



Grant Wood  
American, 1891 - 1942

# *Haying*

1939

oil on canvas on paperboard mounted on hardboard

overall: 32.8 x 37.7 cm (12 15/16 x 14 13/16 in.)

framed: 53.3 x 58.4 cm (21 x 23 in.)

Inscription: lower left: © GRANT / WOOD / 1939

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Strasburger 1982.7.1

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## ENTRY

Grant Wood's early biographer Darrell Garwood identified *Haying* and *New Road* as "a set of twin landscapes" that the artist painted during the unusually short period of three weeks in June 1939, shortly after recovering from a minor operation. [1] They were painted specifically to be exhibited at a fine arts festival at the University of Iowa in Cedar Rapids. [2] Wood had been engrossed with lithography for the previous three years, and these were the first oil paintings he had executed since *Spring Turning* (1936, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, NC). Shortly after completing them he painted the well-known *Parson Weems' Fable* (1939, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX), and he continued to work regularly in oil until his death in 1942.

Although *Haying* and *New Road* were inspired by views Wood saw during his travels between Iowa City and Lake Macbride, they are representative examples of the idealized landscapes of rural Iowa that Wood first painted in *Stone City, Iowa* [fig. 1]. [3] Wood's choice of subject was dictated in part by his rejection of the urban Northeast's cultural hegemony over the rest of the United States and his belief that an artist has a special rapport with his native area. In his 1935 essay

*Revolt Against the City* Wood expresses his annoyance at the eastern habit of stereotyping the Midwest as “provincial” and populated by “peasants.” He declares that Iowa, his native state, is “a various, rich land abounding in painting material.” In accordance with Wood’s statement that “central and dominant in our Midwestern scene is the farmer,” his landscapes feature the cultivated lands, farms, manual farm machinery, windmills, and grazing animals characteristic of Iowa. [4] The few previous scholarly discussions of *Haying* and *New Road* have generally centered on the barn, a staple of the regionalist landscape, as a rapidly vanishing icon of the American countryside that signified community and social stability. [5]

Despite Wood’s regionalist convictions and advocacy of American subjects and artistic styles, European influences are discernable in his mature oeuvre. Wood was familiar with the contemporary *Neue Sachlichkeit* painters in Germany, who practiced various forms of detailed realism and whose work he had seen during his 1928 trip to Munich. [7] The wide-angle vista, bird’s-eye view, slightly distorted linear perspective, lack of atmospheric perspective, unusually high horizon line, and meticulous attention to detail in many of Wood’s landscapes also reflect his keen awareness of 15th-century northern European precedents. [6] Operating in tandem with Wood’s evocations of the traditional harvesting scenes found in the calendar pages of illuminated manuscripts and paintings such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s *Hay Making* (1565, National Gallery, Prague), the eerie absence of anecdotal human activity in *Haying* reveals his modernist sensibilities.

Although Wood has generally been considered a conservative realist, his habit of reducing landscapes into a series of simplified, ornamental, abstract, repeating patterns demonstrates a familiarity with modernism and art deco design. [8] Brady M. Roberts has recently noted that *Haying*’s complex structure of multicolored, thin, horizontal brush strokes creates “a surface vocabulary approximating Seurat’s pointillism.” [9] Although *Haying* and *New Road* were executed in Wood’s precise, crosshatched technique, the relatively loose handling of paint has more in common with his plein-air studies than the smoother, more polished surfaces of his major paintings. In a letter to the offices of Associated American Artists in New York Wood referred to them as “sketches,” and it is possible, as the typewritten papers attached to their reverses suggest, that he planned to paint larger versions. [10]

Wood characterized the verdant Iowa landscape as an idyllic land of plenty and gave no indication in his paintings of the severe economic problems and natural disasters that beset Iowa farmers during the 1930s. *Haying* betrays no evidence of severe soil depletion and erosion, declining crop prices, the problems engendered

by tenant farming, the fact that many farm owners were overburdened with heavy mortgages and threatened with foreclosure, manifestations of labor unrest among the farmers, the mass exodus of lowans to other states, and the many farmers who abandoned their agricultural lifestyle and sought a better livelihood in growing urban industrial centers. [11] While Wood acknowledged that the farmer's life "is engaged in a constant conflict with natural forces," [12] he, unlike John Steuart Curry (American, 1897 - 1946) and lesser-known Texas regionalists such as Jerry Bywaters (American, 1906 - 1989) and Alexandre Hogue (American, 1898 - 1994), [13] did not stress the ravages of natural calamities in his benign, sunny landscapes. Although many of Iowa's problems were successfully addressed by state and federally funded programs, the idealistic agrarianism of landscapes such as *Haying* was far removed from reality.

James Dennis has explained this phenomenon by citing Wood's populist belief that the farmer was a virtuous, pure, and self-sufficient tiller of the soil who was immune from corrupting influences. This idealized view of rural life had its origins in the late 19th century. During the 1930s, isolationist, nationalist agrarians revived this attitude in response to the growing encroachment of urbanization into the American heartland. [14] Dennis discusses how Wood reinforces this myth by excluding mechanized farm machinery in his agricultural landscapes, as well as railroads, utility poles, telephone wires, billboards, and other signs of the modern industrial era. Here the haying machine on the horizon signifies the farmer's close, physical relationship with the soil through manual labor. Nevertheless, Wood revealed his involuntary susceptibility to technology by illustrating wide expanses of uniformly cultivated land that could only have been accomplished through mechanization. Similarly, Wood's characteristic form of abstraction was influenced by innovations in industrial design, such as streamlining. [15]

Despite their disarmingly benign and seemingly straightforward appearance, landscapes such as *Haying* and *New Road* are complex, carefully orchestrated works full of ambiguities and inconsistencies that reveal much about Wood's unique brand of regionalism. If *New Road* depicts the country in 1939 as literally and figuratively approaching a crossroads, a fateful turning point between the calamities of the Great Depression and what would prove to be the even more ominous, existential challenges of World War II, the irregular patterning of the fields in *Haying* presents the same moment as even more intricate and mazelike. The corked water jug resting in the shadows at the elbow of an L-shaped row in the foreground beckons the viewer to begin their journey through the painting's

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labyrinth of hay. Like a traveler at a crossroads, a decision must be made to go to the right or to the left.

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Grant Wood, *Stone City, Iowa*, 1930, oil on wood panel, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha. Gift of the Art Institute of Omaha, 1930.35

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## NOTES

- [1] Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York, 1944; repr. Westport, CT, 1971), 222.
- [2] “Grant Wood Completes Two Paintings for Arts Festival,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, July 16, 1939.
- [3] In addition to the landscapes mentioned in the text, other closely related examples are *Young Corn* (1931, Cedar Rapids Art Center, IA), *Fall Plowing* (1931, John Deere Administration Building, East Moline, IL), and *Spring Plowing* (1932, private collection).
- [4] Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City* (Iowa City, IA, 1935), 28–29. Wood was well informed about Iowa's status. According to *Iowa: A Guide to the*

*Hawkeye State Compiled and Written by the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Iowa* (Iowa City, IA, 1938), 65, the state possessed the “largest proportion of arable land of all states, the number of farms is estimated at 221,986 with a combined average of 34,359,000 acres.” Agriculture was the state's main industry, and at the time “the population of 31 of the 99 counties is entirely rural and in only 14 counties do the urban groups (people living in cities of over 2,500 population) exceed the rural.”

- [5] Heath Schenker, “Picturing the Central Valley,” *Landscape* 32 (1994): 8; see also the pamphlet that accompanied the exhibition *Barn Again*, National Building Museum, Washington, DC, 1994, NGA curatorial files.
- [6] Wood's interest in early northern European painting is discussed throughout Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood, The Regionalist Vision* (Minneapolis, MN, 1983).
- [7] The influence of Neue Sachlichkeit painting on Wood was first discussed by Horst W. Janson, “The International Aspects of Regionalism,” *College Art Journal* 2 (May 1943): 110–115.
- [8] For a discussion of Wood's relationship with modernism, see James M. Dennis, “Grant Wood's Native-Born Modernism,” in Brady M. Roberts, James M. Dennis, James S. Horns, and Helen Mar Parkin, *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed* (Davenport, IA, 1995), 43–63.
- [9] Brady M. Roberts, James M. Dennis, James S. Horns, and Helen Mar Parkin, *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed* (Davenport, IA, 1995), 3.
- [10] Grant Wood to Reeves Lewenthal and Maurice Liederman, June 29, 1939, *Associated American Artists Records*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- [11] For a brief summary of Iowa's economic woes, see *Iowa: A Guide to the Hawkeye State Compiled and Written by the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Iowa* (Iowa City, IA, 1938), 59–60 and 67–68.
- [12] Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City* (Iowa City, IA, 1935), 33.
- [13] Describing the work of these two Texas regionalists, Edward Lucie-Smith, *American Realism* (London, 1994), 108, noted: “Both artists painted memorable images of drought-stricken landscapes which make Wood's work in this genre look decorative and complacent.”
- [14] James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York, 1975), 210–211.
- [15] James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York, 1975), 222.

## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of a medium-weight, plain-weave, double-threaded fabric that was adhered to a secondary support of pressed board, which was in turn mounted to a Masonite panel. These materials were probably laminated prior to painting, as some paint has spilled over the edges onto the sides of the board. [1] An original typed label attached to the reverse reflects Wood's concern about protecting his rights and retaining monetary value of his works after they were sold: "THIS PAINTING IS SOLD WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT I RESERVE THE RIGHT TO MAKE A LARGER PAINTING OF THE SAME SCENE IF I SO DESIRE. GRANT WOOD." The fabric texture is visible through the thin white ground layer. Paint (estimated to be oil but may also be tempera or a tempera mixture) was mostly built up in thinly applied opaque to transparent fine hatching strokes and dabs. At some point glass was placed directly on the paint surface, resulting in minor losses when the glass was removed. There are also flattened areas of paint scattered across the paint surface from its contact with the glass. Infrared examination of the painting showed underdrawing around the roof of the barn and changes to the hay wagon and to the field. [2] There is no surface coating. The original light wood frame was probably made by Wood or an assistant.

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] James S. Horns and Helen Mar Parkin, "Grant Wood: A Technical Study," in Brady M. Roberts, James M. Dennis, James S. Horns, and Helen Mar Parkin, *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed* (Davenport, IA, 1995), 73. According to the authors, Wood, who preferred rigid supports, was one of the first artists to use Masonite after it was developed in 1926. According to Nan Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood* (Iowa City, IA, 1993), 133, the Masonite Corporation began to pre-groove Masonite panels after Wood grooved the material while working on an interior decorating project in 1935.
- [2] Infrared examination was conducted with the Kodak 310-21x, a platinum silicide camera with a 55 mm macro lens and a 1.5–2.0 micron filter.
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## PROVENANCE

The artist; sold to Irwin [1880-1953] and Clara R. Sax [1889-1981] Strasburger, White Plains, New York, by 1944; [1] bequest 1982 to NGA.

[1] Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood*, New York, 1944: 222, 254.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1939 Fine Arts Festival, Memorial Union, University of Iowa, Cedar Rapids, 1939.

1981 John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America, Cedar Rapids Art Center; Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University; Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1981, fig. 149.

1985 America in Transition: Benton and His Contemporaries, 1920-1940, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1985.

1987 Extended loan for use by Vice President and Mrs. George Bush, Vice President's House, Washington, D.C., 1987-1989.

1990 Loan to display with permanent collection, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, 1990-1991.

1991 One-Hundredth Birthday Anniversary Celebration, Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, 1991.

1994 Barn Again, National Building Museum, Washington, D.C., 1994, no catalogue.

1995 Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; Davenport Museum of Art, Iowa; Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts, 1995-1996, no. 55, pl. 9.

2008 Double Lives: American Painters as Illustrators, 1850-1950, Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford; New Britain Museum of American Art, 2008-2009, unnumbered catalogue.

2016 Grant Wood and the American Farm, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, 2016, no catalogue.

2018 Grant Wood: *American Gothic and Other Fables*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2018, no. 96, repro.

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#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1971 Garwood, Darrell. *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood*. (New York, 1944) Reprint Westport, CT, 1971: 222, 254.
- 1975 Dennis, James M. *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*. New York, 1975: 93-94, color pl. 35.
- 1981 Czestochowski, Joseph S. *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America*. Columbia, MO, 1981: fig. 149.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 384, repro.
- 1994 Schenker, Heath. "Picturing the Central Valley." *Landscape* 32, no. 2 (1994): 8, repro.
- 1995 Roberts, Brady M., James M. Dennis et al. *Grant Wood: An American Artist Revealed*. Exh. cat. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; Davenport Museum of Art, IA, and the Worcester Art Museum, MA, 1995-1996. Davenport and San Francisco, 1995: 3, 73, color pl. 9.
- 2018 Haskell, Barbara, and Glenn Adamson. *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*. Exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2018: 30, color pl. 96.
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**To cite:** Robert Torchia, "Grant Wood/*Haying*/1939," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/61104> (accessed February 17, 2025).