Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996 p 1 of 10

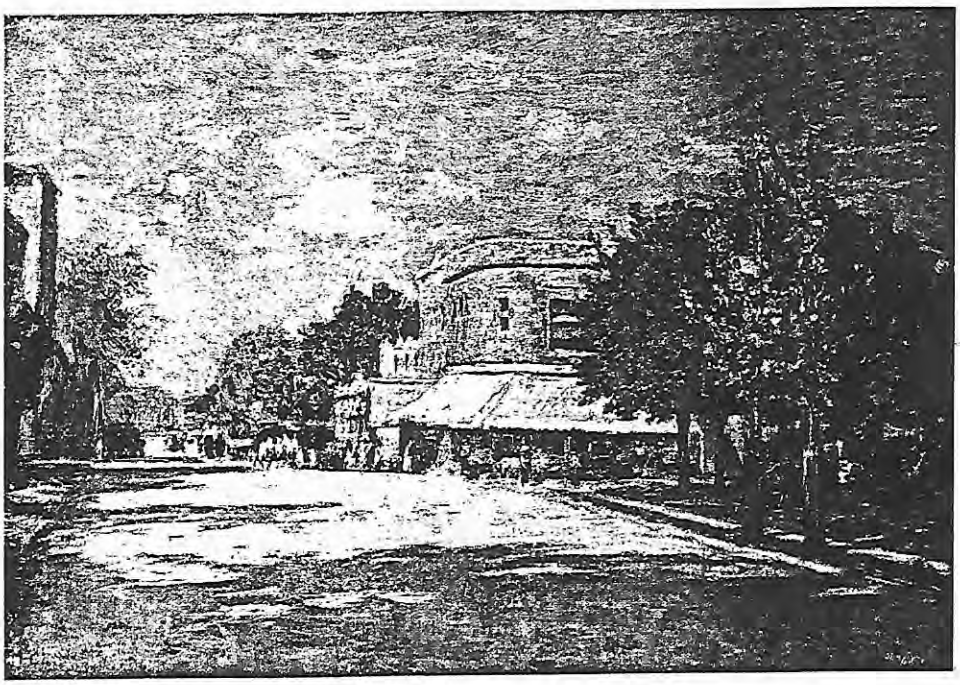
BLOOMINGTON ◆ INDIANA UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

THEODORE CLEMENT STEELE

An American Master of Light

by William H. Gerdts

The pride evinced by the people of Indiana in their nineteenth-century artists and artistic traditions is apparent in the many serious publications that have appeared on the subject, dating back as far as 1916 with the publication of William Forsyth's *Art In Indiana*. While a celebration of native talent may not be unique—there are numerous studies of nineteenth-century painters and sculptors from neighboring Ohio—what is unusual is the relative lack of nationally recognized masters from Indiana, in contradistinction to the many famous artists from Ohio, or even from Missouri and Illinois, states whose artistic histories remain relatively little studied.



Theodore Clement Steele: An American Master of Light, organized by the Evansville Museum of Arts and Science, is on view through September 29, 1996 at the Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, Indiana, 812-855-1038. It continues at the National Academy of Design in New York City from January 12 through March 9, 1997. Accompanying the exhibition is a eighty-page hardbound book with an essay by Dr. William H. Gerdts.

All illustrations are by Theodore Clement Steele.

RIGHT: *Cows by the Stream*, 1895, o/c, 16 x 23, collection of Mark and Carmen Holeman.

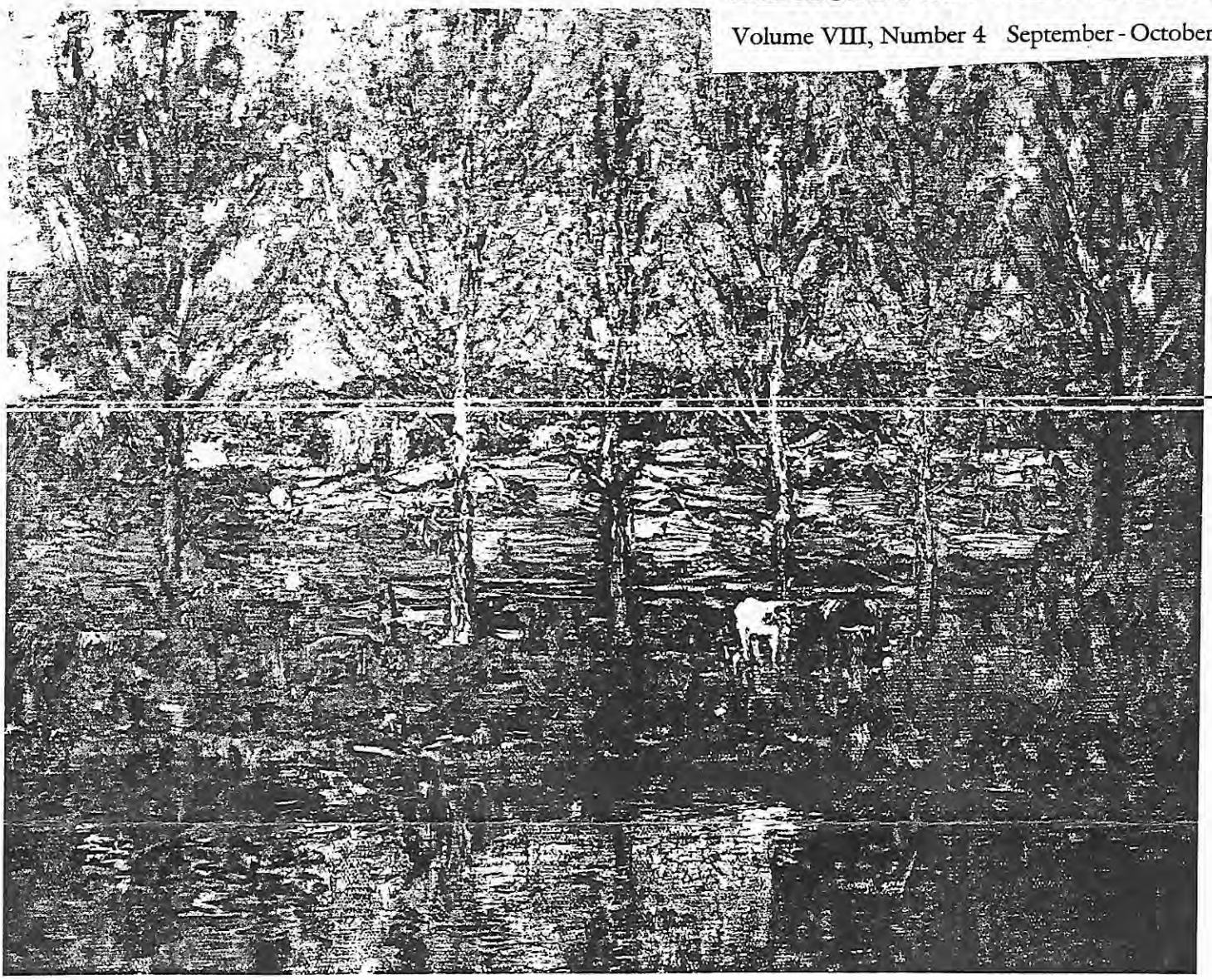
LEFT: *Morning by the Stream*, 1893, o/c, 22 x 27, private collection.

BELOW LEFT: *Street Scene*, 1896, o/c, 16 x 23, collection of Bob and Ellie Haan.

Only one truly celebrated painter emerged in the nineteenth century from a background or early training and practice in Indiana, William Merritt Chase, and his mature career as artist and teacher was pretty much confined to the East Coast. This was not true of his near contemporary, Theodore Clement Steele, who like Chase sought training abroad in Munich, but unlike Chase returned to establish his career in his native state. And while Steele is much admired today among Indiana art lovers, his art is little known outside the state, although in his own lifetime his paintings were praised, exhibited, and acquired nationally. Steele's election as associate member of the National Academy of Design in New York City in 1913 confirmed him as the most famous Hoosier artist of his time.

Steele was born near Gosport in southern Indiana in 1847; four years later the family moved north to Waveland, where in 1859 at the age of twelve he entered Waveland Collegiate Institute. His intuitive artistic skills were so quickly honed there that the following year he was put in charge of a drawing class. After completing his studies in 1868, Steele went briefly to Chicago for further instruction where he practiced por-

American Art Review
Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996



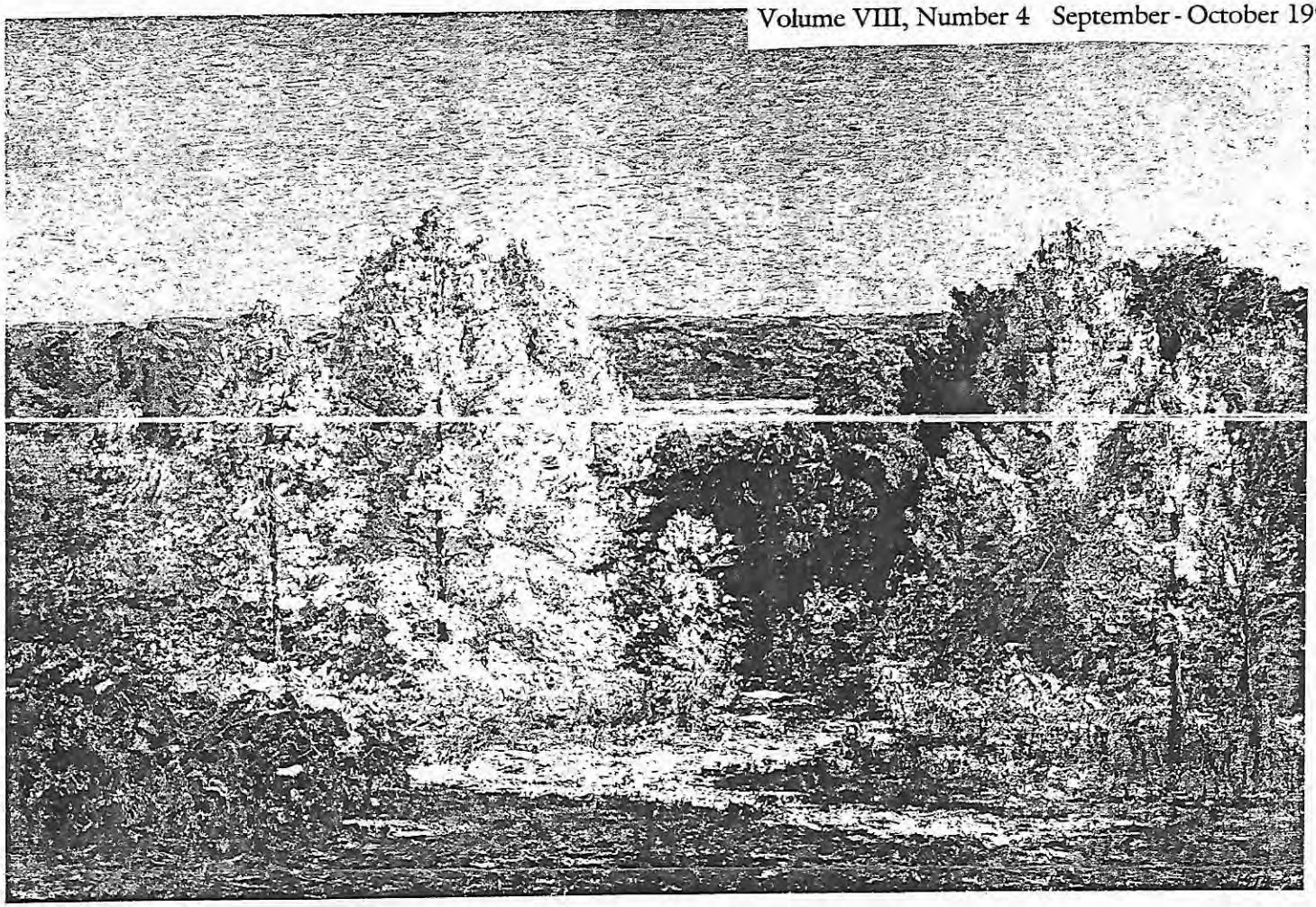
traiture. Two years later he married a former fellow Waveland pupil, Mary Elizabeth (Libbie) Lakin, and the Steeles moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, where they stayed for three years. They soon were the parents of two children, Rembrandt (Brandt) and Margaret (Daisy), born respectively in 1870 and 1872. A third child and second son, Shirley, was born in 1878. In 1873 the family moved back to Indiana and settled in Indianapolis, where Steele attempted to earn a living as a portraitist. Early in 1877 he and a group of Indianapolis artists organized the short-lived Indianapolis Art Association, which in turn spawned the equally short-lived Indiana School of Art at the end of the year.

One of the School's founders and teachers was James Gookins from Terre Haute, whose career had been established in Chicago. Gookins had studied in Munich in the early 1870s, and it may have been he who urged Steele to do likewise. In truth, however, there was a strong tradition for young Midwestern artists, especially from communities with large Germany populations, to seek their advanced training in Munich, rather than in Paris, which drew most American art students. All told, about four hundred Americans studied in Munich in the nineteenth century, while easily five times that number trained in the French capital.

Steele, with financial support provided by thirteen Indiana friends and patrons, traveled to Germany and enrolled in the Munich Royal Academy. On October 16, 1880 he began study with Gyula Benczur, a Hungarian artist of some reputation. The opportunity to study the works of the old masters in the galleries of the Pinakothek was of equal significance in Steele's formal training.

The following summer Steele and his family moved from Munich and settled in Schleissheim, six miles from the Bavarian capital. There he began painting landscapes under the guidance of J. Frank Currier, one of the most renowned American expatriates in Germany. Currier had begun his studies in Munich in 1870 and had remained there after his colleagues, Frank Duveneck, Chase, and Walter Shirlaw, had left—Duveneck to teach and work in Italy, and Chase and Shirlaw to settle in New York City. All of these artists had imbibed the more vigorous, painterly and very unacademic manner practiced in Munich by Wilhelm Leibl and his followers, a group known as the "Leibl-Kreiss." The "Leibl-Kreiss" were inspired more immediately by the French Realist, Gustave Courbet, and more distantly by the late work of the great Dutch masters Rembrandt and especially

American Art Review
Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996



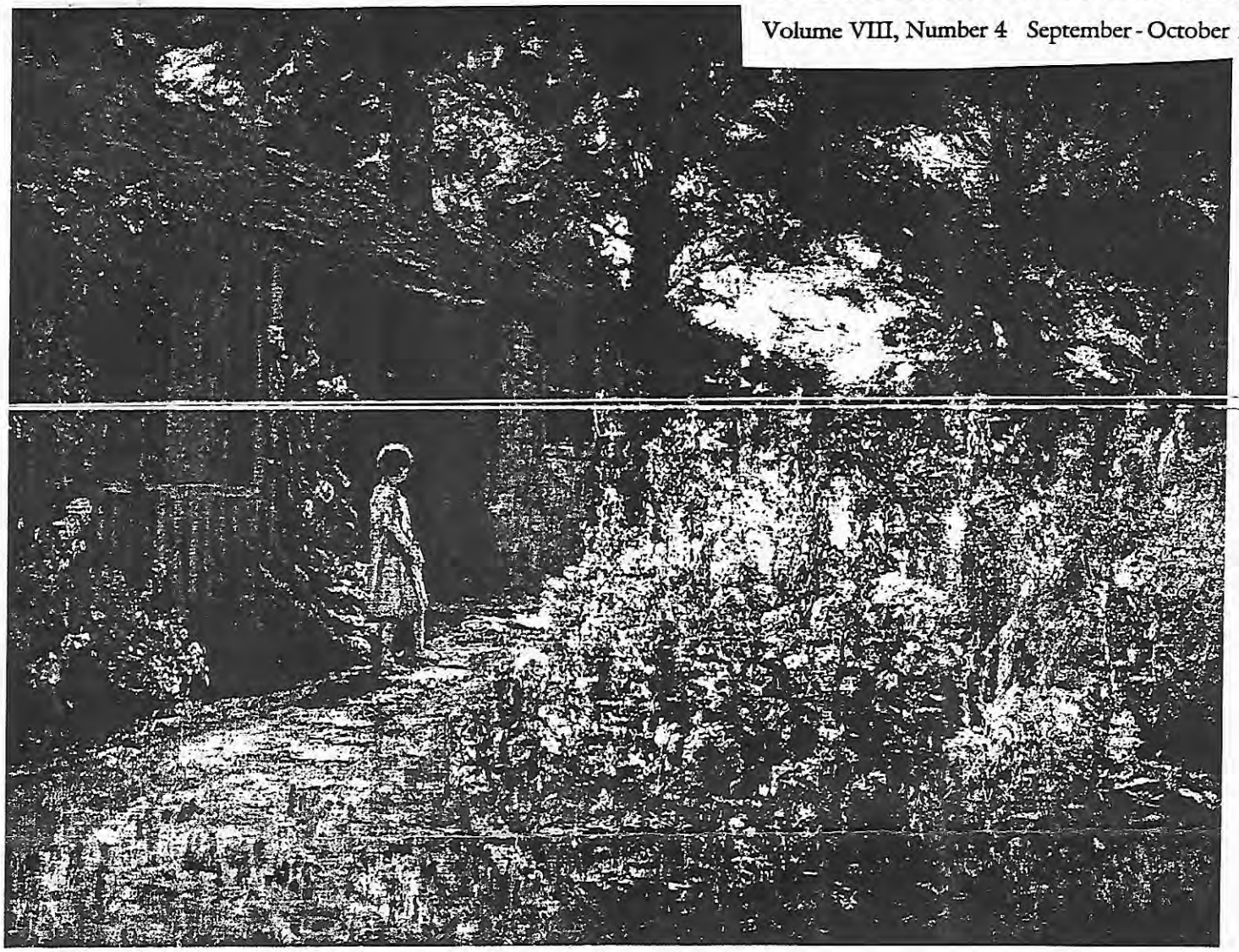
BELOW: *June Glory*, o/c, 20 x 24, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Wade C. Harrison.

ABOVE: *The Poplars*, 1914, o/c, 48 x 56, collection of Jane and Andrew Paine.
ABOVE RIGHT: *Child with Flowers*, 1918, o/c, 30 x 40, private collection.
RIGHT: *A June Idyll*, 1887, o/c, 18 x 29, Indianapolis Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. William B. Wheelock.

Frans Hals.

When the Academy reopened in October of 1880, Steele entered the painting class of Ludwig von Loefftz, a severe disciplinarian with a disdain for spontaneous effects, who remained Steele's teacher for the rest of his five-year stay in Munich. Thus, Steele was exposed to two divergent sets of strategies, applicable to separate thematic concerns—sketchily painted landscapes and carefully drawn and finished figure works. The conflict inherent in such experience was not that unusual for many artists in the 1880s who were trained in both Munich and Paris. Although Steele advanced in proficiency to such a degree that his painting *The Boatman* won a silver medal in the annual student exhibition in the summer of 1884, it was Currier's (and ultimately

American Art Review
Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996

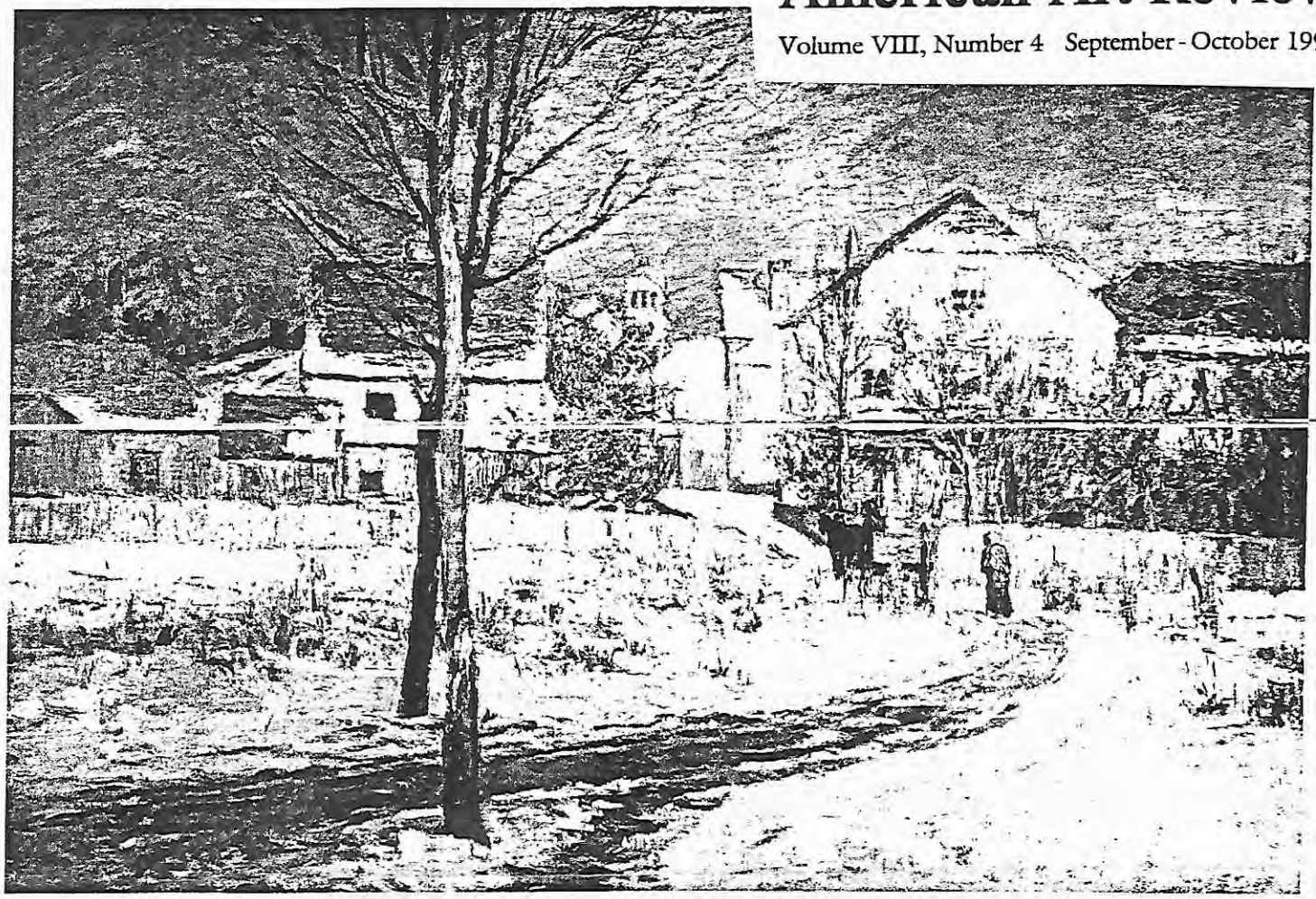


Leibl's) more dynamic aesthetic which ultimately became the hallmark of Steele's art.

On May 23, 1885, the Steeles left Germany, departing from Antwerp, Belgium, on the *Nordland*. They docked in New York City on June 6 and returned immediately to Indianapolis. There they leased Tinker Place, a home at Sixteenth Street between Pennsylvania Street and Talbot Avenue near the northern edge of the city, where they would remain for much of their Indianapolis residence. The following years Steele added a studio to the property. The city was already familiar with his Munich painting, since he had sent pictures back during his student days, and two months before his return a show of pictures by Steele and fellow Hossier, William Forsyth, with whom he had studied in Munich, had been held at English Hall in Indianapolis.

In Indianapolis Steele returned to portraiture, both to fulfill his obligations to the patrons who had supported him abroad and to ensure a livelihood. Painting commissioned portraits did not entail the financial hazards of speculative landscape and still-life work, and Steele painted many of them, especially during the winter and early springtime, before venturing out-of-doors to

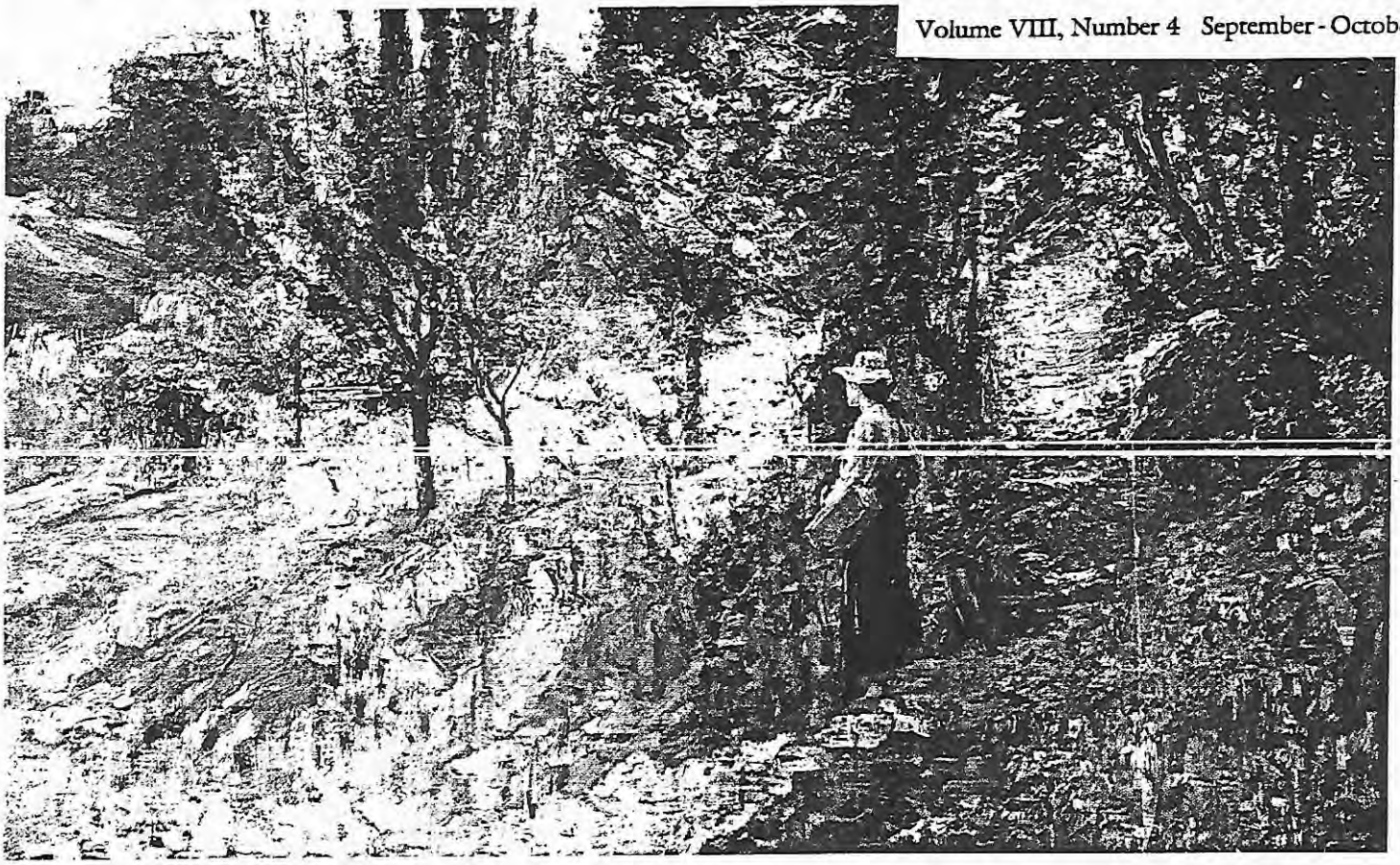
American Art Review
Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996



engage in landscape work. With his Munich training in figure drawing and painting behind him, Steele was an assured portraitist, if not always an especially inspired one; it was he who was chosen to paint the likenesses of five successive Indiana governors. Like many an artist, his more personal likenesses were also his finest and most expressive, such as *Portrait of Daisy*. Still emphasizing the neutral tones favored by he artists who had trained him in Munich, Steele painted a somber, almost haunting likeness of his daughter, devoid of the sentimentality which one might expect in a familial image.

After his return to Indiana, Steele devoted himself primarily to scenic art. He and the painters, who had returned from Europe to Indiana, were shortly to be designated as the Hoosier Group. Unlike the majority of midwestern painters who studied abroad and settled in New York City or elsewhere in the East, this group explored the beauties of Indiana's placid landscape, peaceful rivers, and small communities.

For quite a while, Indianapolis itself remained Steele's base of operation and the city itself is not absent from his pictorial repertory. Throughout his career the urban scene was attractive to him as a subject, including his own home, *Tinker Place*, which he painted in the winter of 1891. Here Steele renders the confluence of the rural and the urban—a theme which also interested many of the French Impressionists—but in very midwestern terms. In addition to Steele's urban painting, his non-portrait work consisted of rural scenes painted outside of the state's capital. Some of the earli-



ABOVE: *Berry Picker*, 1894, o/c, 19 x 31, private collection.
RIGHT: *Village Scene*, 1885, o/c, 22 x 32, collection of Bob and Ellie Haan.
ABOVE LEFT: *Tinker Place*, 1891, o/c, 22 x 32, collection of Dr. Brandt F. Steele.
LEFT: *Women on the Porch*, 1899, o/c, 15 x 22, collection of Bob and Ellie Haan.

est of these still continued to reflect the character of his Munich work.

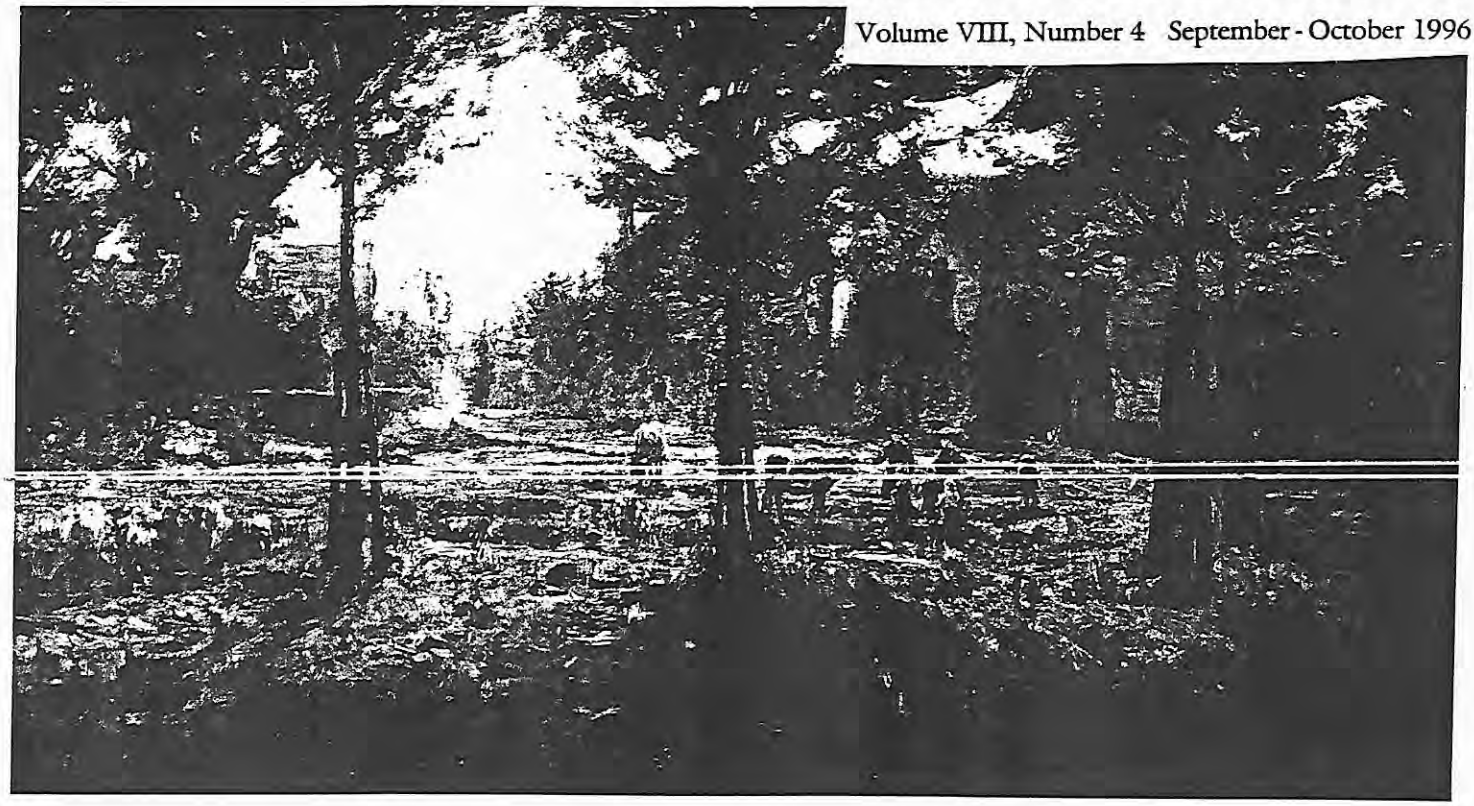
Steele's outdoor summer work took him, sometimes with his family, sometimes on his own, to various rural areas throughout the state. Because of the general pastoral nature of these landscapes, the exact sites depicted are often difficult to identify. From 1890 to 1895, Steele worked during the summers in and around the old Indiana town of Vernon on the Muscatatuck River, where he had previously painted as early as 1886. The first three summers he worked with another of his former fellow Munich colleagues, William Forsyth, one of the most innovative of the Munich-trained Hoosiers. Forsyth also joined Steele in Indianapolis in 1891 to teach at the Indiana School of Art.

During this time, Steele painted the monumental *Summer Days at Vernon*, in which the unique Munich sensibility of back-lit landscape forms and scraggly but formally balanced silhouettes harmonize with the brilliant sunlight and pastoral beauty that mark Steele's vision of rural life. A few years later Steele would abandon entirely the darker drama of Munich, replacing it with lighter, sometimes even pastel tones, and casual, asymmetrical compositions which one finds in *Morning by the Stream*.

The paintings of 1893 reflect Steele's conscious philosophy of modern landscape painting, a philosophy he set forth in a lecture entitled "The Trend of Modern Art (The Gospel of Beauty)," delivered to the Convention of Indiana Union Literary Clubs in Huntington in May of 1895:

The painter of today is more sensi-

American Art Review
Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996



tive to the quality of light. He now regards light as the great fact in nature. It is light that gives mystery to shadow, vibration to atmosphere, and makes all the color notes sing together in harmony.... There is another characteristic of modern landscape that it worthy of notice. It is the growth of an appreciation of the quieter elements and qualities of landscape beauty. The Niagaras, and Yosemite valley have had their day, and now the painter finds sufficient interest in the hillside pasture and the meadow brooks, in a country road, and in fact it seems that in his choice of subject most anything will do.

It is surely not coincidental that at this time, when Steele was completely resolving his personal philosophy of landscape painting, critical esteem for his work was also increasing beyond the purely local. Indeed the artist was being hailed as one of the standard-bearers of a uniquely American form of Modernism, one arising appropriately from the nation's heartland. In 1893 Steele and Forsyth were the two Indiana artists whose works were included in the art exhibition at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

At the Exposition, Steele was exposed to the work of the French Impressionists, perhaps for the first time. The influence of

Impressionism can be seen in the higher colorism manifest in the pictures of 1893 painted after the exposition, such as *Morning by the Stream,* as well as in the rich, warm sunlight of *Berry Picker*, which was probably painted in Vernon during his last season there.

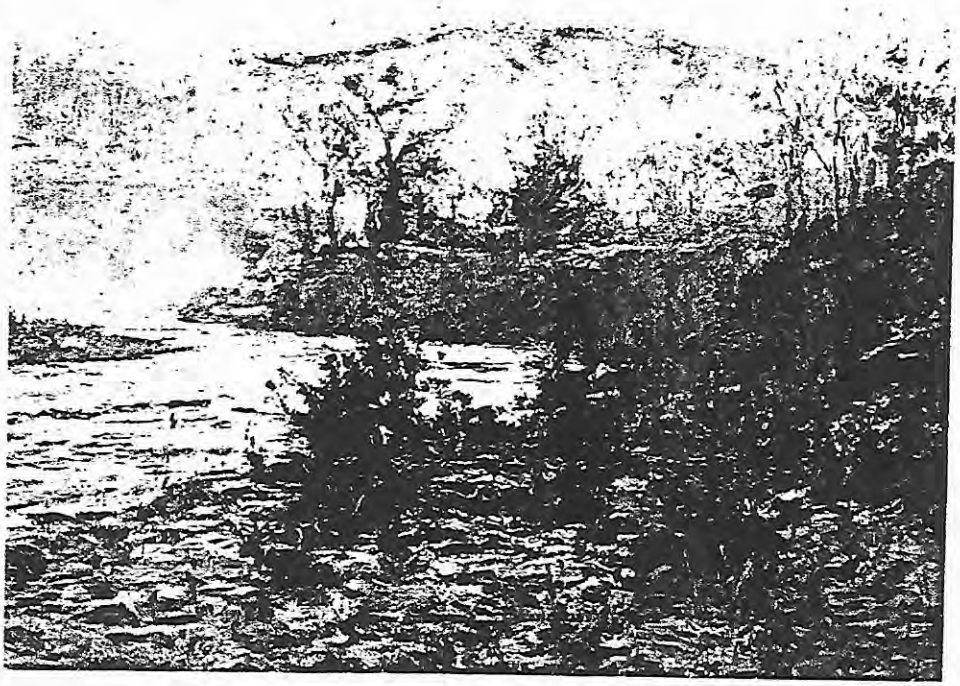
The appearance of the works by Steele and Forsyth in the Columbian Exposition led the noted writer and critic Hamlin Garland to invite Steele, Forsyth, Otto Stark, and Richard Gruelle to show their work at the Chicago studio of the city's leading sculptor, Laredo Taft, Garland's brother-in-law. The Chicago show was sponsored by the Central Art Association, an organization promoting western art, and also included two paintings by John Ottis Adams. Garland entitled the exhibition—and thus christened the five painters—"The Hoosier School" and championed the group as a model for a distinctly American Modernism, based upon the adaptation of contemporary, i.e., impressionist principles.

Steele certainly approved of the impressionism technique of placing colors side by side upon the canvas, unmixed, based upon the study of light. But his subscription to the movement was tentative, and he called for greater structural qualities and imagination in design, and a greater spiritual and poetic significance. It was certainly these constituents which he strived to incorporate into his own impressionist canvases.

Steele resigned from the Indiana School of Art in 1895 and spent the summer in Spencer, where his wife, increasingly ill with rheumatoid arthritis, was placed in a sanitarium. He then joined John Ottis Adams at Black's Mill on the Mississinewa, exploring the flat, prairie-like landscape where his

American Art Review
Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996

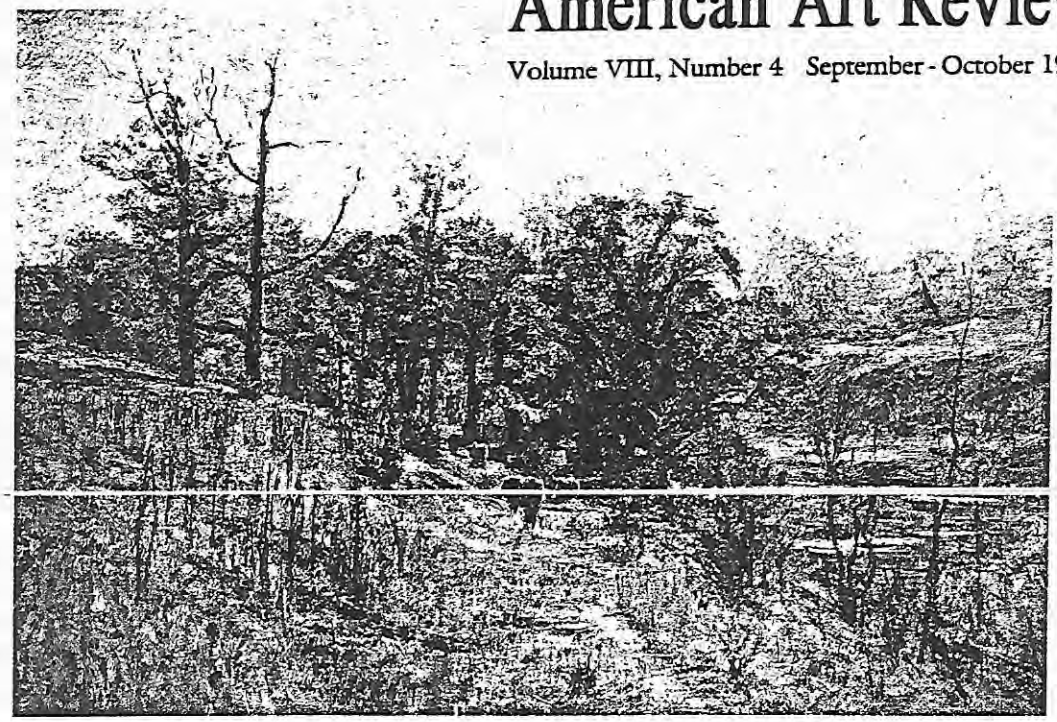
ABOVE: *The Grist Mill*, 1901, o/c, 21½, 26½, private collection.
RIGHT: *Whitewater River*, 1904, o/c, 22 x 29, collection of Dana Reihman and Eileen Cravens.
ABOVE LEFT: *Summer Days at Vernon*, 1892, o/c, 21 x 39, private collection.
LEFT: *Portrait of Daisy*, 1891, o/c, 45 x 30, Evansville Museum of Arts and Science, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Neubacher.



1895 pictures were painted. In October 1896, Steele joined Adams in Metamora, on the Whitewater River, a new area for pictorial exploration and one which would be vital to the development of Hoosier landscape painting. The following year Steele and Adams returned to Metamora, and a sketching trip down the Whitewater to Brookville led them to purchase The Hermitage in 1898, which remained their

(continued on page 157)

American Art Review
Volume VIII, Number 4 September - October 1996



RIGHT: Theodore C. Steele, *November's Harmony*, 1893, o/c, 26½ x 38, private collection.

Steele *(continued from page 97)*

painting base until Steele sold his half-interest in the house to Adams in 1907.

Steele's fame as a premier Hoosier painter continued to increase. In 1896 he was appointed vice-president of the Art Association of Indianapolis. At the same time, he, Forsyth, and Adams, Steele headed the Indiana contingent of the Society of Western Artists, which organized traveling exhibitions of the work of Midwestern painters for a period of almost twenty years. In 1898 Steele became President of the Society.

Meanwhile, the health of his wife Libby became increasingly precarious when she contracted of tuberculosis, and the family summered that year in Roan Mountain, Tennessee, in the hopes of alleviating her condition. Libbie died in November 1894; their younger son Shirley married the following year and moved to California; and in 1901, with the lease on the Tinker Place home terminated, the property was sold to the Art Association of Indianapolis which opened the John Herron Art Institute there. Steele and his two unmarried children, Brandt and Daisy, moved to a small house on East St. Clair Street, while the artist continued to summer at The Hermitage in Brookville.

After Brandt's marriage in June of 1902, Steele and his daughter journeyed West the following month to visit family in Oregon and California. Once Steele reached the Oregon shore, he began to produce a series of vigorously painted coastal scenes with an enhanced colorism. This was a new experience for Steele, who quickly mastered the artistic conventions of the seascape and completed fifteen canvases. Steele and his daughter continued south to San Francisco and then to Redlands in Southern California where Shirley and his wife were living. They returned home in November by way of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas.

Steele returned to the Far West the following year, visiting many of the same locales he had the previous year. Although Steele was very proud of the results of his pictorial excursions into such unfamiliar territory, in a paper he delivered to the Portfolio Club in Indianapolis in 1903, he promised:

> as a lover of my State and a believer in the beauty of its scenery, that I will love none the less but perhaps appreciate the more its charms of woodland hill and field, because I have lived awhile where the long waves of the pacific break on the Oregon coast...."

In 1905 Daisy married Gustave Neubacher of Indianapolis, and two years later, in August 1907, Steele married Gustave's sister Selma, an artist and art supervisor twenty-three years his junior. Earlier in 1907, Steele had purchased over two-hundred acres of woodland in Brown County, sixty miles south of Indianapolis. There he built a hilltop studio and home, appropriately called "The House of the Singing Winds," where he and Selma settled. The Brown County residence became Steele's base of artistic activity, although winters were still spent in Indianapolis. In 1914 he was one of a large number of Indiana artists who painted a mural for the Indianapolis City Hospital.

Although not far from Indiana University in Bloomington, much of Brown County remained relatively isolated and primitive. With perhaps the most rugged and varied scenery in Indiana, the county had recently begun to attract artists from the Chicago area for summer landscape work. From the time of Steele's appearance there, it became one of the most popular art colonies in the Midwest, attracting not only painters from Indiana, but others from as far as Salt Lake City and Buffalo, many of whom became either annual visitors or permanent residents in and around Nashville, the county seat.

The great majority of Steele's later paintings depicts the countryside surrounding his estate. In many of these Steele uses even more vivid light and color than he had in his previous work, often concentrating on the trees, singly and in groves, that punctuate and fill the landscape—the "living denizens" of his private world.

At "The House of the Singing Winds," Selma developed a commercial vegetable and fruit garden and supervised a flower garden which added new dimensions to her husband's paintings. Flowers became a major focus of many of his finest paintings. In *Child with Flowers*, a profusion of flowers bloom in the garden, around the house, and on trellises on the porch, echoing a thematic interest previously more associated with his former Munich colleagues, Forsyth and especially Adams. Steele also painted a considerable number of more formal floral still lifes, table-top groupings of flowers in vases and other containers, such as *June Glory*. He became one of Indiana's finest masters of this theme, one that he could undertake in inclement weather, and one

(continued on page 160)

Steele *(continued from page 157)*
that as he grew older required less strenuous physical effort than outdoor landscape work.

As time went on, he spent more and more time at his country home. In 1922 Steele was invited to join the faculty of Indiana University in nearby Bloomington as an honorary professor of art, serving as artist-in-residence with a studio and room in the University library. Steele suffered a heart attack in December 1925, and although he recovered, his condition gradually deteriorated throughout 1926. He died on July 24 of that year in "The House of the Singing Winds." He was immediately honored by a memorial exhibition at the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis, which had exhibited his Brown County paintings in one-artist shows in 1910 and again in December 1920. To the end, Steele remained steadfast in his devotion to his native landscape, and his work continues to represent a late nineteenth-century vision of a uniquely American Modernism.

Hibbard *(continued from page 159)*
tioned. Tom Nicholas noted, "It has been said by some of his admirers later in his life, they wished he had circulated more broadly among other artists and schools of painters and not confined himself to Rockport and Vermont. Conversely he got so skilled at putting together the painting that later in life it became somewhat mannered. It comes with total command of his subject." Strisik suggested, "If he'd traveled more, I think it would have stimulated him to go to even greater heights."

Whatever period of Aldro T. Hibbard's work one prefers, he was a giant who truly knew how to tackle his subject Elaine reflected, "I really think he saw more deeply what's out there: what others fail to see. He really loved what he saw; he had an immense feeling for it."

Arnold Knauth's summation is more direct, "Aldro Hibbard was one of the best men I ever knew...of course being an artist made him all the better."

---

[1] Unless otherwise noted, biographical information and quoted material are from the following sources: John L. Cooley, *A.T. Hibbard, N.A.: Artist in Two Worlds*, 1968, and John L. Cooley, *Rockport Sketchbook*, 1965.

[2] I am indebted to the seven people interviewed for this article: Tom Nicholas N.A., Ann Fisk, Charlie Nelson, Roger Curtis, Elaine Hibbard, Paul Strisik, N.A., Arnold Knauth.

[3] "Aldro T. Hibbard, Painter of New England Winters," *American Artist*, June 1940, p. 8.

[4] James M. Keny, "Legacy of Cape Ann," *American Art Review*, Vol. 7 No. 5 (Oct-Nov 1995,) p. 128.

[5] "Aldro T. Hibbard, Painter of New England Winters," *American Artist*, June 1940, p. 9.

[6] Ibid., p. 9.