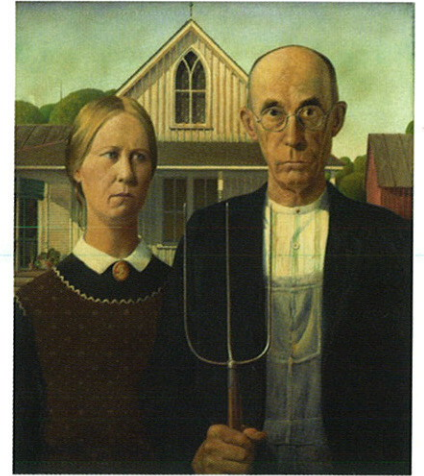


Grant Wood's *American Gothic* is one of the most familiar paintings in the history of art. It was exhibited publicly for the first time at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930, where it was awarded a prize of three hundred dollars. The idea for the painting came when Wood visited the small town of Eldon in southern Iowa and spotted a wooden farmhouse with a single, oversized window on the second story. The style of the house is known as Carpenter **Gothic** because the upper window is in the shape of pointed arch, recalling Gothic architecture of the **Middle Ages**. In imagining the residents of such a house, Wood pictured them as an isolated pair holding onto old values, or "American Gothic" people.

Wood asked his dentist, Dr. B. H. McKeeby, and his sister, Nan Wood, to pose as a farmer and his unmarried daughter in front of the house. Wood carefully constructed the composition to convey their respective male and female roles. Pitchfork in hand, the man wears overalls and stands in front of the barn to suggest his daily labor on the farm. His daughter is dressed simply, in a long-sleeved dress with a brown apron; her only jewelry is an old-fashioned brooch at her neck. Behind her several houseplants can be seen, an indication of her domestic work. Their pious ways are suggested by the cross shape in the window and the tiny church steeple in the background on the left. There is no interaction between the figures, but the painting uses repeated patterns to connect the farmer and his daughter to the house behind them. The three-pronged shape of the pitchfork is mimicked in the piping of his overalls, and the vertical pattern on his shirt is repeated in the siding on the second story of the house. The pattern of her dress is similar to the design of the curtain in the window. The hard edges and controlled lines of the elements of the painting are seen even in the depiction of the tree in the background.

The highly detailed style and rigid frontal arrangement of the two figures were inspired by **Northern Renaissance** art, which the artist studied during three trips to Europe between 1920 and 1926. The composition of the couple in front of their house also recalls 19th-century photographs, which commonly picture families posed in front of their home. Wood had seen such photographs in his family album, and the style of *American Gothic* might also reflect early photographic realism. Wood is said to have chosen both the style and the subject of *American Gothic* as a way to create an image that epitomized **Puritan** ethics and virtues that he believed defined the Midwestern character. The image caused a sensation when it was first exhibited in 1930; in particular, wives of farmers in Iowa protested the painting for its perceived **caricature**. But as newspapers across the country carried the image, the frank, realistic depiction struck a chord with Americans at this time.

Image 21



Grant Wood
(American, 1891–1942)

American Gothic, 1930
Oil on beaverboard
78 x 65.3 cm (30 11/16 x 25 11/16 in.)
Friends of American Art Collection
1930.934

Beginning with the stock market crash in October 1929 and ending with the onset of World War II in 1939, the decade of the 1930s was a time of economic depression and political change. Throughout these years, the United States attempted to rebuild and stabilize its economy through the **New Deal**, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's system of public assistance programs designed to provide relief from the strain of the Great Depression. From this confusing time rose **Regionalism**, an art movement that championed everyday themes, common citizens, and the pastoral values of rural America. Wood was one of the leading artists of this movement, and *American Gothic* is a primary example of Regionalism. Regionalism also opposed the influx of European-inspired **abstract** art between World War I and World War II (see, for example, Hartley's *Movements*, p. 50) by depicting rural American subjects in a straightforward, representational style. Some believe that Wood used this painting to critique the alleged narrow-mindedness and repression found in Midwestern culture, an accusation he denied. Whether it should be read as a positive, reassuring image of rural American values during a time of uncertainty or as an ambiguous mixture of praise and satire remains a subject of debate.

THEMES:

Identity

Economics