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# The Art of Mary Holmes



REFERENCE



by Inge Sandvoss

MARY Holmes, painter, philosopher and teacher of Art History at UCSC, whose wonderful show of paintings and drawings opened Easter Sunday at the Eloise Packard Smith Gallery at Cowell College, lives in a 100-year-old house on top of a mountain above Happy Valley Road—a harrowing, narrow and dark road leading up the mountain with seven hairpin curves.

But the traveler, who isn't too petrified by the purgatorial path, will notice fanciful animal shapes, including a "unicorn crossing" sign, and if he persists, will in the end be rewarded by arriving at a sunny hilltop meadow, where he finds himself surrounded by sheep, horses, goats, chickens, dogs and cats, all of them Mary's.

When we visited her on Easter Eve, just hours before her show was to go up, a time which has most artists tied up in nervous knots, she was calmly feeding the animals. "I enjoy animals," she says, brushing hay off her sweater, "I enjoy everything about them, and I love to feed them." As we walk up to the house, which sits higher than the barn, next to an immense Tammarack tree, surrounded by a bramble of citrus, fig and avocado trees, Jessica, one of the dogs, bothers a bee. "Don't do that, Jessica," scolds Mary, who picks up the bee and brings it to safety.

Her concern for animals seems to have been predestined. "When I was little," she says, "people used to take the 30th book of psalms, where each verse deals with women, and give one verse to girls when they were born. And since I was born on the 8th of May, the verse given to me was: She shall open her mouth for the dumb and such as need protection."

Mary was born in South Dakota, but has lived all over the United States. She also spent one year in Berlin, Germany, when her first degree, a B.A. in philosophy, made it hard for her to find a job at home. "There is no place for a lady with a B.A. in

philosophy," she says emphatically. "It's a stigma, not a degree."

The large living room in Mary's house, where we sit down for a while to talk, is crammed with chairs, curios, icons and the paintings and drawings which are soon to be taken to the show. The paintings are exquisitely beautiful, glowing with life; and their central theme is women with animals. However, the animals in Mary Holmes' paintings are symbolical beasts—unicorns and dragons, the dove of peace, and the sacrificial lamb. Her women, likewise, are not individual women, but represent *woman*, the great mother, Eve, or the Virgin Mary, or the yin principle. "All art begins in sacredness," says Mary, "and when it moves out of sacredness into the secular it very soon dies."

Having lectured for the past ten years at UCSC, where she is enormously popular with students, she sounds not one bit academic. "Art has a terrible power," she maintains. "Many people take art



Photos by Dan Covro

solemnly, but not seriously; they put on a pious face about it, but don't believe that it has any real power. The head of an advertising agency," she says, "is much more convinced of the power of art than the head of an art department in a university. Advertising agencies know about the power of art; that's why they pay so much money for it."

Though Mary Holmes lectures on art (at the Penny University at Caffè Pergolesi, Fridays at 5 pm as well as UC), she does not teach painting. "If one wants to be an artist," she laughs, "it's better to look at the greatest works that have been produced than at students art." She believes when one looks at student art too much it eventually takes over because the teacher has to look till he finds something commendable, and eventually he will lower his standards. She recommends to budding painters that it would be a great experience for them to work as restorers in a museum. "When you work as a restorer you get to look at the works themselves, and besides it's a great technical education," she declares.

Mary's sense of history extends into the future as well as into the past. Page Smith, an old friend of Mary's, who insisted that she come to Cowell when he was provost there, says she predicted every major development of contemporary art for the past 20 years. Both Page and Mary were on the faculty of UCLA before coming to Santa Cruz.

"Mary has a remarkable gift for sensing what is going to be the coming preoccupation," says Page. "She was also one of the first persons to talk about the tarot, long before it was popular," he remembers, adding that the people who had their fortunes told by her were always amazed at the accuracy of her pronouncements. "Of course," observes Page wryly, "people like Mary don't usually fit into Universities very well. UCLA kept trying to get rid of her. When I came to Santa Cruz, Mary was my first appointment to Cowell. It was a struggle, but (Dean) McHenry was for it and so we got it through." (McHenry was then chancellor of UCSC.)

Mary not only lay an astute deck of Tarot, she also uses Tarot symbols, as well as astrological symbols, in her paintings. One 7' tall painting, which graces a staircase at Cowell, depicts the tarot symbol of fortitude, a woman who keeps a lion subdued, in

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glowing orange and gold colors. Next to it is a painting of the same size, showing a woman with a unicorn in cool, blue shades. The two paintings entitled, "Day and Night" are at Cowell, because Mary's living room ceiling is not high enough to hold them. Her living room's loss is Cowell's gain.

Cowell, in fact, gained a lot more than an unorthodox professor in art history in Mary. The college may well be known in the future as the place where Mary Holmes' frieze of seven paintings, entitled "Aquarius," enriches a wall in the chapel-like room next to the Eloise Smith Gallery. Her impressionistic painting came to her through an accident of nature, says Mary. "I've always been very near-sighted," she explains, "and didn't get any glasses till I was 17. What I saw, therefore, was much more general than what most people see."

"It's good for art to see the whole rather than little details," she emphasizes. "When you get fascinated by parts, the whole never really comes out right. In the end, everything is finally relationships."

In much the same way I find myself unable to question Mary Holmes about details like dates and specific events—these things seem to be irrelevant to her. All I want to do is to sit by her and feel the timeless essence of her person. Her show at Cowell will be up through May 10, open daily from 11:30 to 4. I urge you to see it. You'll do yourself a favor. •