

Mary Holmes: A Biographical Sketch

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By Gideon Rappaport

Mary Adams Holmes was born in Aberdeen, South Dakota, on May 8, 1910, a date to which she attached at least three kinds of significance: First, the date of her birth put her under the sign of Taurus, which seemed to confirm her native strength and independence. Second, Mary always took delight in having been born on the first Mother's Day. (As we read in Wikipedia, the very first celebration of Mother's Day, organized by Anna Jarvis, the originator of the idea, had been held exactly two years earlier on the morning of May 8, 1908, in Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, W.VA, and was repeated that afternoon at the Wannamaker Auditorium, in Philadelphia. Though in 1909 Robert Vessey, Governor of South Dakota, had proclaimed the second Sunday in May to be Mother's Day, the first state to celebrate Mother's Day officially was West Virginia, on the day Mary was born, and on that day the observance of Mother's Day had spread unofficially to nearly every state in the union. In 1914, by proclamation President Woodrow Wilson made the second Sunday in May the official national holiday of Mother's Day.) Third, Mary's birth date yielded Mary an oracle. In those days, Mary said, it was the custom to assign to a newborn girl the verse from the thirty-first chapter of the Book of Proverbs that corresponded to the day of the month on which she was born. Verse eight reads, "Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction." Mary always felt this verse to be a calling and an inspiration to speak—for animals, for oddball human beings, for all who could not articulate the meaning of their own experiences of art and of life—in fact for all of us, appointed to the destruction that is mortality.

Mary spoke of the significance of her name as well. She said,

The name 'Mary' has influenced me all my life. It is a Catholic name in a Protestant world. My father loved Robert Burns and used to recite his poems. All the Marys in Burns are dead. I believed that all references to any Mary were about me. In the Christmas pageant put on by in the fourth grade at my school in Chicago [The University School for Girls], they made me play the Virgin, for which I had to memorize and sing the

Magnificat. (I've never had stage fright because I couldn't see. I didn't get glasses till later.) So I memorized and sang it.

Others included in the list of important Marys were the three Marys of the New Testament (the Virgin Mary, Mary the sister of Martha, and Mary Magdalene), and the Mary who had a little lamb in the nursery rhyme. (Mary also identified with the teacher in that allegorical poem.) She also confessed to having a touch of the Mary who was quite contrary in another nursery rhyme. If she did, it was not because she was contrary on principle but because she fearlessly spoke the truth as she saw it and lived as she wanted regardless of conventions and majorities.

According to family lore, Mary, like Abraham Lincoln, was a descendant of that Obadiah Holmes of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who in 1651 was given thirty lashes at the whipping post in Boston for his "schismist" religious ideas, one for each pound he owed, having refused to allow friends to pay his thirty-pound monetary fine, and who thereafter moved to Rhode Island, where for the next thirty years he served as the pastor of the Baptist church. He called his lashes "the marks of the Lord Jesus," and his case became a *cause celebre* among advocates of religious freedom. Mary also said she was distantly related to Oliver Wendel Holmes. How those two ancestries relate to one another, since Oliver Wendel was descended not from Obadiah but from an apparently unrelated David Holmes, remains a question for the professional genealogists.

Mary's father, John Holmes, was born in 1867 to a family who lived among Quakers in Mastersville (later Conotton), Ohio. His own father too was something of a freethinker; again according to family lore he had gone to a women's rights convention to find a wife. In an obituary his mother was called a "lady abolitionist and classical scholar." John Holmes, whom the family all called Grandfather, had at various times been a farmer, a railroad land agent, a banker, a college president, and for ten years the mayor of Greeley, Iowa. He was a remarkable man and a remarkable American about whom more may be read in the introduction to historian Page Smith's book *As a City upon a Hill*.

In late 1905 (possibly early 1906) Grandfather was on a train from Washington, D.C., where he had been visiting his friend Leslie M. Shaw, former governor of Iowa and then Secretary of the U.S. Treasury under Theodore Roosevelt. Invited to dine with William Howard Taft, who was to be the next U.S. president, Grandfather declined because he was scheduled to be in Ohio with his aunts. On the train to Ohio he met Marie Heloise Adams, born in 1880 to an Episcopalian family who lived near Rehobeth, Maryland, on the Eastern

Shore, where her father was a doctor. Marie was on her way to Tiffin, Ohio, to take up a teaching position, and she attracted Grandfather's attention because she was dressed in black. Himself a widower, he thought she must be a widow. In fact she was in mourning for her father, who had died the previous year. Grandfather was so smitten with her that he asked the porter at which stop she would be getting off the train. It would be at Tiffin, the porter said, beyond the stop where Grandfather would be getting off the train. Grandfather wrote a short note on a tiny piece of paper on which was printed

The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Company
Conductor's Cash Fare Slip
West of Ohio River
No. Q38403

On the back of that slip of paper, Grandfather wrote, in pencil,

Here is
another
Goodby

I am now
counting the
days till
I see you

Within the year he had searched for her, found her, courted her, and won her hand. (In later years, with a twinkle in her eye, Grandmother would say, "I was a pick-up.") They were married in November 1906, having known one another for under a year. Grandfather was 39, Grandmother 26. They had two daughters, Sara in 1909 and Mary in 1910. (Sara Holmes Boutelle was for many years the Assistant Headmistress of the Brearley School in New York City, from which she retired in 1974. She moved the next year to Santa Cruz to be near Mary and then wrote a successful book on the American architect Julia Morgan.) Over the years the family had lived in South Dakota, Chicago, the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Montana, Iowa, New Jersey, and finally California.

Raised as a Southern lady, Grandmother taught school, played the organ in church, played piano entirely by ear, reared the children. She was proud of being one of the first Montessori Mothers. Grandfather voted Republican and for

years had Grandmother serve as secretary of the Republican Ladies' Club. This job she executed faithfully while always voting Democratic. Mary said this showed what an unusual thing is American democracy with its enshrinement of the secret ballot. Grandfather would take the three ladies riding in the automobile and plunge off the road striking out across open country, up and down banks, through streams, over railroad tracks, with Grandmother and the girls screaming and quaking in the back. When they got lost and Grandmother suggested that they return the way they had come, Grandfather would shout, "General Grant said 'Never turn back!'" and on they would go.

Grandfather ran things and was successful; Grandmother made sure to save everything, and there came a day when that habit saved the family from ruin. When Grandfather was the mayor of Greeley, the banking company whose branch was the only bank in town decided there was not enough business to warrant remaining open there. The manager, "a big and utterly probable Irishman," went around having the landowners of the area sign notes to the effect that they had sold their land to him. He could thereby say that all their income from these sales had been deposited in the bank, thus proving its business brisk and its continuance in Greeley necessary. No money in fact changed hands, and there were notes bearing his signature to that effect. In several years, however, it became clear that this most convincing and likely of bankers was over head and ears in gambling debts when he tried actually to collect on the many spurious notes the landowners had signed. Many men went under, unable to prove the notes they had signed were phony. Grandfather too, who had signed away all the land and the cattle, was about to be ruined when Grandmother discovered the piece of paper, signed by the Irish banker and put away years before, that said "the transaction with John Holmes involved no money."

Mary's parents lived together for sixty years. In their later years, they lived with Mary. For a time so did Mary's nephew (Sara's son Jonathan) and his wife Kim, who writes,

One morning . . . Mary told me that Grandfather wasn't feeling great and was still in bed. This was unusual [because] he was always up early making oatmeal. I stuck my head in his bedroom door to speak to him and, in his gruff voice, he said he wanted me to get him a new typewriter ribbon before I came home. He was a passionate reader of the news and frequently wrote letters to the editor. . . . [T]hat day he died before noon. . . . [Grandmother] was not a typical housewife. She told me she had never

been to a grocery store. She did not cook, although she made the best mint julep and beaten biscuits, her only specialties. She adored champagne and many times . . . had enough to become giggly and silly. . . . She also told me how, when living in Montana, she shocked people by inviting Native Americans into their home and [in] a section of that home incorporat[ing] Native American design to honor those tribal people.

Grandfather died in 1966 at nearly ninety-nine years old and in possession of all his faculties. Grandmother died nine years later at ninety-five after a dignified and good-natured decline into senility, in which she was attended by three inexhaustible spirits: Mary herself, who cared for Grandmother exactly as if human traditions were intact and homes for the aged unheard of; Bruce Cantz (Mary's disciple, helper, and friend for over thirty years), who was a wonder worker of Grandmother's entertainment and performer of those physical labors of caring for Grandmother which at the last were too much for Mary; and the spirit of saving things, which, like them, never left her. In her last years, Grandmother was always taking up silver spoons or paper clips or plastic flowers or brooches or bottle caps and wrapping them elaborately and deeply in Kleenex or toilet paper. She would bind them with string or rubber bands or wire and put an emery board or a pencil or a water color brush or a flower stem through them, perhaps wrap them again, and then stuff them into her overflowing dresser drawers to preserve them. They were endlessly varied and yet all of a style, inscrutable and surprising when unraveled. Mary preserved a number of examples of this "Grandmother Art" under glass in the recessed top of a small wooden chest. Also among Grandmother's things was a small envelope on which Grandmother had written "Very Important." Inside was the Conductor's Cash Fare Slip with the note on the back that Grandfather had written seventy years before.

All her life Mary remembered a childhood experience that stamped her indelibly. At age four, while standing on the front steps of her grandparents' home near Rehobeth on Maryland's Eastern Shore, she saw a dead bird lying on the brick walkway in front of her. She made a characteristic nineteenth-century melodramatic gesture of horror, putting her hands up to her heart, and said something like "Oh dear me." And then she heard a voice saying that the words and gesture were false. That voice was not hers, was not that of anyone she knew, was not identifiable. Yet to her it was utterly authoritative. She imagined it to be the voice of God within her and thereafter felt the moment to have been a great gift, the initiation of her lifelong renunciation of sentimentality and of her devotion to the authentic in speech and gesture both in her own life and in art.

“Little Mary Sunshine,” Mary’s nickname within the family, adored her older sister Sara and was her devoted defender. One evening at dinner, Grandfather and Grandmother were scolding Sara for not eating her meat. In protest against the perceived injustice, Mary stood up and shouted the two worst things she had ever heard of: “Cold coffee and castor oil!”

In 1914 the Holmes family moved from Aberdeen, South Dakota, where Mary’s father had worked for the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad, to Chicago. There Mary attended one of the nation’s first Montessori schools, where she spent four years drawing and painting until the school decided that it had better start teaching her to read—Mary later celebrated Montessori’s principles of freedom of activity and joy in learning—and then Miss Haire’s School, the University School for Girls (1106 Lakeshore Drive). In 1922 or 1923, the family moved to Musselshell and then to Kinsey, Montana, and when almost fourteen Mary, under the auspices of her Aunt Nellie, who loved her and wanted to adopt her, was sent to the first Episcopal boarding school for girls in the United States, the Hannah More Academy, near Baltimore in Reisterstown, Maryland. She returned to the family home for summer vacations, because of which her nickname at school was “Montana.”

From childhood on, Mary was devoted to painting and drawing. She remembered that people found her pictures to be “impressionistic.” At the age of fifteen she was fitted with her first pair of glasses, which she usually called spectacles, to correct her nearsightedness, and the effect on her was overwhelming. It had never occurred to her that one might recognize by his or her facial features who it was that had walked into the room. Until that time, she said, when people would enter a room she would “recognize them by their conformation, as one recognizes a horse.” Now the world, sprung into focus, was filled with clarity and detail. She never forgot the first impression made upon her by the discovery that seeing a tree outside the window could include seeing its particular leaves, and the impact of that moment never wore off.

After graduating from Hannah More in 1927, Mary enrolled at Hollins College in Virginia, majoring in philosophy. According to Mary, she regularly made the dean’s list every *other* semester. Being on the list gave a student the privilege of not having to attend classes. Mary took full advantage, spending all her time in the library reading. As a result, her grades would drop and she would be taken off the list. She would then return to classes, earn all A’s, get back on the dean’s list, re-earning the privilege, and “cheerfully” (as Mary would

say) resubmerge herself in the library. She was remembered by Rosamond Larmour Loomis, a year or two behind Mary at Hollins and later headmistress of The Bishop's School in La Jolla, California, as beautiful and outspoken and intimidating to the younger girls by virtue of her intensity.

In 1931, after receiving her bachelor's degree from Hollins, Mary traveled to Europe with her sister, Sara, and their cousin Frederick Adams, Jr., nicknamed Tubby. Mary spent a year studying philosophy in Berlin, Heidelberg, and Paris. While in Europe she drew, painted, visited museums, and attended concerts, to which in those Depression days, she said, tickets cost the equivalent of ten cents.

When she returned to the States in 1932, Mary met a medical artist whose work earned him \$10,000 a year, "which was of course a fortune at that time," she said. "I thought, 'I can do that.'" So after a summer in Greeley, Iowa, where her parents had moved from Montana, she enrolled in the medical illustration program at the Johns Hopkins University medical school in Baltimore. Max Brödel, father of modern American medical illustration and founder of the program, "was delighted to have me," she recalled, "because I was a painter and not a scientist." She remembered being assigned to make a charcoal drawing of the anterior superior iliac spine. She finished in a few hours, but when she showed it to Brödel, he sent her back to correct it, instructing her to include "every pore and bump and crease. Six weeks later, it was done. We just kept looking and looking, and it was invaluable." Though Mary quit the two-year program after six months because, what with the dissections and the body parts, "it was too bloody and painful," she also said, "I wouldn't trade that experience for anything."

In 1933 Mary moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where she and her friend Barbara Betz ran a boardinghouse (in a building that, according to the local newspaper, had been an illegal gambling joint and then a Chinese restaurant). When she wasn't cooking for the roomers, who were mostly medical students, she spent her time painting. It was in Madison that the twenty-six-year-old Mary met a tall, handsome real estate agent, Gerald O'Malley, who came from a large, prosperous, Irish Catholic family. Mary and Gerald were married in Greeley, Iowa, on June 15, 1936. But Mary's original and indomitable character turned out to be at odds with Gerald's expectations of wifely obedience. As she wrote to Sara, a

black eye was given because I refused to agree to obey every slightest and stupidest command Gerald chooses to make—without hope of explanation. That isn't the sort of person I am or have ever wanted to be,

so I got chucked down stairs and around the apt, and alas for the Montessori system that teaches little children to have a will of their own and to say “why, teacher” and alas for higher education, the critical mind *and* the knowledge that I can support myself.

Despite the rarity of divorce in that time, Mary, pregnant, with a black eye and “without a cent,” left Gerald. She borrowed \$7.00, some pajamas, and “a doz. kleenex s” from a friend named June Deadman, who “drove me a few miles out in the country and helped me into the bus.” That bus took Mary to Dubuque, Iowa, where she hoped to make some money by painting a portrait for a Doctor Fitzgerald and his wife. The next day she went on to Greeley, and after staying some time with her parents in Greeley, she traveled to New York City, where she joined her sister Sara and Sara’s husband Bill Boutelle in their apartment in the East Village. (Sara and Bill had been married in 1934.) There, in October 1937, Mary’s son, Michael, was born.

Mary said, “My son is named Michael because I’m devoted to the archangel Michael, who carries the scales for the judgment at the end of the world.” Michael was also the name of Gerald’s father. When Michael was six months old, Mary returned with him to Greeley and eventually obtained a divorce. In later years, Mary would assert that when a couple divorces, they ought never to have anything to do with one another afterwards, and she held to that principle. Though she appreciated men—she once said that the most attractive man she ever met was Lewis Mumford—and though she had many admirers and at least two subsequent proposals, she never remarried.

The next year, with a child to support, Mary taught English at her alma mater, the Hannah More Academy, where she had been invited by Laura Fowler, headmistress from 1926 to 1943. Mary then learned that at the State University of Iowa (now the University of Iowa) one could earn an advanced degree just by painting pictures. It turned out that one could also earn a degree there for writing, and, as a talented writer, she was tempted. The teachers at her boarding school had been certain that they had found in Mary a natural writer and the most promising candidate for the next generation’s “major female author.” All her life she wrote lyrical, sometimes hauntingly moving poetry, which she claimed merely “came to her.” (The short essays she wrote later as notes to accompany her Art 5a course at UCLA and on television may be read online at www.Maryholmesart5a.com and at www.MaryHolmes.org.) But faced with the choice between the two careers, painting and writing, and knowing she could not do both with equal excellence, and also no doubt still under the lasting effect of

that first pair of spectacles, Mary chose to concentrate on painting. She received her master's degree from the State University of Iowa in 1941, a fact that later, in her indifference to the forms of the academic world, she rarely if ever mentioned.

While earning the degree, Mary served as a teaching assistant to the artist-in-residence Emil Ganso. In that capacity, she had to do "hundreds of slide reviews" for the students. "I came to know every slide in the library and what to say about each one and learned to talk on my feet." In April, speaking with Lester Longman, who was the chairman of the department, Ganso said that Longman really ought to hire Mary to teach art history — she was that good. At home that night Ganso suffered a heart attack and dropped dead. Longman, influenced by what may have been Ganso's last words, hired Mary to teach.

Mary's teaching at Iowa began during a period of cultural and political conflict within the art department. Both Lester Longman and H.W. Janson (author of *Janson's History of Art*), also teaching at Iowa at the time, supported modernism, social realism, and internationalism and opposed the regionalism of Grant Wood, the iconic American realist painter. There is a story that Longman tried to have Wood fired, not only because of the aesthetic and cultural conflict but also because it was thought that Wood was a closet homosexual. A case was brought, the administration dismissed the allegations, but Grant Wood died in February 1942 of pancreatic cancer before he could take up his teaching duties again. The rift with Wood was such, so Mary reported, that not one member of the art department attended Grant Wood's funeral.

In Iowa City Mary and her son Michael, along with Mary's sister Sara and her sons, who had moved to Iowa City when Sara's husband had gone off to war, became friends with the families of Paul Engle (who in 1941 took over the leadership of the soon widely celebrated Iowa Writers' Workshop) and the painter Philip Guston (who had come also in 1941 to replace the late Emil Ganso as artist-in-residence at the university). Mary told that once when she and Guston had both entered paintings in a local art exhibit, she won the first prize. Mary was also friends with the sculptor Humbert Albrizio and his wife Sonia. And at Iowa Mary met Charles Embree, who had been a painting student of Thomas Hart Benton and had come to Iowa City to join the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Mary's student at first, Charles became a lifelong friend.

"Then came World War II," Mary said, "which was another marvelous opportunity for me, because all the men left and I taught their classes. Which meant I had to learn things like Near Eastern ceramics and primitive art, things I

never would have studied because I was only interested in painting." By war's end, Mary was able to lecture on any topic in art history.

There was another story of an unusual relationship that also ended in a sudden death. Mary told of an intense and frightening rancher who fell in love with her—in which year she didn't say—and was determined to marry her, as he told her while driving her home from an evening out. He made it clear that if she refused him, he would kill both her and himself. She got home petrified, sure that he meant what he had said. The next day she found out that he had died suddenly during the night.

In 1947 Mary was hired to teach art history at Ohio State University in Columbus by Frank Seiberling (son of F.A. Seiberling, co-founder of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company), who was head of the art department. Mary's son Michael writes, Frank "was an intelligent, academic, friendly person with a nice wife and a daughter near my age. Mary and I were frequent visitors for parties and dinners at his house," and Frank came to be considered Michael's "godfather." It was in Columbus that Mary became one of the first people in the nation to teach art on television. Her course, which offered credit through the university, was broadcast on the local TV station. She helped to invent the fledgling medium of TV in another way: For the same station she co-"horror hosted" late-night monster movies dressed as "Vampira" (apparently originating the role that was later taken up and made famous by Maila Nurmi [Maila Elizabeth Niemi] on KABC in Los Angeles in 1954–1955). Mary's son Michael, then twelve years old, operated the studio's sound boom.

As at Iowa, so at Ohio State there was a rift in the art department, here between the faction of the recently installed chairman Seiberling and the faction influenced by Hoyt L. Sherman, who, according to Michael,

believed that art appreciation could be reduced to Gestalt Psychology. Mary disagreed. The faculty divided. The University asked the Group Dynamics department to referee. . . . [After a year], the Group Dynamics people said that one side was right (Mary's) and the other was wrong but that the two would never agree, so they went home.

At OSU Mary also knew the painter Roy Lichtenstein, who, when Mary arrived, was there earning an art degree and later taught in the art department. That Mary was above factionalism, as always, is illustrated by her abiding affection for Lichtenstein, who claimed to be significantly influenced by Hoyt Sherman's teaching of art with a "flash room" technique (images briefly flashed on a screen

in a darkened room). In 1952 Gibson Danes, another member of the art department at OSU, was hired to chair the art department at UCLA. According to Mary, Danes did not particularly like her, but his wife did. He offered Mary a position and she accepted.

In 1953 Mary moved to southern California and began teaching at UCLA. At first she lived in Santa Monica on Georgina Avenue, a few blocks from Charles Embree and from American historian Page Smith, who was also teaching at UCLA, and Page's wife Eloise, with whom too Mary became good friends. Then, in 1955, Mary bought a castle on a hilltop in Agoura, which at that time was beyond the farthest northwestern outskirts of Los Angeles. The castle came complete with a turret, a loggia, battlements, a great hall with a huge fireplace, and a long driveway that, in winter, could function almost as a moat: When its mud became impassible in heavy rains, Mary had to trek up to the castle on foot. Starting in 1929, Charles Lapworth, an English socialist, later a newspaper editor and Hollywood film writer and distributor, had designed and built the castle himself out of hand-made concrete blocks. According to Mary, he believed that everyone in America deserved a castle. (Charles Embree maintained that Mary had inadvertently transposed that idea into Lapworth's and that its origin actually lay with "a Mrs. Couhy, the wife of a history professor at UCLA," who, at an open house in a big mansion, had said, "I want everyone to own a house like this." "Eloise [Smith] used to quote her all the time," said Charles.) According to *The Acorn*, a local community newspaper, before Mary's time there the castle had been the location for the shooting of various Hollywood western and thriller films starring the likes of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford; *The Bad Seed* was written there when William March was staying in it; it was visited by Charlie Chaplin, for whom Lapworth had written screenplays. (More recently it served as the location for a movie called *Inherent Vice*, based on a novel by Thomas Pynchon. The castle is reported to have been destroyed in the Woolsey wildfire in 2018.)

Mary bought the castle from Lapworth's widow, Elsa, and lived there with her parents. It was a place where she could have not only her beloved dogs, but also cats, horses, chickens, and other animals. In a house down the hill lived Chester, whom Mary called her "homicidal handyman" because he had once killed a man in a fight. Mary cultivated a garden, rode horseback, sometimes had to kill a rattle snake with a hoe, entertained, and painted. It was painting on the loggia of the castle one day that Mary heard a high squeaky voice saying, "My name is Bernie Schwartz! My name is Bernie Schwartz!" She looked up to see that the voice was coming from a small bird (cockatiel? parakeet?) perched on

the balustrade. She was able to pick up the bird and hold it in some form of cage until she could get to the Agoura phone book, where, sure enough, she found one only Bernie Schwartz living in Agoura. She called and Mr. Bernie Schwartz gratefully came to the castle to retrieve his pet.

Mary always enjoyed giving dinner parties, and the castle was a much celebrated and fondly remembered venue for Mary's entertainment of friends and students in her own version of an eighteenth-century salon. Regular visitors, in addition to family, were Mary's friends and former students, including Page Smith (American historian, later Provost of Cowell College, UCSC) and his wife Eloise (artist), Charles Embree (painter, story writer, musician and song writer, and later story editor for Walt Disney) and his wife Barbara (artist), Ketti Frings (author of the novel *Hold Back the Dawn*, the screenplay for William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*, and the play adaptation of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize), Marvin Borowsky (painter, musician, screen writer, and UCLA professor of screenwriting) and his wife Maxine (painter), Sterling McIlhaney (Mary's teaching assistant at UCLA, painter, later editor of *American Artist*), Philip Thompson (poet) and his wife Beatrice Terzian Thompson (painter, for thirty years head of the art department at The Brearley School in New York City), Rosalind Wholden (Mary's teaching assistant at UCLA, later lecturer in art at the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara), William Fredlund (Mary's teaching assistant at UCLA, later founder of the Institute for the Study of Western Civilization in Cupertino, CA), and many others. When Mary moved from Agoura to Santa Cruz, she took with her the monastic high-backed bench that had been carved by Elsa Lapworth for the castle. It served thenceforth as the seating for one side of Mary's formal dining table in Santa Cruz, the venue for celebratory dinner parties during two and a half more decades.

During the mid-1950s Mary offered, through UCLA Extension, the "first credit course by television" (the promoter apparently not knowing of Mary's local TV course given a few years earlier through Ohio State University). It was a daily fifteen-minute TV program devoted to art appreciation called Art 5a. Once a week Mary would go to the studio of the local CBS station KNXT (Channel 2) to record five segments, which were then broadcast the following week. The course ran for fifteen weeks and became very popular, making Mary something of a celebrity in Los Angeles. Observing her lecturing to the camera at KNXT one day, the writer-director-producer Joseph L. Mankiewicz (*All About Eve*, *The Philadelphia Story*, etc.) said to Mary's hairdresser at the station, "That woman has star quality. But don't tell her!" The hairdresser told her anyway.

Not all members of the UCLA art department approved of Mary's star quality, and this time Mary herself felt the ill effects of an intra-departmental rift. Her lack of a doctorate and scholarly publications, combined with her popularity with students and the TV audience, offended the sense of academic decorum of other art teachers. In 1956 Mary lost her job as lecturer. To earn money she painted portraits of her friends, including the actresses Angie Dickinson, Mildred Dunnock, Susan French, and Julie Newmar. She also gave talks to an informal women's group in Pasadena. (For years her "Pasadena Ladies" continued to invite her to speak even after she was teaching again and had moved to Santa Cruz.) In 1958 Gibson Danes left UCLA to take a position at Yale. His replacement as chairman of the UCLA art department was Lester Longman, who, having held that position at the University of Iowa, knew Mary well and admired both her art and her spirited intellect. By 1960 he had hired Mary back again to teach at UCLA.

To the students enrolled in her introduction to art called Art 5a, and in particular to art students in her other courses, Mary brought her training in the philosophical work of Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer, who had stressed the uniquely human capacity to perceive forms symbolically. In her own teaching Mary emphasized that all the arts convey meaning and feeling through four capacities of the human mind: making and perceiving forms symbolically; empathy, "the intuition of meaning in form"; psychic or aesthetic distance, the faculty, operating simultaneously with empathy, by which we know a work of art to be art and not life; and the ability to escape ourselves in a work of art and to find ourselves again having gained a meaningful experience. Among the undergraduates at UCLA who especially valued Mary's teaching at that time were the gifted painters Eduardo Carrillo, Charles Garabedian, and Keisho Okayama. Mary's popularity among student was again high, and her departure for Santa Cruz in 1965 made the headlines in the *UCLA Daily Bruin*. It also, as Mary laughingly recounted, prompted some members of the art department to pass a motion that she should never again be permitted to teach at UCLA.

While at UCLA, Mary had enjoyed discussing with Page Smith how to make an ideal university. In the early 1960s Smith was asked by Dean McHenry to become the founding provost of Cowell College, the first of the residential undergraduate colleges to be built on the new, experimental campus of the University of California scheduled to open in Santa Cruz in 1965, of which McHenry was the founding chancellor. Page Smith set the tone for UCSC by declaring his intent to hire a faculty more devoted to teaching than to research. "[Mary] was my first appointment," Smith later said. "I knew Mary was the most

marvelous lecturer, and if I could get her to come up here, we'd have a wonderful World Civilization course—and we did.”

Mary and her parents moved to a house on Empire Grade near Santa Cruz, and Mary began teaching as a founding faculty member of UCSC. In the two-year Cowell College core course, called by the students *World Civ*, Mary lectured weekly to the freshmen on Western art from ancient times to the twentieth century, and the next year, also weekly, to the sophomores on American art and on the art of Islam and of India, China, and Japan. During her years at UCSC she also taught courses on the art of ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Europe, the Italian Renaissance, the northern European Renaissance, the seventeenth century, Romanticism, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, China and Japan, and India. To those who heard her once and those who heard her time and again, Mary's lectures provided fresh and living insights into the experience of life and art. She often had listeners laughing uproariously, though she denied that that was because she was witty. “People laugh when they hear the truth spoken,” she said, “because people simply delight in the truth.”

Laughter was not the only response to Mary's gift for vividly articulating what we know to be true as soon as we hear it expressed. Once in 1947 she had been invited to speak about the art of India at Wilson College, a small women's school in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, about fifty miles north of Washington, D.C. With no time to plan, Mary prepared only by filling a big suitcase with a large collection of clothes, from which she would later pick out something to wear, and going to the slide library in a rush to collect all the relevant slides she could, planning to arrange them, her outfit, and her thoughts when she got to the college on the night before the lecture. She arrived at the college in the afternoon and was greeted by the head of the philosophy department, “a mad expert on India—his library was a room lined with nothing but books about India.” He immediately spirited her off to a cocktail party and then to a formal dinner. There she found to her dismay that she was to be the keynote speaker for a weeklong cultural event devoted to the philosophy head's pet subject and that the audience would include not only the expected college girls but also an entire delegation of Indian political and cultural officials led by His Excellency Asaf Ali, India's first ambassador to the United States. (Ali had studied law in London, had striven together with Nehru for the independence of India from Great Britain, had translated some of Rabindranath Tagore, and had been involved with the literary elite of London. He was also a rarity in being a Muslim married to a Hindu, his wife, too, being well known in India as a fighter for independence.)

That night, intending to arrange her slides in bed after a warm bath, Mary, exhausted, fell asleep. She awoke amid a jumble of slides on the bed to a knock on the door, summoned to a “typical Indian breakfast,” after which she was to give her lecture. She rose, threw the slides into their box, grabbed whatever was on top in her suitcase, dressed in a hurry, and made it to the breakfast. When it was over, she handed the box of still unorganized slides to the projectionist and began to speak. She talked for something over an hour to a quietly listening audience. When she finished, there was not even polite applause—only a seemingly interminable silence. Mary was feeling that the best she could hope for was to beat a hasty and embarrassed retreat. Then the audience erupted into loud applause, cheers, and a standing ovation. The ambassador came onto the stage and, with tears in his eyes, said, “Miss Holmes, you have shown us ourselves as not one of us could have done.” He then bowed, kissed her hand, and invited her to visit the embassy anytime as his guest. (She never took him up on the offer.)

Those who heard Mary speak could have no doubt of the accuracy of that story. Her lectures were consistently informative, entertaining, compelling, illuminating, inspired—often electrifying. Asked once how it was that she could spend the morning riding horseback or reading a novel or a history book or a magazine or the newspaper, then feed Grandmother, dress, drive to the university slide library, pick out a boxful of slides, go into the lecture hall, and there, seemingly without preparation, become inspired, Mary replied, “I expect to be.”

In addition to the moving profundity of her teaching, Mary’s presence added luminosity, color, and drama to life at UCSC. In a human chess game, she played the white queen in an elaborate homemade costume. At other events she dressed as a gypsy and told fortunes with tarot cards, rode her white horse in a ceremonial procession, performed roles in group readings of Shakespeare plays (the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Mistress Quickly in *Henry IV, Part I*), and stole the show as Miss Prism in a university production of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Responding to praise for the authenticity of that performance, she claimed simply to have called upon the storehouse of Victorian gestures so familiar to her in Grandmother. She painted the college’s formal portrait of Provost Page Smith on his retirement in 1970, and the Mary Holmes Fireside Lounge (formerly called the Junior Common Room) at Cowell College is home to her great seven-panel mural, *The Return of Aquarius*, completed in 1974.

Mary was always interested in what she called “the left-hand way,” the heterodox and occult. Her character was such that her studies in the Tarot, astrology, mythology, and all religions, her fascination with the paradoxical mysteries of life, her capacity not to exclude from her interest any aspect or approach to reality, never led her into pride or immorality or cynicism or heresy or any sort of preaching. On the contrary, they led to insight and wisdom.

Beyond studying the histories and philosophies of occult practices, and occasionally reading Tarot cards, Mary was not tempted to engage in anything occult herself. She had had only one experience in her life of seeing—or rather hearing—a ghost, and she said that was enough. She had been lying in bed in her home in Iowa City when she heard a car drive up the long gravel driveway and a loud, heavy-footed presence tromp into the house and drunkenly down the hallway and through a wall into the closet behind her bed, where it began pounding loudly on the wall just behind her head. The noise lasted for an hour. Mary remained frozen in fear until morning and then could find no evidence of any intrusion, even onto the driveway. “Experiencing anything supernatural is absolutely terrifying,” said Mary. “You would do anything or run anywhere to avoid it.” When asked why she thought such supernatural experiences are rare, she said, “because the physical world is so intractable”—that is, because it is so hard for a spirit without a body to break through the barrier between the non-material and the material worlds.

Mary’s belief in the reality of the invisible was a constant. In fact that was her definition of the real purpose of art: Art is not merely self-expression, communication, or the pursuit of beauty or pleasure. It includes these, but its true purpose is to make the invisible visible, to allow us to see what otherwise cannot be seen, whether yesterday’s sunset or the reality of forgiveness or the meaning of anything. It was her fundamental teaching that “seeing is believing” and that art makes visible that which we need to see, that which we can’t quite believe is real until we can see it. On one occasion, the invisible world itself seemed to confirm the authenticity of Mary’s vision. She had a visit from some female students who reported that they had been “playing” with a Ouija board and scaring themselves with its answers to their questions. At some point one of them had asked, “Do you have any messages for Mary Holmes?” Whatever was impelling the movement of the girls’ hands on the ring that slid around the board to spell out the answers to their questions spelled out “Mary Holmes the artist?” “Yes,” they said. The sliding ring then spelled out “Mary Holmes the artist needs no messages.”

Mary taught at UCSC, initially as lecturer and eventually—thanks to the efforts of Jasper Rose, the college's second provost, and others—as full professor until her official retirement in 1975. Thereafter, as professor emerita, she continued to give a variety of courses and free public lectures at the university and elsewhere for two decades. Some of the titles to her lectures and lecture series were “The Nature of Art,” “Why Art?” “Eastern Art and Western Responses,” “Pictorial Art as Narrative,” “Art as Revelation, Meditation, and Judgment,” “Art and the Inner Life,” “Can Anybody Love Art?” “Can Art Be Underground Now?” “A Celebration of Beauty,” “The Universality of Art,” “Spirit in Art,” and “The End of Art.”

Mary was also a regular leader of discussions at the Penny University in Santa Cruz, which Page Smith founded in 1972. In the beginning, the Penny University, named after the English coffeehouse gatherings of the eighteenth century, offered five individual classes that met weekly in a downtown coffee shop, each class led by a different teacher on a different day of the week. In 1973, when Visiting Professor of History Donald Nicholl left UCSC to return to England, Mary took over his slot at the Penny (as locals called it), and the number of those attending on her day grew. After some months, Smith and Mary decided to join forces, condensing the Penny into an informal weekly seminar led by the two of them. It met every Monday at 5 p.m. for decades. In later years Paul Lee, who had taught in the philosophy department at UCSC, and James Bierman, who still taught in the theater department there, joined Mary as co-leaders. After the earthquake of 1989, the Penny moved to the social hall of the Calvary Episcopal Church a few blocks away, and it continued on after Smith died in 1995. Free and open to all, it was an ongoing conversation that wandered through topics ranging from local, national, and international politics to the arts to science and technology to ecology to the distant past and the distant future to the meaning of life.

A tireless reader of newspapers, magazines, and books (fiction and non-fiction, scholarly and popular), Mary sometimes called her reading a vice, which she defined as “anything you do when you should be doing something else.” She was also tirelessly interested in people of all ages, backgrounds, and aptitudes. At a lunch or dinner at her house one was as likely to meet a German countess, a drug-dazed hippie, a Hollywood agent, a wealthy cattle rancher, a British royal calligrapher, or a renowned psychotherapist as an academic colleague, another artist, or a devoted student. One was equally likely to encounter people who had just met Mary and others who had known her for decades. These varieties of people were drawn into Mary's life not only because she was interested in

people. They were fascinated and then captivated by Mary because of her entertaining, enriching, visionary personality and conversation, but perhaps even more because of her capacity to connect with and to recognize as an individual every person that she came to know. And not only to recognize but also to acknowledge and accept. Once, in preparing to give a lecture on William Blake, Mary had made a series of note cards. One of the notes reads,

If it's a course in anything it is a course in slaying dragons—dragons that keep you from your rightful heritage—
There is no broad highway with road signs and gas stations. It's just a little path wide enough for you.

People were drawn to Mary because, seeing and absolutely accepting them as individuals, through her insights and attitude she conveyed to them the life-affirming experience of an absolute permission to be themselves.

Always there were animals: dogs and cats in the house, and, in the barnyard (and sometimes in the house too), chickens, guinea fowl, geese for a time, peacocks, goats, sheep, a cow, and, most especially, horses. Mary loved horses and horseback riding from the time she was a child. She used to say that as a young child she believed that she would grow up to be a horse. Once, asked at a cocktail party how many horses she owned, she replied, "Oh dear, that's like asking an alcoholic how many drinks he's had: I'd only lie to you." For many city-bred visitors, including her three granddaughters, Mary's place provided rare firsthand experience of country life around animals. Mary would say that living with animals helps us to know our particular place in the universe, which is between the animals and the angels. Only people who do not live with animals and angels could entertain the notion that human beings are just animals themselves. "Human beings are no more merely animals than animals are merely plants," she said.

And everywhere at Mary's, inside and out, were works of art: every kind (paintings, drawings, sculptures, furniture, tools, curiosities, junk, artifacts without category), every quality (good, bad, figurative, abstract, fine, popular, original, reproduced, sophisticated, naïve, profound, sentimental, crass), every medium (wood, feathers, marble, crayon, clay, plastic, watercolor, cloth, paper, stone, cardboard, brass, papier-mâché, iron, rusty iron, and porcelain, not to mention oils and acrylics on canvas, wood, or Masonite)—all testifying to Mary's passion for seeing the imagination at work in the things human beings make.

From 1968 until the end of her life, Mary lived with her menagerie of animals and art on a sixty-acre farm about five miles north of Santa Cruz. It was and is known for its driveway, as treacherous (in a different way) as that of the castle. Unpaved until after Mary's time, its bumpy, barely-one-lane-wide road climbs perilously through seven hairpin switchbacks up a steep, wooded slope to the cleared hilltop. Mary called its hairpin turns the Seven Crises of Life: After the gateway at the bottom (flanked by a sign reading "The Holmestead"), which was Birth, there were Childhood; Young Manhood; Marriage and Career; Life Itself; Age; Desuetude and Senescence; and Death. Each was decorated with figures accordingly, and at the top two large redwood trees (one bearing a triangular warning sign signifying the possible sighting of unicorns ahead) formed the gateway to the Heavens or the Elysian Fields or what Mary sometimes called Mountain Islandia. There one now sees first the vineyard planted by Bruce Cantz, who owns and operates the Four Gates vineyard and kosher winery. Beyond the vineyard are, on the left, Mary's house and the water tower, ahead, invisible among the redwoods, a rustic cabin, and to the right the barn and corral. The cabin was inhabited for years by Mary's friend Charles (Chuck) Selberg, Olympian fencer, cartoonist, and raconteur, and his wife Julie. Chuck taught fencing at UCSC and coached the university's perpetually winning team. In his spare time he designed and helped build the main gateway in the white fence around the house and, together with Mary's nephew Christopher, dug the septic tank for Grandmother's new bathroom and moved up from town the tool shed that came to be called "Cowell Cottage." He also drew a series of cartoons about these and other events at The Holmestead.

Beyond the barn are several structures, built in the 1990s to Mary's specifications by local carpenter and one-time tenant on the farm Larry Makjavich. These include the cinderblock Chapel of the Holy Spirit and its two side chapels, built (and officially consecrated) in 1993 to house three sets of Mary's large paintings on the subjects of the Nine Gifts of the Spirit, the Life of the Virgin Mary, and Holy Wisdom; a large cement labyrinth laid out on the ground nearby and illustrated with Mary's drawings of the Seven Days of Creation scratched into the wet cement with a nail duct-taped to the end of a cane—"not meant to give any kind of therapy to people who walk it," Mary said, "but to remind them that they're part of creation . . . the extraordinary universe that we live in"; a rough, rustic shack enclosing a glorious interior featuring the sculpture called *The Mother of Us All*; a columned shrine with a seashell motif containing the paintings comprising *The Throne of Aphrodite: The Saints and Martyrs of Love*; and the two-story building containing Mary's studio and library and housing many of her paintings and drawings, including portraits and

paintings on mythical subjects, some of her favorites being Europa and the Bull, Death and the Maiden, Eros and Agape, St. Michael Subduing the Dragon, and most often the Three Aspects of Woman. For Bruce Cantz Mary also painted a *succah* (booth) portraying the seven guests traditionally invited to dine with observers of the Jewish harvest festival of *Succot*: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David. Mary's mastery and profundity as a painter is exhibited throughout this treasury of her work and in *The Return of Aquarius* mural in Cowell College, UCSC. One assessment of Mary's greatness as a painter of spiritual realities was uttered by the poet Philip Thompson in response to contemplating that masterpiece: "Since the seventeenth century," he said, "there is Goya and there is Mary." Perhaps the best comment on Mary's paintings was her own: In the context of what she observed to be the decline of civilization — she once called Los Angeles "the last gasp of Western Civilization" — she professed to be painting pictures that would make visible the realities of the spirit that have been obscured by the materialism, commodification, and skepticism of the age; she strove to paint what she called "healing images."

Despite the challenging driveway, whose first quality, Mary said, was to keep people out, Mary often had visitors — friends, former students, colleagues, and acquaintances as well as people who had heard about her and had come to meet her. While most people see the number of their friends decline as they advance into old age, Mary never ceased making new friends and finding new devotees, including several of the nurses who attended her in her last illness.

From her late fifties on, Mary suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis and later from chronic leukemia and related diseases. Throughout years of pain, life-threatening infections, and increasing physical debility, Mary remained cheerful, continuing to ride horses into her eighties and to paint and draw into her nineties. She refused to give physical suffering more than a minimal place in her consciousness. She lived to mourn the death of her sister Sara, whose ashes were placed in the chapel Mary had built, and said, in grieving for her sister, "all those memories — gone." However, except for a short period of what she called "old folks' depression," during which she questioned whether she had made sufficient use of her gifts in life — she could have made a career in television, she said as an example, but had preferred to live as she liked, painting, teaching, riding, reading, living in the country — her gifts of insight, wisdom, good humor, and truthful speech accompanied her till the end.

During her last week of life, lying in the hospital, Mary heard read to her parts of Addi Somekh's book *Mary Holmes: Paintings and Ideas*, was pleased to see

its reproductions of her paintings, and was eager to know her visitors' honest opinion of the book. She was visited by various friends and, so long as she was able, had a word of kindness, encouragement, or wisdom for each. She died peacefully, surrounded by family and friends, early on the evening of January 21, 2002, at age ninety-one. She was survived by her son Michael and his wife Becky; her three granddaughters, Sara, Rachel, and Eliza; Sara's sons Will, Jonathan, and Christopher Boutelle; and her friend and companion Bruce Cantz. Her legacy includes a great number of paintings and drawings, video and audio recordings of many of her lectures on art, and the profound education of four generations of students, who remember Mary as the greatest teacher they ever had. Her ashes rest in the chapel that she built, devoted to the Holy Spirit.