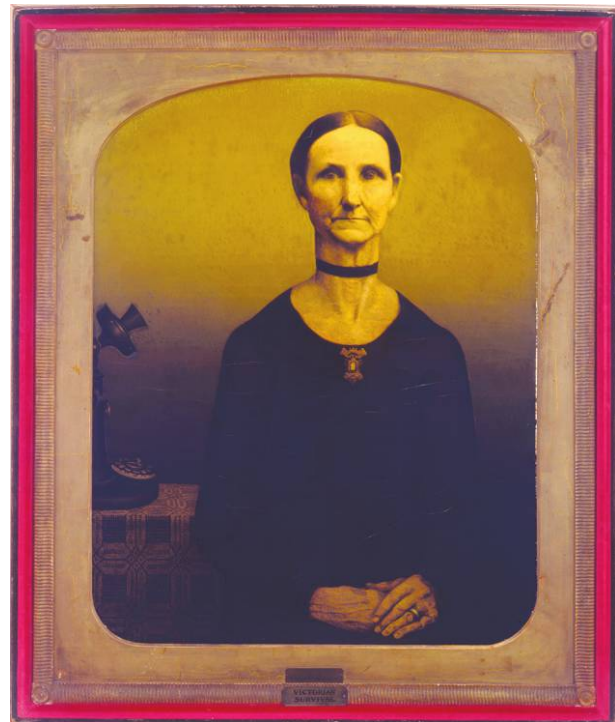


Fig. 26. Grant Wood, *Victorian Survival*, 1931. Oil on composition board; H. 32½", W. 26¼". (LTL.99.09, Dubuque Museum of Art, on long-term loan from the Carnegie-Stout Public Library, acquired through the Lull Art Fund.)

prompted some of the humorous targeting of the Gay Nineties in the 1930s. But Victoriana was especially caricatured because its subversive reputation for being both proper and indecent—think Oscar Wilde—easily lent itself to contemporary scrutiny of social and political realities.

At the Stone City Art Colony and in Little Theater companies throughout America, for example, spoofs of *East Lynne* melodramas were mounted to critique the survival of obsolete Victorian norms in modern times, from expectations of genteel womanhood to expressions of mawkish sentimentality. In the movie *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), Mae West played a Gay Nineties nightclub singer and appropriated the fashions of that era—huge hats, feather boas, parasols, and her own hourglass figure—to glibly satirize 1930s "decency codes" endorsed by the Catholic Church and Hollywood studios. Five years earlier, West's queer play *The Drag*, a "homosexual comedy" about a closeted gay socialite, had

(Winter 2012): 249–55; Jennifer A. Greenhill, *Playing It Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 111–27.



Fig. 27. Tintype, Matilda Peet, ca. 1870s. H. $3\frac{1}{2}$ ", W. $2\frac{1}{8}$ ". (Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa.)

been banned. In the 1930s, however, West's campy style, especially her use of double entendre and the way she exaggerated her femininity by copying female impersonators, deflected Motion Picture Production Code censorship and drew a popular fan base.¹¹⁰

Transgressive, gender-bending parodies of Victorian norms were also common in 1930s print media. In the humor magazine *Americana*, Perkins Harnly drew pictures of houses bursting out of "wasp-waisted, full-bosomed female" bodies crammed into corsets (fig. 28). Harnly's visual "exercises in voluptuous overload," Sarah Burns writes, played on 1930s stereotypes of "Victorians as suffocatingly proper hypocrites who feared, repressed, and denied their sexuality." They also "encoded the secret" of Harnly's own queer fears and desires as a "transvestite living on the social and economic fringe."¹¹¹ Wood's painting *Victorian Survival* similarly spoofed the visual

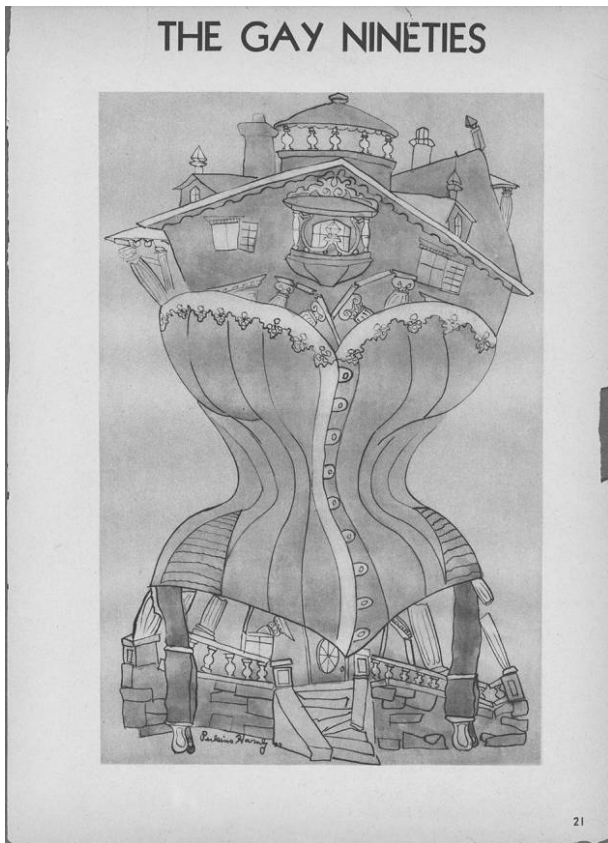


Fig. 28. Perkins Harnly, *The Gay Nineties*, 1933. From *Americana, Satire and Humor*, n.s., 1, no. 8 (June 1933): 21. (General Research Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, New York Public Library.)

metaphors of Victoriana to affirm his queer independence in modern America.

Victoriana was not the only historical past to be parodied in the 1930s: the American Revolution and "the spirit of filiopietism" that it inspired was also spoofed.¹¹² Wood's pictorial parodies of George Washington, Parson Weems, and Paul Revere, which originated in the junior high school skits that he supervised in Cedar Rapids, are prime examples. Parody, Hutcheon argues, is one of the "major forms of modern self-reflexivity," a practice of "ironic inversion" signaling the collapse of essential, or singular, interpretation and meaning.¹¹³ It was widely practiced in the early years of the Great Depression,

¹¹⁰ Lillian Schlissel, "Mae West and the 'Queer Plays,'" *Women's History Review* 11, no. 1 (2002): 71–88; Pamela Robertson, "The Kinda Comedy That Imitates Me': Mae West's Identification with the Feminist Camp," in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 156–72.

¹¹¹ Sarah Burns, "Better for Haunts," *American Art* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 20–21. Published by Alexander King from 1932–33, *Americana* featured articles and cartoons by Nathanael West, Gil-

bert Seldes, Kenneth Burke, E. E. Cummings, Peggy Bacon, Miguel Covarrubias, George Grosz, Lynn Ward, and Art Young, among others; for selections from the magazine, see Jane Van Nimmen, *Lightest Blues: Great Humor from the Thirties* (New York: Imago Imprint, 1984).

¹¹² David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 443.

¹¹³ Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 2, 6.



Fig. 29. Grant Wood, *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, 1931. Oil on fiberboard; H. 30", W. 40". (Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, Metropolitan Museum of Art; photo, Art Resource, New York.)

when economic collapse and the threat of social and political upheaval fueled a broad reassessment of conventional attitudes. In his history paintings of the 1930s, Wood used parody to imagine the nation's beginnings differently.

Wood's *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* (1931, fig. 29) was one such queer parody: a campy inversion of the tale penned by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (first published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861) about the legendary messenger who called American patriots to arms in April 1775. A bird's-eye view of the New England villages that Revere galloped through—a view akin to looking down at a model train set, laid out on a tabletop—Wood's cheeky painting sets the tale in Iowa's rolling hills, reduces Revere to a tiny figure riding a rocking horse, and pointedly references offstage lighting from "glaring electric bulbs," not the moon.¹¹⁴ The picture "was a lot of fun to paint,"

¹¹⁴ Marling, "Don't Knock Wood," 97.

Wood told a *Kansas City Star* reporter, "because there must have been so many comic sights for a rider who set out to arouse the populace." His association of comedy with arousal is telling on multiple levels. At the very least, Wood's humorous take on Revere's legendary ride was similarly intended to stimulate audience recognition of the artifice at the core of American myth-making. His spoof of Revere and American patriotism resonated in 1930s film comedies including the Marx Brothers' farce *Duck Soup* (1933) and the New Deal musical *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934).¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Wood quoted in clipping, "Iowan's Art the Vogue," *Kansas City Star*, March 20, 1931, Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, image 42, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/show/923/rec/1>. On the debunking of Paul Revere during the interwar era, see David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 336–38.

A major target of 1930s humor was the Great Depression itself. *Ballyhoo*, a humor magazine that started in August 1931 with striking success—a first issue of 150,000 copies sold out in five days; by the end of the year, the magazine had a monthly circulation of 1.5 million—spoofed the fears of imminent American collapse that were anxiously intoned in other periodicals and newspapers of the day.¹¹⁶ *Ballyhoo*'s editors teased in its first issue: "Whither? What next? The crisis? The People? Good times? What Next? Blah, blah, blah, blah."¹¹⁷ Wood adopted a similarly sardonic tone in a one-page memo headlined "NEWS," "NOV. 1931," and "CAME TO AN END" (fig. 30). Typing "There was a business depression in 1819 lasting 12 months" on the first line, Wood listed subsequent depressions, substituting the words "DO DO DO DO DO DO," the year that each economic catastrophe began, and its duration. The last line, referencing 1931–32, reads: "ALL CAME TO AN END EXCEPT THIS ONE . . . MEBBE THIS WILL."¹¹⁸ Mimicking the repetitive dots and numbers found on stock market ticker tape, the innovative typography of modern graphic design, and the experimental grammar and form of writers such as Gertrude Stein (*Tender Buttons*, 1914) and Robert Carlton Brown (whose Dada poems were published in *The Blindman* in 1917), Wood's odd memo further alludes to the nonsense syllables and offbeat intonation of scat, the vocal jazz technique that Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway popularized in the late 1920s.

Wood's comic take on the repetitive, nonsensical catastrophe of the American economy echoed *Ballyhoo*'s scorn for the business leaders and inept politicians who fueled the worst economic crisis in American history. In the early 1930s, *Ballyhoo* repeatedly featured Iowa native Herbert Hoover as a "rhetorical punching bag," mocking his failure to redress the profound loss of savings, jobs, and

¹¹⁶ Henry F. Pringle, "The Anatomy of *Ballyhoo*: A New Type of Magazine—Smutty or Smart?" *Outlook and Independent* 16, no. 1 (January 6, 1932): 13–14; see also Joseph B. Berni, "Ballyhoo Magazine," in *The Advertising Age Encyclopedia of Advertising*, ed. John McDonough and Karen Egolf (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2002), 133–35.

¹¹⁷ Editorial, *Ballyhoo*, August 1931, 11.

¹¹⁸ Grant Wood, "List of economic depressions, November 1931" (with carbon copy, annotated January 26, 1932), in Liza Kirwin, *Lists: To-Dos, Illustrated Inventories, Collected Thoughts, and Other Artists' Enumerations from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 174–75. See November 1931 writing, Writings, re: Business Depressions, 1932, folder 4, box 1, Grant Wood Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gilbert Selde wrote a similar list titled "Short History of the Depression" for the November 1932 issue of *Americana*; see Van Nimmen, *Lightest Blues*, 21–22.

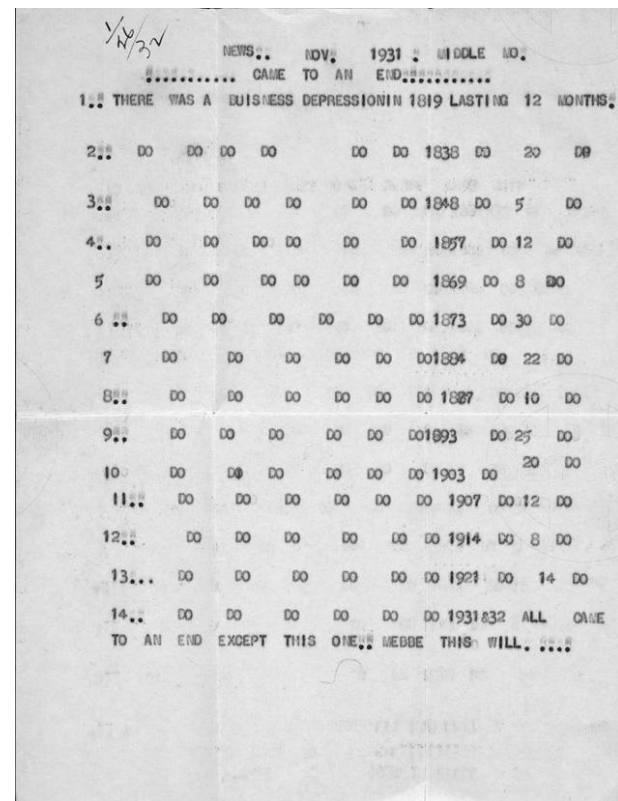


Fig. 30. Grant Wood, list of business depressions, 1932. (Grant Wood Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.)

homes that millions of Americans suffered during the Great Depression.¹¹⁹ President Hoover's response—"what this country needs is a great poem," he told author Christopher Morley—was easily lampooned. Invited to the White House, Morley described his visit in a sunny-sardonic *Saturday Review of Literature* essay, depicting Hoover as a "good" man especially "interested in Ideas," books, dogs, and children, a man whose "Quakerish honesty" and conflict-averse temperament was fundamentally ill suited to presidential leadership in hard times.¹²⁰

Morley's article was illustrated with Wood's *Birthplace of Herbert Hoover, West Branch, Iowa* (1931, fig. 31). Commissioned by a "group of Iowa busi-

¹¹⁹ Troy Cooper, "'You Can Fool Some of the People Some of the Time': Perspective by Incongruity in *Ballyhoo* Magazine, 1931–1932" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014), 59.

¹²⁰ Christopher Morley, "What the President Reads, Notes on a Visit to the White House," *Saturday Review of Literature* 9, no. 10 (September 24, 1932): 117–20. Hoover, like Wood, was raised Quaker in Iowa.



Fig. 31. Grant Wood, *Birthplace of Herbert Hoover, West Branch, Iowa*, 1931. Oil on composition board; H. 29 $\frac{5}{8}$ ", W. 39 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". (John R. Van Derlip Fund, Minneapolis Institute of Art; owned jointly with the Des Moines Art Center.)

nessmen" who aimed to give a painting by Iowa's most famous artist to Iowa's most famous statesman, the picture features the tiny figure of a tour guide pointing to the tiny white cottage that became a site of national pilgrimage when America's thirty-first president was elected (in 1928) on a platform of "humble beginnings" presaging fortune and fame.¹²¹ By 1931, the nation's fortunes had all but dematerialized. Wood parodied this by visually burying Hoover's iconic birthplace in back of several other undistinguished buildings, next to an outhouse. Queering expectations of presidential tribute, Wood's painting was recognized as the satire that it was and rejected as a presidential gift. "I suspect Mr. Wood has a waggish humor," Harlan Miller observed in a 1931 newspaper column, adding that

"the ballyhooer in the front yard" of the painting "wasn't even necessary."¹²²

Miller's word choice suggests how "ballyhoo" held widespread cultural cachet in the early years of the Great Depression, symbolizing extravagant—and untrustworthy—forms of publicity and excessive bombast. Silas Bent's 1927 exposé *Ballyhoo: The Voice of the Press*, a withering critique of the Fourth Estate, was followed by a flood of ballyhoo-themed songs, musicals, and murals, including Thomas Hart Benton's *Political Business and Intellectual Ballyhoo*, painted for the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1932.¹²³ Mobilizing humor with scapegoat-

¹²¹ James M. Dennis, "Grant Wood Works on Paper: Cartooning One Way or the Other," in Milosch, *Grant Wood's Studio*, 41–42.

¹²² H.S.M. (Harlan Miller), "Over the Coffee," *Des Moines Register*, November 23, 1931, 14. Newspaper magnate and Des Moines businessman Gardner Cowles bought the painting from Ferargil Galleries in 1934.

¹²³ Silas Bent, *Ballyhoo: The Voice of the Press* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927). *Political Business and Intellectual Ballyhoo* is one panel in Benton's 1932 mural *The Arts of Life in America*, originally

SERVICE TO ADVERTISERS

Our self-help page enables you to write your own Ad. Simply fill in the name of your product on the lines below, check the words you want to use and, lo, you have a National Advertising Campaign, which would ordinarily cost a couple of million dollars.

PRESENTING BALLYHOO'S AUTOMATIC AD. WRITER — IT NEVER FAILS

Now

(Name of Product)

A NEW {
Toothpaste
Gingerale
Cigarette
Mouthwash
Chewing Gum
Yeast
Motor Oil (Check your Product)

**ASTOUNDING Value!!!
AMAZING New Process!**

Modern Science declares our
new process is essential

for your {
Health
Social Prestige
Budget
Prosperity
Personal Cleanliness
Piston Rings
(Check one)

and will

instantly cure your {
Coughing
Stomach Trouble
Dandruff
Mistakes in Grammar
Bad Breath
Film on Teeth
Knocking
(Check one)

Ordinary {
Toothpastes
Gingerales
Cigarettes
Mouthwashes
Chewing Gums
Yeasts
Motor Oils (Check one)

are filled with deadly, harmful



Mrs. Cabot Van Burp, Noted Society Leader, who says, "I always use—"

(Name of product)
No home should be without it."
(Fill in name of product and send check for not one cent to Mrs. Van Burp.)

{
Acids
Irritants
Sheep Dips
Hoosies
Carbons
(Check one)

PROTECT YOUR LOVED ONES—USE ONLY _____
(Name of Product)

(Cut of Product)

is kind to the delicate membranes of your

{
Throat
Stomach
Liver
Feet
Cylinder Walls
Pocketbook
(Check one)

Keep Lovable with _____
(Name of Product)

Smoke
Drink
Chew
Buy
Demand

the

{
Toothpaste
Gingerale
Cigarette
Mouth Wash
Chewing Gum
Motor Oil (Check one)

that's Different!

43

Fig. 32. Advertisement, "Service to Advertisers," *Ballyhoo*, October 1932, 43. (Erika Doss.)

ing, parody, and disassociation, the magazine *Ballyhoo* especially mocked the overstated claims of advertising (fig. 32). Using fake testimonials and

painted for the library of the Whitney's West Eighth Street building and now in the collection of the New Britain Museum of American Art.

quasi-familiar visuals, *Ballyhoo* exposed how Madison Avenue duped consumers into buying fraudulent and inane products: from "wonderful little gadgets" like the "Smilette," a Depression-defeating, morale-boosting headband that guaranteed a permanent smile (fig. 33), to "Lady Pippel" bedsheets,

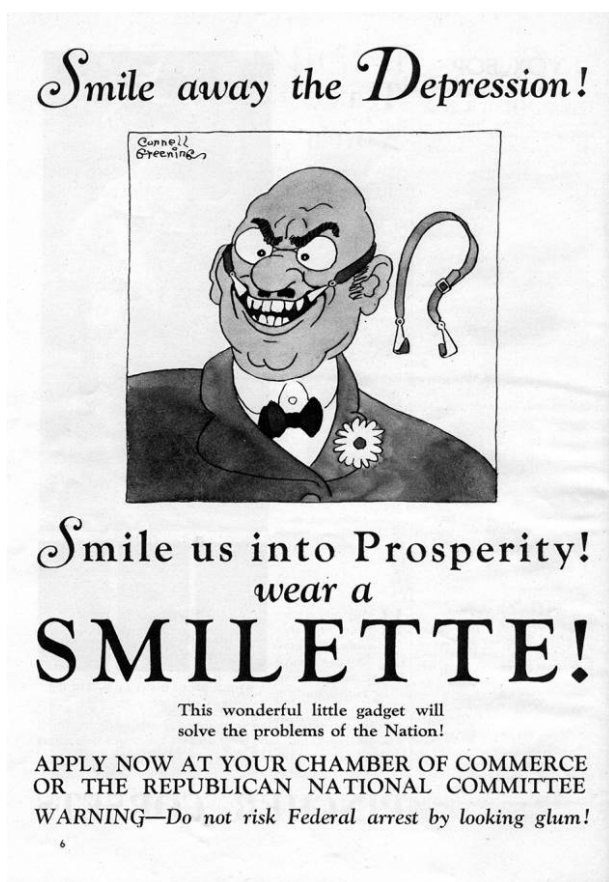


Fig. 33. Advertisement, "Smile Away the Depression!" *Ballyhoo*, November 1931, 6. (Erika Doss.)

designed to fit snugly around homeless sleepers on park benches. Margaret McFadden explains that "by presenting and then ridiculing a wide variety of dominant cultural conventions" espoused by various figures of authority, *Ballyhoo* "helped to organize popular common sense" in the 1930s, encouraging Americans to become more discerning consumers of products and politics alike.¹²⁴ Wood's parodic use of humor in *Birthplace of Herbert Hoover* and other 1930s paintings was similarly organized: first, to show viewers how American myths were invented and promoted and, second, to persuade them to develop more nuanced habits of cultural and social assessment, which included imagining difference as an American standard.

¹²⁴ Margaret McFadden, "'Warning—Do not risk federal arrest by looking glum!' *Ballyhoo* Magazine and the Cultural Politics of Early 1930s Humor," *Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 1 (March 2003): 132, 124; see also Roland Marchand's discussion of *Ballyhoo* in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 312–14.

1930s Humor and Popular Culture

In 1930s America, humor played a role as a national binding agent. President Franklin Roosevelt remarked in 1933, "I sometimes think the saving grace of America lies in the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans are possessed of two great qualities—a sense of humor and a sense of proportion."¹²⁵ In Hollywood, humor ranged from the lunatic anarchy of the Marx Brothers to screwball comedies like *My Man Godfrey*, a fast-talking spoof of the nitwittery of high society. Many moviegoers flocked to see Shirley Temple, who, in a decade full of glamorous stars like Jean Harlow and Joan Crawford, was the top box office draw for four years in a row from 1935 to 1938. Shirley's popularity, explains John Kasson, stemmed from her sense of humor and her smile, both of which met the "emotional demands of a capitalist society" in crisis.¹²⁶ At his first inaugural address in 1933, FDR asserted his "firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." A year later, he urged Americans to counter their fears by watching Shirley Temple movies, saying: "When the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time during this Depression, it is a splendid thing that for just 15 cents, an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles."¹²⁷ The difference between FDR's promotion of Shirley Temple's smile and the "Smilette" cynically advertised in *Ballyhoo* was a matter of faith in America's futurity. More campy than cynical, Grant Wood's humor leaned toward Shirley Temple.

Shirley's big screen breakthrough came in *Stand Up and Cheer*, which includes a surreal sequence of a modern-day Paul Revere riding a white horse across America—in the clouds, above the nation's farms and cityscapes—and exclaiming to the multitudes below that the Depression was officially "over": "There is no unemployment!" "Fear has been banished!" "Poverty has been wiped out!" and "The people are laughing again!" The final scene of the movie shows Shirley Temple and a jovial parade of American farmers, policemen, nurses, milkmen, garbage men, cooks, maids, and railroad porters all smiling and singing "Stand up and cheer! Banish all fear! We're out of the red!" (fig. 34).

¹²⁵ FDR quoted in Wickberg, *Senses of Humor*, 203.

¹²⁶ John Kasson, "Behind Shirley Temple's Smile: Children, Emotional Labor, and the Great Depression," in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 185–86.

¹²⁷ FDR quoted in *ibid.*, 187.



Fig. 34. Promotional photo, *Stand Up and Cheer*, director Hamilton MacFadden, starring Shirley Temple, 1934. (© Fox Film Corporation; photo, Fox Film Corporation/Photofest.)

Marching through a triumphal arch featuring a gigantic eagle—a reference to the Blue Eagle of the National Recovery Administration, a New Deal agency established in 1933 to set fair labor practices and regulate consumer prices—the movie's forced optimism is complete ballyhoo: Hollywood's version of the *Triumph of the Will*. Not surprisingly, some reviewers were not amused: "The gist of this preposterous NRA propaganda musical," wrote one, "is that the depression is a purely mental state . . . [and] mass campaigns of musical enlightenment are forthwith organized against poverty and misery."¹²⁸ Such critics were not wrong, of course: many Americans did "internalize the blame for their fears," persuaded by advertisers and other authority figures that their "bad" feelings and nega-

tive emotions, rather than the systemic imbalances of modern capitalism, were to blame for the catastrophe of the Great Depression.¹²⁹ If one of FDR's primary objectives as president was to counter the grim emotional regime of the 1930s with "a contagious sense of optimism," Shirley Temple's "natural effusion of cheer" met the challenge.¹³⁰

Stand Up and Cheer was based on a story by "cowboy philosopher" Will Rogers, a hugely popular humorist, widely syndicated newspaper columnist, radio personality, and actor. Known as the "Mark Twain of the Screen," Rogers starred in the 1933 film *State Fair* (fig. 35), which, writes James Dennis, was "a favorite of movie-lover Grant Wood."¹³¹ A

¹²⁸ David Platt, "Stand Up and Cheer, Review," *New Theatre* (1934), as noted in *British Film Institute Film Classics*, ed. Rob White and Edward Buscombe (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), 1:216; see also Robert Forsythe, "Let's Show Our Teeth," *New Masses* 11, no. 5 (May 1, 1934): 29–30.

¹²⁹ Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 197.

¹³⁰ John Kasson, *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America* (New York: Norton, 2014), 21; Kasson, "Behind Shirley Temple's Smile," 185.

¹³¹ James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Stuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 38.



Fig. 35. Promotional photo, *State Fair*, director Henry King, starring Will Rogers and Janet Gaynor, 1933. (© Fox Film Corporation; photo, Fox Film Corporation/Photofest.)

Cherokee from Oklahoma, Rogers called himself a “ropin’ fool” (he was, in fact, a world champion lasso artist), wore rustic costumes, and played the naive rube, drawing on an “Indian trickster” persona as he dished out “politically acute” comic jibes. In the early 1930s he directed his droll humor at big business privilege and working class exploitation. As Rogers quipped, “All the feed is going into one manger and the stock on the other side of the stall ain’t getting a thing.”¹³² When *Wall Street Journal* writers objected to his folksy taunts and his

popularity, Rogers threw down his Cherokee ancestry and retorted: “I have a different slant on things . . . for my ancestors did not come over on the Mayflower. They met the boat.”¹³³

In *State Fair*, Rogers used his subversive sense of humor to identify Iowa as a place where culture was competitive *and* communal and American character was “constantly reinventing itself in accord with the inclusion of new people and experiences.”¹³⁴ His was the first film version of the best selling novel, written by Iowa native Phil Stong and published in 1932, about an Iowa farm family’s week-long adventures at their state’s annual exhibition, competition, and celebration of itself. Wood surely knew the novel: a full-page announcement

¹³² Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 19; Michael Moon, “A Long Foreground: Re-materializing the History of Native American Relations in Mass Culture,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronova and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 285; Rogers is quoted in Michael Kazin, “The First Radio Populist: A Lesson from the 1930s,” *Tikkun* 10, no. 1 (January 1995): 37.

¹³³ Rogers quoted in May, *Big Tomorrow*, 13.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.



Fig. 36. Grant Wood, *Appraisal*, 1931. Oil on composition board; H. 37", W. 43". (LTL.99.08, Dubuque Museum of Art, on long-term loan from the Carnegie-Stout Public Library, acquired through the Lull Art Fund.)

of its weekly serialization in the *Des Moines Sunday Register* appeared next to the newspaper's lengthy story (by Harlan Miller) on his Stone City Art Colony.¹³⁵ But it was the Iowa-centric humor of the movie, which capitalized on the comic interface of country and city types in modern America, that held Wood's interest.

Wood had turned to a similar theme in his 1931 painting *Appraisal*, a sly scene of the transactions between a farm woman selling a chicken and a city woman buying Sunday dinner (fig. 36). *Appraisal* is sly because the face of the farm woman was Ed Rowan, director of the Little Gallery in Cedar Rapids (and future Stone City Art Colony instructor), and the city woman was modeled by Mary Lackersteen, Hazel Brown's business and domestic partner. Evans observes that *Appraisal* operates on multiple levels:

"We move from the work's public meaning (country meets city) to a semi-private, inside joke (Ed Rowan in drag), and finally to its most deeply hidden reading (a semi-erotic 'appraisal' that hints at Wood's own unconventional attractions)."¹³⁶ Drawn, like Mae West, to the camp effects of female impersonation, Wood used *Appraisal* to throw a comic spotlight on the artificiality of gender and sexual categories. Like Will Rogers in *State Fair*, Wood further foiled standard perceptions of midwestern, and by extension American, character.

In *State Fair*, Rogers played farm patriarch Abel Frake, determined to win a blue ribbon for his beloved Blue Boy, a 900-pound hog played by the actual grand champion boar of Iowa's 1932 fair. (When filming ended, Blue Boy was "offered" to Rogers but he demurred, saying, "I wouldn't feel right eatin' a

¹³⁵ See the ad in the *Des Moines Sunday Register*, July 31, 1932, L-6.

¹³⁶ Evans, *Grant Wood*, 142; see also Brown, *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone*, 70–72.

fellow actor.”)¹³⁷ Janet Gaynor played Abel’s daughter Margy, bored to tears by rural beaux and mesmerized during the fair by her geographic and ideological opposite: Pat, a citified newspaperman who calls Iowa’s radical farmers the “Bolsheviks of the corn belt” and wants to move to Chicago or New York to write the Great American Novel.¹³⁸ In the end, Blue Boy wins and the lovers kiss, confirming how 1930s humor lubricated social frictions and brought folks together. Well, not everyone: critic Dwight Macdonald fumed, “At a time when the American farmer is faced with ruin, when the whole Middle West is seething with bitterness and economic discontent, a movie like ‘State Fair’ is an insulting ‘let ‘em eat cake’ gesture.”¹³⁹

Macdonald, who became the editor of *Partisan Review* in 1937, wanted *State Fair* to be a cinema vérité documentary about radical politics in America’s heartland, not a romantic comedy featuring a huge hog and Will Rogers’s “politically acute” evocation of a more inclusive America. Wood, however, prized *State Fair* because he identified Will Rogers as a like-minded humorist: a fellow artist who resisted, disturbed, and inverted conventional expectations about himself and his art in order to visualize new and different ways of thinking about American character. Wood’s admiration was shared by other American movie fans: *State Fair* was nominated for two Academy Awards and became one of Hollywood’s few big-screen hits in 1933, saving Fox Film Studios from Depression-era bankruptcy.¹⁴⁰

Humor and the American Public

Iowa’s state fair was also very good to Wood, who in 1929 won the grand prize at the fair’s Art Salon for *Portrait of John B. Turner, Pioneer* (1928–30), a painting that paid homage to the elderly father of his Cedar Rapids patron, mortuary owner David Turner. In 1930, Wood won prizes at the fair for *Arnold Comes of Age* (1930), a homoerotic portrait of his studio assistant Arnold Pyle (who had just turned twenty-one), and for his landscape painting *Stone City*. Shortly thereafter, *Stone City* and *American Gothic*

were selected for inclusion in the Annual Exhibition of American Painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, and Wood was catapulted to art world fame. Writing “Hurray!” to his friend Zenobia B. Ness, an art teacher who became head of the Iowa fair’s art exhibitions in 1928, Wood said the “credit for my luck” lay with her “and the state fair.”¹⁴¹ Chris Rasmussen observes that the Iowa State Fair’s Art Salon “was by far the most widely attended and well-publicized art exhibition in the state, and was in fact the only art gallery in which many Iowans ever set foot.”¹⁴² For Wood, it was a perfect setting to reach a large public audience with his humor-inflected art.

Responding to the New Deal’s agenda of making “art for the millions,” reaching the public was the resolve of many American artists in the 1930s, including Wood. In 1933, he was appointed head of the Midwest Division of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and tasked with supervising painting, sculpture, and other public art projects throughout Iowa, including many at Iowa State University in Ames.¹⁴³ Wood also began making popular prints for the Associated American Artists (AAA), a New York-based gallery that sold his lithographs for \$5 each in department stores and by mail order. Organized in 1934, the AAA took advantage of democratizing New Deal directives by convincing consumers that they were supporting a uniquely American cultural enterprise guaranteed to elevate their standards of cultural awareness and taste. At the same time, they were getting a fine art bargain.¹⁴⁴ As one 1940 AAA ad put it: “Why have America’s leading artists made this sacrifice when they could normally get three to eight times more for their works? Because they realize that the artist achieves his finest expression, attains a wider market, only when *every*

¹³⁷ As noted in Frank Miller, “State Fair (1933),” Turner Classic Movies, <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article.html?id=455912%7C463931>; see also Richard M. Ketchum, *Will Rogers: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

¹³⁸ May, *Big Tomorrow*, 35.

¹³⁹ Dwight Macdonald, “Notes on Directors,” *The Symposium* (1933), as noted in Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers, A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 311.

¹⁴⁰ Chris Rasmussen, *Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 142.

¹⁴¹ Grant Wood to Zenobia B. Ness, October 28, 1930, letters, folder 2, box 1, Grant Wood Papers, Archives of American Art. Wood inscribed the photo in fig. 2 “To Mrs. Ness in appreciation. Grant Wood (‘Exhibit A’).”

¹⁴² Chris Rasmussen, “Agricultural Lag: The Iowa State Fair Art Salon, 1854–1941,” *American Studies* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 17.

¹⁴³ See Lea Rosson DeLong’s extensive study of the Iowa State murals, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals* (Ames: University Museums, Iowa State University, 2006). Wood also supervised PWAP artist Harry Stinson, whose stone sculpture of Sauk Chief Black Hawk was dedicated in Lake View, Iowa, on September 3, 1934.

¹⁴⁴ Erika Doss, “Catering to Consumerism: Associated American Artists and the Marketing of American Art, 1934–1958,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 26, nos. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1991): 143–67; see also *Art for Every Home: Associated American Artists, 1934–2000*, ed. Elizabeth G. Seaton, Jane Myers, and Gail Windisch (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

cultured person (not just wealthy collectors) can afford a genuine original."¹⁴⁵

By extension, reaching the public with humor was a major goal in 1930s American schools. If classrooms had typically been organized as laughter-free zones of discipline, order, and authority, a progressive education movement endorsed humor as a pedagogical tool that stimulated love of learning and helped students develop informed and adult senses of humor. Dewey's earlier writing on humor; books on the subject published by Rourke (1931), Bruère and Beard (1934), and Walter Blair (*Native American Humor*, 1937); the popularity of humor writers from Will Rogers and H. L. Mencken to Dorothy Parker, James Thurber, and S. J. Perelman (all staffers at *The New Yorker*, founded in 1925 as a "comic weekly"); and the huge presence that comedy commanded on the radio, in the movies, and in print media; all contributed to humor's heightened value among American educators. In 1934, the Mark Twain Association announced plans to raise \$200,000 to establish the Mark Twain Chair for the Advancement of Humor, an endowed professoriate intended to circulate among various universities.¹⁴⁶ In 1936, the first college course in humor—"Types of Humorous Literature," designed "to develop the student's ability to view life from the standpoint of the spectator at a comedy, to perceive the comic elements in situations and in people without being upset by them, and, above all, to recognize the comic elements in himself"—was offered at the University of Florida.¹⁴⁷

Educator Leon Ormond was a major proponent of "student mirth," advising in *Laugh and Learn* that laughter was an "instrument of moral maturation," a "marvelously effective means of social growth in that it makes for self-confidence, poise, and adequate adjustment."¹⁴⁸ Likewise, art teacher Reggie Correthers, Stone City's most theatrical colonist, published essays in *Progressive Education* promoting

an experiential and "emotional approach" to art instruction that emphasized play and joy.¹⁴⁹ Invited to deliver the keynote address at the Tenth Iowa Conference on Child Development and Parent Education in 1936, Wood quoted Correthers's insights about the "joy of creation" and the "great emotional release" of "self-expression" in early childhood drawing and painting. Wood especially urged parents to be supportive and nonjudgmental regarding their children's art efforts and, by extension, their children.¹⁵⁰

For Wood, whose teaching in the 1930s involved summertime stints at Stone City and then, from 1934 to 1940, in the art department at the University of Iowa, art, humor, pedagogy, and a rejection of aesthetic hierarchies (good/bad, high/low) were all related.¹⁵¹ Academic hierarchies were also subjected to his humor. In his 1938 lithograph *Honorary Degree* (fig. 37), Wood depicted himself as a pudgy professor sandwiched between two dons—their lanky bodies aligned with the tall Gothic window in the rear, his body ridiculously stunted. The Associated American Artists catalog advertising Wood's print observed: "We believe it to be one of the finest examples of the artist's work in a mildly satirical vein."¹⁵²

Satirizing Social Class

In his paintings from the early 1930s, Wood used satire to foreground a more egalitarian and culturally discerning American scene, often drawing on a

¹⁴⁵ Advertisement, Associated American Artists, *Life*, December 2, 1940, 5.

¹⁴⁶ "Courses in Humor at Colleges Urged, Lack of Them Is Educational Tragedy," *New York Times*, February 5, 1934, 17. The Mark Twain Association's proposal for an endowed chair in humor was instigated by the group's founder, professional storyteller Ida Benfey Judd, and was spoofed in numerous newspapers and magazines; see, e.g., "Coals to Newcastle," *New York Times*, February 6, 1934, 20; and Judd's reply, "Appreciation of Humor," *New York Times*, February 23, 1934, 18. Judd tirelessly solicited honorary board members (including Will Rogers), but the proposed chair was never established.

¹⁴⁷ Eunice Barnard, "In the Classroom and on the Campus," *New York Times*, September 27, 1936, N10.

¹⁴⁸ Leon Ormond, *Laugh and Learn: The Art of Teaching with Humor* (New York: Greenberg, 1941), 267.

¹⁴⁹ On Correthers's writing on art education, see Patricia Ann Kurriger, "Philosophy of Art in *Progressive Education*, 1919–1940" (PhD diss., Loyola University, 1973), 41–43, 128, 172.

¹⁵⁰ Clipping, Dorothy Ashby Pownall, "Iowa Parents Hear Artist, Wood Makes Plea for Children," *Des Moines Tribune*, June 18, 1936, Grant Wood scrapbook 02: Grant Wood, 1935–39, image 64, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/130/show/78/rec/1>; see also DeLong, *Grant Wood's Main Street*, 37 n. 31. Wood's lecture most likely referenced Reggie Correthers's article "The Development of Creative Impulses in Art Classes," *Progressive Education* 3 (April–May–June 1926): 105–9.

¹⁵¹ Wood was an artist in residence and professor in the School of Art at the University of Iowa; see Erika Doss, "Arrival and Afterlife: Jackson Pollock's *Mural* and the University of Iowa," in suppl. 1, "Examining Pollock," *Getty Research Journal* 9, no. S1 (2017): 117–32.

¹⁵² AAA press release quoted in Bruce E. Johnson, *Grant Wood: The 19 Lithographs, A Catalogue Raisonné* (Fletcher, NC: Arts and Crafts Research Fund, 2016), 69. Wood was awarded honorary doctorates at the University of Wisconsin (1936), Lawrence University (1938), the University of Minnesota (1939), Wesleyan University (1940), and Northwestern (1941). The figures in *Honorary Degree* were based on two eminent University of Iowa faculty: Dean Emeritus Carl E. Seashore and Professor Norman Foerster.

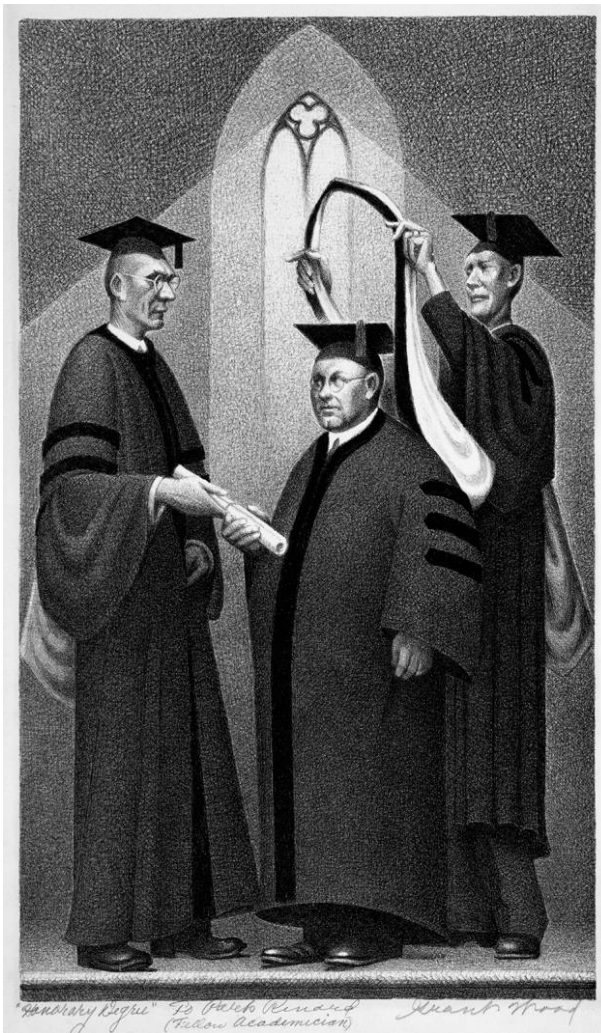


Fig. 37. Grant Wood, *Honorary Degree*, 1938. Lithograph on paper; H. 16¼", W. 11¾" (sheet). (Gift of Park and Phyllis Rinard in honor of Nan Wood Graham, Smithsonian American Art Museum.)

"comedy of manners" to parody hierarchies of social class. Like 1930s screwball comedies, movies that scoffed at "the social and sexual foibles of the idle rich" and wellborn, Wood's painting *Appraisal* mediated class, gender, and sexual difference within a humorous narrative of grudging acceptance and tolerance. Similarly forced to interact and "make nice" in the Frank Capra comedy *It Happened One Night* (1934), spoiled rich girl Claudette Colbert and rogue newspaperman Clark Gable initially form an uneasy alliance and then discover different "things about the other that are admirable," which leads to genuine partnership.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Philip L. Gianos, *Politics and Politicians in American Film* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 90, 91.

Wood blatantly ridiculed social class in his 1932 painting *Daughters of Revolution*, a deadpan satire of the smugly exclusionary women's club that was one of "America's pet institutions," the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Calling its self-righteous subjects "Those Tory Gals," Wood depicted them with their mouths tightly shut to show their utter disinterest in democratizing conversations, let alone dissent. "Foxing" the Leutze print in back of them, he implied that their "revolutionary" associations, narrow notions of national membership, and claims on modern America were similarly moldy and rotten. Burlesquing their gender—one reporter described the figure on the right as "the female Stonewall Jackson," and Karal Ann Marling asserts that the figure on the left is "none other than Gilbert Stuarts's George Washington in drag"—he called into question their membership qualifications in a women's club.¹⁵⁴ In conversations with reporters and friends, Wood described the DAR, which denounced his "insulting picture" as a "hideous monstrosity," as "people who are trying to set up an aristocracy of birth in a Republic." Wood was disgusted by the club's blacklisting of liberals, political progressives, social reformers, and peace activists, including Jane Addams, W. E. B. DuBois, and Reinhold Neibuhr, all of whom the DAR deemed "doubtful speakers" and American undesirables. Wood also detested the DAR's "superpatriotism," Corn writes, because of their finicky interference with a memorial window he had designed in Cedar Rapids in the late 1920s.¹⁵⁵

Deeply aware of his own tenuous position in a nation where homosexuality was against the law, Wood surely identified with the threat of social ostracism; indeed, Evans recounts that Wood was the target of a homosexual blackmail attempt in 1931.¹⁵⁶ Not long afterward, when stories on the DAR's blacklisting campaigns gained extensive coverage in major news outlets and magazines, spurring "national clamor over the irony of the descendants

¹⁵⁴ Adeline Taylor, "Grant Wood's Penetrating Eye and Skillful Brush to Deal Next with Some of America's Pet Institutions," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 25, 1932, 3; Marling, "Don't Knock Wood," 98.

¹⁵⁵ Wood quoted in Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 136–38; on DAR response to the painting, see Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists*, 106; on DAR blacklisting, see Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 124–29; Kirsten Marie DeLegard, *Battling Miss Bolshevik: The Origins of Female Conservatism in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 160–72; on Wood's dispute with the DAR in Cedar Rapids, see Corn, *Grant Wood*, 98.

¹⁵⁶ Evans, *Grant Wood*, 107–8.

of American revolutionaries curtailing free speech," Wood began work on a painting exposing the conservative clubwomen as mean, dim-witted biddies.¹⁵⁷

Cedar Rapids Gazette staffer Adeline Taylor admired his audacity, writing: "Grant Wood seems to enjoy taking a stroll where even artists have feared to tread. 'American Gothic' blazed the gateway to this path, but 'Daughters of Revolution' turns it into a highway. . . . There is nothing this Iowan enjoys more than creating his own little revolution. And he admits, 'I'd rather have people rant and rave against my painting than pass it up with 'Isn't that a pretty picture?'"¹⁵⁸ Taylor recognized that in addition to parodying the pretenders to America's heritage of dissent and independence and upsetting norms about national character and "pet institutions," Wood's paintings—"his own little revolution"—incited viewers to think differently. Like John Dewey and Jane Addams, Wood's vision of interwar America was one of social egalitarianism and cultural pluralism.¹⁵⁹

Queer Parody Rebuffed

During the first half of the 1930s, when class-conscious critiques of elite privilege were common, Wood's snarky assessment of American entitlement and intolerance, of the jingoistic posturing of automatic, superficial pronouncements like "my country, right or wrong," was widely shared. The laughter that *Daughters of Revolution* aroused when it was shown in the Whitney Biennial, in the Carnegie International, and at the Art Institute of Chicago, which was recounted in scores of newspaper articles in 1933–34, suggests that the painting hit its mark.¹⁶⁰ Its humor was also appropriated in other send-ups of privilege and rank. In *Sons of Peace* (1934), *Chicago Tribune* cartoonist John T. McCutcheon viciously lampooned the hypocrisy of elite authority, depicting the diplomats, munitions manufacturers, and politicians who advocated for "peace" but profited from war (fig. 38). Standing in front



Fig. 38. John T. McCutcheon, *Sons of Peace*, 1934. Lithograph on paperboard hand colored with black ink; H. 17¼", W. 14¼" (sheet and image). (Gift of Park and Phyllis Rinard in honor of Nan Wood Graham, Smithsonian American Art Museum.)

of a framed print labeled "The War to End War, 1914–1918," which shows maniacal soldiers bayonetting screaming civilians, the three cynically haloed figures clutch daisies and treaties in symbolic hands: iron fists, skeletal fingers, and velvet gloves. McCutcheon subtitled his cartoon "Adapted from Grant Wood's painting *Daughters of Revolution*" and gave Wood the original drawing.¹⁶¹

Toward the end of the 1930s, however, Wood's campy sense of humor was increasingly questioned. Writing about Wood's landscape painting *Spring Turning*, which was first exhibited in the Fall 1936 Carnegie International, *New York Sun* art critic Henry McBride remarked: "His satire this time goes too far, I think. He paints a 'Spring Plowing' [*sic*] in which the hills resolve, under the plowman's touch, into vast checker board squares that are highly ridiculous. This is making fun of nature. Artists should not do that. It is all very well to poke fun at the Daughters of the Revolution but you can't do that to anything so serious as spring plowing. Some-

¹⁵⁷ Delegard, *Battling Miss Bolshevik*, 162.

¹⁵⁸ Taylor, "Grant Wood's Penetrating Eye," 3.

¹⁵⁹ Michael C. Steiner, "The Midwestern Mind of Jane Addams: Cultural Pluralism and the Rural Roots of an Urban Idea," in *The Midwestern Moment: The Forgotten World of Early-Twentieth Century Midwestern Regionalism, 1880–1940*, ed. Jon K. Lauck (Hastings, NE: Hastings College Press, 2017), 210–11.

¹⁶⁰ See articles in the Grant Wood scrapbook 01: Grant Wood, 1900–1969, Figge Art Museum Grant Wood Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/1030/rec/2>.

¹⁶¹ McCutcheon's drawing was gifted to the Smithsonian American Art Museum by Wood's secretary Park Rinard.

thing will surely happen to Grant Wood. You wait and see.”¹⁶² McBride, an early enthusiast of American modernism and a friend of Gertrude Stein and Charles Demuth, often tossed amusing bon mots in his chatty art reviews, but his comments on Wood were especially prescient. Something “did” happen to Grant Wood: by the end of the Great Depression, his campy parodies of an American fondness for fantasy and reflexive patriotism, and his overall critique of normative American values and labels, were rebuked and rejected.

In 1939, as Wood worked on *Parson Weems' Fable*, drumrolls for US entry in another global war became louder and louder. Despite an official position of neutrality and a substantial body of citizens with isolationist sentiments, proclamations of American exceptionalism and expectations of unhesitant national loyalty and uncritical patriotism gained traction. Critiques of class hierarchy were replaced by pronouncements of American unity, and American humor shifted from the detached, self-deprecating discernment of Americans laughing at themselves to the graphic condemnation of others—as in mocking posters of German, Italian, and Japanese enemies. Difference in America, including the queer parodies that Wood had projected throughout his career, became suspect.

In January 1940, *Parson Weems' Fable* was shown in New York at Associated American Artists. Anticipating (or soliciting) heightened media response to Wood's parody of political integrity and American myth at a moment of militaristic drumbeating, the gallery issued a press release in which Wood stated:

It is, of course, good that we are wiser today and recognize historical fact from historical fiction. Still, when we begin to ridicule the story of George and the cherry tree and quit teaching it to our children, something of color and imagination departed from American life. It is this something that I am interested in helping to preserve. As I see it, the most effective way to do this is frankly to accept these historical tales for what they are now known to be—folklore—and treat them in such a fashion that the realistic-minded, sophisticated people of our generation can accept them.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Clipping, Henry McBride, “Wood's Satire,” *New York Sun*, n.d. but probably October 1936, in Grant Wood Scrapbook 02: Grant Wood, 1935–39, image 67, <http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/grantwood/id/130/show/78/rec/1>.

¹⁶³ Wood quoted in “Grant Wood Tells Story of Latest Work,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, January 6, 1940, 12. For a full copy of the widely circulated AAA press release, see “A Statement from Grant Wood Concerning His Painting ‘Parson Weems' Fable,’” Grant Wood files, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 39. Poster, Grant Wood, “Blitzkrieg! Now Is the Time to Aid England!” *Bundles for Britain*, 1940. H. 25", W. 2". (US 3350, Poster Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.)

Wood's statement confirmed his abiding conviction that humor was the learned skill of an educated and “sophisticated” American: that being able to recognize historical fiction as folklore was fundamental to the development of American character. Yet his circumspect tone suggests that he also recognized the changed terms of that character in a nation on the brink of war. “In our present, unsettled times,” he warily continued, “when democracy is threatened on all sides, the preservation of our folklore is more important than is generally realized.”¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Cécile Whiting argues that Wood's statement suggests his new interests in “fortifying American patriotism in the face of the fascist threat.”¹⁶⁵

Wood's sense of the need for fortification arose from other threats. Joni Kinsey details that during the time Wood painted and exhibited *Parson Weems'*

¹⁶⁴ Madelyn Miles, “‘Parson Weems' Fable Merely a Fantasy of Delightful American Myth—Grant Wood,” *Daily Iowan*, January 6, 1940, 1, 6; see also Corn, *Grant Wood*, 122.

¹⁶⁵ Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 100.

Fable, several members of his department at the University of Iowa publicly criticized his art in an interview with a *Time* magazine reporter and privately implied that he was a homosexual. Wood responded with an angry letter to his dean demanding an official investigation and declaring, "The charges are false but they are so serious that they indicate a deliberate campaign to destroy my reputation as an artist and a teacher and to impugn my personal integrity."¹⁶⁶ He also took on a conventionally patriotic project: the design of a poster for the 1940 Bundles for Britain campaign, which featured the words "Blitzkrieg! Now Is the Time to Aid England!" and the image of a mother and child looking up in terror at an onslaught of Nazi war planes (fig. 39).

Even after Wood died of pancreatic cancer (in February 1942), posthumous hounding of his art and reputation continued. Former champion C. J. Bulliet now called Wood "small-souled," and *Chicago Sun* art critic Dorothy Odenheimer dismissed his paintings as "gift shop art" and "too cute." Former colleague Horst W. Janson, who taught at the University of Iowa from 1938 to 1941, wrote several articles equating Wood's work with "the paintings officially approved by the Nazis."¹⁶⁷ Correlations between totalitarian political regimes, modern American art, and homosexuality escalated in the 1940s,

leading to the vile purges of the Cold War's "Lavender Scare." As Chauncey relates, gay life "was *less* tolerated, *less* visible to outsiders, and *more* rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than the first."¹⁶⁸ While America's robust gay subculture did not entirely disappear, the blatant homophobia sanctioned during the 1940s and the Cold War pushed camp humor and queer parody out of the popular mainstream, where Wood had helped position it in the 1930s.

From the beginning to the end of the Great Depression, Grant Wood's campy humor was noticed, critiqued, and then, denied. In September 1942, just seven months after Wood died, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* informed its readers that *American Gothic* was "finally recognized as the sympathetic, yet realistic portrayal that the artist intended it to be."¹⁶⁹ This was, of course, a complete reversal of Wood's own remarks about the painting, as well as his interests in exposing the "faults and fanaticism" of American character and proposing through queer parody the possibilities—social, political, and cultural—of American difference. But in the changed conditions of 1940s America, Wood's campy humor was an anomaly. Viewed as a dangerously naive Regionalist during the war years and generally dismissed for decades after, Wood was discounted in American art history, and his queer parody was forgotten.

¹⁶⁶ Kinsey, "Cultivating Iowa," 27–31.

¹⁶⁷ "Knocking Wood," *Art Digest* 17 (December 1, 1942): 12; "Controversy over Wood's Paintings Still Raging a Year after His Death," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, February 12, 1943, 13; Horst W. Janson, "Benton and Wood, Champions of Regionalism," *Magazine of Art* 39, no. 5 (May 1946): 186. See also Janson, "The International Aspects of Regionalism," *College Art Journal* 2, no. 4 (May 1943): 110–15, and "The Case of the Naked Chicken," *College Art Journal* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1955): 124–27; Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 363–64, 388–91.

¹⁶⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 9.

¹⁶⁹ Dorothy Dougherty, "The Right and Wrong of America: Grant Wood's 'American Gothic' Is Finally Understood," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, September 6, 1942, sec. 4, 1.