

THE COVER drawing of Wanda Gág's classic book, Millions of Cats, has been familiar to children and their parents for more than a quarter of a century

Wanda Gág

The Bite of the Picture Book

Richard W. Cox

FOR SEVERAL decades the drawings, prints, and books of Wanda Gág of New Ulm, Minnesota, have charmed children and adults on both sides of the Atlantic. Her lithographs of swaying railroad stations and skyscrapers caught the fancy of sophisticated art critics in the 1920s. Her picture books captured the verve of animal and human life as few illustrated volumes have done before or since. Such Gág works as *Millions of Cats*, *Snippy and Snappy*, *The Funny Thing*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* offered some of the normal fare of children's literature: a love of nature, celebration of youth, wit and whimsy, and cuddly creatures. The infectious cadence of the first-named and most famous has also left parents and children chanting "hundreds of cats,

thousands of cats, and millions and billions and trillions of cats" at the most unexpected moments.

On the strength of her first "one man" show at the Weyhe Gallery in New York City in 1926, Miss Gág secured a place in the art world at a time when many artists were beginning to face neglect as depression swept America.¹ Her ascent from poverty in rural Minnesota to international fame was akin to something out of the pages of a Horatio Alger novel — a testimony to the opportunity America sometimes provided immigrant families.

But this climb to success was an arduous one, a struggle that left a mark on her personality and art heretofore not widely appreciated. Underlying the charming tales of furry cats and wicked witches was an earnest regard for the underdog and a reverence for the working class. The artist's personal experience with economic hard times, her education in realist literature, and her brush with left-wing intellectuals in Minnesota and New York imparted a consciousness that at least indirectly affected her art. Her drawings, prints, and children's books of the 1920–40 era reveal a strong undercurrent of social concern, a rejection of easy sentiment, and even a disenchantment with American values and institutions. This can be gleaned from her own remarkable diary covering her student years in Minnesota (1908–17), from the words of other artists who knew her

¹ See Milton Brown, *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1955). John Sloan once remarked that the depression was not such a major event for artists since they had been in a depressed state since World War I. Richard W. Cox interview with Helen Farr Sloan, wife of John Sloan, June 15, 1970.

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ANTON GÁG'S self-portrait (1903) is at far left. Also a commercial photographer, he probably took the picture of his family at left in about 1906. In the front row are Howard, Asta, and Tussy. In the back are Stella, Dehli, and Wanda. Flavia, the youngest, was not yet born.

in Minnesota and New York, and by comparing her prints and illustrations with the general course of American art between the two world wars.²

From her family — especially her parents, Anton and Elisabeth Biebl (Lissi) Gág — Wanda derived a compassion for the less fortunate. In order to escape the tyranny of police and others in nineteenth-century Bohemia, young Anton Gág immigrated with his family in 1872 to New Ulm, already populated with other Austrian-German settlers. Wanda, born in 1893, was the oldest of a family of six girls and one boy. Forced by family responsibilities to forego the formal art education he wanted, Anton became a painter-decorator by trade, a man remembered for his generosity and his compassion for the rights of all men. Employers took advantage of his generosity, getting him to do major projects for a "house painter's pay."³

At least two illustrations of her parents' humanitarianism remained firm in Wanda's memory. Anton's major art commission was an enormous mural, now hanging in the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul, depicting the Sioux attack on New Ulm on August 23, 1862, during the Indian war of that year. His portrayal of attacking Sioux on the fringe of burning New Ulm was done in 1893 but, according to Wanda, did not represent a personal contempt for American Indians that was so pervasive before and at the turn of the century. "I have often wondered with what mixed emotions Papa must have made these pictures," wrote Wanda. "Naturally he sympathized with the pioneers who through no fault of their own had been so brutally attacked, and yet I know that he loved the Indians also and felt they had been wronged." As for Lissi Gág, she gained local notoriety for giving breakfast in her home to wandering gypsies, an act of charity that did not endear the Gág family to other members of the New Ulm community.⁴

Throughout her diary Wanda intimates that she benefited from a more tolerant and cosmopolitan upbringing

than the average New Ulm youngster at the turn of the century. Although the Gágs struggled to make ends meet (decorating and painting assignments were not plentiful for Anton), they did not resist Wanda in her choice of art as a career. In fact, Anton championed her future in art and on his deathbed said faintly, "Was der Papa nicht thun konnt', muss die Wanda halt fertig machen" ("What papa couldn't do, Wanda will have to finish").⁵

After she completed high school, Wanda would periodically be forced by the long arm of poverty to

² The Gág literature is appreciative and mostly biographical. Little analytical evaluation of her art and connection to American culture has yet appeared. Alma Scott's biography, *Wanda Gág: The Story of an Artist* (Minneapolis, 1949), published shortly after Wanda's untimely death in 1946, traces her childhood and adulthood but does not try to link her to the various political and art movements afoot in America after World War I, a major omission since she was involved with these developments to some extent. Without such a study, it is impossible to understand her concern for human values that emerges in her work. As with anyone interested in Miss Gág, Mrs. Scott's primary source, apart from her close friendship with the author herself, was Wanda's own diary, covering her school girl years in New Ulm and art school period in the Twin Cities. See Wanda Gág, *Growing Pains. Diaries and Drawings for the Years 1905-1917* (New York, 1940). The best introduction to the general course of American art during Wanda's formative years is Brown, *American Painting*.

³ Gág, *Growing Pains*, xviii; Scott, *Gág*, 4-5, 48-50 (quote). Local churches were apparently the ones — "the large impersonal organizations which might have paid well" — that most often abused Anton Gág's trusting nature.

⁴ Scott, *Gág*, 23. As Mrs. Scott recounts the incident in her book (p. 27): "One day . . . Mrs. Gág gave breakfast to a gypsy mother and baby, setting the gypsy baby in Wanda's high chair and feeding it some of the cereal and warm milk that had been prepared for Wanda's own breakfast. Such actions were looked upon askance in the community, but they were examples that bred in Wanda her love for people of all races and creeds."

⁵ Gág, *Growing Pains*, xix.

interrupt her art career to help support her mother, brother, and five sisters.⁶ Yet the family always understood that Wanda would someday have to fulfill her destiny as a great artist.

Wanda had mixed feelings about New Ulm itself. She loved the town's quaint buildings and surrounding hilly landscape overlooking the Minnesota River. She had numerous school friends and was fiercely loyal to her extended family throughout her life. But she resented those businessmen she felt exploited her father, was uncomfortable in what she considered the Philistine atmosphere of New Ulm, and plainly scorned the "stupid dolts" in prominent positions in the town. She came to believe that provincialism had disfigured New Ulm's character.⁷ Much of her resentment of New Ulm turned on the issue of her decision to become an artist, which she believed the townspeople considered frivolous. Many friends of the Gág family thought it much more sensible for a girl of Wanda's intelligence to teach school or work in a local store than to rush to the big city to draw and paint, especially in the light of the insolvency Anton's passion for art had brought to the Gágs. Gossip that she was being financed in her art studies by men with questionable motives reached Wanda in the Twin Cities in 1914 and 1915, bringing tear stains to her diary entries.⁸

⁶ The Gág family's financial troubles compelled Wanda to teach school upon graduation from high school and forced her into commercial art (at least part-time) until the mid-1920s. Her father and mother died in 1908 and 1916 respectively, and Wanda was a major source of support for the family. See Scott, *Gág*, 67-97, 139-55; *Gág, Growing Pains*, 128-60.

⁷ *Gág, Growing Pains*, 1-80. Scott, *Gág*, 48-50, 190. Wanda termed those she disliked and considered insensitive and boorish "stupid dolts of a Bauer [farmer or peasant]."

⁸ *Gág, Growing Pains*, 238-39, 273-74, 357. Speaking of certain people in New Ulm who questioned the worth of her attending art school, Wanda wrote in September, 1914 (p. 274): "They (people) have been in a most terrible suspense all the time for fear that I wouldn't get to the point where I would earn money. They expect me to make a great deal of money and, sort of along the side, to become famous. And when I want neither fame nor money. Ding it, ding it, ding it. I wish I had iron to bite or wood to gnaw or logs to chop. I know I need the money but I can't sit here serenely listening while they lose sight of the — *the thing* [meaning her inner compulsion to create]."

"I am afraid I shall disappoint them. If I were to become a popular magazine illustrator they would undoubtedly say, 'Wanda has made good,' whereas if I turn my art over to Life and win no fame, they will say, 'She had talent but she didn't use it in the right way.'"

⁹ *Gág, Growing Pains*, 239, 244, 250, 252-53, 258, 305-07. Part of Wanda's disenchantment with New Ulm was simply her first enthusiasm for St. Paul and Minneapolis, where the opera, symphony, ballet, theater, and the University of Minnesota made the events in her native town seem dull by comparison.

¹⁰ *Gág, Growing Pains*, 180, 194-96 (quote p. 195).

¹¹ Scott, *Gág*, 109

After leaving New Ulm, Wanda could never again participate wholeheartedly in the ice cream social and quilting bee scene as was expected of her when she returned during holidays.⁹ Not one to pick at old sores, Wanda could not, nevertheless, resist some satire of backwoods provincialism in her 1930 lithograph, "Grandma's Parlor." Even before she first left, Wanda found it increasingly difficult to talk freely to those friends who still lived in New Ulm. When the opportunity finally came in 1913 for her to enter art school, she lost no time taking the train to the Twin Cities.

WANDA GÁG entered the St. Paul School of Art as a restless, ambitious, socially concerned woman of twenty. She had little insight into the actual workings of the rapidly changing modern urban society that existed just before World War I. She was frightened and naïve as she unpacked her bags at the St. Paul YWCA. When she departed for New York City five years later, she was wiser to the larger social and political issues of America, as well as to the styles of the great modern art masters.

It was not her art classes that stirred Wanda's deeper interests. The rigid instruction of the St. Paul School of Art and the Minneapolis School of Art (which she entered in 1914) frequently left her despondent. Hours of drawing before classical casts and evenings spent drawing such subjects as "The Miser" violated her concept of the "inspired artist." She preferred to wait for drawing moods, acting not upon outside ignition but from her own "inner necessity." Life without a drawing mood is miserable, miserable, miserable," she wrote in her diary one evening. "I am trying to entice, to lure, and to re-capture it, but of course it's all in vain. Drawing moods, delicious tyrants as they are when they let me draw, are cruelly tyrannical when they don't let me see things so that I want to draw them, and they cannot be brought by human aid."¹⁰ To their credit, St. Paul art teachers tolerated, if they did not like, this trait in Wanda. One of them, Hilma Berglund, said that "she was considered a somewhat rebellious student in those days. She often disagreed with her instructors. Time has, of course, proven her right, but at the time many of her views seemed radical."¹¹

Only Wanda's contacts outside the classrooms kept her from abandoning the academies. Her friend, Armand Emraad, and then artist Adolf Dehn and members of the John Ruskin Club, sustained her through these years. Emraad, four years her senior, a University of Minnesota student and self-styled sophisticate, was Wanda's mentor into cosmopolitan life. Her diary covering the years spent in the Twin Cities is dotted with romantic allusions to Armand, some plainly "girlish gush-and-crush." Wanda may not have realized it at the time, but Armand's intellectual influence was more crucial. With her eager consent, he acquainted her with the



WANDA as
an art student
in 1916 or 1917

opera, symphony, ballet, and theater and urged her to read the works of Ibsen, Hugo, Shaw, Tolstoy, and Whitman. Then he discussed all these cultural monuments with her over Italian dinners in Cedar Avenue restaurants. All this so excited Wanda that she frequently stayed up late after dates with Armand to discuss "love, humanity, justice and similar things" with friends at the YWCA.¹²

Armand also introduced an awed Wanda to the heady company of his university friends — poets, piano players, and the like. Suffering under the arid curriculum of the academy, Wanda wrote in her diary: "[Armand] also said again that I ought to go to college. I told him that I intended to some time, whereupon he said 'and I suppose in the meantime it's up to your friends to hand over as much of the University as they can' and I said 'Yes.'" And a few days later she wrote: "I almost bawled once when I thought of how badly I wanted and needed the University."¹³ Still, she stayed on at the St. Paul School of Art, realizing the benefits of an art degree to her career.

What Armand did not provide in intellectual nourishment, the John Ruskin Club did. The brain child of a wealthy Minneapolis art student and patron, Marietta Fournier, the John Ruskin Club was one bit of proof that the art schools failed to satisfy their students' thirst for a broader education. Mrs. Fournier was an ardent socialist and attracted a small coterie of free-thinking artists, social workers, and various dissenters into her home once a week for "discussion and argumentation."¹⁴

Members debated the merits of abstract art, the artist's social responsibilities, religion, women's suffrage, realist literature, and political philosophy. Wanda sparkled at the club, arguing vehemently, if not always clearly, on the various issues. At times the discussion became

hot, and Wanda could not easily brush aside her feelings after meetings adjourned: People remember her continuing arguments on streetcars and back at the YWCA. But the sessions at Mrs. Fournier's also charged Wanda's flagging spirits ("saved my life"), opened her eyes to new ideas, and probably helped take her mind off Armand Emraad, who was coming around less frequently after 1915.¹⁵

Wanda also was stimulated by her conversations (arguments is probably a better term) with another young art student and refugee from a small Minnesota town — Adolf Dehn. Cynical and irrepressible, Dehn played devil's advocate with Wanda, challenging her Victorian morals and caution toward issues of religion and politics. Dehn also came from impoverished circumstances, but his hardships seemed to embitter him against the whole grain of American civilization. In John Ruskin meetings and on walks with Wanda to Loring Park and Lake of the Isles in Minneapolis, Dehn railed against big business, organized religion, government, and the art establishment.¹⁶ Wanda's reaction against the American powers-that-be was not so knee-jerk. (By 1920, Dehn had already become an active social-commentary artist who satirized bankers, nuns, corrupt politicians, art dealers, and industrial pollution, while Wanda would always tip-toe gingerly about this form of art.)

Still, Dehn's iconoclasm and flair excited Wanda, and he certainly made her more politically conscious. They roamed St. Paul and Minneapolis together in search of

¹² Wanda liked to think of her relationship with Armand as platonic but indicated on several occasions that she hoped it would become more than that. See Gág, *Growing Pains*, xvii ("gush" quote), 198–201, 268–70, 321–22, 349, 352–53, 407–08, 409, 421, 438; Scott, *Gág*, 131–32.

¹³ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 198, 199 (quotes).

¹⁴ This was the catchword for the John Ruskin Club, as Adolf Dehn remembered it. Richard W. Cox interview with Virginia Dehn, Adolf's wife, June 17, 1970. Wanda said the official purpose of the John Ruskin Club, formed in February, 1915, was to provide a forum for "Rambles thru Art, Science and Literature." See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 362–63.

¹⁵ Scott, *Gág*, 127–28; Gág, *Growing Pains*, 363 (quote).

¹⁶ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 369, 375–429, 436–37, 439, 441–45, 447, 449, 457–59. Much of the information about Dehn's and Wanda's views and political activities during this period and later in New York City is from the author's interviews with Virginia Dehn on June 17, 1970, and with Dehn's two sisters, Viola Dehn Tiala and Olivia Dehn Mitchell, on June 3, 1975, and June 14, 1975, respectively. Letters from Dehn to his mother, Emilie Haas Dehn, and his two sisters also frequently mention meetings, political activities, views (often harsh, even bitter), and similar information. Examples are Dehn to Emilie Dehn, October 18, 1917, May 26, 1919, November 13, 1919, July 20, 1920; Dehn to his sister Viola, December 7 and 22, 1917; letters all owned by Olivia Dehn Mitchell, Woodstock, New York. See also *The Liberator* (1918–24) and *New Masses* (1926–48) during these years for an expression of Dehn's views in his art and cartoons.



WANDA AND ADOLF Dehn both became artists for the University of Minnesota humor magazine, *The Minneha*. The university did not have its own art department at the time, so artists were recruited from the Minneapolis School of Art. The February, 1916, issue (left) carried Wanda's first published cover. Another of her drawings, in the November, 1915, issue, is also shown.

causes, discussing art, literature, politics, and love. They criticized social status and the general ostentation of the leisure class. Wanda buoyed Dehn's spirits and tried to convince him that he would someday be solvent enough to devote his time to art for the good of the socialist movement.¹⁷

In 1916 Wanda and Adolf attended a peace rally (where few women were present) in Minneapolis, and she went into deep depression upon learning that he might soon be conscripted into the army. Wanda was reluctant to discuss her views on the war, possibly fearing that her pacifist convictions would be misconstrued as pro-Germanism because of her ethnic background. By 1916 she and Dehn were already avid readers of *The Masses*, the celebrated Greenwich Village socialist jour-

¹⁷ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 413-14, 454. Dehn grew up in Waterville, Minnesota, went to New York in 1917, spent most of the 1920s in Europe, and contributed sharp satirical drawings to radical magazines in the 1920s. For a fuller account of Dehn after he left Minnesota, see Mary Anne Guita, 22 *Famous Painters and Illustrators Tell How They Work*, 44-53 (New York, 1964); Carl Zigrosser, *The Artist in America: Twenty-Four Close-ups of Contemporary Printmakers*, 14-23 (New York, 1942).

¹⁸ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 271, 458, 459. One of the best accounts of the sedition trial of the editors of *The Masses* is by Floyd Dell, "The Story of the Trial," in *The Liberator*, June, 1918, p. 7-18.

¹⁹ Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, v-x, 7, 43, 73, 80, 140f (Philadelphia, 1923); Brown, *American Painting*, 9-14.



FRIENDS and fellow students at the Minneapolis School of Art are pictured with Wanda. From left: Adolf Dehn, Stella Gág, Ernst Schmidt, Wanda, and Garth Howland.

nal that featured many of America's finest art and literary talents. In her diary in 1917 she made note of the United States Justice Department's wartime suppression of *The Masses*, which was followed by the sedition trial of its major editors, Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, and Art Young.¹⁸

IN MANY WAYS, Wanda Gág's "rebel" experiences in St. Paul and Minneapolis were akin to those of the more famous New York progressive artists, John Sloan, George Bellows, George Luks, and Edward Hopper, all students of the crusading realist, Robert Henri. Between 1905 and 1915 Henri challenged his students to mix "art and life," to shun traditional subjects of beauty and goodness, and to avoid isolation from controversial issues. The artist, Henri said, should strive to be neither genteel nor esoteric and should stay away from classical casts and Victorian mores. Obeying this injunction, Sloan, Bellows, and the others immersed themselves in realist literature (favoring Walt Whitman and Theodore Dreiser), progressive music, and radical politics. They prowled New York's back alleys, ghettos, amusement parks, skid rows, and other common haunts in search of the unconventional.¹⁹

Had she gone directly to New York instead of to St. Paul in 1913, Wanda Gág could have held her own in the Henri circle. The parallels between her "education" and that of John Sloan, Henri's prize student, are striking. Both scorned the academicism governing the established

American art world. Both resisted the lure of commercial art at considerable sacrifice since they had talents in this field. Their vision of the special destiny of the creative artist fixed their course through hard times. Both turned away from the fashionable, *avant-garde* notion of "art for art's sake," believing that a broad, humanistic education would enhance the value of their art. Both read, listened to, and discussed the same writers, left-wing magazines, and musicians. Both came to support unpopular political causes such as socialism and feminism. Both enjoyed the "rude" sections of the modern city (even though neither had roots there), and both cultivated friendships among the intelligentsia — writers, dancers, political radicals, and other dissidents.²⁰

To be sure, Minneapolis and St. Paul were not New York, and Wanda could not possibly acquire in the Twin Cities the degree of cosmopolitanism the nation's largest city offered Sloan. Her poet-friends from the University of Minnesota were hardly in a league with William B. Yeats. Armand Emraad was no Robert Henri. As a political activist, Adolf Dehn did not match up to Art Young, Robert Minor, or John Reed with whom Sloan collaborated on the radical New York journals. The John Ruskin Club did not offer as vital a forum for unorthodox ideas as *The Masses*. Nevertheless, the general train of Sloan's and Wanda's learning was similar. Their emerging consciousness as humanistic artists and their baptism into the realities of modern life differed more in degree than in kind.

By 1918 when Wanda went to New York, still several years away from being a productive artist, she was like an unguided missile — loaded with talent but not yet pointing anywhere. The four years in the Twin Cities would remain pivotal to her career, for it was there that her talents were refined and her humanitarian concerns expanded. In the East she would not have to swim in waters over her head.

WANDA GÁG went to New York on a scholarship to the Art Students League in September, 1917, and there she drew even closer to the Henri spirit of open inquiry. Manhattan offered many adventures the Twin Cities did not. A young midwesterner could not help being staggered by the New York art scene. Museums, galleries, exhibitions, competitions, street art fairs, academies, and "anti-Academy" (National Academy of Design) schools, art magazines, and art clubs abounded in New York even in those years. The sensational Armory Show of 1913 had revealed to American artists and public the revolution of the European *avant-garde*, and artists, young and not so young, inevitably began measuring the progress of their painting and sculpture against the works of Rodin, Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso.²¹ American Cubist, Futurist, and even Dada movements soon emerged — the deformation of form

and color was applied to native subjects such as the Brooklyn Bridge, the Woolworth Building, Coney Island, and even midwestern grain elevators. Even such Henri-school realists as John Sloan, George Bellows, and Stuart Davis felt compelled to introduce levels of abstraction into their postwar paintings.²²

Wanda Gág had been exposed to at least picture reproductions of modern European art at school in Minneapolis and had discussed them with Emraad and Dehn, but the chance to see original Cezannes and Gauguins (and to argue about them with new friends) was a revelation. She was never tempted by the more radical abstractionists like Matisse and Picasso. But Cezanne, generally considered the progenitor of abstract artists, proved to be irresistible, and her later efforts to reduce detail and get to the "essence" of nature testify to the French master's influence.²³

At the Art Students League (which was itself anti-Academy) Wanda took classes from Sloan, among other instructors, who re-enforced her interest in life and art outside closed studio doors. She explored the New York metropolitan junkyard, combing the ghetto streets, ethnic restaurants, and subway stations. She also found the New York artist's life style congenial. No YWCA this time! Wanda moved into a Thirty-Ninth Street flat in Greenwich Village, where she lived something of a

²⁰ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 287–88, 293–94. The literature on John Sloan is growing. One perceptive early account was Louis Baurly, "The Message of Bohemia," in *The Bookman*, 34:256–66 (November, 1911). See also Bruce St. John, *John Sloan* (New York, 1971); John Sloan, *The Gist of Art* (New York, 1939); and Bruce St. John, ed., *John Sloan's New York Scene from the Diaries, Notes and Correspondence, 1906–1913* (New York, 1965).

²¹ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York, 1963) is the best account of this exhibition of modern art and its impact on American artists and American taste. It was organized by a small group of young artists, the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. After the Armory Show, the conservative National Academy of Design "never again played any significant role on the American artistic stage," according to Brown (p. 28).

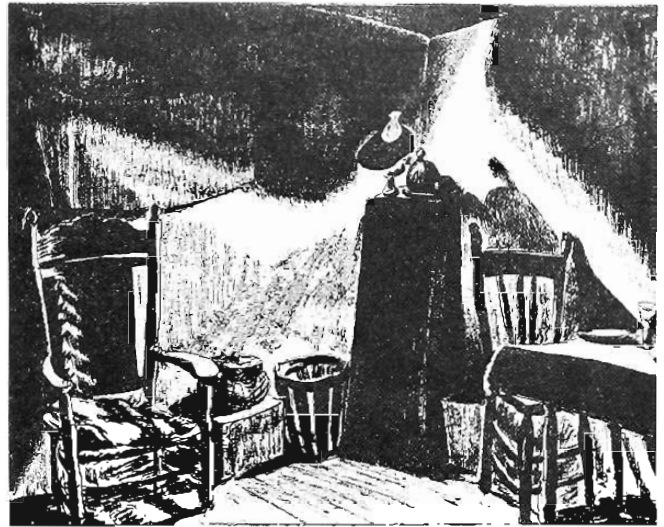
The show, wrote Brown, presented an "exposition of the history of what we still call 'Modern Art' — from Goya, Ingres and Delacroix, through the Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Fauves and Cubists." Small showings of the more advanced European artists had previously been shown at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, but this was the "first massive presentation to the American public" of such *avant-garde* European artists as Cezanne, Picasso, Braque, Duchamp, Villon, Matisse, and Gauguin. "In spite of ridicule and vituperation," says Brown, "the sweep of artistic history could not be impeded by either ignorance or eloquence; American art was never the same again" (p. 27).

²² Brown, *American Painting*, 79–83, 160–67.

²³ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 287–88, 375, 394–95, 438, 453, 458; Carl Zigrosser, "Wanda Gág, Artist," in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:172 (May, 1947).

Bohemian life, complete with “ . . . incense, Buddahs, and batiks” around as she worked “and dreamed.”²⁴

Joseph Freeman, a perceptive Marxian critic, chided those transplanted midwestern artists and writers (“parlor radicals”) who played at Bohemia in the Village, flirted with Freudian psychology, Eastern mysticism, and feminism, but ignored the crucial political and economic problems of the American working class.²⁵ Wanda’s commitment to social justice, however, probably was strengthened by her brief stint in the Village. She apparently did not experiment with liquor, free love, psychoanalysis, and other preoccupations prescribed by stylists of the counterculture in the 1920s. But Greenwich Village did draw her into the company of Art Young, Floyd Dell, Robert Minor, Boardman Robinson, and other intellectuals she had admired from *The Mass-*



“SUPPER LAID FOR ONE” appeared in the July, 1926, issue of *New Masses*.

²⁴ Interview with Virginia Dehn, June 17, 1970; Scott, *Gäg*, 145–46, 153–54.

²⁵ Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics*, 229–91 (New York, 1936). For more flattering accounts of Greenwich Village, see Carolyn F. Ware, *Greenwich Village, 1920–1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post-War Years* (Boston, 1935); and Oscar Cargill, *Intellectual America: Ideas on the March* (New York, 1941), especially pages 537–763, which deal with the interest in Freudian analysis among American intellectuals of that era.

²⁶ Richard W. Cox interview with William Gropper, June 2, 1970 (quote). Gropper was an editor and one of the strongest social-critic artists for *The Liberator* and *New Masses*. Dehn’s letters to his mother and sisters and the author’s interviews with other family members and acquaintances document Wanda’s and Adolf’s association with these leftist artists and writers, many of whom they visited in their homes at Croton on Hudson.

²⁷ Scott, *Gäg*, 155–60. Seldom are her prints discussed today in texts of American art. (For one such discussion, see Zigrosser, *The Artist in America*, 33–44.) One reason might be that the prints number just over 100 and that she did them irregularly between 1920 and 1940, spending much of her time in commercial art as well as doing a great deal of book illustrating after publication of *Millions of Cats* in 1928.

²⁸ In his book on protest art of the Western world, Ralph E. Shikes only considers as social-criticism art “ . . . social or political criticism of specific ways of life, institutions, conditions, or circumstances, not man’s general spiritual malaise or discontent with his own psyche, or general statements of man’s fate. We are concerned with man in relation to society.” See Ralph E. Shikes, *The Indignant Eye: The Artist as Social Critic in Prints and Drawings from the Fifteenth Century to Picasso*, xxv (Boston, 1969). To this writer, Shikes’s limits on social-criticism art seem too confining. His own examples show a preponderance of the more obvious, melodramatic forms of protest expression.

²⁹ See Irwin Cranich, “Towards Proletarian Art,” in *The Liberator*, February, 1921, p. 20–22, for a firm statement of the artist’s social duties to the revolution. Advocates of a looser policy toward the artists were Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, two radicals increasingly at odds with the Marxist leadership of the magazine. See Max Eastman, “Clarifying the Light,” in *The Liberator*, June, 1921, p. 7, and F[loyd] D[ell], “Pictures,” in *The Liberator*, December, 1919, p. 44.

es. She and Dehn, who had also gone to New York with a scholarship in hand, submitted drawings to the socialist successors of *The Masses* (1911–17) — *The Liberator* (1918–24) and *New Masses* (1926–48). She participated in the many social and political functions of these lively rebel journals and is fondly remembered as a “plucky radical” even though her drawings were not strong political commentaries.²⁶ Six years in New York, then, firmed up her political sentiments and enlarged her vision of modern art.

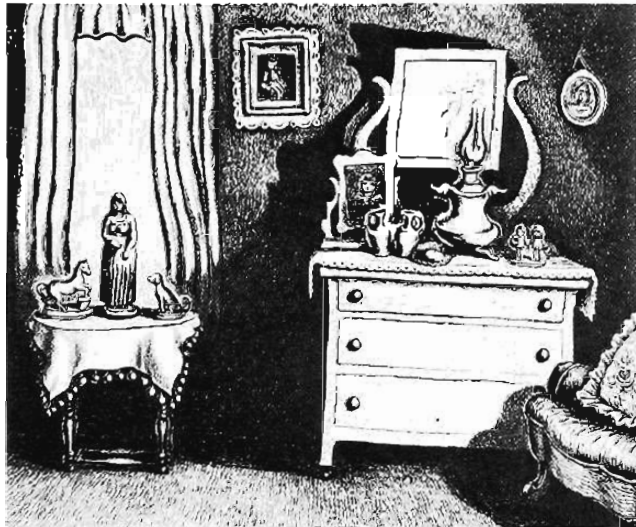
Wanda’s subsequent fame as a book illustrator has obscured her print-making achievements, especially the many lithographs she produced between 1920 and 1928 before publication of *Millions of Cats*. Some of her prints produced later are better known. Most of her drawings and lithographs dealt with close-range studies of apartment rooms, elevated train stations, and other urban vignettes until she moved in the 1920s to rural Connecticut and, later, to New Jersey where the imagery was primarily pastoral.²⁷

As social commentary, her prints need explanation. Certainly, they did not meet any hard definition of critical art. They did not lash out at the enemies of socialism. There are no scenes of striking workers, maimed war victims, brutal soldiers and policemen, starving beggars, or bloated capitalist employers in her art.²⁸ Her drawings for the radical journals rank alongside the mild satirical output of Peggy Bacon, Otto Soglow, and Cornelia Barns. These gentle works were published because the early editors of *The Liberator* and *New Masses* encouraged an open artistic expression.²⁹

By mid-1928, however, control of *New Masses* passed into the hands of Stalinist Communists Michael Gold and Hugo Gellert, who argued that the artist should re-

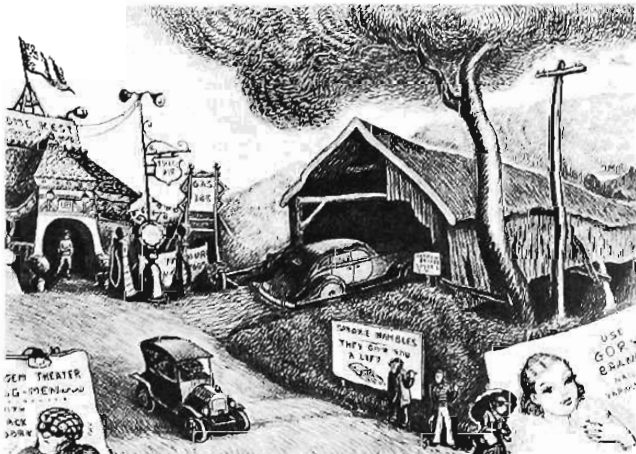


"STAIRWAY AT MACY'S" — 1941



"GRANDMA'S PARLOR" — 1930

"PROGRESS!" — 1936



"ELEVATED STATION" — 1924



"WINTER GARDEN" — 1935

nounce the oath to so-called "fine art" and throw all effort into works that would directly advance the workers' cause. This meant more baldly propagandistic drawings and prints, which were not Wanda Gág's style, and so she and other less doctrinaire satirists were driven off the pages of *New Masses*. By temperament and training she brooked no direction as to the content of her art. John Sloan, having fought some battles of his own around this matter, had strongly upheld to his students the inviolability of artistic freedom for the socially concerned artist.³⁰

Wanda had already made up her mind on this issue. Her conviction had grown out of heated discussions in the John Ruskin Club. Back in 1915 in Minneapolis, Mrs. Fournier and Dehn had rebuked her "undemocratic" posture, meaning her unassailable belief in the

³⁰ Interview with Gropper, June 2, 1970. Gropper straddled the fence between the "soft" and "tough" radicals of *New Masses* but reluctantly acceded to the Gold-Gellert coup of the magazine and confirms that this led to an impossible situation for Wanda, Peggy Bacon, and some of the other independent-minded socialists. John Sloan, Stuart Davis, and several other staff members of *The Masses* quit the magazine in 1916 over a row with the literary editors, Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, regarding the "censorship" of the drawings. Dell and Eastman, hardly dogmatic Marxists, had been adding captions to some of the nonpolitical drawings sent to them, much to the chagrin of the fiercely independent Sloan. See John Sloan Papers, Wilmington Art Museum, Delaware. For Eastman's account of this struggle, see Eastman, *Enjoyment of Living*, 548-59 (New York, 1948). For an account of the infighting on the staff of *New Masses*, see Donald Drew Egbert, "Socialism and American Art," in Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life*, 708-23 (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952).

³¹ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 362, 366-67, 375.

³² Gág, *Growing Pains*, 238-39, 276-78, 311, 338-39, 362, 415. Others believed that Wanda was blessed with a special talent; the most important to Wanda was Armand. See Scott, Gág, 117.

³³ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 334-35, 375. Wanda's aversion to material possessions was consistently expressed in her diary. See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 293, 375, 381-83, 431.

³⁴ Interview with Gropper, June 2, 1970; Gág, *Growing Pains*, 404-05.

³⁵ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 244, 293; Scott, Gág, 145-46. Various articles and books touch on the subject of American artists' concern with the effects of rapid industrialization, especially as applied to urban living. See John I. H. Baur, *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art*, 23-33 (Boston, 1958); Brown, *American Painting*, 109-35; Marvin Fisher, "The Iconology of Industrialization, 1830-60," in *American Quarterly*, 13:347-64 (Fall, 1961), and a retort to Fisher by James Hiner, "On Distinguishing 'A Machine' From Its System," in *American Quarterly*, 14:612-17 (Winter, 1962); Martin Friedman, *The Precisionist View in American Art* (Minneapolis, 1960); John I. H. Baur, *Joseph Stella* (New York, 1971); Hilton Kramer, "The American Precisionists," in *Arts Magazine*, March, 1961, p. 32-37; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, 8-11, 355-56 (New York, 1964).

"artist-genius." Wanda maintained that artistic talent was inborn and that such a rare gift should not be buffeted by any ideological wind, political or otherwise. Mrs. Fournier and Dehn argued that artistic genius grew out of the soil of social opportunity, which placed a special duty on the artist to see that his or her themes were comprehended by a large audience. Wanda held her ground and rejected "democratic accountability" for artists. Her own struggle to surmount poverty and provincialism, as well as her reading of the lives of Michelangelo and James M. Whistler, persuaded her that the large mass of humanity was "mediocre" about creative matters and should defer to the few geniuses in dealing with them. Gearing her subject matter and style down to a common denominator would benefit neither the artist nor the common man — the latter must be made to soar.³¹

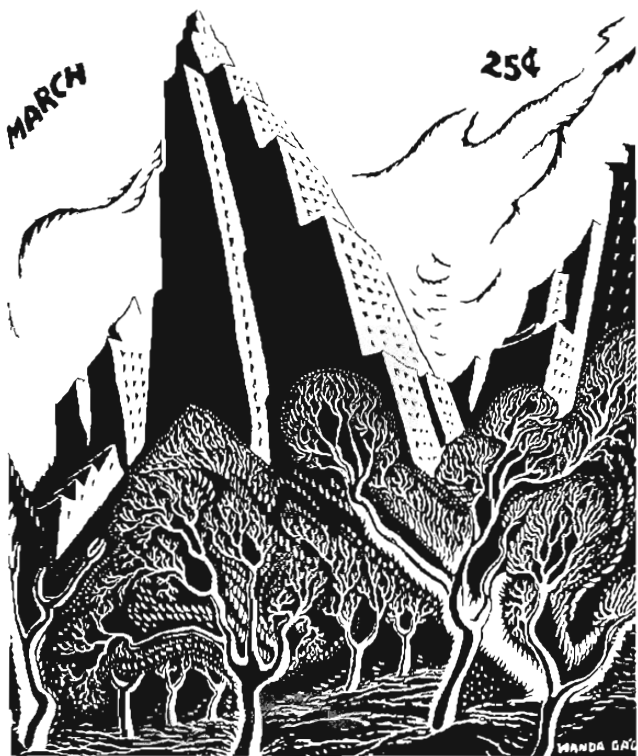
And what about Wanda herself? A false sense of modesty never held her back. She considered herself one of the elect.³² She always denied that there was a contradiction between her notion of genius and belief in the working class and socialism. In fact, she believed that genius would more likely spring from men and women of humble origins who did not have to contend with the debilitating effects of status and material acquisition.³³

WANDA GÁG'S feelings about genius and mediocrity steered her art the length of her career. She could never play down to the pedestrian tastes of workers (or children), no matter how sympathetic she was to their cause. The sledge-hammer political cartooning that became increasingly prominent on the pages of *The Masses* impressed her as somewhat infantile, riddled by formula. She simply could not do such cartooning, although a number of her drawings and prints did carry implicit social comment.³⁴ Themes of class struggle were only one form of social art. Wanda joined many other American artists who probed the more indefinable (although just as sinister) forms of suffering: alienation from one's culture and disorientation within a depersonalized, urban, technological society.

Again, it is worthwhile to consider Wanda in relationship to the general American art scene. The city — the new urban, industrial complex — became an obsession with American artists during the 1920s. Before this era, artists had not seriously weighed the consequences of urbanization as they gloried in the fast tempo and crude charms of the new metropolis. But by the end of World War I, artists took a second, more critical, look. Although they continued to appreciate the ethnic and art diversity of the city (as Wanda had done in Minneapolis and New York), they began to resent the crowding, noise, architectural blight, and nervous disorders afflicting inhabitants of modern urban centers.³⁵

The skyscraper, the city's most dominant kind of

NEW MASSES



WANDA'S CARICATURE of a skyscraper was published on the cover of the *March*, 1927, issue of *New Masses*.

building, became a symbol that embodied the artist's mixed feelings toward the new industrial order. Lyonel Feininger seized on its abstract shapes, Louis Lozowick praised its political meaning, Stefan Hirsch condemned its dehumanizing effects, and Joseph Stella both celebrated and damned its energy. Other artists, among them John Marin, Art Young, José Orozco, and Wanda Gág, depicted expressionistic views of skyscrapers, grossly distorted, sometimes comical, sometimes evil — images meant to prick the pervasive American dream that industry and technology were the servants of a future utopia.³⁶ Wanda's cover drawing for the *March*, 1927, issue of *New Masses* showed the skyscraper as an enormous creature, possibly menacing and certainly on the move. Others might abstract the skyscraper's form, hoping to uncover its full meaning, but it took someone with her whimsy to caricature the giant mass of steel and concrete. Her penchant for spoof had a long history (she drew caricatures of teachers and classmates back at New Ulm Junior High School), and it is surprising that she did not indulge more than she did in satire, which was enjoying something of a vogue in the 1920s.

Only rarely did she depict the lighter side, the verve and picturesque aspects of Manhattan that had captured the fancy of Sloan and others. One exception was "Encore — Saturday Night" (1927), showing the exuberant jazz bands of New York.³⁷ Other works, among them "Supper Laid for One" (1926) and "Stairway at Macy's" (1941), highlighted the melancholy of the city, its numbing effect on the human spirit, in a manner reminiscent of the more famous prints of Edward Hopper. Hopper and Wanda had the knack of freezing an incident or emotion in time, even in scenes where no people are present. Their city prints imparted life and significance to inanimate objects such as a table, bed, or building edge and made them two of the more subtle, profound critics of impersonal urban America of that era.³⁸ Strikers, street brawlers, drunks, and drug addicts do not appear in their art, but lonely, uncommunicative humans, caught in the vise of swift industrial expansion, do.

A stimulating environment could also be a deadening one. More and more after 1920, the day-to-day routine of New York City began to wear on Wanda's nerves. She never really adjusted to the "artificiality" of New York, the "glare," "the high unnatural key of things," and the "gross materialism" that depressed her when she first went to that metropolis in September, 1917. In succeeding years, the overpowering New York atmosphere of striking it rich and making it big (she was again doing commercial art work to pay her family's bills) bothered her and prompted this outburst: "I do not want to live in the restless, hectic, busy-busy life for which Americans are noted. I want to sort of ramble through life — not lazily, for I must be active to be happy. I want to read and study and work hard and live, but I do not want

³⁶ Brown, *American Painting*, 103–32, 133–34; Friedman, *The Precisionist View*, especially p. 28–37; Richard W. Cox interview with Louis Lozowick, June 21, 1970; Barbara Zabel, "Louis Lozowick and Urban Optimism of the 1920s," in *Archives of American Art Journal*, Spring, 1975, p. 17–21; Hugo Cellert, "The Independents' Art Exhibition," in *New Masses*, May, 1932, p. 29; Art Young, *Art Young's Inferno* (New York, 1934). One of the best discussions of the "industry is God" phenomenon is still Henry F. May's "Shifting Perspectives on the 1920's," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 43:405–27 (December, 1956).

³⁷ Among several American satirists to caricature jazz bands playing in and around New York City were Stuart Davis, Thomas Hart Benton, William Gropper, Ralph Barton, and Miguel Covarrubias. Wanda went with Dehn and other friends from *The Liberator* staff to see jazz performers; interview with Gropper, June 2, 1970, and interview with Virginia Dehn, June 17, 1970.

³⁸ The Hopper literature is huge. For a start, see Carl Zigrosser, "The Etchings of Edward Hopper," in [Carl Zigrosser, ed.], *Prints*, 155–73 (New York, 1962); Richard W. Cox, "William Gropper and Edward Hopper: Printmakers of the American City," unpublished master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1970.

always to feel myself rushing along in pursuit of money."³⁹ Greenwich Village, supposedly an enclave of free spirits rejecting American material values, offered her only small solace, and New York did not have the Twin Cities' many lakes, parks, and tree-lined streets to relieve the tension produced by massed bodies and steel canyons.

IN THE MID-1920s, therefore, with her family grown and self-supporting. Wanda abandoned commercial art and moved first to Connecticut and then to rural New Jersey, anticipating by several years the exodus of other artists from oppressive New York.⁴⁰ With its slower pace and open spaces, the eastern countryside of the 1920s proved to be a perfect escape. In a way, this move marked Wanda's symbolic return to Minnesota. Often, it seemed that nature transcended everything, even in Wanda's city pictures where the rambling, distorted wildlife almost seems to be competing with man-made forms. The irony suggested by these disparate elements was intentional. It was as though even the steel, concrete, and glass monuments could not conquer the mystical workings of nature: Mother Nature held Frankenstein to a draw in his own arena.

Yet, Wanda never underestimated the impact of modern industry. Its long reach touched even the New



"ENCORE — SATURDAY NIGHT," one of Wanda's few drawings of New York City life in a light vein, was published in the *New Masses* issue of July, 1926.

Jersey countryside, as she revealed in the 1929 lithograph, "The Stone Crusher." Hardly a savage indictment of the new age (Wanda wrote that the dinosaur-like machine amused her), "The Stone Crusher" revealed, just the same, a cynicism toward the "dawning-of-a-new-civilization" mentality afflicting many Americans awestruck by the possibilities of technology.⁴¹

A more direct criticism of the new era was "Progress!," a print Wanda selected to show in the anti-Fascist American Artists' Congress art exhibition of 1936. "Progress!" (according to Lynd Ward) "... seems to me to tell a great deal about the kind of person she [Wanda] was and what she believed about the world. It is a landscape with rolling hills, a swirling tree, an old covered bridge, and a road in the foreground cluttered with a fantastic castle-like gas station and billboards advertising nail polish, cigarettes, a gangster movie."⁴² Wanda was concerned about what she considered the loss of human values and the deterioration of life in modern America, a view which emerged in various subtle ways in all of her art forms, including her children's books.

WHEN WANDA took her manuscript of *Millions of Cats* to publishers in 1927, little did she suspect the significance of this moment to herself or American art. *Millions of Cats* became the prototype for the picture book, defined as one in which a single artist conceives, writes, illustrates, and supervises the printing of the whole book project.⁴³ Her success in the children's book field should not have come as a surprise, as her upbringing and later training left her peculiarly prepared for the new genre. As a child she "... grew up in an atmosphere of Old World customs and legends, of Bavarian and Bohemian folk songs, of German *Märchen* [fairy tales or folklore] and *Turnverein* activities."⁴⁴ Telling, reading,

³⁹ Scott, *Gág*, 145–46 (first series of quotes), 158–59 (last quote).

⁴⁰ The list of artists who fled New York City for calmer surroundings in the late 1920s is long. John Sloan, William Gropper, Boardman Robinson, Art Young, and Adolf Dehn are some of the artists who spent more and more time away from the city in places like Croton on Hudson, New York (which became something of a rural Greenwich Village), and New Mexico.

⁴¹ Scott, *Gág*, 164–65. Wanda and Earle Humphreys, a friend from her Greenwich Village days, were married in 1930. Mrs. Scott refers to Humphreys as a salesman (p. 164), but he was apparently, at least for a time, a labor organizer. He was also a conscientious objector in World War I, for which he served time in federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. Dehn — for a while a roommate of Humphreys — writes about Earle as "the fellow from Leavenworth" who is "doing organizing among the Paterson [New Jersey] silk workers." See Dehn to Emilie Haas Dehn, October 27, 1919.

⁴² Lynd Ward, "Wanda Gág, Fellow-Artist," in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:194–97 (May, 1947).

⁴³ Richard W. Cox interview with Lynd Ward, June 6, 1975. According to Cornelia Meigs, ed., *A Critical History of Children's Literature*, 634 (London, revised edition, 1969). Wanda produced the "first true 'picture book' by an American artist." *Critical History* defines "picture book" as one in which the pictures carry the story with little or no need for a text. According to this source, William Nicholson published the first picture book in England in 1927, the year before *Millions of Cats* was published.

⁴⁴ Gág, *Growing Pains*, xviii.

writing, and illustrating stories was a major pastime in the Gág home, and Wanda proved to be more imaginative here than the other children. The substance of nearly all her stories of the 1920s and 1930s came from middle European lore she absorbed in those early years on North Washington Street in New Ulm.

In those days Wanda drew incessantly, producing mostly pictures of children, animals, and simple nature scenes, which, of course, form the core of most children's picture books. By her freshman year in high school, she had already published drawings in the *Junior Journal*, supplement to the *Minneapolis Journal*, including an original illustrated story, "Robby Bobby in Mother Goose Land." In the Twin Cities she had excelled in her illustration classes, closely studied children's anatomy, and received a commission to illustrate Jean Sherwood Rankin's *A Child's Book of Folk Lore*. More than one expert from the publishing world told her that this art was her "long suit," and though she still had other art ambitions, she enjoyed the praise and began seriously to consider a role for children's book illustration in her future.⁴³

Just how *Millions of Cats* came about is unclear. It may have originated from one of the now obscure Bohemian legends she heard as a child, or it may have emerged out of her mature imagination. In any case, the book began taking shape sometime around 1920, but Wanda's first attempt to interest a New York publisher in the project failed.⁴⁴ The initial turndown in the competitive publishing world was perhaps to be expected because the manuscript was only half-finished and Wanda was as yet a largely unknown artist. Not until she had scored a critical triumph at her water-color and print show at the Weyhe Gallery in 1926, and made connections with the right people through the fashionable socialist organ, *New Masses*, would *Millions of Cats* get off the ground.

The key figure in final acceptance of the book was Ernestine Evans, a socialist sympathizer and editor at the Coward-McCann publishing firm, who was drawn to the art and personality of Wanda. Miss Evans spirited out *Millions of Cats* from the dusty rejection bin. The very qualities of wit, whimsy, social concern, and organic flow of line that critics raved about in the 1926 Weyhe show captivated Miss Evans, who surmised that children might also take delight in Wanda's pictures. Furthermore, Wanda impressed Miss Evans (and nearly everyone else) with her almost childlike honesty, intense innocence, mystical bent, and impeccable character, all of which seemed like assets for someone doing stories and illustrations about and for children. The Gág-Evans collaboration proved propitious, and no more time was wasted in getting *Millions of Cats* to press — a sage move because the book became an overnight classic, creating demands on Wanda's time for more books that

she did not expect and might not have wanted to produce.⁴⁷

The appeal to children of Wanda's work is not its easy sentiment but its honesty and rejection of the maudlin. She swam against the flood of sweet "pictorial baby talk" that dominated children's literature in that era.⁴⁸ Her intelligence, philosophy, and rigid standards of art made it impossible for her to dilute the European folk tales or to crank out soppy picture stories. In her dealings with children Wanda never condescended. She had taught school and had played a major role in raising her sisters and brother, experiences which persuaded her that children were more alert to the outside world than most people thought.⁴⁹ She believed children were blessed with forthrightness and innate good sense and need not be shielded from reality.

Out of Wanda's bedrock belief in the high potential of human behavior and in the artist's intellectual integrity came picture stories that strongly suggested aspects of the tense, modern era: stories featuring the same struggle, hardship, human frailty, violence, and even death that she had known in her own lifetime. In *Millions of Cats*, an old man's apparent beneficence (he cannot choose one cat over another to bring to his lonely wife) leads ultimately to mass carnage when the cats begin to fight to decide which one will be permitted to live with the poor farm couple. In another story, *Cinderella*, Wanda emphasized the irrevocable ill will between the heroine and her jealous stepsisters even after the prince proved Cinderella the rightful owner of the glass slipper.

⁴³ Gág, *Growing Pains*, xviii, xx, 17, 25, 466, Scott, *Gág*, 145–46.

⁴⁴ Sometime around 1920, Wanda had mentioned the preliminary idea for *Cats* to a New York City publisher but found no interest in the project. See Wanda's handwritten notes on original, typewritten manuscript of *Millions of Cats* in Wanda Gág Papers, Kerlan Collection of Children's Literature, Walter Library, University of Minnesota; Ernestine Evans, "Wanda Gág As Writer," in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:182–83.

⁴⁵ Evans, in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:182–83, Zigrusser, in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:172–75 (May, 1947); interview with Ward, June 6, 1975. Zigrusser, who had sponsored Wanda's show at the Weyhe Gallery in 1926, kept urging her to return to printmaking and painting in the 1930s and 1940s.

⁴⁶ Lynd Ward, "The Book Artist: Ideas and Techniques," in Bertha Mahoney et al., *Illustrators of Children's Books, 1744–1945*, 28–34 (quote p. 31) (Boston, 1947). Ward wrote (p. 30) that in the 1930s many illustrators (encouraged by publishers and educators) made "pictures the artist thinks children will like, pictures that would be 'good' for him to gaze on," which Ward said led to an oversentimentalized aesthetic where "cheeks were too round, lips always smiling, puppies and lambs too cute, background landscapes too green."

⁴⁹ Wanda ran a "progressive" classroom, giving her students (of all ages, for she taught in a one-room country schoolhouse) freedom and responsibility in their studies, which brought criticism from parents who wanted a more disciplined approach. See Scott, *Gág*, 100–03.



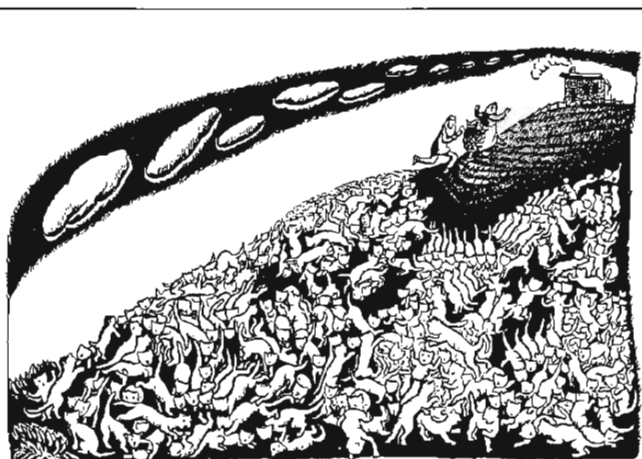
Cats here, cats there,
Cats and kittens everywhere,
Hundreds of cats,
Thousands of cats,
Millions and billions and trillions of cats

⁵⁰ Wanda Gág, "I Like Fairy Tales," in *Horn Book Magazine*, 18:75-80 (March-April, 1939). In answer to those who said that fairy tales were irrelevant to the modern child living in a scientific, industrial age. Wanda wrote in that article: "Certainly children are fascinated by stories concerning the modern miracles of science, and why shouldn't they be? But why shouldn't they also be interested in other kinds of stories? In fact, I believe it is *just* the modern children who need it [the fairy tale], since their lives are already over-balanced on the side of steel and stone and machinery — and nowadays, one might well add, bombs, gas-masks and machine guns." Wanda's imagination, largely born out of the folklore she had been immersed in, was crucial to the power of her children's stories and drawings. Other socially concerned artists such as Groppe, Peggy Bacon, and William Siegel, tried children's book illustrating in the 1930s only to fail for lack of imagination. Unlike those of many other artists, Wanda's pictures were not literal renderings of the depression — harsh portrayals of California-bound Okies or undernourished Blacks living in Louisiana shacks. Poignant views of poverty became common among artists in the 1930s and were particularly effective in Ben Shahn's paintings and Walker Evans' photographs.

⁵¹ Evans, in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:185. In Miss Evans' words: "I do not think I am imagining that she often found in some of the oldest stories much that was slyly apropos to high policy in Washington and grim struggles in farm and factory. Read 'Clever Elsie' again, one of the stories in *Tales From Grimm*. There was a man. He had a daughter who always tried to use her brains as much as possible. . . . I still think the story appealed to her because she thought that less brains, maybe, and more common sense, and a little less exploitation of crises and imagined crises might be wiser politics."

⁵² Ward, in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:195-97.

THE OLD MAN confronts millions of cats (left) and is unable to choose one. The result is a deadly quarrel (below) among the cats.



And they began to quarrel.

(In most accounts, they all go off together to the castle.) Wanda did not feel bound to any rule of virtuous finish that locked in Walt Disney artists. Instead, her books consistently exhibit the same brand of realism that is found in her prints of urban and small-town America. Although most of her stories were fairy tales, she viewed them as a palliative against, not an escape from, the grim, impersonal, industrial living of the twentieth century. She wrote of mythical places where good sense, communication between people, and a sense of humor still were prized.⁵⁰ Yet even here she would not soft-pedal human folly, and frequently the fairy tales were partly allegories of modern problems.

INEVITABLY, Wanda's social consciousness emerged in her children's illustrations. Ernestine Evans observed that Wanda always had absolute editorial choice of her material and that her selection of one legend over another sometimes betrayed her: ". . . she was always aware of political and social issues in the world around her."⁵¹ Lynd Ward, another illustrator of the realist vein, believed that Wanda's animal stories were not only parables on human error in the tradition of Beatrix Potter but social statements. Ward wrote that ". . . her outstanding quality . . . both as an artist and a person, was that of social motivation. . . . her spiritual home was always among those, both artists and laymen, who were pushed around by circumstance and less than well treated by a world that in our lifetime has too often seemed patterned more for the strong and ruthless than for those who, to put it a bit obliquely, believe that cats and trees and old spinning wheels are pretty important in the scheme of things."⁵²



WANDA'S VERSION of Snow White, published in 1938, was a good deal less cloying than the Disney story.

The cat battle in *Millions of Cats* may reflect her revulsion against the destruction caused by World War I.⁵³ Peasants abound in nearly all her stories, and Wanda's regard for the peasant class was almost legendary. Her seven dwarfs are frugal, hard-working, sensible men, not Disney's famous likable, comic fools who anxiously stumbled around the forest cottage awaiting Snow White's next kiss.⁵⁴ Wanda spoke of peasants in the sense of all honest workers trying to maintain their integrity amidst the pressures of the industrial Western world.⁵⁵ The picture book proved to be a good way for her to serve humanity and to vindicate herself from earlier accusations of "elitism" and being out of touch with ordinary human beings.

She also revealed in her children's books the strength and dignity of women. Like Wanda herself, females in her books assert their opinions and make decisions. They suffer the same sins of pride, vanity, and greed as men. With few exceptions, their faults are those of commission, not omission: Rarely do they emerge as fragile housewives baking cookies while their he-man husbands till the fields and decide on the urgent family matters. The wife in *Millions of Cats* suggests that her husband find a cat, tells him that they can only afford to keep one after he returns with "trillions" of cats, and then takes charge of feeding the lone survivor of the ensuing cat fight. A more direct sally into feminist issues can be seen in her version of the folk legend, *Gone Is Gone: or The Story of the Man Who Wanted to Do Housework*.

Fritzl, the farmer, decides that the chores of his wife Liesi are much easier than his own and trades roles with her for the day, only to find that cooking, gardening, cleaning, and child care are far beyond his capacity or energy (Liesi breezes through her day in the fields).⁵⁷

Among authors of children's books Wanda Gág was far ahead of her time with regard to women's rights, and again we can credit her early responsibilities and her unusual education for this attitude. Her womanhood, even in her school years, loomed large in her sensibilities, as *Growing Pains* reveals repeatedly. Anton Gág had anointed Wanda as the one who would redeem his thwarted career, even though it was an era when women artists had practically no chance of cracking the masculine art world.⁵⁸

Wanda's diary also reveals her strong advocacy of the women's suffrage movement before World War I at a time when her girl friends at the St. Paul YWCA considered such a cause intemperate.⁵⁹ At times she was incon-

⁵³ Wanda's pacifist convictions were stated occasionally in her diary, and, later, to others. See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 252, 271, 457-59, 461, 463, and Richard Cox interviews with Groppe, June 2, 1970, with Virginia Dehn, June 17, 1970, with Otto Soglow, June 18, 1970, and with Lynd Ward, June 6, 1975.

⁵⁴ Walt Disney, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (New York, 1938); Wanda Gág, translator and illustrator, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (New York, 1938). Disney's book was an outgrowth of the phenomenally popular film, "Snow White," released in 1937. As Mrs. Scott relates the story of Wanda's book (p. 182): "In 1937 Anne Carroll Moore, unhappy about a version of 'Snow White' that had just come out of Hollywood, suggested to Wanda that she do an authentic telling of the story in its original form and spirit.

"Wanda had already translated 'Snow White,' though it had not been included in *Tales From Grimm*. She now took it out of her files of unfinished work, polished it, and did the illustrations for it, and it was published by Coward-McCann in 1938 as a separate book."

⁵⁵ Speaking on this subject in 1929, Wanda said, "And the word *peasant* again is a word which might be misinterpreted. A peasant can be a stupid dolt of a *Bauer*, but it can also mean a human being who has still something of the nobility of the good earth about him — and whose real qualities have not been vitiated by too much civilization." See Scott, *Gág*, 190. She dedicated *Gone is Gone* "To My Peasant Ancestors."

⁵⁶ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 375.

⁵⁷ Wanda Gág, *Gone is Gone: or The Story of the Man Who Wanted to Do Housework* (New York, 1936). In an interview with Richard Cox on June 2, 1975, Lucile Lundquist Blanch, another art student in Minneapolis who also went to New York and shared an apartment with Wanda, stressed the latter's "independent-woman" attitude and feminist views. Mrs. Blanch said Wanda had gone to hear Emma Goldman both in Minneapolis and New York and had seen Isadora Duncan.

⁵⁸ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 421, 428, 433. Georgia O'Keeffe was the first woman to make a major impact in American art, and she did not gain prominence until Alfred Stieglitz exhibited her work in his studio after World War I. See Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York, 1970).

⁵⁹ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 276, 311, 396.

sistent in her feelings about the modern woman and reprimanded herself for arguing so forcefully on such subjects as politics and religion that were traditionally considered the province of men.

But her actions spoke louder than her occasional doubts written into the diary late at night. Her destiny as an artist obsessed her, and nothing would be permitted to quash her career or the fulfillment of her inner drive — “Myself,” as she called it. In New York she gloried in the presence of strong-willed women like anarchist Emma Goldman, dancer Isadora Duncan, and other political-cultural figures defying feminine stereotypes. She scorned double standards, whether they applied to the vote, political debate, or sexual relations.⁶⁰ She did not hold her tongue in the classroom, political club meetings, or in private conversations with friends and family.

A COMMITMENT to lofty art standards also mitigated against false sentimentalism in Wanda’s picture books. She had undertaken the rigors of academic classwork and made a careful study of the old masters and modern artists such as Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Cezanne. Her prints, drawings, and paintings drew ideas from the classics, modern realists, and abstract artists, and she did not alter her carefully developed style when she began producing for a younger audience.⁶¹ It is beyond the scope of this study to make a detailed analysis of Wanda’s various art forms. Briefly, it can be said that her illustrations revealed many of the same features of her earlier

⁶⁰ More than one man saw the perky, innocent Wanda as possibly vulnerable to his approaches, only to discover that she steadfastly guarded her virtue and expected her beaux to possess the same rectitude. Also, Wanda one time lamented the state of women’s subjugation in the nineteenth century and suggested that her mother suffered for not having an outlet for her creative energies. See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 328, 353, 386, 388–89, 462. Richard W. Cox interview with Lucile Lundquist Blanch, June 2, 1975, with Olivia Dehn Mitchell, June 3, 1975, and with Viola Dehn Tiala, June 14, 1975.

⁶¹ Wanda’s dedication to quality in her art was expressed early in her Minnesota school days when she often criticized the state of American magazine illustration. One time she wrote: “I told him [one of her suitors] . . . I thought it was a crime to give the public bad pictures even tho they demanded it [sic]. Surely it is wrong to give a child candy and candy and candy when its stomach is out of order as it is, *from candy*.” See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 256.

⁶² Zigrosser, in *Horn Book Magazine*, 23:175 (quote) (May, 1947). A careful look at the drawings she did in her childhood and published in *Growing Pains* reveals early efforts at using sophisticated stylistic devices, including abstraction. For more on the impact of abstract art on children’s books, and particularly the influence on Maurice Sendak, author-illustrator of such books as *In the Night Kitchen* (New York, 1970), *Hector Protector* and *As I Went Over the Water* (1965), and *Chicken Soup with Rice* (1962), see Miriam Hoffman and Eva Samuels, *Authors and Illustrators of Children’s Books: Writings on Their Lives and Works*, 365–72 (New York, 1972).



SNOOPY, one of the two cats used as models for *Millions of Cats*, is held by Wanda in this 1928 photograph. She is wearing one of her embroidered “peasant” dresses, a style she adopted because of its casual grace and because it “suited her personality,” according to Mrs. Scott.

drawings and prints: stylized human figures, slight spatial distortions, asymmetrical compositions, and, as Carl Zigrosser put it, the “interplay of complex repetitive rhythms.” The animal and human figures of *Millions of Cats*, *The Funny Thing*, *More Is More*, and her three books based on fairy tales of the brothers Grimm are more representational than some of the hybrid creatures and surreal settings of more recent picture books that draw heavily on post-World War II abstract art movements.⁶²

Wanda studied and lived in the era of American realist art, dominated by urban reporters such as Sloan and Bellows and regional partisans like Thomas Hart Benton. Even abstract American art of the 1920–40 period had a strong foundation in the facts of the American scene — in skyscrapers, factories, and barns. For all her appreciation of Cezanne and modern European art, Wanda never risked obscuring her stories through an adventuresome abstract vocabulary. Making pictures and stories comprehensible to a wide audience was ultimately her best response to those who questioned her “democratic” sentiments. Her images were recognizable



A HAPPY ENDING for at least one of the millions of cats

but hardly photographic. They were halfway steps between academic realism and the European *avant-garde*, like so much of American art of this era. John Sloan's teaching may have played a part, but the real source for Wanda's expressionistic pictures can be traced to her own discoveries as an art student in Minnesota. The urge to get to the "essence" of the object and idea, which meant going beyond visual description through stylized design, composition, space, and form, is evident in her sketches as early as 1910 when she was still in high school, long before she ever heard of Cezanne.⁶³

Wanda simply would not discard the fruits of her hard-earned education — humanist and technical — to appeal to a young audience. She epitomized Lynd Ward's description of the realist credo: "I will make the best pictures of which I am capable, whether for children or grown-ups."⁶⁴

In all of her art forms, Wanda refused to use push-button sentimentality. Unconventional parents, liberal and radical friends, personal contests with poverty and

provincialism, a steady diet of realist literature, and a close study of art history all made her a questioning art-humanist, alert to human problems and eager to deal with them in her prints, paintings, and children's books. She was fortunate to have had such a rich past. New York broadened her art and political awareness and gave her a strong whiff of glamour. But it also depressed her, and like other artists she began to see the city as a product of a dehumanizing civilization brought on by industrialization. Subtly, she made such commentary in her art — in a manner that did not satisfy dogmatic Marxists but met her own criteria of quality.

The emergence of this remarkable artist is due in large part to her early experiences in Minnesota. In New Ulm, St. Paul, and Minneapolis, she saw prejudice and exploitation, had to learn to overcome rumor and innuendo, formed opinions about social and political issues, first experimented with abstract art, and made crucial career decisions. The tough edge, the strong undercurrent of social concern in her lilting prints and illustrations, was formed out of those difficult and exciting years of her youth.

⁶³ Gág, *Growing Pains*, facing p. 30, 43, facing 92, facing 124, facing 126.

⁶⁴ Ward, in Mahoney *et al.*, *Illustrators of Children's Books*, 32.

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