

Maynard Dixon Searching for a Home:

Painted and Poetic Imagination
in the American West

October 28, 2022 – September 23, 2023



Maynard Dixon was a man of the West

From his cowboy boots to his Stetson hat, where he chose to live and what he preferred to paint, Dixon became an honest personification of the West he loved.

Dixon was raised in California's San Joaquin Valley with cattle ranches and fields extending in all directions, a geographic feature that would influence the aspiring artist. Reflecting on his childhood, Dixon said:

"No doubt these flat scenes have influenced my work. I don't like to psychoanalyze myself, but I have always felt my boyhood impressions are responsible for my 'weakness' for horizontal lines."

In the summer of 1900, Dixon took the first of many journeys "east to see the West." It was a revelatory experience that brought maturity and accuracy to his depictions of the western landscape and indigenous inhabitants. From Montana to the Southwest, he gained a love for and understanding of the Native American way of life and admired their strong ties to unique traditions as well as the diverse land in which they lived.

Eventually, Dixon found a home in the West. He settled in Tucson, Arizona during the winter months and spent summers in Mt. Carmel, Utah. He painted the deserts surrounding his home until his death in 1946. Among the letters of sympathy sent to his wife, Edith Hamlin, was this beautiful line of summation from Edward Dewitt Taylor:

"...He lives in his monumental creations, and because of him, the Great West will live, through his eyes, forever."

People of the Land

Dixon was enamored with the indigenous people he met on his travels. He developed friendships based on admiration and respect with the Flathead (Salish) and Blackfoot Tribes of Montana and the Hopi and Navajo People of Arizona and New Mexico. The invitation to embed himself into their daily routines allowed Dixon to experience distinctive cultures heavily influenced by the lands they inhabited.

How does Dixon create a harmonious relationship between the people and the land in each of these works?



Hopi Interior reveals the sparse walls of a permanent adobe dwelling briefly punctuated with beautiful textiles. Woven baskets hang patiently above a woman who grinds home-grown corn. In contrast, *Flathead Indian and Pony* illustrates this tribe's nomadic way of life. The Flathead acquired and tamed horses for buffalo hunting and lived in tepees that could be easily moved.



How do Dixon's paintings preserve tradition and culture? How does he document influences that altered indigenous life?

Round Dance and *Christmas Eve Procession*, at lower left, were both painted in Taos, New Mexico during the winter of 1931. The round dance started as a way to bring tribal communities together during the long, lonely winter months. Dixon's eyewitness account of this gathering is brought to life through the use of rich colors, bold patterns, and the rhythmic movement of the dancers' feet. Dixon was also invited to witness a Christmas Eve procession: a cultural blend of Christian customs introduced by Spanish missionaries and traditional rituals of the Taos Pueblo people.

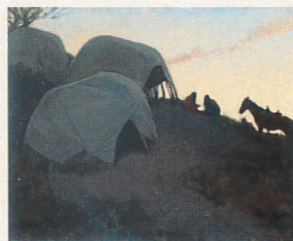
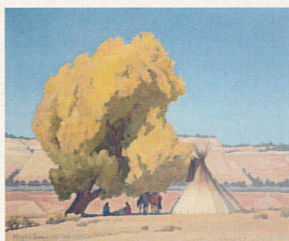
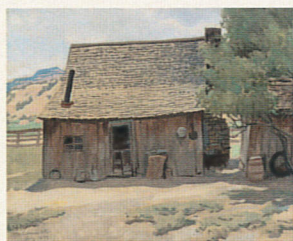
A Portrait of Home

Adobe houses, tepees, and cabins would only be a shelter if not for the people that give them the title of "home."

Does the word "home" imply more than a physical dwelling? What does it mean to you?

Dixon was intrigued by the daily activities of people, particularly as they moved in and around their homes. Based on the number and variety of scenes he painted, this idea of "home" seems to have preoccupied his thoughts. The observations Dixon made during his travels were his motivation to eventually settle in the West.

Portraits provide a glimpse into the life of an individual. How do the homes Dixon painted serve as portraits?



The Land

At the age of eighteen, Dixon had his first illustrations published in *Overland Monthly*. Numerous commissions followed, making Dixon one of the most successful illustrators working in Old West themes.

For seven years, Dixon painted a West he had never seen with his own eyes. Detesting imitation, he took the first opportunity to travel and the knowledge he gained impacted the veracity of his work. His range of subjects expanded, his use of color became more vibrant, and his compositions were stronger. Dixon continued to travel during his twenties, exposing him to the grandeur and varied beauty of the West.

Dixon left his career as an illustrator to devote himself to painting, however the elements of design continue to influence his art. Looking at *Mesas in Shadow* (right), reflect on Dixon's use of the following design elements: line, space, and color.

The sweeping horizontal **lines** of the desert and distant mesas draw the viewer's attention into the landscape and then expands it horizontally suggesting that the composition continues beyond the frame, an endless landscape with unlimited possibilities. Dixon creates a sense of unbounded **space** with the expansive sky that spreads over the pristine desert. The appearance of large cumulus clouds suggests that weather and circumstances often change quickly and unpredictably. His simplified palette, reduced to the essential **colors** of the location, assert the reality of both the scorching sun and the welcomed shade.

Dixon claimed to be a realist, but what evidence is there of his interest in modernism?

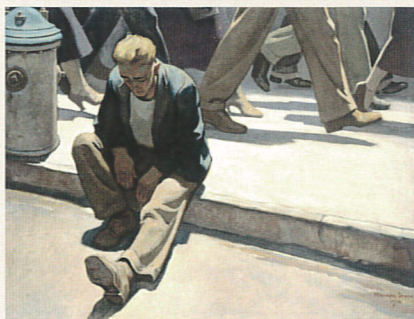
While Dixon's subject matter remained consistent, the style of his art evolved dramatically. His illustrations of the Old West transformed into distinctive landscapes, portraits, and genre scenes painted in a bold modern style with abstract forms and simplified color.



Forgotten Men

Beginning with the stock market crash in 1929, millions of American workers lost their jobs, savings, and homes during the Great Depression. Men (and families) wandered the country looking for work while those with jobs fought for better working conditions. Moved by the growing adversity he saw, Dixon turned his attention from the Western landscape to documenting the hopelessness and insecurity sweeping across America.

What does the title of each work tell you about the men in these paintings? How does their body language and placement in the scene communicate a mood?



Forgotten Man



Free Speech

Dixon's broad brushstrokes create an ambiguity about the identity of the men he painted. Nothing of their personal lives is revealed and yet the viewer is invited into the scene as an empathetic witness or an inspired follower.

In *Forgotten Man*, Dixon communicates hardship, despair, and isolation through the man's slumped posture as he sits on the curb against a backdrop of passing pedestrians. Contrast this painting with *Free Speech*, where we see a man elevated above his peers giving a universal sign of assurance.



Maynard Dixon: Poet

Constance Dixon, Maynard's mother, was a voracious reader who surrounded her children with the classics. It was by her side that Dixon learned to love the written word. The powerful visual language of Alfred Lord Tennyson's poetry influenced Dixon's imagination and in time he began writing poems that expressed his search for the spirit of the West and his hopes of finding a place in it.

FRONT IMAGE: Maynard Dixon, *Empty House*, 1935, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 25 1/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

PHOTOGRAPH IMAGES: Maynard Dixon, c. 1895. Photograph by Isabel Porter Collins. California Historical Society, Isabel Porter Collins Collection.

Maynard Dixon, c. 1940. Photographer Unknown. Medicine Man Gallery, J. Mark Sublette Collection.

FORGOTTEN MEN IMAGES: Maynard Dixon, *Forgotten Man*, 1934–1936, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 1/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

Maynard Dixon, *Free Speech*, 1934–1936, oil on canvas, 36 3/8 x 40 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

PEOPLE OF THE LAND IMAGES: Maynard Dixon, *Hopi Interior (Sichomovi Arizona)*, 1923, oil on canvas board, 15 15/16 x 19 3/4 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

Maynard Dixon, *Flathead Indian and Pony*, 1909, oil on chipboard, 7 x 10 1/4 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

Maynard Dixon, *Round Dance*, 1931, oil on canvas board, 15 7/16 x 19 7/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

Maynard Dixon, *Christmas Eve Procession*, Taos New Mexico, 1931, oil on canvas board, 15 15/16 x 19 3/4 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

A PORTRAIT OF HOME IMAGES: Maynard Dixon, *Dad Walker's House*, 1933, oil on canvas board, 15 7/8 x 19 7/8 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

Maynard Dixon, *Lazy Autumn*, 1943, oil on canvas, 25 3/8 x 30 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of Gene L. Jones and Hazel Anna Smith.

Maynard Dixon, *Apache Camp*, 1925, oil on canvas board, 19 3/4 x 15 7/16 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

POSTCARD IMAGE: Maynard Dixon, *Mesas in Shadow*, 1926, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 40 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

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