

Grant Wood : still lifes as decorative abstractions : Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, February 16-April 6, 1985.

Dennis, James M.

Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of
Wisconsin-Madison, 1985

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/42DYWPNHCBZC6P9E>

<http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC/1.0/>

The libraries provide public access to a wide range of material, including online exhibits, digitized collections, archival finding aids, our catalog, online articles, and a growing range of materials in many media.

When possible, we provide rights information in catalog records, finding aids, and other metadata that accompanies collections or items. However, it is always the user's obligation to evaluate copyright and rights issues in light of their own use.

GRANT WOOD



Still Lives as Decorative Abstractions

GRANT WOOD

Still Lifes as Decorative Abstractions

by James M. Dennis

Elvehjem Museum of Art
University of Wisconsin-Madison
February 16-April 6, 1985

Catalogue design: Earl J. Madden
Cover illustration: Catalogue number 7
© Copyright 1985
The Regents of the University of Wisconsin System
ISBN 0-932900-09-7

Foreword

Museums that are integrated into a university context have a very distinct advantage over autonomous civic or municipal museums. Students provide the university based museum with a built in and intellectually demanding audience, while the highly trained and multi-faceted Art History faculty represents the kind of expert support that would normally be beyond the reach of most museums. A healthy symbiotic relationship between an Art History Department and a museum can produce some fascinating results. This exhibition, *Grant Wood Still Lives as Decorative Abstractions*, is the product of just such a relationship.

The Elvehjem is very grateful to James M. Dennis, Professor of American Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for the intellectual and organizational efforts which he so generously made in order to bring this exhibition into being. A leading expert on Grant Wood, Professor

Dennis identified this totally unexplored region of the artist's oeuvre and then worked indefatigably to convert the idea into a visual reality. The Elvehjem is delighted to be able to serve as an intellectual forum for Professor Dennis' students while at the same time bringing to its broader audience an exciting and stimulating exhibition.

The Elvehjem is also grateful to the various lenders who so generously agreed to share their art with us and without whose cooperation this exhibition would not have been possible. And I personally would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the efforts of the Elvehjem staff who worked so diligently to ensure that the many details that go into an exhibition were carefully attended to.

Russell Panczenko
Director

Lenders

We are grateful to the following individuals and institutions for lending works to the exhibition:

Anonymous Lenders

Associated American Artists

Eugenie Mayer Bolz

Dr. William K. Brunot

Cedar Rapids Museum of Art

Coe College

Davenport Art Gallery

Gordon Fennell

University of Iowa Museum of Art

Mrs. Herbert S. Stamats

Museum Staff

Russell Panczenko, *Director*

Stephen C. McGough, *Associate Director*

Joel Skornicka, *Director of Development*

Carlton Overland, *Curator of Collections*

Anne Lambert, *Curator of Education*

Lisa Calden, *Registrar*

Susan Latton, *Coordinator of Membership and Outreach*

Kathleen Parks, *Museum Shop Manager/Coordinator of Publicity*

Henry Behrnd, *Carpenter/Chief Gallery Technician*

Ruth Struve, *Administrative Assistant*

Sandra Paske, *Word Processor Operator*

Jacqueline Captain, *Curatorial Project Assistant*

Mary Harshaw, *Membership Assistant*

Sandy Ebert, *Museum Shop Assistant*

Brandy Larson, *Instructor, Children's Art Classes*

Christine Ott, *Arts Administration Intern*

Shirley Scheier, *Curatorial Assistant*

Laura Vanderploeg, *Photographer*

Brian Lorbiecki, *Graphic Artist*

James L. Williams, *Security Supervisor*

Richard P. Hegg, *Lead Security Officer*

William McMahan, *Lead Security Officer*

Steven C. Butzlaff, Frank Cooper, Carol A. DePagter, Joshua M.

Diehm III, Mark R. Golbach, Carey D. Hall, Lyle G. Kahl, Joseph

E. Ross, Edward J. Schweiger, Theodore T. Tyler, *Security Officers*

Jesus Avila, Doris Wipperfurth, *Custodians*

Two purposes underlie this exhibition. First it is intended to display the heretofore unnoticed qualities of Grant Wood's transitional style as expressed in his floral still lifes painted primarily during the years 1927 to 1930. In time, technique and composition these works come between his early "impressionist" style and his best known mature and meticulous style first fully characterized by the paintings *American Gothic* and *Stone City* of late 1930. The floral still lifes are composed of a surface patterning that creates a positive force of attraction. As such they exemplify Grant Wood's work at its most abstract level, in keeping with early aspects of modern French painting. This he acknowledged willingly. The second purpose of the exhibition emerges from this emphasis on abstraction. Contrary to popular belief, or to art historical emphasis and Regionalist rhetoric, Grant Wood was interested in concepts and practices of contemporary abstract art. In fact he experimented with non-figurative, non-representational composition in the 1920s. The floral still lifes with all their abstract qualities, remain the earliest culmination of his commitment to what he referred to as the "decorative." To him and other prominent American artists of his generation this was synonymous with abstraction and basic to his view of a "20th century" style.

The following essay intends to relate Grant Wood's floral still lifes to the American sources of art theory, art education, and art criticism from which he directly drew his brand of modernism.

Published writings on Grant Wood's art and on Regionalism as a whole have concentrated primarily on subject matter. Feature writers, critics and art historians alike have tended to proceed from the initial pronouncements of the Regionalist Movement. The depiction of people and places in Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and elsewhere in the Heartland has been praised as the seedbed or damned as the backwater of contemporary American art, and has been viewed as either stylistically indigenous or hopelessly provincial.¹ Either way, Regionalist Art has been evaluated vis-a-vis European academicism or, more commonly, in confrontation with the Paris-based, pre-World War I avant-garde and what was accused of being its American counterpart, the Stieglitz 291 group of painters in and out of New York City.

Not so preoccupied with subject matter as most observers would believe, the three leading Midwest Regionalists pondered whether expression of personal experience would create distinct form, abstracted from a given environment. In his 1937 address to the Madison Art Association, John Steuart Curry held to the Romantic concept of *Volkgeist* the "emphasis on singularity" as a creative reciprocity between the individual and place, as proposed by the cultural-nationalist Johann Gottfried Herder of the late eighteenth century. A truly native form, Curry maintained, would be achieved through the artist's deep attachment to the painted content regardless of specific locale: "Great art is within yourself."² The determining factor in his own art-expression was "the historical struggle of man with nature" (Fig. 1). This he localized into an American time frame as a Curry family tradition, "and the tradition of a great majority of Kansas people . . ."³

By 1940, Grant Wood, in agreement with the universal principles lodged in Curry's point of view, had grown



Fig. 1 John Steuart Curry, *The Tornado*, 1929, oil on canvas, 46¼ x 60½ in., Hackley Art Gallery, Muskegon, Michigan

cautious and even leary about the term "Regionalism" and about a "movement" that prescribed a program of restrictive subject matter. In keeping with this scepticism he emphasized more emphatically the personal experience whose natural outcome could be that of characterizing a regional identity: "It is . . . the depth and intensity of the artist's experience that are of first importance in art. More often than not, however, the preponderance of a significant experience is rooted to a certain region."⁴

That subject matter from the immediate environment should also determine compositional form and that pictorial abstraction project a national identity were modern concerns shared by many Regionalist artists, in particular Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. In spite of deep dissatisfaction with his youthful Synchronist experiments in color cubism, and with non-figural composition in general as an end in itself, Benton announced in a mid-1920s series of articles for *Arts Magazine* his reliance on abstract form for synthetically devising pictures. In "Form and the Subject" (1924) and in his five part series entitled "Mechanics of Form Organization in Painting" (1926-1927), Benton not only intended to demonstrate the basis for a work of art as existing initially in the abstract but hypothesized that subject matter as "historical material, if adequately represented, would cause the form itself to change."⁵ Echoing Gauguin he visualized a synthesis of meanings and shapes (Fig. 2).

While Grant Wood also was to grow dissatisfied with his early paintings, it obviously could not have been their modernity which came to bother him, but, as he explained, by the "picturesqueness" of his "impressionistic" style (Cat. 11). And while his mature art was to assume a *moderne* appearance, especially in the landscapes, an overriding concern for clear pictorial design can be detected in work from the beginning of his career, culminating in the pre-*American Gothic* period with his floral

still lifes of the late 1920s.

Approaching Grant Wood, alert to abstractionist tendencies, one discovers that his career-long commitment to the "decorative" as a central basis of composition corresponds to his consistent effort toward a "20th century" form. By way of this his development can be seen to join, in at least one way, that of the first American modernists in deriving abstractive means of expression from more immediate sources of influence than those afforded by European avant-garde artists. In common with the Stieglitz circle, he agreed that Paris-School modernism had "added too many powerful tools to the kit of the artist to be forgotten."⁶



Fig. 2 Thomas Hart Benton, *Constructivist Still Life*, 1917, oil on paper, 17½ x 13¾ in., Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio.

In a talk given in Kansas City in March, 1931, he further clarified this point of view by drawing a parallel between the historical significance of abstract art to the painting he envisioned as the "new movement" and the evolution of furniture design from the time of his early youth, when he faithfully read *Craftsman Magazine* and enthusiastically absorbed the anti-Victorian principles of simplified design advocated by Gustav Stickley:

The mission period was only a clearing away period for better things to come . . . A generation later we find art going through the same phases, Modernism instead of Mission. The clearing away period, with its simplification to the point of crudity is showing signs of its decline, and we are already looking forward to the newer, I hope, better things to come.⁷

In the wake of imported modernism, now ostensibly on the wane, Grant Wood sensed a definite movement over the country to American subject matter, and though this was by no means a novelty in the history of American painting, local artists would distinguish themselves from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American painting by spontaneously rejecting European "techniques." The strongest tendency of the new movement, according to Wood, would be towards a "literary feeling," "the story telling picture" being the "logical reaction from the abstraction of the modernists." However, as he hastened to point out, therein lay its greatest danger. The general public would favor more illustrations which it could understand without "mental exertion," and lead us back to the *Yard of Puppies* and *The Spirit of 76*. To avoid this reactionary extreme, Wood proposed the establishment of a "decorative" convention, a positive limitation that he, along with other progressive American painters such as John Sloan, witnessed in the religious paintings of Early and Northern Renaissance masters:

They are decorations first and story telling pictures afterwards, and the story is in no wise weakened by the decorative qualities. The story of American life of this period can be told in a very realistic manner, employing sympathy, humor, irony or caustic criticism at the will of the painter, and yet have decorative qualities that will make it class; not as an illustration, but as a work of fine art with the possibilities of living through the ages—if the decorative side is finely considered.⁸

The universally valued painting as a work of fine art, therefore, in contrast to an illustration, was achieved

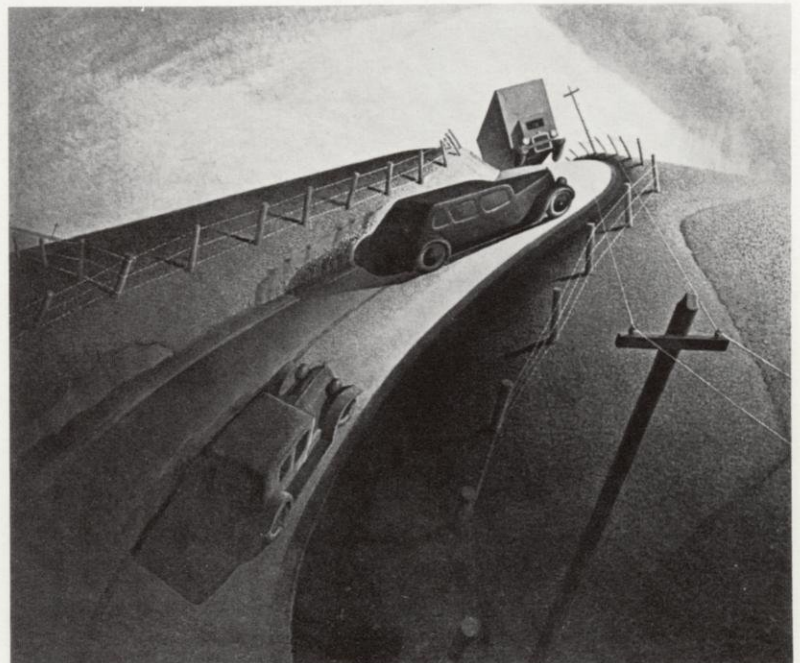


Fig. 3 Grant Wood, *Death on the Ridge Road*, 1934, oil on masonite panel, 32 x 39 in., Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

through means of decorative design. This, in the nomenclature of leading American art educators and critics during the first decades of the twentieth century, was essentially synonymous with abstraction, especially pictorial abstraction. Thus, while Grant Wood did experiment at one point in the early 1920s with intuitive, non-figurative painting as an expressionist response to modern romantic music⁹ and, in contrast, later devised a sure-fire, mechanistic means of synthetically laying out the superstructure of a picture by dividing each edge into thirds and criss-crossing surface diagonals from point to point through nine equal oblongs, he conceived his most lasting works as decorative abstractions emerging from the "decorative adventures" of his commonplace, native surroundings.¹⁰ (Fig. 3).

Regardless of subject matter, the possibility of creating a work that would perpetuate itself in the abstract as fine art was conveyed to Grant Wood by late Gothic and Renaissance masterpieces illustrated from time to time in *Craftsman Magazine*. In those same pages, he first experienced his closest contemporary source of decorative design concepts which, through direct causal connections of art education, placed him in closer proximity to the vanguard of American abstract artists than he initially realized and for ideological purposes could later admit.

While still in high school, Grant Wood not only followed the articles of art instruction published as a series by Ernest Batchelder in *Craftsman Magazine*, but he also completed the art educator's correspondence course of design. On the night of his graduation in June, 1910, Wood traveled north to the Minneapolis School of Design and Handicraft to study with Batchelder, who was there from Pasadena, California for the summer session. In the preface to his 1904 book *The Principles of Design*, Batchelder forthrightly claimed no originality in the theory of design to be presented but gave full credit to Denman W. Ross, with whom he had worked at Harvard in the summer of 1901.¹¹ A much less intellectual and quasi-scientific systematization of design than that published by Ross in his 1907 *A Theory of Pure Design; Harmony, Balance, Rhythm*, Batchelder's *Principles* nonetheless borrowed basic concepts and terminology from the Bostonian and presented them in reverse order of progression.

Throughout eleven concise chapters, beginning with "Elementary Line," Batchelder defines, demonstrates and illustrates with his own drawings and some historical, mostly Oriental, examples "Rhythm," "Balance," and "Harmony" as they apply in turn to "Tone," "Measure" (size) and "Shape for designs," "Ornamental" and "Pictorial"¹² (Fig. 4). The transcendent purpose was to acquire a clear concept of the underlying principles of line and area (mass) composition, from the simple to the complex. Like Ross, Batchelder disavowed illusionistic truth to nature and borrowed the former's basic distinction between "Representation" and "Design" to emphasize in his own right the abstract significance of the decorative.

Representation, or the recording of facts of observation, was not intended to serve any decorative purpose. "Pure Design" is "the arrangement of lines or masses in an orderly way for sake of their decorative value."¹³ "Design in Representation" occurs when the element of representation dominates; but at the same time the arrangement of lines shows recognition of a decorative value. "Representation

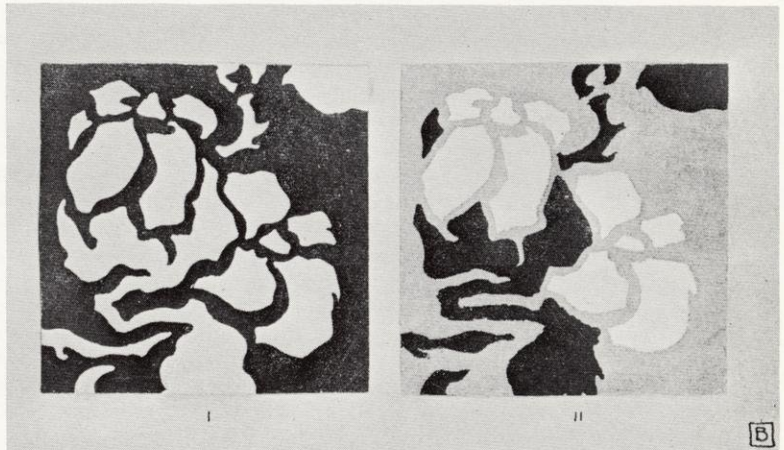


Fig. 4 Ernest A. Batchelder: Illustration from his book *The Principles of Design*, 1903.



Fig. 5 Arthur Wesley Dow: Illustration from his book *Composition*, 1913.

in Design" on the other hand permits design to receive first consideration, while representation is of secondary importance. Resemblance to some natural feature remains but is so abstract in character that there is little means of identification.¹⁴ As a glance at early examples of Wood's work demonstrates, Batchelder's principles of decorative design were elementary to the young artist (Cat. 6).

In line of succession, it is clear that Batchelder's basic frame of reference may be traced from his attachment to Denman W. Ross to the Fenollosa-Dow system of art education. As Marianne Martin indicates in her 1981 *Arts Magazine* article, "Some American Contributions to Early 20th Century Abstraction," Ross met Arthur W. Dow in Boston in 1898; they traveled to Venice together, painted side-by-side, and exchanged views on art.¹⁵ Both, under the spell of Ernest Fenollosa, believed that Oriental art, in particular Japanese Ukiyo-e painting and printmaking, encompassed "primary" or "abstract" art principles. Imagination to them implied an exact, sharply focused singularity, a "fundamental unity of line, mass and color."¹⁶

In his manual of art exercises for students and teachers called *Composition*, first published in 1899, revised and enlarged in 1913 and last printed by Doubleday in the

early 1940s, Dow organized Fenollosan principles of abstract harmony and pure art into a trinity of "Line," "Notan" (light and dark patterns) and "Color" (Fig. 5). In *Composition* Dow advocated "a better method of teaching than the prevailing nature-copying."¹⁷ Regretting the divorce of "decorative" and "representation" in Western Art, he had discovered the continued integration of these two facets in Japanese art through the prints of Hokusai: "The Japanese know of no such divisions as Representative and Decorative; they conceive of painting as the art of two dimensions; an art in which roundness and nature-imitation are subordinate to the flat relations."¹⁸

This new awareness came in 1891, the same year he became acquainted with Ernest Fenollosa, then curator of the collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Their ensuing friendship not only expedited Dow's knowledge of Eastern art but provided him with the concept of art as "visual music."¹⁹ He identified as the language of the art of painting Fenollosa's basic elements of line, notan or dark and light, and color: these are indispensable to "all forms of space-art, whether representative or decorative; architectural, sculptural or pictorial," with design as "the very beginning, the primer of art."²⁰ They were to be applied and integrated according to "a few simple principles" whether "in making a picture . . . building a house, in designing a costume or wall decoration, in the adornment of a street or in the laying out of a public park."²¹ From this system, Dow was confident, would arise "a powerful, distinctly American school," which would be responsive to the history and character of the country.²² A more pronounced anticipation and possible source of influence could not be found for the fundamental ingredients of later Regionalist principles as adopted by Wood, Benton and Curry.

In his manual Dow characterized the trio of line, notan and color as interdependent units and located them within a kind of hierarchical ordering which sees line as the initial determinant of composition and the measure of ultimate success or failure: "All kinds of line harmony, beauty of contour, proportion of spaces, relations of size—all drawing whether representative or decorative."²³

The second step of the learning process detailed in *Composition* is notan, the distribution of values. This achieves a balanced, harmonious order, in contradistinction to any effect accomplished through the illusionistic rendering of light and shadow: "A placing together of masses of dark and light, synthetically related."²⁴ On this central point rests the essential means of decorative abstraction for Grant Wood, who, regardless of color, painted primarily value relationships (Fig. 6). Whether based on two or "many tones," the beauty associated with notan necessarily implies abstract, pictorial space: "We do not wish to be misunderstood as advocating the entire omission of shadows, or of modelling . . . but the flat relations are of first importance; in them must lie the art of painting." Lights and darks create a "beautiful arrangement" when they

occur as a pattern, "when they are 'decorative.'"²⁵

Beyond naming it as the third of the structural elements, cautioning the student to coordinate it with the scheme in notan, and citing a few historical standards of application, Dow had little to say on the subject of color in the 1899 edition of his manual. In fact, at the outset he established his intent to treat only line and notan.²⁶ His intervening teachers' handbook *Theory and Practice of Teaching Art* (1908) and the 1913 edition of *Composition*, the publication of which corresponded with Grant Wood's earliest intentions to concentrate his talents on painting, devote an entire section apiece on color. But as Dow frankly admitted, color remained "baffling, its finer harmonies, like those of music, can be grasped by the appreciation only, not by reasoning or analysis."²⁷

Likewise, the issue of composition ironically did not receive any systematic coverage in manual form until the 1913 expanded version of *Composition*, although Dow is thought to have established a routine of principles by 1892.²⁸ For the usual course of art study Dow found the principles of "Subordination" and "Rhythmic Repetition" sufficient. "Symmetry," "Opposition," and "Transition" were delegated to lesser ranks of importance. In the exercise section of "Line Composition part VII—Landscape Arrangement," the subject-matter possibilities cited by Dow could very well have been directed to Grant Wood: "A street where there is variety in the size of buildings and trees," or "ranges of hills, spires and pinnacles, clumps of large and small trees, clusters of haystacks." Dow also prescribes a reductive analysis of the image selected: "Take any landscape that has some good elements in it, reduce it



Fig. 6 Grant Wood, *Cocks-Combs*, c. 1927-28, oil on canvas, 21½ x 21¼ in., Private Collection.



Fig. 7 Grant Wood, *Shadows*, 1914, oil on canvas, 9¾ x 7½ in., Private Collection.

to a few main lines and strive to present it in the most beautiful way"²⁹ (Fig. 7). As if that were not enough to inspire Wood, this same section of *Composition*, devoted to line exercises with landscape, compares the linear interplay of land and tree forms to that of gingham cloth: "Looking out from a grove we have trees as vertical straight lines, cutting horizontal lines, or nearly so. Leaving small forms out of account we have in the main lines an arrangement of rectangular spaces much like the gingham and other simple patterns."³⁰ Safely assuming that Grant Wood developed his means of pictorial composition as abstractive, decorative design under the pervasive influence of Dow as well as that of Batchelder, the future Regionalist may be located in association with first generation American abstractionists.

Dow, as an instructor at Pratt Institute (1895–1903), of his own summer classes at Ipswich, Massachusetts and, beginning in 1903 as the Director of the Department of Fine Arts at Teachers College, Columbia University, counted among his students and proponents several painters, photographers, and critics who were associated with Alfred Stieglitz' circle and who are generally identified with American vanguard tendencies of the early twentieth century. The photographer Gertrude Kasebier was a colleague at Pratt and among the first photographers affiliated with the Photo-Secession Gallery, along with Alvin Langdon Coburn who enrolled in Dow's 1903 summer session at Ipswich. Pamela Coleman Smith, the first American painter to be exhibited at "291" (in January, 1907) had attended Dow's classes while at Pratt between 1893–99.³¹

The painter Max Weber who extended his study with Dow into the new century went on to teach his mentor's principles at the State Normal School of Minnesota where he headed the Department of Drawing and Manual Training. Dow's teachings, as he would ever after acknowledge, served Weber's development, preparing the way for his further study abroad and the rapid assimilation of advanced European art, in particular that of Cubism and Futurism.³² Georgia O'Keeffe was introduced to the principles of Dow through her study and assistantship with disciple Alon Bement at the University of Virginia in 1912. Studying under the master teacher himself at Columbia in 1914/15

and the 1916 spring term, she credited Dow with aiding her discovery of the imagery as well as of the abstract style that would characterize her mature work, especially in experimenting with variations of framing the image³³ (Fig. 8). As witnessed throughout the illustrations in *Composition* and *Theory and Practice of Teaching Art*, success of composition characteristically involved the asymmetrical arrangement and close-up view of the image with its forms partially cut off at the edge of the frame.³⁴

Visual lessons presented in *Composition* also correspond to Arthur G. Dove's highly personal abstract style of painting that climaxed at the beginning of his career in 1912 (Fig. 9). Influence of Cubism notwithstanding, evidence that Dow served as a stimulus equal in importance to the 291–Picasso exhibition of 1911 provides an explanation for the distinctly decorative character of Dove's early pictures. In a statement to Arthur Jerome Eddy for the Chicago collector's book *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (1914) and reiterated to Samuel Kootz as published in *Modern American Painters* (1930), Dove wrote that "all



Fig. 8 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit, No. 2*, 1930, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in., Private Collection.

good art" had been guided by a few fundamental principles of form and composition in the abstract, and that he too had abandoned "my more disorderly methods (impressionism)" believing the "statement of facts" to be as relevant to painting as statistics to literature.³⁵

Like Dow, Dove developed a trio of basic precepts to guide his creative process toward a decorative pictorial form that was in substance abstract. Color, the most problematic element for Dow, assumed a primary function in Dove's way of abstraction, while form and line assumed less emphasis. A triad of hues plus black and white were determined by "the condition of light," the property of color which Dove saw as unique to the object in nature from which his picture evolved.³⁶

As may be judged by frequent references to Dow in Stieglitz's art periodical *Camera Work* and by the adoption of his terminology and aesthetic standards in the writings of such prominent contributors as the art historian/critics Charles Caffin and Sadakichi Hartmann, the art educator seems to have contributed significantly to the progress of art criticism, advancing it from purely descriptive accounts to formal analysis. Although indebted to Bernard Berenson for his early appreciation of Cezanne and for his later bias against the works of Picasso and Matisse, Leo Stein's ideas and vocabulary regarding "pictorial seeing" bore an increasing resemblance to the Fenollosa-Dow instructions on abstraction. Written in time for the major changes of Grant Wood's final development, Stein's *A.B.C. of Aesthetics* was published in 1927, the year the floral still-life series began in anticipation of the Iowan's mature style of decorative composition. Primarily concerned with the art of painting, Stein saw a picture as "something that one looks into, but . . . keeps out of."³⁷ Comprised of subject matter in space, a complete picture must be "a composed abstraction" with distortions necessarily imposed upon "inventorial things" in order to create unity and qualify as a work of art.³⁸ While success in flat composition was quite common, a true painting was meant to be a rhythmically ordered spatial whole with diagonal planes (perspective planes) reciprocating at intervals with transverse planes, "like the successive layers of scenery on the stage,"³⁹ a familiar analogy for Wood, who designed sets for the Cedar Rapids community theater:

A picture could, in fact, be conceived as made up only of transverse planes like successive layers of theatre scenery, in which the object would be to emphasize the intervals, rather than, as in naturalistic stage scenery, to blend and so obscure them. These transverse planes are the means for creating a series of intervals and therefore for producing rhythmic movement in the deep dimension of the picture.⁴⁰

As clearly understood by Wood, the "compositional relation of depth to the flat plane of the picture's surface" allows for rhythmically related intervals to maintain a continuous back and forth movement, the "rhythmic throwback to the frontal plane"⁴¹ (Fig. 10). While the Cubists never made mere surface decoration, they, in Stein's opinion, almost never controlled effectively the relations in depth: "The departure from design on a flat



Fig. 9 Arthur G. Dove, *Abstraction No. 3*, 1910, oil on composition board, 9 x 10½ in., Private Collection.



Fig. 10 Grant Wood, *Calendulas*, c. 1928-29, oil on composition board, 17½ x 20¼ in., Private Collection.

surface, leads to all these difficulties of design in depth, which the modern artists have tried to solve."⁴²

Grant Wood and Leo Stein shared what Ernest Batchelder discussed as a good "curve sense," and by means of this aptitude the painter achieved a cogent synthesis of composition and content immediately recognized by the

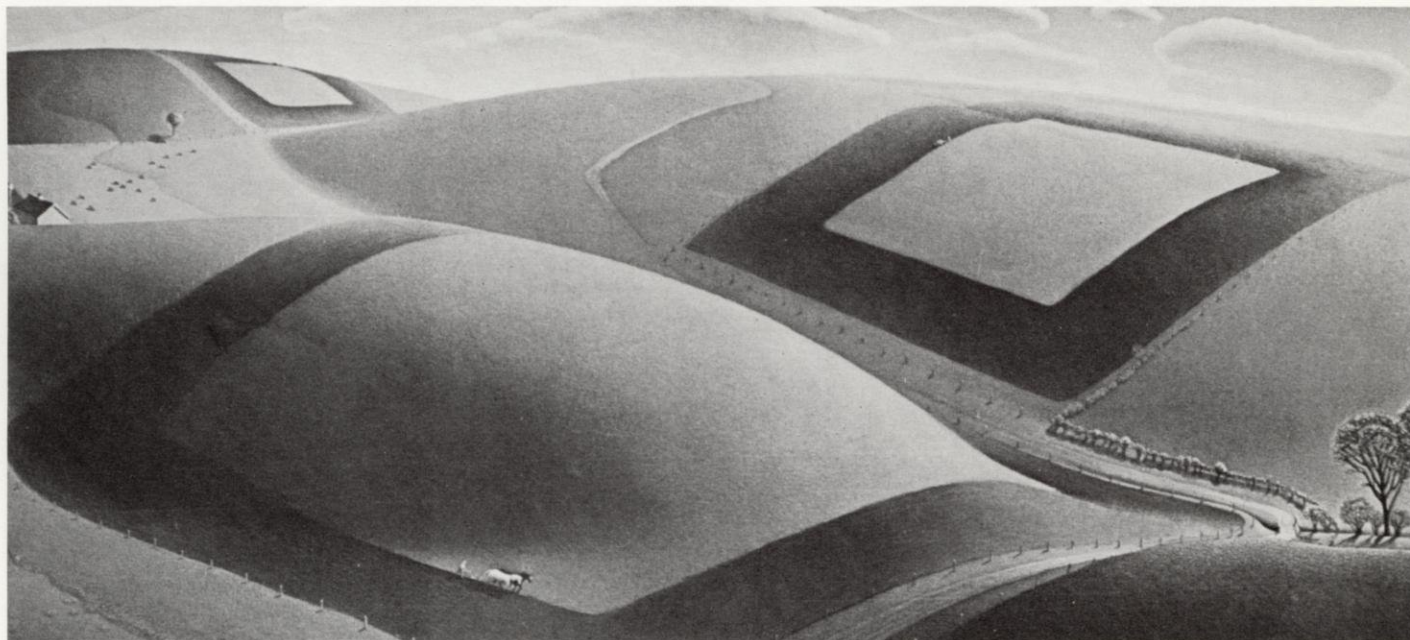


Fig. 11 Grant Wood, *Spring Turning*, 1936, oil on masonite panel, 18½ × 40 in., Private Collection.

alert critic. As abstract composition in depth, "hill country becomes transformed," according to Stein, "when the lines are made to serve in a definite way instead of rolling accidentally. By moving the pictorial planes backward or forward, masses are flattened or developed at will. The plasticity of natural materials is in fact almost infinite, if only one has learned to mould them."⁴³ The "curve of force" or Ruskin's "infinite curve," plotted on a geometric sequence of lines and angles with a T-square and triangle,⁴⁴ was stressed by Batchelder as a metaphoric expression of growth, of force and vitality, especially if motivated by the "play impulse"; that is, a vigorous imagination, an evidence of pleasure and joy witnessed in primitive work

and in the work of medieval craftsmen.⁴⁵

It was apparently through an active "play impulse" in conjunction with a dynamic "curve sense" and a life-long love of decorative design that Wood's major pictures following the floral still lifes coincided with *arts decoratifs* in its streamline phase (Fig. 11). As with industrial designers, who by the mid-1930s had molded the modern automobile, airplane and ship in line with the science of aerodynamics, Wood crafted his streamlined compositions out of a superstructure of diagonals. In direct view of a machine aesthetic, minus the applied ornamentation of local color, design and decoration became one and transformed eastern Iowa into the abstract fantasies of a shy dreamer.⁴⁶

Notes

1. Paul Rosenfeld and James Johnson Sweeney in the *New Republic*; Edward A. Jewell, *New York Times*; Stuart Davis, *Art Front*; Lewis Mumford, *New Yorker*; Arthur Millier, *Los Angeles Times* all either condemned or at best tolerated Regionalist subject matter in view of the movement's rhetoric. Milton Brown in *Parnassus*, May, 1941 made a good attempt to evaluate Regionalist art as a socio-cultural phenomenon in terms of sectional mythology. In 1943 H.W. Janson over-reacted to the rave promotions Regionalism had received from the nationalistic Thomas Craven and the egocentric Thomas Hart Benton when he identified Regionalism with the official art of the Third Reich. A comparative study of the two contemporaneous bodies of art as "Volkish" expression would be of greater value. H.W. Janson, "The International Aspects of Regionalism," *College Art Journal*, 2 (May, 1943), pp. 110-115. In 1946 Janson attacked Benton and Wood as enemies of modern art comparable to the *Reichskulturkammer*. "Benton and Wood, Champions of Regionalism," *Magazine of Art*, 39 (May, 1946), pp. 184-186, pp. 198-200.
2. As quoted in Lawrence E. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York, 1943), p. 299. The entire address delivered January 19, 1937 is included, pp. 290-299.
3. As quoted in Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, p. 321. This particular statement Curry wrote in 1938 to accompany the preliminary sketches for his mural cycle in the state capitol building in Topeka, Kansas when they were presented to a legislative commission for approval.
4. Grant Wood, "John Steuart Curry and the Midwest," *Democrat*, 11 (April, 1941), p. 3.
5. Thomas Hart Benton, "My American Epic in Paint," *Creative Arts*, 3 (December, 1928), XXXIV.
6. "Grant Wood Explains Why He Prefers to Remain in Middle West," *Cedar Rapids Sunday Gazette and Republican*, March 22, 1931.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. In the fall of 1922 or the spring of 1923 Grant Wood is reported to have exhibited a totally non-figurative abstract painting at the Cedar Rapids Art Association. He called it *Song of India*. Allegedly it consisted of swirls of oil paint in contrasting colors that he applied to burlap while playing Rimsky-Korsakov's composition on a victrola. Interview with Mrs. Marvin Cone, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, April 13, 1981.
10. "Grant Wood Helps Young Artists Develop Technique," *Daily Iowan*, November 3, 1935.
11. Ernest Batchelder, *The Principles of Design* (New York, 1904).
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
15. Marianne Martin, "Some American Contributions to Early 20th Century Abstraction," *Arts Magazine*, 10 (June, 1980), pp. 158-165.
16. Ernest Fenollosa, *Imagination in Art* (Boston, 1894), p. 7, as quoted in Martin, "Some American Contributions," p. 159.
17. Arthur W. Dow, *Composition* (New York, 1899), p. 5.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
20. Arthur W. Dow, *Theory and Practise of Teaching Art* (New York, 1908), p. 4.
21. *Ibid.*
22. As quoted in Frederick C. Moffatt, *Arthur Wesley Dow* (Washington, D.C., 1977), p. 50.
23. Dow, *Theory and Practise of Teaching Art*, p. 5.
24. Dow, *Composition* (1899), p. 37.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
27. Dow, *Composition* (1913), p. 100.
28. Moffatt, *Arthur Wesley Dow*, p. 63.
29. Dow, *Composition* (1913), p. 47.
30. Dow, *Composition* (1899), p. 25.
31. Moffatt, *Arthur Wesley Dow*, p. 95.
32. Lawrence W. Chisolm, *Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture* (New Haven and London, 1963), p. 237.
33. For considerations of Dow's influence on O'Keeffe see Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice* (New York, 1962) and Sandra Fillin Yeh, "Innovative Moderns: Arthur G. Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe," *Arts Magazine*, 56 (June, 1982), pp. 68-72.
34. Dow, *Composition*, (1913), p. 63.
35. As quoted in Samuel Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (New York, 1930), p. 36. For the best treatment to date of Dove's awareness and assimilation of Dow's teachings see Arlette Klaric, *Arthur G. Dove's Abstract Style of 1912: Dimensions of the Decorative and Bergsonian Realities* (University of Wisconsin-Madison Ph.D. Dissertation, 1984).
36. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
37. Leo Stein, *A.B.C. of Aesthetics* (New York, 1927), p. 156.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-128.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.
44. Batchelder, *Principles*, p. 34, Figure 15.
45. *Ibid.*
46. A term used by Leo Stein to distinguish the artist of fantasy from the realist, *A.B.C. of Aesthetics*, pp. 211-212.



1. Beet, c. 1903-04
Watercolor, 9×6 in. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art



2. Currants, 1907
Watercolor on paper, 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Davenport Gallery of Art

THE PULSE



EASTER

3. **Easter**, illustration for *Pulse*, (yearbook for Washington High School, Cedar Rapids), 1910
Ink on paper, 19½×12½ in. Collection Gordon Fennell



4. Floral Still Life: Mixed Bouquet in Brown Vase, c. 1920
Oil on composition board, 20×15 in. Collection Mrs. Herbert S. Stamats



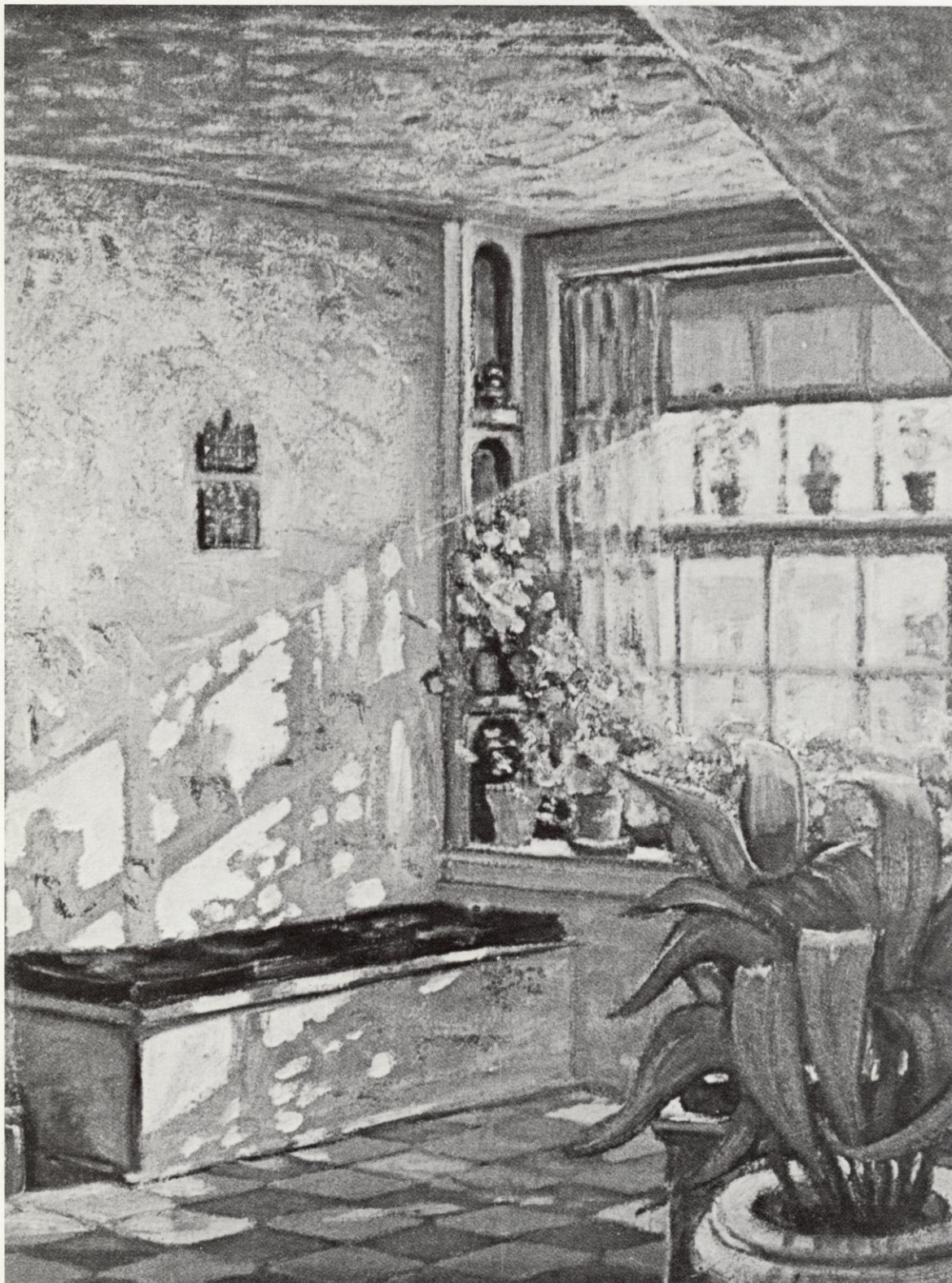
5. Lilies of the Alley, (with clothespin), c. 1922-25
Mixed media, 11×11¼×7 in. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art



6. Single Candleholder, c. 1924
Wrought iron, 42×12 in. Cedar Rapids Museum of Art



7. Floral Still Life: Iowa Flowers in Terracotta Vase with Small Blue-green Vase, 1925
Oil on board, 21½×21½ in. Collection Gordon Fennell



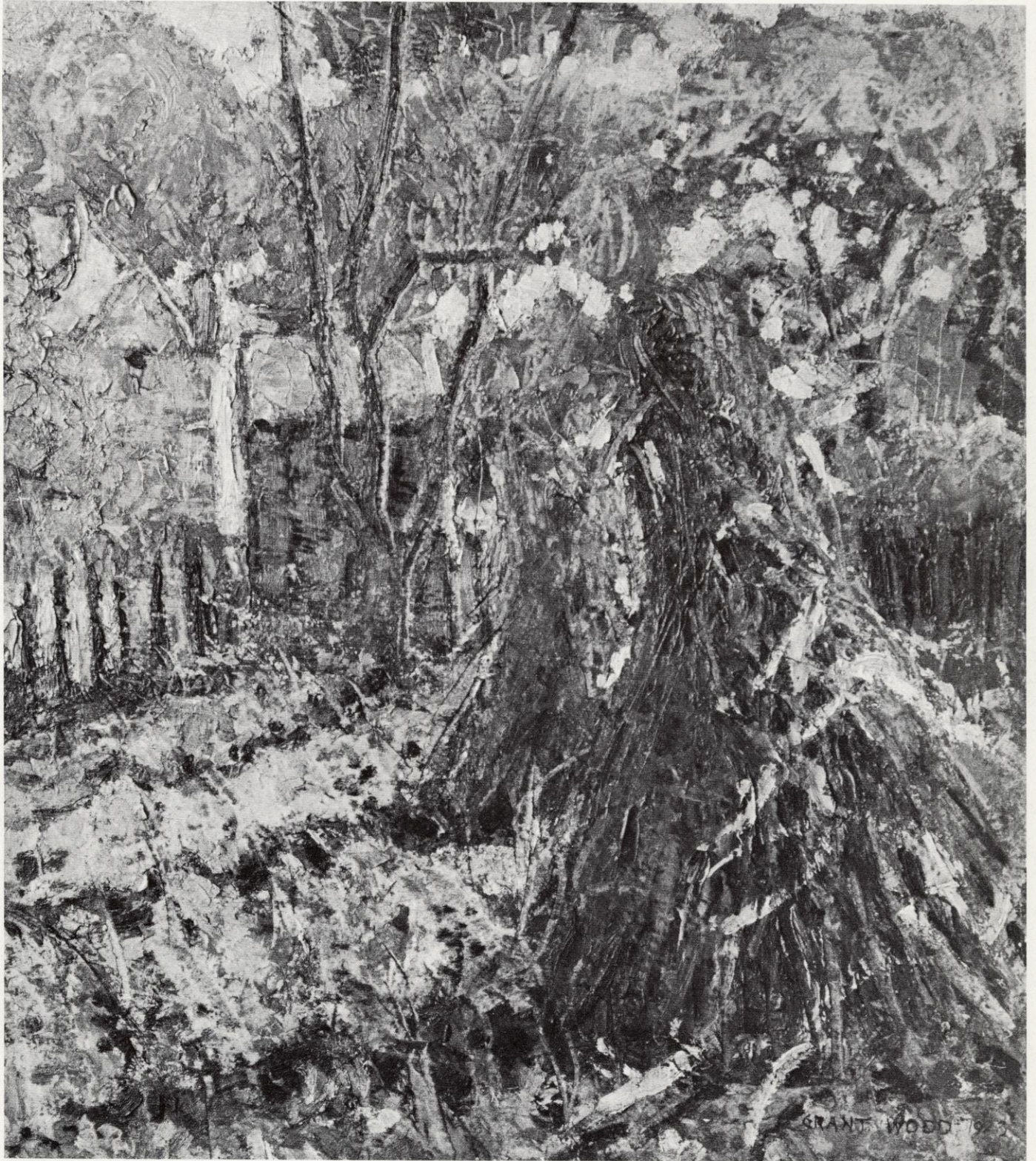
8. **Sunlit Corner, #5 Turner Alley**, 1925-28
Oil on composition board, 19¼×15¼ in. Private Collection



9. Floral Still Life: Zinnias and Calendulas in Grey Vase with Small Red Bowl, c. 1927
Oil on canvas, 22×22 in. Collection Gordon Fennell



10. Floral Still Life: Calendulas in Grey-blue Stoneware Vase, c. 1927-28
Oil on composition board, 15×13 in. University of Iowa Museum of Art, Gift of Mel and Carole Blumberg



11. **Cornshocks**, 1928
Oil on composition board, 15×13 in. Collection Eugenie Mayer Bolz



12. Flowers for Alice, c. 1928
Oil on composition board, 18×22 in. Collection Dr. William K. Brunot



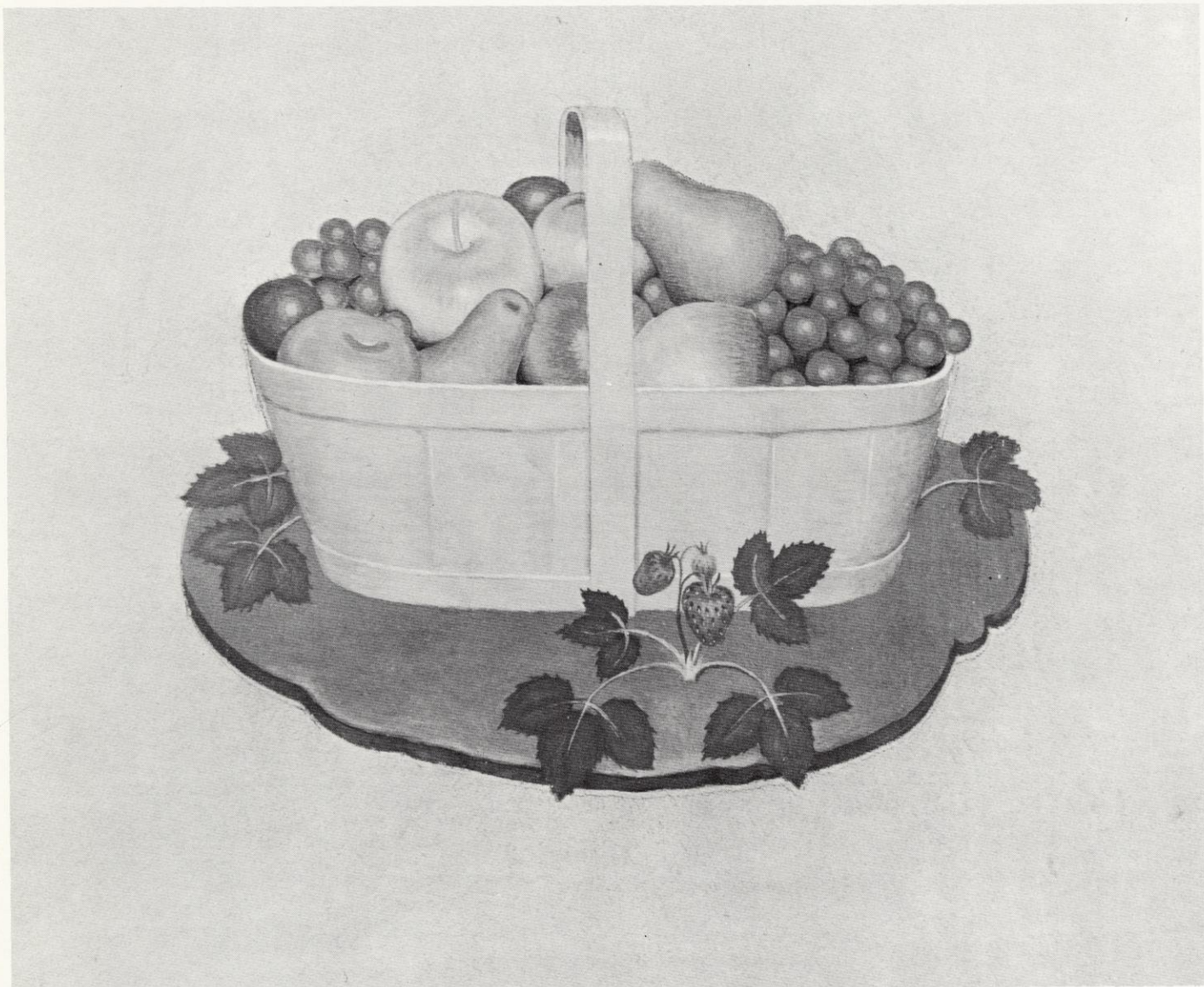
13. **Floral Still Life: Mixed Bouquet in White Vase**, 1929
Oil on board, 20×22 in. Private Collection



14. Floral Still Life: Delphiniums in White Vase, 1930
Oil on board, 22×18 in. Private Collection



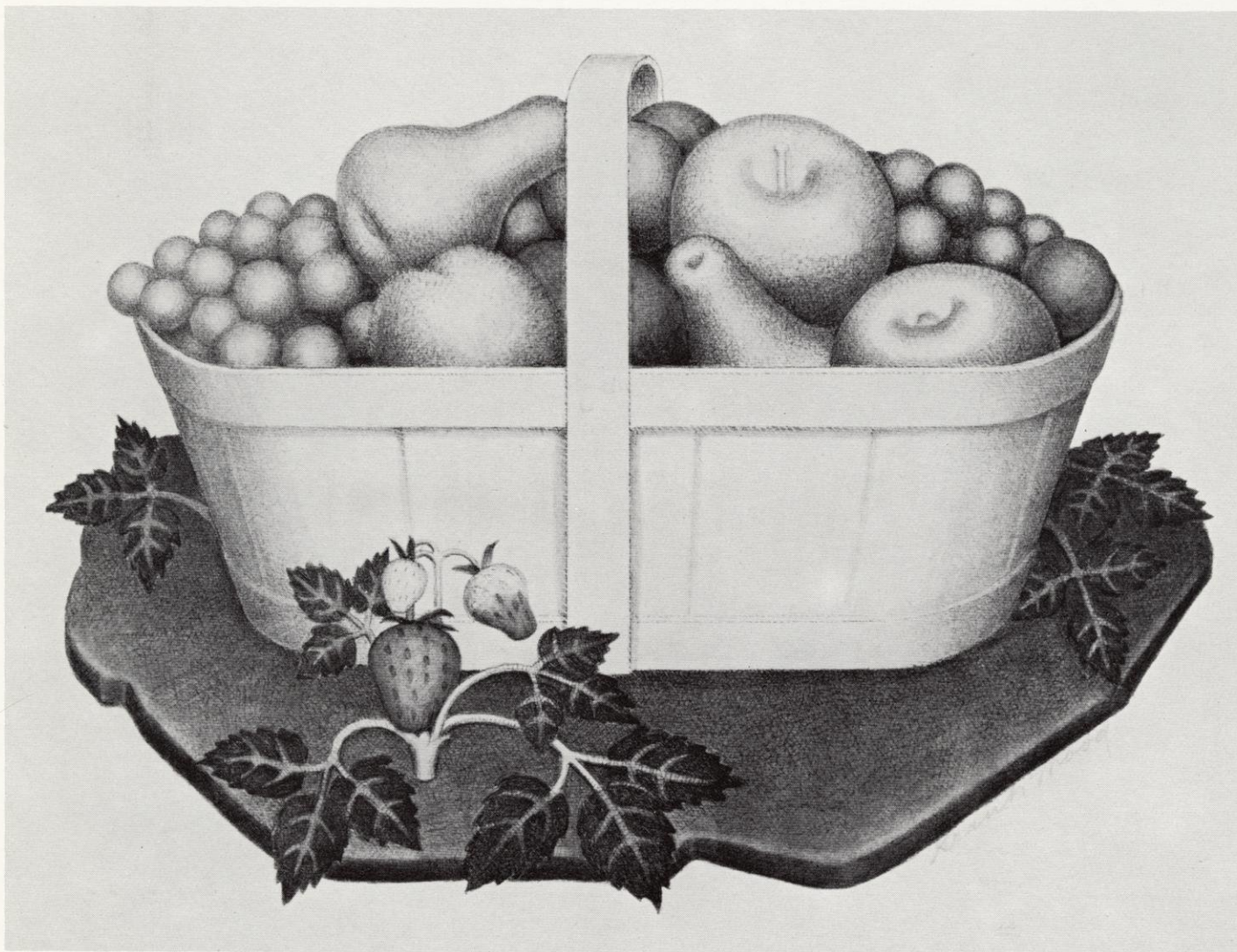
15. Floral Still Life: Zinnias, 1930
Oil on composition board, 24×30 in. Private Collection



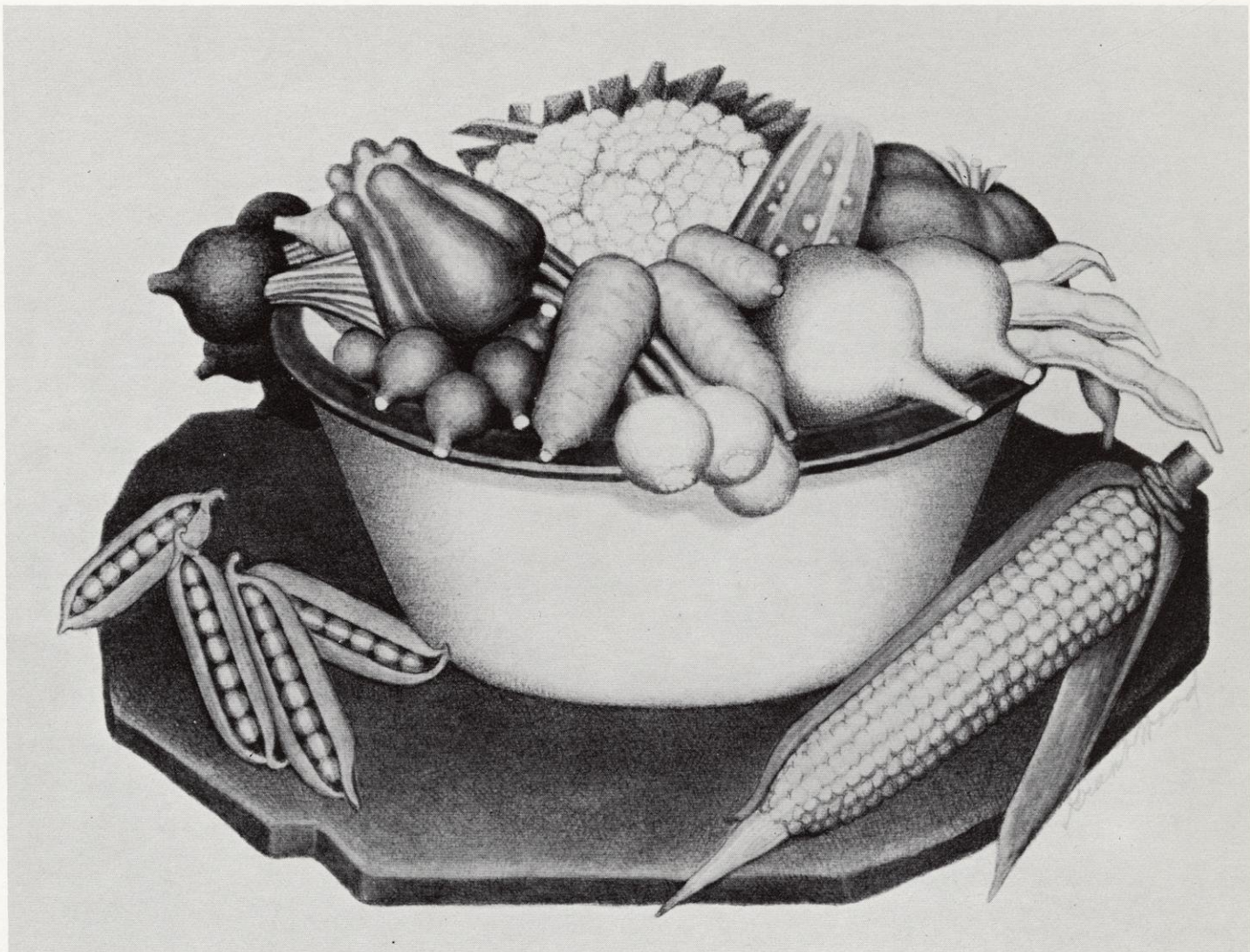
16. Still Life: Basket of Fruit, 1932
Oil on canvas, 12×18 in. Coe College



17. Artist's Self Portrait, 1932
Chalk and pencil on paper, 15¼×12¾ in. Private Collection



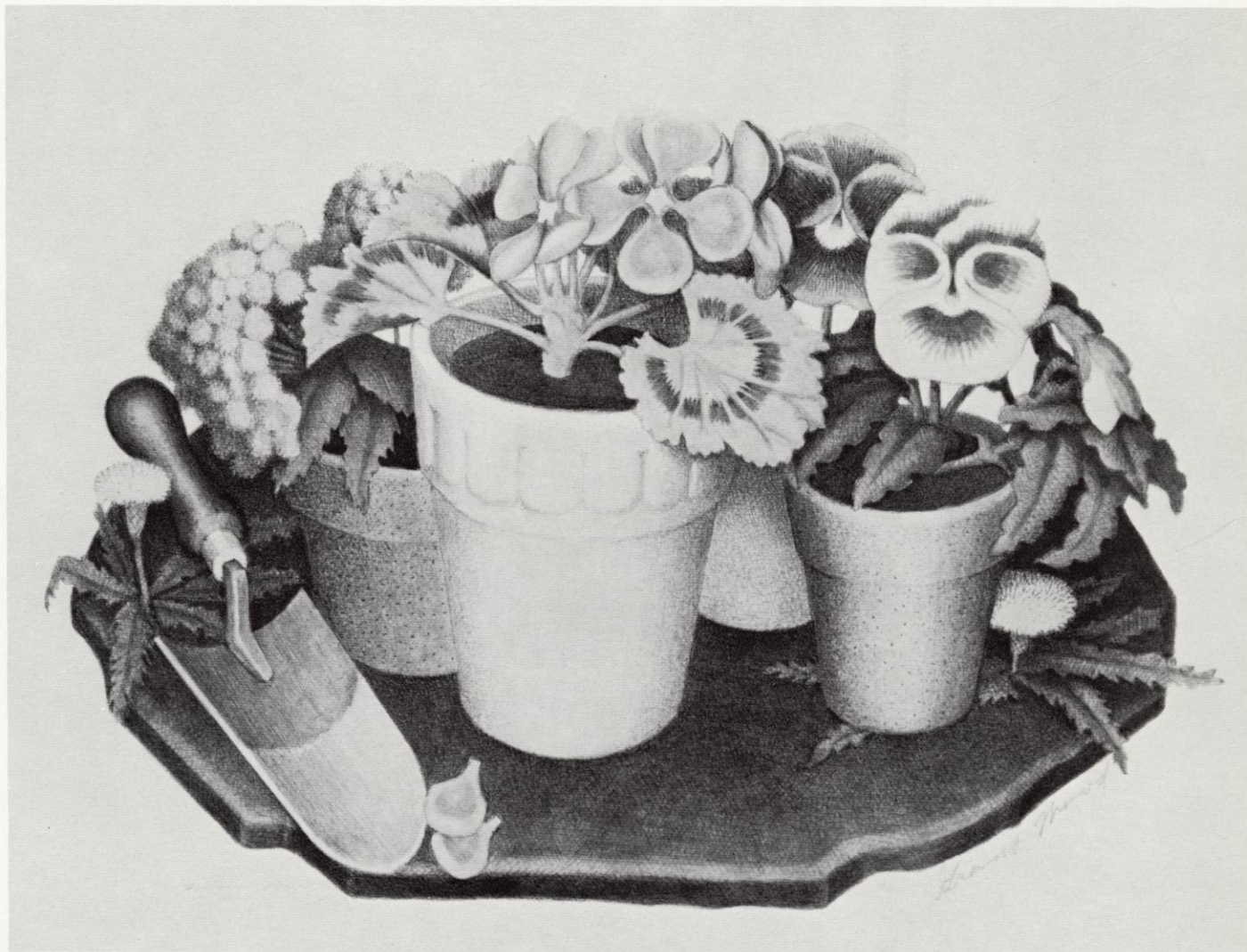
18. Fruits, 1938
Hand-colored lithograph, 7×10 in. Associated American Artists



19. Vegetables, 1938
Hand-colored lithograph, 7×10 in. Associated American Artists



20. Wild Flowers, 1938
Hand-colored lithograph, 7×10 in. Associated American Artists



21. Tame Flowers, 1938
Hand-colored lithograph, 7×10 in. Associated American Artists

