

# OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART  
CONSULTATION | SALES | APPRAISAL

WILLIAM HERBERT DUNTON

(b. 1878 Augusta, Maine – d. 1936 Albuquerque, New Mexico)

Media: Oil; lithography; charcoal; crayon.

Education: Cowles Art School, Boston; Art Students League, New York; in Taos with E.L. Blumenschein and Leon Gaspard.

Collections: (partial list) Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY; Eiteljorg Museum of American Indian and Western Art, Indianapolis, IN; Harwood Foundation Museum, Taos, NM; Kit Carson Memorial Museums, Taos, NM; Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, NM; Museum of the Southwest, Midland, TX; National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ; The Rockwell Museum, Corning, NY.

Reference Material:

Coke, Van Deren, Taos and Santa Fe The Artist's Environment 1882-1942. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1963.

Nelson, Mary Carroll, The Legendary Artists of Taos. Watson-Guptill Publications, New York, 1980.

Taggett, Sherry Clayton and Schwartz, Ted, Paintbrushes and Pistols, How the Taos Artists Sold the West. John Muir Publications, Santa Fe, 1990.

Born in Augusta, Maine in 1878, William Herbert Dunton grew up in rural comfort on family farms. He began sketching at an early age and he took his sketchbooks everywhere on his treks, avidly recording in them details of nature. At the age of 18 he took his first trip, to Montana, following his boyhood dream of freedom in the West. For the next 15 years he returned to the West regularly and hired himself out to work on cattle ranches. By living with cowboys, working beside them, and painting them on location, Dunton became America's leading illustrator of outdoor western life

In 1911 Dunton met Ernest L. Blumenschein at the exclusive, artists' social club, the Salmagundi in New York. Soon afterwards, he enrolled in Blumenschein's class at the Art Students League. Encouraged by Blumenschein, Dunton moved to Taos in 1912 and devoted his time to serious painting while virtually abandoning his career as an illustrator. Three years later, Dunton, along with Blumenschein, Sharp, Couse, Phillips and Berninghaus formed an association to promote the sale of their work through traveling exhibitions. From its inception, the Taos Society of Artists remained a successful commercial venture until its dissolution in 1927.

# OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART  
CONSULTATION | SALES | APPRAISAL

“Buck” Dunton became the resident cowboy artist of Taos. He was the man who had lived the life the rest had only heard about. He had been a cowboy in the American West and a Vaquero in Mexico. It was Dunton’s wish to preserve in paint something of the sturdy old Westerners who had opened up the region. His favorite subjects were hearty hunters, men of the open range, and the Indians as they had appeared before European civilization altered their way of life. There was an urgency in him to capture and document the romantic untamed quality of western life that was passing, thus his paintings are active with authentically represented clothing and equipment. According to Dunton, “The West has passed – more’s the pity. In another 25 years the old-time Westerner will have gone, too – gone with the buffalo and the antelope. I’m going to hand down to posterity a bit of the unadulterated real thing...” (American Magazine of Art, October, 1925).

In response to his new environment, Dunton’s works from 1912 to the early 1920s exhibited a growing sensitivity to different light effects on a variety of surfaces, an interest in brushstroke as an expressive tool, and a brightening of palette. Like so many American artists during this period, his paintings were showing the effects of French Impressionism. However, unlike the French Impressionists who commonly allowed forms to dissolve in brushwork and light, the solidity of forms was essential to Dunton’s works, as was the American art tradition at that time.

Dunton’s major figure paintings of the mid-1920’s and 30’s are distinctly different from similar images from the earlier years. The final phase of Dunton’s career is marked by an emphasis on nature. He painted animals in the wild for much of his life, however during his final years, he began to integrate animals – elk, deer, and especially bears – into simplified, stylized landscapes characterized by rich color. They are clearly carefully composed, and many consider these later canvases to be his most masterful compositions.

Despite his many successes, Dunton is often given the least credibility of any of the Taos artists. Perhaps this is due to his earlier reputation as an illustrator. Or perhaps it is due to the fact that Dunton was “so intent upon seizing the vanishing life of hunter, trapper, scout, and cowmen that he has an earnestness of style which makes one apt to overlook his virtuosity as a painter.” (John H. McGinnis, Southwest Review). However, amongst his peers, Dunton’s work was often viewed as some of the strongest and he received high critical praise during his lifetime. His Cattle Buyer was selected for the 1924 Venice Biennial and in 1927 Alexandre Hogue considered Dunton to be “in the front rank of living American painters.”