**Edwin Steele junior, 1839–1919 (and Edwin Steele senior, 1803–1871)**

Two members of a family of ceramic fruit and flower painters who also painted still-life arrangements in similar style on canvas. Most of the examples on Art UK appear to be by the younger man.

Edwin senior’s father was Thomas Steel (or Steele, 1770/1–1850) who married in Burslem before 1806 and had three sons, all baptised there in 1807. Edwin may have been born as early as 1803–05: Thomas and Horatio (1806–74) were the other two and both also ceramic painters. Around 1815 Thomas senior joined the Nottingham Road works in Derby for about eleven years but by late 1826 he was at the Rockingham factory in Yorkshire. He returned to Staffordshire in 1832 and worked as one of Minton’s principal painters for the rest of his life.

Edwin senior was apprenticed at the Derby factory in 1818, as were his brothers, and married Charlotte Laban there on 18 June 1826 before following his father to Rockingham. In 1832 he returned to Derby, then moved back to the Potteries. He was noted as a ‘China Painter’ at the baptisms of four of his children (1826, 1832, 1835 and 1839) and Edwin junior, the fourth, was born on 6 May 1839 in Russell Street, Shelton, Hanley. By 1841 the family had moved to Wolverhampton where Edwin senior worked for Ryton & Walton as a flower/fruit painter and Japanner on their domestic papier-maché wares: trays, boxes etc., and some quite large decorative panels. In that year’s census, and all subsequent ones, he called himself an ‘Artist’ and returned to Stoke-on-Trent sometime between the birth of his daughter Eliza in 1842 and 1851, when he was living in Keeling Lane.

Thereafter he was largely a freelance ceramic painter for firms including Coalport, Davenport and Minton. In 1866 and 1867 he was taken to court over unfinished work, probably because of difficulties around the time he lost his wife, who died early in May 1866. In the first case, brought by a China maker called G.H. Allen, the matter was dismissed (*Staffordshire Advertiser*, 3 March 1866). In the second he was charged by John Aynsley, a Hanley manufacturer for whom he had exclusively painted for four years at up to £1 per week until early June 1867, although he was also simultaneously ‘employed by others as a designer, and devoted a portion of his time to paintings in oil’. Aynsley had been ‘anxious to retain him, as he was a very skilled artizan’ but Steele denied any formal contract existed between them given his claim to be ‘an “artist” and [that] he would not bind himself to work for any individual, as he believed his talents belonged to the “country at large”’. The magistrates disagreed, saying he had been employed as a ‘servant within the meaning of the Act’ and ordered him to repay £1 plus costs to Aynsley (*Staffordshire Sentinel*, 26 October 1867).

Steele seems to have made some local headway as a late-life oil painter. By July 1870 he was living as a lodger at 26 Broom Street, Hanley, and one of his canvases of ‘Flowers and Fruit, in Oil’ was on the list of local exhibits intended for the South Kensington Exhibition of 1871 (*Staffordshire Sentinel*, 9 July). He last appeared, still at Broom Street, in the 1871 census but died later in the year.

At the 1861 census, his son Edwin Steele junior is also listed as a ‘Potter’s Flower Painter’. He was then living with his wife Elizabeth Walker (both 21 and married in 1859) at 18 ½ High Street, Hanley, where their son Edwin James – the first of six children (three sons, three daughters) – was born on 13 March. In 1871, when they were at 46 Oldbury Road, Harborne, Smethwick, Edwin was listed as a ‘Glass Painter’ but by 1878 they had returned to the Potteries where he started a (China) decorating business with John Bloor. This lasted to around 1880, after which he continued on his own, living in Hanley. In 1881 at 57 Peel Street (late Regent Street) he was just called ‘Artist; in 1891 at 115 Waterloo Road, Burslem, ‘Flower and Fruit Pottery Painter’ and in 1901 ‘Artist in Oils’. He was then at 36 Dinsdale View, Porthill (or Wolstanton) on the outskirts of Newcastle-under-Lyme. In 1911, widowed and still living there with his daughter Florence, he was called a ‘Painter of Flowers on Canvases’. His death on 2 December 1919 was registered in Birmingham. References to him as ‘Edwin H. Steele’ appear to be misunderstandings of record and a baptismal one has not been found.

There are fifteen flower and fruit paintings attributed to ‘Edwin Steele’ on Art UK of which four are specifically given to Edwin senior (1803–71). It is hard to be entirely sure what is by who, given their very similar styles and signatures, but most seem to be by Edwin junior and the only four dated ones (1889–1908) must be. Others have been sighted on the market dating 1868–1918, which might include late work by his father. The broad conclusion seems to be that Edwin junior gradually abandoned pottery decoration in the 1890s to concentrate on the oil painting that he had begun to practise some time earlier, and was doing so full-time by about 1900.

Edwin junior’s son, Edwin James Steele (b. 1861), was described as a ‘China Painter’ in the 1881 census, when still living with his parents at 57 Peel Street, Hanley, and a ‘Painter’, when he married Emily Cambridge, daughter of William, a tailor, on 10 September 1883 at St Mark’s, Birmingham. Report of the 1891 census gives his occupation then as ‘Enamel Painter’ and in that of 1911 he was a bedstead ‘Ornamenter’ lodging at 205 King Edward’s Road, Ladywood, Birmingham. By 1921 he had moved to no. 147 and was a ‘Porter’ for a Birmingham manufacturing jeweller. He remained on the Ladywood electoral roll until 1931 and his death was registered in Birmingham in April 1933.

The Steeles (including Horatio, Edwin senior’s brother) are well recorded in ceramic literature.

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