

Mary Holmes, beloved UC Santa Cruz art historian, dead at 91

January 22, 2002

By [Jennifer McNulty](#), Staff Writer, UCSC



Mary A. Holmes, a founding member of the faculty of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a beloved artist and art historian, died in a Santa Cruz hospital on January 21 after a brief illness. She was 91.

Holmes, who grew up in various towns in the West, and in Chicago, began her career as a painter and became equally well-known for her work as an art historian, hosting a series of community lectures, as well.

Holmes loomed larger than life for many, and her personal magnetism was legendary.

"She was remarkable in many respects," said John Dizikes, a fellow founding faculty member and a close friend. "She was an incomparable colleague, there was no one like her. She was delightful company. I admired her intense professionalism as an art historian, which she rather disguised because she was full of so many eccentric opinions. Above all I admired her courage; she was indomitable, that's the word."

Prior to her time at UC Santa Cruz, Holmes was a lecturer at University of California, Los Angeles. In 1953, during her tenure at UCLA, Holmes hosted a highly rated educational television program, "Art 5A," which was based on her university lectures. Holmes's affiliation with UCSC began in 1965 when she arrived from Los Angeles as a lecturer in art; she was promoted to associate professor of art in 1971 and retired, as a full professor, in 1977.

Holmes was a painter of visionary and mythical forms, though she chose to teach art history rather than painting, telling a reporter once that she thought it was "very dangerous for anybody who wants to paint to teach painting. I've seen it destroy I don't know how many people."

Holmes lived for many years on a 100-year-old ranch on a mountaintop farm above Happy Valley Road, in rural Santa Cruz, with a menagerie of animals. For 20 years, she faithfully attended the Penny University, a salon-style gathering she co-founded with old friends and UCSC colleagues historian Page Smith and philosophy professor Paul Lee. The group, which was open to everyone and often drew hundreds, met every Monday at 5 p.m. at various Santa Cruz locales to exchange ideas, opinions, and float intellectual balloons. The Penny University continues to meet in Santa Cruz.

Holmes earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Hollins College in Virginia and a master's in art from the University of Iowa. She also attended the University of Berlin, the Academie Collorossi in Paris, Johns Hopkins University, and the Art Students League.

Of her degree in philosophy, Holmes once joked that it made her "unemployable, which I thought was a smart move since I always planned not to work."

Fortunately for the Santa Cruz community, that plan didn't work out, and thousands benefited from Holmes's lengthy career.

Survivors include her son, Michael Adams Holmes O'Malley, and a daughter-in-law, Becky O'Malley, of Berkeley; three grandchildren, Rachel O'Malley, of Santa Cruz, Sara O'Malley, of San Francisco, Eliza O'Malley, of Berkeley; two great-grandchildren; and Bruce Cantz, a friend of 35 years. She was preceded in death by her sister, Sara Holmes Boutelle, the biographer of the architect Julia Morgan.

A memorial service will take place on Sunday February 3rd, at 2 p.m. in the Calvary Episcopal Church, 532 Center St., in Santa Cruz.

Jim Burns and Ann Gibb contributed to this story.

For information on the **Mary Holmes Festival 2014**



see: <http://cowell.ucsc.edu/alumni/holmes/>

As we are approaching the 50 year celebrations, many members of the Cowell community thought to honor one of the few women among the founding faculty: Mary Holmes.

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(Adapted from the UCSC Public Affairs obituary by [Jennifer McNulty](#))