

William Henry Holmes (1846 - 1933)

On the Village Road, 1889

signed lower left

watercolor on paper on board

21 1/4" x 31"

As a celebrated artist, educated geologist and anthropologist, and former director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, William Henry Holmes attained distinction in a number of noteworthy fields. Born in Ohio, he came to Washington, DC with the intention of pursuing a career as an artist and studied under Theodore Kaufman (1814 - 1896). As a visitor to the Smithsonian, he was discovered sketching a bird by a scientist who brought the young artist's ability to the attention of his associates. Consequently, he began his career in scientific illustrative drawing. Through his travels he became superlatively knowledgeable in the fields of geology, anthropology, and archeology. Although he occupied scientific positions and was engaged in scientific work for the greater part of his life, he consistently remained devoted to the arts.

In June of 1879, Holmes interrupted his geological work to visit Europe, where he spent the next year a half sketching and examining the collections of many notable museums and galleries. He also worked in the American art colony in Munich where Frank Duveneck (1848 - 1919) was the leading figure. Holmes was "a brilliant technician" in the use of watercolor, and his artworks have been described as "crisply painted, with an assurance and swiftness of touch which has seldom been excelled" (1). *On the Village Road* is a poetic transcription of nature which demonstrates Holmes' appreciation of pure sunlight. The palette is subdued, and the medium allows for a particular clarity of color and softness of form. Holmes' background awarded an interesting dynamic to the body of work he created over the course of his career: "To the patient accuracy of the scientist he added the illuminating vision of the artist and thus attained a rare and sympathetic understanding of the fitness and beauty of man's handiwork as an expression of his culture" (2).

1889 was a significant year for Holmes, as he resigned from his position as a geologist for the United States Geological Survey to accept an appointment as Archeologist in the Bureau of American Ethnology. Soon after he began an exhaustive study of the Indian quarries in DC, and later extended the survey to include the Potomac valley, the region west of it as far as the Alleghany, and the tidewater sections of Maryland and Virginia. Incidental trips were made to Wisconsin, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and Ohio. (3) Although the exact location of the subject in *On the Village Road* is unknown, based on his extensive traveling in 1889 we can defer that it is an American landscape.

Holmes returned to the Smithsonian in 1897 and was appointed Head Curator of Anthropology, a position he served in for over twenty years. In 1920, he was elected Director of the newly established National Museum of Art and resigned only a year before his death. He contributed regularly to the annual exhibitions of both the Society of Washington Artists and the Washington Water Color Club, serving for a number of years as the president of the latter. He was also president of the Washington Society of Fine Arts.

Provenance: From the trade to the gallery.

Bibliography:

Leila Mechlin, "Tribute to the Late William H. Holmes" in an unknown newspaper, 1933. Newspaper clipping from The Cooley Gallery archives. Mechlin.

John R. Swanton, [“Biographical Memoir of William Henry Holmes, 1846 - 1933”](#) in *Biographical Memoirs of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 17 (Washington, DC: [National Academy of Sciences](#), 1935), 228.

