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## Magic Reality:
## Grant Wood's 1930s Works


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# Magic Reality: Grant Wood's 1930s Works

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## Abstract

Grant Wood is one of the most celebrated artists in the history of American art. His American Gothic, 1934, is a national icon, and is both revered and satirized. As is the case with Regionalist artists, with whom he has frequently been grouped, Wood's reputation has suffered, especially with the rise of Abstract Expressionism. He has been situated as part of a homespun indigenous realism, an exemplar of an anti-avant-garde, anti-European and politically conservative regionalism. This common perception of Wood's work overlooks its clear relationship to the international Magic Realism to which he was exposed in Europe in the 1920s. However the influence of Magic Realism has rarely been discussed or even mentioned in the literature on Wood. An exception is the author Seymour Menton, who, in his Magic Realism Rediscovered (1983), compared Wood with other European and American Magic realists and contrasted his style with Hart Benton and Steuart Curry's. Wood's Magic Realist work did not appear in either MoMA's 1943 seminal exhibition American Realists and Magic Realists, which included artists such as Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth; or in the recent Trip Evans biography, (2010), in which Wood's art is only discussed as Regionalist. My paper focuses on the underemphasized influence of Magic Realism on Wood's work, and its importance in interpreting his significance.

Franz Roh defines Magic Realism as a style that suggests hidden values beneath surface appearances. This is also an essential element of some aspects of American Protestantism, which advocates for each individual to see the divine in the quotidian, and of Transcendental philosophy, one of whose main aims is to reveal the ordinary as extraordinary. The relationships between these two aspects of Wood's life (in his Quaker/Puritan family he was encouraged to focus on everyday "true things," and was also interested in Walt Whitman's writings) and his art have not yet been studied. Indeed, Wood's 1930s subjects reveal the language of Magic Realism as the most effective vehicle through which to express the American spirit.

**Keywords**: Grant Wood, Magic Realism, American Spirit

> *The naked earth in rounded, massive contours, asserts itself through everything upon it.*
> *From glacial time the ground has enforced its sovereignty, thrusting away all that would obscure its surface. When first seen by white men, this Midwest prairie was like no other region known to them – a vast, open sea of soil. ... Rich and illimitable, it awaited the plow. ... the immigrants who came from the East ... had to adapt themselves to the vast openness of the prairie and the ubiquitous light of an unbroken sky. One could see it in their eyes. I saw it in the eyes of my father and mother ... a quality bleak, far-away, timeless – the severe but generous vision of the Midwest pioneer.*[1]

This is how Grant Wood, in the first chapter of his never published autobiography *Return from Bohemia*, described his Iowa native land and his people. He became a widely popular artist thanks to one painting, *American Gothic,* but he called himself "a farmer painter."[2] Indeed in his artistic production, he celebrated the essence of rural America: its land, its cultivated green and golden hills, the fruits of its earth, its farmers and local characters. He is considered one of the main representatives of the Regional Style, along with the other Midwestern regionalists, such as Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry. But, at the same time, as Seymor Menton writes in his 1983 book, *Magic Realism Rediscovered*, even though this categorization can be considered thematically quite correct, stylistically "he is clearly related to magic realism and precisionism."[3] Indeed his smooth and rounded fields, perfectly sleek landscapes, still lifes and portraits are perfect expression of Magic Realist style. His "card-board-stiff forms and dry, laconic style, as shown in *Stone City, Iowa* (1930, Figure 1, Annex), for example, are quite the opposite of Benton's rolling, bulging forms and rhetorical expression (Annex, Figures 2, 3)."[4] In addition, elements such as the vivid, almost enamel-like quality of colors, are characterized at the same time by a "puritan" essentiality, but also by a luminous and bright quality of light.[5] As has been said, it also has a miniature, toy like quality which contributes to characterize his unique style.[6] Yet, even in very recent texts, such as R. Tripp Evans' recent biography, published in 2010, Wood is still analyzed and discussed as "one of America's

[1]Grant Wood, and Park Rinard, *Return from Bohemia; A Painter's Story. Part I.* Thesis (M.A.) - Iowa, 1939, 3-4.
[2]R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: a Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, 4.
[3]Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*, Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1983.
[4]S. Menton, op. cit., 81.
[5]As Robert Hughes emphasizes in *American Visions*, following the 1933 Kansas City Art Institute exhibition organized by Maynard Walker, a journalist turned art dealer, after all, the Regionalist art movement was created overnight by Time magazine, "out of more or less thin air." Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, 439.
[6]S. Menton, op. cit., 82.

most famous regionalist painters."[1] In the entire 380 page book, the author mentions the words "Magic Realism" or "magic realist" two times. Wood's Magic Realism is still underemphasized or ignored. Instead, it deserves to be reasserted, analyzed and further investigated, especially in his 1930s landscapes, still lifes and interiors. To this purpose, the artist's personal, historical, philosophical and cultural background reveals some precious sources of his distinctive, unique and also in some way, quintessentially American realism.

## European Origins of Magic Realism

One of the least recognized 20th century artistic tendency, Magic Realism originated in Europe during the first two decades of the 20th century (Annex, Figures 5-9). It began as a counter movement of Expressionism, Cubism and other avant-gardes. After World War I, "that great festive stillness"[2] flourished both in the European and United States artistic worlds, albeit with differences and peculiarities. In 1925, Franz Roh formulated the term Magic Realism and described its characteristics in the book *Nach- expressionismus: magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei*. A contemporary exhibition was organized by G. F. Hartlaub in Mannheim but unfortunately was named "Neue Sachlichkeit," a term that won out over "magischer Realismus" in Germany. During the 1920s and 1930s Magic Realism suffered a setback in most countries, especially after the Depression in 1929, which saw a rising of socialist realism instead. In Nazi Germany, Magic realists left the country or went into internal exile. Many of their works were burned. At the same time, Surrealism, with a more coordinated program of self-definition and promotion, emerged in 1924 and overshadowed Magic Realism.

The term became known in Latin America through the 1937 translation of Roh's book, as well as through the innovative Italian poet and writer Massimo Bontempelli and his campaign in favor of "realismo magico" in art and literature on his journal *Novecento* (1926-1929). In his writings, Bontempelli invited the modern artist to discover in himself the enchantment only revealed by the unconscious which can lead us to unexpected adventures, without losing the function of control and the mastering of human reason. In his opinion, the artist has been cut off from the problematic and complex reality of mass society, and he has to reveal the "magic meaning hidden in human and object quotidian life,"[3] and transform it into fables and myths.

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[1]R. Tripp Evans, op. cit., Introduction. Furthermore it is worth noticing that also every other important author who wrote on Wood, included Wanda Corn and James M. Dennis did not mention any reference to Magic Realism.

[2]Emily Braun, "Franz Roh: tra post-espressionismo e realismo magico," in Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco. *Realismo Magico, pittura e scultura in Italia 1919-1925*, Milano: Mazzotta, 1988, 57-64.

[3]Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco. *Realismo Magico, pittura e scultura in Italia 1919-1925*, Milano: Mazzotta, 1988, 290.

## Magic Realism Characteristics

In his book Roh describes Magic Realism as a "magic insight into an artistically produced unemphatic clarified piece of 'reality."[1] Moreover, in his 1925 book, he creates a list of Magic Realism characteristics: sober subjects, representational, intellectually absorbing, puristically severe, static, and quiet, thorough, cool to cold, thin paint surface, smooth, harmonic purification of the object, miniature like, centripetal and emphasizing right angles within a framework of parallels. In 1969, Wieland Schmiedt also elaborates a list which, besides some elements common to Roh, includes others such as: sharp focus, artist's vision directed to the everyday, banal, insignificant subjects, static, tightly unified structure which suggest an airless space, and "a new spiritual relationship with the world of things."[2] Besides their differences, all critics identify Magic Realism as a distinct tendency with basic differences from previous, contemporaneous, and subsequent art movements. But they trace its roots from its earliest precursors beginning with Giotto and the 15th century Dutch and Italian art (including especially Crivelli and Bellini). Among its other characteristics, as Menton writes, the juxtaposition of "magic" and "realism" is also clearly "an artistic reflection of the psychological-philosophical ideas of Carl Jung.[3] Indeed, consciously or unconsciously, this tendency has been in tune with Carl Jung's ideas about the modern human being's need to rediscover the elements of magic that little by little had been lost through the centuries. Jung attributed modern human neuroses and Western society's crisis to an overdependence on the rational and the scientific to the detriment of the non-rational and the unconscious. In addition, Schmiedt also emphasizes the importance of the two artists considered the principal forerunners of magic realism, Henri Rousseau and Giorgio de Chirico who conveyed the idea of objects "being painted with amazement by the discoveries of a new world." In regard to the two artists primary importance he writes

> *In order to obtain this new relationship with things, it was necessary, above all, to forget what we knew about them, in the sense of de Chirico's words, to set aside "every idea and every symbol that exists in painting." Then only, if no previous notion were joined to the vision of the artist as the first observer, if nothing were read into the picture, could things in their original character appear new "as on the first day of creation," as Henri Rousseau has put it.*[4]

[1] Roh, Franz. *Nach-expressionismus; magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei*, Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925, 30-31.
[2] Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland 1918-1933*, Hannover: Schmidt-Küster, 1969, 26.
[3] S. Menton, op. cit., 13.
[4] Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland 1918-1933*, Hannover: Schmidt-Küster, 1969, 29.

## American Magic Realism

In the meantime, starting around the 1920s, Magic Realism also developed in America. Among its important precursors were Raphaelle Peale "whose perfection of technique with just a trace of piquant taste and Magic Realism makes his *After the Bath* a unique if minor masterpiece of American Art,"[1] (Annex, Figures 10-12) and William Harnett, whose "uncanny illusionistic technique … even though the subjects are commonplace produces an effect of *trompe-l'oeil* magic realism-," (Annex, Figures 13-15) wrote Lincoln Kirstein.[2] Along with Grant Wood, with distinctive artistic personalities, others considered to be giants of Magic Realism include Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler and Andrew Wyeth.[3] Werner Haftmann considered Hopper a magic realist beginning with his 1923 works.[4] With overly sharp lines, stark contrasts of light and darkness, he indeed achieved unique uncanny effects. Menton writes that his best paintings have a "quiet, haunting intensity' that definitely place them within the magic realist category,"[5] (Annex, Figures 16-19). Expressing his hopes for the artistic future and declaring his own poetics, in 1933, Hopper himself wrote

> *No one can correctly forecast the direction that painting will take in the next few years, but to me at least there seems to be a revulsion against the invention of arbitrary and stylized design. There will be, I think, an attempt to grasp again the surprise and accidents of nature, and the more intimate and sympathetic study of its moods,*

[1]Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), Dorothy Canning Miller, and Alfred H. Barr, *American Realists and Magic Realists*. New York: Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Arno Press, 1969, 9. The exhibition included Peale's *Still Life with Strawberry* (1822) and *After the Bath* (1823).
[2]Museum of Modern Art, Dorothy Canning Miller, and Alfred H. Barr, *American Realists and Magic Realists*, New York: Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Arno Press, 1969, 20.
[3]Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Praeger, 1961, vol. 2.., 321.
[4]Ibid .
[5]S. Menton, op. cit., 72-73. Moreover Menton emphasizes that, even the art historians who focused on Hopper's style as 'romantic realist,' indeed perceive "the magic quality of his paintings." Also, Menton mentions Arnason's remarks on Hopper's kinship with de Chirico, "the most immediate precursor of the European magic realists;" Indeed, "the form and the appearance are, nevertheless, only attributes of a mood as lonely as a De Chirico Italian piazza transformed into an American provincial town." See H. Harvard Arnason, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1968, 429. Menton considers Hopper's *House by the Railroad* (Annex, Figure 16) probably his most deChiriquesque painting. In his opinion, other exemplary magic realist works by the artist are *Early Sunday Morning* (1930, Figure 17, Annex), *Skyline Near Washington Square* (1925, Figure 18, Annex) and *Manhattan Bridge Loop* (1928, Figure 19, Annex). In order to emphasize Hopper's consistency in terms of Magic Realist style, he also mentions the later *Rooms for Tourists* (1945) and *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (1958).

*together with a renewed wonder and humility on the part of such as are still capable of these basic reactions.*[1]

Charles Sheeler's Magic Realism is especially evident in works from 1931 and 1946, and in particular in its ultrasharp outlines of his forms, "the total tranquility and static conditions of an intrinsically dynamic subject, the absence of human figures, the sensation of the subject's reposing in a vacuum, the use of subdued colors, and the total effacement of the painterly process,"[2] (Annex, Figures 20-22). Historians have emphasized his European influences, such as de Chirico, Leger, Ozenfant and the German Magic Realism. But, as Menton writes, "the contrast between the Germans' generally pessimistic view (Grosz, Dix and Radziwill) and Sheeler's perception of the beauty of this environment are obvious reflections of the artists' Weltanschauung as well as of the contrasting condition in the two countries."[3] Finally, Andrew Wyeth's Magic Realism is evident not only in his very famous *Christina's World* but also in interior works such as *Seed Corn* and *GroundHog Day* (Annex, Figures 23-24). They all combine "uncanningly precise details" with a cool palette which David McCord likens to the poetry of Robert Frost.[4]

In the United States Magic Realism has also maintained a definite continuity, lacking in Germany because of the Hitler years of 1933-45. But the style was not labeled "Magic Realism" until the 1943 exhibition *Americas Realists and Magic Realists* at the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition included Peale, Harnett and Kensett, in the 19th century section; Hopper, Sheeler and Wyeth, among others in the 20th century section. Yet this exhibition did not include Grant Wood in this artists' selection. The director Dorothy Miller did not recognize a fusion of "inner quality and outer reality" in his work. She considered his works as "decoratively mannered."

Lincoln Kirstein, co-curator of the exhibition, emphasized the art exhibited as anti-Expressionist, and wrote that the artists included in the show – "… do not exaggerate or distort their subjects but rather present identical painted equivalents transformed though selective imagination." Their technique is characterized

*By a combination of crisp hard edges, tightly indicated forms and the counterfeiting of material surfaces such as paper, grain of wood,*

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[1]Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), Dorothy Canning Miller, and Alfred H. Barr. *American Realists and Magic Realists*. [New York]: Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Arno Press, 1969, 22.

[2]S. Menton, op. cit., 75. It is also noteworthy William Carlos Williams who, in the 1939 Museum of Modern art book, wrote, "I think Sheeler is particularly valuable because of the bewildering directness of his vision, without blur, through the fantastic overlay with which our livers so vastly are concerned." Art historians have mentioned de Chirico's important influence on Sheeler, especially in the case of the painting *Hallway* (1919), as well as Amedee Ozenfant's and Fernand Leger's. See Martin L. Friedman, *Charles Sheeler*, New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1975, 89.

[3]S. Menton, op. cit., 78.

[4]David McCord, *Introduction to Andrew Wyeth*, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1970, 15, 19.

*fish or leaf, our eyes are deceived into believing in the reality of what is rendered, whether factual or imaginary. Magic realism is an application of this technique to the fantastic subject. Magic realists try to convince us that extraordinary things are possible simply by painting them ... . ...*"

In this context no artistic example could be a better representative than Grant Wood's work.

## Grant Wood (1891- 1942). Beginnings

Grant Wood (Annex, Figure 25) was born in 1891 and grew up in rural America, on a farm near Anamosa, Iowa, a town of 2,000 people. His father was an industrious local farmer of Quaker origin. As a child, he had a typical farmer family life. The daily routine was viewed as in tune with the cycle of the sun and the changing seasons; he lived surrounded by animals of different sorts, memorized the names of different kinds of birds, avidly learned the species of vegetables and wildflowers, loved farm pets and cherished some of them as his favorites. But at age ten, his father suddenly died and his mother had to sell the farm and move with her children to Cedar Rapids where her parents lived in retirement. It was the end of Grant's childhood as he also had to take small part time jobs at that young age to help the family. As an adult, some twenty years later, when he would devote himself to painting, he would come back to these strongly felt and passionately cherished roots. Moreover, even though as an adult, he was not a conventionally religious person, his Quaker origins undoubtedly had their importance in his life and inspired him a special reverence toward the farmer's work and his relationship with the land.[1] He once said, "the rhythms of the low hills, the patterns of crops upon them, the mystery of the season, and above all, a feeling for the integrity of the ground itself- these are my deep-rooted heritage."[2] Wood was proud of his roots. In his opinion, it was the predominance of farm culture that had made the Midwest unique.

## Arts and Crafts

Since high school Wood highly valued manual work. He was interested in the Arts and Crafts. When he became a teacher, even in his teaching in the 1920s, he also emphasized handicrafts and natural materials and kept working as a successful decorator throughout the decade in Cedar Rapids. He took courses in jewelry making, copper working and decorative design. He studied with Ernest Batchelder, well known architect and designer in the Arts and

[1]Wanda Corn, and Grant Wood. *Grant Wood, the Regionalist Vision*, New Haven: Published for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts by Yale University Press, 1983, 90.
[2]W. Corn, op. cit. 35.

Crafts style. Indeed his work reflected Batchelder's insistence on simplicity, repetition of form, beauty of contour, and use of pattern. These principles, hardened and stylized, became the basis of Wood's style. He called his style, "decorative," a testimony to his fin-de siècle aesthetic grounding. In his job as home decorator, he definitely was not a modernist. He did not embrace Louis Sullivan or F. L. Wright's design; he was a historicist, drawn to revival. He also earned his living as a maker of miniature model houses,[1] which along with his decorative job is another aspect which might have contributed to forge his unique style. His decorating career indeed thrived during the 1920s, (Annex, Figure 27). But his painting did not.

## Europe

At a certain point he decided he wanted to explore the artistic climate in Europe and planned a sojourn in Paris, around 1920 during what he called his "bohemian years." Between 1920 and 1928 indeed he made four trips to Europe. During his second trip, from 1923 to 1924, he studied at the Académie Julian in Paris, and also traveled to Italy (Annex, Figure 27), visited Tuscany and spent some time in Sorrento, in the Amalfi Coast. During this time, he studied many styles of painting, experimented with different techniques and produced an eclectic corpus of work. He was influenced by Puvis de Chauvannes and painted in a sort of NeoImpressionist style adopting a Seurat-kind-of technique (Annex, Figure 28).

In 1928 he made a trip to Munich were he saw and studied the work of the Northern Renaissance masters, which turned to be a very important influence on his art. Indeed he always credited the Flemish and German old masters and Hans Memling in particular for having inspired his new style, particularly their meticulous technique, sharp image focus and "detailed information about things far past of the ordinary limits of scrutiny,"[2] (Annex, Figures 29-30). In regard to old masters such as van Eyck, in *Art d'Occident* (1938) Henri Focillon described their ultrasharp realism and magic quality with words that could also perfectly describe Magic Realism technique: "In a certain sense every aspect of reality has a mystic quality for Van Eyck; he find himself face to face with an object as if he were discovering it for the first time. He studies it with visionary patience as if he wished to extract from it the solution to an enigma, to 'put a spell' upon it and to instill in to his imagery a new and silent life for it."[3] Wood liked the crystalline realism, bright palette and careful subdual of surface texture of the Flemish artist and resolved to attempt a "neo-Flemish painting." He was said to be especially "impressed by the lovely apparel and accessories of the Gothic period" and by the fact that the paintings

[1]S. Menton, op. cit., 82.
[2]Robert Hughes, *The Complete Paintings of the Van Eycks*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970, 6.
[3]R. Hughes, op. cit. , 12.

often showed local people in contemporary dress.[1] He treated his discovery of these works as a pivotal moment in his life, as it had been a sort of religious conversion. In Germany, he was sort of bewitched by the Flemish painters, and inspired by them, he reinvented their technique and used it with his local subjects. In regard to 15th century German and Flemish artists, Darrell Garwood wrote

> *[They] were the kind of thing Grant liked to do. They were not created by men who slashee on paint during bursts of emotion. They were made by deliberate careful men who worked long with small brushes, men who had feeling for small details as well as for over-all effect. The glazing technique of Renaissance painters attracted him. He stood long in the Old Pinakothek watching a copyist who was using this method.*[2]

Also in Munich in 1928 he might have seen Carl Grossberg's landscape and architecture scenes, characterized by a colorful miniature quality (Annex, Figures 31-33); and it could not be a coincidence that some of his most important paintings were produced right after this trip. James Dennis has also emphasized in a particular way the relationship between Wood and the German magic realists, and especially his figures "precisely contoured against a background parallel in plane," which evoke an affinity with the Munich Neue Sachlekeit.[3] On the other hand, compared with the German Neue Sachlichkeit artists, Wood's work has nothing of the sharp angled portraits and urban scenes.

Speaking of American Magic Realism, it is worth noting that Dennis Crockett in *German post-expressionism* explains that Neue Sachlichkeit has to be related with the original meaning in German. *Sachlichkeit* should be understood by its root, *Sach*, meaning "thing", "fact", "subject", or "object." *Sachlich* could be best understood as "factual", "matter-of-fact", "impartial", "practical", or "precise." *Sachlichkeit* is the noun form of the adjective/adverb and usually implies "matter-of-factness." But, as Crockett writes, rather than some goal of philosophical objectivity, it was meant to imply a turn towards practical engagement with the world—an all-business attitude, understood by Germans as intrinsically American: "The *Neue Sachlichkeit* is Americanism, cult of the objective, the hard fact, the predilection for functional work, professional conscientiousness, and usefulness."[4]

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[1]Irma René Koen, "The Art of Grant Wood," Christian Science Monitor, March 26, 1932.
[2]Darrell Garwood, *Artists in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood*, New York: MCGraw-Hill, 1944, 165.
[3]James Dennis, M. *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*, New York: Viking Press, 1975, 68.
[4]Dennis Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: the art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924,"* University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.

## 1930: A Career Turning Point

Going back to Wood, his Quaker father always told him to paint "truthful" imagery, on historical facts," and that "Quakers can only read true things."[1] In 1930, the year that represents his artistic turning point and a great success, he indeed focused on historic and contemporary Midwestern subjects. He had gradually developed an appreciation for themes, such as cornfields, historic Iowa and the pioneer life. He drew his inspirations from pieces of Americana, Currier and Ives prints,[2] frontier photographs, old family photos, nineteenth century architecture and nineteenth American folk paintings, - and the painter Edward Hicks among them –, (Annex, Figure 34) but also century folk paintings of rural landscapes. This was his "return from Bohemia," as he called his biography. As Wanda Corn suggests, "the Flemish convinced him to paint the local scene, [and] the Americans to try to create an indigenous painting style."[3] He abandoned the Impressionist technique and worked with a craftmanlike detail. He invented a new hard-edged realist style. In a few years he became one of the most acclaimed painters of the "American Scene." He said "he had really found himself" to his friend and supporter Ed Rowan in the early 1930s.[4] He had a very supportive community and the help of business patrons; and with the help of his supporters, had become convinced that art could thrive also in the Midwest. He eventually overcame his inferiority complex about being in the Midwest and working with regional themes.

In 1930 the first work he made in a sort of neo-Flemish painting style was *Woman with Plants* (Annex, Figure 35). He hardened the outlines, gave a descriptive detail to her face and made her costume into simple decorative patterns, all lessons he learned from the Flemish painters. She looked, as a commentator put it, "like Mona Lisa on a Iowa landscape."[5] The painting was a great success. It was accepted for the annual exhibition of American painting and sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago.

## Landscapes

During this important time, the most successful and fertile of his career, he produces significant works. Among these, were the landscapes. Defined as "the most sensuous and passionate works he painted,"[6] this curvy and flexuous

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[1]R. Tripp Evans, op. cit., 146.
[2]Currier and Ives prints was a successful American printmaking firm headed by Nathaniel Currier (1813–1888) and James Merritt Ives (1824–1895). Based in New York City from 1834–1907, the prolific firm produced prints from paintings by fine artists as black and white lithographs that were hand colored. Lithographic prints could be reproduced quickly and purchased inexpensively; the firm called itself "the Grand Central Depot for Cheap and Popular Prints" and advertised its lithographs as "colored engravings for the people."
[3]W. Corn, op. cit., 33.
[4]W. Corn, op. cit., 32.
[5]W. Corn, op. cit., 31.
[6]W. Corn, op. cit., 90.

landscapes are some of the most interesting works of his oeuvre. There is a Romantic reference to Ruskin and to the Art Deco time, on the backdrop of the longtime American Landscape tradition. In particular, *Stone City* (1930) (Annex, Figure 1), image of the location where Wood was presently to set up an artist's commune, represents the threshold of creating his new style. Indeed here Wood rejected the impressionist kind of brushwork and realized that his preference in terms of artistic vocabulary and technique was for the extreme detailed. Recalling Wieland and Menton's writings, *Stone City* embodies some of the most important magic realist characteristics: ultrasharp focus in which all objects in the picture have an equal level of focus; an apparent objectivity that eliminates the presence of the artist but endows the commonplace objects with their own magic realism; a centripetal force which "moves the view's eyes all over the canvas before they are allowed to reassemble all the details and grasp the totality of the picture;"[1] and a miniature-like quality that reminds one of "Monopoly game or a scaled model."[2]

He was extremely excited about his new personal style, and a stream of "memorable canvases came off the easel,"[3] between 1930 and 1932. Characterized by a similar elements, a series of works followed *Stone City*, such as *Young Corn* (1931, Figure 36, Annex), *Fall Plowing* (1931, Figure 37, Annex), *Spring Plowing* (1932, Figure 38, Annex), *Near Sundown* (1933, Figure 39, Annex*)*, *Spring Plowing* (1936, Figure 40, Annex), *The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover* (1931, Figure 41, Annex). But also the historically inspired landscapes such as *Midnight of Paul Revere* (1931, Figure 42, Annex) and *Parson Weems' Fable* (1939, Figure 43, Annex). He recalled his father's insistence on "truthful" stories and his interest in history. Yet the origins of *Midnight of Paul Revere* painting is Wood's mother telling him Paul Revere's story when he was a child, a reference, like for most of American children, to Longfellow famous poem, which he painted thirty years wrapped in longtime memories and his childhood fantasy. Wood's intention was "to save bits of American folklore that are too good to lose."[4] Indeed he wanted to instill new magic and charm into old fables, and, like many Americans at the time, he was involved in this revival of taste for colonial times Americana and colonial-federal period history in general. Also *Parson Weems' Fable* represents a piece of American past and traditional tales. Stylistically it evokes the classic Italian Quattrocento composite scene in which Parson Weems is unveiling a scene representing the young Washington. It is rendered with typical Wood's circular motifs, both in Weems' coat buttons, innumerable cherries and pebbles in the foreground, stylized tress on the slope in the background. As Menton emphasizes, it is also a perfect expression of "coldness," one of the most

[1]S. Menton, op. cit., 22.
[2]S. Menton, op. cit., 82.
[3]W. Corn, op. cit., 35.
[4]"Artist Denies Intent to Debunk Legend," New York Times, Jan. 3, 1940. Reported also by Corn, op. cit., 86.

salient features of Magic Realism. Indeed it creates a magic aura around the objects and story represented but is purposely cold.[1]

Moreover, in his still lifes lithographs, Wood represents fruits, vegetables and flowers, products of the land that surrounds him, produced by local farmers and proprietors (Annex, Figure 44). Here also Wood uses an elaborate, close-at-hand detailing and achieves a sense of compressed space.[2] In the interiors, such as *Dinner for Threshers* (1934, Figure 45, Annex), *Daughters of the Revolution* (1932, Figure 46, Annex), *Sentimental Ballad* (1940, Figure 47, Annex), he portraits his neighbors, acquaintances, friends, perfect representative of the American Scene. Their style evolve from a doll-like figures and a soft light general effect to an airless, almost hyper realist style of *Sentimental Ballad* which is characterized by a stark contrast of light and dark, very evocative of an ironic vision of a late night pub atmosphere.

## On the Americaness of Wood's Artistic Vocabulary. Wood's Historical Context of the 1930s

It has been written that *Daughters of American Revolution* has Otto Dix's influence[3] but even here the German lesson has been interpreted by Wood in a very original and autonomous way, with an American artistic vocabulary. His "Americaness," is indeed composed with unique artistic language and technique characterized by vivid and bright colors, dazzling lights, along with a festive and humorous glorification of rural life, a particular celebration of nature and everyday life which is worthy contextualizing in a wider American cultural context. As Robert Hughes writes in *American Visions,*[4] historically, Wood was carried along on a cultural tide that was then celebrating mid western regionalism, an inward looking resistance to Europe's dominance in the arts at that time, a celebration of America's fecundity and a certain social anxiety about the disappearance of stability that was borne out of the Depression. During this time indeed, a large middle class found reassurance in artworks with a realistic subject which portrayed country landscapes and farm lands represented with a certain lyricism and evocative of a sturdy American optimism for a better future. In this regard, Samuel Koots compares Wood's rural scenes with Sheeler's industrial views, as both expressions of "the whole colossal evidence of self sufficiency."[5] During a few interviews, Wood also

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[1]Also Menton writes, it is a "delightful example of Brecht's theory applied to painting." In theatre, indeed, Bertold Brecht's influential theory focused on striving to prevent his audiences and readers from having an emotional response, rather than an intellectual one with his characters. S. Menton, op. cit., 22.

[2]See J. Dennis, op. cit., 92-93.

[3]Brady M. Roberts. *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed*, Davenport, Iowa: Davenport Museum of Art, 1995, 27.

[4]Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

[5]Samuel Melvine Kootz, *New Frontiers in American Painting*, New York: Hastings House, 1943, 10-14.

emphasized the importance of evaluating American history and folklore, as he did in his most recent works especially. In one of these occasion he said, "In our present unsettled times, when democracy is threatened on all sides, the preservation of our folklore is more important than is generally realized; and he also cited an article by the scholar Howard Mumford Jones titled "Patriotism- But How?" which maintained that America needed to promote patriotism through its "national mythology."[1]

## Protestant Religion in America

Characterized by growing up as the son of a deeply religious Quaker father and a Puritan mother, even though he was not particularly religious as an adult, Wood's life must certainly be permeated by Protestant religion. At least it must have provided an important background and could have possibly influenced his views and artistic choices.[2] In the 1943 MoMA exhibition catalogue, Kirstein mentions that this art exhibited in the show exemplifies one of great differences between northern and southern origins of Magic realism, making reference to contrasting Weltanschaung between the Protestant and Catholic worlds. In regard to the taste for representing the everyday world and its objects in a "magical" kind of way, he writes

> *In fact there is something peculiarly northern or at least Protestant about this attitude. There is emotion, but the feeling runs narrow and deep rather than violent or accidental. All looseness is wasteful. Impulsiveness cannot be afforded… It is puritanical artifice wherein a termite gusto for detail is substituted for exuberance …. the authors of the pictures in this exhibition are not sympathetic to transitory atmospheric effects and hence may be thought of as anti-impressionist. They do not care for impressions but for the completely achieved visual fact. They submit to a rigid discipline of almost anonymous manual dexterity, always controlled and never spontaneous…* … The chill of exact delineation is not necessarily harsh. *There is often a tenderness of the surgeon's capable hand, an icy affection acquired from a complete knowledge of the subject.*[3]

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[1]Howard Mumford Jones, "Patriotism –But How?" The Atlantic Monthly 162, (November 1938), 585-592. See also Gail Levin, and Judith Tick., *Aaron Copland's America: A Cultural Perspective*, New York: Watson-Guptill, 2000, 100.

[2]Speaking of Protestant character and peculiarities, also in regard to his peer artists Hopper and Sheeler, as outstanding representatives of American Magic Realism, Menton emphasizes their peculiar being "strongly rooted in the American tradition, with Protestant and even Puritan overtones." S. Menton, op. cit., 73.

[3]L. Kirstein, Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), Dorothy Canning Miller, and Alfred H. Barr, *American Realists and Magic Realists*. New York: Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Arno Press, 1943, 7.

Indeed, perhaps one of the deepest, most important facts about America is this Protestant background, and what it became, or gave rise to, in this country. The central idea in Protestantism -in America at least - is that every person has, or can have, a direct, unmediated relation to the Divine – there is no need for any institution, any so called "authority" "between" a person and his God. Indeed the idea that there even could be any intermediary – priests, bishops, cardinals,–is a sort of an anathema to the Protestant spirit. This idea fuses so perfectly with other American ideas (or dreams) that begin to take hold and define America since its settlement – that everyone can find a way of making a living suitable to that person, that civic authority should be minimal, and where necessary, local… the idea is always the ordinary individual is nevertheless very, very close to God – as close as anyone or anything ever can be. The ordinary individual is autonomous, self governing, self reliant. The religious, here and here alone is very closely tied to a fierce anti-authoritarianism individualism. The religious is not, as it with Europe, tied to authority or to the dominant intellectual culture of a nation. This is also connected to the Protestant (Lutheran) interpretation of the Bible which advocate for each individual to find his own interpretation and discover the religious and the spiritual in every aspect of everyday life, and see the divine in the quotidian, which can be considered extraordinary.[1] The ordinary is indeed extra-ordinary, i.e., "magical."

## Emerson and the Transcendentalists

Moreover, Grant Wood's interest in the everyday and his Magic Realist style also has important roots in the philosophical terrain of this country; in particular the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, considered "the founding thinkers of American culture."[2] Many scholars indeed identify them as the first writers (with others, such as Walt Whitman) to develop a literary style and vision that is uniquely American, rather than following in the British cultural heritage. Emerson indeed repeatedly and variously described as one of the aims of his lecturing and writing to show the ordinary to be extraordinary. Both he and Thoreau had close attention to everything that is common, familiar, near, low.[3] Emerson wrote: "Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds."[4] His radical religious views at the time also brought him to believe that all things are connected to God and, therefore, all things are divine. His views, the basis of Trascendentalism, suggest that God does not have to reveal the truth but could be intuitively experienced directly from nature. Indeed, in *Nature* he states a

[1]See Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, 3 vols., (St. Louis: CPH, 1959), 88, no. 269; M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures*, Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1944), 23.
[2]S. Cavell, op. cit., 13.
[3]S. Cavell, op. cit., 4.
[4]See Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, *Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 171.

belief system that espouses a non-traditional appreciation of nature. Trascendentalism indeed suggests that divinity diffuses all nature, and speaks to the notion that we can only understand reality through studying nature.

## Popular Art. Influences

Moreover, it is also worthy to contextualize the unique American artistic vocabulary that Wood adopted in the moment of his creative prime, in the 1930s, within the larger cultural background of his age, including the popular arts. Wood himself expressed his eclectic talent also drawing a few book jackets, a series of illustrations for a deluxe edition of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, working as a set designer of two landscapes in the *Wizard of Oz* (1939), and even of a scene of a movie version of Eugene O'Neill *The Long Voyage Home* (1940). Like every twentieth century person, and, especially as an American, he was constantly immersed in "popular culture" production which includes comic strips, cartoon and advertising. Some remarkable examples could be, at least partially, responsible of the "toy like quality" mentioned by Michael Batterberry in his *Twentieth Century American Art*, in regard to Wood.[1] Indeed some of them have certain aspect of visual vocabulary in common with the artist and they might have inspired or influenced him. Comic strips were extremely popular in the United States during the first decades of the 1900s, both in newspapers and magazines.[2] They were published in black and white in the weekday edition but the colored Sunday edition was awaited by readers with even higher expectations. Among the most popular, Zenas Winsor McCay, Lyonel Feininger and Frank King's are some of the most remarkable. McCay's most relevant comic strips *Little Nemo* (1905–14; 1924–26; Figures 48-49, Annex) and *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, appeared in the *New York Herald* newspaper between 1905 and 1909 and in William Randolph Hearst's *New York American* newspaper from 1911 to 1914. They both told stories of bizarre dreams, in the first case of a little boy during his regular sleep, in the second one of an adult usually after eating a Welsh rarebit (a cheese-on-toast dish) and waking up regretting having eaten it. They remarkably expressed the surrealist/magic realist vein which flowed through the world of comic strips of this time and are characterized by an inventive rendering of the landscape, a use of dazzling vivid colors, and anthropomorphic natural elements, such as a giant rounded moon. Also painter and illustrator Feininger's well-know strips such as *The Kin-der-Kids* and *Wee Willie Winkie's World* (Annex, Figures 50-51), published by the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* in 1906-07, show a colorful landscapes juxtaposed to anthropomorphic clouds, trees and houses on a cultivated land by different colors which resembles a series of American quilts. Finally, Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* (Annex, Figures 52-53), first published November 24, 1918, is

[1]Michael Batterberry, *Twentieth Century Art*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969, 165.
[2]See Ian, Gordon. *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998.

also characterized by innumerable multicolored circles that create both rainbow skies and smoothed hills which we can easily see as possible sources of inspiration for the sensuous and brightly colored landscapes of Wood's *Stone City* and *Young Corn.*

## Conclusions

Grant Wood is a celebrated American artists and his painting *American Gothic* is more than a classic, one of the most famous works of the art history of the country. With the success of this painting in 1934, *Time* magazine singled out Wood as "the chief philosopher and greatest teacher of representational U.S. art."[1] He captured the true spirit of his country and was acclaimed both by viewers and critics who they perceived his art as "quaint, humorous, and American."[2] Indeed he had travelled to Europe, had studied the art of the 14th and 15th centuries, and he learned the technique of the first masters of Modern art. Yet "he found himself"[3] depicting his American Iowa.

He represented the most American subjects he knew, the land around his hometown in Cedar Rapids and the nature around himself, as he evoked the crispy windy air and warm light of his countryside. Also, with his eclectic background and diverse artistic interests, he developed his extremely original technique and style. In his major works and especially the landscapes of the 1930s he elaborated his Magic Realist artistic language which perfectly rendered his quintessentially American subjects. But even the most recent art historical literature has overlooked Wood's Magic Realism and its peculiarities. Instead it deserves to be captured with all its peculiarities, singled out and emphasized. Indeed, Wood's choices in terms of subject matter and technique are also deeply and significantly rooted in his particular personal environment and the particular and unique American religious philosophical, and cultural background: in a special interest on the everyday aspects of life, a Protestant evaluation of the inner divinity of the practical world that surrounds us, Trascendentalist philosophy and a world that soon produced a rich, colorful and extremely diversified popular art production which dominated everybody's life. The exploration of these relationships opens new exciting avenues of research and represents the potential to better unveil and identify the "magic" secrets behind Grant Wood's unique artistic style.

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[1]"U.S. Scene," Time, 24, Dec. 24, 1934, 24-27.
[2]W. Corn, op. cit., 131.
[3]W. Corn, op. cit. 133.

## Annex

**Figure 1.** *Grant Wood, Stone City, Iowa 1930*

**Figure 2.** *Thomas Hart Benton, July Hay, 1930*

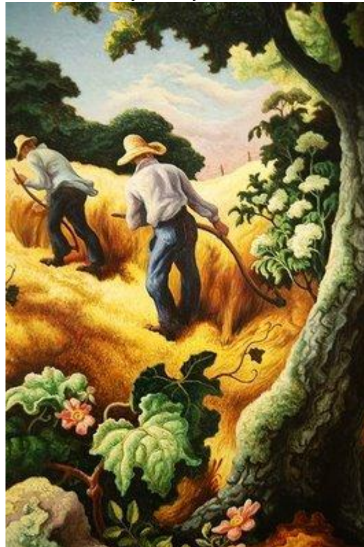


**Figure 3.** *Thomas Hart Benton, Going Home, 1934*

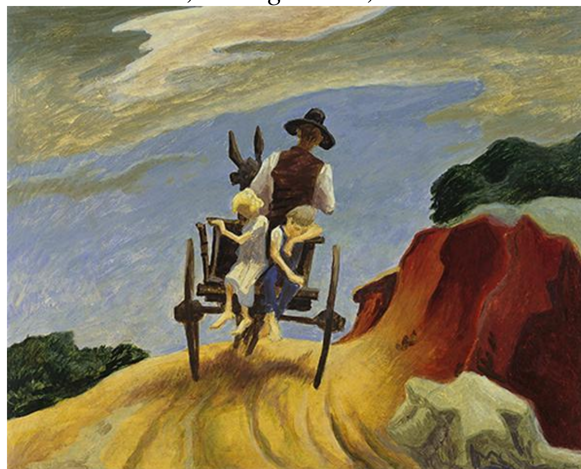


**Figure 4.** *John Steuart Curry, Ajax, 1936*

**Figure 5.** *Rudolf Schlichter, Damenknelpe Ladies Dive, 1923*

**Figure 6.** *Hans Mertens. Hinterhof (Backyard), 1925*

**Figure 7.** *Carlo Carrà, L'attesa, 1926*

**Figure 8.** *Edita Broglio, Le scarpe, 1920 ca*.

**Figure 9.** *Amerigo Bartoli, Gli amici al Caffè, 1930*

**Figure 10.** *Raphaelle Peale Still Life with Cake, 1818*

**Figure 11.** *Raphaelle Peale Strawberries, Nuts, & c.1822*

**Figure 12.** *Raphaelle Peale, After the Bath, 1823*

**Figure 13.** *William Michael Harnett, Still Life-Violin and Music, 1888*

**Figure 14.** *William Michael Harnett, Munich Still Life, 1882*

**Figure 15.** *William Michael Harnett, Still Life with Pipe, 1877.*

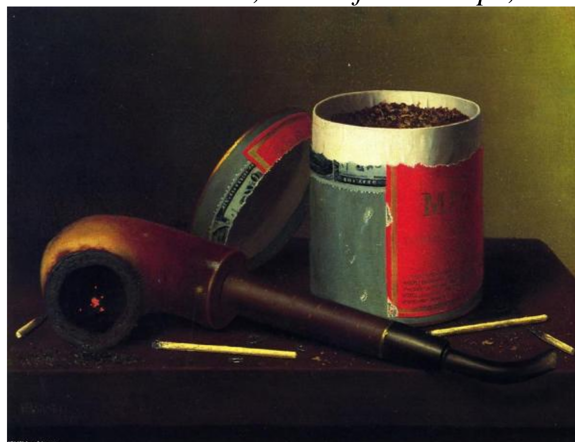


**Figure 16.** *Edward Hopper, House by the Railroad, 1925*

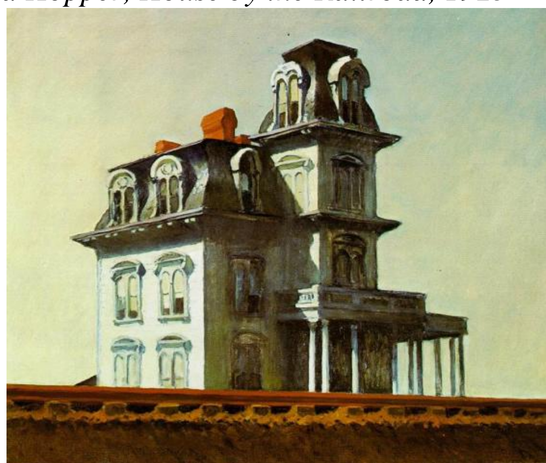


**Figure 17.** *Edward Hopper, Early Sunday Morning, 1930*

**Figure 18.** *Edward Hopper, Skyline Near Washington Square, 1925*

**Figure 19.** *Edward Hopper, Manhattan Bridge Loop, 1928*

**Figure 20.** *Charles Sheeler, Church Street El, 1922*

**Figure 21.** *Charles Sheeler, Self Portrait, 1923*

**Figure 22.** *Charles Sheeler, The Open Door, 1932*

**Figure 23.** *Andrew Wyeth, Seed Corn, 1948*

**Figure 24.** *Andrew Wyeth, Slight Breeze, 1968*

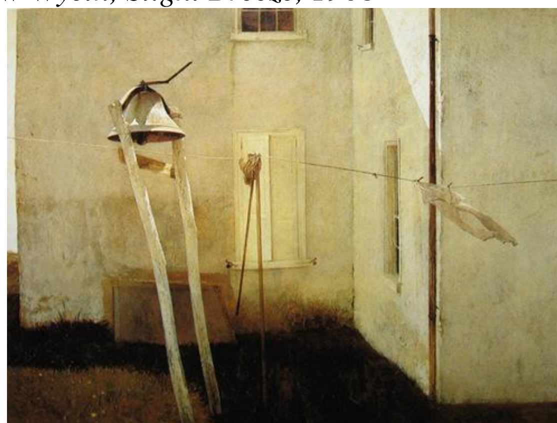


**Figure 25.** *Grant Wood, Self Portrait, 1941*

**Figure 26.** *Designed by Grant Wood, Corn Cob Chandelier for Iowa Corn Room, 1925-26*

**Figure 27.** *Grant Wood, Italian Farmyard, 1924*

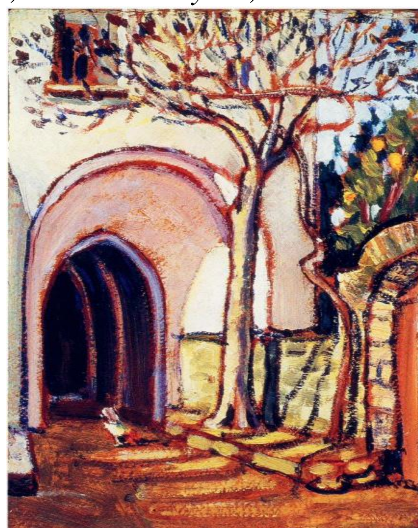


**Figure 28.** *Grant Wood, Vegetable Farm, 1924*

**Figure 29.** *Hans Memling , Diptych of Maria and S. George with a Donor, 1433-94 ca*

**Figure 30.** *Hans Memling, The Seven Joys of the Virgin, 1480*

**Figure 31.** *Carl Grossberg, Iphofen, 1925*

**Figure 32.** *Carl Grossberg, Dinkelsbuehl - Rothenburger Tor, 1938*

**Figure 33.** *Carl Grossberg, Creglingen, 1926*

**Figure 34.** *Edward Hicks, Noha's Ark, 1846*

**Figure 35.** *Grant Wood, Woman with Plant, 1930*

**Figure 36.** *Grant Wood, Young Corn, 1931*

**Figure 37.** *Grant Wood, Fall Plowing, 1931*

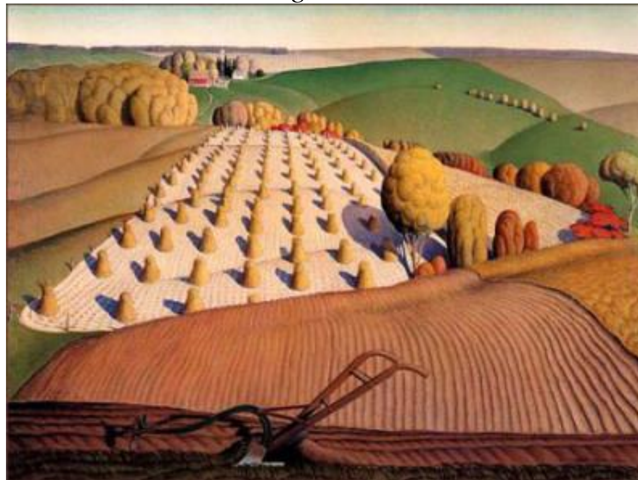


**Figure 38.** *Grant Wood, Spring Plowing, 1932*

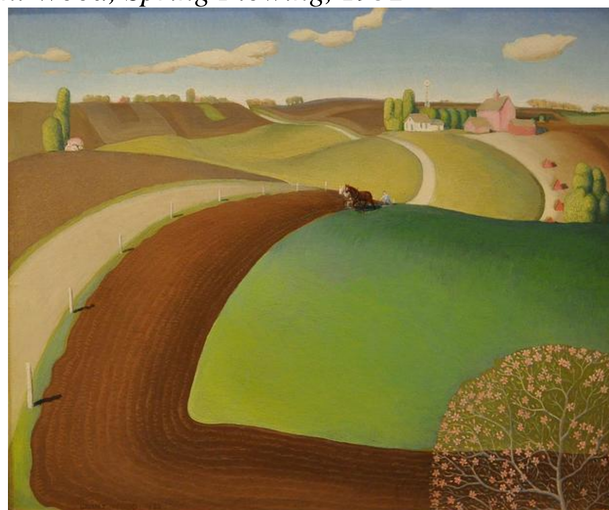


**Figure 39.** *Grant Wood, Near Sundown, 1933*

**Figure 40.** *Grant Wood, Spring Plowing, 1936*

**Figure 41.** *Grant Wood, The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover, 1931*

**Figure 42.** *Grant Wood, The Ride of Paul Revere, 1931*

**Figure 43.** *Grant Wood, Parson Weem's Fable, 1939*

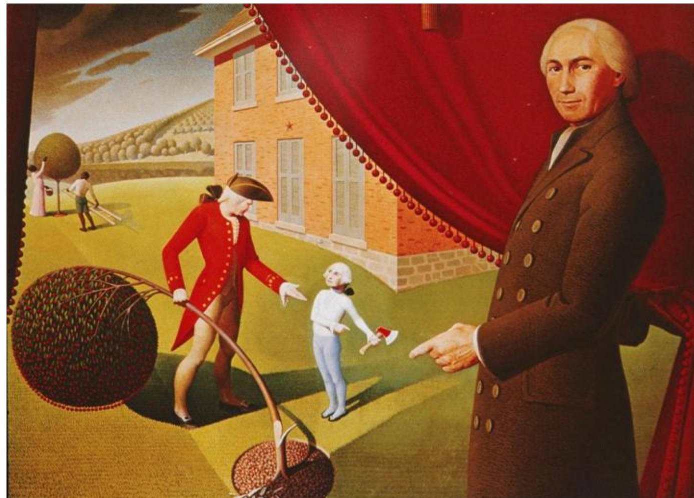


**Figure 44.** *Grant Wood, Fruits, Tame Flowers, Vegetables, Wild Flowers, 1938, Hand colored lithograph*.

**Figure 45.** *Grant Wood, Dinner for Threshers, 1934*

**Figure 46.** *Grant Wood, Daughters of the Revolution, 1932*

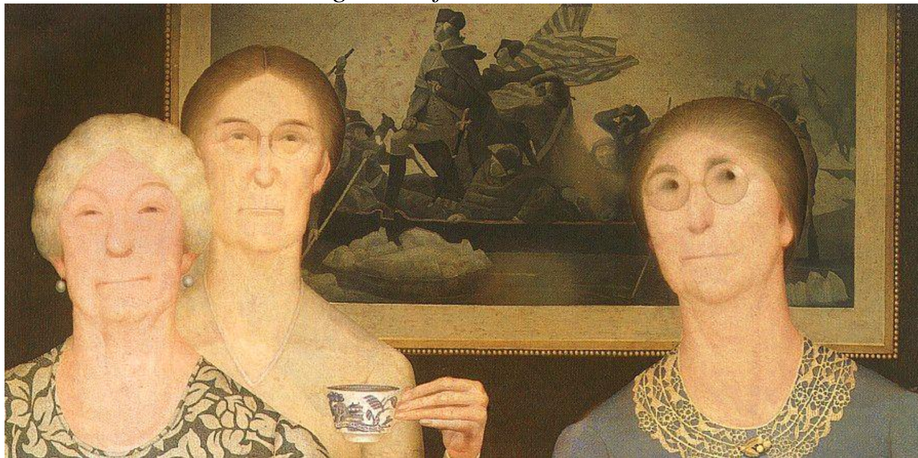
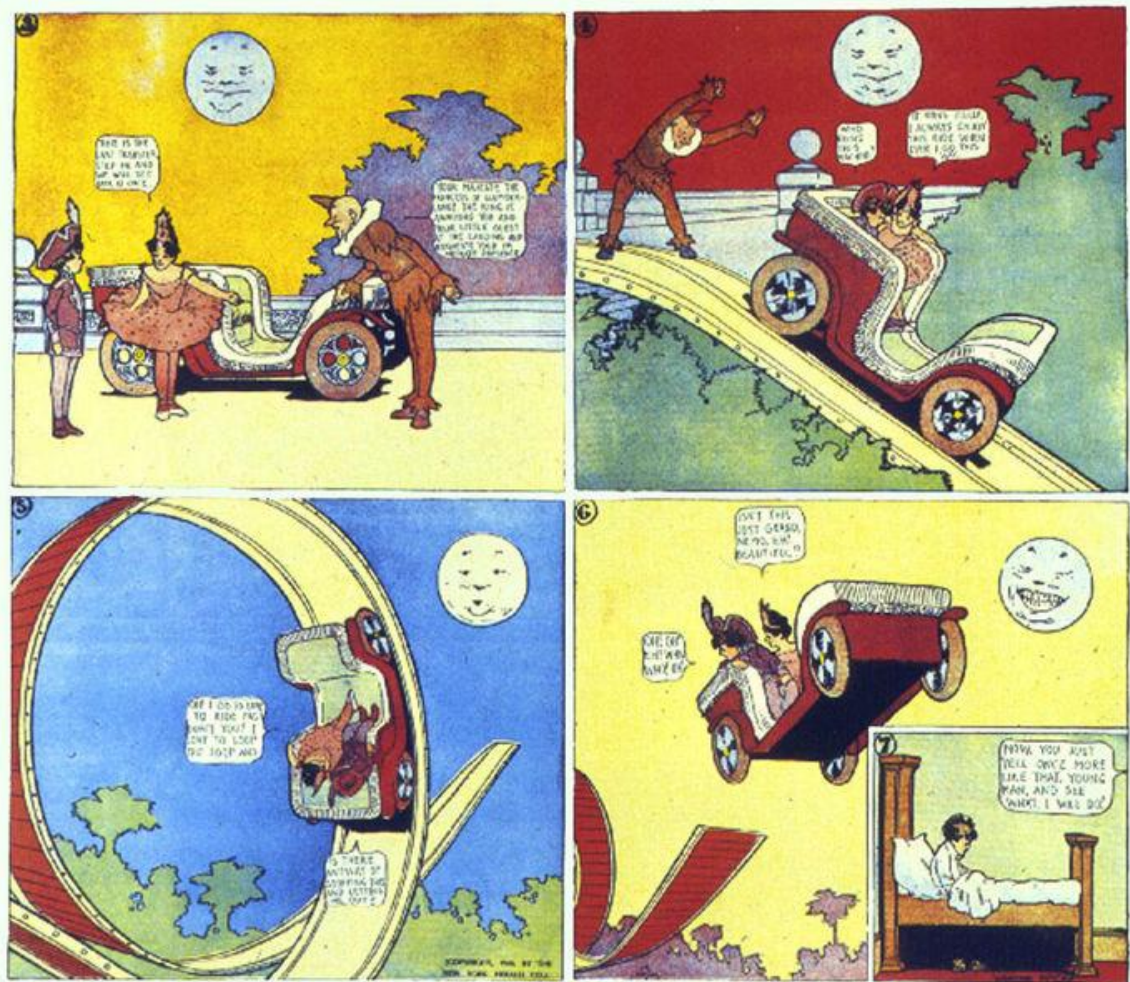


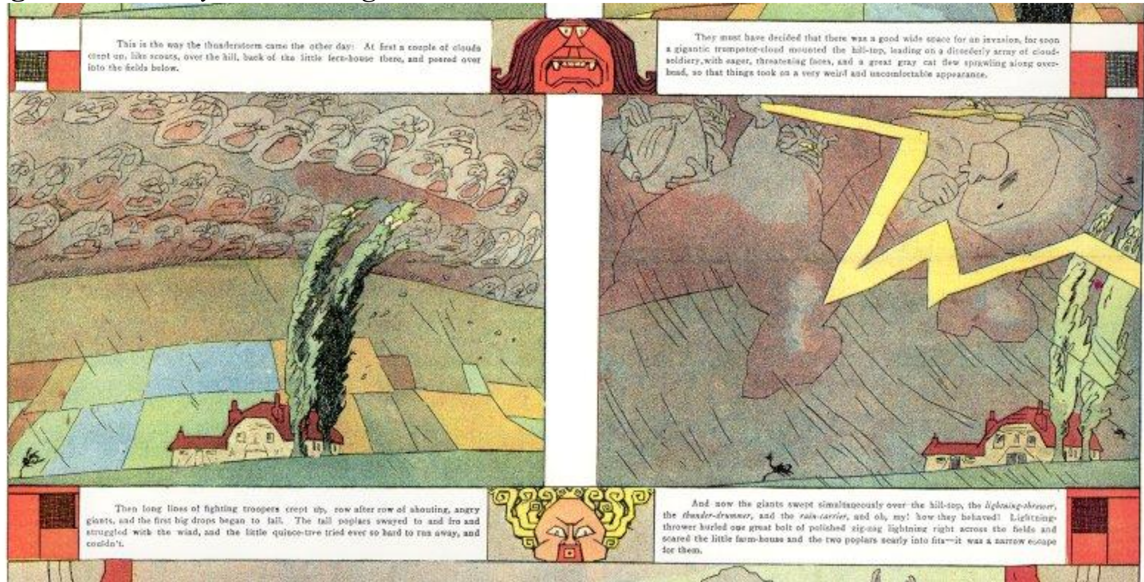
**Figure 47.** *Grant Wood, Sentimental Ballad, 1940*

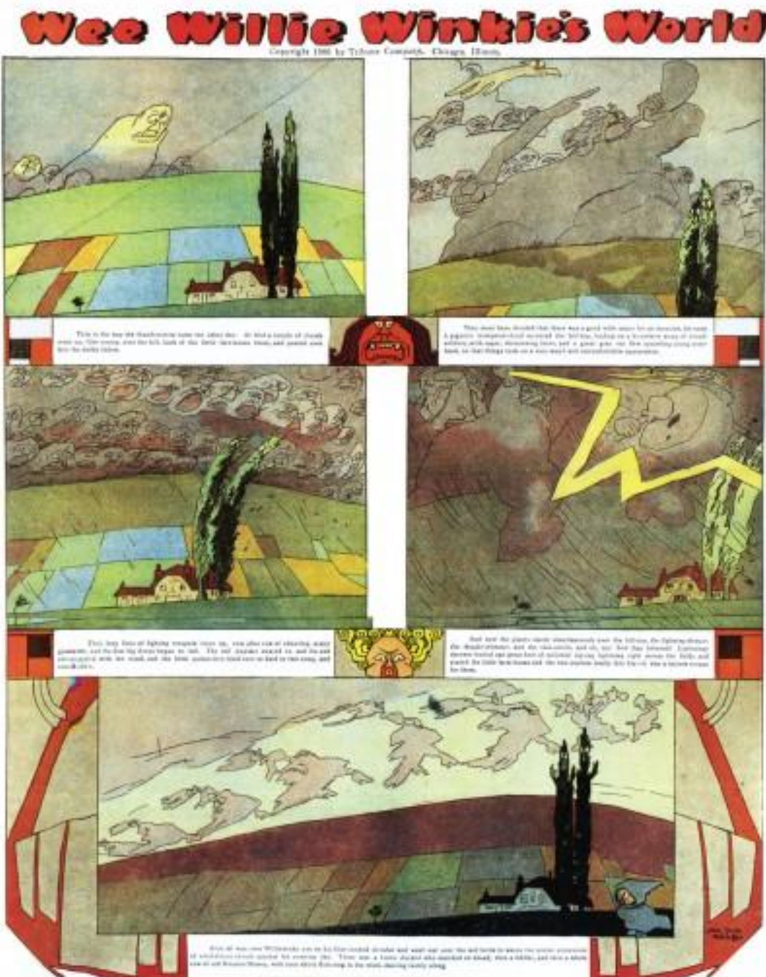
**Figure 48.** *Zenas Winsor McCay, Little Nemo, 1905–14; 1924–26*

**Figure 49.** *Winsor McCay, Little Nemo in Slumberland (1905-1914)*



**Figures 50-51.** *Lyonel Feininger, Wee Willie Winkie's World, 1906*



**Figures 52-53.** *Frank King, Gasoline Alley, 1931*

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