

# Flyfishing & TYING JOURNAL

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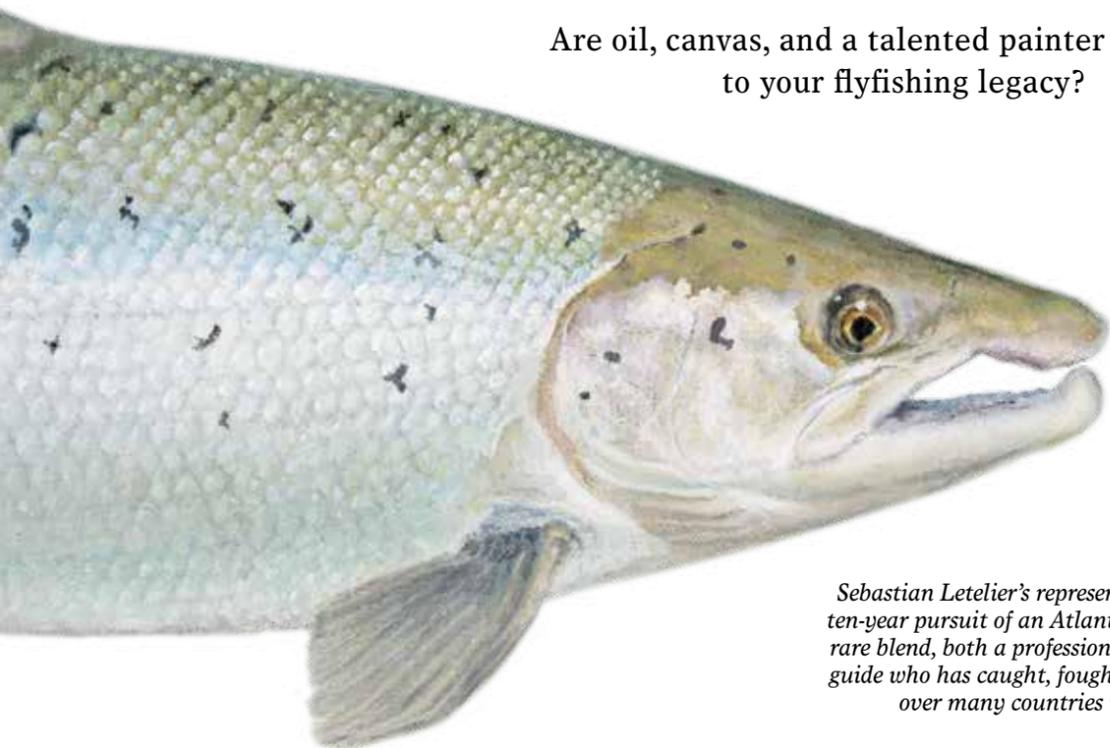
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## SEBASTIAN LETELIER: ART AS TAXIDERMISTRY

Are oil, canvas, and a talented painter the secret to your flyfishing legacy?



*Sebastian Letelier's representation of the author's ten-year pursuit of an Atlantic salmon. Letelier is a rare blend, both a professional artist and flyfishing guide who has caught, fought, and held this species over many countries in Scandinavia.*

It's a sight that is as common as it is sad. Worldly possessions spread across a lawn left unclaimed by relatives and friends that so often include taxidermy of a once treasured fish or antlered animal. Why? It isn't personal; it's someone else's memory. The story the object preserved of a long-ago stream, strike, or a shared moment of kinship with another person and nature gets lost to time. Lonely, dusty, yellowed, and peeling—without the memory, the object's cosmetics don't merit a place in the next generation's collective consciousness. But what if the right painter could change that? Could canvas, oil, and artistic talent preserve the memory of a time and place so well it transcends your brief moment of ownership? Could the right painter make family or strangers want to look, learn, and remember the source and story behind the artist's inspiration long beyond the fisherman's lifetime? If the painter is also a flyfishing guide and world-renowned salmon fly tier named Sebastian Letelier, it might be possible.

I am not opposed to taxidermy. The walls of my home hang heavy with the fins, fur, and bones of cherished adventures from around the world. My life as an outdoor writer has blessed me with re-

wards beyond what any single man deserves. On dreary days I can sit at my desk and admire a Coho salmon, a Maine grouse, or an African Kudu that transports my mind to a place and time when a COVID mask wasn't required, and my legs moved a little better than they do today. I enjoy all of them each day for the gift of nature they provided, and I make a point to honor them in my memory. But a chance encounter with an oil painting of a brown trout near the bottom of the earth broadened my perspective on preserving sporting memories.

Located in Chilean Patagonia, the interior of the Estancia del Zorro's great room still looks like the private British club it was undoubtedly modeled after. Constructed by the British Wool Company at the turn of the 20th century, it has some South American touches, but the bar, furniture, and art all have a distinctly Victorian-era feel. Seated at the wooden dining table, I noticed an oil painting of a brown trout, and there was something special about it. The painting captured my eyes every morning before I departed to fish and each evening when I returned. I sat in the same seat at the table for the morning and evening meals and noticed how its hues changed with the movement

of the natural light from earlier in the day. The painting looked as vintage as the room itself, but full of color and life. After several days, I asked my guide, Sebastian Letelier, about the painting.

"Do you know the story behind the painting over the sideboard in the dining room," I asked.

"Yes, I painted it," Letelier answered.

I thought we were having an English-Spanish translation problem. The painting I was referring to had to be older than both our ages combined. I thought perhaps he was telling me he knew the painting. I was sure a fishing guide hadn't painted it. I tried again.

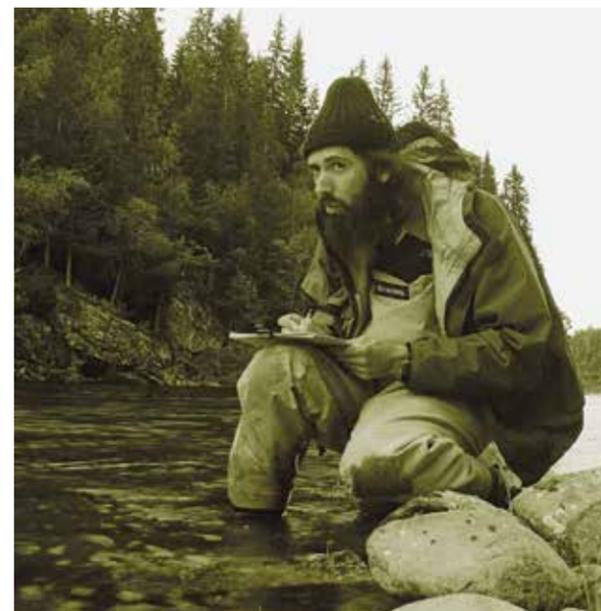
"No, the brown trout painting on the wall at the end of the table next to the window. Do you know its story?" I asked again.

"Yes, I painted it two years ago," Letelier answered with certainty and a proud smile.

I was dumbstruck. Not only had I assumed the painting was much older, but I had also underestimated the breadth of talent possessed by the man who had already proven to be an exceptional trout guide.

### Feather, Brush, and Oil

Viewed in this new light, I soon learned the thin, bearded man wasn't just a fisherman, but a world-renowned tier of traditional salmon flies and a classically trained painter.



*The artist and fisherman, Sebastian Letelier, setting down the rod and taking up the sketch pad on the Orkla River in Norway.*

Born in Santiago, Chile, in 1979, Sebastian Letelier began fishing around the age of eight, and by age twelve, he was both flyfishing and tying flies. At the age of thirteen, fly fishing pioneer and owner of the Cumilahue Lodge, Adrian Dufflocq, took Letelier under his wing. Established in 1963 in the Lake District of Chile, Dufflocq hosted many great angling figures and opened much of Patagonia to the flyfishing world. Adrian's son, Marcelo, later offered him work as a flyfishing guide at the unusually young age of sixteen at the Estancia de los Rios Lodge. Here, Letelier found his place among the fish and streams of Patagonia.

In his late teens, Letelier enrolled in art academy in Santiago, Chile learning to both paint and prepare canvases in the "old European tradition of painting." This technique requires students to stretch their canvases on hand-built frames and prepare them to receive paint with a base of rabbit skin glue, linseed oil, chalk and iron oxide pigments in the style of the old Masters. This traditional training comes through in his painting style, which creates work that appears to be much older.

Letelier cultivated his formal painting and drawing skills while in training, but also spent three to five months each year guiding in Chilean Patagonia. During this time, the influences of his mind and outdoor passions began to merge. Letelier sees observation and appreciation as crucial practices for both the artist and the fly fisherman. He believes in being "awake, so you are sharp" when nature shows you something you have never seen before. "This mindset leads to the possibility of being amazed by things that are sometimes easy to skip," he notes.

Letelier's fishing and painting education took him to Europe, and Scandinavia in particular, where he furthered his artist's training and learned the art of tying traditional salmon flies by hand (without the use of a vice). With his artist's eye for color and proportion along with a lifetime of fly-tying experience, he quickly made a name for himself among an older and skeptical crowd of

*The painting that captured the author's imagination on the wall of the Victorian-styled great room at Estancia del Zorro in Chilean, Patagonia. Morning and evening, Letelier's brown trout took on new life and revealed fresh details.*



