

Teacher's Guide: American Gothic House

Goal: The student will understand and appreciate the significance of the American Gothic House, Grant Wood and Regionalism painting.

Objectives:

1. Learn about Grant Wood
2. Understand the style of painting known as regionalism
3. Recognize the significance of the American Gothic House
4. Learn about the painting *American Gothic*

Site Summary

Grant Wood

Grant Wood was born in Anamosa, Iowa, in 1891. For the first ten years of his life, he and his family lived on a small farm. After his father died in 1901, the family moved from their farm to Cedar Rapids, a town so big that, according to Wood's older brother, "its little finger is bigger than Anamosa."

Wood's love for art developed early, as did his artistic ability. He drew everything he saw in nature around him. He drew farm animals, houses, trees, and chickens, his favorite. His art supplies consisted of cardboard from cracker boxes and charred black sticks from the cooking stove. When Wood was in eighth grade, he entered one of his drawings in a nationwide art contest. The picture of oak leaves won a prize of five dollars.

Wood began selling his paintings during high school. He sold them in order to buy art supplies like watercolor paints and India ink. After Wood graduated from high school, he went to Minneapolis to attend a well-known art school, the Handicraft Guild.

At the Handicraft Guild, he studied under a teacher named Ernest Batchelder. Batchelder was his idol. While studying with Batchelder, Wood's style of painting began to take form. He liked to paint carefully, using crisp lines and solid shapes. He didn't like the styles popular at the time such as Impressionism (paintings where the subjects are blurry).

Regionalism

Wood's style of painting became known as Regionalism. This style was popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Regionalism got its name from the artists who painted the natural landscape and the people of the Midwest, especially Iowa. Other Regionalist artists wrote stories and poems set in or about the Midwest. Regionalism is sometimes called the first uniquely American style of art.

Regionalism was unique in its time because it depicted familiar subjects in realistic ways. The other popular styles at that time were abstract, painting familiar subjects, like trees, in strange forms and colors. Up to the 1930s, most famous artists used European subjects (landscapes, buildings) and not American landscapes and buildings.

Wood's art was based on the people, places and events he saw around him as a young boy on his family's farm. His paintings featured family members, friends, and places from his youth. His first three paintings done in the Regionalist style featured his mother (*Woman with Plants*), a nearby town (*Stone City, Iowa*), and his sister and his dentist (*American Gothic*).

Wood's paintings resemble photographs, but something is different. The paintings are detailed and realistic, and have qualities of a young boy's memories. The trees are rounder and puffier than a photograph, the hills more rolling, and the women's skirts more billowy.

American Gothic

Wood's most famous painting is titled *American Gothic*. This painting was created in 1930 and depicts a farmer and his daughter (who is often mistaken for his wife) in front of a small farmhouse. The bullet-shaped window in the background is where the name of the painting came from. The window looks like windows on the large churches in Germany built in the Gothic tradition of architecture.

American Gothic was the first painting by Wood to receive attention outside of Iowa. Up to 1930, his work was well-known within the Cedar Rapids community and had received awards at Iowa State Fair, but few people outside of Iowa knew of his art. This all changed when *American Gothic* was shown at a Chicago art exhibition in 1930. The painting won an award and was purchased by the Art Institute of Chicago, where it is today.

The house used as the backdrop for the painting is located in Eldon, Iowa. The house was found by Wood when he was scouting for things (landscapes, towns, people) to paint. The house today appears the same as it did when he originally sketched it for his painting.

American Gothic has become a well-known image of Americans and Midwesterners, especially Iowans. The picture has been used in many different places: on magnets, ties, t-shirts, and in political cartoons. The image of a couple in front of a house has been used to sell a wide range of products. Many people (and animals) have replaced the original pair: presidents and their wives, Native Americans, Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy, pigs, cats, cows, and movie stars, to name a few. The original pair has been placed in many different settings: under water (when Iowa was flooded), on the beach, at a party with figures from other well-known paintings (*The Mona Lisa*, *Whistler's Mother*, *The Scream*), in a car, and in France.

Vocabulary

Students should become familiar with these vocabulary words before visiting the American Gothic House.

- **Gothic:** A style of architecture common in medieval Germany using pointed arches (the window in *American Gothic* is a good example).
- **Impressionism:** A style of art, primarily painting, where the subjects are blurry around the edges popular in the late nineteenth century.
- **Parody:** A funny imitation (copy) of a picture, song, or story, intended making fun of someone or something.
- **Regionalism:** The style of art depicting familiar scenes in realistic ways made famous by Grant Wood in the 1930s.
- **Subject:** What a painting or picture is of. For example, a farmer and his daughter are the subjects of *American Gothic*.

Pre-Visit Activities

Before your visit, plan some classroom time to try one or more of the following activities.

- A historic site, such as the American Gothic House, is one type of museum that focuses on a specific place, person, or event. What places in your town or county would you make into historic sites? Make a list of these places and the persons, places or events they represent.
- Discuss Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic*. The April 1987 issue of [The Goldfinch, Vol. 8, No. 4](#), has suggestions of questions to ask, themes to explore, and issues to discuss.
- The *American Gothic* image is a very common one. Discuss where students have seen versions and what the image seems to represent.

On-Site Activities

Include these activities in your visit to the American Gothic House.

- Take turns posing in front of the house like the people in the famous painting. Draw pictures of you and your friends as the farmer and his daughter.
- Compare the American Gothic House with other houses you have seen in Iowa. Does this house look like others you've seen? What makes it unique?
- As you pass through the town of Eldon, notice how many stores or streets use the words "American Gothic" or "Grant Wood" in their names or advertising. For example, the street in front of the house is American Gothic Street. Why would people do this? Can you name other examples (beyond those relating to *American Gothic*)?

Post-Visit Activities

Discussion

Ask some of the following questions after visiting the American Gothic House. After each question we give some suggested answers. Have students expand on these answers.

- The people in *American Gothic* have serious expressions on their faces. Some people think this is because they're unhappy, some because they're strong and determined. Why do you think they look so serious? Why is the woman looking in a different direction than the man? (One suggestion is that she was embarrassed to have her "picture" taken.)
- The painting has become a symbol of Iowans, Midwesterners and Americans. Why? Does the painting represent you as an Iowan/Midwesterner/American (consider Iowa and the Midwest as farming regions)?

Detective Work

Here are suggested themes for student research; results might be presented in both written and oral reports.

- Hundreds of parodies have been done involving the painting. Investigate some (Wanda Corn's book, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* is a good place to start). What patterns do you see in the parodies? What features change? Why do these features change?
- Grant Wood painted many paintings depicting his life in Iowa. Look at his paintings (pictured in any book or magazine about him). What do you think he thought about Iowa? Do the paintings look like the Iowa you know?
- Regionalism was not confined to painting. Other regionalist artists wrote poems and stories. Find some examples and read them ([The Goldfinch "Regionalist Art and Literature"](#) is a good place to start). What makes these stories unique? Do you enjoy them more or less because they are about Iowans and Iowa?

Activities

These activities may be used to further explore ideas presented by your visit. You may want to adjust activities to the students' interests and abilities.

- Write a story about the people in the picture. Why are they serious? What is the woman looking at? Why is it a farmer and his daughter? Why are they posing for a portrait?
- Draw your own parody of *American Gothic*, either with yourself in it or someone else (a friend, celebrity, your pets, your sister and dentist). Write a story to go along with your drawing.
- Be a Regionalist artist. Write a poem, a play, or a story about Iowa. Alternatively, draw or paint a picture of life in Iowa – farms, trees, hills, animals, people or events.
- Create your own *American Gothic*.

Resources

These materials will help you learn more about the American Gothic House, Grant Wood, and Regionalism artists.

Books and Articles: 4th-8th Grade

Duggleby, John. *Artist in Overalls: The Life of Grant Wood*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995. (Public Library)

Goldstein, Ernest. *Grant Wood: American Gothic*. Champaign, IL: Garrard Publishing Company, 1984. (Public Library)

Kinney, Jean. *Grant Wood: Farm Boy with an Artist's Eye*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975. (Public Library)

["Regionalist Art and Literature."](#) *The Goldfinch*. Vol. 8, No. 4. (State Historical Society of Iowa, School Library)

Books and Articles: 9th Grade-Adult

Brown, Hazel E. *Grant Wood and Marvin Cone: Artists of an Era*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1972. (Public Library)

Chapman, Mike. *Iowans of Interest*. Waterloo, IA: Enterprise Publishing Company, 1984. (State Historical Society of Iowa, Public Library)

Corn, Wanda M. *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983. (Public Library)

Firestone, Evan R. "Incursions of Modern Art in the Regionalist Heartland." *Palimpsest*. Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 148-160. (State Historical Society of Iowa, Public Library)

Graham, Nan Wood. *My Brother, Grant Wood*. State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993. (State Historical Society of Iowa, Public Library)

Green, Edwin B. "A Grant Wood Sampler." *The Palimpsest*. Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 1-32. (State Historical Society of Iowa, Public Library)

The Iowan. "Treading in Grant Wood's Past." "Grant Wood's Little Sister." "Grant Wood Festival." Vol. 24, pp. 4-23. Fall 1975. (State Historical Society of Iowa, Public Library)

Muyskens, Joan. "[Stone City, Iowa](#)." *Annals of Iowa*. Vol. 39, pp. 261-274. (State Historical Society of Iowa, Public Library)