

ARTS & LETTERS

Genius Manqué?

"The Tragedy of Leonard Bernstein" by Leon Botstein, in *Harper's* (May 1983), P.O. Box 2620, Boulder, Colo. 80321.

Despite his unrivaled stature in American music, Leonard Bernstein has never become the artist he could have been. Having just reached 65, Bernstein has one "last chance" for greatness, says Botstein, president of Bard College.

Bernstein's accomplishments are legion. His *Omnibus* TV shows of the 1950s and '60s popularized classical music in America and made him a celebrity. Like German composer Kurt Weill and only a few others, he successfully exploited the techniques of serious music in composing such scores as *West Side Story* (1957) and *Candide* (1956). Bernstein has also turned to more serious composing—his *Kaddish* (1963) and *Mass* (1971) are well known to contemporary listeners. On top of all this, Bernstein is an accomplished pianist. His recordings of Schumann and Mozart are superb.

Even so, argues the author, Bernstein's career "has been an accumulation of false starts, spent opportunities." His popular compositions lack the "melodic invention" of Weill or Cole Porter. In his symphonies, Bernstein imitates and often trivializes the art of his predecessors. Seeking profundity, he achieves "only grandiose gesture."

Bernstein has gained his greatest fame as a conductor, notably as head of the New York Philharmonic during the 1960s. But even here he has succumbed to theatricality. His expressive physical performances are mere "podium acrobatics," Botstein contends, that conceal poor control over his orchestras and bland readings of musical scores.

How to account for the shortcomings of America's "most gifted musician"? Bernstein longed to be great, Botstein believes, but sacrificed that ambition to his "need for adulation, for instant and perpetual acclaim." But now that he has achieved stardom and has reached what are for most conductors the peak years, he may at last discipline his talent to achieve "the monument he deserves."

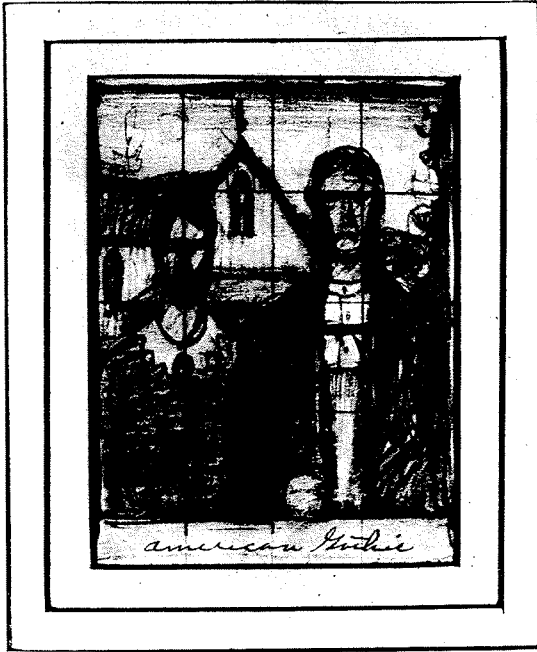
American Icon

"In Detail: Grant Wood's *American Gothic*" by Wanda Corn, in *Portfolio* (May-June 1983), P.O. Box 2714, Boulder, Colo. 80322.

Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1930) is an American classic. Yet art critics have dismissed Wood's work as trivial. Most other Americans see his famous picture of a dour Iowa farm couple as a satire and remain ignorant of his other works. A reappraisal of Wood's career, writes Corn, a Stanford art historian, is long overdue.

Born on an Iowa farm in 1891, Wood had an unremarkable early career. He viewed his years as a student at the state university and the Art Institute of Chicago during the early 1920s as his "bohemian" period. He adopted an impressionist style and visited Paris briefly. Back in Cedar Rapids, Wood supported himself with a variety of jobs and gained

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Grant Wood's preliminary sketch for American Gothic. The two people were not man and wife, as many viewers assumed, but a father and his spinster daughter.

the patronage of local businessmen eager to make the growing Iowa city a cosmopolitan center.

By 1930, Corn says, Wood had "invented a brand-new hard-edged realist style" and become a confirmed regionalist painter, devoting himself to Midwestern scenes. Part of the change she attributes to the influence of the Flemish Renaissance masters—Memling, Holbein, and Dürer—whose works of "crystalline realism" he saw during a 1928 visit to Germany. Also at work was his nostalgia for his farm childhood.

In the new style, Wood painted *Woman with Plants* (1929), using his mother as the model, and *Stone City* (1930), a self-consciously primitive landscape. In 1930, *American Gothic* won the surprised painter a bronze medal from the Art Institute of Chicago. Instant public acclaim followed. Wood's newfound fame led to an art teaching appointment at the University of Iowa in 1934; he died eight years later.

Far from ridiculing his subjects, Corn writes, Wood meant to pay them affectionate tribute as tokens of his own past. "These people had bad points," he said, "and I did not paint them under, but to me they were basically good and solid people." From the simple, blunt colors, to the man's dark jacket suggesting a preacher, to the potted plants emblematic of domesticity, every element of *American Gothic* is calculated to reveal the couple's character and background.

Intending only to capture something of his own roots, Corn believes, Wood almost unwittingly painted the "national ancestral icon."