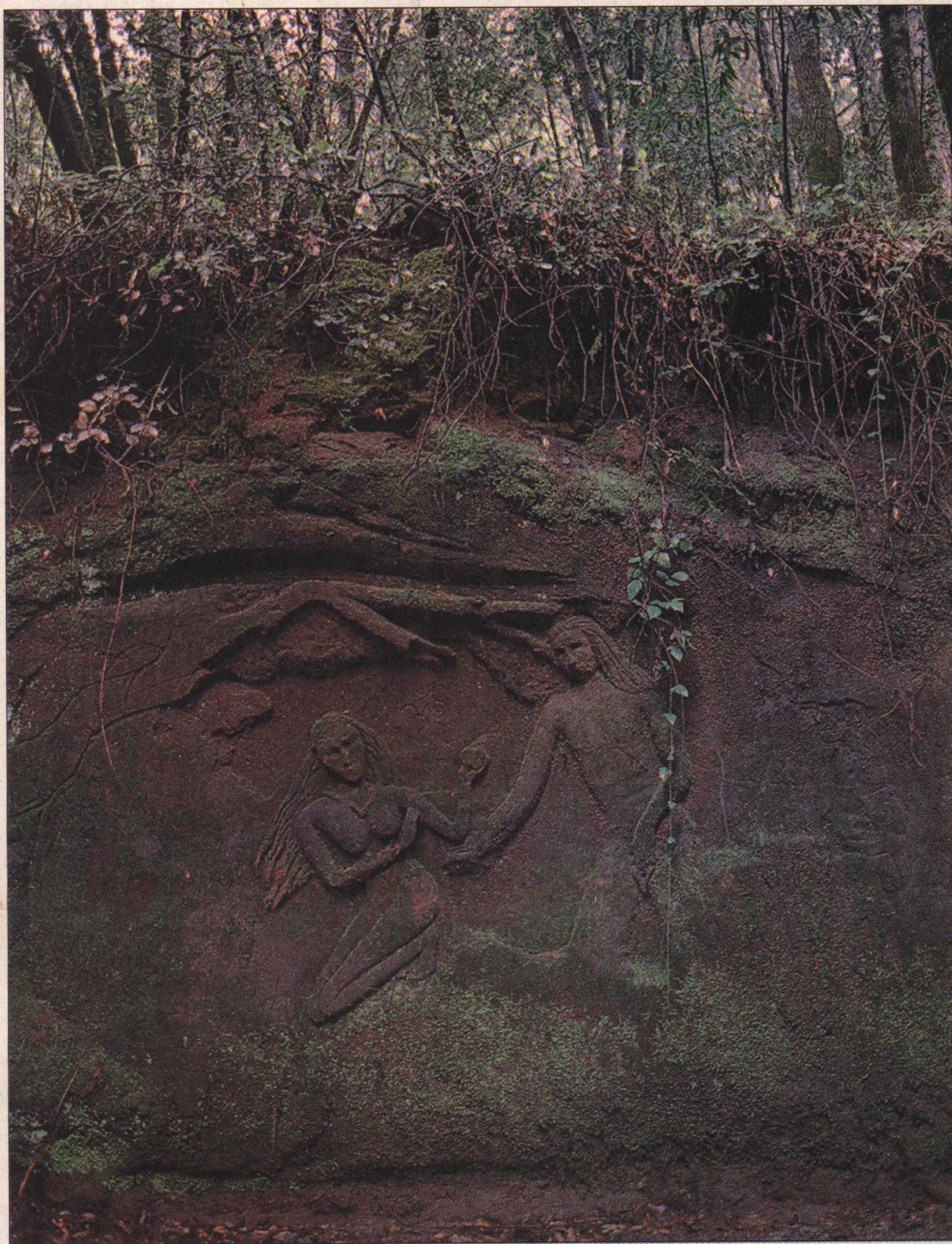


# Mary's home



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Visitors winding up the late Mary Holmes' drive are met by this image carved into a cliff.

## A tribute to a Santa Cruz original

By WALLACE BAINE

Sentinel entertainment writer

Mary Holmes lived and worked on a remote hilltop expanse just north of Santa Cruz for more than a third of her life. Considering she lived to see 91, that accounts for 30-plus years.

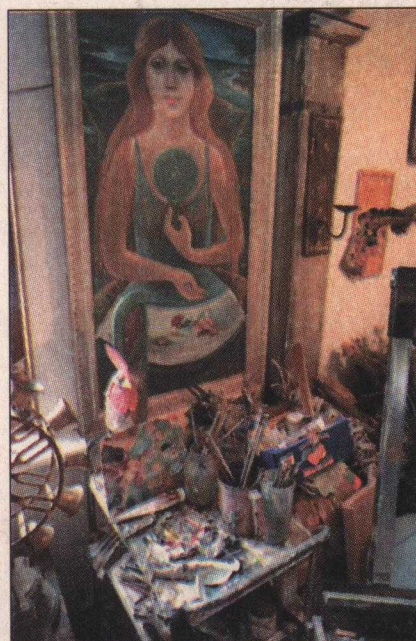
Considering that she was a painter with her own studio on the property and usually no compelling reason to venture into town, she must have felt rooted to the place, like the old oaks that surrounded her.

Holmes, a painter, art theorist and historian, and one of the charter faculty members of UC Santa Cruz, died on Jan. 21 after a long, adventurous life that was filled with art.

Among her friends, students and contemporaries, her Happy Valley home has become famous over the years for its magical eccentricities and the insights it provides into the artistic imagination of the woman who lived there.

The Holmes property is not easy to get to. It is at the end of a tortuous dirt road afflicted with dizzying switchbacks.

Bruce Cantz, Mary's longtime friend and former student, who also lives on the property, said that the unforgiving drive



up to the house was an effective disincentive for would-be thieves and casual visitors, much to Mary's delight.

Along the driveway, the visitor gets a taste of what awaits. On one bend is a bas-relief image of what looks like a

female swimmer. On another plateau sits an old, weathered hobby horse.

Mary Holmes' paints and brushes lay untouched in her studio.

The maddening one-lane drive eventually yields to a hilltop clearing. Here sits the Holmes house and, on an adjacent site 100

yards away, a barn-like structure that is the late artist's studio, a complex of out-buildings surrounded by animal pens.

"This house was built in the 1940s," said Cantz in Mary's living room, standing next to a small, makeshift shrine.

"Things are normally in disarray, but they're in particular disarray now."

There is an empty spot against a far wall near a window looking out over a verdant landscape. It was here where Holmes spent her final months in a hospital bed.

On a table near the now-empty spot is a sketch pad. Holmes

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# Mary

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continued drawing until the end.

The feel of the house is musty and antique. The floor tiles are worn, the ceiling panels waterstained.

Pinned to the ceiling is a circle of what looks like Hindu devotional posters. On the wall is an ancient, black-and-white portrait of an unsmiling man. No one in the family knows who the man is.

Though art is everywhere in the house, this is where Mary Holmes lived her practical life, not her artistic one. She did her painting in the studio down the drive, past the horse stables.

After chatting with Cantz, I found myself standing on a enormous circular labyrinth, an ancient symbol of the spiritual path, talking with Michael O'Malley, Mary's son and only child.

Behind him was a small chapel, built from concrete block. As we talked, hail fell from the sky and bounced at our feet. It was the kind of cheap symbolism, Holmes would likely have disapproved of.

O'Malley took me into the chapel, which has a cold, earthen smell. Inside are a couple of modest benches surrounded by tall panels: Mary's paintings of nude figures in pristine natural settings, representations of Biblical imagery.

In the studio house, every room feels like three-dimensional artwork. Painted or otherwise represented throughout are beloved Holmes' motifs: horses, angels, religious iconography.

In the loft of her high-ceilinged painting room (the place was built as a barn) are dozens of old, wooden rocking horses, the same kind that's welded to the roof outside.

The hail adds to the general peculiarity of the place, but it's intriguing to note that Mary Holmes once lived in an honest-to-goodness castle fashioned out of the wasteland of the San Fernando Valley by a headstrong English socialist, who in the 1920s took literally the milk-and-honey dictum that in America each man could have his own castle.

Holmes was not only a painter of considerable artistic hunger, but a perceptive interpreter of art. She is known not for her paintings, but for her singular talent at explaining fuzzy artistic concepts in blunt language that could thrill those who otherwise would find lectures on art a perfectly effective sleep aid.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Mary Holmes and two friends hang out in her studio.

Those seduced by her talent — students, colleagues, friends, even lay people who heard her act during free public lectures — often came up to the property to see Mary in her element.

In her library, adjacent to the chapel, are books whose sagging brown spines suggest they may be printed in long-dead languages. I can imagine Mary sitting by the fire entertaining her sister, Sara Holmes Boutelle, the biographer of architect Julia Morgan and also a Santa Cruzan, who died just 18 months before her sister.

"She built this studio with the idea that she was going to move here in her old age," said Michael's wife, Becky O'Malley. "But she never really got to her old age."

At Becky's feet in the library is a magnificent tiled floor in a pattern similar to the giant labyrinth outside.

In a side room, once stuffed with the residue of a 91-year-old life, the floor features old woodcut prints cut from calendars, glued to plywood, then shellacked over. On the ceiling, are copper-colored discs on which are drawn symbols of the zodiac.

In the adjoining kitchen, the window frames are covered with circular representations done in bottle glass from pop bottles, Chianti bottles, syrup bottles.

Almost anyone who talks of Mary Holmes talks of her ferocious defense of animals. On the property are (or were) horses, sheep, goats, chickens, dogs, cats and peacocks. Her beloved dog Demi still wanders the grounds.

Horses were her totem animal, said Cantz. She rode horses well into her twilight years. Images of them are everywhere you turn.

Mary Holmes was an Episcopalian, but if she's now checking into the Afterlife Motor Lodge, she's going to be outraged if it doesn't include horses.

"When she was a young girl," said Cantz, "she thought she was going to be a horse."

"It was only the passage of time that convinced her that she wasn't, although some people said she had succeeded."

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