

# Product of Iowa—representing “solid midwestern values”—the American gothic painting

## Opinion

Most everyone recognizes Grant Wood’s depiction of the farmer and his wife with pitchfork in a backdrop of farmhouse with gothic window. Grant Wood, a native of Iowa, was also famous for other pictures of Iowa, including the rolling hills and landscapes of the region that the author was called to identify in the U.S. Foreign Service exam in the 1970’s. His work was so representative of American culture that it was chosen as an identifying theme in American tradition. The picture was an iconic image of solid midwestern rural values and steadfast cultivation of farming and family life in a time of change during the area preceding the Great Depression, specifically 1930.<sup>1</sup> The gothic window itself, represents an image of Christian rural America and traditional values. There still exists today gothic windows in Iowa and the author’s native home had one such as these, also in Wapello County but in the village of Farson. According to research, a shipment had come in of church windows of the gothic style and to such an excess that not enough churches were built to accommodate the windows. Thus, the windows became incorporated into the upper sections of family farm and village houses. In particular, a cross section across Iowa with a road traversing from East to West in south central Iowa had a series of houses with such windows (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1 The American gothic painting.

The “American Gothic” window picture was painted in Eldon, Iowa, of Wapello County, the county where the author was born and raised. The artist, Grand Wood, had traveled to Europe to study art and painted this picture in the tradition of Flemish Renaissance. Contrary to the appearance, it is not a farmer and his wife, but actually, his dentist and his sister posing for the picture.<sup>1</sup> Most people think that the man and woman represent a husband and wife, but Wood wanted to portray a father and daughter.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, the artist had been traveling Europe collecting odd and unique items of fancy. When

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he returned to his native Iowa, he noted the cross-stich embroidery in his Mother’s apron in the kitchen and realized he had discovered a fascination with items in his native land.<sup>3</sup> He had discovered the “Craft gothic window” in the town of Eldon and liked the setting with the simple placard wooden house.<sup>3</sup> It was then he decided he would set a pose to create the American Gothic picture of a couple. However, he did not wish to portray husband and wife since he was gay so he chose a father and daughter theme although most people are not aware of his depiction since the lady has a bun and stern look.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Art Institute of Chicago, “I imagined American Gothic people with their faces stretched out long to go with this American Gothic house,” he said. He won \$300 for the picture in an art competition at the Art Institute of Chicago. His painting brought him instant fame and also began a period of American art called “regionalism”.<sup>4</sup> Missouri’s Thomas Hart Benton and Kansas’s John Steuart Curry, also of this period, painted with the regionalism theme as well.<sup>4</sup> His original choice for female model was his Mother. However, he feared the standing pose would be too much effort. Instead of posing, the Mother loaned her apron and came to her daughter, Wood’s sister for the picture.<sup>4</sup> The pose was considered “rigid frontalism” of Northern Europe Renaissance art.<sup>4</sup> The house is now a tourist attraction in Eldon, Iowa in Southeastern section of Iowa. One can pose in period costume for the picture and have a picture taken with your own image in the backdrop of the gothic window.<sup>4</sup> The house is called “the Dribble House” and was built in 1881. It was in the Dibble family for a century before being donated to the State Historical Society of Iowa as a museum for Grant Wood and his work.<sup>4</sup>

The depiction of the “dour faces” was not appreciated by many Iowans at the time of the painting, especially in Cedar Rapids, where Grant Wood lived.<sup>4</sup> Many thought this was a very negative view of their people and some threatened to hurt Wood because they were offended.<sup>4</sup> However, the classic painting represented to many people the stalwart midwestern values and endurance accomplished by moderation, honesty and diligence, as well as hard work. It is said to help many people keep faith during the Depression years of the 1930’s. This is the story of what has been labeled “The Mona Lisa of American Art”.<sup>4</sup>

## Acknowledgements

None.

## Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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