



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

APG 8987

GRANT WOOD (1891–1942)

*Study No. 1, Fall Plowing*, 1931

Charcoal and pencil on paper, 10 3/4 x 14 in.

Signed, dated, and inscribed (at lower right): GRANT WOOD 1931; (on the back, at lower left): Study No. 1 / Fall Plowing / Grant Wood [cursive] – 1931



EX COLL.: private collections until 2023

Dressed in overalls and sporting large round eyeglasses, Grant Wood fashioned his enduring historical persona: a simple Iowa farm boy painting local subject matter in a hard-edged style who achieved success despite an American art establishment ruled by an urban east coast New York-centered cosmopolitan elite. Wood's self-image had a kernel of truth and a lot of spin. Grant Wood was almost forty years old in 1930, the year his “mature” career began. That career lasted just over a decade, ending abruptly with the artist's untimely death from cancer in 1942. Wood was working as a local artist in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1930, when two of his recent oils, [\*American Gothic\*](#) and [\*Stone City, Iowa\*](#), were accepted to show at the prestigious Forty Third Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago. These paintings represented his new departure, a conscious decision to paint local subjects in a decorative style inspired by Wood's intensive study of the works of the Flemish master Hans Memling (1430–1494) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) of Nuremberg. What followed is the stuff of American art legend. Much to the artist's surprise and delight, [\*American Gothic\*](#) won the Norman Wait Harris Bronze medal, which came with a greatly appreciated \$300 prize. Posing his sister, Nan, and the family dentist, Dr. B. H. McKeeby, as an Iowa farmer and his spinster daughter in front of a gothic-style farmhouse,



Wood had painted a picture intended to be nostalgic and at once both admiring and satirical. The Friends of American Art at the Art Institute purchased the work for the museum collection, where it remains. It was Wood's first sale to a museum. And more, the painting was a critical and popular success. It has become an icon of American art, as familiar as it is enigmatic, much quoted, much caricatured, and its meaning much debated as it nears its centenary. (The most concise and readily available source for Wood is Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* exhib. cat. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name that traveled among the Whitney Museum in New York City, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Art Institute of Chicago and the De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, in 1983–84. This was the first major exhibition of Wood's work since a memorial show in 1942 and heralded renewed interest in the artist. More recent is Barbara Haskell, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*, a catalogue with essays accompanying a 2018 exhibition of the same name at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.)

Buoyed by this unexpected, but by no means sudden success, Wood produced seven major oil paintings in 1931: [\*Appraisal\*](#) (Dubuque Museum of Art, Iowa); [\*The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere\*](#) (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); [\*The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover\*](#) (The Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Des Moines Art Center); [\*Plaid Sweater\*](#) (Stanley Museum of Art, University of Iowa, Iowa City); [\*Young Corn\*](#) (Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Iowa); and [\*Fall Plowing\*](#) (The John Deere Collection, Moline, Illinois). The present drawing is a study for *Fall Plowing*. Taken as a group these paintings herald the fully fledged arrival of a distinctly American idiom in painting for the twentieth century emphasizing regional, and specifically Midwestern, subject matter and executed in a hard-edged technique with attention to precise detail. During the 1930s, Wood produced a series of farm belt-themed oil paintings, book illustrations, and lithographs. He became a spokesman and advocate for the so-called American Regionalists, who included his high school friend, Marvin Cone, as well as Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and John Rogers Cox.

In a 1935 exhibition catalogue, Arnold Pyle and Park Rinard described Wood's working method: "He decides very quickly what he would like to paint and then may take over a year in thinking it over. Invariably he makes several drawings for the sake of composition and at least one very careful, finished drawing with a good deal of regard for values." ([\*Catalogue of a Loan Exhibition of Drawing and Painting by Grant Wood\*](#)," p. 7). Pyle and Rinard were students, assistants, and close friends of the artist. (Pyle became an artist. Rinard worked as Wood's secretary and later had a career in Iowa politics.) *Study No. 1, Fall Plowing* neatly illustrates the catalogue definition. It is "a careful, finished drawing with a good deal of regard for values." In its final oil-on-canvas iteration, the painting is one of Grant Wood's early and important oil paintings, [\*Fall Plowing\*](#), a rural landscape with a John Deere self-scouring steel plow sitting mid-furrow, abandoned by its horse and farmer and, at the bottom center foreground of the canvas, positioned to attract the immediate attention of the viewer. An [oil on](#)

[Masonite sketch](#) for *Fall Plowing*, without the plow, is in the collection of the Figge Art Museum (formerly Davenport Art Museum), Davenport, Iowa.



The importance of drawing for Wood is made clear in the choice of title for Wood's 1935 career retrospective at Chicago's Lakeland Press Galleries, "Loan Exhibition of Drawing and Painting by Grant Wood." Although Wood's drawings have been illustrated occasionally, the Wood literature is understandably focused on Wood's most famous works: his oil paintings. There is, to this date, no dedicated discussion of the artist's working methods. Notably, however, the Whitney Museum's 2018 show included eight works identified as studies, including three of the Whitney's own: [Study for Dinner for Threshers, left section](#) and [right section](#) (pp. 150–51, plates 56 and 57), both purchased by the museum in 1933; and [Study for Breaking the Prairie](#), 1935–39 (pp. 156–57 plate 65). The Haskell catalogue includes illustrations of a total of fourteen works described as "Study for ..." held in museums in Iowa and Ohio as well as at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California ([Study for Spring Turning](#), 1936, p. 161, plate 68). Not all of Wood's drawings were realized as oil paintings. [Fertility](#) (1939, charcoal on board, now a promised gift to

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, p. 179, plate 87), for one example, appears to have been a study for a lithograph. [\*March 1940\*](#) (p. 184, plate 91) is a charcoal drawing in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. *Study No. 1 for Fall Plowing* remained unknown, presumably in private collections, until 2023. Close examination of the drawing reveals evidence of Wood's known practice, which Haskell describes as "the technique he typically used in drawing of building up forms with numerous individual brushstrokes layered one on top of the other (Haskell, "Grant Wood: Through the Past, Darkly," in *ibid.*, p. 30).

Grant Wood was the second child in a family of four born to Francis Maryville Wood and Hattie Weaver Wood, farmers in Anamosa, Iowa. Maryville's family had Quaker roots in Pennsylvania; Hattie came from New England stock. Their parents had been among Iowa's pioneering families. When Wood died, just 51 years later, he was a nationally famous painter, an avatar of middle American culture and values expressed in iconic oil paintings. Wood's art and his persona were deliberately regional, trumpeting a proudly provincial brand of straightforward avowedly authentic simplicity. The path to that identity, however, lay through Chicago, Paris, Italy, and Germany before coming home to firmly roost in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. Wood's life can be divided roughly into decades. His first ten years were spent on the family farm. Wood's father was a stern man who died suddenly, of a heart attack, when Grant was ten years old. Hattie Wood sold the farm and moved the family to nearby Cedar Rapids, where she had relatives. Those ten years on the farm, a time of hard work and limited outside contact, became the core of Wood's mature artistic inspiration. The physical distance from farm to town was only about forty miles, but the change in daily life was transformative. Three decades later Wood mythologized nostalgic recollections of his rural childhood into the images that informed the series of oil paintings that made him a celebrated American artist.

Wood was artistic as a child, a proclivity encouraged by his widowed mother (in the absence, it must be noted, of his late father, who likely would have disapproved). Encouraged also by the art teacher at his elementary school, Wood soon attracted local notice of his talent when, at the age of fourteen, he won first prize for a drawing of leaves he submitted to a New York competition. In high school he drew for the yearbook and made sets for theatrical production together with his lifelong friend and fellow Iowa artist, Marvin Cone (1891–1965). Through his high school years, Wood took on odd jobs to help support his family. Grant Wood knew that he wanted to be an artist, but with equal conviction, knew that his art needed to yield a living. According to Wanda Corn, "the day [Wood] graduated from high school, in June of 1910, he took a night train north to follow a summer course at the Minneapolis School of Design and Handicraft" (p. 5). The choice was not accidental. Wood's early work as an artist was firmly rooted in the context of the Arts and Crafts movement, an aesthetic ethos, imported from Europe and adapted for America that privileged "art for life" and, by extension, art production for patrons who prized and would pay for art in their homes and businesses. Wood sought formal instruction in a catch-as-catch-can manner: through correspondence courses, evening courses and part-time studies. He never committed himself to prolonged instruction, but he was not untutored, and at

various times studied at the Art Institute in Chicago, as well as the Académie Julien in Paris. In 1911 and 1912, he supported himself working in a succession of jobs while trying to make a living in art related activities. Teaching was always a fallback. He taught in 1911, and then intermittently from 1919 to 1925. From 1913 to 1916, he lived in Chicago where he was employed as a jewelry and household wares designer at the Kalo Silversmith Shop. Wood's early career is notable for the variety of media he mastered and produced, jewelry and metalsmithing, sculpture, architecture, interior design, and home building, as well as drawing and painting. In 1918 to 1919, he served in the United States Army, first in Iowa and then in Washington, D.C. where he designed camouflage and supplemented his salary by sketching fellow soldiers.

After the war, Wood took a job as a middle school teacher, working on and off until 1925 when he finally established himself as a full-time freelance artist, decorator, and designer. During the decade of the 1920s Grant Wood spent substantial time in Europe. In 1920, he went to Paris with Marvin Cone. Cone had graduated from Coe College, a relationship that he maintained for his entire life as a member of the Coe faculty. Wood returned to Europe for the year 1923–24, based in Paris and traveling to the French countryside and painting in Sorrento, Italy. When he returned to Cedar Rapids, he designed a home for himself and his mother. Wood traveled again in June and July of 1926 where he painted in Paris and southern France. In the Fall, he resumed life in Iowa, exhibiting his European works. A 1927 commission to design stained-glass windows for a Veteran's Memorial Building in Cedar Rapids resulted in Wood's residence from September to December of 1928 in Munich to supervise the production of the windows. The trip to Germany proved seminal. While his earliest work distinctly echoes the tastes of the American Arts and Crafts style, by the 1920s, reflecting his trips to Europe, Wood was painting in an American impressionist style. In Munich, Wood found himself fascinated by the collection in the Alte Pinokothek, particularly the artists Hans Memling and Albrecht Dürer with their hard-edged drawing, stylized decoration, and luminous colors. Wood had already decided to shift his attention to local Iowa subject matter. In Germany he found the technique, methods, and language for his new artistic expression.

Grant Wood returned to Cedar Rapids in December 1928. He never returned to Europe. As the western world plunged into economic depression, Grant Wood settled firmly into Iowa. This is not to say that he became a provincial. He taught at the University of Iowa and was actively involved in bringing American artists and writers to visit and speak, hosting them and presiding over a salon of invited guests and friends first in Cedar Rapids and later in Iowa City. He attempted to establish an artist's colony in nearby Stone City. He envisioned Iowa as a regional art center, one of hopefully a number that would counterbalance the domination of the East Coast. The oil version of *Fall Plowing* won a grand prize in the Fine Arts section at the Iowa State Fair in 1932, Wood's fourth consecutive grand prize. Thereafter, although he contributed to the Fair, he withdrew from consideration for awards, not wishing to dominate the competition. When Wood sent *Fall Plowing* to the Ferargil Gallery in New York, it was purchased by Marshall Field III. In 1966 *Fall Plowing* was among the earliest purchases

for the John Deere Art Collection (founded in 1965) in Moline, Illinois, where it occupies pride of place. It has been published, illustrated, and discussed in every major examination of Grant Wood and his oeuvre.

The history of Grant Wood's drawings is an evolving one, as drawings continue to emerge from private collections. In 2014, the New York auction house Christie's featured the sale from the estate of Stanley and Helen Resor, founders of the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency, of a second set of Wood's studies for *Dinner for Threshers* (see catalogue, Christie's New York, November 19, 2014, lot 16). The Resors bought their drawing from Ferargil Gallery in New York in 1934. [The oil painting](#) is in the collection of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, a gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller (Haskell, pp. 152–53, plate 58). A lengthy essay accompanying the sale entry discussed the offering. "The importance of ... drawings in Wood's oeuvre cannot be overstated." The essay quotes Lea Rosson DeLong (*When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals*, exhib. cat. [Ames: University Museums at Iowa State University], 2006), who wrote that the Resor drawing "was as much a finished work as the painting itself. Drawing assumed a central importance in his output, and he frequently produced drawings that were at least as complex if not more so, than the paintings for which they were supposedly 'studies'" (p. 252). The Christie's essay goes on to say that "Wood used this working method throughout the 1930s, and for the remainder of his career." The Resor *Study* realized more than \$1.5 million at auction.

Current interest in Wood's drawings makes it likely that more will come to light. The artist, meanwhile, continues to elude easy labels. He was intensely sociable, but personally shy. A farm boy in New York City, he was a bohemian in Iowa. While he made some home folks uncomfortable, he was a source of local pride. As the 1930s progressed, Wood found his art championed by a group of anti-modernist nativist critics and commentators whom he appeared to join, damaging his standing in the art community. During his lifetime, he became embroiled in bitter and personal faculty politics at the University of Iowa that included nasty whispers about his sexuality. These whispers have now been turned on their heads and he has been resurrected in recent scholarship as a martyr to closet homosexuality. His art has been read as eroticized, sometimes male, sometimes female, and combed for telltale signs. What is quite clear is that Wood intended for his personal life to remain just that: personal, a stance that after his death was zealously reinforced by his sister Nan with a vehemence that suggested she had secrets to hide.

Today there is consensus that Wood, at his best, occupies a rightful place in the canon of American Art. His work is held in major American museum collections. It remains, however, as it always has, hard to categorize. His is not the simple nostalgia of, for example, Norman Rockwell. There is ambivalence, alienation, and loneliness in pictures that claim to describe and celebrate Midwestern life. Emily Braun's essay in the Haskell catalogue, "Cryptic Corn: Magic Realism and The Art of Grant Wood." (pp. 66–77) addresses this issue and places it in historical context, making the argument

that Wood's landscapes can be understood in terms of "magic realism." In 1943, The Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted a show titled *American Realists and Magic Realists*, curated by Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller with a catalogue essay by Miller. Braun notes that Miller referred to Wood in her introductory essay, describing him as "the late Grant Wood, whose landscapes are decoratively mannered" (p. 5). Wood, however, was not included in the show, because, by Braun's account, by 1943, Wood's "Regionalist polemics" had caused him to be relegated to critical exile as a supposedly right-wing artist. This was despite, "his [earlier] record as a liberal" (p. 67). Further, in a time when art was expected to be socially engaged, Wood's regionalist fine art was apolitical. In fact, in 1940, Wood, ever the patriot, designed a campaign poster for "Bundles for Britain."

*Study No. 1 for Fall Plowing* partakes of the atmosphere of magic realism. This is a farm without people. The plow, by 1932 a relic of earlier days, seems to have been abandoned in the middle of its task. However, the picture, carefully composed and deliberately detailed, does not attempt to replicate reality. Wood's trees are schematized; his piles of wheat are conical soldiers mustered in geometric precision on a field. A set of farm buildings suggesting human presence is tiny and barely visible in the distance. There is no sign of movement of any sort. The drawing, though very close to the final oil version, differs in minor detail, suggesting Wood's ongoing creative process.

CONDITION: Excellent. Paper has a rough edge, now stabilized and covered by the frame rabbet. Reproduction American Regionalist-style painted frame with a deep combed cove and contrasting flat inner liner, glazed with True Vue Optium® museum acrylic.