

Grant Wood's *American Gothic*

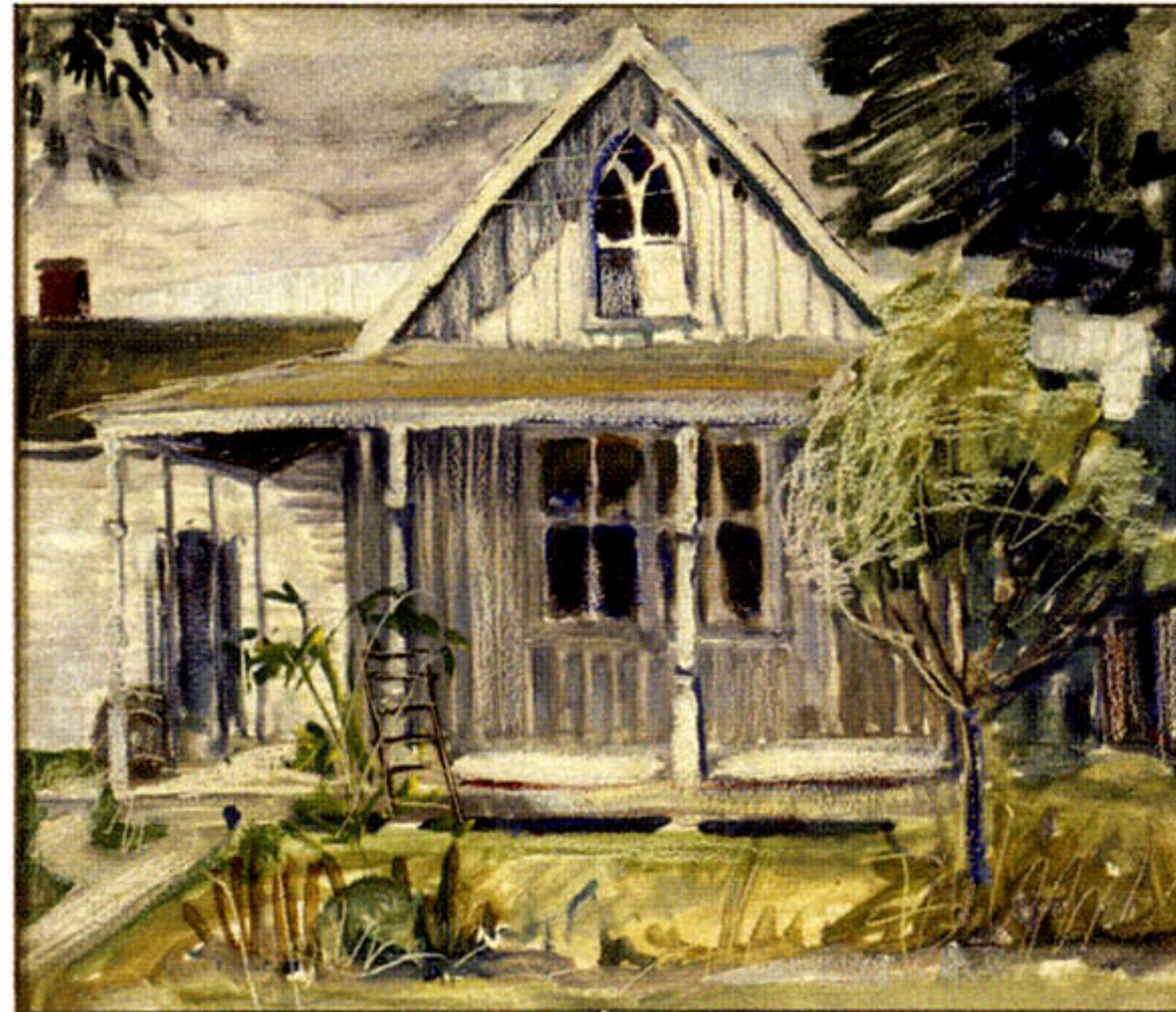
Elijah Burgher

About the Artist

Grant Wood was born on a farm outside the small town of Anamosa, Iowa, where he developed a love for farm animals and learned to identify many local birds and wildflowers. However, he spent most of his life in Cedar Rapids, where his family moved after his father died. He spent his student years taking art classes at the University of Iowa and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as well as traveling to Europe on sev-

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eral occasions. It wasn't until later in his life, in the late 1920s and at the beginning of the Great Depression, that Wood developed the unique style for which we know him today. Rather than making abstract art like many artists in New York or Paris, Wood decided to paint the things he knew best: rural America with its rolling farmlands and the modest, hard-working people who lived there. This style is called Regionalism because the artist uses the local landscape, people, and ways of life as his subject matter.



Grant Wood (1892–1942) Study for American Gothic. Location: Private Collection. Photo: Edward Owen / Art Resource, NY. © VAGA, NY.

About the Artwork

American Gothic was inspired by a farmhouse Wood encountered that had a Gothic window (you can see its pointed arch), like those in the medieval cathedrals of Europe. He decided to make a portrait of a farmer and his daughter in front of this house, and asked his sister and his dentist to pose for the painting. Many people think that the two figures are husband and wife—an assumption that Wood did not mind;

**"All the really good ideas I ever had came to me while I was milking a cow."
— Grant Wood**

he probably enjoyed the different interpretations. The painting was first exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930 where it was awarded a prize and purchased by the museum. It almost immediately became a national icon, and has been used as the subject of endless parodies in cartoons and advertising ever since.

A Closer Look

The farmer and his daughter stand in front of their home. The man looks straight ahead at the viewer, gripping his pitchfork tightly, while his daughter stands slightly behind him, looking to her left. The two figures take up most of the space of the picture, but one can see the upper part of a farmhouse behind them. They are not smiling, and both stand with rigid postures. Some people have argued that Wood was satirizing rural narrow-mindedness, while others have interpreted the portrait as praising the modesty and work ethic of Midwestern farmers. The most prominent feature of their home is the Gothic window, which is centered in the picture.



Grant Wood, American (1892–1942). *American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on beaverboard, 30 $\frac{11}{16}$ x 25 $\frac{11}{16}$ " (78 x 65 cm) unframed. Friends of American Art Collection. All rights reserved by The Art Institute of Chicago and VAGA, New York, NY.

The window's pointed arch mimics the shape of the daughter's forehead with her hair parted in the middle. Wood has repeated a number of shapes throughout the painting. The pattern on the woman's dress echoes the

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man's circularly rimmed glasses. Vertical lines are repeated in the prongs of the pitchfork, the seams on the man's overalls, and the panes of the window. The artist's interest in patterns may reflect the Midwestern landscape in which he lived, where adjacent plots of land make a checkerboard pattern on rolling hills, and rows of crops form intricate grids. When Wood painted *American Gothic* in 1930, modern farmers would not have depended on pitchforks and other hand tools, but would have used mechanical farming equipment instead. Not only was the pitchfork a farm implement that carried connotations of the nineteenth century, but the painting also recalls family photographs of that era, which often featured husbands and wives posed in front of their homes and holding items that symbolized their livelihood or roles in the household.

Resources

Web

Art Access (Art Institute of Chicago), www.artic.edu/artaccess

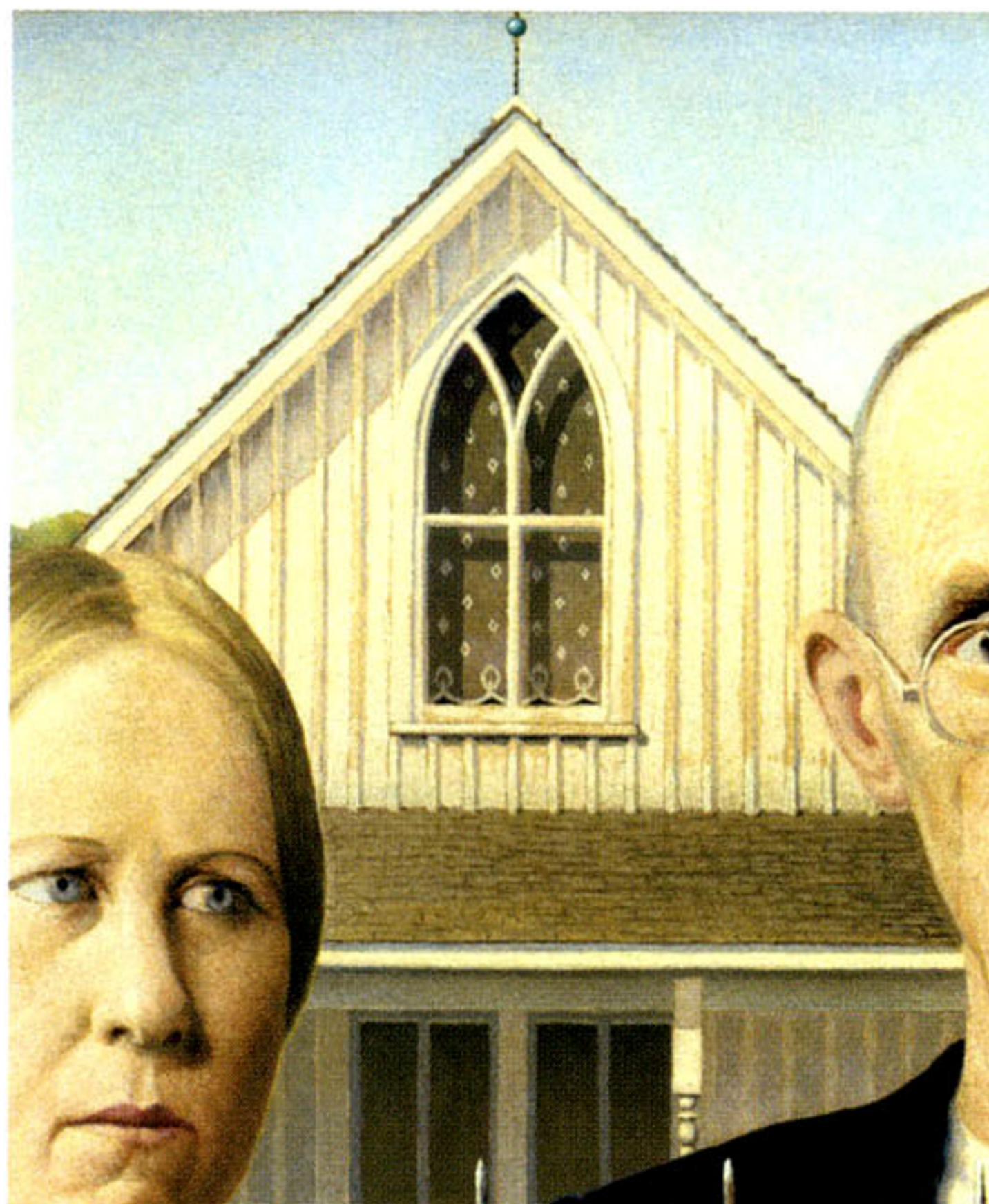
Web site that provides illustrations and interpretive texts for a cross-section of the

Art Institute of Chicago's permanent collection, along with lesson plans, family activities, glossaries, and bibliographies of books and links to related Web sites.

Books

Corn, Wanda M. *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

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



Grant Wood, *American* (1892–1942). *American Gothic (detail)*, 1930. Oil on beaverboard, 30 11/16 x 25 11/16" (78 x 65 cm) unframed. Friends of American Art Collection. All rights reserved by The Art Institute of Chicago and VAGA, New York, NY.

Classroom Activities

Elementary

Have students examine the painting, naming all the objects in the painting that they see. Then have them identify the different lines and shapes. Divide students into groups of five or six and have them reenact the painting. Two students should play the farmer and daughter. The others should act out the shapes of other objects that they consider to be important parts of the picture, such as the pitchfork, house, or even the potted plants on the front porch.

Middle School

Have students consider the following elements while looking at *American Gothic*. What is the point of view from which Wood has depicted the farm couple? Describe their facial expressions, poses, and gestures. What clothing are they wearing? What objects are included in the painting? Describe the setting. What is the relationship between the figures and the setting?

After discussing these elements, have students choose the farmer or his daughter and write an inner monologue based on evidence they find in the painting. Have students read their monologues aloud in class.

High School

Have students choose an object that is considered old-fashioned or is no longer in use, such as a cassette tape or typewriter. Students should research the object through interviews and by looking at old photographs and advertisements. Have students create a portrait that incorporates the object. Ask them to consider how the style of the portrait relates to the object's history.

Elijah Burgher is teacher resource center assistant, Department of Museum Education, the Art Institute of Chicago.