

William Henry Holmes

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WILLIAM HENRY HOLMES died at Royal Oak, Michigan, on April 20, 1933, at the age of 86 years. Born near Cadiz, Ohio, December 1, 1846, son of Joseph and Mary Heberling Holmes, his education was cared for according to the best local lines of the period with a view to teaching as a career. Along with his education he fancied drawing, and early developed a precocity of line that was to influence his whole life. The urge for art expression in due course pushed him into the world of science. As a visitor to the Smithsonian the youth's talent was recognized and he found employment and association of scientific men. With the idea of an art career yet in mind he studied art in Germany and visited the great museums of Europe in 1879-80, and many early reports show the quality of his illustrations. This talent drew him into the work of the U. S. Geological Survey, and in 1872 he took the field as an artist under F. V. Hayden. Interesting himself deeply in geology he became assistant geologist in 1874. The vast landscapes of the Far West lying bare to the sun were traced by his pencil, and there remain from this period hundreds of drawings showing physiographic features of which those of the Grand Canyon are classics in geology. Assigned to the survey of the San Juan region of Colorado about 1875, this fortunate event brought together the man and the subject that was largely to dominate his scientific life. The cliff dwellings and pueblos of this region were fallow to his researches after a millennium of solitude in the deep canyons and on the high mesas. Here we find him writing the first report on the ancient remains of the San Juan results of his surveys and clambering in the dusty, smoke-blackened rooms of the ancient people.

During Mr. Holmes' service in the U. S. Geological Survey from 1872 to 1889 he found time to keep up his interest in the works of man initiated, as was said, by his surveys in the region of the Cliff Dwellers. Thus we find traces of his artistic skill in the first volume of the Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879-80 and an important paper on the art in shell in the second report, showing that he was keenly studying the stream of accessions coming into the Smithsonian from the various

explorations conducted by the Government. In following reports are other papers of his, especially in the Fourth, where three papers of his appear. They show that at this period he was deeply interested in aboriginal decorative art. In 1882, while still with the Survey, he was appointed Curator of Aboriginal Ceramics in the U. S. National Museum. In 1889 he was definitely transferred to the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian.

Among the disturbing dreams of the infant Anthropology was the correlation of European and American archaeology. Chipped implements resembling European types were labelled in museums American paleolithic implements. Dr. Holmes' knowledge of technique came in handy at this time. He found that none of the so-called implements showed wear by use or of specialization of form fitting them for any ordinary use. He carried on work in numerous Indian village sites and quarries where implements had been made. This study demonstrated that all these chipped stones labelled Paleoliths were only the rejects of the native implement makers thrown away on the workshops because of flaws in the stone or shapes not suitable for making finished implements. Those who believed in the great antiquity of man in America were thus deprived of their best argument, and a long and bitter fight ensued. Dr. Holmes scored a complete victory, however, and archaeologists now agree that there are no American paleolithic implements.

Dr. Holmes' interest in the antiquity of man was paramount, and he led the opposition to the previously generally accepted belief in the existence of a glacial age man in America. His scientific interests became concentrated in the field of American archaeology. It is in this field that he achieved most fame. He comprehended the whole American field, carrying on explorations in the various areas and studying the collections brought in by other workers. Twice did Dr. Holmes receive concrete recognition of his major work in archaeology. In 1898 he was awarded the Loubat prize of \$1,000 by Columbia University for the most important work in American archaeology in the three year period, also a prize of \$400 for the most

outstanding publication in this field for the five year period ending with 1920.

Interrupting his work in the Smithsonian, Dr. Holmes from 1894 to 1897 served as Head Curator of Anthropology in the Field Museum, Chicago, and Professor of Anthropic Geology in the University of Chicago. During this assignment he accompanied Mr. Allison Armour on an exploration to Yucatan. Here he gathered materials for a volume on the ancient ruins of Maya civilization in Yucatan and Central America, with numerous illustrations from his pen of the remarkable ruined buildings and works of sculpture and with maps and plans of the cities.

Returning to the Smithsonian in 1897, Dr. Holmes accepted the Head Curatorship of Anthropology in the U. S. National Museum, this department covering ethnology, archaeology, technology, and history. This service was interrupted in 1902, when he succeeded Major J. W. Powell as Chief of the Bureau of American Ethnology. He applied himself assiduously to the work of the Bureau and during his intendency brought out the important volumes of the Handbook of the American Indians. He continued as chief till 1909, when he resigned to devote himself entirely to Museum work. During the subsequent years he supervised the classification and installation of the great collections of American archaeology and the establishment of the Division of Physical Anthropology with Dr. Ales Hrdlicka [*sic*] as Curator. In museum science Dr. Holmes was preeminent. His impeccable good taste and his mastery of composition made for outstanding results in the anthropological exhibits of the National Museum. Especially this is seen in the racial groups, which have remained the best of their class.

Toward the close of his long life Dr. Holmes returned to his first affiliations with art. The art materials aggregating to the Smithsonian were always subject to his care. In 1920 he was made Director of the newly established National Gallery of Art, then having become by additions of considerable importance. This work he carried on actively for the rest of his life, establishing the foundation of the National Gallery eventually to be housed by the Government.

Dr. Holmes received numerous honors both here and abroad. He was a National Academician, member and former president of the Washington Academy of Sciences, a charter member of the Cosmos Club and past president, member of the Archaeological Institute of Great

Britain and Ireland, and of the National Institute of Fine Arts, of which he was president in 1909. His name is indelibly fixed in the Geography of the West, two mountains having been named for him. He was a noted mountain climber, having been first to ascend several high peaks in the Rockies, including the Mount of the Holy Cross. Dr. Holmes was always spare in physique and seemingly delicate, but his agility was remarkable. In mountain climbing no one could keep up with him.

On his seventieth birthday his friends and admirers presented him with a unique publication of 500 pages of essays titled the Holmes Anniversary Volume. On his eightieth he was given a bound volume of letters from his fellow scientists in various parts of the world. Dr. Holmes was slender, erect, with brown eyes and pointed beard. He was never too busy to be polite, but he was always busy. His thoroughness stands out in high relief. He had a broad foundation in general culture. He always said that "the broader your foundation, the better your results will be." Another typical expression was "Make it tell the story." In 1883 he was married to Katherine Osgood, who bore him two sons.

To sum up, Dr. Holmes was an eminent man of science in whom the various phases of art and science were fused to a degree seldom given in one man. Art, science, and technic were the agencies he applied to the elucidation of his favorite science, anthropology. His passion for pure art is seen in his paintings, which are poetical transcriptions of nature, not only portraying nature but revealing his inmost soul.

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