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The Quilts of Grant Wood's Family and Paintings

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In the summer of 1981 while visiting family in Iowa City, Iowa, I received an invitation to study the quilts of Grant Wood's family. The current owner, Edwin Green, a close personal friend and devotee of Wood, was seeking recommendations about their future location.

The two quilts in Iowa City were given to Green by Wood's sister Nan Wood Graham. They were made by Lydia Wood, Grant Wood's maiden great aunt. No birthdate is available at this time for Lydia Wood, but it is known that she was the third child born in her family. Wood's grandfather Joseph Wood was the first born in 1824. They were born in Springboro, Ohio.

The immigrant ancestor was Quaker Othiwell Wood, who was born in Lancaster, England, and came to America about 1731. He settled in Chester County, Pennsylvania.¹ The family line descended through Jesse and Hannah Hollingsworth Wood, Grant Wood's great grandparents. The family of Joseph and Rebecca Shepard Wood migrated to Iowa from Winchester, in the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia by covered wagon. They eventually settled on a farm three and one-half miles from Anamosa, Iowa, in the rolling hills of the Mississippi River Valley. Grant Wood's father Francis Maryville Wood married Hattie De Ette Weaver.² The Weaver family had migrated to Iowa from upstate New York in the 1840s. Francis Wood's maiden sister Sarah inherited the quilts from Aunt Lydia Wood, who had continued to live in Virginia. Nan Wood Graham, in turn, inherited them from Aunt Sarah Wood in 1919³ (Figure 1).

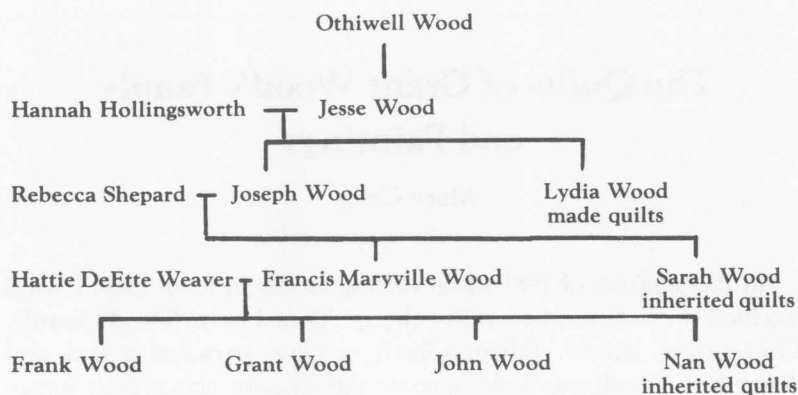


Fig. 1. The Wood family line.

The eight-pointed Star quilt is colonial bed size 102" x 106". It dates from between 1840–1860 in Ohio or Virginia. The condition is good considering the brown streak and the migration of one fabric's dye. There are forty-two star blocks and fifty-six white blocks. The finished size of the star is six inches. Each star is set in a brown fabric frame, giving a finished block size of 8¼ inches. This type of set called "cross-bar" was popular everywhere, especially with Pennsylvania women who liked to make striking contrasts between blocks.⁴ The print fabrics have mostly brown fields with only one showing deterioration. One of the most outstanding features is the quality of the piecing. The fabrics have been joined in ways that make it extremely difficult to tell where the seams are located. The stars with more than one fabric show a very careful attention to fabric placement with matching pieces equally balanced forming the star points. The quilting is very intricate with six stitches per inch. The patterns are princess feather wreaths and either a pineapple or a cluster of grapes in the white blocks. A princess feather garland is quilted on the white border. In between, the rest of the quilting is gridwork. The backing is 32-inch wide "homespun." The knots show on the back of the quilt. The quilt has "Nan Wood 1919" written in pen in one corner. This was the date she inherited the quilt⁵ (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. Eight-Pointed Star, 1840–1860, made by Lydia Wood. 102" x 106". Photo by author.

The second quilt is the Noonday or Sunburst pattern. "It was only natural that the early housewife's day was" marked "by the rising and setting of the sun. After dark, . . . only the most primitive (forms of) lighting . . . such as rushlight holders, phoebe or betty lamps, and candles," were available. "After 1812 whale oil for lamps became cheaper and more available." Kerosene lamps became the accepted light device after the fuel was approved for home use about 1860.⁶ The overall size of the quilt is 107" x 108" indicating it was made for a large bed. This all-cotton quilt dates from the same 1840–1860 year period. The sixty-four 8½" finished circles are set in an elaborate and difficult to make arrangement according to Ruth Finley.⁷ There are fifteen diamonds surrounding each circle. This motif is classified as solar variant in the design field and was derived from Japanese heraldry and Arabian sources.⁸ The diamonds are repeated in double rows along the border of the entire quilt. The diamonds in the corners create arrowheads forming a nice solution to the corner treatment problem. The diamond segments were not cut consistently according to grain or design of the fabric. The end

row of blocks are all the same fabric indicating (perhaps) that the quilter needed to add extra length or perhaps she ran out of the other fabrics. The quilting is magnificent. It consists primarily of garlands of princess feathers that wind around the circular blocks across the quilt's surface. The cotton batting has seeds in it. The backing is of consistent weave and thirty-six inch width. There is an "SS" stamped near the edge of the backing⁹ (Figure 3).

The decision has been made to donate the quilts to the Living History Farms of Iowa near Des Moines. The plans are underway to construct a quilt house to serve as a center for antique textiles and research. When this building is completed, the quilts will be presented.

As I studied these quilts, I began to wonder if there were others available from the Wood family. I began to wonder about Grant Wood's artistic talents. Had he inherited his interest in meticulous detail work from the Wood family? Had he ever used these quilts or similar ones for any of his paintings? I was challenged and the research was started.

Grant Wood may not have known these quilts existed because, to Edwin Green's knowledge, they were never displayed at his home. Green would stay at the house while Wood traveled.¹⁰

To my delight, I learned there are at least four other quilts. One being Grant Wood's baby quilt. He gave it along with his combination cradle and youth bed to his Cedar Rapids, Iowa patron's wife Mrs. David Turner. The two items are now part of the John B. Turner Collection at the Cedar Rapids Art Center.

A Four-patch variation quilt was made by Grandmother Nancy Weaver for Grant, who was born February 13, 1891. The overall size is 31¼" x 34½". The 3¾" pieced and solid blocks create diagonal lines of color and texture across the quilt surface. The fifteen rows of blocks contain 21 different calicos and woven checks of the type dating from 1880-1900. There are purple and white, red and black, a red and white calico as well as brown and blue checks. One outside row is made of totally different fabrics causing a break in the flow of design and color. Speculation would be that either the quilter ran out of fabrics or needed to add extra width to the finished top. There is careful piecing of some of the blocks with most of the fabrics placed on the straight of grain and only one on the diagonal. There are 5



Fig. 3. Noonday or Sunburst, all cotton, 1840–1860, made by Lydia Wood. 107" x 108". Photo by author.

stitches per inch in the quilting lines that flow in parallels across the surface. The backing and binding are of a pink and white print. The quilt has been mounted and framed with glass for many years. The overall condition is good except for some fading. The batting is a smooth consistency of wool. There is one place where the quilting lines do not come through to the back¹¹ (Figure 4).

Three other quilts have been inherited by Nan Wood Graham. Two of them are stored in an old trunk which is unavailable at this time. One is an Album quilt made and signed by friends of Joseph Wood. The other, Mrs. Graham reports, is a colonial-sized quilt in poor condition but with evidence still of beautiful quilting. Further examination will depend upon the trunk becoming available from storage and the convenience for Mrs. Graham to study them. The third quilt is currently missing. It was consigned to an Arts Alliance shop at Riverside, California's historic Mission Inn. The quilt was sold to someone from the East who requested the shop get verification from Mrs. Graham. Unfortunately, the shop went bankrupt

Fig. 4. Four-Patch variation, made by Nancy Weaver circa 1891. 31 1/4" x 34 1/2". Grant Wood's baby quilt. Courtesy the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Gift of Harriet Y. and John B. Turner, II.

before she was able to get the buyer's name and to collect her profit from the sale.¹²

To my further joy, I learned about two paintings done by Grant Wood containing quilts. These I was able to track down through a nationwide search of museums, researchers, and Grant Wood enthusiasts. A current complete listing of his works and their locations does not exist. The first, "Quilts," was painted in 1928 and the second, "Spring in Town," was painted in 1941. Further study of Grant Wood's work led to the finding that these two oil paintings clearly represented the two distinct styles of his work.



Fig. 5. Painting, "Quilts," Grant Wood, 1928. Courtesy James Sigmund.

The first quilt-related painting, "Quilts," was typical of the style he was using during the first part of his career. His familiar themes of trees, backyards, and simple structures are present (Figure 5).

The setting is a cottage next door to his friend's summer cottage in Waubeek, Iowa. The son of the cottage owner remembers Wood approaching Mrs. Miles, the neighbor lady, as she was airing her quilts, and asking permission to paint them. He remembers looking over Wood's shoulder as he painted. This memory was preserved by Wood through his techniques of narrowing the field of vision and of closing the composition. This creates an immediate presence as the viewer studies the quilts from a vantage point of standing on the road with the artist, just as the current owner did fifty-five years ago. The warmth of the colors shows the affection the artist and friends

had for the location. Thus the painting has great personal meaning to the owner's family and has rarely been shared with the viewing public. It is not listed in any of the inventories of Wood's work except for an unauthorized 1941 publication which identified it as being part of an estate. It was given to Wood's host the moment it was completed and never went to his studio where, perhaps, it would have been formally recorded. The overall effect of the painting is an encounter with small-town life that appears to rarely change.¹³

Soon after completing the "Quilts" painting, Wood went to Munich, Germany to supervise the creation of a stained glass window for the Cedar Rapids Veterans' Memorial Coliseum. Visiting the annual exhibition at the Glass Palace, he was impressed by the Gothic painters, especially Memling, for their attention to detail and accuracy. Later, speaking with Irma Koen of the *CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR*, March 26, 1932, Wood stated:

Until several years ago, I was strongly influenced by the Impressionistic school probably because I was taught to paint after their manner. However, my natural tendencies were toward the extremely detailed. As a boy, I once painted a picture of a bunch of currants which no one—not even a Japanese—could have executed with a more meticulous finish. At this period none of my work was ever accepted in any important exhibition.... It seemed to me the Gothic painters were the next step.... The lovely apparel and accessories of the Gothic period appealed to me so vitally that I longed to see pictorial and decorative possibilities in our contemporary clothes and art articles. Gradually as I searched, I began to realize that there was real decoration in the rickrack braid on the aprons of the farmers' wives, in calico patterns and in lace curtains. At present my most useful reference and one that is authentic is a Sears, Roebuck catalog. And so, to my great joy, I discovered that in the very commonplace, in my native surroundings, were decorative adventures and that my only difficulty had been in taking them for granted.¹⁴

Returning to Iowa, he developed his new direction which was to result in the creation of "American Gothic" in 1930 and its instant

Fig. 6. Oil painting, "Spring in Town," Grant Wood, 1941. 26" x 24½". Permanent collection, The Sheldon Swope Art Gallery, Terre Haute, IN.

fame and notoriety. The famous painting of the bald-headed villager and his daughter in front of a hybrid Gothic-style house won the Norman Wait Harris bronze medal and \$300 purchase award at the Chicago Art Institute's Annual Exhibition of American Paintings. Wood became a prime favorite of Americans. His paintings were the most popular of American artists at the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition in 1933. Popularity with the public was important to him.

He wanted his work "to mean something to the public at large, not just a hypersensitive minority."¹⁵

Wood's choice was to depict the farmer as the possessor/caretaker of the land, as in his last quilt-related painting. In the summer of 1941, exhausted by pressures on him as a ranking artist, from the petty attacks on him by the public, and his own ill health, Wood spent the summer in Clear Lake, Iowa. Here, using an abandoned railroad depot as a studio, he created his last two oil paintings, "Spring in the Country" and "Spring in Town."

This second quilt-related painting, "Spring in Town," shows the sense of anticipation and preparation for the new season in the illustrated activities. From a vantage point above the scene, the viewer looks down as the young girl is pulling over the branch of spring blossoms and the woman is airing her quilts. This position gives the viewer the impression of looking into a make-believe scene. Wood often showed the woman's role to be that of beautifier and conservator. Man, on the other hand, is shown as the caretaker spading the garden, mowing the lawn, beating the rugs, and checking the roof after the long winter (Figure 6).

These represent his theme of man as the possessor of the land, carefully and lovingly working it to his benefit. However, these are not only Grant Wood themes, they are the traditional roles of rural Iowans. The picture of the small town church at a great distance from the city's factories and smokestacks shown in the distant corner of the painting is another tribute to the good life in rural Iowa. A further notion is that as long as man works his fields in harmony with nature, no harm will come to him and he will receive his material rewards. Wood considered both of his spring paintings of 1941 as patriotic statements in face of the approaching war. According to an interview in the CEDAR RAPIDS GAZETTE June 29, 1941, Wood described the paintings as representing the good life at stake, "inspired by a new appreciation of an America tranquil in a warring world, of democracy free and hopeful, of a country worth preserving."¹⁶

Although he may not have known the Wood family quilts existed and thus did not use them in his paintings, I conclude that Wood was probably attracted to the subject for his first painting, "Quilts," through his interest in carefully planned and detailed items

in his environment. Quilts airing on the spring day are a natural example. In "Spring in Town," I conclude he used the quilts to illustrate woman's role as beautifier of her home through her artistic expressions. The airing quilts of both paintings are illustrative of his favorite theme—the beautiful, peaceful life available in American small towns.

Quilts

1. Pieced Quilt, Star, made by Lydia Wood, Virginia, Mid-19th century, in collection of Edwin Green
2. Pieced Quilt, Noonday or Sunburst, made by Lydia Wood, Virginia, mid-19th century, in collection of Edwin Green
3. Pieced Quilt, Four-patch variation, made by Nancy Weaver, Iowa, c. 1890, in John B. Turner collection at Cedar Rapids, Iowa Art Center
4. Pieced Quilt, unknown, in collection of Nan Wood Graham
5. Pieced Quilt, Album, in collection of Nan Wood Graham
6. Pieced Quilt, unknown

Notes and References:

1. Interview with Nan Wood Graham, October, 1982.
2. NATIONAL CYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY, White and Co., 1949, Vol 35, p. 522.
3. Interview with Nan Wood Graham, November, 1982.
4. Ruth Finley, OLD PATCHWORK QUILTS, Branford, 1980, p. 131.
5. Interview.
6. Lilian Carlisle, PIECED WORK AND APPLIQUE QUILTS AT SHELBURNE MUSEUM, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, VT, 1957, p. 16.
7. Finley, op. cit., p. 131.
8. Carlisle, op. cit., p. 34.
9. Pieced quilt, Noonday, made by Lydia Wood, c. 1840-1860, in the collection of Edwin Green.
10. Interview with Edwin Green, June, 1982.
11. Pieced quilt, Four-patch, made by Nancy Weaver, c. 1890, in the John B. Turner Collection at the Cedar Rapids Art Center.
12. Interview with Nan Wood Graham, October, 1982.
13. Interview with James Sigmund, June, 1982.
14. Quoted in Joan Liffing-Zug, THIS IS GRANT WOOD COUNTRY, Davenport Municipal Art Gallery, Davenport, Iowa, 1977, p. 27.
15. Edwin Green, "A Grant Wood Sampler," PALIMPSEST, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, January 1972, p. 14.
16. James Dennis, GRANT WOOD, Viking, 1975, p. 247.

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Mrs. Nan Wood Graham of Riverside, California

Mrs. Nadine Larson of Iowa City, Iowa

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Cedar Rapids Art Center, Cedar Rapids, Iowa