

Collection #
M 0464

**THEODORE CLEMENT STEELE AND
MARY LAKIN STEELE
PAPERS, 1869-1966**

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Manuscript and Visual Collections Department
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Indiana Historical Society
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Indianapolis, IN 46202-3269

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COLLECTION INFORMATION

VOLUME OF COLLECTION: 2 manuscript boxes, 6 photograph folders

COLLECTION DATES: 1869-1966

PROVENANCE: Gift of Theodore L. Steele, Indianapolis, Indiana and Brandt F. Steele, Denver Colorado, 16 October 1986

RESTRICTIONS: None

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ALTERNATE FORMATS:

RELATED HOLDINGS:

ACCESSION NUMBER: 1987.0002

NOTES:

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Theodore Clement Steele was born in Owen County, Indiana, on 11 September 1847, the son of Samuel Hamilton Steele and Harriett Newell Evans Steele. Five years later the family moved to Waveland, southwest of Crawfordsville. There Steele attended school, and graduated from Waveland Collegiate Institute in 1868. He began painting at an early age, and is said to have been giving instruction when he was only thirteen. In the years 1868-1870 he began painting for a living. He specialized in portraits, and received some instruction in Cincinnati and Chicago.

In 1870 Steele moved to Indianapolis. In the same year he married Mary Elizabeth Lakin. She was born in 1850 near Rushville, the daughter of Adam Simmons Lakin and Mary Cloud Matson. After her mother's death in 1862, she had gone to school in Waveland while her father ran a sawmill in Kansas. The marriage took place near Rushville at the home of an uncle.

For two years after their marriage, the Steeles lived in Battle Creek, Michigan, while he fulfilled a number of portrait commissions. In 1873 they returned to Indianapolis, where he set up a studio. They lived in a number of places. The longest stay was in an apartment in the Bradshaw Block on Washington Street, where they became friends with the Lockridge family. Steele's work enlisted the interest of his cousin William Richards and of Herman Lieber. With their help a plan was formulated to enable Steele to study in Munich, where many local artists had already gone, including William Merritt Chase and Frank Duveneck. Shares of \$100 were subscribed by Lieber, Richards, several members of the Fletcher family, and others. This raised a total of \$1300, which enabled the Steele family, which by now included three children, to stay in Munich from 1880 to 1885. In return, Steele was to send back copies of paintings in the Munich galleries and work of his own. J. Ottis Adams and William Forsyth were among other Indiana artists who came to Munich at the same time.

During their stay in Germany, the Steeles lived first in Munich and then in the nearby village of Schleissheim. Steele studied drawing and painting at the Royal Academy under Professors Benczur and Loefftz. He also worked on his own at landscape painting, receiving helpful criticism from Frank Currier and other colleagues. Meanwhile Mrs. Steele took care of the house and of the children, Brandt, Margaret (Daisy), and Shirley (Ted). During the Munich stay, Daisy was very sick with scarlet fever.

In 1885 the Steele family returned to Indianapolis. They moved into the Tinker place at the northeast corner of 7th (now 16th) and Pennsylvania Streets, and in the following year built a separate studio. The family lived there at "Talbot Place" until 1901, when the property was purchased for the John Herron Art Museum.

Steele gave instruction in art. In 1885 he started a school in cooperation with Sue Ketcham. From 1889 to 1895 he and William Forsyth ran an art school in the upper floors of Circle Hall.

By now Steele had learned that, while he might continue to paint portraits in order to make a living, his primary interest was in landscapes. He was especially concerned with capturing the light and color of the autumn landscape. He arranged his work so that during most summers and autumns he could be in the country. At different times between 1886 and 1897 he spent time at Vernon, West Baden, Yountsville (near Crawfordsville), Black's Mill (near Muncie, where J. Ottis Adams was running an art school), and Metamora. In 1896 he obtained a "studio wagon" in which he and sometimes his family could travel and work in some comfort. In 1898 Steele, in cooperation with J. Ottis Adams, bought a place in Brookville which they named "The Hermitage," where each artist had a studio and each family had living quarters.

By the 1890s Steele was becoming nationally recognized. He was involved with an important exhibition of the Hoosier School at Huntington, Indiana, in 1895, and in the formation of the Society of Western Artists at Chicago in 1896. Especially at this period, he wrote a number of papers about current trends in art.

During all this time, Mrs. Steele was occupied with maintaining a home, for her husband when he was home, and for his family when he was working in the field. She took a helpful interest in his work, and especially in setting up The Hermitage. She was active in the Portfolio Club which was organized in 1890, and in 1893 read a paper, "Impressions", about the years in Munich. Her health, always somewhat precarious, weakened. She spent some time in a sanatorium in Spencer, Indiana, in 1895. Suffering from both rheumatoid arthritis and tuberculosis, she died in 1899.

After the Tinker place was sold in 1901, the Steele family moved to East St. Clair Street. In 1902 and 1903 Steele made visits to the West Coast. In 1905 his daughter Daisy married Gustave Neubacher; two years later Steele married Neubacher's sister Selma, then assistant superintendent of art in the Indianapolis schools. That same year the Steeles purchased two hundred acres of land in Brown County, and began to develop the house and studio called "The House of the Singing Winds". They lived there each year from spring until early December. Winters were usually spent in Indianapolis, some with a studio next door to the Circle Theater. Proximity to Bloomington brought connections with Indiana University; in the last three years of his life, Steele was made an honorary professor there, and saw students both in a studio on campus and at the place in Brown County.

Steele continued the active practice of his art until his death on 24 July 1926.

Sources: Article on Steele in *Dictionary of American Biography*.
Steele, Steele, and Peat, *The House of the Singing Winds*.
Who Was Who in America, Volume I.
Materials in collection

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of correspondence and typescript papers. It fills three manuscript boxes.

Box 1 contains biographical material concerning T.C. Steele, and correspondence to and from him. The biographical material includes memorial tributes, and also correspondence of his widow concerning the disposal of his paintings.

Steele's correspondence begins with draft letters written from Munich (1881-1885) to the sponsors of his trip. These are largely concerned with money matters, but also lay out his plans for study and describe his progress. His letters to his wife are mainly written when he is away from home on painting expeditions; these contain some interesting descriptions of landscapes and of his pictures. Several of these painting expeditions were made in company with Harry Meakin of Cincinnati, or with J. Ottis Adams, who at the time was running an art school in Muncie. Letters of 1895 and 1896 describe his experiences as a speaker at an exhibition in Huntington, Indiana, and at an artists' convention in Chicago. He saw a good deal of Hamlin Garland on both occasions. There is one undated letter from James Whitcomb Riley, containing a poem written especially for Steele.

Box 1 also contains correspondence of Mary Lakin Steele. Though she was an intelligent and independent woman, her most interesting letters concern her husband's work. One significant series (Folder 25) comprises the letters she wrote from Germany, describing the domestic situation, social contacts, and her husband's studies. Another interesting group of letters (Folder 26) describe Steele's studio at Metamora, Ind., in the summer of 1897, and then the setting up of a joint studio, "The Hermitage", with J. Ottis Adams at Brookville in 1898. Other letters describe Mrs. Steele's trips to Kansas to visit members of her family. In these she makes some pungent comments about the newness and boosterism of the West.

Included in Box 2 are lists of Steele's early work, a typescript of an early journal and of some notes on painting, and, most of them typed, copies of papers about art written by Steele. Many of these papers are undated; most seem to have been written in the period 1895-1905, when he was most active in national art circles. Some were written to be read before the Indianapolis Literary Club; one, "the Trend of Modern Art," was read both there and at Huntington, Ind., in May 1896. As a group, the papers indicate his special interest in Impressionism and in the art of western America.

There are also six folders of photographs in this collection stored in visual collections.

A calendar of the correspondence of Mr. and Mrs. Steele is available in the IHS Library.

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CONTAINER

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