

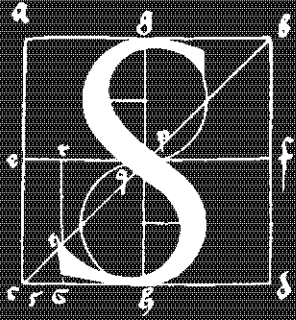
December 9

1962

Syrac

GORDON T. STEELE | 1906 - 1961

DESIGN CENTER | SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



University Art Galleries



Gordon Steele

GORDON J. STEELE

1906 - 1961

PHOTO: AL EDISON, SYRACUSE 1969.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY | SCHOOL OF ART

GORDON J. STEELE

1906 - 1961

University Art Galleries

A Memorial Exhibition

held in the galleries of the

JOE AND EMILY LOWE ART CENTER

DECEMBER 9-31, 1962

The real heroes among American artists are not always those who win the most prizes or the spectacular publicity, but rather those whose progress towards artistic fulfillment and recognition springs from personal conviction, patience, and quietly stubborn independence. Such a hero was Gordon Steele. It was just three years ago this month that I published the first full account of his career,* not only as a leading figure in the artistic community of Syracuse, but also as a devoted teacher, a member of the Syracuse University faculty, and an artist of national stature. His untimely death in September 1961 was a severe shock to his many friends and colleagues and it is to his memory, the artistic ideas he sought, and the cultural achievement he embodies, that the present exhibition is dedicated.

The road to recognition for the American artist is an endlessly varied one, but each variation gives new impact to the historical concept that America is indeed the land of opportunity. Though we complain that "the times are not propitious for the arts," we find many an artist whose creative enterprise compels progress and whose achievements are not only accepted, but often unconsciously fostered by society.

The career of Gordon J. Steele is such a story. Emily Genauer's respectful comments on his first one-man show in New York in 1958 characterized him as the "kind of painter easily overlooked on the clamorous local scene. His pictures are quiet, gentle, extremely capable. . . . They make no splash. They celebrate not himself but his subjects." While jurying a Syracuse regional show the same year, Norman Kent, the distinguished New York artist and critic, pointed out Steele's work as that of an extraordinary painter of great promise.

*Laurence Schmeckebier; GORDON STEELE: His Development as a Painter, American Artist, December, 1959. p. 40ff. With the necessary changes and additions this text is included in the following essay by permission of the editor.

Steele was born in Enfield, Connecticut, October 17, 1906, the son of George Steele, an interior decorator and Sunday painter. The family moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1913 and for many years the father maintained a successful decorating establishment there which was later taken over by his three sons. In addition to the congenial artistic atmosphere of the home and the practical experience



NIGHT SONG | 1950

of the family business, the boy was first exposed to the fine arts in Saturday classes at the George Walter Vincent Smith Museum in Springfield. Here he had ample opportunity to draw from casts and original objects of art in the galleries. His artistic ability gave him a certain prestige in grammar and high school, where little art was taught but where his expressive skill made him a center of attraction, particularly in the printing shop of James McGinnis whose kindly encouragement made a deep impression. No outstanding scholar, the

young artist took great pleasure in the youthful companionship of his friends, and art furnished a means of rapport. He preferred to be liked rather than respected.

In 1923 Steele attended the Hartford School of Art where he studied cast drawing, some painting, and figure drawing with Albertus Jones. His finances lasted but one term and then he became an apprentice at the Brooks Banknote Company, a Springfield lithography firm. His three years there among the engravers, mostly German craftsmen of the old school, taught him the basic techniques for his subsequent career as a commercial artist. He mastered lettering and design, and always took pride in doing a finished job without preliminary layout. From 1927 until the Depression, he held a number of jobs—dreary, but a means of livelihood—at carpet design, greeting cards (White & Wyckoff, in Holyoke), commercial games for Milton Bradley, and finally art director for a small Holyoke agency.

The hunger of the Depression and the helping hand of W.P.A. developed Gordon Steele as a fine artist, as they did many another contemporary artist. Through the Twenties, he had painted figures and city scenes of the dead-end river and gashouse districts. These were regularly accepted in the regional shows sponsored by the Springfield Art League, the Smith Museum, and the Wadsworth Atheneum. Two years with the Federal Art Project in 1936-38 in Springfield and another term in Boston from 1938-40 gave him further opportunity to paint and develop his individual point of view, and to exhibit on a wide scale.

First recognition came in 1935 when Steele's painting was selected for a traveling exhibition sponsored by the Art League of Springfield. Then, several of his paintings were included in a Project exhibition at the Federal Art Gallery in Boston in December 1936, along with those of some fifty other artists, including nationally known Karl Knaths, Jack Levine, and Karl Zerbe. The objectives of the federal

project were stated by the Massachusetts State Director, Harley Perkins, in the introduction to the catalog of that show: "The Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration is part of a great national program to encourage the artist and foster his progress through an epoch of social and economic readjustment."

Historians would do well to review the impact of this epoch-making program on artists throughout the country in these critical years when ideas and concepts now reaching their full artistic expression were just in the process of formation. It took nearly twenty years for them to grow and mature to the rich artistic expression of the 1950's. Gordon Steele was a significant and representative case in point.

The review of a 1939 exhibit at the Boston gallery characterized Steele as having "not only an insatiable curiosity about new mediums and fresh combinations but he also has the sustaining quality of logical thinking and careful planning. He has another ingredient, the most valuable of all, poetic imagination . . . In *Backstage* he manages to suggest atmosphere and tap a deep emotional reserve."

In 1940, Steele married the charming Helen Mika from his home town in Enfield. During the war he worked with a number of engraving firms, then free-lanced in Springfield, Hartford, and New York until 1945 when he went to Syracuse as Art Director for the John Flack studios. Here he worked two years and then continued independently as a free-lance artist in the Syracuse area. Though he had taught for several years with the Federal Art Project in Boston, his first major teaching assignment was in the School of Art of Syracuse University where he conducted courses in advertising design and illustration from 1957 until 1959.

It was the congenial atmosphere of Syracuse and upstate New York which furnished the background for the full realization of Steele's capacities as a fine artist. The first prize awards came in the regional

exhibitions of the Syracuse (now Everson) Museum of Fine Arts, beginning in 1946 and extending to those of Cooperstown, Rochester, Chautauqua, Binghamton, the Munson-Williams-Proctor shows at Utica, the Cortland County and New York State Fairs, as well as outside regionals such as Springfield, Silvermine, and the Connecticut Academy.



CLOSE HARMONY | 1954

He received a total of forty-seven awards in these competitive exhibitions. He participated in national exhibitions at the Terry Art Institute in Miami, the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, the Corcoran Gallery of Washington, the Columbia Biennial in South Carolina, the Audubon, the National Academy, and the Art U.S.A. 1958 shows in New York. The continuously expanding range of recognition included nine one-man shows with a well-received first New York exhibition at the Salpeter Gallery in 1958.

He is represented in the permanent collections of Syracuse University, the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute of Utica, the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts, the Everson Museum of Fine Arts (Syracuse), the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, the Cortland and Oswego State Teachers Colleges, as well as in more than twenty-five private collections.

Out of this thirty-five year professional career Gordon Steele developed a philosophy as practical as it was inspiring. The fine arts and those of the market place were two separate worlds for him. Without meaning to be cynical, he accepted commercial design for what it was and recognized the fact that businessmen could not be coaxed into esthetic adventures when it meant an investment of institutional money. Painting, on the other hand, was pure pleasure, a continuous adventure in discovery which became richer and deeper as the years and his own sense of values advanced. He admired and respected the experimental adventures of other artists, but modestly could not understand what others saw in his work. Yet, he sold most of what he produced so that his commercial work gradually gave way to painting. In our day the fine artist who makes a living painting whatever he wishes, as he pleases, is indeed an accomplishment.

But this philosophy is rooted in ideals as well as in the facts of life, ideals that have been translated into human experience by sheer hard work. The personalities Steele considered most influential on his career were the aforementioned James McGinnis, whose fatherly kindness helped form his way of life at an early age. A second was the New York engineer and architect, Fred Garner, who gave up a lucrative metropolitan career and retired to his family farm near upstate Jamesville, New York to paint and live a creative life through emphasis on its basic simplicities.

With regard to the works of the Old Masters, Steele was a profound admirer of the eerie light and design effects of El Greco as seen in the paintings in Boston and Rochester, the Magnasco in Springfield, the strong light and form of the Boston Piero della Francesca, and the work of Winslow Homer. It was the solid form of the illustrator which he liked in the early Homer, and the romantic feeling of his later work seen especially in the combination of form and light in *Eight Bells*. Among the modern masters it was much the same quality trans-

lated into a stronger and more expressive form which he admired in the work of Georges Braque and Rico Lebrun, particularly the famous *Crucifixion* in the Syracuse University collection.

Steele loved poetry and took special pleasure in reading the Romantic classics—Coleridge, Keats, and Shakespeare. Music was another love, not the hi-fi monster, but the performing art of the guitar and the folk songs of New England. He enjoyed painting and never ceased to delight in new effects as they sprang spontaneously from his brush. The theme of St. Francis and the doctrine of creative pleasure in life had more than literary significance for him.



FACADE #2 | 1956 COLLECTION: SPRINGFIELD MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Steele's belief in logical thinking had definite application to his technical procedure. Though he frequently used watercolor and casein, his usual medium was oil mixed with enamel. He liked the deep luminous color effects of this mixture, as well as the textural qualities which the viscous state of partly-dried enamel provided. He

usually did not draw from nature; he was a sharp observer, so much so that he was able to paint the memorized image directly into the design as he saw and needed it—perhaps the result of his early training in direct lettering and layout.

“I have a definite feeling that many of my better paintings are actually conceived not at the easel but when I am doing such menial tasks as mowing the lawn or working around the house,” he wrote in 1959. “I have always found this of prime importance as it gives me complete change and balance and is greatly needed in trying to produce a work of art.



EDGE OF TOWN | 1958 COLLECTION: OSWEGO STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE

“My technique in painting is to start with about three or four panels using a two-inch wide, soft brush. In this way I find one can quite rapidly lay in the large forms, and this arrangement can be completely changed while keeping the design continuously in movement. Having several paintings in various stages of development furnishes me with more material with which to judge my progress, if any, and makes me more keenly aware of the possibilities or potentials in each painting.



TRESTLE | 1958 COLLECTION: EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART, SYRACUSE, N. Y.

CONSTRUCTION #2 | 1960 COLLECTION: BUTLER INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN ART
YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO



“In rare instances I make a rough drawing from a figure or other subject matter. The sketch is made in most simple linear terms to permit me greater latitude for creativity in the inventing of shapes and colors which were not in the original subject. I use the sketch only as a stimulus, as I do the small, colored, abstract sketches which I have been doing for a number of years.

“I have no sympathy for the painting which is composed simply of tricks and gimmicks. I use a number of tools, such as rollers, various painting knives, and cloth, as I have found that many effects can be achieved with them which cannot be arrived at by brush. However, these first effects are only to build up texture and tonality, which are then heightened and solidified by the light manipulation of the artist’s best friend and most responsive one—the brush!

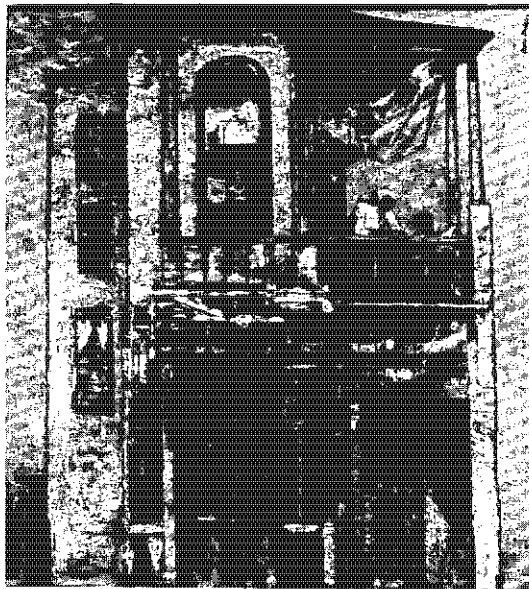
“I don’t believe I would be painting today if I had to go ‘on location’ to paint a specific scene. The non-preconceived subject suits my temperament and gives me a true balance in relation to commissioned work, plus the fact that there is the ever-present excitement in developing some form or object which was previously not imagined.”

Design (i.e., abstraction) not nature, came first in Steele’s working procedure. His ideas came from anywhere—newspaper or magazine photographs, a textured wall or building facade, a fabric or a painted page. His studio contained stacks of wonderful preliminary sketches in color, painted directly over a page layout or printed reproduction in which the original identity was completely lost in the abstract design extracted from the material. This he developed into a painting, usually on canvas or masonite, and worked the natural objects or figures into the design as the painting evolved. A reproduction of a vase of flowers by Redon, for instance, was inverted and transformed into a handsome head—an entirely new concept.

And so it goes. As one reviews these key examples of a lifetime’s creative effort on display in this exhibition, there is much to think

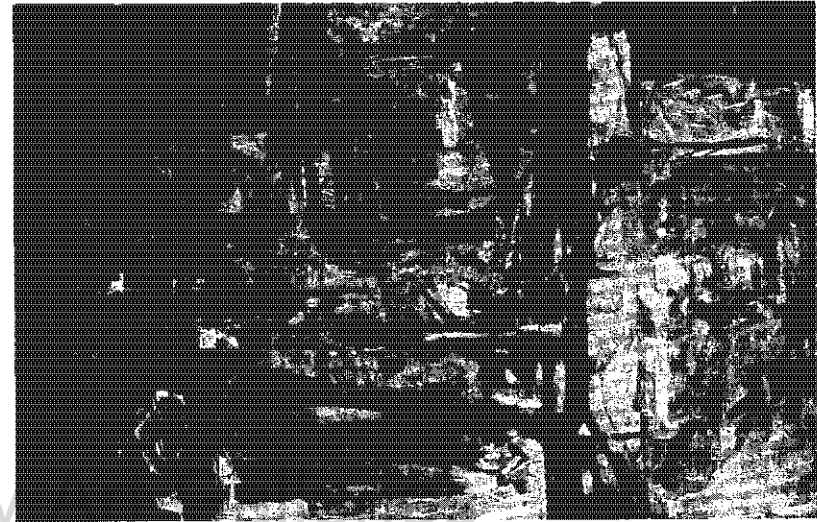
about, much to be learned, much to be clarified, as we grope our way toward artistic maturity. It is not the objective which poses the problem, but the means of its achievement. This is the real concern for both the artist and his patrons on all levels—the individual, the community, and that of the national scene.

Here is an artist who has not been enveloped by an influence or a tradition. Certainly there are none of the banal realities characteristic of Main Street commercialism. There is no revival of old masters, Depression's American scene, nor postwar abstraction, yet one feels the presence of these experiences in the well-integrated design, strong form, and romantic mood of a remarkable succession of work developed over three decades. Here is an artist who has not been obliged to fight the competition of a crowded Madison Avenue, but has discovered an expressive form and an appreciative following within the region of his own life and experience—in his own backyard—if such a trite and old-fashioned expression may be permitted. Indeed, recogni-



ON THE PORCH | 1959 COLLECTION: ROCHESTER MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

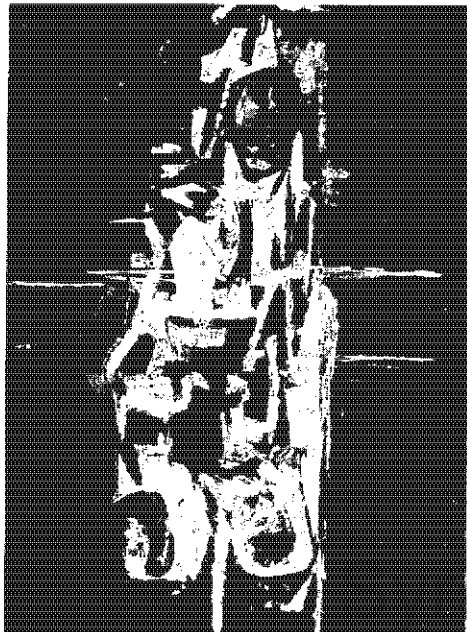
tion in the larger world of the metropolis invariably follows, given the basic ingredients of quality, patience, and persistence required for any major career.



AUTUMN RHAPSODY | 1960 COLLECTION: SPRINGFIELD MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

The tragedy is that this life was so short. In this age of almost passionate insecurity, we tend to overstress the enthusiasm, adventure, experiment, and creative opulence of youth without realizing that in art as in the other basic and humanistic disciplines, it takes many years for the artist to mature, to perfect his medium, and clarify his point of view.

Gordon Steele, it seems, had only begun to hit his stride when the "arthritis" which had bothered his back was discovered in the spring of 1961 to be the advanced stages of cancer. The seven terminal months of his illness were spent mostly at home. In spite of persistent and desperate pain, he continued to draw: the doctors and nurses in the hospital, the many friends who visited him, the birds and wildlife he enjoyed watching as he sat out on the lawn under the trees. To the last day he managed the characteristic smile, the friendly and erect posture, the cheerful optimism.



UNTITLED FIGURE | 1961

ORCHESTRA | 1961



To the last day too he managed to paint. The large "Untitled Figure" was one of two paintings in which the fusing of the material and immaterial in an abstract form, the rich and expressive character of the black and the hovering weightlessness of the total composition have something of the quality of a religious painting. The other was "Untitled Orchestra" whose characteristically romantic theme of guitar-playing musicians is accompanied by a panorama of buildings and bridges he had used so often in his earlier work. Its spirit is consistent—Steele had often quoted passages from Walt Whitman (I Hear America Singing!)—but the overall pattern in striated black carries the ominous mood of life's impending curtain.

The story of the "Spaetwerke," the frequently heroic achievements by the great masters in their late years, has often been told. Thus the late work of Titian and Rembrandt, El Greco and Goya, Beethoven and Brahms serve as models of inspiration and sources of renewed faith in the necessity and fulfillment of man's creative responsibility. We are sometimes reluctant to recognize this same spirit in the artists of our own experience and community.

In the case of Gordon Steele this is not so. His exhibition tells its own story. The inspiration he has provided for his many friends and students tells another. The recent and spontaneous establishment of a Gordon Steele Memorial Medal for outstanding artistic achievement, presented this year by the Associated Artists of Syracuse at its 39th Annual Exhibition, "to perpetuate the memory of a wonderful man" presents another aspect of this career and the living tradition it has created. For all of these the Syracuse community can be justly proud.

LAURENCE SCHMECKEBIER

SOLITAIRE	1	OIL	1940	19½ x 26	OIL	1958	23 x 43	39	EVENING #2
ORCHESTRA	2	OIL	1944	15½ x 20	OIL	1958	24½ x 43	40	ABANDONED
SKATERS IN THE PARK	3	CASEIN	1944	10 x 14	OIL	1958	18 x 28	41	TRUMPETER
ATTIC ARTICLES	4	OIL	1948	20 x 36	OIL	1958	18 x 28	42	INTERIOR
THE COVE	5	CASEIN	1949	18 x 24	OIL	1958	18 x 30	43	FAYETTE PARK
CONSTRUCTION CREW	6	CASEIN	1950	22 x 36	OIL	1958	20 x 36	44	WHITE MARINE
CONSTRUCTION CREW	7	OIL	1950	14 x 28	OIL	1958	16 x 20	45	EXPLORERS
NIGHT VIGIL	8	OIL	1950	19½ x 23½	OIL	1958	24 x 43½	46	EXPLORERS
PASSING STORM	9	OIL	1950	22 x 28	OIL	1958	23 x 43	47	DOCKS
THE FAMILY	10	OIL	1950		OIL	1958	48 x 34	48	EDGE OF TOWN
MELON BOY	11	OIL	1950	14 x 28	COLLECTION: OSWEGO STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE				
HIDE AND SEEK	12	OIL	1950	35 x 29	OIL AND ENAMEL	1958	41½ x 28½	49	TRESTLE
SELF PORTRAIT	13	OIL	1951		COLLECTION: EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART, SYRACUSE, N. Y.				
THE CONNOISSEURS	14	OIL	1951	11 x 13	OIL	1959	19 x 36	50	ROOFTOPS
THE EDGE OF TOWN	15	OIL	1951	24 x 42	OIL	1959	14 x 36	51	THE FIVE MUSICIANS
RUMMAGE SHOP	16	OIL	1952	19 x 28	OIL	1959	31 x 40	52	SUMMERTIME
SHANTYTOWN	17	OIL	1952	20 x 26	OIL	1959	34 x 48	53	CITADEL
INTERMISSION	18	OIL	1954	29 x 39	OIL	1959	31 x 40	54	THE WORKERS
CONSTRUCTION #1	19	OIL	1954	31 x 40	COLLECTION: SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY				
CLOSE HARMONY	20	OIL	1954	18 x 28	OIL	1959	24 x 43	55	ABUTMENT
WINTER SENTINELS	21	OIL	1954	18 x 28	OIL	1959	32 x 40	56	RED INTERIOR
NIGHT SONG	22	OIL	1955	15 x 28	OIL	1959	34 x 48	57	SEGMENT OF THE CITY
NIGHT SENTINELS	23	CASEIN	1955	22 x 38	COLLECTION: ROCHESTER MEMORIAL ART GALLERY				
NIGHT SENTINELS	24	OIL	1955	29½ x 34½	OIL	1960	24 x 28	58	ON THE PORCH
FACADE #1	25	6fl	1955	24 x 28	OIL	1960	24 x 43	59	CAUSEWAY
FIRST SNOW	26	CASEIN	1955	10 x 22	OIL	1960	24 x 43	60	REHEARSAL
HALLWAY	27	OIL	1956	28 x 38	OIL	1960	18½ x 36	61	BACK YARDS OSWEGO
MEDITATION	28	OIL	1956	14 x 28	OIL	1960	32 x 48	62	AUTUMNAL
PROCESSION	29	OIL	1956	18 x 28	OIL	1960	24 x 48	63	FACTORY YARD
TENEMENT MADONNA	30	OIL	1956	20 x 36	OIL	1960	24 x 43	64	MORNING MIST
FACADE #2	31	OIL	1956		OIL	1960	28½ x 40	65	COMPOSITION
ON THE PORCH	32	OIL	1957	16 x 24	COLLECTION: SPRINGFIELD MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS				
FRAGMENTS	33	OIL	1957	23 x 40	OIL	1960	42 x 28	66	AUTUMN RHAPSODY
QUATERNION	34	OIL	1957	24 x 48	OIL	1960	43 x 34	67	SEASCAPE
CROSSTOWN	35	OIL	1957	37½ x 47½	COLLECTION: MR. AND MRS. HARRY KING, SYRACUSE, N. Y.				
ST. FRANCIS	36	OIL	1957	43 x 23½	OIL	1960	23 x 43	68	CONSTRUCTION #2
TERMINAL	37	OIL	1958	24 x 43	COLLECTION: BUTLER INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN ART YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO				
EVENING #1	38	OIL	1958	14½ x 29	OIL	1961	17 x 39	69	BLUE COMPOSITION
					OIL	1961	26 x 40	70	REFLECTIONS
					OIL	1961	31 x 40	71	UNTITLED FIGURE
					INK DRAWING	1961	16 x 22	72	COLUMBUS CIRCLE
					OIL	1961	34 x 48	73	NIGHT FORMS (Unfinished)
					OIL	1961	31 x 40	74	UNFINISHED ORCHESTRA

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Unless otherwise noted all works are from the collection of Mrs. Gordon Steele. The Art Center wishes to express its sincerest gratitude to the private collectors and public museums listed for the loan of these significant works and to Mrs. Steele for her generous assistance in the planning and assembly of the exhibition.

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