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Fellowship of the Artists: The Dixon Studio Art Tour in New Mexico

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BY ANNE Z. COOKE

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DIXON, N.M. - The next time you drive north from Santa Fe to Taos on State Highway 68, look for Highway 75 and the turnoff to Dixon, in the green Embudo Valley. Whether you're an art collector, critic or merely a student of quirky hideaways, make a mental note of the intersection. This is the way to New Mexico's leading art fair, the Dixon Studio Art Tour, held annually on the first weekend in November.

From 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday, Dixon's artists set aside their paints, brushes, pastels, clay, looms, silk screens, lathes and chisels and open their doors to all comers, from browsers and buyers to colleagues and friends. Many of the artists who call Dixon home exhibit their work in galleries elsewhere, in Santa Fe, Taos and beyond. But this is a chance to meet them at home and to see where and how they work.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

"The tour map is essential to finding your way around," said artist Judy Pearson, one of the many volunteers who organize the event. "All of the studios have a stack, so you can pick one up almost anywhere, at the first studio you visit, or any gallery."

The map is also crucial to planning your day. With a panoply of art styles to consider, ranging from oil paintings, watercolors, ink, pottery, porcelain, majolica and jewelry to furniture, wood carving, stone carving, fabrics, weaving, basketry and bronzes - you'll have to pick and choose.

Count on driving from one studio to the next. As in most of New Mexico's rural communities, vegetable gardens, homes, barns, stores - and now the studios - are scattered over a mile or two, a legacy of the 1725 Embudo Land Grant and the original Spanish colonists' farm plots.

A few of Dixon's residents trace their ancestry and haciendas to the colonists. Some to the occasional settler or occasional farmer looking for land. In the 1930s another group arrived, Dust Bowl migrants moving west. But it was the fellowship of hippies that came to town in the mid-1960s and 1970s and turned the sleepy outpost on its head.

"You remember the Vietnam War," said Joan McDonald, owner of Embudo Fabric Design and one of the tour's founders. "Well, a bunch of us college students decided to flee the city and the horrors of war for a purer, less-compromised life. But we didn't know the first thing about how to live it.

"We were artists and intellectuals," she said, chuckling at the memory. "We could quote philosophy and conjugate German verbs, but we had absolutely no skills, no tools and no money. We were starving. Then somebody suggested organized an art tour."

That was in 1982. Since then the Studio Tour has been a boon to Dixon, attracting new artists to the community, supporting local projects, and creating a demand for organic vegetable farmers, apple and grape growers, and wine makers. Two wine-tasting rooms, a half-dozen B&Bs, the KLDK-LP radio station and the Dixon Cooperative Market have prospered.

FIRST IN THE HEARTS OF NEW MEXICANS

Dixon is small - population 926. With few street signs, first-time visitors are never quite sure when "there" is "there." If that's you, stop at the Dixon Cooperative Market to ask directions, buy a sandwich, get a tour map, survey the vegetable bins, and look at the hand-made, one-of-a-kind gifts offered for sale. The Co-op, a non-profit service organization founded to benefit the community, buys - and sells - locally grown produce, meats, jams, spices, hand-crafted items and kitchen wares. Manned by volunteers, the Co-op was my lodestone. Open on Tour weekend from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. At 215 State Hwy 75. (505) 579-9625 or see www.dixonmarket.com.

To meet the locals, stop for a cup of strong coffee at Zuly's Cafe, Dixon's only eatery, known for locally grown ingredients. A favorite of residents and visitors, the green chile cheeseburger, served with local beef and fresh chiles, is unrivaled. Ditto for the chicken dishes, fried or in tacos, prepared with farm-raised chickens. Open for breakfast and lunch. At 234 State Hwy 75. (505) 579-4001 or go to www.zulyscafe.org.

If you plan to make a mini-vacation out of your visit, look for a list of B&Bs on the Studio Tour website (www.dixonarts.org). Those who stay at novelist and historian Stanley Crawford's Tower Guest House, at the El Bosque Garlic Farm, can buy fresh garlic and vegetables from 3 to 5 a.m. on Friday mornings, before it's packed and sent to Santa Fe Farmers Market. Fresh organic garlic - the best you'll ever taste - makes unforgettable gifts.

Crawford himself, whose life and work in New Mexico's Embudo Valley spans 40 years, is usually there, working in the garden or selling his books. At 88 County Rd. 64 (dirt road off State Rd. 75). (505) 579-4288 or go to www.stanleycrawford.net.

FIRST AMONG EQUALS

Don't miss Dixon's newest gallery, Manifestation, on Highway 75 opposite the Blue Heron brewery. Owned by four well-known Dixon artists, Manifestation displays and sells both art and antiques, and will be open during the show. For hours go to www.manifestationarts.com.

Check out the Rift Contemporary Art Gallery, open daily, showcasing award-winning pottery by ceramicist Betsy Williams, stone carvings by Mark Saxe, and the works of four other area artists. At 2249 State Hwy 68, one mile from the intersection with Highway 75. (505) 579-9179.

On the tour: glimpse the Embudo Valley's early years as seen by Clarence Medina, whose plein art oil paintings have been capturing the look of the mountains, rivers and adobe haciendas since he was a boy. (505) 579-4645, and at www.clarencemedina.com.

Also on the tour: Eli Levin's landscape paintings and black and white etchings, depicting serenity, nature, and - in the etchings - the darker side, rely on art to speak the truth. (505) 579-416, www.elilevin.com.

WHEN YOU GO:

The 34th Studio Art Tour, organized and manned by volunteers, will be held Nov. 7 and 8, 2015, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., in Dixon, N.M. Get a map at the first gallery you visit; the tour is free. Most displayed art is available for purchase. Bring cash or checks; some artists don't accept credit cards. As of this writing there was no ATM in town. Parking is plentiful. Additional stalls exhibiting and selling hand-made crafts, food and jewelry are set up in the library and the community center.

The "Mercado" food stand, organized to support the Tour, sells sandwiches, drinks, fresh local produce, fresh bread, honey, wine, herbs and spices. Check the website, updated regularly as the tour date approaches, at www.dixonarts.org. Additional artists may be added. Dixon is 30 minutes south of Taos on NM State Hwy 68.

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