

WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE



Grant Wood (1891–1942), *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on composition board, 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (78 x 65.3 cm). Art Institute of Chicago; Friends of American Art Collection 1930.934. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY

THE WHITNEY TO PRESENT GRANT WOOD: *AMERICAN GOTHIC* AND OTHER FABLES

American Gothic, Wood's best known painting, to travel to the Whitney

NEW YORK, December 20, 2017 – The upcoming Grant Wood retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art reassesses the career of an under-known artist, giving center stage to his most famous work, *American Gothic*, an indelible emblem of Americana, which will be making a rare voyage from the Art Institute of Chicago for the occasion. Curated by the Whitney's Barbara Haskell with Sarah Humphreville, this exhibition is the most comprehensive Wood retrospective ever mounted, the first in a New York museum since 1983, and only the third survey of his work held outside the Midwest since 1935. It will be on view in the Whitney's fifth-floor Neil Bluhm Family Galleries from March 2 through June 10, 2018.

Grant Wood (1891–1942) achieved instant celebrity following the debut of *American Gothic* at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930. Until then, he had been a relatively unknown painter of French-inspired Impressionist landscapes in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. His relatively short mature career, from 1930 to 1942, spanned a tormented period for the country, as the United States grappled with the aftermath of an economic meltdown and engaged in bitter debates over its core national identity. What emerged as a powerful strain in popular culture during the period was a pronounced reverence for the values of community, hard work, and self-reliance that were seen as fundamental to the national character and embodied most fully in America's small towns and on its farms. Wood's romanticized depictions of a seemingly more innocent and

uncomplicated time elevated him into a popular, almost mythic figure, celebrated for his art and promotion of Regionalism, the representational style associated with the Midwest that dominated American art during the Depression.

As Barbara Haskell has noted, “Today it is clear that the enduring power of Wood’s art owes as much to its mesmerizing psychological ambiguity as to its archetypal Midwestern imagery. An eerie silence and disquiet runs throughout his work, complicating its seemingly bucolic, elegiac appearance. The tension between Wood’s desire to recapture the imagined world of his childhood and his instincts as a shy, sexually closeted Midwesterner seeped into his art, endowing it with an unsettling solitude and chilling sense of make-believe. By subconsciously expressing his conflicted relationship to the homeland he professed to adore, Wood created hypnotic works that address the unresolved tensions of the American experience.”

Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables brings together the full range of Wood’s art, from his Arts and Crafts decorative objects and early oils through his mature paintings, works on paper and commercial projects. Also included is a half-scale model of his 1928 stained glass window and a film projection of his two large-scale PWAP murals at Iowa State University at Ames. The exhibition reveals a complex, sophisticated artist whose image as a farmer-painter was as mythical as the fables he depicted in his art. “This exhibition is an interrogation—not a reification—of stereotypes, values, and reputations,” writes Adam D. Weinberg, the Whitney’s Alice Pratt Brown Director, in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue. Rather than celebrating a nostalgic American past that never was, the exhibition is “a quest to understand how a remarkable artist created mythic images, images that are not as unequivocal or as unambiguous as some might think or, yet, as some might wish...What one discovers, looking deeply into Wood’s paintings, is that, for all their apparent clarity and precision of style, in the best of them what is depicted is not at all straightforward. The images put forth are often conflicting and ambiguous. They reveal a collision of amplified meanings, sublimated feelings, and layered evidence.”

Wood began his career as an Arts and Crafts decorative artist. Even after he shifted to fine arts, he retained the movement’s ideology and pictorial vocabulary. To it, he owed his later use of flat, decorative patterns and sinuous, intertwined organic forms as well as his belief that art was a democratic enterprise that must be accessible to the average person, not just the elite. Wood’s training in the decorative arts began early. He studied at the Handicraft Guild in Minneapolis for two summers after graduating from high school before joining the Kalo Arts and Crafts Community in Park Ridge, a suburb of Chicago. In 1914, he opened the Volund Crafts Shop with a fellow craftsman and began to exhibit his jewelry and metalwork in the Art Institute of Chicago’s prestigious decorative arts exhibitions. Despite this recognition, commercial success eluded him and he closed the shop and returned to Cedar Rapids in 1916 to begin his painting career. The decision did not mean the end of his work in decorative arts, however, as is evident from the 1925 *Corn Cob Chandelier* included in the exhibition and the 1928 stained-glass window he designed for Cedar Rapids’ Veterans Memorial Building, replicated at half-scale in the exhibition. Even after he became a nationally revered painter, he continued designing objects for popular use: textiles, furniture, a glass vase, book and magazine covers, and book illustrations, all of which are represented in the exhibition

Like many Americans, Wood began his career believing in the cultural superiority of Europe. Consequently, he went abroad four times between 1920 and 1928 for a total of twenty-three months, primarily studying the work of the French Impressionists, whose loose brushwork he used in the first two decades of his career to paint what he later called “Europy-looking” subjects. His assimilation of the style served him well; by the early 1920s, he was the city’s leading artist, selling his paintings to its residents and executing commissions in a variety of styles according to the given project’s needs. Three of Wood’s commissioned paintings, along with examples of his Impressionist works, are included in the exhibition.

By the late 1920s, Wood had come to believe that the emergence of a rich American culture depended on American artists breaking free from Europe and expressing the specific character of their own regions. For him, it was Iowa, whose rolling hills he used as the background for his earliest mature portraits. In Europe, he had admired Northern Renaissance painting by artists such as Hans Memling and Albrecht Dürer. His realization that the hard edge precision and meticulous detail in their art could convey a distinctly American quality, especially suggestive of the Midwest, became the foundation of his mature style.

Wood brought to his portraits and landscapes his belief that democratic art necessitated universal and timeless story telling. He achieved this in his portraits by painting types rather than individuals and by including images that suggested something about the life and character of the depicted subject. He left these images intentionally ambiguous, making the stories they suggest so enigmatic that they defy ready explanation; they are puzzles to be deciphered by viewers, based on their individual attitudes and experiences.

Wood believed that people are psychologically formed in the first twelve years of life and that everything they experience later is tied up with those childhood years. He often spoke of the experiences of his early years on his family's farm as "clearer than any I have known since." Not surprisingly, his landscapes do not depict Midwestern farm life in the 1930s, but instead, portray his idealized memories of the 1890s farm he lived on as a young boy before moving to Cedar Rapids with his family, following the death of his father. His desire was not so much to celebrate a world that was becoming extinct as to recapture the idyllic, re-imagined dream world of his own childhood. In his hands, the Midwestern farm became an Arcadian fantasy of undulating, swollen shapes and decorative embellishments whose tumescent abundance was sufficiently polymorphous to be read as both masculine and feminine. Yet Wood unconsciously challenged this evocation of sensuality and fecundity by employing rigid geometries, shellac-like surfaces and sharp, unnatural light that yielded landscapes that appear airless and still, a dollhouse world of estrangement and solitude.

Wood's hard edge style and nostalgic subject matter made him one of America's most revered artists during the 1930s, with a host of painters around the country imitating his art, especially his murals. Seen as paradigmatic images of prosperity and shared purpose, his murals served as models for the scores of murals commissioned by President Roosevelt's New Deal art programs during Depression. With their subdued colors and monumental, frozen figures, Wood's murals evoke the early Renaissance art of Fra Angelico and Giotto that he had admired in Europe. Examples of all of Wood's murals, both realized and unrealized, are included in the exhibition, along with a projected film of his two large-scale PWAP murals at Iowa State University at Ames.

The rise of fascist powers in Europe in the late thirties turned Wood's attention to the fate of democracy. Worried that America might be vulnerable to outside aggression, he was determined to inspire the public to defend the country in case of attack by rekindling national pride through the depiction of American folktales, highlighting their fictional aspect to avoid the chauvinism associated with fascism. The first was Parson Weems's tale of George Washington as a child, confessing to having chopped down his father's cherry tree. The growing crisis in Europe shifted Wood's focus. Faced with Nazi victories over the Allies in the first years of World War II, he accelerated his efforts to awaken the country to what it stood to lose by depicting what he called the "simple, everyday things that make life significant to the average person." He completed only two works in the series—*Spring in the Country* and *Spring in Town*—before his death from pancreatic cancer on February 2, 1942, two hours before he would have turned fifty-one.

Catalogue

The exhibition catalogue, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*, includes a major reconsideration of Wood by Barbara Haskell, an extensive narrative chronology, and essays by Glenn Adamson, senior scholar at the Yale Center for British Art; Eric Banks, a New York-based writer and critic; Emily Braun, Distinguished Professor of 20th Century European and American Art at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York; Richard Meyer, the Robert and Ruth Halperin Professor in Art History at Stanford University; and Shirley Reece-Hughes, Curator of Paintings and Sculpture at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth. Generously illustrated, this volume includes several works published here for the first time, as well as new photography of other paintings. The essays contextualize Wood's work within a much larger art historical framework than has previously been considered and address such topics as the artist's literary influences, the role of his sexuality in his paintings, and the parallels between Wood's work and Surrealism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Precisionism, Art Deco design, and the Arts and Crafts movement. The book is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, and distributed by Yale University Press.

Curatorial Credit

This exhibition is organized by Barbara Haskell, curator, with Sarah Humphreville, senior curatorial assistant, Whitney Museum of American Art.

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About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for more than eighty years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World	Through January 28, 2018
Laura Owens	Through February 4, 2018
Toyin Ojih Odutola: To Wander Determined	Through February 25, 2018
Experiments in Electrostatics: Photocopy Art from the Whitney's Collection, 1966–1986	Through March 2018
Christine Sun Kim: 95 Horatio Street	Opens January 2018
Juan Antonio Olivares: Moléculas	Opens March 2, 2018
Zoe Leonard: Survey	March 2, 2018–June 10, 2018
Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables	March 2, 2018–June 10, 2018
Between the Waters	Opens March 2018
Nick Mauss	Opens March 2018
Mary Corse	Opens June 2018
Pacha, Llacta, Wasichay: Building the Indigenous Present	Opens July 2018
David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night	Summer 2018
Kevin Beasley	Opens Fall 2018
Andy Warhol	Opens November 2018
An Incomplete History of Protest:	Ongoing
Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017	Ongoing
Where We Are: Selections from the Whitney's Collection 1900–1960	Ongoing
Do Ho Suh: 95 Horatio Street	Ongoing

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Museum hours are: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday from 10:30 am to 6 pm; Friday and Saturday from 10:30 am to 10 pm. Closed Tuesday. Adults: \$25. Full-time students and visitors 65 & over: \$18. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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