

Painter Nicolai Fechin Returns to His Homeland

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A drawing of a Native American and Fechin's "Joshua Trees," from the Southwest of the United States.

As stories of relationships go, this one is small. But I'm too big a fan of paradox to ignore it.

I grew up, as I enjoy telling people, in a desert. The Mojave Desert is a huge swath of dirt, tumbleweed and Joshua trees that covers portions of four states in the southwest of the United States. My particular stomping grounds were in the far west corner of the Mojave in a dusty Southern California town whose propitious name, Apple Valley, was a ruse dreamed up by developers trying to entice unsuspecting investors to buy up multiple-acre lots of dust and cactus.

It was a great place for a kid to grow up — clean air, blue skies, empty spaces as far as the eye could see. As long as you stayed clear of the rattlesnakes and Black Widow spiders, you didn't have a care in the world. My best friends were ants (I preferred the little black ones to the big red ones because they struck me as being more, well, refined, than the brute reds), horny

toads, lizards, tarantulas and butterflies. These fascinating creatures were among the only living things within a couple miles of our house.

Now, we had a neighbor down the road, a wonderful man by the name of Ellsworth Sylvester. His wife Agnes was my teacher in fifth grade and I loved her dearly, too. But I'm using Ellsworth today as my tenuous link to the Russian-born painter Nicolai Fechin. Bear with me.

Ellsworth would occasionally gather up a truckload of kids and drive us out to a place called Dead Man's Point. We never thought about why it was called that. It was just one of the coolest places around, way out at the edge of town. Dead Man's Point consisted of a small but beautiful outcropping of sandstone rocks that jutted and rolled skyward like billowing clouds from the sandy desert floor. This for us was a marvelous, even sacred place, for here Native Americans — we revered and referred to them as Indians at the time — had once camped and lived. Ellsworth would bring us here to teach us about the history of the land that we now occupied. And while he told us stories we would hunt for arrowheads and sometimes find them. Every find we made put us in direct contact with the people and the times about which Ellsworth told.

Nothing at this stage of my life in the early 1960s could possibly have indicated I would ever have an interest in Russian culture. That would not come until much later. But there is one curious thing that came flooding back into my mind last week when I saw that the Tretyakov Gallery had mounted a retrospective of Nicolai Fechin's paintings. At some point many decades ago — the exact moment is lost forever to history — I was given a catalogue of exquisite paintings of Native Americans and Southwest American landscapes. Most of the paintings were done in New Mexico, but a few were done in the Mojave Desert — specifically in Joshua Tree, California. All were done by Nicolai Fechin.

I, fascinated by everything to do with Native American culture, remember being confused by the paintings. Many were so deeply impressionistic that to my ignorant young mind they disappeared into a chaos of lines, patterns and colors on the page. I don't think I ever thought about the artist's origins. And I don't know what I thought about Russia or Russianness at the time — most likely nothing at all — but I doubt I would have considered this artist Russian. He also wasn't American, though.

American painters of the Wild West were usually photographic in their detail. That American desire to be clear and accessible and realistic is usually strongly apparent in paintings of cowboys, Indians and the land they shared and fought over. There was something else going on in Fechin's paintings, something that I found alien and seductive all at once.

Over the years I ran across Fechin's name from time to time. When I first encountered him he was considered an obscure, though respected, painter. Now, over a half a century after his death in Southern California on Oct. 5, 1955 (16 months after I was born), he is recognized as one of the most distinctive painters of his time. His teacher, the great Ilya Repin, once called him the "finest painter in Russia," according to the Artrussia.ru website. Americans claim him as American. Russians claim him as Russian. His former home in Taos, New Mexico, is a museum that promotes his legacy in that region. According to an article on that museum's website, the largest collection of Fechin's paintings is located in the Fechin Center in Kazan, Russia, where the artist was born in 1881.

For the record, Fechin's name would be written Feshin if transliterated today. But the artist, escaping the dangers of post-revolutionary Russia in 1923, arrived in the United States at a time when few gave much thought to such linguistic obscurities. Thus, Fechin it is in English.

I continue to be amazed by the small but significant way that Fechin's biography dovetails with my own from my pre-Russia days to my post-U.S. life. Not many people, even in the United States southwest, live in adobe houses. I grew up in one in Apple Valley and Fechin bought and maintained one in Taos. One of Fechin's canvases, "Joshua Trees," was made just 100 kilometers from my childhood home. I now live just 1 kilometer from the Tretyakov Gallery where the exhibit "Nicolai Fechin. On the 130th Anniversary of his Birth" runs through July 29. In some ways, it seems like an old friend has come back to visit me. Again.

"Nicolai Fechin (1881-1955)" runs to July 29. Tretyakov Gallery. 10/12 Lavrushinsky Pereulok. Metro Tretyakovskaya. Tel. 230-7788. www.tretyakovgallery.ru

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