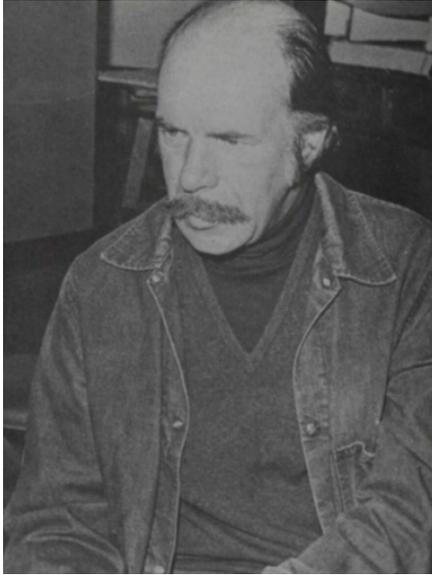


“The Brush that Perceives the World: A William Holst Circle”

Davidow Art Gallery, Colby Sawyer College, New London, NH

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William H. Holst (1912-1995)

“Artists.... make gestures of care and repair, or they merely try to beam out an electrifying personal and strange signal that wakes up the receiver for a moment – one weird moment that could shift the sense of things, and thereby the world, even if only slightly. This sounds urgent to me.” - Amy Sillman

Student/Artist/Teacher

Charles W. Hawthorne, father of the legendary Cape Cod School of Art and the son of a Maine sea captain, said two things that resonate with, if not portend, William Holst’s arc; “a great painter is always a student” and “to see things simply is the hardest thing in the world.”

Let’s examine Holst, the student, painter, and teacher and his curiosity that led to seeing things simply.

Born in 1912 and raised in Cambridge, MA, Holst graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston in 1934. Having subsequently worked in commercial art, served in World War II, and taught at the University of Florida, by 1948 he was the chairman of the art department of Colby Sawyer College (“CSC”). He held the position for three decades.

His life wasn't so much a progression as a consistent state of being: student, artist, and teacher, with Modernism his north star. At Haystack in particular, where he taught nine summers between 1957 and 1972, he was variously a teacher, artist in residence, and student.

In addition to his education, various jobs, military service, and teaching, Holst was also a nationally exhibited and award-winning painter by the time he first arrived at The Hans Hofmann School in Provincetown the summer of 1949. A neophyte he was not. Yet, his transformation under Hofmann's spell from "wizard" draftsman (as his fellow artist, educator, classmate, and friend, Fran Merritt described him) to pure abstractionist was fundamental and complete.

At least as remarkable as his mid-career metamorphosis is how steadfast and unflinching his ensuing effort, results, and devotion were. For 45 years, with rigor and clarity, he studied, espoused, and practiced Hofmann's ideas about spatial dynamics: "push/pull," "fathoming a surface," or "leaving the flat picture plane behind." The title of his painting "Suspended" which was included in the Provincetown Art Association's First 1955 Exhibition along with Hofmann, Hawthorne, and other luminaries describes the tension in the balance of push/pull. It also serves as apt metaphor for Holst's legacy. Suspended.

The Student

By his account figuration came easily to Holst at MassArt and he hungered for more. He bore a restlessness and had predilections for modernist tendencies. The traditional approach in Boston was academic and skills based. It lacked feeling. Holst recalled no discussion of what art was about. Within hours his first summer on Cape Cod he recognized Hofmann as the elixir of his cravings. Under Hofmann's sway Holst enthusiastically embraced invention, modulation of space, and expression: slipways to non-objective formal modernism. In a 1987 interview he recounted "the idea of a little distortion, different shades, or accentuation...made sense."

Hofmann's classes were conducted in the Hawthorne Barn, formerly home to The Cape Cod School of Art. Holst spent five summers there.



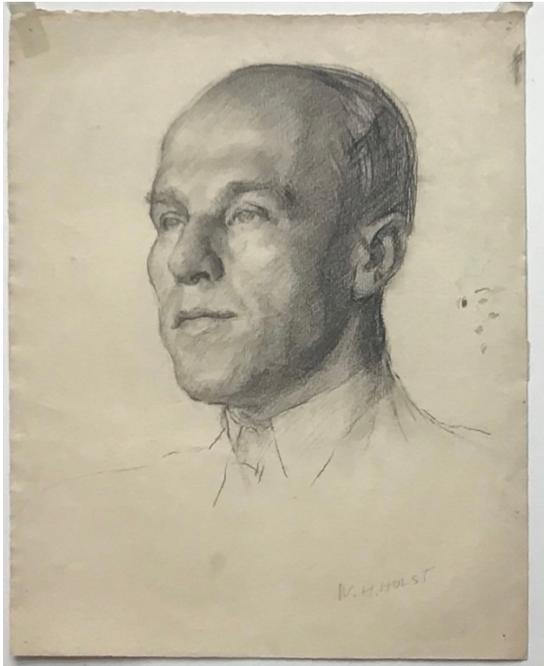
Holst, stands left as Hans Hofmann enters class.



Holst, "Lobsterman's Gear, oil on board, 1949, 12" x 15", courtesy of Jill Hoy.



Holst, student work, charcoal, 1950, 30" x 22" (private collection, NY).



Holst, portrait of his brother Charles, graphite, 1965, 13" x 10" (private collection, PA).

During a 1959-1960 sabbatical Holst painted and studied in France, Spain, Italy, Denmark, and Holland. In 1961 he took a class in painting at Haystack with Willem de Kooning's friend and fellow Dutchman, the non-representational painter Joop Sanders. That summer doubtlessly reinforced the pioneering impulses that had led him to Hofmann. Another summer at Haystack he enrolled in ceramics and a third summer he studied painting again. In Haystack at Liberty Alana VanDerwerker observes Fran Merritt, Haystack's founding and long-time director (and Holst's MassArt classmate and lifelong friend), "was well attuned to the interest in abstraction permeating the contemporary art scene, and between 1961 and 1964, he invited painters Joop Sanders, William Holst, Wolf Kahn, and Fred Mitchell to Haystack" to teach, believing craft could be positively influenced by these non-objective modernists.

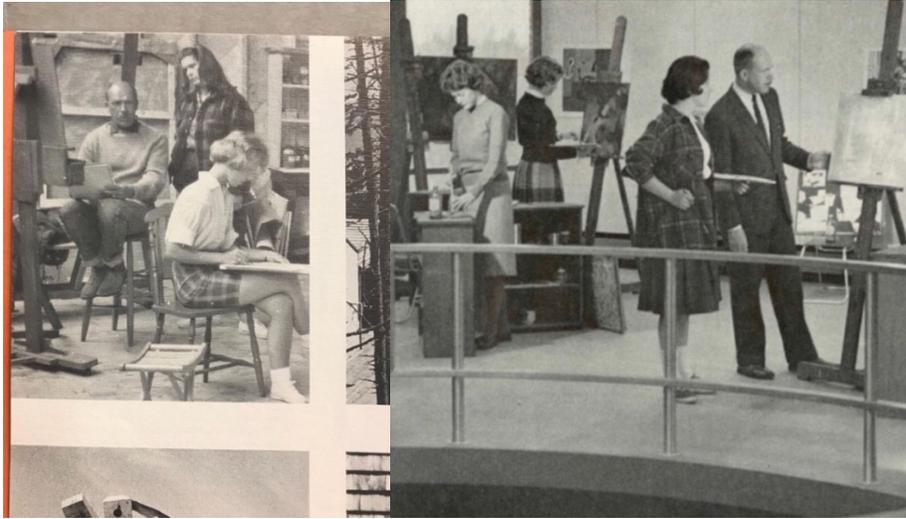


In his late 70s, ever the student: note the diagrams at the top of this 5" x 7" sketch (private collection, ME).

The Teacher

According to VanDerwerker, Holst had not intended to teach but it became the means to pay for painting artworks of his own inspiration rather than illustration. He said “when I was teaching the students, I began to think for myself. Experimenting.” Hofmann had previously observed Holst the student was “able to mingle easily with and stimulate people.”

Holst’s teaching and learning fueled each other and both informed his painting.



Holst teaching at Colby Sawyer, right, and Haystack, left, ca 1961-62.

Chris Cook, one time director of The Addison Gallery of American Art and ICA, recalled Holst provided the most thorough art education of all kinds possible (history, theory, and making). While Bill was “private and shy, if you got him worked up - he’d get revved up” and he could discuss art and theory deep into the night. Cook reiterated “Hofmann was very important to him.”

The prominent Canadian artist, teacher, and writer Ron Shuebrook was “introduced to significant notions about rigorous pictorial structure and expression by William Holst. A former student of Hans Hofmann, and a painter of serious and diverse accomplishment, Holst was perhaps the first teacher of mine who seemed to fully understand the dynamic formal languages of visual art.”

Former CSC student and painter Fran Wilson remarked he was “way ahead of his time,” “a modern man,” and while he was reserved and quiet, he was encouraging and open: “a person that would have your back.”

Artist Elizabeth Kasevich wrote: “I studied with Bill privately for many years, both in Exeter and in Stonington, Maine. We met when he was teaching at the Art Institute of Boston in the 1980’s. How well I remember his “push-pull” and “open book” discussions as he tried to instill plastic space ... I hear Bill speak whenever I paint. He was a remarkable man with a rare zest for life.”

Former CSC student and weaver Sarah Haskell shared “Bill could see my potential in ways I could not...I was lucky to be in his circle of light, creativity, and love.”

VanDerwerker said he “spoke the way he painted and taught - with care.”

Painter Arthur Yanoff reported “Bill gave stunning lectures to a group of us at an art school and in studios... Bill should be better known both as a painter and an inventor of the Holstian theories.”

The Artist



Holst, untitled, oil on paper ca 1960s, 18” x 25” (private collection, NY).

The painting above brings to mind the dealer, curator, and collector Kevin Rita’s response to Holst: “perfect expression ... perfect restraint.” It is refined yet primal, simple but rich. Rita identifies in Holst a “very analytical approach with sensual results” – more on polarity follows later in this text. And, isn’t Hans Hofmann’s influence palpable?

In the introduction to The Extreme of Middle: Writings of Jack Tworckov, Mira Schor defines “the epitome of a ‘painter’s painter’ - one who knows painting to the core of his being and who is devoted to its traditions, history, and practice above and beyond all personal ambition.” Holst, student/teacher/artist, was a painter’s painter. Cook’s estimation above concurs as do a chorus of others. “As a professional artist, Bill modeled perseverance, commitment, and vision” according to Haskell.

But, to invoke W.B. Yeats what of the dancer and the dance? Former CSC student and printmaker Carol Lummus shared the following: “‘Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work’ (Flaubert). That was William Holst. Period.” In other words, Holst the person (dancer) was quiet and reserved while Holst the artist and educator

(dance) was bold, unflinching, and groundbreaking.

Holst said "nothing in isolation is absolute... Hofmann put it this way, a thing's meaning constantly changes according to relationships; this thing is small in relation to this but large in relation to that. It's like a symphony as moment after moment unfolds and builds. You're always working with tensions and variables."

In an interview in the 1960s, Holst said his paintings became simpler in form the longer he worked on them. For an article in the "Colby Courier" in 1962, Holst quoted Hofmann saying "it is more important to make the most of the least - not the least of the most." The following progressive pictures illustrate the process of addition by subtraction and what CSC alumna and painter Anne Neely identifies as Holst's ability to reduce something "to its most essential form."



A plant in a pot on a table in winnowed charcoal (left) and further abstracted in black, blue, white, and red, and may relate to "Proar," below (private collection, NY).



Holst, "Proar," oil on canvas, 1966, 58" x 45" (The Addison Gallery of American Art, MA)



Holst, "#9, 1961," oil on canvas, 18" x 24" (private collection, ME)

This process recapitulates Holst's evolution as artist, student, and teacher from representationalist to abstractionist stimulated by Hofmann. The object in the painting dissolves in the same way Holst's figurative drive slipped away. Provincetown painter Paul Resika refers to "Hofmann's lesson: there are no 'things' here, only forceful relationships between formal

elements... with Hofmann you had to draw forces; there were no things." "No things" amounts to non-objective.

Holst focused on, drew from, and distilled the underlying energies in both occupied space (positive) and the void (negative). In Hawthorne's vernacular Holst came to see things simply.



Holst, left, at a 1962 exhibition of his work, with "#9, 1961" in the background (courtesy CSC Archives).

Lummus celebrated "the essence of all the Hofmann theories in William Holst's black and whites...Bill took all he had learned: reduced, simplified, and became a poet with his brush. He found color in black and white."

Speaking of Hofmann's theories, what's the hubbub about plasticity? There are ambiguities in "plasticity" as there are, almost by definition, in Hofmann's push/pull and the two are intertwined. Holst synopsised the concept: "the pictorial means that brings the flat surface into a three-dimensional reality – commonly called plasticity." The painter Bob Henry, a Hofmann School classmate of Holst, celebrates the "bothness" in For Artists and Art Lovers; "if you get rid of perspective, forms would appear to be both on the surface and in space, and that space would be an ambiguous, breathing space." This would have piqued Holst's curiosity. In "ArtNews" James Beck dubbed a related quality he saw in Holst's work "logical irrationality."

Going a little deeper, whether in Romantic Poetry or Abstract Expressionism, pure inspiration is often mythologized. Is the artist a noble savage or trained technician? Both. While it exists, creativity is more often anchored by or built upon intentional, disciplined exertion. Hofmann said "genius is hard work." Seeing simply may just be genius and is anything but simple.

A parallel duplexity is found in a traditional versus a modern use of the term "plasticity." On the one hand, the term "plastic arts," as in "plasticize" or 'mold," is a traditional one used to differentiate sculpture and painting from writing. On the other hand, a 1967 "Colby Courier" article states Holst "prefers to work with simple pure colors, whose unique 'plastic' qualities will not be modified.'" This more modern sense of plastic is the strict materiality of the paint, its insistence that it is paint. So, is it rigid or malleable? This duality is confounding, yes. The polysemy reflects the art and science of a thing, the push and pull if you will. Tina Dickey, in

Color Creates Light, refers to artist Allen Leepa's recalling "you had to challenge (Hofmann). The same with plasticity. You discovered the meaning yourself." The contradictory meanings of "plastic" may analogize the diligence of creativity and modernism "breaking the mold."

New York and Provincetown painter and sculptor Fritz Bultman wrote about dualities in a 1963 essay on Hofmann for a MOMA exhibition. He discussed flatness and depth, concentration and dispersion, and what is revealed and what is veiled. He concludes "that this duality should remain in the final work is also important for the beholder. It is through the possibility of multiple readings that pictorial freedom is possible thus giving the spectator freedom of choice." In Hofmann's push/pull, positive and negative space, and plasticity's doubleness, Holst found the extreme of middle and achieved grace.

Another modernist tenet is found in Holst's non-objectivism. According to the exhibition essay for what was likely the last show that included Holst's paintings in his lifetime "The Elusive Object," "in our time, we deal with art that *is* something and is not *of* something."

A painting *being* something recalls Hofmann's proposition that an artist creates a reality. It mirrors Christine Gardner's posit in an interview for "Art New England Magazine" to Holst "the process of painting becomes the painting?" Holst answered "I use the television analogy for my students too. When the picture appears on the screen, it is the result of electrons being transmitted and rearranged. The artist also rearranges reality, but unlike a television set, he uses his emotions to perceive his empathy with a subject. A TV can't do that, can't relate to experience in a personal way." Isn't this acutely germane in the AI age? It also both reminds us of Holst's yearning to express and begins to describe process art. And, isn't it a way of saying "The Brush that Perceives the World?"

The Belgian poet and art critic Emile Verhaeren said "Seurat's brush thinks and reflects as it touches the canvas." Professor Richard Schiff agrees: "each of his touches of the brush or crayon was a thought that required an additional material trial, with consequences that demanded further thought."

Deer Isle artist Larry Moffet described Holst similarly as methodical: painting one brushstroke at a time and then considering how each impacted the whole and responded to the other. So, Holst's brush perceives, considers, translates, and articulates the world. It answers a call, sees simply, and beams out a considered, clear response. Studies with Holst were profound according to Moffett.

Richard Schiff concludes that Seurat's sense of reflection must itself be reflected upon.

Holst the student, teacher, artist, his brush, and his legacy provoke the same consideration. This sounds urgent to me.

Andrew W. Young
awyoungart.wordpress.com; images courtesy of williamholst.info
Sources: @williamholstinfo and williamholst.info

