

Parks Library

title

Breaking the Prairie Sod

designer

Grant Wood

Location:
East wing of
Parks Library,
ground floor
lobby
Materials:
oil on canvas
Size:
center panel: 23'x11'
side panels:
11'x9' each
Date:
1935 - 1937
Project Director:
Francis McCray



Breaking the Prairie Sod, center panel

Student Artists: **Lee Allen, Richard Gates, John Hoagland, Thealtus Alberts,
Joseph Swan, Holland Foster, Aurin Lee Hunt**

Commissioned by: **Iowa State College**

Made possible by: **Works Projects Administration, National Youth Administration**

Collection: **Art on Campus Collection, University Museums, Iowa State University**

About the Mural

Iowa State College President Raymond Hughes commissioned the triptych mural *Breaking the Prairie Sod*, which is located across from the staircase in Parks Library's lower lobby. As with *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*, Wood's other mural at Iowa State University, this set is narrative, based on Daniel Webster's quote, "When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of human civilization." Although *Breaking the Prairie Sod* was painted after *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*, it is actually a prelude to the staircase murals, depicting the beginnings of tillage and the founding of the state by pioneers in the 1840s. Other themes portrayed in the mural include the advancement of agricultural technology through the introduction of new plows in the 1870s, the founding of Iowa State College, and the uncertain future that was ahead of Iowa and the nation in the late 1930s (World War II, the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression) as depicted by the ominous clouds in the skyscape.

**University Museums/Art on Campus Program
Iowa State University** **Ames, Iowa**

In order to make the murals detailed, authentic, and able to withstand the scrutiny of a scientifically minded campus community, two years were spent planning, researching, designing and redesigning the murals. Early 19th century clothing, farming implements, livestock, and native prairie flowers were studied extensively. (The flowers shown include: may apple or wild mandrake, hepatica, spring beauty, yellow stargrass, hairy Solomon's seal, blood-root, dogtooth violet, Jack-in-the-pulpit, Virginia cowslip or bluebell, wild blue phlox, midland shooting star, horsetail, pasque flower, prairie violet, and wild strawberry.) Antique plows and 'old-time' farmers were sought to furnish advice about the proper way to chop trees and drink from a stoneware jug. Iowa State faculty supplied information on prairie and woodland flowers.

Although the details in the mural are accurate representations, the images show an idealized view of the event taking place. The settlers and animals are not sweating, even though they are performing back-breaking labor under the mid-day sun. Other examples of the 'streamlined rural paradise' Wood has depicted are the carpet-like sod being rolled back by the plow and the Art Deco clouds thrusting across the sky.

Grant Wood incorporated three Abraham Lincolnesque figures, portrayed in youth, middle age and maturity, into his mural. The inclusion of images of Lincoln illustrated the former president's importance to the nation and to Iowa. The Morrill Act was signed into law during Lincoln's tenure, and significantly impacted the newly formed Iowa State Agricultural College and Model Farm. Lincoln was revered for his hard work, moral courage, leadership, and belief in education. By placing Lincoln in the mural, the message was clear to young college students: 'With hard work, dedication, and an education, you too can aspire to greatness.'

Breaking the Prairie Sod was designed by Grant Wood, who, at the time, was the head of the federally funded Public Works of Art Project for Iowa and a member of the Graphic and Plastic Arts Department at the University of Iowa. The mural was painted in Iowa City by eight University of Iowa art students working under the direction of Francis McCray. Wood's designs were enlarged by the students onto brown wrapping paper and then transferred to the canvas using a spiked wheel to create a perforated outline. The largest of Grant Wood's murals, *Breaking the Prairie Sod* was installed in 1937 in the library's main lobby, near the front door through which students constantly passed.

About the Artist

Grant Wood painted in a style known as "regionalism." The regionalist style, which began with Wood and other midwestern artists such as John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, held that painters should paint what they know best rather than rely on European influences for subject matter. Born on a farm near Anamosa, Iowa in 1891, Wood painted the fields, activities, and people of Iowa. His farmscapes depict the land as Wood had viewed it as a boy -- as a 'streamlined rural paradise,' with no sweating hands, bad weather, crop pests, or foreclosed mortgages. Another artist with ties to Iowa State University, former sculptor-in-residence Christian Petersen, also depicted what he knew best -- the people and environment of Iowa State College. Of the students portrayed in *Conversations*, one of Petersen's well known works of art at Iowa State, Petersen said, "I'm trying to make them typical. They can't all be studios."

The sharp, bold style of painting for which Wood became known developed slowly over the years. As a student, Wood was encouraged to paint in the style of the French Impressionist artists. He was, however, more attracted to the clear, simple, and detailed style of the Northern European old master painters of the 15th century. It wasn't until Wood began to paint his everyday, Middle-American scenes in this Gothic style that he became a success, using the technique on his most famous paintings, including *American Gothic* (1930) and *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* (1931).

Wood once said, "All my pictures are first planned as abstractions. I make a design of abstract shapes without any naturalistic details. Until I am satisfied with this abstract picture, I don't go ahead. When I think it's a sound design, then I start very cautiously making it look like nature." Meticulous attention to detail was one of Wood's characteristics. An excerpt from *The Daily Iowan* of February 6, 1937, describes this attention to detail: "The research by which the details of the mural have been authenticated has been especially exacting owing to the fact that the scene deals with a period before the camera was in common use. Exact information was secured of pioneer types, costumes, native Iowa topography, animals, plant life and pioneer implements."

BREAKING THE PRAIRIE SOD

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Additional information about *Breaking the Prairie Sod*, other Art on Campus information sheets, and Art on Campus maps are available at the University Museums office - 290 Scheman Building, (2nd Floor) 515/294-3342, or visit us online at <http://www.museums.iastate.edu>

This information sheet is intended to be used in addition to viewing the Art on Campus. At no time should this sheet be used as a substitute for experiencing the art in person!

Tillage as Art

(after *Breaking the Prairie Sod*
based on Daniel Webster's statement,
"When tillage begins, other arts follow")

In this version of the past,
life is so simple and pure
no one has buttons or buckles or pockets.

At sunup, the men step into
their leotard trousers, shrugging
suspenders over their shoulders;
the woman rises like a clapper
into her bell-shaped dress;
and they all set out to work
in the clean earth where no one gets dirty.

Nobody sweats (not even the horses),
though thirst seems to be a possibility
as the plowman turns over the plush pile prairie,
easy as lifting a rug.

In the grove with the wildflower border,
one of the men chopping trees
looks like a young Abe Lincoln,
The job is that noble.

Meanwhile, over this rustic scene,
art deco clouds drift in,
streamlined, urban, building
in the distance like the future
of everyone's dreams,
too pure and simple to be true.

Neal Bowers, 1990
Ames, Iowa