

Parks Library

title *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*

designer

Grant Wood

Location:
East wing, first floor staircase

Materials:
oil on canvas

Date:
1934

Project Director:
Francis McCray

Commissioned by:
Iowa State College

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

Student Artists:
**Bertrand Adams, Lee Allen,
John Bloom, Dan Finch,
Elwyn Giles, Gregory Hull,
Harry Jones, Lowell Houser,
Howard Johnson, Arthur Munch,
Francis McCray, Arnold Pyle,
Thomas Savage, Jack Van Dyck**



detail

About the Murals

Surrounding the first floor lobby staircase in Parks Library are eight mural panels designed by Iowa artist Grant Wood. As with *Breaking the Prairie Sod*, Wood's other Iowa State University mural painted two years later, Wood borrowed his theme for *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow* from a speech on agriculture delivered by Daniel Webster in 1840 at the State House in Boston. Webster said, "When tillage begins, other arts follow. The farmers therefore are the founders of human civilization." Wood had planned to create seventeen mural panels for the library, but only the eleven devoted to agriculture and the practical arts were completed. The final six, which would have hung in the main reading room (now the Periodical Room) and were to have depicted the fine arts, were never begun.

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

In the 1930s, Grant Wood, an acclaimed Iowa and national artist, was director of the Public Works of Art Project for Iowa, a federal program to give work relief to unemployed artists. In 1933, Raymond Hughes, Iowa State president, approached Wood and commissioned the eight panels that are located in the library's main stairwell. These murals, the first to be made under the federal Public Works of Art Project for an educational institution, depict the then current technology that followed Iowa State's agricultural beginnings, and also reflect some of the major divisions of Iowa State College at that time: veterinary medicine, farm crops, animal husbandry, home economics, ceramics and chemical engineering, mechanical engineering and aeronautical and civil engineering.

The mural panels were created in Grant Wood's studio at the University of Iowa by a team of 14 student artists who received university credit for their work. Swamped with 230 applications, Wood decided to hire only those student artists who had exhibited at the Art Salon of the Iowa State Fair. From Wood's initial sketches, Francis McCray made life-sized charcoal drawings on great sheets of brown wrapping paper. The canvas was hung for several weeks to remove creases caused by shipping. The images were then transferred to the canvas using a spiked wheel to create perforated outlines, and the artists who did the painting followed a small color sketch by Grant Wood. Wood selected a very limited color palette when he designed the murals -- the only pigments used were yellow ochre, red, black, and white.

The agricultural murals -- Veterinary Medicine, Farm Crops and Animal Husbandry (located on the library's west wall) -- were the first to be completed. They were displayed in Washington D.C., first in the main building of the Department of Agriculture, and then at the Corcoran Gallery. In 1934 the murals were ready for transport to the college library in Ames. They were rolled, paint side out, on a large metal cylinder, and upon arrival, the murals were unrolled. The back sides were then coated with wheat paste and installed under the direction of staff from the Art Institute of Chicago.

In the October 23, 1934 issue of *The Iowa State Student*, Miss Joanne M. Hansen, then head and professor of the Applied Art Department at Iowa State College, stated, "The ideas expressed, the fitness to purpose and place, the suitability of the style and technique, the simplicity of form, the well chosen detail, the fine light and dark pattern, and the decorative quality and unity of the whole form a real contribution to the art of mural painting."

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. 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 studious."

The sharp, bold style of painting for which Grant 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 *Fortune* from January 1935, which published photographs of *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*, describes Wood's attention to detail: "...as the sketches were worked out, every detail was studiously checked and rechecked by members of the faculty of the College. The breeds of hog and horse, the kind of hay, the chemical experiment in process -- all such details were selected not merely for esthetic but the literal, even statistical reasons; and all are exactly, even scientifically reproduced. The very blueprint on the wall, in the last picture, is an actual bridge. In fact, this work of art is no mere blare of the imagination; it is the product of an imagination humbly and willingly subjected to the criticism of a group imagination, and to the hard facts of contemporary history."

WHEN TILLAGE BEGINS OTHER ARTS FOLLOW U88.91a-i

Additional information about *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*, 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!

HARD LABOR

For John Madsen

(inspired by *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*)

I

The purest form of hell
is threshing in Iowa
in July or stacking bales
of straw or wheat
on the wagon
or in the hay mow.

Under the cuffs,
under your collar
chaff blisters
the skin into boils,
your body drenched
in a sweat
that will not
cool or wash
away the dust
from the eaves
or the dirt in the air
you can't breathe
anyway, because
it's been smothered
in 110 degrees
and 82 per cent
humidity.

II

The further we get,
the prettier the picture,
the softer the line
on the rough edges
of the wagon. Even
pigs fall silent
as men measure
their medicine.

No one moves
their sullen faces,
no one smiles,
not the boy
with the head
of his father,
not the quiet wives
with their needles
and thread and china.

It is the distance
they stare into,
the soothing balm of years.
Step by step, we leave them
to their never-ending chores.

Step by step, we rise
like the painted butterflies
on the wallpaper or are they
leaves blown in on the sudden wind,
the white window left open,
caressing our brains
into different bodies
that see and touch and do,
now, different things,
softer things, strange things
in a world, we love, like them,
and cannot understand.

Michael Carey, 1992
Farragut, Iowa