

THE STORY OF THE **AMERICAN GOTHIC**

In August of 1930, Grant Wood was visiting the town of Eldon in the southern part of Iowa when he came upon a house that would eventually make him famous. This five-room structure was built in the 1880s in a style known as Carpenter Gothic. Wood was very impressed with its compactness and strong design, particularly the Gothic Window placed in the gable. Wood imagined a farmer and his daughter standing in front of the house. He immediately did a small sketch of his idea on paper and had someone take a photograph of the house so that he could work out his idea when he returned home.



"The American Gothic" by Caty (age 9), Gainesville, FL.

Back in his studio, Wood used old Victorian photographs and 19th century portrait paintings to plan the scene he was to paint. His sister, Nan, and his dentist, Dr. Byron McKeeby, served as models and were dressed in the period clothes they are seen wearing. Even though they are seen standing together in the painting, each was painted during separate sittings. The man was given a pitchfork to hold because Wood wanted him to be associated with haying in the 19th century rather than the more common farming practice of gardening in the 20th century. The pitchfork also symbolized masculinity, the devil, and farming; and served as a compositional device to echo the ovalness of the people's faces and the repeated lines of the Gothic Window.

Wood worked on the painting for two months and finished it in time to enter it into a juried exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. Although the jurors were at first divided over whether to accept the painting, it eventually got into the show and even received a bronze medal and a \$300.00 prize. At the time it aroused great controversy and was called by one art critic "an insulting caricature of plain country people." But, the *American Gothic* gradually gained acceptance and has since become one of the most popular and widely recognized paintings in America.

The original *American Gothic* hangs today in The Art Institute of Chicago.

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