

OWINGS-DEWEY FINE ART

A GALLERY FOR 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN ART
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Nicolai Fechin

(b. 1881 Kazan, Russia – d. 1955 Santa Monica, California)

Nicolai Fechin arrived in New York in 1923. Born in Russia, Fechin was the protégé of Ilya Repin, the highly respected and best known Russian realist of the pre-revolutionary era. When in 1910 Fechin was granted a state scholarship to travel to the art centers of Europe, he relished in the opportunity to see firsthand examples of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists and the German Impressionists and Expressionists. He then returned to Kazan to teach other young artists what he had learned. The first the U.S. knew of Nicolai Fechin was the showing of one of his pictures at the International Exhibition of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. It was there that W.S. Stimmell, an American art collector, began to purchase this little-known Russian artist's pictures.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Fechin spent years in poverty and seclusion because of his identification with the old regime. In 1923, Stimmel arranged for the artist and his family to emigrate to the United States. Portrait commissions occupied him immediately upon his arrival in New York. The artist prospered in New York; however, after three years he developed tuberculosis and was ordered by his doctor to move to a dry climate. Fechin knew of Taos from John Young Hunter, a fellow artist, and in 1927 he accepted Mabel Dodge Luhan's invitation to visit the art colony. After a few months in Taos he purchased a seven-acre tract of land adjacent to Kit Carson Park and built a house and studio there.

Fechin is most well known for his outstanding Taos portraits. He loved the colorful costumes of the Pueblo ceremonies, and he found a wealth of cooperative portrait subjects, for he found it easy to establish rapport with the Indians. They reminded him of the nomadic tribes of his native country, and he set to work to capture in glowing color the temper of these people. Fechin was a master draftsman and had great technical proficiency as a painter. In all of his portraits there is an underlying structure of superb drawing. Over this, he applied broad, slashing strokes of pigment. When painting a face, where individual elements were differentiated carefully, traditional light and shade techniques were used, but overall the forms were enlivened with seeming accidents of charged brushwork. Fechin perfected a technique of applying a series of oil glazes over an underpainting of white casein tempera; the resulting paintings are a symphony of brilliant, lustrous reds and browns. He continued to use the same basic palette throughout his life.

The artist was also fascinated by the landscape and the architecture of Taos. In his few landscapes, Fechin allowed his execution to communicate some of the pleasure involved in fearless paint application. All of this concurred with a sense of lustrous color, daringly combined for the maximum of visual excitement, yet still rooted in natural appearance.

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Fechin's career flowered in Taos and he developed artistically, but his personal life grew increasingly unbearable. In 1934, when his wife divorced him, Fechin and his daughter left Taos, first for New York and then for Santa Monica, where he established an art school. Although he continued to paint in California, his Taos paintings remain among his finest artistic achievements.