

UI art colony helps spread the good news of Grant Wood



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(Photo: David Scrivner / Iowa City Press-Citizen)

Although "American Gothic" remains Grant Wood's best-known painting, the artist's largest and most time-consuming masterpiece just might be the Iowa City home he lived in and extensively restored toward the end of his life.

And through the recent long-term leasing of a group of four houses bordering the 19th-century, brick, Italianate-style home at 1142 E. Court St., the University of Iowa and the Iowa Board of Regents are moving forward with the [Grant Wood Art Colony](http://www.art.uiowa.edu/grant-wood-art-colony) (<http://www.art.uiowa.edu/grant-wood-art-colony>) in Iowa City — and thus strengthening their connection to one of the most famous UI faculty members of all time.

"It's not just a house; it was a really creative project for (Wood)," said Joni Kinsey, professor in UI's School of Art and Art History. "He was really interested in cultivating the culture of the Midwest ... everything from agriculture, to science, to the arts and humanities. He wanted his home to be used as a center for that."

Cultivating Midwest culture

It was Wood's broader vision for the house he nicknamed "1142" that the home's current owner, local lawyer Jim Hayes, hoped to expand when, back in the early 2000s, he signed a gift agreement promising to bequeath the property to UI upon his death. Under Hayes' ownership, the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978 and named an Iowa City landmark in 1996.

The seven years that Wood lived in 1142 represents the smallest ownership period in the house's 147-year history. Yet the work Wood put into restoring the property — combined with the long list of artists, scholars, performers and politicians he hosted between 1935 and his death in 1942 — has made the house as much a work of art as any of the paintings, sculptures, lithographs or drawings Wood created there.

"It is one of the more historic homes in Iowa City, but certainly one of the most cared-for homes in Iowa City," UI's interim senior vice president, Rod Lehnertz, told the regents' Property and Facilities Committee during a June 4 meeting in Ames. "We see it as an opportunity for multiple university advancement events, and we look forward to the opportunity to host the regents to come and see the home, tour the home and enjoy it."

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Wood offered his home as temporary lodging for painters such as Thomas Hart Benton, poets such as Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost, politicians such as former U.S. Vice President Henry Wallace and performers such as actor Edward G. Robinson and singer Burl Ives. Hayes wanted to ensure the guest list would expand to include 21st-century — and eventually 22nd-century — artists, scholars, politicians and performers who make their way to Iowa City for a few days.

"The gift agreement is very specific about the purpose of the house and the use of 1142," Hayes said in a recent interview. "It is my wish and intention that it be a historic center, a center of creativity, not a period museum. ... That it be a living place of activity of people talking and doing things and meeting one another. That's what it is now, and that's what I'd like it to continue to be."

Hayes also had begun buying up several early-1900s-era homes along Burlington Street adjacent to Wood's former home. At first, it just was to provide parking access to the carriage house on the property — which Hayes himself had rented for years from the previous owner before buying the property in 1975.

When he had collected four parcels — 1205, 1211, 1131 and 1137 E. Burlington St. — Hayes expanded his posthumous vision for the house to include a longer-term, rotating community of artists modeled after the colonies that Wood tried to establish — with varying degrees of success — in Cedar Rapids and Stone City.

Hayes, now 77, also started wondering at the time: "Why should this project wait until I'm dead?"

Growing an art colony

For the past four years, Hayes has been working with UI artists and administrators to lease two of the four houses as the Grant Wood Art Colony — providing an academic year's worth of lodging and a visiting professorship to between one and three fellows annually.

Since 2011, the colony has been placed under a number of administrative umbrellas, including the School of Art and Art History, the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies and the Division of Performing Arts. It currently falls under UI's Office of Outreach and Engagement, with a focus on getting the visiting

The fellows will continue to work with the UI Museum of Art and other groups to travel the state and explain Wood's importance to the UI campus and the state, said Linda Snetselaar, UI vice president for outreach and engagement.

The regents recently approved a new, 20-year lease between UI and Hayes for all four parcels. The agreement, according to UI officials, will allow the university to begin some more long-term development of the properties — including the construction of a decorative fence around the parcels to provide a more campus-like feel.

"The vision by Jim Hayes and by supporters of Grant Wood's work and by the School of Art and Art History to establish the Grant Wood (Art) Colony is visionary and I think difference-making," Lehnertz told the regents.

Only two of the Burlington Street houses are currently in use, and UI will continue to sublet the other two until needed, according to regent documents.

"The concept has always been that all four houses would be used for the colony, with as many as seven or eight fellows," Hayes said. "It's early in the process. So we have three."

'Just the beginning'

The four houses are linked to Wood's Court Street home historically in that the land was all part of the original plot owned by Nicholas Oakes, the brickmaker who built the home in 1868. Constructed between 1900 and 1910, three of the houses since have been divided into duplexes, while 1131 — which also serves as the colony's central office — remains a single-family dwelling.

With last year's three fellows having already left, the houses used by the colony will be largely empty for the summer. But the colony's recently hired director, Maura Pilcher, will be preparing them for the crop of fellows for the 2015-16 school year: printmaker [Terry Conrad](http://cargocollective.com/terryjamesconrad) (<http://cargocollective.com/terryjamesconrad>), painter [Neal Rock](http://www.nealrock.com/) (<http://www.nealrock.com/>) and musician [Christopher Jette](http://www.cj.lovelyweather.com/) (<http://www.cj.lovelyweather.com/>).

Each fellow is given academic standing as visiting assistant professors rather than adjuncts, Pilcher said. The title and teaching responsibility adds an impressive line to fellows' resume and makes it more likely that they will be hired on for similar jobs later.

"It's basically the equivalent of a post-doc in the arts," Pilcher said.

Artist [Tyler Starr](http://www.tylerstarr.com/) (<http://www.tylerstarr.com/>), for example, noted that his 2011-12 fellowship with the colony gave him the teaching and outreach experience needed to secure his current position as an assistant professor of Art at Davidson College in North Carolina. It also allowed him, like Wood, to work through his artistic experiences abroad in a quintessentially American setting.

"I developed an affinity with Grant Wood in the sense that he had a transformative experience in Paris where he was exposed to Modernist approaches to making art, which he then used to recalculate his own studio practice while back in Iowa in an attempt to formulate a uniquely 'American' approach to making art," Starr wrote in a June 18 email while conducting research in Japan.

Although the colony is still in a state of evolution, UI's Kinsey sees it well positioned to benefit artists and scholars throughout the nation and globe — especially in terms of the biennial symposium hosted by the colony.

"This is just the beginning," said Kinsey, who also serves on the colony's national board. "This has the potential to grow into something really significant. Not just for the university, but for all the people of Iowa and beyond."

With the long-term lease in place, Hayes said, the separated parcels will be well-merged into a single campus by the time UI takes full possession of the property upon his death.

"And for me to see it all before I'm dead," Hayes said, "that's kind of fun."

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Past, future fellows

Here is a list of past, present and future fellows of the Grant Wood Art Colony overseen by the University of Iowa:

Spring 2011

•**Laura Capp**, studio: <http://pentameterpress.com>.

•**Mariangeles Soto-Diaz**, teaching: www.sotodiaz.com.

•**Tyler Starr**, teaching: www.tylerstarr.com.

2012-13

•**Jeremy Lundquist**, printmaking: www.drawnlots.com/jeremy.html.

•**Hartmut Austen**, painting: www.hartmutausten.com.

2013-14

•**Eric Sall**, painting: <http://ericallpaintings.blogspot.com>.

•**Kristina Paabus**, printmaking: <http://kristinapaabus.com/home.html>.

•**Esther Baker-Tarpage**, performance: www.btdanceproject.com.

2014-15

•**Careena Melia**, performance: www.careenamelia.com.

•**Michele Lauriat**, painting: www.michelelauriat.com.

•**Serhat Tanyolacar**, printmaking: www.serhattanyolacar.com.

2015-16

•**Terry Conrad**, printmaking: <http://cargocollective.com/terryjamesconrad>.

•**Neal Rock**, painting/drawing: www.nealrock.com.

•**Christopher Jette**, music: www.cj.lovelyweather.com.

Art and controversy

Art often attracts controversy, and during the 2014-15 school year, the Grant Wood Art Colony made national news when one of its fellows, Serhat Tanyolacar, displayed a large, KKK-effigy on the University of Iowa's Pentacrest.

Tanyolacar has said repeatedly ([/story/news/local/2015/02/24/kkk-sculpture-part-iowa-city-public-art-forum/23944767/](http://story/news/local/2015/02/24/kkk-sculpture-part-iowa-city-public-art-forum/23944767/)) that he intended the unauthorized display of his sculpture on Dec. 5, 2014, to highlight and critique the ongoing nature of racial violence in the U.S. But some members of the UI community — some of whom Tanyolacar had intended to express solidarity with — found the sculpture to be ill-conceived, at best, and an active threat against them, at worst.

UI officials ([/story/news/local/2015/02/01/university-iowa-pentacrest-sculpture-serhat-tanyolacar-student-life-tom-rocklin/22703181/](http://story/news/local/2015/02/01/university-iowa-pentacrest-sculpture-serhat-tanyolacar-student-life-tom-rocklin/22703181/)) asked Tanyolacar to remove the display because he had not received the proper permission for such a display on the campus's most recognizable public space.

"Art is fraught with controversy, but it provides and prompts us to consider what it is that is provocative," said Joni Kinsey, a professor in the UI School of Art and Art History and a member of the board for the Grant Wood Art Colony. "It can be pleasant and beautiful, but it doesn't have to be. ... Good art should always make us think."

Kinsey said the display sparked campus and community-wide discussions about race and a "deep conversation about how art can and should function."

"To me, there shouldn't have been a controversy," said Jim Hayes, board member and owner of the property that houses the colony. "Everyone is very supportive of Serhat. It was a beautiful piece of art and had a lot of emotion and a lot of message. I think that Serhat probably could have explained it a little better ahead of time, ... but if you have an ounce of understanding and empathy, you would see what he intended it to be."

When asked how officials might address any future controversies sparked by visiting artists, UI Vice President of Outreach and Engagement Linda

"I think that we care deeply about art and the expression of ideas in art," said Snetselaar, whose office oversees the colony. "But we also care very much about students on our campus and the impression that they might take away from art."

— Jeff Charis-Carlson

Wood's house and colony

Grant Wood's own experiment with the Stone City Arts Colony was interrupted in 1934, when he was offered a temporary position working and teaching in Iowa City as director of a New Deal Public Works of Art Program. That temporary position led to an offer of serving as an associate professor of fine arts at UI.

Wood bought the Court Street property in 1935, shortly after his marriage to Sara Sherman Moxon. The couple divorced four years later, but Wood remained in the house until he died from pancreatic cancer in 1942. The house was sold later that year to Dr. Pauline Moore and her husband Ed Miltner, who sold it to local lawyer Jim Hayes 33 years later.

The most familiar of Wood's works completed on the 1142 property is the 1939 painting "Parson Weems' Fable." The image depicts the apocryphal story of a young George Washington — whose face looks straight off a \$1 bill — admitting to the chopping down of a perfectly rounded cherry tree. The brick home in the background, many art historians have pointed out, draws significant inspiration from the Court Street house.

Terms of the lease

Under a 20-year lease recently approved by the Iowa Board of Regents, the University of Iowa will lease four houses along East Burlington Street (1131, 1137, 1205 and 1211) for use by the Grant Wood Art Colony. The university will pay a base rate of \$4,635 per month, increasing at 2 percent annually. UI also would be responsible for all utilities, property taxes, insurance, maintenance and upkeep on the homes.

The university also agrees to pay an additional \$416 per month as reimbursement for the costs of HVAC upgrades and repairs. The additional payment would continue until the final payment in July 2019. The money will come from the rental income received from sub-tenants of the property.

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