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ROBERT HOLMES, R.C.A.

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ROBERT HOLMES, R.C.A.

by G. A. Reid

The career of Robert Holmes as a Canadian Artist is almost equally divided between his distinction as an Art teacher and a painter of Canadian wild flowers. He was born at Cannington, Ontario, in 1861 and died at Toronto in 1930. His early art training was obtained at the Ontario School of Art and at a later period he attended the Royal College of Art in London, England.

The young Robert Holmes came to Toronto in the early 80's, there being no record of the date. His father desired him to enter the University to study medicine, but a stronger impulse intervened, when he came upon the classes of the Ontario School of Art, then located in the Normal School Building. There is no story of how the dramatic change took place, but there was a "right about face" and his true career began. There must have been strong predilections for his brother, John J. Holmes, relates his great affection for the Sproule woods with its leafy beds and wild flowers at Cannington in which he wandered as a boy. To those who knew Holmes the man and artist, as he became the prophet of Canadian wild flowers, the true secret of why he became the artist he was, is thus made clear.

The advancement of Holmes towards the eminent position he occupied as an artist was very gradual. The writer and he were contemporary as young artists and it came in my way at the death of Richard Baigent to recommend him to Principal Dickson of Upper Canada College to succeed Baigent as drawing master. Although Holmes had made no application, the enquiry which followed resulted almost immediately in the appointment. A few years after this in 1900 Holmes was appointed as head of the classes in Design in the Ontario School of Art. This last position he held till the time of his death in 1930 except that when the Ontario College of Art was established in 1912 taking over the original Ontario School of Art, he was made head of the Department of Design and lecturer on the history of Art.

As further evidence of the leadership of Holmes, he was President of the Art Students' League 1909-1911 and President of the Ontario Society of Artists 1919-1923, Vice-President of the Canadian Society of Applied Art for a period. He was elected member of the O.S.A. in 1909 and full member of the R.C.A. in 1920. On account of his outstanding work at that time it was made possible to take Holmes into the Academy to fill a vacancy as an Academician designer without having to pass a probationary period as an associate member.

Although Holmes was for a considerable part of his career as an artist regarded as a designer, it being the case that he was fundamentally a designer, and when as he has related himself he, when teaching he encouraged his pupils to make studies and designs of Canadian wild flowers in order to make their work of national interest, this led him to the making of pictorial representations of Canadian wild flowers, using water colors as a medium.

This must have been almost at the outset of his long experience as an art teacher, as his work in that particular direction early took a definite character, that is the painting of the flowers in their natural place of growth, an unusual type of flower painting. The picture so painted was eminently a design, the flower chosen as the subject being a principal and central part with the setting of other plants, tree trunks, rocks or ground composed as integral parts of the picture, and studied with the same faithful accuracy to their character and structure. Through this

accuracy Holmes became well known by botanists as essentially an artist botanist. For many years he was a close friend of S. T. Wood, the naturalist writer, and illustrated one of his books.

Following his death in 1930 a monument was instituted to acquire the collection of his works for the Toronto Art Gallery, resulting in this being accomplished, the Holmes' collection of water color paintings of Canadian wild flowers being one of the outstanding possessions of the Art Gallery.

Partly written for the prospectus
of the Ontario School of Art, 1904.

G.A.R.