

*THE RETURN OF AQUARIUS*  
by Mary Holmes

We move backward through the Zodiac, Taurus, Aries, Pisces, each constellation dominant for two thousand years to make up the Great Year.

Now Aquarius stands on the burned earth pouring the divine energy, the water of life, from one pitcher to another. On the far right the precursors, the Bull, the Ram, the Fishes live in the dawn world, at one with earth and sea, in a garden with a shepherd and his dog. The shepherd foresees the exile, the loss, when the sweet companions will be gone and the waters spilled on the sand.

What sacrifice will allow the Unicorn to carry the soul to the sky? The virgin must be devoured by the Dragon.

Then the water can rise and white birds fly. All now shall have the flame and shall stand in the living water. Even the two, bound together by their difference, will frolic in the trees.

So the world moves through the constellations and so we move, in a day, an hour, a moment of time, we move from Paradise, innocent as animals, to isolation and despair, to a little death in the belly of the dragon. Yet through that alchemy lifted on the Unicorn to the Divine presence of the Waterbearer.

Now again we can celebrate. The waters rise, the beloved tree contains us.

—Mary Holmes

**Commentary by Gideon Rappaport and Philip Thompson [PT] based on lectures by Mary Holmes:**

The seven panels of *The Return of Aquarius*, a gift of George and Grace Tooby, were completed in 1974 by Mary Holmes, Professor of Art at UCSC and founding faculty member of Cowell College. The calligraphy was done and the mural was installed by Bruce Cantz (Cowell '71) in the room formerly called the Cowell College Junior Common Room and now the Mary Holmes Fireside Lounge. They cover the windows leading into the coffee shop above so as in part to redeem a cubic room that Holmes called an architectural failure because its dimensions make one feel as if one is at the bottom of a well.

Like most of Mary Holmes' work, these paintings are based on mythology. As Holmes said in her lecture introducing the paintings, mythology is the only way to talk about spiritual and psychological events. Myths do not correct or change reality but illuminate it, and they do so because what happens in myth, legend, and story corresponds so completely to reality, as completely as mathematics corresponds to the physical world (so that based on it we can send a man to the moon and back).

*The Return of Aquarius* addresses the present time's general despair and universal expectation of the end of the world and the beginning of another world arising from a new revelation of the

nature of God, a period akin to the first century B.C., whose general despair and longing for redemption produced a multiplication of Eastern cults. The movement into the new age we are experiencing is a movement away from the physical toward the spirit, which may be seen in the dematerialization of the world and its techniques of invisibility—so that we have become accustomed to conversing with people not in our presence, to hearing a resurrected Bing Crosby sing, to making an electric circuit merely by photographing a circuit, to knowing that the room is filled with people conversing, musical instruments playing, political debates going on invisibly, which it takes only a radio to make accessible. There is a terrible combination of physical reality and the absence of it, so that people can still fall in love with Greta Garbo.

*The Return of Aquarius* depicts spiritual transformation in imagery that combines the mythology of astrology, alchemy, the Tarot, a Hasidic tale, and Christianity.

The cycle of the great astrological year (24,000 years) moves backward through the signs of the zodiac—the age of Taurus, followed by that of Aries, then Pisces, then Aquarius—each age lasting approximately 2000 years. Our time marks the end of the age of Pisces and the beginning of the age of Aquarius. The painting ties these astrological ages to historical time: Ancient eras correspond to the ages of Taurus (the bull having been worshipped in India, Egypt, the Mediterranean, and elsewhere) and Aries (the ram having been sacred in ancient France and significant in the Old Testament). The Christian era corresponds with the age of Pisces, the fish, the earliest and the latest symbol of Christ (visible on ancient sarcophagi and present-day bumper stickers), the Greek word for fish, *Ichthus*, being interpreted as an acrostic of “**I**esous **C**hristos, **T**heou **H**yios, **S**oter” (“Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour”). The age of Aquarius, now beginning, will be characterized by the Water Bearer, a symbol of the bringer of spiritual enlightenment, water being one of the two main images of spirit, the other being fire.

Combined with this astrological imagery is the prophecy of the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic Abbot Joachim of Flora, who foresaw that the ages of the Old Testament devoted to God the Father (the power of God) and the New Testament devoted to God the Son (the love of God) would be followed by a third age and a third testament devoted to God the Holy Spirit (the wisdom of God), each age lasting a millennium. Expanding Joachim’s ages to two millennia each to correspond with astrological and historical time, Holmes said that we can confidently believe that this third revelation and its testament will appear because of the accuracy of myth in illuminating reality.

“In the painting’s myth the coming of the great astrological year of Aquarius to succeed that of Pisces is equated with the arrival of the dispensation of the Holy Spirit that follows the ages of the Father and the Son . . . and establishes an earthly heaven of peace, perfection and spiritual fulfillment. The astrological fable is a good one since in the old poetic tradition of the zodiac, Aquarius the water bearer stands for clarity, vision.” [PT]

The paintings and inscription read from right to left, symbolizing the reversal of all things in the transition from one age to the next, as Hebrew, which is read right to left, was succeeded by Latin, which is read left to right. Holmes pointed out that writing from left to right prevents the ink from smearing, then said “but now who’s using ink?” Like the direction of writing, all things, she said, will be curiously reversed.

The inscription is an excerpt of two stanzas from the hymn *Veni Sancte Spiritus* [Come Holy Spirit], dating also from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and found in the Roman Catholic liturgy for the mass of Pentecost. It reads:

*O Lux Beatissima,  
reple cordis intima  
tuorum fidelium.*

*Sine tuo numine  
nihil est in homine,  
nihil est innocium.*

[O most blessed light,  
fill the inmost heart  
of your faithful.

Without your divine spirit  
nothing is in man,  
nothing is innocent.]

According to Holmes, the last part of the inscription applies especially to the present time, in which we find it impossible to believe that anything can be innocent.

Panel I:

“A first-Adam, precursor figure, clothed in a skin and holding a staff, is flanked by sacred animals (ram and bull [and fish]) and attended by his animal brother the dog. Landscape of rich fields, bright quiet sky—the book of the creatures: spirit and nature indistinguishable in the pastoral imagination, spirit both omnipresent and hidden.” [PT]

The figure is a shepherd, living, partly by necessity, in close proximity to animals and in harmony with them and with the whole natural world surrounding him. He holds a serpent in a cup, an image seen in a legend of St. John (who, given a cup of poisoned wine, blessed it before drinking, whereupon the poison rose out of the cup in the form of a serpent) and in Chapter 47 of *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, where in a vision the goddess Isis (identified there with Minerva, Venus, Diana, Proserpine, Ceres, Juno, Bellona, Hecate, and Rhamnusia) rises from the sea holding a cup of gold from which an asp lifts up its head. The shepherd, like the bull (Taurus), the ram (Aries), and the fish (Pisces), is a precursor, pointing toward the coming transformation and the despair that is experienced before the change is complete.

Panel II:

“Abomination of desolation: in a wasteland stretching far into the distance a woman empties a vessel of water onto the sand. Man withdrawn from the divine pictured as the divine withdrawn from man and nature (an illusion represented by a tiny burning building in the background [based on] a Hasidic tale of a Rabbi who, passing by a burning house because he assumed no one was in it, heard a cry coming from the midst of the flames: moral—the spiritual emptiness of the universe is always an illusion).” [PT]

When one power begins to lose its potency, and before the next appears, the feeling is despair. Here the cup lies overturned and the waters of the spirit are being poured on the ground, indicating the failure to see anything but futility in any other kind of action. Yet there is a hope: the sun is rising, and from the seemingly uninhabited house on fire a voice is heard.

Panels III, IV and V:

“Virgin half-swallowed by a dragon connected by a rainbow-like band of light to virgin astride a prancing unicorn; the rainbow passes behind the head of Aquarius, a towering, glowing naked man who pours water between two pitchers and who is enclosed by a ring of fiery light. [Panel III] is the penultimate stage of the great alchemical work, the negation of matter that precedes its transformation into spirit, and [Panel V] is life transcending all destructions of matter and spirit, a world of pure form, intention, meaning. Virgin and dragon appear upon a landscape underneath a large sky filled with strips of luminous cloud—virgin and unicorn are in this sky—Aquarius stands in a supernatural light.” [PT]

How is despair to be overcome? Only by hitting bottom, as Holmes observed, like an alcoholic on skid row. Only when there is recognition that one cannot go further down can one somehow bounce back, as if pushing off from that ground below which one cannot fall. This lowest point is symbolized by the dragon’s swallowing of the virgin.

Holmes pointed out that the original goal of alchemy was not to get wealth but to achieve the philosopher’s stone, by which the alchemist could transform the lower in all realms to the higher, the transformation of base lead into incorruptible gold being only one symbol of that more general purpose. She said that the alchemical discipline/learning/wisdom was the only one that required the presence of a mutually loving male and female in order to achieve the philosopher’s stone and thereby to raise us out of our isolation and loneliness. It also required the sacrifice of a virgin to the dragon. The dragon’s devouring of the virgin is also an image of the fate of Saint Margaret of Antioch, patron saint of childbirth, who, thrown into prison for her faith and swallowed by a dragon, spoke the name of God and stepped unharmed from the belly of the beast. In other works of Mary Holmes that miracle becomes an image of the birth of the human child out of its mother’s blood and slime and of the human spirit out of the blood and slime of the physical world. Here the dragon devours the virgin, who is holding a cup of flames, fire being the second of the two images by which spirit is depicted in art. Her sacrifice complete, the dragon regurgitates the virgin—now as the philosopher’s stone—and tosses her up toward the heavens, where she is caught by the unicorn.

The Virgin with the head of a Unicorn in her lap is another common theme in the paintings of Mary Holmes. In medieval lore, the rare unicorn, whose horn was believed to be a powerful antidote and curative and therefore extremely valuable, was a fierce and unconquerable beast that could not be caught by hunters directly. Only when a pure virgin sat singing in the forest would the unicorn come and lay its head in her lap, whereupon the hunters could surprise, capture, and kill it for its horn. The virgin and unicorn became thus an image of the incarnation of Christ and of the divine compassion it represented. The unicorn is Christ, who willingly chooses to be borne into the world by a virgin in order that he might be killed and thereby cure mankind of sin and death. In the reversal of Panel V, by contrast, the fruition of the sacrifice of Panel III, the unicorn (the power of the spirit) now catches the virgin and carries her—all of us—in ecstatic triumph up to the Water Bearer, who stands on ground that may be burned. The dispensation of the Bearer of the Spirit has brought redemption.

The image of Aquarius, in his pouring of the waters of the spirit from one vessel to another, is merged with the Tarot image of Temperance, mixing cold and hot, yin and yang, desire and sacrifice, time and eternity, and offering the tempered waters of the spirit to the world thirsty for the harmony of peace, joy, and fulfillment. Holmes said that generally men desire perfection and women desire completeness. The bearer of the waters of the spirit here bestows the harmony of both upon the world.

Panel VI:

“Images of the state of paradise with a feminine theme . . . 3 women half immersed in a stream—baptismal water, moisture on leaves, three aspects of woman . . . —amid thick shining foliage, a dove hovering just overhead: A world ‘saturated with spirit’ in [Holmes’] words.” [PI]

Once the blessing of spirit is granted, the waters of the spirit can rise to baptize and fecundate the world. Panel VI depicts the lushness and fertility of life redeemed from the dryness and despair of Panel II. The three women—nurturing mother, virgin bride, and prophetess—are really one woman in her three aspects, another familiar theme in Holmes’ work, where the deepest quality of woman, her most valuable gift, is wisdom, the capacity to worship the spirit and to be its vehicle in the life of the world. The women stand in water and hold cups of flame. The rising of the waters is an image of the blessing of the spirit upon the physical world, a baptism, contrasting with the image of waters of the spirit fruitlessly poured upon dry ground in Panel II, where the apparent spiritual emptiness of the physical seems to devour the spirit. The white bird derives from Genesis 1:2 (“And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters”), the dove that brought Noah the olive leaf (sign of the earth’s restoration after the flood, Genesis 8:11), the dove that represents the Holy Spirit in all four New Testament Gospels (Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:32), and the doves sacred to Aphrodite/Venus, goddess of love and beauty.

Panel VII:

“Panel 7 represents the new Adam and the new Eve (exchange of attributes: man in yin colors, woman in yang, transcendence of mere sex—perhaps see Donne’s “Extasie”) as sovereigns of a redeemed nature, a dance in repose upon the boughs of a tree.” [PI]

The new Adam and the new Eve are now at home in the tree of knowledge, and the world begins again, *above* the world. In Chinese philosophy, the Tao (the Way, both of the universe and of man) is a whole made up of the harmonious union of opposite principles: yin, representing the shadow side of the mountain, the moon, the feminine, the dark, the receptive, the yielding, as of water; and yang, representing the sunny side of the mountain, the sun, the masculine, the light, the active, the unyielding, as of rock. That union of equal opposites, usually imaged in the yin-yang or tai-chi symbol, is here represented by the colors in which Adam and Eve are painted. The reversals brought about by the return of Aquarius include the reversal of the colors traditionally used for painting man and woman, so that the new Adam is here painted in yin colors and the new Eve in yang colors. Holmes said, when the Messiah comes, the moon will be as bright as the sun [*cf.*, Isaiah 30:26]. The new Adam and the new Eve, now at home above the world in the tree of knowledge, contrast the Genesis story of the fall and figure the joyful reversal of the soul’s exile from the harmonious natural world of Panel I. This transformation may require two millennia to unfold; it may also happen in a moment.

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