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This special issue of the *Gilcrease Magazine* is published to commemorate the opening of the exhibition, "The Works of Nicolai Fechin," at Gilcrease Museum on February 15, 1986. This exhibition includes important paintings, drawings, and sculpture by the acclaimed Russian-American artist on loan from the collection of the Robert S. and Grayce B. Kerr Foundation. Gilcrease Museum wishes to acknowledge the generosity of the Foundation Trustees and the Bank of Oklahoma in making this exhibition possible, and the contributions of Eya Fechin, for sharing her memories and herself on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition of her father's works at Gilcrease Museum.

THE WORKS OF

N. Fechin

BY STEPHEN L. GOOD

THE PAINTINGS IN THE KERR COLLECTION summarize Fechin's entire American opus. Yet Fechin's style was fully formed when he left Russia at age 42. During his American career his art changed only very subtly, in response to internal dynamics rather than outside influences. To begin to understand why Fechin painted what he painted, and why his pictures look the way they do, we must consider the Russian legacy.

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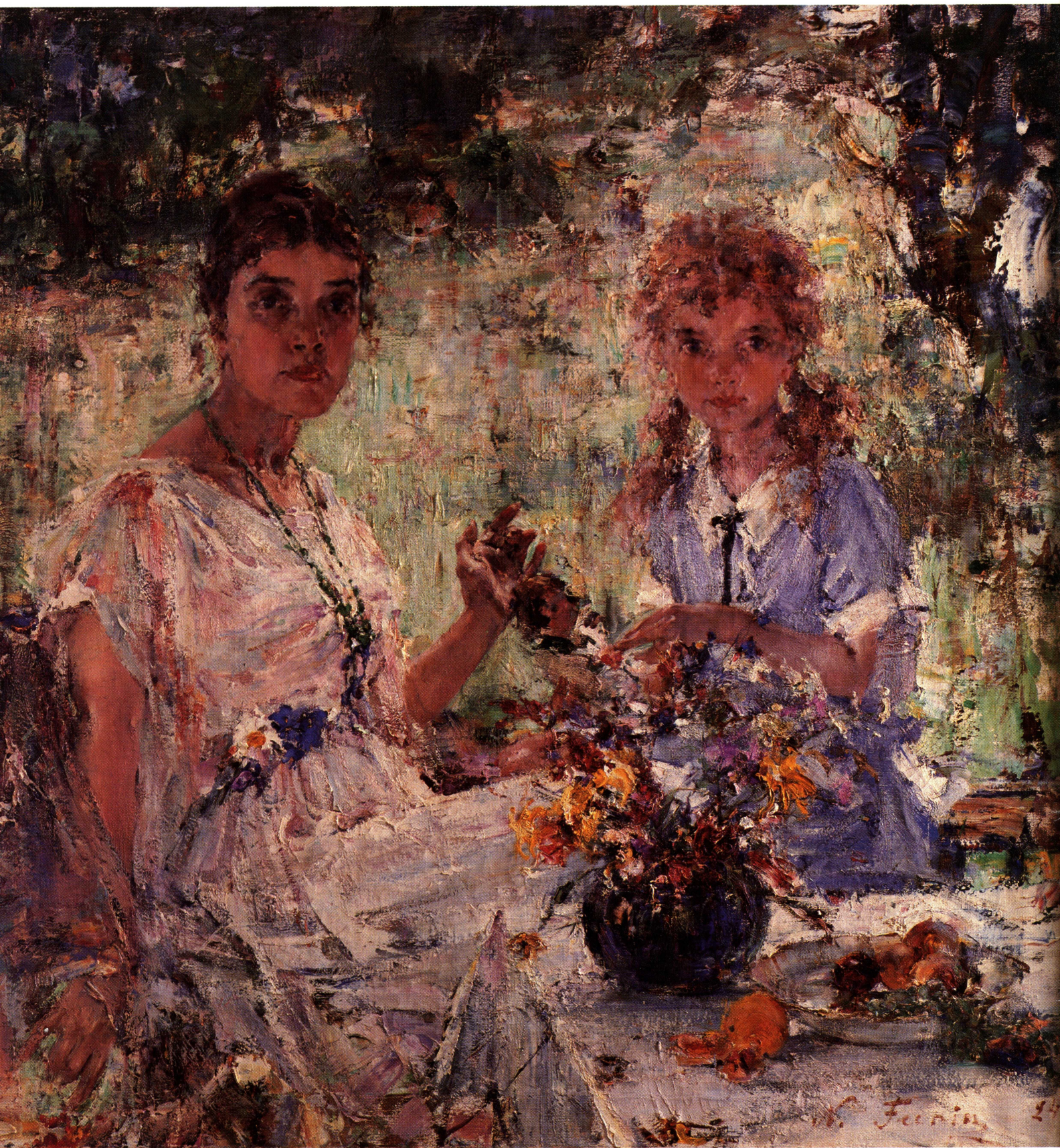


PLATE II "Summer" (1924), 50 inches by 50 inches, oil

“What an artist uses to fill
his canvas with is not important.
What is vital is how he does it.”

— NICOLAI FECHIN

Portraiture is of paramount importance in establishing the continuity of Russian art history. The historical and genre painters of the nineteenth century tried to make each figure in their often oversized canvases a complete portrait in itself. Fechin's master Ilya Repin (1844-1930) divided his oeuvre between historical and “purpose” paintings (which incorporated social or political content in narrative form) and portraits of his contemporaries. Repin's portrayals of the socially eminent are always psychologically penetrating, and the common people who were the subjects of his genre paintings bear the whole range of human emotion, which Repin did not shrink from carrying to violent, Goyaesque extremes. The ability to present clearly and emphatically the essentials of character was the most important facet of the Russian art tradition to reach Fechin through the teachings of Ilya Repin.

In Fechin's Russian figure studies, however, there is a flair, a kind of controlled excess that departs from Repin. These portraits are infused with a passion which, divorced from the situational or literary context of genre, seems to turn inward and take on a highly erotic charge. We know little about Fechin's reactions to what he saw in Paris or Vienna during his student journey of 1910. But his Russian figure work invites comparison with that of art nouveau and *Jugendstil*, styles which were sympathetically echoed in the progressive “World of Art” circle of Valentine Serov (1865-1911) and Mikhail Vrubel (1856-1910) in St. Petersburg, with which Fechin was very familiar. Certainly Fechin moves from the traditions of Russian realism toward a more international style in such paintings as “Mlle. Sapojnikova” and “Lady in

Pink” (two of the first Fechins to reach the United States, preceding the artist himself by several years, and now in the collection of the San Diego Museum of Art) which seem related to the decorative and highly patterned work of Klimt or Beardsley.

The Fechins spent their first months in this country in a small apartment in the Bronx. Here Fechin painted PORTRAIT OF MRS. KRAG (1923), Plate I (Cover). The Fechins' daughter Eya was then nine years old, and neither she nor her parents could speak a word of English. Mrs. Krag was Eya's English tutor.

This picture, painted for exhibition, displays the elegant ease of composition which we associate with Fechin's best works. The pose and props are chosen to reveal the identity, social and particular, of the sitter. In the background we see evidence of the “silver-gray” palette which Fechin's Russian critics so admired, while touches of bright color focus our attention on key elements of the design. A sense of visual excitement is created in the sweeping, expressive brushwork and the variety of interesting shapes which emerge from the light in the area of the face and hands, and this overall animation subtly reinforces the feeling of heightened interaction between the artist and his model.

The large signature on “Mrs. Krag” is typical of Fechin's first efforts to write his name in English. Eya tells us that her father regarded the signing of a canvas as a silly convention: an artist should be recognized by his work alone, if he deserved recognition at all. Dating, too, he thought a superfluous practice, and after 1925, dates all but disappear from his paintings.

“Everything which is alive reflects color and every reflection is a vibration. Hence, if one wishes to produce this living vibration, one must use the pure basic colors and ‘build’ with them in such a manner as to preserve their living effect and vibrancy”.

— NICOLAI FECHIN

In the summer of 1924, the Fechins spent a vacation near the town of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. Here Eya remembers posing on the veranda of a country home for a large portrait of her and her mother.

The outdoor setting, bright color and light in SUMMER, Plate II, lend the picture an impressionist feeling, as does the subject. Scenes of women at leisure had long filled the canvases of those artists who adapted the impressionist style in this country to the portrayal of an idyllic version of *fin-de-siecle* life. In Russia Serov, who epitomized many of the tendencies of his artistic generation and whose influence on Fechin was great, had similarly turned in the eighties and nineties to a lyricism free of any narrative program, presenting, as he put it, “only the joys of life” in his paintings.

In painting “Summer,” Fechin brings the values of the faces as close as possible to those of the sunny background, but by painting the figures in the open shade of the veranda, he avoids merging these values in the impressionist fashion. Thus it should be noted that “Summer” is, first and last, portraiture. Typically with Fechin, the faces of the sitters, highly modeled and painted in a smooth, flat manner, form the greatest contrast with the surface of the rest of the painting, a wilderness of heavy impasto and exposed ground, palette knife applications and vigorously brushed areas. Yet the painter seems suddenly to reverse, as it were, the direction indicated by his technique, in which the faces are given a calm surface and the setting a wild abandon, and focuses his attention on the inner life of his models, whose keenly

observed faces and expressive eyes create an intensity in startling opposition to the serenity and repose of the scene as a whole. This tension is resolved into a sense of balanced movement in the composition by the high pose of the figures, emphasized in the hands of Alexandra Fechin. Her left hand, raised toward the center of the painting as in mid-gesture, is arrested by the eye of the painter and delineated, under the play of sunlight, in exacting detail; her right hand hangs loosely by her side but is enveloped in a swirling, agitated matrix of paint.

In the disparity between figures and background, used here to dramatic and unusual effect, this work departs from true impressionist painting, in which the figures would be integrated into an even surface pattern created by juxtaposing small strokes of separate colors. Fechin’s dry-brush technique was quite different. Starting with a relatively rough canvas to which he applied a dry, absorbent ground, Fechin would build up or “scumble” layers of paint, very often applied in a “pure” or unmixed state, using both tempera and oil paint. Scumbling softened the edges of his forms, enabling him to achieve a greater visual unity between them, and created a coloristic effect similar to that of pointillist brushwork by laying one color partially over another. Just as importantly, it gave Fechin a powerful tool for modeling. He developed consummate skill in using scumbling techniques together with directional brushwork for creating areas of light and dark, opening up negative space, and defining line.

Looking at Alexandra’s hand, we can see the close alignment between Fechin’s drawing technique and his painting methods. The shadowed areas are built up with a layering of dark colors, while the light areas, in which the colors are reduced with white, are smoothly brushed. When examined closely, these areas seem to swirl together or collide, but they are in fact placed in a highly organized and deliberate manner, giving the rendering an extraordinary precision. With his transcendent skill as a draughtsman and colorist, Fechin thus fixes his imagery firmly in our consciousness, while at the same time making us aware of the world of creative *process*, a world seemingly self-contained and brought into being by the spontaneous and accidental.

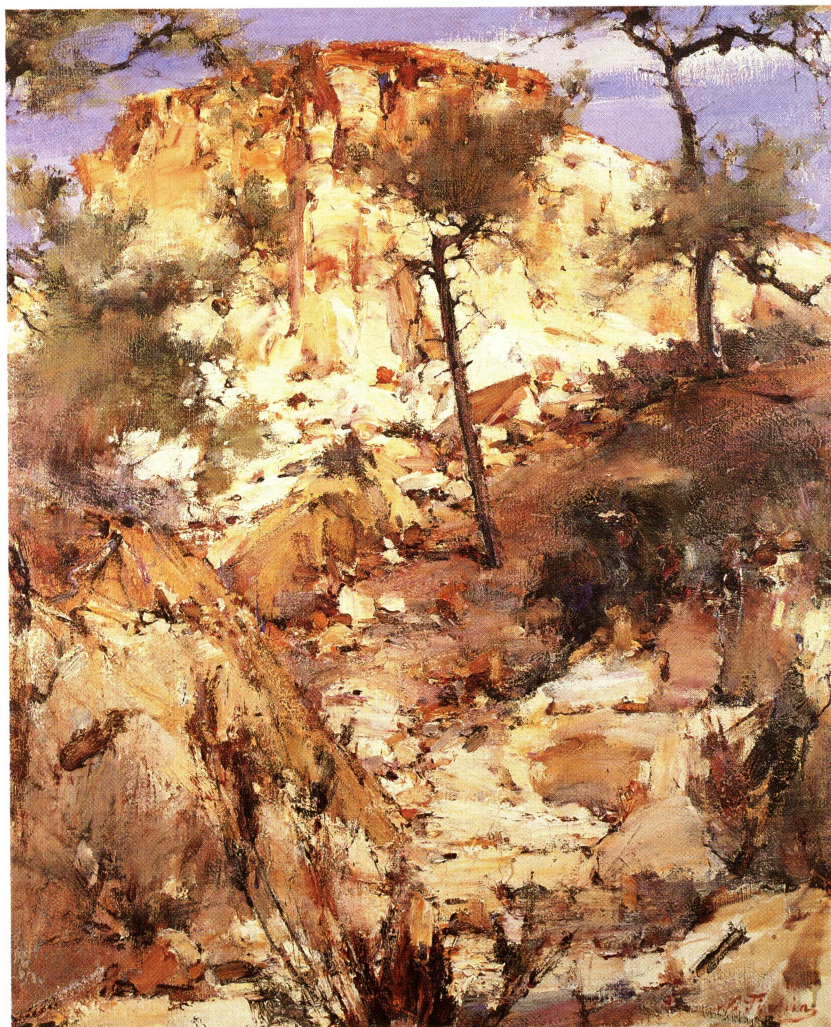


PLATE III "Torrey Pines" (1925), 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches by 30 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches, oil

“The artist must never forget that he is dealing with the entire canvas and not with any one section of it. Regardless of what he sets out to paint, the problem remains one and the same: with his own creative originality, he must fill in the canvas and make of it an organic whole.”

— NICOLAI FECHIN

In the summer of 1925 the Fechins traveled to southern California, spending a month at Laguna and a month at La Jolla. North of La Jolla, at Torrey Pines State Beach, Fechin painted TORREY PINES, Plate III. Here, in one of his most impressive landscapes, Fechin explicates his conception of organic unity in composition and brings great visual excite-

ment to a challenging and non-decorative motif. In his immediate, sensual reaction to color, Fechin seems allied to the *fauves*. Yet each wild outburst of painterly expression is carefully tied to the observation of a specific form, and each element in the composition thoughtfully related to surrounding elements, as when two shaded, intersecting planes of earth reflect alternately the cool values of the sky and the warm values of the scorched hillside. Fechin constructs his hill in the same deliberate manner in which he would model the planes of a face, and demonstrates, in his concern for structure and form, the enduring debt of modern painting to Cezanne.

When he moved to Taos in 1927, Fechin did not react to the clear atmosphere and celebrated light which had such a dramatic impact on the palette of so many artists, and while he loved the landscape of New Mexico (Eya tells us that the Sangre de Cristos reminded him of the mountains of the Caucasus), he was not moved by it to change the strategies of his art, as were the painters of the Taos and Santa Fe colonies.



PLATE IV "First Snow" (1927-33), 18 inches by 31 inches, oil



Of the landscapes painted at Taos, *FIRST SNOW* (1927-33), Plate IV, a scene near Arroyo Seco, is a delightful example. Here the necessity of maintaining an obligation to strictly constructed forms is less pressing, and the problem of uniting an acutely drawn figure with an energized background disappears. Fechin relaxes his eye and allows his brush a joyously expressive freedom. He is not concerned with light or atmosphere, or, beyond a certain point, with the organization of space, but rather with creating, through color and texture, abstract rhythms and designs which are repeated throughout the canvas. The fresh, delicate color, the rapid notation and abstraction of a large field of visual detail, the facile movement of line which harmonizes, with great economy, horizontal and vertical elements, all lend the painting its sketch-like quality, its feeling of an immediate sensual impression.

"I always strove to express . . . the subject technically, basing my work upon the process of technical executions, as a musician-virtuoso and not as a musician-composer."

—NICOLAI FECHIN

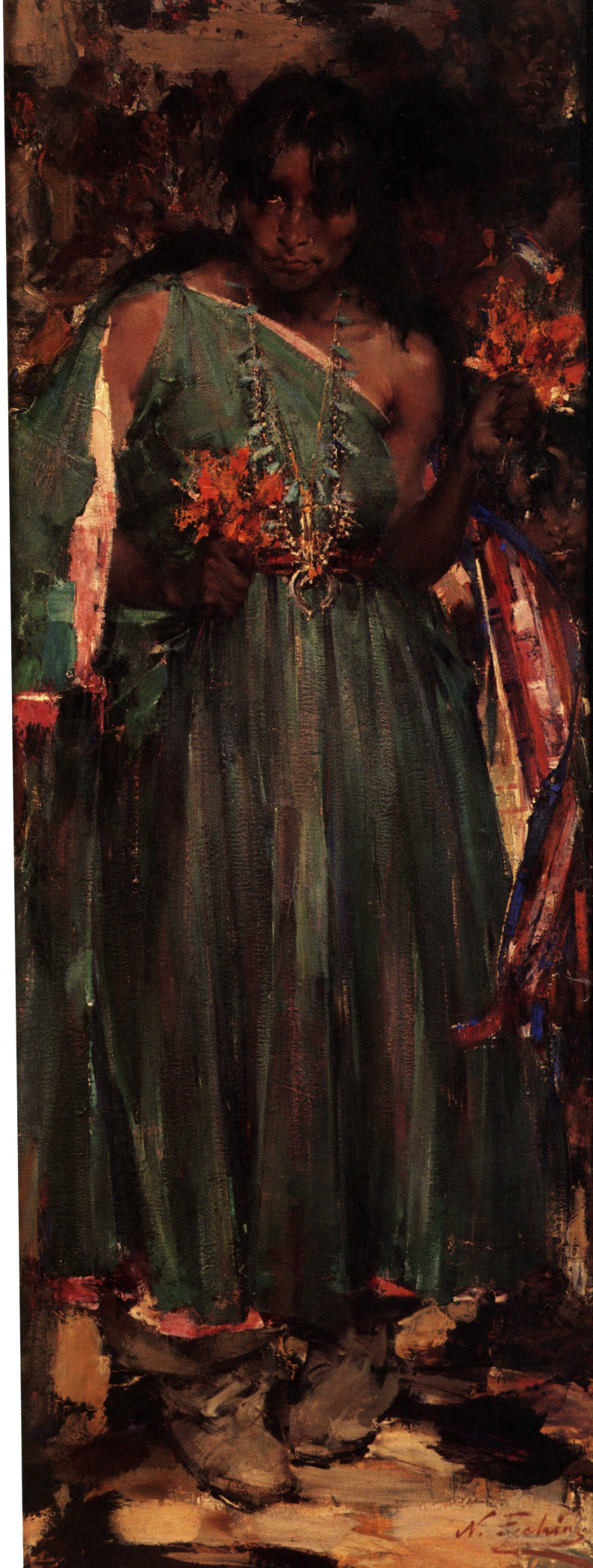




PLATE VI "Black Horse" (1927-33). 15¼ inches by 19⅝ inches. oil

In Taos, Eya Fechin tells us, the ethnic mix of Indian, Spanish and Anglo recalled her father to the diversity of cultures in his native Kazan; in particular the Pueblo Indians made him think of the forest tribes near Kazan — the Cheremiss, Mordva and Chuvass. Eya remembers an incident from the family's preliminary visit to Taos in 1926 that is wonderfully suggestive. At the pueblo they met the Taos medicine man, Dr. Bird:

He was blind and led around by a young grandson, and when he was introduced to my father, Fechin instantly asked that he pose for him — a forbidden thing for Indian elders. There occurred a conversation in Russian between my parents about how to persuade the medicine man to pose . . . Suddenly the old man asked what language we were speaking and was told it was Russian. After a deep silence, the elder stated that it sounded close to his own (Tewa) and that therefore it was safe to pose.

Fechin painted CORN DANCER, Plate V, in his Taos studio during the summer months of either 1928 or 1929. Eya Fechin remembers that her father was captivated by the wild air of this Taos woman, and by the delicacy of her green dress, in which he asked her to pose. The dress, she replied, was meant only for the dance ceremony, and could not be

used for making the portrait — but she would buy more material and make a second dress to wear for the sitting. "Corn Dancer" became Fechin's favorite American work, one which he never offered for sale. Probably his American masterpiece, this painting is an interesting summation of the important Russian influences on Fechin: first, those of Repin and the tradition of Russian realism; secondly, those of Vrubel and Serov who, together with Fechin and other fellow students of Repin, brought Russian painting into the twentieth century.

Like those of Repin's generation, Fechin's genre compositions were often huge, and reflected the central position of a portraiture in which a spiritual identification with the subject went hand in hand with a serious and contemporary humanitarian concern. The "purpose paintings" of the Russian realists depicted scenes from the daily life of workers and peasants, but included also more overtly political statements. It should be noted that Fechin, with Repin and many others, was very much in sympathy with the revolutionary stance of the liberal intelligentsia toward the Czarist regime. He contributed illustrations to journals like *Shout* and *Letters from Hell*, the titles of which speak for themselves: "They Pacified Them," "Confronting the Guardsman," "Accidental Victim," "Execution," and "For the Landowner."

Fechin's work departed from that of the older generation of realists in that it focused in large part on tribal and semi-tribal



PLATE VII
"Still Life - Corn" (1927-33),
25 inches by 30 inches, oil



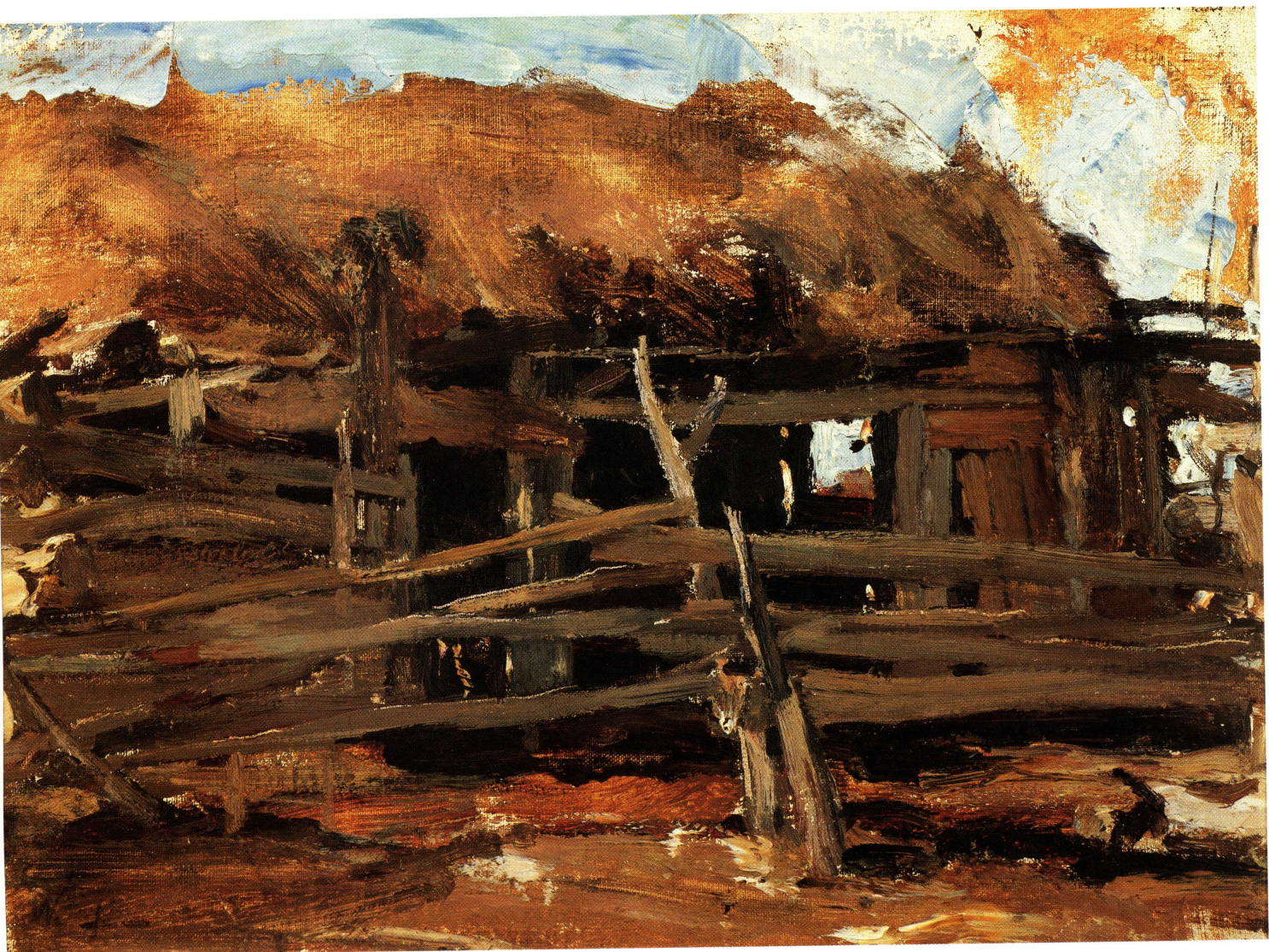


PLATE VIII "Corral" (1927-33), 14 inches by 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches, oil

peoples who were not really part of the mainstream of Russian life; it was further distinguished by the quality of fantasy which he interjected stylistically into an otherwise completely realistic narrative program. The one major painting of Russian life now in this country ("Bearing Away the Bride," collection of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame) illustrates this. The picture is descriptive in detail of a Cheremiss custom, "reported" pictorially for the first time, yet the flowing, linear design and decorative surface introduce an exaggerated, fairy tale-like atmosphere, qualities directly related to the "World of Art" program with its progressive, art nouveau tendencies.

In "Corn Dancer" the remnants of Fechin's genre style are realized in elements which are compressed into the compositional frame in an almost surrealistic manner, the faces of the other dancers swirling about the central figure like Vedder's

faces in the fire. The brooding, fantastic atmosphere is partially indebted to Vrubel; the enigmatic, expressive face of the Corn Dancer and the flowers she holds like blazing torches reinforce the dark, dreamlike ambience of the scene — in actuality, a summer ceremony performed in daylight.

Fechin's painting of the **BLACK HORSE** (1927-33), Plate VI, shares these same imaginative qualities. Fechin loved horses and enjoyed watching them run and posture in the snow in the moonlight. "Black Horse" is related to similar stylized images of horses in Vrubel's "Night Watch" and Serov's "Colts at a Watering Place;" unfortunately this painting was damaged and its effect further diluted by an old restoration.

In the assimilation of the content of genre painting into an abstracted background, we witness the evolution of Fechin the "composer" of the highly orchestrated, multi-figure can-





PLATE X "Indian Man Dancer" (c. 1929-33), 31 inches by 18 inches, oil

vases which Repin urged him to paint, into Fedchin the "virtuoso," the artist of the swift and penetrating glance and the painter of extraordinary effects: the ascendancy, in Fedchin's words, of "rendition" over "concept."

Another striking feature of "Corn Dancer," already noted in "Mrs. Krag" and "Summer," is its highly posed model. Here Fedchin was close to his great near-contemporary, Serov, whose "unsurpassable" artistry in portraiture he valued highly, according to a former student. The way Serov posed his sitter "completes the portrait," said Fedchin, meaning that the pose both completes the study of the subject by revealing his character or spiritual essence, and completes the painting by giving it a unifying design.

With Serov also, Fedchin reacted happily to the challenge of painting people who were themselves creative or artistic. Serov's most notable works portrayed singers, actors and fellow painters in attitudes that subtly revealed their creativity and inner freedom. Some of Fedchin's most inspired portrait studies were drawn from the arts: the architect Abramychyev, Ivan Fedchin (his father), Willa Cather, Aaron Gorson, Lillian Gish, Rebecca James, and W.G. Watt ("The Wood Engraver") to name only a few. In painting Indian subjects, Fedchin was again drawn to the creative aspects of personality, often posing his models with kachinas or pots, or in "Corn Dancer," portraying a participant in a ceremonial dance. Eya recalls another instance of her father's rapport with Indian peoples, usually achieved through his characteristic silence. Eya's friend, the anthropologist Alice Marriott, whose book on Maria Martinez was then a work in progress, took Fedchin to San Idelfonso to visit the celebrated potter. Fedchin at that time had moved from Taos to California, and developed an interest in ceramics, which he studied for a time with Glen Lukens. Marriott was astonished at the amount of information that flowed freely from Maria to Fedchin, who hardly spoke a word all day — more material than Marriott had been able to glean from her informant in months of research. They spent the whole day together, at the end of which Maria, to Marriott's further amazement, presented Fedchin with two very old polishing stones of long use in her family.

"Corn Dancer" also demonstrates Fedchin's exhilarating manner with the brush. In the generation of Russian painters who came to maturity around the turn of the century, this type of broad and visible, "bold" or "nervous" or "painterly"



PLATE XI "Old Patriarch" (c. 1933-40), 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, oil



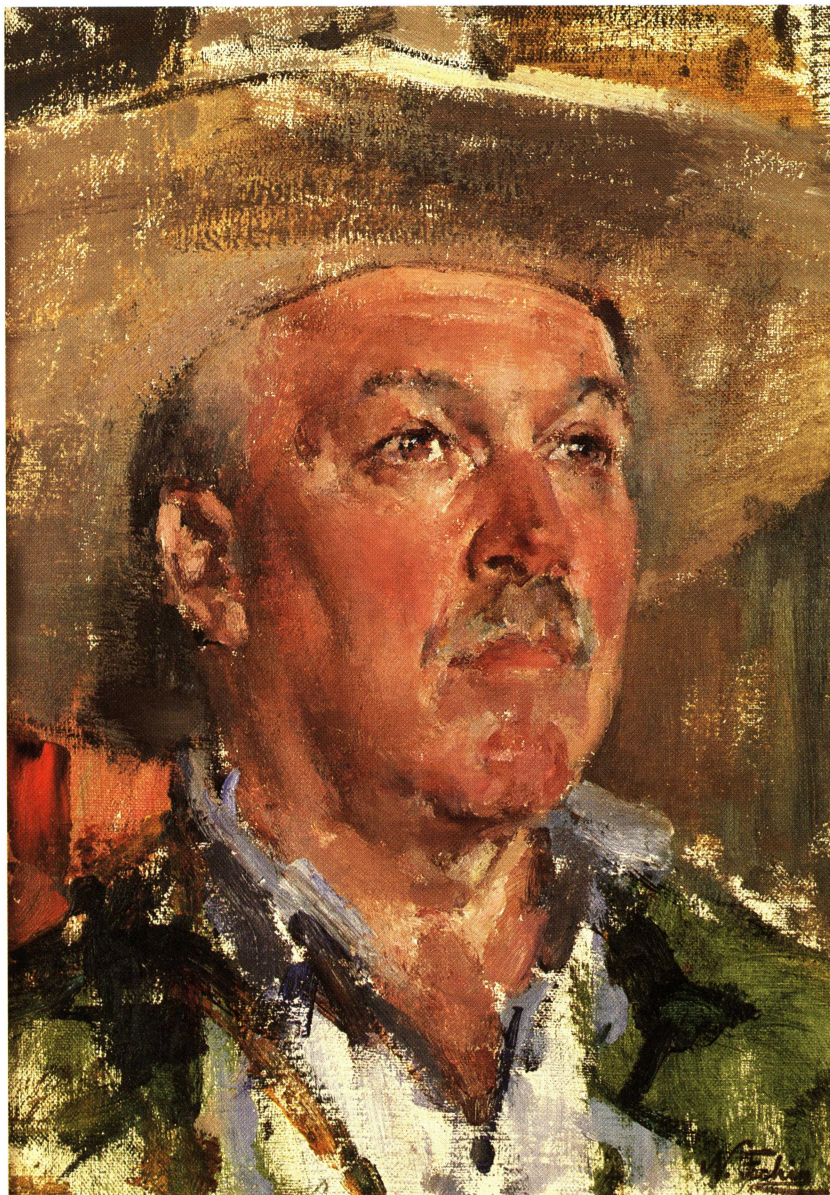


PLATE XIII "Cowboy" (c. 1933-40), 16 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches by 12 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches, oil

brushwork had gained wide acceptance. In the hands of such masters as Sargent or Sorolla or the Swedish painter Anders Zorn, it had, in fact, become an international currency. The visit of Zorn (whom Fechin and Serov both regarded as one of the greatest living portrait artists) to Moscow in 1897 reinforced the disposition of the Russians to this type of paint application, which they used to enhance the visual excitement and decorative effect of the paint surface, as well as to unify the elements of composition. Abram Arkhipov (1862-1930), Constantin Korovin (1861-1939), and Philip Malyavin (1869-1939), were leading Russian painters who shared Fechin's penchant for bravura brush handling, although it was Fechin who put the technique to its most accomplished uses.

"It is essential that the artist approach every new painting as an entirely special world of color, light, form and line."

—NICOLAI FECHIN

STILL LIFE — CORN, Plate VII, and CORRAL (1927-33), Plate VIII, are the other two pictures in the Kerr collection painted during Fechin's residence in Taos — a remarkably short six years.

In the Indian corn picture, we feel the force and energy which Fechin has imparted to inanimate materials. The care-



PLATE XIV "Mexican Boy" (c. 1945-47), 18 inches by 14 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches, oil

ful symmetry which marked the usual approach to this motif deprived painting of its vitality, in Fechin's view. Here he uses slashing diagonals to create a variety of lively shapes by introducing irregular, abstract patches of color. We see again the rich "jewel-like" color achieved through the buildup of oil paints, and the bravura technique which harmonizes areas of wet mixing and built-up impasto, scumbling, palette knife and smooth brushwork. Together these "spontaneous" features of design and paint application reveal an active, intelligent search for organic unity — the unity of a work of art which responds not to the demands of the subject but to its own internal relations of "color, light, form and line."

In "Corral" (1927-33), Fechin again takes a dynamic approach to a simple but resistant subject. He subtly differ-

entiates the color values in the horizontal and vertical elements, which are quickly dry-brushed in; he exposes the ground when painting the hay on top of the shed, and uses the palette knife to create the light of the blue sky, which reappears through the window to break up and galvanize the forms around it, giving depth to the composition.

The other still lifes in the Kerr collection were painted after Fechin moved to California and do not approach the earlier painting in expressiveness or degree of organization. CALLA LILIES (after 1948), Plate IX, includes a rendering of a small shrine which Fechin acquired on a trip to Japan. While Fechin was an exceptional painter of flowers, Eya recalls that lilies were not a particular favorite, perhaps accounting for this rather pedestrian portrayal. The smooth



M. Fickling



PLATE XVI "Hands" (after 1923), 18 inches by 13½ inches, charcoal

contours of the lilies do not harmonize well in terms of form or color with the spiky, bird of paradise-like flowers or the blocky, simplified dry-brushed background. Fechin tries here to bring recalcitrant objects into a unified whole, at the same time revealing a bias for simplification which would become more pronounced as his later career progressed.

Fechin would not let his students attempt the human figure until they had achieved some degree of competence with the still life. He refrained, however, from painting with a class, for fear he would merely be copied. The other *STILL LIFE*, Plate XIX, which depicts a group of objects disparate in form, has the look almost of a "demonstration piece" for students; probably it was more of a practice piece for Fechin's private use, and can tentatively be placed toward the end of his career, after he moved into his Santa Monica studio in 1948.

"The principle of constructing a form,
for an artist, remains the same no
matter what kind of form it may be . . .
natural or imaginary, realistic
or non-objective."

—NICOLAI FECHIN

Fechin's attitude toward modern art was well expressed by Ernest Blumenschein when he concluded that "to the blessed few whose works will live because their gifts were rich, their soul great, and their intellects profound, Modernism was a spur. Yet it did not make them lose sight of the fundamentals of order, form, proportion, and color that sings." Fechin, like Blumenschein, never lost interest in abstract painting, but reserved his scorn for the imitators, who shunned the fundamentals and embraced novelty for its own sake, producing what Fechin called "illiteracy" in the arts. In general Fechin withheld approval from abstraction that did not construct form, whether objective or not.

In Fechin's work the specific legacy of Modernism, in the simplest terms, was the domination of content by technique. Fechin held that "fine workmanship can make one forgive even triviality," but knew also that "technique should be considered only as a means to an end but never as the end itself." Within this broad philosophical framework, Fechin's

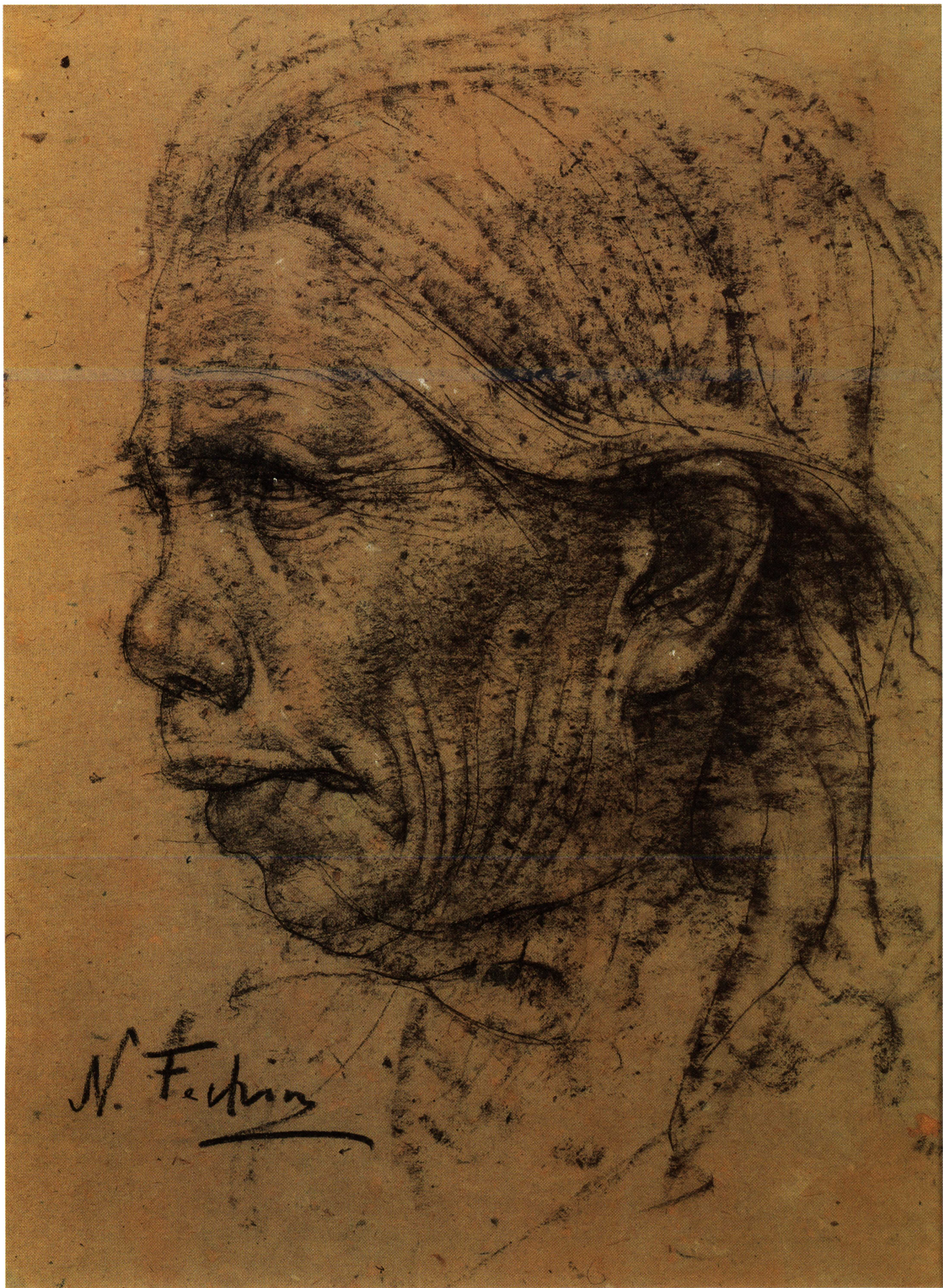


PLATE XVII "Old Indian Woman" (c. 1927-33), 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches by 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches, charcoal

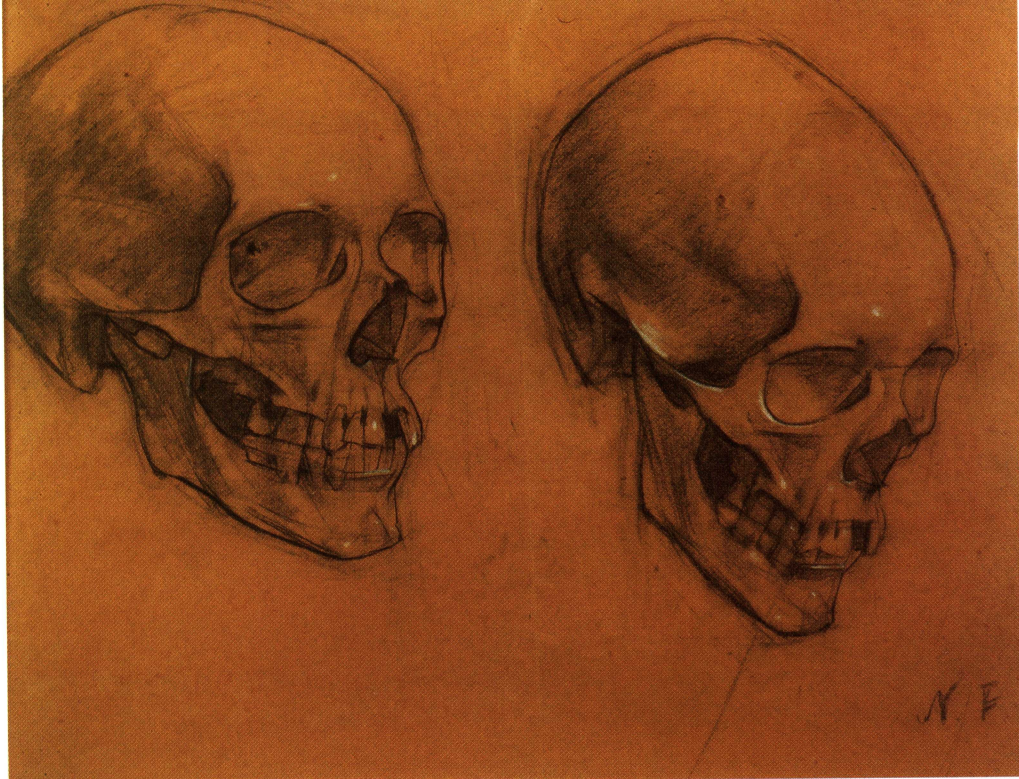


PLATE XVIII "Skulls" (after 1923), 12 inches by 17 inches, charcoal

aesthetic problem became to unify his compositions, using his formidable technical range to eliminate inessentials, rather than multiply them, and thereby realize the quick and evanescent but penetrating glimpse of character which was so dependent on the forcefulness of the entire composition.

This aesthetic problem resolved itself into the technical one of creating a dynamic correspondence between the portrait figure and its background, and this became the challenge against which Fechin constantly tested his creative powers.

INDIAN MAN DANCER (c. 1929-33), Plate X, a portrait probably of Romero Mirabal, illustrates with its bold use of primary colors, the use of paint for its own sake. We see here too the beginnings of a process of simplification, achieved in this instance through strokes of the palette knife in the background, that would increasingly come to mark Fechin's later work. These smooth areas of paint are meant both to complement the surface of the torso, and by refracting the background into many separate shapes, set up a rhythmic counterpoint to the figure which will lend him a sense of movement. In this picture, however, the desire to simplify leads to fussiness, and the bright color becomes distracting. The paint application seems not to grow naturally from the imagery, but to be laid over it. In spite of the even greater complexity of technique and amount of detail in "Corn Dancer" and "Mrs. Krag," these pictures are better able to

subordinate their expressive means to a main idea, and seem simpler and more unified in their effect.

The figure in "Indian Man Dancer" seems to result from a hardening or narrowing of emotional response. The kind of interaction between artist and model which makes "Corn Dancer" an interesting and sympathetic portrait is absent here. Fechin was most successful when he was able to relate the face as an artifact of the creative personality to the sense of a real person with a complex emotional history. Stripped of this underlying tension, the reliance on exaggerations of attitude and gesture to suggest character could easily degenerate into mere theatricality, and the portrait harden into a mask. In "Corn Dancer," we react immediately to the dignified and self-contained world of creative ritual, but we sense also the shy but passionate inner person in whom Fechin perhaps saw a reflection of his own temperament.

"Art, like the whole of our life, submits
to the eternal law of change, and
any attempts to stop it at one particular
level are like vain efforts to
stop time itself."

—NICOLAI FECHIN



PLATE XIX "Still Life" (1948), 15¼ inches by 15¼ inches, oil



PLATE XX "Indian Boy," 10¼ inches, wood



PLATE XXI "Indian Boy," 9¼ inches, bronze

After "Corn Dancer," the heroic scale was largely abandoned. The creative problem of uniting figure and ground became increasingly resolved through a simplification of technical means in Fechin's later portraits, which, although they often lack the visual excitement and passionate introspection of his earlier work, have been like an open textbook for subsequent generations of American figure painters.

The remaining portraits in the Kerr collection were almost certainly painted after Fechin had left Taos for California. In part, these pictures reflect a fascination with the exotic; although not as restless as his compatriot and Taos neighbor Gaspard, Fechin too traveled to the Orient, and also to Mexico, in search of colorful material. Yet Fechin's interest in the diversity of human types grew largely from his folk background and his own aesthetic interests. His was not an anthropological orientation — he did not record typology or investigate different cultures; in New Mexico he found all he needed at Taos and did not paint at the other pueblos. Fechin selected the portraits for his gallery of the "family of man" in response to his basic human sympathies, to his feelings of kinship for the creative personality in its universal incarnations, and to his artistic affinity for exaggerations of physiognomy. While we are drawn to these "exotic" portraits more than to his commissioned portraits, we really respond more to Fechin's own artistic and emotional criteria than to the appeal of the strange or "primitive."

Three of Fechin's sitters were natives of one of the world's most unusual cultural areas, Los Angeles County. The OLD PATRIARCH (c. 1933-40), Plate XI, was a Hollywood extra who often posed in the studios of Earl Stendahl's large gallery on Wilshire Boulevard. THE FORTUNE TELLER (c. 1933-40), Plate XII, was a real gypsy from downtown Los Angeles, who offered her services at Stendahl's as a clairvoyant in return for silver dollars. Not a professional model, she sat only once for Fechin, and did not enjoy the experience. CARMELITA (c. 1933-40), Plate XXIII, also an Angeleno, was a black woman. Fechin was enchanted with black skin; his first portrait of an American had been "Negro Girl With Orange." He also modeled the head of Carmelita in wax, intending later to cast it in bronze. Eya Fechin remembers the painting on exhibition at Stendahl's gallery; the brilliant color of the blouse prompted two visitors to look behind the canvas to see if a light had been placed there.

The unfinished COWBOY (c. 1933-40), Plate XIII, may have been done in Los Angeles or on a visit to Fechin's friend, cartoonist J. R. Williams, at his K-4 Ranch near Prescott, Arizona, which Fechin described in a letter to his brother as a "completely wild area, like in Siberia only the climate is



PLATE XXII "Christ," 10¼ inches, bronze

different — it's hot," so hot, in fact, according to Eya, that many of his paints melted.

MEXICAN BOY (c. 1945-47), Plate XIV, a portrait of the son of a workman named Ricardo who had assisted Fechin in the creation of his "Russian" house and studio in Taos, was made during a visit back to New Mexico after Fechin's divorce.

In 1938 Fechin traveled with his friend Milan Rupert to Java, Bali and Japan. BALINESE GIRL, Plate XV, was painted on this trip.

In all of these portraits, the use of a wider brushstroke, while remaining true to facial anatomy, creates a more abstract form. There is much less tonal variation in these faces than those in "Summer" or "Corn Dancer;" similarly the hands of "Carmelita" or "Mexican Boy" are now extremely sketchy. A more unified surface is obtained by making the brush strokes more even throughout the painting. The use of the dry brush is more pervasive but the surface is no longer as built up and the color is simpler and more direct.

The background itself becomes simpler and in "Balinese Girl" consists almost entirely of the exposed white ground. Fechin has introduced a patch of purple color, which may or may not have been abstracted from a textile or other real object, behind the model's head, thereby reducing the contrast of values in this area of the canvas and leading the eye to the area of maximum interest, the facial features. In addition, a negative space is created behind the neck which both gives depth to the image and breaks up the design of the painting into a variety of abstract and visually interesting shapes.

Fechin had not attempted his own likeness in many years and after he moved into his Santa Monica studio, felt that the time for such an essay had perhaps come around. In his SELF PORTRAIT (after 1948), Plate XXIV, we see again the importance of the pose which "completes the portrait" of the confident artist, who holds his loaded brush completely horizontally, with an air of deliberateness and balance, as he contemplates his own image with a bemused air. The picture is painted with great economy, as in the use of exposed ground in the collar. The dry-brush technique dominates, and we see traces of the "silver-gray" palette which always recurred in his painting. Fechin disliked making self-portraits, and while the self-consciousness of the effort engen-

ders a certain stiffness, this is softened by a gentle humor at his own discomfort. There is an introspection, a feeling for the whole person here which is missing in "Old Patriarch," with its surface vivacity and theatricality, or even in "Mexican Boy" with its subtle color and beautiful draughtsmanship.

In Fechin's drawings the core of his art stands revealed. "We love and admire Fechin's virtuosity as a painter, but are filled with wonder at his consummate mastery of line," writes one of his critics. "If Fechin had never painted a single picture, we should still hail him as a great artist because of his drawings."

Far from being photographic, these drawings are attempts to select and organize detail into the salient features of the subject. Fechin was not afraid to "exaggerate the principle" in order to capture what was essential in a likeness. "You see too much," he once cautioned a novice student. During the early forties, Fechin felt that his own drawings were becoming overly complex, Eya recalls, and he applied the corrective of studying Holbein, whose economy of line he admired.

Fechin's charcoal portrait of an OLD INDIAN WOMAN (c. 1927-33), Plate XVII, is typical, however, both for its poetic beauty and for the way in which it controls a remarkable amount of detail without becoming cluttered.

Fechin felt that an artist, just like a professional musician, needed daily practice to remain in top form and his study of the four "HANDS" (after 1923), Plate XVI, which are his own, is such a practice piece. Fechin did many such studies; we have noted the importance of the hands, and their role in emphasizing gesture, in many of his paintings. The study of the two "SKULLS" (after 1923), Plate XVIII, is another practice piece; Fechin always kept a skull around, and would use it when no models were available or when he tired of painting from a model.

Fechin's interest in sculpture grew directly out of his Russian folk art background. Fechin learned woodcarving in the shop of his father, who carved and gilded the iconostases, or frameworks which held the icons, in Russian Orthodox churches. Woodcarving remained a very important activity to Fechin, who also engaged in architectural decoration and furniture making. Fechin's wood sculptures are portraiture: Russian peasants, Indians, and purely imaginary, fairy tale creatures. Fechin's figures always have a deliberately rough,



unfinished look; they emerge organically from the wood in the same way that the figures in his paintings seem to grow out of their matrix of paint. Fechin was deeply impressed by the art of Sergei Konenkov, whose work was based on a revival of Russian folk art traditions. Fechin considered Konenkov the greatest sculptor of his time; he also admired some of the fanciful sculpture of Vrubel.

While Fechin loved the immediacy of wood, its tactile qualities and the way in which the asymmetry of the grain suggested compositions, he also made some models in wax, which he meant to have cast in bronze but never did. The CHRIST, Plate XXII, figure was cast around 1970 at Roman Bronze Works by Hammer Galleries. The INDIAN BOY, Plates XX and XXI, was cast through the lost wax process, in an edition of 15, by Fenn Galleries in 1974.

For Nicolai Ivanovich Fechin, whose life was swept through one of the terrible vortices of modern history, vengeance for the ravages of time had to be won with the "silence, exile and cunning" of the artist. In his art, Fechin found the spiritual continuity to overcome the dislocations of history.

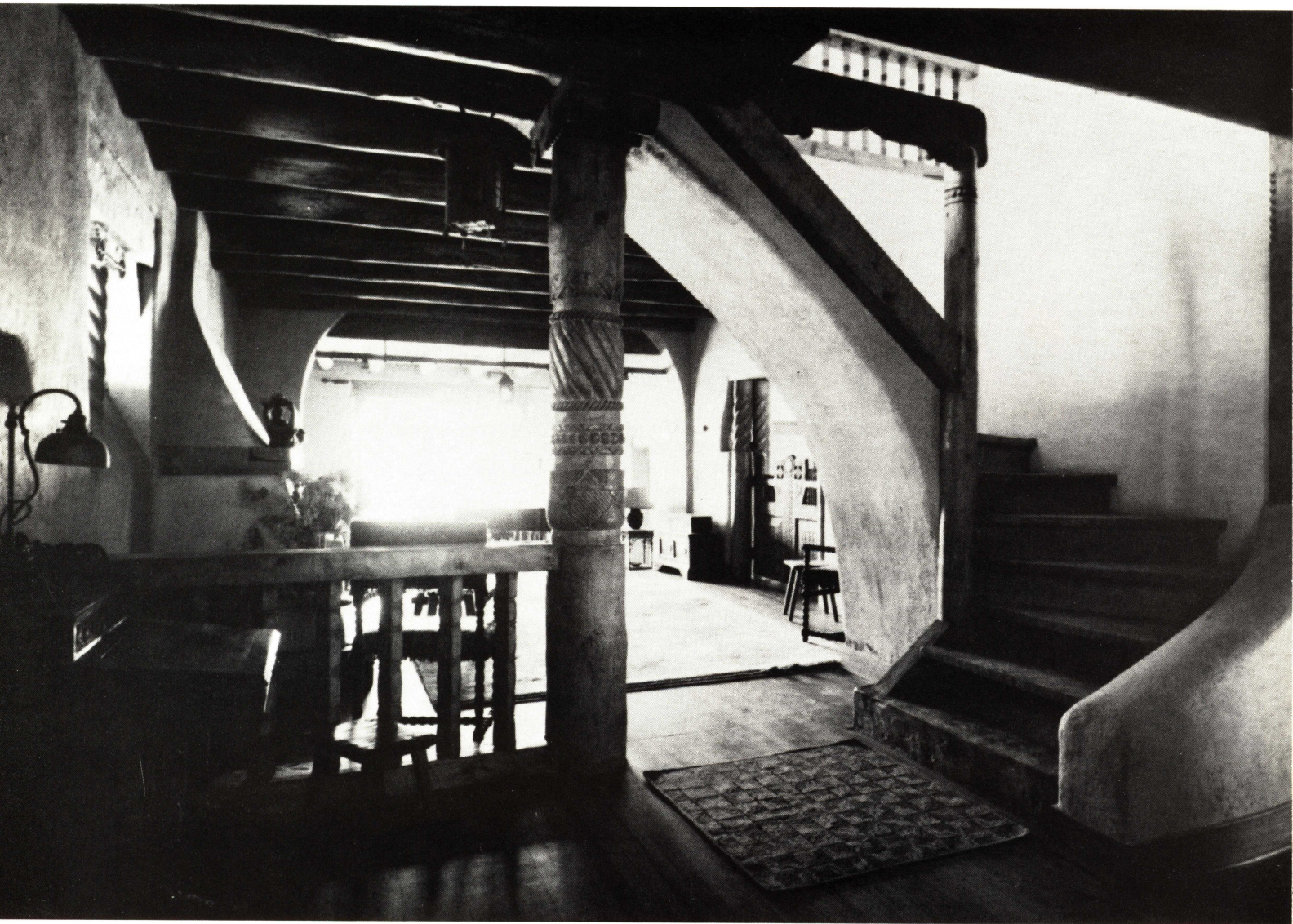
Yet Fechin never expected his move to America to be permanent; when reasonable working conditions again prevailed in Russia, he would go home again. His emigration was to Fechin like an amputation, and his native land never relinquished its hold on him. Eventually he was able to transplant his art to a new soil, but it remained an essentially foreign growth. In Taos he built a Russian house, with handcarved *vigas*, doors, niches for icons and santos, and furniture decorated in the folk tradition he loved. Eya says that "indeed, he was compelled, driven to reproduce such an environment within which his soul felt at home and his painting flourished." Fechin wrote to his brother that "I have come to the conclusion that creative people should not leave their homeland no matter what happens to it . . . in a foreign country one only physically exists, living in constant loneliness, not understanding the purpose of life." After the war Fechin longed to return to Russia but felt uncertain of his welcome; he had been away so long, and felt guilty about not having stayed through the hard times to share the struggle. When he

learned of the welcome given his friend Konenkov at this time, he was very excited. He initiated a correspondence with the museum in Kazan about donating a large body of his work.

Clearly, Fechin's art was thoroughly Russian in character and did not undergo, as so many American commentators would have it, any sort of liberating transformation through his experience in this country. For their part, Soviet critics, while generally admiring Fechin's achievement, now conclude that had he remained at home, his early "promise" as a creator of serious "thematic" works would have been fulfilled, and his descent into affectation, technique empty of content and "philosophical depth" might have been avoided. Yet Russian art, so pregnant with rich possibilities in the first decades of the century, suffered a terribly ironic fate in a nation whose very reason for existence was to bring the future into being. Fechin chose to create an art that would exist according to its own laws and reflect the spiritual autonomy of man. Although his style was not too radical to have precluded acceptance in the Soviet Union had he returned, his art would not have been nourished by the constraints of socialist realism. "One consolation," he wrote to his brother, "is that fate has divided my life between two great peoples and this way gave me the possibility to finish what I started."

My thanks above all to Eya Fechin for invaluable help in preparing this article; also to Linda Lebsack of Rosenstock Arts, Carmen Bria and Carl Grimm of the Western Center for the Conservation of Fine Arts, Kang Cho, George Schriever and Lucy McCarthy for translation of Russian materials.

... S.L. GOOD



Views on this page are of the Fechin house in Taos, extensively worked on by the artist himself. Fechin started with a small two story adobe structure and made extensive additions as well as renovations of the existing structure. According to Eya Fechin, her father particularly liked the adobe houses because their soft contours looked as though they were melting back into the earth. Fechin also appreciated the way the native pine was incorporated structurally into the adobe buildings. In the five years that followed Fechin worked with the wood and earth to make his home memorable, even carving woodwork, doors and furniture, and designing hardware and light fixtures himself. Today, the Fechin house, extensively restored, is the home of the Fechin Institute.

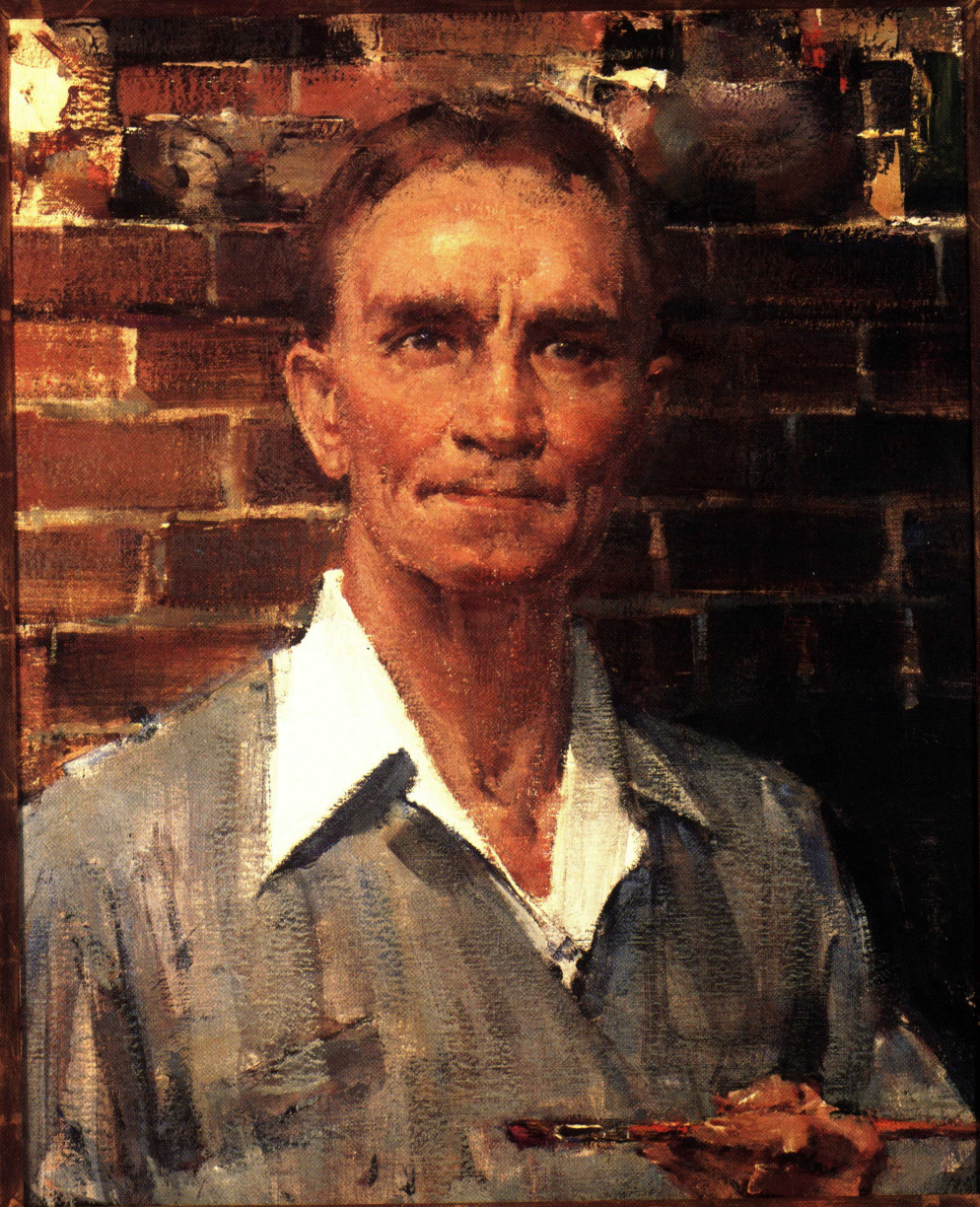
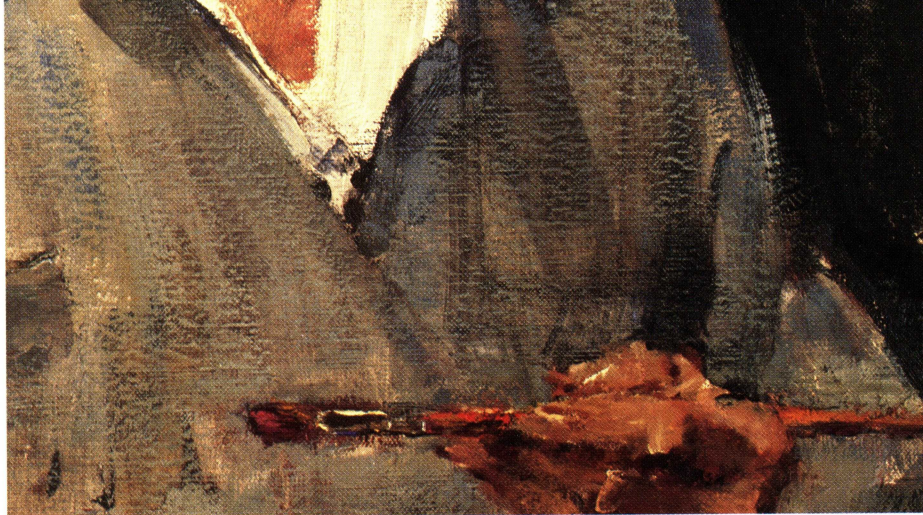


PLATE XXIV "Self Portrait" (after 1948), 24 inches by 20 inches, oil

NICOLAI FECHIN

BIOGRAPHY

- 1881 Born in Kazan, Russia, December 9 (Old Julian Calendar, November 26)
- 1894 Thirteen year-old Fechin receives 10 rubles, his first paid commission, for drafting plans for a country chapel.
- 1895 Enters newly opened Kazan Art School.
- 1900 Graduates from Kazan Art School, is accepted into the Imperial Academy of Art in St. Petersburg (Leningrad). Studies under Ilya Repin.
- 1903-04 Goes on two summer trips along the South Enisei River in Siberia with an engineer-geologist.
- 1904-06 Repin leaves Academy; Fechin experiments freely with painting techniques and his mature style begins to crystalize.
- 1906-07 Spends summer vacations sketching local customs in the hinterland outside Kazan.
- 1908 Becomes instructor at the Kazan Art School. Graduates from Art Academy with top honors. Is invited to enter international exhibits.
- 1910 Fechin travels through Austria, Italy and France. Participates in first American exhibit, Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, with "Mlle. Sapojnikova" and "Portrait of My Father." Exhibits "Bearing Away the Bride" and "Portrait Sketch" at the International Exhibition in Munich.
- 1913 Marries Alexandra Belkovich, daughter of the founder of the Kazan Art School. Sends "Lady in Pink" to Carnegie Institute.
- 1914 Birth of only child, daughter Eya. The Fechins move to a home in the country near Kazan.
- 1923 Fechin, who has developed tuberculosis, leaves behind chaotic conditions in Russia in aftermath of First World War and Russian Revolution, emigrates to U.S. with aid of American patrons, W. S. Stimmel and J. R. Hunter.
On August 1 arrives in New York and lives there four years. Teaches art classes at Grand Central Art Galleries. Paints "Portrait of Mrs. Krag" and portraits of Willa Cather and Lillian Gish.
- 1924 Fechin paints "Summer," "Tuppy with Cat," and "The Wood Engraver" at Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. "The Wood Engraver" awarded Proctor Prize at National Academy of Design. First U.S. one-man show at Arden Gallery, New York City.
- 1925 Spends summer in southern California as guest of his major patron, John Burnham. Paints "Torrey Pines."
Has one-man show at Art Institute of Chicago.
- 1926 Summer visit to Taos, New Mexico. Paints portrait of Dr. Bird, Taos medicine man.
- 1927 Moves to Taos. Stays in guest house of Mabel Dodge Luhan.
- 1928 Begins remodeling adobe house with handcarved woodwork.
- 1931 Obtains U.S. Citizenship.
- 1933 Divorced by Alexandra. Goes to New York for winter and then moves to southern California. Exhibits with Stendahl Gallery.
- 1935 "Summer" awarded first prize at the first annual exhibition of the Academy of Western Painters in Los Angeles.
- 1936 Travels in Mexico.
- 1938 Travels with friend Milan Rupert to Japan, Java, Bali.
- 1948 Buys the studio in Santa Monica, California.
- 1955 Special collectors' exhibit simultaneously in La Jolla Art Center and San Diego Museum.
On October 5 dies quietly in his sleep in his Santa Monica studio.
On December 20, his only grandchild, Nicaela, born.
- 1976 Exchange exhibits with USSR.
Fechin ashes returned to Kazan by daughter and granddaughter.
- 1979 Fechin house becomes State Historical Site, listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
- 1981 June-August, Centennial Exhibition, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
December 9, Centennial Show and Conference in the Fine Arts Museum, Kazan, USSR.
- 1981-83 Fechin Institute, a non-profit institution, organized in Taos, New Mexico.
First annual exhibition of Fechin's works held in September and October.



“THE WORKS OF NICOLAI FECHIN”

PLATE I, front cover	“Portrait of Mrs. Krag” (1923) Previously known as “Tea in Santa Monica”	oil	33 inches by 35 inches
PLATE II, page 2	“Summer” (1924) Sometimes known as “Alexandra and Eya Fechin”	oil	50 inches by 50 inches
PLATE III, page 5	“Torrey Pines” (1925)	oil	36 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches by 30 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches
PLATE IV, page 6	“First Snow” (1927-33)	oil	18 inches by 31 inches
PLATE V, page 8	“Corn Dancer” (1928-29)	oil	74 inches by 28 inches
PLATE VI, page 9	“Black Horse” (1927-33)	oil	15 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches by 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches
PLATE VII, page 10	“Still Life - Corn” (1927-33)	oil	25 inches by 30 inches
PLATE VIII, page 12	“Corral” (1927-33)	oil	14 inches by 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches
PLATE IX, page 13	“Calla Lillies” (1948)	oil	24 inches by 20 inches
PLATE X, page 14	“Indian Man Dancer” (c. 1929-33)	oil	31 inches by 18 inches
PLATE XI, page 15	“Old Patriarch” (c. 1933-40)	oil	29 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches
PLATE XII, page 16	“The Fortune Teller” (c. 1933-40)	oil	20 inches by 16 inches
PLATE XIII, page 17	“Cowboy” (c. 1933-40)	oil	16 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches by 12 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches
PLATE XIV, page 18	“Mexican Boy” (c. 1945-47)	oil	18 inches by 14 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches
PLATE XV, page 19	“Balinese Girl” (1938)	oil	18 inches by 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
PLATE XVI, page 20	“Hands” (after 1923)	charcoal	18 inches by 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
PLATE XVII, page 21	“Old Indian Woman” (c. 1927-33)	charcoal	15 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches by 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches
PLATE XVIII, page 22	“Skulls” (after 1923)	charcoal	12 inches by 17 inches
PLATE XIX, page 23	“Still Life” (after 1948)	oil	15 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches by 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
PLATE XX, page 24	“Indian Boy”	wood	10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches
PLATE XXI, page 24	“Indian Boy”	bronze	9 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
PLATE XXII, page 25	“Christ”	bronze	10 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
PLATE XXIII, page 27	“Carmelita” (c. 1933-40)	oil	24 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches by 20 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches
PLATE XXIV, page 30	“Self Portrait” (after 1948)	oil	24 inches by 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches

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"The Works of Nicolai Fechin"	Cover
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FRONT COVER:

"Portrait of Mrs. Krag," by Nicolai Fechin.

BACK COVER:

Detail, "Still Life - Corn" by Nicholai Fechin.
The complete painting may be found on page 10.

ILLUSTRATIONS:

All Fechin paintings in this issue are from the collection of the Robert S. and Grayce B. Kerr Foundation. The photographs inside front cover and page 29 are courtesy of the Fechin Institute.

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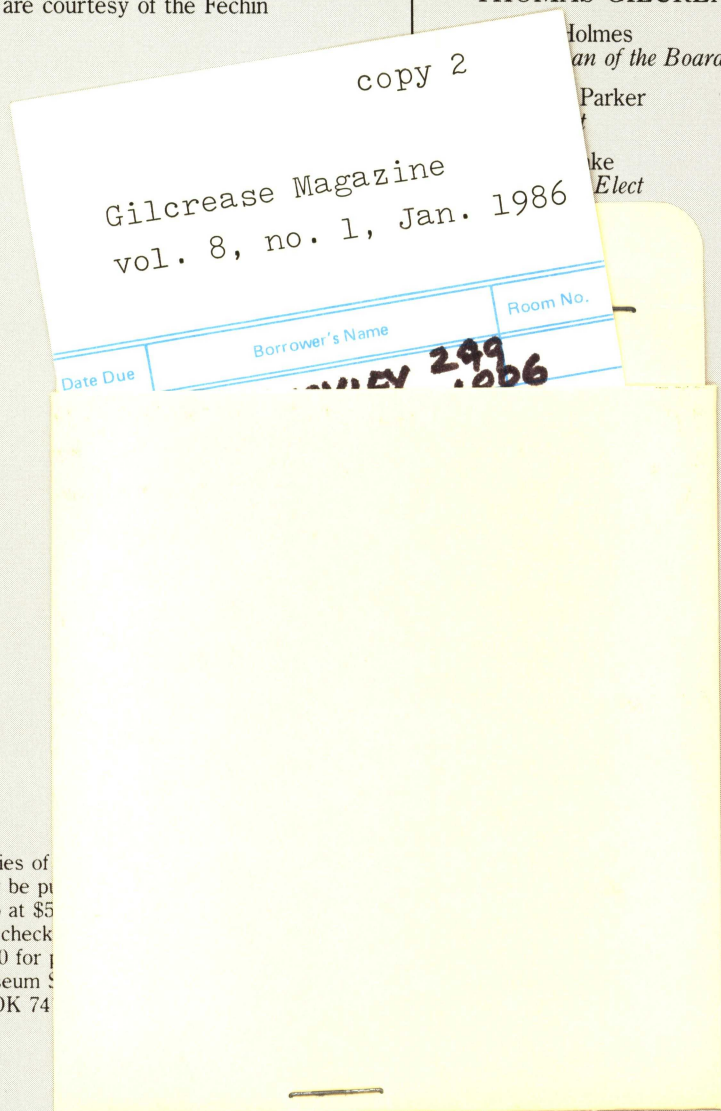
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