



Modernism in the Southwest

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“ Miles upon miles of level stretches covered with
sage brush,
with here and there a drop of a few hundred feet
that would be a canyon,
Hills and Mountains of every color...
A sunset seems to embrace the Earth
Big sun heat
Big storm
Big everything...”¹

In the 1900's, a group of New York City Modernists made a move to create art in the southwest region of North America. This took place almost simultaneously with the Armory Show in New York in 1913. Well-known academic artists from different schools in New York were drawn to the relatively unexplored exotic territory. Their paintings bridged the gap between landscape painting and Modernism. These artists presented a

¹ John Marin. *John Marin*, ed. Cleve Gray. (New York: Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1974), p. 161.

unique view of the landscape and culture of the Southwest. This paper will explore four artists and their responses to the Southwest landscape.

In New York City during the 1910s and 1920s, many painters were concerned with the social context of city life and political issues. The role of these artists had been to explore urban culture through the style of genre paintings. Modernist painting, which included Individualism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, and Impressionism was also emerging at this time. Modernist groups were headed by two main schools of art, Alfred Stieglitz's group, and Robert Henri of the Ashcan School.

Stieglitz headed a conceptually oriented group of artists who were concerned with individualism and spirituality in art. The Henri school was a group of eight painters well trained in plein-air painting and realism. These painters also addressed individualist theories in their paintings. Both of these groups were significantly affected by the Armory Show. After the Show, the students of these groups decided on different pathways and directions with their painting.

The significance of the Armory Show in 1913, in New York City, was that it extended to the American public, “ a daring presentation of a new and

revolutionary art.”² This marked the first time a new European style was presented after the change from Classicism. The critics attacked and praised the art in the show and this sparked the fuel for Modernism to become accepted and popular. Although the works received good and bad responses, the controversy alone commanded attention from the public.

“Individualism is a time-honored trait of character in the American hierarchy of values, and yet the Modernists were reviled for that also. In art as in all other fields, individualism apparently was considered a virtue only so long as it remained within the established framework of social precepts.”³ The Armory was the first show to receive enough publicity to change the view the general public had towards art. The show also caused a reaction and change in many artists “to the powerful challenge of the new art.”⁴ Some artists were inspired and exhilarated by the show, but some were not able to face the challenge of the new art and backed out. Many artists jumped on the bandwagon, and a few artists “struck out boldly and made their own way.”⁵

Of the few that chose their own way, some went to the Southwest.

Inspired by the Armory Show, John Sloan, Mardsen Hartly, Georgia

² Brown, Milton W. American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 47.

³ Ibid., p.51.

⁴ Ibid., p.58.

⁵ Ibid., p.59.

O'Keeffe, and Maynard Dixon left the Northeast in search of a new American subject matter. Inspired by the Southwest topography, they all spent time painting beautiful desert landscapes, and mountains. They were also fascinated by the Indian culture, and their spirituality. They brought Modernism to the Southwest and the Southwest to Modernism. Their Southwestern paintings were brought to New York and accepted by galleries, dealers, and critics. The images gained popularity quite rapidly because the artists who studied in the Southwest were already established in New York.

A determining factor which enabled artists to travel to the Southwest was the hospitality of Mabel Luhan Dodge. Mabel lived in the heart of the New York art scene in an elegant apartment on Fifth Avenue. She was a socialite and patron of the arts who hosted artists, musicians, philosophers, professors, and many other professionals. With her guests, she engaged in intellectual discussions on revolutionary ideas. "Her personification of the village intellectual rebel casts light on the reasons that brought her and a subsequent contingent of modernists painters to New Mexico and the Southwest."⁶ Mabel moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1917, and continued to host the Modernists. Among the well-known painters that she hosted from the East were Andrew Dasburg, Ernest Blumenschein, B. J. O.

Nordfeldt, John Marin, Robert Henri, John Sloan, Georgia O'Keeffe, Marsden Hartley, and Maynard Dixon. The following are examples of her guest's Southwest paintings.



Figure 1. Dasburg, Clouds, 1930. watercolor, 14x20in. Gerald P. Peters Gallery.

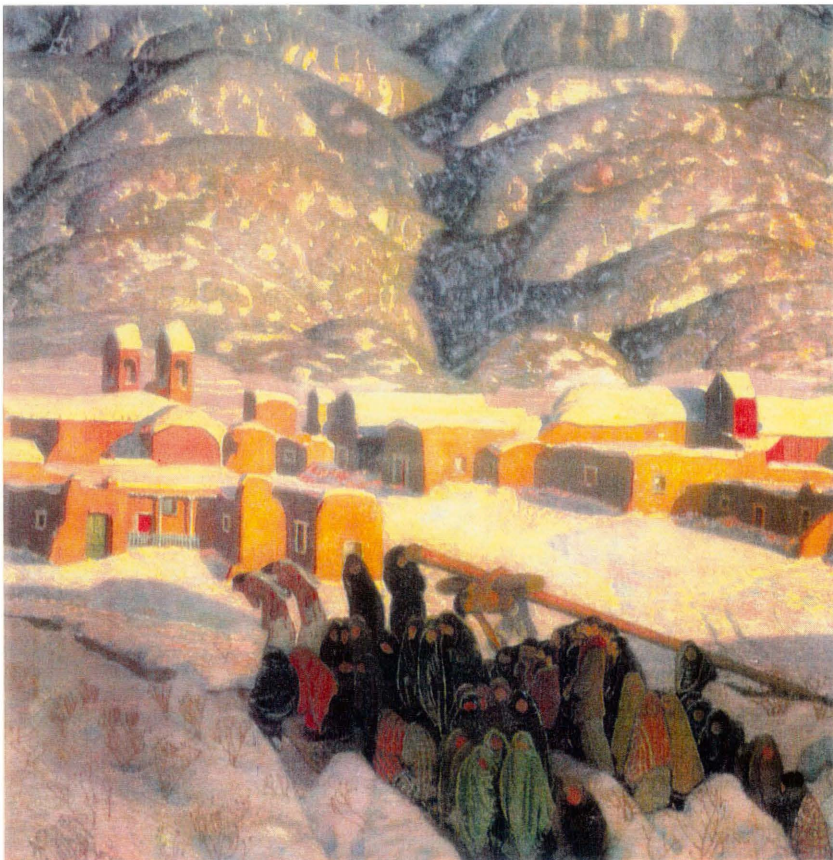


Figure 2. Blumenschein, Sangre de Cristo Mountains, 1925, oil on canvas, 50 ¼ x60in. Anschutz Collection.

⁶ Ibid., p.19.



Figure 3. Nordfeldt, Antelope Dance, 1919. oil on canvas, 35 5/8 x 43in. Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.



Figure 4. Marin, Canyon of the Hondo, New Mexico, 1930. watercolor, 15x20in. Anschutz Collection.



Figure 5. Henri, Miguel of Tesque, 1917. oil on canvas, 24x20in. Anschutz Collection.



Figure 6. Sloan, Chama Running Red, 1927. oil on canvas, 29 ½ x39 ½ in. Anschutz Collection.

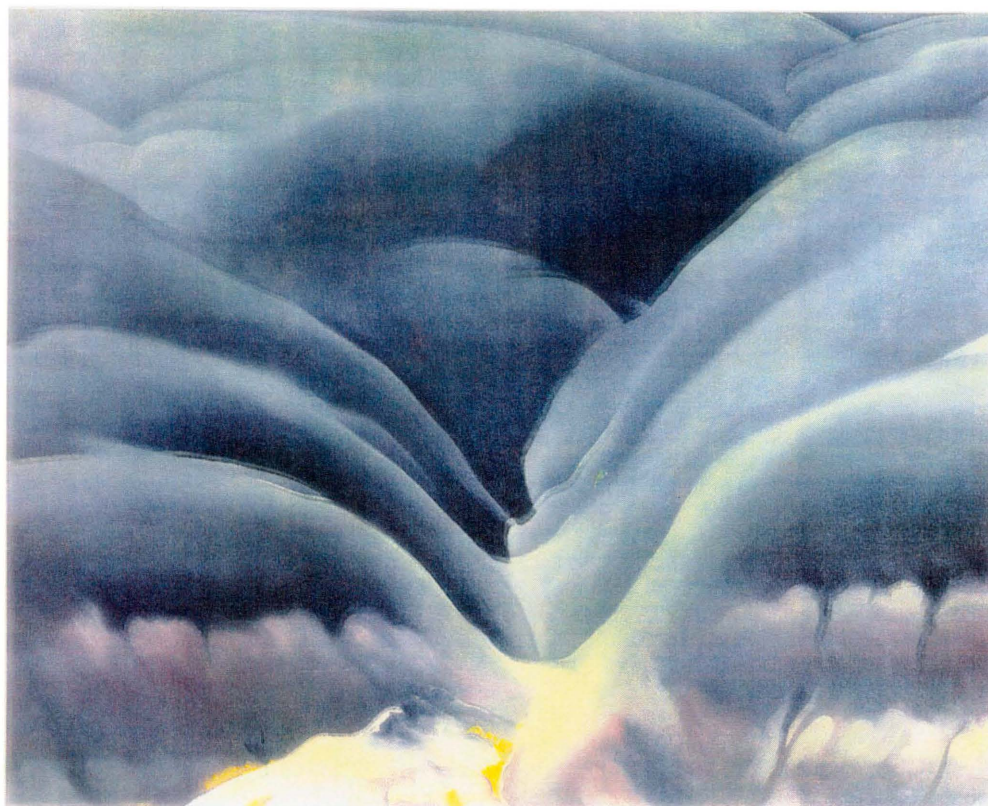


Figure 7. O'Keeffe, Black Place II, 1945. oil on canvas, 24x30in. Private Collection.



Figure 8. Hartley, New Mexican Landscape, 1918. oil on board, 24 x 31 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Private Collection.



Figure 9. Dixon, Nevada Cottonwoods, 1931. oil on canvas, 36x48in. Private Collection.

John Sloan was a regular guest of Mabel Dodge in the 1920s.

Previously, when he was a student of Robert Henri and the Ashcan School in New York, he was persuaded by Henri to go to the Southwest. He believed that the American scene in New Mexico was as worthy a subject for painting as the American scene in New York City. The Ashcan school was a group of painters in search of the depiction of 'truth' as opposed to beauty in society. Sloan was interested in social reform and was influenced greatly by Post Impressionism until "the impact of Modernism on American art was brought about by the Armory Show."⁷ Sloan brought the influence of the Armory Show with his progressive ideas to the Southwest when he and his family moved to Santa Fe during the 1920s.

Sloan's work went through a transformation of color and imagery in response to the Southwest. The colors on his palette were lightened and the landscape provided references to experimentation in approaches to abstract painting. For example, in figures 6 and 10, the landscape is arranged by the simple forms and colors fields of the mountains. " Sloan's work has a

⁷ Ibid., p.18.

metaphysical quality which exposes the heart of his work - there is a strong contrast between nature, human nature, and early city work.”⁸

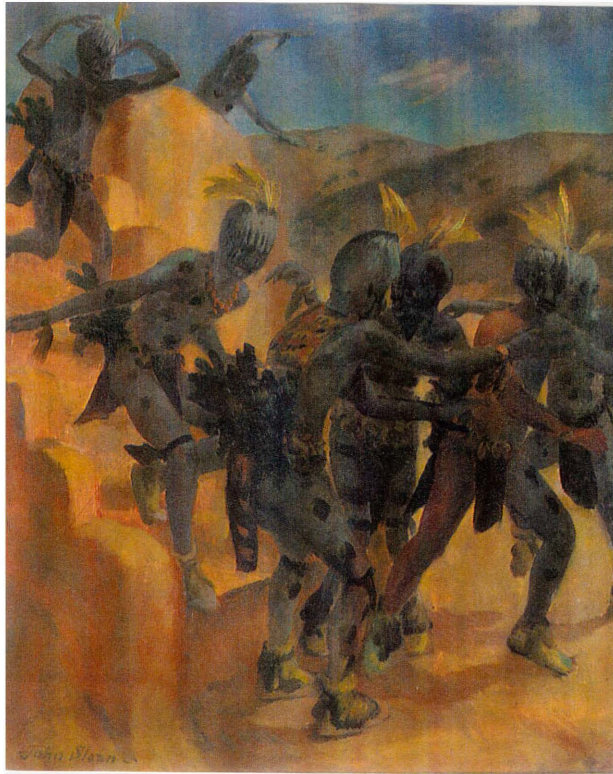


Figure 10. Sloan, Koshare, 1919. oil on canvas, 24x20in. The Museum of New Mexico.

It was common for Eastern painters such as Sloan to describe their encounter with New Mexico as ‘primitive’ or ‘exotic’.⁹ Sloan was intrigued with the expressions of cultural traditions and as he observed the Indian’s ritual

⁸ Scott, David. John Sloan. New York. Watson-Guption Publications, 1975.

⁹ Udall, Sharyn R. Contested Terrain: Myth and Meaning in Southwest Art. p. 89.

dances, he found “the Indian’s deep harmony with nature unforgettable.”¹⁰

He explored this subject in figures 10, 11, and 12 with depictions of the different tribal dances.



Figure 11. Sloan, Dance at Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico, 1922. oil on canvas, 22x30in. New York.



Figure 12. Sloan, Snake Dance, 1921. lithograph, 12 ¾ x 9 ¼ in. Delaware Art Museum.

¹⁰ Scott, David. John Sloan, p.91.

Together with Henri, Sloan brought publicity and increased notoriety to the Santa Fe art colony. “The work he produced there, as well as his early praise for the town and his willingness to identify himself with New Mexico artists, interested more painters in coming and reinforced long established links between New York and New Mexico.”¹¹ Sloan opened a gallery in Santa Fe which welcomed all artists to show their work. This was different from the New York galleries that only had competitive juried exhibitions. The Open Gallery in Santa Fe was successful as long as there were academic artists painting in the Southwest who drew art collectors from New York. The gallery eventually failed because their liberal policy of showing everyone’s art. This eventually gave way to mediocrity.

Although Henri and Sloan were the first to make an artistic impact in New York with Southwest art, Marsden Hartley was one of the first visitors of Mabel Dodge. Hartley was a colleague of Alfred Stieglitz in New York who shared with him the modernist philosophies. They had exhibitions together. They were under the impression that the Southwest was good for health and was a healing place. Many artists went to the Southwest states in search of religion, adventure, fresh subject matter, and because they believed

¹¹ Udall, Sharyn R. Modernist Painting in New Mexico 1913-1935, p. 127.

the place to be mystical and exotic. “Strains of popular and artistic mysticism converge in Southwestern art and literature. Several modernist painters who worked in New Mexico had encountered mysticism and this is evident in the formal or symbolic result in their paintings.”¹² Hartley’s paintings are a prime example of the use of symbolism to express spirituality. He was originally from Maine and was inspired by the words of the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, and later the poetry of Walt Whitman sparked his interest in the West.

The main ways in which the spiritual was expressed in Hartley’s paintings were his use of religious subject matter and occult symbolism as in figure 13.

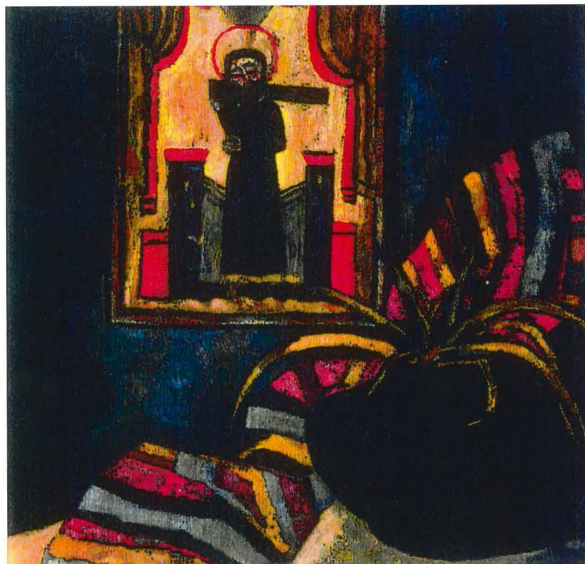


Figure 13. Hartley, El Santo, 1919.
oil on canvas, 36x32in.
Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.

¹² Charles C. Eldredge, Julie Schimmel, and William H. Truettner. Art in New Mexico 1900-1945, p. 126.

Viewers found his paintings spiritually uplifting because of his potency of expression, for example, in his expressive brushwork.¹³ His use of abstract symbols was also related to mysticism and Indian cults.(Figure 14).



Figure 14. Hartley, Indian Fantasy, 1914. oil on canvas, 46x39in.North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

Hartley's landscapes and interior paintings are a blend of abstraction and mysticism. In figure 15, "The mountains have been reduced to undulating

¹³ Ludington, Townsend. Seeking the Spiritual: The Paintings of Marsden Hartley, p. 30.

forms, creating a turbulent landscape. The somber colors underscore the overall brooding quality.”¹⁴



Figure 15. Hartley, New Mexico Recollections, 1922. oil on canvas, 23x41in. Hudson Walker Collection.

Hartley’s travels were funded by Stieglitz and therefore he was free to spend time in the Southwest and in other places around the world. Georgia O’Keeffe was another artist sponsored by Stieglitz who spent even more time in the Southwest than Hartley. For O’Keeffe, New Mexico would eventually become a permanent residence. “She once said, ‘ If you ever go to New Mexico, it will itch you the rest of your life.’ For Hartley the affliction was slightly briefer.”¹⁵ Because O’Keeffe spent much time in the Southwest, she became very familiar with the area and attuned to the mystical elements. She

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁵ Udall, Sharyn R. Contested Terrain, p. 89.

listened to the advice of Henri, “Follow your own road.”¹⁶ O’Keeffe’s life and art were an adventure into the unknown, and this is the way in which she achieved mystical paintings.

Early on, O’Keeffe had been influenced by Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*. “Artists are spiritual seekers who can benefit from nonmaterial wisdom of primitives and at the same time further their own self-enlightenment. Form is the outward expression of... inner meaning.”¹⁷ Kandinsky’s philosophy was a large part of the Modernist influence. He felt that the artist should work intuitively to capture an inner spiritual essence in the work. O’Keeffe was able to capture the spiritual essence of the Southwest in paintings of architecture (figure 16), as well as land masses (figure 17) and found objects. Her imagination and telescopic vision influenced her work.

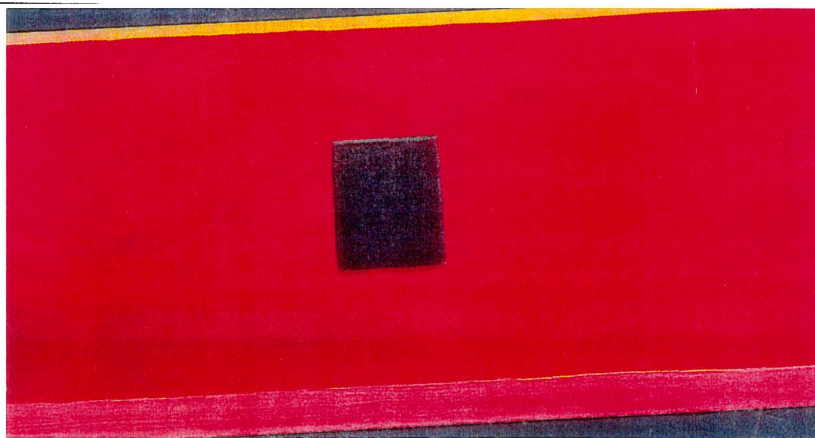


Figure 16. O’Keeffe, Patio Door-Green and Red, 1951. oil on canvas, 12x26in. Hudson Walker Collection.

¹⁶ Brown, Milton W. American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression, p.56.

¹⁷ Kandinsky, Wassily. Concerning the Spiritual in Art, p. 12.



Figure 17. O'Keeffe, Abstraction, Dark, 1920. Watercolor, 11 ¼ x 10 ¼ in. Stieglitz/O'Keeffe Collection.

“Particularly poignant were her paintings of the dark crosses erected by members of the Penitente Sect.”¹⁸ These paintings were considered to be, “something more and something less than modernism.”¹⁹ In figures 18 and 19, the crosses are symbolic of secret religious rites performed by the Penitente Indian Tribe. The intense expressionistic color and use of symbols

¹⁸ Udall, Sharyn R. Modernist Painting in New Mexico, p. 148.

in her paintings suggests mysticism and spirituality. O'Keeffe achieved a delicate balance between abstraction and representation in her paintings.

“Unlike most New Mexico modernists, O'Keeffe was able to pin down, with clarity and precision, the amorphous essences of the place.”²⁰



Figure 18. O'Keeffe, Black Cross with Red Sky, 1929. oil on canvas, 40x30in. Private.

²⁰ Udall, Sharyn R. Contested Terrain: The Myth and Meaning in Southwest Art, p. 89.

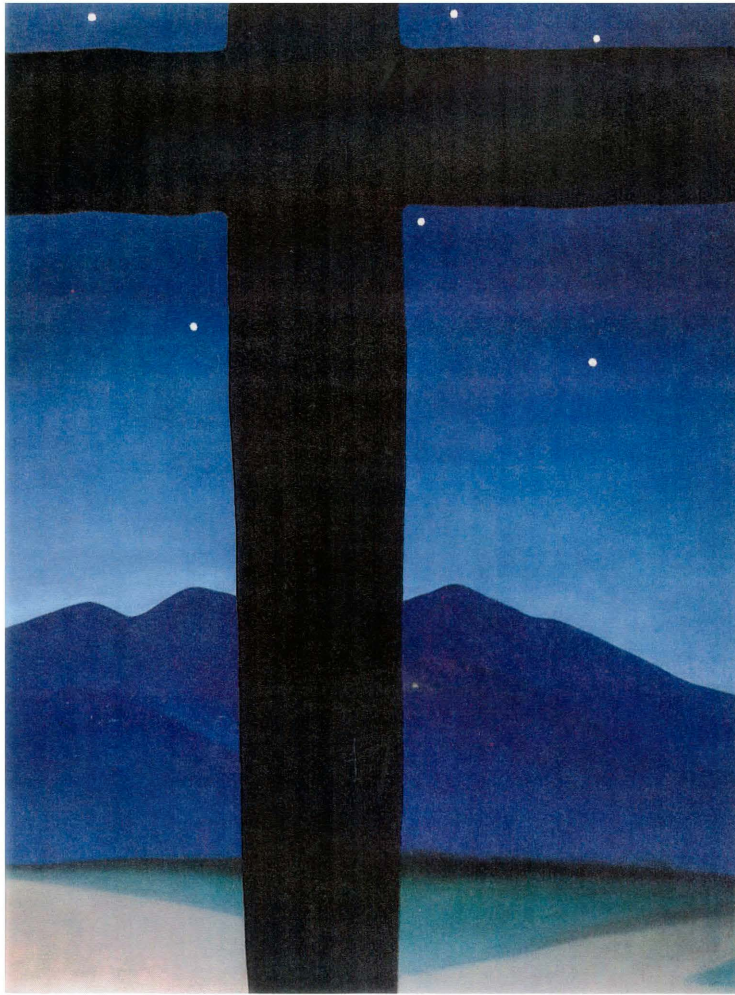


Figure 19. O'Keeffe, Black Cross with Stars and Blue, 1929. oil on canvas, 40x30in. Private Collection.

With the help of Stieglitz's funding and exhibitions, O'Keeffe maintained a healthy career in New York. She moved in and out of modernist painting. This maintained the interest and curiosity of her audience. In figure 20, O'Keeffe is photographed by her long time friend, Elliot Porter, and is investigating Glen Canyon in Utah.

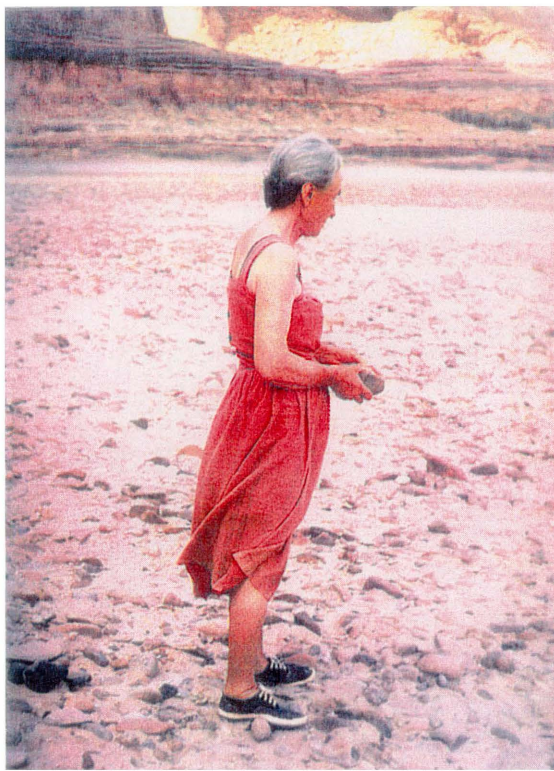


Figure 20. Elliot Porter, Georgia O'Keeffe, Glen Canyon, Utah, 1961. dye transfer print.
Elliot Porter Collection, Texas.

Maynard Dixon was also a Southwest artist, but was different in that he was not trained in New York. He was born in Fresno, California, in 1875 and spent most his life in San Francisco. Throughout his painting career, he would go on painting excursions all over the southwest states. He participated in the New York art scene by showing his paintings and by illustrating for magazines and books from 1906-1912. He did not enjoy living in New York because he found greater inspiration roaming the plains, mesas, and deserts. He created most of his art while on long solo excursions and living among various Indian tribes. Dixon's landscapes are a modernist and realist interpretation of color and of place.

According to Dixon, Modernism meant two different things. One he termed, “exclusive Modernism,”²¹ which implies that the paintings have broken away from conventions of the past. In figure 21, Dixon’s color fields and abstractions of form are examples of exclusive modernism.



Figure 21. Dixon, Cloud World, 1925. oil on canvas, 34x62in. Arizona West Galleries.

His other term is “inclusive Modernism,”²² which is the Modernist thought process going on inside the artist. The Modernist paints not only what he sees in the landscapes, but how he sees it. For example, in figure 22, he

²¹ Workman, Marchal Andre. “Modernism and the Desert: Maynard Dixon.” Vanguard. p. 23.

²² Ibid., p.23.

portrays the relationship between man and nature, and dwarfs the size of man in relation to nature.

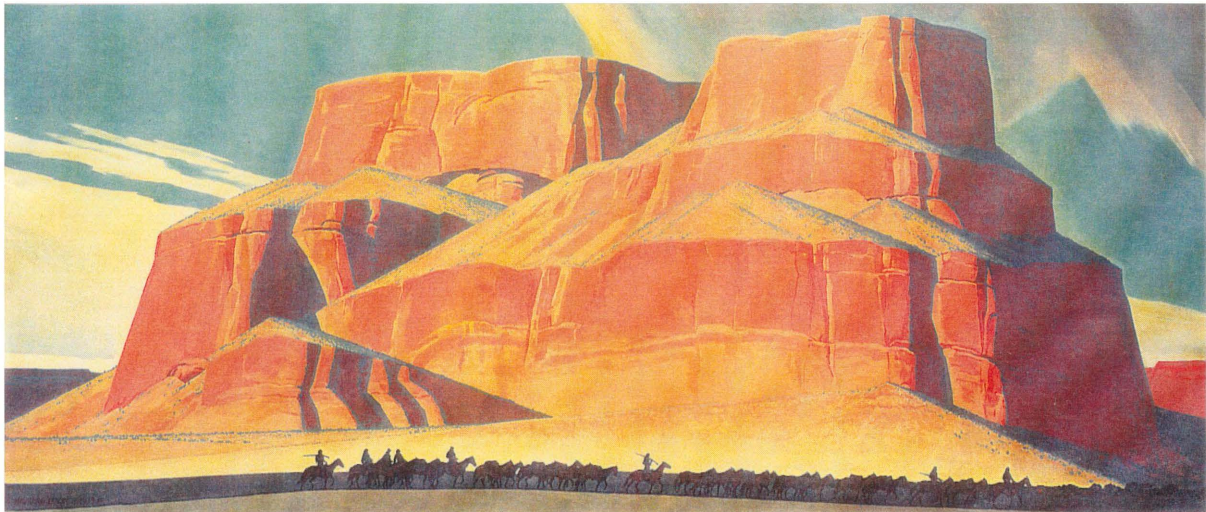


Figure 22. Dixon, Red Butte with Mountain Men Mural, 1935. oil on canvas, 96x204in.

“For him, the picture becomes... a record of perceiving, an-on-the spot document of what is going on both inside and outside the artist, and the artist’s mediations on nature embodied on canvas.”²³

In 1930, Dixon was torn between following the mode of Modernism by making non-objective or pure expressionistic paintings, or following his love for western landscape. He felt pressured to change his style of painting to compete with the work that was in vogue in New York. He did not realize that his paintings were modernistic because of his color choices, and his individualistic theory about making paintings. After he spent time alone in

the desert to figure out how he would respond, he concluded that :

“Shakespeare was right, ‘To thine own self be true... Thou canst not then be false to any man.’ If the artist’s own observation and experience are less important to him than an urge to be ‘modern’ and to always be in the mode, then he has little self to express.”²⁴

In 1931, Dixon and his wife, photographer Dorothea Lange, moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. They immediately received hospitality from Mabel Dodge and submerged themselves in the artist’s community. Dixon was aware of the Penitente group and the many other Indian tribes which Sloan, Hartley, and O’Keeffe had painted. Dixon continued to paint the culture, mountains, and fascinating colors of the Southwest landscape (figure 23) until the last years of his life in 1940-1946.

²³ Hagerty, Donald J. Desert Dreams: The Art and Life of Maynard Dixon. p. 143.

²⁴ Workman, Andre. “Modernism and the Desert. Maynard Dixon.” Vanguard. p. 24.

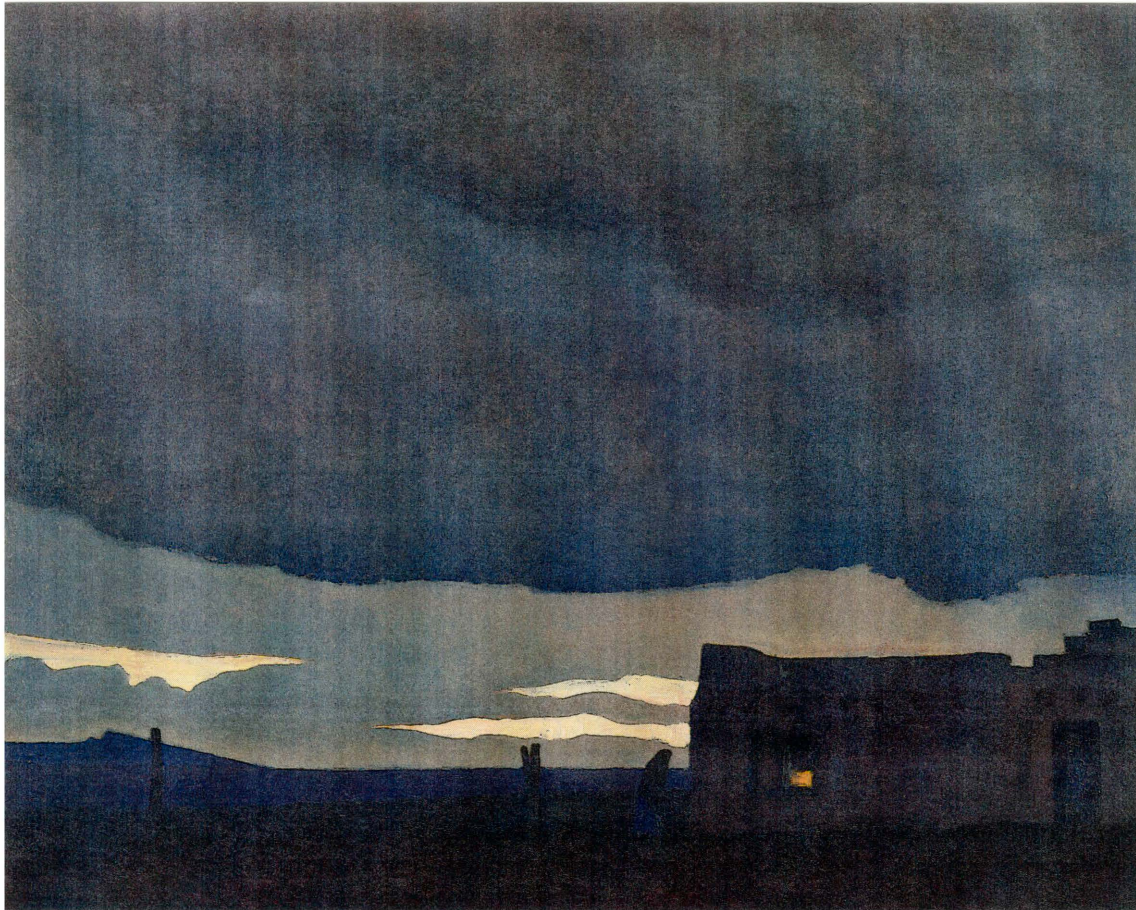


Figure 23. Dixon, Late Afternoon, 1931. oil on canvas, 16x20in. Private Collection.

The Southwest is an amalgamation of ancient land and culture that appealed to urban modernists painters, as well as landscape artists. The expansive sky, beautiful canyons, light and colors of the land, so different from the East and West coasts, beckoned a group of adventurous painters to explore its uncharted territories. John Sloan, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Maynard Dixon, were all drawn to the Southwest during the

drawn to the Southwest during the same time period and responded with a blend of mysticism, abstraction, intense coloration, and strong stylization. They all found the Indian culture engaging and were inspired by their spiritual connection to the Earth. These avant-guard artists evolved a new genre in the heritage of art, introducing to the established art world, the legitimacy of the Southwest landscape, and in turn, brought to the rural Southwest, an aesthetic language that still exists today.

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