



Maynard Dixon completed *In the Legend of Earth and Sun* (left) at Phoenix's Arizona Biltmore hotel in 1929. His widow, Edith Hamlin, painted an accompanying piece, *The Turquoise Goddess and the Warrior Twins* (below), in 1948, two years after Dixon's death.

THE PAINTINGS ON THE WALL

Although Maynard Dixon was a master of oil painting, a practiced sketch artist and an experimental watercolorist, many of his most iconic and boundary-pushing pieces are murals, including two at the Arizona Biltmore in Phoenix.

BY CHELS KNORR
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG SMITH

THE MOST COMMON traditions of Western art include American landscape (think misty paintings of Yosemite) and the Western genre (think the struggle of the cowboy). Maynard Dixon considered both — and wholeheartedly rejected them. He then spent his career pursuing his own artistic tradition.

Dixon, quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* in April 1933, said: “Ever since I began to see and think, I have had a feeling that the West is spiritually important to America.” He wanted to represent the West as it was: not sensational or grandiose, not via the techniques taught in European academies, not racially colorblind. He sought to recognize, depict and respect the diverse Western terrain and the culture of its people.

Although Dixon was a master of oil painting, a practiced sketch artist and an experimental watercolorist, many of his most iconic and boundary-pushing pieces are murals. He was commissioned for around 20 such works, and they adorn or have adorned the walls of historic structures such as the California State Library building in Sacramento, Tucson’s train station and the federal Department of the Interior’s building in Washington, D.C.



Two of the commissioned pieces hang in the Arizona Biltmore hotel in Phoenix, beneath the gold-leaf ceiling of the aptly named Gold Ballroom. This space, now used for events, was previously the hotel’s main dining room. Dixon’s pieces, *In the Legend of Earth and Sun* and *The Turquoise Goddess and the Warrior Twins*, hang side by side, covering two separated walls opposite the windows, and command more attention than the art of most dining rooms.

The works are oil paint on linen, and each measures 8 by 25 feet. “The linen needs to breathe,” says Brian Rowley, director of sales and marketing at the Biltmore, so they remain in their

original locations, unprotected by glass or plastic barriers.

The murals began as a study called *The Father Sun*. Dixon and his then-wife, Dorothea Lange, traveled by train to Los Angeles in 1928 to meet with Albert Chase McArthur, architect of the Biltmore and admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright. From that study and meeting, the hotel commissioned the murals.

Dixon drew heavily on the time he spent living among and painting the Hopi people in the tribe’s village of Walpi in 1923. His bold colors and flat style work alongside thematic elements such as swallows, clouds and corn. Together, they tell a version of the Hopi creation story, punctuated with main characters Father Sun and Mother Earth.

The artist completed *In the Legend of Earth and Sun* in 1929, just before the Great Depression; Mark Sublette, a Tucson art dealer and the author of *Maynard Dixon’s American West*, says Dixon considered *Legend* “his most successful public work.” But the second mural was postponed until 1948 — after the hotel had

weathered the Depression and World War II. By then, Dixon had died; although he likely helped design the second mural, Edith Hamlin, his third wife and an accomplished muralist herself, painted it.

While Dixon was learning from the Western art of those before him and creating his own tradition, he also was laying the groundwork for something bigger. Ruth Pielkovo, in an article for *The International Studio* in March 1924, wrote: “In his work is the spirit of America, of both land and race, rendered with truth, and which will be, as is all great art, the heritage of the whole world.” **AH**