

**How my great aunt became part of a fresco at
the University of Missouri-Kansas City
and
The surprising way I learned about it**

Craig Swan

One day in June 2023 I received a message through Ancestry.com from a Chris Wolff asking about Antoinette Swan, one of my grandfather's sisters.

Message from Chris Wolff

Hello, my name is Chris Wolff and I am a historian from Kansas City. I am working on a project and came across a person who is in your tree. Antoinette Swan. I thought you might be interested in what I found out. Antoinette was the Dean of Woman for the University of Kansas City (today known as UMKC) in 1940-1941. During that time a Spanish painter and political refugee Luis Quintanilla was painting a series of murals called Don Quixote in the Modern World in a campus building today called Haag Hall. He used Toinette (as she went by at UKC) as one of the models in the mural. You can see the mural here <http://www.lqart.org/muralfold/fresco.html>. She is in the Ideal World of Don Quixote. She is on the left under the king. She is dressed as a harlequin. An article from the school newspaper describes how acting was her true passion so perhaps that is why she is depicted as an actor.

I did not know Chris. I knew that Antoinette (or Toni as I knew her) had worked at the University of Kansas City from 1940 to 1941, but I knew little about what she did there and nothing about other activities she was involved with at that time.

Of course I was interested. As far as I know my Aunt Toni is the only relative of mine who is part of a fresco anywhere in the world. She had a long term interest in theater and performance. She probably would have majored in theater at Grinnell College, had it been an option. Instead she majored in history. After graduating from Grinnell in 1918, she spent a year at the Boston School of Expression and then taught for two years as an Instructor in Speech, Public Speaking and Dramatic Interpretation at Vassar. Over the next decade she was involved in theater in Seattle, WA (Cornish Little Theatre), Poughkeepsie, NY (Poughkeepsie Community Theatre) and Madison, CT (Madison Revival Players).

In a follow-up email Chris told me

We are raising money to restore these murals and creating a website dedicated to them. We are covering the artistic interpretation of the murals, the history of their creation and the biographies of all the students, staff and faculty that were models for the murals. I have been reaching out to families looking to see if they have biographical information that they would be interested in sharing with us for this project.

I have some information on Toni leading up to her tenure at UKC. But would you be able to fill me in on where she went and what she did afterwards? And what she was like. Did she keep up with acting and theater? Did she have favorite causes or charities? Obviously she got married as I can see from the photo in your tree. But I'm not finding much more information.

The mural has six panels, three for Don Quixote (a modern American businessman) and three for Sancho Panza (his sidekick from the book) The panels are everyday life, The ideal world, the real 20th century world. Don Quixote was an idealist and Toni is in the Ideal World of Don Quixote panel. They all have weird headgear to make them look ridiculous according to the artist. The artist Quintanilla, his wife Janet and infant son Paul are in the top right. Paul is still alive,...I believe Toni's figure represents the arts. Don Quixote has surrounded himself with important people in his ideal world (the king, the clergy, the professor, the artist, girl looking in the mirror (beauty), etc.

Here is the picture of the mural The Ideal World of Don Quixote by Luis Quintanilla that Chris sent me. My aunt is to the left of Don Quixote wearing the red harlequin hat.



Here is a preliminary sketch of upper right hand corner of the mural that Chris shared with me.



Some commentary about the mural by Luis Quintanilla's son Paul
<http://www.lqart.org/index.html#menu>

From September 1940 until June of '41 he [Luis Quintanilla] was the "artist in residence" of the University of Kansas City, in Kansas City, Missouri. Here he painted six large panels, covering 375 square feet of wall space, in the Language Arts Building, which depict Don Quixote in the modern world.

The Ideal World of Don Quixote

In the ideal world of Don Quixote the Don is portrayed standing in the center of the mural surrounded by those human types he most admires, abstracted and dreamily distant in his pose and appearance. Poets, philosophers, statesmen, beautiful women, artists, happy children, ideal humanity surrounds him as he dreams oblivious to the whirling of society "in its own fantastic carnival dance," as my father explained it. My mother appears in this mural in the upper right with a little bird resting on top of her head and I appear in her arms with a tiny hat on mine. My father completes the family portrait.

I asked Chris how he made the connection between Antoinette and me. He clearly had searched for her on Ancestry and looked at family trees that included her. He replied:

I have discovered that the tree with the largest amount of sources on a person is usually a close relative. If someone is placing a 4th cousin on their tree, they are usually content with name and birth/death dates. But you have family photos and passenger lists and a page from the family bible.

One of the models for the murals was a 10 year old boy named Bill Montgomery. I discovered him still living in New Hampshire. He's 92 and try as I might I couldn't quite explain to him how I found him through his daughter in laws ancestry tree. He has had a newspaper article about the murals framed on his wall his entire life. He was so excited that after 82 years his participation was being recognized. He was kind enough to do an oral history interview with us that we'll put up on the website.

If it had not been for my Ancestry family tree I doubt if I would have learned about my Aunt's involvement with Quintanilla and his fresco

Below is one of my favorite pictures of my Aunt Toni. She is second from right. I believe this was a May Day celebration when she was at Grinnell College. I am told that today May Day celebrations at Grinnell focus more on worker solidarity and human rights, not Greek frivolity.



History of the Haag Hall Don Quixote Mural

By Patricia O'Dell, UMKC Today, November 2018

The Haag Hall Mural by Luis Quintanilla captures an enduring, pre-World War II point of view and has special connection for one Kansas Citian



Julián Zugazagoitia, director of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, on the second floor of Haag Hall in front of the murals by Luis Quintanilla, who was friends with his grandfather. Every year, hundreds of students, faculty, staff and visitors pass the vibrant murals of Luis Quintanilla, the Spanish expatriate who spent part of his exile from Spain creating the work for the University of Kansas City (UKC).

Julián Zugazagoitia, director of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, has a compelling connection to the murals — one he only discovered when he saw them firsthand.

Zugazagoitia had lived in Kansas City for five years before he climbed the marble steps to the second floor of Haag Hall to investigate the legacy between his family and Kansas City. Quintanilla and Zugazagoitia's grandfather, also named Julián Zugazagoitia, were friends and soldiers in the Spanish Civil War, fighting the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco.

Quintanilla and Zugazagoitia had been in prison together in Spain in 1934, where the artist sketched his friend and compatriot.

"I'd seen an exhibit in New York that included the drawing of my grandfather," says Zugazagoitia. "Not long after, Quintanilla's grandson sent me an email to tell me about the murals. It was in the back of my mind, but I had not made it over to see."

A Presidential Request

Quintanilla came to UKC in 1940 to serve as its first artist-in-residence at the invitation of UKC President Clarence Decker. At 34 years old, Decker was the youngest-serving president of the country's youngest university. He suggested Quintanilla paint a mural in Haag Hall using the theme, "Don Quixote in the Modern World."

It was a bold move for the college president, considering Quintanilla's political past.

"The national mood in 1938 was certainly one of unease," says John Herron, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of history. "The effects of the Great Depression were still apparent, and the growing militarism and unrest in Europe did little to calm fears. Americans, for the most part, wanted nothing to do with a second world conflict and were eager to stay out of European politics."



Decker, a vocal proponent of the arts and culture, used his role at the university to cultivate relationships with many politically informed artists.

"He offered visiting appointments to a number of artists, poets and writers, and worked actively to make Kansas City a kind of avant-garde center in the American Midwest," Herron says. "Decker understood the hostility many artists and scholars, especially Jews, faced abroad. He remained a proponent of bringing these artists to Kansas City whenever possible."

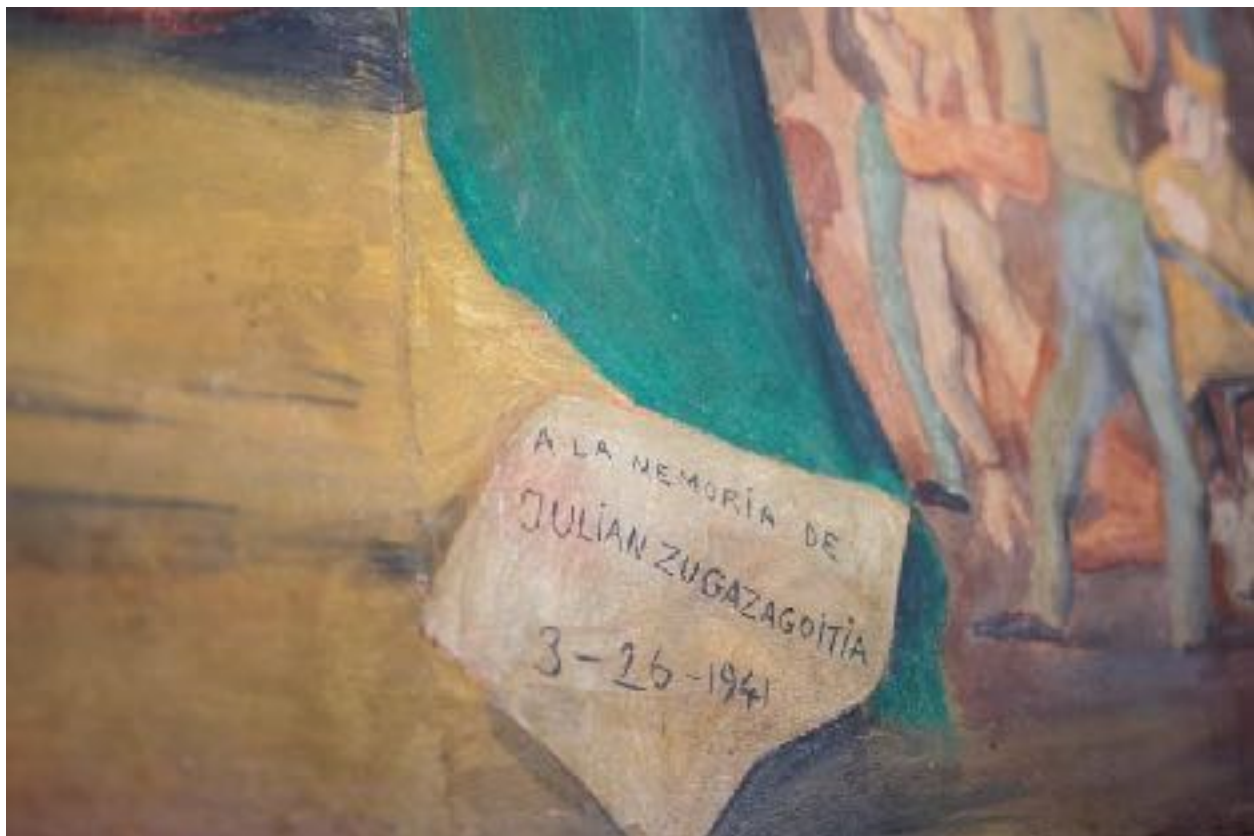
Quintanilla's Vision

At the time of Decker's invitation, Quintanilla was living in New York as part of the Rockefeller Foundation's Committee for Displaced Scholars and Artists program that brought oppressed and imprisoned artists from Europe to the United States. His art had recently been shown at the 1938 World's Fair in New York.

Quintanilla envisioned four panels using Don Quixote's story as an allegory of the horrors and oppression of fascism in Europe. The artist used members of the university faculty and staff as models. His own family appears in one panel.

Zugazagoitia, who was aware that Quintanilla used family and friends as models in his work, expected to find his grandfather's face looking back at him from the walls. This was not the case, but what he discovered was even more powerful.

"When I saw he had dedicated the mural to my grandfather I was stunned. To see his name — my name — in the corner ... It took a while for me to process, but it fulfilled a notion of destiny for me. Finding his name confirmed that Kansas City is where I should be."



Modern-day Revelations

Beyond his personal connection, Zugazagoitia was reminded how significant it is to be an immigrant. He sees the murals as a reminder of what it takes to make your way in a foreign place.

“It underscored for me how important it is to reinvent yourself in a new country. It seems the perfect time to be talking about this,” he says.

Zugazagoitia emphasizes how important it is to preserve these murals. Besides recognizing the work for its artistic and historical merit — it is one of only two Quintanilla murals that were not destroyed during the Spanish Civil War — he believes living with art changes those who are exposed to it.

“Our experience is better because it exists. We are privileged to live in an environment that nourishes us, even if we don’t notice,” he says. “It makes these stories meaningful and present in our lives.”

The link below is to the website at the University of Missouri-Kansas City that Chris mentioned about the Quintanilla Murals Project. It includes biographical sketches for most of the models included in the frescoes. The short video on the website takes you inside Haag Hall and up the stairs to the murals.

<https://www.umkc.edu/mide/Quintanilla-Murals-Project/>