



BECOMING PABLO O'HIGGINS

By Susan Vogel

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Becoming Pablo O'Higgins tells the intriguing story of how a blond-haired, blue-eyed Presbyterian from Salt Lake City, Utah, became a celebrated Mexican muralist. Born Paul Higgins in 1904 into a conservative Republican family of Mayflower English and Protestant Scots-Irish ancestry, O'Higgins, at age 20, boldly traveled to Mexico City at a time when Mexico was still reeling from its violent 10-year revolution. He went to see the mural renaissance involving Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and he soon became an assistant to Diego Rivera. O'Higgins worked with Rivera on three of his most important murals and became a life-long friend. Rivera said if he ever had a son, he'd want him to be like O'Higgins.

As a muralist and political graphic artist spreading the ideals of the Mexican Revolution to the masses, O'Higgins was drawn into Mexico's volatile politics. He went into hiding when the Communist Party was made illegal in Mexico as well as after an assassination attempt on Leon Trotsky. He followed to Russia one of the most beautiful and controversial women of the 1920s, photographer, radical, and fugitive Tina Modotti. O'Higgins landed on the U.S. attorney general's blacklist and on a deportation list of the Mexican government during the 1950s. As an Anglo-American from a well-to-do family, he kept a secret his entire life: his father's involvement as an assistant attorney general in the 1915 execution in Utah of miner and labor martyr Joe Hill.

Despite his distancing himself from his boyhood and family in Utah, O'Higgins was influenced by the art education he received there. At East High School he studied with renowned regionalists James T. Harwood and LeConte Stewart, whose influence can be seen in the subject matter of O'Higgins's later art, his technique, and his approach to being an artist. He was also influenced by time he spent as a child in El Cajon, San Diego County, where his father had a ranch. There, as a young child, he first met Mexican farmworkers and fell in love with the Spanish language and Mexican culture. He returned to San Diego after high school to briefly attend art school.

Besides being a highly respected muralist in Mexico, where he painted more than a dozen murals, O'Higgins is well-known for co-founding the world-famous political graphic arts workshop, Mexico City's Taller de Gráfica Popular, which he formed with Leopoldo Méndez in 1937 to produce art denouncing fascism.

O'Higgins lived in Mexico for all of his adult life, but maintained his U.S. citizenship until 1961, enabling him to work in both the U.S. and Mexico. He developed strong ties to labor on the West Coast during the 1940s: he painted murals for the Ship Scalers Union in Seattle in 1945 and for the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) in Honolulu in 1952. O'Higgins helped Bay Area artists Byron Randall, Victor Arnautoff, and Adelyne Cross Erikson establish a graphic arts workshop in San Francisco in 1947, and he taught at the California Labor School in San Francisco in 1945 and 1949. O'Higgins often said he was born or grew up in San Francisco, likely to distance himself from his family and the Joe Hill case. O'Higgins spent considerable time in Los Angeles as well, where his mother lived in her later years, and, along with Jules Heller and Arnold Mesches, he helped establish the Los Angeles Graphic Arts Workshop in 1947.

When O'Higgins died in 1983, the Mexican government gave him a state funeral in its famed Palacio de Bellas Artes. During his life, and to this day, O'Higgins is an inspiration for artists seeking to create socially-conscious, community-based art. His portrait is included in a mural in Chicano Park, in San Diego County, the largest collection of Chicano murals in the U.S. He appears next to Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso, Emiliano Zapata, Che Guevara, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. O'Higgins is admired not only for his art but also for his love of Mexico and his determination to bridge the two countries and their cultures through art.

While many books have been published in Spanish praising O'Higgins's art and his love of Mexico, no biographies exist in English. *Becoming Pablo O'Higgins* is the first such book in English and the first critical look at his life published in any language.

AUTHOR

Author Susan Vogel, a graduate of San Francisco State University and Hastings College of the Law, is a freelance writer and journalist. Her writing has appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *SF Weekly*, *Silicon Valley Magazine*, *Santa Clara Magazine*, *Voices of Mexico*, *Continuum*, and other local, national and international publications. In 1977, she studied at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, in Mexico City. Her research on Pablo O'Higgins was funded in part by a grant from the Utah Humanities Council.

FROM BECOMING PABLO O'HIGGINS

“That a blue-eyed blond-haired young man who grew up in an affluent, conservative Republican family in Utah could become a Mexican artist—and be presented by a La Raza group as a Chicano—was an amazing and paradoxical feat requiring some adjustment of his life and family history.”

“In a way, Pablo took on an almost impossible challenge. The Mexican identity that the Mexican revolution and the revolutionary artists helped create was, to varying degrees, inherently anti-American. Thus, ironically, Pablo’s role in perpetuating the leftist ‘revolutionary’ movement was somewhat self-defeating.”

“[During the late 1940s] Pablo truly was in his element. Having U.S. citizenship and having avoided problems with the Mexican government, Pablo could come and go in and out of the United States as he pleased, acting as an art ambassador between the two countries and using his connections, his political beliefs, his generosity, and his likable personality to bring people together. Pablo’s travel perhaps reflects an idealism that the arbitrariness of borders might someday disappear. He was multicultural, multilingual, a citizen of the world—an advanced idea at the time.”

“For Pablo, an American who had been in Mexico for only four years, to be chosen to teach Mexican revolutionary principles to the very people for whom the anti-imperialist, anti-American revolution was fought, was a great honor. In the early days of the missions, the teachers had to be people who ‘knew or would learn the Indian language of the area where they were working.’ The most successful teachers were ‘men of campesino origin with little formal education who were technically competent and adapted to the conditions of rural life . . . [and who] demonstrated rather than taught’—a pedagogy that Pablo believed in.”

“Most accounts of Pablo’s life list Chapingo as the last mural project on which Pablo assisted Rivera. But records of Joseph Freeman indicate that Pablo and Louis Bunin were both assistants to Rivera in the early stages of the National Palace murals.”

“On September 9, 1952, the governor of the Territory of Hawai‘i, Oren E. Long, wrote a letter to Mr. Willis H. Young, acting chief of the State Department Passport Division, assuring him that if Mr. Paul Stevenson Higgins applied for a passport, such application would be referred ‘directly to the [State] Department in Washington.’”

“In Mexico, Pablo stands as an example not only to artists but to immigrants wishing to become Mexican citizens. In 2005, President Vicente Fox told a group of people becoming naturalized Mexican citizens to ‘Love Mexico always as before you Pablo O’Higgins and Luis Buñuel loved it with tenderness and passion.’”

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

“Exhaustively researched, *Becoming Pablo O’Higgins* examines the complex personality of Pablo O’Higgins and his participation in the vibrant and often volatile twentieth century political art movement in Mexico. Vogel traces O’Higgins’s life as an American artist at the center of Mexican politics—an ideal time and setting to serve the leftist ideals in which he believed and to escape a personal past that he held in contempt. Unraveling O’Higgins’s true identity, this fascinating narrative weaves together some of the most powerful personalities in international politics and art.

—Donna L. Poulton, Ph.D., Curator, “Pablo O’Higgins: Works on Paper,” Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 2010; co-author, *Painters of Utah’s Canyons and Deserts*; co-author, *Utah Art, Utah Artists: 150 Years Survey*; and co-author, *Painters of Utah’s Mountain and Basin Regions*

“A masterful job. This is an ambitious piece of writing, well researched and well done. The research alone is exhaustive and I’ve no doubt that this book will be a major contribution to the field.”

—Diana Anhalt, author of *A Gathering of Fugitives: American Political Expatriates in Mexico 1948-1965*

“*Becoming Pablo O’Higgins* unveils with outstanding skill the real person and the artist behind the legend. With this masterful work, which involved very serious research and a deep understanding of the cultural and political environment that prevailed on both sides of the border in the times of Pablo O’Higgins, Susan Vogel has also made a very important contribution for a better understanding between the U.S. and Mexico.”

—Salvador Jiménez, former Mexican Consul to Utah

“A fine piece of work with an engrossing narrative.”

—John Charlot, Vice President, Jean Charlot Foundation, University of Hawai‘i

ORDERING BECOMING PABLO O'HIGGINS

Press: Call for copy - 415-218-0010, 801-707-7795 or email pincenezpress@gmail.com

Readers: *Becoming Pablo O'Higgins* may be ordered from the publisher at www.pince-nez.com. Orders will be shipped April 15, 2010.

Bookstores and libraries: *Becoming Pablo O'Higgins* will be available from the publisher on April 15, 2010, and from Ingram, Partners West, LS, and Baker & Taylor, by May 1.

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