

## The Maynard Dixon Line

*One of the best early California painters holds ties to the Coachella Valley*

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*By Ann Japenga*

IN THE EARLY 1940S, PAINTERS GATHERED ON THE NORTH SHORE OF THE SALTON SEA, east of Mecca. Writer Ed Ainsworth had a house there. Painters John Hilton, Clyde Forsythe, Bill Bender, and others came to camp and paint in a makeshift salon nestled between the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks and the sea.

The place had some sort of natural magnetism for painters. Sometime around 1940, budding artist and railroad man Carl Bray was building a railroad bridge at this same spot. He had begun fooling around with paints, but wasn't yet the confident painter he would become. (Though he moved away, his studio still sits along Highway 111 in Indian Wells.)



*Photo Courtesy Brigham Young University Museum of Art*

Bray noticed a gaunt pilgrim bent over an easel outside a shack near the tracks. The locals told him the man was Maynard Dixon. Today, Dixon is a famous name. Thom Gianetto, co-owner of Edenhurst Gallery in Palm Desert and an executive producer of the new documentary *Maynard Dixon: Art and Spirit*, says Dixon is considered by some to be the greatest Western artist — greater than Frederic Remington or Charles M. Russell.

But to Bray, Dixon hardly looked like somebody important. He was wan from emphysema and dispirited over his divorce from photographer Dorothea Lange. The high plateaus hampered his breathing, so he was living for a couple of winters at the shack he called Desert Camp.

While he will always be best known for painting New Mexico-style desert — buttes, mesas, and stately clouds — a part of Dixon will always reside near Mecca. At least one of his surviving paintings was painted there. *Destination Unknown* shows a hobo along the tracks. The model for the hobo was desert artist John Hilton; the inspiration was the North Shore setting.

For rehabilitation, Dixon soaked in hot springs near his shack and sunbathed in the sand. Visitors included painter Jimmy Swinnerton and Randall Henderson, publisher of *The Desert Magazine*. Sometimes in the evenings, Dixon read his poetry out loud to friends:

Oh I am Maynard Dixon  
And I live out here alone  
With pencil and pen and paint-brush  
And a camp-stool for my throne

Carl Bray was young and shy in those days, so he just managed to get out a “hello” and an introduction. “Maynard Dixon had some great advice for me,” Bray remembers with a chuckle. “He said, ‘Get out of this business while you can.’”

Plagued with health woes and financial worries, Dixon wasn't joking. But Bray stubbornly went on to become a prized desert painter. Collectors still come to see the 90-year-old artist in Banning, where he lives today.

Dixon died in 1946, only a few years after he encountered Carl Bray at Mecca. But his connection to the Coachella Valley continued after his death. One of his sons, John Dixon, lives part time in Palm Desert. And local gallery owners Thom Gianetto, Don Merrill, and Dan Nicodemo are executive producers of the recently released documentary on Dixon.

A Los Angeles filmmaker, Jayne McKay, fell in love with the painter the first time she saw his work and set out to make a full-length documentary on his life, narrated by Dixon collector Diane Keaton. McKay enlisted the help of the owners of Edenhurst Gallery, which shares her passion for early California painters.

The desert painters represent the antithesis of midcentury modern, Gianetto says. They appeal to romantics who long for the days of the caballeros and the ranchos. And the biggest romantic of all was Maynard Dixon. "He brings a fourth dimension to a painting," Gianetto says. "Dixon paints the heart and soul and spirit of the desert."