Maynard Dixon's West

You may have seen Maynard Dixon's art without even knowing it. Diane Keaton's 2000 film, "Hanging Up," offered a heavy dose of Dixon's unique brand of Western art.

"Diane Keaton included Maynard Dixon in just about every scene of this movie," said Eric Lee, director of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. "A lot of people in Hollywood, like Steven Spielberg and Diane Keaton, they've become very big fans of Maynard Dixon. He's seeping into popular culture."

Oklahomans can get a close-up view of Dixon's art with the Fred Jones museum's latest exhibition, "Maynard Dixon's West: Space, Silence, Spirit," which runs through Sept. 8. The exhibit includes more than 30 paintings, spanning Dixon's 50-year career.

Dixon (1875-1946), who came from a Fresno, Calif., ranching family, started his career as an illustrator of the Old West. He worked as an illustrator for several San Francisco newspapers and for books by authors like Jack London, John Muir, O. Henry and Clarence Mulford, who was well-known for his books about Hopalong Cassidy.

By 1915, when the World's Fair was held in San Francisco, Dixon began experimenting with impressionism and postimpressionism, while continuing his career in commercial design. Dixon married photographer Dorothea Lange, who used composition as a key element in her work, in 1920. (They later divorced in 1935.) Some historians and critics have argued that Lange influenced Dixon's work.

"The style he's more known for today - the more modernist style - he developed in the Twenties. That did correspond to his marriage to Dorothea Lange, but it is very debatable to what extent Dorothea Lange helped him forge that style," Lee said.

Lee said Dixon's work forges the utopian vision of the West that was so popular in his day. Dixon painted the West as he saw it, Lee said, and, in the process, his representation of the landscape was not romanticized.

"He does not look at the West through rose-colored glasses. He depicts the sublimity of the West," Lee said. "There's a starkness about his paintings, there's an austerity about his paintings."

Lee said museum visitors should pay particular attention to how Dixon signed his name: with a thunderbird symbol. Lee said Dixon began signing his name with the symbol in 1897.

"The thunderbird is a Native-American symbol of a creature that can produce lightning with its eyes, thunder with the flapping of its wings," Lee said. "He had a great reverence for Native-American culture and this comes through clearly in his art. It also symbolized his view of the West — of the American Western landscape as a place of great beauty and potentially dangerous beauty."

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, 410 W. Boyd, Norman, is open 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday; and noon to 4:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. The exhibition is free and open to the public. For more information, call 325-3272.

- Deborah Benjamin