
Ellen W. Bradbury

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VICTOR HIGGINS: A TRANSITIONAL ARTIST
1884-1949

By
Ellen W. Bradbury

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Art History

The University of New Mexico
1966
This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Committee of the University of New Mexico in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Thesis committee

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VICTOR HIGGINS: A TRANSITIONAL ARTIST
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ABSTRACT

For over half a century Taos has exerted a strong attraction on artists who sought picturesque subject matter and were concerned with the romantic concept of "the West." The appeal of the Indian pueblo and Spanish settlement was particularly strong for artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, men who were searching for new subject matter, particularly that which was peculiar to the West. In this thesis the development of Taos into an art colony whose members were specialists in Indian and landscape painting is considered with respect to its effect on Victor Higgins, an artist from the Midwest who settled in Taos.

Higgins, who came from a rural Ohio River Valley background, studied art in Chicago and Europe. His initial style of painting was developed in Munich where the brauvra brush stroke was used to evoke an Old Masters look. When he arrived in Taos in 1914 he painted in a manner then popular but already dated from an art historical standpoint. The extremely romantic atmosphere of Taos and its isolation did not encourage artists to confront the harsher newer trends of contemporary art. But Higgins was not blind to the changes. His work
already somewhat changed by the strong light and bare land around Taos, took on even more geometric aspects. His rendering of the landscape became more structural; his color sense, always fine, was gradually heightened.

Higgins attempted to incorporate some of the innovations of the twentieth century into his traditional academic style. The addition of cubist elements constituted a superficial but nevertheless effective framework for his art. He investigated Dynamic Symmetry for its intellectual discipline and was able, through its approach, to simplify and strengthen his work.

Although he never seemed truly to comprehend the philosophic basis of such movements as cubism, in the last twenty years of his life he produced paintings which incorporated in a personal style elements that were both traditional and modern.
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There can be no oases in the desert of ever-shifting time, no idyllic glades of primitive culture in the forest of mankind, no ivory towers of thought. We are all caught in the tide of perpetual change.

.....Frank Waters, *The Man Who Killed the Deer*
INTRODUCTION

Before examining the development of the painter Victor Higgins it is instructive to trace the history of a few of the subjects common in American paintings.

One of the most common subjects for artistic endeavor in the United States was the countryside. American painting had established a strong landscape tradition by the 1850's; a tradition which was reinforced by the people's general identification of God with Nature. The landscape was something the United States had in abundance. The wilderness was unique and pervasive. Painters like Asher Durand were already painting out-of-doors, sitting at Nature's feet, before the Barbizon made the practice famous. The Hudson River School and the painters of the Western mountains, all testified to the vastness and glory of the American landscape.

Another subject which was popular with the country's early artists was the exotic, pagan Indian. The Indian, like the landscape, was indisputably American. Collectors who bought canvases depicting these native subjects felt they were performing a patriotic duty by supporting a type of painting that was unique and indigenous to America. They preferred the
Indian native instead of following the European practice of using the Arabian or peasant in their paintings.

George Catlin (1796-1872), the foremost Indian painter of his day, remarked: "Artists of the future may look in vain for another race so picturesque."¹ Catlin knew his subject well, for he actually lived with them; but there were few painters after Catlin who actually participated in the Indian world. As the nineteenth century went on, the Indian's world was growing smaller and the Indians harder to know. In the 1880's George de Forest Brush, Frederick Remington, and Charles Russell painted the Indians and lived with them in their camps; but the Indian power and freedom was already damaged by the Western expansion.

By the turn of the century the Indians were as remote and unreal to most Americans as the Arabians. Many painters who painted them tended toward exoticism. They capitalized on the sentimental evocations and semi-nudity of the Noble Savage. There were few places in the United States where Indians still lived in large numbers on their ancient tribal lands. New Mexico however had a number of agricultural pueblos which were relatively untouched, probably because the land was dry and the Indians, not being nomads, did not take up much space.

By 1900 even the wild frontiersman's world had been pushed aside by the advance of civilization. As the cities grew there were many citizens to whom the new intellectual fashions seemed false, who longed for the simplicity of country life. Many of the people who felt that way were the products of a rural childhood whose love for Nature was sincere. Others were defecters from the twentieth century, who made what T.M. Pearce called "the pathetic attempt to keep scientific and rational thought from robbing the world of its enchantment." Still a third group was more visually oriented, the artists were imbued with the American tradition of landscape painting; but there were few landscapes left to paint.

As the open lands receded and culture advanced young American artists went to Europe in increasing numbers for their artistic training. They returned with the years of Paris, Düsseldorf or Munich schooling behind them, painting in dark colors and using atmospheric effects which were not native to the clear air and wild lands of the United States. They had learned to depend on subject matter for stimulus, but the tractor had replaced the plow and nothing in this country had the correct aspect of romantic decay.

It was the search for material, for new stimulus, which

2. Thomas M. Pearce, Mary Austin (New York: Twayne Publisher, 1965), p. 158.
led Joseph Sharp to Taos in 1883. Taos was a small community nestled at the foot of the Taos Mountains. San Fernando de Taos, a small Spanish-American settlement, lay a few miles away from the Indian pueblo. Visually Taos Pueblo was one of the most interesting of the New Mexican Indian pueblos, the houses were piled up on top of each other into shapes which resembled the mountains behind them. The light was strong and bright and the land, capped by the high mountains, dramatic. In this one location were combined Indians and spectacular scenery. It is easy to see how the spot offered stimulating material to the artist.

Other artists, Ernest Blumenschein and Bert Phillips, heard of Taos from Sharp. They drove in over a wagon trail in 1898 and were satisfied that they had found a place where they could really paint, where the living was cheap and colorful subjects bountiful. Soon a handful of artists and adventurers had settled in.

The motive of recording a life or scene soon to disappear did not really apply to the Taos painters, all of whom arrived in Taos after the perfection of the camera. Although they filled their studios with 'objets de verti' and some of them, (especially Joseph Sharp and Joseph Imhof) did pictures worthy of anthropological attention, for most painters simply recording the romantic aspects of the Indian was enough.
Many of these early painters in Taos were artist-illustrators who needed the stimulating scene Taos presented. They were dependent on their material and their draftsmanship, not on any inner vision. They were not, generally speaking, philosophically committed to the Indian as Mable Dodge was to become. They saw the Indian as an interesting enigmatic child of Nature. They wanted both the exoticism and the native American subject matter he offered. As Van Deren Coke says: "They sought to enlist the spectator as a participant in a world that was part Hiawatha and part Zane Grey."³

There are some similarities between the Taos Colony and the earlier Barbizon community in France. Both were formed to allow the painters a more simple life in a small community; both tended to glorify local farm people; both were influenced directly or indirectly by the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau and his philosophic glorification of rustic, simple life. The renunciation of some of the comforts of civilization was to many of these people part of the game—how long could they stand it? Although there can be no doubt of their basic sincerity and love for their chosen refuge, they differed from the Indians or French peasants in that they always held the option of getting

out of the muddy streets and back to the city.

Taos, as Helen Blumenschein describes it at the turn of the century, had its physical drawbacks:

Roads were primitive, the road from Taos to Santa Fe was not oiled until 1936. Communications were limited to a single telephone between Taos Junction, 25 miles to the west, and the local telegraph office. There was no electricity. The winters were hard and cold deep snow was followed by deep mud and leaky roofs were a way of life. There was a new language to learn, Spanish. But the physical hardships didn't discourage the artists who got down to work and produced paintings after painting, thrilled by the new landscapes and Indians available to them to paint a refreshing change after the hackneyed subject matter they had been taught in France and the Eastern United States. Another factor entered in, one which has brought and kept artists in Taos through the years. The environment of Taos has a definite effect on those who experience it. There is something in Taos that is creatively stimulating, in a way that defies definition, though many have tried. D. H. Lawrence called it "the peculiar 'otherness' of Taos", which perhaps comes as close as anything to describing it.4

It was difficult for the artists living so far from the East to get their pictures before a large audience. Although all of them had dealers in the East, the artists living in Taos formed a society, Los Ocho Pintores, with a membership of Bert G. Phillips, E. L. Blumenschein, Joseph H. Sharp, O. E. Berninghaus, E. Irving Couse, W. Herbert Dunton, E. Martin Henning, Catherine C. Critcher. In 1927, the same year the society dissolved itself, Victor Higgins was asked to join the group.

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4Newsletter of the Taos Historical Society, Helen Blumenschein, Taos, New Mexico, August, 1965.
Another group organized to send paintings East, which Higgins belonged to, the Taos Society of Artists, was composed of many of the same artists.\textsuperscript{5} Organized in 1912 it was also dissolved in 1927. A third society of artists which Higgins joined was the New Mexico Painters, organized in 1923. The "Ocho Pintores" group was somewhat unique in that it also sent displays to towns in the Mid-West so that they had an opportunity to see examples of creative fine art.\textsuperscript{6}

The artistic economy of Taos was also boosted by the Santa Fe Railroad which saw in the paintings of mountains and sagebrush a way of luring tourists westward over their tracks. The railroad used to give the artists free tickets, which Higgins and most of the artists used to travel East each winter.

In 1916, when there were about ten or twelve artists in Taos,\textsuperscript{7} Mable Ganson Dodge Sterne arrived. She had come West to be with her husband, the artist Maurice Sterne, who was in Santa Fe. Mable, however, did not like Santa Fe and decided

\textsuperscript{5}Six original members, Bert Phillips, E. L. Blumenschein, Oscar Berninghaus, W. Herbert Dunton, E. Irving Couse, J. H. Sharp; in 1915 Walter Ufer and Victor Higgins; E. Martin Hennings in 1921 and Kenneth Adams in 1926. Higgins was the last president in 1927.

\textsuperscript{6}Kenneth Adams, "Los Ocho Pintores," \textit{New Mexico Quarterly} (Summer, 1951), p.35.

\textsuperscript{7}There were six in 1914 who formed the Taos Society of Artists, and probably other people about town who painted less seriously.
to go up to Taos. Sterne made some depreciating remark about
the town. "Immediately I felt like defending Taos," Mable
recalls:

Taos was nice. I couldn't see it, but I could smell
it, and I loved it already. It was not love at first
sight, but it was love. Some other sense had already
accepted it, and I had fully decided to come back here
and stay. I felt at home.8

A wealthy woman, Mable Dodge was already well known as
a hostess and authoress in the East. She seemed to have a
free spirit which intuitively responded to the elemental, earthy
life of Taos. She set up an informal "salon" and soon gathered
about her friends from the East like Leo Stein and Elizabeth
Duncan, Isabella's sister. She worked actively to help the
Indians, was one of the first to collect old Santos; and stim-
ulated the community to one of its first collective actions,
an attempt to have her arrested as a German spy.9 She was
never quite able to reject all the social conventions she had
eschewed, and although once she had adopted Taos she never left,
she retained odd vestiges of civilization.10

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8 Mable Dodge Luhan, Intimate Memories, The Edge of the
Taos Desert.

9 Mable Dodge Luhan, Intimate Memories, The Edge of the
Taos Desert, pp. 125-132.

10 She had a few dogs which she had bought from her Spanish
or Indian neighbors. Despite the fact that she and Tony butch-
ered their own meat and must have had scraps, and the fact that
in their pasts these dogs had probably never eaten anything but
After settling in Taos Mable left Sterne and later married as her fourth husband, a Taos Indian, Tony Luhan.

Another arrival important to the town was that of Bert and Elizabeth Harwood, in 1917. They came because World War I was destroying the life and villages they loved in Europe. They felt they had found the quietness and charm of the Old World in the New Mexican village. Important to the art set, Mrs. Harwood was a wonderful cook, an endearing asset in those days of corner cafe cookery. The Harwoods, who had private means and were able to function to some extent as local Medici, took an interest in many of the young artists just coming to Taos.

Perhaps the third "salon" in town was that of Eleanor Kissel, an attractive and well-to-do woman from Moorstown, N. J. who was noted for her pleasant dinners. She was especially devoted to Victor Higgins, who served as chief raconteur at many of her parties. There were, of course, many other houses where food and conversation and evenings by the fire were arranged.

Frank Waters, in his book *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, which is set in Taos, gives a revealing glimpse of one of those old artist illustrators.

garbage; she insisted on having canned dog food sent up from Kaune's Grocery in Santa Fe each week. *Intimate Memories, On the Edge of the Taos Desert*, p. 251.
Benson (the artist) had come West as a young illustrator for the Santa Fe (Railroad.) The color, the raw newness of the life had caught him; he stayed—nearly five months of every year, even now. He had become a well-known painter. A little romantic, a bit sweet, old style for nowadays. But N. A. originals in the best galleries, and reproduced in magazines and on calendars. Really a fine, unaffected fellow, better than his work.¹¹

The zest of the Twenties was mixed with romantic escapism in Taos. It was still, after all, the age of expatriots. Life in Taos during the first forty years of this century was possibly more lively than much of the painting it produced. There were picnics, fishing trips, long afternoons at the Indian dances, and midnight rides. The community, part small town, part cosmopolitan, was interested in itself. They published a series of newspapers, took part in a city government,¹² helped secure the Taos Indian the right to his sacred lake,¹³ and took turns bringing each other's groceries up from Santa Fe. Many of them had an amateur interest in archeology and would wander around the many ruins looking for arrow heads and pot sherds. Others dedicated themselves to preserving the local fiestas and


¹²Higgins once missed being elected mayor by one vote, later in his life--Verbal communication, Joan Higgins Reed.

¹³Frank Waters, The Man Who Killed the Deer.
The atmosphere was friendly and casual, with an air of do-it-yourself improvisation. People saw each other frequently when they went to pick up the mail or to perform other small errands. Many of the artists took sketching and fishing trips together. It is not surprising that during the first part of the century many of the artists' work looks somewhat alike. They generally painted the same subjects, the mountains and the Indians, in a similar tradition, that of the academically trained artist.

The emphasis in 1900 on sentiment and craftsmanship over intellectual achievement would serve to doom many American artists in the years between 1900 and 1930. Higgins performed an unusual feat when, at middle age, he dropped some of his traditional training and took up some of the forms of a modern art which he had probably heard condemned all his life. Perhaps his interest in mechanical drawing had given him an eye for analysis which helped him view things with detachment. He had always kept more emotional distance between himself and his

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14 In Santa Fe people especially interested in preserving local traditions were Mary Austin, Edgar Hewett, and Carlos Vierra, who also advocated retaining pueblo architecture.

15 This improvisation extended so far that it was common for the Indians to be called by the name of the artist for whom they most frequently modeled.
subjects than other Taos artists. However, there seems little
doubt that Higgins initial attraction to Taos and the Indians
was their sentimental value.

Victor Higgins, like most Taos painters, was involved
more with the actual subject matter of a picture than the
abstract aesthetic theories behind it. In most Taos painters
there was a very strong prior commitment to their subjects which
kept them hostile to the distortionist tendencies of the modern
innovations in art. They loved the mountains and the Indians,
in a sense, more than they loved the intellectual idea of art.

Higgins was unique because he was not so blindly enamoured
with his subjects that he was impervious to change. His great-
est asset was the fact that he did change, and develop. The
object of this thesis will be to trace that development and to
investigate some of the sources of his art.
CHAPTER I

HIGGINS' EDUCATION AND EARLY YEARS, 1884-1929

William Victor Higgins was born June 28, 1884, on the family apple farm near Shelbyville, Indiana. He was the son of Irish parents and one of nine children. Although the family was moderately well to do, they all shared in the farm work. In later years Higgins' mother recalled that from the day he was born, Victor was noticeably different from her other children. "apparently the whole family sensed his difference, and perhaps his genius, and spared him most of the farm chores he so disliked." 16

When Victor was about ten a sign painter who painted the kind of advertising which used to cover the sides of barns arrived in Shelbyville. His presence must have been especially stimulating to a boy who probably already had a predilection for drawing. This sign painter gave Higgins some paints and taught him a few rudiments of painting. When Sara Parsons Higgins visited the farm, shortly after her marriage to Higgins in 1919, the efforts of his early days were still visible.

Covering the walls of barns and outbuildings, they were, in her words "really remarkable." 17

In 1899 at the age of fifteen Higgins felt he was a man and wanted to go to Chicago to art school. His father thought this was too far from home for a boy who had never been away before and gave him only enough money to pay for a ticket to Indianapolis. On the day Higgins was to leave, his father asked to see the ticket. It read to Chicago. His father only embraced him and said "Take care of yourself...."

Chicago at this time was more of a literary than an artistic center. 18 It seems unlikely that the provincial Higgins would have been aware of the new ideas current in select inner circles when he arrived to attend art school.

He went to the school of the Art Institute of Chicago, still a relatively new institution founded in 1879. The school's approach to art education placed heavy emphasis on drill to achieve draftsmanship. It felt that impressions of color were not in themselves sufficient stimulus. Drawing was not neces-

17 Letter from Sara Mack.

sarily learned by looking directly at an object since photographs or descriptions were also utilized. The faculty believed it was important for the artist to be personally interested in his material, and that interest increased perception. To become familiar with a subject the artist should draw it again and again. 19 Perhaps Higgins was still following the injunctions of his teachers from the Chicago Art Institute when he went West to settle in Taos.

Higgins also attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Chicago. He supported himself by doing odd jobs and teaching art to small private groups. He had a good business sense and was always financially independent, 20 even at this early age. Later he taught for a year or two at the Chicago Art Institute. It was at this time that he may have first caught the attention of Carter H. Harrison, then mayor of Chicago and patron of the American arts. 21 Harrison offered to sponsor Higgins for a few years of European study.

In 1910, when he was twenty six years old, Higgins went to Europe to complete his artistic training. He first went to

19 Walter Sargent, Elizabeth Miller. How Children Learn to Draw (Boston, New York: Ginn and Co., 1916), p. 231-40. Both the authors are teachers at the Art Institute of Chicago.


21 Coke, Santa Fe and Taos, p. 24
Munich where he studied under Hans von Hyeck. In later years Higgins recommended Munich to young artists because he felt that academic training "preserved painting from the danger of formlessness," although he "recognized the tendency of its severe drill to destroy the illusion and inspiration."22

When Higgins arrived in Munich about 1903 the school there was no longer the most famous art center in Europe. Paris had replaced it. The Munich art schools were less revolutionary, more established and conservative than those in the French capital, a fact which might have attracted a young painter somewhat unsure of himself in the wide world of European art. The German coloring was usually richer than the French. They used bitumen to produce black. Munich trained students in the style of the Old Masters. This training included dark brown backgrounds and attempts at Rembrandt-like brush work. When the Munich masters painted the landscape it was in their studios, not plein air. They taught that nature should be painted in a gray north light and brought well within the compass of a balanced pictorial design. The Germans were slow about allowing the young artist to paint; it took two or three years of drawing before he was advanced to painting class. The artists produced

by the German schools took little interest in aesthetics or general culture. They were not strong on subtle insight, and looked generally for sentiment and broad painterly effects to create their art.\textsuperscript{23}

It is also true that already in 1900 the sentimental side of French art was weakening; Bouguereau and Gérôme were old men and the Symbolists had already achieved a prominent place in the art world. The United States however, was still committed to old fashioned ideals of sentiment and Victorianism. Samuel Isham notes that about 1900 most Americans loved and comprehended sentiment more than any other quality in art. "The quest for beauty dominated the quest for truth."\textsuperscript{24} This lacked any other criteria other than emotion did not stimulate a very refined or intellectual art production.

The German emphasis on the sentimental was closer to the feeling then common in the United States. The Art Institute of Chicago held a variant of this sentimental approach in its idea that the artist must "know" the subject he was drawing. The notion that if you liked something and drew it frequently you would be more inspired and artistic in your rendering certainly indicates an emotional rather than intellectual attitude.


\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Tbid.}, p. 494.
Higgins came from a part of the country which has never embraced the avant garde and it would be unfair to expect that he would be able or willing to drop the attitudes formed in his early years and adopt modern art when he got to Paris about 1902.

After about two years in Munich Higgins went to Paris, a city where he felt the more experienced artist could profitably study. There he worked from the nude in the free school of the Grand Chaumerie, under the direction of René Menard and Lucien Simon who urged the young man to return to his country and "paint America with an open eye." Before following his teacher's advice, Higgins spent some time in Belgium and England to round out his European education.

Of all his European experiences the Munich period seems to have made the greatest impression. Ever since Frank Duveneck, (1848-1919), an American from Cincinatti, had come back from Munich forty years earlier with a dashing new technique, Munich had been the place for aspiring American painters to study. This may have been partly because Duveneck was a magnetic personality and an inspiring teacher. Also an impeccable draftsman, Duveneck was noted for his solid modeling and drawing which he

25 This school was held in a large room where a number of students came and went. The instructors walked around criticizing the drawings in progress. Verbal, Helen Blumenschein, December, 1965.

enlivened with spectacular brushwork. His compositions were usually dark and the subject tended to be picturesque (see Plate I). Duveneck had enjoyed a very brief period of considerable fame when he returned to the United States about 1875, and then, as Royal Cortissoz put it, although "his fame did not precisely wane, it rested where he left it thirty or forty years ago."27 In Munich, where Duveneck had his first success, his approach had become a formula.28

This was the style which Higgins had acquired in Europe. Like Duveneck, when he returned to the United States, he enjoyed an almost immediate series of successes and prizes, but these gradually tapered off as the years passed. Unlike Duveneck; however, Higgins was not content with one approach and technique, and later in his life evolved a much more individual and poetic style.

By 1914 Higgins was back in Chicago and almost thirty years old. He began looking about for a place to paint. Again Carter Harrison, his old patron, appeared and offered to send him on a painting trip through the Southwest. Harrison had been West himself and had become so intrigued with the landscape that


28 Other American artists Robert Henri and George Luks, trained in Munich, had a similar feeling to their brushwork.
he wanted paintings of it for his collection. He also must have known something of the existence of Taos as an art colony.

The trip was decisive for Higgins. As Evelyn Marie Staut says "He beheld the level yellow mesas dreaming in the white sun and the picture remained with him as though imprinted on the retina of his soul." The Munich school had shown him the Tyrolian peasant and the imposing Alps, but Higgins must have felt instinctively that type of picturesque subject matter would never be his own. In New Mexico he saw people and country not only native, but even more picturesque than the Alpine scenes. Harrison probably was pleased with the paintings which resulted from this trip, for he continued to buy Higgins' work throughout the years in Taos, until his death in 1949.31

When Higgins first saw New Mexico he was thirty years old, an attractive bachelor of about 5'10" with wavy hair. He had arrived in Santa Fe about Thanksgiving Day and had Thanksgiving dinner with the Sheldon Parsons, who took in many of the artists who were just beginning to come West. Sheldon Parsons had

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31Carter Harrison's collection, which should contain many of the early works of Victor Higgins, has been dispersed. Harrison's granddaughters could not locate any paintings by Higgins. The only picture from this collection I found was 'Spring Rains,' 1924, which is in the Chicago Art Institute.
come to New Mexico from New York after the death of his wife. He was perhaps the second painter to settle in Santa Fe after Carlos Vierra. Together with his daughter Sara, Parsons offered hospitality to many travelers, among them Maurice Sterne and Mable Dodge Sterne.\footnote{Sterne had arrived in Santa Fe first and wrote back to Mable such flowing accounts of southwestern life and Sara Parsons that Mable, a little jealous, decided to come west herself. In \textit{The Edge of the Taos Desert}, Mable describes Sara, who was later to become Higgins' wife, as "a small girl with green eyes and freckles." p. 19.}

The year after he arrived in Taos, Higgins won the Martin B. Cahn Prize from the Art Institute of Chicago for his painting "Oka and Walmacho"\footnote{I have only seen a very grainy old photograph of "Oka and Walmacho." It has two semi-nude Taos braves sitting down looking at a peace pipe or tomahawk. They are in the foreground, dark against a white wall.}. In 1917 he won the Second Logan Prize for "Juanito and the Suspicious Cat," an anecdotal picture of an Indian boy and cat. The picture shows the effects of Higgins' Munich training. The figure occupies the major part of the canvas and is solidly drawn. There are fewer shadows and there exists a more direct contrast between the areas of dark and light, but the brush work still has a Munich flair. It still had much in common with Duveneck's, "The Turkish Page" (Plate I) although some of the background has been eliminated and the light intensified. The placement
of the subject, the literary quality, the exoticism, the trappings which add to the exotic quality, the hooka and the woven blanket, all belong to the Munich manner. The light comes in from off to one side, modeling the forms and creating highlights. The subject occupies the immediate foreground. The romantic tradition involved with the rendering of foreign, picturesque and exotic material was well established as prize winning material. The revolutionary change in taste which was beginning in some quarters had not yet affected the juries of large shows.

During these early years in Taos, before 1920, Higgins worked with the Indian subjects so frequently that D. H. Lawrence's comment comes to mind.

It is almost impossible for the white people to approach the Indian without either sentimentality or dislike. The common vulgar white usually feels a certain native dislike of these drumming aboriginals. The highbrow invariably lapses into sentimentalism like the smell of bad eggs. . . . . there's only two things you can do. You can detest the insidious devil for having an utterly different way from our own great way. Or you can perform the mental trick, and fool yourself and others into believing that the be-feathered and bedaubed darling is nearer to the true ideal gods than we are.

This last is just bunk, and a lie. 34

These early paintings of the Indians were successful and still have a kind of calendar charm. Perhaps this is because,

unusual as the Taos Indians were, they as human figures could be painted using the same techniques which Higgins had already mastered in Europe. Later Higgins must have come to feel very much as Lawrence did, for as the years went by he painted the Indians less frequently and less sentimentally. His late paintings of Indians have nothing of the old exploitation of the red man as exotic subject material but use the Indian model in a very direct, almost formal fashion.

It is not surprising that Higgins who had found in Taos subjects and atmosphere which were stimulating to him personally soon became known in Chicago as a "Taos Painter."35 Although he painted the standard Indians and pueblo in his pleasant broadly brushed Munich style, he was not immune to the effect of New Mexico. The strong sunlight clarified his vision and brightened his colors. The New Mexican landscape, the vastness, the flatness, the sudden mountains, were not as readily adaptable to the methods of landscape painting Higgins knew. The land under the very bright sky demanded a new treatment.36 And perhaps as a mid-westerner he felt somewhat alien in the

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35 He was also frequently referred to as a Chicago Painter. Coke, *Santa Fe and Taos*, p. 25.

36 Joan Higgins Reed has seen works from Higgins' student days, one a view of Antwerp, and she agrees that the first and most decided effect New Mexico had on her father was to lighten his palettes. Joan Reed still owns many of her father's paintings.
desert spaces.

Higgins did not develop his most successful approach to painting the New Mexican landscape until about 1930 when, with a change of style, he was really able to portray the beauty of the long distances. Until that time he used fairly tall trees to separate the foreground from the horizon. These tall trees (see Plate III) were the vertical lines in his compositions.

In 1918 Higgins won his second Logan Prize for "Fiesta Day," a painting of Indians in white robes sitting on white horses. The sunlight is strong and washes out the colors, leaving the white blankets outlined against the light background. There is, in this picture, an element of daring. The horses' nose is cut off, out of the picture. There seems to be more concern for pure design in the loops of the slack rein and greater simplicity in the flat areas of the Indian's blankets than Higgins had formerly shown. Where in "Juanito and the Suspicious Cat" there was some attempt to make Juanito an individual; in "Fiesta Day" the Indians are more generalized. Their solidity and impassivity is heightened by their white blanket sheet robes, which give them a kind of Biblical air.

37 The use of trees in the foreground was standard academic landscape practice. Innes was told "that if I did not paint trees brown in the foreground I would certainly fail." Flexner, That Wilder Image, p. 315.
Higgins frequently emphasized the anonymity gained by the envelopment of the body by showing them in profile or only from the back. In the very choice of pose, withdrawn, detached, Higgins communicates something of the essence of Indians.

Shortly after he won this important prize Higgins, then thirty-five, married Sara Parsons, who was just eighteen. During that time he lived in a rented studio across from what is now the Harwood Foundation. As E. Blumenschein described it, the artist making a home in Taos had to dig in for life, with fishing rods (Higgins was an avid fisherman), shotguns, camping outfits for work in the mountains, clothing for a rough country and helpers from the Indian Pueblo.38

Blumenschein describes Higgins as possessing a "hesitating, sensitive nature."39 Sara Mack noted:

He had a rich inner life, apparently from early childhood on....He got the reputation of being a procrastinator in the matter of shipping pictures off (to shows in the East), and he also got the reputation of being a sleepy-time-joe. He had two passionately loved hobbies, fishing and mechanics. His interest in the latter was the cause of his sleepy-time-joe reputation. He simply didn't go to sleep at night in time to get up at a reasonable time in the morning. He worked on mechanical inventions — did endless mechanical drawings just for the joy of it.

To be sure, not all nights were spent in this hobby, but, as the habit of not going to bed at a reasonable hour

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39 Ibid., p. 2.
was well established, he would find something equally fascinating to occupy him. He was an avid reader.... Also he was a great one for midnight and early morning drives over the mountain roads. He would often get me up and we would get in the car and awaken friends to join us in auto rides over wild New Mexican terrain.40

He had many friends, and was generally sought after, but he had few real intimates.

Among those who were on as nearly intimate terms with him as his nature would allow were the Harwoods, both Bert and Elizabeth. After Bert's death, Victor and Elizabeth continued the close friendship. We used to see them daily... 41

Sara Mack recalled.

A daughter, Joan Higgins, was born in 1922. In 1924 the marriage ended in divorce. Higgins married Marion Koogler McNay, a wealthy painter and art collector,42 who had spent a few summers in Taos. This second marriage which took place in 1938 lasted only a very short time. A more lasting relationship was with Eleanora Kissel, who lived in Taos.

Higgins style during the twenties was unfussy. He employed broad brush strokes and relatively large forms which were modeled carefully. He began to do more landscapes, (see Plate III). A good example is "Spring Rains", 1924, which was

40 Letter from Sara Mack, November 30, 1965

41 Letter from Sara Mack.

42 She had oil holdings in south Kansas. Her collection is now in the Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas. Kenneth Adams remembers that she gave an elaborate
bought by Carter Harrison. It is a pastoral scene in the Taos valley looking toward the mountains. A storm is coming, just as in so many other paintings of landscapes done at that time, but here the storm is used as more than a device to create a mood. The sheet of falling rain becomes an integral part of the composition. This is an early use of rain and clouds, motifs which later were included in the inner frame of almost all Higgins' landscapes. The Indians are nothing more than accents. The colors are warm and lyrical, giving life to the solidly painted shapes of the rolling hills.

Although he was simplifying nature he was not yet attempting to see any system or mathematical order. The solid volumes and planes were the result of a direct observation of visual reality, not of an intellectual searching. It was probably about the pictures of this period that Mable Dodge Luhan was speaking when she said, "His color sense is very individual, delicate and subtle, and he can say more with his pearly tones than most painters do with the whole color scale." ⁴³

He continued to paint the studio subjects of vases of flowers and still life objects throughout his life. These

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reception at the now Sage Brush Inn which featured ices in the shapes of brides and grooms, very funny and fancy. Verbal communication.

traditional subjects show clearly his changing styles. The early works are set in dark rooms, and glitter with high lights; the works from the twenties are much lighter, and more carefully composed; after 1930 the still lifes rest on tilted table tops and indicate his growing concern with Cubism and Dynamic Symmetry (Plate IV). Higgins frequently painted the same subject twice, another indication of his studious approach to his art. Perhaps it was this serious approach to art which made him aware of the changes in the art world.

Most of the artists living in Taos were interested in a selective view of the world, with the turbulence edited out. Nevertheless they were not isolated from new movements in art because most of them spent their winters in the East, selling the summer's work.\textsuperscript{44} Having found success, many of them were not interested in change.

Higgins, however, began some experimental works in a newer, more expressionistic fashion. He painted slashing strokes of color which was much too light to be truly expressionistic; then cut back into the pigment with his brush handle, exposing the prime of the canvas. This white wireyness which comes through the paint gives these pictures an unexpected delicacy (see Plate IV). But such advances were not consistent

\textsuperscript{44}Higgins maintained an address in Chicago until the late twenties.
for in other pictures his work is an ecclectic hodge podge of
other styles and idea.

As Van Deren Coke says:

A number of years passed before Higgins could purge
himself of a tendency to rely on stock subjects painted in
a rather free manner. His early style....was turned to
landscape as well as Indian subjects and in both he retained
a large measure of solidity and simplification which gave
his reports an element of detachment.

After 1921 Higgins began to break gradually with the
standard recipes which had led to his election to the
National Academy.....

In the late twenties he began a number of experiments
in the use of multi-point perspective and interlocking
planes applied to a series of still-life and figure studies.
These indicated a knowledge of Cezanne, absorbed through
Dasburg and Marin. These changes rescued Higgins work of
the thirties and bore full fruit in the forties, by which
time he had broken completely with the retarded academic
heritage of his early work. Nature remained his stimulus
.... 45

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45 Van Deren Coke, Taos and Santa Fe, pp. 24, 63.
CHAPTER II

THE LAST BIG PRIZE AND AFTERWARD, 1930-1949

The years between 1930 and 1945 were the last during which the Taos artists had of peace and serenity, of the quiet old way of life. The distances which had protected Taos from the rest of the world were still great enough in those years to allow many of the artists to continue their work in the familiar romantic realist manner.

Higgins was a transitional painter from the older, more illustrative tradition (1880-1900) to the newer (1900-1940) more intellectual approach to art. He was not blind to the expressive and organizational possibilities of the twentieth century innovations. He reminded a realist all his life, but never fell into the trap of being only an illustrator. Higgins had been trained in a conservative, academic fashion and it was an unusual artistic graft which supports his cubism and allowed his art to blossom into a new life.

It is interesting to compare Higgins to another Taos artist from Chicago, Walter Ufer. Ufer had come to Taos with Higgins and enjoyed the same initial success. Ufer's style, which was well established when he arrived in Taos at the age of
thirty-eight, was that of a draftsman and realist. He had worked as a commercial artist and his art always had a very strong illustrative tendency. Ufer’s colors were less integrated and more superficial than Higgins’. He rendered the surface qualities of his subjects much more minutely than Higgins ever did, but he lacked the intellectual structuring which Higgins used to unify his works. Ufer eventually “sold out: to a dealer who suggested that he paint only one picture, one of a white robed Taos Indian on a horse standing before the mountains. This formula failed and Ufer died in 1936, a broken and penniless man. Higgins at that time was just beginning to get into his new style.

Higgins was relatively slow worker, probably in part because he was such an analytical and craftsman-like painter. His total output was not as large as that of either Ufer or Blumenschein, both of whom outstripped him in popularity in their later years. Higgins painted some portraits but for the most part he concentrated on the traditional Taos subjects. He would sometimes paint the same view, and then move ten feet to the left or right and paint it again, with the light different or some part of the composition changed.

The problem of how to support oneself as an artist was seriously intensified by the Depression. Although Higgins, who had a good business sense, was always able to survive, the
thirties in Taos were lean years. There seemed to be some economic motivation behind the general lack of dates on the canvases of the Taos artists, according to Emil Bisttram. If a picture did not sell one year, or the next and had an "old" date on it, the prospective buyer might think there was something wrong with it, and never buy it. For this reason or another Higgins did not date his work and it is frequently difficult to assign specific dates to the canvases.

It was Bisttram, who visited Taos in 1930 and settled there permanently in 1931, who brought the discipline of Dynamic Symmetry to Taos. The twenties and thirties were dedicated to the idea of science, which seemed about to make all things possible. Jay Hambridge was one of those men who saw in science a safeguard against the uncertainties of intuition. Dynamic Symmetry was a system he claimed to have discovered in a study of Greek vases. The technique uses measurements which are in terms of areas rather than linear units, so that a series of harmonious geometrical shapes can be established according to a regular progression. (See Plate IV).

46 Verbal communication, Emil Bisttram.

Possibly predisposed to such a mechanical solution of artistic problems by his lifetime interest in mechanics and mechanical drawing, Higgins adopted the system as preached by Bisttram. Bisttram taught many painters in Taos the gospel of modern art according to Dynamic Symmetry, and had a definite effect on many of the local artists.

This scientific approach to art was still foremost in Higgins' mind when he told Inez Sizer Cassidy in an interview in 1932:

Art is a scientific thing. Scientists are making good contributions in the arts today....
Modern does not mean distortionist or innovator, but a man who builds his picture, not merely paints it. A picture has a superstructure which must be true mathematically.

I paint because I want to solve a problem. I paint in Taos because the light is best, because of the more colorful landscape and people. There is a constant call here to create something, possibly because of the Indians.

There is, in this statement, a certain knowledge of Hambridge's system, but there was soon more than Dynamic Symmetry in Higgins' pictures. He also was aware of the Cubist works, and took some elements from them.

Although as a young painter, Higgins had been in Paris it is unlikely that he was aware of the Cubist works of Picasso

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48 Letter from Sara Mack.

and Braque. Even if he had seen some Cubism then he probably would not have considered it serious art. His background as a conservative Mid-westerner, his Chicago training and experience in Munich would have given him no basis for appreciation. As a young artist he was serious about desiring success and sales; and he had a good head for business. It must have been obvious to him that the Cubist paintings were not going to be immediately remunerative.

As a youth he also seems to have been untouched by the Fauves, and only brushed lightly by Impressionism. There is nothing in his early work even in Taos to indicate he had any contact with the new movements in Paris. It was not until he was about fifty years old that he began to work with ideas like multi-point perspective and more daring color.

Cubism came to Taos with the arrival of Andrew Dasburg in 1917. Van Deren Coke says "Dasburg was able to distil from the compelling landscape a new reality which was subordinate to illusionistic intentions." Although Dasburg did not become a permanent resident of Taos until 1930, he visited there each summer. Dasburg taught a number of the younger Taos artists, although he never formally instructed Higgins.

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50Letter from Sara Mack, Higgins always supported himself.
51Van Deren Coke, Taos and Santa Fe, pp. 36-37.
52He does not feel Higgins understood what he was doing, or was influenced by him. Verbal communication Andrew Dasburg.
Perhaps even a more direct influence on Higgins was John Marin, who first came to Taos in 1929. Marin kept to himself much of the time, however, frequently on Sunday afternoons other artists would drop by and Marin would show his work in an informal way. It is possible that this is how Higgins came to know Marin's work. (See Plate VII and VIII). Marin's approach, for which Dasburg has suggested the Term "Abstract Realism," was very individual and utilized a sort of Cubist "frame" within the picture. It was this inner frame which Higgins adopted.

Bisttram feels that this idea of an inner frame may have been an extension of Dynamic Symmetry, and this is entirely possible, however there is a strong resemblance between Higgins' landscapes and those of Marin. Wherever the element originated, Higgins soon made it his own. Although Higgins' use of Cubism was superficial, it was effective. His basic sensitivity toward the proportion of one area to another, never lost, enabled him to handle the new, more geometric shapes fairly easily.

In 1932 Higgins won his last major prize for a landscape utilizing one of these inner frames. "Winter Funeral", (Plate IX) now in the Harwood Foundation, was awarded both the First Altman Prize, by the National Academy of Design Award and the French Memorial Gold Medal from the Art Institute of Chicago. It is considered by many to be his finest work. The canvas shows a burial in the cold of winter, wagons and cars huddled in the distance under a heavy sky. There is a quiet, silvery
gray tone over the canvas. Instead of painting a specific view, or person, Higgins paints an event, death. The men in the picture are quite small, dwarfed by the hugeness of nature. The picture moves back in a series of formal planes. Higgins here begins to work his space so that it moves back and up to where the pyramid-like mountains stand, and then laps back at the viewer in the form of the storm clouds. This treatment tends to create a hollow in the center of the canvas and it is in this hollow, lonely and distant, that the funeral takes place.

During the thirties he also worked out a number of Indian figure studies. All of them consist of a central figure surrounded by the same type of Cubist superstructure he used in his landscapes. The figures have a certain monumentality and detachment. The form of the body is never changed to resemble more closely that of a cube, but the play of light on the solid forms naturally reveal geometric shapes. These studies stand on tilted floors, as do his flower studies from this period.

One of these studies, "Daisy Mirabel" (see Plate VI), now in the Blue Door Gallery, is done predominately in orange, chartreuse, Prussian blue and gray in the shadows. The girl's shadow on one side is balanced by a whitish square on the other, and these two elements begin to work as the inner frame. The bright, strongly patterned blanket the girl wears and her

53Higgins for a number of years used the building which is now the Blue Door Gallery as his studio.
frontal pose, give her a very abstract air. Another of this group of Indian studies is one of a nude Indian woman which aroused a furor when a prospective buyer, part Oklahoma Indian himself, was incensed at the idea of a nude Indian, despite the fact that nudity plays a minor part in the composition.\textsuperscript{54}

He did some pictures in which the analytical approach is completely dominant. A car with a flat tire is placed in the yard of a local house (Plate X). The anecdotal nature of the subject is incidental. The major interest of the canvas is in the natural geometry of the house and church. Although this approach is not as individual as his treatment of the landscape, it is very skillfully done. This canvas bears a surface resemblance to Stuart Davis, and there can be no doubt from looking at his work, that Higgins knew American cubism.

Higgins had the gift of producing forms of solidity and weight as well as an inborn sense of color. He always had a tendency to suppress details and let the forms show through.

\textsuperscript{54}Verbal Helen Blumenschein.—Reproduced on page 101 of V. D. Coke's \textit{Santa Fe and Taos}. 
These traits were heightened by the use of a small sheet of paper and the flowing nature of water color. As he moved farther away from his early teachers and became more certain of himself he attained a real freedom.

His views became longer, unusually drawn as if he were up on a hill overlooking a valley (Plate XI). Late in his life he did buy a house from Mable Dodge Luhan which she, as a good realtor, described as "a small abode castle.....From his tower room the valley lies spread out before one...."55 This view, which was his everyday, may have influenced him. Also he usually painted plein air, using a small improvised studio in the trunk of his car, which he probably frequently parked at the top of hills. (See Plate XI). This period which corresponds to the last years of Higgins' life (1940-49), was the time of his finest, most progressive work. His late watercolors, small in size and lyrical in feeling, are completely realized works of art. They have a sparkle and joy of clear bright colors. They are composed of simple brush marks which make a pattern over the shapes of the hills. The clouds and rain work into the inner frame, but this effect has been softened, and seems less forced. Most of these works were probably completed on the spot.

Although his sales were never again as high as in his earlier days, his agent in Chicago did manage one sale for ten thousand dollars. E. Blumenschein tells how about 1940 Higgins' dealer "persuaded a real estate man who had a nice residence for sale to furnish it and place eight or ten of Higgins' framed canvases on the walls. It worked...."

Blumenschein, who accompanied Higgins on one of his last sketching trips, writes of these final pictures:

In them was the best Higgins quality, a lyrical charm added to his lovely color. His art had developed an intellectual side through his adventure with Dynamic Symmetry,...It helped him to verify his artistic feelings regarding the basic principles of position, spacing and spotting. And he put all he had into this dozen small canvases.

In 1949, at the age of sixty five, Victor Higgins died. He had just finished dinner at the home of the Taos artist, Thomas Benrino. He leaned back, lit a cigar, and had a heart attack.

56 Laura Bickerstaff, *Pioneer Artists of Taos*, p. 5


58 Verbal communication from Kenneth Adams. Higgins also had an ulcer, and a year or two prior to this had an ulcer operation which was to give him new dietary freedom. It was this dietary freedom which may have lead to over-eating, which, in turn, led to a heart condition. Letter from Sara Mack.
CONCLUSION

Victor Higgins was not a great artistic innovator. He did not have the special humanistic sympathy which would have allowed him a penetrating vision of the Taos Indian or his life. Higgins' late Indian figure studies are more successful than any of his early work because they deal with the Indian primarily as a human form, not as an anthropological curiosity.

Although his national recognition came early, his most completely integrated artistic works came late in his life. The period beginning in 1930 marked Higgins' change in style to a new cubistic approach to the landscape especially suited to the views he painted. He reached his peak as an artist with the small watercolors done just before his death.

Higgins did not accept all of the innovations of the modern art movement, but he saw which ones he could use and included them in many of his late works. He never stopped developing. His landscapes changed from careful, pleasant renderings of the land and mountains into delightful private glimpses into the valleys around Taos. Higgins was at his best in these late paintings of the land. Throughout all his changing styles the past subjects seemed to remain his major
theme and in them reside his major artistic triumphs.
CHRONOLOGY

Major Events and Awards

1884 Born Shelbyville, Indiana.

1898 Goes to Chicago to study at the Art Institute and the Academy of Fine Arts.

1910 Carter Harrison pays for his European study in Munich and Paris.

1913-1914 Returns to Chicago and in 1914 is sent to New Mexico by Harrison.

1915 Higgins awarded Martin B. Cahn prize ($100) from Chicago Art Institute for "Oka and Walmacho." Joins Taos Society of Artists.

1916 Higgins awarded Edward B. Butler purchase prize ($200) from Chicago Art Institute for "Town of Taos." Mable Dodge comes to Taos.

1917 Higgins awarded the Second Logan Prize ($200) for "Juanito and the Suspicious Cat," also half of the Hearst Prize ($300), for a group of seven paintings including "Pipita Passes." Silver medal from Chicago Society of Artists. Bert Harwoods and Andrew Dasburg settle in Taos.

1918 Living on La Douce street in Taos. Marries Sara Parsons. Awarded first Logan Prize ($500), the Chicago Art Institute for "Fiesta Day," also first Altman prize for figure ($1000) from the National Academy of Design, for "Fiesta Day." Marsden Hartley to Taos.

1919 Higgins selected by a committee of fifteen, including Henri and Bellows, to be shown at U.S. Exhibition in Paris. Murals in Jefferson City, Missouri, state capital.


1921 Higgins on jury for Eighth Biennial Corcoran Exhibition of Contemporary Oil Painting. Elected to the National Academy.
1922 Higgins daughter, Joan, born. Taos Society of Artists show held at Howard Young Galleries, New York.

1923 Higgins has a traveling exhibition of twenty-four canvases shown at Macbeth Gallery in New York, Corcoran Gallery in Washington, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Stuart Davis in New Mexico.

1924 Higgins is divorced from Sara Parsons Higgins. His "Taos Mountains" included in Venice Biennial.

1925 Higgins "Solo Circus" included in Carnegie Twenty-Fourth International Exhibition in Pittsburgh.

1926 Higgins one of five man jury for Pan-American Exhibition held in Los Angeles.

1927 Higgins president of Taos Society of Artists, dissolves by its own vote. Awarded the John C. Schaffer Prize.

1929 John Marin to Taos. Georgia O'Keeffe to Taos.

1932 Higgins awarded first Altman prize, National Academy of Design, for "Winter Funeral"; French Memorial Gold Medal, the Chicago Art Institute, for "Winter Funeral."

1938 Higgins marries Marion Koogler McNay, divorced after about six months.

1945 Buys house from Mable Dodge Luhan.

1949 Dies of a heart attack in Taos, New Mexico.

1957 Victor Higgins Memorial Exhibition at Museum of New Mexico Art Gallery February 3-24, 1957.

Major collections of Victor Higgins works are in the Harwood Foundation, Taos, New Mexico; the private collection of Mrs. Joan Higgins Reed; and the Santa Fe Railroad, Chicago, Illinois. Other collections which include works by Higgins are "Fiesta Day", the Butler Institute of American Art; "Spring Rains", Chicago Art Institute; "Juanito and the Suspicious Cat", Union League Civic and Arts Foundation, Chicago; "Taos Mountains", Museum of New Mexico; "Taos Mountains" watercolor, The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; "The Widower", The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. None of Higgins works are presently included in the collection of his second wife Marion Koogler McNay in San Antonio, Texas.
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Catalogues


Catalogue to the Marion Hoggler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas.

PLATE I

THE TURKISH PAGE
Frank Duveneck
1875
PLATE II

JUANITO AND THE SUSPICIOUS CAT
Victor Higgins
c. 1915
PLATE IV

STILL LIFE
Dynamic Symmetry
Victor Higgins
c. 1930
PLATE V

LANDSCAPE
Victor Higgins
c. 1930
PLATE VI

DAISEY MIRABEL
Victor Higgins
c. 1933
PLATE VII

TAOS MOUNTAIN
John Marin
c. 1930
PLATE VIII

John Marin influenced watercolor
Victor Higgins
c. 1930
PLATE IX

WINTER FUNERAL
Victor Higgins
1932
PLATE X

TAOS SCENE
Victor Higgins
c. 1935
PLATE XI

LANDSCAPE
watercolor
Victor Higgins
1940
PLATE XII

Victor Higgins Painting