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# Sister Wendy's

AMERICAN COLLECTION

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AMERICAN GOTHIC: THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



## American Gothic

**The Art Institute of Chicago**  
 Grant Wood, American (1891-1942)  
 1930  
 Oil on beaverboard  
 29 1/4 x 24 5/8 in. (74.3 x 62.4 cm)  
 Friends of American Art Collection  
 Acquired in 1930

Grant Wood, American, 1891-1942, *American Gothic*, 1930, oil on beaverboard, 74.3 x 62.4 cm, Friends of American Art Collection, All rights reserved by the Art Institute of Chicago and VAGA, New York, NY, 1930.934, digital file © The Art Institute of Chicago. All Rights Reserved.

Regionalism in American painting developed at the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929. Exclusively Midwestern in origin, Regionalism portrayed American life as simple and rural, in direct contrast to the urban-based Realist paintings that had dominated the American art scene since the turn of the century. Unlike Realism, Regionalism left no room for social criticism.

[Larger version \(JPG\)](#) | [Detail viewer \(Flash\)](#)

"You can recycle the *Mona Lisa* any way you like. Back to front, upside down, it remains instantly recognizable. That's the ultimate compliment, and it's been paid to Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. Somehow it seems to speak to the American psyche, though what it actually says isn't as simple as it might seem."

— Sister Wendy Beckett

So went the theory. In reality, this may not have always been so. Since first shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930, Grant Wood's *American Gothic* has been fodder for speculation. In one camp were those who believed the painting was a celebration of "American" values; in the other were those who saw it as a satiric critique of the selfsame thing. The pair's dour expressions led many outside the Midwest to believe that Wood, a self-proclaimed Regionalist, was poking fun at rural life. Wood himself denied this in some interviews, but in others hinted that there were indeed some satiric elements present. (He wouldn't say which elements those were.)

Wood's subjects spurred much of the debate. Was the pair a farmer husband and wife, or a father and daughter? Many Iowa farmers' wives objected to what they perceived as a negative portrayal, writing letters of complaint to the artist. Wood later revealed that the models were his 30-year-old sister and their 62-year-old family dentist.

The subjects' motivations, even when considered as father and daughter, are unclear: The man may be a farmer holding a pitchfork, nothing more than a piece of farming equipment. Or he may not be a farmer at all, but a preacher, perhaps, jealously guarding his daughter from male suitors. Critics who interpret the woman as his daughter have often assumed that she was a spinster -- but just what kind of spinster is left to the imagination. Some see the stray curl at the nape of her neck as related to the snake plant in the background, each one symbolizing a sharp-tongued "old maid." Sister Wendy sees in the curl, however, a sign that she is not as repressed as her buttoned-up exterior might indicate.

Grant Wood's *American Gothic* has been part of the Art Institute of Chicago's Department of Modern and Contemporary Art since he debuted it there in 1930. The AIC's modern art collection is considered one of the best and most comprehensive in the world.

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