

3 SCENES OF NYMPHS IN CANADIAN LANDSCAPES (c. 1938), Kenneth Hensley Holmden

This is the sixth and final stop of the Public Art, Public Memory tour.

In the auditorium are three paintings: two flank either side of the stage, with one tucked into the entrance.

This auditorium is a lecture hall for Concordia students but its predecessor, the York Theatre, once inhabited the same address. The York Theatre was a destination for film enthusiasts during the Golden Age of Hollywood. The *3 Scenes of Nymphs in Canadian Landscapes* — originally comprised of eight scenes — was a part of the original York Theatre's interior decor. The paintings were commissioned by Emmanuel Briffa, the York Theatre's interior designer and a popular theatre decorator in this era. Briffa designed the interiors of many other theatres in Montreal and the surrounding area, including such landmarks as the Rialto Theatre in the Mile End neighbourhood, which is still an active venue today.

The artworks were painted by artist Kenneth Hensley Holmden. Holmden was born in Ottawa in 1893. He later served in the First World War, where he lost a leg in battle. Upon his return, he trained as a painter, regularly exhibiting his work in Montreal and Ottawa for many years. His typical subjects were naturalistic landscapes, life painting, and Canadiana. Holmden is known for several other works in Montreal, including one at the famous Ruby Foo's Restaurant, but no others survive.

Take a moment to sit in the auditorium seats or view or imagine the works from a new row. If you can, get a closer look at the surface details by examining the panel at the top of the auditorium. What do you notice?

The stylized nude figures frolicking in the abstracted landscape are an aesthetic departure from the rest of Hensley Holmden's oeuvre. The figures could be characterized as "Egyptian revival" a popular Art Deco style that would have been compatible with Briffa's approach. In this way, we might consider the original *3 Scenes of Nymphs in Canadian Landscapes* as a collaboration between Briffa and Holmden.

Nude female figures are a common motif in this style, as they are throughout history, especially in combination with nature themes. These works would not have particularly stood out to theatregoers, as they would have blended in with the original interior's ornate decor. However, in the relatively demure context that is the amphitheatre's interior, which today hosts art history lectures, these works might stand out to their contemporary audience as an historical example of women's objectification.

After a 1989 fire led the York Theatre to close its doors to the public, it was considered vacant for nearly a decade until it was purchased by Concordia University in 1998. However, the theatre housed many squatters during the 1990s, for whom it became home. After determining that it was impossible to save the original building, the university demolished the York Theatre in 2001 — but not before salvaging three of the eight original panels. The paintings were conserved and installed in this amphitheatre–classroom, returning full circle to their original location.

This concludes the Public Art, Public Memory tour. Continue the audio-guided tours with the Public Art, Nature and the City or Public Art, Science and Technology tours.