

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Grant Wood of Iowa

The life of Grant Wood, who rose from an Iowa farm boyhood to become one of the world's most renowned artists, is one of the great success stories of American life in this century.

Gaining international attention in his lifetime as an artist who immortalized the scenes and people of his native state, he was to die at the peak of his career at middle age. But in the years since his death 30 years ago, his place in art history not only has endured but has been greatly enhanced.

Grant Wood was born on a farm near Anamosa, Iowa, on February 13, 1891. His father's people were Quakers who migrated to Iowa from Winchester in the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia. His mother's family name was Weaver, and her parents, of English Protestant origin, had come to Iowa by covered wagon from upstate New York in the 1840's.

The father was very strict. Once, when Grant was a boy, a neighbor lent him a copy of Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. However, the father made the boy

return the book, unread, saying: "We Quakers can read only true things."

From earliest childhood, the boy showed an interest in drawing. His first artistic efforts were depictions of Plymouth Rock hens setting on great mountains of eggs.

"The only drawing materials I could get," he said, "were the large sheets of cheap white cardboard that were enclosed in the wooden boxes of huge square crackers that father bought in Anamosa. . . . My studio was underneath the oval dining room table which was covered with a red checkered cloth. The cloth hung with nice arched openings on both sides."

The boy's childhood was exceptionally vivid in sense impressions and observations of nature.

An article in *The Anamosa Eureka*, April 15, 1901, reveals that: "Master Grant Wood, only ten years of age, reports that he has found 55 varieties of birds in his neighborhood. His communication on this subject is very interesting and shows he is an observing, thoughtful, wide-awake boy."

When Grant was 10 years old, his father died and the mother and four children—Frank, Grant, Jack, and Nan—moved from the farm to Cedar Rapids. It then became Grant's responsibility to help earn the family livelihood. People in Cedar Rapids often recalled years later what he was in those days, a painfully shy youngster who raised the earliest sweet corn and tomatoes for sale,

mowed lawns, took care of horses, and milked the neighbor's cows.

Grant Wood was known during this period as "the kid who took care of Doc Lord's horse."

Through necessity he became proficient in many practical lines. He was a born craftsman and he loved to work with all kinds of material. He experimented with carpentry, modeled figures out of blue clay he dug from nearby creek beds, tried his hand at metal working, and learned the fundamentals of building. All his experience was later to be useful to him in his work. He painted his greatest pictures in much the same methodical way he would build a house, making each material serve its special part.

However, his chief interest through these years was in drawing and painting and he always returned to this. He worked in a very close, meticulous style that was the result of careful observation of nature and an innate sense of design.

When he was in the eighth grade of Polk school in Cedar Rapids he won a prize in a nationwide contest conducted by a manufacturer of drawing crayons. His drawing was a careful study of a sprig of oak leaves.

Upon his graduation from high school in 1910, he went to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he worked and studied at the Handicraft Guild.

After a summer spent as an apprentice in metalcraft and a student of design, he was given a job

as a professional craftsman in the Guild's shops. During part of this period he earned his lodging by acting as night watchman for an undertaking establishment.

In the fall of 1911, he returned to Cedar Rapids and got a job as machinist's assistant in the Rock Island Railroad shops. An accident compelled him to quit this work and he next taught country school for a term in the Rosedale district, six miles from Cedar Rapids.

In the summer of 1912, Wood established a small handicraft shop in Cedar Rapids. At this time he was trying to get enough money ahead to attend art school.

In that fall he enrolled at the University of Iowa for part-time study in art. The following year he went to Chicago where he worked as a professional craftsman and jewelry designer in the Kalo shop by day and studied painting at the Art Institute by night.

In the summer of 1914, Wood, in partnership with a man named Christopher Haga, started an independent handicraft shop in Chicago. However, after an encouraging beginning, this business collapsed as a result of the European war.

Then followed a particularly difficult period in the city when the artist, unable to get a job, lived on practically nothing in order to continue his studies at the Art Institute night school.

In the winter he returned to Cedar Rapids to

find his mother and sister in impoverished circumstances. No steady work was to be had and Wood earned the family living by doing odd jobs of all kinds. He and his mother and sister had no place of their own to live so the artist, with typical resourcefulness, bought a lot for a dollar down and a dollar a month and built a shack, 10 by 16 feet. Here he lived with his mother and sister for two years. Later, for helping to build two houses, he was given a suburban lot. He borrowed money on the lot and built his own house, cut the rafters, poured the cement floors, and plastered the walls with his own hands.

He went into the army in 1917 and was stationed first at Camp Dodge in Des Moines, later in the camouflage division at Camp Leach near Washington, D.C.

At army camp, Wood started making quick portrait sketches of his fellow doughboys during odd moments. Soon there was a great demand for his work and the artist eventually charged for the sketches—two bits a head for buck privates, a dollar a head for officers.

With the signing of the Armistice in 1918, Grant Wood returned to Cedar Rapids and got a job teaching art in the public schools. For seven years he taught school, saving money to travel in Europe. All of this time he had been painting in his spare time, producing, however, nothing of unusual significance.

Between the years of 1920 and 1928, he made four trips to Europe. He studied at the Academie Julien in Paris and traveled in France, Italy, Germany, and other countries. With Wood on some of his trips to Europe was Marvin Cone, who also became a well-known Iowa artist, and who had been his closest friend when both were students at Washington High School in Cedar Rapids.

During these trips abroad, Grant Wood painted scores of pictures—dreamy, old-world landscapes after the manner of the old French Impressionists. These he brought back and sold to his fellow townspeople in Cedar Rapids.

In 1926, 47 of Wood's paintings were exhibited at the Galerie Carmine in Paris but the show produced no reviews in the United States.

Wood had no knack for languages and during his European travels, he never learned to speak a foreign tongue. But he became ingenious at making himself understood by a gesture and facial expressions. And if these methods didn't work, he got out his sketch pad and drew pictures.

It was in 1924 that Wood moved into a studio in the upstairs of a barn at the John B. Turner & Son mortuary in Cedar Rapids. This studio was provided by David Turner, the mortician, who was a friend and patron of the artist. Turner was to acquire the largest single collection of Grant Wood paintings in existence in Wood's earlier Impressionistic style.

Wood's mother and sister, Nan, lived with him in his studio home at 5 Turner Alley for 11 years. Wood completely remodeled the studio and it became a social center for his many friends and admirers. A few years later, when Wood was working in a new style, he painted, "John B. Turner, Pioneer," a portrait of David Turner's father.

In 1928 the artist went to Munich to supervise the manufacture of a stained-glass window he designed for the Cedar Rapids Memorial Coliseum.

During this trip the groundwork was laid for a drastic change in his painting. For some time, he had been dissatisfied with his work. The casual Impressionistic landscapes he was turning out were pleasant enough but lacked the form and expressiveness he wanted to get into his work. During this period he studied the European primitives in the German museums and was impressed by the emotional impact they got into their work. These naive artists of centuries back had used Biblical subject matter but had interpreted it in terms of their own environment—in terms of the landscapes and characters they knew. Wood felt here was a lesson he could adapt to his own work.

Wood was also fascinated by the meticulous craftsmanship and exquisite sense of design of the primitives. This was a kind of work in harmony with his orderly and imaginative mind. Seeing it suggested to him the idea of reverting to the precise style of painting he had used as a boy.

Upon his return to Iowa, Wood looked upon the landscape, the people, the familiar objects in a new light. It was a reality he had seen before but now it had taken on a new meaning. So the artist settled down to paint the American characters and scenes he knew so well, not in casual, impressionistic terms of sunlight effects, but in a precise, strongly designed style that was to mark his work from that point on.

One of his first pictures in this new direction was the portrait of his mother, "Woman With Plant." In this picture, his mother, an aged woman, is shown against the background of an autumn midwestern landscape. This tribute to his mother, to whom he was very devoted, brought him his first substantial recognition in the art world.

The artist was now started in the field that was naturally and inevitably his own—the depiction of his own surroundings and people.

"At first," he said, "I had difficulty in finding subject matter. I felt I had to search for old things to paint—something soft and mellow—but now I discovered a decorative quality in American newness."

Such commonplace things of American rural life as ric-rac braid on dresses, wire fencing, overalls, and methodically spaced cornfields attracted his attention.

Thus, in the late 1920's, as it turned out, Wood's fame began to rise. It was the pre-depres-



sion era when imitation of French Modernism was the overwhelming vogue in American art. Grant Wood was to become one of the pioneers in the building of the indigenous American Art movement which blossomed forth in the 1930's.

In 1930, Wood's painting, "American Gothic," was exhibited at the Art Institute in Chicago. It was a picture of a pious, bald-headed villager and his grown-up daughter. In the background, corresponding to the long angular faces of the people, was a house of that hybrid-Gothic variety common in rural Iowa.

Wood had seen the Gothic house on a trip to Eldon, Iowa, the year before. Greatly impressed, he sketched it. Months later, he decided to use his sister, Nan, and his dentist, Dr. Byron H. McKeeby of Cedar Rapids, as his models.

"American Gothic" won the Norman Wait Harris bronze medal and a \$300 purchase award at the Art Institute's Annual Exhibition of American Painting and, in addition, became an immediate sensation.

Up to the moment when "American Gothic" won its prizes, Grant Wood was little known as an artist outside his own home town of Cedar Rapids. But when this painting burst on the art world, Grant Wood, then 39, became world famous overnight.

Then, in a particularly productive two-to-three year period, Wood followed up his initial success-

es with a series of highly individual landscapes, portraits, and genre paintings which established him firmly in the front rank of American artists.

Among his best known works of this period are "Stone City," "Portrait of Susan Angevine Shaffer," "Arnold Comes of Age," "Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," "Birthplace of Herbert Hoover," "Young Corn," "Fall Plowing," "Daughters of Revolution," "Arbor Day," "Adolescence," "Dinner for Threshers," "Portrait of Nan," "Victorian Survival," and "Self-Portrait."

Wood was the nation's leading exponent of regional art long before the Public Works of Art Project was started. He had established, in 1932 an independent art colony at Stone City, an abandoned Iowa stone quarry town near Anamosa. Artists lived in colorfully painted ice wagons surrounding the old stone Green mansion and there were public outdoor sales on week-ends. After two summers, financial and other difficulties ended the colony.

When the Public Works of Art Project was established, Wood became its director for Iowa in 1934, refusing any salary for this work. A group of PWAP workers, under Wood's direction and working from his designs, executed a series of murals for the Iowa State University library at Ames. The murals were acclaimed by critics and gained national attention from such publications as *Fortune* and the *New York Times*.

Grant Wood became a lecturer at the University of Iowa in Iowa City in 1934 and a year later was made an associate professor. He was given full professorship in 1939 and received a special appointment as professor of fine arts in September, 1941, when he returned to the university after a year's leave of absence. During his seven years of university teaching, he gave advanced instruction in painting.

In 1935, he married Sara Sherman Maxon, a voice teacher and Lieder singer. They lived in Iowa City until their divorce in 1939.

In 1937, Wood began producing work for the public in a medium new to him—lithography—and he pursued this for the next few years in addition to doing an occasional painting. Some of his best-known subjects in this medium were: "Seedtime and Harvest," "January," "Honorary Degree," "Fertility," "March," "February," "July 15," "December Afternoon," and "Family Doctor."

For his work and influence in promoting creative art in American education, Wood was awarded honorary degrees by the University of Wisconsin, Wesleyan University, Lawrence College, and Northwestern University.

In addition to his painting and teaching, Wood lectured throughout the United States for several years and was noted for the wisdom and salty humor of his remarks from the platform.

Grant Wood's place in the art world was entirely his own. As Edward Alden Jewel wrote in the *New York Times* at the time of Wood's first New York one-man show at the Ferargil Galleries in 1935:

Grant Wood's approach to the American scene is unique; so is the style that has developed into so arresting a vehicle of expression. He is a genuinely creative spirit; an artist of real power and originality; a man who has seriously taken the trouble, besides, to learn and to perfect his craft.

Wood also was a prime favorite with the American public. His work was the most popular of the American artists exhibiting at the Chicago Century of Progress exhibitions. His best known paintings were widely reproduced in newspapers and periodicals. His lithographs, distributed by Associated American Artists of New York under their democratic plan of selling original prints by leading American artists at \$5 each, were in enormous demand. In many cases, the entire issue of a Grant Wood print was exhausted within a few days after it was put on the market.

Public response was admittedly important to Wood, who had no time for esthetic snobbery and wanted his work "to mean something to the public at large, not just a hypersensitive minority."

Wood did not fit the popular conception of an artist. Far from being a temperamental recluse, he was an easy-going, friendly person—stocky,

round-faced, and eternally deliberate in everything he did. In his calm, humorous eyes and his slow, dry speech, one sensed his relationship to the people he had depicted in his paintings.

The Iowa artist drew his share of brickbats as well as bouquets. He was subject to bitter attack, as well as to high praise, by certain fellow members of the art and educational professions.

According to Arthur Millier, art critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, writing in 1941, there were two chief reasons for these attacks.

The first was "rampant professional jealousy." The second was "his denial of phony Bohemianism."

"Grant Wood's love for the customs of his own folk is real," wrote Millier. "He has roots in his own region and his subjects mean something deep to him. The average American responds to this. Whereas the hostile critics and jealous artists are still Bohemians, instinctively at war with anything so sure of itself as the calm, orderly art of Iowa's and America's great painter, Grant Wood."

In his craft, Wood was a slow and most painstaking worker. His output was very limited, but his paintings were always in great demand and brought prices said, in some cases, to be as high as \$10,000 in the post-depression era.

Painting a picture was a long-drawn-out affair with Wood. He decided very quickly what he would like to paint and then might take a year in

thinking it over. Invariably he made several drawings for the sake of composition and at least one very careful finished drawing with a good deal of regard for values. He was particular that his drawings be authentic in every way, even going so far as to consult mail order catalogs for details of farm implements, women's clothing or wallpaper.

The actual painting was stretched over a considerable length of time. Sometimes he would work from 14 to 18 hours a day for seven or eight weeks. He applied paints in coats and spoke of them as such in the manner of a house painter. When finally finished, there might be seven or eight layers of paint beneath the surface, any one of which might have satisfied one less meticulous.

Grant Wood was a man of many interests and skills. He was almost as much at home in woodworking, metalcraft, and building as he was in painting. He was a talented furniture designer and a proficient sculptor. And, with the heritage of farm people in his blood, he had a love for the soil and an intimate knowledge of growing things. Gardening was his favorite diversion, and during any good evening in the spring, Iowa Citians would see him working in the large flower garden he kept at his Court Street home.

A gentle, easy-going man, Wood, nonetheless, was the center of several national controversies.

When "American Gothic" was first reproduced,

a storm of censure fell upon Wood's head from Iowans who felt that they had been unfairly represented by the artist. One woman telephoned the artist and said he ought to have his "head bashed in." Later, when they got used to his work, Iowans became proud of the artist of the cornbelt.

In 1932, when Wood exhibited "Daughters of Revolution," his celebrated painting of three grim-lipped, intolerant Daughters sipping tea before a reproduction of "Washington Crossing the Delaware," stirred up another nest of hornets. However, as time went on, the laughter drowned out the denunciations, and eventually, the more liberal Daughters themselves acknowledged the humor of the satire.

In 1940, Wood tossed another bombshell to the literal-minded, with his painting, "Parson Weems' Fable," a humorous and imaginative version of the time-worn myth of George Washington and the Cherry Tree.

In addition to being a top-rank artist, Wood was one of the most colorful personalities on the American scene. To his lovely, old brick house at 1142 East Court Street in Iowa City came the celebrities of the nation—poets, painters and statesmen—to visit with this modest, soft-spoken Iowan whose observations of life had a rare wisdom and dry humor. Among those entertained by Wood were such distinguished persons as Henry Wallace, John Dewey, Lawrence Tibbett, Chris-

topher Morley, Carl Sandburg, John Mason Brown, and many others.

The artist also had many friends in his own profession who stopped to visit him en route across the country—men like Millard Sheets, Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, James Chapin, Arnold Blanch, Adolf Dehn, Doris Lee, and Yasuo Kuniyoshi—all distinguished American painters.

In the summer of 1941, fatigued from the pressures that came to him from his high ranking as a leading American artist, from petty attacks on him, and because of ill health, he spent the summer at Clear Lake, Iowa, using an old abandoned railroad depot for a studio. It was here that he finished what were to be his last major oil paintings, "Spring in Town" and "Spring in the Country."

Returning to Iowa City in the fall, he was under doctor's care. Failing to respond to treatment, he entered University Hospitals. On December 19, he underwent exploratory surgery resulting in the discovery of hopeless cancer of the liver.

Wood remained in the hospital for the next eight weeks, never regaining enough strength to paint. He died there at 10 p.m. on Thursday, February 12, 1942, two hours before his 51st birthday. He was buried beside his mother on the Weaver lot in Riverside cemetery at Anamosa, his birthplace, after funeral services at the Turner mortuary in Cedar Rapids.





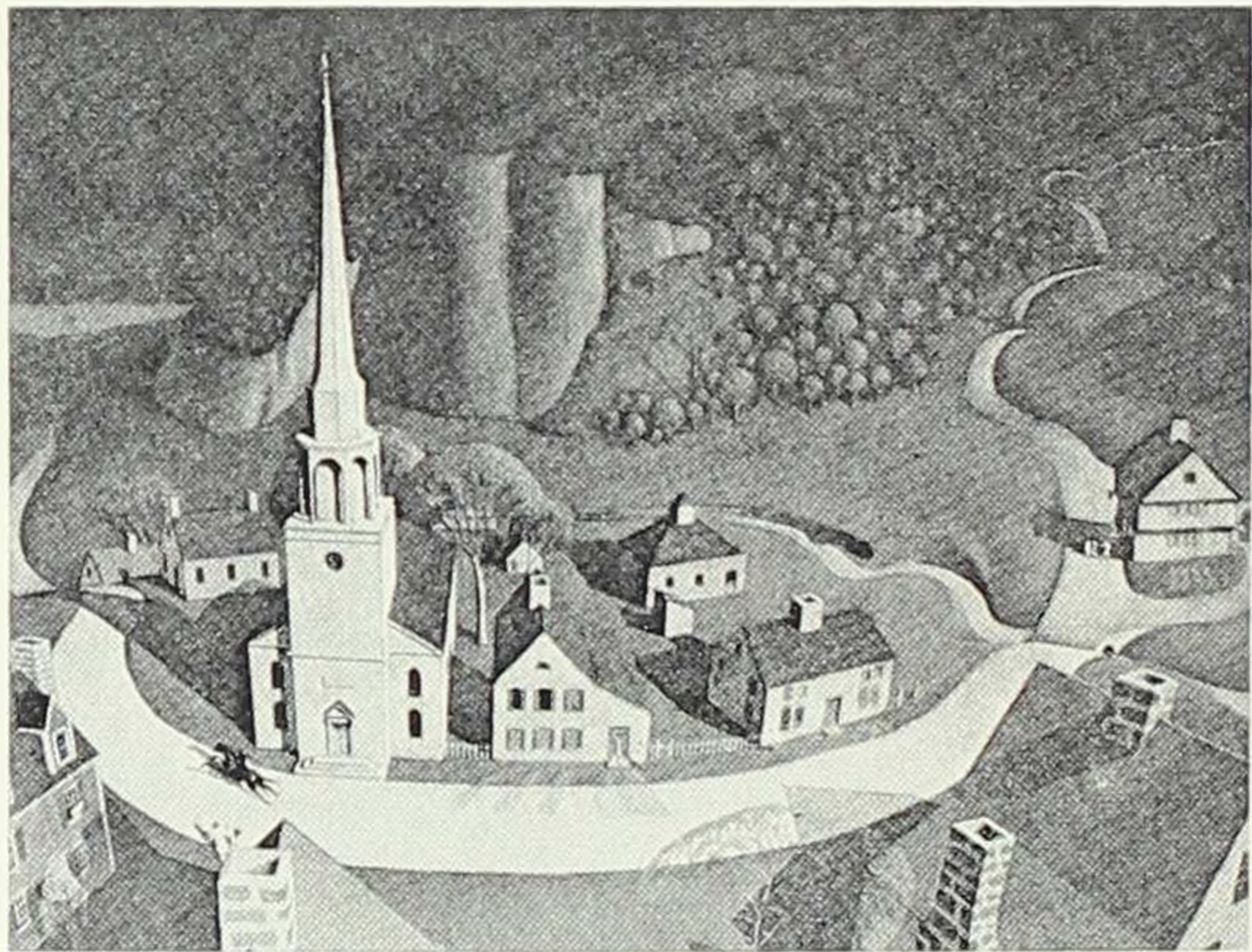
*Chicago Art Institute*

American Gothic (1930)



*Cedar Rapids Art Association*

Woman with Plant (1929)

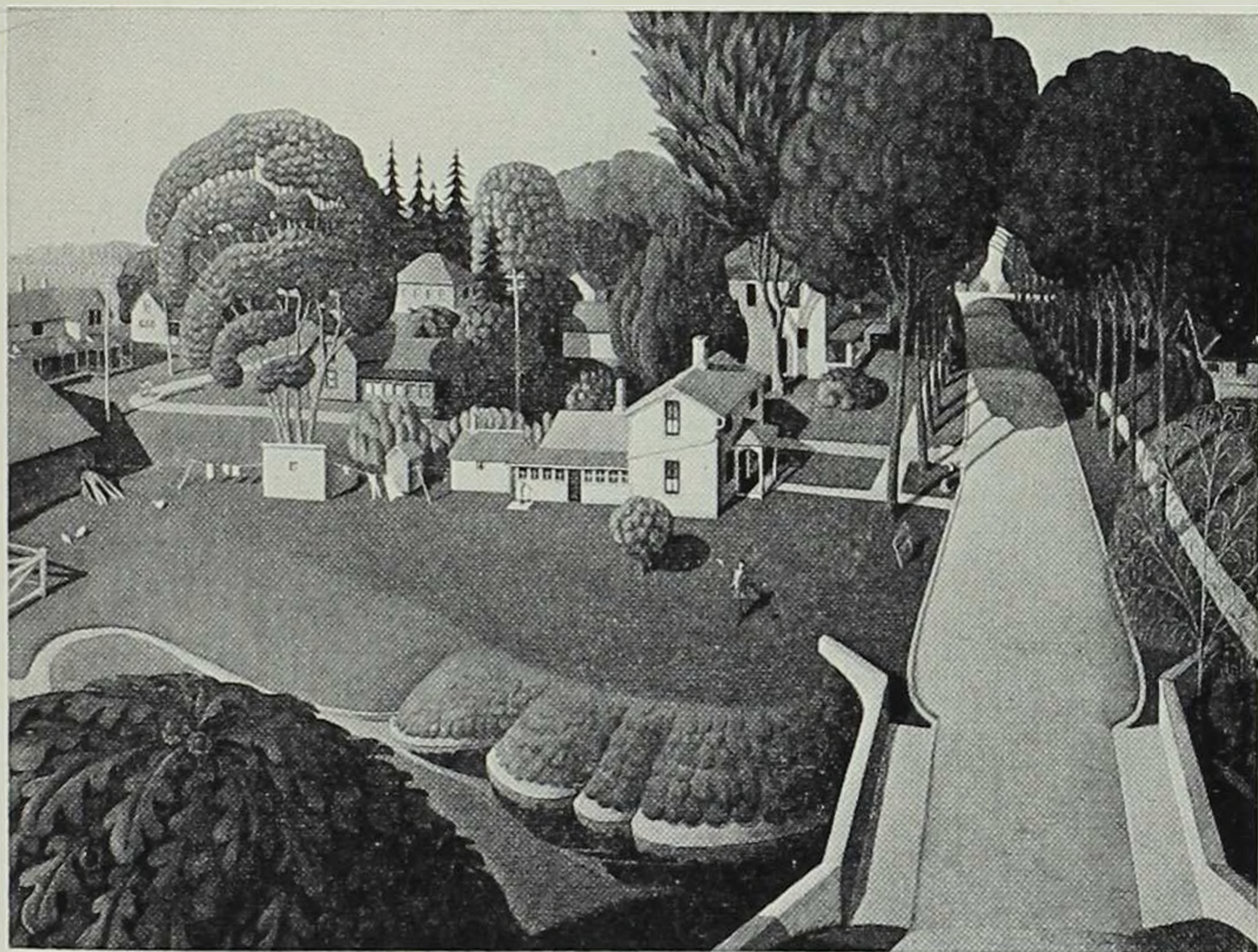


*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*

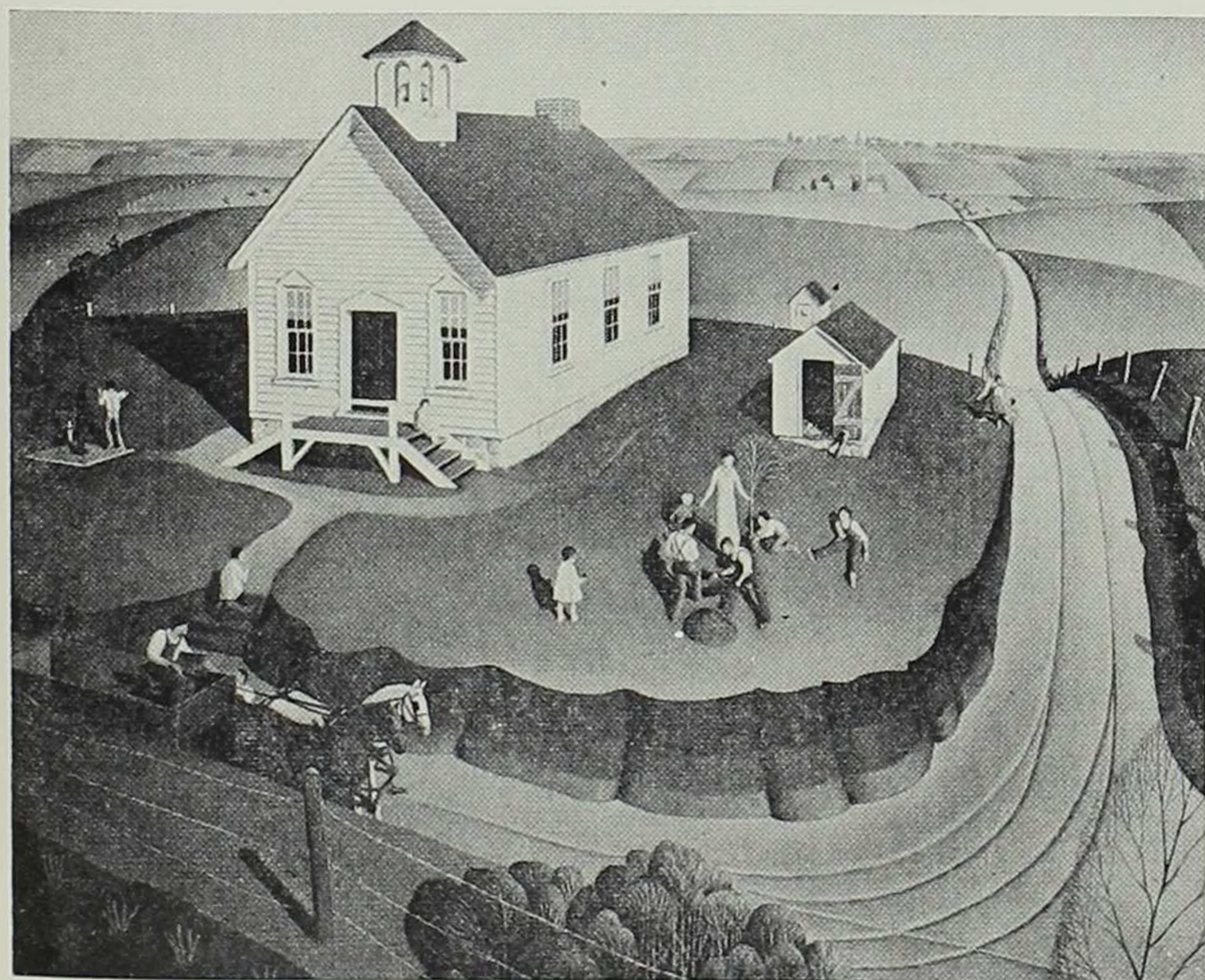
Midnight Ride of Paul Revere (1931)



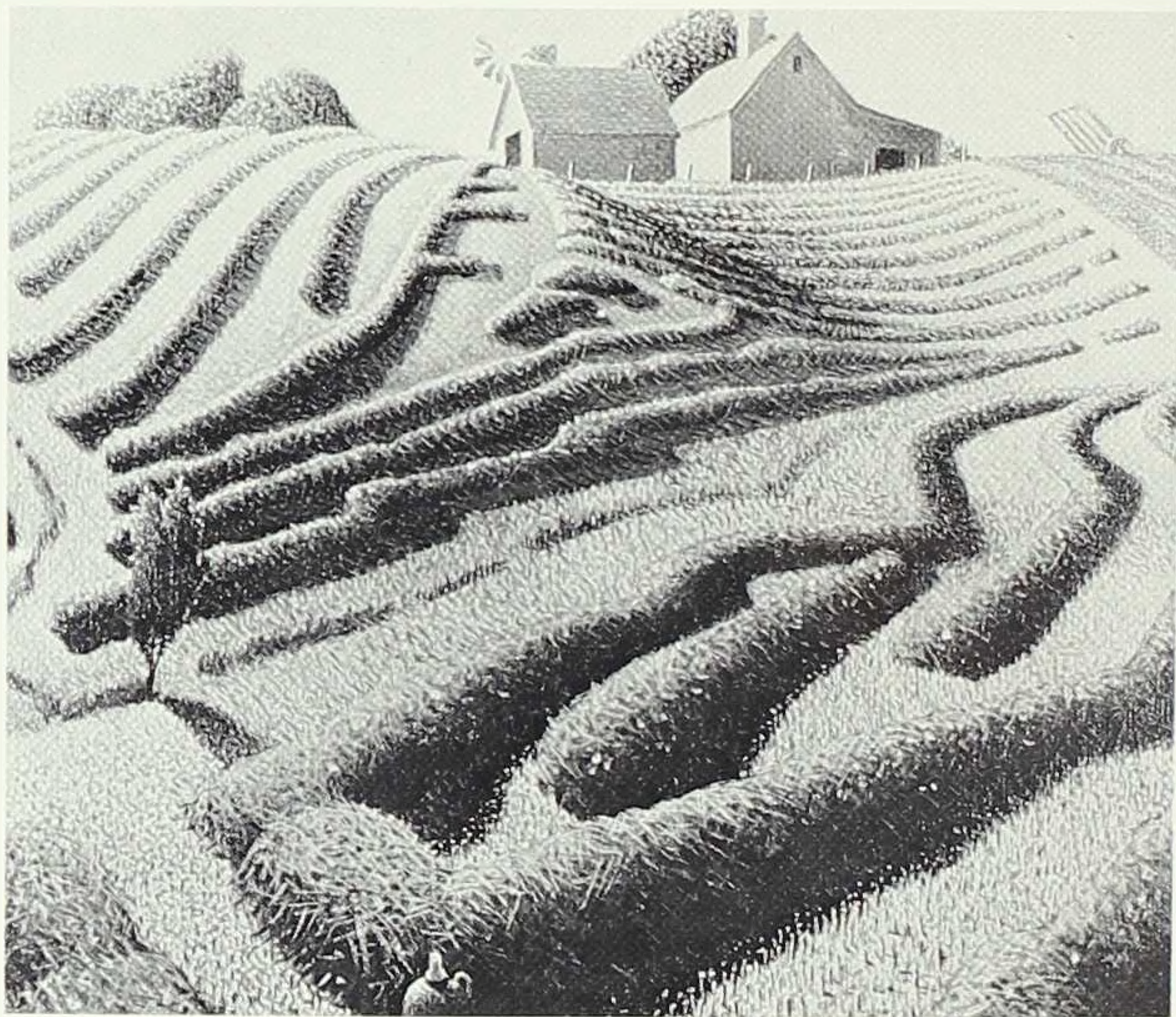
Grant Wood with his art class at the University of Iowa



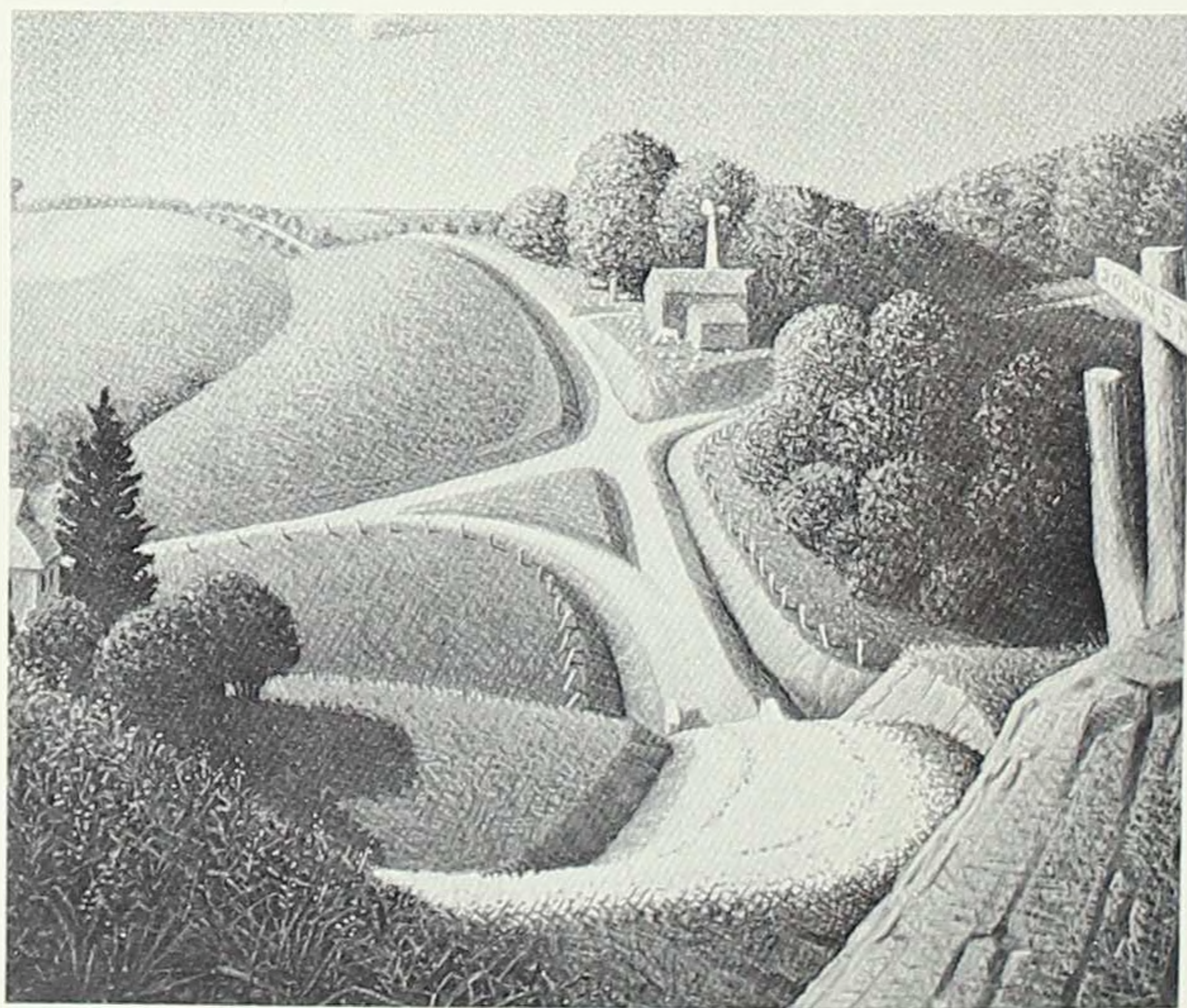
Hoover Home (1931)



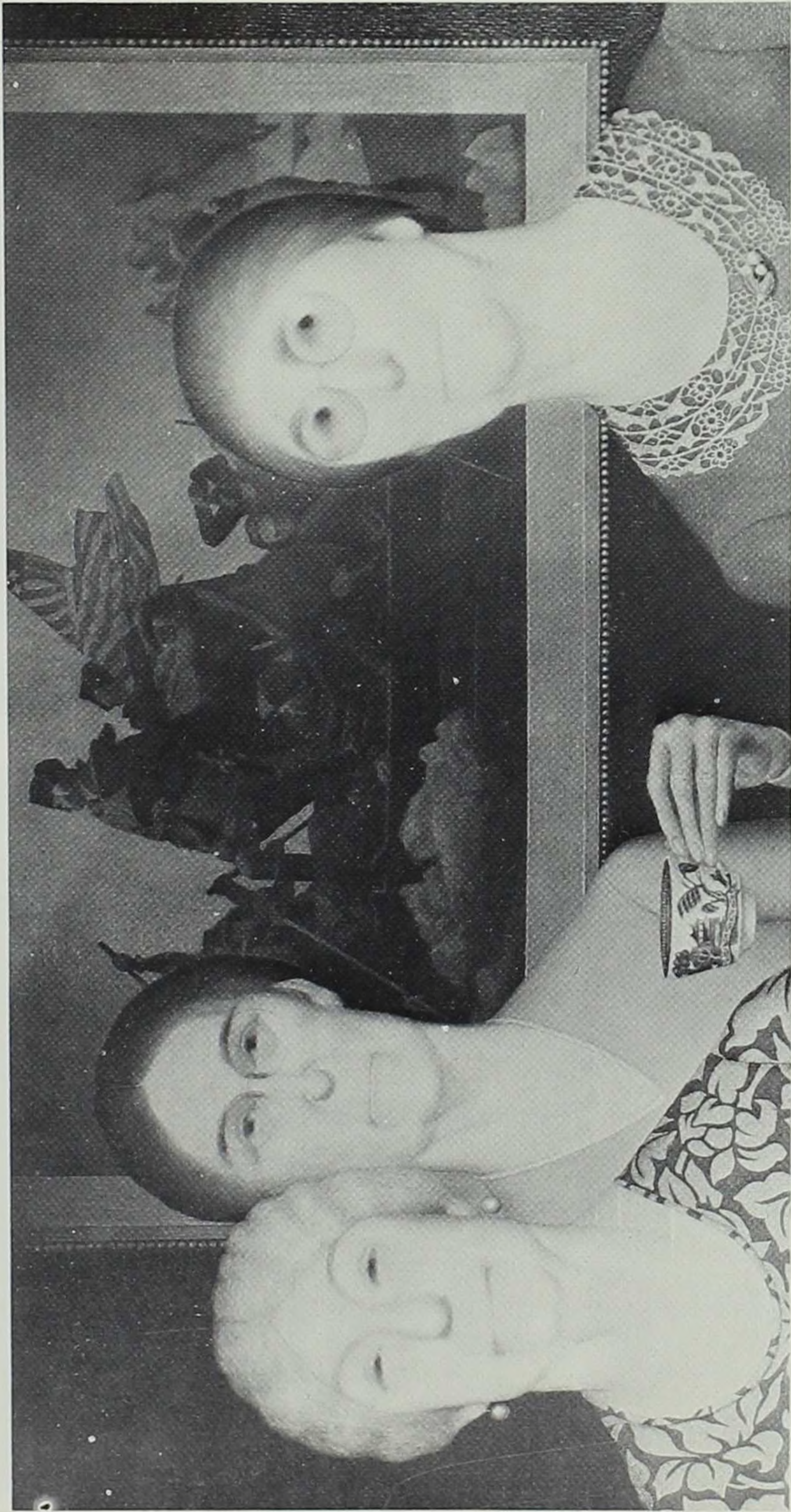
Arbor Day (1932)



Haying (1939)

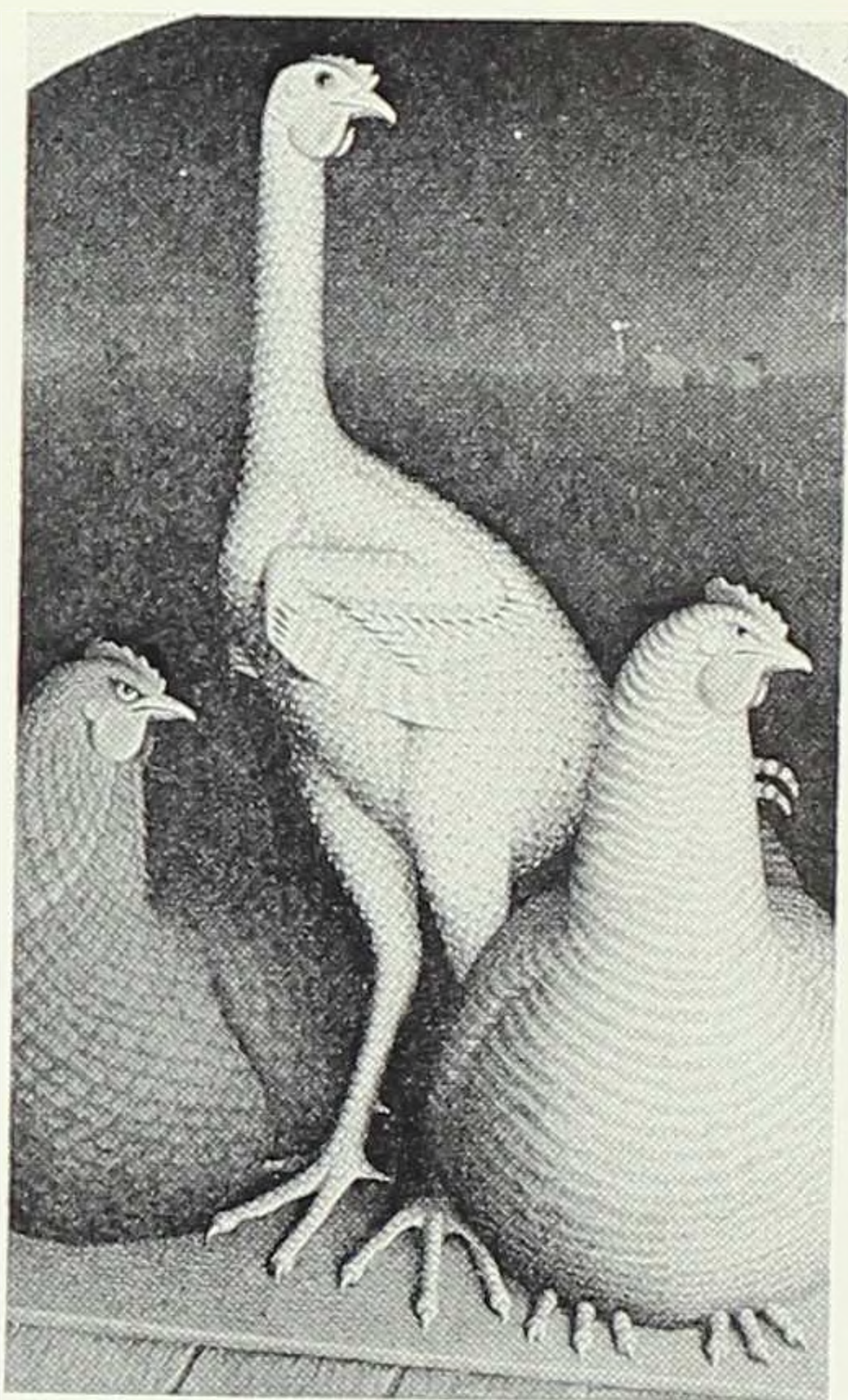


New Road (1939)



Daughters of Revolution (1932)

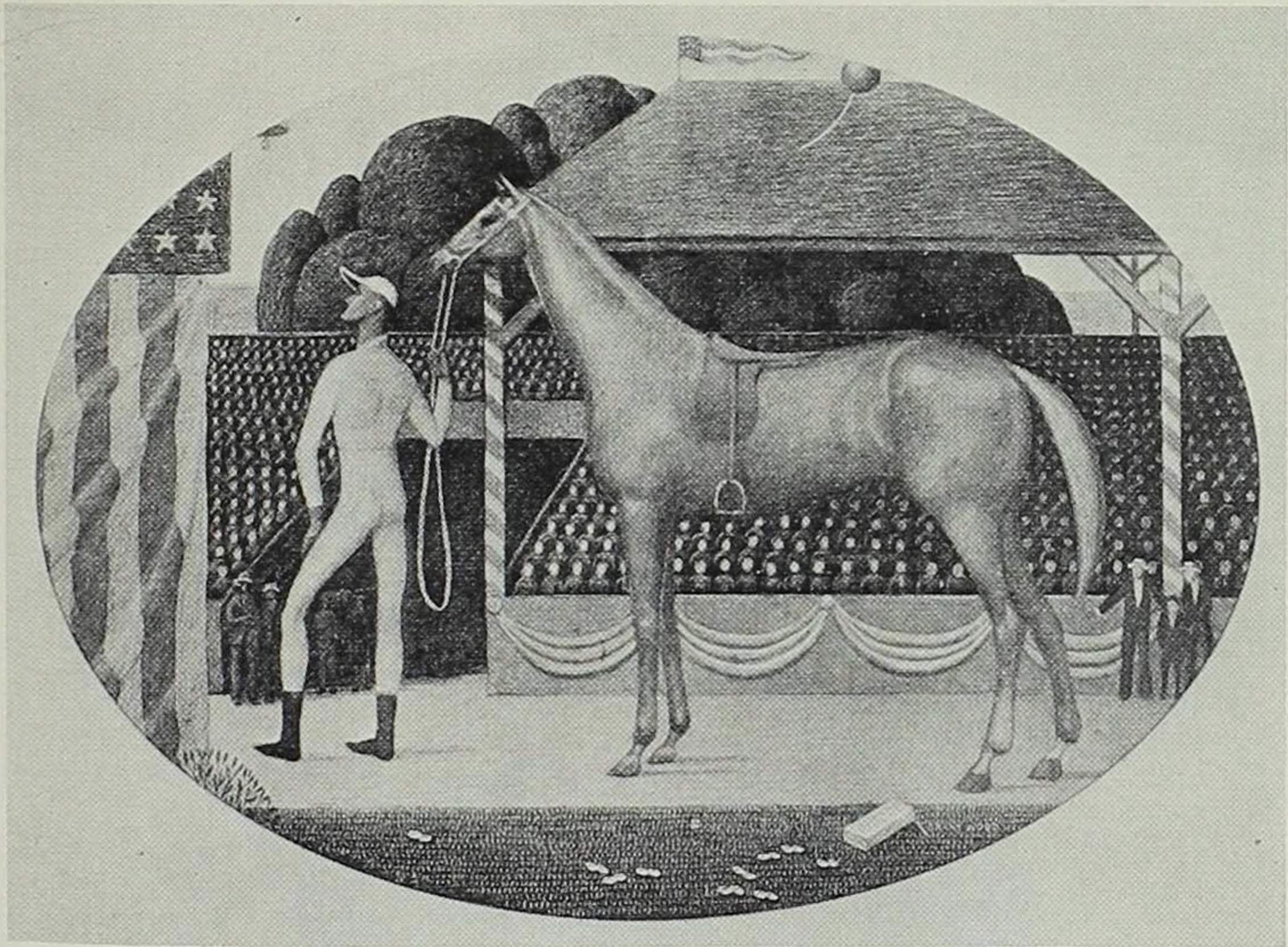
Cincinnati Art Museum



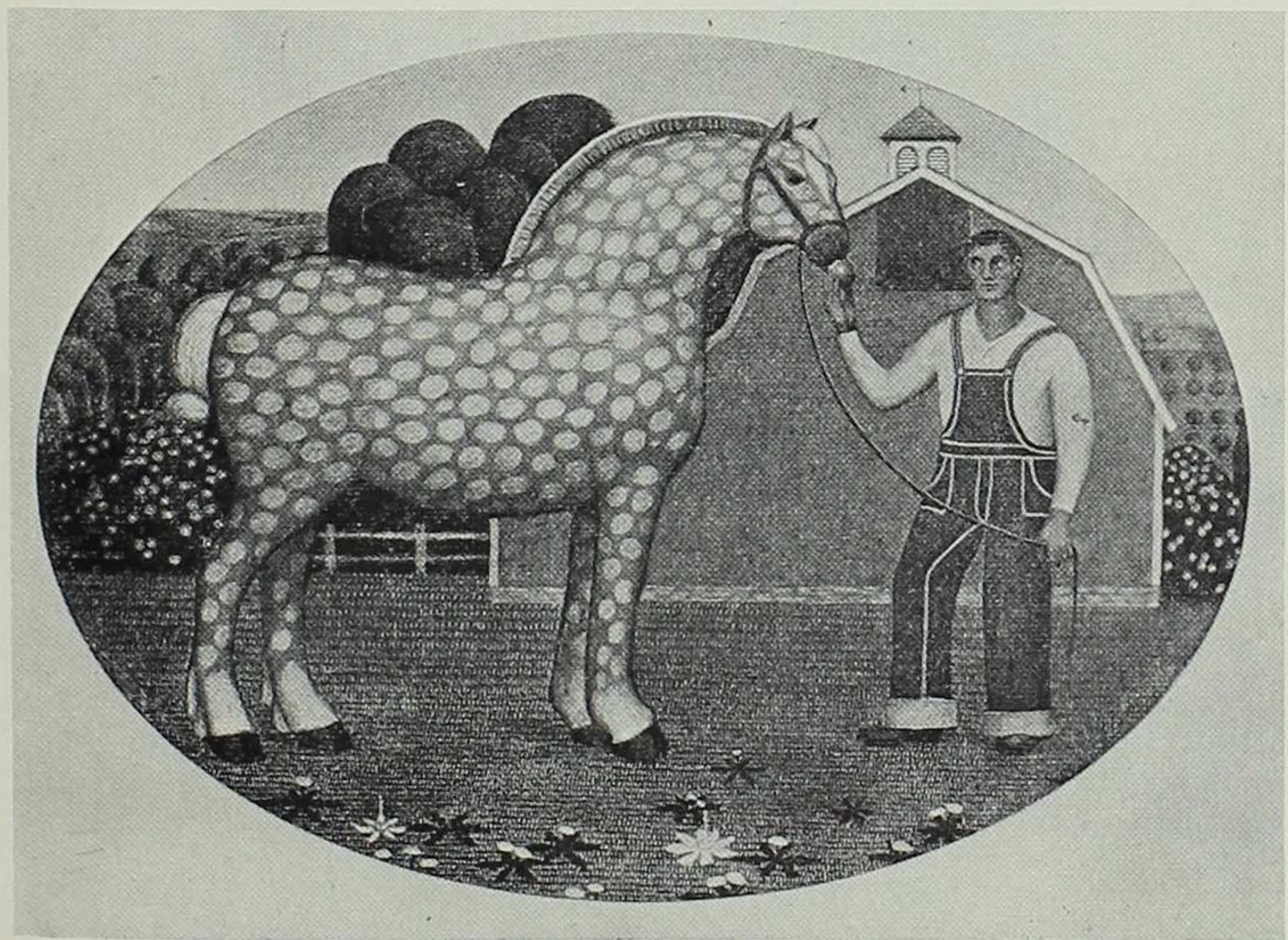
*Abbott Laboratories—North Chicago*  
Adolescence (1940)



Appraisal (1931)



Racehorse (1933)



Draft Horse (1933)

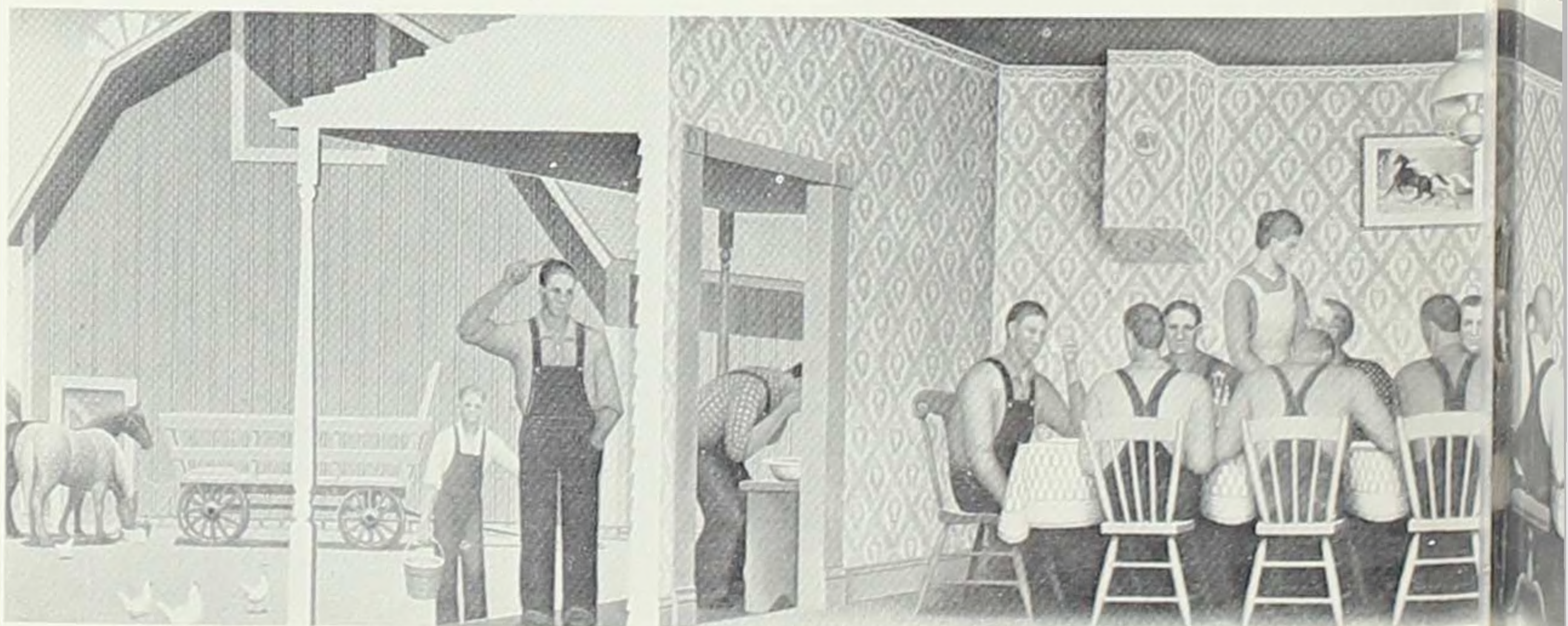


Vegetable (1938)



Fruit (1938)

The only colored litho  
Courtesy



Dinner for





Wild Flower (1938)

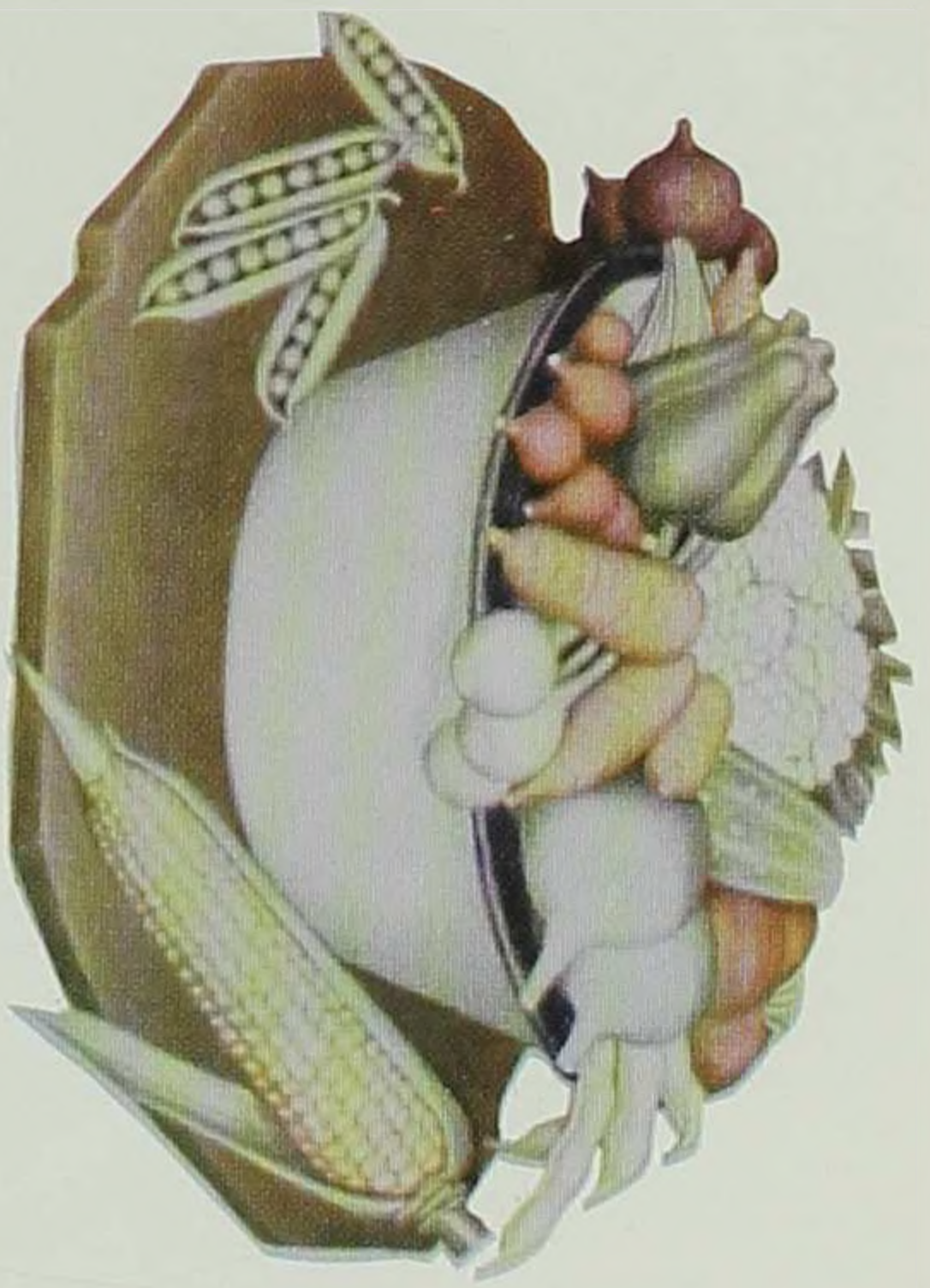


Tame Flower (1938)

Grant Wood ever made.  
ated Artists, New York



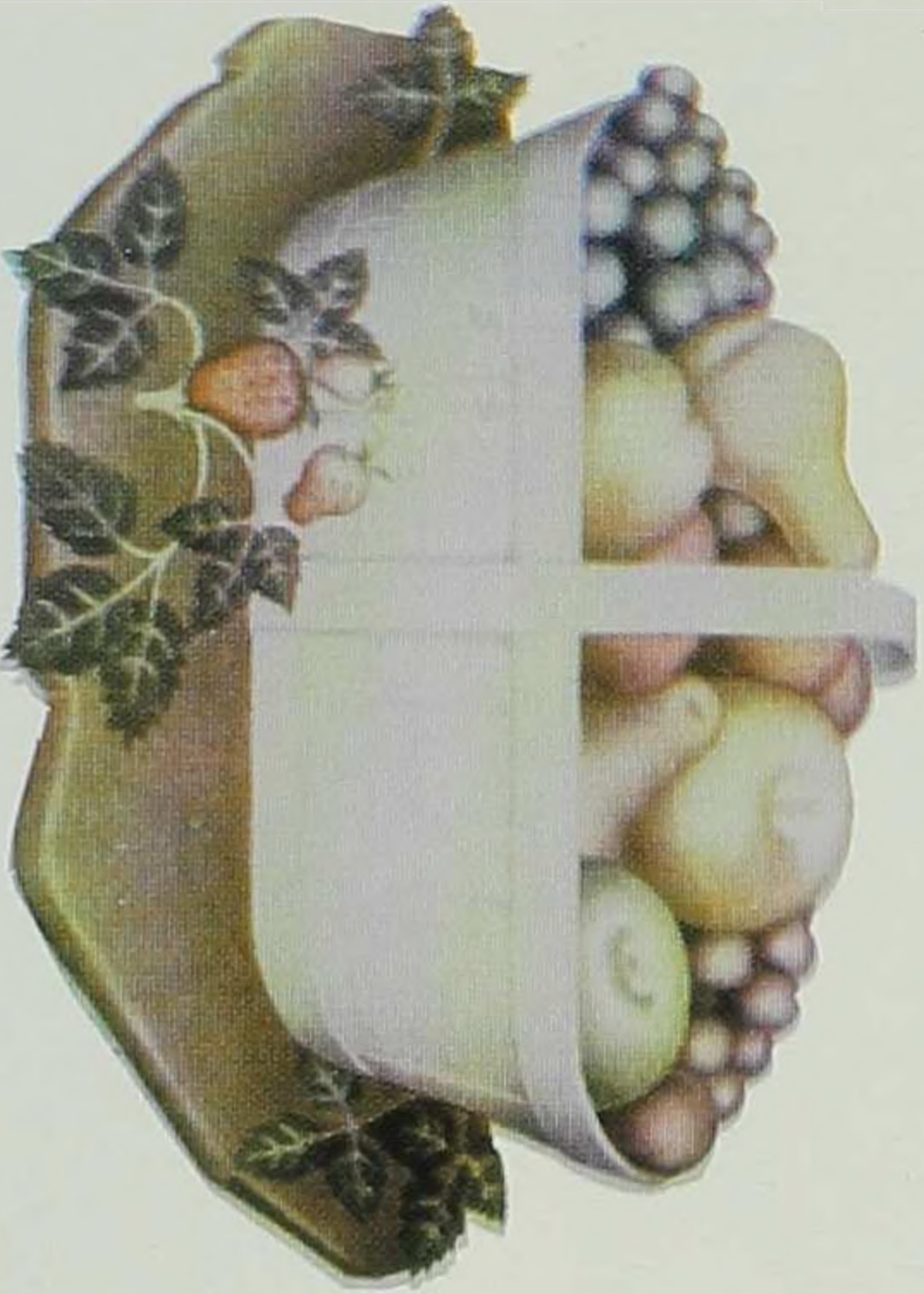
The Kitchen (1934)



Vegetable (1938)



Wild Flower (1938)

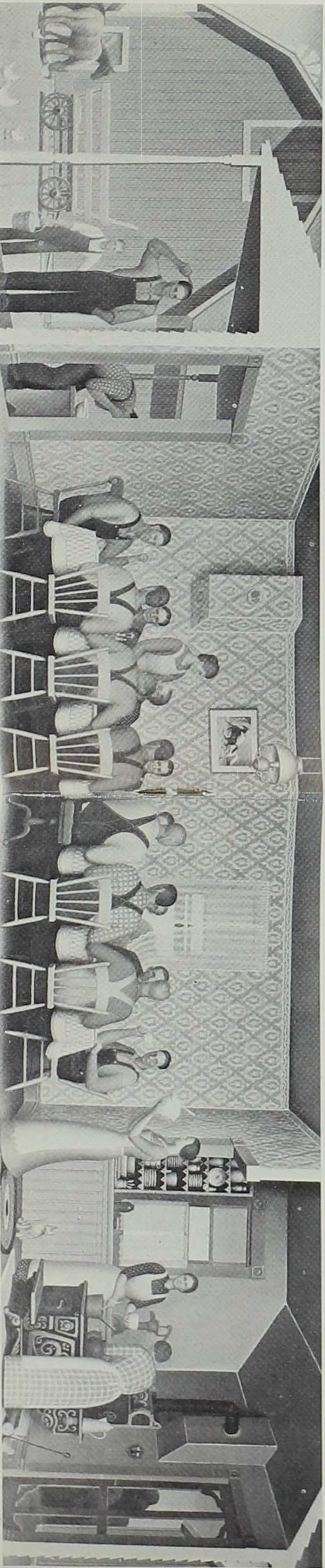


Fruit (1938)



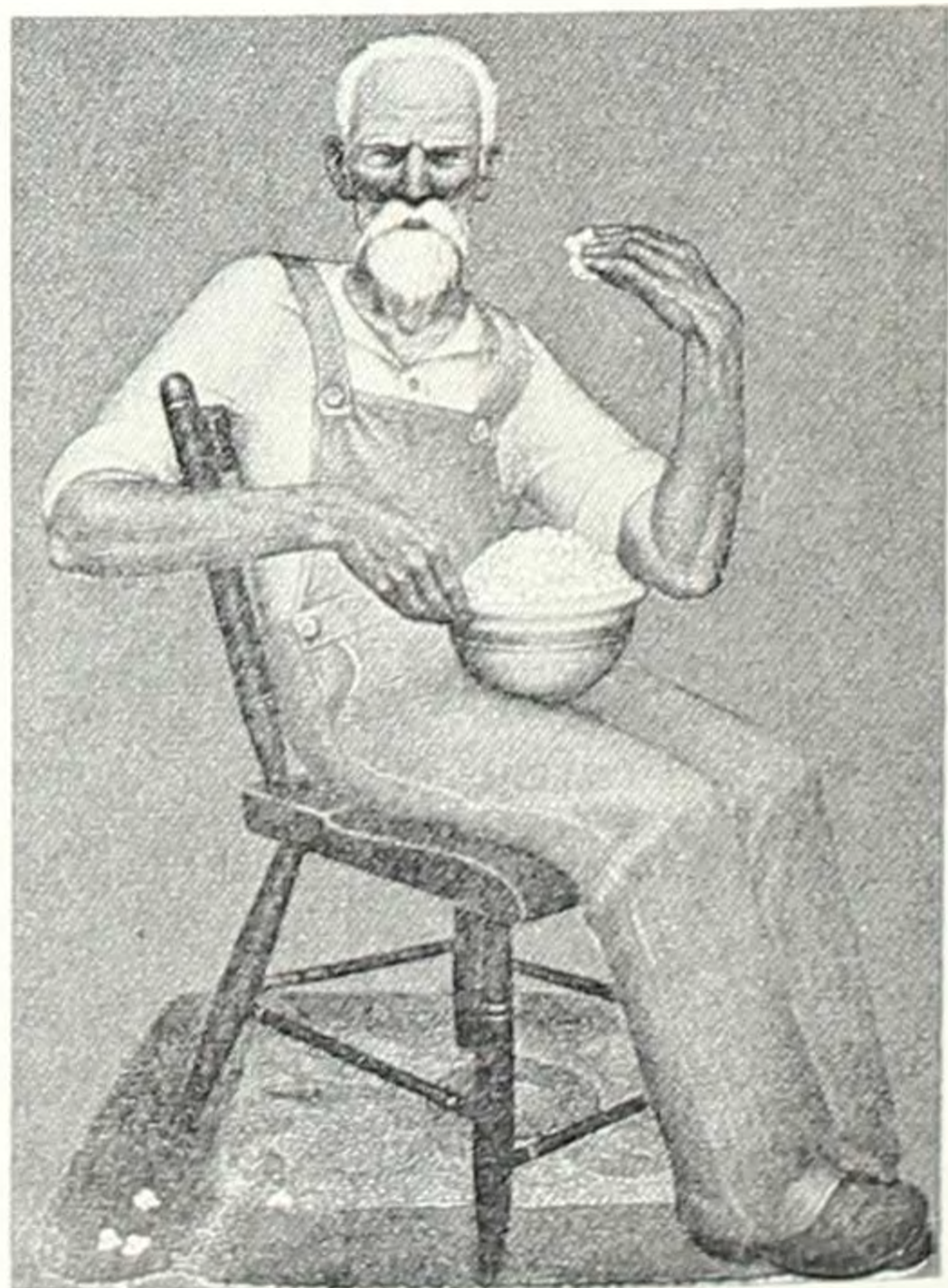
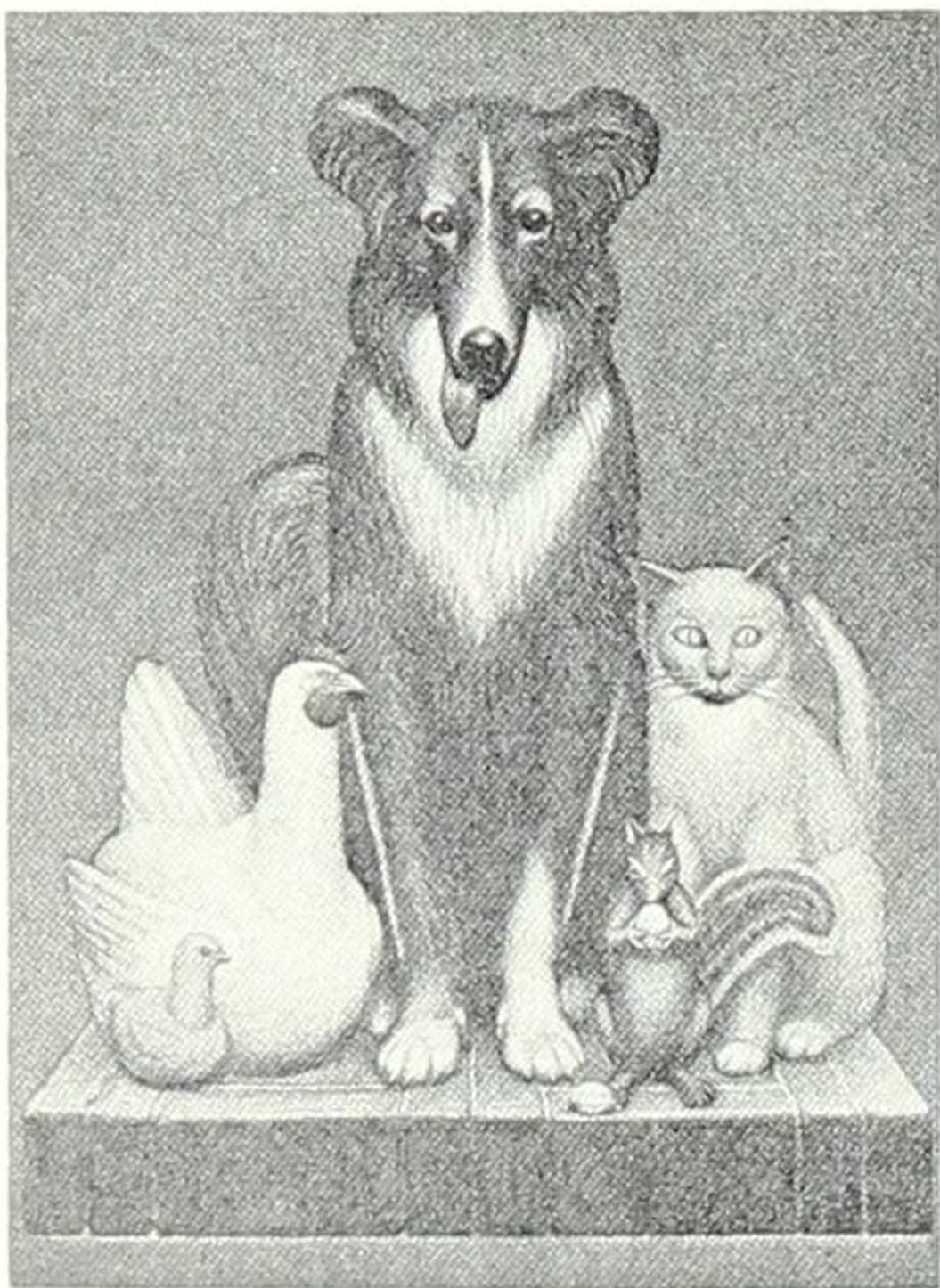
Tame Flower (1938)

*The only colored lithographs Grant Wood ever made.  
Courtesy Associated Artists, New York*

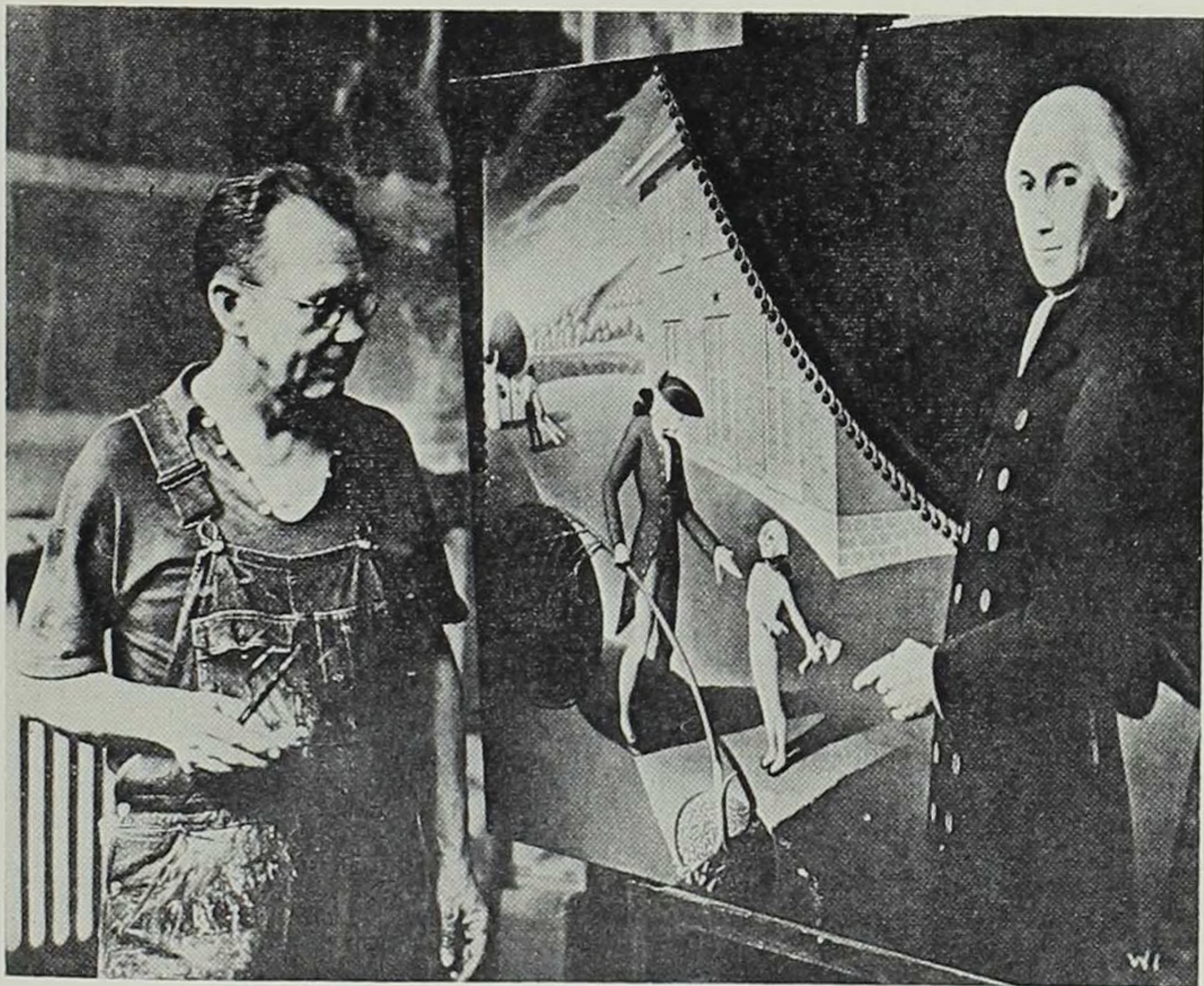


Dinner for Threshers (1934)

FARM ON THE HILL

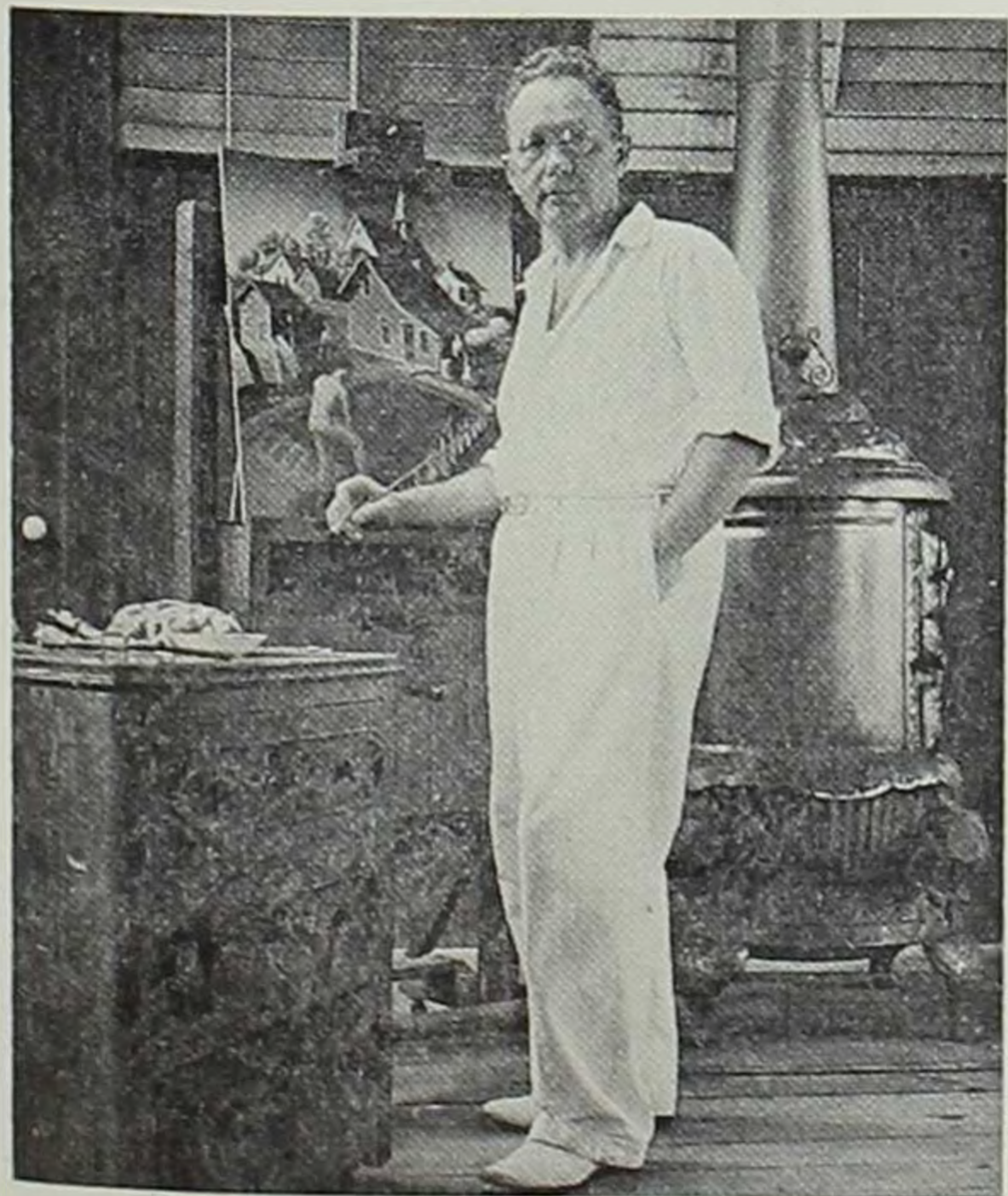


*From Madeline Horn's Farm on the Hill, Scribners*



*Photo Cedar Rapids Gazette*

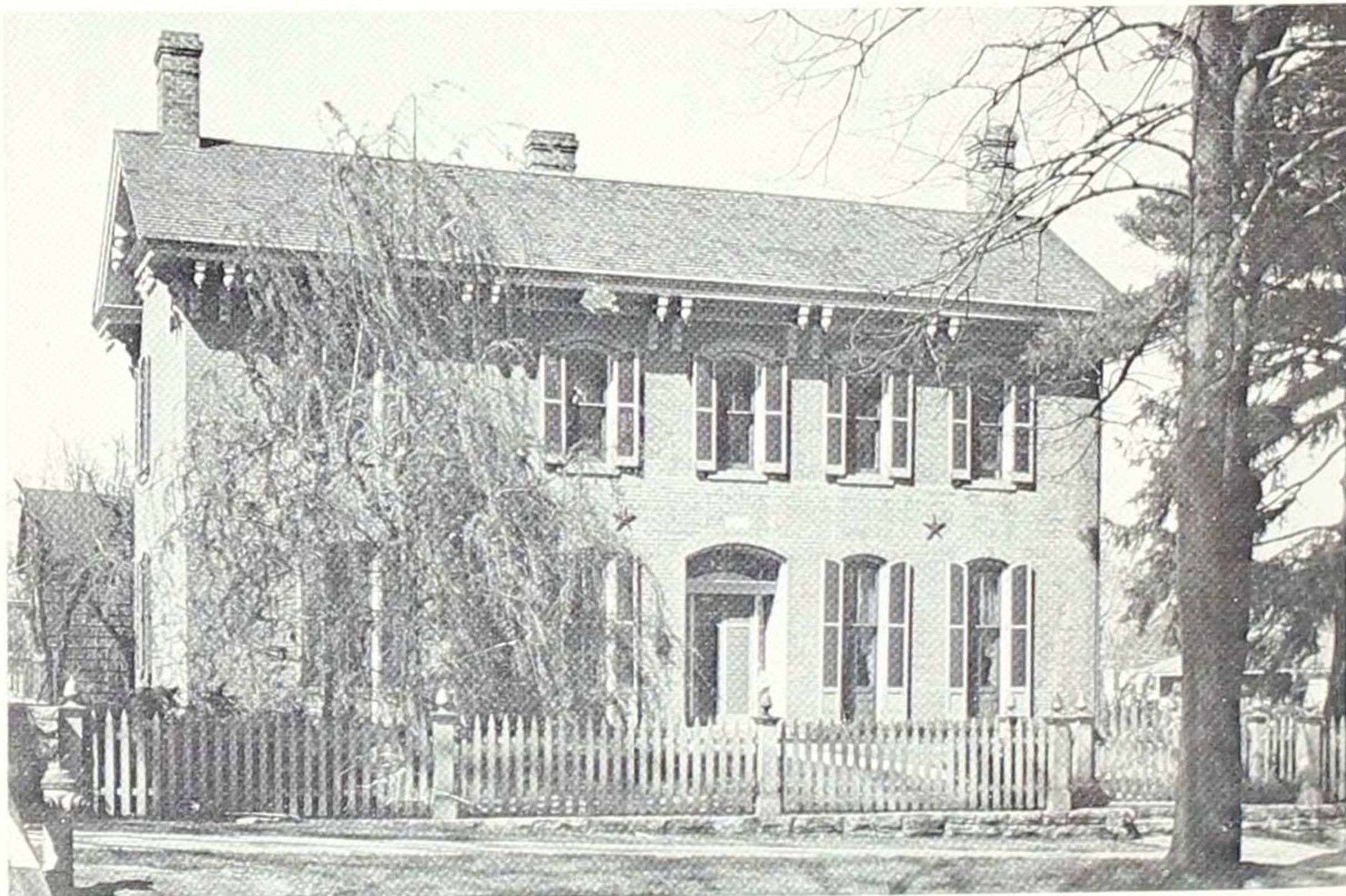
Parson Weems Fable—Washington Cherry Tree (1939)



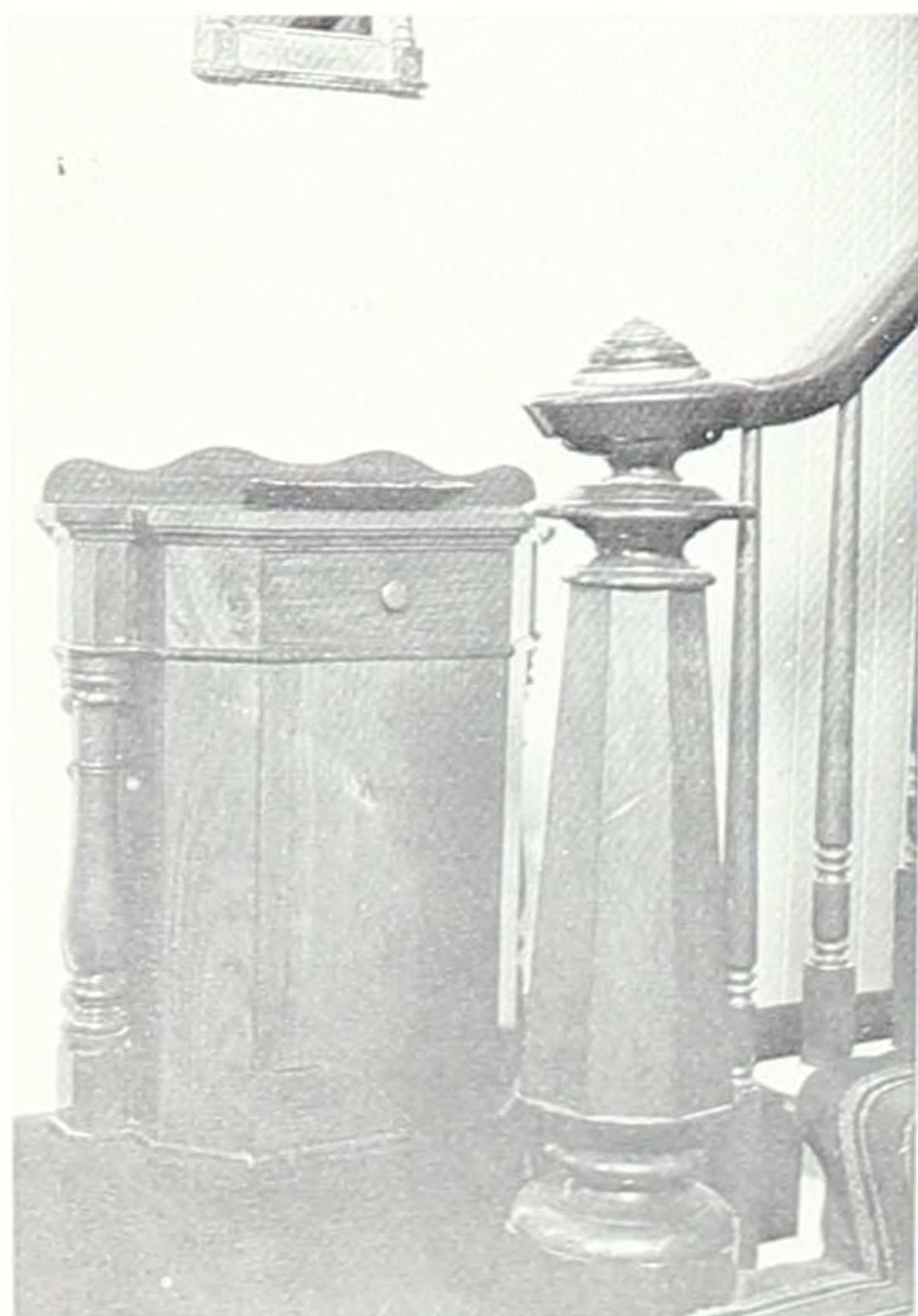
*Done in Studio at Clear Lake*  
Spring in Town (1941)



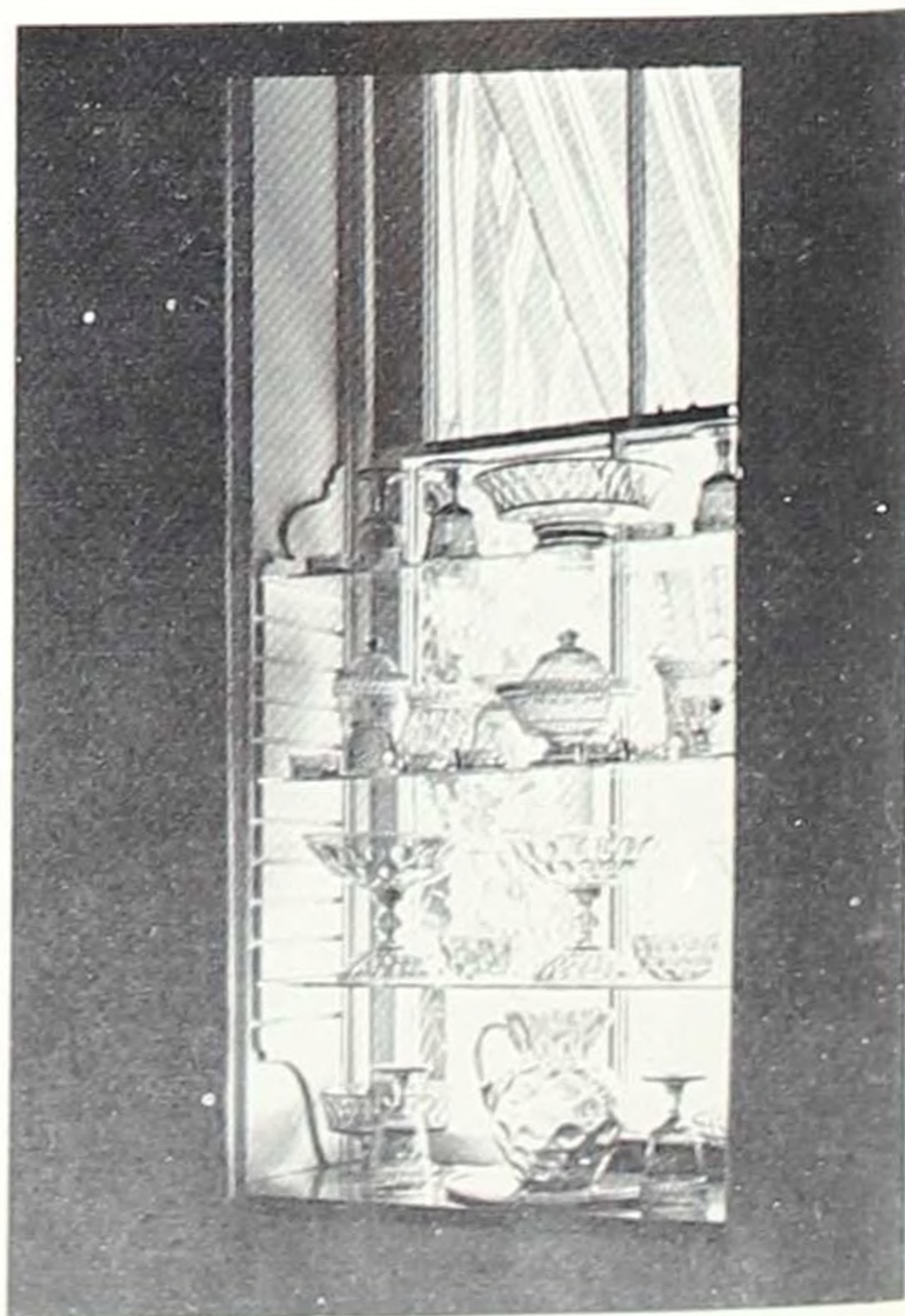
*Done in Turner Alley, Cedar Rapids*  
Daughters of Revolution (1932)



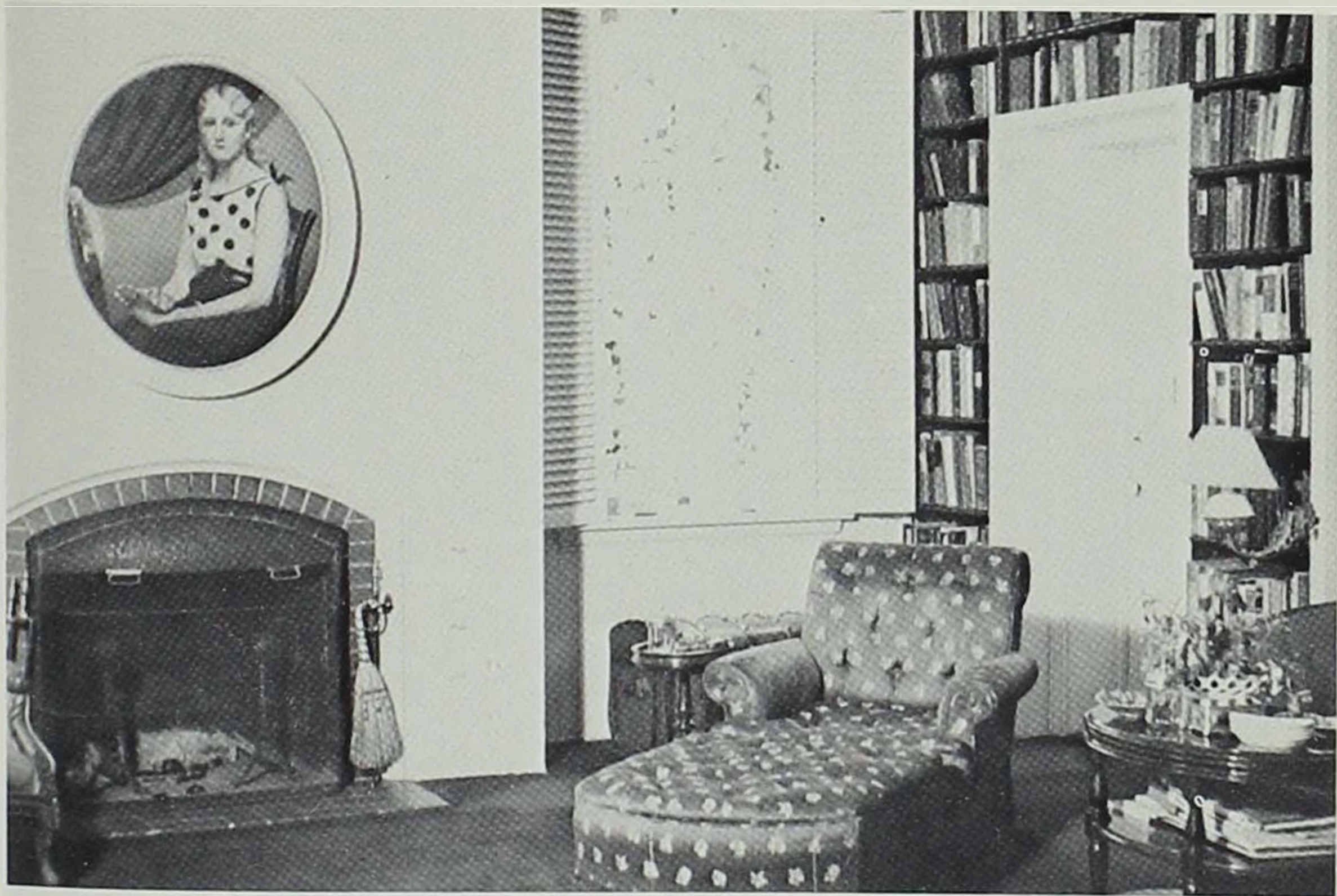
One of Grant Wood's finest artistic endeavors was his restoration, beginning in 1936, of the old Oakes Victorian house built in Iowa City in 1858.



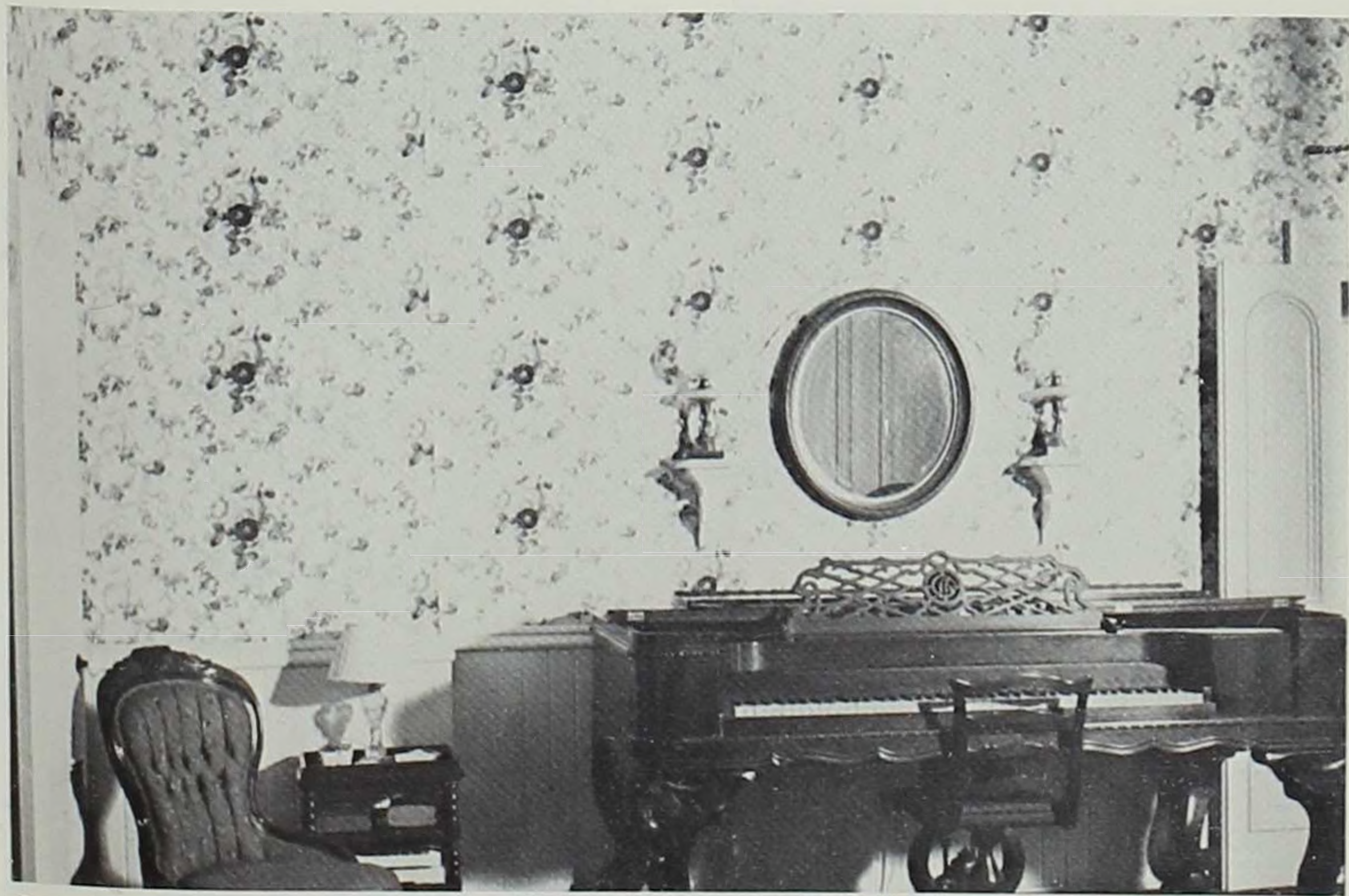
The artist designed an overshoe bin to stand at the foot of the stairs inside the front door.



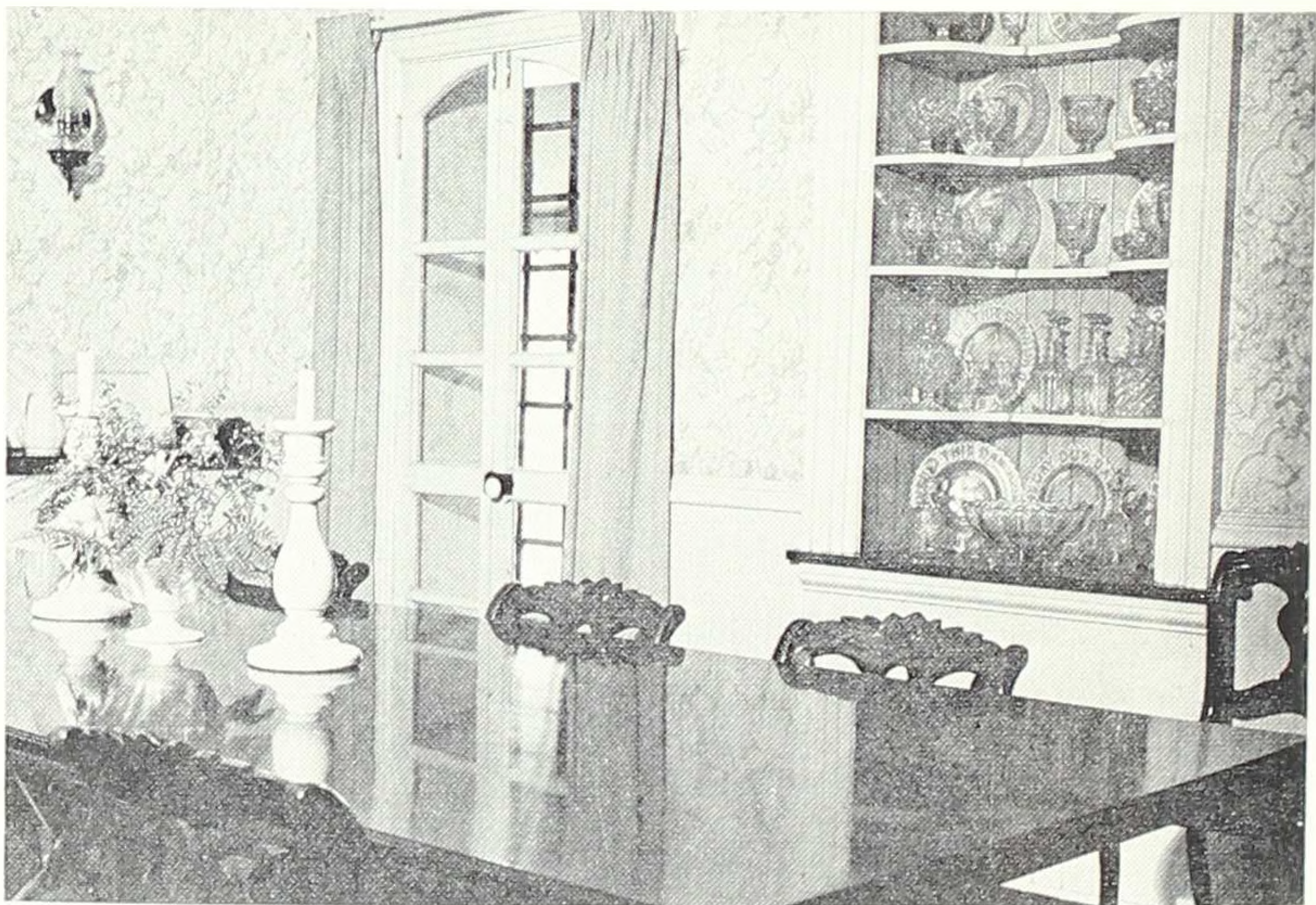
Glass shelves in a dining room held a collection of amber glass.



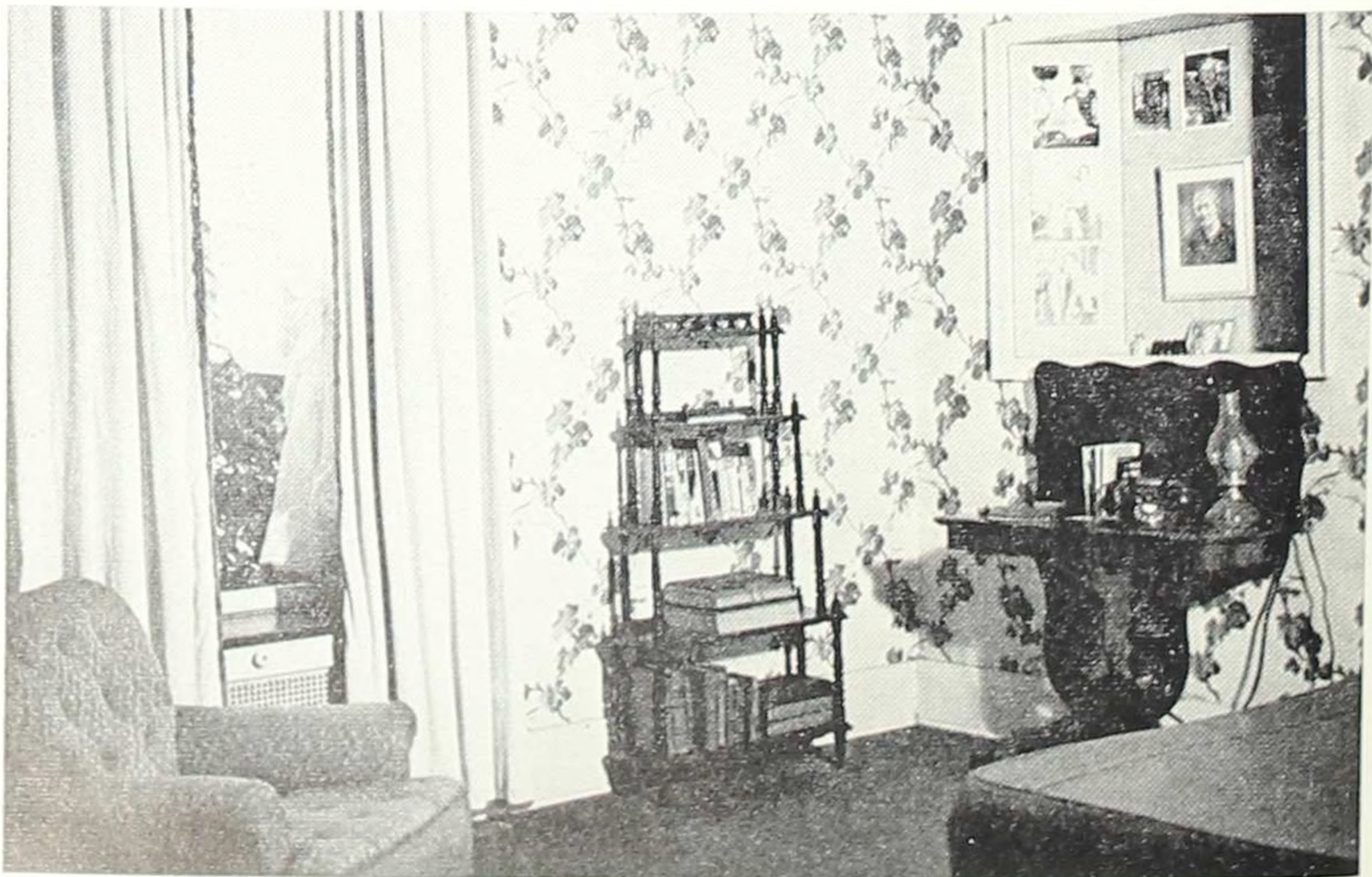
Grant designed the arm chair, built the bookcase, hammered out the fireplace copper hood, and designed the tables in the living room corner.



An old rose-wood piano fit in perfectly with the Early American furnishings and imported wallpaper of Victorian design.



Grant Wood designed his huge dining room table, using cast-iron supports from old store counters as legs. An open cupboard contained a large flint glass collection.



A corner of the bedroom contained an antique pedestal table, a whatnot for books, and a wall alcove for his personal photos, including one of his mother.

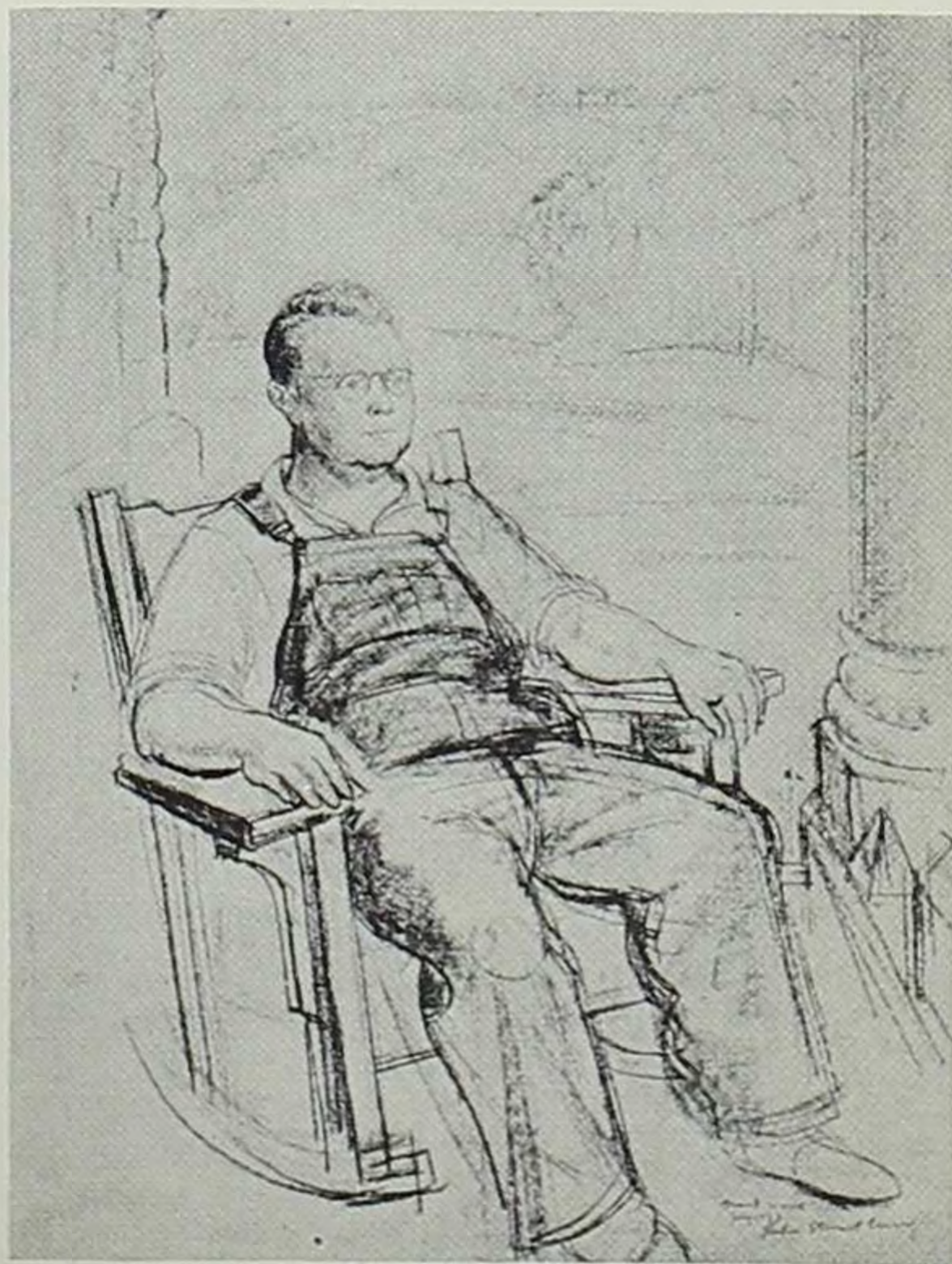


December Afternoon (1941)



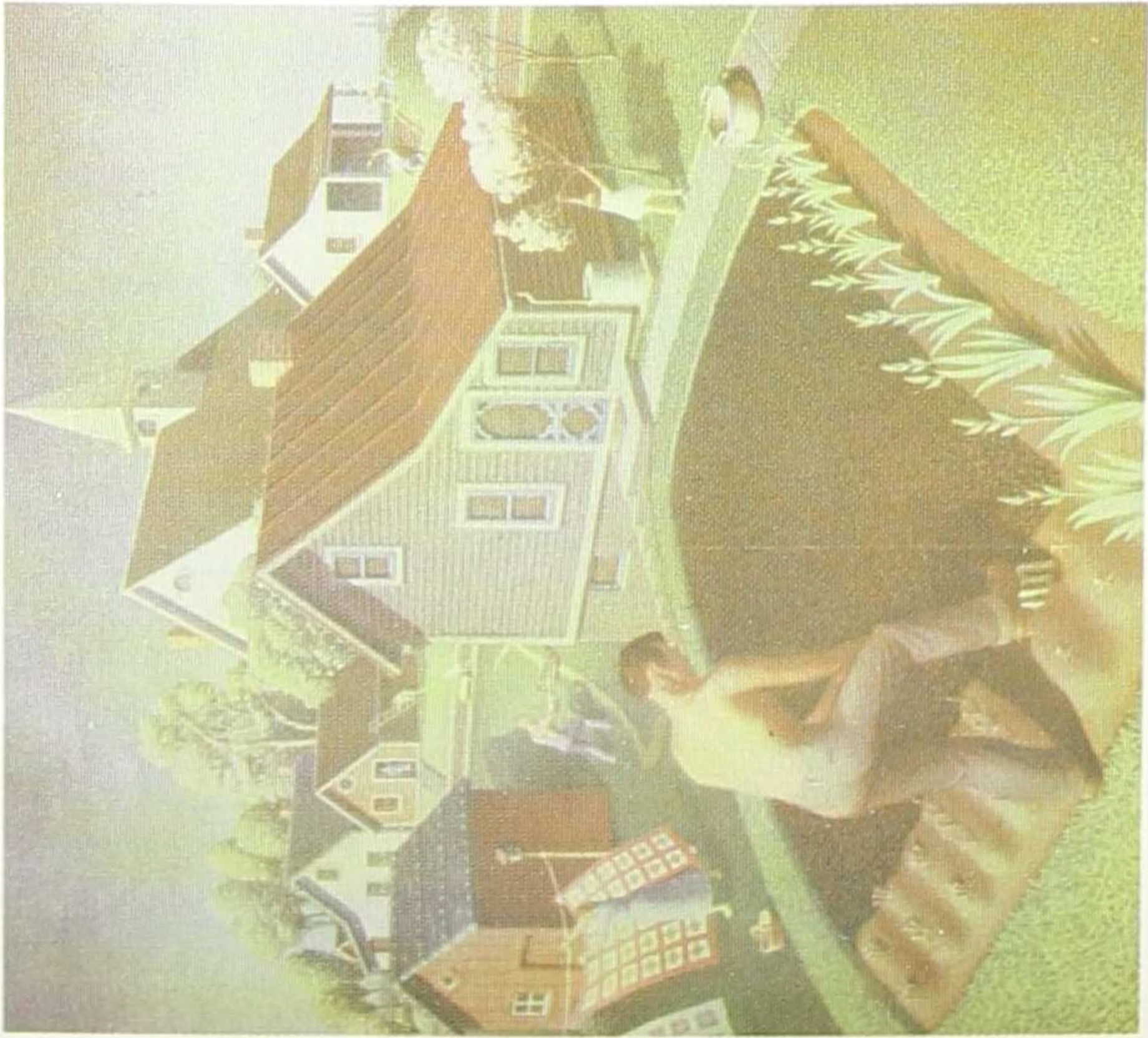
Davenport Municipal Art Gallery  
Self Portrait (1932)

*Grant Wood*



Joslyn Memorial Museum, Omaha  
John Stuart Curry Portrait of Wood (1933)





*Sheldon Swope Art Gallery, Terre Haute*  
Spring in Town (1941)



*William Benton, Southport, Conn.*  
Portrait of Nan (1938)

Tributes and messages of sorrow came from across the country from all walks of life. But all that might be said of him was said simply by his close friend, George D. Stoddard, then dean of the University of Iowa's Graduate College:

"Grant Wood painted what he knew and loved—and at times he had a little fun. Since he was modest and friendly, he was often misunderstood. He never defended himself or his work, but he believed in, and fought for, the right of his fellow artists to paint the American scene. Grant Wood was Iowa's best gift to the country. . ."