MYTH, MEMORIES, AND THE MIDWEST: GRANT WOOD AND BEYOND

GRANT WOOD SYMPOSIUM

presented by the Grant Wood Art Colony
“Screwball Regionalism: Grant Wood and Humor During the Great Depression.”

Erika Doss, University of Notre Dame
Grant Wood Art Colony 5th Biennial Symposium
University of Iowa, October 28, 2016
"To infinity and beyond..."
Grant Wood
*American Gothic* 1930
Art Institute of Chicago

Buzz and Jessie in
*American Gothic* spoof, 2013
Model in Wood's Famous Painting Breaks Silence

Cedar Rapids Dentist Admits It Was His Face.

CEDAR RAPIDS, Ia. (AP) — His was the model for the masculine face in "American Gothic" and he's proud of it.

But not until Saturday did Dr. R. H. McKeeby, veteran Cedar Rapids dentist and business leader, make public acknowledgment of his part in the Grant Wood masterpiece.

Shocked at Publicity.

When the painting touched the popular fancy a few years ago and made Wood internationally famous, the dentist was so shocked at the publicity it achieved and so perturbed by his friends' recognition of his features on the canvas that he refused to discuss his connection with it.

But now he appreciates the honor and admits he is pleased by the selection of his physiognomy for depiction in what many critics term the No. 1 painting of the current American art trend toward depicting the native scene.

Became Fast Friends.

Ten years ago Dr. McKeeby and Wood became fast friends. They had been acquainted for several years.

"When he asked me to pose for him," said the dentist, "I readily agreed."

"He told me," the dentist continued, "that he wanted a face showing integrity from a man with a sense of humor who would not rebel at the distortion that might be necessary to carry out his theme. The painting was in no manner intended to be a portrait.

Shocked Into Silence.

"But the likeness was so apparent and the recognition of me by my intimates so general that I was shocked into a silence which has continued until this time."

Finally, Wood himself joined in persuading his friend to remove the last trace of anonymity from the masculine visage. That did the trick.
Daughters of Revolution 1932
Cincinnati Museum of Art
Constance Rourke (1885-1941)
Thomas Waterman Wood
*The Yankee Pedlar* 1872

George Caleb Bingham
*The Jolly Flatboatman* 1846

Thomas Hart Benton
*Minstrel Show* 1934
Parson Weems’ Fable 1939
Amon Carter Museum of American Art
Grant Wood, stage backdrop painted for McKinley Jr. High School, 1922-26
Grant Wood, decorated ice wagon
Stone City Art Colony, summer 1932
Stone City
Art Colony
summer 1932
newspaper ad for farm auction
1930s

Wood, newspaper ad for public auction
Stone City Art Colony, August 7, 1932
Cedar Rapids Gazette (August 6, 1932)
Wood, newspaper ad for public auction
Stone City Art Colony, August 7, 1932
Cedar Rapids Gazette (August 4, 1932)

Wood, newspaper ad for public auction
Stone City Art Colony, August 7, 1932
Cedar Rapids Gazette (August 6, 1932)
Daughters of Revolution
1932
Cincinnati Museum of Art

Parson Weems’ Fable
1939
Amon Carter Museum of American Art
Grant Wood, “There was a business depression in 1819 lasting 12 months.” November 1931
NOW! All the Crap in the world

. . . At your finger tips!

NOW you can hear foreign radio announcers gargle hot potatoes . . . also ships in distress, tenors, sopranos, etc.

With the sensational new INTERNATIONAL RADIO, the world will be at your door . . . asking you to shut the damn thing off. One slight turn of the dial and you've got France, England, Scandinavia, bedlam!

$34.50

INTERNATIONAL RADIO

Ask to see the new LADY PIPPERAL BEDSHEET DE LUXE

The new Lady Pipperal is two feet longer and wider than any other sheet on the market. The one illustrated above is 90 by 60 . . . costs but $2.50.

That's a lot of sheet . . . for the money.

Lady Pipperals come in soft tints . . . brick red . . . navy blue . . . pea green.

You sleep in comfort with Lady Pipperals.

LADY PIPPERAL MEN'S SHIRTS
with extra long tails . . . $1.95

BIGGEST SHEET HOUSE IN THE UNITED STATES

LADY PIPPERAL BLANKETS
Lady Pipperal sheets and Lady Pipperal blankets make the perfect combination for perfect comfort.

Ballyhoo "ads" 1932
Smile away the Depression!

Smile us into Prosperity! wear a SMILETTE!

This wonderful little gadget will solve the problems of the Nation!

APPLY NOW AT YOUR CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OR THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL COMMITTEE
WARNING—Do not risk Federal arrest by looking glum!

Free Wheeling!

Free Gas! Free Oil! Free Air! Free Transportation! Free for all! Free cheers!

That's what you get in a ZILCH 8!

Here is the car for Hard Times!... it has no engine... uses no gas... no oil!
Get behind the wheel of a Zilch 81: Hook it on to the car ahead with our new FREE WHEELING attachment and enjoy motoring!

Ballyhoo “ad” November 1931

Ballyhoo “ad” October 1931
Daughters of Revolution 1932
Cincinnati Museum of Art
Thomas Hart Benton *Political Business and Intellectual Ballyhoo* 1932; panel for *The Arts of Life in America* mural, originally painted for the Whitney Museum of American Art, now In the New Britain Museum of American Art
The Marx Brothers

Carole Lombard, William Powell
My Man Godfrey 1936
Shirley Temple and a cast of thousands in *Stand Up and Cheer* 1934
Stand Up and Cheer
1934
Will Rogers (1879-1935)

1933

STATE FAIR

Will Rogers
Janet Gaynor

with
Lew Ayres
Sally Eilers
Norman Foster
Louise Dresser
Frank Craven
Victor Jory

Story by Phil Stong
A Henry King Production
A State Fair is like life -- begins lustily -- offers everything -- whether you go for sheep and blue ribbons -- or shape and blue eyes. And, too soon, it's all over!
Will Rogers and Blue Boy
State Fair 1933
State Fair, 1933
Janet Gaynor bored

State Fair, 1933
Janet Gaynor mesmerized
Portrait of John B. Turner, Pioneer 1929
Portray of Arnold Pyle retitled
Arnold Comes of Age
1930
Sheldon Museum of Art

Stone City 1930
Joslyn Art Museum
Wood, letter to Zenobia Ness
October 28, 1930

Cedar Rapids, Oct 28 - 1930

Hurray!

Two paintings of mine in the American show - "Stone City" and "American Gothic"! Two is the maximum and only a few make it each year. I am having photos of the two made at the Art Institute and will get them when I go in next week. Intend to have
Grant Wood
*Breaking the Prairie* 1937
The Iowa State University Library
Ames
Grant Wood
Associated American Artists lithographs
Associated American Artists (Triple A) ad

Life (December 2, 1940)

Tree Planting Group 1937

February 1941
American public school classrooms c. 1900: no humor allowed
motivational posters
1920s
Mather & Co., Chicago
Let There Be LAUGHTER

By LEON ORMOND ★ in the Classroom!

And last be the day to us in which a measure hath not been danced. And hate be every truth which hath not had laughter along with it.—Nietzsche

EVEN as laughter at the dinner table is reputed to aid in the digestion of food (or at least it serves to divert attention from the taste of the spinach), so laughter in the classroom aids the absorption of information. Student laughter is good, healthy, even necessary. All teachers would swear to the truth of this on their syllabi. Nobody would publicly dare admit otherwise. Then why are so many high-school classrooms like tombs?

There are, of course, many reasons more or less obvious. For one, it is a sad but true fact that newly-appointed teachers are often judged not so much upon their effectiveness in stimulating learning as upon their ability to preserve order. A laughing class frequently becomes disorderly, noisy, and difficult to handle. It is little wonder, then, that instructors with uncertain status are tempted to espouse the cause of discipline so zealously they become martinet in the process. Pedagogic principles are wonderful things, but a job is a job.

A second reason for solemnity not readily confessed by offending teachers is the tendency toward exaggerated reverence for subject matter.

At the risk of appearing heretical I would go on record as suggesting that quadratic equations are something less than holy, and that even with Jove's mythological philanderings levity is not entirely unbecoming. No dynasties will fall if pupils laugh their way through Shakespeare's Twelfth Night even though it is a comedy. Nor does it really, really matter in the long run whether Caesar's De Bello Gallico is learned in six weeks or six months or not at all.

Closely allied to this idolatrous attitude toward the printed fact is the unfortunate habit of some teachers of taking themselves altogether too seriously. The youngsters want companionship and inspiration and they get—dignity. The browning defense for slovenliness is that it engenders respect in the pupil. But this respect is too often synonymous with fear to make it anything but suspect.

And it isn't necessarily true that every time an educator opens his mouth he utters the Word of Revelation. No, if an instructor wishes to have gaiety in his class he must first learn to laugh at himself. And many a teacher has accomplished more with his smile than with his erudition.

Wholesome, hearty laughter can flourish only in a free and easy classroom atmosphere. Axiomatic as this may sound, the number of teachers who fail to grasp the principle in practice is appalling. Pity the plight of the disciplinary genius who tells

Leon Ormond
The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies (1940)
Wood, Stone City Art Colony 1932-1933

Wood and student at the University of Iowa 1939
Honorary degree recipients at Commencement
Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin
June 13, 1938
Grant Wood on right

Grant Wood
*Honorary Degree 1938*
lithograph
Lilies of the Alley  1925  
ceramic, paint, wire, and found objects  
Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven  
God  1917  
cast iron plumbing trap, wooden mitre box  
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Self Portrait  c. 1925  
brass, 3” x 2” x 1”  
Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

Blind man with guide dog, France  
postcard?  c. 1920s
Self Portrait  c. 1925
brass, 3 x 2 x 1”
Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

The Blind Man, Dada magazine
April 1917
Self Portrait  c. 1925
brass, 3 x 2 x 1”
Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

The Blind Man, Dada magazine
May 1917
Appraisal 1931
Dubuque Museum of Art
It Happened One Night
1934
Daughters of Revolution 1932
Cincinnati Museum of Art
newspaper coverage of Daughters of Revolution 1933-1934
Parson Weems’ Fable
1939
Amon Carter Museum of American Art

Daughters of Revolution
1932
Cincinnati Museum of Art
The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere  1931
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Parson Weems’ Fable 1939
Amon Carter Museum of American Art
Parson Weems Fable

Mason Locke Weems
The Life of George Washington
5th edition, 1806
'Parson Weems' Fable Merely a Fantasy
Of Delightful American Myth—Grant Wood

When Grant Wood made his second picture 'Parson Weems' Fable,' he honestly painted the cherry tree story as a delightful American myth. He is committing the same error that the book of George Washington has very little hold on fact.

The painting, which has raised a storm in artistic circles, depicts the scene where, in the cherry tree world, 'Washington at last discovered the embarrassment of his son as he was George Washington as he had never been before, and could, if he had to be gotten at any price, then be seen as a fairy tale.

In his A History of American Art, Abbot T. Thayer, writing under the title page, says, "I do not know how the story of the cherry tree is so frequently mentioned in the book of Washington."

'I do believe,' says the painting, "that the cherry tree is a fairy tale, and that the story of Washington is more important in the story of American life than the cherry tree story."
Parson Weems’ Fable

World War II poster, c. 1942
The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere  1931
Metropolitan Museum of Art