

The Rabblrouser and the Homebody: Minnesota's Elizabeth Olds and Wanda Gág

Exhibition Dates: March 24 - December 9, 2018

Gallery 315 Labels – FINAL

Wanda Gág

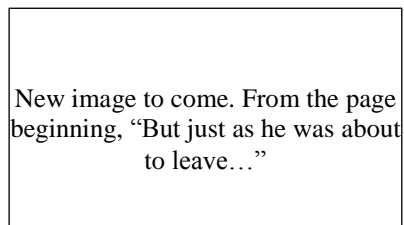
American, 1893–1946

Two Trees, 1923

Linocut

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

With the fierce gouge marks on this early linoleum block print, Wanda Gág may have been signaling her urgent desire to become a printmaker. We see her developing the language that would characterize her work: the swaying forms, the eerie lighting effects, the storybook feel. The man's beard in the Gág book *Millions of Cats* (1928) could be a direct descendant of the foliage on these trees.



The once-lonely very old man from Gág's *Millions of Cats*.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Chidlow, Connecticut, 1924

Brush and ink on sandpaper

Bequest of the Estate of Wanda Gág 56.29.6

Wanda Gág declared that no person or thing sent her into ecstasy like this old apple tree. Starting in 1923 she fled New York City for the countryside a good part of every year, and this tree was at a house she rented in Connecticut. She drew it obsessively, struck by the vitality of its smooth, dead branches. In some drawings, like this one on sandpaper, the tree turned sinister and its branches, she said, became claws.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Moonlight, 1926

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of the Estate of Wanda Gág P.12,449

Wanda Gág believed that things radiated their own special atmosphere, or “essence” as she called it, and she was always trying to find an object’s hidden essence and express it in her prints. Could *Moonlight* be a metaphor for her struggle? This field is visible when the moon peeks through the clouds; but the minute the clouds move by, the landscape will be hidden in darkness once again.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Elevated Station, 1926

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.6

In Wanda Gág’s day, New Yorkers traveled up and down Manhattan by trains running on elevated tracks. (It’s doubtful the thrifty Gág ever splurged on the nickel fare.) This charming wooden railway station was at Columbus and 81st Street. Filtered through Gág’s idiosyncratic inner vision, it has been transformed into a gangly creature pulsing with energy. About ten years after this print was made, the elevated train lines began to close, replaced by the subway.



A station along New York’s elevated railroad, 1936.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Tumble Timbers in Spring, 1927

Pastel and gouache on paper

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

Awash in the pale pinks and greens of spring, this work was a 1927 Christmas gift to Earle Humphreys, Wanda Gág’s lifelong partner and eventual husband. *Tumble Timbers* was a house she rented in rural New Jersey, about 60 miles from New York City.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Tumble Timbers, 1926

Wash lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.4

Tumble Timbers was Wanda Gág’s name for the place she rented (1925–29) to get out of New York and into nature. She so loved its ramshackle appearance that she talked the landlord out of repairing the sagging porch. In this print, she distorted the house, supersized the garden, and made them both seem to grow out of the earth, as if interconnected.

Secluded, stripped-down, and self-sufficient, Tumble Timbers gave Gág time to work. Her years there were the most productive in her life, yielding 35 prints in 1926–27 alone.



Tumble Timbers, 1929.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Gumbo Lane, 1927

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.7

This slightly surreal scene captures Wanda Gág’s rapture over the garden at her rural retreat Tumble Timbers. She nicknamed the garden Gumbo Lane. It produced nothing more exotic than lima beans and Swiss chard, but to Gág it was something primal and passionately alive. The plants sprout eyes, the wooden posts rear up like snakes, and the grape arbor appears ready to charge. The little building at upper right was the outhouse for Tumble Timbers, which had no electricity or running water.



Gág tending her garden, dubbed Gumbo Lane.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Earle's Shoes, 1927

Brush and black ink on paper

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

These shoes belonged to Earle Humphreys, Wanda Gág's longtime companion and eventual husband. He shared her back-to-nature ethos and tended to the endless chores at Tumble Timbers so Gág could focus on her art and children's books. Consistent with her belief that inanimate things seem to have an "intelligence," these shoes continue to radiate the energy of their owner long after the workday is done.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Fireplace, 1930

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of the Estate of Wanda Gág P.12,457

This fireplace was at the Connecticut country home of New York newspaperman Lewis Gannett (1891–1966). Wanda Gág had time to draw it in 1930 when Gannett lent her his house for the summer. Five different Gág siblings paid long visits, making this hearth—with its connotations of comfort and family—an especially potent subject.

The knobby ironwork points to the folk-like quality in much of Gág's work. It can be traced to her German-Bohemian childhood in New Ulm, Minnesota, which was filled with fairytales, folk legends, and old-world craftsmanship.

[RURIK: GOES IN CASE]

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Plate for Grandma’s Parlor, c. 1930

Zinc

Collection of The City of New Ulm, Minnesota

Lithographs traditionally are drawn on limestone—*lithos* means stone. But stones can be unwieldy to transport when your studio is in the country and your printer is in New York City. For this reason, Wanda Gág made most of her lithographs on lighter-weight zinc plates. This is a rare surviving plate.

After receiving this image, drawn with grease-based crayons, printer George C. Miller would have treated it with chemicals to make the design adhere to the plate and be receptive to ink. Because Miller was a brilliant technician, he was able to capture faithfully even the most delicate of Gág’s passages.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Grandma’s Parlor, 1930

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.25

Grandma’s Parlor captures every grownup’s discovery that the not-to-be-touched rooms of their childhood—those objects meant only for show—aren’t so formidable after all. Here the two pitchers prepare to dance, and the lamp, as Gág put it, resembles “a gosling poising its ridiculous wings for flight.” Yet the dramatic shadows indicate that this room at her grandmother’s Minnesota farmhouse may hold some residual terror still. The six figures in the scene may represent Gág’s six younger siblings.



Gág in her studio, with *Grandma’s Parlor* hanging on the wall.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Grandma’s Kitchen, 1931

Lithograph on zinc plate

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund P.12,186

Wanda Gág loved walking to her grandparents’ Minnesota farm as a child. She was delighted to find it virtually unchanged when, as a successful 34-year-old author, she took a side trip during a Midwestern book tour in 1929 to pay a visit.

There was the familiar sewing machine, the wall calendar, the newspaper rack. There was the old couch where, she said, “all the Gágs had sat thousands of times.” Newly acclaimed for her 1928 book *Millions of Cats*, Gág inserted a sleeping cat into the print—perhaps a sign that she, too, was part of this mythic place.



Gág with her gray cat, Snooky.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Uncle Frank’s Workshop, 1935

Lithograph on zinc plate

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund P.12,187

Tall, mustachioed, and largely silent, Frank Biebl was Wanda Gág’s artistic ideal. Visiting her uncle’s tiny workshop during a trip to Minnesota in 1929, Gág was touched by the authenticity of his Middle European craftsmanship and decided to memorialize him with this print. We see the varnish-stained rags, the wood slung up near the ceiling to age, the glue heating on the stove, the chair impatient to be finished. Gág further honored her uncle by taking great care in crafting this print, especially in her handling of the various textures.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Green Pepper, 1929

Brush and ink on sandpaper

Bequest of the Estate of Wanda Gág 56.29.1

[NO COPY]

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Squash, 1926

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of the Estate of Wanda Gág P.12,450

It's hard to miss the curving embrace of the forms in this still life, a genre Gág saw as anything but still. When her diaries were made available for the first time in 1987, there were several entries about how her sensual nature fueled her creativity. The strongly contrasting lights and darks reflect Gág's tendency in the mid-1920s to draw at night, when her only illumination was often the harsh light of a kerosene lamp.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Winter Twilight, 1927

Hand-colored lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.9

Poverty struck the Gág household when Wanda, the oldest of seven, was just 15: father Anton died of tuberculosis and mother Lissi grew frail soon after. *Winter Twilight* could represent Wanda's dream of something different. Just one or two impressions of this print are known to bear her hand-coloring, and indeed the glowing windows seem to make the house even more welcoming. The absence of footsteps in the snow suggests that everyone is safely tucked away inside, snug and warm.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Tree Forms, 1927

Watercolor on sandpaper

Bequest of the Estate of Wanda Gág 56.29.4

The short, feathery lines throughout Wanda Gág's work show her reverence for the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). His tiny strokes and stylized natural forms gave Gág the vocabulary she was looking for to express her exuberant reaction to rural life. In this watercolor on sandpaper, we see van Gogh's influence in the vibrating trees, angular branches, and ground built up with countless daubs of paint.



Vincent van Gogh's *Olive Trees* (1889), on view in Mia's Gallery 355.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Castor Oil Plant, 1927

Watercolor on sandpaper

Bequest of the Estate of Wanda Gág 56.29.10

Wanda Gág first used sandpaper for drawings and watercolors because it was cheap. But it became indispensable when she discovered that light glinting off the raised grains of sand on the sheet's surface made her scenes luminous and alive—major goals of her art. She rarely made sandpaper paintings as rich and deeply colored as this ornamental castor oil plant. One reason may be that such paintings used great quantities of paint and destroyed her brushes.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Stone Crusher, 1928–29

Lithograph

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund P.12,184

Dragon. Dinosaur. Caterpillar rearing up on its legs. Whatever creature this stone-crushing machine calls to mind, it loomed in front of Wanda Gág one evening on the road to a neighboring chicken farm. As if swept along by the churning foliage, the wheels appear to move all on their own. One art historian saw *Stone Crusher* as a comment on industrialization, but Gág simply said the subject amused her.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Nicotiana, c. 1929

Oil on board

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

Oil painting paralyzed, awed, and frightened Wanda Gág. Partly she felt pressured to fulfill the dreams of her painter father, who died at age 49, and partly she never had money early on for good-quality paints, making mastery difficult. With *Nicotiana*, one challenge was handling the tricky perspective of the crumpled leaf and flower on the ground.

Only about a dozen of Gág’s paintings survive. She remained so unsure of her ability that her art dealer Carl Zigrosser attached a note to each painting after her death cautioning that it was not “representative of her usual standards.”



Gág painting in the studio at her New Jersey farm.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Backyard Corner, 1930

Lithograph

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.27

Backyard Corner could be Wanda Gág’s manifesto. Besides demonstrating her deep emotional attachment to things and places, it describes the activated space that she felt enveloped objects and connected them. This idea can be seen in the halo of concentric lines around the ax handle and the force-lines (her term) flowing from the buckets. These pulsing, vibrating lines knit these objects—and by extension their user—to the soil. In this way, the print conveys Gág’s personal credo of living close to the earth.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Chicago, 1929

Ink and chalk on sandpaper

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

A book tour put Wanda Gág in Chicago in the 1920s, a time of especially fevered skyscraper construction in the city. What interested her in this scene were not the tall buildings (note the empty flagpole), but the pointed roof jutting up behind them. That roof marked the old headquarters of the Montgomery Ward mail-order business, built in 1898. Gág paid particular attention to the metal figure balancing on top, whose torch symbolized progress.



The tower of Chicago's Montgomery Ward building, removed in 1947.

<https://chicagology.com/goldenage/goldenage015/spiritofprogress/>

[RURIK: GOES IN CASE]

Maker unknown

Bohemian-style blouse

Linen and embroidery

Collection of Wanda Gág House

Wanda Gág wore this blouse and others like it to proclaim her Bohemian heritage. Her unique style of dress prompted the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, upon first meeting her, to remark, "You look like your drawings." (Gág was very pleased.)

Gág grew up surrounded by old European customs and folklore in New Ulm, Minnesota, in a house built by her father, Anton, a painter-decorator. He was born in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic), as were Wanda's maternal grandparents, the Biebls. During restoration of the house in 1994, artifacts found under the attic floorboards testify to Wanda's creative childhood. The trove included homemade paper dolls, sea shells, cigar papers, spools of thread, bits of lace, pencil nubs, lampshade prisms, hat pins, tiddlywink pieces, handsewn doll clothes, and dishes to hold India ink. All are on view at the restored Wanda Gág House in New Ulm, open weekends May 19–October 21 and other times by appointment.



At left, Gág wears the blouse on display here. The home where she was steeped in Bohemian culture is open for tours.

For house: <http://www.wandagaghouse.org/about/the-wanda-gag-house/>

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

50 Acre Farm for Sale (Connecticut), 1920s–1930s

Pen and ink, brush and wash on paper

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

[NO COPY]

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Progress, 1936

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of the Estate of Wanda Gág P.12,464

In this satirical print, the anti-materialistic Wanda Gág scorned commercialism, which she felt was destroying the sense of tradition she held dear. After filling up at a gas station gussied up like a theme park, a late-model car tries to fit through an old covered bridge. A new telephone pole elbows out the lone tree. Billboards compete for attention with a hitchhiking man and boy, reminders that the Great Depression (1929–39) was ongoing.

[RURIK: BOTH GO IN CASE]

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

New Masses cover, March 1927

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

New Masses cover mockup, early 1927

Gouache on cardboard

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

The radical magazine *New Masses* (1926–48) gave the era’s finest writers and artists a forum for their leftist views. Wanda Gág wasn’t much of an activist, but in 1927 she needed places to publicize her art. This composition fit the magazine’s anti-capitalist stance perfectly and remains one of its standout covers. Skyscrapers rear up in every direction, not caring that their massive concrete and steel frames are depriving the trees of sun.



Gág’s second cover for *New Masses*, December 1927.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Macy’s Stairway, 1940–1941

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.41

Macy’s was Wanda Gág’s favorite store. Instead of showing us sales counters and crowded aisles, however, Gág chose an empty stairwell, a reference to the loneliness and alienation that many artists and writers of the 1920s associated with modern urban life. The print was based on a drawing made in 1929, when Gág had grown disillusioned with the big city. “New York always makes a wreck of me after the first two months or so,” she had written in 1928.

The prominent firehose and ax reflect the Macy’s preoccupation with fire: when this New York store was built in 1902, every floor had its own fire department.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Reclining Cat, c. 1920s

Graphite

Gift of Mrs. Carl Waring Jones 78.61.1

[NO COPY]

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Siesta, 1937

Lithograph on zinc plate

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund P.12,182

Wanda Gág said she was charmed by the way cats “fit themselves into and over all sorts of places and spaces.” Here their blissful pliability contrasts with the hard geometries of stove, logs, and kindling box. Our eye travels from curve to curve around a warm pool of light.

Surprisingly, Gág had only two cats while making *Siesta*: Snoopy and Snooky. She sat and sketched their antics on the kitchen floor, then used their various poses for this print. The same cats were her models for her book *Millions of Cats* ten years earlier.



Gág with her cat Snoopy, 1929.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Lamplight, 1929

Wash lithograph

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.20

Wanda Gág made her own bent lampshade to produce the dramatic shadows in *Lamplight*. She loved the honesty of everyday objects and the associations they evoked. For her, this humble setting stood for a simpler, preindustrial time, in contrast to the blackened doorway, which suggests an unknown future. This image was first exhibited in January 1930, just a few months into the Great Depression. It became one of Gág's most famous prints.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Spinning Wheel, 1927

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.8

Harsh spotlights and nightmarish distortions—this spinning wheel practically touches the ceiling—are two trademark techniques used by Wanda Gág to communicate the intensity with which she saw the world. The spinning wheel could refer to old-fashioned self-reliance, a theme of her summers at a rural spot she called Tumble Timbers, where this scene was set.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Evening, 1929

Wash lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.21

As night fell outside, Wanda Gág was indoors making these strange zigzag patterns on the wall, apparently by propping a slightly opened book in front of a kerosene lamp. This print speaks to her fascination with pattern, and to the mystery everyday objects held for her.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Winter Garden, 1935

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.36

Wanda Gág sketched this jumble at the home of her friend, the American painter Alfred Maurer (1868–1932). When she eventually turned the sketch into a print, she added the cats. The pair at left echo the sinewy stems above their heads, and the striped cat echoes the giant leaves.

Gág sought painting tips from every painter she met, and she befriended Maurer after corralling him at a gallery opening to ask about preparing canvases and grinding pigments. After this encounter, the reclusive Maurer sent her a spatula and a bottle of his prized oil to mix with her colors.



Gág's cat Snoopy, the model for much of her cat imagery.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Steep Road, 1934

Lithograph

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.38

After Wanda Gág bought a 125-acre New Jersey farm in 1931, she traveled this road to get her milk. Although her childhood had its struggles, milk was one thing she usually had in abundance: her beloved Grandma Biebl drove a milk wagon. (A May 1909 diary entry reported the arrival of butter, cheese, “and two pails of sweet milk from grandma.”) Perhaps Gág's grandmother was on her mind as she made this print, with its flat, decorative trees and white, milky ribbon of road.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Spring on the Hillside, c. 1935

Gouache and pastel on sandpaper

Collection of Colles and John E. Larkin

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Spring on the Hillside, 1935

Lithograph on zinc plate

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund P.12,189

Here Wanda Gág veered from her determinedly original style into regionalism. Popularized in the 1930s, regionalism tended to idealize rural America, presenting it as a place of stability, innocence, and order. People suffering under the Great Depression (1929–39) were enchanted.

In Gág's abstracted landscape, fields and trees shift between recognizable objects and stylized patterns. The road around the farmhouse could be read as a moat, reinforcing the regionalist concept of country life as protected and safe.

In the study drawing, Gág dusted the scene with snow and elevated our viewpoint. The lithograph puts us closer to the landscape, increasing our sense of belonging and highlighting the changes and choices an artist makes from one version to the next.



Gág at work on a drawing.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Cats at the Window, 1929

Wood engraving

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.24

[NO COPY]

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Franklin Stove, 1927

Wood engraving

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.13

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Airtight Stove, 1927–33

Wood engraving

Gift of the Estate of Wanda Gág P.12,462

Wood engravings are carved on the dense end grain of a wooden plank, allowing for great precision. In these two prints, Wanda Gág used the technique to convey heat particles swarming from wood-burning stoves. She kept the airtight stove burning at her rural retreat Tumble Timbers through late fall (the place had no electricity), hoping to grab every last second in the country before returning to New York.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Snowy Fields, 1933

Lithograph

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.34

In the winter of 1933, having spent months on her book *The ABC Bunny* (1933), Wanda Gág was in need of inspiration. To find new printmaking subjects, she wandered outdoors with pencil and paper. When she found a setting, she sketched it day after day to get at its essence. One outcome was this work, *Snowy Fields*, in which she exposed the underlying rhythms of the hills, trees, and snow-covered ground.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Snow Drifts, 1934

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. John E. Larkin, Jr. P.87.13.35

Snowbound in the early 1930s at her New Jersey farm (bought with earnings from her children's books), Wanda Gág headed to her studio and apparently decided to have some fun. Treating snow like hunks of sugary meringue, she carved it into patterns that might have been plucked from her childhood. The various shapes could be a frilly collar, an angel wing, or a chair leg. At middle left could be a stylized G.

Wanda Gág

American, 1893–1946

Abandoned Quarry, 1939

Lithograph on zinc plate

Gift of the Estate of Wanda Gág P.12,469

In not-so-subtle ways, Wanda Gág emphasized industry's transformation of this landscape. The ridge in the near distance is shaped like the machine parts lined up in the foreground, and in place of trees on the horizon we see a tiny civilization of deserted worker housing. Sitting in the lower right corner is a slice of a tree that presumably once stood on this land.

This is one of Gág's last prints. When she died of cancer in 1946, at age 53, Mia honored her with a major memorial exhibition that same year.



Gág in the 1940s, in nature.