

Book Review, 15 Bytes

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Becoming Pablo O'Higgins

New book and UMFA exhibit shed light on one of Utah's lesser known artistic sons by Ehren Clark

Becoming Pablo O'Higgins is a study of character that questions identity, integrity, authenticity and ultimately loyalty. This newly released biography by Susan Vogel, published to accompany the exhibit of O'Higgins work now at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, gives us a compelling portrayal of Paul Higgins, a young Presbyterian bourgeois from Salt Lake City who would be known to history and legend as Pablo O'Higgins, a communist artist in post-revolutionary Mexico. In this groundbreaking portrayal of one of Utah's least known artistic sons unanswered questions remain, but the life of a legend often leaves a wake of mystery.

Considering that Pablo O'Higgins did little to help future historians give a substantial story of his early life, Vogel does an admirable job of separating much of the fact from fiction in her archival research of the young Higgins. He is introduced to the reader only after a substantial back story is laid out, including a history of Mormons and miners, Higgins' ancestry, his stern father Edward, an influential judge, and his sympathetic mother Alice, who gave birth to Paul in 1904. The elaborate history proves important to shed light on the push and pull of much of the artist's long-term conflicts. The details of his formative years, spent between Salt Lake and San Diego, are stitched together, although much remains uncertain. He is said to have attended two years of high school in Salt Lake City's East High and to have studied art for a brief time under LeConte Stewart. Any formal art training he might received in San Diego, where the family eventually moved, is unknown. According to Vogel, Higgins' mother suggested in 1924 that he journey to Mexico City and offer his assistance to the famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. Higgins' reluctant father drove him from San Diego to the border, where, with 100 dollars in his pocket, Higgins began his life in Mexico.

From this point the artist's history is well documented. Vogel introduces the reader to the golden age of Post-revolutionary Mexico, a complex and dynamic environment of culture and political polemics that would form the backdrop to the remainder of Higgins life. Higgins quickly assimilated to life in Mexico, changing his first name to Pablo and adding the O' to his surname to become Pablo O'Higgins. The tall, blue-eyed, blond-haired boy was giving himself a working class name, with the intention to align himself with the PMC, the Communist Mexican Party. With the new name he also took on a new identity. Once across the border he embellished some of his past – he claimed to have been born in San Francisco and to have worked as an offshore man -- while completely hiding the rest: the PMC would not look favorably on his bourgeois upbringing in the family of the judge who upheld the ruling in the infamous murder trial of Joe Hill, martyr

to the proletariat.

The first thirty-five years of Pablo's life in Mexico are explored in great detail. He does meet and work with Diego Rivera, and allies himself with the Mexican workers, newly energized by the successful revolution and armed with a new constitution. O'Higgins considered his vocation as a muralist no different than the work of any laborer and spent his time painting the peasant, the capitalist antagonist, and revolutionary Mexican themes as well as Soviet ones. Vogel does a laudable job of spinning out the story of these complicated thirty-five years of Pablo O'Higgins' life, weaving analysis of the effects of world events like the Great Depression, World War II, and the frenzy of McCarthyism, with characterizations of many of the artist's enduring relationships and his development as an artist.

One of O'Higgins' most remembered accomplishments is co-founding the People's Graphic Workshop, the TGP, a propaganda-motivated print works still in operation. His works from the period, like "Cardenas Informing the People," 1938, or "Rights of the Working Class," 1940, on display at the UMFA, are great examples of propaganda printmaking, not too different from that of the German prints that emerged after WWI.

In Vogel's account Pablo O'Higgins lived life on a large scale. Lacking some of the skills that come from substantial training, he did not ascend to the heights of success many of his contemporaries achieved, but his work successfully expressed his commitment, as an artist, activist and humanist, to the working class. O'Higgins, it is said, cared less about the human form and more about the human being.

In 1959 O'Higgins married María de Jesús de la Fuente, a decision that caused a sudden change in his life, and Vogel's account leaves the reader wondering if they have understood the subject at all. The author glides through these last twenty-four years. In contrast to his committed communist past, from the marriage until his death in 1983, O'Higgins lived in bourgeois opulence, isolated in his studio when not helping his wife entertain the upper-crust of Mexico City. María is portrayed as a controlling and manipulating spouse who was better at playing the part of agent than loving wife. The art produced during this period reflects the changes in the artist's lifestyle: his aggressive depictions of social realism shift to romanticized visions of the ideals of Mexico in works like "Family Working in the Fields," 1973, and "Vendador de Flores."

The vague account of O'Higgins' life in this twenty-four year period is insufficient for the reader to formulate a solid conclusion. Vogel's own conclusion that O'Higgins died a "painter of the people," conflicts with the opinions expressed by some of her interviewees. Despite the questions and inconsistencies that shroud O'Higgins' later life, Vogel has done an admirable job of establishing a compelling portrait of an artist who though a national treasure in his adopted home south of the border was, until now, a complete unknown in his native state.

Becoming Pablo O'Higgins is available locally at [Ken Sanders Rare Books](#), [The King's English Book Shop](#) and [Williams Fine Art](#), and online at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Pablo O'Higgins: Works on Paper is on view at the [Utah Museum of Fine Arts](#) through September 19.