

MARY HOLMES *Paints the Figure*

*Two works in progressive steps
by a modern painter of the myth.*

BY PHILIP THOMPSON

MARY HOLMES lives and works on a farm in Santa Cruz, California, which lies among forested hills overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The house is a vibrant world overflowing with images. Her oil paintings cover the walls of every room and hallway, forming a comprehensive theater of imagination from her evolving life work as a painter of figures. It is an experience that communicates to the visitor a dramatic, personal symbolism of great scope and intensity. One sees mythological figures, portraits, Madonnas, saints of spiritual battle, St. Michael and St. George, and allegorical figures representing the cardinal virtues, Fortitude and Temperance. They all combine to create a scene of tremendous variety, a feast of creative energy and technical accomplishment that one very seldom encounters today. Her studio is located in a beautiful old nineteenth-century water tower at the edge of a redwood grove. Here one sees a gathering of

works in progress which, together with the finished pictures, indicates an extraordinary concentration on the work of painting.

Mary Holmes described the general lack of concern for the figure in art today: "One major reason there is so little regard for the figure is that we live in such a fast-paced world. Much of today's art, from the images of advertising to the works of fine artists, is meant to be seen only once, at a quick glance. Even the great figurative art in museums is usually looked at a single time by people on hurried tours. The figure in art requires a strong feeling for the value and meaning of time by everyone—artists and viewers alike."

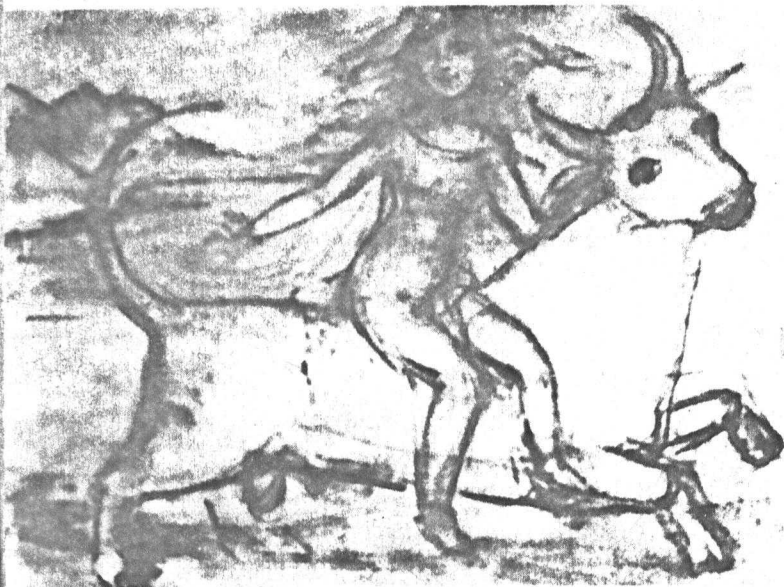
Mary Holmes has had a long teaching career, and is known as a brilliant lecturer in art history and humanities by both college and general audiences. In 1954 she was given her own television series in Los Angeles. She has taught at the University of Iowa, Ohio State University, at U.C.L.A., and at the Santa Cruz branch of the Univer-

sity of California where she is currently directing the Western Civilization humanities program.

As her teaching experience and paintings show, the imagination of Mary Holmes is emphatic and profuse, with an energy that generates innumerable images and possesses the skill to lead us to the visions informing them. Students and the viewers of her art recognize a commitment to the maximum illumination, to the most her imagination can say or see of reality.

The two oil paintings reproduced here, *Europa and the Bull* and *Orpheus and Eurydice*, were created by Mary Holmes to reveal in separate stages—from beginning brush drawings on canvas to the finished paintings reproduced in color—her creative and technical conceptions. Except when painting portraits, she usually works without studio models. She relies on her long experience as a painter of figures and her profound knowledge and imagination.

Her images belong to the poetic



Europa and the Bull. The beginning line drawing, made with brush and oil wash, blocks in the figures on a canvas coated with gesso.



Detail of the drawing showing some areas blocked in with a thin oil wash.

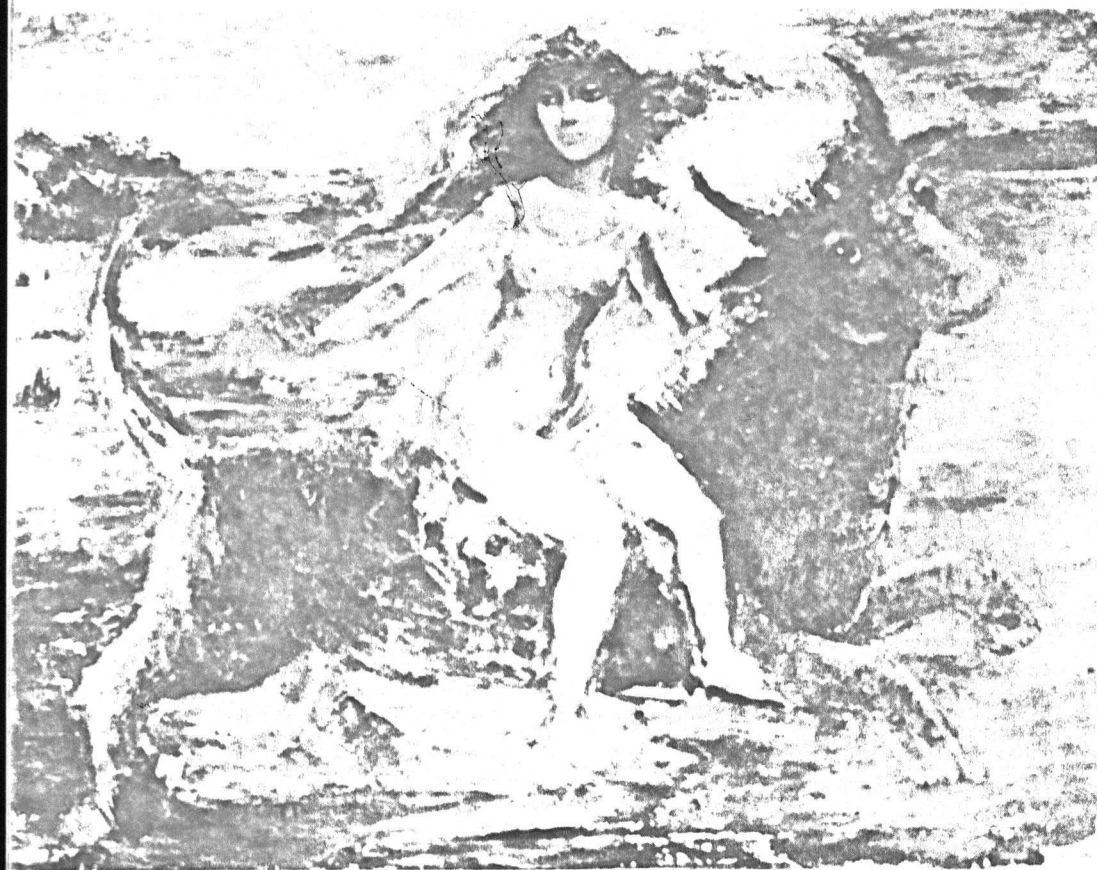


Wide brushes and a palette knife were used to indicate roughly major areas of the figures and landscape.



Details of the face become more textured and refined.

The figure of Europa is given greater delicacy of surface with the palette knife.



Middle stage of the painting. The bull is more defined, clothing is painted on Europa, the distant landscape is brushed in.



The painting near completion. Highlights are added to the hair, the face is lighter and more detailed in expression.

world of Greek myth, a body of vivid symbolic expressions, which has been studied by scholars and artists for centuries, revealing the spiritual history of the universe in episodes which render its holiness, order, and beauty. The myths are concerned with the powers, virtues, and dramas which characterize a world of man-like gods and a history of gods among men. The tradition of allegory in art is currently regarded as a ridiculous freak of pedantry, or as a rather vulgar excess that diverts us from current standards of imagination; most current art asks us to abandon our experience of images in art and literature, and consequently to withdraw from any joyous contact with deliberate meaning. In contrast to this trend Mary Holmes' paintings are not simply attempts to represent pleasurable emotion or to illustrate general wisdom; they concentrate on the image, and as a result of the integrity of the image, symbolic meanings abound.

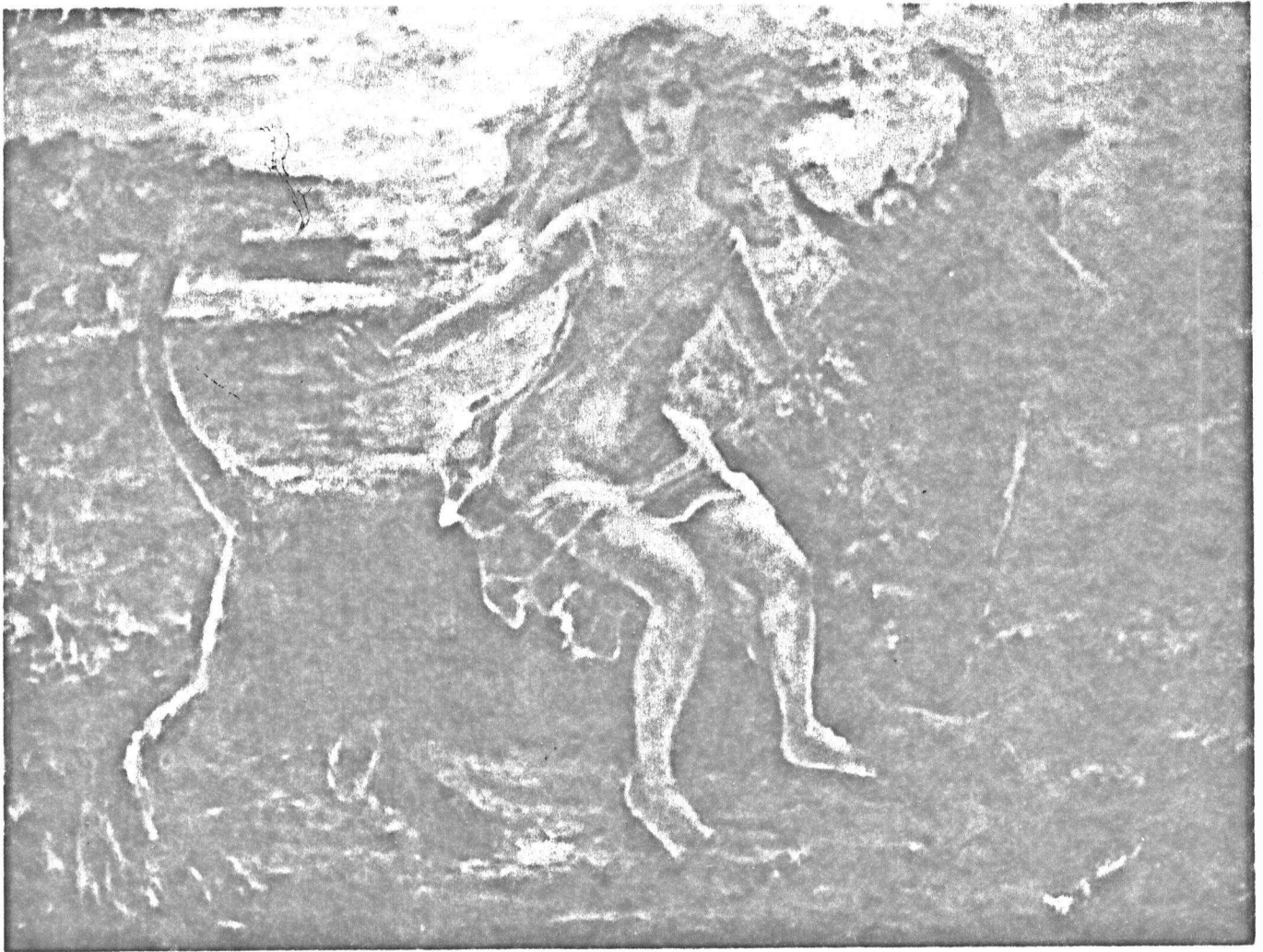
The truncated approach to imagery can be clarified by using as an example the *Juno* of Rembrandt, at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. We may analyze Rembrandt's treatment of human flesh, and wonder at his ability to transform the element of darkness into the winepress of light and substance, but we fail to understand the painting deeply if we remain unaware of the new life and intensity expressed by Rembrandt in the allegory whose quality is known today as the *junoesque*. The dictionary, which contains the corpse of imagination, gives the meaning of "junoesque" as a stately beauty, and implies by this definition that everything relevant has been seen and organized. But abstract definitions are not visions, and it is the Rembrandt painting that defines and organizes the meaning of the word in human terms, not the dictionary. If we say that Juno lives on only in a word, the Rembrandt painting will refute us.

An essential conflict can be discerned here: art is subversive of all dictionaries and must be understood by a general minimum of consciousness, or it may be reduced to the form of more decoration. The artist has always insisted on interpreting nature in human terms so vividly that today many people find it difficult to admit what art tells them, for example about the relation between tears and storms, joy and sunlight, love and the moon, death and winter, resurrection and spring. The mythic image or allegory should be seen as the most intense and imaginative definition of human experience, and therefore as a consecration of human reality.

I want to apply the term "festive" to the paintings of Mary Holmes. In its largest sense, it describes occasions of



Detail of the figure of Europa. Brush work has built up surface by adding textures and light colors.



Europa and the Bull. Oil on canvas. 3 x 4 feet. 1970.

(All photographs by Richard Fernau.)



Europa and the Bull. Oil on canvas. 4 x 8 feet. 1970. A larger painting of the same subject, with an upward-gesturing figure against an evening sky.



Orpheus and Eurydice. Oil on canvas. 4 x 2 feet. 1970.



Orpheus and Eurydice. *Beginning dark line brush drawing on gesso-coated canvas. Thin oil washes block in parts of the figures and the background.*



the ultimate human giving and receiving; we receive inspiration, and we propagate this power in a culture of architecture, poetry, music, and painting. William Blake said, "The whole business of man is the arts," meaning that the arts alone provide the full inspiration and the full humanity, and that art, the divine freedom of ornament, is the real goal toward which life moves. Myths are true because they celebrate this goal.

The paintings reproduced on these pages draw upon two myths of far-reaching resonance, the bridal-capture of Europa by Zeus, the king of the gods, and the quest of the poet Orpheus for his bride Eurydice, who was killed soon after their wedding day and exiled to the underworld. Both stories are concerned with the perfection of a human beauty that governs the highest powers of the universe, the ruler of the earth and sky, and the law of death. Europa embodies the bridal rite on every level. She is beauty, wife, nature, and humanity, and the shape of the glorious bull is both the feeling that animates the natural and the blessing that transfigures it. The painting makes these meanings concrete in its four parts: the light pouring down and blending with a sea, the blue of which is almost fragrant; the warm and delicate body carried by the divine creature whose eye unites all of the elements, light, water, and blood, into an expression of clear and passionate intelligence.

For Mary Holmes, the figures of Europa and the bull have a personal as well as a mythic significance. It was a "birthday painting" because, as she ex-

plains: "Being born in May, I am a Taurus. For me, the painting symbolizes the extraordinary quality of being carried away by animal nature to discover the true meaning of humans."

In the Orpheus painting, the poet is shown as he emerges into the light of day, having won Eurydice from the god of death through the power of his song. The two figures appear against the cold, shattered fires of the underworld, and Eurydice is about to cross the threshold of the living world. In the Greek myth, the bargain made was that she could return to life in the event that Orpheus did not turn back to look at her before they had left the passages of Hell. This fable is the original myth of art, and it celebrates the power of human genius to restore a fallen world of change and death to living form. Through gesture and tone, the painting represents the movement of incipient triumph. The movement of the shade Eurydice is toward the poetry and warmth embodied in the form of Orpheus. He is painted as the fullness and the light standing over against chaos and drawing his creation into his sphere.

The work of Mary Holmes throws light on the argument over whether art is self-contained or points to something allegorical or mythic beyond itself, whether it is pure form or a means to understanding life. These paintings suggest that there is no such problem: Mary Holmes' art is at once an effort to create absolute clarity of vision and, as in her paintings reproduced here, a guide to the traditional vision from which it was drawn.



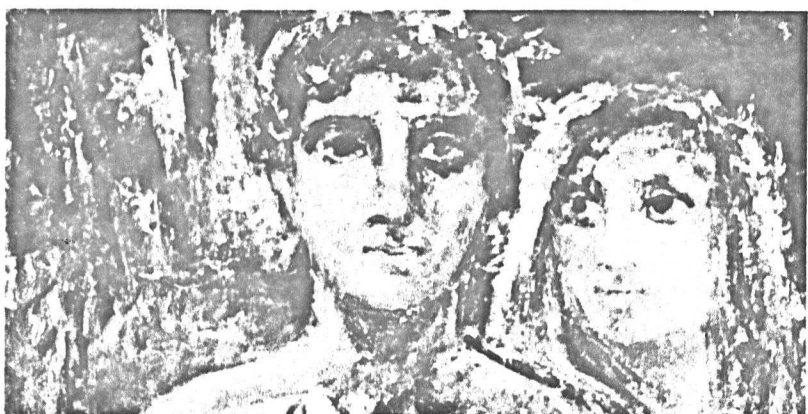
Detail of the first stage showing the expressive line.



In the next stage, thicker oil is used to block in the background and add detail to the faces.



Detail showing the effects of the palette knife to develop textures.



Detail showing added richness of texture. The figure of Eurydice is defined with light colors.



The faces have been painted further to produce a sculptural appearance.



The faces almost finished, with added highlights.