

William Charles Baker

November 17, 1872 — February 20, 1958

William Charles Baker, artist and Emeritus Professor of Freehand Drawing in the College of Agriculture, came to Cornell as a student in 1894 and, except for a year of art study in Paris after graduation, spent the next sixty-four years painting in Ithaca and teaching at Cornell, ever awakening in those about him an appreciation for the beauty to be found in the world of Nature. It was his belief that education should be for living as well as for making-a-living and he was convinced, to use his own words “that nurture can supplement Nature in developing appreciation of beauty, material or artistic.” For him, Nature was lavish with her beauty and he was eager, both as artist and teacher, to awaken in others awareness of this bounty. He never doubted the worth of teaching appreciation and was ready to take issue with anyone who expressed the belief that appreciation of beauty is innate and cannot be taught. The many students for whom he opened new realms of enjoyment are staunch and grateful supporters of his view.

Professor Baker was born on November 17, 1872 in Buffalo, New York. He worked as a bank clerk in Buffalo for two years before coming to Cornell. As an undergraduate, his drawing ability was so outstanding in biological courses that various professors called upon him for illustrations for their publications. This work helped him to earn his way through college. Although he majored in chemistry and graduated in 1898 from the College of Agriculture with a BSA degree, he began his career by teaching drawing in Sibley College for four years. It was during this period that he decided to make a career of Art. In 1904 he went to France where he studied drawing and painting for a year. At the request of Liberty Hyde Bailey, he returned to Cornell in 1905 to make illustrations for Dr. Bailey’s American Encyclopedia of Agriculture. In 1907 he was appointed assistant professor of drawing in the College of Agriculture by Dr. Bailey who considered drawing to be an indispensable aid in teaching accuracy of observation in biological sciences. In 1914 he was advanced to a professorship which he held until he became an emeritus professor in 1938.

Professor Baker was not only an expert illustrator, skilled in the graphic arts, but a painter of note. He loved the Finger Lakes countryside and captured on canvas its seasonal changes and atmospheric qualities in a way that has caused countless others to see it with new appreciation. His paintings have been exhibited in Paris and many American cities, including New York, Philadelphia, and Buffalo. Ithacans and the Cornell community have been privileged to enjoy them many times.

The versatility and broad, general culture of W. C. Baker, his love of Nature and his alert, inquiring mind all combined to make him an inspiring teacher. He delighted in awakening interests and stimulating students to think. An avid and thoughtful reader himself, he was ever anxious to share with others the ideas and discoveries he gleaned from wide acquaintance with literature, art, philosophy and natural science. His zest for living, his enjoyment of beauty and his warm humanism in regard to the foibles of mankind left indelible imprints on his students.

Retirement meant for Professor Baker an opportunity to concentrate on painting. He was a frequent contributor to “The Cornell Plantations”* magazine of poems, photographs and articles in which he reiterated his belief that “we live in a beautiful world and those who live in the Finger Lakes region dwell in one of the finest parts of this beautiful world.” He died on February 20, 1958 at the age of eighty-five. He is survived by his wife, Anna Wagner Baker; a son, Robert W. Baker; a daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Baker Wells; a granddaughter and a great-granddaughter. The community shares both their loss and a wealth of memories of this artist, scholar and man who did so much to open our eyes and help us see with new vision.

Elizabeth Burckmyer, R. W. Curtis, Clara Garrett