

The *Life & Legacy* of T.C. Steele

Indiana's Foremost Painter

BY NANCY Hiller

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE Raymer

"My dear," the painter addressed his bride-to-be, "if you think you can manage to live in this wilderness, we will build our home here—on this hill."

April 1907

The undulating topography was still bare of leaves that April day in 1907 when Theodore Clement Steele took Selma Neubacher, who would soon become his second wife, to an isolated ridge choked with brush and brambles. Steele, a 59-year-old painter who had studied in Europe and exhibited his work in all the major eastern-U.S. and Midwestern cities, had come to Brown



An undated portrait by acclaimed Brown County photographer Frank Hohenberger shows Selma and T.C. Steele in their garden.

Photo courtesy of Indiana University, Lilly Library, Hohenberger Collection

County in search of fresh inspiration. With the choice of potential home sites narrowed down to two, he wanted Selma to share in making the final decision.

By this point in his life, T.C. Steele would probably have felt more comfortable among his

fellow artists at the Royal Academy in Munich, where he had completed his formal training, or with the dignitaries of Indianapolis and Chicago, scores of whose portraits he had painted, than among the tradesmen and subsistence farmers who populated Brown County. Though he and Selma were Indiana natives, each with a poetic appreciation of the countryside, their cosmopolitanism made them curiosities to their soon-to-be new neighbors.

As they fought their way uphill to the home site through ankle-deep spring mud, Selma had her doubts. But at the crest, she understood; the breathtaking vista would provide her future husband with a wealth of subject matter. "I had no idea the Indiana landscape could be so fine," she would later write, describing her elation.

A portrait of T.C. Steele by Indianapolis painter Simon Baus hangs next to a companion portrait, not visible here, of Steele's second wife, Selma. The piano is a cabinet grand made by Vose & Sons of Boston.



**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT:**

T.C. Steele with canvas outside the “House of the Singing Winds.”

Photo courtesy of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, part of the Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites system

In the dining room, Steele’s painting *Vase of Flowers* hangs over a bas-relief tile depicting Steele, sculpted by Caroline “Carrie” Wolff who traveled to Germany on the same ship that took Steele and his family there in 1880.

The Steeles’ living room is simply and comfortably furnished with a mix of late-19th-century pieces. A Moroccan bowl sits on a hand-carved wooden tripod, atop a table covered in a jacquard cloth with a Middle Eastern-inspired design. The turn-of-the-century books have covers designed by artist Margaret Armstrong.

In an undated image, Selma shows her husband around the garden, with the pergola on the south side of the house visible in the background.

Photo courtesy of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, part of the Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites system

The Steele house and pergola today.

TOP RIGHT:

Portrait of T.C. Steele some time after 1916.

Photo courtesy of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, part of the Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites system

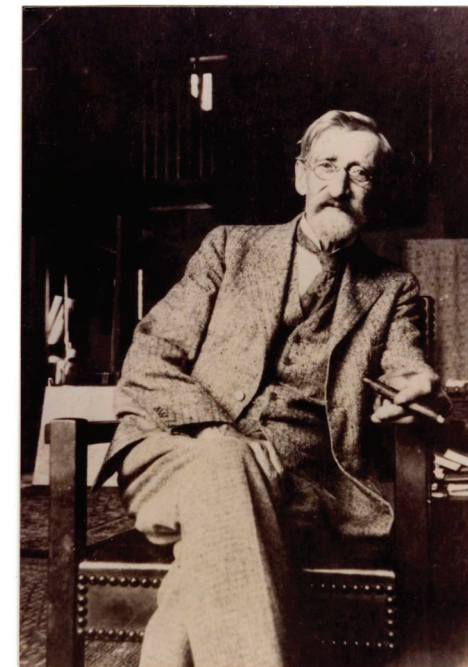
Still an Attraction

A century after the Steeles created their home, called the “House of the Singing Winds,” and its studio and garden, the property is as delightfully foreign in its provincial setting as it was for the locals who flocked there, beginning in 1907, to marvel at something utterly new: an artist’s home.

With its spare interior, goldfish ponds, and winding paths of native stone, the Steele home, now a state historic site, is like a doorway to another world—one where rooms are small and dimly lit, their walls painted in colors startling to the 21st-century eye. The turquoise sunroom and shellacked wood paneling in the study call to mind Swedish painter Carl Larsson, whose most beloved works depicted home and family. Though humble, the décor is far from rustic; the Victorian settees, upright piano, books, and decorative objects would have looked more appropriate furnishing a parlor in Glasgow or Vienna than this simple cottage overlooking the southern Indiana hills.

Down the sloping driveway, past a grove of Norway spruce, a formal garden is cut into the sod. In May, rows of peonies, from fuchsia to shell pink, spill lavishly over neat gravel paths. Spiked with purple iris and clouds of pale-blue catmint, the view is pure Monet.

The similarities between these artists’ surroundings are more than coincidental. Steele, Monet, and Larsson were contemporaries who considered their homes worthy subject matter for their art.



From humble beginnings

Considering Theodore Clement Steele’s background, his unshakable determination to be an artist is nothing short of remarkable. His parents and grandparents on both sides made their livings as farmers, ministers, and craftspeople in rural areas. When Theodore, first of eight children, was born in 1847, his father was a harness maker in the village of Gosport, northwest of Bloomington.

“I really think that Steele was one of those fortunate people who had a ‘calling’ from an early age to draw and paint,” says Rachel Berenson Perry, fine arts curator at the Indiana State Museum and author of *T.C. Steele and the Society of Western Artists, 1896-1914* (Indiana University Press, 2009). “Family lore has him showing intense appreciation for color and attempting ambitious paintings.” Equally extraordinary is that Steele’s parents encouraged their son to develop these artistic skills. In 1852, when Theodore was almost 5, the family relocated to the small town of Waveland, 50 miles farther north, the caliber of the town’s schools an important reason for the move.

Steele attended the Waveland Academy and took his first formal art classes beginning at the age of 12. When his father died the following year, his mother encouraged her eldest son, now the man of the house, to continue his education—a testament to her faith in his artistic abilities. By the age of 18, Steele was officially on the school’s art faculty.





LEFT:

Steele's bead-board-paneled study is a picture of Arts and Crafts simplicity, with its leather-covered desk, brass-studded chair, and hand-stenciled drapes by Selma. Steele's painting of a winter scene depicts the hill coming up to the "House of the Singing Winds" from Belmont, near the corner of today's State Road 46 and TC Steele Road.

INSET:

Detail from a bowl made by H.A. Graack & Son of Bradenton, Florida, circa 1921. The same bowl appears in one of Steele's still-life paintings. Courtesy photo

T.C. Steele and the Arts and Crafts Movement



Though many associate the name Arts and Crafts with a style of architecture and design prevalent around the turn of the 20th century, the term denotes far more than an aesthetic.

Originally coined in 1887 by a group of British designers who founded an organization called the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, the term properly refers to a movement based on the belief that all people should have work that is meaningful, even joyous—far from the daily reality of those who labored in factories generated by the Industrial Revolution. As the widespread availability of mass-produced wares drove traditional artisans out of business, designers in Britain, then in continental Europe and North America, became concerned with the importance of countering this cheapening of daily life—not just for those who made things but for those who used them.

The Arts and Crafts Movement is most often associated with places far from Indiana, such as London, Vienna, and New York. But the movement's ideals, as well as its indictment of then-modern industry's cultural impoverishment and worker exploitation, found positive reception among designers and artists wherever they were conveyed, whether through conversation or via printed word.

Theodore Clement Steele was among those who shared Arts and Crafts values. Steele contributed an essay on the subject to the Spring 1894 issue of *Modern Art*, an elegant periodical published in Indianapolis that had national and even international subscribers. In "The Mark of the Tool," Steele lamented that the beauty and usefulness of manufactured goods, most notably furniture, had been diminished by the capitalist's determination to maximize financial gain.

Less well known is that Steele also decried the exclusive association of quality with machine-made perfection. "So largely has machinery taken the place of handicraft in the production of beautiful things," he wrote, "that the quality machinery gives, and the only

quality it can give, has become the standard of excellence. Mechanical finish, the work of the machine, has taken the place of artistic finish, the work of the craftsman."

Steele's Brown County home, "House of the Singing Winds," built with his second wife Selma, furnished with handmade ceramics, textiles, and works of art, thoroughly embodies these convictions, indoors and out. This authentically Hoosier expression of the Arts and Crafts Movement is presently the site of an 18-month rotating exhibition, "Arts & Crafts Moments: Simplicity in Design." The current rotation, which will run until November 1, features pottery, furniture, and artworks from the Indiana State Museum collection.

Among the objects on display are a 1910 woodblock print by Gustave Baumann, a personal friend of the Steeles, who carved the motto, "Every morning I take off my hat to the beauty of the world," in their parlor mantel; an original copy of the Spring 1894 issue of *Modern Art* magazine containing Steele's essay; and a workbook used by renowned journalist Ernie Pyle as a college student.

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ABOVE:

Steele's painting *Selma in the Garden* shows his wife tending masses of blue flowers (probably delphinium) interspersed with lilies, or phlox, or possibly both. The work is one of Steele's best-known and most beloved.

Yet he had no intention of spending his life teaching. He wanted to paint professionally.

From an early age, Steele longed to paint landscapes, as he noted in his diary when he was 23. But then, as now, the market for original works of art was extremely limited, and he had to make a living. Portrait painting, unlike landscapes, offered a potential livelihood; anyone who was anyone had a portrait painted as evidence of his (and it almost always was his rather than her) standing.

After studying briefly in Chicago and Cincinnati, Steele married his first wife, Libbie, in 1870. The two had met at school in Waveland, where they discovered they shared an interest in music and poetry, as well as a deep love of nature. The couple moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, a city reputed to have considerable demand for portraiture. Their first two children, Rembrandt (known as Brandt) and Margaret (known as Daisy), were born there.

Steele was under no illusion that supporting a family by painting would be easy. In a journal entry from 1870, he wrote:



I am aware that difficulties are in my way that are great, but others possessing no more talent than I have conquered them. And it is our part and portion here upon the earth to battle forever with difficulties. Especially is it so with him who adopts as his vocation a profession that ministers to the taste of man rather than his appetites; to his feeling for the beautiful rather than that for utility.



To succeed as an artist, he would need the best instruction available, which meant studying in Europe. Libbie was more than supportive; the only question was how they would finance their "adventure."

In 1873 the Steeles returned to Indiana, where they rented accommodations in Indianapolis. With the help of his cousin William Richards, a manager in the newspaper

business, Steele worked assiduously to establish professional connections. Times were trying, especially in the wake of the 1873 economic crash, which prompted Steele to join forces with the young James Whitcomb Riley (who would later become one of Indiana's most famous poets), producing commercial signs to make ends meet. Steele continued painting portraits, and within a few years his clientele included doctors, businessmen, and religious and literary leaders.

Steele frequently exhibited his work, and in 1874 he took the gold medal for "best original portraits in oil" in a show that included works by artists from as far away as the East Coast and Europe. *The Indianapolis Journal* commended him as "a young artist...who has struggled with adverse circumstances from the outset, but through industry, patience, and application to his profession, has already risen to a proud eminence among Western artists, with fair prospects of going much higher before his career closes."

Among Steele's acquaintances was Herman Lieber, a bookbinder from Düsseldorf, Germany, who had moved to Indianapolis in the early 1850s and become a dealer of art supplies. Steele had been a customer of the H. Lieber & Company Art Emporium before

Steele's first wife Mary Elizabeth ("Libbie") Lakin Steele (1850-1899), oil on canvas (private collection; used with permission). Andrea deTarnowsky, manager and curator of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, points out that this portrait illustrates Steele's raw talent, since it was painted very early in his career, before he had much formal training.

Photo courtesy of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, part of the Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites system



LEFT:

The living room, which faces north, also served as Steele's first studio in Brown County. Even after the artist had moved his workspace into his detached studio, he and Selma kept their living room walls hung with paintings.

BELOW:

Selma and T.C. sit beside their living room fireplace. The photograph was taken before Thanksgiving Day, 1910, when Gustave Baumann carved the motto visible in the contemporary image above.

Photo courtesy of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, part of the Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites system

moving to Indianapolis, and he soon became a close friend of the German entrepreneur.

Lieber was well aware of Steele's long-held ambition to study abroad and in 1879 proposed a plan to fund the trip. He and a small group of fellow supporters would each advance a minimum of \$100 to support the Steele family in Germany for one or two years. The promissory document stated that Steele was to repay the loans "in paintings from his own easel as soon as practicable after his return from abroad." The group of lenders explicitly viewed the plan as an investment, not only for themselves but for the state of Indiana; the loan was made in the belief that Steele "only require[d] the benefit of study in European schools to develop into one of the first artists of this country and thus become an honor to Indianapolis and the State."

The European 'Adventure'

Theodore was 32 years old, Libbie 30, when they and their three children sailed from New York to Antwerp in the summer of 1880. On arriving in Munich, they rented rooms near the Royal Academy. Steele spent his days in life-drawing classes and copying old masters, a practice widely employed to teach technique. During vacations, the family escaped to the countryside, where

the quaint architecture and pastoral views rekindled Steele's longing to paint landscapes.

Pleased with his progress after the first year of study, Steele realized he would need to extend his stay to take full advantage of the opportunity he had been granted. "When I return to Indianapolis I want to be thoroughly & well grounded in my art," he wrote to Richards, his cousin in Indianapolis, "not for my own sake only but that I may be able to give to the people of Indianapolis in exchange for their money something of real artistic value." Richards helped raise the additional funds, and Lieber was the first to sign the promissory note.

Steele would request still more funding to extend his Munich sojourn, which eventually lasted five years. He never took his supporters' generosity for granted. At the conclusion of his final term of study, he submitted his painting *The Boatman* to an end-of-year show. The painting won a silver medal. Still more prestigious, the Royal Academy authorized the purchase of the painting for its collection. Though his family could certainly have used the income, Steele decided not to sell the piece, believing that his best work should be taken home to reside in Indianapolis.





ABOVE:

A pair of chairs—probably made by the Old Hickory Chair Company of Martinsville, Indiana—sit on the front porch of the Steeles' house.

LEFT:

Selma (nicknamed Sally) and T.C. sometime after 1910. On the back of the original photographic print, Steele wrote, "Sally in the alley, caught unaware." Selma's negotiations with the state of Indiana were crucial to ensuring the preservation of the Steeles' home, studio, and gardens.

Photo courtesy of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, part of the Indiana State Museum & Historic Sites system

Back home in Indiana

The family sailed back to New York in late spring 1885, returning to the crushing news that all of their possessions, stored in a warehouse in Indianapolis, had been destroyed by fire. Richards set them up in a comfortably furnished house, and Steele leapt into an extremely busy period, "painting portraits like mad," says historian Perry, "to repay his sponsors." He soon gained a reputation as the premier portrait painter in Indianapolis, and within three years had painted two governors, as well as many of the city's most prominent citizens. During this period he also completed what Perry calls his landmark landscape at the time, *On the Muscatatuck* (1886). When the Boston Art Club purchased the painting, Steele became the first Western artist to have his work added to the collection of the East Coast art establishment, elevating his status significantly.

Over the next several years, Steele exhibited in St. Louis, Cincinnati, New York, and other major cities; started the Indiana School of Art (later renamed The Art Institute) in downtown Indianapolis; and worked tirelessly to promote the stature of his fellow Midwestern painters by cofounding the Society of Western Artists.



LEFT:

Today, the T.C. Steele State Historic Site hosts an annual Plein Air Paint Out in spring, when the peonies and irises are in full bloom.

BELOW:

Steele built his "Dream Studio" in 1916.

Libbie, the love of his life, died of tuberculosis in the fall of 1899. Steele forged on after her death, no doubt finding solace in the work she had joyously encouraged. Eventually, though, as his grandson and biographer Theodore L. Steele wrote, "It was natural for Steele to marry again."

Steele had met Selma Neubacher, 23 years his junior, through her work in arts education. Though she is typically remembered as her husband's helpmate, Selma was an uncommonly ambitious individual in her own right, particularly for a woman at the turn of the 20th century. Long before she and Steele became acquainted, she had left her family in Indianapolis to study art at Brooklyn's prestigious Pratt Institute. On her return home, she was active in the same art-related circles as Steele's son Brandt, ran classes at The Art Institute for schoolteachers, and worked as the assistant supervisor of art for the public schools. Though considerably younger than Steele, at 37 she was well on her way to the condition then known as spinsterhood, having devoted her youth to her passion for arts education rather than finding a husband.

Despite Selma's initial concern about the rigors of making a home in Brown County, it did not take her long to recast the move as an adventure—one she wholeheartedly embraced. Steele painted several hundred pictures of the property, some of them his most beloved, during the



19 years he lived there before his death in 1926 at age 78.

Determined to ensure the preservation of the home she and Steele had created, Selma sought out various institutions that might be willing to take ownership. Shortly before her own death in 1945, she donated artwork and the 211-acre property to the state of Indiana, hoping it would be a center of education and inspiration for future generations—which is exactly what the T.C. Steele State Historic Site has become. ✨