THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO
SPECIAL EXHIBITION PAINTINGS
BY NIKOLAI FECHIN
DECEMBER 18 TO JANUARY 20
NINETEEN HUNDRED TWENTY-FOUR
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NIKOLAI IVANOVICH FECHIN
BY CHRISTIAN BRINTON

Complex and inspiring Russia, which for generations has been the enigma of modern civilization, is gradually becoming clearer to the popular mind. Long stifled by rigid caste and rigorous officialism, the voice of the Slav is now raised in courageous, appealing accent throughout the world, and the Slavic soul is rapidly moving within the radius of our comprehension and sympathy. We once perused in execrable translation the perplexing pages of Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky, and labored under the delusion that Chaykovsky typified Russian music. Today we have with us the incomparable Moscow Art Theatre, we listen unperturbed to Russian drama and opera in the vernacular, and are familiar with the Ballet Rome, the sparkling scores of Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky, and the passionate lyric aspiration of Sergei Rachmaninov.

In art, matters are much the same as in literature and music. The barriers are down. The Great Wall between Russia and the Western nations has been stormed by a social convulsion as terrific as it is tragic, and through the breaches throng countless Slavs of various stations and varied degrees of culture and accomplishment. The primitive meshik, the perennial peasant, Ivan Ivanovich, alone clings to his native soil and soil, to the vast undulating steppe and the far-sweeping skies of his beloved Rassaya.

Our earliest acquaintance with contemporary Russian art dates from the appearance at the World’s Columbian Exposition of Chicago in 1893, of Repin’s stirring canvas known as The Cossacks’ Reply to the Sultan Mohammed
IV. Next came the popular genre compositions of Makovsky, and the stark realism of Vereshchagin’s propaganda painting in the interest of a peace that failed to slight even momentarily upon a stressful world. While the incomplete and unequal representation of Russian painting at St. Louis in 1904 helped matters a trifle, it was not until the advent in our midst of the rich chromatic fantasy of Anisfeld, and the remote, archaic magic of Roerich, that we actually succumbed to the spell of these amazing Slavs.

Yet even before the coming of Anisfeld, Roerich, and the brilliant compatriots who have followed in their wake, there began to appear in the current International Exhibitions at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, canvases by a Russian artist of different character and caliber. The former men are decorative, stylistic, and imaginative. The art of Nikolai Fechin bases itself upon observation and simple verity of vision and rendering. They paint the dream, he paints reality.

The modest, earnest spirit whose work looks from those walls in restrained dignity of tone, and sincere depth and humanity of appeal, was born at Kazan, November 26, 1881, and christened Nikolai Ivanovich, his father being a local wood carver, gilder, and maker of church images. Fair haired and delicate, the lad assisted the family as best he could in the humble workshop until the age of fourteen, when he entered the newly organized Kazan Art School. The atmosphere of the school in Great Ladosky Street was friendly and informal. His fellow pupils numbered such talents as Fonin, the water colorist Davidov, and the dynamic Burluk, who had but recently come up from Odessa. So exceptional was Fechin’s ability, and so rapid his progress, that he was
graduated in the spring of 1901, and in the autumn of the same year entered the Imperial Academy of Petrograd with the highest letters of recommendation.

Nikolai Fechin’s sojourn at the Academy, which officially lasted until 1909, when he was awarded his diploma and travelling scholarship, proved typical of his future development. After the end of the first season, when he joined the atelier of Repin, he began to reveal his true capacity for expression upon painted canvas. Almost from the beginning he evolved a free, individual style based upon his own temperament. Reactions to reality and the training he received from his master, who displayed immediate interest in the young special student from Kazan.

Not the least significant feature of Fechin’s career is the fact he was not forced to pass through that long period of struggle and probation which is the bitter portion of most artists. He tasted success and recognition from the outset. A year before leaving the Imperial Academy he was invited to become an instructor in the Kazan Art School, and on the occasion of his first trip abroad in 1910 he enjoyed the distinction of seeing two of his paintings in the International Art Exhibition held in the famous Munich Glaspalast. It was likewise 1910 that witnessed his debut at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, whose doors have since been periodically opened to him. And it is also in Pittsburgh, in the distinguished private gallery of Mr. W. S. Stimmel, and the home of Mr. John R. Hunter, where the most extensive collection of Fechin’s paintings, either in America or Europe, has found appropriate welcome.

Following his appointment as instructor, and later as official State teacher, in the Kazan Art School, Fechin
definitely settled in his native city, where he has since continued his professional activities. His production, taken as a whole, represents Kazan and the picturesque districts in the neighborhood of this ancient Tatar capital. During the summer months whilst still a student, he spent considerable time in the country, among the native Cherekis, Chivaevs, and Mordvo, and the impression made upon him by these colorful people, still primitive and paganistic in character, was distinctly fruitful.

Two important canvases, Bearing Away the Bride, and Gathering the Cabbage Crop, were the direct outcome of sketches and studies made respectively in the remote villages of Lipshka and Pushkaraka. They are both large, effective compositions in which the various local types assume the significance of individual yet masterfully unified portraits; for portraiture is after all the keynote of Fechin's work. Bearing Away the Bride is fortunately with us to-day. Gathering the Cabbage Crop has temporarily at least suffered the vicissitudes of war and consequent social disintegration.

Yet nothing has interrupted, save momentarily, the steady unfolding of Fechin's art. During those quiet, industrious years as painter and preceptor when he lived in Gruzinsky Street and occupied a spacious and picturesque studio in the Art School building, Fechin continued to progress with earnest integrity of aim and purpose.

From the outbreak of the Revolution until he came to our shores last midsummer, he was, however, compelled to reside in the isolated summer retreat of Vasilievko, on the Volga some twenty versts from Kazan. The little family of three, together with their faithful cow, actually passed seven years on the edge of a great dark forest by the gleaming river. The cow sometimes wandered off into
the wood. Provisions were scarce, and paints and canvas almost impossible to obtain, but nevertheless, all managed to survive, and the artist to retain his will to conquer and create.

The call to America and the organization of the present exhibition have served to throw into sympathetic relief the art and personality of Nikolai Fechin. Neither theatric nor stylistic, and totally undisturbed by clamorous modernism, this work is based upon discriminating analysis of the simple and actual, and upon sound, disciplined craftsmanship. The paintings on view consist mainly of portrait studies of modest folk in and about Kazan. Here is the father of the artist, also his wife and child. Here is a talented young woman from the Art School, there a man fishing, a thoughtful architect, a bright flower of the steppe, or little Kisa and her doll—all sincerely and truthfully presented.

Free, vigorous drawing; the ability to catch subtle modulations of light and shade, and to render form with plastic power, are here in evidence. And yet mere technique is not the chief message of Fechin's art. The painter's vision of character looks deeper than this. It reflects the great, brooding spirit of Russian provincial life. You spontaneously think of Maxim Gorky when gazing at certain of these likenesses. For here is the same penetrant observation, the same deep compassion, the same peremptory pessimism you meet for example in the troubled pages of Foma Gordeyev.

You cannot understand Russian art, letters, or music unless you appreciate the eternal dualism of the Russian soul, unless you realize that these Slavs are at once a nation of vivid fantasists, and a people who faithfully follow
fact. Nikolai Fechin belongs with the frankly objective protagonists of Russian painting. Bred and trained in the atmosphere of the Peredvizhnaya Vystavka, or Society of Travelling Exhibitions, he to-day stands foremost among the younger representatives of this particular group.

It is not with Vrubel, or Roerich, with Anisfeld, or Sudeykin, that the art of Fechin is aligned. It is with the rigorous realistic tradition so stoutly upheld by the redoubtable veteran Ilya Repin. This art is based not upon fancy, but upon fact. It affiliates itself with the sober, searching verism of the Moscow Art Theatre, not the delectable divertissement of the Chauve-Souris.
CATALOGUE

1 PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG GIRL
   Lent by the Milch Galleries, New York

2 BEARING OFF THE BRIDE
   Lent by Mr. Clarkson Cowl, New York

3 PORTRAIT OF KISSA
   Lent by Mr. Edward Duff Balken, Pittsburgh

4 THE RUSSIAN FAMINE

5 PORTRAIT OF GEORGINA DE BRYLKINE CHILDS

6 PORTRAIT OF J. RIVES CHILDS
   Lent by Mr. J. Rives Childs, Lynchburg, Virginia

7 MADAME SAPOJNOFF

8 LADY IN PINK

9 PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER (Oil)

10 PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER (Tempera)

11 PORTRAIT IN SUNLIGHT

12 PORTRAIT (Study)
13 WOMAN WHO SMOKES
14 YOUNG WOMAN WITH NECKLACE
15 LITTLE PEASANT BOY
16 CHRISTMAS SINGERS
17 SELF-PORTRAIT
   Lent by Mr. W. S. Stillman, Pittsburgh
18 PORTRAIT OF YOUNG WOMAN
19 MY DAUGHTER EYA
20 PORTRAIT OF ABRAMYCHEV
21 NUDE FIGURE
22 SPRING IN THE STEPPE
23 PEASANT GIRL
   Lent by Mr. John R. Hunter, Pittsburgh
24 PORTRAIT OF THE RUSSIAN PAINTER,
   DAVID BURLIUK
25 PORTRAIT OF THE RUSSIAN SINGER,
   NADANA EUPHALY HATAYENA