

William Bliss Baker (1859 - 1886)

Dark Forest, circa 1880

Signed "Wm. Bliss Baker" lower right

Oil on canvas

24" x 20"

Landscape painter William Bliss Baker had gained conspicuous distinction in both oil and watercolor work before a fatal ice skating accident at the age of twenty-seven. A year after his death, Ortigie's Gallery in New York City held an auction of his work consisting of 130 pictures. The audience was "large and select [and] consisted mainly of private collectors," according to the *New York Times*. "Considering the youth of the artist, and the fact that his training was entirely American, the result was regarded by every one present as highly gratifying" (1). It was evident among the city's prominent art circles that American art had lost one of its most promising artists.

Baker was born in New York City in 1859 and spent his childhood in the town of Ballston Spa, New York. Beginning regular art studies at the National Academy of Design at the age of seventeen, Baker won the Elliott prize for drawing in 1879. He is also noted as having studied under Mauritz de Haas (1832-1895) and with the panoramic landscape artist Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902). He maintained a studio in upstate New York above Albany and began exhibiting yearly at the National Academy in 1881. Although not yet twenty-five, he entered the forefront of landscape painting in 1885 when he won the Academy's Hallgarten Prize. He sought to express the natural world in his own unique, precise, and truthful style.

The young artist was animated by an intense love of nature, which he manifested from his earliest years, and this, aided by his great industry and energy, was among the chief elements of his success in the line of art he had chosen (2).

Between 1878 and 1887, the Salmagundi Club hosted annual exhibitions of black and white artworks, including etchings, drawings, engravings, and oils. Baker exhibited consecutively from 1881 until 1886, with the exception of 1885, and made significant contributions to oils in grisaille. As an example of such a painting, *Dark Forest* is a monochromatic image carried out in mostly shades of gray. It is not entirely clear why Baker decided to utilize this palette. In a larger context, grisaille was often adopted by nineteenth-century artists for preparatory oil sketches that preceded finished, or colored, paintings in order to clarify the distribution of light and shade. It was also used to produce preliminary studies for book and magazine illustrations, as colored paintings were not as easily reproduced by black and white photography (3). It is not evident whether Baker created *Dark Forest*, or any other of his grisaille paintings, for either of these aforementioned reasons.

Regardless, the painting attests to the young artist's remarkable ability. Positive solitude is expressed in the untrodden wilderness and motionless trees. The painting also displays a great wealth of detail and an appreciation of nature's subtle beauties. There is a very rich color sense despite the limited palette, and the lack of a broad range of colors calls attention to the seamlessly executed variety of form and line in the composition.

Provenance: From auction to the gallery.

Bibliography:

1. "Selling Works of Art: Pictures of Baker, Sprague's collection, and the Baker Statues" in *The New York Times* (March 18, 1887), http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9405EED61F3BE532A2575BC1A9659C94669FD7CF.

2. Obituary of William Bliss Baker in the New York *Evening Post*, 1886. The Cooley Gallery archives.
3. Michaela Krieger, "Grisaille" In *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*,
<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T034995>.