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ART IN THE UNIVERSITY

On Monday morning, November 18, 1940, a correspondent from *Life* magazine arrived at the State University of Iowa, now the University of Iowa, to investigate rumors then circulating in New York about the famous Regionalist painter Grant Wood, who had been a professor at the state university since 1934. Did Wood's students create paintings that he signed and passed off as his own? Did Wood rely secretly on photographs because he could not draw? Was the artist's signing of works produced by students, a practice that was de rigueur in a Renaissance workshop, or the use of photographs, common in a commercial art studio, to be deemed unethical in the context of a twentieth-century U.S. research university? *Time's* reporter, Eleanor Welch, questioned both administration officials and Wood's artist and art historian colleagues in Iowa's Department of Art. The magazine had given national exposure to Wood and his fellow Regionalists in countless articles supporting their work. Welch ultimately decided that the evidence in Iowa was insufficient to warrant new coverage, but the controversy that began with her visit continued in Iowa, even after Wood's death less than two years later.¹

Scholars have traced the rumors to which Welch responded and the subsequent scandal to "irrational" and "obsessive" colleagues jealous of Wood's national success.² However, the situation was not, or not only, a passionate, local, personal disagreement, for the issues that roiled the department sprang from the often uncomfortable place that art and art history had achieved only recently in the American university. Iowa had created an anomaly in 1938, when the Princeton-trained art historian Lester Longman combined the Department of Art History and the Department of the Graphic and Plastic Arts into

a single Department of Art. At Iowa and in his role as editor of the College Art Association's journal *Parnassus*, from 1940 to 1941, Longman urged art historians to engage with contemporary art to create, as one editorial put it, "a better American art."³ Although at Iowa Longman brought art historians and artists together, in doing so he foregrounded the contested nature of just what each discipline aimed to teach.

Art history occupied an ambiguous position between the humanities and the arts even among art historians in the United States during the late 1930s. In 1938 the German émigré art historian Erwin Panofsky, in his essay "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," argued that art historians pursued the "*vita contemplativa*," because "to grasp reality we have to detach ourselves from the present."⁴ In contrast, Longman, who belonged to the first generation of American art historians to pursue their PhDs in the United States rather than Germany, was reluctant to distance the discipline from questions of the present.

Instead of allying art history exclusively with the humanities, Longman described two approaches to U.S. education in the 1930s: that of conservatives, who took a long view, assuming students would take "time to absorb the legacy of the past," and that of progressives, who took their inspiration from the philosopher and reformer John Dewey, encouraging students to pursue their own artworks as part of a pragmatic plan to encourage students to learn actively. Conservatives championed a liberal arts education centered on a scientific search for truth; progressives focused on the fine arts to teach a "philosophy of learning by doing." Conservatives intended to preserve "the good in the past" of "European civilization"; progressives aimed "to create a new and unique American culture."⁵ Longman described these polarities in arguing that the discipline of art history might play a unique role as *mediator* between them. In the United States, the Ohio-born, Princeton-trained Longman suggested, art history as an academic discipline could become relevant and strategically powerful by operating between conservatives' search for civilization's truths in traditional academic disciplines (the sciences and humanities) and progressives' focus on building a national culture by engaging in artistic practice.

Longman advocated a uniquely American approach to art history that combined it with the practice of art, but his German colleagues proved skeptical of conscripting history to serve the art and politics of the present. Edgar Breitenbach, for example, critiqued Longman's idea by arguing that combining art and art history represented an American anomaly. Breitenbach pointed out to readers that Europeans, or at least those "accustomed to European universities," felt it odd that "in the majority of American institutions, art history is incorporated in an art department." Breitenbach, who had arrived in the United States in 1937, questioned the wisdom of such an educational structure.⁶ He allied himself with Longman's conservative educators, suggesting that uniting studio art and art history forced an accommodation of history to art-making in the present, so that art history would inevitably evade its responsibility to think through the past. Longman, in contrast, hoped American art history, as a humanistic discipline fundamentally linked to art, could bridge the gap between educational cultures of thinking and doing, solving

the shortcomings of each by combining them. Whereas for Breitenbach America's educational structure prevented art history from flourishing as a liberal art, for Longman that structure had the potential to generate a new, better art and art history in the United States.

Before Longman restructured the department, Grant Wood had been among the most progressive of the Graphic and Plastic Arts faculty. He had joined the university after co-organizing a summer art colony in Stone City, Iowa. There he and other instructors taught students by working alongside them and selling work to local audiences. The federal Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) hired Wood as an Iowa director in 1934, and he also took on a temporary job through the PWAP supervising mural painting at the university with students employed on his mural *When Tillage Begins*. His appointment soon became permanent. As Longman shifted the program away from art academy models of manual training, Wood's classroom pedagogy, based on formal exercises and art sales, began to seem antiquated or even corrupt. The artist responded by questioning whether art historians could ably judge the art of the present.

Responses to Wood's emphasis on a meticulous flat finish and exacting detail—techniques that provoked rumors that he and his students copied projected photographs in 1940—varied. For example, some reviewers praised Wood's 1934 *Dinner for Threshers* (see figure 4), for its accurate account of details; Wood noted proudly that these included shadows under chickens that he had calibrated with a micrometer and astronomical chart. Grant Wood's earliest biographer, Darrell Garwood, however, remarked that in the later 1930s, most critics, finding that Wood's efforts to represent such facts undermined the art's attention to values, described his work as “documentary, tiresome, jejune, irritating, puerile, photographic and mediocre.”⁷

The historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison analyze the “moralization of objectivity,” which I argue was the element of Wood's factual approach that infuriated art historians. Daston and Galison, focusing on scientific images in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, note the layered, contingent, and often negative character of objectivity marshaled to oppose forms of subjectivity deemed dangerous.⁸ Wood, prizing fact in art, associated it with practical, verifiable science, a model of the discipline that historians of science have linked to the increased importance of images produced mechanically, particularly photographs made with a camera.⁹ He opposed that model to one concerned only with idiosyncratic personal expression and virtuosic technique. As Daston and Galison show, the emphasis on objectivity supported a view of the discipline of science predicated on the “plodding reliability of the bourgeois” rather than the imagination of an individual genius. This social ideal translated to the discipline of art explains Wood's focus on painting sales and the artist's integration into the community. Attention to the factual is a constant in his work, and terms from the history of science establish the artist's pursuit as objective, associating artistic work with reliable, repeatable, middle-class production against a view of the modern artist as concerned only with the subjective, avant-garde, and unique.

This view of modernism found a champion in the art historian H. W. Janson, whom Longman hired in 1938. Janson had fled Germany five years earlier and was in the process of completing his PhD at Harvard. Janson's best-selling textbook, *History of Art*, had a profound influence on the teaching of art history in U.S. universities. The book was published in 1962, long after Janson had left Iowa and become a professor at New York University. Janson asserted late in his life, however, that he had learned the purpose of teaching art history during his three years at Iowa. When he was still in Germany and a student of Panofsky, Janson had assumed he would devote his career to educating future art historians. At Iowa, however, he quickly "realized how limited and limiting a view that was."¹⁰ There, Janson recalled, he had taught aspiring artists, not art historians, and had realized that artists and art historians in the twentieth century had become interdependent. The aspiring artists now neither trained in workshops, as they had in the days of Giotto, nor imitated only their teachers; they could choose living or dead artists from across history as their "artistic ancestors."¹¹ Janson argued that art historians had displaced studio teachers and workshop masters—and had become central to the production of art—by introducing them to a variety of possible antecedents in art's history from which they might choose their own styles.

Welch, when she arrived in Iowa City, stepped into this debate about art and art history by sharing the multiple rumors about Wood that were then circulating in New York. They ranged from the suggestion that Wood had been permanently fired by the university to accusations about Wood's teaching methods, particularly his alleged use of photographs and of his students' labor both in the classroom and in the artworks he created in a private studio on campus. University officials were able to squelch quickly the rumors about Wood's employment, which was a matter of university record, but those about his teaching were more difficult to counter. Although Welch never identified the source of the rumors that had brought her to Iowa City, she ultimately confirmed to the university's administrators that the allegations against Wood had come from within the Department of Art.

Various deans and even the university's president called many meetings in an attempt to trace and address the accusations. Objections to Wood's painting and teaching had become pervasive in the small department of around a dozen faculty following the artist's leave of absence for a national lecture tour in fall of 1940. Wood had been greeted as an expert by enthusiastic audiences across the country and returned to Iowa convinced that in light of his art's popularity he should lead the department. Within the university context, his colleagues countered that popularity did not indicate artistic importance (or administrative aptitude). In response to Welch's visit, for example, Longman reported to university administrators that when he had conducted a poll of members of the department, he found agreement that Wood was not one of the nation's leading artists.¹²

Longman, under pressure from university administrators who valued Wood's national fame and his popularity in Iowa, wrote a letter to Wood, framing it as an apology though in fact he neither apologized nor acquiesced. He explained that he viewed differences of

opinion in the department as valuable and objected to the idea that “all the faculty should be expected to agree.” At issue for Longman in the debate was the strength of the university over a “mere” institute of art, and from his perspective an emphasis on agreement or the dominance of the department by one faculty member was “prejudicial to the principles of liberal education still possible in democratic America.”¹³ Although the questions that roiled the Department of Art belonged to a seemingly local historical squabble, the University of Iowa’s influence and the questions Welch’s visit raised about art—who can judge it, where it comes from, how to teach it, why it matters (especially at a state university)—remain unresolved.

To describe the pedagogical contests that unfolded in Iowa, part I includes a chapter on Wood’s Stone City colony as a Regionalist experiment, a chapter on the controversy at the University of Iowa focusing on the multivalent role of photography, and a chapter that considers the afterlife Welch’s investigation had in the reception of Regionalism, in particular the impact of several articles Janson wrote after Wood’s death linking Regionalism formally to German painting and insinuating that fascist aesthetics underlay its objectivity.