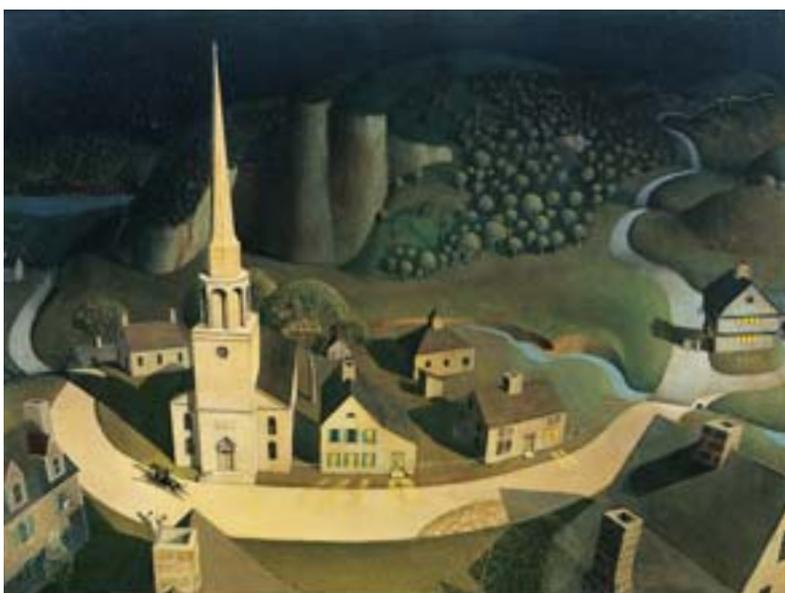


The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere, 1931

In *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, the Midwestern painter Grant Wood casts a magical spell on a familiar American story. As scholar Wanda Corn has recounted, as a child, Wood had been captivated by the tale of Revere's journey through the night from Boston to Lexington (the site of the opening skirmish of the Revolutionary War) to warn the patriots of the British advance. The precise details of this historical event would have been indistinct, or perhaps unknown, to Wood since, like most Americans of his day, he had learned the legend from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, published in 1863:

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

Wood was enchanted by the notion of a local hero bearing urgent news, raising the alarm, and consequently attaining immortality. He liked to imagine himself on just such a mission in his home state of Iowa, galloping from farm to farm to warn his neighbors of an impending tornado—"and being handsomely praised when the storm was over and everyone had been saved." Wood never had the opportunity to become that sort of hero, but he did become immortal through his famous work *American Gothic* (1930)—painted just a year before he completed *The Midnight Ride*—which dignifies a homely country couple on an ordinary Iowa farm.



3-A Grant Wood (1892–1942), *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, 1931. Oil on Masonite, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1950 (50.117). Photograph © 1988 The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art © Estate of Grant Wood / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

Although he had trained as an artist, Wood was a self-consciously "primitive" painter who emulated the unpretentious, unschooled manner of American folk artists. This straightforward approach rejects any detail or artifice that might divert attention from the principal subject. *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* goes one step further to capture a child's point of view. A bird's-eye perspective (like the view from an airplane) allows us to survey a vast sweep of countryside and gives the New England village the ordered clarity of a town made of toys: the country church and surrounding houses are simple geometric shapes, as though constructed of building blocks; the trees are crowned with perfect green spheres, like those a child would try to draw. Wood makes no attempt to be either historically correct—the windows of the houses, for instance, are far too bright to be lit by candles—or scientifically accurate: the moonlight illuminating the foreground scene is preternaturally brilliant, casting long, deep shadows on the road like a spotlight focused on the main event. The rolling landscape beyond is left sleeping in a darkness that is broken only by tiny glimmers from faraway windows. To complete this evocation of a childhood dream, Wood whimsically portrays Paul Revere's trusty steed—"flying fearless and fleet," in Longfellow's words—as a rocking horse.

Wanda Corn points out that some who saw this playful painting assumed Wood was making fun of a beloved American legend, when in fact his intention was just the opposite. His aim, he said, was to save those "bits of American folklore that are too good to lose." This preservationist tendency was part of his greater scheme to forge a national identity, which he believed could be created through art as well as history. Wood's conviction is supported by the longevity of the legend preserved in Longfellow's lines:

Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

Wood's mission took on added urgency during the Great Depression, when *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* was painted. The image of the United States as a young and vibrant nation was beginning to lose its luster; at the same time, American art was losing its traditional association with ordinary life as younger artists exchanged regional subjects and traditions for the more cosmopolitan, largely abstract styles emerging from Paris and New York. Grant Wood struggled against that tide, committed to his dream of a truly American art that would link the present to the past and preserve all the stories that made up the American heritage.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this painting and observe its many details.

teaching activities

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M | S

Have each student write a list of at least five different objects they see in the painting. Let them point out what they see to their classmates.

E | M | S

Have students locate Paul Revere on the horse. Ask where he seems to be going and where he has been.

E | M | S

How did the artist show that Revere was on an urgent mission?

He leans forward as his horse's tail and legs stretch out in a gallop.

E | M | S

Have students look at the painting with their eyes squinted. What do they see first? *They probably will see the church.*

How did the artist emphasize the church? *It is large and its brightness contrasts with the dark background.*

M | S

Ask students to describe how Wood guides them through the story in this picture. Have them follow the road through the scene beginning from the distant lights in the upper right.

INTERPRET

E | M

Encourage students to guess what time of night this might be. What clues has Wood given us? *The dark sky, deep shadows, muted background colors, lights in the houses, and people in white night clothes suggest that it is late at night.*

E | M

Ask what the biggest light source in this scene is. *They will probably say "the moon."*

Where is it in the sky? *It is located a little to the right.*

Why do students think this? *The shadows are on the left of objects.*

E | M | S

Ask students if they have ever seen moonlight this bright. Does it seem natural? Why or why not? What other light in this painting seems unusual for an eighteenth-century village?

The house lights are a little too bright for candlelight, and more like yet-to-be-invented electric lights.

E | M | S

Encourage students to guess what some of the buildings are. *One example is the small building that might be an outhouse (this was before indoor plumbing) that is in front of a schoolhouse topped with a cupola.*

M | S

If students have studied New England, ask them how this scene is typical of a New England village.

The land is hilly with a river near the town. Houses with chimneys cluster around a white church with a tall steeple.

M | S

Ask students where someone might stand to view this scene from this angle.

Most likely one would take a position above the town, maybe on a high hill or even on a tall building.

Discuss what Wood implies about this scene by painting it from this angle.

He suggests that it is a story with a feeling of fantasy. We're looking down on the scene as though we were flying over it in a dream or as though it were a toy village.

M | S

What else makes this village seem not quite real — more like a stage set?

Students might notice that the lighting seems like a spotlight. Some may notice the lack of details; everything is simplified or slightly stylized to look like a perfect village — even most of the trees are round with smooth edges.

S

Have students explain why they think this is or is not an appropriate way to depict this important American legend.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections:

Revolutionary War; importance of Boston in colonial and Revolutionary times

Historical Figures: Paul Revere; King George III; Patrick Henry; John Adams; Samuel Adams

Geography:

colonial America
Literary Connections and Primary Documents: "Paul Revere's Ride," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (elementary); "The Ride of Tench Tilghman," Clinton Scollard (middle,

secondary); "The Concord Hymn," Ralph Waldo Emerson (middle, secondary)

Arts: perspective; Regionalism