

## Edith Hamlin, Muralist and Painter



**Edith Ann Hamlin, (1902-1992)**

Photo credit: Ansel Adams, 1937/no date  
Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts

By Sally Swope, Jan, 2017

Edith Hamlin was part of the California and Southwest art scene for more than half a century. In her long career, she painted 30 murals (1925-1967) and her paintings were shown in 36 exhibits nationwide (1925-1980). They are still sold at auction houses. Some of her early work were huge architectural painting later called murals. Some of best works were small landscapes of Utah painted in watercolors. At the end of her career she was making abstract images with many unusual materials in her murals.

We met when I visited her at her studio in the Excelsior District of San Francisco, we talked about the many murals she had made indoors and outdoors in the Southwest that had faded and no longer even existed. She had photos of each one. I left her studio with a large landscape painting of the Southwest. I knew I'd met an extraordinary woman and an exceptional artist. At that time, I was organizing Coit Tower's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in San Francisco in 1984. She was among the eight artists in their 70s and 80s, and all of them were still

producing new work. Even Takeo Terada in Tokyo sent a painting to the Coit Tower exhibit. Mayor Feinstein welcomed the crowd at City Hall who came to see some of their new work and celebrate some of San Francisco's early artists. Then the crowd moved to Coit Tower for a party.

When the murals at Coit Tower were painted in 1934, Edie and Takeo Terada shared the small room at the top of the stairs on the tower's second floor. Edie painted two duck hunters holding rifles with several deer in the distant rolling green hills ready to shoot at the right time Terada painted the famous tennis star, Helen Willis. They knew each other from the Art Institute where both had graduated.

When I returned the painting to Edie, I saw a huge painting with a fireplace, clay pots and several large woven baskets made by the Hopi. Another large landscape paintings of the Southwest rested on a tall easel.

Her companion was a golden lab and her nephew lived on the property too. She had helped build her studio first and then added a home on top of a hill that gave her a view of the entire Bay and Pacific Ocean from her living room.

Born in Oakland, California, Hamlin's interest in art began early in life on sketching trips with her father after the family moved to Santa Cruz. She won a two-year scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute, formerly the California School of Fine Arts, and was one of four students chosen to paint a mural on the school's walls.

By age 22, Edie knew she wanted to be a muralist. This was a new kind of art influenced by several Mexican muralists. One of the most famous muralists, Diego Rivera, visited San Francisco when he painted murals at The City Club and the San Francisco Art Institute in 1931 and Edie met him several times.

After graduation, Hamlin moved to New York to attend Columbia's Teachers College, but when she heard there might be work for artists in San Francisco she decided to go back to San Francisco. She learned to drive and headed west in a Model A Ford—a trip that took her to Taos and through the Southwest. This trip had a great influence on her career as an artist.

Edie arrived in San Francisco in time to submit a sketch of a local landscape she would paint. There was tremendous competition for these jobs. She was one of 26 artists chosen to paint murals at the newly built Coit Tower, now an iconic landmark. Only four women were chosen to paint there and she learned fresco painting on site.



**Murals at Mission High School show Mission Dolores, 1937**

The mission is the oldest part of the city a few blocks from the school  
Edith Hamlin, 1937, Photo Credit: the author

The success of Coit Tower launched the Works Project Administration (WPA), a federal program that paid artists for their abilities not their need for “relief.” The pilot project was created by President Roosevelt and Mrs. Roosevelt visited the project. Lucien Labaudt painted her image in his mural on the Coit Tower stairwell.

Three years after her Coit Tower commission, Hamlin was hired by the WPA to paint two 8 x 24 feet murals in the library at Mission High School in front of Dolores Park. The school had recently reopened after the school burned to the ground. It was a prestigious assignment that was followed by the press. She hired and supervised four assistants and it took a year to complete the egg tempera fresco mural. This was the medium Michelangelo used. Each brush was dipped in an egg yoke so the colors looked liked jewels.

She met Maynard Dixon, a famous painter then, whose studio was a few doors from Hamlin’s on Montgomery Street in the city’s bohemian North Beach district. He helped Hamlin paint many of the faces of the dozens of people in the Mission Dolores including Spanish conquistadors, missionaries, and indigenous people depicted. The high school was only a few blocks from Mission Dolores. The murals were about California’s history.

When they met, Maynard was recently divorced from Dorthea Lange, the famous photographer. Edie was divorced from her husband who also was an artist. They needed company and found good companionship.



**Edie taking a break from painting at Mission High, 1936**

Photo gift to the author from School's Alumni Association

Dixon and Hamlin shared a fascination with the Southwest and Native American's customs and rituals. When Edie had finished painting the murals at Mission High School, they married in 1937 and moved to Tucson, Arizona.

During the summers when Tucson was very hot, they moved to Carmel, Utah, near Zion National Park where they had a home and studio. Maynard's two sons who lived in Oakland, came to visit for the summers. Maynard had severe respiratory problems and was better in Utah. Edie recalled those nine years with Maynard as the happiest of her life.

After his death in 1946, she moved back to Tucson and during World War II, she worked making ammunition. Then her life took a different turn after marrying a concert conductor and they moved to Paris. She saw famous European art every city they visited. For many reasons they were divorced after a few years together. She returned to San Francisco where she lived for the next 50 years.

She continued to get commissions such as a large mural for Chevron's dining room for their employees. This large abstract mural made with acrylics, iron and wood with a glass mosaic was unlike any other she had made. Each mural was different in their themes and the materials she used.



### **Painter of the Desert**

Edith Hamlin portrait of her husband, artist Maynard Dixon

Photo credit: Oakland Museum of California

In 1968, the San Francisco Arts Commission acquired a huge mural that was a map she had made for the interior of the American President Lines. The Art Commission loaned it to the city and it hung in the new San Francisco International Airport.



**Edie and Maynard Dixon in Tucson, 1937**

Photo gift to the author

Besides making her own work, she kept Maynard's work before the public and sent his drawings and paintings to museums nationwide and she wrote a catalog about his artwork.

Eddie and I always had something to talk about since we both appreciated the arts. Once we went an exhibit at the de Young Museum. Sometimes we had a glass of wine and dinner together. She was a gifted artist who loved making her artwork. She had a full life with her extended family and large circle of friends.

During this eighty years we knew each other, I was a travel writer exploring and writing about Asia. And I heard about her trips to the Amazon, China and Oaxaca, Mexico where she had lived in an artists colony for a year. We talked about the men in our lives and friends and ideas that motivated us.

She was one of San Francisco's best early artists, who had graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute, and then went the art center of the world, New York. She knew the Southwest first-hand before she met and married Maynard Dixon.

San Francisco was home for 50 years. When she died in 1992, she left a strong body of her artwork. She was so versatile and made large architectural paintings that explained San Francisco earliest history and small watercolor landscapes of Utah. She continued to paint her whole life and supported herself as a painter when few women were so independent. She was integral part of the emerging art scene in San Francisco and she was a special friend of mine.

**Landscape of the West, 1941**

Photo credit: Insulate auction house in New York



**Edith Hamlin, Flower Vendor in Oaxaca, 1970**

Photo credit: Insulate Action House



**Edie Hamlin in her studio, 1990, photo by Sally Swope**

Today there is a smaller body of her work that is available for sale and she is not well known. During the many years I knew Edie, she nurtured my creativity and included me as part of her life. She showed me how to be more creative and believed in me as a writer. I liked hearing stories about her life and admired her for many reasons. We had a special friendship that transcended time as our love of good art was a lasting bond.