

Deseret News

Utah Artist Pablo O'Higgins' works are featured in exhibit in his native Utah

By Carma Wadley

Deseret News

Published: Saturday, March 27, 2010 4:46 p.m. MDT

A Utahn by birth. A Mexican by choice. An artist by profession. A socialist by persuasion.

The man known as Pablo O'Higgins led a life full of interesting quirks and a few enigmas.

Still highly esteemed in his adopted country, he is almost unknown in his native state, although that is changing, particularly with exhibits such as the one currently on display at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

"Pablo O'Higgins: Works on Paper" will be on display through Sept. 19. It features 26 lithographs and two linoleum cuts from local private collections, all of which feature "heroic depictions of Mexican laborers," exhibition curator Donna Poulton says.

"He loved and adored the peasants in Mexico. But his works mostly show faceless workers, rather than specific people. He wanted it so that anyone could put themselves in the picture, could identify with it," she said.

Born Paul Higgins on March 1, 1904, in Salt Lake City, he showed an early interest in piano and visual arts. His mother even allowed him to experiment with acid etching in their kitchen.

Higgins' father, Edward, was an assistant attorney general, and was one of the attorneys who urged the Utah Supreme Court to uphold the trial court's conviction of Joe Hill and go forward with his execution. Higgins was 11 at the time of the execution. He never made reference to it after he moved to Mexico, but it might have influenced his future political views.

Higgins attended East High for his sophomore and senior years in the early 1920s, but he chose not appear in the yearbooks. He did take a class from Utah artist LeConte Stewart as a senior.

He spent his junior year near El Cajon, Calif., where his family had a ranch and where he became acquainted with children of Mexican workers and learned colloquial Spanish.

After graduation he went to San Diego to study at the School of Fine Arts, but he became dissatisfied there and left to set up a studio with a Mexican friend, Miguel Foncecerra. Through Foncecerra, Higgins became aware of the work of Diego Rivera, who had recently returned to Mexico from Europe and was painting murals. When Higgins wrote to Rivera, the Mexican artist invited him to come "learn of the artistic movement that has begun" in Mexico.

Higgins accepted that invitation and arrived in Mexico City in 1924. The 20-year-old became an assistant to Rivera, who was working on murals at the Secretariat of Public Education and at the National Agricultural University at Chapingo.

He worked with Rivera for several years, and along the way, he changed his name to Pablo Esteban O'Higgins, and he joined the Mexican Communist Party.

Eventually, O'Higgins once again set up his own shop, founding an anti-fascist printmaking workshop called "Taller de Grafica Popular" with Leopold Mendez, designed to enable widespread distribution of politically inspired images to often-illiterate audiences.

O'Higgins spent the rest of his life in Mexico, becoming an official citizen of the country in 1961. He was the only non-native Mexican whose work was included in the New York Museum of Modern Art's 1940 exhibition "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art." His work was exhibited to wide acclaim in Mexico and also in the United States and Europe.

If you go to Mexico today, Poulton says, "you very well could see murals and posters of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Diego Rivera and Pablo O'Higgins. He still is one of the heroes there."

In books and documentaries that have been written and produced in Mexico, "not one word has been written about his life in Utah," Poulton says. But the first book in English, "Becoming Pablo O'Higgins," has now been written by Utahn Susan Vogel. "Susan was very helpful in putting this exhibition together," Poulton says. "We also got a lot of help from Phyllis Vetter, an attorney on campus, who has been in contact with Maria, Pablo's wife, who still lives in Mexico."

There was a brief exhibit of O'Higgins' work held at the University of Utah in 1990, Poulton says, but there have been very few shows anywhere in the United States. "His work, however, is still very popular and sells very well."

O'Higgins did come back to the U.S. briefly during World War II. "But he never came back to Utah," Poulton says, "and never talked about his bourgeois childhood. In fact, he sometimes told people his parents were migrant workers in California." After Stalin, he became less committed to the Communist party, "but he retained his socialist interests and was always devoted to the people."

That is what you see in these lithographs, she says. "You see a sustained commitment to Mexico's working class and their struggle for emancipation. It's really a fascinating story."

e-mail: carma@desnews.com

© 2010 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved