



# An **ARTIST** for **ALL** **SEASONS**

**Theodore Clement Steele,** Indiana's most celebrated landscape artist, enjoyed a 30-year relationship with Indiana University, spending the last four years of his life as an honorary professor. His legacy to IU comprises almost 70 paintings displayed on the Bloomington and Indianapolis campuses, a magnificent record of the university and its people, and an incalculable influence on its students, faculty and alumni.

By Anne Kibbler

INDIANA STATE MUSEUM AND HISTORIC SITES

**Campus Tower**  
This T.C. Steele painting is one of many that features the IU Bloomington campus. [1925, 30 x 45 in.]

# On a Tuesday afternoon in early May, 1907,

two young men in a horse-drawn cart traveled 12 miles east from Bloomington up Bracken Hill in Brown County to a remote, abandoned property known as Hopper Farm. One of the men, a senior from Indiana University representing a committee of his graduating class, had a specific mission: to visit the internationally recognized Indiana artist T.C. Steele and commission a portrait of IU President William Lowe Bryan, BA 1884, MA 1886, LLD'37, in time for the June 18 Commencement ceremony.

The student found Steele, LLD'16, then nearing his 60th birthday, on the hilltop, supervising the clearing of underbrush and the hauling of stone for the foundation of his new house and studio. The young man presented his request, and Steele accepted. Portraits of IU faculty, including Theophilus Wylie, Elisha Ballantine, and Daniel Kirkwood, had provided part of his livelihood since at least the mid-1890s, enabling him to continue his passion of painting landscapes.

He saw the proposition of a portrait of Bryan no differently. It would, he wrote to Selma Neubacher, who was soon to become his second wife, help pay for the cost of the house.

But the portrait of Bryan proved to be more than just another commission. For during the four weeks it took Steele to complete the work, the men found in each other a kindred spirit, a meeting of the minds between two Southern Indiana farm boys whose intel-

lectual horizons had expanded beyond their simple beginnings.

Their friendship was to serve as the anchor of a deeper relationship between Steele and the university that would influence thousands of students, including future president and chancellor Herman B Wells, BS'24, MA'27, LLD'62, and endure until Steele's death two decades later.

In the course of those two decades, Steele received an honorary degree from IU and spent four years as Honorary Professor of Painting on the Bloomington campus. Almost 70 of his works hang in buildings at IU Bloomington and IUPUI, including several portraits and Bloomington campus scenes.

"IU is a big part of the [Steele] story," says Andrea deTarnowsky, site manager for the T.C. Steele State Historic Site in Nashville, Ind. "In a way, Steele was going full circle. When he went to IU, he was essentially getting ready to pass on the paintbrush to the next generation."

## A Born Artist

Theodore Clement Steele was born in 1847 on an Owen County farm to Samuel Steele, a saddle-maker and farmer, and Harriet Evans Steele, a homemaker. The family moved to Waveland in west central Indiana when T.C. Steele was 5.

A self-taught artist from an early age, Steele attended the Waveland Collegiate Institute preparatory department, where he received his first formal instruction in drawing. By age 13, he was teaching his classmates, and by the time he advanced to the collegiate department, he was the official teacher of drawing and painting for the younger pupils.

After graduation, Steele continued his studies and began to make a living as a portrait artist. Although portraits provided his bread and butter for the rest of his life, his real love lay in the painting of landscapes. In 1880, in a quest to develop his painting technique, he moved his family from Indianapolis to Munich, where he studied for five years at the Royal Academy and observed in person the work of the European masters.

The experience expanded his palette, literally and figuratively. Where earlier he had used coal tar oils and brown pigments as a basis for his paintings, he began to incorporate the luminescent hues and lighter textures reminiscent of the French impressionists. And previously he had worked in an indoor studio, but he now embraced the European practice of "plein air" painting, applying color to canvas in the midst of the great outdoors.

He was not alone in this approach. In Munich, he studied with four other Indiana artists whose work was influenced by the Europeans — William Forsyth, Otto Stark, J. Ottis Adams, Richard Gruelle. Along with Steele, they would become known as the Hoosier Group.

"The Hoosier Group was a national story," says Rachel Berenson Perry, BGS'92, former fine arts curator for the Indiana State Museum and author of *T.C. Steele and the Society of Western Artists 1896-1914*. "When the Hoosier Group had a show in 1894 in Chicago, the critics at the time were hailing it as the beginning of a uniquely American way of painting. It was really on the cutting edge at the end of the last century."

Steele also played a leading role in the Society of Western Artists, promoting a better understanding of art throughout the Midwest and beyond with writings and lectures at the Society of Western Artists exhibitions.

"He had a great reputation," Perry says, noting Steele "dragged all his paintings around by train."

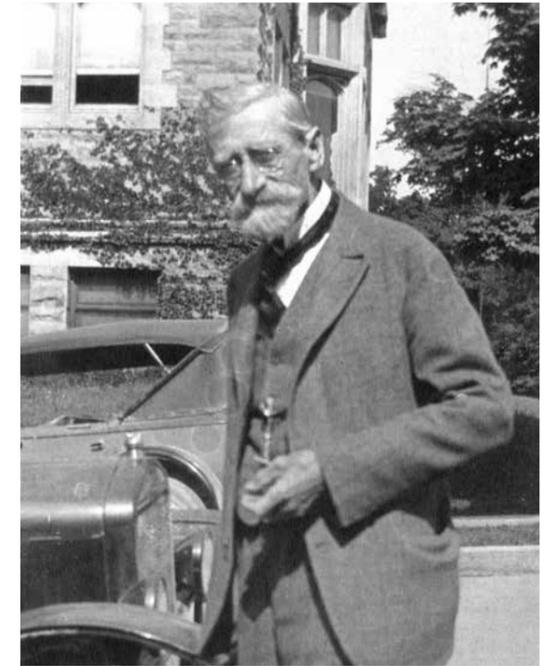
"He was a juror for several international exhibitions and World Fairs. He was very well respected internationally. A lot of people think if he had gone to New York, he would have become a much bigger name. But he chose to live here in his home state."

## Paradise in Brown County

Steele's first wife, Libbie, died in 1899, and in 1907 he married Selma Neubacher, a longtime family friend and art educator. The relationship marked a new phase not only in Steele's personal life, but also in his career.

In 1906, in a quest to find a fresh painting ground, Steele had visited Brown County and fallen in love with its vistas. He took Selma there the next spring, a few months before their wedding.

Selma described the two-day journey from Indianapolis in *The House of the Singing Winds: The Life and Work of T.C. Steele*, which she wrote with Steele's grandson, Theodore L. Steele, and Wilbur Peat, former director of the John Herron Art Museum in Indianapolis. The final miles along rocky, rut-filled tracks and up and down precipitous hills made her wonder if she could manage living in the wilderness. But her doubts disappeared when she stood on the top of Bracken Hill, from which, on a clear day, the smokestacks of Indiana University were visible in the distance.



Top, the last known photograph of T.C. Steele, taken in 1926 in front of Franklin Hall on the IU Bloomington campus.

Below, Steele's studio in Brown County at the T.C. Steele State Historic Site.



**Morning — Old Schofield's Mill**  
 Depicting a water-powered grist mill in northern Indianapolis, Steele put a steep asking price of \$400 on the painting. [1889, 30.5 x 45.5 in.]

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STEELE, IU ARCHIVES (P0027142) / STUDIO, MARC LEBRYK

“There was an incomparable quality of beauty to the hills,” she wrote. “There was a great variety of subject matter. Above all, everything seen and felt conjoined to sing its way into our hearts, divining that here there would always be inspiration for the tasks that lay before us.”

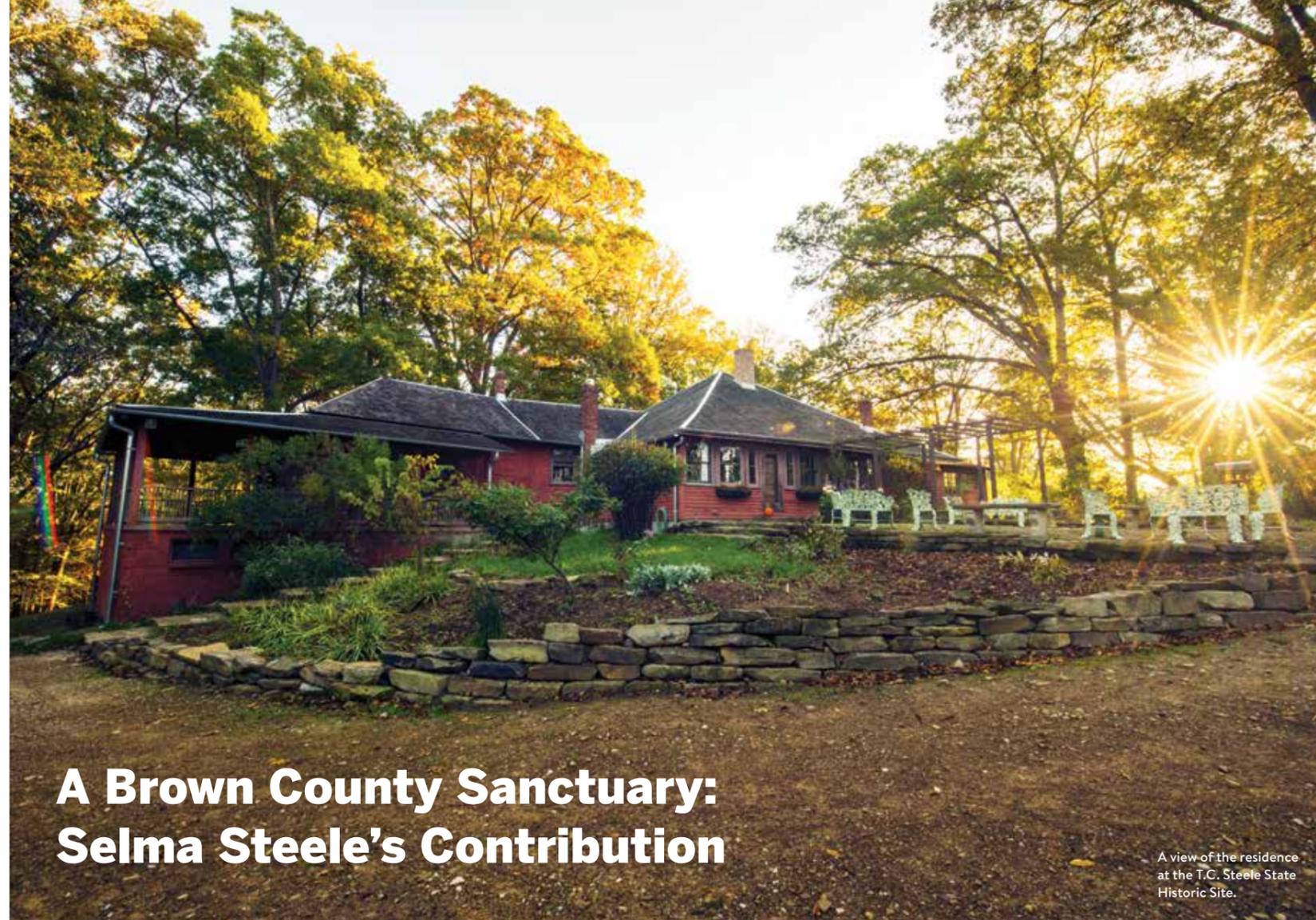
Steele settled the purchase of the property, which was to serve as a seasonal residence and studio during the warmer months. It was to have a low profile to withstand the winds on the hilltop, and would consist of four rooms. On the north side would be a living room/studio, with a view of the hills and an open porch that would not obstruct the light. Behind this room would be a kitchen, a dressing room and a bedroom. The three remaining sides of the house would have full-length screened porches that would serve as dining and sleeping areas.

Some features of the house became objects of curiosity among the locals: a cellar—the first of its kind in the area; an outhouse, in which Selma installed screens to cover the gaps between the wooden planks that made up its walls; and a stone fireplace on which later was inscribed a sentence from Fiona Macleod, one of Selma’s favorite Gaelic authors: “Every morning I take off my hat to the beauty of the world.”

Within a month of the property purchase, construction began. On Steele’s very first day supervising the labor, up rode the IU student from the senior class, having tracked down Steele via phone calls to Indianapolis, Helmsburg, and Nashville to execute his urgent commission.

Steele started his portrait of William Lowe Bryan within days of the student’s request, setting up his easel in a temporary studio in the Frances Morgan Swain Student Building. He traveled back and forth between Bloomington and Brown County by phaeton, an open horse-drawn carriage, spending some nights in Bloomington and some in a small cabin on the Brown County property. Selma remained in Indianapolis, and he wrote to her regularly, updating her on the progress of both the house and the portrait.

“I think I never saw a more beautiful afternoon than this has been,” he wrote one evening in late May from Bloomington’s Hotel Bowles. “The view from the studio window was magnificent. A



## A Brown County Sanctuary: Selma Steele’s Contribution

A view of the residence at the T.C. Steele State Historic Site.



Inside the residence, with Steele’s paintings displayed.



Selma and T.C. Steele stroll through and view the Iris Garden in June 1926.

**S**elma Steele remained in close contact with Indiana University after her husband’s death in 1926.

Records in the university archives include correspondence with several administrators, including President William Lowe Bryan, BA 1884, MA 1886, LLD’37, comptroller Ward Biddle, BA 1916, and Herman B Wells, BS’24, MA’27, LLD’62, in his role as president.

The Steeles and the Bryans had been close friends for almost 20 years, and the exchanges between Selma Steele and President Bryan were warm and personal. Bryan was acutely aware of Selma’s struggles to keep the Brown County sanctuary afloat after her husband’s death. She even sold fruit from her orchard to bring in money. In a letter dated Aug. 17, 1929, filed in the University Archives, Bryan writes:

“My dear Mrs. Steele, Would you not sell more peaches if you would with your wagon haul the baskets to Belmont? Hundreds of people pass through there every day in comparison with the relatively few who pass

your orchard. Excuse me if this suggestion does not seem wise. Very truly yours, William Lowe Bryan.”

In December 1930, Bryan wrote to tell Selma the IU trustees have agreed to buy six Steele canvases for a total of \$6,350. Selma received a down payment and installments over five years, a guaranteed income of \$100 a month.

The correspondence between Selma Steele and Herman B Wells was less personal. Its focus was Selma’s desire to sell the Steele property in Brown County to the university, which she believed would be the best curator of the house, the studio, and the artwork that remained there. She envisioned it as a center for artistic activity that would provide a sanctuary for students, faculty, alumni, and the public.

In 1939, the discussions resulted in a draft contract stipulating the terms of the sale, but the document was never signed.

“It was a tight year with the Indiana Legislature,” says Rachel Berenson Perry,

BGS’92, former curator of the Indiana State Museum fine art collection. “Wells did what he could, but I don’t think it was a top priority. And the site was a long way away at that time. Trying to maintain it was expensive, not to mention the personnel to run it.

“Selma got disillusioned and impatient with whole thing and just gave up.”

In spring 1945, determined to keep her husband’s legacy alive, Selma donated the property of 211 acres, its eight buildings, and its collection of more than 300 paintings to the Indiana Conservation Department, now the Department of Natural Resources. The estate was valued at about \$120,000, the 2017 equivalent of about \$1.6 million.

In return, the state named Selma Steele curator and resident manager for life. She lived only a few months longer, having safeguarded the future of the estate and her husband’s legacy.

Despite Selma’s gift to the state, records show IU’s interest in the property persisted. Wells hoped to procure the use of the site for educational purposes, and as early as the

1950s, the state pushed for the university to take over its management.

None of the plans came to fruition.

The T.C. Steele State Historic Site in Brown County, however, is thriving.

“Look what Selma did,” says Berenson Perry. “She made T.C. Steele live on with a memorial and state historic site. She was amazing.”

Although IU never took over ownership or management of the site, some connections with the university remain, with students filling internship roles.

In May 2017, the state installed a historic marker on the site, making Steele the only person or place in Indiana to be accorded two such markers. The second marker is at 16th and Talbot streets in Indianapolis, the site of Steele’s studio in the city and the first home of the John Herron Art Institute, now the Herron School of Art and Design at IUPUI.

The Brown County marker notes Steele’s appointment at IU as Honorary Professor of Painting, and University Historian James Capshaw, BA’79, gave the keynote address at

the installation ceremony.

Also present was David E. Steele, BS’89, whose grandfather Harry Steele and T.C. Steele were great-grandsons of Ninian Steele.

David Steele graduated from the Kelley School of Business at IUPUI, where he has been a visiting lecturer since 1997. He is president of the board of directors of The Friends of the T.C. Steele State Historic Site.

“T.C. Steele’s contribution to the State of Indiana is profound and his contribution to Indiana University is well recognized,” David Steele wrote after the dedication ceremony in *The Singing Winds*, the organization’s newsletter. “We are very proud of this new marker and the notation of T.C. Steele’s role at Indiana University.”

*To visit the T.C. Steele State Historic Site, take Ind. 46 east from Bloomington toward Nashville. After 9 miles, in Belmont, turn right (south) onto T.C. Steele Road. The site is 1.5 miles on the right. The gardens and grounds are open at no charge; tours of the house and studio are offered several times a day*

HISTORIC SITE, MARC LEBRYK

SELMA AND T.C. STEELE, IU ARCHIVES (P0027140)



### STEELE AT IU

Clockwise from top left: *The Bridge over the Jordan (Stone Bridge)* [1926, 35 x 45 in.]; *Flowers in Spring (Magnolias in Bloom)* [1923, 21.5 x 31.5 in.]; *God's Acre on the Campus* [1926, 21.75 x 32 in.].

In 1922, Steele accepted an appointment as IU's first artist in residence. He kept a studio on the top floor of the University Library (now Franklin Hall), and he took full advantage of his status, painting numerous landscapes of the campus—some shown here—and working with students. Of his paintings, Sherry Rouse, IU's campus art curator, says, "He showed the campus in its greatness before anybody thought of it that way." Steele remained in the role until his death in 1926.



beautiful green meadow [likely Dunn Meadow], a great plain of sunlit green, dotted here and there with children playing. Houses beyond it and a great sky of silver clouds. A beautiful stream runs through it, too. I have told you how beautiful the campus is here, with its cluster of stone buildings among the trees."

He pronounced Bryan "a delightful sitter, a delightful man, and charming." Bryan was equally taken.

"They were both lovers of music, poetry, and the good of education," says Sherry Rouse, BS'81, MA'94, curator of campus art.

The resulting portrait, which hangs with other presidential portraits in Presidents Hall, a part of Franklin Hall, reflects the men's affinity for each other, Rouse says.

"It's the best portrait T.C. Steele ever painted," she says. "These two men hit it off. You can see it in the eyes. It's rare that you feel that."

### A Relationship Grows

Newly married, T.C. and Selma settled into their home, gradually enlarging it and transforming it into the sanctuary they had envisioned. They named it "The House of the Singing Winds," after the sound made by the wind as it blew through the wires of the screened porch.

Selma designed the interior, decorating it with handmade pottery and her collection of intricate paisley shawls. Outside, she created extensive flower gardens to further inspire her husband's work.

The couple spent hours roaming the surrounding hills and forests, which yielded rich subject matter for Steele's art. He painted prolifically, showing his work at home and abroad. In 1913, he was accorded what Selma termed the most coveted recognition of an artist of the day: membership in the National Academy of Design in New York City.

They drew other painters to Brown County, including Hoosier Group members Gustave Baumann, Adolph and Ada Schulz, and other noted artists of the era.

The Steeles also maintained their ties with the university, socializing with Bryan and his wife, Charlotte, as well as with fine arts professor Alfred Brooks and journalism department head Joseph Piercy and their families.

In 1916, at Brooks's suggestion, the city of Bloomington and the university organized an exhibition of Steele's work in the Student Building as part of a pageant celebrating the state's centennial.

"As I recall, this came to mark the beginning of an interest on our part to assist more vitally and give impulse to a better understanding of art expression among the students attending the university," Selma wrote.

Selma noted the large attendance throughout the month-long exhibition, which concluded the week of Commencement. Bryan invited the Steeles to attend the Commencement ceremonies, and to Steele's surprise, conferred upon him an honorary doctorate.

"He painted parts of Southern Indiana in every month of the

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“These sessions, Dr. Wells said, left him with a lifelong interest in the visual arts and a deep appreciation for Steele's achievement and his intellect... [His] experience with Steele was something he could look back on and see this was part of what a university should be.”



IU ARCHIVES (P0027137)

Steele paints in Dunn Meadow in 1923 while then IU student Herman B Wells observes.

year, in every kind of weather, under a thousand different exquisite skies,” Bryan said in his conferral speech. “He revealed the thrilling beauty that plays over our home land every day of the year.”

Selma wrote that she and her husband were greatly affected by the speech.

“When finally the presentation by President Bryan came, in words so beautiful that I was in tears, the painter, too, showed plainly how deeply he was moved by the honor bestowed upon him,” she wrote. “Later he told me how difficult it had been to grasp the idea that this recognition had come to him. His unassuming nature would always have it so.”

## The Artist in Residence

Commencement over, the Steeles returned to Brown County and began building Steele’s dream studio. The 30-by-50-foot structure had soaring ceilings and an entire wall of north-facing windows.

“Its most notable features are its spaciousness and its splendid light,” said a story in the Nov. 10, 1917, *Indiana Daily Student*, which called the studio one of the largest and finest in the country.

Despite the remote location, the studio and house gained renown far and wide. In 1921, according to the *Indianapolis News*, nearly 2,000 people visited the site.

“The trek of visitors to the studio increased with the years, from simple farm people who were attracted to the gold frames around the pictures as much as to the pictures themselves, to the people of note not only of this country but from abroad,” Selma wrote. “And the students attending the University came, and they came in large numbers.”

Among them were IU music students, hired to play at the Steeles’ many social gatherings. Other students came to visit the studio or simply to enjoy the grounds. One year, when a visitor’s campfire threatened to burn the house and studio, students drove from Bloomington to beat back the flames with rakes and dirt.

In 1922, after Alfred Brooks left IU, Bryan invited Steele to become an honorary professor for six months of the next school year.

“Bryan thought Steele was a great painter but also a remarkable person, and thought students would benefit from being around him,” says Cate Whetzel, MFA’08, program developer at the T.C. Steele State Historic Site.

University Historian James Capsheaw, BA’79, says Steele’s presence on campus represented one of the first artistic residencies in the country.

“William Lowe Bryan was very much interested in showing the whole range of human occupations,” Capsheaw says. “That’s why he created professional schools and why he promoted the idea that you can find fulfillment and make a living in art.”

As Selma told it, her husband certainly believed in the mission of helping students appreciate art.

But there were additional motives.

“Wintering in Bloomington was much easier than wintering in Belmont,” Whetzel says, noting the artist’s advancing age. “Steele was always a working painter. He had taxes. He had upkeep. He didn’t have a tidy bank account. The residency allowed the artist to work on his own projects while being available to students.”

Steele, too, benefited from the relationship. He took advantage of his new environment, creating numerous landscapes of the Bloomington campus and its buildings.

“He showed the campus in its greatness before anybody thought of it that way,” says Rouse, the campus art curator.

## The Painter and the Students

The Steeles set up a studio above the reading room of the library, now Presidents Hall, a large space in Franklin Hall. Selma decorated it with plants, Turkish rugs, and part of her shawl collection.

That same student, chatting with Steele in the studio, questioned him about a painting of the Kirkwood Observatory that hung on the wall. In response, he received a lesson on Steele’s emphasis on color and light.

“From the sky come the different lights and atmospheric change. And from this you can tell whether nature is angry and cold, or warm and friendly,” Steele is said to have told the student.

To brief students on studio etiquette and provide some background in art appreciation, English professor Frank Senour wrote a series of articles in the *Indiana Daily Student* under such headings as “What Not to Do,” “A Typical Picture,” “Lines,” and “Color.”

The columns were published in a 1924 pamphlet called “Art for Your Sake.” President Bryan wrote the introduction.

“I believe we need beauty as much as we need truth,” he wrote. “The university needs artists as much as it needs scholars.”

One of the students who watched Steele at work was more notable, in retrospect, than others. A photo dated 1923 shows the artist seated at his easel in what is now Dunn Meadow. Behind him, hands on hips, gaze fixed intently on the canvas, is a young moustached man in a vest, tie and jacket: none other than future IU president and chancellor Herman B Wells, BA’24, MA’27, LLD’62.

Bloomington *Herald-Times* columnist Lydia Brown Finkelstein, BS’54, in a letter to the editor after Wells’s death in 2000, recalled a note Wells sent her after he read a 1996 column she wrote about Steele. Wells told Finkelstein he had often visited Steele in his studio.

“He liked to watch Steele paint, and to listen to the artist talk about art,” Finkelstein wrote. “These sessions, Dr. Wells said, left him with a lifelong interest in the visual arts and a deep appreciation for Steele’s achievement and his intellect.”

Adds Capsheaw, “Wells’s experience with Steele was something he could look back on and see it was part of what a university should be.”

## Art for the Ages

Steele’s tenure on campus was to last until his death at age 78 in July 1926. According to Selma, he enjoyed his time there immensely. He took pleasure in campus life and appreciated the wealth and variety of subject matter for his work.

His appreciation was reciprocated.

“He came to hold the esteem of all — from the president of the University down through the faculty, the student body, and the townspeople,” Selma wrote in *The House of the Singing Winds*.

In tribute to Steele, Bryan canceled classes to allow faculty and students to attend his funeral.

Registrar John W. Cravens told *The Indiana Alumnus* at the time, “While most of Dr. Steele’s paintings in recent years glorified Brown county scenery, many of his most beautiful ones were made on or near the campus of the University. His work and associations at Indiana University will always remain as outstanding features in the life of this institution.”

Says Capsheaw, “In Steele’s landscapes and portraits, the physicality of the campus and the characters of its leaders were documented by a great artist. That’s a wonderful legacy.” ■

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