

GRANT WOOD

Gay American Artist (1891 - 1942)



Determined to become an artist since placing third in a national crayon-drawing contest at age 14, Grant Wood's art education included evening classes at The Art Institute of Chicago and 14 months studying in Paris. In 1927 the native Iowan received a commission to do a 20 x 24-foot stained glass window in the Cedar Rapids City Hall memorializing war veterans. To learn stained glass technique, Wood travelled to Munich where he was deeply influenced by 15th century Northern European artists who inspired his signature primitive linear style. All these influences came together when 'American Gothic' (1930) transformed Wood into a leading national figure in the art world. First exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, 'American Gothic' – a touchstone of American culture – became one of the world's most popular and beloved – as well as one of the most satirized – works of art in history. His other paintings, numbering in the hundreds, feature primarily landscapes and portraits. These include 'Victorian Survival', 'Daughters of the Revolution', and 'Washington Crossing the Delaware'. Grant spent much of the 1930s painting and promoting *regionalism* in the arts – a feeling that artists should paint what is around them. Two weeks after the initial unveiling of 'American Gothic,' caught in the spotlight of unexpected celebrity, a man appeared threatening to reveal that Wood was homosexual. In an attempt to conceal his sexuality, he married (and quickly divorced) an older woman. From then on, he lived in constant fear of being outed, and it took its toll. An exposé of his gay private life that was being prepared by *TIME Magazine* was surreptitiously pulled as word of Wood's failing health leaked out. The man who had helped capture the steadfast perseverance of the American spirit amidst The Great Depression died of liver cancer just two hours short of his 51st birthday.

Lesson Plans

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: Have you seen the painting "American Gothic"? What do you think of it? Have you ever seen any satirized versions of it?
2. Read the biographical information at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/grant-wood>.
3. Group Discussion: Together, explore several of Grant Wood's artworks online at: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/grantwood> Which artworks are each person's favorite? Least favorite? Discuss why.
4. Extend Knowledge: Read about Wood's early life, and how he became interested in art: <http://www.crma.org/Content/Collection/Grant-Wood.aspx> Does anything in his story surprise you? Or remind you of anyone else?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Grant Wood was a "closeted" gay man. Read both <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/closet-close-read-metaphor/2010-08> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Closeted>. What does it mean, and when did it originate? Can you think of another word that would work?
2. Read about other LGBTQ+ artists at the Legacy Project, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Rosa Bonheur, Beauford Delaney, and Keith Haring by clicking [HERE](#). Can you identify any similarities in their stories?
3. Wood was not only a painter; he was also a sculptor. Look closely at "Lilies of the Alley," which he made from garbage found in the alleys around his studio. <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/grantwood?section=1&subsection=3#exhibition-artworks> Make a similar work of art by using recycled "junk." Share why you chose the pieces you used.
4. Visit the Cedar Rapids Art Museum online at <http://www.crma.org/Content/Grant-Wood.aspx> to explore Wood's studio and several of his best-known artworks. How do you think his surroundings may have influenced him?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Grant Wood was considered a "Regionalist," meaning he drew artistic inspiration from his Iowa surroundings. Now imagine *you* are a Regionalist. Make a list of subjects from your life and community that inspire you.
2. What do you think the relationship is between the two people depicted in "American Gothic"? What aspects of the way they are rendered in the painting cause you to think of them that way? What assumptions did you make based on common perceptions their gender and age? How do the assumptions we make of one another impact society as a whole?
3. Imagine if Wood was an "out" gay artist living and creating today. Do you think he would be the same artist he was decades earlier? Why or why not?
4. Some art historians believe Wood used his artwork to express inner feelings about his sexual orientation that he could not express openly. View "Spring in Town" and "Arnold Comes of Age." Do you think these art historians are correct? Why or why not?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Take a long look at "The Appraisal," Wood's painting of a wealthy woman buying a chicken at a farm. www.wikiart.org/en/grant-wood/the-appraisal-1931 Who do you think is doing the appraisal? What (or who) is being appraised (evaluated)? Look at the artwork from both women's point of view? How does the meaning change from one viewpoint to the other?
2. "American Gothic" is one of the most satirized (parodied) artworks in history. www.americangothicparodies.com What is a parody? Why do you think people make parodies?
3. Create your own parody of "American Gothic" to express how you feel about life in America today.