

What to see in Philly galleries this January

philly.com/news/philadelphia-gallery-shows-january-edwin-walter-dickinson-20190102.html

News

by Edith Newhall, Updated: January 2, 2019



Detail from Edwin Walter Dickinson's "Interior" (1916), at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

When the weather is temperamental and gray, my thoughts turn to artists who've conveyed dark moods and melancholy.

One master of gloom was Edwin Walter Dickinson (1891-1978), the esteemed American "painter's painter" of dreamlike landscapes, symbolic still lifes, and strange, occasionally macabre, interior scenes of figures enacting curious scenes in dim rooms. He is the main subject of a beautiful, under-the-radar exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"Between Nature and Abstraction: Edwin Dickinson and Friends," tucked away in Gallery 119 of the museum's American art wing, marks the museum's first display of six Dickinson paintings that were a part of a recent bequest from the late collector Daniel W. Dietrich II.

Also included in the exhibition are three Dickinsons already in the museum's collection, as well as paintings by two of Dickinson's instructors, William Merritt Chase and Charles Webster Hawthorne. Here, too, are brooding paintings by Albert Pinkham Ryder, with whom Dickinson is often compared, and works by contemporaries including Willem de Kooning, Edward Hopper, Charles Demuth, Rockwell Kent, Milton Avery, and Jack Tworkov.

All are from the museum's collection and were chosen by its senior curator of American art, Kathleen A. Foster.

The somberness of Dickinson's palette and his eerie images are understandable. Born in Seneca Falls, N.Y., and raised in nearby Buffalo, Dickinson lost his mother to tuberculosis in 1903, when he was 12. One of his brothers committed suicide in 1913 by jumping from Dickinson's sixth-floor apartment window in Manhattan, where the artist had moved to study painting with Chase. Another brother was murdered in Detroit in 1935.

Interior (1916), the first of eight monumental figure paintings that established his reputation, is a haunting image of odd characters clustered around a young man playing a guitar who seems oblivious to them. Locals from Provincetown, Mass., where Dickinson lived during his 20s and 30s, served as models.

One of Dickinson's signature ways of painting — known as "premier coup" or "first strike" and championed by Chase — was to apply paint quickly to a surface with a brush, palette knife, and his fingers. Its blurred effect is seen in this exhibition in such paintings as *Apple Tree with Mistletoe* (1938) and *East Room* (1940).

Another technique of his, borrowed from Paul Cézanne, was to create forms with patches of closely related colors, as in *Glen Eyrie* (1929), an interior view of a cottage his family owned. Seen up close, it looks completely abstract.

The late Philadelphia artist Thomas Chimes was three decades younger than Dickinson. In his mysterious 1988 painting *Faustroll (L'Infini)*, a man in a hat is seen in profile as through a dense mist. It makes a logical bookend to the show.

Through Feb. 10, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays (Wednesdays and Fridays to 8:45 p.m.). 215-763-8100 or philamuseum.org.