MAYNARD DIXON

(1875-1946)

Study for The Ancients

Charcoal on paper
23 x 16 1/2 inches
Signed lower right, *MD* with artist's cipher and dated, *1922*

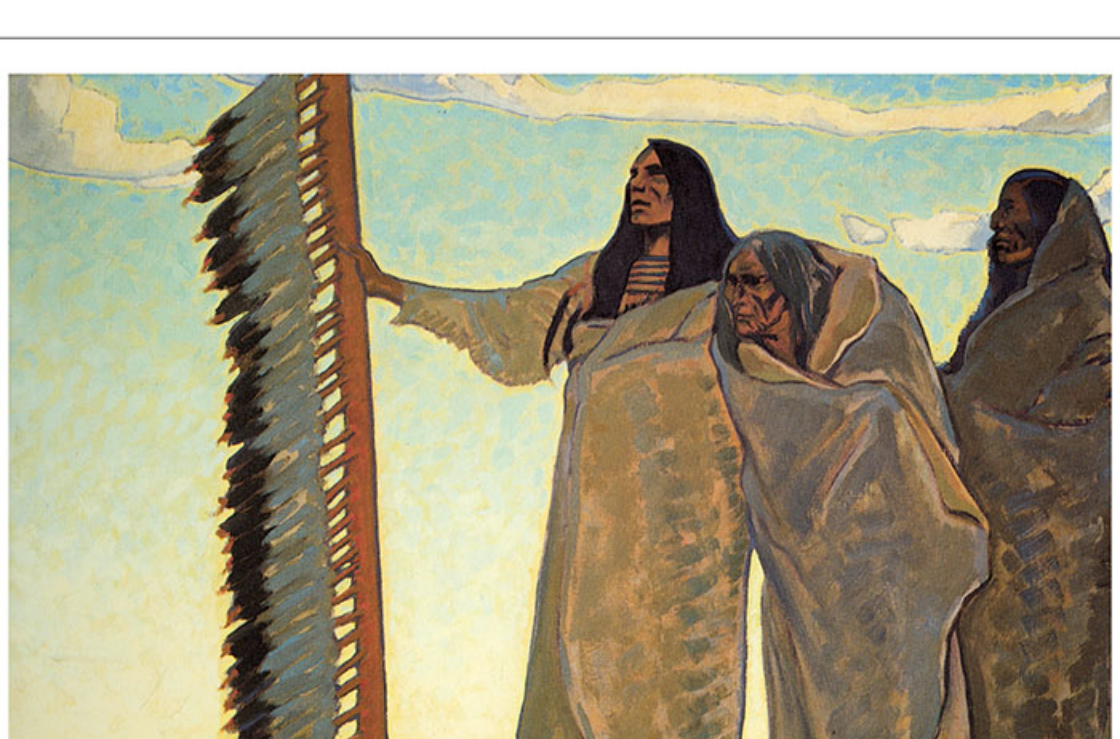
Maynard Dixon is widely respected as one of the most important southwestern painters of the 20th century. His work is often characterized by near stylized figures and landscapes that are emphasized by the soft, dramatic light that is so prevalent in the areas where he painted. His diverse styles spanned from representative work to more impressionistic painting and ultimately towards modernism. Various examples of his art can be found throughout the United States in institutions such as Autry National Center, Brigham Young University, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum of Fine Arts - Houston, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, and the Stark Museum of Art.

Dixon's painting *The Ancients* and his study for this painting are a result of his 1917 trip to Glacier National Park in Montana at the invitation of the Great Northern Railroad. Prior to his first trip to Montana in 1909, he had traveled north in 1901 with fellow artist Edward Borein in hopes of reaching Montana and Wyoming, but unfortunately never made it that far. This time Dixon brought with him his friend and well known illustrator Frank Hoffman as well as his six year old daughter, Constance.[1] Following a lengthy pack trip through the park, which eventually brought them to Red Eagle Lake, the artist visited Charles Russell at his Bull Head Lodge on Lake McDonald.

Always willing to entertain traveling artists Russell was eager to have Dixon join him, stating in a letter; "When you come, the robe will be shared and the pipe lit. There are no Injuns here but there is lots of good picture country and I think we can have a good time."[2] Dixon remained with Russell for a short period, painting landscape scenes in the mountains and forests surrounding Lake McDonald. However, the flora and fauna of Montana were not the artists ultimate goal and he soon set off for the Blackfoot Indian Reservation near Browning, Montana.

Here, on the banks of Cutbank Creek, Dixon set about to capture the majesty of one of Americas most notorious Indian tribes. Not only did the artist paint and sketch vigorously, but he worked hard to absorb and understand every aspect of Blackfoot life, from activities of daily life to important cultural events like the Beaver Medicine ceremony. Dixon's experience with the Montana natives was incredibly profound, culminating in his feeling that "...the Blackfeet are the best Indians I have seen yet, bar none."[3]

Finally in October of 1917, Dixon returned to San Francisco, brining with him a large number of drawings and studies with which he would derive some twelve finished paintings meant for the collection of the president of the Great Northern Railroad.[4] After these paintings were shipped to the companies headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota, they were supposedly shipped on to a number of hotels in Northern Montana where the company had agreed to sell them on the artists behalf. Curiously, the majority of these paintings have disappeared and can not be located today. *Study for The Ancients* is a fine example of those few works that have survived and an excellent example of Dixon's developing style.



The Ancients

The Ancients itself was first exhibited at the MacBeth Galleries of New York in 1923, along with work from Dixon's trip to Arizona in 1922.[5] In that same year the painting was also exhibited at the winter exhibition of the National Academy of Design and a year later at the Biltmore Salon in Los Angeles. *The Ancients* was most recently exhibited at the de Young Memorial Museum of San Francisco in 1968, but remains in a private collection to this day.[6]

The exhibition history of *The Ancients* is testament to the significance of Dixon's unique style and ability to capture the essence of his subjects. Works like *Study for The Ancients* are exemplarily of his well known stoic Indian portraits, in which Dixon dramatically captured not just an individual Indians appearance, but their persona and their majesty. It was the artist's first hand experiences with his Native Americans friends that resulted in a profound respect and admiration for his subjects and allowed him to transcend simple factual representation.[7] His fascination with the history of America's earliest cultures meant that works like *Study for The Ancients* became at once soulful, religious, and celebratory; presenting the subject as if "on an immense pedestal as isolated remnants of the past."[8]

- Special thanks to respected Maynard Dixon scholar Donald Hagerty for his insight relating to this piece.

[1] Donald J. Hagerty, Desert Dreams: The Art & Life of Maynard Dixon, revised edition (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs-Smith Publisher, 1998), pg. 90
[2] Ibid. pg. 90
[3] Ibid. pg. 91
[4] Ibid. pg. 92
[5] Ibid. pg. 115
[6] Wesley M. Burnside, Maynard Dixon; Artist of the West (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1974) pg. 75-76
[7] Linda Jones Gibbs, Escape to Reality; The Western World of Maynard Dixon (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), pg. 98
[8] Ibid. pg. 82

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