

A TRUE ORIGINAL: MAYNARD DIXON'S ENDURING LEGACY

ANGELIKA PAGEL

California-born Maynard Dixon (1875-1946) traveled extensively in the American (South)West during the first thirty-plus years of the twentieth century. Disillusioned, as so many artists and writers were, by the rapidly growing industrial society and its accompanying modernity, he was drawn to the epic landscapes of the West and its Indigenous Peoples. World War I and the Great Depression exacerbated Dixon's desire to abandon the city for the desert. For the last decade of his life, he settled in Utah (wintering in Arizona), and when he passed, he left behind an oeuvre that firmly established him as the archetypal twentieth-century painter of the American West.

By the time Dixon began traveling throughout the Southwest, around 1900, the West had been "won": in 1890 the U.S. Census Bureau declared the official end of the western frontier, and during the same year, the last of the "Indian Wars" – the Massacre at Wounded Knee – relegated Native Americans to "the past" once and for all. This paradigm shift in the perception of the American West resulted in a rush by painters (and photographers) to document the "last frontier" and its "vanishing race," Native Americans.

A Conversation with
SUSAN BINGHAM



Paul and Susan Bingham. Photo Credit: The Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts.

Dixon's landscapes could be seen to conclude the romantic depiction of the West by such artists as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. His portrayals of Native Americans seem grafted onto the, by his time, well-established stereotype of the stoic "noble savage" – permanently fixed in an idealized

yesteryear and “in touch” with nature and the sublime – while governmental oppression and forced assimilation of Indigenous Peoples were in full swing.

This complex context does by no means devalue Dixon’s oeuvre, nor is it meant as a judgment on Dixon’s artistic merits. Indeed, it makes his work even more charismatic and compelling. His landscapes emit a seductive beauty achieved via his remarkable handling of light and shapes; Indigenous Peoples are portrayed with respect, dignity, and reverence (as are the destitute urban Americans of the Depression era). It has even been suggested that Dixon’s admiration for Indigenous culture comes from “a place of envy,” whether in his poetry or paintings.¹ Art never exists in isolation; it is always a product of its era.

Susan Bingham and her late husband, Paul, are from the greater Ogden area and became art dealers specializing in Dixon’s

work beginning in the 1980s. Eventually, they created the Thunderbird Foundation in Mt. Carmel, on the property in Southern Utah where Dixon and his third wife, Edith Hamlin – an accomplished artist in her own right – resided for a good many years. I had the privilege of interviewing Susan in Mt. Carmel in February of 2023. As she observes, Dixon lived the changing West during the early twentieth century and found his soul in the desert, the only place where he ever put down roots. Cliché it may be, but there has always been that transcendent and harsh beauty of the desert. This is the beauty Dixon’s work captures so well. The radiant, hard-edged abstract realism of his paintings (as well as the muted light and darkened palette of his lesser-known California Depression-era work) will remain significant for both their artistic integrity and as silent signifiers of the changing West.



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

I would like to express my gratitude for your hospitality and for giving me the time to talk to you about Maynard Dixon and your and your late husband Paul's Foundation. As stated on the Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts website, Paul left corporate America in the early 1980s to follow his love for art and became an art dealer. The site mentions that "he liked selling art more than he liked selling Xerox machines!" A few years after this career change, you and your husband met Edith Hamlin, Maynard Dixon's third wife and a renowned artist herself, then 80 years old. Could you please tell me how you met Edith and how that led to the subsequent exhibition, in 1987, of Maynard Dixon's work, installed at your gallery in San José, California?

Let me back up a bit. We're both from the Ogden area. Paul graduated college with degrees in history, French, and German. He also spoke Scandinavian languages because he'd been on an LDS mission there. He went to Washington, D.C., for a job interview translating patents into Danish but decided that wasn't what he wanted to do. On the flight back, he noticed a Xerox Corporation advertisement for job openings in their sales department. Back in Salt Lake City, he interviewed with Xerox—they hired him, we packed up our little two-month-old baby, and drove to California. It was the first time that I had been to California. As we came down the Sacramento Valley, I thought, "Oh, my goodness, this is the land of milk and honey!" We settled in Sunnyvale.

Paul did very well at Xerox, which allowed us to make several trips to Europe, including Denmark and Norway. But after 13 years of sales, and then management, the pressure of corporate life was difficult. You always have to be better than you were the year before. By this time, we had started collecting art.

We had friends in Salt Lake City who owned a gallery. They were both BYU graduates; one was an artist, and the other was a collector of Dixon's work. Through them, we

became acquainted with the art of Maynard Dixon. Maynard's work led to us being interested in all kinds of art from that particular period, early 20th century American.

While still at Xerox, Paul had two partners who owned an art gallery called Tivoli Gallery. With them, we opened a gallery in Los Altos. After a couple of years, Paul decided that he wanted to be on his own and broke ties with his partners. During that process, Paul was introduced to Edith Hamlin, who was then living in San Francisco and, in 1963, had sold the Mt. Carmel property to Milford Zornes.

When Paul met Edith, he became quite a good friend of hers. Oftentimes, he would take one of our kids with him to San Francisco to pick up works by Dixon that she would consign to us to sell. We'd sell the work, take her a check, and get more of Dixon's work. She had a tremendous amount of his drawings and even some oils. She also would refer people to us if they had a Dixon to sell.

Paul became known for loving Maynard Dixon paintings, and of course, in the Bay Area—where Maynard lived most of his life, this was 30 years after his death—there was quite a bit of it that people had collected during his lifetime. The stories that we were able to unearth through that process are great stories. Many times, what comes with the painting, even what's written on the back, is almost as interesting as what's on the front, because there's a whole history there.

That's how I met Edith. The years passed, my children were getting older, and eventually Paul decided to be a full-time art dealer. We needed extra income, so I got a job with Nordstrom—I was always into clothes and makeup; I was kind of a girly-girl (Laughter). But eventually, Paul wanted me to come into the business with him. So I did. And we never looked back.

We each had our roles. I did the gallery displays. He was the guy who was grinding out various ways to promote the business—he was really great at selling, having learned some high end sales techniques by



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

Are there any particular anecdotes you could share about that first exhibition of Dixon's works at the San José gallery?

Well, the way Paul told it, he always went to see Edith, and she'd have boxes of things set aside for different dealers who dealt with the same art we did. Edith had boxes set aside—marked for Kerwin Galleries, Maxwell Galleries, Paul Bingham, A.B. Hayes, and Mark Hoff-

man, and others. Paul remembered going to see Edith, who said: "I'm thinking about getting out of the business, I'm getting older; but here's the box of the paintings, the drawings, that I'd like you to sell," to which Paul retorted: "I want to see what's in those other boxes too!" (Laughter)

She let him look, and they came to an agreement about selling the Dixon works inherited by Edith. We also acquired a three-panel screen at that point—a dressing screen painted by Dixon. It had been in the possession of a woman in San Francisco who was a model for Maynard. The woman was now elderly, and she called up my husband one day, telling him that she was thinking about cutting up the screen into several pieces! Paul said, "No, don't do that! I'll be right there." (Laughter) That piece would become part of the resolution of Edith's Dixon holdings, and we had a really nice show. So many people came to see it!

On one occasion, we took a large Dixon painting we had acquired to the LA Art Show, which was attended by Diane Keaton and Steve Martin, who were both interested in Dixons. There was also a Dixon painting titled *The Grim Wall* [1923], which we had sold before, but the collector's wife didn't like it, so they brought it back to the LA Art Show to resell. We resold it—and it went to Diane Keaton. I think she still has it. We've had an exciting time in this world of art. The art that came to us through the years—pieces by Stuart Davis and others like him—we were really fortunate to have. In the Bay Area, everybody came from somewhere else and brought "grandma's paintings" with them to make some money from them. So, they came to people like us and we would find a buyer for them.

There was a Mexican restaurant right next to our gallery and a plaza out front. Edith had always loved Mexican music, so we hired a mariachi band. Edith was out there dancing to the music and we had a great time. We *sold*—all I did was sit at the desk and just write up things! I've never had a show like that since. There were so many wonderful drawings and oil paintings—people were

happy to get them. After the show was over, Edith came up to Paul and said, “Oh, Paul, that was just wonderful. Maynard would have loved this. This is just the way Maynard would have done it.” That was in 1987.

Edith and Maynard moved to Mt. Carmel Junction, Utah, in 1939. As I understand it, they spent their summers here and their winters in Tucson, Arizona, until Maynard’s death in 1946. Edith brought Maynard’s ashes to Mt. Carmel and continued to live in Mt. Carmel for a while until she eventually sold the property to one of her artist friends. I’m curious how the opportunity arose for you and your husband to acquire the Dixon-Hamlin home in 1998. I’m also keen to know more about the various buildings that make up the property. Was extensive restoration necessary?

When Maynard fell ill, during his Canoga Park Post Office mural project [completed in 1941], they hired “California Style” artist Milford Zornes and Dixon’s artist friend Buck Weaver to install that mural for him. That’s how Zornes got to know Maynard.

They kept in touch over the years, after Maynard and Edith bought the property here in Mt. Carmel, sometime in 1937-1938. They planned the home to build and then moved

People think the art business is a glamorous business. They don’t understand what artists go through or the work galleries have with shipping, storing, pricing, rehanging, insurance, and all the rest of it. Nevertheless, it’s a great business and you meet wonderful people. Many collectors and artists become your friends.

in late 1938 or 1939. Milford Zornes bought the property in 1963. He happened to come through here and saw that it was for sale, but Edith was renting it out to a family at the time. According to Milford, there were tricycles on the lawn, and the doors were open, but nobody was there. He decided to just walk in—and there were Maynard Dixon paintings on the walls! That evening, he and his friends went to a girlie show in Las Vegas, and he said, “We were at a show where there were all these naked girls, and all I could think about was the place in Mt. Carmel.” (Laughter)

One thing led to another, and Milford and his wife, Pat, purchased the property from Edith. Milford started doing workshops every year. Many artists still come to us who have studied with Milford on this property. Anyway, late in 1997, Paul had gone to Southern California to sell a Dixon painting titled *Mountains in Sunset Light* [1927]—it was beautiful. The sale provided him with some money. At the same time, I’m in the gallery in San José where I get a call from Milford Zornes. In his big voice he asked for Paul, and since Milford was also in Southern California—he had a house in Claremont—I gave him Paul’s cell number and didn’t think a thing of it.

So, I’m about to lock up the gallery and the phone rings. It was Paul and he said, “Well, I just bought the Dixon property.” My jaw dropped, and I said, “I’m not moving to Southern Utah!” (Laughter) I agreed to at least go and look at the property.

We didn’t get up here until January of 1998. The property was in very bad disarray; Milford really hadn’t lived here much. He was 90 years old at the time, finding that his and Pat’s life in Claremont was a much better place to be. He would come to visit Carmel but didn’t stay at the property. There were big cobwebs and mouse droppings and dead mice everywhere. It was scary. I kind of kicked the mice out of the way when I looked around. (Laughter) The bunk house was packed full of furniture, boxes, and all kinds of stuff. The same with the studio.



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

We looked at the property and then drove around the area, up towards the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. As you drive back toward Mt. Carmel, it's so beautiful. By this time, all these thoughts were going through my head: I could fix the house, I could make a flower bed, I could make a patio. . . you know, *Country Living Magazine* ideas. I thought, maybe I could become a country girl. (Laughter)

But because the property was in such bad shape, there was no way we could get a loan on it, so Paul made a deal with Milford. They agreed on a price, we pressed forward, and everything fell into line. We had a lot of paintings come to us at that time that we were able to make nice commissions on. There are times in your life when things fall together in the right way, so much so that it makes you think there's some kind of intervention. That's how we felt about it, that maybe we are supposed to be stewards of this property.

By this time, we were so deep into everything about Maynard Dixon. We knew Edith; we got to know Milford; we heard all the stories; we sold work for Daniel Dixon—

Maynard's oldest son; we knew his younger son John well. When Don Hagerty wrote his book on Dixon [*Desert Dreams: The Art and Life of Maynard Dixon*], we helped find images—so we were pretty deep into the Dixon world. We weren't sure what we were going to do with the property at that point, but decided that at the very least it could be a summer home for our family. Once we got into it, we realized it was an important, historical property.

The recent Maynard Dixon exhibition at BYU [October 2022–September 2023] is called *Searching*

for a Home. People are surprised to learn that Maynard never owned a home until he moved to Mt. Carmel. I often think about all of the changes that he saw in his lifetime because he was born right after the Civil War, in a little settlement that wasn't even called Fresno. Maynard Dixon was a true American painter. He was born in the West. He grew up painting and drawing the West. He drew the Mexican cowboys, the *vaqueros*, who worked on the property that his grandfather bought. He loved American lore. His mother encouraged his reading of novels, and he knew all the illustrators of those books. Maynard was a sickly child and hospitalized a few times with asthma, so he was basically homeschooled. He learned to draw (with his left hand) like nobody can draw! His sons said that he would take a pencil and draw a fluid line, where his hand would hardly come off the paper. By the time he was 16, he sent his drawings to Fredrick Remington for encouragement. Remington told him that he could become a great artist if he continued to observe, paint, and draw. Maynard took that to heart. He got

his first illustration job at age 18. He was a natural talent and mostly studied on his own, though he did attend the California School of Design, now the San Francisco Art Institute, where he studied with Arthur Matthews.

I would like to have known Maynard. I get the feeling, through everything that I've read, that because of his supportive mother, he really loved women. I think the women in his life took care of him. Dorthea Lange took care of him. Because of her success, he was able to travel to the West and stay for months at a time. Edith, in his older age, took care of him. Of course, his first wife, she was not able to take care of anyone. She had a hard enough time taking care of herself.

What motivated you to preserve Maynard Dixon's legacy with such unconditional commitment? I think you already answered part of that – you were so fully involved and engaged with Maynard Dixon and his life. Is there anything else you want to add to that?

Well, I think because we are originally from Utah, it made a difference. I don't think that there are many other people who would do what we do. They would come into this culture and say, "My goodness, you came from the Bay Area to this out-of-the-way little hamlet, tucked away on the east side of Zion, a sleepy little town. What made you think you could have an art gallery here? You're crazy people." Well, we are! (Laughter) It's not an easy thing to do, but Paul was a visionary. We aren't the kind of people who planned to retire at 65. . . What were we going to do? This was our life. If you die hanging a painting, that's a good life. (Laughter)

We wanted to make a living history museum; we wanted to share it with artists so they could get the same kind of inspiration that Maynard Dixon did. We tried to restore it in a way that, if the Dixons came back, if they could, they would still be comfortable here.

Within a year of purchasing the property, you made the decision to open it up for work-

shops, internships, and retreats by establishing the Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts. Artist residencies are of course prized opportunities in today's world. I admire your decision to continue the foundation, with its opportunities, even after your husband's passing. What has been your experience for the past twenty-some years hosting artists, photographers, and writers, here at the Maynard Dixon property?

We've met so many wonderful people. My husband had an interesting personality. On one hand, he would appear to people as arrogant, even a little grumpy sometimes. But anyone who got to know him well knew that there was a big generous heart underneath. It was not about money at all. It was about a vision; it was about doing something that mattered. We got the Utah Heritage Foundation to help us get the property on the National Historical Register of Historic Places.

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Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

We've met wonderful people who came into our lives and became our friends, such as Russell Case, whose career we kind of launched. In about 2001, we started a show called *Maynard Dixon Country*. We built outdoor walls with awnings over the top and lighting inside. The artists would come for about 4 or 5 days, paint for a few days, then hang the wet paintings in the outdoor space, and eventually the paintings would be inside the studio on all the walls.

We had a very successful run of *Maynard Dixon Country* for about 17 years. Once a year, in August, all the artists would come. Paul would cook for everyone, and the wine flowed, and they'd sit up by the bunkhouse singing all night. It was wonderful networking for the artists; it was wonderful for the collectors to meet the artists. The paintings were pretty affordable—there was a lot of collecting that went on. Many were young artists like Russell Case, Josh Elliott, Skip Whitcomb, Dan Young, it goes on and on—we helped them launch their careers. Conversely, invited artists recommended their friends—for instance, Ray Roberts suggested Robert Goldman, and we've done extremely well with Robert Goldman's beautiful work.

The collectors that we've met have become friends. Those are the rewards of what we do. This is not an easy business, there's always competition, or artists who are not happy that they didn't sell—we're always unhappy that they didn't sell. There's stress and pressure that comes along with it. We stopped doing the Dixon show—there are so many plein-air shows now, everywhere; it has become such a diluted market. The collector base has changed too. There are now young rich people in California and elsewhere who

are starting to buy these younger plein-air artists, but don't recognize the roots of this type of art. For Paul and me, and our generation, Maynard Dixon was innovative.

Impressionism was radical and shocking at the time, and now it has become mundane and loved by everyone.

Well, even further back: Van Gogh didn't sell a painting during his lifetime. He had an innovative, new approach. He was that bridge between Impressionism and Modernism.

But, back to Maynard Dixon—he was a true original. I'm finding now that I see these contemporary paintings—they're big, they're beautiful, they make a statement, but they are derivative. I heard Wayne Thiebaud give a talk at the San José Museum of Art stating, "I've borrowed from everybody in history." People do borrow. I enjoy seeing what people today are doing—even though they are borrowing from artists like Dixon, or some of the Taos art colony founders. Sometimes I see a painting and think, wow, that looks like a Victor Higgins! Many young collectors don't care, or don't know, but they probably could be collecting the real thing [Victor Higgins] for the prices they are paying

for contemporary art. That signifies a change in the market. However, it's important that we have a viable contemporary market.

Could you please speak a bit more about Maynard Dixon's art? What attracted you to his work, style, and subject matter? Though his depictions of Native Americans as stoic and passive are romanticized, I am the first to admit that during my early California college years a large poster of his Earth Knower [1931-32] decorated my apartment – and resurfaced on the walls of my office at Weber State University. Dixon's western landscapes are undeniably seductive – I enjoy the stark lights and shadows, the simplified, cubist-inspired shapes, and the expansive panoramas – not to mention his urban realism, perhaps less known, when he painted the hardships of Depression-era San Francisco.

What I have learned, not only from Maynard Dixon's paintings, but from his life, through living here, on this historical property, walking in the same footsteps, looking at the chinking between the logs and the colors he chose, is that I wish I could have known him. You have to understand that we were driving back and forth from California to Utah all the time, but I never paid attention to the desert. It was a big, hot, dry place. It didn't appeal to me. Of course, once I started living in the desert, *understanding* the desert, Dixon's work meant more and more to me. I started seeing the shadows, and the light, the vastness, and the clouds. His thunderbird logo—did I understand it until I moved to the Southwest? Not really.

I'll tell you what made me understand it. We had just restored the property, so we decided that we would open it up to the community. We invited the mayors and council-people from all the little towns around. We sent out invitations, prepared hors d'oeuvres, and it was a beautiful day. Just before everyone arrived, there were a bunch of clouds in

the sky. As everyone had gone into the studio, where we were going to give a presentation, the sky let loose. We couldn't get the food from the house to the studio without getting wet. Paul and I were both drenched. The studio started to flood; all the women had nylons on, but they took off their shoes and started grabbing towels. I called Eddie at the Thunderbird Hotel and said, "Eddie, we need towels up here, we're flooding!" Paul was outside shoveling (Laughter); we had to put boards down so people could get to their cars. Anyway, we finally had this little, drenched presentation, and then everyone got out of there. We thought, what just happened? Was this a bad omen? What are we doing?

Then the sun came out, and it was a lovely evening. I thought: that is the thunderbird!

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You can understand why Native Americans believed the sky was falling. Their explanation for these storms was that a large bird caused all of this. I gained a greater appreciation of the drama of this area, how all of this was formed. Maynard, as a young man, knew about the thunderbird legend and decided to design a thunderbird as his logo.

You mentioned that Maynard painted Native Americans passively. A lot of artists from the East Coast who came to paint in the Southwest were city people. This area was a novelty—the color of the clothing, the textiles, the pottery, the flora and fauna of the desert, the architecture—it was all intriguing. Here is what I came to believe: that Maynard Dixon appreciated Native Americans as people, a living culture—which is also reflected in his poetry. They had this creativity—their pottery, their weavings, their resolute spirit. I think that's what he tried to portray—the spirit of these people.

You also mentioned *Earth Knower*. It was one of the very first paintings by Maynard Dixon that really touched me—I've thought about it a million times since. I thought, what is it about that painting that touched me? Now, I know. Dixon knew everything there was to know about composition—he

studied dynamic symmetry. There were so many angles and geometric shapes in the way he composed, and he simplified all of that. *Earth Knower* is a perfect example of that, because here is this Native American draped in a blanket, and the color of the face, the color of the blanket, the color of the earth, they are all coordinated. The shadows of the blanket, the folds of the skin—Dixon seems to say, as Native Americans believe, that they come from the earth and they go back to the earth; they are a part of the earth. The way Dixon put it all together, it's just genius. And when you see something that is genius like that, you don't always know why it touches you. Maynard Dixon painted the spirit of the West. A lot of young painters are painting nostalgia, but it doesn't have the spirit.

His was a lived experience. He lived here; he lived among the Indigenous Peoples, he spent time with them.

Exactly. When you have a painting like *Cloud World*, with the tiny Navajo riders across the bottom—he again explained it in the title, *Cloud World*—there's a world above us that is so vast and so unknowable, and here we are, these small people. When he went to the desert, he would find his soul. That was

where he realized that all his little problems—politics back in San Francisco; an artist who got a commission and he didn't—they weren't important to him anymore.

Maynard's poetry is wonderful. One of my favorite poems is called "The Years," written in the late 1930s. He writes, "Now as the years pass more quickly,/ and I become better acquainted/ with the slowly approaching visage of death. . . / I must hold myself up, above petty disputes and



Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

distinctions,/ keeping some largeness of heart/ alike for those who trust me and those who distrust me. . . .” He goes on to say that, if all he did while on this earth was to create beauty, he would be satisfied: “Yes, this is enough. So unhurriedly I will pass/ peacefully, content under the desert stars.” It’s a fabulous poem. He came to Mt. Carmel during the last part of his life, and he had a lot of things to resolve. He’d been through a lot—divorced twice, the Great Depression. He had great times in the 1920s, he’d seen WWI and then WWII right before he passed away. He saw the cowboy, the automobile, and everything in between.



Photo of Maynard and Edith Dixon on display at the Maynard Dixon Estate, 2022. Photo by Angelika Pagel.

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*What do you think his legacy is nowadays?
Why do you think he is still important?*

I think he is still important as far as his art goes because he was innovative. For example, if you look out at that mountain, look at those trees, look at all those branches. He was able to zoom in and tell a story. He might just want to talk about the clouds; he might just want to talk about a cabin. He knew how to focus on a subject both in his paintings and his poetry. That’s why he is often called a “poetic painter.” His paintings tell a story but they are not literal. There’s nothing literal about *Cloud World* whatsoever, they are just shapes. And yet, it tells a story. He was a genius in his ability to edit. I was told long ago that a good painter knows that it’s not what you put *into* a work of art, it’s what you leave *out*, and Dixon knew how to do that.

As mentioned before, it’s interesting to watch the contemporary market now, with so many wonderful, big landscape paintings. Some of it is getting to the point where it rivals Dixon’s work. There are purists in the art world who will say that these newer pieces are derivative and nostalgic—because that isn’t their world, really. But the West is still here, and the West is still vast. There are

still wonderful things to paint, and to feel. Maynard's original experiences here, to tell it like *he* did, that's still worth something.

Thank you. This has been a wonderful conversation.

Notes

1. See "Indigenous Life Through Dixon's Eyes," exhibition label *Maynard Dixon: Searching for a Home*, BYU Museum of Art, October 28, 2022—September 23, 2023.



After teaching 37 years of art history at Weber State University, Angelika Pagel (Ph.D., UC Berkeley) is now happily retired. Her most recent publication was the exhibition catalog, "Buster Simpson: Constructs for the Anthropocene," that accompanied the artist's retrospective at Weber State University's Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery in the fall of 2022. Though she may have closed her office door to her career, Dr. Pagel will continue to pursue her art historical passions, but with all the leisure of a professor emerita.