



# SHADOWS ON A WALL

Juan O'Gorman

and the Mural

in Pátzcuaro

Hilary Masters

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A John D. S. and Aida C. Truxall Book

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Juan O’Gorman and  
the Mural in Pátzcuaro

HILARY MASTERS

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Frontispiece: Juan O’Gorman, *Historia de Michoacán*, 1941–1942. Fresco, 14 x 12 m. *Courtesy Biblioteca Gertrudis Bocanegra, Pátzcuaro, Mexico.* The mural illustrates the epic history of the village of Tarasco. It begins with the Purepecha tradition of the creation of the world, depicts the brutal shock and social consequences of the European conquest of Mexico, and ends with the period of Mexican independence, including revolutionary events. O’Gorman portrays many of the figures with mocking or tragic intention. In some places, the artist has inserted written political commentary.

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**FOR WAYNE DODD**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Here I want to acknowledge and thank all the different sources that have contributed to this account, and to credit those agencies that have supported this effort. This endeavor has taken almost three years to assemble, often fitting one piece at a time into the overall picture as a pebble of particular hue might find its right place in a mosaic.

Printed sources naturally attracted me first and of these records the most important were the autobiographical notes of Juan O’Gorman himself as collected and edited by Antonio Luna Arroyo, which I discovered on the Internet. Next, the files of the Pennsylvania History Division of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh—the staff always helpful and patient with my peripatetic research—turned up a copy of the *Pittsburgh Bulletin Index*, September 26, 1940, edited by Robert C. Alberts, which reported the O’Gorman’s arrest in East Pittsburgh and the chase was on. Essential to my understanding of the historical events and personages O’Gorman illustrated in his magnificent mural in the Gertrudis Bocanegra Library of Pátzcuaro is the description of the mural’s details published by Juan E. Becerril, the library’s director. This work was located through the Interlibrary Loan Section of the Hunt Library of Carnegie Mellon University, for which I am very grateful.

Of great importance also was the magnificent tome *O’Gorman*, edited by Sandro Landucci and published by Américo Arte Editores: Grupo Financiero BITAL, to whom I am grateful for the use of the illustrations in this essay. Franklin Toker, the noted architectural scholar, provided valuable information about the buildings and sites of Pittsburgh, 1940, in his two books, *Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait* and *Fallingwater Rising: Frank Lloyd Wright, E. J. Kaufmann, and America’s Most Extraordinary House*; and *Bloom’s Street Guide* helped me travel through that earlier city on its different streetcar routes. Stefan Lorant’s *Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City* provided colorful insights.

Archives are essential to an inquiry like this one, and two collections in the city of Pittsburgh were particularly useful. The Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center provided me with extraordinary material about the Kaufmanns, even down to the kind of sandals they wore. Archivists Robert Stakeley and Susan Melnick, she director of the Rauh Jewish Archives, were unfailingly helpful, and their colleagues and staff at the center—especially librarian Kerin Shellenbarger—were always a source of interest and enthusiasm that inspired me.

Then, Louise Lipincott, curator of the Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Museum of Art, generously led me to material on John White Alexander and the history of his murals. In the course of this particular review, I came across the pitiful figure of John Kane seeking employment from the wealthy and more established Alexander only to be turned away. It was through the good offices of Tom Rimer that I met Ms. Lipincott.

Of smaller contribution but no less important were fragments of information from the Avery Library of Columbia University, the Victoria and Albert Museum of London, the

Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, the Jewish Community Center of Pittsburgh (Leslie Hartman, curator) and the FBI for the reports of E. J. Kaufmann jr.'s supposed interest in left-wing politics and personalities such as Paul Robeson. And finally, I wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of my friend and colleague Lynn Berard, Head of the Science Libraries of Carnegie Mellon University who put me in touch with Rosa Maria Fernandez, Coordinadora of the Biblioteca Nacional, Mexico. Dr. Fernandez and her staff generously directed me toward sources and personalities in Mexico that were germane to my story. Equally important was the assistance given me by Rafael C. Arvea, Investigador, Instituto de Belles Artes, who introduced me to other important sources.

It was at this point that my research met with the need to create characters who had acted and reacted some sixty-five years ago but who had long passed from the scene. Few of their contemporaries were available for interviews as well. So, at this point my research began to resemble a detective novel, connecting points and personae that seemed to have no linkage but when placed within the overall pattern, struck a correspondence that often illuminated a dark corner or even led me into another room.

Thanks to a grant from the English department of Carnegie Mellon I was able to travel to Mexico and interview people who, as children, knew Juan and Helen O'Gorman. My good friends Hector Leonardí and Karl Mann put me in touch with the painter Carmen Parra and her sister Luisa Riley who ran Casa Riley, probably one of the more elegant bed and breakfast inns ever to welcome a guest. This inn was located a few blocks from Rivera's and Kahlo's red and blue studio homes in the San Angel suburb of Mexico City that O'Gorman had designed and built for them. Growing up, both women knew the O'Gormans and gave

me their remembrances of O’Gorman’s exuberant spirit, Helen’s personality, and other details that were invaluable.

Carmen Parra served me the delicious *chile en nogada* and also gained me an interview with the sculptor Angela Gurria. Luisa Riley introduced me to Patricia Bubela O’Gorman, the artist’s niece, and to Ana Maria Cetto Kramis whose father, the architect Max Cetto, was O’Gorman’s best friend.

Patricia O’Gorman described her uncle’s manner and his sense of humor in some detail, including his joke about diarrhea. I have assumed the artist’s tendency to elaborate a joke by stretching this anecdote a little at the Kaufmanns’ dinner table. Señora Bubela O’Gorman also commented on Helen’s character and added some comments on O’Gorman’s attitude toward women. She vehemently disavowed his “donkey meat” story, putting it to his fanciful imagination. I have transcribed her skepticism into Helen’s attitude.

Ana Maria Cetto Kramis described O’Gorman’s preference for sherry and pumpkin pie and talked at length and sympathetically of Helen O’Gorman and her sense of estrangement in her husband’s circle. Her remembrance of the Pedregal House and the effect of its destruction on O’Gorman was also an important contribution.

Angela Gurria, the sculptor, was a student of O’Gorman’s many years ago. She generously received me in her walled house in the Coyoacan quarter and led me through two of its drawing rooms with paintings and art objects from floor to ceiling. One of the paintings is of her as a young woman done by O’Gorman. She described his charm and finesse, his vibrant personality, and his *savoir-faire* in the tango. She spoke frankly of his effect on women and of a cross-Atlantic affair he had with a woman in France. She described his later depres-

sion and his last days. At the end of our interview, she served me a shot of the tastiest tequila I have ever drunk.

So much for the groom's side of this observance. What about Helen O'Gorman? I knew of her two daughters, one born of her first marriage and the second adopted with O'Gorman. Where were they and how could I locate them? They might not have been witnesses to the 1940 episode in Pittsburgh that is my subject, but they might have insights into Juan and Helen.

At this junction, Luísa Riley again furnished me another lead by giving me the name and address of Susan Drucker-Brown, whose parents lived in Mexico and who were close friends of Señora Riley's father. They were all part of the colony in and around San Angel that sometimes socialized with the O'Gormans. Susan Drucker-Brown is a social anthropologist educated in Cambridge and Mexico and now living in England who, during our e-mail exchanges, recalled times with the O'Gormans in Mexico with particular insights into Helen's personality and firsthand accounts of festivals and other occasions shared. The fact of the O'Gormans' divorce, remarriage, and then a final divorce is her contribution also. She remembered the sound of O'Gorman's tenor voice and his slightly accented English. In turn, she put me on to Jean Butler of Santa Monica, California.

Jean Butler and her husband, Hugo, were a successful team of screenwriters with many films to their credit in the 1940s and early 1950s. During the hysteria of the "blacklisting" in the latter decade, she and her husband and children exiled themselves to Mexico and eventually rented the O'Gormans' glass house on Palmas 81 in San Angel, around the corner from the Rivera-Kahlo studios. The account of this episode in her book *Refugees from*

*Hollywood* is a vivid review of that period's madness for the contemporary reader and especially the very human drama of one family rising to meet the challenges of that peculiar American-bred oppression.

Jean Butler provided me with detailed remembrances of the O'Gormans—her landlords—which were helpful to my building their characters though their acquaintanceship took place ten years after the Kaufmann incident in Pittsburgh. She wrote me of Helen's "blunt, outspoken and, at times, forbidding" manner but also her basic generosity. She offered to loan the American couple money in some of their hard times. Her description of Juan was the same one that had become familiar to me: charming, always obliging and courteous, but with a wild sense of humor. And then in one of her letters and almost as an afterthought, she gave me the addresses and phone numbers of both daughters.

Lori Ellis is the daughter of Helen O'Gorman from her first marriage and lives in Los Angeles. Her recall of the artist was similar to that of others, but most interesting was her visit to Pittsburgh in the summer of 1940 when the O'Gormans were living in the small apartment on South Aiken Street. She was about twelve years old and remembers going to Fallingwater and even sent me a picture of herself poised on the diving board of the Kaufmanns' swimming pool. In later years, her mother spoke to her of the anguish caused by O'Gorman's womanizing while, simultaneously, she performed the tasks of a dutiful wife—even an acolyte.

María Carstensen of San Antonio, Texas, is "Bunny," the child adopted by Helen O'Gorman much after the Kaufmann episode. Her knowledge of my subject was consequently very limited but she did remember her mother describing the young O'Gormans in Pittsburgh as being "very much in love."

My Pittsburgh sources, in addition to the archives and museums already noted, are dominated by the several conversations I had with James and Ruth Bachman, who were very generous with their time and memories. Mr. Bachman's grandmother was Bertha Kaufmann, who married Max Blum and who became, through the various genealogical couplings sometimes arranged to assure the family's control of the department store, the aunt of Liliane Kaufmann. Growing up, Mr. Bachman was in and out of Edgar Kaufmann's house in Fox Chapel, his family's house near by, and he was a younger contemporary of E. J. Kaufmann, jr. He shared with me intimate details of the Kaufmann household, such as the family's favorite food and drink and memories of the family's cook and chauffeur. Their jaunts to The Hangover, the summer camp that preceded Fallingwater, were remembered along with vivid impressions of all three Kaufmanns—their voices and mannerisms and tastes. Family gossip was not excluded and the Bachmans passed on anecdotes of E. J.'s flings in Atlantic City together with Liliane's different retrievals of him. The rumor of her own affair was also related.

John Wolf, a nephew of E. J. Kaufmann's, worked in the store as a young man and was able to recall Liliane's liking for margaritas as well as E. J. Kaufmann's annual pep talks to the store employees on the subject of white and yellow fat. He supplied details of Liliane's showers under the falls of Fallingwater as well as a description of E. J. Kaufmann's walking stick.

The obituary that attended Paul Chew's recent death described him as an "art historian and bon vivant." He was for me also a most engaging and frank respondent to my questions about E. J. Kaufmann jr. As young men, they were colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, both as adjunct archivists, and they maintained an acquaintanceship through their later years in Pittsburgh. Mr. Chew furnished me details of junior's appearance, his

expertise as an art historian, and his sexual preferences. “If you’re gay,” Mr. Chew told me, “it helps to be good looking to find partners. Junior looked very odd, but he had money.”

I am indebted to my good friend, the poet Judith Vollmer, who directed me to Paul Chew.

In more ways than I can count, I enjoyed the support and interest of the English department and my colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University as I pursued these different informants and fit their fragments together. I must register my profound thanks to the Great River Arts Institute, which brought me to Pátzcuaro and the fabulous mural by Juan O’Gorman that started this whole inquiry. And once again, I recognize the empowering largesse of Yaddo where about a year ago I began to tape the pieces of this literary mural together on the huge mirror of my room in the mansion.

Above all, there is Kathleen George, whose love and faith have nourished me in all kinds of weather, and at every turning in the road, uphill or down—my soul’s companion.

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