

William Dickerson

1904-1972



William Judson Dickerson was born in El Dorado, Kansas in 1904. His parents moved to Wichita when he was still a small child, where he chose to live the remainder of his life.

After graduating from Wichita East High School in 1925, he attended Fairmount College a short time (now Wichita State University), and also took night classes at the school of the Wichita Art Association, now known as Wichita's Center for the Arts.

His artistic talent drew the attention of Coy Avon Seward, one of Wichita's earliest commercial artists. Seward provided him with employment and encouraged him to attend the Art Institute of Chicago, from 1926 -1930.

Dickerson was the only painter of recognized national rank to have been born in Kansas who spent his entire career painting Kansas subjects and also teaching and mentoring Kansas art students.

As an artist in the Regionalist style, he played a major role in the development of visual arts in Wichita and the Mountain-Plains region. He helped make Kansas a fertile field for the national mainstream Regionalist movement led by Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood. But unlike their popular works, Dickerson's work was less stylized, more realistic, and intentionally understated. His paintings and lithographs seem to possess a hint of emotional separation and loneliness.

Acquainted with fellow artists B.J.O. Nordfeldt, John Steuart Curry, and Edward Hopper, he also worked closely with Birger Sandzen, C. A. Seward and the other members of Prairie Print Makers. He was the first artist invited to join this group after their founding. They shared a dedication to an un-idealized, honest portrayal of the mid-west. He was also a member of Prairie Watercolor Society and Wichita Artists Guild.

Dickerson died only one year after retirement, in 1972, at the age of 68.

CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Two years after his birth to Thomas and Alice Dickerson in El Dorado, William's family moved to Wichita. His father was a construction foreman for the Missouri Pacific Railroad. Except for time spent at college in Illinois and summer trips to the Southwest, William lived in Wichita the rest of his life.

COMING TO / LEAVING THE AREA

After high school, Dickerson worked at the Western Lithograph Co. in Wichita, a commercial art printing service established by C. A. Seward, an ardent promoter of Kansas art. Seward was a source of guidance and support for Dickerson, encouraging him to attend the Art Institute of Chicago. While at the institute, he studied under renowned printmaker Bolton Brown, who was spending one year there teaching lithography. During his senior year, Dickerson served as Brown's assistant teacher.

Upon graduation, Dickerson was offered Bolton Brown's position at that prestigious institute. At the same time, he was also offered a teaching position for the School of the Wichita Art Association. He chose the latter offer and returned to Wichita. As he wrote to his soon-to-be wife, Betty Millard, "there are things that I have to paint in Kansas".

For a state witnessing the exodus of so many of its most talented artists and literary figures (William Inge, Gordon Parks, John Steuart Curry, etc.), this decision was noteworthy. It had a positive effect on the history of art and artists in Kansas for the next 40 years.

ACHIEVEMENTS

William Dickerson became director of the Art Association in 1933, a position he held until retirement in 1971. Together with his wife and fellow teacher, Betty, the Art Association became known as one of the state's most important centers of studio art instruction.

As a regionalist artist, Dickerson seemed to paint his own environment not as a matter of creed, but because he found in it materials for captivating works of art. He was deeply devoted to the subtle beauties of the Kansas landscape, requiring tenacious thought and a long-term commitment. He often told his students that, with a bit of digging, they could find subjects for beautiful paintings in Kansas. In so doing, they would be able to paint anywhere else. Like Cézanne, he sought to teach others to see beyond the ordinary.

Dickerson opened up Kansans to the realization of Kansas' own beauty. His work spread nationwide as he continued to find inspiration in the subjects he had grown up: the people, the faded barns, back alleys, trees, gullies and country roads of the prairie. He also painted many scenes of the arroyos of northern New Mexico.

The “Native Realism” of 1930’s art was to be swept away by the New York School and abstract expression following World War II. But Dickerson continued to maintain his representational style, risking almost certain obscurity. He sustained a lifelong commitment to his personal vision, celebrating the region he loved.

Former students remember him as an inspirational teacher who loved his art and his students, and taught the fundamentals of art with sensitivity to the needs of each student. A colleague recalls that Dickerson’s reward came, not from recognitions & honors, but from the students whose lives he touched, their growth and accomplishments.

Dickerson expected his students to be professional and he treated each one, regardless of ability, with difference. Using a “hands-on” approach, he kept theory to a minimum, teaching by example as he worked alongside them. Those who received instruction from him knew that they were in the room with an artist who taught, not a teacher who happened to make art.

In 1933 and 1934, Dickerson produced seven lithographs and seven watercolors for the Public Works of Art Project, under the Civil Works Administration. Under this program, artists in 16 regions contributed more than 300 prints to decorate public buildings, including schools, libraries and military bases.

In 1955, Dickerson was elected President of the Kansas State Federation of Art. His work has been exhibited in one-man and group shows in museums and colleges throughout America and Canada, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and the Smithsonian in Washington, DC.

AWARDS, RECOGNITION

During the 1930’s and 1940’s, Dickerson’s prints and watercolors won several gold and silver medals, as well as the Friends of Art Prize, in the Midwestern Artist’s Exhibition held annually at the Kansas City Art Institute. His “Still Life” won the Purchase Prize at the Northwestern Print Makers 3rd Annual Exhibition in Seattle. He was also a finalist in the Guggenheim Fellowship for painting and lithography.

His works were exhibited in many one-person and two-person shows throughout the nation, and he had two works chosen for exhibit at the New York World’s Fair in 1937.

His print, “Church at Canyoncito”, was presented as the Prairie Print Makers gift print for 1942, and “Elevator” was chosen as Kansas State University Friends of Art gift print in 1960.

Dickerson was one of seven artists invited to participate in the 10th Biennial Exhibition of Regional Art.

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