William Henry Holmes and the Rediscovery of the American West  
by Kevin J. Fernlund

Americans have long been enchanted with the West. Starting with the popular reports of Lewis and Clark, which were best sellers, and continuing through to today’s books, movies and magazines that keep America’s romance with the West alive, “Easterners” continue to emigrate west. Americans’ fascination with the West was particularly strong in the mid-1800s, fueled by the reports of explorers and surveyors. In what has been called the “Great Reconnaissance,” the government sent out expeditions to map the West and make preliminary assessments of its economic and development potential, and survey parties set out in search of the best possible railroad routes. The work went on unabated until the Civil War, in which many of the West’s finest mapmakers assumed notable roles, but resumed in earnest after the war.

Perhaps the most enchanting elements of the reports were the illustrations, engravings, paintings and engravings. These were done by topographers and expedition artists whose occupations often overlapped—topographers drew terrain in relief from an oblique perspective, while artists sketched or painted according to assignment, with natural history specimens being of high importance.

William Henry Holmes was both a topographer and an expedition artist whose many years of experience led to his recognition as a well-known scientist as well. Peaks in Yellowstone Park and in Utah’s Henry Mountains bear his name, and further details of his long and productive life may be found in this interesting and well-written biography, William Henry Holmes and the Rediscovery of the American West, by Kevin Fernlund.

Holmes was born on a farm in Ohio in 1846. He decided at an early age that he would rather become an artist than a farmer, obtaining what education and
art training he could in the Midwest, then moving to Washington, D.C. to further his art studies. One day, in what Fernlund calls “the magical moment when opportunity meets talent,” Holmes bumped into a member of the Smithsonian’s scientific staff while practicing his sketches in the museum. Upon viewing Holmes’ work, the scientist invited him upstairs to meet other members of the scientific staff, and he was hired on the spot. It is a wonderful example of a simpler time when talent, ambition and hard work were enough to launch a career—no bureaucratic paperwork, certificates of qualifications or training, just a demonstrated ability and an eagerness to excel.

Holmes worked in the Smithsonian’s offices until 1872 when he was offered a job as an expedition artist by its leader, Ferdinand Hayden. He did not hesitate to accept. Based on his talent, he was hired year after year to work on government expeditions. In addition to plying his artistic talents, Holmes enthusiastically took on additional assignments and discovered a keen interest in geology. He studied both on his own and under the tutelage of the most eminent scientists in the country, expanding his reputation as artist and field geologist, and developing what he called “double vision”—an artist with a geologist’s insight. Perhaps the best example of this approach is his painting “Panorama from Point Sublime” (pictured), published in 1882. This well-known painting is an icon of Western American artistry and revered by generations of geologists for its accuracy and details (images of Holmes and his colleague Clarence Dutton are depicted at the lower left of the image). Author Fernlund describes the image as “the result of the West’s greatest draftsman seeing the West’s greatest view.” The goal of scientific illustrators is to convey ideas and information, and Holmes was a master of his craft. More than just a painting, the image of the Grand Canyon emerges as an idea. “Panorama from Point Sublime” can still be purchased today through the U.S. Geological Survey.

Holmes’ approach to his artistic work differed greatly from that of his friend and contemporary artist, Thomas Moran, whose style, unlike Holmes’, was not bound by the physical features of the terrain that he painted. Moran modified details with artistic license, yielding stunning images, many of which are better-known today than those by Holmes.

As Holmes’ career progressed, he focused less on art and more on geology and anthropology, expanding his studies to Central and South America. He returned to art in the latter years of his long career, becoming the first director of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. As the West evolved from its wild and wooly past to a tamer frontier, its representation at the Smithsonian also evolved from discovery to preservation. In spite of bureaucratic challenges—personality conflicts, battles over scientific theories, and fights for funding—Holmes persevered, and it is his work that largely shaped America’s present image of the West. If you’re looking for a worthwhile book on Western exploration to add to your personal library, Fernlund’s biography of William Henry Holmes is a good choice.