

## **The Colors and Shapes of Home**

By Jacqui Larsen

### **Overview:**

Inspired by the colors and shapes in Maynard Dixon's landscape paintings, students will create their own abstract composition of the western landscape using nature rubbings, drawing, and collage techniques.

**Grades:** K-6

**Duration:** 45-60 minutes

### **Materials:**

- (1) 8.5" x 11" copy paper on which is printed a geometric shapes template.
- (1) Blank sheet of paper
- Colored pencils
- Oil pastels
- Scissors
- Glue sticks

### **Standards:**

- Math:
  - Strand: Geometry (G) Kindergarten, First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth
- Visual Arts:
  - Strand: Create (V.CR)
  - Strand: Respond (V.R)
  - Strand: Connect (V.CO)

### **Objectives:**

By studying Maynard Dixon's landscapes and imitating his color choices, students will recognize and experiment with the sensory and emotional effects of complementary color combinations.

In addition, students will identify Dixon's use of geometric shapes: triangles, rectangles, trapezoids, circles, and ovals, and explore placement of shapes to develop their own abstract composition.

## **Instructions:**

**1) View and discuss the 20 Maynard Dixon landscapes on the BYU Museum of Art website** <https://moa.byu.edu/maynard-dixon-searching-for-a-home> while introducing the artist Maynard Dixon.

Maynard Dixon (1875-1946) was born in Fresno, California, but loved the true western states of Montana, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. His childhood love for drawing grew into a desire to become an illustrator, which was realized when he moved to San Francisco and attended the California School of Design. After three months in the program, he decided he did not like the traditional approach they taught; however, the emphasis on shape and color stayed with Dixon throughout his career. Within two years, he received his first salaried position—his job was to illustrate scenes of western life. Dixon was always enamored with this subject matter, even before witnessing the western landscape himself. He wrote poems about finding oneself in the beautiful west a few years before traveling (east, ironically) to Arizona and New Mexico. He appreciated the mountains, mesas, red rocks, aspen trees, billowing clouds, and sage brush. For Dixon, the land is not merely a location; rather, it is connected to the people who live on it, it encourages sacred experiences, it is home. He also visited Utah, Nevada, and Montana, often spending several months in one location. He befriended the Native Americans, stayed on their reservations with them, and was invited to witness their sacred ceremonies. Ultimately, because these western landscapes were where Dixon felt most at home, he moved away from California, splitting his time between Arizona and Utah.

While viewing the paintings, ask students questions to help them experience the paintings. Have you visited places similar to these? Have you seen clouds like these dark gray clouds with light on the edges? Where have you seen this red dirt and red rocks like these? What about the purple/blue mountains? Have you ever seen mountains with large patches of shadows on them? How do these places make you feel when you visit them? How do you feel looking at these paintings?

Discuss how we also live in a western landscape. This landscape is a home to all of us. Ask questions about their own observations. When you stand at your front door, what can you see when you look up? The sky, sun, moon, stars, clouds, snow falling, etc. What can you see when you look out in the distance? How do the mountains compare in the summer to the same mountains in the winter? What can you see nearby? Trees, grass, flowers, etc. Does what you see change when you stand in your backyard, or at a nearby park? All these things in nature are part of our home.

## **2) Discuss Color Theory and Color Mixing:**

Show students a color wheel:

[https://ptgmedia.pearsoncmg.com/images/chap4\\_9780321935281/elementLinks/figure\\_4\\_1\\_alt.jpg](https://ptgmedia.pearsoncmg.com/images/chap4_9780321935281/elementLinks/figure_4_1_alt.jpg)

Return to the first landscape slide on the BYUMOA website: *Mesas in Shadow*.

Ask the students to notice the varieties of colors in this painting—what do you see? Point out different colors: blues, purples, bright reds, oranges, light yellows, greenish grays, etc.

Using the color wheel, explain that complementary colors are across from each other on the color wheel. When complementary pairs, such as red and green, orange and blue, or purple and yellow are in a painting, they give the painting energy and excitement. Where do you see complementary colors here? (Red and green in the foreground, blue mountains and orange dirt.) Based on the colors, how would you describe the mood of this landscape? (Bright, lively and energetic due to the complementary colors.)

Discuss how Maynard Dixon made the colors in his paintings. Because Maynard Dixon loved the western skies, mountains, rocks and plants, he wanted to paint them, and so he looked very carefully at their colors and color combinations. He didn't just take a blue tube of paint and use that color; he mixed it with whites and greens and reds to get just the right blue for the sky he was looking at.

### **3) Discuss Geometric Shape:**

In addition to using lively complementary colors, Maynard Dixon also simplified the shapes of the landscape, often representing mountains and fields as triangles and rectangles, and clouds and plants as circles.

In *Mesas in Shadow*, point out the rectangular and trapezoidal shapes of the mesas, and the circles in the sagebrush and clouds. (You may hold up cut-outs of these shapes for students to find in the paintings.)

Move ahead to slide 4, *Fortification Butte, Arizona*, and have the students find triangular shapes in the mountains. Also notice the complementary colors of orange and blue.

In slide 5, *The Plains*, notice that the plains are made up of triangles.

In slide 6, *Diana's Throne*, find trapezoids and triangles in the highest mountains, triangles in the foothills and mountains, rectangles in the fields, and circles in the trees and distant plants.

### **4) Begin Student Drawings:**

Students will make a collage using the colors and shapes of Maynard Dixon's paintings. These are the colors and shapes of our western landscape home, too!

Step one: Give each student a blank paper and some colored pencils. Go outside and find some dry textures to do rubbings on using the sides of the pencils. Fill the page with rubbings. Students can use the ground, tree bark, brick walls, rocks, etc.

Step two: Back in the classroom, have students set aside the rubbings page, and pull out the Geometric Shapes template and oil pastels. While you slowly rotate through the Dixon landscape slides, have students carefully look at the colors he used and try to duplicate some of them on their shapes with oil pastels. No shape stands for any object, they are just landscape-colored shapes.

As they choose colors, remind students to include pairs of complementary colors. (For example, if they draw some blue shapes, also draw some orange shapes.) This should feel free form.

Step three: Students will cut out the shapes along the template lines.

Step four: They will then arrange the shapes on the rubbings page and use glue sticks to attach. Their arrangements might mimic a landscape, or be only loosely based on one. They can be in geometric patterns or randomly scattered placements based on the memory and feeling of a landscape—any way they choose is fine. The final collage/drawing is an abstraction based on the colors and shapes of Maynard Dixon's paintings.

**Optional Extensions:**

Collage shapes can be expanded to include geometric shapes cut from topographical maps of Utah (such as can be found at Deseret Industries or printed from the internet), black and white photography of the western landscape, or photocopies of Maynard Dixon's poetry about the West.

With additional discussion, SEEd standards can also be incorporated:

- K.2 Living Things and Their Surroundings
- 1.2 The Needs of Living Things and Their Offspring
- 2.2 Living Things and Their Habitats
- 3.2 Effects of Traits on Survival