

Stewart H. Holbrook Mr. Otis paintings collection, 1947-1962

Overview of the Collection

Collector	Holbrook, Stewart H., 1893-1964
Title	Stewart H. Holbrook Mr. Otis paintings collection
Dates	1947-1962 (inclusive) 1947 1962
Quantity	27 paintings, 2 reproduction prints (5 boxes) : oil on canvas
Collection Number	PH0425
Summary	Oil paintings by Mr. Otis, a Northwest artist active from the 1930s to the early 1960s
Repository	University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections Special Collections University of Washington Libraries Box 352900 Seattle, WA 98195-2900 Telephone: 206-543-1929 Fax: 206-543-1931 speccoll@uw.edu
Access Restrictions	Entire collection can be viewed on the Libraries' Digital Collections website. Permission of Visual Materials Curator required to view originals. Contact Special Collections for more information.
Languages	English

Biographical Note

Stewart Hall Holbrook emerged from logging camps to become, in the words of Lewis Gannett, "the only ex-lumberjack who has lectured at Harvard University on American history." Holbrook, the "Lumberjack Boswell," was born in Vermont on August 12, 1893. His father bounced around North America, taking the young Stewart with him, until dying suddenly in Manitoba. Now a teenager, Stewart found himself deposited alone on the Canadian plains. He survived with various jobs, including reporting for a Winnipeg newspaper and performing in a traveling dramatic stock company, before serving in France as an artillery sergeant during the First World War. After the war, he bought a round-trip ticket to British Columbia, curious to see the big trees he had heard about. He took employment in a logging camp, and was so enamored with the work and the region that he cashed in his return ticket. He spent the next three years as a clerk in isolated logging camps, while writing articles and drawing popular cartoons for the *British Columbia Lumberman* at night. His desire to pursue his writing career propelled him to Portland in 1923, lured by "the finest public library in the West."

He spent the rest of the decade dividing his time between writing stories and freelance articles and the editing work that provided a semblance of a steady income. This precarious career crashed with the Great Depression. "The mss market," he lamented, "is as bad off as the so-called stock market." Despite the lean years, he persevered, and was enjoying renewed success by the mid-1930s. He

completed his first book during this time, but at least the first three publishers he solicited thought the manuscript warranted only a rejection slip. Finally, the Macmillan Company decided to publish it in 1938. *Holy Old Mackinaw: A Natural History of the American Lumberjack* spent five months on national best-seller lists. Fortified by the prospect of additional successes, he moved to Boston and began cranking out a steady and swift stream of additional books on a wide variety of historical subjects, establishing himself as one of the country's most popular historians. He returned to the Pacific Northwest in the early 1940s to head the newly-created Keep Washington Green organization. The nonprofit corporation, grounded in the private forest industry and actively endorsed by the U.S. Forest Service and state government, popularized the problem of forest fire much as Smokey Bear would begin to do a few years later. Out of his work for the Keep Washington Green movement, Holbrook wrote *Burning an Empire*, the first, and for decades the only, history of wildlands fire.

Holbrook purposely set himself apart from academic history and the "timidity and woodenness usual to professors." He disliked the use of footnotes and presented his work as an alternative to what he saw as the arid and colorless output of "stuffed-shirt historians." He also wanted to resurrect important individuals neglected by academic history, a goal most explicitly followed in his 1946 *Lost Men of American History*. If his deliberate attempt to write "low-brow" history sprang from his inclinations, it also had a very practical dimension. Unlike most academic historians, Holbrook enjoyed neither a college paycheck nor fellowships; his income depended upon writing books that would sell in sufficient quantities. Yet, despite his zeal to write popular history, he never abandoned the desire to infuse his work with high literary quality. He never did resolve the tension between the often competing demands of the market and the muse.

He moved back to Portland in the mid-1940s, this time permanently, and continued his prolific production. He also undertook a second career, as the popular oil painter "Mr. Otis." Through Mr. Otis, Holbrook poked fun at the pretensions of modern art, while individual pieces such as "Someone has been here before us Meriwether" and "I was with Custer said the old man" allowed him to deflate myths surrounding the Little Big Horn and the "overly sentimental cult of the pioneer." In keeping with his mischievous personality, he never publicly admitted being Mr. Otis, whom he heralded as the founder of the "Primitive-Moderne School" of art. (The final "e" in moderne was indispensable, according to Holbrook. "It makes the word foreign hence fashionable.")

In the early 1960s, Holbrook suffered a series of incapacitating strokes which essentially curtailed his literary and artistic production. He died from complications of a heart attack in September 1964.

Holbrook published some of his crime stories under pseudonyms. These include: Marcus M. Clark, Chris K. Stanton, Stanley Underwood, Ethan O. Allen and Lee Howard. He also used the pseudonyms, Stewart Hall or Dutch in theater work.

Historical Background

In 1949, a bright artistic talent in the form of the mysterious Mr. Otis appeared on the Portland, Oregon art scene. Northwest author Stewart H. Holbrook, Mr. Otis' "discoverer," had become acquainted with the artist (a man of "shabby gentility" who "wore neither a beret nor a beard") when they shared quarters at the Press Club's Portland mansion in the 1930s. Rejected for employment by the WPA, Mr. Otis spent the lean years of the Depression bartering paintings for food. The artist and the author continued their acquaintance throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and Holbrook offered Mr. Otis studio space in his own workshop.

In 1949, Mr. Otis was thrilled to see one of his paintings, *Fido Can Set Up!*, in the *Portland Oregonian*. He had submitted it to the paper's Salon Arts Independent. As Holbrook put it, "the dam had broken,

the Otis cup ranneth over." Before long, Mr. Otis' works were displayed in the homes and offices of prominent personalities such as Bennett Cerf and Bernard De Voto. Although the Portland Art Museum refused Mr. Otis a one-man show, exhibits of his work sprang up all over town, and eventually, all over the country, much to the delight of eager art aficionados and collectors.

Stewart Holbrook provided further details of his friendship with the artist in the 1958 book, *Mr. Otis*, which displayed several of Mr. Otis' works and included an introduction by Holbrook. The introduction hailed Mr. Otis as the founding member of the Primitive-Moderne school of painting (Holbrook insisted that the "e" at the end of "Moderne" was "imperative," as "it makes the word foreign, hence fashionable"). Holbrook frequently made appearances on behalf of the somewhat reserved Mr. Otis, who was often busy with work.

Most of Mr. Otis' works were oil paintings, but he also employed techniques of collage and mixed media. Historical figures such as Jesse James, James G. Blaine, and Lydia Pinkham appear in Mr. Otis' paintings, while other scenes reference historical, literary, or even Biblical subjects. Genre scenes -- often whimsical, humorous, or even satirical -- also appear. While Mr. Otis' style often defied classification, the artist once stated that "I always paint as I see things."

Forty of Mr. Otis' works were displayed in an exhibition entitled "The World of Mr. Otis" at the University of Oregon Museum of Art in 1994, and, in 2005, the University of Washington's Special Collections Division exhibited several of Mr. Otis' paintings in a show entitled "Pure Poppycock: The Paintings of Mr. Otis."

Content Description

The collection contains twenty-six paintings by Mr. Otis, two reproduction prints, and one painting by Karen Quinn. All but one of the paintings are oil on canvas. While many paintings are untitled, others have typed or penciled titles and notes on the verso. The inventory notes where images have been illustrated in the 1958 book *Mr. Otis* by Stewart H. Holbrook. It also contains color transparencies of paintings not held in this collection.

Several of Mr. Otis' more well-known paintings, including *Fido Can Set Up #2*, appear in the collection. Some paintings are untitled, and several are unfinished.

All works are by Mr. Otis unless otherwise indicated; all paintings are oil on canvas unless otherwise indicated.

Other Descriptive Information

Beloved Northwest author Stewart H. Holbrook, a Vermont native and former logger, came to Portland, Oregon, in 1923. His works of popular history covered a variety of topics, including logging, famous figures of the Old West, and interesting events and people of the Pacific Northwest. A columnist for the *Oregonian*, Holbrook had articles published in newspapers and magazines all over the country, and he published many books. Holbrook described these writings as "lowbrow or non-stuffed shirt history." The much-celebrated author was known to consort with a wide variety of people, from the literary elite to loggers and labor organizers.

Given Holbrook's reputation as a colorful character in the literary and social worlds, it was only a matter of time before he turned the art world upside down. Although the author never admitted it publicly, it was Holbrook, encouraged by his wife Sibyl, who had taken up his brush in the 1940s, signing the

resulting works with the name Mr. Otis. True to form, Holbrook used Mr. Otis' brightly-colored paintings to poke fun at society, history, and modern art.

Stewart Holbrook died in 1964.

Use of the Collection

Restrictions on Use

Restrictions may exist on reproduction, quotation, or publication. Contact the repository for details.

Administrative Information

Arrangement

Paintings in the collection are arranged alphabetically by title.

Acquisition Information

Source: Sibyl Holbrook Strahl. [Transparencies not from Sibyl Holbrook Strahl. Probably made for an exhibit at one time.]

Processing Note

Processed by Shannon B. Lynch, 2005, and Megan E. Peacock, 2006; Revised by Stefanie Terasaki, 2013.

Bibliography

Mr. Otis, by Stewart H. Holbrook, 1958.

"*Mr. Otis and Mr. Holbrook*," by Brian Booth. Included in the exhibition catalogue for *The World of Mr. Otis* at the University of Oregon Museum of Art in 1994.

Wildmen, Wobblies and Whistle Punks: Stewart Holbrook's Lowbrow Northwest, edited and introduced by Brian Booth, 1993.

Detailed Description of the Collection

The following section contains a detailed listing of the materials in the collection.

Mr. Otis Paintings

Container(s)		Description	Dates
Box/ Folder	Item		
2/1	1	<i>The Demon Rum</i> [view]	1956
3/1	2	<i>"Fido Can Set Up!" #2</i> [view] Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook.	1953
Case			
ND	2a	<i>Fido Can Set Up</i> color transparency Color transparency number: UW29166Color transparency missing as of 2013.	1953
Box/ Folder			
5/1	3	<i>The Fall Term Opens</i> [view]	1959
4/1	4	<i>Frank Merriwell and the Harvard Cads</i> [view] Caption on verso: "Yale's incomparable hero; ask Dad, he knows"	1959
3/2	5	<i>House in the Swamp</i> [view]	1954
4/2	6	<i>I Was With Custer the Old Man Said</i> Reproduction print from collection of Tom Booth. Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook.	1954
Case			
ND	6a	<i>I Was with Custer the Old Man Said</i> color transparency Color transparency number: UW29167	1954
Box/ Folder			
3/3	7	<i>James G. Blaine is Nominated</i> [view] Signed: Calvin Otis.	1948
5/2	8	<i>James G. Blaine #2</i> [view]	1959
3/4	9	<i>Jesse James Was Always Kind to His Horse</i> [view]	1960

Container(s)	Description	Dates
	Caption on verso: "An interesting moment in the great man's parlor"	
3/5 10	<i>The Juvenile Delinquents of 1896</i> [view]	1959
4/3 11	<i>The Ladder of Success and the Buzzard</i> [view] Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Title in book is <i>The Ladder of Success; or, Horatio Alger, Jr., & the Buzzard</i> .	1956
Case		
ND 11a	<i>The Ladder of Sucess or Horatio Alger, Jr., & The Buzzard</i> color transparency Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW29162	1956
Box/ Folder		
4/4 12	<i>The New Rigging Crew at Dosewallips, Washington</i> [view]	1961
2/2 13	<i>Nostalgia of an Aged Roué</i> [view] Reproduction print. Includes publicity review and information about recent gallery showing. Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook.	undated
Case		
ND 13a	<i>Nostalgia of an Aged Roué</i> color transparency Color transparency number: UW29163	undated
Box/ Folder		
3/6 14	<i>A Portrait of Joaquin Miller</i> [view] Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Title in book is <i>Call Me Ishmael He Cried</i> .	1953
Case		
ND 14a	<i>Call me Ishmael he cried [A Portrait of Joaquin Miller]</i> color transparency Color transparency number: UW29164	1953

Container(s)	Description	Dates	
Box/ Folder			
3/7	15	<i>Skid Road Queen #1</i> [view] Signed: Hols.	1947
4/5	16	<i>"There Goes Steve Brodie Now!"</i> [view] Caption on verso: "Only sophisticates will appreciate this scene at Brooklyn Bridge"	1959
4/6	17	<i>"Where is Shorty This Morning?"</i> [view] Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook.	undated
Case			
ND	17a	<i>Where is Shorty this Morning</i> color transparency Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW29165	undated
Box/ Folder			
4/7	18	<i>A Wild-Eyed Patriarch Posed Before a Timeline of Biblical and Historical Events</i> [view] Title taken from Mr. Otis exhibit at www.intangible.org	undated
4/8	19	<i>Circus strongman watched by woman in green dress</i> [view] Title taken from item list in catalogue for University of Oregon exhibit.	undated
3/8	20	<i>Girl with broom; bogeyman in window</i> [view] : Oil on masonite Title taken from item list in catalogue for University of Oregon exhibit.	1952
1/1	21	<i>Speaker at I.W.W. rally</i> [view] Title taken from item list in catalogue for University of Oregon exhibit.	undated
3/9	22	Untitled (man on sled with oxen) [view]	undated
3/10	23	Untitled (snow scene in town) [view]	undated

Container(s)		Description	Dates
3/11	24	Untitled (Skidmore Fountain, Portland, Oregon, with peacock; unfinished) [view]	undated
2/3	25	Untitled (swirls of paint with an eye) [view]	undated
2/4	26	Untitled (fire engine and firemen; "Mary Ann Mill City") [view]	undated
1/2	27	Untitled (people in snow) [view]	undated
3/12	28	Untitled (swirls of paint) [view]	undated
2/5	29	Untitled (Japanese woman) [view] Quinn, Karen (artist) An envelope containing notes written between Karen Quinn and Stewart H. Holbrook is taped to the verso of the painting.	1962

Color Transparencies of Mr. Otis Paintings not owned by the University of Washington

Container(s)		Description	Dates
Case	Item		
ND	C-1	<i>The Dilema of Piet Mondrian</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Painting in the collection of Brian and Gwyneth Booth. Color transparency number: UW34493	1958
ND	C-2	<i>A Gathering of Pioneers at the Skidmore Fountain</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW34494	1953
ND	C-3	<i>Great Ideas of Western Man</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW34495	undated
ND	C-4	<i>It Talks Good Daddy</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW34496	1955
ND	C-5	<i>John the Messenger</i>	1953

Container(s)	Description	Dates
	Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW34497	
ND C-6	<i>The Jolly Capitalist Retired</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW34498	1952
ND C-7	<i>A Legend of Fall River (Massachusetts)</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW34499	undated
ND C-8	<i>Listen my Children said Mr. Longfellow</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35500	1957
ND C-9	<i>Low Tide at Megler</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35501	1951
ND C-10	<i>Lydia E. Pinkham Enters Heaven No. 1</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. In the collection of Brian and Gwyneth Booth. Color transparency number: UW35502, UW35503	1951
ND C-11	<i>The Man is Here about the Wallpaper</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35504	1949
ND C-12	<i>Mr. Audubon finds the Lesser Bustard (Nesting)</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35505	1957
ND C-13	<i>The New Galluses</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35506	1954
ND C-14	<i>Night Life in Portland</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35507	1950
ND C-15	<i>Ode to the Great Speckled Bird</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. In the collection of Don and Roberta Jean Fox. Color transparency number: UW35508	1956

Container(s)	Description	Dates
ND C-16	<i>The Pioneer Mother with Child and Late Husband</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35509	1954
ND C-17	<i>Return of the Farmer's Daughter</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35510	1956
ND C-18	<i>The Rise of Populism</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35511	circa 1955
ND C-19	<i>A Room with a View</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35512	1951
ND C-20	<i>Self-portrait of the artist</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35513 From catalogue for University of Oregon exhibit: Adding collage to his usual medium, Mr. Otis struck a surprisingly carefree note for this snug scene in his atelier.	undated
ND C-21	<i>Truth Crushed to Earth at Third and Burnside</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35514	undated
ND C-22	<i>Welcome to the New Poltergeist</i> Illustrated in <i>Mr. Otis</i> by Stewart H. Holbrook. Color transparency number: UW35515	1957
ND C-23	Unidentified (Abstract figures in a group) Color transparency number: UW35516	1954
ND C-24	Unidentified (Group of figures with a signs) Color transparency number: UW35517	1957
ND C-25	Unidentified (Man with a cane) Color transparency number: UW35518	1951

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms :

American wit and humor, Pictorial--Specimens

Artists--Oregon
Painting, American--20th century
Painting, Modern--20th century--Humor
Parody in art--Specimens
Visual Materials Collections (University of Washington)
Personal Names :
Holbrook, Stewart H., 1893-1964--Pictorial works
Form or Genre Terms :
Oil paintings

2008 (Last modified: 11/27/2017)



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