

Old World



Siesta (1937), lithograph on zinc plate

Symphony

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Thoughts of Minnesota in the Late Work of Wanda Gág

In 1938 artist Wanda Gág's lithograph *Siesta* was selected as one of the Fifty Prints of the Year by the American Institute of Graphic Arts. In it the logs, cats, and wood stove harmonize into a ballet of undulating lines and warm textures that drive away any sense of the fret of the outside world. *Siesta* speaks with a soft and honeyed voice, revealing the quiet intensity of Gág's romanticism. It turned out to be one of her last lithographs. By 1946 she would be dead, her promise as an

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Wanda Gág, wearing one of the embroidered peasant blouses she favored, 1930s



artist not fully realized. Soon she would be pushed off the stage of American art by the flashier abstract expressionists.¹

But in the 1990s Wanda Gág is back in the public eye. A recent article, a catalogue raisonné of her prints, and an exhibition at the Minnesota Historical Society have brought her new attention. Actually, this Minnesota-born and -raised artist never fell into complete obscurity. Even after her untimely death Gág remained a recognizable name in American culture, largely due to the steady success of her children's picture book *Millions of Cats*. But her reputation as a fine artist did not stand on such solid ground. Her best prints were produced between 1926 and 1937, a short time span. And there were relatively few—less than 90—true lithographs, wood engravings, etchings, and woodcuts. Her chances for major recognition were also hurt by her losing struggle to master the techniques of painting. Thus she has remained a tantalizing figure, her work and personality defined mainly by short, laudatory biographies. Now, thanks to the opening of her diaries written between 1919 and 1944 and the appearance of new correspondence, Wanda Gág the artist and personality is emerging out of the shadows.²

Gág's early years—her hardscrabble life in New Ulm, Minnesota, where she was born in 1893, and struggles as a young artist in New York City—have been discussed elsewhere. By the 1930s Gág was living at a remote New Jersey retreat and working in a studio she named "All Creation." There she produced intimate still lifes and landscapes that signaled her growing distrust of urban civilization. Some of these lithographs show the influence of her Minnesota youth—a romanticism that was rooted in nineteenth-century middle-European folk-

ways passed down to her through the large Gág-Biebl family of Brown County. This legacy was reinforced by Gág's triumphant return to New Ulm in 1929.³

Gág was 33 in 1926, when her first one-person exhibition took place at Carl Zigrosser's Weyhe Gallery in New York. It was a smash: nearly all the prints were quickly sold and artists such as Rockwell Kent, Max Weber, and Alfred Stieglitz sang her praises. Curiously, few spotted the jaunty erotic themes of lithographs such as *Tumble Timbers* (1926) and *Gumbo Lane* (1927) where garden plants embrace a run-down farmhouse and gyrating leaves and lurching fenceposts merge into a lascivious comic dance. (Gág once likened herself to "a fraulein drenched in beautiful sin.") Peppery talk about sex dominated her diaries through the 1920s and now commands the attention of writers trying to understand her early prints.⁴

By the end of the decade, however, the tone of both diary and prints becomes more quiet and settled. In a world of increasing bigness and noise, Gág turned inward. True, she remained vain and flamboyant; she wanted others to think of her as a modern-day gypsy, wild and free. But the diaries also reveal a rational artist who knew she must rein in her passion and (in the phrase of Henri Matisse) prune the expressiveness of her art to make it fuller. Her writings reflect the teaching of her beloved father, the artist Anton Gág, whose fragmentary notes on the education necessary for a painter, found among her papers at All Creation, counsel "diligent observation, study, and practice. An artist . . . whatever he does and produces, must always observe and gather and retain new impressions, teach

¹ The award was for 1937; Audur H. Winman, *Wanda Gág: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Prints* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 75.

² Richard Cox and Julie L'Enfant, "Wanda Gág's Free Spirit: A Reconsideration of the Prints," in *Second Impressions: Modern Prints and Printmaking Reconsidered*, ed. Clinton Adams (Albuquerque: Tamarind Institute and the University of New Mexico Press, Feb. 1996), 59–64; Winman, *Wanda Gág*, which includes selected diary entries; "Wanda Gág, Inside and Out: An Exhibition of Art and Books at the James J. Hill House," Mar. 6–Aug. 14, 1993. More than 100 volumes of Gág's diaries and notebooks were stored for 40 years at the Department of Special Collections, Van Pelt-Dietrich Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, before being opened to selected scholars, including Richard Cox. Unless noted, all diary quotations are from this source.

³ On Gág's experiences in Minnesota and New York, 1917–26, see Richard W. Cox, "Wanda Gág: The Bite of the Picture Book," *Minnesota History* 44 (Fall 1975): 239–54; Alma Scott, *Wanda Gág: The Story of an Artist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949); Karen Nekson Hoyle, *Wanda Gág* (New York: Twayne, 1994), focusing on Gág's books for children.

⁴ Lucile Lundquist-Blanch, interview with Richard Cox, Woodstock, N.Y., May 30, 1975, notes in Cox's possession; Lundquist was Gág's best friend in Minneapolis and her roommate in New York until 1923. Cox and L'Enfant, "Wanda Gág's Free Spirit," 59–64; Winman, *Wanda Gág*, 71; Gág, diary, July 31, 1918–Dec. 1921.



Gumbo Lane (1927), lithograph on zinc plate

himself and let himself be taught, and success will not be lacking.”⁵

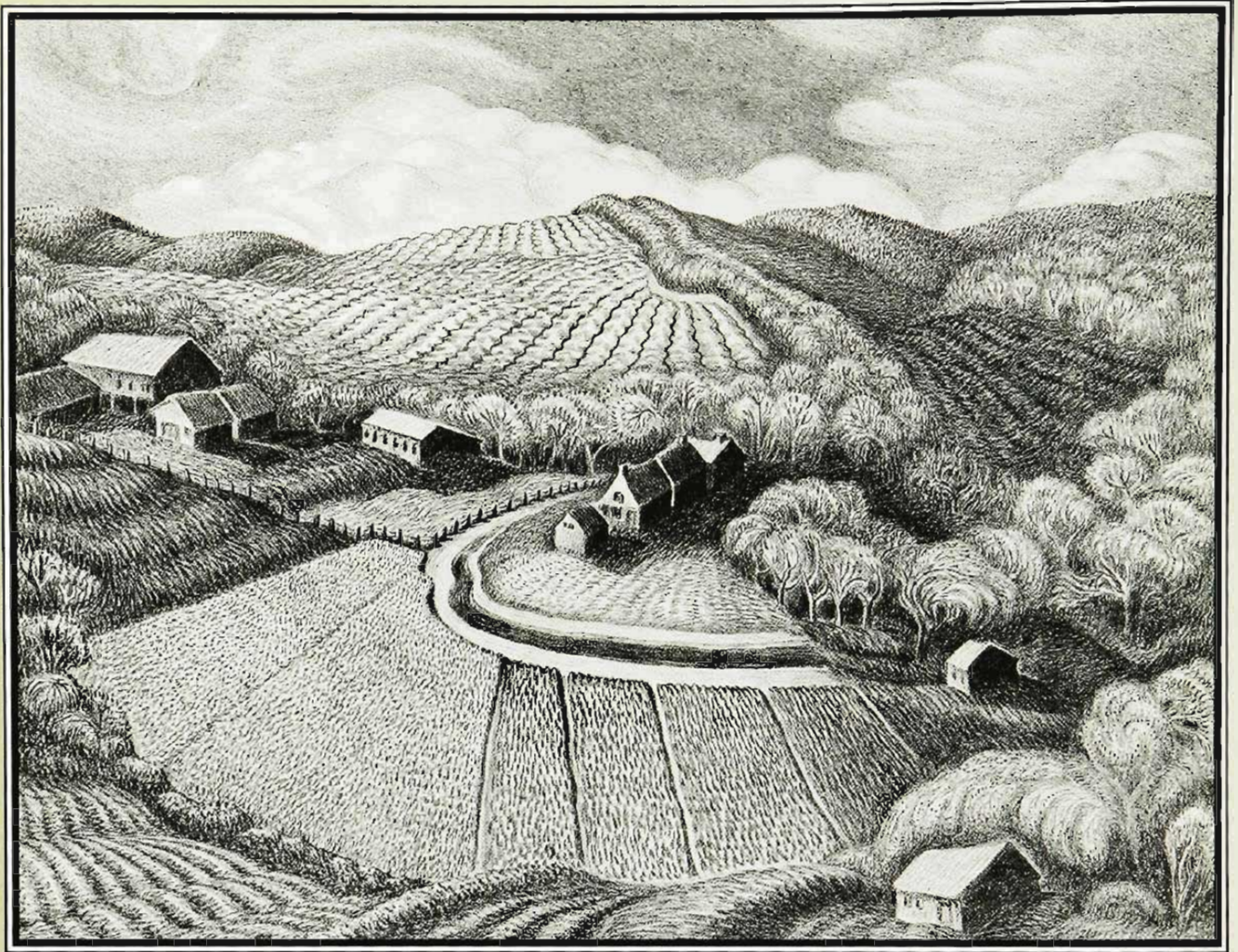
Many of the prints in Gag’s 1926 exhibition were rightly read by the New York critics as expressions of subtle nature worship rather than manifestos for sexual freedom. She had learned to harness her emotions and measure the meaning of life forces. “Stone fences, wooden gates, barns, sheds, and trees all merge together in the landscape,” she wrote in her diary in 1928. “There is a seeming intelligence of inanimate things, a unique grace and power as if this tree has meant a great deal to the land for so many years.”⁶ The lithograph

Backyard Corner (1930) orchestrates farm tools into rhyming patterns that give off a gentle melancholy. *Spring on the Hillside* (1935) depicts an enclosed paradise of fertile fields, leading the eye ever deeper into its terraced valley, the curves of which are echoed by scuttling clouds.

After years of dividing time between apartments in Manhattan and rented houses (such as Tumble Timbers) in the country, Gag and Earle Humphreys, her paramour for many years, moved to rural New Jersey in 1931. Money from the sale of her children’s books enabled them to purchase a farmhouse and 125 adjoining acres in the Kittatinny Mountains, where they

⁵ “Notes by Anton Gag: On the Observation of Nature for the Education of a Painter,” n.d., trans. (from German) Delmar Brick, copy in the Brown County Historical Society, New Ulm.

⁶ *The Checkerboard* (occasional publication of the Weyhe Gallery), Dec. 1929, reprinting reviews of Gag’s Weyhe Gallery exhibitions, copy in Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Gag, diary, Jan. 9, 1928.



Spring on the Hillside (Farmland) (1935), lithograph on zinc plate

lived year-round through the Great Depression. Behind the farmhouse, furnished simply in a manner resembling the rural houses of her childhood, Gág built the studio she named All Creation to evoke her back-to-nature creed. She loved to walk barefoot in the woods and open countryside, then swim alone in nearby lakes. With drawing gear under one arm, she would eagerly set forth to “do battle with the hills.”⁷

Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* had been Gág’s favorite book since childhood, and she later versed herself in other transcendental texts. In the 1920s a friend had given her a copy of Adolf Just’s *Return to Nature*, which helped

shape her dream of a rustic paradise. Gág studied the work of two great artists who had lived in self-imposed isolation, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne. Her diligence paid off, for her art achieved new intensity and imaginative power in the early 1930s. Certainly she did not fit the traditional stereotype of the female artist tied to visual observation and limited to the creation of charming, sentimental works. For Gág, nature was something to be arranged, not merely recorded. First heady eroticism and then a deeper romantic symbolism enlarged the meaning of the old houses, tools, animals, foliage, and crops that are stylized in her prints.⁸

⁷ Gág, diary, Jan. 9, 1928.

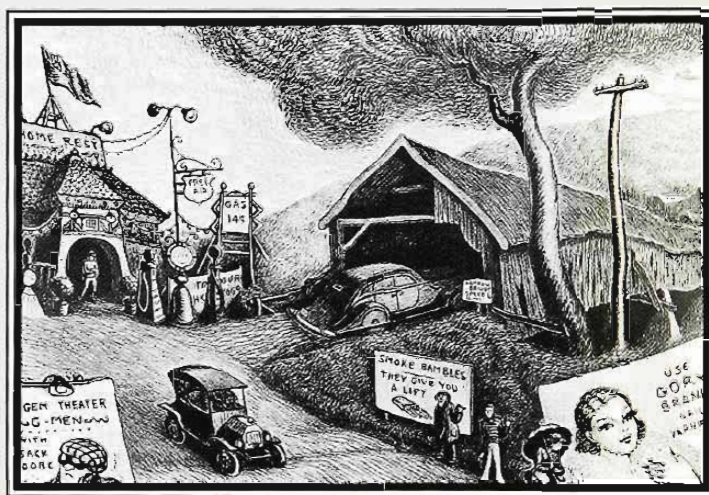
⁸ Gág, diary, Feb. 27, 1924; Tamar Garth, “Gender and Representation,” in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Francis Francina et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), especially 284–85.

None of this came easy. Warning friends and family to stay away, Gág would retreat to her studio, cigarette burning between her lips, to fight the artist's battle. Her diary chronicles an agonizing struggle to bring coherence to her artistic ideas. Many drawings were started, then discarded. Periodically she would turn to Cézanne's drawings to help her realize more volume and depth in the prints, to "whip into submission [her] drawing moods." Diagrams and schema loosely based on Cézanne's ideas of space and form fill occasional diary pages. Her goal was fuller and more rounded shapes, "an inter-action of enveloping planes of space," as she put it in 1930. "There is, to me, no such thing as an empty place in the universe—and if nature abhors a vacuum, so do I—and I am just as eager as nature to fill a vacuum with something—if with nothing else, at least with a tiny rhythm of its own, that is rhythm created by the surrounding forms." The repetitive swells of her forms were meant to unify all aspects of the emotional and intellectual life, "all the helpless fringes and frayed edges of our groping lives."⁹

The gradual change from carnal nature prints with extravagantly spiraling lines toward more contemplative works with gentle curves was furthered by a change in Gág's way of life. In 1933 she took her physician Hugh Darby (the "Spanish cavalier" of diary accounts) as her final lover before settling down with Earle Humphreys in something like a bourgeois union. That her two youngest sisters, Dehli and Flavia, lived in the household on and off through the 1930s may also have had a stabilizing effect.¹⁰

Life in the foothills of Appalachia satisfied Gág's deeper needs. In the 1930s she made fewer trips into New York and participated less in the frenetic night life of the city (which was dimmed, in any case, by the sobering effect of the Great Depression). She grew increasingly disenchanted with modern urban life. Advertising slogans, Hollywood movies, cheap novels, and other vulgarities coming out of the new media age often repelled her. She had come away from her days among the Greenwich Village radical crowd during the First World

War with a strong disdain for business-dominated American culture. Memories of her experiences in the New York business world still rankled, confirming her feeling that the crass American civilization was spinning out of control, crushing the spirit of the fine artist in the process. ("There is no term vile enough in my estimation that applies to business," she once wrote.) The often-reproduced 1936 satirical print *Progress* was her strongest impeachment of the bumptious, fast-buck commercialism she saw around her: her forthright comments on the need for taste and quality in children's books addressed the same issues. The quiet life at All Creation, along with her meditative art



Progress (1936), lithograph on zinc plate

celebrating the beauty of pre-industrial-age objects, served as personal antidotes to a sick and flimsy popular culture.¹¹

A reawakened interest in her Minnesota roots also promoted Gág's turn towards an intimate brand of romantic art. She had not been back to New Ulm since the end of the Great War, for her parents had died and most of her art-school friends had migrated east. Memories of financial struggles and family responsibilities

⁹ Gág, diary, May 1926, June 1930, Oct. 29, 1929; Gág to Adolf Dehn, Dec. 1921, Adolf Dehn Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰ Olivia Dehn Mitchell, interview with Richard Cox, Woodstock, N.Y., June 14, 1975, notes in Cox's possession; Lundquist-Blanch interview.

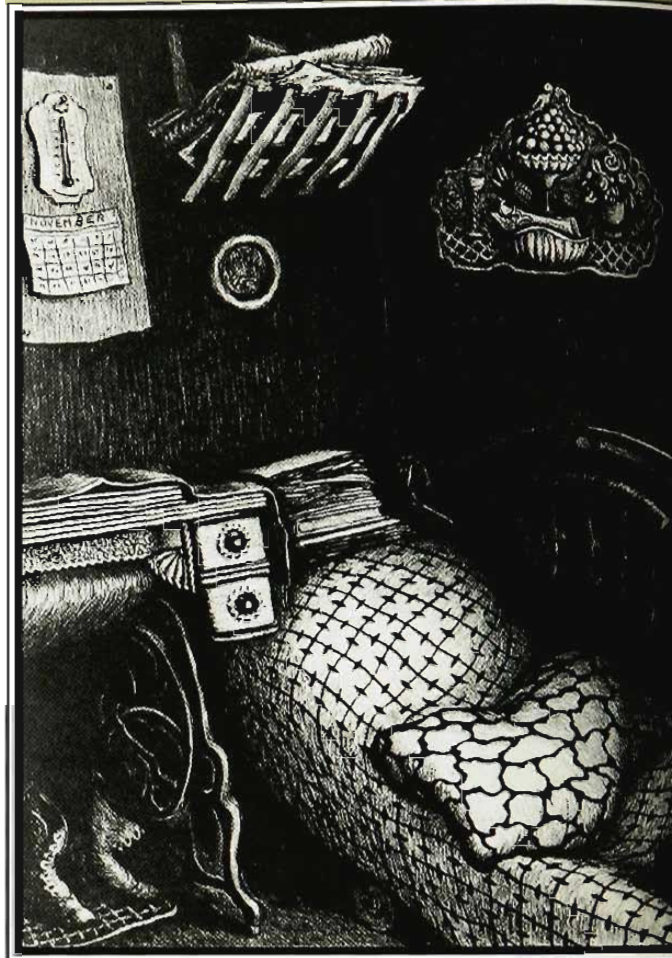
¹¹ Gág, diary, Feb. 27, 1924, Jan. 22, 1923; Winnan, *Wanda Gág*, 11–12. See also Floyd Dell, *Love in Greenwich Village* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1926) and William L. O'Neill, ed., *Echoes of Revolt: The Masses, 1911–1917* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), the best general study of these left-wing radicals and their bohemian social attitudes.

were bittersweet, at best. (She had become, in effect, a single parent of four younger sisters and one brother after her mother died in 1917.) Still, by the late 1920s more generous, even sentimental, thoughts of Minnesota came into her mind. When Dehli and Flavia moved East in 1926, they brought Wanda's school-girl drawings, diaries, and letters, as well as news from New Ulm and the Twin Cities.¹²

In 1927 Gág wrote an article for *The Nation* that threw a positive light on the rich Bohemian upbringing in the Gág-Biebl clan. Ernestine Evans, her editor at Coward-McCann, began urging her to write an autobiography, and the artist spent much time in 1929 and 1930 rereading her girlhood diaries to prepare some sort of memoir for publication. (It was not until 1938 that she finally completed *Growing Pains*, based on those early diaries.) In addition, reminders of Slavic and Bohemian folktales with their colorful, humble subjects and her father's books on nineteenth-century German painting and printmaking certainly played key roles in the formation of *Millions of Cats* (1928) and later children's books. Gág wrote a letter to Alfred Stieglitz in April 1928 about her nostalgia for her father, Anton Gág: "All my life I have wished there were some way of getting across to my father . . . some of the sympathy and appreciation which was denied him in his lifetime. All I could think of doing was to fulfill his wish, 'Was der Papa nicht thun konnte, muss die Wanda halt fertig machen' [What Papa was unable to accomplish, Wanda will have to finish] to the best of my ability, hoping that in some way it would even things up."¹³

But the main event that helped prod her memories of Minnesota was a five-week trip to the Midwest in the fall of 1929 to promote her new children's book, *The Funny Thing*. After the promotion, she visited her maternal relatives in New Ulm, arriving by taxi at the Biebls' farm ("Grandma's house") during a blizzard on Thanksgiving Day. As she later recounted her excitement:

There are some houses which one can always . . . approach without a thrill of emotion—and there are others which no matter how many hundreds of times one has seen them, never fail to send a tingling shiver of pleasure



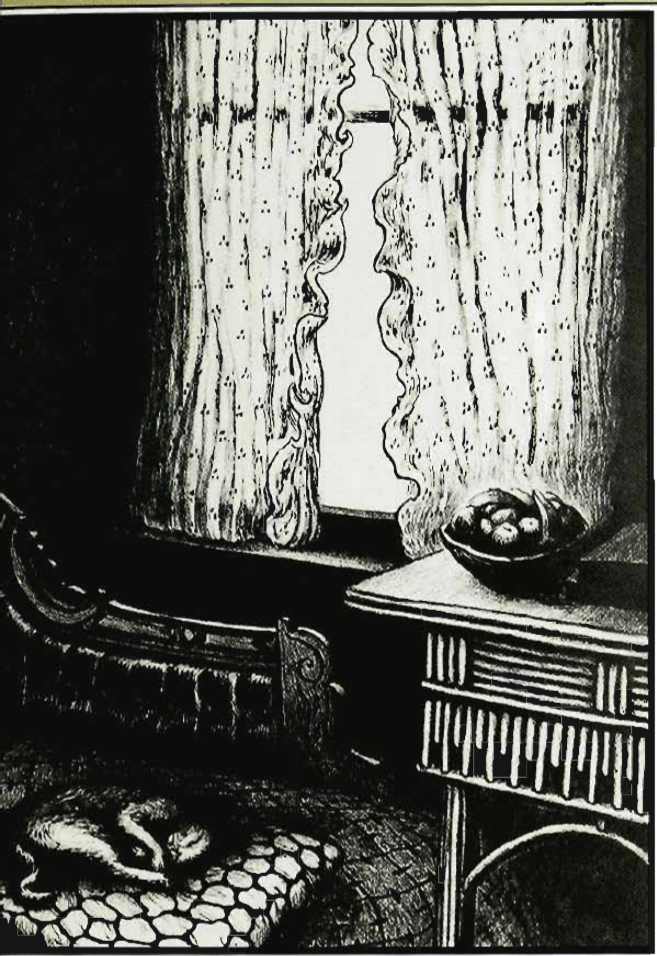
thru one's body. Tumble Timbers is such a place, and so is Grandma's house.

Thru the snowy pasture and in thru the gate. To my left the low-roofed ambling barn, which somehow is always a portrait of Grandpa to me. Not the literal structure, of course, but its mood, its look. . . .

The interior of the house, with the exception of the wallpaper and curtains, both of which had a mildly modern touch, was practically unchanged. To my great delight of course, for one of the things I planned to do during my short visit there, was to get some very accurate drawing of all these well-known corners, furniture and so on. Even the old couch, on which all the Gágs had sat thou-

¹² Gág, diary, July 10, 11, 1929.

¹³ "A Hotbed of Feminists," *The Nation*, June 22, 1927, p. 691-93, published anonymously; Gág, *Growing Pains: Diaries and Drawings for the Years 1908-1917* (1940; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984); Gág to Stieglitz (copied into diary entry), Apr. 10, 1928; translation from Scott, *Wanda Gág*, 65.



Grandma's Kitchen (1931), lithograph on zinc plate

sands of times, was still in its old place, with the newspaper rack above it, Aunt Lena's sewing machine to the left of it, and one of those wild pink, blue and lavender bas-relief calendars on the wall to the right of the couch.¹⁴

Some of these telltale objects appear in *Grandma's Parlor* (1930) and *Grandma's Kitchen* (1931). In the latter, Gálg sets the viewer's eye meandering across the assorted wavy shapes of the floor, couch, sewing machine, calendar, newspaper rack, curtains—and the curled-up cat. All the contour lines are choreographed into a disciplined waltz of patterns, and the textures of reed, wicker, wrought iron, lace, wool, and fur are deftly handled. The rich shades of

black, white, and brown, worked out jointly with her lithographic printer, George Miller, give the room the effect of a fading antique portrait.

New York Times reviewer Elisabeth Luther Cary wrote that *Grandma's Kitchen* symbolized "the time when the kitchen was the centre of the home and of the universe." The same critic had seen a more impish quality in *Grandma's Parlor*, where the tipsy lamp and big-eared bureau pitchers, as well as the assortment of cherished photographs and ceramic figures, stand out with exaggerated clarity, like fetishes of the Old Country. "There will be those who will love these antiquities the better for the waggish way they are disporting themselves. . . . Never again can that parlor frighten a child by its austere virtue. Kind young Wanda Gálg to thus break the spell laid by antiquity upon quivering youth." Gálg took issue with those who saw a satirical intent in these prints: "When they say that the parlor struck me funny because it was so dignified and trim, they are telling the truth—but only such a very little part of it," she wrote to her friend and biographer Alma Scott. "The big and important part is that I love the Grandma folks so very deeply, and admire them for their integrity and their peasant solidity."¹⁵ In New Ulm in 1929 Gálg was confronted by these fragments of herself, dispersed among the kitchen and parlor.

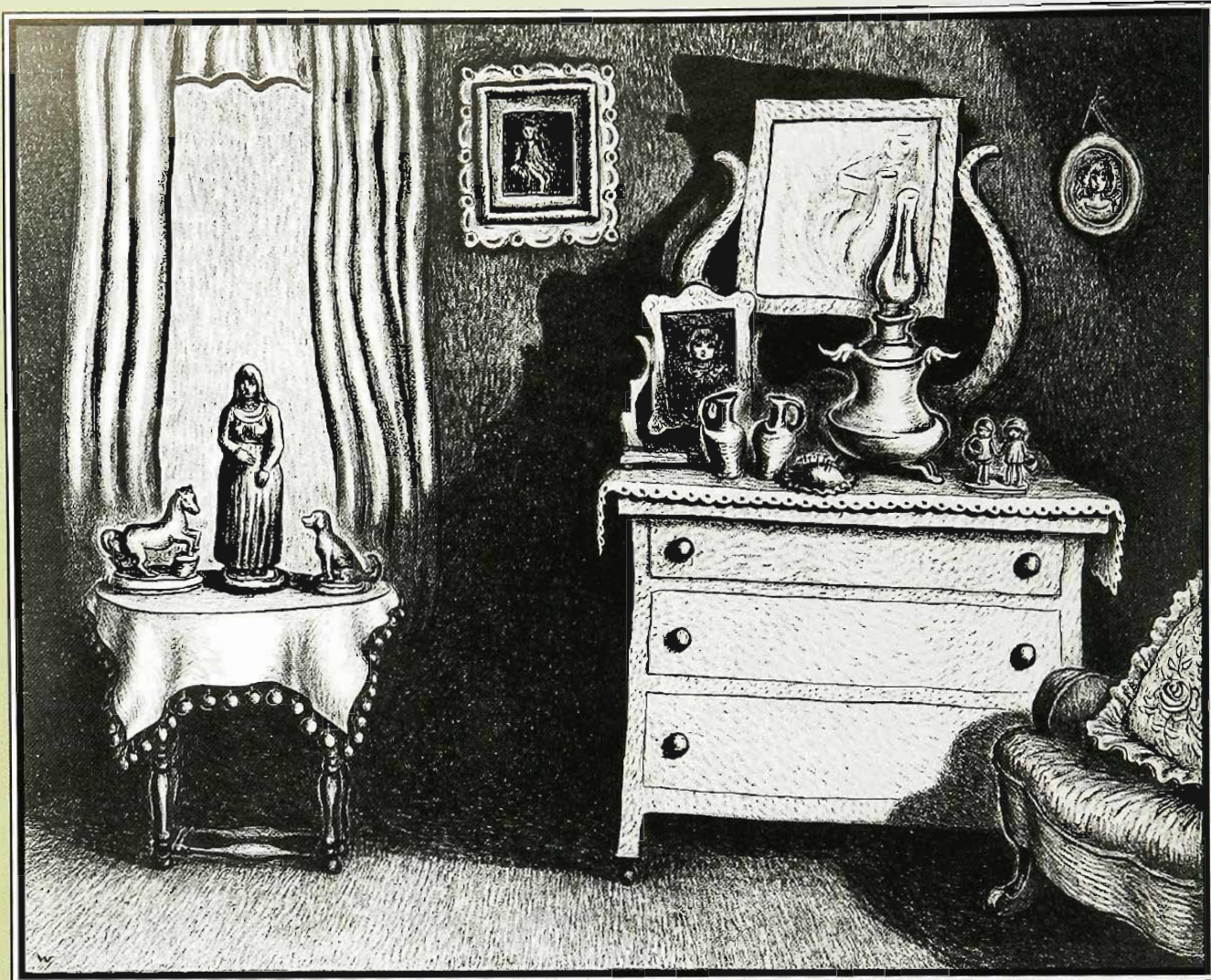
The trip produced another psychologically revealing lithograph in 1935, *Uncle Frank's Workshop*. The reminiscence in her diary focuses on three living members of the Biebl clan: Aunt Lena, an accomplished seamstress, Uncle Josie, a craftsman and self-taught scholar, and Uncle Frank, a gifted woodworker. Surprisingly, Gálg's diaries mention few artists she admired, and none is written about so extensively as Uncle Frank: "He does beautiful cabinet work—makes whole writing desks, doctors' cabinets, also guitars and other musical instruments. He makes most of his own tools. . . . He has a tiny little shop. . . . [where] one finds it difficult to realize that one is in America—for one is enveloped in the mood and tempo of the old world."¹⁶

Being a quiet "peasant" (a term Gálg uses reverently), he cannot explain his creative urge; he only knows he has it. Initially drawn into the shop to document him at work, Gálg later attempted to act as his voice, finding words for

¹⁴ Gálg, diary, Mar. 6 and 16, 1930 (one entry). Earlier she had written of her desire to return to Minnesota, "It was twenty years ago Papa was buried. I couldn't stand it any longer"; diary, May 24, 1928.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 1931, sec. 8, p. 11, Dec. 14, 1930, sec. 10, p. 18; Scott, *Wanda Gálg*, 189–90.

¹⁶ Here and below, see Gálg, diary, Mar. 6 and 16, 1930.



Grandma's Parlor (1930), lithograph on zinc plate

his attachment to the little space crowded with "contours square, flat, curved, curled, fluted, ridged and rippled [which convey] something ineffably sweet, overwhelming—unexplainable!" Not one to be daunted by the unexplainable, she continued her tribute:

Oh, Uncle Frank!—if you only knew how much more you are an artist, how much more deeply so than many, many "artists" I have met—if you could realize how close are you and I—I with my years of studies, with my knowledge of Cézanne, Renoir, Michelangelo, abstract form, dynamic rhythm, inter-relation of objects—you with a tool you have carved yourself, running your rough, gnarly hand over its negative curves, in complete appreciation of the primitive forms it will carve in wood; not realizing how

close you come to—let us say, Archipenko!—with his concave forms in a statue, which one is expected to translate, aesthetically, into convex ones.

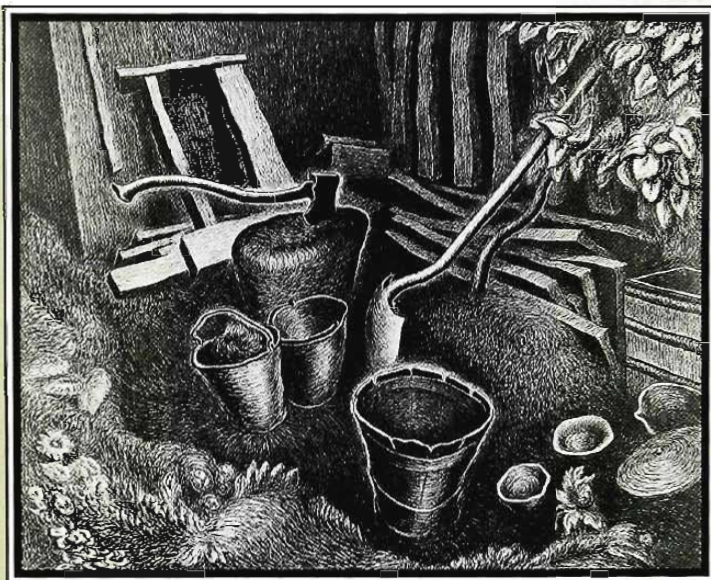
Gág's task in *Uncle Frank's Workshop* was to find the mysterious bridge between his craft and her art. In the dim light of the workshop, she presents the tools, a large board, the wood suspended from the ceiling to be seasoned, half-finished wooden furniture, rags and varnishes, and the old wood stove. All carry emotional associations of authenticity and family; they are tangible connections to the past. Perhaps the scratchy textures of the wood objects were an analog to Wanda's memory of the way Uncle Frank's beard felt when he greeted her as a child. Frank himself is not pictured—the country people Gág honors in many still-life



Uncle Frank's Workshop (1935), lithograph on zinc plate

and landscape prints are never rendered directly—but his presence is palpable.¹⁷

Back in New Jersey, Gág could not shake from her mind that poignant moment in 1929 when the “taciturn, inarticulate creator,” Uncle Frank, stood alone beside the railroad track in homage to her as she took the Chicago and Northwestern out of New Ulm for the last time. “To think that he would come out especially to



Backyard Corner (1930), lithograph on stone

look at that train, knowing that he could not really see me—this dramatic final scene to my New Ulm visit, pierced my Slavic Biebl-Gág heart, like a sharp sweet blade, and the tears ran fiercely, hotly, ecstatically, hurtlingly down my face.”¹⁸

The gentle, rolling farmland near All Creation was Gág’s favorite subject during the mid-1930s. The lay of this land, pockmarked by clusters of deciduous trees, which she stylized

into expanding arcs of fertility, was not very different from that of her native Brown County. In these late nature pictures, Gág seemed to blur the distinction between what she actually saw in rural New Jersey and what she had absorbed as a child in Minnesota. *Steep Road* (1934), *Spring on the Hillside* (1935), and *Ploughed Fields* (1936) are prime examples of such a union. The folds of hills and the belts of trees are drawn in mellifluous contours to suggest the mysteries that lie at the core of all nature art. *Spring on the Hillside*, with its pattern of pleated fields, invites comparison to some of Grant Wood’s idealized reorderings of midwestern farmland, such as his 1932 painting *Stone City, Iowa*.¹⁹

Genre and still-life lithographs such as *Backyard Corner* (1930) and *The Forge* (1932) also show a subdued mood and tightened structure. The knobby folksiness of the shovels, wooden pails, and blacksmith gear, put into interlocking shapes and bathed in resonant light, symbolizes life linked with the soil—consoling, warm, and nourishing. This is the stuff of nineteenth-century pastoral myth-makers—artists like François Millet and Jules Breton, whose works, enormously popular in America at the turn of the century when Gág was growing up, she likely knew. It is a blend of realist subjects and romanticized sentiments, rendered by painters alarmed that the Industrial Revolution was destroying agrarian ways.²⁰

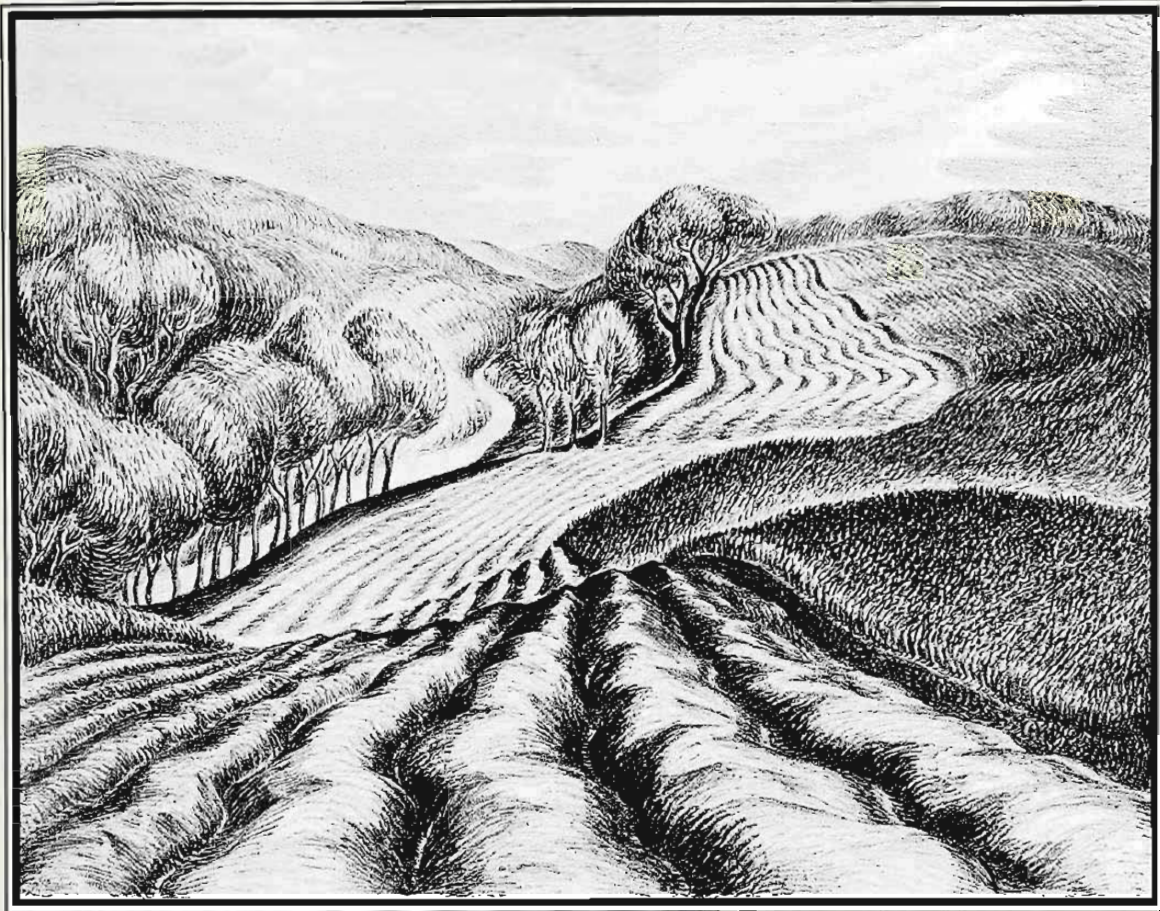
The artist who may have felt this most urgently was Vincent Van Gogh, and sometimes the Dutch artist seemed to be peering over Gág’s shoulder as she composed her pictures. She knew Van Gogh’s work well. Although she never traveled to Amsterdam or Paris and saw but a few of his paintings in New York, Gág’s library at All Creation contained at least six books on the Dutch artist, including a two-volume treatment by Julius Meier-Graefe with more than 100 fine illustrations. Moreover, Van Gogh’s philosophy of art and life affected her

¹⁷ See Richard R. Brettell and Caroline Brettell, *Painters and Peasants in the Nineteenth Century* (Geneva: Skira, 1983) on the values connected with this enduringly popular subject matter. Gág’s prints explore the idea of farmers as noble, hardworking, and family oriented even though they are not pictured, possibly because she lacked confidence in drawing the human figure. Gág had no training in drawing from live nudes and her attempts at rendering the figure were tentative, even embarrassing. See, for example, *Nude* (1917) in Winnan, *Wanda Gág*, 99; Gág, diary, July 5, 1924, where she writes disparagingly of her figure drawings.

¹⁸ Gág, diary, Mar. 6 and 16, 1930.

¹⁹ On Gág’s place in the Minnesota landscape tradition, see Thomas O’Sullivan’s introductory essay by the same title in *Shaping the Land: Minnesota Landscapes 1840s to the Present* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), 12–13.

²⁰ On Gág’s relation to the nineteenth-century tradition of painting peasant life, see Brettell and Brettell, *Painters and Peasants*, especially 45–47, and Gabriel P. Weisberg, *The Realist Tradition: French Painting and Drawing, 1830–1900* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980).



Ploughed Fields (1936), lithograph on zinc plate

deeply. Both Van Gogh and Gág were passionate letter writers and diarists, and their writings are filled with ecstatic declarations about nature and its healing properties for the sensitive artist. Like the Dutch painter, Gág was a thoroughgoing romantic who was ill at ease in the modern city and willing to go into isolation to save her soul. Both carried a deep affection for folk culture, manifested in fondness for peasant dress: Van Gogh loved to paint in the blue smocks of Flemish cattle traders, Gág in the embroidered linen blouses of her Bohemian forebears.²¹

A more important aspect of the romanticism Gág shared with Van Gogh was a belief in the

moral superiority of rural folkways. Among other things, this empathy with the peasant allowed each artist to rationalize limited academic training—to scorn as anemic and false the watered-down classical drawing and compositional methods learned in fine-arts schools. Each searched for a more original style that bent representational accuracy to express strong feeling. For Van Gogh, it was an awkward, primitivistic handling of human and landscape form. For Gág, it was curvilinear yet streamlined drawing of humble objects and scenes that paralleled the finely wrought crafts of the central European countryside.²²

²¹ Gág, diary, Apr. 22, June 4, 1927, Mar. 3, 1930. Some books from All Creation are now at the Wanda Gág House in New Ulm, including four titles on Van Gogh. The authors are grateful to James Beck, curator of the the Wanda Gág House, for pointing these out. On Van Gogh's immersion in the folkways of Provence, see Ronald Pickvance, "Van Gogh in Arles," in *Van Gogh in Arles* (New York: Metropolitan Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 11–30.

²² Ross Neher, "Van Gogh's Problem with Tradition," *Arts* (N.Y.) 65 (Jan. 1987): 43–48. As a child, Gág had pored over her father's books on German, Swiss, and Hungarian painting, printmaking, and crafts; see, for example, Gág, diary, Sept.–Nov. 1920. *Ludwig Richter*, an 1896 volume from the library at All Creation, may be one of her father's books.

Of course, Gág's work does deal with the specific character of childhood memories: her landscapes, for instance, partake of the rich undulations of New Ulm, a town that rises in a series of terraces above the Minnesota River, all contained within a broad and fertile valley. Yet Gág thought of rural life in Minnesota and New Jersey in archetypal terms: her pastoral scenes were conceived, not merely observed. In a print like *Ploughed Fields*, she imposes an obstinate rhythm of repetitive lines within a flattened, schematic space that closely recalls Van Gogh's staccato drawings of Provence. Writing about her 1929 train trip to Minneapolis, Gág recalled her excitement at the flat landscape reminiscent of the area around Arles that Van Gogh painted, and she wondered how she could overcome her difficulty in getting the land to "lie flat" in her own drawings.²³

Both artists were seeking an accord among the peasants and their tasks, their creations, and environment. A fundamental difference was Van Gogh's ability to realize the full expressive potential of strong colors; it became a chronic disappointment to Gág that she could not do the same. But both artists project intense emotions onto their landscapes, referring as much to their own psyches as to nature. Texture is also a key to the emotional content: Van Gogh's heaps of impasto provoke a strong sense of touch in the viewer. As art historian Bradley Collins has put it: "By making the world flesh, Van Gogh gives us access to some of our most powerful and archaic urges. We return to that very early infantile state in which we apprehend our mother or caretaker as much through the skin as the eyes. Van Gogh's art permits us, albeit in a sublimated visual form, to touch freely—to caress, nudge, fondle—the bodies around us."²⁴ For Gág, the archaic sense of touching and caressing is aroused in a different but equally basic way: through wavy, sensuous surfaces. Hers is an art of strong recall, perhaps of a young girl's primal desire to return to the protective warmth of her parents' bodies.

Gág was only marginally connected to the much-ballyhooed Regionalist movement of the

1930s. She resisted the examples set by Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood to renounce the wicked East and return to ancestral homes in the Midwest to focus on subjects there. Her Minnesota themes were quiet, not epic. Gág gave rapt attention to the most humble of objects—old lamps, spinning wheels, and antique sewing machines, as well as garden vegetables, pussy willows, and spruce trees. Such work clearly reveals a romantic nostalgia for the rural verities of the handicraft age absorbed as a child in the tradition-rich Bohemian environment of Brown County, even if she did not relocate there in the 1930s to create it.²⁵ The picture books and lithographs Gág created during this troubled era embody a childlike vision, much like the poetry of Wordsworth and other nineteenth-century romantics who believed that children had the most direct access to the sublime. Nature is, in Gág's mature work, about miracle and wonder.

As the depression drew to a close and war clouds began to gather in Europe, Wanda Gág was still at the peak of her ability. But her productive days as a fine artist were over, partly because of health problems that often confined her to bed, keeping her away from the studio for long periods. From time to time she would swear off meat, coffee, and tobacco in an attempt to calm her nerves and restore her vigor. Also weighing on her spirits were the frustrations of trying to paint in oils. These ambitions may have derived in part from the injunction laid upon her by the dying Anton Gág to complete *his work* (cut short by an early death from tuberculosis), but they were also stimulated by the continual prodding of her dear friend and mentor Carl Ziggrosser, who believed that successful paintings would lift her into the upper echelon of American artists.²⁶

Sadly, Gág was never satisfied with her efforts: color became muddy when she tried to achieve solid form; even in watercolors, color seemed merely decorative. Yet she persisted in painting and, especially, drawing at All Creation during World War II. Her face and figure lost their extraordinary youthfulness, and there was

²³ Gág's edition of Van Gogh's letters is illustrated with reproductions of reed-pen drawings; see also Neher, "Van Gogh's Problem," 46–47; Gág, diary, Mar. 3, 1930.

²⁴ Bradley Collins, "Art and Psychoanalysis: Van Gogh and Gauguin on the Couch," *Art in America* 77 (Dec. 1989): 59.

²⁵ Matthew Baigrell, *The American Scene: American Painting in the 1930's* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 46–55; Hoyle, *Wanda Gág*, 3, 67–68. Winman writes that Gág "drew on Bohemian motifs and customs," pointing to the use of Old World symbols in *The Forge* and in the wood engraving *Franklin Stone* (1927); Winman, *Wanda Gág*, 65–66.

²⁶ Winman, *Wanda Gág*, 61; Gág, diary, Jan. 16, 1923, June 14, 1927, Feb. 14, 1928, Sept. 1933.

a weariness about her that troubled friends and family. She rarely went into Manhattan, although her diminutive figure could be spotted occasionally at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Zigrosser now worked.²⁷

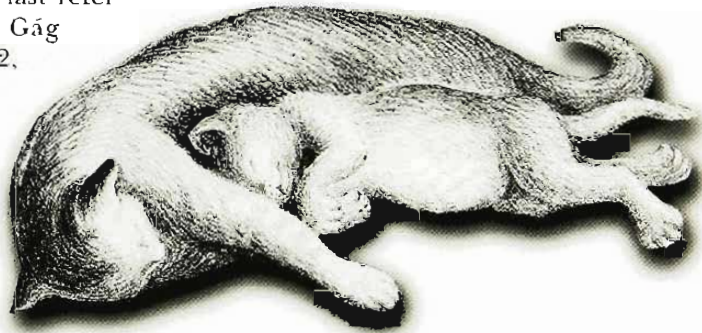
Gág was not at the forefront of American art, but she never considered herself a failure. It is true that she had no role in the avant-garde: like most of the Weyhe Gallery printmakers, she held a middle ground between the abstract and academic artists of her era. It was widely accepted in Wanda Gág's day that, in order to do important work, an artist must make exciting innovations in style or technique, particularly in oil painting. But this idea has been questioned in recent years. Historian Selma Kraft has observed that women tend to see art as *connection* and "thus are not likely to engage in the kind of abrupt breaks with tradition that innovation requires." Pursuit of the latter, Kraft argues, can involve the loss of the "richness of meaning and social context found in women's art."²⁸ Perhaps we should honor Wanda Gág for such humanistic values, found throughout her work.

In what was probably her last reference to art and aesthetics, Gág wrote philosophically in 1942, "Perhaps I'm not a painter after all. Perhaps in a more calm period I might be able to get somewhere with it still, but at present it seems somehow less important than writing to me." In one

form or another, writing had always been central to Gág and, while she never said it, a creative act the equal of visual art. In the same diary entry she observed:

While I'm painting nowadays, I feel selfish to be putting down one stroke or another, while human beings are starving, being executed and being killed by millions on the battlefields; with writing somehow this feeling is not as strong, perhaps because I feel that provided I can perfect myself in this craft, I will later be able to write some of my deepest convictions as I could not hope to do graphically or in color.²⁹

Wanda Gág was planning to start an autobiography when the first signs of lung cancer appeared in 1944. She was barely 50. Earle Humphreys, whom she had married the year before, was by her side for the final two years. As much as we lament the absence of more lithographs, we are perhaps more bereft of the long portrait of herself and her Minnesota home that she did not live to write.



²⁷ Gág, diary, Sept. 12, 1934, July 26, 1938; see also Winnan, *Wanda Gág*, 66–67.

²⁸ Selma Kraft, "Definition of Feminist Art or Feminist Definition of Art?" in *Politics, Gender, and the Arts: Women, the Arts, and Society*, ed. Ronald Dotterer and Susan Bowers (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 1992), 16.

²⁹ Gág, diary, Aug. 5, 1942.

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