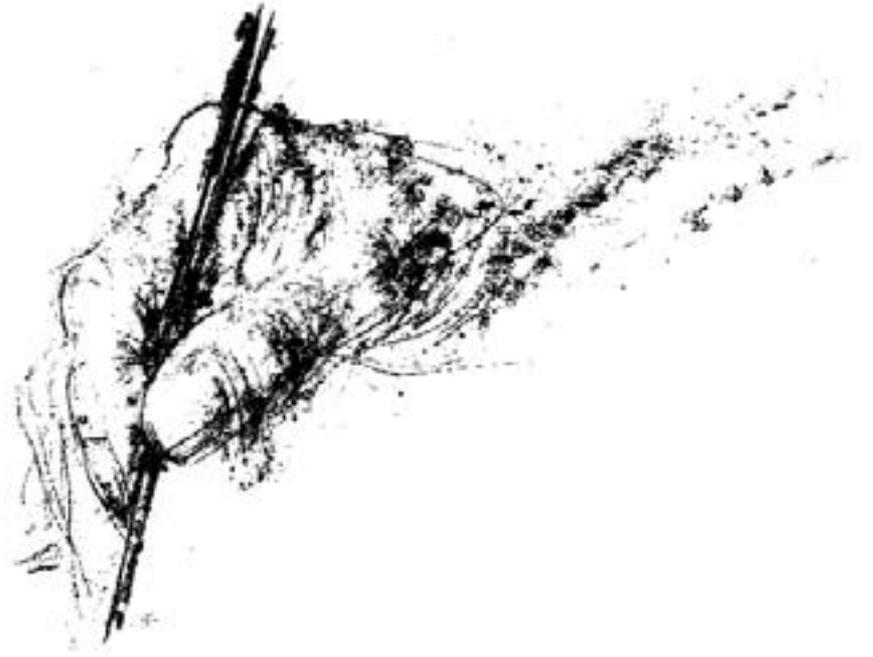


THE GENIUS OF NICOLAI FECHIN



RECOLLECTIONS BY FORREST FENN

PREFACE



Many of the words that follow are but the wayside notes and remembrances of an interested vagabond who climbed over the old walls of Taos and into the minds of those who played a starring role in the art history of that golden place. In the natural order of things, the years bring changes so insidious as to be almost unnoticed, none the least of which are in the minds of those who watched them happen. Long-gone thoughts may come seeping back in easy conversations among friends. It is from such discussions that I learned the most about Fechin.

Generally, art historians have elevated their human subjects to a lofty throne, high above the fray, where real people don't exist. I will not be one of those. Perhaps nothing is more deceptive than absolute candor. If an artist's work is to be remembered, it surely must be enhanced by the honest recording of who the artist really was. That's what this book is all about: Nicolai Fechin and a few of those who touched him on the way by.

It also must be said that much of my information came from Frank Waters, Saki Karavas, Jane Hiatt, Ivan Dunton, Regina Cooke, Fremont Ellis, Marion and Kibby Couse, Harold McCracken, Helen Blumenschein, Alexandra Fechin and her daughter, Eya. And, of course, Katherine Benepe, Milam Rupert, Ed Lineberry, and Dorothy Brett, who presented their unique perspectives, as did Dora Gaspard.

I must also credit my wonderful Taos archive of taped interviews, manuscripts, photographs, letters, and idle scribblings. They're what made me start this story in the first place.

I am indebted to John Schiff, who moved me back so I could see the forest, and to Charmay Allred, who removed as many bumps from my prose as my vanity would allow. Both were essential to this effort and have my special thanks.

INTRODUCTION



In 1972, I retired after twenty years of flying fighters in the Air Force, a career that culminated in a hectic, year-long tour in Viet Nam, where I flew 328 combat missions and was shot down twice. A long night spent in the jungles of Laos hoping to be rescued provided me with ample time to contemplate my lot and review what cards I had left. One thing for sure, I knew there had to be something better than this.

With a wife and two young daughters, \$800 a month retirement, a high school education, and no business experience or probabilities, I decided to move on. So in Texas I packed the family into the truck and headed for Santa Fe. It was the only place I knew where I could have a

Paul Weaver and Eya chat during the opening of the Fechin show at Fenn Galleries in 1976, as famed writer Frank Waters and Forrest Fenn look on. Weaver published the Fechin biography.

Photo courtesy Fenn Archives

business and wear blue jeans, hush puppies, and short-sleeved shirts. I had thrown my watch out in a cotton field after skipping my retirement ceremony from the military. Maybe that was a sign that I was ready for something new.

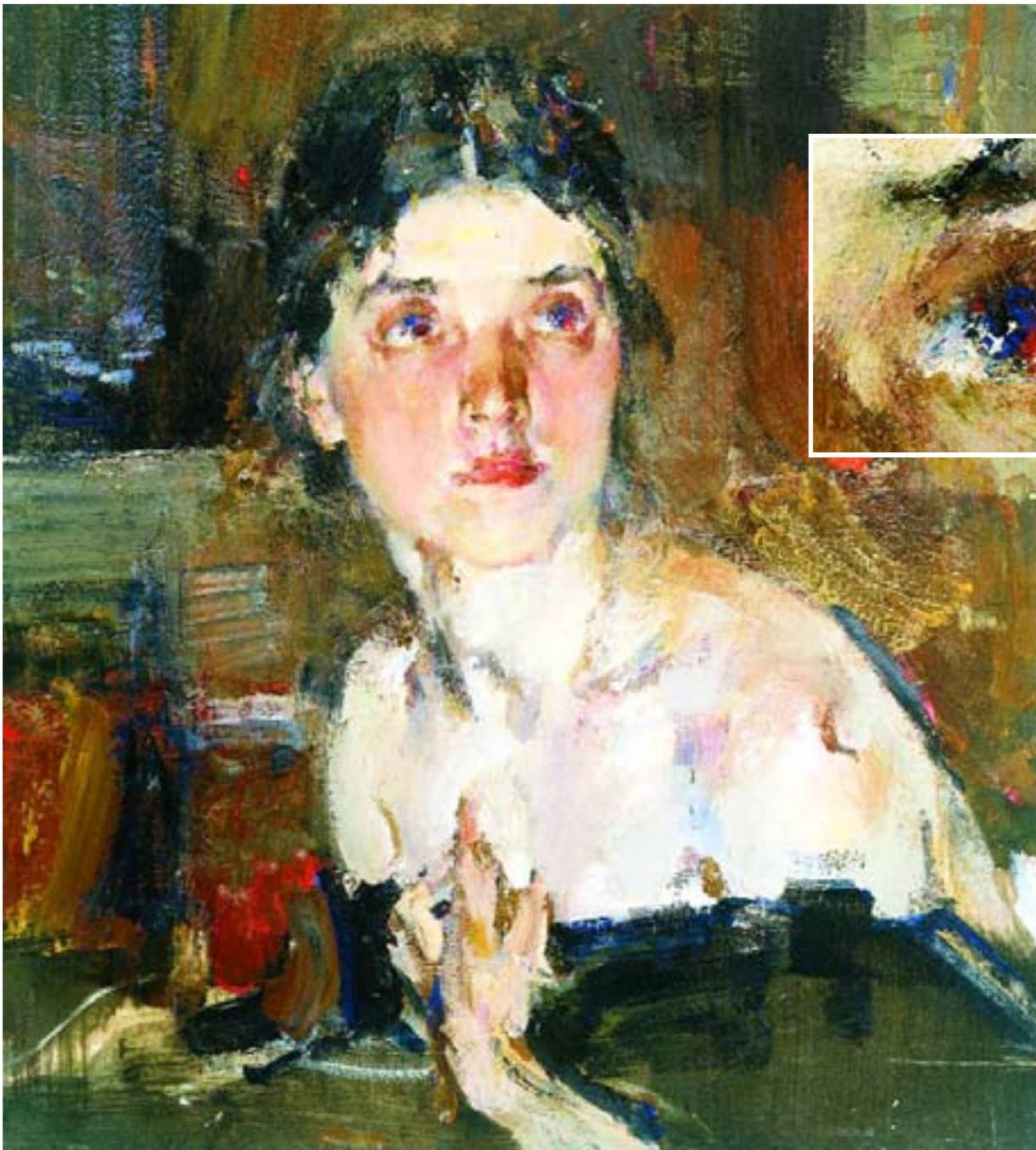
My wife and I traded for a large house on the main drag and remodeled it into a gallery. Although I had never owned a painting and knew few people who did, I was suddenly in the art business full-time. It had always seemed to me that paintings were something that women made while the men folk were outside fixing the fence or something. I had a lot to learn, and things started happening fast. Steve Rose, from the Biltmore Gallery in Los Angeles, came around and introduced me to the work of Nicolai Fechin, and that was it for me. My mind suddenly was like a sponge. I was both shocked and captivated by the strength and beauty of his work, and all of a sudden my young business life had focus and direction.

Fechin was primarily a painter of portraits, and his oil studies reveal the very deep-down character of his subjects. At times I thought it was arrogant of him to even attempt with a brush what, to him, must have been so easy. For example, on occasion, he would paint an impressionistic eye or lips that, when taken out of context, might not even be recognizable as such. Yet when viewed from a step back, the picture melded into a surprisingly beautiful composition. He used the subject's hands to command the temperament and attitude of the painting. It was fun to cover the hands in his portraits and look at the paintings again to see their totally different personalities .

Even his floral paintings held me in awe and disbelief of their beauty and their seemingly complex simplicity. Many of his backgrounds could be described as a rainbow symphony of splotches, lines, forms, and smears that enveloped the overall composition to make a very pleasing picture. It was marvelous.

But this book is not about the artist's paintings. It's about Nicolai Fechin, the man. It is also about his photographs — a series never seen before — that were taken in 1936, while he was traveling in Mexico with a group of his students.

It has been twenty-eight years since a client purchased the first of about 540 pieces of Fechin's art sold in our gallery, the first one seventeen years after his death. Although I never had the chance to meet him, over the years I traveled to many places seeking information about his life, even to his home in a distant and foreboding land. I interviewed many of those who had known him intimately, some who had been his neighbors and casual friends, and a few who had painted in his classes. In that search no detractors were revealed to me save his ex-wife and maybe myself, if the full truth were known. While the purpose of this book is to display the photographs he made in Mexico, it will do much more. An introduction to the photographer is necessary, so this is the revealing story about that man.



Detail

- 5 *ALEXANDRA* oil on plywood, 25 x 20 inches. This unfinished portrait is the last painting Fechin worked on before they were divorced in 1933. He stored it in an old trastero in Mabel Luhan's hay barn where it remained for thirty-one years, until Eya retrieved it and sold it to the author.