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## Utah Museum of Fine Arts: Utah-born artist, with Mexican heart

New book and exhibition explore Mexico's best-known Utah artist.

By Ben Fulton  
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He was born Paul Higgins in 1904 Salt Lake City to a prosperous Presbyterian family that traced its roots all the way back to Mayflower English and Scots-Irish ancestry.

Known as Pablo O'Higgins when he died in 1983 in Mexico City, he was given a state funeral. Renowned as a true friend of Mexico's poor, he was a muralist with communist political affiliations like his artistic colleague Diego Rivera. In fact, he had served as an assistant to the great Mexican muralist, who once said that if he had a son, he'd want him to be like Pablo.

How did this blond boy from Utah transport his outsized artistic and political ambitions from here to there?

"That's the question I've been exploring for 20 years," said Susan Vogel, a Salt Lake City attorney who's just completed *Becoming Pablo O'Higgins*, the first-ever critical biography of the Utah artist turned south-of-the-border muralist.

"I talked to many Latino and Chicano artists who said O'Higgins was considered a hero and inspiration -- right up there with Diego Rivera, Pablo Picasso, Che Guevara and Juan Diego," Vogel said. "Then I came back to Utah, where no one had heard of him."

Vogel studied Mexican art and anthropology at the National University of Mexico in the late 1970s, and then in the mid-1980s she learned about the Utah-born artist who had come to prominence in Mexico. In 1990, she secured a grant from the Utah Humanities Council to research and write a book about the Utah native, who left Salt Lake City at age 20 to take up a new home in Mexico.

The portrait that emerges, said Vogel, is that of a good-hearted but slightly naive young man who strove to escape his upper-class roots in the United States. Instead, he plunged headfirst into the heady political and artistic environment of the 1920s Mexican art scene, in a country still working out its national identity.

Even as he joined Mexico's communist party and took up his paintbrush to portray the nobility and suffering of common people, the irony wasn't lost on O'Higgins. As a result, he forged his own identity in a de facto dual citizenship of good will between two countries often on rocky terms with one another.

If that kind of cross-border identity seemed odd back then, Vogel points out, it's more commonplace now. His artistic legacy with Mexico's *Taller de Gráfica Popular*, or People's Graphic Art Workshop, is where O'Higgins' work is remembered.

"In his letters, he refers to himself as a Mexican, but then he refers to the United States as 'our country,'" Vogel said. "Most young Latinos today don't see that as contradictory today. Pablo was a pioneer in this idea, he was a citizen of this country, but desperately wanted to be seen as Mexican."

Although he maintained his U.S. citizenship up until 1961, the artist traveled back and forth between the two countries even during the McCarthy era, Vogel said. Although a passionate communist, he became disenchanted with the movement after the 1939 Soviet-Nazi nonaggression pact and the assassination of Russian revolutionary

Leon Trotsky.

Certain elements of his Salt Lake City upbringing he attempted to avoid at all costs, even going so far as to maintain he grew up in California. In fact, it was playing with the children of Mexican farmhands on his family's ranch near San Diego that first enamored him of Latino culture at age 5, Vogel said.

Years later, his father's role in prosecuting and upholding the execution of famed Utah labor activist Joe Hill would prove a source of shame he didn't dare to reveal. His communist credentials depended on it.

A graduate of East High School who pared his senior-year classes down to courses in Spanish and painting, O'Higgins inherited another Utah legacy he found even harder to shake. Before high-tailing it to Mexico, he studied with famed Utah painter LeConte Stewart.

"I think [O'Higgins] probably balked at most formal art training," said Donna Poulton, curator of Western art at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts. "But under Stewart, he learned more of what he wanted to do."

While not quite on technical par with famed Utah artists Cyrus Dallin and Mahonri Young, Poulton said no other artist with Utah roots yet surpasses O'Higgins in terms of international renown.

"He was in such a special place during such a special time," she said. "But he had to go quite a ways away to achieve that kind of fame."

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*Becoming Pablo O'Higgins*

The launch of the first critical biography (in English or Spanish) of Utah artist turned Mexican muralist Pablo O'Higgins.

When » April 16, 5-9 p.m. Author Susan Vogel will speak at 6:30 p.m. about her book with Donna Poulton of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, who will speak about the influence of Utah artists on O'Higgins.

Where » Williams Fine Art, 200 E. South Temple, Salt Lake City

Info » Free. Call 801-534-0331 for information, or visit [www.pince-nez.com](http://www.pince-nez.com).

**"Pablo O'Higgins: Works on Paper" at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts**

When » Through Sept. 19. Gallery hours are Tuesday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Wednesday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Thursday and Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; closed Monday.

Where » Marcia and John Price Museum Building, 410 Campus Center Drive, University of Utah campus, Salt Lake City

Info » \$7 for adults, \$5 for youth and seniors, free to U. students, faculty and staff. Call 801-581-7332 for information, or visit [www.umfa.utah.edu](http://www.umfa.utah.edu).