

Reciprocal Connections: Wanda Gag and Her Hometown Community of New Ulm, Minnesota

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Abstract:

A noted artist from New Ulm, Minnesota, Wanda Gag was strongly influenced by her community. Her legacy lives on, as well as her influence on the community itself. Born in 1893, Gag started from very humble beginnings. Her father was an artist, but was unable to devote all of his time to his passion. He needed to work on commercial art to provide an income for his family. With the death of her parents early on in her life, Wanda became the sole provider for her family. Instead of working as a store clerk, Wanda focused on completing her education and selling her art to help provide an income. Her skills were noticed and she received a scholarship to the Saint Paul School of Art. In 1917, she received a scholarship to attend the Arts Students League school in New York City. There, Gag's distinctive style began to develop: tilted structures, ordinary items becoming magical, curved lines and forms, motion and a strong focus on nature. Her love of nature came from her early years as a child growing up in rural Minnesota. One of her favorite places in New Ulm was her grandparents' farm. She was later inspired by her many trips through Goosetown, the stories her relatives shared, and pleasant memories of her grandparents' home. Today her memory lives on. Each year a birthday party is held in her honor at the Wanda Gag House (a National Historical Site). This paper shows the interconnectedness of the artist Wanda Gag and her community of New Ulm, focusing on the years prior to her move to New York City.

"Live to draw, draw to live," was Wanda Gag's personal motto (Swain 22). Wanda Gag was a very influential person. Her community and her close knit family helped to shape who she was as an artist. Other influences included having artists for her parents, being the firstborn child who ended up taking responsibility for her siblings at an early age, and living through two World Wars and the Great Depression. In turn, Gag greatly influenced her hometown. Her original home (Figs. 1 and 2) and the story of her life, as well as her works of art, are treasured by the community.



**Figures 1-2: The house in New Ulm, MN, where Wanda Gag grew up.
Photos by: Leda Cempellin / Courtesy Wanda Gag House Association.**

Wanda Gag was born on March 11, 1893, in the rural town of New Ulm, Minnesota (L'Enfant 13). At that time, New Ulm was populated mostly by Middle Europeans, especially German Americans. In fact, most of the New Ulm people spoke German in their everyday lives. Wanda's father and mother both grew up in Bohemia, which was formerly part of Austria (Winnan 2). The countryside around New Ulm looks similar to the hills of Bohemia. It is evident that Wanda Gag's "Spring on the Hillside" (Fig. 3) mirrors both the countryside of New Ulm and the Hills of Pernartitz, Bohemia (shown in photograph L'Enfant 23).

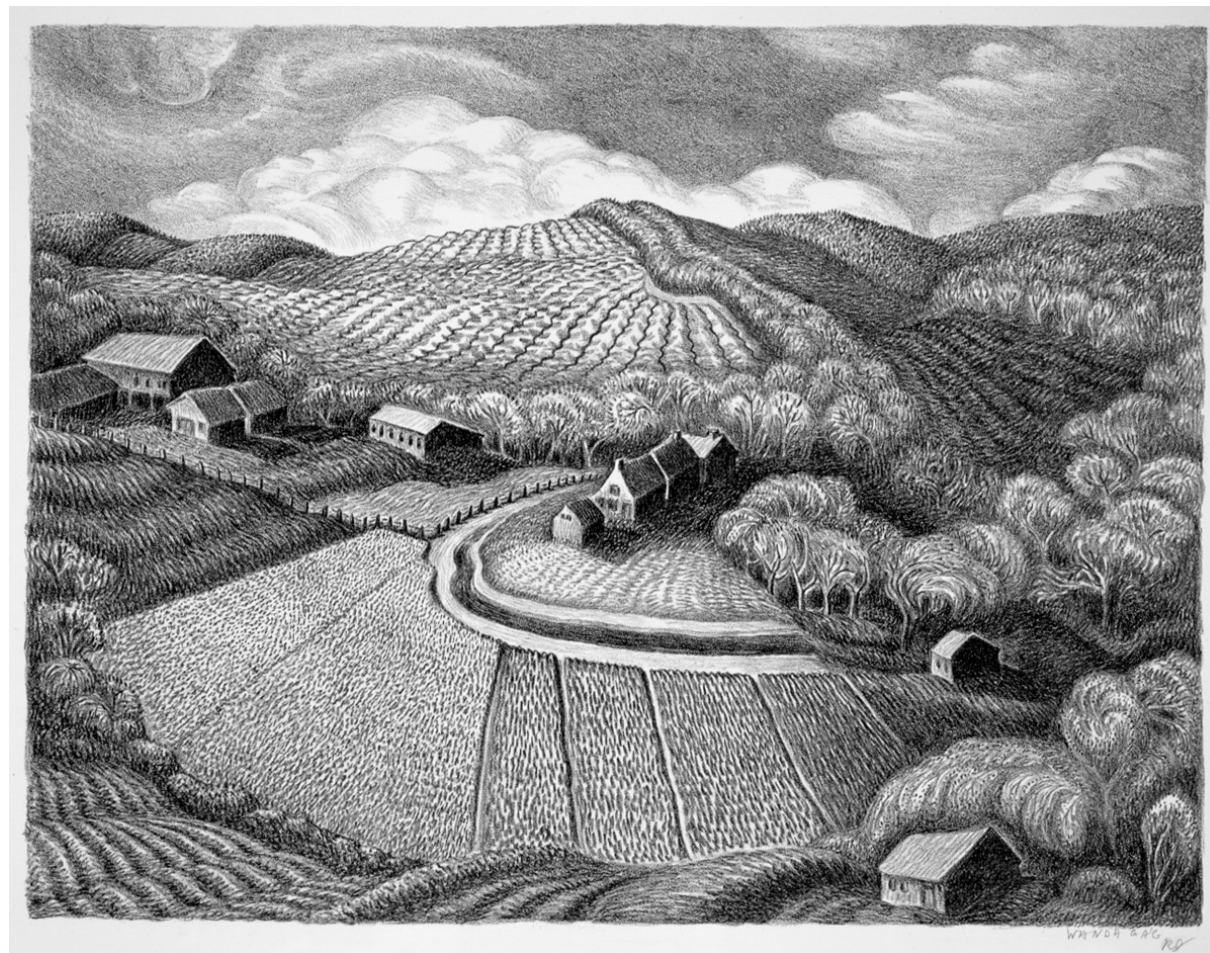


Figure 3: Wanda Gag, *Spring on the Hillside*, 1935, lithograph, 12.125 x 16 inches. Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN.

The citizens of New Ulm maintained old world customs and legends. These traditions were apparent in the Gag household as well. At the Wanda Gag House, it was interesting to note that in the parent's bedroom the door lock had been installed upside-down. This was believed to confuse and keep out evil spirits (Fig. 4).

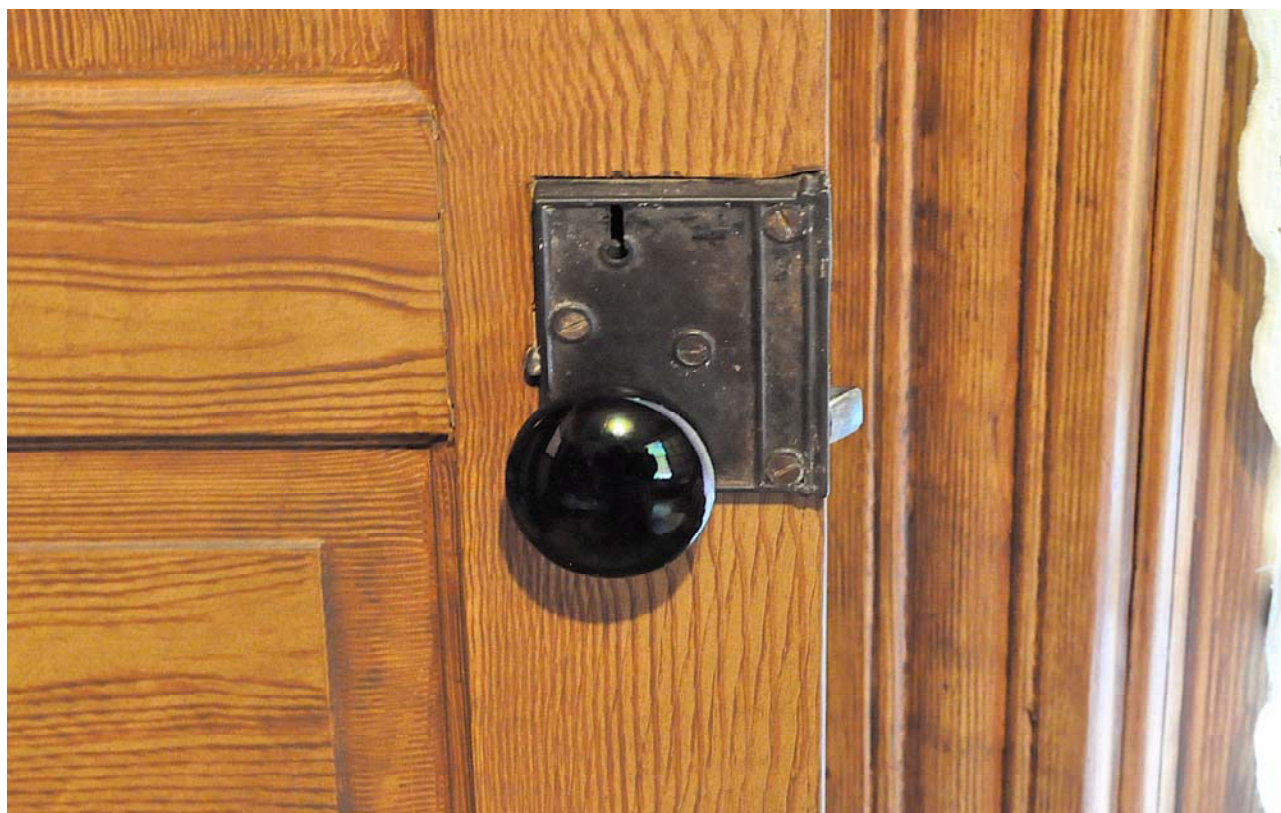


Figure 4: The door lock in the bedroom of Wanda Gag's parents. Photo by: Leda Cempellin / Courtesy Wanda Gag House Association

Wanda was the eldest of seven children (L'Enfant 18) (Fig. 5). An old New Ulm memory is that if offered the choice of a gift, the Gag children would rather have a pencil than a penny (Swain 3).

The Gag family was not wealthy, so even a pencil was a great treasure. In Wanda's later artworks as a mature artist, she seldom used color. Many of her art pieces are displayed in her childhood home;--all in black, white, and gray, except for one watercolor painting "Slushy Evening." The main focus of this painting is a large industrial building in the evening. The predominant colors in this work are black and gray with muted yellows and oranges added. These colors only appear in the horizon and the light posts. The light emitted from these light posts has similarities to Van Gogh's works. Displayed in a bookcase, in the Gag house, are several books about Vincent Van Gogh (Fig. 6).

The majority of her works are black and white lithographs and woodcarvings. She grew up at a rather bleak time in America. I believe these factors influenced her choice of media and color.



Figure 5: Wanda Gag holding artist's palette, 1916-1917. Photograph. Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN



Figure 6: Wanda Gag's library. Photo by: Leda Cempellin / Courtesy Wanda Gag House Association

During Wanda's childhood, she and her siblings were encouraged to draw and to be imaginative. Creative activities were taken for granted in the Gag household because both parents were artists. The children were very gifted and spent their time writing poems and stories, singing, and drawing (Fig. 7).

Wanda loved to watch her father, Anton, paint and sketch in his studio. It was a magical place, lighted with natural light from a skylight. The Gag home also contained a large library, and Wanda often spent afternoons reading fairy tales (L'Enfant 72). Some of her most recognized work is from her published children's books. Wanda often entertained her siblings with stories that she made up or retold fairy tales that were passed down to her. In 1928, Wanda signed a contract to write and illustrate a children's book entitled *"Millions of Cats."* This is an original story in which she pioneered the use of one design across two pages (Winnan 36-37). An example of this is seen in this book on pages 4 and 5 (Gag 4-5). It depicts the "very old man," walking through the rolling hills and countryside. Gag shows motion through this illustration by her use of curved lines and the wave-shaped layout of the drawing across the pages. Even some of the trees seem to be blowing in the wind as the clouds float gently across the sky.



Figure 7: Detail from a game created by Wanda Gag. Photo by: Sara Keller / Courtesy Wanda Gag House Association.

The Gag children were frequent visitors at their maternal grandparents' house. This home was situated on a small farm close to New Ulm. The time she spent at her grandparents' home influenced her later artwork in a significant way. It took about an hour for the Gag children to walk to their grandparents' farm. During this walk the children absorbed all the sights, sounds, and even smells. Part of this walk took the children through Goosetown (Winnan 43), the oldest area of New Ulm located along the Minnesota River. Goosetown's houses and buildings were often painted with vibrant colors, which reflected the old world German heritage. The residents of Goosetown frequently kept flocks of geese. Later in her life, Wanda often drew from these experiences to create scenes for her stories and illustrations. She was able to take everyday items and make them look magical (Winnan 42). Two examples of this are: "Spinning Wheel" and "Fireplace."

In "Spinning Wheel" (Fig. 8), the spinning wheel is the center of attention, but the wheel casts an eerie shadow on the wall. It is up to the viewer to interpret the shadow image. In 1930, many homes had fireplaces. Along the lower edge of the "Fireplace" lithograph, the glowing grates draw the eye and then upward to the candles atop the mantle.

In addition to the house and farm buildings at their grandparents' home there were gardens, woods, fields, and riverbanks to explore. Many of Wanda's lithographs and sketches display fields and different corners of her grandparents' home. These works show that Wanda was very content and happy when she was visiting her grandparents. They also display her love of nature and the simple rural life. In fact her lithographs, "Grandma's Parlor and "Grandma's Kitchen (Fig. 9)," are two of her most

well known prints (Winnan 41). Both were illustrations from her grandparent's home in New Ulm.



Figure 8: Wanda Gag, *Spinning Wheel*, ca. 1925, woodcut on paper, 9.75 x 8 inches. Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN.

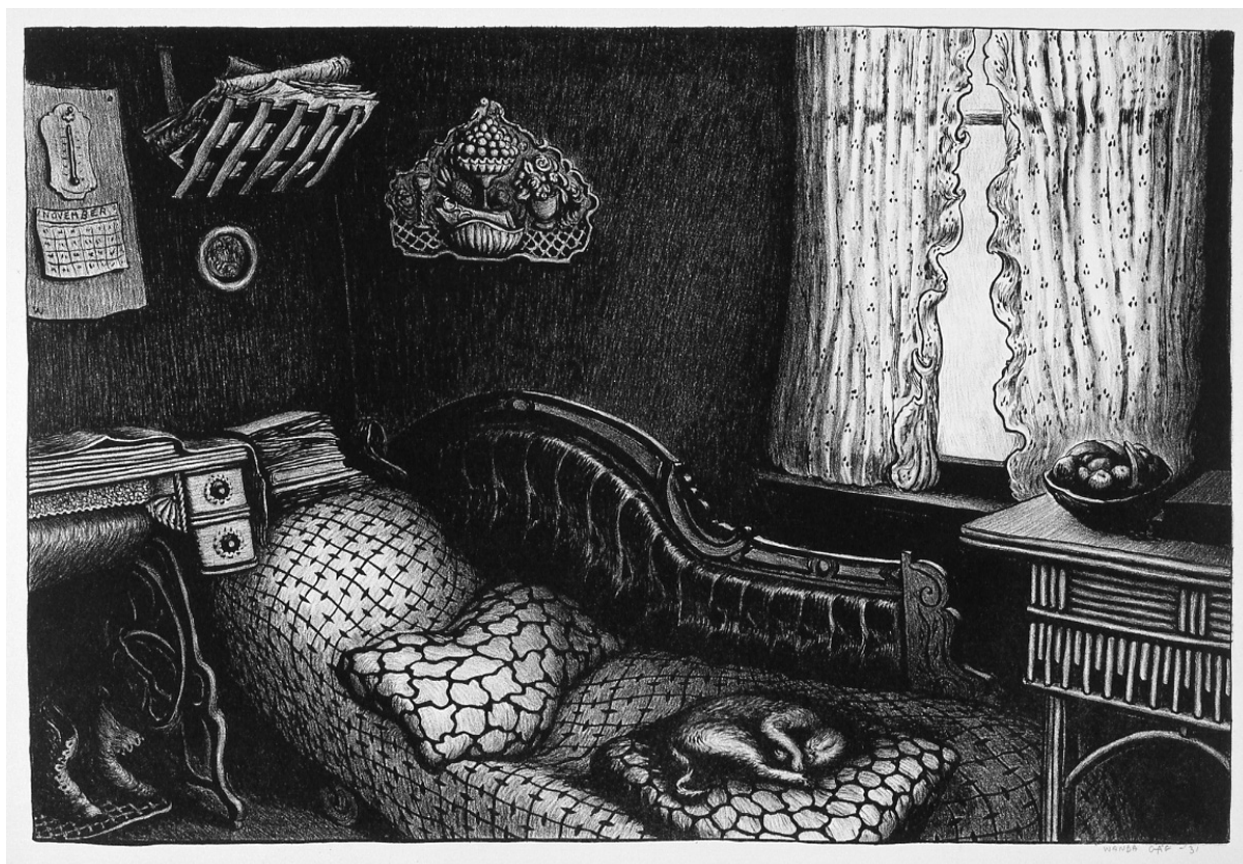


Figure 9: Wanda Gag, *Grandma's Kitchen*, 1931, lithograph on paper, 10 x 13 inches. Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, MN.

Wanda drew sketches for these prints in 1929, when she visited her grandparents' home after a long absence. These prints show her love of simple rural homes and the ordinary items in them. "Grandma's Parlor" shows items on one side of the room. A chest of drawers and a small table with figurines are two focal areas. To show texture in the walls and the wood floor Gag used many lines of varying thickness. Similar to "Spinning Wheel," the shadow from the chest of drawers stands out as well. Moving to another room, "Grandma's Kitchen" (Fig. 9) depicts a sleeping cat curled up on a reclining couch. The atmosphere of the room is uniformly dark, with the exception of a few areas--the window, curtains, and the couch. As in other art pieces (see Fig. 3), Gag enjoys the use of curved lines.

Family members of Wanda's mother's were all very artistic, and each person had a unique and unusual personality. Many of her uncles were craftsmen and worked with their hands. Her aunts and uncles regularly told stories, from fairytales to their adventures. Her aunts, Mary and Lena, taught Wanda to sew and to cook, and she remodeled clothes that were given to her family (Swain 27). Her sewing and embroidery skills strongly displayed her bohemian and gypsy style. A colorful blouse she created is on display at the Wanda Gag House (Figs. 10, 11 and 12).





Figures 10, 11, 12: Blouse designed by Wanda Gag. Photos by: Leda Cempellin / Courtesy Wanda Gag House Association

Anton Gag, Wanda's father, died of tuberculosis when she was just fifteen. Her mother had always been sickly and the death of her husband only worsened her condition (Swain 19). Because Wanda was the oldest child, the responsibility for the family's welfare fell heavily onto her shoulders. She was unable to go to school full time, due to the daily household chores and the duties of being the family provider. Many New Ulm people felt that Wanda should get a job as a store clerk to provide for her family. But instead of quitting school and working as a clerk, Wanda sold her artwork as postcards and sent in her drawings to the Junior Journal. This was a children's supplement to the Minneapolis Journal newspaper (Winnan 2). The community of New Ulm was not always the most supportive of Wanda's decisions. She was very independent and challenged traditional views. Wanda was frequently upset by rumors that said she did nothing but read and draw all day (Swain 24). Her mother passed away when she was only twenty-three years old (L'Enfant 15), thus making her the main provider for herself and her six siblings.

Despite unfavorable odds, Wanda was able to complete her high school degree. She showed her determination by continuing high school even when the people of New Ulm thought she should drop out and provide for the family. Some community members even offered to adopt the younger children, but this would have meant splitting up her family. Wanda Gag refused these offers, since she wanted to keep her family together (L'Enfant 89) and support the completion of all her siblings' education. After graduating from high school, Wanda took a job as a schoolteacher in a nearby town. This job paid very well, but it did not allow her the creative freedom she craved. Luckily, after the year

of teaching, the next oldest sister took a teaching job to support the rest of the family (Swain 34). With this extra family income, Wanda was able to accept a scholarship to attend the Saint Paul School of Art (Winnan 4), a commercial art school that focused on preparing students for business. It was very structured, and because she was considering fashion design she spent a considerable amount of time drawing people. A 1914 photograph shows Wanda with a poster she submitted for a contest during the Twin Cities' Fashion Week.³

Wanda developed a reputation for being somewhat rebellious. She did not want her artwork to conform, as her quote shows: "...I don't give two cents [for] how other people work. Just because every one else works one way, is just the reason why I must work another," (Gag qtd. in Winnan 5).

Even though Gag regularly challenged the traditional art teaching methods at the Saint Paul School of Art, her work was special and was noticed. In 1917, she won a scholarship to attend the Art Students League in New York City (Winnan 6). This scholarship was one of only 12 awarded nation-wide. Wanda worked hard at art school and flourished into a bright young artist and an award-winning author of children's book.

Gag's influence on her hometown community is still apparent today. At her first teaching job she had the students do art projects and drawings. This was an unorthodox method of teaching for a small rural school. And although the parents of the students sometimes did not know what to think about her teaching methods, the superintendent of the school approved of them (Swain 32).

Her art teaching methods are mirrored today, with very experienced art teachers working at the public schools in New Ulm. These teachers work together to help create a love for the arts among their students. There are even annual art shows at the elementary schools. These shows allow the students to display their projects and are well attended by community members.

The Gag home is a historic site in Minnesota and has been carefully restored to its original condition. A photograph that Anton Gag had taken of the house, as well as diary entries, were used to bring it back to its original look. Various artworks are displayed at the Gag house. These works include paintings, prints, and sketches by Anton (Fig. 13), Wanda, and even her youngest sister Flavia. Photographs and drawings from current local artists are shown as well. Other New Ulm art galleries (like the Kiesling House and the Brown County Historical Museum) display works of art done by the many local artists who call New Ulm their home.

Wanda Gag is very celebrated in her hometown community. I can remember when I was a little girl that I painted a wooden cat image for a parade float to honor the artist and her book *Millions of Cats*. During the school year (at the elementary level) the students took a field trip to tour the Gag house. Her birthday is celebrated every year, and the festivities at the Gag home include readings of her literary works, drawing opportunities for children, and treats of cupcakes topped with little cat images (Cat Tales 1).



Figure 13: Anton Gag, "Seascape", c. 1880. Oil painting. Donated to the Association by Robert Jenson. Photo by: Leda Cempellin/ Courtesy Wanda Gag House Association.

Gag's artwork progressed throughout her career. At the art school in St. Paul, she frequently drew lifelike images of women and children in drypoint medium. Her drawings of buildings were more straightforward, realistic, and made in one point perspective. As Wanda moved to the art school in New York, her drawings seemed to acquire more freedom, as in her 1918 Drypoint drawing, "Nude." She worked to express her personal vision of nature. Similar to Van Gogh, Gag focused on trees (Winnan 30-31) and how to convey the tree foliage against the sky, as well as how to draw the atmosphere surrounding objects. Later, Wanda retreated to the countryside in Connecticut. Here she worked on "training her eye to see as her mind planned, as opposed to drawing what her eyes saw" (Winnan 21). One apple tree in particular was repeatedly drawn. The drawing, "My Special Tree, Chidlow Place". shows her unique interpretation of a tree form. Many of Gag's works have repetition and rhythm. This similarity in lines creates a feeling of unity and an overall cohesiveness. "Spring on the Hillside," (Fig. 3) clearly shows her use of repetition. In one way, Gag has meticulously repeated small lines to show the texture of the fields in the foreground. In addition, the treetops have the same curves, angles, and flowing lines. Balance is created in Wanda Gag's work by her strategic placement of light items opposite darker, heavier objects. For example, in the lithograph "Grandma's Kitchen" (Fig. 9), a corner window, surrounded by a light and airy curtain, is diagonally placed across from a dark, heavier couch. This window is full of natural bright light and brings a balance to this relatively dark room. Gag was very good at placing emphasis on a certain point in her work and

then focusing the rest of the piece on that certain object. In her wood engraving on maple “Lantern and Fireplace,” the emphasis is on the lantern. The light emitted from the lantern seems to draw the viewer’s eye back to it. Even the shading of the fireplace draws one’s eyes from the floor of the room up to the center ceiling of the room. On the ceiling, the shadows created by the lantern produce a radial pattern. This radial pattern pulls the viewer’s eye to the place where the lantern is connected to the ceiling, by a chain; and then the eye follows this chain down to the lantern. The lantern is the most detailed object in this engraving. This gives the viewer the visual clue that the lantern deserves the focal point of this piece of art. In general, Wanda Gag’s style evolved to include tilted structures, absence of human form, curved lines, her unique personal view of nature, bold light and dark contrasts, creative use of shadows, fairytale-like quality, muted range of colors, increased energy, and motion (Fig. 14).



Figure 14: Door to a storage area in the attic of the Wanda Gag’s house. Spaces, such as this one, explain some major stylistic features in Wanda’s work (compare Fig. 8). Photo by: Leda Cempellin / Courtesy Wanda Gag House Association

In conclusion, numerous factors influenced the evolution of Wanda Gag's artwork. Among these factors are: the rural New Ulm German community, Goosetown, her German Bohemian family, the encouragement from her parents and her studies at the art school in Saint Paul and in New York. Wanda left her mark on her hometown, New Ulm, Minnesota. Her love for art, nature, education, and family are strong values in the city. As a brave, strong, independent woman, she is a role model to many young girls; and her influence in the rural Minnesota community will last for many years to come.

NOTES:

- ¹ Sara Keller is an Honors Freshmen student at SDSU. This reconstruction of the biography of this Minnesota artist during her period in rural Minnesota, combined with a formalist analysis of a choice of artworks, represents an outstanding research contribution to the ARTH 100 Art Appreciation course.
- ² Without the extensive assistance of Dr. John Isch, on behalf of the Wanda Gag House Association in New Ulm, MN, we would not have been able to publish this essay. We wish to acknowledge the professional review work and the extensive feedback volunteered by John Isch, Beverlee Haar, James Boeck, in their capacity of Board Members of the Wanda Gag House Association and external reviewers. We wish to thank also Diana R. Lee Schaefer and the Wanda Gag House Association, for having graciously authorized the images from the house that accompany this text; Szott Brian, Bridget White, Eric Mortenson Diane Adams-Graf, and the Minnesota Historical Society, for assistance through the process, and Gary Harm's widow, for the courtesy on the images of the Minnesota Historical Society. We also wish to gratefully acknowledge the Visual Arts Department at South Dakota State University, for generously sponsoring the images from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.
- ³ The photo in question, 1914, belongs to the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society, Location no. por 11071 r12, Negative no. 83246.

<http://collections.mnhs.org/visualresources/image.cfm?imageid=124762&Page=2&Digital=Yes&Keywords=wanda%20gag&SearchType=Basic&CFID=7915942&CFTOKEN=66482603>

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