

Grant Wood's Appraisal: Where Folk Art and Popular Culture Meet

Barbara E. Ladner, Ph.D.

Professor of English

West Virginia State University

ladnerbe@wvstateu.edu

ABSTRACT

In Grant Wood's Appraisal, parallels among the painting's various transactions mirror the socio-economic transformations behind them. Wood's depiction of two women engaged in farmyard chicken-selling/buying reflects a then-contemporary transition from family flock to chicken factory, as industrialized poultry production was just coming into being. The women's contrasted clothing represents several tensions in pre-World War II American society: rural versus urban, work versus leisure, production versus consumption, folk versus popular culture, tradition versus modernization, and inherited versus social identity. Appraisal suggests that this fundamental economic shift produced not only a widening gap between very different lifestyles but also a clear distinction between modes of expression and representation. This paper examines how folk art, here seen through the farm's material culture and the painting's "folky" style, and popular culture, seen in the older woman's fashionable clothes and the scene's similarity to popular advertisements of the day, operate in fundamentally different ways to express two divergent life ways. Wood's representation of vanishing American lifestyles and 'hallowed' legends pokes fun at the conspicuous nostalgia of a society that was, in fact, modernizing its way of life with all deliberate speed.

Key words: *Grant Wood, agriculture, consumption, advertising, material culture*

El cuadro Appraisal [Evaluación] de Grant Wood: Donde convergen el arte folklórico y la cultura popular

RESUMEN

En el cuadro del pintor Grant Wood, llamado Appraisal [Evaluación] los paralelos entre las distintas transacciones de la pintura son un reflejo de las transformaciones socio-económicas que le subyacen. La representación que Wood hace de dos mujeres involucradas en la compra-venta de gallinas de patio o granja refleja una transición contemporánea (en ese entonces) de un sistema de producción avícola familiar a uno industrial en fábricas, ya que la producción avícola industrializada estaba apenas iniciándose. El contraste existente entre la ropa de las mujeres representa varias tensiones de la sociedad americana anterior a la segunda guerra mundial: campo versus ciudad; trabajo versus recreación; producción versus consumo; folklor versus cultura popular; tradición versus modernización e identidad heredada versus identidad cultural. El cuadro sugiere que este cambio económico fundamental produjo no solamente una brecha cada vez mayor entre estilos de vida muy distintos, sino también una clara distinción entre modos de expresión y de representación. Este artículo examina cómo el arte folklórico [visto a través de la cultura material de la granja y el estilo "folklórico" de la pintura] y la cultura popular [vista en la ropa de moda de la mujer más vieja y en el parecido de la escena a propagandas populares de la época] operan de maneras fundamentalmente distintas para expresar dos estilos de vida divergentes. La representación de Wood de estilos de vida Americanos en proceso de extinción y de leyendas "consagradas" le toma el pelo a la nostalgia conspicua de una sociedad que, de hecho, estaba modernizando su modus vivendi con rapidez deliberada.

Palabras clave: *Grant Wood, agricultura, consumo, propaganda, cultura material*

“From the countless brands and grades on the market today, the finest kinds of each food have been painstakingly sifted out by able men.

“You take what you please in your hands look it over read the price tags arrive at your own decision. Uninfluenced by salesmen you buy purely on merit at Piggly Wiggly.” (Piggly Wiggly, p. 59)

Introduction

An encounter between two women dominates the farm setting of Grant Wood's *Appraisal* (Image 1; 1931). Seen from the waist up, the women each fill one side of the foreground, putting the viewer in the position of a third party to the meeting. What kind of meeting between such different women, what kind of appraisal do we witness here? The direction of the gazes of the painting's three figures suggests at least three acts of appraisal: the young woman at left looks at her older visitor; the older woman gazes at the chicken; and the chicken stares pointedly out at the viewer. Wood's presentation of these figures and the context in which he painted this work suggest not only a simple pecuniary transaction but also a number of cultural transactions, between producer and consumer, rural and urban values, folk ways and popular culture. In each case, the transaction at stake is an implied challenge based on relative value. This paper will show that the painting's structure draws parallels among these various transactions that, in turn, mirror

the socio-economic transformations behind them. The chicken's central place on the canvas emblemizes this link between cultural expression and societal structure, because Wood painted this work in the era of transition from family flock to chicken factory, when industrialized poultry production was just coming into being. Appraisal suggests that this fundamental economic shift, of which industrialized food production was perhaps the last stage, produced not only a widening gap between very different lifestyles but also a clear distinction between modes of expression and representation. This paper examines how folk art, here seen through the farm's material culture and the painting's "folky" style, and popular culture, seen in the older woman's fashionable clothes and the scene's similarity to popular advertisements of the day,¹ operate in fundamentally different ways to express two divergent life ways.

Clothes

The most obvious point of difference a viewer notices is that of dress; Wood himself originally called the painting *Clothes*

(Dennis, 1975, p. 78). The young woman wears an ill-fitting but functional brown coat with worn gray trim and a safety-pin fastener over a black dress or blouse with white circle-and-dot motifs. A red and white, ribbed stocking cap covers her hair, except for a few brown wisps above her right cheek. Her only other accessory, a large chicken with mottled golden, gray-brown and white feathers, a yellow beak, and red comb and wattles, seems almost better attired in its costume of breed markings. She seems practical (literally down-to-earth?), but still she casts a sideways glance at the black, sleekly-styled cloche hat of her counterpart.

The older woman wears an ample brown coat with thick fur collar and cuffs. Adorned with a pearl earring on her left ear and a silver hat pin on the hat's front, she clutches a black beaded bag between her left arm and her body; her fur cuffs extend beyond the painting's edge so that we cannot see her hands. She holds her head up, her profile straight ahead, but her downcast eyes regard the bird, apparently blind to the fact that she, too, is being appraised.

The two women, opposite in the detail of their attire as well as in their positions in the painting, seem emblematic of opposing realms, worlds beyond themselves. Wanda Corn (1983) has succinctly summarized the binary oppositions in these women's attire. "The simple lines of the farm woman's worn and misshapen coat, held together by her only jewelry - a

¹ I rely here on Henry Glassie's distinction between "folk" and "popular," which emphasizes the role of an individual's own tradition in the form, construction, or use of an object or expression. For Glassie, industrialization and urbanization have been too widespread in the U.S. for any pure folk culture to remain, but he stresses that products can be partly folk as long as they were produced apart from popular or academic cultures. By popular, he refers primarily to the normative, public culture of the contemporaneous society.

safety pin at the neck - contrasts sharply with the bulging, fur-trimmed coat and glistening pearl earrings of the city woman. The farm woman's plain knitted cap coming down over her forehead parodies the city lady's chic cloche hat with its glittering crystal pin" (p. 80).

The "city" woman reveals something of her value system in the great care she has taken with her appearance. Her coat's ample cut enwraps her completely. The fur of her collar lies about her neck in folds that emphasize its wealth of thick pile. The matching cuffs and the tapering lines of the fur down the coat's lapels bespeak fine styling and contrast sharply with the worn braid of differing widths trimming the farm woman's coat. And while the farm woman's coat appears made of some roughly matted fabric, such as felt or often-washed corduroy, the other woman's coat, with its smooth surface, seems made of finely woven cloth, such as thick wool flannel or camel's hair. The coat, even the fur at its collar, might be just as functional as the farm woman's coat and cap. Her other accessories, however, announce unmistakably the care and time she has taken on her appearance, for they serve only as decorative, non-functional additions to her costume. Her hat pin and earring(s) serve, in addition, not only the decorative function served by the stripes on the farm woman's cap but also to announce that their wearer has money to buy such things and opportunity, including the time, to be concerned with them.

Details like her accessories must serve as our primary clues in the painting about the woman at right. For while the farm woman's back faces toward the green door of the house, so that she seems to 'come' from there, the woman at right stands with her back against the painting's right edge, so that she seems to 'come' from outside the scene, from somewhere off 'stage right.' A visitor, she stands in tenuous relation to the scene to which the woman at left so clearly belongs; the farm buildings and small plants offer no concrete information about this outsider. We know only that something has brought her and her wealth (indicated by her beaded bag as well as by her her accessories) into this alien space. Her differentiation from the young woman suggests that it is alien; she seems to come from someplace different - a town - as well as someplace other.

Her visible wealth gives her power that, as an outsider, she might not otherwise have. And the beaded bag that she clutches between her arm and her body, together with its visual counterpart, the chicken the farm woman holds, suggest one reason for the visit. For from her bag, the lady visitor might take the money needed to pay for - should she choose to buy it - the chicken she now examines. James Dennis (1975) formulates the relationship of the pair in terms of the action needed from each woman for the exchange: "the farm woman unassumingly provides; the city woman consumes" (p. 78). Her trip to this farm

to buy a chicken also suggests that her home is in town; she might not have room to raise her own chickens. Yet the bag's elaborate beadwork points beyond the purely economic function of this exchange. We might extrapolate from action and appearance to identity: the visitor not only consumes; she is a consumer. She might, of course, also produce, while the farm woman surely also consumes, but the visitor's clothing, especially its styling and accessories, makes her consumption conspicuous and so proclaims that she has taken on the identity of a consumer.

While the older woman's stylish clothes links her to town, removed from the site of production, the red and white of the farm woman's hat links her to the red barn and white house, the earthy brown of her coat to the newly cultivated garden behind her. Like a similar motif worn by the woman in *American Gothic* (Image 2; 1930), which links her to curtains in the Gothic farmhouse guarded by her father, the regular deployment of circles and dots across the chest of *Appraisal's* farm woman mimics the regular array of small plants behind her. Similarly, the ribbing of her hat, forming a vertical pattern of parallel lines down from her crown, mimics the parallel boards of the barn's gable and lower facade, as well as of the fence, the porch, and the wall of the house. The simple decorative elements on the farm woman's fundamentally functional clothes 'fit' esthetically with the simple, turned post on the porch

and the simple color for decoration of the farm buildings behind her.

The farm woman's clothes also emphasize her role in the work of the farm. Their worn, misshapen appearance provides an index of the amount of work performed in them while their decorative elements point to specific tasks this farm woman might do. Her hat's pompon mimics the comb of the chicken she holds in her arms. The simple dot-and-circle motif might be described as a "miniature breast-hieroglyph" (Corn, 1983, p. 133), but we might also see it as a cell with nucleus - the inside of an egg, sunnyside up, or a symbolic representation of a seed. The chicken, the plants behind her, and probably eggs from chickens like the one she holds all are products of the farm, perhaps the woman's contribution in complement to field crops we do not see. Her worn clothes give mute testimony to her toil, here concretely symbolized by only some small plants and a single chicken. The bedraggled impression her disheveled hair and worn coat makes suggests that she works long and hard, so that she has little time or energy to spend on her appearance. Her neat farmyard and clean face and hands, however, especially her clean fingernails, show her concern with order and cleanliness and counter any suspicion of mere slovenliness. The care with which her hands cradle the chicken suggests, instead, that the care she might have devoted to choosing a new hat, making a new coat or mending this one, combing her

hair or putting on earrings have been diverted to the care of her chickens and to other chores. Though we will return to the question of clothes, let's examine further the nature of the work we can deduce each woman does.

Rural Production vs. Urban Consumption

A farm wife's "home business" of selling poultry and eggs contributed significantly to the income of many family farms in the period Wood depicts. One advice manual for farm women in the twenties weighs the importance of this income over against the perceived disadvantages of a "separate career for the woman on the farm."

But when one considers that in the past few years it has often been the woman's poultry work or other activity which has saved the farm mortgage from foreclosure, that her separate income has brought happiness and comfort to the home, and sent her children through college - one cannot entirely condemn it (Atkeson, 1924, p.112).

In fact, home businesses, which most farm women pursued on the side, in addition to their primary duties of caring for home and family, constituted a major branch of farm enterprise; in 1909, for example, the value of eggs, fowls, butter, and cheese produced by farm women exceeded the value of the entire United States wheat

crop by several million dollars (Taylor, p. 273).

Already by 1931, most viewers of Wood's painting residing in big cities, as well as many of those in small towns, would probably have purchased their own table fowl, in a very different state than what we see here, from a butcher shop or grocery store where they would have chosen from among a group of dead chickens that were hanging by their feet, often stripped of all or most of their feathers - but still retaining their heads (Image 3). Certainly the poultry industry's marketing strategy emphasized the availability of completely- or partially-dressed fowl. As early as 1915, a Good Housekeeping article on choosing a chicken dealt almost exclusively with characteristics to look for in a dead bird at market. The article concerned itself with living birds only with regard to their care and breeding and gave no clues as to how one might tell by looking whether a live bird had come from good stock or had been properly fed. Instead, it described a plucked bird: "A well-bred bird is of an even yellow or white color over the entire body" (Wiley, 1915, p. 522). Indeed, the article depicts the completely featherless, scalded chicken as the "usual," though not preferred, state of purchased chicken.

Cookbooks of the period, as well, gave the cook instructions in selecting a chicken that assume she will be able to see the bird's bare skin. One 1935 book did provide tips for dealing with a recently killed bird: "All poultry should be dressed

as soon as killed. The feathers come out easily when the fowl is warm and when stripped off towards the head" (Bailey, 1935, p. 446). But others, including the famous Boston Cooking-School Cook Book and The Settlement Cook Book, assumed in their instructions that the cook has an already plucked bird that retains head and feet.

TO DRESS AND CLEAN POULTRY
- Singe by holding the chicken over a flame from gas, alcohol or burning paper. Cut off the head, turn back the skin, and cut the neck off quite close; take out wind-pipe and crop, cutting off close to the body. Remove pin feathers with the point of a knife. Remove oil bag from the tail. If internal organs have not been removed, make an opening under one of the legs, or at the vent, and remove them carefully (Kander).

These buying tips and cooking instructions suggest that Wood depicts an occurrence which, if not yet uncommon, was becoming less and less necessary or commonplace. The transition to a system of mass-produced and mass-marketed chicken had gotten well under way. Wood offers his audience a snapshot, a summarizing image for one aspect of that process of transition.

The old ways of home-grown or live-purchase chicken had not yet vanished; they had, however, begun to gather around them an aura of nostalgia. Indeed, a 1931

story by Ruth Suckow (1931) (another Iowan) portrays a drive out in the country to get a chicken primarily as an excursion with which two worried parents hope to cheer up their grieving daughter (p. 133). And a 1928 advertisement for Texaco Golden Motor Oil in The Saturday Evening Post Image 4² uses a journey into a golden landscape to buy a Thanksgiving turkey as an image of the contentment, the happy times a reliable car can bring (to the user of their oil, of course). A 1925 Good Housekeeping article used just such nostalgia to bring the realization of how much things had changed: "Time was when the housewife knew the life history of every bird she slew, but since the poultry of today comes to market by long and devious routes, it is necessary for the buyer of poultry to appreciate the points that are indicative of good quality" (Conklin, 1925, p. 73). For all the suggestion in this passage of 'then-and-now,' the transition from a flock of chickens in nearly every backyard in both town and country to specialized, scientific poultry farms took place gradually and at different rates in different parts of the country. In fact, the mass poultry industry still had some changes ahead of it at the time of Wood's painting; we might see the farm woman, the chicken, and the prospective buyer as emblems of a world - or worlds - in transition.

² Most of the ads referenced in this chapter are representative of several other similar ads of the period. For example, several ads deal with driving out to the country. See the list of specific ad references.

As early as 1914, a writer on the poultry business harkened back to old-fashioned methods of raising chicken and eggs to which he compared current 'modern' methods.

I have in mind the poultry on a farm well within my memory, and typical of many others of its time. The fowls were a nondescript lot, fitly described as 'dunghills,' of no specific origin, These unpromising fowls were housed in a cheap, inadequate lean-to usually fed on corn, often on the ear, during winter, and left to shift for themselves during the rest of the year. The hens were not expected to lay except during spring and summer. A few nest boxes were provided, but many 'stole' their nests in hay mows, straw stacks, or other secluded places. . . . Chicken raising was equally primitive But times change, and in no farm operations have there been greater changes than in poultry keeping (Valentine, 1914, p. 86).

In the two decades preceding Wood's painting the poultry business and the public image of it came to look very different from these 'primitive' conditions. By 1918, fifteen percent of the chicks in the United States came from eggs hatched, not by a "broody hen" in a hay mow nest, but in an incubator holding thousands of eggs; by 1944, chicks hatched artificially and cared for in brooders, rather than under the feather skirts of a hen, accounted for eighty-five percent of

the total in the United States (Giedieon, 1948, p. 251). Improvements in methods of raising poultry also included scientific development of balanced feeding rations to improve the birds' health and the quality of their meat and eggs (Image 5; Lapp, 1930, pp. 16-17).

The apparently healthy chicken and the absence of dunghills, hay mows, or lean-tos might lead viewers to guess that this neat farm makes use of the most rational methods available. This plump chicken belongs to the bar rock breed, a breed valued for its good quality both as a layer and as a meat bird. This particular bird has standard breed markings, so it might have come from a commercial hatchery, where stocks were carefully bred to produce standardized flocks (Lapp, 1930, p. 17). In addition, the painting as first exhibited included a chicken wire fence in the foreground which Wood cut off, making the painting horizontal rather than vertical (Corn, 80). That fence suggests that Wood envisioned a flock raised by at least partially modern methods, perhaps like one pictured as a "good flock" in a 1930 article on scientific poultry raising (Image 6). While a 1930 article observed that "everyone knows what improvements have been made in poultry during the past ten years" (Johnson, 1930, p. 4), other articles might have made viewers aware also of flocks consisting of "twelve hens in a back yard, that can be fed by flinging scraps out of the kitchen window without extra labor" (Bairnsfather, 1930, p. 25).

Many viewers of *Appraisal* in 1931 could have known something about poultry raising. Until 1920, the United States remained more than half rural (Morison, 1962, vol. 2, p. 1016), and during the early part of the century many who lived in cities continued to harbor an interest, if not a fascination with country life.

We all remember how, just a few years ago, it was the 'back to the farm' idea. Every city writer was telling of the joys of country life . . . then disillusioned pilgrims of 'back to the farm' . . . turned the tide of public thinking in the opposite direction . . . But since the automobile has become so common, public opinion has veered again, and we are hearing a great deal about God's out-of-doors and the broad open spaces where fresh breezes and the kindly fruits of the earth render life delightful (Atkeson, 1924, pp. 308-309-310).

Of course, these urban nature lovers would hardly have known all the details of farming, but many city dwellers of the period dabbled in a farm of their own or at least fantasized to the point of learning something of what would be involved. "As far as I have been able to judge, after extensive observation," wrote one such part-time farmer, "nearly everybody who is not a farmer has either an open or a secret desire to farm. There can be few expert trades so encroached upon by amateurs as farming" (Bairnsfather 24). Wood might reasonably, then, have expected that many of his viewers (city

folks as well as those who, like him, had once lived on a farm) would have brought to the painting some knowledge of chicken raising and of some of the changes that had recently taken place in the poultry business. A knowledge of this context of transition must have helped to energize the way in which his audience viewed this painting.

Technological improvements such as better tractors and hybrid corn would increase farm production still more after 1931, but large-scale production was already a reality, 'over-production' already a problem. Farmers could provide canneries and chain stores with quantity. But these processors and distributors of mass production required a mass product, that is a standardized product.

A chain system has had excellent results from a packaged chicken. The fowl is cut up ready for cooking and then packed in a waterproof paper. It is sold not by the pound but at a flat price, and the chain's principal trouble is in finding enough chickens of a size to sell at eighty-nine cents, which seems to be the limit price in the territories where they have made the experiments (Crowther, 1930, p. 114).

In order to take advantage of developments in distribution - especially canning and chain stores with their emphasis on packaging and brand names - farmers of the late twenties and early thirties had to standardize their product, both

by changes in production that tended to produce a standard product (e.g., careful breeding/hybridization) and by rigorous grading.

Selling from her home, the farm woman's work is in tension with modern business, modern selling, and steady consumers' markets (Crowther, 1930, p.8), and, while still independent, probably felt the push for standardization. Advice manuals and magazine articles urged the farm woman who would sell her produce at farmers' market or roadside store to keep her produce as standard as possible because city women expected predictable quality; "the wise country woman in putting up her products makes them look as nearly machine-made as possible" (Atkeson, 1924, p. 117). Distributors and merchants had believed that consumers would not accept food that they could not examine, for fear of getting inferior or unacceptable goods, but as standards became established for various kinds of packaged foods, it was "discovered that the buyer has no desire at all to examine the article before buying it if she can know that the quality is uniform. In the standard packaged article the delegation of inspection is to the manufacturer" (Crowther, 1930, p. 8).

The encounter depicted in *Appraisal* compresses the transaction from production to sale such that marketing and distribution, where the most visible changes in the poultry business had taken place, are virtually bypassed in this instance, while the food industry they

make possible is what, in turn, allows this excursion. An elaborate system of distribution had been growing up since the first railway poultry car had been used to transport live chickens in bulk from Centerville, Iowa, in 1888 (Lapp, 1930, p. 16), influencing the amount of poultry and number of eggs produced, as well as the condition in which the consumer received a chicken.

Not more than a dozen years ago, I heard the prediction repeatedly that the use of such vast numbers of incubators and brooders would so reduce the price of poultry and eggs as to render their production unprofitable Have these pessimistic prognosticators proved true or false? Answer is found in the fact that poultry and its products have averaged higher and higher, year by year; . . . that marketing methods have been revolutionized and improved (Valentine, 1914, p. 86).

Perhaps the most important marketing improvement resulted from the development in the 1920s of the mechanically refrigerated poultry car; "recent developments in refrigeration have made it possible to market highly perishable commodities thousands of miles from their source with their freshness completely preserved" (Lapp, 1930, p. 16). About the same time (shortly preceding 1930), marketers of poultry introduced canned chicken - a whole chicken with gravy ready for the table. "This product

no doubt will be especially popular with the city woman who is both worker and housekeeper" (Lapp, 1930, p. 16). Although the older woman is not here taking advantage of prepared chicken, other canned foods or 'store-bought' bread may have been in part responsible for the leisure she displays in her appearance and this outing.

By bringing the consumer on this occasion, directly into contact with the producer, *Appraisal* harkens back to a time when distribution, the relation between producer and consumer, was simpler. The painting has achieved at least an image of the Populist dream of eliminating the middle man. *Appraisal* presents us with two women of the late 1920s or early 1930s engaged in what might be read as a nostalgic act. Christopher Lasch argues that, by the 1920s, "feelings formerly associated with pastoralism, the celebration of the American West, and the myth of the small town were now assimilated quite self-consciously to the phenomenon of nostalgia" (Lasch, 1991, p. 106). The well-dressed woman in *Appraisal* seems to represent that phenomenon, having driven out to this farm to get a live chicken because she remembers the wonderful taste of a freshly killed and roasted chicken from her childhood or from the time when she had her own flock. We might read her act as approximating, attempting to conserve one old-fashioned practice in the face of an otherwise thoroughly modern life.

The well-dressed woman might also want to do something herself, for a change. For while the farm woman produces, skillfully uses her hands, the visitor's unseen hands have been supplanted by her purse. We might read her lack of hands and elaborately beaded bag as suggesting that her productive capacity has been replaced by consumption. And indeed, behind this symbolic substitution in the painting of consumption for production lay myriad changes - perhaps more drastic than those taking place in the production of food - in the lives of urban middle-class women. The well-dressed woman's presence in the painting gives testimony to three major changes in the lives of urban housewives: indoor plumbing, electricity, and gas or electric stoves. We can guess that indoor plumbing and bathrooms and electric washing machines made the creation of her well-groomed and carefully styled appearance much easier, and it seems unlikely that she would have taken on any of the unnecessary tasks of killing, dressing, or cleaning the chicken without the compensating convenience of a gas stove. While almost every part of household labor had been revolutionized in the 1920s (Cowan, 1976, 159), these three changes created enormous gaps between the daily lives of the average urban housewife of 1931 and the average farm woman of the same era.

Today we take for granted the improved quality of life made possible by indoor plumbing, electricity, and gas/electric stoves. But without indoor plumbing,

for example, someone, almost always the woman of the house, had to haul water for every household use: drinking, cooking, bathing, clothes washing, scrubbing. Even if the house had an indoor hand pump, bathing and washing chores required large amounts of water be carried to the task at hand. The work and conditions on a farm greatly compounded the last two chores.³ With a coal or wood stove, not only did the cook have to haul fuel from the fuel box, but also she had to keep the fire lit and regulated throughout the day and clean the kitchen of the resultant soot (Cowan, 1976, p. 161). And without electricity, the housewife could use no electric appliances. By 1925, almost seventy percent of non-farm homes in the United States had electricity (Cowan, 1976, p. 159), while in Iowa in 1930, only twenty-one percent of farms had electricity for the home; nationally, electrification of farm dwellings slightly exceeded thirteen percent (Taylor, 1933, pp. 331-332). "No farmer [in 1933] would think of harvesting wheat with a cradle, or shelling corn or pumping water by hand; but he makes his wife get along with a washboard, a coal stove, and the old well with no thought of the waste created by such labor-consuming equipment" (Taylor 326).

³ But city folks haven't the least idea how dirty the farm sitting-room can get a day or two after it is cleaned. the men's clothes are covered with chaff, dust and dirt of every sort, not to mention the odors of fertilized, manure and so on. The children have no spick and span sidewalks to play on, so their shoes are generally all gummed with mud" (Atkeson, p. 39).

Urban and even small-town housewives faced a far different work load by 1930. By 1924 in Muncie, Indiana, for example, two out of three homes had gas cook stoves; "the burdensome chore of keeping a coal stove lit and regulated . . . had probably been eliminated from most [non-farm] American homes by the 30s" (Cowan, 1976, p. 161). Three in four homes in Muncie had running water and two thirds in Zanesville, Ohio, had water and bathroom by 1924 (Cowan, 1976, pp. 161-162). These changes relieved the mistresses of these homes from the chore of hauling water, heating it on the stove for baths and washing, and hauling it out after washing or bathing; she could wash clothes or bathe more frequently without worrying about back-breaking labor. In addition, although electric, mechanized tools for the home were not universal even in 1940, appliances such as the "self-heating" iron (gas or electric), the vacuum cleaner, the electric sewing machine, and the refrigerator found their way into an increasing number of middle-class homes after 1920 (Wilson, 1979, p. 84). "All of these developments simplified the maintenance of the urban, middle-class home, greatly enlarging the free time available to women However, the myriad of chores, generally unrelieved by modern conveniences, left the farm woman with little spare time or energy" (Wilson, 1979, pp. 84-85). Little wonder that the farm woman in *Appraisal*, probably caught in the middle of her 'myriad' of chores, looks somewhat bedraggled.

Advice manuals and articles for farm women continued to give tips on household production, limiting discussions of consumption to ways to avoid spending more money than necessary.⁴⁴ The ideal woman presented in the advice columns, information articles, and advertisements in magazines such as *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, and *American Home*, however, seem increasingly the "American consumer par excellence" (Cowan, 1976, p.165). *Appraisal* not only hints at the modernization of poultry raising but also, in the gap between these two women, offers a potent image of the on-going transition in housework. In the 1920s a young farm wife had to know or learn how to can surplus produce, raise chickens, cultivate a garden, churn butter, separate milk, build a fire, and any number of other productive chores (Harris, 1930, p. 130); the young urban housewife increasingly had to learn how to buy things well.

Product testing services, home shopping guides, and home demonstrators appeared or greatly increased in importance during the twenties. *The Ladies' Home Journal* published articles on "How to Buy Towels" and "When the Bride Selects Bed Linens" (Cowan, 1976, pp. 152- 169) A 1928 Piggly Wiggly (1928) ad announces

⁴⁴ The farm woman] is interested primarily in the problems of consumption, just as her husband is interested primarily in the problems of production. She conserves and makes use of farm products or the money brought in by the farm business. Otherwise, as country people say, she would 'throw out with a teaspoon more than he could bring in with a shove (Atkeson, p. 29).

to the reader "Today . . . She makes her own Decisions . . .

She has become infinitely more discriminating -- more sophisticated in her buying." So one of our great magazines describes the woman of today. . . . Now, in shopping for foodstuffs, she chooses for herself. . . . [At Piggly Wiggly] You take what you please in your hands -- look it over -- read the price tags -- arrive at your own decision (p. 59).

While this ad goes on to advise the shopper to examine packages and labels and choose from among "famous and familiar" brand names, the prospective buyer in Wood's painting goes even further in examining before she buys. From Piggly Wiggly's point of view, she goes too far; for she has taken their advice to decide for herself so to heart that she ignores the packaged products offered by the chain store. Instead, she goes straight to the source and so deprives the store of profits. We might even read the transaction in *Appraisal* as Wood's parody of this sort of advertising logic that urges the consumer simultaneously to independent thinking and to dependence for a product on a merchant or manufacturer (rather than on one's own productive abilities). Certainly the painting reminds the viewer that the independence and choice touted by advertisers falls far short of the independence and self-determination possible for the individual.

Someone viewing *Appraisal* in 1931 would probably have recognized the visiting woman as a consumer not only by her implied behavior but also by her clothes. We have discussed how her carefully arranged appearance suggests that she has at her disposal a good deal of leisure and/or labor-saving devices; the studied lack of evidence of productive activity points to the complementary function of consuming. But the contemporary viewer need not have followed such intricate reasoning to spot the woman for a typical, if not ideal, consumer, for younger versions of this woman appear in ad after ad in the late twenties (Images 4 and 7). Some of these ads simply use the uniform of cloche hat, fur-collared coat, and clutch bag as symbols of the modern, well-to-do woman (whom readers would presumably want to emulate). These ads show this modern woman going about her errands, perhaps driving her Buick or Ford De Luxe Coupe or visiting a friend (from whom she fortunately learns about some wonderful product). Others actually celebrate the decrease in the labor required of her. "Alice Gartley used to travel the dreary road that leads up from the Valley of the Wash-tub and on to Nowhere" (*Laundryowners*, 1928, p. 172). But now that Alice has discovered the convenience of a laundry service, we see her in her shopping uniform (Image 12), free to do the things a modern woman does with her leisure. This ad leaves those leisure activities to the imagination, but they might include a shopping trip, even one out to the country as in *Appraisal* or the Texaco oil ad.

The country woman might, according to other ads, also put on the modern-woman-about-her-business uniform “when the day’s work is done and you drive to town to the movies, to see friends or shop” (Image 13) Indeed, though most advice to farm women about consuming dealt with using what the farm produced, in clothing herself, the farm woman did get advice on the shopping side of consuming. Ready-made clothing became available to farm families (primarily through mail-order) around the turn of the century (Wilson, 1979, p. 85), and by the twenties, farm women took advantage of the opportunity occasionally to emulate their city sisters.

The desire of the American country woman is to dress so much like her city sisters that she can mingle in the city crowds without an added glance in her direction, except perhaps for the vigor of her step, the clear brightness of her eyes and the natural healthful color of her complexion. . . . For this reason many of the farm women whom I know buy their best clothes by mail from the shops on Fifth Avenue, New York, rather than from the local stores or the general mail-order houses which cater particularly to the country trade. They buy, perhaps, a simple conservative suit, well tailored and cut, a dainty waist, and a becoming hat (Atkeson, 1924, p. 134).

By wearing such an outfit, a farm woman might hope to avoid the very

contrast, emphasized by the original title *Clothes*, with which Wood presents us. This discussion of how best to mingle, however, underscores the usual difference in farm and town women’s habitual attire. In their uniforms - the farm woman in her ‘simple wash dress’ and old coat, the town woman in her fashionable attire - these women most vividly reveal the differences between them as producer and consumer, worker and shopper.

Authentic vs. Social Selves: Material Culture and Advertising

The painting’s ultimate title, *Appraisal*, refers in part to the work the visiting woman does as a shopper: she appraises the chicken she might buy. But from the opposing roles they play here, the two women also appraise each other. Especially in this farm setting, we perceive the role each woman plays in the context of the world to which she belongs. “The painting is Wood’s update of a confrontation popular in nineteenth-century Victorian painting: the rich visiting or buying goods from the poor. . . . In Wood’s reprise of this familiar theme, it was not the issue of money and class that animates the confrontation, but the challenge of modernity to agrarian life” (Corn, 1983, p. 80)⁵ Just as the viewer

⁵ Corn offers for comparison E. L. Henry’s 1881 painting *Capital and Labor* in which “a wealthy young lady visits the home of a poor older woman. Bedecked in her Parisian fashions and accompanied by her pedigree pug, she appears like an apparition to the poor wo-

would have recognized the woman as consumer and producer, shopper and worker, such a viewer would have recognized the women as representatives, respectively, of the world of increasingly available consumer goods and of the world of family farms, where people worked hard and produced for themselves most of what they used. This viewer might also have realized, even in 1931, that the independence and self-sufficiency of such farms was endangered by economic and ecological changes.⁶

While Wood uses these women as types to represent two worlds in confrontation, he also presents close-up, if not deeply psychological, portraits of them. We see here individual women whom we could recognize if we met them on the street. *Appraisal* casts the encounter between social worlds more in terms of the social psychological understanding that defined personality “as the individual’s characteristic reactions to social stimuli, and the quality of his adaptation to the social features of his environment” (Allport, 1924, p. 101). This understanding

man whose mutt dog slaves to churn the butter by tread-mill, the artist’s all-too-obvious metaphor for poverty.”

⁶ Taylor’s *Rural Sociology*, for example, described the threat of increasing tenantry to the independent farm, as well as the farmer’s increasing dependency on the market and the price system both for selling his produce and obtaining what he needed. Painter Alexander Hogue vividly depicted the ravages of erosion on dust bowl farms of the twenties and thirties.

contrasted with the contemporaneous sociological perspective that attempted to assemble characteristics of and plot interactions among various groups, like the working class or farmers (Taylor, 1933, p. 138).⁷

Increasingly in the twenties and thirties, Americans (potential viewers) encountered an individualized, even atomized view of social 'reality' not only in myths of rugged individuals on the frontier or of Horatio Algers climbing the ladder of economic opportunity but also in ads that portray problems as a lack in the individual (which the advertised product could conveniently fill or correct). In these ads, as in earlier notions of the individual, the onus for success lies squarely on the individual's shoulders, but now success depends more and more on social acceptance and less on independent achievement. As one psychologist of the new understanding of the self put it, "Our consciousness of ourselves is largely a reflection of the consciousness which others have of us. This introspective phase of self has been aptly termed by Professor Cooley as the 'looking-glass self.' We shall refer to its hereafter as the social self" (Allport, 1924, p. 325).

⁷ "In 1917 L. L. Bernard catalogued very definitely what he believed to be the mental characteristics of the farmer, and later (1925) he elaborated on the list. It is as follows: 1. Individualism 2. Conservatism 3. Orthodoxy 4. Suggestibility 5. Mysticism 6. Shyness 7. Suspiciousness 8. Introvert personality 9. Personal democracy 10. Sentimentality" (Taylor 138).

Translated into ads, this examination by one's neighbors which had such a strong effect on self-image become a harsh social scrutiny to 'mobilize the instincts' of desire for social prestige, beauty, self-adornment, and others. (Ewen, 1976, pp. 31-40)

In place of the relatively mild, scattered, something-for-nothing-sample-free, I-tell-you-this-is-a-good-article copy seen in Middletown a generation ago, advertising is concentrating increasingly upon a type of copy aiming to make the reader emotionally uneasy, to bludgeon him with the fact that decent people don't live the way he does: decent people ride on balloon tires, have a second bathroom, and so on. This copy points an accusing finger at the stenographer as she reads her Motion Picture Magazine and makes her acutely conscious of her unpolished finger nails, or of the worn place in the living room rug, and sends the housewife peering anxiously into the mirror to see if her wrinkles look like those that made Mrs. X__ in the ad. "old at thirty-five" because she did not have a Leisure Hour electric washer (Lynd, 1929, p. 82n).

Many ads achieve such effects by externalizing the forces causing individuals to define their sense of self through the looking glass. Some ads encourage the reader to rush to the mirror by showing a lovely woman (who was to be emulated) or a haggard one (whose condition was

to be shunned) looking in their mirrors (Image 14). Other ads depict scenes of direct social scrutiny. A 1928 ad for Listerine (Image 15) shows an unfortunate victim of her own failure to live up to a crucial social test; she has been weighed in the balance of social (and olfactory) scrutiny and found wanting. While more recent (and ostensibly humorous) versions of this pitch actually show companions recoiling with horror from a person with 'halitosis,' in the 1928 ad we still imagine, on the basis of the social aftermath it shows, the social judgment and rejection that has led to the lonely lady's predicament.

Other ads emphasize the positive side of such social tests: acceptance. We want to emulate the "nice people" who "recognize the risk - and avoid it" (Image 16), or the considerate hostess who preserves her guest's sleep by serving Sanka (Image 17), or the woman who caught her future husband's eye with her poise and sure step, even in a swaying boat, by wearing Red Cross shoes (Image 18). But however positive the thrust of these ads, they seek to remind readers of the constant social appraisal that they encountered in the social world and to offer products as buffers against rejection.

We can see similarities to the appraisal going on in Wood's painting even more clearly in the form many ads of the twenties and thirties use to portray social examinations and judgments. Especially for household products, ads

often depict a visiting lady observing, considering some aspect of the home of her hostess, usually with the hostess at her side. As in *Appraisal*, these female-encounter ads place the viewer in the scene, at least marginally. In the ads for Sealex linoleum and for Lloyd wallpaper (Images 10 and 11), the viewer might be a guest for tea observing the later arrival of another guest (in cloche hat and fur-collared coat). Ideally, we will envy the security that her home can stand up to the scrutiny of her guest which these products give the hostess.

An ad for Community (silver) plate (Image 19) makes the viewer an eavesdropper on a catty conversation between two women in fashionable evening dresses. The viewer might be another guest or the hostess herself hearing a conversation not meant for her ears. While some ads emphasize the product (Image 5), these encounter ads emphasize the viewer/reader's relationship to the sort of social drama depicted. These ads assume, and so encourage us to believe, that we belong in the same situations as these women and, naturally, share the same values. In the silver ad, we see the thorough examination guests presumably give one's home. "Look at Your Silver -- Your Guests Do," it warns. Illustrating this caution, it depicts one lady guest commenting to another, "Eugenie must be SUNK! . . . I happen to KNOW that she's going to have an Early-American dining room and, OF COURSE, all her heavy French silver simply won't DO . . . !"

By placing us in the scene, the ad helps us to imagine finding ourselves subject to such high standards; not only must we have silver, but it must harmonize perfectly with our décor! Wood places us in a similar relationship to his version of the female encounter and so helps us to identify with these women in the midst of social scrutiny. While the farm woman in *Appraisal* might not hope for full acceptance from her town visitor, her sideways glance may express curiosity about the other woman's evaluation of all she sees, especially the chicken but also the farmstead and the farm woman herself, just as the reader of the silver ad may have wondered about the evaluations made by callers on her home.

Wood's painting, however, bears the most striking resemblance to a series of ads for Rinso soap. In these ads (Images 20 through 23), two women, one in some variation of a cloche hat, a simple street dress and a string of pearls, the other in a wash dress and apron, with no hat, stand over the aproned woman's washing or ironing and discuss the virtues of Rinso. In one version, the well-dressed woman imparts her knowledge of the wonders of Rinso. Cartoon-style balloons convey the dialogue:

Well-dressed woman: "Aren't washing machines marvelous! They save so much time."

Aproned woman: "Yes. This one's great. But I do wish I knew how to

keep my clothes from getting that grayish look."

Well-dressed woman: "I'll tell you how. Use Rinso. Its thick suds wash clothes bright and gleaming."

Of course, the aproned woman tries Rinso and finds it to work. In some versions of this ad (Images 22 and 23), however, the aproned woman holds the washday secret; in the first frame of these ads' cartoon drama, the women relate to each other much as the women in Wood's painting do. The well-dressed woman examines the other woman's clean clothes, the results of Rinso's cleaning action, while the aproned woman observes her guest, much as the visitor in *Appraisal* observes the chicken while the farm woman observes her. Two of the versions cast the knowing, aproned woman as a farm woman, one subtly (Image 22) by mentioning work shirts, milk cans, and separators, the other explicitly with the headline, "'How those rich suds soak out dirt!' farm women everywhere tell us" (Image 23). In the first ad, where the well-dressed woman has the secret to washing success, the women might both be city or town women.⁸ This advertising series, then, seems to reverse or ignore the normal ad stereotype in which the ideal consumer, usually a cosmopo-

⁸ These Rinso ads are presented here in reverse chronological order. My argument needs only to represent a spectrum of ad versions and does not imply any notion of chronological development away from or toward the idea of farm women as wise.

litan woman about town, knows and buys the best products. Rinso asserts the practicality and buying wisdom of farm women. But it still makes use of the ideal consumer who, upon receiving a product recommendation, buys and tries the new product.

While even the Rinso depictions of knowledgeable farm women placed high value on the 'good consumer,' we might imagine Appraisal as a parody of the sort of ad in which the advertised product gives one party or the other the upper hand in meetings between hostesses and guests. Wood instead presents us with such an encounter where his sympathies lie, not with the stereotypical consumer, but "with the farm woman, whose territory has been invaded by this creature from another planet. With obvious glee, he points out the beauty of the chicken's coat of striped feathers compared with the dead animal trim on the woman's coat and contrasts the strong, aggressive stance of the farm woman with the soft, pudgy, double-chinned figure of the overstuffed visitor" (Corn, 1983, 80). The farm woman, not her counterpart who has taken such care with her appearance, has an enviable smooth, clear complexion; her broad, wrinkle-free forehead, firm jaw line, and smile lines bespeak an admirable strength of character. Her dark eyes seem to pierce, to penetrate the carefully composed surface of her visitor.

The farm woman is also imbedded in cultural surroundings that anchor her

three-dimensionally to the farm's material world, while her visitor's flattened form is pushed to its margins. That material world, as well as the farm woman's vigor and sidewise glance, offer a powerful challenge to the encroaching popular consumer culture. Of course, this farm is not a pure product of folk culture; Henry Glassie concedes that "eight generations of industrialization and urbanization have transformed a heterogeneous population into a nonfolk mass" (3) and that the "proportion of folk to nonfolk elements in the cultural makeup of an individual varies from person to person" (5). Folk material culture, however, is determined according to form, construction, use, and whether any or all of these aspects grow out of the producer's "own tradition" (Glassie, 1968, pp. 5-8). Glassie (1968) links this issues to matters of individuality and ability to resist normative pressures from popular culture:

The recognized leaders of [groups which maintain some traditional orientation] will often embrace the up-to-date to reinforce their status. The members of the group which has a weak orientation toward tradition tend to follow the leader, with the individuals having the highest proportion of folk elements in their culture being last in line. The more traditionally oriented groups are split by progress (p. 19)

Perhaps such an ability to resist popular pressures accounts for the farm woman's

smile when confronted with a visitor whom the ads would lead us to consider intimidating.

Looking again at clothing, we can be fairly certain that the farm woman had a more active role in clothing herself than did her visitor; she almost certainly knitted the hat or obtained it from a knitting friend or relative, and she probably put on the uneven braid and possibly even made the coat and dress. Even if she used purchased fabric and patterns, she would have used sewing techniques learned in traditional ways, from mother or aunts. She seems, however, to have devoted even more energy to her farmstead, and it, in turn, shows her folk grounding most clearly. She did not actually construct the simple farm house or the red barn with its intricate pattern of board gables and doors, but her husband or father almost certainly did. And even if the turned newel post might point to some purchased materials, the farmer almost certainly put the buildings together using techniques learned within his "own tradition." Indeed, the barn, which fills much of the central background, manifests a folk aesthetic sense that certainly qualifies as craft and possibly as folk art.⁹ Wood offers his viewers an alternative to the mainstream consumer culture, grounded in a lifestyle

⁹ "A problem harder to attack is determining how much of the material which is genuinely folk, is art. Art is the application of an aesthetic, so that it can include more than paintings and sculpture However, art cannot include things which the producer did not consider aesthetically, even when we find them pleasing" (Glassie, p. 30).

that in many ways is still clearly oriented toward tradition. A letter to *The Farmer's Wife* magazine expresses the rhythm of such a lifestyle.

Then there is the beauty of family life on the farm . . . peace, a love of nature, and time for quiet, happy thoughts. Can they be gotten by any other class of working people as easily as by the woman on the farm? She doesn't rush to finish her work that she may spend a day bargain hunting - a day of hurry, worry and "me-first" thoughts; of spending money she shouldn't spend, and gazing at things she wants and can't have. No; she may sit on the front porch a bit, while she sews, or mends, or reads. She will see and feel and hear the beauty of the world - her world - and with an unruffled spirit she will go in and get supper for her hungry brood (Taylor, 1933, pp. 287-288).

This woman's rejection of frivolous consumption is directly linked to traditional uses of her home, sitting on the porch, and to traditional skills, sewing and mending, terms that emphasize the opposition of her values to popular consumer culture

Far from being rooted in a culture that helps her resist normative pressures, the visitor's passive stance, in contrast, reinforces a "soft, pudgy," weak and "overstuffed" or conformist appearance. Her arms rest impotently across her stomach; her small eyes and pale lashes

suggest a lack of penetration, a narrowness of vision. The ways in which Wood has objectified this woman, however, most damage our estimation of her. Her fur collar roughly traces an arc about the lower right corner so that the woman's brown coat and collar resemble nothing more than a large wedge of chocolate cream pie, complete with crust. Even more telling, her profile mimics that of the chicken, element by element: her bead-like nose, with its rounded slope and slight hook; her eye, with its tiny, back iris; her double chin, hanging wattle-like below her face; her pearl earring, mimicking the pale circle of feathers over the chicken's ear. Even the shell motif on her hat pin somewhat resembles the fanning projections of the chicken's comb, and the colors of her fur collar suggest a pale imitation of the "beauty of the chicken's coat." All her efforts toward a stylish, if not beautiful, appearance have only succeeded here in making her into just another commodity, as the chicken is a commodity. We do not want to emulate this woman as we might her advertising counterpart; we pity her and want to avoid her mistakes.

Wood has reversed the standard of the advertising images his painting resembles. The farm woman not only fills the role of 'producer' rather than that of 'consumer' but also by her clothing reveals 'inferior' buying skills; yet the painting values her. She might be a haggard 'Mrs. X___' who had no time for her appearance because she does not have a 'Leisure

Hour' washing machine, but we would emulate her over her visitor. And the painting does, by placing these women so near the viewer, invite us to identify with and perhaps consider emulating its characters, as though it were an advertisement of the day. We cannot stand back, as we might in viewing Henry's *Capital and Labor* (Image 24; 1881), and pity the poor woman while preferring to be in the rich woman's shoes; we would rather be the youthful and self-sufficient farm woman, in spite of her inferior station. We see implied here, however, not only more than one sort of personality but also more than one set of social standards that might shape individual personalities. By updating the popular nineteenth-century confrontation between rich and poor with familiar advertising clichés, Wood not only satirized the too-ideal, dependent consumer but also, like the farm woman's letter, reminded contemporary viewers that the world portrayed in the ads was not the only possible or even desirable world.

Folk Art and Popular Culture

Not only does the farm scene portray material culture that is at least partly folk in its origins, but also Wood has chosen, as he did in many of his paintings, to emulate important features of the folk or naive painting that was receiving its first serious aesthetic consideration in the 1930s, "when the newly-formed Museum of Modern Art made special provision for study and collection in the field"

(Rugoff 182). The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover (Image 25; 1931), for example, takes Hoover's humble origins, a focal episode in Hoover's campaign biography, and updates them, including the large house that by 1931 (campaign year) stood in front of the small cabin where Hoover was actually born. In this painting, he discourages the viewer's suspension of disbelief by distorting perspective and creating fantastic curvilinear trees like the work of an untrained artist and by placing a small tour guide in the middle of this bird's-eye view. While the tour guide seems to remind viewers of the careful staging of Hoover's (or any politician's) campaign biography, perhaps the painting's naive style points to the naïveté, the gullibility the public usually, in fact, exhibits.

In the Fruits of Iowa series (Images 26 through 30, 1932), Wood also flattens, smooths, and rounds familiar attributes to create stylized types, outlines of farm families a talented naive painter might draw. As in Appraisal, perhaps showing the decorative influence of his Arts and Crafts training, Wood emphasizes folk elements in the material culture so that the textiles the figures wear become a kind of naive abstract art as well as clothing; the animals and produce, on the other hand, may owe more to popular consumer culture, especially the pigs (Image 28), the chickens (Image 26), and the watermelon (Image 28), which seem to draw on ceramic figurines of nineteen-twenties knick-knack shelves,

even as they prefigure the "country" crafts so plentiful now in gift shops along interstate highways.

When Wood uses folk art or culture, it is not always in direct challenge to popular consumer culture; sometimes notions of consumption challenge folklore held too sacred. Karal Ann Marling (1983) has shown that his use of George Washington in Parson Weems' Fable (Image 31; 1939) and Daughters of Revolution (Image 32; 1932) stimulated much public response in part because they followed on the heels of widespread celebration of and national fascination with our first president (pp.94-99). Following lavish festivals honoring Washington, both at the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1932 and the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his inauguration in 1937, the 1939 World's Fair at Flushing Meadow mixed patriotic with commercial sentiment as a sixty-five-foot-high white plaster statue of Washington presided over the fair grounds. "Although the fair . . . existed to sell new Fords, GE toasters and Borden's processed cheese, its managers were pleased to take advantage of federal promotional spadework by dedicating their extravaganza, in very fine print, to the remembrance of the 150th anniversary of Washington's inauguration" (Marling, 1983, 98). Throughout the decade Washington mania made his face ubiquitous; his image adorned postage stamps, Heinz vinegar bottles, and thermometers given away by a Minnesota feed mill. In Parson Weems'

Fable, Wood reveals how a beloved part of national mythology was, in fact, fabricated and packaged for consumption by Washington's first biographer. In Daughters of Revolution, he suggests, not very subtly, that groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution attempt to appropriate and control parts of the national lore for their own ends.

Wood's treatment of these 'hallowed' American legends pokes fun at the conspicuous nostalgia of a society that was, in fact, modernizing its way of life with all deliberate speed. Like the patrons of the World's Fair, the older woman in Appraisal is a consumer of old-fashioned ways as much as she is of the latest fashions in clothes. We might read her as one who has lost much of the real independence in her life; perhaps she compensates by buying the makings for an old-fashioned chicken dinner, creating an illusion of the days when she did more for herself. Perhaps we can read this as a subtler joke than Parson Weems' Fable; still it is a joke at the expense of those who, with "Early American" furniture at home and wood paneling on their automobile, would have their nostalgia be as conspicuous as their modernity.

As early as ninth grade, Wood cast the artist as one "who leads the public away from the material, commercial world and into one of imagination and dreams" (Corn, 1983, p. 9). In Appraisal, as in many other works, he attempted to accomplish that by bringing two alternative worlds

into contact. Sometimes the progressive, irreverent tendencies in popular culture could counter a too-restrictive tradition, but most often, the traditional is an antidote to the relentless pressures of the popular. In his world of imagination, at least, he could give folk art sway; he could create his own “body of folklore that would ensure his region and its types a place in the national memory bank”

(Corn, 1983, p. 120). It may be fitting that his American Gothic has become, with the exception of the Mona Lisa, the work of art most “rapaciously consumed by the American public” (Corn, 1983, p. 135), for his paintings, with their ersatz folk style and their blend of folk and popular content, leave a fascinating record of an important stage in the shift to a popular consumer culture.



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