

William Henry Holmes (1846 - 1933)

Along the Potomac, circa 1905

signed lower left

watercolor on paper

8 ½" x 11 ½" s. s.

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). *Along the Potomac* is a poetic transcription of nature, with its juxtaposition of bright colors and appreciation of pure sunlight. The painting was most likely created during one of the many summers Holmes spent at his second home near Rockville, Maryland, only miles from the banks of the Potomac. 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).

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 at one time president of the Washington Society of Fine Arts.

Provenance: From a private collection to the gallery.

Bibliography:

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