

# OUR SPRING IN TOWN

Education Gallery  
February 7 – March 29

In partnership with  
The Vigo County Public Library's BIG READ 2020: Our Town

*Spring in Town* depicts a typical small town, not unlike Grover's Corners in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938.) In the painting, Wood set the scene to critique the myth of the American way of life pre-WWII. Wilder's play is minimalist in nature, and while taking place in 1901 through 1913, is a timeless slice of rural life. In both tales, time passes by quickly while the characters go about their tasks, often noted by the Stage Manager in *Our Town*. Figures are repeated in *Spring in Town*, creating a compression of time and narrative similar to the Flemish masters Wood was inspired by. The figure mowing can be seen beating dust from a rug and climbing a ladder to repair a roof. The motherly figure is seen hanging a quilt to dry and peering from a doorway watching repairs being done to her roof.

He started plans for *Spring in Town* around the time of a significant anniversary — forty years since his father, Maryville Wood, had died on March 17, 1901. Both Wood and Wilder were plagued by their fathers — stern and disciplinarian, suspicious of their personalities and interest in the arts. Well into his 20s, Thornton's father sent him off to do physical labor on farms to "rid him of his peculiar gait and certain effeminate ways." At 10, with the death of his father, Grant with his mother and three siblings left their family farm for Cedar Rapids.

The history of art is fraught with artists using elements in their work to stand in for other things or ideas. Grant Wood is no exception, as his scenes were highly composed and involved sketching and gathering separate elements before combining them to fit a composition. Historian Henry Adams wrote that, "homosexual feelings fundamentally shaped [Wood's] artistic vision, and ... his masterpieces are permeated with what might be termed a homosexual outlook, which is evident in their play of double meanings, with sexual ambiguities, and their camp sense of humor."

Wood's work has become a strange mix of revelation and concealment, the most hidden and often left-out part of his life being that he was a homosexual. In *Spring in Town*, most of the males wear overalls, a costume Grant himself wore to assume the role of every-day farmer-turned-painter, a role his father wanted him to have. Freudian analysis of the scene would point to an oedipal complex, with a missing father, a son fulfilling all of the traditionally male tasks of the house. Props delineate sexual difference: males are given phallic implements (spading fork, lawn mower, rug beaters, ladder); females are juxtaposed with containers (baskets, barrel, wagon, house.)

Richard Meyer stated that scholars "should not lose sight of the intricate play of silence and suggestion, ambiguity and avoidance, that shaped Wood's life and art." Sighting Christopher Hommerding, he points out that "gay" was not yet an identity in America, and trying to reconstruct the artist as such would "wipe away the fact that public discourse of American art in the 1930s did not allow for any affirmative discussion of same-sex desire or experience."

Wilder and Wood both highly valued the transience of human life. Grant said, "This isn't the time for smart, sophisticated stuff in any of the arts... Artists should go on painting simple, everyday things that make life significant to the average person."

Consider the elements recreated from the painting, what do the objects mean to you?

A special thank you to Sue Taylor for her in depth research into the Swope's *Spring in Town*. Her recent book, **Grant Wood's Secrets**, is the latest research into the psychology of Grant Wood and his art. Also, thanks to Dorothy Montgomery (Los Angeles, CA) for commissioning Debbie Thompson (O'Fallon, IL) to recreate the quilt.