



THOUGHTS ON MAYNARD DIXON

BY WILL SOUTH

The art of Maynard Dixon is about the land. The color, temperature, intensity, and vastness of the desert were his subjects; the rhythms and forces of nature were his themes. To experience Dixon's work over time and in quantity is to refresh our own senses and to remember our own fundamental connection with earth and sky. We might call him a poet and a politician in addition to painter, such is Dixon's power to enable us to feel both the energy and the elegance of our own geography and by extension, to reflect upon the importance of the earth to virtually everything we do.

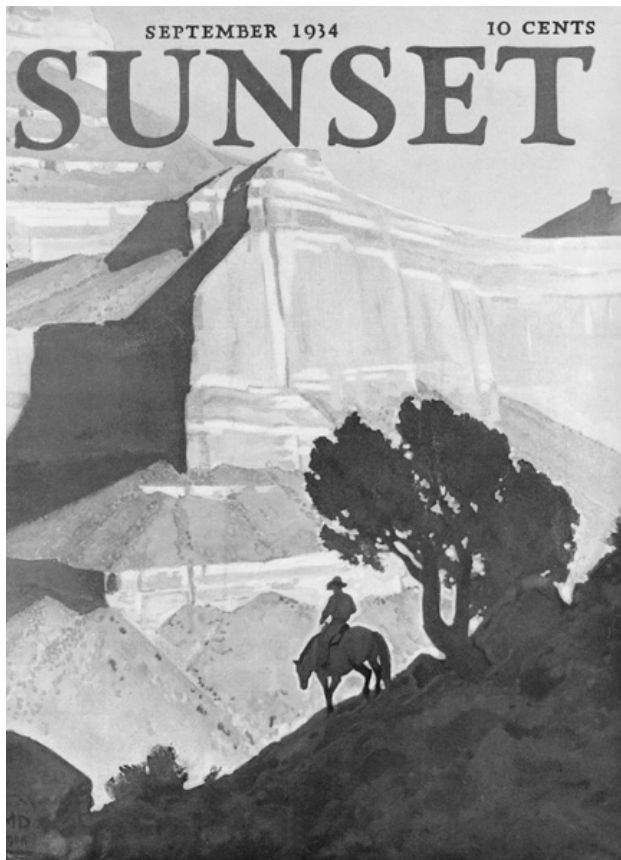
There is little in Dixon's early life to portend his career as an artist. He was born in 1875 in Fresno, California, a town at the center of the State's great central valley, the San Joaquin. There were no galleries to visit let alone museums in which to discover great art of the past, there was nothing much in the way of art instruction for adults let alone children. The valley was a land of farming and ranching; Fresno was spotted with shops and saloons. Local business was conducted with stagecoaches passing through. The terrain was flat, the air hot and dry. Beyond the town, emptiness stretched out in all directions.

That Dixon drew as a child is hardly miraculous--all children draw. He sketched the openness around him and

he made pictures on trips to the family ranch, a place called Refuge. Young Maynard, like any wide-eyed, willful boy, had no idea he lived in a cultural backwater. For him, coyotes and cattle loomed large in a world of romance and adventure. He might have grown to be a cowboy except for the fact that he never stopped drawing.

At the age of sixteen, Dixon wrote a letter to the famous illustrator of the West, Frederic Remington, who replied with words of encouragement. This important support led directly to Dixon's enrollment in 1893 at San Francisco's California School of Design. He lasted there only three months; and this short stint gives us our first evidence of the artist's fierce individual temperament: Dixon was not a blind follower of the artistic trends then dominating Northern California, nor would he ever be a slavish adherent to any artistic school or style.

The work of Albert Bierstadt and George Inness dominated the artistic imagination of late-nineteenth-century San Francisco. Bierstadt's paintings defined the highest aspirations of visual art with their technical virtuosity and epic grandeur: Art was nature in all its glory, nature with expansive skies where sunrays split through clouds and illuminated the emerald hills below. Art was nature



Dixon's cover artwork for Sept. 1934 issue of *Sunset Magazine*.

polished and precisely described, nature as enormous outdoor theater and temple combined. In short, Bierstadt represented the Hudson River School gone West.

The soft, smoky and emotionally introspective paintings of Inness, meanwhile, were the apogee of the poetic and spiritual landscape. The gentle mysticism of his oils suggested that the artist was, indeed, akin to a preacher who reveals the mysteries of Creation. Bierstadt was emulated locally by Thomas Hill and Virgil Williams, while Inness's influence was best spread by William Keith. In both camps, which were far from mutually exclusive, there existed a strong awareness of artistic lineage and European indebtedness. Inness and Keith were unthinkable without the Barbizon School in France that preceded them; Bierstadt stemmed, ultimately, from Claude Lorraine. For these artists and their aficionados, art with a capital 'A' involved the grand scheme of historical precedent.

For Dixon, it did not. His inclination was not toward drawing plaster casts of Greek statuary, and even less toward going abroad to Paris, Munich or London for study at a prestigious academy. Fine art as it was conventionally conceived of as being populated by heroes, nymphs, angels and transcendent landscapes was all well and good, but he could squeeze all of those things (minus the angels) into the pen and ink illustrations for the *Overland Monthly* that he began making at the time he dropped out of the School of Design. What Maynard Dixon learned from Bierstadt and Inness (and what he built upon years later) was not the idea that he needed to emulate either one's classical control of the other's symbolist narratives, but rather that it was nature first and foremost that could convey majesty and mystery.

Before he came to really see nature, though, the young Dixon saw myth and sensation. He studied the work of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell; he looked closely at the illustrations in everything from the San Francisco dailies to *Harper's Weekly*. From these sources he learned both the traditional and the most contemporary approaches to design and composition. He developed a muscular and tight graphic style that served well his robust imagination. It was a style not dissimilar to those dominating American magazines and books: it clung closely to the observable and verifiable facts of things; it seized upon the drama inherent in the story at hand.

From the outset, Dixon had the illustrator's knack for exaggerating and energizing his subjects. Whether for the fascinating and promotional periodical *Land of Sunshine* or for Jack London's novel *Son of the Wolf*, Dixon's illustrations carried visual impact as well as the sensual facts of time and place. Like his erstwhile mentor, Remington, who spent very little time in the West in favor of concocting his illustration in his East Coast studio, Dixon as an illustrator contributed to the mythology of the West.

Still, it was Dixon's illustration work that provided his essential understanding of what was actually *in* the West, and it was illustration work that gave him strategies to represent those things. Early in the twentieth

century, Dixon began traveling through Arizona, New Mexico and Nevada. In between trips, his San Francisco studio began to swell with artifacts from his travels: with guns, saddles, arrowheads and blankets. As his immersion in all things Western deepened, the lanky and sardonic Dixon adopted the look: he wore a Stetson and a hand-rolled cigarette dangled from his lips.

Dixon's commercial success was sure if not always steady after 1900. By 1908, he established a studio in New York and in 1912 Dixon, by then a member of the prestigious Salmagundi Club, showed paintings at the Nation Academy of Design. As a young man, Dixon had rejected the academic route perhaps in large part because there were too many rules and rules conflicted with individuality. With an increasing maturity in his head and hand, he came to realize that it was precisely his own individuality that would lead him back toward a career as a painter and not an illustrator. As a painter, he could expound on the West

rather than merely exploit it; he could interpret it in color in ways similar to how he poeticized it with words; and he could do this without being confined by any one style or point of view.

When Dixon returned to San Francisco in 1912, two rather distinct styles of regional Impressionism had overtaken the primacy of Bierstadt and Inness. Artists who had trained in European academies and simultaneously imbibed the innovations of outdoor painting had returned home not as full fledged Impressionists but as aesthetic hybrids: they retained careful drawing, a feel for the grandeur of Nature inherited from earlier

American painting, and overlaid their narrative landscapes with the palette of outdoor light. In the North, California Impressionism was more of a tonal style stemming from Inness and propagated by Arthur Matthews, while in the Southland it manifest itself as an optimistic, redolent, and decorative style that celebrated all that picturesque. Both approaches continued to be underpinned by academics and traditional art world values; neither could or would convert Maynard Dixon.

Instead, Dixon's evolving genius was to identify and assimilate strategies--whatever their source--that would

help him realize his own gathering vision. Upon his return to California, he explored the possibilities of using Impressionism's fragmented brushstrokes and pure pigments. He was learning from Impressionism how light and atmosphere affect what we see and what we think we see. The black shadows of illustration became blue on canvas.

While he learned from Impressionism, he did not abandon the les-

sons of traditional landscape of the theatrical compositional techniques he had mastered as an illustrator: horses were seen galloping from above; massive cumulus clouds formed the backdrop to a solitary Indian atop a pony on the plains. Innovations from the world of fine art were blending unabashedly with the commercial eye of the illustrator. In 1915, Dixon was awarded a bronze medal at the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, and held a one-man show at that city's Bohemian Club. Had he continued to paint in an impressionistic vein, he easily could have joined the rank of California's premier practitioners: Granville Redmond, William Wendt and Guy Rose.



Wild Horses of Nevada, 1927, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Karges Family Trust.



Como Se Pasa La Vida, 1931, oil on canvas.

However, Dixon did not continue in this vein, and the reasons are not difficult to discern. To be a full-blown Impressionist would require dissolving the solidity of nature into atmosphere. Impressionism did not define the scale of the West that he traveled through, it did not offer a way to interpret the people who lived there, and it did not by itself explain the experience of being in and of the land. Bierstadt's art had scale and solidity, but lacked the heat, angularity and toughness of the West. The soft focus of Inness and his followers spoke more to inner states of mind than to outer states of body. What Dixon required more and more was a way to combine his first hand knowledge of the West's many subjects and his ardent feelings for those subjects with the most effective techniques available from the proliferation of styles in the art world.

Among those styles was the electric color and flattened patterns of the Society of Six, a group of Bay Area painters who took the cues from Matisse and his "Wild Beast" followers. Far more than the Impressionists and Tonalists that preceded them, the Six--a group that included Selden Gile, Maurice Logan and August Gay--obliterated detail and maximized sensation, allowing simplicity and geometry to express space and force. Dixon, with his own keen eye and poetic soul, understood the power of such an approach. He was never a modernist per se, not a follower of Matisse let alone a Cubist, but he recognized and appreciated modern art's expressive prowess with color and abstraction. Dixon applied the power of angular geometry and brilliant color to the desert, putting these instruments at the service of his own voice.

In and around 1920 at the age of forty-five--more than midway through his life's journey--Dixon fully found that Voice. Making art as a commercial venture gave way to painting as the way to express his relentless passion for the West as a place and as a state of mind. For him, the West was enormous and open but hardly a Garden of Eden--it was full of brutal edges and immense dryness. It was full of color, but not the dappled pleasantries of Impressionism as much as simplified horizontal bands that alone described mesa, sky and clouds. And, the West was still full of stories, but no longer the sensationalized shoot-outs of his imagination as much as the dignified rituals of his observation.

Dixon was a man of the West not because he was born there or because he painted Western scenes, but because he embraces what the West was and represented: mobility, freedom, possibility and the sense of the infinite. For Dixon, room to move about was not a luxury but a necessity. To know the world, he needed space to listen to it. He needed space for time itself to disappear and for his own poetry to take shape.

And, so do we. We are drawn to the art of Maynard Dixon today more so than ever as space slips away and the desert hush is no longer. Dixon's West of space, color and intensity is the West of our own physical and spiritual desires: we desire the experience of it more than to merely admire it. We understand the land once more for the healthful and nurturing phenomenon it is. The great reward in the art of Maynard Dixon is not pleasure, though there are many to be had there, rather it is our recognition of ourselves in the land, and that art and all that it represents is dependent in every way on the preservation of what Dixon saw all around him: the fragile, dynamic, radiant, and irreplaceable earth. 🌍



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