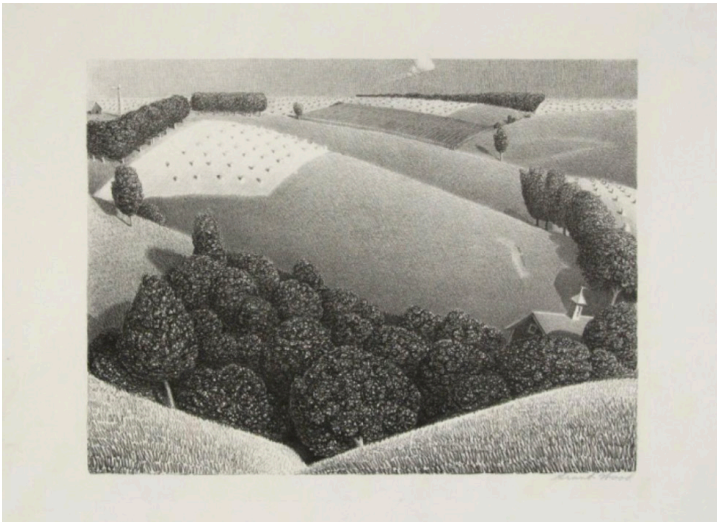




[Subsistence Homestead, Old Style](#), Berenice Abbott [Object 1981.2534]



[July Fifteenth](#), Grant Wood [Object 1996.0472]

Artist: Berenice Abbott
 Date: circa 1936
 Medium: Gelatin silver print
 Classification: Photograph
 Credit Line: Gift of Ben Wunsch
 Object: 1981.2534
 Copyright: © Berenice Abbott /
 Commerce Graphics Ltd.

Artist: Grant Wood
 Date: 1939
 Medium: Lithograph
 Classification: Print
 Credit Line: Gift of Marjorie Dibble
 Object: 1996.0472
 Copyright: Public domain

Teaching guide by Jeffrey Adams, PhD student in English

Berenice Abbott's *Subsistence Homestead, Old Style* (circa 1936) and Grant Wood's *July Fifteenth* (1939) both depict rolling hills, abundant trees, and signs of agricultural labor. Their similar subject matter and temporal proximity but different media permit exciting avenues for bringing them into dialogue with one another. Each image represents farmlands in the wake of the Great Depression, a period that was marked by mass human migration out of urban centers and into rural areas. Farms became sites for economic opportunity and domestic stability during this period when factories and other businesses failed on a mass scale. Both Wood's and Abbott's images document this geographical and cultural shift in the United States by representing rural landscapes where both crops and communities are beginning to sprout.

Teaching Guide

Depression-era Farmscapes

Context



The homestead found in Abbott's photograph was built by the Subsistence Homestead Division of the Department of the Interior (1933-35) as a part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Like other New Deal programs, this agency was created to combat the economic turmoil of the Great Depression. The United States Department of the Interior's pamphlet *A Homestead and Hope* (1935) explains that a "subsistence homestead consists of a modern but inexpensive house and outbuildings, located on a plot of land upon which a family may produce a considerable portion of the food required for home consumption" (6). Though these homesteads were sold to economically vulnerable families, the families were required to have some form of income or a high chance of employment once relocated. The program aimed to give homestead residents a change "from crowded slum and tenement to the healthier atmosphere of the suburbs of the country" (10). The pamphlet alleges that the change of scenery and the opportunity to own land "reemphasizes the home and family as the desirable social unit" (10).

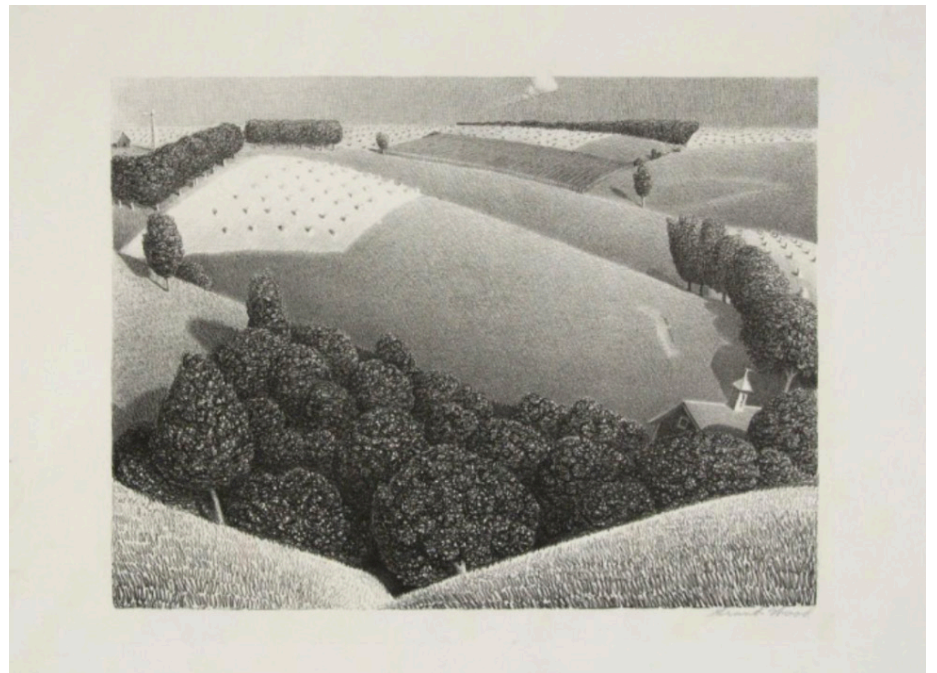
In its criteria for who got to be relocated to a subsistence homestead and why, the Department of the Interior showed who it considered to be good citizens of the United States. The Department also stressed the alleged health benefits of moving to a rural area, citing improved atmospheric conditions explicitly while also implicitly celebrating the sexual virility necessary to produce a family. In practice, the program largely benefited White families, and the building of subsistence homestead communities thus enabled "White flight" from urban areas and promoted the emergence of a White, suburban, middle class. The homestead pictured in Abbott's photograph is in West Virginia, but similar communities were financed and built all over the United States. Many of the people relocating to subsistence homesteads in West Virginia were former coal miners, since the failure of the region's mining companies during the Depression had produced mass unemployment.

Context cont.

Like Abbott's photograph, Wood's *July Fifteenth* shows a hilly landscape with no people in sight. Much of Wood's work sought to represent the American Midwest, specifically its rural and agricultural areas. His most famous work, the painting *American Gothic* (1930), is representative of this artistic focus. *July Fifteenth* was made while Wood was teaching at the University of Iowa's School of Art, where he was a professor from 1934 to 1941. As a professor, Wood also wrote art criticism, and his essay *Revolt Against the City* (1935) provides some context for *July Fifteenth*, an image that has been little written about by either Wood or scholars. In the essay, Wood outlines his artistic philosophy and his work's regionalist focus, which he then connects to the Great Depression's impact on artistic production in the United States. Addressing the growth of regionalism in art, Wood posits that "the Depression Era has stimulated us to a re-evaluation of our resources in both art and economics, and that this turning of our eyes inward upon ourselves has awakened us to values which were little known before the grand crash of 1929 and which are chiefly non-urban" (Wood 128). Despite the widespread harms the Depression was causing, Wood thus implies that its negative economic impacts would produce a net positive for American artistic expression.

It became an economic necessity for many people living in the United States during the Depression to leave the city, which, Wood believed, would prompt a productive shift towards an introspective art that engages more directly with the American landscape. Wood continues, "I think the alarming nature of the depression and the general economic unrest have had much to do in producing this wistful nostalgia for the Midwest to which I have referred" (Wood 132). In Wood's mind, the Midwest's position in the broader cultural imaginary allowed it to exist as a soothing fantasy that could partially ameliorate the psychological and material turmoil caused by the Depression. The rural Midwest amounted, in Wood's formulation, to a place ideologically removed from the capitalist economic conditions that triggered the Depression. But,

for Wood, the Midwest represented more than just a nostalgic site that fostered artistic creativity; he highlighted the material conditions that produced more Midwest regionalist art and artists. One such condition for him was the development of subsistence homesteads, such as the one in Abbott's photograph. Wood writes: "To the East, which is not in a position to produce its own food, the Middle West today looks a haven of security. This is, of course, the basis for the various projects for the return of urban populations to the land; but it is an economic condition not without implications for art" (132). During times of economic collapse, Wood writes, people "come back solidly to the good earth" (132). His logic was that, by growing food, people became less dependent on an unstable capitalist market that was bound to fail again.



Artist Backgrounds

Berenice Abbott

Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) was an American photographer who spent most of her career photographing shifting cityscapes while also photographing rural areas in the United States. She worked as Man Ray's studio assistant in Paris, which kicked off her photography career. Abbott then became focused on documenting the rapid changes that New York City was undergoing in the 1930s. Later in her career, she worked to photograph and thus make legible scientific phenomena such as magnetism and gravity.

Grant Wood

Grant Wood (1891-1942) was an American painter and illustrator who is famous for his representations of the Midwestern United States. Wood was a proponent of an artistic movement called Regionalism which grew out of a philosophy which argued for the importance of depicting and working within rural areas in the United States rather than in its urban areas. Regionalism was also a move towards realism in art in response to modernism's focus on abstraction. Wood taught at the University of Iowa until right before his death from pancreatic cancer. He is most famous for his painting *American Gothic* (1930) which is perhaps the most readily recognizable painting by an artist from the United States.

Discussion Questions

- Both of these objects might be considered “pastoral,” in that they foster a vision of human beings living in a kind of harmony with their rural surroundings. What are the components of each of these objects that contributes to that vision? How do human-created structures show up in each image, and what relation do these structures have to their surroundings? To create images of humanity living in harmony with nature, what aspects of rural life, of agriculture, and/or of the ecosystem do these images not depict?
- Both Abbott’s and Wood’s images represent similar subject matter but one is a print and the other is a photograph. What sorts of affordances do each of these modes of representation allow? What can prints do that photographs cannot and vice versa?
- The points of view in these images are similar yet slightly different, a difference that might be caused by their distinct media and which may be a result of their intended vantage points. Whose perspective are we looking out from in each of these images? Why does it matter who is seeing these landscapes? How do different media imply different focal points? This question will require speculation and imagination.
- How can the historical backdrop of the Great Depression inform our interpretation of these images? How do these unassuming images of farms become more complicated by the movement to rural areas that the Depression brought about? Who might have lived on these farms and what would have been their relationship to both the region they are living in and the United States as a whole?
- The crops on these farms are not very visible when one looks at either of these images, but instead, there is an abundance of trees. What is significant about perhaps not being able to notice immediately that each of these images is representing a farm? How can we place the “naturally” growing trees into dialogue with the less visible but agriculturally cultivated plants?
- How does the economy interact with art? How is art both a tool for responding to economic conditions and something that has its own economic value (especially for artists, dealers, and collectors)? In what ways do we see art as an economic entity today? How is art’s relationship to economic conditions like and unlike how it would have been during the 1930s?
- Does the absence of people in both of these works influence how we can interpret them? We know that farms need people in order to operate, but what can be said about the lack of laboring farm workers in each of these images? Does this help create a stronger contrast between the city and the countryside?

Selected Recent Texts

Further Readings and Works Consulted

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- United States Department of the Interior Division of Subsistence Homesteads. *A Homestead and Hope*. United States Government Printing Office, 1935.
- Wood, Grant. *Revolt Against the City*. Frank Luther Mott, 1935. <https://interarts.org/CW%20Wood%20Essay%20Revolt.pdf>

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- Caldwell, Erskine and Margaret Bourke-White. *You Have Seen Their Faces*. 1937. Photography Book.
- *The Dust Bowl*. Dir. by Ken Burns. 2012. Documentary film.
- Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn, and Jacqueline Moore. *To Ask an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. Non-fiction.
- *Modern Times*. Dir. by Charlie Cahplin. 1936. Narrative film.
- *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. Dir. by Joel Coen. 2000. Narrative film.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. 1939. Novel.
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