

“FRIEND DIXON”

Charles M. Russell and Maynard Dixon

By Donald J. Hagerty

*Excerpted from Desert Dreams: The Art and Life of Maynard Dixon,
Gibbs Smith, Layton, Utah, 1993*



“The Oil Bunk House,” 1927, oil, 16” x 20”. The Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr. Collection.

By the time of his death in 1946, Maynard Dixon had achieved considerable acclaim as one of the West’s leading artists. From the beginning, Dixon was different—an authentic, iconoclastic, self-created individual. Born in Fresno, California in 1875, he had no formal academic art training except for three miserable months at San Francisco’s Mark Hopkins

Institute of Art in early 1893, and he did not, as so many American artists would, make an obligatory pilgrimage to Paris for study. Disdainful and bothered, yet intrigued and involved by the self-absorbed onslaught of Modernism in the art world, he would develop by the 1920s two enduring themes in his work: the timeless truth of the immense western landscape

and the religious mysticism of the Native American.

In reality, two Maynard Dixons existed, as exemplified in his body of work. Part of his art lamented the "flickering out of old campfires," knowing the change was coming, an Old West departing and a New West arriving. Like many other American artists at that time, Dixon, contemptuous of fashion and convention, resisted inroads made on the West by the nation's rapid urbanization and industrial progress.

The other Dixon and his art emerged in the early 1920s as a clear, unequivocal product from the reality of the American West's landscapes. Infused with Dixon's consistent philosophy of art and life and his search for meaningful goals in an increasingly technological era, his paintings were characterized by intense feelings for man's place in the grand natural scheme. Dixon's work is a reflection, not only of his own inner nature and laborious craftsmanship, but of a people and land with which he became allied.

Dixon discovered a difference between the frontier and the West. The frontier, a historical concept concerned with certain American values, had all but disappeared, while the West itself seemed timeless, impervious to change, even spiritual. Ultimately he concluded that the West's landscapes held the answers to his searching, arguing that American painting could best work its influence on the lives and thoughts of people when painters based their work upon native material and their native reaction to it. Maynard Dixon was a regionalist, long before the term arrived, with a confirmed belief in the vitality of regional America, particularly the West.

Part city-living bohemian, part traveler on desert landscapes, and sometimes a mystic touched by the reverberation of unknown presences, Maynard Dixon often left his San Francisco studio to roam the West's plains, mesas, and deserts by foot, horseback, buckboard—and yes, ultimately, the dreaded automobile—drawing, painting, and expressing his creative personality in poems, essays, and letters, searching for a transcendent awareness of the region's spirit.

These long, often solitary excursions into lands "where no one went," were prompted by intense personal and philosophic examinations. "Otherness" and "remoteness" are basic to ideas about the American West, and Maynard Dixon possessed this concept of a region as qualitatively, not just quantitatively, different. In obtaining this insight, Dixon moved through several transitions in his artistic life—never easily. In the middle 1890s, he was an illustrator of mostly Western adventure stories for magazines, newspapers, and books; yet by 1912 he had moved back to San Francisco, concluding that he could no longer portray the West in "false" terms. By then he had become one of America's foremost illustrators of western life, his art

bound up with literary appeal for a departed and increasingly mythic Old West, in an era acknowledged as the Golden Age of Illustration.

During that period, in January 1908, Dixon moved from San Francisco to New York seeking greater opportunities for his illustration work. There he established a studio at the Lincoln Arcade on Broadway, home to many artists and writers. These artists, writers, actors, Wild West showmen and others with an emotional and intellectual interest in the West and American art used Dixon's place as an informal meeting location. Among them, one individual seemed unique. Sometime during 1908, Dixon met Charles M. Russell at the studio.

I first began to hear about "Charlie Russell, the cowboy artist" as far back as 1890, and from then on with fair regularity in almost any part of the West wherever pictures of western life might be mentioned. His fame was greatest, of course, among cattlemen and old-timers. He had a poor rating with artists and esthetes—though I believe no one, especially none who had attempted a study of the life he pictured, ever questioned his complete knowledge and truthfulness. For these we all respected him, whatever we thought of the artistic use he made of them. Natural fact and historical accuracy were his aims; imagination, interpretation,—a recreation of the subject matter—to him were non-sense. He said "I do not object to broad free painting—but I want to have sense,—I want to see what it is." Also, "I talk with these esthetic fellows, and I don't believe they know what they want. They don't seem to know a damn thing but painting. They are just 'artists.' I'm not an 'artist'—I'm an illustrator. I just try to tell the truth about what I know." He made such statements always quietly and modestly, even humbly.

He never questioned another man's right to paint as he pleased—but judged him and his works with the literal commonsense of hard experience. (Nothing like long days in the saddle over rough ground in any kind of weather to work the foolishness out of you.)

In appearance he was all an old timer: about five-feet ten inches—heavily boned, wide and solid shoulders, square body, slightly bowed legs; massive head; deliberate of movement, slow of smile. He was the only white man I have ever known whose bone structure of head and conformation of features were really those of an Indian. He had smallish gray eyes and a mane of coarse tawny hair; but if he had been brunette and swarthy you could not have told him from a Crow

or a Blackfoot. Also like an Indian, his face was immobile. The gray eyes were kindly; yet looking in them you could realize that he had grown up in a country where "justifiable homicide" was an honored custom. He always wore a cowboy Stetson, the crown not dented, no vest, a northwest "breed sash" and plain cowboy boots; but there was no hint of show business or movie costuming in this;—it was his native garb.¹

Dixon and Russell never saw each other often, nor corresponded regularly, yet an enduring, respectful friendship emerged. In 1917, Dixon and Frank B. Hoffman, an artist Dixon met while in New York from 1908 to 1912, were invited by the Great Northern Railway to develop promotional paintings and posters at Glacier National Park and among the Blackfeet Indians, the railroad's principal tourist attractions. One of the first things Dixon did was to write to Russell, asking if they could visit while in Montana. Russell, at his summer lodge on Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park, replied with distinctive syntax:

Aug. 21, 1917

Friend Dixon and Hoffman

I received your letter and will be glad to see you over here and when you come the robe will be spread and the pipe lit if you will drop me a line when you are coming I will meet you at the foot of the lake there are no Injuns here but there is lots of good picture country and I think we can have a good time My wife sends best wishes and will also be glad to see you I spoke to our son Jack about you fellers coming he sprung a long talk but I dont savy his language yet it might have been a kick he was putting in but come on over I think I can squar with him for you

Your friend

C.M. Russell²

During late August of 1917, Dixon and Hoffman visited Russell at his Bull Head Lodge, located along the shore of Lake McDonald, in the shadow of Glacier's lofty peaks. From late June until the first snowfall, Russell often made the lodge a workshop and study. A buffalo skull, fastened onto planks and nailed to a nearby tree, served as a beacon to visitors arriving by boat. Two figures, a gnome and an Indian, flanked the steps leading to the porch. At one time, the cabin had only one large room; later bedrooms were added, along with a special studio room with a large northlight window where Russell would paint. In the early

morning Russell would work at his easel in the studio, devoting afternoons and evenings to guests, either close personal friends from his cowboy days or artists like Maynard Dixon, met on his trips east. During the summer guests always stopped by and when they became numerous, Russell placed white cotton screens around the camp cots to afford some privacy. Each guest signed their name on the screen for that year and if an artist, added a little painting or drawing.

Dixon enjoyed his two-week stay at Bull Head Lodge, often talking with Russell into the early-morning hours, respecting him as an authentic westerner and for his knowledge of the West. There would be things Dixon was unsure about, costume details, for example, or things about the landscape, or matters of feel and mood that Russell helped him understand. There was something else too. Both Russell and Dixon knew the Old West was slipping away, and that their art would be important in remembering the West.



Charles M. Russell in Dixon's studio, 1924. Photograph by Dorothea Lange. Museum Permanent Collection.

Harold Von Schmidt, a student and protege of Dixon, and later to become a noted illustrator, recalled that in late fall during the early 1920s, Dixon would go down to the San Francisco train station to pick up Russell and bring him to Dixon's Montgomery Street studio. Russell, in the last years of his life before his death in 1926, migrated from Montana's cold winters to Pasadena, returning to Montana in the spring. Dixon

¹ Letter of Maynard Dixon to George Rankin, San Francisco, January 15, 1937. Copy in the Maynard Dixon Papers. Collection of Donald J. Hagerty.

² Letter of Charles M. Russell to Maynard Dixon and Frank B. Hoffman, Lake McDonald, Montana. August 21, 1917. Charles M. Russell, *Word Painter: Letters 1887-1926*. Edited by Brian W. Dippie, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon Carter Museum, 1993.

and Russell would spend all day and night talking about the West and things western, go from one restaurant to another, ending at an all-night coffee house, then back to the studio for more talking. Finally Dixon would put Russell on the morning train to Los Angeles. When Russell came to San Francisco in 1924, Dorothea Lange, Dixon's second wife, who would achieve acclaim as a Depression-era photographer in the 1930s, took two photographs of him in the studio, one a profile of his great shaggy head, his right hand holding a cigarette. Lange remembered she was not a participant in the discussion between Dixon and Russell; she was just there, with her camera. She also recalled Dixon and Russell were in serious conversation, not trading anecdotes on western lore, or entertaining each other, which they both could do well, but engaged in intense dialogue.

That afternoon in Dixon's studio left Lange with an indelible memory, "a quality not unlike other rare occasions, when I have been in the presence of old-type American Indians. There is a sort of echo, which remains and is unforgettable."³

Von Schmidt and Edward Borein sometimes would join the talk sessions, particularly when the artists argued about modern art. Once, Dixon and Borein claimed modern artists could not draw or paint. Russell though, thought for a while and then surprising everyone said, "I don't think so. When I was in New York I met a fellow that painted like you and I do. Then he got interested in something else. He decided to paint intersecting planes of light. He painted a long time that way...but by God he drew and painted just as good as we do."⁴

During those first several years of the 1920s, Dixon had worked out painting techniques to express the West as he felt it should be seen. But to his dismay, he discovered his subject changing under the impact of popular culture. Inexpensive automobiles were destroying the isolation of even the most remote communities, emptying the stables and dousing old campfires. At first the motion pictures imitated the Old West, then the Old West began imitating the movies. That Maynard Dixon did not like what was coming is



Maynard Dixon at Walpi, 1925. Photograph by Dorothea Lange. Collection of John Dixon.

³ Paper Talk: Illustrated Letters of Charles M. Russell. Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1962. p. 3.

⁴ Walt Reed. Harold Von Schmidt Draws and Paints the Old West. Flagstaff: Northland Press. 1972. p. 34.

Desert Dreams

The Art of Maynard Dixon

Desert Dreams will be on exhibit at the C.M. Russell Museum from July 1 through August 31. Approximately 70 dramatically executed original works by Maynard Dixon will be displayed, including oils, pen and inks, and works in pencil.

Donald Hagerty will present a lecture on Maynard Dixon and the exhibition on July 10 at 1:30 p.m. Reception to follow at 2:30 p.m.; refreshments will be served. Standard admission; free to Museum members.

Desert Dreams is sponsored by Norwest Bank, Great Falls and Myhre Advertising.

evident in his poem, "To An Old Timer." Perhaps not surprisingly, he dedicated the poem to Charles M. Russell:

*What news, old timer? True that line and fence
now subdivide the prairies and the hills—
a web of worries and machine-made ills
impeded your freedom without recompense;
that little people crowd and trade, and pass—
nor lift their eyes beyond the day that brings
their petty profit of the little things—
where once the west wind turned the prairie grass.
And yet I know, remote, a country where
God's desert peaks, unmoved, outstare the sun:
and still in lonely unsought valleys run
the distant antelope; and flashing clear
stampeding mustangs from their dust-clouds dim
wheel and are gone across the broken range;
the hidden ranch house and the springs are strange;
and eagles perch upon the lava rim.
So somewhere faith believes, though sense denies,
that while these peaks are free, these heavens pure,
still something of their nature must endure
in men who meet the silence of these skies;
that here these greater-hearted ones shall find,
where lesser men their lesser fortunes seek,
a mighty upland, clear from peak to peak—
the free unfenced republic of the mind.⁵*



Donald J. Hagerty has recently retired from the University of California at Davis where he was a teacher and administrator. He is the author of the comprehensive catalog *Desert Dreams, the Art and Life of Maynard Dixon* published in 1993 by Peregrine Smith Books. Hagerty studied and researched Maynard Dixon extensively, interviewing living relatives and friends of Dixon for much of his primary information.

⁵ Poem of Maynard Dixon. In *Rim-Rock and Sage: The Collected Poems of Maynard Dixon*. Introduction by Kevin Starr. San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1977, pp. 77-79. Sunset Magazine reproduced this poem, accompanied by a Dixon drawing in January, 1922.