

**American Gothic**  
Project  
**Grant Wood**



Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, 1974

**Volunteer:**

**Date:**

**Grade Level:**

**Kindergarten through 5th**

**Artist:**

**Grant Wood**

**Print Sculpture:**

**American Gothic**

**Art Vocabulary:**

**Regionalism**  
**Gothic Revival**

## **Artist and His Works:**

**Grant Wood** (born Grant DeVolson Wood) was an American painter, born on a farm near Anamosa, Iowa on February 13, 1891. This is not far from Eldon where is located the house he painted in the background of *American Gothic*. He studied woodworking and metalwork and then painting at the Art Institute in Chicago (1912). During World War I, he painted camouflage colors on military equipment (like Paul Klee for the Germans), then taught art in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He went to Paris to study painting and returned home in 1924. Four years later he was back in Europe, in Munich this time, to supervise the manufacture of stained glass windows. He was deeply impressed by early Flemish paintings and their very detailed and naturalistic manner. The primitive and naive qualities of Gothic art had already fascinated the Blaue Reider group in Munich some 17 years before.

Back in America, Wood became a regionalist painter specializing in the representation of everyday, ordinary people from his rural Iowa. He came on the national art scene with his *American Gothic* picture, which won him a bronze medal and a \$300 prize at the 1930 exhibition of the Art Institute of Chicago and was immediately purchased by the Art Institute of Chicago.

In the early 1930's and under the Federal Arts Project, Wood supervised several Iowa projects that painted murals, including those for the Post Office Building in Washington, D.C. and for the Library of the Iowa State College at Ames, Iowa. The very idea for these murals was made possible by earlier contributions to this type of public and didactic art by Mexican painters such as Jose Clemente Orozco.

Show example of his paintings and discuss gothic art and country gothic art:

- **Calendulas, 1929**
- **Indian Summer, 1929**
- **Woman with Plant, 1929**
  
- **Young Corn, 1931**

## Art work: American Gothic

### Literal Qualities

- Display painting and discuss.
- Who are these people?  
*An Iowa farmer and his daughter.  
The models are Dr. McKeeby (Wood's dentist) and Nan Wood (Wood's sister).*
- Would you like to spend your summer on their farm? What would they have you do there? Are the man and the woman inviting you on their land?  
*Relate to Robert Frost's New England neighbor in "Mending Wall" and to his obstinate sense of boundaries: "Good fences make good neighbors".*
- What are the qualities of these people?  
*Note the frontal directness of the two figures. They know what is right and wrong. They are steadfast, frugal, and hardworking.*
- What clues tell you that these people are not poor?  
*The cameo, the flower pot, the freshly painted barn, the lacy curtains and well-maintained house.*
- Are they affected by the Great Depression? How do they respond to the economic challenges of their day?
- What day of the week is it? How can you tell?  
*Sunday or a special holiday. The characters are dressed in their best clothes (woman's cameo and white collar; farmer's black jacket may indicate that he is the minister of a local Protestant church). Also, the characters seem to be posing for their picture, not something they would do wantonly on an ordinary weekday. They have the stiffness and identifying accessories (pitchfork and clothes) of old tintype portraits.*

## Analysis

- What kinds of lines are repeated in the picture?  
*Vertical lines in the board and batten siding of the house, church steeple, the stiffly standing figures in front, the pitchfork, etc.  
Rounded shapes in the designs on the woman's pinafore and cameo, on the curtains. Photographs of Nan Wood show that she had a plump face. Wood elongated her face and figure. The farmer also has a number of round shapes on him (glasses, buttons).*
- How do the lines reinforce the mood of the picture?  
*The vertical lines stress the sternness, rigidity, steadfastness of the man, his lack of humor too. Here is a highly disciplined farmer whose task is to tame and control undisciplined nature. To him land is to be owned, exploited and protected from intruders. No celebration of the harvest here. Life is all work and no play.  
The rounded shapes, on the other hand, suggest domesticity and feminine softness. They are associated mostly with the woman. Note the loose lock of hair – a touch of frivolity, of untamed nature. Still, there is no warmth in the woman; she has a harsh expression, flat chest and critical look. She is not the nurturing type. Nan Wood had a round face. Wood stretched that face just enough to make her look like a dissatisfied spinster. The plant behind her is not the blooming geranium you might expect in Iowa but a cactus with prickly thorns.*

## Interpretation

- Ideas, feelings, moods (How does the art work make you feel? Happy, sad, excited? How would it sound? Music? How would you dance to the painting?)
- Why is she looking to the side so critically?
- Where is the shape of the pitchfork repeated?  
*In the man's overalls, the wrinkles on faces  
Upside down, in the window, the woman's hairline, the bottom of the pitchfork.  
The shape of the pitchfork appropriately combines the straight vertical lines and rounded shapes which dominate the picture.*
- What do we call shapes that are repeated over and over again?  
*Patterns are one way to keep our eyes searching the picture. In music, repetitions of the same melody; here repetitions of the same them. When we hear a melody for the first time, we hardly notice it; as we become familiar with it, we keep listening for it to come back. It is the same in a painting. The more we look, the more we can see.*
- What is the symbolic importance of the pitchfork?  
*As a farm implement, it serves to identify the farmers.  
As a barrier between the figures and the viewers, it embodies the defensive attitude of the farmers. They want to protect their way of life from all types of novelty and intruders --that means technological and social changes as well as the pernicious transformations in modern art. Their appreciation of art stops at the figurative representation on the cameo. Much of modern art is about scraping the rules and conventions of the past and rejecting the discipline of reason. Much of modern art is also about repudiating the discipline of craftsmanship and hard work. Wood's characters cannot but view it with suspicion. They are dogged survivors of a dying tradition.*
- What is the meaning of the title American Gothic? What does Gothic mean?  
*It refers to the Gothic revival architectural style of the house, with its arched window and steep roof. Gothic Revival style is a term used to describe the early-19th-century movement in architecture and the decorative arts inspired by the Gothic style, which flourished from the 12th to 15th centuries and is characterized by an aesthetic emphasizing verticality and height and features such as the pointed arch and flying buttress. The 19th-century Gothic Revival was felt most strongly in the design of churches, university campuses, and government buildings. The house in Eldon was built in the 1880's.  
By way of a humorous contrast, the title also harks back to the Gothic cathedrals of Europe, with pointed arched windows, high naves and flying buttresses. It also alludes to Gothic paintings, with their realistic, iconographic details and their elongated forms. Here, as in early Renaissance pictures, the elongated forms are a sign of spiritual hankering and every detail of their representation has meaning.  
As to secular extension, Gothic suggests something old-fashioned and grim. Relate to the Gothic novel of Mary Shelly, for example, Frankenstein.*
- American Gothic is a primary example of Regionalism, a movement that aggressively opposed European abstract art, preferring depictions of rural American subjects rendered in a representational style.

## Judgment

- Is Grant Wood making fun of his characters? Are they ridiculous or are they depicted affectionately, as he maintained?  
*Critics have been offended by what they regarded as a disparaging caricature of Middle West farmers. Wood's sitters were his sister, Nan, and his dentist, Dr. McKeeby. Wood claims: "I tried to characterize them honestly, to make them more like themselves that they are in actual life".*
- Is this a parody of the Midwestern culture?  
*The painting has become part of American popular culture, and the couple has been the subject of endless parodies. Some believe that Wood used this painting to satirize the narrow-mindedness and repression that has been said to characterize Midwestern culture, an accusation he denied. The painting may also be read as a glorification of the moral virtue of rural America or even as an ambiguous mixture of praise and satire.*
- Where is a good place to put this picture? Do you like it? Which do you like most? The colors, shapes, or the way it makes you feel?

### **Art Activity: Telling a Story**

- Grant Wood discovered a new painting style in order to better express the images he had in his mind. Each student will choose a well-known story, and then create an illustration in the art style that best expresses the way the student feels about the story.
- Have the children each choose a book, movie song or poem.
- Give each student various materials to illustrate his/her story (e.g. paper, pencils, paint, chalk, pieces of material or pictures for a collage, watercolors etc.)
- Have the children pick an important moment in the story. They could sketch classmates as characters, or create their own figures.

### **Art Activity: Students Draw Gothic Architecture**

- Have students draw a Gothic style house with pencil and paper
- Have students draw simple house outline
- Add ornate wood trim, arched window shapes, door shapes,
- Add porch and trim, window railings, spindle trim, stain-glass, spires on roof etc.
- Place each pencil drawings on large 3'by 4' background after trimming around each house.

### **Art Activity: Students Replace Characters in American Gothic**

- American Gothic has been reproduced and altered many ways because it is so recognizable (like the Mona Lisa). There have been many parodies of this painting.
- Pass out copies of simple outlines of American Gothic (found in the Artist's Folder).
- Have each student create their own portrait of a famous couple using pencils, colored pencils or marker (and finish coloring in the entire picture).
- No matter how you change the portrait, the painting is still recognizable.