

Grant Wood (1891–1942)

Corn Room



Corn Room, (Eppley Hotel, Sioux City) 1927; Donated by Alan Fredregill

biography

Grant Wood is the most famous artist born in Iowa with an international reputation. His best-known painting, *American Gothic* (1930), has become an iconic image of rural America. Wood spent the majority of his art career living and working in Cedar Rapids. He was the head of the Iowa section of the Public Works of Art Project which ran from 1933-1934.

Wood was the most prominent artist in the Regionalist art movement in the 1930s, and he remained a proponent of its approach to art for the remainder of his career. This movement was a democratic art accessible to everyone and reflected local, rather than imported from Europe or elsewhere, interests and traditions. The ideas Regionalism describes are connected to the immediate, local audience for the art.

The *Corn Room* mural is a typical example of the kinds of landscape visible in the surrounding countryside, and its genesis—as one of four murals commissioned by a local businessman, Eugene Eppley, for hotels in Council Bluffs, Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, and Sioux City—describes the types of relationship between artist and audience Wood hoped Regionalism would foster everywhere in America. This close connection between artist, community, and locale was an essential part of the broader agenda of Regionalism.

the process

Wood's technique in painting this mural was subtractive—his assistant Carl Eybers would put a thin layer of paint on a prepared section of the canvas, and Wood would then wipe away from that paint to create the corn stalks, buildings and other imagery visible. The mural is faded today both because of this subtractive technique and because it was painted over. The lengthy conservation process to remove the paint and wallpaper that covered up Wood's painting could not restore it to its original brightness.

This mural was originally painted in 1927. It is an important early example of Wood's emerging Regionalist approach. It is one of his first works to be drawn specifically from local concerns, and it prefigures his shift towards a more highly detailed realism following his 1928 trip to Munich, Germany, to supervise the manufacture of the Memorial Window for the Cedar Rapids Veteran's Memorial Building.

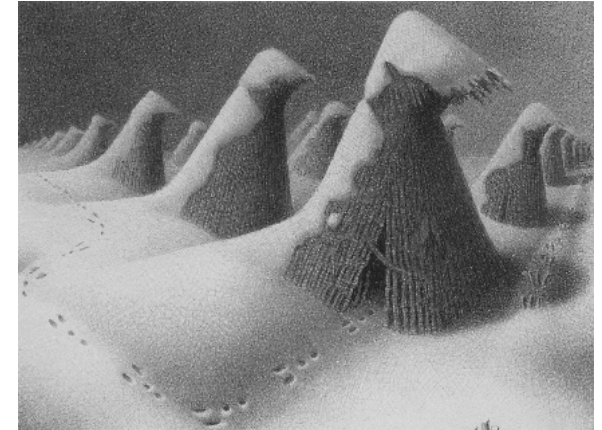
the historical context

Grant Wood's *Corn Room* mural is historically important because it shows that Wood was developing the ideas and approaches that would become Regionalism several years before he produced his first clearly-Regionalist works and achieved critical success with his invention: *Woman with Plants* (1929) and *American Gothic* (1930). Both these paintings have their origins in the specific landscape of the Midwest, but fuse their local subjects with formal concerns drawn from seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Wood's concerns with landscape, visible in the *Corn Room* mural, remain a constant reference point for his Regionalist works: it appears as the background to *Woman with Plants* and in the famous house seen behind the couple in *American Gothic*. The central imagery in one of the main panels—conical piles of harvested corn—reappears in his later work, notably as the central focus of his lithograph, *January* (1937), in the painting *Iowa Cornfield* (1941), and in his last known work, an oil sketch from 1941 called *Iowa Landscape*.

This mural was papered over in the early 1950s and forgotten until it was rediscovered in 1979 by Leah Hartman, an interviewer for the Siouland Oral History Program. Her interview with Carl Eybers, Wood's assistant in painting the Martin Hotel mural,



Digitally enhanced detail, *Corn Room*, 1927



January, 1937, lithograph; Purchased through the Burlington Northern Foundation; 983.01

led to its being removed from the Hotel and conserved by the Sioux City Art Center. Tower Properties Ltd., the owners of the Martin Hotel donated the mural to the Art Center in the 1980s after its recovery, but when they filed for bankruptcy in 1989, the future of the mural in Sioux City was uncertain. Local attorney Alan Fredregill purchased the mural at the auction and donated it to the Art Center so it would remain in Sioux City.



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