

San Diego Historical Society

Dan Dickey standing next to his portrait of Belle Baranceanu and Melisse Jewell. ©SDHS #90:18346.

Dan Dickey: Mid-Century San Diego Artist

William Perrine

I have seldom seen a boy who is more of a day dreamer.¹
Teacher's Report for Daniel Dickey, The University High School, Chicago

New York born and Chicago raised, Daniel Ellsworth Dickey arrived in San Diego in 1935 on his way to Mexico. He and two friends, Paul Swartz and Malcolm McDowell, were traveling in an old pickup truck headed to Mexico City where they hoped to meet muralist Diego Rivera. Later in life, he romanticized the journey, claiming they had simply jumped a boxcar and rode the rails to the end of the line: San Diego and the 1935 California Pacific International Exhibition in Balboa Park. There the young artists set up their easels and offered freelance portraiture services to the masses. When the exhibition



Dickey's father, Roy Dickey, at the Salmagundi Club, New York. ©SDHS, Dickey scrapbook.

ended, he chose to stay in San Diego and developed a successful professional career in art, associating himself with artists Belle Baranceanu, Ethel Greene, and Fred Hocks, and architect Lloyd Ruocco, among others.²

Born in New York City on March 17, 1910, Dickey was the son of Roy Dickey (1878-1953), a commercial artist turned advertising executive, and his wife Ellen Rose Higgins (d. 1952), a descendant of Oliver Ellsworth, one of the founding fathers and third Chief Justice of the United States.³ He spent his early years at 523 West 152nd Street, not far from the Hudson River. A scrapbook filled with photographs and drawings shows summer trips to his grandfather's cabin on Bohners Lake in Wisconsin and visits to the New Jersey shore. In 1913, the family moved to the Jackson Park neighborhood in Chicago. Tensions in the Dickey household reached an impasse



Old House, ca. 1935-38, by Dan Dickey. Gouache on paper. San Diego Historical Society #83.53.4.

A native of San Diego, **William Perrine** is active in the research and preservation of San Diego art with an emphasis on the San Diego Moderns and Allied Artists groups. Readers with works by Dan Dickey or additional biographical material related to the artist or his colleagues are encouraged to write the author at iambillperrine@yahoo.com.

the following year.

In 1914, young Daniel was removed from the care of his mother who was physically, and perhaps emotionally, ill. Ellen Rose later wrote to her son, "Yesterday while going through some old papers, I came upon my little diary, written in 1914, that fateful year, when I was so ill. I had to have my baby-to-be taken, because the doctors believed I was going into a "decline," or T.B. or something." She quoted from her diary entries:

[August 7] Roy arrived & I found out he got Mama to tell Father Dickey about things. Oh, I am so unhappy. I wish I needn't have to live with Roy any more, but just my darling Dan...

[August 8] Roy left in evening with Dan. He cried all down the street for me, my heart aches, to part from him.

Ellen Rose told him, "that was the last time I was permitted to see you – for nearly a year." She added,

You were the hardest hit of all, but as I look back over the years, & consider all sides, I am sure I should never be here to tell the tale, had I tried to stay on, under the circumstances. Perhaps you have never been able to understand the "whys" of me, well it's this, I couldn't endure living a life of "Pretense" any longer.⁴



Dickey with his mother before they were separated in 1914. ©SDHS, Dickey scrapbook.



Dickey's father married McCall's editor Alice Manning in 1916. Beneath the photo, he wrote, joking, "If she had really looked like this I wouldn't have married her." ©SDHS, Dickey scrapbook.

Dickey's father divorced Ellen Rose and, in 1916, married Alice Manning whom he knew from his career in the New York advertising world. Manning was an editor at *McCall's* magazine and daughter of Colonel Michael W. and Harriet Manning. Although Dan maintained contact with his birth mother throughout his life, he was raised by his stepmother and referred to her, rather than Ellen Rose, as "Mother."

In 1919, the Dickeys purchased an historic home at 5115 Cornell Avenue in Hyde Park, a suburb on the south side of Chicago. The two-story frame house with the gabled roof and spacious front porch had been built for financier B. P. "Old Hutch" Hutchinson in the 1870s and, later, occupied by his son Charles, a founder of the Art Institute of Chicago and one of the first trustees of the University of Chicago. Alice Manning Dickey, a niece of Hyde Park founder Paul Cornell, had often admired the property. Over the years, she and

her husband filled it with their collections of porcelain, glass, antiques and curios from around the world.⁵

In Chicago, Dickey augmented his early education with Saturday classes and summer sessions at the Art Institute of Chicago. Later, he studied at the American Academy of Art, the Worcester Academy in Massachusetts, and his father's alma mater, Carleton College in Minnesota, where he earned his B.A. in English in 1932. His reputation as an urbane ladies man was noted in the Carleton College Yearbook, *The Algol*:

Artist, athlete, wooer,—well these words don't begin to describe Dan. His work with a pen has decorated an *Algol* together with many a poster. His form as a high-jumper is the envy of the aspiring Freshmen. As one of the more devoted members of the Nourse parlor crew, he is in a class by himself.⁶

Dickey began his studies at the Art Students League in New York soon after college, despite expressing some interest in becoming a writer. He studied under the relatively conservative Leon Kroll, the academic George Bridgman, and the influential abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann.⁷ During a European sojourn in 1933, he absorbed the work of the Renaissance painters, particularly Piero della Francesca (for whom he impishly named his beloved dog). These experiences signaled his increasing dedication to the visual arts.⁸

Dickey spent most of 1934 in New York working as a commercial artist for an advertising agency. Judging from his desultory answers to a questionnaire sent to him by his father, it was not a happy experience. After several perfunctory responses to questions regarding his work, his future job prospects, and his father's letters of referral, he told his father what he thought about his work in advertising:

It's alright, it's good discipline I suppose. But I envy the other fellows not at all some of the stuff they have to do. Sometimes I think I'd rather drive a truck.

He stressed that he did not want to follow his father's career path:

I would write stories or articles but never [advertising] copy, fearing to get caught as you did. That would be all right for someone else but not for me. I'd rather die tomorrow than have to give up the one thing I give more than two whoops about.



Dan Dickey at Worcester Academy, Massachusetts, 1927. Dickey wrote under the picture, "Cradle of knowledge...As Hal would say, 'slippery with brains.'" ©SDHS, Dickey scrapbook.

He added, despondently,

I'm sometimes damn sorry I'm the way I am. I'm terribly disgusted with myself. Some things I love and others actually make me sick in my mind. If I had a wife and children of course it would be different. They'd be my chief interest. But not wanting them, in fact hoping to God I never have them to inherit my selfish wandering nature I'm interested in doing what interests me. Now did you ever hear anything so selfish in all your life? I'm trying to change myself around and I hope maybe I can but some things just seem not to change. You could never be more sorry than I that you got the wrong kind of guy for a son.⁹

Soon afterwards, Dan Dickey hopped the proverbial boxcar and headed west. Dickey was drawn to the 1935 California Pacific International Exhibition in Balboa Park, which made extensive use of the talents of the burgeoning San Diego art community. The Fine Arts Gallery, renamed the Palace of Fine Arts during the exhibition, hosted a major display of its own permanent collection as well as a gallery devoted to San Diego artists. Many of those active in the design of the exposition would become Dickey's friends and colleagues for the next twenty-six years. It was here that he first encountered fellow Chicagoan Belle Baranceanu exhibiting a forty-foot mural illustrating *The Progress of Man*. She would become a close friend and artistic ally to Dickey. However, it was his introduction to artist Foster Jewell and his wife Melisse, an artist and nurse, that would change the course of his life.

Dickey's first year in San Diego was dominated by his romantic entanglement with Melisse Jewell. Dickey met her and her husband in 1935 at the quaint Spanish Village Art Center built for the Exhibition.¹⁰ At that time, Melisse was an untutored painter of idyllic town scenes and landscapes. She described her early work with distaste:



Melisse Jewell moved with her husband from Michigan to San Diego in the early 1930s. A landscape painter, she also rode with the Balboa Mounted Troop. ©SDHS, Dickey collection.

As often happens to the products of the untutored eye and hand, my pictures, ill-conceived and horribly painted, instantly captured the public fancy...When I came to California, I continued to turn out pictures in factory lots...the same amount of popular appeal...added the ever-dear California Mission to my repertoire...Two years ago painting was strictly a business with me...I took it not at all seriously, much less myself.¹¹

Melisse and Dickey fell in love, paying little attention to their respective ages

and marital status. According to a friend, Melisse said of Dickey, "That is the man that I loved from the moment I saw him." Shortly after the fair closed in 1936, Melisse divorced her husband and moved in with Dickey at the former Bishop's Day School facilities at 3066 First Avenue, joining a group of local artists who maintained studios there. Later, she credited Dickey's tutelage and emphasis on the "individual approach" with her emergence as a true artist.¹²

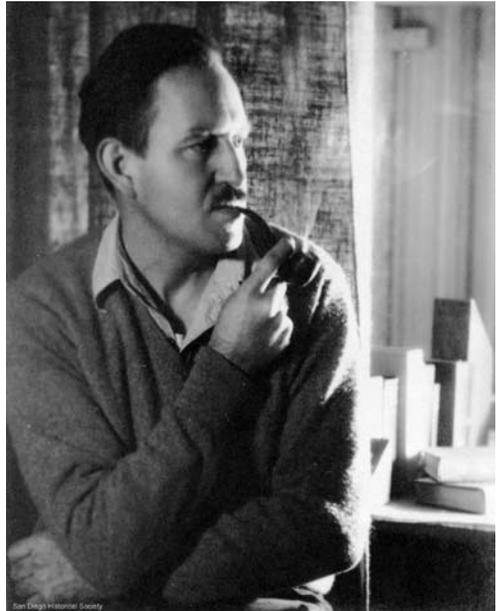
Dickey and Foster Jewell maintained a cordial relationship through the divorce proceedings. In early 1937, Dickey was called back to Chicago to work on a mural commission.¹³ He planned to extend his trip to serve as a witness at the Jewells' divorce proceedings in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the couple had been married. In a letter to Melisse, he wrote,

Life here is going along very monotonously. All I can think of all day long is getting back there [San Diego]. And so I just sit around, marking off the days. I had been rather vaguely planning on starting back around March 1st, but now with your divorce business coming up it will probably mean April 1st. I will go over to Grand Rapids toward the last of March and tell the necessary lies. Quite naturally I don't like to say those things about you, because they're not true, but in the best interests of "our family" I'll do it gladly. I've had two very nice letters from Fos [Foster Jewell]. We are planning on driving back together in a new car for a dealer and saving about \$25 apiece.

He speaks of moving in with you—he and Rhoda [de Long, Foster Jewell's future wife]—until he can find another place similar in price and location for his frame business and gallery. But I am inclined to think that it might be the best if you and I were to move and leave him the old place....

Or am I possibly assuming too much? I'm wondering if perhaps you are falling in love with Gene. Don't be afraid to tell me if you are. He's a swell guy and I'm sure he'd make you very happy. And your happiness is the most important thing. I'm not, and never would be, jealous. Because my love for you is so big and full that there isn't room for jealousy in its repertoire....

Everything is an effort. I've hardly been able to do a thing since I finished the mural design. Painting doesn't seem futile to me the



Artist Foster Jewell divorced Melisse so she would be free to live with Dickey. Not long afterwards, he married Rhoda de Long. ©SDHS, Dickey collection.

way it used to, but I can't drag myself to it and have nothing to say anyway. Can it be that your presence is the required incentive?¹⁴

The "necessary lies" apparently having been told and the divorce papers filed, Dickey wrote again to Melisse:

You wonder what Fos and I had to talk about for two hours. Well, all I can say is that I was awfully glad to see him and as far as I was concerned we had a perfectly grand visit and I can't tell you how happy I am for him that he has his mind straightened out to its normal state once more. I am very fond of Fos and feel very close to him, principally, I suppose, by reason of having been fortunate enough to have shared you with him. We talked of everything under the sun, but mostly about you, because we both love you.¹⁵

The letters written during this stay in the Midwest are long, meandering and intensely personal as Dickey took stock of his place in life and his future with Melisse. However, despite the lovelorn tone, he was reluctant to commit to marriage, as was she, and there are numerous contradictions in tone. In one sentence, Dickey professes his devotion to Melisse while, in the next, he details the potential rekindling of an old flame whom he is reluctant to court because he might be tempted by her "lovely sister."¹⁶ One missive consists almost entirely of an extended criticism of Melisse's grammar, spelling, manner of dress and hairstyle, followed by his explicit instructions on remedying these faults, complete with illustrations and a particularly strong injunction to "get those goddamn eyebrows plucked and keep them plucked."¹⁷

At some point, Dickey realized that he was diabetic, a condition that would affect his life considerably in the years to come.¹⁸ Some of his letters to Melisse, written from a hospital bed in Chicago, express his yearning to return home to California:

It is indescribably swell to be with them [his family] again and to see Chicago again and to bump into my friends once more, but



Melisse Jewell and Dan Dickey painting outdoors at Spanish Village in Balboa Park. ©SDHS, Dickey collection.

now more than ever before I realize this is not the place for me and that I am definitely and thoroughly a Californian. Already I miss San Diego. I miss you more than I can say. I miss the park and the puppy dogs and the waterfront and Donal [Hord] and [Homer] Dana & Mary and the work-bench and Miller. In fact I miss all the people and things that have brought me more happiness and peace and contentment than I ever experienced before.¹⁹

Upon his return to San Diego, Dickey firmly established himself in the artistic community and began exhibiting locally. His work, building on his always exquisite draftsmanship, steadily evolved in depth and feeling. The hallmarks of his mature style were a strong “da Vinci line,” emphatic yet loose and sometimes gestural in the manner of the abstract expressionists, coupled with the melancholy lyricism of Picasso’s “blue” period. His subjects—almost invariably women—appear iconic and elusive. Solitary or intimately paired, perhaps a lute or mandola in hand to suggest the ethereal quality of music, female figures seem to be cut adrift from terra firma. The corporeality of their flesh is the sole connection to the world. At its core, his work expressed a profound humanism, traditional in its respect for form and line yet modern in its expressionism. He wrote:

What is it that I require of a picture or a statue or a sonnet or a sonata? What is it that I seek in these things and for the lack of which I should prefer bare walls and great silences?

And I shall answer: It is not enough that I shall see and hear and touch. I must look and listen and feel—and understand. Then I shall know that life is not just happening to me; rather, I am happening to life.

I shall say then, that the picture, the statue, the sonnet and the sonata, if they are to remain my allies and guides in the quest of growing consciousness, must possess the vital element of Form. And what is Form?

Form is the integrated relationship of parts to whole, wherein the resultant compound, greater than the sum of its ingredients, spells the symbol and the animus of life, as that which emerges from the organic unity of a molecule, or a tree, or a man or a solar system.

In that then will I ever delight increasingly; for I shall have experienced through Michelangelo, for example, and the Persian miniaturists, and Cezanne and



Untitled, 1938, by Dan Dickey. Mixed media on paper, 14.5 x 11.5 inches. Collection of William Perrine.

Shakespeare, and Handel and Beethoven, and a varied host of other genii, the essence of the order and fruition of life which is the hoped-for lot of civilized man.²⁰

The artist's life must have been precarious in a pre-war San Diego still suffering from the effects of the Great Depression. By 1937, however, Dickey and Melisse managed to purchase a piece of property together.²¹ In the late 1930s, Dickey was recruited to work in the Federal Art Project (FAP) under Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Director of the Southern California Art Project.²² FAP artists in the visual arts division of Roosevelt's WPA program were provided a steady paycheck for producing works of art for various government buildings and projects. The program was a godsend, fostering a collaborative spirit among San Diego's most progressive artists and resulting in several spectacular public murals in addition to scores of smaller studio works. Dickey's reaction to the program is recorded in an undated poem:

There is cause for rejoicing in the Land;
America has a Federal Arts Project;
The struggling artist has a patron.

He has not yet come into the good life,
For the day is not yet come when art is appreciated by all men
For all men have not yet become artists.

But he who had to choose between
brushes and bread,
And chose brushes,
Will now be fed.²³

Dickey's tenure with the Federal Art Project was relatively brief—he left in September 1939—but the boost to both his pocketbook and his morale was substantial. During this period, his work was increasingly exhibited and attracted favorable critical attention. He won his first significant prize when he received the sculpture award for *Olympia*, an imposing stone head reflecting the artist's avowed admiration of Aristide Maillol, at the Southern California Annual Exhibition in 1938. He also enjoyed the additional honor of being the only artist in the competition to have work accepted in the three media classes of watercolor, oil painting and sculpture.²⁴ His *Rondo*, an eight by twelve inch watercolor, was selected by a jury including John Marin and Charles Burchfield for purchase by the Federal Art Project as decoration for the Carville, Louisiana Marine Hospital. It was later chosen for the inaugural exhibition, *Two Hundred*



Spring, 1940, by Dan Dickey. Ink on paper, 13 x 8 inches, Collection of William Perrine.

American Watercolors, at the National Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian.²⁵ A popular and critical success, the show subsequently traveled to four other venues, including the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Whitney Museum in New York.²⁶

Dickey exhibited widely from this point on, with shows at the San Francisco Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum, Long Beach Museum of Art, Golden Gate International Exhibition and the San Diego Art Guild, along with occasional appearances in the local galleries. The Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, under the directorship of Reginald Poland, purchased his *Arabesque*, a charcoal drawing, for their permanent collection in 1942. The gallery would provide him with his first major solo exhibition in 1948. Poland's support and the frequent attention of critics James Britton, Etilie Wallace, and Dr. Armin Kietzmann helped ensure Dickey's frequent appearances in the San Diego press as an artist and authority on cultural matters of local import.

Dickey produced his only documented murals in the summer of 1944. He and Belle Baranceanu were asked to paint a total of six "heroic" battle scenes for display in the front window of Marston's department store in downtown San Diego in support of the war loan bond effort. Although they likely collaborated in the conception of the murals and in the research necessary to realistically depict the military subjects, each artist painted his or her own mural separately with no help from the other. Given a mere three weeks, they completed six murals, each eight by twelve feet and depicting a true incident of World War II military heroism. A photograph in the *San Diego Union* shows Dickey working on his mural of "Maj. Richard I. Bong's P-38 [airplane] in battle," the design of which he gleaned from "the funnies" and a young aviation enthusiast's files. Indeed the *Union* reports that Dickey considered the murals "gargantuan topical illustrations," perhaps intentionally marginalizing them from his classical and usually non-topical studio works.²⁷

Like many artists, Dickey's primary occupation was teaching. A popular instructor, he began at San Diego State College and over the course of his career taught classes at Monty Lewis' Coronado School of Fine Art, the University of California Extension, San Diego City Schools, as well as lessons under the auspices of the Fine Arts Gallery. Painter Ethel Greene, who took classes from Dickey in the early 1950s, recalled:

He had taught life drawing for so long that he was one of the few people I knew who could paint and draw without a model...When I went to art school, we had various ways of doing line drawings. Sometimes, we would block them out in charcoal in big areas and then pick out the lights and darks. There was practically no line work in that. That was not Dan's method. His was always, and he didn't spend much time, probably because he had been doing it for so long that he didn't have to, to indicate the shoulder to shoulder, the shoulder to hips, and all that with these basic lines before he would start doing the outline. He taught his students to draw the motion lines.²⁸

Dickey gained a small measure of national notoriety when one of his students,

the minimalist painter Ad Reinhardt, included him in a satirical comic published in the June 1946 issue of the leftist tabloid *P.M.* Reinhardt had spent time recuperating at the Navy Hospital in San Diego where Dickey was teaching classes and the two had become acquainted.²⁹ A biting satire of the various art factions of the postwar period, *How To Look at Modern Art in America*, was the first and most famous of Reinhardt's family trees and was soon found "pinned to the studio walls of artists all over America for years."³⁰ It showed:

A tree of contemporary art from pure (abstract) "paintings" (on your left) to pure illustrative "pictures" (down on your right). If you know what you like but don't know anything about art, you'll find the artists on the left hardest to understand, and the names on the right easiest and most familiar (famous). You can start in the cornfields, where no demand is made on you and work your way up and around. Be especially careful of those curious schools situated on that overloaded section of the tree, which somehow think of themselves as being both abstract and pictorial (as if they could be both today).³¹

Next to a cornfield flush with the populist likes of Norman Rockwell and Grant Wood emerges a thick bodied trunk labeled "Braque Matisse Picasso." Its branches are laurelled in awards and influences, weighted by subject matter, its myriad leaves of artists arrayed left to right (reading in concordance with Reinhardt's arrangement of "hardest" to "easiest"), and near the center a huge branch—"that overloaded section of the tree"—breaking from its own mass. Dickey's leaf rested in the first cluster to the right of the break, not far from the Russian-American cubist Max Weber and the Santa Fe modernist Paul Burlin, caught at the junction between "the abstract and the pictorial."³²

Dickey gave voice to his own critical impulses in occasional columns for the *San Diego Journal* in late 1944 and 1945. He used his writing as a forum for whatever was on his mind, interspersing musings on art, aesthetics, science, criticism, and the Old Masters, with reviews and commentary on the Southern California art scene. In one instance, he went so far as to "pass the buck" by turning over most of the column to his friend and kindred spirit Lorser Feitelson (1898-1978) when it came time to review a Los Angeles exhibition.³³ Dickey was invariably outspoken, even when the subject was close to home. He gave the following account of the opening of the Fine Arts Gallery at San Diego's temporary quarters in Mission Hills during the war:

Conversation was spirited and gay and between the sipping and munching would come bursts of superlatives at the drop of an "R." I wish I could tell you what Mrs. So-and-so was wearing. But I can't. For I was occupied in trying ever so desperately to get the merest fleeting glimpse of the neglected pictures and sculpture... Each year is like the year before, with corporal's guard of artists and sincerely interested laymen struggling valiantly against great odds to look and to see and to experience art, despite the debilitating obligato of the inevitable host of twittering dilettanti.³⁴

Dickey's appraisal of Baranceanu's contribution to an Art Guild exhibition was equally candid if rather more warm-hearted:

Though Belle Baranceanu's self-portrait stands out also in sharp relief from the surrounding paintings with its subjective inquiry and strong design, it is still far from her best work. I had promised Miss Baranceanu a scolding for sending it at all because I know how much better a painter she really is. It would have been a great deal more pertinent to the display of her excellent talents, I think, if she had been represented by one of a number of her other works in the show upstairs, where as in past instances in exhibitions from coast to coast, she could stand with the best of contemporary Americans.³⁵

In a passage that captured both his iconoclasm and his wry humor, he defended his own critical prerogatives:

Not long ago I was informed most haughtily by one with whom I had disagreed over some negligible scholastic straw that I am interested in no one's opinion but my own. The informant then stalked off in a huff before I could register a denial, for it is not true, really it is not. There is actually a fair number of individuals, mostly artists, in whose opinion I am greatly interested and for whose works and ideas I have the profoundest respect. Still there are others, oh, many others, I must confess, whose opinions I find it impossible to respect in the slightest.³⁶

In 1946, Dickey, along with Baranceanu, Fred Hocks, and architect Lloyd Ruocco, became a founder of the Allied Artists Council, a group devoted to fostering interaction among artists of varying disciplines and the general public. The group started with a series of informal meetings at the art complex at 3066 First Avenue where Baranceanu, Dickey, Melisse Jewell, and Hocks had their studios. It was short lived but ambitious in its efforts to forge an interdisciplinary artist's collective in a rapidly growing city still lacking the sense of community that both Baranceanu and Dickey had known during their days in Chicago. Separate committees were established for painting, crafts, theater, dance, film, photography, music and architecture. A foreign film festival, a fine arts ball and speakers such as Man Ray and Aldous Huxley were among the notable events sponsored by the council.³⁷ Although the larger vision of the Allied Artists Council failed, it left a lasting legacy in its offshoot the Allied Craftsmen, who held yearly exhibitions at the Fine Arts Gallery for thirty-three years.

As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, Dickey's personal life and his art underwent drastic changes. Settled into a Pacific Beach house designed with San Diego architect Sim Bruce Richards, his body began to fail.³⁸ The effects of his diabetes greatly curtailed his activity. For at least one period during the early 1950s, he was confined to his bed for three months, allowed to rise for only four hours per day, and dependent largely upon the care of Melisse Jewell.³⁹

Dickey's long-term relationship with Jewell was threatened by his involvement with another woman, Ethel Greene, a young painter from Boston. They met

when Dickey was working as an artist at the Naval Electronics Laboratory in Point Loma. Greene, recently arrived from Boston, was already an admirer of Dickey's work which she had seen exhibited in New York and the two began taking lunch together.⁴⁰ They were married February 27, 1950, and divorced less than three years later, in August 1952.⁴¹ Dickey's father expressed his reaction to this marriage:

We wish you all the best of everything—but as you may well imagine, a great part of our thought is for Melisse, who as you know, has a bead on the little Rosary of Christlike people I have known—of whom Mom heads the list.

Our suggestion is that Melisse hop aboard El Capitan and come on to Chicago and make us a visit. She's the one entitled to a Honeymoon.⁴²

Letters from his parents indicate that Dickey and the two women shared the same home for at least part of the time. Ethel Greene may have moved out to live on her own later in the marriage. Even after this separation, they discussed what would happen if she had Dickey's child and raised questions about whether parenthood would require a more traditional family structure. In any event there was never a child (evidently to Dickey's regret) and the nature of the marriage remains mysterious.⁴³ Greene reflected fondly upon Dickey in later interviews and credited him with encouraging and influencing her own paintings but she made little mention of the circumstances surrounding their union and its dissolution.⁴⁴ After his divorce, Dickey returned to Melisse Jewell and they were married in 1955.

In 1950, Dickey reflected on the progress of his art:

Yes, I believe I am inclining toward abstraction. It's mainly because one is dealing then more directly with form relationships, and not taking advantage of that convenient gap in the hedge of allowing the subject matter to carry the load... Perhaps abstractionists are seeking for a unity of forces. It might even be a quest to unify the forces in the individual living in a world where he does not find that concord or harmony.⁴⁵

The postwar period saw an increased interest in non-objective or abstract painting but the style was far from universally accepted. It was particularly controversial in the conservative social and political climate of San Diego. When *Hope Deferred*, an abstract painting by Dana Point artist John McLaughlin won first prize at the San Diego Art Guild Spring Exhibition in 1948, the selection was greeted by outrage from partisans of more traditional art. As a result, many future competitions would have separate juries for "modern" and "conservative" work. Dickey himself addressed the issue when he served on the "modern" jury at the San Diego County Fair in 1951:



Self Portrait, 1946, by Dan Dickey.
©SDHS, Union-Tribune Collection,
#UT 90:05004-8a.

The big question in judging a picture is whether it is a living thing or a dead thing. If a juror is any good at all, he should be able to tell what values are present in any picture.⁴⁶

Dickey produced few completely abstract works but an untitled painting from late 1951, formerly in the collection of the La Jolla Art Center, is ample evidence of his facility within the pictorial language of abstraction. Subject matter is gone and with it his characteristic line, leaving only a gently modulated wash of richly hued orange and red tones surmounted by expressionistic strokes of textured black. Dickey called subject matter the “gap in the hedge.” Without it, he was free to explore the essential qualities of rhythm, form and color, free of the danger that he will be “carried away by the referential elements” which distract the viewer from intimations of the sublime.⁴⁷ In the absence of a figural subject, the melancholic poetry of Dickey’s art is all the more starkly exposed.



Untitled, 1951, by Dan Dickey. Oil on board, 16 x 20 inches. Collection of William Perrine.

For all his forays into modernism and abstraction, Dickey took pains to emphasize his profound connection to the past. When a review singled out his abstract *San Romano Revisited* for reflecting the influence of contemporary New Bauhaus painter Gyorgy Kepes, Dickey replied that he had not seen Kepes’ work prior to painting his own. Instead, his abstract was rather an “homage to Paolo Uccello [Florentine painter of the battle of San Romano, circa 1440], that perennial modernist and space-cadet par excellence and one of my most revered spiritual forefathers.”⁴⁸

The 1950s were also a time of great loss for Dickey. His birth mother, Ellen Rose Higgins, died in 1952 and his father followed in 1953. At the same time, his own health continued to deteriorate. In a handwritten Christmas card, its shaky penmanship here and there exaggerated for effect, Dickey mused:

FLEETING
GREETING.
I’M
EATING,
 MEETING,
 BEATING
 TIME

(but time is running out, but fast) – Dan⁴⁹

Though he began suffering from episodes of double vision and his artistic output decreased, Dickey continued to exhibit and to teach as much as his health would allow. Etilie Wallace noted, he was “an invalid, who refused to live like one.”⁵⁰ He enjoyed a reputation as San Diego’s preeminent artist/intellectual and a strong network of friends and supporters. His one-man show of drawings at the Art Center in La Jolla opened in 1959, ending the decade on a high note. It was a great success both as a record of his achievement and as a statement of potential. Dr. Armin Kietzmann noted in the *San Diego Union*:

His decision to show drawings predominantly is a courageous step and one which—as the scarcity of such exhibits denotes—only few painters can afford.... In the choice of themes

an extension of range may also be observed. Beside female heads and hands, seated or crouching nude or draped figures there appear a self-portrait study, Cezannesque landscapes, compositions with standing figures and landscapes, and also a few of those abstractions which Dickey had done intermittently for 12 years....The show reveals an intensity which might be the source of many new developments.⁵¹

On the night of November 1, 1961 he and Melisse were dinner guests at the home of Etilie Wallace, along with Baranceanu and several others. Wallace later recalled the evening:

I think it was only a party of about 8 or 10 at most and we...before the evening was over we were all looking at one another with very tender loving looks. We all spoke of this afterward, that there was something very special about the atmosphere of appreciation of one another. Not that that was sad. There was nothing maudlin, there was nothing overt. It was just an atmosphere that was...had a glow to it. And the next morning we got a phone call from Melissa. She said ‘Dan is dead’.⁵²



By the Sea, 1940, by Dan Dickey. San Diego Historical Society #91.137.1.

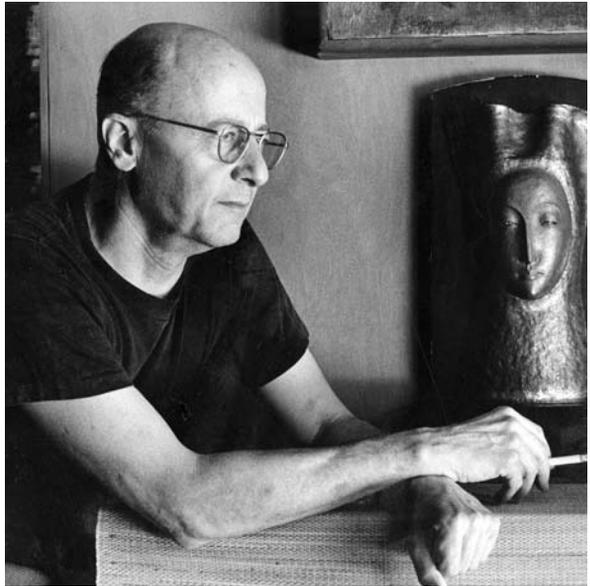
Daniel Ellsworth Dickey died November 2, 1961. On the occasion of Melisse's birthday the following January, Baranceanu wrote:

My birthday wish to you is that you get well soon and hurry back to Dan's studio and finish it as shrine for his work. I don't think you realize that it was you who made it possible for Dan to paint – your loving care and help and inspiration.⁵³

In February 1962, the Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego honored Dickey with a memorial show, the largest exhibition the museum had ever undertaken for a local artist. *By the Sea*, one of the show's major oils, was purchased for the museum's permanent collection.⁵⁴ Wallace curated another further retrospective at the San Diego Library's downtown branch in 1978. Of the eighty-some pieces on display, thirty-five were self-portraits constituting a visual autobiography. In a review of the show, critic James Britton quoted the artist:

Every year in the last moments before my birthday rolls around (that is toward midnight) I make a self-portrait drawing or painting...Usually I am dead for sleep... Nobody recognizes my

self-portraits as images of me...and with fatigue, etc., prevailing, plus mirrored reversal of form, why should they?



Dan Dickey in 1962. ©SDHS, Dickey collection.

Britton paid tribute to his friend:

To those who knew him, Dan was a man of great humor, kindly consideration and bemused wonderment at the antics of all. I don't think I ever saw him without a trace of a smile except when I came on him bent over a drawing or standing before an easel, when intentness was total.⁵⁵

A partial list of works by Dan Dickey

From Ettilie Wallace, *Dan Dickey Memorial Exhibition* (San Diego: Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, 1962):

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i>'Morning': Melissa</i> , 1938 | <i>Chez La Chose Jaune</i> , 1952 |
| <i>Olympia</i> , ca. 1938 | <i>Girl's Head</i> , 1952 |
| <i>Three Nudes</i> , 1939 | <i>Two Heads</i> , 1952 |
| <i>Madonna and Child</i> , 1939 | <i>Girl in Gray</i> , 1953 |
| <i>Young Girl's Head</i> , ca. 1939 | <i>Woman with Bird</i> , 1953 |
| <i>Untitled</i> , 1940 | <i>Allegory</i> , 1953 |
| <i>Abbey</i> , 1940 | <i>Portrait of Mary</i> , 1953 |
| <i>Europa, Spring</i> , 1940 | <i>Fantasy Abstraction</i> , 1954 |
| <i>Embrace</i> , 1940 | <i>Blue Turban</i> , 1954 |
| <i>Woman in Blue</i> , 1941 | <i>Girl with Chinese Lute</i> , 1955 |
| <i>Mother and Child</i> , 1941 | <i>Untitled Abstraction</i> , ca. 1955 |
| <i>By the Sea</i> , 1942-46 | <i>If You Wish</i> , ca. 1958 |
| <i>Madonna</i> , ca. 1942 | <i>Configuration with a Red Haired Girl</i> , 1958 |
| <i>Pensive Woman: Head</i> , 1944 | <i>The Hand</i> , 1960 |
| <i>Portrait of Betty</i> , ca. 1944 | <i>Pavanne</i> , n.d. |
| <i>Piero</i> , ca. 1945 | <i>Lady in a Chair</i> , n.d. |
| <i>Autumn</i> , 1946 | <i>Blue Plate with Fruit</i> , n.d. |
| <i>Rondeau</i> , 1947 | <i>Head</i> , n.d. |
| <i>Mother and Child</i> , ca. 1947 | <i>Self-Portrait</i> , n.d. |
| <i>Woman in Red</i> , 1948 | <i>Self-Portrait</i> , 1945 |
| <i>Girl with Mandola</i> , 1949 | <i>Self-Portrait</i> , 1950 |
| <i>Girl's Head</i> , ca. 1950 | <i>Self-Portrait</i> , 1954 |
| <i>Red Haired Woman</i> , 1950 | <i>Self-Portrait</i> , 1960 |

Unidentified exhibition list, Dickey manuscripts, San Diego Historical Society:

- Contemplation*, tempera
- House with Banana Tree*, watercolor
- Monoprint #1*, black and gray
- Head of Girl*, line drawing over wash
- Composition*, mixed media
- Configuration*, red, yellow with black ink
- Embryonic*, oil
- Joy*, monoprint
- Man in Blue Cap*, watercolor
- Heritage House*, watercolor with ink
- Grey Girl*, pastel with charcoal
- Girl in Shawl*, charcoal
- Woman with Cat*, block print
- Woman in Blue Turban*, oil

Woman in Red Blouse, oil
Composition, oil in red, black and white
Red Haired Woman, oil
Morning, oil
Repose, oil
Chez la Chose Jaune, oil
Configuration, oil in greens, black
Monoprint #2, abstract heads
Boy and Girl with Guitar, charcoal
Head, charcoal
White Bowl, tempera
Leda and Swan, block print
Monoprint #3, green, orange, yellow
Oranges, Green Lemons, mixed media
Geometrical Composition, oil
Horses in Pasture, mixed media
Two Women with Flower, oil
Fruit, watercolor



Untitled sketch of a seated woman, n.d., by Dan Dickey. Pastel chalk on pale blue/green paper. San Diego Historical Society #83.53.8.

Additional works exhibited and/or published⁵⁶

Arabesque, ca. 1941, charcoal
Configuration With Red Haired Girl, oil
Debarcation
Fantasy in Scarlet, oil
Girl in Yellow, 1938, painting
Head of a Girl, 1940, oil
Leona
Morning, 1938, oil
Mother and Child, 1941, crayon
Mousehound Asleep
Nina's Christmas Dinner, 1936, painting
Olympia, granite sculpture
Portrait of My Mother
San Romano Revisited
Spring 1940, 1940, ink
Two Girls, gouache
Untitled, abstract, Spring-Summer, 1957, oil
Untitled, monotype abstract
Vaediction, 1942, oil



Two Figures, n.d., by Dan Dickey. Gouache on paper. San Diego Historical Society #83.53.1.

NOTES

1. Teacher's Report, University of Chicago, The University High School, n.d., uncataloged collection of manuscripts and other materials donated by Dan Dickey, San Diego Historical Society, San Diego, California (hereafter Dickey manuscripts, SDHS).
2. "Peorians, in Old Truck, Head for Rio Grande," *The Peoria Star Tribune*, July 23, 1935; Ettilie Wallace, interviewed by Myra Alleger, October 10, 1980, transcript, SDHS.
3. Roy Dickey was the son of Frank Herbert Dickey and Kitty Hennessey Dickey and the grandson of Daniel Dickey. Photograph album, Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
4. Ellen Rose Higgins to Dan Dickey, February, 1939, Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
5. "Couple Fills Historic Hyde Park House with Curios from Far Off Lands," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, December 11, 1949; Janet Peck, "Old Hyde Park House Revives Glory of Past: 'Jigsaw' Home Filled with Bric-A-Brac," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1949; "Mrs. Dickey Opens Home for Benefit," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 10, 1953. Roy Dickey and Alice Manning were married in New York City on May 16, 1916. Wedding announcement, Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
6. *The Algol, Carleton College Yearbook*, 1932, photocopy, Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
7. Ettilie Wallace, interviewed by Myra Alleger, November 13, 1980, transcript, SDHS.
8. Ethel Maud Greene, interviewed by Myra Alleger, 1979, transcript, SDHS.
9. Dan Dickey, questionnaire from Roy Dickey, n.d., Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
10. Velma Melisse Holben graduated from nurse training at Blodgett Memorial Hospital in Michigan in 1919. She married Foster Jewell in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1922. They came in San Diego during the early 1930s. A horsewoman, Melisse rode with the Balboa Mounted Troop.
11. Quoted by Donald Button, unknown publication, n.d. This seems to date from the late 1930s. Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
12. Ettilie Wallace, interviewed by Myra Alleger, October 10, 1980, transcript, SDHS.
13. Nothing further is known about this mural and it seems to have meant little to the artist. It may have been a commercial work arranged by his father.
14. Dan Dickey, letter to Melisse Jewell, n.d., Dickey manuscripts, SDHS; annotated "Friday Night."
15. Ibid., annotated "Monday Morning."
16. Ibid., annotated "Friday."
17. Ibid., annotated "Monday Morning."
18. Ibid., annotated "Wednesday."
19. Ibid., annotated "Friday."
20. Quoted in Ettilie Wallace, *Dan Dickey Memorial Exhibition* (San Diego: Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, 1962).
21. Dan Dickey, letter to Melisse Jewell, n.d., Dickey manuscripts, SDHS. Dickey asked Melisse if she had "gone down yet to the county recorder to record our property." The letter is undated save for the annotation "Friday" but the events described therein can be dated to 1937.
22. Stanton Macdonald-Wright, letter "To Whom it May Concern," September 20, 1939, Dickey manuscripts, SDHS. The letter, on WPA letterhead, said that Dickey left the Federal Art Project to concentrate on teaching and gave his tenure as two years.
23. Manuscript page, n.d., Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
24. Marg Loring, "'Exciting' Is Word For Annual Southern California Show In Gallery; Dan Dickey Lone San Diego Winner," *The San Diego Sun*, n.d.
25. "Artists Work On Huge Paintings On Exhibition At Marston's," *The San Diego Union*, June 19, 1944.
26. National Gallery of Art, "Past Exhibitions—Two Hundred American Watercolors," <http://www.nga.gov/past/data/exh1.shtm> (accessed June 26, 2007).

27. "Artists Work On Huge Paintings."
28. Ethel Maud Greene, interviewed by Myra Alleger, 1979, transcript, SDHS.
29. Ibid.
30. Thomas B. Hess, *The Complete Art Comics and Satires of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Marlborough, 1975).
31. Ad Reinhardt, "How To Look at Modern Art in America," *P.M.* 7, June 2, 1946.
32. Ibid.
33. Dan Dickey and Lorser Feitelson, "The Visual Arts," *San Diego Journal*, March 15, 1945.
34. Dan Dickey, "The Visual Arts," *San Diego Journal*, January 4, 1945.
35. Dickey, "The Visual Arts," *San Diego Journal*, n.d.
36. Dickey, [title needed], *San Diego Journal*, January 11, 1945.
37. Ettillie Wallace, interviewed by Myra Alleger, November 13, 1980, SDHS.
38. After Dickey's death the house at 3712 Promontory Street and its contents were left to Ettillie Wallace who lived there until her own death in 1992. As of this writing, the present owner of the house intends to tear down the structure.
39. Alice Manning Dickey, letter to Dan Dickey, February 7, 1952, Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
40. She probably saw *By the Sea*, a large (40 x 30-1/2 inch) painting that had won first prize at the California State Fair in 1946 and was exhibited in the second annual Pepsi-Cola show in New York.
41. Ethel Greene, interviewed by Betty Quayle, January 26, 1987, transcript, SDHS.
42. Roy Dickey, letter to Dan Dickey, March 6, 1951. Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
43. Letters from his mother, Alice Manning Dickey, are full of supportive concern over the domestic situation at 3172 Promontory but it is unclear how well informed she was. Nonetheless, from her references it seems she kept up a friendly correspondence with all three parties for most of the period.
44. For further information about Ethel Greene see, Bruce Kamerling, *100 Years of Art in San Diego* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1991), 94-95.
45. Jo Ellen Adams and Marjorie Breitenbach, *San Diego and Point Magazine*, March 1950.
46. James Britton, "Culture has Bugs," *Point*, July 20, 1951.
47. Quoted in Jo Ellen Adams and Marjorie Breitenbach, *San Diego and Point Magazine*, March 1950.
48. Thomas B. Robertson, "Artist Exhibits At Old Town," unknown publication, n.d. Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
49. Dan Dickey, Christmas Card, n.d., Dickey manuscripts, SDHS.
50. Wallace, *Dan Dickey Memorial Exhibition*.
51. Dr. Armin Kietzmann, "Artist's Drawing Show Is Daring Step," *The San Diego Union*, December 20, 1959.
52. Ettillie Wallace, interviewed by Myra Alleger, November 13, 1980, transcript, SDHS.
53. Belle Baranceanu, letter to Melissa Dickey, January 4, 1962, Dickey manuscripts, SDHS. Melissa died on March 10, 1963.
54. The painting was later de-accessioned, as was *Cavatina*. The San Diego Museum of Art currently has two drawings by Dickey in the permanent collection, *Arabesque* and *Mother and Child*.
55. James Britton, "The Image of Artist Dan Dickey Recalled," *San Diego Union*, March 4, 1978.
56. I have attempted to avoid redundancies from the above lists but when in doubt, given that some works undoubtedly share names, I have opted to include them.