

## The Muralist Edie Hamlin and Me

by Sally Swope

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After I organized Coit Tower's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in San Francisco in 1984 and a reunion of the eight living Coit Tower artists, I met Edith Hamlin and we became friends over the next six years. Her home in the Excelsior District of San Francisco was on a hill so she could see the Bay and the Pacific Ocean from her favorite chair in the living room.

Her studio was a step away from her dining room and it had tall walls and a skylight so she could paint murals there. Several large woven baskets and clay pots made by the Hopi and Zuni Indians were on top of the tall cabinet full of her paintings. She used two desks and a large landscape painting of the Southwest rested on a tall easel.

During her life, she sold many murals and paintings, and her work was shown in museums and galleries nationwide. One mural hung at city's new airport and her last commission was from Chevron's dining room in San Francisco. Hamlin had been part of the California and Southwest art scene for more than half a century. Born in Oakland, CA, her interest in art began with sketching trips with her father. She won a two-year scholarship to the college of art later named the San Francisco Art Institute and at age 22, she knew she wanted to be an artist.

After graduating, she lived in San Diego and then went to the most exciting art center in the country, New York, for the next three years (1929 to 1932). She attended the Columbia Teachers College, made murals inside homes, taught art and exhibited her work in many galleries. It was one of the most exciting times of her life.

Even so by 1932 the Depression made it difficult to find work. When she heard there might be work in San Francisco, she learned to drive and on her way west, she stopped in Taos, NM. This visit where she met other artists and real Indians influenced her career as an artist for her entire life.

Edie was one of 26 artists, including only four women, who were selected in 1933 to paint murals at San Francisco's Coit Tower. The success of the first government funded mural in the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) resulted in artists being hired by the government nationwide (WPA) based on their abilities.

At Coit Tower the frescoes were surrounded by controversy when they opened in 1934. One artist showed a man reaching for Carl Marx's Das Capital in a library. Most of the muralists showed scenes of northern California during the Depression. Edie painted duck hunters in Marin County and learned fresco painting on the job. Her mural on the second floor unfortunately is closed to the public.



Edie Hamlin and Maynard Dixon, Tucson, 1935 nd  
Gift to the writer

Four years later in 1938, Hamlin won a prestigious commission funded by the WPA to make “architectural paintings with Western themes.” She chose Mission High where she painted two 8 by 24 foot murals in the school’s library. The murals show the founding of Mission Dolores two blocks away.



Edie on a step ladder in front of her mural at Mission High School, 1938  
Alumni Association from Mission High School



“The Founding of Mission Dolores” Two panels 8 feet by 24 feet of murals over the doors in the library, funded by the WPA in 1938  
Photo by the writer

Because there were about 20 faces to paint including Indians, Spanish soldiers, Caucasians, Catholic monks, men, women, and children, the famous artist, Maynard Dixon, consulted with Hamlin. They were friends and lived near each other on Montgomery Street, then the city’s bohemian center.

Hamlin and four assistants worked on the mural for a year. Soon after the mural was finished, they married in 1939 and moved to Tucson, AZ. They shared a vision of capturing scenes of the Old West and the Northern Plains Indians’ way of life before both vanished.



Hamlin married Maynard Dixon in 1937 moving to Tucson

with a summer home in Mt. Carmel, Utah in 1939

They had a summer home-studio in Mount Carmel, UT. Dixon's two sons visited them many summers. "My time with Maynard was the best years of my life," she told me.

After Dixon's death in 1946, she gained a commission from the famous Arizona Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix that Frank Lloyd Wright had designed. The hotel commissioned Maynard to make a mural in 1929 when the posh hotel opened.

Many years later in 1948, the hotel's director asked Edie to paint a companion mural. Both of them used themes from the mythology of the northern Plain's Indians and a similar palette of earth tones and turquoise.

After this she returned to San Francisco where she continued making murals and paintings and showing her work for 50 years. Also she kept Maynard's work before the public by organizing exhibits in museums nationwide. She enjoyed her friends, extended family and travels that included Mexico and China when it first welcomed tourists.



Navaho Legend: "The Turquoise Goddess" in the Biltmore Hotel, Phoenix, Arizona, 1948  
Companion to Maynard Dixon's Mural painted in 1929  
Gift to the writer



“The Legend of Earth and Sun” Maynard Dixon, 1929

Drawn from Zuni and Hopi sources for the opening of the Arizona Biltmore Hotel

“I can’t imagine life without art, music, and literature, and such things,” she told her biographer for the Archives of American Art. “The period with Maynard, especially, and the years following that, which had to do with his work and the memories of our years together have added a great deal to my personal and professional life. Looking back, I had a vital, rewarding and adventurous life.”



Landscape of the West by Edith Hamlin, 1941

One of her best paintings is a portrait of Maynard Dixon at the Oakland Museum of California. Another fabulous painting is “The Flower Vendor in Oaxaca,” painted in 1980 when she lived there. She died in 1992 at the age of 90 and her paintings are still sold at several auction houses.



“Flower Vendor in Oaxaca” by Edith Hamlin, 1970

On my trips to Asia as a travel writer, I parked at her home so I wouldn’t get parking tickets. She saw me excited as I was leaving and when I returned, we had lively discussions of my travels. I’ll always remember her warmth and encouragement.

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