



MARIA R. DIXON (1849-1897)

A Quiet Moment, 1896

Oil on canvas

26 x 13 inches

Signed lower left, "M. R. Dixon"

Provenance:

Lawrence J. Cantor & Co., Los Angeles, CA 2006

Christie's, Sep. 8, 2004, Lot 61

Exhibition:

Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, Hagerstown, MD, "Friends and Members Collect," 2009

Maria R. Dixon was born in Sag Harbor, Long Island in 1849. She spent the majority of her life in New York, moving to Brooklyn shortly after her marriage to Henry Dixon. Dixon, known for the delicate quality of her domestic scenes that often featured mothers and children, began exhibiting her works in the 1870s until 1896, the year before her death.

Dixon studied at the Art Students League in New York with Charles Yardley Turner (1850 - 1919), where she predominately painted genre scenes, as well as some portraiture and floral still lifes. After the birth of her daughter, Tillie, in 1872, Dixon began exhibiting her work at the Brooklyn Art Association in 1873 and throughout the 1870s, with subsequent exhibitions in 1882, 1883, and 1891. Dixon's work was also exhibited in the "Ladies Department" at the Louisville Industrial Exposition in Louisville, Kentucky in 1875, as well as in the "Women's Pavilion" at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia the following year, where she showed a genre scene of children playing. She began exhibiting regularly at the National Academy of Design in New York beginning in 1883. However, the exhibition records recorded her name as "Maynard R. Dixon" – likely a pseudonym devised by the artist herself in order to disguise her gender in the hopes of having her work be taken more seriously. After her husband's death in 1886, Dixon continued to exhibit scenes of domestic life at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1891 and 1895, as well as the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia the same year. In 1896, she showed her work at the Art



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Institute of Chicago. She was one of the early members of the Woman's Art Club of New York (later called the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors), joining the organization in 1893.

Much of the documentation surrounding her later work comes from *The Quarterly Illustrator*, a periodical published between 1893 and 1895, which regularly featured and reported on her work. An 1893 entry notes that Dixon "...has planned an extensive sketching trip to Concord and Gloucester, Massachusetts, ending the season at Spring Lake, New Jersey."¹ Several of her figural illustrations appear in issues throughout 1894, where her images of young girls and childhood are deemed "deservedly popular."² An 1894 issue features an illustration of a teenage girl titled *That Daughter of Mine*, which depicts Tillie, her daughter who served as Dixon's favorite model for many years. Tillie's delicate features and strong square jawline depicted in *That Daughter of Mine* can also be seen in Dixon's painting, *A Quiet Corner*, as well as in this similar work, *A Quiet Moment*.

A Quiet Moment features a young woman casually seated on a chaise longue lost in the pages of a book. Depictions of women reading were common in the Victorian era, as novels reached an unprecedented popularity due to increased literacy rates and improvements in production that reduced publication costs. This work is one of several paintings produced by Dixon that feature a woman reading inside a domestic interior. The idea of a lady painter depicting a woman reading is significant, as increased access to fiction gave women intellectual freedom and entrée to imagined worlds that were outside the scope of their own limited access to experiences in reality due to their gender and social class. Contemporary cultural commentators frequently voiced anxieties over women reading novels, claiming that engrossing fictional stories provided a distraction allowing women to shirk their domestic duties. It was also commonly stated that a woman's physiology made her vulnerable to the excitement provided by the escapist fantasies in novels, causing women to become dissatisfied with the limitations of their own lives.

¹ "The Year's Art as Recorded in *The Quarterly Illustrator*. New York: Harry C. Jones, 1893, p. 215.

² The Year's Art as Recorded in *The Quarterly Illustrator*. New York: Harry C. Jones, 1894, p. 117.



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That Daughter of Mine. Illustration in The Quarterly Illustrator, Vol. 2, No. 5 (Jan.-Mar., 1894), p. 74.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

Woman in Bonnet Reading a Book. Oil on canvas. 17 ¼ x 14 inches. Signed lower left. Private collection.³

Here, Dixon presents reading as a respectable and pleasant afternoon pastime -- the purity of the young woman's white dress is emphasized by its juxtaposition with the dark striped fabric that covers the chaise. The book lays open upon the luxurious material, whose rich deep colors hint at an exotic world beyond the realm of the Victorian sitting room, perhaps toward an imagined land of sensual pleasure of the sort evoked in the novel that rests upon it. The light blue folding screen in the background gives a brightness to the room and helps to illuminate the young woman, who appears bathed in light from an unseen source. At the same time, the screen's linear qualities and stylized rendering of cherry blossoms and birds speaks to the fashion for Japanese-inspired home décor, which once again emphasizes the contemporary taste for the exotic and the interest in the types of escapist fantasies found in novels.

A Quiet Moment, featuring Dixon's daughter as the model, was painted in 1896, the same year of Tillie's death, which occurred in July on the eve of her intended marriage to Henry MacConell. Dixon's own health deteriorated soon after. *The New York Times* reported, "Her daughter's death seemed to sap all of her strength and ambition."⁴

³ Image courtesy of Heritage Auctions and askArt.

⁴ Death Notice, Maria E. (sic) Dixon, *New York Times*, January 8, 1897.



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Dixon's works can now be found in such notable institutions as the Art Institute of Chicago and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Sources:

The Year's Art as Recorded in The Quarterly Illustrator. New York: Harry C. Jones, 1893.

The Year's Art as Recorded in The Quarterly Illustrator for 1894. New York: Harry C. Jones, 1894.

The Monthly Illustrator for the Second Quarter of 1895. New York: Harry C. Jones, 1895.

The Monthly Illustrator for the Third Quarter of 1895. New York: Harry C. Jones, 1895.

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