Forgotten Man, 1934
From the time he was a boy in the San Joaquin Valley until his death in 1946, Maynard Dixon painted the scenes and landscapes of the American West, leaving a visual record of the American frontier and its inhabitants. Dixon is recognized for the strong, abstract quality of his patterned landscapes of canyons, mesas, peaks, and stretching deserts which often give a heavy compositional emphasis to the weight and shapes of clouds in the sky. Dixon's paintings and drawings also reflect a great love and respect for the Native American in relationship to his majestic ancestral land.

During the Great Depression in the thirties, Dixon felt compelled to depart from familiar themes in order to make a political protest through his art. He produced a powerful and emotional series of social commentary paintings, sympathetically portraying the hopelessness of the common man and the rage of the proletariat. Dixon called these rare works his "Forgotten Man and Strike" series.

Virtually self-taught, Dixon was at the height of his success when the Depression occurred. After several disappointments, including losing a major mural contract, he moved his family to Taos, New Mexico, where although impoverished, he continued to study and paint cloud formations, landscapes, and Native Americans. Earth Knowers, the most outstanding work of this period, is in the permanent collection of The Oakland Museum.

Returning to San Francisco in 1932 by automobile, Dixon and his family were confronted by a human wasteland of economic devastation. They saw displaced Americans aimlessly wandering with no place to go and men seeking work in vain. Dixon's wife, Dorothea Lange, photographed the homeless vagabonds they encountered along the roads. Dixon was deeply disturbed by what he saw and was influenced by his wife's activist views.

He commenced his "Forgotten Man" paintings in angry response to the unfair social conditions he had observed for so long. The two paintings from this series represented in MATRIX are The Forgotten Man and No Place to Go. At about the same time, the San Francisco Maritime Strike took place. Dixon witnessed the violence and rioting caused when authorities tried to prevent the Longshoremen and Seamen from striking. This event further stirred Dixon's social conscience, and he was prompted to champion the cause of the oppressed strikers in his five "Strike" paintings, four of which (Pickets, Law and Disorder, Free Speech, and Scab) are on view in MATRIX. Working from preliminary composition sketches, sometimes consisting of only a few directional lines, Dixon developed elaborate studies. When he reached the point where he could envision the final result, he worked very rapidly, usually finishing the painting at one sitting to avoid overworking the canvas' surface.

In many ways the social commentary paintings, particularly the "Forgotten Man" series, bear a close relationship to the work of the American realist, Edward Hopper. Like Hopper, Dixon established a strong mood that projects a desolate, almost eerie vision of human isolation in an urban setting. Both artists used strong value patterns of light and shadow. Also, the features of their subjects are generalized, and only those which further visual impact and contribute to a dynamic composition are represented. Both give their subjects a sculptural solidity by modeling natural forms from light to dark, which lends them a monumentality and dignity. Unlike Hopper, Dixon's work of this period focuses on those most victimized and exploited by the economic deprivation of the Depression.

Perhaps the finest painting of the "Forgotten Man" series is the one that bears that title. The image of a lonely vagrant sitting on a curb, in what could be any large American city, is a timeless portrayal of a dejected "have not," who is down but not yet trampled to death by the passing feet on the sidewalk, symbolic of the "haves." The alienated condition of this transient is depicted with a forceful clarity underlining the contrast between relative affluence and dire poverty. In this work and in No Place to Go, Dixon continues the American social realist tradition begun by George Bellows and John Sloan thirty years earlier. These stark sympathetic and socially motivated works reveal some of the most direct and bluntly conceived works of Dixon's career.

The influence of Francisco Goya is evident in the strongly patterned "Strike" series which employ intense dark and light contrasts made dynamic by diagonal thrusts. Muted tones of grey and blue are used to establish an ominous mood. These somber yet emotional paintings echo the intensity of Honoré Daumier's Uprising.

The Depression was the only period in Dixon's life in which he felt compelled to make a political statement through his art. As he said, "...like other artists, I had dodged the responsibility of facing social conditions. The depression woke me up to the fact that I had a part in all this, as an artist."

By 1937, Maynard Dixon had exhausted his need to protest and devoted himself once more to painting Western scenes. The same year he moved to Arizona, where he died seven years later at the age of 71.

Terry St. John
Associate Curator,
The Oakland Museum

Works in MATRIX:

Pickets, 1934, oil on canvas, 25" x 30".
Law and Disorder, 1934, oil on canvas, 25" x 30".
Scab, 1934, oil on canvas, 36" x 40". From the Collection of The Oakland Museum, lent by Edith Hammer.
Forgotten Man, 1934, oil on canvas, 40" x 50".
Free Speech, 1934-36, oil on canvas, 36" x 40".
No Place to Go, 1935, oil on canvas, 25" x 30".

Unless otherwise noted, all works are from the Heralds of Clark Collection, lent by the Brigham Young University Art Museum Collection.
Selected one-person exhibitions:
Vickery, Atkins and Torrey Gallery, SF '14; Beaux Arts Gallery, SF '20-'32; Gump Galleries, SF '20-'45; Stendahl Galleries, L.A. '21-'38; MacBeth Galleries, NY '23, '24; Chicago Galleries Association, IL '27, '28; San Diego Fine Arts Gallery, CA '30, '35, '38, '45; Artists' Co-operative Gallery, SF '32-'36; Rotunda Gallery, SF '48; M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, SF '68; Phoenix Art Museum, AZ '70; Brigham Young University, Provo, UT '73; Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, UC Berkeley '78, '79; California Academy of Sciences, SF '81.

Maynard Dixon: Painter of the West (Tucson, AZ: Edith Hamlin Dixon '45).
Burnside, Wesley M. Maynard Dixon, Artist of the West (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press '74).
Heyman, Therese Thau. Celebrating a Collection, the Work of Dorothea Lange (Oakland, CA: The Oakland Museum '78).
Maynard Dixon, Images of the Native American (San Francisco: The California Academy of Sciences '81).

Selected group exhibitions:
San Francisco Art Association—Annuals, '98-'45 (San Francisco Museum of Art, '36-'45); National Academy of Design, NY '11, '12, '32, '34, '35; Panama-Pacific International Exposition, Palace of Fine Arts, SF '15; Denver Art Museum, CO '35.

Selected bibliography about Dixon:
Millier, Arthur.

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