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Research Paper

Preston Dickinson's *Mountain Farm in the Snow*: An Early Modern Milestone

James W. Ellis, Ph.D, J.D.
[1] *Case Western Reserve University, USA*
Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, USA

ABSTRACT: *Art historians recognize Preston Dickinson as a leading American modern artist and a major contributor to the Precisionist movement of the 1920s. However, researchers have tended to overlook Dickinson's transitional work of the late-nineteen teens, even though it is emblematic of a groundbreaking generation of young Americans coming to terms with European modernism and non-Western styles. This essay analyzes one of Dickinson's major early paintings, Mountain Farm in the Snow, in which he synthesized a traditional American theme with elements of European Cubism and Japanese printed landscapes. The goal is to reevaluate Preston Dickinson's transitional aesthetic and to position Mountain Farm in its proper place within his oeuvre and the early modernist canon.*

KEYWORDS: *Cubism, Landscape, Modernism, New York, Preston Dickinson, Ukiyo-e*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Historians and critics have long considered Preston Dickinson (1889-1930) to be one of America's leading early modern artists (fig. 1). In a 1917 review of a modernist exhibition, a critic for the *New York Times* wrote, "Preston Dickinson combines technical precision and intellectual force to a degree hardly approached by any of his companions" [1]. Shortly before Dickinson's sudden death in 1930, the New York art dealer and champion of American modernism, Samuel Kootz (1898-1982) wrote, "Dickinson to me is the symbol of all that is good [in American painting]. Sharply intelligent, he is a master technician who … constructs his pictures in brilliant intellectual order" [2: 35]. More recently, art historian and curator, Thomas S. Holman wrote, "A master of color and composition, Dickinson painted with an original purity and boldness [that] has ultimately secured [him] a lasting place in the history of American Modernism" [3].

Figure 1. Preston Dickinson, ca. 1920.

Given Dickinson's lofty position in American art history, it is remarkable how little is known about his early life. The primary sources are a biographic sketch written in 1934 by the artist's sister, Enid Dickinson Collins, and a brief entry written in 1944 by the Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, William Milliken (1889-1978), for the *Dictionary of American Biography* [4: 245-246]. According to these sources, William

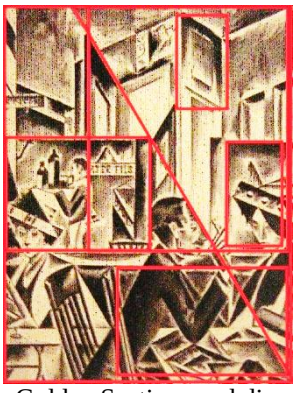
Preston Dickinson was born in September 1889 into a working-class family that lived on Morton Street in Greenwich Village, lower Manhattan, New York City. Dickinson's parents were American born, but his grandparents immigrated to the United States from England. The artist's father, Watson Dickinson, studied fine art at the Cooper Union Art School and made his living as a sign painter. When Watson Dickinson died in 1900, Preston, his sister, and their mother moved to the Bronx to live with relatives. Five years later, Dickinson dropped out of school to find work to help support his family. He found a position as a clerk at a firm of marine architects. Dickinson's talent as a drafter caught the attention of one of the firm's partners, Henry G. Barbey, who offered to pay Dickinson's tuition to attend the Art Students League of New York. Dickinson distinguished himself during his four years at the League. The renowned portrait painter and instructor, William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) singled him out for special recognition and Dickinson received a scholarship to attend the League's summer school in Woodstock, New York.

Chase, and Dickinson's other instructors, encouraged him to augment his studies by going to art galleries and museums, especially New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and if possible, to continue his education abroad. He readily accepted this advice. Dickinson visited the Metropolitan Museum as often as he could, always allotting time to examine its fine collection of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. The Metropolitan began collecting ukiyo-e prints following their introduction to U.S. society at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 [5; 6: 17]. Dickinson also visited Alfred Stieglitz's (1864-1946) progressive gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, where in November 1910 he saw three of Paul Cézanne's (1839-1906) lithographs, stylistic forerunners of *Cubism* [see 7]. In early 1911, Dickinson boarded a ship bound for Europe, he would live in Paris until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. As he had done in New York, Dickinson took art classes, at the École des Beaux-Arts and the Académie Julian, but he spent his free time visiting galleries and museums, where he continued to learn about Japanese prints and European modernism [see 8].

Unfortunately, only one of Dickinson's works survives from his years in Paris [6: 17], a charcoal drawing entitled *Café Scene with a Portrait of Charles Demuth* (fig. 2) In *Café Scene*, Dickinson was working toward a more modernist visual language, synthesizing a geometric compositional structure, inspired by the work of Spanish Cubist Juan Gris (1887-1927), with a nod to the conventions of Japanese prints, seen primarily in the women's faces and the delicacy and variation of lines.

Figure 2. Preston Dickinson, *Café Scene with a Portrait of Charles Demuth*, ca. 1913. Public Domain.

Dickinson saw Juan Gris' paintings and collages for the first time at the *Section d'Or*, or "Golden Section" exhibition, held in Paris in 1912. Unlike Cubism's reticent originators, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Georges Braque (1882-1963), Juan Gris was an enthusiastic spokesperson and advocate of the Cubist style for younger artists, including the so-called French "Salon Cubists" and American expatriates like Dickinson [see 9: 136-164]. Gris meticulously broke down his compositions into implied grids and placed elements in predetermined places following pseudo-mathematical formulas, and he incorporated the proportions of the *Golden Section* or *Golden Ratio* into his works [10]. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, artists, architects, and engineers have sought ways to integrate the aesthetically pleasing Golden Ratio (1 to 1.6, roughly) and Golden Sections into paintings and designs [11]. Golden Sections are found throughout *Café Scene* and in Dickinson's other 1913-1915 works, including *Mountain Farm in the Snow*, of 1915 (fig. 7). Also note Dickinson's interest in another compositional device found in both *Café Scene* and *Mountain Farm*: an implied diagonal running from the lower right to the upper left, which adds balance and symmetry (figs. 3, 4).



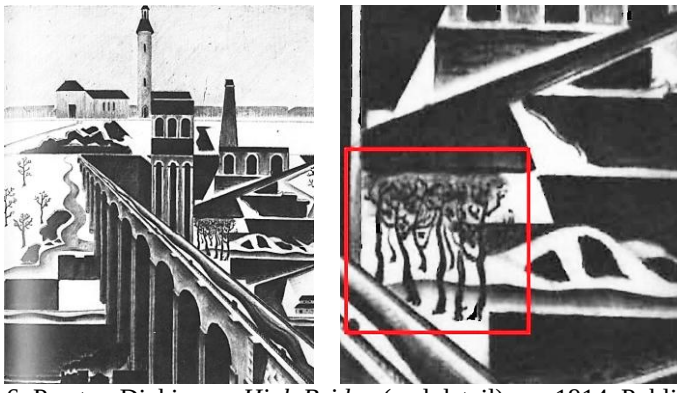

Figures 3, 4. Golden Sections and diagonals in *Café Scene* and *Mountain Farm*.

Before embarking on his European sojourn, Dickinson met an art collector named Charles Daniel (1878-1971) at a framing shop on West 43rd Street in Manhattan. Daniel later described Dickinson at this first encounter as a "snappy, handsome young chap" [12: 283]. Dickinson showed a few of his student works, and again Daniel was favorably impressed, so he bought twenty paintings for two hundred dollars. While Dickinson was away in Paris, Charles Daniel opened an art gallery on West 47th Street. When Dickinson returned to New York in 1914, after the First World War flared up, the first place he went was Daniel's new gallery. Daniel was surprised by the change in Dickinson's appearance: "When he left, he was the handsomest boy I ever saw in my life-gold hair with a sheen, a fine complexion, a neat figure and straight as an arrow. When he returned his hair was old and tired, he was pale, and he looked worn out. I don't know what he did over there-everything wrong. I think he took some kind of dope ... [anyway] he went to live with his mother in the Bronx" [13]. Despite this troubling change, Daniel offered to include Dickinson's new works in upcoming group exhibitions, beginning in the fall of 1914 [14]. In response to this offer, Dickinson produced a remarkable series of drawings and paintings. The rest of this essay will evaluate one of the most intriguing of these new works, *Mountain Farm in the Snow*.

II. A PRECEDING WORK

In late 1914 and 1915, Preston Dickinson stayed with his mother, sister, and his maternal grandparents on Bathgate Avenue in the Tremont section of the Bronx. Tremont is one mile east of the Harlem River, the waterway that separates the Bronx from extreme upper Manhattan. The impressive steel arches of High Bridge, New York City's oldest extant bridge, tower one-hundred-forty feet over the Harlem River. In the fall of 1914, Dickinson often sketched the river, the bridge, and its surrounding architecture using ink and charcoal on rice paper. These drawings feature quasi-Cubist geometric simplifications as well as calligraphic lines that are reminiscent of *Café Scene with a Portrait of Charles Demuth*.

Dickinson began drawing buildings and producing structural designs during his apprentice days at Henry G. Barbey's marine architectural firm, but in late 1914, under the influence of Cubism, Dickinson started treating architecture in an increasingly summary way, by cutting out every needless detail. This simplifying trend would reach fruition the following year in *Mountain Farm in the Snow*. In 1915, two critics praised the way Dickinson streamlined structures. One wrote, "unlike so many 'modernists,' [Dickinson] is choice in his work." Probably referring to *Mountain Farm*, the critic wrote, "his landscape has much in common with the *primitive* [emphasis added]" [15]. The critic's use of the term "primitive" alluded to the purity and reductive qualities of so-called *naïve art*. Another critic commented that in his drawings of High Bridge and in his landscapes, "Mr. Dickinson breaks away from parallelism [meaning depicting landscape as strictly parallel to the picture plane] with vigorous interest in a more living effect … The arrangement is flexible and interesting and full of the asymmetric charm of ancient architecture" [16].



Figures 5, 6. Preston Dickinson. *High Bridge* (and detail). ca. 1914. Public Domain.

In a late 1914 drawing, Dickinson portrayed the High Bridge as seen from the Bronx (fig. 5). Viewers can tell they are looking toward Manhattan because the High Bridge Water Tower, a prominent landmark in Manhattan's Highbridge Park, is shown looming over the scene like a sentinel. The pathway of High Bridge is a dramatic diagonal slashing across the picture plane. On its left is an open field and on its right is a jumble of architectural structures, a busy urban environment of geometric shapes and crisscrossing lines. Within this jumble is a small, squarish clump of trees, which is easily overlooked within the maze of shapes (fig. 6). Whereas the stark, abstracted architecture and quadrangular trees quietly merge with their surroundings in *High Bridge*, when they reappear more conspicuously and in isolation in *Mountain Farm in the Snow*, they demand a thorough explanation.

Figure 7. Preston Dickinson, *Mountain Farm in the Snow*, 1915, Oil on canvas.

Unlike in *High Bridge*, it is difficult to decide Dickinson's vantage point in *Mountain Farm*. He may have viewed the scene from some lofty unseen structure, such as a silo, or from an elevated natural setting, such as another mountaintop. It seems more likely, though, that he employed an imagined "bird's-eye view," a clever conceit used for centuries by landscape artists and cartographers [17]. A cool, bluish-grey band stretches over *Mountain Farm*'s frozen terrain, a distinctly wintry sky, clear but gloomy. The high horizon adds weight to the landscape, as does the deep snow blanketing the rocky hilltops. The painting's most striking motifs are three isolated groves of trees, each with stylized, wavy, curvilinear bare branches. A grouping of farmhouses and barns spread over the lower half of the image. At the bottom, Dickinson placed an almost-unbroken frieze of angular black rooftops, with two grey gables poking upward. The houses' dark windows either have blackened panes or show into unlit interiors. Three sienna barns crowd the lower right edge of the composition. The peaks of their receding gables are echoed in the peaks of receding hills in the left background. Beside the barns are three addition grey-black houses, seen from three distinct angles. The closest house sits at a diagonal, and smoke rises from its chimney. In fact, the only suggestion of a human presence is the billowing smoke, which twists upward and blends into golden pathways stretching to the center of the composition and a thin horizontal line that runs to the right edge (suggesting a roadway). A cylindrical water well is another striking motif, isolated in the lower left, topped by a wooden crossbar, from which dangles a suspended bucket.

III. *MOUNTAIN FARM*'S PROVENANCE AND EXHIBITION HISTORY

Mountain Farm in the Snow is an exceptional painting; however, museum curators and private collectors have not always recognized it as such. Historically, curators and major collectors have tended to favor Dickinson's fully realized *Precisionist* paintings of the 1920s over his transitional paintings of the 1910s. The major exception to this rule was Ferdinand Howald (1856-1934), who appreciated Dickinson's entire *oeuvre*. Between 1917 and 1928, Howald bought twenty-seven of Dickinson's works from the Daniel Gallery, and he later donated seventeen of those works to the Columbus (Ohio) Museum of Art. Howald amassed a fortune operating coal mines in West Virginia, and he assembled his impressive art collection buying almost-exclusively from Charles Daniel. When Howald's health began to decline seriously in 1929, he stopped collecting and retired to Columbus. The loss of Howald's patronage, combined with the financial hardships of the Great Depression, dealt a deadly blow to the Daniel Gallery, which was forced to close in 1932 [18]. Ferdinand Howald, who had an astute eye and appreciated Dickinson's early output, for some reason chose not to buy *Mountain Farm in the Snow*.

Mountain Farm may have been included in Daniel Gallery's 1915 Autumn Group Show, but its first documented public showing came in January 1917 at the *Modern Art Exhibition*, which was sponsored by the People's Art Guild. The pioneering advocate of modern art, John Weichsel (1870-1946) founded the People's Art Guild in 1915 [19]. Weichsel intended the cooperative to serve as an alternative to the traditional art gallery system and he put on avant-garde exhibitions in "various unorthodox spaces," including migrant settlement houses and tenements on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Weichsel's goal was to expose "a new population to modern art and provide artists with direct contact to new markets" [20; see also 21]. The *Modern Art Exhibition* was held at the Parish House of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension, in New York's Greenwich Village, near Preston Dickinson's childhood home. *Mountain Farm*, however, did not find a buyer and it was returned to the Daniel Gallery, where it remained until the gallery closed in 1932. In 1946, the Parke-Bernet Galleries actioned off Charles Daniel's personal collection [22], and *Mountain Farm* passed into the hands of art collector and sculptor Edith Cooke Denniston (1890-1977). Denniston then sold the painting to Manhattan's Kraushaar Galleries, and finally, in 1949, Kraushaar sold the painting to the Cleveland Museum of Art.

The Cleveland Museum's interest in buying *Mountain Farm in the Snow* was, at least in part, motivated by the painting's inclusion in the Whitney Museum of American Art's major 1946 retrospective *Pioneers of Modern Art in America* [23: 21]. In the estimation of Lloyd Goodrich (1897-1987), the Whitney's influential curator, *Mountain Farm* deserved a place alongside the acknowledged masterworks of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), Charles Demuth (1883-1935), Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), and Stuart Davis (1892-1964). In total, five of Dickinson's works were included in *Pioneers of Modern Art*, but *Mountain Farm* was singled out for special attention. The Whitney Museum's exhibition catalogue included an illustration of *Mountain Farm*, and the prominent journal *Art News* included a reproduction of the painting to illustrate Alfred M. Frankfurter's (1906-1965) review of the Whitney show. Frankfurter wrote, "Among the most promising *minor moderns* [emphasis added] was Preston Dickinson … His *Mountain Farm* shows the geometric pattern in which *he remained constantly absorbed* [emphasis added]" [24]. Frankfurter wrote of Dickinson in the past tense because he died in 1930.

In 1963, *Mountain Farm* appeared in another major Whitney Museum exhibition, entitled *The Decade of the Armory Show: New Directions in American Art, 1910-1920*, and it was included in Dickinson's first comprehensive retrospective, *Preston Dickinson, 1889-1930*, which was organized by the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery in 1979 [25; 6]. Each of these succeeding showings enhanced *Mountain Farm in the Snow*'s standing, both within Dickinson's body of work and within the canon of American modernism.

Figure 8. Preston Dickinson, *Factory*, 1920. Public Domain.

It is worth noting that the Whitney exhibition of 1963 included only two works by Dickinson: *Mountain Farm* and an industrial scene of 1920 (fig. 8). The two paintings are a study in contrasts, but each reflects a specific stage in early American modernism. In 1915, when Dickinson painted *Mountain Farm*, many American modernists were grappling with the fallout of the Armory Show, and with Cézanne's geometric post-Impressionism, Picasso and Braque's Cubism, and the aesthetics of non-Western art, including Japanese printmaking [see 26]. By 1920, one group of American modernists had moved on to producing abstracted renderings of industrial architecture and geometric urban cityscapes. Art writers assigned various labels to this group, which included Dickinson, Demuth, Sheeler, and Joseph Stella (1877-1946): the *Cubist-Realists*, the *Immaculates*, and finally the Precisionists [27]. By representing Dickinson's achievements with only two works, *Mountain Farm* and the industrial painting of 1920, the 1963 Whitney exhibition went a long way in establishing his specific position(s) within American modernism; Dickinson was both 1) an eclectic post-Armory experimenter; and 2) an important Precisionist.

IV. THE CATSKILL MOUNTAINS

Although the formal style of *Mountain Farm in the Snow* is modern, its subject matter is traditional. Indeed, Dickinson selected an archetypical American subject: the Catskill Mountains. We can be fairly sure that *Mountain Farm* is not merely a generic scene because Dickinson gave a specific title to the painting's preparatory study: *Snow Scene, Catskills*. That preparatory work is in the collections of the Sheldon Museum of Art, in Lincoln, Nebraska. The Catskill Mountains cover 700,000 acres west of the Hudson River, approximately one hundred miles northwest of New York City. For centuries, the Catskills' picturesque peaks and dense forests have attracted landscape artists, including the nineteenth century group known as the *Hudson River School*, "America's first true artistic fraternity" [28]. The Hudson River School artists (ca. 1825-1875) depicted the Catskills in many ways: from Thomas Cole's (1801-1848) dramatically *sublime* scenes (fig. 9) to Frederic Edwin Church's (1826-1900) scientific studies to the *plein-air* naturalism of Asher B. Durand (1796-1886) [see 29]. The Hudson River School, though, faded before the advent of modernism.

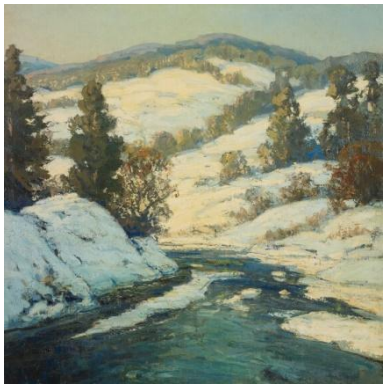


Figure 9. Thomas Cole, *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1836–37, Oil. Public Domain.
Figure 10. John Carlson, *A Stream in Winter* (The Catskills), ca. 1910.

Preston Dickinson first visited the Catskills during the summers of 1909 and 1910, when he attended the Art Students League summer school in Woodstock, New York, and studied with John Fabian Carlson (1874-1945). Carlson was the director of the summer school, the head of the Woodstock Art Association, and the most prominent Catskill landscape painter during the period in which Dickinson completed *Mountain Farm*. However, although Dickinson appreciated Carlson's snow-covered woodland landscapes and there are compositional similarities between *Mountain Farm* and some of Carlson's paintings, such as *A Stream in Winter* (fig. 10), by 1915 Dickinson would have had had little interest in emulating Carlson's highly realist style. After spending years studying the latest trends in Paris, Dickinson had discovered new ways to portray nature.

V. *MOUNTAIN FARM* AND CUBISM

When Dickinson was studying in Paris, one of his landscapes was shown at the 1912 *Salon des Indépendants*, an annual Parisian showcase organized by the *Société des Artistes Indépendants* ("Society of Independent Artists"). The *Société* was famous, or infamous, for displaying the most challenging avant-garde art. The 1912 show featured startling work by a new generation of Analytical and Synthetic Cubists, who were described as "Salon Cubists" to distinguish them from the "Gallery Cubists," Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. By 1912, Picasso and Braque, the first-generation Cubist innovators, had moved on from the salons and showed their work exclusively at the gallery of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1884-1979). Preston Dickinson spent time contemplating the landscapes of the Salon Cubists at the *Salon des Indépendants* and the landscapes of

Picasso and Braque at Kahnweiler's gallery. Georges Braque seems to have had the deepest impact on Dickinson's evolving aesthetic.

In 1908, Braque submitted six paintings to the Parisian *Salon d'Automne* ("Autumn Salon"), but they were all rejected. Braque then took his six paintings to Kahnweiler, who included them in the artist's first solo exhibition [see 30]. In a review of the show, critic Louis Vauxcelles (1870-1943) wrote, "[Braque] reduces everything—places and figures and houses—to geometrical patterns, to cubes" [31]. Vauxcelles' words certainly describe *Houses at L'Estaque* (fig. 11), Braque's famous portrayal of a group of houses and trees on a hillside in a small fishing village near Marseille, France. Braque depicted a conventional subject in an unconventional way, by simplifying architecture and abstracting from nature. As Preston Dickinson would later do in *Mountain Farm in the Snow*, Braque subordinated realism and accuracy to a rhythmic display of cubic forms.

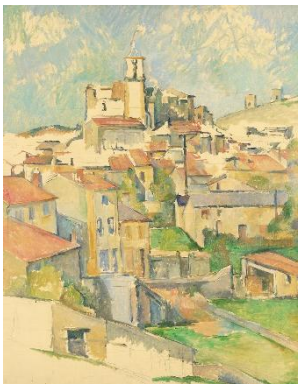


Figure 11. Georges Braque, *Houses at L'Estaque*, 1908. Public Domain.
Figure 12. Paul Cézanne, *Gardanne*, 1886, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain.

Both Braque and Dickinson felt the influence of the post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne (fig. 12). Cézanne thought that, instead of merely copying what they see, artists should transform nature into elemental shapes. In a 1904 letter sent to the painter Emile Bernard (1868-1941), Cézanne wrote, "treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything brought into proper perspective" [32: 301; see also 33]. After Cézanne died, his supporters held a memorial exhibition, which Braque visited. He was particularly impressed by Cézanne's own studies of the landscape surrounding L'Estaque, which helped inspire Braque (and Picasso's) new Cubist style. In turn, Braque had a direct impact on Preston Dickinson's evolving Cubist-Realism. Like the post-Impressionist landscapes of Cézanne and the Cubist landscapes of Braque, Dickinson's Cubist-Realist *Mountain Farm in the Snow* features a bird's-eye view, presents nearby and distant things with equal clarity, and portrays forms from different vantage points simultaneously. *Mountain Farm* is not simply a modified Cubist painting though; its incorporation of non-Western elements makes it much more complex.

VI. *MOUNTAIN FARM* AND JAPANESE ART

Preston Dickinson's interest in Japanese prints predated the years he spent in Paris; he had studied Japanese art before being fully immersed in European modernism. During his time at the Art Students League, Dickinson's fellow students and instructors already noted the profound influence Japanese aesthetics played in his style [6: 17, 21-22, 28, 30]. League instructor, Louis Bouché (1896-1969), for instance, noted, "It is possible that, largely because of [Dickinson's] love of design, Japanese prints had an even greater influence on his work" than did [Cézanne or European modernism]. … As Japanese prints suggest Japanese people, Dickinson's landscapes suggest the actual scenes" [34: 2]. The emphasis on formalism in Cubist landscapes, such as those of Georges Braque (fig. 11), could tend to overwhelm their connection to the actual motif. In *Mountain Farm*, Dickinson synthesized Cubist formalism with a realist's interest in a specific place, an interest shared by Japanese artists such as Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) (figs. 13, 14).


Figure 13. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Fujikawa, a Village*, 1855, Woodblock Ink on rice paper.
Figure 14. Utagawa Hiroshige, *The Taiko (Drum) Bridge*, 1857, Woodblock Ink on rice paper.

The "woodblock art of pre-modern Japan … revolutionized European [avant-garde] painting" and made a major contribution (following ca. 1860) to the development of Impressionism, post-Impressionism, and early modernism [35: 85; see also 36 and 37]. Exposure to Japanese landscapes changed the ways Western modernists represented nature, from Claude Monet (1840-1926) and his fellow Impressionists, through Vincent van Gogh (1853-1900) and the post-Impressionists, to symbolists like Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) and others [see 38; 39; 40]. Critics coined the term *Japonisme* to describe the widescale late-nineteenth century Western craze for Japanese art and design, and their cultural appropriation [see 35: 84-91]. Preston Dickinson's *Mountain Farm in the Snow* was a late and understated, but still significant, manifestation of Japonisme.

Whereas Western landscape painters historically were absorbed with "naturalism," the desire to describe things accurately and objectively, Japanese artists such as Hiroshige offered more subjective, selective interpretations of nature. Landscape artists of the Western tradition used subtle tonal modelling to suggest three-dimensionality and used atmospheric and linear perspective tricks to suggest the recession of forms in space. Landscape artists of the Eastern tradition, on the other hand, eschewed modeling and suggested spatial recession by placing (larger) closer elements at the bottom of the composition and placing (smaller) more distant elements at the top of the composition. Western and Eastern artists also used colors differently. Whereas a Western landscape painter might typically employ an unlimited palette to capture nature's plentitude and to record fleeting lighting and atmospheric effects, an Eastern artist might go the other direction, using a restricted palette to simplify complex scenery and eliminate unnecessary details. Hiroshige was particularly admired for his ability to deftly manipulate unmodulated *localized colors* and interlocking, flattened planes to organize his scenes. Preston Dickinson understood these Eastern techniques and used them effectively in *Mountain Farm in the Snow*.

VII. THE INFLUENCE OF ARTHUR WESLEY DOW

Dickinson's understanding of Japanese principles of art would have been enhanced by the teachings of Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922). Dow, an accomplished printmaker and painter, is remembered today primarily for his influence as an American arts educator [see 41; 42]. After receiving his first training in Massachusetts, in 1884 Dow went to Paris to study at the Académie Julian. After returning to the United States, he spent years researching Japanese prints at the Boston Public Library and eventually became assistant curator for Japanese art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In this capacity, Dow was a leading advocate for the aesthetic virtues of Japanese woodblock prints, particularly those of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Hiroshige. Dow joined the faculty of the Art Students League in 1897, and two years later, he published *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, which, in its various editions, became a standard textbook for art education. In *Composition*, Dow expounded Japanese theories, such as the notion that artists should not prioritize copying nature, but, rather, should systematically create compositions that harmonize lines, colors, and *no-tan* (darks and lights) [43: 3]. Dow's theories held sway over the Art Students League during Preston Dickinson years as a student, and clearly affected *Mountain Farm in the Snow*.

Before continuing to further analysis of *Mountain Farm*'s composition, it is worthwhile to pause briefly and ponder the degree to which Dickinson relied on the appearance of a specific location. Although the preparatory study for *Mountain Farm* was entitled *Snow Scene, Catskills*, it is unclear whether Dickinson really wanted to portray any particular "snow scene," or if he used the theme merely as a jumping off point for formalist experimentation. Dickinson may have painted *Mountain Farm* from life, or he may have painted it in his studio in the Bronx using his onsite preparatory studies or even photographic sources (fig. 16). Art Students League payment records show Dickinson attended the League's summer school at the Byrdcliffe Arts Colony in

Woodstock, New York, in 1909 and 1910 [6: 40; see also 45]. His Woodstock instructors were John Carlson, Birge Harrison (1854-1929), and Frank DuMond (1865-1951), each of whom was known for painting wintery mountain scenes onsite, *en plein air*. During the summers of 1909 and 1910 Dickinson may have produced studies that he later reworked in his studio, or perhaps after returning from Europe in 1914 he visited Woodstock again. Whatever the case, it seems clear that Dickinson liberally employed *artistic license* and freely manipulated his design after consulting Arthur Wesley Dow's Japanese-inspired guidelines.

Figure 15. Preston Dickinson, *Mountain Farm in the Snow*.
Figure 16. Postcard showing a Woodstock farm and Mount Guardian ca. 1900. Public Domain.

According to Dow, a picture's "harmony" depends to a great degree upon 1) the softening of opposing horizontal and vertical elements by transitional diagonals; 2) the rhythmical repetition of lines and forms; and 3) the design's overall order and/or symmetry [43: 21-22, 24-28]. Dickinson systematically attended to each of these factors in *Mountain Farm in the Snow*. His foreground is a network of horizontal and vertical lines that are joined or harmonized both by the connecting diagonal lines of gables and rooftops and by the softer rounded forms of billowing smoke and the golden roads. Furthermore, Dickinson linked his geometric architecture, at least in part, with rhythmic repetitions of straight edges. Similarly, his overall composition is interconnected by sets of visual repetitions (the houses and barns, the tree clusters, and rocky hillsides). Dickinson achieved unity through well-spaced, ordered patterning, without needing to resort to unimaginative pure symmetry. He did insert one major symmetrical element, though: an implied diagonal line runs from the lower right to the upper left, bisecting the image into two equal halves. However, *Mountain Farm*'s diagonal is subtle, much more so than the diagonal in *High Bridge*, for example (fig. 5). Dickinson achieved a *yin and yang* visual balance without inserting a distracting hard edge.

Dickinson also heeded Dow's advice concerning the "harmonic relations" of *no-tan*, a Japanese term roughly translated as "darks and lights" [43: 53-58]. Neither Dow nor Dickinson was particularly interested in balancing "shadows and lights," shadows being a historical obsession of Western landscape artists. Every dark and every light area in *Mountain Farm* serves to enhance Dickinson's complete design. The darker tones of architecture dominate the lower half; the lighter tones of the snowy mountainside dominate the upper half. The vertical balance of contrasting tones is vaguely reminiscent of the way East Asian calligraphers achieve balance when brushing black ink onto white rice paper. Dickinson also used his limited palette to produce strong tonal contrasts. His lightest tone is the pale snow running throughout the scene. The middle tones are scattered here and there, in the cool blues of the winter sky, house exteriors, and rising smoke. Dickinson saved his *dominant color*, however, for his barns: a jarringly hot, dark burnt sienna projecting from the scene, demanding the viewer's attention. The chromatic weight of the intense orange is equivalent to the (generally) grayscale remainder of Dickinson's image; thus, he achieved a *chromatic asymmetrical balance*.

So far, this essay has focused on *Mountain Farm*'s subject matter, stylistic sources, and compositional arrangement. The conclusion will analyze two of its unusual iconographic components: 1) the enigmatic groves of trees; and 2) the oddly conspicuous water well.

VIII. *MOUNTAIN FARM*'S TREES

Arthur Wesley Dow disparaged the unfortunate and "arbitrary division of painting into Representational and Decorative" categories, asserting, "in the world's [historical] art epochs there was no such division" [43: 44]. Dow stressed that modern artists should not feel bound by natural "likenesses," but were free to incorporate abstract designs to improve their compositions, and he showed how these principles could be used in portrayals of groves of trees. Dow advised artists to first notice how trees' "vertical straight lines" and "cut horizontal lines" form "an arrangement in opposition and repetition making a pattern in rectangular shapes. … [T]his is a common effect in nature, to be translated into terms of art" [43: 44-47]. Dow offered his own

illustrations of how to arrange trees. Dow's rectangular formatting and the way he cropped trees at the top of their trunks closely corresponded to Dickinson's approach in *Mountain Farm in the Snow* (figs. 17, 18).

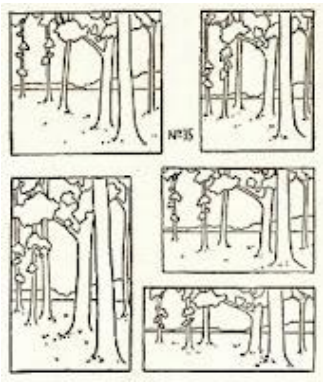



Figure 17. Illustration No. 35 from Arthur Wesley Dow's *Composition*, 1913. Public Domain.
Figure 18. Preston Dickinson, *Mountain Farm in the Snow* (detail).

Arthur Wesley Dow's ideas on art were particularly influential in Woodstock, New York, at the Art Students League summer program and at the Byrdcliffe Arts and Crafts Colony [44]. When Preston Dickinson attended summer school at Woodstock in 1909 and 1910, he undoubtedly would have met Edna M. Walker (born 1880) and Zulma Steele (1881-1983), two of Byrdcliffe's leading designers. Walker had been a top student of Dow before she was hired at Byrdcliffe to produce abstracted designs of foliage and trees to adorn pottery and furnishings [46]. Steele was also a follower of Dow who painted trees and other natural forms in a decorative American Arts and Crafts style [47; 48]. In fact, by the time Dickinson created *Mountain Farm*, there was a large and respected group of women artists who had studied with Arthur Wesley Dow and painted trees in a similar, faintly Japanese style. Among this group was the Iowa-born printmaker Bertha Lum (1864-1954), who closely followed Dow's guidance [49]. It is therefore no coincidence that Lum's stylized, wavy arbores echo those of Preston Dickinson (figs. 19, 20). There may have been other sources, though.


Figure 19. Bertha Lum, *Pines by the Sea*, 1912, Woodcut. Public Domain.
Figure 20. Preston Dickinson, *Mountain Farm in the Snow* (detail).

When Dickinson was a student at the Académie Julian in Paris, he would have become quite familiar with the work of Maurice Denis (1870-1943). Denis was a leading avant-garde painter, decorative artist, and writer, and in the years before the First World War, he taught at the Académie Ranson, near the Académie Julian. During his student days, Denis also attended the Académie Julian and two of Denis' former classmates and close friends, Marcel-André Baschet (1862-1941) and Henri Paul Royer (1869-1938), were Dickinson's painting instructors at the Académie Julian [6: 17]. Denis' philosophy was like that of Arthur Wesley Dow. Denis was a vocal advocate for Japanese aesthetics, he steadfastly challenged traditional distinctions dividing fine arts from crafts, and he embraced decoration as a primary purpose of painting. In a famous 1890 essay written for the art review *Art et Critique*, Denis issued what became one of the best-known dicta of modernism in the visual arts: "Remember that a picture—before a war horse or a nude woman or an anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order" [cited in 50: 21]. Denis' best-known paintings invariably featured ornamental groves of trees characterized by bold patterning and unmediated color [51]. Dickinson was surely aware of Denis's boxy stylized tree clusters and seems to have referenced them in *Mountain Farm in the Snow* (figs. 21-23).



Figures 21, 22. Maurice Denis, *The Miracle of St. Hubert* (Details), 1897. Public Domain.
Figure 23. Preston Dickinson, *Mountain Farm in the Snow* (detail).

There is also a less formalist way of understanding *Mountain Farm*'s trees. John Carlson, Preston Dickinson's landscape instructor at the Art Students League, wrote about the unique characteristics of trees and their connections to people.

> Every tree is a 'personality,' and possesses, within the limits of its species, a tremendous latitude of expression. … Trees are elusive! Nature seems to have especially created them to tease beginners in landscape painting. With sympathetic understanding, we are apt to feel a tree more keenly. Trees are the most personal objects in nature; we feel distinctly related to them. The vast sky or the gloomy mountain are far removed from us ─ they are like a distant, deep organ note. They are dictators of conditions; they even influence the weather. The trees, like ourselves, are the humble recipients" [52: 95-96].

Carlson's ideas are rooted in European Romantic notions of "sympathy," and to the late nineteenth century conception of "empathy" or *Einfühlung* (literally "feeling-into"), which was especially important in the German aesthetic philosophy of Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) [see 53]. Lipps wrote about how viewers can "feel-into" art objects and contemplate what the artist depicted as representative of their own experiences or sentiments. By feeling into a painted landscape, it is possible "to understand what it would be like to be in that landscape and thus to understand its particular emotions" [54: 142].

The limited biographical information about Preston Dickinson suggests he experienced profound personal struggles: with his finances, with substance abuse, with his sexuality, and his ability to relate to others [3; 6: 16]. Those who knew him described Dickinson as lonely and sad; his life was "tragic" and "lacking in peace" [34: 3]. Although this essay does not address these issues, they may help explain his unconventional groves of trees. Thick forests blanket most of the Catskill Mountains, but Dickinson's small groves are oddly isolated; they seem disconnected, even lonely. Dickinson decided to not include any people in *Mountain Farm in the Snow*. No one is there to appreciate the tree clusters as they bravely resist the harsh winter weather. No one is there to admire their flair, their expressiveness, or their wavy branches. The trees may be understood as stand-ins for the Preston Dickinson himself, a socially isolated, troubled man. Like the trees he painted, in 1915 Dickinson was struggling to get through a transitional period and he was hoping to see a new season of artistic maturity and fruition.

IX. *MOUNTAIN FARM*'S WATER WELL

Preston Dickinson used various methods to emphasize various parts of *Mountain Farm in the Snow*. For instance, the barns draw attention with their projecting burnt sienna color and the trees attract the eye with their quirky decorative qualities. Dickinson's water well, though, demands notice because of 1) its prominent placement (isolated in a field of white in the foreground); 2) its outsized scale (compared to nearby houses); and 3) its *anthropomorphic* quality. Anthropomorphism, the attribution of human characteristics to non-human things, is an instinctive tendency of human psychology and a common historical tool of artists [see 55: 163-194]. Although it is not obvious at first, when Dickinson's water well and its surrounding forms are considered in isolation, they closely resemble a human face (figs. 24 a-c). The well's black ovoid opening could be a gaping mouth. The well's suspended bucket could be a nose. The eyes can be perceived nearby, in the dark windows of a house above the well, or within the branches of a tree cluster, where a single eye peers outward. As the artist and viewers look at nature, natural looks back at the artist and viewers.

Figures 24 a-c. Preston Dickinson, *Mountain Farm in the Snow* (details).

There is, however, another way to think about the water well, based upon an analytical framework supplied by the renowned art historian and theorist Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) [56: 26-54; on Panofsky's relation to semiotic art history, see 57]. According to Panofsky, people understand artistic representations on three levels: 1) a "primary" or "natural" level; 2) a "secondary" or "conventional" level; and 3) an "intrinsic" level. A hypothetical *average person* living in the United States in 1915 would have been familiar with the appearance of a water well, based upon their individual experiences, and would have realized that Dickinson had depicted a water well. Thus, his well conveyed a primary, natural meaning. The same hypothetical average person would have known that farmers typically dig wells on their property, as a source of water for themselves, their animals, and to irrigate crops. It would have made sense that the artist included a water well in a picture of a farmyard. Thus, Dickinson's well conveyed a conventional, or *iconographic* meaning. Panofsky's third level is the most interesting. Appreciating the intrinsic or essential meaning of the well requires some knowledge of the general attitudes and philosophies of a people or a culture as filtered through a single person in a single work. What symbolic significance would Preston Dickinson's society have assigned to water wells and why would it have been meaningful for him to give a well such a prominent position in his painting?

The scant information concerning Dickinson's early life makes *iconological* analysis of the water well a highly speculative, but intriguing, endeavor. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prominent Christian theologians and *typologists* taught that biblical wells and fountains symbolized divine blessings or the "living water" of eternal life [NIV Bible John 4:10; 58; 59]. Nothing in Dickinson's biography, however, suggests he was a religious person and religious symbolism seems to have played no part in his imagery. Similarly, even though there is a familiar folkloric belief dating back to ancient Rome that tossing coins into a "wishing well" can bring good luck [see 60], nothing suggests Dickinson was particularly superstitious or that *Mountain Farm*'s water well possesses any magical powers. Finally, in the classic Chinese divination text known as the *I Ching* (易經), wells are said to symbolize the health of a community because in ancient China they usually sat in the center of villages and supplied a constant source of nourishing water [61]. Even though Preston Dickinson was interested in East Asian culture and philosophy, his work is nevertheless devoid of Japanese or Chinese symbolism.

The enigmatic water well may be a form of personal symbolism; the motive for its inclusion may lie in Preston Dickinson's tendency to emulate the artwork of others. The progressive French and Japanese artists whom Dickinson most admired ─ Maurice Denis, Hiroshige, and Hokusai ─ each on occasion produced images of people drawing water from wells. Dickinson's water well may act as a stand-in for the artistic sources from which he drew inspiration. The well reflects Dickinson's process of creative assimilation, his ability to synthesize from a variety of aesthetic wellsprings. Both the water well, and *Mountain Farm in the Snow* as a whole, function in two realms, above and below the surface.

X. CONCLUSION

In the first few years following his return from Europe, Preston Dickinson fashioned an original stylistic synthesis, conjoining Western modernism and the traditions of the Far East, as filtered through the teachings of Arthur Wesley Dow. Dickinson was committed to conventional American subject matter, specifically the architectural wonders of Manhattan and farmland in the Catskills, but he portrayed these subjects with a remarkably eloquent and distinctive visual idiom. In *Mountain Farm in the Snow*, Dickinson applied a reductive geometry to forms, derived from European Cubist landscapes, and imposed a strict compositional order to nature, derived from Japanese landscapes, a true East-West blend. The transitional works Dickinson created in 1914-1915 pointed the way to his later accomplishments as a Precisionist and a major American modernist, and *Mountain Farm in the Snow* is the most significant of these transitional paintings. Thus, it deserves an honored position in the history of early American modern art.

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