Transplanted—
Edward Hopper in Cedar Rapids, Grant Wood in New York City: A Review Essay

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TENSION between rural and urban outlooks continues to shape American culture long after Grant Wood and other Regionalist painters brought images of the countryside and its inhabitants to big-city galleries and museums. Wood called that movement a "Revolt against the City," a topic of particular interest both in the mid-twentieth century, when dust storms and the Great Depression displaced so many rural Americans, and now, when American politics and culture are riven by our fixation on broad red and blue brush strokes. Interrelated recent exhibits devoted to Grant Wood at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and to Edward Hopper at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art create new understanding of what Regionalist art shows us and what it means to be part of a regional community.

The Whitney and Cedar Rapids exhibits speak to each other specifically since the Whitney lent nine paintings and four etchings from its collection for *Edward Hopper: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York* (in Cedar Rapids, February 3–May 20, 2018) in exchange for the 27 works that Cedar Rapids contributed to *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables* (in New York City, March 2–June 10, 2018). Although the Cedar Rapids exhibit did not call attention to the fact, Wood's career spanned just the middle of Hopper's; Hopper, born in 1882, began

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exhibiting in 1906, when Wood was 15 years old. Hopper died in his studio in 1967, 25 years after Wood was buried. Nevertheless, the two artists reached career peaks nearly simultaneously albeit a thousand miles apart. Hopper exhibited in the first *Whitney Museum Annual* (1932) and every subsequent one until his death. (That Whitney tradition became a biennial event in 1973.) In 1933 the Museum of Modern Art mounted a retrospective of his work. Outside of the New York orbit, Wood, too, experienced a rapid artistic ascent in the 1930s, vaulting from entering Iowa State Fair art competitions to national renown for *American Gothic*, his 1930 third-place entry in the Chicago Art Institute's annual juried show.

Hopper: Selections from the Whitney focused on Hopper's early career (1906–1933) and included none of his masterpieces. The time frame excluded *Nighthawks* (1942), the urban counterpart of *American Gothic*, but its absence did not erase its image in the context of the works on display. The ability to capture ineffably American scenes links Hopper to Wood, as does their shared rejection of modern, non-representational art. Yet the Regionalist movement fueled its engine not only by rejecting European traditions and trends but also by separating itself from the East Coast art establishment, Hopper included. In turn, Hopper believed that "the Midwestern painters . . . caricatured America."[1]

In light of this mutual rejection, the differences between the lonely late-night diner in New York City and the incongruous gothic window on an Iowa farmhouse reveal important ways to appreciate each artist. The large well-lit window in *Nighthawks* lets you look in, lets you look at people who don't see you. (That invisibility may be one of the reasons the painting is so often parodied by replacing the diner's self-absorbed customers with self-absorbed dead celebrities.) In contrast, the small curtained gothic window in *American Gothic* bars your eyes while the farm couple meets your gaze, makes you feel judged. In turn, they protect themselves from your judgments and preconceptions with that curtain and a pitchfork. This painting, too, has sparked countless parodies that replace the man and woman with couples whose role in American culture spark controversy. Therein lies the midwestern mystique that Grant Wood unleashed, turning on an elemental

1. Cited in Wieland Schmied, *Edward Hopper: Portraits of America* (Munich, 1995), 8.

question: how do we see the hands that feed us and the ones who lead us? In *Nighthawks*, the cook is almost literally beneath notice, squatting behind the counter, looking up at the customers, whereas the farmers in *American Gothic* stand stiffly upright, holding their equal creation self-evident.

The Cedar Rapids show revealed the divergence between Hopper and Wood through a focus on geography: the exhibit implicitly contrasts Hopper's East Coast cosmopolitanism with Wood's "homebodyhood." Like Wood, Hopper painted scenes from France early in his career, and, like Wood, he lost interest in being an artist in the expatriate style. But post-Paris, Hopper worked in more varied venues than Wood—Manhattan, Vermont, and Cape Cod, among others—although his distancing perspective remained a constant.

Sequenced chronologically, the show opened with *Stairway at 48 rue de Lille* (1906), a claustrophobic gray-toned painting of a Paris interior. The etchings, all about the size of a piece of typing paper and inherently limited in color, create more gloom. *Rural Scene* (1920) shows a scrawny trio of cows coming home. They're crossing a railroad track to get there. The viewer's point of view, along with the etcher's, is a distant one: you're far from the tracks, probably on the right side of them, much farther from the inhospitable, possibly empty house that the cows are approaching. The landscape, such as it is, looks stunted: sere grass along the tracks and a blur of unimpressive trees on the horizon.

The urban scenes on view capture similar emptiness and disengagement. In the etching *Night Shadows* (1921), the viewer looks down on a man striding through a deserted street. The man keeps his head down. You see his back in full. One log-like shadow, emerging from the upper story of the building as well as from the entrance, breaks the street in two, just as the railroad track divides *Rural Scene*. In *The Balcony* (1928, alternately titled *The Movies*), you survey the sparsely attended theater from the upper rows, looking down on the backs of two viewers who sit side by side yet keep their distance.

The last painting, *Cobb's Barn and Distant Houses* (1931), nearly contemporaneous with *American Gothic* (1930), shows no sign of an active farmer or farming: just trees, grass, and the buildings.

A road running between the barn and the houses puts the viewer in transit, engaged in a sort of drive-by abandonment.

In addition to displaying the Whitney loans, the Cedar Rapids Museum drew on its own collection to assemble a group of paintings by lesser-known artists who portray Hopper's favorite settings. The selections in *Hopper's World: New York, Cape Cod, and Beyond* don't so much illuminate as affirm the essentially urban perspective of Hopper's East Coast contemporaries and successors. These scenes and landscapes emerge from respite, from summer homes and beach cottages, rather than from engagement in the communities depicted.

Underwhelmed by the stingy offering from the Whitney, I went to the New York City show with the defensive eyes of, say, "a little old lady from Dubuque." Curator Barbara Haskell's introductory wall text elevated my dander by promising to show "the tension between [Wood's] desire to recapture the dream world of his childhood and his instincts as a shy, deeply repressed homosexual." No doubt curators heavily weigh their opening words, and these, in turn, weighed heavily on me. What "instincts" direct a "deeply repressed homosexual"? And what was the "dream world" of Wood's 1890s childhood? More to the point, why wouldn't Wood's dreams and instincts be as varied and volatile as anyone else's? And how does any of this add up to fables? In Haskell's introduction to the show's excellent catalog and essay collection, she uses the words *myth* and *fable* interchangeably and argues more broadly that Wood's art is best seen as self-expression: "However compelling Wood's art is as a window onto American consciousness, its enduring power lies in its mesmerizing psychological dimension. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that Wood's paintings were primarily expressions of his inner life, much like those of his fellow American realist Edward Hopper."[2]

2. Barbara Haskell et al., *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables* (New York, 2018), 14. This argument apparently draws heavily on R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life* (New York, 2010), a fascinating and fearless biography of the artist that emphasizes the homoerotic element of Wood's vision and the troubled relationship that Wood had with his father, Francis Maryville Wood, a stern Quaker and hardworking farmer. His sudden death when Grant was 10 years old forced the family to sell their farm and move to Cedar Rapids.

I don't call attention to these statements to argue that the Whitney exhibit fails, but rather to say that it doesn't describe its achievements well—even that it understates its own achievements in a way that could be called midwestern. The show captured the fascinating, confrontational beauty of Wood's imagination and artistic realizations. I walked through the exhibit twice, then came back the next day with a Frank Sinatra mind set: Wood made it there; he could make it anywhere—not because he was like Edward Hopper but rather because the way he structures the viewer's experience, the eye contact he requires or withholds, differs so significantly. In the world outside Iowa, Wood's commitment to the state as his home and the source of his subjects adds mystery and misinterpretation to his body of work. Going well beyond the geographic setting, Wood focuses our attention on our relationship to his characteristic subjects—the pioneers whose labors made the midwestern landscape the source of our food.

This exhibit reveals more about Wood's signature patterns and designs than his deepest secrets, more about his cultural and historical context than his childhood dreams. More important, it alters our history of viewing Wood by gathering more than 100 objects from scattered museums and private collections.[3] I had seen the works from the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art and other Iowa museums several times, but in the Whitney exhibit I saw many other works for the first time, and all but the most ardent and well-traveled Wood aficionados would be in that position. This well-chosen accumulation created an experience that opened new perspectives on Wood's career and creativity, from his early craftwork and classroom teaching to his most renowned oil paintings, from his interior decorating to his book covers and illustrations. Large-scale installations, such as the stained-glass *Memorial Window* in Cedar Rapids's Veterans Memorial Building (1928–29) and the Iowa State University murals *Breaking the Prairie* and *Where Tillage Begins* (1934) could be viewed via video. This full spectrum revealed how Wood spent his time and used his gifts to cultivate a midwestern community and (re)present it to the world.

3. The Whitney website hosts an excellent account of the exhibit and associated events as well as good reproductions of many of the objects on display. See https://whitney.org/Exhibitions/GrantWood.

The art was well displayed and thoughtfully sequenced, adjusting our lenses on even the most familiar pieces. In addition to creating thought-provoking juxtapositions, the Whitney exhibit used space generously, allowing people to look from many different angles and as up close as possible. The midwestern mystique could be seen all over—corn, cows, pigs, barns, plows, and people who appear to be thriving in communities that many people have never seen—hence the term *flyover country*.

Work embedded in a community, in public spaces and family homes, runs through Wood's career. In 1924, while working as an art teacher at McKinley Junior High School in Cedar Rapids, he engaged 45 14-year-old art students in a mural project: *The Imagination Isles*. Each boy painted a landscape scene, and Wood wrote a brief narrative for one boy to read aloud as the public witnessed the unfurling of the 28-feet-long finished project. The text promises that viewers will see "brilliantly colored trees of shapes unknown to science" and explains that as children "almost all of us" have "dream-power" but we lose it if we are not trained and encouraged in the arts—exactly what Wood was doing in the democratic space of the Cedar Rapids Public School system. The Whitney ingeniously displayed this work by having local high-school students recreate it. They hung it in a windowed room set apart from the cool, hushed, windowless galleries, suspended over the busy streets and the glittering river, reminding you as you stepped into the brightness that the museum itself, open to all, stands on an endlessly reimagined, remade island.

The Imagination Isles aside, the galleries displayed the art roughly in chronological order. The first room included Wood's early work as a decorator and craftsman: well-executed teapots and jewelry that he created to sell in a craft store he briefly operated with a colleague in Chicago (1914–16). The most eye-arresting work is a generically titled *Overmantel Decoration*. Mounted on a filigree mat, it's bright and banal except for the overblown, childlike rendering of trees that would come to characterize his work. A young woman, a young girl, and a baby in a buggy stand in front of their large white house and expansive lawn. The woman wears a white hoop-skirted dress and the young girl frilly white pantaloons. They wave at the man of the house as he takes leave, riding his horse and waving his top hat. Neither the time nor

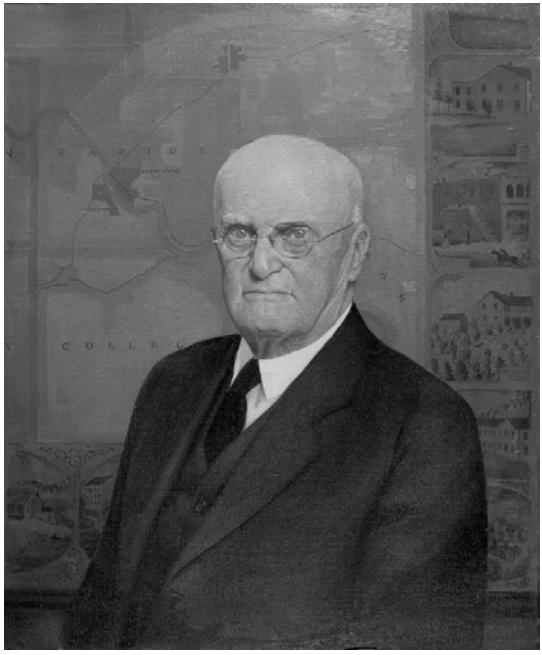
place can be clearly specified: it's just the past prettified. The lawn, though expansive, shows no trace of agriculture or neighbors. Wood made it as part of an interior decoration project for the Stamats family of Cedar Rapids in 1930, the same year he painted *American Gothic*. The Whitney wall text characterizes it as a "fanciful scene . . . that speaks to [Wood's] romance with the world of his childhood"; I saw it as a picture of Wood waving goodbye to all that.

In the time he worked on the Stamats house, he also developed his distinctive style.[4] Iowa themes define early decorative projects such as the *Iowa Corn Room* at the Hotel Montrose in Cedar Rapids (1925) and at the Chieftain Hotel in Council Bluffs (1927), both featuring corncob chandeliers and cornfield murals (also on display in the first room of the exhibit).

As he worked on *Overmantel*, Wood also began to paint Iowans. The level gaze of peers, so different from the vantage point in Hopper's work, shows in the portraits that hang in the next room: *John B. Turner, Pioneer* (1928), *Woman with Plants* (1930), and *American Gothic.* Wood's friends and family posed for all of them. The Turner portrait, like most commissioned images, entailed pleasing, if not flattering, a patron; Turner was the father of one of Wood's first patrons, David Turner. Most important, John Turner was the owner of the carriage house that Wood transformed into his (rent-free) studio when hearses replaced horses, rendering the hayloft available. Here Wood ingeniously crafted a small living, working, and gallery space, a sort of installation piece that he titled *5 Turner Alley* (a house number and street name of his own devising).[5] Wood paints Turner as if he were the owner of their patch of the state, posed in front of an 1869 map of Linn County and its county seat, Cedar Rapids. Dressed in a funereal suit, Turner isn't forbidding but he's not quite friendly: he's got real estate and gravitas, his face mirroring the lines of

4. Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New Haven, CT, 1983), 75.

5. This building was part of Turner Mortuary, the business interest of John B. Turner (pioneer) and his son David. Wood took charge of decorating the public areas of the mortuary business as well as his own intriguing living/studio space. Sadly, the Whitney did not exhibit any images or objects from it, although the space has become part of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art. For an illustrated account and analysis, see Jane C. Milosch, ed., *Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic* (Munich, 2005).



Grant Wood, Portrait of John B. Turner, Pioneer, 1928–1930. *Oil on canvas, 37″ x 31¾″. Courtesy Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Gift of Harriet Y. and John B. Turner II. 76.2.2.*

settlement that the map documents. This painting won first prize at the 1929 Iowa State Fair art show, Wood's first recognition outside of Cedar Rapids, according to Barbara Haskell. She also points out that this success may have inspired Wood to paint his mother, Hattie, in *Woman with Plants* in a similar style.[6]

At the Whitney, that picture hung directly across from *John B. Turner*, and the wall text connected them by quoting Wood's explanation of the woman's stolid, unsmiling gaze: she has "the bleak, faraway, timeless . . . severe but generous vision of the Midwest pioneer." Like Turner, she meets you, but she doesn't greet you. As a pioneer, she's already done her part. Dressed dully in dark blue and black, she also communicates an aesthetic

6. Haskell et al., *Grant Wood: American Gothic*, 18.

with the rickrack on her apron, her earrings, and the cameo at her throat. She arranges her potted plants around her, epitomes of the fertile landscape portrayed alongside her. The largest, a *sansevieria*, rests in her lap, while begonia and geranium flank her. Those details, in turn, link the woman with the *American Gothic* couple, not only because the model for the woman in *American Gothic* was Hattie's daughter (and Wood's sister), Nan, but also because the *sansevieria* reappears on the porch and the cameo reappears pinned above the woman's rickracked apron. The cameo, as R. Tripp Evans has noted, was a gift Wood bought in Italy. It depicts Persephone, a Greek agrarian goddess who, along with her mother, Demeter, symbolizes fertility, spring growth, and harvest.[7] That mythology is confirmed in Wood's 1939 lithograph *Fertility*, on display near the end of the exhibit, in which the American Gothic house reappears, dwarfed by a bulging barn that looms over a field of tasseling corn.

In addition to painting individuals, Wood also portrayed rural communities working for the common good. In those pictures, Wood structures our view differently. Instead of looking into the eyes of people, we see their absorption in shared labors. We're on the outside looking in as the work that feeds us—and them—gets done. *Arbor Day* (1932), *Dinner for Threshers* (1934), and the murals at Iowa State University (1934–1937) offer clear examples that most museumgoers would be seeing for the first time. *Arbor Day*, loaned from a private collection, shows children in a schoolyard, their backs turned from the viewer as they prepare to plant a sapling. The nearly treeless agricultural landscape that surrounds them highlights the value of their task, and their already green schoolyard foretells the eventual realization of their vision. *Dinner for Threshers* likewise offers a vision of community work and respite as farmhands groom and gather to eat while aproned and cameo-adorned women make it all happen by cooking and serving the products of previous harvests. They look at each other or at their plates. Although excluded, the viewer has a magical view of it all since the farmhouse interior is revealed in cross-section.

7. Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life*, 84–88.

While working on *Dinner for Threshers,* Wood became director of the Public Works of Art Project in Iowa (which later was absorbed by the Works Project Administration). In that role, Wood designed a series of murals and guided 34 painters in the execution of a project for Iowa State University illustrating Daniel Webster's 1840 proclamation that "Where Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow." Like *Imagination Isles*, the 1,254 square feet of murals in the Iowa State University library were created through a group effort that, in turn, shows pioneers banding together to make and sustain the Midwest. On the ground floor opposite the foot of the stairs, the triptych *Breaking the Prairie* shows tillage meeting the challenging soil of the prairie where deep and dense grass roots hold the soil like chain mail. The central panel foregrounds a farmer pausing his horse and plow to drink from a jug that a woman, her eyes averted, has brought him. In the background, a farmer plows a greener field with a team of oxen. The mature hardwood trees, too, require determined rail-splitters before they give way, so Abe Lincoln lookalikes swing axes on the side panels. Opposite *Where Tillage Begins*, a grand staircase rises and murals of the arts that follow ascend. These depict subjects taught at Iowa State University: agriculture, veterinary medicine, mechanical engineering, home economics. In these murals, the people portrayed witness each other and their tasks. If these are fables, the moral of the story is community, cooperation, and an eye on posterity. The prairie breakers and university builders don't see us, as they seem to do in Wood's portraits, but with the generous gaze Wood ascribes to pioneers, they imagined us as they built the Midwest's institutions and farming economy.[8]

In *The American Golfer* (1940), a painting that only recently came into public circulation, Wood sets aside the generosity, bleakness, and severity he attributed to the pioneer gaze.[9] Art historians,

8. Despite the serene sense of progress and cooperation projected by these murals, the painters chafed at working according to Wood's design. In September 1935 they wrote to the WPA requesting that other arrangements be considered for future projects, and when Wood learned of this matter in early October 1935, he resigned. See "Letter from the Cooperative Mural Painters Protesting Grant Wood's Leadership," in Lea Rosson DeLong, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals* (Ames, 2006), 367–68.

9. The painting was purchased at auction in 2014 by Walmart heir Alice Walton for her Crystal Bridges Museum.

Grant Wood, The American Golfer, *1940. Oil on board, 36½" x 48". Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2014.33. Photography by Edward C. Robison III.*

including the contributors to the exhibit catalog and biographer R. Tripp Evans, have said little about this portrait of Charles Campbell, a banker from Kalamazoo, Michigan, whose name is elided from the title in order to make a "fable" or exemplar out of the golfer. The echo effect of the titles *American Golfer* and *American Gothic* struck me immediately, and I could see both pictures at once from the corners of my eyes. In the second gallery, the *American Gothic* couple stands firmly in front of their churchy white house, while in the third gallery the *American Golfer* plays alone, the club his pitchfork and a distant white mansion his property (or his country club's clubhouse at the very least). The grounds, with their verdant uselessness, return us to *Overmantel Decoration*. The frame, a blond wood oval with nailhead trim, echoes the golf theme as the wood of a club or the dotted surface of a golf ball (in contrast to the simple frame for *American Gothic*, streaked with barn red). Like a Hopper subject, the golfer is oblivious to human presence. Incongruously dressed in a jacket and

tie, he looks to the horizon, following his shot with a self-satisfied smile. Coincidentally, yet significantly, as an archetypal midwestern businessman, he resembles Vice-President Mike Pence. Wood accepted the commission in 1937 (judging from his dated studies for the project), a time of financial duress and personal upheaval. He painted it knowing that the immediate viewership would be limited; he even separated it from the rest of his work by shriveling one of his signature visual details: oversized, improbable tree foliage. A twig feeding three autumnal oak leaves, not falling yet unmoored from the rest of the branches, floats above the golfer's head. What acorns it produced are fallen; only an empty acorn cap hangs on. In the context of all the other works on display, this portrait is an anomaly that proves Wood's commitment to portraying the Midwest as a community and vital resource for the rest of the country.

Another portrait from 1940, perhaps the last one that Wood made, shows how persistently he relied on the style and theme he established with *John B. Turner, Pioneer*. For the cover of the September 23, 1940, issue of *Time* magazine, Wood drew [Henry A.] *Wallace of Iowa*, portraying a food-producing Iowan as a leader. Just announced as Franklin D. Roosevelt's running mate, Wallace looks out, a little sideways but with a gentle smile, at everyone who passes a newsstand. In the background, a farmer who looks like a young Wallace keeps his back to viewers as he bundles shocks. The title, telling us that Wallace is "of Iowa," links the two figures—one is working for our food, as Wallace does as an Iowa State University–trained farmer and as the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, while the other takes time to look at us, draw us in, perhaps lead us forward. Its appearance in *Time* magazine tells people that this candidacy is important, and Wood's rendering tells people that as a candidate, Wallace of Iowa can be trusted.

In distinguishing himself from the East Coast and European artists of his age, Wood showed not only the wary self-satisfaction that could result from the "pioneer" spirit but also the cooperative ethos and resourcefulness that turned pioneers into settlers and citizens, artists, models, and patrons. The "broken" prairie that produced golden corn and the golden corn that adorned hotel dining rooms in Iowa's cities shimmer in a continuum, the deco-

rated interior not so distinct from a painted landscape, the broken prairie looking exactly like a carpet, the broad lines made by a farmer's plow copied by a paintbrush. In the cities, artworks assembled from varying collections show community-supported artistry.

As always, what's not shown can place uncomfortable or irrepressible demands on the viewer, especially viewers from other times and places. I often visit *Where Tillage Begins* and I wonder how Wood (and his critics) could have failed to imagine the previous inhabitants of the land, why no Indian artifacts, let alone Indians, can be seen. Wood lived less than 60 miles from the Meskwaki Settlement, but its presence did not register in his artistic vision. I worry about the land that feeds us, our truly broken prairie ecosystem, a sort of community that needs a more compelling portrayal. I keep going back because, in some sense, I hope my looking will turn into finding. These two exhibits, *Edward Hopper: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art* and especially *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*, gave art lovers and scholars an enriching and intriguing opportunity to keep looking.