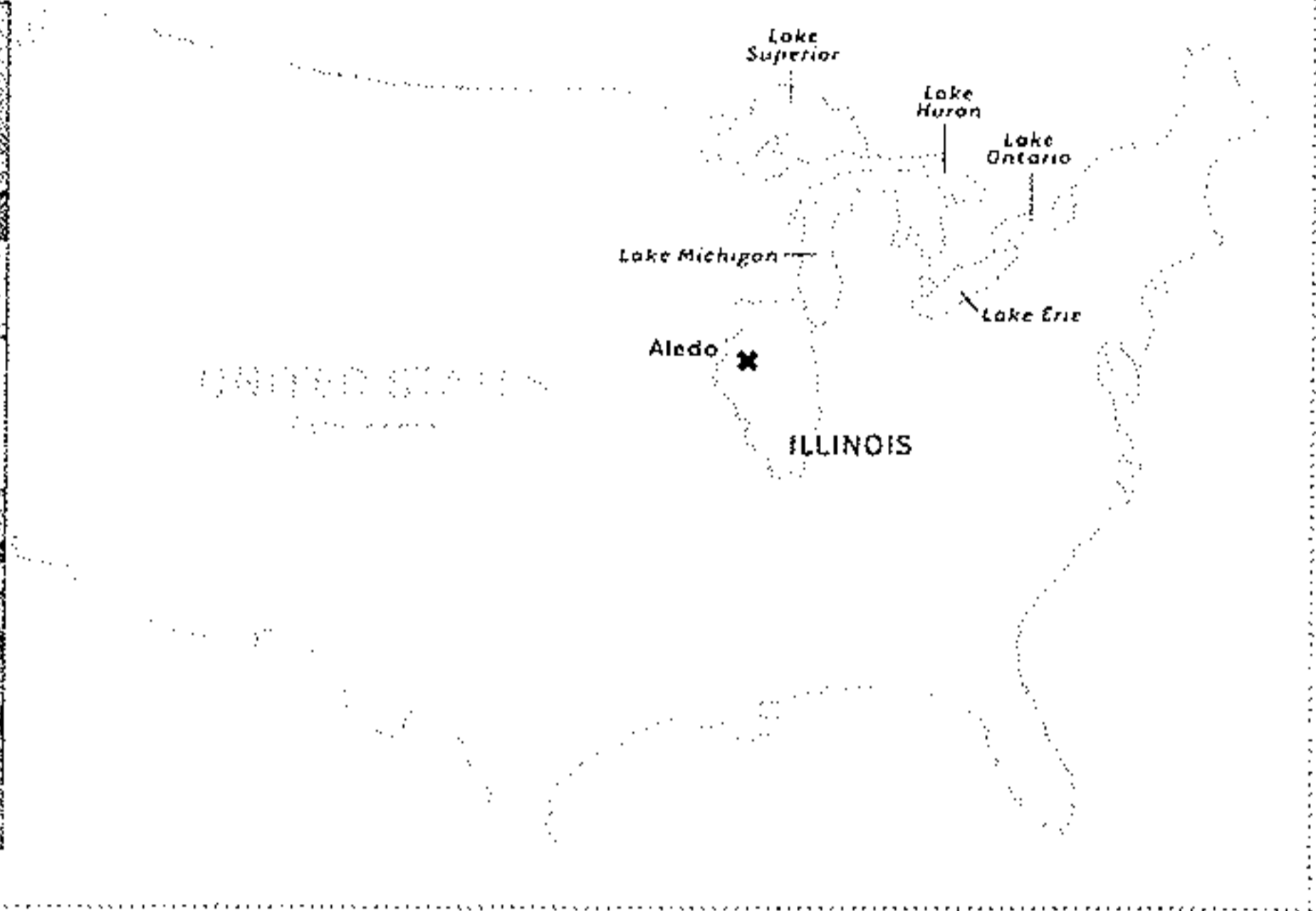
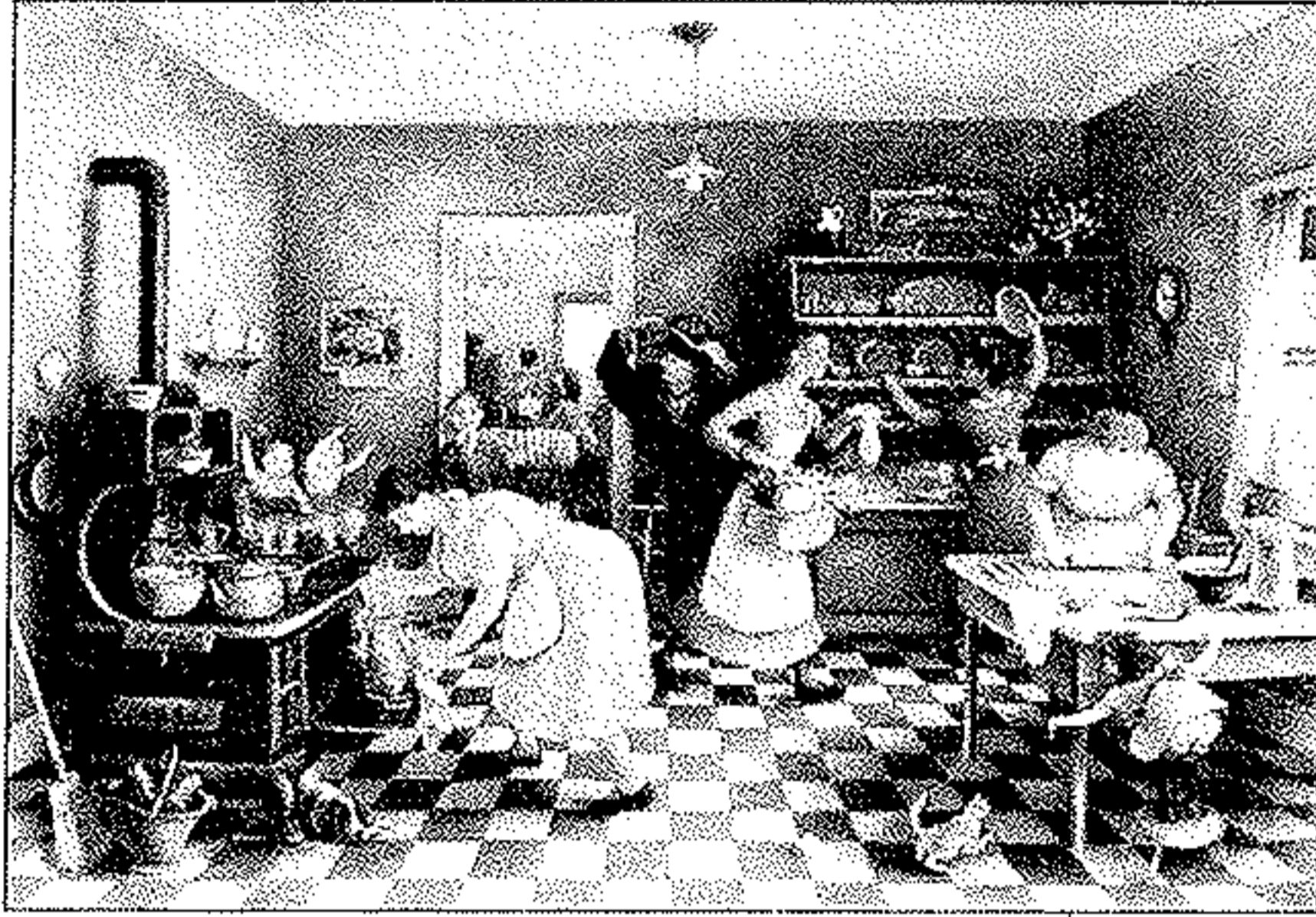


Transparency 2



Doris Lee, American (1905–1983) *Thanksgiving*, 1935 Oil on canvas; 28 1/16 in. x 40 1/16 in. (71.3 x 101.8 cm) Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Prize Fund, 1935.313

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Doris Lee's *Thanksgiving* celebrates the joys of family gatherings. The bustling kitchen is filled with life and love as a group of women prepares the annual feast. In this cozy place, a steaming turkey emerges from the oven as women set the table, roll dough, and prepare vegetables. Babies fidget in the corner. A dog dozes under the stove while a cat watches a scrap of food held by a little girl.

Although simple in subject, the painting is filled with tiny details that evoke a warm, bustling atmosphere. The cast-iron stove gleams around the edges from the sunlight entering the opposite window. **Realistic** touches—the floral patterns on the women's dresses composed of small dots and splotches of paint, a brown line creating a hint of shadow defining the collar of the woman holding the rolling pin, the calendar near the door, the designs on the wallpaper, and the cat's marmalade stripes—suggest that the painting was drawn from by the artist's close observations of everyday life. Each figure is carefully positioned to create a sense

of balance and unity in the painting. It is clear that Lee finds the meaning and joy of Thanksgiving in the **ritual** of the meal's preparation rather than its consumption. Surrounded by generations of family in the warmth of their kitchen, the women happily create the day's feast.

Lee's interest in the experience and the spirit of the American family developed as she was growing up on her grandfather's farm near Aledo, Illinois, (figure 5) and these themes reappeared in her paintings long after she moved away from the Midwest. After graduating from Rockford College in Rockford, Illinois, in 1927, Lee married future **Farm Security Administration** photographer Russell Lee, traveled in France and Italy, studied at the Kansas City Art Institute, and then studied in Paris. She returned to the United States to enroll in the San Francisco School of Art, where she studied under the artist Arnold Blanch (who later became her second husband). In 1931, Lee settled in an artists' community in Woodstock, New York, where she focused on depicting life in rural America, drawing on her childhood experiences on her family's Illinois



FIGURE 5
Location of Aledo, IL

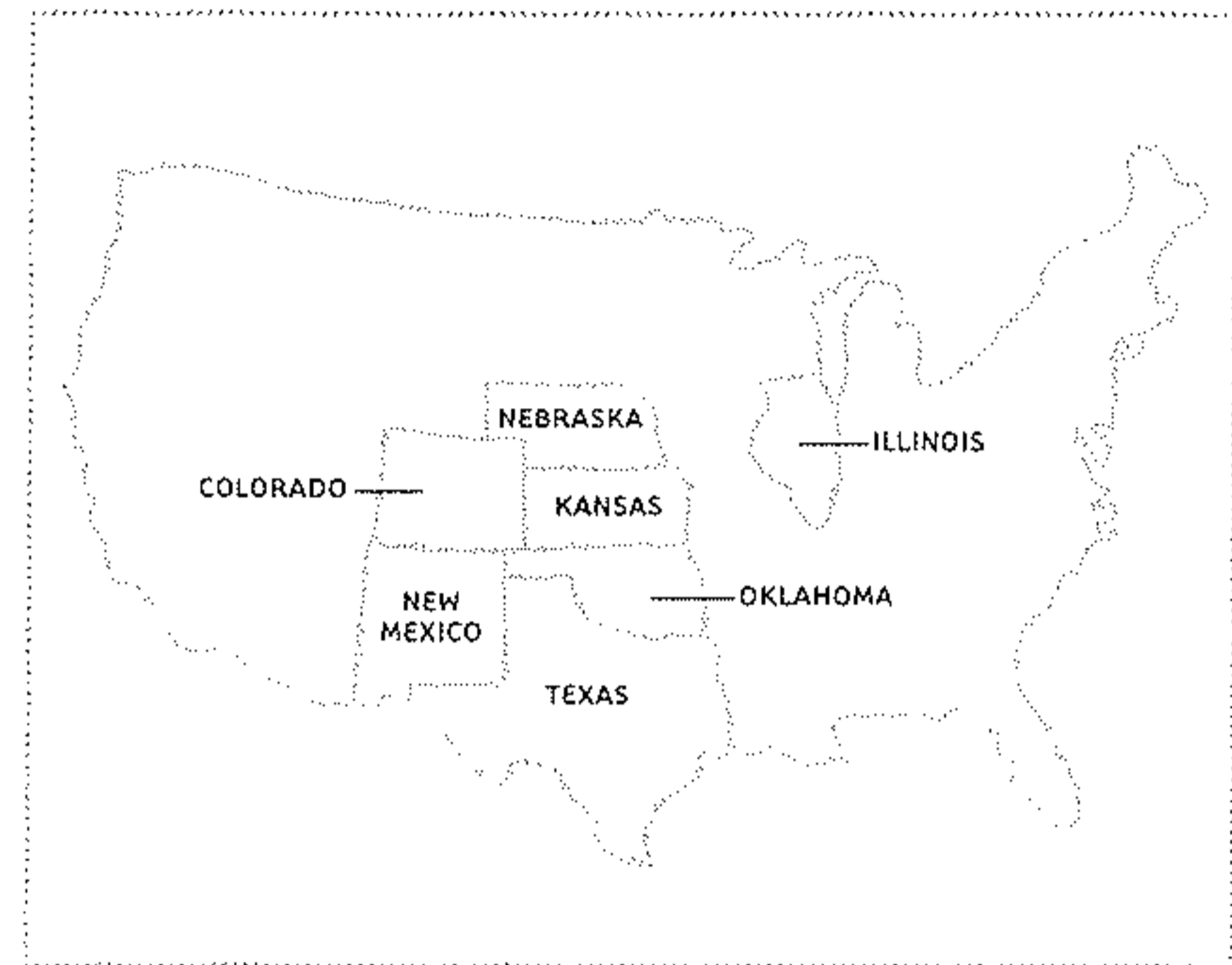


FIGURE 6
Plains region of the United States
affected by the Dust Bowl (shaded area)

farm. In many of her works, she portrayed the simple joys of American life in touching, nostalgic, and fanciful ways.

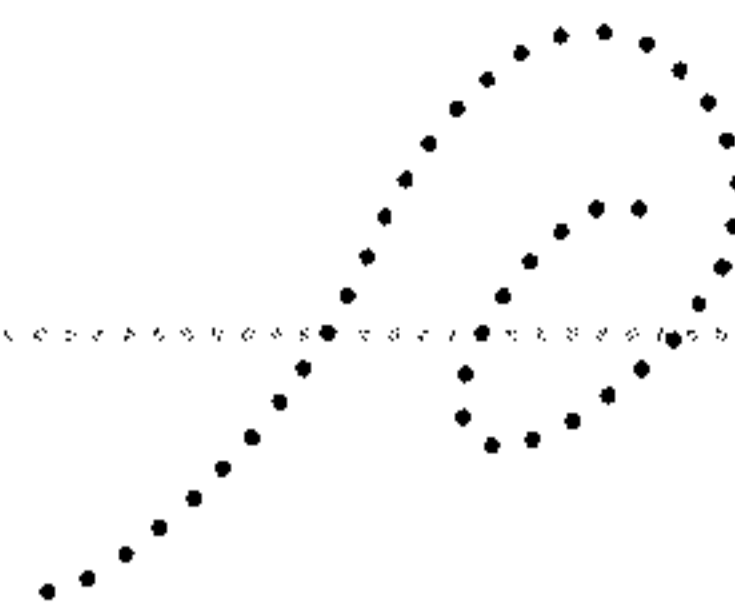
THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Thanksgiving was indeed a nostalgic image of American life, for the experience it presented did not match the country's current social and economic situation. Lee painted the work in 1935 at the height of the Depression, a period that began with the Stock Market crash of 1929 and continued until the United States entered **World War II** in 1941. In this decade, a downward economic cycle reached such depths that families were no longer able to feed, clothe, and house themselves. By 1932, stocks were valued at just 20 percent of their 1929 cost. Almost half of the nation's banks had failed (leaving investors bereft of their life savings), and unemployment reached a staggering 25 to 30 percent.

Farmers in the **Dust Bowl** states in the Plains region (figure 6) were particularly hard hit. Over-farming in the previous decades depleted the soil so much that farmlands began to erode. In 1931, a seven-year drought began, and the earth became further parched. A year later, a great dust storm swept through these states. Farms that were already dry and failing literally blew away in the wind, leaving their owners without a livelihood. Many of the inhabitants of the Dust Bowl packed up and headed west to California, but this too proved disastrous. California's farming industry was also affected by the economic downward spiral, and the state did not have enough jobs to accommodate the thousands of migrant laborers flooding in from hard-hit states. In 1935, the warm, abundant image of the rural American life that Lee depicted was a remnant of a bygone era, an image of a seemingly less troubled American past.

THANKSGIVING

Lee was not alone in her desire to picture a more prosperous past. There was a collective need to connect with American history and create a national identity. Celebrating Thanksgiving was one way of connecting with the past. Local, state, and national days for giving thanks had long been part of American culture. In every generation, people looked to the example of the **Pilgrims**, who had weathered a terrible first year at **Plymouth Plantation** and celebrated their survival with a feast provided by the native **Wampanoag** (WAMPAH-nog) people, as the model of the resiliency of the American spirit. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday. By the 1920s and '30s, Thanksgiving had acquired many of the aspects that are now a part of our modern experience. In 1924, Macy's Department Store in New York City held its first Macy's Day Parade, and in 1927 the parade included the first giant balloons. In 1934, the National Football League held its first Thanksgiving Day game between the Detroit Lions and Chicago Bears. (The Lions have played every year since, except during World War II.) The game was broadcast nationally on NBC, and families crowded around their radios to listen. During this period, Thanksgiving became more than merely a day for families to gather and give thanks. It was an annual sporting event, the first day of the Christmas shopping season, and the unofficial beginning of winter. Lee's painting expresses the significance of Thanksgiving in the early part of the 20th century as a reminder of a more prosperous recent past and as a part of the nation's cultural identity.



Celebrations Across the World

We generally think of Thanksgiving as a distinctly American celebration. In fact holidays that revolve around remembering family or ancestors and celebrating good fortune through feasting occur in many different cultures. *El Dia de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, is now celebrated November second (and also sometimes November first) in Mexico to honor the Catholic feast day of All Souls. Families visit cemeteries to decorate the graves of loved ones with flowers and candles, believing that the spirits of departed family members will return to be with them on those days. It is a serious day, but it is also a celebration that includes humor and fun. Vendors sell loaves of bread shaped like skulls (*pan de los muertos*), chocolate ghosts, and sugar skulls. Artists make toys and figurines of skeletons, and families enjoy themselves with feasting, music, games, and fireworks. The *Bon Festival*, held in Japan August 13 through 15, is a time for families to remember the deeds of their ancestors. The festival ends with the *Bon Odori*, a community dance in which the people float lanterns down rivers, **symbolizing** the loved ones' spirits leaving earth again. In India, people celebrate the end of the monsoon (flood) season by holding a harvest festival called *Onam*. Though Indian society is divided into castes, or different social ranks, everyone comes together for *Onam* to play music, dance, feast, and play games. During late September and early October, the people of Munich, Germany, hold a harvest festival called *Oktoberfest*. The festival includes brass-band music, dancing, eating, and drinking. Festival-goers help build a harvest monument, and they watch a parade led by a child, representing the nation's early history.

CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THANKSGIVING

In 1934, The Art Institute of Chicago awarded Doris Lee the Frank G. Logan Prize for best painting of the year. Yet, not everyone admired the work: curiously, Mrs. Logan, wife of the man for whom the prize was named, objected to the supposed caricature-like quality and casual feel of the painting. In reaction, she founded the Sanity in Art organization, which sought to rid museums of “modernistic, moronic grotesqueries that were masquerading as art.” Although Mrs. Logan labeled the painting “modern,” it has little in common with what is

normally considered early 20th-century modern art, which sought to reveal “the shock of the new” through subject matter or technique. Robert Delaunay’s *Champs de Mars: The Red Tower*, 1911/1923 (figure 7) is modern in part because it depicts the urban metropolis of Paris and the Eiffel Tower, which was constructed with machine-fabricated steel parts. It is also executed in an **abstract** style that signals the hustle and bustle of Paris’s city streets. By contrast, Lee’s painting celebrates traditional values and customs, looks to the past for inspiration, and is executed in a simplified, realistic style in which forms, **composition**, and narrative are clearly legible.

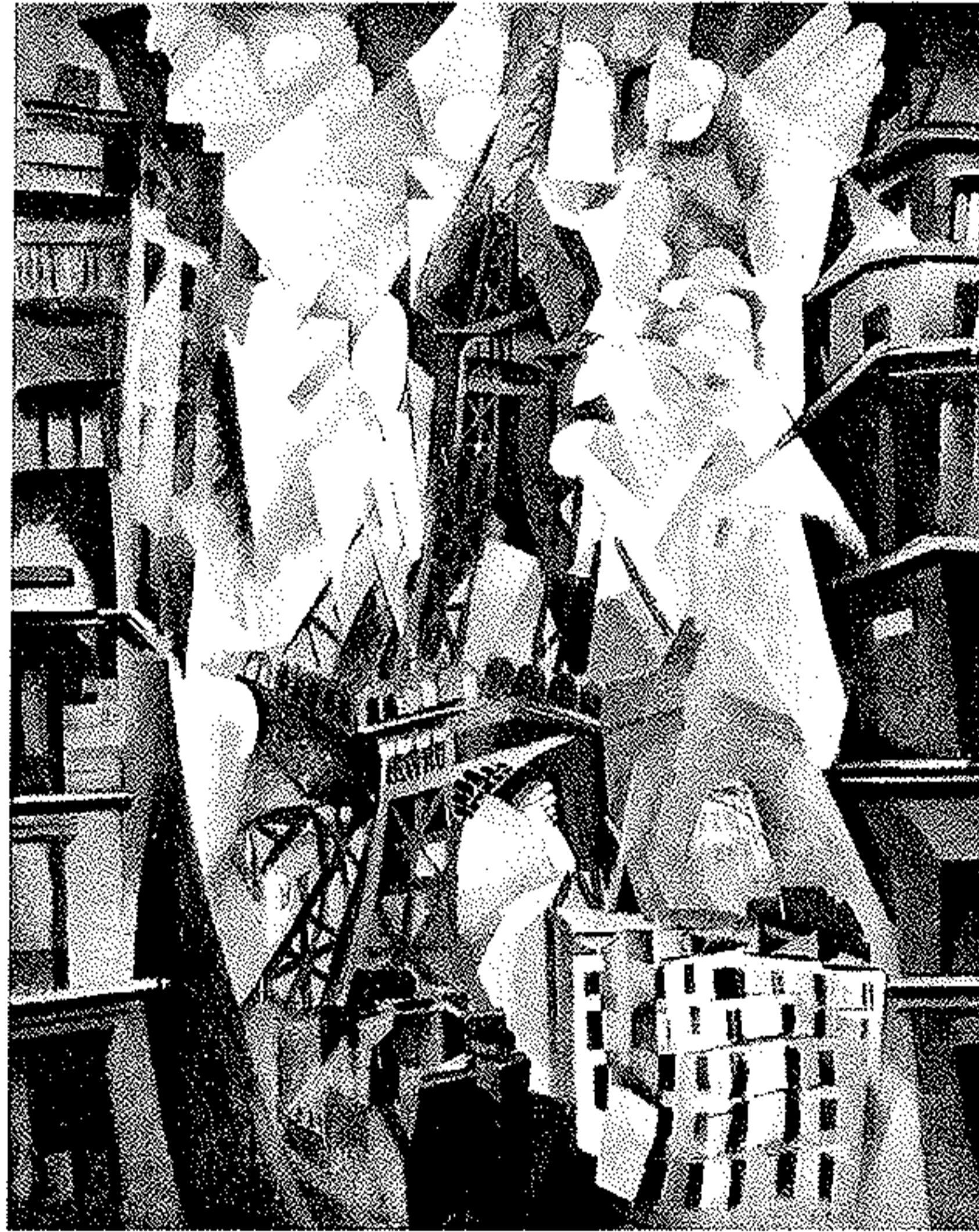


FIGURE 7

Robert Delaunay (French, 1885–1941)
Champs de Mars: The Red Tower, 1911/1923
Oil on canvas; 63 1/4 in. x 50 5/8 in. (160.7 x 128.6 cm)
Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1959.1

Classroom Applications

Transparency 2

Doris Lee, American. *Thanksgiving*, 1935

1. Test Your Memory

This painting is rich in detail. Play a game that tests students' visual memory. Show them the image for 30 seconds. Then, have them face away from the work and ask questions about the details they observed. Students should record their answers. Questions may include the following:

How many people are in the painting? Describe them.

Are there any animals in the painting? How many?

What are they doing?

Where are they? Describe the room.

Does the painting show a scene from today or from long ago?

How can you tell?

After you have finished, have students compare their answers with the image. Discuss any differences. This activity sharpens students' skills of observation, analysis, and interpretation.

Challenge the students' memory for detail by doing a similar activity with an actual room. Visit a room in the school, such as the library or cafeteria, and have them look around for a couple of minutes paying close attention to everything in the room. After they return to the classroom, have them list or draw all of the objects in the room. Have them include as much detail as possible, including color, size, and texture of objects. Have students visit the same room again to see how their lists or drawings compare to the actual. Have them complete their lists or drawings using a different colored pen or pencil, then calculate the percentage of the objects they were able to list from memory.

State Learning Standards: 6A, 25A, 26B

2. The Five Senses

Thanksgiving includes elements of sound, movement, smell, touch, and sight. Encourage students to step into the painting and identify these senses.

SOUND

What sounds do you hear? Which objects in the painting make noise?

MOVEMENT

What are all of the people doing? Are they moving slowly or quickly? What would this kitchen look like a couple of seconds later? Would the people still be in the same positions?

SMELL

What scents do you smell in this kitchen? Where are they coming from?

TOUCH

What kinds of textures are shown in this picture? Identify different objects that are soft, hard, furry, smooth, hot. How did the artist communicate these different textures?

SIGHT

Have your students look carefully at the painting using their hands shaped like binoculars. Play "I Spy." Start each observation with the phrase "I spy something..." and then describe the object without naming it. Example: "I spy something that is worn on the head. It is made out of glass and plastic, and it has two circles." (Glasses.) Divide the class in half and have one side provide the descriptions for the other side to guess.

Have students write short sentences describing the multisensory qualities of the painting. Using the following sample simile and metaphor sentence structures will help students express their ideas.

The sound of the _____ is like _____ .

_____ moves like _____ .

The smell of the _____ makes me feel _____ .

The _____ feels like _____ .

The colors are like _____ .

Encourage students to create a poem about the painting by arranging these descriptive sensory phrases. The poem should answer the question, "If this work of art could speak, what would it say?"

State Learning Standards: 3B, 25A

3. Let's Celebrate

Thanksgiving is a holiday that can unite families. Have students bring photographs of their families' celebration of Thanksgiving (or another holiday) to class and compile them in a class album. Discuss the traditions represented in the photos noting the differences in beliefs and styles of celebration. Have students write about and illustrate a favorite family tradition. As an alternative to this activity, have students interview grandparents to learn how family celebrations of Thanksgiving (or another holiday) have changed over the years.

State Learning Standards: 3B, 18A

4. The Illusion of Depth

Artists use several devices to create distance in a painting. One device is to use diagonal lines (orthogonals) within the composition that converge at a vanishing point. These diagonal lines represent actual parallel lines that do not cross in real life (see page 78). For example, when looking down a straight stretch of road, the sides of the road appear to meet in the distance. That meeting point is the vanishing point. In this painting, where do you see diagonal lines? In order to find the vanishing point, have students look at a reproduction of the painting, draw the diagonal lines they can see, then extend those lines beyond where they end in the painting. Draw extended lines that make up the ceiling and floor tiles. The lines cross at the vanishing point, which should be near the center of the painting.

Artists also manipulate size to create a sense of distance in a picture. Are the floor tiles larger in the **foreground** or **background** of the painting? Instruct students to examine the figures in the painting. Direct them to use rulers to measure the height of a figure in the foreground and a figure in the background of the painting. Compare the two. Suggest students measure the height of the woman carrying the basket and compare her to the height of the doorway measurement. What conclusions can you make by the results of the measurements?

Artists often overlap figures to create space in a painting. Encourage students to think about how and where figures and objects overlap in this painting. What does this show? Is the woman carrying the basket in front of or behind the woman wearing a coat? Is the boy in front of or behind the doorway?

State Learning Standards: 7A, 9A, 26A

5. Kitchens of the Past, Present, and Future

Have students compare the kitchen in *Thanksgiving* to kitchens in their own homes. Have students decide whether the painting depicts a scene from today or from long ago. What details tell you that? How is this kitchen similar to your kitchen at home? How is it different? What do you have in your kitchen that is not shown in this painting? Discuss how people cooked without these devices in the past.

Challenge students to design a kitchen for the future. Which appliances or details would be the same as today? As a class, brainstorm ideas for new inventions for kitchens. Have students draw their own futuristic kitchens. Invite them to practice perspective skills by drawing larger objects in the foreground and smaller objects in the background. (see activity 4, “The Illusion of Depth”) When the drawings are completed, students can share their innovations and explain the functions of their creative tools.

State Learning Standards: 13A, 26B

6. The Dust Bowl

Read the novel *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse (see *Student Bibliography*) either to or with the class. This book describes the main character Billie Jo's personal struggles and growth to overcome difficulties while living in the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. She describes two holiday meals at her house: Christmas 1934 and Thanksgiving 1935 (see pages 100–101 and 220–224, respectively). Encourage students to visualize these holiday scenes. Who is there? How is the house decorated? What is the mood of the scene? What colors would you use to convey the mood? Have students illustrate these events and then compare their own pictures to Doris Lee's painting *Thanksgiving*. Have students imagine the life of one of the characters in Lee's painting and write a "Thanksgiving List" for that person in a style that is similar to the list included in the novel (see pages 220–221).

State Learning Standards: 2B, 3C, 4A, 16D, 25A, 26B