Pioneering Artist: Museum Exhibit Focuses on Brown County Printmaker

By: Ryan Trares, *Daily Journal* (Franklin, IN)

From a carved wooden block and layer after layer of colored ink, Gustave Baumann captured the beauty, vitality and charm of Brown County for the art world to see.

Hollyhocks, marigolds and black-eyed Susans overwhelm the forefront in shades of blue, orange and yellow in his print “Grandma Battin’s Garden.” The ghostly white tree trunks enhanced the burnished red-orange foliage and blue sky in “The Sycamore.”

Before Indiana turned it into State Road 135, Baumann showed the delicate springtime lavenders and greens coming down into Nashville in “Ridge Road.”

Brown County artists such as T.C. Steele and Will Vawter have greater name recognition today. But in the early 20th century, it was Baumann who was a national celebrity.

“Baumann was the guy who put Brown County on the map,” said Martin Krause, curator of print, drawings and photographs for the Indianapolis Museum of Art. “It’s not that his works were more popular than Steele’s paintings, but his were distributed much more widely. With prints, you could have 100 copies.”

In honor of the former Brown County resident and one of the world masters of wood-print artistry, the museum will open one of the largest exhibitions of Baumann’s work to the public Oct. 25. The museum has supplemented its own 300-piece collection with paintings, drawings, watercolors, tools, woodblocks, even marionette puppets created by the artist.

In connection with Indiana’s bicentennial in 2016, an exhibition of a truly unique Hoosier master is a chance to discover and appreciate an artist that many local resident know nothing about, Krause said.

“There were lots of artists who started out in this Arts and Crafts era making woodblock prints. But Baumann was really the only one who stuck with it throughout his career,” he said. “He’s really considered the dean of colored woodblock printmaking.”

The exhibition will feature about 125 pieces spanning Baumann’s career. It will be the most comprehensive showing of his work, Krause said.

The Indianapolis Museum of Art has a long history with Baumann. It was the first museum to own a Baumann print and supported the artist throughout his career. Baumann would come to the museum to give lectures.

Krause has been working with his art since the 1970s. When Baumann’s family wanted an autobiography of the artist, Krause was chosen to be its editor.

The German-born artist moved to the U.S. as a child, settling with his family in Chicago. He went to work at age 16 as a commercial artist and eventually started his own studio.
By 1904, he had saved enough to return to the Arts and Crafts School in Munich, Germany, to study color woodblock printmaking — the only formal art training he ever received, Krause said.

When Baumann returned, he was introduced to Brown County by an art club that he belonged to. Many of the artists started going every summer to the area, and in 1910, he joined them. Baumann became one of the first major artists to permanently reside in the Nashville area.

He considered that time the most formative of his career, Krause said.

“People would ask him later in life, ‘Gus, why did you leave Brown County.’ He always responded that he never left Brown County; it remained with him for his entire life,” he said.

After six years in Brown County, Baumann moved on to other parts of the country — New York, then Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Each location has a different color signature, from the browns, oranges and golds of Indiana to the seaside blues, greens and corals of New York to the bright, bold hues of the desert.

The prints are made with blocks of wood hand-carved to the scene that Baumann wanted to create. The works have layers of greens, blues, pinks, purples, browns and other hues that all blend together to recreate a vibrant Brown County fall day or the bright landscape of Santa Fe.

To get that effect, Baumann had to carve a different block for each color he used. Putting it all together required vision to see the result, while also having the ability to separate it into each individual layer of ink, Krause said.

The exhibition helps showcase the tools, different woodblocks and photographs of the work to give viewers a sense of Baumann’s art.

“It’s a very process-driven exhibition,” said Stephanie Perry, spokeswoman for the Indianapolis Museum of Art. “You’re not just seeing the final prints; you’re seeing the whole process.”

“You had to actually build up the image, so that the inks don’t mix,” he said.

While wood prints are the bulk of the exhibition, the museum also focused on Baumann’s myriad artistic interests. Drawings and paintings are included, as are the artist’s work doing illustrations for publications.

One of the more interesting aspects of his artwork was his puppet making. Baumann initially wanted to be a toymaker, and as his career progressed, he developed that aspect of his carving.

During the Depression, when the sales of artwork dried up, he and his family created a show for their friends. That performance became a beloved tradition in the Santa Fe area, Krause said.

The museum is actually bringing puppeteers and replicas of the family’s work to put on performances that are still done in New Mexico.

Museum organizers said the exhibition offers a well-rounded catalog of Baumann’s work, Krause said. The excitement has built in presenting such an accomplished artist to the public, in the place where he once made his home.
“People will discover a new and very interesting personality, an artist whose main characteristic was that he always had to be working on something,” Krause said. “He could elevate personally what had been a humble printmaking process to something that is really more akin to painting.”