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A GROVE OF FOLK ART ON STATEN ISLAND:

Documenting the Carvings of W. Dixon

BY JOSEPH PENTANGELO

Introduction: Dendroglyphs and Folk Art

In Staten Island, New York, near a derelict building that was once part of the historic Seaview Hospital, stands a group of beech trees carved with human figures and sacred hearts, each in a consistent and highly distinctive style. Most of these trees are signed by a W. Dixon, and two are dated to the early 1930s. These carvings constitute a previously undiscussed collection of folk art in New York City. This article documents these carvings in detail, while advocating for a broader consideration of tree carvings in folklore studies.

Tree carvings, also known as dendroglyphs and arborglyphs, have a long history in New York. In 1666, it was reported that Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) tribes, who had gone to war, would mark trees with dendroglyphs of their associated animals holding hatchets (O'Callaghan 1850, 12). In 1779, Lieutenant-Colonel Adam Hubley, Jr., recorded several tree carvings made by Haudenosaunee warriors under the command of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) leader, Joseph Brant, whom Hubley and his comrades had recently battled in western New York (Coy 2004, 13–14). Coy (2004) provided a far more thorough discussion of dendroglyph practices among Indigenous people in what is now the eastern United States.

Tree carving was well established in early modern England (Knight 2011), and soon after the arrival of Europeans in North America, colonists, too, carved messages on trees. One famous dendroglyph is the single word "CROATOAN," carved by one of the residents of Virginia's ill-fated Roanoke colony and discovered by John White in 1590 (Knight 2011, 463–4). From the mid-19th to late 20th centuries, shepherds in the American West, who had emigrated from South America and the Basque country, made a multitude of tree carvings including human figures, as well as short messages, dates, and their own names (Shteir 2007, 20–1). See, also, Mallea-Olaetxe (2000).

W. Dixon's earliest-dated carving, *Dots. All images are by the author.*

Generally, dendroglyphs have little representation in the folklore literature, even though, as Coy (2004, 4) noted, "we have all seen the 'John loves Mary' type of carvings on trees in our parks." They are mentioned in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (Brunvand 2006, 147 and 1,387), only in relation to the aforementioned shepherds in the American West, and in the two-volume *American Folk Art: A Regional Reference* (Congdon and

Beside the human figure of *Dots* is one of Dixon's sacred hearts, showing an off-center puncture and a tau cross.

Hallmark 2012, 436 and 556), pertaining to Basque American shepherds and bas-relief carver Elijah Pierce. The only real discussion of dendroglyphs in the context of folk art that I can find has to do with Jesse J. Aaron, a multiethnic Floridian folk artist, active from 1968 until his death in 1979. Before making the wooden sculptures that he is best known for, Aaron carved faces into the dogwood trees that marked the boundaries of his property, "adding eyes and sometimes horns." As the trees grew, the images stretched, "giving an eerie feeling to his already somewhat shrouded yard" (Roche 2013, 203). These dendroglyphs have been described as "living charms," a contemporary continuation of a "Kongo root tradition" (Southwell Wahlman 2013, 54). For his part, Aaron strongly denied any African influence on his work (Congdon and Hallmark 2012, 121–2). One of Aaron's tree faces is shown in the photographic survey of Aaron's work found in Roy Craven's chapter in *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular Art* (Craven 2000, 196). The sparse coverage of dendroglyphs is surprising, as they are an art form traditionally engaged in by non-professional artists in a context far removed from the world of commercial art.

Dendroglyphs are one variety of culturally modified trees (CMTs). Lars Östlund, Olle Zackrisson, and Greger Hörnberg (2002, 48) characterized CMTs "that survive today [as] a biological archive that can tell us much about the historic relationships between people and forests." This statement's scope may be broadened. Trees exist in many non-forest environments, including public gardens, backyards, amusement parks, and city sidewalks. The ways that these trees have been modified—through topiary, pruning, painting, and carving, to give just some examples—all speak to the cultural practices of the community who performed the modification.

Nicholas C. Kawa, Bradley Painter, and Cailín E. Murray (2015) identified CMTs as "vivifacts," a term that they coined to name "living artifacts." They highlighted that vivifacts, unlike traditional artifacts, will naturally die, and soon after they do, will naturally degrade and be lost forever. "And for that reason," the researchers argue, vivifacts "require our attention now while they are still alive" (Kawa, Painter, and Murray 2015, 185–6). In discussing Basque American tree carvings in Idaho, Ryan Schuessler (2017) summarized the many risks that dendroglyphs face:

> [The] time to document them is running out. The fact that the Basque herders carved into trees (as opposed to rocks) always meant the arborglyphs would not be permanent. Not only do the trees heal over time, but anything that can damage the trees themselves—disease, pests, fires like those currently raging across the West—puts existing arborglyphs in danger.

To this list should be added intentional vandalism and, ironically, the production of new dendroglyphs.

Although the threats are recognized, documentation efforts for vivifacts, in general, and dendroglyphs, in particular, are lacking. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe's decades-long work documenting thousands of Basque tree carvings in the American West must be acknowledged, and mention should be made of Boise State University's *Arborglyph Database* (see Mallea-Olaetxe 2000; Boise State University 2020). For decades, Nevadans Jean and Phillip Earl made rubbings of Basque tree carvings onto canvas; a selection of these were used for a touring exhibition that ran from 2016 to 2018, called *Mountain Picassos* (Shadley 2016). However, there has been little academic discussion and documentation of dendroglyphs outside of the American West, even though the practice is well established throughout the United States. The topic is ripe for inquiry: where are some of the more long-standing "tattoo trees"—trees covered in carvings from numerous people, done over a long period of time? When did lovers start carving hearts on trees, and how did the practice spread throughout America? To what extent is tree carving affected by the growing sense of environmental concern among young people? Some of these issues are touched upon from a literary angle in C. D. Wright's (2019) posthumous *Casting Deep Shade*, a poetic memoir that addressed the relationship between people and beech trees.

Taking these factors into account, this article documents the dendroglyphs carved by W. Dixon in the early 1930s on five trees on Staten Island, New York. Dixon's works have received virtually no notice. To my knowledge, the only discussion of them thus far is a blog post by photographer Erik T. Burke (2011). Given the risks highlighted above, it is essential that these works be documented. Although they are located in a protected area, they are still at risk. One of the carvings, which I have dubbed "Cube," has sustained considerable damage within the last eight years, as evidenced by comparing photographs that I took recently in 2019 to those taken by Burke in 2011.

The Carvings' Location

The five beech trees that bear Dixon's carvings, all within sight of one another, are located in a small patch of woodland near Manor Creek and Blood Root Valley, part of the New York City Farm Colony–Seaview Hospital Historic District, a protected area on Staten Island. A rusted chain link fence, riddled with gaps, is all that separates the grove from a major trail in the Greenbelt, a popular park system on the island. The forest floor is littered with detritus from Seaview Hospital, including old glass wine bottles, rusted school desks, and fallen roof tiles. It is almost certain that Dixon was a patient or employee of the hospital. To give a better understanding of Dixon's environment, the following is a brief recap of Seaview's history. Much more can be found in the 1985 report by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, the major source for the remainder of this section.

In 1905, Staten Island was selected as the location for New York City's new tuberculosis hospital (LPC 1985, 16). Fresh air, high elevation, and a natural setting were considered essential for treating the disease, and the wooded location in the center of the borough was ideal. At Seaview's dedication in November 1913, the *New York Times* described it as the "largest and finest hospital ever built for the care and treatment" of patients with tuberculosis (quoted in LPC 1985, 22). The complex boasted a number of buildings, including patient pavilions, nurses' quarters, and a power house; additions were constructed throughout the following decades, including a sanatorium in 1917, and a pathology laboratory in 1928 (LPC 1985, 23–4). That year, the first religious institution, a Roman Catholic church and rectory, was established on the grounds (LPC 1985, 65). From 1915 to 1924, the hospital was merged with the adjacent New York City Farm Colony, which housed over 1,000 of the city's poor and disabled residents (LPC 1985, 11). In 1938, with the completion of a children's hospital, Seaview reached a capacity of approximately 2,000 patients, and functioned "at full capacity and often beyond" throughout the 1940s (LPC 1985, 24–25). An antibiotic cure for tuberculosis was developed in the mid-1940s, but it was rife with side effects: the incorporation of isonicotinic acid in 1952, the result of research begun at Seaview, was crucial to finally obtaining a practical pharmacological treatment of the disease (LPC 1985, 25).

Stripes, dated to 1931, is the most intact of Dixon's human figures.

Note the flourish in Dixon's signature.

The "phasing out of Seaview as a tuberculosis hospital" began in 1961, although the institution remained operational in some capacity. In 1973, a new "300-bed hospital for geriatric patients" was opened on the grounds, and by the mid-1980s, some of the historic buildings were used to house administrative offices, as well as "various community agencies and civic groups" (LPC 1985, 26). In 1985, Seaview and the adjacent New York City Farm Colony were designated a protected historic district. Nonetheless, the vacant buildings and overgrown grounds remain accessible to locals, and exploring the vacant parts of the site is still a rite of passage for teenagers on Staten Island.

The grounds have been partially revived with the establishment of several health facilities in both new and old buildings, including The Brielle at Seaview, an assisted living facility; Camelot, a substance abuse and living recovery center, located in Seaview's former dining hall; and NYC Health + Hospitals/SeaView, a rehabilitation and nursing facility (Penavic 2016). In 2016, the site was announced as the city's "first planned wellness community," an ongoing project that intends to add more medical facilities, as well as retail, housing, and community spaces to the campus (NYCEDC 2016).

Dixon's Carvings

By signing and dating most of the images, W. Dixon seemed to indicate the pieces were regarded as works of art rather than idle time tree carvings. Beyond the name "W. Dixon," most information about the artist is unknown. However, we can deduce some biographical information from other factors. The carvings are quite large, some over four feet from top to bottom, suggesting that Dixon was an adult by 1930, the earliest carved date. As noted above, the artist was probably an employee or patient at Seaview. (Unfortunately, I have not been able to track down any medical or employment records from Seaview Hospital.) If the latter was the case, Dixon would have had tuberculosis. It is unlikely that Dixon was associated with the adjacent Farm Colony for two main reasons: Seaview and the Farm Colony were operated as entirely separate institutions after 1924, and Dixon's carvings are nowhere near Seaview's border with the Farm Colony.

The subject matter of Dixon's dendroglyphs offers some hints of the artist's background. Three depict human figures, each basically symmetrical, with a distinctively wide, somewhat heart-shaped head and hourglass body, with their hands tucked behind their backs. Each figure bears an inverted triangle on their left breast, seemingly a badge or patch. (Although this sort of

emblem was infamously used in Nazi concentration camps, these carvings seem to just predate the practice, as the first Nazi camp was not erected until 1933.) The figures' faces are similar to those found on colonial gravestones, with tapering heads and triangular noses. There are several historic cemeteries on Staten Island with headstones in this style, including those of the Reformed Church of Staten Island, established in 1680, and the Church of St. Andrew, established in the early 18th century. Dixon's carvings are particularly reminiscent of the stones carved by William Stanclift (1688–1761) in Connecticut, especially the 1728 stone for Elizabeth Francis of Newington. On this stone, the face's hair spreads out to the sides of the head in a way that nearly matches Dixon's figures (Caulfield 1991, 27). One of Dixon's carvings depicts what appears to be a stylized willow tree, another motif commonly found in gravestones of that era. Taken together, this suggests that Dixon had some familiarity with colonial cemeteries, and perhaps, a New England background.

Three of the carvings show a unique sacred heart design. The hearts are each "pierced" by at least a single dot and capped with a tau cross. The sacred heart motif indicates that Dixon was Roman Catholic; the tau cross suggests a particular devotion to St. Francis of Assisi (Thompson 2003, 909). Two of the hearts are not depicted with a thorny crown or flames, typical elements of a traditional sacred heart design, demonstrating the artist's personal take on the symbol. One of the trees, identified as "Messy" in Table 1, is not signed or dated, but since it contains Dixon's distinctive sacred heart design, I believe that this carving is by the artist.

If a line is to be drawn between folk art and outsider art, Dixon's work seems to straddle it (see Wertkin [2004, xxxi–xxxii]) for an overview of the distinction). Dixon's sacred heart motif seems to be a personal take on a cultural symbol; the human figures are characteristic of Dixon's personal style, but elements seem resonant of folk traditions, especially colonial gravestone carvings.

Regarding technique, Dixon's carvings incorporate both lines and dots. Lines are used for the majority of the carvings. Dots are used in the faces of the humanoid figures, especially in their eyes and clothing, as well as in the sacred hearts, two of which are composed entirely of dots. The dots are reminiscent of the chip-carving technique, and may suggest that Dixon also whittled freestanding sculptures.

Table 1. The five trees with carvings by W. Dixon

Nickname	Features
Dots	date (1930), human, heart, name
Stripes	date (1931), human, name
Cube	human, name
Tree	date (illegible), heart, name (initials only)
Messy	heart

Table 1 lists the five dendroglyphs that I have identified as being by Dixon, including the nicknames I have given them (each based on a defining element of that carving) and what repeated elements are featured.

Next are descriptions of the five trees and their carvings that I believe to be by W. Dixon.

Signed only "W.D," this appears to be a stylized willow tree.

Another of Dixon's sacred hearts, this one accompanying the willow tree.

Dots

This tree contains two tableaux by W. Dixon: a main carving, depicting a human figure, some text, and additional ornamentation; and a secondary carving, depicting a sacred heart. With the tree's growth, the lines have spread considerably, obscuring many features, especially the text.

The main carving is composed vertically, with a downturned semicircle at the top of the image, suggestive of a gravestone; below that, an illegible symbol; below that, the date "1930"; below that, an elaborately carved "W. DIXON," with long trailing lines coming from the "W" and "N"; below that, a partly legible inscription that seems to read in part "E. Dixon"; and below that, a human figure. The figure is nearly symmetrical, bearing a characteristically wide head and hourglass body. The face's almond-shaped eyes meet in the center of the face, touching the top of the triangular nose. Below the nose is a downturned semicircle which meets the figure's chin. This may indicate a beard or moustache, or may simply be a very wide frown. The hair is full and wide, and the suggestion of bangs are present above the figure's eyes. The figure is wearing a tunic or dress, belted in the middle, and covered with dots on the inside and along its outline. As with all of Dixon's humanoid figures, this one bears an inverted triangle on its left breast. The figure's hands are shown behind its back, and the legs are two lines which seem almost an afterthought: they dangle off to the side, ignoring the figure's near symmetry, and have nothing resembling feet. It is possible that the legs were carved by someone other than W. Dixon at a later date, as they do not match the image's style; they are carved much less deeply than the rest of Dixon's carvings on this tree, and the other two humanoid figures (*Stripes* and *Cube*) do not have legs at all. The total carving, including the text and ornamentation, measures 51″ tall. The humanoid figure alone is 21-1/2″ wide and 40″ tall and begins at 27″ above ground.

The secondary carving, to the right of the humanoid figure, shows one of Dixon's distinctive hearts. Carved entirely of dots, this image consists of a heart shape with an off-center dot, seemingly a piercing, in the left side. This carving is 9-1/2″ wide by 10-1/2″ tall and begins at 42″ above ground.

There are also dozens of initials carved into the tree. Judging by their difference in line weight, it seems that they were carved over a long period of time by several different people, and it is unclear whether any of them were by W. Dixon.

Stripes

This dendroglyph contains three key elements: a human figure, Dixon's name, and the year 1931. The lines are mostly quite clear, indicating that this tree was already mature when Dixon made the carving.

The human figure is nearly symmetrical and has a wide head, hourglass body, inverted triangle on the left breast, and hands tucked behind its back. The head is more heart-shaped than is the face of *Dots*. Long, full hair frames the sides of the face; individual strands are visible. The eyes are simple dots. Between the triangular nose and the horizontal-line mouth are two angled lines, perhaps a trim moustache. The figure's body is divided into two parts by a belt cinched at the very narrow waist. The chest is characterized by angled lines, descending from the figure's sides to the row of buttons running from the collar to the belt. The lower part of the outfit, either a skirt or apron, is

outlined with a fringe on the left and right sides, and the bottom is striped horizontally. Four wrinkles come down from the belt, reflecting the stripes in the upper garment. Unlike *Dots*, the figure has no apparent legs. The figure is 19″ wide and 29″ tall.

To the right of the figure, "W. Dixon" is carved, with a long, ornamental line coming from the top of the right side of the "W" and covering "Dixon," slanting downward at the "n." Below this is the date "1931," which is underlined. The entire carving, encompassing the figure as well as the signature and date, is 42″ wide and 29″ tall, and begins at 33″ above ground.

A number of other stray marks are on the tree, including gouges, dates, and initials. It is unclear what, if any, relation they have to the carvings described here. Although there is no heart on this tree in Dixon's distinctive style, there is a more traditional lover's heart, pierced by an arrow and containing initials ("C," followed by something illegible). I don't believe this to have been carved by Dixon.

Cube

This image is composed vertically for the most part, with a 14″ by 9-1/2″ Necker cube carved at the top; below this is a human figure, which, again, is nearly symmetrical, with a wide, vaguely heart-shaped head, an hourglass body (albeit with a far wider waist than shown in *Stripes*), an inverted triangle on its left breast, and hands tucked behind its back. The figure measures 23″ wide and 33-1/3″ tall, and its base is 27-1/2″ above the forest floor. The carvings are 47″ from the top of the cube to the bottom of the figure.

As with *Stripes*, the strands of the figure's hair are visible. The figure's outfit shows a row of buttons, running from the collar to the dot-studded belt. The base of the apron or skirt bears a single horizontal stripe, from which a triangle runs about two-thirds of the way up toward the belt. At the peak of this triangle are a number of slashes. The thinness of these lines suggests that they are newer than those carved by Dixon. The figure's face is damaged, but still visible are its almond eyes and horizontal-line mouth, which runs almost from cheek to cheek. Comparing the photos that I took in 2019 (February and October) with that taken by Erik T. Burke in 2011, it is clear that this figure's face has severely deteriorated within the last eight years. Today, most of the bark beneath the figure's right eye has been obliterated, as has much of its left cheek. Flakes of bark flap freely from the face and seem destined to fall away entirely. It is unclear what caused this damage.

To the right of the figure, "W. Dixon" is carved. To the figure's left is another carving, only partly legible, but possibly in the same hand as Dixon's. This reads, in part, "Vincent" and "1934."

Tree

This dendroglyph does not contain a human figure but instead a carving of a tree, perhaps a stylized willow. Toward the top of the tree, on the right side, is a circle, which may represent something (a fruit?) or someone in the branches. The tree's trunk flares out at the bottom and is underlined. The tree measures 20″ wide and 29″ high and begins at 39″ above ground. This image, especially toward the bottom and to the right side, is lightly carved, so that the image appears faded. At the left side of the carving's trunk, below its lowest branch, the piece is signed with Dixon's initials, "W. D.," with an

A third sacred heart, this one seems to be ringed by a crown of thorns. Although unsigned, its similarity to Dixon's other sacred hearts suggests that it is by the artist. The accompanying text is largely illegible.

Four of the trees carved by W. Dixon are visible in this shot. From left to right, they are *Cube (*which has sustained considerable damage, especially to the human figure's face), *Messy*, *Dots,* and *Stripes*.

extended line from the bottom of the "D" serving to underline the "W." Below this is a date, but it is illegible beyond "19."

A secondary carving is found to the left: another sacred heart, like that in *Dots*, carved entirely with dots and pierced in the center with a single dot. This image is 11″ wide and 13-1/2″ tall.

On the opposite side of the tree is a tertiary carving that features the initials "M. DC." above "M. W.," below which is a long horizontal line whose ends are capped with inward-pointing angle brackets. This line is similar to that below the date in *Stripes*, and a connection to W. Dixon is possible, although the meaning is not at all clear.

Messy

This tree is covered in assorted initials and a large block of illegible writing. It is similar to the Bible tree near Brookville, Pennsylvania, into which Douglas Stahlman carved a scriptural verse (Frank 2008). Neither Dixon's signature nor initials are present, nor is any date apparent. However, there is a sacred heart capped with a tau cross, which I believe to have been carved by Dixon. Unlike the sacred crosses mentioned previously, this is carved with lines rather than dots, and running across its center is a squiggly line, which may represent the crown of thorns found on more typical sacred heart symbols. The heart begins 29-1/2″ above the ground.

Conclusion

Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe has led the charge in documenting the dendroglyphs made by shepherds in the American West and has successfully garnered coverage for these images in both the academic and popular press. Public awareness of these Western dendroglyphs is thus fairly well established: Burke (2011), who previously photographed W. Dixon's carvings, noted, "For me it was so amazing to see these Arborglyphs on Staten Island because I've only known them to have a big history on the west coast where a majority can be found [carved] by Basque sheepherders throughout the Sierra Nevada." Yet, as Dixon's example clearly shows,

this art form is by no means limited to the American West and can, in fact, be found in New York City.

In this article, I have suggested a broader consideration of dendroglyphs in folklore and folk art literature. To this end, I have documented and described five trees carved by W. Dixon in the early 1930s. Although very little is known about the artist, Dixon's artistic legacy remains with us. Since vivifacts such as tree carvings are destined to die, decay, and disappear, it is crucial that greater efforts be made to document this ephemeral art form. As the example of *Cube* clearly shows, even while the trees are still living, the carvings may deteriorate substantially.

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