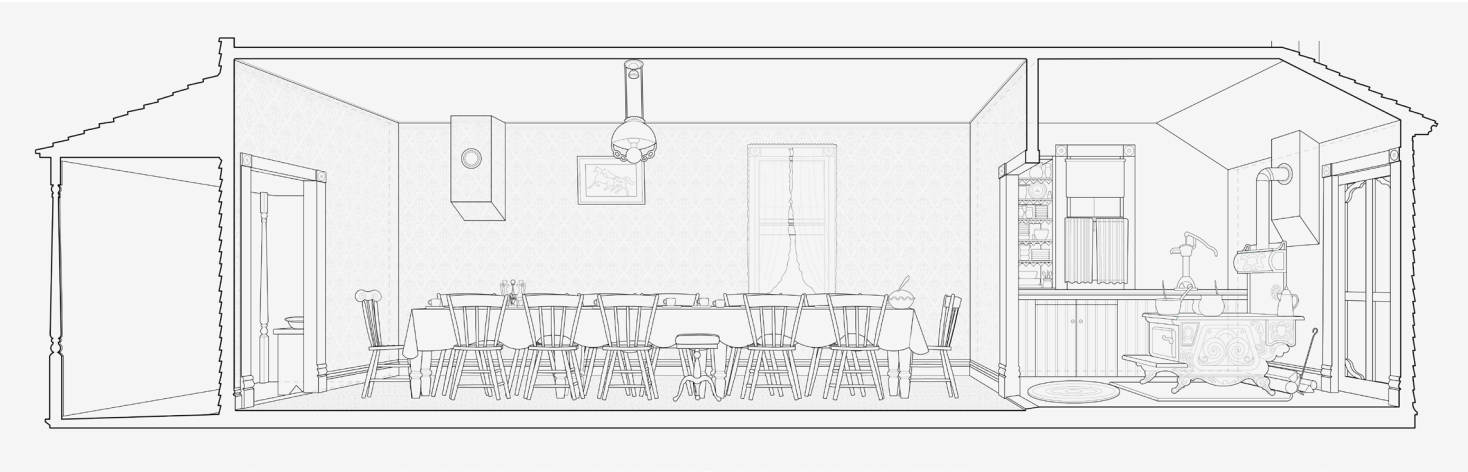
The Last Supper of the Midwest Staging Rituals and Revolt in a Carpenter-Gothic Farmhouse

Filippo Fanciotti



Filippo Fanciotti, Digital Reconstruction of Grant Wood *Dinner for Threashers* (1933–1934), 2025.

Grant Wood, a central figure in the "Regionalist Triumvirate" and best remembered for *American Gothic* (1930), painted *Dinner for Threshers* in 1934. Though often overlooked, the work is emblematic in its engagement with typological and social themes, as well as its nuanced representation of domesticity. Emerging during the Great Depression and shaped by a broader cultural project of emancipation, Regionalism sought to ground American identity in local realities. Wood's painting enacts his own "Revolt Against the City" by anchoring its subjects in the rituals of rural life. While the farmhouse has traditionally been analyzed either in economic terms or through its architectural features, this paper shifts attention to its representational dimension, interpreting it in dialogue with Wood's broader body of work—his images, writings, and housing experiments. The analysis offers a layered reading of the painting, presenting the sectioned interior as the stage of a domestic temple, where both architecture and human figures are abstracted and function as vessels of collective memory. Drawing on early Italian pictorial traditions, Wood transforms the harvest meal into a tableau rich in religious symbolism: humble, mass-produced utensils—borrowed from both childhood memory and mail-order catalogues—become ritual objects in their own right. The neighbors—those who took part in what Wood called "the most exciting event of each childhood year"—are arranged within a Carpenter Gothic scenography: a long cross-section that evokes a Last Supper staged at the dawn of the twentieth century. This elevation of the ordinary into the sacred reflects Wood's effort to preserve the agrarian myth, transforming a pivotal moment into a pedagogical fresco amidst the wave of deruralization that, in the 1930s, was reshaping even his native Jones County, Iowa. The painting thus models a method for reading architectural representation through alternative media, showing how works beyond conventional drawing can yield deep architectural insight. Informed by Wood's investigations into typology and supported by his wider oeuvre—from New Deal murals to "decorative adventures" in vernacular design—*Dinner for Threshers* appears not as a nostalgic tribute to a vanishing world, but as a structured response to the social and spatial pressures of twentieth-cen-

tury urbanization. It positions domesticity as a framework for negotiating identity, territory, and inhabitation—offering a pointed contrast to the speculative housing proposals that increasingly dominated the expanding cityscape. Ultimately, the painting serves as a figurative manifesto against cultural and social homogenization. Through a combination of digital reconstruction and iconological and semiotic inquiry, the analysis reveals how each compositional decision contributes to the operative lexicon of a counter-discourse embedded in Wood's artistic and political vision. His depiction of rural life offers a bottom-up perspective in which so-called minor domestic spaces embody a neglected material culture, reshaping our understanding of both artistic and architectural narratives.

DRAWING THE TYPE: REGIONALISM AS EMANCIPATION

> I had to go to France to appreciate Iowa.
> Grant Wood[1]

With this remark, Grant Wood acknowledged a paradox at the core of his artistic turn: only through the critical distance afforded by Europe could he fully recognized the aesthetic and cultural value of his native Midwest. During the 1920s, Wood embarked on a series of European sojourns that revolutionized not only his painterly grammar but, more significantly, his pictorial lexicon. In 1920, he travelled to Paris to practice *en plein air*. He returned several times over the next few years, enrolling at the Académie Julian, then continuing through Italy to study Mediterranean light, before getting back to France to paint boulevards, architectural details, and landscapes. His return to Cedar Rapids in 1924 marked a first act of domestic re-foundation: he relocated his studio to the rooms above the garage of Dave Turner's funeral home—Turner being a devoted patron—and personally oversaw its furnishing and decoration, filtering Victorian taste through a rigorous artisanal lens.[2] This engagement with manual craft was rooted in a foundational pedagogical trajectory: his work as "staff artist" at Washington High School, where he produced stage sets and decorations;[3] the *Craftsman Lessons*; studying with Ernest Batchelder by correspondence; and training at the Minneapolis School of Design and Handicraft and Normal Art (1911).[4] He worked briefly for Kalo Silversmiths in Chicago (1913–14), then opened his own silversmithing workshop (1914–16) before designing camouflage schemes for artillery during the Great War (1918).[5,6] In 1926, he went back to Paris to exhibit at Galerie Carmine. The show proved to be a partial failure: only a handful of the forty-six works were sold. Although the exhibition received praise from several established French critics, it failed to generate serious attention. Some visitors dismissed Wood as not being a true artist, while American critics—the audience to whom the show was ultimately addressed—remained entirely

1 Grant Wood, 1935, as cited in Julie Jensen McDonald, *Grant Wood and Little Sister Nan: Essays and Remembrances* (Iowa City: Penfield Press, 2000).

2 See Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 23. Catalog for the exhibition held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 16 – September 4, 1983.

3 See Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1944), 29.

4 Ibid., 29–30.

5 Ibid., 39. Together with his former Norwegian colleague Christopher Haga, Wood left his job, rented a farmhouse, and opened a the Wolund Shop. The name, chosen by Grant, was "after the god of the silversmiths in a Norwegian saga."

6 Most of the available information on Wood's life can be found in Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*. For a summary of Wood's training, see also James M. Dennis, "Chronology," in *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 14.

silent.[7] In retrospect, Wood would describe this period with candor, admitting that he had spent years painting the wrong subjects in the wrong style—namely, the impressionist idiom that, even across the Atlantic, continued to define artistic legitimacy. Wood told the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper: "I spent twenty years wandering around the world hunting arty subjects to paint. I came back to Cedar Rapids, my hometown, and the first thing I noticed was the cross-stitched embroidery of my mother's kitchen apron."[8] The following year, a commission from the City of Cedar Rapids offered him both recognition and a breakthrough: he was asked to design a large stained-glass window for the Veterans Memorial Building (1928) [Atlas 1, Fig. 3].

Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 1: *Drawing the Type*, 2025.

Wood entrusted its execution to the Bavarian craftsmen of Emil Frei and traveled to Munich in September to oversee its production.[9] Scholars widely accept the autobiographical narrative the artist constructed around this event, recognizing it as a moment of epiphany. Watching the glaziers—accustomed to shaping the hieratic visages of Christs and saints—transform the faces of soldiers into medieval icons, as observed by James M. Dennis, Wood abstracted and depersonalized the models

7 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 85–86.

8 Grant Wood. The quote is taken from R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life*, and refers to a statement made by Wood to the *Chicago Tribune*. Evans notes that, although Wood offered different versions of the story over the course of his career, the detail about the apron consistently reappears. See R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 79.

9 As reported by Doebel in "Memorial Window for Island Building," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 1929: "In January 1928 the cartoon was approved by the Memorial Window Committee, and the Emil Frei-stained glass company of St. Louis agreed to color and assemble the windows in Munich."

to achieve a deliberate "uniformity of expressionlessness."[10] Though retaining an anecdotal flavor, the six figures at the base of the Memorial Window present themselves as types. The central female figure—as seen in the preparatory sketch [Atlas 1, Fig. 1-4]—is modelled directly on the Madonna from Piero della Francesca's *Polyptych of the Misericordia*.[11] Symbolizing the Church as a whole and drawing on medieval iconography, she literally enfolds the community of the faithful in her monumental mantle. This episode marked not only the affirmation of a modus operandi in which classical references were employed as deliberate rhetorical devices, but also introduced Wood's full appropriation of this legacy, through his reprise and transformation of Piero's act of turning the human figure into an architectural subject. This is a roleplay he would later reverse, revisit, and refine throughout his typological investigations of the built environment. The works studied in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg—from the Late Gothic to the Northern Renaissance—combined with the magic realism of Neue Sachlichkeit, completed the metamorphosis.[12] They prompted a return to measured verisimilitude, a practice in which line did not simply describe but actively enclosed the figure within a clearly defined frame, effectively aligning with the broader Return to Order that was sweeping through interwar Europe.[13] At the same time, the familiar subjects he chose were no longer treated as incidental details. Instead, they became visual anchors, gateways, for a broader symbolic system, one that expressed shared cultural values and a renewed vision of the American inland regions. From these two aspects emerged a clear synthesis of Wood's personal articulation of American Regionalism, the very framework through which his work would later be understood.[14] His encounter with "those German primitives who locate the Gospel among half-timbered houses and Northern landscapes" marked, first and foremost, a shift in perception.[15] The idea that the sacred might be embedded in the everyday accompanied him back to Iowa, where he began to see the familiar in a newly heightened way. The impassive faces of farmers, the carefully cultivated fields, the modest and functional objects of rural life no longer appeared as background detail—they became signs: material expressions of a quiet, underlying ethi-

10 Ibid. See also Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture,* 67: "After several attempts the faces were fired; despite some slight degree of individuation, they endure with a uniformity of expressionlessness."

11 See Luciano Cheles, "The Italian Renaissance in *American Gothic*: Grant Wood and Piero della Francesca," *American Art* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 106–124, note 6.

12 The term Late Gothic here refers primarily to the Northern European panel painting of the late-fourteenth to early-fifteenth centuries, characterized by intricate detail, elongated figures, and spiritual intensity—seen, for instance, in the works of Stefan Lochner or the Master of the Altarpiece of the Augustinians. The Northern Renaissance (roughly mid-fifteenth to early-sixteenth century) introduced heightened naturalism, atmospheric perspective, and a more empirical observation of the visible world, as exemplified by Hans Memling or Rogier van der Weyden. The transition between the two lies not in abrupt rupture, but in the gradual secularization of subject matter and a deepening commitment to visual realism.

13 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 30. The biographer recounts an episode that reveals how, for Grant Wood, the use of line marked a return to his artistic origins: "One of his most humiliating experiences in high school came when a teacher held one of his watercolors under a faucet to blur the lines. Grant was inclined to define forms through line, both in painting and drawing, whereas the prevailing artistic mode favored broken contours and emphasized atmospheric diffusion. The teacher tried to explain this to him and attempted to improve the picture by running water over it."

14 Regionalism was an American art movement that gained prominence in the 1930s and 1940s, centered on the depiction of scenes and figures from rural America, particularly the Midwest and Deep South. Emerging with the aim of constructing a genuinely national imagery, it celebrated small-town life through a figurative and traditional style, in open reaction to the cultural dominance of French art. See Michael Clarke, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). The leading exponents of the movement—known as the "Triumvirate"—were Grant Wood (Iowa), Thomas Hart Benton (Missouri), and John Steuart Curry (Kansas), with Wood as its most prominent voice.

15 See P. Rinard and A. Pyle, *Catalogue of a Loan Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings by Grant Wood, with an Evaluation of the Artist and His Work* (Chicago, 1935), 5.

cal order, and thus became paintable. The human figure, once treated as an individual subject, became a bearer of collective meaning. Painting no longer simply represented what was visible; it reconstructed a symbolic world by reinterpreting reality that then acquired meaning.[16] And it is in considering this inflection that his greatest success must also be observed. Already in the early pencil sketch for *American Gothic* (1930) [Atlas 1, Fig.8], the features of his sister, Nan, are elongated [Atlas 1, Fig.15]—a process that extends to the second figure, the dentist Byron McKeeby, as well as to the façade itself, which in the final painting assumes proportions more truly Gothic than those of its real-life counterpart. The initial oil-and-watercolor sketch [Atlas 1, Fig.7] functioned as a medium for capturing impressions gathered on site. Yet it is through drawing that Wood enacts the necessary transformation—turning the Dibble House (built in 1881) [Atlas 1, Fig.6], observed during a visit to Eldon, into the archetypal home of "any" American:

> Any northern town old enough to have some building dating back to the Civil War is liable to have a house or a church in the American Gothic *style*. I simply invented some American-Gothic people to stand in front of a house of this *type*. […] It was my intention later to do a Mission bungalow painting as a companion piece, with Mission bungalow *types* standing in front of it. The accent then, of course, would be put on the horizontal instead of the vertical. The people in American Gothic are not farmers but are smalltown, as the shirt on the man indicates. They are American, however, and it is unfair to localize them as Iowa.[17]

In this passage, Wood used the terms *style* and *type* with little distinction, yet a subtle shift emerges toward a deliberate process of abstraction—one in which architecture serves as a matrix of identity, and the human figure adopts its correspondent character as a social and cultural type. Through drawing, the architecture of the *American Gothic* house begins to shed its phenomenal condition as an isolated episode and is converted into a stratified organism capable of incorporating collective intuition and the imprint of a specific historical environment, thus reflecting the entire narrative of a tradition.[18] The building type represented is woven into the genetic code of rural communities and serves as the custodian of a spontaneous, unified, and synthetic consciousness. Years later, Wood would again invoke the term *type* to distinguish between two ways of being a portrait painter. By granting equal scenic dignity to faces and façades and by using the term to describe not only the architecture of the house but also the people standing before it, it is not far-fetched to extend his work of characterization to a third—and arguably the true—protagonist of the work. In "the Writer and the Painter" (1935), Wood identified two kinds of portraitists: "The other kind [of portrait painter] has to acquaint himself profoundly with his subject, or have a personal knowledge of him as

16 Ibid.

17 Quoted in full in Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture,* 80. See also Wanda M. Corn, "American Gothic: The Making of a National Icon," in *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, 156, note 1: letter to the editor from Grant Wood, published in *The Sunday Register's Open Forum*, *Des Moines Register*, December 21, 1930, preserved in the Wood scrapbooks, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter AAA), 1216/286. Calder Loth and Julius Trousdale Sadler Jr., in *The Only Proper Style: Gothic Architecture in America* (Boston, 1975), 104, date the Eldon house to 1881–82 and attribute its construction to the local carpenters Busey and Herald. The second part of the quote, "It was my intention…," is also fully quoted in Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture, 85. From the author's note ("Open Forum," Des Moines Sunday Register*, December 21, 1930), we may assume it is taken from the same forum. Emphasis added.

18 See Saverio Muratori, *I caratteri degli edifici nello studio dell'architettura* (Venice, 1950); and Giorgio Pigafetta, *Saverio Muratori architetto: teoria e progetti* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990).

a *type*… This second kind of painter puts a whole philosophy into his picture, not just a set of features and a complexion. His work has depth." [19] To mediate sensory perception through thought, and ultimately to place the subject within a typological category, is a process that enables the artist to universalize their message and, in turn, to engage with the audience on a deeper level. The typological inquiry into portraiture, which frees itself from the logic of individual patronage, becomes instead a discourse addressed to the American public at large.[20] Even when engaging with the medium of writing in his unfinished autobiography *Return from Bohemia*, Wood sketched the people of Anamosa as types: the father represents the archetypal farmer, the aunts are the classic Victorian old maids, and so on.[21] To adopt the concept of type—whether architectural or human—implied, for Wood, a dual operation: the abstraction of empirical data and the restitution of a container of meaning shared with the recipients of his message. In *American Gothic*, the American public is confronted with two typical American people standing before a typical American house, which for Wood coincided with the Carpenter Gothic type.

CARPENTER GOTHIC SURVIVAL: TOWARD AN OPERATIVE LEXICON

The so-called carpenter gothic is a mid-nineteenth-century American adaptation of Gothic Revival, characterized by decorative motifs such as turrets and pointed arches applied to domestic buildings—often with little structural or spatial coherence.[22] It is essential to recognize that the movement mainly has roots in the vernacular tradition:[23] to overlook this premise is to misinterpret both Wood's intentions and the cultural framework within which his work takes shape. To read the Dibble House—that is, the real counterpart of the house depicted in *American Gothic*—as a mere exercise in Gothic Revival would distort the semantic boundaries the artist himself delineated. In *Carpenter Gothic: Nineteenth-Century Ornamented Houses of New England*, Alma Dec and Deirdre Bartlett McArdle effectively summarize how the Gothic Revival—originating in England and later developing in America—unfolded along two complementary axes. On one side, there was the artisanal continuity transmitted by master builders, custodians of a medieval knowledge perpetuated in an almost liturgical fashion: this subterranean phenomenon has been

19 Grant Wood, "The Writer and the Painter," *American Prefaces: A Journal of Critical and Imaginative Writing* 1, no. 1 (October 1935): 3, cited in Sue Taylor, "Grant Wood's Family Album," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 123.

20 Patronage-based portraiture was a practice Wood did not enjoy, as confirmed by his famous remark, "Usually the people with money to pay a portrait are the very ones who have nothing to put into it." See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 212. Garwood reports some other emblematic quotes from Wood: "You don't paint a portrait of a baby, it hasn't lived; there's nothing to tell. It may be a beautiful baby, but a camera would tell you that"; "It takes me so long to do a portrait, I can make more money with landscapes."

21 See Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, 2.

22 See Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), s.v. "Carpenter Gothic": "Refers to the movement in the Gothic-Revival period characterized by the use of Gothic forms in domestic buildings (chiefly in the U.S. Northeast and Midwest, mid-19th century) and by the scroll-saw technique; an awkward imitation of original Gothic proportions and ornament (turrets, spires, pointed arches) with no logical spatial relationship to the house."

23 See Angela Miller, "Review: *Carpenter Gothic: 19th Century Ornamented Houses of New England* by Alma Dec. McArdle, Deidre Bartlett McArdle, and Frederick L. Hamilton," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 39, no. 4 (December 1, 1980): 339–340.

evocatively termed *Gothic Survival*.[24] On the other side, beginning in the late-eighteenth century, came the intervention of architects drawn to the *Picturesque*, whose theoretical contributions gradually overlaid its practical ones. In the American context, this dialectic reemerged, and *Carpenter Gothic* arose precisely at the intersection of constructive practice and design vision: the architectural principles that circulated in the texts of Andrew Jackson Downing, Ithiel Town, Alexander Jackson Davis, Gervase Wheeler, and Calvert Vaux engaged with the practical know-how of local carpenters, tasked with translating into built form the aspirations of clients seeking more accessible, customizable architectural solutions untethered from the strictures of academic tradition. For instance, Davis operated on both fronts: he designed for affluent clients but also democratized the language of architecture through the publication of *pattern books*—true typological manuals intended for both clients and artisans.[25] Widely disseminated, these compendia contributed to the transformation of the wooden house into a vehicle of national identity. The ideals of John Claudius Loudon, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, and John Ruskin were thus domesticated by the hands of American carpenters: high theory entered the workshop, and popular culture defined an autonomous building language in which the creativity of the carpenter-artist produced not only successfully resolved works but also those ornamental exuberances that Downing himself did not hesitate to denounce.[26] According to the typological classification he proposed, dwellings could be mainly divided into *Rural Gothic*—identifiable through features such as steep gables and pointed-arch windows—and the *Italianate* style, characterized by overhanging roofs, balconies, and terraces. Within this taxonomy, Grant Wood consistently favored the Gothic lineage in its wooden variant, recognizing in it a formal language more aligned with his expressive sensibility and more representative of an authentically Midwestern identity. "I know now that our cardboardy frame houses on Iowa farms have distinct American quality and are very paintable. To me their hard edges are especially suggestive of the Middle West civilization."[27] Lumber, being economical and abundant, was more accessible than stone, and the introduction of steam-powered tools and *balloon framing* techniques had further encouraged its adoption; a skilled carpenter could thus replicate the elaborate Gothic motifs that, in masonry, remained the privilege of

24 See Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste* (London: Constable, 1929), chap. 1, "The Survival of Gothic," 1. Clark notes that some English writers argue the Gothic tradition persisted continuously from the early Tudor period to the nineteenth century, suggesting that the notion of a distinct "revival" may be misleading.

25 The term *pattern book* refers to an illustrated collection of architectural and construction models intended for practical replication. Particularly widespread in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these functioned as guides for architects, carpenters, and clients, offering standardized typological, stylistic, or decorative solutions. Rather than a theoretical treatise, it served as a practical tool, aimed at making design knowledge accessible and disseminating shared codes of building and taste. In nineteenth-century American culture, authors such as Andrew Jackson Downing used pattern books to promote moral and civic ideals through domestic design, transforming the bourgeois house into a pedagogical device. As Downing himself wrote, "when smiling lawns and tasteful cottages begin to embellish a country, we know that order and culture are established" (*The Architecture of Country Houses*, 1850): domestic architecture, when guided by taste and harmony with nature, becomes a tangible sign of cultural progress and moral order.

26 Downing's pattern books offered efficient floor plans but also, at times, encouraged ornamental excesses; he himself criticized "cottages stuffed with fanciful vergeboards." Nonetheless, such elements often evolved into lively wooden "lacework"—the well-known *gingerbread* trim.

27 Grant Wood, quoted in Irma R. Koen, "The Art of Grant Wood," *Christian Science Monitor* (1932), 263.

the wealthy.[28] It is within this context that the choice to identify in the house of *American Gothic*—a simple one-and-a-half-story wooden structure with a gabled roof, a wooden porch, and a prefabricated Gothic window—the 'archetypal' American farmhouse must be understood.[29] The correspondence between this building—including the post-1900 addition that gives it its characteristic L-shaped plan [Atlas 1, Fig.5]—and the model of "country house" proposed by Davis is striking, both graphically and in the textual descriptions with usage instructions.[30] Davis intended the project to come across as simple, economical, and suitable for the American climate: a two-story house with an inhabitable attic, surrounded by a loggia that could either wrap around the entire building or terminate along a predetermined line. The ground floor spaces were designed to expand when needed by enclosing the loggia; as Davis noted, for instance, the area marked with the letter A could be easily absorbed into the kitchen, [Atlas 1, Fig.10] just as in the case of the Dibble House.[31]

In the transition from the on-site sketch to its later graphic reworking, culminating in the iconic final version [Atlas 1, Fig. 6] in *American Gothic*, Wood carried out a formal synthesis between two poles: the painterly and the linear.[32] The choice of tools is far from incidental: the brush suggests and narrates; the pencil delimits, structures, and establishes a physical and semantic enclosure. The final painting emerges from the interweaving of four layers: the oil-and-watercolor sketch executed on location; the photographic documentation gathered in parallel; the theoretical model derived from Davis's teachings; and, finally, the graphic elaboration, which abstracts from the contingent to present the house as a type.[33] Likewise, the figures, liberated from the biographical data of their horizontal plot —understood as a descriptive function within the syntagmatic plane of the image—are elevated to emblems of belonging within a shared mental landscape, according to a paradigmatic logic that symbolically restructures the sign system.[34] The same architectural type, now framed, now sectioned, reappears in two other works by Wood: *Appraisal* (1931) and *Dinner for Threshers* (1934). The former—originally titled *Clothes*—stages an encounter between two women.[35] One, dressed in ostentatious elegance; the other, more humbly, firmly grips a chicken covered in majestic plumage. Here, clothing becomes a social index, and the scene operates as

28 See Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses: Including Designs for Cottages, Farm Houses, and Villas, with Remarks on Interiors, Furniture, and the Best Modes of Warming and Ventilating* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1851), especially section III, "On Materials and Modes of Construction," 49 and following pages. See also 44–48, 145, 171, 266–267. See also Alexander Jackson Davis, *Rural Residences, etc., Consisting of Designs Original and Selected, Cottages, for Farmhouses, Villas, and Village Churches; with Brief Explanations, Estimates, and a Specification of Materials, Construction, etc.* (New York, 1837), 1, "Advertisement": "The English collegiate style, is for many reasons to be preferred. It admits of greater variety both of plan and outline; — is susceptible of additions from time to time, while its bay windows, oriels, turrets, and chimney shafts, give a pictorial effect to the elevation."

29 "While the window might appear to be purely decorative, it was actually functional. […] It is believed the window was either ordered from a Sears catalog or brought in by train," *American Gothic House Center*, www.americangothichouse.org.

30 See Davis, *Rural Residences*. A more general parallel between the American Gothic House and the writings of Davis and Downing is drawn by James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture,* 80.

31 Ibid. Table: Farmer house.

32 See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. Marie D. Hottinger (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1932) [orig. ed. *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1915)].

33 See Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture.* Dennis reports in a note that "Wood discovered the house in Eldon while visiting a friend, John Sharp, who photographed it for him. Personal interview [of Dennis] with Mrs. Nan Wood Graham, September 1971, Riverside, California."

34 See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, in *Essais* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), 278.

35 It was common practice for Wood to change the titles of his works, even long after their completion.

a visual synthesis of the tension between "working the land" and "owning the land" that runs through rural America. In the initial version—before Wood "reframed" the scene for compositional purposes, as reported by Wanda M. Corn—the two figures were separated from the viewer by a chicken wire fence [Atlas 1, Fig.20], an explicit denotation of social distance that also carries an ethical connotation.[36] As in *American Gothic*, architecture here—the green-painted screen door, the clapboard siding, the wooden porch post [Atlas 1, Figs.12–14]—too acts as a type-character, bearer of a cultural and moral subtext, thus sympathizing with the characters it frames. These elements constitute an operative lexicon that the artist was gradually codifying. Through this approach, Wood transferred into pictorial language a function akin to the one Downing articulated in the introduction to his pattern books: to construct, through recognizable forms, a cultural repertoire.

VERNACULAR ASSEMBLAGE AND DECORATIVE ADVENTURES: GRANT WOOD ARCHITECT

Grant Wood carried forward his typological inquiry also through his work as a designer, which unfolded in parallel with his pictorial production, with intensity between 1925 and 1933.[37] The desire to define a vernacular lexicon through the selective assemblage of elements drawn from the local context found full expression in the project for the Robert C. and Esther Armstrong House (1932–33), developed in collaboration with builder-architect Bruce McKay [Atlas 2, Fig. 2]. It is the last documented intervention among the fourteen architectural works completed by the artist during this period. The house is described by the United States Department of Historic Places as an example of "stylized vernacular": foundations and walls in warm beige local limestone, and a shingle roof—a kind of philological reworking of Midwestern rural stone houses, hybridized with other regional idioms. The clients requested an "Iowa Architecture," and Wood's methodological response was one of assemblage, beginning with research into elements—sometimes conceptually referenced, sometimes physically reused—conducted through a careful survey of nineteenth-century vernacular buildings in the surroundings. The porch [Atlas 2, Fig. 2] is grafted onto the masonry shell like an alien presence; with its scalloped arches and octagonal columns, it faithfully replicates one observed during site visits with the clients in nearby towns. The stone comes from the quarries of Stone City—the ghost town where, at the same time, Wood founded his artist colony—and is carved by hand by two octogenarian stonemasons personally selected by him.[38] The openings, marked by massive lintels, quote directly from the repertoire of Greek Revival.[39] The fireplace closely reproduces the one from the Old Perkins Tavern (1855) [Atlas 2, Figs. 5-7], from which Wood also derived several elements for the interiors. A second architectural model was the Doe House [Atlas 2, Fig. 1] (1860), from which Wood borrowed key elements such as the recessed entrance [Atlas 2, fig.3], the proportions of the windowpanes, and the design of the original shutters. In the rear garden, enclosed by a dry-stone wall, he installed a semicircular stone bench, built from fragments salvaged from a disused mausoleum in Oak Hill Cemetery and precisely aligned with the dining room's bow window [Atlas 2, Figs. 4,9]. In

36 Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist* Vision, fig. 114.

37 As recorded in the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the National Park Service. The form was compiled by Mrs. Eudora Seyfer for the Linn County Historical Society in 1989. In the document, the house is registered as an example of "Vernacular Regionalism." Most information reported in the paragraph is drawn from this document.

38 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, chap. 21, "Stone City Colony."

39 See note 35.

front of it, he placed a round table fashioned from the millstone that once belonged to the owner's grandfather. Every wooden component—board-and-batten walls, staircase, doors, baseboards, and furnishings—was designed by Wood and crafted from locally sourced hardwoods such as pine, birch, and walnut. He also made use of his silversmith skills for the hardware with meticulous care: the wrought-iron fire screen incorporates custom-made hooks for hanging the children's Christmas stockings. Lighting was treated with rhetorical intent: ceiling medallions are cast directly into the plaster as a nod to nineteenth-century fixtures designed for kerosene lamps, while outdoor bulbs are embedded in rough stone and deliberately left unfinished, evoking the natural irregularity of a grotto [Atlas 2, Figs. 8,10]. The Brussels carpet—woven in Philadelphia in green tones flecked with red—contributes to the staging of an alternate universe, its pattern conjuring the image of a blooming meadow.

Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 2: *Vernacular Assemblage and Decorative Adventures*, 2025.

Although many of the design experiments described may appear closer to spontaneous acts of "decorative adventure"—in the artist's own words—than to fully structured typological investigations, even in cases of explicit stylistic exercise—such as the *library doors* (1929) made for the Italianate Van Vechten-Shaffer residence—Wood did not refrain from filtering citation through a local lens. The panels, decorated with grotesques in homage to Raphael, include the figure of Ceres, Roman goddess of agriculture—an explicit symbolic reference to Iowa's rural identity [Atlas 2, Fig. 20]. In the same spirit, the pair of wrought-iron gates leading to the solarium porch incorporate an additional territorial marker: in the lower quadrant, isolated and stylized, appear several ears of wheat [Atlas 2, Fig.

19].[40] A more active dialogue with Downing's texts can be observed in the decorative project for the *Iowa Corn Room* (1925).[41] It has already been noted that for formal and iconographic solutions, Wood drew inspiration from the nearby Peoples Savings Bank, designed by Louis Sullivan in 1911[Atlas 2, Fig. 18].[42] In the *Iowa Corn Room*, every element—from the canvases to the curtains, down to the lighting fixtures—is treated according to a decorative system centered on the motif of maize. Exemplary is the *Corn Cob Chandelier* [Atlas 2, Fig.15], whose name seem to quite explicitly evoke Benjamin Henry Latrobe's *Corn Cob Capital (1808),* already revived by A. J. Davis for the colonnade of the Smith-Playmakers Theater at the University of North Carolina (1849–1852) [Atlas 2, Figs. 16-17].[43] Wood's creation is a hand-painted copper-and-iron flourish, with arms that extend like stalks, culminating in fully ripened ears. Ornament here appears to give visual form to Sullivan's famous principle that "it was there by the same right that a flower appears amid the leaves of its parent plant."[44] For his part, Downing had explicitly theorized that American architecture should emancipate itself from the ornamental inertia of European origin, instead deriving its decorative motifs from the elementary signs of the national landscape, to give built form an authentically local expression:

> The capitals of the columns might be formed of the foliage and ear of Indian corn […] By the introduction, in an artistic manner, of the cotton, the tobacco, the magnolia, and other characteristic forms of foliage and flowers in the decorative parts of such a building, a novel and beautiful character would be given to the architecture, which every American would feel to have more meaning here than the zigzag or billet-molding of the Northern, or the more classical ornaments of the Southern Romanesque style, as it is seen in Europe. [45]

This passage is accompanied by an illustrative plate—*Design for a New Capital* [Atlas 2, Fig. 18]—in which the vocabulary of the classical order is reinterpreted according to an indigenous principle. In place of the usual Corinthian acanthus scrolls, Downing introduces a first register of corn leaves, surmounted by a second band of interwoven foliage wrapped around a *kantharos*—now far from the Greek archetype and closer to the basket weaving of rural American communities. Among these decorations appear the very ripened ears of corn that, seventy-five years later, will reemerge as the crowning element of Wood's chandelier. In this object—archived among the minor arts and neglected by the same public

40 See Jane C. Milosch, "Grant Wood's Studio: A Decorative Adventure," in *Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic* (New York: Prestel, 2005), 98–99.

41 See *Sioux City Art Center*, "Grant Wood's Corn Room Mural," https://siouxcityartcenter.org/exhibition/grant-woods-corn-room-mural/. The *Corn Room* mural was one of four murals commissioned by Omaha businessman Eugene Eppley for his hotels in Council Bluffs, Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, and Sioux City. Originally part of the historic Martin Hotel, the mural was created by Grant Wood in 1926, then lost for decades under layers of paint and wallpaper, until its rediscovery in 1979.

42 Ibid., 99–102.

43 Designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe and sculpted by Giuseppe Franzoni in 1808. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Latrobe wrote: "I have packed up & sent to Richmond to be forwarded to Monticello a box containing the Model of the Capital of the Columns of the lower Vestibule of the Senatorial apartments of the North Wing of the Capitol; which is composed of Ears of Maize. On a short frustum raising it about 4 feet from the Ground it may serve for a Dial stand [...] This Capital, during the Summer Session obtained me more applause from the Members of Congress than all the Works of Magnitude, of difficulty & of splendor that surround them. They christened it, the Corn Cob Capital, whether for the sake of alliteration I cannot tell, but certainly not very appropriately." *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, August 28, 1809; reproduced in *Papers of Benjamin H. Latrobe*, Microtext Edition.

44 Louis Sullivan, "Ornament in Architecture," *The Engineering Magazine* 3, no. 2 (March 1892): 210.

45 Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 362.

that would one day elevate the artist to the status of national icon—lie, in apparent dormancy, the seeds of the regionalist poetics that he would later make flourish, with full ideological awareness, in his work of the nineteen-thirties, particularly in his mural cycles.

FROM SOIL TO WALL: *WHEN TILLAGE BEGINS, OTHER ARTS FOLLOW*

In December 1933, shortly after being appointed Iowa state director of the Public Works of Art Project, Grant Wood received a commission from Raymond M. Hughes, president of Iowa State College, to decorate several university spaces, including a frieze for the entrance hall of the Parks Library.[46] This is one of the first mural interventions funded by the federal program in an academic context.[47] The cycle is titled *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*, a quotation from Daniel Webster's famous speech that elevates the labor of the land to the foundation of all civilization [Atlas 3, Fig. 7].[48]

Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 3: *From Soil to Wall*, 2025.

46 The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was a New Deal program established in the United States during the Great Depression. It aimed to employ artists by commissioning them to create artworks for public buildings and spaces. The program ran from December 1933 to June 1934 and served as a precursor to larger New Deal art initiatives, such as the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration.

47 See Lea DeLong Rosson, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals*, 1st ed. (Ames, Iowa: University Museums, Iowa State University, 2006), 116–127. The original project included seventeen panels: twelve were executed, devoted to agriculture, mechanics, and home economics; the remaining six, reserved for the fine arts, were never realized.

48 The quote was delivered by Daniel Webster in 1840 at the State House in Boston: "When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers, therefore, are the founders of human civilization."

Wood transformed the worksite into a collective workshop: he converted the former campus swimming pool into an atelier, recruited students and young artists from the Iowa State Fair, organizeed them into teams, and assigned tasks following a division of labor inspired by the agricultural world [Atlas 3, Fig.1].[49] At the entrance to the library stands *Breaking the Prairie*, the introductory panel of the cycle [Atlas 3, Fig.2]. According to Lea DeLong Rosson, the title—assigned only later—refers to the scene in the background, where the plough cuts into the virgin prairie for the first time.[50] In the foreground, however, a farmer tills an already cultivated field; to the sides, two men fell trees to prepare new land for planting. This is not merely a narrative choice: tillage is not an isolated founding act, but a moment within a cyclical process. The story begins in a "second phase," and it is precisely in continuity—not in rupture—that the identity of Iowa's agricultural civilization takes root.[51] The first section to be completed was the triptych *Other Arts Follow* (1934) [Atlas 3, Figs. 3-5], placed along the stairwell. The iconography reflects the university's fields of study: Agriculture, Home Economics, Engineering. The lateral panels, dedicated to disciplines then reserved for men, are marked by monumentality: on the left, a cart overflowing with harvest breaks through the frame; on the right [Atlas 3, Fig. 5], a stationary vertical radial engine spans the full double height of the industrial space, whose brick masonry and concrete slabs are rendered with precision. This configuration is commonly associated with early twentieth-century aviation technology—a reference underscored by the adjacent depiction of a propeller. Likely inspired by piston-driven air compressors, the engine is represented as a typological construct, combining technical realism with celebrative intent. It serves as a visual allegory for mechanical engineering, as indicated by the accompanying nameplate. At the center of the staircase [Atlas 3, Fig. 4], two panels address the theme of *Home Economics*, a field which, since the college's founding, offered women access to higher education. Unlike Agriculture and Engineering—each labelled with corresponding plaques—the diptych does not explicitly name its internal subdivisions, though they are present: the scenes—*Child Care, Fooding, Clothing,* and *House Cleaning*—are treated more as practical activities than as specialized domains of knowledge, reflecting the widespread contemporary view of female expertise as rooted in caregiving rather than in the autonomous production of knowledge.[52] The representational technique adopted by Wood in this cycle, for the first time, is that of the *perspective section*—a type of drawing which, at this scale, requires careful design planning and exposes technical aspects that allow for a didactic reading of the construction system. The side wings of the barn façade in *Agriculture* literally open to the viewer's gaze, revealing in a cut-away the Gambrel roof framing. But it is in the panel dedicated to *Home Economics* that the interest in architectural detail emerges most clearly. Here, the section of the building displays, with textbook precision, the *light-frame platform* technique [Atlas 3, Fig. 11, 12], codified in federal

49 See Olivia Marie Armball Madison, "Reflections on the Heritage of the Grant Wood Murals," in DeLong Rosson, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*, 115–127. Among the collaborators: Bertrand Adams, Lee Allen, John Bloom, Dan Finch, Elwyn Giles, Lowell Houser, Gregory Hull, Howard Johnson, Harry Jones, Francis McCray, Arthur Munch, Arnold Pyle, Thomas Savage, and Jack Van Dyke (source: Public Art Archive).

50 See Lea DeLong Rosson, "When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals," lecture, Brunnier Art Museum, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, 2006.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid. Wood lists five divisions under Engineering. For Agriculture, the titles of the three panels are Veterinary Medicine, Farm Crops, and Animal Husbandry. For Engineering, there are five panels: Ceramic Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, and Aeronautical Engineering.

manuals of the 1930s.[53] Atop the concrete foundation sits a continuous sill plate, serving as a transitional element between the foundation and the wooden frame. Nailed to this are nominal joists, set at regular intervals, with rim or header joists closing the ends. To ensure structural stability — distributing the load and preventing racking —diagonal braces are nailed in to form an "X" pattern, a method known as cross-bridging.[54]

The division of the mural into panels that, while connected to form a polyptych, retain a certain autonomy, follows the rhythm imposed by the structure of the Parks Library vestibule, where the spacing between pilasters provides decorative surfaces to fill the wall infill. As a result, the work is structured into three triptychs, each developed to host a specific disciplinary theme. Wood had already tried his hand with the triptych format, with *The First Three Degrees of Freemasonry* [Atlas 3, Fig. 6].[55] The three panels, dedicated to the degrees of Masonic initiation, construct a progressive narrative in which architecture takes on an allegorical function: the building of Solomon's Temple, its completion, and its ruin. This symbolic sequence is enriched by classical quotations—from Albin Polasek's *The Builder* to Rodin's *The Thinker* [Atlas 3, Figs. 8–10]—which reinforce the iconographic dimension of the composition.[56] This triadic structure seems to re-emerge, in secularized form, in the organization of the mural cycle *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*—including the detached section *Breaking the Prairie*—and extending ideally to *Dinner for Threshers*, a project for a mural developed in parallel, independently of any commission, yet with notable points of contact on both formal and narrative levels.[57] The sowing of the prairie, understood as the dawn of agricultural civilization, corresponds to the degree of apprenticeship:[58] it is the initial, foundational labor, the beginning of the process. The panels of *Other Arts Follow*, dedicated to applied arts, embody the journeyman's degree: the full operativity of the "derivative" arts, grounded in technical competence and the transmission of knowledge. *Dinner for Threshers* ultimately represents the master's degree. In this final panel, the cycle reaches its culmination through death and rebirth, embodied in the ritual of the shared meal on threshing day. Here, an offstage Wood reconstructed a cherished childhood memory, transfigured into a celebration of labor and collective remembrance.

DINNER FOR THRESHERS: INTERPRETING THE COMMONPLACE

While overseeing the work on the library, the pictorial construction of *Dinner for Threshers* began to take shape. Wood developed two series of preparatory drawings. Of the first—executed in graphite, opaque water-

53 See Robert William Hambrook and National Committee on Wood Utilization (U.S.), *Light Frame House Construction: Technical Information for the Use of Apprentice and Journeyman Carpenters*, rev. ed. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931).

54 Ibid, 76-77.

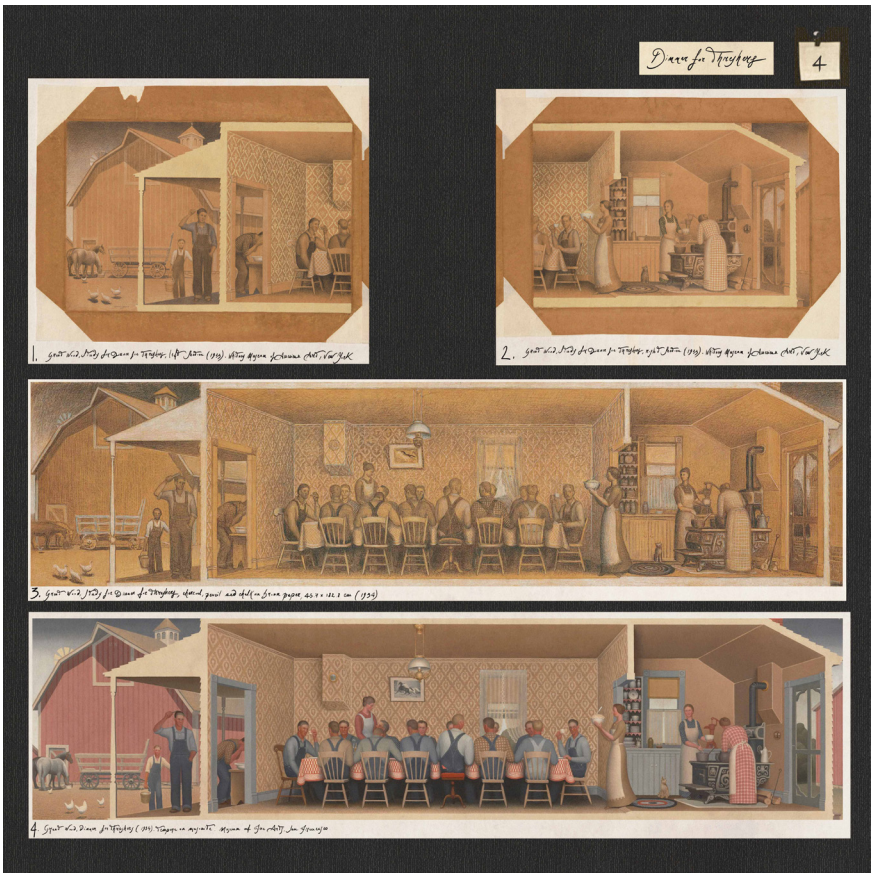
55 The work was commissioned by George Schoonover for the National Masonic Research Society in Anamosa (1921).

56 See Sue Taylor, *Grant Wood's Secrets* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2020), 67, 72. See also Philippa Lee, "First Three Degrees of Freemasonry by Grant Wood," *The Square Magazine*, June 2025.

57 Evidence of the mural destination of the work can be found in a manuscript by Bertrand Adams (1907–1994), a farmer and mural painter who, in addition to being involved in the *When Tillage Begins…* project, had the opportunity to observe—over several weeks in the Cedar Rapids studio—the pilot drawing (as he would later call it) of *Dinner for Threshers*: "I could see how effective dynamic symmetry was in properly lining up... all elements that helped to create a pleasing lifelike mural." Further evidence, noted by Garwood, is the copyright symbol on the second drawing, following the signature "grant wood 1934.

58 See DeLong Rosson, "When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow," 251.

color, and colored pencil in 1933 [Atlas 4, Figs. 1–2]—only the two lateral fields survive, now held by the Whitney Museum of American Art. As in *Study for Breaking the Prairie*, the composition is articulated in three sheets.[59] A second version, executed on a single sheet in 1934 and titled *Study for Dinner for Threshers* [Atlas 4, Fig. 3], was purchased by Helen Lansdowne Resor—wife of broker Stanley Resor—and entered their private collection, while the third version (1934), in tempera on masonite [Atlas 4, Fig. 4], was acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller 3rd and later donated to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. A fourth version, never realized, would have eventually seen the transposition of the drawing on wall.



Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 4: *Dinner for Threshers*, 2025.

Dinner for Threshers is not Wood's most famous work, but it is certainly one of the most intricate in terms of compositional complexity and symbolic density. Interpretations range from biographical correspondences to commentary on the socioeconomic context, from psychologically or queer-inflected readings to iconological frameworks—each contributing to the layered meaning of the image. The scene, rendered in longitudinal section, depicts the interior of a farmhouse. At the center, the dining room hosts fourteen men seated around a long set table, awaiting their meal. Two female figures animate the scene: one pauses to converse with a guest, the other enters from the adjoining room carrying a bowl of mashed potatoes. The room, framed by two open doorways and opened to the outside through a window, features on the back wall a lithograph and the metal-jacketed box of a disused flue, recognizable by the toothed flange

59 Juliana Force, director of the museum, exhibited them at the first Whitney Biennial devoted to sculpture, watercolors, and prints and, in the same year, acquired them for the collection.

identical to the one still in use in the adjacent kitchen. The right-hand panel depicts the latter, with two women busy preparing food, a cat drawn by the aroma, and a rich array of details that document domestic material culture: dishes neatly arranged on a cupboard, a red water pump mounted on a long counter, and a Victorian cast iron stove with its accompanying utensils. On the opposite side, the scene opens outward to the farmyard. A red barn, topped with a gambrel roof—a type common in the Midwest from the late nineteenth century onward to maximize storage space for hay or grain—is crowned with a square cupola equipped with louvres.[60] In front of it, in the yard, two horses drink, preceded by a small group of chickens; three male figures in overalls, dressed like the diners inside, stand on the porch: two are grooming themselves, while the third, visibly younger, carries a bucket of water. The precision with which objects, architectural details, and figures are rendered offers a meticulous portrayal of Midwestern farm life in the early decades of the twentieth century. The caption clarifies that the scene depicts threshing day—the culminating phase of the agricultural season, when grain is separated from straw and chaff. In rural communities, this was a collective event involving families, neighbors, and seasonal workers, often ending with a shared meal in a spirit of gratitude. Speaking about the work, Wood states: "*Dinner for Threshers* is taken from my life. There are my family and our neighbors, our tablecloths, our chairs, and our chickens."[61]

The house depicted is the one in Anamosa, where Wood was born in 1891. Among the neighbors—though completely transfigured as types—are the Weavers, his maternal relatives. It is precisely on their plot, at a respectful distance from the imposing lion-shaped funerary monument erected by the Wood family, that the artist will request to be buried beside his mother—for whose burial he fought with equal determination—in Riverside Cemetery in Anamosa.[62] These biographical details are far from incidental: not only do they help counter certain contradictory interpretations that have alternately cast Wood as a reactionary or a socialist, but they also illuminate the social reality the work represents.[63] Political or religious differences—such as those between the Woods, Republican Quakers from Virginia, and the Weavers, Democratic Presbyterians from New York—are dissolved in the face of collective life: from sharing agricultural labor to building family networks.[64] Of the childhood home, destroyed by fire in 1974, a few photographs survive [Atlas 1, Figs.16–17], showing white clapboard siding and a porch with the now-canonical column.[65] In the pictorial transposition, however, the form is simplified and reinterpreted. As Wood repeatedly stated, "If you want to duplicate a thing, you take a photograph."[66] His method was never purely mimetic: the selection of details and the critical assemblage of elements drawn from real sources—whether deeply personal craft objects or mass-produced items—combine to construct an image which is, first and foremost, a mental construct. The twelve chairs around the dining table are the same ones his mother bought with her savings from teaching: "Hattie bought twelve dining chairs, and they weren't always enough when the Wood and Weaver families got together. It was the time of velvet albums, kerosene lamps, abundant food, and great

60 See Eric Arthur and Dudley Witney, *The Barn: A Vanishing Landmark in North America* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1972), 229.

61 Grant Wood, *Time Magazine*, 1935, as reported in Garwood, 192–193.

62 See Bertha Finn, Pat Worden Sutton, JoAnn McRoberts Walters, and Mildred Barker Brown, eds., *Anamosa—A Reminiscence 1838–1988* (Monticello, Iowa: Monticello Express, 1988), 258.

63 See Joni Kinsey, "Grant Wood, Just Living," lecture presented at *Grant Wood's 125th Birthday*, University of Iowa, April 28, 2016: "Some of the most vehement criticism was emanating from Wood's own department at the University [of Iowa], where Lester Longman had become chair in 1936… He strongly objected to what he called Wood's Atelier method… cast Wood as a reactionary."

64 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa,* 19.

65 See Finn, Sutton, McRoberts Walters, Barker Brown, *Anamosa—A Reminiscence 1838–1988, 259.*

66 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa, 183.*

hospitality."[67] And indeed, at the head of the table we find a Windsor chair with the typical carved volutes on the crest rail [Atlas 5, Fig. 1], and along the side, a stool borrowed from the parlor organ.[68]

Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 5: *Interpreting the Commonplace*, 2025

According to Garwood, on the occasion depicted, the family uses their *Haviland moss-rose* porcelain set [Atlas 5, Fig. 3], while the ironstone dishes remains on the shelf. On the floor, one of the rag rugs Mrs. Wood wove and gave as gifts to her son's friends: Dave Turner kept several in his funeral home, and the painter had one underfoot in his studio while working on the painting [Atlas 5, Fig. 5].[69] The cupboard does not come from the Anamosa house—it is the piece Grant built for his mother in the basement kitchen of the Kenwood Heights house, where he moved with his friend Paul Hanson after abandoning the shack-studio, and with whom he shared a photography-illustrator atelier (1911). The piece is reproduced faithfully: same design, same handle, the same slightly faded slate blue.[70] For everything not drawn from a specific autobiographical source, Wood—by his own account—used Sears, Roebuck catalogues as a reference for objects. In one of his most significant declarations he stated:

> I began to realize that there was real decoration in the rick-rack braid on the aprons of the farmers' wives, in calico pat-

67 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa, 170.*

68 In fact, it was the stool for the parlor organ. See Nan Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1993), 2: "No radio or television offering could equal the exquisite tenderness of the hymns Mother played on the parlor organ on Sunday afternoons."

69 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, p. 170.

70 Ibid., 170.

> terns and in the lace curtains. At present, my most useful reference book, and one that is authentic, is a Sears, Roebuck catalogue. And so, to my great joy, I discover that in the very commonplace, in my native surroundings, were decorative adventures and that my only difficulty had been taking them too much for granted.[71]

Consulting various editions of the catalogues from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of the objects in the scene are clearly identifiable.[72] In the kitchen, one finds the Pitcher Spout Pump—the same object the artist will later depict in a portrait in 1937 [Atlas 5, Fig. 20–21]—the Peerless Enamelled Steel Coffee Boiler, tin-lidded saucepans, and lightweight fabric curtains made of scrim or marquisette [Atlas 5, Figs. 6-8,17,18]. The exterior space, too, is constructed through the layering of visual sources drawn from Sears catalogues: cedar buckets with galvanized iron bands, modular wagon wheels, and finally the Kenwood Windmill, which recurs across the artist's work as an identity emblem—almost a visual signature [Atlas 5, Figs.,14-16,].[73, 74] The inclusion of highly specific objects—such as the decorated cap placed over the flue opening, the *Wild Horses Currier and Ives* lithograph (or *Black and White Beauties*, as Wood recalled it) [Atlas 5, Fig.12], or the wooden match holder hanging on the kitchen wall—combined with other standardized, catalogue-sourced elements, serves to immerse the viewer in the depicted environment.[75] It invites not only the evocation of personal memory, but also the establishment of a direct dialogue with the painting—and, by extension, with one's own lived experience, in its specific architectural and typological configuration. Among all the objects in the scene, the dining table remains the most enigmatic: in every version of the work, the legs are absent, and the entire area beneath it is immersed in shadow. During threshing time, it was customary to push together several tables to form a long communal one, but testimonies diverge. Garwood himself alternately describes an oval table or "a very long table on which two or three red-checked tablecloths sewn together by his mother were laid." What is certain, however, is that when Wood will furnish his Victorian residence in Iowa City, he chooses a twenty-foot-long table, built with three layers of masonite and iron legs salvaged from an old pharmacy counter: a table "big enough to feed threshers; fifteen or twenty dinner guests didn't crowd it."[76] Whatever the material reference, it is the meaning that endures: the gigantic table as a mental and symbolic space, held in childhood memory and destined to resurface in adult life as a foundational sign of sociality and sharing. And it is precisely this meaning that the painting gives form to, making it, above all else, his own manifesto.

71 Grant Wood, 1932, as reported in *Grant Wood's Studio*, referring to: "See Roberts, 'The European Roots of Regionalism: Grant Wood's Stylistic Synthesis,'" in Roberts et al., *Grant Wood*, 20–21.

72 See *Sears and Roebuck Catalogue*, no. 112, 1902 (Chicago, Ill., U.S.A.), entries related to "Pitcher Spout Pump," "Solid Steel Lava Enameled Kettle," "Peerless Enameled Steel Lipped Coffee Pots," "Peerless Enameled Steel Patent Covered Berlin Saucepans," and "Popular Scrim and Marquisette Curtains."

73 Ibid.: "Kenwood Steel Windmills ('as it appears when mounted on a wood mast over the barn, showing the manner of bracing the mast with our steel guy rods and how various machines can be driven by the power developed by the windmill')."

74 Ibid.: "Cedar Water Pails, with galvanized Electric Welded Hoops ('these pails have proven to be the greatest selling article we have ever put on the market')."

75 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 169.

76 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 214.

WEAVES OF SIGNS: A SONG OF WILD PRAIRIE LILY AND FLEUR-DE-LIS

Between the two works on paper and the final tempera-on-masonite version, few differences emerge—the most evident of which concerns the decorative motif of the wallpaper [Atlas 6, Figs. 7,8]. The pattern adopted in the 1934 tempera version, while maintaining a grid-like structure similar to that of the 1933 drawings, aligns with a different symbolic register, one rooted in a bourgeois and Victorian domestic lexicon.

Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 6: *Weave of Signs*, 2025.

Beyond the plausible historical accuracy—after all, their parlor was known to be "the most elegant for miles around"—it is well known that, as early as the late nineteen-twenties, Wood had turned his attention to the furnishings and decorations of Victorian homes in the Midwest, drawing inspiration from them for various decorative projects, including the design of a Lounge Chair and Ottoman in 1938 for his own living room [Atlas 6, Fig.3].[77, 78] In 1933, he redecorated the room above the Smitty Café on Dubuque Street, intended to host the meetings of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Speakers, a goliardic club he co-founded in the context of the University of Iowa lectures series, where he served as

77 Nan also recalled the carpet: a sumptuous cream-colored Wilton, with a scrolling brown-gold border and a scattered motif of pink cabbages and roses. Although this element does not appear in the painting, its decorative design resonated with the golden floral wallpaper, creating a visual harmony that—in her words— "made that room the most elegant parlor for miles around." See Nan Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 7, 22.

78 See Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935*, reprint 2024 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

a Professor of Fine Art. He did so, by his own admission, in the "worst of the Victorian style", dominated by floral wallpapers and a deliberately eccentric, even caricatural décor, as documented by numerous photographs depicting the artist and his guests in period costume [Atlas 6, Figs. 1,2].[79] The decorative motif that appears on the wall in the final version of the painting fits fully within this ornamental genealogy, drawing from nineteenth-century pattern books in which lozenge grids and floral interlacing merge into seamlessly continuous, meticulously rhythmic surfaces [Atlas 6, Fig. 5].[80] In the tempera version, at the center of the front-facing plate displayed on the cupboard, a small stylized red flower appears. The extremely reduced scale of the mark—approximately 2 × 2 mm—makes it difficult to read with the naked eye, but comparison with the preparatory drawings reveals a clear resemblance to the motif decorating the wallpaper. It is most likely a *fleur-de-lis*, which appeared on the flag of New France until 1715—and whose jurisdiction once extended to the territories of present-day Iowa [Atlas 6, Fig. 9]. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the wallpaper motif was originally conceived as a stylization of the *Wild Prairie Lily* (*Lilium Philadelphicum*) [Atlas 6, Fig. 12], a native Midwestern species belonging to the same botanical genus of the one traditionally associated with the heraldic flower—and already evoked in *Breaking the Prairie* [Atlas 6, Fig. 13]. The process of graphic simplification—a formal exercise to which Wood devoted significant attention in his ornamental experiments—may have rendered its contours ambiguously similar to the blazoned flower, inadvertently imbuing it with meanings foreign to the original intent. Given the symbolic charge of that motif—an emblem of the French colonial legacy from which Wood was increasingly seeking to distance himself—it seems plausible that the artist deliberately altered its appearance to avoid any counterproductive associations. Wood's deep botanical knowledge had its roots in childhood. In *Return from Bohemia*, the artist recalled how, returning from a walk, he once brought home a bouquet of flowers which his mother, seated on the porch, could identify one by one with precision: buttercups, marsh marigolds, cowslips, lavender wild geraniums, prairie pointers, wild strawberries, blue flags, the great plume of Solomon's Seal, and finally the red-orange meadow lilies. For her, each flower was a "personality"—fragile, exquisite, almost human.[81] From this perspective, the stylized flower takes on a mnemonic and emotional value, part of an identity repertoire in which Midwestern flora becomes a sign of what is most intimate and familiar: the bond with the mother and with an internalized landscape is transfigured into the decoration of the domestic interior itself, turning the architecture into a protective envelope—like Piero della Francesca's Madonna revived in the *Memorial Window*—capable of sheltering and preserving the community within.

The dialogue with the femininity of the domestic space—evoked through decorative motifs and maternal memory—ultimately intersects with a more complex discourse on masculine figures. A queer reading—first proposed by Tripp Evans and later extended to Wood's entire oeuvre by Sue Taylor—identifies in this painting a coexistence, and a tension, between the celebration of feminine domestic care and the admiration of the male threshers' corporeality.[82] Emblematic in this sense is Evans's emphasis on the sequence of the diners' backsides, whose visual rhythm echoes—almost obsessively—that of the folds in the tablecloth. Despite

79 See Joni Kinsey, "Grant Wood, Just Living."

80 In the typographic repertories of the period, such patterns are classified under the terms *ogee diaper* or *floral trellis*: the former refers to the double-curved profile of the modular element, the latter to the lattice structure that connects the units, evoking the lightness of a vegetal trellis. The most common samples display small ogival motifs intertwined in diamond or cross-shaped knots, printed in terra-cotta brown on light backgrounds.

81 See Taylor, *Grant Wood's Secrets*, 185.

82 See Taylor, *Grant Wood's* Secrets. See also Richard Meyer, "Grant Wood Goes Gay," in *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018).*

the now fairly shared recognition of Wood's homosexuality, certain comparisons would do little more than seek additional confirmation of an already evident interest in the representation of the male body.[83] A reading from a semiotic perspective, by contrast, offers greater clarity with regard to the communicative intentions that underlie the work's complex network of signs, contributing to the decoding of its overarching message. This interpretive operation is supported by Wood's own words. During the brief yet pivotal period in which he taught at the art school he founded in Stone City, he articulated his view of artmaking as an act shaped by the purpose of communication: "Our theory being that when a painter has a definite *message*, he will by experiment, find the most adequate means of expressing it, let the result be as conservative, as eclectic or as radical as it may."[84]

The muscular backs depicted function as indices of the physical strength required to carry out the full agricultural cycle—from ploughing to threshing; the flush of the cheeks, in contrast to the forehead left pale, signals work performed under a scorching sun; the uniformity of the overalls suggests a functional practicality that leaves little room for individual stylistic expression; finally, the lowered sleeves of the diners—in contrast to the rolled-up ones of the laborers outside—indicate a search for decorum upon crossing the domestic threshold, as well as a gesture of respect toward those who have prepared the meal. These clues gain additional weight when placed in dialogue with iconographic readings, among which Evans's remain among the keenest.

FLIGHT FROM THE HOME: THE LAST SUPPER OF THE MIDWEST

Evans recalls how contemporary critics already noted the Italian lineage of the work: *the American Magazine of Art* spoke of a "purity" worthy of Fra Angelico, while the *New York Times* evoked the "monumental simplicity" of Giotto. The reference to the *Last Supper* [Atlas 7, Fig. 3] is evident, widely agreed upon, and confirmed by the artist's travels in Italy and his direct engagement with Renaissance visual sources.[85, 86] It is Evans himself who offers a compelling iconological reinterpretation of the painting, overlaying the Christian model with an autobiographical version: Maryville Wood, the artist's father, died in 1901. "The coffin was in the parlor of our home—the room with the gold wallpaper and the roses."[87] The omission of the table legs in such a meticulously rendered work, and the darkness enveloping that area, might tempt one to go further, connecting this macabre biographical detail to the visual narrative. Yet it is again Evans who confirms the already recognized figure of Maryville in the thresher seated on the stool with his back to us, justifying the choice

83 This refers, for example, to the reading by the author who claimed to detect a symbolic emphasis on stallions in the wall print *Thunder and Lightning*—in fact, simply an image of two horses, one black and one white, with a thunderstorm in the background. It was one of the most widely reproduced lithographs of the time, and the Woods did indeed have it hanging on the wall in their Anamosa home. Many barns also featured painted decorations on their wooden doors, often depicting horses—frequently shown as a pair, one white and one black. See Eric Arthur and Dudley Witney, *The Barn*, 194–197.

84 See Grant Wood, "The Aim of the Colony," pamphlet for the Stone City Colony and Art School, 1932.

85 See Cheles, "The Italian Renaissance in *American Gothic*," 107: "The artist used Italian imagery with considerable subtlety, in most cases to convey messages that alter the surface meaning of the paintings."

86 A reproduction of Giotto's *Last Supper* is held at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and was already part of the collection at the time of Grant Wood's trip to the city, as mentioned by Cheles, "The Italian Renaissance in *American Gothic*," 115, and as documented in Hermann Bauer, *L'ancienne Pinacothèque, Munich*, in *Musées du monde* (Paris: Grange Batelière, 1973).

87 See Nan Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 8.

through the strict logic of hospitality: the head of the household takes "the least comfortable seat."[88] However, the vanishing point of the entire composition does not converge on him, as his analysis would suggest, but rather on the arm of another diner. This is a significant deviation, one that distances the scene from a canonical *Christomimetic* reading and instead redirects it, at once, into a broader code—that of genre painting—with which Wood simultaneously engaged.[89] The allegory constructed through the ordinariness of the domestic interior and its inhabitants is by no means new to art history, and its strength lies precisely in the ability to transfigure the everyday into symbolic form, without abandoning its grounding in the real, lapsing into sentimental dramatization, or renouncing mythic evocation by means of learned citation.[90] One of the most compelling interpretations concerns the association between the patches of white skin left by the men's hats and the haloes of the apostles. The mark of labor in the fields is transformed, at the moment of the meal, into a trace of secular sanctification. The division by gender and function also recalls that of medieval triptychs, and one can easily agree with the author in identifying, in the young boy carrying water on the left-hand panel, the figure of Grant himself—who, at the time depicted in the painting, was ten years old and who, "at threshing time, he was the water boy."[91] On the right-hand panel we find his female counterpart: his mother, Hattie, portrayed in a monumental position behind the cookstove, serving food from a steaming pot. It is the visual translation of a passage from *Return from Bohemia*: "Mother was standing before the big wood-range, dishing food out of the steaming kettle."[92] She is, in fact, the true allegory of the Savior, as suggested by the resemblance of her face to that of Christ in Giotto's *Scrovegni Chapel* [Atlas 7, Fig. 4], a rhetorical operation which finds full justification in light of the central role she played in the artist's life: guardian of the domestic temple, a vestal charged with ensuring its survival after the father's death, and also a key figure—apron in place of the Virgin's mantle—in the stylistic revolution undertaken by Wood. A first 'transgender' transfiguration of Hattie occurred in *Woman with Plants*, modelled on Hans Memling's *Portrait of a Man* and Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* [Atlas 7, Figs. 6–8], right after his artistic conversion.[93]

88 See Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life*, 174. In fact, it was not the piano stool, as reported by Evans, but the stool for the parlor organ. See Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*: "No radio or television offering could equal the exquisite tenderness of the hymns Mother played on the parlor organ on Sunday afternoons."

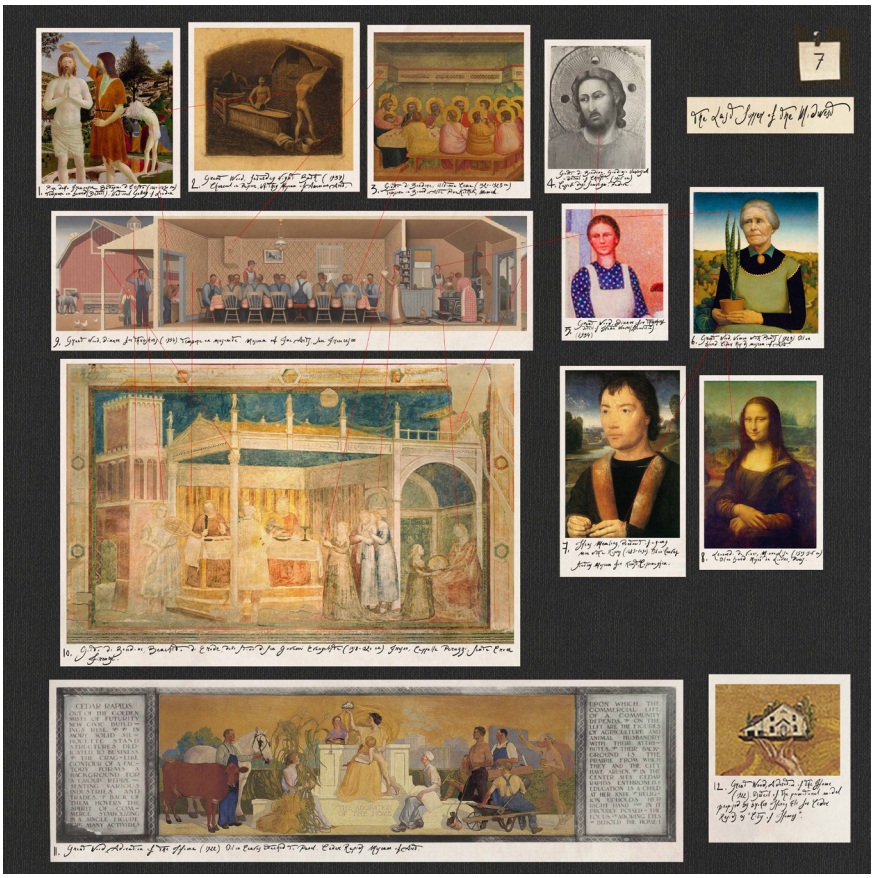
89 In the context of the course *Théorie et techniques de la figuration architecturale* (École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne), the author of this essay has, both personally and through student-led exercises, reconstructed and reinterpreted several dozen genre scenes, particularly from the Dutch Golden Age. In the case of Vermeer, for instance, this practice became almost standard. See, for example, *A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman* (also known as *The Music Lesson*), *The Astronomer*, *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, and *The Geographer.*

90 For further studies on genre painting and allegories, see Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Tzvetan Todorov, *Éloge du quotidien: Essai sur la peinture hollandaise du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Points, 2010).

91 See Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 2.

92 See Grant Wood, *Return from Bohemia...: A Painter's Story, Part 1, "The Ground Itself," ch. 1, "Speak to the Earth," in Sue Taylor, Grant Wood's Secrets (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2020), 195.*

93 See Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, 70.



Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 7: *The Last Supper of the Midwest*, 2025.

The iconography of fourteenth-century Italian painting, and particularly that of Giotto, also reappears in the compositional structure: *Dinner for Threshers* inherits from the *Last Supper* the arrangement of the diners on all sides of the table, a convention that gradually disappeared in the Renaissance, where figures shown from behind were often moved to the far side of the table.[94] An even closer similarity emerges from a previously unnoticed comparison with *The Feast of Herod* [Atlas 7, Fig. 10], where the architectural setting divides the scene into three parts: at the center, the men seated at the table partake in the enactment of the rite; on the right, its preparation is entrusted to women; on the left, at the threshold of the scene, a mediator—through the act of music-making—confers an official character upon the banquet, sacralizing its profane form. The female figure who crosses the threshold between the two spaces—in Giotto after delivering the Baptist's head, in Wood carrying a bowl of abundance crowned by a pat of butter—is, in every respect, the officiant of the ceremony.[95] Not only the figures, but the architecture itself participates in this dialogue. In addition to the wallpaper resembling the painted wall and the reproduction of a sectional interior, the red barn on the left—with its white frame around a blind opening and its cupola with arched vents—echoes the vocabulary of pilasters and blind arcading found in Giotto's towers. A second red building, barely visible on the right, formally balances the two architectural segments. Wood's intention is clear: not only to consecrate the ceremonial of the meal and its participants, but to transform the childhood home into a temple, further sublimating a legacy of Quaker thought

94 For single-wall *Last Suppers*, see, for example, those of Andrea del Castagno (c. 1445–1450), Andrea del Sarto (1520–1525), Cosimo Rosselli (1481–1482), Ghirlandaio (1480), and Leonardo (1495–1498); and for Trecento two-wall compositions: Giotto (c. 1304–1306), Piero Lorenzetti (c. 1320–1325), Ugolino di Nerio (c. 1325–1330).

95 See Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 113.

according to which the sacred and the profane are not separate domains, but coexisting aspects of everyday life. Every gesture may become sacrament, every place—from the barn to the threshold—can become a space of revelation.[96] The threshers advance in procession from the farmyard—now transfigured into a parvis—toward the porch, transformed into a narthex. The washtub placed at the threshold is a decisive detail, almost a direct quotation of the font of holy water: during threshing days, just a few splashes of water were enough to rid the skin of the dust that caused irritation and to restore order to the body. The transition from field labor to the communion of the meal thus takes place through the ritual gesture of purification—an act Wood would evoke more explicitly in *Saturday Night Bath* (1937), where the iconography of Piero della Francesca's neophyte is transferred to the body of the farm worker [Atlas 7, Figs. 1, 2].[97] *Dinner for Threshers* stages the agrarian rite of the communal meal, the culminating moment of the harvest season and a fundamental node in the social life of rural communities.[98] Cooperation among farms not only optimized labor but fostered relationships between families and offered unmarried youths the opportunity to integrate into community life; Wood wrote:

> The most exciting event of each childhood year was threshing day, when the big machines and neighboring farmers arrived to help thresh the grain. The threshers' noontime meal was a feast, brimming the little farmhouse over with people, smells, and activities.[99]

Every element of the composition—from utensils to decorations—contributes to organizing the space and time of the ceremony, evoking a collective memory and setting in motion a mechanism of cohesion. It is in the repetition of the ritual that the sense of belonging to a group is preserved and renewed.[100] Rather than nostalgic—now widely refuted by the scholarship—Wood's formal register appears ordered and deliberate: *Dinner for Threshers* records the fragmentation and the loss of meaning of rituals in modern urban life, and proposes, in visual form, a return to the diffuse and participatory sacredness of collective existence.[101] In the present of the adult Wood, many of the practices that had organically accompanied the life cycles of his childhood came to appear as separate activities, stripped of their symbolic and relational dimensions. The most significant sociological feature of the farmhouse lied precisely in its role as the gravitational center of everyday family life. Unlike the emerging model of the 1930s, marked by spatial disaggregation and temporal fragmentation—with individuals oriented toward autonomous trajectories, transiting from the self-sustaining, productive family unit to living alone and acquiring wages—the rural family shared the hours of the day within a common

96 See Pink Dandelion, *An Introduction to Quakerism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

97 See Cheles, "The Italian Renaissance in *American Gothic*," 113. Henry Adams has already remarked that *Sultry Night, which depicts a naked man standing next to a watering trough washing his body, and the charcoal drawing Saturday Night Bath, showing a nude farmhand immersing his bucket in the trough while his companion removes his shirt, both produced in 1937.*

98 See Brady M. Roberts, "The European Roots of Regionalism: Grant Wood's Stylistic Synthesis," in Brady M. Roberts, James M. Dennis, James M. Horns, and Helen Mar Parkin, *Grant Wood: An American Master Revealed* (San Francisco: Davenport Museum of Art / Pomegranate Artbooks, 1995).

99 In *The Birth of a National Icon: Grant Wood's "American Gothic,"* published in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, vol. 10, *The Art Institute of Chicago Centennial Lectures* (1983), 252–275, Wanda M. Corn quotes a passage from P. Rinard's *Return from Bohemia: A Painter's Story*, Archives of American Art, no. D24/I6I-295, 78. Although this biography is frequently attributed to Grant Wood, it was in fact the M.A. thesis of P. Rinard, submitted to the Department of English at the University of Iowa in August 1939. Rinard, a close friend and associate of Wood's, wrote the text in close consultation with the artist.

100 See Martine Segalen, *Rites et rituels contemporains* (Cursus, 2017), 8.

101 See Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, xiv.

perimeter, articulated between home, school, fields, and barn. And in the evening, the hearth reasserted itself as the symbolic and emotional core around which the domestic community gathered.[102]

The family's move, that same year, from the farm to the city of Cedar Rapids marked a pivotal moment in his biography—one that became the cipher of an experience shared by many Americans. It was not merely a change of setting, but the crossing of a historical threshold: the passage from nineteenth-century agrarian America to the modern urbanism of the twentieth century. Millions of individuals, during those same years, traverse that same fracture, redefining space, relationships, and identity. Designated by economists as the "golden age of American agriculture," the period straddling the turn of the century coincided in Iowa with the apex of mechanization and a rapid increase in land value.[103] Innovations such as Froelich's gasoline-powered thresher (1892) and Hart-Parr's tractor (1907) radically transformed farm life, culminating in the dominance of a few large enterprises.[104, 105] But the machine that increased productivity also reduced the need for manual labor: as early as 1910, Iowa recorded population decline in seventy-one rural counties, while the twenty-eight with urban majorities were on the rise.[106] This dynamic was compounded by the development of an early industrial fabric, the rise of the automobile, and the delayed electrification of rural areas—all factors that deepened the divide between city and countryside and fuel the phenomenon known as the *flight from the farm*.[107, 108] Deruralization entailed not only the physical dispersion of agricultural communities but also a profound symbolic desacralization: the identity of the group disintegrated in favor of the individual, and that of the individual in favor of the group, and architecture—both rural and metropolitan—came to play a central role in representing this transformation. Already in the mural *Adoration of the Home* [Atlas 7, Fig. 11], Wood staged the tension between the individual dwelling of small rural communities and urban expansion: a female figure holds a model of a single-family house—clearly legible in its architectural features—while an indistinct urban skyline looms in the background. Commissioned by the broker Henry Ely as a promotional tool, the painting transcends its advertising function to aspire to a civic meaning: Cedar Rapids is presented as a "city of homes," where the house becomes an interface between private life and public space, a symbol of a community resisting the homogenization of the metropolis.

Though not funded by federal agencies and rooted in personal memory, the mural project *Dinner for Threshers* continues the same civil and symbolic reflection already initiated in *Adoration of the Home* and made

102 See Henry J. Kauffman, *The American Farmhouse* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1975).

103 See Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996), 169–171.

104 See "John Froelich and the First Gasoline Tractor," Froelich Tractor Museum, https://www.froelichtractor.com/history; and Floyd County Historical Society, "The Hart-Parr Story," https://www.floydcountymuseum.org/hart-parr.

105 In 1918, for example, John Deere—one of the world's leading agricultural machinery manufacturers—acquired the Waterloo Gasoline Engine Company. See John Deere Archives, "1918: Deere Enters the Tractor Business," https://www.deere.com/en/our-company/history.

106 See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910, vol. II, Population, table 11*.

107 In Cedar Rapids, for example, the Quaker Oats giant rose from the ashes of the 1905 fire and became the largest cereal mill in the world. See Diane Fannon-Langton, "Time Machine: Quaker Oats," *The Gazette* (Cedar Rapids), October 3, 2023, https://www.thegazette.com/history/time-machine-quaker-oats/. In Newton, in 1907, the Iowa Washing Machine Company launched the "Pastime," precursor of the future Maytag brand. See "History of Maytag in Newton, Iowa," *Maytag Story Archive*, May 10, 2006, https://maytagarchive.wordpress.com/2006/05/10/history-of-maytag-in-newton-iowa/.

108 See Rodney O. Davis, "Iowa Farm Opinion and the Good Roads Movement, 1903–1904," *Annals of Iowa* 37, no. 5 (1964): 321–344; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, "History of the Rural Electrification Act."

explicit in Wood's public commissions. The model of rural cooperation it celebrates is the very one Roosevelt adopted as a paradigm for national recovery. The first pencil sketch dates to 1933, the same year the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) was established—one of the key instruments of the New Deal's agricultural program.[109] Over the span of two decades, Iowa underwent the paradox typical of every productive revolution: economic growth was accompanied by the dissolution of the social fabric, and agricultural abundance itself became the very seed of exodus. The countryside—once the epicenter of community life—gradually lost its centrality in the national imagination, relegated to the margins in the form of quaint nostalgia, if not outright caricature. Hence the ambivalence with which *American Gothic* was received in 1930: to some, a satirical parody of an archaic world; to others, the solemn effigy of a resilient American spirit. As Barbara Haskell observes, it was the trauma of the Great Depression that reverses the trend: in the symbolic economy of the nineteen-thirties, the rural Midwest was no longer a relic to be forgotten, but a redemptive reservoir of values—authentic, ancestral, enduring.[110] It is precisely within this symbolic inversion that a curious parallel emerges with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939): not as escapism, but as a parable of return. Dorothy's revelation "This is the place I've been looking for all my life"is not merely an assertion of domestic belonging: it is the mythopoetic reinvestment of the Midwest—as much for Dorothy as for Grant synonymous with "home"—as the locus of truth. And what is most striking is the uncanny resonance of this phrase with the confession Grant Wood had formulated nearly a decade earlier: "I had to go to France to appreciate Iowa." At the heart of both declarations lies the same structure of recognition: the journey as a necessary experience of estrangement, the return as an epiphanic moment of synthesis.

REVOLT AGAINST THE CITY: THE FARMHOUSE-AS-*MANSIO*, A MANIFESTO

In 1934, Wood submitted the second drawing to the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh and, although it did not win a prize, was voted the third most popular by the public. *Time* magazine described it as "simple and direct," and the work was said to bear "as genuine a U.S. stamp as a hot dog stand or a baseball park.[111] The magazine published the image along with a series of critical letters from readers. In August 1935,

109 See *Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933*, Pub. L. No. 73-10, ch. 25, 48, Stat. 31 (May 12, 1933), digitized by the National Agricultural Law Center, University of Arkansas (Cooperative Agreement No. 58-8201-4-197 with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library). With this law, Henry A. Wallace—whom Wood cited as a political reference and to whom he had planned to dedicate a portrait (see Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*)—introduced a subsidy system for cotton, wheat, corn, milk, and tobacco growers in exchange for reduced planting. The goal was to reduce surpluses and raise prices. This was the logic behind domestic allotment, a mechanism that incentivized letting land lie fallow or reducing livestock. Meanwhile, the newly created Commodity Credit Corporation provided loans and made purchases to support the market. The state thus began to actively regulate the sector, realigning farm incomes with those of the 1909–1914 period—then considered ideal and still used today as the benchmark for parity. See also USDA-NASS Manual, "Parity Prices, Parity Ratio, and Feed Price Ratios" (*Guide to NASS Surveys*, ch. 4): "The 1910–1914 base period … remains the reference point for expressing parity prices for farm products," anchoring the concept of parity to the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933.

110 See Barbara Haskell, "Grant Wood: Through the Past, Darkly," in *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables* (New York: Yale University Press, 2018).

111 The exhibition recorded an exceptional turnout: more than eight hundred visitors signed the register, including Eleanor Roosevelt, George Gershwin, Edna Ferber, Carl Van Vechten, Fanny Hurst, and MacKinlay Kantor. The register was presented to Grant and is now at the Davenport Museum of Art. See Wood Graham, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, 113.

the artist responded firmly: "It was painted with my paint and my brushes on my own time. It is of and by me, and readers have no right to try to force upon me their families and their farms."[112]

Free from the pressures of managing public resources and the spatial constraints imposed by mural commissions, and while his ideas were converging in the manifesto *Revolt Against the City*, Wood worked on what could eventually be considered the fullest expression of his vision of regionalism.[113] *Dinner for Threshers* became, in every respect, his political declaration in pictorial form. For Wood, regionalism—a term that already felt too narrow by the time he adopted it—was above all an act of revolt: against homogenization and against intellectual dependence on colonial Europe.[114] It is not, then, a sentimental return to the countryside against industrialization, but a return to one's origins, as declared by the author himself and confirmed by scholars.[115] *Revolt Against the City* positions itself as a counter-discourse to the "revolt against the village":[116] it is not the city itself that is under attack, but a form of living that has severed its connection to place and robbed people of the ability to clearly perceive the richness in the ordinary, small things they have left behind.[117] To paint local subjects, for Wood, meant returning to Anamosa—to the places and faces he knew best. The artist must depict what is most familiar to them, because it is the reality about which they have something truthful to say. In this sense, his exhortation is unequivocal: no one should address rural themes unless they have a rural past—this applies to painting just as much as to literature or music.[118] The style he adopted to convey this message is that of a mature artist, capable of integrating Late Gothic composition with Renaissance studies of light and perspective, the lessons of *Neue Sachlichkeit* into a personal synthesis coherent with his own experience. Wood treated pictorial and architectural styles as tools to define types: he filtered them through his own sensibility and employed them as an operative vocabulary. When one viewer criticized a technical error in the overly round shadow cast by the chickens, Wood pulled out a micrometer and cited astronomical data to demonstrate that, at Iowa's latitude, at that hour and during threshing season, shadows would indeed fall precisely to the northeast, just as in the painting.[119] When a reader remarked that the back door lacks a screen and that the kitchen would therefore be full of flies, Wood responded categorically:

> Why allow me, without comment, to bisect an entire house and then quibble about a screen door? Especially when the presence of the screen door would ruin my composition. If the lady from North Dakota is so mentally hide-bound that

112 Grant Wood, *Time Magazine*, 1935, as reported in Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, 192–193

113 See James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture, appendix, where the essay Revolt Against the City* edited by Frank Luther Mott—originally published by Clio Press, Iowa City, 1935—is reprinted in full.

114 See Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City*, in Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture, 232: "But a cult or a fad for Midwestern materials is just what must be avoided. Regionalism has already suffered from a kind of cultism which is essentially false."*

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid., 231: "The feeling that the East, and perhaps Europe, was the true goal of the seeker after culture was greatly argumented by the literary movement which Mr. Van Doren since dubbed 'the revolt against the village.' Such books as *Spoon River Anthology and Main Street brought contempt upon the hinterland and strengthened the cityward tendency."*

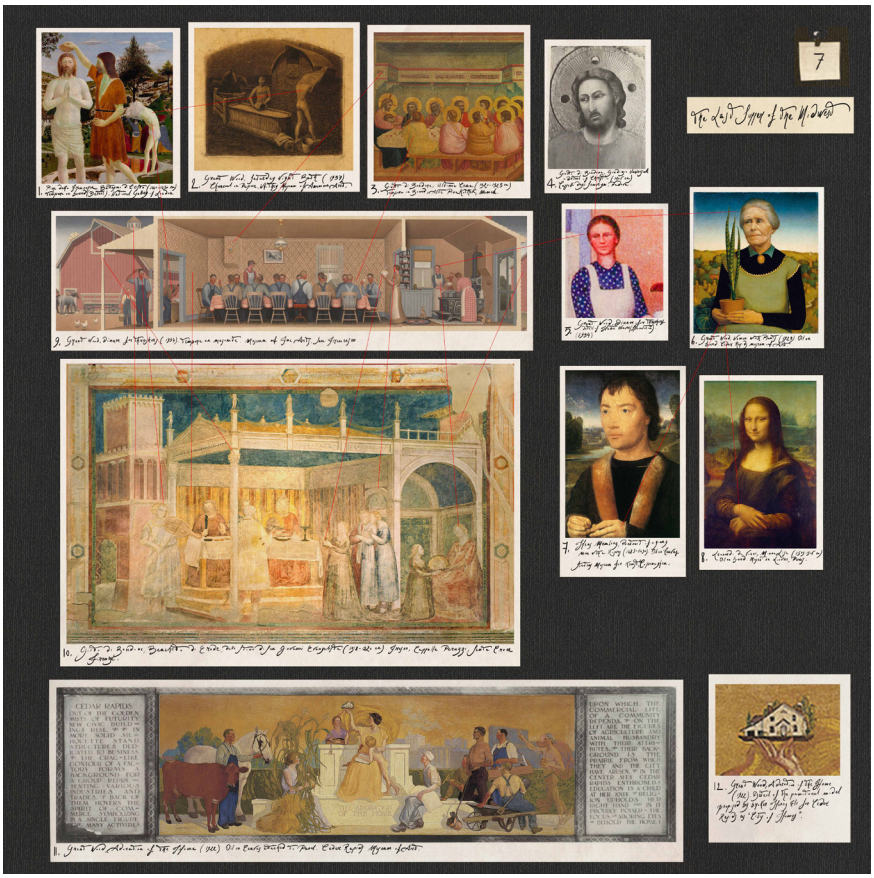
117 See Corn, *Grant Wood: the Regionalist Vision,* xiv-xv.

118 Wood, *Revolt Against the City*, in Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*, 232 "I shall not quarrel with the painter from New Mexico, from further West, or from quaint New England, if he differs with me; for if he does so honestly, he doubtless has the same basic feeling for his material that I have for mine—he believes in its genuiness. After all, all I contend for is the sincere use of native material by the artist who has command for it."

119 See Garwood, *Artist in Iowa, 168*.

> she cannot make allowance for this, let her imagine the screen door open at a 45-degree angle-for a momentary and flyless space of time.[120]

In this way, he transformed the accusation of documentary inaccuracy into a reflection on the nature of representational convention: what is perceived as realistic is, in fact, the calibrated effect of a code—a delicate equilibrium between subjective memory, collective projection, and compositional necessity—in which the precision of detail serves both to conceal and to disclose the image's mental construction. The model house in *Dinner for Threshers* is structured as an orderly sequence of enfilade rooms, beginning with a front porch and ending with a back door. The structure resembles that of a theater set—an object with which Wood had recently re-engaged during his time with the Stone City art colony [Atlas 8, Fig. 4].



Filippo Fanciotti, Atlas 8: *The Farmhouse as Mansio*, 2025.

It is no coincidence that, in layout and design, the painting closely resembles the scenographic panel of the *Ideal City* in Berlin. Specifically, Wood's painting mirrors the spatial tripartition achieved through the lateral arched wings. A digital overlay of the two works, calibrated through their vanishing points, reveals a precise perspectival correspondence [Atlas 8, Fig. 1]. The depth of the stage-like space is even identical: in the Renaissance case, it is generated by the loggia with its diamond-patterned intrados; in Wood's, by the plastered ceiling of the dining room. The entrance threshold, lacking the hinged door that so irked the lady from North Dakota, functions as a scenic passage for the characters' entry; symmetri-

120 Grant Wood, *Time Magazine*, 1935, as reported in Garwood, *Artist in Iowa*, pp. 192–193.

cally, the sectioned opening between the kitchen and the dining room segments the internal narrative. The formal coincidence and the constructive precision of the analogy betray a deliberate reference. After all, if *Dinner for Threshers* presents an idealized image of a provincial model home, it is hardly surprising that Wood would engage with one of the most paradigmatic representations of the ideal city—incidentally, the only work he ever executed using the same technique of tempera-on-Masonite.[121] The *Ideal City* panel in Berlin, too—however well disguised—presents itself to the viewer as a perspectival section; while the ideal loggia ends in itself, Wood's cut deliberately excludes the upper floor and any vertical extension: no staircase is visible; a slight allusion to upward development survives only in the preparatory drawing, largely lost in the transition to Masonite. The porticoed house is shown entirely in the thickness of the ground floor, as if all its reality—and thus all its truth—were contained in that sequence of enfilade rooms, echoing the archetypal *cailles longues*.[122] This horizontal arrangement is not just a continuation of Wood's typological inquiry, but the adoption of a visual code. *Dinner for Threshers* adopts—both in its structure and its narrative syntax—an iconographic grammar traditionally reserved, in Late Gothic painting, for depictions of the life of Christ. The ground floor of the house unfolds like a sacred predella, organizing the rooms into a sequence that the public can read as a sacred space. The effect is that of a sacred representation of 'everyday' life, in which visual staging constructs a scene intended not only for the aesthetic experience of a performance, but for the reception and interiorization of a political message. As in medieval sacred cycles, the narrative relies on a relational code that the viewer can recognize and interpret: the lost domesticity is offered as a mythical horizon through which to move forward. The perspectival section imposes a pedagogical relationship on the viewer, codifying a system of signs in which the signifier—the communal meal—points to a deeper signified: communion, no longer Eucharistic but agricultural, based on the proximity of individuals gathered to share the fruits of collective labor.

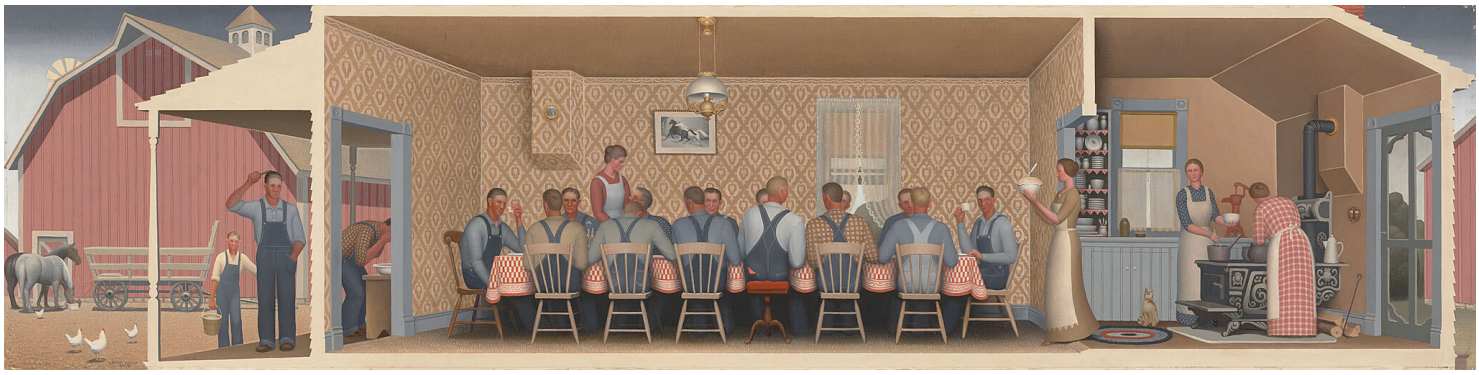
The compositional layout directly recalls the form of the *mansio*, a scenographic structure typical of medieval itinerant sacred plays and commonly adopted by Giotto [Atlas 8, Figs. 6, 8].[123] A well-documented iconographic reference is *Advent and Triumph of Christ* by Hans Memling (1480) [Atlas 8, Fig. 7], a work Wood admired in 1928 in Munich, in which the episodes of Christ's life unfold within an idealized Jerusalem, studded with open, ruined, or truncated architectures that sacrifice themselves as stages for the sacred narrative. And while Wood explicitly declared his admiration for the masters of Northern Europe, the spatial construction of *Dinner for Threshers* reveals an equally deep affinity with the language of Italian painting: "an interior seen from the exterior," a

121 While Masonite had become a standard support for Wood by the nineteen-thirties, this is the first documented instance in which he employed tempera, as noted in the caption to the image in Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, pp. 106–107, plate 22. He would use tempera only once more—though on paper—in *Spring Plowing (Drawing for Textile Design)*, c. 1939.

122 See Hunter Doyle, "Southern Hospitality: A Brief History of the Porch," *Burning Farm*, Essay 30, January 2024. https://burning.farm/essays/southern-hospitality.

123 Widespread between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, these itinerant performances staged biblical or hagiographic episodes along an urban route divided into successive stations. Each *mansio*—from the Latin *manere*, "to stay"—designated a symbolic place (Jerusalem, Calvary, the Praetorium), materialized through simple wooden huts arranged around the *platea*. The spectator followed the unfolding of the story through the actors' movement from station to station, thus transforming narrative time into ritual space.

space that privileges symbolic objectivity over perspectival subjectivity.[124] Here too, as revealed by the reverse perspective [Atlas 8, Fig.5], the focal distance between observer and scene does not invite entry into the space but rather demands that it be deciphered. The floor, abruptly interrupted at the point of section, marks the threshold between the space of representation and the time of interpretation. Compared to contemporary works such as *Thanksgiving* by Doris Lee [Atlas 8, Fig. 2]—often associated with *Dinner for Threshers*—Wood's solution is radically different. While Lee adopted a high vanishing point and an immersive viewpoint that draws the spectator into the bustling kitchen, Wood constructed a frontal and detached vision, in which the domestic is observed from the audience. One aligns with the women's everyday toil, the other establishes a moral paradigm grounded in distance and form. Euripidean theater on one side, Sophoclean on the other. In the end, anti-classical and classical. The adherence to or abstraction from the real—exercised freely—acquires meaning only insofar as the image of the house is not merely the representation of a lived space, nor simply the narration of a biographical experience, but rises to the level of a *type*, which is above all an exemplary and paradigmatic form. This is achieved by means of a conscious operative lexicon, which is not accessory but essential to the transmission of meaning and through the recourse to a recognizable and sedimented visual and cultural code. In this transition, the house becomes a device: a place that does not merely host the scene but institutes it; a scene that does not merely represent but transmits a mythical repertoire of shared values. *Dinner for Threshers* thus enacts a transfiguration of the Carpenter Gothic farmhouse into a prophane temple, bringing mural painting back to its archetypal function as *sacra rappresentazione*. Yet it is a secular sacrality: a civic liturgy that celebrates—through form, signs, and references—the founding principles of democracy.



Grant Wood, *Dinner for Threshers*, 1934, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco (US), Tempera on Masonite (203.2×50.8cm).

The images of *The Last Supper of the Midwest* are preserved in the eponymous collection, as part of the *Archives de l'imaginaire* project.

124 See Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 69: "It thus stands to reason that the Renaissance would interpret the meaning of perspective entirely differently from the Baroque, and Italy entirely differently from the North: in the former cases, speaking quite generally, its objective significance was felt to be more essential, in the latter cases its subjective significance. Thus, even Antonello da Messina, under such strong Netherlandish influence, constructs the study of St. Jerome with a long perpendicular distance, so that, like nearly all Italian interiors, it is basically an architectural exterior with the front surface removed."

AUTHOR

Filippo Fanciotti is an architect, artist, and PhD candidate at LAPIS (EPFL), where he explores digital architectural representation as a methodological tool for engaging with pictorial art history.

COPYRIGHT

ISSN 2813-8058 burning.farm