

Grant Wood: a Study in American Art and Culture

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Book Notices

Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture, by James M. Dennis. Foreword by Karal Ann Marling. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986. Revised edition. 256 pp. 190 black-and-white plates, 13 color plates, notes, index. \$55.00 cloth.

When Dennis's work appeared in 1975, it was the first scholarly monograph on Grant Wood and the first time his art and philosophy had been taken seriously in a major academic publication. Dennis's argument for Wood as a cultural interpreter was and has remained provocative and worthwhile. Since then, a number of works about Wood and Regionalism have appeared, most notably Wanda Corn's *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision* (1983), but none have replaced Dennis's pioneering study as the most thorough and reliable source on the artist's career.

This edition must be, at least in part, a response to the new and expanded audience for Wood's art. There are no substantial changes in the text or the illustrations, which are, as in the first edition, of uneven quality. The main change is the addition of a new introduction. Dennis continues to defend Wood's art against critics like Hilton Kramer who consider it "trash" and not worthy of serious scholarly examination, an opinion offered about the 1983 exhibition organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art. On the other hand, Dennis cannot accept the interpretation of Wood as a satirist or a witty commentator on American, especially midwestern, cultural illusions. Dennis continues to assert that—apart from its considerable artistic quality—Wood's work moves beyond the comic and the regional into the realm of cultural myth on a fairly sophisticated and informed level. Another addition is a new foreword by Karal Ann Marling, a scholar of the depression who has discussed some of the satirical aspects of Wood's work.

The book jacket states that there is an "updated bibliography." In fact, there is no bibliography at all (nor was there in the first edition). In a subject which has received so much new attention, reinterpretation, and reevaluation, that is a serious omission.

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