



Grant Wood
American, 1891 - 1942

New Road

1939

oil on canvas on paperboard mounted on hardboard

overall: 33 x 37.9 cm (13 x 14 15/16 in.)

framed: 53.3 x 58.4 x 3.2 cm (21 x 23 x 1 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: c GRANT WOOD 1939

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Strasburger 1982.7.2

ENTRY

Grant Wood painted *New Road*, along with its companion *Haying*, specifically to be exhibited at a fine arts festival at the University of Iowa in Cedar Rapids. [1] It is an idealized view of the rolling hills dotted with trees, farm buildings, windmills, and grazing animals characteristic of the rural Iowa landscape on the route between Cedar Rapids and Lake Macbride. A rustic sign at the upper right inscribed “SOLON 5 MI” indicates that the gravel motorway leads to Solon, a small city in Johnson County in eastern Iowa just south of Cedar Rapids. The intersection near the center of the composition echoes the cruciform pattern of the signpost. The dramatic vantage point looking directly down the steeply descending road imbues the bucolic scene with a sense of excitement that complements the uphill view of *Haying*. Brady Roberts has noted that *New Road* also “exhibits similar pointillist tendencies, especially in the sky, rendered with a vibrant network of fine pink, red, and violet brush strokes on a blue background.” [2]

According to a 1938 travel guide to Iowa, in 1919 a federally funded road building project was instituted that “provided for highway improvements, and advanced the

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

cause of good roads.” A paving program was begun five years later, and by 1937 “there were 5,455 miles of paved highways out of a total of 102,533 miles of roads.” The author concluded that because of these improvements “Iowa has at last ‘come out of the mud.’” [3] Although *New Road* conveys a similar message of civic pride by representing recently initiated improvements, James Dennis has noted that the composition “excludes any sign of the automobile for which the graded curve and the intersection at the bottom of the hill had been expressly engineered.” [4] This is consistent with the conspicuous absence of motorized farm machinery in Wood’s landscapes and reflects his distrust of cars, a personal eccentricity that is manifested in *Death on the Ridge Road* (1934, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts). [5]

Suspended somewhere between an agrarian past and a mechanistic future, *New Road* depicts the country as literally and figuratively approaching a crossroads, a fateful turning point between the calamities of the 1930s and what would prove to be the even more ominous, existential challenges of World War II. This interpretive framework suggests the significance of the sign to Solon in *New Road*, a reference to the classical Greek statesman and poet Solon who fought corruption and championed the rise of democracy in Athens.

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

NOTES

- [1] “Grant Wood Completes Two Paintings for Arts Festival,” *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, July 16, 1939.
- [2] Brady M. Roberts, James M. Dennis, James S. Horns, and Helen Mar Parkin, *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed* (Davenport, IA, 1995), 3.
- [3] *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), 87.
- [4] James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York, 1975), 159.
- [5] James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York, 1975), 157, 159.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of a medium-weight, plain-weave, double-threaded canvas mounted on paperboard that the artist adhered directly to the smooth side of a Masonite panel. This Masonite is clearly original as original paint extends over the edges of the fabric onto the underlying Masonite. The characteristics of the paint application are otherwise identical to its companion piece *Haying*. A similar typed label attached to the reverse reads: "THIS PAINTING IS SOLD WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT I RESERVE THE RIGHT TO MAKE A LARGER PAINTING OF THE 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) has mostly been built up in thinly applied opaque to transparent fine hatching strokes and dabs. At some point glass was placed directly on the paint surface and got stuck, resulting in minor losses when it was removed. Infrared examination of the painting showed an underdrawing of the outline of the hill and possible changes to the position of the sign. [1] There is no surface coating. The original light wood frame was probably made by Wood or an assistant.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] 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.

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.

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, no. 148.

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.

2000 Illusions of Eden: Visions of the American Heartland, Columbus Mus. of Art; Palais Liechtenstein, Vienna; Ludwig Mus., Budapest; Madison Art Center; Wash. Pavilion of Arts and Sciences, Sioux Falls, 2000-2001, no. 9, repro. (shown only in Columbus).

2008 Walt Disneys wunderbare Welt und ihre Wurzeln in der europäischen Kunst [Disney's Wonderful World and its Roots in European Art], Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, Munich; Helsinki Art Museum, 2008-2009, no. 90, repro.

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. 95, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1971 Garwood, Darrell. *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood*. (New York, 1944) Reprint Westport, CT, 1971: 222.
- 1975 Dennis, James M. *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*. New York, 1975: 93-94, 159, color pl. 36.
- 1981 Czestochowski, Joseph S. *John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood: A Portrait of Rural America*. Columbia, MO, 1981: fig. 148.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 182, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 384, 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. 10.
- 2000 Stearns, Robert, et al. *Illusions of Eden: Visions of the American Heartland*. Exh. cat. Columbus Museum of Art, OH, 2000: no. 9, fig. 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. 95.
-

To cite: Robert Torchia, "Grant Wood/*New Road*/1939," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/61105> (accessed August 14, 2024).