

## BRANDT STEELE,



*Brandt Steele in 1902.*

**“ON LOOKING AT** the ‘Life of William Morris’ I found a sentence that has been my guide all my life as well as the lives of many others. Here it is—‘it is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which should be worth doing and be itself pleasant to do; and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither overwearisome nor overanxious.’”



## DESIGNER AND PÖTTER

So said Rembrandt Theodore Steele, son of the well-known Hoosier artist Theodore C. Steele and his wife Mary Elizabeth Lakin Steele. Born in Battle Creek, Michigan, on 16 November 1870, Brandt Steele came to Indianapolis with his family in 1873. At home Brandt and his sister, Margaret, often interacted with artists, craftspeople, teachers, writers, and musicians. The young Steele was influenced by his mother's love and knowledge of nature, and botany would be a lifelong interest for him.

*Design for a beer stein, about 1898, in watercolor and ink.*

Brandt Steele held an important place in Indianapolis during the first decades of this century. He was probably the city's most active designer working in the Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Besides teaching at the John Herron Art Institute, he was an art potter and designer of stained glass, interiors, and metalwork. By studying for several years in Paris and Munich, Steele absorbed contemporary European taste. He combined aspects of the French Art Nouveau style, German *Jugendstil* (style of youth), and English Arts and Crafts to create his own American vision.

**W**hen his family moved to Munich in 1880, Steele came under the influence of German culture, language, and scenery. Because of these childhood years abroad and his study in Bavaria between 1895 and 1897, Steele reflected his love of Germany in his design work. Upon the family's return to Indianapolis in May 1885, he attended Indianapolis High School and graduated four years later.

Joseph Moore Bowles, Bruce Rogers, and Carl H. Lieber all exerted a profound influence on the young Steele. Of course, his parents also contributed to his education and outlook on life. His closest friend was Lieber, a member of a German family who owned the H. Lieber Company, a fine arts store and gallery well known in the city. Meeting at the Portfolio Club, Steele's group of lively friends discussed Morris, the Arts and Crafts aesthetic, and other art-related topics. Morris's book *News from Nowhere*, published in 1890, made a strong impact on the budding artist. According to Steele:

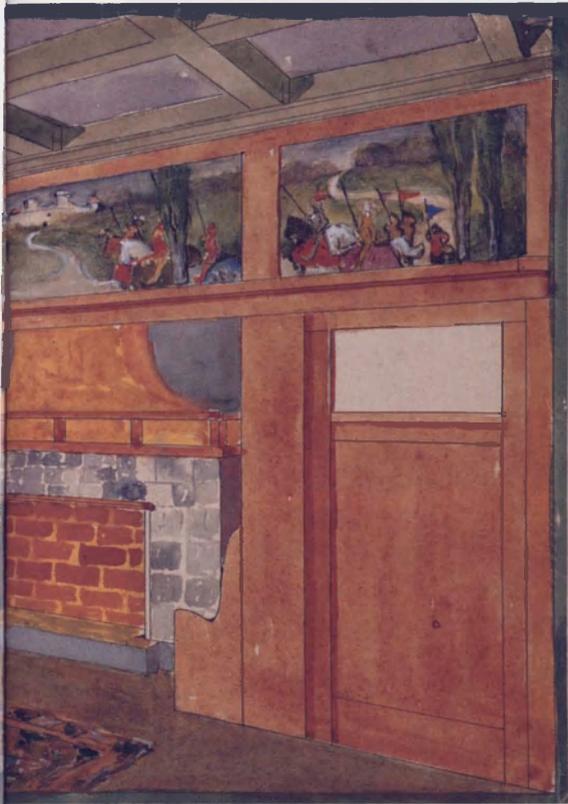
The reading of this book and the subsequent recital of a quotation from the same author made a profound impression upon me . . . made me decide then and there to give up being a great scientist. . . . It was only after I had become really more acquainted with my father and a friend by the name of Joe Bowles, that I found the goal I was looking for.



Steele became a disciple of Morris and undertook a career as a designer working in the Arts and Crafts mode. His goal was to have a career in architecture and design. To this end he worked at the Indianapolis Terra Cotta Company, specializing in the creation of architectural and ornamental terracotta. Steele felt he needed further education in architecture, so in the evenings he attended the *Gewerbeschule*, a private industrial training school that became public in 1895 and would eventually be called Manual Training High School. He took courses in engineering, drafting, modeling, drawing, and geometry. Moreover, in order to acquire additional architectural training, Steele sought employment with a number of Indianapolis architects. Those he worked for included Bernard Vonnegut and Arthur Bohn, John Stem, Henry Hendrickson, and Louis Gibson. While under contract with Gibson he helped design the exterior ornamentation for the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.

*"It is right and necessary that all men should have WORK to do which should be WORTH DOING and be itself PLEASANT to do."*





Left: Wall elevation, about 1900, in watercolor and ink.

Below, left: Three earthenware vases by Brandt Steele, about 1900.

Below, right: Iron candelabrum, about 1902.

Steele's father, T. C. Steele, the sculptor Frederick William MacMonnies, and Gibson all felt the young student should study art in Paris for a number of years. Brandt Steele was excited about the prospect of studying abroad but wanted to explore England for possible schools, too. It was during this period that he created several designs for Bowles's *Modern Art*, such as a decorative border and the initial "I" for the spring 1894 issue.

On his way to France in 1894, Steele stopped briefly in England, where



he met the distinguished ceramist William De Morgan, discussed schools with him, and visited Kelmscott House with hopes of meeting William Morris. Upon arriving in Paris, Steele attended the Ecole Normale d'Enseignement du Dessin (Normal School of Design Teaching), founded in 1881, which MacMonnies had selected for him. Steele studied under Eugène Grasset, who was head of the program in decorative composition. Grasset designed posters, furniture, stained glass, jewelry, and interiors, among other things. Steele also studied at the Académie Julian, the most popular and successful commercial academy in Paris, at the Académie Colarossi, a private school in Montparnasse, and at the University of Paris. He quickly absorbed the Parisian Art Nouveau style, and it appeared in his work thereafter.

Since his days at work for the Indianapolis Terra Cotta Company in Indianapolis, Steele had wanted to pursue his interest in ceramic production. One of the elements of the Ecole Normale d'Enseignement du Dessin was the study of a related craft. For brief periods in 1894 and 1895 he worked at a pottery in Brolles, making ceramic vessels and clay pipes. During his visit to France, Steele also became acquainted with the work of Clément Massier, who had in the early 1880s established his own workshop in Golfe-Juan where he perfected the technique of lustre decoration. Besides Massier, Steele was aware of the reputation of Jean Carriès, founder of the modern method of pottery manufacture. One of the most important Art Nouveau potters working in France, Carriès is especially known for his ceramics in the style of Japanese rustic pottery. Two other celebrated French Art Nouveau potters that Steele knew of were Adrien-Pierre Dalpayrat and Auguste Delaherche.

Steele clearly was familiar with the most current taste in France.

Steele went to Munich around 1895 to continue his art education. At that time the German Art Nouveau style of decoration, known as *Jugendstil* (a variation of the English Arts and Crafts style and the French Art Nouveau aesthetic) was popular in Munich. Well aware of this, Steele was eager to participate in the activities of the lively and cosmopolitan city. Some of the leading artists included Bernhard Pankok, August Endell, and Richard Riemerschmid, who created masterpieces in architecture, furniture, and metalwork. Steele settled in the village of Schleissheim, where he had lived as a youth and where he would be among old friends. Sometime in about 1896 Steele was said to have studied with Riemerschmid, one of the most distinguished European architects and designers. He therefore acquired a taste for German architecture, furniture, metalwork, and glass.

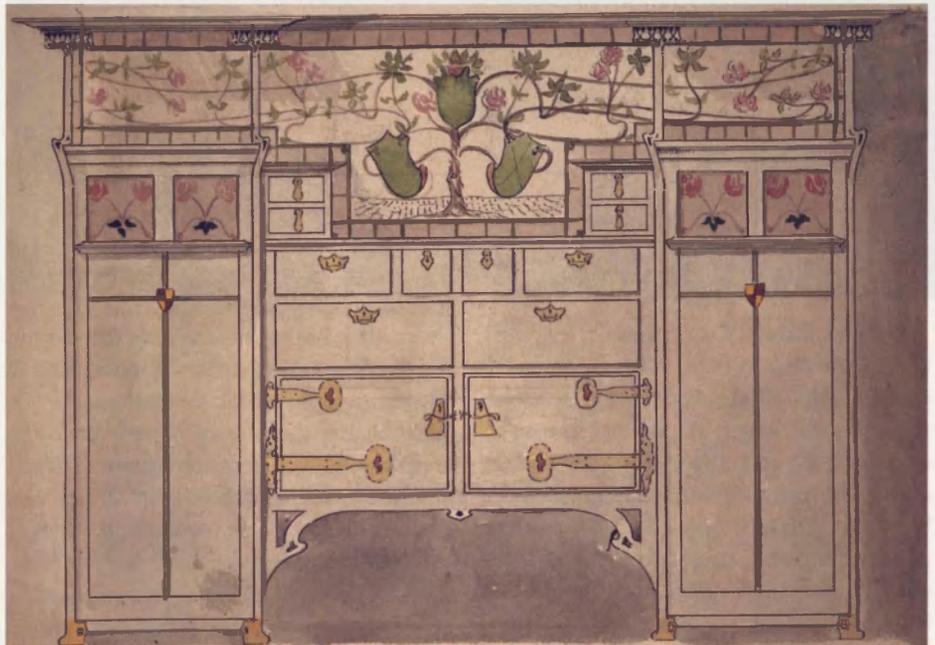
During his stay in Munich, Steele entered a competition to design a beer stein symbolic of the city. The stein, showing the Munich skyline dominated by the great Frauenkirche with its twin towers, won first prize and was soon produced commercially. When Steele returned to Indianapolis in 1897 his metalwork showed German influence. For example, a wrought iron candlestick he designed between 1902 and 1905 showed similarities to some of Riemerschmid's pieces. Furthermore, Steele looked to a number of contemporary German publications, such as *Kunst und Handwerk* (*Art and Craft*), for additional inspiration.

Steele worked in both the French and German traditions. In 1898 he designed stained glass doors for the interior of his father's newly purchased house, later named the Hermitage, in

Brookville, Indiana. The building was used as a studio by both T. C. Steele and J. Ottis Adams. The stained glass for the project, as well as for many others by Brandt Steele, is thought to have been executed by Ulysses Grant Cassady of Indianapolis. At the large art exhibition, called the First Exhibition of the Arts and Crafts, held in 1898 at Shortridge High School, Steele displayed designs for bookbindings, ceramics, and metalwork, as well as examples of his pottery. The following year he showed additional selections of pottery. His work was clearly inspired by French Art Nouveau ceramics, reminiscent of rustic Japanese stoneware and drip glazes. During this period Steele organized the Brandt Steele Pottery on Shelby Street. Unfortunately, a fire in the kiln went out of control and destroyed everything. In 1901 the artist designed the wrought iron gate at the southwest entrance to Crown Hill Cemetery. He established the Indiana Ornamental Iron Work in 1902 in order to create his designs in metal. Later that year, and in 1903, Steele displayed some of these new designs, including gold frames, candlesticks, and a paper knife, at the annual exhibition of the Richmond Art Association. Some of his metalwork could also be seen at the Seventh Annual Exhibition of the Society of Western Artists, which was presented at the John Herron Art Institute in 1903.

In 1902 Steele married Helen Elizabeth McKay, daughter of Horace McKay and Martha Nicholson McKay, leading members of the artistic and intellectual circles in Indianapolis. Helen McKay had studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and often exhibited her work and taught children's classes at Herron.

Like his wife, Steele was a teacher and lecturer of design at Herron. He taught a design course called "Modern Ornament" from 1902 until 1909. The subjects discussed included enamels, metalwork, illuminations, wallpaper and textiles, leather, and interior decoration. Other activities by Steele at Herron included lectures or series of



lectures on topics such as "History of Ornament" and the "Origin and Development of Decorative Forms."

From about 1902 Steele, who formed his own architectural practice, designed stained glass windows and interiors for, among others, several members of the Lieber family. By its active patronage of Steele, the Lieber family played an important role in the expansion of the Arts and Crafts movement in the city. Herman P. Lieber's house, created about 1909, shows Steele's use of stained glass windows throughout the entire building.

One of the most unusual houses created in Indianapolis at the turn of the century was Steele's own residence on

East Drive in Woodruff Place. The design of the house departs markedly from that of the other houses built at the time. It includes an applied half-timber and stucco facade, while the Arts and Crafts taste predominates in the interior design. Most important, stained glass throughout the house reflects Steele's love of nature. It is here, too, that his acceptance of the philosophical concepts of Morris is most evident.

Among Steele's possessions are journals such as *Kunst und Handwerk*, *Modern British Domestic Architecture and Decoration*, *Das Interieur (The Interior)*, and *The Studio*. These periodicals illustrated examples of the latest artistic



*Above: Brandt Steele residence designed and executed in 1904.*

*Top right: Brandt Steele displayed this pottery at the Second Exhibition of Arts and Crafts, Shortridge High School, Indianapolis, 14 through 22 April 1899.*

*Lower right: Steele designed the principal's office of School No. 45, 23d and Park Avenue, Indianapolis. The plan was executed about 1910.*

*Opposite, top: Design for stained glass windows for the Herman P. Lieber home, Indianapolis, about 1909, in graphite, ink, and watercolor.*

*Opposite, below: Design for a cabinet for the Robert Lieber home, about 1905, in watercolor and ink.*



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photography. He joined the Indianapolis Camera Club, one of the most important organizations of its kind in the country, when it was founded in 1928. He exhibited at the First Invitational Club Exhibit of Pictorial Photograph held at the John Herron Art Institute in 1934. His photographs also appeared in exhibitions elsewhere in the United States, as well as in South America and Japan.

Throughout his life, Steele was always busy. He renewed his interest in pottery making and around 1945 shared his hobby with Kurt Vonnegut Sr., a longtime friend. He remained active with both the Camera Club and the Portfolio Club until his death at the age of ninety-four in March 1965.

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trends in England, Scotland, Germany, and Austria. Steele especially valued the interiors and furniture designed by M. H. Baillie Scott and Charles Voysey as well as works by Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland, among others. In late 1905 Brandt, as vice president of the Arts and Crafts Society of Indianapolis, designed the interior of the craft shop at the society's new home on East Ohio Street. Some five years later, he designed the interior, bookcases, and stained glass windows for the principal's office at School No. 45 at the corner of 15th Street (now 23d Street) and Park Avenue. Steele later designed the stained glass for All Souls Unitarian Church in Indianapolis, built

between 1913 and 1914. Again, the windows clearly reflect Steele's use of forms derived from nature.

**F**rom about 1910 until 1930, Steele worked in the design department at H. Lieber Company. There he created catalog covers, moldings, picture frames, mantelpieces, and mirrors. The company, established in 1854, was a large art-related establishment that also had artists' materials, photographic supplies, and manufactured picture frames and moldings. Because of ill health, however, Steele only worked part-time after 1925.

Upon retiring from work, Steele renewed his long-standing interest in