

Holmead – an American Expressionist

Between the Old World and the New World



How does one envisage a painter, profoundly influenced by family tradition and later also by the masterpieces of earlier centuries, yet struggling all his life to leave a distinctive mark with his art? **Clifford Holmead Phillips**, who called himself **HOLMEAD** since the 1940s and signed his paintings 'HP', was such an artist. He was to become a contemporary and critical observer of Modernism, dedicated to find his very own form of expression.

HOLMEAD, born in 1889 in Shippensburg/Pennsylvania as a descendant of early immigrants from Ireland and England, was raised by strict puritanical parents. His first contact with art was at a time when art faced tremendous upheaval. Throughout his life, **HOLMEAD** was torn between the old world and the new world. He crossed the Atlantic no less than 25 times until his death in Brussels in 1975. When he first travelled to Europe in 1912 on the Olympic, the new flagship of the White Star Line, a flow of refugees, emigrants and soldiers of fortune had already for a long time been on their way in the opposite direction where the land of milk and honey was supposed to be. For many American artists, on the other hand, Europe was predominantly a place of cultural pilgrimage. In Paris, **HOLMEAD** only just caught the last rays of the Belle Époque before initially in Europe, and then also in the USA, a very different form of art emerged. Without this particular, transatlantic area of conflict his works are hard to understand.

It was by no means on the cards that **HOLMEAD** would become a painter, since his father owned a flourishing furniture company that the only son was supposed to take over. His father gave him an automobile when he was twenty-three years old, which was the decisive factor for a change in the planned course of his life. **HOLMEAD**, who despised the industrialization and the emerging technological age, sold the automobile in exchange for his first ship's passage to Europe. He preferred the journey on the sister ship of the Titanic to the 'Old Continent' to have a good look around. He visited numerous museums and galleries there, and was so fascinated by the art he saw that he returned to America with the irreversible resolution to become a self-taught painter. In the USA, unlike in Europe, the

term self-made played an important role at all levels of society. It stood for an egalitarian community, associated with the freedom and creativity of the individual and the ideal of the self-educated artist, who approaches problems again and again afresh as if there had not been a solution before. As an autodidact, he represented American individuality in contrast to the European academic artist. With this belief in individuality, **HOLMEAD** had been growing up, with a father who started as a lawyer to become a successful, wealthy furniture factory owner. Now the son did not only educate himself as a painter, but also acquired an in-depth knowledge of art and history of art. He constantly made drawings, worked with oil and continuously pursued his studies in American museums after his return from Europe. At first he became excellent at drawing, and his early works are proof that he actually followed the path set out by official academies and schools. **HOLMEAD**'s first paintings, originating from before 1920, show the influence on his landscape paintings by the **Hudson River School**, the first national art school in the United States as well as the early 19th century **Barbizon** school of painters in France. Like many American painters of his time, he settled for several months in the artist colonies of New England, where he painted gentle, delicate idylls and traditional landscapes in a cool, silvery light.

Between 1922 and 1924, **HOLMEAD** lived, among others, in Provincetown, Cap Cod, where he joined the Art Colony. Over time, however, he felt that the prevailing painting practice was too pretty. When he saw a painting by Maurice de Vlaminck, a member of the Fauve movement in the window of an art gallery in Paris during his second stay in Europe, it virtually revolutionized his work: now he used warm tones, expression, movement and power in his compositions. One also senses elements of the coolness of the 'New Objectivity' in the urban landscapes he painted in Europe or the suburbs of New York. He sought and found the contradictions of an all-encompassing industrialization, depicted draughty street corners and railway crossings, the discomfort of urban change, the rise of too many factories, and the uncontrolled increase of traffic at the many sites showing the cracks of a new era.

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He had returned to Europe in the mid-1920s but this time not to vibrant Paris or the Berlin of the roaring twenties. He was drawn to Flanders, where he encountered the bewildering art of James Ensor and the earthy landscapes of Constant Permeke. HOLMEAD discovered the honesty of rural motifs, the dry pathos of the landscape and all that was reflected in a different, more melancholic colourfulness and a more frequent use of spatulas instead of brushes. Many paintings of forests in sober shades of ochre, dark earth brown, broken olive or pale green, sometimes in combination with dark red or blue, resulted from those years. He was increasingly attracted by Expressionism during the course of his development, even though the main exponents of German Expressionism, the artists of 'Die Brücke' or 'Der Blaue Reiter' did not influence his works. Eventually he became a self-confessed Expressionist, but described his style as 'Crude Expressionism', a raw version without decorative features. Many years later, at the age of 84, he wrote in a letter: **"unlike many others, I didn't begin my painting with Cézanne but by studying romantic and gothic art. Then further via Rembrandt to Daumier, Vlaminck and Expressionists like Soutine, Kokoschka, de Staël, etc."**

During the years between 1926 and 1936, renowned galleries in New York, Philadelphia, Paris, Detroit, Chicago and Munich had already discovered the artist he had become and exhibited his works. In New York, the prestigious **Montross Gallery** represented him from 1927 on in the USA, after the first solo exhibition had been a great success. The reviews from those days up to his last exhibition repeatedly contain terms like **'a very personal expression', 'independence', 'courage'** and **'individuality'**.

A particular highlight in HOLMEAD's career was his first European exhibition in 1927 in the famous **Bernheim-Jeune** gallery in Paris, which was opened in the presence of numerous members of Paris society. He had been discovered by none other than François Monod, curator of the **Musée National du Luxembourg** in Paris, who would not only remain one of his most important patrons but also gave the introductory speech titled **'Les Faubourgs de New York'**. Monod began by saying: **"At last an American landscape painter has not come to France with the purpose to paint again in Moret, Giverny, Auvers or Martigues but one who won't be uprooted, remains true to himself and brings us an inspiration of quintessentially American topics."**

The second solo exhibition at **Bernheim-Jeune** followed two years later. François Monod wrote in a letter: **"Mr. Norman Armour, Uncle Sam's 'Chargée d'affaires' in France opened the exhibition – a very unusual compliment. The Minister for the Fine Arts was present as well as many people of repute, critics, artists and quite a few elegant ladies. The gallery owner noted that no less than 6,000 people have visited the exhibition. American and French newspapers published very favourable reports. All in all: it was a great success, especially since it was only the second time that Phillips tried his luck in this city that is swamped with countless artists and where an endless stream of exhibitions takes place"**. Only one year later, the highly regarded **Durand-Ruel** gallery showed HOLMEAD's paintings for the first time in New York and his international success seemed already secure. Nine years earlier, **Katherine S. Dreier**, painter, art collector and patron of the arts had founded the groundbreaking **Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art** 1920 in America together with **Marcel Duchamp** and **Man Ray**, giving the starting signal for a genuine American Modernism. Before too long, they considered two of his works worthy to be included in this prominent collection. The calls for an own cultural production, clearly distinguished from the European art of bygone eras, became louder and louder in America in the early 1920s but HOLMEAD's attitude was indifferent and his voice was not the only critical one. He rejected abstract Expressionism and abstraction for his works until the end of his life.

Between 1924 and 1931 he lived mainly in Bruges and maintained, among others, contacts with artists like George Grosz, the painters Rudolf and Annot Jacobi or the Polish countess Olga de Boznanska, a highly respected portrait painter who lived in Paris. He alternated between rented studios in Bruges, Brussels, Munich, Den Haag or Amsterdam and in between also visited his mother in New York.

HOLMEAD's international breakthrough was imminent when the political climate in Europe darkened. He spent most of 1932 and 1933 in Munich, where the photographer Elizabeth Fritze from Bremen, his future wife, was working at the time. He witnessed the rise of the Nazi movement and travelled frequently. By now he did not only paint but also acted as a collector and supporter of promising young artists such as Sergius Pausser, Josef Dobrowski, Erich Glette or Franz Doll,

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whose paintings he bought and added to his private collection. In 1933, the **Galerie Heinemann** held an exhibition of HOLMEAD's works in Munich and the proceeds were donated entirely to young Munich artists. In a review of his works at the time it was stated that **"one is prone to look for role models and outside influences in Philip's paintings. A born American, he has travelled a great deal and his themes offer an abundance of study material: once he is interested in the play of lights, another time in the constructive or the areal structure of a landscape. Behind all the diversity lies individualism, even personality, which is artistically captivating because one has the feeling that Phillips, albeit often in a peculiar way, battles for the soul of the landscape"**.

In the same year, Elisabeth Fritze and HOLMEAD got married in the famed **'The Little Church around the Corner'** in New York. Due to his initiative, the **Montross Gallery** exhibited his collection of works by German and Austrian artists in New York the following year; his name wasn't mentioned, though. Two years later, he returned to Europe with his wife and first-born daughter, this time neither to Germany or Belgium but initially to Sweden and Denmark.

The gathering dark clouds were also reflected in his art now. HOLMEAD responded to them with his first paintings of biblical themes such as **'The Entombment'**, **'Annunciation to the Shepherds'**, **'The Good Samaritan'**, **Saint Martin'**, **'Jonah and the Whale'** or **'Daniel in the Lion's Den'**. He commented on this thematic extension that **"the Old Testament is great material for the imagination, from each chapter an artist can weave a wild and sinister pattern of colours and stories"**. Almost simultaneously, his attention turned to the mythological and philosophical motifs around the fundamental questions of human existence. Figures like knights, dragons, saints, philosophers, witches or devils began to appear. Similar subjects as well as the horror of Hiroshima, and motifs from literature, Greek mythology and legends would occupy him again and again until the early 1960s. Some works are reminiscent of Georges Rouault and Emil Nolde and their renewal of religious paintings, and they evoke a first notion of his masterly use of the spatula in later days but also of the human expression in faces that become dramatic scenes themselves.

During a stay in Brussels HOLMEAD met the best-known

Flemish expressionist, **Constant Permeke**. He had been very impressed by his works before and later showed his irritation in a letter about the art world that had only taken notice of this great talent after the London **Tate Gallery** had dedicated an exhibition to him. In 1939, HOLMEAD showed 31 of his latest paintings in a solo exhibition in the **'Palais des Beaux-Arts'** in Brussels, where almost at the same time Permeke's paintings were presented in a solo exhibition. HOLMEAD's exhibition titled **'The Human Drama'** was supposed to open in the **Kunstforeningen Oslo**, but on 9 April 1940, the day before the opening, German troops marched into Norway and the exhibition was closed immediately. The war had reached HOLMEAD's place of refuge and after hazardous detours from Norway via Denmark, Italy, France and Portugal the family returned to America in June 1941. He spent a few weeks in New York with his wife and the then two daughters before he moved to the Mid West for a while.

A lot had changed in America as well. He didn't share the general enthusiasm for abstract and surrealistic European art prevalent there; neither did he want to follow the new American trend towards abstract Expressionism. In 1954 and 1955 there were exhibitions in the **Wellons Galleries** and the **Charles Barzansky Galleries** in New York but HOLMEAD had already decided to return to Europe. The plan was realised in 1956 and the family now settled in Brussels for good. The price he paid for his long absence was high: his good relations with galleries, museum directors and collectors in Europe were broken off and could not be revived. Many galleries no longer existed, many friends had disappeared or were dead, and HOLMEAD was facing a new beginning again. He had some practice in that, and his life-long movements between the old continent and the new continent were certainly a reason for the diversity in his work, the lack of stagnation and stereotypes, and his critical attitude towards his own works. He often destroyed paintings or painted over them when he thought they were not good enough, and his alertness as well as the need to develop something new again and again had kept his spirit and his paintings artistically alive. But now he lacked the safe ground constituted by the gradually grown awareness of a loyal public, familiar with his art, as well as by well-informed critics. The direction which the development of art had taken not only in the USA but also in Europe was far too commercial in his view, and he particularly despised the new art market. He disliked the high-flying

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self-interpretations of the Avant-garde: **“I have no philosophical, metaphysical or astrological theories about my painting. I believe that I have to paint unaware and spontaneously - like the bird sings”.**

Until 1975 HOLMEAD led a secluded life in Brussels. His paintings, done in impulsive spatula technique, were mainly still exhibited there and in Paris. They showed open landscapes with prominent skies, forests with green-leafed trees, brown trunks, dark earth and now and then a hidden water with interesting, incoming incidences of light and reflections. His subjects were never cut off from reality, he painted urban landscapes or buildings resembling literary apparitions, sometimes seeming a little sinister or like a plastic cast. He reigned in his spontaneous subjectivity with bold simplification and clear, strict composition.

But then, after a stroke and only five years before his death, he began with something entirely new. In liberated, almost angry painting style, he created the characters and landscapes of his dynamic late works. He had found his very own form of abstract expressionism, a distinctive trademark that he called ‘shorthand painting’ (stenographic painting). Character heads, swiftly created by a few spatula strokes, form the essence of a long painter’s life, in a dramatic way he unfolded a sarcastic clarity, his eye on what peoples’ faces and gestures reveal in the relentless light that comes with the wisdom of old age, and he didn’t paint the affectionate portraits of his early years but characters in a grotesque human comedy: intellectuals with egg-shaped heads, ghostly old people, pompous people, smart men or fat gourmands. In some faces vanity, greed, an obsession with power, smugness, heartlessness and slyness can be recognized, in others friendliness, kindness, sadness or bitterness about having missed out in life, being offended, disregarded or hurt. These aren’t caricatures of anonymous people who caught his attention on his long walks, they are generalising, also disturbing abbreviations of what he had seen in those people with his observant, disillusioned eyes. HOLMSTEAD’s sarcastic distance to mankind is conspicuous but this distance is not marked by bitter contempt, instead it shows cheerful irony and sometimes a sense of the comic. He says in a letter that **“in its ultimate simplification the human face is one of the greatest miracles of creation. The versatility of its form and expression is endless. In millions there aren’t two that are the same - although the elements always are”**

Everything that HOLMEAD knew, had ever learnt and tried to achieve, he put into these layers of furrowed colour with vehement spatula strokes. In 1970 he wrote to his daughter Margaret: **“For many years I have been asleep in my coffin, and I decided to resurrect and do something. So I invented ‘Shorthand Painting’, a method which can exist only if absolutely instantaneous and equally spontaneous and crystal clear as well. If I tinker with a canvas more than seven or eight minutes, I will have a carte postal, which is not permissible”.** This spontaneous way attracts the keen interest of those who understand painting.

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