

Visual Arts- Part 3: A Growing Artistic Community in the State ^[1]

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Visual Arts

by Bruce E. Baker and Martha Belle Caldwell, 2006

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Part 3: A Growing Artistic Community in the State

The beauty and diversity of North Carolina's natural environment inspired a generation of painters in the mid-nineteenth century. Attention to the geographic richness of the region, long admired by indigenous artists, was perfectly suited to European movements such as [French naturalism](#) ^[18]. The pull of the mountains both influenced and attracted numerous painters. In 1854 William C. A. Frerichs, a native of [Ghent, Belgium](#) ^[19], brought his expertise in European art to the [Greensboro Female Academy](#) ^[20]. Frerichs developed a thematic fascination with western North Carolina that continued even after his departure for New York in the mid-1860s. Conversely, [Elliott Daingerfield](#) ^[21] was raised in North Carolina but became an established New York artist. However, as early as 1886 he began to spend his summers in [Blowing Rock](#) ^[22], and his influence attracted many artists to that location. Daingerfield's own work was largely landscapes-a "vision of order" in which the artist became one with his subject.

Although North Carolina's budding artistic community was not celebrated nationally, it had influence, and as lesser artists followed established painters to the area, a cooperative spirit came to steer much of the artistic development. Education became a focus of many artists, such as Elizabeth Augusta Chant, who established an art school in [Wilmington](#) ^[23] in the mid-1920s and mentored many others. Her school developed a number of fine pupils, including Claude Howell, whose vibrant scenes of [coastal life](#) ^[24] made him one of the area's best-known painters. In 1931 a group of artists-among them, [Daingerfield](#), [Charles Baskerville](#) ^[25], [Isabelle Bower Henderson](#) ^[26], James McLean, [Mabel Pugh](#) ^[27], Frances Speight, and [Mary Tannahill](#) ^[28]-banded together as the North Carolina Association of Professional Artists and sponsored juried shows. In fact, Howell had won the juried show prize in 1937 and used the notoriety to launch his career as a professional artist. [Robert Gwathmey](#) ^[29], Virginia-born and partially educated in North Carolina, became a leader of the Social Realist movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Gwathmey often depicted the degradation and struggles of poor blacks in North Carolina and other southern states in modern, strikingly colorful paintings.

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