

## BILL HOLM 1925-2020

“As you travel on through time, friend, no matter where you go, keep your eye upon  
the donut, and not upon the hole.”  
— Bill Holm’s “Donut Theory”

School of Art + Art History + Design alumnus and Professor Emeritus Bill Holm died in his sleep on December 16, 2020, age 95. He received his BA (magna cum laude) in Art (painting) in 1949 and his MFA in painting in 1951, followed by two teaching certificates in 1953 and 1958. He taught art history in the School of Art with an adjunct appointment in anthropology from 1968 to 1985.

Bill and his twin sister, Betty Holm (Odle), were born in Roundup, Montana, where their father, Oscar William Holm, was an electrician and their mother, Martha Ida (Gerntholz) Holm, was a schoolteacher. The Holms moved to Seattle when the twins were twelve, and soon after that Bill’s mother took him to visit the old Washington State Museum that stood on the site of the current Husky Union Building on the University of Washington campus. There Bill met the museum director, Dr. Erna Gunther, who nurtured his already deep interest in Indigenous peoples and their cultures.

Bill graduated from Lincoln High School in 1943 and soon after was inducted into the US army. After Army Specialized Training at Pomona College, Oscar W Holm, Jr., as the military called him, was sent to the French/German border where he served on the front lines, earning a bronze star and the rank of master sergeant. He illustrated his wartime exploits in drawings during the conflict, and later in life he painted a beaded elk hide recording his war experiences in the Plains pictorial winter count style. After the war, he attended the University of Washington on the GI Bill, studying painting in the School of Art. His passion for the Indigenous cultures of the Plains, Plateau, and Northwest Coast and the landscapes they inhabit are apparent in the paintings he produced throughout his life. His achievements as an artist were celebrated in the book, *Sun Dogs and Eagle Down, The Indian Paintings of Bill Holm* (UW Press 2000).

In 1953, Bill began teaching art at his alma mater, Lincoln High School. During his fourteen years there, he not only taught art but also created sets for dramatic productions and made screen prints for school activities. One of his significant contributions to Lincoln is the 5’ by 30’ mural he painted depicting Puget Sound, the Olympic Mountains, and the original peoples of the Salish Sea as they observed from their canoes in 1792 Captain George Vancouver’s ship, *Discovery*, anchored off what Vancouver called Restoration Point. The mural currently hangs in the recently restored Lincoln library, on the wall for which it was originally created.

In 1942, Frank Henderson had asked Bill to work at his Camp San Juan, and this was the beginning of a life-long association with the Henderson Camps (now Camp Nor’wester) in the San Juan Islands. There, in 1949, he met fellow camp counselor Martha “Marty” Mueller. They were married in 1953 and continued their work at the camp every summer. That same year, Bill and Marty were invited to attend the opening potlatch of Wawaditł̓a, the first ceremonial bighouse to be built after the potlatch became legal again. This was the house of Chief Mungo Martin, carver-in-residence on the grounds of the Provincial Museum in Victoria. Bill’s thirst for learning about the art and cultural traditions he witnessed at that event led him to become close friends with Martin and his wife, Abaya Martin. They graciously shared songs and traditions, and they travelled with family members to the bighouse built by Holm at Camp Nor’wester to celebrate ceremonial dance traditions by firelight. The richness, depth, and number of relationships and events that have sprung from that time of meeting is inestimable. Bill carried the Kwakwaka’wakw names Ho’misk̓anis and Tł̓alelitł̓a.

A paper Holm wrote for a course taught by Dr. Gunther in 1958, when he returned to UW to earn a teaching certificate, became the seed for his book *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (UW Press, 1965). In this book, Bill created a vocabulary to describe the elements, shapes, and relationships of forms found in northern Northwest Coast Native art. This vocabulary became a widespread, useful tool for artists, scholars, and anyone else wanting to converse about the northern Northwest Coast style of art. *Northwest Coast Indian Art, An Analysis of Form* has become one of the all-time best-selling books published by the University of Washington Press, having sold over 119,000 copies. This book is credited with having drawn a remarkable

number of artists into their own practice of Northwest Coast art, and his classes at the University of Washington broadened the understanding and appreciation of that art in several generations of students.

Due in part to the early success of this book, in 1968 Spencer Moseley, then Director of the UW School of Art, and George Quimby, the Director of the Burke Museum, came together to recruit Holm for a joint position teaching art history and working in the Education Department at the Burke. Bill began teaching in Room 3 in the basement of the Art Building, an intimate space that allowed him to serve samples of smoked salmon dipped in oolichan oil with soapberries for dessert after the final exams. Soon, the popularity of his classes required a move to Kane Hall, but even in the large lecture hall his students still experienced Holm's very personal and charismatic teaching, infectious enthusiasm, and deep knowledge of Northwest Coast art and culture.

The Burke Museum building that opened in 1964 had been designed to display totem poles that had been purchased by Dr. Gunther from the Walter Waters collection. Before they could be delivered, these poles were destroyed in a tragic fire on the dock in Wrangell, Alaska. When Bill was hired, he offered to carve several replica poles that allowed him to spend his summers on Lopez Island. These poles were erected inside the museum, filling the space of the missing poles until 1990 when they were moved outside to the front of the museum. Two of Bill's poles still stand on the Burke's campus while others were moved to storage when the new Burke opened in 2019.

Before arriving at the Burke Museum, Bill co-curated with Bill Reid and Wilson Duff the exhibition "Arts of the Raven" at the Vancouver Art Gallery, one of the first exhibitions to focus on Northwest Coast Native art as art rather than artifact. Other major exhibitions followed, including "Crooked Beak of Heaven" at the Henry Art Gallery (1972), "Smoky-Top: The Art and Times of Willie Seaweed" (1983) at the Pacific Science Center, and "Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art" (1983) at the Seattle Art Museum.

By 1976, Bill had been promoted to Curator of Northwest Coast Indian Art and Professor of Art History. In that same year, he received a National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Research Fellowship that allowed him to travel to major museum collections around the world and photograph Northwest Coast Native art. Many of the objects he photographed had not been known to others or understood by their keepers. This led to his becoming an important consultant to museum curators. His knowledge and the slide collection that he amassed and shared has been an important resource for artists, scholars, and students around the world.

His books have won scholarly acclaim and recognition with four Washington State Governor's Writers Awards and two special Governor's awards. In 2001, he was honored with a certificate of appreciation from the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people of Southeast Alaska through the Sealaska Heritage Institute. The Native American Art Studies Association recognized him with its Honor Award in 1991. The University of Washington honored him with a Distinguished Achievement Award from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1994 and selected him to give the annual University Faculty Lecture in 2003. In 2008, the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters.

In 2004, the Bill Holm Center for the Study of Northwest Coast Native Art was established at the Burke Museum by Dr. Robin K. Wright, Holm's successor, to continue his legacy by giving research grants to students and funding visiting artists to study the Burke's collections. Dr. Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse carries on this work, and over 500 artists and researchers have participated in the Bill Holm Center's grant programs, which include research visits, mentoring, and workshops. Wright and Bunn-Marcuse also edit [Native Art of the Pacific Northwest: A Bill Holm Center Series](#) with University of Washington Press, continuing the art historical legacy of Holm's work.

Bill Holm is survived by his wife Marty; his daughters, Carla Holm (David Martens) and Karen Holm (Rob Walker); and grandsons: Aubrey Martens (Jess Lawro), Evrard Martens, and Julian Martens.

Memorial gifts to the Bill Holm Center may be sent to the Burke Museum at Box 353010, Seattle, WA 98195-3010 or [donate online](#). Memorial gifts may also be made to Camp Nor'wester at PO Box 1055, Edmonds, WA 98020 or [donate online](#).

As Nuu-chah-nulth artist Joe David said: “I am lucky to have lived in the time of Bill Holm.” This is a sentiment shared by the many people whose lives were changed by Bill Holm.

### **Books by Bill Holm**

- 1965 *Northwest Coast Indian Art, An Analysis of Form*. Seattle: University of Washington Press (50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition published in 2015 with the Bill Holm Center for the Study of Northwest Coast Native Art).
- 1972 *Crooked Beak of Heaven*. Index of Art in the Pacific Northwest, No. 3, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- 1975 *Form and Freedom: A Dialogue on Northwest Coast Indian Art* (with Bill Reid). Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University (republished as *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics* by the University of Washington Press, 1976).
- 1980 *Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes: A Pioneer Cinematographer in the Pacific Northwest*. (with George I. Quimby) Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- 1982 *Soft Gold: The Fur Trade and Cultural Exchange on the Northwest Coast of America*. (with Thomas Vaughan). Portland: Oregon Historical Society.
- 1983 *Smoky-Top: The Art and Times of Willie Seaweed*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- 1983 *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art*. Seattle Art Museum and Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- 1987 *Spirit and Ancestor: A Century of Northwest Coast Art in the Burke Museum*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

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Written as a collaborative effort by Carla Holm, Evrard Martens, Robin Wright, and Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse.