

**Searching for a Home:
Converting Maynard Dixon Paintings into Poetry**
By Lance Larsen

Overview:

Students will compose a poem inspired by the colors and textures of Maynard Dixon's landscape paintings, created with poetic technique, including narrative, imagery, metaphor, and repetition.

Grades: K-12

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Materials:

- A writing notebook
- Pen or pencil

Utah State Core Standards:

- English Language Arts
 - Writing Standard 3:
 - “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.”
 - Writing Standard 4
 - “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.”
 - Language Standard 5
 - “Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.”
- Visual Arts:
 - Strand: Respond (V.R)
 - “Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.”
 - Strand: Connect (V.CO)
 - “Students will relate artistic skills, ideas, and work with personal meaning and external context.”

Objectives: By studying Maynard Dixon’s landscapes, including color and texture, the student will recognize the sensory and emotional effects of painterly techniques.

In addition, the student will learn to define the term “ekphrastic poem,” and create an ekphrastic of her own in collaboration with Maynard Dixon. In doing so, the student will practice such techniques as narrative, imagery, metaphor, repetition, and juxtaposition.

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 wrote poetry to convey what he could not convey in his paintings, and painted to convey what he could not convey in his poems. 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. In some artworks he seems especially interested in those places where landscape and civilization meet and overlap. Dixon 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.

Rather than have students passively try to reproduce Dixon’s landscapes in words, we’ll focus on using the paintings as a jumping off point to new creation.

- Have you visited wild places like those in his paintings, including Utah national parks?
- What stories do these places tell?
- Do these landscapes seem harsh and foreign or beautiful and welcoming, or maybe even a mix of both?
- How do you feel looking at Dixon’s paintings?
- What would you do to make this new landscape your home?

2) Show image of Maynard Dixon's *Sketch for Campo Santo* (slide 15). Invite students to comment on the painting technique as objectively as possible, then invite them to talk more impressionistically about how the artwork makes them feel. Finally, ask them to tell stories about the painting. Remind them that they'll hear different stories depending on who the speaker is.

3) Read a poem written in response to this painting.

“Campo Santo Visitation” (by Lance Larsen)

If I were a ghost, I'd swim desert air whispering blue mountain, hills like houses,
bushes the color of Christmas.
If I were a ghost, I'd play hide and seek with jack rabbits.
If I were a ghost, I'd cozy up to the darkest clouds and fall like rain.
If I were a ghost, I'd circle the white cross three times and count that as prayer.
If I were a ghost, I'd slither red sand like a snake, ride thermals with the vultures.
If I were a ghost, I'd nap inside the ear of a lost horse the color of caramel.
If I were a ghost, I'd sing sad songs with the voice of a mermaid.
If I were a ghost, I'd scare cowboys out of their boots and kiss scared children on
their necks.

4) Briefly discuss the technique of the poem, especially how the narrator (in this case a ghost) enters this landscape and makes a home out of it, an uneasy home perhaps, but a home nonetheless. This is an ekphrastic poem, or a poem written about another work of art. Students will also write an ekphrastic poem based on one of Maynard Dixon's paintings.

5) Share the prompt that the poet followed in writing this poem, discuss it briefly, field questions, and invite students to select their own painting to write about.

Writing Prompt:

Select a landscape painting by Maynard Dixon, preferably one with some markings of civilization: a house, a graveyard, a horse grazing, etc. ***Note: you can find these on the BYU Museum of Art website linked above. In addition to “The Land” section, students may choose an artwork from the section “Other People's Houses.”

Choose a narrator for the poem. This can be the voice of something non-human in the painting (horse, cow, dog), or another creature that drops into the painting for a visit (crow, eagle, hawk, rabbit, deer, coyote, porcupine, rattlesnake, scorpion, tarantula, bat, gila monster), or some other creature passing through (ghost, angel, unicorn, bigfoot, etc.).

Write 6-9 sentences, each one beginning with “If I were a _____” (fill in the blank), and ending with how you would interact with this specific place. Try to

compose using imagery and metaphor and other vivid language. Feel free to give your creature a problem to solve or a mischievous nature. Let your creature get into trouble. Is your creature scared, at peace, mad, vindictive, happy?

6) Presentation. Invite students to share part or all of their compositions and perhaps discuss why each student made their respective poetic decisions. Ask them why they selected that particular landscape to write a poem about. What did they learn about poetry, themselves, home, or this place in writing a poem?

Extension or Modification:

You may choose a different poetic approach with your class. See two bonus prompts below inspired by Dixon's landscapes in general.

Bonus Prompt #1. Select a landscape or portrait by Maynard Dixon and write a poem that consists of nothing but questions. Ask a variety of questions, being outlandish is encouraged.

“Nine Questions while Looking at a Desert Landscape” (by Lance Larsen)

How can the horses be happy eating this scrubby grass?
Are the skies always this red?
How can I possibly start a fire without matches?
How to describe these greens? Like spinach, like curtains in a ratty room, like sadness?
If I fall asleep, what will curl up beside me---a gila monster, faraway stars?
Dear Maynard Dixon, did you paint this after a fight with your wife?
How many million ants live underground?
Why do those boulders look like a birthday party of broken bikes?
What does that cloud look like---a weasel, a dirty shoe, maybe a mother crying for her
lost baby?

Bonus Prompt #2. Compose a class pantoum using lines from one of the other two assignments. The pantoum is a strict form poem in which every line gets repeated twice in a prescribed order. The length of the poem can vary, but you must start with an even number of lines, which will then double. Ultimately, the finished product would need to be written in increments of four: 16 lines, or 20, or 24, or 28, etc. Each stanza is composed of four lines, and the second and four lines will be the first and third lines of the next stanza, respectively.

A few rules: the first line of the poem is also the last line, and the third line is the third-to-last line of the poem. Each middle stanza will thus have two new lines and two repeated lines. Don't worry about rhyming. Here's the prescribed order for a 16-line pantoum, using 8 sentences from the poem above. If you're composing as a class, you would use 8 different lines from 8 students.

“Desert Pantoum” (by Lance Larsen)

- A. Are the skies always this red?
 - B. How to describe these greens? Like spinach, like curtains in a ratty room, like sadness?
 - C. How can the horses be happy eating this scrubby grass?
 - D. How many million ants live underground?
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 - E. If I fall asleep, what will curl up beside me---a gila monster, faraway stars?
 - D. How many million ants live underground?
 - F. How can I possibly start a fire without matches?
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- E. If I fall asleep, what will curl up beside me---a gila monster, faraway stars?
 - G. Maynard Dixon, did you paint this after a fight with your wife?
 - F. How can I possibly start a fire without matches?
 - H. What does that cloud look like---weasel, dirty shoe, maybe a mother crying for her lost baby?
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- G. Maynard Dixon, did you paint this after a fight with your wife?
 - C. How can the horses be happy eating this scrubby grass?
 - H. What does that cloud look like---weasel, dirty shoe, maybe a mother crying for her lost baby?
 - A. Are the skies always this red?