

Sagebrush and Solitude: Maynard Dixon in Nevada

Maynard Dixon (1875-1946) is frequently cited as one of the most important painters of the American West in the early twentieth century; however, the extent to which he engaged with the people and places of the Great Basin and Sierra Nevada has not been fully examined until now. From 1901 to 1939, Dixon made frequent trips from his San Francisco home to paint and sketch the striking landscapes of Nevada and the Eastern Sierra.

Born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley ranching community of Fresno, Dixon briefly attended the California School of Design in San Francisco in 1893 and participated in social organizations and the cultural life of the city at the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps influenced by his rural roots, he also developed a passion for outdoor scenery and established an artistic practice dependent on time spent alone outdoors. For Dixon, who donned cowboy boots, a black-suit, and a wide-brimmed Stetson hat on the streets outside his Montgomery Street studio in San Francisco, Nevada's alkali flats and sagebrush-studded rangelands offered a relatively easy-to-reach respite from the bustling city.

For forty years, as Dixon crisscrossed the Great Basin, he sketched, painted, and wrote poetry that captured the beauty of Nevada's open spaces, while introducing a new era of modernism to the state. Among Dixon's favorite subjects to paint were old homesteads, ranches, wild horses, and stands of cottonwood trees, all of which figured prominently into the hundreds of drawings and paintings he produced. Together with his poems, Dixon's life and art stand as a testament to his relentless search for solitude, spiritual understanding, and personal healing in the high desert.

This exhibition is curated by Ann M. Wolfe, Andrea and John C. Deane Family Chief Curator and Associate Director, with scholarly contributions from Donald J. Hagerty, John Ott, and Ann Keniston.

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On Horseback: The 1901 Journey to the Northern Great Basin

On May 17, 1901, Maynard Dixon and his artist-friend Edward Borein (1872-1945) rode horseback from Oakland, California, into Carson City, Nevada, on the first leg of an epic thousand-mile-ride through the northern Great Basin. With no specific destination in mind, the two artists headed in the direction of Montana. Dixon was an experienced horseman who first learned to ride while growing up in California's San Joaquin Valley.

Dixon and Borein departed Oakland, California with six horses, camp equipment, and art supplies. They traveled east across the Sierra on today's Highway 50, arrived in Carson City, Nevada after eleven days, and eventually reached Reno, which Dixon dismissed as "dreary and of no account." They continued north to California's Lassen and Modoc counties, visiting a succession of remote ranches before heading to Alturas, California and on to Harney County in southeastern Oregon. They stayed for several weeks at French Glen, headquarters of the P Ranch, one of Oregon's largest cattle operations, where Dixon produced several studies of ranch operations.

At age sixteen, Dixon was encouraged by artist Frederic Remington—the country's foremost chronicler of Western life—to "draw, draw from nature." During the 1901 trip, Dixon observed and sketched cowboy life. Based on the number of drawings he produced, he obviously heeded Remington's advice. As summer ended, Dixon and Borein headed east, concluding their trip in Boise, Idaho. Subsisting on an occasional jackrabbit and cornmeal biscuits, Dixon wrote to a friend, "We have been stalled here [in Boise] a week with sick horses—and the country is full of 'pinkeye.'" Plagued by difficulties and diminished resources, the pair abandoned their adventure, sold their worn-out horses and gear, made their way to Salt Lake City, and returned home to California by train.

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Eastern Sierra Wanderings: 1919-1923

The first quarter of the twentieth century was filled with both highs and lows for Maynard Dixon. In 1905, he married artist Lillian West Tobey (1879-1926) in San Francisco and his career as an illustrator flourished. Dixon received many commissions to illustrate magazines and books, and used the city as a home base for his travels to the American Southwest. In 1906, however, the San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed much of the city along with Dixon's studio, and there was little work for illustrators. The couple picked up and moved to New York, where he jump-started his illustration work and began a family.

A mere six years later, however, Dixon's marriage struggled, and he yearned for the West. Once back in San Francisco, he exhibited paintings at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition, where one painting earned a bronze medal. Although his career was thriving, Dixon confronted several personal dilemmas that threatened to unravel his life. Facing a divorce in 1917, and suffering from asthma, bouts of depression, and self-doubt, Dixon sought relief and solace in the wide, open spaces of the American West.

In 1919, Dixon embarked on a journey to Nevada and the Eastern Sierra. He made stops in Reno and Carson City before hitching a ride on a Southern Pacific train traveling three hundred miles south to Keeler, near Lone Pine. Dixon loved the scenery of the Eastern Sierra and explored the surrounding mountain ranges and vast desert playas.

Dixon met photographer Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) and they married after a brief courtship in 1920. The couple became central to San Francisco's circle of writers and artists, but Lange soon realized that Dixon needed to routinely escape the city for his art to remain vital. She recalled, "...he was always going for a month or six weeks, but he would never come back inside of four months. His trips were practically disappearances as far as San Francisco life was concerned. He was just either there, or he was gone."

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S.S. Silver State Murals

In late 1920, owners of the Admiral Orient Line, a subsidiary of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, began fabrication of a 535-foot-long passenger and cargo steamship named the S.S. *Silver State*. The company invited Maynard Dixon to design murals for the steamship's spacious dining room. Mindful of the ship's name, Dixon prepared three preliminary oil paintings on themes related to Nevada's mining heritage.

When the liner arrived in San Francisco from a Virginia shipyard in early 1921, it moored at a pier on the city's waterfront. Dixon quickly began work on the project, walking daily to the ship from his Montgomery Street studio. In slightly over two months, Dixon translated his three paintings into large, lunette-shaped murals, eight-by-sixteen feet each, located over the entrance to the dining room. Delighted with the result, the steamship company paid Dixon \$5,600 for his effort.

In July 1940, the U.S. Navy acquired the vessel. After service during World War II, it was scrapped in 1948. To date, no photographs of the murals on the vessel have surfaced.

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Tahoe Escape: Dixon and Lange at Fallen Leaf Lake

Maynard Dixon visited Lake Tahoe in the early 1920s and 30s as a guest of his major patron, Anita Baldwin (1876-1939). He first met Baldwin, the daughter of Comstock pioneer E. J. “Lucky” Baldwin (1828-1909), when she visited him in San Francisco in 1913 to purchase several of his paintings. For years afterward, she was one of Dixon’s major clients and acquired many important paintings from him.

In 1932, Dixon took his wife, photographer Dorothea Lange, and their two boys, along with the twin sons of their artist-friends Roi Partridge (1888-1984) and Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976), to Baldwin’s 2,000-acre-estate at Fallen Leaf Lake near South Lake Tahoe. They spent the summer in one of the Baldwin estate’s private cottages, isolated from the ravages of the Great Depression. There was an English butler at the main house, and Baldwin’s personal bodyguard (armed with a Colt .45 pistol) rode horseback around the property’s perimeter to discourage trespassers. Lange documented the family’s visit in photo scrapbooks showing Dixon and the children enjoying a range of outdoor activities.

Dixon managed to complete some paintings during his stay at Fallen Leaf Lake; even so, he described the mountain landscape as having, “too many trees.” By hiking above the tree line, the landscape “opened up” for Dixon, and he would focus in on a single tree or a small grouping of trees set against an empty sky. This approach could be considered modern compared to that of his predecessors, who aimed to depict the landscape with more topographic accuracy and precise detail. Whenever possible, Dixon descended from the mountains to explore Nevada, especially the hills around Virginia City and the Carson Valley.

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Towards Modernism in Nevada: Humboldt County, 1927

During the late summer of 1927, Maynard Dixon headed for Nevada's northwest corner, initially planning only a two-week excursion. The trip turned into four extremely productive months. Traveling from San Francisco to Winnemucca, Dixon met up with Frank Tobin, the son of stockman Clement Tobin. Mostly on horseback, they headed north in Nevada's Humboldt County where they pitched their tents in aspen groves and on remote cattle ranches. Along the way, Dixon wrote letters and composed poetry by the light of a kerosene lantern or flickering campfire.

When Dixon and Tobin reached Denio, near the Oregon border, they explored the opal mining operations near Thousand Creek Valley, and visited the remote areas of Virgin Valley, Rainbow Ridge, and the Pueblo Mountains before heading south along the western edge of the Pine Forest Range. They stayed for several weeks at the Alder Creek Ranch, forty miles north of the Black Rock Desert.

Dixon produced fifty-six oil paintings and numerous drawings during his four-month stay in Nevada. In these paintings, he began to experiment with slightly distorted and tightly framed compositions that emphasized the geometric forms of desert rocks, grassy meadows, and illuminated mountain ranges. Following his summer in the field, many of his paintings were on view in back-to-back autumn exhibitions at Reno's Twentieth Century Club and Riverside Hotel.

Upon Dixon's return to his San Francisco studio, he painted many canvases inspired by the Nevada landscape that were increasingly influenced by the formal principles of modernism. By eliminating unnecessary details, employing a limited color palette, and emphasizing the underlying geometric structure of the landscape, Dixon produced some of the earliest modern Nevada landscape paintings of the twentieth century.

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Portraits from the Eastern Sierra

Maynard Dixon loved the Eastern Sierra and returned whenever possible. Whether passing through during his travels from San Francisco to the American Southwest or lingering with the intent to paint and explore, the Owens Valley, Amargosa Desert, Inyo Mountains and the Coso Range inspired many of his paintings.

When visiting the town of Lone Pine (not far from the Alabama Hills and Mount Whitney), Dixon often stayed with the family of William “Bill” Skinner (1878-1952) and Charlotte Skinner (1879-1963). He had met the couple, both practicing artists, when they attended the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art and California School of Fine Arts in the early 1900s. After the Skinners completed their schooling in 1905, they settled permanently in Lone Pine since Bill’s family had roots and mining interests in the area. During his visits, Dixon regularly joined the Skinners on sketching trips. Sometimes they were accompanied by Dorothea Lange, and their mutual artist-friends Roi Partridge and Imogen Cunningham.

Dixon’s visits to Lone Pine were concurrent with the construction of the Owens Valley Aqueduct project, an initiative that diverted water from the rural Owens Valley to Southern California. The endeavor was catastrophic for the region, decimating surrounding farms and destroying the Owens Lake ecosystem. In his writing, Dixon critiqued what he witnessed, referring to the changes as “tin front progress.” However, no evidence of the transformation can be found in his paintings. Rather Dixon depicted the region with nostalgia, painting dramatic mountain vistas, quaint town scenes, and portraits of the residents he encountered.

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Painting the Boulder Dam, 1934

Constructed between 1931 and 1935 during the Great Depression, the Boulder Dam (today known as the Hoover Dam) was designed to divert water from the Colorado River to Southern California. Made from millions of tons of concrete, with labor from thousands of workers, the dam is often considered one of the seven engineering wonders of the world. In April 1934, Dixon was commissioned by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), a New Deal work-relief program for artists, to document construction activities at the Boulder Dam. Dixon's brother-in-law, Martin Lange, was employed as a worker on the dam when Dixon arrived.

During Dixon's monthlong stay, he lived at a worker's home in Boulder City, a community established to provide living quarters near the dam. What Dixon experienced distressed him, and he compared the town to a prison camp with armed guards, company houses, and concessions, "paying with one hand and taking it back with the other." All these things, an angry Dixon fumed, "emerged in a sense of the tragedy of men's labor, the great treadmill of lost endeavor....."

Other artists and photographers working alongside Dixon at the Boulder Dam produced paintings and photographs that celebrated the achievements of the project and glorified the bravery of the workers. Dixon's paintings, on the other hand, offer an unromantic and anti-heroic view of the endeavor, portraying laborers as miniscule figures set against imposing walls of rock in an inhospitable desert environment. "Man versus Rock," Dixon lamented. "It gave me an impression of concealed forces—and of ultimate futility."

Dixon also wrote two poems, "Industrial" and "1934," reflecting on what he had seen at the dam site. "America doesn't realize what a dangerous undertaking it is. Four were killed while I was there and the hospital was full all the time," he wrote. Dixon's dam paintings reveal his underlying pessimism and hopelessness towards the endeavor and represent his first sustained effort to grapple with the crisis of the Great Depression. He concluded that, "in the long run, the desert will have the last laugh."

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Tree Portraits: A Passion for Poplars

During Maynard Dixon's Nevada travels, a special tree caught his attention and became a fixture in many of his paintings—the Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), named for the pioneering explorer of the American West, John C. Frémont (1813-1890). The recognizable trees typically grow along springs and waterways in the arid high desert. As summer turns to autumn and frosty nights arrive, the cottonwood tree's foliage turns from bright green to rich yellow and gold, with the glowing trees visible from a great distance.

As a seasoned explorer of the Great Basin, Dixon knew the tree's promises: its rattling and shimmering leaves often foreshadow rain, and its leafy forms on the horizon promise water, firewood, shade, and shelter to desert travelers. Many of Dixon's cottonwood paintings were made in the Carson Valley, where the Carson River meanders through grassy meadows and pastures.

Another species of poplar tree, the Lombardy poplar (*Populus nigra*), began to appear in Dixon's paintings starting in the 1920s. Introduced to the American West from Italy in the late nineteenth century, the narrow, upright and fast-growing tree is often used as a windbreak on high desert ranches, or as a landscape element in small, rural towns.

In the last fifteen years of his life, Dixon painted over forty canvases of Fremont cottonwoods and Lombardy poplars standing alone or in small groves. His "portraits" of these trees—some old and gnarled, others young, ambitious, and candle-like in their shape—suggest his close attention to the nuance and detail of the living landscape.

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Love and Loss: Carson City in the 1930s

In the early years of the 1930s, Maynard Dixon became increasingly nervous about the rapidly worsening Great Depression and felt a need to retreat to the desert. In June 1933, Dixon, his wife Dorothea Lange, and their two boys left San Francisco for a summer trip to Zion National Park in Utah. On the way, they stopped in Carson City for a month and explored the surrounding area, visiting the Comstock-era mining town of Virginia City, and the Carson Valley near Gardnerville. They proceeded east across Nevada through Eureka, Austin, Ely, and Pioche before arriving at Zion, where they stayed until October.

After the month he spent painting at the Boulder Dam in 1934, Dixon returned to San Francisco to confront his unravelling marriage to Lange. In an attempt to salvage their relationship, Dixon and Lange again took their boys to Carson City for several weeks in the fall of 1934. This would be the last time the couple was together, for both knew their marriage was slowly eroding as they moved in opposite directions personally. The family stayed in a small apartment at one end of the historic Bliss Mansion in downtown Carson City. Dixon commandeered the spacious family dining room for his large canvases and painting materials, while Lange used the pantry as a darkroom. Dixon wandered Carson City, making numerous oil sketches of the city's trees and buildings.

In October 1935, Dixon traveled from San Francisco to Carson City, where he filed for divorce from Lange. By all accounts, the divorce was amicable. Dixon and Lange's longtime photographer-friend Imogen Cunningham lamented that the couple had seemed like a picture together, and that the rupture was like someone had slashed that picture in half. Again, Dixon stayed at the Bliss Mansion in Carson City through November 1935. Shaken to his core by the loss of his family, he ventured out on solo painting expeditions into the Nevada desert.

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Farewell to Nevada

Following Maynard Dixon's divorce from Dorothea Lange, he executed the details of a major sale of eighty-five paintings, sketches, and drawings to Brigham Young University, completing the transaction in 1937. With the sale behind him, he took the next steps in a romantic relationship with San Francisco painter and muralist Edith Hamlin (1902-1992). In fall 1937, the couple packed their bags and painting equipment for a trip from San Francisco to Carson City, where they were married in a brief ceremony on the veranda of the Bliss Mansion. The couple rented a small cottage and remained in Carson City for several weeks, sketching and painting. They also spent time in nearby Washoe Valley, Virginia City, Gold Hill, and Dayton.

Now suffering from emphysema, Dixon fell seriously ill while in Nevada, and the couple decided to head for Los Angeles, where a doctor friend could prescribe treatment. While driving south, Dixon painted *One Night Stand*, a rare nocturne showing the couple's Ford station wagon parked in front of a cabin at an auto campsite near Indian Springs, Nevada.

By 1938, Dixon's asthma had transformed into life-threatening emphysema, which meant he needed to seek a home in a warmer and more temperate climate. He and Hamlin discussed moving to Carson City or Tucson, Arizona. In the spring of 1939, they made a quick trip to Carson City, but reluctantly decided that the winter climate there would be detrimental to Dixon's failing health. After making a few more sketches, he left Nevada—never to return.

Dixon and Hamlin settled in Tucson, Arizona, building a home and studio just outside the city, where they planted a single tree in their patio—a cottonwood. Although it was hundreds of miles away, the Great Basin and Eastern Sierra still resonated for Dixon. In 1944, he rummaged through his portfolios of drawings and found inspiration for *Inyo Mountains*, which he completed in his studio.

Maynard Dixon died on November 13, 1946, at his Tucson home. Upon his passing, a small sketchbook was found tucked into his shirt pocket.

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A Dialogue with Life: The Poems of Maynard Dixon

When the paint would not say what he wanted, or when he was distressed by personal challenges, Maynard Dixon used poetry to express his deeply held feelings and beliefs. In 1896, Dixon began writing poetry in the lofty, romantic style of the period with rhymed verse. Over time, his poems changed in terms of rhyme and diction, but his preoccupation with the Western landscape remained consistent. By the 1920s, Dixon was writing more prolifically, his poems revealing flashes of insight and an emotional depth that mirrored his tumultuous life and art.

Dixon's poetry can be "linked to two strands of then-contemporary Western poetry about the landscape, cowboy poetry, and a proto-modernist or regional modernist mode," Ann Keniston, Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno has written. "Both [strands] emphasize the importance of an unspoiled Western United States landscape vulnerable to the incursions of modernity; explore the difference between nature and the human while attempting to draw lessons from the natural world; and emphasize notions of purity and unity that seem, to twenty-first-century eyes, at once touching and naïve."

Dixon's fondness for the ballad form of cowboy poetry is evident in much of his writing. However, unlike many cowboy poems or ballads, his writing isn't particularly narrative, even though it does emphasize the "vanishing West." Only a few of Dixon's poems appeared in print, although in 1923, San Francisco's famed Grabhorn Press issued *Poems and Seven Drawings*. The literary magazine *Laughing Horse*, which featured writers like Mary Hunter Austin, D. H. Lawrence, and Witter Bynner, included a Dixon poem in its 1923 issue, and in 1925, John Henry Nash published a single poem by Dixon in *Continent's End: An Anthology of Contemporary California Poets*.

As Keniston concludes in her assessment of Dixon's poetry, his "...poems explore different modes of seeing in ways that evoke modernism itself: they are at once nostalgic and forward looking and also both allegorical and real. ...[They] are interpretive, less descriptions of specific places than gestures toward universalism."

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