

The Artistic Paths of Theodore Czebotar

Early life in Racine: Born in Milwaukee of Polish-born parents in 1915, Theodore Czebotar had a hardscrabble life with his five brothers and two sisters born between 1914 and 1931. Family financial instability especially during the Great Depression instigated moves from Milwaukee to Racine and numerous moves within Racine when home ownership was not viable. While a student at Racine's Washington Park High school, Ted Czebotar was known as a prolific cartoonist and poet. In his high school years, Ted found solace in art and was aware of artists Arthur Dove, John Marin, and Marsden Hartley shaping American modernism as well as the ultimate rebel, Pablo Picasso.¹



Ted Czebotar in the 1934 Racine Park HS yearbook. Photo from Ancestry.com



T. Czebotar, Untitled (riding the rails), n.d., Oil on board. Collection Cedarburg Art Museum, Gift of the Theodore Czebotar Collection, LLC and the Kohler Foundation, Inc.

The itinerant lifestyle: In 1934, when Czebotar wanted sensual examples of excellence in painting, his demanding Racine high school art teacher Helen Sawyer emphasized draftsmanship and rules. So, at age 18, Czebotar willfully left school before graduation to hop on a freight train heading west. He lived the hobo life and sometimes exchanged sketches for food. Czebotar utilized hitchhiking and free boxcar rides to traverse the West Coast from Tacoma to Los Angeles and beyond.² One of the paintings in this exhibition recalls Czebotar's travels by boxcar. During this itinerant period from mid-1934 through October 1936, Czebotar had a four-month stay near Denver where he worked on a WPA federal mural project and then worked as a scenic designer for a Federal Theater Project.³

Return to Wisconsin: By October 1936, after stints in Colorado and San Francisco, Czebotar was sufficiently starved to come home to Wisconsin. Early 1937 in Racine was a period of turning sketches of western travels, midwestern scenes, and family life into paintings.⁴ This artist preferred to do most of his painting in the privacy of his studio rather than in open air, so many of his sketches may have had imaginative studio touches, as in the midwestern scene pictured here that resembles in many ways, but not exactly, Cedarburg's Columbia Mill that was active from 1846 through the 1960s.



T. Czebotar, Untitled (red mill), 1937, Oil on board. Collection Cedarburg Art Museum, Gift of the Theodore Czebotar Collection, LLC and the Kohler Foundation, Inc.

Domestic family scenes were another source of subject matter for Czebotar during in the 1937-38 period such as the untitled oil painting of Ted's youngest sister, born in October 1931, getting her hair braided by her mother. Other free and undemanding subjects for the prolific, but poor artist were his youngest siblings sleeping, also shown in this exhibition.⁵ Self-portraits were another way for Czebotar to practice portraiture and figurative painting without hiring a model. The striking self-portrait of the young artist in this exhibition reveals his characteristic spare use of oil paint. Later, Czebotar was also known for his spontaneity, being able to instantly capture the essence of a scene, with a few, quick strokes.⁶



T. Czebotar, Untitled (self-portrait), n.d., Oil on board. Collection Cedarburg Art Museum, Gift of the Theodore Czebotar Collection, LLC and the Kohler Foundation, Inc.

The New York scene: It was fortuitous that in February 1937 Czebotar met John Steuart Curry at a Thomas Hart Benton exhibition in Milwaukee. Curry was the University of Wisconsin's first Artist-in-Residence and a prominent American Regionalist painter. Curry was impressed with the young artist's works and sent a letter of recommendation to his own gallery dealer Maynard Walker in New York City.⁷ This was the break that the young artist needed! By December 20, 1937, Czebotar had his first exhibition at the Maynard Walker Galleries for a three-week period. Numerous favorable reviews and selling about 40 artworks to critics, collectors, and two museums were highlights of that debut exhibition.⁸

With that explosive introduction to the New York centric art world, Theodore Czebotar went on to have numerous other solo and group exhibitions from 1938 through the late 1940s not only in New York City, but also in Boston, Chicago, Hollywood, Santa Barbara, Brooklyn, Madison, and Milwaukee.⁹ By 1942, Czebotar permanently relocated to New York, but was not enamored with living in Manhattan. Ted was one of the friends who helped artist Joe Jones construct

a home and studio in a remote area near Fishkill in New York's Hudson River Valley.

Seeking solitude: When Ted's friend Jones left for military duty in 1943, Czebotar moved into Jones' remote Fishkill, NY studio and home, as he was exempted from military duty due to a hernia. Ted's eventual wife, Dutch-born Elizabeth (Els) Snapper was also Czebotar's muse and life-long partner starting in 1943 and she bought the Fishkill home for the couple, thanks to her father's gift. Because Czebotar had conflicts with working for money rather than working for himself, his greatest pleasure was finding solace in a rural retreat where he could work on his own, free from commercial constraints. His marriage and the financial security that came with it allowed Czebotar to work independently for the rest of his life.¹⁰

Czebotar's artistic works of the 1940s through his later years reflect the ongoing interest in the natural world from his rural New York haven. Several of the undated Czebotar landscapes in the Cedarburg Art Museum Collection emerge from this 1940s period and possibly one even later. Note the evolution of a free and more modernist approach to depicting nature, all the while that Czebotar disavows clinging to any artistic movements of his time.

Later years: Ted Czebotar was always grounded in the natural world for his painting. In later years, he explored the Northeast Coast of the USA, Arizona, and the Pacific Northwest Coast where Czebotar found a primal attraction to the aboriginal qualities of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. In all these distant explorations, Ted always returned to his Fishkill home to work on his paintings. Not concerned with exhibiting or selling any of his artwork beyond the 1940s, Czebotar continued to create prolifically for the sake of painting and his own enraptured joy. When Theodore Czebotar died in 1996, his extended family found an avalanche of a lifetime of painting in his small home. Fortunately, extended family members have worked to bring Czebotar's art to the public through exhibitions, an extensive biography by his niece Patricia Hamilton, and by sharing his artwork through Wisconsin's Kohler Foundation. The Cedarburg Art Museum and the public will benefit greatly from the gifts of the Theodore Czebotar Collection, LLC and the Kohler Foundation, Inc. for the museum's permanent collection.



T. Czebotar, Fishkill Meadow, n.d., Oil on canvas. Collection Cedarburg Art Museum, Gift of the Theodore Czebotar Collection, LLC and the Kohler Foundation, Inc.

Notes:

1. Patricia Hamilton, *Hidden Treasure: The Life and Art of Theodore Czebotar* (Madison: Borderland Books, 2015), 36.
2. Hamilton, *Hidden Treasure*, 43-46.
3. Ibid, 48-49, 55.
4. Ibid, 62, 70.
5. Ibid, 96.
6. "An Impetuous Pole from Racine: Czebotar," *Art News*, March 1, 1941
7. Ibid, 78-79.
8. Ibid, 82-87.
9. <http://theodorczebotar.com/exhibits/>, accessed October 28, 2020.
10. Hamilton, *Hidden Treasure*, 163-166.

-Mary Chemotti
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